



Transcript: Taken from alifeintravel.net

Ep 7: Loh Lik Peng – Collector of passion projects

(Intro music begins)

Hi, I'm Siew Hoon and I love to travel. More than that, I'm in love with the ability of travel to change lives. Welcome to A Life in Travel. This season is brought to you by Expedia Group – Bringing the world within reach.

In this episode, find out how a boy, born in Singapore took to the Irish Hills to study law, and gave it all up for hospitality and food. No brainer really as far as I'm concerned, but perhaps his parents weren't to happy at the time. But all's well that ends well, because today, Loh Lik Peng is a successful hotelier, restaurateur, lifestyle creator, the founder of Unlisted Collection.:

(Music fades)

SHY: Hi, Peng.

Lik Peng: Actually, I was born in Ireland [laughs], not Singapore.

SHY: [Laugh] Damn, I got that wrong! So, you then stayed there most of your childhood?

Lik Peng: No, I actually came back to Singapore when I was very young, still a baby. But my parents sent me back to boarding school there, 12 to 18.

SHY: Clearly they were in love with Ireland and they felt that Ireland would be good for you.

Lik Peng: Well, I think it was partly done because I was not doing very well in Singapore, particularly in Chinese. And it was my dad's old school, so I think he had a certain affinity to the school.

SHY: They thought you could do better in Irish, rather than Chinese then?

Lik Peng: Yes, and the funny thing is when I first went to Ireland, I was forced to learn Gaelic because I was in fact, Irish at the time. Being Irish you had to learn Gaelic, so I went from struggling with Chinese to struggling with Gaelic [laughs].

SHY: Wow. What was the first word you learned in Gaelic?

Lik Peng: Probably *dia dhuit* [laughs].

SHY: *Dia duit*. I know a word in Welsh, by the way, it's called *iechyd da*, which is like cheers. Drinking, so that's the most important word that you could possibly learn in Wales [laughs]. So, anyway –



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Lik Peng: Ireland is *slainte*. Same thing but *slainte*.

SHY: [Laugh] Well, I wish we could have a drink now Peng, because that would really lubricate this conversation [laugh]. You studied in Ireland and clearly did well studying law, better than you did in Singapore, and then you came back to Singapore.

I want to ask you a question, first up, would you consider yourself what is called a Southeast Asian turtle? Not because you're slow, but because turtle is a term they call folks from here and then they've gone overseas to study, and then they come back to seek their fortunes at home. Would you consider yourself a turtle?

Lik Peng: Yeah, very much so. I came back in the late '90s, because that was supposed to have been the Asian century. At that time, Asia was growing double digits and things like that, and it seemed a lot more exciting. Ireland in those days was a poor country, changed a lot now, but in the '80s and '90s it was considered the poor man of Europe.

SHY: Singapore clearly offered a better promise as the Asian century. But that wasn't to be, because then we came into the Asian Financial Crisis –

Lik Peng: Yeah, yeah.

SHY: – around that time that you came back. So, it's not you, I hope [laughs], but maybe just timing. Talk about the time when you gave up law to become a hotelier. Firstly, did your parents approve? What did they say about that decision?

Lik Peng: At the end of the day, I think when I first came back it really was because of family actually, it wasn't just career. (Although) career had something to do with it, my parents were also here and I had been abroad so many years that it felt natural to come back. In a sense, when I first came back, the Asian Financial Crisis happened, it wasn't what I was expecting, it wasn't what I signed up for it. As a lawyer, I was just doing lots of bankruptcy work.

SHY: That must be depressing.

Lik Peng: It was very depressing cause you literally go to people's houses and you put stickers on their TVs and stuff, because they hadn't paid for it. Do writs of seizure and sale and stuff like that, garnishee orders and bankruptcy, stuff like that. So it really wasn't what –

SHY: Okay, you're depressing me. I can see how you got depressed, and then you give that up to get into hospitality.



