

Who moved into my cheese?

With inputs by Aabhas Sharma

Business Standard

When Deval Tibrewalla returned with a hotel degree from Switzerland, it was with some definite idea. Tibrewalla's family ran the non-descript four-star Hotel Polo Tower' in Shillong, but instead of just aspiring to the extra star or attempting to "photocopy" the brand to other centres, Tibrewalla decided to have some "fun" instead. The result: A brand new luxury hotel in Kolkata which, among other things, resembles a block of cheese!

"We got bored with the standard luxury hotels with their standard plastic smiles," says Tibrewalla. "We decided to create a hotel with some spunk, so we decided to make merry hotels." merry being the key word at Chocolate Hotels, the company he launched for making "hip, sexy hotels". These may not be adjectives you'd associate with luxury hotels, but today Chocolate Hotels leads a whole new genre of lifestyle hotels targeted at a more assured Gen X and Y and "hip oldsters" who look for rather more than just a daily change of linen, freebies in the bath and indiscriminate buffets.

Chrome, Tibrewalla's hotel in Kolkata, breaks away from most hoteliering cliches. Instead of the traditional main entrance, there is a side door into the prop-erty. The hotel's 63 rooms are classified into seven categories, each with contemporary hi-tech fixture such as Bose speakers and high-pressure showers. The wacky design of the public spaces transforms into practicality within the rooms. It is possible to view the TV while shaving through glass partitions separating the bath from the room. Standard 'Do Not Disturb" cards are replaced by those that read "The Obvious".

"We don't compromise on luxury and have the best of everything, but it's slightly cooler," remarks Tibrewalla, who feels that his target guest is someone who is not stuck with traditional things. It's a customer that Dhiraj Arora of Mahima Hospitality would connect with. Arora, who started the trendy lounge-bar Shalom in New Delhi six years ago, found that a "new type of Indian" had begun frequenting it. "These were Dot people who came to drink, they came to hang out!. There were couples who would meet at Shalom in the evening because they were too busy with their careers and did not find time even at home. There were those who wouldn't hesitate in giving a hand to our boys on busy evenings, and others who would sit on even when the lights and the air-conditioning were switched off, because they treated it as their own space," recalls Arora.

So when he started toying around with the idea of opening a hotel, he was convinced that a property that could bottle this spirit would be a winner. Soul Vacation by Shalom came up in Goa about three years ago with a laidback Mediterranean charm, yoga in the garden, a Med lounge, and friendly staffers who were taught neither to follow the "Taj style or the Oberoi style" of greeting but "somewhere in between".

Today, the staff - his "boys" - Arora say, are the key to the way the place is nm. "Regulars don't email the hotel for reservations, they just inform one of our. boys," notices Arora. What these guests demonstrate is the existence of a new breed of younger Indians behaving in a non-hierarchical "Western" way, seeking not the deferential pampering of a five-star luxury hotel out newer ways of checking in.

One of the fastest growing segments in tile global hotel business has been upscale hotels for travellers who eschew assembly-line concepts for cutting-edge, environmentally or culturally responsive experiences. Starwood Hotels, one of the world's biggest hospitality companies, has introduced two of its offerings in this segment: Aloft ["a loft"; with

plans to come to India soon) and Element (that launched in the US last year; no India plans yet.) While Aloft (guests are greeted with an "aloha", front desk supervisors may break into a song, and there are jean clad bartenders) bears the DNA of W (a unique brand with special design features and its own band of fierce loyalists), it is set at a lower price point. Element, as the name may suggest, is for the "eco-chic". The attempt by mainstream chains to break out of older moulds can also be seen in the likes of Le-Meridian focusing on concepts of architecture. Then, there are supervisors properties that have taken the branding of fashion houses such as Armani and Bvlgari.

