talk of the town

BEING A DIPLOMAT DOES NOT NECESSARILY MEAN HAVING TO BE DIPLOMATIC, REVEALED A RENDEZVOUS WITH SOME OF THE WOMEN AMBASSADORS IN INDIA

In the rarefied confines of diplomacy, there is little room for repartee and a rendezvous with diplomats is, at best, politically correct—each exclamation spliced for justification, every guffaw for a bilateral reason. But on a warm Delhi afternoon, as a bunch of women ambassadors and high commissioners converged at Masala Art, the Indian restaurant at Taj Palace, an unusual tete-a-tete with *Simply Delhi* ensued. Weaving the personal with the professional, it brought out the forthright women in the formidable diplomats. These women may have power etched in their profiles, but with preferences increasingly coloured by India's cultural and social hues, the country has turned into a coveted posting for them all.

Culture kitsch
Settling down to the heat, dust and flavours of India has not been too tough a going for both Nzaro (left) and Edwards

PHOTOS BY HEMANT CHAWLA

LUCIE EDWARDS, CANADA

soft power

Lucie Edwards walks in for lunch with a seemly swiftness, a pretty printed dress, and an accessory to match: a wide, engaging smile that merges into her eyes and stays there for as long as you care to check. She settles into lunch with the same genial vigour (the sumptuous galauti kababs are a help), but is gingerly wooing her new environs at the Canadian High Commission where she has been for the past six months, the youngest in the diplomatic social group.

"Privacy has a different context in different cultures," says Edwards as she strives to make sense of India's multi-layered diversity. With the bulk of her career shaped in Africa, the shift to India may not have been too jarring because of cultural similarities, but it still took a while to adapt to the comfort level with which well-meaning Delhiites probed and delved into her private life—family, pets (three dogs, two cats) and what-have-you. "Once I was unwell and went to a party where a woman, a complete stranger, sat by me and took her time advising me on my well-being," says the lady who has a masters degree in public administration from Harvard University but is now taking Hindi lessons for a better grasp of India. It may be working, for not only she but her computer consultant husband—who restores vintage cars—is also warming up to the ways of India. Be it Rajasthan with its vibrant colours, tie-and-dye fabrics and the architecture of its palaces, or the jewellery—there is no place like India for exquisitely crafted ornaments, she says—Edwards' fascination for colour and wholesome fun is finding expression in India. So it was no surprise that she and her husband along with close friends even played Holi with rare gusto this year.

However, it is human rights that has been a staple and an important facet of Edwards' portfolio in her previous postings. During her tenure in South Africa, she was responsible for her mission's work on human rights, democratic development and support for the anti-apartheid movement. In India, much like other posts, Edwards hasn't found it perplexing being a woman in the boss's chair. Little wonder; her infectious enthusiasm peppered with her gentle tenacity must necessarily have led the way.

EVA LILIAN NZARO, TANZANIA

home spun

You could easily mistake her for a kind, cuddly grandma, and you wouldn't be too far off the mark either. Eva Lilian Nzaro has two of her grandchildren staying with her in Delhi, and nurturing, be it her family or a vegetable garden, is a prime passion. Being an envoy could almost be incidental, except that Nzaro, the Tanzanian high commissioner to India, has over 30 years in diplomacy to fall back on for experience. It's an exposure that comes from a liberal dose of continent-hopping, including Africa, Asia and America, through the years, as well as from her involvement in human rights in all her postings.

It is nevertheless a while before Nzaro turns from a cautious observer at lunch to an active participant, shedding apprehensions and dispensing her thoughts on her life, family and posting to India with the same relish as she digs into her food. Belonging to a family of strong women—her grandmother died at the age of 103 and her 100-year old mother-in-law can still put a thread into a needle without using specs—Nzaro is easily one herself.

In India for two years now (she took over as high commissioner in June 2002), Nzaro finds a reflection of her own culture in the customs and social details of the country despite completely different pasts. It is this commonality what has effectively made for a smooth transition. From spices and grandma's recipes for common ailments to large, winding families—not unexpectedly, the conversation was liberally sprinkled with mention of her kith and kin—and wedding rituals spread over several days, the familiarity between the two cultures has been a persuasive bond. Women's issues in India she admits, remind her of similar conflicts in her own country.

Little wonder then that the gold bangles tinkling on her wrist had India written all over them even though they are from Tanzania.

JUTTA STEFAN-BASTL, AUSTRIA

vienna vibes

It's not easy to take to a country whose trying weather only adds to the ordeal of grappling with its limitless people, places and cultures. So it wasn't surprising that for Jutta Stefan-Bastl's—whose tryst with foreign affairs has taken her to places as varied as Slovenia, China and Abidjan—the heat, dust and flavours of India took a while to seep in after she took over as Austria's ambassador in November 2002. But watch her tucking into the succulent paneer tikka and tawa bhindi at Masala Art or hear her raving about the colours and textures of Indian fabrics and you know the process is well begun.