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Lik Peng: But one thing, doing bankruptcies, you work (with) a lot of banks, you see a lot of mortgagee documents crossing your desk. That time I realised that the banks were selling foreclosed properties at a tiny fraction of what they were worth, even a few years before, (at) what the owners had bought them for. To me, it seemed like an opportunity, I looked at all these mortgagee sales and say, "Okay, something's gotta be of good value here, right?", because literally you are seeing places sold for 1/3 of what they were worth even a few years before that.

I think Singapore wasn't that badly affected by Asian Crisis, we got the aftershocks maybe. I can't imagine what it would've been like if you were in Thailand or Indonesia, and we had lots of Indonesian clients.

(Music break)

SHY: That's when you picked up the first opportunity, right?

Lik Peng: Yeah.

SHY: Talk to us about that first opportunity and how did you translate that into your vision?

Lik Peng: I have to admit I didn't really have a vision, [laughs] but I think I was there at the right place at the right time. My first property was 1929, a unique building. It was a beautiful row of shophouses in the wrong location, it was in Keong Saik Road.

SHY: Which has become the right location now.

Lik Peng: Yeah. Keong Saik Road is the coolest place in Singapore now, it was I think a year or two ago in Time Out's coolest places, there was a big picture of Keong Saik Road. But in the early 2000s Keong Saik Road was a hardcore red-light area. I would say if you had walked down the street, maybe three quarters of the businesses were related to the red-light industry. If you had gone to all the *kopitiams* (local coffee shops) and stuff, (you will see that) it's still a very traditional kind of street.

Actually, you saw a lot of working girls [laughs] and it was a very local street, you saw old men. In fact, most of the working girls, when I looked at them, I realised that maybe (they were at) the tail end of their careers [laughs], they were in their 50s. It was amazing to me they still had patrons and they would be putting on all their sequin clothes and makeup in the middle of the day.

SHY: Sounds like a fantastic place.



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Lik Peng: It was fantastic.

SHY: Gosh, I wish I'd been there then rather than now, which has become so gentrified. Coming back to Hotel 1929, why did you pick that kind of place to build what was considered Singapore's first urban boutique hotel?

Lik Peng: Because it was cheap, it was a mortgagee sale. It was really, really cheap.

SHY: Spoken like a true lawyer.

Lik Peng: [Laugh] At the time, you couldn't go to a bank and get a mortgage for a red-light area. So these properties, when they went up for mortgagee sale was really cheap. It's whatever cash you had, you could almost buy it in those days, it was really like that. The whole construction costs, everything, was cheap. The first hotel really was a shoe string thing for me. It was a former brothel that had been shuttered for maybe a year by the time we bought it. But the bones of the building were great, so I spent as little as possible doing it up, put some cool furniture in it [laughs] and reopened it and did not charge –

SHY: I hope you changed the beds.

Lik Peng: We changed the beds [laughs]. We changed the toilets and changed the beds, that was about it.

SHY: But it was positioned very cleverly as urban boutique design hotel, and it clearly became really hip really quickly in Singapore.

Lik Peng: Yeah, and it won lots of awards, unexpectedly. I didn't expect anything like that. To be honest, it was just my version of what I would like a cute little boutique budget hotel to be. But when we opened, everyone thought of it as some really cool hip place. At the start, it wasn't my intention to do it that way, but it worked out really well and I think Singapore was just going through that change at the time. It's on the cusp of a lot of opening up (of) creative industries and stuff.

SHY: So amazing, it's timing and the fact that you wanted to create something that you would want to stay in, and it just happens like quite a lot of people like it, and the location probably kind of added an edge to it –

Lik Peng: It totally did.

SHY: – that clearly encouraged you because then you used that formula to create other properties, for example, you would say Wanderlust in Singapore, the New Majestic Hotel, which is now become The Straits Clan. Then you went overseas as well?

Lik Peng: Yes.



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SHY: You picked up, was it the brewery in Sydney to become The Old Clare?

Lik Peng: Yup.

SHY: And an old town hall to now become the Town Hall (Hotel) in London. So you use what was an accidental model to turn it into a winning model.

