

A photograph of a hotel room. In the foreground, there is a round glass table and a patterned armchair. In the middle ground, a large bed with a white sheet and a striped blanket is visible, along with a nightstand and a lamp. In the background, there is a large, ornate lamp with a circular patterned shade. The text 'GRAND DESIGNS' is overlaid on the right side of the image.

GRAND DESIGNS

RAJA RAJA WOULD APPROVE. A THOUSAND YEARS AFTER HE STEPPED DOWN AS THE GRAND MONARCH OF THE SOUTHERN PENINSULA, HANDING OVER THE REINS OF HIS EMPIRE TO HIS EQUALLY COMPETENT SON RAJENDRA, A VAST AND IMPOSING NEW HOTEL—THE ITC GRAND CHOLA—BEARING HIS DYNASTY'S NAME IS CONTRIVING TO BRING THE STORIED GLORIES OF THE CHOLAS CENTRE STAGE ONCE AGAIN. BY ROOPA PAI. PHOTOGRAPHED BY VINOBHA NATHAN



The staff at Peshawri restaurant at ITC Grand Chola in Chennai. Opposite: Inside a lavish guestroom.

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ON'T BE TOO EMBARRASSED IF YOUR MOUTH FALLS OPEN—and stays that way—as your car sweeps past the gateway and into the grounds of the ITC Grand Chola (not to be confused with the iconic and beloved Chola Sheraton, now rejigged as

My Fortune, Chennai), Chennai's newest and grandest luxury hotel. You have not exposed yourself as an ingénue; in fact, your reaction is natural, expected—and yes, most gleefully noted, particularly by the genial M Charraudeau, the general manager. After all, this is, as he will never tire of telling you, India's largest hotel.

SUPERSIZE ME

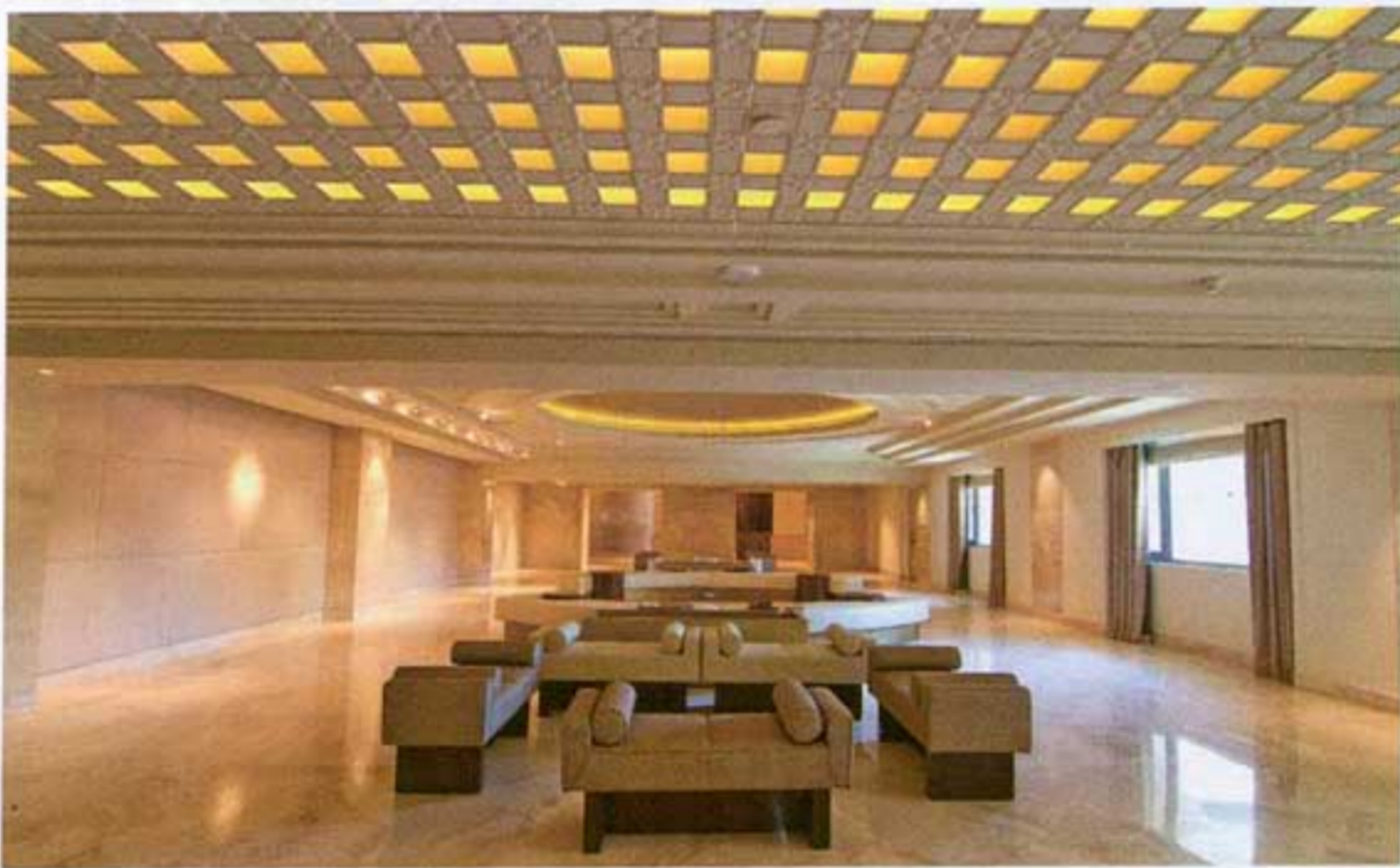
Before going any further—into the architecture and the design and the cuisine and the hospitality standards that the Chola offers, a pause for some boldly stated but seriously eye-popping numbers. Eight acres of grounds in the neighbourhood of Guindy, where once was housed the main Campa Cola factory. Close to 1.5 million square feet of built-up area; 600 rooms, of which 78 will be one-, two-, and three-bedroom serviced apartments; a Grand Presidential suite (not yet in operation) sprawling over 4,400 square feet; 100,000 square feet of banqueting and convention spaces, including the gargantuan Rajendra Ballroom (which already has, at two marquee weddings, easily accommodated over 3,000); a proposed 27,000 square feet of luxury retail space; a spa that encompasses 23,000 square feet. And so on.

