

FOOD STOPS: SOUTHERN INDIA & MUMBAI



EXPLORE CONTEMPORARY INDIA & SOUTH ASIA

Magazine

JANUARY 2014



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Editor's Note

LET IT SNOW,
LET IT SNOW,
LET IT SNOW!



It still comes as a surprise to many but this little ditty is equally applicable to the snowfields of Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand in India. Ski and snowboard enthusiasts from around the world are already in the know that these are some of the most pristine, scenic and challenging slopes on earth for these adventure sports. The time to visit them is now, as the season officially ends around March. The great news too is that those who are new to the sports can also enroll in Beginner packages that we feature in our Winter Thrills in India's Alpine Country feature. India is one of the most inexpensive places on earth to learn to ski!

Adventure travel in India, whether it is skiing, hiking, treks or river rafting — lots more is coming up in a BIG way. We were privileged to get an expert's insight on this topic when Raneer Sahaney interviewed India's best known Adventure Expert, Mandip Singh Sooin for whom a 'childhood hobby' became a way of life — and ultimately his business calling! Untold thrills and limitless excitement await the visitor in this multi-faceted land — And with the slew of fresh new developments, promotions and new facilities in the pipeline you can be assured it's going to be one rollercoaster ride of new adventures and discovery in India's tourism landscape.

It's a Luxe Life and the Royal Treatment is exactly what you will get in our Forts and Palaces Guide. The Cover Story gives our selection of the best of what India offers in this unique category of accommodation that money can buy. We also have an article also in this issue that suggests private air charter is one of the most convenient, hassle-free and thrilling ways to go palace-hopping—Just ask the well-heeled!

Paradise 'Lost'— and found. That in a nutshell is the tourism story of Sri Lanka. After years of strife, the country's tourism scene is making a comeback with a vengeance. Our South Asia Select features the Sri Lanka of today which will spoil you for choices. We start with recommendations for the best places to stay in this issue.

Nomita Dhar
Publisher & Editor-in-Chief

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Adventure travel in India— whether it is skiing, hiking, treks or river rafting— lots more is coming up in a Big way



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PRIONKA RAY

Prionka has interviewed, edited or written up this issue's Guest Contributions from the region for the IN PERSON column. She hails from India and has lived in Switzerland and Hongkong before settling down in Singapore 15 years ago. Her favourite destinations are always Indian. She says, "I love Mumbai, where I studied for three years, but I am absolutely and totally smitten by Benares, where my grandparents lived. This city is so anachronistic, that here I lose myself completely." On what inspired her when writing the wedding story, she says, "Indians love to love and weddings are where the emotions go beautifully overboard. I myself had an elaborate Bengali style wedding in India, 18 years ago. It was a typical big, fat wedding with countless rituals, constant dress changes, ample food and of course, abundance of emotions. Weddings tend to get larger than life and that's the best part of an Indian wedding."



RANEE SAHANEY

The author of this issue's cover story, Ranee Sahaney is no stranger to travel writing. A prolific travel writer and contributor to IN Magazine as well as its weekly e-newsletter IN Touch, she also interviews Mandip Singh Soin for some great insights on Adventure Travel in India. She also contributed substantially to the Sri Lanka section for this edition. She has been a Consulting Editor for the past 12 years to the Outlook Traveller group of publications as well as contributed to Discover India, BBC Good Food Guide, India Abroad as well as yatra.com. In the past 25 years, her features have appeared in India's leading newspapers and magazines on a variety of subjects that include travel, culture, heritage, jewellery, fashion etc. She has published a lavish coffee table book, Adventure Sites in the World, and also written A Travellers' Companion: India's North East for the Tourism Department (GOI) and several chapters for Dorling Kindersley's India and Delhi Agra & Jaipur travel guides. She has also worked in the capacity of Editorial Co-ordinator for the Incredible India magazine, brought out by the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India.



RANJANA RANA

Ranjana Rana gives an interesting twist to travel planning in this issue by linking destinations and astrology! Her own journey into astrology began when she was 12, after reading books on palmistry. Her successful predictions on reading the palms of friends and family strengthened her desire to go deeper into this field. She later went on to do her PHD in Astrology and she also studied Numerology, Vastu and Fengshui. A Reiki Grandmaster and Pranic Healing teacher, Ranjana also reads Tarot Cards. In addition to this she is also a past-life regression therapist and innerchild and breathwork facilitator. Ranjana travels a lot as a consultant in her area of expertise and also participates in many TV shows.



PICTURES

RAJESH DHAR

Rajesh Dhar lives in the City of Joy, Mumbai and is a graphic designer by profession. The 38-year old has a Bachelor of Visual Arts and took up photography seriously in 2006. He takes great interest in focusing on people of different religions and their diverse cultures. He says he still gets a great thrill travelling into the country's heartlands and capturing the spirit of the nation. Ultimately for him, he says his aim is to portray all the possible "merits and demerits of human lives in our society through my work".



FOO YONG HAN

He loves action whether it is on screen (watching movies or playing video games) or for real - sky diving or white-water river rafting. Sun Media's youngest editorial correspondent also loves to ride words and transport readers into the now of the moment. He spent the last 10 years writing and editing for a variety of print and online magazines in Singapore.



Indian Forts & Palaces



(Above) Ram Bagh Palace

THE ROYAL *Treatment*

BY **Ranee Sahaney**

Just a couple of months ago, a galaxy of the country's who's who from Bollywood, cricket and the business community, along with several politicians jetsetted into Jodhpur to join in the lavish 50th birthday celebrations of Nita Ambani, wife of India's richest industrial magnate, Mukesh Ambani, of Reliance fame. The party, of course, was at the fabulous Umaid Bhavan Palace.

The fantasy world of India's regal past continues to fascinate and intrigue us. Straddling the length and breadth of the country are a host of exquisite palaces and havelis (mansions). They are rich repositories

of some of the most intimate aspects of India's royals hailing from the 565-odd kingdoms that made up the country centuries earlier.

One of the most enticing attractions of holidaying in India is to stay in one of these lavishly appointed royal residences. This came about with the need for the erstwhile royals to partially or completely convert them into luxurious hotels to ensure their upkeep after 1971, when the Indian government withdrew their privy purses. Many of these magnificent palaces are centuries-old ancestral properties (and quite a few in good working condition)—and part of the allure lies the charm of living

within the ambit of a world where (sometimes) time seems to have stood still.

The elegant, the subtle, the whimsical, the bizarre — the range of palaces boggles the mind. Yet some of these heritage properties (either sold off to hotel chains or retained partially), fashioned from the finest of materials and services that money could buy, are now perfectly successful, professionally-run luxury hotels, where the regal trappings of yesteryear meld seamlessly with all mod cons. Charting the landscape of heritage palace hotels across the country, clearly, it is the desert state of Rajasthan—the Rajputana



Umaid Bhavan Palace

of yesteryears, which offers the richest and most opulent pickings. Reinventing the courtly life and world of feudal pageantry they are perfect extravaganzas of luxury and leisure. From Aubusson tapestries to Belgian glass, from silver-embossed buggies to gold crockery, from polo playing elephants to gun salutes and Rolls Royces— we love Royal India's dedication to excess.

Our list (for the well-heeled traveler who wants to enjoy a slice of royal living) does however throw up some nice little surprise too. Incredibly many of India's exquisite royal residences-turned- luxury hotels have been given a new lease of life with the growing demand for them as an appropriate setting for wedding ceremonials, honeymooning sojourns and even lavish birthday parties.

Ram Bagh Palace Jaipur

Slip into the gilded world of the maharajas at Ram Bagh Palace in Jaipur. This fabulous pile was the home of one of the most beautiful women in the world— the glamorous Maharani Gayatri Devi, married to Jaipur's polo-playing maharaja (Jai)

Swai Man Singh II. Ram Bagh Palace has been commissioned to run as a luxury hotel by the Taj chain since 1972, two years after Jai died in a polo accident. His internationally-celebrated rani moved into the adjoining Lily Pool where she continued to live till her death in 2009.

Meanwhile, the hotel goes from strength to strength attracting the well-heeled and celebrated from the four corners of the earth as they come to sample the legendary offerings of Rajasthan , quintessentially steeped in Jaipur's bazaars and palace-museums, gardens and fortifications. High tea on the terrace overlooking the lavish 47-acre landscaped environs merges gently into the dusk as the lights come up one by one to delineate the palaces' exquisite proportions against the purpling sky.

Lighted lamps guide the footsteps of the folk dancer...while the sound of her anklets seem to herald the arrival of the cocktail hour at one of India's most atmospheric and hospitable palace hotels. Tennis courts, a luxury spa, a shopping arcade and the lovely swimming pool garden are added allurements to the palace's classy restaurants, manned by gourmet chefs.

Gorgeously appointed interiors— four poster beds and silken chaise longues et al, transport you to a world of self-effacing glamour and luxury.

The choice of guestrooms varies from the luxury and palace suites to the historical and royal suites. The Grand Royal Suites (Prince's Suite and the Maharani Suite) served as the personal chambers of the royals. The Presidential Suryavanshi suite is a world of understated luxury and elegance. Riding and even a game of polo can be arranged on request.

www.tajhotels.com/Luxury/Grand-Palaces-And-Iconic-Hotels/Rambagh-Palace-Jaipur

Umaid Bhavan Palace Jodhpur

Located in this celebrated desert outpost Jodhpur's sprawling Umaid Bhavan Palace, now a hotel with the Taj chain, has played host to the likes of Madonna, Mick Jagger and Naomi Campbell. Home still to erstwhile Maharaja Gaj Singh, the Umaid Bhavan Palace Hotel (one of the world's largest private homes) dominates Jodhpur's skyline from Chittar Hill, as does the fabulous 13th century sprawl of the Mehrangarh



Hotel Lake Palace

Fort, where tourists swarm to explore its history— and some even to do a bit of zipping from its ramparts.

This massive regal pile was commissioned to give work to his subjects by Maharaja Umaid Singh during the great famine that hit the region in 1929. The yellow sandstone Indo-Art Deco palace (designed by Henry Vaughan Lancaster and spread over 26 acres with 347 rooms) with its lavish setting and period furniture, is now divided into three wings: the Residential Wing for the erstwhile His Highness Maharaja Gaj Singh II and his family, the Private Museum and the Hotel Wing, commissioned in 1972. Its 64 guestrooms are steeped in Art Deco atmospherics. There's a small fee if you want to just visit (10am-4pm, closed Sunday).

Don't miss the fabulous 105 foot high cupola, the amazing Durbar Hall, billiards room, two marble squash courts, an indoor swimming pool and heritage spots in the palace. Another star attraction is the collection of murals drawn by Jodhpur's court painter Stefan Norblin, a refugee Polish muralist who fled here during the WWII. Requests are entertained for riding, golf and jeep safaris.

www.tajhotels.com/Luxury/Grand-Palaces-And-Iconic-Hotels/Umaid-Bhawan-Palace-Jodhpur

Hotel Lake Palace Udaipur

Set upon the silvery waters of Lake Pichola, the four-acre milky-marble sprawl of the Lake Palace on Jag Nivas Island, is one of the world's most highly rated private water palaces—now run as a luxury hotel by the Taj chain of hotels since the 60s. This secluded fairytale retreat offers exclusive holidaying experiences for all occasions—be it for a honeymoon —or a writer seeking fresh inspiration. Legend has it that it was created by a young scion (Maharana Jagat Singh II) of the Mewar royals, to escape the censure of his elders who objected to his hedonistic lifestyle. The only access to his retreat was by boat—even as it is today.

Memorable experiences can be enjoyed amidst its mirrored guestrooms, the private sit-outs jutting over the lake, the lily pond, the swimming pool and charming public spots. Pampering is the keynote of the services and entertainment and gourmet meals are the cherry on the cake. The enchantment begins the minute you step on to the boat from the Gangaur Ghat near the City Palace complex, for the ride to the water palace. Take time in between to

uncover the layers of history embedded in the serpentine lanes of Udaipur and its glorious palaces.

www.tajhotels.com/Luxury/Grand-Palaces-And-Iconic-Hotels/Taj-Lake-Palace-Udaipur

Deogarh Mahal Palace Rajsamand District

Situated between Jodhpur and the lake city of Udaipur, Deogarh Mahal Palace seems to be caught in a time warp with its medieval setting. Yet the hotel offers every comfort for a modern-day visitor. Quintessential to the Deogarh experience is the personalized service...you may even get to dine with Rawat Nahar Singh's family (who continue to reside in one wing) over a cultural evening on the beautifully mashal-lit terrace.

Wake to the peacocks' cry on a crisp Rajasthani dawn, tuck into a thali full of yummy dishes for breakfast and then saunter off into the nearby bazaar for local crafts and silver jewellery. All 50 rooms reflect their ages-old Rajasthani heritage — Gokul Ajara, Moti Mahal and Ranjit Prakash guestrooms date to 1670— but all offer the comforts of every modern convenience.

Do take time to check out the Deogarh-school miniatures dotting the interiors. Meals at Deogarh are driven by the freshness of home-grown fruits and vegetables, in-house milk products and oils. Later take a jeep ride with a picnic basket to one of the grand waterfalls or ride the rails on the toy train running through the verdant environs of the Aravallis. Vintage car rides, riding, treks are also arranged.

www.deogarhmahal.com

Gajner Palace Gajner (near Bikaner)

Parrots chase each other amongst the ancient trees, the demoiselle cranes and black ducks on the lake dip deep to catch an unwary fish... then scatter wildly as a tiny boat

transporting visitors to the other end of end glides by... the priest rings the bell in the family shrine in the Mandir Chowk...guests drowsily loll on sun-warmed stone benches catching itinerant breezes wafting over the lake...Welcome to Gajner Palace—one of Rajasthan's most picturesque, out-of-the-tourist-path, retreats. Once a hunting lodge for the Bikaner royals, Gajner (famed for its Imperial sand grouse shoots with the English Viceroy since the 'roaring 20s'), is now run as a heritage hotel (with four wings—Dungar Niwas, Mandir Chowk, Gulab Niwas and Champa Niwas) by HRH Hotels, owned by the Mewar royals.

Just a half hour run from the desert city of Bikaner on the Jaisalmer Road, Gajner has its own little sanctuary where jeep rides bring you up-close with blackbuck, chinkara and wild hog. The beautifully accoutered guest suites (13 historic suites and 32 deluxe suites) drowse in dappled sunlight under ancient trees amidst the surrounds of rich foliage on a scattering of landscaped verdure punctuated by stone court yards. You can sign up for elephant rides, boating, jeep rides into the desert with dinner on the dunes and cycling trips or a game of billiards on the 1900s table. Candlelight dinners can be arranged in the sanctuary on request. In between those lazy bouts head for the Camel Farm near Bikaner or the famous Rat Temple at Deshnoke.

www.hrrhotels.com/grand_heritage/gajner_palace

Raj Nivas Palace Dholpur

Another laidback retreat, this beautiful red sandstone palace, run by a scion of the Gwalior royals, offers easy access to Agra with its iconic Taj Mahal, and Gwalior, renowned for its spectacular Fort. Dushyant and his famous mother Vasundhra Raje Scindia, Chief Minister of Rajasthan, have painstakingly converted the Raj

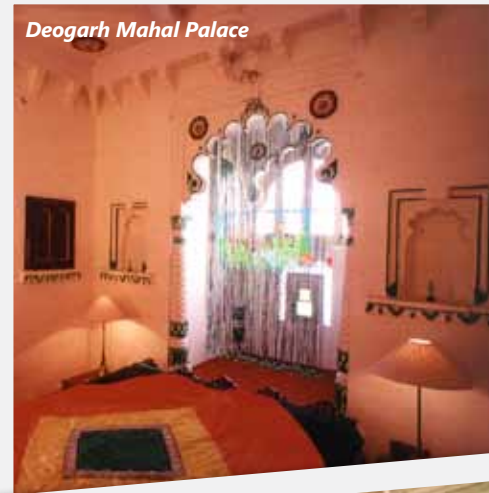
DHOLPUR IS FAMOUS FOR ITS STONE QUARRIES WHICH SUPPLIED THE RAJ FOR BUILDING THE VICEROY'S PALACE—NOW RASHTRAPATI BHAVAN, RESIDENCE OF INDIA'S PRESIDENT, IN NEW DELHI.

Nivas Palace into beautiful palace resort with both a heritage wing with gorgeously accoutered period guestrooms, and a cavalcade of newly structured cottages, scattered around swathes of landscaped verdure.

Dholpur offers easy access to the legendary Chambal River, where you can go crocodile spotting and even take a jeep ride around those Chambal ravines, famed once for their dreaded dacoits. Picnics are arranged at the Talab Shahi lake retreat surrounded by lush forests filled with wildlife Mughal Shahjehan once hunted.

Dholpur is also famous for its stone quarries which supplied the Raj for building the Viceroy's palace—now Rashtrapati Bhavan, residence of India's president, in New Delhi. Riding is also arranged on request, as are tours of the Taj or

Deogarh Mahal Palace



Gajner Palace



Nadesar Palace



Gwalior's star attractions. The palace has also been the perfect setting for low key weddings for well-heeled and discerning patrons.

www.dholpurpalace.com

Nadesar Palace

Varanasi

The atmospheric of the ancient city of Varanasi—the Benaras of old, is best explored from the luxurious setting of the Nadesar Palace, run now as a Taj hotel. Surrounded by fragrant swathes of jasmine and marigold in a cool mango grove the hotel's laidback ambience is the perfect counterpoint to the dusty hustle and bustle of one of India's most visited pilgrimage hubs. Its picture windows, overlooking the hallowed Ganga, have offered great moments of delight to streams of celebrated visitors since 1835.

Its ten guestrooms, done up in colours of the floral offerings to the Ganga—marigold and lotus, jasmine and champa, serve up islands of tranquility and modern day comforts. Scattered around the palace are paintings from the maharaja's personal collection. Golf and spa treatments have been welcomed diversions at the palace.

www.tajhotels.com/Business/Nadesar%20Palace,VARANASI

Falaknuma Palace

Hyderabad

A massive pile of Italian marble spread over 93,971 sq m, the Falaknuma Palace was painstakingly filled with every imaginable luxury and cultural appointments from the four corners of the earth by Nawab Vikar-ul-Umra, prime minister of Hyderabad. No wonder his lord and master Mehboob Ali Pasha, 6th Nizam of Hyderabad, turned green with envy when he came here for a party. So when he extended his stay telling him how much he loved it the prime minister had little choice but to offer it as a gift to his ruler.



