

Inside Outside

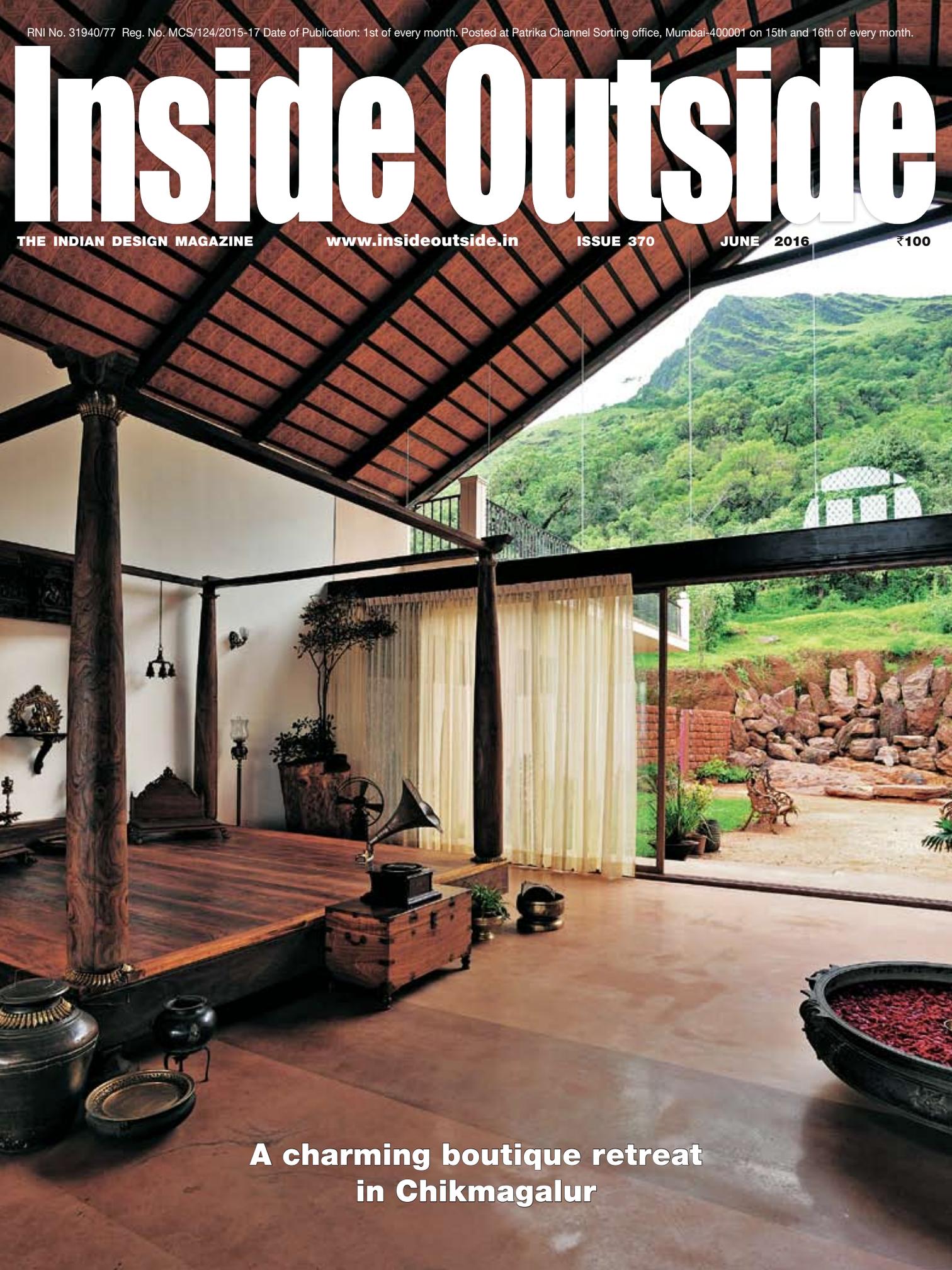
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**A charming boutique retreat
in Chikmagalur**

Villas With A View

Set amidst a vast coffee estate, this charming boutique retreat is a labour of love and attention to the minutest details.

PHOTOGRAPHS: ANSHUMAN SEN

As a teenager, Sumitra Ramu stumbled upon her favorite hideaway adjacent to her family's 700-acre coffee estate in Chikmagalur, a four-hour drive from Bengaluru. The stunning views of the Western Ghats from that spot were to die for. 'One day I'll build the house of my dreams at this very place,' she vowed to herself.

