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Taj Umaid Bhawan Palace



Bask in the luxury of a bygone era



Would you like to experience a royal palace where the king and his family actually reside? Look no further as Umaid Bhawan Palace, located at Jodhpur in Rajasthan, India provides this opportunity says **Chandragupta Amritkar** after a royal experience

It was at ITB, Berlin when two dear friends of mine Girish Sehgal, GM, Taj Falaknuma and Ranjit Phillipose who was then GM Taj Exotica Resort and Spa, Maldives (now Area Director Taj Goa & GM Taj Exotica Goa Madgaon Area, India) introduced me to Vincent Ramos, GM, Taj Umaid Bhawan Palace. He saw the ITB Berlin special issue of Global Destinations as well as the feature on Taj Falaknuma. Impressed he was kind enough to invite me to his royal abode and giving due respect I and my wife visited one of the most luxurious palace hotels - Umaid Bhawan Palace.

Taj hotels have always been synonymous with luxury and great service but don't be surprised if you find the GM mixing with the guests and his team taking care of you with utmost sincerity and personal attention. For apart from everything what I noticed is the service is par excellence. The royal Marwaar welcome started right from the time we arrived at the airport as a staff from the hotel was their to personally welcome us. We were picked up by a Land Rover (they also have a Jaguar which dropped us to the airport on return) and as we moved towards the palace the driver pointed out the magnificent palace saying that being on a hilltop its visible from most points of Jodhpur. As we entered the Palace we were welcomed with the beatings of the drums, flower petals and garlands.

Unlike other hotels there was no need for us to go to the check in counter, instead we were escorted through marble hallways to the lobby beneath an enormous central dome (my wife loved the

central dome that soars 105 feet overhead, and provides spectacular centerpiece - a focal point for all the visitors to the property). We were given the options of enjoying a glass of sparkling wine or an aam panna (raw mango) or a lichee with ginger refresher. As it was lunch time the staff led us to the restaurant for lunch as our room was getting ready. We had an excellent lunch and then the staff led us to the lift to take us just a floor upstairs. The Royal elevator has a nice sofa to sit as you move up the floor. We were checked into the exclusive Maharaja Suite to begin our royal stay.

The Palace

Named after Maharaja Umaid Singh, grandfather of the present owners of the palace it is one of the world's largest private residences - set amidst 26 acres of lush gardens with 347 rooms. Currently split into three parts - a part of the palace is managed by Taj Hotels, the principal residence of the erstwhile Jodhpur royal family and a museum focusing on the 20th century history of the Jodhpur Royal Family.

Umaid Bhawan Palace was called Chittar Palace during its construction due to use of stones commonly known as Chittar in the building. The Palace was built, between 1928 and 1943, for H.H. Maharaja Umaid Singh ji, Grand Father the present Maharaja Gaj Singh, who had benevolently commissioned a new palace in 1923 to replace Mehrangarh Fort as the symbol of a new Jodhpur. The Palace was built to provide employment to thousands of people during the time of famine.

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Designed by renowned Edwardian architect Henry Lanchester, the palace is a blend of eastern and western architectural influences. Its majestic 105 - foot high cupola is influenced by the Renaissance, while the towers draw inspiration from Rajput tradition. The lavish interiors with gilt furniture and elegant artwork follow the Art Deco style, complemented by the exotic murals of the self-exiled Polish artist Stefan Norblin.

The hotel organises a palace heritage tour each evening at 5pm, which I believe should be on a to do list of every guest. After a short presentation on the history of the Palace you are taken on an hour long palace tour which familiarises you with all aspects of the palace. During the tour we were also informed of the unique feature of the palace - the hand - chiselled sandstone blocks have been put together by a special system of interlocking with no mortar binding and its possible to shift each portion individually to another location and recreate the structure as it is. The tour really enables one to fully appreciate the splendours of the palace. We were quite taken aback by this beautiful piece of architecture.

The rooms and suites

The Taj Umaid Bhawan Palace has 64 luxurious rooms and suites - Palace Rooms, Historical Suites, Royal Suites, Grand Royal Suites, Maharaja Suite and Maharani Suite. All rooms offer a bath menu with four distinct choices - Rani Padmawati milk bath - rejuvenating bath; Rajput princess bath - healing bath; Narangi bath - energizing bath; Vishuddhi Bath - detoxification bath.

The Historical Suites are the erstwhile residences of visiting Royalty. Each suite has its own unique theme and all have a different colour scheme from classy maroons to gold and sage greens. Try to opt for any of the corner rooms (e.g, room no. 202) as they are more spacious and give an excellent view. The Royal Suites are presented in a luxurious Art Deco style with mirror-finished terrazzo, large bedroom and sitting area. Two bay rooms (living and bedroom) offer spectacular views of the sweeping Baradari Lawns and magnificent Mehrangarh Fort in the distance.

Maharaja Suite and the Maharani Suite

But for the ultimate luxury and if Vitamin M (Rs, \$, Euro, pound) is not a concern then the best suites to stay in are the Maharaja Suite and the Maharani Suite. The GM was kind enough to give us the opportunity to experience both the suites.

