

Not willing to fade away into the sepia-tinted pages of history, the heritage properties are defiant and continuously rediscovering themselves, revealing the old, yet blending with the modern. We check out some of these as well as some new one's on the circuit.

HAUTE HERITAGE



Envision a heavily frescoed room as your backdrop for a million dollar deal or indulging in Cleopatra's bath in a 17th century *hammam* or, better still, getting wi-fi connectivity in your four-poster room. Staying at a heritage hotel across the country is slowly getting you this and much more.

Irresistible in their magnetism, these heritage hotels have been raking in the moolah by not being dusty, tethering or dilapidated. They have been evolving to become synonymous as idyllic getaways, be it for work, leisure or rejuvenation. While not selling short on their 'heritage' quotient they are now also peppering up their offerings with creature comforts to make your stay a little longer.

The desert...

It is the heritage hotels from across the tawny desertscape of Rajasthan, more than anyone else, that have been incorporating contemporary amenities and refining the rough edges. The dynamic duo of Aman Nath and Francis Wacziarg of Neemrana Palace-Hotels, who started off with a run down Fort-Palace in **Neemrana** (www.neemranahotels.com) added a swimming pool in 2000, and, in the last few years, a spa, a health club and conference facilities (last year).

Following the philosophy that today's corporate wants to combine work and play, three conference rooms – Jalgiri Mahal, Kasturi Mahal and the Darbar Mahal – were added during the first half of 2006. The stunning terrace pool with a breathtaking view of the countryside gets an addition of another pool this year.

So, now if you head there don't just

plan a weekend away. Also, the Aravallis make a better backdrop for a brainstorming session, with three thematic conference rooms and multiple terrace venues as options, than the facilities in the city.

Following the same philosophy is **Ghanerao Royal Castle** (www.ghaneraoroyalcastle.com) near Jodhpur run by the local royal family. The convention facility here is scheduled to be ready in another three months. A large suite on the ground floor is being converted into a conference room which will seat up to 90. Along with this, a sit-out area has been converted into an evening entertainment corner.

In the neighbouring town, at the 13th century **Balsamand Palace** (www.jodhpurheritage.com) which operates under the aegis of Marudhar Hotels, nine suites and 26 garden rooms were refurbished last September. The rooms now feature single curtains instead of the earlier double-layered ones to allow natural light. Also, the heavy printed carpets



and bedspreads have been dropped for richer, bolder self-printed upholstery in dark reds, blues and greens. The sprawling landscaped, lawns at this lakeside, redstone, heritage hotel have been embellished with concrete walking paths criss-crossing the verdant landscape.

