

Heritage Hotels in India and the Implications for Thailand: A Case Study of Raj Palace, Jai Mahal, Rambagh Palace, Samode Haveli and Narain Niwas Palace in Jaipur, Rajasthan

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Abstract

The paper observes the very different trajectories of the heritage hotel movements in India and Thailand. That in India has been long established and utilises the abundance of palaces and forts surviving from the numerous princely states of pre-1947 India. Five such heritage hotels are summarised here, from a survey of the industry in Jaipur, Rajasthan. In Thailand, where there is no similar provision of grand buildings from the past that present as candidates for conversion to luxury hotels, there is some conversion of smaller buildings as boutique hotels; however, there are also new hotels built that simulate antiquity and heritage. These are replicas or simulacra – they derive codes (forms, elements) from authentic old architecture and produce entirely new constructions as a sort of fake heritage.

Keywords: *heritage hotels, palaces, forts, India, Jaipur, Thailand, boutique hotels, simulacra*

Tourism is fast becoming the biggest industry in the world, “The Greatest Show on Earth”. The lifeblood of much of that industry is heritage (Boniface and Fowler, 1993).

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In recent years, tourism has become an increasingly complex phenomenon, with political, economic, social, cultural, educational, biophysical, ecological and aesthetic dimensions. The achievement of a beneficial interaction between the potentially conflicting expectations and aspirations of visitors and those of host or local communities, presents many challenges and opportunities. Culture and how it interacts with tourism is increasingly a key aspect of tourism in the 21st century.

There is a deep divide within the international tourism experts' fraternity on cultural tourism. How could we add more value; then, on the other hand, how is it possible to sustain and maintain benefits achieved? Among those who see cultural programs as a means to motivate and promote heritage sites, some economists have for many years promoted cultural and heritage tourism in the development of the tourism industry. Believers of this school of thought such as the International Council of Monuments and Sites, UNESCO, the Nordic World Heritage Office, the Committee for the Protection of the World's Cultural and Natural Heritage (1999, 2005, 2007) and Sukhothai World Heritage (1998, 2001 2005, n.d.) are seeking to create a sustainable tourism.

Cultural tourism is defined as visits by persons from outside the host community motivated wholly or in part by interest in the historical, artistic, and scientific or lifestyle heritage offered by a community, region, group or institution (Silberberg, 1995).

However heritage means different things to different people in different contexts. Heritage can be defined as "contemporary uses of the past" (Ashworth, 1995). Heritage can be classified into three groups, as tangible immovable resources (e.g. buildings, rivers, natural areas); tangible movable resources (e.g. objects in museums, documents in archives); or intangibles such as values, customs, ceremonies, lifestyles, and including experiences such as festivals, arts and cultural events (Timothy and Boyd, 2003: 3). In an alternative classification of Natural Heritage of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 1972, heritage was divided into two categories namely cultural heritage and natural heritage.

In the present paper the term Heritage is specifically used to denote Heritage Hotels. In this sense, 'heritage' refers to the intrinsic historical and cultural values of these buildings. It can also refer to the privilege that is bestowed on the visitor in being able to stay in and inter-react with a building which might otherwise be reserved only for museum purposes and, moreover, the notion that as our heritage – that is, something precious that we have inherited – we should therefore take care of and maintain such a building for future generations to appreciate. Nowadays, Asia has become one of the most dynamic of tourist destinations, partly due to the price of the requisite transportation decreasing with low cost air fares on many operating airlines, also the improvement in infrastructure such as international roads that link one country to another country, high speed trains, holiday cruises, social media, and new technology.

Economic growth and rising incomes have brought affluence to many regions, particularly those of new economies such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). In 1998, the World Tourism Organisation (WTO) forecast that, by the year 2020, East Asia and the Pacific will be the most dynamic tourist destination in the world, particularly with the rapid growth of the tourism industry in China, South Korea, Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia. This WTO study, *Vision 2020 – A Perspective for Asia and the Pacific*, estimated international tourists worldwide will reach 1.6 billion by 2020 generating a turnover in excess of US\$ 2 trillion. East Asia and the Pacific will account for 27.3 per cent of world tourism by 2020. The rise of Asia is readily apparent: in 1997 there were just 90 million tourists rising to 438 million by the end of the first decade of the 21st century.

