

HERITAGE HOTELS: BUILDING A
FUTURE BY PRESERVING THE PAST

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Ancient cobblestones, smoothed and rounded with the passing of time, stretch up over the hill to a place far beyond where the eye can see. Side by side, symmetrical in shape and shade, they line up to map out the final stage of a journey that is over a century old. Each stone, each of the tens of thousands needed to cover the paved route's final stages, bears through its edges and angles the tool-tapped signature of the stonemason who once, in a quarry hundreds of kilometers away, sat day after day under the hot Rajasthan sun shaping pieces of the path to a king's palace on a hill overlooking the city.

The sound of horse hooves, rhythmically clip-clop-clip-clop-clip-clopping away, vibrate off of the long, lingering, lightly carved sandstone walls that slowly transition from beige to rose as the sun sets. As the horses near the palace gates, the buggy's brass wheels start to slow, the carriage driver sounding the horses to a halt. The horses stand still, majestically, unmoving, aside from their heavily beating hearts regaining a hush following the long, continuously ascending trip to the entrance of the now clearly visible palace. Silence, with the exception of the sound of the horse's heavy, tired breathing, and, surely it can't be. Yes, it is. The sound of peacocks in the gardens beyond the gates.

At this altitude, high up above the city, the air is thin. And it smells of jasmine - that soothing scent that somehow seems to carry the message of *'you have arrived where you were meant to be.'* Slowly, the massive wooden doors of the palace, with their intricate artistic detailing yet fortress-strong structure, start to open...

Suddenly, like a gentle shower overhead, tiny fresh red rose petals start to fall, falling slowly through the air, finally reaching the cobblestones with a gentle patting sound.

Shoulders drop in relaxation, spirits lift in awe.

Once the traditional welcome for the Nizams, Maharajahs and other royal figures, today the ritual of greeting is showered upon tourists coming to stay at one of India's magnificent 'heritage hotels' – invaluable jewels in India's tourism crown.

And a clear, confident sign, that creation of the future of tourism in this incredible nation is not only about shaping and styling what lies ahead, it is also about safeguarding and showcasing what was the past.

PRECIOUS ASSETS

The travel and tourism sector is praised for many things – its ability to:

- move economies and societies forward;
- turn industry competitors into collaborators; its ability to find common ground of understanding across borders;
- turn pride and passion for place into productive citizenry;
- arrest the process of environmental and/or cultural decay, unlocking a programme for development;
- inspire a unifying vision of the future.

Uniquely, the travel and tourism sector also possesses a remarkable ability to turn back the clock - not just preserving the past, but giving the past a future.

It is the travel & tourism sector that can make it possible for the past to participate in the future:

- showcasing history harmoniously alongside modernity;
- offering new travellers of the world access to old worlds
- providing context to cities and communities;
- keeping art, and artisans, appreciated;
- sustaining age-old skills and jobs through new generations;

and, importantly, protecting precious assets of the past by giving them a purpose in the present.

'Heritage hotels' – ancient palaces scattered across the landscapes and history books of centuries old nations that operated (and in some cases, still operate) as royal households, are one such powerful example.

For tourists seeking exposure to, and immersion in, the luxurious history, art, culture, tastes, traditions and sentiments of chapters of a nation's (or region's) history, heritage hotels, many of which are now UNESCO World Heritage Sites, offer the opportunity. In heritage hotels travellers are able to visit, and stay in, a property continuing to live out traditional ways, gently and naturally weaving together the finer details of décor, service and cuisine with the modern demands of wifi and air conditioning. One may be forgiven for referring to the experience as '*hospitality theatre*'.

Globally, India's heritage hotels stand tall, with particular grace and dignity, as representations of excellence in repurposing historical properties in ways that make good tourism business sense, while maintaining their sentiment.

For travellers to India, the attraction of heritage hotels is obvious – exceptional opulence of experience, breathtakingly characterful and often times magical design, décor and detailing, unique directness of exposure to the lives and lifestyles of the royal elite in iconic times and places. Openly regarded as the most prestigious properties of the destination, guests are prepared to pay a premium for the opportunity to enter into such exclusive, majestic and often mysterious worlds.

For this reason, the value for the sector, commercially and strategically, has been clearly identified and embraced by tourism leaders, investors and developers. As expressed by HotelNewsNow.com,:

"Once viewed as ancient, deteriorating money pits, some of India's oldest building stock is finding new life as heritage hotels, an emerging accommodations segment that promises travelers unique guest experiences in historical settings. The Indian Heritage Hotels Association includes 170 hotels comprising approximately 8,000 rooms. And with the total number of heritage rooms in India counting fewer than 10% of the country's total hotel supply, there exists plenty of room to grow."

The Economic Times echoes the belief that old properties can yield rich, new returns, stating that.:

"Having royalty and grandeur as their USP, Indian heritage hotels are now seeking new ways to earn big bucks. While off-site business conferences are the chart toppers, shooting for films and soap operas are also picking up in a big way. Of course, weddings remain the traditional favourite. Mostly, scheduled in the off-season, film shootings and conferences increase the room occupancy by almost 15-20%, say experts."

GUARDIANS OF THE PAST, HOSTS OF THE PRESENT

Understanding the value of heritage hotels to a luxury hotel portfolio, at all levels, the *Taj Group of Hotels, Resorts and Palaces*, a part of India's history itself now being over a century old, today represents one of the world's leading guardians of heritage properties.

