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NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER INDIA

YELLOWSTONE
GEYSERS AND
GRIZZLIES

GOA
DRIVING
WITH THE DOGS

NILGIRIS
TAKING THE
LONG WAY HOME

KUTCH
ON THE
CRAFT TRAIL

THE ROAD TRIP ISSUE

INCREDIBLE DRIVES, INSPIRING STORIES

APRIL 2017

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About us National Geographic Traveller India is about immersive travel and authentic storytelling that inspires travel. It is about family travel, about travel experiences, about discoveries, and insights. Our tagline is "Nobody Knows This World Better" and every story attempts to capture the essence of a place in a way that will urge readers to create their own memorable trips, and come back with their own amazing stories.

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DREAM RUN

I've always felt a bit strange about having a job that others want and many envy. Over the years, countless people have written in, or said to me at travel meetups, workshops, even socially, that I have their dream job. In their imagination, I travel the world from one wondrous destination to the next on someone else's tab. I spend my time in exotic locations, and somewhere between cocktails with colourful umbrellas, I write some free-flowing prose and send it to print in the magazine. Many assume this job is easy. Some think of it as little more than a free ride.

For a while I tried to dispel these myths. Indignantly, I'd respond that it is a hard job that involves being nitpicky about facts, grammar, and how we tell a story. The truth I now know is somewhere in the middle. While it's certainly true that mine is a dream job, it's the sum of many fantastic parts. It has taken me around the world, but also put me in the fortunate position of giving others the chance to travel to places they've never been, to fulfil dreams they didn't know they had. It's allowed my passion for travel and the written word to come together as a career. As much as I love travel, I love the process of editing, rehashing, finessing stories, working with a team to bring out a cracker of a travel magazine and website month after month. This dream job has allowed me to come to work every day for five-and-a-half-years, and create something I consider worthwhile, beautiful, and a pleasure to read. If along the way a story we published touched a chord with someone, if I've managed to bring joy to a few, or to help make a positive change in anyone's life, it is icing on the cake.

This is my last month at this dream job, and as Winnie the Pooh once said: "How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard."

So what does one do when a dream job comes to a close? I don't know just yet. What I do know is that the skills I've acquired will hold me in good stead. The life lessons I've learnt will serve me well. The travel I've done has enriched my every cell and changed who I am.

I could count the sights I've seen. List the places I've been. But I'd rather dwell on what



I've learnt. I've always known that travel is a wonderful thing and of course I've loved all the destinations I've reached. But it was only in the course of this job that I recognized that travel truly is a magic potion. It's the elixir that enlightens and educates me, that quietly feeds the choices I make.

Travel has allowed me to scratch beyond the surface, shown me how incredible the world really is. It was on assignment for this dream job that I understood the difference between merely observing a tiger on a safari from the security of a 4WD, and coming to grips with what it means for a place to be truly wild. Standing on the banks of the Yellowstone River as night fell one late summer evening, I watched a grizzly tearing into the carcass of a bison half submerged in the water. It was a warm day, but I felt a shiver of fear. It was a moment in which the essence of

Travel is the elixir that enlightens and educates me, that quietly feeds the choices I make

the wilderness and what it stands for in this muddled modern world of high technology came home to me.

Travel often helps confirm the things we know theoretically. Thanks to this dream job, I once got to travel around Azerbaijan with Nat Geo editors and photographers from around the world. During late-night conversations, while walking the length of Baku Boulevard along the Caspian Sea with new friends from different cultures, I closely felt the truth of our basic human sameness.

Travel has touched every aspect of my life, and as editor of this travel magazine I have become even more obsessive about taking regular family holidays. It's the most important and cherished family time we get, and I can see that the one who recognizes this the most is my 11-year-old. She's willing to give up on other treats, but not on travel. It's not just about visiting exciting new places. We as a family are addicted to the wonder of the global classroom, the making of new friends, the opening of our eyes to other ways of seeing and being. No matter where I go then, I know that I will carry the rainbow of what I've learnt here. And I will always feel the magic of travel, as I'm sure will you. ●

Niloufer Venkatraman

OUR MISSION

National Geographic Traveller India is about immersive travel and authentic storytelling, inspiring readers to create their own journeys and return with amazing stories. Our distinctive yellow rectangle is a window into a world of unparalleled discovery.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

A Feast to Remember



For me, Lyon is about nose-to-tail gastronomic adventures in a city whose greatest celebrity is a beaming nonagenarian chef, Paul Bocuse.

In 2013, on a holiday brimming with fabulous

food, there is one meal whose flavour memory still starts up a party in my brain. Set in a simple four-table *bouchon*, an old-world family-run establishment with rickety tables covered with chequered cloths,

this was a meal fit for royals as well as one that reminded me of my mum's heartwarming dinners. The affable owner made sure that we had bottomless glasses of wine as he whipped up a feast for my husband and me. The braised pork cheeks laid before me made me want to write epic verses in its praise. The meat fell away at the gentlest nudge of the fork and the long slow hours of cooking had turned each bite into a flavour bomb. My husband's pike dumpling smothered in a dreamy crayfish cream sauce was as indulgent as it sounded and worth every calorie consumed that afternoon. Quintessentially Lyonnaise and exceptionally beautiful, this was a meal worth the 7,000-plus kilometres we had travelled with the sole intention of feasting in the city.

—Senior Associate Editor, Diya Kohli

THE FIND

Bird Call



Last month, I went on a walking safari through the core area of Madhya Pradesh's Satpura National Park. Besides seeing wild mammals, I had one other wish: to spot an owl.

However the Indian eagle owl, jungle owlet, and brown fish owl that call Satpura home remained elusive over the three-day wildlife trip.

On the last day, at the Denwa Backwater Escape lodge I bought this wooden block which can be used on fabric or paper. Made from teak and etched with an owl, it was small compensation for not seeing the bird in the wild, but it's a pretty souvenir nonetheless. —Associate Editor, Kareena Gianani

INSTAGRAM OF THE MONTH

Scaling New Heights

Wildlife photographer **Dhritiman Mukherjee** took this photograph near the peaks of Annapurna and Machhapuchhre, over the Pokhara Valley of Nepal.

Since February 2016, Mukherjee and music composer Shantanu Moitra have been making a series of trips to the Himalayas as part of their #100DaysInHimalayas project. On their visit to Pokhara in October 2016 they sought a different point of view of the landscape. Moitra hopped on to a hang-glider which was pulled by a microlight aircraft, a tiny craft that is open to the elements (in picture). Mukherjee accompanied him on another microlight, which afforded a bird's-eye view and terrific vantage point to click photographs. "It was very cold," says Mukherjee, "about 1 or 2°C when we were up. But everything is so exciting that you ignore the cold."

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Oh! The Places You'll Go

A FATHER FINDS THAT SOWING THE SEEDS OF WANDERLUST EARLY REAPS RICH BENEFITS

We've travelled with our daughter Anya, now 11, since she was a baby. We've taken her on family vacations, strung her along to medical conferences, destination weddings, trips with friends, single-parent vacations, and even sent her off to travel with family and friends without us.

Too often I hear couples say they don't want to travel with young children. They are worried about hygiene, illnesses, tiring them out, annoyances—the reasons are varied. My wife and I however made the conscious decision to take our daughter on all our travels almost from the day she was born. I've always felt that travel is not just about seeing new places. It's one of the best ways to expand one's horizons, meet different people, experience varied foods, and see that the world is a very diverse, interesting, and colourful place.

Anya's first adventure activity was when she was just a few days old. I took her in her stroller for a winter walk through Central Park, New York, where we lived then. I ended up staying out a bit longer than I should have, because it seemed like so much fun. At some point it struck me that the temperature was too low for a newborn. While I was walking and therefore warm, the baby was obviously still and would get cold. I picked her up, stuck her into my winter coat and walked back home. It's one of the fondest memories I have and consider it our first father-daughter moment.

Like all travels, ours too have been scattered with good and bad experiences. By the time she was two months old, we took her with us to Toronto to attend my sister's wedding. She was an angel on the flight, through the entire trip, even through the pre-wedding photo shoot in the cold Canadian winter and in



ADITYA DAFTARY

is a Mumbai-based radiologist who likes to wander. While in the city, he spends more time on his bicycle than in his car, and hopes that soon family vacations will also be the same.

church. She acted like she was destined to travel. On another trip, we were on a transatlantic flight when she opened up from both ends to the point that by the end of the flight we were out of diapers and the aircraft out of paper towels. When she was two, we went on a trekking holiday in the Himalayas, when a bout of wheezing forced us to turn back on day two. But we got over the disappointment quickly and enjoyed exploring McLeod Ganj and the varied cuisines its restaurants offer.

Over the years I've noticed that she enjoys a luxury resort vacation as much as a trip to a small, mostly rural fishing town in Gujarat that I went to as a child. I think we've all realized together that it's not about how much money you spend, but how you spend your time that results in an enjoyable vacation.

As she grows older I find it even more significant to take my daughter travelling. In this era of instant gratification I've found that travel let's her understand that good things take time and patience. Our experiences in different cultures and places can enrich us, make us more interesting people, who are more immersed in what exists around us than in an online virtual reality.

At home my daughter is a bit picky with her food; while travelling a more adventurous side emerges. In rural Rajasthan she excitedly wanted to try *dal baati churma*, *bhakhri*, and other local fare. With the same zest while visiting New York City, she wanted to try a new restaurant every day and came up with a list of her favourites. At the same time, as a family we've learnt to accept that all food experiences can't be successful and we've had our fair share of bad meals.

Travel has made a better family of us. It's drawn us closer and given our daughter real-world experiences she could never gain from the Internet or books. Travel has given us hours of entertainment not only during a trip but in the pre-planning and post-trip spaces.

Though I've always felt good about giving Anya these experiences, it's only on a few recent trips that I have realized the impact that it's had on her. For instance, on a recent trip to Shivpuri in Uttarakhand we were travelling without my wife. Being just the two of us, I found that we engaged in more conversations with complete strangers. I watched Anya engage them with stories of her travels. I watched her wolf down lunch while providing me non-stop commentary on the different components of the meal. I listened to her rattle off a long list of places she wants to go to next and why. That's when I realized that travel had done exactly what we had hoped for. In an era of social media-obsessed youth, we are hopefully training our child to also converse face-to-face with strangers of all ages and backgrounds. I have no doubt that starting her out young and giving her this exposure is teaching her to appreciate and thrive in diversity, the true essence of life. ●

Pub Love

WHERE STRANGERS BECOME FRIENDS:
RAISING A TOAST TO NEW PLACES



DIYA KOHLI

is Senior Associate Editor at National Geographic Traveller India. She loves the many stories of big old cities. For her, the best kind of travel experience involves long rambling walks through labyrinthine lanes with plenty of food stops along the way.

I am no red-nosed tippler, but I like bars. When I travel, a bar or pub has a way of cheering me up. It is a modern-day tavern for the traveller, offering shelter from the storm of stimuli of a day spent sightseeing. It's where I slow down and gauge a city's vibe, its friendliness, food, and musical tastes. Choosing the right kind of bar has always been an important part of my itinerary making.

For instance, in the magnetic Swiss city of Lucerne, I found an old-fashioned British pub a few metres from the 600-year-old Kapellbrücke bridge. This bar festooned with football flags became my favoured spot for my two nights in the city. I sat at the tables on the pavement outside, watching passers-by feed swans floating on the Reuss River. Inside, there was happy cheering as a favourite team scored a goal. When I ducked in for some warmth and a refill, the cheerful bartender took me under his wing. He handed me free tumblers of various brews, and kept an eye out for any overenthusiastic barflies. As the night stretched its long limbs, I struck up friendships with members of a young British rock band and itinerant consultants. Many a song was sung and that evening, in a very English bar in a very Swiss town, I felt the spirit of *joie de vivre* with a bunch of strangers.

In Amsterdam a few years earlier, two friends, my husband, and I spent three days admiring van Gogh's work, ambling by skinny townhouses, and feeding ducks at the lush Vondelpark. But our evenings were reserved for an atmospheric bar with an unpronounceable name in the charming Jordaan district. We found it quite by chance while looking for an escape from the crowds at Dam Square, and it became one of the highlights of our trip. Occupying the same little table each evening, at the very edge of a canal, we downed pint after pint of locally produced craft beer. We revelled in the nostalgia of college days and discussed future plans. One of our friends used the Hindi word *mahaul* to describe our mood and that bar—a combination of a great setting, good company, and a feeling of comfort or cosiness. And this bar was indeed all *mahaul*. It gave us the space for heart-to-heart chats as well as the chance to pause in companionable silence and admire the city's centuries-old buildings. It drew us into the neighbourhood, giving us a window into a city that we had just a short time to explore. And, more than anything, it brought us closer to each other.

On a trip to Paris, my aim was to follow Hemingway's trail, and find his historical stomping grounds in and around Saint-Germain. Instead, the city's diverse charms

held me in their thrall, and I went about making my own Paris memories. In the gentrified working class neighbourhood of Belleville, I found Aux Folies, a grungy, lively joint where painters, poets, and students gather. Tables are shared, as are jokes and the occasional carafe of vino, and as the night progresses, the place fills up with Parisians and visitors searching for their own moveable feast.

All through my travels, I always find a bar that later reminds me of the place and vice versa. An alternative graffiti-scrawled bar in downtown Jerusalem was an eye opener. I sat among bearded 20-somethings quaffing beer and learnt much about the conflicted politics of one of the world's most ancient cities.

On sun-bleached Havelock Island in the Andamans, there was a terraced bar where my husband and I, on our honeymoon, spent many evenings. Through a canopy of leaves, over the rim of tropical martinis, we looked at the orange sun dip into the sea and imagined our happy future. The gregarious Italian owner cooked us a freshly caught lobster which we ate in soft candlelight. The soundtrack of crickets, the distant roar of waves, a low hum of conversation, and the love in our young hearts made this an island bar we will always remember.

In Cairo, a city of many teetotallers, I found a bar in Zamalek where men and women mingled freely and danced with abandon outside of the dicta of regressive regimes.

I think there is a reason why so many jokes begin with "A man walks into a bar..." This is a space of merriment and mirth, where strangers are rendered less strange, and a city becomes less alien. And every time I am far away from home, it is a bar that always grabs a little piece of both my liver and my heart. ●



MARIA GOLOVIANKO/SHUTTERSTOCK

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A tour of Odisha through its diverse handicrafts

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Bird life thrives in a wetland among Gurgaon's high-rises

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CHASING LEGENDS

Amsterdam's Van Gogh Museum is a window into the artist's life



Leading musicians and bands such as U2, Snoop Dogg, and Pharrell Williams have featured Selarón's magnificent stairs in their music videos.

Stairway to Heaven

AN ARTIST'S ODE TO RIO DE JANEIRO BY CHAITALI PATEL

Located far from the confines of any museum, the Escadaria Selarón is a brightly-hued masterpiece in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. Thousands visit, walk, or sit on it every day. This flight of 215 steps that's covered in more than 2,000 tiles began in 1990 as a project Chilean artist Jorge Selarón did in his free time. He recycled broken tiles from trash to beautify the stairs which were located near his home.

Straddling the bohemian neighbourhoods of Lapa and Santa Teresa, the project soon caught the attention of

visitors who began bringing tiles from around the world for Selarón to use. The steps, which are largely green, yellow, and blue—the colours of the Brazilian flag—and flanked by red walls, have tiles from more than 60 countries.

Eventually, the artist dedicated his life to the project, considering it his ode to the Brazilian people and his adopted city, in which he'd settled in 1983. Before that he travelled the world, earning his living as a painter. Deeply passionate about his creation, Selarón often stated that the project would end only on the

last day of his life. In a fitting twist of fate, the 65-year-old artist was found dead on the steps in 2013.

The project that Selarón began as a diversion from his work has become an icon for the city. Today hundreds of tourists throng the area to view his masterpiece. They follow it up with a visit to neighbouring Santa Teresa, where chic boutiques, trendy restaurants, artist studios, and souvenir shops line the cobbled streets. Or party the night away in Lapa, where clubs boom with the sounds of samba. ●

Craft of the Matter

ODISHA'S INDIGENOUS ART IS A REFLECTION OF ITS DIVERSE HISTORY AND PEOPLE

BY DIANA SAHU | PHOTOGRAPHS BY BISWANATH SWAIN

Odisha's varied landscapes range from forests to beaches, and its tradition of handicrafts is no less diverse. Inspired by Hindu myths, Mughal designs, tribal folktales, and nature. Odisha's crafts are worked in metal, cloth, and stone, and are an integral part of its culture.



At the workshop at Raghunath Crafts Museum visitors can watch the stone sculptors of Bhubaneswar at work.

LESSONS IN FILIGREE IN CUTTACK

The ancient city of Cuttack is home to the delicate art of silver filigree jewellery, or *tarakasi*, which especially flourished under the patronage of the Mughal emperors. Silver still sparkles in its dusty bylanes, with about 1,500 filigree artisans, who learned the craft from their ancestors, plying their wares.

At the workshop of Nirakar Das, in Mansinghpatta, one group of artisans creates silver wires almost as thin as a spider's web. Others meticulously shape these into flowers, trinket boxes, jewellery, chariot-shaped souvenirs, and more. As I look around the shelves

decorated with showpieces, idols, and jewellery, Das demonstrates how to twist long silver threads into intricate floral designs with the help of a sharp knife. The product is fired in a furnace, and glazed and polished with *reetha*, or soap nut, for that pristine white sparkle.

Visit Cuttack during Durga Puja to witness pandals where idols are set against gorgeous filigree backdrops. While these are the grandest of the lot, almost all pandals in the city have some element of filigree in their design.

How to Reach: Cuttack is around 25 km/45 min north of Bhubaneswar, Odisha's capital city.

Where to Buy: Besides Mansinghpatta, silver filigree is available in jewellery shops at Shaikh Bazaar, Naya Sadak, and Dolomundai.

STONE LEGENDS OF BHUBANESWAR

Bhubaneswar abounds in temples and stone sculptures. In fact, the city once had about 2,000 temples, of which 700 still survive. Thanks to the area's abundant red sandstone, the art of stone carving took off here in the 13th century, and prospered especially under the patronage of the Eastern Ganga dynasty, which ruled between the 11th and 15th centuries.

Taking the Bhubaneswar-Puri Road, where shops sell stone statues of deities in different postures and sizes, I make my way to the Raghunath Crafts Museum, to see how these sculptures take form. The museum is spread over two acres on the outskirts of the city. An ornate gate opens to a garden decorated with lifelike sculptures of dancing celestial beings. Raghunath Mohapatra, the founder of the museum, is a pioneer in his field. In the workshop at the museum, artists painstakingly chisel small strips of stone from a large block, which will take the shape of a meditating Buddha. While small statues can be completed within a day, more complex figures can take months to finish. Watching these sculptors work is an experience in itself, as every stroke of their hammer immortalises both myth and history.

How to Reach: Bhubaneswar is well connected to Indian metro cities by air, rail and road.

Where to Buy: Travellers can purchase sculptures from stone craft shops on the Bhubaneswar-Puri Highway. The Raghunath Stone Crafts Museum at Sisupalgarh and Sudarshan Arts and Crafts Village at Jaydev Vihar also have pieces for sale.

EVERY LEAF TELLS A STORY IN RAGHURAJPUR

Most people associate Raghurajpur with *pattachitra* scroll paintings, but this idyllic village on the banks of the River Bhargabi is equally well-known for *tala patra chitra*, or palm leaf engraving. Raghurajpur has two neat rows of identical houses, where about 100 artisan families live and work. As I walk through the colourful village, Banamali Mohapatra, an elderly artist, invites me to his house. He makes miniature paintings on sheets of palm leaves. He shows me an extremely intricate painting of the Dashavatara or the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu, which took him six months to complete. Each palm leaf painting goes through a number of processes—from stitching sun-dried palm leaves together, to sketching the subject, engraving it with a needle, and staining it with lamp soot. Besides palm leaf engraving, Raghurajpur artists also make toys, paper masks, coconut shell paintings, and wood carvings.

How to Reach: Raghurajpur is accessible



The appliqué artisans of Puri (top) entered the Limca Book of Records in 2004 for creating a 177-foot-long piece depicting India's freedom struggle; Odisha's *pattachitra* painting is an extension of the ancient technique of palm leaf painting or *tala patra chitra* (bottom left and right).

via taxi from either Puri (10 km/30 min) or Bhubaneswar (58 km/1 hr).

Where to Buy: Almost all the artists in Raghurajpur sell samples of their work from their home-workshops.

APPLIQUÉ AWAY IN PIPILI

Visitors to the small town of Pipili are greeted by mirror-encrusted lanterns and umbrellas, gently swaying in the breeze outside handicraft shops. One of Odisha's most vibrant crafts is the appliqué work found in Pipili. Locally known as *chandua*, it involves sewing

colourful patches of cotton, jute, and silk onto a contrasting fabric with special embroidery techniques.

Common appliqué products include cushion covers, lampshades, bed covers, bags, and umbrellas. More importantly, *chandua* adorns the giant chariots of the divine trinity of Odisha—Jagannath, Subhadra, and Balabhadra—during the annual Rath Yatra in Puri. The erstwhile rulers of Puri, who were followers of Lord Jagannath, promoted the craft and resettled all the *chandua* artisans in the same village, which



Cuttack's artisans (left) use three techniques to create *tarakasi*, or silver filigree work (bottom); The little-known *dokra* (right) artisans of Dhenkanal claim to be related to their more famous counterparts in Bastar, Chhattisgarh.

grew into present-day Pipili.

Hindu and Muslim appliqué makers live next to each other and work together to produce and sell chandua. Their designs follow age-old patterns with Jagannath's face often taking pride of place in the larger pieces. Today, some artisans are trying to bring modern elements to this art form by integrating motifs from *pattachitra*, *Warli*, and *saura* tribal paintings, and experimenting with new colour palettes. Pipili's appliqué has also earned it the Geographical Indication (GI) tag for design and artistry.

How to Reach: Pipili is accessible via NH316 from both Bhubaneswar (24 km/40 min) and Puri (36 km/40 min).

Where to Buy: The approach road to Pipili is lined with crafts shops.

METAL MAGICIANS OF DHENKANAL

The famous bronze figurine of a dancing girl, excavated from the ancient Indus Valley Civilization site of Mohenjo Daro, is considered the earliest example of *dokra*, or metal casting. Amazingly, this technique thrives 4,500 years later in

the Dhenkanal district of Odisha.

Located near the Saptasarjya Hills, Sadeibareni village has 60 thatched houses, inhabited by members of the Situla tribe. Each house is a repository of dokra art, and every local an expert in the craft. Many have received the National Shilp Guru award from the Ministry of Textiles.

As I walk down the untarred road, I see women preparing black wax strands from beeswax, and resin, which they collect from the surrounding Saptasarjya



forest. At another corner of the village, Golap Gadia, a 2002 National Shilp Guru awardee, is busy applying natural glue onto sculptures prepared with cow dung and red clay. After the glue is applied, the wax threads are layered around the figurines, which are covered with a clay and cowdung mixture. Golap bakes these sculptures in a kiln at the centre of the village. The melting wax drains out from a duct at the bottom of the sculpture, and molten brass is poured through a duct on top to fill the space, forming a metal statue. Unlike Chhattisgarhi dokra, which artisans polish to a shiny golden hue, the Sadeibareni dokra retains its raw, unpolished look.

How to Reach: Sadeibareni is around 80 km/1 hr 40 min from Bhubaneswar. One can also take a train to Dhenkanal from Bhubaneswar and proceed to Sadeibareni by car.

Where to Buy: The entire village is an open-air gallery. Dokra is sold in the village by weight, intricacy of the work notwithstanding, and is priced at approximately ₹800/kg. ●

The Shape of Whimsy

THREE STRUCTURES THAT BRING FABLES AND FANTASY TO LIFE BY RUMELA BASU

Poland's Crooked House, often referred to as the house made of Jell-O, was inspired by the fairy-tale drawings of children's books illustrator Jan Marcin Szancer.



Children's books, stories of magic, and even personal idiosyncrasies often inspire architecture that seems out of place in the regular scheme of things. Often described as "bizarre," "eccentric," or "enchanting," here are three structures—homes and commercial spaces—that will tickle any traveller's fancy.

WINCHESTER MYSTERY HOUSE, U.S.A.

Winchester mansion in California's San Jose Bay area was built in the late 1800s by Sarah Winchester, heiress of the Winchester Repeating Arms company fortune. Counted among the most modern buildings of its time, the mansion's elegant Victorian facade reveals nothing of its eccentric interior.

It took years to build the 161-room expansive property with brightly

coloured window panes. Even after construction was complete, Winchester insisted on introducing odd additions to the interiors. She commissioned doors that lead nowhere, staircases going up to the ceiling, and a cabinet that runs uninterrupted through 30 rooms.

Depending on whom you ask, there are two stories about the reasons for these additions. According to one, the arthritic Winchester couldn't move freely, so many of the incomplete stairs were abandoned constructions. Supporting this theory is the Hall of Fires, a room with large windows and four fireplaces that were lit up at once to make it warm and comfortable for someone with painful joints.

As per the second story, the lady of the house had an inordinate fear of being haunted by the ghosts of people killed by Winchester rifles. She had these various

elements added to the house to confuse angry spirits. Guided tours of the house come with a statutory warning: Do not wander away from the group, you might not find your way out (*www.winchestermysteryhouse.com*; tours from \$26/₹1,750; online bookings must be made a day in advance).

KRZYWY DOMEK, Poland

Krzywy Domek or Crooked House in the coastal town of Sopot in northern Poland is a wobbly, wavy structure that looks like a horizontal box a giant held in both hands and squeezed. Designed by architects Szotyńscy & Zaleski in 2004, the 43,000-square-foot building was inspired by the fantastical drawings of Polish illustrator Jan Marcin Szancer. The off-white and blue structure has weird tapering walls, bulges, and crooked windows, which look like the distorted



From a rope bridge that is the only way to enter the resort, to a golf course nestled in the wilderness, Montaña Mágica Lodge lives up to its name.

reflections in mirrors at a theme park. Patches of yellow peep out of the window frames, and its interiors have concave ceilings and curved glass windows.

Krzywy Domek houses a shopping complex, offices, and eateries. One of the building's main attractions is its Wall of Fame—a canvas for the signatures of every person who has ever been part of any cultural event held within this topsy-turvy creation (*krzywydomek.info*).

MONTAÑA MÁGICA LODGE, Chile
If a home for a queen of forest nymphs or a secluded abode for an elf from Middle Earth had to be built, it would probably look like Montaña Mágica Lodge. The spire-shaped, wood-and-stone guest house in Huilo Huilo Biological Reserve in southern Chile looks like it has risen from the forest floor. A blanket of twining vines and tropical plants covers its facade, trailing around little arched windows that look out to the forest. A stream of water flowing from the peak of this hill-like structure sends rivulets down the outer walls, nourishing Montaña Mágica's green wrap and resulting in it being commonly described as a "water-spouting volcano."

Getting to the lodge located in the middle of a 3,00,000-acre rainforest is in fact part of the adventure: Guests cross a swinging footbridge in the nature reserve to reach Montaña Mágica. Pudus, the world's smallest deer species, roam jungle hiking trails that take walkers deep into the wilderness. Visitors can also fly over the forest on a 250-foot-high zip line, one of South America's longest.

Inside, the lodge has low ceilings with wooden beams and a spiral staircase curling to the top floor. Each room is named after a tropical bird. Guests can soak in a hot tub carved out of a tree trunk while listening to the waterfall pouring down the sides of the lodge. It's like spending a night in an enchanted forest, where you might meet a mythical beast at any turn (*huilohuilo.com*). ●



The very odd Winchester Mystery House in San Jose, California, has 161 rooms, but 10,000 windows, 2,000 doors, and 40 staircases.

PHOTO COURTESY: MONTAÑA MÁGICA LODGE (MONTAÑA MÁGICA LODGE), RICHARD T. NOWITZ/CORBIS DOCUMENTARY/GETTY IMAGES (WINCHESTER MYSTERY HOUSE)

The Spirited Traveller

KENYAN CHEF KIRAN JETHWA EXPLORES THE DIFFERENT DRINKS OF INDIA



Chef Kiran Jethwa's food and drink experiences are hands-on and include learning the nuances of thandai in Varanasi (left) and scaling coconut palms with toddy tappers in Kochi (right).

My new show on Fox Life called *Spirited Traveller* explores a variety of beverages from across India. From fishing and toddy tasting in Kerala to sharing millet beer with the elders of the Lepcha community of Sikkim, my travels to the far corners of the country helped me forge new connections with people and learn about the origins of diverse drinks. Here are some of my top picks:

MILKY WAY

In Varanasi, pure cow's milk is the undisputed beverage of choice. I met this group of young wrestlers who showed me a couple of their moves, and then we sat together and downed tumblers of milk. In the bylanes of this sacred city, there is a little hole-in-the-wall establishment which is believed to be one of the oldest lassi shops in India. Here, a lone guy sits on his precarious perch and churns out litres of delicious lassi. Nothing much seems to have changed in a long time—the recipe, the ingredients, or the way it is made. This age-old tradition is evident in yet another north Indian milk product—thandai laced with bhang. The aromatic mix of milk and spices is actually quite pleasing to the palate.