Three decades later that wish was fulfilled when Sumitra and her husband Ravi Ramu bought the plot abutting the coffee estate and went about creating the abode of their dreams. Somewhere along the way, their intentions expanded. 'We thought we should share the scenic beauty and not just keep it to ourselves,' recalls Ravi.

In October 2014, the Ramus opened the doors to Primrose Villas, a charming boutique retreat, named after the road on which they live in Bengaluru. Primrose bears in its every corner, the imprint of the Ramus' fine sensibilities and painstaking attention to detail. The five villas that are literally glass houses, afford guests unrestricted views of the Baba Budan Hills, named after the 16th century Sufi saint who brought coffee beans to India from Yemen.

'We wanted people to be able to view the hills from their beds,' explains Sumitra. And indeed waking up on a four-poster bed to see the ghats enveloped by the early morning mist, which gradually lifts, is a



Each 1,200 sq foot villa is encased in glass with a sloping roof supported by six pillars



A Burma teak mandap in the living room designed by Sumitra is a space where she performs pujas and meditates.



The library-cum-formal dining room has a teak dining table that rests on legs made of old coffee plants.

splendiferous sight. (The glass walls, though, involve high maintenance and a daily cleaning by Primrose's industrious staff.)

The scenic exterior blends seamlessly with the luxurious interiors filled with Sumitra's lovingly assembled pieces of antique furniture and artifacts, some from the Victorian and Jacobean eras. It exudes a vintage charm combined with all the mod cons.

Though her dream house was still a distant dream back then, Sumitra began collecting antique furniture in 1994 after the Ramus had returned to India from an extended stay overseas. While Ravi got involved in setting up KPMG's operations in India, Sumitra built up her prized collection piece



The fireplace in each villa has been designed by Sumitra.



The sit-out is Ravi's favourite spot.



Ravi and Sumitra Ramu

by piece. 'They weren't very expensive back then,' she discloses. The pieces were stored in various places, including in two specially built storerooms in their Bengaluru home.

Building Primrose Villas was a saga in itself given the site's location at a height of 5,000 feet. It took four years and involved no external architects. Ravi took two years off from his corporate career to plan it along with Sumitra who designed the villas as well as the main house where the dining and living room areas and kitchen are located.

The Ramus knew that they wanted the ambience of the mountain tops and valleys to become a part of every living space, including the bathrooms. 'We tried

to find an architect who could translate our vision but then decided to do it ourselves,' says Ravi.

Working with local contractors proved to be another challenge to achieving the level of quality and fine finishes they aspired to. 'Navigating the steep slopes especially during the monsoon wasn't easy,' Ravi recalls. It helped that the family's 125-year-old estate already had infrastructure in the form of roads and paths leading to the site.

To optimise the cascading effect of the outside streaming in, they decided on glass walls, high ceilings and verandahs overlooking a landscaped garden for every villa. 'We spent days in selecting the ideal spots to build the villas,' says Sumitra. Adds



Antique furniture creates a cozy nook in the dining area.



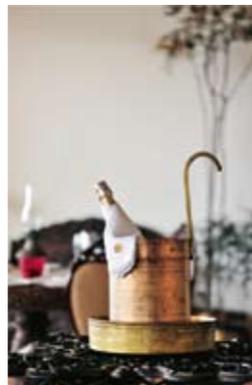
The villas combine privacy with stunning outdoor views.

The faraway mountains are never too far.

Ravi, 'You can't appoint contractors and hope for the best. We supervised every bit.'

The search for the 'perfect angles' has resulted in each villa being built in such a way as to afford maximum privacy without compromising on the mountain views. Hence, one can be soaking in the bathtub while contemplating the hillside. It is utterly relaxing.

The Ramus' personal touch is evident everywhere. The linen is embroidered with a primrose flower as are the bedroom slippers. The bathroom is stocked with coffee soap especially handmade for Primrose Villas. The welcome letter is handwritten on a letterhead that



has a vintage look achieved by staining it with coffee.

