

FOOD STOPS: BEST CHOMPS IN BANGALORE



EXPLORE CONTEMPORARY INDIA & SOUTH ASIA

# Magazine

MARCH 2014

**PLUS**

VOLUNTOURISM:  
FEEL GOOD TRAVEL  
IN INDIA

SAFARI IN STYLE  
WITH RATNA SINGH

WELLNESS THE NEW HIGH:  
AYURVEDA SCIENCE  
& SCENIC SETTING

**SOUTH ASIA SELECT**

BANGLADESH  
HITTING THE  
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THE PALACE ON WHEELS:

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# Editor's Note



## FEEL GOOD TRAVEL, ANY VOLUNTEER?

Travel, interact and contribute at the same time. Don't just watch the scenery pass by—be part of the action. Best of all, make a real difference in others' lives or do something for a worthy cause. That's the 'pay off' for a relatively new brand of travel experience called Volunteer Tourism. Where and how to start? Raneer Sahaney gives some ideas and insights into this worthwhile area in her feature on 'Voluntourism: Feel-Good Travel in India.'

Shopping has always been one of the great draws for the sub-continent. From clothes, crafts to jewellery – we give a lightning tour of the best places to go in India and what are the specialities offered. The range and variety is perfect for retail therapy of any intensity which pleases one's fancy. Real spa and health therapy can be experienced in Bangalore's Dr Mathai's International Holistic Health Centre, which organised a seminar late last year on the best of Eastern-Western medicine. The holistic sciences of the centre received a ringing endorsement from no less than Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales who had visited India with the Duchess of Cornwall, Camilla Parker Bowles.

Royalty is revisited again in this issue as we feature Rajasthan. We were only able to touch briefly on some of the stately forts in the last issue. The story of the Maharaja is colourfully told through the palaces of Udaipur –the Venice of the East— and other facets such as their leisure spaces such as the fabulous game park—Ranthambore National Park, are explored. We also continue with the second part of the Bangalore story, started last issue, with the 'must go to eat places' in the IT city, in our Food Stops column.

Bangladesh is our South Asia Select destination with good reason. Throughout all that has happened domestically, the country's economy enters 2014 booming with strong exports—especially from its garment industry. One effect of this growth is the opening of new five-star hotel properties in the gateway cities of Dhaka and Chittagong. The country's hinterlands are also primed for exploration of its natural touristic assets. Biman, the national air carrier is ready to tap tourist growth with new aircraft and routes. This is definitely a destination to study and look out for in the present and very near future.

**Nomita Dhar**  
Publisher & Editor-in-Chief



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“  
*The story of the Maharaja is colourfully told through the palaces of Udaipur –the Venice of the East - and other facets like the National Park of Ranthambore are explored*

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## WORDS

### KRISTIAN GOODCHILD

A Journalism Graduate of the London College of Communications, Kristian brings copy-writing, proof-reading, editing and reporting élan to Sun Media's range of publications. He has a passion for news and travel and has travelled extensively throughout Asia as well as the world in general> he is able to give a broad range of perspectives to his writing. A recent arrival to Singapore, he now lives here with his Singaporean wife of one year and enjoys live music, fine wine, politics and obscure documentaries.



### RANEE SAHANEY

Ranee Sahaney has been Consulting Editor for 12 years to the Outlook Traveller group of publications and contributed to Discover India, BBC Good Food Guide and others. In the past 25 years, her features have been published widely. To her credit are a lavish coffee table book, Adventure Sites in the World; A GOI Tourist Department publication, A Travellers' Companion: India's North East; and others. She has also worked as Editorial Co-ordinator for Incredible India magazine.



### RANJANA RANA

Ranjana Rana ties astrology and travel together in this issue. 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 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.



### SHASHI SUNNY

Shashi has written for many leading publications such as PEOPLE, Society, Savvy and Stardust interviewing celebrities, achievers and newsmakers. She has over 25 years of experience in journalism covering a wide range of fields such as glamour industry, fashion, politics, business, films, publishing A post graduate in English Literature from Lady Shri Ram College New Delhi, Shashi has also taught English Literature at Delhi University.



## PICTURES

### SUGATO MUKHERJEE



Sugato grew up in the transitional period of the 90s when the multidimensional layers of India became more apparent than ever. Based in Calcutta, he often takes time off his professional schedule to lyrically document those visual textures, both on and off the beaten track. He has contributed to a host of national and international publications including The Globe and Mail, Al Jazeera, Roads & Kingdoms, Outlook Traveller and Jet Wings with photo essays, travel articles and images. His coffee table book An Antique Land: A Visual Memoir of

Ladakh has recently been published by Alchemy Publishers, New Delhi and has been critically acclaimed widely. Email: [sugato.mukherjee71@gmail.com](mailto:sugato.mukherjee71@gmail.com)

### RATNA SINGH



She is the right person, in the right place, at the right time. A naturalist with Taj Safaris, her work brings her close to nature where she is most comfortable. She sometimes exchange her

work binoculars with a camera and is perfectly placed to capture the beauty of the national parks and tiger reserves in Madhya Pradesh. She says in her work, "You rely on your senses to interpret the jungle for the visitor" and shares some awesome sights with our readers.

# Voluntourism



(Above) Australian GTEF volunteers at Neora

## FEEL GOOD *Travel* • I N I N D I A •

BY **Ranee Sahaney**

**There's a host of enticing opportunities to do good and feel good for a satisfying humanitarian holiday experience**

**A** keen eye, a steady hand and centuries-old traditions are guiding the old man as he painstakingly paints his newest creation on a dried palm leaf (patta). Pattachitra, one of India's most unique forms of painting, traditionally associated with rituals of the temples in Odisha, in particular, the famous Rath Yatra, since the 5th century, used to be the lifeblood of the artisan village of Raghurajpur, located near Puri. Fortunes changed as, over time, the loss of patronage resulted

in the sidelining of pattachitra craft, leaving its community impoverished and demoralized.

The tide is turning slowly in favour of craft villages such as Raghurajpur all over India. Well not just artisan communities, but many others as well who are in dire need of sustenance and economic empowerment. There's a whole new range of initiatives and activities getting closely associated with this. A relatively new niche in India's tourism arena, volunteer tourism or voluntourism as it is sometimes called, is getting serious attention by motivated players in the industry.

### *Richer Emotional Experience*

Volunteer tourism is all about travellers who wish to combine both leisure and some form of voluntary work as a measure of giving back to the community/environment, in order to come away with a richer experience of the people, places and cultures they encounter on their travels. Raghurajpur is now a heritage village and an iconic symbol of what this movement can achieve.

Voluntourists range from students in their 20s to senior citizens pushing 70, who seek opportunities to travel to, learn from and contribute to, amongst the more needy segments

of society mostly in Asia, Africa and the Latin countries. Travelers looking to make a difference in the lives of the underprivileged, or, the conditions of endangered environs, while still providing a tourist experience, may also find some truly unique lesser-travelled tourist routes along the way.

## Rural-tribal pockets of poverty

While India's urban landscape features a plethora of modern allurements as a holiday destination there are vast swathes of rural and tribal pockets in India which are marked by poverty and poor development though the natural setting and cultural richness may offer a host of allurements for the holidaymaker. Scattered across the country are a range of inspiring and popular options for a leisure-cum-learning volunteering holiday.

It's not that India has lacked an active response from voluntary workers from both home and the international community for scores of projects and causes scattered along the length and breadth of the country, but a trend has begun where travelers now want to use a vacation also as a tool for doing some meaningful social service amongst the communities and environs they visit, to gather together more fulfilling life experiences. If its childcare or community development, sponsoring an underprivileged child to empowering women, health work or husbandry, culture or nature heritage, revival of lost arts and crafts, or environmental programmes, tribal welfare or infrastructure development that interest you...there's a wide spectrum of opportunities available all over the land... Travel agents are now catering to this emerging market of the volunteer-focused traveler with hands-on information, connectivity and logistics and teaming up with reliable NGOs and other non-profit organization to volunteer and contribute to the region of their visit.



Australian GTEF Volunteers Chuikhim Gate

## Painterly Raghurajpur

It has been a host of champions of the revivalist movement of India's dying crafts that have also impacted on the resurgence of pattachitra at Raghurajpur. Now this contained community rejoices in its status as a protected heritage village with the nurturing of this vibrant art form and its artisans as an ongoing process even today.

Painterly artifacts of pattachitra, featuring the iconic themes of deities, mythological scenes and motifs from nature have now found a flourishing export market. Many are sought-out collectors' items. Spurred on by the winds of change Grassroute Journeys, the Odisha-based travel agency, offers travellers a range of activities which provide purpose-defined holidays in places like Raghurajpur where tourists not only enjoy the cultural delights of village India but also engage with the community and help promote the works of these gifted craftsmen.

Raghurajpur is also famed for its woodcarving, papier mache, sculptures and stone carving. The projects the agency supports are not tourist initiatives, but seek to use tourism for funding, support and community interaction. It also facilitates volunteering opportunities in agriculture and organic farming, vocational training for women, teaching

A RELATIVELY NEW NICHE IN INDIA'S TOURISM ARENA, VOLUNTEER TOURISM OR VOLUNTOURISM AS IT IS SOMETIMES CALLED, IS GETTING SERIOUS ATTENTION BY MOTIVATED PLAYERS IN THE INDUSTRY



English in tribal schools. Some of Grassroutes' other thrilling contributions to Odisha's natural heritage (through volunteer tourism) are eco-centric, sustainable tourism trips in holiday destinations such as Chilika Lake, Bhitarkanika and the beach resorts. For more information visit [www.grassroutesjourneys.com](http://www.grassroutesjourneys.com)

## Heritage by the Nila

In Kerala travelers have a unique opportunity to participate in enjoying a tourism experience of the highest order with the River Nila project set up by The Blue Yonder involving the revival of the dying River Nila. Not only do tourists contribute to the ongoing process of the Nila's resurgence, they can also enjoy a host of thrilling experiences of the Nila's communities, its culture, its heritage, lifestyle and livelihood which have got a new lease of life with its revival.

Tourism plays a supplementary role as a source of income for the communities living along the river which tends to attract tourists who are genuinely interested in absorbing the dynamics of this hitherto off-the-beaten-track local culture, heritage and communities. A tour of the Nila also brings you in touch with the musicians of Mulayankaavu near Angadipuram (a platform for more than 150 students to learn

music) and the folk group Vayali in Arangottukkara, a platform preserving many lost folk art forms and a repository of one of the largest digital archives of folk music and local knowledge from the three districts of Malappuram, Thrissur and Palakkad.

Visitors can enjoy workshops by the potters who have received a new life with the revival of the river community. Not only has the project helped preserve their traditional skills it has also opened up a window for a new market for their products. The Blue Yonder also encourages voluntary work at the Institute of Palliative Medicine (IPM). For more information: [www.blog.theblueyonder.com](http://www.blog.theblueyonder.com)

## Rosy Kanda Homestay

In the pristine environs of the Kumaon Himalayas in Uttarakhand the R.O.S.E Kanda Homestay has been enjoying tremendous support from voluntourists from both home and abroad. This Rural Organization for Social Elevation

(R.O.S.E.) is a grassroots non-profit group located in the remote village Kanda, near Bageshwar. This dispersed settlement cluster of about 30 villages, with almost 50 per cent of the populace living below the poverty line, offers travelers a wondrous exposure to one of Kumaon's prettiest regions while at the same time creating opportunities for social work. Tourists get to stay with the hospitable Verma family, enjoy first-hand cultural experiences with the locals and also immerse themselves in the rural development activities of R.O.S.E./JPGU. For more information: [www.rosekandahomestay.com](http://www.rosekandahomestay.com)

## Serene Spiti

A treasure trove of memorable experiences awaits visitors in the remote moonscape land of Himachal Pradesh's Spiti Valley with its stark mountains, wind-sculpted vistas and ancient Buddhist monasteries filled with vibrant murals and antiquities. Critical to the preservation of this awesome natural and cultural heritage is the need for setting in place many more processes for sustainable livelihoods and economic empowerment.

Spiti Ecosphere Homestay, a social enterprise which has been long active in these parts, hosts visitors in the villages of Demul, Komic and Langza and sets up culture-rich

journeys around this remote valley in addition to welcoming voluntary work (anything from 4 days to a week) in the conservation of natural resources through eco-friendly tourist practices, infrastructure development and interaction with the village communities in their daily activities. For more information: [www.spiticosphere.com](http://www.spiticosphere.com)

## Wild Chennai

While exploring the splendours of Tamil Nadu's fabulous temple and cultural offerings an intriguing voluntary programme at the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust & Centre for Herpetology will surely appeal to the adventurous wildlife enthusiast. Conservation and research on the crocodile, one of nature's most feared predators, offers volunteering opportunities at the centre in the fields of maintenance, short term research, the library on herpetological literature and the outreach programmes with the locals. For more information: [www.madrascrocodilebank.org](http://www.madrascrocodilebank.org)

## Spiritual Bodhgaya

At Bodhgaya, the spiritual founthead of the Buddhist faith, travellers can soak up the rich nuances of a blissfully rewarding spiritual experience. But they can also enrich themselves further by signing up for voluntary work with the Roots Institute, a center for Buddhist meditation and study, which offers gratifying humanitarian opportunities for the upliftment of the remote village communities in Bihar. The work largely entails health education along with its promotion and development amongst the village communities. Spiritual volunteers are welcome to assist with daily meditations, run short workshops and offer general help with the spiritual program. In addition to this health program volunteers are needed to assist with program coordination and nursing and physiotherapy / occupational therapy volunteers. For more information: [www.rootinstitute.com](http://www.rootinstitute.com)



*Indo-Nepal Circuit Salakpur Children*

## Mesmerising Eastern Himalayas

Darjeeling, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam are some of the most thrilling holiday experiences await visitors in their splendiferous environs in the setting of the Eastern Himalayas and the lush Brahmaputra Valley. From tea plantation homestays in Darjeeling and the Dooars to stalking the one-horned rhino in Kaziranga...from soaking in the scents of the unique botanical wonders of its forestlands while trekking in Sikkim to sharing a meal at a remote village with the tribals in Arunachal—there are experiences aplenty to involve yourself in the conservation and community-based initiatives set in place here.

Spearheading the volunteer tourism activities is the Siliguri and Kolkata-based Help Tourism, long associated in this region with the development of communities and preservation of ethnic cultures. In conjunction with the Association for Conservation and Tourism (ACT), Help Tourism continues its foray in action-oriented environmental based livelihood projects— best enjoyed as home stays and eco-guide training, seminars and workshops sensitization for community conservation and empowerment of isolated communities. For more information: [www.helptourism.com](http://www.helptourism.com)

## The Educators Trust

Located in the tourist paradise of Goa, the Educators trust is for thousands of children the only organization which will save them from poverty. Run almost entirely by volunteers the ETI visits Goan slums and offers the families regular fruit, medical packs and blankets in return for allowing their children to attend school each morning, where the children also receive two good meals. In doing so the charity aims to save the children from a life of begging and equip them with the education they need to have a real chance in life.

Recent volunteer Tim Whitehouse says that the charity makes an incredible difference to the lives of the kids, not just in educating them, but also in providing health and welfare outreach services. Of his experience there he says, "The children's health is often neglected in slums – burns and insect bites get infected and the parents do not take them to see a doctor. The kids get treated for head lice, checked for infected wounds and are well fed, which prevents further illness. Illnesses such as Dengue Fever or Malaria are also much more quickly spotted, so lives are saved."

The ETI has a number of positions for philanthropic travellers to fill, and are always in particular need of anyone with administration skills. For more information visit: [www.educatorstrustindia.org](http://www.educatorstrustindia.org)

# The Palace on Wheels: Royal Journey to Rajasthan's Timeless Treasures

Travel by night and explore by day on India's luxury trains



A dazzling tapestry, of exquisite destinations and exotic people, of stunning crafts and cultural traditions of dance and music, of creatures wild and of palaces and havelis, of fortresses and temples of stunning beauty— Rajasthan holds the promise of a journey to timeless delights.

And what better than to discover this magical world from the lap of luxury on the now-world famous Palace On Wheels, one of India's most luxurious train travel services, which takes you to some of the most fabulous holiday destinations in the state with the added bonus of a take-off from the historic national capital of India, Delhi, and a sign-off at Agra, home of the exquisite Taj Mahal.

The Palace on Wheels is the oldest (1982) and most popular luxury trains of

India; it also has the distinction of being rated as one of the 10 best luxurious train journeys in the world. With unparalleled luxury facilities and services onboard, the train has 14 carriages—all individually named after a city in the desert state of Rajasthan; it also features two restaurants and a bar lounge area. You travel through the night to different cities and explore them during the day.

India has the second largest rail network in the world and also distinguishes itself with a host of some of the world's most luxurious train travel services— amongst them also the Royal Rajasthan on Wheels and the Maharajas' Express. The Palace On Wheels itinerary Ex Delhi is Jaipur- Sawai Madhopur - Chittaurgarh - Udaipur - Jaisalmer- Jodhpur- Bharatpur - Taj Mahal (Agra) - Delhi. Passengers can travel and savour the following highlights on the train's 8-day / 7-night journey.



## Jaipur-Amber

The ancient fiefdom of the Kachhawaha rulers was originally ruled from Amer and then the capital was moved to Jaipur by the enlightened Maharaja Swai Jai Singh. The legendary 'Pink City' is a major tourist hub today with its palace museums and medieval bazaars bristling with life and all manner of exotica. It's also an excellent base for detours to the fortified Amer, and nearby townships of Sanganer and Bagru, known for their beautiful and very unique textile traditions.

Jaipur's beautifully vastu-inspired old city houses the famous Maharaja Swai Man Singh II Museum (City Palace Museum) located in the Rajput-Mughal-style City Palace, which marks the 1,000-odd year reign of the Kachhawaha rulers. Its superb collection incorporates traditional crafts, art works, rare manuscripts, textiles, carpets, wall hangings and jewellery, costumes and well-documented armoury. Highlights include two massive silver urns used to carry holy Ganga jal for ruler Madho Singh II to London.

The peachy, multi-layered confection of balconies, windows and feathery screens of the Hawa Mahal, along the busy Sireh Deori bazaar, were built in 1799. It was used as a viewing gallery for the ladies of the palace. The Jantar Mantar is a witness to Swai Jai Singh II's futuristic leanings; he set up five such astronomical observatories across India. Jawahar Kala Kendra, designed by Indian architect Charles Correa, has displays of traditional textiles, pottery, handicrafts and weaponry. Scour Jaipur's famous bazaars in the

INDIA HAS  
THE SECOND  
LARGEST RAIL  
NETWORK IN  
THE WORLD  
AND ALSO  
DISTINGUISHES  
ITSELF WITH  
A HOST OF  
SOME OF THE  
WORLD'S MOST  
LUXURIOUS  
TRAIN TRAVEL  
SERVICES

old quarter around Badi Chaupar and Chotti Chaupar for gem stones, textiles, handicrafts and jootis etc. MI Road is another major shopping hub.

Amer was traditionally the capital city of the Kachhawahas from the 11th century. An integral stop on a tour of the Jaipur area, Amer will enthrall with its massive fortification, its Sheesh Mahal (hall of mirrors) and the superb Sound and Light show held nightly. Just 30km from Jaipur it offers detours to Nahargarh Fort, Jaigarh Fort and the beautifully restored Jal Mahal. Jaipur is 260 km from Delhi and 240 km from Agra and forms the 'Golden Triangle' of Delhi, Agra and Jaipur.