Falaknuma Palace

The Nizam graciously accepted the offer. Greatly under pressure for overshooting his budget for his astonishing personal residence, the prime minister did not demur when the Nizam sent him the money to compensate him for the lavish gift!!!

Today even you can enjoy the pleasures of that fabulous gift, thanks to the arrangements by the Nizam's family with the Taj group to run it as a hotel. The splendour of the Nizam's envy will continue to be the talking point for ages to come. Beautifully restored and refurbished the palace hotel offers visitors an aesthetic journey of many delights during a sojourn here in one of their 60 guestrooms. Don't be in a hurry to leave. And of course the star attractions of Hyderabad city—an astonishing amalgam of the old (Hyderabad of the Nizams) and the super-new (after all its one of India's top IT hubs) come as an added bonus.

www.tajhotels.com/Luxury/Grand-Palaces-And-Iconic-Hotels/Taj-Falaknuma-Palace-Hyderabad

Chapslee Palace

Shimla

Exploring the Raj-era nuances of Shimla (Simla of those times) from the charming Chapslee Palace gives you a whole new take on this most popular of hill stations in India.

It is from their summer retreat in Simla that the British continued to strengthen their rule from India to Singapore in an increasingly dense web of political intrigue. Yet Simla was also the most glamorous social hub of the Raj days. Chapslee, the summer retreat of Charanjit Singh, Maharaja of Kapurthala, is a beautiful little palace hotel steeped in Raj-era nostalgia with its period rooms and furnishings and scatter of exquisite mementoes and bric-a-brac. Savour the yesteryear atmospheric amidst its five suites, library, card room, croquet lawn, tennis court and tasty meals. It's located near Auckland House School.

www.chapslee.com

EXPLORING THE RAJ-ERA
NUANCES OF SHIMLA FROM THE
CHARMING CHAPSLEE PALACE
GIVES YOU A WHOLE NEW TAKE
ON THIS MOST POPULAR OF HILL
STATIONS IN INDIA

Winter Thrills in India's Alpine Country

**Stunning scenery,
skiing and
snowboarding in
India's Himalayan
retreats**

For many the alpine village resort of **Gulmarg** (2,730m), in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, summons up visions of leisurely summer holidays and Bollywood stars from the 60's romancing each other amongst its sylvan glades or just enjoying pony rides past its beautiful golf course.

Gulmarg's summer delights are the stuff of legend for those in the know. After all Emperor Jehangir spent hours exploring the botanical richness of its biosphere expanses and we are so thrilled that its winter offerings are being recognised by the global

holidaying community. Skiing holidays in India are all the more enticing as visitors can combine a favourite adventure sport with magical cultural experiences. CNN International in 2010 rated Gulmarg as Asia's seventh best ski destination.

Today, Gulmarg is one of the hottest draws in the global skiing arena for the discerning winter sports enthusiast. If anything the numbers of foreign skiing professionals seem to have only increased as word has spread of



its natural virgin powders, off-piste expanses for the thrill seekers, and excellent facilities.

High above the little resort stands Mt Apharwat (4,124m) in the Pir Panjal Range, which is the magnet for the daring skiing and snowboarding buff. It is the fabulous, untrammelled run down its pristine slopes, which has catapulted the resort into the adventure sports arena in India in a really big way. Ski and snowboarding enthusiasts from around the world seem to have more than doubled each passing year buffered by the confidence in the bountiful snowfall, uncrowded ski slopes, back country runs beyond the resort, world-class facilities and Indian hospitality at its best.

Challenging Terrain

Gulmarg's terrain is pretty steep and this makes for a really adrenalin-pumping run for advanced level skiers. In the winter of 2012-13 the hill resort resounded with the exploits of Australian skier—"Wolf Pack" who was reputed for being the best and fastest skier the resort has seen in time.

The other enticement, especially for the beginner, is that it's probably the most inexpensive place in the world to learn to ski. The Indian Institute of Skiing and Mountaineering here, conducts regular 10 and 21-day ski courses for different levels. The high season is between late-December to early April. This was originally the Gulmarg Ski Club established in 1927 by Raj-era British skiing enthusiasts excited by Gulmarg's skiing prospects.

International skiing companies of repute have set up base to cater to the needs of the visitors. American avalanche forecaster Brian Newman helped launch the Gulmarg Avalanche Centre. He has also set up an expert ski patrol team. The resort is supported with a slew of top-of-the-line facilities and equipment to facilitate the winter sports. Gulmarg has the world's second highest gondola ski lift set up in 1998 by Pomagalsky, the world-renowned French company to access Mt Apharwat from the valley floor. The 2-stage gondola is operated by the J&K Cable Car Corporation under Poma regulations. The cable links the valley



(Clockwise from left): Views of Gulmarg Gondola base station and scenery. The cable cars go up to almost 4,000 metres

GULMARG'S TERRAIN MAKES FOR A REALLY ADRENALIN-PUMPING RUN FOR REALLY ADVANCED LEVEL SKIERS

floor via a mid-station (the Kondogri Restaurant has many takers) to an elevation of 3990m to Mt Apharwat. Advance-level skiers and snowboarders love that over 1,330 vertical metres of uncrowded snow-riding terrain.

It's not just the facilities which make Gulmarg so enticing, the ski patrol team in place too has had rigorous training in avalanche rescue and medical aid to international standards. One can hire equipment for alpine and cross country skiing, snowboarding, ice skating, ice hockey, toboggans, sledges and snow cycles etc are available from the J&K government shop. Another popular shop has expert skier 'Chacha' Yasin

who runs the Alpine Ski Shop here and also arranges accommodation in the cottages scattered around Gulmarg. Yasin and his team also provide lessons and mountain guides.

Skiing is available at two levels at Gulmarg. Beginner and intermediate boarders and skiers can follow the 200m run from the mid-station hub of Kondogri. For the more advanced level the gondola takes you up to Apharwat. Daily reports on snow conditions are also readily available with the ski patrol. If you are looking to enjoy the more risky ungroomed, back-country (off-piste) explorations a mountain guide is recommended. Bunny slopes Poma lifts are run by J&K Tourism on the snow-mantled golf course. The area is groomed regularly by Kassbohrer machines.

The golf course is also the venue for cross-country ski training and racing. Another thrilling experience is heli-skiing, operated here by professional international companies stationed here. For the less adventurous Gulmarg has plenty of sledding and ice-skating.

Patni Top

Apart from Gulmarg the hill station of **Patni Top**, close to Jammu is also a fun place for skiing beginners; ice skating, snow ball fights and gentler snow activates make it a popular winter destination too.

The months of snowfall in the state of Himachal Pradesh is an important highlight on the winter sports calendar. Lots of fun and adventure await heli-skiing experts as well as skiing buffs. Top hubs are the summer resorts of Manali (popular for those daring heli-skiing thrills), Rohtang Pass and the gorgeous Solang Valley. Snow-clad Narkanda and Kufri bring out the hatted and mittened visitors in droves but Hanuman Tibba, Deo Tibba, Rohtang Pass and Chandrakhani Pass bring on the heli-skiers to these legendary haunts for the more daring.

AULI IS THE HUB OF THE ANNUAL NATIONAL SKI COMPETITION HELD BY THE WINTER GAMES FEDERATION OF INDIA



Uttarakhand's Auli

In the state of Uttarakhand the summer resort of **Auli**, becomes a major hub for skiing and snowboarding in the dead of winter. With its memorable views of the snow peaks of the Himalayas it offers a fabulous back-to-nature holiday. Altitudes at Auli range from 2,500-3050 m and its surrounding terrain is marked by lofty pinnacles and picturesque valleys.

From January to March its snowfields come alive with skiing enthusiasts. Auli is also the hub of the annual national ski competition held by the Winter Games Federation of India, which give a nice edge to all the snow activities here. Garhwal Mandal Vikas Nigam

(GMVN), the state tourism department, has equipment on hire as well as accommodation.

You can also enrol for one of their two courses, ranging from 7day-14 days, in the months of January-March. The package includes basic ski equipment and the lift facility, as well as food and accommodation. Auli is also connected by ropeway from Joshimath, the longest run in Asia, from where you can enjoy the priceless extravaganza of the snow-bound Nanda Devi Range. The resort is also equipped with a state-of-the-art skiing facility, chairlift system and artificial snow making system —arranged for the 2011 South Asian Winter Games.

BEST TIME TO GO

Season starts from mid-December right up to mid-April.

Tourism Offices:

JAMMU & KASHMIR

J&K Tourism
Assistant Director
Tourism Department, Gulmarg
Mobile: 09419708180
Tel: 01954 -254487, 254439

J&K Tourism
Directorate of Tourism
Tourism Reception Centre
Shervani Road, Srinagar
Tel: 0194-2452690-91, 2479548
Website: jktourism.org

UTTARAKHAND

Garhwal Mandal Vikas Nigam (GMVNL)
Tourist Bureau
Joshimath
Tel.: 01372-22781
Website: www.gmvnl.com

GMVN
Rishikesh (Yatra Office)
AGM (Tourism)
Tourist Information Centre
Shail Vihar, Haridwar By Pass Road, Rishikesh
Tel.: 0135-2431793



HIMACHAL PRADESH TOURISM DEV CORP (HPTDC)

The Mall, Manali
Tel: 01902-253531
Website: hptdc.nic.in



Private Jet Charter

Taj Air Flight

The uber luxury way of destination hopping in India

With India's economy in overdrive this past decade it comes as no surprise that corporate India started looking at time and money-saving alternatives in travel. Reliance Industries, GMR, Bharat Hotels, Taj Air, Oberoi Videocon, UB Group and Raymond, have been just a few of the top corporate houses who've been buying up private jets such as Cessnas, Beech Kings, Bombardiers, Embraer, Falcon and Gulfstream for their needs.

And the market seems to be growing exponentially. Till around 2005 there were less than 40 private planes in India. The Business Aviation Association for India predicts 1,400 private aircraft including helicopters by 2015, compared to some 500 today.

Founder and chairman of VistaJet Holding SA, Thomas Flohr, opines that, business aviation in India is on the cusp of the next phase of growth because the number of such travellers — "their DNA is very global" — is poised to rise dramatically. India's fast-

growing private jets market represents 12 percent of the global market, according to industry watchers.

And it's not just the business community which is looking at private jet travel. The leisure sector is revving up to a whole new world of sensations and experiences as well-heeled travelers sign up for a customized private charter with family and friends for an exclusive jaunt to their favourite holidaying destinations.

Today, one can buy a plane - for the ultimate in luxury travel for the really well-heeled (read crorepatris) or just get together with a bunch of friends and hire one.... Luxury is no longer just about clothes, hand bags, shoes, perfumes, makeup and fancy hotels... It's the ability to afford the luxury of a world of special customised flights, dedicated boarding areas, luxurious interiors, spacious and comfortable seating/reclining high-definition flat-screen television, Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP) —even shower facilities and on-board chefs.

Popular Holiday Charters

And now you can choose from a range of holiday destinations with quick access to a landing site for a jet or a helicopter—be it a full scale airport to a landing strip in the back of beyond. Some of the top destinations: **Agra**, oh the Taj, yes that glorious poem to romance 'the teardrop on the cheek of time' the Taj Mahal! Private jets now wing over its riverside setting, offering you the thrill of your life at one of India's top holiday destinations. The aircraft is parked at the Kheria Air Force Station airport while you indulge yourself. By the way, Indian aircraft usually get clearances within two days while foreign registered jets can take up to a month.

Hyderabad, the city of the Nawabs is on everyone's hot-to-go list for those on a private jet jaunt. It's also convenient since the airport has a fleet of Cessna Citation CJ1 and CJ2 jets stationed there



Photo: Joao Carlos Medau



(Clockwise from top left): Religare Voyages' Dassault Falcon 2000; Invision Air's Embraer Phenom 100; and Taj Air's Piaggio P180 Avanti II

for hire. So prep up to pick pearls and savour traditional biryanis, after a round of the amazing nawabi collections at the Salarjung Museum, dinner and stay at the fabulous Falunkama Palace, now a glitzy hotel run by the Taj group.

Kerala, is where one can pump up the excitement of an iconic backwater tour by flying into town on your own private vahan; there are ready facilities for private chartered craft at the capital's Thiruvananthapuram, pepper port town Kochi and Calicut (Kozikode) airports.

Jodhpur's spectacular Mehrangarh Fort offers zipping as an adventurous diversion to guests. But you can also zip into town in a private jet to enjoy the pleasures of Rajasthan's popular desert outpost with its uber-luxurious Umaid Bhavan Palace— which has played host to celebs such as Madonna and her entire entourage. From Delhi, a Citation CJ2 private jet charter can get you there in an hour. A wildlife safari is definitely enhanced if you get there by helicopter or a small plane...You'll never think about Ranthambhore or Kanha National parks again without that little frisson of delight about that private flight jaunt.

Udaipur, one of the world's most romantic water palaces was built here as a private retreat in a fit of pique by the scion of the Mewar royals, because his elders objected to his late night parties. Privacy and luxury are your twin companions as you zoom into town on

your private jet to this city of lakes and royal splendour.

There are quite a few firms that have come up in response to the burgeoning market demand for charters. If money is literally no object, next to buying a jet or helicopter, a call to **Taj Air**, which has been in business of exclusive private charters since 2002, caters to domestic and international travel with a Dassault Falcon 2000LX, Dassault Falcon 2000, and the Piaggio P.180 Avanti II. It flies to over 150 airports in 56 countries. In India it offers 130 destinations while commercial airlines cover 71 destinations.

Religare Voyages' (run by billionaire brothers Malvinder Singh and Shivinder

Singh) fleet of multiple jets and turbo props are ready to take you anywhere. The fleet boasts of the Falcon 7X, Falcon 2000, Hawker 800XP, Beechcraft 1900D, King Air B200 and King Air C90.

Air Charters India operated by the Stic Travel Group offers access to about 680 aircraft. **Baron Aviation** with a fleet of 25 varied aircraft has a unique stand— you're not particularly chartering a plane but actually renting a service with them. **Invision Air** has a fleet of Embraer's Phenom 100s and the larger Phenom 300s jet for charter. The choice of charter companies and the destination to fly to is limited just only by your imagination.

For more information

- **Air Charters India**
Tel: 91 12-44595300 or 9811120318
Email: info@airchartersindia.net
- **Baron Aviation, Mumbai**
Tel: +91 22 3002 5252
Email: marketing@barongroup.in
- **Religare Voyages, New Delhi**
Tel: 91 11-66562200
Fax: + 91 11 66371499
Email: voyagesinfo@religarevoyages.com
- **Taj Air, Mumbai**
Tel: 91 22-66011825, 91 22-66651081
Fax: 91 22-26157555
Email: tajair@tajhotels.com



Hawker 800XP Interior

R Niranjan Das

Vythiri – The Emerald Gateway

R Niranjan Das takes the long and winding road on his bike through the emerald gateway that leads to the fabulous Wyanad biosphere expanse

▶ Vythiri envelopes him in a world of whirling mists, waterfalls and blue hills, which punctuate the carpet of lush verdure that typifies the terrain of the Wyanad region. Hopping from one side of the road to the other, bonnet macaques look on as the new visitor finds himself entranced by the curve of black tarmac translating into a series of nine hair pin bends serving up breathtaking views every step of the way as the morning chill catches him unawares as he rides on.

At the first hair pin bend he hops off at the side road shack to drink hot coffee, a hot spicy duck omelet and some mangoes while tendrils of mist fasten themselves on its surrounds. Back on the winding 14 km ghat road his lungs gorge on the fresh mountain air... his head swirls with the delightful scenery heading the other way from him. Most of the journey feels like a "forest ride" as it's covered in a green canopy and when it clears up in some places, he is rewarded by "mind blowing vistas with views of the valley."

As Niranjan explains it, for those travelling from Bangalore or Mysore to Wyanad, Vythiri is the last stop before going down the hills. For travellers from Cochin, Kozhikode and places like Kerala, Vythiri is the gateway to the beautiful Wyanad region. Highlights of his trip included the drive through the

Thamarassery ghats and visit to the the famous Pookote Lake.

Vythiri View Point marks the end of the ghats and one's welcome to Wyanad district. The rolling landscape hits all the right places as he stands bemusedly, where so many other travellers have been equally bereft of words. Look to the left where by the road stands, the district's iconic ficus tree marked by a chain wound around it. This is very significant in Wyanad's history.

CHAINED SPIRIT

The story: Legend has it that the spirit of a tribal named Karinthandan was chained to the tree after it started troubling travellers on this route. The tribal helped a Britisher reach Wyanad after crossing the treacherous forest hills. However, to claim that he had discovered the place, the Britisher killed the tribal. The spirit of the tribal troubled people travelling on that route ever since until he was chained to the tree by a priest!

From the chained spirit tree, Niranjan rode to Pookote Lake where there are boating facilities, a small park and souvenir shop. The road ahead leads into a mosaic of tea plantations and forested enclaves. It may be misty and cold from October to February, but the summer months are a delight with gorgeous untrammelled views and balmy days. For Niranjan, the sweeping vistas, the ghats and the lake make Vythiri a worthwhile destination; there's also the option of staying in one of the numerous resorts here.

Blog note: R Niranjan Das's blog titled 'Tales of a Nomad...!!' records his personal insights and experiences of the many places he's travelled. He goes on long bike trips and will not shirk from undertaking treacherous treks, back packing and train holidays. Many of his writings have been reproduced in numerous in print and online publications. To read more, visit: www.rajniranjandas.blogspot.in



Her blog on the hill town stood out as one of the most charming destinations in all her encounters with the land and the people in the North East. The beauty of the land and the simplicity of its people left a lasting impression

► Bomdila is a picturesque hill town which is generally the night halt for folks heading for Arunachal Pradesh's ancient and beautifully located Tawang Monastery. Anuradha loved the bustling bazaar, the gossiping ladies, the colourful stalls and the amazing views of its surrounds.

The old monastery at the end of the main road dates back three to four centuries. The hill town also sports a new monastery. The government handicraft center preserves the ancient traditions of local artifacts such as mask making, furniture making, fabric weaving, embroidery, metal crafts. The store here offers excellent souvenirs.