TODDY TALES

The toddy culture of Kerala is fascinating. The beverage goes through three stages from when it is a non-alcoholic drink called *neera* which is the sap of palm trees, to the final fermented alcoholic beverage called toddy. Local toddy shops around Kochi and the backwaters are colourful, loud, and noisy, and also serve amazing local delicacies like the famous *karimeen polichathu* (pearl spot fish steamed in a banana leaf). While toddy might be an acquired taste, the toddy shop experience was something I took to immediately.

BEER AND ARROWS

Sikkim is a gorgeous state and my time spent with the Lepcha community in the mountains was all about understanding their culture through their food and drink. I tried *chang*, the local millet beer, as well as their local tea with added butter and salt. I had expected *chang* to knock my socks off, but due to its natural fermentation it's rather beer-like in strength. My adventures also included a local archery competition where I took part, lost miserably, but had a whale of a time.

NAGALAND NOSHES

In Nagaland I was fascinated by the

distinct food cultures of different tribal communities. Foraged ingredients, traditional methods of cooking, and unique Naga flavours gave me new insight into my own culinary craft. Here, the favoured local tittle is *zutho*, a fermented rice beer. Under the tutelage of Naga chef Aketoli Zhimomi, I also tried an array of exciting Naga dishes featuring smoky pork, fried silkworms, fermented mustard leaves, and the fiery *bhut jolokia* or ghost pepper.

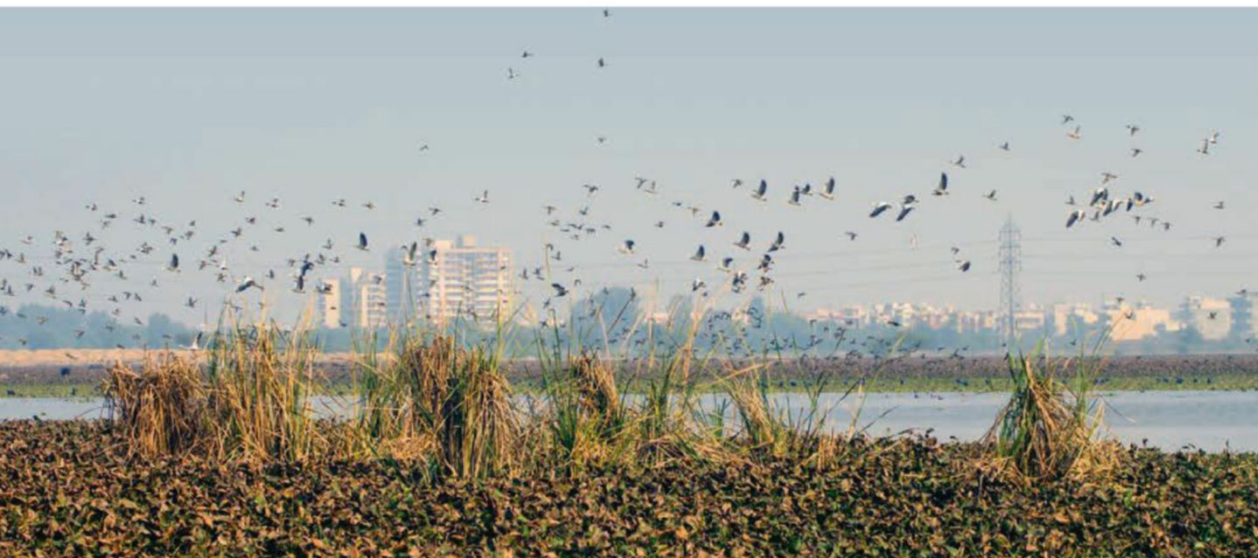
BENGALURU BREWERIES

Bengaluru is the city of craft beer and some of India's best whiskies. The city's many microbreweries offer beers flavoured with local ingredients, including fruits. Bengaluru is also where one of India's most premium single malt whiskies, Amrut, comes from. It is produced in copper stills and barrel-aged to get a characteristic smoky flavour. In this city I saw the merging of traditional and modern cultures. And this was evident in the drinks as well, which ranged from trendy boutique brews to ragi malt, a local staple beverage made by adding ragi flour to hot milk.

Spirited Traveller airs on Fox Life Mon and Tue at 9 p.m. ●

Secret Garden

HIDING AMONG GURGAON'S HIGH-RISES IS A WETLAND WHERE BIRDLIFE THRIVES BY SUTIRTHA LAHIRI



A flock of migratory ducks takes off from one of several waterbodies that form the Basai wetlands (left); Sarus crane, the tallest flying bird in the world, is a resident here (right); A migratory steppe eagle watches from its perch (bottom).

Seen from afar, Basai resembles nothing more than a wasteland, stuck between high-rises on all sides. But this wetland is in fact one of Delhi's best birding locales, with many species visible in a small area.

About 50 kilometres/1.5 hours from central Delhi, Basai is accessed by a blink-and-you'll-miss-it turn, right up to what looks like an undemarcated marsh filled with dirty water. A kilometre-long dirt track goes through the swamp, which is filled with water hyacinths and tall typha reeds. A canal runs along its far end. Mexican mesquite trees and clumps of grass grow on the solid land between the waterbodies.

On my most recent visit, I arrived early in the morning with ten fellow birders. Heavy fog covered most of the area, and a weak-looking sun hung in the eastern sky. As we drove into the wetland, we saw hordes of waders foraging in the water for their breakfast. We parked halfway up the track, continuing along the length of the road on foot. Purple swamphens announced their presence with their crass call. We also saw black-winged stilts, sandpipers, stints, ibises; and

pintail, teal, and gadwall ducks.

A moustached warbler called from the reeds, and we stopped to watch it creep out to look for small insects. It vanished back into the leafy labyrinth almost as soon as it had appeared. But what held my attention longest was a flock of 17 greater flamingoes. We could see only the silhouettes of these beautiful birds through the haze, but were mesmerised by their serpentine necks and long legs. They seemed to walk on tiptoe, preening, and occasionally dipping their beaks in the water to feed.

As we sipped some tea we had brought, there was a commotion on the water. A flock of waders flew haphazardly in front of us. The reason for their distress soon became apparent: a peregrine falcon was on the hunt! This small raptor can reach a speed of up to 320 kmph while diving, which makes it the fastest animal in the world (three times faster than a cheetah, which is the fastest land animal). Using this speed as a weapon, the peregrine falcon can hunt a diverse range of prey, as many as a hundred species. This has been well documented—I still remember footage of this bird seeking its food that I watched as a child.

But watching this drama unfold before my eyes was something else. Unperturbed by the frenzied manoeuvres of the wader flock, the falcon flew right behind it, breaking it up by flying straight into it. It isolated an individual bird, which plunged in terror, trying to outfly the fast predator on its tail. Like a bolt of lightning, the peregrine dived in pursuit. Its speed sent shivers down my spine.

Despite this, the peregrine was unsuccessful. We watched as it made a few more attempts, but the wader lived to see another day. Finally, the falcon flew off, leaving an amazed group of birders behind. ●



SUTIRTHA LAHIRI (WETLANDS & EAGLE), BARCROFT MEDIA/GETTY IMAGES (CRANE)

Bastar Au Naturel

IN SEARCH OF GIANT WATERFALLS AND PREHISTORIC CAVES IN CHHATTISGARH

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY SUGATO TRIPATHY

I rolled down the window of the old Ambassador car and strained to tune out the local remix of a Kishore Kumar melody. As our vehicle rumbled along the winding roads that run between the verdant paddy fields of Jagdalpur, in the Bastar district of Chhattisgarh, I sniffed the fresh air and listened for a different kind of music.

"I can't hear it. Are we near?" I asked Palomji, my driver. The sound I was so eager to hear was the loud reverberation of thousands of gallons of water gushing down from the rugged, 100-foot cliffs at **Chitrakote Falls**. Called the "Niagara Falls of India," the country's widest waterfall earned its sobriquet because of the expansive horseshoe shape it

acquires during the monsoons.

Chitrakote, which descends from the Indravati River, is about an hour's drive from the small town of Jagdalpur. It is difficult to fathom such a gigantic waterfall emerging from such a gentle and innocuous body of water. The calmness of the Indravati just before the plunge is reminiscent of a tiger creeping up to its prey; a slow and silent approach, just before a frenzied offensive.

There are many vantage points to view Chitrakote from the adjacent cliffs. However, I was wary of the crowds wielding selfie sticks, and decided to hop in a boat and watch the falls from below. With the flair of a seasoned daredevil,

our intrepid boatman navigated us through treacherous rapids, right to the base of the gushing falls. The splash of water droplets on my face, the resounding roar of the falls, the rocking boat, and the magical strands of a rainbow against the backdrop of white froth coalesced into an experience I still rhapsodise about.

Chitrakote is famous, but there is more to explore in rugged Bastar, where tourism is relatively underdeveloped due to the region's association with Maoist activities. With Jagdalpur as my base, I explored several nearby places in a rented car. After Chitrakote, I headed to the **Tirathgarh Waterfalls**, which is formed by the Mugabaha

The gushing waters of Chitrakote Falls change from a muddy brown in the monsoon to a frothy white during summer. On a bright sunny day, small rainbows can be seen against the waterfall.





The rocks at Kutumsar Caves (left) are rich in minerals. Years of geological activity have led to the formation of different coloured striations on the rock faces; Alongside displays about tribal customs and culture, the old-fashioned Anthropological Museum (top right) also has exhibits collected from local villages in the 1970s and '80s; Frequenting by visitors year-round, Tirathgarh Waterfall (bottom right) is a popular picnic spot.

River, a tributary of the Kanger. At Tirathgarh, the water drops down the craggy cliffs in white, frothy cascades, earning them the nickname “Milky Falls.” The uneven stone formations divide the river into several channels, creating a stunning vista.

Thanks to these channels, there are several places to bathe in clear water below the falls. To enjoy them without the crowds, I paid Tirathgarh a second visit, this time at sunrise. The experience of standing beneath the gorgeous waterfall felt right, the way humans are supposed to interact with nature. I thought again of an uninhibited relationship with the world as I watched children running ahead of me into the narrow, slippery, moss-covered pathways of **Kutumsar Caves**. About 40 kilometres south of Jagdalpur, Kutumsar is a long natural cave system.

Its five huge chambers have magnificent formations of stalactites and stalagmites sculpted at the glacial pace of one inch every 6,000 years. Mineral-rich rock adds bands of brilliant colour to these formations. Not a single ray of sunlight penetrates the dark cavern. The wildlife too has evolved duly, and a rare species of blind cave fish (*Indoreonectes evezardi*) inhabit the underground waters (open 9 a.m to 4 p.m; entry ₹25 per person; closed Jun-Aug).

Another glimpse of evolution in harmony with nature is on view at the **Anthropological Museum**. Established in 1972, the museum displays the cultural traditions of Bastar’s tribes. Exhibits include collections of clothing, headgear and footwear, paintings and carvings, musical instruments, ornaments, and weapons (open 9.30 a.m to 5.30 p.m., closed Sunday,

entry free, photography is prohibited inside the museum). ●

THE VITALS

Getting There Jagdalpur is 280 km/ 6 hr south of Raipur, which is connected by direct flights to major Indian cities. Taxis charge ₹3,500 for a one-way trip.

Season Chitrakote Falls is most grandiose (and muddy) in Aug-Sep (during and just after the monsoon). In Oct-Feb, the weather is more pleasant and the water pristine white.

Stay The Dandami Luxury Resort run by the Chhattisgarh Tourism Board offers both tents and cottages (cgtourism.choice.gov.in; from ₹1,750). Naman Bastar, about 6 km from Jagdalpur, provides an eco-conscious, local experience (75877 75500; www.namanbastar.com; doubles from ₹4,500).

DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (CAVE)

Riverside Stroll

WALKING THROUGH THE CENTURIES, ON CHANDERNAGORE'S PROMENADE BY NIRUPAMA SUBRAMANIAN



Remnants of colonial times still linger in Chandernagore, in the pastel facades of buildings like the Saint Joseph's Convent, and the toots of cycle rickshaws; A statue of Saint Peter with a rooster (bottom) stands inside Sacred Heart Church.

I had heard bits and pieces about Chandernagore over the years. It was one of the first outposts of India's colonial past, a French colony rather like Puducherry.

The taxi driver we hired for the day from Kolkata stared blankly when we told him our destination. When realization dawned he said: "Oh... Chandonnogar. But there is nothing there," advising us instead to go during the time of Jagadhatri Puja. My husband and daughter were ready to change plans, but though daunted, I stayed firm.

At first sight, it looked like any small town in India. There were people, cars, and signboards for mobile connections and bank loans everywhere. Small shops with colourful wares spilled onto streets. There must be a French Quarter I thought, with charming old homes and a French café, but no one had heard about any of these. All we were told was to "go straight." Straight led to the Hooghly River, an important distributory of the Ganga. The river-side promenade was

grandly named the Strand. We walked along it, looking for the Indo-French Cultural Centre and Museum.

The museum and French language school are housed in Dupleix House, a handsome cream-coloured building, once the home of the French Governor. With no one else at the museum, we wandered freely, gazing at the motley collection of maps, models, furniture, and household items. For those with patience and good eyesight, the maps offer stories of the town's turbulent, eventful past. The French, Dutch, Danish, Portuguese, Germans, and English, all coveted the prime lands along the banks of the Hooghly, the opening to the riches of the Indian subcontinent. The French received a *firman* from Emperor Aurangzeb in 1688 and established Fort d'Orleans at Chandernagore, which was later razed to the ground by the British. Chandernagore

passed from the French to the British and back again until it became a part of the Indian Republic in 1952. From the condition of the museum, it seemed like no one really cares much about its history or current state. The old four-poster bed, the run-down sofas, the pretty crockery, and the odd statues and lithographs are scattered about the rooms in no particular order. They looked shabby, yet stolid and proud, all mute witnesses to another era. Behind the museum is a garden, still lovely in a wild unkempt way, where the governor may have held soirees on balmy summer evenings. (institutedechandernagor.gov.in; open 11 a.m.-5.30 p.m., closed Thu and Sat; adults ₹5, children under ten free).

We left the museum and walked along the Strand towards a structure vaguely reminiscent of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. The



peach-coloured arch combines eastern influences in the form of elephants and flowers along with slender columns and typical European stucco work. A marble slab high up on the facade says in French that the structure is a gift to the city, constructed by Shamachorone Roquitte. He built it in memory of his father Dourgachourone Roquitte, who was awarded the Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur in 1841. Who was this man, I wondered, who had rendered his name in French and now provides his countrymen with a place to relax on the banks of the river that flows through his birthplace? Few bother to read the slab, fewer still know that this is a memorial to Durgacharan Rakshit, a French Bengali who had lived here more than a hundred years ago.

Further along the promenade was yet another structure, a flash of white against the darkening sky, the Sacred Heart Church. Though the walls in the front had peeled to reveal a bare brown with bits of plaster sticking on like scabs, this is a living, thriving place. Inside, under the tall ceiling, are beautiful stained-glass windows, the colours glowing bright red, blue, and yellow. The parish priest showed us around. We saw a statue of St. Peter with a rooster at the entrance, a restored grave, altar lights which had been brought from France, just like the bell that still tolls three times a day to call the faithful to prayer. The church was built in the late 19th century to provide spiritual solace to French traders.

There was no French café anywhere in Chandernagore, but we found a tea stall and stood in the light rain sipping sweet milky tea. How do we deal with the past, I pondered. Chandernagore has moved on, shrugging off its history like an old coat. Yet, it is its unique past that makes this town special, that gives it a charm and identity different from any other town in West Bengal. And just for that I hoped whatever fragments were left of its past could still be preserved for the future. ●

THE VITALS

Chandernagore is 35 km/1.5 hr north of Kolkata, in West Bengal's Hooghly district. Trains ply frequently between Chandernagore and Kolkata's Howrah railway station. Taxis from Kolkata charge ₹1,500 for a return trip.



1



2



3

1 The erstwhile French administrator's house, now a museum, became a symbol of Indo-French friendship after Chandernagore became part of the Indian Union. 2 The centuries-old Sacred Heart Church has a statue of Mother Theresa as a saint. 3 Chandernagore is famous for sweets like baked ras malai. 4 The riverside Strand is a favourite spot for residents to unwind.



4

AYON MANDAL (STATUE), STUART FREEDMAN/CONTRIBUTOR/CORBIS NEWS/GETTY IMAGES (CHURCH & MEN), SUGATO MUKHERJEE (FOOD)

Bottled Charm

A FRAGRANT SURPRISE IN AN OLD DELHI PERFUME SHOP TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY NITIN CHAUDHARY



In addition to their collection of oils (left) perfumer Gulabsingh Johrimal blends bespoke fragrances on demand; The store combines fragrances like musk and rose to make handmade soaps, incense, and *dhoop* sticks (right).

Delhi's most famous old perfumery, the unassuming Gulabsingh Johrimal, blends into the surrounding chaos of Dariba Kalan in Chandni Chowk. I might have missed it but for the sweet scent of perfumes, essential oils, and attars that emanated from it, rising above the street's dominant stench.

Established in 1816, Gulabsingh's is an old hand at blending perfumes. The shop is simply set up: shelves line the walls, holding countless glass bottles of different shapes and colours. Behind a counter is the workspace, where oils from large jars are poured into smaller bottles and packed.

Besides essential oils, perfumes, and attars, the shop also has incense sticks, aromatherapy sets, room-fresheners, and accessories, such as small glass perfume bottles and diffusers. The scents range from the fundamental floral aromas of mogra, rose, jasmine, and sandal, to blends that mimic the latest

commercial collections from the houses of Armani and Hugo Boss. Despite loud and tacky names—Funtoosh, Tehelka, Gadar, Aakarshan—these compositions are a fair approximation of the international brands they emulate.

After sampling dozens of the store's popular scents, I asked for oud: a smutty, earthy fragrance that I was introduced to by an Arab friend in Dubai. Disconcerting, crude, and uninhibited, yet still strangely alluring, it smells the way I think men should smell.

Oud is serious business in the Middle East, where Arab men invariably dab on a few drops before stepping out. In the past couple of years, it has caught the fancy of the rest of the world as well. And it has a strong Indian connection: Oud is derived from the resinous heartwood of tropical agar trees, which are grown mostly in India and Bangladesh. This resin, worth ₹2,000 per gram, is among the world's most expensive natural raw ingredients.

I figured I could find a cheaper version at Gulabsingh Johrimal. "You won't like it," said Mukul Gundhi, the shop's proprietor. "Many Indians think it smells of sweat."

There was some truth to this statement. When I persisted, I was shown two bottles of blends: White Gold Oud and Amiri Oud. Both carried strong notes of oud, and were also faintly reminiscent of the foul-smelling lanes I had left outside. But, well, this was the smell I had sought. I left with not only two bottles of oud, but a whole bunch of sweet-smelling souvenirs. ●

THE VITALS

Gulabsingh Johrimal has two shops in Old Delhi. The head office is at shop number 320, Dariba Kalan. A newer shop is located at 467, Chandni Chowk (011-23271345; www.gulabsinghjohrimal.com). Prices for 10 ml bottles start at ₹30; popular fragrances are about ₹100, oud ₹600.



Indonesians from across the country savour *kawa daun* when visiting the West Sumatra province. At the Kiniko Home Industry, the beverage is served with snacks made from banana and tapioca.

Colonial Cuppa

WHAT'S COFFEE WITHOUT THE BEAN? FIND OUT IN WEST SUMATRA BY RATHINA SANKARI

There must be a hundred ways to prepare coffee, but it all begins with the bean. Or so I assumed, until I found myself craving a cup of the brew while exploring Indonesia's Western Sumatra province with my local Minangkabau guide, Budiman, or Buddy. Palpably excited at showing me one more local speciality, Buddy suggested I try *kawa daun*, a drink prepared by boiling coffee leaves.

I was incredulous, but followed Buddy to Kiniko Home Industry, a coffee processing plant in Tanah Datar, one of West Sumatra's regencies. On the way, Buddy revealed the origins of *kawa daun*. The Dutch introduced coffee from their territory in Malabar to Indonesia in the late 17th century. The plantations—powered by local labourers who cleared forests, planted, and harvested—flourished in the archipelago's tropical conditions. Despite their drudgery, however, the Minang were not privy to the yield. All of it went to Europe,

which was abuzz with the new coffee culture that had begun displacing common breakfast beverages like ale and wine. Lavish coffee shops mushroomed and access to every single coffee bean was restricted to the colonizers, Buddy told me.

But the Minang, not to be outdone, developed an indigenous technique of using the plants. "If not the beans, then the leaves," explained Buddy. The leaves were plucked, dried and then boiled in water to prepare an aromatic drink. The locals named the drink for *qahwah*, which means coffee in Arabic, and *daun*, the local word for leaves. Since the drink is brewed like tea, it is also called *teh kawa daun*, or coffee leaf tea.

The beverage is easily available at roadside stalls around the towns of Padang Panjang and Kota Baru. It is always served in a coconut shell (coconut plantations are widespread in Sumatra) placed on a bamboo pedestal. Sometimes milk is added to the drink.

The best accompaniments are the glutinous rice snack *lamang* and a few pieces of durian. The drink is said to help treat hypertension, cholesterol, and diabetes.

When we arrived at Kiniko it was lunchtime and most workers were on a break. The factory looked desolate, but the smell of coffee hung heavily in the air. A lady in hijab sat alone in front of a huge tray of coffee powder, packing auburn dust into transparent envelopes. We moved past her to an outdoor patio with short tree trunks for stools. Endless views of verdant rice steppes and swaying coconut trees stretched ahead of us.

Buddy handed me a steaming cup of the bitter decoction. I brooded over the jet-black liquid, and took a sip. It hinted at the dark history surrounding West Sumatran coffee. But it also spoke to me about the genius of the local alchemists, who refused to be denied their daily cuppa. ●



Loaded with antioxidants, virgin white tea has caught the world's attention because of the enormous health benefits it offers (top); Plucked tea leaf buds are spread over flannel lined trays and sun-dried under filtered light (bottom).

Royal Brew

A TEA FIT FOR CHINESE EMPERORS FOUND IN SOUTHERN SRI LANKA BY CHAITALI PATEL

Sri Lankan tea planter Herman Gunaratne first came across the legend of virgin white tea in books on ancient tea lore. According to this narrative, in fifth-century B.C. China, virgins wearing silk gloves used golden scissors to cut the plant's most delicate tea buds into golden bowls. From plucking to preparation, the tea was untouched by humans, until the emperor raised a cup of it to his lips. The delicate flavour was so rare that it was the prerogative of royalty. It was a tale that stayed in Gunaratne's mind though he regarded it somewhat absurd.

Several years later, visiting Grasse in the French Riviera, Gunaratne grasped the significance of human touch and how it might affect taste. Almost all tea comes from the *Camellia sinensis* plant, and what lends the drink from different parts of the world a unique flavour, apart

from the environmental factors, is the people involved in the picking process. By eliminating human touch, the chance of contaminating flavour by sweat is eliminated. Marrying his new-found knowledge with the legend of virgin white tea, Herman decided to produce this drink, once served only in the Chinese imperial courts.

The Handunugoda estate close to Galle in Sri Lanka follows a meticulous process of tea picking, but virgins are not sought to pluck the leaves. The painstaking picking process involves plucking only the closed buds of the plant. A picker's output is only 160 grams a day, as opposed to 30 kilograms of regular tea picked in the same time. With minimal processing, white tea has a very high percentage of antioxidants, making it a unique blend of taste and good health.

When my guide in Galle mentioned

this peculiar tea, I was keen to see it for myself. As we drove down a road hugging the Indian Ocean, past fishermen on stilts and tsunami memorials, a tea plantation seemed incongruous to the setting, further piquing my interest. Crossing Kathaluwa junction, the tuk-tuk drove past plantations of paddy and banana to reach Handunugoda Tea Factory.

At the estate, a planter took us on a tour. We saw how over 25 varieties of tea are grown, including the coveted white tea. We also stopped by at estate owner Gunaratne's bungalow with its immaculately tended garden, for some tea and cake. We saw tea being graded, dried, and rolled, and the tour ended at the museum and store where we tasted the various teas produced at Handunugoda. I had my first taste of the rare virgin white tea, which was light and aromatic, its unblemished flavour truly fit for kings.

A small quantity of the tea is sold in the store, while the rest goes exclusively to Mariage Frères, a renowned gourmet tea company and salon in Paris, for a whopping one lakh Indian rupees per kilo. Like in the days of the emperors, few have access to virgin white tea even today. I guess we were lucky to have had a tiny sip. ●



THE VITALS

Handunugoda tea estate is located in the town of Ahangama, in Sri Lanka, 24 km/35 min south of Galle. It is a good idea to hire a tuk-tuk for the trip (hermantea.com; open daily 8 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.; entry free; allow 2 hours for the visit; tuk-tuks cost approx. LKR1,500/₹660 return trip).

Arcade Games

TIME TRAVELLING ON MELBOURNE'S HISTORIC RETAIL TRAIL BY SONAL SHAH



Giants Gog and Magog, the mythic timekeepers at the Royal Arcade, guard Gaunt's Clock and have been striking the adjacent bells every hour since 1892.

Melbourne feels less like a small city than a miniaturized big one. Roughly the size of Delhi's old walled city, its central business district is compact enough to survey on foot in a few hours. Its regular grid, buildings in diverse architectural styles, and vibrant summer streets bristle with reasons why Australia's good-time capital constantly tops global "liveability"

lists. They also provide clues about its economic booms, beginning with the gold rush of the 1850s.

Melbourne's historic core is the "Hoddle Grid" street system, laid out in 1837 and named for its planner. Here, east-west streets intersect perpendicularly with small laneways, which originally provided service access to the buildings of each block. Since the 1990s, these have been redeveloped as

open-air eating and shopping areas. With distractions on every corner, it's helpful to use the city's enclosed arcades to orient oneself.

The critic Walter Benjamin deemed arcades "the most important architecture of the 19th century" in his massive, unfinished study of them. Melbourne once had over a dozen of these 19th- and 20th-century structures—somewhere between shopping mall and souk—inspired by their forebears in London, Paris, and Milan. Strolling through a handful of Melbourne's surviving arcades, I glimpse aspects of the history of this colonial outpost, from the 1860s to the 1960s.

GOLD AND OLD

The **Royal Arcade**, Australia's oldest still standing, opened in 1870, towards the latter half of the gold rush that brought hundreds of thousands of immigrants to Melbourne's ports, almost doubling its population annually for several years. The boom-town's first opulent flush is reflected in the Royal Arcade's restored interiors, its yellow-gold walls, and a lofty, skylit ceiling. The expensive boutiques here pick up the whisper of Melbourne's past wealth and amplify it in their glittering window displays. I notice a few odd gems amongst the jewellers and chocolatiers; for example, Spellbox, a magic supply store run by a self-proclaimed witch.

I stop to look at the arcade's centre-piece clock, flanked by two seven-foot statues of ancient soldiers. These two giants—Gog and Magog of various end-times legends—were inspired by a similar pair in London's Guildhall. Stationed opposite a statue of Chronos, the ancient Greek personification of time, they mechanically beat out the hours until doomsday as people shop below them. I think about Benjamin's observation that architecture betrays the mythological imaginings of its makers; here, with each toll, these mythic figures resoundingly endorse the ruling principle of the industrial age: that time is money.

COMPLETELY FLOORED

Across Little Collins Street is **Block Place**, a partially covered lane (with the cavernous Basement Discs record shop and performance space beneath it) that leads to **Block Arcade**. Inspired by Milan's Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, the arcade opened in 1892, just as Melbourne's land boom of the previous decade gave way to a financial slump. Named after the area's pre-existing ritual of young men and women "walking the block" in opposite directions, the arcade invited romance to take shelter and thrive under the roof of commerce.

The Block's most dazzling feature is its mosaic floor. It becomes even more impressive when I learn that the floor survived the boots of World War II soldiers under felt carpeting, and that it has, over the years, been repaired using leftover tiles from an original shipment. Another Block original is the Hopetoun Tea Rooms. It's difficult to decide which is more ornate, the Victorian wallpapered walls behind its glass windows, or the gorgeous cakes in the vitrine outside. I resist the urge to join the snaking line for a table, and duck into the Gewürzhaus spice shop instead to buy little packets of truffle salt and powdered Australian bush herbs by weight.

