



Clockwise from this picture: the pool is both the crown and the heart of The Farm; bedrooms are silver, blue and colourful; the chef's cooking station at the poolside

EDITED BY MANIDIPA MANDAL ■

HOTELS

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[CHECK OUT]

THE ART OF LIVING

Rukminee Guha Thakurta finds The Farm altogether funkier and far quieter than Old MacDonald's

I'll begin this story somewhere near the end of my trip, which is when my hosts at The Farm, Ritu and Surya Singh, request me to "please write this": Don't plan your stay at The Farm if you won't be a considerate guest in their home, if you will be impolite with their staff, if you cannot live without television or if you'll generally be difficult and demanding. This is probably an odd thing to write, but I understand that while there are forums for guests to review hotels and homestays, one never reads rants by the owners and managers in the business, and this is certainly not the first homestay or 'artistic residence'

(as Surya and Ritu like to call their place) where I have heard out exasperated hosts bemoaning disagreeable guests. But if you are not going to be that offensive guest, then read on, because I would highly recommend that you do stay at The Farm, especially if you enjoy peace and quiet, quirky design, marvellous food—a rarity in Jaipur—and sweet hosts. Now to begin at the beginning, which is when I arrive at The Farm, quite tired, after having slept in a different bed each night for several nights (no, not as exciting as that may sound—I was only moving between towns in Shekhawati, seeing havelis with a group of elderly

ladies). All I want to do is sleep; instead, I walk around interestedly, looking at rooms and noting details—because the space is, well, interesting. At the heart of this grassy idyll is a large pool. When weather allows, your days at The Farm can revolve around the poolside. Surya and Ritu, who dreamt up this place, have kept the cooking and dining facilities outdoors—next to the pool and under the stars. There are naturally arrangements to eat indoors when the weather gets nasty; but luckily, it is cool and breezy during my visit. The professional designer in me scans the space critically and decides that there is a laudable effort to keep it