Lik Peng: That's exactly right. We always sought out the most unusual, beautiful buildings in neighbourhoods that weren't quite developed yet that were slightly seedy or down a hill. I always figured, so long as the neighbourhoods weren't too remote or weren't too far away, people will come if I created something really beautiful and interesting enough. That was the formula that I really worked on for my first three, four or five hotels. We literally just followed that formula; you went to some seedy neighbourhoods [laughs] and tried to find a beautiful building –

SHY: [Laugh] Sin sells.

Lik Peng: Yeah! At that time, if talk real estate to hoteliers, nobody would go to a bad area. They'd rather have a lousy building in a great area or what was perceived as a great area, than a great building in a lousy area. I could never afford a great area at that time. So I always went to the seedy areas and [laughs] tried to find the best building I could.

SHY: I like that. Sin and sizzle sell.

(Music break)

SHY: I've stayed in both The Old Clare in Kensington in Sydney, which is also considered a NG district –

Lik Peng: Yeah at the time it was very NG.

SHY: – and in Town Hall in London, you're in Bethnal Green, and if you read all the old British novels, that area was like no-go –

Lik Peng: Yeah, hotbed of crime, it was the Kray brothers, right?

SHY: – yeah, and now is a gentrified happening and thriving district. You created a lot of successful hotels and now you also went into food. Even before the word lifestyle was a buzz word, you were the first to marry hospitality with food, and you invested in passionate chefs and you allowed them to run their own restaurant. I remember Hotel 1929 had –

Lik Peng: – Ember.



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SHY: – the Ember. Oh, fantastic. I think that was the first place that served cod with miso and fantastic lamb chops [laughs], yeah I remember that.

Lik Peng: All the vogue in the early 2000s.

SHY: Yeah. What inspired that union between hospitality and food?

Lik Peng: Well for me, when I first set about doing the hotel, at some point I sat down and realised, hey, where do my guests have breakfast? We were also planning the hotel (at the time) and I didn't really want to put rooms on the ground floor where everyone could peer in. It occurred to me that we should do a restaurant there, and was really just that. That process of reducing what else we could use that space for. We ended up, "Okay, let's do a restaurant." Then I cast my eyes about, "Okay, what do –", I've never opened a restaurant, I enjoyed food. So I went around, going to various places, eating in restaurants, trying to learn the craft that way [laughs], enjoying myself doing it.

SHY: [Laugh] Eat your way to success.

Lik Peng: Yeah, I met a few chefs and one of the chefs I met was Sebastian, you know him, and we really clicked. I sold him on this vision of opening a restaurant in Keong Saik Road [laughs]. The only way I could sell him on the vision was to tell him I'd give him a stake in the restaurant. That became a very successful restaurant, almost by accident, I had very little to do with it other than bringing the chef in. From there the restaurant was wildly successful, and the next hotel we did, we had another Chinese restaurant, Majestic. Again, it was wildly successful. So my first two restaurants that we put into the hotels because we needed restaurants, both happened to be very successful. And from there –

SHY: You are kind of humble. Because now you're also implying that getting that restaurant and giving the chef a stake was an accidental model, and now you've used this model to open like 20 restaurants around the world, 13 of which are in Singapore. Clearly that formula worked because you gave the chefs a vested interest in their own place rather than them working for you. Between hotels and restaurants, what do you love more?

Lik Peng: I think I'm still a hotelier at heart. The thing that really gets my blood racing is still getting a great hotel, a great raw property and turning it into something special.

SHY: Of the hotels that you have now, and you are opening one in Dublin, or you've opened one in Dublin, which was kind of a dream for you, going back to Dublin?

Lik Peng: Yeah, always was. I had all these roots in Ireland, I've always loved the country, I've gone back many times to see old friends, and I've a godson there and things like that. When I first left Ireland it was a poor country. The next time I kind of looked at it again, seriously, it was boom town. It was massive boom town. This



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was the mid-2000s, Ireland was the Celtic tiger. Everything was unaffordable, and I said, "Okay, I can't afford anything," [laughs] and then '08 happened and everything crashed. I saw Ireland through that period, I was going back and you could see the kind of distress it was in. So at the same time, I said, "Okay, maybe there's an opportunity," and when the economy started reviving a little bit, I looked into it very much more seriously. Then we did our first hotel there –

SHY: Tell us about the property that you picked, does it have sin and sizzle as well?

