

# Raising Te Aroha

It's been called the queen of the valley, haven in disguise and the place to find Dhaunchali by bloggers and writers alike. One of the most beautiful landmarks in the sleepy hamlet of this little village on the way to Mukhteswar, Te Aroha, literally meaning 'a place of love' is an award winning boutique hotel – and rightly so. From being the pioneer in eco-building to trending local flavors, this 10-room hotel has many a first to itself, and all thanks to the dedication of one man – owner, Sumant Batra. Here the practicing lawyer turned hotelier talks about Te Aroha, and the rise of boutique hotels in India.

- Madhulika Dash

## Excerpts of the interview...

### Where and how did the story of Te Aroha begin?

It all began as a second hobby three years ago. As a practicing lawyer for 21 years, I had practically lived in and out of hotels. As time passed, I realized that this routine had actually turned into a hobby. Staying at hotels was no more just about having a comfortable place to rest in; it was more of a curious hobby. I was developing a keen interest and understanding of the hospitality world. Then a few years ago, I decided to have my own place. We had this summer house in the mountains, which was ideal to convert into a boutique hotel. I loved mountains and always wanted to go back there. So this sort of fitted into the plan with ease. That's how Te Aroha was born.

### In a time when joint ventures are the 'key' to hospitality success, how wise was it to go solo? What was the most challenging aspect of turning an old summer home into a boutique hotel?

It is a daunting task for sure. The learning curve is long, but the final result is huge on contentment. With Te Aroha, I had to start from the scratch and climb all the way up to building a

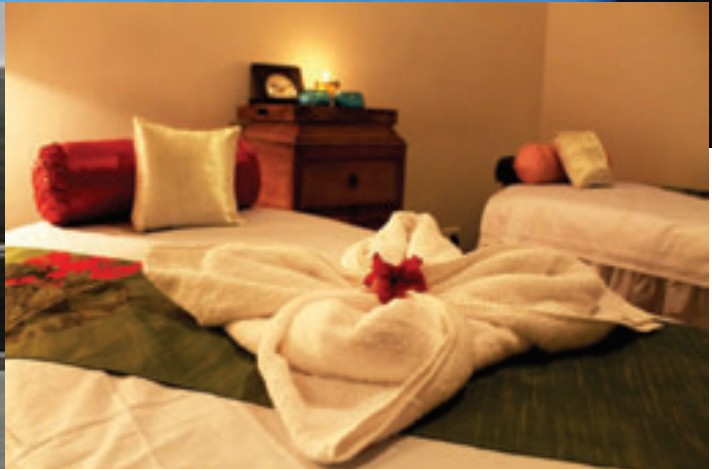
place, where people could escape and feel bliss! To do a boutique luxury hotel on a mountain top in a small village hidden from the world in itself was a bigger challenge in all terms – including logistics and marketing. What helped was that my summer house was built like a colonial style bungalow. The plan was to modify it while preserving its original charm. Also to build a new structure that complimented it rather than copied it or stood in contrast was equally difficult. Moreover we wanted to be eco-friendly and decided not to cut even a single tree. In fact there are two oak trees right in the middle of our fine dining restaurant called The Oaks.

### When it comes to operations and bringing changes, boutique hotels are said to be at an advantage point. How true is this on ground reality?

It is true only to an extent that one has the freedom to conceptualise it the way one likes. For example, guests say Te Aroha mirrors my persona. But in terms of operations while we do follow established industry standards in many areas we do end up experimenting a lot. We being a hill property located in tough terrain our dynamics are different and so are our operational needs, requirements and standards.







**What are the roadblocks of a self-owned boutique hotel today?**

The biggest roadblock for a single boutique hotel owner is retaining talented employees. So very early in my formation years, I decided to hire local people and train them so that attrition is low. That has worked well. One has to multi-task which is both an advantage and a challenge. Advantage because it becomes very personalised hospitality. Challenge because it is time-consuming.

**Boutique hotels seem to be a recent fad among travelers. Your take on this.**

Absolutely... The Indian traveler appreciates hotels that are different from the run-of-the-mill in particular leisure hotels and prefer them. I owe our success a lot to Indian traveler who has matured so rapidly in the last 5 years.

**What kind of role does F&B play in the success of a boutique hotel – especially in terms of its popularity and revenue generation?**

Substantial, I would say. For Te Aroha in particular, food and beverage is absolutely critical. We are located in a remote village and the guests have little options to dine out. So it's doubly imperative that our F&B is up to the mark. Also, since we are an experiential property so food becomes a very important part of the Te Aroha story. For a 10-room property we have three chefs – continental, Indian and local cuisine chef. And have experts flown in regularly to review the food and introduce newer trends.

**What has been the trend in boutique hotels here, when it comes to giving a different experience to its guests?**

I think to offer an experience that is identified exclusively with the hotel is the key. For example, Te Aroha is built around stories or stories built around Te Aroha if one can put it that way. For example, every single piece of furniture has a story. There are stories around pictures and maps on the walls. What works for boutique hotel, in my opinion, is the greater rate of indulgence we can afford to our guests – and that will remain a constant trend for a long, long time.

**When it comes to design innovation and creative ingenuity, where do our boutique hotels stand to the brethren in the UK and US?**

We still have a long way to go. I think it is mainly because we are still wary of starting anything in remote and new locations as that involves greater risk. We are so stuck with Goa, Rajasthan and other set destinations, where there is a pre-existing market for travelers. We must recognise however infrastructure can be poor in many Indian locations and that serves as a deterrent. Also I think we lack transparency and overrepresent. The expectation of travelers is very high these days. You have to deliver not only what you promise but also what you have represented. Guests are very unforgiving. The Indian warmth and hospitality however beats anyone anywhere in the world. We just need to add a degree of professionalism to that. With this, we would not only be up there, but better than many existing properties in the world.

**What are your future plans with Te Aroha?**

We are soon going to introduce a unique concept of activities at the property that combines entertainment with education built around Indian culture and heritage – a first of the kind in the country. Also a museum on the Indian graphic art will open at Te Aroha in the next few months.