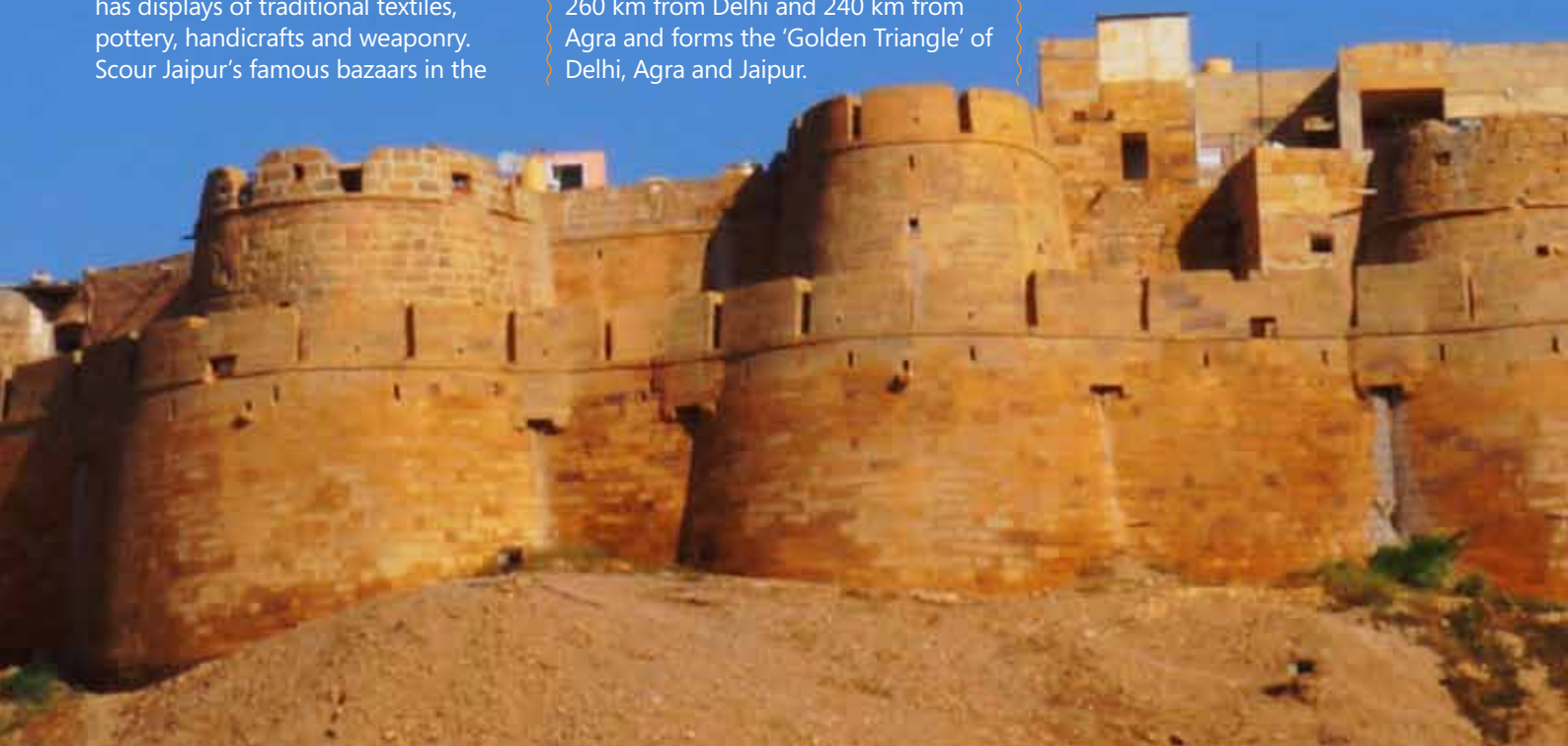
## Swai Madhopur-Ranthambhore National Park

Access to one of India's most beautiful tiger havens is by the railhead of Swai Madhopur.

Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve and National Park offers some of the most fabulous tiger-spotting experiences in India. An important part of India's Project Tiger conservation programme it is also home to the leopard, sloth bear, wild boar, chinkara etc. The Aravalli Range is a natural barrier protecting the 329 sq km area, marked by thick forest of deep antiquity and numerous water bodies. The stunning Ranthambhore Fort is Rajasthan's oldest battlement enclave. Nearby is the ancient Ganesh Temple visited by hundreds of devotees all year round. It's especially colourful during Ganesh Chaturthi.

## Chittorgarh

Much of its past glory has faded into oblivion, as most of it lies in ruins. Just 90 km away from Mewar's capital of Udaipur, Chittorgarh was the ancient seat of the Sisodia Rajputs. The ruins of the palace of the brave Rani Padmini reminds you of her inventiveness in outwitting the Delhi's sultan Allauddin Khilji, who was so obsessed by tales of her legendary beauty that he laid siege to Chittor to get to see her for himself.



The ancient stones of Chittor Fort, one considered the most invincible in Rajasthan, still seem to resound with the heroic and cunning military exploits of Sisodia rulers such as Rana Kumbha and Rana Sangha. It summons up vignettes of the itinerant wars from 1303 when Khilji unleashed his fury against Chittor, and how it rose again only to fall again during the 16th century from death-defying clashes with the sultan of Gujarat — and again with the Mughal emperor Akbar. Kirti Stambh is another highlight here as is the 37-m high Vijay Stambh built in the 15th century to commemorate the victories against Malwa and Gujarat.

## Udaipur

Most people will have heard of one of the world's most famous water palace of India, the legendary Lake Palace of Udaipur, set upon the picturesque Lake Pichola and now run as a luxury hotel by the Taj Group. But Udaipur city is steeped in ancient legends of the Mewar rulers of the Sisodia clan of Rajputs. Udaipur became the brand new capital of the Sisodia Rajput rulers after the sacking of Chittorgarh and the flight of the infant Udai Singh, heir apparent, with his nurse Panna Dai, to Kumbhalgarh their fortified retreat. The new capital of the Sisodia became the city of Udaipur built on the advice of a sage. Today the city is a conglomeration of palaces and temples built by 20 odd maharanas of Mewar, beginning from the 16th century to the 20th century. Chief amongst these are the lakeside Shiv Niwas City Palace, part hotel and part museum today, showcasing some of the most interesting elements of the history and culture of Sisodia rule.

The royals still occupy one wing of the palace; it is closed to the public. Take time to visit the famous Crystal Gallery and the museum of beautifully maintained vintage cars. Built by Maharana Jagat Singh, the Jagdish Temple is located on Lal Ghat, close to the City Palace; it is home to Lord Jagannath who is an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. It is one of the city's most popular shrines. Get there during the morning or evening aarti when the atmospheric are really evocative.



Take a leisurely boat ride to the Jag Mandir on Lake Pichola. Have a meal at the air-conditioned restaurant here. Jag Mandir has become popular as a venue for wedding receptions. Shop for jewels, old weaponry and textiles in the squiggly lanes of its antique bazaars. You can do side trips to the famous Shiv temple of Eklingji, 24 km north of town. It is the tutelary deity of the Mewar rajyas. Nathdwara 48km away from Udaipur reveres Lord Krishna housed in the venerated and venerable Shrinathji Temple. The temples at Nagda, close to Udaipur are famous for their Khajuraho-temple like erotica. The Shilpgram Festival is a great crowd-puller in the New Year.

## Jaisalmer

The desert sands have been witness to centuries of comings and goings at the beautiful golden fort which marks the desert outpost of Jaisalmer. Within the ancient embrace of its golden sand stone walls and bristling bastions of this living fort lies a centuries old saga of ancient traditions and cultural moorings lovingly kept alive by a people who pride themselves on their valorous past. Located strategically along the ancient caravan routes the lonely city survived on the business it accrued from those who plied their trade along the West Asian trade route. It was the death knell of a flourishing world in this harsh and unforgiving land, when its importance fell into decline as a trading outpost with the opening up of the seaports



of Kolkata, Mumbai and Surat during British rule. Jaisalmer saw the exodus of much of its Marwari trading community to these port towns. Today the city relies on tourism for its revival and survival.

Jaisalmer was established as the hub of the 12th century kingdom of Rawal Jaisal, the Bhatti Rajput chieftain. Today you can wander around many of its spectacular 19th century havelis (mansions), palaces and Jain temples built by the city's affluent traders and ministers. Elaborate confections created to please the ambitions of the rich and influential, they are a delectable fusion of carved facades and lofty pillars, delicate chattris and cupolas, lacy jali (screen) work and evocative jharokas (balconies) made from the ubiquitous local golden sandstone. Do visit the Patwon-ki-Haveli, Nathmalji's Haveli and the 19th century Salim Singh's Haveli, along with the 20th century Badal Nivas Palace and the Sarvottam Vilas Palace is renowned for its exquisite glass mosaic and blue tile work.

In the fort precincts you will discover seven extensively carved Jain temples (Chandraprabhu, Parasnath, Shitlanath, Sambhavanath, Shantinath, Kunthunath

and Rikhabdev) built by the town's rich merchants during the 15th and 16th centuries. They are a beautiful symbiosis of Islamic-Hindu workmanship. The grand fort itself sits atop the 80m high Trikuta Hill, and was witness to a massive invasion in which thousands of women and children died committing jauhar (self-immolation), the traditional end for Rajput women in the face of defeat in war.

Garsisar Tank attracts scores of visitors during the annual Gangaur festivities. In the markets look for Jaisalmer's famous puppets and wall hangings. The tiny stalls at Manik Chowk, where once numerous caravans congregated, have all manner of enticements. The nearby sand dunes of Sam and Khuri are great for tented stays under the stars. These can be arranged by government-recognised local travel agencies. The Desert Festival is a three-day extravaganza .

## Jodhpur

The fabulous Mehrangarh Fort (1459) built by Rao Jodha, rears its ancient head into a fierce blue sky. Today visitors go zipping at the fort in this former capital of the erstwhile rulers of Marwar. Set along the great trade routes of the caravans that traversed this region Mehrangarh was a force to be reckoned with. There's a nice little museum where you can explore vignettes of its glorious past.

Umaid Bhawan Palace now partially run as a hotel was a work in progress started by the maharaja to give people work during a great famine in 1929 by Maharaja Umaid Singh; construction was completed in 1943. Travel around the surrounding villages where you'll come upon families of local craftsmen famed for their dhurrie weaving and pottery making. Jaswant Thada is dotted with a collection of elegant royal cenotaphs. For shopping sprees set off for the famous streets and gullies of bustling Giridkot and Sardarmarkets showcasing local handicrafts for all budgets. Picnics are lazy pastimes at the serene Balsamand Lake, just 5km away as is Mandore (8km away) marked by royal cenotaphs and a landscaped garden.



## Bharatpur

One of India's most important wetlands and a bustling Ramsar Site, the Keoladeo Ghana National Park, attracts bird watchers from all over the world during the winter months when it becomes a haven for migratory birds from Europe. It is also renowned as the world's finest heronries. Bharatpur, where the birdwatching park is located, used to be ruled by the Jat chieftains from the 17th century. Their formidable Fort Lohagarh established by Raja Suraj Mal is also well worth a wander. When you have time on your hands drive down to picturesque Deeg (34km), which is another old Jat fiefdom. The gorgeous Monsoon Palace with its pretty fountains will assuredly invite you to spend more time here.

## Agra

Home to that most evocative monument to love, The Taj Mahal (1653), Agra used to be one of the most colourful bastions of the early

Mughal rulers, till Emperor Shahjahan built his new capital of Shahjahanabad in Delhi. A visit to this mesmerising monument also offers opportunities for leisurely forays of the stunning Agra Fort, commissioned by Mughal Emperor Akbar in 1565. It overlooks the sleepy Yamuna River which also winds past the Taj. The Itmad-ud-Daullah Tomb was commissioned by Empress Noorjehan for her father. Do pencil in a visit to Akbar's famous capital city (1571-1585) of Fatehpur Sikri with its fabulous architecture. It's a short drive from Agra city and will really blow you away with its exquisite carvings.

As an approximate indicator of the costs of the Palace on Wheels package, Mustafa Travels in Singapore markets both the 8D/7N Palace on Wheels and Royal Rajasthan on Wheels packages starting from S\$4,055 / US\$3,027 (twin share) and S\$5,555 / US\$4,393 (twin share deluxe cabin) respectively. The cost is inclusive of accommodation and all meals, sightseeing, entrance fees to monuments and cultural sites as and service taxes.



# INDIA: Endless Allurements

## FOR RETAIL THERAPY

**No matter where you are, there is always the opportunity to shop. Some recommended buys special to these places**



**Q**ts legend. India specialising in opening up the purse strings, has always done so. From the time those sailing ships bringing traders from Europe and Araby, from China and the Indies. And again from the forbidding mountain passes, from Central Asia and Afghanistan, where raiders and caravans alike sought her riches, who could not get enough of her wealth, gold, diamonds, coloured gemstones, spices, textiles and tea.

You may not be a merchant prince, just a besotted tourist who's heard from others back home who have summoned up tales of the fantastic offerings of India's bazaars, her crafting villages and now even her world-famed designer houses. It's time now to check things out for yourself and return home with bags loaded and stories of India's shopping experience extraordinaire.

### Agra

The historic Mughal bastion which is home to that great fabled monument of love...that imperial 'tear drop on the cheek of time' The Taj Mahal is one of India's top tourist destinations. Vigorously promoted as part of the famous 'Golden Triangle' of Delhi-Agra-Jaipur, it is a gem of a destination in the country's tourism portfolio, which continues to shine as it did when the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan dazzled the ancient world with his paean of love to his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal when she died. Pile up your bags with Agra's famous handicrafts, made of marble and soapstone inlay work, leather ware, brassware, carpets, jewellery and embroidery work. The Mughals were great patrons of arts and crafts. Empress Nur Jahan took personal interest and was an accomplished artist herself in zari embroidery work. Agra is also well known for its sweets 'Petha' and 'Gazak' and the salty snack 'Dalmoth.'

### Amritsar

The spiritual and secular fountainhead of the Sikh faith, the ancient city of Amritsar is a whirlwind of surprising holiday experiences. Stock up on traditional pappads, vari and pickles for the kitchen, on Queens Road, opposite Crystal Restaurant. For jewellery head for the old quarter where they still make traditional gem-encrusted jadau jewellery for a bride's trousseau.

Pick up a vibrantly coloured embroidered Phulkari chadars, traditionally given to a Punjabi bride before she leaves home. Salwar-kameez sets, richly embroidered dupattas are available aplenty in the old bazaars and the fancy boutiques around Lawrence Road. It has now also become a hub for replicating the embroidered shawls (many machine made) handcrafted by the craftsmen of the Kashmir Valley. Amritsar was a major hub for textiles and its blankets and woolens legendary.

## Aurangabad

This ancient city named after the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb the city of Aurangabad in Maharashtra, is the gateway to the world famous UNESCO Heritage Sites of Ajanta and Ellora Caves. Aurangabad also offers quick access to the village of Paithan where its craftsmen weave some of the most exquisite saris.

Pick up Paithani saris woven in gold. The really expensive ones take 6-18 months to weave. Paithan is just 56 km from Aurangabad. The local craftsmen have weaving these gorgeous saris from generation to generation for over 2000 years now. Mashru and Himroo fabrics, made of cotton and lustrous silk and bidri work has flourished over the centuries in Aurangabad district

## Bangalore

The fusion of past and present is a seamless one... but which still catches the unwary visitor with unexpected delight.

Brigade Road, MG Road and Commercial Street stock up on every conceivable allurements for the avid shopper—shoes, bags, clothes and electronics are top of the pile. For handicrafts its Cauvery Emporium on MG Road, where you can fill your bags with incense, local crafts in stonework and expensive woods—rosewood, sandalwood et al—and of course textiles, stoles and jewellery. UB City is the posh hub for designer wear and international brands. Chill out between shopping bouts at the food court here.

## Bikaner

This ancient desert outpost lies on the ancient trade routes of caravans traveling through the Thar Desert to the legendary Silk Route in Central Asia. Pick up Bikaneri's famous camel leather products and the cocktail snack Bikaneri bhujia. The jail carpets of Bikaner have been awarded the Grand Prix Diploma.

## Darjeeling

With its fabulous views of the world's third highest peak Mt Khanchendzonga Darjeeling reminds you that it has played a pivotal role in India's mountaineering heritage.

Chowrasta, the popular hangout on the Mall offers many shops worth exploring for hand made rugs, curios, tea, woolens, tangkha paintings, masks etc lots of and bric-a-brac. Nathumulls on the Mall is a favoured stop for excellent teas, both Darjeeling and Assam varieties. Pony rides and views of Khanchendzonga (on clear winter days) are also on offer here. The Refugee Self Help Centre and Haydn Hall... Both are excellent for picking up souvenirs

## Hyderabad

The regal abode of the Nizam's is a splendid fusion of heritage and modernity. Steeped in the dazzling cultural delights of its past, Hyderabad is also one of India's top IT hubs. If you want to explore Hyderabad's famous arts and crafts heritage its best to drop in at the Shilparam Arts and Crafts Village at Madhapur. This 30-acre sprawl brings you in direct touch with craftsmen at work. The annual 2-week Crafts Mela in December is held here to encourage the artisans to preserve their centuries-old ancient skills and crafting heritage. Laad Bazaar is also a must on your shopping list. Set in the old quarter this atmospheric bazaar showcases a vast variety of tempting buys. Top of the tops—the pearls, the lac bangles and a wide selection of bridal attire.

## Jaipur

The pink City, an integral part of India's tourism "Golden Triangle" continues to be charged by the energy and allure of streams of visitors from home and abroad. Badi Chaupar, Chhota Chaupar, Johari Bazaar, Bapu Bazaar and Tripolia Bazaar an evocative treasure house of colour and spicy scents. Jaipur's bazaars are a magnet for all kinds of enticing wares. The medieval streets of the old quarter give the spanking new malls and glitzy

boutiques a run for their money any day. From churans to bangles, from traditional textiles to jewels there are choices aplenty. Bargain hard for jootis and dures, lehenga-cholis and Jaipuri light-as-a-feather Jaipuri quilts. Get someone in the know to take you through a maze of noodle lanes where gemstones—emeralds and sapphires, rubies and pearls are sold in poky little apartment buildings by precious stones merchants. Bandhej (tie and dye) saris and fabrics can be found in Rangwolkli-Gali and Kishanpal Bazaar. Gopalji-Ka-Rasta has shops selling jewels and numerous goldsmiths and silver smiths and gem cutters and polishers. For traditional Rajasthani juttis hit the shops at Ramganj Bazaar. Ittars, textiles and handmade shoes are at Nehru Bazaar and Bapu Bazaar. Unmissable experiences await at Jaipur Blue Pottery Art Centre on the Amber Road, the Friends of the Museum (City Palace) and Anokhi Museum near Amber Fort.

## Varanasi

A religious and cultural capital (being home to many renowned writers over centuries), it may be but Varanasi is also well known as a silk weaving centre and there are many opportunities to shop along many of its chaotic bazaars to haggle for souvenirs and the humble rickshaw is the best way to get around. Banarasi silks are a part of every girl's wedding trousseau and the Banaras Brocades are prized the world over. Brassware, copperware, wooden and clay toys and exquisite gold jewellery are some of the other craft the city is famous for. The hand-knotted carpets of Mirzapur and musical instruments are among the other shopping attraction.



# Safari IN Style

WITH RATNA SINGH



**She also shows how one can play a part in wildlife conservation at Taj Safaris which offers exclusive wilderness programmes in India**

**R**atna Singh is something of a rarity in India. As one of the nation's only fully trained female naturalist and jungle tour guides she has become something of a celebrity among locals, co-workers, and safari-enthusiasts alike. Following promotional exposure from Indian TV legend Amitabh Bachchan in 2012 her fame as a naturalist has grown. Today she is the International Sales Manager of &Beyond (South Asia), a leader in luxury experiential travel and safaris, with its roots in Africa and South Asia.

Ratna knew from an early age that she wanted to be a naturalist. Throughout her childhood she was always exposed to animals of a breathtaking variety and quickly became as comfortable in the company of wild animals as people. Growing up two hours away from the Bandhavgarh National Park it was commonplace for her to encounter all manner of wild fauna on a day-to-day basis: "I lived in a thickly forested area, and it was very common to see wild animals around the village. I went to a boarding school when I was about four-years old, but would come back to the village on vacations. Apart from the farm animals, there were plenty of langurs and macaques that came by; sometimes even wild boars, deer, and

the occasional leopard, tiger or bear. It wasn't a big deal.

