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How to spend it

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A close-up photograph of a man's hand, showing a large, ornate silver ring on the ring finger. The hand is hairy and appears to be resting on a dark, textured surface, possibly a jacket. The man is wearing a dark, textured jacket over a red and white striped shirt. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

MIXING IT UP






a calcutta above

Glorious change is afoot in West Bengal as a new urban boutique hotel and a restored rural palace redefine sojourns in the former centre of the Raj. **Stanley Stewart** takes in the theatre of Calcutta's city streets before heading out to the magnificent Rajbari Bawali





Arun Babu remembered the palace when there were servants hurrying along the galleries and petitioners arriving at the gates. He remembered the grand candlelit receptions in the Durbar Hall, and the Nautch dancers who used to arrive in closed boats to entertain the men in the pavilion on the lake.

Arun leaned forward in the candlelight, his graceful hand gestures unfolding at half speed. “I am 99 and five months,” he said, turning his palms upward. “When I was a boy, they called Calcutta the City of Palaces. And this was one I loved.”

Calcutta and West Bengal hold a special place in the hearts of people who know and love India. While Mumbai and Delhi wrestle with a modernity that threatens to undermine their

sense of identity, Calcutta remains stubbornly true to itself: intense, cultured and resolutely traditional. Even the new name – the city was rechristened Kolkata in 2001 as a sop to Bengali nationalists – is slow to be accepted, and even the most ardent nationalists are guilty of reverting to the old one. But whichever name they favour, this is a city people fall for: chaotic, vibrant, cosmopolitan, parochial, literary, dilapidated, glorious, maddening and idiosyncratic.

One of its many idiosyncrasies has been the dearth of serious high-end accommodation. There is the wonderful Oberoi Grand, of course – the peerless dowager of Chowringhee, and one of the finest hotels in India. But for such a great city (and Calcutta is a world city) there have been surprisingly few other options – until now.

It has recently been bolstered by two remarkable new properties, one a stylish boutique retreat in the heart of the city opening in the new year, the other an atmospheric palace in rural

**This page: Calcutta's
Victoria Memorial**



Rajbari Bawali has kept faith with the picturesque wear of the centuries and still looks like what it is – an antique



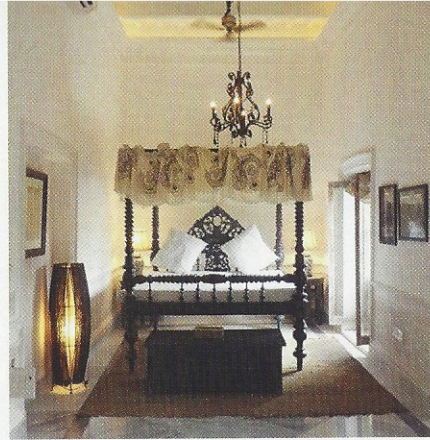
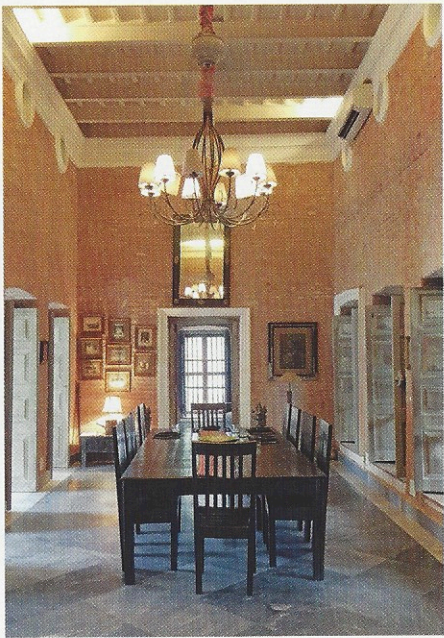
pages), a marble colossus whose fine gardens offer courting couples moments of privacy as dusk falls. Round to the

tranquillity, which opened in spring. This is the way to see Calcutta or, indeed, anyplace in India – a few days in the urban whirl combined with a stay in the peace of the countryside. Boutique hotel The Penthouse (pictured overleaf) comes from the people behind the Glenburn Tea Estate in Darjeeling and is effortlessly stylish. The palace – the Rajbari Bawali (pictured on this page) – comes with a trunkload of stories and abundant atmosphere.

