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ISSUE 5

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"The most beautiful thing in the world, of course, is the world itself."
–Wallace Stevens

Cover photograph: AMIT DIXIT

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Back to Square One

It's that time of year again...I'm assailed by a strong sense of deja vu. And it's not a pleasant feeling. Didn't we live through all of this same time last year? Only, this time round things seem to be much, much worse. We had hoped for a revival of the beleaguered tourism and hospitality industry by now. Indeed, 2021 was supposed to be the year when it all got better. But it's difficult to think of travel right now, much less encourage others to venture forth. All one can say is: hunker down, and stay safe. And get the jab as soon as you can.

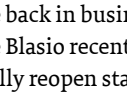
Mass vaccination seems to be our best option right now; of course, without letting our guard—or our masks—down. Destinations around the world, where a decent part of the population has been vaccinated, are planning to open their shutters gradually. I just read that New York, one of my favourite cities, will be back in business soon. A confident mayor Bill de Blasio recently announced that the city will fully reopen starting July 1. "We are ready for stores to open, for businesses to open, offices, theatres,

New York City will be back in business soon. A confident mayor Bill de Blasio announced that the city will fully reopen starting July 1

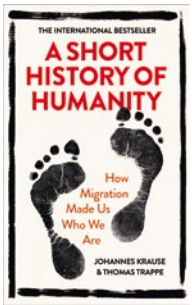
full strength," he said. Restaurants, gyms, shops, hair salons and arenas—everything is expected to open at full capacity. There is a possibility that smaller theatres will open over the summer. (But for Broadway we'll have to wait till September.) Europe is also mulling welcoming fully vaccinated Americans in the summer.

Just a few months ago, things seemed to have gotten back to normal. I spent Valentine's Day in Visakhapatnam and the beach was packed. A month later I was at the Dashashwamedh Ghat in Varanasi and it could not have been busier.

No one has a magic mantra. We just hope, on a wing and a prayer, to unfurl our wings again.



Amit Dixit @omitdixit



CROSSED OFF MY READING LIST

A Short History of Humanity
Johannes Krause & Thomas Trappe

A riveting book that offers a new understanding of our past, present and future.

UP NEXT
Capital in the Twenty-First Century
Thomas Piketty

3 things I did this month

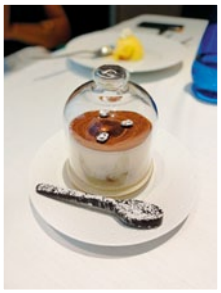
↓ Went to Agra and saw this mini Taj instead of the real thing

↑ Had a team lunch at Savya Rasa, just before the second wave

← Chatted with Michelin-star chef Adriano Baldassarre at The Lodhi, Delhi

Something I ate

You can't go to Delhi's best Italian restaurant—Perbacco—and not order a tiramisu, especially one as sublime as this



radar

HERE, THERE, NOW & SOON

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PARADISE LOST AND...

Regained

Contrary to the buzz on social media, Indians can still travel to the Maldives

MALDIVES

Yes, you read that right. Were you also one of those who jumped the gun to troll Bollywood celebrities after the news about the Maldives banning travellers from India appeared? Well, you should have done a fact check first. The Health Protection Agency of the Maldives has only put travel restrictions on islands which are inhabited by Maldivians. Indian travellers are still allowed to visit private island resorts of the Maldives which are not home to the local population. The standalone islands and the hotels and resorts they house are still open and ready to welcome guests from India and, indeed, elsewhere. However, Indian travellers do have to produce a negative RT-PCR test report conducted within a maximum of 96 hours before their departure for the Maldives. Travellers will also have to undergo an RT-PCR test 72 hours before heading back to India.

» **Given the current uncertainty, we'd suggest you avoid all non-essential travel right now. If you do choose to visit the Maldives, please check the latest rules and regulations with your resort and travel agent before travelling**

PHOTOGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK

Halasana
Plough Pose

Halasana is an inverted yoga posture ideal for intermediate practitioners. The name is derived from two Sanskrit words: '*hal*' meaning plough and '*asana*' meaning pose. In Halasana, the shape of the body resembles a plough. The pose has many health benefits, from rejuvenating abdominal muscles to increasing the suppleness of the spine and, in women, stimulating the reproductive organs.

Steps to Master Halasana

1. Lie flat on the mat keeping your arms to the side, palms downward and legs together. Relax and take a few deep breaths.

2. Using your abdominal muscles, gently lift the legs off the ground until they're perpendicular to the floor. Keep them straight and together.

3. Gently press your arms against the floor and raise your buttocks. Continue to roll the spine till your big toes reach the ground over your head. Don't force your feet to touch the ground.

4. Bring your arms closer and interlock the fingers of both hands.

5. In the final position, tuck the chin in the centre of the collar bones. Don't exert force. It takes practice to achieve this position.

6. Stretch the legs and arms in opposite directions. Hold the pose for 15 seconds to a minute. Take slow and deep breaths.

7. To release the pose, gently lower the spine and bring the legs in vertical position. Then lower the legs to the ground. Relax.

On Trend
Hot Yoga

Hot yoga is a form of yoga performed under hot and humid conditions, which results in considerable sweating. Said to have been popularised by Bikram Choudhury, the idea was to replicate the heat and humidity of India—where, of course, yoga originated—in colder climates. Choudhury first tried it in Japan by increasing the temperature of the studios. He has suggested that the heated environment primes the body for movement and removes impurities. But Bikram Yoga is not the only hot yoga. Some other hot yoga styles are Forrest Yoga, CorePower Yoga and Tribalance Hot Yoga.

When in Doubt, Meditate

Meditation is the purest form of self-love there is. When we meditate, we calm the mind, align the senses, affirm and cleanse! Externally as well, you start glowing, become more peaceful, tolerant, and learn to live life with spiritual strength. The way we try and inculcate healthy habits like mindful eating, working out and even proper sleep schedules, creating a habit wherein we meditate at least 3-4 times a week, brings in supreme benefits of the mind, body and soul. Being privileged today means having the time and resources to take care of the self, and this has to include meditation. Personally, I like to do guided pranic healing meditations and pranayamas. This is a self-enhancing practice, and should be done the way you prefer it, as long as you are able to incorporate it into your daily life.

—A pranic healer, **Sharmilee Kapur** is the co-founder of **Atmantan Wellness Centre**, Mulshi

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Top things to see and do

Edge of the world
Not for the faint hearted, uninterrupted views from the edge of a sheer precipice

Diving in the Red Sea
Discover shipwrecks, clownfish, lionfish, eels, bull sharks and more!

Moon Mountain
Otherworldly outcrops, pitted dunes, and the vast solitude of the sands!
Perfect for stargazing under a jet-black night sky

Adventure Trail in AlUla
Hit the mountains for an 8 km journey led by an expert guide through rocky terrain and pools of water

Yanbu
A scenic lake, stunning waterfronts and beaches and a night market Souq Al Lail to get your hands on local dates and green mulkhiah leaves

Umluj
Known as the Maldives of Saudi with over 100 small islands known for their white sands swaying palms, turtles and dugongs living in the aquarium-like waters

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@saiwang_photography

BRAHMAPUTRA RIVER, ASSAM
Interlocking land and water
@parthkonwar

LOKTAK LAKE, MANIPUR
For a minute there, I lost myself
@john_irom

Northeast Montage

A region synonymous with untouched natural beauty, these visuals offer a glimpse into the unexplored gems Northeast India has to offer

@findyourhappiness2020

DUMBOOR LAKE, TRIPURA
Waterways leading up to the island of Narkel Kunja

GURUDONGMAR LAKE, SIKKIM
A tarn so well secure
@mitsuo_apurva

HORNBILL FESTIVAL, NAGALAND
Beauty is power, smile is its sword
@arifkaser

TLAWNG RIVER, MIZORAM
It all stacks up
@zara_fanai_21

MAN IN EUROPE
13

NITIN CHAUDHARY

A Few Of My Favourite Cities

A YEAR AGO, I hadn't imagined I would still be sitting at home, doing armchair travelling. Many of us are overwhelmed by this new reality and are looking for ways to come back on the road. I must confess though that I enjoyed the first few months of the lockdown. For once, I started sleeping eight hours a night and not rushing to catch a cheap early morning flight to someplace. Moreover, I started exercising regularly and eating healthy, habits that I intend to retain when I'm back on the road as intensely as before.

Later in the lockdown though, I started missing my favourite cities—the ones I used to travel frequently to. When travel opens in full again, these are the European cities that would be on top of my travel list:

Copenhagen: To be fair, I did travel to Copenhagen during the lockdown. I chose a sunny winter day to take the train to the Danish capital. Well-prepared, with all papers in place, I managed to get into the city. However, this much beloved city of mine turned out to be a shell of its former self. I walked to the Nyhavn district, which with its colourful buildings is a favourite hangout spot for tourists and locals alike. However, that day, the tourist spots were empty, the bars shut. The place was soulless without the fervent activity that surrounds it. I wait for the day when people are back in the city centre, and when one can sit in one of its overcrowded cafés enjoying a drink, while looking at the yachts shilly-shallying in Öresund's waters.

London: London is our food capital. That's one city where we have eaten well every time. I won't deny that at times I have travelled there just to eat great Indian food (specifically, *chaat*) and to drown in the comfort of hearing English on the streets. Cheap flights to this city have helped. The prospect of watching a day of cricket at its mecca on an English summer's day is yet another temptation and I am still nursing my dream of squeezing into the English capital this summer.

Modena: Yet another food destination, Modena in Italy is home to Ferrari and Massimo Bottura who heads Osteria Francescana, one of the best restaurants in the world. It helps that my work used to take me to Modena quite often. Whenever possible, I tried to extend my work trips to combine them with weekends. On these weekends, I would explore Modena's famous eateries and hunt for the best places to shop local produce. Modena is renowned for three of Italy's most significant heritage foods—Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, traditional balsamic vinegar, and prosciutto ham. Being a vegetarian, I stocked up on balsamic vinegar and cheese. Now that the stock is running out, I am itching to return to this elegant city.

I must confess though that I enjoyed the first few months of the lockdown. Later in the lockdown though, I started missing my favourite European cities

So, these are the cities I am dreaming about. When putting together this list I thought of how strange it is that the mind seeks familiarity. Don't I think of myself as an explorer, always on the lookout for new places and seeking new experiences? And here I am waiting for the lockdown to end so I can visit the cities I have missed so much in the bygone year. Well, that's one thing I have learnt about myself in these strange times.

An outdoor café in Modena
ILLUSTRATION: NITIN CHAUDHARY

THE ART OF ODISHA

Since antiquity itself, Odisha has been renowned for the finesse of its arts and crafts —a noble tradition that continues to this day

Odisha has something for everyone, be it beaches or eco-tourism, architecture or adventure, culture or cuisine. And when it comes to the arts, Odisha is peerless. In ancient times, it was referred to as Utkala—a place of *utkrista* (excellent) *kala* (arts). Odias are bestowed with an innate artistic temperament—from a penchant for classical dance and music to exquisite art forms, they are a skilled people. Their crafts range from stonework and sand art to appliqué, woodwork, silver filigree, etc.

Pattachitra

The word *pattachitra* consists of two words—*patta* meaning cloth and *chitra* which is picture. The paintings are inspired by Odisha's most revered deity—Lord Jagannath—and his siblings, and depict scenes from Hindu mythology in vibrant colours. A living art form of Odisha, *pattachitra* is believed to have evolved during the 12th century. A nerve centre of the craft is Raghurajpur in Puri, where every household has a master *pattachitra* artist.

Tala Pattachitra
Also known as palm-leaf painting, it is an ancient art form, originating in Odisha when written communication began. The execution involves pin-tip thin sketching on a string of palm leaves which is then highlighted with kohl black or lampblack.

Appliqué
The village of Pipili in Puri district is famous for its appliqué work, locally known as *chandua*. It is a hereditary craft that uses brightly coloured fabric patches cut into shapes of flowers and animals and sewn onto wall hangings, bedsheets and cushion covers, colourful umbrellas, and so on.

Metalwork
Metal artisanship using non-ferrous metals is an important part of Odia craft. The bell metal artisans of Puri, known as *kansa karigaras*, make utensils for the worship of Lord Jagannath. Apart from Puri, metalcraft is also practiced in the districts of Nayagarh, Sambalpur, Bolangir and Phulbani. Dhokra is another traditional craft using brass of the Dhokra Damar tribes who are gifted with exceptional metallurgical skills.

Sand Art
Making waves across the world is Odisha's sand art where the only materials required for sculpting a masterpiece are sand and water. The state also hosts the annual International Sand Art Festival during the first five days of December.

Silver Filigree Work
Also known as *Kataka Tarakasi*, this is one of the most unique craft forms where fine wires and foil made from beaten silver are folded and fashioned together to create intricate jewellery. Native to the district of Cuttack, this art form is mainly used to create ornaments and decorative items.

Stone carving
The ancient monuments of Odisha speak volumes about stone carving, it being one of the main architectural components of temples in Odisha. The UNESCO World Heritage Konark Temple which dates back to the 13th century is a prime example as are Udaygiri and Ratnagiri, the Jagannath, Lingaraj and Mukteswar temples, etc. Today, the craftsmen make useful items like stoneware utensils, containers, cups, paperweights, lamp bases, and so on.

Textiles
The rich weaves, intricate designs, and vibrant colours of Odia textiles are a reflection of the state's rich cultural ethos. There are a whopping 11 distinct weaves here that have GI tags—Orissa Ikat, Orissa Pattachitra, Kotpad Handloom Fabric, Pipili Appliqué work, Gopalpur Tussar Fabrics, Khandua Saree & Fabrics, Dhalapathar Parda & Fabrics, Sambalpuri Bandha Saree & Fabrics, Habaspuri Saree & Fabrics, Bomkai Saree & Fabrics, and Berhampur Patta (Phoda Kumbha) Saree & Joda.

Noted for exquisite craftsmanship, Odisha continues to tirelessly propagate its rich crafts legacy. The next time you visit, buy a souvenir and take home a bit of Odisha with you. There can be no better memento of your trip!

For more, visit
odishatourism.gov.in

Clockwise from facing page: appliqué work; handicrafts for sale at Pipili; a stunning display at the International Sand Art Festival; and exquisite silver filigree earrings

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A ZEN DAY IN KYOTO **54**

Once a hotbed of Maoist activity, peace has come to the mist-laden hills of Purulia, and, with it, tourism. Roads have been fixed and this off-the-beaten-track adventure destination now boasts some excellent properties. One of the highlights, given its remote location, is a stunning night sky which, on moonless nights, is a blanket of stars. There's excellent birdwatching for those who swing that way, as well as easy treks for walking enthusiasts, ranging from one to three days in duration. So, what are you waiting for?

PHOTOGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK

18
KERALA
Parts
UNKNOWN

***

Edakkal Caves

A stunning heritage site in Wayanad

***

Cooking Classes

By the end, you'll be a pro in the kitchen

***

Theyyam

Performances are held across the region all winter

North Kerala often gets overshadowed by its popular southern sibling. And that's actually a blessing in disguise.
Text and photographs by

AMIT DIXIT

↖ The Lotus houseboat on the backwaters

WOULD YOU BELIEVE IT IF I TOLD YOU THERE IS A PART OF KERALA that has it all: pristine, uncrowded beaches, looming mountains shrouded in mist, not to mention serene, unpolluted and traffic jam-free backwaters? I wouldn't have believed it either, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes.