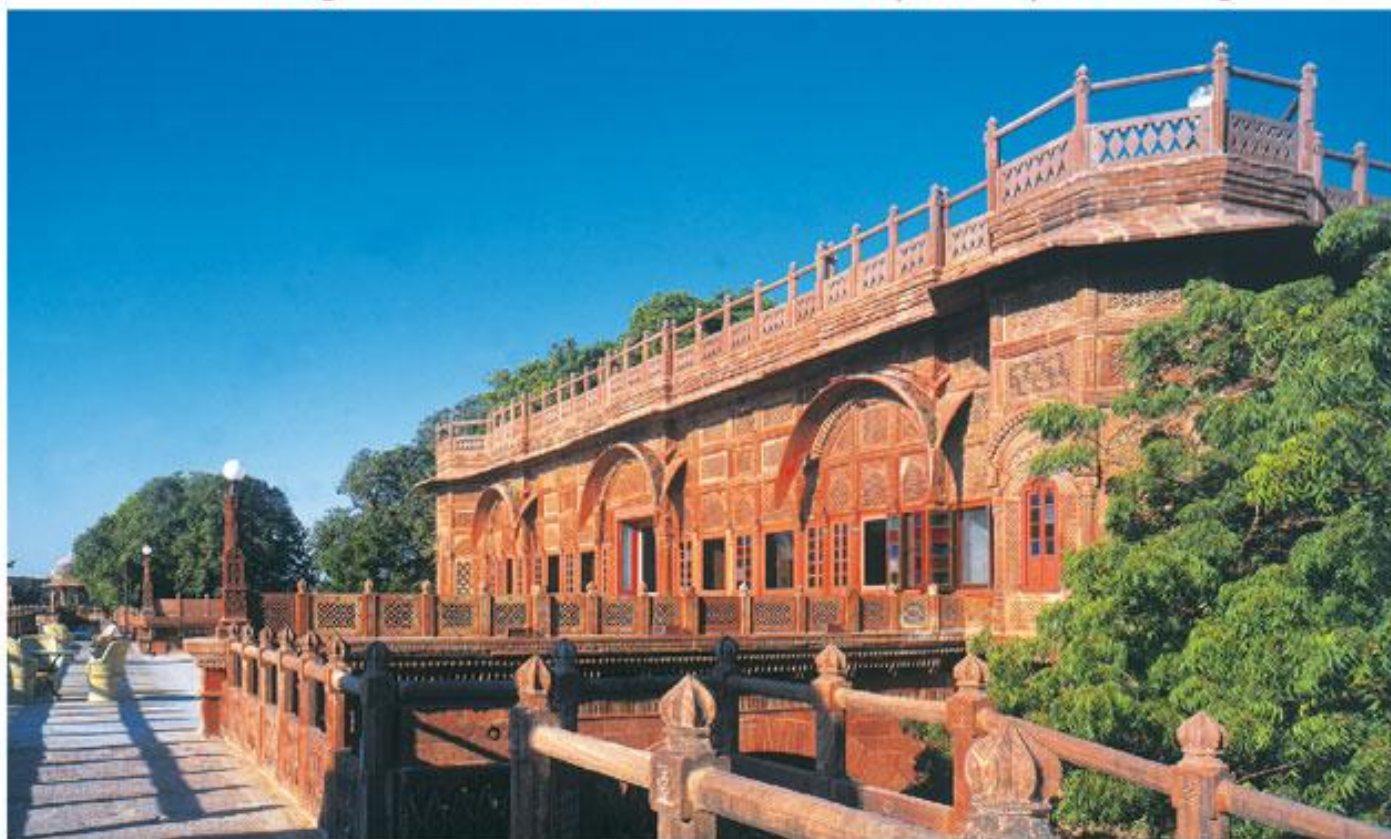
Another property promoted by Marudhar Hotels, which has added more facilities, is **Maharanibagh Orchard**

(Above) *Neemrana Fort-Palace, a preferred weekend option from Delhi now offers multiple conference venues.*

(Below) *Located by the lake, Bal Samand Palace recently refurbished its rooms.*

(Facing page) *Mussoorie's Kasmanda Palace's spruced up interiors are a sheer delight.*

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near the Ranakpur Temples. As the name suggests, it is nestled amidst an orchard and features an open-air swimming pool with attached changing rooms. To service the summer travellers better, an air conditioned dining room serving continental cuisine was added in August last year.

Jaipur's **Narian Niwas Palace** introduced a garden restaurant, which seats 80, recently. A bar has also been added that sports a traditional Rajasthani décor replete with frescoed walls, mirror work and plush dark brown arm chairs lit up by old-style glass chandeliers. A spa is currently under construction; the spa management company is yet to be finalized (www.hotelnarainniwas.com).



(Above) A recently upgraded room at the Lallgarh Palace Hotel in Bikaner.

(Left) Taragarh Palace in Kangra Valley recently added a conference room.

(Facing page) The well-stocked library at Darbargadh Palace in Gondal.

(Below) One of the recently renovated rooms at the Noor-Ussubah Palace in Bhopal.



While in the town of Bikaner, **Lallgarh Palace** promoted by the erstwhile rulers of Bikaner, has been abuzz with activity since November last. Replacing the Salar Jung Museum on the first level are 10 new rooms powered with wi-fi connectivity and a spa. Added last November, the new rooms with private terraces are carpet-free with sparkling marble floors and are furnished with artefacts which were earlier housed in the museum. These rooms here are a smart blend of modern convenience and classic antiquity. The spa was opened last month and features three treatment rooms and a beauty

salon offering ayurvedic and Vedantic massages as well as Yoga classes. (www.lallgarhpalace.com)

The hills...

Up in the hills the story is no different. The conference room at **The Nabha Palace** (www.claridges-hotels.com), in Mussoorie was added last July and can seat upto 20, boardroom-style, and comes equipped with a projector screen, printers, scanners and fax facility and is ideal for board meetings, training programmes and small conferences.

The 19th century **Kasmanda Palace** (www.welcomheritagehotels.com) in Mussoorie, the erstwhile summer home of the UP-based owners, shed its old look opting for bolder and richer prints, modern amenities like TVs, internet connection, fax and printer facility. This heritage hotel in the hills has also added a new restaurant called the Magnolia, named so after the Magnolia trees that surround the garden. The 36-seater restaurant serves Indian, *Tandoori*, Chinese and local *Garhwali* dishes. The hotel is also currently adding another six rooms, which will become functional by May 2007.