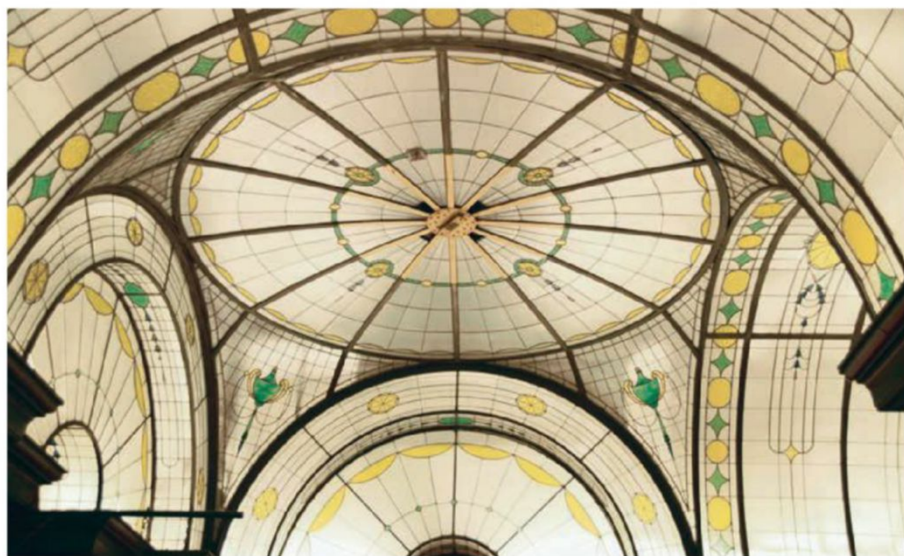
RETRO METRO

South of Block Arcade, across Collins Street, is the **Centreway Arcade**. It is more notable for its Edwardian Baroque facade from 1912, than its interior, which was converted to a soaring, glass-filled temple to designer shopping in the 1980s. I quickly walk through to Centre Place, a clutch of tempting cafés and bars, which opens onto Degraves Street and its popular Degraves Espresso Bar.

More commuter-friendly coffee is to be found in the subterranean **Campbell Arcade**, which was built to relieve the pedestrian traffic at Flinders Street Station. The arcade's art deco shopfronts were retro when it opened, in 1956; its pink tiles and black granite pillars recall the prevalent palette of its era. The businesses here are both functional and creative: an old-fashioned barbershop run by an opera singer; a zine print shop; and cup.of.truth, an alcove selling one of Melbourne's most sought-after coffees.

CATHEDRAL OF CRAFT

Down Flinders Lane, the **Nicholas**



The Nicholas Building's leadlight ceiling (top) is the first and last remaining feature of its kind in Melbourne; Block Place, one of the city's covered pedestrian laneways, is packed with cafés and eateries (bottom) ideal for a pit stop while shopping in the adjoining heritage Block Arcade.

Building and its ground floor Cathedral Arcade, built in 1926, house a warren of artists' workshops and quirky boutiques. I imagine the building has been spruced up since Gregory David Roberts wrote *Shantaram* on its second floor, but probably not much. Downstairs, poetry bookshop Collected Works and the huge RetroStar Vintage Clothing beg for longer visits.

STAMPED OUT

My last stop is the **Port Phillip Arcade**, which opened in 1961 on the site of a 19th-century hotel. The arcade was refurbished in the 1990s, and except for a metal and mosaic representation of the sea god Neptune on its facade, is not particularly eye-catching. Inside is Max Stern & Company, a philatelist's delight. A prominent stamp dealer, Stern died recently at 94, perhaps fortunately avoiding the demolition of the Port Phillip Arcade, slated for 2017, to make way for

Melbourne's new Metro Rail tunnel.

Even if it comes at the expense of a retail relic, the metro tunnel is a necessary measure to ease the pressure on Melbourne. Attracting about 1,00,000 immigrants annually, it is Australia's fastest growing city. And after all, it's possible that public transport will be considered the most important architectural feature of our century, while arcades remain, as Benjamin wrote, "residues of a dream world." ●

THE VITALS

Melbourne's arcades and laneways are easy to explore with Google Maps and a willingness to fall down rabbit holes. For greater historical insight, however, take one of the city's dozens of walking tours. Kathy Deacon of MELTours showed the writer the arcades and more, with lots of trivia along the way (www.meltours.com.au; 2.5-hr tours about AUD70/₹3,500).

ALISON RIDGWAY/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (CEILING); RAYMOND WARREN/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (CAFÉ)

Museum Matters

A RESOURCE CENTRE IN KUTCH SPEARHEADS EFFORTS TO KEEP CRAFTS ALIVE BY PRACHI JOSHI



Each Kutchi community has its own embroidery style. The Sodha Jadejas, for instance, use more than 50 different stitches, while the Mochi community works only with chain stitch and creates designs using a hook.

This is a living museum which showcases the work of present-day craftspeople,” says Ami Shroff, director of Living & Learning Design Centre (LLDC) in Kutch, Gujarat. And the space is just that—part training centre, part resource hub and part platform for artisans to showcase their work. The place was set up in January 2016 by Shrujan, an organisation started by Chandaben Shroff in 1969 to empower rural women in Kutch and help them develop a sustainable source of income through their diverse embroidery traditions.

Apart from embroidery, Kutch has a rich legacy of over 20 crafts including *ajrakh* (indigo) block printing, lacquer work, weaving, metalwork, leatherwork, *lippan kaam* (mud work), and more. Part of Shrujan’s vision was to create a space which would have workshops for all these different handicrafts. LLDC is a step in this direction. A sprawling eight-acre plot in Ajarakhpur, on the outskirts of Bhuj, houses the flat two-storey campus, which includes the museum, crafts studio, research wing and library, cafeteria, shop, and guest house. The light-filled tangerine coloured building

is earthquake-resistant and blends into the sunbaked Kutchi landscape.

Assistant curator Kalyani Waghela gives me a guided tour of the museum, whose collections are scheduled to change every six months. It is currently running the exhibit “The Living Embroideries of Kutch.” The first gallery displays mannequins dressed in the unique costumes of the different Kutchi communities. There are huge embroidered panels on display, and Waghela points out how the work differs across communities, for example the Rabaris embellish clothes with mirrors of different geometrical shapes while the Mutvas use very tiny mirrors. Even the stitches used by the various communities are different. Each embroidered garment tells a story reflecting the community’s identity and the age group of the wearer. There are also audio-visual displays which provide cultural insights into the Kutchi way of life and depict how these crafts are practised. One interesting video depicts a man showing all the ways in which the different tribes of the region tie a turban.

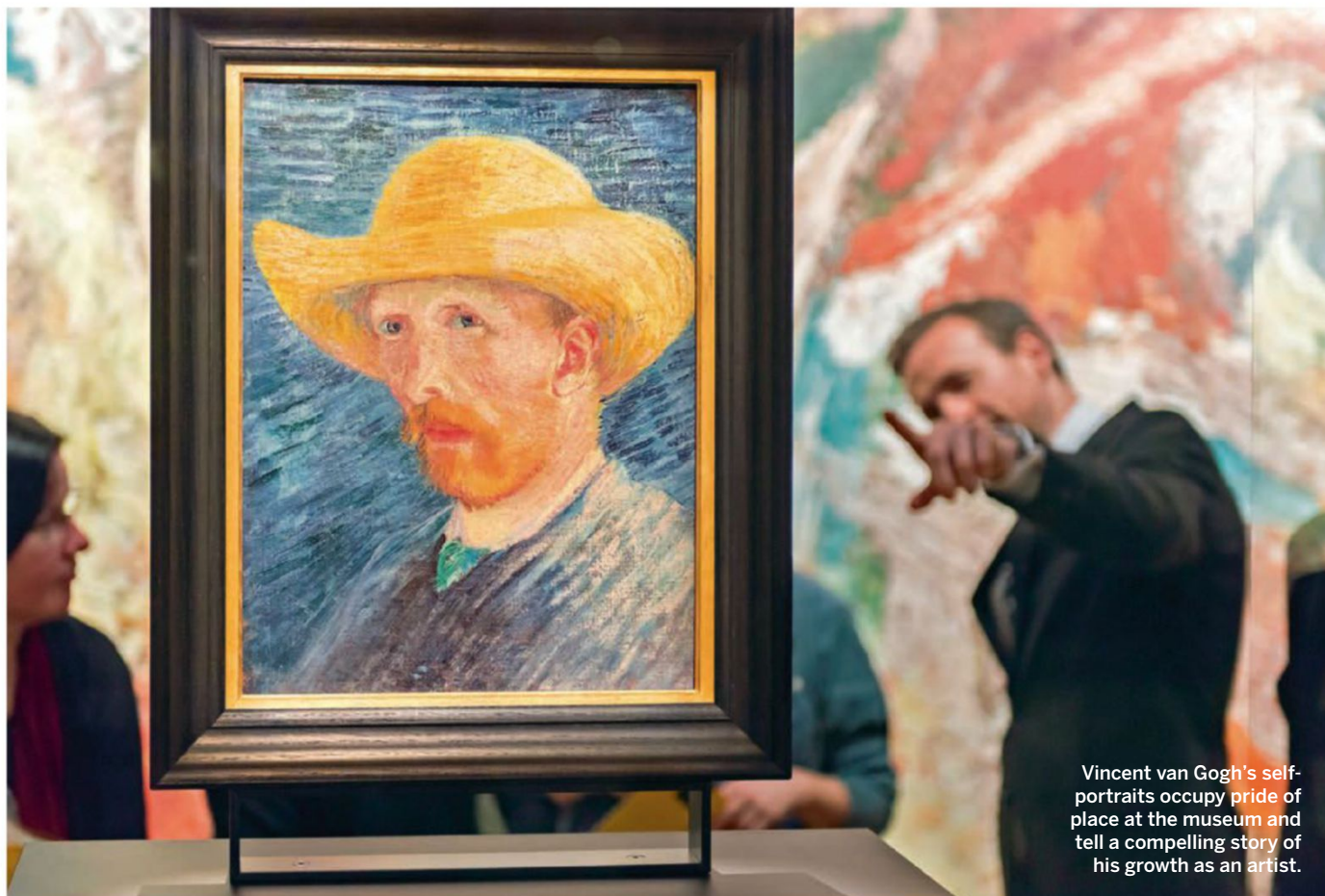
Later, I visit the Crafts Studio where enthusiasts can learn skills such as weaving and block printing. This

section will eventually have studios for all the crafts of the region. Visitors can also practise some of the crafts in the Hands On Gallery, which has among other things, a small loom for weaving, materials and designs for creating embroidery pieces, and a lacquering machine. I try my hand at block printing, which is not as easy as it seems. Each design requires three different blocks to be pressed onto the cloth at the exact same position and demands a high level of precision.

I end my visit at the museum shop, which retails Shrujan’s embroidery products as well as local handicrafts and souvenirs. I pick up a striking magenta coloured stole with fine embroidery. To me it perfectly encapsulates all the vivid colours and exquisite workmanship of Kutch. ●

THE VITALS

LLDC is 17 km/25 min southeast of the Bhuj airport and can be accessed by taxi, rickshaw, or bus (705, Bhuj-Bhachau Road, Ajarakhpur; shrujanlldc.org; open Tues-Sun 10 a.m.-6 p.m.; entry adults ₹50, children ₹20. Allow at least 3 hours for the visit; guided tours available).



Vincent van Gogh's self-portraits occupy pride of place at the museum and tell a compelling story of his growth as an artist.

Put on Earth to Paint

AMSTERDAM'S VAN GOGH MUSEUM IS A WINDOW INTO THE ARTIST'S LIFE **BY KAREENA GIANANI**

Ma'am," whispers the tall, bearded man with deep brown eyes, "you're getting too close..."

I jump back from the subject of my affection: red beard, furrowed brows, pipe dangling from his lips, a yellow straw hat. I have dreamt of standing inches away from this Vincent van Gogh self-portrait for all my adult life.

"Thank you, ma'am," nods the security guard when I am at a respectable distance, and walks away.

Around me, the ground floor of Amsterdam's three-storey Van Gogh Museum brims with people gazing at the artwork of the legendary 19th-century Dutch artist. The museum holds the largest collection of van Gogh's works anywhere in the world, including over 200 paintings, about 500 drawings,

and hundreds of letters exchanged with his younger brother and lifelong patron, Theo. "Sunflowers" is here, as is "Almond Blossom" and 16 evocative self-portraits.

With his use of bold colours and signature short, thick brushstrokes, van Gogh changed the face of modern art. It is little surprise that visitors are often seen holding magnifying glasses in front of paintings, while others shift their spectacles for a better look at the forceful brushwork.

Van Gogh sold few paintings in his lifetime: it was only after his death in 1890 that the world took notice of what he had left behind. "The Starry Night," "Sunflowers," and "The Bedroom," are now considered masterpieces, and his artwork peeks out from café facades, mugs, and bags sold across Amsterdam.

This museum is to me what Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory was to little Charlie. Vincent van Gogh was the first artist who stirred my interest in art, and like all first loves, he indelibly coloured my teenage imagination. I am here to know him better; and perhaps see the world as intensely as he did even if it's just for a few hours. I make my way to one of my favourites. "The Potato Eaters" is a famous 1885 painting of a family of peasants eating a meagre meal. I notice that the paintings preceding it are arranged to tell the story of its conception. After van Gogh decided to be an artist, he elected to paint farmers, people who worked with the earth. He drew a woman's portrait using coarse swipes of reds and browns to show her sun-hardened features, as if hewn out of the land she tilled. Standing in front

PHOTO COURTESY: JAN KEES STEENMAN

of the “The Potato Eaters” I see for the first time how van Gogh used the colours of a dusty potato to paint the peasants’ weary faces, signifying their harsh reality. He wanted this painting to be his “visiting card” as an artist, but it found appreciation only after his death.

The museum is more than a repository of van Gogh’s greatest works. Each artwork, letter, and object pieces together the story of the artist’s life. I feel like I am getting under the skin of his paintings, understanding what went into their creation. In one corner of a gallery, I geek out over a microscope that shows grains of sand trapped between van Gogh’s brushstrokes in an 1888 painting he made at a beach in France. Touchscreens reveal different layers to “The Bedroom,” and I discover how the artist used colour and perspective. Wearing headphones I listen to audio recordings of the earnest letters he wrote to the only man who believed in him, his brother Theo. These multimedia experiences highlight the fervour, anxiety, and hard work that ruled van Gogh’s art and personal life. His work begins to have a visceral impact on me. I feel the melancholy exuded by his painting of Agostina, a pensive woman in a bright red hat, sitting at a table with a cigarette and beer; she was the owner of a Parisian bar and, for a short while, van Gogh’s lover. I almost touch my nose to “Almond Blossom,” marvelling at the intricate cross-hatch pattern he painted as its background, a detail utterly lost on a computer screen. He dedicated this painting to Theo’s newborn son Vincent Willem, to signify new beginnings. Fittingly, it was his nephew who founded the Van Gogh Museum in 1973.

Over a century after his death, the myths and theories about van Gogh’s breakdowns are passionately retold, especially the story of how “the tortured genius” sliced his own ear off in a fit of despair. The museum, however, does not indulge this portrayal, focusing instead on his talent and hard work. I walk around the section dedicated to the end of his life. There are letters

Among the museum’s marvellous exhibits are an evocative painting of van Gogh’s lover Agostina Segatori (middle), and the palette and tubes of paint he used (top); The museum shop sells timeless souvenirs including delicate jewellery, crockery (bottom), and leather wallets, all imprinted with famous van Gogh paintings.



This museum is to me what Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory was to little Charlie. Vincent van Gogh was the first artist who stirred my interest in art, and like all first loves, he indelibly coloured my teenage imagination

exchanged between him, his doctors, and Theo, and paintings created in that period—portraits of kind doctors and fellow patients at an asylum. He may have been battling his demons during this period, but the people and landscapes he painted fill the room with life.

To me this museum reinforces how deeply art inspires us and tells us that we aren’t alone in our experience of love, loss, or life. I take one last look at van Gogh’s only surviving palette; every inch is covered in thick daubs of blue, yellow, white, or green, and it feels as if the paint was smeared on it just minutes ago. ●

THE VITALS

Van Gogh Museum is at Museumplein in Amsterdam, Netherlands (www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en; check website for hours; buy tickets online to avoid the queues; entry adults €17/₹1,200, visitors under 18 free).



PHOTO COURTESY: JAN KEES STEENMAN (PALETTE); VINCENT VAN GOGH/IN THE CAFE; AGOSTINA SEGATORI IN LE TAMBOURIN/1887/VAN GOGH MUSEUM (AGOSTINA); & KLEVERING (PLATES)



Part circus, part adventure, Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows entertained thousands in the U.S. and Europe from 1883 to 1917.

A Slice of the Wild West

CODY, WYOMING, MATCHES EVERY LEGEND OF A FRONTIER TOWN OF THE AMERICAN OLD WEST

BY NILOUFER VENKATRAMAN

On the edge of Yellowstone National Park in northwest Wyoming is a town called Cody, which is a place that looks like a set for a western. En route to Yellowstone last summer, I spent a day in this western frontier town, founded by and named after William F. Cody, better known to the world as Buffalo Bill.

Buffalo Bill was an Army scout and hunter who apparently killed over 4,000 buffaloes to feed the building crews of the Kansas Pacific Railway. However, it is his later life as a showman that made him famous. The stories and myths surrounding him are an integral part of the history of the American West.

With a legendary character like Buffalo Bill it's hard to separate fact

from fiction. At Cody's **Buffalo Bill Center of the West** the lines between myth and reality blur further. This complex of five museums includes the **Buffalo Bill Museum** which contains a huge assortment of his artefacts and memorabilia including stagecoaches and tents. By the 1890s Buffalo Bill had become North America's most well-known performer whose shows captured the imagination of the media and a variety of audiences in the United States and Europe. Buffalo Bill was probably the original American celebrity and Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows featured classic frontier characters, horse riding skills, and drama that depicted the life and history of the American West from the point of view of the settlers. This

spectacle travelled for 30 years, and no doubt helped mould and entrench the stereotype of heroic cowboys who battled savage Indian tribes. (*centerofthewest.org; hours vary depending on season; entry adults \$19/₹1,268.*)

A day in Cody allows me to delve into what the legendary West was like, at least the stuff of historical legend that has filtered into public imagination through Western novels, comics, theatre, and films. It is a romantic notion of a way of life that was both rugged and adventurous. A walk down Sheridan Avenue in downtown Cody allows visitors to play into the legend of the Wild West that has been part of American pop culture since the movement westward.

WILD WEST/PHOTO 12/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE

This is not a history of the problems of expansion, the social and ecological cost of the destruction of bison and the environment, nor the massacre of Native Americans. This is the settlers' tale, the fusion of fact, folklore, and fiction.

But Cody is not all Old West. It is also a typical American small town packed with diners that cater to a meat-and-potatoes-loving public.

En route to dinner we swung a little outside the main street to stop at **Old Trail Town**. It looked like a ghost town—a perfectly preserved Old West settlement from the late 1800s, with rows of wooden cabins and wagons parked outside. In the orange light of a late summer evening, this collection of historic buildings looked remarkably eerie. I half expected to hear the rattle of horse hooves, gunshots, and a cloud of dust rising over the vacant main street. We'd reached too late to enter the buildings, but I would have liked to walk into the saloon, the post office, the general store, even the cemetery. The structures of Old Trail Town are all original buildings brought from locations in Wyoming and Montana, encapsulating the character of the Old West. They include original cabins of famous outlaws like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. (www.oldtrailtown.org; open 15 May–30 Sep; adults \$9/₹600.)

Dinner was at the historic **Irma Hotel** built by Buffalo Bill in 1902. A cherry wood bar, a gift from Queen Victoria who enjoyed the Wild West show in 1887, is the central attraction of this traditional dining room. The favourite dish on the menu is a classic prime rib, enjoyed in the company of mounted moose, elk, and bison heads and numerous portraits of Buffalo Bill and his daughter Irma. (www.irmahotel.com; 8 oz/225 gm prime rib \$20.99/₹1,400.)

After dinner, we joined a significant part of the town's locals for some classic western entertainment. At the **Cody Nite Rodeo** we got a sense of the buckaroo spirit that lives on in this part of America. Each summer since 1938 this nightly rodeo is packed with families, including children, for whom there are special events. Even those who have reservations about rodeos and their treatment of farm animals can't help feeling they are in a time warp while watching real cowboys and cowgirls display their horse riding and ranching



Old Trail Town's original buildings, wagons, and artefacts (top) give visitors a real feel of the Old West; From buffalo hunter and U.S. Army scout to theatre star, Buffalo Bill (bottom left) wore many hats in his lifetime; It's not just drinks at the majestic cherry wood bar (bottom right) inside the historic Irma Hotel in Cody.

skills in the arena. Rodeo remains today the official state sport of Wyoming.

The humorous commentary and distinctive western drawl of the MC created an electric atmosphere. Families including infants obviously enjoy this entertainment, an integral part of local culture. It transported me to a Frontier West era and way of life very distant from the 21st century lifestyle I know (www.codystampede-rodeo.com; 1 Jun–31 Aug daily 8 p.m.; entry adults \$20/₹1,335).

Cody represents a land where the Wild West was created and mythologized and anyone who has been exposed to Hollywood westerns or literature will find resonance with the town.

It was in this region that the life of the hardy western bronco riders and gun-toting cowboys rounding cattle to markets or having bar-room brawls was romanticized. If you're passing through Cody on your way to Yellowstone, make no mistake—this is much more than a one-horse town. ●

THE VITALS

Orientation The town of Cody is 80 km from the east entrance and 128 km from the northeast entrance of Yellowstone National Park.

Getting There Regular flights connect Denver and Salt Lake City with Yellowstone Regional Airport in Cody.



With a few simple hacks, an overnight flight can transform into a snooze cruise.

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON'S TIPS

GET INTO GEAR

I have sleeping gear permanently packed in my carry-on: an eye mask, earplugs, noise-cancelling headphones, herbal teas (like lavender and liquorice), and my favourite neck pillow. I also pack my own snacks—salt-free nuts, vegetables, and goat cheese and turkey in a container with an ice pack.

MOBILE MOTIVATOR

Some apps aim to help you adjust to different time zones. Entrain, an app connecting users to sleep schedules developed by University of Michigan researchers, relies on math and data analysis to tell users how and when to utilize light so they can more quickly shift their sleep cycle in a new location.

PREP WORK

Dr. Charles Czeisler, professor of sleep medicine at Harvard Medical School, says that a common mistake with red-eyes is starting them off tired. "People are usually running around before their trip, so they tend to be sleep deprived when they set foot on the plane." Nap the day before.

SMIFF AROUND

I'm an advocate of herbal sleep aids such as lavender or valerian root. Interior designer Michael Smith, who spends a large part of his life on planes, told me he sprays orange essential oil on the T-shirt he will sleep in that night. He finds the scent calms his mind and also has a humidifying effect. ●

In the Air

HOW TO SNAG SOME SHUT-EYE ON A RED-EYE BY HANNAH SHEINBERG

Arianna Huffington doesn't lose much sleep. In her new book, *The Sleep Revolution*, the former president and editor-in-chief of *The Huffington Post* advocates for frequent dozing off, and also offers tips for time zone-crossing travellers beyond just counting sheep. "Because I travel

so much, I've learned over time that a little preparation goes a long way," she says. Here Huffington tells us how it's possible to get a good night's rest on a red-eye flight—even when you're sitting upright, wrapped in a threadbare, airline-provided blanket, and being used as your neighbour's pillow.

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ALLIA/ISTOCK

Mauritius

It's a pleasure

A dream destination



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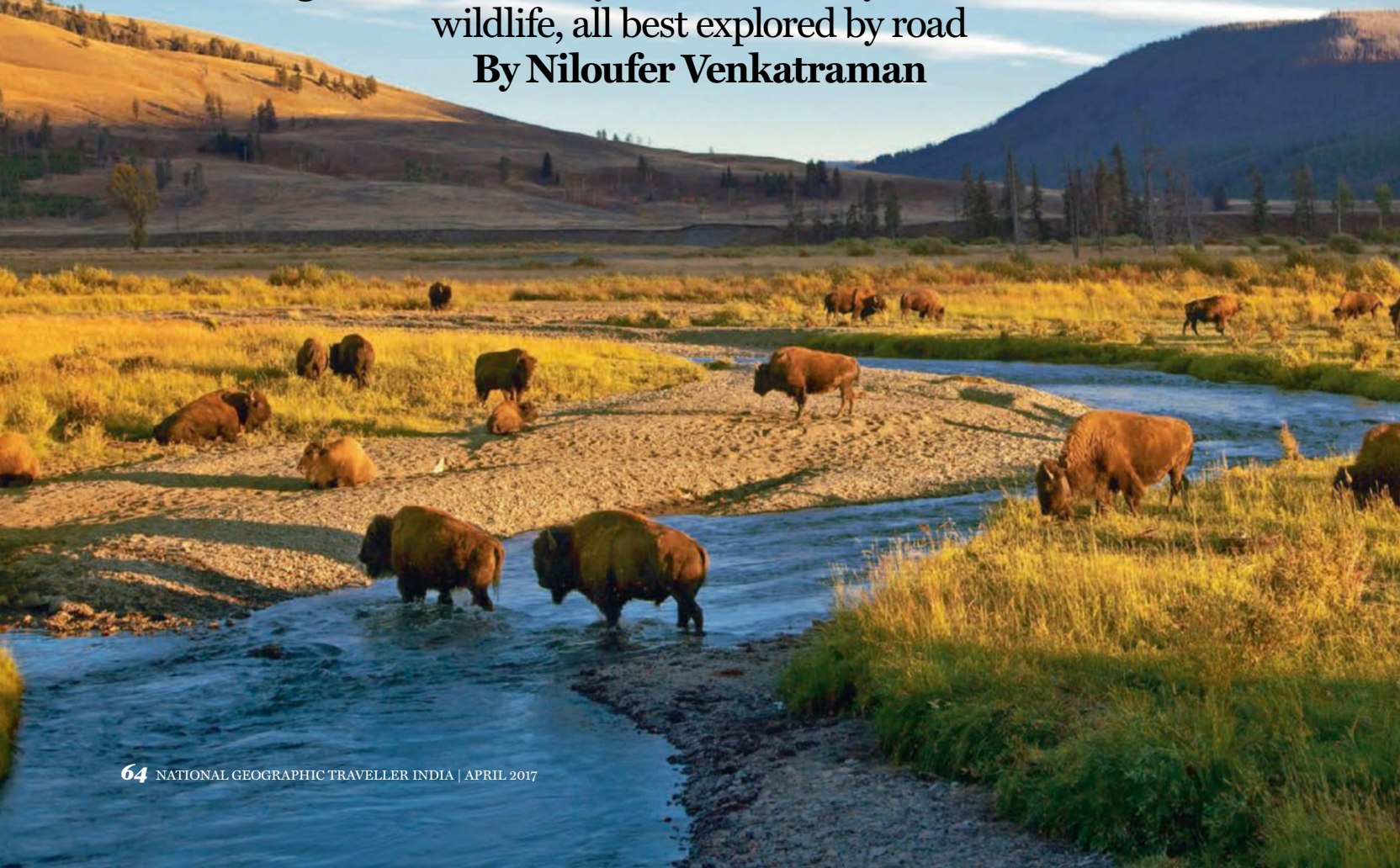
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WHERE THE BUFFALO ROAM

America's first national park is a hotbed of geothermal activity and a sanctuary for abundant wildlife, all best explored by road

By Niloufer Venkatraman





merica's oldest national park has 2.2 million acres of forests, lakes, and mountains. Heat and volcanic activity from the centre of the Earth power this landscape filled with mud pots, geysers, fumaroles, and hot springs.

Abundant wildlife roams the park and during my road trip through it I was lucky not only to see plenty of bison and deer, but also a pair of grizzlies and a bald eagle.

A road trip is the only way to see the variety and beauty of Yellowstone National Park. Depending on where you are coming from, Yellowstone can be accessed from five different gates, in three different states. My companions and I entered from the east since we were coming from Cody, Wyoming.

A Yellowstone experience can be two days or two weeks. If you only have a little time to spare, take in the highlights via the 230-kilometre-long **Grand Loop drive**. Even on a longer trip, there is no chance of ever getting bored. There is much to see and do, roads to drive through, paths to hike, sublime vistas to absorb, wildlife to encounter. And most unique of all, the bubbling, gurgling, boiling, steaming earth all around is eternally mesmerizing.

STOP 1

Point of View

Yellowstone has countless vantage points with views of Yellowstone Lake, forests, rivers, and waterfalls. The observation decks at **Artist Point**, a short walk from the parking lot on the South Rim of the **Grand Canyon of Yellowstone**, offer a stunning view of the Lower Falls of the Yellowstone River as well as of the canyon. This 32-kilometre-long canyon is marked by steep white-and-yellow cliffs that appear to erode even as they are watched. Streaks of pink mineral stain the canyon walls, and vents and spires tell the story of the thermal activity that continues unabated underground. The Lower Falls are also dazzling when seen from **Lookout Point** on the North Rim which is where we stopped. For those who have the time, hiking is an essential part of the Yellowstone adventure.

STOP 2

Old Faithful Geyser

Few sights in Yellowstone match that of watching a huge plume of steam and water gushing out of the earth, shooting 100-184 feet into the air. I'd first seen **Old Faithful geyser** in action as a young teen and it's one of the most vivid memories I have of that month-long trip through the U.S.

On this trip I watched the geyser erupt from a vantage point on one of the many wooden boardwalks built around the geyser, and had ample time to take pictures and videos. With its reliable eruption times (every 60 to 110 minutes) it's easy to plan a visit to witness a blowout. Afterwards, the **Old Faithful Visitor Education Center** offers a quick lesson on the geology behind the world's most famous geyser.



Though bison or wild buffalo can be seen all over Yellowstone National Park, they are most easily seen grazing and ruminating in herds on the open grasslands of Lamar Valley.