For travellers, the far north of Kerala has always been a bit of an unchartered territory, although, of course, it is home to millions of people. I had been aching to visit for well over a decade but, somehow, plans kept fizzling out. Then, suddenly, it all fell into place. I flew into the brand-new Kannur airport with my friend Altaf Chapri, who runs one of the most exclusive beach resorts in this part of the country (his hospitality empire stretches, quite literally, from Kashmir to Kerala). But, before our bums hit the beach, we had a loftier rendezvous to make.

LIFE IN THE High Lane

It was a wild and dreamy drive deep into the folds of Wayanad, past coffee bushes in heady, aromatic bloom, towering teak and rubber plantations, neatly manicured tea estates, bustling, little towns—and those legendary hairpin bends...

There were culinary temptations at every turn too. I finally gave in to a sublime *mutta* (egg) curry and *parotta* combo at a clean, well-appointed teashop, which are ubiquitous in these parts (clean ones, I mean). The tea could be politely described as 'strong'—that's how they like it here. If I'd known what sumptuous fare awaited me at our destination, I would have held out, god's-own-country promise.

The 200-acre estate where we were headed had a discreet entrance and our driver—who, in another lifetime, used to set his passengers' hearts racing on *wadi*-bashing rounds in Dubai—would have missed it, had he not been familiar with it. But we were in safe hands (down to the state government-mandated speed regulator and panic button for tourist cabs).

As we stepped out and walked in—there was a nip in the air—it felt like entering another world, a world where old-growth trees and verdure held sway. The Mangalam Carp Estate was set up in the 1800s by Colin Auley Mackenzie, a pioneer planter of the era. He was also one of the founders of the Ooty Club, and his old bungalow at the estate is the centrepiece of Pepper Trail, as this boutique hospitality venture is called. In 1932, the estate was purchased by P. Balram Kurup, a pioneer in the cultivation of rare spices and aromatic plants as well as the extraction of essential oils. The area is a major producer of eucalyptus oil to this day. Thanks to his vision, the plantation has an impressive bio-diversity of plant species.

Pepper Trail is run by his grandson, Anand Jayan, ever the attentive, genial host (seeing my dusty, travel-fatigued visage, he promptly organised an al fresco massage session for me). A tad shy, get him talking and you will find he's a mine of information on Wayanad. The package comes with a sardonic sense of humour, which makes him excellent dinner company.

Meals are multi-course affairs, and the food authentic, local fare. Pepper Trail will remain permanently etched in my memory as the place where I discovered baby mango pickle. Over dinner, Anand opened up. All he had ever wanted to do is travel the world—he still gets away whenever he can—but life had other plans for him clearly. Pepper Trail is his labour of love and he keeps chiselling away at it, being the perfectionist he is.

Set in a clearing, the 140-year-old colonial bungalow has been restored with great care, and houses antiques, colonial furniture and family heirlooms. To the original bungalow, Anand has added a couple of tree houses. The treehouses are built high in the canopy of jackfruit trees, 40 feet above ground level, accessed by elevated walkways. The jackfruit trees grow *in* the room. When I visited, they were in fruit. Theoretically, you could have breakfast in bed, if ripe jackfruit were your thing. Then there is a row of plantation villas and newly minted pool villas, with temperature-controlled pools. I was installed in one of the latter. Lavish and tasteful, yet understated, it had a koi pond encircling it. The pool villas have, expectedly, seen a lot of interest from guests post-pandemic. I have to say, though, that after seeing them all, I had a hard time picking a favourite.

Next day, I woke up to birdcall. Wayanad, quite prosaically, derives its name from 'Vayal Naadu' or 'land of paddy fields'. There's something antique about the land which the name fails to capture. Humans have been in the area since at least the 10th century BCE and there's evidence of New Stone Age civilisation in the hills. Wayanad's No. 1 attraction are the Edakkal Caves—sitting on top of the Ambukuthi Hill—and we set out early to explore them, intending to beat the crowds.

Past the ticketing window, it was a steep ascent up a metal staircase. Before the staircase was built, enthusiasts just scrambled up. It's on the World Heritage waitlist, and when I entered the cool confines

*** Wayanad is a district in the northeast of Kerala with administrative headquarters at Kalpetta. Set high on the Western Ghats, the altitude here ranges from 700 to 2,100 metres. The district was formed on 1 November, 1980 as the 12th district of Kerala by carving out areas from Kozhikode and Kannur districts. Nearly 900 sq km of the district is forest. There are three municipal towns: Kalpetta, Mananthavady and Sulthan Bathery. The district is home to many tribal communities**

Theyyam

A ritual form of dance worship—featuring dramatic face painting and costumes—theyyam is popular in Kerala and Karnataka. In Kerala, it is performed in the northern districts of Kasargod, Kannur and parts of Wayanad and Kozhikode (basically, the area which used to be the Kolathunadu kingdom). If you travel to north Kerala between October and April, don't miss a performance. Over the course of the dance, the performer slowly transforms into the particular deity the theyyam is for.

↙ The heritage bungalow at Pepper Trail

↑ The Ambukuthi Hill, home to the Edakkal Caves

↓ Govindan, the master archer, takes aim

← Rock art inside the Edakkal Caves

↑ Sunset and the Arabian Sea at Neeleshwar

of the main cave, I could see right away why. The walls are covered with petroglyphs (rock carvings) depicting scenes and characters from deep antiquity. Some inscriptions in Tamil Brahmi script are also present. There's a richness of detail in the art.

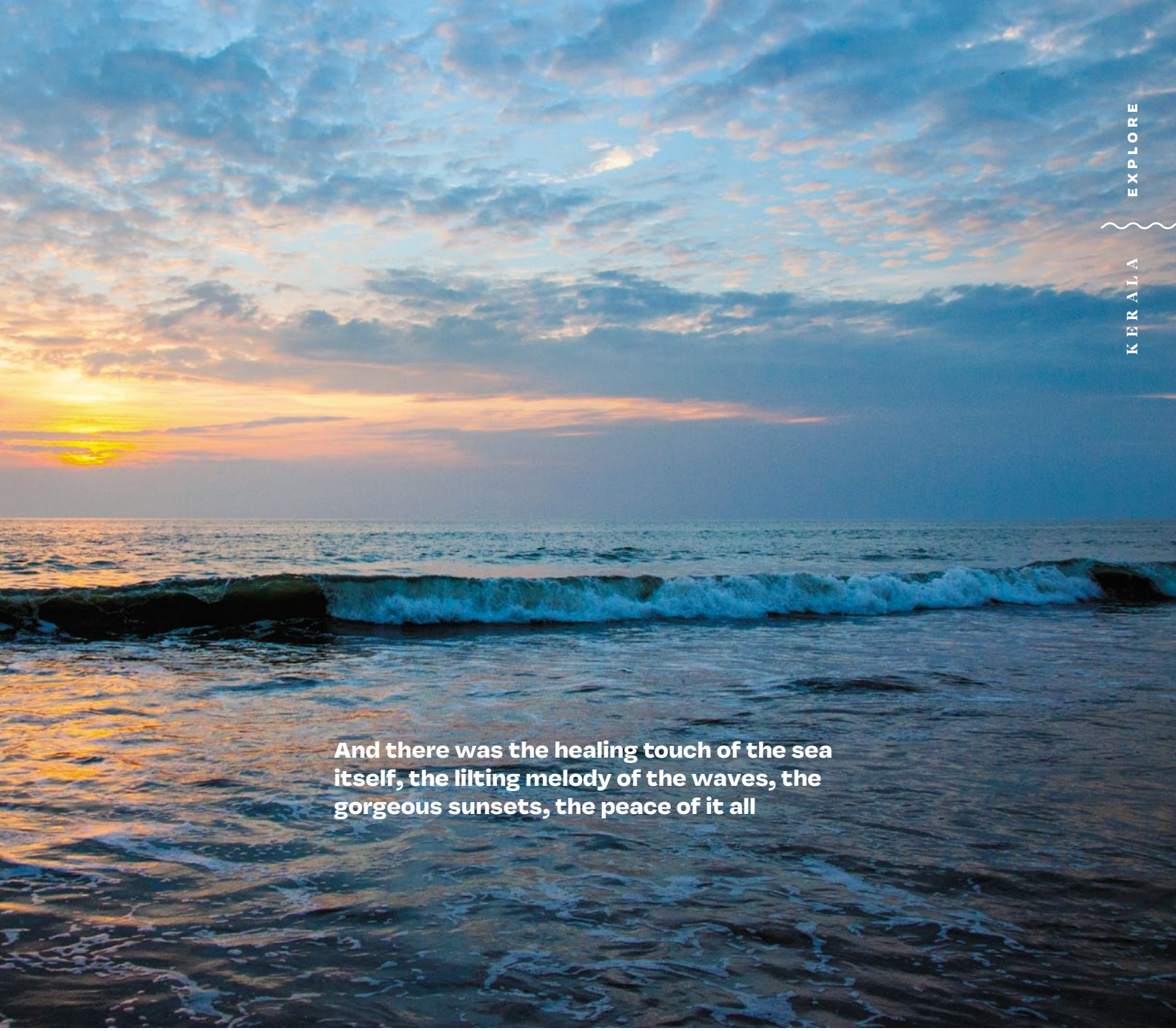
The ancients must have used it as protection from harsh weather and predators. It's not technically a cave, Edakkal meaning 'a stone in between'. A 30-foot-deep fissure was caused when one part of the rock split away, presumably during a geologic event. Legend, however, has it that an arrow shot by Lord Rama caused the cleft. A rock weighing several tons covers the gap, forming the roof of the shelter.

People in these parts are no strangers to fine archery, we discovered shortly. Driving to the home of one of the last traditional archers of the Kuruma community, I was expecting a lean, mean, killing machine. Govindan could not have been more different. The gentlest of souls, he enthralled us with his tales and showed off his superlative skills with bow and arrow.

Given the popularity of Edakkal—and the consequent pressure on it—local government bodies are making an effort to carve out new tourist attractions in the district, with a view to generating employment and revenue as well as distributing the visitor load more equitably.

We saw a few: the views were stunning without exception. A centre for bamboo craft turned out to be an eye-opener.

If you chose, you could have a perfectly nice holiday without ever leaving Pepper Trail (barring, of course, a quick trip to the spice shop just outside for a bit of retail therapy). I realised this when we explored the estate that afternoon. One could have walked but, after an epic lunch, the jeep was tempting. It was a wise move, I thought, as the scale of the estate dawned on me. A pavilion overlooked a small lake, ideal for a tea break. There were pre-historic dolmens. There were tea bushes as far as the eye could see. There were interesting birds. Beyond the



And there was the healing touch of the sea itself, the lilting melody of the waves, the gorgeous sunsets, the peace of it all

mountains on the horizon was Ooty.

Wayanad is one prong of a tourism triangle—more green than golden—that Altaf promotes, the others being his Neeleshwar Hermitage beach property and the luxurious Lotus houseboat. All in all, the full Kerala experience.

SONG OF THE River

We bid a reluctant farewell to Wayanad, but there was a boat we had to catch. Tourism in Kerala is synonymous with them. But when you think of a Kerala houseboat or *kettuvallom*, images of Lake Vembanad—that ethereal, landlocked ocean—typically spring to mind. Not enough tourists know that north Kerala has its fair share of backwaters, although short cruises for locals do ply here. Thankfully, the tourism department is trying to popularise the circuit now.

The jetty was at Payyanur, close to the legendary Payyanur Temple which, sadly, we weren't able to visit owing to Covid restrictions. At the boat we were welcomed with cold towels, temperature checks and organic cotton masks. And then we were off, sailing ever so gently on the Valiyaparamba backwaters.

Lotus is unique among Kerala houseboats in having an upper deck, great for soaking in some vitamin D, dining under the stars and, indeed, sleeping under them. There was a chef at hand to rustle up gourmet multi-course meals. My bedroom—there are just two in all—on the lower deck came with an attached bath and a private balcony. If you want a socially-distanced holiday, there's little to beat a private houseboat. On the route were villages and a sprawling fish market to explore, but we had to exercise caution owing to the pandemic. It was good to learn that, committed as it is to sustainable tourism practices, Lotus releases no waste into the waters.

Next morning, we had breakfast on the

↑ A plant species that thrives in Kerala

↓ Healthy breakfast by the sea at Neeleshwar Hermitage

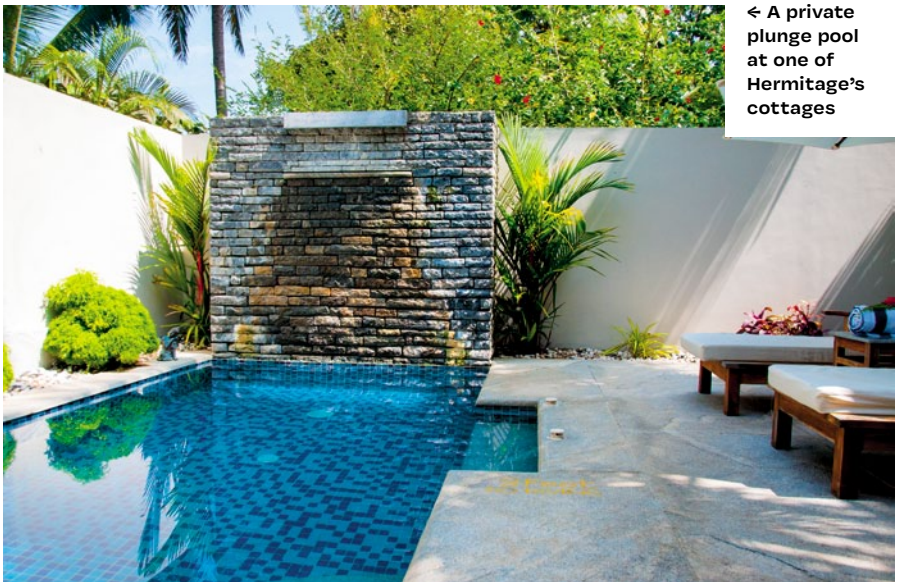
→ The yoga teacher at the property

deck as the sun came up in front of us, a sublime sight. We entered the Tejaswini River before disembarking near Neeleshwar. A short drive later, we were being welcomed again, now at the Hermitage.

LIFE'S A Beach

Neeleshwar Hermitage is Altaf's labour of love, and the first luxury resort in the area. In its wake, many have followed, but none has been able to match up. The resort embraces a chic, minimalist aesthetic, with local elements like thatched roofs worked in.

There are just 18 cottages, and the property has direct beach access. The



← A private plunge pool at one of Hermitage's cottages

↑ Cottage at Neeleshwar Hermitage

pricing, geared towards a foreign clientele, has ensured exclusivity. The pandemic, however, has compelled it to pivot and embrace the domestic market as well.

There are enough activities to keep the restless occupied, and a daily dispatch lists them out. These include cooking classes at which I, apparently, excelled. Altaf ate my efforts without complaint after all.

THERAPY FOR
The Soul

The highlight, though, has to be the Priya Spa. Offering five spacious treatment rooms built around a courtyard, it runs under the care of Dr Suma, the in-house Ayurvedic doctor. All therapies are preceded by a complimentary consultation with her. No one has ever explained the Ayurvedic concept of *doshas* to me better than her. Apart from nudging you towards the right therapy, Dr Suma also offers lifestyle and dietary advice. If you pay heed, the benefits of the consultation with stay with you for a long, long time.