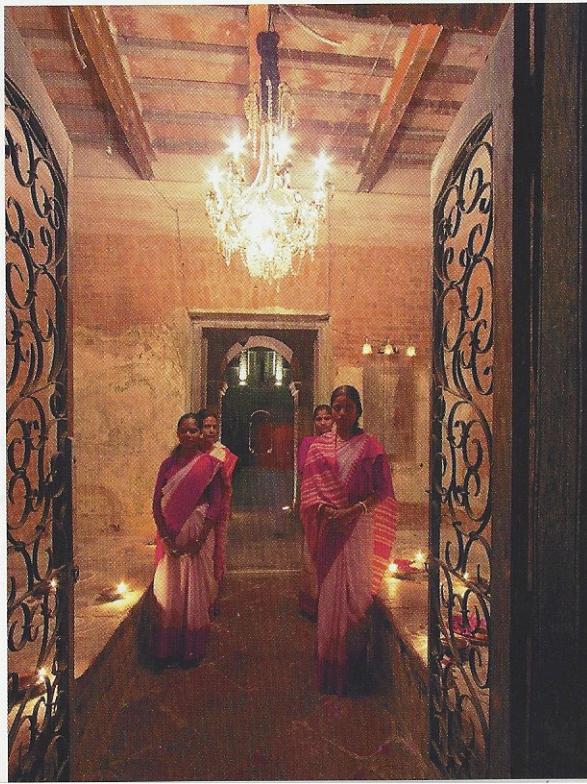
Commerce made Calcutta. A trading port established in the 18th century by the East India Company for the export of cotton to Lancashire (and opium to China), it grew into a great metropolis as the centre of the company's operations through the boom years of the 19th century. In 1858 it became the capital of the British Raj; Calcutta was second only to London among the Empire's cities. When it was suddenly decided to transfer imperial power to Delhi in 1911, in the vain hope that the Raj might associate itself with Mughal grandeur, one could have heard – for the first and only time in this feverish city – a pin drop.

The Penthouse is one of the few places in Calcutta where pin dropping might still be audible. Like any great hotel, it is a cocoon. Incongruously situated on the top two floors of a relatively modern office block, it offers an elegant world of old-fashioned personal service. The fact that there are only nine rooms, each individually conceived, creates an atmosphere of private luxury. The ambition here is to offer guests opportunities to get under the skin of Calcutta, from private walking and shopping tours to charming lunches with members of Calcuttan society, from visits to the latest art galleries to tiffin in old English churchyards.

But the greatest joy of The Penthouse is its unrivalled location. From the balconies you can look out over the green spaces of the Maidan, Calcutta's vast central park, where overlapping cricket matches mean boundary fielders may well be playing in two or three games simultaneously. On the left is the cathedral whose spire is modelled on Canterbury's. Even closer is the great white hulk of the Victoria Memorial (pictured on previous



Clockwise from top left: the lake at Rajbari Bawali. Exposed stone reveals the building's history. Rooms have antique four-poster beds. Guests are welcomed at the entrance to the hotel. They dine in the Durbar Hall



gardens offer courting couples moments of privacy as dusk falls. Round to the right, beyond Eden Gardens, cricket's most passionate arena, is the Raj Bhawan, the former viceregal palace, inspired by Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire, one of England's finest houses.

Throw in St Andrew's Kirk, the Royal Turf Club, the Royal Calcutta Golf Club, a general post office that might have graced Victorian Manchester, some once grand department stores, law courts through which robed judges and barristers flap like crows, and a fascinating cemetery of colonial graves, and you have some sense of Calcutta's colonial stage set.