THE HOTTEST SPOT IN YELLOWSTONE LAKE IS AT MARY BAY WHERE THE TEMPERATURE IS AROUND 122°C

DANITA/INDIAPICTURE (PHOTO); ETTRAVELER/ISTOCK (ROAD ILLUSTRATION)



The terraces of Mammoth Hot Springs change rapidly as a result of intense thermal activity. Springs that are active one year may disappear the next.

STOP 3 Mammoth Tiers

On a slow drive-through of the **Mammoth Hot Springs** area, visitors can see the churning thermal landscape, as well as grazing elk right from the car. Step onto the network of boardwalks, however, to see much more. These wooden paths wind their way through a multitude of travertine terraces with changing abstract shapes and contours. Colours change as heat and minerals combine, and bacteria and algae transform the pools and

surfaces. A two-hour walk along the **Lower Terrace Interpretive Trail** is a good way to imbibe the essence of this park.

STOP 4 Yellowstone Lake and Geyser Basins

Although smaller than some of the others, **West Thumb Geyser Basin** is a spectacular must-see. In this small area, on the edge of Yellowstone Lake, it's easy to view all the thermal features that make this park so unique. Hot springs, bubbling pools, mud pots, fumaroles and

lakeshore geysers empty into the chilly waters of Yellowstone Lake. Outstanding features include **Abyss Pool**, a 53-foot-deep blue pond, and **Fishing Cone**, a submerged geyser that becomes visible only in the summer when lake water levels drop. Time permitting, make a stop at **Norris Geyser Basin**, a short distance south of Mammoth Hot Springs. It has the world's tallest active geyser and a colourful display caused by the combination of various minerals and the life forms that exist in this torrid environment.

STOP 5 Grand Prismatic Spring

To get to the **Grand Prismatic Spring**, Yellowstone's largest hot spring, drive to Midway Geyser Basin and then walk along the boardwalk. Through the steam rising off the surface, a large turquoise pool ringed with orange and yellow comes into view like a dream. Temperatures around the pool are high, especially on a summer's day. The rainbow colours of this pool producing the effect of a prism are best viewed from a height. Take a



4.2 MILLION PEOPLE VISITED YELLOWSTONE IN 2016



From the air, Grand Prismatic Spring is at its most stunning: Its deep colours are caused by heat-loving bacteria that thrive within (bottom); Time intervals between the eruptions at Old Faithful geyser range from 60 to 110 minutes and each individual eruption can last between 1.5 and 5 minutes (top).

slightly strenuous hike up the Midway Bluff trail to get to the perfect vantage point.

MORE STOPS

Other Yellowstone highlights that are worth the detours they require are **Lamar Valley** for its wildlife and **Morning Glory Pool** on the outer areas of the Upper Geyser Basin, for its teal and orange coloured waters, the result of thermophilic bacteria thriving in its scorching depths.

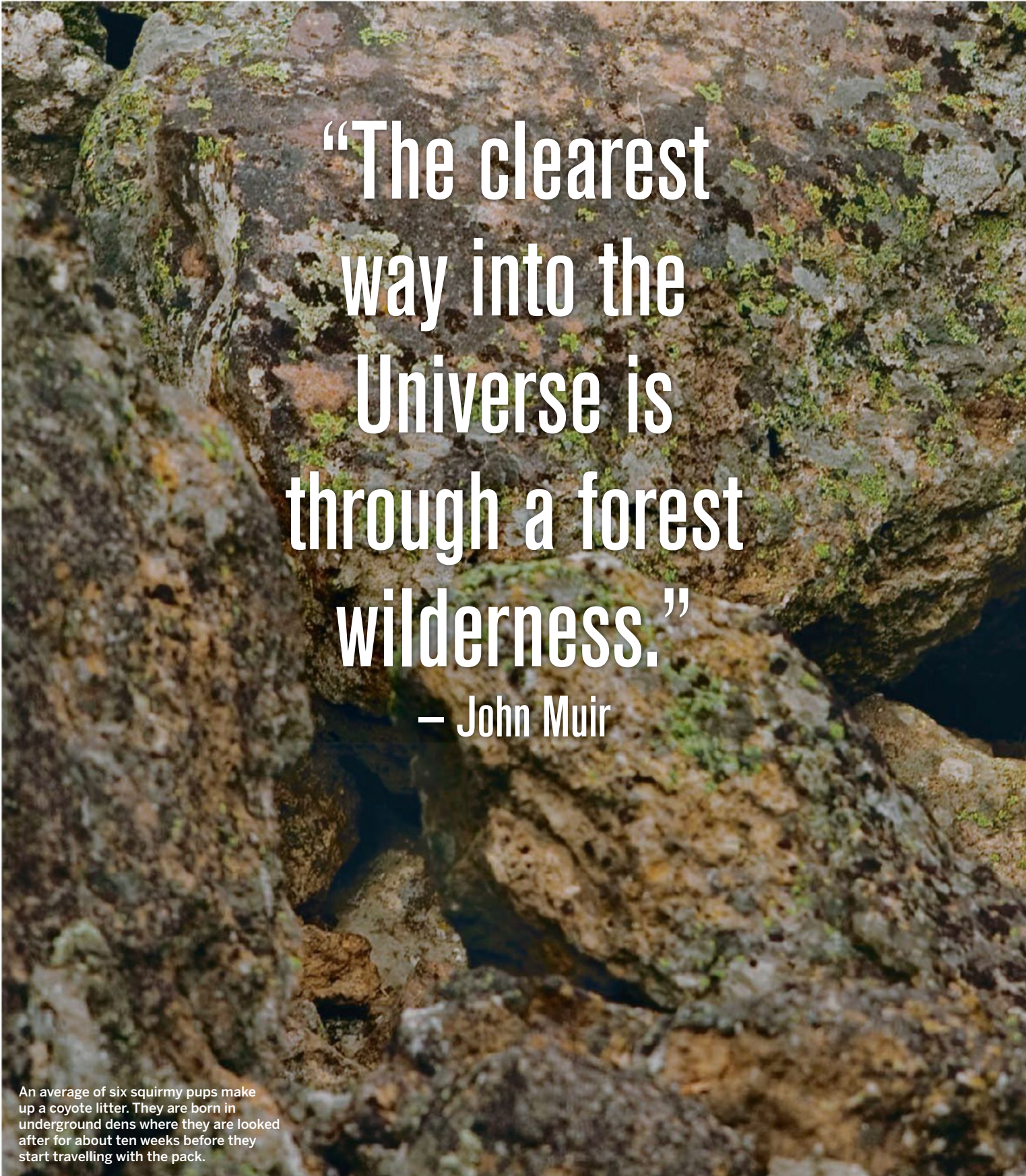
Firehole Canyon Drive skirts the edge of a cliff, along the Firehole River, and makes for an interesting drive as well. It's one of the few places in the park where we saw visitors soaking in the warm waters without fear of getting burnt. Swimming is possible here because the boiling hot spring water meets the cold snowmelt of the river, bringing it to a bearable temperature.

STAYING INSIDE THE PARK

If you can splurge on staying at one of the upscale lodgings in the park, there are several choices. The two most iconic stay options are Old Faithful Inn and Lake Yellowstone Hotel. Note that any accommodation inside the park needs to be booked months in advance, especially for the peak summer (Jun-Aug) season. All these can be booked through www.yellowstonenationalpark-lodges.com.

Old Faithful Inn I stayed at Old Faithful Inn when I was a teen and fell in love with this huge lodgepole pine building with its multistorey lobby. On this trip I walked around its public areas and could see that very little has changed. A stone's throw from Old Faithful geyser, this landmark hotel exudes warmth and old-world charm (*doubles* \$236-590/ ₹15,620-39,052).

Old Faithful Snowlodge and Cabins is a stylish hotel made with numerous recycled and



“The clearest
way into the
Universe is
through a forest
wilderness.”

— John Muir

An average of six squirmy pups make up a coyote litter. They are born in underground dens where they are looked after for about ten weeks before they start travelling with the pack.



DAN SULLIVAN/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE

THERE ARE 10,000 THERMAL FEATURES AND MORE THAN 300 GEYSERS IN YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

repurposed materials as well as wood (*doubles \$117-272/₹7,744-18,003*).

Lake Yellowstone Hotel This is the oldest lodging in the park going back 126 years, but has recently been renovated in art deco style. My room was cosy and comfortable, and the hotel atmosphere old-style colonial. Though on the banks of Yellowstone Lake, most rooms don't actually overlook it, but wildlife can be seen roaming pretty close to the building (*doubles \$244-590/₹16,150-39,052*).

Lake Lodge Cabins Not far from the Lake Yellowstone Hotel is another set of charming historic cabins with front porches and rocking chairs. Two fireplaces in the lobby keep the place warm and inviting. Western Cabins are modern, while the Frontier Cabins are more basic (*doubles \$90-209/₹5,957-13,834*).

WILDLIFE

Bison or buffalo graze leisurely through Yellowstone's grasslands. Even before we'd entered the official east gate of the park we spotted a herd of whitetail deer, which we learned to identify by the distinctive white rump patch, frolicking in a patch of grass. Before long we came upon a herd of bison. A young one decided to play, kick, and charge around, then roll on the ground and throw up a cloud of dust, much to the annoyance of the adults in the herd, and pleasure of onlookers. Further along the drive, we saw several graceful elk grazing by the edge of the road. Nearby, our guide pointed out trees on whose lower sections bark had

peeled off where bison had rubbed against them to shed their winter coat.

In a remote northeast corner of Yellowstone is **Lamar Valley**, inhabited by the park's famous wolves. The animals had been extinct for two decades and were reintroduced to the park in 1995. Elk, bison, grizzlies, black bear, pronghorn antelope, moose, and bighorn sheep also roam the vast open areas of this valley. Driving on the **Lamar Valley Road** which runs through it, is the best way to observe this wonderful wildlife.

Our drives through Yellowstone were full of animal sightings. At lunchtime the first day, we stopped at picnic tables laid out alongside the Yellowstone River, and watched a group of ducks crossing the blue waters as we enjoyed our sandwiches.

Our luckiest moment however, was when we pulled off a road running parallel to Yellowstone River, not far from the Lake Yellowstone Hotel. Walking down to the boardwalk, we saw across the river, a small grizzly bear curled up and asleep near a fallen log. In front of it, half submerged in the water lay the carcass of a bison that had been swept off while crossing the swollen river two days earlier. Atop the carcass sat a bald eagle. But the highlight of the road trip through Yellowstone was yet to come. That evening we returned to the spot to see if the grizzly was still there. We were amazed to find not only was it still asleep on the shore, another, slightly larger one had arrived and was sitting atop the dead bison, tearing away at the meat. ●



Grizzly bears bathing, splashing, and frolicking at a waterhole in Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming.





COASTAL CRUISE

SAN DIEGO TO SANTA BARBARA

A road trip along America's Pacific coast throws up epic views, delicious fried treats, and the chance to blast your favourite playlist



California's southern city of San Diego is the land of year-round sun and easy living. Here, creature comforts tempt passers-by into extended stays. Start the all-American scenic drive along the southern part of the Pacific Coast Highway in this vacation city.

Continue north along Interstate 5, navigating through frenzied Los Angeles, finally finding balance among the hills of Santa Barbara in a safari tent.

Between San Diego and Santa Barbara, you'll have a meet-and-greet with fear, reorient your view, and binge on doughnuts—all necessary stops for the adventurous.

—Hannah Lott-Schwartz



Besides a glimpse of the heavens, a trip to Griffith Observatory also yields stunning views of downtown Los Angeles from its perch atop Mt. Hollywood.

STOP 1

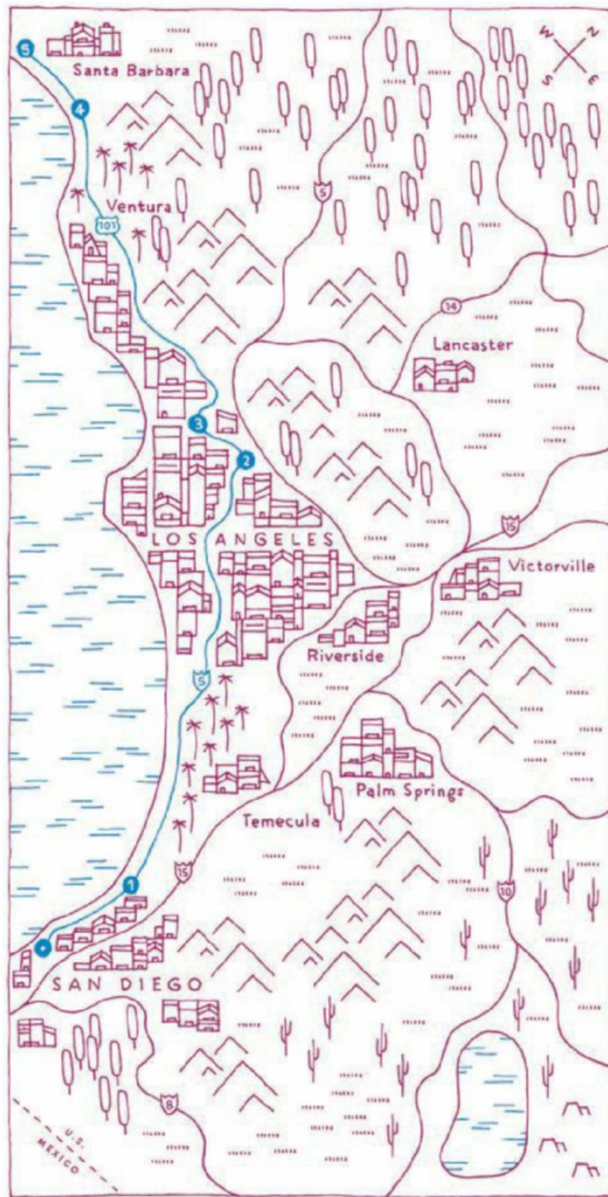
Adventure on the Fly

Standing at the edge of a cliff above Black's Beach in San Diego, you have just one choice: to jump. At **Torrey Pines Gliderport**, the wind's got your back—as does the paragliding pro you're strapped to. So say sayonara to fear as you leap directly into it, then ride the resulting adrenaline rush high above barrelling waves below (flytorrey.com; open daily 9 a.m.-5 p.m.; 20-25-min flight costs \$175/₹11,463).

STOP 2

Feast Your Eyes

Enter **Donut Friend**, the sugar-spun shop stuffed with doughnuts that rock punny punk band names such as S'Morrissey and Drive Like Jelly. They'll fuel your hike to the **Griffith Observatory**, a domed marvel that overlooks Los Angeles. Peep into the telescope to put everything in perspective. (Donut Friend, donutfriend.com; open Tue-Sun; doughnuts from \$2/₹130. Griffith Observatory, griffithobservatory.org; open Tue-Sun; entry free.)



STOP 3
Lonely Hearts Club

A wedding dress, cassette collection, even a thousand origami cranes—these are among the emotion-filled relics at the **Museum of Broken Relationships** in Hollywood Boulevard. Notes written by anonymous donors give context to the crowd-sourced artefacts on display, framing a legacy of human experience that makes a compelling argument for shared catharsis. (*brokenships.la*; open daily; entry \$18/₹1,180.)

STOP 4
Detox (then Retox)

Hidden below State Street in Santa Barbara lies **Salt**, North America's largest Himalayan salt therapy cave. Let 45 tons of minerals work its magic, then head to the Funk Zone, an arts district overflowing with viniculturists who pour at outposts like **Municipal Winemakers**. (*Salt, saltcavesb.com*; open daily; *Himalayan Salt Scrub and Massage* from \$155/₹10,155. *Municipal Winemakers*; *municipalwinemakers.com*; open daily.)

STOP 5
Stay the Night

At **El Capitan Canyon**, camp out in a roomy, luxury safari tent (made cushy with custom woodworking and Turkish textiles) that is surrounded by 350 acres of lush, protected land. When the beach, heated pool, and endless trails leave you peckish, order the hotel's BBQ and s'mores kits and prepare the feast on your tent-side grill. (*elcapitan-canyon.com*; doubles from \$170/₹11,135.)

KILOMETRES: 250

DAYS ON THE ROAD: 2

BEST SELFIE SPOT: POINT MUGU STATE PARK

BEST ROADSIDE SNACK STOP: PADARO BEACH GRILL, CARPINTERIA, SANTA BARBARA

SEANFANONPHOTO/ISTOCK (CITY); GUILLERMO TRAPIELLO (MAP); CAT_CHAT (PALM TREES ILLUSTRATION)



The massive Tian Shan mountains dominate most of Kyrgyzstan. In this landlocked country, the lofty peaks which are snow-capped for most of the year are never too far away. On some, it is possible to ride up all the way to the snow line.



A TALE OF POWERFUL STEEDS



With nimble motorcycles and herds of wild horses, a road trip through Kyrgyzstan redefines life in the saddle
Text & Photographs by Rishad Saam Mehta

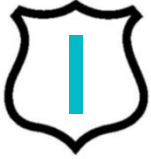
ETRAVELLER/ISTOCK (MOUNTAIN ILLUSTRATION)



During the time when trade on the Silk Route thrived, the 15th-century stone caravanserai of Tash Rabat (top) was an important stop. Caravans halted here to rest, refresh, and restock; Traditionally, in rural Kyrgyzstan, a groom must catch his prospective bride on horseback (bottom) and steal a kiss to prove he was worthy of marrying her. In modern times, since it is feared that this might set a precedent for kidnappings, the horse games are only played symbolically.

Facing page: The double-humped Bactrian camel is critically endangered but sightings are fairly common in the Kyrgyzstan countryside, along the Silk Route.





Is the bike an extension of my body? I think about changing gears and it's done. I turn to look at where I want go and the motorcycle follows, just like that. That is why I find motorcycling so involving and sublime.

Riding down a tarmac road that ribbons through the Tian Shan mountains, one of the largest mountain ranges in the world, these meditations on motorcycling floated through my mind. Any rider who's driven a stretch like the one I was on, with the cold, fresh mountain air blowing into my face, will confess to having similar thoughts.

I was riding from Naryn to Tash Rabat in central Kyrgyzstan, with a group of motorcyclists. As we rode through the undulating brown landscape, a dull drumming of hooves came in from the left, slowly building up like the surround sound in a movie theatre. As it got louder, a herd of wild horses came into my field of sight. The drumming took on a metallic note as they galloped onto the tarmac. Seeing our group, they shied away, galloping ahead of us with muscles rippling in the sunshine and manes flying in the wind.

That minute or so of riding with the herd racing ahead of us is etched in my mind as the most memorable moment of my 1,500-kilometre road trip in Kyrgyzstan.

Until a few months before the trip, I couldn't even have pointed

out with certainty where Kyrgyzstan was on the map. But the lure of a motorcycling trip offering dual sport bikes, great tarmac roads, and scenic dirt trails through a snow-capped mountain range hooked me in.

Until its independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstan was a territory of the U.S.S.R. Riding out of the capital Bishkek, I noticed Soviet influences in the stoic and sombre statues which signified the importance of state above self. In the countryside and smaller towns and cities however there was a palpable sense of a Kyrgyz national identity. This was reflected in the clothes people wore, made of wool, fur, felt, and leather, that represented the country's nomadic heritage.

Our route was a circuit of Issyk-Kul, one of the world's largest lakes after Peru's Lake Titicaca, and the second largest saline lake after the Caspian Sea. Along the way we encountered nomadic traditions that live on here. This included equestrian games for prospective brides and grooms; the use of hunting eagles to catch game for dinner; and heart-warming hospitality.

I came away with a sense of having visited a land that stood outside of modern times. ●

RISHAD SAAM MEHTA is a travel writer and photographer. He is the author of two books, the latest being *Fast Cars and Fidgety Feet* (Tranquebar, 2016).





Horses are highly valued in Kyrgyz culture for farming, transport, and even as food. While riding through the hilly terrain, our group of riders sometimes encountered wild herds that galloped in front of us.





The country has some lovely off-road trails that any bike rider will enjoy. This one wound through a valley between Kochkor and Naryn. We stopped midway for a picnic lunch of barbequed lamb and fresh bread.



Cemeteries (top) like these dot the Kyrgyzstan countryside. They seem so at odds with the bare mountains and deserts. Although some look like miniature cities, there are no humans around since the Kyrgyz don't visit the graves. As we got closer, the delicate stars and crescent moons atop the structures came into view; While youngsters (bottom) usually wear western clothes, rural folk tend to wear clothes made of wool, fur, and leather, still reflecting the country's herding heritage. The more affluent add velvet and silk to the fabrics they use, a tradition of demonstrating your wealth that began when caravans from China came down the Silk Route.

THE VITALS

GETTING THERE

Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek is a 4-hour flight from Delhi. Air Astana and Aeroflot have daily flights (approx. ₹20,000 round trip).

VISA

Indian travellers require tourist visas, for which they need a completed visa form, passport with one photocopy, two passport size photos, and a visa support letter from a recognized travel agent. These must be submitted to the embassy in Delhi in person or through an agent (visa fee ₹2,950; form at www.kgzembind.in).

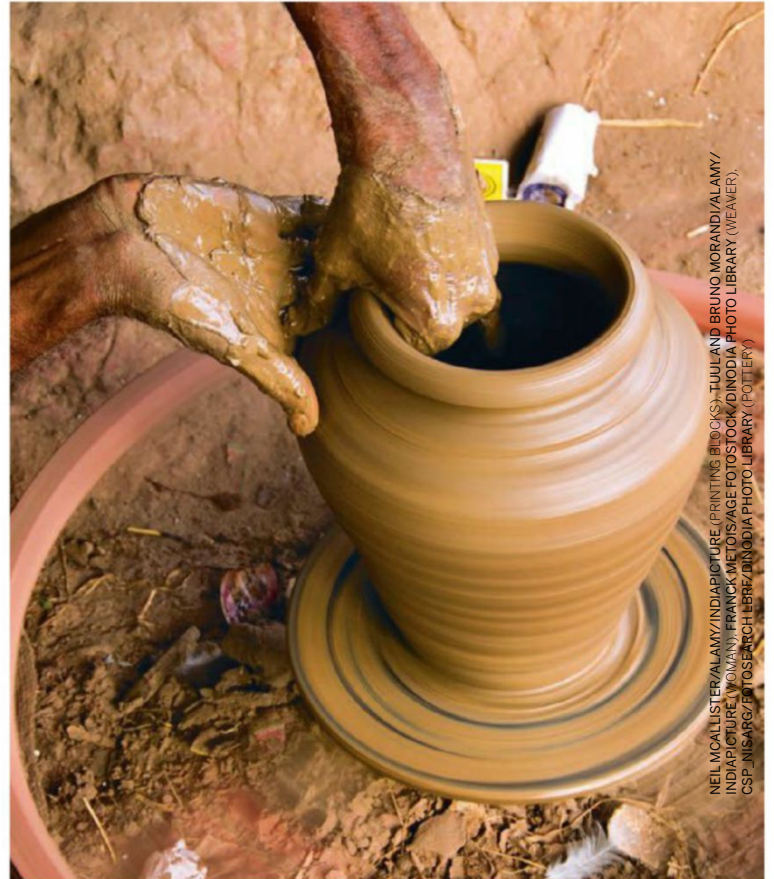
MOTORCYCLING TOUR

The country offers tarmac riding and light off-roading. MotoRover runs week-long trips, and organizes everything from visas to ground support (www.motorover.in; ₹1.6 lakh).





Blocks used for Ajrakh printing are made from shisham wood, and plant-inspired motifs dominate the patterns (top left); *Kanjiri* or a long blouse with a burst of colourful embroidery and mirror work worn over a skirt is a typical Kutchi outfit (top right); Weavers work closely with herders who supply them with wool to make shawls (bottom left); The potters from Khavda source their clay from a lake near the village. While the men do the throwing, the women do the painting and decorating (bottom right).



NEIL MCALLISTER/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (PRINTING BLOCKS); TUUL AND BRUNO MORANDI/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (WOMAN); FRANCK METOIS/AGEFOTOSTOCK/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (WEAVER); CSP, NISARG/GETTY IMAGES (POTTERY); DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (POTTERY)



TALES FROM THE KUTCH

Accepting the unexpected on a road trip through Gujarat's craft belt
By Chaitali Patel



Made using local materials, *bhungas* or traditional Kutchi houses are known to withstand earthquakes. Colourful designs adorn the outside, while the insides are often decorated with mirrors inset in the mud walls.

TUUL AND BRUNO MORANDI/ALAMY/INDIANPOTTERY.COM (PHOTO); AALTZAR/ISTOCK/POTTERY ILLUSTRATION



Doubts about my sanity and impending travel plan were topmost on my mind as I gulped down the last of my chai. My mobile phone was ringing and Kuldip's name flashed on the screen. For a brief moment I wondered if what I was doing was hare-brained.

I didn't know Kuldip, but I'd hired him as a guide to take me around Kutch, on the basis of the review of a solo woman traveller on TripAdvisor. I'd landed in Bhuj on the back of 15-year-old memories of beautiful pieces of hand-painted pottery. My sister had done an internship with a potter's family in Khavda, a village in Kutch, while she was a student at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad a decade-and-a-half ago. She'd returned with incredible pottery and stories of the place and its people. Kutch had been on my radar since then.

With an itch to travel on my own, I'd booked myself a ticket to Bhuj on a whim, and contacted Kuldip. And in no time, there he was in front of me. After a quick introduction, I threw my bag into the boot of his white Maruti 800 and settled into the rear seat. I tried to appear calm. Inside, I was a cocktail of nervousness and excitement. Saying a silent prayer for my safety, I tried to push away niggling doubts and focus on the next two days, during which I planned on driving to craft villages

scattered across Kutch. Meeting the different communities, including the family my sister had stayed with was high on my agenda. I confessed to Kuldip that I didn't have their contact details. All I had was the name of the village and a crystal-clear image of the stunning pottery they produced.

As we drove down NH341, traces of Bhuj and city life faded away. Anxious as I was, I lost no time in establishing that I was married and had a three-year-old daughter. Kuldip and I were two strangers in a small car, heading out towards the vast, open, and barren landscape of Kutch—I was seeking an adventure, and he was facilitating it by doing his job.

Located on the westernmost extremity of India, Kutch is an expansive salt marsh. In the dry season, the land breaks into honeycomb-like cracks, and in the monsoon, large tracts lie submerged under water. The pastoral and nomadic communities who inhabit the region are a sturdy lot and have adapted to living in these tough conditions.

The further we drove from Bhuj, the more familiar Kuldip seemed with the land and its people. A casual greeting, a smile, a nod, everyone was duly acknowledged, and some even welcomed into the back seat if they needed a ride.

Nirona, 40 kilometres northwest of Bhuj, was our first stop. Some of the region's finest crafts

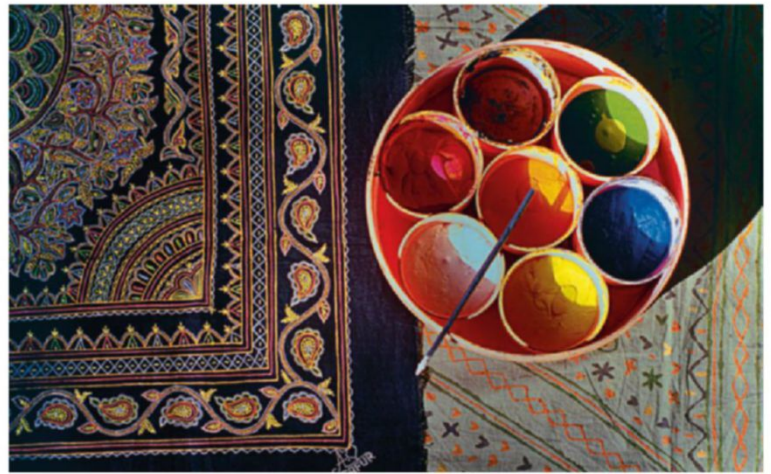


Different **Ajrakh blocks** are used to create a design on fabric, some for the outline, others to fill in colour.



Kutchi cow bells or **ghantadis** are fancied as decor pieces elsewhere.

MIKE SMITH/YAY MICRO/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (SALT PLAIN), TRAVELIB PRIME/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (BLOCK), VALERIE ARMSTRONG/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (BELL)



The Agariya community extracts salt from exposed land once the seawater recedes from the Rann of Kutch in the winter months (facing page); It is believed that Rogan painting (left) originated among the Afridi tribes of medieval Persia, from where it made its way to Kutch centuries ago. The paint (top right) is made by mixing natural dyes with the thick residue from boiling and cooling castor oil; Cattle herders work with the *luhars* to ensure the bells they have ordered produce the desired sound (bottom right).

come from this nondescript village. It shot into the limelight when Prime Minister Modi gifted President Obama a painting from this village on his maiden visit to the White House. Traditionally used to decorate bridal wear, Rogan painting is done using pigments made from the oil of castor seeds, a crop that's cultivated in the area. Until a few years ago, several villages across Kutch practised Rogan art, but today only the Khatri household in Nirona keeps this art form alive. Sitting on the floor of the Khatri household, we watched Sumarbhai Khatri dip a six-inch-long stick into some paint and draw out a fine thread on a piece of cloth he held in one hand. Watching his nimble fingers form curvy lines, twisting the sticky paint around, was almost therapeutic. I felt my nervousness and stress abate. Such is the finesse of the end product that Rogan-painted cloth often looks like it is printed rather than hand-painted.