Woodville Palace in Shimla has added a Chinese restaurant, the House of Ming, which was inaugurated last February by Amitabh Bachchan. The 20-cover Glass-house restaurant projects into the garden surrounded by bamboo and deodars. Three cottages are also being added to the room inventory which will be fashioned along the same lines as the existing rooms at Woodville. (www.woodvillepalace.com)

Further down below, the Kangra Valley too has seen three of its celebrated properties trying to keep up with the times. The 22 rooms at **Taragarh Palace**



(www.taragarh.com) now feature new furniture, heritage tiles, tea/coffee maker and room refrigerators. The palace-hotel has added a 100-seater state-of-the-art conference facility, a gymnasium, as well as a health club. The treat here though is the in-house ayurvedic spa run by Delhi-based Sansha, which also manages the spas at Neemrana, Devigarh and Chowki Dhani, among many others. A fully equipped wooden-panelled Bar is going to be functional by the end of next month.

About 95 kilometres from Taragarh, a similar exercise has been going on at Vijay Lal's **Judge's Court** (www.judgescourt.com) in Pragpur, the first heritage village in the country. Three more rooms are being added to the existing twelve as is a fully-equipped gymnasium with state-of-the-art machines and a health club located bang opposite the swimming pool all of which will provide more reasons to check-into this heritage home. In the same region, **The Fort** (www.nalagarh.com) at



Nalagarh, 60 km away from Chandigarh, in the same region too has gone ahead and added a state-of-the-art health club replete with a steam, sauna, Jacuzzi and a fully-equipped gym. Up next is a conference facility.

The plains...

At Bhopal's **Noor-Us-Subah Palace** hotel, 10 brand new rooms have been laid out in a new wing, taking the total room inventory to 57. The new rooms vary from 250 sq ft to 450 sq ft and come equipped with Plasma TVs, wooden parquet flooring, the latest branded bathroom fittings and wi-fi connectivity. Going a step further, Noor-Us-Subah has designed two rooms for single women travellers which have more feminine décor. Last July, **Narmada Jackson's**, (www.jackson-hotel.com) the 19th century colonial bungalow in Jabalpur (a member of WelcomHeritage Hotels) completed its six-month-long makeover. The heritage hotel fitted all of its 66 rooms with wi-fi connectivity, TV screens, remotes, A/cs etc. The old worn out furnishings were flushed out for a more stylized look – heavy antique armchairs, artefacts, colourful duvets and resplendent curtains to recreate the period

look were introduced. (www.noorussubahpalace.com)

Likewise, **Pallavi International**, the former residence of the erstwhile aristocracy of Hatwa in Varanasi – it was known as The Hatwa Palace earlier – has gone ahead with a complete overhaul by engaging a period expert on furnishings and architecture. While retaining the old antique furniture, beds, tables, lamps, dressing tables, basins and tubs, it has torn down the rooms to make way for larger rooms taking down the room count from 37 to 32. The restaurant too has been refurbished and the menu has been augmented to include European and Italian fare.

The other heritage property in the temple town, **Palace on the Ganges** (www.palaceontheganges), too has been busy upgrading its rooms which have been re-done in a city-wise theme. So there are rooms furnished with antique furniture reflecting Jaipur, Agra, Khajuraho.. The hotel brought down experts from BHU to help them in this endeavour. **Darbagadh Palace** in Gujarat has recently established a well-stocked library featuring books from the royal family's personal collection. (www.gondalpalaces.com)

The backwaters...

Down south, in Kerala, **Travancore Heritage**, located by the Kovalam coastline, has added a second conference facility and a new wing of rooms down by the beach. The convention facility which can seat up to 200 was added last November to allow for a larger conference space as the earlier one could seat only 60. The new wing of 44 rooms were added specially for those wanting to be closer to the beach. Designed differently from the 14 Kerala-style cottages scattered around on the sloping gardens, these rooms are standard fare with a casual seating area, writing desk, luggage rack, TV and a three-fixture bathroom.

Located in Calicut, **Harivihar**, a traditional Kerala-style home offering ayurvedic treatments has upgraded its rooms over the last year. (www.harivihar.com)

However, it is the backwaters offerings of heritage home-stays that is the piece de resistance.