In India too, newer chains like Chocolate and Shalom, as also Zuri (backed by the Dubai based Phoenix Hotels) and Ista whose parent company runs the spa Ananda in the Himalayas), not to mention. The Lemon Tree (in the upscale category) started by former Taj brand Patu Keswani in 2002, can be seen as constituting a similar attempt to break contemporary ground. While one of the most popular ways in which hotel chains abroad are attempting to redefine themselves is by being eco-chic (though research has found that customers still prefer to change of bed linen every day and don't want to pay more for being environmentally friendly), this is a category that is yet to take off in India. The new ITC hotels in Bangalore as also The Park in Hyderabad are set to tackle that. But, as notes The Park's Priya Paul, "concepts like food miles and carbon footprints are still alien to Indian hotels."

However, one way in which new hotel companies are redefining their space is through design-again, in keeping with trends in the West where cutting-edge boutique environs include the likes of Hotel Q! in Berlin (that has the bath tub right next to the queen bed) and Starf in Milan (that uses quarry rough slate, concrete and iron has rough-looking doors that barely cover the bathroom) where blankets are seemingly thrown across the bed, not neatly folded!

In India, while such extremes have not yet been reached, hotel designs have undergone a sea change. Ista, for example, roped in Singapore-based P Interior Associates for its latest Amritsar property, for a trademark no-clutter look. "For example, there are no wall to wall elements," says Mahesh Natarajan, vice president, marketing, IHHR hospitality (Ananda group). Instead, design sensibilities at each property borrow from local inspirations-crafts, culture and terrain. In Hyderabad, the hotel is spread over a natural hillside. "Most hoteliers would have flattened this out," points out Natarajan, "we built the property around it."

The emphasis is on bringing about a "confluence of nature's five elements". There are free flowing public areas, an abundance of water bodies, and attempt to bring the outside inside and baths which are far from being boxed in. "Instead of opulent luxury, we wanted a trendier, lighter touch," explains Natarajan.

In many ways, it was The Park under Priya Paul that started the process of incorporating modern design into hotel space-the chain was the first to bring in foreign expertise (Conran & Co) and redefine spaces. Newer chains are taking this forward. At Kolkata's Chrome, the lobby has 110 LED lights that change color depending on the mood of the city. If the city is happy, the lights are pink; if it's somber; they change to blue! At the chic Zuri in Bangalore, the bar has a lounging space that is designed around a temperature-controlled pool. Explains Aditya Kamani, director, Zuri, "The profile of the Indian business traveller has changed over the years. While traditional luxury hotels were around, there always existed a gap for the business traveller. We aim to bridge that gap."

It's not just space that has been contemporised but also the offerings. Restaurants, for instance, offer lighter, chicer but authentic offerings, the accent is on local flavors for a more cosmopolitan traveller who may be unlike the notoriously unadventurous Indian of an older generation. KhanaSutra, the north Indian restaurant at Chrome, has two trendy chef's studios. There are modern outlets such as a bistro serving just finger food.

At Soul Vacation, ghar ka khana is the mainstay "because our guests are not the kind to overload on cheesy coffee shop lasagnas". The Lemon Tree's Citrus Cage is lively "chill-out" experience with jokes on disposable table mats (owner Keswani is an enthusiastic joke collector and forwards online ones to a dedicated team that sifts through these). Slounge, a bar that accompanies the coffee shop at many properties, like an informal sports bar where travellers can play pool or watch football. And even the third F&B brand recently acquired by the company, Republic

of Noodles, is an interactive, informal concept.

Above all, what distinguishes these hotels is an entirely fresh management style and philosophy. Soul Vacation's Arora says that in his company there are no hierarchies. He can chat easily to the service staff and vice versa. This ethos is extended to guests/ "If you don't like a dish and want to send it back, any one of our boys has the power to say, 'Sorry, I'll get you something else'," explains Arora.

At Ista, the organizational structure is lean in keeping with the youthfulness of the brand, while at The Lemon Tree quirkiness has become a branding feature with the closely-knit staff following "head lemon" Keswani's example of keeping a ponytail tied with a yellow bow! "The more senior you are to keep it," explains VP, marketing, Aradhana Lal.

In keeping with its philosophy, Chocolate advertised for a "cool" general manager-an unlikely proposition in the traditional five-star set up-and promised a "happy" work environment for its staff. This kind of informally gets translated into the ethos of many of these hotels. So that when you check in, instead of the standard formal greeting, a cheery "Hi" may be all you get. And just as well.

Semptember 12, 2009