

HOME TRUTHS

Come, Live In My HOUSE

Letting out your holiday home is a great entrepreneurial option.

By Purna Raturi

The royalty in Rajasthan do it. And so does a quaint hamlet called Lata in Uttarakhand. They offer a slice of their life to friends, family and like-minded guests by having them stay in their own homes, or even rent out accommodation adjoining their property, at a price. It's a trend that is slowly gaining ground with urban professionals, too. While all of us cherish the utopian dream of having a hideout in the hills or by the beach, some are lucky enough to actually realize it. With it, however, come issues about maintenance when you are away, and wanting to share your happiness with like-minded people.

Sangeeta Singh, a media professional, built her beach house on a foothill in Goa because she always dreamt of having a place of her own there. "But I don't get to go there more than twice a year," she says, "And I can't be bothered with fixing pipes and cleaning cobwebs for the week-long vacation I squeeze

from my busy schedule in Delhi." So she rents it out to foreigners on a monthly basis, or to guests at Rs.1,000 a night. "It not only takes care of my maintenance charges but also keeps the property in top shape," she says. Her beach house is occupied between November and February on a back-to-back basis.

Apart from the critical advantage of having the place well-maintained, it is also a great way of sharing your experiences with people who are willing to pay for it. Take asset management and investment advisor Manish Chandra's Soulitude, for instance. Tucked away in Gagar, about 30 km from Nainital, Soulitude was initially meant to be a getaway for Delhi-based Chandra and his family. Offering a 180 degree view of the Kumaon Himalayas, the place even boasts of a stream gurgling nearby, which you can access only through Soulitude. What started as modest plans for a small two-bedroom cottage became a lifetime project of having a holiday home that has five bedrooms, each done up with a different theme. "I also bought land next door, since it was at risk of being exploited by builders, thus impacting our privacy," says Chandra.

The old cottage on that site has been rebuilt, and Soulitude now has 11 rooms—much more than Chandra needs as his home. He is there every three weeks, with his family visiting about 8-10 times a year. For the rest of the year, he opens the doors of his home to select people. "Having a home in such remote locations is a case of 'use it or lose it'. In order to enjoy Soulitude the way I like, it had to have excellent staff and regular maintenance," says Chandra adding, "And what better way of ensuring this than by allowing restricted use of the property



1 & 6. Himalaica 2. Ek Chidiya
3, 4 & 5. Soulitude



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by holidaymakers." Priced between Rs.4,750-Rs.8,000 a night for a room in the main house or a suite in the cottage, Chandra's Soulitude welcomes 8-10 guests every month, who spend an average of four to seven days per trip.

Two-and-a-half km off the Bhowali-Ramgarh road in the Kumaon Hills in Uttarakhand, Himalaica for Shalini Dave is part of her retirement plan. In her early 50s, Dave felt it was time to make her dream of having a Himalayan home come true. The head of Special Section of Delhi-based Vasant Valley School created the villa just the way she wanted to way back in 2003. "But gradually, I realized that although we visit it twice a month, the maintenance costs were starting to pinch," says Dave. Thus, she decided to rent out the entire villa for Rs.15,000 a day. Though she has managed to give it out only twice in the past two years, she's spreading the word to her friends and colleagues.

It was a different story for the husband-wife team of Anurag Tomer and Pallavi Srivastava. Both of them quit their high-stress jobs in the media and headed for Nathuakhan, a village 40 km away from Nainital, Uttarakhand. Ek Chidiya, their property, is set on an acre of land with a total investment of Rs.50 lakh. And the owners take pride in not having a TV set on the premises. The couple and their two sons have their separate cottage on the premises, and rent out a four-bedroom cottage throughout the year, each room costing Rs.2,490 per night. As with any other business venture comes the marketing strategy. For Soulitude's Manish Chandra, a no-marketing strategy gives the place a classified reputation. Most people call with references of friends or people who have already stayed at Soulitude. This in itself is a great filtration

mechanism.

Chandra not only does not have a deal with travel agents, Soulitude doesn't feature on any guide book or travel website either. The owners of Ek Chidiya—who now call travel, hospitality and orchard farming their vocations—have a listing of the place in a travel magazine, run a hands-on website, have a social networking group of the same name, and get past visitors to spread the word. Sangeeta Singh, on the other hand, doesn't need too much advertising for her home in Goa, since the demand is always high. Also, the caretaker for the house usually brokers all the deals.

While the Ek Chidiya proprietors are concentrating on running the cottage efficiently, Shalini Dave of Himalaica is already working on another project in the same area with the collaboration of friends. Soulitude's Chandra has acquired a second property near a glacial stream and is organically growing a number of fruits and vegetables that are used in the property's kitchen. The renovated rustic riverside home called Soulitude by the Riverside is fast becoming a hit with his friends.

There is an ever-increasing army of urban people looking for getaways just like these. As Chandra sums it up, "It always amazes me how many people need introspection at places such as these to realize how important it is to follow your dreams." So what will you do about it—book a room at such a property, or get on with making such a nest of your own? 🏡

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