With booming economies, tourism contributed significantly to growth. Tourism was also considered as a commodity having a big impact and influence on all other economic sectors in both direct and indirect ways.

In India, heritage tourism is an important product that contributes to the total tourism income. Heritage tourism in India exists in different forms: the immense and vibrant national history and heritage inspire different emotions – of sorrow, love, betrayal and joy – which lay the footprints and lead to our understanding of Indian culture.

India's culture is also very much related with its present. The development or progress of any heritage site must be carefully considered. Culture and heritage has always been and will remain the biggest draw for tourism in India. Tourism in India is assumed to revolve some 90 percent around its history, culture and adventure, clubbed with business travel.

In India history can be traced back more than 5,000 years; many kingdoms established their power and therefore, as in other countries, India has a rich history of royal lifestyles from one kingdom to another, yielding a glorious legacy which recounts stories of the emperor, the maharaja and the conqueror, a rich heritage waiting to be discovered by people from around the world.

The Beginning of Heritage Hotels

The independence of India in 1947 closed an era by the accession of the princely states to the Union of India or Pakistan, followed about a year later with their merger or integration with the Indian states. Special status was guaranteed under the constitution to the princes when their states were integrated with the other Indian states. However, this status was revoked in 1971 and the Indian princes suffered a betrayal by the government in power (Dwivedi, 1999).

This ended the tales from a bygone era. Unlike the fairy-tale endings, stories that began with "Ek tha Raja" – Once upon a time there was a king (Dwivedi, 1999) – they gradually began to fade away. Seeing that the days ahead would not be smooth, the maharajas wisely started to look for alternative means of sustenance. Several princes, on the other hand, began selling their assets such as palaces, jewelry, objets d'art, furniture, paintings or vintage cars to channel these funds into a variety of businesses. Others with educational qualifications took jobs as managers in industries or joined the diplomatic service. Still others opted to become politicians and engaged in elections. There were also those who believed in the commitment to preserving the specialised arts and crafts of their states (Dwivedi, 1999).

In due course, the palatial residences of many maharajas had similar fates. However, some of the older and more traditional forts and palaces fell into ruins. Those that survived were in urgent need of

restoration. The loss of the privy purses resulted not only in the decay of palaces, but more importantly caused unemployment in the ranks of the innumerable retainers who had once helped maintain them. A few maharajas reluctantly sold their palaces to the Government to be converted into offices or museums. Others, whose capitals were located on popular tourist trails, converted their palaces into gracious guest houses or luxury hotels where tourists could, for a few days, live like a maharaja. A stay at these hotels can transport the visitor to a world of enchantment, elegance and splendor beyond belief.

The state of Rajasthan took a leading role in creating a heritage business venture by converting ancestral homes into hotels. The first heritage hotel in India was Ajit Bhawan Palace in Jodhpur, a splendid private mansion that had belonged to Maharaja Ajit Singhji of Jodhpur. This palace, built in 1927, became renowned as an oasis of hospitality and of the typical warmth of Rajput charm. Decades later his son, the late Maharaj Swaroop Singh along with his wife Rane Usha, had turned some part of the palace into a hotel for travelers coming to Jodhpur or the Blue City. The palace played a vital role as the pioneer “Heritage Hotel” in India.

Private entrepreneurs subsequently played the more significant role in the Heritage Hotel business, starting in the 1970s when Taj (as one of India’s biggest hotel chains) took the initiative and risk to maintain and manage these pieces of history in an efficient manner.

In many cases, private companies were the initiators in developing or converting heritage sites into different hotels, such as HRH Group which is India’s largest and the only chain of heritage palace-hotels and resorts under private ownership. Shiv Niwas Palace and Fateh Prakash Palace in Udaipur and Gajner Palace, Gajner (near Bikaner), are classified Grand Heritage Palaces. Kamat Hotels (India) Limited (KHIL) took over Fort Jadhavgadh in Maharashtra and Neemrana Hotel Pvt. Ltd of Mr. Aman nath and Mr. Francis Wacziarg has been restoring many historical properties which reflect glorious stories of India’s past. The properties that Neemrana group had converted to heritage buildings and to heritage hotels were the 14th century Hill Fort-Kesroli, the 15th century Neemrana Fort Palace, and the 16th century Le Colonial-Cochin in Kerala. The latest venture was the joint operation between Taj and the Falaknuma Palace in Hyderabad, which has already made an impact on the international market.

