

EATING OUT

A bit heavy on the monkey nuts

BY HELEN FIELDING

IN THE BAR of La Porte des Indes, London's new 350-seater Franco-Indian theme restaurant near Marble Arch, there seemed to have been a series of messy accidents with monkey-nut shells scattered on the floor beneath each table. "It's the Jungle Bar," the waiter explained, in a manner Sir Richard Scott would surely have found so enigmatic as – in any normal use of speech – to be evasive. What did he mean? The ceiling was lush, as in a cabana; there were hurricane lamps, jungle friezes on the walls, and monkey nuts on the tables: but were you supposed to throw the shells on the floor when you'd opened them? And was it OK to throw other things on the floor too: paper hankies perhaps, matchboxes, chicken bones?

"Oh my God, what have you done?" said my friend Jane when she joined me, hurtfully assuming I had guzzled several bowlfuls of nuts in a frenzy of greed while waiting, spitting the shells out on to the floor in manner of a monkey. Thankfully, there were jungle drinks on hand to calm everyone down – champagne and mango cocktails – such as are often found in impenetrable tropical undergrowth.

La Porte des Indes is the latest venture of the Blue Elephant group – experts in the virtual long-haul-destination dining experience. As well in Brussels, Paris, Dubai and Copenhagen, a Blue Elephant has long been welcoming diners into an alternative Thai reality in Fulham, where they feast under thatched canopies surrounded by ponds, palms and caves entirely free of Khmer rebels, child prostitutes or murderous Buddhist monks.

The opening of this imaginative and gigantic Indian venture in the dull hinterland north of Marble Arch is a joyous thing. It was hard to imagine what form the virtual Indian dining experience would take – an entrance by elephant across a lake, perhaps, to dine in a Rajasthan-style sandstone temple, greedily watched over by vultures; but, whatever, it seemed certain to offer a change. Not everyone wants to feast on pan-fried offal and whimsically presented root vegetables on a special occasion. And even though La Porte des Indes seemed to have opened to the public some weeks too soon, having the air of being a huge staff training exercise, it was delightfully kitsch and we started enjoying ourselves



LA PORTE DES INDES

32 Bryanston Street, London W1H 7AE. Tel: 0171 224 0055.
Open daily, lunch 12-2.30; dinner 6-12. Three-course sat menu, £29 or £34. Average à la carte meal, £40 per person. All credit cards accepted

straight away. We felt we had got quite out of ourselves and travelled to India – albeit to a brand new, lavish but wobbly, locally-themed Holiday Inn.

Our drinks consumed we were led, scrunching over the nuts, through the basement dining room, with its vast, fragrant tropical flower arrangements, wood carvings, garlands, dried-flower statues of Ganesh the elephant god (managing, it seemed, to keep off the milk) and blue-tiled pond. We went up a dramatic white staircase – where the whole shebang was reflected in a wall-sized mirror – to the upper floor where palms, carved screens and archways separated a great number of tables of

flexible sizes. Indian music, dark wood floors, slightly tacky white bamboo chairs, the eager nervousness of the staff controlled by a computer in a shrine, and – despite the cold outside – the chill of the air conditioning, all contributed to the colonial atmosphere. Our table was beautifully laid out with orchid, bronze plates, and many wide-ranging items of glassware and crockery.

The menus gave off a disconcerting air of "think of a number" on the pricing. Lamb kofta was offered at £18.50 then altered in bino to £10.50; and lentil soup similarly knocked down from £8.50 to £4. It was clear that one would have to concentrate hard to get away for

much under £40 a head. In the interests of research we plumped for the three-course set menu at £29 each (plus coffee) which offered a little taste of almost everything. Mark-ups were steep on the wine, with even the least expensive Chardonnay at £19, and a fierce red notice on the wine list declaring that a 12.5 per cent service and £1.50 cover charge would be added. Emboldened by its modest £12 tag, I decided to order a bottle of Indian white.

"Is it sparkling?" we asked when it arrived, peering at the weird bottle. "No, er, well, slightly, it goes very well with the food," said our waiter as we tried it. "Whatever it tastes like it certainly isn't wine," said Jane, and though by no means regretting our experiment we were forced to order half a bottle of house wine in order to recover from it.

Much is made of the Indo-French colonial origin of the cuisine. We were told, however, that the top chefs hadn't all arrived yet, and it did rather show in the starters. They were beautifully presented on what looked like a cake-stand accompanied by a flower made of turnip with bits of carrot underneath. Highlights were aubergine fritters, stuffed with cheese and herb pâté, and an excellent tamarind dipping sauce. Chicken tikka, however, "from the lofty heights of the Himalayas", was dry and uninspiring, though maybe that's what happens to chickens at high altitudes.

The main course brought a foretaste of what it's hoped will soon be the full glory of the cuisine. Poulet Rouge was superb: shredded chicken marinated in red spices, grilled, then served in a sauce mild and delicate but with a marvellously confident – as we critics say – layering of flavours, including a scrumptious burnt-cream undertone. Crevette Assailli was extraordinary too: prawns in a superb fresh and zingy coconut curry with mangoes, green chillies and ginger. Dessert was simple but exquisite: fruit in mango coulis topped with a top-flight vanilla ice-cream.

We were given an orchid each as we left, which was a very nice touch, and we both agreed that as a slightly potty special-occasion venue La Porte des Indes deserves to succeed. But at £90 for two – not including the cocktails and extra house wine – we would have preferred a more affordable set menu, and a few less orchids, elephant gods and monkey nuts.

La Porte Des Indes Fielding Indy



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