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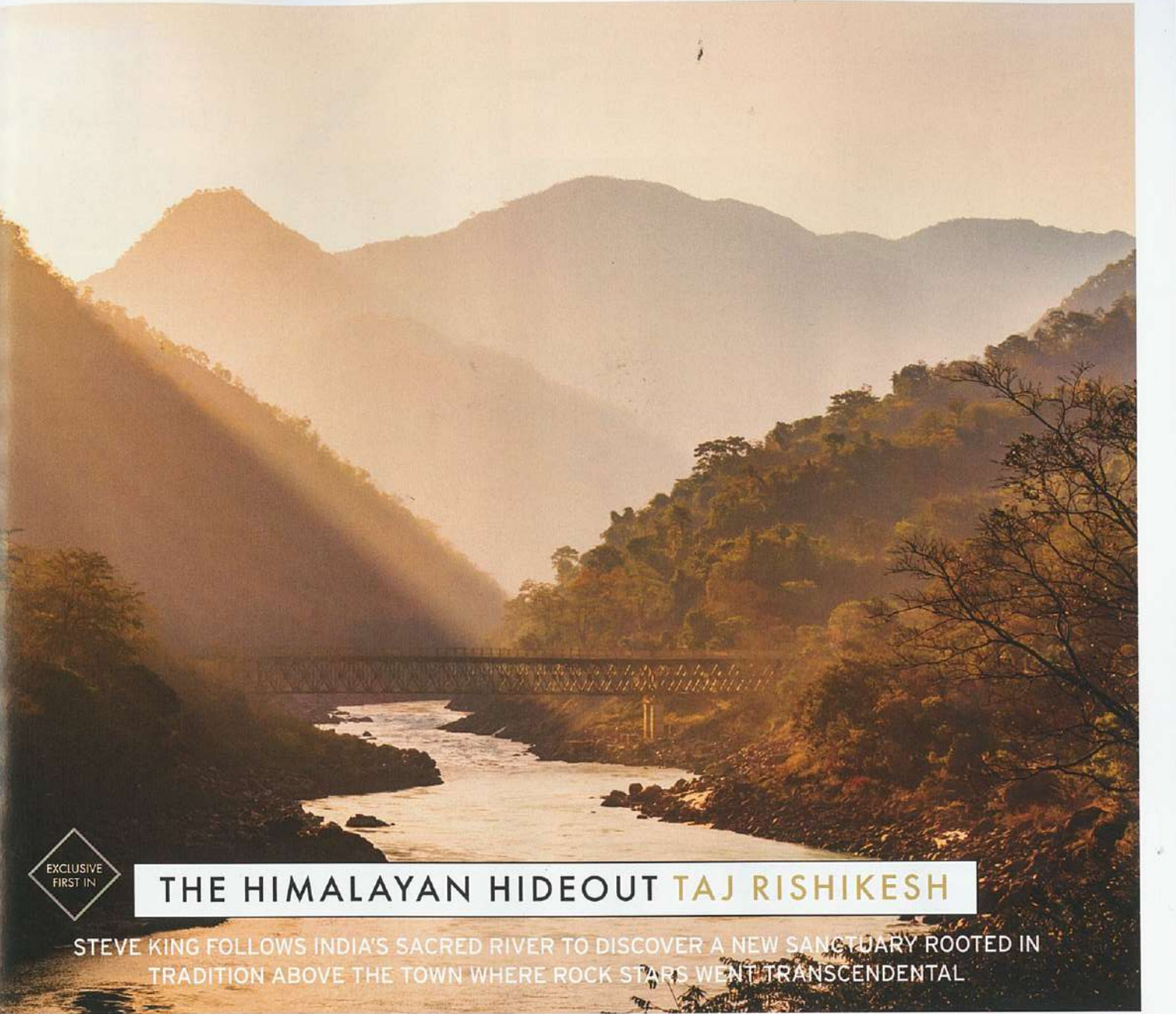
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THE GOLD LIST 2020

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FIRST IN

THE HIMALAYAN HIDEOUT TAJ RISHIKESH

STEVE KING FOLLOWS INDIA'S SACRED RIVER TO DISCOVER A NEW SANCTUARY ROOTED IN TRADITION ABOVE THE TOWN WHERE ROCK STARS WENT TRANSCENDENTAL

PEOPLE OFTEN SAY THAT IT WAS THE BEATLES who put Rishikesh on the map when they visited in 1968. This is not quite true. Even at its height, Beatlemania had nothing on Hinduism. Rishikesh's location near the source of the Ganges has made it a pilgrimage destination for millennia. Countless billions of worshippers have travelled from all over India to its startlingly white sandy shores to sprinkle themselves with holy water and perform *Ganga aarti*, a beautiful ritual involving prayers sung to a harmonium accompaniment and the launching of a flotilla of tea light candles on the river.

