

I lost it at The Park

The Park Hotel at Chennai has completely changed the idea of what a Hotel should be like. A part of the Apeejay Surrendra Hotels it reflects the philosophy of it's young and dazzlingly bold owner Priya Paul.

It's so cool it's sexy.

The Park Hotel at Chennai's busiest intersection the Gemini Circle, where once the fabled Gemini Film Studios used to be, is designed to thrill. You walk in through the double doors of pale blonde wood, with bullet hole like circles made of ground glass and stainless steel and find yourself trapped, for the merest instant, in a narrow, irregular sliver of space. You swing the second set of doors, like you might the curtains in an old-fashioned cinema theatre and Voila! You're In!

"It's very deliberate the sense of creating the Lobby as theatre, as a performance space," explains Priya Paul, Chairperson of the Park Hotels, who has worked closely with the California based Interior Designer firm of Hirsch Bedner and Associates to create the Park into a boutique hotel. In the words of Ian Schrager, who is credited with having created the concept of boutique hotels in the 1980s



Photographs by Sudeep Gurtu

Priya Paul, Chairperson, the Park Hotels is the Park. Her style and zest is reflected in the funky art and décor that creates the ambience at Aqua, the cafe that adjoins the swimming pool on the 8th floor of the Park..



Lotus Power at the entrance to the Park Hotel in glass and metal sets the tone for the spectacular array of visual delights that await the visitor

where style and design would define the product, "You are where you sleep." The amazing thing about the Park is that sleep is just about the last thing that you think about when you enter the hotel.

You find yourself in the large light filled lobby that soars to a high ceiling at the top. All around you there are boutique-like openings that lead you into temptation. The Leather Bar with lighted glass and mirror panels tucked away in one corner. The Shop that makes a bold statement by focussing tiny tungsten lamps on the most common of objects, a line of plastic water pot that has been given pride of place, only because for Paul, the sight of water starved women standing in a line to fill water is a striking symbol of Chennai. There's the Terrace, an open air area just outside flanked by panels of glass and fountains of water to hide the view of the adjoining office building that is ideal for private cocktail parties, and leading off from beyond the leather upholstered Reception Area, the steps that lead up into the Six-O-One Coffee Shop (so named because that was the original postal number of the Studio), the Thai restaurant, the rest-rooms and the banqueting halls that have been tucked in underground. Again, getting there is a dramatic visual focus that leads you down. There are glass balustrades bordering the stairway and a magnificent cascade of water that falls in a sheet across a grid of

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regular panels of light to flow under the glass floor of the landing between the stairs to tumble silently across a slope and disappear into the pool below.

"Obviously with the site itself being once a part of the famous Gemini Studios we knew what we wanted from Day One. That was part of our brief to the designers, Hirsh Bedner. The design had to be film oriented. This is a film mad City. So we were very clear about our brief. My sister Preeti is an architect and designer so she sat in at all our discussions. It was very much of a collaborative effort, we wanted a hotel that reflected a very contemporary look. It had to cater to a wide variety of clients who would come into the 200 plus room hotel. So we had these conversations going back and forth, but I knew what I wanted," says Priya.

"The first design was good but it was not what we had in mind. The second design was much more adventurous. It's very

important at that point to develop a design story. I think the idea of a theatrical space has been very cleverly done throughout the hotel. The whole idea of the Lobby as theatre, or of hotel as a source of entertainment; you can see it happening in our lobby. It's a dramatic space, the lights, the different settings, then of course the screens that are hanging there. When you go into the elevator, you have the small screen built into the side that's silently showing you something. Then of course, the Six-O-One, the curtains have been designed to look like the ones you see in a cinema theatre. All the corridors have carpets that look like film reels, with the numbers on them to show you which floor you are on and of course, each room has a film poster. We also plan to have different themes for every floor that will combine film stills, contemporary artists who use film as a metaphor, digitalised art work, cartoons, perhaps, the possibilities are endless."

The fantasy world of the Park creates it's own drama. The girls are dressed in black like Pussy Galore and flick back their shoulder



Lobby as theatre. This is the heart of the hotel where everyone comes to watch and be watched. Two giant hanging screens show films in the evening.



length hair, while asking you very politely of course, "Can I help you?" The young men at the Leather Bar in black leather and chain belts look like they have just wandered in from an audition for "West Side Story." While suspended from the ceiling there seems to be two movies that are continuously being projected on two gauze-like screens that hover against one wall of the cube of the reception cum lobby. The lobby is built in a series of very low



Clock wise from left; Stardust Alley. The Atrium that leads to the de-luxe suites celebrates both cinema and contemporary art. The two metal pieces are by Priti Paul, the ceramic one by Ray Meeker. ;Take Three. The corridors are covered in 'reel time' as the designer carpets imitate rolls of film. The elevators have their own mini-film screens as you ride. ; Meet me at the Kasbah! The nights are hot and happening at the Pasha, the Nightspot where you can step on a mirrored dance floor and create your own Arabian nights.

platforms, very comfortable and casually cushioned to create a series of intimate spaces that allow people to watch what the others are doing, without actually appearing to do so. It's cut off from the reception area by a bamboo picket fence, or randomly placed poles that have been planted in a bed of green glass shards. "We had a blast doing that" recalls Priya Paul who when she's not being the tough boss-lady is a promoter of the arts. "The glass was from all the left-overs of the plate glass that had been broken in transit. The idea of using the bamboo was from Sharan Appa Rao (of Apparao Galleries) because we felt we needed a screen between the two areas, the reception and the lobby."

