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**The Big Interview:
Ricky Kapoor, MD of The Edinburgh Collection**

His extensive business interests include high-profile hotels, city-centre office space and a wine bar.

And entrepreneur Ricky Kapoor stresses his attention to detail extends to regularly checking that at the latter, the Sancerre is not only of a suitable standard, but “at the right temperature”, he laughs.

In fact, many meetings take place at his Blackfriars Wine Bar in London’s Southwark, but Kapoor also boasts a flourishing portfolio in the Scottish capital, as well as its UK counterpart, splitting his time between the two locations.

The Edinburgh Collection, where he is also MD, in April announced its completed acquisition of Princes Street Suites. The deal saw that property join a portfolio spanning key locations in Auld Reekie, encompassing the three-star Old Waverley Hotel on Princes Street; the four-star Holyrood ApartHotel serviced apartments in the shadow of Arthur’s Seat; and the “business class” Haymarket Hub Hotel located just opposite the train station of the same name.

Kapoor – whose brother, Sheetal, is chief executive of The Edinburgh Collection – said after the Princes Street Suites deal was concluded that Edinburgh offered a “robust market, where we are long-term investors”. He continued: “The Edinburgh Collection is well-placed to cater to this, with each of our Edinburgh properties offering its own unique character, appealing to a different kind of customer.”

Kapoor flags up plans to invest “quite substantially” in the site – just as his company made big adjustments on taking over the Old Waverley, imposing a lateral rethink that saw it boost its rooms from 66 to above 80. It even converted a management office with an enviable view over Princes Street (“there was absolutely no need for that”) into accommodation.

The Holyrood ApartHotel was bought in March 2010, followed that December by high-end, high-profile properties Channings and The Howard.

It was decided to market the four properties under a new brand, The Edinburgh Collection, whose name was chosen not least because the online domain name was available.

Buying Channings and The Howard “put The Edinburgh Collection on the map”, states Kapoor, although the hotels were sold on in what was branded a “shock” deal announced in 2017 to residential property developer Square and Crescent.

Kapoor said when the deal was announced that the focus of The Edinburgh Collection was “to provide a greater number of affordable hotel bedrooms to visitors to the capital... we are actively looking, therefore, to re-invest the money from the sale of the hotels back into the buoyant local tourism market in line with our overall direction”.



'We enjoy the business and we just want it to continue to grow,' says Kapoor. Picture: Lisa Ferguson.

Joining the collection in July 2017 was The Tune Hotel in Haymarket, which on the change of ownership was immediately rebranded the Haymarket Hub Hotel. Changes at that venue included scrapping additional charges for amenities such as hairdryers and TV remote controls, which Kapoor notes wouldn't suit business travellers, a key market given the hotel's proximity to, the Edinburgh International Conference Centre.

The hotel boss says that he couldn't change the size of the rooms, but focused on upping the quality, for example by introducing toiletries from The White Company, better bed linen, free bottled water, and smartphones.

"All of the properties we've bought, we like to invest in them, reposition them and work them well, and subsequently refinance to see how we can do the next deal," he says.

Kapoor grew up around the hospitality trade, working as a youngster in the family hotel booking business which operated from kiosks at airports and railway stations.

This took up his holidays. "It was something to do, and it was good fun – I enjoyed the sales aspect of it," he says. But he then headed off to university, determined to carve out his own niche.

"I wanted to have a blue-chip career where I was working in, maybe, a large manufacturing company." His business management degree dissertation was on total quality control as applied to organisations.

But when Kapoor was invited back into the family firm, he couldn't resist the opportunity it offered to tackle his student overdraft. And he was further convinced by brother Sheetal, who was in a senior role, and told him that the firm was about to rebrand as Thomas Cook Hotel Reservations, "and we're going to be the first UK company to be branded as Thomas Cook without actually being owned by them".

Kapoor worked on the retail desks in London for a couple of years, but jumped at the "exciting" opportunity to manage the Scottish operation, opening new outlets in Edinburgh and Glasgow.

He moved to the capital and also extended the network to Inverness and Aberdeen. The firm then also set up a corporate hotel reservations business – First Option Hotel Reservations – in Stockport.

"I got involved in corporate sales in Edinburgh whilst looking after the retail units as well," he continues. Accounts included the Scottish Office, Kingfisher Group and pharmacy chain Boots; "good blue-chip organisations using our corporate hotel booking agency services".

He later moved to Stockport, where he and Sheetal took up an "opportunity we couldn't refuse" to sell the corporate hotel booking agency business to Lastminute.com. He worked for the online travel giant for a year.

But the duo had already snapped up their first hotel in Edinburgh – the Old Waverley – in 2003, at the time having no plans to sell the agency business the following year. "We thought, 'we know we're putting a lot of business into Edinburgh. We have this retail business, but we also have some large corporate business going into Edinburgh, for government departments and corporates.'"

It's clear the brothers had been bitten by the hotel-ownership bug. Fast-forward to the present day, and expansion of the portfolio is now very much on the cards.

There is a "great desire" to own a hotel in London, but the Kapoors are also eyeing cities such as Glasgow, Manchester, and Birmingham. "We like the key metro cities close to railway station locations," says Kapoor.

Colliers International in March published its UK Hotels Market Index, with Edinburgh remaining at the top, "with a strong active pipeline and performance" although London held on to its crown as the top-performing market for revenue per available room.

But Kapoor says he and Sheetal don't see themselves as typical hoteliers but rather businessmen – with The Edinburgh Collection sitting under the family's Palm Holdings group, where Ricky is UK MD, and which also includes Europoint Centre serviced offices in London, and extends to hotels in the US and Canada.

The pair are focused on the UK, and in terms of how any expansion would fit in branding-wise with the Edinburgh Collection, Kapoor says that in other locations there could be an expansion of what it has done with the Haymarket Hub, “so it could be part of the Hub collection if we find similar kinds of properties.

“We're not afraid of keeping it independent but also we work well with our wider family group in North America, so we're very open to working with chain hotels as well. It all depends on the opportunity – the size, scale and location.”

Kapoor is a keen philanthropist. The Edinburgh Collection supports Social Bite, for example, and Ricky has taken part in its sleepouts.

He has also worked with Entrepreneurial Scotland, as well as hospitality trade bodies such as The Association of Serviced Apartment Providers. “I love networking, I love getting involved in some of these associations, where we share ideas.”

Kapoor favours a “common sense” approach when it comes to business, citing the maxim that “turnover is vanity, profit is sanity – but cashflow is king”.

But he also acknowledges the challenges involved in running the business, with increasing costs, such as payroll and utilities, “so we've got these pressures and we're always trying to see how can we become more efficient while the hotel market continues to evolve.

“We've certainly seen change – but it's about embracing that change and we ourselves are looking at products and services that we feel work well for what the customer is requiring today.”

Looking five years down the line, Kapoor is aiming to have a “robust” business. “I think we will have a London hotel by then and hopefully we'll have a few others.

“We enjoy what we do, we enjoy the business and we just want it to continue to grow. We don't want to grow just for the sake of growing, where we lose control. We want to grow at a rate that we can control with a good management team behind it.”

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