



PAST

PRESERVED

The stunning Ranbanka Palace, a heritage hotel, may not be the Umaid Bhawan or the Mehrangarh Fort, but over the years, it has become equally cherished.

TEXT: **NAMRATA GOGOI** | PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY **RANBANKA PALACE**



Almost a century old, the *ghatu patthar* (red stone) facade with bulbous domes and an arched portico stands as a magnificent testimony to a royal past.

It's an unforgiving May morning and there's a haze of dust across acres of sandstone structures. Jodhpur, Rajasthan. I am here to review the Ranbanka Palace — a heritage hotel promoted by RK Karanvijay Singh (grandson of the owner, Maharajadhiraj Sir Ajit Singhji). Structures layered in history pique my curiosity as we pass through the deserted city roads, in the short drive from the railway station.

"This is it," I mutter in excitement as the majestic *ghatu patthar* (red stone) facade of the palace came into sight, towering above the high gates

and cluster of trees in its private garden. The palace is like a slice of history — preserving memories of those who built and lived in it.

While waiting in the reception area, trying to shake off 12 hours of travel time with some refreshments, my eyes scan the long, narrow corridor and its walls that host family portraits and traditional accessories. A glimpse of the clever blend between contemporary and traditional that encompasses the palace is seen here. "A section of the original structure was first converted into a hotel with 27 rooms, while a portion of the building is still used by the



(Above) At night, the garden looks like a jewel with lights suspended from the branches and wrapped around the trunks. You can choose to dine under the starry sky or in the *chabutra* [an enclosed platform] that sports a cement *jaali*-patterned fence.

(Left) The Pancharanga Restaurant, an erstwhile stable, was extended to include the dining area whose floor is now clad with *katni* marble. Broken pieces of mirror, embedded into the cement pillar, add to the rich look.



So, a considerable amount of effort went into ensuring that the new wing is in congruence with the existing architecture, and all the building material was obtained locally," states Sujata. The result is a magnificent *ghatu patthar* construction that looks out onto Ranbanka Bagh. It's difficult to miss the trees that took root long before the dwelling came into being, rising steadily towards the skies in the middle of the common balcony that borders this structure. "No trees were felled, and the new building was created around them," shares the hotel manager. After an hour-long tour of the hotel, it became quite evident that the entire project was handled with great reverence for the past.



(Above) With no scope for natural light to flow in, the reception witnesses an extensive use of back-lit jaali work. Note the stunning Tree of Life cutwork on the pillar.

(Left) As you wait at the lobby, it is easy to see how the space is designed with refined aesthetics and traditional elements. The gleaming Indo-Italian marble flooring (resembling the carrara marble of the main palace) holds the space together, while a dramatic red sofa complements the sheesham wall panelling.



royal family as their home. One of the first steps was to transform this enclosed area that didn't have much natural light filtering in. So, we used back-lit lattice screens," shares interior designer Sujata Hoon who has been associated with the project for the past 15 years. Antique fans, Indo-Italian marble flooring and latticework add to the old-world charm of the space. The floor cladding and jaali work is similar to that seen in the main palace.

A major restoration, undertaken in 2005, created a new structure comprising 53 rooms, a restaurant, a bar, a gazebo and a swimming pool. "Karanvijay Singh is someone who knows the value of what he has inherited.



(Clockwise, from left) The dining area sports Chippendale teak furniture. Ever-smiling waiters, wearing red *bandhani* turbans, serve mouth-watering Rajasthani delicacies.

RK Karanvijay Singh's love for polo manifests in his proud display of trophies and sepia-toned pictures in the Polo Bar. Large windows dressed with chenille and mashru drapes, offer irresistible views of the Ranbanka Bagh.

The newly-constructed *ghatu patthar baradari* (a 12-doorway colonnade), furnished with *bajots* and cots, makes a perfect lounging space to enjoy the cool evening breeze.

