

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

THE INTERNATIONAL DESIGN AUTHORITY

SEPTEMBER 2011

Exclusive:
WILL + JADA
PINKETT SMITH

At Home with
Hollywood's Power Family

A photograph of Will Smith and Jada Pinkett Smith in a modern living room. Will is sitting on a patterned ottoman, wearing a white sweater and jeans. Jada is standing next to him, wearing a red dress. The room features a red sofa, a coffee table with a vase of pink flowers, and large windows overlooking a lush green landscape with mountains in the background.

John Pawson's
Los Angeles
Masterpiece

A Lutyens
Manor
Reborn

Plus
THE AD
INNOVATORS
Design's New Guard



BOOMTOWN NEW DELHI

India's capital has a new elite, art-scene buzz, and a trio of recently opened hotels that are vying for the title of best in town

New Delhi is feeling flush, and it shows. A forest of construction cranes has risen above this capital city—above the imperial domes of Edwin Lutyens's government buildings, above the gated bungalow compounds on the stately boulevards, above the labyrinthine alleyways of adjoining Old Delhi. Heady contrasts abound, as millennia of Mauryan, Moghul, and Raj history

play backdrop to a concentration of new millionaires unmatched in India, conspicuous in their diamonds and their Bentleys. And it's no surprise that the art scene is flourishing, too; galleries and museums are sprouting up the way call centers did in the 1990s. No longer the sleepy sibling to bustling Mumbai, New Delhi has gained advantage on its old rival to the south, and it's not looking back.

Speaking of rivalries, a trio of hyper-luxury hotels have recently opened to vie for the title of Delhi's best. And they're not competing just with each other; the venerable Taj Mahal hotel still hosts heads of state, and blue-liveried waiters serve high tea to VIPs beneath portraits of monarchs and maharajas at the iconic Imperial Hotel. But in varied ways, these newcomers—the Leela Palace New Delhi;

Clockwise from far left: A view from Delhi's well-known Jama Masjid mosque. Its busy courtyard. The Leela Palace New Delhi's lobby. A marble-floored corridor at the Leela. For details see Sources.

TRAVELS

the Oberoi, Gurgaon; and the Aman New Delhi—hold their own against the more established lodgings. Together they project the flamboyant confidence of a city finding itself at the cultural and capitalist center of India—and grabbing the world's attention.

The Leela Palace, the newest and most opulent of the three, occupies a prime site in New Delhi's diplomatic enclave. Its rooftop domes and the carved white elephants in the entry court pay architectural tribute to the city's colonial past. ("I was channeling Lutyens," says the hotel's chief architect, John Gerondelis, of the firm Smallwood, Reynolds, Stewart, Stewart.) The ornate lobby is filled with paintings and engravings by Paresch Maity, Laxma Goud, and Dimpny Menon, and smiling benignly from the grassy courtyard is an 11-foot copper bust of the goddess Devi by sculptor Satish Gupta. "These are some of the biggest contemporary artists

in India," enthuses acclaimed poet and painter Namrita Bachchan, a recent transplant from Mumbai and a member of one of the country's most prominent artistic families. (The hotel's art budget was \$5 million; strolling the public spaces compares favorably with a visit to the newly renovated National Gallery of Modern Art, a short taxi ride away.) On this warm evening, expat businessmen and local media types mingle in the lobby, perhaps waiting for a table at Le Cirque—the restaurant's first outpost in Asia—on the tenth floor. At the Qube, a pavilion-like glass boîte in the garden, tables of young women wearing showy jewelry dine on fusion cuisine. Later in the evening the action will move to the Library Bar—a dramatically red-lit cave of Venetian mirrors, handwoven carpets, and velvet-covered sofas.

"The vision was to create a modern Indian palace with elegance, but also with

a rich sense of Indian craftsmanship, from the lights to the floors," says Madhu Nair, who led the hotel's interior design. Her father-in-law, Captain C. P. Krishnan Nair, the chairman of the seven-property Leela Hotel Group, pulled out all the budgetary stops, wanting this to be his company's grandest statement yet.

