

AS THE ENGINES OF HIS Airbus A319 'Kingliner' roared into life and the aircraft lifted off the runway at Stansted airport, Dr Vijay Mallya – airline and brewery tycoon, racing driver, yachtsman, politician, and India's third richest man – sat back in his throne-like seat and began flicking casually through a helicopter catalogue.

Ever in good spirits, Mallya is a substantial figure in every sense. He may be relatively unfamiliar outside India, but for how much longer? In March 2007 he is expected to announce the success of his \$1bn bid for Whyte & Mackay, the Scotch whisky group, which will take UB Group, his beer and spirits behemoth, to within a short measure of rivaling Pernod-Ricard as the world's second-largest drinks company.

Kingfisher beer, his most famous brand, rinses down millions of curries all over the world. In May 2005, in a masterstroke of brand leveraging, Mallya transposed the Kingfisher brand onto a start-up airline: Kingfisher Airlines (alcohol advertising is banned in India), which will go global later this year. To underscore his global ambitions, Mallya recently

King of good times

bought 20 wide-bodied Airbuses, including five A380 super jumbos and A345s, which will fly non-stop between India and the USA, linking the silicon valleys of San Francisco and Bangalore, the IT capital of India.

'The Indian airline industry is growing at 50 per cent a year. Twenty per cent of that is low-fare madness, the other 30 per cent is sustainable growth. I have a vision for 2010 that we should be India's largest airline. To maintain quality while growing so explosively is critically important.'

Mallya cuts a far more colourful dash than his billionaire Indian peers, the almost invisible Mittals, Rubens, Hinduja and Tatas. He owns 14 private residences, including properties in the USA, London, Monaco, South Africa and India, as well as a castle in Scotland and a string of islands just north of the Maldives; his Kingfisher Villa in Goa is one kilometre long. He dabbles in yachting, racehorses and South African game lodges, as well as a 240-strong classic car collection based on the west coast of the USA, where his wife and two daughters live. He chairs two rival Indian motorsports organisations and is working to bring India's first F1 Grand Prix to Delhi in 2009. He is also an independent member of the Upper House of the Indian Parliament in Delhi, where he has represented Karnataka State since 2002. He speaks eight languages, is a qualified a scuba diver, musician, art collector, interior designer, host extraordinaire, doting parent, loving husband and fixed-wing pilot. 'My ultimate objective,' he says, 'is to pilot a Kingfisher Airlines A380 super jumbo.' Unlike many driven men, he radiates personal charm and warmth, and is the sort of chap with whom you could spend an excellent evening's entertainment.

Tycoon Vijay Mallya has been called larger than life. Rory Ross catches up with him and decides that life is simply smaller than India's most flamboyant entrepreneur

Mallya is the role model to the rising Indian consumer classes. Although 350 million Indians survive on less than a dollar a day, the country has the second-fastest growing economy in the world. On the 2006 Forbes rich list, India boasted 10 new billionaires (23 in total), second only to the United States. By 2020, India will be richer than any single European nation; by 2040, it will be wealthier than America. If anyone embodies this economic superpower in waiting, it's Mallya.

Shortly after we touch down in Delhi the following morning, Mallya appears from his bedroom at the back of his Airbus ready to eat the day, dressed in a blazer and tasseled shoes, with a flash of silk in his top pocket touched off with the first cigarillo of the morning. 'He is one of few men,' says Prasad Bidappa, India's leading stylist, 'who can carry off jewellery with an unapologetic verve that defines the true übersexual.'

Mallya is in Delhi on political business. We arrange to meet again in Mumbai the following day. Shadowing Mallya are two tall ex-army close-protection bodyguards. Mallya himself dispenses with the usual

business impedimenta, papers and briefcases, in favour of a BlackBerry. His sole piece of luggage is a small Louis Vuitton handbag which one of his his bodyguards totes.

I later learn that Mallya has four private jets: the Airbus, a Hawker, a Gulfstream and a Boeing 727. Speed is the leitmotif of Mallya's life. 'He's a modern-day Maharaja who rides aeroplanes instead of elephants,' says his friend Neeraj Rawal. No single jet can keep up with him. In 2005, he put in 1,600 hours on his Boeing. 'The Airbus is my home,' Mallya told me. 'I keep my wardrobe in the back. I am on a plane almost every day, sometimes several times a day.' One evening during my six-day tour with Mallya, we flew from Mumbai to Bangalore to spend 15 minutes at the wedding of his group treasurer's son, then flew back to Mumbai, a 1,000 mile round trip. 'The jets are highly effective business tools,' says Vijay Rekhi, President of United Spirits, Mallya's whisky and vodka division. 'Flying with Dr Mallya is the only time when you have his undivided and uninterrupted attention.'

