

Nilaya, literally heaven, has only 11 rooms with a guest list that includes Hollywood film stars, media moguls and European aristocracy

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# The style gurus of Goa

Text by Namita

O Pescador



Although O Pescador has been with the family for over 20 years, it's only recently that its owners Rainer and Cynthia Diaz commissioned and designed their own swimming pool adding stylistic touches of terrazzo, mosaic and designer furniture

"As foreign tourists we missed French food," says Florence. It helped also that Morgan is a professional cook. Florence herself looks after the décor, which changes with every season (the current look is theatrical with red curtains and faux tiger-striped cushions), and what she calls developing personal relationships with the restaurant's clients. "We get the Anjuna beach crowd, we get the local jet-set but throughout we try to maintain an environment that is elegant without being stifling," says Serge.

Maneck Contractor and his half-Italian, half-Punjabi wife Pyl Mehra, better known as Yellow, run the other restaurant, Fiesta. "Yellow has been helping in her grandmother's kitchen making ravioli and pasta sauce since she was four," says Maneck. Speaking about their decision to move to Goa he says, "We were sick of the big city lifestyle." As with Le Restaurant it certainly helped that one of the promoters, in this case Yellow, was a gourmet chef who could whip up authentic Italian cuisine



in an old Goan beach house. The outsiders have made an impact on the local scene as well.

"Things have changed a lot in the last few years," says Hari Anjwani who, along with his fashion designer wife Claudia Derain, runs what is perhaps Goa's finest boutique hotel, Nilaya. "Two years ago if a guest asked me to recommend a good restaurant, I would tell him there's nothing. Now, that's not true any longer." The story of Nilaya really began 10 years ago when Anjwani and Derain met on a vacation in Goa, fell in love and bought 15 acres



Busabong specialises in south-east Asian cuisine and has one of the liveliest bars in town

of land on a hill at Arpora, a tiny village near Calangute. The next task was commissioning architects Gerard d’Cunha and Dean d’Cruz to create a cross between Xanadu and the Garden of Eden. The interiors were designed by Derain and the couple established their own workshop commissioning work in wrought iron and even a tailoring division to meet the hotel’s needs.

Nilaya (literally heaven), with its terracotta walls, undulating roofs in black and red with sienna domes, has only 11 rooms and is rumoured to have a guest list that includes Hollywood film stars, media moguls and European aristocracy. It’s been featured in such magazines as *Tatler*, *Marie Claire*, *Voyager* and *Elle*.

Each of the stunning rooms (none has either a television or a telephone or even for that matter, air-conditioning) is centred around a theme. There’s the circular star room done up in shades of blue, a sunroom in orange and yellow and an earth room in green and pink. The décor is changed every two years. Life at the hotel centres around an enormous blue and white tiled swimming pool complete with a waterfall grotto. There is, also, a steam room, tennis courts and a jogging trail.

None of this comes cheap. At US\$ 235 per night, Nilaya is exclusive, and deliberately so. Yet, despite the price, the hotel is choc-a-bloc. To deal with the millennium rush, Anjwani and Derain put up tents on the property. All were sold out. The success of Nilaya has spurred imitators, says Anjwani: “One hotel even hired the same architect. But there is no formula that you can repeat.” One offspring of the hotel is a store, Sangolda,

located in a small village by the same name. Anjwani says he bought the property, an old house, because he wanted to restore it. Having done that the couple decided to put their workshop to better use. The store opened in January and like Camelot, is basically a lifestyle store that showcases Indian designs for home decor.

One definite offshoot of the advent of the style gurus

is the impact on local style. “Today most shacks have two table cloths because they believe it’s classy,” says Morgan of Le Restaurant. Adds Ritu Nanda: “Even the quality of goods at the flea market has gone up. You can really pick up some very nice things there.” One of the most striking buildings in Panjim, the Commissioner of Customs and Central Excise office with its bright blue façade, was painted only a year ago. It’s hard to imagine a similar government office anywhere else in India.

The new secretariat building now looks more like a new resort with its red pagoda-style roof. Influences of the style movement can also be seen in such family-run hotels as O Pescador in Dona Paula. Although the hotel has been with the family for over 20 years, it’s only recently

that its owners Rainer and Cynthia Diaz commissioned and designed their own swimming pool adding stylistic touches of terrazzo, mosaic and designer furniture.

Goa is still years away from becoming a magnet for style and fashion. Yet, the shape of things to come shouldn’t be too hard to predict. With a small but committed core of style gurus who have made an impact on local taste and design, Goa could help shape a new definition in style and design. ■

Camelot, Ritu Nanda’s store near old Goa, makes available the absolute best in Indian design



