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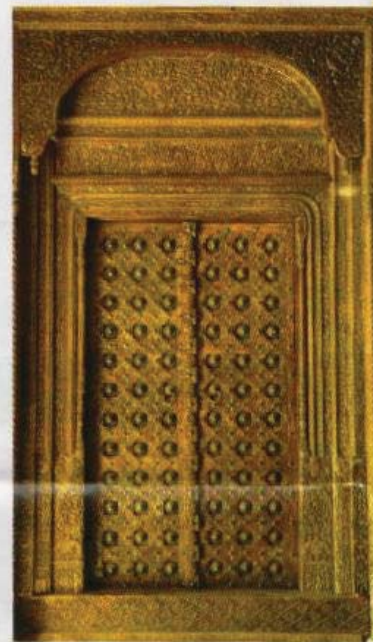


DOWN MEMORY LANE

Preserving the heritage and history of an age old building is a rewarding task. **Jayanthi Somasundaram** visits a property in Madurai which has been restored and turned into a resort.

IF there is one man I'd like to meet, it would be Geoffry Bawa. He was the man who created the concept 'sustainable architecture' even long before the term was coined. This once upon a time successful lawyer, gave it all up to study architecture from scratch in his late 30s. He created master pieces and landmarks across the South East Asian belt, starting from as early as 1960s, which includes the Sri Lankan Parliament building, the Simamalaka Shrine of Gagaramaya Temple in Colombo and many others. Infact, rumour has it, that this lawyer first drew a sketch of his house behind a match box and from there quickly shifted profession. Another story is that he would walk into a property and literally dictate his plan and whether it was possible or impossible the work still had to be completed as he had visualized it – the end result was always picture perfect! The temple town of Mana Madurai is proud to have one of the many pieces of work, done by this one-of-a-kind eccentric architect. Formerly the Officers' Club of Madura Coats, it is today re-christened (also re-worked upon) and presented to us as Heritance Madurai.

With the name it is quiet plausible to think that it's a heritage hotel, but literally speaking it's not. Its classy resort within the city, quietly tucked away in 17 acres housing, a cluster of suites, villas and even business class rooms amidst lush green gardens. So, why such a name? This resort in Madurai, is Aikten Spence Hotels' entry into India. This leading group, under the brand Heritance Hotels & Resorts has a collection of resorts which are architecturally unique and blend with its natural environment. The two words heritage and inheritance, combined together gave rise to the brand Heritance. The philosophy revolves around that fact that they have learnt from the past and use this as a foundation for the future. The group also understands that it has inherited the locality and the environment in which their hotels function. Hence, all the hotels which carry the brand 'Heritance' recognise and appreciate the individuality of each property and reflect the local flavor and warmth. Voila! With that note Heritance Madurai was born.



Photography: Ezhilmathy

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The resort welcomes you into a large reception area which has a backdrop of a huge Mayurbhanj door with intricate woodwork and the lobby is surrounded by stone pillars. Walkways and courtyards lead one to the different stay options systematically spread across the property. The architectural treatment and style details are the factors that bring a sense of 'Oneness' in this expansive resort. In fact, some of the buildings were constructed in the 70s and the rest were constructed just a few years ago, but they all look alike. Geoffrey Bawa's contribution is crystal clear in this property – his school of thought was to break down the barriers between indoor and outdoor spaces and create buildings to a series of sceno-graphically conceived spaces separated by courtyards and gardens – he reasserted this statement in this Madurai project.

It's believed that Bawa was asked to construct the club house in 1970s using material found within 10 kilometers of the site. Sourcing material from the neighbourhood, pillars, flooring, windows and all other much need materials, he completed the project in 1975. It was constructed using honey-coloured granite from the Nagamalai Hills, stone slabs from an abandoned textile mill, 18th century columns salvaged from derelict homes and Chettinad doors. For the windows and doors he opted for cast from bronze and the ceilings were lined with handloom cotton tapestries. In short, the Madurai Club was an architectural masterpiece. A philosophy he believed in was never to cut down trees. Hence, this new club house which he built was amidst trees like the banyan, frangipani and many more, which are still seen today.

THE LEGACY CONTINUES

Fast forward thirty years, and though Bawa is no more now, Vinod Jayasinghe his associate carries his architectural philosophies forward but with few twists and turns. When Chennai-based ELT Hospitality Services Limited took over the clubhouse, they decided not to bring down a property which has so much character and history. So, teaming up with Jayasinghe, they decided to restore the building and source material from neighbouring towns and villages, just like Bawa did. The team visited the Chettinad belt and even went further south to bring in the pillars, granite and even beautiful urils and lamps.

