

[CHECK OUT]

HAVE A LITTLE FAITH

An agnostic goes to Haridwar and finds herself well-humoured and rejuvenated. **Nayanika Mukherjee** was left pleasantly surprised at the Haveli Hari Ganga

The first thing you notice is the fat Bhagavad Gita on your table. Set in a bright hardbound cover, it stands out much more than the cacophony of bells that greet you at the entrance. Probably because you don't expect it inside your average, clinical hotel room. But this place is anything but detached. Over the course of my stay, I was surprised at how subtly the Haveli Hari Ganga wove in devotional aspects of Hinduism and *pahadi* culture without being preachy. I'd expected a pushy pleasantness, and the fact that the hotel didn't take itself (and its location) too seriously, was a refreshing start.

This is a 107-year-old property that's retained most of its original workings. The marble bases for each bed—connected with longer slabs to the wall, which act as your side table—are just as how they were when the royal family of Pilibhit first lived here. The family's old devī mandir dominates the courtyard, and children skip along on antique arabesque. The bathrooms, of course, are the size of a Mumbai apartment. But along with the old, there's amusing touches that bring a smile to your face. I couldn't help but smirk at the coffee machine next to the temple and its old well (imagine the litres of Americano you could make with one happy accident), or at the vintage movie posters—all Ganga-themed—adorning the courtyard. The Pilibhit family photographs line the walls on the ground floor, right next to cabinets of organic honey, face packs and a crafting display.

My family hasn't been one for pilgrimage, which is why I've also missed out on a lot of the more interesting aspects that crop up in these locations. Some of these, like palm reading sessions, are on offer at the hotel.

The property has a charming rooftop restaurant that serves up *kadak* chai, *pakode* and several accompaniments while you bask in the warm sunlight. As my companions munched on eggplant, the in-house palmist took a look at my future. I was told that I'd be writing for the rest of my life and earning truckloads of money (an unlikely combination), unless someone I trusted took me for a ride. Not terrible, but not the spiciest of revelations. The palmist was delightfully accommodating of curious (and perhaps, somewhat blasphemous) questions about the field. He chortled when I pointed my most burning query: if you pick which palm to read based on a person's gender, what do you do when the customer is intersex or transgender?

Aside from the dabbles in astrology, the hotel also offers evening bhajans, flautist sessions and a private ghat if you don't want to brave the crowds at the nearby Har ki Pauri. I can't say I enjoyed the privacy *that* much—the crowds, noise and general liveliness are a necessary part of the experience. The hotel has a special arrangement for its guests if they wish to visit Har ki Pauri for the famous evening aarti as well—a VIP entrance on the bridge overlooking the Ganga and her pandits. Sitting with just three others on a gigantic stairway as throngs of devotees jostled for space below didn't feel entirely right, but the aarti wrapped up in what felt like minutes (I somehow expected it to be more long-drawn and dramatic) and we returned for dinner.

Meat and alcohol may be off-limits in the city, but the food at the haveli is anything but austere. Chef Raja Ganguly does a splendid job of catering to all crowds, be they vegan, Jain or homesick. I could tell almost nothing in the buffet spreads was processed or came out of a bottle. Meat became a distant memory as

we hogged on everything from *dhokla* to ratatouille, mezze platters to *aloo posto*. The terrace seating overlooking the Ganga—its waters, fresh from a glacial outflow, a divine shade of turquoise—was our favourite spot for lunch and *adda*. The scenery from this area, of sparsely-visited ghats and forests, stirred up a hankering for local eats, and we were soon supplied with *aloo puri*, *tehrī pulao*, sweet pumpkin curry and minty green *lassi*. Chef Ganguly informed us that a lot of guests sign up for cooking classes here, where you can learn to make Uttarakhand specialties like *kaffi* (a warming spinach and methi curry) and different kinds of flavoured salt and relish.

If you're not looking to find faith, Haveli Hari Ganga facilitates excursions beyond the ghats and temples. You could head to Rishikesh (one hour away) for rafting, boating or some time at hippie cafés, or visit the nearby Rajaji National Park for safaris and birdwatching. All that food and walking around is bound to get you sleepy, and the cosy Tattva Spa is quick to iron out any tensions. Especially if you're a sore loser after a long, pensive game of chess. The hotel has a lot of these nooks—pink, white, golden—where you could sit for hours. And if you forgot to bring a book, well, the Gita's always there. 

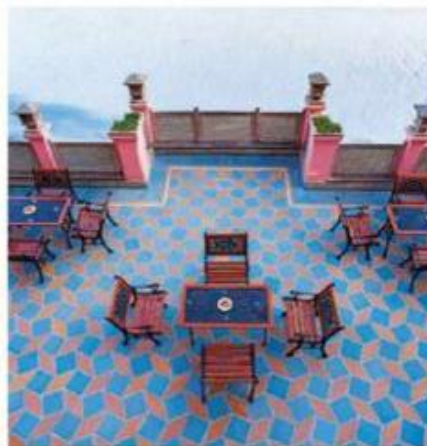
THE INFORMATION

LOCATION 21 Pilibhit House, Ram Ghat, Haridwar. 20 km from Jolly Grant Airport (Dehradun) and 220 km/4.5 hrs from Delhi

ACCOMMODATION 14 heritage rooms and 6 Ganga view suites

TARIFF From ₹8,820 for heritage rooms and ₹10,000 for Ganga view suites. Taxes extra

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*Clockwise from here:
lunchtime views beside the
river; a cosy room; and
adding vintage charm in all
nooks and corners*