Lik Peng: Actually, no, but it was a –

SHY: Damn, you've gone away from your model [laughs]!

Lik Peng: [Laugh] But it was still a mortgagee sale.

SHY: [Laugh] Okay, alright.

Lik Peng: I think I picked it up at a very good price, but it's smack in the centre of town. It's right next to Trinity College in the area called South Frederick Street, which is really smack in the middle of Dublin. It was called the Trinity Lodge, we have since renamed it the Trinity Townhouse. Beautiful little townhouse hotel.

SHY: So again, heritage feel –

Lik Peng: Heritage feel.

SHY: – and then a signature restaurant?

Lik Peng: Not yet, but soon.

SHY: Soon. So you're looking for a great Irish chef?

Lik Peng: We do already have a great Irish chef [laughs].

SHY: Oh, you already do have a great Irish chef [laughs].

Lik Peng: It's going to open in about two months.

(Music break)

SHY: Of the hotels, is that your favourite now?

Lik Peng: No really, you know. The ones that gave me the most grief are still my favourite. I think in the back of my mind, even though I've sold it, 1929 will always be my favourite hotel.



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- SHY: And that gave you the most grief? I thought it was Old Clare that gave you the most grief.
- Lik Peng: No. Okay Old Clare gave me the most grief, but I would say sentimentally 1929 gave me my start. So, in some ways it always has a special place in my heart, but in terms of difficulty, yeah, Old Clare. So, Old Clare will always kind of comes up in my mind because those properties that really gave you so much stress, you never forget the fee –
- SHY: Suffering, right? That brings you joy in the end [laughs]
- Lik Peng: [Laugh] Yeah, I'll never forget the suffering.
- SHY: Then, of your restaurants, I know it's impossible, you've got 20, which is your favourite?
- Lik Peng: I will say, depending on what my craving is. If I'm after meat and all that, I would say Burnt Ends, always something I crave and Dave's so creative. Chinese restaurants, Majestic for sure, because Chef Yong is like my great buddy now.
- SHY: Were you the one who suggested bringing in that Irish Silver Hill roast duck? Which is amazing.
- Lik Peng: No [laughs]. The funny thing is, I used to see this all the time because I'd go to Four Seasons and Gold Mine in London, and you'd see the Irish Monaghan Silver Hill ducks, and I always said, "Hey, maybe someone should bring it to Singapore." Next thing I know, Andrew at Tung Lok brought it in [laughs] and created this craze. After that Chef Yong was like, "Oh wow, this is great duck," and he brought it in. So I claim no credit –
- SHY: Let's buy all the ducks from Ireland! [laughs]
- Lik Peng: Exactly.
- SHY: Who's more difficult to deal with – hotel industry people or chefs?
- Lik Peng: I think chefs are more difficult to deal with because I think they have their own very particular demands, all of them.
- SHY: Do they scream in the kitchen and throw skillets and woks and stuff around?
- Lik Peng: I think that's the old school chefs, you very seldom see them. They still exist, but they're not as commonplace as they used to be. I think most chefs nowadays, in order to survive in this industry, have to be quite caring because talent is scarce and they are very mobile. If you're rude to your guys, they can walk [laughs] out any day and find a job somewhere else.
- SHY: Caring chefs?



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Lik Peng: I am telling you, it's like that. For me, working with chefs is all about chemistry. You got to learn what they care about and you've got to make sure you empathise with their issues and try and be a genuine partner to them. So, I try not to be that sort of a person who tries to tell them what to do. I'm not a specialist in restaurants, they very much are.

SHY: You leave them to it.

Lik Peng: Yeah.

SHY: You say you're a hotelier at heart, I'm going to ask you, which makes more money – hotels or restaurants?

