

NOBODY KNOWS THIS WORLD BETTER

FEBRUARY 2017 • ₹150 • VOL. 5 ISSUE 8 • NATGEOTRAVELLER.IN

**BIG
CITIES
BRIGHT
LIGHTS**

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER INDIA

*City
Love*

NEW YORK
AFTER DARK

NEPAL
TO MUKTINATH'S
ETERNAL FLAME

URBAN ADVENTURES FROM BENGALURU TO BARCELONA

FEBRUARY 2017

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Photographer

William West took this image of people on a chair swing ride, with the Melbourne skyline in the background, during the city's annual Moomba Festival. The 60-odd-year-old community festival, often described as a celebration of Melbourne, brings almost a million people to the banks of the Yarra River to eat and drink, walk in multiple parades, and generally revel in the spirit of the city.

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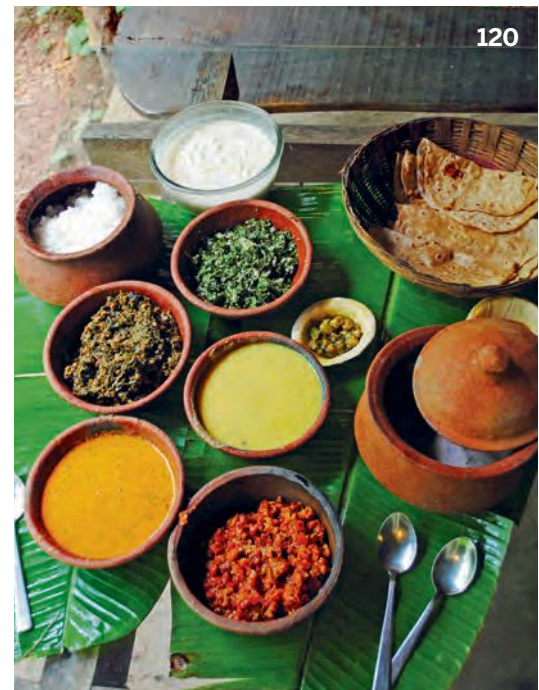
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THE OUTDOORS CITY



It amazes me that Cape Town's urban sprawl has not devoured its natural environment



For 15 years I'd been talking about making a trip to South Africa. To see wildlife of course, but the bigger motivation was to meet an old friend in Cape Town. So when we finally went last month, I had no expectations from the trip. I had no checklist for what I wanted of the city. My family and I just wanted to go with the flow.

On our first morning in Cape Town, as we drove around the city, I was captivated by its stunning location. The magnificent blue ocean in the curve of the bay on one side, Table Mountain sprawled in the city's backdrop, beaches dotting the coast: It was love at first sight.

I know we're supposed to be drawn to a city for its people, its architecture, restaurants, nightclubs, and food culture, or because it's bustling with activity and life. And surely Cape Town has all of these. But the reason I fell in love with the city was a combination of its dramatic location and its quick and easy access to the outdoors. Seeing how nature was woven into the city, made me think of the tremendous potential and missed opportunities of my own city, Mumbai, with its long but unused coastline.

On day one, within ten minutes of leaving downtown Cape Town, we were parked at the base of Lion's Head peak and had begun our hike up the mountain. On New Year's Eve, as the city's fireworks display ended, we turned our attention to this same peak and watched a long line of torch lights and headlamps making their way up. This is clearly a city that loves hiking and the great outdoors, and this particular peak is also a popular spot on full-moon nights.

Cape Town is blessed with great geography. It is a city in the shadow of the magnificent granite and sandstone massif of Table Mountain, which towers above it. One moment Table Mountain can be completely clear and then next it's covered in a thick blanket of clouds that locals like to call the tablecloth.

The day after Christmas we rode the cable car to the top of Table Mountain, and traversed the flat top to reach MacLear's Beacon, its highest point. The vistas from on top were breathtaking, and we kept stopping to take in the panoramic views. Along the way we said

hello to dassies, rabbit-like creatures that are native to these parts. Interestingly, these tiny mammals are most closely related to elephants.

From the top, our hiking route took us on a strenuous five-hour descent through native flora and Afromontane forest via a ravine called Skeleton Gorge. There were points that were so steep we had to descend down fixed ladders. The hike ended in the Kirstenbosch Botanical Garden, another spectacular Cape Town green space that's now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. My muscles were aching for three days after that walk, but I consider it one of the highlights of my trip.

Another day, and another mere ten minutes from downtown Cape Town, we were hiking in Newlands Forest. Splashing in a stream, walking among tall pines and dark mahogany trees, savouring the scent of the forest and the crisp, fresh air.

I loved every minute of it. To be able to enjoy the outdoors with friends is, for me, one of the greatest joys of travel. In fact when friends travel and visit us in Mumbai, we often take them on a day hike into the Sahyadris nearby, to share the beauty and biodiversity in our backyard. And when the journey's over, I find, this is what they remember most fondly.

In Cape Town, as the temperature soared, crowds made a beeline for the beaches. I personally found the water of the Atlantic too cold to swim in, but what a gorgeous sight it is! And the fantastic part is how every bit of the outdoors is used and looked after in this city. Its many beaches and trails are supremely clean, even when packed with locals and visitors in peak season. It amazes me that Cape Town's urban sprawl has not devoured its natural environment. Its mountains, trees, and forest are preserved for its citizens to enjoy. No matter where we went, we saw locals of all ages walking, hiking, swimming. Clearly the outdoors is an integral part of their everyday lives.

Some may think it not quite logical that the reasons I love Cape Town most are precisely its non-urban aspects. There are many other reasons I love the place, but for me the principal magic is that it has embraced its stunning location and maintained the great outdoors squarely within its metropolitan space.

I know so many people who live in big cities who want to escape the concrete jungle and move to the hills or to a rural setting. Travelling to a city like Cape Town opened my eyes to the possibility that cities which offer the perfect blend of the hip and urbane, the natural and wild, can and do exist. ●

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.

BEST OF WEB

Long Weekends Calendar

This year holds tremendous travel potential—if you can manage a little planning.

To help you get started, we created a travel calendar with three-day weekends and potential four-day breaks neatly marked out. Plus, NatGeo-approved trips for each long break. *See Getaways>Inspire Me!*



LEARNING HOLIDAYS

The next time you travel, make a miniature painting in Jaipur or stir up cheese in Tamil Nadu. Go on, make your holiday memories last longer. *See Getaways>Inspire me*

TURTLE POWER

Every February and March, thousands of olive ridley turtles arrive on Odisha's shores to lay eggs. It's an event few ever witness, and fewer manage to photograph. *See Photos and More>Photo Stories*

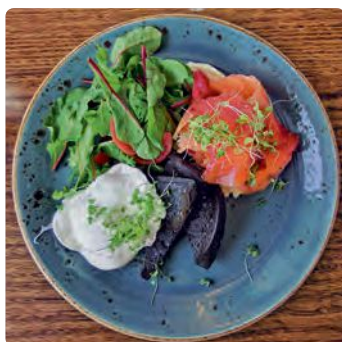
BENGAL CALLING

Thick mangroves, centuries-old terracotta temples, tranquil hill stations, pristine national parks—we've got 11 reasons why your next holiday should be in West Bengal. *See Getaways>Inspire me*

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INSTAGRAM OF THE MONTH

Morning Glory



On her recent trip to Australia, writer and editor **Sonal Shah** took this photograph of what to her is one of the world's most delicious breakfasts: Gin and Beetroot Cured Ocean Trout at the Pavilion Cafe & Bar. Located in Warrnambool in the state of Victoria, the café is run by an ex-Melburnian who quit city life to be able to surf before dropping the kids off to school. "Can't fault his logic," concurs Shah, "especially when presented with a generous heap of beet-and-gin-cured ocean trout atop horseradish crème fraîche, poached eggs, lemony mixed greens with pickled radish slices, and smoky "charcoal" brioche. All on a plate as blue as the ocean view from the windows."

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Travel Trends in 2017

At the January NGT Meetup, in Mumbai, slow traveller and blogger **Shivya Nath**, entrepreneur and food lover **Mark Hannant**, and **Hormazd Mehta**, who plans off-the-grid escapes, spoke to NGT India's Deputy Editor **Neha Dara** about travel trends in 2017.

- Cultivate the mindset for slow travel, and don't just cross places off a checklist. When in France for instance, pick a rural village over the Eiffel Tower.
- Travel responsibly, and rethink the amenities you expect in a new place. Websites such as *responsibletavel.com* are helpful resources.
- Pick places which offer unique experiences, like Guatemala for its rich Mayan culture or Georgia for a less-explored slice of Europe.
- Try a food-themed holiday this year. Sharing meals is a great way to dissolve language barriers and get under the skin of a new place.
- Volunteer to make deeper connections. You can help build basic homes in rural areas, or help organisations conduct an animal census.

NEXT MEETUP:

10 February 2017, 7.30-9 p.m.

Venue: Title Waves bookstore, Bandra (West), Mumbai.

NGTINDIA@WORK

Miniature City

There are several ways to see Amsterdam. One could get into a boat or amble along its canals, peeling one historic layer at a time. Or glide along this arty city on a bike, past museums, gabled houses, and galleries.

There is one more way, and for that I headed to the Amsterdam-Noord area, to the top of the 22-storey A'DAM tower. The building is known for its revolving restaurant, a hotel, and an observation point where people gather for panoramic views of the city. On the tower's sky deck is a massive elevated swing spilling over the edge. I joined the queue beside it, eager to see Amsterdam spread out 330 feet below me.

Seconds after I got in and fastened my seat belt, the swing creaked into motion and rose higher, faster. My legs dangled over boats bobbing on the River IJ and canals squiggling through the city like arteries. "AMSTERDAM" written in giant letters across the curved glass roof of Central Station's bus terminal dominated my view. Whooping and shrieking, I took in pointy cathedral spires and cars that looked like toys moving in slow motion. I felt like I was bending over a vast model of Amsterdam sculpted from papier mâché.

—Associate Editor, Kareena Gianani



PICTURE POSTCARD

Holy Hues



Varanasi has always fascinated me, for its billowing ghats, zealous tourists, and the vermilion of sadhus who crowd its streets. Something about the city seems unreal to me, and though I am fascinated by the idea of Varanasi, I have never wanted to visit myself—until, I received this delicately illustrated postcard from an artist friend who spent some time there. His watercolour sketches captured a side of the holy

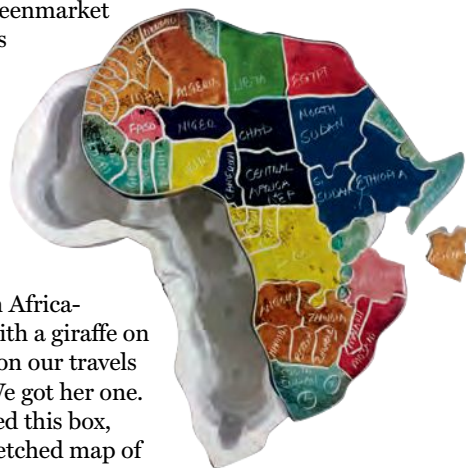
city I had never considered: one that was serene and deeply spiritual *despite* the religious ruckus. It got me thinking about my preconceived notions of place—and how thankful I am for friends that break them.

—Web Editor, Neha Sumitran

THE FIND

Outside the Box

Stalls at Cape Town's Greenmarket Square sell stunning arts and crafts from all over Africa. My husband and I spent many long hours browsing at this market, chatting with vendors, debating what we wanted to take back as souvenirs. Our daughter had wanted an Africa-shaped soapstone box with a giraffe on it, an animal she'd seen on our travels through South Africa. We got her one. But the moment I spotted this box, with its colourful hand-etched map of Africa, I knew I had to have one as well.



Kenya is a removable piece which forms the lock for the box and has to be lifted before the lid can slide open. Interestingly, that's the country where these boxes are made. The stone comes from near Kiisi in southwestern Kenya, which artisans then hand carve and paint with bright African motifs. We bought this from a young man who had recently arrived in Cape Town from the Democratic Republic of Congo. It made me look at this box differently, not just as a souvenir of my trip: a Kenyan craft, bought in South Africa from a migrant Congolese, now sitting at my desk in India.

—Editor-in-Chief, Niloufer Venkatraman

RUCHI J. SINGH (SWING), JEREMIAH RAO (BOX)

Food and Flashback

A LECTURE TOUR TO A SMALL TOWN IN GUJARAT SPRINGS A FEW SURPRISES



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.

Jamnagar has always been special to me. This Gujarati town on the Gulf of Kutch was where my great-grandfather was appointed physician to Digvijaysinhji Ranjitsinhji, the Jam Saheb or ruler of the erstwhile princely state. It is in Jamnagar where almost 50 years later as a child I learnt to ride a bicycle, which is now an integral part of my life and existence. And last but not least, it is home to one of my favourite radiology departments in the country, which invites me as a guest lecturer every few years.

The town itself is an interesting mix of an old town that maintains the graceful pace of the past, and an urban centre bursting into modernity. The buildings, stores, and shops, like the people who inhabit them, seem to be in a past-present conundrum and swanky multi-city chains coexist with old neighbourhood stores that look like they have been run by the same family for eons. However, on one point I noticed there is no compromise: This town remains purely traditional in its legendary Kathiawadi hospitality.

As I walked through the streets of Jamnagar, I passed the Jam Saheb's estate, and imagined my great-grandfather treating its residents. The now defunct Solarium, where diseases were treated with sunray therapy, one of only two in the world at the time, took me back to memories of my grandfather. I recalled finding letterheads bearing its pictures in his non-functional office as a six-year-old, and using them to make paper rockets. Strolling past the Ayurvedic College reminded me of his contribution to medicine and the time I found his translated works in the Medical

Historical Library at Yale University. Jamnagar reconnected me to a man I knew very briefly, but I felt happy to grow up in the shadow of this incredible medical figure from my family.

Jamnagar is one of the birdwatching hotspots of India and my friend Dr. Dipak Parmar took me on a fascinating walk along the outskirts of town. We saw more than 40 varieties of birds along the highway, closer than I could ever have imagined. Walking through the salt flats I feasted my eyes on thousands of flamingoes, pelicans, and an array of other migratory birds, and found myself lost in thought about their travelling lives. Suddenly my internal clock chimed and I asked my host if I'd taken too much of his time, surely he must need to get back to work. He reminded me that life in Jamnagar is not as fast-paced as it is in Mumbai.

As our walk came to an end we stopped at a local dhaba, serving freshly fried *ganthiya* with shredded papaya, and masala tea. I thought of my great grandfather again; he so loved ganthiya and I recalled sharing some from his plate every morning while he was alive. In the market, Dr. Parmar led me to Trimbak, an old sweet shop specializing in *mehsoob*, an airy, melt-in-your-mouth calorie-laden mithai. I absolutely love mehsoob, but I only remembered it from when my grandmother made it for me more than 25 years ago. As I bit into it, memories of her came flooding back. I WhatsApped a picture of the sweet to my 80-year-old aunt to share the moment I knew she would truly appreciate. She in turn sent back a message telling me I should try the famous *kala jamuns* at Valabh sweet shop. This set me out on another mission deeper into the market to enjoy the goodies it had to offer, and spiralled me back in time to family stories I'd long forgotten.

