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# THE WORLD OF INTERIORS



**GREAT ESCAPES**

From Jaipur to Madeira, Lamu to the Bahamas, Yorkshire to Mbour



A black-and-white chequerboard sun terrace anchored by a central sandstone fountain adds theatre to the façade of Villa Palladio. The red window awnings and Italian parasols offer a clue to the punchy palette that awaits guests once they've passed through the Mughal arches

# RAJMATAZZ



Follow the old camel road out of Jaipur towards Agra and you'll soon find the Pink City takes on an altogether ruddier tone. Scarlet sun loungers, awnings, parasols and jazzy chevron stripes signal that you've arrived at Villa Palladio, a fantastical new hotel conjured up by three of the most accomplished alchemists in the game. Surveying all that saturated colour, Cosmo Brockway thought this former palace couldn't possibly get any – ahem – madder. Then he stepped inside... Photography: Bikramjit Bose

The double-height hall features jali screens painted pink one side and a shade of garnet the other as well as a flotilla of tented daybeds. The floor again is a chequer pattern, albeit here in white and imperial-red marble



**WHO AMONG US**, on visiting Jaipur, has not stood silent at the very first sight of Bar Palladio (*Wol* June 2016)? Surrounded by the peacock-strewn lawns of Narain Niwas Palace, the pavilion, with its Gothic-flavoured windows, tented daybeds and cool frescoes, might just be the most visually hypnotic restaurant in the world. The daydream-turned-triumph of Swiss/Italian Barbara Miolini, a resident of the Pink City, it has already once spread its wings beyond the palace gates in the form of another whimsical set piece – the tangerine- and mint-hued Caffé Palladio on a bougainvillea-lined road nearby. Now the triumvirate responsible – Miolini, Marie-Anne Oudejans, a Dutch designer and fellow expat, and Rajasthani painter Vikas Soni – have struck again, this time alighting on a small palace nestled among the dromedary humps of the Aravalli hills on the old camel road to Agra. Possibly a former hunting lodge for a noble family, the pearl-white edifice, surrounded by neem and almond trees, was ripe for the plucking.