A WALK IN THE HERITANCE

All the 35 suites designed by Jayasinghe have a lounge area, bedroom, bathroom and a small garden dotted with



either a lanky papaya tree or a frangipani tree. A few of them include a small pool, where guests can indulge within the privacy of their space. With recliners, arm chairs, blue-white-striped towels neatly rolled and placed by the poolside, it is inevitable to not want to jump in or simply sit around with a book and iced tea!

As we tour the 17 acres, there seems to be a lot of work in progress. One of the buildings is being converted to provide business class rooms for the travelers on the go, and on one end, a space of land is being cleaned up and we were told that a spa will be constructed there. The front portion of the premise which currently houses a complex is being converted to a small shopping centre. We noticed that windows, doors and even lamps have been dismantled from the old buildings and kept aside; it will probably be used in the new construction. More interestingly, the amphitheatre area which was used by Madura Coats back then, is almost in the centre of the property and will be converted as an 'experience' centre. The current management team is bustling with ideas and they are very clear that they are not just another resort, but one which provides a memorable and long lasting experience. The Heritage Cultural Tour Package is one of the many they have planned, which is a three day getaway option allowing guests to stay in the resort, visit the famous temples in the town, drive down the Chettinad belt and even learn to make Madurai malli garlands!

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Sure it sounds simple, but how many of us have experienced the 'Madurai hospitality'? It's an over-whelming feeling and till we were at Heritage Madurai, we thought it was an over-rated filmi phrase. You arrive at 3 am and a group of young housekeeping boys make sure you are well settled in your room and the chef serves up piping hot filter coffee with a sunshine smile. It's very difficult to go back to sleep and you wait for the first light of dawn to hit your room so you can start exploring this resort.

At breakfast the ever-charming and smiling General Manager, Srinith De Silva welcomes you to a lavish buffet and explains that the current dining area is the club house built by Bawa in the 70s. As he has worked with two other Aikten Spence Hotels (during the Tsunami he was also GM of their resort in Sri Lanka) he understands how important it is to bring in the local culture and also cater to the local population. Besides the food, which is a good mix between Sri Lankan, Indian and Continental, he has planned several events for the localites, and the New Year 2010 Bash was quiet spectacular we heard.

It's almost a surreal experience; as you wander around the property you hear the tweet-tweets of various birds, guessing the names of the different fruit bearing trees and once in a while catch up with other guests from across the globe. There seems to be a state of constant bliss vibrating in the air. Though well within the main part of the city, the noisy temple town strangely feels very distance and at times almost non-existence. While sharing interesting stories on the resort which has been functioning for almost 2 years now, Srinith introduces us to a business traveller who has been staying at the resort for one month. He has to travel 45 minutes to work but he prefers to stay here. I'm not surprised, the hospitality and service offered is quiet addictive and if somebody makes your eggs and toast just the way it's meant to be, then why not?

HERITANCE MADURAI

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THE HEART OF HERITANCE MADURAI

In an exclusive tour of the resort, Srinith De Silva took us to what he calls 'the heart of the resort'. First we thought it would be the kitchen, but to our surprise he took us to the 'recycle area' - neatly stacked sections of plastics, bottles, paper, aluminium and everything else were kept in precise order according to height, size and shape - it was recycling in style. "If this area is not in order, it will affect everything else in the resort," he said and took us to the next room. The pantry was well stocked with boxes which had labels of their contents and to our astonishment it was arranged alphabetically! The tour went room by room and he explained how each department operates. The only thing common across all departments is that their style of functioning is very transparent. Each department has a methodological order of filing, storing and even organising their stationary, and to my memory I remember each room had a map, indicating where things are placed. It seems like a cumbersome task, so we ask "Why?" He explains, "Suppose my chef is unwell, if I need to run it or an accountant needs to take something from the tool room, we should be able to do it in 5 seconds! In every room the principle should work; you should know what you want and be out with it in 5 seconds, with no fuss or mess." For a moment one might think it's a very 'Utopian' principle, but if you're in the laundry room and you want a pencil, just look at the map and you'll find it. We did!

Another interesting element that Srinith brought to our notice was that the pricing of each product used, was on display. Some of the priced items was the housekeeping amenities, like soaps and shower caps, neatly stuck on the board with their prices in bold letters. Again we ask "Why?" "It brings a sense of belongingness to the staff. It tells them that they are a part of the group and it is their responsibility to take care of the resort and not waste or discard products without thinking." Srinith also showed us the tree house that the staff came up with. "We asked the staff to create a model design, and they came up with this. There's so much more work to be done, but they'll finish it soon and we will incorporate it." If this isn't teamwork, then what is?