The walk would not have been complete without a local "soda" and while hunting for one I saw a stash of "Sosyo," a yesteryear drink I simply had to have again. With my status as a foodie established with my hosts, the rest of the trip was spent sampling the best Jamnagar street food and experiencing the town from the point of view of a local. From egg curry outside the college to *anjeer* milk, *thabdi* pedas, bun *maska* (crusty bread with beaten white butter), *bhaji* cones—the list of must-haves kept growing. Just before my last talk, some of the students even snuck me away for a "chaas soda" (buttermilk with ice and soda).

Throughout my time in Jamnagar, as I relived old memories, I shared them on Instagram with my ten-year-old daughter, who hungrily lapped it all up. Boarding the flight home I realized that in just over 48 hours, Jamnagar had allowed me to connect five generations of my family. I'd made new memories of my own, and shared them with my daughter for the future. Sometimes travelling solo is about connecting families across generations. ●



Singing in the Rain

THE BEST-LAID PLANS OF MICE AND MEN OFTEN GO AWRY



NITIN CHAUDHARY
is a freelance travel writer based in Sweden. He is an adrenaline seeker who loves mountains and oceans, and wants to travel the world in a boat.

Sir, your flight is tomorrow, not today.” Panic gripped my heart when I heard those words. My wife Priya and I were on our way back from a week-long vacation in Europe, checking in at Milan airport for our flight home to Copenhagen. We stepped aside and looked at the bookings. The attendant was right, we’d made a mistake.

Sweet memories of the trip vaporised in a whiff and we slumped on a bench, soaked in dispirited silence. A pause later, I began laughing at the situation, the absurdity of a well-crafted plan going down the drain. Priya looked at me incredulously, then joined in.

Reenergized, we called up our offices and explained the situation. Then we wondered how to best savour the accidental reward of an extra vacation day. We found a cheap rental car, and less than an hour later were on the road, reading signs and wondering where to go. Cinque Terre or Venice were both only a few hours’ drive away. “Venice!” Priya declared with delight when I asked which turn we should take.

Later that day, leaning on the cushions of a gondola, and listening to the oars kissing the water, we marvelled at the unexpected adventure. That morning neither of us could have imagined that a few hours later we would be in this beautiful Italian city. As the gondola wandered through the canals, we neatly folded the beautiful, serene evening in Venice and tucked it away in our memories. Those moments counted among our most precious from the holiday.

Later, I began to think about why that impromptu one-day escapade brought as much joy as a luxurious week-long vacation. It made me think about why I travel. Travel stills time, forcing me to live in the moment. When I was at university, I travelled on a whim to escape the punctilious regimen of studying. I revelled in the unfamiliarity that followed upon boarding a bus to a new destination, with just enough money to get by. Over the years, that changed. I had the resources to travel comfortably. And once I moved to the Nordics, a military precision surreptitiously took over my travel planning. I began to book everything in advance, carefully constructing the

vacation in my head before experiencing it in real life.

With this cultivated meticulousness, I once arranged a trip to Prague on my birthday. Destiny conspired, and my wife and I were late in reaching Prague, missing out on the dinner we had reserved. Moreover, it was raining and cold. I was frustrated and stayed holed up in my hotel room, waiting for the rain to subside. It didn’t. As I sat looking out of the window, the calmness returned. I decided to walk to Prague’s Old Town alone. At that hour, there were only a few people out on the streets. I paced cobblestone streets bathed in artificial light. The amalgam of rain and light made the Old Town seem like a watercolour painting. The more I explored, the more I was convinced that Prague looks its best softly lit in the rain. At midnight I returned to my room wet and cold. But I was thrilled to have walked through what to me at that moment was the most beautiful city in the world.

Since Prague, I’ve changed the way I travel, leaving room for unexpected adventures. I still plan, for it is a necessary evil and mistakes can be costly in a foreign land. But now I allow for serendipity to sneak in. I stay at B&Bs where opportunities to interact with locals are greater. I leave at least one day fully unplanned, and remind myself of the years when I travelled with no agenda and little money, and returned with a bagful of unforgettable experiences. And when things don’t go as expected, I take a deep breath and force myself to slow down. My favourite way to do that is by seeking out a cup of tea; by the time I finish it I’ve had time to recalibrate my situation.

Once, my wife and I lost our way while driving in the dark to our B&B in a small Swiss village. We stopped to soothe our anxiety. As we waited in silence, a herd of red deer surrounded us. At that moment, in the isolated mountains with no other person in sight, the herd ignored our presence allowing us a glimpse of Alpine wildlife in its natural habitat. When we recounted the experience to our B&B hosts later, they were shocked. In 12 years of living there, they’d never seen these deer.

Unique experiences can be sought but not planned. And sometimes it’s the unexpected that makes a journey memorable. ●



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Across a sea of sand to the Mount Bromo volcano in Indonesia

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Five trips across India that make history come alive for children

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TASTE OF TRAVEL

Feasting like a local in France's food capital Lyon



In winter, Gujarat's Marine National Park and Sanctuary is a haven for migratory birds. Painted stork marching amid shallow pools looking for food are a common sight.

Walking on Water

EXPLORING THE MARINE DIVERSITY OF THE GULF OF KUTCH AT NARARA REEF

BY AMBIKA VISHWANATH | PHOTOGRAPHS BY HOSHNER REPORTER

The Gulf of Kutch in Gujarat is an ecological paradise endowed with marine biodiversity that is still being discovered. But few know that this diversity is accessible to the public via the Marine Sanctuary and Marine National Park, both set up in the early 1980s. On a trip from the town of Bhuj to Gondal, my husband and I would have bypassed them entirely, had it not been for the fact that I'd read that the seawater recedes several kilometres during low tide. This allows visitors to experience the drama of marine life without actually diving underwater. This unique proposition convinced me to take the 150-kilometre detour off the

main highway from somewhere near Morbi. We found ourselves driving along an industrial belt, past several factories, including an Indian Oil refinery. It seemed an odd approach to a marine park, supposedly teeming with coral and sea life, including puffer fish, octopuses, stingrays, and more. Suddenly the smooth asphalt gave way to a broken dirt road, and hoardings of animals and aquatic life appeared, as did signs for the park.

The park and sanctuary are spread along the coastline and a series of islands, the most popular being Pirotan, easily accessed by boat. The park alone is spread over 163 square kilometres with

extensive mangroves and a complex coral reef ecosystem with 49 species of hard corals, 23 species of soft corals, 70 species of sponges, 421 species of fish, 172 species of birds, and a whole lot of colourful algae. We were headed to the Narara Reef, which is where you can walk on the seabed and see much of this flora and fauna.

The road abruptly ended at a parking lot and an old building. It was a little past 2 p.m. and we'd just about made it in time for low tide. In the building we were greeted by a forest official who assigned us a guide and gave us the necessary permits. Our guide was Vipul, a chatty sort, who proceeded to narrate

a long list of do's and don'ts. He then showed us a row of rather well-worn sneakers, canvas shoes, and chappals. "You will be walking on the seabed," he explained, "your shoes will tear." I exchanged my shoes for a pair of white canvas ones, with only a few holes in them, and we were off into the mangroves.

After walking a few hundred metres, we emerged from the mangroves and saw the sea in the distance: a thin blue line that merged with the sky above. We followed Vipul eagerly splashing unsteadily in pools of water. After our initial excitement ebbed, we began to take in the vast vista of shallow water, punctuated by coral mounds and algae, with storks, herons, and other birds here and there. Walking through this could have been a bit underwhelming, which is why having a guide was imperative; hidden in the pools, swimming amongst the algae, were the treasures of the sea.

Vipul, who grew up swimming in these waters, opened up the underwater world to us. He uncovered the right rocks to reveal colourful coral and sponges, with tiny starfish, sea anemone, and sea cucumbers hidden beneath. He introduced us to hairy looking wolf crabs, an octopus-like sea creature with tentacles from the starfish family, and the fascinating puffer fish, which balloons up when threatened. And those who walk far enough and are lucky may even spot a stingray or octopus.

Vipul was incredibly knowledgeable and gentle with the marine life. We were allowed to photograph and touch what he touched, but not permitted to pick up anything else, or otherwise disturb the marine life.

We saw only one other guided group while we were there. Perhaps the lack of tourists is a good thing, with all the oil refineries and factories around already affecting the fragile balance of the region's ecosystem.

Two hours later we walked back, with squishy feet and many photographs. It was a surreal experience to share space with marine life in its natural habitat, without actually having to go underwater. For those afraid of water and/or unable to travel to the Andamans or elsewhere to dive, this is an excellent alternative. ●



Good guides bring alive the magic of the sea. They can help identify sponges and tiny starfish (bottom) hidden among colourful coral, or explain to travellers why they should not disturb puffer fish, which rapidly inflates itself when it feels threatened (top).

THE VITALS

Narara Reef is 55 km/1.5 hr west of Jamnagar in Gujarat. The park is open mid-Oct to mid-Jun. In Dec-Jan, the weather is pleasant and there are many migratory birds. Before visiting confirm the day's low tide timings (Forest Department, Jamnagar; 0288-2679357). Permits and guides are available at the Forest Office in Narara (permits ₹40-50 per person; guide fee approximately ₹250-300, depending on size of group).



The extinct volcano of Mount Batok in the foreground, Mount Bromo in the middle, and gigantic Mount Semeru at the back are all bathed in a reddish-orange glow as the sun rises over the Tengger volcanic complex.

Volcanic Pursuits

ACROSS A SEA OF SAND TO THE MOUTH OF A FUMING VOLCANO IN INDONESIA

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY SUGATO MUKHERJEE

From across a swathe of a volcanic desert in East Java, I watch the formidable Mount Semeru (12,060 feet). It is one of the Indonesian archipelago's most active volcanoes. For the third time in 30 minutes, it belches out a thick volley of steam, which fades into the evening sky. Next to Semeru, Mount Bromo (7,641 feet) looks like the sidekick, sitting idly in the middle of a sandy plain of Laut Pasir, a Javanese term that means "sea of sand." Mount Bromo's oddly shaped summit—with its inverse cone—belies its violent nature. Inside its crater, the earth continuously spews off sulphurous smoke.

Tomorrow morning, I will go there.

Meanwhile, I contemplate the view from the lobby of my guesthouse in the village of Cemoro Lawang, perched on the fringe of this undulating stretch of fine volcanic sand. Sewak, my guide to this part of East Java, tells me that his

ancestors came through this unearthly territory, also called the Tengger Sand Sea, 500 years ago.

Sewak's sunburnt moustachioed face becomes animated as he recounts the story of Princess Roro Anteng, who fled here from the green plains of Central Java with her husband Joko Seger, to escape a band of marauding invaders. They crossed Laut Pasir on horses and mules, with their followers. They called their new barren kingdom Tengger, combining their respective surnames, and their descendants are known as the Tenggerese.

I wake up at 3.30 the next morning, and gulp some strong Javanese coffee to prepare myself for a hike to Bromo Tengger Semeru National Park. After a short twisting ride in a 1970s-era Toyota Land Cruiser, I reach the base of a dirt path that seems to lead to the twinkling stars overhead. The hike to the peak of Mount Penanjakan (9,088 feet), which

offers the best panorama of the park, is an uphill trudge over a thick carpet of volcanic ash. For a while I hear only the collective heaves and sighs, and the soft thud of hiking boots on the steep trail, lit by the headlamps of sunrise trekkers like me. As the trail eases after about 40 minutes, the eastern sky turns a pale violet. I reach a flat top in another 20 minutes and find a vantage point overlooking the valley. The twin mounds of Bromo and Semeru had looked foreboding and desolate yesterday evening; now, the soft morning light has metamorphosed them into ethereal hills floating in an ocean of clouds.

Returning to the base of Penanjakan I replenish myself with a hearty breakfast of mee goreng or fried noodles with eggs and fresh vegetables generously topped with peanuts. Next is a two-hour walk over Laut Pasir to Bromo's summit. I could ride across in the Land Cruiser, but I choose to walk through



Smoke constantly spirals out of the crater of Mount Bromo (top), which last erupted on July 11 2016 spewing up a 3,940-foot-tall column of ash. Laut Pasir or the Sea of Sand (bottom) was formed nearly 8,000 years ago as a result of a massive eruption of Mount Bromo. It has been a protected nature reserve since 1919.

the arid moon-like landscape. This eerie, swirling dustbowl, dotted with trotting horses, is edged by barren, deep-fissured mountains—it is hard to imagine that beyond this ten-square-kilometre stretch of Laut Pasir lies the greenest of tropical valleys.

Sewak points out Pura Luhur Poten, a small complex of Tenggerese Hindu temples, at the foot of Bromo. Every August, the Kasada festival starts there.

“There is a colourful procession, in which all 30 Tenggerese villages take part,” Sewak tells me. “It ends up there,” he says pointing to grey-white fumes shooting out of the collapsed head of Bromo.

We arrive at the base of the mountain, where a flight of 245 stairs goes straight up to the rim of the crater. A lone horseman disembarks near us; Sewak speaks reverentially to the diminutive old man, a Tenggerese high priest. As we go

up the stairs, he tells me the legend of the volcano.

The story begins with Princess Roro Anteng and her husband Joko Seger. They were childless and prayed on Mount Bromo for days until the crater opened and the mountain god, Hyang Widi Wasa, granted them their wish, with the condition that their last child be sacrificed to him. Roro and Joko went on to have 25 children, but refused to sacrifice the last, Prince Kesuma. A dreadful eruption of Mount Bromo followed, which swallowed Kesuma into the earth.

From the volcano’s rim, the rugged expanse of Bromo Tengger Semeru National Park looks like something out of a period drama, with horses and men moving slowly through its sandy-brown textured surfaces. The striated slopes of the cavernous interiors of the crater converge into a dark cauldron, from which sulphurous smoke puffs skyward, releasing a thick, pungent smell. “During Kasada, we throw fruits, vegetables and livestock into the crater below to appease the god of the mountain,” the old priest says. “If the god is not satisfied with our offerings, he erupts.” ●

THE VITALS

Orientation Cemoro Lawang village is 3.5 hr south of Surabaya, the nearest major airport, with flights to Indonesian cities like Jakarta, Yogyakarta, and Denpasar. **Getting There** From Surabaya, a 3-hr bus ride (tickets IDR40,000-50,000/₹202-254 one way) takes travellers to Probolinggo, the gateway to Bromo Tengger Semeru National Park. From there, a 90-min ride in a 10-seater minibus (IDR20,000-30,000/₹101-152 one way) through lush green farmlands leads to Cemoro Lawang. **Stay** Cemoro Lawang has several homestays and guesthouses. Bromo Permai is a mid-range option (doubles from approx. IDR6,00,000/₹3,000, including breakfast) with stunning views of Laut Pasir. **Need to Know** It can be near freezing on top of Mount Penanjakan in the pre-dawn hours, so bundle up. A mask is handy protection from the sulphur fumes of Bromo, and the ash and dust of Laut Pasir. **Tour** Travel agencies in Surabaya make all arrangements for the hike, including transfers, accommodation, and guide. Java Discovery is a reliable option (www.javadiscovery.com).

