TAJ WEST END – BANGALORE'S OLDEST, AND FINEST

Many luxuries go into making the Taj West End one of Bangalore's most iconic properties. But the most precious of these, is time.

The Taj West End is so much more than a hotel. It is a place of healing, a retreat, an oasis. Amitabh Bachchan recuperated here after his near fatal injury while shooting Coolie, while Prince Charles called it home during his stay in Bangalore. In its gardens, Sir Ronald Ross wrote down the cure for malaria that won him the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1902. To director David Lean, it was the colonial set for his movie 'A Passage to India'. To me, it's where birthdays and wedding anniversaries get their due.

I used to come here as a little girl for my customary birthday lunch, stumbling behind my parents as I took in the glamour of the lobby with awe. Decades later, the broad sweep of the trees behind the imposing iron gates and the quiet elegance of the white colonial buildings still make me catch my breath.

The musk and lemongrass-scented lobby has been designed around the ficus tree, which was here much before the hotel itself.

GREAT THINGS START SMALL

Established by the Bronsons in 1887 as a 10-room inn, the West End was named by the Spencers who bought it in 1905 (for Rs. 4,000!) and expanded it to include 20 more rooms.

When the Taj Group leased it for 99 years in 1984, a clause in the contract dictated that the name should be retained.

The Taj West End is now a 20-acre fragment of history that writes itself into the lives of all those who visit it. Families precede birthday lunches with a visit to the Muneeshwara shrine tucked away beside the Prince of Wales lawn, which is also known as the go-to wedding venue for many generations of families. Prominent business houses consider the property auspicious, which is why it has seen the launch of some of India's most iconic brands.

What began as an inn for the cantonment's English soldiers has grown into a base for world leaders like Angela Merkel and Theresa May, and Hollywood icons like Julia Roberts. Name-dropping aside, today, the Taj West End is the oldest running hotel in India! But then, the word 'oldest' attaches itself to many things here.

TIME'S TREASURE BOX

Just outside the lobby stands the oldest functioning postbox in the country, tipped with a crown in honour of Queen Victoria's coronation. Guests still use it to send post cards to family, and others, themselves. It's religiously cleared every day, except Sundays.

The cast iron post box was shipped from London to mark Queen Victoria's ascent to the throne.

This leads to a lounge that's a mini museum of antiques, from rare hand-drawn maps of colonial India to Persian zodiac charts, and the rosewood bar stand from the Bronsons' original bar. The story goes that British officers were allotted only two (30ml) 'chhota pegs' of alcohol each, but thanks to a helpful understanding with the bartender, they would discretely upgrade to the more generous 90ml 'Patiala peg'. The tradition would no doubt have endured under the Spencer management's Crazy Horse Bar, which also ranks among Bangalore's oldest.

Step outside the lobby, and you'll see a tree species that's been around since the dinosaurs – the cycad. Some varieties of the tree have been known to live for a thousand years, and it seems fitting that they thrive in the gardens of the Taj West End.

Along the Heritage Corridor, you'll see sepia photos of an era relegated to the history books. Look closely, and you might spot Winston Churchill, unrecognizable because he's smiling. That might be because unlike the Bangalore Club, held cleared his bill at the Taj West End.

Decades ago, guests would watch the races at the Turf Club from their balconies at the hotel, and the ballroom was often the venue of dog and horse shows. These days though, the ballroom exclusively hosts guests of the homo sapien variety.

The hotel's Heritage Corridor is an album of memories from the early 20th century.

WHERE THE GRASS IS ALWAYS GREENER

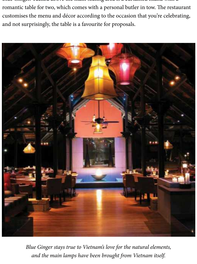
Step into the dewy lawns, and you'll see the second oldest tree in Bangalore, a rain tree whose branches arch up and away into a glorious canopy. Carbon dating says it was planted in 1848. Not far is another icon – the old gulmohar tree, which bursts into fiery bloom just as summer wanes. The buildings with their tiled roofs and white pillars occupy just one-fourth of the property, giving the tropical gardens and lotus ponds pride of place. All the restaurants have al fresco sections that treat diners to a verdant view of the 150 varieties of flora. Fittingly, each block of rooms is named after an indigenous flower, and often, you can tell if you've walked into the Frangipani or Gardenia block just by the fragrance that welcomes you.

A sought-after event venue, the Prince of Wales lawns are named after Price Charles, who frequented the garden while staying at the Taj West End.

THE TASTE OF LUXURY

The landscape at the Taj West End adds to the irresistible draw of its celebrated restaurants. I still remember the birds of paradise that lined the erstwhile Paradise Island restaurant, with its waitresses dressed in the elegant chut thai, and lamps reflected in the placid lotus pond. It became the country's first Vietnamese restaurant when it changed avatars to become Blue Ginger in 2004.

One of the most sought-after experiences at the hotel is the Paradise Table at Blue Ginger. Tucked above the main seating area is a curtained island with a romantic table for two, which comes with a personal butler in tow. The restaurant customises the menu and décor according to the occasion that you're celebrating, and not surprisingly, the table is a favourite for proposals.



Blue Ginger stays true to Vietnam's love for the natural elements, and the main lamps have been brought from Vietnam itself.

The Taj West End's 'Dinner Under the Stars', set beneath the gazebo at the Tulip pool deck, is equally romantic. The property also houses a Jiva Grande spa, the Taj's luxury edition of the Jiva brand.

Regulars recommend the signature Pehlwan Malish. Although the name conjures up images of some rather forceful muscle kneading, the experience it quite the opposite. The treatment takes cues from the techniques of the Gwalior pehlwans to ease out any tension in the muscles and leave one (pardon the pun) fighting fit.

Jiva proudly lays claim to being India's only homegrown spa brand, and is known for its use of Indian ingredients.

For a more quintessentially Bangalorean experience, try the signature 'Breakfast Under the Rain Tree', or even the high tea at Myrtt. With a fine selection of teas and treats that you'll relish with childish abandon, it truthfully recreates a colonial British ritual, if only for an evening.

'Breakfast Under The Rain Tree', a signature experience at the Taj West End, is a treat for all the senses.

The Bronsons built the inn as an ode to the city they loved, trying to make it a place that was always in bloom, where the birdsong was fulsome, and Time slowed down its eternal march. 130 years later, Bangalore has expanded unrecognizably, and yet, within the Taj West End, it's still a dewy day in 1887.

This post was written by Kavita Mohandas Rao