

atleisure

ZOO

at home in **THE HILLS**

Chirpy mornings, undulating views of orchards and deodar forests, a cosy, creaking

All izz well, I felt like crying out loud! The front tyres of our Honda City were stuck deep in mud on a narrow *kuchha* path in the middle of a sugarcane field! It can barely get any more adventurous than that, unless, of course, you discount crossing an almost knee-deep stream minutes ago. We had to turn onto the alternative path as the bridge to Tanda had broken down in places, rendering it unusable for four-wheelers. It's not that there weren't other ways to reach Nainital after crossing Moradabad, but we decided to go by some smart Alec's 'smart route' (posted on a travel web forum) to the hill station, in order to save us a good 70 km-drive. I started believing that it's our lot to attract unwarranted adventure and stunts on all our road trips.

But I'm not complaining. We were excited about the almost impromptu long-weekend plan to Ramgarh, some 22 km ahead of Nainital. We were skipping Nainital for it was too crowded for the kind of escape we were looking for.

HISTORY

Taradale Cottage, built sometime in the early 1900s, was christened after the illustrious aristocrat-diplomat Major General Tara Singh Bal. The grey and white stucco façade is enhanced by the huge bay windows, charming verandas, and furnishings with Victorian trims.

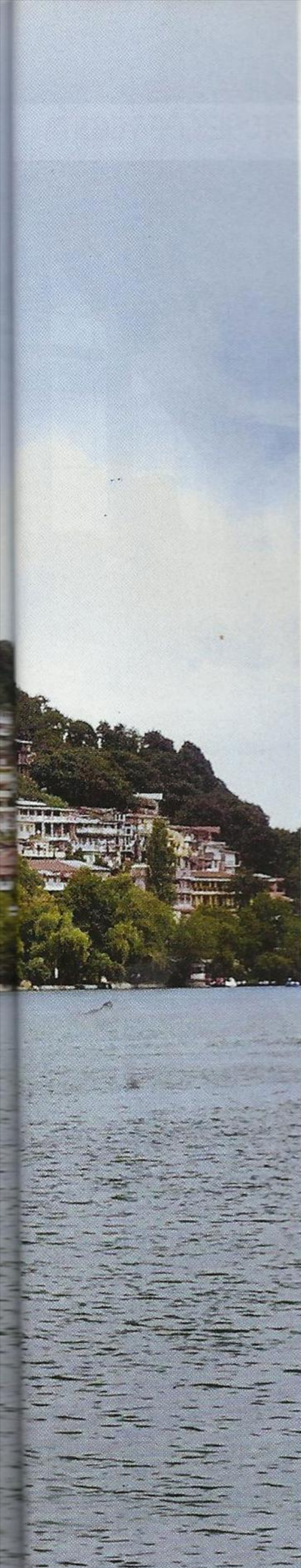
SERENE WATERS: (Facing page) Boating in the calm Naini lake; a bird's eye view of Khurpa Tal

About 10 km short of Nainital, we came across a rush of tourists posing and clicking away eagerly. We stopped out of curiosity. Down below was a stunning view of Khurpatal, the lake we had just crossed. After a few clicks, and throwing plenty of adjectives at the valley view, we too were on our way.

When we reached Nainital, it was struggling to breathe with the onslaught of holidaymakers,

ambling in its narrow streets, while Mall Road had fallen to mass mall crawl. But it is the sight of the Naini lake that never fails to draw gasps. The colourful paddle and row boats look like mere toys in its expansive, sparkling waters, hemmed by stern-looking hills, their chests puffed up with pride. But there was no opportunity to stop the car and dwell on the lake, or even catch a quick picture of the cricket match in progress at the nearby skating rink. We musn't fall for Nainital now, for we had to move ahead to Ramgarh.

