



# EXPRESS FOOD & HOSPITALITY

EXPRESS EXCLUSIVE ▼

## 'WHEN YOU USE DESIGN THINKING TO WORK ON A CONCEPT, YOU TAKE A DEEP DIVE INTO THAT IDEA'

Designer, hotelier, entrepreneur, adventurer and developer. **Jimmy Mistry** is a man with many hats. He founded Della Group in 1991 with a core belief that anything “we design or create should be unique and should improve the lives of as many people as possible.” In an exclusive interview with **Steena Joy**, he elucidates on how design can be used to create experiential spaces

From college dropout to entrepreneur, what made you opt for hospitality rather than any other sector?

The calling has been there right from childhood. To try and take a product or a given environment and improvise it. That has been ingrained in me since my school days. After I finished school I enrolled for a diploma in mechanical engineering. Those days I was very fond of automobile and motorcycle modifications and motorcycle racing. That took me on to the next level of my life and I wanted to be an entrepreneur. I dabbled

in contracting, furniture imports, manufacturing, interiors, architecture, designing offices that stood out from the crowd – the idea was better and better environments for people. In interiors when we reached a stage in our careers when we realised we have designed enough across the length and breadth of the country, we wanted to design hospitality for ourselves. But I wanted to do hospitality with a difference or what was not available in the country. We started off with a very humble 30 room resort, an adventure park, a small cafeteria that

was made into a restaurant. The beginnings were very very humble and even today we are very close to the ground and listen to what the guest wants. We always put ourselves in our guest's shoes and understand what is it that they would want.

How is Della different?

I wanted to have a place where I can have fun with my family, friends and which is different. Not the same mundane menu and the same mundane restaurant with nothing else to do. How much can you attract people with only food or only ambience? You need something much much more than that. Hence we decided to do experiential hospitality - the whole experience, not just food or the décor. And experience needs to be theme based so that's how Della Adventure was born. We are the pioneers in this space- there was nothing like extreme adventure in the country. We started the adventure park, restaurants inside it so that when someone is doing dirt bike riding they can come and sit in the restaurants on the edge of the race-track. And all this comes from my personal experiences while working and growing up. Same is with interaction with animals. I am very fond of dogs, pets, horses, and activities like milking cows, etc. simple things that give tremendous sense of satisfaction to the soul within. Buying a cow is not that costly, doesn't need much investment but the experience of milking a cow is not available. So my job as an entrepreneur has always been to identify the missing gap - what is not available and then recreate those experiences.

From the heritage styles of the Taj and the Oberois to hotels with contemporary design, how has hospitality design in India evolved over the years?

Hospitality design has gone through a sea change. It was an organised seg-



Jimmy Mistry

ment so to speak but it was old world. We were lost in an bygone era. I think there was a time in 80s and 90s when we didn't keep up with the world. And that was the time when international hotel brands were just entering India. By 2000, most of the brands had entered and they came in with their international designers, their contractors, their standards - that standardisation really took the country by storm. So the hotel avatar you see today is very different from the one say 20 years ago. We being in the world of design, we were keenly observing the entire change. And our designs were always more motivated and inclined towards international designs and the standardisation therein. When we set up, we made sure all the customer touchpoints are the same, like the safes, door locks, phones etc. decor and design was contemporary because we were always on the cutting edge of design and this is our forte. At the same time using deeprooted design thinking, getting into human centric design and trying to give consumers

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sd/-  
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what they are NOT getting in a Taj or Oberoi - this is where we specialise in, creating a small niche for ourselves. We have installed aeration knobs in all our washrooms, we use VOC free paints, no use of wood, we don't even promote wood from recyclable forests, we do not use melamine polish - we were the first in the country to launch water-based paints in our factory. I firmly believe that we must leave this planet a better place for our children. This is not a corporate mantra, not a management philosophy - it is deeprooted in me - love for Nature, love for environment and love for plants and animals - that's who I am.

#### **Your resorts have design themes all across from**

idea where I design the products and then let the designers do their interior designing using my products. So this gives me an opportunity to collaborate with interior designers. That's the idea behind Della Concept Stores or Experience Centres. Where I design products and concepts that are truly global. We have got about 2,500 products designed and manufactured by Brand Della. Our factories in Daman have been upgraded for luxury furniture. We have finest of tiles, very unique and different from other tiles available in India. We have decorative lights, a range of sanitary-ware manufactured in China, faucets, so anything that is up-market design will be showcased here - architects and in-

**grenade shaped and gun shaped door handles to animal shaped lampshade bases. How do you source these elements?**

When you use design thinking to work on a concept or an idea, you take a deep dive into that idea. And you spend a lot of time at the listening stage asking a lot of questions and ideation stage and keep doing the exercise again and again. It has to be deep rooted. So when we came up with a military theme concept, a first in India, arms are not available so we would sit hours doing research and drawings of an AK 47 or assault rifle recreating it in a one to one scale, making a diecast or mould in aluminium and finishing in our factory. Similarly with the grenades

and the military look throughout the resort, keeping to the theme but at the same time giving it an ultra luxury look. I keep looking for the vacuum, what others are not doing and where I can stand out. Of course I idealise the Taj, I am hard core fan of theirs, and I love the Four Seasons, but I try to use design to give my guests that core element of surprise and we do it deliberately. So we have guests coming out of our washrooms smiling, they are floored when they visit D.A.T.A and then they become your brand ambassadors.

