



Celebrations galore (Clockwise from below left) Burlesque performers; Priya Paul with husband Sethu Vaidyanathan; and The Park Kolkata •SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Celebrations will continue in each of the cities the chain has hotels, culminating in The Park Visakhapatnam, which turns 50 in 2018.

of a club." Paul says changing mindsets began by hiring younger people, and allowing to express themselves. "We changed the way the staff dressed. When the Leather bar opened in Chennai we hired cool young men. I said if they don't want to cut their hair, they don't have to: so we had men in long hair. Some wearing earrings. And it worked - hotels with individuality need to be run by people with individuality. Even now our grooming guidelines are very flexible."

In an age of disruptors like Airbnb, Paul says they work hard on keeping things fresh. "We have always firmly believes that hotels have to be happening, global spaces. Fashion and design are part of our DNA."

She talks about how they also work on keeping the vibe young and fun. "Our anything but ordinary arrival experience for example involves giving guests shots to drink while they check in - it adds to the party vibe."

One of The Park's greatest strengths has been design, with each hotel reflecting the city it is set in. "Location drives the art and design. Hyderabad to me is all about spicy food and jewels. So the hotel reflects that. When we opened in Bangalore the tech boom was happening, so we played with a lot of colour. Chennai's property was set where the old Gemini film studio once stood. So that drove the design there. I am also a collector of film memorabilia, so I enjoyed putting that hotel together."

She's built a colourful legacy. "It was not quick though: it took 27 years," she says. "Initially the growth was organic. I was working on just Delhi, Kolkata and Visakhapatnam."

Then, when we reinforced the idea of boutique design hotels, we began to own the concept. Now we have 15 hotels, with two brands, including The Zone. All of which are expanding at a pace that is, well, nice."

Paul talks about how the idea of an edgy boutique hotels evolved. "The idea of what a good hotel should be has changed over the years. Hotels used to mean formal, stiff and dull places. My brief was five star service: Without the gloves." She smiles, "We wanted to be anything

Park here for the extraordinary

The Park hotels just turned 50, kicking off celebrations in Kolkata with 50 hours of partying, featuring burlesque, EDM and champagne. Chairperson, hospitality division of Apeejay Surrendra Group, Priya Paul, talks about their journey



chain launched celebrations at its flagship property in Kolkata, from where it all began.

The late Jit Paul and late Surrendra Paul started Apeejay Surrendra Group's first hotel The Park, with 150 rooms on fashionable Park Street in Kolkata in November 1967. They opened in Vishakhapatnam in 1968, then in Delhi in 1987.

Priya Paul joined the company after graduating from Wellesley College (US) as a marketing manager at The Park New Delhi. She became Acting General Manager in 1989 and succeeded her father Surrendra Paul as Chairperson of the hospitality division of Apeejay Surrendra Group in 1990.

The celebrations begin with an extravagant party that encompasses the entire Kolkata hotel. As chefs hand out freshly shucked oysters served with gin and tonic chasers and pile caviar on dainty blinis at the banquet hall, where it all kicks off, Priya Paul holds up a glass of chilled champagne and says, "Thank you. This is an iconic hotel and the cornerstone of our company. I never thought, when I started working for my father, that three hotels would become a cornerstone for hoteliering in India. It has been fantastic to have this canvas to play with."

SHONALI MUTHALALY

When The Park hotels turned 50 recently, they did it with characteristic edgy cool. With champagne and caviar. Burlesque and EDM. Fashion and art. And 50 hours of relentless partying.

Guests, who flew in from across the world to celebrate this milestone, included famous faces from disparate worlds that tend to collide at The Park hotels: business, fashion, food and art.

Considered the pioneers of lux-

ACROSS THE COUNTRY

The chain's portfolio includes The Park hotels in Bengaluru, Chennai, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Navi Mumbai, New Delhi and Visakhapatnam. There's the Park Collection in Calangute (Goa), which will expand to The Park Baga River (Goa 2017 end) and Chettinad (2018). There's also Zone by The Park, described as their "social catalyst brand" in Coimbatore, Jaipur, Chennai ORR, Raipur, Bengaluru and Jodhpur. Zone has upcoming hotels in Igatpuri, Mamallapuram and Goa.

ing together the coolest thinkers and pioneers of creativity to engage in her hotels. Hence the eclectic guest list includes everyone from designer Rohit Bal to contemporary India artist Subodh Gupta.

Burlesque star and CEO of House of Burlesque, Tempest Rose along with three principal dancers from her team performs at the party. So does Miss Branbury Cross, dubbed the Neo-Marilyn of Burlesque, from London.

At popular live-music venue Ehsaan Noorani and Loy Mendonsa jam with a selection of the bar's favourite bands. While clubs Roxy and Tantra play EDM and Bollywood dance music till morning.

On day two the high-energy partying moves to the Paul's sprawling residence, where guests are greeted by an enormous, mes-

replete with smoke and artfully designed light. The pool has been converted into a dance floor, and there's a DJ on the roof. Between greeting guests, Paul takes a break to chat about the event, sinking into the plush sofa with a sigh of relief.

To a different beat

"I was looking for ways to do things differently," she says, adding that it was an advantage that she was not a hotelier to begin with. "I was not bound by any rules. I wanted to create spaces that were young, happening and strong in design. Great places for younger people to hang out. I was 23-24 when I started working in India and there was nothing much to do if you were young and wanted to party. You had to go to a seedy bar. Or, be a member