Ramgarh is about an hour's drive from Nainital, and is a far cry

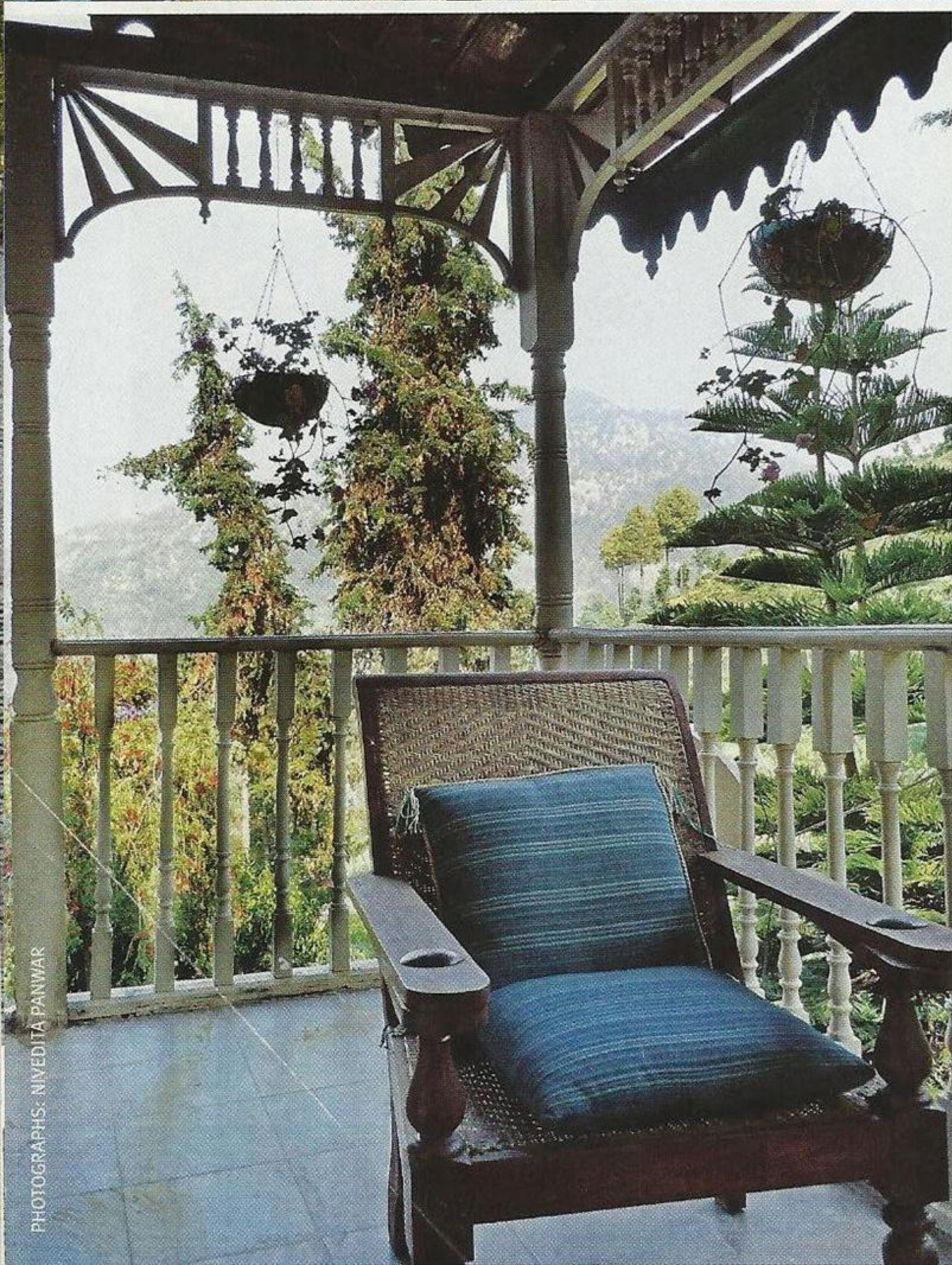


JITENDRA SINGH



cottage, and some wonderful meals await you at Ramgarh, says **Nivedita Panwar**

THE PRISTINE DRIVE TO RAMGARH TAKES YOU PAST TINY HOUSES, LITTLE PATCHES OF VEGET



ATION, ROADSIDE STALLS OF KAAFAL AND KHUBANI, AND RUDDY-CHEEKED CHILDREN

from the jumble and jostle of the latter. A pristine drive takes you past tiny houses, little patches of vegetation, roadside stalls of *kaafal* and *khubani*, and ruddy-cheeked children happily waving at you. We turn into a narrow road, and stop by some locals to take further directions to the WelcomHeritage Taradale Cottage. They call out to Omi, the manager-cum-housekeeper of the Cottage, who helps us with the luggage.