While there are many therapies on offer—and I tried a few—what stood out for me was the unique Kalari massage. Practiced by the martial artists of Kerala, it is done by a therapist standing over you and massaging you with his feet. Yup, deep tissue in the truest sense.

Venturing forth from the property can be therapeutic too. On a village walk—respecting social-distancing norms, of course—I was glad to observe that the locals had not lost any of their traditional skills. A wizened old matron wove a palm frond in a matter of seconds and it didn't take the coconut climber any longer to fetch tender coconuts for us from atop a tree. Then we went boating in a canoe. The promise of fresh toddy did not materialise but the oversight was fixed by evening and I had the desired libation with my seafood dinner at Meenakshi, the beachside restaurant.

And there was the healing touch of the sea itself, the lilting melody of the waves, the gorgeous sunsets, the peace of it all.

The highlight of the trip was witnessing my first theyyam performance. It was also the first theyyam of the season in that temple and only a select few had been invited to attend, making it all the more special. The deity it was dedicated to was Muthappan, actually a personification of two figures: Thiruvappana or Valiya Muthappan (Vishnu) and Vellatom or Cheriya Muthappan (Shiva). If you think the Durga puja *dhaakis* know a thing or two about drums, wait till you hear the theyyam drummers at their peak. It's an absorbing experience like no other, commanding total attention. At the end of it, I felt blessed.

Indeed, the entire week—well spent immersing myself in all things Kerala—had been something of a blessing. From the healing hills to the quiet waterways, the soothing seaside and the fervour of theyyam...One couldn't ask for more.

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28

HIMACHAL PRADESH

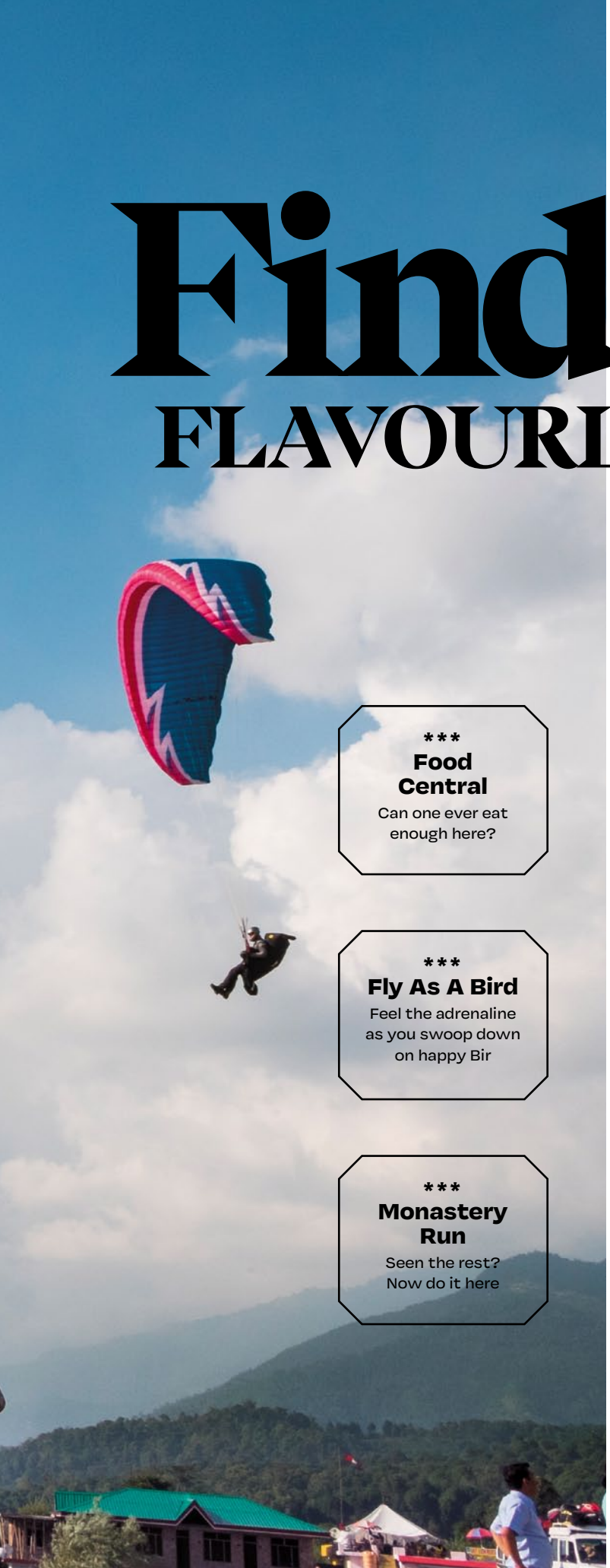
PRANNAY PATHAK

went café-hopping in paragliding hotspot Bir, and found the billing justified

↗ Bir—a place to eat, pray, and love

PHOTGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK

Finding FLAVOURLAND



***
Food Central
Can one ever eat enough here?

***
Fly As A Bird
Feel the adrenaline as you swoop down on happy Bir

***
Monastery Run
Seen the rest? Now do it here

I

REALLY WISH THIS ACCOUNT COULD BE NARRATED IN REVERSE EVEN THOUGH

I wouldn't change the order in which it actually happened. I did give cheating you a bit some thought. I could just tell you that I first went to Dharamkot and not Bir for my long-due café crawl in the hills. But as I sat looking jadedly at my beverage and then at the woman who had collapsed on her partner's shoulder and was gazing away at the faraway hill, eyes wide awake, as if in a Fleetwood Mac song, I decided to tell you as it happened.

But first a little about the drink that was on my table. The perky honey-lemon-ginger tea is at most places and times, decent at worst and unbelievably uplifting at best. At Morgan's Place—seemingly Dharamkot's best-known café—I couldn't believe I had sipped half a glass of hot lemonade on an unusually sunny day. Making our way through all the smoke in search of some crisp mountain air and some half-decent coffee, we hiked through the one-lane village wearily, downsizing our choices with each shut door we encountered. Finally, at a café named Moonlight, where digital nomads smoked endlessly and two enormous German Shepherds strutted from one table to the other, we had Turkish coffee and falafel.

THE BIR Buzz

In Bir, where we went looking the previous day for an up-and-coming café movement with quite a billing, things, however, were different. Everyone we had met had vouched for the food and the environment in the village—one half of the paragliding site adventurers and frequent travellers in these

← What else but plain old momos at Moonlight Cafe in Dharamkot

↓ Sip on some cold coffee and admire the decor at Silver Linings

↑ June 16 Café seems to have perfected the art of the shakshouka

→ Some Israeli-style coffee with the traditional elaichi punch

parts know as Bir-Billing. Harmit Singh, co-founder of Exsul, a travel company that curates experiences in the Kangra Valley, had sounded particularly excited. The young scions of the tea-growing Prakash family, too, had their share of good things to say. And that was how we decided to do the hour-and-a-quarter's drive from Palampur, our base, to Bir.

On the day of our visit, the sun was out in all its glory. It was early summer but it seemed business as usual in the paraglider's Bir. The streets swarmed with cyclists riding rented bikes and backpackers with rucksacks on their backs. Amar, our capable friend driving us, pulled over at what was really a small establishment whose underdone façade would have meant that only insiders knew about the exciting flavour experiments cooking inside.

Anyway, we stepped inside, and having greeted the silent lady at the reception with a smile indiscernible from under our mask, settled down at the table near the entrance. The lady, as we later found out, was actor Ritu Barmecha—sister of *Udaan* (2010) star Rajat Barmecha—and co-owner of the café along with her husband, Sumit Soni, also an actor. The name is June 16, after the date Sumit 'professed his love' to her—as everyone finds out. I did too.

For all its understated exterior, a modish vibe fills the café area inside. A chalkboard menu describes the fare on offer; there's an impressive variety of coffee, too, from the usual lattes and mochas to Vietnamese and cortado. On a hot day, one could order the Kokum Cooler or the equally interesting-sounding Beetroot Lemonade. The breakfast section had some interesting picks as well, but it not being breakfast time gave me the excuse to order shakshouka and Nutella pancakes.

As far as the hippie-village phenomenon goes, Bir seems hippie enough. That familiar profusion of fluttering prayer flags and monasteries and respected institutions like the Deer Park can be found here, too. There's a Tibetan Colony and matted-haired and pajama-wearing backpackers, and shaggy mountain dogs enthusiastic about being petted. Though I will say—and you may disagree—there is a distinct sense of purpose in the goings-on here, as opposed to the do-anything charm that pervades the iconic Tibetan enclave of McLeodganj and its diminutive sibling Dharamkot.

The sun was out in all its glory. It was early summer but it seemed business as usual in Bir. The streets swarmed with cyclists and backpackers with rucksacks on their backs

The Deer Park, established in 2006, is an educational institution in tune with the spirit of Nalanda from ancient India. It conducts workshops and courses in disciplines such as Buddhist literature, Kashmir Shaivism, wilderness writing, classical music, calligraphy and a lot else throughout the year.

This whole difference in vibe is definitely to be credited to its status as one of the country's top paragliding destinations. It is this difference that trickles down into the café business in both places, not to mention the vast difference in taste. And the shakshouka at June 16, rustled up and brought to our table by Sumit, tasted just perfect—a gooey indulgence that carried the familiar anxiety that most good experiences do. The Nutella pancakes

↑ Almost out of a Western: At Avva, Bir's only south Indian café

↓ Café Moonshine Madness is known for its trippy murals

looked just as fabulous as they tasted.

Across the road, a little further on, is Moonshine Madness Café, which, by the looks of it, is meant for more boisterous crowds. The café can be spotted easily as you enter Bir, and is known for its trippy vibe. Our visit saw service a bit low, so I asked for a blueberry smoothie, which took a while to be whipped up. During that time, I checked out the psychedelic artwork painted on the walls and enjoyed the view of the street from the community seating area on the first floor.

WILD WEST MEETS
Hippie Chic

Cafés in Bir are largely just lined in quick succession by both sides of the road that takes one to the landing site. For our run, we had a list in hand, thanks to Harmit. There are quite a few here for only so much of one's appetite—so get recommendations. Our selections had passed through multiple hands, so we kept walking and having crossed the landing site—a meadow that looked a little drier than usual under the daytime sun—came upon Silver Linings, a curious establishment in a garden setting whose coffee came highly recommended.

We deliberated on grabbing some homestyle, wood-fired pizza with a side of waffles at the cute-looking Gliders Pizzeria, but then decided against it.

At Silver Linings, a wooden signpost signals one's arrival and the café itself waits in a corner of the same field that sees hundreds of people make haphazard landings. We entered the premises and were left amazed by what we saw—a latticed wooden frame supporting a slate-panelled, sloping ceiling and mud-plastered walls. Proprietor and de-facto barista Sanjay Thakur explained that the feature helped with temperature control. It looked like a hippie café right out of the Wild West, but that spell was broken by the iced frappe that is served in a chilled mason jar.

I proceeded to make some conversation with the no-nonsense Thakur, and it turned out that the man is a paragliding pilot when he is not fixing sandwiches (ask for the aubergine ones) and burritos at his kewl café. Thakur has been running the place after his partner had to rush back home owing to a COVID-19 emergency. The pandemic has got everybody thinking, myself included. How were things earlier?

↑ Bir—which café can make the most heads turn?

↓ Mrs and Mr Dikonda of Avva's Café

In what ways have they changed? How are they going to be when all of this is over? Earlier, I would just walk into a restaurant, order and pay, do my business and walk out. But when everything came crashing down in 2020, I started wondering the exact same things that you were wondering.

I would get pretty good answers next door. The last name on our list was Avva's, which, as anyone who has been to Bir in the past three years knows, is Bir's only café/eatery serving south Indian fare. Its sea vessel-like calmness—grounded on both levels by gravel flooring and its contemporary white exteriors reminiscent of establishments in Santorini—exists in the middle of a field of gregarious golden-green stalks of wild grass that wave and chortle when whooping paragliders float unheroically to the ground.

MAN AND Wife

Avva's is run by the cutest couple around—the chatty Sunil Dikonda manages the counter and keeps affairs in order while his spouse, the shy and ever-smiling Sunanda Dikonda, is in charge of the kitchen. Before we ordered, a steel tumbler of tangy, hot rasam covered with a little dish of fragrant boiled *channa* (an appetite-booster) was served. We placed the order and, seizing the right moment, I stole Mr Dikonda for a quick chat.

The jolly middle-aged gentleman from Pune told me that the couple started the place after their son, employed with an advertising agency in Delhi and smitten by the charms of Bir, urged them to move here and start their own restaurant serving Andhra-style South Indian fare. First, they refused, but the son persisted and finally got them to relocate. The man has endless stories to tell about their experiences in Bir—including how a young woman once stayed back till the restaurant was done for the day, to request them to make her their *bahu* so she could eat all the great food that Mrs Dikonda makes!

> The shakshouka, available at cafés throughout Bir, is an inventive one-pot Maghrebi dish, which, in its present form, features eggs poached in a thick, creamy sauce with tomatoes, olive oil, green peppers, cumin, onions and garlic.

It isn't just the Dikondas who moved here from far away in search of an idyllic life. Ritu and Sumit of June 16 Café, too, were charmed by the youthful vibe of the paragliding hub. Interestingly, at first glance, Bir is no Khajjiar or Darjeeling, but I suppose there is some appeal that draws people who love food—both cooking and eating it—here. It could also be that the ever-growing demand among adventure buffs and the active paragliding community, has metabolised into this throbbing café movement. As opposed to the Israeli, Tibetan and faux-Maghrebi fare you get throughout Dharamkot and McLeodganj, Bir has a richer smorgasbord to offer to the visitor. And it is just the beginning.

traveller BIR HIMACHAL

How to reach

The picturesque **KANGRA AIRPORT** in Gaggal (42km) is just over an hour's drive away.