Many old buildings such as forts, palaces, haveli (haveli, a Hindi term of Arabic and Persian derivation, referring to a private mansion in India and Pakistan) had been converted into heritage hotels but now face many challenges. However, despite difficulties, the development of heritage hotels in India is giving a chance for old properties to have a new lease of life.

The India Heritage Hotel Association (IHHA), founded in 1990, has set an aim to unite and bind in a common bond all heritage hotels in the country. IHHA has also tried to preserve forts, palaces, haveli and traditional buildings from decay, and to present guests with rich and traditional experiences that mark India as the ‘heritage destination of international heritage tourism’. Heritage hotels officially registered with IHHA totalled only 14 in 1990 and rose to 54 in 1993, 123 in 2004, 141 in 2008, and 174 hotels in 2011. However, it is believed that there will be a number of additional hotels to join that are not yet registered with IHHA.

According to the India Department of Tourism, the heritage hotels in India could be categorised into three main classes:

Grand Heritage – This category will cover hotels in residences/havelis/hunting lodges/castles/forts/palaces built prior to 1935. The hotel should have a minimum of 15 rooms (30 beds).

Classic Heritage – This category will cover hotels in residences/havelis/hunting lodges/castles/forts/palaces built after 1935. These hotels should also have a minimum of 15 rooms (30 beds).

Heritage Hotels – This category will cover hotels in residences/havelis/hunting lodges/castles/forts/palaces built after 1950. They should have a minimum of 5 rooms (10 beds).

In Jaipur, Rajasthan, “Heritage” is a unique selling point (USP) and has also played a vital role in tourism industry growth potential. It has also greatly impacted economic activities, government policies, environment and community. The success of the heritage hotels in Rajasthan state has had considerable implications for other Asian countries such as Thailand whose tourism industry is central to the economy.

While the focus is on heritage hotels in Jaipur, the survey for the present study narrowed down to five Heritage Hotels – Raj Palace, Jai Mahal, Rambagh Palace, Samode Haveli and Narain Niwas Palace.

Raj Palace



Built : 1727
Location : Jaipur, Rajasthan
Style : Mughal and Rajput
Dynasty : Choumoo
Operated by : Gkv Hotel Pvt. Ltd.
Heritage Hotel type : Heritage Grand

Jai Mahal



Built : 1745
Location : Jaipur, Rajasthan
Style : Rajput and Indo Saracenic
Dynasty : Kachhuuaha Rajputs
Operated by : Taj group Pvt. Ltd.
Heritage Hotel type : Heritage Grand

Rambagh Palace



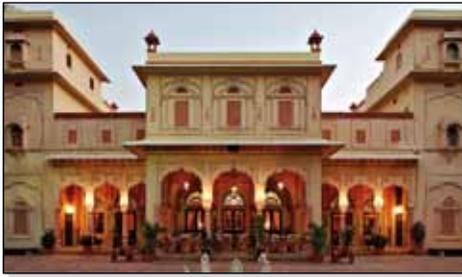
Built : 1835
Location : Jaipur, Rajasthan
Style : Rajput
Dynasty : Kacchwaha
Operated by : Taj group Pvt. Ltd.
Heritage Hotel type : Heritage Grand

Samode Haveli



Built : 1900
Location : Jaipur, Rajasthan
Style : Rajput
Dynasty : Nathawat Rawals
Operated by : Family run hotel
Heritage Hotel type : Heritage Classic

Narain Niwas Palace



Built : 1928
Location : Jaipur, Rajasthan
Style : Anglo-Indian
Operated by : Family run hotel
: (Janota Resort)
Heritage Hotel type : Heritage Classic

The Indian government recognises the concept of heritage hotels as being introduced to convert havelis, castles, residences, forts and palaces into hotels and providing more rooms while also preserving the culture and heritage of the region. Both central government and local administration policy is to provide support for the heritage hotel program. These efforts have especially arisen from the extraordinarily rich royal heritage of Rajasthan (and see Levick et al., 2007). Starting with the state of Rajasthan, the central Indian government has also begun to promote heritage hotel concepts to other states including Bihar, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Puducherry, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh. However, the entrepreneur and the investor must also consider the impacts, influences and the benefits for the local community.