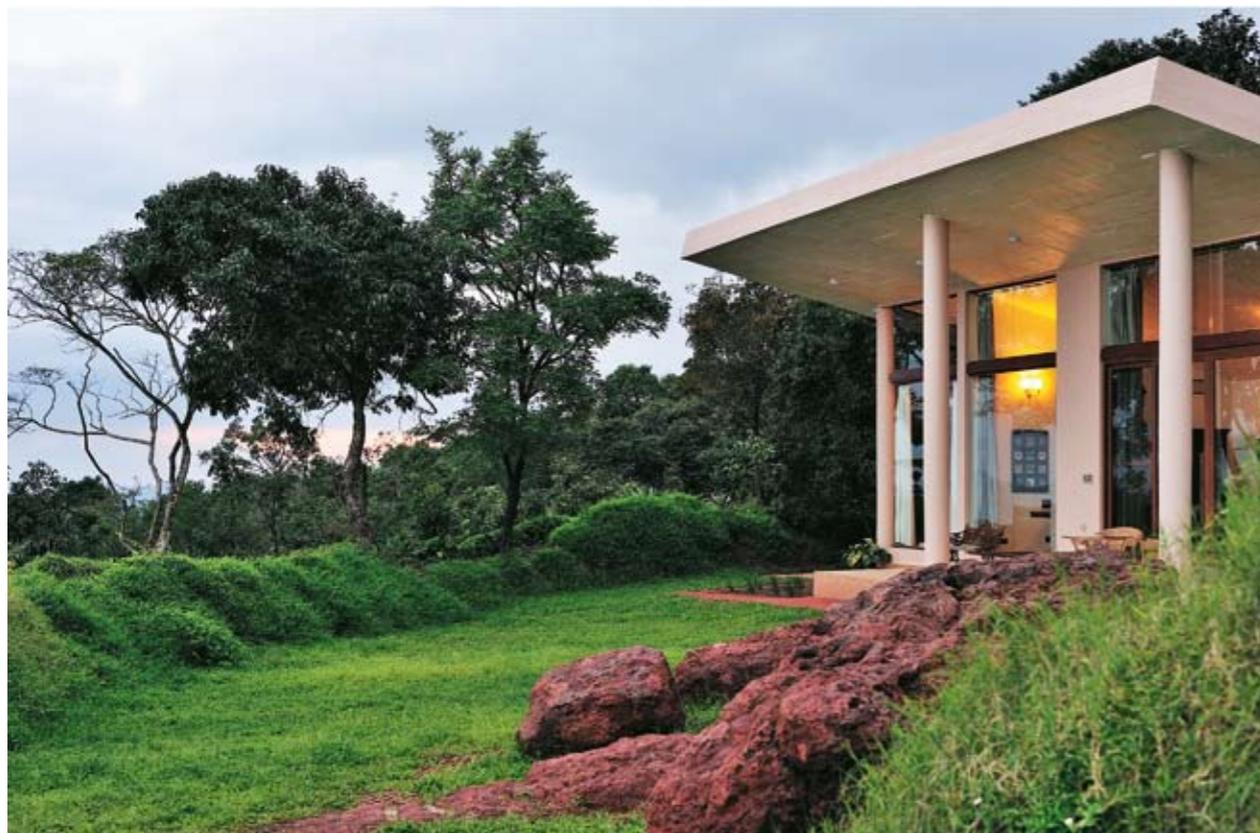
All this 'hardware' is matched by top shelf 'software'. The quietly efficient staff at Primrose all underwent a nine-month training by the Ramus before the first guests were welcomed. Three chefs, personally supervised by Sumitra who also oversees the adjoining coffee estate, prepare multiple-course meals that can be enjoyed at leisure. Best of all: there are no fixed times for meals.

'Hotels tend to be sticklers for timing and when I'm on holiday that annoys me the most. So we decided that our guests could eat whenever they want, at their



Sunset at Primrose.

The changing colours of the sky and hills.



Bathing in the great outdoors.

villas



Premium arabica coffee is served here.



leisure,' says Ravi. Meals can be enjoyed in the dining room of the main house or in the villa. High tea or rather coffee – a premium arabica from their estate – is best savoured on the terrace of the main house as it offers the vision of a spectacular sunset. As a special treat, a dinner barbecue can be arranged in the private garden.

Primrose is an ideal spot for the sleep-deprived. The combination of fresh mountain air and freshly-prepared food, bordering on banquets, is sleep-inducing. This is the place to bring those books you always wanted to read. More energetic souls can take off on a trek, go horse riding or do a coffee estate trail. The Bhadra Tiger Reserve is an hour's drive away. There's also the option of a round at the Chikmagalur Golf Course.

The Ramus have chosen not to advertise their haven of peace. Primrose relies on word of mouth to draw 'like-minded' guests. Companies have found it an ideal spot for an off-site for senior management. Ravi recommends a stay of 3 to 4 nights to get fully relaxed and recharged to face the hurly-burly of the world again. 