

RAISED TO THE POWER OF FIFTY

Reviving the legacy of dynasties, interpreting opulence through a cultural lens, revisiting regional cuisines and arts, becoming the Indian home of visiting presidents and global icons, restaurants with cult status—that is the five-decade long journey of ITC Hotels Limited—a hotel chain that made Indian luxury its unique brand.

PALLAVI PASRICHA

Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH | Model: Shivani Varma, Kathak dancer

For a New Delhi family, the ITC Maurya in the Indian capital has become a habit passed down two generations. Whether it is a stay, a milestone family celebration, or a dinner with friends, the experience always feels ultra luxurious yet rooted. “My father hosted my wedding reception at ITC Maurya in 1989. When my sons got married, I chose the same venue for the parties I held. For me, these hotels are a home away from home,” says New Delhi resident Ajay Chopra. “Nothing here changes, the traditions remain the same, the courtesy extended is so heartwarming.”

His tryst with the hotel chain underlined the spirit of Indian hospitality against a backdrop of luxury the ITC Hotel Group built since 1975 when its first property opened to upscale travellers on a quiet road

in Chennai. The next year, its hotel in Agra reflected Mughal era influences in the geometric gardens, courtyards and arches. Then came its New Delhi property which paid tribute to the ancient Mauryan dynasty. Even after a tiring journey, the eyes at ITC Maurya, New Delhi linger on Krishen Khanna's breathtaking mural sweeping across the lobby's dome and on works by famous artists like M.F. Husain depicting Indian culture.

Over 50 glorious years, intertwining the local stories of each destination became a leitmotif for the hospitality chain as it grew to over 150 properties and more than 14,200 keys in over 95 destinations across the country from Kashmir in the north to Kochi in the south. In 2024, the company made its overseas debut with a hotel gazing over the Indian Ocean in Colombo and another in Bhaktapur in Nepal.

COVER STORY

LEGACY

Clockwise from below left: ITC Royal Bengal is the brand's second hotel in Kolkata; Welcomhotel By ITC Hotels, Hamsa Manali is surrounded by snow-clad Himalayan mountains; ITC Grand Chola in Chennai is a palatial tribute to the Chola dynasty; ITC Ratnadipa in Colombo is the brand's first international hotel

Facing page: Art has always been integral to the ITC Hotels experience



FIVE DECADES, FIVE SIGNATURE MOMENTS

FIVE THINGS THAT STOOD OUT IN 50 YEARS

2004

Restaurant Magazine UK declared Bukhara as the Best Restaurant in Asia.

2012

ITC Grand Chola opened in Chennai with 600 rooms, its biggest hotel in India.

2021

ITC Windsor in Bengaluru became the world's first hotel to earn the LEED zero carbon certification.

2024

The launch of ITC Ratnadipa in Colombo marked ITC Hotels' international foray with this luxury property.

2025

ITC Hotels achieves a global sustainability milestone with 23 LEED Platinum certified hotels, the highest number within any hotel chain worldwide. It is the first hotel chain in India to be recognised with the Leadership Award for Organisational Excellence by the US Green Building Council.



"We believed that India had all the ingredients to create a hospitality experience that could be truly distinctive—our traditions of welcoming, our architecture, our art and craft, the extraordinary diversity of our cuisine, and above all, our instinctive warmth as a people."

ANIL CHADHA, Managing Director of ITC Hotels



PIONEERING INDIAN LUXURY

But the narrative is not one of numbers. It is of the unique path the hotel chain carved in the world of experiential hospitality, as it boldly veered away from the good life as defined by five-star international brands. Instead, ITC Hotels' bastions of luxury became quintessentially Indian spaces.

"We believed that India had all the ingredients to create a hospitality experience that could be truly distinctive—our traditions of welcoming, our architecture, our art and craft, the extraordinary diversity of our cuisine, and above all, our instinctive warmth as a people," said Anil Chadha, Managing Director of ITC Hotels Limited. "The ambition was therefore not to replicate what already existed elsewhere, but to build a hospitality philosophy that was unmistakably our own."

So instead of looking outward, the company chose to look inward. The smallest detail reflects the local ethos of the destination of each hotel, such as the tapestry chosen for drapes and sofas—from exquisite crewel embroidery in its Pahalgam property that resembles a mountain chalet to rich ikat at ITC Kakatiya, Hyderabad. In Storii Jawai in Rajasthan, wildlife lovers set out to spot leopards from an intimate 15-key boutique style stay set amid dramatic granite boulders. During the stay, whether in a cottage or tented villa, they can savour Rajasthani fare like gatte ke sabzi and laal maas. At its spa, Kaya Kalp, the signatures focus on Indian wellness and Ayurvedic treatments.

"What makes a stay memorable is often something less tangible—the feeling that you have encountered a place rather than simply occupied a hotel room. India offers an ex-

traordinary depth of stories, traditions, craftsmanship, food and living cultures. We felt that these should not sit outside the hotel experience; they should be part of it," Chadha said pointing out that luxury should never come at the cost of identity.

