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THE AGE OF EXCESS

Travel, Think, Buy, Why, Confess...

Right: A painted wall in
the central lounge
at Sitara Himalaya.





Looking Out and Turning In at **SITARA HIMALAYA**

A spa-serenity sanctuary, Sitara by Good Earth founder Anita Lal poses a rare dilemma: look at its maximalist magic indoors, or gaze out at the snow-covered mystery of the Himalayas?

BY SHEFALEE VASUDEV

Past cosmos blooms, hydrangeas, *nargis* and roses, along a cobbled path through a verandah warmed by Kullu shawls, the cool fragrance of the mountainside plants a kiss as you are ushered into a large drawing room. The central lounge at Sitara Himalaya, the recently opened spa-sanctuary atop a hill in the Palchan region of Manali, sends you into an exhale moment. Its Vedic architectural aura mixed with maximalist décor is designed to cast a spell. Yet, how an individual responds eventually becomes the headline of a travel story.

I find myself in a tranquil float. Through glass windows looms a view of the Pir Panjal mountain range that is majestic and monastic. Its snow-clad, moss green silhouette has plummeting rivulets pencilled in. But the dilemma comes from the inside of Sitara.

Let's go back then to Delhi where this began. It is May and Anita Lal, creative director and founder of Good Earth and Paro—luxury lifestyle brands that mirror the muster of fine Indian living—has sent an invite. AL, as she is fondly known, has been speaking about Sitara for the last year. She would send occasional WhatsApp photos with postcards of the spa-resort in the making at the time. A lady with rare insights into

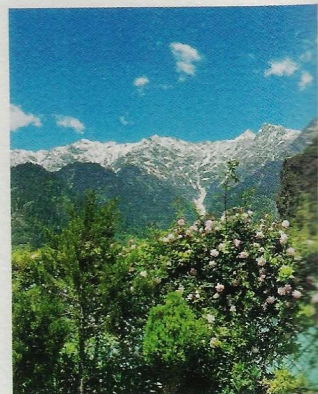
the finer connects between products, textiles, fragrances and spaces with the human mind, she has held this vision for the last decade. In the last few years, through the pandemic lockdown, AL moved to Manali to direct, design and build Sitara.

Ever since it opened this April, AL has been inviting her guests in small groups. "I am not a mountain person," I tell actor-author Lisa Ray, Vasudha Rai (beauty and wellness writer) and Divya B Mishra (spouse of designer Rahul Mishra and CEO of the Rahul Mishra label), who are in the group among others, as the flight lands in Kullu. They all are: Divya was raised in Kumaon and Lisa swears by the Canadian countryside.

I am clearly unprepared for the inhale-exhale moment when we actually reach Sitara. How can you not be a mountain person?

The Hero of the Story?

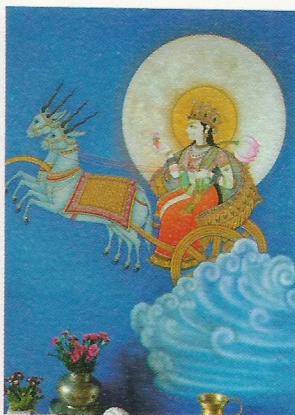
Beauty and complexity lie at the heart of storytelling. The fact that any space reveals peculiarities of the person "behind it" has been evident in literature, cinema, art, architecture and product design. Fiction writers tell us there is One True Story that we must find and narrate. By that yardstick, Sitara has AL's signature writ all over: pomegranate prints on velvet cushions,



For those comforted by skilled massages that take away both pains, real and imaginary, the Svasti spa is a star in its own right. Its infra-red hot sauna is filled with Himalayan deodar oil. The fragrance is blended with Himalayan rock salt and green cardamom oil.

Photos by Himanshu Lakhwani

Anita Lal appears proud of Sitara, of what she has made of “a piece of land in the hills” and then in her characteristic style where triumph is fleeting and humility conclusive, she says, “The Himalaya is the real hero.”



