

# KING OF *Bling*

Named the world's richest man in 1937, the seventh Nizam of Hyderabad owned the planet's greatest collection of jewels valued by Sotheby's in 1995 at USD350 million. The gems were later purchased by the Indian government and now languish, rarely seen, in a Delhi bank vault. But the fascination with these baubles and the ostentatious lifestyle of the Nizams persist, and remain a top draw for visitors to the city

WORDS CAROL WRIGHT

**#1 The seventh Nizam inherited an astounding collection of family jewels:** 25,000 diamonds, 226 diamond necklaces, a 245 white and gold diamond belt and 2,000 emeralds. He kept them in seven rooms to which only he had the key carried in an inner pocket, and he paid a visit to the rooms every day. Many pieces were created for him by RJB Jewellers, established in 1729, who made elaborate belts, fan-like turban ornaments, multi-jewelled armbands and necklaces. The company still exists on Nizam Shai Road where visitors can see replicas of jewellery made for the Nizams.

**#2 Diamonds financed the Nizam's state and made it one of India's richest.** From 800BC until the early 18th century, when diamonds were discovered in Brazil and later South Africa, the Kollur mine near Hyderabad were the world's diamond source, producing stones like the Koh-I-Noor, the world's most famous diamond, and the Hope diamond – which, despite its name, had a reputation for causing disaster to its owners.

**#3 To protect these priceless gems, the Hyderabad fortress of Golconda was built.**

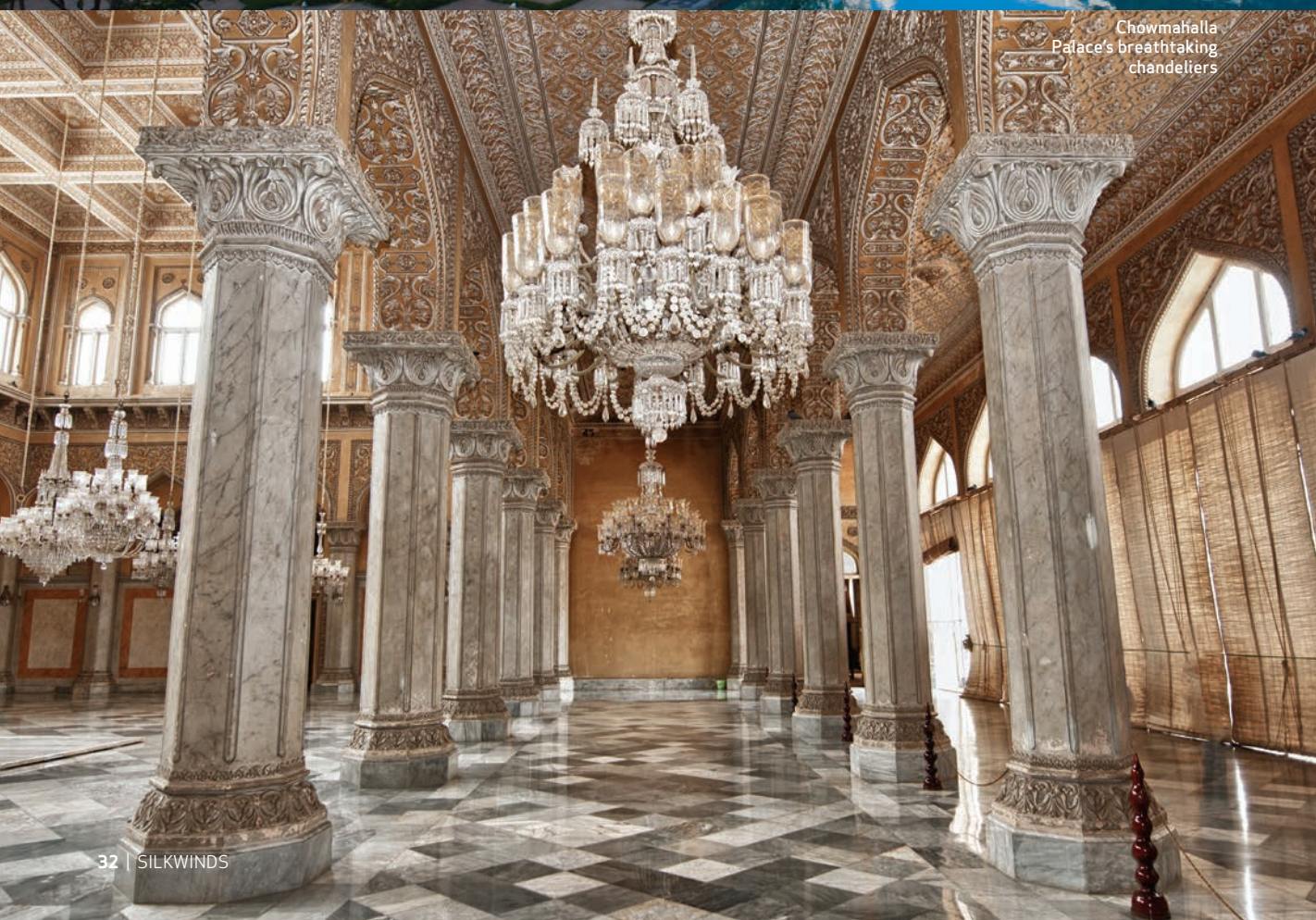
The vast granite stronghold was encircled by 11km of 100m-high walls with 87 semi-circular bastions – some still contain their original cannons. Mighty gates had spikes to prevent elephants battering them down. A whisper in the entrance gate could be clearly heard way up in the hilltop royal chambers – an early warning system of any treachery. The ruins of Golconda, destroyed by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb in 1687, still impress with their size and strength as you climb the 380 steps designed for horses, and descend shallow steps meant for elephants.



