

WORTH THE TRIP

ITALY MEETS INDIA

Jaipur's Bar Palladio has become the go-to restaurant and de facto cultural center in the city. Now even weekend excursions are included among its European-style offerings.

BY SARAH MEDFORD PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHEN KENT JOHNSON



SHAKE IT UP Bar Palladio, where designer Marie-Anne Oudejans mixed Indian and European decorative traditions, such as a carved-stone bar, painted ceilings, a Louis XV-style ottoman and block-printed cotton upholstery.

ALMOST FROM the day it opened in 2013, Bar Palladio—a deluxe canteen in Jaipur, India—has attracted a colorful band of regulars. There's Ruchi Jain, a fashion stylist in her 20s who lives across the street; John Harwood, a tattooed British sculptor who directs one of the city's top stone-carving workshops; and Shiva Gujar, a well-traveled jeweler and local hotel owner who dresses exclusively in white kurtas and orders from the pasta menu in flawless Italian. Jaipur is the center of India's gem trade as well as a major crafts producer, and its sidewalks are usually choked with such artistic high achievers. Bar Palladio, with its mirrored salons, stiff Negronis and peacocks silently raking the garden with their tails, has given them a hangout that satisfies their discerning tastes. Later this month, the bar and restaurant will further extend its reach by offering Palladio Weekends, three-day excursions for a small number of guests who want to experience the culture and history of India filtered through the lens of one of Rajasthan's most unusual luxury ventures.

Bar Palladio is the creation of Barbara Miolini, a 43-year-old Swiss-Italian who spent 15 years working for the Hotel Villa Cipriani outside Venice before coming to India in 2005. She was on a sabbatical of sorts, seeking what she calls "a cultural opposite" to her European life; she planned to stay six months, maybe a year. At the end of that year, she found herself circling back to Rajasthan. "I was fascinated by the desert," Miolini says in her lightly accented English. "I knew I wanted to stay."

She launched a small textile factory in Jaipur and began to meet the polyglot locals and expats, many of them French, who had first encountered the city through its artisans. Before long she decided that what Jaipur really needed wasn't another textile factory (though hers continues to thrive), but one of the grand old European cafes she'd grown up with—a Caffè Florian or Harry's Bar—transposed to an Indian key. And so she opened one.

The success of Bar Palladio owes a lot to Miolini's hotel background but also to the team she assembled. Several months before Miolini opened the cafe, when she was still short a designer for the project, French friends introduced her to Marie-Anne Oudejans, the Dutch fashion designer whose colorful, free-spirited Tocca label had been a breakout hit in the 1990s. Oudejans was living part-time in Jaipur and renting an apartment in the Narain Niwas Palace Hotel—as it happens, the same noble, slightly raffish building whose existing bar and garden Miolini planned to convert into her new venue.

The hotel had been built in 1928 as a private residence and hunting lodge, and it retained a small park and swimming pool where parrots and other local birds congregated. "Jaipur is a very crowded city," Miolini says. "Narain Niwas is right in the center and still a very green area." She knew the space but never thought the hotel would make it available to her. The courage to ask for it, she says, came to her in a dream. She and Oudejans began to plot their new décor from their lounge chairs around the Narain Niwas pool. "Marie-Anne had never decorated before, but I was sure she was the right person to help me," Miolini recalls. "We are very similar in our aesthetic and the places we like"—the Palace of Versailles being high on both their lists.

It took Oudejans eight months to bring to life what she describes as "the Italian bar that Barbara wanted but with the feeling of the maharajah palaces that Euro jet-setters in the '60s used to come to Rajasthan for." Oudejans pulled the head-swiveling blue wall color that has become Bar Palladio's signature from her imagination; the hue is an echo of an 18th-century reception room in Jaipur's vast City Palace. Other touches—Louis XV-style ottomans block-printed with subcontinental flowers, tented iron beds for sipping cocktails in the garden—capture the exuberance and Eurocentric incongruities of Indian high style. "I was completely fearless because I was really excited about it," Oudejans says.

She extended the Bar Palladio look into everything from soup plates rimmed in pistachio and gold to a quirky cocktail card. "Marie-Anne has been amazing in her ability to create not just the décor but also the brand," says Miolini, who in the past year has opened two offshoot boutiques named Bar Palladio Jaipur Delicatessen, in New Delhi and Mumbai, selling Italian delicacies and the home wares Oudejans has concocted.

Though the enterprise has all the glamour of its Venetian forebears (and a name borrowed from Venetian architect Andrea Palladio, a Miolini favorite), it may be closer to London's Groucho Club in the almost familial role it plays in the life of the city. Miolini estimates that 80 percent of her patrons are Indian-born, and most are under the age of 35. She programs a continuous stream of events for Bar Palladio, including dance performances, poetry readings and even opera on occasion, tapping cross-cultural talent, sometimes in collaboration with the Swiss Arts Council and the Italian Cultural Institute in New Delhi.

"It's actually the one place of community in the city," says Will Mulford, a Wisconsin native who came to India in 2010 to study Hindi, met Miolini three years ago and has since become her director of programming. "Jaipur is made up of very creative people. With that comes this crazy personality—Bar Palladio is like the Indian version of *Cheers*."

Imagine *Cheers* onboard a low-speed rail line



BLUE VALENTINE Clockwise from left: Painted and mirrored walls in one of Bar Palladio's back rooms; local transport that's on the wild side; a balconied barroom. Though Jaipur is known as "the pink city" for its sandstone facades, Bar Palladio's signature color is blue.



between Jaipur and Jodhpur and that sums up the first Palladio Weekend, which will unfold this month, if all goes as planned, against the backdrops of a desert landscape (where a multicourse picnic will be laid) and an abandoned palace (where an intimate concert will take place). The program will be a conflation of Indian and European traditions, designed to appeal to Bar Palladio's worldly followers.

"The audience for these trips didn't exist a decade ago in India," Mulford says. "Young people now have more of an income to come and hang out with us. They want to seek out the idea of Italy, for instance—or any far-flung idea. They are starting to say, 'I am part of the luxury life.'"

For the next weekend program, in May, Mulford has already planned an excursion to Kashmir, and more trips are underway for the fall, including a jungle outing that will revolve heavily around dance. At the moment, he's plotting a Bar Palladio tent for the Jaipur railway station, its signature blue awning marking the departure location for a railway car that will be draped in scalloped bunting and packed with champagne. The destination is almost beside the point. ●

