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EXCLUSIVE
TAN SRI VINCENT TAN
BERJAYA CORPORATION

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THE DREAM PROJECT

The Chateau in Berjaya Hills, Pahang, lays claim to be the world's first spa and organic wellness resort. In a rare interview, Tan Sri Dato' Seri Vincent Tan, Founder and Chairman of Berjaya Corporation, tells **Kenneth Tan** the story behind how an 18th-century medieval castle, the celebrated Château du Haut-Kœnigsbourg, in Alsace, France, became the inspiration for a resort in the lush tropical forests of Malaysia.

Art Direction: Shahrul Hilal Radzashah. Photography: Yong Keen Koong

OVER THE LAST DECADE, the attentions of visitors on the road up Berjaya Hills in Pahang would have easily been rivaled by a monolithic castle replete with turrets, spires and stone fortifications – en route to the recreated French village of Colmar Tropicale. That castle, a scaled replica of the actual Château du Haut-Koenigsbourg in Alsace, is known today by its elegant moniker – The Chateau, a sign of imitation being the sincerest form. And not unlike its namesake in France, The Chateau of Berjaya Hills is also poised to become a tourism magnet as the world's first spa and organic wellness resort.

Visitors venturing into The Chateau for the first time will marvel at how this edifice was put together with the place resonant with antiquity and a lived-in calm. At 3,000 feet above sea level, a delicious cooling breeze regularly swishes through the 34,000 square metres of property, much of it commanding stunning views of the natural highlands. In this relaxing clime and pristine location, it's easy to see why the idea of first building a resort intrigued Tan Sri Vincent Tan Chee Yoon, Founder and Chairman of Berjaya Corporation.

On a recent evening at The Chateau, guests streamed into the resort to attend a gala dinner which celebrated both its opening as well as the conferment of four awards by Seven Stars and Stripes, an international authority on luxury hospitality. Pre-dinner cocktails by the poolside included a chamber group distilling the air with sweet music, while guests sampled canapés by twinkling candlelight.



Here, at one of several gazebos surrounding the pool, Tan Sri Vincent reflected fondly on the circumstances that brought about the present day. "Let me say this, the credit to build Colmar and the French village was (former Prime Minister of Malaysia) Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's, who knew of my intention to build a resort at the time," he says. "At the time, I was thinking about a golf course and some properties around it," he adds. "Then he said, 'Why not build a French village?' and asked me to take a look at Colmar in north-eastern France for inspiration."

"So, I went, was very impressed and decided to go ahead with it," he says. "We hired a French architect and our brief to him was to go to Colmar and replicate it here," he says. "And today, if you visit our properties here in Berjaya Hills, there's this feeling of being in Europe... it's actually quite authentic."

That authenticity also extends to The Chateau's range of offerings, in that it leans largely to European-style spas, a rarity in Asia where most are largely inclined to Balinese, Thai or Asian-styled treatments. "We have a European-styled salt grotto and

a herbal sauna, both outfitted by a specialist company from Europe," he says, indicating that the European spa idea was both a unique selling point and developed naturally from the complex in which it is located. "We are a European-looking castle – and it actually is a castle – albeit in a tropical rainforest."

TAKING FORM

"Originally, this castle started being built almost 10 years ago," Tan Sri Vincent begins. "We took a long time because we initially thought of selling it as apartments – it would be quite exciting to live in a castle," he says. A couple of other plans, including turning it into a mini-casino, were also bandied about but, due to circumstances, the team had to think about how the castle – overlooking the already humming tourist destination of Colmar Tropicale – could be repurposed.

"It was important for us to look for something different and, in discussions with our General Manager of The Chateau, Teh Ming Wah, we came up with the idea of an organic wellness resort," Tan Sri Vincent says. "I've always placed a great deal of importance in organics, that's why one of my businesses is health foods store Country Farm Organics," he adds. "I was sure others would think the same so we discussed how we could make this resort as organic as possible for others to reap the same benefits."

The philosophy behind organic wellness excludes the use of pesticides, chemical fertilisers, hormones, genetic modification, antibiotics and additives in the cultivation of the end product, preferring natural and biological methods in its creation. It's a subject that Tan Sri Vincent takes to warmly and he is quick to point out that The Chateau has made every attempt to "be as organic as we can make it." That underlying ethos in differentiating The Chateau from all and sundry hasn't been inexpensive and the costs of setting up rooms at The Chateau are estimated to be much more than what it usually is for setting up a comparable five-star hotel room due to the materials used. "Providing organic vegetables is easier – you simply steer clear of pesticides. With chicken, you need to make sure it is free-range and we specifically chose wild salmon over the farmed variety," Tan Sri Vincent points out. "Then we have organic bed linen, pillowcases and towels... all this adds up in costs."

