

Hotelier India

Circulation: 33,000

Readership: 99,000

Ad Value: \$ 4,000

Volume 9 | Issue 9 | October 2017 | ₹50

hotelier *india*

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO
www.hotelierindia.com

MANAGEMENT

CELEBRATING DESIGN
ARCHITECTS, DESIGNERS SHARE
THEIR INSIGHTS

QUICK CHAT
ASHOK CHANDRA PANDA, MINISTER
OF STATE, TOURISM AND CULTURE,
ODISHA GOVERNMENT

THE RIGHT MOVES

DILIP RAY, OWNER AND CMD OF MAYFAIR
HOTELS & RESORTS HAS THE UNCANNY
KNACK FOR SELECTING THE PERFECT
LOCATION FOR HIS PROPERTIES.

Published by: ITP Media (India)



→ The 18 Heritage rooms have a daybed set against a jarokha-style window, offering uninterrupted views of Bishangra's rural beauty.

THE MAKING OF ALILA FORT BISHANGRAH

From a two-century old fort to a luxury resort, Hotelier India explores how Alila Fort Bishangra rebuilt the past to suit the future

Perched on top of a granite hillock in the midst of a vast expanse of the Aravalli range, surrounded by hills dotted with havelis, villages and temples, Alila Fort Bishangra is the result of the adaptive reuse of a 230-year-old warrior fort into one of India's unique heritage properties.

Adaptive reuse offers a sustainable option for the reclamation of heritage sites, an inspiring way to preserve and revive an existing building by merging its traditional ideals with modern culture, usage,

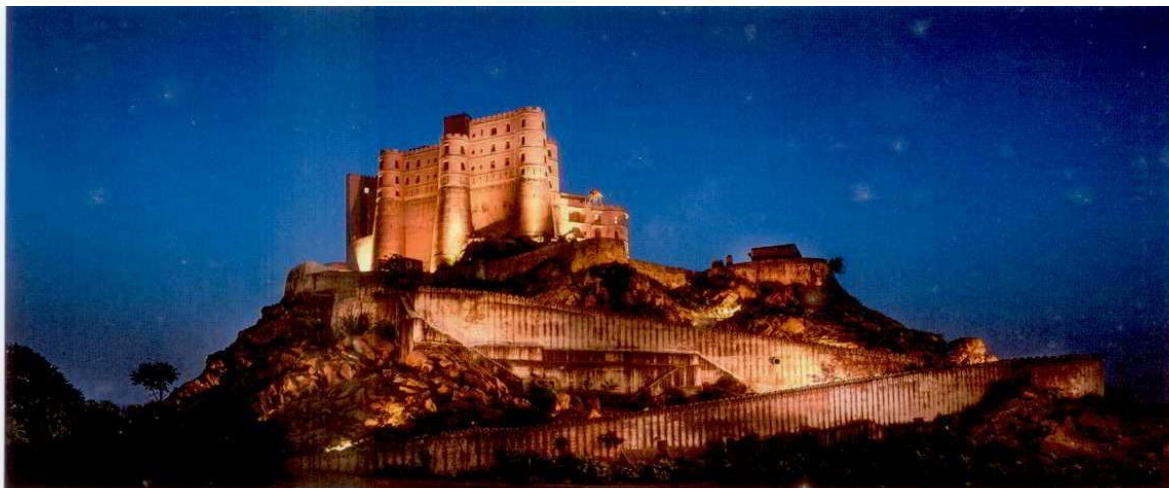
design techniques and ideas.

Built during Rajasthan's royal era as an outpost guarding the kingdom of Jaipur (Amber) against invaders from the North, the fort at Bishangra had long outlived its original purpose. Almost a decade ago, as the fort stood abandoned in a dilapidated condition, inhabited by thousands of bats and monkeys, the owners – a Rajput leader by birth and election and two successful entrepreneurs – together with Alila decided to breathe new life into its reincarnation as a boutique resort, while maintaining its stark sanctity.

WORKING THROUGH A MAZE

What followed was an extraordinary journey of transformation to keep this piece of tangible heritage alive, taking complete care to retain the original structure in its full integrity while reinventing it for the 21st century.

Immense challenges had to be overcome – including stabilising and strengthening the ruins, constructing a road up to the fort, finding circulation through 3m-thick walls, and deciphering the unconventional puzzle of the organic structure, which featured not a single 90-degree wall.



While working on the fort's exterior, the architects experimented with numerous mortar mixes using local stone dust to achieve the same 'cracked' appearance as what existed earlier.

CHANGES UNDERTAKEN

- Upper and outer wings were adapted to the original fortification to carve out 59 suites following the curved and sloping walls of the existing turrets.
- Rooms and restaurants were made to fit around the original walls – two to three metre-wide in many places
- With no typical floor plan, there were 23 different room configurations in all, the precise details of which took some 1,800 hours to draw up.
- 23 venues were created for meetings and celebratory events.

On the outer plaster work done to the fort, the architects had to work on numerous experimental mixes of mortar using local stone dust to achieve the same 'cracked' appearance as the existing plaster on the old walls. Meanwhile, working out the position of vertical shafts had to be done using a traditional method of dropping ropes attached with torches, no easy feat given that the fort has four lifts, two staircases and a kitchen lift for goods.

