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Published on Saturdays

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The Hospitality Stretch

PRINCE FREDERICK

First, it was the builders. Now hoteliers and restaurateurs are making a beeline for the OMR. Prince Frederick reports



It is common knowledge that every big builder already has, or is keen on having, a project on the Old Mahabalipuram Road (OMR). Suddenly, the same seems to be true of the hotel and restaurant business. A slew of hotels have risen alongside the road and more and more standalone restaurants continue to open for business.

Welcome to Chennai's new hospitality stretch, a phenomenon that is being spurred by a burgeoning IT workforce. According to estimates, 1.2 lakh people work on the OMR today — a number that is expected to surpass two lakh in a year. As D. Sudhakar Reddy, Chairman and Managing Director of the bakery chain La Boulangerie, which recently opened its central kitchen in Sholinganallur, points out, "In addition to being an IT hub, the OMR has grown into a big residential area. I think there must be 35,000 to 40,000 apartments and villas here already. This area is going to feed the hospitality industry in a big way."

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It sure looks that way. Many big hotel chains have addresses on OMR. Partnering with Aauromatrix Hotels Pvt. Ltd., Starwood recently established the four-star 'Aloft' in Sholinganallur. The hospitality map has included Asiana Hotel in Semmenchery for some time now. Also open are the four-star Fortune Select Palms in Thoraipakkam, the four-star Quality Hotel Sabari Classic in Navalur and the three-star CentrePoint in Sholinganallur. A Gateway hotel by the Taj Group, next to Accenture, is in the process of completion. The Hilton group also has big plans. Sometime ago, it announced a 250-room Hilton Garden Inn and a 100-room Homewood Suites.



The majority of these hotels openly woo the IT sector. 'Aloft' is a worldwide brand of Starwood that targets the business and corporate crowd. This is the first Aloft hotel in India; the next ones will come up in Coimbatore, Bangalore, Ahmedabad and Chandigarh. Five more cities are set for 'Alofts'.

"Alofts are business hotels with specific targets. The one on OMR is aimed primarily at the IT crowd," says Suresh Badlaney, vice-president, Operations, Aloft. The hotel has been designed with the yuppie IT professional in mind. "Guests are often handed out a laundry list of 'dos and don'ts' at hotels. Aloft breaks the mould. It allows people to be informal and chill out."



"Clients of IT companies used to patronise the star hotels in the city. Now they don't look beyond OMR," says Sudhakar Reddy.

Aware of the potential, hotel chains have grabbed whatever space they can get on OMR. Given the realty prices, it has been necessary to use the space prudently. Aloft is set on about two acres. "Aloft in Chennai is a 130-room property, in the other cities, they fall in the 170-to-190 room range," says Badlaney.



The three starred CentrePoint is on a piece of land that looks like a long rectangular slab. "It's a 22,000 sq.ft area," says Denzil C. Palman, operations manager, CentrePoint. The lack of a wide frontage has been masked by efficient and aesthetic architectural planning. "We have to count ourselves lucky to have got a parcel of land near the junction," says Andavan Kadir, director, F&B, Aauromatrix Hotels Pvt. Ltd.

As youngsters away from home make up the majority of the workforce on OMR, none of the restaurants, small or big, are starved for clientele. Ponnuswamy, Nala's Appa Kadai, Seena Vanna, Ranganayaki, Shogun (Japanese), and La Focaccia (Italian) are among the many restaurants that provide a multiplicity of cuisines.

Some offer exotic fare. Gourmand's Delight has Arabian dishes on its menu. Peanut Planet offers only items based on peanuts.



An army marches on its stomach, they say. The IT brigades on OMR have plenty of places to fuel up for their long and irregular working hours, with eateries — big and small, pretentious and unpretentious, pricey and affordable — springing up like mushrooms after the rains.