"People accepted the animals as a part of life. My folks used to hunt in the olden days, but my father had turned to conservation. I think that's the grain I imbibed. I learnt that out in that part of the world you lived with animals, they had their rightful place alongside the villagers."

"I have always loved wildlife, and a love for the wilderness came from my family. I was always keen to be a naturalist, taking inspiration from the people I met growing up.

"Back then, if you wanted to be in the jungle, you sort of had to be a man. There were a few female researchers but no one out in the field."

## Trained Professional Guides

The concept of trained professional guides was fairly new to India. The idea of a trained, professional female guide was unheard of. So, when she heard that Taj Safaris (a joint venture between &Beyond, TAJ Resorts & Palaces and Cigen) was recruiting, she applied and to her surprise was asked to go in for the selection process. She knew that



there were going to be those who would claim that a woman could never do the job as well as a man. Nonetheless, the 33-year old prepared herself for any harassment that came her way. "It was rather hard. I used to get phone calls, at all odd hours, telling me to get out (of the industry); I was criticized for wearing pants and living among men, doing a man's job, getting sweaty, being unladylike and so on.

Despite all the difficulties, Ratna got the job and today she is one of many women in the field, a sure sign that the industry is gradually changing, "It is now nearly eight years on and more and more women can be seen around."

## Most Popular Guide

Today Ratna is one of the most popular guides in the park and lives amongst the wilderness she loves so much. "I live in the staff village provided by Taj Safaris. It's a cute cottage with a living room, bedroom and kitchen-although food is provided for us in the staff cafeteria so I rarely use it. The company ensures its facilities have a minimal impact on the natural environment, using a proven sustainable ecotourism model; it also spearheads wildlife conservation efforts and contribute to the social development in the community it operates in. This led to Taj Safaris winning the 2013 Tourism for Tomorrow Conservation Award in recognition of its position as a world leader in responsible tourism and conservation.

"My daily schedule usually starts with me getting up at dawn to go into the jungle with my guests. Some days I'll return to the cottage around noon to shower, change or eat lunch. I'll often spend all day in the jungle though.

"I don't return until after sunset, after which I return, shower, change and go to act as host for the guests in the lodge - which usually involves cocktails or dinner. So a typical day usually consists of 8 to 10 hours of driving in the jungle with a few hours of hosting."

Through her pioneering role as the park's first female naturalist, Ratna has become an inspiration for girls throughout her village. She is seen as something of a trail-blazing role model. Parents of young girls now actively seek her out to convince their daughters to study hard and focus on their careers! "Once, last year in Bandhavgarh, there was a large extended family of visitors to the park. They called up and wanted to meet me. Then these three sets of parents from Mumbai brought their kids, ranging from early teens to early twenties, to visit me in the park. They said they wanted their kids to meet real-life role models like me and not emulate film stars. Then all the kids touched my feet! I still get overwhelmed by that memory."

The secret of Ratna's success appears to be in her unwavering passion for wildlife. She still gets as excited about the great animals of the park as she did when she was



a small girl. She says, "I love wildlife. I love the wilderness! I grew up with a lot of animals around me. It's as if my soul belonged there. It's an easier, simpler life."

## Tiger Meeting

"There have been so many instances of fantastic animal sightings and animal behaviour in the park. For example, last season I was guiding a couple of South African wildlife veterans. We had had wonderful sightings of tigresses, which they wanted to crown with a sighting of a tiger.

"So I asked around, and found out that a young male tiger had gone into a certain cave late that morning. The guide and I decided to go and wait at the cave's mouth. Since it was very hot we were convinced that he wouldn't have gone anywhere so I stayed with my guests for over two hours in silence, patiently waiting. They were really beginning to doubt my professional capabilities as the day drew on.

"After a while a few other jeeps joined us in waiting. Then, one of the vehicles got a flat tyre from the sharp rocks just

as we saw the tiger emerge, and then turn and wander away from us, in-between some rocks.

"I, along with the other vehicles reversed to see to where the tiger was heading. The guy with the puncture couldn't move though: His tyre was flat and his jack had jammed, so he couldn't do a thing about it.

"Meanwhile the tiger had settled on a rock giving everyone a fantastic view of him lounging in the sun; everyone apart from the guys in the vehicle with the flat tyre that is. The driver was gesturing for someone to go and help him but no one moved. They didn't want to lose the magnificent tiger sighting.

"After about 10 minutes I felt bad for them, so I told my guests we'd drive back and help them. They agreed, and I drove about 50 metres round the bend, back to where the vehicle had gotten stuck. The rest of the vehicles started to leave as it was getting time to exit the park, while the young male tiger was still resting on the rock.

"Picture the scene: me, my guide, the naturalist and guide of the other car were trying to change the tyre. As we were on the ground, not 10 metres ahead of us in walks the dominant male tiger of the area, while the young male is sitting behind us about 60 metres away. It was an electric moment: We were right in the middle of a tiger stand-off!

"We quickly returned to the safety of our vehicles. What followed was one of the most thrilling sightings I have ever seen. The older male set about asserting his dominance over the younger one in a spectacular fashion. The growling and displays of power... the way they were circling each other... It gave me goose bumps!"

Pressure is mounting on Ratna to tell her remarkable story- she is constantly battling off demands that she write a book of her adventures. For the time being though she is more than happy in the jungle with her animals, "I love wildlife. You can't get lonely around something you love. Yes, one needs to be comfortable in your own company: the isolation of the job gets to some and they leave in a season or two.

"But for me, standing alone in the jungle makes my soul soar! It's as if the wilderness communicates with me, giving me a tremendous sense of well being."

It's as if my soul belongs in the jungle. It's an easier, simpler life. And most importantly, there are the tigers! Tigers! Tigers! There is nothing more regal!

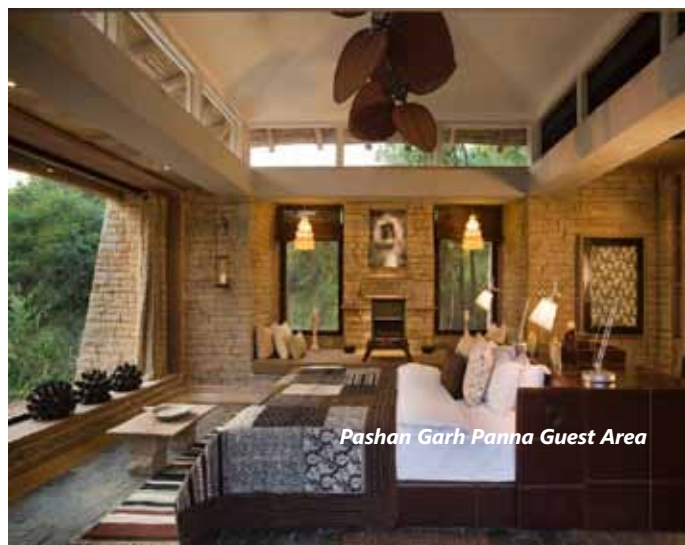
For more information on Taj Safaris visit: [www.tajsafaris.com](http://www.tajsafaris.com)



Pashan Garh Panna Guest Area



Banjaar tola Guest Area



Pashan Garh Panna Guest Area



Banjaar Tola Lodge bedroom

## Venkat Ganesh

### Western Ghats - Travelling South

**The Western Ghats is a natural eco wonder of the world - the top eight most biologically diverse region on earth. Venkat, the Backpack Motorbike blogger, rides south to Pallaruvu Waterfalls, Pathimoonu Kunnara Palam & Gavi**

► It's not every day writes Venkat that one wakes up looking forward to showering under a huge waterfall. After spending the night in a lodge in the village of Pallakal which is situated on the Kerala side of the Kerala-TN border, Venkat's group of riders had started off early. The village of Gavi, located inside the Periyar Tiger Reserve, was their first pit stop for the day. It was about 200 km away but they knew it would take much time no thanks to the mountainous and (at times) non-existent roads. Added to that they had been in a habit to take many breaks for photography and enjoy a leisurely lunch. This time they skipped it altogether and just had fruits (bananas) and chips.

The Pallaruvu waterfalls was a real spectacle. He wrote how, "The water runs down with a great roar and the resultant impact produces a mist that dampens even those who decide not to venture into the small lake below. I stayed far away, but the rest of the gang had a quick and vigorous massage, Jacuzzi and shower by standing under the 100 feet gushing water!"

#### 13-ARCHED BRIDGE

Next was a quick stop at Pathimoonu Kannara Palam (the 13-Arched Bridge) and then its back on the road to Gavi. The bridge was

built over 100 years during the early colonial era using the Surki method that employs a mixture of lime, under burnt clay and water. The result of this method of construction is a strong structure that still endures till today. Venkat was impressed by what he's seen and said, "I was immediately filled with wonder and awe at the history and the changing times that such buildings have been a witness to. What must it have been when the first train passed through this bridge from or towards a tunnel that lies on one side of the bridge? How much trade must it have witnessed being the only railway link between Kollam and Chennai?" Weather-wise the air had turned from hot and humid to pleasantly rainy and cool as the convoy rode on the state highways that passed through rubber and banana plantations. They saw many little villages along the way with homes of every colour and shade. He had a wistful thought, "I was filled by the desire to leave the world behind and settle down behind one off the little doors, right there and then."

A state highway connects the sanctuary Angamoozhy to Vandiperiyar. Armed with a permit from the sanctuary's range officer, they could ride through the natural wilderness on a very narrow single lane road. Road conditions were poor here and the weather had also turned as wet and foggy on

the narrow potholed roads. While it might make better sense to keep on the highway, the slower pace respects the rights of the wild animals in their habitat.

The next 60 km stage of the ride took four hours with the weather remaining foggy and wet abetted by an occasional slight drizzle. He said that they had hoped to spot a tiger or elephant, but unfortunately, they were not able to see any wildlife.

But the weather did inspire one of the riders, a flautist to perform a rendition of ARR's Jashn-e-Bahara during a break halfway through the sanctuary. For Venkat, it provided one of the trip's most memorable moment. He recalled, "The misty weather, the melody of the flute and slight chill in the temperature right there in the wild lap of nature combined to provide me with my favourite moment of the trip. I couldn't ask for more."

#### Blog note:

Venkat started his travel 'India Backpack Motorbike' blog in 2012. Recently his work and photos were published by Economic Times of India and though he rides a bike to many rural and rustic destinations, it is his enthusiasm and gung ho approach to exploring which readers find infectious and inspiring. Check out his blog and latest routes at [www.indiackpackmotorbike.com](http://www.indiackpackmotorbike.com).



# Alyx Kottmeier

## How It is Hip to be in India

**A slice of life featuring The Wandering Yogini who is a frequent traveller to India, the Mother of Yoga**

▶ The gypsiness is in my blood. India is the mother of yoga. I've been here since 2009 and never really left. I occasionally leave to train teachers in yoga workshops in Mexico and Guatemala, but I always come back. Home is where the heart is, why does it have to stay in one place?

I came to India in 2009 to train as a teacher in the back waters of Kerala. After I graduated I decided to back pack around the country, on a tiny budget. This usually happens when you're a yoga teacher and jewellery creator, as you don't exactly get paid the best wages in the world. As with most hippies, India was the perfect place for me: I could do yoga with the best teachers of the world and sell jewellery off my mat. For me it really was a dream life.

I was doing amazingly, so I decided to make an online magazine called Hiptrip, reviewing amazing hotels and guesthouses and writing about yoga and fashion.



My plan was to sell adverts, stay for free at guest houses and practice yoga on the roof tops. I believe in the law of least effort. Except that this was becoming really hard. First of all, I have dyslexia so writing is super hard for me. Also, good internet connections can be difficult to find in India and sometimes, depending on where you are, the electricity tends to have a mind of its own. Plus, no-one was paying for my adverts.

However, Yoga Companies kept sending me free clothes to wear in yoga for promotional purposes on Facebook and Instagram. So I decided I to keep my online magazine and not be so serious about it and do what I do best teach yoga and wear other peoples clothes and just send them pictures of me. So I decided to put up a yoga shala in Agonda Goa. It wasn't long before I was making around US\$400 on a good day. Not only that but I got to live on a tropical beach and have yoga clothes sent to me. Life was getting awesome.

Then it got even better: my friend Meghan Currie and I decided to write to Royal Enfield the motor cycle company and ask to be sponsored. We pitched the idea that we would showcase them on YouTube in a self-made documentary called the Wandering Yoginis. Incredibly, they said yes and gave us two brand new Bullet



500s to ride through India.

You can still watch us we on Youtube we only have three episodes but one day we will finish the rest. That's how India works its magic. You just dream of something and it happens. So I've been living from November to March in Goa and then hoping to Nepal or Thailand and making jewellery for Gypsalove: a jewellery line based on being a gypsy-incorporating healing stones in fashionable products.

All good things must come to an end. For me and Goa this end came when the hotel I was working at wanted a bigger slice of my income to have my students from all around the globe walk on their land. It happens everywhere even in my beloved India. From now on, I might take some seasonal work in Northern Goa for a company called Super Soul.

### **Blog Note:**

Alyx is a wandering Yogini who often goes to see her Guru in India as well as meet her colleagues at Gypsalove. So India is always in her heart. She wrote the above when she was at Pushkar, Rajasthan where there was a colourful holy festival happening and it was quite the place to be then. A typical day for her would be teaching a class on her roof top in the evenings. To find out more about Alyx Kottmeier's work check out: **Hiptrip.com**, gypsalove.com or Instagram: **@hiptrip** and **@gypsalove**.

**This Mumbai-based blogger specialises in spiritual destinations**

► If you are considering a visit to temples in Kerala you should check out My Yatra Diary for the local Shree Krishna, Trichambaram Shree Krishna, Shree Muthappan and Hree Vaidyanatha Temples in Kannur, you should check out the blog by 'Arti' of Mumbai. Her temple visits are well illustrated with photos and, more importantly, loads of travel tips to prepare one for the visit there.

She first sets the stage: "Resonating true to the nature of Kerala, its Temples too paint a picture of peace and calm. So peaceful are its precincts that there were a few instances when I was discouraged even ringing the bell so that its tranquility could be maintained!"

At the Shree Muthappan Temple, Parassinikadavu (Kannur). This temple is highly recommended and is dedicated to the highly revered deity of northern Kerala, characterised by Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva. She also reveals, "The temple is one of the most significant ones for the Kannur-ites and attracts many a visitors like me for more reasons than one; one of the chief features being the existence of dogs. You find them everywhere - Outside the temple, inside the temple and even near the sanctum - real as well as artificial! Some keep themselves busy by catching a nap."

According to Arti, the temple regards dogs as sacred creatures and this fact is very well highlighted at the entrance itself. The main temple is neatly defended by two fierce looking statue of dogs installed to keep



## Arti

### Kerala Temple Visits

a watch at the pilgrims and the visitors. Besides these, one also comes across a large number of bronze dogs guarding the sanctum. If one were to believe ancient stories, Muthappan used to have a dog accompany in his journey and that is how dogs have come to enjoy a special place in the temple today."

She also writes that the second feature of the temple and probably the most significant one is the aura of a 'Live' God. Here, you not only pray but also interact with the deity through a special folk dance that is held everyday during the morning and evening time. Theyyam as it is called; this folk art entails an ornately dressed resident priest to perform a special dance representing the Lord himself. The devotees watching it from the sidelines get a chance to interact with the Lord at the end of the show.

Such close-up and fascinating reports are typical for all her blogs. Followed by an "Important Travel Tips & Information" section. She also blogs on her experiences visiting the Ghats of Mathura - Vishram Ghat by the Yamuba River; the Triveni Ghat, Ram Jhula, laxma Jhula, Kailesh Niketan Temple in Rishikesh among other places.

**Blog Note:**

Arti's low-key blog is called 'My Yatra Diary' and it proudly proclaims it is both an "award-free and tag free diary" and tells visitors to the blog their visits are her only reward. Though not exclusively on India travel her 'Temples' and 'Festivals' sections gives some great insights and travel tips for a visit. Check them out at [www.myyatradiary.com/search/label/Temples](http://www.myyatradiary.com/search/label/Temples) or Facebook: [www.facebook.com/myyatradiary](http://www.facebook.com/myyatradiary)



# URVASHI KAUR

## Amazing Arunachal

The international fashion designer has a soft spot for Arunachal Pradesh where she grew up

By **Shashi Sunny**



Urvashi Kaur has worked with fashion leaders like Marcel Marongiu, Lolita Lempika and Issey Miyake, and believes that the most creative designs in fashion are necessarily entwined with the creative ethos one is exposed to. The daughter of an Indian army officer, Urvashi spent her childhood and teenage years in Arunachal Pradesh where her father, former Army chief, General JJ Singh was then posted. She says the natural beauty of the landscape there and the traditional craft skills of the local population left a permanent imprint on her aesthetic sensibilities as a fashion designer.

Growing up, Urvashi who loves to travel says, "The extensive exposure to a wide variety of cultural influences has been a catalyst in developing my aesthetic sensibility and the inspiration to work in areas of culture, art and natural beauty came from growing up in the pristine beauty of Arunachal Pradesh. I was blessed to be able to grow up in a place that is now rated as one of the top 21 under the radar destinations by The Lonely Planet."

### Nature's Bounty

She says for an amazing travel experience, "You simply must go to this state which is at the remotest north eastern tip of India. Arunachal has a splendid biodiversity of flora and fauna. Here I must make a special mention of the orchids – the state boasts of over 500 varieties of orchids. Arunachal has Asia's largest orchidarium and of the thousands or so species of orchids in India, Arunachal is home to over 500 of them. These orchids can be found in so many colours and brilliant shades and in some spectacular shapes and sizes. Some of them have exotic names like Draupadipushpa and Sitapushpa, as locals believe that these Goddesses have worn the orchids."



It is not just its floral richness, Urvashi also pointed out the altitudinal variety and climatic conditions and geographical differences have also allowed for a huge diversity of wildlife, "It is perhaps the only state in India to feature all the four major cats: tiger, leopard, clouded leopard and snow leopard." Arunachal is also home to seven species of primates, including the hoolock gibbon, slow loris, Assamese macaque, stump-tailed macaque and capped langur. It is the one of the few states where the threatened takin (goat-antelope) and the most endangered hispid hare are found.

## Shopping Spree

"It is also a great place to shop. You can get all kinds of woven articles of bamboo and cane and also woven textiles which are fashioned into coats, shawls, skirts and carpets. Pick up carpets, produced by the Monpas, with beautifully traditional tribal designs," she added. The local blacksmiths are also experts in making arrowheads, knives, iron bracelets as well as jewellery and Urvashi, who is the granddaughter of Punjabi poet, Prabhjot Kaur and celebrated writer Narendra Pal Singh, appreciates creative handiwork of the Arunachalis and says, "They are also skilled potters, and their vases and earthenware - some of which have attained the status of collector's items - are a must buy. Also pick up beautiful beadwork, exquisitely rendered by the tribals with multi-coloured beads, feathers of birds and wings of the green beetles (also featured in many other crafts) as an embellishment. And of course, don't forget to buy a gale - a kind of woven tribal skirt."

Although Urvashi is now based in Delhi with her husband and two children, her heart is still very much in Arunachal and she shares her list of "must visits" when you are there.

Tawang is a meandering highland pass leading into a picturesque valley, which is the land of the famous 400-year-old Tawang Monastery— the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama. The monastery houses gold-lettered copies of sacred Buddhist scriptures.

According to myth, sage Parashuram washed his sin of matricide in the waters of the River Lohit, and this hallowed place by the river is now known as Parashuram Kund. Held in January the Parashuram Mela is an added attraction for anyone who wishes to sample the flavour of the local life.

The excavation sites of Bhismaknagar and Malinithan have revealed a very early settlement of the Aryans here. Malinithan has a 7-8 centuries old temple site in ruins. You can have a magnificent bird's-eye view of the glittering Brahmaputra river at Akashiganga, which stretches out all the way to the plains below.