But these are mere numbers, which are neither readily available nor particularly interesting to guests. What guests *will* be impressed by, however, is the sense of vastness, which is conveyed not only through clever design—high ceilings, large rooms, sprawling lounges punctuating dining and residential areas—but also through smart strategy. For instance, the hotel has four entrances—an exclusive one for guests staying at the Presidential Suites and the premier rooms, another for guests staying at the Residences (serviced apartments), a third for the retail area, and the last, designated the “main” entrance, for everyone else. Although the main entrance is actually closest to the gates, the route to it is designed such that all vehicles have to execute a *parikrama* (a circumambulation) around the hotel, before they get to the main entrance, by which time, as we have discussed, their jaws have satisfactorily descended.

INSPIRED DESIGN

The *parikrama* concept may be smart, but it is also extremely appropriate, for the main design aesthetic of the Grand Chola is inspired by the many-pillared





CHENNAI CALLING Clockwise from top: The hotel's imposing grand staircase; spices on display; Peshawri is one of the best restaurants serving North Indian cuisine; a secluded sitting area. Opposite, from top: The entrance to Nutmeg, the gourmet shop; shrimp extravagance; Tranquebar redefines the word elegance.



LAVISH LIVING From left: The hotel's chefs strike a pose; a long corridor of luxury at the ITC Grand Chola; an aerial view of the buffet-only restaurant Madras Pavilion. Opposite: Inside Café Mercara Express.

halls and the soaring *vimanas* and *gopurams* (temple towers) of millennium-old Chola temples. Those temples, especially the magnificent Brihadeeshwara Temple at the Chola capital of Thanjavur, are marvels of engineering in themselves, designed to leave visitors marvelling as much at the prowess of the men who built it as at the enshrined deity's glory.

The architects of the ITC Grand Chola have borrowed many elements and motifs from the temples—the sturdy but elegant columns, the four-petalled clover, elephants with upraised trunks, the chakra, delicate fretwork creepers, peacocks. The motifs repeat over and over across the hotel—etched in glass, carved painstakingly on walls and ceilings, masquerading as door handles, turned into elaborate and permanent *kolams* at entrances to restaurants and lounges, and more. Striking in their absence are bronze *Natarajas*, considered the apogee of Chola art, and visual references to the maritime prowess of the only Indian dynasty that dared to think of an empire beyond the seas.

All the motifs that have been used, however, are so subtly and elegantly woven into the overall hotel design, and in such muted, unobtrusive tones, that most casual visitors to the hotel, while admitting to a feeling of being amidst grandeur and opulence, would be unable to put their fingers on exactly what made them feel that way.

The sensation is heightened by the colour palette of the hotel—an unrelenting brown. One would be tempted to dismiss brown as dull, but that would be before one has walked through the Grand Chola. Once you do, however, taking in the magnificent bronze and copper horse to the right of the lobby, the marbled chocolate pillars encircling the all-day Café Mercara, the warm russet of the teak-and-brick in the cosy little boulangerie Nutmeg, the roasted-coffee leather armchairs at the cigar lounge Cheroot, the rich cream carpets and upholstery with their café au lait swirls in the rooms, and the array of smooth, sophisticated dull golds and beiges and ecrus of the walls, ceilings and sweeping staircases, all this shown off to great advantage in the soft yellow light of countless incandescent lamps, you will never think of brown as monochromatic again.