BY ROAD You could take the classic road-trip route; Bir is 516km or 10hrs from Delhi and 283km or 6hrs from Chandigarh. Check the latest travel SOPs including RT-PCR requirement and possible border closures before you hit the road

Where to Stay

- Siddhartha Green Resort has a great location, offers spacious rooms at affordable rates. Zostel and goStops also provide affordable community accommodation but might not be safe, keeping in mind Covid-19 concerns.
- Araiya Palampur (35km) has duplexes and executive suites in a resort setting while RS Sarovar Portico provides 42 well-furnished rooms and suites along with a revolving restaurant

What to Do

- Go café-hopping in Bir and chat up their illustrious proprietors. Hire a bicycle for some added fun
- Tour operators in these parts do really nice village walks that culminate in high tea at points with arresting views. Ask for one if you're staying at a property that offers curated tours or just call Harmit Singh of Exsul Travel (+91-9816009603) before travelling
- Go paragliding—it'll reinstate your faith in adventure after a while of playing it safe
- Always wanted a Tibetan *chuba*? Grab the opportunity and shop for some local wares at the Tibetan Colony nearby
- Feel like a monastery run? Bir has quite a few, including the Drukpa Kagyu, Tsering Jong, Pelpung and Chokling. While at it, also pay a visit to the Deer Park

What to Eat

- Shakshouka at June 16 Café and berry smoothies just about anywhere must be had. Silver Linings has a mean, no-fuss and chill cold coffee
- You cannot come to Kangra and not savour *dham*—head for Maranda near Palampur and ask for the Thakur Dhaba
- Also ask for any local concoctions available in the drinks menu. Saunfi/local anise yields a fun cocktail and so do local citrus fruits
- In Bir, you'll be digging into Andhra-style south Indian fare at Avva's anyway but do ask for their homemade *achaar*

STEP OUTSIDE

LOOK WITHIN

UNWTO AFFILIATE MEMBER

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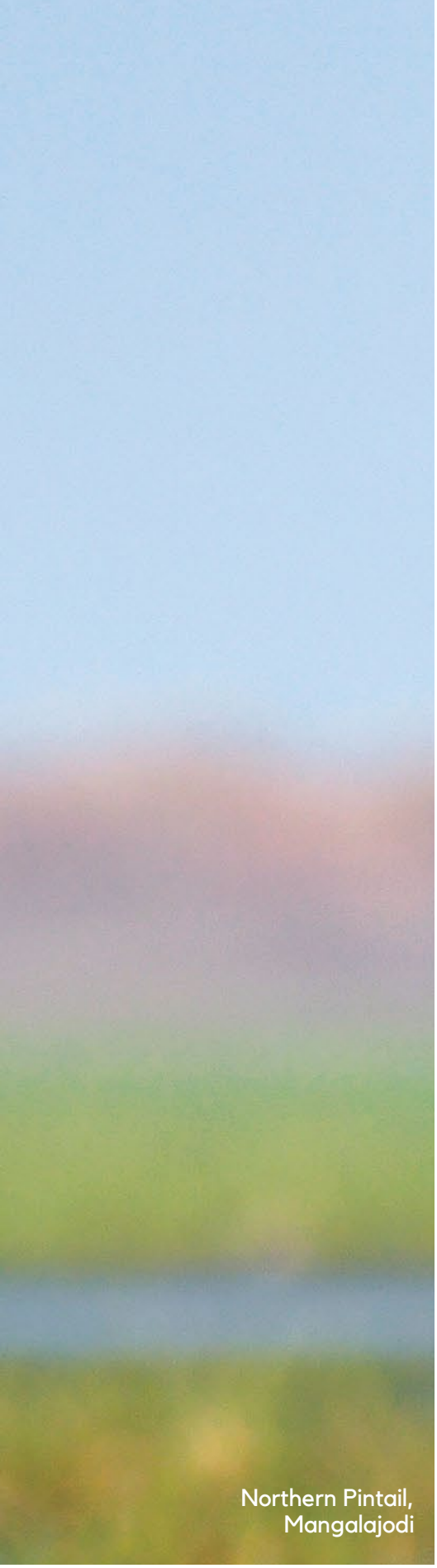
Gujarat Tourism



Northern Pintail,
Mangalajodi

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AJODHYA HILLS

THE other AJODHYA

***
Scenic Treks
The area is a trekker's paradise

***
Waterbodies
Khairabera, Murguma, Upper and Lower Dams

***
Culinary Highlights
Bengali fare, tribal inflections

It pulsates with raw, natural beauty when it's not throbbing with culture.

SOHINEE BASU

stumbles across peace while trekking through dense forests under starlit winter nights in Purulia

↖ The sublime and sprawling Ghatkhola Waterfall

IF THERE IS ONE THING THAT THE BYGONE YEAR CAN BE CREDITED FOR, it is helping me arrive at my own eureka moment when I realised that my inherent wanderlust shared a directly proportional relationship with the months spent at home, locked in within four walls, with only the window of daydreaming flung open. So come January, with college work pressure building to a crescendo, a long, scenic drive, perhaps a bit of fresh wintry air, the gurgle of waterfalls and the chill of the hills seemed to be just what the doctor had ordered—and it manifested in the form of Ajodhya Hills in West Bengal's Purulia district.

For the longest time, Ajodhya Hills, located some 330 kilometres from Kolkata, was the hotbed of Maoist activity and tourism was almost nil in these hills which happen to be the easternmost part of the Chhota Nagpur Plateau. During my first visit in 2013, when only limited stay options were available and visitors were warned against stepping out after sundown, to travelling here some eight years down the line, with the roads smoothened out, bordered by flower-showers and patient, tall trees, the beauty of rural Bengal in all its regal display—I was in for a surprise.

In winter, Ajodhya Hills wears a cape of beauty all its own, sans too much network availability (thank you for once, Vodafone?), and your senses grow more attuned to your surroundings. The weather is all-inviting, the sunlight kisses the tree-tops, filtering in like rays of hope, the hills cradle the water in the dams, reflect the blue skies in the manmade lakes while evening brings the mixed melody from the chirping crickets and the raucous beats of the drums (dhamsa, madol) from the nearby village where a Chhau performance has just begun. You look up, briefly, to see the night sky studded with stars, and you find the fleeting moment of peace again.

WITH A NEW lens

In memory of my first trip to the Ajodhya Hills along bouncy roads, I had said quiet prayers for my weakly coping back, before embarking on an eight-hour-long drive. Powered by a heart-filling dhaba breakfast of butter tandoori roti and chicken tadka, it seemed like my prayers were automatically answered when the roads stretched out smoothly before us, past Barjora-Durgapur-Bankura and onwards into Purulia. The quickest indication of the changing of districts perhaps comes from the soil, transitioning from the muddy alluvial to coarse, dusty red to arid browns as we entered the largely rocky terrain of Purulia, scenic and attractive even in its ruggedness.

It was nearing dusk by the time our vehicle crept up the mildly serpentine

↗ A boy dives into a stream in Purulia. Waterbodies are common here

↗ Hairpin bends in the Ajodhya Hills

roads. The mercury dipped a little lower, we climbed a little higher and, finally, some 712 metres above sea level, with a bluish fog crowding the distant green hills, we arrived at the other Ajodhya.

At Ajodhya you will be spoiled by the number of things to see. As I pored over the intricate map framed in our hotel's reception area, trying to find the best route for next day's outing, indecision was knocking at my door. The manager of the hotel—a certain Bidyut Dey—middle-aged, smiling but curious, bespectacled eyes, came to the rescue. He fished out a pen, grabbed the nearest notepad and etched out a map-route for us to follow.

When dawn broke the following day and I stood at the window with my cup of elaichi chai—the sunlight still locked in an embrace with the fog among the trees of the Kalha forest, I heard the migratory birds chirping in the distance, serenading the aubade. Armed with the hand-drawn map, we set off towards Upper Dam, our first stop for what promised to be a long day. Set amidst softly curving hills with the placid blue waters of the dam nestled in between, Upper Dam is a splendid sight.

The quickest indication of the changing of districts perhaps comes from the soil. It was nearing dusk by the time our vehicle crept up the mildly serpentine roads. The mercury dipped a little lower, we climbed a little higher and, finally, some 712 metres above sea level, with a bluish fog crowding the distant green hills, we arrived at the other Ajodhya

In fact, Ajodhya has a lot of dams on offer—Khairabera Dam, Murguma Dam, Lower Dam, et al—all indicating the region's dependency on hydel power. After Upper Dam, it was customary to follow the trail to Lower Dam before making our way to Turga Dam and Falls. Right next to Turga, Marble Lake is a must stopover. Naturally reminiscent of the Madhya Pradesh wonder, Ajodhya's Marble Lake is, however, manmade. Yet another star attraction is Bamni Falls (take a deep breath before you attempt this descent), crashing over tempered rocks and gurgling in three different stages. Seeing the falls, despite the physical exhaustion it entailed (some 600 odd steps need to be overcome both ways), was an experience worth having.

Making our way from Bamni, we lost our way trying to find Murguma Dam. After traversing questionable 'roads', with the sun racing behind our backs, we made it on time to catch the dying rays of the sun as it hid behind the hills at Murguma. Wonderfully serene and exceptionally scenic, the natural mud dam lay calmly as nature dipped its paintbrush on its watery palette, dissolving the hues of dusk in the still waters.

CALL OF Culture

Purulia may be famous for a lot of things but the heartbeat of its culture is the dusty little artistic village of Charida, near Baghmundi, which has been labelled as Mukhosh Gram ('Village of Masks'). These particular masks are associated with Chhau. A form of dance mixed with martial arts, it's the traditional folk dance of the region and the Chhau recitals usually enact stories from the Mahabharata and Ramayana. In Charida, the narrow roads are delineated by thatched roof establishments with artisans dotting either side of it, heads bent over, paintbrush in hand, deftly making strokes and adding life to the masks.

However, Chhau is no longer performed regularly, having become an occasional spectacle at fairs. So, while we wound our way back to our hotel a little after sundown, we could spot a brightly lit-up outdoor stage in the distance and the euphoric beats of drums as a Chhau performance played out. The beats are quite infectious and you are easily reminded of scenes from Ray's Aranyer Din Ratri, the santhali flavour of the music difficult to ignore.

A SKY FULL OF Stars

Perhaps Ajodhya saved the very best for last and, after a hearty meal of fluffy tawa roti and the softest of mutton preparations, I decided to take an unassuming walk outside through the surrounding Kalha forest. Seeing me head off, our ever-friendly and extremely knowledgeable manager, Mr Dey offered me company. He went to get a torch and a walking stick, before leading the way for our night-trek.

Leaving the lights of our hotel behind, we set off towards the forest trail where only the moonlight gently shimmered and bounced off the tall trees that rustled with the winter air. Hands tucked into my jacket pocket, phones put away for good and a chill hanging in the air, the trek began. Making our way through the uneven path with twigs and dried leaves scattered on the ground, their crunch alerting us about our impact, we suddenly came to a clearing and my guide for the night asked me to look up. The next few seconds were surreal.

↓ Common nightshade growing in the wild

↑ A herd of cattle enroute Ajodhya

↓ A local mutton preparation

A form of dance mixed with martial arts, Chhau is the traditional folk dance of the region. Recitals usually enact stories from the Indian epics

↑ A demon mask used during Chhau performances

The sky stretched out like an unending carpet of stars, weaving a magical glow on the celestial canvas. Pointing up, my guide expertly etched out the constellations—the Big Dipper here, Orion there, letting his torchlight cross-stitch patterns across the galaxies, forming meaning out of the apparently meaningless. Shining from myriad lightyears away a bright blue or pale orange, the light from some dead, some nascent, some caught-in-between stars still spiralling with their gaseous fury up-close yet seemingly twinkling from a distance, was oddly revelatory, oddly hopeful.

The following day, as I left Ajodhya, I was still starry eyed. I did not visit Ajodhya with a lot of expectations—what could a place marketed as a rugged hill station possibly offer, especially when visited the second time around? But, returning after eight years—older and with a new perspective—I did not see Ajodhya like I had seen it the first time. Instead, I learned to hear music in the gurgle of the Bamni Falls, the beats of Chhau, a strange placidity in the locked-in waters of the myriad dams and the Marble Lake, to find truths behind the most telling of masks, to discover hope in the rays of dawn and poetry in the hues of dusk and, finally, I found the possibility of magic written in the stars in the most hapless of places, asking me to simply look up and believe again.

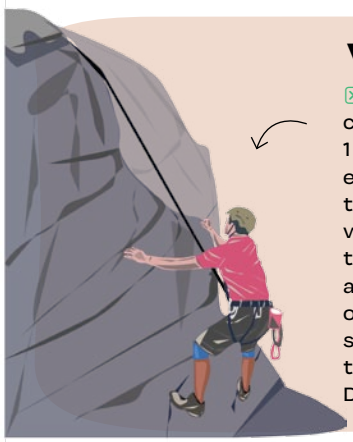
↗ Pakhi Pahar is popular with birders

traveller AJODHYA HILLS

How to Reach Ajodhya Hills is a 330km drive from Kolkata. Or take a train to Purulia Junction. The nearest airport is Ranchi, 115km away

Where to Stay

- The most luxurious property currently is the Kushal Palli Resort (*pic*), offering even spa and pool facilities
- For a more adventurous stay, choose the Kalyan Forest Resort; they have stay options in tents and treehouses as well
- The Eco Adventure Resorts near Khairabera offers brilliant, one-of-a-kind stay experiences



What to Do

- Go trekking and rock-climbing. Treks range from 1 to 2 days and are fairly easy. You can begin your trek from Sirkabad which will take you across several tribal hamlets, rivulets, falls and rocky paths. Watch out for elephants which sometimes come over to the Ajodhya hills from the Dalma range
- Ajodhya is perfect for birdwatching in the winter months. Pakhi Pahar, aside from its resident peacocks, is a great spot
- Being culturally rich, you can visit Charida and watch masks being made for Chhau and, by evening, catch a performance
- You can also try mahua, the local liquor

What to Eat

- Bengali cuisine dominates, but there's an odd fusion with tribal tastes as well
- Think dak bungalow-style chicken and succulent mutton recipes and a definite homely taste
- However, resorts like Kushal Palli are dabbling in multi-cuisine offerings as well and can dish up perfectly steamed momos and warm, comforting soups that suit the hilly location

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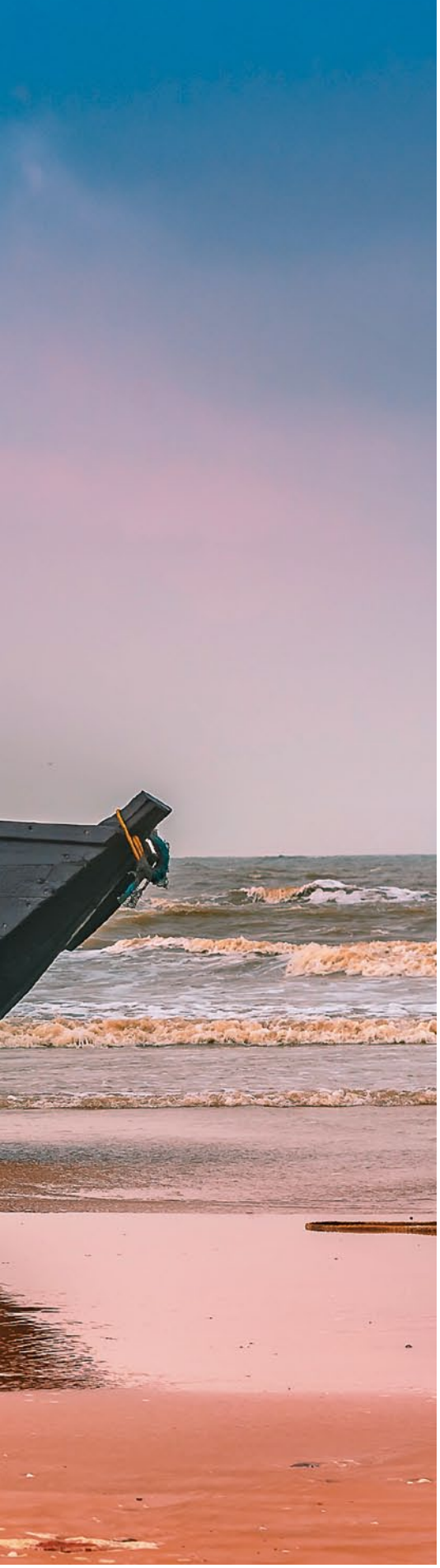
Gujarat Tourism



Incredible India

ODISHA
INDIA'S BEST KEPT SECRET.

