



# A HIDDEN GEM IN BHOPAL

I've spent many years trawling the country looking for hotels that no one speaks of—undiscovered gems are what they are called. It could be a bed and breakfast in Mussoorie or a traditional home turned hotel in Kerala or even an understated Aman property that prides itself on flying under the radar and being known the traditional way by “word of mouth.”

Nothing, though, had prepared me for the surprise that was Jehan Numa Palace in Bhopal. This over hundred-year-old property has never been a home. In the past, it has served as offices during the days of the Raj and was taken over by another government body post-independence. Its beautiful name—loosely translated—means a view of the world, is in contrast to its bureaucratic past. That has since been resolved. Today Jehan Numa Palace is quite simply one of the most exquisite properties one can stay at in India. Its appeal is eclectic; it doesn't bring to you the grandeur of a palace but instead offers the stately charm of a residence, replete with a trotting track for horses, wicker chairs and photographs of the erstwhile Begum's family adorning its long corridors.

The handsome young General Manager, Gaurav Rege, takes me on the walk around of the hotel, detailing the modifications made to the original building, adding to it the conveniences of the present. The alterations have been significant but discreet, holding on to the heritage nature of the main structure of the building. I meet with the patriarch of the family and owner of the hotel, Nadir Rashid, a genteel, sophisticated man who is immersed in Indian culture, the next day his wife is holding an exhibition that invites potters from across India to display their wares.

When Jehan Numa was converted into a hotel, the aim was

to hold on to the past but also accommodate the future. On the upper level a trendy bar is the place to be on weekends, the music is thumping and the interiors are done in the style of an English pub. The al fresco area adjacent to the lobby has a café that serves quick bites and cappuccinos and lattes, and even a mean iced tea. Rege tells me that the food and beverage outlets have been designed to attract all kinds of customers, since Bhopal has limited options. This is reflected not only in the choice and mood of the outlets but also the price points, the café is as affordable as freestanding coffee shops will be; the Italian restaurant more premium in its pricing.

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This reflects in the clientele Jehan Numa Palace attracts, there are young and old, business travellers and foreign tourists, even a group of Japanese monks on their way to Sanchi. The interesting thing is that Jehan Numa has done this without any official “tie-up” with a chain hotel. Most recently the *Telegraph* of the UK has declared it one of the best palace hotels in the world, this without any lobbying, visits or PR spin. Jehan Numa has achieved all of this the old-fashioned way by consistently providing good service and a quality product and some say as a result of its

dynamic new general manager.

There is a lesson here; the corporatisation of the hotel business has come with some benefits, the most obvious one being the standardisation of service. Jehan Numa is the way forward for personalised, signature hospitality as the guest becomes more discerning and extracts more than the promise of a free buffet breakfast. ♦

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