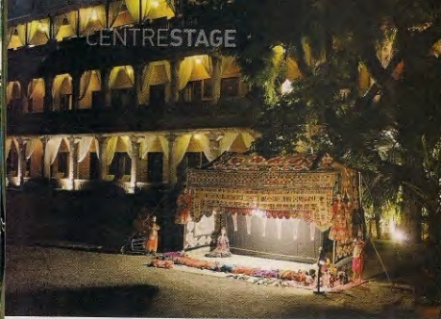
The most dramatic space, the Pancharanga *baithak*, takes its name from the five royal colours of the Jodhpur flag. Hand-picked local handicrafts and traditional furniture team up with the family's collection of artefacts to create a sense of warmth amidst the riot of rich hues.





CONCEPT: To share Ranbanka Palace's special warmth, stateliness and heritage with a new generation of guests, while ensuring that the new building spoke the same architectural language as the existing one.



**MATERIALS:** STRUCTURE *Ghatu*

pathhar (red stone). FLOORING

Indo-Italian marble (lobby); *katni* marble (Pancharanga Restaurant); *baroda* green stone (Jodhana Sikhar Suites) and Italian marble (Royal Suites). FURNITURE

Sheesham and teak (customized locally); wrought iron and cane (Ranbanka Bagh).

FURNISHINGS Custom made.



One of the two most dramatic spaces in this area is the Pancharanga Restaurant; the other being the Polo Bar. "The former was a stable earlier. It was extended to accommodate more seating," smiles Sujata. Today, the space, with an array of linear windows, offers stunning views of the garden. As for the decor, the restaurant with the adjoining *baithak* stays true to the five royal colours of the Jodhpur flag: saffron, white, red, yellow and green. The sophisticated warmth of the sheesham and teak furniture is perked up with dramatic hues of the wall, furnishings and artefacts. Old hunting photos and the family's collection of silverware — on which mouth-watering kebabs, *gaate ki sabzi*, succulent *ghewar*, etc are served — find a place here.

The Polo Bar is the only place that overdraws on nostalgia, packed as it is with pictures and trophies. "R.K. Karanvijay Singh is an ace polo player, so we wanted to give guests a glimpse of his love for the sport by displaying memorabilia," Sujata enthuses. And if hanging around the bar isn't your sort of thing, you can catch a cool breeze at the *baradari* (a 12-doorway colonnade) whose steps lead to the swimming pool where they offer a slew of wellness therapies. At dusk, the palace, aglow with brilliantly-hued lanterns, t-lights and fairy lights, looks surreal. Enchanting performances such as puppet shows by local artists, ensure that you won't be leaving in a hurry!



Priceless antiques, hunting memorabilia, period furniture and sepia-toned portraits pepper the suites and rooms. Guests can choose from the Royal Suite, Jodhana Sikhar, Deluxe Suite, Deluxe Rooms and Club Rooms that are accommodated in the old and new wings. Each suite is spatially distinct and comprises a bedroom, a sitting area and a balcony. The interiors speak a language of richness in textiles and handicrafts of the region, replete with refined aesthetics and contemporary comforts.



(Clockwise, from top left)

At dusk, you're tempted to sit back and enjoy performances by local artists, organized by the hotel. The common balcony that borders the structure of the new wing, serves as a majestic backdrop.

The Deluxe room: The soft textures of the accent cushions, placed against the hand-carved sheesham headboard, fill the space with a sense of lightness.

All the rooms have private balconies that make for cosy sit-out spaces. An early morning view with a cup of tea is recommended!

The decor of the Club Room boasts of the rich textiles and handicrafts of the region, replete with contemporary comforts. Check out the table that is carved out of a single slab of jaisalmer stone.

The past's magnificence lingers on in this Royal Suite that was once inhabited by the royal family. A four-poster bed, brocade curtains and sheesham furniture create an old-world aura. The relatively sombre feel is peppered with a toss of seductive orange.



Standing in the plush balcony, I now understand why the hotel staff recommended an early morning view. There's a sense of calm over the landscape that even the hot desert climate can't dispel. An

almost picture perfect scene — with the exception of the few unsightly constructions in the vicinity. I thank my stars for this opportunity to live like royalty, even if it's just for a weekend. **BI**

FACT FILE: PROJECT Ranbanka Palace. CLIENT RK Karanvijay Singh. LOCATION Jodhpur, Rajasthan. ARCHITECT/INTERIOR DESIGNER Late TK Ganju (Phase 1); Sujata Hoon (Phase 2). DATE OF COMPLETION Ongoing.