After the demonstration we sipped sweet, milky chai from saucers. Our conversation was gently interrupted by a melodious tinkling coming from a large herd of cattle making its way out of the village. To keep track of their massive droves, local herders

tie *ghantadis* or copper bells around the necks of their cattle. Next, we entered the home of Hussein Siddiq Luhar who was surrounded by tools and busy on the floor of his small workshop. He was beating scrap metal sheets into bell shapes, joining them together using a locking system without any kind of welding. When dipped in a mixture of mud and powdered copper and baked in a kiln, the bells get a gleaming copper sheen.

Back on the highway, with me now comfortably settled in the front beside Kuldip, our conversations became more relaxed. The day wore on and a hot, dry breeze blew through the open windows. The heat singed our skin. Mirages glistened on the road ahead. For company, we had hoopoes, drongos, and kingfishers, perched on the electricity poles running alongside roads.

I was glad to get off the road and into the cool of a *bhunga* or traditional mud hut of the Mahefeel e Rann Resort at Hodka. After a lunch of Kutchi staples of *rotla*, *gur*, a side of *kathor*, dal, and cold *chaas*, and then a short nap, we drove to the craft village of Hodka. Kuldip warned me not to fall for the tourist trap in which little girls dressed



The Meghwal community practise leather crafts, producing shoes, harnesses, file holders, and mirror frames of hide.



Men of the Wadha community make colourful lacquered wooden spoons.

CHRISTOPHE BOISVIEUX/AGE FOTOSTOCK/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (PAINTER), IP-BLACK/INDIAPICTURE (COLOURS), ZAMZAM IMAGES/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (BELLMAKER), IP-BLACK/INDIAPICTURE (SHOES) PHOTO COURTESY: KHAMIR (SPOONS)

like princesses lure visitors to buy souvenirs. My ears heard him, but not my mind. In no time I was sitting in a bhunga with Kavita, her mother and siblings, looking at exquisite embroidered creations. I did yield to their persistence and left with hair accessories for my daughter.

That night, lying on a charpoy under a canopy of stars, whatever traces of self-doubt I had about my trip and my guide melted away. Kuldip on his charpoy was silent, lost in his thoughts. I felt calm, and tried to plot my life, feeling like a mere speck in the larger canvas of the universe.

The next thing I knew it was morning, and I could hear the faint sound of ghantadis tinkling in the distance. Our journey continued north towards Khavda, the village that had brought me to Kutch. The flat sun-baked land stretched out on either side of us, but there was a small dot on the horizon, gradually growing in size. As the distance between us reduced we realised it was a tall, hardy woman in her fifties. Sari-clad Alamelu was carrying all her worldly possessions with her, including a broom. The back seat of

our car was empty and hers for the taking.

Since I spoke Tamil and could understand her, she shared her story with us. She had left home 30 years ago because of a fight with her family, and since then had traversed hundreds of kilometres on foot. She said she was hoping to journey home to Tamil Nadu, but didn't seem to understand that she was walking towards the India-Pakistan border. It seemed strange to us that she had been getting around without a common language or money, and we felt we ought to help her.

At Khavda, we dropped her at a bus stop on the outskirts of town with the promise that we would pick her up later in the day, when we continued our drive to Bhuj. It was midday and the streets wore a deserted look except for a few sauntering cows.

Inside the flat-roofed houses we visited Ajrakh printers who were busy dying and printing fabric. It takes an elaborate multi-step process to produce an authentic piece of Ajrakh fabric. Hand printed on both sides, a true test of its quality is if the colour doesn't run when washed.

At the other end of Khavda was the *kumbhar*

With cheap, mass-produced modern utensils available everywhere, there are now only a handful of potters (top left) left in Kutch. Difficulty in finding raw materials has forced many traditional artisans to look for other sources of income; Traditionally, men of the Maldhari community carry a piece of Ajrakh printed cloth, wearing it as a lungi, a turban, or just thrown over their shoulder (top right). Different Kutchi communities can be identified by the varying weaves of the fabric they wear (bottom left); Women across communities supplement their family income by making and selling embroidered clothes and handmade toys (bottom right).



To create symmetric patterns in Rogan art, artists paint one side of the cloth and then fold it to transfer the design onto the other side.



The pottery from Khavda gets its distinctive red colour from natural red clay or geru.

RAJENDRA SHUKLA/DINODIA PHOTO/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (POTTERY), TRAVEL ASIA/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (SARIS), D SHAI/DINODIA PHOTO/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (WEAVING), BHARAT PANIA/DINODIA PHOTO/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (WOMEN), JEREMIAH RAO (POTTERY), IP-BLACK/INDIAPICTURE (ROGAN ART)



(potter) family I was looking for. When Kuldip introduced me to the matriarch, Saraben, I reminded her about my sister. She flashed a grin and drew me into an embrace. That warm hug made the effort I had put into finding her worthwhile. Her flock of grandchildren surrounded me, happy to have a visitor in their midst. Saraben chatted and continued to decorate a plate she was making with fine black-and-white lines and dots. Though the designs were simple, the end result was spectacular.

A small adjoining room displayed the different products the family made. Saraben proudly showed me newspaper cuttings and photographs of the national awards they had won over the years. In turn, I showed her photos of my sister and her family, and Saraben fondly remarked that she looked just the same.

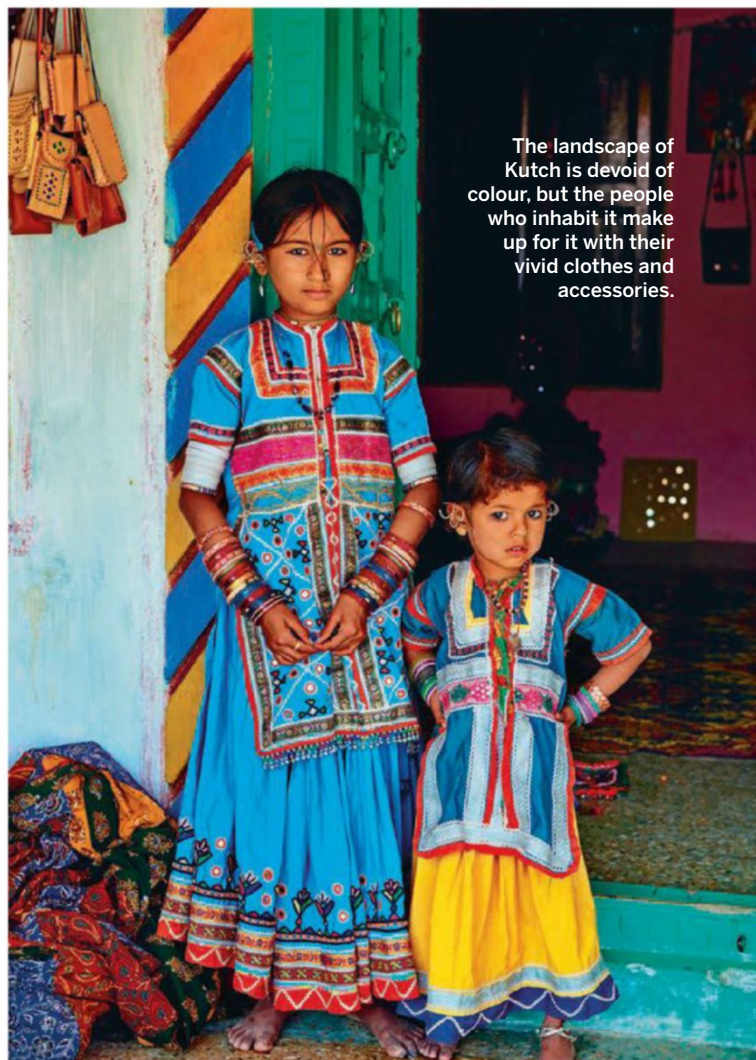
Satisfied with having met my sister's host family, we set out to find Alamelu. As I had half expected, she was gone from the place she had promised to meet us. We asked around, but no one seemed to have seen her. We drove on further north to Kala Dungar, the highest point in Kutch, and from there to India Bridge, the last point near the border that civilians can access without a permit. The sole jawan at the checkpoint there was happy to have company, even if for a short while. During off-season, which is the larger part of the year, hours pass without him seeing anyone, he said. Driving back towards Bhuj, we passed a group of men surrounding someone. On closer inspection we found it was Alamelu, who was being heckled because she spoke only Tamil. We quickly dispersed the small crowd and got her back in the car. As we drove on, I wondered: Would I have been so open to helping a stranger had I been in the city? I don't think so. Out on the road, I felt my inhibitions had loosened.

Kuldip and I decided to take Alamelu to a local NGO in Bhuj and ask if they might help her find her way home. But they declined to help and so we decided to do something for her ourselves.

We took her to the railway station and finding no direct trains to the south, bought her a ticket to Mumbai hoping it would take her one step closer to Tamil Nadu. At the entrance to platform 1 of Bhuj Station we handed Alamelu her ticket. Kuldip and I were talking, and took our eyes off her for what must have been less than a minute. When we turned around, she was gone. Just like that, she had vanished without a trace.

Overwhelmed with the day's events and the journey, Kuldip and I shared one last chai discussing what had just happened and saying our goodbyes. I was miles away from home and part of me expected the unexpected. But for Kuldip, who knew the land and its people like the back of his hand, this bizarre experience was disturbing. This was the end of our trip and now we would go back to our families. What about Alamelu, I wondered. Did she really want to go home? Did she really even want our help? What was it like to be on the road with no one to answer to, no home to go to, nothing to be responsible for, and no one to stay in touch with? Kuldip and I on the other hand were ending this road trip as friends, bound by a somewhat surreal experience that will always fill us with a sense of disquiet. ●

CHAITALI PATEL is Associate Editor, Special Projects, at *National Geographic Traveller India*. She's partial to nature and the arts, and feels that every trip is as much a journey outside as it is within.



The landscape of Kutch is devoid of colour, but the people who inhabit it make up for it with their vivid clothes and accessories.

THE VITALS

Bhuj is the largest city in Gujarat's Kutch district. It's a good base from which to explore the craft villages of Kutch.

GETTING THERE

Air Bhuj has only one daily flight, coming in from Mumbai. Alternatively, fly into Ahmedabad and drive down from there to Bhuj. Taxis charge approximately ₹2,500 for a one-way trip from Ahmedabad (332 km/5.15 hr).

Rail Bhuj is connected to Mumbai by several trains, including the daily Kutch Express. BE Bhuj Express connects New Delhi to Bhuj and operates on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday.

Road From Mumbai take NH48, NE1, NH47, NH947 and NH27 to Bhuj-Bhachau Highway in Gujarat. Take the exit from NH41 to Bhuj (855 km/ 13.5 hr).

GETTING AROUND

It's best to hire a car to explore the different artisan villages in Kutch as public transport is erratic and can be very crowded. Hire a guide to take you around. The writer travelled with Kuldip (kutchadventuresindia.com; fee ₹5,000 per day, includes taxi and guide).



TAKING THE LONG WAY HOME

Nostalgia rules the road on a journey home to the Nilgiris

By **Reshma Krishnan**
Barshikar



he sight of “big mountain,” on the 20-kilometre stretch from Coonoor to Ooty, is my favourite bit of the journey home to the Nilgiris. Black-and-white revetments ribbon endlessly along the road, like breadcrumbs to my destination.

The sun glints through the trees, illuminating the flame-of-the-forest, which washes the hills in burnt orange.

The beloved rock face emerges from the ground like a gigantic slice of cake. Some days, its stony peak is shrouded in mist, its lower half wrapped in a scarf of green forest. Today the sky is clear, and I picture the view from its top—of the undulating Bhavani River, the Nilgiri valley, and the plains of Mettupalayam. I have no idea what the big rock face is called, but the sight of it is imperative to my sense of belonging.





The Nilgiris is a haven for birdwatchers and conservationists alike, each screaming their case for preservation. Fifteen years ago the hills looked like a congregation of bald heads squatting between bushes, but conservation has resulted in green gaining on brown and a plastic-free Blue Mountains.

I ache to share this with the friends I am bringing home, but worry that the place, almost mythically beautiful to me, will fall short of their expectations. On this trip, our party of 13 comprises my husband, who has made the journey numerous times; our 11-month-old, who had just started walking; her nanny; my best friend, her husband, and their two older children; and a 15-month-old with his parents. And my parents, who are hosting us at the family tea plantation in Gudalur. Almost everybody has visited the Nilgiris before, but I'm taking them home. I want to show them why this area is the most beautiful place south of the Vindhyas.

TANGLED UP IN BLUE

The 137-kilometre journey from Coimbatore to Gudalur shouldn't take more than four hours, but does, with the many stops we make to take in favourite views. After breaking a coconut at a small Ganesh Temple in Mathampalayam, about an hour into our journey, we enter Mettupalayam, a potato-trading town, via the Bhavani Bridge. The sight of the Bhavani River, the second longest in Tamil Nadu and a major tributary of the Kaveri, inspires an animated discussion about the never-ending water wars between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

Turning left after the bridge, we continue up the NH181 to Coonoor. The road on the right goes to Kotagiri, a panchayat town known for its perfect climate and beautiful tea estates due to an ideal elevation (5,800 feet). This original route into the Nilgiris was once frequented by traders, their bullock carts filled to the brim with vegetables and tea.

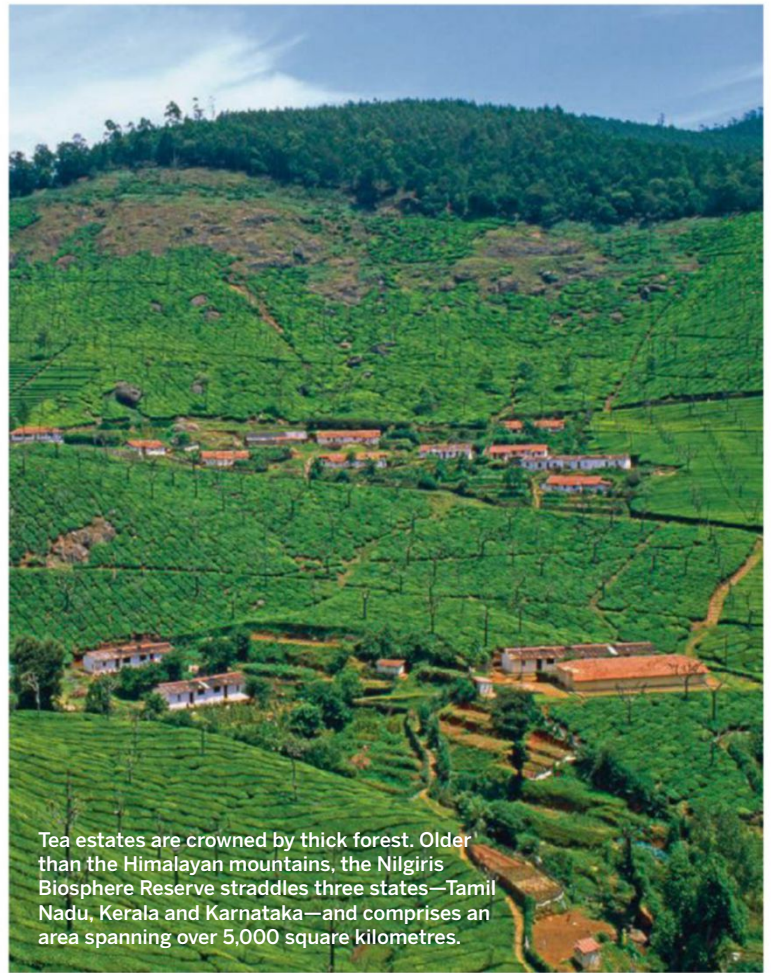
Chewing on sweet, white coconut meat, we pass Black Thunder theme park on our right, a well-known landmark that is popular for school excursions and with young truant college students. Our road cuts through thickets of bamboo and banana fields, and we greet the Nilgiris. The name is Sanskrit for "blue mountains," and on a clear day, the sun's rays reflect a smoky teal as they dance on eucalyptus leaves. There is also the iridescent blue of the *kurinji* shrub, which blooms every twelve years. Having never witnessed this myself, I insist it is a rural legend: 2018 is when it flowers next.



► Begin the journey in Coimbatore with a large breakfast of ghee dosa, *medu vadas*, and dynamite filter coffee at Shree Anandhaas (www.anandhaas.com; several branches; breakfast for two approx. ₹200).

WELCOME TO WELLINGTON

Before we know it we are negotiating sharp hairpin bends. Over the 28 kilometres from Mettupalayam to Coonoor, the road ascends about 4,000 feet in 40 minutes. The eight-year-old was soon bestowing his breakfast upon the wild bluebells. This ascent gives the Nilgiri Mountain Railway the steepest slope of any rail system in Asia. The rare sight of the blue-and-white locomotive traversing a bridge always lifts my spirits, especially if it's the old steam engine. The tiny puffs of smoke transport me to scenes from *A Passage to India*, a part of which was shot in Coonoor in 1984. Arriving into the hill station alongside train tracks, we reach a busy junction that splits NH181 into two. We take the scenic route to Upper Coonoor, called the 1081 or Ooty-Mettupalayam Road. The other road extends from Coonoor Road to Lower Coonoor.



Tea estates are crowned by thick forest. Older than the Himalayan mountains, the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve straddles three states—Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka—and comprises an area spanning over 5,000 square kilometres.

While Ooty is the mainstay for blushing honeymooners from out-of-state, Coonoor, its more reserved cousin, is the local favourite. There's almost no frost in its sub-tropical highland climate, which nurtures azaleas, and more importantly, tea. Small lanes lead into the forest, wrought-iron gates open to gravelled driveways, and large bungalows are still home to retired colonels who love serving visitors their home-made fruit wine.

Wellington's army cantonment area, which lies three kilometres northwest, made such an impression on me as a child that it is still my model for how all of India should look. Between the war memorial and the Madras Regimental Centre, is an almost Narnia-esque landscape, complete with a historic bridge called Waterloo, Black Bridge, or Manekshaw, depending on whom you speak to.

But peel back the manicured tea gardens, and you still see traces of the old Badaga village of Jakkatalla, which is what Wellington was called before it became home first to the British, and then to affluent farmers. The divide between Lower and Upper Coonoor is clearly reflected in the sudden transition of names, from Gandhipuram to Bedford Circle, Cornwall Road, and Forest Dale. I prop the tyke up and point out familiar red-tiled roofs, but she's far more mesmerized by the rhesus monkeys by the road that are picking ants out of each other's teeth.

Several movies have been filmed on one particular scenic stretch, and to everyone's delight, we stop and admire 180° McIver, a bungalow enjoying its 15 minutes of fame thanks to the recent *Kapoor & Sons*. The perfectly maintained picture-postcard homestay was built in the early 1900s and has sprawling lawns with a panoramic view of Coonoor.



Travellers often opt for homestays and boutique hotels that enable them to experience true plantation life, the essence of which is solitude and simplicity.

The 1081 merges back into Coonoor Road at Black Bridge, but before we cross, we stop at the Madras Regimental Centre, home to one of India's oldest regiments—formed in the 1750s. Visitors can't go in, but I've often peeked in when the doors are ajar, sneaking a look at the large square framed by postbox red-and-white buildings. Someone comments on the familiarity of it, and I remember that the film *Roja* was filmed primarily in Wellington.

TIP

- ▶ Home Needs, a 10-minute drive from Black Bridge, is a great place to shop for essentials like milk, bacon, cheese, sausages, and bread.
- ▶ The advantage of taking the slightly longer scenic route is that it's a more gradual climb—all the better for children's tummies.

PERFECT CRUSTS AND PONY CRAFTS

In about 20 minutes we pull into Culinarium, my favourite pit stop, where I promise the slightly bedraggled and nauseous travellers crusty chicken pot pie, and the cleanest loos outside a five-star hotel. The girls take a table by the bay window and sip from glasses of white wine, while our spouses change diapers. It's around Christmas, and a gingerbread house rests temptingly at the centre of the table, against the backdrop of terraced gardens.

After a meal of chicken liver pâté, melba toast, lamb pot pie, and beer, topped off with airy éclairs and espresso, we walk down to the Pony Craft Store, where I always buy too much wool for sweaters that lie half-made. Their cross-stitch by numbers kits have rescued many a parent during summer holidays; every household in the hills is bound to have one of these crafts framed in a bathroom.

TIP

- ▶ If you're a large group, reserve a table, especially on the weekend.
- ▶ If you've left early in the morning, skip lunch and pick up delicious fried bread vegetable rolls and hot Nilgiri tea from **Ooty Iyengar Bakery**. Adjacent to this is a roadside vendor who sells the most perfectly formed oyster mushrooms.
- ▶ Dosa and thali lovers can head to **Nahar Nilgiris Hotel** which is purely vegetarian.



The intensely aromatic Nilgiri Tea remains the region's primary economic produce.

THE QUEEN OF THE MOUNTAINS

Before driving into Gudalur, we make a diversion to Ooty, the summer capital of the Madras Presidency. Past Hotel Blue Bird, we head towards Upper Bazaar, entering the town through Charring Cross Junction. At a fork, we take the right road, away from the bus station and the commercial heart of Ooty, towards its beautiful face. Behind the commercialization and concrete there's a surprising wealth of architecture, history, and urban mythology to uncover. Ooty is home to Tamil Nadu's oldest and most prestigious library, and its Government Botanical Garden is among the oldest in India.

As we continue down Garden Road towards them, an elderly Toda woman walks slowly past our car. Her stooping shoulders are covered in a traditional shawl embroidered with black and red leaves, her hair is slicked back with buffalo butter into a tight bun, and an intricate silver necklace shines at her throat. Ooty, or rather Udhagamandalam, was Toda land before being ceded to the British in May 1819; we spare some time at the Botanical Gardens for Toda Mund, a hill dedicated to the tribe, which

IP-BLACK/INDIAPICTURE (BUNGALOW), VLADIMIR ZHOGA/SHUTTERSTOCK (WOMAN)

along with the Irulas, Badagas, Kotas, and Kurumbas comprise the five indigenous inhabitants of the Nilgiris.

There's plenty more to see in the 22 acres of landscaped terraced gardens, which lie on the lower part of Doddabetta Peak, the highest point of the Nilgiris (8,650 feet). Its six sections make for a great, stroller-friendly walk. There is also a 20-million-year-old fossilized tree that can make even the most jaded of teenagers perk up. Then there's the Rose Garden with over 300 varieties, and the Italian garden, with its beds of colourful perennials and trimmed topiaries, designed by Italian POWs interred here during World War I. A flower show, with an exhibition of rare plant species, is held every May.

We make our way back towards Upper Bazaar, the heritage quarter, with its neat red buildings and white windowpanes. This triangle houses the Collector's Office—where I spent many an afternoon waiting for my father—the District Court and the Head Post Office, all built in a similar Victorian style. Opposite the Collector's Office is the old Nilgiri library. St. Stephen's Church, built in 1829, stands to the right. Its plain cream facade is enhanced by minimal colonial flourishes, as if John James Underwood, the architect and Captain of the Madras Regiment, thought the surrounding beauty was distraction enough from the lord. There is a hint of opulence in the hefty teak wooden doors, which were pilfered from Tipu Sultan's palace after the British victory at Srirangapatna.

I tell the kids how I used to sit in the graveyard behind the church, scaring other children with ghost stories. My husband, who's heard this umpteen times, nods approvingly.



▶ I can't drive past **Modern Stores** without making a stop. This treasure house, with everything from Pringles to dust mops, has kept posh boarding school tuck boxes full since 1951. We stock up on sausages and bacon for barbecues, and the kid's eyes widen at the sight of Moddy's chocolates. Ooty is famous for its home-made chocolate fudge. While King Star confectionery is the pioneer, I prefer Moddy's sugar-free dark.

▶ Those interested in tribal history, may also like to visit the Ooty Tribal Museum in Muthorai Palada (10 km southwest).

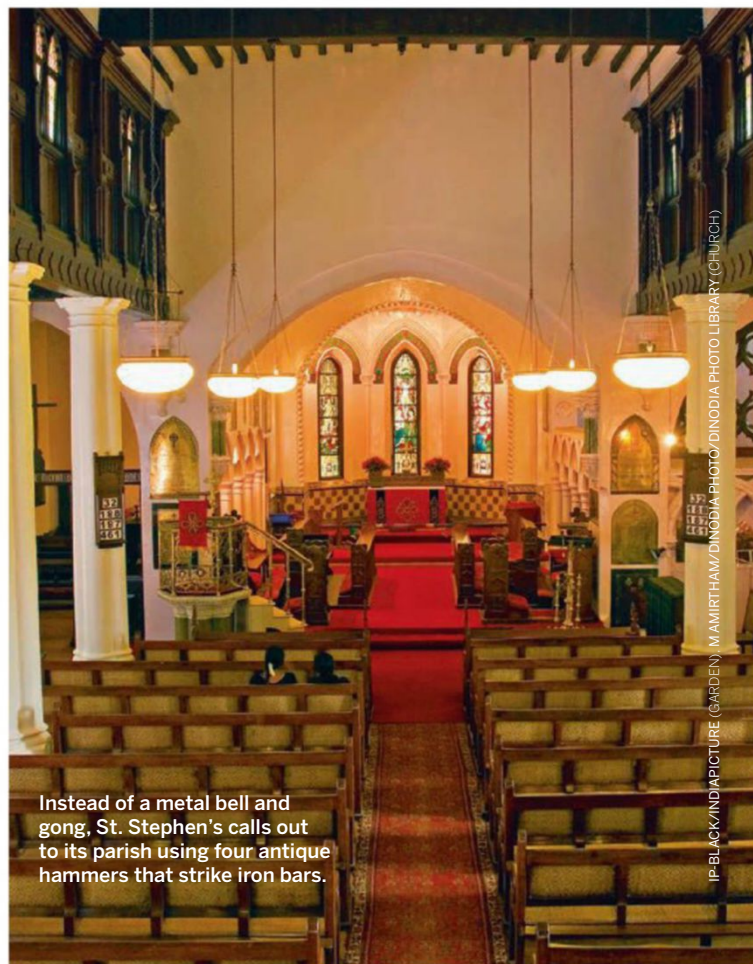
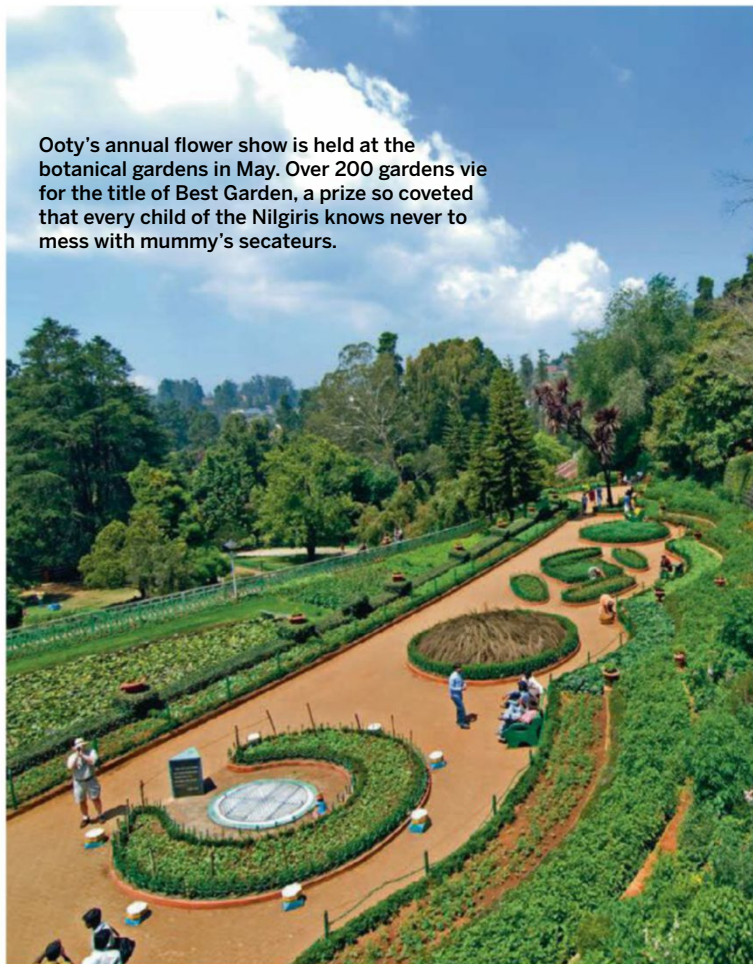
THE HILLS ARE ALIVE

The kids are getting restless and we are eager to reach home before twilight. My parents are worried we might find ourselves stranded outside our estate, conversing with the elephants that frequently visit it; though our guests find this prospect delicious. The breeze gets some teeth as the sun disappears behind the pine forests, and we make our way up Old Pykara road, passing the Ootacamund Gymkhana Golf Club located on the rolling Wenlock Downs.

One of the highest courses in the world (7,000 feet), it's also one of the most difficult, with wooded tree lines of eucalyptus, oak, rhododendron, and fir as well as uphill and downhill slopes. As a child, I preferred munching on finger sandwiches on the club's veranda, looking out towards the Avalanchi range, imaginatively named after an avalanche in the 1800s.