India's National Institute of Fashion Technology, she reveals, helps them with designs and also in getting them IP protection for their traditional designs and weaves. Anuradha clearly enjoyed interacting with the local ladies when she encountered some novelties in the little-visited museum there. At Nag Mandir, midway between Bomdila and Balukpong, she discovers the popular cult that worships snakes in these parts.

When not distracted by the gorgeous views she also encounters hundreds of beehives along the way and is left wondering how the locals manage to extract the honey from the



Anuradha Goyal

Bewitching Bomdila

combs. The misty drive, she finds is at once thrilling yet scary.

She gives some excellent advice to would-be travelers: In these lesser travelled tourist spots, no plans for trips here are carved in stone. One must be prepared for the unexpected, delays for example from a bandh, which force you to make alternative arrangements such as a stay at a tea estate. To enter the state of Arunachal Pradesh, she also reminds us, that you need an inner line permit that can be obtained by filling a form and giving your

photographs and copy of a photo Id card. This can be done in Delhi, Guwahati or Shillong. You have to specify which entry route of the three available will you take and what places you intend to visit and between what dates. Usually a permit is issued for 15 days.

Blog note: Anuradha has been writing her travel blog for over eight years and her blog was voted one of 50 best blogs on travel worldwide, many of them off-beat destinations. To read more, visit: anuradhagoyal.blogspot.sg



Puru

Nalanda: Lost Knowledge

The ruins still offer today's visitors a lesson from history

► Puru, one half of the husband and wife team, Ekta and Puru, of the award-winning Shadows Galore web and blog, visited the ancient university city of Nalanda last December. He finds the ruins can still teach us a lesson or two about tolerance.

The University of Nalanda is the first great university in recorded history. Students from Persia, Turkey, Greece, China and Tibet came to study subjects like theology, grammar, logic, astronomy, metaphysics, medicine and philosophy. First established over 1,000 years ago, it was once a massive complex and centre of learning that can house up to 10,000 students and 2,000 teachers! In fact, it was so huge that the current excavated area of 14 hectares represents just 10 per cent of the original site.

To get the most from the visit, Puru recommended one must buy the tickets and hire a guide, otherwise the place will "all be just broken bricks." The main gateway with its mighty

towers which was described in the writings of Xuanzang were never found and the walls were cut to make a gate. He described how, "As we crossed the thick walls, we came to the courtyard. There were nine hostels with rows of double storied rooms for the students. Each room accommodated two student boarders with brick beds and shelves for keeping books. Each teacher had a room to themselves. Every hostel had a central courtyard which served as the meditation hall as well as community kitchen, each with its own water source. On one of such courtyards, the guide showed us the design of a bow, the insignia of the Guptas. It felt weird, the ruins of a glorious past and an uncertain future. There are plans to revive the Nalanda University in Bihar but it's doubtful it ever reach its former glory."

In 1193 AD, a savage, marauding army of Turks under the brutal leadership of Bakthiyar Khilji attacked and looted Nalanda. Thousands of monks were

burnt alive and even more were

beheaded. And the library was set on fire – the loss of lives and knowledge were incalculable. The University was lost to history and was to remain buried until its rediscovery in the 19th century.

Photo: Hideyuki Kamon



The most famous part of the University is its giant stupa. History related how the stupa was built in in seven successive rounds. Before the excavations began, it was totally covered by earth and resembled a small hillock. Till a few years back, tourists were allowed to climb to the top but had caused damage to the structure. It is now off limits to people. Surrounding the main stupa are several smaller stupas, which contain the remains of the monks and scholars who once resided in the university.

The devastation first experienced by the University century past made Puru wonder, "How could one have the heart to destroy this priceless treasure of human knowledge. Nalanda today stands testimony to the death and destruction religious fanaticism has brought on mankind." He take heart that at least the damage experienced by the ruins during contemporary times has been arrested thanks to greater efforts in conservation.

Blog note: The web and blog site by the husband and wife team, Puru and Ekta called Shadows Galore announced this year it was chosen by Thrillophilia, the biggest activity travel curator of India as one of its 'Top 25 Indian Travel Bloggers.' You will find at their website "travelogues, photographs, talks about books, films and food, and some memories". To read more, visit: www.shadowsgalore.com



Photo: www.veda.wikidot.com

MANDIP SINGH SOIN

Adventure is My Business

It is also his passion. The founder and managing director of IBEX Expeditions explores highlights of India's adventure tourism sector with IN Magazine

By **Ranee Sahaney**



Multiple awards winner, Mandip Singh Soin, is one of India's leading adventure buffs, whose passion has taken him to some of the world's and India's most daring adventure arenas. He has quite successfully married the 'hobby' of his youth with a full-fledged business in adventure tourism! Today he is also a respected and sought-after speaker for adventure tourism. He was last in Singapore for ITB Asia last October; Ibex Expeditions has earned numerous awards and was rated by National Geographic as among 'The Best Adventure Travel Companies On Earth.' He was nominated 'India's Most Versatile Adventurer' by The Limca Book of Records and won the Ness Award for mountaineering and explorations by the Royal Geographical Society, UK. In 2012, he was awarded the 'Tenzing Norgay National Adventure Award for Lifetime Achievement' by the President of India.



Mandip at ITB Asia

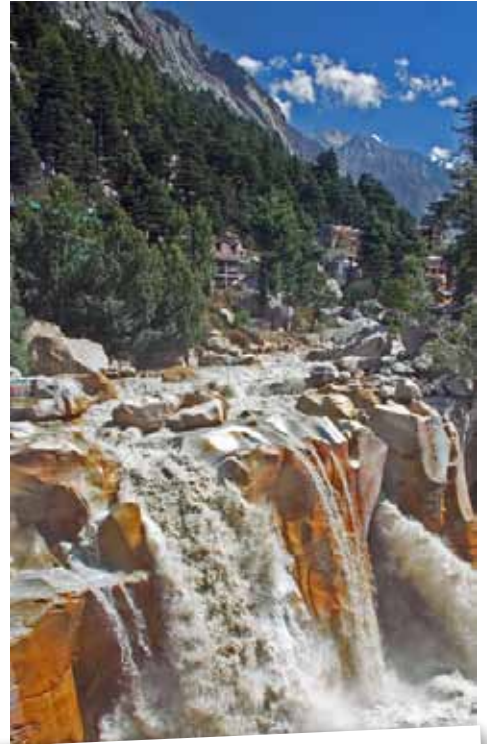
Can you tell us a little about the hottest trends in adventure tourism?

There are two streams emerging. One is the soft adventure type where folks who have never really done any adventure are venturing forth to try their hand at some gentle walks in the Himalaya or overland jeep safaris etc. Two, are other folks adding on high adventure activities within their holidays such as river rafting or mountain biking or even trying a bunje or scuba within their adventure holiday.

What are some of the best and most professionally run extreme sports available in India, and how would you rate those experiences?



Panna Park



(Left to right) Mandip at Lake Mansarovar in Tibet; Ladakh; Gangotri Waterfall; Nagaland Hill



We now have an operation which offers bunjy jumping and canyon swings which is a super operation with internationally qualified personnel and the same holds true for zip wire experiences. This is true for river rafting as well where a lot of our guides are internationally trained and have rafted some of the challenging Himalayan Rivers where regular trips operate.

In terms of Mountaineering expeditions, here too we have well qualified personnel who are mountain guides who can guide mountaineers on trekking summits or indeed, a few specialist adventure tour operators can provide support for the overseas mountain expeditions that come to climb in the Himalaya.

What in your mind are the most popular activities in this area that attract foreign travellers to India?

The premier options are Himalayan Mountaineering expeditions where there is ample scope to still make first ascents of so many Himalayan peaks that are unclimbed. The second is to just experience a Himalayan trek, be it on a popular trail or a relatively unexplored trail, because a Himalayan trek is something quite unique unlike the Alps which are very developed. With the unique cultural intermix of the diverse Himalayan states, it becomes a very powerful magnet. Incidentally, India has 77% of the Himalaya in its territory.

What are the best adventure tourism destinations in the country? And why?

Some of the prime ones are, of course, the Himalayan states themselves like Ladakh and Zaskar in J&K – good for jeep safaris, treks, mountain expeditions, river rafting, mountain biking, angling and more. Then there is of course, Lahaul and Spiti and the Kulu valley in Himachal Pradesh that are good for all the above activities, and we can add kayaking as well.

Garhwal and Kumaon in Uttarakhand hold their magic as do Sikkim and Arunachal for trekking, mountaineering, river rafting and canoeing. Some of these states also afford unique winter trekking options like walking on the frozen river Zaskar or tracking the snow leopard.

What has been the most exciting adventure experience in India for you personally in all your years in this field?

Possibly the winter expedition that I led which was an Indo -British effort in 1994 , to walk on the frozen river Zaskar and to attempt to climb Stok Kangri a 6000m peak in winter by Skiis. We were flown in a helicopter from Leh to Padum in a helicopter that was flown out from our troops in the Siachen Glacier. We took local porters, guides and cooks and gave them employment in winter which kick-started this winter tourism in that region; we had so much fun staying in local Zanskari homes and caves along the way for a week through the awesome Zaskar Gorge, also called the Grand Canyon of India. We then made an attempt on Stok in Snow leopard country as the only people in that wilderness.

IN 2012, MANDIP SINGH SOIN WAS AWARDED THE 'TENZING NORGAY NATIONAL ADVENTURE AWARD FOR LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT' BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA

What is so unique about an adventure holiday experience in India? Say rafting, trekking, mountain climbing, skiing?

I think it is the uniqueness of India where each of these sports is conducted in destinations that are uniquely diverse and as is known "people make the difference"! There is also delectable cuisine and an incredible sense of warmth and hospitality wherever people go, be it staying in a ski chalet in the Himalaya or a homestay in Ladakh; or a charming lodge in the forest with vernacular-style architecture which affords trekking possibilities.

According to a recent study by Trip Advisor some of the most chosen experiences are bunjee jumping, sky diving, scuba amongst Indians. Please comment.

Sky diving is still nascent as there is only one operation and it is a bit expensive. However, this trend is primarily there in the age range of 25 to 50 and this is good and welcome, having been spurred by the media channels like Discovery and National Geographic, and also people's ability to travel and see similar activities in other parts of the world and of course, in having the disposable income to partake of this.

Barren Island, India's only live volcano, was out of bounds. Now an agency like Karina Tourism and Adventure was talking about diving trips via a live board in the waters by the volcano, which have already been sold out. You did a trip to the volcano some years ago with special permission. Your take on this as an experience to look forward to.

Barren Island should not be opened for tourism and should be left for scientific studies/visitation since it is an extremely fragile eco system and would not be able to sustain tourism numbers. However, so long as scuba diving happens and its around the Barren Island and conducted from a ship, I think the impact should be minimal. Of course, proper guidelines of garbage, no feeding etc would be important to maintain.

What was the most thrilling activity you enjoyed on your trip to the North East?

A trek into the fabled area of Kanchenjunga going up to the Goecha La was one of the highlights, as was rafting down the Siang in Arunachal.

Madhya Pradesh



Puducherry

Can you recommend a luxury adventure holiday, sahib-style?

We have been conducting these for high net worth individuals who want to experience adventure in luxury so not only do they have a higher ratio of staff per person but are also given deluxe vehicles and more comfortable outdoor equipment such as luxury tents, hot water solar showers, hot water bottles, luxury dining tents with rugs, fresh coffee and percolators and delectable teas and cuisine that is high end.

What would you recommend for first timers wanting an adventure trip to India?

There is nothing like a combination of doing a jeep safari into the Himalaya, absorbing the awe and beauty of the mountain vistas, getting gently acclimatized and finally ending of with day walks and day rafting trips to come back longing for more.

What about veterans in the field coming to India for the first time?

The sky is the limit as far as mountaineering expeditions go if they are so trained or Himalayan trekking is concerned. To make a 7000 metre ascent or indeed even a 6500 metre technically difficult ascent still draws many from around the world.

One of the leading mountaineers of the US, who discovered mountaineer Mallory's body on Everest, called Conrad Anker made the ascent of Mt Meru's Sharks Fin route in 2011, which was deemed to be one of the most challenging routes ever done in the Himalaya.

What about activities for young adults?

As I mentioned it can range between adventure sports between bunjy, zip wire, para gliding or skiing but certainly, many would like to try their hand at Himalayan mountain biking which gives a physical challenge as well as a high sense of adventure going through Himalayan roads and high and remote passes.

Some recommendations for an adventure holiday for a family with a 60 + member and 12-14 year old?

A lot of the family adventures can either be in the Kumaon with the charming Himalayan lodges combining walks, looking for Himalayan birds or panoramic Himalayan views and doing this all through a jeep safari or indeed treating the wider landscape of India as an adventure tourism destination.

For example, we do a lot of these in Rajasthan using forts and palace hotels as well as boutique camps, interspersed with short camel safaris, jeep safaris, and Marwari horse riding for those with the skill.

Similarly, a walking wildlife safari inside a National Park in Central India or a dedicated Elephant safari for 2-3 days whilst camping en route are all great family ideas, not to miss Kerala where one can walk with the poachers- turned-guides and stay in tree houses.

View of Dhankar, Himachal Pradesh



Mandip on Thermometer Egg on Rifflehorn

What are some of the tips you'd give to someone who'd like to follow your career path?

Take the road less travelled and first check if you have a passion for the great outdoors and if you have a sense of adventure and a zest for travel.

Second, get yourself trained in the outdoors by doing a mountaineering course by which you can not just conduct yourself safely but also take care of your clients and understand the importance of minimizing environmental impacts. One must have the knowledge of how tourism works in general and have a keen eye for ecotourism and responsible travel ethics.

How viable has it been to make your 'hobby' a business? Some tips?

I guess I was luckier as the field was fairly new and virgin and today there is more competition for the startups. However for anything in Life, the first thing to have and not waver in is 'self belief'. Then the passion makes sure one does it well and at the same time one needs to display the entrepreneurial spirit to manage the business end of the venture. Not a bad idea to start small as the very nature of Adventure Tourism is different to Big/Large funded startups which are fine for normal tourism but not necessarily for adventure tourism where an organic growth gets you loyal customers and the experience to handle clients safely.



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Photo: bombaybites.net

FLAVOURS OF Southern India & Mumbai

A literary tour of the best of South Indian staples and a Michelin chef's personal guide to Mumbai street to 5-star food haunts

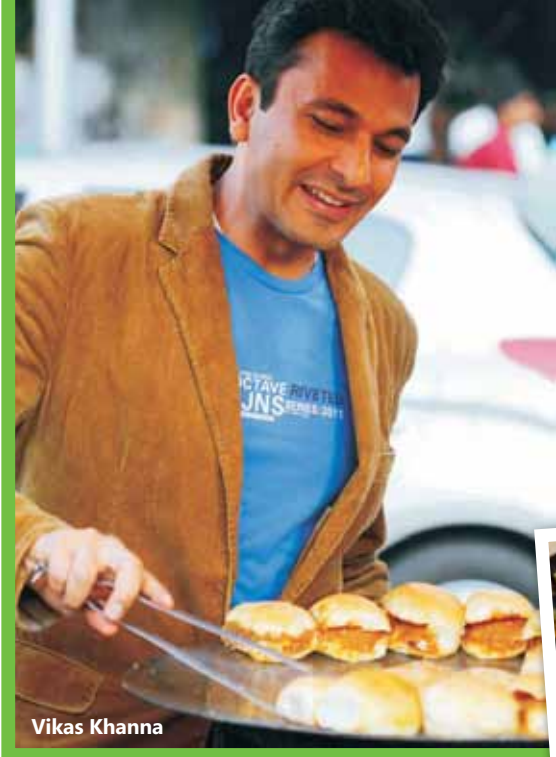
In **Southern Flavours: The Best of South Indian Cuisine**, the author Chandra Padmanabhan looks at South Indian staples — the dosa, idli and vada — which have been seducing Indian palates (and foreign too) from Kashmir to Kanyakumari for decades now. India's culinary repertoire is as rich and varied as her cultural offerings and integral to this is the exotic dishes of the southern states. For those who love to experiment with all manner of cuisines Chandra Padmanabhan's **Southern Flavours**, brought out by Westland books, comes as a perfect addition to your cookery bookshelf. This is Padmanabhan's fourth book; earlier she gave us *Dakshin* (Harper Collins), *Southern Spice* (Penguin) and *Simply South* (Westland).

Southern Flavours appropriately introduces us to the culinary heritage of India's four southern states: Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. The photographs in the book are by N. Prabhakkar. Priced at INR.599, it features a total of 153 recipes; 50 of these are new, the others a compilation of her favourite recipes showcased in the previous books. Padmanabhan has drawn upon the rich experiences and piquant experiments in southern cooking from her mother-in-law, relatives, close buddies and several cooks, to preserve them in her books for posterity.

Southern Flavours— hardbound and glossily appealing, features an *Introduction, Buffet Spreads, Suggested Menus* and *Glossary*—the last of which is particularly useful (it has the names

of ingredients in English, Tamil and Hindi) for those who are approaching southern cooking as novices— By the way, the book is perfect for the likes of these adventurous souls. What's also nice is she takes you practically step by step through the *eight food sections*— *Basic Recipes, Sambar & Kuzhambu* (28 recipes), *Rasam* (12 recipes), *Poriyal & Kootu* (26 recipes), *Rice* (16 recipes), *Snacks* (32 recipes), *Sweets* (12 recipes), *Accompaniments* (20 varieties).

You'll also like the fact that she has started each section by telling you what it's about, the state from which the recipes are drawn and an index 'introducing the names of recipes in that section' The recipes come accompanied by 'notes' and 'introduction' jazzing them up with some interesting tidbits of information and insights which help the



Vikas Khanna

INDIA'S CULINARY REPERTOIRE IS AS RICH AND VARIED AS HER CULTURAL OFFERINGS AND INTEGRAL TO THIS ARE THE EXOTIC DISHES OF THE SOUTHERN STATES



through the melting pot of cultures and cuisines — Mumbai. Travel with Vikas and experiment with him as he visits some of his favourite restaurants and eateries, selects their signature dishes, and helpfully modifies and adapts their recipes into a form that will be a boon to the home cook.