Lik Peng: I think over the longer term, hotel will make a lot more money than restaurant. Restaurant(s) are low margin [laughs], visitors, very labour intensive, very management intensive, and you do it not because you want to make a lot of money. It's certainly the type of restaurants we do, the more boutique single-cuisine type restaurants. Those are passion projects. They are not big money-makers, but I do it because I absolutely love the restaurant trade. I find it a lot of fun and I love working with the chefs. But, they don't often make money [laughs].

SHY: It's quite clever, you balance one which is more passion projects and then hotels, which are more profit projects. That's interesting. The word hotel has also completely changed since you started Hotel 1929. Now honestly, you go and Google boutique hotel / design hotels, and so many names come up.

Lik Peng: Yup.

SHY: As a traveller today, I have such choice. I was in Iceland recently and I stayed in a cottage apartment and a geodesic dome on a working farm. I did not go near a hotel. Is that why you decided to convert the New Majestic into The Straits Clan, because you saw that writing on the wall for hotels or –?

Lik Peng: Not really. I think what has happened with our Singapore hotels, and we have shut all of them down, and converted them to other uses or sold them, was that we gradually became uncompetitive. If you look at my early hotels, 1929, New Majestic, Wanderlust, all those, when they first came out were doing very well. But over the last few years, what has happened is labour rates and all that have gone up. So the margins that we were making kept getting smaller and smaller and when you're looking at hotels with 30 rooms, that kind of scale, you don't get a lot of economies of scale. So it's harder and harder for the very small hotels in Singapore to work. The rates haven't necessarily kept pace with the cost.

SHY: Does that mean that the future for small, independent hotels is really kind of doomed in Singapore? And we are all gonna stay in branded commoditised hotels?



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Lik Peng: I would say it's increasingly hard and I think the way to get about it maybe, is to link your hotels as part of a bigger chain or something. Given the cost, certainly of the type of real estate that we were operating from, shophouses and things like that, if you did the sums of what it will cost you to buy that real estate, convert it into a hotel and then run it as hotel, I think you'd find that the numbers don't really stack up. I think that maybe the existing ones, if the owners are happy enough to keep them ticking, maybe it's okay. But I think if you had to do one from scratch now, I think the numbers won't really stack up.

(Music break)

SHY: New Majestic now is Straits Clan, it's kind of like a co-working, co-living (space) – so the lines have blurred. You have hotel companies now doing co-working, co-living, co-playing, so it seems like all the lines are blurring. And food is also going that way.

Lik Peng: Yes.

SHY: I can't go in Singapore now without coming across fusion cuisine. We have Japanese-French, Korean-French, Japanese, Peranakan. In Seoul, I went to a Danish-Korean.

Lik Peng: [Laugh] Really?

SHY: Yeah. Do you think this is creativity or desperation?

Lik Peng: I think it's creativity. I love the fusion stuff, to be honest, if you look at Peranakan food, Peranakan food is the quintessential fusion food. It's Malay and Chinese and a little bit of Indian all thrown in.

SHY: That's true.

Lik Peng: Yeah, in Singapore we're used to it.

SHY: Hmm. So, you like fusion cuisine?

Lik Peng: I love it. So long as it's not something that's contrived, but I think the vast majority of the ones that are well done are really tasty.

SHY: Do you find generally that food that looks good on social media don't taste as good? Because they are made to look good on social media?