But everyone's "hills are alive" moment comes a little ahead, when we cross the Hindustan Photo Films factory and take a sharp left to gaze towards Lake Sandynulla, a calm tourmaline pool surrounded by fantastic green. Leaving the bulk of civilization behind, we wind our way towards Naduvattam,

Ooty's annual flower show is held at the botanical gardens in May. Over 200 gardens vie for the title of Best Garden, a prize so coveted that every child of the Nilgiris knows never to mess with mummy's secateurs.



Instead of a metal bell and gong, St. Stephen's calls out to its parish using four antique hammers that strike iron bars.

IP:BLACK/INDIAPICTURE (GARDEN); M:AMIRTHAM/DINODIA PHOTO/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (CHURCH)



If the steam train looks familiar, it's because you remember it from the song "Chaiyya Chaiyya" from the movie *Dil Se*. The train travels through 208 curves, 16 tunnels, and across 250 bridges, and stops at some of the most picturesque railway stations in the country including Lovedale.

stopping only once, to let a bunch of tourists board their bus after visiting the spot where I once saw Aamir Khan roll down a hill with Raveena Tandon for a film shooting.



TIP

▶ The weather in Ooty can be tricky, swinging between extremes. Regardless of when you go, layer appropriately to avoid a chill.

JUNGLE BOOK

Leaving the tourists behind, we drive deeper into part of the 5,000-square-kilometre Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. This evergreen pine, deciduous oak, and shola forest ecosystem, with patches of stunted tropical montane forests between rolling grassland and tea plantation, is home to panthers and bison, giant squirrels and tigers, and endemic species like the Nilgiri tahr.

After this, we reach Naduvattam, a nondescript one-horse panchayat village famous for its eternal fog, fresh vegetables, and the fact that Chinese convicts were imprisoned here during the Opium Wars. An ancient jail, now a museum, marks their presence.

The estate is now 15 minutes away, and my husband holds our daughter by the window to show her the beloved home stretch. We roll down our windows to breathe in the fragrance of Wilson Gardens, a forest of eucalyptus that renders even the sceptical eight-year-old speechless. Sunrays break through the shade of young green trees with peeling, blushing bark, creating a

fairylend of dense growth where giant Malabar squirrels frolic. My father often mumbles about the ecological damage caused by eucalyptus, the almost parasitical impact they have on the land, but he's shushed this time by collective awe.

After passing the hairpin bend under Frog Hill, we are home, and have beaten the elephants to it. We are a mere 20 minutes away from Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary, which means we enjoy—and fear—visits from elephants that my family named things like Rowdy Ranga and Monstra; as well as from the occasional leopard and bear, too scary to name. Our tamer resident wildlife, the barking deer and endangered Nilgiri langurs, provide us company over the next three days of eating, drinking, walking, birding, and sitting by the bonfire.

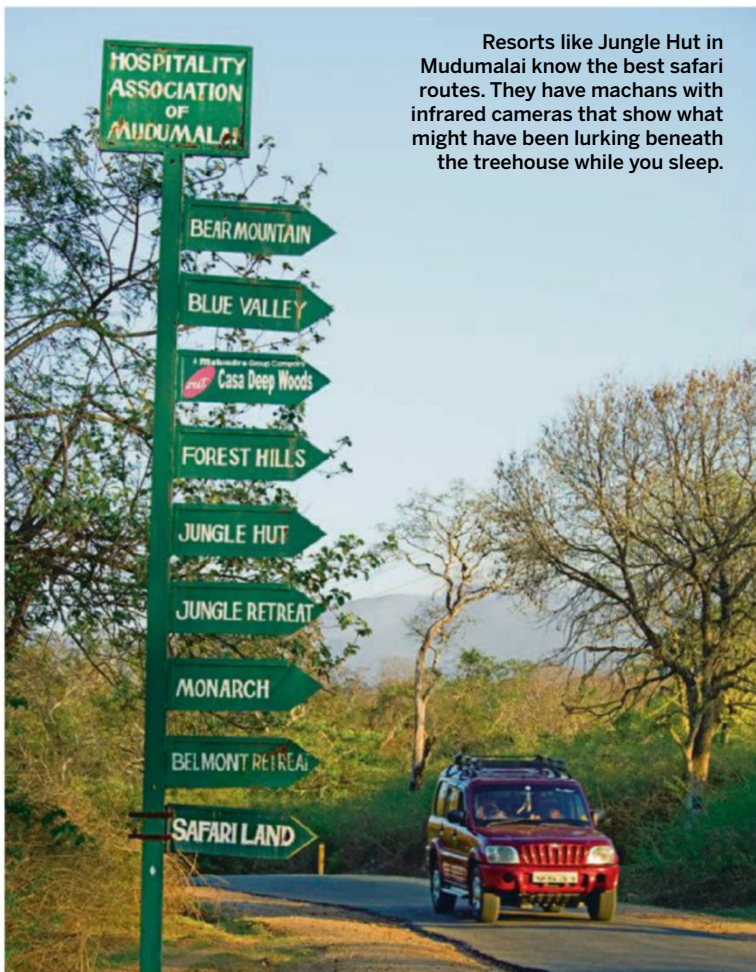


TIP

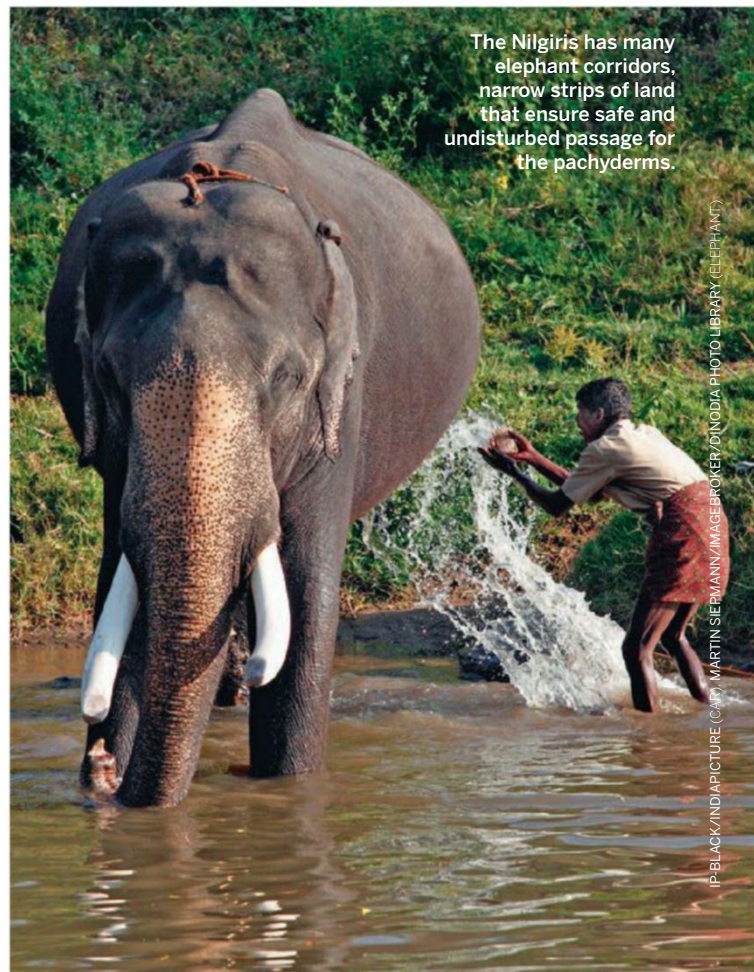
▶ To visit the difficult-to-access Avalanche Lake, set aside a day. Private cars are not allowed beyond a certain point, and the trip is not recommended for those with small children.

▶ The trek to Frog Hill Viewpoint is easy on almost everyone and offers a panorama of the landscape, tea estates, shola forests, and tiny villages. It's particularly stunning at twilight when you may find yourself floating on a cloud of mist (entry ₹10). ●

RESHMA KRISHNAN BARSHIKAR is an author and freelance travel writer. She finds her travel bliss in creating her own walking tours, visiting museum shops, riding, eating local, and reading maps.



Resorts like Jungle Hut in Mudumalai know the best safari routes. They have machans with infrared cameras that show what might have been lurking beneath the treehouse while you sleep.



The Nilgiris has many elephant corridors, narrow strips of land that ensure safe and undisturbed passage for the pachyderms.



Some of the wild cats seen in the Nilgiris include the Bengal tiger, Indian leopard (in photo), jungle cat, and leopard cat. The forest complex of Mudumalai, Bandipur, Nagarhole, and Wayanad has one of the world's largest tiger populations, estimated at 600.

STAY

Because of the relative proximity of Coonoor and Ooty, you can stay at either place and still explore the area with relative ease.

For film buffs

180° Mclver Choose from six rooms with wood-panelled windows and wide porches. The multi-cuisine restaurant has a cosy fireplace (1-4, Orange Grove Road, Coonoor; 97150 33066; serendipityo.com/mciver; doubles from ₹3,999).

For cheese lovers and explorers

Acres Wild Perfect for a family holiday, with space for kids to run around, and cheesemaking courses for adults (571, Upper Meanjee Estate, Kannimariamman Kovil Street, Coonoor; 94432 32621; www.acres-wild.com; doubles from ₹3,000).

For large boisterous families

Richmond House A charming, four-bedroom bungalow that's perfect for a group. Have breakfast on the lawn overlooking the valley; they also make a killer chicken curry (23, Brooklands, Coonoor; 97150 33066; serendipityo.com/richmondhouse; doubles from ₹4,500).

For romantics and furniture lovers

King's Cliff This imposing former ancestral mansion offers nine rooms named after Shakespeare's plays, and an excellent restaurant (King's Cliff, Havelock Road; 0423-2244000; www.littleearth.in/kingscliff; doubles from ₹3,775).

For lovers of fading royalty

Fernhills Royal Palace The historical palace of the Mysore Wadiyar kings has 19 large rooms filled with art and antiques (Fernhills Post Nilgiris, Ooty; 0423-244 3910; www.welcomheritagehotels.in/hotel-details/fern-hills-palace-ooty; doubles from ₹9,500).

For those who cringe at the word "homestay"

Savoy Hotel Victorian-style row houses feature old writing desks and intricately carved working fireplaces with modern bathrooms and amenities (77, Sylks Road, Ooty; 0423-2225500; gateway.tajhotels.com/en-in/savoy; doubles from ₹5,750).



Inside the Crystal Springs nature reserve just after sunrise, zebras amble along the trail, undisturbed by visitors' cars.

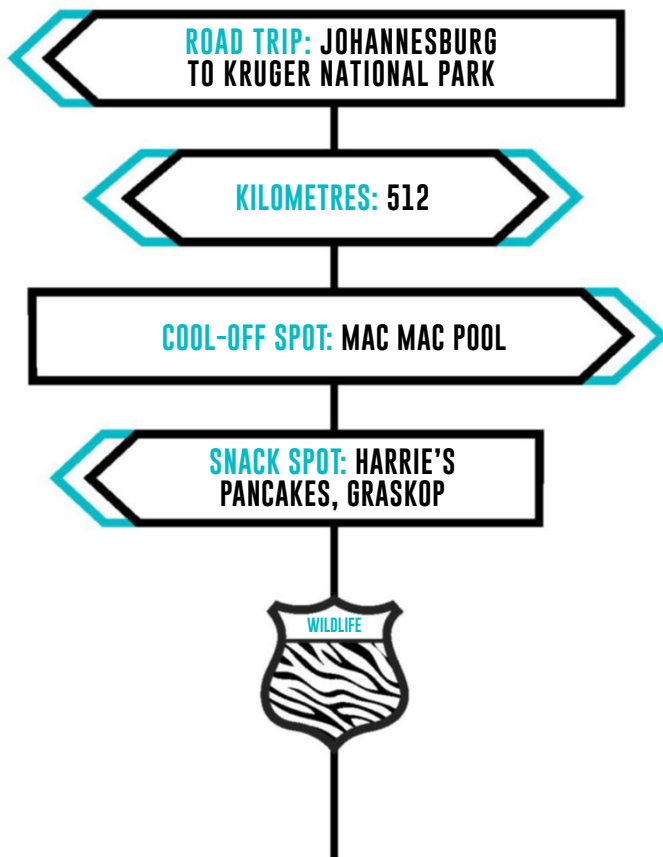


GAME FOR A DRIVE



Skip the flight. Drive through the scenic route from Johannesburg to Kruger National Park
Text & Photographs by Rishad Saam Mehta

APHOGRAPH/ISTOCK (ZEBRA STRIPES ILLUSTRATION)



Most tourists who fly from Johannesburg to Kruger National Park miss the rewards of driving through Mpumalanga, South Africa's smallest province. It's a journey packed with natural wonders, wildlife, waterfalls, and historical sites.

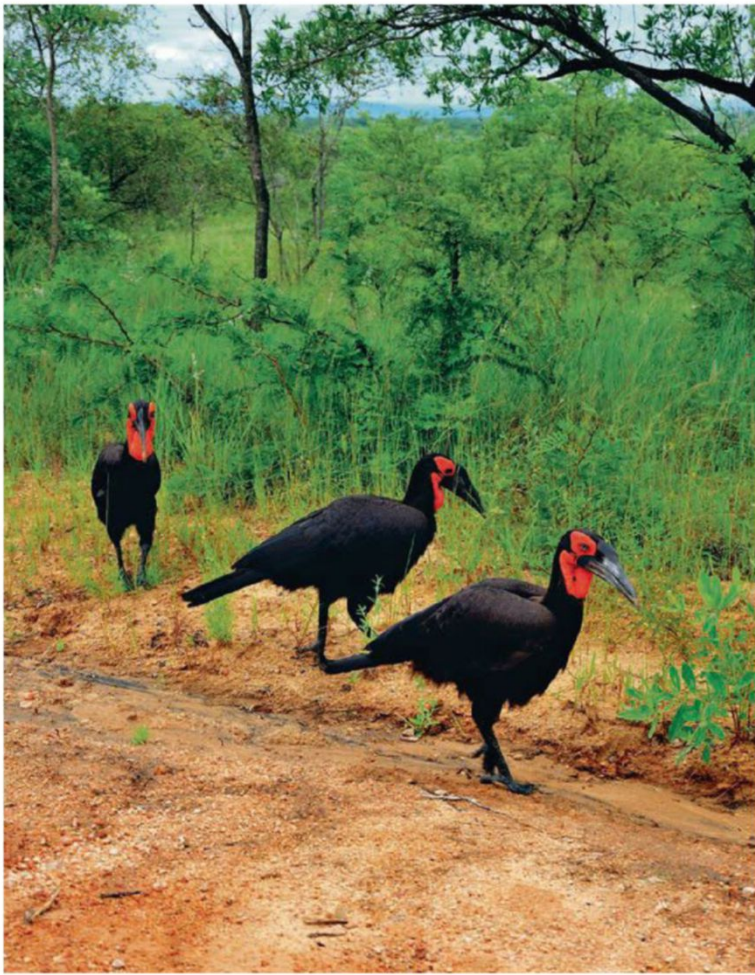
The GPS will tell you that the quickest route is the 400-kilometre road from Johannesburg Airport to Kruger's Phabeni Gate via N12 and N4 highways. Disregard that and take the more leisurely, scenic regional roads (R450, R36, R532) that go via the towns of Dullstroom, Graskop, and Hazyview. On the smooth and well-marked roads it is possible to do the journey in two days, but three is better.

The drive is full of breathtaking moments, when you may chance upon wildlife on the road, watch waterfalls in awe, take in gorgeous natural wonders from scenic viewpoints. This region saw a lot of action during the 19th-century Boer War, fought between the descendants of South Africa's early Dutch settlers and the British who came later. It is also an area rich in natural splendour, minerals, and wildlife—all factors that have shaped its eventful history. Besides that, this whole route is lined by nature reserves, which always means the possibility of sighting wildlife like gazelles, zebras, giraffes and sometimes even big cats. On the way back, turn the car in at Kruger Mpumalanga International Airport and take the flight to Johannesburg.

DAY 1

Johannesburg to Dullstroom (250 km)

Leaving Johannesburg, take N12, N4, and R540 towards Dullstroom. End the 250-kilometre drive with an overnight stay



Facing page: A headstrong rhino or two may occasionally hold up the traffic inside Kruger National Park; A noisy party of male southern ground-hornbills preen and parade in order to attract mates (left); Families enjoy tubing down an offshoot of Mpumalanga's Blyde River, known for its large population of crocs and hippos (right).

at the lovely Walkersons Resort and Spa. Set in pristine woodland, with the feel of a Scottish country manor, this is a perfect welcome to Mpumalanga. The surrounding area is known for fly fishing: Spend a tranquil afternoon at one of the idyllic waterholes with a line.

DAY 2

Dullstroom to Crystal Springs Mountain Lodge (175 km)

Drive to Lydenburg and then take the road over Long Tom Pass, named after the long silver cannon that still stands on the crest of the pass. The Boers placed it here during the war and it could fire a 38-kilogram shell a distance of 10 kilometres. For British troops this strategically placed cannon was a curse.

Descend from the pass, travelling 23 kilometres on R37 to reach a junction where you turn left on R532. Another 7-8 kilometre drive leads to an intersection with the Old Lydenburg Road. Around here, in a distance of 3-8 kilometres, are three wonderful waterfalls: Bridal Veil, Horseshoe, and Lone Creek. Reaching the falls requires short but steep walks from the road head, but they are stunning sights on a bright summer's day. Relax afterwards at the Mac Mac Pools, idyllic natural swimming holes in a forest, just a two-kilometre drive on a turnoff from the R532.

Return to the R532, and drive 16 kilometres to Graskop. If you're hungry after the hiking, stop for a bite at Harrie's Pancakes on the corner of Louis Trichardt and Church streets.

From there take R533 and drive 26 kilometres to Crystal Springs Mountain Lodge via Pilgrimsrest. Situated at the top of Robber's Pass, this lodge is attached to Crystal Springs Nature Reserve and offers game drives and plenty of hiking trails. You could also wake up early in the morning and do a game drive in your own car through a designated route through the reserve. There are many places to park and go for a short or long hike. The sightings are fantastic—giraffe, antelope, zebra, jackal and even leopards. Always stay in your car when you come across wildlife.

DAY 3

Head to Hazyview (87 km)

Drive 25 kilometres back towards Graskop and turn left onto the R532, and then right onto the R534 after 2.6 kilometres. There are many viewpoints along this road through the Drakensberg Escarpment, an area of skyscraping cliffs, deep canyons, and dramatic hillsides. Drive ten kilometres along this stretch, stopping at imaginatively named points like Bridal Veil Falls, God's Window, and Three Rondavels. Return to Graskop and take the R535 to Hazyview, 42 kilometres away. This little town is just 12 kilometres from the Phabeni Gate leading into the western part of Kruger National Park. It has numerous cosy guest houses, and B&Bs. From this gate, visitors can enter the park in their cars, and spend the day driving around. Wildlife sightings, including rhinos, elephants, buffaloes, and even lions are likely. ●



THE FURRY TRAVELLERS

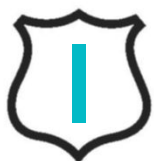
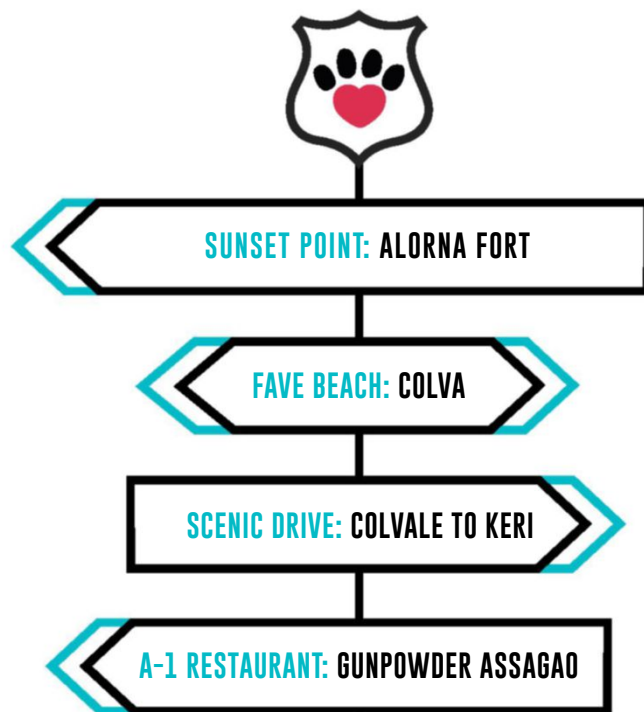
A motley family rediscovers
the joy of slow travel in India's
sunshine state

Text & Photographs by
Divya Dugar



Green picnic spots close to Aldona allow pets the liberty of exploring and being close to nature. They are a welcome change from the urban jungle that is Delhi.

PHOTO: OTN/NIKOV/ISTOCK (PUG WARKS ILLUSTRATION)



In 2010, my life changed for good when Pondi and Tigress adopted me into their family. One year later, Marco-Polo joined our gang. I felt responsible, anchored, and looked forward to coming home to wet noses, wagging tails, and nonstop cuddles. Then, last summer, Pondi passed away, leaving me and my partner Olivier, heartbroken. Sad, angry, and a bit guilty for not having spent enough time with my family, I made a pact with Olivier to take Marco-Polo and Tigress along with us on our travels.

Our first trip with the dogs was a five-week road trip across Goa. The journey began with a train ride from our home in New Delhi to Madgaon in Goa—an adventure in itself (*see box*). Once in Goa, we rented a car for our five-week stay. At first, we were wary of driving long distances with Tigress and Marco-Polo, so we started with short half-hour drives, planning our routes well, carrying plenty of water, and avoiding big meals just before a drive. The dogs were happy troopers, and soon we were going on longer journeys. In fact, after a while, Tigress only wanted to be driven around instead of going for walks.

Goa became a whole new experience as we rediscovered the joy of slow travel, searched for offbeat locations for picnics and walks, and made many more local friends because of our motley family. We'd frequently pull over on a whim to go on impromptu picnics, run across fields, chase buffaloes, explore a fishing village, or walk in the wilderness. Marco-Polo and Tigress marked great swathes of territory as their own.

With Colvale, Benaulim, and Saligao as our bases, we explored the region drive by drive. Olivier and I found a scenic route

from Colvale to Keri beach, which we hadn't experienced on our previous trips. Colvale to Alorna Fort became another favourite stretch. We loved the dreamy landscape of the riverside fort, surrounded by swaying palms: perfect for sunset views and letting the pets off the leash.

From Benaulim, we drove through Salcete, Quepem, and Chandor, to admire Portuguese houses in a lush landscape. From Saligao, we often made the easy drive to Chapora fort to watch sunsets. With a hamper full of beer, and treats for the dogs, we'd hike a little to the fort's outer periphery where the crowd was thinner and the views unparalleled. Our longest drive was a day trip to Wilderrest Resort in Chorla Ghat, on SH4, where we took a small hike in the tropical forest.

We discovered that taking Marco-Polo and Tigress to the ocean was a challenge, as most beaches are overrun by shacks, or occupied by territorial, frequently aggressive stray dogs. Our favourite slice of coast was the laidback Colva beach, with fewer shacks, hence fewer beach dogs, and lots of space to run around. Morjim and Keri beaches were also convenient to visit with the dogs. And most of the shacks allow well-behaved pets.

But our favourite spot became Mapusa Market, whose fruit vendors, bossy fish ladies, and local bakers all began to recognise Olivier and me as Marco-Polo and Tigress's parents. On each trip, the two dogs had a ball sniffing out Goa sausages, assorted cookies, and seafood.

By the end of five weeks of crisscrossing Goa, my family of four felt more tightly knit than ever. ●

DIVYA DUGAR is a journalist and documentary producer. She loves meeting people and dogs on her travels, and is always on the lookout for local crafts.



Introducing our dogs to water was not easy, but at the end of five weeks Marco-Polo was jumping waves (bottom left); A day of running around and chasing dogs on the beach at Saligao ends with a quiet sunset (top); On the way to Keri Beach, Marco-Polo refuses to budge from the front seat (bottom right) holding on to Olivier during the drive.





While I kicked back with a book at Morjim, Marco-Polo enjoyed the breeze and sniffed delicious food aromas wafting through the air (top left); Most shacks including Babazin's in Nerul allow well-behaved pets entry (top right); Within half an hour of boarding, Marco-Polo and Tigress abandoned their inhibitions of being on a train. They perched on window seats to take in the sights (bottom) and partake of the hospitality of Indian Railways.



TRAVELLING ON THE INDIAN RAILWAYS

We debated driving to Goa from our home in Delhi, or taking a 26-odd-hour train journey to Madgaon, eventually settling on the latter. It is possible to travel with pets on a train if you take a complete coupe (2 berths) or cabin (4 berths). So, we booked two first-class tickets on the *Hazrat Nizamuddin-Madgaon Rajdhani Express*, then submitted an application three days before departure to the railways' Chief Commercial Officer, who allocates seats.

Since the seats are only confirmed when the chart arrives at the station, we lived in suspense until a few hours before departure. When we finally got our coupe, I registered both my pets at the parcel office (it is not necessary for the pet to be physically present). Marco-Polo and Tigress arrived with Olivier half an hour before departure, full of excitement and energy. Once we were settled in, we informed the first-class staff, and made a list of the train's stops, so we could plan our pets' toilet breaks.

Marco-Polo and Tigress enjoyed the hospitality of the Indian Railways. They munched on bread sticks, ate rice with yogurt, and got a few licks of vanilla ice cream at night. The train journey there and back was one of the highlights of the trip.



At Chapora Fort, once we'd checked the area for broken beer bottles and settled to watch the sunset, Tigress and Marco-Polo had a blast rolling in the grass.

THE VITALS

STAY

Goa is a pet-friendly state, with numerous hotels that allow four-legged guests. To avoid crowds and traffic, we stayed away from beachfront properties, choosing spaces that were big enough for our pets to enjoy the outdoors. We settled on three Airbnbs run by the same hosts, Yshana and Jude, who opened their beautifully restored Portuguese houses in the villages of Saligao, Benaulim, and Colvale to us. Each of the properties came with staff who cooked us lovely Goan meals, and cleaned the house on alternate days.

EAT

Travelling with our pets turned out to have the unexpected side benefit of being budget-friendly, as we kept an eye out for small, local eateries that wouldn't mind our furry family. Some of our regular favourites weren't on any pet-friendly list, but were extremely welcoming.

Saligao Deck at Kotla Waddo in Saligao was our go-to place for an evening snack or light meal, sandwiched between locals exchanging gossip or discussing a football match. I particularly loved their coconut flavoured mushroom *xacuti* with *pao*.

Babazin's shack near Reis Magos fort is a great place to enjoy a lazy Goan fish curry lunch. Marco-Polo and Tigress loved looking out to the beach and sleeping on the cool floor. We also frequented **Hotel Venite** near the Head Post Office in Panjim, and always booked a balcony table, from where our dogs could indulge in people-watching while we ate.

Gunpowder Assagao, at Saunta Vaddo, Assagao, is a great spot for dog lovers. They already have four in-house furry residents, and there's a lovely outdoor seating area. **Mum's Kitchen** at D.B. Street in Panjim, also allows pets on prior notice.

JOURNEYS

106 **AUSTRALIA**
Eating local, drinking premium—the
flavourful greats of Barossa Valley

114 **IRELAND**
In the footsteps of Luke Skywalker from
Star Wars, on the island of Skellig Michael



114
Skellig Michael, Ireland

GEORGE GERSTER/SCIENCE SOURCE/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY



Great wine and experiments with fresh local produce are at the heart of the many food experiences in the Barossa Valley. Grilling your own food at a Jacob's Creek cooking class (top left), buying sauces and sugo at Maggie Beer's Farm Shop (top right), savouring locally-sourced salami and olives at Fino restaurant (bottom right), and wine tastings (bottom left) at the valley's many wineries—are all affairs to remember.

Facing page: Jacob's Creek winery's Chef Nic Tucker turns out an outstanding beef fillet and lamb rack.





THE GREATS OF BAROSSA VALLEY

EATING LOCAL, DRINKING
PREMIUM—A FLAVOUR BOMB
TOUR IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

BY FABIOLA MONTEIRO
PHOTOGRAPHS BY KAREN DIAS

FROM THE SKY, BAROSSA VALLEY

looks like a sheet of ruled paper, with row upon row of neatly trimmed grapevines. Tiny green buds have already appeared on some of the trellis vines. An hour's drive from Adelaide in South Australia, Barossa Valley is one of the state's premium winemaking regions, with over a hundred different wineries. I'm here to get acquainted with the wine and the culinary scene, which in recent years has been given a conscious push towards eating local. Across South Australia, restaurants have small square "Eat Local" signs verifying that they're part of the state's campaign to promote a farm-to-table culture. I've spotted these in Adelaide as well as on Kangaroo Island, but nowhere does it taste truer than in Barossa.

During my short visit to this region, smaller than the size of Delhi and made up of tiny towns such as Angaston, Gawler, and Nuriootpa, I pop freshly picked flowers straight into my mouth, and learn to tell the subtle differences between various red wines. My scotch fillet is by far the best steak I've ever had, but it's the salad—*salad!*—which accompanies it that steals my heart.