Photographs are an important crowdpuller for Vikas who wants people to dip into his recipes again and again. He wants his books to gather the wherewithal of the regular handling by a devoted fan...dog years and haldi stains notwithstanding...not moulder away gathering dust in a forgotten part of the bookshelf.

Vikas' wanderings around Mumbai involved spending time rolling Roomali Rotis and mastering Dhania-Pudina chutney at Colaba's Bade Miyan, folding Patti Samosas at Goodluck Restaurant in Bandra, to turning Patras at Govinda's in Juhu. The tempting aromas of street food too pulled him into the narrow bylanes and khau gallis. Vikas' book tempts you to summon up gourmet meals for friends from the choicest five-star restaurants...or just a simple chaat made at some poky joint down a khau galli. At least

20 pages in his book are totally devoted to street food, the rest — the finest and best recipes from Mumbai's famed eateries — ranging from 5 star hotel restaurants, iconic eateries and restaurants in town.



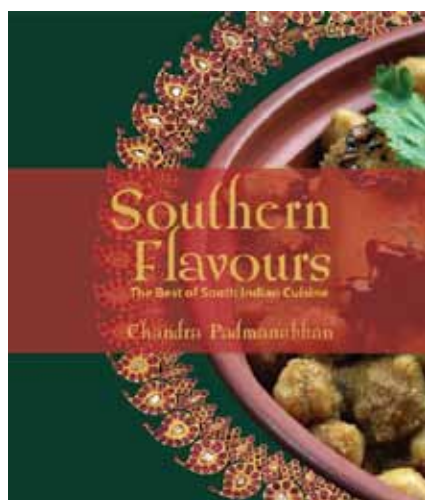
**Savour Mumbai - A Culinary
Journey Through India's Melting Pot**

Savour Mumbai

Author Vikas Khanna takes a different route in **Savour Mumbai — A Culinary Journey Through India's Melting Pot**. This Punjabi boy-turned Michelin Chef, who hails from Amritsar and runs his own restaurant Junoon in New York, has been vowing foodies the world over with his culinary expertise. Vikas really knows his business — after all he started off from Amritsar — a foodie paradise par excellence — starting from the flavourful fare served at the langars of the Golden Temple — to the palate-seducing offerings of the city's street food. His cookbook *Flavors First* was published in 2011.

Savour Mumbai — A Culinary Journey Through India's Melting Pot is Vikas' salute to the city, which has played a pivotal role in his journey. This, his 11th book, and rather than featuring his own recipes, is a commendation of the fantastic smorgasbord of culinary delights on offer in this bustling metropolis. Maharashtran, Gujarati, Konkan, Parsi, street food and five-star favoured fare — all find a place in this excellent selection Vikas has put together.

Featured in this hard bound, 312 page book brought out by Westland, is Vikas' celebration of his culinary experiences in the city during those years in Mumbai when he was working at the The Leela Kempinski Hotel. He holds us by the hand and leads us (with his plethora of recipes culled from his favourite culinary haunts in town)



**Southern Flavours: The Best of South
Indian Cuisine**

cook avoid making errors in following the recipes. When it comes to recipes there are a string of them, which are basic — thus giving first timers a nice introduction to favourites from each region. She also informs you about the kind of utensils you'll need for cooking these dishes. She is particularly careful in giving the correct measurements, to avoid those cooking disasters.

Padmanabhan's new book also introduces readers to the variety of preparations for basics like dosas and rasam, sambar and even rice. She also brings fresh light on chutneys, again a culinary staple in homes across India. Keeping in view the growing concern for healthy eating she offers alternatives — such in cooking mediums (olive oil) which can be incorporated in traditional southern dish such as Bissi Belle Hulli Godhi.

Olde Bangalore BECKONS



Photo: Incredible India

Over a decade ago, Bangalore (now called Bengaluru) summoned up visions of quietude and sonorous splendor, a garden city that was ideal for living the retired life. The Bangalore of old wasn't just the idyll for retired folks, it was magnet for those who enjoyed slow-paced living in a cultured, elegant retreat.

The whirlwind of India's IT revolution changed Bangalore forever. It was no longer just peopled with folks living out their days here after retirement, it became a lively youthful hub energized afresh with young executives swarming the IT hubs that mushroomed around the city.

Gated condos came up to house them and pubs sprouted every which way lending their own effervescent might to the city's social whirl. The oldies may have taken to the pubs like duck to water but they still prefer the tranquil retreats of their clubs with their blooming flower beds and a

A quiet garden city - the other side of Bengaluru's image as the 'Silicon Valley' of India

By **Ranee Sahaney**

round of golf even on weekdays or for the races for that matter.

For those looking for the old Bangalore, a visit around its monumental heritage sites and its beautiful gardens and palaces will surely put back the clock. The regal bearings of the city's beautiful old hotels like the Taj West End and Windsor Manor, still ooze richly nuanced etchings of their colonial inspirations and stand tall on the city's landscape despite the mushrooming competition from younger, more brash contestants for patronage. Head out for the sprawling verdure of the areas around the Race Course where you'll discover Old Bangalore flourishing amongst those beautiful bungalows and Raj-era villas set amidst brilliantly coloured waterfalls of bougainvillea.

Drive down Crescent Road and soak in those old world charms or step into Bridge Road's favoured haunts, bookshops — some shops, which shut out the clamour of the new city. Make a tryst with theatre for the night



Photo: Sanjay Kaul



Photo: Incredible India



Photo: Incredible India

(On opposite page)
Vidhana Soudha, the largest legislative building in India is in Bangalore

(On this page, clockwise from top left)
Brigade Road at night; Lalbagh Botanical Garden; Pandi Curry

Getting There



Air: Bengaluru International Airport has excellent connections with the major metros and cities in India.

Rail: The city's three railheads are: City Railway Station, Yeshwanthpur Railway Station and Cantt, which offer good connections the major metros and cities in India

Road: Kempegowda /Majestic Bus Station offer services by KSRTC interstate buses all over the state and to Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Puducherry, Goa and Maharashtra. Private services are also available on luxury buses such as Volvos and the deluxe buses.

Tourist Information

Karnataka Tourism Dev Corp (KSTDC)

Central Reservation Office, Badami House, NR Square, Bengaluru. Tel 080-43344334/ 37.

www.karnatakaturism.org
www.karnatakaholidays.net

followed by a leisurely dinner, say, at pricey Jamavar at The Leela... Old Bangalore you'll find hasn't gone away completely.

Vidhan Soudha and the High Court, Bangalore's iconic Legislative House of Karnataka state is a spectacular granite structure broodily overlooking the surrounding by swathes of verdancy. Standing across the road is the red-bricked Attara Kacheri, Karnataka High Court. Commissioned in 1952, the Vidhan Soudha is an amalgamation of Neo-Dravidian, Dravidian and Indo-Saracenic inspirations.

Castles and Palaces

Bangalore Palace was inspired by England's Windsor Castle and was commissioned in 1887 by Chamrajara Wodeyar, the Maharaja of Mysore, who was so impressed with the original. The Tudor- Gothic lines of the structure have melded seamlessly with its verdant surrounds. Visitors arriving in its precincts are confronted

by a cavalcade of fortified towers, battlements and turrets and clinging ivy. The 45,000 sq ft, sprawl of the Bangalore palace, originally an English manor house, is as English as it can get both within and out. The furniture, designed by Lazarus & Company is neo-classical, Victorian and Edwardian. The Wodeyar's reputation for the fine arts is well established at the Bangalore Palace where you will encounter the very finest right from the upholstery, to the rosewood doors, from the stained glass windows to the Belgium crystal chandeliers. Star points for reflection are the stunning ballroom and the Durbar Hall. The palace gardens were designed by famed German botanist Gustav Krumbiegel, the architect of Lalbagh and government botanist at London's Kew Gardens.

Tipu Sultan Palace is now a museum and this flagrant sprawl of Tipu Sultan's personal residence was built between the period 1781 and 1791. The 334-acre spread of Cubbon Park is one of the city's most important green spaces



Leela Palace Bangalore Mahajara Suite sitting room

- the lung of Bengaluru. With the city becoming even more congested, traffic running amok at rush hour, Cubbon Park is the just the perfect retreat. The great canopy of trees, flowerbeds and walkways and the tranquil lotus-filled pond inspire the park's reflective ambience. The park environs also house a host of cultural institutions and government buildings.

Walkers' Paradise

Lal Bagh covers 240 acres at the southern end of the city and is a horticulturist's paradise. Be there in January and August when it hosts its annual flower shows. Gifted to the city by Mysore's (Karnataka of present times) legendary rulers, Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan in the 18th century, this is one of the city's unmissable attractions. The fountains, the flowering plants and trees, the tranquil ponds and the bird song makes this a walker's paradise. It was given the status of Government Botanical Garden in 1856. The inspiration of the garden is Delhi's famous Mughal gardens. The Lal Bagh Rock that is found there is said to be almost 3000 million years old.

This iconic shopping landmark may be a tad racier from older times, but Brigade Road is still a popular

shopping hub. Look for local and international brands in those sparkling show windows. Brigade Road is also home to Patrick's Church and Catholic Club.

Amongst Bangalore's oldest shrines is the 16th century Bull Temple, a living shrine, it is located amongst the serene surrounds of Basavangudi. This temple sports the massive bulk of a bull, carved from black granite. The bull appears to be hovering over its devotees. Legend has it the shrine was built by farmers to appease the rampaging bull, who used to terrorized their groundnut fields. Featuring traditional Dravidian inspirations the temple holds its annual festival in January during which groundnuts are given as an offering. Close by is the equally well attended Dodda Ganesha Temple. Another older temple, the 9th century cave shrine Gavi Gangadhareshwara Temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva. It also features four monolithic pillars and the idol of Agni—the God of Fire.

The city's major spiritual and religious sites include the St. Mary's Basilica Gothic church with its vaulting arches in the shape of a cross. Mother Mary's is holding the Christ child in the sanctum. The church was ascribed the status of a basilica in 1973.

Culture & Art Kraze

Bangalore is one of India's most cultured cities. All year round you'll find some interesting cultural activity being hosted at its many cultural venues such as the Bangalore Palace Grounds; look out for dates for exhibitions, concerts, fairs and festivals being held here. Ranga Shankara also arranges plays (all week long, barring Monday). Its well attended annual festival is held in the month of November.

Visitors are spoilt for choice amidst Bangalore's astonishing range of art galleries and exhibitions. Top venues include the National Gallery of Modern Art and the Karnataka Chitrakala Parishathl.

A day of the races is highly recommended. The city is home to some of the finest thoroughbreds of the world and the Race Course is where you will see them going through their paces. The racing is all year round but the race course is busiest between May and June and again from November to March

Located along the Mysore highway is the Wonder La Amusement Park, one of the city's most popular hubs for entertainment for all ages. Its claim to being the country's biggest water and amusement park seems to have added to the lustre. The park features water slides, on-ground rides, wave pools and many other thrilling activities. In the evening enjoy the fireworks and a laser show.

Shopping

The major shopping hubs are Brigade Road, MG Road and Commercial Street which stock a huge variety of goods. The Cauvery Emporium on MG Road is good for souvenirs and Karnataka handicrafts. Stock up on incense, local crafts in stonework and expensive rosewood, sandalwood items such as sculptured deities, trays and bric a brac. You'll love the range of textiles, stoles and jewelry in the city stores. The posh UB City complex features stores with international brands and a food court.



Curious about the Spirit and People of India

A young member of the Thai travel trade was first drawn to India by religion and culture

Almost 10 years ago, Chananchida Prachumpol was first drawn to India by a curiosity to see the people and culture in the land where Buddha came from. She said, "I am a Buddhist and I wanted to know about the Indian culture, traditions and the religion." The 35-year old is also the Managing Director of Tara Arrya Travel Co. Ltd. and is the webmaster for the company's Thai language online site.

Chananchida's travel company has been in business since 2009 and specializes in tour packages to different Indian destinations like the Buddhist circuit, Kashmir, Southern Indian destinations, Central India, Rajasthan and places like Ajanta, Ellora and Mumbai, among others.

Chananchida Prachumpol, or Pie (as she prefers to be called), comes from a big family of six siblings and started handling travel groups to different parts of India nine years ago as a tour leader. Pie, whose hobbies are travelling and reading, has always travelled in groups

to India either as a tour leader or with travel agents from Thailand and other countries on FAM trips. It never ceases to amaze her, the impressions of those especially new to India invariably find the country interesting and there is always something new to learn on the trip. She said, "It is also great for me to learn with such groups."

Pie said that even though the more popular Indian destinations for Thai travellers are the Buddhist sector and the North Indian states of Rajasthan and Kashmir, she considers Tawang in the Eastern Himalayas as having great potential for the Thai market. After her first trip there last October, it is now her favourite destination.

"I would like to highlight the Sela Pass entrance of Tawang," she says, where the natural beauty and the atmosphere of the place ensured an entirely different experience for the visitors. Sela Pass or Se La as it is locally known, is a site located in the high altitudes of Arunachal Pradesh, a region specialised by the Tara Arrya

Travels Co Ltd. Known for being surrounded by 101 lakes, the site is sacred to the Buddhists. Dubbed as "Paradise Lake" for its beauty, Se La is known to freeze in the winters and therefore Pie's advice is to be "prepared." Both the cold and the high altitude of Se La need a little 'getting used to.' Pie's practical suggestion to the travellers visiting Se La, is to carry enough warm clothes and to be "careful about the altitude problems."

Listing Sikkim, Madhya Pradesh, Leh and Ladakh as other preferred destinations for the Thai market, Pie says on the whole, visitors to India can look forward to a smooth travel and immigration-customs experience. The trips she has been on have been comfortable and she described the hotels and resorts she has stayed at as quite "normal."

"Overall, the whole travel experience to India is good," notes Pie, but food is important to Thai travelers. She feels that the quality and the availability of Thai food could be improved. Many a times, she felt Thai food provided in hotels for travel groups need to be improved in both quality and quantity.

Needless to say, that India has been a cultural and religious experience for Chananchida Prachumpol and her photo albums are full of ethereal images taken of serene monasteries and secluded mountains. Over the years, Pie has grown very familiar with India and it's not just the scenic beauty that keeps her coming back. In terms of work, she is impressed by the smooth organization in ground handling by Indian inbound tour operators and agents. That is another reason why the list of Indian destinations offered by Pie's Tara Arrya will also continue to grow.

Tara Arrya Thai website is at www.taraarryatravel.com

Bodhisattva Bhumi *Buddha's Land*

After Buddha attained enlightenment, he devoted the remaining 45 years of his life travelling through much of northern India spreading his teachings. Two hundred years later after his death, Buddhism started gaining popularity across the world during the reign of Mauryan Emperor Ashoka.

According to the Mahaparinirvana Sutra, one can attain merit and a noble rebirth by visiting Lumbini (Buddha's birth place), Bodhgaya (where he gained enlightenment), Sarnath (where he taught) and Kushinagar (where he attained Nirvana). Retracing the trail of Buddha's spiritual journey across India is a pilgrimage that makes the teachings of the 'enlightened one' more meaningful.

Mahaparinirvan Express - Buddhist Circuit

The Mahaparinirvan Express, a Buddhist circuit train, stops at all the prime spots such as Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Varanasi, Nalanda and Kushinagar. For more details on the express, visit <http://www.railtourismindia.com>

Some of the highlights of the Buddhist circuit in India include the city of Bodhgaya, the spiritual home of Buddhists. During 500 BC Prince Gautama Siddhartha, wandering as a monk, reached the sylvan



Excavated Ruins of Nalanda Maha Vihar



Rajgir



Above are excerpts from India Tourism Singapore's publication 'INDIA – A Spiritual Journey'. Travel agents wishing to receive free copies please contact: info@indiatourism.com.sg

the temple is visible from far off; early morning on weekends, the temple is less crowded. Also known as the Harmandir or Darbar Sahib, the two-storied temple structure is built on a 67 sq ft of marble. The Akal Takht (eternal throne), the supreme seat of Sikh religious authority, which was established in 1609 by the sixth Sikh guru, Guru Hargobind, is located in the Golden Temple complex. This is the oldest of the five takhts. While the Golden Temple is a place of worship, the takht is a place to discuss secular and political matters. The Akal Takht houses the ancient weapons used by the Sikh warriors. During the day time, the Guru Granth Sahib (holy book of the Sikhs) is kept in the Golden

Temple, while at night it is kept in the Akal Takht. The 'Guru Ka Langar' is located near the eastern entrance of the temple and offers food to all visitors. Before entering the temple you have to cover your head and remove your shoes.

The Takht Sri Damdama Sahib is located in the village of Talwandi Sabo near Bhatinda. It was here that Guru Gobind Singh stayed for nine months and compiled the final edition of Guru Granth Sahib in 1705. **Takht Sri Keshgarh Sahib** is at Anandpur Sahib near Chandigarh, where the order of the 'Khalsa' was founded. Some of the weapons of Guru Gobind Singh are displayed here. **Takht Sachkhand Sri Hazur Abchalnagar Sahib** known popularly as Takht

Sri Hazur Saheb, was where Guru Gobind Singh breathed his last. Situated on the banks of River Godavari at Nanded in Maharashtra, here unlike in other Gurudwaras, the Guru Granth Sahib is kept in a room in front of the sanctum from morning till evening and moved to the sanctum only for the night.

Takht Sri Patna Sahib in Patna is the birthplace of Guru Gobind Singh where he spent his early childhood. This Takht is considered to be the centre from which Sikhism was propagated in the eastern part of the country. Historical displays here include a 'pangura' (cradle), four iron arrows, a sacred sword and a pair of the guru's sandals.



Takht Sri Hazoor Sahib



Sri Keshgarh Sahib



Sri Damdama Sahib



Takht Sri Patna Sahib

GETTING THERE

PUNJAB

Amritsar

Air: The Rajasansi airport, about 11 km from city centre, is connected by domestic flights to Delhi, Srinagar and Chandigarh.

Rail: Amritsar is connected with major cities of India.

Road: Amritsar is well connected to the rest of the country; it is 643 km from Agra, 235 km from Chandigarh and 435 km from Delhi. Takht Sri Damdama Sahib is around 160 km from Amritsar. Takht Sri Keshgarh Sahib is near Chandigarh.

Chandigarh

Air: The city's airport is connected by flights from major cities such as Delhi, Chennai and Mumbai.

Rail: Chandigarh is well connected by rail to the rest of India.