Tushita Patel, Mallya's political secretary, captures Mallya's awesome working style: 'Even before his aircraft can touch down, half the office shifts to the runway – with papers, phones, laptops. We work in the plane, then in the car, then in the office, continue at home, pool, disco, back to the car, back to the plane, till the rest of us can stand no more and VJM, changing hats from industrialist to darling-of-the media to racehorse owner to Member of Parliament, enters his 64th hour of work and dictates his nth letter – perfect in grammar, syntax, thought and diction. By then, three secretaries have changed shifts. Working for



PHOTOGRAPH: PETER DENCH



From left: Vijay Mallya with his son Sidhartha; Mallya enjoys burning rubber on the Sholavaram track; Mallya is a keen sportsman and cricket is another passion



'I like to enjoy myself. It took time for the media to come to terms with that'

Vijay is like being a victim of Stockholm syndrome. We slog, we fail, we get breathless. But it's impossible to leave. We are addicted to the energy and excitement, love, generosity, kindness and decency, and we admire the courage. It's not about the job. It's about faith. He's a rock star and we really are his groupies.'

The main source of Mallya's wealth is UB Group's beer and spirits divisions which account for 75 per cent of UB's \$2.5 billion turnover, control 60 per cent of the Indian market, and 10 per cent of the global beer and spirits market. Almost all sales, however, are derived from India, indicating just how vast the Sub-Continental economy has become.

Mallya is answering the needs and aspirations of India's new consumer classes, the target of every global lifestyle brand. 'We are the world's youngest nation,' Mallya tells me. 'Fifty per cent of India's population is under 25. Their needs are constantly evolving. They want better quality and superior experiences, and they have money to spend.' He threw into the conversation that the success of the Louis Vuitton store in Mumbai has surprised even Louis Vuitton. Two days later, we are off to the races. Mallya has turf business to sort out at Mumbai racetrack, where he is heading a committee to introduce evening racing. The turf may be a hobby for Mallya, but that is no reason not to do it in grand style. India's second biggest owner/breeder, he owns 100 thoroughbred racehorses, and 250 horses at stud at his 300-year-old farm Kunigal.

'I started racing in 1983,' he tells me in his box. 'My father was dead against it. I have never gambled and never will, but I have won almost every big classic in India, including the Derby four times. In my first Derby, my horses finished first, second and third.'

Mallya concurs with his 'King of Good Times' moniker, lifted from the branding of Kingfisher beer. 'No point in being in denial,' he says. 'I like to enjoy myself. It took time for the media to come to terms with that. They started off calling me a playboy, and since then have used every adjective except "frivolous". I am not

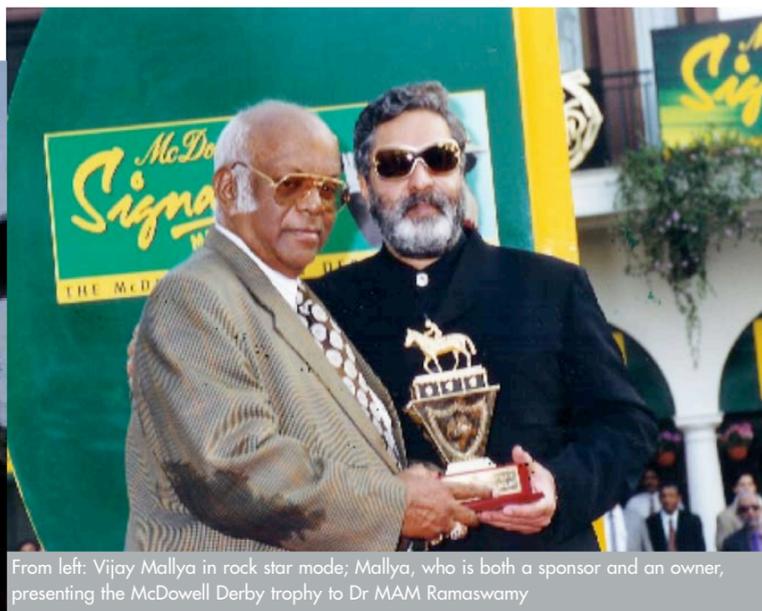
apologetic about how I live, if I don't live off other people's money.'

Mallya's ascent has been achieved thanks to a combination of a fortunate birthright, the galvanising early loss of his father, a series of audacious and brilliantly executed deals, and finely honed people skills, combined with a grasp of the Indian market that have allowed him to ride a transformation in lifestyles.

Vijay's father, Vittal Mallya, son of an Indian army doctor, shrewdly bought shares in United Breweries when prohibition was mooted. He believed prohibition was unworkable, and snapped up rival breweries at depressed prices. He was proved correct. When prohibition was dropped five years later, UB Group took off.

Vijay says his relationship with his father was a 'close emotional relationship but tough professional relationship,' adding that, 'He was a man of exacting standards and a strict disciplinarian. I was an average student. "Look son," he said, "you are a mid-ranker, which is not acceptable." So I put my mind to it, and for the last three years in college topped the class in everything.' On 13 October 1983, Vittal Mallya dropped dead of a heart attack at 59. 'I became chairman at 27,' says Vijay. 'My industry peers were in their 50s. I stuck out like a sore thumb. I was branded a playboy, but what 27-year-old doesn't like fast cars, discos and planes?'