## For a little more offbeat...

Go bird watching in the Sangti Valley where you will spot rare and endangered species, many of which are restricted to this state, which boasts of over 600 different species of birds. If you are the adventurous sort, don't forget to try a river rafting experience. Arunachal has many rapid rivers and is an ideal place to go white water rafting. In fact the rafting here is considered amongst the most thrilling in the world. You can also go for boat rides on the Brahmaputra— and with so many water bodies that there are ample opportunities for angling and rafting, as well as trekking and hiking in the neighbouring hills. There are rivers that you can only cross on elephant back because the current is so swift and the river bed is too shallow and rocky for a boat. Another fun thing is camping along the Doporijo road, which has a suspension bridge nearby and some very picturesque scenic sights that will leave you enthralled.

# The Best Chomps IN BANGLORE

At some of these establishments be sure to make reservations; for MTR be ready to queue in the streets to get in!

Photo: Incredible India

## Masala Klub & Masala Grill at the Taj West End

This iconic restaurant at The Taj West End which has a pretty good fan following in the city continues to draw new diwanas for its fresh and fragrant offerings. The journey of seductions begins the moment your palate encounters the divine morsel of their Burra Kebab, as good a starter as any other here. Seafood patrons swear on the Sowa Tandoori Jhinga..but vegetarians too get some interesting options like their Palak Papad ke Kebab. Main course specialities such as the Alleppy Fish Curry, Murgh Khatta Pyaz are equally drool worthy...Even the delays become tolerable when you sink into the sensational aromas and freshness of each dish.

Masala Klub at the Taj West End is part of the hotel chains signature "Masala" brand restaurants. Expect some exquisite renderings of both north and south Indian favorites at Masala Klub. In keeping with its reputation for its culinary offerings, the restaurant's open wine cellar stocks a dazzling selection of 225 new world and traditional wines. If you enjoy interacting with the chef about your choice of dishes step into the restaurant's Masala Studio, where guests watch their food being prepared by the in-house gourmet chef.

And if you really like to do things hands-on the Masala Grill offers guests the opportunity to do their own grilling on stone grill tables overseen by the Chef. These stones are quite unique. These are the famous Matterhorn stones sourced from Switzerland and are electronically heated; they have also been marinated in herbs and saffron for 15 days to transfer flavors to the food during grilling. Another interesting feature at Masala Klub is the clever Instant Sketch menus for lunch and Tasting Menus for dinner.

**Address:** Masala Klub The Taj West End, 23 Racecourse Road, Bangalore. **Tel:** 080-6660-5660. **Timings:** Lunch - 12:30 p.m. to 2:45 p.m., Dinner - 7:00 p.m. to 11:45 p.m.

## The Leela Palace's Jamavar Restaurant

The powerful and the moneyed raised the Jamavar's prestige in the eyes of the global business community honing on India's primary IT hub. It's no wonder that The Leela, Bangalore's Jamavar restaurant came to be acclaimed amongst the world's top power-broking restaurants.

The very name is evocative of luxury, priceless crafting and royal living— for this what Kashmir's exquisite jamavar shawl was all about. The Jamavar's presentation of its regal ambience is

impressive to say the least. Be it the jamavar shawls used as wall hangings, the beautiful table settings, the crockery, the cutlery, the table linen, the glassware—top of the tops drawn from the world's finest. Not only is the ornate setting so evocative, the beautifully ethnically accoutered wait-staff go out of their way to make you feel a bit like royalty. What's really nice is that Jamavar also offers outdoor tables—that means you can really soak up that splendid serenity and lush verdure The Leela is so renowned for.

Maybe it's in keeping with their need to cater to a global patronage, but for an Indian restaurant the Jamavar's offerings lack spice...a common enough complaint from India patrons, but most foreigners aren't complaining. If you like your food spicy, you'll have to ask for it. Jamvar offers both north and south Indian cuisine. Hot favourites are the tender, succulent seekh kebabs and the Jhinga Masala for the non-veggies. The open kitchen is a stimulating feature in the restaurant especially when you can't make up your mind what to choose. Patrons clearly enjoy their Lobster Neeruli, Alleppy Fish Curry, Gosth Nalli ka Saalan, Lucknavi Chop and Kashmiri Kanguch comprising those delicious Morel Mushrooms.

**Address:** Jamavar, The Leela Palace Hotel, Old Airport Road, Bangalore. **Tel:** 080-30571344, 30571342. **Timings:** 12 Noon to 2:30 PM, 7 PM to 11:30 PM



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## Mavalli Tiffin Rooms

The serpentine queues snaking their way down the street are the measure of this iconic eatery of Bangalore. Its humble setting is no downside for Bangalore's Mavalli Tiffin Rooms on Lal Bagh Road. Its appeal for thousands of people crossing its threshold lies its clean, hygienic and authentic south India food. Whipping up endless South Indian breakfast/ tiffin's for a stream of hungry patrons MTR, as its affectionately known, has been bringing in the crowds to gorge on its pure vegetarian fare for over 85 years now. Not for nothing are MTR's cuisine referred to as the pride of Bangalore for millions of fans.

The eatery features three different areas of business; the ground floor is for meals on the go...the other two are sit-down options. The menu for that day's lunch is chalked up on a board by the billing counter. Each patron is guided to their table in the eatery so it's pretty organized despite the swelling crowds outside. On weekends expect to wait a couple of hours to get a table...Its only about the good food...not about the décor or people watching at the three storied MTR!!! Clean and inexpensive, MTR continues to be Bangalore's hottest and speediest eatery.

From the early morning walkers and joggers heading back home from the nearby Lal Bagh Gardens — to the office goes— MTR's the Mecca for hot and fresh idlis, kesari bhath, dosas and mouth-searing hot coffee to wash it all down. Don't miss the rava idli invented



by MTR. With a five course thali going at Rs 75 they shouldn't be at all surprised at the serpentine queues. And quality and hygiene, apart from the delicious food, has been MTR's mainstay...

(Many a fancier restaurant has fallen by the wayside on compromising in this area!!!). It was the first Indian restaurant to introduce steam sterilization—way back in 1951. Those visiting the city have have started stocking up on its vegetarian snack foods and chips, soups, frozen foods, ready-to-eat meals, spices powders, pickles, vermicelli; MTR also supplies a selection of 30-odd varieties of ice cream. For people living in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Singapore, Malaysia, Japan and other Asian countries MTR Foods Ltd has become familiar for its exported canned foods, Ready to Eat Foods and its spices.

**Address:** Mavalli Tiffin Rooms (MTR), #11, Lalbagh Road, Bangalore. **Tel:** 080-22220022. **Timings:** Tuesday to Sunday 6:30am-noon, 12:30-2:30pm, and 7:30-9pm. Mondays closed.



01. Private Room at The Leela Palace Jamavar
02. Masala Klub at the Taj West End Bangalore
03. Pandi curry
04. Rava Idli one of the specialities served by MTR
05. Shavige

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



# HRH PRINCESS MAHA CHAKRI VISITS Nalanda, Bodh Gaya and Kohima

In an interview with **IN Magazine**, the recently appointed Indian Ambassador to Thailand, H.E. Mr Harsh Vardhan Shringla, shares how India and Thailand have much in common

**Y**our Excellency since your arrival in January much has happened between India and Thailand—most significant the recent visit of HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn’s to India. Please share with us the highlights of this visit?

It is for me a singular honour to have been appointed the envoy of my government to the Kingdom of Thailand, a country with which we have traditionally enjoyed the closest of ties. India and Thailand share a friendly and comprehensive partnership based on civilizational exchanges and people-to-people contacts.

We had the opportunity to host HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, who is a close and special friend of India’s, from 23 to 28 February, 2014. HRH Princess Maha Chakri visited Nalanda and Bodh Gaya in Bihar, Kohima in Nagaland and New Delhi. During the visit, HRH Princess Maha Chakri called

on President Pranab Mukherjee and Vice President Hamid Ansari and met Minister for External Affairs Salman Khurshid. She graced the Angami premier festival Sekrenyi as the chief guest at the Naga Heritage Village, Kisama.

Thailand has been steadfast in its support for the establishment of Nalanda University and HRH Princess Mahachakri Sirindhorn is a member of the Executive Board of the Advisory Committee for the University. This is yet another example of our multifaceted relationship with Thailand.

**The Embassy has organised a “Festival of India” in Thailand from 19-31 March. What are the objectives of the event?**

The ‘Festival of India in Thailand’ focuses on Indian culture from a historical and contemporary perspective. It showcases common areas of heritage and contemporary ties between India and Thailand.

The Festival consists of a Buddhist Dance and Exhibition; performance of the Ramayana by the famous Kalakshetra troupe; presentation of the refined ‘Chettinad’ cuisine of South India at the Indian Food Festival; performances of a folk dance troupe from the state of Nagaland in North Eastern India; and an outreach to the youth through Yoga and BOLLYFIT. We are very appreciative of and happy with the tremendous response the Festival has received from Thai citizens and the local media. This reflects the inherent interest on India among the Thai public.

**Festivals like these are always known to infuse new life into ties between nations, what should one expect from this one?**

India’s traditionally friendly relations with Thailand draw its

# THE OBJECTIVE OF THE DHARMA DARSHAN, THE BUDDHIST EXHIBITION, IS TO EXPLORE AND ILLUSTRATE THE BUDDHA'S LIFE AND TEACHINGS AS WELL DEPICT SACRED BUDDHIST SITES IN INDIA AND IMPORTANT ARTEFACTS.

strength from common values of age-old social and cultural interaction. No visitor to the bustling city of Bangkok would miss the indelible imprint of our ancient links of civilization, culture and commerce. The timeless message of Lord Buddha and the shared lore of the Ramayana make us kindred in spirit. In this context, the Festival of India is designed to cater to the interests of various segments of Thai society and to showcase common heritage and contemporary ties between the two countries, bringing them closer together.

**As part of the festival we believe you are also arranging a 'Buddhist Exhibition' and celebrating 'Buddhist Mahotsav'. Could you elaborate on this segment of the festival?**

India looks at Buddhism as a shared heritage with Thailand and other countries of the region. We are partnering with the most revered Wat Bovornnivesvihara in organizing the Buddhist Mahotsav (Festival), with dance and chants by Buddhist monks from India, a performance the likes of which has never taken place before in Thailand. The monks will also present their formidable skills in the making of a Sand Mandala and Butter Sculptures with images of the Buddha and stories and symbols of Buddha's life. In association with the Thai side, we have dedicated this aspect of the Festival to honour of His Holiness Somdej Phra Nyanasamvara, the late Supreme Patriarch of Thailand.

The objective of the Dharma Darshan, the Buddhist Exhibition, is to explore and illustrate the Buddha's

life and teachings as well depict sacred Buddhist sites in India and important artefacts. Another section of the Dharma Darshan exhibition is a collection of Jataka Tales recounted through illustrated paintings and stories.

**A mix of the elements like Bollywood, Henna, Yoga and traditional favourites like Ramayana and food are all part of the festival. Could you share with us more about this aspect of the festival?**

We have brought visual and audio treats in the form of the Bharatanatyam Indian classical dance of the Ramayana performed by the eminent Kalakshetra Foundation from Chennai. Another highlight is the Warrior Dance (from Nagaland), which depicts might and power of the victorious Sumi Naga warriors through the ages.

We will introduce the exquisite 'Chettinad' cuisine through our Food Festival. Chettinad, with its rich variety of spices and use of coconut, has both similarities with Thai Cuisine and its own uniqueness. The ancient spiritual and health tradition of Yoga will be showcased by Indian experts. This is complemented by the new age 'BOLLYFIT' that is especially designed to appeal to the youth.

**In the subsequent months what are the other activities that the Mission has planned?**

We would be unveiling a series of political, cultural, commercial and people-to-people exchanges this year. As a beginning, we are having a Business Conclave this month itself to introduce the opportunities that

India presents for trade and investment opportunities. We are also organizing a Regional Hindi conference in Bangkok in association with the Silpakorn University with the participation of Hindi scholars from the ASEAN countries and India. We are working on organizing a 'World Sanskrit Conference' in Thailand next year.

On the bilateral side, we are looking at the early implementation of the Visa on Arrival (VoA) Scheme for our Thai friends, action for which is already underway. On the commercial front, we are hoping to conclude a Free Trade Agreement with Thailand, which would give a boost to our commercial ties. Regular political exchanges are also being planned for the year. In all, I would say that the Mission has a full calendar ahead.

**How many Thais are currently visiting India and which are their most favourite destinations, do you have a target for the number of visitors visiting India as tourists and for business?**

Last year, around 90,000 Thais visited India. While many Thais visit Buddhist pilgrimage sites, an increasing number are also showing an interest in other popular destinations of touristic interest in India. In the coming months, we expect an increase in Thai tourists visiting. The VoA Scheme and the pilot 'biometrics' scheme the Mission is introducing are expected to facilitate easier travel to India. Our Tourism office in Singapore also participates in tourism promotion opportunities in Bangkok from time to time.

**Many countries have invested in India and they continue to do so, how would you like to promote investment opportunities in India to the business fraternity?**

There has been a significant growth in investments between India and Thailand. The potential is huge as economy is growing and the strengths of Thai companies in infrastructure and hospitality are complementary. India's infrastructure sector would require investments of about US\$ one trillion over the next five years 2013-17 (our 12th Five Year plan) in areas such as highways, ports and power generation. Industries like tourism and hospitality, ports and highways, power generation, food-processing, electronics and ICT hardware and automotive sector are poised for growth. In all these areas, Thai companies have an intrinsic strength and will be welcomed in India. We have already invited Thailand to invest in the manufacturing and infrastructure areas, like the Delhi-Mumbai and Chennai-Bangalore industrial corridors, the Buddhist circuit and the North-East States of India. We are committed to provide all facilitation required.

**Thailand has been one of the most favoured destinations for Indians travelling abroad, making a positive impact on the travel receipts of the country. In your opinion is it a good time for them to visit Thailand. What is your reading of the situation of Thailand currently and do you think it is safe for India tourists to visit?**

People-to-people links are central to the relationship between Thailand and India. With over 160 flights per week between Bangkok and 10 major Indian cities, air connectivity is excellent. Practically all Indian carriers fly to Thailand. There is significant tourist traffic between the two countries. Last year, over million Indian tourists visited Thailand, making it the most popular outbound destination from India. The Embassy maintains an updated notice on its website for Indian citizens visiting or planning to visit Thailand. There has been no perceptible decrease in the numbers of Indian tourists travelling to Thailand.



**What is your message for the travel trade of the region? How can they further increase the number of visitors to India?**

India has much to offer tourists, from nature to adventure sports; from religious tourism to leisure travel; from the desert to snow-filled mountains; from the back waters to the beaches; and different festivals. India has also become a favoured destination for medical tourism. Every state in the country has a unique flavour to offer visitors. The "Incredible India" campaign has done much to highlight India's tourism potential. For Thai citizens, the launch of the 'Mahaparinirvan Express' to all major Buddhist sites would prove to be a major attraction. We are popularizing this new facility in Thailand In collaboration with the Indian Railways. Initiatives like the 'Festival of India in Thailand' will do much to promote 'Brand India'. The Indian Embassy in Bangkok will seek to be at the forefront of all such efforts.

INDIA HAS MUCH TO OFFER TOURISTS, FROM NATURE TO ADVENTURE SPORTS; FROM RELIGIOUS TOURISM TO LEISURE TRAVEL; FROM THE DESERT TO SNOW-FILLED MOUNTAINS; FROM THE BACK WATERS TO THE BEACHES— AND DIFFERENT FESTIVALS



Photo: Incredible India

# Golden Temple Beckons

## JOURNEY TO THE SIKH HEARTLANDS

**W**hile it is not a religious requirement for Sikhs to make pilgrimage, spiritual journeys to the holy sites of India are proving to be increasingly popular with adherents from around the world. The Golden Temple in Amritsar is by far the most popular destination- but is only one of five incredible holy sites, known as Gurudwaras, or Takhts. The beauty and significance of these sites, sacred to Sikhs, makes them ideal tourist destinations for believers and non-believers alike.

### The Five Takhts

Of the five Takhts, two are located outside the state of Punjab - Takht Sri Patna Sahib at Patna in the state of Bihar and Takht Sri Hazur Sahib at Nanded in Maharashtra. The remaining three are in Punjab - Akal Takht at Amritsar, Sri Keshgarh Sahib at Anandpur and Sri Damdama

**Whether you are planning a pilgrimage or a sight-seeing tour of some of the finest Sikh temples of India. Our handy guide to the Five Takhts will make planning your trip a breeze!**

By **Ranee Sahaney**

Sahib at Talwandi Sabo in Bhatinda district. Travelling the five takhts is not limited to any particular season. The Panj Takht Darshan is a special tourist train for visiting the takhts; it has two departure points - Amritsar and Delhi. Starting from Delhi, the tour runs for six nights / seven days. It runs for four nights/five days from Amritsar. For more information: [www.thespiritualjourneys.com/E-Brochure](http://www.thespiritualjourneys.com/E-Brochure)

### The Golden Temple of Amritsar (Akal Takht)

The most important seat of Sikh culture and religion is the Golden Temple in Amritsar - a 400-year old city that derives its name from the holy Amrit Sarovar (pool of nectar) that surrounds the temple. The gold and white structure of this majestic shrine is located in the centre of Amritsar and is surrounded by one of



Photo: Incredible India



Photo: Incredible India



Photo: Incredible India

(On previous page)  
The Golden Temple of Amritsar

(On this page, clockwise from top left)  
Takht Sri Hazoor Sahib; Sri Keshgarh Sahib;  
Sri Damdama Sahib

the busiest markets. The shining gold steeple of 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- 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 free 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. This is the birthplace of the popular order of the 'Khalsa', or Guru Panth.

Some of the weapons of Guru Gobind Singh are displayed in Takhat Sachkhand Sri Hazur Abchalnagar Sahib, known popularly as Takht Sri Hazur Saheb: This is the holy site 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.

## Sri Hemkund Shahib Himalayan Trek



The mountain trek to Sri Hemkund Sahib at 4,572 m, is across one of the most exotic regions of the Himalayas. A popular centre of Sikh pilgrimage, the sacred journey is completed when, pilgrims take the ishan (holy bath) in the sacred waters of Hemkund. One can visit the Valley of Flowers in the journey to Hemkund Sahib where the mythical 'flower of the gods' can be seen. It blooms at midnight and once in 14 years!

*Above are excerpts from India Tourism Singapore's publication India A Spiritual Journey. Travel agents wishing to receive copies please contact [info@indiatourism.com.sg](mailto:info@indiatourism.com.sg)*

# Incredible India

## India Tourism Outdoor Campaign

### LAUNCHED IN SINGAPORE

Singaporeans island-wide are getting a sneak peek of the many attractions offered by destinations in India with the launch of a major outdoor media campaign that was started in March by India Tourism Board Singapore. The messages are on public buses plying Singapore roads, in Sentosa as well as bus shelters throughout the island. Famous travel icons associated with India as well as other facets of travel to India such as spiritual, wildlife and cultural attractions can be seen on the buses.



Incredible India

Brought out with the support of India Tourism, Singapore



# Singaporeans' Spiritual Journey to AJMER & SIRHIND

**Yoga teacher, Adam Alfur, brought a Singapore family to Ajmer, famous for the Dargahs of famous Sufi saints**

**Y**oga teacher and soft skills instructor, Adam Aflur, 42, took a spiritual journey to India where he visited the Dargahs of the Naqsanbandi Sufi Order which is situated between Delhi and Ajmer. He has been to India many times over the years and his parents are from South India's Tanjore district. Ajmer is one of his favourite places in the whole of India because of its special significance and for what it represents.

In his last trip he made earlier this year, with his sister and her family, he became interested and active in the Naqsanbandi Sufi Order. The Dargahs of Delhi and beyond hold special significance to Sufis as they are some of the earliest sites in the Indian lineage of the order. The journey took them from Delhi to Sirhind (Punjab) with Ajmer being one of the main attractions of the trip.

Adam first zeroed in on the shrines to visit in Delhi, Ajmer and Sirhind.