KITCHEN GARDEN

I've entered a magical garden, full of tiny treasures and flavour bombs in every corner. Chef Nik Tucker and I are picking bits and bobs for the afternoon cooking class he's conducting for me at **Jacob's Creek winery** in the town of Rowland Flat. Every step I take is potentially a new taste, and we're taking our time meandering through each garden bed. He hands me a delicate white flower—I bite down hard, unprepared for the pungent garlicky flavour that fills my mouth. It's a flower of the garlic chives plant, and it's delicious.

By the end of our walk through the garden, Chef Nik's salad bowl is filled with purple rocket flowers that we use in place of rocket leaves, sweet snow pea flowers, a thick wad of cos lettuce leaves, spring onion that I've pulled out of the ground, and sprigs of fennel. With the tender carrots that he's stowed away from his visit to the local farmers market, I sense our sides of salad and veggies are going to be divine.

For the mains, we're cooking a beef fillet steak and lamb racks on Chef Nik's large grill, set up alongside the garden. It's a cold, windy afternoon and I'm thankful for the warmth coming off the grill. Two upturned oak barrels serve as cooking stations. I learn how to cut away the silverskin (thin, white connective tissue) of the beef. Though it's a skill that requires dexterity, Nik makes it look supremely easy. The lamb racks come with a thick layer of fat, on which there are red markings. These, Nik explains, help to identify where the meats come from. He tells me that ours, for instance, have been sourced from farms less than ten kilometres away.

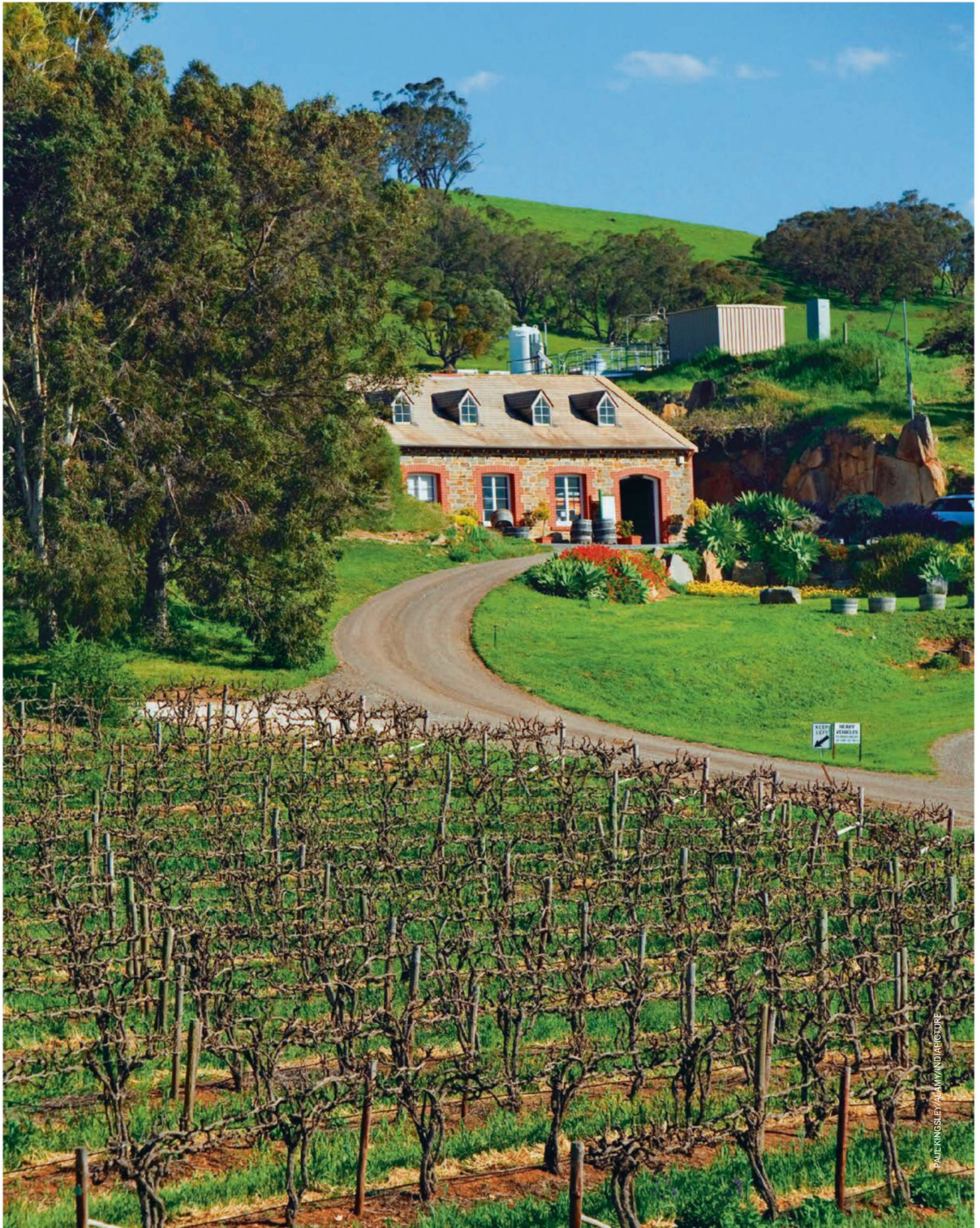
Before the meats go on the grill, Nik asks me to slather the cuts with salt. I take a generous amount and smear it all over the lamb and beef. According to Nik, most visitors are hesitant and not as generous, and my liberal application indicates I'm a natural in the kitchen. I reckon this is the closest I'll come to *Masterchef Australia* in real life.

By the time we're done, I'm starving. The steak is pink in the centre, but crusty on the outside (thanks to the salt) and the lamb racks are cooked to perfection. We have the steak with a thick cream that tastes like mayonnaise and the lamb with a rich rocket pesto. For the salad, Nik has thrown together the cos lettuce, garlic chive flowers, and snow pea flowers. The tender purple and pale yellow carrots are now crunchy, after being tossed in olive oil and yoghurt. We sit down to eat inside a cosy, refurbished cottage, with wooden flooring and an old fireplace. It's the best meal I've had in a long while, and I realise that fresh produce can make a world of difference to the quality of a meal. (+61-885213000; www.jacobscreek.com; AUD175/₹8,845 per head for a 4-hr cooking class, inclusive of lunch, paired with Jacob's Creek wines; booking required.)

BEYOND THE VINES

Wine tasting in Barossa Valley isn't necessarily a posh activity. The hands-on approach that a lot of wineries offer helps to break down complex ideas for an amateur's palate. I have my first sampling at **St. Hugo** in Rowland Flat, where the cellar door and restaurant have giant glass walls that look out onto the winery's sprawling vineyards. Here, I discover how important the barrel is for a wine. My guide, James, points out the sweeter and fruitier notes of a wine stored in a barrel made of American oak, while the wine from a French oak barrel has a scent akin to chopped wood. We tour the vineyards as well, learning about the winery's history and seeing cork trees that yield bark every 30-odd years. (+61-881159200; www.sthugo.com; AUD50/₹2,529 per head for a 1.5-hour tour and tasting; daily 11 a.m. and 3 p.m.)

Facing page: Barossa has numerous wineries, and there's always an opportunity to walk through a vineyard and examine the trellis vines up close.





Maggie Beer's Farm Shop is a cosy, friendly space, with a small café that is perfect for a quick break over coffee and cake.

Our next stop is the **Seppeltsfield winery** in the village of the same name, which dates back to the late 1800s. Back in the day, Mr. Seppelt had the vision to lock away four barrels each year and leave them unopened for a century. Each year now, the winery releases one vintage from a hundred years ago. About five years ago, they started the Taste Your Birth Year tour, which lets visitors sample fortified wines from the year they were born. Mine is sweet and a burnished red, and reminds me of the port wine I've had in Goa. Nigel, our host at the winery, tells us stories of elderly visitors who'd wept while drinking wine that had been through as many years as they had, as well as others who'd ordered engraved bottles of the wine to take home as keepsakes. (+61-885686200; www.seppeltsfield.com.au; AUD75/₹3,795 for a 30-minute tour of the winery's centennial cellar and tasting; daily, 2.30 p.m.; prior booking required.)

A visit to **Penfolds Barossa Valley Winery and Cellar Door** in Nuriootpa turns any regular wine tasting on its head. For the Make Your Own Blend experience, I get to don a white coat and enter the Penfolds' Winemaker's Laboratory. It's like going back to my science lab in school—complete with pencils, beakers, and tabular sheets. The winery produces a yearly vintage blend of Grenache, Shiraz and Mourvèdre wines, and this experience encourages visitors to do the same. Andrew, the leader of our session, helps me detect the sweet, full-bodied notes of the Grenache wine, the cocoa and cherry hints of the Shiraz, and the drier, darker berry flavour of the Mourvèdre. He encourages me to use proportions of the red wines as I prefer, even though I feel like I ought to model mine on Penfolds' blend for perfection. There is no wrong or right. I get three tries before I have to make up my mind. My final blend has 50 per cent of the Grenache, which is my favourite, 40 per cent Shiraz and 10 per cent Mourvèdre, making it much sweeter than the winery's blend. Having such immense control over flavours makes me realise how complex winemaking is. (+61-885688408; www.penfolds.com; AUD65/₹3,290 for a 1.5-hour session; daily, 10.30 a.m. and 2 p.m.; prior booking required.)

WINE & DINE

In the Barossa each meal is better than the last one. Every dish is plated to perfection, every bite reveals pockets of eye-opening flavour. There are many options to choose from, all prioritising local produce and fine ingredients.

It's at **Vintners** in the town of Angaston that I sample my first oysters—and get hooked immediately. If I close my eyes, the saltiness of the oyster coupled with the freshly squeezed lime puts me right by the sea. While we wait for our main course, we tuck into warm house-made sourdough with a peppery butter. I've ordered a fried baby barramundi, one of the region's more popular fish. My barramundi, cooked with nam prik and coriander, is distinctly Thai in flavour and is cleaned to the bone by the time I am



During the cooking class at Jacob's Creek winery, Chef Nic holds up a garlic chives flower (top)—don't be deluded by its size, the little bloom packs a punch; The Penfolds winery helps visitors make their own blends and understand the science behind producing wine (bottom).





finished. The other items on the menu sound just as delightful: smoked pork hock consommé, a rack of South Australian lamb with sourdough salsa, heirloom beets, and jus. I've saved space for dessert though—we have three beautiful, tiny tarts and a chocolate soufflé powerful enough to remedy the world's worst day (+61-885642488; www.vintners.com.au).

Before our visit to the Seppeltsfield winery, we stop for lunch at **Fino At Seppeltsfield**. The restaurant is filled with natural light and located in the same building as the cellars. Known for their beautifully crafted meals, Fino's options may appear limited, but are made from only the freshest ingredients. We start with Rocco's Salami and Domenico Torzi's olives. It strikes me that the food is so local, it's named after the people from whom the produce is sourced. I pick a 300 gm Clare Valley scotch fillet with charred broccolini for my main course. Covered in a tart pistachio sauce, the fillet is done to perfection. This isn't a meal I'm going to forget anytime soon (+61-885628528; www.seppeltsfield.com.au).

STOCK UP

No food trip to Barossa is complete without stocking up on goodies to take back home. Skip the supermarket run and visit **Maggie Beer's Farm Shop** in Nuriootpa. The shop's namesake, Australian cook Maggie Beer, emphasized the need for flavoursome, simple food decades ago. Time your visit right, and you could be privy to a cooking demonstration by

The best part of the cooking class at Jacob's Creek is sitting down to taste the flavourful meal you've helped prepare.






Beer herself (*weekdays at 2 p.m.; free*). There are little tasters for every product in the shop, so visitors know exactly what they're buying. I sample everything from pheasant farm pâté to burnt fig jam. The shelves are lined with pickles, salad dressings, fruit pastes, sauces, vinegar, and even tea. I buy a large jar of salted brandy caramel (AUD9.95/₹492), a bottle of verjuice—a substitute for salad dressing, made with the juice of unfermented grapes (AUD10/₹495)—and a box of rosemary and verjuice biscuits (AUD7.49/₹370). (+61-885630204; www.maggibeer.com.au).

Make like the locals and visit the **Barossa Farmers Market**. The agricultural community comes together every Saturday in the giant Vintners Sheds to display their wares. Stalls sell seasonal fruit and vegetables, freshly baked bread, meats, and eggs—everything that's needed to run an everyday kitchen in the Barossa. This may not be produce that will last the journey back home, but the shelf life on insightful conversations with local farmers and chefs is a lifetime (+61-402026882; www.barossafarmersmarket.com.au; Saturdays 7.30-11.30 a.m.). ●

FABIOLA MONTEIRO was until recently part of the *National Geographic Traveller India's* Web team. She loves beaches, blue skies, and baking, and is most centred while trying a new cake recipe.

KAREN DIAS is a photographer who shuttles between Mumbai and Goa. When she isn't shooting, she can be found reading, drinking feni, and planning her next big adventure.

THE GUIDE

 <p>Orientation</p>	<p>Barossa Valley is 70 km/1 hr northeast of Adelaide, South Australia's capital city. The region spreads over 912 sq. km. and comprises small towns such as Tanunda, Angaston, and Nuriootpa.</p>
 <p>Getting There</p>	<p>To reach Barossa Valley, travellers from India must first fly to Adelaide city. Flights from major Indian cities to Adelaide require at least one layover at a Southeast Asian gateway, or an Australian city like Sydney or Melbourne. From Adelaide, the most convenient option is to hire a car for the journey to Barossa Valley. Alternatively, catch the Adelaide Metro to Gawler Central (www.adelaidemetro.com.au), from where there are daily LinkSA buses (www.linksa.com.au) to Angaston in the Barossa Valley.</p>
 <p>Getting Around</p>	<p>Having your own vehicle is the most convenient way to get around Barossa Valley. Regular LinkSA buses connect towns like Angaston, Gawler and Nuriootpa. Alternatively, opt for a tour that takes visitors around for a day or half a day. Operators like Taste the Barossa (www.tastethebarossa.com.au), Barossa Daimler Tours (www.barossadaimlertours.com.au), and Barossa Unique Tours (www.barossaunique.com.au) offer a variety of options (prices vary, start from approximately AUD129/₹6,605). Most operators do customized tours as well.</p>
 <p>Visa</p>	<p>Indian travellers to Australia require an Australian tourist visa. A 30-, 60-, or 90-day visa costs ₹7,200, with an additional service charge of ₹984. For application forms and a list of documents required to process the visa, visit www.vfsglobal.com. Visas generally take around 17 days, so apply well in advance.</p>
 <p>Seasons</p>	<p>Daytime temperatures in Barossa Valley vary from 12-29°C, depending on the time of year. Summer (December-February) is warm, but the sun can be strong, so pack a hat and sunscreen. Pro tip: Summer is when the grapes are harvested—keep an eye out for experiences that allow travellers to pick the fruit as well. Autumn (March-May) is mild but sunny, with the evenings growing much cooler. Winter (June-August) is cold, with</p>

night temperatures falling to around 3°C. Spring (September-November) sees sunny days with cool temperatures. It's a good time for outdoor activities, but pack woollens as the wind can be quite chilly.



Stay

LUXURY

Kingsford Homestead is a luxury retreat that overlooks picturesque fields where cows graze. Its claim to fame is that it was the set to Australian TV show *McLeod's Daughters*, which ran from 2001 to 2009. There are seven suites, one of which is a private cottage, ideal for couples (www.kingsfordhomestead.com.au; doubles from AUD430/₹22,051).

The Louise offers plush suites that look out onto vineyards, and have private terraces and spa tubs. Don't miss a meal at the hotel's fine-dining restaurant Appellation (www.thelouise.com.au; doubles from AUD605/₹31,025, including breakfast).

COMFORT

Novotel Barossa Valley Resort, a short drive from the Jacob's Creek Visitor Centre, is made up of two-storey cottages. Each room has its own private balcony with vineyard views (www.novotelbarossa.com; doubles from AUD117/₹6,000, inclusive of breakfast).

Barossa House dates to 1926 and is said to be the first bed and breakfast in Barossa Valley. The cosy rooms have been named after the local plants growing near them (www.barossahouse.com.au; doubles from AUD175/₹8,970, inclusive of breakfast).

BUDGET

Vine Inn in Nuriootpa has rooms that are clean, functional, and comfortable, ideal for travellers on a budget. The inn also offers self-contained apartments for larger groups (www.vineinn.com.au; doubles from AUD110/₹5,638).



Visitors touring the Seppeltsfield winery can opt to taste wine from their birth year or one that is a hundred years old. The estate can also be explored on a bike or Segway.

FORCE OF NATURE

ALTERNATING MEMORIES OF STAR WARS SCENES AND ENID BLYTON
NOVELS EMERGE ON A CRAGGY CLIFF OFF THE IRISH COAST

BY NILOUFER VENKATRAMAN



From some angles, Skellig Michael, the larger of the two Skellig Islands, looks like the Millennium Falcon spaceship from the Star Wars universe. Visitors climb the steep craggy cliff to get to the ruins of the monastic settlement on the summit's northeastern side.

DAVID LYONS/AGE FOTOSTOCK/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY

LUKE SKYWALKER FROM STAR WARS

might have brought me here, but the overwhelming feeling I have is of entering a scene from an Enid Blyton novel. More specifically, the flashback is of a Famous Five novel in which I could well be making my way to Kirrin Island.

The boat I'm on cuts its way through the choppy Atlantic Ocean, making the 12-kilometre journey from Portmagee to the Skellig Islands in Ireland's County Kerry in about an hour. My travel companions are an intrepid bunch interested in visiting



The pretty little fishing village of Portmagee is the gateway to visiting Skellig Michael, where, according to the movie *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, the Jedi Luke Skywalker has been hiding out for 30 years.

a striking location from the seventh Star Wars film. Seen in the dramatic last few minutes of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* is a remote, mysterious island on a planet far away. It's where Jedi Luke Skywalker is revealed to have been hiding for 30 years. Incidentally, it's also purportedly the location of the opening scene of the next Star Wars film *The Last Jedi*, to be released in December 2017. This lonely, mystical place is Skellig Michael, an island somewhat shaped like the Millennium Falcon spaceship, whose geography evokes awe and fascination.

Skellig Michael or Great Skellig, the larger of the two Skellig Islands, is a steep pinnacle rising out of the wild waters of the Atlantic Ocean. It's here that one of Ireland's oldest monastic settlements was founded, though much of its early history is unknown. At the northeastern summit of this rocky outcrop are a number of dome-like cells of a monastery where, according to legend, Saint Fionan settled with a group of Christian monks in the sixth century. It remained a monastery until the 16th century, and later became a place of pilgrimage.

The most convenient access to the Skelligs is from the fishing village of Portmagee, a small, pretty spot on the Iveragh Peninsula with a population of under 200. It's the kind of town



where fresh fish comes in each evening and goes straight to the kitchen for the cook to prepare supper. That's exactly what happened the one night I spent there at The Moorings guest house, right opposite the marina.

Our tour boat leaves Portmagee soon after breakfast the next day and nears Little Skellig Island first and circles it. The tops of its craggy cliffs are white, covered with thousands of birds and their droppings. Over 40,000 gannets and other seabirds live on this island, and I'm sure I can see at least 39,999 of them right away. This area hosts one of the largest gannet colonies in Ireland and they are literally everywhere: lining every ridge, swirling overhead, diving majestically to fish in the water, swooping up and down cliffs, in and out of nests, darting to and from their families. When some fly closer, I notice they have a yellow tint on their heads and black tips at the end of their large wings. Interestingly, these seabirds can live for up to 30 years.

We then circle Skellig Michael, and the guide points out the lighthouse and a treacherous old route that the monks once used when they came down from their mountaintop perch to fish for supper. I'm not quite sure what led me to think of

this journey as an Enid Blyton adventure, but as we moor at a small cove, it becomes clear. I'd listened to our guide Tammy talk of how the rough seas and windy weather of this area often mean that tour boats don't leave for their scheduled tours. The unpredictable weather requires that boatmen be extra careful to ensure they don't crash into the sharp rocks that fringe the shore. It reminds me of the Famous Five dashing against rocks in their wooden boat as they land on Kirrin Island. The thousands of gannets here awaken memories of the gulls and jackdaws of Blyton's novels, and the idea of a wind-pummelled island close enough to the shore to get there in an hour, evokes even more parallels.

Skellig Michael has for centuries been a significant spiritual site, accessible only by three sets of steep steps cut into its dangerous cliffs. Only the rock-cut steps on the south side are still usable and open to visitors. In the penultimate scenes of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, the lead protagonist Rey runs up this set of rugged, weather-worn stairs. There are about 600 steps to the top, and we've been warned so much about how tough it is that I'm mentally prepared. I plan to do what I usually do when I have a massive task ahead of me; I break it

down into smaller more manageable parts. Fifty steps at time, 12 times over.

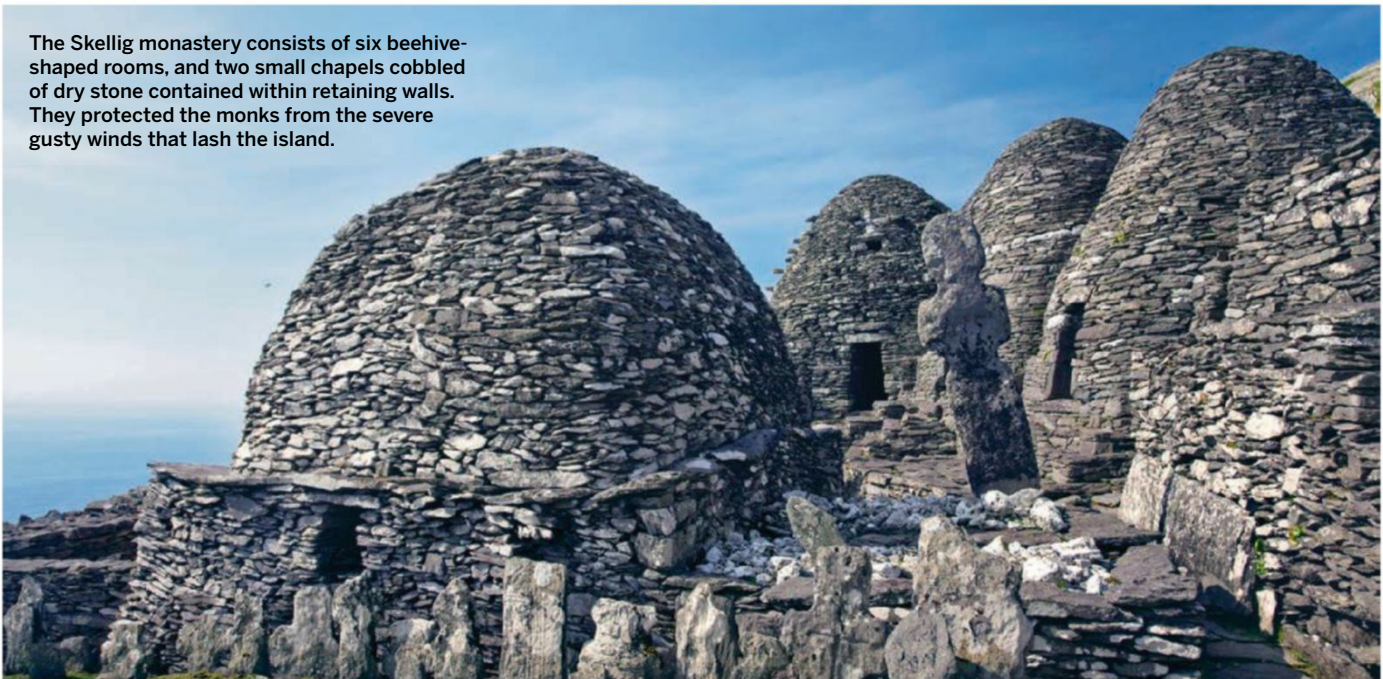
Trudging up the cliff face slowly, I examine the island's resident birds closely. Until I landed on Skellig Michael, the puffin was a bird I'd only heard about in Enid Blyton novels. As soon as we'd landed on the island, however, we'd seen them everywhere. This could well be Blyton's Puffin Island. As we climb the hill they pop out of burrows in the soil, stick their heads out of crevices in the rock, their red beaks, orange feet, and distinctive eye-markings demanding we pay more attention to them. During one of our breaks while hiking I see a puffin near me. It stays put as I edge closer. It seems rather bold considering it doesn't really see that many humans. After all, only 180 visitors are allowed onto Skellig Micheal every day, to preserve its fragile ecology. When I am about five inches from its beak, Ms. Puffin dives into a hole in the ground.

My companions seem to like the walking pace I set, so I count aloud 1, 2, 3... until we've climbed 50 steps. Then we stop

spot. Looking out over the island and the sea from our vantage point, it makes perfect sense why this place was chosen to be *the* mysterious location for what would become the highest grossing film in North America. The rugged landscape of Skellig Michael truly echoes the drama of the movie's final scene set on the planet of Ahch-To. The island's old monastic settlement is also perfectly cast as the galaxy's first Jedi Temple where Luke Skywalker lives as a hermit. Though it's just an hour from the Irish coast, it seems like a universe away. It's the kind of pristine place that's fast disappearing, its raw beauty accentuated by perilous cliffs and a deep blue ocean. We enjoy the warm sunshine and chomp down our ham, cheese, sliced tomato, and lettuce sandwiches. Enid Blyton would approve. ●

Editor-in-Chief **NILOUFER VENKATRAMAN**'s idea of unwinding is to put on boots and meander through wilderness or the bylanes of a city, and to instill in her daughter a love for the outdoors.

The Skellig monastery consists of six beehive-shaped rooms, and two small chapels cobbled of dry stone contained within retaining walls. They protected the monks from the severe gusty winds that lash the island.



for a two-minute breather. We also stop occasionally to look all around us; the views are truly breathtaking. We repeat this a dozen times until we're at the clifftop.

Before I arrived in Ireland I was told to expect cloudy skies, a fierce Atlantic wind, and always, always rain. But the elements have refused to obey the law of Irish skies and we've got blue skies, sunny 18-20°C weather, and not a drop from the skies. We've been gifted the perfect conditions for exploring this UNESCO World Heritage Site.

At the top, the beehive-shaped stone huts built and occupied by monks centuries ago are intriguing. The stark monastery complex occupied for some 600 years between the 6th and 12th centuries is where small groups of resident Christian monks lived and prayed. We enter the empty stone structures, wander along low walls, and notice medieval crosses.

On the hike back down from the peak to our boat, we stop on a grassy col with a few flat stones that makes a good picnic

THE VITALS

Orientation The Skellig Islands lie 12 kilometres off the coast of southwest Ireland and the fishing village of Portmagee.

Getting There From Dublin, Portmagee is about 5-hr driving distance, and 2.45 hr from Cork. Plan on hiring a car from either city. From Dublin you can drive to Killarney and then drive the famous Ring of Kerry (route N70). Portmagee in County Kerry is 16 kilometres off this scenic route.

Tours A number of operators offer landing trips from Portmagee, Ballinskelligs, and Valentia Island to the Skelligs from €60/₹4,225. Boats operate only when the weather and sea conditions permit and only from about mid-May to end-Sep. Even if a boat does leave the shore, landing on Skellig Michael is not guaranteed. In a sense the stars truly have to be aligned for a trip to work out as planned. Landing on Little Skellig is not permitted.



1



2



3

1 Puffins tend to prefer swimming to flying. Their large beaks are red only in the summer, fading to a grey in winter. 2 Fresh catch at the Portmagee harbour immediately makes its way to the seafood menus of local restaurants. 3 The path up the mountain is steep, uneven, and narrow in places but anyone with an average level of fitness can get to the summit. 4 Right next door to the pink facade of The Moorings guest house is the Cois Cuain gift shop which sells artefacts as well as locally made bread and sweets. 5 Rough Atlantic weather means you can only land on Skellig Michael on days with good weather between mid-May and end-September. 6 Over 40,000 gannets occupy Little Skellig island. They fish by flying high before diving down at great speed when their sharp eyes spot a fish.



