



Clockwise from here: a bedroom; the villas; the reception and restaurant; private living area; and spa

EDITED BY MANIDIPA MANDAL

HOTELS

CHECK OUT 42 AALIA, HARIDWAR 46 HYATT PLACE, DUBAI/AL RIGGA 50 PERSONAL CHOICE IMRAN KHAN WE LIKE AHILYA BY THE SEA, NERUL, GOA 52 FRESH SHEET KEEMALA, PHUKET

[CHECK OUT]

HOME IN THE RANGE

Aalia, just beyond Haridwar, makes for a wildly comfortable pilgrimage to the Rajaji National Park, says **Manidipa Mandal**

Checking into my wood-floored room felt...unexpectedly like a homecoming. After all, I had walked along a pathway curving around a *champa (Plumeria) tree in a pebbled court-

yard; past a glass-panelled and nicely stocked library; and up the stairs to a bedroom with a family-sized wood-panelled dressing room leading into a bathroom you could wash a dog and two kids in together, plus

a double-width jacuzzi overlooking the Ganga on the balcony across the stairwell. With a spacious kitchenette and living/dining room and one more bedroom with French windows downstairs, and another bedroom up top,

all with little terraces with tea tables, each of the Aalia villas was surprisingly like a cluster of posh holiday homes.

Posh given the ATVs on the pebble-strewn beach, the helipad on the lawn next to the archery range and across from the infinity pool, and also the cigar lounge and the boardroom and the children's club and climbing wall and trampoline and the machaan of a restaurant away towards the reception. And surprising given the glass-walled, granite-clad, pebble-and-bamboo-framed reception itself that greeted me first, a very subdued, soothing and boutique-y welcome after the bouncy, rainy ride through the temple town which would have suggested anonymity more than family feeling.

I soon find they are not at odds, though. Except for the evening aarti

and the kids' play areas, and despite the villas cheek by jowl, I hardly ever run into other guests though they are running close to full capacity this long festive weekend. It seems, apart from breakfast, most people prefer to drink in their whirlpool, take tea on their terrace and order dinner in their rooms and relax with the family. Or else head out for a jeep safari, appetites whetted by the lovely last stretch of their rides through field and forest to see the elephants. The closest I get to socialising is in the pool. Otherwise, when not relaxing at 'home', guests are off at the spa and getting a flower-shaded massage in the courtyard below the neighbouring villa; or out meandering past the agricultural villages of my neighbourhood on mountain bikes or shank's mare—it is a great

place for birdwatching; or go white-water rafting near Rishikesh upstream from here.

No silly bonfires and barbecues distract me from the star-swathed skies at night. The lure of the TV screens cannot hold a candle to the heavens, uninterrupted by even outdoor lighting. So cosy, so thoughtful. Between sunrise to sunset, ranging from picturesque to photogenic, no matter how your taste in photography runs—although the loss of a pretty oxbow lake after the Ganga mulishly switched its course has left the general manager a little sad.

If the furniture and fixtures look a bit 'lived in', that is almost endearing given how close this getaway is to the congestion of Haridwar's largely unimposing accommodations. And

A view of the Ganga from the extensive lawns of Aalia



yet, for all its easy access from Rishikesh and Dehradun and Delhi, it is a delightfully quiet and private retreat. Even the birds feel the safety of its walls, swifts and woodpeckers and tailor bird and sunbird and bulbul and yes the fishing kites. Indeed, we are more surprised at the lack of langurs given the prominent glasshouse of the dining space, with smokers' tables looking out to the river where the farmers navigate boulders and pebbles with their teams of water buffaloes.

And if the menu is restricted to Continental and Indian crowd-pleasers, who can blame them given the frequent cargo embargoes that cripple the freight highway through Haridwar? After all, this is the closest you can get to a full English with sausage and eggs or a bottle of sparkling wine near the vegetarian, teetotaler city

limits. Staff are quick, attentive, unobtrusive, both housekeeping and room/restaurant service. And the portions are ample, preparations well executed. Enough that I contemplate packing a box of their ginormous club sandwich platters for the journey home, rather than fuel up at the usual pit stops.

We hear trekkers and mountaineers come here to be pampered after a tryst with the harsher side of the Himalaya. What is classy comfort for the citified is positively indulgent luxury after camping, surely. Certainly the foothills of the Chila range make for a more authentic footnote to an Indian idyll that looks beyond the rigid and relentless royal triptych of the Golden Triangle. If the little punctuation of pleasure and leisure brings farther travellers wandering closer to some of the most majestic heights of the na-

tion, surely no one can have cause for complaint! Indeed, I am surprised this property, just a few seasons old, is not more talked about, but one can hardly blame lucky stumblers-upon from wanting to keep it quiet. 

THE INFORMATION

LOCATION Near Rajaji National Park, Chila Range, Shyampur Noamabad, Haridwar; about 10km uphill from Haridwar town

ACCOMMODATION 12 Chila suites, 12 Garden suites and 12 River suites (one each per category in each villa), including 4 Aalia villas with one suite of each category and a kitchen and dining-drawing room apiece

TARIFF Rack rates: ₹12,500 (Chila suite), ₹15,000 (Garden suite), ₹16,500 (River suite), ₹45,000 (full villa, i.e. three suites), ₹55,000 (Aalia villa). Check their website for attractive Best Available Rates.

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