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- Lik Peng: I think most chefs nowadays are conscious of social media and to some extent, some of them will do dishes that are tailored towards looking good or videoing well or having some dramatic effect, and that's driven by Instagram.
- SHY: And is that a shame, you think?
- Lik Peng: No. So long as the taste continues to be the primary driver and I think the majority of good chefs still make sure that the food tastes good. But yes, I would say that almost every chef thinks about how his food is presented now and how it comes out on social media.
- SHY: Do you think social media, just as it's changed the way chefs approach their food, do you think social media created the foodie culture that we are seeing all over the world? Or is it the other way around?
- Lik Peng: I think the foodie culture has always been there. As far as I've been in this business, for as long as I've known people in this business and our patrons, the foodies have always been there. Social media has perhaps been a different platform, some of the people who post all those things are not necessarily foodies. They don't really have any knowledge of the food. I think they do it for different reasons. So if you read some of these so-called foodie's posts and stuff, it's quite clear [laughs] they don't really know the ingredients.
- SHY: I follow your posting of pictures of food and you always make me hungry. Every time you post something, I say, "Oh, I must go and eat that." Can I ask you; do you eat all you shoot, and how do you stay fit, Peng, with all the food you must consume or at least, taste?
- Lik Peng: I absolutely do eat everything I post, all of it, sometimes multiple portions. But I don't stay fit as – [laughs].
- SHY: Oh, come on.
- Lik Peng: I hardly exercise. So, recently my wife's given me a kick up the backside and she said, "I'm going to drag you off." She's bringing me to all these Krav Maga classes, which has been making me work out a little bit more. But it's only been a recent thing. So, I hope I can keep it up [laughs].
- SHY: You can work hard so that you can eat more.
- Lik Peng: That's the only reason I would actually work out. But I've been quite lazy about it.
- SHY: Bring back the conversation to fusion. I'm always curious, and I've been covering the hospitality industry for a long time. Why is the hospitality industry in Asia so dominated still by Western leaders? I mean like the Asian families are the owners, but they all seem to hire Western executives to run their companies.



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Lik Peng: Yeah, GMs and things like that.

SHY: I don't get that.

Lik Peng: Partly, that's because if you look at the level of training in the industry, traditionally the big schools (like) the Cornells and the Swiss schools have all been Western, I would say. You're starting to see in the East (and) in Asia, some of these training institutions coming up. But if someone was now wanting to take a serious career in hospitality, they would still consider all the big Western schools.

SHY: Why is that? You're on the board of SHATEC –

Lik Peng: Hmm, I'm the Chairman of SHATEC.

SHY: – which is the Singapore hotel association training educational centre, right?

Lik Peng: Yeah.

SHY: So why is it still, when given that you say the Asian century was actually in 1990s, but actually now they're talking (sic) this is the Golden Age of Asia, why is that Western bend still there?

Lik Peng: You also realise that most of the big management companies are also Western. Even though there are big Chinese shareholders now [laughs], a lot of them. I would say the reality is that that senior rank is also occupied by Westerners and that's partly because of the history of the –

SHY: Is that important that that changes, or should we just accept that as part of the landscape?

Lik Peng: I think it gradually will change and it gradually is changing. Particularly now that you see countries like China becoming a very important part of the hotel industry. If you go to China now, if you go to a Westin or something, you're as likely to find a Chinese GM as you are a Western GM, so the equation is changing. Particularly if you look at places like Singapore and Hong Kong, we have provided a large chunk of that talent in that mid to senior roles because (of their ability to be) bilingual, they speak both Chinese and English.

Traditionally the hotel trade has been largely about that Western brands in Western countries, and now that you're seeing that formula change (with) a lot more important emphasis placed on high growth Asian markets, you will see that management thing change. I think you do see it even in Singapore now, when I first came into the industry, if you had walked into a GMs meeting, I will say 90% of the GMs [laugh] were white, and if you go there now, maybe only about 60%.



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(Music break)

SHY: Clearly there's a desire in Singapore by kids to study hospitality because SHATEC has been going for many, many years. Would you tell your kids to study hospitality?

Lik Peng: Absolutely, because I think it's one of the industries –

SHY: – and in Asia or the West?

Lik Peng: I think it depends on what they want to do. If it's things like cooking and all that, I would say go local. If you want to do finance management, if I had to send a kid now, maybe Cornell is still the best option, Lausanne and all these. I think it depends on whether it's the more vocational side or the more investment / management side.

But at the end of day, I think the most important thing is not really the school you go to, but whether or not you have the passion for this industry. This industry requires people who really are outgoing, who really love mixing with other people. The academic side is great, but it only gets you so far. I think the people who really succeed in this industry are the real people who love that whole sociability about this industry.

