

Each checkpoint carried points and the highest scoring team was declared the winner.

Cougar has regularly organised events for leading manufacturers such as Land Rover, Mitsubishi, Renault, Tata Motors and Audi and is the exclusive execution partner for all the Tata's Land Rover Experiences in India. Shah's business model has always been based on recovering direct costs from participants with no subsidies. Overheads are met from sponsorships. The company has organised as many as 25 events for Tata, seven for Land Rover, four for Mitsubishi and two for Renault Duster. His immediate target is to make Rain Forrest Challenge India (the only international off road motorsport event in India) a popular and profitable entity.

With all the events they have organised for Land Rover, which is their signature Dashes and now Rain Forrest Challenge India and Rainforest Edition of Off Road Expo, Shah openly admits his calendar is quite full. While he has been asked about events for two-wheelers, which are gaining popularity in India, he admits that there are already established players in that segment, who are doing a good job. And being a car and driving enthusiast, he wants to introduce new experiences in this space where through his motorsport events.

"In the coming years, we plan to make it bigger and tougher," he says. "We have also launched an interesting property called Rainforest edition of off road expo. I envision for it to become the annual event in India for the global off-road community. Though we do not want to increase the number of participants in our Dashes, we might look at increasing the number of expeditions in each season. For example, we currently have only one Himalayan Dash every year. Based on customer queries, we might look at increasing that number to two or three. We already have an international partner, RFC International from Malaysia. Further, we are open to partnering with large international travel companies to bring synergies together for our Dashes."

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TWO DIFFERENT RESORTS HAVE RAISED THE BAR

Time for themed resorts



ITC has been famous for its grand hotels, amply reflected in Starwood's Luxury Collection, of which there are about 10. Each new hotel has been hailed as a landmark, right up to the latest entrant – the Grand Chola, arguably India's largest hotel. When this group announced its most ambitious project yet – its first resort too, expectations had been sky high.

Located about 40 km south west of Delhi and nestled among the Aravalis, ITC Grand Bharat is finally open. This vast property spread over 300 acres (while most of which is the golf course) has to be traversed on foot or as most do, on golf carts that scurry over as you beckon them.

Exploring what is purported to be India's first all suite resort – there are a hundred of them – is a voyage of discovery. As the name implies, the resort draws inspiration from myriad sources for its aesthetics. The main building has most of the public spaces, the sense of awe starts right from the lobby, Sangam, named after the meeting of the three rivers.



The India Room – ITC Grand Bharat

The central dome is inspired from Odishan Nagara style temple of Mukteshwara. The capitals and the detailing on columns pay homage to Adalaj step well. Parapet details come from Vadodara's Laxmi Vilas Palace while the ghats of Varanasi are present in a scaled down version, next to a water channel named Yamuna! Mughals contribute design inspirations for the interiors, and for one of the yet to open Presidential villas, of which there will be four, all inspired from different dynasties that ruled India. There is a dizzying array of details to be noted for those interested and this makes the story of the hotel even more singular. Note the fountains or the Tree of Life or the carpet designs, or the signature Kaya Kalp spa.

The residential blocks are to north of the main block. With no entry level rooms, the resort has opted for cozy suites that comprise of a living room, a bedroom, a closet and a vast washroom. Unsurprisingly the rooms are heavily stocked with every conceivable amenity, some just for pure indulgence. A chocolate picture frame? Monogrammed towels Each ground floor suite has a semi-private pool, while the upper floors have a terraced view.

Dining at the resort is unlike any other hotel in India. The showcase India Room, with its striking interiors, offers an 'array of cuisines of the colonisers of India – from the Greeks, the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French, to the British'. There is

no all day dining restaurant, instead the nearest option is the 3-meal bistro, Aravali Pavilion. Pastel hued and soft in contrast to the glitzy India Room, it too offers its menu in prefixed sets. The Peacock Bar is just as multi hued as its inspiration and so are its unique cocktails. The Apas Promenade is in a verandah like setting next to Aravali Pavilion, offering breakfast and smaller meals.

The resort is located where ITC's Classic Golf Course was, and though the course has shifted slightly, it is now an add on for those who want to putt as well. It's a 27-hole course designed by Jack Nicklaus. Any visitor however, would be well advised to take a leisurely tour of the vast course, if only for the spectacular setting and the rich variety of birds skimming through the links.

Conceived as a kind of Camp David, an exclusive retreat when the powers need to confabulate away from the hubris, Grand Bharat is one of a kind. Ambitious, its design may be an acquired taste, its service standards – it is staffed by ITC's future leaders – is unique as well. It includes a proprietary face recognition software that will help the hotel know precisely where the guest is at all times! Of course each suite comes with a butler, who will be happy (hopefully) to cater to your every whim! General manager Anand Rao, an ITC veteran, is confident that the resort will attract its clientele, which at a stated starting price of about ₹25,000 per night, will definitely be an exclusive list!

PILGRIMAGE PLUS

Essentially, that's what temple town Tirupati's first resort has on offer. For the pilgrim visiting Tirumala, with the desire to combine it with a family holiday, there really wasn't an option. Till the newly opened Marasa Sarovar Premiere, which offers all the typical trappings of a resort, without overlooking the primary reason for the visit here – a darshan at the shrine overlooking the town. Nirvana luxe is how Anil Madhok, managing director, Sarovar Hotels & Resorts, described it!

While Tirumala draws in an



Tirupati, Marasa Sarovar Premiere

average of 50,000 visitors a day, and already has about 500 hotels catering to them, few are branded. The well-off pilgrim has often had to seek an immediate return or drive down about 135 km to Chennai, from where general manager Rishu Roshan feels some of the traffic can be diverted.

Marasa Sarovar Premiere's design draws from the temple, with the 10 avatars of Vishnu incorporated into its design. Indeed the design is the most noticeable feature of the hotel, and a closer look reveals the extent to which SJK Architects have drawn from the temple itself. The introverted, orthogonal structure around a water body, which temples in the region typically follow, has been retained. Each of the avatars gets a separate niche, functionality aligned to the symbolism of the avatar! So, Matsya is associated with the pool, while the powerful Parasurama gets the gym! More symbolism is woven into the patterns, textures and colours used across the hotel, letting the guest undertake a voyage of discovering almost covert aesthetics.

The hotel's primary guest is the pilgrim who wants to weave in some leisure time. So, the hotel has a swimming pool, a games room, a



Krishna – the thali restaurant

health club and a spa. The hotel's 121 rooms meet upscale hotel standards but for those willing to fork out the extra cash, there are spacious suites as well! The staff is trained to speak in languages that can put any Indian guest at ease.

The hotel has also pushed the envelope regarding food. Two ambitious restaurants offer buffets and an a la carte menu that is unmatched in this town. There are two restaurants – the all day diner Lotus Café and the vegetarian speciality outlet Krishna, and the design and menu are both worth taking note of.

Tirupati is a boom town, and that means increasing opportunities to cater to a more corporate client. A large banqueting space has been built in, along with a business centre. A new international airport is slated to start operation in weeks, and a focus of the new Andhra Pradesh government to raise the profile of the town should all help attract more business, feels Roshan. He is targeting an occupancy of 50 per cent for year one of operations.

While a couple of hotels by Fortune are about the only competition at present, groups such as the Taj, Radisson and Holiday Inn are in various stages of developing their hotels. The Sarovar Group, which operates about 70 hotels, largely in India, manages the Uganda-based \$500 million Madhvani group owned hotel.

For who can afford a bit of luxury, well, Tirupati now no longer means box hotels but a resort to recover in after the rigours of darshan!

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