

## 'Now It's Time to Rest'

Taj Mahal founders head to the mainland, leaving behind the monument to their love of Victoria

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Twenty-five years after building a temple to East Indian cuisine and adding a distinct domed landmark on our modest skyline, Abdul and Gulshan Adatia are closing their Taj Mahal restaurant today.

The Ugandan refugees of Indian descent, who escaped the bloody regime of notorious dictator Idi Amin for a new life in Canada, are serving their last dishes tonight in their iconic restaurant at 679 Herald St., just up from the Chinatown gates.

Abdul, 80, and Gulshan, 73, will be moving to Burnaby at the end of October to enjoy something they've never experienced -- a life of leisure. After an escape from Africa, decades of hard work to build up their business and two hip replacements and a new knee for Gulshan, it's time for the personable couple to settle down.



CREDIT: Debra Brash, Times Colonist  
Abdul and Gulshan Adatia are leaving the Taj Mahal restaurant that they have owned and operated for 25 years.

"We've worked hard all our lives and now it is time to do something for our souls," says Gulshan, who is looking forward to prayers at the mosque across the street from their new Burnaby townhouse.

"But we will miss this beautiful city where we have made so many good friends, and the tourists who came back to us every year. It is sad for us, but a new beginning."

The Adatias have sold their unique building to Three Point Properties -- it's actually two buildings connected and includes a historic rooming house that was converted to 10-room bed and breakfast. The purchase price was not disclosed.

The Victoria development company has no immediate plans to redevelop the site and will stay within the current zoning, said Joanna Bateson, a project manager for Three Point.

She said the company will refurbish the building with new paint and other improvements "to bring it back to its former glory" and is actively pursuing a new operator for the restaurant. She gave no indication of when it would reopen.

Bateson said Three Point considers the Taj Mahal Restaurant a valuable asset, as the area is growing with residential developments and falls within the neighbourhood of the massive former Bay store project that is expected to transform several blocks.

The company has a prolific track record for notable projects, including its current redevelopment of the former Bamberton cement site on the Malahat, the Scott Building at Hillside and Douglas and the Breakwater project in James Bay.

The Adatias built the restaurant from a dilapidated lawn mower repair shop in 1981, fashioning the plaster and fibreglass domes, iron spires and curved windows from a model of India's famed Taj Mahal. The Adatias lived above the restaurant and added the bed and breakfast in 1991.

The interior is decorated with antique tapestries and fixtures collected from small villages in India. Everything is going to the new owners, says Abdul.

The Adatias are third-generation Africans whose forefathers were business people who emigrated from Bombay. Abdul was born in Tanzania and Gulshan in Kenya.

They have two sons: Salim, who is in the real estate business in Montreal, and Minaz, who works for a government ministry in Victoria.

They were prosperous business owners in Uganda, operating a home appliance store and a farm that produced molasses from cane sugar. Idi Amin took over the former British colony and in the early 1970s started killing and deporting the Christians, Jews and Indians, not to mention local ethnic groups.

The Adatias were allowed to leave on a jet sponsored by the Canadian government. Stripped of their money and belongings, they arrived in Montreal with one suitcase and the clothes on their backs.

The family lived in Vancouver for several months -- Abdul working at Wosk's Furniture and Gulshan in a jewelry store -- and saved their money with the hopes of opening their own business again.

"We would walk instead of taking the bus to save the 25 cents," recalls Gulshan. "It added up."

A visit to Victoria sealed their fate. "We fell in love," says Gulshan.

In 1973, the couple bought Bob's Burgers, where the current Burger King is located, near the View Royal-Colwood border. They operated the drive-in for eight years.

Gulshan tested the Indian food market with special buffets. The response was overwhelming, and the couple made plans for the Taj Mahal.

"I'm proud to say that after Canada helped us escape and gave us a new start, we never put a hand out," says Gulshan. "We were obligated to work hard and we did."

"Now it's time to rest."