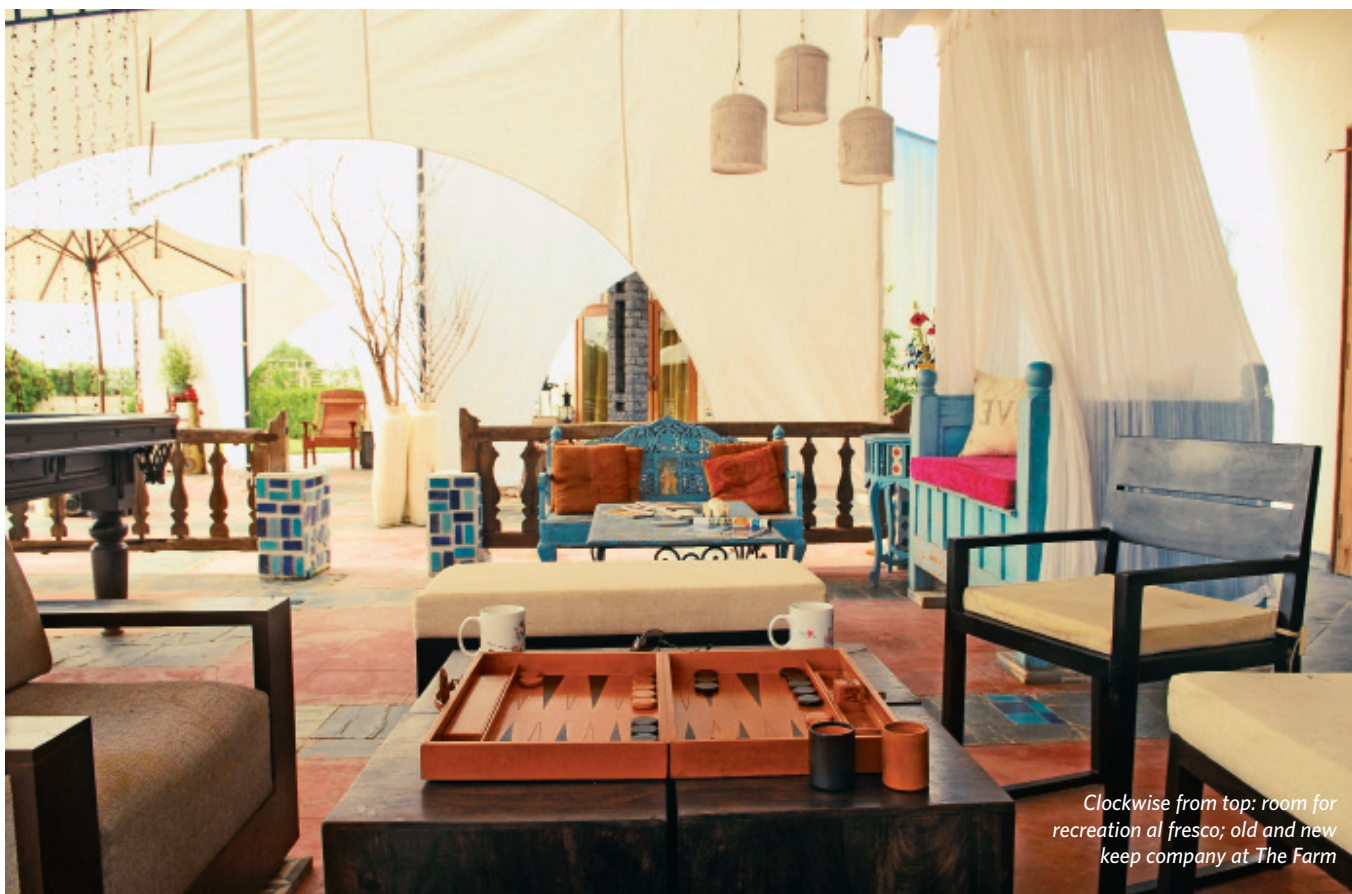


light and easy despite a lot of furniture and other objects strewn here and there. Though my hosts have not studied design, it is apparent that they are preoccupied by it and their vast property is their canvas. They have evidently had a lot of fun collecting and tweaking junk and other things into usable or just admirable objects, which they have placed in their guest rooms and eventually want to sell through a shop they are planning to open on the property. I am not the world's most talented conversationalist and it turns out that Surya too requires a generous amount of prodding in order to break the ice. Over lunch

with him, I wrack my sleep-deprived brain to ask questions, and then give up and just enjoy the excellent food—baked chicken with orange-rocket-walnut salad now; dinner would feature shami kebab for starters with exotic salad greens, followed by Mediterranean fish and rice. I do manage to learn that they used to run a restaurant and that the two of them enjoy pottering around in the kitchen, creating menus and trying out new recipes. After that gargantuan postprandial effort, I decide I definitely need to sleep now. My room looks almost posh with silvery-blue made-ups that I instantly recognise as products from Rasa, a design

house in Jaipur. This is all very nice, but doesn't delight me quite as much as the shower curtain in the bathroom made of bubble wrap, which has been designed in-house. I collapse on to the fancy bed linen and then realise that, from my bed, I can see the bathtub. It has been placed in a sort of no-man's land between the bedroom and the bathroom. There are pretty, diaphanous, white half-curtains to create a separation of spaces; but there it is—a great white tub that watches me while I sleep. I am mildly disgruntled. Happily, my room opens out on to rambling grounds with big trees, and I settle down on the porch after catching forty winks

HOTELS



Clockwise from top: room for recreation al fresco; old and new keep company at The Farm



and watch as Ritu saunters off in the distance with her dogs leaping around her.

This, I think, is living today's urban dream—the sort being sold to every city dweller hoping to buy a home—to stay just outside city limits, to have rooms with a view, a pool to dive into, plants and vegetables to tend to, two dogs to follow at your heels, to see your children run unfettered. We have a chat about this in the evening over beer, under a starry sky, and now the conversation is flowing. We are joined by two more guests—they are a British couple—and we chatter away until midnight.

Surya tells me the story of his family who, in the 1970s, had to quickly dismantle their life in a palace near Udaipur and move to Jaipur when the government informed them that their land would be flooded by the construction of a new dam. The family acquired a new property, where now stands The Farm. Ritu, who is as loquacious as her husband is reserved, has an aura of energy about her. She makes even the furniture come alive as she tells me how they cut and chopped wooden beams from the palace to make outdoor frameworks, rescued vintage toys and collectibles and fitted them into the décor in their rooms, stuck knick-knacks from the old residence on to doors to serve as knobs and mixed and matched old objects with found objects and high design to create their own look. The Farm is very much about its look and vibe, which is haphazard, yet curated; a little mad, yet serene. It makes sense in retrospect, when I think of the temperaments of the couple who are the

central figures there, making it a very personality-driven place. I thoroughly enjoyed their easy, affable charm, the truly good and experimental food cooked with whatever's to hand (rather than to a fixed menu), their polite and considerate staff and the greenery surrounding their home. Go in good weather and be prepared to be taken aback that such a place exists just a thirty-minute drive away from Jaipur.

THE INFORMATION

LOCATION The Farm, Prithvisinghpura, Dhankiya Road, Bad ke Balaji, off Ajmer Road, Jaipur. 30min from the city centre (M.I. Road), 30min from the train station, 40min from the airport

ACCOMMODATION 3 lawn-facing rooms, 2 pool-facing rooms, 1 suite

TARIFF ₹10,000 (rooms), ₹15,000 (suite) with all meals (taxes extra), from July (The Farm is closed May and June).

CONTACT 9828023030, 9982223060, thefarmjaipur.com