

TOUCHED BY ROYALTY

The history and lore are filled with stories of the opulent lives and extravagant exploits of regality. Today, vivid remnants of their lifestyle still remain to enchant us.

BY CHITMAN KANWAR AHUJA

India, a land of luxury, the realm of *Maharajas*, an exotic landscape of amazing variety is home to praiseworthy palace hotels. If you're planning to come to India for a luxury holiday experience then these accommodations which are a destination in themselves, would make for your ideal dream come true. Previously the palaces, forts and mansions of the *Maharajas* of yesteryear, these grand residences have opened their doors to discerning travelers. Indian heritage hotels offer you a holiday you will never forget. Numerous emperors have ruled over India in the last few millennia, right from the Mauryan Empire in ancient *Magadha* to the Mughal Sultanate in north India from the 16th to the 19th century. Each empire had its own heritage and culture, marvelously captured in diverse forms of architecture and engineering. After India became a republic in 1950, the status of royalty was abolished and the royal privileges were gradually withdrawn. Since then, some of the exquisite royal residences have been conserved and converted into luxurious heritage hotels.

But turning a royal dwelling into a hotel isn't a simple architectural transformation; it mandates a sense of history and conservation to capture the unique essence of every property, not just its scale of opulence. Most of the royal families that either tie up with luxury chains or rope in architects to turn their homes into standalone hotels have a simple brief: Stick to the spirit and don't

fix anything that's not broken. We take you along on a grand experience, to explore the majestic palatial turned hospitality properties set amongst erstwhile *Rajputana* and the land of Nizams...

FALAKNUMA PALACE: HYDERABAD

For more than two centuries, until the middle of the 20th century, the *Nizams* ruled the Hyderabad state, a huge principality in central India. They had their own mint, which produced their own currency, had hundreds of millions of dollars in gold bullion, even more in precious gems and currency, Rolls Royce's galore and, their favorite little weakness, palaces, palaces, and yet more palaces.

The luxury bandwagon came to an abrupt halt in 1948, when the princely states were abolished by newly Independent India. The privy purse was confiscated, and no longer was there any cash to support a lifestyle that has gone down in history as one of the most decadent royal families of all time. While the royal abode was turned into a hotel,



Her Highness, Princess Esra, the former first wife of *Nizam Mukarram Jah*, supervised the restoration process, which took a full ten years.

A heritage palace with royal finesse, Falaknuma Palace is a 19th century palace which belonged to the Paigah Hyderabad state when built. It later became a regal residence of *Nizam Mehboob Ali Khan Bahadur*, in 1951 served the then-president Rajendra Prasad, and today serves as a luxurious hotel property. It's name, Falaknuma means a *Mirror of the Sky* or *Like the Sky* in Urdu.

From the first moment of your arrival, a yellow horse drawn carriage brings you up the mile-long drive, you feel as if you're entering a fantasy world. There's a Cinderella-like charm about it all, well it is a grand home indeed, so that aspect serves right. The carriage door is opened by a footman. Then, a standard bearer, golden standard held high before him,

leads you up the great curved stairway and into the palace itself.

Inside, a graceful vestibule leads into the main body of the scorpion palace. Walls and ceiling adorned in frescoes, it has at its heart a marble fountain and matching Greek urns. This being the Falaknuma, there's no reception desk, concierge, or bell-hop, none of trappings of normal five star hotels. Instead, there's the strong sense that you are a guest in the *Nizam's* own home.

The palace has 220 lavishly decorated rooms and 22 spacious halls, filled with the finest treasured collections of the *Nizams*. The Jade collection of the Falaknuma is considered to be one-of-its-kind in the world. It also has the largest collection of Venetian chandeliers, 40 in total. Even the library ceiling is monogrammed. Inspired by the one at Windsor Castle, the room has 6,000 rare volumes, including a series of oversized



1. Carriage Ride and entrance of the Falaknuma Palace
2. Azam Jah and Princess Durrusehvar - National Museum, Ministry of Culture, Government of India, New Delhi
3. Durbar Hall at the palace

leather-bound tomes entitled *Glimpses of the Nizam's Dominions*. Flicking through them, you get a sense of the limitless power and wealth held by the *Nizams*.



1. Facade of Lake Palace over Lake Pichola
2. Swimming pool at the palace hotel



LAKE PALACE: UDAIPUR

The Lake Palace appears floating amidst the turquoise water of Lake Pichola. It's almost hard to believe your eyes, once you see it. The white marble marvel appears to float above the water, all the while surrounded by the majestic ambience.