Each day, all day, the waves wash a beach clean like a slate — awaiting new footprints in the sand, new burrows of crabs that never seem to rest or retire. And yet, few beaches remain untouched, unspoilt, sullied as they are by plastics and human folly. But like the fishermen who push their boats out to sea every morning, praying for a big haul, no matter what the odds are, we're hoping for a sea change too, along the entire length of the 7,516km Indian coastline... Leading the way in 2018, Chandrabhaga near Konark in Odisha cleaned up its act to become the first Blue Flag beach in all of Asia. Last year, eight other beaches, including the Golden Beach in Puri, also won this globally coveted tag, to set a new record for India. The tide is turning...

And so, we must continue to protect, preserve and celebrate our seascapes, our coasts, and the life they support. At Outlook Responsible Tourism Initiative that is exactly what we do.
Be a responsible traveller. Join the movement!

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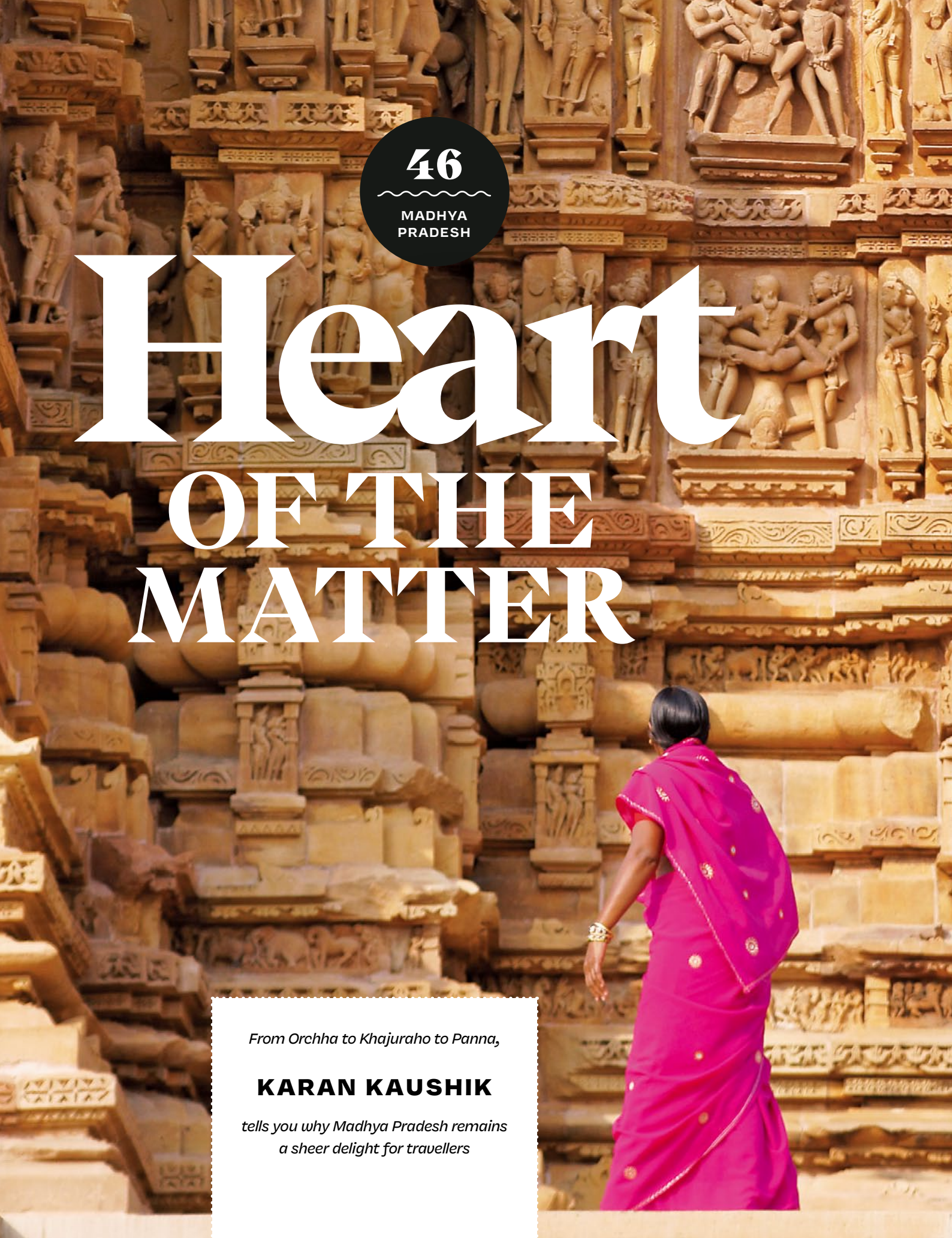
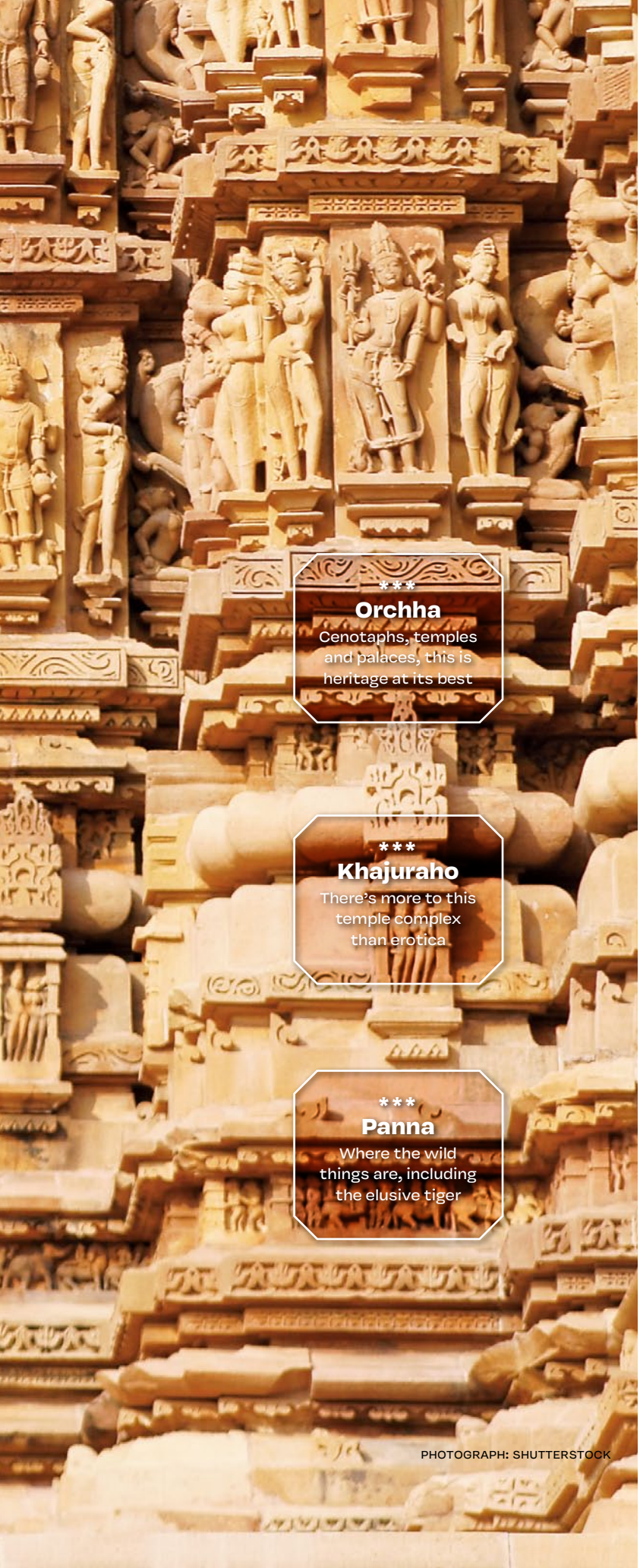
Heart OF THE MATTER



From Orchha to Khajuraho to Panna,

KARAN KAUSHIK

tells you why Madhya Pradesh remains a sheer delight for travellers



PHOTOGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK

↙ The temples at Khajuraho are riveting

EARLIER THIS YEAR, I JOINED A GROUP OF JOURNALISTS AND WRITERS FROM Delhi for a trip to Madhya Pradesh (MP). The tourism sector was bouncing back after a challenging year and things were finally looking good. There couldn't have been a better time to be in the heart of incredible India than late February, when the 47th edition of the Khajuraho Dance Festival—an integral event on the state's cultural calendar—unfurled at the iconic Khajuraho Temples.

You know you are up for a great trip, when you run into William Dalrymple on the early morning train. Dressed in a black pathani and beige shawl and carrying a chic leather suitcase, the eminent historian and author was also embarking on a long heritage sojourn across MP. A visit to his Instagram handle will give you a peak into his envy-inducing trip, which included Gwalior, Morena, Chanderi, Vidisha and Maheshwar among many other lesser-explored gems.

Ours was also going to be a trip largely focussed on exploring a few of the heritage and cultural gems, which make MP such a hot favourite of history and architecture buffs. We would begin in Orchha, explore temples and attend the dance festival in Khajuraho and end with a thrilling safari in Panna. I was excited about Panna. I had already been to Khajuraho and Orchha but visiting a tiger reserve in the tiger state of India had always been on my wish list. It was finally going to come true.

Orchha 2.0

In Orchha, we stayed at MP Tourism's Betwa Retreat, which rests along the banks of the quiet and tranquil Betwa. Nestled amidst lush environs, my luxurious tent cottage made for a great WFH spot. A few of us went to the riverbank after lunch. A sage draped in saffron sat under a colourful umbrella singing *chaupaais* (verses) from the *Ramcharitmanas* on a harmonium.

The last time I was there, Orchha was a nondescript town desperately trying to wake up from its long slumber. But in a matter of just a few years, Orchha has evolved as 'The Place' to visit in MP. Apart from the overall infrastructure, the tourism support network of the town has improved drastically.

You'll now find river bridges that are properly fenced, there's rafting and boating on the Betwa, there are newly built, cemented ghats, and there's even a tourist police checkpost by the river. Some new cafés have also sprung up.

Later in the day, we went sightseeing. From the landmark royal cenotaphs to the glorious Jehangir Mahal and the much-revered Ram Raja Temple, we took in the must-see destinations of Orchha.

What stood out for me, however, was our visit to the Lakshmi Temple. While most temples in India are known for the idols that sit in their sanctum sanctorum or their elaborate façades or towering entrance gates, Orchha's Lakshmi Temple is known for its wealth of gorgeous and tastefully done paintings.

Constructed by Bundela chieftain Raja Bir Singh Deo in 1662 AD, the temple is dedicated to the goddess of wealth, Lakshmi. Raja Prithvi Singh added to the building in 1743 AD. The murals that cover the ceilings and walls of the temple are nothing short of sublime, absolute gems hidden from the usual touristy bustle.

The chef-d'oeuvre of the Lakshmi Temple are the paintings on its ceilings. From scenes inspired by the Ramayana and Gita to the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, they are absolutely stunning.

↑ One of the 64 yoginis at the Maharaja Chhatrasal Museum

CHASING BUNDELA

Legacy

A similar surprise awaited us at Dhubela the next day. Located in Bundelkhand's Chhatarpur district, the sleepy little town is being developed as a tourist pitstop on the way from Orchha to Khajuraho. Here, we walked through Bundela history at the Dhubela Palace. Built by Maharaja Chhatrasal during the 17th-18th century, the palace is home to a well-kept museum. On display are age-old inscriptions, Brahmi scripts, copper plates, sati pillars, lingas, weapons, garments, paintings, etc. Two of the eight galleries showcase inscribed images from the Gupta and Kalchuri periods. Then there are the Jain, Shaivya and Shakti galleries which feature idols of Jain Tirthankaras.

The most intriguing sculptures were the ones on the sprawling lawn outside, which also boasts an imposing statue of Maharaja Chhatrasal. Next up was the Painting Gallery, which pays homage to the emperors of Rewa, Panna and Charkhari. While the different beard styles of the royalty had my attention, I also had great fun at the next door amusement gallery with its strategically placed concave-convex mirrors which distort your figure.

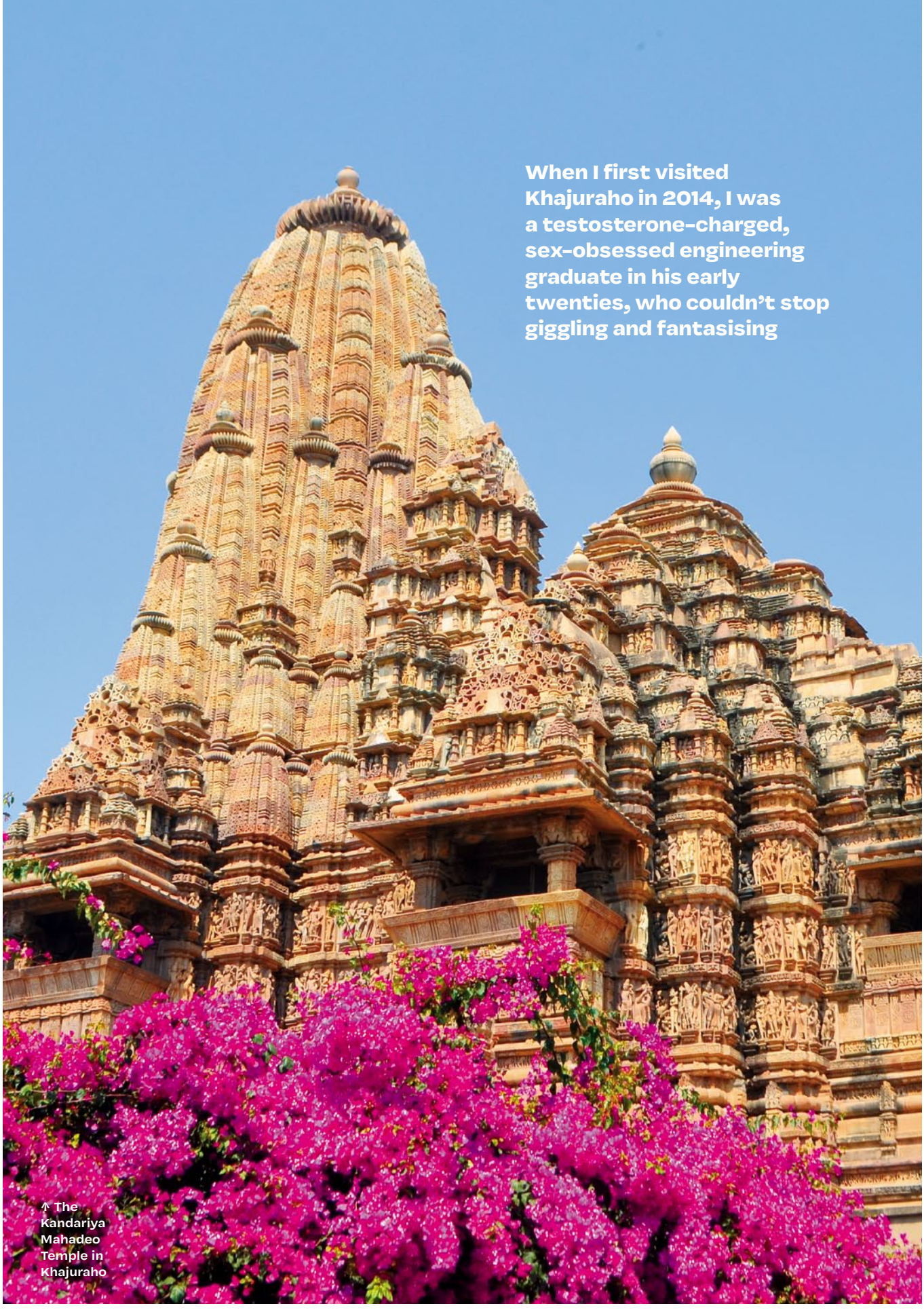
In the northeastern corner of the Dhubela Palace stand the ruins of Mastani Mahal, which narrate the story of the fort dancer Mastani, who was gifted to Peshwa Bajirao by Maharaja Chhatrasal. Right outside the Dhubela Palace, you would see the dilapidated Hridaya Shah Mahal, which was built in 1733 for the eldest son of Maharaja Chhatrasal. Hriday Shah ruled over Panna and this castle served as his retreat.

