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SITARA HIMALAYA

This charming retreat carries iconic design brand Good Earth's aesthetic and its founder, Anita Lal's joie de vivre. By Daisy Finer. Photographs by Himanshu Lakhwani

FIRST LOOK

Ever the creative, Anita Lal, founder of India's iconic lifestyle brand Good Earth, has channelled her alchemist's heart into a new 10-bedroom garden retreat immersed in the spiritual magnitude of the Himalayas. Located at an altitude of 8,200 feet, 13km from Manali, on the way to the ancient Buddhist valleys of Lahaul and Spiti, Sitara Himalaya is not just a showcase for the Good Earth aesthetic. An extension of Lal's own holiday home (a two-minute walk away) and imbued with her unpretentious, embracing approach to life, here is a sanctuary in which to pause, reflect, reconnect with the natural world, meet interesting new friends, laugh, dance and re-remember the pulse of life.

“Sitara can mould itself to guests' needs, from a solitary trek past clouds of butterflies to a picnic or formal dining followed by a live guitar performance”

I first met Mrs Lal at her Delhi home in Chanakyapuri seven years ago. As we sat chatting under the bougainvillea in her garden, the smell of frangipani floating evocatively in the air, a silver tray bearing home-brewed tea, the prettiest mugs and copious amounts of biscuits arrived. Anita Lal leant forward, pressed her hand lightly on my forearm and suggested, “Don't hold back”. She may be globally renowned for her lifestyle brand, but amongst her friends Mrs Lal is beloved for her innate generosity, warmth, wisdom, storytelling, and sparkle. From the beginning, “AL”, as she is affectionately known by the women who work with her, taught me a new definition of living well, one rooted in her own adage “life is short, let's make it sweet”. Away from the rigid interpretations of well-being that I have been exposed to in the West—summarised by strict protocols, thin bodies and green juices—she showed me a new, distinctly Indian path. One where good health was equated to joy and to beauty, an indulgence of the senses—some oil in your hair whilst you work, the drape of a fabric, some perfectly arranged tuberose, a home-cooked chicken curry, an evening spent dancing to the sweetness and romance of an old Hindi song.

Sitara is a celebration of Indian spirit with a global outlook. The splendour of the interiors is immediate. “It took me a year,” says Lal. “Little by little, step by step, it organically came together.” Tibetan rugs, ornamental blue and white china, a bold

brass work by designer Vikram Goyal, hand-painted murals of mountain passes and hummingbirds, vases of flowers, the earthy smell of juniper berry incense. On one wall, two embroidered Chamba Rumal panels, sewn by local women, depict scenes from the life of Krishna. She turns the embroidery around to show me the underside. The front and back are almost exactly the same. “I prefer craft. It gives me a feeling of a person, a hand, a heart, a soul,” says Lal.

Ten spacious bedrooms (five downstairs, five upstairs) are covered in varying shades of a hand-spun Banarasi silk wallpaper depicting a sacred Buddhist motif of a Himalayan cloud. Up in the clouds is where guests sleep. Opening the curtains to a view

of snow-capped peaks and the purity of light and air is an immediate uplift.

Each bedroom comes with a daybed bedecked in plush cushions (perfect for daydreaming, meditating or an impromptu tarot card reading) and a scattering of campaign-style furniture, Chinese-style lamps and lacquered pieces. Bathrooms are neat affairs: the essentials, plus showers with exquisitely scented oils and washes from Paro. This holistic brand run by Anita Lal's daughter, Simran, also provides the unique turn-down service, two little bottles of synergistically blended essential oils, one, “Clarify”, clears your head, the other, with Kashmiri lavender, aids “Deep Sleep”. Don't expect room service menus, mini-bars, or TVs. “Our bodies are so intelligent. Every cell knows. You have to be careful of polluting your system,” says Lal. This goes to further explain the glorious, dedicated library space, painted in teal and sky blue with red accents in homage to Buddhist monasteries. Books include the likes of *The Secret Teachings of the Vedas*, *The Forgotten Gods of Tibet* and BKS Iyengar's *Light on Yoga*. One gets the feeling you could settle into a new way of life here. Read a little more, sleep a little more, dream a little more, do nothing a little more.

The go-with-the-flow homestead feel is further magnified in the live kitchen with its open shelving filled with Good Earth tableware, teas, pickles, spices and nuts. At the high-topped polished wooden island, where Lal herself loves to eat, guests can chat to 24-year-old chef Aman Singhal

whilst he makes tamarind ice-cream or nutrient-dense but light delights, such as full-bodied soups made with “just whatever vegetables we happened to have”. I can see why Aman and Anita get on. Both work in flow, both can create a masterpiece from what they casually find on hand, drawing on indigenous heritage soaked in excellence. Food at Sitara follows a journey through the Himalayan ranges: tandoori delicacies from the Khyber, decadent wazwan from Jammu & Kashmir, Anglo-Indian dishes from the colonial hill stations, the dham from Himachal. And from Ladakh? Steamed momos eaten outside on the candlelit veranda curled up under blankets and a starry sky, warm spiced apple toddy in hand.

Sitara Himalaya can mould itself to guests' needs, whether that means a solitary trek past clouds of butterflies, a group picnic or more formal evening dining followed by time spent listening to the in-house sutradhar, Navarino Narah, play his guitar. “For me it was never a hotel,” says Lal, which goes a long way to explain the atmospheric house party vibe. This is not to belie the world-class quality of the experience.

The “Svasthi” dedicated well-being area offers a retreat space like no other. A steam, sauna and plunge pool with epic views of the Himalayas, yoga practised as it should be, and exceptional, transformative body therapies rooted in ancient marma massage techniques.

From the glass-roofed “Skylight” room, filled with comfort and cushions, you can watch the Milky Way. Behind you lies the very spot where, it is believed, thousands of years ago, the great sage Rishi Ved Vyasa meditated for 12 years before inscribing the eternal cosmic wisdom into the four Vedas.

Sitara Himalaya offers an exquisite dance of colour, textiles and texture, but it is also a catalyst for revelations and good conversations. My advice? Don't hold back. 📍

SITARA HIMALAYA Palchan, Tehsil Manali, Himachal Pradesh 175103.
(Doubles from ₹90,000 for a minimum three-night stay, which includes transfers from Kullu, all meals, excursions, laundry and beverages; sitarahimalaya.com)