The brand's identity armour and ethos is best captured in its logo, the familiar greeting, Namaste. From hotels that encompass the grandeur of an erstwhile dynasty, to those housed in Rajasthan's brooding forts or at a small boutique-style stay tucked in the Himalayan mountains in Manali, the folded hands are not merely a greeting offered to guests at the door.

"You literally walk in like a king. They make you feel special. When you're going to a luxury hotel, that's what you want to feel—wanted," says New Delhi doctor and professor

Sanjeev Bagai, who often frequents the Maurya in Delhi. "The managers and general managers have changed over the past 35 years, but the spirit of warmth has remained constant."

ITC Hotels Limited says its five core values – 'Warmth, Innovation, Sustainable Responsibility, Ethical Leadership and Respect for People' are deeply embedded in every hotel. In fact, words like "constant," "caring" and "consistent" are virtually an echo, whether one speaks to guests or employees.

"Nothing has changed, honestly, over half a century. That's the phenomenal part, as the world has changed all around us, the DNA of ITC Hotels, of being caring and quality focused, have remained constant," says Ashish Thakar, Chief Financial Officer at ITC Hotels, who moved to the hotel group in 1993.

COVER STORY

LEGACY

MEMORABLE GUEST EXPERIENCES AT ITC HOTELS

WHEN ITC HOTELS WENT OUT OF THEIR WAY TO HELP GUESTS

A SUNGLASS SHOP APPEARS OVERNIGHT:

On a foggy winter night in New Delhi, the butler of a prominent lady guest at ITC Maurya received a call an hour before midnight. She had planned to set out for a full day of sightseeing the next morning but left her sunglasses behind. Could the hotel assist? Reaching out to every contact, the team connected with accessory stores and virtually put together a sunglass shop in a corner of the lobby by the time she walked in there the next morning with her entourage. The VIP guest praised the team's warmth and their willingness to go the extra mile.

AN 80-YEAR-OLD RELIVES HER CHILDHOOD ON HER BIRTHDAY

A guest wanted his mother to experience her childhood on her 80th birthday and re-live the memories of the home where she grew up. The ITC team at Rajputana, Jaipur, spent the day gathering family photographs, understanding the recipes of her favourite childhood dishes and creating a playlist of songs she loved. What followed was not just a birthday dinner. It was a dream sequence of her life in flashback and an evening of stories, laughter and happy tears.

A FORGOTTEN WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

A guest at ITC Grand Central, Mumbai confessed that he had forgotten his wedding anniversary and his spouse was staying at another ITC property in Bengaluru. The ITC Windsor quickly arranged flowers, a cake, chocolates, and a very romantic dinner for both in their respective cities, connecting them virtually. By the end of the evening the disaster had turned into a wonderful evening.

A RARE MOMENT

Checking into ITC Maratha in Mumbai, an anxious guest realised he had left his iPad in the seat pocket of his flight and had just a few hours to log in for a crucial presentation. He was offered the business centre to redo the presentation if he needed. At the same time, the hotel's airport team immediately got into action. Connecting the dots, they worked with the airline and airport authorities to track down the device. It was back with the guest that same night. He called it 'rare'.

THE EMPLOYEES WHO NEVER LEFT

Salina's journey has taken her from a telephone operator at ITC Maurya as a 19 year old in 1988, to the role of Senior Supervisor today. "The company cares for you, the colleagues are my second family. I can never forget that I received my full salary even during the Covid pandemic," she says. Younger employees share that sentiment. In Kolkata, 31-year-old Priyanka Bhattacharyya, Assistant PR Manager at ITC Royal Bengal and ITC Sonar, returned to the company after briefly working elsewhere. "The difference is how the organisation makes you feel, be heard and be seen. So I chose to come back, and since then there is no looking back."

At a time when switching jobs is the new mantra, what makes both young and old stick? "It floated from the ITC DNA, which is about taking care of your people, being married to ITC, being inclusive, being competitive in what you do compared to market," says Sanjay Bose, Executive Vice President, Human Resources. In fact ITC Hotels has one of the lowest attrition rates in the industry. "In the past 3-4 years it hovers between 38 to 42% for the hospitality industry but at ITC it is below 10%," he adds.

HOSTING WORLD LEADERS

International recognition for the hotel group came not through a global award, but when American presidents chose to stay in the opulent presidential suite at ITC Maurya, New Delhi. Bill Clinton arrived in 2000. The list of global dignitaries and celebrities who have been hosted in the sprawling 4,700 square foot "Chanakya" suite that comes with silk-panelled walls, artworks that could be housed in museums, and a mini spa, is long. U.S. President, Joe Biden was the latest American president to stay here during the Group of 20 summit New Delhi hosted in 2023.

