

5 EASY TRIPS

Itmenaan only has three rooms, but they're all luxurious and cosy



Itmenaan Estate, Almora, Uttarakhand

HIDEAWAY IN THE HILLS

"A couple of days ago, there was talk of a leopard picking up goats from the nearby villages," says naturalist Avijit Dutta, with a glint in his eye. "And the staff told me that they've seen one right here on our lawn," he says, pointing to a spot a few metres from where we're seated. Leopard scares aside, Itmenaan Estate, set in the Kumaon Himalayas, is a wonderful hideaway in the truest sense of the word. Just getting to Itmenaan (meaning relaxation or leisure)

is an adventure. The drive over winding roads from Almora (approx 44km) is a scenic one, with chir pine trees forming a sea of green, as pink and yellow creepers provide bursts of colour, and the cold mountain air turns your nose into an ice cube. If you follow the directions provided by the lodge, it's easy to get to this 10-acre property. The hotel staff waits for you with walking sticks by the side of a deserted road. You look around, wondering where the estate is. Then, you spot a *kaccha* road

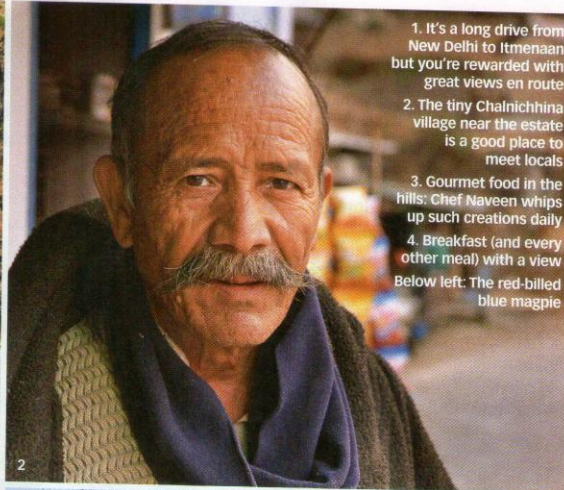
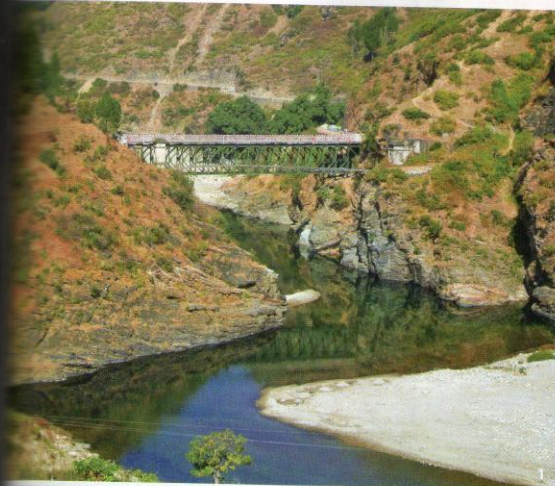
next to the main one, sloping downwards (a bit steeply at that). A 25-minute trek down the stony path will give you your first sight of terraced fields dotted with a few stone village houses. Then, you turn a corner and find yourself standing in front of a stone house, similar to the others but with a neat coat of paint and a landscaped lawn.

The interiors of this 100-year-old renovated house are another matter altogether. There's no hint of the rural within – these are luxurious, well-appointed rooms with

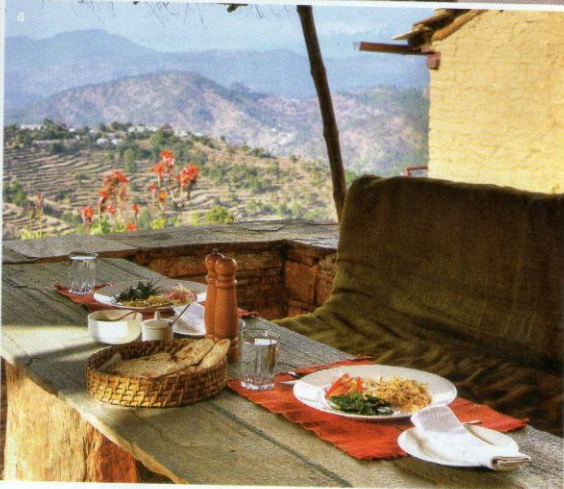
a bathroom to die for, complete with skylights, a separate shower area with a raised wooden platform, brass buckets, bins and soap dispenser and, to bring in a touch of the local, a *lota* with which to bathe, too!