Located in a village in Palakkad, **The Kandavath Tharavad**, home to the Bhagladas family, has been welcoming people into their ancestral home for over eight years to share their heritage and age-old traditions. Recent additions here are the attached three-fixture bathrooms with provision for running hot water in all of the six rooms on offer. Electricity too which didn't feature earlier at the Bhagladas home has been a convenience for some seven months now. Albeit less charming but more convenient, bulbs and tubelights, have replaced the oil-lanterns of yore. More recently village walks and visits to the homes of local potters, basket-



(Left) One of the refurbished rooms at Kasmanda Palace.

(Below) The ayurvedic resort, Harivihar in Calicut, offers an authentic experience of Kerala.



New Heritage Hot-Spots...

Dholpur: The red sandstone **Raj Niwas Palace**, the home of the erstwhile Dholpur royal family is now on the tourist circuit. Situated on the Jaipur-Agra Highway in the fabled Chambal Valley – a 30-minute drive from Agra, 45 minutes from Bharatpur and an hour's drive from Gwalior – this seven-room palace is a fusion of colour with intricate, custom designed European tiled walls everywhere. High ceilings, painted glass windows, marble fountains and statues, antique curios, trophies and artifacts and well-manicured lawns lend this recently restored residence an opulent touch. There is a library, a smoking room and a movie theatre to keep you occupied during your stay. If there is some business to attend to there is a business centre, if there isn't however, opt for a cruise on the Chambal River, visit the crocodile farm or go horse riding or bike-riding in the ravines. www.dholpurpalace.com

Deogarh: From the owners of Deogarh Mahal (five hours from Udaipur) comes a new offering, **Fort Seengh Sagar**, a few minutes from its better known and much celebrated neighbour Deogarh Mahal. Shatrunjay and Veerbhadra Singh introduced Seengh Sagar ten months ago, originally the family's private shooting lodge, as a more exclusive and private getaway ideally suited for a group of friends or a family. The fort itself is stunningly located on a stream and features four suites all named after classical ragas like *Megh Malhar*, *Darbari*, *Basant* and *Kamod*. Set around the central courtyard, with sit-outs overlooking the lake, hiring the whole fort to draw its best would be ideal. One of the focuses here would definitely be home-cooked traditional Rajasthani meals in different settings – the *baradari* (pillared dining hall), the promenades and even the balconies make for ideal locations. You can have a go at the countryside too on a horse, bike or jeep. In fact, you can also get on to a horse-driven carriage... www.deogarhmahal.com

Shahpura: Jai Rathore of Shahpura Bagh has refurbished and has thrown open yet another of his ancestral homes to guests. Located in the Bhilwara district, four hours by road from Jaipur, close to Shahpura Bagh, the **Umaid Niwas Palace** is a former hunting lodge. It is tastefully furnished with period furniture and features a living room dining area, a study and five suites. www.shahpurbagh.com

Mandawa: The famed Shekhawati region is home to the Mandawa family, the erstwhile rulers of Mandawa, who launched their home as a heritage hotel in the 80s. Now they've opened up the former clubhouse, **Jai Niwas Resort**. The colonial-style clubhouse lets you experience a dash of English finesse along with the rustic flavours of Rajasthan. The resort retains the original eight clubrooms which have been redesigned to offer independent cottages. You also get to enjoy

village walks and camel and horse rides, the best way to explore the frescoed havelis in the region. www.castlemandawa.com

Jaisalmer: **Mool Sagar Luxury Camp**, six km from Jaisalmer is a Marudhar Hotels-promoted endeavour. Owned by the erstwhile Jaisalmer royal family, it was inaugurated only last November. Mool Sagar is right out of a Mughal miniature painting. Spread over two acres around an 18th century Charbagh-style garden, it features four stone-carved pavilions, a *jahra* (step-garden with fountains) and three bylanes and 18 spacious tents, handmade by traditional artisans. Each features an ensuite bathroom



Moolsagar

and a private verandah. The desert camp also offers a swimming pool, a shop and a small business centre.

www.moolsagar.com

Peemad: Located in the cardamom hills of Peemad in Central Kerala, WelcomHeritage's new property, **Chinnar Heritage Plantation** resort is a Raj-style Estate Bungalow. Set amidst Cypress and Flame of the Forest trees, the plantation resort is a single-storey bungalow built in semi-colonial style with four well-appointed ensuite bedrooms. The outhouse features two more bedrooms. The Tea Bungalow is furnished with 19th century antique furniture – armchairs, easy chairs and



Chinnar Heritage Plantation Resort



Raj Niwas Palace



Fort Seengh Sagar



Umaid Niwas Palace



Jai Niwas Palace

wooden coat-stands. Here you can relish home-cooked south Indian as well as north Indian cuisine.

