

Dehradun: AD takes a tour inside Vana, one of the world's most pioneering wellness retreats

Vana lies quietly within the Sal forests at the foothills of the Himalayas. Here, the elegant architecture by the balearic design studio Esteva I Esteva Arquitectura and enchanting gardens planted by founder Veer Singh are as important to the therapeutic experience as massage, medicine and yoga

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These pebbled pathways lead to Vana, a wellness retreat in Dehradun. Hues change almost every season and creeping fig vines emerge from the dense forest on either side of the path

In Puranic literature, the forest or vana plays the role of being the abode of the gods. It is in the forest that the ultimate truth of oneness rises like a silent roar. This roar is not corporeal. Instead, it is borne in the spirit and makes the spirit tremble with jouissance,

just like a dry leaf does when a drop of water falls on it from a broken cloud, giving it a head rush of this very thing called life. The erasure of the forest would then be a blasphemous act as it would lead to the eviction of divinity, and if the gods and goddesses are kicked to the curb then with them dies the chance of hope. A vana is that very of cradle hope.







The retreat was designed by Esteva | Esteva Arquitectura—a boutique design studio from the Balearic Islands, Spain—in close consultation with Vana founder Veer Singh. The fine lines and straight-cut architectural parallels expressed in the layout are meant to indicate harmony between contemporary design and rustic simplicity

In Vana, an ultra-premier wellness retreat in Dehradun, surrounded by the Sal forest at the foothills of the Himalayas, this universal idea of believing in hope, as is the wont of the human spirit, is what is reset and renewed. The restoration of faith in God and therefore in oneself is the most potent catapult known to humanity. If the forest is some

kind of magical heaven, then vana is its womb, because it is only when we are in utero that all realms of possibilities glisten with newborn hope.

This feeling of regeneration wraps itself around you like a cashmere shawl from the moment you walk into the Kila, the central space at the heart of Vana. The infusion of serenity is unmissable here and the belief that you have a life outside of this place starts to slowly fade away like a wet patch of water drying under a radiantly luminous sun. In that moment, you begin to surrender to the forest and take vanavas, thus allowing the very essence of Vana to shapeshift you into something more primordial. A vanavasi. You become one with nature.





The Kila—the main space at the entrance—was designed to evoke the serenity, sincerity and confidence that one sometimes finds in spiritual places. Ash-veneer panelling separates the library from the main space. The oval-shaped water body positioned right at the centre aids in creating the sense of calm. The thick wooden chequered ceiling accentuates the warmth of the space. A wavy bamboo-clad ceiling on the right enhances the decor of the space, while keeping harmony with the overall aesthetic

The invisible architecture, like a wall-less cocoon, engulfs you in its embrace. Vana is exquisitely designed by the Balearic design studio, Esteva I Esteva Arquitectura. Their design sophistication lies in creating shapes that are like hypnotic whispers. And their heightened artistry is evident in the use of natural and sustainable materials in bespoke designs that hum in their tranced-up neutral colour tones.

The ethereal lighting by the Thailand-based British light designer Angus Hutcheson, who has created pieces and installations using innovative natural materials including silkworm cocoon, rattan, mulberry tree bark and sea kelp as lighting is pure art, illuminating the whole place discreetly but evocatively, as though it were some kind of diffused halo.

Artist Siraj Saxena has created almost 500 pieces of commissioned art across several mediums including oil on canvas, oil on paper, kite paper, metal mesh, mirror and a prolific variety of ceramics using both tribal and contemporary aesthetics in a brilliant juxtaposition. The liminal artworks serenade you into absorbing the equilibrium and make your world-weary troubles dissolve into motes of dust.



Artwork by Delhi-based artist Siraj Saxena and lighting by Angus Hutcheson, a British designer based in Thailand, accentuate the seating area in the Kila

The retreat is spread over 20 acres but you don't feel its vastness, either in space or form. Instead it is a profound sense of humility that you feel at Vana, because the glory of the forest humbles you into the realisation, that we are all nothing. And so, we can be anything. Begin anew. Each of the living spaces has a balcony or terrace that either nudges the Sal forest, the fruit orchards or the lush gardens, conjoining you in an inspired and peaceful coexistence with the trees, plants, birds, monkeys, butterflies and insects. Being one with the elements as you escape into jungle life sharpens your intuition and deepens your contemplation, especially when you surrender to the intoxication of silence in Vana's magnetic Tibetan meditation rooms, which are the retreat's exceptional sanctum sanctorums.



In the litchi orchard, a rustic iron firepit rests on a circular cobblestoned platform, where prayers are offered to seek blessings from Surya (the sun)

Authentic traditions of wellness, medicine and wisdom, from the worlds of Ayurveda, Sowa Rigpa and yoga are harmoniously complemented by the soothing design aesthetic in all the wellness spaces, which have a deep reverence for the ecology. The ecology also plays a transformational part in Vana's remarkable self-produced cuisine where everything from the wasabi to the organic plum jam has the taste of nectar, inextricably linking the soil of the jungle to the majesty of human senses.

It is a fabulous sensation that Vana's founder, Veer Singh, has generously made us feel in this jungle bijoux. Like a rare crystal with a multitude of healing powers that is embedded in the earth's soul, the journey into the vitality of Vana is one of pure peace. Veer has created a glorious ancient cathedral where all its inhabitants—the flora, fauna and we humans—carry the same prayer in our hearts. This is a communal prayer because the forest protects, nourishes and nurtures us all, and so we are all interlinked in this circle of oneness. And therein lies Vana's truth. No matter who you are or where you come from, in the quiet heart of the forest, we are all just children of God.



Principal architect Antoni Esteve's creative genius is reflected in the playful juxtaposition of geometrical shapes and linear woodwork with the natural greens and cobblestoned space