Ian Schragger who pioneered the idea of hotels creating their own

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magic by a combination of design and theatrical devices that would entice people- the right people of course to come right in and produce an electrifying atmosphere, would applaud Paul's chutzpah. Remember the bad old wonderful days when he and Steve Rubell opened Studio 54 in New York and the likes of Bianca Jagger came trotting in riding a white horse? It was not enough to get people into Studio 54, it was equally important to keep some people out, so that there would always be that anxiety amongst the party animals to try and crash the barrier. Schragger has progressed from such ideas of exclusive privilege to compare the lobby of his boutique hotels to the old-fashioned town square where everybody meets in what he calls a 'fantasy environment' to take part in the evolution of a city within a city, or a "micro-city".

It's difficult not to get away from the metaphor of film nostalgia while sampling the many different aspects of the Park. On the 8th floor for instance, floating up over the rest of the still modest Chennai landscape is a setting worthy of Lawrence of Arabia. There are blue and white striped tents and sunshades that hover over white cushioned deck chairs that border a California style swimming pool. An op-art like effect of black and white stripes dominates the floor of the adjoining coffee shop called Aqua, with blonde wood furniture and a startling close up of a young woman clad in a blue and white thong stretches along one wall to add a surreal effect.

Meanwhile, just a little away from the main entrance to the property, things are probably just hotting up at the Nightspot, named Pasha. It's a squat kasbah like building that has somehow been squeezed into a corner of the long narrow plot. You walk into it via a dramatically lit gangway and once you are inside, again there's a temporary suspension of disbelief. The square box has expanded into an octagonal space filled with mirrors. It's a bit like entering a kaleidoscope. There are glass walled ramps that lead you to a second tier, this is the more classy, for which read expensive, segment of the Nightspot. Once you have climbed up in life, you can hide away for the rest of the evening in your own private boudoir that has been furnished with pillows and bolsters, candles and curtains and tiny table for your drinks, while the rest of the crowd are hamming it up on the mirrored dance floor downstairs. This bit has to be out of the Adam's Family set, everything is either in black or mirrored, or inlaid with baroque designs in mother of pearl and glitter.

With so much happening in the public spaces, it's almost a surprise to find that the bedrooms and suites have actually been designed for comfort. The medium range rooms are almost

From top: On the Terrace. Fountains and designer walls in curving steel panels define this informal meeting place, ideal for an intimate outdoor party. ; Suite Sensation. The ultimate in cool luxury, the Park has a number of personalized rooms where you can entertain and live in stylish comfort. The lamp on the desk is a Phillippe Stark original. ; Room with a view: only a glass partition lies between you and the de-luxe bathroom area. The white curtains are for Hitchcock fans.



Photo courtesy: The Park



Aqua the cafe is as fresh and in your face as its name suggests, in blue and white with blonde wood and floors striped in black and white. The art on the wall suggests that you let it all hang out and plunge in. You only die once.

Spartan, with bare floors that have just a mat perhaps and a framed film poster. The only surprise is the glass partition separating the bathroom and toilet areas from the sleeping space, a design innovation that makes most Indian guests acutely self-conscious.

In the suites that are located in a separate floor of the Hotel altogether, with a large Atrium filled with film memorabilia along the sides and plenty of space for the display of Paul's love of contemporary sculpture and art, the bathrooms are worth this public display. There are cabins for a sauna, shower, Jacuzzi and an old-fashioned bathtub with black marble cubes and stands on which to place the scented candles and champagne, quite apart from washbasins in different coloured glass that match or contrast with the colour scheme in the room. The Presidential Suite for instance is done in shades of pale powder blue silk curtains with figured under-curtains with silvery grey velvet textured upholstery that perfectly complements the Philippe Stark lamp on the desk with its pleated glass shade. By way of contrast, the dining table is a hefty slab of smoothed stone on which there's just one black boat shaped candle-stand. The paintings on the wall are soft and feminine in wisps of cotton collaged onto a lace background done by an artist named Eleana and accessories are of African grass plaited containers with black upon grey geometric designs. Floral arrangements throughout the hotel are striking, either in the form of exotic vegetable products, artichokes, miniaturized pine-apples or citrus fruits arranged in rows on steel platters, or monumental tropical plants selected for the architectural shapes or colours.

"In most hotels the art programme is chosen by the interior decorator who then decide on a particular look or style, which they order in bulk from a dealer of their choice," says Paul. "In my

"I love contemporary art. I've lived with art all my life so it's something I enjoy doing."

hotel, I manage it. I decide what goes where. I think it's what defines a place. I love contemporary art. I've lived with art all my life so it's something I enjoy doing. I might buy a work and keep it for some time, till it finds the right place, or I might commission a special piece like the Lotuses at the entrance. That's by an artist called Hemi Bawa who works in glass. We commissioned her to do that piece because designers wanted something dramatic at the entrance and I had seen the work that she does, so it all fell into place. After all what could be more appropriate than to have lotuses at the entrance. It's Indian and it's entirely contemporary in spirit that's what I love about it."

Geeta Doctor



Photo courtesy: The Park

The swimming pool is where Hollywood meets Kollywood as the Kodambakkam film district is known. It's so romantic, you imagine that the moment has come for Rudolf Valentino to appear again, as "The Sheikh".