SHY: And they love making people happy –

Lik Peng: Yeah, exactly.

SHY: – just serving people. But chefs are different because today, everyone wants to be a chef. I speak to young boys and they want to bake, and I cannot count the number of cooking shows there are today [laughs]. I'm actually quite amused by the irony, I just came back from Europe and (there were) so many cooking shows, they are all teaching us to cook. But few of us cook at home these days, we eat out, we order food delivery because it's too easy. So, tell me why are there so many cooking shows?

Lik Peng: I think a lot of it is a glamourising of the kitchen, you have the whole rise of the celebrity chefs. Even in my generation, you have people like Willin Low, who was a fellow lawyer in my batch who went off to be chefs. Bankers, Han Liguang was a banker, and now he's a chef. None of these guys went to traditional cooking schools. They all just had a passion for cooking. They dumped their well-paying day jobs and [laughs] became chefs, and took a huge pay cut and took on much more risk to be chefs. I think a lot of it is just driven by that sense of mission. They really wanted to –



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SHY: Passion.

Lik Peng: Passion, and wanting to just be that chef and to really succeed. Fair play to them, they've been very successful, but their parents probably were taken aback when they first suggested it. That's the reality. Like, "Hey, I spent so much money on law school and now you're going to be a chef?" [laughs].

SHY: So, cooking has become glamorous.

Lik Peng: Yes, become glamorous. But even at SHATEC, any young person wanting to sign on, I always tell them, "Hey, you got to understand that this is not an industry where you are going to be in front of a television screen most of the time, you know? Actually, three quarters of your work is in a kitchen, peeling onions and potatoes, especially in the first few years. There's a big premium on experience, but in the first few years it's hard work, you know."

SHY: Do you cook?

Lik Peng: I don't. Well, I cook occasionally, but I hardly cook. It's just a question of time. But when I do cook, I love it –

SHY: You see that's what I mean. We watch cooking shows, but none of us cook.

(Music break)

SHY: Let's get back to you as a traveller. Do you travel for food or the place?

Lik Peng: I always travel for the place, but I always look for restaurants when I travel. I always have an eating list by the time I arrive.

SHY: How do you find your restaurants?

Lik Peng: Recommendations from the chefs, generally speaking. Wherever I go in the world, unless it's a very small –

SHY: You ask your 20 chefs around the world? So you have your ready, personal adviser?

Lik Peng: I do. When I went to Miami recently, I asked for a list of restaurants and I immediately made bookings two / three weeks before I arrived.

SHY: Wow. Best destination to eat?

Lik Peng: If I had to rank one, two, three, I would say Singapore, because great location; you can have your one-Michelin-star chicken rice [laughs] all the way to your



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Odette where you have to pay 400 bucks a head. New York, I always love, cause every time I go there, I run out of time to eat in all the places I want to eat. And London. Three of my favourites, and Tokyo too, actually.

SHY: That's four. Okay, I'll let you have four.

Lik Peng: [Laugh].

SHY: Worst destination to eat?

Lik Peng: I don't want to run any country down, but I would say the least options I've had rather than, I wouldn't say the worst places to eat, the least options I've had is in Bhutan.

SHY: That is true. Other than cheese with chilli.

Lik Peng: Cheese with chilli and the dried – it's not that the food there is terrible. But after two or three days, you've [laughs] eaten it all.

SHY: [Laughs] Alright, only one, I'll let you get away with that. Most over-hyped cuisine?

Lik Peng: Wow, that's a tough one because I love all cuisines. Maybe umm –

SHY: Okay, maybe most over-hyped dish or –

Lik Peng: I would say maybe Korean fried chicken, I still don't get it [laughs].

SHY: Yeah. They have a chicken university by the way, to teach people how to make the perfect chicken.

Lik Peng: I just don't get it. It's still fried chicken. It's not that good [laughs].

SHY: Most under-hyped cuisine?

Lik Peng: I would say, the place that really blew me away in terms of food where I really didn't expect it was Sweden. You know, the Swedish –

SHY: I just came back from Sweden and it's really good!