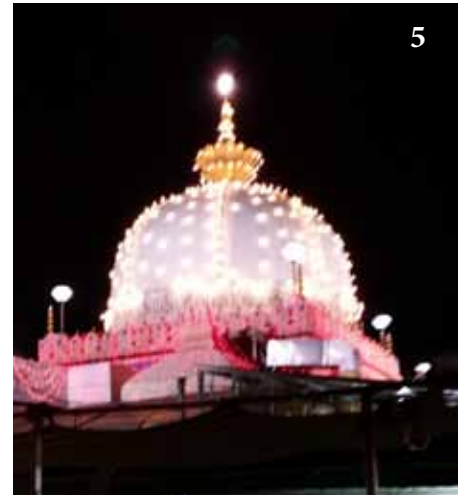
Ajmer Sharif has been a place of great importance and reverence in his family for guidance and inspiration. Khadim, the assigned caretaker of the Dargah showed them around and the vibrations of sacredness and radiance here are palpable, attracting people seeking blessings and good fortune from all walks of life.

They visited Ajmer Sharif for the early morning prayer when the stillness of the morning and the soft recitation of Quranic verses in the background lingered beautifully in the air. They were fortunate to witness a group of men full of passion singing Qawwalis (devotional songs) with vigour while the number of devotees continued to



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grow. The tour of the shrine ended with Friday prayers. It was a day full of colour and vibrancy, as is the norm in Rajasthan culture.

## Next Stop Nizamuddin Dargah

The Nizamuddin Aulia Dargah in Delhi, is an equally charming but smaller version of Ajmer Sharif. After that the family moved on to central Dargah at Srihind in Punjab. This shrine holds a very prominent place in the Sufi Naqsabandi Order teaching. The shrine honours the teacher Shyakh Ahmad Faruqi, revered as the teacher of the last millennium who unified and brought the teachings of

brotherhood far and wide during the Mughal rule. In contrast to Ajmer and other dargahs, the Sirhind Dargah is ruled by silence and orderliness. Everything is conducted calmly; the caretakers come from a place of genuine hospitality and serenity.

During the tour of Pushkar near Ajmer they found the town's atmosphere to be very engaging and were taken by its palpable charm and energy on arrival. The sight of camels and elephants was thrilling for all the family. Pushkar is world famous for its Camel Fair which is usually held in October-November period.

For accommodation, two places stood out; in Pushkar, **Orchard Hospitality** is

01. Architectural beautiful dargah in Jaipur with peaceful surroundings Moulana Ziauddin Sharif
02. Ajmer Dargah Sharif
03. Surrounded by marigold flowers with our luxury tent facing the main garden, ideal place to chill out
04. All offering their respect and making prayers in this colourful dargah
05. Ajmeer Sharif Dargah

an eco-camp hotel with air-conditioned luxury tents surrounded by a marigold field with all mod cons while still retaining its rustic charm. In Jaipur, the **ITC Rajputana** was outstanding in design and grandeur. A very comfortable hotel with great service, a huge lobby and architecture that transports one back to the days of the Maharajas.



# Business Travellers' Perspective on Bangalore & Chennai

**Some SICCI members share their impressions of  
India's two popular business hubs**

Generally, business travellers are some of the most demanding categories of travellers as they have paid for (and expect) a premium experience. On 26 January some of Singapore's foremost business people flew into Bangalore before travelling overland to Chennai. The Singapore Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SICCI) multi-national delegation was on a four-day trip to the Indian business hubs of Bangalore and Chennai. They were led by SICCI chairman Rangarajan Narayanamohan.

The economic growth of Bangalore and Chennai has exploded in recent years to the extent that they were voted the top two places to do

business in India by the Global Initiative for Restructuring Environment and Management. It is a well-justified accolade according to one of the delegates, Director of Daalini Engineering, Tulasy Naidu, who said, "It seems that Chennai and Bangalore have developed tremendously and the living standard has also reached a higher level. These places have attracted more and more investors due to the growing cities."

The delegates were glad to confirm that travelling around the cities as well as doing business was a cinch. M Naidu also cites the lack of language barriers as a very strong motivation for anyone looking to do business in either of the cities- a sentiment shared by Kumaran Barathan, "Both Bangalore and Chennai

conduct their business communications in English which makes it a lot easier for Singaporean businesses to thrive."

One of the main draws for Singaporeans in Chennai and Bangalore is their relative proximity to the Island nation, Mr Barathan says, "Both cities are only about four hours away from Singapore, which makes them very enticing for Singaporeans looking to work in India. And they are very close to each other too, which certainly helps"

Transportation in the area has recently experienced heavy investment, which the delegation took to their advantage by driving from Bangalore to Chennai on a newly-built highway. A strange travel arrangement given the fact that both cities are served by

## Bangalore & Chennai for Business

Bangalore is world famous as an IT hub and technological advancements in the area have been outstanding in recent years e.g. high-speed broadband is now de rigueur throughout the business centres of both cities. The benefits For Singaporean companies looking to do business in India go beyond tech though, Mr Naidu insists, "India has a very strong and reliable source of quality products besides their [skills in] IT. There are a lot of companies who have migrated to India for the IT hub and I believe they are also developing more and more to attract foreign investors."

Mr Barathan agrees, "While IT is long-established in Bangalore you also have to factor in the excellent relationship between our governments. The Singaporean government has a long history of working closely with Chennai, and has recently set up a Consul General in the state.

So impressed was Mr Naidu with the opportunities presented in the Indian powerhouse states and the potential of the Indian market that he seized the opportunity to invest in a start-up company while on the trip- an endeavour which he looks forward to seeing come to fruition in May.



busy airports, but due to scheduling concerns it made more sense to drive than to wait unnecessarily at the airport for a flight.

There was the added bonus of the scenery visible along the route says Mr Barathan. With all of its scope for those delegates who had never travelled to the sub-continent to take in the sights, sounds and smells of the real, rural India between the cities. It was a resounding success, although Mr Tulasy admits it was rather a long journey.

The delegation stayed in the Bangalore Vivanta Hotel, By Taj which was rated as a '5-star' experience by all the members of the delegation. They flew by Air India, which comes highly recommended by Mr Barathan for their friendly inflight service.





# MIRACLES OF THE DIVINE SPIRIT:

# Kerala's Healing Churches

**T**his is most evident in the thick scattering of holy places, all around Kerala, especially the many churches. Infused with healing powers some of these churches have become a magnet for devotees from the local area and have also drawn people from distant shores. There are healing processes which defy logic, sometimes in the waters of a sacred pond, sometimes the very earth itself and sometimes those prayerful entreaties to long dead saints. Kerala's churches have healing powers that have passed into legend, drawing even greater numbers than before. What is incredible about the devotees is their enduring faith in the church as a repository of some kind of healing processes that give them hope.

**Faith can move mountains and many Malaysian tour groups to Kerala visit the temples there**

By **Ranee Sahaney**

## St Thomas Church, Malayattoor

This venerable church in the village of Malayattoor is closely associated with the beginnings of Christianity in Kerala, brought here for the first time by St Thomas, one of the 12 apostles of Jesus Christ, who travelled from Kodungallur, in 52 CE to spread the teachings of Christ along India's Malabar Coast. The church draws thousands of devotees who seek the saint's blessing and pray to him to

intercede on their behalf with God to heal their illnesses and alleviate their sufferings and of those of their loved ones.

Located 10km from Kalady, by the banks of holy Periyar River, the fishing hamlet of Malayattoor is located in Ernakulam district near the harbor town of Kochi. The Church was raised in sacred memory of St Thomas. When the apostle first came he sensed some suspicion and hostility from the local people and so he left for the nearby mountain of Kurusumudi. He prayed for spiritual sustenance and fortitude

to hold good his faith and carry on his mission. Mother Mary herself, it is said, appeared to him and consoled him. Charged with new hope St Thomas went on to evangelize the villagers of Malyatoor before leaving for Mylapore on the east coast where he was martyred in 72 CE. The villagers came to revere the apostle and would visit the mountain and worship the Golden Cross which had appeared where the saint had made a sign of the cross on a rock. The rock also carried the impress of the footprints and the knees of the apostle where he had knelt in prayer.

Today devotees travel up the Kurusumudi mountain and pay obeisance at the Marthoma Mandapam (pavilion) which features the glass enclosed imprint of the saint's footprints and knees (kalpadam) as well as the Golden Cross set on a pedestal the rock. In 900 CE the shrine of the St Thomas Archdiocesan was established on the mountain. The Spring of Miracles located close by is said to have healing properties. The saint is said to have quenched his thirst here during his prayers. Devotees are also known to carry a heavy cross up the mountain to plead their case to the saint. Those who suffer from headaches carry stones on their heads to be relieved of this ailment by the saint. People take home the healing water from the spring. The Feast at Kurisumudy (Puthunjayar) is held on the first Sunday after Easter. The Vatican has accorded the church the recognition as an international pilgrim centre.

## Basilica of Our Lady of Ransom, Vallarpadam-Ernakulam

Mother Mary is the reigning deity in this 16th century temple, located on the island of Vallarpadam, close to Bolgatty island and linked to Ernakulam on the mainland by the Goshree bridges. The focal point is the wooden painting of the Divine Mother holding the Christ Child. There is a legend behind the painting. Originally the painting was established here by the Portuguese merchant who accompanied the explorer Vasco

de Gama and stored it in a small shed by the Kochi backwaters, which served as a church. A flood destroyed the small church and only the painting was discovered floating on the water by the Diwan of the Raja of Cochin, Paliyath Raman Valiyachan. The Diwan built a church (also known as Our Lady of Ransom Church) and later in 1972 it became known as 'Vallarpadathamma.'

A noble woman of the Nair community and her child while travelling by boat were feared to be drowned in an accident. But the church's vicar had a dream that they were alive in the water. It appears that the drowning woman cried out to Mother Mary to save them, promising she would be her devotee all her life. On being rescued with the nets of the fishermen she kept her promise. When she eventually passed away a painting of her depicting this life-changing experience was hung alongside Mother Mary's at the church.

Ever since then the church has been associated with miracles of various kinds. The vicar Joseph Thannikott is reported to have said that "at least 15 miracles happen every week in Vallarpada." The present building built in 1676 was declared a 'Special Church' by Pope Leo XIII in 1888 and in 1951 the Indian Government declared it a major pilgrim centre. His Holiness Pope John Paul II elevated the church to the status of a Basilica in 2001. The major festival here is the feast of Vallarpadath Amma, held annually on 16 - 24 September.



## St Andrew's Basilica, Arthunkal

The seaside hamlet of Arthunkal is located in Allapuzha district 22km from Alleppey. The shrine was originally set up in the 16th century by the Portuguese missionaries during their evangelical mission amongst the native populace along India's Malabar coast. The vicar Fr. Jacoma Fenicio, or the Arthunkal Veluthachan, meaning fair skinned father, rebuilt it in 1584 and was believed to have miraculous healing powers. In 1647 the renovated church acquired from Milan, Italy, the idol of St Sebastian featuring arrows all over his body (symbolizing his martyrdom in Rome for becoming a Christian). Arthunkal's St Andrews Forane Church, the first Parish of the Diocese of Alleppey was elevated to the status of Basilica on 9 July 2010. People also refer to it as the St Sebastian Church. The legend goes that the parish priest of Arthunkal had a vision that the ship carrying the idol of St Sebastian was going to drown in a storm. The priest with some devotees went to the beach and prayed hard for its safety. The storm abated and the ship landed unharmed. In 1647 the statue was carried in a procession amongst the people and is believed to have healed many sick people—leading to the spread of word on its healing powers and bringing many new devotees to the church. The statue was installed in the new church established because of a vision the parish priest had received.

The annual feast of St Sebastian

(Arthunkal Perunnal) is celebrated with great pomp and show from 10 -27 January. The last day of the 10-day feast features the ritual of the urulu nercha when devotees crawl on their knees along the route from the nearby beach to the church. The church attracts many who have lost their limbs in accidents or otherwise. Offerings at the shrine during the festivities include gold and silver replicas of human limbs, bows and arrows. Thanks are given to St Sebastian by devotees who have escaped from accidents or have recovered from grave illnesses. There is a strong belief that St Sebastian is empowered by God to heal the maimed, crippled and those with mental disorders.

Strangely enough the shrine also attracts pilgrims returning from the Hindu shrine of Sabarimala. A ritual bath either at the pond by the church is also taken by the pilgrims. The tradition it is believed goes back to a legend which traces linkages between the Arthunkal Veluthachan and the Sabarimala Ayyapan.

## St George Church, Edapally, Kochi

Dating back to 593 AD, St George's Church at Edapally is one of Kerala's major healing churches attracting the sick and troubled of all faiths. Hordes of pilgrims visit the shrine in gratitude for favours rendered by the saint to his devotees. Devotees have immense faith in the saint's power to intercede on their behalf before the throne of God. Many miracles have been ascribed to him. The annual festival held on 23 April – 15 May annually is marked by deep solemnity. On May Day the statue of St George is carried in procession through the town.

Located just 10km from Kochi close to the junction of National Highway 47 and National Highway 17 this is one of Kerala's most ancient churches. Officially called St George's Syro-Malabar Catholic Forane Church, it is also referred to as the Edapally Church. The local people were converted to Christianity by St Thomas. With the growing number of devotees it became



clear a new church was needed to accommodate more people and so a new church was constructed in 1080 AD. The altar features a picture of Mother Mary surrounded by sculptures of angels and vines. The foundation stone was laid by Pope John Paul II during his visit to Kerala. The waters of the nearby well are believed to have miraculous healing powers as does the soil in the churchyard. People take home both items to sprinkle at home,

## Chettikkad St Antony's Church, Ernakulam

Devotees seeking the help of St Anthony 'The Miracle Man' arrive in droves not just from India but abroad as well. The saint is said to successfully intercede on behalf of those who are ill, childless, plagued by misfortune and stricken by terminal diseases. Three important sacred relics are housed in the Chettikkad St Antony's Church including a part of the tongue of Saint Anthony. The adjoining well is said to have waters with immense miraculous powers. Many of the miracles at the church are related to children, so it comes as no surprise that a small children's park has been set up near then church. The annual feast is celebrated on 12 May every year. Special healing services take place at the shrine on the first Tuesday of every month. It is located North Paravur, in Ernakulam district.

## Edathua Church, Alappuzha

This massive shrine located by the picturesque Pampa River and dedicated to St George was set up in 1810. The Edathua Church, located just 27km from Allapuzza along the Alappuzha - Thiruvalla Road attracts thousands of devotees who believe the saint is empowered to heal mental disorders and other ailments. The annual feast held from 5 - 7 May attracts pilgrims from all over South India.

## St Mary's Jacobite Syrian Cathedral, Manarcad

The Church site, located 8km from Kottayam, is over 1,000 years old according to an inscription discovered by archeologists. The temple itself has been rebuilt several times and has been under the leadership of the Holy Bava, the Patriarch of Antioch and of all East from the throne of St Peter and the Blessed Catholic Bava; and the Arch Bishop appointed by the Throne of Antioch.' The church has been a major draw for those ill, childless couples and those who seek protection against calamities. The holy tank and a golden cross, are held sacred by devotees who visit from all over the world. The ancient ritual of the 8-day fast and the festivities of the Feast of Virgin Mary's Birth are celebrated between 1 to 8 September every year.

# Complementary Therapies: Siddha & Unani

Apart from Ayurveda, you will also discover these two other medicinal systems in Indian spas and wellness all over India



Some Siddha medical practitioners claim that certain medicines are effective enough to be able to arrest aging altogether.

Unani medicine is very similar to Ayurveda as it includes similar theories and principles regarding the role of key elements including air, earth, water, and fire. Practitioners of Unani in India are called hakims who believe an imbalance in these elements results in disease. Treatments, which often include various herbal combinations, are aimed at rebalancing these elements. The diagnosis in Unani medicine, apart from being similar to Ayurveda and traditional Chinese medicine, often relies on a pulse diagnosis.

In the story of Unani, equilibrium plays a very important role. Unani says that the human body is maintained by the harmonious arrangement of the seven basic physiological principles. These are the heroes and villains that play their crucial role in human life. Unani recognises the influence of the surrounding environment on the health of human beings. It endeavours to restore the equilibrium of the various elements and faculties of the human body.

Ayurveda and other alternative therapies, combined with yoga and meditation, promise a more wholesome approach to wellness. A combination of Yoga, Ayurveda, Siddha and Unani calms the nervous system and balances the body, mind, and spirit. It is believed that these treatments prevent specific diseases and maladies by relaxing the body, deepening respiration and calming the mind.

Above are excerpts from India Tourism Singapore's publication The Wellness Destination. Travel agents wishing to receive copies please contact [info@indiatourism.com.sg](mailto:info@indiatourism.com.sg)

The three Indian medicinal systems are Ayurveda, Siddha and Unani. While much has been written about Ayurveda, the Siddha medicinal system is mainly practiced in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. However, some practitioners say there is also a north Indian school of Siddha medicine that had developed in the Himalayas.

The Siddha system of medical healing was popular in ancient India and is believed to be over 10,000 years old. In fact, historians believe that the Siddha system of medicine is

one of the earliest traditional medical systems in the world. The system is believed to have been developed by the 18 siddhas called the Siddhars. Siddhars were spiritual adepts who possessed the ashta siddhis, or the eight supernatural powers.

Most medicines are for the most part natural and processed in such a way as to be readily absorbed within each cell in the body, giving it proper nourishment to sustain a long and healthy life. Healthy cells within the body can reproduce new cells that are just as healthy, thus slowing the process of aging from the inside out.

# The Taj: Testament of Love for Hong & Chuah

Malaysian couple 'discover' the romance and winter fun in India



marble of The Taj had stood so long as if, said Mrs Chuah, it was built only recently.

The food is okay and Malaysians used to "mamak" (Malaysian Indian food) will find no problems with the diet there. They did not miss Chinese food at all as they found all the Indian meals "quite nice" and the novelty of having their food cooked for them on the houseboats in Kashmir left a lasting impression with them.

The married couple have three children ages 10, 15 and 16. They plan to return and explore other places in Kashmir and they have already targeted Sonmarg and Ladakh. The couple who live in Johore Bahru, also work together, she as an accounts executive in Hong's accountant firm for the last 10 years.

As for their experience flying in and processing at the customs and immigration at Delhi, they wished they were more order in the queues. But on the whole, it was a great experience and they can't wait to repeat again next year.

**M**r Hong You Loong, 46 and his wife Chuah Mooi Kin, 43 had just come back from their trip in February and the memories were still fresh in their minds. It was like another second honeymoon as they went to Taj Mahal, Agra and Kashmir for a wintry break. Mrs Chuah admitted that she had some apprehensions about going to India as it was their first time there but was won over by the beauty of the Taj and fun they had in the snow at Gulmarg before leaving Delhi.

They said they found the snow was "very soft and clean." In fact, she had had reservations about going to India and had preconceptions about the cleanliness of the country. But she and her husband were shown photos of a friend's trip (with the same itinerary) and saw how it can also be fun.

Kashmir changed her mind completely about India and now she is recommending her friends to visit and, in fact, is making plans to go again but this time with their three teenage children.

**KASHMIR CHANGED HER MIND COMPLETELY ABOUT INDIA AND NOW SHE IS RECOMMENDING HER FRIENDS TO VISIT AND, IN FACT, IS MAKING PLANS TO GO AGAIN BUT THIS TIME WITH THEIR THREE TEENAGE CHILDREN**

After Kashmir, their next favourite place is the Taj Mahal. Just like the other couples before them the tale of the love of Mughul emperor Shah Jahan for his wife, Mumtaz Mahal, provided them with inspiration for love. They said they were in awe of what was done in the name of love. And the massive white



# FORTIS SURGICAL HOSPITAL

Delivering clinical excellence and personalized patient care

Fortis Surgical Hospital (FSH) combines the medical expertise of renowned surgeons, advanced technology and personalised patient care, in the delivery of world-class surgical services in Colorectal, Urology, Gynaecology and General Surgery.

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In the area of minimally invasive surgery, FSH's da Vinci® robotic surgical option allows surgeons greater flexibility, control and precision. Performed by our experienced surgeons and supported by a dedicated nursing team, patients enjoy the benefits of less pain and quicker recovery times <sup>1,2,3</sup>.