The lodge is big on the preservation of the local community and its culture, and uses materials available within a 100-mile radius, so most of the stuff (and the





1. It's a long drive from New Delhi to Itmenaan but you're rewarded with great views en route
 2. The tiny Chalnichhina village near the estate is a good place to meet locals
 3. Gourmet food in the hills: Chef Naveen whips up such creations daily
 4. Breakfast (and every other meal) with a view
- Below left: The red-billed blue magpie



GREAT FROM

New Delhi

GREAT FOR

Treks, photography and dining – a lot

DO NOW

Enjoy the bracing weather.

(ff) on the estate is local. The house is built in the traditional style with stones stacked above one another to create the walls, and pine logs and slate stone used for the roof. Outside,

the dining shed is fashioned similarly, with tables made with logs and stone slabs. Close to the dining shed is another stone structure that serves as the staff quarters-cum-kitchen, where Chef Naveen cooks up a storm.

Don't worry about piling on the kilos though, as anything you do will involve hiking. Be it a visit to the local Chalnichhina *ghanti ka mandir* (three hours away; open 24/7; free), or the village walk (two hours away; free), or the garden walk (one hour away; free), every activity works your calf muscles,

and challenges your sense of balance as you trot along narrow trails. Quite tough, you think, as you try to work out whether this tuft of grass will be a better foothold than that rock, until you see a bunch of local school kids prancing down the slopes with ease. If you aren't used to trekking, this is when you'll decide to join that Pilates class back home, but hold that thought: while you're there, concentrate on waking up to views of the mighty Himalayas, experiencing stunning sunsets and spotting flocks of red-billed

blue magpies gliding from tree to tree, with Himalayan bulbuls darting in and out of plants. And on planning to visit again in flowering season (June – October), when the raspberry and rhododendron trees will have painted the landscape a vivid red, while wild flowers add dashes of lilac and yellow. Because, sure, the treks will have you huffing, but then, you've got to earn your *itmenaan* here.

WORDS HARDIKA PANCHAL
PHOTOGRAPHS VISHAL SABHARWAL

TURN OVER FOR ALL YOU NEED TO GET THERE

5 EASY TRIPS ITMENAAN ESTATE, ALMORA, UTTARAKHAND

FACT SHEET

GETTING THERE

Closest metro: New Delhi (375km). It's a 10-hour drive, long but pretty, from New Delhi to Itmenaar Estate.

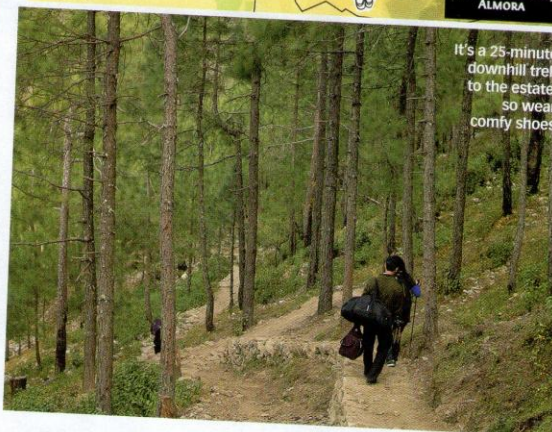
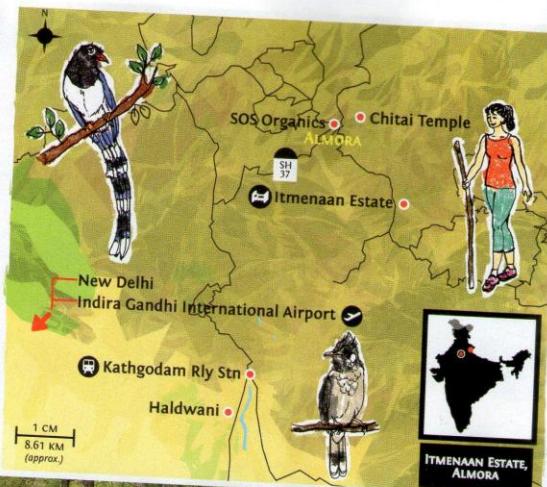
Closest airport: New Delhi's **Indira Gandhi International Airport** (370km). Itmenaar Estate can arrange for transfers (from ₹ 10,500 for an AC Innova one-way).