Road: Chandigarh is well connected by road; it is 240 km from Amritsar, 230 km from Dehradun and 248 km from Delhi

MAHARASHTRA

Nanded

Air: The city's airport is connected by flights from major cities such as Mumbai. Aurangabad is the nearest airport.

Rail: Nanded is a major railway station connecting several important cities in India.

Road: Nanded is well connected to the rest of the country; it is 277 km from Aurangabad, 667 km from Mumbai and 379 km from Nagpur.

BIHAR

Patna

Air: Kolkata Airport is the nearest international airport and is well connected to Patna Airport.

Rail: Patna is well connected by rail to the rest

of the country.

Road: Patna is well connected by road to the rest of the country; it is 1015 km from Delhi, 1802 km from Mumbai, 535 km from Lucknow and 646 km from Kolkata.

UTTARAKHAND

Hemkund Sahib & Valley of Flowers

Air: From Delhi's international airport there are buses, private vehicles and trains to Haridwar, 225 km away.

Road: From Delhi travel 230 kms to Rishikesh and another 250 km drive (12 hours) to the base of the footpath to Hemkund and the Valley of Flowers. The path leading to both Hemkund and the Valley of Flowers starts from Gobind Ghat (1,828 m) village. Walk or hire sedan chairs, mules or horses to cover the 12 km from the village to Govind Dham. Spend a night at Govind Dham before undertaking six km trek to Hemkund Sahib.

Shravanabelagola

Jewels of Jainism

Jainism prescribes pacifism and a path of non-violence towards all living beings. Practicing Jains follow the teachings of the 24 special 'jinas,' who are known as Tirthankaras. Jain temples are usually known as Derasar or Mandir. A majority of them are built from marble and are exquisite works of art. Found across India, some of them date back to ancient times and are highly revered pilgrimage destinations for Jains.

Just to name a few: Arthuna Temple, Deogarh, Dilwara Temple, Makavirji, Nakoda, Osiyan Temple, Palitana, Ranakpur, Rikhabdev and Shravanbelagola. Following are some of the most important shrines that Jains aim to travel to.

The monolithic statue of the Jain saint Gomateshwara stands on a hill in the city of **Shravanabelagola** in Karnataka. Carved out of a mountain it is one of the tallest at 17.38 metres (58 ft) high and graceful looking statues in the world. It was created around 983 AD. Once in 12 years the Mahamastakabhisheka festival is held and the statue of Gomateshwara is bathed in milk, curds, ghee, saffron and gold coins.



Dilwara temple

The five legendary marble temples of **Jain Dilwara** are about 2.5 km from Mt Abu, Rajasthan's only hill station. They are world famous for their stunning use of marble. The ornamental detail spreading over the minutely carved ceilings, doorways, pillars and panels is simply amazing. Each temple has its own unique identity and was built by the Chalukya dynasty between the 11th and 13th centuries.

The 863 **Palitana** temples at Gujarat are considered the most sacred of all the Jain temples. Located on sacred Mount Shatrunjaya, they are exquisitely carved in marble. They were built by generations of Jains over a period

of 900 years, from the 11th century onwards. The top is reached by climbing 3,572 steps, a two hour ascent.

The **Ranakpur Temple** in Rajasthan is dedicated to Adinatha; it rises majestically from the slope of a hill. The temple is supported by over 1444 marble pillars, the detailed carving on which is exemplary of the artistic talent prevalent in that era. The pillars are all differently carved and no two pillars are the same. The construction of the temple and quadrupled image symbolise the Tirthankara's conquest of the four cardinal directions and hence the cosmos. The dating of this temple is controversial but it was probably built between the late 14th and mid-15th centuries.

GETTING THERE

KARNATAKA

Shravanabelagola

Air: The nearest airport is Bangalore and is connected with major cities in India.

Rail: Nearest railhead is Hassan connected by rail with major cities and towns in the country.

Road: Shravanabelagola is well connected by roads; it is 52 km from Hassan, 170 km from Bangalore and 83 km from Mysore.

RAJASTHAN

Mount Abu

Air: The nearest and most convenient airports are at Udaipur (185 km) and Ahmedabad (222 km).

Rail: The nearest railhead is Abu Road (29 km), linked with Ahmedabad, Delhi, Jaipur, Jodhpur, Mumbai, etc.

Road: Mt Abu is well connected with roads; it is 735 km from Agra, 222 km from Ahmedabad, 764 km from Delhi and 510 km from Jaipur.

RAJASTHAN

Ranakpur

Air: The nearest airport is Maharana Pratap Airport at Dabok, Udaipur, which is situated at a distance of about 105 km.

Rail: The nearest railway station is Falna, which is about 35km away from Ranakpur. Falna is well connected by trains from all the major cities of the country.

Road: Ranakpur is ideally situated between Udaipur and Jodhpur being just 90km away from Udaipur.

GUJARAT

Palitana

Air: Bhavnagar's airport is connected by flights from major cities in India.

Rail: Palitana is on a rail branch line, with trains available to Bhavnagar, Ahmedabad and intermediate points.

Road: Palitana is well connected by roads; it is 56 km from Bhavnagar, 215 km from Ahmedabad, 295 km from Mumbai and 403 km from Pune.



Shravanabelagola

Kashmir is Heaven on Earth

Why retired accountant Suat Lim, 53, and her friends give Kashmir two thumbs up



Suat Lim had retired as a professional accountant since 2004 when she decided to go on a 'mission' to visit all the ancient and heritage sites of the world. She had heard that in India alone there are over 30 UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Having read up about the country, she went with another friend for her first trip to Northern India in 2006.

Since then, she has visited the country six times and the most recent trip was last November. "China, Rome and Egypt, I have visited them all," says the Malaysian who lists travelling as her main hobby, "but India is where I have gone the most number of times." She attributes the multiple visits to the discovery that, "It is not just the scenery but the people in India are beautiful too."

Suat, who is single, prefers travelling with her friends. The group usually surfs the net for details about a chosen destination and then gets in touch with a "local agent in India" for a personalised itinerary. She describes her agent in India, Mr Ivinder Singh, as, "Attentive, responsible and a very good person," Snowland Holidays handled all her trips to India and ensured a relaxed and hassle-free itinerary. Since she has insisted on a 'no hiking and no trekking rule,' her travel

itinerary has included only a comfortable amount of walking. On the other hand, few of her friends who craved for a more adventurous pace have stayed on longer to go on long hikes.

Lake Dal, Kashmir

In the last six trips to India, Suat has visited the Golden Triangle (Delhi, Jaipur and Agra), Srinagar in Kashmir, Kerala, the Spices Road, Sikkim, Armistar, Leh in Ladakh and Bodh Gaya in Bihar where Suat, a Buddhist herself has served as a Chinese translator to her group. Asked to choose a favourite destination, she instantly picks Kashmir. "Kashmir is heaven on earth," she says and is glad to have seen it in all the four seasons. This according to her makes Kashmir a "completed trip."

She talks fondly about her stay at the quaint houseboats of Dal Lake, where she managed her 'only' truly memorable shopping experience in India. She recalled on that trip there never was time for shopping in any other city and neither was shopping her priority. But in Kashmir, the wares, she says, were brought directly to the house-boat for sale! For Suat Lim savouring the sights is her main pleasure in all her travels.

Tsokar Lake, Ladakh

Beautiful scenery is aplenty in India and Suat's travel took her to yet another breathtaking place, the Tsokar Lake in Rapshu, Ladakh. She described the experience at the salt lake as primitive but beautiful. It is in a cold and remote location and there weren't the usual hotel accommodations or modern facilities available (visitors had to pitch a tent for three days in the cold) but in spite of it all, Suat says the stay at Tsokar Lake was the one that stay fresh in her memory till now (since 2006).

Suat feels, her general Indian experience has been good so far, with no trouble with the ground transport and transfers, customs and immigration. The hotels, restaurants and chalets were comfortable too, but she offers this advice to those travelling to the smaller towns, please be prepared for just the basics and do not expect any luxury touches. What there anything about her India travel experience that can be improved on? Suat mentions the heavy, sometimes chaotic traffic and the poor conditions of the roads, especially in Bodh Gaya. Otherwise it was a relatively smooth trip. She also mentioned Indian airport facilities have improved with each of her trip; it is only the roads that could be made better.

That has not dampened Lim Suat's interest in India. In fact, a growing confidence on her travel agent and a fascination with the scenic beauty has ensured that her Indian journey continues. The next trip is already booked and this time, there's a hint of adventure in it as she heads for Solang, a ski resort in Manali.



The Leela Palace, Udaipur, Rajasthan, India

Foods that Heal

Following are excerpts from India Tourism Singapore's publication 'The Wellness Destination.' Travel agents wishing to receive copies please contact info@indiatourism.com.sg

India is the gateway for a rejuvenating getaway. The country is the world travellers' answer to the question of where to go to enhance one's general well-being. It is a hot favourite for wellness, relaxation, therapy and health. It offers destinations that offer the ideal setting for health spas like Ananda

The Ayurvedic diet is one that not only nourishes the body, but also restores balance of 'Tridoshas' which is very much essential for maintaining good health

in the Himalayas, Ayurvedic spas and Royal spas in heritage hotels, as well as spas in seaside destinations like Goa. The surrounding environment and the foods you eat play an important role in maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Thousands of years of wisdom and practical application are distilled into formal treatments as part of the Ayurvedic diet. As many have discovered through the ages, Ayurveda is the natural solution to modern ailments or disorders. With stress levels rising day by day, ayurvedic treatments and diets are becoming a popular way to relax as well as restore and rejuvenate one's health.

The Ayurvedic diet is one that not only nourishes the body, but also restores balance of 'Tridoshas' which is very much essential for maintaining good health. Depending on our dosha, or constitutional type, some foods can be beneficial, and others should be avoided. These

same foods may have the opposite effect on another dosha. The science of Ayurveda teaches that the right diet is the foundation of healing. For maximum health and vitality, the ideal diet is one balances or doshas.

Ayurveda categories food under three kinds: Sattvic, Rajasic and Tamasic.

The main consideration when categorising foods as Sattvic, Rajasic, or Tamasic is their effect on the human organism. Do they create heat or dryness in the body? Do they create extreme cold? Do they stimulate the human organism- including the glandular secretions and the psychic centres (chakras)? Do they have an extended nourishing effect? What are the after effects? Are the foods readily digestible, or do they take some time and energy to digest?

Sattvic is a trait of the mind which includes harmony, balance and clarity. Fresh fruits and vegetables, milk, dry fruits, nuts, honey, jaggery,



Like a refuge among the wilderness, this health resort has pollution free surroundings with soothing waterfalls and fountains

herbal teas are some of the foods that promote sattva.

Rajas is the feature of mind which induces energy and action, and the need to create. Ready to eat canned food, ice cream, paneer, garlic, vinegar, pickles are examples of foods that promote Rajas.

Tamasic is an attribute of the mind which evokes darkness, inertia, resistance and the need to stop. Alcohol, all meats and fish, eggs, tea, coffee, fried food etc promote tamas. Food not only nourishes the body, it affects the mind and consciousness as well. As our physical constitution is characterised by different proportions of Vata, Pitta, and Kapha, we also have a mental constitution determined by the sattva, rajas, and tamas. These three qualities are universal and equally necessary to maintain our psychological balance.

Spa breaks

India is a favourite wellness destination among tourists. Seeking Ayurveda and other alternative therapies, many tourist plan spa holidays across various places in India. Some of the must visit places to recharge and rejuvenate are:

Ananda in the Himalayas

Located near Rishikesh, Ananda in the Himalayas is a world class destination spa. It is the finest spa in the country and has beautifully blended the traditionally Indian system of Ayurveda with the more contemporary western spa approach. The spa provides unique and exotic massages, spas and water therapies. Body treatments here include various types of exfoliation and body wraps treatments. Once the residence of the then Maharaja of Tehri-Garhwal, it is dedicated to today's traveller, who is looking for the ultimate escape.

Contact details: Ananda in the Himalayas, The Palace Estate, Narendra Nagar, Tehri-Garhwal, Uttaranchal- 249175.

Website: www.anandaspa.com

Kaya Kalp

In close proximity to the Taj Mahal is the ITC Mughal, Agra which houses Kaya Kalp- The Royal Spa. This premier resort and spa, is spread over 35 acres and offers a truly royal Mughal experience with its exquisite interiors, impeccable service and extraordinary cuisine. Kaya Kalp- The Royal Spa, is India's largest spa at over 99,000 square feet. With a harmonious blend of Mughal and contemporary design, it offers an oasis of tranquillity, where holistic therapies and services are offered in royal styles. Eight luxurious treatment suites provide varied experiences of opulent luxury, including a Royal Mughal Hamam- the first luxury Hamam in India, outdoor rain showers in enclosed gardens, a regal beauty saloon, and a water therapy room with steam, whirlpool and sauna.

Contact details: ITC Mughal, Agra, Taj Ganj, Agra, Uttar Pradesh- 282001.

Website: www.Itchotels.in



Jiva Grande Spa, Vivanta by Taj, Bekal, Northern Kerala, India

Park Hyatt Goa Resort and Spa



Sereno Spa

Located in the Park Hyatt Goa Resort and Spa, Sereno Spa is a unique health and wellness oasis that offers holistic treatments through a blend of unique therapies. A visit there promises to be a transformational experience, integrating mystical traditions and philosophies of old world India with contemporary spa principles of aromatherapy and energy healing. Spread over 36,000 sq feet, it is an award-winning wellness spa destination set in the lush beachfront gardens in the idyllic regions of south Goa.

Contact details: Park Hyatt Goa Resort and Spa, Arossim Beach, Cansaulim, South Goa, Maharashtra- 403712.

Website: www.goa.park.hyatt.com

Jiva Spa

Located at the Taj Lake Palace, Udaipur, Jiva Spa is in a league of its own. The place offers exquisite suites with special arrangements and décor for an opulent spa experience. Most of the massages and therapies are offered on the boat. The royal boat blends the aura of the Taj Lake Palace, Udaipur and the rejuvenating experience of the Jiva Spa. This majestic vessel offers a dramatic lake view of the hotel. A true floating spa, it has on board a double spa suite, relaxation lounge, steam room and shower, while on deck you'll find a soaking pool, day bed and dining area. Spa journeys combine Indian-technique massages with treatments like scrubs and wraps, using local herbs and spices.

Contact details: Taj Lake Palace, Udaipur, P.O. Box No 5, Lake Pichola, Udaipur- 313001.





Audrey Quek's

PASSAGE TO INDIA

Singapore journalist Audrey Quek discovers Assam and Tawang on her first trip to India

A book and the "promise of natural beauty" prompted 55-year-old Deputy Foreign Editor of The Straits Times, Audrey Quek to jump at the offer of her first visit to India in October 2013. This was her first trip to Arunachal Pradesh and Assam.

Audrey had always been keen on the world of news and had joined the Foreign Desk after graduating from university, lured by journalism's promise of providing a 'window to the world.' True to that promise, her current job allows her to shape the coverage of world events and social-political trends in the 'World' and 'Opinion' sections of Singapore's leading daily. In spite of the pressures of deadlines, Audrey says her work is never boring and she is always keen to seek fresh insights on a subject or even a country for that matter. That's why

she loves reading and travelling to find out and decide things for herself.

And it was a book that prompted her to travel to India. Audrey had read 'A Passage to India,' by E. M. Forster in her teens and had been intrigued by the thought of the country and its people, wondering if it indeed was as colourful, as chaotic and as mysterious in parts, as Forster had made it out to be. Equally curious she was to find out, if there were interesting characters like Professor Godbole and Dr Aziz in the country as there were in the book.

The Tawang-Assam visit, therefore she said had, "hit the right buttons," and gave her the opportunity to travel the "less trodden path" of north-eastern India with its Himalayan peaks and the cool tea gardens. Her travel also took her to the Sino-Indian border, where she visited war memorials and the famous Tawang monastery.

Reference of the Sino-Indian border disputes had frequently surfaced in Audrey's course of work, and so, this visit she said was, "professionally very satisfying." The visit to the monastery revealed a display of photos showing the visits by the Indian prime ministers and the Dalai Lama.

While in India, Audrey attended the 2nd International Tourism Mart as one of the two media representatives from Singapore and her subsequent trip took her to Assam, where she spent five of her 10 days in the country. Audrey says that she was the only one in the group, who was new to India. She felt this was good as she came with fresh eyes and an open mind. Her verdict was the trip did live up to the country's slogan "Incredible India."

She found the diversity of ethnic groups, cultures and tourist attractions, was especially an eye-opening experience. She says, "The folk dances I saw at the Travel Mart were fascinating and the lion dance performance reminded me of similar performances back home except that the Indian lion had a shaggy green mane and looked more endearingly friendly rather than fierce than those in Singapore."

India offered Audrey many unforgettable moments, one which still stayed in her mind was, "The ferry ride on the Brahmaputra, with cool evening breeze rippling through the waters against the setting sun which looked like a huge red ball glowing in the sky. The water and the sky glowed a deep red and purple. It was breathtakingly beautiful. You almost forget that you are crammed together with other passengers, cars and luggage on that vessel."

Cherished Memories

Another cherished moment was the "dawn at a tea garden" in Assam where she found the trees outside their cottage, "bathed in a golden early morning light" with only the birds breaking the silence with their occasional twittering.

Apart from the beauty of the scenery, Audrey found herself being charmed by the locals too. She remembers how, "During a lunch above the clouds, 400 metres high on a mountain near Ptso lake, a soldier from the Indian army had come up seemingly from nowhere to offer me an umbrella when it started to rain! His surprise gesture on a chilly autumn day was deeply appreciated and so was the lunch that was courtesy of the Indian army. Equally charming was the "hot masala tea" that was offered to her and the evening chats with the friendly folks who ran the hotel in Tawang.

On the downside, was the memory of the assorted insects that crawled in from the nearby fields to their rest-house in Assam. There was no such problem when

the group moved to the tea garden resort the next day. The Kaziranga Golf Resort was a much-welcomed relief, with its serene surroundings and colonial era buildings. The National Park, which is a UNESCO Heritage site, had a rich variety of wildlife as well as excellent hotels. According to Audrey, Kaziranga is a "huge, under-appreciated asset for Assam."

