

An aerial photograph of a mountain estate. In the center, a large, multi-story stone building with a tiled roof sits on a hillside. To its left, a smaller, conical-roofed structure is visible. The surrounding landscape is a mix of green pine trees and brownish, rocky terrain. In the background, a deep valley opens up, showing a winding road and a small white building. The sky is a pale, hazy blue. The overall scene is serene and scenic.

COVER STORY BY MASON

# ESTATELY CHARMS

NANDINI MEHTA DISCOVERS ITMENAAN ESTATE, AN UNLIKELY  
BUT CHARMING WINTER GETAWAY IN A PERFECT SETTING.  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SANKAR SRIDHAR





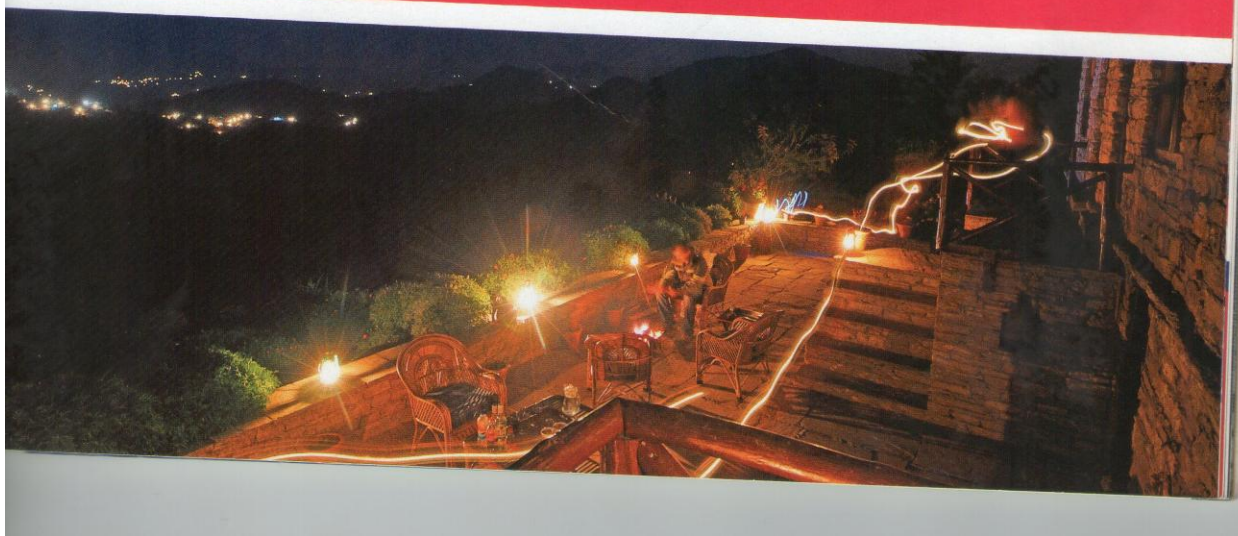
*A Kumaoni woman; and  
(left) Itmenaan Estate,  
hidden among pine groves*





*Clockwise from this picture:  
rituals at the Jageshwar temple;  
staff at the Estate carry lanterns;  
morning tea in the courtyard*