#### **Future roadmap for the group?**

After 25 years, I have realised that I am tired of designing. And came up with the

terior designers needn't travel across the world to source these products. We always try to price our products at an 'optimal' level. We are not cheap but we are not super expensive either. Just like Della, every product is value for money. We are putting up our first store in Lonavla, of 50,000 sq ft and it's going to redefine the user interface and experience of interior shopping completely, that's why it's an Experience Centre rather than a Store. Later we plan to set up a little smaller format in Delhi Gurugram and Bengaluru as well. Once we set up these three company owned stores, we are open to give out our franchise to about 30 cities across India that we have identified.



# D.A.T.A by design

Nestled deep in the woods of the Sahyadri Range, Della Adventure Training Academy (D.A.T.A) by the Della Group is a one-of-its-kind military themed luxury camping resort aiming to converge military self-defence awareness with exuberant hospitality. **Akshay Nayak** checks out the design elements that make it an experiential hospitality product

**W**orld over, international hospitality companies vouch on providing money-can't-buy experiences to their patrons by increasingly striving to thin out the predominant line distinguishing "in-house" and "outside of the hotel" experiences. One such element that enlivens the spirit of the hotel/resort are the sleek brushes of design, inevitably kindling a "tale to tell" in every inch, from artefacts to installations.

Not restricting only to the hospitality industry, design plays a crucial role in defence for various activities. Right from natural navigation techniques by locating constellations, to sending SOS alerts seeking help using design, to formation of sublime regiments at national events, etc.

Marrying the application of design in hospitality with defence, Jimmy Mistry, chairman & MD, Della Group, conceptualised the country's maiden military-themed glamorous camping resort - Della Adventure Training Academy (D.A.T.A) in Lonavla, Maharashtra.

After what he had faced during his brief visit to The Taj Hotel in Mumbai just a few hours ahead of the Mumbai terror attacks in 2008, Mistry had one aim - to keep the citizens of the country informed and trained to deal with any unforeseen natural/man-made crises like terrorism. The resort pays homage to the martyred soldiers of the country and offers self-defence training to the guests at D.A.T.A.

## Luxury amidst the woods

Nestled deep into the woods of Sahyadri Range, D.A.T.A is an hour-long dirt track drive from Della Resorts in jeeps with military camouflage, giving guests a feel of the experience that awaits them. This is followed by a 10-minute pontoon ride across the Shirota lake, manned by retired Indian Army personnel. On arrival, there is a welcome by horse salute and a memorial service for martyrs. Each villa in the 27-villa property offers best-in-class amenities with a hint of military-themed artefacts placed throughout.

Showcasing glass table tops resting on machine gun replicas, to the artificial bull-head taxidermy and grenade-style doorknobs, a villa at D.A.T.A can accommodate four pax and comes equipped with a jacuzzi pool and twin king-sized beds, ensuring absolute opulence.

Keeping in mind the nitty-gritty of the military touch while ensuring sustainability in the property, D.A.T.A is built by refurbishing cargo containers stacked and designed to blend in with the backdrop of mountains and forests. Salaam Manekshaw - the multi-cuisine restaurant at the resort named after India's famous field marshal, has pictures from Indian Army's various regiments across the walls. Chef Shah-nawaz, heading the culinary operations at D.A.T.A ensures that the guest's tastebuds are satisfied, be it over the Indian succulent fish preparations in the night, or the wholesome



Continental breakfast in the morning. The guests can also keep gazing at the stars while immersing in the outdoor pool right under the sky, or watch the chefs preparing dishes live from the Gurkha Lounge next to the souvenir store and spa. Ideal for corporate events, D.A.T.A offers an indoor banquet space - Maratha, which too comes equipped with modern equipment.

## The centrestage

The military obstacle



Jimmy Mistry

## SPOTLIGHT - HOTEL DESIGN



course in the property along with the team of Lt. General Raymond Noronha (Retd.) - past Chief of Staff Southern Command and Col. Milind Patwardhan, take the centrestage wherein men of valour from the various defence verticals, who served for the country, share real-life experiences and techniques with guests to prepare them for unforeseen calamities.

The team of these experts ensures that each guest returns with dynamic learning about survival, endurance in extreme conditions and a sense of patriotism deeply embedded in their psyche. For this, they have devised interesting activities like Hell Night, nature walk, flag hoisting ceremony, knowledge sessions, and obstacle course drill. The Hell Night includes practical sessions of locating directions with the help of heavenly bodies like the Sun, Moon, Constellations, etc.

"We also train the guests for survival like identifying edible and non-edible flora and fauna in the woods, creating SOS signs using fire lit in a particular design/ pattern, etc. Flag hoisting every morning, with the guests dressed up in uniform in itself kindles a sense of patriotism in them. The obstacle course is thoughtfully planned to get the guests accustomed to how to put their muscles to do the thinking subconsciously when faced with any situation," informed Col. Patwardhan.

Bringing many other experiences such as designing special types of knots using battle ropes for various rescue operations, to creating makeshift containers and cooking vessels from bamboo, the men of action at D.A.T.A ensure that 'design' as a keyword is exuded in its best iteration at every nodal point of the guest experience.

The rightful convergence of military skills with opulent hospitality, based on design as the tasteful element makes D.A.T.A an ensemble of the country's one-of-its-kind experiential hospitality product.

