



[CHECK OUT]

## SUCH A BLESSING

Lalitha Sridhar finds the Marasa Sarovar Premiere unique and outstanding because it's in Tirupati

It is a truth universally acknowledged (or at least it should be!) that some of the most visited destinations in India inspire tremendous piety but not, regrettably, the desire to linger. I refer, of course, to the great religious sites of the subcontinent, thronged by thousands of the ardent faithful, with questionable infrastructure catering indifferently to floating hordes that aren't going to stand around demanding better. The privileged arrive by air-conditioned transport and hurry away just as quickly, while the other Indias, which animate and transform every such trip of mine, carry on as before, only in ever larger numbers, their devotion undiminished by the vicissitudes of an unequal life. It has only become harder, if not impossible, to conceive of a soothing trip (dare I say holiday?) in such a setting. I begin with such a long-winded note because Marasa Sarovar Premiere, unwieldy as it sounds, has arrived purposefully as 'the

first world class hotel at the holy feet of Tirumala, Tirupati', no less. Interesting! So I packed with atypical alacrity, throwing in a couple of extras. Who knew? I might want to hang around a bit.

I left Chennai alone and early on a diverting road trip, elongated by impulsive halts for the famous Subramanya temple at Tiruttani (the signage announcing which I chanced upon en route) and the shrine to Venkateswara's goddess-consort, Padmavathi Ammavari, at Alamelumangapuram in the outskirts of Tirupati. So when I arrived at the Marasa Sarovar (past an unremarkable residential layout till the road ended at a small hill, which nicely backdrops the hotel), I was tired and hungry. This only made my heart lurch with anticipation when I was delivered to the expansive portico, my bags scooped even before I had made my way up the short flight of polished granite steps (recalling the modern Kalki, I was later told) to the

Kurma-themed 'transformative' reception. Oh, yes, this is also India's 'first Dasavatara hotel', conceptualised after the ten incarnations of Vishnu—there's also Rama (the social banquet hall), Matsya (water-centric pool court, naturally), Varaha (fiercely presiding over, er, indoor games), Parasurama (powerful, and therefore a gym!), Krishna (the versatile vegetarian thali restaurant), Narasimha (the 'transitional' Lotus café with fluted wood panelling and a roof crafted like petals), Vamana (the intellectual meeting room) and Buddha (the peaceful spa).

Egad, I thought. But it wasn't a case of symbolic overload, thank heavens. In fact, Marasa Sarovar understates its design sensibilities with quiet self-possession. It's a high-ceilinged sprawl with generously assigned spaces shimmering in jewel tones beside spotless plate glass and shallow pools of water (the swimming pool is away from full view, discreetly to the left of the





Clockwise from here: reception; a room; Krishna, the thali restaurant; and the property set against the Tirumala hills



walkway that connects the reception areas and restaurants to the four storeys of rooms set at the rear, the layout reminiscent of a linear temple plan with the shallow water bodies a contemporised take on the *kulam* or *kund*). The references to the Hindu god among gods are equally muted—the reception uses the geometric pattern seen on a tortoise's shell in brass inlaid veneer; the peacock-feather, butter pot and flute celebrate Krishna in turquoise at the restaurant; the exquisitely crafted bow in a matte finish (observe the inspired chandeliers) denotes Rama at the meeting room done up in a regal red and purple for him. If the public spaces benefit from dhokra cast metal door handles and artworks in superbly etched Dasavatara-inspired motifs, accents from the local Mangalagiri looms are seen in the carpets and bed runners of the guest rooms.

In fact, Marasa Sarovar Premiere never loses sight of its role as a modern hotel for pilgrim travellers. There's high speed wi-fi at no charge, round the clock multi-cuisine in-room dining options to match any upscale urban hotel, flexible check-in and check-out (takeaway breakfasts are offered for early check-outs), and the chef address-

es possible food taboos by making 'your dish, your way'. If that's one side to it, on the other are plush beds and smart bathrooms, a small but splendid spa, and terrific food.

Whereas I am happy to recommend the potato parmesan, 'Mexican spaghetti', paneer jalfrezi, *lauki kheer*, apple crumble and such other delicious stuff from the rotating dinner buffet menu, I have to say I enjoyed the native cuisine the most—*dondakaya* (ivy gourd) fried with crunchy peanuts, *chikkudukaya poriyal* (a side dish of lightly flavoured cluster beans), capsicum *more kolambu* (divinely creamy spiced yoghurt) and *munakaya pulusu* (drumsticks in a mouthwatering gravy). Some of these dishes pop up at Lotus Café's buffets but Krishna, the thali restaurant, is really the best place enjoy them, because it's here that the perfectly cooked smorgasbord is served with rice and accompaniments like carrot *bajji*, gun powder, just-fried papad, *gongura* pickle and spiced buttermilk (four-star fare for ₹250 plus taxes).

That would have been more than enough to herald the arrival of a good hotel but the service gets the last word. Marasa Sarovar's personnel are mostly local and small town.

I have no doubt they are trained in the art of hospitality but no quality standard can account for such genuine warmth, personal concern and an almost naïve interest in the well-being of a guest. It never wavered, not when I got back past ten in the night after a fleeting darshan of the god on the hill, nor when I left for Tirumala again at half past four in the morning. I returned from each fulfilling excursion to superb aesthetics, thoughtful mod cons, reflective quietude and winsome service. It was easily my most memorable trip to Tirupati.

### THE INFORMATION

**LOCATION** Marasa Sarovar Premiere, Upadhyaya Nagar, Karakambadi Road, Tirupati (30min/18km from Renigunta airport; 10min/4.5km from Tirupati railway station). Cabs are arranged (₹1,000 for airport pickup; ₹600 for railway station).

**ACCOMMODATION** 71 deluxe rooms, 44 premiere rooms, 6 suites

**TARIFF** ₹3,500 inclusive taxes and breakfast for double occupancy in deluxe rooms, ₹4,500 for premiere rooms, and ₹8,000 for suites

**CONTACT** 0877-6660000, sarovarhotels.com