But the real theatre here is in the streets; there is more happening on a single corner than you would find in a whole neighbourhood of New York or London. Settle down at a pavement tea house, where a milky cardamom-flavoured brew will be served in a clay cup, and enjoy the spectacle: a man opposite having a shave at a street barber, the cracked mirror propped on a ledge, while an elderly woman hangs her washing to dry on the railings; three rickshaw wallahs playing whist on an upturned tea chest while they wait for fares; across the road, men mould fearsome images of the goddess Durga (pictured overleaf) in a pavement workshop; a man trots past pushing a handcart on which half-a-dozen sofas are piled to precarious heights, while a bare-chested fellow, carrying six mattresses on his head, carefully negotiates a scrum of taxis, rickshaws and trucks. Three cows jaywalk, bringing a belching double-decker to a halt, while a herd of goats suddenly emerges from a side alley.

But after four days or so of this kind of wonderful chaos, you may need a break. It is time to head out of town to your rural retreat, to the palace cloistered in a green and fecund countryside. Rajbari Bawali is just over an hour's drive into rural West Bengal. When Arun was young, family members coming home from Calcutta along the dust lanes felt themselves unwinding the moment they passed through the entrance.

When the Mughals conquered Bengal in the 16th century, Akbar the Great gave the Mandal family vast swathes of land here and appointed them to the hereditary posts of *zamindar*, or tax collectors. For several centuries they prospered, until the reforms of the new Republic of India in the early 1950s meant they lost much



The Penthouse offers opportunities to get under the skin of Calcutta; its greatest joy is its unrivalled location

of their land and their income. No one could afford to maintain the palace. The servants were sent away; the family members, one by one, moved to city apartments. Owls and bats took up residence in the empty rooms. Arun was the last inhabitant, retreating to one wing and, finally, to one room.

Which is where Ajay Rawla came in, in 2008. A businessman from Calcutta, he was looking for rural land for small-scale industrial units. Instead, he found the crumbling palace, trees growing out of the façade, vines choking the galleries, ceilings collapsed. Rawla forgot about the industrial units and for three nights lay awake thinking about Rajbari Bawali. On the fourth day he came back, bringing his family to show them his discovery and introduce them to Arun. Eventually, he offered to buy the palace, beginning a process that involved tracking down all 18 of the relatives who jointly owned the property. Three days after he took possession, the entire pediment above the Hall collapsed into the courtyard.

The restoration has taken almost seven years. The result is stunning. To the great credit of Rawla and his



the religious implications of the dance. But after another couple of G&Ts, we forgot about meanings and surrendered to the dancer's sensual beauty, the mesmerising jangling of the bells on her ankles, the fine chains across her midriff.

The next morning Samar took me to visit the abandoned Nautch pavilion, carefully situated at some distance from the palace. We took brick paths through a landscape of thatched cottages and vegetable plots. The only traffic here came by foot or bicycle, and from time to time we had to make way for a lumbering buffalo or herd of goats.

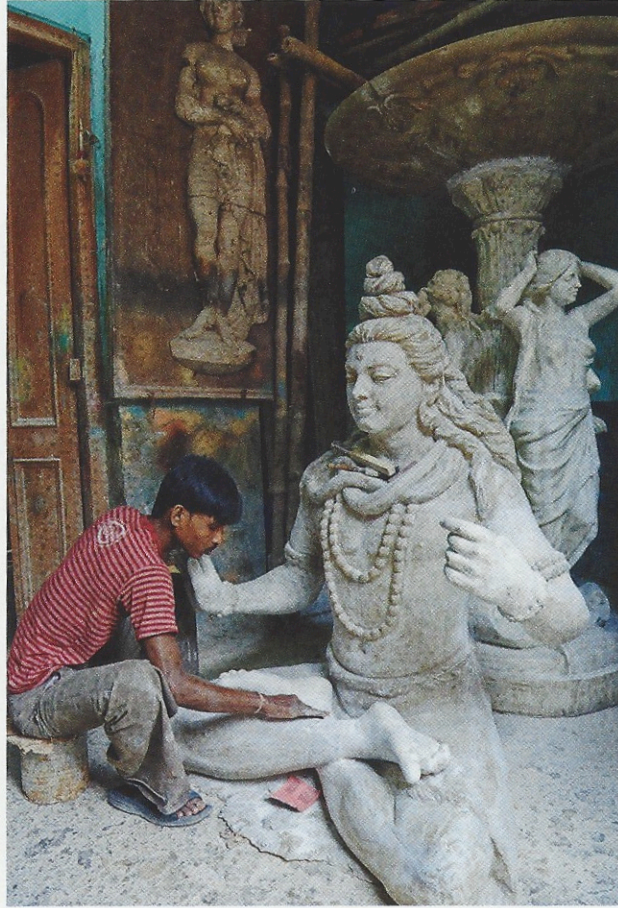
Eventually, we came to a lake choked with lilies and ferns; at its centre was a dilapidated pavilion. "The men came here alone with the Nautch dancers," Samar said. "Away from the womenfolk in the palace