There is, of course, Lutyens' Delhi with its imposing wide roads prettily punctuated with reminders from history in the form of monuments and landmarks which adds to her growing fascination for India. "CNG has made a big difference to the way Delhi looks and breathes," says the envoy, whose laid-back elegance is complemented by her quiet confidence. Perhaps, it has something to do with the rejuvenating Kerala Ayurvedic massage, the New Age quotient of contemporary India, and the holistic healing techniques that this mother of a 19-year-old indulges in.

Envoy trap
Ayurvedic massages, fabrics and old Delhi monuments have helped Stefan-Bastl bond with India

Being a mom may be easy but what of her experience as a woman boss in a country where men obviously have the professional advantage? Working here is the same as anywhere else in the world, replies the woman who has a doctorate in law. Except that people in India have a fretful tendency to believe that an ambassador's job must belong to a man. While attending a function with her husband, Stefan-Bastl recalls how on being introduced to a group of people all of them assumed that her husband was the ambassador and she the spouse.

As for her preoccupations, human rights has been a constant in her life, pursued either as a professional priority or guided by personal zeal. So much so that she has already visited a village in Uttar Pradesh for a reality check on women's conditions. Stefan-Bastl says that her Indian assignment, with its wide spectrum of experiences, will always remain a valued part of her personal and professional life. This knowledge was like icing on the cake. The fig kulfi that we had for dessert was just a cool aside.

WORKING IN INDIA IS THE SAME AS ANYWHERE ELSE IN THE WORLD, SAYS STEFAN-BASTL. EXCEPT THAT PEOPLE HERE HAVE A TENDENCY TO BELIEVE THAT AN AMBASSADOR'S JOB MUST BELONG TO A MAN.

LAURA Q. DEL ROSARIO, PHILIPPINES

whirl from the east

Blood may be thicker than water, but when Laura Q. Del Rosario landed in India, it was water that defined her proximity to blood. For when the Philippines ambassador reached Delhi, the first mineral water bottle she got hold of was "Paras". It was a name that had had her family in a fuming fiddle while tracing its genealogy. Her maternal grandfather's last name, it had taken much scouring on her part before she could trace its genesis to India.

Her "love affair with India" started years ago when she was in college. The then Indian ambassador to the Philippines filled in the blanks about her intrigue with this country.

Not surprising then that as her last posting at Singapore was wrapping up, she wanted to come to India. Now, both Delhi and India have a sense of déjà vu for her. "If the idea of where you want to be is given to you, it is like a dream fulfilled," explains Rosario, who, in her fortress-like office appears to be a woman who woos solitude.

Slowly as the chat evolves, Rosario eases into it. She isn't rushing with any details but they do pop up without making a noise. Her love for Indian fabrics, salwar kameez and silk shawls. Between Khan Market where she shops and the posh Olive bar restaurant where she hopes to host a lunch soon, Rosario is a woman of multiple tastes.

Rosario's extra curricular interests get clouded as her inclination for human rights and women's issues starts shining. The widows of India, the fact that the maximum Magsaysay awardees have been Indian, her competence with numbers. That's her real roll. Now we know why she loves working till 11 p.m on most nights.

Filipino fervour
Rosario is on a mission to forge ties with India as a continuation of her long-standing affair with the country

CAROLINE J. MCDONALD, NEW ZEALAND

goodwill ambassador

Of the many things that strike you about Caroline Jenny McDonald, the New Zealand high commissioner to India, two stand out unflinchingly: her amiable, unaffected demeanour and her obvious affection for India and its cultural heritage.

She has the knack of spinning an ordinary interview into an elevating conversation on cultural diplomacy between India and New Zealand. "It's one of the most interesting assignments that I have handled so far," she says. You know she means it. "There is a lot of positivity among people here and it makes for a happy working environment," she adds. McDonald isn't just playing amateurish tennis with questions on India, the sense of involvement is genuine, not fake.

Indophile
From cuisines to culture and literature to Lakhnawi embroidery, McDonald can hold her own on any debate on India

The names of Indian painters, art historians, authors, cultural connoisseurs and fashion designers come up in her conversation with ease. For now, it is Amitav Ghosh and his work that takes up much of her attention.

She is right when she says that India and New Zealand can only become better friends. After all, not only do they share a passion for cricket, culture and films but in McDonald they have a person who is as good an ambassador of India as she is of her own country.

—SHEFALEE VASUDEV