This small luxury hotel is voted India's most romantic hotel, a fact that could be attributed to the legend of this hotel. It is believed that *Jag Niwas*, better known as Lake Palace was built as a pleasure palace when the moonlight soiree of the young prince *Jagat Singh* along with the ladies of the *zenana* was caught by his father.

The Lake Palace is an awe inspiring fusion of the *Mewar's* diverse history of ethnic cultures with the European elements of architecture. Shot to fame internationally after the shooting

of the Bond film *Octopussy*, this floating palace set amidst a lake in Rajasthan is one of the most romantic hotels in the world, born of 16th century Indian aristocracy. This palace which was later turned into a heritage hotel, was built in 1743-46 during the reign of *Maharana Jagat Sigh II* of *Mewar* Dynasty. Today the hotel with its serene surrounding and undulating view of the *Aravali* mountain range is considered to be one of the best and luxurious honeymoon destination in India. An opulent experience from start to finish, beginning with a boat ride to the royal island, where guests are immediately welcomed with a shower of rose petals and a complimentary drink. The royal butlers who serve the guests in this hotel are actually the descendents of the butlers who served during the reign of erstwhile *Rajput* kings of *Udaipur*. The hotel with its royal charm has attracted many a royal dignitaries and celebrities from all around the globe. The clientele of the hotel include the likes of *Queen Elizabeth*, former first lady *Jacqueline Kennedy*, *Shah of Iran*, *Lord Kurzon* and *Vivian Leigh* among others. The *Grand Presidential Suite* spread across 1,734 square meters is named *Shambhu Prakash* Suite. The interior décor of this suite is characterised by seamless fusion of *Rajputana* style of architecture with European forms.

High curved arches, walls adorned with artifacts and lavish furnishings make this grand presidential suite one of the most exclusive luxury accommodation of its kind. The suite offers a mesmerising sunset view by the lake and *Aravalis*.

UMAID BHAWAN PALACE: JODHPUR

Named after *Maharaja Umaid Singh* of *Jodhpur*, it is known as the home of brave warriors. The palace has been transformed into a grand heritage hotel, designed as the right retreat for all who wish to enjoy a blend of traditional and contemporary hospitality. Situated on *Chittar* hills on the outskirts of *Jodhpur*. The magnificent palace is built with golden yellow sandstone, *Makrana* marble, which reflects the marvel of architecture soaked in history. The interior wooden works boast of *Burmese* wood, intricately carved out into perfection.

It has been built over a considerable period of time and much needed patience. With large luscious lawns on every corner of the hotel, this magnificently decorated property is a curious blend of identities, with a rich individuality. The ambience of the hotel provides you with an experience that is fit for a king. The palace replicates a heaven in the evening, as the musical fountains spring up synchronising itself with the rhythm of the music.

The regal suites of this hotel are grandiosely decorated and they are the original ones where the *Maharaja* and his consorts used to reside. The rooms are filled with original palace furniture that will transport you into the lives and times of the royal abode.

Rajasthan is famous for its delicious cuisine and this is also replicated in the culinary skills at the *Umaid Bhawan* Palace. Your taste buds would tingle after indulging in the delicious food of the *Marwar* Hall or the *Risala* restaurant of the hotel.

When one finds himself indulging in a royal affair it is essential to enjoy it, while you sit back and relax, having your drink to the melodious tunes of folk music. If you want to cherish the night then you can go for a *flaming torch* dinner arranged on the lawns of the garden. Apart from the brilliant arrangements of food and lodging you can get different elements to entertain yourself,

including few rounds of squash and croquet.

Most essential to visit is the outrageously black and gold painted *Oriental Room* featuring murals of the *Ramayana* by Polish artist *Stephan Norblin*. The private museum in the campus of the hotel provides extensive knowledge of the historical pasts. It houses exhibits of stuffed leopards and an impressive banner, which was a gift to *Maharaja Jaswant Singh* by the queen of *England*. It also hosts collections of clocks, inner photographs, memorabilia,

glasswares and all information related to the palace. The *darbar* hall of the museum hosts fine mural paintings and the compound showcases vintage cars of the palace.

History aside, the hotel is up to date on all the accoutrements essential to upscale travel, such as the spa, which is well equipped for an afternoon of aroma laden, oil rich bodily decadence. Best, it's located alongside the spectacular zodiac pool — an original element, aquamarine murals included.



1. Facade of Umaid Bhawan Palace
2. Courtyard of the palace hotel

