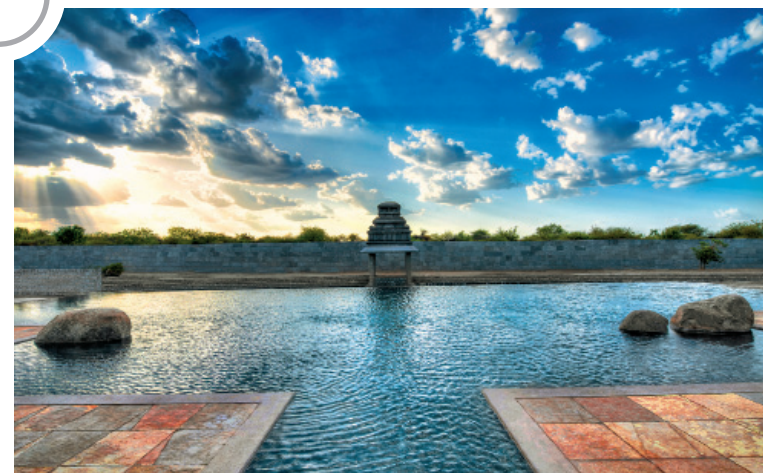




Clockwise from here: the main palace building at the resort; zenana bedroom; and the pool



HOTELS

CHECK OUT 32 ORANGE COUNTY HAMPI 35 THE LALIT MANGAR
36 GRAND MERCURE BANGALORE 38 NOVOTEL KOLKATA
40 **PERSONAL CHOICE** MATT DAMON **WE LIKE** SHAHEEN BAGH

[CHECK OUT]

ON THE ROCKS

Orange County's new resort in Hampi is an architectural marvel, and a much needed addition to the heritage destination's hospitality scene, says **Charukesi Ramadurai**

A couple of years ago, the good people at Orange County Resorts sat up and took notice of the fact that despite all the stunning history and architecture of Hampi, there has never been a great fort to speak of. And so they went about creating one in the form of their latest luxury offering in this town of temples. After an overnight train journey, de-

layed for over four hours (really, when is Hampi going to get an airport), and a half hour drive from Hospet station, it was quite a relief to finally pull up at the gates of this new property. Even at first glance, it was obvious that this sprawling fort-palace is a nod to the Indo-Islamic architectural style of the region. The main building, where most of the accommodation is located, was across a short stretch of flagstone path lined

with narrow lily and lotus ponds. On one side of this boulevard are the ten Jal Mahal suites (still work in progress when I went), which come with their private swimming pools. And on the other, closer to the main building, is the multi-purpose annexe, named and modelled after the stunning Lotus Mahal of Hampi. This Lotus Mahal houses four individual units on two levels: the speciality Bahmani

restaurant, the gift shop, the spa and the reading lounge.

At first glance, I was slightly taken aback by the absolute sparseness of the reception and lobby area, open and spacious but all plain granite and wood. Apart from a few comfy sofas strewn about, there seemed nothing to indicate that I had entered a luxury resort.

And then the warm welcome, in the classic Orange County style Namas-kara, and a peek at the splendid arches and pillars beyond this area removed any doubt.

Some elements of the architecture—like the omnipresent arches—are reminiscent of a Rajasthani palace, large and luxurious. But the overall décor carries the understated elegance that I would expect from a south Indian mansion. Even the exteriors are coated in subdued beige, with the miniature temple gopuram motifs dotted along the roof left unpainted, to make them develop an aging-fading patina over the years.

In fact, there has been every effort to keep the design sensibilities of the region intact, in the form of muted colours in furnishings, rough granite flooring and polished dark wood furniture. These typical elements are found in my room—a Nivasa Deluxe suite—as also in those in the other categories. The massive bedroom, as I enter, has a dining table on one end and a living area on the other, leading out into the bathroom space and open terrace with the private jacuzzi.

A particularly pleasing touch, given the arid landscape, is the presence of water everywhere, in various clever forms. To me, the highlight of this concept is the way the main building is set around a central outdoor courtyard with squiggly water channels that continue all the way into the multi-cuisine Tulavu restaurant, creating natural breaks in the dining space.

The restaurant in turn opens out to the infinity pool, inspired by traditional temple tanks, and watched over

by another of the miniature gopurams. This pool marks one end of the property and is bounded by low walls, beyond which the rugged countryside stretches all around. This expanse is prettily punctuated by the millennia-old boulders that form the signature look of this region.

And that is how it is in Hampi itself: the religious and royal structures are all part of a larger, brown, stark landscape.

Hampi can also be intimidating, even to a fangirl type repeat visitor like me. There is just so much history, art and architecture that it is impossible to not be templed out very quickly.

This is why I was impressed by Orange County's astute idea of creating Trails: three themed around the temple circuit (Vithalapura Walk, Virupaksha Trail, Tungabhadra Trek) and one around the secular circuit (Raya Trail, which covers the history of the Vijayanagara empire). Apart from the one temple trail labelled as a trek, I went



on the others, accompanied by the in-house guide.

Instead of an entire day spent ruin-hopping, this way of seeing Hampi in small bite-sized nuggets worked much better for me. There are also plans to start more nature activities like birdwatching and trekking in the Anegundi hills.

After a morning walking up and down the hillock near the live Virupaksha temple, I headed to the spa for what turned out to be one of my best Orange County experiences. The Vaidyashala offers traditional Ayurveda treatments, from which I chose the Abhyanga synchronised massage performed by two therapists.

What can I say, other than that, at the

end of that hour, I felt so rejuvenated that I was ready to take on the challenge of Hampi again.

Although the property was not fully ready at the time of my visit, things ran smoothly under the expert eye of General Manager Joydeep Banerjee, an old Orange County hand. The only area where the resort was still struggling to find its feet was the food.

There has been a lot of research and thought put into the menu at both restaurants, but this has not translated into consistent execution. But given my experience at other Orange County properties, I would hope it is just a question of time before things settle down.

This resort plugs the need for a luxury

Clockwise from top left: pool-view dining; Lotus Mahal ayurveda therapy room; and a corridor

stay option at this very popular tourist destination. It will be interesting to see the new ideas the team comes up with, to showcase Hampi better to visitors. 📍

THE INFORMATION

LOCATION P.K. Halli Road, Kamalapura, Hospet Taluk; 18km from Hospet station

ACCOMMODATION 46 rooms: 23 Nivasa (Deluxe Suite), 8 Nilaya (Terrace Suite), 6 Zenana (Palace Suite), 9 Jal Mahal (Pool Villa)

TARIFF From ₹27,000 per night (inclusive of breakfast, dinner and taxes)

CONTACT +91-8394-294700, orangecounty.in/hampi-resorts