In consequence, the heritage hotel industry has become one of the profit makers of the hotel business. In addition to the big hotel chains, smaller players in the market such as small individual owners have also found this to be a lucrative venture, not only to yield

additional revenue but also to maintain the fragile architecture. Even though development has required different treatment and support in asset management, heritage hotels are described as one of the major sources of foreign-exchange earnings for India. They are a great attraction for foreign tourists who are drawn by their historical and monumental value.

Nowadays, heritage hotels are defined as a luxury experience. Travellers to India identify heritage hotels as luxury dwellings for multiple reasons: the history behind the structure and the region, the feeling of elitism of being the selected few people to enjoy the privilege of staying in these cultural places, as well as the high standards of service in Indian hotels. For experienced travellers who are now looking for more luxury, these palaces converted to heritage hotels are the next level in luxury.

However, besides the government's campaign to promote heritage hotels through cultural and heritage tourism, government needs to provide more policy in order to support the growth of heritage hotels such as through tourism and management planning. The government should promote a proper market via the use of road shows and through the social media as a transactional channel. Social media could create a wider perception of the brand and enhance dialogue with the customer. Improvement of infrastructure would be great for tourism development, including the creation of adequate and suitable infrastructure in the form of accommodation, roads, airport facilities, local transport, communication links and other essential amenities.

Thailand

The tourism industry has been a major component of Thailand's economy and a principal export over the past four decades. Nowadays, travelers have more requirements due to higher levels of education and the effects of globalisation, and these requirements relate in part to culture and environment. Therefore, they are searching for more creative tourism, which could be considered as a new generation of tourism. The emphasis of creative tourism is on more access to culture or history (less museums and more squares) and involves doing something experientially as an authentic engagement in the real cultural life of the city. Southeast Asian countries also have paid great

attention to the new creative tourism roles. In Thailand, the government has started to implement new policies to promote ecotourism and also creative tourism under the campaign “Unseen Thailand.”

Unlike India, Thailand does not have many old structures such as palaces or forts that could be converted to heritage sites (such as hotels). India has a large number of widely distributed buildings and constructions; indeed, in Rajasthan alone there are hundreds of heritage hotels (both registered and non-registered with IHHA). However, current tourists to Thailand are searching for more unique identities in their destinations. Therefore, heritage hotels are getting more popular among this group of tourists and new generation travelers.

Unlike other countries in the world, Thailand is moving forward on the heritage hotel concept due to market force and requirements, while other countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and some other countries nearby Thailand are promoting their tourism using their own uniqueness (such as Singapore using their environmental management and Malaysia using their uniqueness in multicultural aspects, Laos and Cambodia also using their histories and heritage sites).

At the moment, Thailand is starting to use traditional Thai ways to provide a unique selling point, where new investors focus more on the development of old buildings and converting them to heritage hotels known as Boutique hotels in Thailand. In some cases, the investors build a new hotel as a replica of the old Thai architecture style – for example the Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi in Chiang Mai, the Rachamankha and the Ping Nakara, also both in Chiang Mai or The Eugenia in Bangkok etc. Narin Naratuschan (2012) has especially drawn attention to the questions of authenticity – or, rather, its lack – that inevitably arise in these replicas (Taylor, 1991; Trilling, 1972). They would properly be seen as ‘simulacra’ in the sense argued by Jean Baudrillard (1994): they are reproductions accordingly to a ‘code’. However, there are dangers in such enterprises that are well illustrated in the case of Chiang Mai’s Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi, which takes elements recalling Lanna Buddhist religious architecture and layers these over a five-star hotel. This has caused both controversy and consternation: replicating the architecture of

a Lanna temple and applying this to a hotel for overnight stays by men and women is considered severely inappropriate in Thai culture. (It is worth noting that, in India, temples are not converted to hotels nor is temple architecture replicated in heritage hotels.)

Perhaps surprisingly, most replicas of the old Thai architectural styles are very successful in term of business in both domestic and international markets. This result emphasises the new quest in Thailand's tourism sector for a sense of belonging or identity and the need for a precious cultural story – Narin Naratuschan (2012) identifies this phenomenon as 'nostalgic heritage'.