Party on Wheels

IN THE PHILIPPINES, THE JEEPNEY IS BOTH MEANS OF TRANSPORTATION AND CULTURAL ICON BY KALPANA SUNDER

I am in a mobile disco, rocking and rolling through the streets of downtown Manila. Loud music booms from the vehicle's speakers, people hang out from its sides, and some sit on the roof. This low-slung, gaily decorated ride is a jeepney, the most popular vehicle in the Philippines. A gas guzzling, gleaming monster with up to 18 passengers packed in its belly, the jeepney is as much a cultural icon as Thailand's tuk-tuks or the Big Apple's yellow taxi. Even Pope John Paul II rode in one on his visit to Manila in 1981. With a ride costing around 8 pesos (₹11) they remain the cheapest way to get around the capital city.

Jeepneys rose from the ashes of World War II, when the US armed forces departed from the Philippines in the 1950s, leaving behind droves of old jeeps. Filipinos put in metal roofs for shade, added benches, turned

the camouflage into happy colours, and jazzed them up with fairy lights, religious imagery, and ornaments. And lo! The jeepney was born.

When the American military jeeps became run-down, "Made in the Philippines" jeepneys emerged. Their main engine parts were imported from Japan, and the chassis and body were made from scratch in the country. As our local guide Lorna told us, "The vivid colours are Spanish, the jeep itself is American, and there is a little bit of Japan in the engine." Most of the vehicles were made by the iconic company Sarao, founded in 1953 by Leonarda Sarao, a former horse-drawn carriage driver.

The jeepney slowly evolved into an artist's canvas. Most jeepneys are emblazoned with Western motifs: familiar cartoon characters, superheroes, or F1 logos. Stickers or

painted decorations can range from horoscope designs to scantily clad women, and even family portraits. Common quotations found include "In God we trust," "Walk with Jesus," or "Jesus Christ Superstar." Flowers often hang from the rear-view mirror, while a miniature altar occupies a place of importance on the dashboard. Glitzy accessories can range from racks and rails to mirrors and antennae, decorative mud flaps, fenders, and chromed horns.

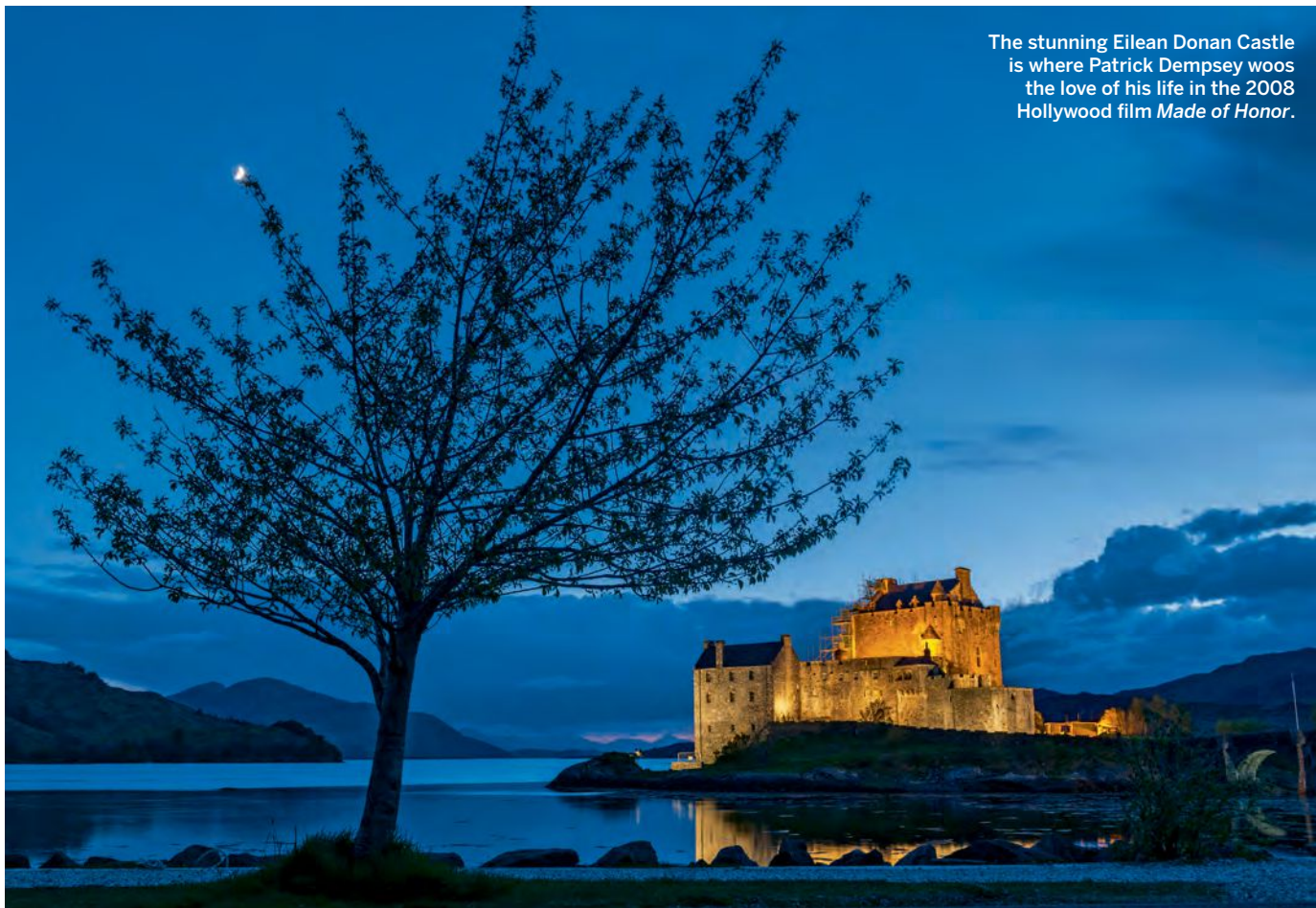
As the Philippines tries to fight air pollution, E-jeepneys are slowly entering the market. But even as they continue to evolve, they remain, as Lorna said, "linked with Filipino society, history and culture, and are a lens into its psyche." Boisterous and chaotic, yet practical, the jeepney may be deeply influenced by America, but it is always authentically Filipino. ●



Riding a brightly decorated jeepney is the quintessential Filipino experience. Inside, visitors can witness the boisterous camaraderie of passengers accompanied by loud music.

Castle on High

A PICTURESQUE PIECE OF HISTORY ADORNS THE SCOTTISH COUNTRYSIDE BY CHAITALI PATEL



The stunning Eilean Donan Castle is where Patrick Dempsey wooed the love of his life in the 2008 Hollywood film *Made of Honor*.

Driving from Inverness to the Isle of Skye, the Scottish scenery was everything the guidebooks had promised, surreal and otherworldly. About 15 kilometres short of Skye Bridge, we crossed Eilean Donan, a smallish castle that the same guidebooks described as one of Scotland's most photographed. Since they'd been right about the first part, I decided to return to explore it.

First built in the 13th century, then destroyed and rebuilt several times over, the castle looked unassuming from a distance. It was only when I got closer that I felt the full impact of its dramatic setting on a small islet surrounded by three lochs, with the jaw-dropping Scottish highlands in the background. On the day I visited, the castle was

wrapped in the soft haze of rain, but it was easy to picture it looking fairy-tale like when the sun shone, and ominous when the clouds hung low. Visit the castle at different times and, chances are, it will look completely different.

The current version of the castle was restored over 20 years after Lieutenant Colonel John MacRae-Gilstrap bought it in 1911. Before that, it had lain in ruins for nearly 200 years, after being partially destroyed during a 1719 Jacobite uprising. Since then, Eilean Donan has become something of a Scottish icon, featuring in films like *Highlander* and *The World is Not Enough*.

Though the weather was cold and dreary, the castle's interiors were warm and welcoming. A majestic wrought-iron chandelier lit up the banquet hall where

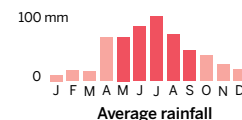
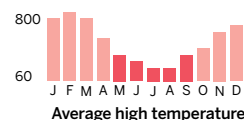
family heirlooms, Jacobite memorabilia, and paintings of members of the MacRae clan shone in all their glory. Magnificent timber beams carved from Douglas fir shipped from Canada held up the ceiling. Narrow passageways barely wide enough to let one person through took visitors to the first floor where corridors were lined with photographs of John MacRae-Gilstrap's descendants.

But it was the castle kitchen that sprang to life with its beautiful recreation of piles of produce, pots on the stove, and cooks engaged in banter—all reminiscent of a time when the citadel was an actual home. (www.eileandonancastle.com; Feb 1-Mar 24 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Mar 24-Oct 29 10 a.m.-6 p.m., Oct 31-Dec 30 10 a.m.-4 p.m.; adults £7.50/₹630, children over 5 £4.00/₹335, children under 5 free). ●

Cape Town Chill

RIDING THE WINTER WAVE MINUS THE CROWDS BY ERIC ROSEN

The Southern Hemisphere winter (May to September) is the perfect time to explore Cape Town, South Africa. Temperatures are mostly moderate, and visitors can take on the city without having to brave crowds of tourists or shell out for the peak pricing markup.



Cape Town's Camps Bay is prime for biking in cooler seasons.

DINING

Cape Cuisine

Winter in Cape Town serves up a smorgasbord of more affordable tasting menus and available tables at some of the city's top restaurants. Chef-owner Harald Bresselschmidt creates menus featuring seasonal ingredients at Aubergine in the historic Gardens district. "South African black truffles lend themselves to veal and springbok dishes, perfect for winter," he says (aubergine.co.za).

At French hot spot La Mouette, chef Henry Vigar prepares a special winter six-course tasting menu that includes mushrooms with salt-and-pepper chestnuts and house-barbecued beef brisket with fermented carrots and cauliflower-cheese puree (www.lamouette-restaurant.co.za).

LODGING

Stay in a Silo

Cape Town will welcome its most exciting new hotel in years when the Silo opens at the V&A Waterfront in March this year. The 28-room accommodation will include a one-bedroom penthouse. The property will reside on the top six floors of a historic 1924 grain silo complex that will also house the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (due to open 23 September 2017). (www.theroyal-portfolio.com/the-silo; doubles from ZAR12,000/₹59,825).

ACTIVITY

Winter Wave Rider

"Because of the shape of the peninsula, we always have waves in Cape Town," explains Gary's Surf School owner, Gary Kleynhans. "But winter is when we get all the swell because of the cold fronts." So suit up (water temperatures hover around -15°C) and head to Muizenberg Beach in False Bay, where the waves are big enough to be thrilling, but gentle enough for beginners (www.garysurf.co.za; adults ZAR450/₹2,245 for a group of up to ten, children ZAR300/₹1,495 for a group of 6 or more).

FRANZ MARC FREI (MOUNTAINS), TAMER KOSELI (ILLUSTRATION)

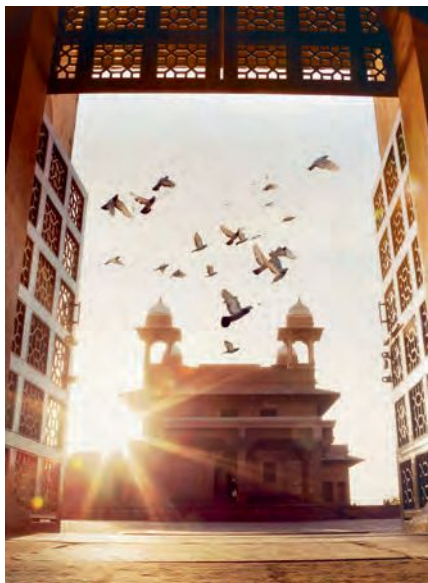
Monumental Lessons

FIVE TRIPS TO MAKE HISTORY COME ALIVE FOR CHILDREN BY CHAITALI PATEL

A good way to instil curiosity about India's past in a child's mind is by taking them to some of the magnificent monuments around the country. Belonging to different eras of India's rich past, these five structures are remarkable examples of ingenuity and creativity.



1 VIVEKANANDA ROCK MEMORIAL, Tamil Nadu ▲
 Taking a ferry to Kanyakumari at the southern tip of India, the meeting point of two seas and a mighty ocean, is an adventure any kid will jump at. A short ferry ride from the mainland takes visitors to one of the two rocks on which the Vivekananda Rock Memorial is built. Legend has it that the philosopher dived into shark-infested waters to reach the rock where he meditated. A memorial built at the spot has two structures: the Vivekananda Mandapam and the Sripada Mandapam. The former adjoins a meditation hall which has a bronze statue of the philosopher made by renowned sculptor Sitaram S. Arte (www.kanyakumari.tn.nic.in; daily 8 a.m.-4 p.m.; entry ₹20; ferry ride ₹34).



2 FATEHPUR SIKRI, Uttar Pradesh ◀
 Birbal was an advisor in Emperor Akbar's court who was known for his sharp intellect and wit. Tales of their friendship and conversations form the base for many children's stories today. A visit to Fatehpur Sikri, a city founded in the 16th century, will transport children to the place where many of Akbar and Birbal's legendary interactions took place. One of the best examples of Mughal architecture in India, Fatehpur Sikri is a striking collection of magnificent structures. Climb up the steps of the imposing Buland Darwaza, peep through the marble screens at the tomb of Salim Chisti, or explore the fountains and courtyards of Panch Mahal (www.uptourism.gov.in; open daily sunrise to sunset; entry ₹40).

JTB PHOTO/CONTRIBUTOR/GETTY IMAGES (BEACH); POWEROFFOREVER/E+/GETTY IMAGES (MONUMENT)



4 BRIHADEESWARA TEMPLE, Tamil Nadu ▶

Superlatives like the first, the tallest, or the biggest, hold significant weight in a child's world. Tell your children they will be seeing a big temple that is over a thousand years old, and my guess is you already have them hooked.

Dedicated to Lord Shiva, Brihadeeswara temple in Thanjavur was built by Raja Raja Chola I in the 11th century. The gigantic 196-foot-tall *vimana* or tower is a sight to behold. As a child, the massive *kumbam* or rounded dome that crowns the vimana fascinated me the most. Believed to weigh 80 tonnes, it was apparently hauled up to the top with the help of elephants.

The sprawling grounds are also a joy to explore and children will love spotting the lone lizard carved onto the roof of the main temple. Watching priests climb ladders to perform the daily prayer ritual for the imposing lingam and Nandi bull is also fascinating. I have fond memories of playing hide-and-seek with my sisters among the hundreds of pillars within the complex while our parents rested (*daily 6.30 a.m.-noon and 4 p.m.-8 p.m.; entry free*).



