

February 26, 2006

Next Stop

In India's Silicon Valley, Partying Like It's 1999

By SETH SHERWOOD

TO the untutored eye, nothing seemed amiss in the buzzing Friday night scene at I-Bar, a stylish night spot in the Terence Conran-designed Park Hotel in Bangalore. As a blue mosaic swimming pool glimmered outside the low-lit lounge's glass doors, bartenders pressed glowing cocktails into manicured hands while expatriate professionals compared notes on local food (properly spicy) and broadband access (improperly slow). To the sounds of American R & B spun by a D.J. behind a silvery console, a large group of Indian women in tight jeans and high heels began to gyrate on the dance floor.

But to Arvind Chandra, a 35-year-old software engineer reclining with a Kingfisher beer, something looked unusual indeed. Spotting the dancers, his eyes widened as if he had witnessed a crime. In fact, he had.

"I am shocked!" he shouted, much more enthused than appalled. "This is illegal!"

These are strange times in [India's](#) fast-rising high-tech capital, whose abundance of bars and clubs have earned it the moniker Pub City: a law enacted last June has effectively banned dancing in bars and nightclubs and forces them to close by 11:30 p.m.

Officially named the Licensing and Controlling of Place of Public Entertainment (Bangalore City) Order, 2005, the law was ostensibly intended to shut down illegal go-go bars. But the police have applied the vaguely worded law's strictures to practically all places of "public entertainment" in this city of some seven million.

Some bar and restaurant owners have challenged the law in the courts, and a few establishments have received permission to allow dancing or to stay open past 11:30 on certain nights, according to the Bangalore office of the Ministry of Tourism.

The watering down of Pub City under this "Cinderella law" — which has crimped but certainly not crippled the city's nocturnal vibe — is another curious turn in Bangalore's recent emergence as a would-be rival to India's capitals of style and influence, Mumbai and New Delhi. The paradoxes of rapid but uneven development abound.

Though it was the first Indian city with electricity, according to the Karnataka [State](#) government — and is now a global computer-industry center — Bangalore is still prone to power outages. And for an emerging health-care hub whose large parks and warm climate have inspired the nickname Pensioner's Paradise, many streets brim with garbage, standing water and thick exhaust fumes — as well as goats, cows and people mired in obvious poverty.

Yet as with the rebellious dancers at I-Bar, Bangalore's momentum and determination are not easily dampened. "It has that spark, like Silicon Valley in the 1990's," said Christian Misvaer, a [Minneapolis](#) native who is starting a legal-process outsourcing venture in Bangalore.

He's one of thousands of [North](#) Americans and Europeans drawn to Bangalore by the prospect of joining or creating

vanguard companies. (Sip a Sunday latte along the silvery counter at Barista, India's answer to Starbucks, and you'll see them noodling on laptops.) As their Bay Area counterparts did in the 1990's, the multicultural moneymakers and entrepreneurs of India's Silicon Valley are creating a playground worthy of their rupees. Design-conscious restaurants, high-end fashion boutiques and happening nightspots have flourished.

Some of the new crop, like the boutique Cinnamon (where you can find the latest fashions by the hot Indian designer Aki Narula), are blending colorful Indian motifs and Western minimalism into a hybrid Subcontinental cool. Others twist the twin strands of Bangalore's D.N.A. — geek and chic — into concoctions like the "Restart" and "Reboot" ayurvedic massage menus at the Park Hotel's spa. In fits and starts, South Asia's techno-mecca is cultivating its inner South Beach.

On a Friday night in November, chauffeured cars dropped guests at Bangalore's most [Miami](#)-esque hot spot, Olive Beach, a glittery new restaurant cloistered in a compound ringed with imported sand. The interiors, whitewashed and candlelit, exuded the airy elegance of a millionaire's seaside villa. No surprise. One owner is an Indian pop singer, Sagarika.

Within the fantasy-island shelter from binary code and strategy sessions, an apparently acceptably attired crowd of clean-cut 20- and 30-somethings clinked kiwi margaritas at the bar and refocused computer-glazed eyes on lobster risotto and seafood empanada under quiet strains of jazz.