Although Audrey didn't stay at the Banyan Grove resort, she was very impressed by its stately colonial charm. "It's for people who love the Raffles in Singapore," she says. The Lonely Planet award winner, Diphlu River Lodge, with its eco friendly cottages and the Agoratoli, nearest to the National Park's Eastern Range, are other hotels she found impressive.

Audrey's time in Guwahati, the city with excellent eateries and shopping was short, but she did manage to buy a "lovely eri silk shawl, an Assam specialty there. She found it unusual that the silkworms were not killed in the production of the threads and the scarf now serves as a "treasured reminder" of her visit to the state.

According to Audrey, "Assam has gems to offer to the tourists. It is well connected and has good hotels for visitors who value creature comforts and are willing to pay for it." On the other hand, she feels it might be harder to promote Tawang and Arunachal Pradesh because of the requirements like, special restricted area pass in addition to the visa. Also, the remote mountainous location means that you need to take either a special charter flight or a bumpy drive up, making it better suited for back-

packers. Tawang also has special appeal to Buddhists and she felt more could be done to improve the infrastructure, the roads, the power supply, the hotels, and, of course, less red tape.

As for food, Audrey practically became a vegan during the trip. She shared, "Indian vegetarian food has much to offer; cardamom tea is amazingly delicious, yet the simple dessert made up of rice cooked in sweetened milk, the kheer, is particularly addictive." That said, many Singaporeans hankered for local fare after a while and one of their travel companions, a tour operator fished out packs of instant noodle. "It was very odd to encounter 'Singapore noodle' on the menu in Tawang," she says, though she admits that it was nothing like the one in Singapore. Instead, it was essentially, "lots of Hokkien mee fried with chicken and carrots."

On a final note, "India is like a kaleidoscope," says Audrey, "full of many shimmering facets that change with every turn." In hindsight, even the night spent in the bug-ridden guesthouse seems rather amusing to her. "It is part of the rich experience that India offers," she says, "the ying with the yang. I am sure Professor Godbole would agree!" she adds, referring to Forster's book. Her advice to the Singaporeans travelling to India is to go without preconceptions. "What you need are open eyes and a sense of wonder, and you will not be disappointed."

INDIA IS LIKE A KALEIDOSCOPE,
FULL OF MANY SHIMMERING
FACETS THAT CHANGE
WITH EVERY TURN



Yoga

A PRACTICE FOR LIFE

The following are excerpts from India Tourism Singapore's publication on India titled 'The Wellness Destination.'

Travel agents wishing to receive it please contact info@indiatourism.com.sg

Yoga has evolved over thousands of years to embrace a wide range of styles and disciplines. The word yoga means "union" in Sanskrit, the language of ancient India, and its significance has never been more relevant today. Many people think that yoga is just stretching. But while stretching is certainly involved, yoga is really about creating balance in the body and mind through developing both mental strength and flexibility. This is done through the performance of poses of postures, each of which have specific physical benefits. There are many types of yoga that are practiced but almost all styles are based on different postures and it's important to find the right style for you.



Jnana Yoga is the Yoga of Knowledge

This is not knowledge in the intellectual sense, but the knowledge of Brahman and Atman and the realisation of their unity. There are seven stages to Jnana, involving study, self-realisation, desire, and protection of the mind. This form of yoga develops indifference to objects and non-attachment with the world.

Hatha Yoga

It is the most popular form of yoga practiced in the western world. It is the use of yoga postures or asanas. Hatha yoga attempts to balance the mind and body via physical postures or 'asanas, purification practices, controlled breathing, and the calming of the mind through relaxation and meditation.

Kundalini Yoga

It is the most powerful form of yoga and focuses on awakening the energy which is found at the base of the spine. Kundalini is, without a doubt, one of the more spiritual styles of yoga. It focuses on breath and movement and challenges its students both physically and mentally.

Swara Yoga

Swara yoga focuses on controlling and manipulating the flow of breath into the nostrils. It demonstrates that the flow of breath dominates each nostril alternately and regularly. The flow of breath changes from one nostril to the other periodically, thus balancing the entire system, which is the key objective of Swara Yoga.

Yoga is really about creating balance in the body and mind through developing both mental strength and flexibility



Raja Yoga

The aim of Raja Yoga is self-realisation or liberation. However, the masters simplified its technique so that everybody could practice it easily and safely to improve their physical as well as mental health. Raja Yoga focuses on directing one's life-force to bring the mind and emotions into balance. The aim is to focus on an object of meditation or on the lord himself.

Kriya Yoga

The practice of Kriya Yoga is based on breath, the brain and the spinal cord. The goal of Kriya Yoga is union with the divine. It works with the spiritual energy located deep within the spine. Since Kriya Yoga is based on breath, you can practice this special technique during the whole day and in whatever activity you do.

Bikram Yoga

Bikram Yoga class is a 26-posture (Asana) series that is done in a heated room set to 105 degrees. Every posture is intended to be practiced in a given order, to the best of one's ability. The heated rooms ensures the flushing out of toxins, among other benefits. This yoga is a medicine, a process by which the individual can reverse the effects of poor posture and chronic ailments. In a relatively short period of time and with regular practice, the body will transform, gaining in strength, stamina and flexibility.

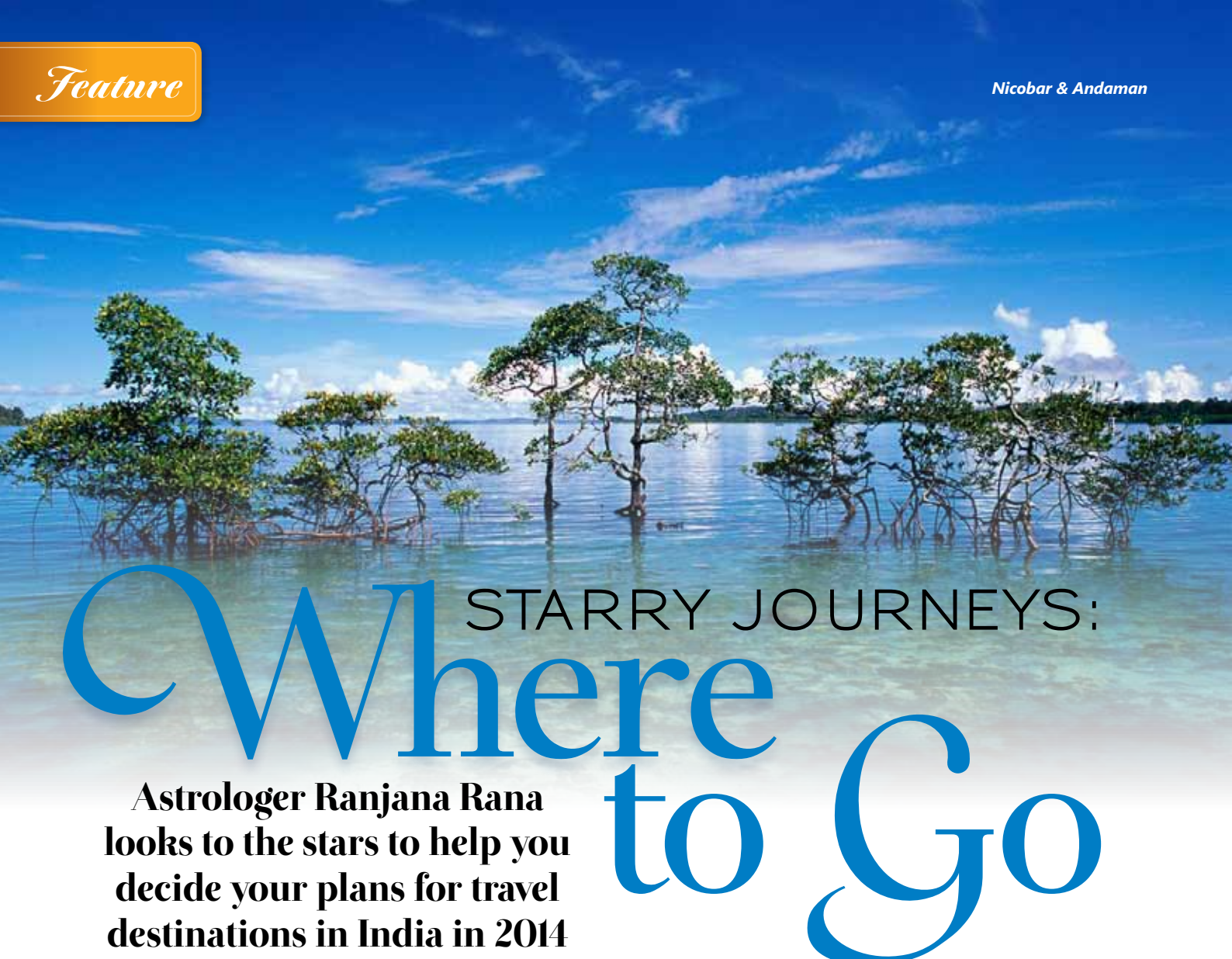
Mantra Yoga

Mantra Yoga is an exact science where the mantras are signposts to the wandering mind, steering it to an ideal state for meditation. Repetition of mantras completely engages the mind, offering a means of getting closer to the divinity within.

Power Yoga

Power Yoga is the western version of the Indian Ashtanga Yoga which emphasis on developing one's physical flexibility and nurtures the desire for self-discipline. Power Yoga moves more quickly than regular yoga, and as such gives more cardio output. In regular Yoga, the focus is on holding one's posture, but in Power Yoga the focus is on the movement.





STARRY JOURNEYS: Where to Go

Astrologer Ranjana Rana looks to the stars to help you decide your plans for travel destinations in India in 2014

The whole universe moves according to the movement of the planets. Around us, the weather, seasons, day and night are all influenced by their movement; even flowers, fruits and vegetables, animals and birds, so why not us humans?

Since ancient times in India, it hasn't been uncommon for people, whether they are leaving for an important trip or a long-awaited adventure, to consult astrologers to find out the most powerful astrological influence that will impact on their plans.

Astrology can help you through a day-to-day analysis of best travel plans and destinations to visit, according to your zodiacal sign. All zodiacal signs love vacations, but all like to travel in different ways, some are more adventurous and seek the unexpected, while some are more structured.



Astrologist Ranjana Rana

Aries

(March 21- April 20)

They are energetic people who enjoy being in control. They would love to drive to the mountains and once they arrive at their destination, they would like to test their competitive skills at trekking, mountaineering or even skydiving. The best choice for them would be to explore the arounds of Gangtok, Darjeeling, Sandakphu or even do the more adventurous climb to the Base Camp of Mt. Everest on the Khumbu Glacier. Hot ballooning in Rajasthan or tiger-spotting in Ranthambhor National Park are also good options.

Taurus

(April 21- May 21)

Taureans like to maintain their comfort zone and the warm secure feeling of a home environment wherever they go. The relaxing luxury

spa such as Ananda In the Himalaya at Rishikesh and Kanatal near Mussoorie are good choices. Even staying in a beautiful palace or haveli resort in Rajasthan or a luxury houseboat in the Kerala backwater is worth exploring.

Gemini

(May 22- June 21)

They like to visit two places at one go, engaging in anything new that stimulates their mind such as museum hopping, shopping, nightlife, musical events, parasailing or scuba diving are the mix of activities they enjoy best. Stimulating places would be Goa, the beaches of Kerala or even the Andamans.

Cancer

(June 22- July 22)

They are family-oriented people who would enjoy the sandy beaches of Goa, Kerala and Puri in Odisha, with their families. The sound of the waves of the sea relaxes their mind.

Leo

(July 23- August 21)

They like to travel in style and prefer only five-star accommodations. They like to dine in first class surroundings. Since the sign of Leo rules royalty, travelling to Rajasthan and visiting the beautiful forts and palaces of Jaipur, Jodhpur and Udaipur makes them feel at home.

Virgo

(August 22 –September 23)

They are perfectionists who like to be working. They would rather be building a home to live in, which they consider the ideal vacation for them. Also, when they return home from their travels they like to talk about the new cuisines they've enjoyed. They would enjoy a trip of wine tasting at the vineyards of Nasik, the relaxed atmosphere of the Dal Lake in Srinagar and the boutique resorts of Rajasthan.

Libra

(September 24- October 23)

They are fun loving people who want good amenities, fine dining and sophisticated culture, but, they also enjoy being in the outdoors. They love to have company while travelling. They would enjoy the deep-forested high-end resorts at Ranthambhor, Jodhpur and Udaipur, Munnar and other places in Coorg, Kabini near Nagarhole National Park and Wyanad in the Western Ghats in the south.

Scorpio

(Oct 24- November 22)

They prefer vacations on a deserted island or a resort with their loved ones. They would enjoy a holiday in a houseboat in Kashmir (complete with shikara rides!) as well as staying on the floating cottages in the Kerala backwaters.

Sagittarius

(November 23- December 22)

They are keen travellers who like to satisfy mind, body and spirit. They love to take as many vacations as possible if they can afford it. They like travelling to exotic lands like the Rann of Kutch or go on a jungle safari to see the wild life of Ranthambore or the Gir National Park in Gujarat.

Capricorn

(December 23- January 20)

They are business-oriented people who like to mix business and pleasure. The preference would be for more city-oriented holidays so they'll visit places like Hyderabad with its Salar Jung Museum, and the historical places in Mumbai, Calcutta, Delhi and Chandigarh, which they find utterly stimulating.

Aquarius

(January 21 – February 19)

They take great pains in planning a unique vacation, no matter where they go and what they plan, the bottom line is their intellect must be stimulated. But they also seek satisfaction for their innermost spiritual needs. For them Agra, Varanasi, Tirupati, Sabarimala and Shirdi are good options.

Pisces

(February 20 – March 20)

They like being near bodies of water bodies of any kind and consider them the perfect getaway. The elegance of their vacation is captured in their camera. A trip to Goa, Puri, Konark, Kerala backwaters are good to go.

Adventure in Ananda in the Himalayas.
Photo: Incredible India



Jetavana Sravasti in Uttar Pradesh.
Photo: Incredible India



There are some very good reasons for Somatheeram Ayurvedic Hospital & Yoga Centre being selected as India's leading wellness centre. They were selected in India's Ministry of Tourism's annual National Tourism Awards under the category, 'Best Wellness Center' for 2011-2012.

There are currently over 2,300 spas in India, with many more expected to come up in the next few years, so it must have been a particularly gratifying experience for Somatheeram to accept the coveted award from Dr K Chiranjeevi, Minister of State with Independent Charge for Tourism, (GOI) in the presence of the President of India, representatives of the country's travel trade and several celebrities.

The spa and wellness market has been registering a 30 per cent year-on-year growth in India, making it the fastest growing segment in the hospitality industry, as revealed at Global Wellness Tourism Congress (2013) in New Delhi. Wellness Tourism focuses on prevention, personal growth, mind-body harmony, and healthy living as opposed to Medical Tourism, which entails procedures that are corrective in nature, episodic, clinical and treatment-based.

There is a huge influx of inbound visitors seeking both spiritual and physical sustenance for stressed-out bodies and minds to India, which is reputed for centuries as a major global

SOMATHEERAM AYURVEDIC HOSPITAL & YOGA CENTRE: Best of the Best

**Check out India's best wellness centre
when visiting Kovalam, Kerala**

hub for holistic wellness practices with its ancient tools such as Ayurveda, yoga and meditation.

Those who have a holistic approach to health should consider Somatheeram Ayurvedic, which has received Harpers & Queen Travel Awards in 2002 as the 'Best Ayurvedic Body and Soul Retreat'; Spa Asia Wellness Media (Singapore) showered it with the "Best Ayurveda Centre Crystal Award" in 2005. Since its inception in 1989, Somatheeram has grown to become not only India's premier Ayurvedic spa but also one of the top spas in the world. It has been classified as 'Green Leaf' by the Government of Kerala.

Sea-side Appeal

Somatheeram's attraction lies also in its appeal as a seaside destination spa amidst lushly verdant environs of 'God's Own Country' – Kerala. The state is also one of the world's top holiday destinations. The timeless ebb and flow of the tide of the waters of the Arabian Sea at Kovalam holds you in a hypnotic spell... even as the rhythmic movement of practiced hands easing away the stress inch by inch seeming to reflect the rhythms of the ocean's swell. For centuries the world over, spas and healing places have been usually sited by the sea or ocean. The fresh sea

Somatheeram's Top Selling Packages



Photo: Somatheram



breezes and steady movement of the waves leaves one calm, and at peace with the world.

Somatheeram was started in 1989 and was the dream of one man, Polly Matthew (living in Germany with his family) to bring to the world the amazing benefits of India's traditional healing practices of Ayurveda. It was in his own home setting in Kerala that he set up a well wellness centre. The tropical garden setting overlooking the sea is scattered with cottages built in the traditional Kerala-style to merge harmoniously with their surrounds. He would offer at his new ocean-side retreat three of the most important gifts from ancient India: Ayurveda, yoga and meditation.

The people manning the wellness activities there are experts in their fields, so you know that you are in good hands. Each patient entering this serene world gets personalized attention for their individual constitution. On arrival patients meet up with one of the doctors for the first consultation. A check-up follows along with a detailed questionnaire about one's lifestyle. Based on this, the doctor charts out an individual treatment course and food plan.

Often this is followed by a two-hour general massage by two therapists, to relax and place one in a calm frame of mind. Whatever the treatment you get for your individual needs, on the following days at the spa there's always a period of relaxation so that the treatment is more effective. Daily yoga and meditation sessions help underscore the entire process of liberation from stress and distress to body and soul.

Diet is an integral part of the treatment and your dietary needs will be charted out according to your individual Dosha (one of the three body energies that govern a person's physical constitution). These meals can be enjoyed at their ocean-facing restaurant's terrace.

Kovalam beach is offers some additional touristic highlights. Some of the packages on offer also includes a traditional Kerala backwater cruise. The resort has an Internet café and WLAN Internet access and also arranges cultural performances for its guests. On the Wellness front the resort's packages include cost of accommodation, treatment, yoga, meditation, Ayurvedic full board and other services (such as transfer to and from the airport). The Panchkarma (body cleansing) packages follow selected regimes.