CULTURAL

Extravaganza

We reached Khajuraho just in time to attend the dance festival which was in its fifth day. It was for the first time in 44 years that the festival was being held on the World Heritage temple group premises. Organised by MP's Department of Culture and Ustad Allauddin Sangeet Kala Akademi with the support of Incredible India, the dance festival was one of the prominent live events

When I first visited Khajuraho in 2014, I was a testosterone-charged, sex-obsessed engineering graduate in his early twenties, who couldn't stop giggling and fantasising



↑ The Kandariya Mahadeo Temple in Khajuraho

↗ Morning jeep safari in Panna National Park

held after the pandemic-induced lockdown.

We were enthralled by the mesmerising performances of celebrated Kuchipudi dancer Avijit Das and Mohiniyattam danseuse Padma Shri Bharati Shivaji and her group. We also explored the vibrant fair which was being held at the same ground and savoured a modest but delicious Bundelkhandi meal at the stall set up by the Food Craft Institute of Khajuraho.

We had simple dishes like kadhi-pakora and methi ki bhaji with birra ki roti and thadula, which is their version of puris, alongside coriander and tomato chutneys. There was coriander rice too and for dessert we had the absolutely amazing lai laddus made of puffed rice and jaggery. The city for sure knows how to welcome its guests.

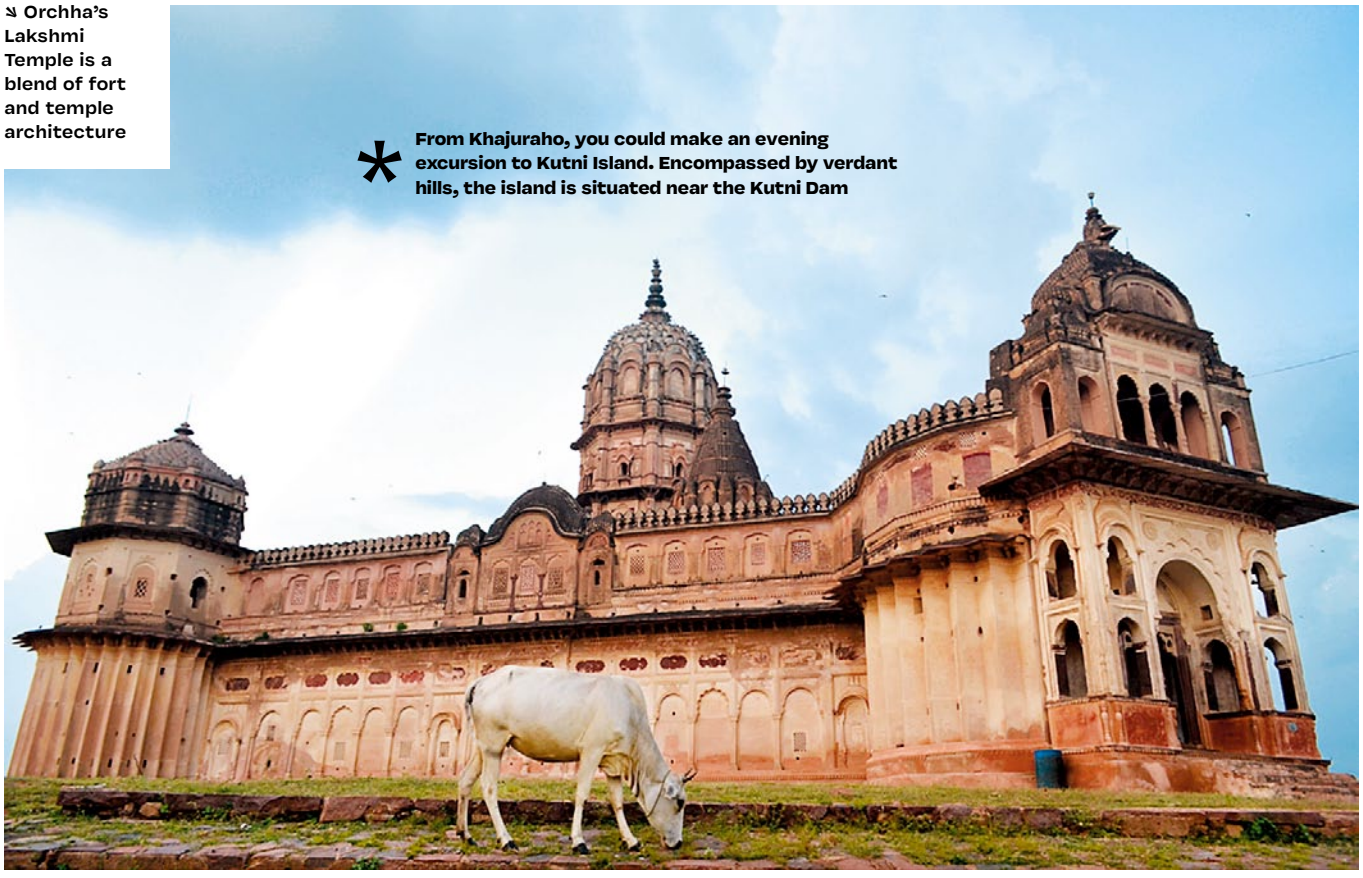
A SYMPHONY IN Stone

The next morning, we visited the western group of temples, which include the most significant of the total 22 temples in Khajuraho that have stood the test of time. Street vendors selling postcards, photobooks, fridge magnets and inappropriate *Kama Sutra*-inspired key chains looked at us with sullen eyes, hopeful of making the day's first sale.

The western group houses prominent temples like Kandariya Mahadeo, Chitragupta, Vishwanath, Lakshmana and Matangeswara. The sun shone bright and we could feel sweet winter's departure on our foreheads which glistened with sweat droplets. Mopping our brows, we hopped from temple to temple trying to embrace the grandiosity of it all.

When I first visited Khajuraho in 2014, I was a testosterone-charged, sex-obsessed engineering graduate in his early twenties, who couldn't stop giggling and fantasising during the temple sightseeing. Seven years later, I had a more mature and fresh perspective to take the temple trail. I was

↗ Painting of Lord Vishnu at Lakshmi Temple, Orchha



↘ Orchha's Lakshmi Temple is a blend of fort and temple architecture

* From Khajuraho, you could make an evening excursion to Kutni Island. Encompassed by verdant hills, the island is situated near the Kutni Dam

able to look beyond the erotica that lends Khajuraho its worldwide fame.

And I would also give a little credit to our guide Anurag Shukla for it. The man has spent 20 years with the temples and claims to have counted each and every stone of each and every temple. His theories on Khajuraho may be debatable but he did make us realise that the temples have much more to them than titillating carvings.

"Jealousy, angst, sorrow, joy, shame, embarrassment...you'll see every emotion in the intricately carved sculptures here... you'll see fighting men, love-sick women, dancing deities, the planetary gods, bearded warriors, celestial divas and much more than sexual positions," Shukla proclaimed. And rightly so. For instance, the Lakshmana Temple featured gorgeous carvings of birds, fishes and animal figures. Similarly, the large idol of Varaha at the Varaha Temple boasted of tastefully done carvings of meditating men and women.

The lintels of the sanctum and the doorjambs at the Kandariya Mahadeo Temple boasted rich floral carvings while the outer walls depicted gods and goddesses and mythical beasts, warriors, hunters, acrobats, musicians, dancers and devotees. At the Chitragupta Temple, a magnificent carving of Lord Vishnu with 11 heads caught our fancy while at the Vishwanath Temple, sculptures of a lady playing the flute, a mother with her child and another lady painting her toes looked impressive.

The last temple we visited was Matangeswara, which continues to be a living place of worship. Dedicated to Lord Shiva, the temple houses an eight-foot lingam and stands outside the precincts of the western group.

OH TIGER, WHERE
art thou?

If there ever was a sample safari on how not be a forest guide, it would be the one we took in Panna. Yes, we could not spot a tiger. Not even a glimpse. But that's not what disappointed us.

We know that it requires sheer luck to spot animals in their natural habitat but we also know that a lot of one's jungle safari experience depends on the guides and drivers. Our guide was on mute mode for most part of the safari, while the jeep driver was absolutely uninterested in helping us track the big cat.

Soon, we made peace with the fact and focussed on enjoying the great landscape of Panna. Blessed with the gentle Ken River and featuring extensive plateaus and gorges, Panna's terrain was surreal. I loved the endless rows of gum trees. Also known as the ghost tree, they looked magnificent with their naked white branches shining under the morning sun.

We also visited the vulture point, where we managed to spot a few vultures. This point serves as home to as many as seven species of vultures of the nine found in India. The giant gorge covered with dense foliage was a sight to behold.

We ended the Panna experience with a nice breakfast at the MP Tourism-run Madla Jungle Camp before heading back to Khajuraho. The safari may not have been the most thrilling that I have undertaken, but it would still be a cherished memory, thanks to the amazing company of my fellow travellers. We are planning to visit Pench, Kanha and Bandhavgarh once the country recovers from the second wave of

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Gujarat Tourism

Eco Retreat, Konark

Incredible India

ODISHA
INDIA'S BEST KEPT SECRET.

At the confluence of the river Kushabhadra and the Bay of Bengal, barely 10km from Konark, lies the dramatic arc that is the Ramchandi beach. Dedicated to the local deity, the beach is ritually bathed in shades of copper and gold each day, as a timeless witness to the most magnificent sunsets and sunrises on the eastern coast... And it is here that a couple of winters ago, yet another ritual was started for discerning travellers who want to immerse themselves in nature for a while.
The Eco Retreat, a glamorous oasis of seasonal, sustainable tents are planted on these shores just for three months every year, wooing those who seek safe, open spaces now. Glampers may also make their way to the Eco Retreats at Hirakud and Bhitarkanika, Daringbadi and Satkosia — all equally charming, eco-conscious and ephemeral.

Celebrate and support people- and planet-friendly travel. At Outlook Responsible Tourism Initiative that is exactly what we do. Be a responsible traveller. Join the movement!

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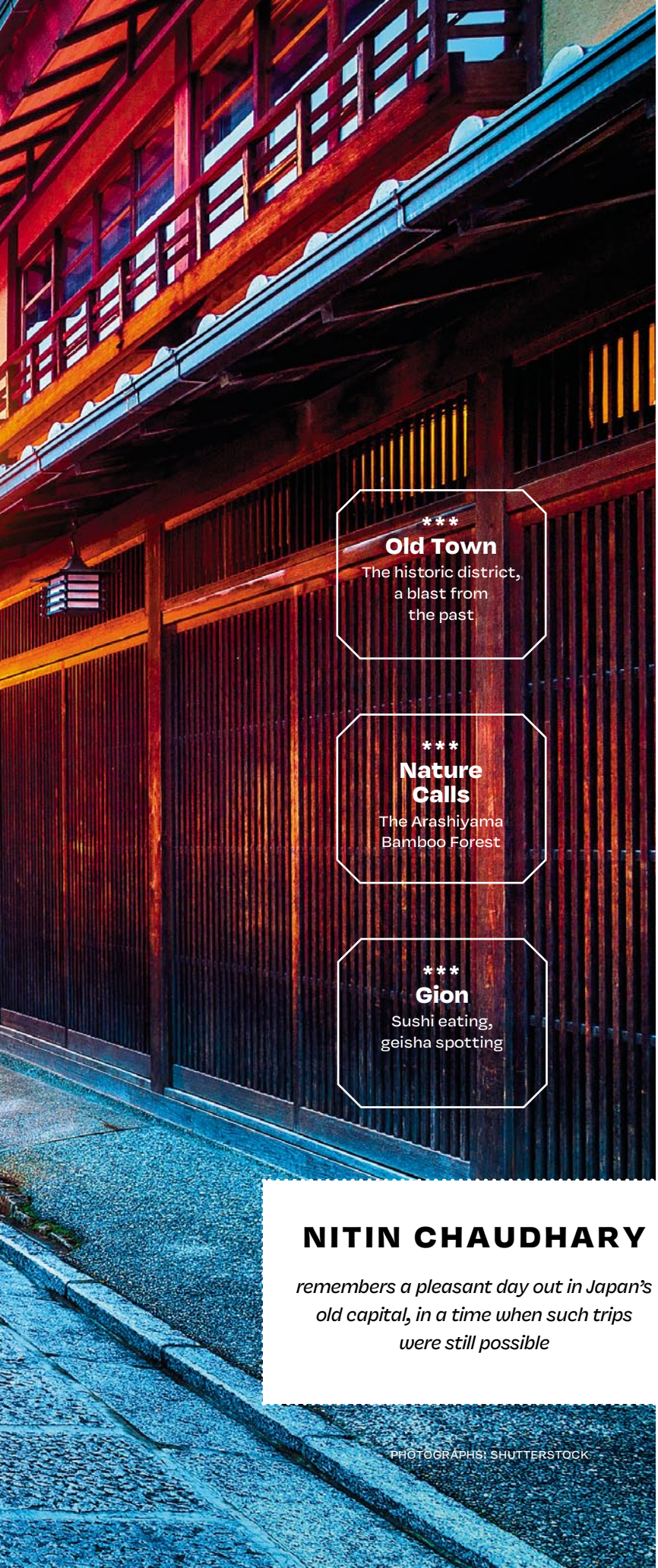
A DAY IN Kyoto



← Yasaka Pagoda and Sannen Zaka Street, Gion

NITIN CHAUDHARY

remembers a pleasant day out in Japan's old capital, in a time when such trips were still possible

PHOTOGRAPHS: SHUTTERSTOCK

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO,

I was in Japan on a business trip. I had reserved a Saturday to explore Kyoto and took the bullet train there.

I was expecting Kyoto to appear like a dreamy apparition in the Japanese countryside, punctuated with shrines at every corner with narrow streams snaking through it. But when the outskirts of the city appeared in the glass window, I was disappointed. It seemed like any other big city bursting at its seams. What I had expected would be a quaint town earmarked with Zen gardens turned out to be just another megapolis.

Or, so I thought.

Myth
AND REALITY

At the train station, I approached the tourist office. After making a note of all I could cover before the day ended, I headed out first to Fushimi Inari Taisha, which is the head shrine of the Inari, located at the base of a 200m-tall mountain also named Inari.