result is stunning. To the great credit of Rawla and his designers, the palace still looks like what it is: an antique. They have kept faith with the picturesque wear of three-and-a-half centuries – the exposed brick and stone, the artful patchiness of the lime plaster, the distressed surfaces of wood and paint. Furnishings run from antique four-posters to shabby-chic “club” chairs, from Indian chests to Raj-era brass and teak tables. In the rambling grounds, rescued from jungle, there is a lake with surrounding pavilions, a first-class spa, a swimming pool in what was once the walled kitchen garden – and Arun, now living happily in a renovated dak bungalow.

Samar, Arun’s 75-year-old nephew, lives next door, and often pops in for a pre-dinner drink. An elegant chap in a white dhoti and a brown waistcoat, with a mop of white hair and a passion for claret, Wordsworth and Indian culture, he emerged as an excellent guide to the evening entertainments.

The first night it was the Bauls, a Bengali group of wandering minstrels who are a cross between religious mystics and bawdy folk musicians. Samar translated the songs, in which spiritual enlightenment is interwoven with double entendres. The next night it was Kathakali dancers from Kerala with their spectacular costumes and make-up. Theirs was a breathless tale involving a witch, a tyrannical king, a plot against Krishna, a good deal of breastfeeding and a dramatic death on the stairs leading up to the Durbar Hall (pictured on previous page).

The third night was an exquisite Nautch dancer. A rich tradition that rose to prominence during Mughal times, Nautch dancers were said to entrance emperors and conquer conquerors. An ensemble of classical Indian musicians played, and Samar whispered explanations of



Clockwise from top left: a sitting area at The Penthouse. One of the bathrooms. A bedroom with four-poster bed. Making a clay idol of the goddess Durga

Nautch dancers,” Samar said. “Away from the womenfolk in the palace. They rowed to the pavilion where the girls performed.” He wagged his head suggestively. “In those days, perhaps, it was not so innocent.”

On the last night, Arun came for dinner in the Durbar Hall. Afterwards, I helped him down the long flight of stairs. He leant on my arm taking each step slowly and steadily. At the bottom, almost

beneath his breath, he said, “17”. He would have first counted these steps as a child, over 90 years ago.

He stood for a moment, looking at the resurrected galleries, the spotlit columns and courtyard illuminated by dozens of candles. I asked what he was thinking. “I do not have the words to tell you,” he said. “But I never thought I would see this old house like this again. It has come back to us, more beautiful than ever.” ♦

CATEGORICALLY CALCUTTA

Stanley Stewart travelled as a guest of **Greaves India** (020-7487 9111; www.greavesindia.com), which offers a week in Calcutta and West Bengal from £1,370 per person, including accommodation at The Oberoi Grand and Rajbari Bawali, flights, transfers and sightseeing. **The Oberoi Grand**, 15 Jawaharlal Nehru Rd (+9133-2249 2323; www.oberoihotels.com), from £255. **The Penthouse**, Kanak Tower, 7A Anandilal Poddar Sarani (+9198-3007 0213; www.thepenthousecalcutta.com), from £354. **Rajbari Bawali**, Bawali, West Bengal 743384 (+9198-3038 3008; www.therajbari.com), from £218. **Emirates** (0344-800 2777; www.emirates.com) flies from London Heathrow to Calcutta daily, from £480 return.