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# Travel Trade Fairs & Events

## India

### GOA INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL MART (GITM)

[www.goatravelmart.in](http://www.goatravelmart.in)

**DATE:** 2 – 4 April 2014

**VENUE:** Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukerjee Stadium, Taleigao

An annual feature in the state's business calendar the Goa International Travel Mart plays a pivotal role in showcasing the finest elements of Goa's tourism attractions— both old and new. It also provides an excellent platform for people from the travel trade, the hospitality industry and a host of other stake holders in the tourism and travel sector, for direct interface with their counterparts from home and abroad. This year the Goa Pavilion will showcase festivals and nightlife, beaches, heritage trails, UNESCO Heritage sites, Wild life, Medical tourism, Monsoon tourism, MICE, Wedding Destination, Spice Farms and Adventure.

### HICSA 2014

[www.hicsaconference.com](http://www.hicsaconference.com)

**DATE:** 2-3 Apr 2014

**VENUE:** Grand Hyatt, Mumbai

Celebrating its tenth anniversary the annual HICSA 2014 (Hotel Investment Conference-South Asia ) to be held in Mumbai from 2 to 3 April offers a slew of opportunities for furthering business associations and facilitating networking for the top decisions makers of the hospitality industry. HICSA traditionally attracts a diverse presence of hoteliers, investors, developers, architects and designers from across the globe. Confirmations are pouring in from the global hospitality community for attendance at the conference. Notable speakers at the conference include



David Vely (Senior Vice President Development-MEAI, Premier Inn/ Whitbread) , Diana L Nelson Chairman, Carlson, Gerald Lawless (President and Group CEO Jumeirah Group), Ingo Schweder (Chief Executive Officer, GOCO Hospitality) and Kapil Chopra (President, The Oberoi Group).

### TTF GUWAHATI 2014

**DATE:** 27 - 29th June 2014

**VENUE:** Guwahati, India

To be held in Guwahati (Assam) from June 27 to 29 TTF Guwahati 2014 provides India's Northeast states an excellent platform to showcase many of their fabulous tourist attractions for the domestic, outbound and inbound tourism markets.

## Asia

### GBTA CONFERENCE 2014, SHANGHAI

**DATE:** 31 March 2014 - 2 April 2014

**VENUE:** Shanghai, China

To be hosted at the Jin Jiang Hotel in the historic environs of Shanghai city the GBTA Asia annual China Conference will be held between 31 March - 2 April 2014. Now

recommended for Chinese state owned enterprises, this much -awaited event will be ideal for local and international participants to discover the attractions of the Chinese business travel market, expected to become the largest in the world by 2016. New highlights at the GBTA China Conference 2014 include, Speed introduction session for all buyers and suppliers; introductory tour of buyers to meet the exhibitors and a Raffle.

### ITE & MICE 2014 - THE 28TH INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL EXPO HONG KONG & THE 9TH M.I.C.E TRAVEL EXPO

**DATE:** 12 - 15 June, 2014

**VENUE:** Hong Kong SAR, China

To be held at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre , in the Hong Kong , China, the ITE & MICE 2014 - The 28th International Travel Expo Hong Kong, and The 9th MICE Travel Expo, from June 12-15,2014, will focus on the travel themes of Cruise, Honeymooning & Overseas Weddings, Sports Tourism, Study Tours, Travel Photography, Wellness. The second day of the event has been designated as MICE / CORPORATE DAY marked by a series of related seminars.

# Festivals OF INDIA

## CELEBRATING LIFE

If one is travelling to India anytime from March to July, following are religious festivals, fairs, fun carnivals and events where one should head to catch most of the action.

### April



Ram Navmii

|                                    |                             |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Tulip Festival (Kashmir)           | First 2 weeks of April 2014 |
| Gangaur Festival (Rajasthan)       | 2 - 3 April 2014            |
| Mewar Festival (Udaipur)           | 2 -3 April 2014             |
| Ram Navmii                         | 8 April 2014                |
| Arattupuzha Pooram (Thrissur)      | 11 April 2014               |
| Mahavir Jayanti                    | 13 April 2014               |
| Palm Sunday                        | 13 April 2014               |
| Baisakhi                           | 14 April 2014               |
| Rongoli Bihu                       | 14 April 2014               |
| Hanuman Jayanti                    | 15 April 2014               |
| Birthday of Sikh Guru Angad Dev    | 18 April 2014               |
| Birthday of Sikh Guru Tegh Bahadur | 18 April 2014               |
| Good Friday                        | 18 April 2014               |
| Easter                             | 20 April 2014               |

### May



International Flower Festival (Gangtok)

|   |               |
|---|---------------|
| International Flower Festival (Gangtok) | 1-30 May 2014 |
| Akshy Tritiya/Akha Teej                 | 2 May 2014    |
| Birthday of Sikh Guru Arjan Dev         | 2 May 2014    |
| Thissur Pooram (Kerala)                 | 9 May 2014    |
| Buddha Purnima                          | 14 May 2014   |
| Birthday of Sikh Guru Arjan Das         | 23 May 2014   |

### June



Ganga Dussehra

|                                  |               |
|----------------------------------|---------------|
| Sindhu Darshan (Leh)             | 1-3 June 2014 |
| Ganga Dussera                    | 8 June 2014   |
| Martyrdom of Sikh Guru Arjan Dev | 16 June 2014  |
| Ramadan begins                   | 28 June 2014  |
| Rath Yatra                       | 29 June 2014  |

### July



Hariyali Teej

|                                       |                |
|---------------------------------------|----------------|
| International Mango Festival (Delhi)  | 2 July 2014    |
| Birthday of Sikh Guru Hargobind       | 5 July 2014    |
| Hemis Festival                        | 7 July 2014    |
| Guru Purnima                          | 12 July 2014   |
| Dharamsala Film Festival 2014         | 13-15 May 2014 |
| Jamshedi Noruz (Zoroastrian New Year) | 19 July 2014   |
| Birthday of Sikh Guru Har Krishen     | 23 July 2014   |
| Id-ul-Fitr                            | 28 July 2014   |
| Hariyali Teej                         | 30 July 2014   |



# Where to Go for Summer



**Astrologer, Ranjana Rana, consults the stars for the perfect gateway for this year's summer season in India**

## Aries

*(March 21- April 20)*

You are a fire sign who needs a list of things to do to hold your interest. You would enjoy a city that has a variety of leisure activities to offer such as, shows, nice restaurants and shopping. You will not be bored with a holiday in Mumbai where you can enjoy all these and even take a short break outside the city say to Mahabaleshwar hill station.

## Taurus

*(April 21- May 21)*

You are an earth sign and being "one" with nature appeals to you. For example in Coonoor there's the option of a wild organic cheese making farm stay. This is a 22-acre family run farm where guests can unwind and take in the beautiful Nilgiris in all their glory while also



**Astrologer Ranjana Rana**

enjoying the simple pleasures of a farm stay. Learn all about the intriguing process of cheese making — and even try your hand at milking a cow.

## Gemini

*(May 22- June 21)*

Your short attention span means you get bored very easily. So any vacation you plan needs to have a little bit of everything. Retreat to the jungles in Masinagudi and you will find just that. Located in the foothills of the Nilgiris this resort shares the boundary with the outer reaches of the Mudumalai jungle in Tamil Nadu and blends seamlessly with surrounding greenery and wilderness. Airy villas and cottages, a cheery bar and dining hall serve drinks plus delicious home cooked food. There are night safaris, jungle walks and treks into the inner reaches of the reserve. You can go bird watching and click pictures of exotic birds.



Kangra Valley

## Cancer

(June 22- July 22)

Being a water sign you feel at home near lakes and oceanfront. Go Himalayan trout fishing in the beautiful Tirthan Valley in Kullu, in Himachal Pradesh. The Himalayan trout fishing camp is truly a getaway from it all. You can fish, feast on trout, sip your tea with the river gurgling by just below you—and even strum on a guitar. Go on long walks, write, read, or just stare at the mountains. With such pristine beauty all around you, it is an alluring summer getaway you will want to return to.

## Leo

(July 23- August 21)

Leo signs love adventure and mountain climbing. You can enjoy paragliding camps in Ranikhet or Naukuchiatal in the Kumaon Hills where you can learn enough to dare a solo flight by the end of the course over the hills. Kamshet in Maharashtra is also a good option for adventure activities like paragliding and trekking.

## Virgo

(August 22 –September 23)

Since you are the worker of the Zodiac it is very important to make and take time for yourself. So resort spa in the hills to rejuvenate body, mind and soul is a good option. Himachal Pradesh where you can be pampered for a change would be apt for you. Basunti, a yoga retreat, is located by the banks of the Maharana Pratap Sagar. The reservoir of the Pong Dam is a natural reserve with an array of flora and fauna. The retreat with its pleasant fruit orchards offers open air yoga classes, swimming, fishing, painting and meditation and other leisure activities. This is a holistic place to unwind and refresh the body and mind.

## Libra

(September 24- October 23)

Places of beauty plus serenity draw the Libra sign. Shopping, dancing, and fine dining are a must. Ri Kynjai, a serene resort on the outskirts of Shillong overlooks the lovely Umiam Lake. A haven of peace, tranquility and comfort Ri Kynjai features native Khasi-style architecture and boasts all mod cons. It is an excellent base for treks and walks, with plenty of views of gorgeous mountain vistas and sunrises and sunsets. The food is an interesting array of north and eastern specialties including pork with bamboo shoot of local herbs. Beautiful Khasi , jewellery, shawls and mufflers to be bought from the local shop vendors.

## Scorpio

(Oct 24- November 22)

Scorpio is a water sign so a place near water is a super idea. Trekking in the Namik-Ram Ganga valley in the Himalayas is just the thing for you. Surrounded by the mighty Nanda Devi and Trishul peaks with plenty of local villages, temples and trails to challenge and entertain avid climbers who like to flee from the city.

## Sagittarius

(November 23- December 22)

The anchor also loves to travel. Your love of the outdoors could take you mountain climbing and hiking through the countryside of Kodaikanal which is rich with lush greenery and towering hills. You can go trekking in the woods or feel the thrill of downhill cycling or a walk in the spice garden. After an exciting day settle for an evening of traditional board games or shake a leg at a salsa session.

## Capricorn

(December 23- January 20)

Historical places with upscale accommodation interest most people under this sign. Explore heritage cities like Jaipur (with Amer Fort) and shop till you drop in the early summer. Enjoy a stay in a historic water palace at Udaipur even in the height of summer as in these desert enclaves the evenings and mornings are cooler.

## Aquarius

(January 21 – February 19)

Aquarians are very spiritual. You like to visit places you have never been before. Many of you like to travel in groups with friends. Kalimpong in Eastern Himalayas is a serene retreat and offers picturesquely located Victorian-era hotels to stay in. You can get views of the Kanchendzonga Mountain from these hotel rooms on clear days. There are some also some impressive Buddhist monasteries at several places in Kalimpong which you can visit.

## Pisces

(February 20 – March 20)

Pisces are fish so anywhere there is a fresh body of water you'll find a Pisces type. Pleasant weather and abundance of greenery plus its hillside location have led locals and tourists to label Haflong in Assam as the Switzerland of the east. Visitors can take a flight to Shillong and then hire a car and take the picturesque and winding route by train through beautiful flower dotted countryside from Guwahati. Haflong ringed by hills a perfusion of streams; forests, rivers and birds make it a perfect breakaway for the Pisces.

## About the Author

Ranjana Rana holds a PHD in Astrology and she has 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 and she also uses her expertise to provide an astrological guide to the best possible places to go for a particular time of the year.



**T**oukya was in the news last October when the Camilla Parker Bowles, the Duchess of Cornwall and wife of Prince Charles visited the facility in Bangalore. Their visit also coincided with the First International Conference of the College of Medicine in association with the Soukya Foundation in November on the theme 'Global Health Futures - Creating Integrated Solutions to the Epidemic of Long Term Disease.' HRH The Prince of Wales in a message for the conference said, "For a very long time I have admired the ancient traditions of healing in the east which has been developed over literally thousands of years of observation and application." He singled out his appreciation especially for Dr Isaac Mathai, founder of Soukya, who has organised and hosted the conference with the College of Medicine as well as the Indian Government and State Government of Karnataka.

He also added, "It has always been my contention that the West has a lot to learn from the East and vice-versa. Of course, modern medicine has completely revolutionised the care of a large number of serious conditions with India leading the way in many areas of conventional treatment. Nevertheless, we also need to retain the best of the healing wisdom that preceded it; wisdom that was invariably developed over countless generations. That is why

when it comes to treatment I always advocated what I can only call the Best of Both Worlds: the best of alipathic treatment and the best of traditional and complementary approaches where ever they are safe, appropriate and supported by evidence.

"Here in India it is so inspiring to see both traditions standing side-by-side. That could only be good for patients too - particularly for patient choice. Too often in the West I fear, we resort to tablets and medical procedures for problems that might be improved or prevented by better management of personal health and lifestyle. Plus I fail to see any health system can remain financially sustainable unless we take

this whole issue of lifestyle more seriously."

Soukya one of the first holistic health centres of its kind in the world - a residential integrative medical centre with a focus on holistic healing. It is owned and managed by world renowned holistic health practitioner, Dr Issac Mathai M.D.(Hom), M.R.C.H.(Lond) and his wife, Suja Issac M.Sc., M.Phil.(Foods & Nutrition), a nutritionist.

All doctors on the team at the centre are said to be medically qualified in their respective system of medicines and have good knowledge, training, experience and above all, passionate about their work.

# SOUKYA in the Spotlight Again

**Bangalore's Soukya Health Centre provides fresh perspectives on Eastern and Western preventive and acute health care**



## Holistic Healing Endorsement

The Conference was a ringing endorsement for the path of holistic healing offered in many of the health spas and wellness centres offered in India and explained how the ancient Indian healing systems have enjoyed so much popularity in the West, personages from Desmond Tutu to Deepak Chopra. Dr Mathai said, "I have always believed that the healing treatment should be person oriented and not system oriented. When a patient comes to me, a minimum of one to three hours is spent with them in order to provide a solution to make the person fit. Quality, honesty and integrity – all the three qualities are required when treating a patient. I am doing nothing new, it is ancient Indian magic at work."

Many visitors to the centre including medical professionals never fail to register how different it is from western medicine in that it is a highly individual treatment compared to more highly impersonal one in western medicine. A full holistic workup and treatments specific to a condition are carried out – from teaching of yoga, oil and herbs treatments, reflexology to individual diet regimes.

Isaac Mathai hails from a family which has practised traditional homeopathic medicine over 40 years. He had practiced in Europe for 10 years before he opened the Bangalore Holistic Medical Centre in 1989 while Soukya commenced operations 13 years later.

Soukya is spread across 30 acres of land with organic farms of vegetables, fruits and herbs and where even certain oils are pressed, so food is able to be served fresh. A connection with all things natural and with nature is promoted here. He said it takes at least two days stay before one finds the "rhythm of this lifestyle." The grounds boast of natural fauna and flora with birds and butterflies.

The Soukya Holistic Health and Ayurveda Treatment Centre was awarded the Best Wellness Centre at a recent India National Tourism Awards and Dr Mathai was also quoted as saying, "Internationally, Indian traditional medicine has been acknowledged and this makes me very happy. I am, after all, a proud Indian."



**A**yurvedic medicine, also known as Ayurveda, is one of the world's oldest holistic (whole-body) healing systems. Derived from its ancient Sanskrit roots — 'ayus' (life) and 'ved' (knowledge) — offers a rich, comprehensive outlook to a healthy life; its origins go back nearly 5,000 years. Ayurveda was expounded and practiced by spiritual rishis, who laid the foundations of the Vedic civilisation in India. They organised the fundamentals of life into proper systems.

Ayurveda offers a unique blend of science and philosophy that balances the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual components necessary for holistic health.

The best thing about Ayurvedic treatments is that they are individualistic. The treatments are based on the five elements of the universe — Earth, Fire, Water, Air and Space. According to Ayurveda, each person will be influenced by certain elements more than others. This is because of their prakriti, or natural constitution. Ayurveda categorises the different constitutions into three different doshas:

- **Vata dosha:** This is where the air and space elements dominate.

# Wellness

## THE NEW HIGH

### The science and scenic setting of Ayurveda

By **Ranee Sahaney**

- **Pitta dosha:** This is where the Fire element dominates.
- **Kapha dosha:** This is where the Earth and Water elements dominate.

An Ayurvedic physician takes into consideration these doshas to measure the equilibrium levels of the body —and accordingly a wellness path is organised. For each element, there is a balanced and out of balance expression. An important goal of Ayurveda is to identify a person's ideal state of balance, determine where they are out of balance, and offer interventions using diet, herbs, aromatherapy, massage treatments, music, and meditation to re-establish this balance.

Spa treatments that are based on Ayurvedic knowledge work at a very deep level to thoroughly cleanse the body of toxins and remove physiological imbalances. The

treatments can be for general health and wellness, or— catered toward treating a specific ailment. Some of the well-known treatments that assure radiance and invigoration include:

### Abhyanga

The Abhyanga therapy treats the whole body physically, mentally and emotionally while balancing the doshas. Its rhythmic motion helps to relieve joints and muscles from stiffness and makes all body movements free.

### Shirodhara

This is a powerful ayurvedic treatment that calms the nervous system and restores the body's natural ability to heal. Lukewarm oil is poured in a continuous stream onto the forehead, while one receives a gentle massage on the head.

## Snehana Therapy

Snehana is a warm oil therapy that is applied to the person seeking Ayurvedic solutions to health. Snehana means 'love' and through this nourishing, nurturing, warming therapy the vata dosha is brought back into balance. It is also called the 'potli massage' or 'herbal pouch treatment.'

## Swedhana

Swedhana is a traditional steam therapy designed to open tissues with the saturation of heat and moisture. Once the tissues are open, deep-seated toxins can be released through the pores of the skin, thereby reducing inflammation, improving circulation, and promoting healing and restoration.

## Udwarthanama

This is a typical deep and dry massage using herbal powders. The dry powder massage helps to reduce blood cholesterol and obesity, while imparting mobility to the joints and strengthening the muscles.

## Panchakarma

Panchakarma (five actions) is a cleansing and rejuvenating program for the body, mind and consciousness. It is known for its beneficial effects on overall health, wellness and self-healing. The Panchakarma therapeutic process appears quite simple in its application. However, its effects are powerful and effective.

Panchakarma is a unique, natural, holistic, health-giving series of therapeutic treatments that cleanses the body's deep tissues of toxins, opens the subtle channels, and brings life-enhancing energy thereby increasing vitality, inner peace, confidence and well-being. It is important to note that the expertise and guidance of a Panchakarma specialist is a must for the diagnosis and therapy for optimal results.

Above are excerpts from India Tourism Singapore's publication *The Wellness Destination*. Travel agents wishing to receive copies please contact [info@indiatourism.com.sg](mailto:info@indiatourism.com.sg)



# Ayurveda Spa

## TOURS & PACKAGES

### Healthy ways to slim down

**A**yurveda forms an intrinsic part of the wellness and beauty regime in India. From massages and specialized diets to rigorous transformations in lifestyle, the ayurveda experience has been designed keeping in mind the individual's desire to heal, cleanse, relax and revitalize. Delight your senses and let your skin be renewed with this unique experience. Your skin will feel soft, refreshed and detoxified.

This is a safe and scientific weight management programme using a unique diagnostic tool, the body composition monitor, to formulate customised treatment based on each person's body type and needs. Treatment is supplemented with an expertly designed diet and exercise plan to so that weight loss is safe, sure and lasting. A month-long spa vacation can help you to reduce as much as 8 to 10 kg. You can customize the duration.

Detoxify your body and refresh your senses with this Ayurveda Spa Tour after your arrival at Thiruvananthapuram City via Trivandrum International Airport. A short 10 km drive will take you to beautiful Kovalam Beach. Start your day with udwartanam, swedanam and internal oleation. This will be followed by meals and herbal medication according to doctor's advice. A yoga session in the evening followed by pranayam classes (breathing exercise) by expert Yogacharya by the picturesque Kovalam Beach will bring you to a most relaxed blissful state. This schedule is for the initial three days.