Though Kyoto is a modern city with its fair share of modern apartments, the concrete façade melts away as one approaches the old part of town. I have always believed that travelling is like a modern-day time machine, and that belief was reiterated the moment I entered the shrine enclosure. As I stepped inside, my disappointment with the city melted away, and I was instantly transported to medieval Japan. The Inari complex has a main shrine surrounded with multiple smaller ones, and what this shrine is famous for is its Senbon Torii, a wooded archway painted in vermillion that leads all the way to the shrine on the top of the mountain.

Given that it was February and the famed cherry trees had not yet blossomed, I was not expecting the shrine to be crowded. How wrong I was. The shrine

was teeming with hundreds who had come for 'Fukumairi', that is to pray for good luck for the year. I also bent down in front of the main shrine, pulled the ropes that rang the bells, and said my prayers.

After circumambulating the Senbon Torii-marked trail that snakes up the mountain shrine and back, I was hungry. I googled eating options and was surprised to find that an Indian restaurant featured as one of the best eating joints in Kyoto. I was curious. Although I love sushi, I decided to check out the restaurant. A taxi dropped me in front of a decrepit, unmarked building, and I somehow found my way to the first floor where I found a small, but crowded eatery, doubling up as a hiking goods store. The Japanese couple who owned it ran the place themselves. So popular was the joint that I had to wait for an hour to get a table. It was well worth it, for I was pleasantly surprised by the delicate Indian flavours in the food. I tried to make conversation with the owners, but they spoke no English and were anxious if I, an Indian, would like their food or not. I employed the universal sign language of approval and gave them a thumbs up.

> Kyoto is the capital city of Kyoto Prefecture in Japan. Located in the Kansai region on the island of Honshu, it forms a part of the Keihanshin metropolitan area.

Half the day had passed, and the remaining hours were not enough to cover all the sights—so I prioritised walking the Philosopher's Path over the bamboo forest of Arashiyama. Approximately two kilometres long, the path begins at the Ginkakuji shrine and ends at the Nanzenji shrine.

The Path

LESS TAKEN

Ginkakuji shrine, or the Silver Pavilion, is a Zen temple built in Kyoto's Higashiyama mountains. On entering the arched gateway, Ginkakuji opens up as a box of surprises, which consists of not only the Silver Pavilion and other temple buildings, but also a beautiful moss garden and a dry sand garden. A circular route takes one through the gardens, up a small hillock from where one can admire the whole composition of this masterly creation—featuring ponds with islands and bridges, little streams and gardens, just like a beautiful landscape painting. Finally, I found myself in the Kyoto that I had come searching for—the Kyoto of the pictures I'd seen before. And for once, I felt I should have made time to explore Kyoto deeply, and experienced the Zen temples at peace, perhaps sitting by myself and soaking in the quiet. But for now, I moved on with the clockwork precision dictated by my tight schedule.

Outside the temple complex flows a gentle stream. Alongside the stream is a stone-laid path lined with cherry trees on both sides. This is Kyoto's famed Philosopher's Path, which was named after Nishida Kitaro, one of Japan's most famous philosophers. He walked this path daily on his way to Kyoto University and is said to have practiced meditation while doing so. The cherry trees had not yet sprouted with sakura, and their skeletal branches lay bare waiting in anticipation. It's in April that these trees explode with colour, and the entire path becomes a popular *hanami* (cherry blossom-viewing) spot.

*** Spring is a magical season in Kyoto, when the landscape is dotted first with delicate pink plum blossoms, and then blanketed in exquisite, pale cherry blossoms. Though temperatures will start warming up during the spring months, you'll want to have a jacket or some layers when you head out to see the seasonal blooms. Be aware that especially in the north of Kyoto Prefecture spring temperatures can still drop quite low once the sun goes down**

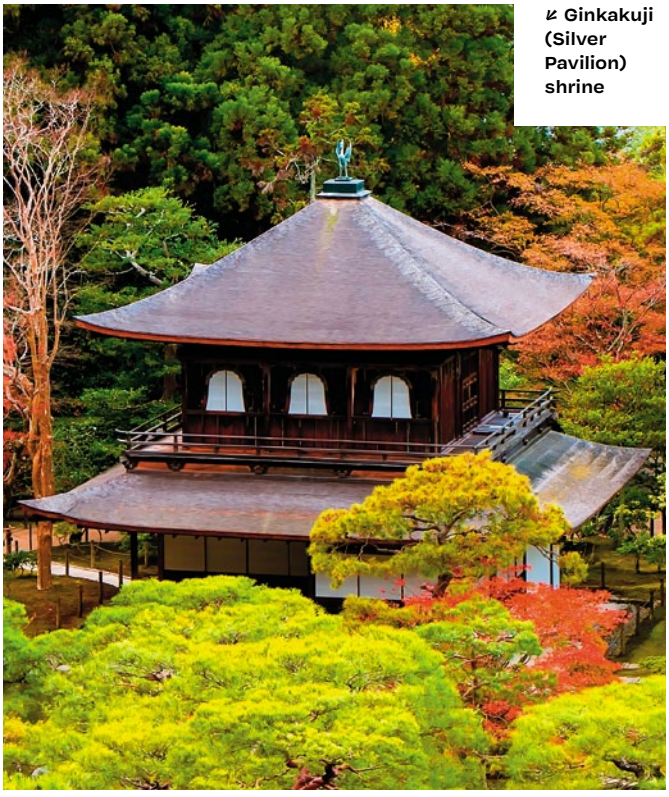
Given that it was not sakura season yet, the path was not mushrooming with picture-clicking tourists, and I could walk through the two-kilometre long route undisturbed. Restaurants, cafés, art galleries and designer boutiques punctuate the path, making it a perfect afternoon stroll option. While it can be covered in 30 minutes, I took my time stopping over for some matcha latte and matcha ice cream on the way, both of which are hugely popular with the locals. While I enjoyed the latte, it was an effort to accept the bitterness of the matcha-laden ice cream. Eventually, I had to throw it.

↗ Dharma Hall (Hatto) at the Nanzen-ji Temple

↑ Fushimi Inari Shrine with its gate

↓ Fox statue at the Fushimi Inari Shrine

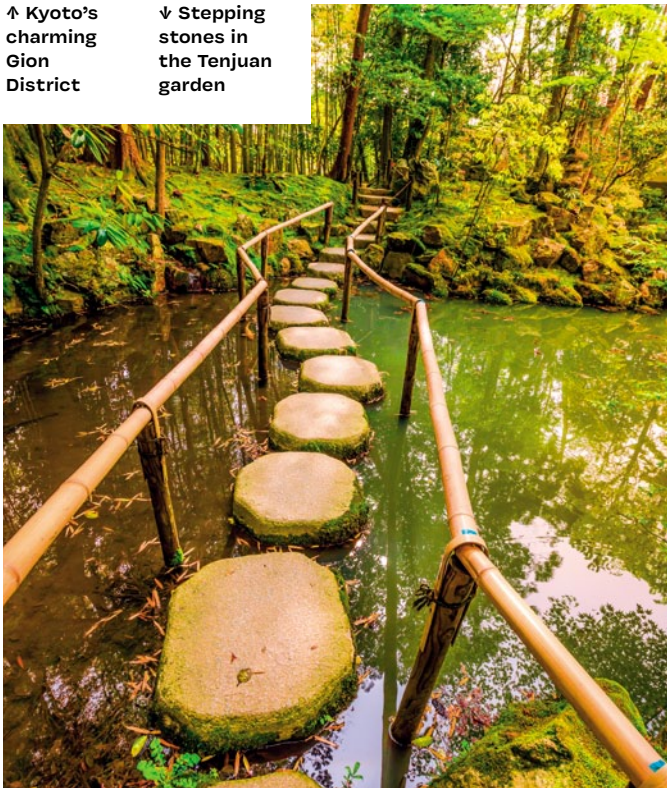
I have always believed that travelling is like a modern-day time machine, and that belief was reiterated the moment I entered the shrine enclosure. My disappointment with the city melted away, and I was instantly transported to medieval Japan



↙ Ginkakuji (Silver Pavilion) shrine

↑ Kyoto's charming Gion District

↓ Stepping stones in the Tenjuan garden



Nanzenji, at the southern end of the Philosopher's Path, is one of the most important Zen temples in Japan. It used to be the retirement villa of a Japanese Emperor in the 13th century before it was converted into a temple. There is a beautiful rock garden and a notable aqueduct, but I only caught a fleeting glimpse. Dusk had begun to settle and at 5pm, the temple closed its entrance to visitors.

Mindful of the quickly passing hours, I decided to head to the old neighbourhood of Gion instead.

Old
IS GOLD

Gion is a neighbourhood best explored on foot, at leisure. First, what stands out is its long pavement, the Shijo Avenue, which bisects the Gion district, and is earmarked with designer shops. This avenue marks Gion's entrance. The shops are the same that one would see in the high streets of Paris but are housed in the Machiya houses that Kyoto is known for. These Machiya houses are wooden houses with narrow entrances that were once the dwellings of the rich merchants and craftsmen of Kyoto.

Past that pavement, one comes to the inner quarters of Gion, which are peppered with restaurants and cafés, including Japanese teahouses (called *ochaya*), where one can observe and participate in a traditional tea ceremony. The Gion district is famous for geisha spotting. Rumour has it that there are less than 20 geishas left in Kyoto, and if you are lucky, a few can be spotted in the narrow bylanes of Gion. These geishas (or geiko, as they are known in Kyoto) are professional entertainers, and still make an appearance in the teahouses on special occasions. While geishas can be found in several Japanese cities, Kyoto remains the best place to spot them.

It had become dark by then—the lanterns were lit and Gion was at its atmospheric best. The bars were full, and the crowd had spilled out on to the streets. I could not spot a geisha, but I was happy. In the last hour I was left with in Gion, I wished for some quiet time. I randomly searched the back alleys, and one of them brought me to a promenade along the Shirakawa canal. Lined with willow trees, it was one of the quieter parts of Gion. It felt like this was the perfect spot to end my trip.

*** Kyoto Prefecture is divided into five areas, in each of which you can get to know a side of Kyoto that you never knew existed. You'll find Kyoto by the Sea facing the Sea of Japan; Woodland Kyoto, where you'll find unspoilt landscapes; Kyoto Tea Country, with its beautiful rolling tea fields; heritage-y Kyoto Otokuni Bamboo Grove; and cosmopolitan Kyoto City**

Good to Know Tipping is not a custom in Japan. A simple 'thanks' will let them know you were happy with the service. Outdoor shoes are not permitted in places with tatami.

↗ Matcha is known to be great for health

Past that pavement, one comes to the inner quarters of Gion, which are peppered with restaurants and cafés, including charming teahouses where one can observe and participate in a traditional Japanese tea ceremony

Soon I would catch my bullet train back to the hustle of Tokyo, and I reflected on the day spent in Kyoto. Kyoto came across as a beautiful relic from the past, but one that was still relevant. To me it served as a necessary reminder that beauty, when well-preserved, has the ability to eclipse time. With its meditative collectedness, Kyoto will remain etched in my memory, and the sweet reminiscences of a day spent here will keep tugging at me gently, suggesting that I come back again.

TRAVEL ONE
BITE AT A TIME

eat

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY:
THE CHAIRMAN

CHEF SHAUN KENWORTHY **62**

•

SPROUTED LENTIL SOUP **64**

50 BEST RESTAURANTS

ASIA

The 'Asia's 50 Best Restaurants 2021' list, now in its ninth edition, was announced on March 25 this year

In a virtual event that was streamed live around the world, Asia's 50 Best Restaurants 2021 were announced in late March, and boasted 11 first-time entries. Hong Kong titles 11 restaurants on the list, trailed by Japan with 9 and Singapore with 8. Two restaurants in India plus one from the Indian subcontinent made it to the list, with Indian Accent, Delhi taking the No. 18 spot, and last year's 'One To Watch' Masque, Mumbai debuting at No. 32 and Dharshan Munidasa's Ministry of Crab in Colombo at No. 29. "We are delighted with the recognition. These are exhilarating times for the food industry in India and we are eager to be contributing towards its evolvement. We look forward to many such achievements in future," says Manish Mehrotra of India Accent.

Two restaurants by Indian chefs in Bangkok made it to the list with Gaggan Anand Restaurant, owned by Kolkata-born chef Gaggan Anand, debuting at No. 5 and Gaa at No. 46. Over 300 members of the Asia's 50 Best Restaurants Academy are said to review possible receivers each year. The Chairman in Hong Kong (*pic*) has the top spot, Odette in Singapore is at No. 2, and Den in Tokyo is No. 3. The organisers also revealed restaurants that were classified below No. 50. India's Avartana in Chennai took the 81st position.

The restaurant industry has confronted strange challenges in the last year and a quarter and William Drew, Director of Content for Asia's 50 Best Restaurants, is proud to be backing the restaurants in their revival by showcasing the area's inventive talents, celebrating the industry's creators and identifying gastronomic excellence.

» To see the full list and learn more about the winners, log on to www.theworlds50best.com/asia/en

—RUPALI DEAN

TRAVEL MENU
62

Chef Shaun Kenworthy's **20 years in India**

ILLUSTRATION: RAJESH KG

If it weren't for the pandemic, we would have been reading a book penned by this British chef, consultant and columnist about his 20 years in India

» You completed 20 years in India in 2020. How did the journey begin?

I was working at Quaglino's in London, one of the busiest restaurants in Europe, when we got an invitation to be a guest restaurant at the World Gourmet Summit in Singapore. That was in 2000. It was here that I met Indian entrepreneur Rohit Khattar and arrived in Delhi on his invitation. After a short stint in Delhi, I would have joined a restaurant in New York but then 9/11 happened and suddenly I was without a job. I shifted to Calcutta [Kolkata now] to join The Park. Apart from the Kolkata property, I also worked for their Chennai and Delhi properties. I left The Park eventually but settled down in Kolkata. My wife is also a Bengali from the city.

» What was your feeling when you arrived in Kolkata?

When I decided to come to India, everyone back home said why India. And when I said I am moving to Calcutta, everybody in Delhi said the same thing, why Calcutta? During the interview at The Park, I had this bizarre conversation with HR. They tried to dissuade me almost. They said Kolkata is a very different city. It moves at a very different pace. The HR Head took me down Park Street for a walk. We walked towards New Market. He said, the roads are crazy. Will you be happy here? But to me this was where the fun was. Even today.

» Being married to a Bengali, what is your take on Bengali food?

The best food in Bengal is the most underrated—the vegetarian food. It's full of interesting flavours and very different from other vegetarian food in the country, but nobody knows about it. Of course, I like my paturi and kosha mangsho. But simple things like shukto and doi potol are sublime...I love anything cooked with doi.

» Changes in the Indian food scene over the past 20 years?

When I first arrived, in Delhi, I could not get iceberg lettuce or red capsicum on a daily basis. Today you can buy almost organic anything here. Incredible cheesemakers around the country. We have great vegetables growing in aquaponics across the country. An established winemaking industry. The other big change happened about eight years ago. Young Indian chefs became adventurous. They trained under great chefs, went overseas. Since then India has become an incredible place.

↑ Fratelli Wines has collaborated with artisanal cheesemaker Käse to produce some gorgeous cheeses

» How is Kolkata's street food?

