

# OPULENT APPEAL

Hoteliers Monica and Sonica Malhotra Kandhari are upping the luxe quotient at their hotels with their new MBD Prive Collection and a high-profile German tie-up

BY CHITRA NARAYANAN

**T**HERE'S ONE WORD TO describe sisters Monica and Sonica Malhotra Kandhari, who together run MBD, the publishing to hotels empire: confident. Flamboyant dressers, they have an imperious charm that gets business done extra-quickly. "Confidence is something we inherited from our father," says Monica, 42 and the elder one. Their dad — Ashok Kumar

Malhotra, a self-made entrepreneur who set up publishing house MBD 60 years ago — told them to aim for the sky and that's exactly what they try to do.

Look at the way the relatively newbie hoteliers with just two running hotels have snagged a prestigious partnership with Germany's leading luxury hotel chain Deutsche Hospitality to operate, manage and franchise hotels in India under the MBD Steigenberger

co-branded name.

The sisters had just begun work on a new luxury hotel project in Bangalore when they were approached by the German chain, which

#### A FANCY UPGRADE

(FACING PAGE) Hotelier sisters Monica (left) and Sonica Malhotra Kandhari are upping the game by upgrading their two Radisson Blu hotels in Noida and (BELOW) Ludhiana into lavishly luxurious properties



**RITZY APPEAL**

The Radisson Blu hotel in Ludhiana has been given an ultra-luxe spin with the MBD Prive Collection of rooms that come with opulent interiors and a range of services

was looking to venture into India. Steigenberger wanted its flag on the Bangalore property.

Sonica, 37, is the tough negotiator who convinces people to do things her way and she persuaded the Germans they should have a full-fledged joint venture instead of a one hotel tie-up. Now, MBD has a 51 per cent in the JV and Deutsche Hospitality, 49 per cent and together they've drawn up an ambitious plan to set up 20 hotels in the next three years. What's more, the sisters have ensured that the Indian brand name comes first in the MBD-Steigenberger hotel, reveals Sonica with an impish grin. She says they're also looking at two other Deutsche Hospitality brands — Jaz in the City and InterCityHotels.

"We may not have a large footprint in the country. But MBD's now a respected name associated with quality service. We've won a huge number of awards not just for financial performance but also for food and beverages," says Sonica, justifying the confidence reposed in them by the German group.

"Sonica's a real tough negotiator," says Monica, recalling the days when MBD first forayed into hospitality and her sister drove a hard bargain with one of the world's leading hotel groups, Carlson Rezidor (which owns the Radisson brand).

It was their farsighted father who, in the late 1990s, laid the foundations for their hoteliering foray. He had decided that it was time to diversify and his strategy was to focus on virgin markets and so he bought parcels of land in Noida and Ludhiana. He looked at it from a three-year horizon. "But people laughed at him and said, 'Malhotra sahib aapne yeh kaunse jhaad mein land liya hai (which forsaken place have you bought land in),' remembers Sonica. "My dad's retort to



that was in three years you people will also be buying land there," chuckles Monica.

In 2003, Radisson MBD (it's now upgraded to a Radisson Blu) opened in Noida, the first five-star hotel in the NCR suburb. Despite being debutants, the Malhotras wanted to run the place. Sonica convinced the Carlson-Rezidor group that MBD should get co-branding and they would manage the property themselves. "It took me seven months of negotiations to get what we wanted," she says.

But given that the girls — who both graduated from Delhi's Jesus & Mary College — had no hotel experience, why did they want to manage it themselves and not allow Carlson to operate? "When you're always ready to

learn, you have no need to fear," says Monica. For the sisters, the Noida Radisson Blu was the experimental learning ground for their hospitality foray.

Judging by their first hotel's performance, they have been quick learners. "We're leading the Noida market, and are number one on RevPar (revenue per available room)," says Sonica. Similarly, they say the Ludhiana hotel, which opened a few years later — it's a mixed-use property that combines a mall with a hotel — has filled a vacuum. "The mall commands the highest lease rentals in Ludhiana and the brand mix is really good," says Sonica.

"If you look back at our decision to manage our own hotels, it's been a very good one. Now

we have the requisite skills," says Sonica. The sisters say they complement each other really well.

While Monica's the creative one, looking after the project management and designing, Sonica oversees operations and strategy as well as legal and finance. "In hospitality you need a great product to start with but you also need great service to sustain it," says Sonica. Interestingly, the sisters have married two brothers, making their family an extremely close-knit one.

Now the sisters, who have a high taste for luxury, the elder one driving a Porsche Cayenne and the younger, a Lamborghini, are upping their game. They are renovating their two Radisson Blu hotels turning them into ultra-luxury destinations. As Monica points out, when they built the Noida property, the demand was for a good business hotel. "Now Noida's ready for luxury," she says. Ditto for Ludhiana.

So they have launched the MBD Prive Collection — an exclusive wing of lavishly

**SUITE DEAL**

(FROM LEFT BELOW) The Prive Lounge at the Radisson Blu Noida is an exclusive area where extravagant lunches or intimate dinners can be arranged; The Prive Suite and the Prive Crescent are sumptuous offerings at the same property



appointed rooms that raise the bar at both hotels. "Our guests' expectations are constantly increasing and we need to keep pace," says Monica.

"When we first built the hotels, the look that was in was minimalistic," she points out. "Today, that's no longer so. So we want to go the timeless route and have a neoclassic look."

No expense has been spared in the Prive Rooms. The furniture is bespoke and have gold carvings. The furnishings are embellished with embroidery. The experience aims to be equally lavish with a personal butler on call, signature aromas and mood lighting. Guests booking the Prive rooms can access the Prive Lounge, an exclusive area where extravagant lunches or intimate dinners can be arranged.

With the Steigenberger deal under their belt, there's a new aggression visible in the sisters. They are set to capitalise on their father's smart investments in land, including a parcel of land in Greater Noida.

Also, when the government's ITDC was disinvesting, they picked up Calcutta's Ashok hotel, but shrewdly decided to sell it and focus instead on Whitefield, Bangalore where the first MBD Steigenberger hotel's taking shape with luxury residences alongside. The sisters also have an eye on Goa to set up an MBD Steigenberger.

To meet the rapid expansion plans, they're also looking at starting hospitality management training institutes including one focused on catering.

With both hospitality and the flagship publication business in expansion mode, the sisters are clocking long hours. They trained as kathak dancers but, nowadays, don't get much time to practice. Exclaims Sonica: "My only indulgence now is the occasional spa session." ■

**The MBD-Steigenberger group has plans to set up hotels in Bangalore and Goa, and also start hospitality management training institutes**