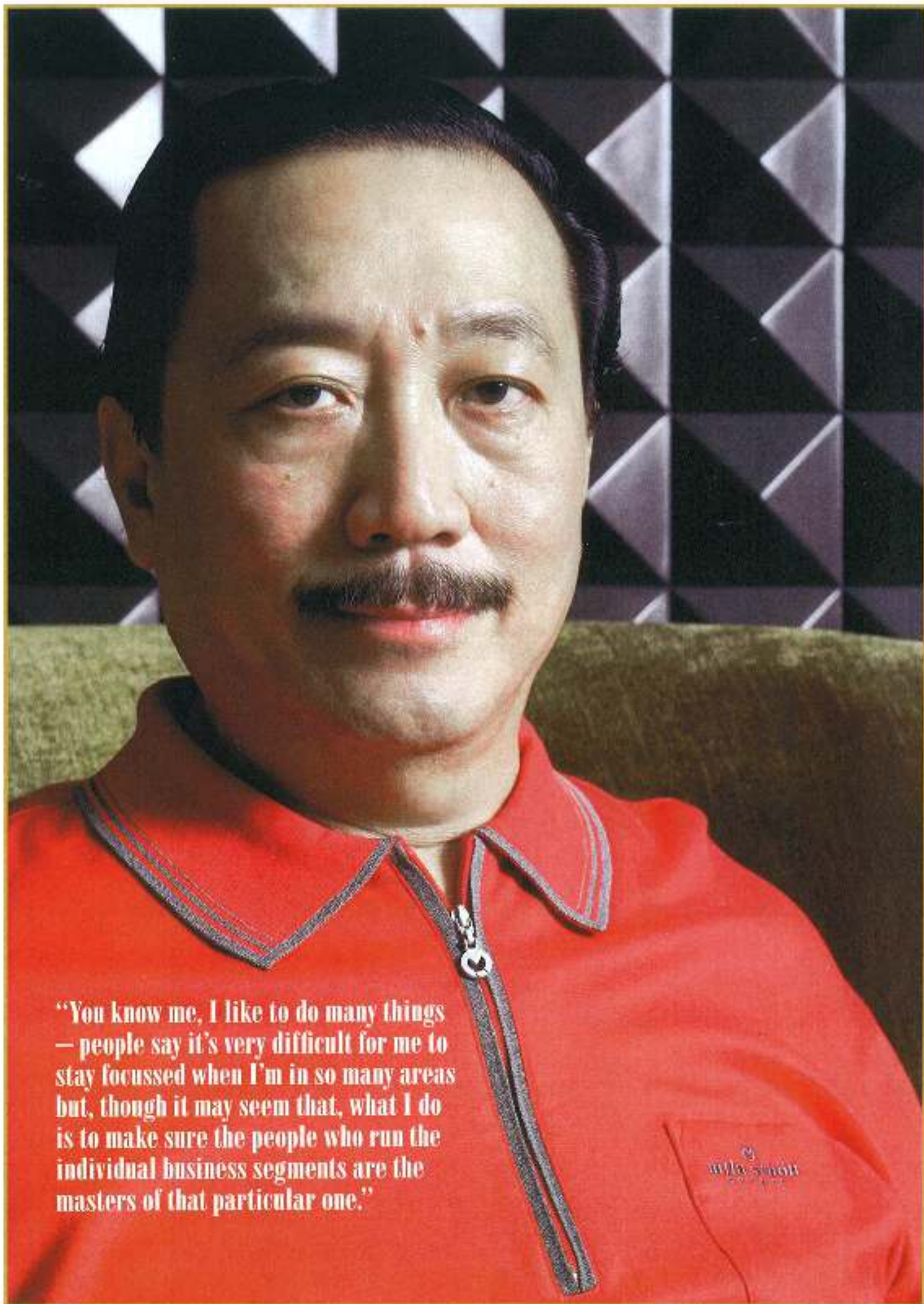
Tan Sri Vincent is pleased, however, at how everything has taken shape. "We've invested a lot but it is worth it. This resort proves that when you put effort into a project, you can build a nice place," he says. "We were lucky that our interior design has done a great job as well." Those who visit The Chateau can certainly attest to the opulent furnishings and beautifully landscaped grounds. From the LeRouge lobby bar to the L'Assiette French fine dine, one finds plush decor which pulls them into an extraordinary world of pomp, an escape from urban realities. Along the corridors that lead into the rooms, one's senses are continually delighted by the waft of lavender, fragrant blooms and birdsong. Through the crevices and above the ramparts, rays of golden sun stream through, bringing its gentle warmth.

