



BACK TO THE Future

Most things have changed while some have remained constant at The Oberoi, Mumbai, which has, literally, been born again, nearly 500 days after the 26/11 attacks. **BY PALLAVI PASRICHA**

DECEMBER 2002: "Shall we have lunch at Kandahar?" My father asked me. Staring at the Queen's necklace from the Oberoi room I pondered for a minute and said, "Yes, let's go." As we walked down towards the restaurant, I suddenly felt like skipping the North West Frontier cuisine for some delicious vada pao which I would not get back home. My father was naturally surprised, but after much persuasion gave up and we went to Vitthals. Till date I don't get to hear the end of it.

November 2008: An eerie silence engulfs the Oberoi and Trident properties as Mumbai's most iconic hotel complex at Nariman Point shuts down after three days of one of the deadliest terror attacks in history.

May 2010: "Shall we have lunch at Ziya?" I was asked by a staff member soon after I checked in. I stared at the Arabian

Sea from the Oberoi Executive Ocean View Suite and answered, "Yes, sure." As I walked down to the lobby, all by myself, I could not help think that a lot had changed in eight years. For starters I would not insist on eating vada pao; Kandahar had become Ziya, the black piano was now gleaming red, and instead of the black granite flooring I was walking on milky-white marble imported from the Greek island of Thassos.

The images of the Oberoi hotel I carried in my mind all these years changed forever. I was not alone. So have they for thousands of guests for whom the hotel had been a frequent haunt prior to 26/11. Nearly 500 days after the terror attacks, The Oberoi, Mumbai reopened in a stylish and suave avatar. The Oberoi was almost, as General Manager Steven Kalczynski puts it, "born again." The adjacent Trident Nariman Point was not too damaged so it opened a

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CLOCKWISE FROM FACING PAGE The Oberoi and Trident hotels at Nariman Point; a stunning black sculpture welcomes you at the lobby; the stylish new lobby of The Oberoi, Mumbai overlooks the Arabian Sea; the ever-accommodating hotel staff at the opening ceremony



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1&2. The Oberoi Executive Ocean View Suite 3. Liam Lambert, President, Oberoi Hotels & Resorts welcomes guests at the opening ceremony 4. The luxurious Kohinoor Presidential Suite 5&6. Sea views from every corner 7. The wine cellar at Vetro

month after the attacks. A plaque in memory of those who lost their lives at the hotels is at the entrance of the Trident and a memorial stone inside the staff cafeteria—solemn reminders of the past.

Enter Kandahar, or Ziya, and I felt as if I have walked into a house of gold. The interiors of this new speciality Indian restaurant by Michelin star chef Vineet Bhatia are in subtle shades of white and gold with *jalis* on the walls finished with delicate gold leaf work. The menu has all that you love, but with a contemporary twist. After contemplating for a long time I finally zeroed in at *Tandoori Salmon*, smoked salmon steeped in a mustard marinade with roasted vegetables and red onion cucumber raita. It tasted as good as it sounds. For main course it was *Nariyal Miroh Jhinga*, prawns cooked in coastal style infused with Kafir lime leaves. As I munched on my food my mind could help but rewind 17 months and thought how the scene must have been that night when terror struck. I shuddered and stopped my thoughts. Like the hotel, I want to put the past behind. Being full, I skipped the dessert. I was advised to come back in the evening for the seven-course 'gourmand menu', the speciality.

After lunch I headed back to my suite on the 19th floor. Although, the number of rooms has been reduced to 287 from 330 to include more suites for business travellers, the room categories have gone up. The separate living area in the suite has a two-seater sofa and a large coffee table. The light-coloured upholstery is offset with bright cushions and a cheerful canvas in the bedroom. What I loved was the 17-inch LCD screen in the spacious bathroom. Unfortunately the angle was slightly off the mark forcing me to crane my neck from the bathtub to be able to see the television clearly. But the sweeping views of the sea



from the floor to ceiling glass windows more than made up for it. A lot of new security measures have been adopted in the hotel; for example the lifts will not operate without room cards, the windows are bullet-proof.

After a siesta it was time to visit the only 24-hour spa in the city. This is also the only Oberoi Spa which is open round the clock and people clearly love it—they get a lot of appointments for midnight or 3a.m. massages from jetlagged passengers. As soon as I entered, the aroma of lemon grass engulfed me. The therapist recommended the newly introduced hot lava shell therapy, but the soaring temperatures outside did not permit me to go for this. I opted for the signature massage, Oberoi Therapy, a Swedish massage with a bit of Balinese strokes. The best part is that you can customise it to suit your needs.

What I found really appealing was that the staff has been involved in every aspect of rebuilding this place. For example they ran a contest to rename the all-day dining

restaurant, Tiffin. There were many votes and finally the name Fenix was chosen. In fact P.R.S. Oberoi, the Chairman and CEO, has taken special interest in the smallest of details, from the golden cutlery in Ziya, the paintings in different areas including the rooms, some of which are from his own private collection, the red piano custom made from Germany, to the marble in the lobby.

But among the many, many things that this hotel has changed, including the names and interiors of the restaurants—like Kandahar is now Ziya, Tiffin was renamed Fenix, Bayview Bar changed to Eau Bar and the Tea Lounge at the lobby rechristened Champagne Lounge—some thing remains constant. The warmth and hospitality of the staff. George continues to belt out songs from the piano at the stylish bar like he has been doing for the last 30 years; or Vetro, the Italian restaurant, which remained undamaged during the attack because a staff member locked the door and asked people to escape from the fire

exit. Only the menu and furniture has altered a bit. When it reopened people were back for their favourite, *Tiramisu alla Vetro*, the signature dessert.

It's good to see people returning lovingly to the hotel, putting the past behind and looking ahead. As the popular Fleetwood Mac song goes, "Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow". The Oberoi did that, and how. ●

GOOD TO KNOW

GETTING THERE

Mumbai is connected to all the metros by daily flights. Fare from Delhi: Rs. 4,000 approximately. The Oberoi, Mumbai, located at Nariman Point, is roughly one hour from the airport, depending on the traffic. Tel: (022) 6632 5757; 1800 11 2030 (toll free); www.oberoihotels.com