According to me, Calcutta has the best street food in the country. I am very disappointed with the Writers' Building still being closed, because on its back side you would get the best street food in the city. Then there are some incredible things like the prawn kabiraji and dim-er devil which you don't get in any other city.

—UTTARA GANGOPADHYAY

CHEF RECOMMENDS

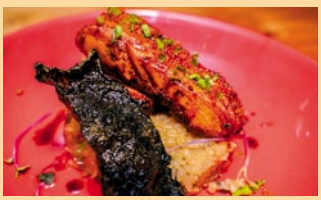
FROM THE MENU FOR OCTA, KOLKATA

Edamami Bonbon

I created this sushi dish which is not quite a sushi. It consists of edamame rice balls with black sesame, truffle oil and a bit of crispy chilli.

Bekti Miso Kasundi

A quite interesting dish is the Bekti Miso Kasundi, served with edamame rice and herb salad.



Prawn Paturi

Essentially a small steamed dumpling, the prawn paturi has a Bengali twist: minced prawn wrapped in spinach leaf, some gondhoraj flavour, and served with mango 'kasundi' mayonnaise.

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This lentil soup is made by sprouting mixed beans for a few days. This dish is consumed during the monsoons on the day of Janai Purnima; considered very healthy, it is eaten with rice. Vegetarians can omit the mutton bones

KWATI
Sprouted Lentil Soup

PREPARATION TIME:
45 minutes

SERVES: 10

PREPARATION
Heat oil till it smokes, add the whole spices and carom seeds, add the onions and fry to a golden-brown. Add the meat and kwati with the onions and stir for 2 minutes. Add the garlic-ginger paste and the dry masalas and stir for five minutes. Once well integrated put in the chopped tomatoes and stir again till the oil separates. Add three cups of water and pressure cook for 3 whistles. Check to see if the beans and meat are cooked and fix the consistency of the soup, add water if necessary. Add a dash of lime juice before serving.

INGREDIENTS
- 3 cups sprouted mixed beans and lentils
- 1 1/2 cups sliced onions
- 250 g mutton bones with meat (optional)
- 1 tbsp ginger paste
- 1 1/2 tbsp garlic paste
- 1 cup chopped tomatoes
- 1/2 cup mustard oil
- 2 bay leaves
- 2 big cardamoms
- 5 small cardamoms
- 1 cinnamon stick
- 1/4 tsp carom seeds
- 1/2 tsp turmeric powder
- 1 1/2 tbsp coriander powder
- 1 1/2 tbsp cumin powder
- 1 tbsp chilli powder
- Chopped coriander leaves for garnishing 6 slices of lemon
- Salt to taste

RECIPE EXCERPTED FROM *THE RANA COOKBOOK: RECIPES FROM THE PALACES OF NEPAL* BY ROHINI RANA (PENGUIN/VIKING ₹1,999)

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stay

HOTELS, HOSTELS AND NOTHING LIKE HOME

THE BHEEMLI RESORT 68

•

THE LEELA PALACE, JAIPUR 69

* At its dedicated, state-of-the-art spa facility, Araiya Palampur offers Western, Oriental and Ayurvedic therapies to work your stress away. Or just take long, leisurely walks in the cosy sprawl of the resort and savour the stunning view from the al fresco bar area

THE HILLS HAVE Sighs

This hideaway may just have everything we want in a calming hill staycation

PALAMPUR

As I clamber up and scamper down the cobblestoned alley, less than inebriated but certainly overcome after a swig of the local *saunfi*, this whole place feels faintly reminiscent of an old European town though you aren't likely to find any taverns or Christmas film crews here.

And that is because Araiya, Palampur's latest soak-it-all-in resort sprawls in the serenest corner of the Kangra Valley. Here mountain dogs thrust their muzzles into your pajama pockets and the beneficent Dhauladhars watch over you like towering grandfathers. I am already dreaming about settling into one of those window seats at the all-day diner and digging into the sumptuous breakfast spread.

At evening, sipping the Neugal Flow cocktail and taking in the darkening forest on the faraway hill, you almost forget you're at a resort where each one of your demands have been met. Even if all you do is flit from your cosy suite to the spa and the bar—cheekily named The Old Fox—and back, you will know Palampur. And if your bubble is greater than that, Sandeep, the Manager, will promptly arrange a day of café-hopping in Dharamkot and Bir or a peaceful village walk (both done courtesy the very capable Exsul Travel team).

The accommodation options (deluxe rooms, deluxe and executive suites, and duplex suites) spell luxury throughout; the only pandemic here is joie de vivre—to be spread among friends, family, and coworkers, thanks to the superb banqueting options available. I hope I return in better times, when I can stand in the pool and gaze away at the hills.

–PRANNAY PATHAK

ANDHRA PRADESH

BHEEMLI RESORT

Bheemunipatnam, 40km from Visakhapatnam airport, 25km from the city
» Just 28 elegant rooms

REJUVENATE » The highlight of the property is the Ayurbay Spa, which offers traditional Ayurveda treatments under the supervision of a certified Ayurveda doctor. The treatment rooms are in charming cottages and the therapists are top notch

WATER THERAPY » This stunning resort sits practically on the beach. Come here for tranquillity, to be one with nature and to explore the town's remaining Dutch heritage. All rooms are sea facing with large balconies. The rooftop infinity pool is stunning

FOOD FOR THE SOUL » The food is to die for, especially if you're seeking authentic Andhra fare. Feeling adventurous? Try the Teppanyaki grill. It's pure food theatre

Escape

On the way to Bheemli from Vizag, do stop at Thotlakonda, once a thriving hilltop Buddhist complex with splendid views of the surrounding coastline

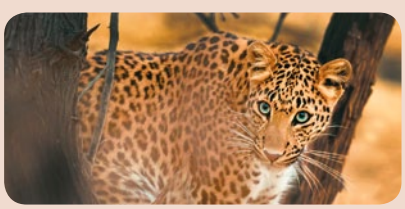
JAIPUR

Pink City's New Jewel
LEELA PALACE

The recently launched palace property joins The Leela Group's iconic hotels in Delhi and Udaipur to cater to leisure travellers sojourning through the popular tourist circuit. Set amidst idyllic surroundings blessed by the majestic Aravallis, the hotel seamlessly blends timeless traditions with contemporary splendour. With tastefully embellished suites and über-luxe villas, the grand property promises to be one of your most cherished experiences in Rajasthan. From traditional Shekhawati paintings that wash its walls to the age-old heritage craft of Thikri, each corner of the hotel is a reminder of the glorious legacy of the state's rich craftsmanship. Fantastic culinary experiences are on offer too, the cuisines ranging from Awadhi to Rajasthani to Italian.

Escape

Embark on a thrilling jeep safari at the Jhalana Leopard Safari Park. Home to as many as 34 leopards, the park guarantees incredible sightings.



THINGS TO DO Take a leisurely swim or get the endorphins rushing at the state-of-the-art gym or grab a soothing massage at the spa; yes, there's a lot to look forward to. Some of their chic villas even boast private plunge pools where you can indulge in some guilt-free self-pampering.

back

I was part of the Sony Extreme Ladakh expedition in January 2020 to explore the habitat and observe how its wildlife survived challenging conditions. The temperature went down to -25°C. Everything froze. While exploring the land I was also trying to find out what was happening under the frozen Indus and Zanskar rivers. I wanted to document the life surviving in the cold water under a frozen surface. In some places the water was very fast flowing and in some very murky. But, finally, near Hunlay I managed to capture this mesmerising image of trouts swimming in the water under the frozen ice.

—DHRITIMAN MUKHERJEE

— BOOKS —

The Automobile

About India's long-drawn love affair with it

Travel Guide

A comprehensive photographic guide to south India's wildife

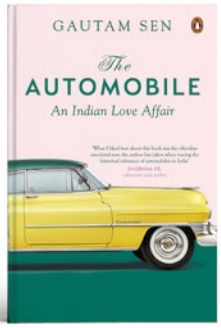
The White Umbrella

Ostensibly a children's book, there's much more to this journey with a donkey

PHOTOGRAPH: DHRITIMAN MUKHERJEE

BOOK REVIEWS
72

Let It Roll, Baby, Roll



THE AUTOMOBILE: AN INDIAN LOVE AFFAIR
by **GAUTAM SEN**
PENGUIN ₹699

IN MY OPINION, the best way to teach history is to teach it through the history of something. It could be an invention, a cultural phenomenon, or an event that recurs several times in a period of time. History, arranged vaguely as a series of events in time, doesn't mean much.

Veteran automotive journalist Gautam Sen's *The Automobile: An Indian Love Affair* hits the spot when it comes to that. Having picked up the book in the middle of my own fascination with 4WD vehicles, it's a treat to read about the evolution of India as an automotive market and how the automobile has come to define our culture. From famous fleets and mean machines assembled for maharajahs and celebrities, the people's car phenomenon that is in its fifth decade now, to the humble beginnings of the Royal Enfield (leather-loving lumberjacks, did you know it even launched a scooter named Fantabulous in the 1960s?) and forgotten three-wheel cars and nostalgia-inducing names like Hero Puch—the book leaves nothing out.

The research that has gone into *The Automobile* is massive but in the end it doesn't really come as a surprise considering the years its author has spent in the field. Sen's voice is straightforward and authoritative, and the narrative takes into account most, if not all, voices involved in a specific event—for instance in the matter of the support extended to Maruti Udyog during the firm's formative years. The chapter on the automobile as a central motif in pop culture makes it even more enjoyable.

From famous royal fleets to the humble people's car, the book leaves nothing out. The research that has gone into it is massive but in the end it doesn't really come as a surprise considering the years its author has spent in the field

What makes the book essential reading is that, as opposed to encyclopaedia-style collectible books for nerds, Sen adopts a research-oriented narrative format that makes for gripping reading. He distils the massive volume of his interactions with industry bigwigs and experts into a 273-page book that's essential reading for automobile lovers in India.

What's the best part? You don't even need to read it from beginning to end—just park it in your shelf and take it for a spin whenever you feel like a ride.

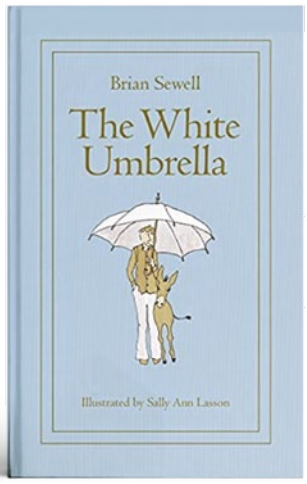
—PRANNAY PATHAK

Photographic Field Guide: Wildlife of South India

by **SURYA RAMACHANDRAN & DAVID RAJU**

Photographic guides to wildlife have an edge over illustrated ones as they make identification of species much easier. This one, on top of that, marries stellar photography with excellent production standards. The writers have a formidable reputation as naturalists, having published a similar guide to the fauna of Central India in 2016 to much acclaim, and were mentored in their early years by Hashim Tyabji at the Satpura Tiger Reserve. A project of this scale can only be a collaborative effort. The photographs have been sourced from a wide pool of photographers, all duly credited next to each photograph. The descriptions are crisp and concise and have been vetted by a range of subject experts. There is a glowing endorsement from no less a personage than Romulus Whitaker, who wrote the Foreword. The book has dedicated chapters on mammals, birds, butterflies, dragons and damselflies, amphibians and reptiles. There's even a sub-section on the marine mammals of south India. All in all, a labour of love which will enthral and educate nature lovers with a particular interest in the wildlife of south India for many, many years to come.

» **NOTION PRESS ₹1,500**



The White Umbrella: Carrying Pavlova from Peshawar to London

by **BRIAN SEWELL**
SPEAKING TIGER ₹299

SOMEWHERE THERE'S AN echo of R.L. Stevenson and his patient plodding Modestine. Brian Sewell, possibly reinvented as Mr B for the purposes of the book, dashingly rescues a donkey in distress out of Peshawar's traffic mayhem. The fact that he is part of a documentary film crew doesn't perturb him at all—he abandons the crew blithely on a moment's impulse, determined to rescue the donkey from a burdened life unbefitting for a creature so young. Pavlova, as he christens her for her long legs, is barely out of foal-hood and no larger than an Alsatian. Mr B charts out a plan to walk 20 miles a day and so cover the distance from Peshawar to London, in between retracing the footsteps of Alexander the Great, if he can. However, he is forced to revise the schedule when he is told by a pharmacist that the delicate Pavlova can cover no more than five miles and is too frail to carry his luggage.

The result is a charmingly old-fashioned tale of a man with a recognisably British white canvas umbrella who manages somehow to get himself and his donkey across various borders travelling in various kinds of transport. Of course, ultimately there isn't much walking involved since Mr B is lucky at falling into the right company. Pavlova and the umbrella win the hearts of people, who generously link them up with vans and trucks going in the right direction or book them on trains. Though he does meet an interesting cast of drug smugglers, carpetbaggers and ambassadors and has to wash a lot of dirty linen. He also finds the ideal rug in Isfahan and a blue-tiled hammam that he plans to recreate in his home in London—when he eventually reaches it. But how he does is another tale altogether and the tiles never do materialise.

Despite its gentle idealism, this is certainly not a children's book because many of the references will be unfamiliar to the average child and also because some of the endings are not happy. Sewell is better known for his art criticism

Sewell's book is a novella with delightfully quirky illustrations by Sally Ann Lasson. *The White Umbrella*, despite its gentle idealism, is certainly not a children's book because many of the references will be unfamiliar to the average child and also because some of the endings are not happy. Certainly, Sewell is better known for his art criticism in England and for the 83-year-old this is new ground—however, his stated intention was to introduce children to the world around them.

The White Umbrella is designed to appeal to an audience familiar with Fortnum & Mason hampers and Coutts where the Queen banks. Even the white umbrella from James Smith & Sons—which perhaps doesn't deserve as much attention as it gets in the title since after a while it vanishes, losing its pristine attraction. The book also has its context in a horsier Britain than the current one, a place in which a young donkey can visit a plush supermarket by capsule lift and be encouraged to do so by the owner since its presence attracts children and makes for better sales. For the fans of Beverley Nichols and the gentle world of scholar gypsies with quotes from Omar Khayyam and Shelley, however, there is contentment in store.

—ANJANA BASU

India 1955 The obsession for malt-based flavoured-milk drinks in former British colonies is well-documented. India is reportedly the largest consumer of these powders to be mixed in milk and had twice a day for 'stronger bones' and 'complete nourishment'. In fact, a few years ago, these drinks sold more in India than in the next five biggest markets taken together. Hardly surprising that 'malt' in India seldom has an alcoholic connotation.

Marketed here as energy-giving and fortifying breakfast staples, malt beverages in pre-Independence India grew popular as invigorating drinks signifying trademark British dynamism. Horlick's was packed in ration supplies on polar expeditions, dietary kits of British Indian Army soldiers who fought in the World Wars, and later distributed at the 1948 London Olympics. That the Indian upper-middle class should take to it like we did to tea and potatoes, was a foregone conclusion.

However, in their countries of origin, these beverages soon turned calming bedtime drinks to boost sleep and alleviate tiredness—the Swiss Ovaltine was marketed as 'the world's best nightcap' and was available only in pharmacies. In India, the purpose, iconography, and the marketing, however, has been markedly different, just like in this 1955 advertisement. Notice the cup and saucer, and the touch of gentility in the illustrated lady.

—PRANNAY PATHAK

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