LET THERE BE LIGHT

Speaking of lamps, the overwhelmingly in-your-face aspect of the hotel's interiors, especially to an untrained eye, would have to be the lighting. Thousands and thousands of incandescent, not energy-saving CFL lamps burn with impunity, round the clock, in the hotel's public areas, with seemingly little thought to piffling issues like the energy crisis, simply because, as team Chola is at pains to explain, CFL light does not have the warm beautiful glow of its energy-guzzling alternative. This seems to sit uncomfortably with ITC's much-touted status of being the "world's greenest hotel chain," but of course there is an explanation—the group has bought windmills in Tamil Nadu that generate more electricity than the hotel consumes!

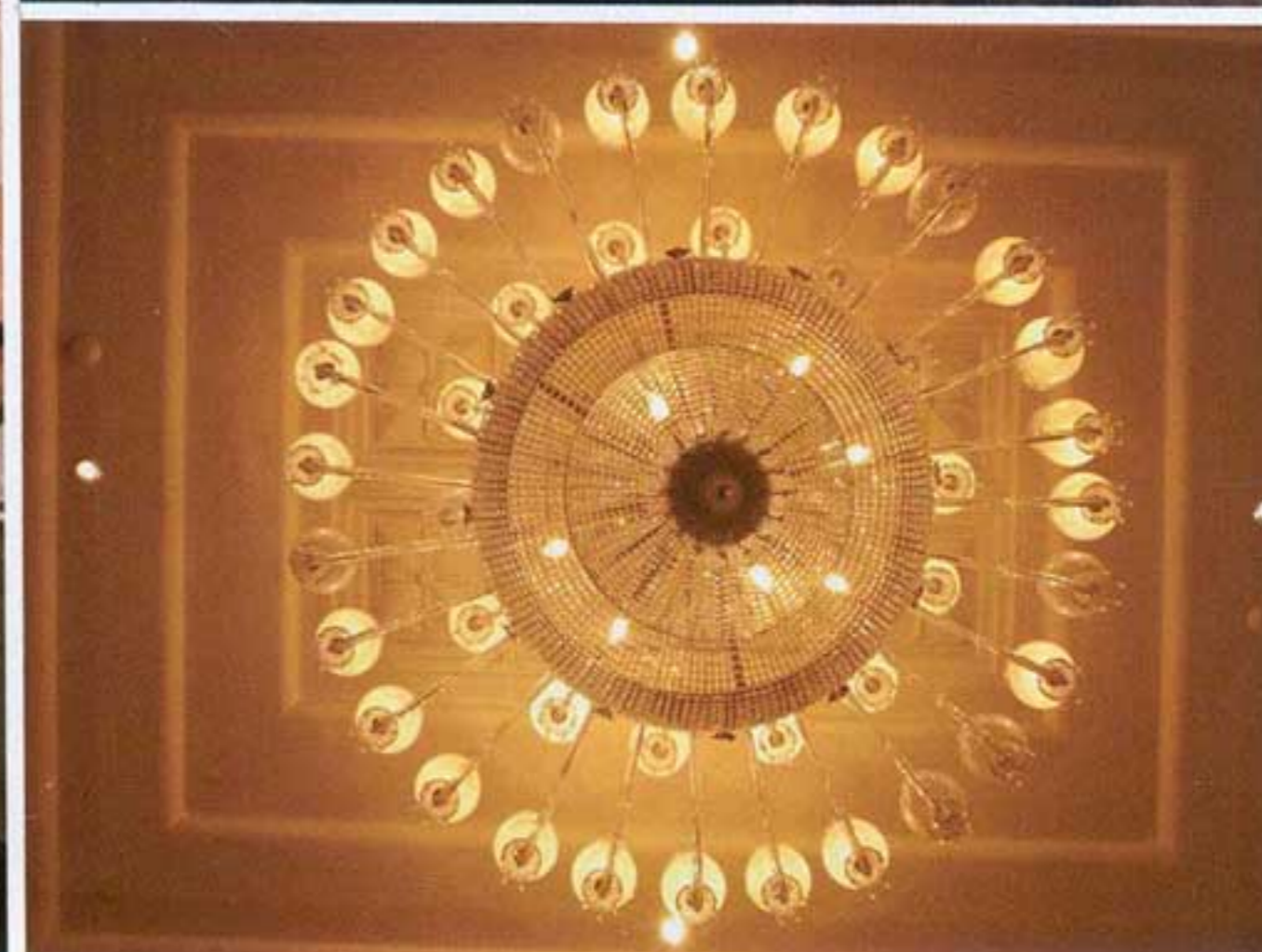
With that out of the way, one can proceed to enjoy the glittering Grand Chola with a clear conscience. Gawk-worthy lighting fixtures include the massive "blooming flower" chandelier—a stylish contemporary take on the flower pattern of a Chola temple ceiling—pendant above Sangam, the grand marble staircase that soars out of the spectacular main entrance lobby; the beaded "suspended rain" rectangle of light in the casual bar and lounge Tranquebar; and the delicate colour-changing "angel hair" stunner in Café Mercara, best viewed after sundown, sipping a cup of clay-pot Chennai-style filter coffee, a well-stacked club sandwich, and your favourite retro number playing on the lovely old in-café jukebox.