We had finally arrived, except that the cottage was 250 m downhill, approached by a *pug-undee*. Omi had already disappeared with our bags, and we tiredly negotiated the way. The scene that met our eyes as we descended last few steps to the cottage, was a riot! It was as if an artist had decided to use his entire colour palette at one go. A burst of pink, purple, white, yellow, blue and orange flowers winked from among the dizzying shades of green all around. And the happy riot seemed to nestle in an all-pervading comfort that exudes from a house lovingly built and carefully maintained. The wind chimes tinkled in welcome.

Every corner of the Cottage whispered old world. The neat metal plaques announcing Foyer, Parlour, Game Room, and Powder Room, the grandfather clocks, the wrought iron sofas and chairs in the sitting area outside, the pastel-coloured linen blinds and upholstery in soft, floral prints, the kelims and runners on the wooden stairs and floors, the numerous black-and-white photographs and the huge Japanese origami fan lining the stairway, the high-backed two-seater and telescope sitting neatly on the first floor landing, and the welcoming, high-ceilinged rooms out of which one had skylights, and another was an attic room.

Six in all, the rooms were thoughtfully and wonderfully done up in the brightest of hues - from canary yellow, pistachio green, malta orange, to bougainvillea pink. But what really brought out the best in these rooms was that the reigning colour was white and these bright hues just offered cheerfulness by way of curtains, cushions and little trimmings in the upholstery, adding unmistakable class and taste to the whole experience. Above all, I was

Navigator

GETTING THERE

By air: Pantnagar (** km away) is the nearest airport.

By rail: Kathgodam (** km away) is the nearest railhead.

By road: The Delhi-Noida - Ghaziabad - Hapur - Moradabad - Kashipur - Ramnagar - Kaladhungi - Nainital - Bhowali - Ramgarh route might be the longest (about 350 km), but is also the cleanest.

WHERE TO STAY

WelcomHeritage Taradale Cottage (on PWD Rest House Road), Village Bohrakot, Tehsil, (Malla), Ramgarh, Dist. Nainital, Kumaon, Uttarakhand. Tel: 05942 281189, holidays@welcomheritagehotels.com

KUMAONI MENU

The food deserves a special mention here - from succulent mutton and melt-in-the-mouth chicken dishes, to a bevy of simple vegetarian fare, you wouldn't want to miss your meals. The must-try Kumaoni delicacies include the *urad ki roti*, *dhubkay* (a dish of ground rice and ground white lentils in a gravy), Kumaoni raita, and desserts that include *baal singhodi mithai* (burpees wrapped in edible leaves) and *aloo ki laudge*.

COMFORT ZONE: (Facing page, clockwise from top) A well-appointed room; the Cottage facade; balcony with a view

thankful for the absence of trophy heads - they make me nervous like someone's always watching my movements. But nothing beat the jolly welcome extended by Whiskey, the two-and-a-half-month old Bhutani pup, a bundle of energy and innocence and a resident at Taradale Cottage.

I love noisy mornings, and more so when on holiday. And mountain retreats offer the most alluring start to the day with enthusiastic rooster calls and the cheery conversations of birds. But Ramgarh was a first. I've never woken up to such a chatter of birds and morning sounds, as if they were all calling out to me to step out on the balcony and capture it all in my memory forever.

Beyond the terraced fields, and the endless orchards that lay right across my balcony, there was a smudge of orange on the silhouette of the hills afar, defining the jagged mountainscape like a needle etching a pulsating life. I had just pledged my heart to Taradale Cottage.

With the sun streaming from the mish mash of trees, and the wind playing singsong amidst the thick greens lent by apple, plum, nashpati, khubani, and apricot trees in the cover of pines, cedars and deodars, I settled myself in one of the long-armed easy chairs out on the balcony, with a cup of ginger tea warming my palms and a light blanket warming my feet, enjoying the fuzzy feeling of being alive.

Even though there's plenty to do around the property, we decided to play lazy. The mornings were spent having a leisurely breakfast cooked by Chef Shankar, followed by chasing Whiskey around the lawns. A short stint with the TV and a leisurely one with the book (the Cottage also has a good collection of light reads) later, we used to return to the dining room for another scrumptious meal and divine dessert. The afternoons were devoted to naps on the long-armed resting chairs in the balcony, while the evenings demanded a walk in the ample Cottage grounds or a game of carrom and pool, nursing a drink or two. And our conversation would veer towards what chef would make for dessert today. ■