Myriad design influences and products create a maximalist decor aura at Sitara Himalaya above Manali. Founded by Good Earth founder Anita Lal, the luxury spa-resort builds a sensory and textural experience

luxurious silks on sofas, glass paintings, wooden artefacts, brass hangings, an artisanal chessboard, crystal lights, white candles, mismatched table crockery and cutlery or the seductively designed wallpaper inside the toilets. A teal wall leads you to tables laden with fresh fruits from the Sitara garden—cherries, apricots, plums. You are in a painting looking at another painting.

AL is all hugs and hellos. She wears a kurta-set from Good Earth's Sustain line, a *kani* shawl over her shoulders. On her wrist is a stack of bangles: glass and gemstones; her rings have rubies and emeralds. She introduces the staff and chastises the kitchen team on why ghee and butter need dissimilar presentations on the table. She appears proud of Sitara, laughs and jokes; and then in her characteristic style where triumph is fleeting and humility conclusive, she says, “The Himalaya is the real hero.” The One True Story has been hit in the gut. The narrator must find another resolution.

Inside-Outside

Sitara is a private luxury sanctuary with ten rooms. Described as a “Saukhya” space—it is built to enhance peace and healing. Its spaciousness is determined by an architectural sync between nature's bounty outdoors and the design inside. Wooden staircases lead to a mezzanine level from where the impression of the same lounge with its high ceiling changes as the cognitive angle shifts. “Colour is a lie, it's a set dressing worked up by the brain. The colours we see are mediated by culture,” author Will Storr reminds us, referring to cognitive scientist Donald Hoffman. The cemented stairs outside take you up or down the sanctuary, a route to the spa, to another glass lounge or the garden, where in the evening, women from the house-keeping crew who wear short, hand-knit sweaters over printed kurtas sing a prayer and dance to local songs.

As you tiptoe behind white cutwork window curtains in the room, you are awed by the

deity-like power of the mountains, while being conscious of the décor composition indoors. The wallpaper is handwoven Gyaser brocade from Varanasi, the room lights are calibrated to enhance calm.. Where to look?

The Svasti Spa

The Sitara experience combines the sensory and the spiritual. A riverside walk jazzed up by hot *samosas* and *jalebis* packed by AL in picnic baskets with hot chai. An unshackled waterfall. A walk up the hills, guided by men of the mountains telling you stories as tall as the trees. Another day is a car drive through the Rohtang tunnel towards Lahaul and even higher up to a monastery that combines Hindu and Tibetan traditions.

Yet, for those comforted by skilful massages that take away real and imaginary pains, the Svasti spa is a star in its own right. An infra-red hot sauna is filled with the oil of deodar, blended with Himalayan rock salt. Its fragrance wafts in the air, blended with Himalayan rock salt and green cardamom oil. I find myself invigorated by yoga and meditation practices (both are offered to guests here as guided or solitary experiences) compared to spa and sauna rituals. Yet, the *marma* (points of energy filed in the body) massage that I took at Svasti was perhaps the only time when I paused to gaze at the scene outside.

Eat, Pray, Live

Earlier in Delhi, besides a packing list (raincoat, down jacket, gloves, sunhat and woollen cap, sunscreen...), sent by Navarino Narah, Sitara's estate manager, we are asked for dietary restrictions and food preferences. What the kitchen turns out at Sitara, however, is such a melting pot of tastes that my discipline is blunted.

“*Dosas* and *idlis* don't suit this region, so they are not on our menu,” said AL casually one morning. So food is fused from local culinary traditions, slow-cooked, or made in open pits, with hillside ingredients. Noodles and *thukpas*, dishes from the Himachali Dham *thali* or Kashmiri *wazwan* at another meal, stuffed *aloo parathas* and local chutneys, or dals and meats from a Khyber menu.

Eat, Pray, Live would be the headline, if I were writing it for how I succumbed to the taste of the food only to skid and almost lose sight of the inside-outside narrative. But that is another story. What I can say as a stargazer and a former not-mountain person is that if you visit Sitara, do find your star, that One True Story. Because it is not going to be easy to pin just one down. ■

For booking details visit www.sitarahimalaya.com
The writer travelled as a guest of Sitara