Nevertheless, it is true that the Beatles gave Rishikesh's profile a boost at a moment when many Westerners were in a receptive frame of mind. The Fab Four came as guests of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the so-called Giggling Guru, a pioneer of transcendental meditation, who was almost as famous as they were. The visit was not, however, an outright success. On the one hand, they wrote a lot of terrific songs while in residence at the ashram. On the other hand, Ringo left early, in a funk; there were rumours of ungallant, un-guru-like advances towards a

female member of the party; in the end the entire band fell out with the Maharishi. 'I did not become great by association of The Beatles!' he scoffed. 'Beatles make Maharishi great? Pah! It is a waste of thought.'

Taj Hotels' latest addition just outside Rishikesh comprises a series of villas on a terraced hillside, thick with sal and sheesham trees. The Ganges flows swiftly through the gorge like liquid jade. The style of the buildings is based on the regional Garhwali vernacular, notably in the use of hand-carved stone and slate. Lozenge-shaped motifs that recall Himalayan shawls and winter hats have been incorporated into the walls and staircases of what might, in another hotel, be called the main building, but here is sweetly referred to as the Welcome House.

On the inside, the 79 rooms are, by contrast, spare and contemporary, serenely neutral, with pale wooden floors and ceilings, and lots of crisp white, grey and cream in between. All overlook the river and face the dramatic hilly landscape on the opposite side of the valley. Large windows and balconies maximise the views.

Above, a view of the Ganges near the town of Rishikesh in Uttarakhand, northern India



'Rock flour' is the poetic name for the sediment that gives the Ganges, at this point in its course, such a lovely colour. It is also the name of the hotel's restaurant, which serves a globe-trotting menu yet uses ingredients sourced not merely locally but, wherever possible, from within walking distance of the hotel. This part of the state of Uttarakhand is known throughout India for its grains, legumes and pulses – to the point where the existence of certain rock formations is explained in mythology as the consequence of the gods conducting a cooking experiment during which some divinely soaked lentils expanded and caused whole mountains to fracture.

ON THE ONE HAND, THE BEATLES WROTE A LOT OF TERRIFIC SONGS WHILE IN RESIDENCE AT THE ASHRAM. ON THE OTHER, THE ENTIRE BAND FELL OUT WITH THE MAHARISHI

Naturally, there is a Jiva Spa – a much-loved hallmark of Taj hotels. It seems appropriate that, here in the lesser Himalayas, a stronghold of Ayurveda, the Rishikesh property should have the largest Jiva Spa of them all, with its own Spa Lawn – a soothing rooftop garden planted with rustling tall grasses. Popular as the spa will no doubt be, I am equally sure that just as many of the hotel's guests will be drawn to the yoga, meditation and *Ganga aarti* sessions, which are open to all comers, every day, free of charge.

Rishikesh has a long association with kayaking and rafting. These and other river-related activities are widely available. Yet it is to Taj's credit that it gently steers guests towards less hectic ways of engaging with the surrounding landscape, through walks,

hikes and treks. These outings might have a particular objective – birdwatching, for example, or tree-planting or pebble-gathering. Or they might not. My favourite moment during my stay – apart from the lively conversations I enjoyed with the troop of langur monkeys that swung by my terrace each morning – came when my guide Azad and I tramped towards a village temple on a peak not far from the hotel.

School exams were in progress and groups of kids gathered in anxious huddles. Azad seemed to know them all. We paused to wish them good luck then continued onwards and upwards. 'One moment,' Azad said. 'May I suggest you turn around and look

the other way?' We must have reached a point where it was possible to see beyond the mountains immediately surrounding us, because there, stretching in a magnificent, snow-covered arc from one side of my field of vision to the other, were the rippling peaks of the greater Himalayas. Their sudden apparition was at once absolutely ordinary – their existence is not a secret, after all – and absolutely extraordinary. A blessing, a gift not of geology but of the gods. 🙏

Ampersand Travel offers tailored Rishikesh itineraries from £2,995 per person, including six nights at Taj Rishikesh Resort & Spa and one night at Taj Palace, New Delhi, flights, transfers and sightseeing in Rishikesh and Delhi. +44 20 7819 9770; ampersandtravel.com

Above from left: Taj Rishikesh's villas are carved right into the hillside; slate-floored Rock Flour restaurant overlooks the Ganges