WEEN A FOREST OF DEODARS AND A MEANDERING RIVULET



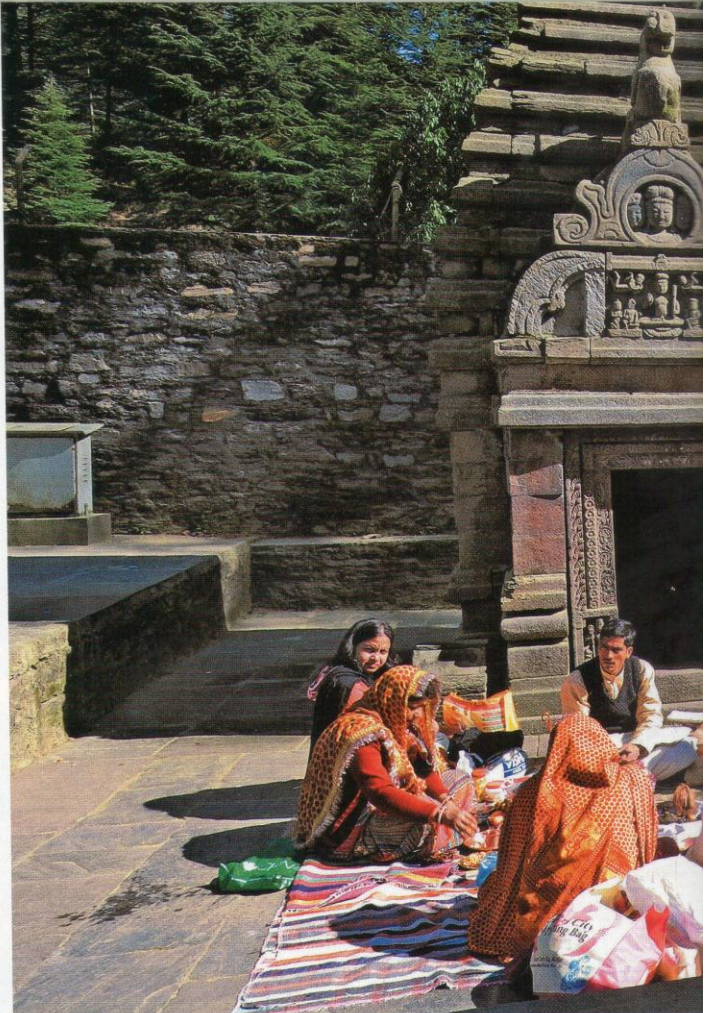


## KUMAON

**W**hen IIM-Ahmedabad graduate Ashish Bhatia stumbled upon the village of Naugaon in Uttarakhand's Almora district, he knew at once that he'd finally found the slice of paradise he had been searching for. It was a bracing February day—the rhododendrons just beginning to come into crimson bloom amidst the oak forests around the village, the sky a cloudless blue, the sun glinting off a vast amphitheatre of terraced fields rippling down to the valley floor, where a rivulet sparkled and gurgled. Best of all, there was a hundred-year-old traditional Kumaoni house for sale just a fifteen-minute walk down from the roadhead; it came with ten acres of those terraced fields and a heart-stopping, panoramic view of the great snowclad peaks—Trishul, Nanda Devi, Mektoli, Nandakot and Panchachuli.

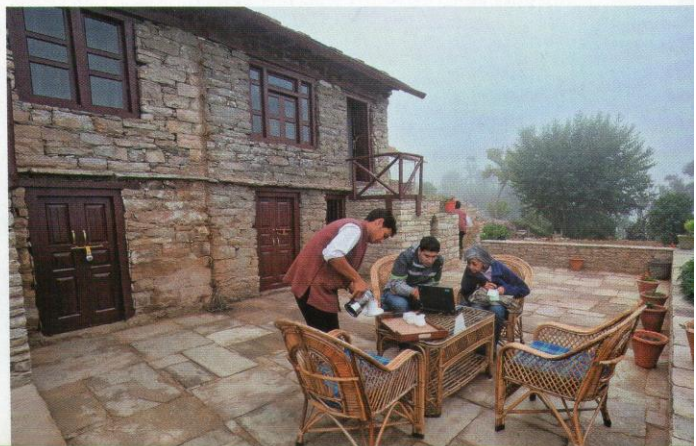
Just eight months later, working at break-neck speed, and with all his problem-solving skills as a high-flying management consultant called into play, Bhatia is now ready to welcome the world into his hidden corner of Kumaon, which he has christened Itmenaan Estate. The crumbling farmhouse has been painstakingly restored, with mod cons installed, and offers three rooms for guests. When we arrived on a mid-November evening, Bhatia was waiting for us in the stone-flagged courtyard where geraniums flowered in their pots, a blazing bonfire and the setting sun cast a warm orange glow and a full moon rose from behind the hill, bathing the house in a silvery glow.

A major passion driving Bhatia's hospitality venture in Kumaon is his zeal to revive the lovely



## IT'S AN ENCHANTING SETTING, THE TEMPLES NESTLED BET

stone houses of Kumaon, many of which are being torn down and replaced by concrete boxes. And Itmenaan Estate's restoration has been a triumph—local masons and carpenters have enthusiastically revived their almost-forgotten skills to reconstruct its dry-stack stone walls (a technique known as *kori-china*), line them with mud plaster, install the huge wooden beams that support the ceiling and lay its slate roof. It's an architecture that not only harmonises with the landscape, it also works beautifully in this climate (Itmenaan is at an altitude of 1,800m)—the stone walls retain the warmth of the sun and the mud





## KUMAON

*Rustic elegance in a bedroom at the Estate*

and husk plaster provides additional insulation, so that the rooms are wonderfully cosy, even on winter nights. Much of the building material has been salvaged from demolished houses in the neighbourhood, but—to Bhatia's delight—many impressed Naugaon residents are now thinking twice about pulling down their old houses.

Another aim of Itmenaan Estate is to offer stressed-out city dwellers an authentic taste of rural life—the luxury of space, silence, clean air, long walks, magnificent landscapes, no crowds (“and no TV and no spa,” adds Bhatia), but with all the comforts not usually associated with rural tourism: impeccable cleanliness, super-comfy beds, plush bathrooms, 24/7 hot water and electricity and gourmet meals. Within a couple of hours of arriving and unwinding over chilled white wine, we get an actual taste of rural Kumaon: delectable soup and chutney made from hemp; thick millet rotis, chicken cooked with coriander and other herbs, green lau saag and a

smoky-flavoured daal made from a small black bean called *bhatt*. Dessert is banana mousse and a lemon cake that has just emerged from a wood-fired oven, where all the bread and cookies are also baked fresh every day.

The chef, Navin, like the rest of the staff, is an ambitious local youngster, and that too is part of Bhatia's plan—to closely involve the village community, whether it is through providing employment, training in hospitality, sourcing milk and other foods from neighbours or in pioneering new agricultural practices. He's turning his estate into a kind of model farm, experimenting with pomegranate, strawberry, broccoli and other things never tried by Naugaon farmers before. He has, moreover, pledged to plough in ten per cent of Itmenaan Estate's profits into local development, especially in health and education. “When I can do all these exciting things here,” he says, grinning happily, “why would I want to remain a management consultant!”

THE ROOMS ARE WONDERFULLY COSY, EVEN ON WINTER NIGHTS