Kick off your fourth day with major therapeutic detox regimes such as vamanam or virechana (colonic cleansing). This day, complete fasting is recommended where there will be no breakfast, lunch or dinner. Rest should be taken the whole day with evening classes of yoga and pranayama will induce holistic well-being.

For the next three days, after special breakfast, there will be a routine of udavartanam and swedanam in the morning and yoga and pranayam in the evening.

During the next four days the morning will start with udawartana, sweadanam, virechana (colonic cleansing). There will be a special healing diet schedule. Yoga and pranayam classes will be conducted in the evening.

In the next two weeks along with a similar routine of udavartanam and swedanam, you will also start with different types of basti. Yoga and pranayam classes will be held in the evening.

The last days of the slimming programme will include morning abhayanga, swedanam and nasyam. Yoga and pranayam classes will be held in the evening. Ayurveda and yoga expert will provide consultations on lifestyle, food supplement and herbal medicines.

Ayurveda Spa Tours are available in Goa, Kerala and other places. To know more log on to: <http://www.travelspiritualindia.com/ayurveda.htm>



# SEARCH OF

## Ladakh – Where the Earth Meets the Sky

Photos by **Sugato Mukherjee**

Going off the beaten track is nothing new for Kolkata-based professional photographer Sugato. But he has a special affinity for Ladakh. In fact, he has published a coffee table book on the Land of the High Passes that has received much critical acclaim.

## Natural Wonders

Photos by **Ratna Singh**

She works in the protected national parks of Madhya Pradesh and wakes up surrounded by nature and shares sights not often seen by others outside the parks.

## Racing & Respect

Horse racing is a prestigious sport among the nomadic Changpa tribesmen

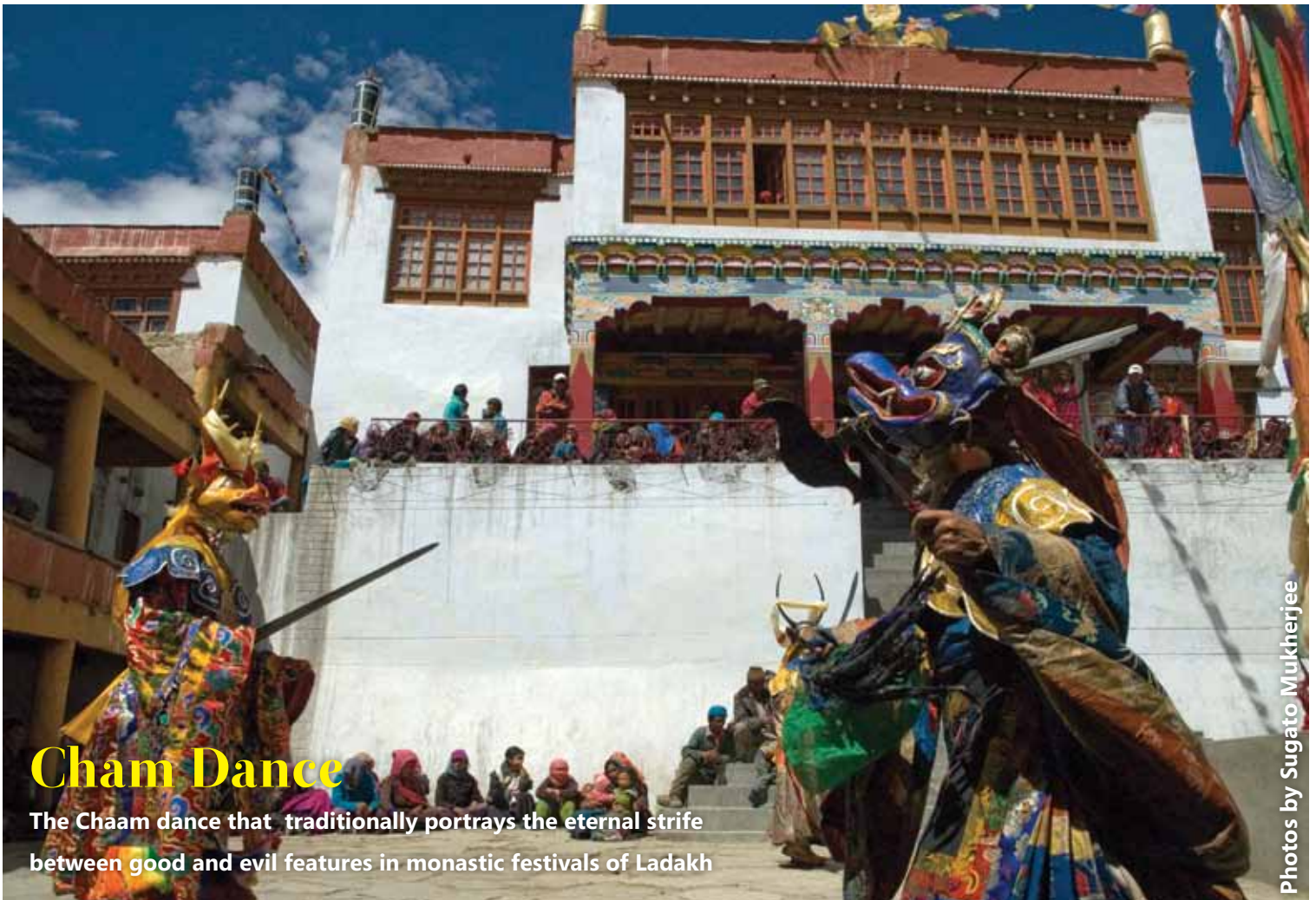


# Leh Palace

The 17th century Leh Palace that overlooks the city of Leh has a striking resemblance to the Potala Palace of Lhasa built around the same time.



Photos by Sugato Mukherjee



# Cham Dance

The Chaam dance that traditionally portrays the eternal strife between good and evil features in monastic festivals of Ladakh

Photos by Sugato Mukherjee

# Silent Sentinels

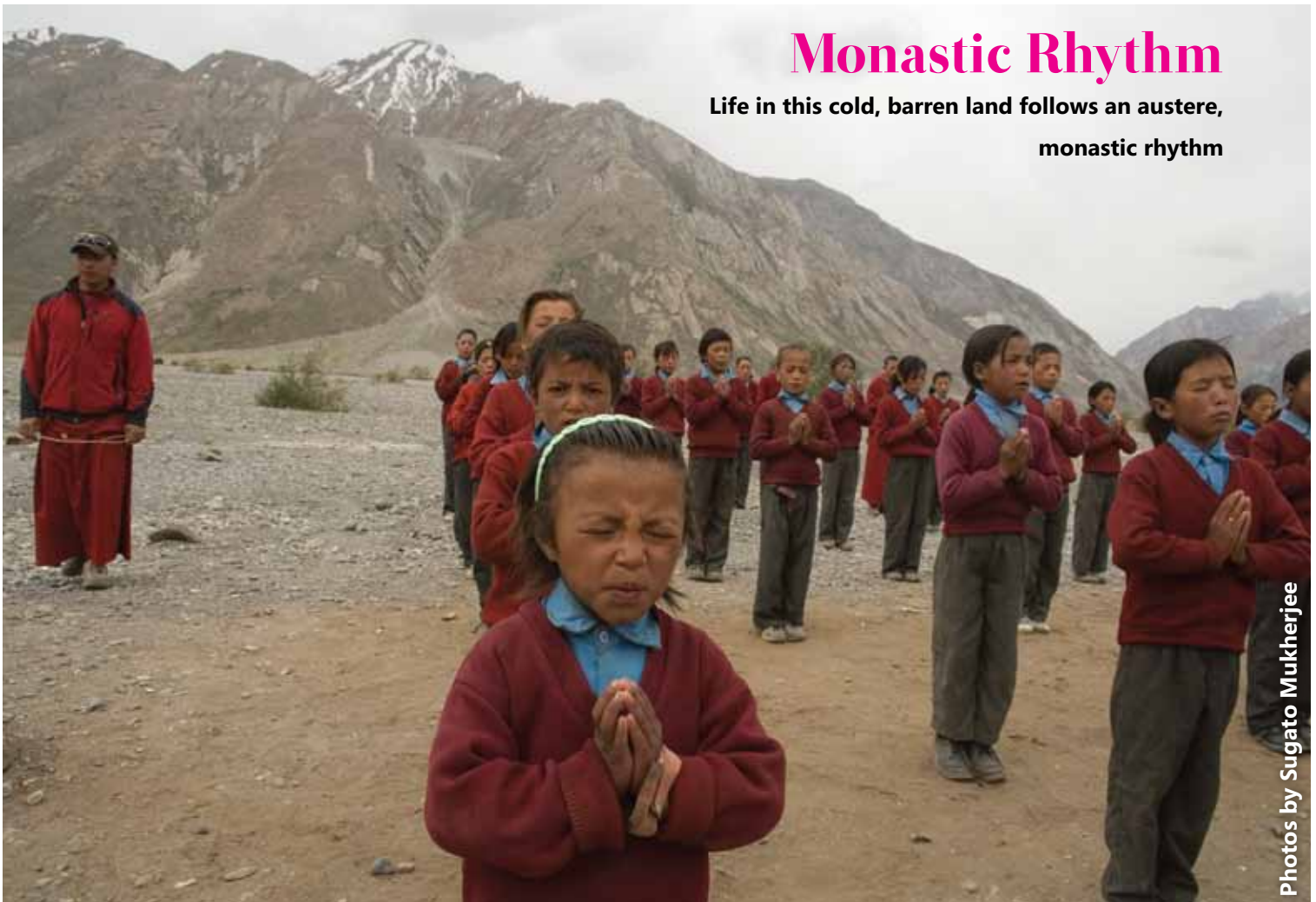
Perched atop steep inclines ancient monasteries loom in the distance as silent bystanders



Photos by Sugato Mukherjee

# Monastic Rhythm

Life in this cold, barren land follows an austere, monastic rhythm



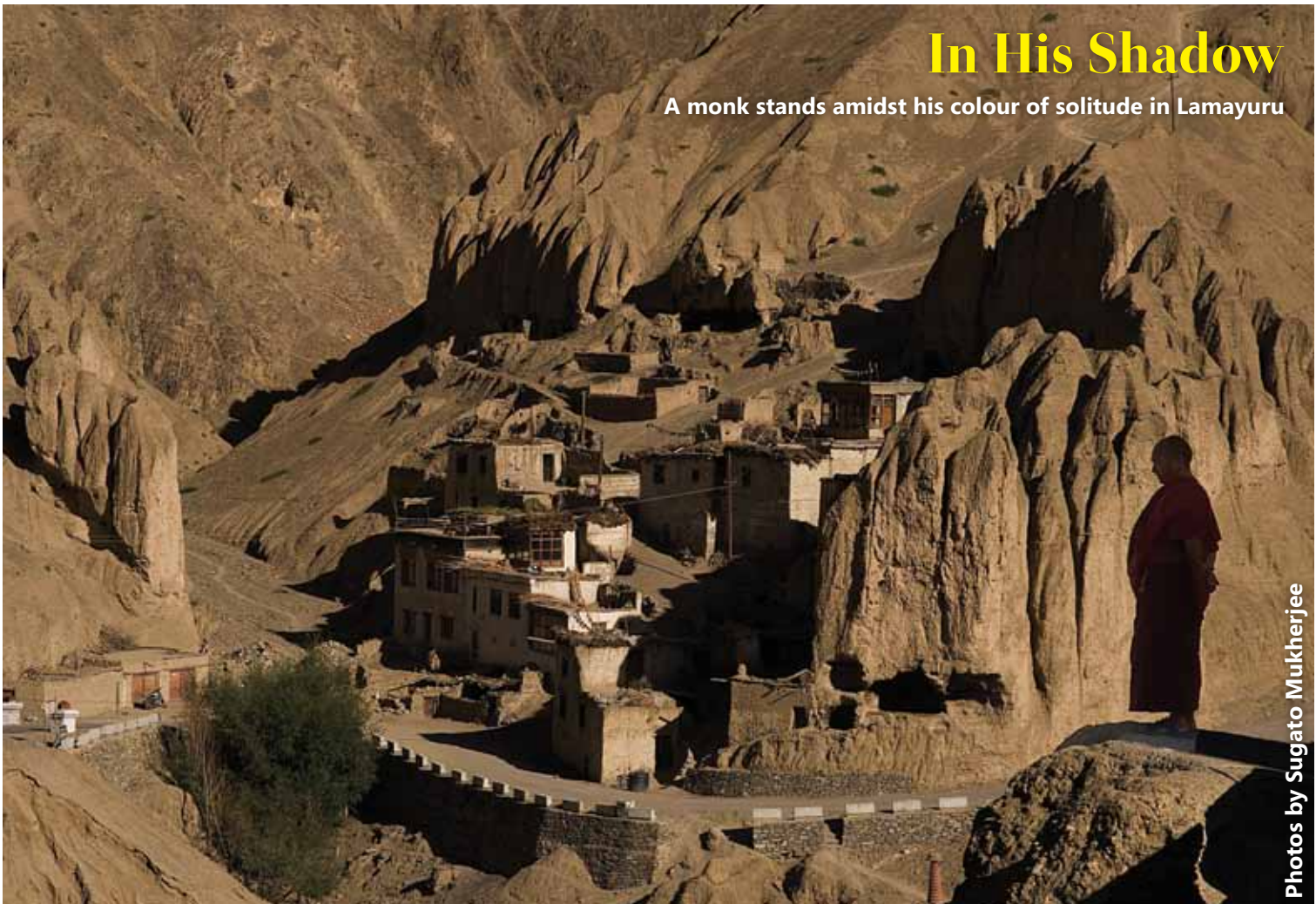
Photos by Sugato Mukherjee



## Free Wheeling

A shepherd boy sets off with his herd in Changthang Highlands

Photos by Sugato Mukherjee



## In His Shadow

A monk stands amidst his colour of solitude in Lamayuru

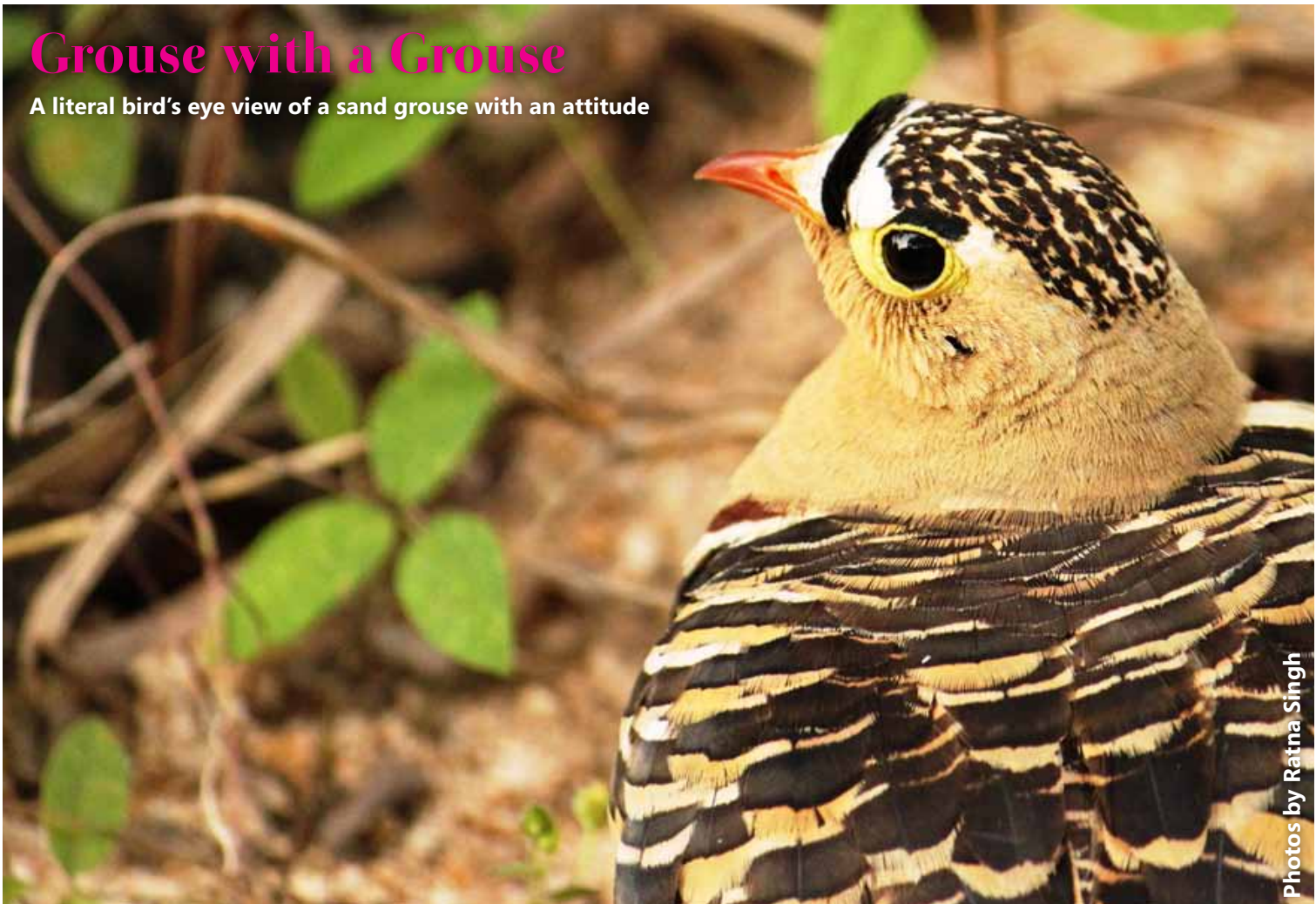
Photos by Sugato Mukherjee



## Sun Life

Sunlight given an ethereal form through a forest

Photos by Ratna Singh



## Grouse with a Grouse

A literal bird's eye view of a sand grouse with an attitude

Photos by Ratna Singh

# Reclaimed by Nature

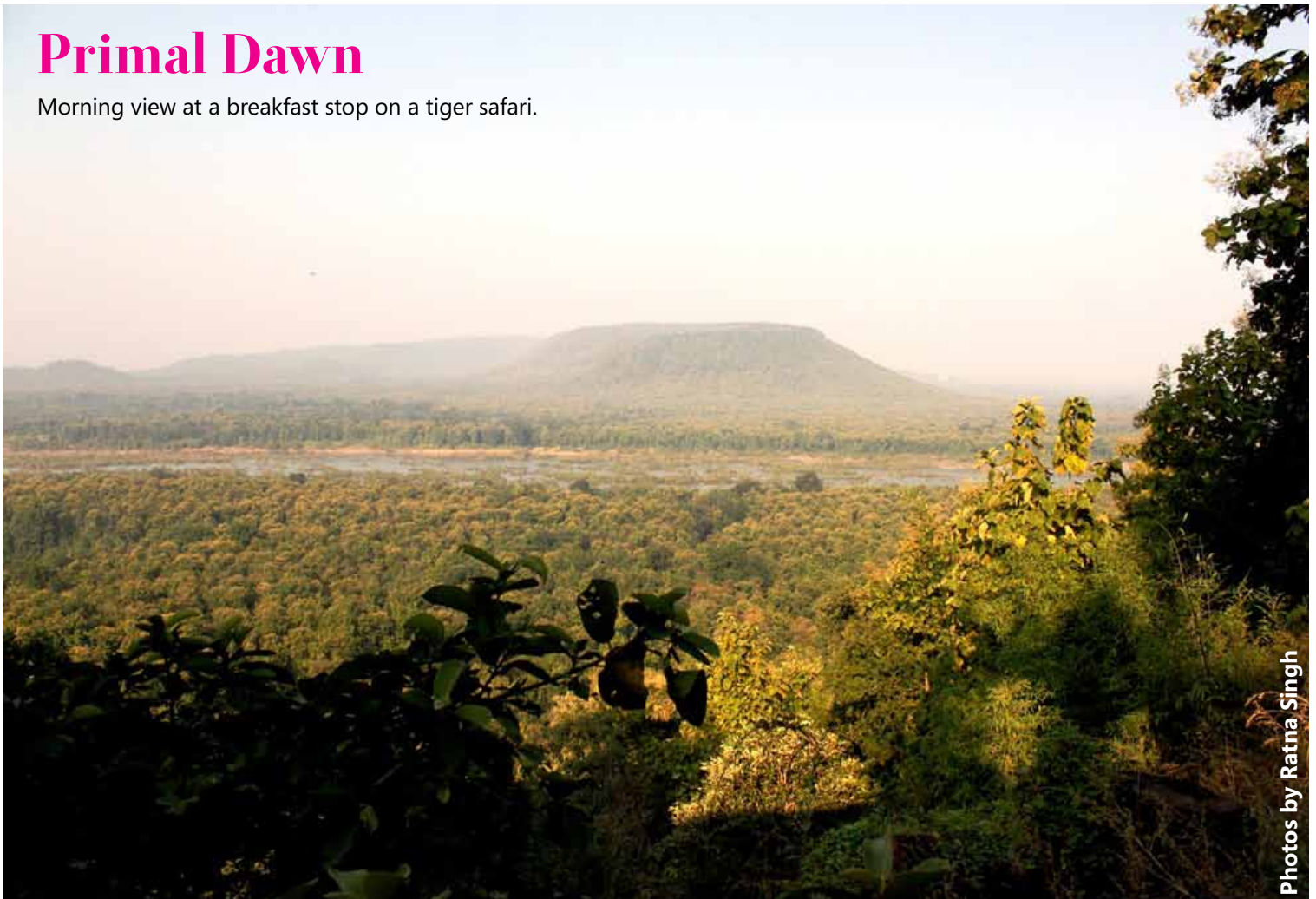
Reclaimed by nature – the remains of a temple by the river



Photos by Ratna Singh

# Primal Dawn

Morning view at a breakfast stop on a tiger safari.



