

SECRET SEVEN

THE HISTORY OF FORT TIRACOL IS A CLIFFHANGER, BUT WITHIN ITS WALLS ARE SEVEN LITTLE-KNOWN BUT WELCOME REFUGES

BY MARIA LOUIS

Walking along the ramparts of Fort Tiracol overlooking the Arabian Sea and the Tiracol river, with dolphins dancing on the waves below, it is easy to feel on top of the world. The splendid isolation of the location is its biggest strength, giving wing to flights of imagination about vanquishing all enemies. But to know that a comfortable room awaits you, makes your 'conquest' of the fort even more satisfying. There's one for every day of the week... seven rooms for seven days! Indeed, so exclusive is this heritage hotel set within a fort that speaks of a long and chequered history, that it can only accommodate 14 adults.

A stay at Fort Tiracol Heritage Hotel is an escape like no other. Getting there is enjoyable, but quite time-consuming. An hour-and-forty-minute drive from Dabolim international airport takes you past the towns through internal roads that skirt the cities and snake through little villages along the beaches of Morjem, Ashvem and Arambol – till you reach the jetty at Keri beach, where a boat ferries you and your car across the river to the winding road leading up to the fort. The majestic edifice standing in solitary splendour on the banks of the river Tiracol that gives it its name, is constructed with laterite – a local stone found abundantly in Goa.

Being an architecture buff as well as someone who hails from Sawantwadi in Maharashtra, which shares its border with the northernmost tip of Goa where the fort is located, I devour all the information about this slice of history that I can

lay my hands on. The original inhabitants were mainly toddy tappers, and the majority of them were Christians in 1863, I discover from Antonio Lopes Mendes's book *India Portuguesa* - which mentions that there were 486 people in this village, of which 426 were Christians and the rest Hindus.

When Goa Tourism Development Corporation (GTDC) took over the property, the structure of the fort was still solid

A SLICE OF HISTORY

Historian Sanjeev V. Sardesai in his 'Fort of Terekhol - Diamond at the head of Goa', tells us that this fort was most probably constructed by Khem Sawant, chieftain of Sawantwadi and feudatory of Adilshah of Bijapur. "Formerly, it was part of an enclave of Oosup, controlled by Oosupkar Desai of the Sawantwadi princely state. Khem Sawant, who was the son of Phond Sawant, secured the domains of Sawantwadi and declared independence from Adilshah, in 1627 AD – as in the mid-17th century, the Adilshahi dynasty was on the decline.

"After 13 years, in 1640, Khem Sawant was succeeded by his son Som Sawant, who was later replaced by his brother Lakhm Sawant. This new chieftain of Sawantwadi, captured the Desai of Kudal (Maharashtra) Pargana (district) in a bloody war, assassinated him and added his territories to his own. In 1650, when Chhatrapati Shivaji, the great Maratha King, attained regal status and a reputation for military warfare, Lakhm Sawant declared his allegiance to him, and for this act he was honored by the latter with the title of 'Sardesai' of Pargana (district) of Kudal in South Konkan. Terekhol [also known as Tiracol] village formed one of the domains, at its South West point. Thus, the fortress of Terekhol remained in possession of the Bhonsles of Sawantwadi till it was occupied by the adventurous Portuguese."

Sardesai also recounts details about the unique church within the fort: "Inside this fort, there is a medium-sized church, dedicated to St. Anthony or Santo Antonio. It was initially built by Marques de Alorna, who captured this fort, on 23rd November 1746, from the Bhonsles of Sawantwadi and named the fort as the 'Holy Trinity Fortress of Tiracol'. It was later raised to the status of a Mission-church from 1822 to 1846, since it was used by the Portuguese to profess their faith in the domains of the Sawantwadi royalty, after seeking their permission. After this period, it was reduced to a chapel, and made filial to the parish of Arambol. This chapel, inside the fort, was rebuilt, in part, in 1901 and enlarged in 1922.

"It is built in the Mannerist style with Neo-Gothic features and has twin bell towers on its façade, with a tiled roof. The altar has a Rococo styled curved gable with cherubs and volutes, in relief. There are fluted pilasters on the ground floor and reliefs of saints on the second floor. It became a parish on 15th November 1934 and was inaugurated on 1st November 1935. It has its own cemetery, just a walk down the approaching slope.

"After Liberation the Tiracol Fort had almost fallen into disuse, and it was only in 1976 that efforts were made to develop the fort as a weekend holiday resort. In 1983, the Government of Goa, Daman and Diu declared it as a protected monument of regional importance under the Ancient Monuments, Sites and Remains Act 1978."