The term heritage hotel in Thailand is not yet well known within the Thai market. The reason is that the government, the entrepreneurs in the tourism industry and the related organisations have never classified the old buildings that have become heritage hotels into distinctive categories. Most are simply known as a boutique hotel, small luxury hotel or, if belonging to a big hotel chain (mostly of five star category), as a luxury hotel. One of the most famous hotels in Bangkok, the Mandarin Oriental Hotel has a history of more than 130 years but it is never claimed as a heritage hotel, only as a luxury hotel.

The best example of a heritage hotel site in Thailand is "Chakrabongse Villas". This is located on the bank of the Chao Phraya River. The villas provide a tranquil haven from the hustle and bustle of the modern city and yet are in easy reach of all the major tourist attractions. Built in 1908 by HRH Prince Chakrabongse, Chakrabongse House was originally used when he attended royal ceremonies in the Grand Palace and also for picnics and excursions on the river. Later, after the 1932 revolution, it became the residence of HRH Prince Chula Chakrabongse, writer and historian. Today his daughter Narisa has transformed the grounds into a magical boutique hotel.

An upcoming hotel is "137 Pillar house" in Chiang Mai. The house revives the old world elegance of the Orient to a very modern luxury hotel. The house is a teak-wood house, which is rich in history, from the era of King Chulalongkorn, best known to foreigners as the royal student of Anna, the British teacher in the royal Thai court, and who signed the Treaty of Chiang Mai in 1883. This royal decree permitted foreigners like British men of the East Borneo Company to cut trees across the vast teak forests of northern Thailand for

commercial purposes. It was also partly instrumental in Siam's opening to the wider world and thereby, a century later, to the present waves of foreign tourism.

There are many other "heritage" hotels in Bangkok which prefer to identify themselves as boutique such as Praya Palazzo, Baan Pra Nond, and Shiang Hai Mansion in Bangkok's China Town or Pukha Nanfa Hotel in Nan Province. Another belongs to the Centara Chain which claims five star status, the Centara Grand Hua Hin, previously known as a railway hotel.

Conclusion

The success of revamping of heritage sites and places (such as palaces) into unique types of hotels requires laborious processes for both Indian and Thai tourism organisations. The processes, however, mark milestones for the revival and promotion of culture and earn revenue through creating more employment at diverse local levels. The success also creates other indirect benefits including Small-Scale Industrial Undertakings (SSIU) and Small-Scale Service Business Enterprises (SSSBE) such as in advertising, marketing agencies, typing and printing centers, laundries, etc. There are also those beneficiaries that are not recognised by SSSBE such as education institutes, retailers, wholesalers, transportation and many other businesses that derive benefit from an enhanced tourism economy.

The heritage hotel movement can also provide stimulus for the creation of new businesses. Marketing is not only selling but also requires effective management. This can be achieved by facilitating effective communication with stakeholders for a specific target market on the one hand and on the other hand developing heritage products – including value-added products such as interpretations, for example interpretation of the heritage that a hotel is intended to mark. In other words, in order to accomplish effective management, the matching of product with audience is the marketing tool necessary to fulfil the goal – hence the role of interpretation.

Since India is one of the first countries in Asia to come up with the idea of turning heritage places into heritage hotels, they have much experience to offer to other countries. Specifically, the cooperation

between the government and the private sector has led India to become the prominent leader of the heritage hotel concept within Asia (though still, it might be added, a century behind Paris in this field). Thailand has less experience than India (and certainly less than selective European cities) in heritage hotel management. Therefore Thailand should not only develop a heritage hotel policy based on their own heritage and experience but also learn lessons from India's successful management of heritage hotels. There are high possibilities for both countries in 'growing up' together in creative tourism including heritage hotels. This might need cooperation between India and Thailand in regards to knowledge exchange in maintenance, preservation techniques, interpretation, marketing, transformation and expertise related to heritage hotels.

Thailand has a strong potential for promoting heritage hotels as a new product in the tourism industry. Thailand's unique heritage and traditions of hospitality can provide a bright future for heritage hotel development luring large numbers of tourists to come and visit. On the other hand India could integrate some good points from Thailand such as the use of both public media and social media as tools to promote the country, also the blend of sensual experiences and luxury to give visitors a warm and comfortable welcome. The Indian government has had to pay attention to the improvement of infrastructure and safety. However, above all, both India and Thailand have strong requirements in heritage hotel management to be sustainable and to reflect with sensitivity the local community's values and goals.

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