Photos by Ratna Singh

**BANGLADESH**

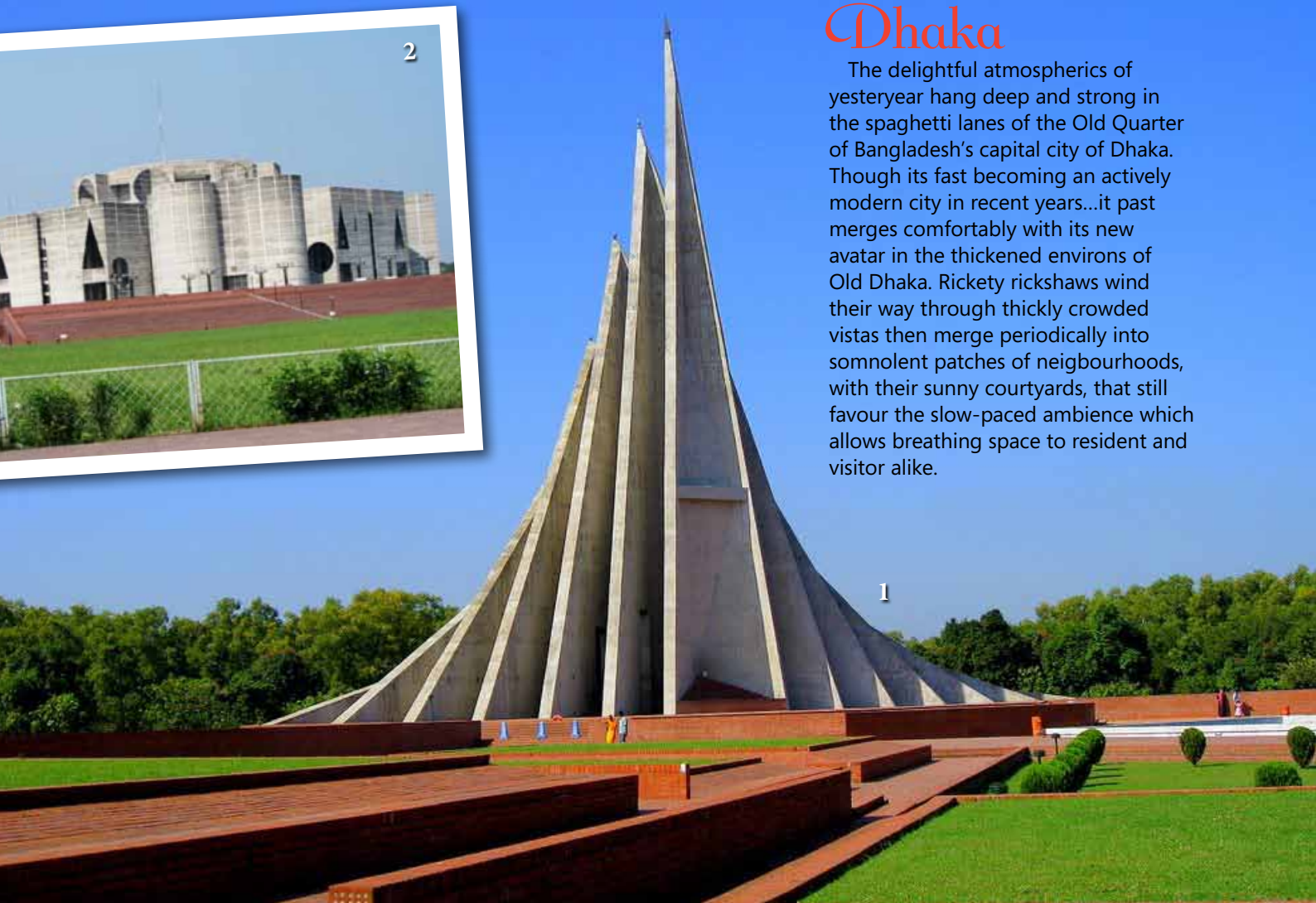
# Hitting the Heritage & Nature Trails

**A booming economy has led to greater development of its tourism assets. Featured in this issue are the best of its cultural heritage and nature sites**



## **Dhaka**

The delightful atmospherics of yesteryear hang deep and strong in the spaghetti lanes of the Old Quarter of Bangladesh's capital city of Dhaka. Though its fast becoming an actively modern city in recent years...it past merges comfortably with its new avatar in the thickened environs of Old Dhaka. Rickety rickshaws wind their way through thickly crowded vistas then merge periodically into somnolent patches of neighbourhoods, with their sunny courtyards, that still favour the slow-paced ambience which allows breathing space to resident and visitor alike.





3

Chawri Bazaar is the place to start your journey of this ancient hub going back at least four centuries if not more. Remember to take home swatches of gorgeous fabrics stacked high in the shops here. Vignettes of the old fort Lalbager Killa or the Fort of Lalbag can be espied from various points as you wind your way deeper and deeper into the quarter's shadowy reaches. The Shia devotees of Islam revere Hoseni Dalan. Overlooking a small lake it offers its serenity as a delightful counterpoint to the bustling bazaar. Marked by a pleasant pink wash the mansion, also called the Pink Palace, used to be the residence of a nawab. It now serves as the National Museum.

A delightful fusion of Mughal and gothic architecture, it is one of the country's most significant structures of historical interest. The lively past and lavish lifestyle of its Nawabi days are still reflected in the interiors which you can tour. The surrounds of the Buriganga River are a bustling world of country and ferryboats, motor launches, etc. It makes for some lovely photops. On offer too are night safaris on the several steamers anchored here

You can travel from Sadarghat, with its delightful port-side ambience to the more serene vistas of Bahadur Shah Park,—the old Victoria Park. There's a memorial to martyrs killed during the 1857 uprising against the British. Carry on to the pretty Armenian Church, one of the oldest in the region.

**Getting there:** Dhaka International Airport is well connected by national and international carriers.

## Paharpur

The lush hills of Paharpur hold many secrets; the serene vistas are still deeply imbued with its linkages with the past. One of the most important archeological finds have been the ruins of the Buddhist site of Paharpur just 270km away from Dhaka, at Naogaon. Often called the "land of monasteries" Paharpur truly lives up to the legend for it has many sites scattered in close proximity dating to the early Buddhist times. Many of these have not even been opened up for deeper explorations. The Somapura Mahavihara, one of the most significant, is a UNESCO World Heritage-acclaimed site (1986). This 7th century site is set in the embrace of about 27 acres. The great mound lies in a courtyard over 900 feet in length and 12-15 feet high. The gateway to the site is an elaborate one. The site features 45 cells on the north and 44 cells each on the other three sides of the rectangular courtyard. South East Asian influences, in particular those of Myanmar and Java are reflected in the architecture of the pyramidal cruciform temple. There's a museum here which display artifacts recovered from the site; some of these are also housed in the Varendra Research Museum in Rajshahi. **Getting there:** Buses and taxis are available from Dhaka. To reach the site head for Bogra town, visit Mahasthangarh and stay at the Parjatan Hotel at night and then hire a taxi to get to Paharpur via Joypurhat the next day.

(Opposite page)

01. National Monument of Bangladesh in Dhaka

02. (inset) National Parliament of Bangladesh in Dhaka

(This page)

03. Royal Bengal Tiger at Sunderbans

## The Sunderbans

One of the largest mangrove forests in the world, the Sunderbans lies partly in Bangladesh and partly in India's West Bengal region. Home to the Royal Bengal Tiger, the Sunderban's is a world of surreal splendour and its unique eco-system has played a pivotal role in the survival abilities of its wilderness inhabitants and plant life. You can catch a boat from Kochi Khali manned by fishermen who are deeply familiar with these unique environs. Good sightings can be enjoyed of dolphins, varieties of deer, wild hog etc. The motor launch which takes you calls on Deemer Char - the egg island—so named because it is egg-shaped.

At low tide the island is linked to the main forest and animals come here to graze or drink water. From here you can journey on to Kotka and then the stunning Badamtoli Beach, which is simply breathtaking. You can stay the night at the Jamtoli Tower. If you get lucky you might catch sight of Mama - the local name for the Royal Bengal Tiger. The tower offers fabulous views of this astonishing region. The journey takes you further on to Dublar Char (start at the end of high tide to get to the island in the shortest possible time). Dublar Char is a popular island with fishermen from Shatkhira who come here to fish. It is one of the biggest producers of dry fish in the country. En route to Khulna stop at Harbaria, an eco-park—home to reptiles, alligators, tigers, and varieties of deer. Alligators are bred at the Korom Jol canal. **Getting there:** Trains are available from Dhaka to Khulna. Other options are motorboat and steamer. You can also fly to Jessore from where the airline bus will take you to Khulna, about 30 km south.



## Cox's Bazaar

This haven for beachgoers seems to have been re-discovered, judging from the number of foreigners and domestic tourists and local residents storming its gorgeous expanses of unspoiled sands (its acclaimed to be one of the world's natural wonders and the longest beaches). The beachside itself is a riot of mushrooming executive level hotels, lounges, clubs, restaurants and cafes. The long arm of modernization has reached out and gathered this wondrous hub into its embrace with a slew of adrenalin thumping activities which run the gamut of surfing, speedboat riding, watersports. Given the hype and attention this beach resort has generated the authorities are working apace to ensure issues like hygiene, security, pollution, sanitation etc.

If you are looking to escape the raucous spirit of the beach area here during the peak of the tourist season you may well enjoy the quietude of the nearby beaches of Kolatoli or Himchori still solitary and pristine in comparison.

Soak in the atmospherics of long walks by the beach, the spectacular sunrises and sunsets but if you are in the mood you can hire a surf board and savor the thrill of a battle with the waves. Evening spins out with parties at the beachside cafes, delicious meals of fresh sea-food and a full moon night. Let Nature bewitch you afresh with

that silvery, mystical wash on the sea and sand. In the winter the beach wears a gay mood of another kind. Hordes of enthusiasts dot the sands with their beautiful and innovative kites at the various kite festivals held here and which attract experts from around the country. Cox's Bazar is a stunning gateway for Maheshkhali, Himchori, Penchar Island, etc. Do pick up local souvenirs from the shops lining the beach. The Burmese market is another magnet for shoppers. **Getting there:** Most airlines serve Cox's Bazar with convenient departure times.

## Sylhet

Though Sylhet is a bustling commercial city it also offers travelers the allure of its luxuriant natural vistas. The city is home to the shrines Hazrat Shah Jalal and Hazrat Shah Poran, which attract thousands of devotees. This is tea country and drives around the plantation expanses offer beautiful serene moments with nature in the area near Maulvi Bazaar with its 90-odd tea estates and rich tropical forests. The region has many ethnic settlements of the Manipuri, Khasia and Tripura communities. Kamalganj, Sreemangal and Kulaura, offer vignettes of tribal life. Travel on to Baralekha Upazilla and get bowled over by the majesty of the Madhabkunda, Falls, the biggest waterfall in Bangladesh, which falls from a height of 200ft.

Jaflong, 60 km from Sylhet, in

Gowanighat Upazila, is a popular tourist spot located along the Bangladesh border with the Indian state of Meghalaya. **Getting there:** Osmani International Airport, which is north of the city, is the third busiest airport of the country. It is served by Biman Bangladesh Airlines, United Airways and GMG Airlines.

## Sonargaon

A freedom fighter, a brave and a visionary, the Sultan Isha Khan, leader of the Baro (12 Bhuyiyas) in Bengal took on the might of the soldiers of Man Singh, the Rajput general of Mughal Emperor Akbar, to repel his onslaught on his beloved land. From his capital of Sonargaon, located on the Grand Trunk Road, built by Chandra Gupta Maurya, he fought each battle with increasing fervour. Sonargaon, a culturally and historically significant city, today is on the World Monuments Fund's 2008 Watch List of the 100 Most Endangered Sites on this planet, because of the many threats to preservation including flooding and vandalism.

The rich atmospherics of one of the finest towns of the independent Sultan's of Bengal Sonargaon is a treat for the history buff as you work your way around those dilapidated structures from that colourful era. Its become popular for film shoots. Check out the Folk Arts and Crafts Museum with its exhibits from the days of the Sultans. Sonargaon was also visited by the legendary Moroccan traveller Ibn Batuta in the 14th century. **Getting there:** Hire a taxi from Dhaka, 15 miles away.

## St. Martin's Island

One of the prettiest places to spend many leisure hours is the picturesque setting of St Martin's island. The ethereal splendor of its azure surrounds, the lush foliage of the isle itself and the laid back ambiance all lend themselves to the lotus-eaters life. Sequestered along the stunning expanses of the Bay of

Bengal, about 9km south of the tip of the Cox's Bazar-Teknaf peninsula, this is Bangladesh's sole coral island. Locally it's called Narikel Jingira, or 'Coconut Island. Winters are best to explore this lovely world of coral and sea, where the waters seem to constantly change their hues. By night the starry heavens seem as enchanting as do the lavish sunrises on the island. A stroll along the Chhera Dwip comes highly recommended. A speedboat ride offers another way to explore the surrounds by the sea. The resort on the island offers delicious sea food. **Getting there:** From Dhaka to Cox's Bazar to Teknaf you can travel by taxi or bus.. From Teknaf boats take you to the island

## Mainamati, Comila

Steeped in historic finds Mainamati, can be found just 8km from Comilla. It has become a magnet for those of the Buddhist faith as well as history and culture buffs over time. It is Bangladesh's biggest repository of Buddhist archeological sites from ancient times. The hilly region is closely linked to Lalmai, renowned for being identified as the Lalambi vana of the Chandra epigraphs. Local ballads and folk songs refer to legendry Chandra queen Maynamati. Step into the museum here to browse the vast collection of artifacts of copperplate coins, terracotta, bronzes and stone sculptures. Kutial Mura, one of the highest mounds of archeological interest here, offers visuals of decorative architectural nuances while Charpatra Mura is believed to be one of the oldest reflections of Hindu temple architecture in Bangladesh. Ananda Vihara is the biggest monument here. It is located in the Kotbari area and is a collection of stupas, viharas and smaller shrines. Queen Maynamati's Palace Mound is even bigger and higher than the Anand Vihara and can be seen east of Brahmanbari Road here. **Getting there:** The Dhaka Chittagong Highway has eased conditions to get from Dhaka to Comilla and on to Mainamati.

## Bandarban

This serene enclave can be found in close proximity of three of Bangladesh's highest mountain peaks Tajio Dong, Modok Muwal and Keo Karadong. Bandarban is a delightful tribal enclave offering visitor's an interesting diversion from Bangladesh's more modern avatar. Steeped in traditions of deep antiquity these 15 communities continue to reflect their rich cultural heritage even in today's fast changing world. Do visit the local bazaar here.

A visit to the Buddha Dhatu Jadi, the country's largest Buddhist temple should be on your agenda. It is just 4 km from the town at Balaghata. Its gilded decorations have earned it the name 'Golden Temple'. This Theravada Buddhist temple is renowned for being home to Bangladesh's second largest statue of Buddha. The Shoilo Propat Waterfall is another popular tourist hotspot at Milanchari, which has many Buddhist shrines. Local taxis are available for trips to the Tiger Hills where tourists come to take in the sights and sunset views. **Getting there:** Taxis and buses are available for explorations of the region from Chittagong.



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(Opposite page)  
04. Cox's Bazar

(This page)  
05. Saint Martin's Island  
(Photo: Shovon)  
06. Tea plantation at Jaflong, Sylhet  
07. Buddha Dhatu Jadi, Bandarban  
(Photo: Shimul Kanti Barua)

# No Strangers in Chennai

## Unexpected middle-east roots in east southern Tamil Nadu villages

**A**dam Ihson, is just 28 but runs his own business trading in medical supplies some of them from India.

Being his own boss, he sometimes tries to arrange trips back to his family's home town in Chennai for business and personal matters. Last November, he also decided to take a trip down the southern coastal region.

The Singaporean travelled to his ancestral village of Koothanallur to visit his maternal grandmother. The village is an hour's drive from the nearest city, Tiruchiappalli. November is a good time to go he says as it is cooler between November and February and much more preferable to experiencing the region's harsh summer sun.

Although most of his family members are no longer residing there, Adam says it is still important for him to connect to his roots, "However, there is not much to do there. The rural part is especially extra rural. You still have bullock carts sharing the roads with other vehicles as it is still a very convenient mode of transport. But things are changing."

He related how the village has grown somewhat into a small town that now has two bank branches and the first ATM machine opened last year. He said that the pace of life, of course, is still very slow compared to Singapore. There are not many places one can go in terms of sights and things to do so unlike the other trips back to his hometown in the past, this time he decided to travel and see the country up close. He was in a for quite an eye opening trip.



Sri Karaneswarar Temple, Mylapore, Chennai

### Outside influences

He set off on a journey south and found, "The thing that I enjoyed most from travelling here was meeting the people and interacting with them. I was surprised by the many outside influences the places along the east southern region have. For example, in my village, there are many cultural influences from Turkey as they (Turks) were the first settlers here and that is why it is a predominantly muslim village. I discovered there were other places where there are Syrian influences and during the trip down to the east southern coast of Tamil Nadu I came across interesting muslims along the way including descendants of the King of Madinah of Saudi Arabia!"

He met them at a village called Ervadi where the King of Madinah had settled after journeying from Saudi Arabia in the early 12th century to spread Islam. He said, "It is a very popular town and you can see the differences in the people, signs and culture. There are many such

places along the coast that have such interesting stories behind them."

Adam first visited India in 2000 but he said, "This was something I did not expect at all to see on the trip – such a large level of Arabic presence in this part of India"

Another interesting stop was Kayalpatnam which was visited by Marco Polo! Kayalpatnam (also known as Kayalpatinam or Korkai) is a town in the Tuticorin district of Tamil Nadu. Kayal was referred to in Marco Polo's travel diaries which date back to 1250 AD. Korkai was an ancient port dating back to the first century.

Adam also shared, "These places are very much centred on communal living traditions with no fancy hotels or resorts along the way so it was heartwarming to find strangers opening their homes for weary travellers to stay." Adam explained, "For them it is a great honour and blessing to be able to take care of a guest in their home. It is something I found quite amazing. It is a beautiful thing I rarely experienced anywhere else."

# WHAT IF...



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Xander returns to the start of his trip to the Himalayas

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