SUSTAINABILITY AND SIMPLICITY IN DESIGN

Sustainable design was the core commitment of the team. Extensive research and care were taken to develop a design vocabulary that fully embraced the original structure and its place in history. Design ideas of the past were encapsulated in a way that served today's needs best. Taking the cue from what was found in the ruins, local traditional materials were

used in modern adaptation, to make it accessible (and applicable) for the younger generation, yet still connecting them to their roots.

All windows, entrance portals, arches, columns, railings, jaali screens (latticed window patterns), turrets and walls had to be fully in sync with the original. Broken elements were recreated, finishes emulated, and old pieces reused. Of the 100,000 sq-ft area of the fort, only 30,000 sq-ft is covered in marble, while the rest is finished in local sandstone.

According to historical records, this was once the residential abode for various kings, which explained the more stately decoration. Two of these royal quarters now house the main restaurant

Amarsar, named after the birthplace of the royal Shekhawat clan.

A FUSION OF STYLES

The design concept embraces elements of Jaipur Gharana architecture, featuring Rajput and Mughal influences. A perfect example of this can be seen in the 'Amarsar' restaurant, where Tudor and Cusped arches harmoniously coexist – aptly styled for a warrior fort. The walls have been finished, not with paint, but with modern adaptations of the traditional *surkhi* (stone dust) and *araish*, the dying Rajasthani plastering art that results in glistening surfaces.

From the very start, simplicity was sought. Rather than creating an ornate



The design concept embraces elements of Jaipur Gharana architecture, featuring Rajput and Mughal influences.

palace, as might be expected of a Rajasthani heritage 'property', the design direction is decidedly stark and spartan, marked by clean and uncluttered interiors judiciously woven with Rajasthani elements - jharokha-style windows, stone jaali work, brass embossed panels, Tarkashi (the craft of brass wire designs inlaid in wood), hand block printed fabric, old-style doors and wall frescoes with Thikri mirror work. Local marble, granite, carpets, fabrics, artefacts, lighting and furniture all contribute to authenticate its adaptive reconstruction.

The result is a fortress that remains completely at home in its setting, its grand majesty respectfully preserved in a unique marriage of history and modernity that is truly 'surprisingly different'.

The fort now begins a new legacy, forged in exceptional facilities and unforgettable experiences. Generously appointed guest rooms come with all the modern comforts and conveniences, including expansive bathrooms, footed/built-in bathtubs and large daybeds. The library, set amidst old marble pillars, bears testimony to the old kingdom with the size of its holdings mapped out on the wall, and Spa Alila, carved out between granite rocks in the old dungeon, provides atmospheric settings for relaxation.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

F&B options are excitingly varied and are a veritable treasure hunt. Turrets, cellars and secret passages have been turned into bars, lounges and creative spaces for dining and meetings. The royal living quarters are now the indoor speciality restaurant Amarsar. Nazaara, an outdoor grill dining terrace dishes out Rajput and frontier cuisine which involves sand-pit cooking and smoked meats.

Madhuveni is where you find the cigar/cognac turret. The room still retains openings in its thick stone wall for muskets and for pouring out hot, boiling oil on intruding armies below. These have been kept open to promote a natural system of air-conditioning. And finally, the Kachhawa Lounge, where the secret royal escape route was found, now serves the four Cs - champagne, coffee, chai and cakes. A grand banquet hall, conference room and show kitchen/event dining space round off the banqueting experience.



➡ The library, set amidst old marble pillars, bears testimony to the old kingdom.



➡ Spa Alila, carved out between granite rocks in the old dungeon, provides atmospheric settings for relaxation.

The Dream Team:

Owners/Directors: Rao Rajendra Singh, Suneet

Bagai, Atul Kapur

Development and Hospitality Consultant: Frederic Simon

Architect: Sandeep Khandelwal

Interior Designer: Ritu Khandelwal

Landscape Designer: Mukul Goyal

Lighting Designer: Vinayak Diwan

Structural Engineer: J.K. Verma

Site Management: Subhash Sehgal

PM Construction: Development2020

The food concept and menus are innovatively curated by Chef Ranveer Brar, to bring back the older ways of cooking on open fire and in hot sand, where food gets slow cooked in its own juices. Simple, fresh and artisanal with a throw-back to tradition are the operating mantras at Alila Fort Bishangarh.

Meanwhile, down the hill is the Haveli,

offering a labyrinth of spaces to chill, including a pool, bar, fitness centre, luxurious banquet lawns, and Play Alila - Kids' Club - with separate areas for teenagers and toddlers. For that connection with Mother Nature, there's an organic garden, a fruit orchard and a greenhouse set up amidst the ravines as well as various green lounging areas to explore.

A work of passion and endurance spanning almost a decade, the rebirth of this historic fort into the stunning Alila Fort Bishangarh provides an architecturally and historically rich experience for guests, encompassing fun, indulgence, discovery, and respect for the past. A walk through the broad corridors (deliberately left open to let the breeze in) with granite stones peeping out every here and there; where standing in the courtyard, one can gaze up at the open sky to have the sun warm your face or enjoy the rain... there is a quiet sense of tranquillity and reverence that can be felt... a feeling of the utmost privilege to have arrived. ■