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Elgin Nor-Khill in Gangtok is a picture-perfect resort that was built in 1932 by Sikkim's last king; (inset) feast like a king on regional, Indian and Continental fare in the royal dining room



Timeless appeal

Exotic resorts in the Northeast are transporting guests to a bygone era of luxury, says **Hoihnu Hauzel**

Which one sounds the most tempting of all? Escaping to an idyllic, grand old mansion in Gangtok that was built by the king of Sikkim in the '30s? Or a king's castle in Shillong that's set amidst thick pine groves and boasts of the writing desk at which Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore once penned his thoughts. Or would you rather vacation in a century-old bungalow in one of the rolling tea estates of Assam?

Off the tourist radar, a handful of timeless resorts in the Northeast are offering to transport guests to another

era. They all have one thing in common: they spell luxury in exotic locales.

"These properties are redefining tourism in the Northeast. Relying primarily on word-of-mouth publicity, they are drawing tourists from different parts of the world," says Rakesh Mathur, former president of WelcomHeritage and a hospitality industry expert.

From Elgin Nor-Khill Gangtok, Sikkim, to The Royal Heritage-Tripura Castle in the heart of Meghalaya, the Northeast is alive with picture-perfect resorts and tea estates turned into resorts that are steeped in a rich history.

Take the 25-room Nor-Khill, built in

1932 by Tashi Namgyal, the 12th and last king of Sikkim. Run and maintained by Elgin Hotels & Resorts, a chain that owns hotels in Darjeeling and Sikkim, the resort is 5,000ft high in the Himalayas and offers spectacular mountain views.

Not far away at The Royal Heritage-Tripura Castle in Shillong, guests revel in what used to be the summer retreat of then Maharaja Bir Bikram of Tripura. The young maharaja came to Shillong when he was 16 and loved the place so much that he ended up building a 10-room summer retreat here in the early 1920s.

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"It's a historic building with a Maharaja Suite that still has the writing desk at which Tagore worked as well as the mahogany bed in which he slept on his visits," says Pradyot Bikram Manikya DebBarman, the present owner, who converted his private retreat into a hotel in 2003.

Besides their rich past, it's also the personal touch of the resort owners that's making the resorts special. Viraj Oberoi and his father B.R. Oberoi — the men behind Elgin Hotels & Resorts — took five years to restore Nor-Khill. To ensure that the doors, windows, paintings, photographs and even the pillars were not altered in any way, the father-son duo roped in a local team that was familiar with the palace's original look.

The look and feel may be traditional but in terms of comfort, all the modern amenities and gadgets are in position at these resorts. A spa for instance is a new addition at Nor-Khill and it's constantly being updated to incorporate new treatments. "We will be introducing traditional Tibetan and Bhutanese treat-

The tea lounge at Shillong's Royal Heritage-Tripura Castle offers a wide variety of the brew; (inset) the Mezzanine bar is a perfect place to unwind in the evenings

ments along with Thai and other regular massages," says Viraj.

DebBarman is giving the Royal Heritage-Tripura Castle a similar push. He has worked painstakingly to keep the property from sinking into oblivion. One unique feature here that guests have probably never seen before is the underground bomb shelter and tunnel — it dates back to World War II — that opens into the rose garden.

"Since I have to keep up with the times, the property gets regular upgrades," says DebBarman. A spa and a restaurant, Café Shillong, serving Southeast Asian cuisine, were added last year. The orchid garden at the resort is another attraction.

Turn your gaze Assam-wards and be rewarded by a different kind of experience. Tucked away amidst endless stretches of Assam's tea estates are private bungalows that have been thrown open to tourists.

Take Mancotta Chang Bungalow that opened its doors to guests a decade ago in Mancotta Tea Estate, on the outskirts of Dibrugarh. A six-room bungalow, it was built by British planters over 162 years ago. The design of the resort is unique as it's built on wooden poles or stilts which allowed people, in those days, to mount and dismount easily from their elephants.

Manoj Jalan, who runs Mancotta Chang Bungalow, says: "A few years ago, it was a challenge to promote lesser known destinations and to introduce the tea growing areas of upper Assam on the international tourist circuit. But all that has changed today."

Jalan also manages two other heritage bungalows — the exclusive, three-room Chowkidingee Chang Bungalow



in Dibrugarh as well as Wathai Bungalow on Limbuguri Tea Estate, Tinsukia, that offers two rooms and a suite. His company, Purvi Discovery, manages to notch up high occupancy levels for most of the bungalows, relying primarily on word-of-mouth publicity.

Cut to Banyan Grove in Gatoonga Tea Estate that lies on the outskirts of Jorhat and is a six-hour drive from Guwahati. Once the official residence of the assistant manager whose task was to oversee the tea production, the 100-year-old property has now been spruced up for guests.

Sitting on five acres of lush greenery, the bungalow — with a wide veranda running around it — offers seven bedrooms that are outfitted with four-poster beds, photographs, paintings and stained-glass doors.

H.P. Barooah owns and runs Banyan Grove as well as three other properties, under the aegis of his company, Heritage Northeast, and he says his prime focus is to preserve the heritage of the bungalows. “The legacy that I have inherited and the expectations from guests never allow me to be complacent. The idea is to create world-class products with a soul,” says Barooah who is also developing a professional golf course just 3km from Banyan Grove.



Wild Mahseer is tucked away in Addabarie Tea Estate in Jorhat, Assam; (inset) the resort's library is ideal for book lovers



The resort owners are walking that extra mile to create new experiences for guests. So, Barooah's guests are initiated into the different processes of preparing tea — right from plucking and brewing to tasting.

Ranjit Borthakur of Wild Mahseer, a tea bungalow tucked away in Addabarie Tea Estate in Jorhat (an hour away from Tezpur) in Assam, invites his guests to get down and dirty at the resort's organic farm. They can do some gardening and pick vegetables for their meals to be cooked by the in-house chef. They can

visit a nearby village where different tribes live, view endangered dolphins in the Brahmaputra (an hour's drive) and go bird watching in the surrounding forests. The icing on the cake is the fact that Kaziranga National Park is just an hour away.

A four-hour drive from Guwahati, Wild Mahseer sits on a 22-acre area and offers four bungalows (with two to four

bedrooms each) to guests. Opened in 2004, the original structure of all the bungalows was painstakingly restored by Borthakur along with some modifications. For instance, the present dining area was once a garage for the estate's tractor until it was modified.

So, the next time you need a different kind of break that packs in a slice of history with loads of fun, you know where to head. ◆

The six-room Mancotta Chang Bungalow, set on the outskirts of Dibrugarh, was built by British planters; (inset) the sit-out dining area overlooks the lush, green estate

