

Designs on a hotel

*With an emerging niche audience and discerning holidaymakers, designer hotels are fast becoming popular. We explore the very existence of these hotels in India, how popular they are when it comes to inbound travellers and their potential future in the Indian market. **By Heena Mahajan***

The Indian hotel industry has witnessed massive expansion over the recent past. As a sequence to which, hospitality groups have been extremely conscious about the way hotels are designed. Every five-star luxury hotel has a unique selling proposition. It could be design, facilities, location or food but the most attractive of all is the design element. For sure there are several hotels in India that take pride in being 'designer' because of the architecture, style and service that they offer. It is their individualistic style of design be it simplistic or artistic that can be appreciated by the discerning traveller.



Take for example the Waterstones Hotel. The entire look and feel of the hotel is accentuated by hip, trendy colors and design elements keeping in tune with nature theme. The Jaypee Greens Golf and Spa Resort, providing a multitude of venues, is designed by a well-known international architect firm - Arcop. The resort is designed along the existing and fully operational golf course with beautiful landscape, water bodies and reflects its serenity in the form of colours (pastels) and wooden interior used. The Imperial is designed in the style of 19th century English manor. The old world ambience of the hotel and the art deco elements is a distinct departure from the shiny, if not glitzy, interiors that one is accustomed to see in many up market hotels today. Filled with rare and original art across all the floors and public areas, the hotel reflects the restoration of rare and priceless collection from ancient and medieval India. This is why it has been characterised as the 'museum' hotel along with aquatints and lithographs of Grindlays, Emily Edens, Daniell's, Simpsons, Chimneys and the likes.

"Indian luxury/ premium hotels have come a long way. Off late, there have been many hotels that have experimented with international luxury designers in the country. The hotel brands hire international architectures and interior designers to reflect the brand vision and create single brand imagery around the globe. Design hotels in India are truly designer in their own sense. Architecture, design, service, gastronomy and lot of intangible qualities must come together to create a good picture. The staff and guests obviously play a large part in that, because they give a hotel its soul," says Manju Sharma, director-finance, Jaypee Hotels.

"The cultural heritage coupled with access to modern facilities, the cultural heritage of India has enabled many hotels in India in establishing their identity at a global level. I believe that a good design hotel reflects the amalgamation of the vision, ideas and conviction of a hotelier who feels passionately for cultural authenticity and genuine hospitality. In India, there are design hotels to suit all kinds of budget and preferences of discerning travellers and they are growing in popularity," feels Tinku Singh, president, SRS Lakshya Hotels.

Trending along

"Design hotels is the in thing today. On a personal note, designer hotels are not cherished by all. One has to have a taste to like them. It's like fashion some can value it, others can't even understand. Making expensive hotels is not making designer ones; it's the elements in the hotels which makes them stand apart or futuristic in designs," says Gaurav Garg, director—operations, Royal Orchid Fort Resort, Mussoorie.

Design element for hotels in India is mainly driven based on the location. "One would not really come across many designer places in India but the trend for out-of-the-box, high tech is fast catching up. At Jaipur Marriott itself which is a contemporary hotel, the whole design concept revolves around getting local touches to provide that



extra experience. In today's scenario designer hotels are synonyms to using imported marble, swish light fixtures, suave artifacts, imported linen and world class techno savvy equipments to make the whole experience a little more exciting and engaging," says Bhaskar Suri, executive housekeeper, Jaipur Marriott.

The term designer hotels originated from North America and UK and were used to describe hotels offering luxury facilities of varying sizes in unique or intimate settings with full service accommodations. "There have been quite a lot of hotels in India which project themselves as designer hotels but there are hardly a few that make the grade. Design hotels require a lot of research, thinking and imagination which is imbibed right from the conceptualisation stages. A lot of focus has to be placed on every small element and the minutest facets to create the designer feel. These minute elements which go a long way in creating the 'wow' factor is what makes a design hotel designer," explains Sampreeth Kotian, general manager, Le Sutra.

Key elements

Many hotels make a mistake of assuming that having royal exteriors and exotic interiors is all that there is to design hotels. Whereas, it is all about flawless execution of a theme and extending it to deliver an exclusively individual, aesthetic and service-driven experience. A good design hotel reflects the amalgamation of the vision, ideas and conviction of a hotelier who is someone who feels passionately for cultural authenticity and genuine hospitality. As such, the true essence of a design hotel is more in what it projects rather than just having plush furniture. Be it an antique property or a newly developed theme based design hotel, the winners are the ones that are able to connect with the guests with the right combination. The constituent elements may include a holistic concept that is not only well executed but also carried forward on a day-to-day basis, the hotel's location and local integration, quality of food and beverage and corporate ethics. All the elements should be in perfect harmony with each other for the design hotel to be truly designer.