This whole idyllic scene is the lucky and, perhaps, unintentional outcome of Tan Sri Vincent's commitment to replicate the authenticity of the commune of Colmar in north-eastern France. Having firmly planted his flag in this spa and organic wellness resort territory, he's pulled out all the stops to show what he can make of it. "We would all like to manage and operate a top resort – and this one is so unique we don't need to rely on the big names in hospitality to manage and market it," he says. "On its own, the organic wellness concept is so unique – and if we do a good job, it can fly."

EARNING ITS STARS (AND STRIPES)

Later that evening, a crowd of around 150 guests, including the Crown Prince of Pahang, HRH Tengku Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah, diplomats and senior executives of Berjaya Corporation, sat down to an eclectic six-course dinner, whilst serenaded by an operatic performance from Samantha Chew, accompanied by the Harmony & Rhythm Strings chamber group. In this rarefied atmosphere, the guests witnessed the presentation of awards by Seven Stars and Stripes President and Founder, Thorsten Buehmann, to The Chateau.

Buehmann's organisation judges resorts, hotels, airlines and restaurants across the globe with an international advisory board consisting of personalities recognised as authorities in their own fields. Members of this advisory board apply the standards of the trademarked



“You know me, I like to do many things — people say it’s very difficult for me to stay focussed when I’m in so many areas but, though it may seem that, what I do is to make sure the people who run the individual business segments are the masters of that particular one.”

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WORLDWIDE



A World First

The Chateau's range of spa and organic wellness offerings at a glance.

ADDRESS: KM48, Persimpangan Bertingkat, Lebuhraya Karak, 28750 Bukit Tinggi, Pahang.

TEL: (6)09-221 3888

NUMBER OF ROOMS: 200, with classique, deluxe, premier types, spa suits, 1-, 2- and 3-bedroom suits and the 175 sqm Sun Altesse Suite.

SPA: La Santé – a state-of-art organic European-inspired spa with herbal bath, salt grotto/mud chamber, soap brush/aquavida-heated bed with automated body exfoliation facility. Relaxation whirlpools, manicure and pedicure cabins, outdoor relaxation, couple suites, deluxe couple suites with hydro bath and a hair salon.

F&B: L'Assiette – French fine dining with organic cuisine; La Vie – all-day dining; Belle Vue – tea room serving organic tea, coffee and snacks; LeRouge – lobby bar with wide selection of organic beverages; and Salon – cigar lounge with selection of organic and non-organic wines, spirits and cocktails.

OTHER AMENITIES: Swimming pool, 18-hole award-winning golf course, sport complex, garden terraces.

NEARBY: Berjaya Hills Golf & Country Club, Japanese Garden & Tatami Spa, Organic Farm, Berjaya Hill's Horse Trails, Botanical Garden.

WEBSITE: www.thechateau.com.my

this is the dream," he says. "I have a big piece of real estate now which will be more valuable in time to come."

That positivity in his frame of mind is a good indication of just why Tan Sri Vincent continues to blaze his own trail in the corporate sphere. To switch off, he enjoys scuba diving, snorkelling, swimming and working out at the gym. "I'm going to turn 60 in a few months and, so, I've got to stay fit," he says, before adding dryly, "I've got a lot of businesses, a lot of responsibilities."

From humble beginnings, where he was first a clerk and insurance agent, the man from Batu Pahat in Johor credits persistence as the key to his rise in life. "In my experience, you should not give up easily as there are bound to be obstacles and discouragement along the way," he says. "Generally people are negative and discouraging but we must not let it affect us. The key is to stay focussed on our goal so we can become successful."

Happiness, according to Tan Sri Vincent, is found simply in being able to meet the challenges in his life. He admits to having taken several big 'crazy' risks in his career but, "as the years have passed, I look more and more sane." In the case of The Chateau – which he calls his dream project – he says: "I hope with the support from friends...the people that visit us, this investment will pay off and I won't look so crazy," he says, jokingly adding, "and because I'm the biggest shareholder, I can afford to dream a little longer." ■