Closest railhead: **Kathgodam** is a three-to four-hour drive from Itmenaar (82km). The **15013 Ranikhet Express** is

a good option (leaves Old Delhi Railway Station [DLI] 10.40pm, arrives Kathgodam [KGM] 5.05am; ₹ 394 3AC). Take the **15014 Ranikhet Express** on your way back (leaves KGM 8.40pm, arrives DLI 3.55am; ₹ 394 3AC). From here, Itmenaar Estate can arrange for transfers (from ₹ 3,500 for an AC Innova or Tavera one-way).

GETTING AROUND

Apart from driving to Almora, you trek to get anywhere! Itmenaar Estate will arrange a visit to Almora and the Chitai Temple at ₹ 3,200 in an Innova.



sosorganics.in, sosorganics@gmail.com; Chitai, Pant Almora; 9.30am – 5pm. Handmade soap ₹ 80/100 (factory tour free). While driving through Almora (44km/2h), you can also pick up balti, a popular sweet in this region made of khoya and sugar at the famed **Khim Singh Rautela sweet shop** (00-91-5962-230105; Mall Almora; 6am – 8pm; ₹ 200).

CLEAN LOO GUIDE

Half-way into the drive from New Delhi (about 114km) at Gajraula, the forest at the Bharat Petroleum pump has Café Coffee Day, McDonald's and Dominos outlets, while the Indian restaurant Tadka serves typical North Indian at reasonable rates (00-91-9927080188; NH 24, Delhi Rd, Gajraula; 24/7; from ₹ 200 paratha, from ₹ 80 thali). Most towns thereafter, like Morad Rudrapur and Haldwani, have good restaurants and Café Day outlets with clean loos.

SAFETY

Don't venture off property at dark: leopards are on the prowl.

MEDICAL AID

The nearest chemist is in Chalnichhina (a 15-minute walk away). There's a government facility in Almora called **Dena Hospital** (00-91-5962-2306118; Matena Village, Almora) while Haldwani (135km) has many big hospitals for more serious medical emergencies.

CHILD-FRIENDLINESS

Avoid bringing very young children here, as the treks are steep and often tough.

GOOD TO KNOW

- ◆ Itmenaar Estate is unfit for elderly and very young children as there's lots of climbing up and down the hills to be done.
- ◆ Driving in the hills is a daunting task unless you're an experienced driver. Get the estate to hire a driver if you aren't comfortable driving.
- ◆ While the drive from New Delhi is scenic, it's very long. It's best to take a train to Kathgodam and then drive to the estate.

WHERE TO STAY

Itmenaar Estate: There are three rooms now, but two larger rooms – to sleep five each – are under construction, so ask about those if you're travelling with the whole shebang (₹ 12,000 for two with all meals, snacks, tea/coffee, soft drinks and guide for walks). They also have a two-night/ three-day 'Hassle-free Package' for two (from Delhi only) that includes all the travel arrangements – 2AC train tickets, an AC Innova from Kathgodam Station to Itmenaar Estate and back, and an all-inclusive stay for ₹ 34,000 (reservations: 00-91-11-26122509, 00-91-9818705508; itmenaar-lodges.com, info@itmenaar-lodges.com; Village Naugaon, Tehsil Bhanoli, District Almora; check website for more offers).



WHAT TO EAT

The food at the estate is delicious. Expect well-planned, three-course meals. Lunch begins with pita bread and a dip, followed by three kinds of salads – sweet, tangy and warm – and mains like roasted aubergine and egg topped with a salsa and cheddar cheese, or stuffed cutlets and pasta, and dessert. Dinners are usually an Indian affair where you can sample Kumaoni cuisine, too. But if you want to try authentic Kumaoni cuisine, like *bhat ki dal* (a type of lentil), *madue ki roti* and *lai ki sabzi* (a type of leafy veggie), try **Tewari Bhojanalaya**, near Almora's famed Chitai Temple (00-91-8938964769; 10am – 8am winter, 10am – 10pm summer; madue ki roti ₹ 25, lai ki sabzi ₹ 10, bhat ki dal ₹ 20).



WHAT TO PACK

Motion sickness meds for the winding *ghat* roads, woollens, moisturiser and sunscreen, a book and an iPod.



SHOPPING

SOS Organics is a natural cosmetics and organic health food company, whose factory is located in Pant Village, a 200m walk from the famous Chitai Temple in Almora. It produces handmade soaps, cosmetics, seasonings, organic food and candles and retails them in select stores all over the country (check website for outlets), but you can pick up some from the factory itself, too. You can also peek into the factory to watch the soaps and candles being made by the local girls (00-91-9719849569;