The Maharaja Suite spread across approximately 4000 square feet gives a masculine touch and has murals of leopards, tigers, horses and even of the famed Jodhpur



sport, pig sticking. It has exotic painted murals by self-exiled artist Stefan Norblin, flaming torch lamps in chrome, plush Ruhlmann sofas in faux leopard skin, the delightful mirrored bar in the drawing room and the original artifacts that still adorn the shelves make this an incredibly handsome suite.

Apart from the spacious bedrooms and living room, the suite has a 10 seated dining table, Glass tiled bathroom with Jacuzzi, a private steam room and the best part an en suite couple therapy room for personal Spa (which my wife thoroughly enjoyed in the suite). It also has an enormous, private terrace.

The Maharani Suite spread across 4850 square feet was originally designed for and indeed once graced by the beautiful and charismatic Maharani Badan Kanwan, is rather appropriately dominated by a Stefan Norblin mural of the Goddess Kali etched on shining black glass.

Designed in pinks, blacks chrome and mirrors, this suite has been retained as it was over the years. The suite includes spacious drawing and dining rooms with an attached kitchenette, an enormous, private terrace with a spectacular view of the palace gardens and the Mehrangarh Fort, a dressing room with a wardrobe. Apart from a modern Jacuzzi the suite has a bath tub that has been carved out of a single piece of pink Italian marble. It also has an en suite couple therapy room for personal Spa.



Exhilarating and relaxing options

Within the hotel there are a lot of activities that the royal guests can indulge in - there is a billiards room, underground pool, outdoor pool, marble squash courts, tennis courts and croquet lawns, secret gardens and stables, a boutique filled with treasures, a library, a bookstore and a gallery for fine antiques libraries, ball rooms, a whispering gallery, turret rooms and terraces with views of the city etc. The palace also has a horse stable.

For those who are health conscious there is the fitness centre that has Technogym equipment. The palace conducts yoga classes in an endeavor to impart the essence of this great Indian treasure to the guests. Then there's the indoor Zodiac swimming pool that is located underground next to the Taj Jiva Spa. For those who prefer to swim in the sun there is also an outdoor pool with a view of Mehrangarh Fort. But the best way to relax and rejuvenate oneself is at the Jiva Spa where I was amply pampered like a royalty. With an excellent ambience guests are treated to millenia-old wellness and beauty treatments including the signature Jiva Spa therapies. Dr. Pankaaj Chansarkarr the SPA Manager suggested a nice one hour Deep tissue Blend massage but during treatment as I felt pressure on the higher side the therapist improvised to relaxation. The ingredients of oil were Cinnamon leaf, peppermint, Black pepper, camphor, eucalyptus, aswagandha, lemon grass, black seed sesame. "The aim was to release body tension and the blend is excellent as it eases any musculo skeletal tension, balance the nervous system," said Dr. Pankaaj Chansarkarr.

It is also a home to a family museum and a fine collection of vintage cars including a Silver Ghost Rolls Royce. The Palace Museum houses a fine collection of Victorian and Edwardian timepieces, porcelain and objects d'art, 19th and 20th century weapons, royal miniature paintings, models of airplanes and exquisite crockery from the Maharaja's personal collection.

For those groups or big families keen on watching a movie the

palace also has an amphitheatre. Named after the renowned court musician and sarod maestro Ali Akbar Khan, this amphitheatre is a spacious venue that can be booked for watching films or for lecture demonstrations and audio/video presentations.

Royal feasts

One of the main reasons for the success of any property is the F&B. Umaid Bhawan Palace has two excellent restaurants where dining can be a visual pleasure as one can enjoy the views of the gardens, the city and the magnificent Mehrangarh Fort right from ones table. Risala, the all day dining restaurant provides Continental and Indian cuisines. Risala, meaning "cavalry", celebrates the acclaimed victory of the Jodhpur Lancers against the Turks at Haifa in 1918. Life size royal portraits of HH Maharaja Sumer Singh and HH Maharaja Umaid Singh gaze down upon the dining patrons. These paintings each have a unique, amusing feature where the shoes of the portrait point at diners from any location within the restaurant.

The other restaurant Pillars, an open-air cafe, is an ideal place for enjoying the breakfast (only in winters) with the melodic chirping of native birds and peacocks as well as the stunning sunset. The menu offers a wide selection of pre-plated meals, snacks, Rajasthani delicacies, full meals and teatime delicacies.

Every evening they placed a very tasty Indian sweetmeat in our



room which both of us relished. Infact they were so tasty we requested the chef to pack a box for us to take home.

MICE and Weddings

What a venue if you want to strike an International deal or hold a meeting for the select few or a large wedding or a private party? There are several venues choice of grand, elegant and informal halls, high-ceilinged rooms, lawns and courtyards. Add to this an excellent cuisine and a par excellence service of the butlers. The palace has 4 meeting rooms and 6 outdoor venues available. The four meeting rooms can accommodate up to 300 participants. The garden and lawn areas are suitable for up to 3000 guests. There's a mini-theatre ideal for screening films or holding lectures, for up to 100 guests.