For Bruno Loosli, CEO, Waterstones Hotel of Mars Enterprises, some of the basic elements of a classic design hotel would be luxurious amenities with a blend of impeccable hospitality matched with awe inspiring decor. "A place which shows its character through its design and understanding of the needs of a seasoned traveller," he says. A design hotel is designed to bring beauty and luxury to your journey without losing out on functionality. Another important aspect that Loosli throws light on is the F&B offering which have transformed the notion of what hotel's dining and bar ought to be.

The concept, aesthetics, welcoming homely feel, friendly atmosphere, unique themes, artifacts and 'wow' elements together form the key elements that make a design hotel. If any one of the aforementioned elements are missing, the overall effect of a design hotel would leave something to be desired.

Preference matters

Though designer hotels are a new trend in the hospitality industry, they have almost marked a degree of excellency in the hospitality industry globally. As globalisation continues with the forever changing lifestyle of the travellers, there is an urge for designers to have new innovations of hotel designs for hoteliers to succeed in a highly competitive market and a need to go beyond the traditional lodging system. Thus, technology advances and expectations increases from the consumer's point of view.



According to Kotian, "Though the domestic market is slowly responding to the new trend of designer hotels, it can be safely stated that 60 per cent of the clientele would comprise of international travellers. Their intrigue factor in knowing about the vast diversity that India has to offer and historical/ mythological influence on the concept of a design hotel go a long way in attracting them away from the opulent five-star hotels."

Similarly, Suri feels that more than the domestic, the international traveller appreciates the design aspect. Owing to a macro psychographic outlook — the domestic traveller is more tuned to the service aspect and is not that highly engaged with the design element — which he/she would be once they travel abroad. On

the contrary when international travellers visit India, they look for the local Indian experience yet expect international standards to be met. "They are equally important to people who can understand them or have a taste for these. Hotels, for the rest of them it's all same. Design aspects of a hotel make the ambience cosy and personalised and enhance the feeling of hospitality and make customers feel home both for international and domestic travellers," says Garg.

Location plays a very important role in the concept and services proffered by design hotels. Depending upon whether it is located in the city or a resort destination, the charm and services will have a stark contrast. In an urban area, location is definitely crucial to any traveller's priority list. Be it a tourist or jet setting business traveller, design needs to include the location, prospective customers and surroundings. Kotian feels that boutique hotels in city destinations are not only visited because of their convenience, but also because of the city's fashion/ historical/ mythological/ archaeological influences. "Technology is an important attribute of a city boutique hotel. It could be technology used to emotionally connect guest with the hotel, like music and light, or it could be technology for guests' convenience, such as computers with high-speed internet, cordless phones, DVD players, and flat-screen televisions," he sums up.

In contrast, boutique hotels in resort destinations generally are located in hidden places, like islands or mountains. Unlike the ones in city destinations, technology is not strictly necessary in the resort destinations. Instead, exotic amenities are the core competence of the resort destinations. They commonly offer spas, yoga and/or painting classes and connection to the environment, in order to promote their guest's comfort. The concept of fashion is different in their case, because the more difficult it is to reach the destination by means of common transportation, the more fashionable the location is considered.

Value add versus gimmick

Several major players in the hospitality industry put forth their opinion in evaluating the concept of a designer hotel, and knowing if it is truly a value add. Kotian says, "Design hotels have typically been unique properties operated by individuals or companies with a small collection. They have made a niche for themselves in the highly evolving hospitality segment. However, their successes have prompted multi-national hotel companies to try and establish their own brands in order to capture a market share. Notable example include Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide's W Hotels, ranging from large boutique hotels to the W 'boutique resorts' category."



"Designer hotels, all over the world are usually smaller in size and unique retreats, what sets them apart from other hotel chains around the world is their passion to be different, luxurious and functional. A true design hotel that prides itself on individuality and its passion for hospitality only adds a value today for a globetrotting traveller. A design hotel could not be bothered about gimmicks as its existence would lie in its individualistic design orientation. It's important these days to celebrate life every day and in every way. Businesses too are successful, when conducted in a place that cultivates productivity and connections," feels Loosli.

