



A magnificent but homely place

A Colombo 7 mansion has been transformed into a grand vintage hideout for the very discerning.

Words Yomal Senerath-Yapa

The Hallocks moved to Kynsey Road 130 years ago. Like a good number of residents of the newly fashionable Cinnamon Gardens, they were a Brahmin Hindu family from Manipay, Jaffna, bringing into Colombo a whiff of Northern gentility. The mansion was named Maniumpathy in memory of the old hometown.

Through the years the house remained a part of Colombo society and has seen times change. During the second world war it even functioned as a hostel for boys from St Joseph's College, Maradana.

So when the idea to transform the house into a boutique hotel came about recently, it would have raised concerns. Maniumpathy is one of the oldest standing Colombo 7 houses, and a heritage property. But no one need have worried; even in its new avatar of a hotel,

Maniumpathy has retained the quiet dignity it had as an upper-class home.

Maniumpathy can house up to 17 adult guests and three children. Each of the eight suites in the hotel is named after a lady of the house, starting with the feisty Hindu matriarch Annapuranie, the first chatelaine, and ending with young Anithra Basnayake of the latest generation.

Singularly, the hotel is still family run. Anithra Basnayake herself is the director of sales and marketing. Having grown up in the house, Anithra remembers her childhood with nostalgia. As a girl she wondered why her father tolerated and even added to the many antiques in the house, which spilled over from rooms to verandahs and passageways. "Now only do I see his vision," she muses. "He had the vision all that time."

After the decision to turn the house into a hotel, Anithra and the management went all over the world looking for décor suitable to grace the property, but 70-80 per cent of the beautiful vintage pieces you now see here are family heirlooms.



Antique opulence of family heirlooms

All other original aspects of the home have also been retained. Walking in, the first thing you notice is that time here had stopped in the 1920s. The silverware, the candelabras and chandeliers, the antique furniture, everything, in fact, down to the Villeroy & Boch crockery, is redolent of early 20th-century opulence.

The only thing that reminds you that this is a hotel is the reservation form that makes a motherly fuss over the guests-to-be. Guests are asked to provide all details from their name and arrival time to food items they do not eat; everything is looked into. On arrival each guest is assigned a butler who will take fastidious care of his charges. There are no menus; no meal times; no regulations. If you have hunger pangs in the middle of the night, the butler can be relied upon to come around to ask what you would like. If you want fish, several possible dishes will be suggested and you can have your pick. The same tailor-made efficiency is applied to all aspects of the hotel. Consequently people cannot just walk in for a room. Everything is pre-planned meticulously.

In Anithra's own words, the hotel tries to immerse the guests in "the moods and pursuits" of the people who lived here in the past. It's like living in a vintage world. When a guest arrives, they are told, "Welcome home", and indeed it is a home which provides a very personalised, luxurious service.

The Grand Ebony Room in Mani-umpathy an exclusive space, which, according to Anithra, gives one a feel of "how kings would have dined". There is also a pool and a spa. The fine dining restaurant, which serves international and local cuisine with a hint of Jaffna flavour, is called Nandi and seats 30.

Nandi the bull is also the icon of Maniumpathy. At the time when the inhabitants of Maniumpathy were Hindu (the family has been Christian for a long time now), the picture of the sacred bull was stamped on all documents that came out of the house.

Today, the house is surrounded by high walls and each room has double doors. Once within the property, it's easy to forget you are in the heart of Colombo. It is a hideout in the very heart of the hub.

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