In 1985, the government launched a tax investigation into UB Group. 'They never pressed charges and I was exonerated,' says Mallya. 'But it left a bitter taste.' To escape the government's foreign exchange laws, Mallya exiled himself in London. Banned by law from spending a cent of UB's resources, in 1988, he fearlessly marched into the offices of HSBC and asked them to fund a 100 per cent leveraged bid for Berger paints. 'I made a personal guarantee and bought the group,' he says. 'In 1996, I sold Berger to the Malaysians and made a profit of \$66m. I told my mother, "This is my money. I made it. I didn't inherit it. If I buy a plane or yacht or fast car, no one can ever complain." The Indian media respected what I had achieved, and stopped all this



From left: Vijay Mallya in rock star mode; Mallya, who is both a sponsor and an owner, presenting the McDowell Derby trophy to Dr MAM Ramaswamy

playboy nonsense. So they called me “flamboyant” instead.’

In 2005, Mallya celebrated his 50th birthday with a five-day bash in Goa. Lionel Ritchie sang, and a squadron of Kingfisher jets performed a fly-past. Mallya’s 51st called for something a little more modest...

At the quayside by the Gateway of India, I board a dinghy and bounce out towards the angular 95-metre silhouette of *Indian Empress* at anchor. The crew is busy polishing windows and setting up a bar. Finally, Mallya appears – timekeeping seems to be his only flaw – radiant in white and fully bangled and braceleted, just as the buffed, varnished and polished Mumbai elite climb aboard to be plied with champagne and spoonfuls of caviar. Presents are soon piling up. When Mallya unwraps a bejewelled knuckle-duster, the roar of laughter seems to shake the yacht.

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Among the guests is Mallya’s mother, Lalitha. ‘I wouldn’t say Vijay excelled his father,’ she tells me. ‘Fifty years ago, everything was very different. Today there is globalisation. But Vijay’s vision was global even 10 years ago. His lifestyle may appear glitzy, but he is not doing it to be noticed. The jets are a necessity.’ The yachts, on the other hand, are another matter: besides *Indian Empress*, he owns *Indian Princess* (55m), and *Kalizma*, a 1906 steam yacht that once belonged to Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton.

His mother points out Mallya’s religious side. Whenever he takes delivery of a new jet, Mallya propitiates the deity by flying it to Tirupati, a temple town in Andhra Pradesh, where a priest blesses it on the tarmac. Mallya also makes pilgrimages to Sabarimalai in Kerala to pray to the deity, preceded by a 42-day abstinence. He walks for 10 kilometres in bare feet. He has done that for the last 19 years, says Mrs Mallya.

Mallya may have good reason to be thankful. One lucky escape occurred in 2003 while campaigning. His helicopter went into free-fall from 100 feet. ‘We hit the ground and broke into four pieces,’ he says. ‘I kicked open the door, jumped out and helped everyone else.

I brushed myself down and asked for another helicopter.’

Mallya also tops the hit lists of several terrorist groups. ‘Once they shot my helicopter,’ he says, yawning. Not surprisingly, Mallya’s wife Rekha prefers the space and security of the United States, where she lives with their daughters Leana and Tanya. Sidhartha, Mallya’s anointed heir and son by his first marriage, is studying at Queen Mary College in London.

The following morning, Mallya is due to speak in Parliament in Delhi. A conscientious parliamentarian, he has forged many cross-party friendships. The jets help. One of his fleet was dubbed the ‘Parliament Express’ after he took several MPs to South Africa to watch the cricket World Cup. On the flight back to Mumbai, Mallya airs his grievances with the Scotch Whisky Association. The SWA opposes his registering his spirits subsidiary McDowell & Co aboard; and they object to his use of Scottish imagery on the branding of his Indian whiskies: ‘They even tried to prevent me using Keillour Castle in Perthshire – which I own – on my whisky labels. Preposterous! What really annoys me are the double standards: they allow Seagram to call their Indian whisky Royal Stag. How much more unmistakably Scottish can you get than that?’. They also object to his use of ‘whisky’ for his Indian whiskies which are distilled from molasses not grain.’ If the end product tastes like whisky, you cannot challenge that it is not whisky. They permit Canadian whisky. Why not Indian?’

Ironically, should Mallya succeed in winning Whyte & Mackay, he will become a substantial member of the SWA himself, controlling £200m worth of stock, the Invergordon distillery, 140 brands dating from 1846, and a large European-wide distribution network. ‘It would actually be quite funny to sit in on the meetings,’ he grins.

With Mallya, what you see is what you get, captured in his personal philosophy: ‘I do things that suit me and not because people expect me to do things. I have made mistakes, but learnt to quickly move on to bigger challenges. I don’t dream, nor do I have any crutches in life.’

A journalist friend, M J Akbar, says that Mallya has created an image of himself that is part real and part shrewd. ‘Real because he likes to live king-size; and shrewd because it fools associates into underestimating him. It also sells his products. The UB Group must have done a thousand ad campaigns, but there has not yet been a campaign better than the life of Vijay Mallya. He isn’t larger than life. It’s just that life is smaller than him.’ ■