"People are attracted to good design. The atmosphere in designer hotels has proven to be a significant aspect in a positive strength of a brand and marks each hotel as a unique experience and makes it a destination in its own right. Thus in order to enhance the brand value and global recognition based on certain designable themes like ascetic modernism, extravagant fantasy, nostalgic opulence and exotic exclusivity; the designer hotels have tweaked their design strategies," says Rohit Sharma of R4 Hospitality.

"New designs always give a fresh feeling and innovations add on to the value of the propositions. The brand value of a hotel enhances every time there is a change in the design or a new design is used," says Garg. Suri adds, "Design is a definite value add as it helps mileage on the brand positioning in that particular location. At the same time, in case of a gap between the brand positioning and design — it could lead to great consumer confusion scenarios and dilute the brand image as well."

Changes predicted

Design is soon to become more important. If we look at the whole design world, hospitality is setting trends. Nowadays an overnight is about an experience and not only a bed-to-rent-for-a-night. The few design hotels in India have a large loyal following, for instance CGH Earth, Apeejay Surrendra Park Group of Hotels, and more. Good genuine design innovations will always have high demand.



“International designs have a following with definite segmentation. But ethnic design with more Indian touch is now becoming contemporary and liked by customers from domestic as well as international markets. It depends on individual perception on the design aspect of an hotel either contemporary or international or ethnic is concerned,” feels Ajay Bakaya, executive director, Sarovar Hotels.

“The situation in India is fast changing. Five-star hotels gave way to five-star deluxe to environmentally sensitive hotels to currently designer hotels. Guests like to be recognised and feel at home which is lacking in the five-star hotels due to the sheer volume of guests they cater to. Designer hotels are not only a refreshing change in this scenario but also an opportunity to add to the overall experience of guests when they relate their trip tales to all and sundry. The appreciation received from international travellers has spurred the initial few designer hotels to open chain properties while forcing the bigger brands to follow suit by adding an additional segment (designer brands) to their existing repertoire of hotels,” adds Kotian.

Sharma lists down the changes predicted in the coming future:

- May lead to 'Glocalisation', the combination of globalisation and localisation, a leading principle in marketing policies of chain hotels
- The designer hotels are encouraged to integrate with the cultural diversity and local styles and by applying luxury and personal touches can expand the upper market sectors
- May lead to standardisation
- Imitation of successful sophisticated and innovative designed hotel concept is a proven method to attract new target groups

“The potential is immense. India has seen a boom of heritage hotels in the last two decades and that has put India on the tourism map surely but I think its time that India offers a contemporary version of itself to visitors,” she adds.

Future ahead

According to a survey by Technopak, luxury trends in India for 2011-12 reported that India ranks 15th amongst the countries having the highest number of high net worth (HNI) individuals in the world. As of now highly customised and exclusive luxury goods remain popular in India, therefore the future looks bright for a few designer hotels to open in India. Key hospitality players provide their take on the future of such hotels in India.

Kotian from Le Sutra thinks that there is a lot of potential for designer hotels in India presently and in the near future. “The segment has its clear brand of followers who do not mind coughing up extra money just to experience the unique feel. However, I think there should be a proper gradation for design hotels as well to prevent abuse of the terminology. A guest should not feel cheated when they stay in a hotel claiming to be a design hotel but failing to deliver on most accounts. The focus and planning needs to be more precise to deliver the overall wow factor and ensure mouth-of-word publicity and repeat patronage,” he adds.

“The future of designer hotels is remarkable as travellers are looking for authentic experiences when they travel and a designer hotel that captures a sense of location is part of this experience. These hotels serve not only as basis for one’s time in another city, but also reminders of that city and of the different

experiences they'll encounter. Also, new generations of architects, interior and industrial designers, landscapers and hoteliers have collaborated to revolutionise the hotel industry too," says Sharma.

"The concept of design hotels will gather momentum in India as the demand in the domestic market is definitely on an upswing. Young travellers, in particular, seek 'designer experiences' instead of just 'staying at a hotel'. They are becoming more of a travel experience connoisseurs than a simple travellers. They seek exclusivity and comfort and are willing to pay a premium for the same. Experience and individuality is something that is the future of the hotel industry and as such, we see a good future for designer hotels in India," says Singh.