www.welcomheritagehotels.com

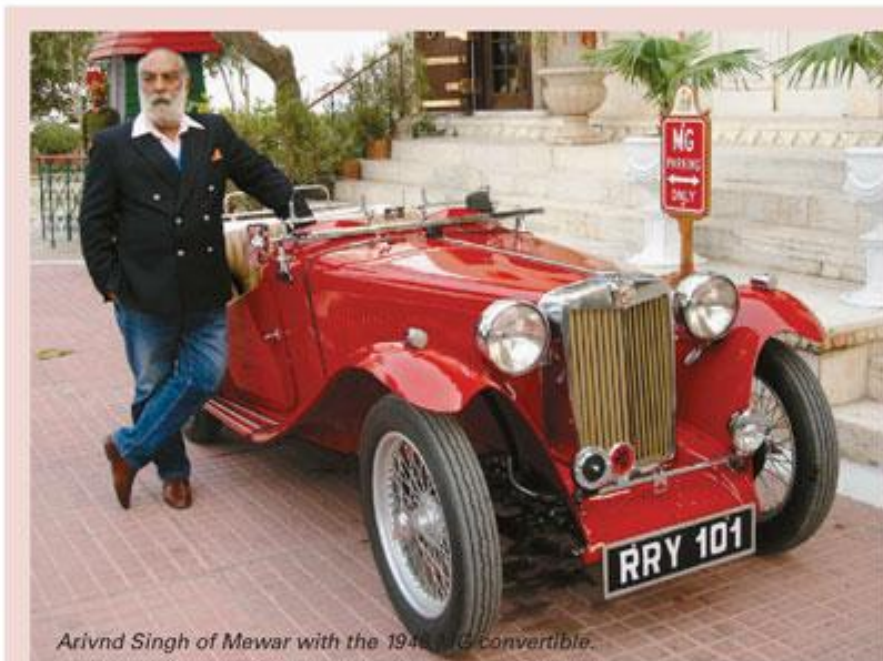
Kalaketty: Experience Kerala afresh by staying at a Syrian Christian family's ancestral home. Inaugurated in July 2006, Kalaketty Estate lies midpoint between Kumarakom and Thekkady. Here you will see how a tea estate is run, visit the vermin composting yard, the poultry farm, and you could also try your hand at farming. Enjoy home-cooked Kerala-style meals and explore the mahogany, mango and mangosteen orchards that surround the estate. www.kalaketty.com



Kalaketty Estate



(Left) The refurbished Tree House at Edakkal Hermitage in Wayanad offers spectacular views of the surrounding hills.



Arvind Singh of Mewar with the 1946 MG Convertible.

Next time you visit HRH Hotels' **Fateh Prakash Palace** (www.hrhotels.com) in Udaipur, head to the inhouse garage, which showcases the Vintage Car Collection. All the vehicles on show have been restored painstakingly and are in working order. The fifteen cars exhibited include a set of four Rolls Royces, two 1938 Cadillacs that are still used on special occasions, a bright red 1946 MG convertible, a 1930 Ford Convertible and a Vauxhall. **Dabargadh Palace** in Gujarat has an interesting museum too. The palace-hotel has recently converted one of its wings, The Naulakha Palace, into a museum. A must-see here is a replica of the 19th century kitchen. Antique beadwork and other textiles, brass utensils, silver-plated palanquin, a swing and an elephant howdah, hand-painted wooden toys of the 1800s and antique timepieces are among the many items on display.

weavers and village artisans were introduced.

(www.kandavaththaravad.com)

Paul Pooppally's home, **Pooppally's Heritage Homestay**, (www.pooppally.com) down in Alleppy too has brought in modern conveniences as well as introduced two traditional Kerala-style cottages and a water-plank house. Sibiraj of **Edakkal Hermitage** has also refurbished the lone tree house at his four-room property in Wayanad. A casual seating, mosquito nets and solar-powered lights are the new additions. (www.wayanad.com)

Theressi John has started serving lunch and elaborate tea at her home **Nazarani Tharavad**, (www.nazaranitharavad.com) which lies enroute to Munnar if you drive down from Kochi. For those of you who just want a whiff of the famed Syrian hospitality, this is the right place. The reason why you might decide to linger longer here, are the stories about John's ancestors with which you are regaled at lunch or tea, whichever you choose to break journey with.

The allure of the majestic forts, palaces, havelis and ancestral homes of yore have been beckoning us, like moths to the flame, but now there is more on offer and, consequently, more than enough reasons to answer the call of heritage homes! ♦

By **DISHA RATHORE**