Bejewelled grandson  
of the third Nizam



Falaknuma Palace was restored in 2010 and opened as a luxury hotel by Taj Hotels and Resorts



Chowmahalla Palace's breathtaking chandeliers

Clockwise, from top left: Replica of a necklace made with pearls and diamonds belonging to the Nizam; the young Nizam surrounded by staff; the library in Falaknuma Palace houses rare books; Nizam jewels were never too lavish, big or bold enough; 100-seater dining table at Falaknuma Palace; even the children of the Nizams were richly attired



**#4 Being adorned with diamonds signalled power and status**, yet the Nizam was mostly dressed shabbily in old clothes which he patched himself. At a regal Durbar in Delhi, it was said that he was criticised for showing disrespect to the silken-clad, bejewelled Maharajahs. The Nizam was then said to have asked for the most richly-dressed man there. He then pointed his walking stick at the man saying, "That man's outfit is worth less than my walking stick." His stick was of solid ruby.

**#5 Diamonds aside, the Nizam was also said to have owned enough pearls to cover London's Piccadilly Circus.** He lavished them on his family; his sister owned 55 trunks of jewels – including pearls the size of pigeon's eggs – to top her walking canes. Her chess pieces were carved from rubies and emeralds, while the dice had numbers marked out in diamonds.

**#6 The love affair with pearls stimulated its import from Basra on the Persian Gulf.** These saltwater pearls were not polished but used in their natural form. In 1906, Ram Dutt Malji opened the first pearl shop in Hyderabad and became the Nizam's pearl jeweller, creating

the typical Hyderabad *satlada* – seven-strand necklaces of pearls mixed with precious stones. Today, Patthar Gatti remains the city's pearl street, where you can buy the 'rice' pearl, a tiny Hyderabad speciality. In Chandanpet village just outside Hyderabad, nearly everyone

works at the delicate art of drilling pearls, which are then boiled to bleach them, sun-dried, washed and graded.

**#7 The Nizam's clothing aimed to show off his jewels to their best.** Suits were made from exquisite silks of which all the





Clockwise, from top left: Replica of a Hyderabad *satlada* – a seven-strand necklace of pearls and precious stones; Golconda Fort was the mighty stronghold where the jewels were kept; replica of a dazzling fan-like turban ornament worn by the Nizam; the infamous Hope diamond

material of the same design was bought up so no one could copy them. He wore each outfit only once and to house them all, had the world's biggest wardrobe built at Purani Haveli – it was 50m long with mirrored alcoves in which to dress.

**#8** The Nizam had 20 palaces in Hyderabad in which to strut his bejewelled stuff. Open to the public is the 18th-century Purani Haveli, now crumbling and partly used as an educational establishment. There, in dusty


showcases in the museum section, you can see how the Nizam grew up surrounded by diamonds. They stud his gold buttons, coffee cups and photo frames and as a boy, he carried his lunch to school in a three-tiered tiffin box decorated with diamonds.

**#9** Built from 1857-69, Chowmahalla, a complex of four palaces in one compound, was the Nizam's official residence. It was restored by the present Nizam's wife, Princess Esra, and is open to visitors. At

the time, the Nizam had 6,000 staff, 3,000 Arab bodyguards, 38 men to dust 19 differently shaped, shimmering European crystal chandeliers, and 23 to bring drinking water.

**#10** The 19th-century Falaknuma Palace ("mirror of the sky") was the Nizam's favourite retreat. Now restored as a hotel, it's perched on a hill to the south of Hyderabad, and blends Italian and Tudor architectural styles. Visitors are guided by the hotel's resident historian into rooms kept as they were in the Nizam's days. The library contains 5,900 valuable books. The Jade Terrace, where afternoon tea is served, has a lounge where hookahs can still be smoked. You can also sip champagne in the Nizam's chair in the ballroom. There, he needed no menu – he merely pointed to one of the dishes painted on the ceiling. Today, those secret family recipes are served in the hotel restaurant.



 SilkAir flies 11 times weekly between Singapore and Hyderabad