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### **Hotel president on staying down to earth**

Ed Fuller compares himself to Clooney's character in *Up in the Air*, having clocked up 15 million air miles. But the value of his travels lies in the lessons along the way. As Marriott's president and MD, he has his feet firmly on the ground and believes in getting the job done

By Shiva Kumar Thekkepat, Friday magazine  
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**Friday**



Image Credit: Silvia Baron/ANM Ed Fuller believes in taking the time to meet face-to-face.



Ed Fuller travels an average of 650,000km a year by air. Yet Marriott's president and managing director of international lodging says one of his biggest frustrations is not having enough time to travel more.

Fuller's travels strengthened his belief that good leadership means getting away from the desk and building personal relationships, face to face. It even inspired him to write a book - *You Can't Lead with Your Feet on the Desk*. He got the chance to put his approach to the test recently when political chaos overtook Egypt, home to seven Marriott hotels. Fuller was in Washington DC when the news broke and he immediately flew to Cairo.

There he saw just how dedicated the Marriott staff were to ensuring the guests' safety. They stayed over at the hotel for days, not returning to their families in the city, to make sure the guests were safe. "That kind of loyalty can only come when management shows a real interest in their well-being and forms genuine relationships," he says.

Fuller, a former US Army Captain who earned a Bronze Star and the Army Commendation Medal in Vietnam, has lived through political turmoil in many countries. And sometimes he has to lead from his desk too, like recently when he helped Marriott guests and staff caught in the crossfire in Libya get out of the country. Fuller and his associates used personal goodwill and ingenuity to get over 200 Marriott guests and staff out safely.

In his book, he compares his feat in flying so many air miles to that of Hollywood actor George Clooney's



character in *Up in the Air*. "I said I am not George Clooney, though some days I wish I was as I wouldn't have to work as hard!" he says deadpan.

## **Work**

I realised the importance of people early in my life, and the job I have been in over the past 21 years continues to reiterate that. You can't really understand what your customer wants, what your associates or business partners need if you don't spend time with them one-on-one. This interview could have been conducted over the phone but I think it is much better sitting across from each other and talking.

In cultures outside the US, such face-to-face interaction is central to doing business. The rules, whether you are in Asia or in the Middle East, require you to spend time one-on-one with people. Recently, I had a meeting with someone in Oman where I first spent time talking to him about his family, the country's history, and so on, before we got down to a business conversation. It would have been considered insensitive to do otherwise.

Personal interaction was very important for me even as a child. I am an extrovert, so I need to interact with people all the time. What I learnt during the course of my childhood influences the way I deal and work with people. I don't mean to suggest that everybody has to be an extrovert but I think people, no matter their style, need to interact more with others in order to be more effective. I am lucky that I happen to enjoy it.

I was a typical American, content in my part of the pond, up until I joined the army and I realised there was



something on the other side of it. I had never left the US and had a very insular view of the world. The army job took me to Germany. I spent two years there and I thoroughly enjoyed the interaction with the people of Germany. I later went to Vietnam during the war and experienced some bad, good and fair things. Through all these mixed experiences what I loved the most was the people. I was in the Military Assistance Command Vietnam, I also served with a Korean unit, and later on served in Thailand. These interludes helped me appreciate Asia, its culture, history and I developed some strong friendships.

I believe it also gave me experience in leadership. My time in Germany convinced me that you could work for a large company in a relatively smaller capacity and still bring about a change. In my job in the US Army, I literally grew up to rewrite the organisational structure and make some significant changes despite being a lowly lieutenant. I gained a lot of self-confidence in the process. Of course, there were some negatives like the fact that you are fighting a war to begin with but there were also things to be learnt every step of the way.

The people I worked with all played a big role in my life. When I went to work for Marriott, the philosophy of the company was a huge force that shaped me. I thoroughly enjoy meeting people in their country, amidst their own surroundings. The biggest buzz I get is seeing the Marriott staff grow and its people develop. We have 75,000 associates and over 6,000 managers globally. In my 21 years with the group, I have watched many of them progress from junior associates to supervisory associates.



I love the hotel business. Every day there is something new. There is nothing routine about my job.

## **Play**

While I was growing up my parents were my biggest influence, naturally. My father was a salesman so he used to interact with other people and I learnt a lot from observing him.

I started a little neighbourhood newspaper called Westwood Acre News when I was eight years old. I sold it for two cents a copy and I got advertisements for \$10 (around Dh36,70). We used a little mimeograph machine that I got from a kids' store. We produced the paper every Saturday and I had a distribution group. So I was interested in business even at that age. I was the business manager of my high school's newspaper, which I also edited, and I was the business manager in college too. So each step just kept moving me closer and closer to what I would do in the future.

To relax I don't have to go to any resort. I just need to go home - Laguna Hills, California - which is a resort destination, and I love that. It appeals to my sense of humour.

I am not a very sporty person, I play golf more to relax after a hard day's work than for exercise. I like photography and to travel and these hobbies feed each other. My partner, Marsha, and I enjoy going to the theatre and movies. I love Hollywood movies, and also find music from the 1980s particularly relaxing.

Ice hockey is the one sport that has me up and rooting for my team, Anaheim Ducks.



I've never experienced the life-changing experience of being a father though my first marriage lasted 27 years. Marsha has a daughter and a granddaughter who I enjoy being with.

Some days I'd rather relax with a book - mysteries and adventure novels fit the bill. But my true passion is for history. I devour history books with the same passion that I travel. I also like to explore historical places when I am on vacation, so I can combine both my passions.

### **Dream**

My first dream was to become a pilot. But then reality kicked in. My eye doctor told me that I would either land the plane several metres before or over the runway, and occasionally I would hit the runway. Your dreams have to be re-dreamt sometimes. I wanted to go out into the world and acquire an international outlook. I wanted to change my attitude, and that came about through my time in the military, two years in Germany and a year in Vietnam. I was excited about that. So my dreams changed.

I have always enjoyed the interaction, the complexity and the need to understand the history of other countries and cultures. So I dreamt about getting involved in the international arena and it came true.

Some of my dreams have to do with my compatriots. I don't think Americans have travelled enough or are open-minded enough about other cultures. America, if you look at our history, is isolated. Historically, we have pretty much been on our own. We were isolated by two oceans. This insulation does not give us the right perspective on what is happening out there. And that I



believe is the reason America is lagging behind in terms of a global perspective. I dream of a day when Americans will be able to embrace the world, and what it has to offer.

I try to encourage people to travel because any American who travels and spends time overseas and is open to communication, to learning, will come back a different person. But that's also true for everyone; I think people of the world have to spend time in different cultures to be able to appreciate them.

Where my job is concerned, my dream is to establish the Marriott brand in Africa. Africa is a challenge, an open canvas that needs to be painted. In other markets we are looking to set up our secondary brands like the Marriott Executive Apartments or the Fairfield Inns.

I also dream of peace. I have fought in wars so I know the value of peace.