

# Flowers blossom as Asia's last frontier is opening up

Set in the idyllic surroundings of Myanmar's National Kandawgy Botanical Gardens, the Culture of Flowers Festival (December 15 2019 – January 15 2020) attracted 600,000 flower aficionados in less than four weeks. Overseeing the event's major overhaul was Ibo Gülsen, managing director of IGMPR, Imagineering Horti Culture, who learned the ropes of the theme park business in China.



*Ibo Gülsen, managing director of IGMPR, Imagineering Horti Culture, learned the ropes of the theme park business in China.*

AUTHOR: RON VAN DER PLOEG PHOTOS: IGMPR

**T**alking in his office in the Hague, business developer Ibo Gülsen has a career spanning telecommunications, publishing and legal services. More recently, he has been active in the theme park business with The Culture of Flowers Festival in Myanmar being one of his latest projects.

## COLONIAL PAST

Myanmar, also known as Burma, was a British colony from 1824-1948 when it gained independence. According to Gülsen, one of the country's hidden gems is Pyin Oo Lin. "Rising 1000 metres above sea level, this town was once a mountain retreat for the colonial British, eager to escape from intense heat and humidity in Mandalay. Victorian and Edwardian-style houses and gardens such as National Kandawgy Botanical Gardens, modelled after Kew Gardens, still hint at its colonial past."

Frequently touted as Asia's last frontier, the country is said to present a great opportunity for investment and growth. Business experts mention the country's vicinity to a market of half a billion people and predict that Myanmar could quadruple the size of its economy, from \$45 billion in 2010 to over \$200 billion in 2030.

## GROWTH POTENTIAL

Gülsen, recalls how impressed he was by the country's beauty and growth potential when he first arrived in the spring of 2019. "One of my friends, who works for the European Chamber of Commerce in Myanmar in Yangon, invited me to come over. He brought me into contact with representatives of HTOO, an established Myanmar holding company with diversified investments in trading, construction and finances. Leisure and recreation is also part of their portfolio with the group managing Yangon Zoo and the Kandawgy

Botanical Gardens. No stranger to building gardens and flower shows in China, I was especially keen to learn more about HTOO's green-fingered activities."

## GUANGZHOU AND DAFENG

Gülsen became a garden and garden show advocate by accident, he explains. "Back in 2013, in my capacity as China business development manager for Dutch bulb suppliers, I met with horticultural entrepreneurs from the Guangzhou area who were thinking up big plans for a 100ha permanent flower show in combination with a trading platform and consumer brand to build customer loyalty. Part of the plan was a Dutch garden and for its realisation Jan Guldemond, former head designer at Keukenhof and I brought together five Dutch bulb suppliers.

The Guangzhou project was trial and error and failed to realise full potential. Gülsen says, "However,





thanks to the Dutch diplomatic network I got to know people from Dafeng who were busy developing Holland Flower Park, a giant theme park in Jiangsu province, modelled after a seventeenth-century Dutch village including tulip fields and authentic Dutch architecture. I joined the Dafeng organisation in 2015 to help expand their business.”

#### CAPITAL INTENSIVE BUSINESS

Dafeng, says Gülsen, gave him a reason to stay in China and dig deeper into the theme park industry, a capital intensive business which requires careful site planning and significant investments in technology, construction, maintenance and IP agreements. It is an industry that is caught up in a never-ending race to keep visitors engaged and entertained with new attractions. Gülsen notes, “Take the Culture of Flowers Festival in Myanmar

*One of the most striking elements of the flower festival was the use of immersive displays allowing visitors to address the hunger of selfie-taking millennials.*

*Garden tourism has been growing significantly over the past few years.*

where only flowers and plants, design and installations account for a relatively small proportion of the operational budget, whereas general infrastructure, depreciation, salaries and a cultural programme put on a lot of financial weight.”

#### FUN

Gülsen thinks that the key characteristic for theme park success is making them fun for people of all ages and is somewhat reluctant when he hears about horticultural expos adopting sustainability themes which often come with a high dose of morality and doom, which are often difficult to relate to people’s daily lives and understanding. Not so in Myanmar. Judging from the photos, visitors had plenty of fun taking part in the flower festival which included an amazing maze of sunflowers a flower fashion parade, a huge flower selfie spot, a food festival and themed areas highlighting floral traditions. One of the most striking elements of the flower festival was the use of immersive displays allowing visitors to address the hunger of selfie-taking millennials. Gülsen notes, “Except for one large scale lily and bedding plant grower, the commercial production of ornamentals in Myanmar is still in its infancy. Bedding plants for the Festival were sourced locally but ice-packed cut flowers were trucked from Kunming. This journey involved a three-day drive. I remember how the first shipment caused consternation with flowers

arriving in rather poor condition. However, blooms started to revive quickly. The show’s Amazing Maze, celebrating Van Gogh paintings, included 25,000 sunflowers which had to be replaced three times during the event.”

#### MAJOR OVERHAUL

The festival took place from December 15 2019 to January 15, 2020 and attracted 600,000 flower aficionados. Gülsen says, “National Kandawgy Botanical Gardens first opened its gates in 1915 and has hosted an annual flower festival in December since 2006. 2019 marked the first major overhaul of what was before predominantly a bedding plant showcase. By adopting an overall theme and story-line, and expanding the wow factor, organisers could double entrance fees (from 0.80 eurocents to 1,60 cents!!).” Gülsen concludes, “Garden tourism has been growing significantly over the past few years and there are 100+ gardens around the world that consistently attract 1 to 2 million visitors each year. Taking into consideration the adverse weather conditions during most of the Festival we are happy with the end result. Kandawgy is state-owned but its management is outsourced. Working with HTOO was a real pleasure. Communication was instantaneous and the entire team brought enthusiasm and flexibility. Talks for the 2020/2021 event are already underway. All plans will be subject to a number of health and safety measures.”

