



Lebua Lucknow's art deco facade is beautifully lit up every night (top). Its repurposed spaces, including its suites (bottom left) and the Azrak restaurant (bottom right), echo its original design aesthetic.



Like a GENERAL in her LABYRINTH

Discovering history and the good life at lebua Lucknow

By Charukesi Ramadurai

You would think it difficult, impossible even, to get lost inside a bungalow. But I managed to do it easily—not just once, but several times while getting from my room on the first floor to the restaurant on the ground level for breakfast. I once walked down a short flight of steps into an open, empty courtyard. Another time, I was confounded by a choice of corridors inside the 1.5-acre property and turned into one that took me into an Alician rabbit hole.

The newly opened and utterly charming lebua Saraca Estate (the name is a tribute to the ashoka trees that line the hotel's gardens) in Lucknow used to be a local army officer's private residence. Only Brigadier Sharma and his wife lived in this haveli, built in 1936, until they sold it to the current owners, Lucknow-born expat Mohammed Abdullah, and his interior designer wife Nayab Bakshi, in 2014. The couple repurposed the property to its current avatar, while remaining faithful to the original architecture and design.

"How did only two people live in such a large house?" Faisal Nafees, General Manager of lebua India Operations, mused over breakfast one morning. He was echoing my own thoughts before Shariq Khan, Lucknow resident and a hotel staff member, explained that the Sharma family had already converted the haveli into an informal guesthouse several years ago.

Hospitality is in the brick and mortar of this building, and lebua was just reinforcing that legacy: Employees had a personalised greeting for every guest, the hotel chauffer Neeraj opened the door of the hotel's yellow Ambassador

with pride as our vintage ride got curious glances from everyone on the streets, and the chef sent *khichdi* and *dahi* to my room on hearing I had a migraine. Perhaps, it was more than just inherent hospitality; it was *tehzeeb*, that delicious mixture of grace and gentility that pervades the air in Lucknow.

Built in the art deco style popular in Bombay in the 1930s, the 41-room hotel—with each room having its own layout depending on its position in the property—is a study in understated class

ESSENTIALS

The 41-room Lebua Lucknow is in central Lucknow at Saraca Estate. It is about 14 km/30 min by road from the international airport (www.lebua.com; doubles from ₹7,040).

and elegance. Think central courtyards, open terraces, verdant lawns, straight verandas and minimal white palettes. The way the labyrinthine corridors suddenly opened out on to small balconies and secret gardens led me to wonder if parts of the building had been added through the years.

My room faced the outer lawns, and had obviously been designed by someone with an exquisite eye for detail: stained glass windows with cheery colours, a ceramic kettle that could almost pass for fine china, pretty zardozi work and sepia prints of the old city framed on the walls.

And this attention to detail is

everywhere at lebua, from the intriguing geometric black-and-white pattern on the staircase to the antique furniture casually strewn around everywhere. I was particularly charmed to see that the door handles in public spaces had been replaced with block print moulds in traditional *chikankari* motifs.

Strangely, in a city as steeped in history as Lucknow, the lebua is the only certified heritage hotel. On my first evening here, Faisal Nafees accompanied me for a chat with Jafar Mir Abdullah—erstwhile nawab Wajid Ali Shah's direct descendant—who reminisced about the good old days of his "golden city." This tête-à-tête, one of the unique experiences lebua offers guests through a local tour company, turned to be a delightful one. As the evening wore on, his eyes twinkled with his stories of the filming of the Hindi film *Umrao Jaan* (1981) in Lucknow, and the small roles played by his father and uncles, who were cast as prosperous, indolent nawabs.

Back at lebua, chef Dheeraj did not even flinch when I said I was vegetarian, but brought some of the legendary local food to my table at their multi-cuisine restaurant, Azrak. His kebab platter consisted of melt-in-the-mouth *kuti mirch ka paneer tikka* (tikkas of paneer marinated in green chilli), *mawa aur mewe ki seekh* (mildly spiced kebabs made of khoya dry fruits) and *mushroom ki galawat* (skewers of mushroom, known locally as khumb). Take that, Tunday Kebabi!

Every experience at lebua Lucknow was a throwback to a bygone era, a tiny glimpse into a time when nawabs ruled Lucknow with an indulgent eye for the good life. 🐾