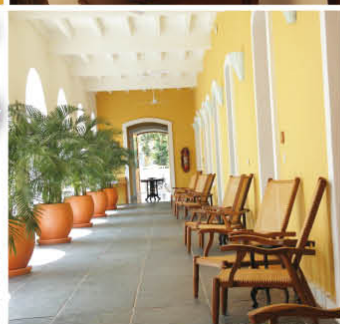
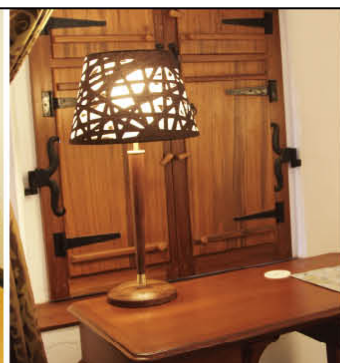




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TANGERINE SANCTUARY

The Palais de Mahe in Pondicherry is a happy marriage between European design and South Indian warmth



Pics: Pattabi Raman

WITH the bracing sea-front promenade of Pondicherry barely 200 meters away, walking down Rue de Bussy in the town's French quarter and coming upon the Palais de Mahe hotel is quite an experience. Taking in its distinctly European colour palette, a calming combination of beige, grey, white and tangerine, I wander in. This is the CGH Earth group's second property in Pondicherry, the first being the Maison Perumal, a restored mansion in the Tamil quarter of the town. Palais de Mahe, launched in December 2012, promises a different experience altogether, taking its name from a smaller French pocket in Kerala.

First impression

Inside, European finery easily mingles with liberal dashes of south Indian warmth. A high-ceilinged lobby opens into the coffee shop, adjacent to which is an enticing swimming pool. The management are welcoming to patrons who walk in; more regularly, arrive in large groups as part of a tour of South India. Next to the pool and sun beds, the three-story hotel makes the best of tangerine, granite-floored corridors and walkways dotted with reading chairs. There are 18 rooms, all of the same standard, and the tariff is inclusive of a continental buffet breakfast.

Local advantage

The design of the hotel is conceptualised by Ajit Koujalgi of the INTACH group, an Aurovillian who lives in Pondicherry and is one of the town's ardent conservators and restorers of heritage properties. Palais de Mahe is a 'facade intervention' as there was no building to be restored, but one constructed to preserve the look and feel of the town's heritage. The plan is simple, to keep the building as close to the effortless artistic sensibility of both European and old Tamil legacy. Large teakwood doors open into rooms minimal in design. The CGH Earth group tries to promote local materials and artists through their properties, while adhering to an eco-friendly policy. The information and stationery material are sourced from the Auroville paper factory, the beds, desks, chairs and tables from another woodwork artist in Auroville.

High ceilings, cool oxide flooring, crisp linen curtains and an almost all-white colour scheme make the rooms a sanctuary after a sunny day of exploring Pondicherry town. There are no TVs, but I'm sure guests prefer to unwind at the chic swimming pool instead.

Case for Ayurveda

As is common with establishments providing lavish experiences, the first floor of the hotel hosts a massage and treatment centre, with trained masseuses from Kerala. There are separate rooms for men and women, hard beds for the special oil massages, and individual steam baths. You can meet a consulting physician, who will recommend the best type of Ayurvedic massage for you. The treatments are priced from ₹2,000 for general massages to ₹15,000, for special experiences like the five day beauty care package 'Soundarya Samrakshana'.

On the plate

The rooftop restaurant has a strange anomaly — their menu changes every day! I attribute this to the three short months of the opening of the hotel, a fluctuating electrical connection and the experimental gusto of the culinary department. From the menu of the day, I recommend the popular starter, Japanese tempura, and for the main course, Malabar fish curry and the prawn moilee. With a liquor licence expected within the next two months, the rooftop restaurant with its fusion French music sets a great ambience for a cheerful meal. The coffee shop on the ground floor, christened Earth Cafe, serves summer drinks, perfect coolers for the bristling tropical temperature. Be sure to try the club sandwiches and salads, recipes straight from Auroville's beloved Marc's coffee shop.

The last word

Palais de Mahe has received reservations until 2014 and a recurring throng of patrons since inauguration. If you are looking for a perfect Pondicherry experience, this hotel will offer you nothing less.

For reservations, contact Dinu Ramakrishnan at 0413 2345611. Rooms are priced at ₹12,000 + service tax.

— Ruella Rahman Khound