

Hotel

Hip addition to New India



House rules ... Blend, at the Taj Mount Road, specialises in "molecular cocktails".

Claire Scobie steps into a Chennai retreat where even the towels are works of art.

Beautiful madam, beautiful. Breathe deeply and relax," says the instructor in a soothing singsong as I try to rearrange myself into the lotus position. I am the first guest for the dawn yoga class in the newly opened Taj Mount Road, in Chennai. From the hotel's rooftop gym, the capital of Tamil Nadu, gateway to India's south, stretches out, illuminated by a coral-red sun. At the end of the class, I am so relaxed, I float back to my room. Taj Mount Road is one of the latest additions to India's premier hotel chain. From the outside, the sharp lines, steel accents and neon-blue facade are hallmarks of the "New India".

It's chic rather than Kipling; contemporary instead of classical. Unlike its sister hotel, Chennai's Taj Coromandel - where the doormen wear turbans, the flock of young staff who greet you at Mount

Road are dressed in dark suits. They are trained with a "yes we can" attitude. "If we can't do something, we say so," says Anshuman Appanna, the sales director. "We don't do the Indian thing of nodding 'yes' when we mean 'no'."

Still, following events in Mumbai last year, security is tight, with bag checks and metal detectors on entry. Once inside, pools with delicate pink lotus flowers and floating glass chandeliers set the serene tone. Even the staff seem to glide rather than scurry.

The 220 rooms, including 16 suites, are styled in a sleek combination of marble and polished wooden floors. All come with Wi-Fi, plasma televisions and workstations; the deluxe rooms also have DVD players and iPod jacks. Blink and you could be in an equivalent five-star hotel in Sydney or London. This is deliberate. The rooms are designed so any frequent jetsetter will know where to find the minibar or bathroom light switch. For the busy exec who is in Chennai - the Detroit of Asia due to the city's burgeoning car and manufacturing industry - this could be an advantage. For others, a drawback.

There are, however, some cute standouts. "Towel art" in the room means your towel changes daily, from the shape of a buddha to an elephant. Downstairs, high tea is served in Brew, the cool tea lounge in the lobby. For the more adventurous there is Blend, a swanky cocktail bar specialising in explosive "molecular cocktails" to deep house tunes.

After a night in a deluxe room in an uber-soft bed, cocooned from the outside world, I almost forget I am in India. Step outside the Taj on to Club House Road, the original site of the British-built Madras Club, and it's back to screeching horns. The footpath is virtually non-existent and severely maimed beggars frequent the subway.

Back at the hotel for lunch, there are three restaurants to choose from - Club House, a 24-hour bistro; the romantic rooftop Mediterranean restaurant, Kefi; and the sumptuous black-and-gold-leaf Beyond Indus.

Club House offers nouvelle cuisine with an Asian slant and a quirky cold-stone gelato counter. I opt for Beyond Indus, busy with well-heeled Chennaiites - groups of elegant ladies in ivory and olive kurtas - dining on a pungent range of North Indian fare made with olive oil rather than conventional ghee (clarified butter). The aim is to keep the flavour but reduce the calories. The result: delicious Punjabi dishes, spicy yet delicate.

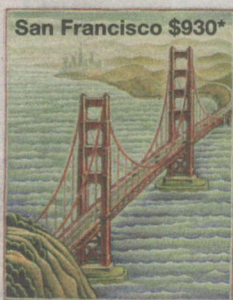
I have roasted pineapple and bell pepper soup followed by a selection of kebabs and vegetable curries. The highlight is "lasooni palak", a burnt garlic and fenugreek-flavoured spinach puree served with piping hot paratha (flatbread).

Leave room for their signature dessert, the "dahi aur anjeer ki lauj" or baked yoghurt with figs. It's sensational.

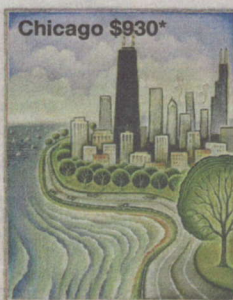
If it's Italian fine dining you prefer, or local South Indian food, there's a neat synergy between Mount Road and the other two Taj residences in the city, Taj Coromandel and Taj Connemara, as you can eat at the other hotels and bill the meal to your room at Mount Road. I am content to linger among the pink lotuses, though, which are best admired rather than attempted in a yoga class.

The writer was a guest of the Taj group.

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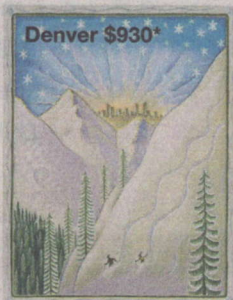
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► TRIP NOTES

- **GETTING THERE** Singapore Airlines flies from Sydney to Chennai via Singapore, from \$1200 return. Phone 13 10 11, see singaporeair.com
- **STAYING THERE** Taj Mount Road, No. 2 Club House Road Chennai, 600 002, Tamil Nadu. Phone +91-44 66313131, see tajhotels.com. Double Deluxe room costs 15,000 INR (\$374) a night. Suites with access to executive lounge start at 18,000 INR.
- **FURTHER INFORMATION** See tamilnadutourism.org.