

Retreat deep into a world where serenity beckons

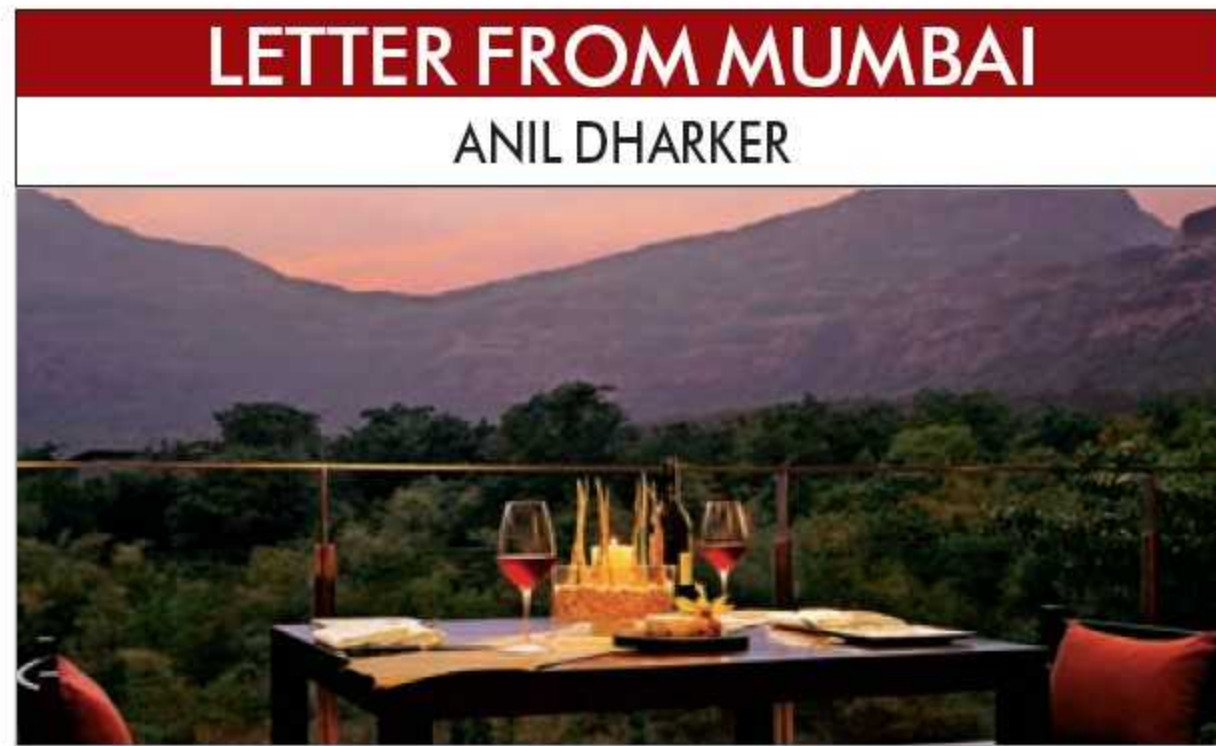
WONDER if anyone goes to Spa? Of course they do, you will say. Lots and lots of people go to spas. But I was asking about Spa with a capital 's', which was a small town in eastern Belgium famous for its mineral springs. That was in the 16th century, so the place may have disappeared. On the other hand, knowing the European proclivity for longevity, Spa not only exists but thrives, its hot springs cunningly mechanised so that they never run dry.

I have a certain reluctance to visit spas. They suggest a certain hedonism, which my inherited work ethic regards as sinful. When I do go, it's not exactly kicking and screaming, but with a pronounced dragging of feet. So it was last weekend when I got into the car to drive to a place near Lonavala, which is a hill resort between Mumbai and Pune.

Shillin, it is called, 3,500 acres of private estate nestled in the midst of the verdant Sahyadri mountain range. It's wonderful what the monsoon does to the countryside, espe-

cially when it's pristine like this. Even when the rains are late, as they have unconscionably been this year, trees burst into green, like a choir kept pent up too long will suddenly burst into song. The soothing colour envelops you, tiny waterfalls bring visual relief, and we, who measure our lives in square feet, suddenly breathe in acres and acres of oxygen. It's a heady feeling in the best sense of the word.

The Hilton Shillin estate retreat and spa sits on 320 acres in the middle of the Shillin estate. The architect's brief must have emphasised the word 'spartan' because this is as spartan as you get, the first impression being that you have come to a vast carpentry complex full of sheds where workmen will be engaged in honest toil. First impressions, as they say, are often deceptive, and so it is here because these apparent sheds are actually villas with all possible mod cons, their own gardens and even private swimming pools. In addition, there are a number of larger structures which house



SOAK IN LUXURY: Hilton Shillin estate retreat and spa sits on 320 acres near Lonavala

restaurants, bars and, best of all, a tea room — a long room where you can sit on cushions on the floor, Japanese style, and choose from a selection of teas. (Sadly, all packaged by Dilmah, the Sri Lankan company, which is a major sponsor of their cricket team.

Our team's major sponsor is Sahara, so I suppose, just as well).

Since we were looking at the origin of words, it's interesting to look at the origin of 'retreat'. The word comes from, as you would expect, an army withdrawing from confrontation with

LETTER FROM MUMBAI

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enemy forces. That changed to the more general usage of moving back from a difficult or uncomfortable situation which, in turn, changed to the more specific withdrawal to a quiet and secluded place. A spa and retreat, then, have to go together.

Hiltons have hitherto been known as quintessential American business hotels. The group's guiding philosophy used to be that the businessman on his hectic work schedule had to feel at home instantly, whichever Hilton he was in. So a Hilton in Cairo would be identical to a Hilton in Houston to a Hilton in Tokyo. No need to adjust, everything the same, switches, beds, controls. That's probably where the phrase 'if it's Tuesday, it must be the Belgium Hilton' comes from.

But now, the Hilton group is running a spa! In India! In the western ghats! And run it pretty well too, with an all-local staff that commutes from Lonavala and all of whom are obviously well trained. We had a 'butler' who anticipated our every need, and moved us around on the vast estate in a Nano.

The Hilton Spa's managers are Indian too — the only foreigner I spotted was a bright, young Hungarian lady who looked after activities like dance classes, the cooking school and yoga (the latest import).

The spa itself, 70 acres of it, is a haven within a haven. The intimidating menu of over 150 treatments was simplified by the spa manager. "I recommend the first one," he said. Instantly, two masseuses materialised, girls from the north-east who knew exactly where they needed to put pressure and how much. One day I must figure out, I promised myself, the relationship between spas and young women from this particular part of India. They speak softly and knead strongly. What more can one ask?

As we drove back in the belting rain we saw cars and cars full of picnickers from Pune and Mumbai. All they had by way of enjoyment were waterfalls in which to get wetter than they were in the rain, and tin sheds offering vada pav and soft drinks. I tried not to feel superior, and failed. ■