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Bhopal's Jehan Numa Retreat blends right in with its wild and verdant surroundings green  
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To many, the very mention of Bhopal evokes begums and nawabs, the wafting aroma of rezalas, narrow alleyways zigzagging through the old city, voluminous lakes, verdant greens, open-topped vintage jeeps...To me, it is, and always will be, the city I call home. Spending my formative years in what was once a small town has left me with a lingering taste for the little pleasures of life, which I crave every now and then in my life in the big city. Any opportunity that comes my way to take me back to the city I cherish, I grab with both hands! A stay at the Jehan Numa Retreat was one such.

This is the most recent offering from Jehan Numa Hotels Pvt Ltd. The first property in the bouquet to open its doors was the Jehan Numa Palace in 1983, a heritage property which not only proved its mettle in the hospitality arena but retains the 'most visited hotel in Bhopal' tag. The branching out into wilder territories started with the launch of the Reni Pani Jungle Lodge in 2011 in the Satpura Tiger Reserve and, in 2014, the Jehan Numa Retreat emerged skirting the edge of Bhopal's zoological park—the Van Vihar National Park.

My two-day stint began with a warm welcome by the gracious staff and a calming sip of herbal tea. Soon after breakfast, I was taken on a tour of this grand tree-lined estate by my delightful hostess, Sahibzadi Sonia Begum Rashid. All the Jehan Numa properties are family-run; with her son Zafar Rashid Khan at the helm of affairs, Mrs Rashid takes pleasure in nurturing her passion for nature.



#### Open-air dining area

Our tour began with a brisk walk around the estate, while Sonia Apa (as I know her) explained in loving detail the finer points of the landscaping. Each tree, plant, sapling is irrigated through a network of drips designed for optimum utilisation of the recycled and treated water generated at the property. Well-known landscape artist Revathi Kamath has done a stupendous job of working out the requirements of the retreat—from the use of fountain grass as a natural yet unobtrusive divider between spaces, to the planting of several banyan trees in close proximity to form a natural amphitheatre. Trees endemic to Madhya Pradesh, such as millingtonia, karanja, shisham, babool and baheda, stand cheek by jowl in what I can only describe as a natural playground. Fruit-bearing trees such as pomegranate, mango and guava not only throw into relief the manicured lawns but also double up as a visitor activity during the fruiting season. Grab a basket, get your hands dirty and be one with nature at the vegetable garden from which spring up turmeric, coriander, sweet basil, thyme, leek, celery, rocket, red radish, spinach, fenugreek and more. Got a nick or a cut? No worries, there's always an aloe vera plant handy!

#### the lounge area

To ensure creature comforts, the group yet again engaged one of the best in the business: architect Dean D'Cruz, co-founder of architecture and product design house, Mozaic. The informal reception introduces one to his design approach. On one hand, the Coriander Leaf restaurant offers a gentle hint of grandeur, while the lounge facing the fields has a sense of comfort and connect with nature. When I got in touch with him to talk about the principles and philosophy he followed, I learnt: "The property being at the edge of the city and sanctuary in Bhopal needed to respond to the rustic and rural nature of the area as well as have the comforts of a city hotel. We thus chose to orient the rooms to the fields that were part of the property and create clusters of rooms, being accessed through a courtyard, much like a small village square. These village squares were connected by a staggered linear stone pillared pathway with plantations on either side."

### A comfortable guestroom

There are 28 rooms in six residential cottage clusters. The façade of the rooms have a traditional village house look, with each one having a “pavilion in the field” (outdoor deck) attached to it. The rooms are large and the interiors luxurious with an old-world furniture setting. In addition to a sit-out deck and a well-fitted and comfortable large bath, some rooms also feature an open-to-air outdoor shower blending in very effectively with the rustic theme.

### The hotel's Spa

After a rejuvenating deep tissue massage at the Chakra spa overlooking the pool (both facilities hidden behind a mound that rises from the field and screening off its own nature-rich environment), I had just enough time to dash to the amphitheatre of Bharat Bhavan and catch a live performance by jazz musician Joe Alvares. The show was part of the first edition of a two-day musical extravaganza called Hriday Drishyam, which was held at four different venues across the city and featured eight performances by some heavyweights of the Indian music world, such as Rahul Sharma, Amaan Ali Khan, the Sabri Brothers, Rakesh Chaurasia, Niladri Kumar, Shefali Alvares and Hariharan.

Back at the Retreat, a weekend brunch buffet was laid out for guests and visitors at the open-air restaurant Jamun Tree. With weekly changes in the menu, weekend travellers look forward to the variations. But I'm not fussy. A vision of putting up my legs on my private deck after dialling room service, was enough to entice me back to the Jehan Numa Retreat.