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COLONIAL HERITAGE HOTELS

Stay at these heritage properties to seek the character, atmosphere and authentic experiences from the days gone by.

Text Kunal Bhatia and Shuvajit Payne

From the shores of Kerala to the hills of West Bengal, a number of homes from the days of the Raj have been converted into hotels. With a blend of historic charm and modern day conveniences, these offer an attractive option for discerning travellers. Here is a collection of five such homes-turned-hotels from different corners of the country.

This spread: The verandah at Siolim House, Goa.



Above: Le Colonial is a living museum with works of art and antique furniture spanning over five centuries. Right: Enjoy picturesque views and old-world charm at Woodville.

Le Colonial, Kochi

Few buildings in Kochi can boast of a history as rich as that of Le Colonial. It was constructed back in 1506 as the private residence of the Portuguese governor. A hundred and fifty years later, the Dutch took over and turned it into a home for their own governors, the last of whom sold it to the English in 1795. Five centuries of such changing fortunes can today be experienced by guests after Neerana Hotels established Le Colonial within the walls of this stellar residence.

The hotel's rooms are named after the legendary people who inhabited, visited or had wished to take over the property, including Tipu Sultan, Vasco da Gama and the English Viceroy. The room honouring the latter is the largest in the property and includes lovely French doors that open on to a long verandah with views of the adjoining St. Francis Church. Le Colonial's historic walled compound is home to a pool under the canopy of lush green trees. Dining options include Keralan, Indian and continental meals served indoors in the dining room, outdoors in the gardens or on the terrace. Fort Kochi's numerous attractions that are in the vicinity include the giant Chinese fishing nets and the Indo-Portuguese Museum.



Woodville Palace Hotel, Shimla

On the pine-covered slopes that surround Shimla, Woodville has all the characteristics of a quintessential hilltop palace – complete with gabled roofs, corner turrets and walls covered in ivy. It was built as a summer residence by the Raja Rana of Jubbal, a former princely state in today's Himachal Pradesh. The residence was converted into a hotel in 1977 by Rana's descendants and has ever since been welcoming visitors who seek a slice of the era gone by.

The Palace's interiors are crammed with precious pieces of furniture and arts mainly from the 1930s, including writing desks, lamps, bathroom fittings and more. Wander deep enough and one might also come across priceless vases from Asia and antiques from Europe. Movie aficionados will be thrilled to know that a number of Bollywood films were shot at Woodville; and the Hollywood Bar at the hotel showcases an autographed photograph from Laurel and Hardy dedicated to Maharani Brinda Devi, the maternal grandmother of the current owners. Amongst the rooms at Woodville, the Royal Suite is the most splendid one and includes a sitting room, a dining area and even a functioning fireplace!



Left: Owing to its charm, Windamere was called 'one of the three jewels of the Raj'. Right and below: The 200-year-old mango tree forms a beautiful canopy in the open-air restaurant serving local cuisine at Le Duplex.

Windamere Hotel, Darjeeling

The grand dame of heritage hotels in Darjeeling brims with old-world hospitality. Rambling up the slopes of Observatory Hill, it began as a boarding house for bachelor English and Scottish tea planters, and was converted into a hotel just before World War II. Guest accommodation is spread across a number of cottages with varying configurations ranging from a single bed to those with large families. Some of the rooms are named after their distinguished guests, including 'Prince Peter of Greece & Denmark' and 'Princess of Siam'.

A common thread across the property is its vintage charm – think white lace tablecloths, wooden armoires, well-worn rugs, hot water bottles, fireplaces and more. Windamere takes pride in its selection of teas, which can be enjoyed through the day – bed tea in the comforts of your room, afternoon tea in the garden, and perhaps another cup after dinner. Meals are served with a generous variety of both English and Indian fare in a dining room, where guests are often known to share tables with others and conversations flow freely. Christmas is the most magical time to visit Windamere, with festivities spread across a fortnight – a tradition that has been carried out without interruption since 1939.



Samir Sarkar

Le Duplex, Puducherry

Situated in the heart of this former French colony, Le Duplex was the home of the mayor of Pondicherry (now Puducherry) in the 18th century. The original building was painstakingly restored using traditional methods which included the use of 'Chettinad Egg Plaster' – a process in which walls are covered with layers of a coating made from egg whites, powdered sea shells and yoghurt! Stepping through the historical wooden gate, visitors enter a charming courtyard which reflects a blend of traditional design and modern touches. The courtyard today functions as an outdoor dining space, and offers local cuisine under the shade of a mango tree.

Present throughout the hotel are interesting wooden pieces, including an exquisitely carved ceiling panel that was rescued from a house being demolished. The colonial aesthetic continues in the hotel's 14 rooms, all of which are different in terms of design. The deluxe rooms have a chequered black-and-white floor and four poster beds, while the luxury suites have wooden flooring and a balcony. On the uppermost level are four penthouses with carved wooden ceilings and lovely views overlooking the town. Le Duplex, a few minutes' walk from the seafront, is conveniently located to explore the town's charming lanes, boutiques and cafes.



Above and below right: The cosy rooms and seating areas at Siolim House reflect the influence of the Portuguese architecture style. Below left: Take a leisurely swim in the property's pool that is surrounded by greenery.



Siolim House, Goa

In the village of Siolim in North Goa, the Siolim House was built in the 17th century by a local noble family. Like many others of that period, they were converted by the Portuguese and given prominent roles in administration along with titles of land, resulting in wealth which was channelled towards building such mansions. Siolim House was constructed in the 'Casa de Sobrado' style which was reflective of the houses of nobility in Portugal. Indicative of the stature of its inhabitants is the house's very own chapel that was built in the front!

Siolim House's meticulous restoration by the current owners have won it an Award of Honour from the UNESCO. The original 24 rooms were converted to a select 7 suites and 7 bathrooms, allowing for a rather

spacious stay today. Traces of the past are found throughout the house and some eye-catching details include window panes covered in oyster shells, the beautifully patterned floor tiles and elegantly carved wooden furniture. For a lazy afternoon read, settle into one of the many nooks and corners throughout the house; or plunge into the pool for a relaxing swim. And be sure to explore the local cuisine by digging into the fresh fish served in the house's verandah restaurant.



Getting there

Jet Airways offers seamless connectivity to the cities of Kochi and Goa. The airline also flies to Chandigarh, Bagdogra and Chennai, from where you can connect to Shimla, Darjeeling and Puducherry.