

GLORIOUS HOTELS OF INDIA

Cosmo
Brockway
&
Harriet
Compston

Photography
by
Karam
Puri







SITARA HIMALAYA

Manali

Anita Lal, founder of the now-iconic homewares brand Good Earth, has ‘ascended her mountain’, both literally and figuratively with her latest unveiling. Sitara, an amalgamation of the names of her three children, is a Himalayan idyll overlooking the cedar-tree-lined Kullu Valley which opened in 2023 as a retreat that caters as much to wellness (spiritual and physical) as hospitality.

‘It began with a desire to buy the swell of land behind my English-style cottage,’ she recalls. ‘Events unfolded and suddenly we found ourselves creating an Alpine-inspired manor house where I envisaged people coming to and finding the sort of peace I myself have relished all these years.’ The setting could not be more magnificent and heart-soaring in this valley of the devatas, or mountain deities. Driving through the ravine which coils around the property, with its seven sister waterfalls tumbling like fallen necklaces of the divine, it is easy to see why Himachal Pradesh is known as Dev Bhoomi – the Land of the Gods. Here, in this elevated plateau, planted by Anita with fruit trees and banks of English flowers, the interiors doyenne has realized her long-held dream of conjuring a place of nurture, joy, and absolute rest.

The challenge of building on a sloping meadow was embraced with typical Lal gusto, who confesses to have worked with ‘more than one architect’. The local vernacular and practicalities of building a house in this altitude with all the weather variations was intuitively understood by her final choice, Manali architect Sri Dunichand. ‘It was a process of learning that seeking out local voices and talent is worth twenty imported names.’ The result is spectacular: a stone-rendered chalet writ large that crowns the hill and is set to become a beacon for a new generation of retreats, returning to the time-honoured ancient traditions of wellness that the Subcontinent abounds in – a well of practices, wisdom, and forgotten alchemy that Anita and her carefully curated team are drawing deeply from.

The heart of the house is a triple-height galleried drawing room hung with delicate chandeliers sourced in the Netherlands, which ripple and reflect the mountain shadows and candlelight. The joyful teal on the walls allows every element to sing, from the huge chintz-covered double sofa (its design inspired by an antique embroidered jacket) in front of the stone fireplace, topped with lion sculptures by Sanjay Garg, to the Chamba rumal textiles of village women and dancing Krishnas, and strewn jewel-like mineral fragments found in the mountains. Anglo-Indian campaign furniture by J&R Guram are plainly civilized, set with cocktail ephemera and board games. This is slow interiors at their most tactile and sensual; the ten bedrooms are given visual depth with walls covered in Banarasi silk wall coverings in jewel tones, evoking Himalayan cloud motifs. In the glass-walled morning room, a piano can be seen below vivid floral motifs, painted by young artists overseen by Anita, who has a passion for fostering such talents, close to a colourfully naive Uzbek suzani hanging grounded by a collection of blue and white china and a 19th-century round table, the setting for a sun-dappled afternoon tea.

Star-gazing up at the Milky Way after dinner in the glass-roofed pavilion above the house close to the very spot where, it is believed, the great sage Rishi Ved Vyas meditated for over a decade before inscribing his revelations into the Vedas, might just rank as one of the most soul-stirring travel experiences to be found anywhere. Sitara is, indeed, a star high on a hill.



Anita Lal's eclectic style is evident in the treasured finds she has filled the rooms with. 'I wanted Sitara to feel like people were coming to a family home, not a soulless hotel,' she explains. Classic Good Earth touches include their enchanting dragonfly voile curtains in the bedrooms, while the famed Kashmiri thali is elegantly served on silver.





Banarsi-woven Damask silk commissioned by Anita Lal to evoke patterns of clouds line the guest bedrooms in a plethora of exquisite colours, adding texture and extravagance along with the mountain-woven clouds of Kashmir used on the beds on chilly mountain nights.





The stargazing pavilion in the upper reaches of Sitara's English-terraced garden comes alive by candlelight as guests recline under the crispest skies found anywhere in the world.