For current rates and more info you can log on their website:

<http://www.somatheeram.org/en/ayurveda>

- **Beauty Care Package** in which the treatments comprise herbal face packs, oil massages followed by herbal teas and steam baths
- **Stress Management Package** comprising a holistic combination of yoga, meditation and Ayurvedic therapies. The treatment is given for 3-4 hours daily—over a period of 7 or 14 days (depending on your need or choice) It includes rejuvenation massages and Dhara, Njavarakizhi, Thalam, herbal steam baths, mud packs etc. and orally taken Ayurvedic medicine
- **Slimming Package** is an Ayurvedic weight reduction programme, which includes herbal powder massage and treatment with various medicinal herbal oils. Massages are given for 28 days. In addition there are medicated steam baths and oral intake of herbal juices and infusions. Its also backed by A special Ayurvedic diet plan during treatment
- **Body Immunisation Package** is Ayurveda's great defense against the ageing processes in the body by putting a stop to the degeneration of the body's cells and to strengthen the body's immune defense system. Recommended for both men and women before they hit the age of 60 it involves Rasayanas (very specialised Ayurvedic medicine) and purifying the body and sweating it out through Panchakarma and Swedakarma. A 28-day programme it incorporates body massages, Snehanam, Virechanam, Nasyam, Snehavasthi, Dhara, Pizhichil, Njavarakizhi, Tharpanam, Sirovasthi, Karnapooranam along with medicated steam baths.
- **Body Purification Package** is a lovely detox session to zap those terrible eating habits, lifestyle aberrations etc. which result in the imbalance of the Tridoshas. The 15-day treatment involves Snehanakarma (oil application), Swedanakarma (sweat treatment) and Panchakarma (purification). In addition there are body massages, Snehanam, Nasyam, Virechanam (a, medically supervised purgative treatment), Snehavasthi, Dhara, Pizhichil, Njavarakizhi, Karnapooranam, Tharpanam, Sirovasthi, steam baths and oral herbal medicines.
- **Rejuvenation Package** This treatment gives the tired old cells and tissues a nice overhaul — refreshing and rejuvenating the body's systems in order to preserve the balance between body, mind and soul. Synchronised body massages with medicinal oils and cream co-ordinated by along with Sirodhara, medicinal steam baths and oral medicine are administered over a period of 7-14 days, for 90-120 minutes daily.



WOVEN OF Dreams OF Desire

A region by region guide for some of the world's finest carpets and floor coverings in India

In a time not so long ago, the names of places like 'Srinagar, Lahore, Amritsar, Sind, Multan, Mirzapur, Allahabad' - rolled off the tongue with practiced ease from the exquisitely dressed merchant, with his turned up curly-toed slippers and elaborate turban atop a fair brow and blue eyes, as he ticked off each item as it was carefully laden on to the sailing ship bound east - to Europe. And the merchandise? Jewels...not precious stones hewn from the earth, but woven dreams in jewel tones from the hands of some of the finest carpet weavers in India, the great gem in the English crown.

Yes, privileged and moneyed Europe just could not get enough of those

Oriental carpets and rugs to drape their mansions and fortified places...their exquisite penthouses in London or New York or their huge ancestral piles back in the English countryside.

An Ancient Craft

Weaving is ancient craft in India, that is steeped in the cultural inspirations drawn from humble villages. There's little doubt that one of the most enticing products to leave those ancient looms are carpets and floor coverings. The art of carpet weaving in India reached its zenith in the 16th century in Mughal times with the introduction of the organised

manufacture of hand knotted carpets by emperor Akbar who brought in carpet weavers from ancient Persia to the royal ateliers of the palaces. It brought in some of the elements of design and refinement.

Common motifs in carpet design became the Tree of Life, the Bird of Paradise, the circle and with some Indian influences in time, the lotus and even the swastika. Dominating hues were those of the new Persian colour palette the '*haft rangi*' (harmonious combination of the celestial seven-colours) style of tile mosaic — the green (Moon), red (Mars), deep blue/turquoise (Mercury), gray (Jupiter), white (Venus), black (Saturn), yellow (Sun), symbolizing paradise and divine beauty on earth.

(Left to right) Kashmir Namdha; Isfahan Persian Rug; Kashmir Chainstitch Tree of Life



Hand knotted

The carpets brightly hued and highly refined were hand knotted dreams in silk featuring a mind boggling 4224 knots per square inch if not more. In time the art of carpet weaving on Indian soil continued to flourish, eventually, absorbing modifications combining royal needs and the influence of the native Indian arts.

Both wool and silk were the favoured materials for hand knotted carpets. During Mughal Jehangir's reign even pashmina was used with the knot count rising higher still—making them gorgeous works of woven art resembling miniature paintings all the rage. Given the emperor's deep interest in botany it is no surprise they featured many floral elements. Overtime local artisans started replacing the Persian *kairgars* in the great *karkhanas* introducing many Indian influences to the craft. Sadly for rugs and us today carpets whose provenance dates back the 16th and 17th century are privately held or to be found in museums. However India today is one of the world's top manufacturers renowned for its superb range of carpets and floor coverings of the highest quality. You can pick up hand-knotted woolen carpets, tufted woolen carpets or *gabbe* woolen carpets and handmade woolen durries. If it's silk you yearn for go for a pure silk carpet or one, which is a mix of both wool and silk, or cotton and silk.

The range of patterns and colorings are drawn from the spectrum of nature—or — if you prefer geometrical weaves, its all there. Check out the quality of a hand woven carpet by the tightness of the weave and the density of the knots. The tighter the weave and more dense the knotting, the higher its durability and value, apart from a much neater design. For flat weave carpets (an integral part of India's weaving heritage) you have a choice of wool and cotton durries and kilims.

Treasured Collectibles

Indian carpets are marked by their refined elegance, superb finish and timeless beauty and continue to be treasured collectibles. Primary carpet weaving centers, which continue to dominate the trade from the ancient times, are the Kashmir Valley, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana and Rajasthan.

Latecomers they may have been but the likes of Madhya Pradesh and Himachal continue to produce vibrant



Kashmir Wool Carpet

offerings. The most prolific centers of duree and kilim production are Haryana, Punjab, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Orissa. From Punjab look for stunning geometric motifs, from Orissa and Andhra Pradesh the ubiquitous *ikat* pattern Karnataka's Navalgund durees also popular as of Karnataka, also known as *jamkhans*, feature parrots and peacocks woven in shades of green and yellow rust and black.

Kashmir Valley

The Kashmir Valley produces some of India's finest, softest and purest silk and woolen carpets. They are inspired by both traditional Persian designs and the splendour of Kashmir's legendary natural beauty. Srinagar was a major carpet-weaving hub. The Kashmiri carpets, which undergo a laborious process, show strong influences of Persian splendour. The world adores them for their silken magic, exquisite beauty and deep refinement; a carpet with a pure silk pile rendered on a 20% cotton yarn base with 400 knots per sq inch is said to be an 80% silk carpet. Kashmiri weavers are richly schooled in the art of reproducing in fine detail Turkish, Turkman and Caucasian antique patterns. From the remote reaches of Ladakh come pure wool carpets defined by vibrant colours and bold motifs. It also produced floor coverings such as the *tsukdan* woven from yaks' hair imported from Yarkand, and the *tsuktul* doubling as a blanket. *Gabbas*, the poor man's floor covering is made from pieces of blanket scraps and then embroidered or appliqued; *namdas* made from pressed felt and embellished with embroidery in chain stitch is another ancient weaving tradition in the Valley. *Wagguor* floor mats woven out of reed mace continue to be produced around Srinagar.

Uttar Pradesh

The carpet belt in Uttar Pradesh makes a sweep over the districts of Bhadohi, Mirzapur, Sonebhadra, Varanasi, Chandauli, Allahabad, Koshambi, Jaunpur, Ghazipur, Sitapur,

Shahjahanpur, Hardoi and — Agra, the home of the Taj Mahal, built by that great connoisseur of all things fine and beautiful, Mughal Emperor Shahjean.

Akbar set up ateliers at Lahore and Agra to produce some of the most exquisitely fashioned hand-knotted carpets for the royals, which would feature Persian, Turkish and Central Asian designs. In Agra you can find both the traditional as well as new designs. Its weavers continue to maintain the traditional "calling out" system in which the master weaver follows the design and keeps calling out to the weavers the colors to be used for each knot. Agra is renowned for its high quality hand-knotted Persian, Turkish carpets using natural dyes.

THE ART OF CARPET WEAVING IN INDIA REACHED ITS ZENITH IN THE 16TH CENTURY IN MUGHAL TIMES

The Mutiny of 1857 against British rule, legend has it, resulted in many weavers from Agra fleeing to a tiny village called Madhosingh, located between Bhadohi and Mirzapur, and started plying there trade here. Another legend claims that in the 17th century a travelling Persian master weaver set up base for carpet weaving here. Be that as it may... the fact is that the region around Bhadohi and Mirzapur (also located in Uttar Pradesh) went on to become the premier carpet weaving hubs in India. Ample support from the maharaja of Benaras (Varanasi) added fresh impetus to the range and quality of carpets being produced in the *Bhadohi*, *Mirzapur* and *Benaras* belt. Eighty per cent of India's carpets are manufactured here, which also includes

the mass production of low quality and medium-range pile carpets. You can also pick up Persian, plain embossed and Tibetan carpets, silk and Indian wool carpets, cotton rugs and carpets and even jute, bamboo, grass and coir floor coverings here.

Rajasthan

Rajasthan's weaver community has been traditionally noted for its fine-quality hand-knotted woolen carpets (80 knots to 120 knots) and floor coverings with the major hubs being Jaipur, Ajmer, and Bikaner. Contributions also come from smaller townships such as Tonk, Barmer, Chaksu and Manaharpura. Predominant colours in the palette were blue, red, and shades of purple along with some light green and deep blue. Afghani influences could be found in the vibrant colouring and geometric motifs. Predominant patterns from Rajasthani carpet ateliers were the *dushala*, *charkona*, *mehrab* and *shikar* along with the traditional Indo-Persian offerings. Carpets of the highest order featuring 400 to 600 knots per square inch are now probably only available on order here as against the more common counts of 16 to 36 knots now available in Rajasthan.

The duree, one of Rajasthan's most popular weaving traditions, continues to fascinate buyers from around the world. Once used as an underlay, the duree has come into its own as a popular floor covering featuring both geometric and floral designs. You can pick up those of cotton yarn, wool and camel hair made in Bikaner and Jaisalmer. Namdahs, felted rugs are woven in around Tonk.

Madhya Pradesh

From Madhya Pradesh come a vibrant range of a carpets and rugs in traditional Indian designs. But the state is also renowned for its fabulous durees featuring range of folk designs. This thick cotton (and also woolen) floor covering is woven on traditional looms by the women in the traditional 'Punja' technique usually in bold patterns and bright colours with folk designs.

Where to Buy

Important hubs are Sironj, Raigarh, Jhabua, Jabalpur and Shahdol.

While the humble Punja duree of Panipat in Haryana has become one of the fastest growing floor coverings from India (Fab India has played a pivotal role in its popularity) Amritsar's famous Mouri Indo-Persian design of geometrical motifs from the 19th century continue to be a popular export item.

There is no doubt that the market also thrives on machine made carpets which are less expensive than handcrafted ones with newer, more contemporary designs but for many of us the antique look is still more endearing.



(Top) Kashmir Silk Carpet; (bottom) Kashmir Namdha

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405/1, First Floor, Ghitorni, Nr
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Memorable Carpets

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D-12/D, HauzKhas
Tel: 91-11-26854671:

Also visit online **Central Cottage Industries Emporium** - www.cottageemporium.in and the **state emporiums** on Baba Kharag Singh Marg (near Connaught Place) and **Dilli Haat** (opp. INA Market)

JAIPUR

Jaipur Choudhry Exports

D12 Hanuman Nagar
Vaishali Nagar
Tel: 0141-2350736

MUMBAI

Cocoon Carpets

A - Block Basement, Shiv Sagar Estate,
Dr. A. B. Road, Worli
Tel: 022 2492 8647, 48
Email: mail@cocooncarpets.com

Mahadjo

Behind the Taj Mahal Hotel, Colaba
Website: www.mahadjo.com/contact-us.html

Shyam Ahuja Durees

Flat No. A-6, Ground Floor, Poonam
Apartments,
Dr Annie Besant Rd, Worli
Tel: 022-2492 6017



PANIPAT

Marwar Carpets Panipat

www.marwarcarpets.com

Vishnu Carpets

www.vishnucarpets.com

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Harika Rugs

Chakdewan Gaan, Bhadohi,

BANGALORE

Carpet Splendor

204-7/23, Sophia's Choice Building,
2nd Floor, St. Marks Road
Tel: 080- 65600949, 22484035
Mobile: 09900281058
carpetsplendor.com

Cocoon Carpets

2nd Floor, K.P.Towers, 777-A, 100 ft
Rd, HAL II Stage, Indiranagar,
Tel: 080-25201120, 44

The Karnataka Handloom Dev. Corp. Ltd.

1, Priyadarshini Commercial Complex,
Tank Road, Ulsoor,
Tel: 080-25575421, 25575425
Mobile: 0 9900017278

AMRITSAR

Everest Carpets

Anand Market, Tel: 0183-3100937

AGRA

Rose Carpets

JeoniMandi, Johns Mill No. 3, Agra,
Tel: 0562-2622121

MIRZAPUR

Adarsh Carpets

Jigna, Mirzapur, Tel: 05442-280356

VARANASI

BIL Continental Limited (previously
Bholanath International Ltd.)

P. O. Thathra, G. T. Road, Kachhawan
Tel: +91-542-2620221
Fax: +91-542-2620090
Email: marketing@bholanath.biz

in SEARCH OF

Heartland OF INDIA

Photos by **Rajesh Dhar**

The focus is on people of different religions and diverse cultures.

Rajesh Dhar loves to travel into the interior of the country to capture what he calls the 'Spirit of India'



Followers

A flock of sheep is religiously following the shepherd through the lush green 'Maidan' of Kolkata.

Location: Kolkata

The Black Beauty

Beauty of an upcoming storm in one of the sea beaches in West Bengal. A colorful, well decorated horse in the foreground and the splashes at the backdrop created a very dramatic ambience.

Location: Digha, West Bengal



Demigod I

'Gajan' is a rural festival of West Bengal. The devotees use to dress like the gods and goddesses and are known as 'bohurupes'. They play sequences from Indian mythology and the 'bohurupes' who perform are mostly underprivileged.

Location: Burdwan, West Bengal



Demigod II

Another 'Gajan' festival performance

Location: Bardhaman, West Bengal.



The Scholar

A young pupil intending to be a pundit is educating himself with the vedic slokas in a Sanskrit school.

Location: Uttar Pradesh



Packaging

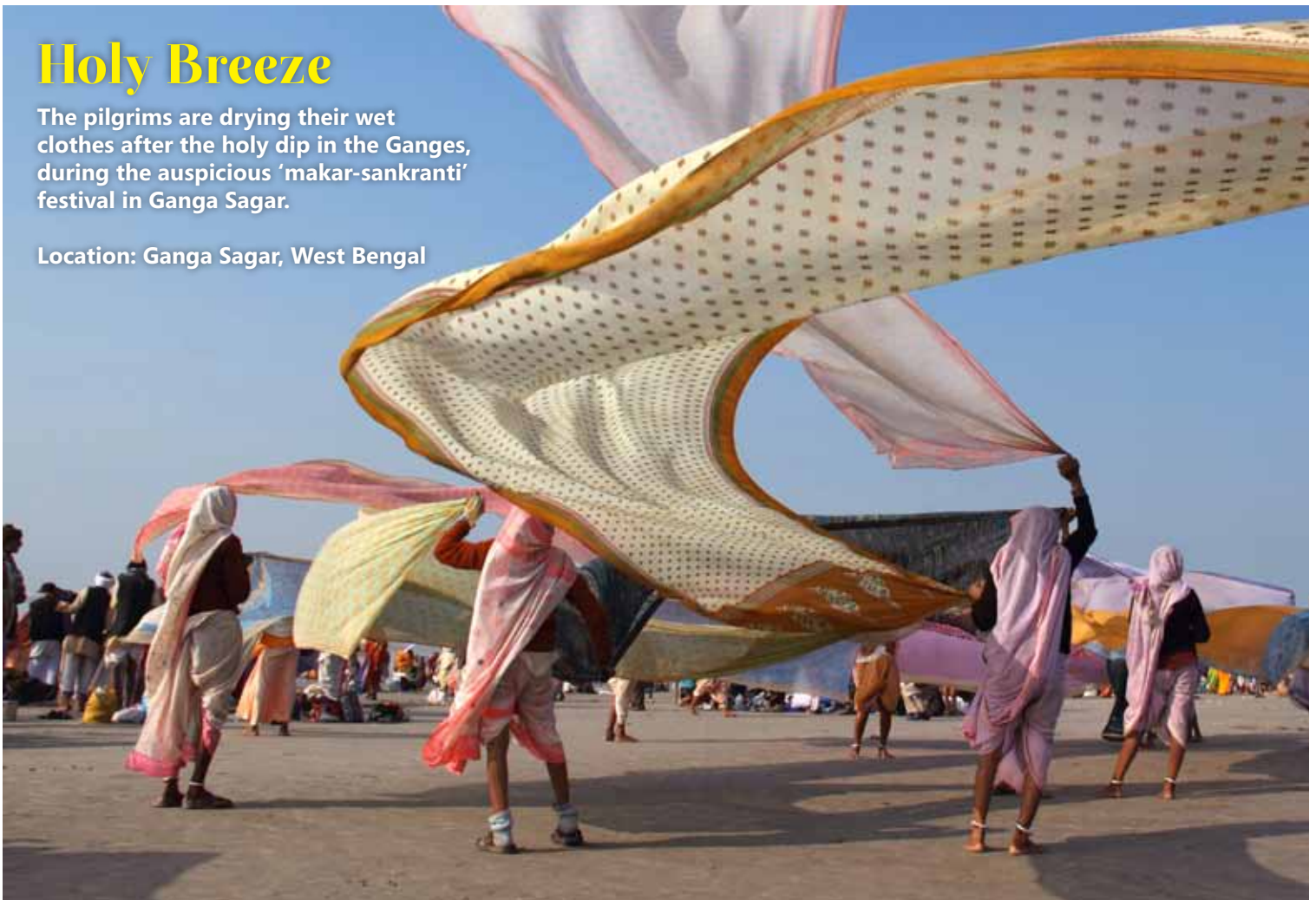
The idol of devi Laxmi is being covered with a polythene sheet to protect her from the sudden rain on the way to the 'pandal' during the durga puja festival.