To attire themselves for the new generation of Bangalore hangouts, the city's increasingly clothes-focused ranks have impressive choices. As the newspaper Hindu observed, "Bangalore's young and happening people, specifically the I.T. and professional crowd, have put the city on the nation's fashion map." The city now has a Fashion Weekend in June, and throughout the year, Indian designers preside over fashion shows at the majestic Leela [Palace](#) hotel, whose indoor Galleria is Bangalore's answer to Rodeo Drive.

For the most elite retail adventure, flag down an autorickshaw and tell the driver, "Vithal Mallya Road." After buzzing noisily among the other hornetlike black-and-yellow autorickshaws that swarm Bangalore's streets, you'll be deposited along a pleasant tree-lined strip of boutiques glowing with some of India's coolest creations.

The music in each boutique offers a clue to its wares. In Ritu Kumar, strains of sitar complement the traditional, richly embroidered saris and salwar-kameez outfits made by Ms. Kumar, the elder stateswoman of Indian fashion. (According to her [Web](#) site, www.ritukumar.com, Ms. Kumar has dressed more than 20 Miss Indias .)

At Ffolio, which represents some 20 top Indian designers, [the groove](#) of the Red Hot Chili Peppers provides the soundtrack for racks of funky threads that seem tailored for nightclubbing Rajasthani princesses.

Chicest of all are the minimalist white galleries in the Embassy Classic building, a tranquil emporium of high-end clothing and home décor bubbling with French electro music. "They do stylish stuff that's Indian but with Western influence so that you could still wear it back home," said Sam Pengilly, a transplanted Londoner, as she admired elegant outfits adapted from saris, swirly cocktail dresses and other threads in the adjoining boutiques Balance and H2O.

They stock clothes from Indian designers like Rohit Bal and Rohit Gandhi. "Here I can buy stuff and everyone at home is like 'Wow, where did you get that?' " Ms. Pengilly said.

It's clear as soon as the weekend arrives that Pub City's sodden soul hasn't been completely desiccated by the new night life restrictions. From the panoramic outdoor terrace at the 13th Floor lounge to the hokey space-shuttle interiors of NASA, the crowds mingle with their raspberry martinis in one hand and Blackberry wireless devices in the other. Cocktail culture appears in full swing.

In early November, in fact, traveling instructors from Lisbon's International Cocktail Academy held workshops at bars, honing bartenders' skills. Clearly Pub City isn't relinquishing its heavyweight belt just yet.

At Taika, a sleek Asian-themed club with a menu of ayurvedic meals and "spa drinks," a well-heeled international crowd was carrying the belt especially high: it was dancing. Not crazily, not naughtily — but enough to declare that those who labor under fluorescent tubes by day should be allowed to shake their bodies under colored lights by night.

As 11 p.m. passed and the Cinderella hour loomed, the D.J. slyly put on a throbbing track whose refrain implored people, "Let's pump it up a notch." And so they did, with help from Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg.

"Last Saturday, we came here and the police raided it," said Juliet Hulme, a British textile designer in her 20's who was studying in Bangalore. "All of a sudden we had to leave. It was a bit scary."

She paused for a moment as her face went cold at the memory. Then she headed to the dance floor.

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Visitor Information

The country and city codes to call Bangalore are 91-80.

WHERE TO STAY

Park Hotel and I-Bar, 14/7 Mahatma Gandhi Road; phone 2559-4666; www.theparkhotels.com. The 109 rooms feature sleek surfaces splashed brightly with colored fabrics. Doubles from \$225.

WHERE TO EAT

Taika, the Pavilion building, 62-63 Mahatma Gandhi Road; 5151-2828. Both ayurvedic meals (yellow dal soup, saffron asparagus) and Asian-Indian-[Continental](#) cuisine (lamb risotto, tandoori lobster) are featured. A meal for two, without wine, runs about 1,000 rupees, about \$23, at 45 rupees to the dollar.

Olive Beach, 16 Wood Street; 5112-8400; offers Mediterranean and Continental cuisine (seafood bisque, special pizzas). A three-course meal for two, without wine, is around 1,700 rupees.

WHERE TO SHOP

Ffolio, 5, Vithal Mallya Road; 221-8142.

Ritu Kumar, 1 Embassy Chambers, 5 Vithal Mallya Road; 5112-0278.

Balance and H20, Embassy Classic, 14 Vithal Mallya Road; 5112-1089.