For weddings the hotel can provide a traditional elephant welcome, a magical gala, rainbow-hued Rajasthani costumes and ambiances, and all the splendid trappings of an ancient royal wedding. The popular outdoor venues are – baradari, baradari front lawns, royal tent at baradari back lawns, lancer lawn, sundeck lawn front, sundeck lawn back, fountain courtyard and museum courtyard.



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“When we invite guests it is an invitation to Live life like a Maharaja”



With over two decades of experience and stints with Four Seasons Group, Leela Group and currently Taj Group (sixteen years with Taj) Vincent Ramos has risen quite rapidly and today is the GM with one of the most luxurious properties of Taj and one of the only four palace hotels of the group in India - The Taj Umaid Bhawan Palace. To get an insight into the palace success story we interacted with the soft spoken **Vincent Ramos, GM, Taj Umaid Bhawan Palace**, who is one of the few people in hospitality industry to be encouraged by parents to choose this profession. Excerpts

What’s so unique about this palace?

We offer a unique and enjoyable combination that cannot be found anywhere else in the world. For the first time guests can enjoy the luxury of an International chain of hotels in a true royal palace where the royal family also resides. It’s also the largest palace and considered to be an architectural marvel.

One of the hoteliers in the city was mentioning you are also selective on the guests.

We are very selective and do our reference work before confirming on guests who want to experience our place. Also for weddings we are very choosy. I believe our palace is for fine people and remains for fine people. When we invite guests it is an invitation to ‘Live life like a Maharaja’.

My wife is pretty impressed by its cleanliness. With such a huge palace with landscaped gardens it must be a challenge?

To a certain extent it is challenging. But we employ a huge staff to make sure everything is spick and spank. Apart from the grounds we also have to maintain the marble that is spread across the palace. That’s what our guests expect and that’s what we deliver. The guests also are well educated and help us maintain the property. As I said it’s a gentlemen’s palace.

Can you throw light on some culinary experiences that you provide - not confined to traditional restaurant setting?

Absolutely. Our palace offers a many enchanting dining experiences including the highest dining point in Jodhpur which is located right in our palace. In a couple of days the son of a business tycoon is planning to propose his girl friend at that location over dinner. For the more adventurous to a local hamlet in the desert where the traditional Opium ceremony is performed by the village elder in full ethnic costume and settings - followed by champagne, cocktails and snacks or dinner.

MICE and weddings has become a major revenue earner for many hotels. What is the scene at the palace?



It has become a favoured MICE destination for most top corporate and CEOs who would like to meet. We have plenty of banqueting venues to choose from. The Rathore Darbar Hall is most popular - a throwback to the grand royal ballrooms of yesteryear with its high vaulted ceiling, gilded mirrors and intricate carvings. For more intimate meetings the CEOs or head of states can opt for the charming and elegant settings at our Chamber of Princes and Smoking Room.

It’s a very popular destination for wedding planners and those clientele whose budget is in the range of a few crores. The guests have a wide option to choose from - the Baradari Lawns, the South Lawns, the Museum Courtyard, the Fountain Courtyard or the Heritage Lawns which provide wonderful options for weddings, feasts or themed events. Our clientele includes business families from metros, CMDs and top directors, NRIs from USA, Europe, South East Asia and even Africa. Infact this year one of the richest NRI from Africa will be holding his siblings wedding here.

We have the sole rights of hosting events at the Fort and that also would be an excellent venue for an event.

How do you rate Taj Umaid Bhawan Palace vis-à-vis the other Taj properties?

I take great pride in saying that it’s not me or my staff who rate the palace. Its guests like you who have rated it as the topmost among all Taj properties.



TAJ FALAKNUMA PALACE

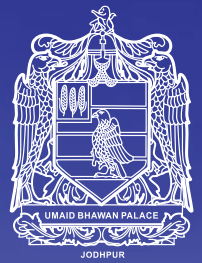
THE CHOICE OF DISCERNING TRAVELLERS AND AWARD JURIES

Taj Falaknuma Palace welcomes guests and friends to its otherworldly embrace. Every facet and facility, room and restaurant, suite and service has been thoughtfully refined and perfected over 120 years. This timeless palace celebrates the numerous accolades received since its reopening three years ago and thanks all those who have voted it amongst the finest in the world.

- Best Hotel of the Year, 2013, Andrew Harper
- Top 25 Hotels in India, 2013, Trip Advisor Traveler's Choice
- Best Heritage Hotel in India, 2012, Travel + Leisure South Asia
- The Best Overseas Leisure Hotel in Asia, 2012 & 2011, Condé Nast Traveller UK
- Best New Spa Hotel, 2012, Asia Spa Awards
- Best of the Best, 2011, The Robb Report
- The Hot List, 2011, Condé Nast Traveler, USA
- The 'It' List, 2011, Travel + Leisure, USA
- Top 20 Places to Visit in the World, 2011, The New York Times

Taj forever.





Umaid Bhawan Palace
Jodhpur, India