3 SABARMATI ASHRAM, Gujarat

In a time when children are used to having their every wish fulfilled, the Sabarmati Ashram set up by Mahatma Gandhi in 1917 in Ahmedabad is a powerful example of modest living. Sandwiched between a jail and a crematorium, the two places that Gandhi believed a satyagrahi would end up in, the ashram is a reflection of his beliefs and ideology. Gandhi and his wife Kasturba's personal belongings like their charkha and writing desk are on display at Hriday Kunj, their home inside the ashram premises.

Also part of the ashram complex, is the Gandhi Memorial Museum. Opened in 1963 and designed by legendary Indian architect Charles Correa, the museum has three galleries and houses the ashram library. The "My Life Is My Message" gallery has an exhibition of 250 photographs that chronicle the Mahatma's life, organised into seven parts.

Don't leave without taking your children to see the statues of the three wise monkeys installed near the ashram entrance (*www.gandhiashramsabarmati.org; daily 8.30 a.m.-6.30 p.m.; entry free*).



5 AJANTA AND ELLORA, Maharashtra

The story behind the discovery of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Ajanta is one that children will lap up. The forgotten caves were left to the mercy of the elements for hundreds of years, until they were discovered by chance by a British officer out on a hunt. The main attraction at this collection of caves dating back to the second century B.C. is intricate Buddhist frescoes painted with natural colours.

Located about 100 kilometres southwest of Ajanta, the Ellora cave temples are some of the finest examples of rock-cut architecture in India. The pièce de résistance of this collection of Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu caves is the Kailasa or Cave 16. It is a multi-storeyed structure resembling a temple, and is carved out of a single rock. I vividly remember being transfixed by it when I visited Ellora on a school trip, wondering how such magnificence could be created using a simple hammer and chisel (*www.maharashtratourism.gov.in/treasures/caves; Ajanta opens 9 a.m.-5 p.m., Monday closed; Ellora opens 9 a.m.-5 p.m., Tuesday closed*).

DINODIA PHOT LIBRARY (GANDHI STATUE), JAYK7/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES (TEMPLE), SHUTTERSTOCK/INDIAPICTURE (BUDDHA)

True Blue

INSIDE DELFT'S LAST 17TH-CENTURY FACTORY OF ICONIC DUTCH POTTERY BY KAREENA GIANANI

Linger at any gift shop in the Netherlands, and your eye will eventually fall on a blue-and-white ceramic windmill or a wee boy and girl closing in for a kiss. This traditional style of pottery, called delftware or Delft pottery, is as quintessentially Dutch as clogs, canal houses, and tulips.

As we walk by one of the many canals that criss-cross the city of Delft, one hour southwest of Amsterdam, my guide narrates the history of the pottery. It started in the 13th century when Marco Polo returned to Europe from China

with blue-and-white porcelain. By

the early 1600s, the Dutch East India Company was trading with China and bringing in these delicate goods. When

Chinese civil wars affected these imports, local potters in Delft swung into action.

They began imitating the blue-and-white porcelain art on clay, often forsaking Chinese patterns in favour of Dutch landscapes.

The world-famous delftware was born and by the late 17th century, there were 32 factories in Delft.

We reach our destination, a brown-brick building of the Royal Delft factory. Built in 1653, it is the only surviving delftware factory in the city from the 17th century, with an attached museum. I pass the hall, which was designed to dazzle buyers with stunning ceramic tile work lining its walls and stairway. The tour guide takes me through the process of making delftware.

After a piece is fired for about 20 hours, painters bring out Royal Delft's signature cobalt colour, which is mixed according to a secret formula. Quiet rivers, trimmed gardens, even iconic paintings of old masters

like Johannes Vermeer and Vincent van Gogh are painted by hand on objects. Delftware is legendary for its centuries-old hand-painted technique, but uses stencils too. The guide holds up two identical plates to illustrate the difference: the landscape on the hand-painted one has excellent shading, while the one done with a stencil lacks the same depth, looking a bit flat.

I meet Laurens van der Velden, a painter who is bent over a vase, lips pursed in concentration as he etches the outline for a floral design. Velden used to be an animator who itched to work with his hands. Knowing that his creations will endure, and maybe end up atop some fireplace on the other side of the world is fulfilling for him. Landscapes and animals are his speciality.

From him I learn that authentic delftware carries a signature: a round flask, a curvy "JT," and the word "Delft" painted one below the other, accompanied by the painter's initials and year code. The slightest fault in a piece is indicated by a scratch on the flask, and significantly reduces its value.

The factory's museum holds ceramic items of every possible shape and size: plates with portraits of Dutch royals, vases painted with peonies, and even Miffy, the famous Dutch picture book character that children adore. I am transfixed by its prize collection, a 13x16-foot reproduction of "The Night Watch," one of the most famous artworks by Dutch master Rembrandt, made with 480 delftware tiles. Two senior painters spent over a year creating this display. I step out of the museum shop with a small souvenir bag of white-and-blue earrings, and a huge appreciation for this timeless tradition. ●

THE VITALS

Royal Delft is located in in Delft, about 68 km/1 hr southwest of Amsterdam (www.royaldelft.com). **Hours** Nov-March, Mon-Sat 9 a.m.-5 p.m., Sun noon-5 p.m.; Mar-Oct, Mon-Sun 9 a.m.-5 p.m. **Entry** adults €12.50/₹910, children 13-18 €6.25/₹455, under 12 free; includes audio tour.

Royal Delft's master painters embellish earthenware using black ink that contains cobalt oxide. After it is fired the ink turns into a signature blue.

Gluttony in Lyon

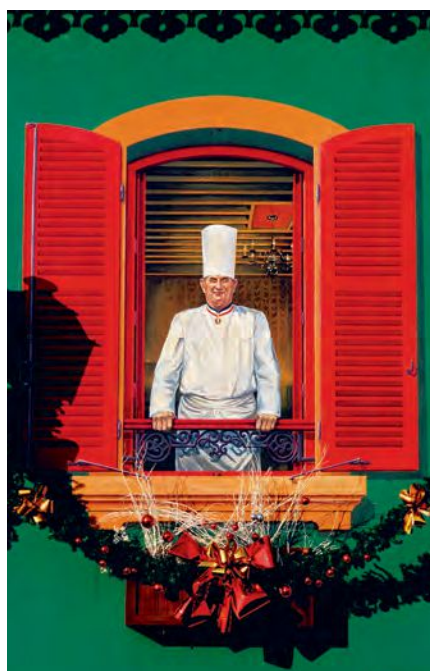
FEASTING LIKE A LOCAL IN FRANCE'S FOOD CAPITAL BY DEBASHREE MAJUMDAR



Lyon's eateries serve all manner of food. Popular ones like À la Pêche aux Moules specialize in mussels and other seafood dishes (top); A wall mural from Paul Bocuse's Michelin-award-winning restaurant Collonges au Mont d'Or (bottom).

There's no need to work up an appetite in Lyon. Every corner of France's third-largest metropolis holds an offering that will instantly make you hungry. And as befits a city known as the culinary capital of France, food here is not just about eating, but also about traditions, institutions, and excellence.

Nobody embodies this better than Chef Paul Bocuse, the undisputed granddaddy of modern French cooking, and the shiniest star in Lyon's culinary firmament. Exploding onto the global gastronomy map with his signature innovation *soupe aux truffes* (truffle soup) decades ago, Monsieur Paul rewrote the principles of French haute cuisine. His nouvelle or new cuisine focused on bringing out the real textures of the ingredients, and using fresh produce alone. Since 1965, he has been keeper of the much coveted



three-Michelin-star rating for his restaurant L'Auberge du Pont de Collonges, located on the outskirts of Lyon.

Bocuse is omnipresent in the city. A giant mural of his smiling face greets visitors at the entrance to Les Halles de Lyon—Paul Bocuse, Lyon's most famous indoor market for all things edible. Here, stall after stall stocks the best local produce including cheeses, fresh fruits, charcuterie, pickles, confectionery, wines, and chocolates. If food were theatre, then this market would literally be the world's greatest stage. The accomplished chef animates this nerve centre of Lyon's perpetual food festival, which everyone is invited to join.

Besides Bocuse, *bouchons* comprise yet another preoccupation of the Lyonnaise. These warm, unpretentious, old-fashioned eateries are known for offering generous portions. Forming a quintessential chunk of the Lyonnaise

MARTIN DR. SCHULTE-KELLINGHAUS/IMAGEBROKER/DINDODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (RESTAURANT), HEMIS/INDIAPICTURE (PAINTING)

experience, the bouchons emerged during the 19th-century economic downturn, when *les mères* (mothers) started kitchens after losing their jobs as cooks in the households of bourgeois families. They managed these humble kitchens with ingredients from local producers. Even today, the ingredients are strictly sourced from local markets and farmers, and traditional dishes, especially meats, are served. From pig's

head to oxtail, eating at a bouchon is a nose-to-tail adventure.

In fact, the rule of thumb when navigating Lyon's gastronomic offerings is to be willing to stuff one's face with all sorts of delicacies rather than avoid the ones with pigs' ears or calf tripe. However, a wide variety of chicken and fish dishes are available for the squeamish eater.

Besides the bouchons, there are nearly

40 local farmers markets in Lyon, which sell everything between Saint-Marcellin cheese and Beaujolais to wash down those portly blood sausages at breakfast. There are trendy bistros too that jostle for space along the alleyways. However, the old-fashioned bouchons, with their red-and-white chequered tablecloths, convivial atmosphere, long lunches, and lingering chats are the best expression of Lyon life. ●



A lazy weekend brunch at Les Halles de Lyon-Paul Bocuse (left) is a local tradition. Over four dozen stalls are set up here by Lyon's best butchers, cheesemakers, and wine growers; The regional favourite *tarte à la praline*, a tart with a pink almond filling (right), is inspired by Lyon's rose gardens.

FIVE BOUCHON CLASSICS & WHERE TO EAT THEM

SALADE LYONNAISE

A staple at most *bouchons*, this classic consists of bitter greens dunked in plenty of vinaigrette mustard. It's served with croutons, crispy bacon strips, and poached eggs, topped with snipped chives.

WHERE TO EAT **Chez Mounier**, 3 Rue des Marronniers, 69002 Lyon; €18-20/₹1,300-1,500.

SALADE DE CERVELAS

The centrepiece of this salad is a special pork and pistachio sausage. In the early days, the sausage was stuffed with pig brain and that is how it got its name *cervelas*, deriving from the Latin cerebrum or brain. This salad also includes eggs, capers, pickles, shallots, parsley, and generous helpings of vinaigrette.

WHERE TO EAT **Le Bouchon des Filles**, 20 Rue Sergent Blandan Ancienne Voie du Rhin, 69001 Lyon; €18-24/₹1,300-1,800.

QUENELLE DE BROCHET

Quenelle, from the German *knödel*, is the heart of Lyonnaise main courses. Made primarily from the flesh of the pike

fish, with an occasional addition of veal fat and meat, these dumplings are coated in moist breadcrumbs and served in a creamy crayfish sauce. Eating this will keep your stomach happy for hours. Pair with a bottle of Beaujolais.

WHERE TO EAT **Café du Soleil**, 2 Rue Saint-Georges, 69005 Lyon; €24-26/₹1,800-1,900.

GÂTEAU DE FOIES DE VOLAILLES

This is a steamed pudding made with chicken liver, white bread, eggs, milk, mushrooms, green olives, tomatoes, thyme, spring onions, and fresh cream. You may need a post-lunch nap to recuperate.

WHERE TO EAT **Les Lyonnais**; 19, Rue de la Bombarde, 69005 Lyon; €25/₹1,800.

TARTE À LA PRALINE

Pralines are a mainstay on Lyon's dessert menus. Lyonnaise pralines are made out of almonds and cloaked in cooked sugar and pink food colouring. These pink confections are used to decorate a whole bunch of desserts, from tarts to cakes.

WHERE TO EAT **Les Halles de Lyon – Paul Bocuse**; 102 Cours Lafayette, 69003 Lyon; €10/₹740.

Lord of the Pitches

HOSTING CRICKET FOR TWO CENTURIES, LORD'S CRICKET GROUND IS A HALLOWED SPACE FOR FANS OF THE SPORT BY NITIN CHAUDHARY

One fine day this summer, I flew to London just to watch cricket at Lord's. England was playing Pakistan. At St. John's Wood tube station, the closest one to the stadium, I was caught in a swirl of men in felt hats and flannel jackets, carrying well-stocked picnic baskets and ice-boxes, eddying towards the stadium. Many wore silk ties, striped red and gold, the official colours of Lord's Cricket Ground. I felt underdressed in an informal shirt and sneakers, but it was too late to turn back.

We entered through the cast-iron Grace Gates, named after W.G. Grace, one of England's greatest cricketers from

the sport's early days. There are many such historic relics at Lord's—most stadiums tend to be impersonal, but Lord's is a mecca for cricket unlike any other. Cricketers often describe playing here as a defining moment in their careers. My favourite cricketing moment

At times, the game itself seemed like an afterthought to a plush picnic. Around me, the chewing and quaffing was constant, punctuated by ripples of polite applause for a well-stroked shot

at Lord's is Saurav Ganguly's 1996 debut, when he scored a fluid 131—the highest debut score in a match at the stadium. I'd heard cricket at Lord's was extraordinary, and here I was, ready to experience it for myself.

Eating and drinking is a big part of Lord's, and I quickly realised that most visitors decide on a strategic plan well in advance. Some collected food hampers that they had pre-ordered with their tickets, others carried picnic baskets. For the uninitiated, like me, there are bars and food joints dotting the periphery of the stadium. On match days, tents selling food and wine come up on the open grounds. What excited



Lord's stadium has been renovated several times to expand audience capacity. A £200 million renovation is planned to prepare it for the 2019 World Cup.

NITIN CHAUDHARY



From 1890 to 1999, Pavilion (top left), one of the oldest constructions at Lord's, was out of bounds for women on match days due to the stadium's gender-based membership policy; The Lord's Media Centre (top right), commissioned for the 1999 Cricket World Cup, is a modern architectural marvel; A tour of the museum (bottom right) allows visitors to go behind the scenes at the "Home of Cricket."

me more than the burgers, hotdogs, and chips, was the typical English fare: tea and scones with clotted cream and strawberry jam, soft rolls with English mustard, cucumber sandwiches, and the famous Dundee fruitcakes.

Inside, though the stadium was full to its capacity of 30,000, it felt relaxed, like a neighbourhood gathering to watch a community match. The favours shifted back and forth between the teams as the day progressed. At times, the game itself seemed like an afterthought to a plush picnic. Around me, the chewing and quaffing was constant, punctuated by ripples of polite applause for a well-stroked shot.

Across my seat, I could see the stadium's most remarkable building, a survivor from the Victorian era: the terracotta-coloured Pavilion. Built in 1890, it houses the players' dressing

rooms. The Indian team received its first ever World Cup trophy on the balcony of this very building.