Location: Kolkata

Holy Breeze

The pilgrims are drying their wet clothes after the holy dip in the Ganges, during the auspicious 'makar-sankranti' festival in Ganga Sagar.

Location: Ganga Sagar, West Bengal





Ritual

During the Durga puja festival there is a ritual of bathing the banana tree in the holy Ganges. The banana tree is called as 'Kola-Bou' or the wife of Lord Ganesha.

Location: Kolkata

Holy Dip

A sadhu is takes a holy dip in the Ganga Sagar during the auspicious 'makar-sankranti' festival.

Location: Ganga Sagar, West Bengal





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PREVENTIVE HEALTH SCREENING

SRI LANKA Luxury Stays

Rising like a Phoenix from the ashes of turbulent times, the country's tourism scene is well on the road to recovery with a vengeance

The most beautiful places in the world don't necessarily have the best accommodations to cater to the salubrious whims of the discriminating traveler. Previously off-limits to travelers, the island of Sri Lanka is now fully open for business and has projected a host of new accommodations in new areas opening up to tourism again. Sri Lanka's attractions include mountains, tea plantations, culture and history. But Sri Lanka's fabled sun-kissed beaches are the major draw for tourists. And this is where you'll find how tourist facilities have been transformed in the last few years, which also means there's an impressive choice of new resorts, villas and boutique hotels.

The Sri Lankan government has set a target of 35,000 rooms by 2016 to meet the anticipated demand of 2.5 million tourist arrivals. The government has reason to be confident of meeting the target. In 2010, just a year after the end of the war, tourist arrivals jumped by 50 per cent, and are increasing steadily by the year. Sri Lanka seems well on its way to recovering its position as one of the world's most desirable travel destinations.

Last March, soon after the opening of Mattala Airport, the Chairman of Sri Lankan Airlines talked about Sri Lanka being more than capable of attracting a million more tourists than the original number of 2.5 million by 2016. He said, "I believe this to be a realistic figure, given that the island now has a second international airport." However, there are still some growing pains.

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL PLACES IN THE WORLD DON'T NECESSARILY HAVE THE BEST ACCOMMODATIONS TO CATER TO THE SALUBRIOUS WHIMS OF THE DISCRIMINATING TRAVELER.

Four months later a news article reported the Minister of Investment Promotion's complaint that under the prevailing conditions, achieving 2.5 million tourists even by 2020 is doubtful. The Minister's reason was, "Hoteliers upped the floor rates by 200 to 300 per cent, making Sri Lanka's hotels the most expensive in the region and if not for this huge hotel room charges, we could have met the 2.5 million tourists target by 2012".

As the best things in life continue to be free, it's just the cost of going and staying there to experience them will continue to cost money. The following handy primer should provide some insights into the best places for a sunny stay in Sri Lanka.

Hotel bookings are up by a third year by year and chic new hotels are opening, both on the beach and on the tourist trail that takes in Nuwara Eliya for the tea plantations, Kandy for the Temple of the Tooth, the Sigiriya rock fortress and the ancient capitals of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. Packages are available, but you might also consider doing Sri Lanka on your own; hiring a car with a driver for a fly-drive with a difference. It doesn't cost much more than self-drive and is much easier.



Chaaya Blu Trincomalee



Nilaveli



Alankuda

North & North Western Coast

Among the finest places to stay in the Northeast area is the pretty little native-style wooden chalets of **Maalu Maalu** (www.maalumaalu.com; US\$195 full-board for a deluxe room) in Passekudah.

Now you can hit the fabled Trincoamalee beaches (which now feature several enticing resorts) travelling there by seaplane. The new service was launched by Cinnamon Air (www.cinnamonair.com). Cinnamon Air's convenient schedules are in sync with incoming international flights, thus you cut the journey time to an hour on the seaplane flights. Cinnamon also flies to Sigiriya, in central Sri Lanka, and Kandy, Koggala and Weerawila in the south.

An excellent new sleep option is the **Chaaya Blu Trincomalee** (www.cinnamonhotels.com/ChaayaBluTrincomalee.htm; singles from US\$140) which has been completely transformed by a makeover. This 70's resort which suffered from the conflicts in the area is welcoming tourists with a whole new fresh outlook offering a choice of 36 beach chalets, 43 superior rooms and two suites all open on to seascapes. The retro-style property features bleached wooden decks, cut cement floors, rattan furniture and denim trimmings. Don't miss the brilliant snorkeling and scuba and, of course, the whale watching.

The 45-room **Nilaveli Beach Hotel** (www.nilaveli-beach-hotel-trincomalee-sri-lanka.en.www.lk; single

deluxe from US\$198) near Nilavaeli Beach is a 10-minute boat ride from Pigeon Island, which also features the popular **Pigeon Island Resort** (www.pigeonislandresort.com). The Nilavaeli Hotel has a huge swimming pool and rooms with ocean views. Dine at leisure at its oceanfront restaurant on fresh sea food. Trincomalee Natural Harbour is just 40 minutes away.

To the north of Colombo, along the West Coast, visitors are now heading for Kalpitiya and Puttalam Lagoon. The serene and pristine expanses of the Kalpitiya peninsula are just a three-hour drive from Colombo. Projections for tourism here include the setting up of a Maldives-style eco-resort around 14 lagoon islands. Already travelers are discovering the joys of leisurely sojourns at the picturesque **Alankuda Beach Resort** (www.alankudabeachresort.com; from US\$138 per night) located on the Kalpitiya peninsula. This new resort which features both medium size houses and low slung cottages is surrounded by tropical splendour. Meals are served in the pool-fronted pavilion. Prices include meals.

Another good bet here is the **Dolphin Beach Resort** (dolphinbeach.lk; doubles full board US\$280) which offers snorkeling at the St Anne's coral reef, dolphin and whale watching and kite surfing. Accommodation features as custom-built spacious, air-conditioned luxury tents with and verandahs. The intimate interiors are fitted with king-size beds, unique furnishings and en suite chic bathroom with rain-showers

West & South West Coast

For those who can't resist the charms of the more fully developed west coast there is quite a diverting range of sleep options. The expressway gets you to Galle the great tourism hub—the 'weekend Rivera' of Sri Lanka, from Colombo in an hour. The Asia Leisure group offers the highly popular boutique property **River House** (www.asialeisure.lk; from US\$ 230+) which is located near Balapitiya.

The Galle Fort Hotel (www.galleforhotel.com; from US\$ 200) an award winning property offers beautifully appointed garden rooms, lofts, suites and apartments. This boutique hotel is steeped in a timeless serenity with the stunning ocean and the stalwart fortification from the 1860s waiting to be explored.

The Aman group properties are renowned for their impeccable lineage and Sri Lanka's beautiful **Amangalla** (amanresorts.com; US\$700 per room per night) is no exception. The recent makeover has converted, what used to be the New Oriental Hotel, into a rare gem, one of the island-country's most enviable boutique properties. The old world charm is further enhanced with its setting in Galle Fort, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Activity highlights include whale watching excursions.

Jetwing Lighthouse (www.jetwinghotels.com/jetwinglighthouse;

half board US\$290) is the last offering of his amazing talent to Sri Lanka by Geoffrey Bawa. The hotel, overlooking the ocean is marked by its minimalist elegance and stately comforts. Bawa's pictorial narratives define its beautiful interiors while its guest rooms envelop you in a world of soul-stirring delight. Jetwing Lighthouse, Galle, a member of Small Luxury Hotels of the World and holds the promise of a fabulous holiday in its tropical environs

Located in the gorgeous environs of a tea plantation the award winning **Kahanda Kanda** (www.kahandakanda.com; from US\$ 450 for two per night) near Galle, offers visitors a richly colonial-era nuanced holiday. This serene boutique retreat, quite close to historic Galle has on board nine stylish, individual suites overlooking Koggala Lake. Whale watching, fort tours, bike rides, rainforest walks, scuba and surfing are arranged on request.

If you are looking for a spot of privacy, while you trawl Sri Lanka's legendary tropical splendour a good option is the secluded **Frangipani Tree** (www.thefrangipanitree.com; from US\$250 per night) resort which fronts the Indian Ocean on the western tip of Thalpe Bay on a picturesque beach. On offer here are three villas with nine suites. Light and airy each sleep option is thematically contemporary, with the villas featuring private terraces and sun beds. Life becomes even more slow-paced around the 35 m infinity pool.

Located on the southern end of Galle is **Villa Bentota** ([www.paradiseroadhotels.com/villabentota; singles/doubles from US\\$312 nett](http://www.paradiseroadhotels.com/villabentota; singles/doubles from US$312 nett)), one of the newer and most popular boutique hotels on Paradise Road it offers 15 designer rooms and suites. Villa Bentota is housed in the Mohotti Walauwa, converted by world-renowned architect, Geoffrey Bawa into Sri Lanka's first boutique hotel in the 70s. It is also open for weddings and private functions. It's just 90-minute drive from Colombo.

In 2010, this spanking new boutique hotel property on the West coast between Wadduwa and Panadura was recognized as the Best Boutique Resort in Sri Lanka. **Serene Pavilions** (www.serenepavilions.com; offers B&B ocean pavilion rooms from US\$630 per



Chaaya Blu Trincomalee



Villa Bentota

night) continues to hold the standard high judging from the number of discerning guests making a beeline for it in Wadduwa. The hotel offers sumptuously appointed pavilion suites (12 of them) which feature private plunge pools and high-tech interiors. The lush lawns are the setting of a huge swimming pool.

South Coast

The atmospheric warmth of the Dutch-colonial-style villa at **Satori Villa** (www.satoriexperience.com; sleeps six, from US\$595 per night) located in the rainforest near Unawatuna, along the south coast, is heightened by the services of the chef who whips up great meals while you soak in the sights. Gather a bunch of friends and head here for some heartwarming leisure time in this secluded tropical

retreat. In between catch some yoga and massage sessions. It's the perfect retreat for honeymooning couples. Accessible by wading through the bay waters in this gorgeous, privately owned island with its neo-Palladian mansion, it is a big hit with those seeking sun and serenity away from the madding crowd. The resort has a long list of celebs, aristocrats, writers and eccentrics who've been charmed by its fabulous moorings.

Taprobane Island (www.taprobaneisland.com; call ahead for rates), found in the bay of Weligama is a delightful tropical retreat spread over 2 ½ acres, punctuated by five en suite bedrooms, tropical gardens and an infinity pool. It used to be the personal retreat of a French hedonist.

For those in the know, the charming resorts in Sri Lanka done by legendary architect Geoffry Bawa add a whole

new dimension to their holiday. Located in the southern coast near Tangalle is **The Last House** (www.thelasthousetangalle.com; whole house, from US\$985 per night), is Bawa's last project before his death in 2003. One can just marvel at the joyous treatment of open and closed living spaces in this cheery, spacious resort ensconced between the sea and the rainforest.

Central & North Central Provinces

Another great winner from the Jetwings stable **Vil Uyana** (jetwinghotels.com/jetwingviluyana; from US\$259 per night full board) located in Sigiriya which is a part of the triangle encompassing Sri Lanka's top cultural and heritage attractions. The resort has become a nature-lovers hotspot as the beautiful thatched-roof villas on stilts overlook the beautiful wetland the hotel has itself created. You can survey the astonishing range of avifaunal wealth it has attracted. The wetland and its forested surrounds are now home to 80 species of birds, 17 species of mammals, 36 species of butterflies and 21 species of amphibians.

The highlands of the Central Province summon up a whole range



Casa Colombo



Tree Trails



Wallawwa

of new holiday experiences when you base yourself at **Tea Trails** (www.teatrails.com; check ahead for current rates) at Hatton reputed for its luxuriant vistas of tea plantations. Sri Lanka's first Relais & Chateaux resort, Tea Trails offers just four colonial-days planter bungalows (built between 1888-1950) with 21 guestrooms and suites, but each one is appointed in utmost luxury and richly nuanced with

poster beds, and period furniture. The in-house chef for each bungalow can summon up picnic lunches, hearty planter breakfasts and delicious high teas—all beautifully served in traditional style. Meals are served in the garden or the bungalow terraces.

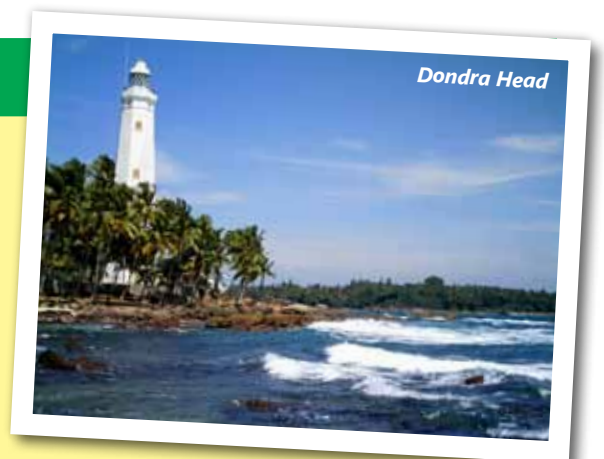
Colombo

Each suite at the Colombo's popular 12-suite retro-chic **Casa Colombo** (www.casacolombo.com; suite from US\$650 per night), features the stamp of its dynamic founder-owner, Lalin Jinasena's, creative inspirations. The pink pool could well be the first of its type in the world according to the hotel website. The poolside features eight glass sun beds, three canopied day beds and chrome elephants wading the shallow pool.

If you don't want to go into town a good option is the picturesquely set **Wallawwa** (www.thewallawwa.com; from US\$205 per night) boutique hotel located in Kotugoda which is just 15 minutes from Colombo's Bandaranaike International Airport. The Wallawwa shows you that you can have a perfectly decent resort in close proximity to the airport without the noise pollution. The Z spa here is the star point of the hotel. Its 17 colonial-style bedrooms and suites are set amidst landscaped verdure.

USEFUL INFO

- From January to April mighty blue whales make a regular appearance near **Dondra Head**, on the southern coast.
- In the vast and verdant expanses of **Yala National Park** thrilling sightings await of leopards and elephants in the wild. The good news is that after having been closed to the public for almost two decades the government has once again opened up the more remote **Wilpattu National Park**.
- Sri Lanka's recently opened up **East Coast beaches**, after the government lifted the ban on them because of the conflict that ripped through the region, putting tourism on hold, are all set to give the southern favourites a run for their money.
- The sandy crescent of **Arugam Bay** is one of Asia's hottest surfing hubs. Other hot spots are further north at the pristine stretches of **Uppuveli** and **Nilaveli** near Trincomalee.
- Militant Tamil leader Prabhakaran's bunker at **Mullaitivu** has become a tourist spot now—a grim reminder of the civil war that impacted heavily on tourism in these parts.
- **Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil**, the most impressive religious piece of architectures in Jaffna, is also one of the most significant Hindu temple complexes in all Sri Lanka.
- Trincomalee's hot springs at the **Koneswaram Temple**, are a huge draw for streams of pilgrims. The stunning **Trincomalee Harbour**, lest we forget, is amongst the top 10 largest in the world.



Dondra Head

Going to Gulmarg to Ski

Unforgettable and unplanned - first experience with snow and skiing!

First to Jammu City, then Kashmir, and a tour of Srinagar; then a last minute decision to see the snow peaks of Gulmarg. Manjeet Singh, a Singaporean IT professional said, "It was the start of the season in October and we wanted to experience snow. We took the Gulmarg cable car gondola, the highest in the world. We covered 1.6 km going up to almost 4,000 metres and that's where the snow and the views were really breathtaking."

"It was the first time I touched snow in my life. My wife and 14 year-old daughter were all very excited. But what made it quite special was when our guide suggested some 'basic' ski lessons! It is something we did not plan it but we did it!

"Right at the top of the mountain the air is very thin and it was advisable that we stay only for two or three hours. So the experience on skis was short but still a memorable one. We found moving around, actually more like pushing along, on skis was very much easier than walking!" said Manjeet. To make the experience complete while taking in the scenery, he added, "The temperatures were around minus four degrees Celcius when we there and then It started snowing for a few minutes."

He and his daughter found skiing especially fun and wished that there was more time for them to have "proper" lessons (that would take up to at least seven days). Manjeet, a first generation Punjabi, born in Singapore, has been on many annual holidays to India but this is the first time for him



(Top): The view from over 13,000 feet at Gulmarg. (Above) Manjeet and family bundled up to brave minus four degrees Celcius climate

and his family to go to a high altitude ski resort like Gulmarg and the unexpected ski lesson was truly the topping on the cake.

They spent about four days in J&K, two nights at the Taj in Srinagar (facing the Dal Lake) and one night in Gulmarg where they stayed at the posh new 5-star Khyber Himalayan Resort & Spa. At Khyber, Manjeet said, "The hospitality, accommodation and service were superb and right from your room's balcony you can see snow-capped mountains."

This was also the first time he visited the state of Jammu and Kashmir. He was quite glad that one

preconception that many travellers have about security in Kashmir was unfounded. He shared, "Everyone was friendly, there were no signs of any trouble and we felt totally safe when we are out on the streets."

He felt, "If you have a spirit of adventure and willing to try something new, or you're the type who enjoys places off the beaten track, you'll like Gulmarg." That spirit of adventure is gearing Manjeet to already start planning his next trip to India to travel on the Lei-Ladakh Highway to explore and see scenic cold desert views of the Trans Himalayan region next summer.

WHAT IF...



EXPLORE WHAT IF



Xander returns to the start of his trip to the Himalayas

... SOME JOURNEYS WERE TEN YEARS IN THE MAKING?

Would a sleepover in their classroom in Grade 1 prepare students for trekking in the Himalayas in Grade 11? At UWCSEA, we believe it does. That's why our Outdoor Education programme begins with a night in the classroom when students are just six years old, and challenges them further each year.

Take Xander, a Grade 11 student, whose five-day trip to Taman Negara in Grade 5 helped to give him the determination, adaptability and resilience he needed to trek for two weeks and have a homestay with a local family in Ladakh, North India in Grade 10. The next step

is his Grade 11 week of independent travel. For Xander, the adventure began when he joined UWCSEA and spent a night away from his family for the first time.

At UWCSEA, students learn that they can stretch themselves further than they thought possible. In the words of the UWC movement founder, Kurt Hahn, "there is more in you than you think."

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