3. A striking architectural feature is the bartizan – an overhanging corner turret.

4. The courtyard holds the statue and chapel dedicated to St. Anthony.

1. A bird's-eye view of the fort. Not many know that it was built by the Bhonsles of Sawantwadi.

2. The rooms are named after the seven days of the week. This is Wednesday.



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MATERIALS & SUPPLIERS

Flooring: IPS; ceramic tiles with faded mosaic designs

Stone: Local stones

Roofing/ceiling: Restored high ceiling with Mangalore tiles, no false ceilings, all original ceilings in the ground floor rooms leaving the wooden beams visible

Lighting/light fixtures: Chandeliers designed by UTI Design; antique wall lights sourced at local markets

Paint: Asian Paints, Royale and Royale Aspira (Le Corbusier Collection)

Tables, chairs, sofas/soft seating, etc. all customised and designed by UTI Design and fabricated with antique wood

Sanitary fittings: Duravitt, Grohe, Baulines

Air-conditioning/HVAC system: Blue Star

– but the existing wooden doors, shades and other exterior portions were rotten. “We studied old photo material and drawings, and took the necessary steps to restore them,” discloses Nikhil Desai, MD of GTDC. Calling it a hidden gem, he adds that they could feel its history and visualised a heritage hotel that would boast modern-day amenities along with royal opulence that would make it one of the finest heritage hotels of India.

5&6. The chapel was built by the Portuguese after they took over the fort from the Bhonsles of Sawantwadi.

7&8. Steps leading down from the rooms allow guests a spot of exercise and a magnificent view of the surroundings.

In October last year, when GTDC re-launched its boutique heritage hotel at Tiracol, it was reiterating its resolve to promote heritage tourism in Goa. History tells us that the fort was originally built by Maharaja Khem Sawant Bhonsle, the Raja of Sawantwadi, in the 17th century. Later, it became an important part of Portuguese maritime defense; and was extensively revamped in 1764. It remained in Portuguese control till December 1961, when the last of Portuguese territorial positions in the subcontinent were annexed by India.

History also tells us that Fort Tiracol was a symbolic location where freedom fighters from Goa demonstrated from time to time. On August 15, 1954, Satyagrahis protesting against the Portuguese rule entered Goa from three different directions – one of which was from the North to Fort Tiracol, which was occupied and flew the Indian flag for a day before they were captured and imprisoned. A monument has been built near the fort to honour their memory.

While the restoration of the fort had to be true to its historic appearance externally, the brief for the interiors of



the rooms was an “understated old-world charm” combined with modern amenities. “This was translated by means of a Portuguese colonial meets contemporary light interior design mixed with Bohemian elements in the restaurant/lounge. While there are modern amenities, they are in keeping with the monumental structure - dramatic and homely in turns,” points out hotel consultant Rainer Stoll. “Since it is a historic building, the division of space was a given. In keeping with the colonial theme, a pastel colour palette was selected. For the fittings, we used antique wooden furniture and ceramic flooring for a historic appeal.”

Once an armed fortress that belonged to the Portuguese, Fort Tiracol is now content to spend the rest of its days on a cliff enjoying a kaleidoscopic view of the Arabian Sea and the spectacular estuary of the Tiracol river on the northernmost tip of Goa. Set foot in its charming courtyard, and you will be taken aback by the 17th century chapel standing right in the centre. There’s a palpable sense of history, yet it has all the comfort a traveller craves for today. With its limited number of rooms, the hotel offers an intimacy befitting its size.

Other facilities include Tavern (the restaurant-lounge bar) and Verandah (the alfresco cafe). All the rooms have King-



PROJECT DETAILS

Name of the project: Fort Tiracol Heritage Hotel

The client: Sanya Hospitality

The designers: UTI by Design (international design firm)

HVAC Consultants: PSI Architects

Lighting consultants: Kenkre

Hotel consultant: Rainer Stoll of Four Seasons Hospitality

Duration of project: 11 months

Date of completion: December 20, 2015

size beds, AC, satellite 42” flat screen TVs, coffee maker, electronic safe and modern bathrooms with rain shower. Coast cruising, river fishing trips and picnics can be organised. Hotel transport is available, and there is a doctor on call.

One of the most challenging aspects of this project was the fact that Sanya Resorts and Hospitality were only allowed to restore and repair the existing premises, but local workmanship and qualified contractors helped them to fulfill the brief satisfactorily. Art plays a big role in the interior design - not just in the careful selection of fabrics and accessories, but also in the handpicked acrylic paintings by an artist called Voxx as well as old oil paintings from colonial times. Together, they create a world of difference. **AS**

9,,10,11&12. The rooms are fitted with modern amenities, but have an understated old-world charm.

13. Tavern, the restaurant-lounge bar on the ramparts.