THE VITALS OF VICTUALS

Which brings the conversation, quite naturally, to the wining and dining options at the Grand Chola. Not all the F&B outlets are open yet—some are scheduled to open only months later—but once all the proposed outlets are up and running, the hotel will have on offer quite a spectacular smorgasbord. While Café Mercara is a great place to catch a coffee and snack any time of the day and night, the casual bistro-esque ambience of the adjoining boulangerie and chocolaterie, Nutmeg, is a perfect refuge from the opulence and overwhelmingness of the entrance lobby just outside its doors.

The focal dining area, however, is the Madras Pavilion, a buffet-only restaurant open for breakfast, lunch and dinner,







PLUSH ENVIRONS Left: The bar area at Tranquebar. Opposite, clockwise from top left: The elegant exteriors of ITC Grand Chola; Indian brass peacock door pulls add a dash of culture; a plate of Chennai chowder; a luxury crystal pendant light; the rustic-style table set-up at Peshawri.

with a nice mix of Indian and international dishes. Buffet isn't a bad word here, though—while there *will* be a large self-serve section for those in a rush, starters, soups, and beautifully-plated main courses of your choice will be brought straight to your table, fresh from the kitchen, if you have the time to linger.

The hotel will also feature two of ITC's signature restaurants. Peshawri, with its rough-hewn stone wall, gleaming show kitchen, checked colour-coded bibs, and its much-loved menu featuring all-time hits such as *Sikandri raan* and *dal Peshawri*, is already open—a welcome oasis of colourful informality. Pan Asian, the popular far-eastern specialty restaurant, is due to open its doors in July.

It will be followed soon after by Ottimo, the Italian specialty restaurant; after which it will be time for the much looked-forward to concept-vegetarian restaurant, Royal Vega, to take centre stage. It is certainly a smart move to test-drive an all-vegetarian high-end restaurant in Chennai rather than anywhere else, and it will be interesting to see how a menu showcasing regional veggie specialties and designed around the principles of Ayurveda, but with a hefty price tag, will go down.

Bars and lounges are aplenty too—there is the cigars, single malts and testosterone-heavy Cheroot, with its winged leather armchairs and its boys-will-be-boys collections of dinky cars and gun-toting soldier toys, and the more light and airy Tranquebar, towards which the Chola hopes the bejewelled ladies of Chennai will gravitate when they want a quiet tippie. For the young and hip, there is I Place, the pub.

AND THEN TO BED

To facilitate privacy and ease of access to rooms for the large number of guests, the hotel has three discrete wings. The first, and the largest, is where the base category Executive Club Rooms are, with their dedicated Eva floor for women travellers,

serviced by women staff and incorporating higher levels of security. The second is for the premier category of Tower rooms, including the two Presidential Suites, and the third is for the still-to-open serviced apartments.

While the Executive Club rooms are a comfortable 400 square feet, it is the Tower Rooms that are truly luxurious, incorporating such goodies as a dedicated butler (freshly made hot chocolate before bed, anyone? Or a 24-hour guide to help you negotiate the labyrinthine corridors and lead you to the restaurant of your choice?) and a strategically placed bathtub, the better to watch television from while you soak in a cloud of aromatic bubbles. But easily the coolest feature is the bedside iPad, using which you can dim the lights, turn up the air-conditioning, pick a pre-loaded movie to watch, access your mail, and even take a peek at who is ringing your doorbell before releasing the lock, all while still soaking in the aforesaid bath!

ITC hotels are usually obsessive about making sure guests have a good night's sleep, and the Grand Chola is no exception. Apart from a pillow menu which offers you a choice of different pillows—you can also pick an aromatic oil with sleep- or calm-inducing properties for your bath or your pillow, a piece of music designed to relax you, and a herbal tea designed to help wind you down.

Only time will tell if a hotel that took so long to make the journey from conception to fruition—the land was bought in 2000, construction began as far back as 2007, and even though it will formally open this month, it is still very much a work in progress—will capture the imaginations of Chennai-ites and guests in the way ITC hopes it will, but the odds are certainly stacked in the favour of this labour of love.

Raja Raja, for one, will be sending his blessings and keeping his fingers crossed.

No. 63 Mount Rd., Guindy, Chennai; 91-44/2220-0000; *itshotels.in*; doubles from Rs 9,000; through September 30. ✚