

The lounge area is equipped with a television, open kitchen and a pool table



HEAD FOR THE HILLS

If you're an early riser, enjoy breakfast on the lawn because sunrises are spectacular here. I'm not, so I decided to sleep in till it was time for a cup of tea and lunch under the Garwad Machan before the onerous journey home. We thought nothing was going to match up to the dinner and bonfire under the open sky, but that was because we hadn't been here yet.

A bumpy 20-minute drive up narrow paths to the Syrah hilltop and we were plunged into a picture-perfect setting. If I missed the idea of a quiet French chalet when I arrived, I didn't anymore. There's nothing for miles but the country sky (that will inspire you to break into

song), a patchwork of emerald and gold stretching out over the hilly slopes, rows of grape vines and dots of blue thanks to the occasional water body in the distance. Apart from the occasional dog sauntering past, we were alone with bottles of wine, delicious Maharashtrian food and the whistling wind (strong enough to knock over glasses) sneaking into the canopied dining space.

It's hard to leave, even after you've finished your meal and the dogs have disappeared for some shut-eye before they continue roaming the hills. But, we had a long drive ahead, so after a quick cup of tea, some more biscuits and a lot of goodbyes, we forlornly watched the vineyard blur into the horizon.

You may think you want a high-class holiday over a home-style retreat, but once you've settled into the comforts at Fratelli, you will see how easy it is to have all the luxuries of a five-star hotel in a homely space.

And, on your first day here, after you're filled with good wine and great food, spend the evening in the garden, watching a blush as pretty as the Rose in your glass spreading gently across the sky till night falls. You'll thank all the twinkling stars slowly coming out to play that you did.

FINDING OUT ABOUT FRATELLI

We were curious about the name too, until we learned it meant 'brothers' in Italian. This makes sense, since the story of the vineyard is traced back to seven brothers who joined hands to set up the space. With Delhi-based Kapil and Gaurav Sekhri, locals Ranjitsinh and Arjunsinh Mohite-Patil, and Italian wine greats Andrea and Alessio Secci at the helm, it's no surprise that the vineyard has been garnering steam to overthrow those that were once more popular. Don't forget that Piero Masi is their viticulturist, a renowned name in the wine industry.

There's a lot of scope for wine tourism in India, with vineyards to match. And, while this one is a little harder to drive down to, forgetting the usual suspects and picking Fratelli is easy when you're surrounded by verdant vines and strolling along under wide open skies worthy of having their own country song.

If you, like most city slickers, breathe a sigh of relief courtesy cooler weather and open skies outside city limits, roll down your windows and take a deep breath in Akluj. Over six hours of alternating between smooth highways and bad roads, snaking through picturesque villages and looping around lakes can leave you euphoric and exhausted in equal measure. Once we found the sharp curve in the road leading to the vineyards, all traces of trepidation were swept away by the breeze swinging over the rolling hills.

A WEEKEND OF WINE

If you haven't yet, **Rhea Dhanbhoora** tells you why you should add **Fratelli Wines** to your list of vineyards to visit in India

spacious (you could fit a group of six into ours), with fresh-smelling bathrooms. What Fratelli lacks in posh rooms, however they more than make up for with experience, and thanks to the location, view and lounge, you won't spend much time in your room anyway.

POOLING EXPERIENCES

The beauty of having only four rooms is that your weekend at the vineyard will be free from cackling crowds and messy tourists. The privacy is a dream, especially in such a picturesque space, and if you find a friendly group (like we did), it's even better. While you can dine on your own, we decided to pause our wine and cheese session (something you're treated to from the get-go here) and sit down to a big lunch with the two other families — a couple on a wedding anniversary holiday and a family of three celebrating a birthday.

Exchanging stories over the large wooden dining table was a good way to kick-start the weekend, especially when complemented by the delicious, home-cooked meal from the open kitchen behind us. Make sure you ask for the coriander, tomato daal and chicken curry — I couldn't get enough! A game of pool and a few sports updates later, it was time for a siesta.

Around early evening, we were taken for a wine tour; but of course, we couldn't go anywhere without a spot of tea. Make this yourself or ask them to brew it the way you like so you feel less like guests in a hotel and more like you're at someone's holiday home. Ask for biscuits with your tea if you get peckish in the evening, because snacks and dinner are a while away.

TAKING THE TOURS

Pumpkin, pink and white bougainvillea



>> See how wine is made on Fratelli's tours

flowers waved cheerfully in the evening breeze as our feet sank slowly into the soft ground, the scent of fresh earth in the air. We'd hopped, skipped and jumped across the road to Motewadi vineyard, where every sapling (imported from France and Italy) was hand-picked. This was followed by a vineyard and barrel cellar tour. We were taken from the pressing to the packaging area, with each step more eye-opening than the last. If you've been on a wine tour before, you know that most processes stay the same, but tricks, tips and secrets change according to the brand. We won't spoil any of these for you; the beauty is in the experience here.

Since we were visiting for two days instead of the suggested three, we squeezed both red and white wine tasting sessions into one evening in their swanky tasting space. While you can spend the rest of your evening alone, we suggest doing what we did and challenging guests to carom, foosball and table tennis in the game room.

After a bonfire with snacks (don't miss the kebabs!) and wine under the stars on the lawn, a birthday/anniversary cake, a delectable dinner and another round of pool (with a 12-year-old who was playing for the first time, but could now probably give you a run for your money), we were ready to turn in for the night.

WINE OVER WATER

I'm not going to pretend, I haven't always been a fan, preferring my favourite Australian and French brands. But it's no secret that Indian wine is going from off-menu to top of the menu for good reason. Fratelli too has stepped up its game, and while you can't expect all 46 varietals to be spectacular, you will be pleasantly surprised. We were impressed by reds over whites, though the sparkling wines are also good options. Of course, the best thing to do is to step into the swanky tasting room and find one that suits your palate.

ONE 'FOUR' ALL

Continuing the curves and bends in the road from the drive is the pathway to the accommodation. The structure is no quaint chalet, of course. It has only four rooms, which helps set it apart from other vineyards, making the experience more personal the minute you walk in.

The country sky metaphor was extended when we drew back the drapes in our vibrant orange-walled room, welcoming in the midday sun through floor-to-ceiling windows that replaced an entire wall. Most of Fratelli is designed this way, with sweeping views of the vineyards on both sides, uninterrupted by anything but the occasional tractor zipping through the grape vines. You can tell that their rooms are a little worn out from the rickety cupboard doors and handles that break off in your hand, but they're well-maintained and

PICK YOUR PACKAGE

■ **The weekend/weekday getaway** Pick this for a two-day stay. The rate includes a double occupancy room, wine tasting, sparkling wine, bonfire dining, dance and recreational facilities.

Price: ₹11,000 (weekends) and ₹6,500 (weekdays) per couple; ₹1,800 (child) or ₹3,000 (additional person).

■ **The rejuvenation getaway** If you've got three nights, pick this. Along with everything mentioned above, you get a vineyard and cellar tours.

Price: For couples: ₹9,500 (weekends) and ₹10,000 (weekdays); For children: ₹1,800; For an additional person: ₹3,000.

They also offer stays at Hotel Grand Regency. Make a booking on www.fratelliwines.in