Lik Peng: The food there, all of it is really good. Even the small little cafes, those open-faced sandwiches.

SHY: I think it's the quality of the produce.

Lik Peng: The quality of the produce and the pride of the chefs. Somehow Sweden is not necessarily known as a foodie capital, but when you go there you struggle to find a bad meal.



Transcript: Taken from alifeintravel.net

- SHY: I had the best Swedish meatballs in a fine dining restaurant [laughs], they were really, really fancy. Best hotel or accommodation you've ever stayed in?
- Lik Peng: My favourite hotel type / resort experience is the Post Ranch in –
- SHY: Where is that?
- Lik Peng: – in California, in the big Sur. It was amazing, and I've since been there –
- SHY: What's so amazing about it?
- Lik Peng: They have these little houses perched in trees and in cliff faces, and it's just the most amazing view. You spend all your time walking through a giant Redwood forest, you have big piles of berries for breakfast. It not super luxurious, but it is luxurious in every way that you want because you're in touch with nature.
- SHY: It sounds like the treehouse that I'm going to stay in, in Penang, which is in a durian orchard.
- Lik Peng: I've heard about it. It's done by that architect, what's his name again? I've read about it and I –
- SHY: – and you can get a sample 30 varieties of durians a day.
- Lik Peng: [Laugh]
- SHY: Beat that [laughs]! You've also built a really rich life in travel, despite you saying you got an accidental start. What's the advice to young people out there who want to work in hospitality or travel?
- Lik Peng: I would say go out and spend a bit of time in whatever part of that profession you want to be in. If it's hotel, spend a few months working in a hotel. If it's restaurant, spend a few months working in restaurants. Any kind of thing in the travel industry is a people industry, you're always facing customers. Some of them will be nasty to you, some of them you'll love, you'll make the best friends of your life. But in all of it, it requires a certain mindset, a certain feel for – so I always encourage people, "Hey, if you want to be a hotelier, you want to be a chef, go work a few weeks, a few months, get a feel for it." Because if you find your true calling, you'll have the happiest career ever. But if you don't, and it's not for everyone, then don't do it.
- SHY: That's such good advice. Just go out, do it and feel it. Feel it's right for you or not. That's fantastic advice.
- Lik Peng: Unlike law where you have to study for years in order to go and write that letter to your client, actually in hospitality industry, you don't. So, go out and experience it, see if it suits you. As I said, it's very much a personality kind of business. It's one



Transcript: Taken from alifeintravel.net

where people who maybe aren't great academically, or aren't great at maths and all that, can really thrive and have a great, really fulfilling, happy career.

SHY: Well, you clearly made the right choice, right [laughs] so –. Finally, how do you think travel has changed your life?

Lik Peng: I guess it's transformed my life more than just changed my life. I think it's been 180 degrees for me being a corporate lawyer to doing the things I do now where, I feel like I'm making a difference in people's lives by happy means. Lawyers always solve other people's problems and what I do now is I'm in the happy business. You strive every day to make someone happy, whether it's eating a meal with you or staying in your hotels or whatever. Those kind of things I find very rewarding.

SHY: It sounds like you're the CHO, the Chief Happy Officer. It sounds like a great job [laughs].

Lik Peng: Yeah, in the travel industry, your whole existence is done to make people happy because that's why we travel, because we want to experience this kind of happiness when we travel. Nobody travels to be miserable or to –

SHY: Some people travel to travel and get miserable.

Lik Peng: Yeah, but those are not the customers we want [laughs].

SHY: [Laugh] On that happy note, Peng, thank you very much for your time. Happy travels –

Lik Peng: Thank you.

SHY: – happy eating,

Lik Peng: Thank you.

SHY: – and happy making other people happy.

You've been listening to 'A life in travel', a podcast hosted by me, Yeoh Siew Hoon.

Each season, we will feature stories of cool people doing cool stuff in a cool industry, folks who've built lives in travel and those whose lives have been changed by travel.

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(Outro music ends)