During one of the breaks, I opened a book that I had carried with me. Unabashedly peering over my shoulder, the English gentleman sitting behind me remarked cheerily that it "seems like heavy reading for a Sunday afternoon." Ticked, I agreed instantly, and put the book away. In the end, Pakistan won the match. The team saluted the crowd, which responded with a standing ovation. The local team may have lost, but the spectators appreciated watching a closely-fought contest.

As I left the stadium, I realised that it's not just a game of cricket that Lord's offers. Rather the experience spans food, humour, and traditions. It is also about true sportsmanship, not just from the players, but also from the spectators. ●

THE VITALS

Orientation Lord's Cricket Ground is located close to the centre of London, near the St John's Wood tube station. **Tickets** Schedules and tickets for upcoming fixtures are available at the stadium's official website (www.lords.org/fixtures/fixtures-and-tickets); £50-75/₹4,100-6,200 for one day at a test match; includes visit to the Lord's Museum). **Tour** On non-match days, visitors can go to the Lord's Museum through the Lord's Tour. One of the oldest sports museums in the world, it displays a collection begun in 1864. The Lord's Tour also takes in the Pavilion and players' dressing rooms, and the Long Room (seven days a week at fixed time slots, except match days and between 23 Dec-2 Jan; 1 hr 40 min; adults £20/₹1,600, children £12/₹1,000; book online in advance).

NITIN CHAUDHARY (PAVILION), JASON SMITH/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (MEDIA CENTRE), ROGER BAMBER/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (MUSEUM)

IN FOCUS

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NEW YORK

Whether uptown or downtown,
no other place makes the night
shine brighter

BY TARA ISABELLA BURTON
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JONNO RATTMAN



U.S.A.

NIGHTS



A carnival spirit reigns at House of Yes, a warehouse turned performance venue in Bushwick, Brooklyn.



In New York—here looking north over Battery Park—“nothing is ever really closed,” says author Burton.



THERE ARE MANY NEW YORKS.

There is one city for the young, another for the old. There's the city for the newly arrived, the established, the broke, the rich. That's the beauty of it.

Or so says Joe—he never gives me his last name—whom I met exactly five minutes ago. He has already bought me a drink and, in the great tradition of New York brashness, told me his life story. He grew up penniless in a Queens tenement, worked his way up, became a diplomat, moved to London, became wealthy, grew accustomed to frequenting bars like this one: Bemelmans at the Carlyle Hotel, perhaps the last bastion of Upper East Side, Edith Wharton-style elegance.

"Timmy," Joe asks the red-jacketed bartender, "how long have I been coming here?"

Timmy shrugs.

Joe likes talking to strangers. He likes hearing their stories. He likes listening to jazz, and drinking champagne, and looking at the murals on the bar wall—by Ludwig Bemelmans, writer and illustrator of the *Madeline* books—marvelling at this place he never thought he'd one day be able to afford.

But most of all, Joe likes New York. "You can be anybody here," he says. "Jane can come here and be a movie star. She can come here and be a transvestite. Anything you want!"

Returning to New York after a decade abroad, I found myself in a city at once foreign and still, indelibly, the one I knew as a child growing up on the Upper East Side. But I'd never tried to do what my 13-year-old self had always longed to do: stay out until sunrise and have that one perfect night I'd dreamed of, the kind of night bohemian Greenwich Village poet Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote of, staying out "very tired" and "very merry" until dawn.

I draft a wish list. It ends up being so lengthy that I realize right away that my perfect night is actually several nights. And, as I come to learn, the most New York of moments is the one you don't expect.



Twenty-four-hour diner Veselka serves up traditional Ukrainian fare in the East Village.

ONE OF MY NIGHTS TAKES ME FROM THE CARLYLE to the Bow Tie cinema in Chelsea, New York's fabled gay district, where a lime-wigged drag queen named Hedda Lettuce emcees a showing of camp classic *Suddenly, Last Summer*, laced with bawdy heckling from the audience. A bleached-blond mother with a Betty Boop voice rushes up to Hedda afterward to get an autograph for her eight-year-old. "He wants to be just like you when he grows up," she says. She's been collecting every drag queen autograph she can find, she says. She knows her son is different from the other boys at school; she wants to show him that there are people in this city—in this world—who can make him feel less alone.

Another night, I head back to Chelsea for the monthly Supercinema party at the McKittrick Hotel. This formerly abandoned hotel has been repurposed as a Hitchcockian theatre space for British company Punchdrunk's "experiential" Macbeth-based *Sleep No More*. But tonight it's all about *The Great Gatsby* at the Supercinema party. The F. Scott Fitzgerald novel is perhaps the best known retelling of New York's capacity for inspiring self-creation and reinvention in all those who come here.

Women in feathers, headdresses, and beads line the block. A live band is playing electronic covers of jazz standards, a techno reimagining of Ella Fitzgerald under a green strobe light. Two girls have come as the twin eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg,

the fictional optician from *The Great Gatsby*. Anywhere else, I think, they might look out of place. Not here.

THE MORE OF NEW YORK I SEE AT NIGHT, the more I realize is still strange to me, even after most of a lifetime here. I take a late-night bike tour with the mild-mannered George Pigeon of Bike the Big Apple. We pass places I know—or thought I knew—and he renders them unfamiliar. In the East Village, on the street outside what used to be the legendary Second Avenue Deli (it's a Chase Bank now, but Second Avenue Deli lives on elsewhere), Pigeon shows me the star-engraved plaques I've never noticed. This was Yiddish theatre's answer to Hollywood's Walk of Fame, where a new wave of immigrants found the freedom to make art of their own.

At Madison Square Park I learn that the limestone-clad Met Life Tower was once the tallest in the world, one of five New York buildings to hold that distinction. Just another example of New York culture, Pigeon says, in a city constantly striving for perfection, constantly one-upping itself.

I stop by a comedy competition at the Peoples Improv Theater and watch as eight unknown comics face off for a chance to perform their own material. Later I hop over to the West Village to the craft-cocktail basement bar Slowly Shirley. The cocktail waitress, my friend Kayla Ferguson, leads a double life: slinging Sazeracs for money, acting in guest spots on TV shows



Red neon lights up the facade of the vintage Smith's Bar in Midtown.

like *Boardwalk Empire* for love. She makes a port-based cocktail, tells me about her auditions, her hunger for that big break that could happen any day. It's those fortuitous moments, ripe with the promise of the next big thing, that make New York so addictive.

I head to Harlem, to Ginny's Supper Club, a red-lit jazz bar in the basement of chef Marcus Samuelsson's Red Rooster, the contemporary comfort food restaurant credited with sparking, in part, Harlem's culinary regeneration. Yet at Ginny's, the atmosphere is less trendy than nostalgic. The decor is deco inflected, a homage to the Harlem Renaissance, when 125th Street was the cultural capital of black America. A guest vocalist—a petite woman in all black, with a timid expression and no makeup—tiptoes onto the stage. She begins to sing the 1930s hit “Deep Purple.” Her voice silences everybody. It is one of those voices, the kind that makes you wonder if you're at a concert people will recall, years later, as that moment when somebody made it big. Her voice is outside, gargantuan; it shakes the barstools.

“Encore!” everybody cries, but there are no encores tonight; things move too quickly. The singer goes back to the bar and starts eating dinner while the rest of the players play.



The band goes on without her.

Along 131st Street and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Boulevard, hundreds of people are drinking, smoking in the streets, spilling all down the block. White candles illuminate the street corner. Between the candles are bottles: Moët, Cîroc. It's a funeral, I learn, for a Harlem fixture who died unexpectedly this week. His friends have come to mourn him. Some are crying; most are laughing through their tears. I stay for a while; I listen and learn snippets of his life. He was always trying to be a better man, someone says.

Much later, I watch as dawn creeps across the horizon, and I come to appreciate the stillest the city will ever get. I walk down Broadway, through streets I have never before seen empty. The sky is crimson. The police horses in Times Square are loading into their trailers. A drunk man is listening to “New York, New York” on his phone earbuds; he's stumbling and singing along. And very tired, and very merry, I walk all the way home. ●

TARA ISABELLA Burton is working on a doctorate in theology and 19th-century French literature at Oxford University. Photographer **JONNO RATTMAN** lives in New York.

TOP PICKS



Broadway is the hub of performing arts in New York City, as well as one of the most vibrant nightlife spots. This lively stretch between Manhattan and the Bronx is lined with hip cafés, bars, and theatres.

Bemelmans Bar

www.rosewoodhotels.com

The bar's nightly jazz performances enliven its art deco interiors and playful murals that depict rabbits picnicking and elephants ice skating in Central Park. A glass of champagne at Bemelmans starts at \$21/₹1,400.

McKittrick Hotel

www.supercinemany.com

Built in 1939, the McKittrick Hotel is home to the immersive theatre production *Sleep No More*. Every month, it hosts lavish Supercinema dance parties themed on books and Hollywood films. Ongoing events include folk theatre musical *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart*, with an all-Scottish cast.

Bike The Big Apple

www.bikethebigapple.com

Pedal on to discover hidden alleys, posh neighbourhoods, and NYC's Dutch connection on these bike tours (*regular tours 5-7 hr; from \$95/₹6,350*).

Peoples Improv Theater

the-pit-nyc.com

Laughter barely dies down at the theatre's three locations—two in Flatiron district and one south of Midtown Manhattan—

as professional improv shows as well as informal jams and open-mics keep everybody entertained (*open mic \$3/₹200, shows from \$5/₹335*).

Slowly Shirley

slowlyshirley.com

With burgundy banquettes and light sconces resembling Oscar statuettes, Slowly Shirley evokes 1940s-era Hollywood in West Village, and serves classic and contemporary cocktails. Rosa Left (*The Window Open*), a port based house special, costs \$16/₹1,070.

Ginny's Supper Club

www.ginnyssupperclub.com

This basement lounge in Harlem is reminiscent of the area's speakeasies of the 1920s, and is well loved for its eclectic cocktails and nightly live music. Craft cocktails like *The Harlem Mule* cost \$15/₹1,000.

Film Screenings with Hedda Lettuce

cinopolisusa.com

Drag personality Hedda Lettuce introduces screenings of Hollywood classics like Alfred Hitchcock's *Stage Fright* at the Cinopolis multiplex in the Chelsea neighbourhood (*Thursdays; from \$8/₹535*).

The Yarra River ribbons through Melbourne and its promenades belong to all—young mums and toddlers, old folks sitting on benches, buskers, skaters, and all manner of sunburnt tourists.

MOVE OVER SYDNEY
MELBOURNE'S
CALLING

Mornings in Australia's second city begin with croissants and a "long black," followed by fab street art, kayaking, and flying foxes
By Robert Reid



WAX DAYS/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES

ANY PROMISING DAY IN MELBOURNE BEGINS WITH A CUP OR TWO OF COFFEE.

Here, though, you don't order just a "coffee." Australia's second largest city has its own coffee vocabulary. An American is called a "long black," a velvety latte is a "flat white."

I'm at Proud Mary, one of Melbourne's buzzy cafés, in the one-time working-class suburb of Collingwood. Along with the nearby Fitzroy neighbourhood, Collingwood makes up what you could call Melbourne's Brooklyn. Streets such as Smith, Gertrude, and Brunswick are filled with cafés, along with one-off designer boutiques, art deco bars serving local microbrews, pocket-size sushi joints, and dandy hat shops. It can get a little precious; I heard the word "milieu" three times in one day. I like Collingwood a lot.

Proud Mary, named for the Creedence Clearwater Revival hit song, offers "cuppings," where visitors crowd the work area to learn how to drink coffee properly. Yes, it can seem like a scene

from the American hipster-spoof TV show *Portlandia* (enhanced by the stereo playing '80s rap). In fact, Proud Mary is opening a location in the U.S. coffee capital, Portland, Oregon.

"We're not afraid of taking on anyone," proclaims head barista Jak Ryan.

This morning I'm going for a long black. Ryan prepares a "sweet brew" with a new Ecuadorian bean he says he is "just getting to know." Joining locals at a communal table as they down their breakfast, or "brekkie" (the most popular appears to be toast smeared with avocado and topped with a poached egg), I dutifully follow Ryan's coffee advice: Spoon the drink's frothy top layer toward me three times, sniff deeply, then taste.

For food, I wander backstreets over to Fitzroy, where I come upon a plain brown-brick warehouse that is home to Lune, a bakery that produces what some—including the New York

DOUG GIMESY



Times—say may be the world’s best croissant. Lines often stretch around the corner. I’m lucky; only four people are ahead of me. As I wait to order, my attention beelines to a glass-walled baking station known as “The Cube.” Inside it, Cam Reid, who sports a moustache and man bun and helps run Lune with his sister, a former aerospace engineer, carefully stacks layered dough. When he emerges to take over DJ honours from the barista, also moustached, I ask him about baking.

“Right now, I am working in laminations of dough and butter,” he says. “We have to stretch and fold it for several hours to make the 27 layers.”

The flaky, twice-baked pecan pie croissant may be the tastiest thing I’ve ever eaten.

STREET ARTS If coffee is one way Melbourne likes to tout its superiority over Sydney, art is another. Grand museums and low-key galleries dot the town. The Lyon Housemuseum, in suburban Kew, for example, occupies part of a private collectors’ home. But it’s the street art of the laneways—the back alleys once so connected with city vice—that makes Melbourne’s art scene most memorable. Shadowy laneways such as Hosier Lane are splattered with colour. Spray-can

graffiti “tags,” paste-up posters, and towering murals coat any available space on walls, sidewalks, doorways, drainpipes, and trash bins.

For a good introduction, join a walk with Melbourne Street Art Tours. Street artist Chris Hancock, who moved to Melbourne from Perth five years ago, leads my tour wearing a black beanie, black jacket, black jeans, and black high-tops. His energy never wanes on a walk that ends, with beers, at a private studio space he shares with other artists.

On the way, Hancock points out a stream of things I would miss otherwise, including art by a who’s who of street artists—stencils by British-born Banksy lurk in one alley corner—and the difference between legal and illegal works.

Our group detours to view Hancock’s latest work, a “loose Purple Rain forest theme” running down the length of ACDC Lane (named for the Aussie hard-rock band). In it I see tributes to the recently deceased Prince and David Bowie.

BIKING ALONG THE YARRA RIVER Everyone knows that Sydney has golden sand beaches and fjord-like bays. But Melbourne, the first Australian host of the Olympic Games, in 1956, is also a notable outdoor destination. With less rainfall

Hosier Lane is a colourful canvas of street art, ripe with political messages and creative expressions of local and international artists; Cakes, macarons, and other confections crowd the shelves of Le Bon Cake Shop (facing page), a sweet-toothed venue in Melbourne’s St. Kilda neighbourhood.

KEVIN CLOGSTOUN/LONELY PLANET IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES





Atlanta
MARTA
Changsha Park
Piedmont Bypass
Westside Mall
Buckhead
Downtown

From the river banks to terrace cafés, large public squares, and parks, Melbourne enables residents and visitors to enjoy picnics, and a range of other activities without leaving city limits.





than Sydney and a generally flat layout, Melbourne is a great place to explore by bicycle.