Blessed to be managing and/or owning numerous heritage properties across India (four 'Grand Palaces' in Jodhpur, Udaipur, Jaipur and Hyderabad, and 10 other heritage properties), the group has established a deserved reputation for its approach to taking such important, yet often severely weathered, historical palaces, bringing them to life in modern day business models that offer a win:win:win:win proposition for palace owners, the Taj Group, guests, and the destination.

Not to mention ensuring that the property acts as a vehicle for sustaining not just local history, but also local communities – residents, artisans, farmers, service providers, etc.

Taking on a heritage property, however, can present challenges to a hospitality business that often could never have been imagined. Time travel in engineering design, facilities refinement, and amenity incorporation can be overwhelming, time consuming, and expensive. Not to mention the need to provide world class, luxury segment service in a property overflowing with not just space, but also treasures, trinkets, tales and factoids begging for storytelling.

Still, the honour of becoming a part of a property with such significance can make it worth rising to the challenge.

The *Taj Falaknuma Palace Hotel* is one such magnificent challenge.

Built in 1894, and sitting 2000 feet above the city of Hyderabad, the palace is nested within 32 acres of land and spread over 19400 square meters. Commissioned by Sir Nawab Vikar-Ul-Umra, a Hyderabad nobleman, the palace took ten years to first be created to the highest of royal family standards and with the additional twist of a unique aerial signature scorpion shape for added symbolic protection.

It was in 1895 when Nizam VI bought the property for his residence until 1911, after which time it was used as a royal guesthouse for leading figures such as, amongst others, India's first President Dr. Rajendra Prasad. Ultimately, after India's independence at which time it became part of the Nizam's Trust (led by Princess Esra, the first wife of Nizam VIII, the current Nizam), the aging property rich in history and sentiment was caught in a downward spiral of natural architectural decay.

It was during the years that followed that a decision was taken to entrust the property to the expertise of the Taj Group through a lease arrangement. Since 1995, following a decade long restoration period, The Taj Group has sensitively and expertly transformed the palace into a 60 suite/room luxury hotel with facilities perfectly suited for both leisure and business guests. Importantly, traditions, rituals, stories and local sentiments are not just retained, but generously and sincerely shared with guests, increasing the emotional connection and memory embedding experienced by guests. The property's legendary grand 101-seater dining table is smoothly converted into a magnificent conference room table

As expressed by Girish Sehgal, the General Manager at the *Taj Falaknuma Palace Hotel*, who leads a staff team of over 250 people,:

"The Palace has a unique and significant history that dates back to the late 1800s. Every effort is made to offer differentiated luxury experiences and superior services in keeping

with the Nizams legendary hospitality. Within the Palace are large custom made Venetian chandeliers, rare furniture, a grand marble staircases which is an architectural marvel, gurgling fountains, priceless statues, stunning stained-glass windows, unique sketches and murals encased in ornate frames, one of its kind illusionary frescos, a world-class collection of crystal, and priceless objects d'art, apart from the well preserved European, Mughal, Rajasthani and Japanese gardens personally conceived by the Nizam."

Bringing the palace to life for guests is not, however, only about maintaining the structure of the property. It is also about the spirit. Sehgal continues,;

"High employee engagement is essential to deliver signature services, custom designed experiences, and embody the spirit of a unique Palace hotel. In addition to having a passionate and dedicated team, it is also important to identify and develop the very few artists who still carry on with the traditional art for example the 'Stucco work', frescos, rare optical illusionary art all done with natural dyes. This is essential to identify and deploy these artists to ensure the authentic look and feel of the Palace is maintained. In its under two years of opening, the palace has received several prestigious International awards and accolades; voted as the Asia and Indian Subcontinent's Best Hotel, and voted among the Top five hotels in the World in the 'Best of Best' list by Condé Nast Traveller's Reader's Travel Awards – 2012, to being recognized by The New York Times as among the 'Top 20 Places in the World' to visit."

For Sehgal, being the chief guardian of the palace is something he takes very personally.

"As a General Manager of one the most opulent Palaces in the world, I take responsibility for discovering the hidden jewels of the city, and work on promoting the destination as well along with the Andhra Pradesh Tourism Board. Our patrons have been our biggest inspiration for us to set new standards in luxury, and every detail has been personally restored under the supervision of Her Highness Princess Esra."

TOURISM – KEEPING HISTORY A TREASURE OF THE FUTURE

As so tirelessly demonstrated by heritage properties across India and across the world, the essence of heritage hotels is this - staying true to what travellers across the world plan for, save for, and journey to, with their hearts full of hope that their dream will be fulfilled: authenticity of experience.

Which is why today, as tourism destinations across the globe invest heavily and hopefully into building destinations in anticipation of what lies ahead, identification of riches of the future is best started by looking at riches of the past.

For as expressed by Dr Taleb Rifai, Secretary General of the UNWTO, while looking up at the intricately hand-painted ceilings and priceless, precious chandeliers of the *Taj Falaknuma Palace Hotel's* grand dining room while seated at the magnificent 101 seat dining room table so elegantly converted into a conference table for the next two days of Asian regional meetings, were it not for the tourism industry, these breathtaking architectural wonders would turn to rubble, and history would be lost.

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