4



5



6

SHORT BREAKS

120

FROM AHMEDABAD

Centuries coalesce in the old town of Bharuch

124

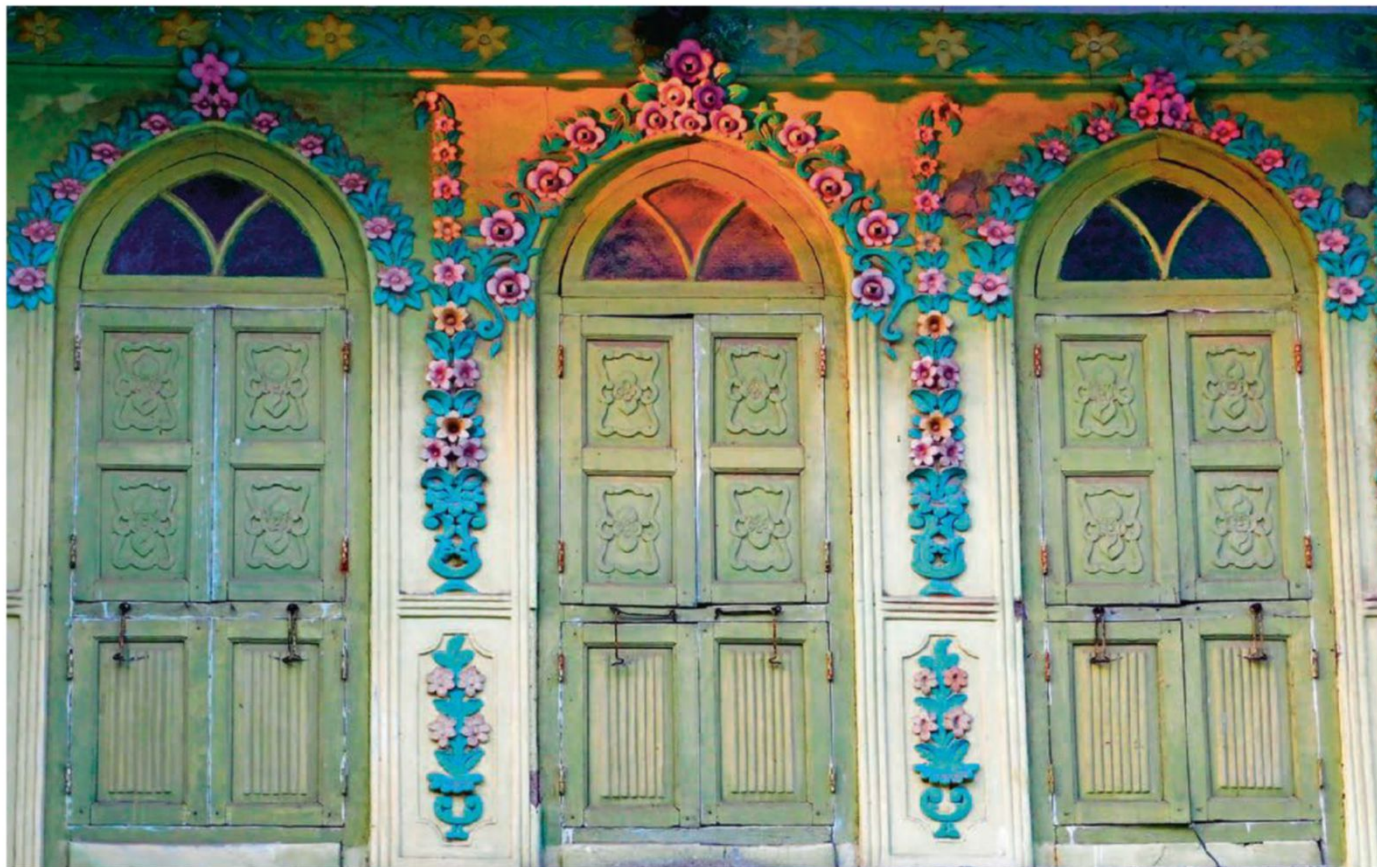
FROM BENGALURU

Ramanagara is a little town with superlative offerings

126

STAY

Head to Satpura National Park for wild encounters and a luxurious stay



Living Museum

A STROLL THROUGH THE HISTORICAL, ARCHITECTURAL WONDERLAND OF OLD BHARUCH

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY ZAC O'YEAH

I had read much on Bharuch in old history books. In ancient Greek and Roman texts it is mostly called Barygaza, the greatest port of India, which attracted scores of foreigners. Not only Greeks and Romans, but Egyptians, Africans, Arabs, and Malay and Chinese merchants came here—making it one of the world's most cosmopolitan cities 2,000 years ago. Yet today, it has largely fallen off the tourist map.

While checking in to a small hotel the staff tells me that they have two restaurants. One specializes in Gujarati thalis and the other in Punjabi style paneer meals. I'm also discreetly informed that they can serve tandoori chicken and alcohol in my room should I require it. The whispered offer makes me thrilled about finally being in Bharuch.

CITY OF GODS

I head off cheerfully on my exploration with printouts from Google Maps in my bag, because I couldn't find any tourist maps or useful information online. Walking along the dotted route I'd plotted, I find there are no signs pointing to heritage buildings or sightseeing spots.

After a kilometre of trudging through increasingly dusty backstreets, a slope takes me downhill to the Narmada River. The riverbed turns out to be an endless stretch of grassland where cattle graze. Imposing old fortifications loom large along the riverfront. After cross-checking with an archaeological document I'd found online, I determine that this is the historic **Undai Darwaja**, once a majestic bastion, and one of the

The old town of Bharuch is noted for its beautiful old havelis and mansions, some well maintained, others in ruins.



nine ancient entrances to the city (*open sunrise-sunset; entry free*).

A short walk upriver is the **Dasavamedha Ghat**, located quite close to a Vamana Temple. The bathing ghat is said to be the place where the demon king Mahabali performed horse sacrifices, giving the ghat its name. It is also believed to be the spot where Vamana, the dwarf avatar of Vishnu, measured the universe in three steps and forced Bali to shift base to the netherworld. The heavily silted riverbed makes it impossible to take holy baths here, but I'm told that just the sight of the Narmada will wash away the sins of three lifetimes.

The surrounding Dandia Bazaar is dotted with old shrines. Among them is the charming **Swaminarayan temple**, built two centuries ago in memory of a guru who came to Gujarat in the early 1800s. The pebbles from the ground Swaminarayan sat upon during his visit have been incorporated into the temple wall. In the next lane is the **Bhrigu Rishi temple**. It is believed that Bharuch was originally named Bhrigukachchha after the Vedic sage who lived here. Greek traders abbreviated the name to Barygaza. The current temple was probably built during Maratha rule, or around 1685, on top of the ancient structure in which the saint's earthly remains are entombed. Next to his samadhi is a statue of Bhrigu in a meditating pose.

PORT OF PLENTY

I follow the old city's fortifications that begin at Undai Darwaja and continue westward, along the riverbank. In the winding lanes around **Hajikhana Bazaar**, every other crumbling building has something worth marvelling at. Carved wooden doors are fronted by elaborate verandas with fluted pillars crowned by fine capitals. Several homes are beautifully maintained in freshly painted pastel hues, while others have pristine

The Narmada River has silted up and receded from the city. Where it once flowed, cattle now graze on green pastures (left); The ceiling (right) of the venerable Swaminarayan temple is a marvellous riot of colours; An antediluvian soldier (bottom) spotted outside a building's entrance.



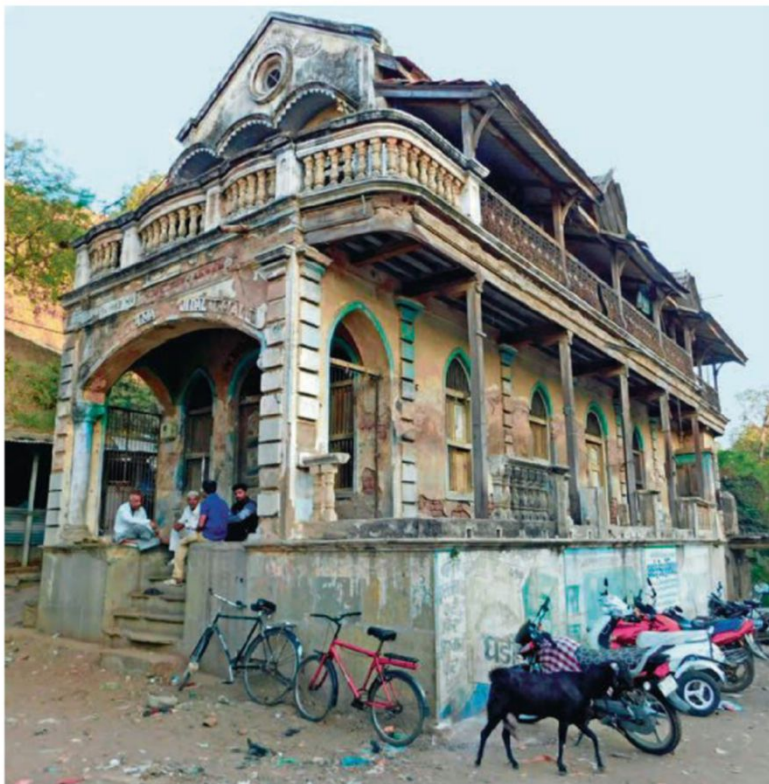
art deco facades in muted blues and yellows—I feel like Alice in an architectural wonderland. The streets are not crowded, so it is a pleasure to saunter around.

Walking through a square off Vadapada Road, a friendly man invites me to the roof of one of the semi-dilapidated houses. Although he doesn't know much English he goes on saying "clock, clock." Puzzled, I follow him up a flight of stairs to the roof. I see the remains of a **sundial** embedded in a decayed brick wall. My self-appointed guide points out the positions for 12 o'clock and so on, indicating that there used to be an iron rod, the shadow of which showed time accurately when he was a child. The entire building was once the **Dutch Factory**, or trading post, built in 1617.

Continuing my walk, I meet another gentleman who suggests visiting the local mosque and points up a dirt track. I don't see a mosque until I climb through some bushes to find a wooden gate with ornate posts. It leads to the modest but splendid **Jama Masjid** that archaeologist James Burgess made an extensive documentation of in the 1890s, in his handbook *On the Muhammadan Architecture of Bharoch, Cambay, Dholka, Champanir, and Mahmudabad in Gujarat*. He found it in a state of decay, and wrote that "the beautiful carved ceilings are so blackened with soot that it is scarcely possible to recognise the wonderful richness and variety of their patterns—probably unequalled in India."

When I visit, a dozen worshippers are praying inside the mosque's main hall, which has been restored and is in use again. Some of the 48 columns are sculpted with pictorial representations of celestial beings, which I've never before seen in a mosque. Different sources give very different construction dates, but Burgess seemed to think it may have been built around A.D. 1300.

Standing inside the hilltop mosque, which reminds me of the pillared temples I had seen in Greece, it



is easy to imagine that Greeks once lived hereabouts. These included the anonymous author of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, a marine travel guidebook written in A.D. 80 by a Greek sailor who navigated the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, Malabar and Coromandel coasts, and resided in Barygaza for many years. The author describes the merchandise traded in Barygaza port: Exports included gemstones, cloth, and spices, while imports consisted of metals, especially precious ones, Italian fine wines, as well as “bright-coloured girdles a cubit wide.”

BAZAAR STREET

This is a multicultural neighbourhood, I find, because the next building I stop to gawk at is the impressive but uninhabited mansion of Parsi trader Shapoorjee Hormasjee Jambusarwalla. I wish these historic Parsi quarters of **Kotparsiwad**, were better maintained. There is apparently a municipal plan to restore a selection of the city’s historical buildings, and convert them into schools. Perhaps they will open a few for tourist visits, too.

I amble downhill towards what is marked as **Malbari Darwaja** on my sketchy map. There stands a substantial stretch of wall at the bottom of the road and in it an ornate but forlorn gateway. As far as I can ascertain, this is the only gate that remains intact from the nine the city originally had. The others survive only as location names. The squat tower-like bastion looming over the gate is a popular hangout for kite fliers.

I climb uphill again and across the hillock to the

In Bharuch’s old town, the majestic public hall (left) lies on the road leading to the harbour at Furja; Though it’s now missing, the shadow of an iron rod marked the hours on this 400-year-old Dutch sun clock (right); Bharuch’s local delicacy *khaman* (bottom), is a spongy-textured, spicier variant of the more well-known *dhokla*.



vicinity of Katpur Darwaja where there seems to be no *darwaja* standing. Instead I find myself in **Katpur Bazaar**, which was once a major market selling luxury goods from around the known world. Greek coins were in use from an early date. The bazaar is congested with a throng of shoppers, looking for everything from savoury Gujarati *farsan* to fashionable burkhas. There’s a **covered food market** (*open until late*) at the far end giving off pungent smells of those same spices that the Greeks and the Romans sailed here to purchase. Nowadays, one also gets readymade mixes for local delicacies such as “nylon *khaman*,” a fast-food version of *dhokla* made of chickpea flour (its texture is as smooth as nylon).

Turning left at the end of Katpur Bazaar, I reach the **Furja area** which was once one of Bharuch’s main harbours. To my utter astonishment, I locate a series of sturdy iron bollards dating to the days when the river was used for shipping. They are bolted to a stretch of quay, presumably part of the British-era harbour, which is now a **riverside promenade**. Here, locals sit and munch on freshly roasted peanuts while taking in the sunset.

Thinking of calling it a day, I head uphill towards an enticing biryani joint I’d spotted that offers half plates at ₹40. But then, I suddenly see, towering above me, a massive **citadel**. I’d been so caught up by the busy bazaar, I had not noticed this fortification so overgrown with weeds and bushes that it can be mistaken for a jungle were it not for the kids flying kites from it. Hiking up a path, I get to the top of the citadel from where the vistas are breathtaking. The sun sinking into the Narmada and elderly men sitting around shooting the breeze, add a sense of timelessness to the scene.

STORIES FROM THE RAJ

Gazing upriver, I see the 19th-century **Golden Bridge**, which almost every Bharuchi tells me is the most important tourist sight in their town. The narrow beam bridge connecting Ankleshwar to Bharuch was built by British engineers during 1877-81 to straddle the Narmada River. It was a hugely expensive project as special rust-resistant



iron was used and therefore it was painted golden. Next to it, the British also built a railway bridge, “the silver bridge,” to connect Ahmedabad and Bombay.

Strolling on the citadel hill, I come across the oldest library of South Gujarat, the **Raichand Dipchand Library** (*open 9-12 a.m. and 3-6 p.m.; entry free*). The building itself is a sight to behold, standing on low iron pillars, perhaps to stop humidity from seeping up to the books during the monsoon. Inside, I feel I’ve stepped into another time. Built in 1858, it has a fine collection of rare manuscripts in Gujarati and some two lakh other books. The famous scribe Feroze Gandhi, who later became the son-in-law of Jawaharlal Nehru, must have come here when he was a child since his ancestral home is around the corner in Kotparsiwad.

Near the library is the **Victoria Clocktower**, built in 1906 in the memory of the then recently deceased British queen and Empress of India. A ground floor is all that remains of the original structure, which was destroyed by an earthquake. Even this is enough to indicate that it must have been a magnificent sight, visible from afar.

Next door is the **Civil Hospital**, an apocalyptic ruin inhabited by the poor. It is definitely worth knocking one’s knuckles on the cast-iron gateposts of this building, which were made in Liverpool and shipped here. I get a kick out of the stunning sunset views from behind the cavernous hospital, looking down toward Furja and



The view from the Golden Bridge, built by British engineers for vehicles, looks out towards Silver Jubilee Railway Bridge.

Katpur Bazaar. There, in the hospital grounds, I find old, carved stones that really belong in a museum.

Walking back to my hotel and the temptation of some hot tandoori chicken, I think that perhaps there’s no need for Bharuch to have any museums—the old town itself is a living museum with free entry to everything. ●

THE GUIDE

ORIENTATION	The city of Bharuch is located by the river Narmada in southern Gujarat. Its old town is 2 km west of Bharuch Junction, and south of Railway Station Road which has a good number of hotels, eateries, ATMs, and other amenities.
GETTING THERE	Bharuch is easily accessible from Ahmedabad (3 hr/182 km north) by train and road. The nearest airport is at Vadodara (1.5 hr/85 km north).
GETTING AROUND	Shared autorickshaws between Furja Bandar/Katpur Bazaar and Railway Station Road cost ₹10. The old town is compact and can be explored on foot. Don’t expect any signposting useful to tourists, but locals will be happy to point you to the various sights, temples, and mosques.
STAY	There are plenty of hotels on Railway Station Road, which is conveniently near the old town as well as the railway and bus stations. Right outside Bharuch Junction, there are several decent hotels such as Corona (www.hotelcoronabharuch.com ; doubles from ₹1,690), Kohinoor Hilton Plaza (hotelkohinoor.co.in ; doubles from ₹2,000) and President (www.rukminihospitality.com ; doubles from ₹1,400). Even more convenient for exploring old Bharuch is Shalimar (hotelshalimar.co.in ; doubles from ₹1,350), midway between the railway station and old town.
EAT	Sample the famous Gujarati thali at Hotel Shalimar (₹160). Next door, the Punjabi-Chinese Ganga Jamna and the south Indian Thakor Restaurant offer more veggie options. Local delicacies such as <i>dhokla</i> and <i>khaman</i> can be sampled at Ganesh Khaman , in a Station Road basement. Pizza places serving cheesy pizzas are plentiful and cheap since Bharuch is so close to the dairy capital of India, Anand. SS Food Treat in Dreamland Plaza serves up some tasty options (<i>pizzas start from ₹70</i>). Milk being plentiful, there are numerous <i>falooda</i> and ice cream places; the Apsara Cold Drink House (opp. Relief Cinema) has an extensive menu of desserts. Some of the stalls opposite the railway station serve delicious <i>Kutchi dabeli</i> with its multiple fillings.
SHOPPING	Keep an eye out for shops dealing in peanuts that Bharuch is renowned for. Across the square from the Big Bazaar on Railway Station Road there’s an outlet for Jabsons , one of India’s top peanut brands (www.jabsons.com ; a 400 gm packet of Jabson’s delicious cheese & tomato pizza-flavoured peanuts costs ₹115). Sargam , its main competitor, is located right next-door.



The peak of Revanasiddeshwara betta is a popular hiking spot about 15 minutes from Ramanagara town.

Ramanagara Revelations

MIGHTY RUINS AND SILK SARIS: RAMANAGARA IS A LITTLE TOWN WITH SUPERLATIVE OFFERINGS | BY RASHMI GOPAL RAO

Driving between Bengaluru and Mysuru, travellers whiz past a sign pointing to Ramanagara barely even noticing it. It's a tiny town that few visit, but what looks like a forgotten place actually has a mix of eclectic sights. Called Shamserebad during the era of Tipu Sultan, and Closepet during the British Raj era after Sir Barry Close, Ramanagara is now known as Silk City. It is a major source of Mysore silk, and one

of the largest silk cocoon markets in all of Asia. Besides learning more about the silk industry there's a host of things a visitor can do in Ramanagara. On your way into town, grab a breakfast of *thatte* idlis at one of the tiny eateries along the highway. While in town, do sample the mouthwatering Mysore pak at Hotel Shri Janardhan, which has been doling out this sinfully rich ghee-laden sweet since 1926.

THE VITALS

Ramanagara is located on the Bengaluru-Mysuru highway, 50 km/1 hr southwest of Bengaluru in Karnataka.

five ways to explore

DATE WITH VULTURES

Reach Ramanagara early in the morning to spot long-billed vultures in their natural habitat. The Ramadevara Betta Vulture Sanctuary is home to about 20 of these critically endangered birds. It can take some time to spot them, since they camouflage perfectly in the hilly terrain. The sanctuary was created in 2012 to shelter the species when its population dropped drastically after feeding on carcasses of cattle injected with the drug diclofenac. Visitors can also see yellow-throated bulbuls, sloth bears, and a variety of eagles including the stunning Eurasian eagle (97410 07628; open 9 a.m. - 5 p.m.; entry adults ₹25; children ₹10; foreigners ₹100).

HISTORY WITH A VIEW

Ramadevara Betta Vulture Sanctuary is named after Ramadevara Betta or the "Hill of Lord Rama" on which it is located. If you continue climbing from the sanctuary, a flight of about 400 steps leads to the top of the hill. There, amid lush greenery and boulders, is an ancient Rama temple that is said to date back over a thousand years. According to legend, the temple was established by monkey god Sugreeva when Lord Rama helped him defeat the demon Sukasura. A natural perennial stream flows nearby, creating Sita Pond in a spot between some rocks. From this scenic spot enjoy stunning views of the surrounding landscape.

MIGHTY ROCKS

Trekkers and rock climbers come here for some of the world's oldest granite formations. Numerous trekking companies organize activities for both beginners and experienced climbers (ex-Bengaluru day trips from ₹1,500). There is no rock climbing during the monsoon, when rocks are slippery. This dramatic landscape has also been the setting in many a movie, including Bollywood evergreen *Sholay* and David Lean's *A Passage to India*.

SILK TRAIL

Ramanagara is synonymous with sericulture, and the government silk cocoon market located in the centre of town is always bustling with activity. A whopping 50 tonnes of cocoons exchange hands each day, and the government has set up elaborate monitoring systems to ensure sericulture farmers get competitive rates. The sight of hundreds of trays holding the white-pale yellow fluffy cocoons being examined by buyers scrutinizing their breed, grade, and quality is fascinating.

Away from the centre, a drive into some dusty bylanes and a bit of asking around leads to the small-scale manufacturing centres where cocoons are processed. Once the cocoons are boiled, you can watch deft hands extract long fibres and feed them onto spinning wheels. The silk produced here is largely used as an input for the state's world-renowned Mysore silk saris.

CULTURE TRIP

Wind up the day with a stop at Janapada Loka folk arts museum which provides an insight into Karnataka's rural culture. The



Early mornings are the best time to spot the shy long-billed vultures (top) of the Ramadevara Betta Vulture Sanctuary; Janapada Loka folk arts museum displays an array of regional handicrafts including puppets of popular characters from traditional Yakshagana theatre (middle); Most local sellers gather at the government-run silk cocoon market (bottom) every day to sell different grades of silk cocoons.

museum has over 5,000 artefacts related to cooking, farming, and animal husbandry: stoves, grinders, and animal traps. The puppets, masks, and dolls of traditional dance and art forms of Karnataka like Yakshagana showcase the state's rich cultural history. The best part: guides here are not only knowledgeable but eminent folk artists themselves (080-23605033; www.jaanapadaloka.org; open Wed-Mon 9 a.m. -5.30 p.m.; entry adults ₹20, children ₹10). ●

STATELY OUTPOST

A WILD ENCOUNTER LURKS AROUND EVERY BEND OF THIS LUXURIOUS STAY
IN SATPURA NATIONAL PARK | BY NEHA DARÀ



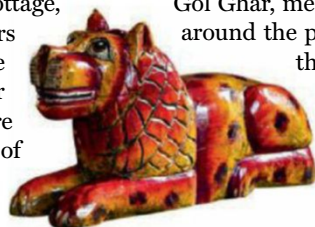
The 30-acre Reni Pani Jungle Lodge is peppered with spots where guests can relax and enjoy being surrounded by the forest.

As the jeep moves forward slowly on the dirt track, my husband and I keep our eyes peeled. Twice we've driven up and down this stretch leading to Reni Pani Jungle Lodge, trying to spot the pair of leopards that frequent it. The pugmarks tell us that one of them walked here just minutes ago, in the brief time it took us to take a U-turn and come back.

There's a thrill in this just-missed sighting. It leaves us with a sense of being surrounded by the jungle, where an interesting encounter is possible at any turn. This feeling stays with us even when we are at the lodge, where we're staying for two nights. A snaking path leads to our cottage, from where it is hard to see the 11 others that are spread out over this 30-acre property, hidden from one another by a veil of trees. After sundown, we're always accompanied by a member of the staff when we walk to dinner and back, since there's a chance of

encountering a snake or other animals from the surrounding woods.

Located in central Madhya Pradesh, near Satpura National Park, Reni Pani Jungle Lodge is like an old-world royal outpost. Gol Ghar, the common area where drinks and meals are served, is an inviting space that exudes comfort and warmth. Wooden beams line the sloping roofs of the star-shaped structure. Old and new photographs cover its walls and it's full of stone specimens from the forest and handicraft knickknacks from around India. Different corners of the space house the lodge's bar and library. Besides the Gol Ghar, meals are served in several other places around the property: Barbeques are organised in the open space right beside Gol Ghar, and candle-lit dinners take place beneath trees strung with lanterns and fairy lights. Individual dinners can sometimes even be set up right by the seasonal stream.



WILDLIFE

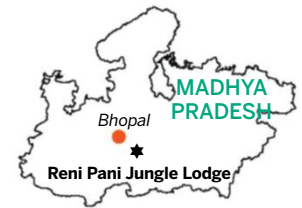


RELAXATION

My favourite time of day at the lodge is the early afternoon, when most people lie down for a nap having woken up early for a safari. Sprawled in the *charpai* on the cottage's porch I peer into the canopy of the trees growing around the stream, where I can hear the chatter and cheeps of birds. They hide from sight; their presence revealed only by the way a bough bends and moves when they settle upon it or take flight.

Owners Aly Rashid and his wife Shefali Alvares live at the lodge with their young daughter. Aly is a naturalist who enjoys taking guests out on safaris and showing off the forest he knows and loves. Shefali, a Bollywood playback singer, supervises menus, service, and decor. Together they lend a personal touch to the stay, and are always available to advise guests on how best to experience the national park.

There are many ways to explore Satpura. Unlike most other national parks in the country, here visitors are also allowed to walk through the jungle and engage more deeply with the forest. The lodge offers multi-day walking safaris with two- and three-day options under its Satpura Under Canvas programme. The hike begins from Pachmarhi, the area's well-known hill station, and provides plenty of opportunities to see animals. It is especially rewarding for birders. But if that seems like too much work, there's also the option of spending a single night camping in the forest under the stars. The lodge organises night jeep safaris in the buffer zone, with the chance of spotting nocturnal animals. Visitors can also opt for canoeing and motorboat trips in the reservoir that wraps around the national park, offering an unusual point of view of the forest and its residents. ●



THE VITALS

Getting There Reni Pani Jungle Lodge is located in the buffer zone of Satpura National Park. It is 132 km/3.5 hr southeast of Madhya Pradesh's capital Bhopal and 300 km/5.5 hr northwest of Nagpur.

Accommodation Set amongst 30 acres of trees and a seasonal spring, the 12 cottages exude old-world opulence. There are three kinds of cottages: six set by the property's seasonal stream, four enveloped by forest, and two atop a hill, with a view of the surroundings. Cottages have walk-in closets and indoor and outdoor showers. The wooden furniture and handloom furnishings give the rooms a cosy air. Between the cushioned window seats and the sit-outs, there are plenty of spots to linger with a book or a mug of chilled beer. Meals featuring Bhopali cuisine are exemplary. (99819 97714; www.renipanijunglelodge.com; doubles from ₹36,000, includes all meals, safari, and buffer zone activity).

Satpura is one of the few national parks in India where besides taking jeep safaris (top), visitors can also walk and canoe; Gol Ghar (bottom left) contains the lodge's main dining room, bar, and cosy nooks for chats over drinks; Meals are also served al fresco, under the trees or around a bonfire (bottom right).



NEHA DARA (JEEPY), PHOTO COURTESY: RENI PANI JUNGLE LODGE (ROOM & BONFIRE)

TRAVEL QUIZ

TEST YOUR TRAVEL IQ

1



IN WHICH INDIAN STATE DID RUDYARD KIPLING SET HIS ICONIC WORK *THE JUNGLE BOOK*?

2



IN WHICH COUNTRY WOULD YOU BE EATING *LUMPIA*, *ADOBO*, AND *KARE KARE*?

3



WHICH ISLAND IN NORTHEASTERN INDIA IS FAMOUS FOR ITS MASK MAKERS?

4



WHEN IS THE SAGRADA FAMÍLIA, ANTONI GAUDI'S UNFINISHED MASTERPIECE, SCHEDULED TO BE COMPLETED?

5



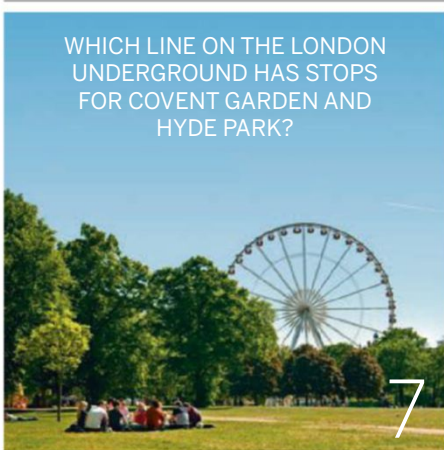
WHERE IN ITALY WILL YOU FIND A CATACOMB WITH ABOUT 2,000 SKELETONS AND MUMMIFIED BODIES?

6



WHERE IS DENALI, NORTH AMERICA'S TALLEST MOUNTAIN?

7



WHICH LINE ON THE LONDON UNDERGROUND HAS STOPS FOR COVENT GARDEN AND HYDE PARK?

8



NAME THE WORLD'S LARGEST LANDLOCKED COUNTRY.

9



WHICH ISLAND IS KNOWN AS THE AUSTRALIAN GALAPAGOS?

ANSWERS 1. MADHYA PRADESH 2. PHILIPPINES 3. MAJULI, ASSAM 4. ON HIS 100TH DEATH ANNIVERSARY IN 2026 5. THE CAPUCHIN MONASTERY IN PALERMO 6. ALASKA 7. PICCADILLY LINE 8. KAZAKHSTAN 9. KANGAROO ISLAND

WALT DISNEY PICTURES/PHOTO12/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (POSTER); MACBRIANNU/ISTOCK (FOOD); DANIEL J. RAO/SHUTTERSTOCK (MASK); DANILOV/ISTOCK (CHURCH); MASSIMO PIZZOTTI/AGE FOTOSTOCK/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (SKELETONS); ROBSONABBOTT/ISTOCK (MOUNTAIN); FERRANTRAITE/ISTOCK (PARK); HUSEVINTUNGER/ISTOCK (CITY); DEWEONE/SHUTTERSTOCK/INDIAPICTURE (BIRDS)