

SPECIAL FASHION ISSUE

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**DAWN
ZULUETA**
AN ENDURING
FAVORITE

Tory
Burch
talks
trends

Working
women
dress for
success

Rajo
Laurel
at home

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P195

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The Dwarika's Hotel: Himalayan Elegance

Life seems to slow down in this living museum of Nepali woodcarving tradition combined with the amenities of laid-back luxury. *By Tristan Choa*

NESTLED AMIDST THE hustle and bustle of Nepal's capital city, Kathmandu, is an oasis of luxury and preserve of history called the Dwarika's Hotel.

As the hotel's lore would have it, the year 1952 saw Dwarika Das Shrestha out jogging when he came upon carpenters sawing off a portion of an intricately engraved wooden pillar. They were tearing down an old building to make way for a new one. Horrified that the legacy of an ancient culture would end up as firewood, Dwarika gave the carpenters new lumber and took away the carved pillar.

This impulse turned out to be the foundation of a lifetime of work. Each time Dwarika heard of an old building being demolished, he would be there buying as much of these wooden carvings as possible. Over the next twenty years, he amassed in his backyard garden an impressive collection of pillars, windows and doors that were the architectural heritage of Nepal. Often he would not discover the historical signifi-

cance of the pieces he had taken until many years later.

In 1964 the strain of purchasing these artifacts and his need to display the beauty created by his ancestors combined to encourage Dwarika to construct the first Nepali-style brick building with his collection. This was to be the nucleus of the hotel that opened in 1977 near the airport with only ten guest rooms, a living showcase of the treasures he had saved from certain destruction.

To walk through the Dwarika's Hotel is to be transported to a more genteel time. It is centuries-old Nepali woodcarving tradition blended with the amenities of laid-back luxury. The chairs and tables under canvas umbrellas generously sprinkled in the courtyards between the buildings become front-row seats to this vibrant display of Nepali craftsmanship on windows and entrances, beams and pillars that whisper of an ancient time.

Wonderfully absent are the lavish trappings of dime-a-dozen five-star hotels that smack of having to live in an urban concrete jungle. Instead, there are dark Sal timber windows and doorways carved with gods, rituals and depictions of ancient beliefs passed down through the ages. These, in turn, are unmistakably outlined against the orange-red terracotta bricks that make up the façade of most of the buildings. Surrounded by tastefully landscaped grounds, the Dwarika's becomes a haven for any soul worn down by living in the city.

To emphasize that point, the suites are a picture of Nepali elegance. Locally made rugs on stone plate floors, colorful cushion covers on a recessed sofa nook, and a four-poster bed come together in a room that is far bigger than the rooms in many other hotels in its class. Together, they create a heaven-sent feeling of space that is the whole point of being on vacation.

Life seems to slow down at the Dwarika's. To walk through the library or the bar is to walk back in time. Even the hotel's prize restaurant, Krishnarpan, where traditional dinners of from six- to twenty-two-course meals are served, is an ode to an earlier age. From the servers dressed in the costumes and jewelry of the various ethnic groups—Newar, Chetris, Limbus and Thakalis—and textiles adorning the tables and walls to the different sets of crockery and the handmade Nepali paper menu, everything is an invitation to slow down.

The Dwarika's is many things at once. More than a luxurious refuge in an often-boisterous city, it is a continuing effort to restore and preserve culturally significant architectural artifacts. It is a training ground for producing young, skilled craftsmen who have an affinity for the heritage of Nepal. It is a living museum that is energized with a purpose. As others have observed, it is a shining example of how a massive heritage project is itself used to create funding for its own conservation. ❧