He has cause to feel competitive. P. R. S. Oberoi, Captain Nair's rival and the chairman of India's prestigious Oberoi Group, has a new place in town, too, and it's the Leela's aesthetic antithesis. The Oberoi, Gurgaon, which opened in April, is a Zenlike vision of restraint in what must be Delhi's least restrained quarter—the hyperactive business and shopping district of Gurgaon. Oberoi constructed the U-shaped hotel of only 202 lodgings on a nine-acre site, leaving plenty of room for elaborately landscaped gardens and, a bit quixotically, a man-made forested hill. "We could have

*The system is not a substitute for your own visual assessment before changing lanes; system accuracy will vary based on weather, size of object and speed. Learn more at acura.com or by calling 1-800-To-Acura. ©2011 Acura. Acura and TL are registered trademarks of Honda Motor Co., Ltd.



Clockwise from near right: The Leela Palace's hot-spot restaurant the Qube provides a contemporary counterpoint to the hotel's neoclassical-themed design. The Leela's manicured garden courtyard features a sculpture of Devi by noted Indian artist Satish Gupta. Colorful rickshaws are ubiquitous in the narrow streets of Old Delhi.



had several hundred more rooms full of marble and Murano glass," says the ever-animated Kapil Chopra, the hotel's senior vice president. "We decided on the greatest luxuries of all: height, light, and space."

The elevated lobby lounge at the crest of the leafy hill (created with some 4,000 truckloads of topsoil) possesses all three qualities. It is dressed in mirrored steel and overlooks a cobalt-tiled reflecting pool equipped with theatrical in-water fire pits. To the west, a wall of nearly 3,000 plants forms a vertical garden that—at 10,000 square feet—the hotel claims is among the largest in the world. To the east, on the



Aggression in its most elegant form.

With a 6-speed automatic transmission and available 305-hp engine, it's aggressive.

But with an Advance Package that includes ventilated front seats and a blind spot information system,* it's also refined. The 2012 Acura TL — elegance with an edge.



Clockwise from top: Oberoi's Zenlike hotel in Gurgaon, a busy suburb. Oversize *jali* screens at the Aman New Delhi. Latitude 28, one of the city's blue-chip galleries for contemporary Indian art. The Aman's pool.

other side of a block of rooms, a David Hockney–blue swimming pool stretches out between lawns and trees. Deep light wells penetrate the hotel itself, drawing natural illumination into the lower recesses, and the open-plan lounges and suites extend the feeling, so hard to come by in New Delhi, of tranquility and openness.

The third entrant in the luxury stakes is the Aman New Delhi, which the Singapore-based Amanresorts opened in 2009. Treading a thematic middle path between the Oberoi and the Leela, it's a thoroughly modern creation that complements an ancient setting. Oversize *jali* screens echo the Moghul features of nearby Humayun's Tomb, but the hotel also sounds Brutalist architectural notes, with sequential geometric forms and roughly textured *khareda* stone (its Australian architect, Kerry Hill, cites Louis Kahn as an influence). As in so many Amanresorts, there is a monastic aura to the long, square-columned hallways opening onto spacious salons and courtyards. And Aman employees, unlike those at other hotels, keep well out of sight, discreetly tidying rooms whenever a guest ventures out—chauffeured, perhaps, in one of the hotel's hip customized Ambassadors (once the car of choice for Delhi taxicabs).

The Aman pool is as sheltered an oasis as you'll find in this city. It's also part of a premier private health club, a popular spot where the elite disappear for a workout and a dip. On a recent visit, during a blast-furnace summer evening, a trio of thirty-something businessmen were arguing a real-estate deal in rapid-fire Hindi and English at one end of the pool; at the other end two of their female companions, in jewels one doesn't typically associate with swimming, were gaily scheming about an imminent shopping spree.

Suddenly the call to evening prayer from the ancient minarets beyond the hotel drifted across the lawn. For a moment, all three disparate soundtracks overlapped operatically in this fantastical setting. It seemed the perfect chorus for the new Delhi. —FINN-OLAF JONES