I'm following a 40-kilometre trail that takes in meadows, public art, and the Yarra River. Leaving behind the central business district (CBD) skyline, it's just me, a few joggers, and scores of red gums, a type of Australian eucalyptus tree that has grown here for thousands of years.

On my rental bike I follow a path that soon brings me to a scene straight out of the Cotswolds region of England. Sheep graze on emerald green grass before the steeped, 19th-century Abbotsford Convent, a former nunnery that now houses art galleries, "creative" studios, and eateries, and holds a variety of arts events—including workshops—in its Victorian interior.

Today's offering is an "indigenous language workshop," part of the Next Wave Art Festival that includes Abbotsford Convent as a venue. Mandy Nicholson, an artist with Aboriginal Wurundjeri roots, leads an audience through a slide show of Melbourne's Aboriginal history, then holds up a walert-walert she made. A traditional cloak fashioned with many possum skins, it's the first one that has been crafted here in more than a hundred years.

"It's not just a piece of clothing," Nicholson explains, but a "jigsaw puzzle" made of curvy Wurundjeri symbols that make up a "cultural map" of Melbourne. "We're the oldest culture in the world," she says. "And we're still here."

I continue cycling and soon cross the Yarra, where I come upon Yarra Bend Park—and an example of Australia's at times freaky wildlife, flying foxes. Long absent from Melbourne, these

*Hanging from
red gums in
bunches, flying
foxes look like
orange-brown
foxes wrapped
in black
ponchos*



Narrow, colourful Centre Place draws pedestrians with its small shops, creative cocktail bars, and artful graffiti; Towering trees in Melbourne's Royal Botanic Gardens (facing page), 94 acres of green near the city centre, upstage the skyline.

members of the bat family have returned in the past few decades. Nowadays, about 6,000 call the city home, with an additional 30,000 showing up in summer. Hanging from red gums in bunches, they look like orange-brown foxes wrapped in black ponchos. And they screech, even when napping, to the consternation of some locals. “They’re quarrelsome, noisy, and smelly,” says conservationist Robert Bender. They also are important pollinators and dispersers of seeds, functions integral to a healthy ecosystem. A 1970s native-garden movement led to the planting of indigenous trees, which replenished a food supply that flying foxes favour. Initially they moved into the cherished Royal Botanic Gardens, and many locals called for their extermination. Instead, the city, experimenting with noise machines, drove them to this less obtrusive spot outside the centre. Today these intelligent animals, protected by law, are making a comeback.

WALKING LUNCH IN FOOTSCRAY For my midday meal I’m on a three-stop tour of Footscray, a suburb that has emerged from years as a crime-prone place many avoided. It’s said more than 35 languages are spoken here, loosely confirmed as I walk a few blocks from the Footscray Market’s fresh produce and packaged noodles—and pass by a Sudanese café, an Ethiopian injera bakery, an Afghan kebab house, Chinese therapy shops, and sidewalk grills cooking Vietnamese nuong (pork).

I start my lunch with crumpets and jam at Rudimentary, a

year-old café with garden boxes made from reclaimed railroad ties and an eating area carved out of four shipping containers. “It’s designed to be portable,” says Rudimentary’s 28-year-old founder, Desmond Huynh. “My dream is to move this to the mountains and make a climber’s pad.”

Next, I head to nearby Little Saigon Market. Unassuming on the outside, inside it’s a whirl of activity, with sellers hawking tropical fruits and freshly carved meats. In one corner I find Co Thu Quan, a five-year-old eatery specializing in Vietnamese street food, including many rare-to-find Hue-style appetizers from central Vietnam. Looking for something small, I settle on banh trang cuon, delicious mini rice-paper rolls filled with crunchy beef jerky, fried shallots, sour mango, and dried shrimp.

I finish my lunchtime feasting a couple of blocks away, at Konjo, an Ethiopian restaurant run by Ethiopia-born Abdul Hussen. Hussen made it to Melbourne 13 years ago by way of refugee camps. His small café offers the full traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony, along with flatbread made with ensete root flour. I go with (yet more) coffee and a bowl of a flavourful bean stew called ful, cooked in tomatoes, onions, and herb-seasoned kibbe butter that Hussen makes himself.

“Everyone mixes here, people accept each other,” he tells me, adding that a neighbourhood writers’ group met at his restaurant the previous day. “I hope it never changes.”

DOUG GIMESY

FOOTY TIME Everyone in Melbourne—and I mean everyone—“barracks,” or roots for, one of Melbourne’s many “footy” teams, as Australian football is known. Visit from late March through early October, and you’ll spot fans flocking to oval fields in city parks or to the historic Melbourne Cricket Ground, which seats 1,00,000. Footy is Melbourne’s own sport. Played here since 1858, it only spread to the rest of the country, professionally, in 1982.

I’m at the Etihad Stadium in anticipation of watching two local teams play: the undefeated North Melbourne Kangaroos and the St. Kilda Saints, who have managed to win only one

championship in their 143 years. In a stadium room I find the St. Kilda Social Club, fans with grey hair and matching Saints shirts, clutching beers as they convene in a game-day tradition. The biggest Saints fan may be Georgie Day. She jokes that she has missed only two games since 1962, after she moved here from Edinburgh. “I was having my kids those days,” she explains, then adds, “This really is a family. After my daughter’s husband died in October, the team brought her food for a week. I love this team.” Day has created a Saints museum and even takes memorabilia on the road when the team plays away games.

So, yeah, I’m barracking for the Saints.

I sit in the top deck (seats up here run about AUD33/₹1,670). All around me fans wear team scarves and hold Four’N Twentys, steak pies that are to footy what hot dogs are to baseball. A ripple of “oohs” follows a great catch but otherwise everyone sits library quiet; no PA system noise distracts you from the match. And the game is irresistible. It’s basically a big wild ramble in which players—wearing tight-fitting shorts, muscle shirts, and no helmets—bounce or punch the ball to teammates. Trainers wearing pink enter the field during play to relay instructions. Scoring is accomplished by punting the ball past skinny posts. If a player misses slightly, it’s okay; refs award a point.

After the North Melbourne ‘Roos inevitably win—they’re playing the Saints, after all—their old-fashioned team song pumps out of the speakers. I follow kids and parents as they flood the field to punt footy balls back and forth, and soon am ducking as balls crash into the grass to my left and right.



Melbourne Stays

ART HOMAGE

The Blackman Hotel

One of five Art Series hotels inspired by Australian artists, the boutique 209-suite Blackman, named for and displaying works by painter Charles Blackman, is near the Royal Botanic Gardens (artserieshotels.com.au/blackman; doubles from AUD186/₹9,510)

APARTMENT LIVING

District South Yarra

Travellers who prefer space will like these sleek one-, two-, and three-bedroom apartments with kitchens and sitting areas (districtsouthyarra.com.au; doubles from AUD119/₹6,085).

SEA VIEWS

The Prince Hotel

Minutes from the beaches

of Port Phillip Bay, this casual design hotel with an award-winning restaurant is in the vibrant southern neighbourhood of St. Kilda (theprince.com.au; doubles from AUD175.50/₹8,975).

Go With Nat Geo

See Melbourne and other parts of Australia on National Geographic Expeditions’ 12-day “Tasmania to the Great Barrier Reef” trip (from \$9,995/₹6,66,415 per person in double occupancy), 12-day “Explore Australia” Journey (from \$4,164/₹2,77,635 per person in double occupancy), and 22-day “Explore Australia and New Zealand” Journey (from \$7,699/₹5,13,330 per person in double occupancy). For more information, log on to natgeoexpeditions.com.

SUNSET KAYAK Rising just west of Melbourne’s CBD, the Docklands neighbourhood is a sea of gleaming glass condos and office towers. I’m viewing it from an unusual vantage point—bobbing in a kayak on the Yarra River in the Victoria Harbour precinct beneath a pinkish purple sunset.

“This is a city of four million, and yet you and I have this waterway to ourselves,” says my guide, Kent Cuthbert, who founded Kayak Melbourne.

Part of the reason is the Yarra’s recent history as a dirty river, due to industrial run-off. But things may be changing.

“It’s now one of the cleanest city rivers I know,” Cuthbert says. “Seals have been returning; I saw one under a bridge a while back eating an eel.”

We pause for a floating fish-and-chips meal as we watch Melburnians work out in an all-glass fitness centre. Resuming our water tour, we glide under low bridges, watch a fire show by a waterside casino, then paddle toward what look like two tall goalposts flanking the Bolte Bridge.

“Yeah, they’re ornamental,” Cuthbert says. “They’re that high to be higher than the Sydney Harbour Bridge.”

I love these stories of urban competition, even if they’re not true (turns out the Bolte towers are just short of surpassing the height of Sydney’s hallowed icon). What is telling is the spirit: Melbourne does whatever it takes to beat Sydney.

As we paddle on, I think, Melbourne needn’t worry. It more than holds its own. ●

National Geographic Traveler’s (U.S.) Digital Nomad **ROBERT REID** now dreams of becoming a trainer wearing pink at a Melbourne footy match.



From Barcelona's mind-bending architecture to Tel Aviv's electric nightlife, from a witches' market in La Paz to a Mumbai jeep safari, here are nine urban adventures a city crawler will love



In Tel Aviv, partying is serious business. On any given night of the week there are top DJs playing at underground clubs, rock bands performing impromptu gigs, and arak shots doing the rounds in bars across the city.

PUT ON YOUR PARTY SHOES IN TEL AVIV

By Diya Kohli





It's a Monday night,

arguably the duller in the week, when most people settle for a TV dinner and hunker down for the workweek ahead. Yet, in Tel Aviv, it is a Monday filled with revelry of the kind that would put weekend shindigs elsewhere to shame. The city is young, electric, and chilled out. Here, hyper modernity goes hand in hand with a laid-back Mediterranean vibe, and something in the air seems to draw the young and restless out night after night.

It's little wonder that there is a discotheque, pub, or live gig to match every taste. Tel Aviv's cosmopolitanism (it counts among the most LGBTQ-friendly cities in the world and has a vibrant gay culture) and free-flowing spirits (last call at a Tel Aviv bar is when the last guest leaves) make for diverse and unstoppable entertainment. On my night out, my guide Ido Weil showed

me how to hang like the locals, guzzle the best Israeli brews, and groove to the wickedest tunes in town (*tlvnight.com*; from *IL\$100/₹1,800*). And as I ambled from one bar to the next, I quickly recalibrated my brain to the idea of a super fun school night out on the town.

In 2013, the vodka brand Absolut dedicated a special limited edition bottle to Tel Aviv's nightlife. Designed by Israeli artist Pilpeled, the artwork represented the glittering ficus-lined nighttime boulevards of Rothschild, Chen, and Nordau. Together with the Port area, Ben Yehuda Street, and Dizengoff Square, these neighbour-hoods form the pulse of the city. Here are our picks of Tel Aviv's bars with the most character.

NANUCHKA

This Georgian bar and restaurant is steeped in atmosphere and throws up surprise after surprise from a delicious, all-vegan menu featuring traditional Georgian foods to curious bar traditions. On the night I visit, a motley trio comprising a drummer, bartender, and guest dance a jig atop the bar. Other members of the staff ring bells, hammer on metal surfaces, and throw toilet paper wreaths in the air while those gathered stomp and clap in unison (*Lilienblum St. 30*; +972-3-5162254; *nanuchka.co.il/en*).

ROTHSCHILD 12

Most people walk right past this bar without knowing it exists,

ALBERTO PAREDES/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (PHOTO); SOULCLD/ISTOCK (BEVERAGES ILLUSTRATION); THEDAK/FISH/ISTOCK (CLOUD ILLUSTRATION)



From cosy neighbourhood pubs, edgy underground clubs (top), late-night snack shacks, and coffee kiosks, there is something for every kind of night crawler (facing page) in Tel Aviv.

for its front is a non-assuming café. Only when I go to the back, do I discover this buzzing space. Located in an old building with an outdoor section surrounded by graffiti-painted walls, this grungy bar is a great live music venue showcasing edgy alternative acts, impromptu all-star jam sessions, and the best new bands in town. There are concerts nearly every night and they are mostly free. Drinks are reasonably priced and the vibe chilled out. An added plus is the café's eggs Benedict (12 Rothschild Blvd, +972-3-5106430; www.rothschild12.co.il).

COFIX BAR

This nifty little joint's USP is that it is value for money. Cofix is the beverage equivalent of a dollar store—coffee, beer, wine, and liquor cost ILS5/₹89 each and mixers are priced at half or even less than they cost elsewhere, making this a student's dream dive and a tippler's Pearly Gates. The bar is part of a larger chain that sells coffee, snacks, and other fast foods. The no-frills seating and bright uncluttered design make Cofix a popular choice for those who want to survive a night out on the town without lightening their wallets (Lilienblum St. 21; +973-9-9733150; www.cofix.co.il/en; closed during Shabbat).

PASÁŽ

A nondescript door on a quiet corner of Allenby Street leads to Pasáž or "the passage." A flight of stairs goes down into a large space that could very well be a parallel dimension. The stage and bar are islands surrounded by a sea of enthusiastic music lovers. Showcasing fresh new sounds, old school blues, indie acts, hip-hop, drum 'n' bass, and big ticket DJs, Pasáž sets high standards. I enter to raucous cheering as an old bluesman makes his guitar truly sing. No one seems to be in any hurry to go home even though it is way past midnight. Dim red lights, old furniture, ping-pong tables, and super-efficient bartenders notch up the coolness further (Allenby St. 94, +972-3-5603636).

A BEERY FOOTNOTE

For those who'd rather ponder the correct way to pour beer or get the perfect foamy head crowning a glass, **Porter & Sons** is a good bet. Just a few minutes from buzzy Rothschild Boulevard, this joint melds an old-fashioned tavern with a modern craft brewery. With over 50 beers on tap, it is a candy shop for beer aficionados. They have a well curated collection of specialist small-batch Israeli brews besides the usual Goldstar and Maccabee pints. Their kitchen is more competent too, serving a range of delicious homemade sausages (14 Ha'arba'a Street; porter.co.il; open 5 p.m.-1 a.m.).

PHOTO COURTESY: MICHAEL SHVADRON/PASAZ

NIGHTS BY THE DANUBE



If you are Budapest bound, especially if you have never been to this city before, plan to arrive via the river at night. Danube cruise ship passengers know to be out on deck when the Hungarian capital's grand illuminated landmarks start to fill the scene, and the senses: the bristling domes of the Parliament building on the Pest side, the Castle atop its

broad hill on the Buda side, and Chain Bridge guarded by stone lions connecting both halves of the city. It's a symphony of architecture, light, and rippling reflection that a history of war, revolution, and occupation hasn't silenced. Dinner cruises, some accompanied by Gypsy violinists, pair chicken paprikás with the panorama. —Amy Alipio



Gellért Hill overlooking the Danube offers sweeping views of Budapest no matter what the season or time of day.

THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO REVEL IN BUDAPEST AT NIGHT —by Rumela Basu

NIGHT WATCH

Take a walking tour around the city just after sunset, when all of Budapest lights up like a Christmas tree. Stroll around the riverside promenade as the city buzzes with night-time revellers, or visit brightly lit heritage sites gleaming in the dark. The adventurous can sign up for the **Legendary Vampires at Castle Court** tour and discover the darker side of the city (*city tours 1-3 hr; from €40/₹3,000; vampire tour www.mysteriumtours.com; 9 p.m. every Wed, Fri, Sun; 2 hr; €20/₹1,500*).

SOAK AND PARTY

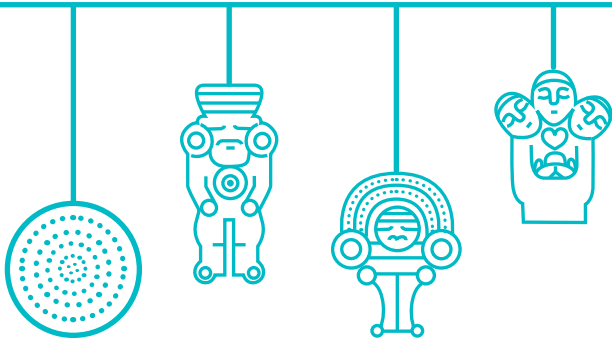
Budapest has over 15 public thermal baths and numerous private spas. Many stay open late. Some, like the 16th-century **Rudas Bath**, are known for weekend spa parties. Soak in steaming waters or get a hammam treatment, while sipping a drink and listening to music. Try to book the glass-domed rooftop thermal bath that overlooks the Danube (*www.bathsbudapest.com for baths in the city; www.rudasbaths.com, Rudas Baths' Fri and Sat spa parties 10 p.m.-4 a.m.; bath €15/₹1,115*).

DRAUGHT AND RUIN

Budapest's seventh district, near the Old Synagogue on the Pest side, has some of the city's most unique night spots—ruin pubs. The **Old Jewish Quarter** has transformed into a hipster hangout, its lanes of ruined buildings now occupied by pubs with beer taps, quirky decor, and DJs spinning turntables. Standing alongside family-owned Jewish restaurants and bakeries, these quirky ruin pubs sport pop-coloured furniture, garden seating, pocket-friendly prices, and a palpable energy.

RIVER OF DREAMS

Come dusk, the Danube shimmers with the magical reflections of the city that sprawls along its banks. Take the road up Gellért Hill to one of the cafés and restaurants around the **Citadel** for a drink with a view. For something quieter, even contemplative, walk to the 19th-century decorative fortification of **Fisherman's Bastion** to gaze out over the Pest side of the city (*Fisherman's Bastion entry free between 8 p.m.-9 a.m.; parts of Citadel open all night, entry free*).



Aymara women with black hats and coca pouches, sell souvenirs and traditional medicine at El Mercado de las Brujas or Witches' Market on Melchor Jimenez street in La Paz. They are known as *yatiri* or witch doctors and believed to have the power to connect to the other world.

THE DIZZY DELIGHTS OF LA PAZ, BOLIVIA

By Aanchal Anand

I don't think I needed a reason to visit

the tantalisingly named Witches' Market in La Paz. But right now, I'm not at this quirky place just for fun. I am desperately looking for something in a market that is known to sell love potions, dry toucan beaks, and dead llama foetuses.

I landed in the Bolivian city of La Paz the previous day and it took my breath away. Literally! At 11,800 feet above sea level, La Paz is the world's highest capital. That's just the average elevation of a city that disregards gravity and sprawls vertically for almost a kilometre upto its highest point, the airport in neighbouring El Alto, at 13,450 feet. Altitude sickness hit me so decisively that I stumbled from immigration straight into the *sala de oxígeno*, the airport's oxygen room. The nurse strapped the oxygen mask around my face and I took a deep breath. The sweet, soothing dose of oxygen massaged my headache away.

I feel the exact opposite sensation as I approach the first few stalls of the Witches' Market. My head is pounding from the altitude and the market has a peculiar odour that I immediately associate with the dead llama foetuses huddled in baskets in front of me.

My mind flashes back to the airport where the nurse had cruelly stripped away my oxygen mask after a mere ten minutes. Apparently, it was just delaying the inevitable: training my body to acclimatize. I managed to find a cab to the city and checked in to a backpackers' hostel where the hypochondriac in me immediately logged into their Wi-Fi to Google all the ways in which I could die of altitude sickness.

Seeing my discomfort, a fellow backpacker had suggested I get myself some coca to alleviate the discomfort.

"Is it safe?" I'd asked, not because I'm sceptical about indigenous folk remedies but because the coca leaf is banned in most countries as it is processed to produce cocaine.

"Yes, absolutely!"

A soft voice breaks my flashback. "Do you want one?"

"Oh no!" I hastily distance myself from the hollowed eyes of the llama foetuses. "I am looking for some coca," I say as I notice the speaker's traditional Aymara clothing: a long layered skirt and a full-sleeved blouse. But it's her black hat that hints that she may be one of the *yatiri*, a word that means witch doctors.

"What kind of coca are you looking for?"

"I thought there was only one kind."

She laughs, flaunting her selection of coca leaves, teas, balms, candy, even toothpaste! I grab a green plastic pouch of coca leaves. Baby steps.

Fast forward a few days and I have fallen in love with La Paz's laid-back style, its colonial architecture, and delicious empanadas. Most of all, I have fallen in love with the view at Mirador Killi Killi where the four-peaked Mount Illimani quietly watches over the cascade of La Paz's buildings.

I don't know whether it was time or the coca leaves that fixed my headache. What I do know is that for me La Paz was an adventure that began with oxygen masks, witch doctors, and forbidden leaves.

VAN DER MEER MARICA/ARTERRA PICTURE LIBRARY/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (PHOTO). SOUMIK LAHIRI (ILLUSTRATIONS)

FOR PRE-LOVED BOOKS

Suitably upbeat, it is time to shop. First, I drop in at **Bookworm**, a 5,000-square-foot showroom for new and second-hand books (1, Church Street). It is a popular haunt of journos from the area's many newspaper offices because those who browse long enough are usually served a free cup of coffee. It is also where celebrity authors like Anita Nair can be spotted on occasion. I love it for the hefty discounts. I've walked away with books worth ₹4,000, but a bill of only ₹2,500—a deal that makes online bookstores seem redundant. Plus, I have much more fun here than when browsing on a website.

If it is lunchtime, the best value-for-money fish thali in town is served between noon and 3 p.m. at **Anupam's Coast II Coast**,



upstairs from the old Bookworm in Shrungar Complex (80/1, M.G. Road; thali ₹160). Their menu comprises a wide range of the finest Karnataka coastal food that you can get in these parts, plus they serve very cold beer, handy for rinsing the throat between bookshop visits.

FOR OLD B'LURU CRED

Another store specializing in book-love is **Blossom Book House**, a few steps away from Bookworm. It comprises two huge stores diagonally across from each other in Church Street, making it probably the biggest second-hand trader in India, a feat which has earned it listings in major tourist guidebooks. The older shop (84/6, Church Street) has three storeys: the ground floor showcases the latest hardbacks, plus travel, cinema, and philosophy; the second floor is for fiction (substantial thriller, romance,

Indian fiction sections); and the top floor is exclusively for non-fiction (history, biography, dictionaries). The newer outlet (2, Church Street), inaugurated in November 2016, is a veritable supermarket of literature. Located above the popular **Matteo Coffee**, it has loos and water dispensers, so I can go on browsing forever. The combined retail space of both is many thousands of square feet, and they hold anywhere between a quarter to half a million books. Even the staff doesn't know the exact number.

FOR A CUPPA AND DOSA

Drifting down Church Street from shop to shop, I first pass the **Indian Coffee House** (19, Church Street), where it is good to clear the mind with the cheapest coffee (₹24) in this otherwise upmarket area. They also sell good coffee powder to take back home. Then, at the Museum Road corner, there's the Kerala-style **Empire** which provides the greasiest non-veg in town. The dosas with chicken curry or mutton kheema combo are a perfect source of cholesterol and calories (₹150), a shawarma roll makes for a cheap bite (₹65), while hungrier shopaholics could go for the slow-grilled mutton leg (₹610).

FOR GRAPHIC NOVELS AND SCI-FI

Across the street from Empire is **The Entertainment Store** (47, Church Street), which isn't strictly a bookshop, but deals in graphic novels, comic books, and movie merchandise. Further down the road is **Goobe's Book Republic** (11, Church Street), which I rank among the city's coolest bookshops. It is smaller than Bookworm and Blossom's, but has a carefully curated selection of pop culture, non-fiction, and sci-fi. Plus, it allows you to rent books if you can't afford to buy them, which is great because my wallet is usually empty by this point. I also enjoy chatting with proprietor Ravi Menezes about his plans to spread book-love and literacy, and make the world a better place; he runs rural and slum library programmes with the profit he makes.

FOR BEER AND LIT TALK

Having lugged my book bag this far, I'm merely a stone's throw from **Koshy's** (39, St Mark's Road). This restaurant has been a nodal point for the city's literati for over sixty years, and is an essential part of the book-shopping experience. This is where you can expect to run into authors like Ramachandra Guha having intensive discussions with the who's who of Bengaluru's writers. Rumour has it that Jawaharlal Nehru, one of the greatest author-politicians in world history, ate here. So the routine for most literature-hungry Bangaloreans is to first go and buy something to read in Church Street, then head to Koshy's for a cup and a puff. Even if the shopping has left you short on cash, the coffee (₹39) here is quite affordable and no waiter will hassle you even if you linger to read. I usually save some cash to go for the best-in-town club sandwich (₹190) and UB Export beer (₹170) to sort through the day's booty and gently ease me out of my bibliomania.

And that is the recipe for a perfect Church Street day.

THE VITALS

Getting There: Once you are in Bengaluru, take the metro to M.G. Road Station and head for the Church Street exit.
Hours: Most bookshops tend to be open 7 days a week, from about 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. or even 9 p.m., though they sometimes shut earlier on Sundays. Shops dealing in used books will normally buy titles back at half the rate you paid for them.

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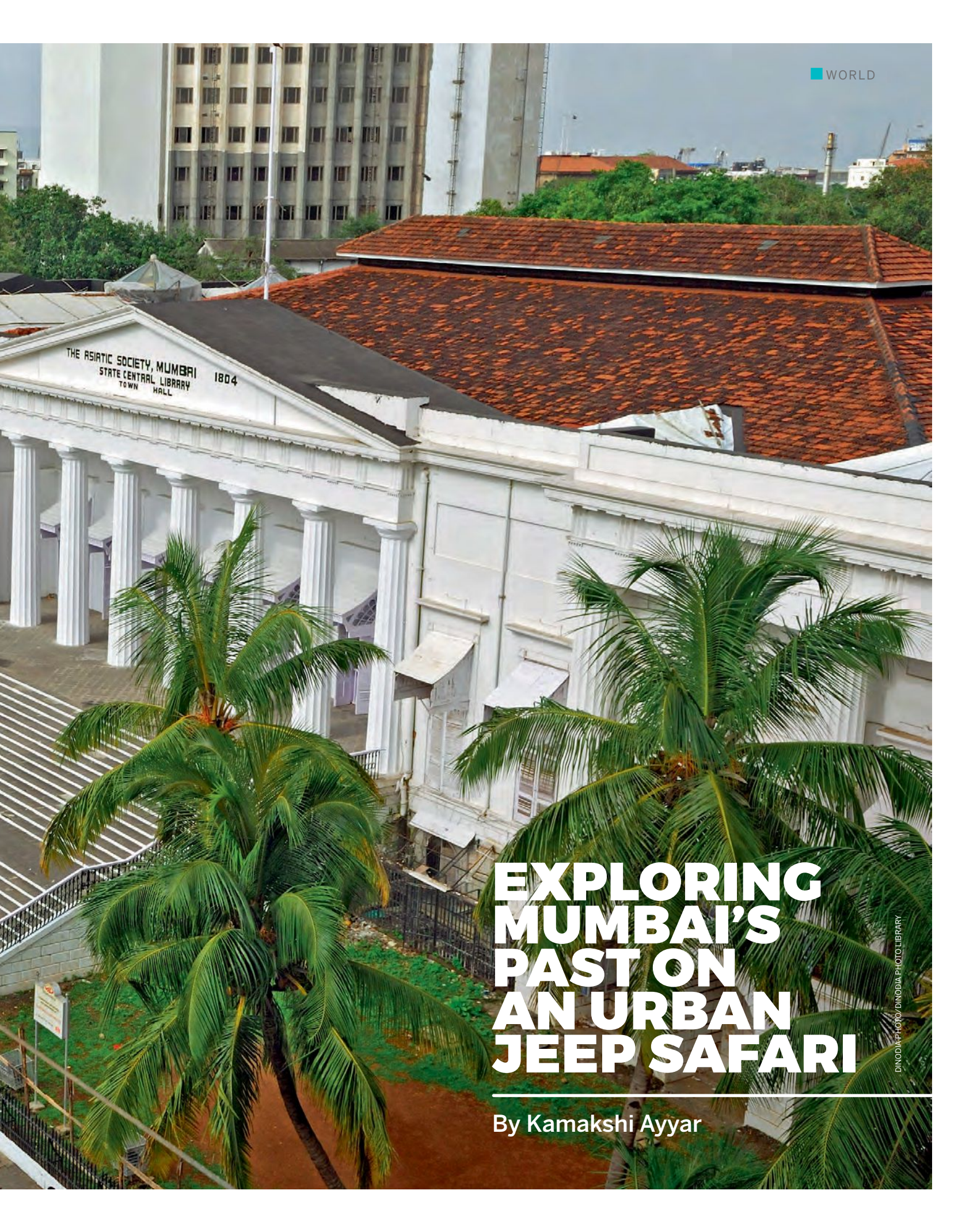


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Built in the 1830s, the Town Hall in south Mumbai was described by Sir John Malcolm, then Governor of Mumbai, as "The most magnificent structure that taste and munificence combined have as yet erected in India."



EXPLORING MUMBAI'S PAST ON AN URBAN JEEP SAFARI

By Kamakshi Ayyar



Mark Twain once stayed in a top-floor suite in this hotel,

our guide Bharat Gothoskar told us, pointing at a building across the street from the artsy Mumbai enclave of Kala Ghoda. “And Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan’s founding father, used to come here to play billiards.” We scrutinized the structure, looking for signs of its former glory. Watson’s Hotel is India’s oldest cast-iron building and was once the grandest hotel in old Bombay.

It’s hard to imagine this past glory considering the facade is crumbling and the window shutters are all but gone. But listening to our guide from Khaki Tours, I began to see the building differently. Built during the British Raj of the 1860s, Watson’s once had an airy atrium and a grand ballroom where guests often danced the night away. I pictured lords and ladies pulling up to the hotel in their carriages, top hats erect, jewellery sparkling.

