

opening

*grand bharat*

# *The Grand Indian*

It is a self-contained all-suite destination resort just south of Delhi. Of course, the ITC Grand Bharat is



# *Hotel*

grand as well, and a grand homage to India, finds **Amit Dixit**

The stylish Apas Promenade, which serves to-die-for local Mewati fare



A healthy dose of scepticism is essential to any investigative project, and this does not exclude inquiries in the reasonably pleasant sphere of travel and hospitality. I, therefore, went laden with a guiltless baggage of doubts to the brand-new ITC Grand Bharat in Manesar. Imagine my surprise when I returned a convert, and a staunch one, after just a two-night stand.

In the few images I skim online before I set foot in it, the hotel seems like a giant confection—of the wedding cake variety. Over the top, skilfully executed and unwavering in its desire to impress, but not really my thing. It's also in the middle of nowhere—but I only think this because I'm not a golfeur. It's not every resort that gets to be next to a 27-hole Jack Nicklaus golf course (South Asia's only such) and devout golfers have been teeing off at ITC's Classic Golf & Country Club next door for years. And how good can the food possibly be?

We set out on a balmy afternoon. Once we pin down the turn-off on the highway, it's lush mustard fields, slumbering villages and lowering Aravalis all the way. The welcome, when we finally roll in, is—what else but—grand. A bugler heralds our approach and nearly sends me bouncing out of my car seat. There's such pomp and pageantry and saluting and salaaming that I can't help feeling special. A short and very wide flight of steps leads up to the domed lobby—aptly named Sangam, or confluence. The benign dome is adorned with a painted tree of life, and surrounded by eight pillars—representing the eight stages of life as expounded in the Vedas. Doors and passageways lead off to restaurants and the bar. A grand staircase elevates you to a ginormous spa and meeting rooms with enviable elbow space. The suites, for this is an all-suite property, are ranged in separate low buildings, interspersed with gardens and water features. It's all laid out in a well being-promoting mandala.

There are two kinds of suites at the Grand Bharat: the pool suites with a semi-private plunge pool and the terrace suites, with a private terrace and a domed ceiling above the bed. Choices, choices. I opt for a pool suite, to which we are escorted by a dedicated butler. It's tastefully, and expensively, furnished with a bedroom, living area, a large bathroom and generous wardrobes. I order a sandwich. The repast

and its accoutrements arrive in a picnic hamper, an elegant solution to their inability to wheel food trolleys around the property.

The experience at the Grand Bharat revolves around three concerns: food, wellness and the outdoors (not just golf; there's everything from Segway rides to zorbing). Of these, the food, helmed by the talented Shivneet Pohoja, is possibly the greatest attraction, and the greatest surprise (of the pleasant variety). There's no rolling out of trusted ITC standards. Each F&B venue is unique and uniquely crafted, care and thought yielding gratifying results at the table.

The Apas Promenade, which sits by the pool and serves regional Mewati fare, is a locavore's table. Everything is sourced from within a small radius of the property and there are dishes you will not encounter elsewhere—the murgh bootan and the bajra tikkia to start, the aloo methi papad ki sabzi and the dhungaar maans to dip hot rotis into, and the bajare ki phirni to finish off. The fresh produce comes from a nearby farm and a citrus plantation is in the works. In season, they serve mustard flowers.

The cheery Aravali Pavilion serves innovative takes on Indian cuisine. Their mulligatawny soup, served with a chorizo kulcha, is to die for. This is also where you repair to for the first meal of the day, not to an indifferent buffet, but to an ample cold spread and hot items off a menu. I can recommend the Grand Chola South Indian platter. If the Aravali Pavilion is informal chic, the India Room (contrary to what you might think, it's a European restaurant, showcasing dishes from nations India has had an association with from ancient to colonial times) pulls out all the stops. It opens only for dinner (barring Sundays) and its interiors are so grand and old world, it would not be out of place in Europe. In fact, it reminds me of Alain Ducasse's Restaurant le Meurice in Paris. Can they match the food though, I wonder as I nurse my complimentary flute of champagne. I needn't have worried. Each dish is a gourmet performance—the prawns piri piri, the velouté of onion, the emmenthal soufflé, the pork belly with puy lentils and balsamic and honey jus—just perfect. Can such a perfect evening get any better? At the Grand Bharat, I am beginning to believe, it can.

Clockwise from top left: the Aravali Pavilion; a suite; Sangam, the lobby; India Room; the Peacock Bar; and specially commissioned artwork at the Aravali Pavilion









## THE INFORMATION

### Location

P.O. Hasanpur, Tauru, Mewat, Gurgaon. 10km from NH-8 (Rajiv Chowk), 32km from the airport.

### Accommodation

100 suites, 4 presidential villas

### Tariff

₹50,000 plus taxes (suites), but excellent deals on advance purchase. ₹500,000 plus taxes (presidential villas)

### Contact

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[itchotels.in](http://itchotels.in)

And so to the stately Peacock Bar. The standard tipples are there, besides the flair, but you come here for classic cocktails, laced with lore, and their newer, molecular cousins. Zac Abbott is the luminous master of ceremonies. If memory serves me right (but you'll understand, it's hazy), he conjured up three drinks—a gin gimlet with bitters, made interesting with a spray of rose water; a sazerac (cognac married with absinthe); and, since I've announced a preference for whisky, a cigar-smoked old fashioned. Something called a PolyScience Smoking Gun is involved in that last one and it's pure theatre. Oh, there was a fourth drink—a bloody good Bloody Mary. Who could have imagined such fun at an old man's bar.

Lest I start thinking I've checked into the Grand Bacchus, Joanna Moran, the spa manager, introduces me to the wellness offerings. The Kaya Kalp Royal Spa currently offers all the good signature brand stuff but will ultimately be enabled though the Ila range of natural plant and mineral products, which are organic, handmade and ethically sourced. Healthy Swasthya cuisine will complete the arc of ingredients that will transform the Grand Bharat into a spa destination.

The Grand Bharat's architectural ingredients have been handpicked from India's past, chosen to embody the spirit of an ur Indian hotel. They have picked

some unusual but overlooked milestones for inspiration, including the stepwell at Adalaj (the detailing of the soaring columns gracing the entrance pavilion and the capitals atop them), the Muktesvara deula in Bhubaneswar (the central dome over the atrium and the torana-style entrance to the hotel block) and the ghats of Varanasi (the steps at 'Yamuna', which separates the hotel block from the main building). And, of course, there is Mughal and Chola. Magically, it all comes together. But that's India for you.

Quite possibly, the Grand Bharat is the best hotel ITC has built so far. Its lavish sprawl feels intimate and that's a feat. It has put Mewat on the map (had you heard of this region before?—and, no, we're not thinking of Mewar). In a masterstroke, having management trainees from the ITC Hotel Management Institute nearby handle the operations, besides doubling up as those nice butlers, considerably elevates the experience. They indulge you to the point of making you feel guilty (how many hotels can make that claim any more?). Then they bring you back from the brink with their 'responsible luxury' spiel.

But that's not enough. Most importantly, in a time when time is a commodity more precious than gold, the Grand Bharat holds up the promise of 'unhurried luxury'. I am certainly in no hurry to leave. /