

INDUSTRY LEADER



# The open plan

Hotelier Priya Paul on creating buzzing new spaces, being a rebel and taking her signature experiences into the jungle | **PAGE 12-13**





Named a rebel with a cause by international travel fair, LE Miami, Priya Paul is carrying the flag high with her brand expansion plans. By **Surya Praphulla Kumar**

# In the **Zone**



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Pic: A Raja Chidambaram

moving ahead

## Eating out

■ Last year, when not sampling the gourmet food whipped up by her chefs in Chennai, Paul paid a quick visit to Junior Kuppanna. This curiosity about food is something all her friends remark on. "Suddenly, in the middle of winter, she'll go to Old Delhi and check out 14 places that do kachoris and halwa," says Vivek Sahni, co-founder of Kama Ayurveda. "But with her, it's not just about trying out things; it's also about finding out why it is interesting for someone else. So she will ask people why they are eating something, what makes it work, etc."

■ Ask Paul about two must-visit restaurants abroad and she names Cosme, a Mexican restaurant in New York, and The Duck and Rice, a Chinese restaurant in London. "Cosme had a lot of flavours and ingredients that I didn't know. And it's run by Enrique Olvera, one of the top chefs in the world right now. The Duck and Rice is Chinese with a contemporary twist. It's conceptualised very well. I am not always looking at only great food, but also interesting concepts," she says.







## Social catalyst

Scrolling through the pictures on her iPad—showing off Zone's playful interiors and hallways lined with marigold carpets—Paul says its asset-light model (they don't own the properties, but "provide the management expertise and brand standards") will help the brand grow faster. Geared to the millennial traveller—who looks for constant connectivity (aka free Wi-Fi), spaces to interact with others and signature experiences—the hotels are "an exciting space, with un-boxy, open-plan zones and a lot of interactive elements (like gaming consoles and foosball tables in the lobby)". She adds that Chennaiites will get quick access to two of these "design-conscious and price-conscious" hotels, with the Mahabalipuram and OMR properties opening its doors in the next few months.

Art, of course, is never far away from anything that Paul—an avid collector of contemporary Indian artists and 19th and 20th century pop memorabilia—does. As Sharan Apparao, friend and owner of Chennai-based Apparao Galleries, says, "Priya has an eye for the unusual. She zeroes in on trends by instinct and usually buys artists much before they become popular." And with Paul's insistence that every one of her



hotel rooms must have at least one original art work, she laughs that Zone can't be any different. "I have commissioned works from award-winning ceramic artist, Rahul Kumar, for the hotel in Jaipur, while the Coimbatore one has photographs by upcoming young photographers on its walls," says the Padma Shri winner. She has also brought in contemporary design through custom-made furniture and interiors by London architects Project Orange and Delhi-based designers Sahil Bagga and Sarthak Sengupta. "The Zone auto—a retail area to sell quirky things and a food outlet for local snacks—is a signature across all the hotels. Only its colours and pop art designs will change according to its location," she says, adding that each hotel will have a "Zoner" (a more informal concierge) who will help guests figure out unusual local things to do and give you insider recommendations.

## Into the jungle

An avid traveller, Paul admits she is always on the lookout for new experiences, be it discovering a new destination or trying out a new restaurant ("I even have research material on destinations I haven't travelled to"). Perhaps one of the reasons she is expanding The Park Collection. These 20-40 room boutique hotels—which kicked off with The Park Pod in Chennai and The Park Calangute—are all about "location, location, location". Coming up soon are properties in Wayanad and the Jim Corbett National Park

## Checking in

While she likes The Standard in New York and Delano in Miami, Paul says her current favourite is the NoMad Hotel. Housed in a turn-of-the-century Beaux-Arts building in New York, "it is situated in a great location (near Madison Square Park), has great interiors (classic European meets contemporary New York) and even better food," says Paul, adding that no matter where she goes, she carries along her own brand of peppermint tea, books and magazines. "I don't travel light, but I travel well," she laughs.

(Uttarakhand). "We want to give these spaces an eco-luxury feel, and let the landscape and architecture speak for itself. Since the next two projects are deep in the forests, they are a unique opportunity to create something that is very different in terms of experiencing nature," says the mother of one, who enjoys going hiking with her son. "The completely holiday destinations will augment our city hotels. At the Collection, we are focussed on going local—from using local stone at the Corbett property to the cottages on stilts at Wayanad, where we will take advantage of the trees. Here the experiences are important, so it will be more about talking to conservationists and learning how the ecology works. And since we are looking at the carbon footprint of the food we use, we will follow the farm-to-fork concept—where we will work with local farmers to source our produce," she says, adding that they have also taken a Chettinad palace on lease, which will tentatively open its doors in two years.

## Time off

Paul is proud that she presents contemporary India through the hotels. And as that India changes, The Park changes with it. Though a hands-on boss (she connects with many thoughts in Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg's book *Lean In*), she also encourages her employees to be creative and come up with 'anything but ordinary' experiences for their guests. As leading interior designer Vikram Phadke puts it, "She is experimental and a risk-taker who has introduced us to innovative styles even before they've hit the Indian markets. She travels extensively to check out all the big fairs, like the one in Milan, and does a lot of research before sourcing her pieces." But it isn't all work and no play for Paul, who makes it a point to balance all the conflicting demands on her time. "I try to average out time spent on work and with family by identifying where I need to be present to be most effective," she says. And her down time, she spends pursuing her passions (like visiting the Kochi Biennale, of which she is a huge fan). "I vacation, go to new places, look at the architecture, art and food. I know I should exercise more, but all my interests take a lot of time," laughs Paul, who has just finished reading Amitav Ghosh's *Flood of Fire*, and admits she has a pile of magazines (from art to fashion) to non-fiction books to catch up on.

**P**RITYA Paul is winding up a hectic two-day trip to Chennai when I catch up with her. But even at 5 pm, the Delhi-based chairperson of The Park Hotels shows no sign of calling it a day. Dressed simply in a printed black sari (crease-less despite the hour), she settles down with a cup of her favourite peppermint tea as we chat about her latest title. LE Miami, the world's first invitation-only travel tradeshow, whose motto is #RebelsWithCause, bestowed the title 'forbearer of the contemporary travel industry' upon her. "I am honoured to be on a global list of people, some of whom I look up to and have learnt from (like entrepreneur-hoteller Ian Schrager), is a validation of what The Park Hotels is and the work that I have done for 25 plus years," begins the 49-year-old. "When I started in this industry, it was small. Even today, the footprint of hotels is not enough and there is very little segmentation. And with changing global trends and the Indian demographic (upwardly mobile and with an eye for exclusivity), we knew it was the right time to diversify."

For over 20 years, she's been the 'rebel'—going boutique when hotels were strait-laced and injecting edgy design when most lobbies wanted to look like ancient palaces. And over the last few months, the trendsetter has been reminding us that the drive to innovate is still raging strong. Paul is currently expanding her brand: taking the Zone by The Park, a new brand of mid-budget hotels that has already opened two—in Coimbatore and Jaipur—to other tier two cities, and expanding The Park Collection, a boutique hotel experience that will give travellers a ticket to unique destinations.



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