

Opportunity doesn't always knock on your door. Sometimes you have to go find it. For brothers Ally and Amin S. Visram, opportunity came in the form of a recession in the early '90s. It was at that point the two gathered their expertise in accounting, law, and hospitality and purchased a foreclosed asset in Upstate New York. This purchase became the platform for the development of Vista Hospitality Group. CEO Amin sees the asset cycle that happened nearly 20 years ago coming full circle with the current recession. Rather than viewing it in a negative light, he sees it as an opportunity for growth. "When we acquired our first hotel, it was the result of the recession, and I see that cycle coming back again," he said.



Amin S. Visram, CEO



This hospitality group was founded on a recession, and as the next one hits, it's looking to continue to grow.

Opportunistic Growth

Since 1992, Vista Hospitality Group has grown its asset size and geographic footprint. In 1996, Amin relocated to Canada with the objective to grow the Canadian arm of the company while brother Ally remained in the Binghamton headquarters to maintain and expand the US arm. The current asset mix of Vista is nine hotels, two retirement homes, three shopping malls, and three office/medical buildings.

"We have anywhere from 15 to 18 assets at any given time," said the CEO. "We have nine hotels today, and we're in the process of growing that arm to between 15 and 20 hotels in the next 12 months."

Historically, Vista's growth strategy has had an opportunistic bent, acquiring assets that need nurturing, capital infusion, and market repositioning. Visram said one of the company's strengths is that unlike many hotel companies, Vista manages only the assets it owns, which aligns the management and ownership sides with the same goals.

"We are motivated in determining what the exit on the asset is versus taking a management fee," he said. "We work for the asset, which qualifies us to define the best assets, nurture the cash flow to the highest extent possible, and align ourselves with management to create value for ourselves as well as for the company and its investors."

Vista also maintains a focused but somewhat flexible approach to its geographic footprint. By looking at the US and Canada as thirds, with the West Coast being one-third, the Midwest being another, and the East Coast being the final third, the eastern one-third has been the company's preference over the years. However, the Nevada Gaming Control Board has licensed both brothers, who owned the Flamingo Reno, which was converted to the Golden Phoenix Hotel and Casino and was subsequently sold in 2006.

"If we look at any West Coast assets, we will probably target casino properties as that market is now presenting itself once again because it is on a downward trend, but our primary focus will be hotels on the eastern border," said the CEO. "Right now, we have critical mass in Florida and New York, and we want to grow aggressively in those states."



Ally Visram, COO

Properly Aligned

Vista is more than an ownership and management company. Its service offering includes operations, finance, marketing, consulting, and development. The company's focus is on cost minimization and revenue maximization, meaning they give consumers what they want and make sure the back-end processes are properly aligned.

With operations in the US and Canada, the company relies on software to stay in touch with the daily activities of each property by accessing performance and budget capabilities. "We work on a united approach with these technologies, which tap into each property's information through the online network, to stay in touch with what's happening each day," said Visram.

For the company's non-hotel assets, technologies such as Yardi Systems and others offer information such as expense and revenue ratios, common area charges, property taxes, tickler systems, and leasing modules and updates. On the hotel side, Data Plus and other software located at the Binghamton office provides that same information while also tapping into a hotel's proprietary programs, such as front desk management systems associated with various brands.

Every morning, company executives get a flash report via e-mail that outlines the previous day's room revenues, expenses, what was compensated, what the budget versus actual numbers are, and what the month-to-date numbers are for every property. Visram said he and his brother's professional backgrounds enable Vista to keep a handle on that information and use it to improve the operations of each property.

"I handle most of the financing and leasing activities of the new acquisitions, renovations of non-hotel assets, and non-hotel commercial properties," he said. "Ally as the COO handles all hotel operations, including the complete renovations of the hotel properties; preparing capital expenditure requirements and budgets; doing monthly comparisons, tax planning, and yield management; and finding ways to curtail costs while also enhancing revenue."

Hands-on Approach

The brothers came to Canada in 1972 as Ugandan refugees with a family of eight, including their parents, grandfather, brothers, and sisters. The family arrived in Canada with \$50 and was assisted by the Canadian Government (Refugee Division) to get settled.

From the time they arrived, both brothers worked and went to school, with Ally eventually attending the University of Windsor and obtaining a Bachelor of Commerce in Accounting and Amin finishing his schooling in one of Boston's law schools and obtaining a J.D.

Collectively, the brothers' life experiences have given them a unique approach to business. "We think globally, but we're very localized," said Visram. "We also make sure the diversity of our employee structure is complementary to our business and the culture of our company."

The Vista family of employees includes individuals from, America, Canada, Poland, Germany, India, Kenya, Turkey, Portugal, Italy, the Philippines, and China, and many are involved in the day-to-day operations. Visram said between 15 and 25 languages are spoken throughout the company, which is beneficial when looking to expand on the East Coast and other metropolitan cities.

"At our New York JFK airport property, the traffic is primarily from foreign ports," he said. "The cultural diversity of our employee base through our sales and marketing teams enhances our ability to retain and bring in group and corporate business and people who are pleased that our culture is so strong and diverse."

Outside of a diverse company culture, Visram believes Vista's real competitive advantage is the hands-on approach he and his brother take when dealing with each property they own. By staying close to the front lines, the company has transformed downtrodden properties into successful revenue generators while finding growth potential in an otherwise down market.

"Although there will definitely be challenges in the hospitality sector over the next 12 to 18 months, over the last two years, we got well capitalized with assistance from investors to start buying again because we could see a recession coming," said Visram. "We anticipated this cycle, and now we're prepared to grow while others are scaling back."