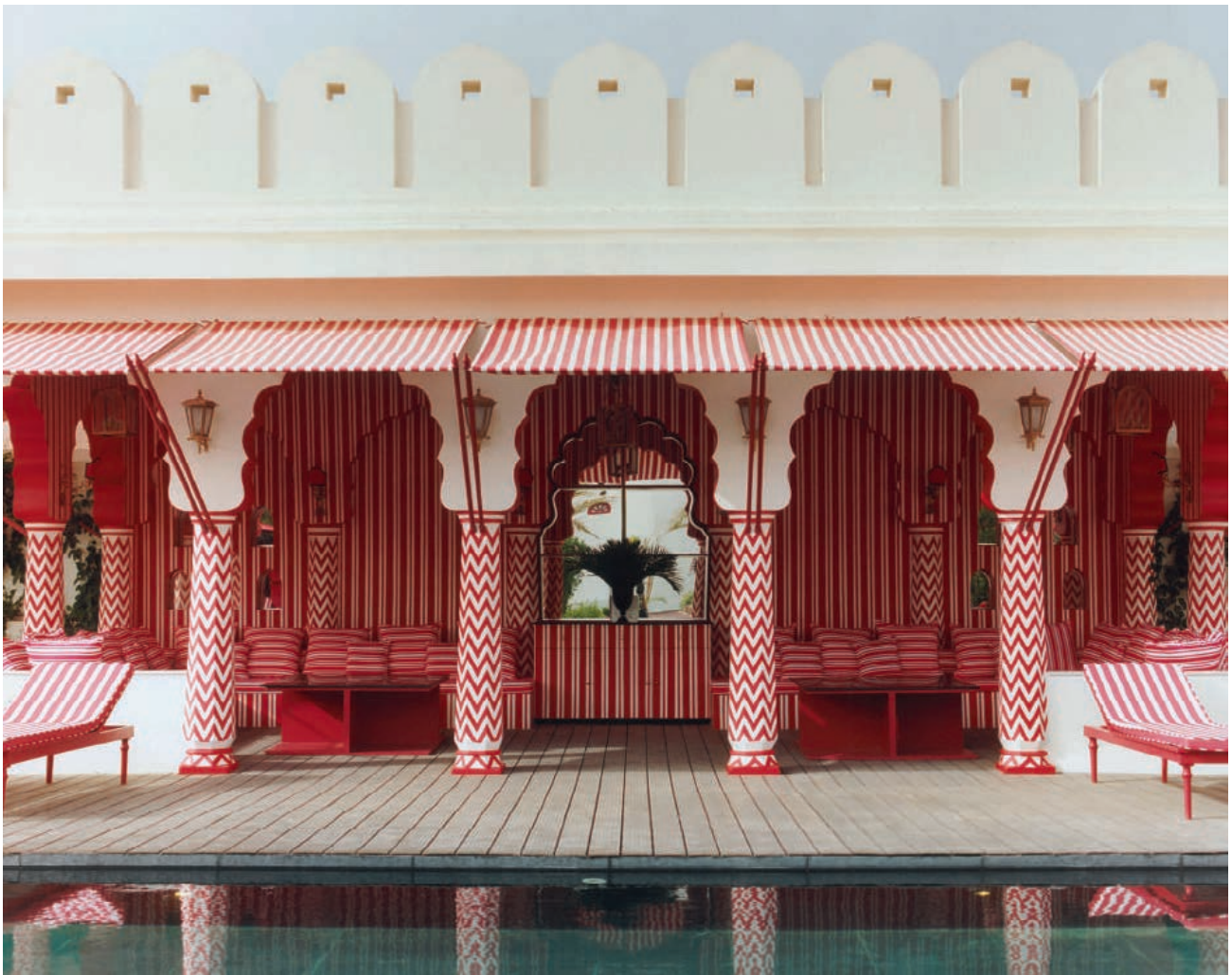
Barbara and Marie-Anne’s first heart-stopping tour of this sleeping beauty, where leopards might be found taking shade under the *chhatri* domes, provided evidence of echoing empty rooms and pierced jali screens. ‘It was in a remarkably good state. We loved the simplicity, it felt like a villa in the Italian countryside somehow,’ Marie-Anne says. Of course nothing is ever really that simple in India and there were inevitably hoops to jump through, in addition to the pandemic, but it was ‘destined to be given a new chapter as part of the Palladio family’.

While modern Jaipur has no dearth of debonair digs, Barbara and Marie-Anne instantly knew that the *palazzetto* was perfect for the boutique-hotel venture they had been dreaming of. Set a 20-minute drive outside the city, the journey flashing with tantalising glimpses into turquoise-screened haveli courtyards, Villa Palladio is on the cusp of being unveiled. Barbara, who relishes the respite it offers from the Jaipur noise, says that ‘the creation, despite the obvious stress of starting any project, has been such a pleasure. Each day I find myself again in the fresh air, amid village living and a simple way of life.’

Curled up on the veranda steps, Marie-Anne explains the initial vision for this modern-day interpretation of a desert caravan-serai. ‘I had an idea of mingling the exuberance and decadence of the maharajas with a heady dose of Italian flair,’ she says. Her eyes fixed on the horizon beyond the castellated walls, she adds: ‘The countryside has given me countless moments of visual inspiration. The women in the fields, scarlet, yellow, aquamarine figures, the Rajput princesses celebrating in their finery, their veils...’

The kaleidoscope of influences from her meanderings across Rajasthan has been shaken down and poured out of the designer’s imagination as... a brilliant, pulsating red. The villa is the reddest (and pinkest) apparition I have ever seen. What a shame that Diana Vreeland is no longer with us to arrive on a caparisoned elephant and then sweep into the galleried hall, a symphony of her favourite colour. ‘Red,’ she held forth, ‘is the great clarifier: bright, cleansing and revealing. It makes all colours beautiful.’