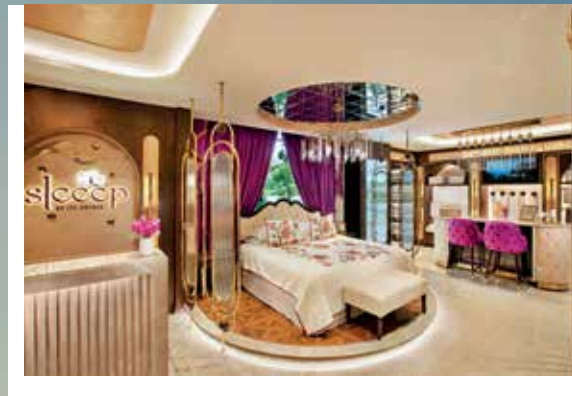
What led an ITC hotel to become the home of visiting dignitaries? "Confidence of that nature is not built through a single gesture or a grand lobby. It is built over years, through thousands of small details being right—consistently, discreetly and without fuss," pointed out Chadha. The dignitaries, he says, need to know that expectations will be understood before they are articulated, privacy will be respected and a complex occasion handled seamlessly.

However the company did not confine itself to the top tier of travellers and instead built seven categories for other segments. For example, ITC Hotels and Mementos attract high end luxury visitors in the metros and resort locations, Welcomhotel caters to the upper upscale to upscale category while the intimate Storii hotels speak to those who prefer the quiet charm of a boutique stay. Fortune Hotels and WelcomHeritage are the perfect choice for those looking for midscale options, and heritage hotels. The newest addition to the portfolio is the Epiq Collection, an upper to upscale brand catering to larger hotels with enhanced services and contemporary cuisine options.



"As an old timer, I'll still say, it's like my home."

AJAY CHOPRA



Clockwise from top left: Works by some of India's leading artists are part of ITC hotels; Mementos Jaipur blends luxury with Jaipur's rich heritage; ITC Windsor is a landmark hotel in Bengaluru; ITC Maurya has a SLEEP boutique

Storii Jawai is an intimate retreat amid Rajasthan's granite landscape (Below).



Clockwise from below left: Bukhara at ITC Maurya is an icon restaurant in India; Dum Pukht celebrates the art of slow cooking; Ramachandran's Ashoka After Kalinga, a bronze sculpture at ITC Maurya; Royal Vega Thali is a lavish dining experience



"The chefs and managers know exactly your taste. You don't have to tell them. The beauty is, they remember."

DOCTOR AND PROFESSOR SANJEEV BAGAI



WHEN FOOD BECAME A LEGEND

Perhaps nothing built the wide appeal of ITC Hotels as much as restaurants like Bukhara at ITC Maurya which famously became a destination in its own right. Calling Bukhara in a "league of its own," one of the country's top chefs, Manish Mehrotra, reflects on why the restaurant achieved cult status. "It is one place consistently giving the same food, the same atmosphere, the same experience, time after time. Anybody can open and run a restaurant, but keeping it consistent, that is amazing. Even after not changing the menu for nearly 50 years, Bukhara is still packed every day."

While Bukhara wears the crown, other signature restaurants like Dum Pukht, Royal Vega, Avartana, Peshawri, Yi Jing, Ottimo and Pavilion have carved out reputations of their own. Avartana at ITC Grand Chola in Chennai puts a modern spin on South Indian cuisine. Its degustation menus bring together familiar regional flavours with creative techniques, interesting textures and beautiful plating. What many don't know is that ITC Hotels also have food sherpas who guide guests to places where they can sample the best local cuisine in that city.



WHERE THE WORLD CHECKS IN

25 FAMOUS PEOPLE WHO'VE STAYED AT ITC HOTELS OVER FIVE DECADES



WORLD LEADERS & STATESMEN

- Vladimir Putin
- Donald Trump
- Emmanuel Macron
- Xi Jinping
- Tony Blair

SPORTING LEGENDS

- Sachin Tendulkar
- Roger Federer
- Novak Djokovic
- Tiger Woods
- Virat Kohli

FILM & BOLLYWOOD

- Amitabh Bachchan
- Shah Rukh Khan
- Priyanka Chopra Jonas
- Deepika Padukone
- Madhuri Dixit

- ITC Hotels have hosted many global and Indian icons over 50 years

MUSIC & GLOBAL POP CULTURE

- Mick Jagger
- Ed Sheeran
- Chris Martin
- Asha Bhosle
- Daler Mehndi

ART & INDIAN CULTURE

- M.F. Husain
- Krishen Khanna

GLOBAL ICONS

- Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum
- Hassanali Bolkiah
- His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama

COVER STORY

LEGACY

GOING GREEN

At the ITC Hotels chain, the trappings of luxury don't come at the cost of planet Earth. Long before environmental degradation became a global buzzword, it pioneered the credo 'Responsible Luxury' reconciling what were seen as polar opposites—over-the-top consumption and sustainability. The hotels used renewable energy, recycled solid waste and conserved water. Today it has the world's largest number of LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Platinum certified hotels.

"We feel sustainability is not only good for society, it's also good for business. For example, we generate power, which is the number three cost in the hospitality business, at a much lesser cost. So it is a win-win for everyone," according to CFO Thakar.

Fifty years on, ITC Hotels' biggest strength remains the philosophy that Indian luxury lies in finding richness in India's own stories, traditions and flavours—while staying not just in step with but even ahead of the times.

Storii Akanni Naina Tikkar is a charming mountain retreat in Himachal Pradesh; Avartana reimagines South Indian flavours (Left)