Top left: meals come with views of the garden and a mirrored meditation pavilion and are served on china bearing hand-painted motifs inspired by Mughal miniatures. Top right: Marie-Anne Oudejans designed the scalloped tables and hand-block cushions seen on the breakfast veranda



It is certainly a typically self-assured choice from the duo. ‘This is all about how pattern and colour work to create a mood,’ Barbara explains. ‘The red was actually inspired by cardinals’ robes and our memories of Rome.’ No doubt the arching rooms will shimmer by night as the *jeunesse dorée* flock. ‘Villa Palladio is about play and delight,’ she adds. ‘And when it comes to colour, Marie-Anne really is brilliant. She just feels it, lives it.’

Everywhere are touches of levity and wit, from the red, white and black chequerboard marble floors up. The vast heights of the central hall/salon have been bedecked with jaunty made-up crests of bears and roosters, while palm trees entwined with scarlet fronds snake up the walls. I am enchanted to catch sight of a huddle of artisans applying Orientalist gold leaf to canopied daybeds. Scarlet-striped corridors lit by black and red sconces suggest *My Fair Lady* but with a surreal twist. In all, nine bedrooms lead off them. One twin room sports pagoda-shade bed canopies against walls painted with splendid palm trees and vibrant red treillage; another chamber beckons with a scalloped four-poster flanked by stained-glass arches. A vaulting kitchen, strangely reminiscent of an English country house,

was designed by the talented ceramicist Simon Marks, alongside a fragrant herbarium brimming with fruits of the soil.

‘We wanted there to be a strong element of privacy and peace,’ Barbara says as we stroll through the scented trees. ‘So we constructed the ramparts to enclose the space and make it feel more intimate – a secret garden. There is something conspiratorial and playful here that is meant to evoke a sense of childlike fantasy.’ The Alice in Wonderland air continues beyond a tall hedge where there is a chevron-striped pool house, its awning reflected in the glistening water below. Concealed by royal palms and hibiscus, it is ‘a nod to European formal gardens with their garden follies’. At that precise moment we spy one of the staff, devilishly slim-hipped in a pair of floral trousers, holding a bunch of lilies. One by one the Rajput men, all bridal innocence and curling moustaches, line up to snap each other clasping the bouquet.

It provides a lasting image as I prepare to set off on my way – along with the colour, of course. Here Barbara has the final word. ‘When travellers leave us here in the pink city,’ she says, ‘I would like them also to remember the red’ ■

*Villa Palladio is due to open in August. Visit [villa-palladio-jaipur.com](http://villa-palladio-jaipur.com)*

The scarlet chevron stripes of the pool-house arcade cast a pleasing reflection on the water – an effect enhanced by the black Kota stone on the walls of the swimming pool itself. Even when temperatures in Rajasthan reach their highest the water feels cool because of the colour of that lining



The shaded entrance veranda looks across to the Aravalli hills and is furnished with handcrafted cane chairs and tables painted the same wine red as the walls. The lattice pattern is a motif used elsewhere in the hotel, while the Baroque-style brass sconces were made locally



'We couldn't resist tenting these beds. It is such a Palladio touch,' says Marie-Anne of the whimsical scalloped canopies in this room. The twin beds themselves have hand-blocked quilts made in Jaipur – the print is based on a centuries-old Sangneri pattern from the south of the city



This suite is formed of an enfilade of pure fantasy, its foreground arch artfully hand-painted to evoke, in the owners' brief, 'a garden gate; leaves mixed with Mughal berries with a touch of French mint'. That same motif is carried through to the door surround, dado panels and cornice





If Slim Aarons did Rajasthan... Sitaram, a waiter, holds a bouquet of lilies, his floral-print trousers (designed by Marie-Anne) co-ordinating jauntily with the hand-painted chevrons of the pool house – or ‘Mughal-inspired belvedere’, as Barbara Miolini put it – and the surrounding foliage