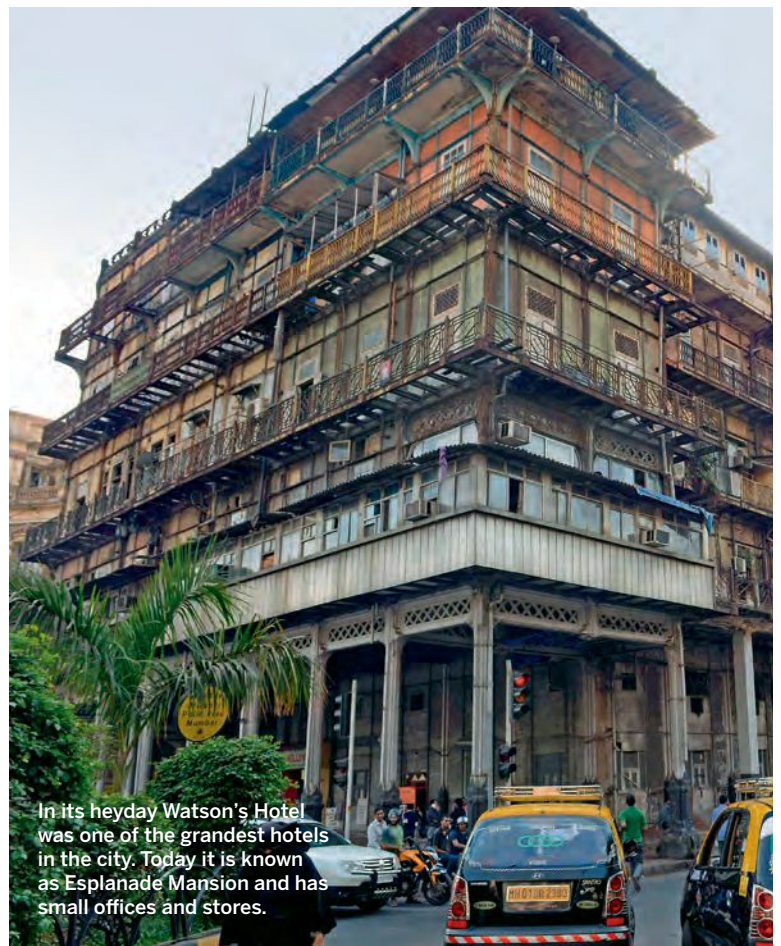
Watson’s was only one of many sites on my guided open-top jeep tour of south Mumbai’s Fort precinct. Dubbed an “urban safari,” it seemed like an exciting way to explore my own urban jungle. Instead of keeping my eyes peeled for crocodiles lazing on rocks, I was scanning for reptiles carved into the Gothic facades of the neighbourhood.

An added plus: It was less tiring than a walking tour, and it allowed me to enjoy the engaging narrative kept up by my guide Bharat, an engineer and history buff. The tour began on the steps of the grand Town Hall building, now called The Asiatic Society of Mumbai, with a quick lesson on Mumbai’s colonial history. Bharat recapped how Mumbai was once ruled by the Portuguese, changed hands to the British, and the crucial role it played in the freedom struggle and the drafting of the Indian Constitution. It reminded me of just how long my city has been around, and how much exploring I still had to do.

AMBEDKAR’S FAVE CHAI SPOT

Our first stop was Rampart Row in Kala Ghoda. En route, we passed the K. R. Cama Oriental Institute building, once a warehouse that stored chunks of ice imported all the way from the U.S. Though they inevitably arrived half-melted, they were a much sought-after commodity among the wealthy. At the end of Rampart Row, we halted near Silk Route, a restaurant easily identifiable by its red awning. Formerly known as the Wayside Inn, the eatery was a favourite of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who apparently framed several parts of the Constitution of India here at table no. 4.

I was flabbergasted. Despite studying the Constitution as a law student in a college not too far from Kala Ghoda, and spending hours at Rhythm House, the music store a stone’s throw away



In its heyday Watson’s Hotel was one of the grandest hotels in the city. Today it is known as Esplanade Mansion and has small offices and stores.



The Greek god Apollo marks the entrance to the Sun Life Assurance Company of Canada building on Dadabhai Naoroji Road.



Rajabai tower's hourly chimes can be heard loud and clear across the Fort neighbourhood of south Mumbai.

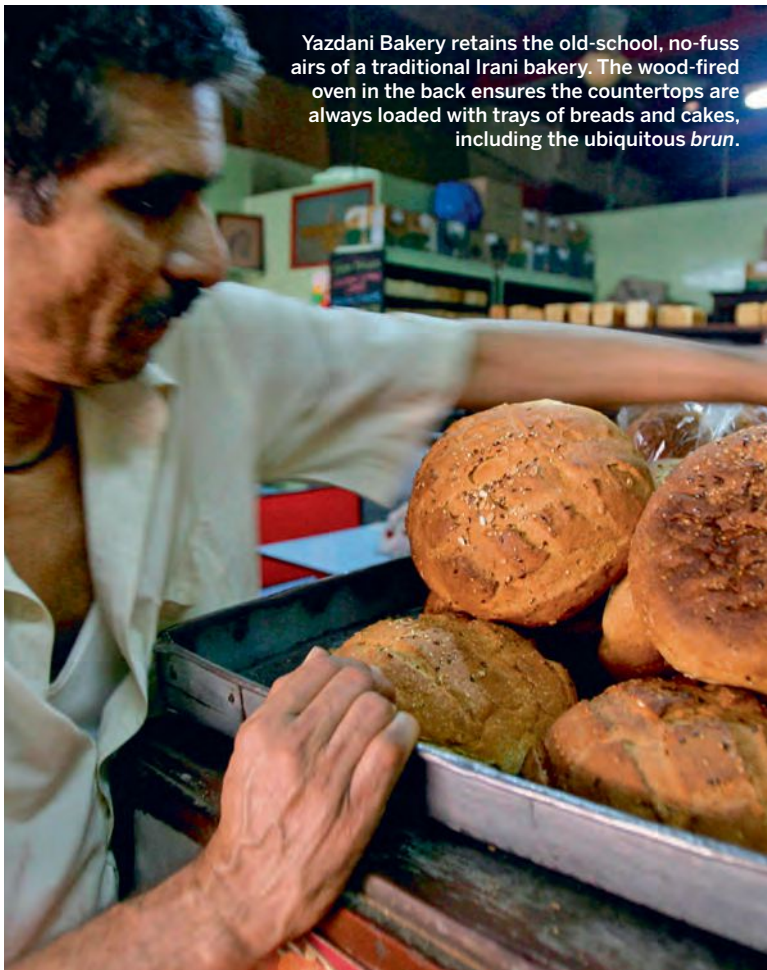
(now sadly shuttered), I had no idea this tiny restaurant is where it all came together.

BIRTH OF MUMBAI ART DECO

After a brief stop at Watson's, we zipped over to Regal Cinema. Mumbai has the second-largest collection of art deco buildings in the world, and Regal was one of its earliest. I've grown up watching movies at this theatre, staring up at the frowning faces carved on the facade and running up the wide stairs to the balcony seats, but I never knew how significant the building was to the city's landscape. On the tour I learned that Regal was built in the early 1930s, and was one of the city's earliest buildings to have air-conditioning, an elevator, and underground parking.

THE STORY OF RAJABAI TOWER

A drive along Oval Maidan brought us to the majestic Rajabai Clock Tower, where Bharat shared one of my favourite stories from the tour. Legend has it that Premchand Roychand, then one of Mumbai's wealthiest merchants, built the structure in the late 1870s for his mother Rajabai. A devout Jain who always ate her meals before sunset, his mother had trouble telling time because she was practically blind. Roychand built her a clock tower so she would know just when the day was going to end. The clock tower has a grislier story too. In 1891, two Parsi women fell to their death from the top of the building under mysterious circumstances. One of them, Bachubai, was the wife of Ardeshir Godrej, founder of the Godrej business conglomerate, the other his sister. Much was debated and reported about the incident, but since then, no one has been allowed to visit the top of Rajabai tower.



Yazdani Bakery retains the old-school, no-fuss airs of a traditional Irani bakery. The wood-fired oven in the back ensures the countertops are always loaded with trays of breads and cakes, including the ubiquitous *brun*.

MR. UNIVERSE WALL VS MAWA CAKE

We needed fortification after that spine-tingling tale and some shade from the mid-morning sun. We paused at Yazdani, one of Mumbai's most famous Irani bakeries. Squished between low shabby buildings on Cawasji Patel Road, Yazdani is popular for chai and butter-toast but I prefer their apple pie, full of warm, sweet goodness. The proprietor drew our attention to the restaurant's Mr. Universe wall covered in pictures of past winners. But I was more interested in the huge trays of freshly baked pav and mawa cakes.

Our trip wound down with pit stops at Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus and Flora Fountain, named for its marble statue of the goddess Flora, and also because it was donated to the city by a local agricultural society. We were intrigued by the small chapel next to the Royal Bombay Seamen's Society in Ballard Estate, which Bharat explained, had been built to remind sailors to "practice Christian values and not stray."

I got off the jeep thinking that I would never see my city the same way again. Roads I'd driven along were reimagined as fort walls, and familiar buildings took on new avatars. The tour was a reminder of how blind I had been to my surroundings. Thankfully, all it took was a few hours and a great guide to change that.

THE GUIDE

The urban safari Fort Ride is a 2-3 hour tour, covering about 50 heritage sites in its 15-km circuit. The tour begins at the Town Hall steps; each jeep seats five, plus guide and driver. Tour includes a map of the sites, bottle of water, and headphones through which to hear the guide over the traffic (*khakitours.com*; tours 8 a.m., 4 p.m., and 7 p.m. daily; ₹2,040 per head).

SAJJAD HUSSAIN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (BAKERY); JTB PHOTO/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP/GETTY IMAGES (CLOCK TOWER); FACING PAGE: INDRANIL MUKHERJEE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (HOTEL); SHARELL COOK (APOLLO); THEDAFKISH (ILLUSTRATION)

A GUIDE TO HIP AND MULTI-CULTURAL BERLIN



By Purva Mehra



The Badeschiff located in front of Arena Berlin is more than just a beach bar. It is a floating swimming pool, and hosts morning yoga sessions, beach activities, and a menu of delicious cocktails attracting locals and tourists of all ages at all times of day.

Berlin favours the unprepared.

On a June afternoon two summers ago, I arrived in the German capital toting an apartment confirmation, a suitcase, and nothing else. Thanks to uncharacteristic ambivalence that year, I had trouble picking a destination until a friend city-hopping through Europe pitched Berlin as the “continent’s coolest metropolis.” I took the bait and landed in the city with four friends, but bereft of a plan. Luckily, I soon found out that plans and itineraries are superfluous in Berlin. All you need is spontaneity and stamina.

FOOD, GLORIOUS FOOD

My experience of alternative Berlin started right from the

location where we chose to stay. I’d picked an apartment strategically located in Kreuzberg, one of Berlin’s most hip and stimulating neighbourhoods. Culture and cuisine converged in our trendy district. As a result, *currywurst*, Berlin’s “national dish,” barely figured in our holiday diet. Instead, we feasted on two-euro shawarmas, and seven-euro bowls of pho with sprightly kimchi, courtesy the Turkish, Korean, and Vietnamese immigrants who flock to Kreuzberg for its cheap rents and in return fill its streets with culinary hotspots.

Our hood’s other gastronomic treasures included Markthalle Neun (Market Hall Nine), a popular weekly food bazaar which attracts connoisseurs of coffee, craft beer, and German sausages. On two occasions we laid waste to mountains of spiced olives, slabs of salty cheeses, and piles of savoury borek peddled at the bi-weekly Turkish market along the Maybachufer bank of the canal, four blocks from us. And then there was Hühnerhaus 36,

a quick-service chicken shop that won the Kreuzberg culinary sweepstakes with its unique brand of juicy rotisserie chicken heaped with Persian rice, garlic sauce, and harissa.

STREET ART AND SURREAL AMUSEMENT PARKS

Graffiti tours, secret performances, and the city's many abandoned sites nourished our appetite for culture. To avoid the tourist crush, we stayed away from historical tours that culminated at the infamous Berlin Wall or the Holocaust Memorial. We chose a different way to get acquainted with Berlin's troubled past by taking a tour with the Alternative Berlin tour company. Penny, a spunky, ginger-haired artist and part-time tour guide, helped us decipher walls filled with weighty colourful slogans and images. She introduced us to the works of graffiti legends such as Blu, Os Gemeos, Alias, ROA, JR, Victor Ash, Don John, and El Bocho (of Berlin's beloved Little Lucy series of street art). While knocking back beer at YAAM (Young and African Arts Market), a communal leisure space by



Every year on Labour Day (1 May), Kreuzberg locals organise Myfest (top), a multicultural street festival with food stalls and performances. Started in 2003 it promotes peace and is a statement against repression and discrimination; Street artist El Bocho has been colouring the walls of Berlin since 1997. Little Lucy (right), a character inspired by a Czech TV series of the same name, is his most famous creation.

the canal that hosts basketball tournaments, reggae concerts, and African dinners, Penny shared her thoughts on alternative art. And pooh-poohed the commissioned public art works of the touristy East Side Gallery.

We found tips on exploring Berlin in the most unlikely of places. At the anniversary celebrations of The Bird, an American steakhouse in the hipster neighbourhood of Prenzlauer Berg, we were treated to free pints of Guinness, pickleback shots, and city recommendations from its multi-ethnic staff. One pointed us to Spreepark, a derelict amusement park overgrown with weeds. It's a Berlin rite of passage to explore the city's many abandoned sites. Snooping around the fenced park, we encountered eerie swan-shaped gondolas, a defunct giant wheel, and cops on the lookout for trespassers on the deserted property. Another Berlin insider led us to Badeschiff, a beach bar attached to a public swimming pool with half of

Berlin's teenage population in it, afloat on the River Spree.

An encounter in the U-Bahn (Berlin's underground train network) with a Russian architect keen to impress four game-for-anything girls, brought us to an erotic horror movie screening in the basement of a private gallery in the tony borough of Mitte. The movie bombed, but the 1 a.m. artichoke pizza at La Pausa right outside the Rosenthaler Platz metro station was worth the gamble with a stranger.

AFTER DARK ADVENTURES

Berlin's affair with colour is evident not just above ground in its murals, but also underground in its artsy U-Bahn. Wonky on an



undiluted shot of absinthe at Druide bar, I found the technicolour city even more vivid. Druide was recommended by our B&B host who also pointed us to Monarch, a secret bar concealed within a supermarket not far from Kreuzberg. Monarch was warm, drenched in red light, with a local vibe.

There's no such thing as an early night in Berlin. We exerted ourselves during an Alternative Berlin pub crawl, hopping from ping-pong dive bars to 70s-themed watering holes and craft beer dens led by indefatigable Yann, a student and energetic night-owl like his fellow Berliners. Our surreal revelry concluded in Honolulu, a pumping bar housed in the whimsically designed Michelberger Hotel in Friedrichshain, an expressive former East Berlin borough with a throbbing nightlife. Sprawled on a couch under an enormous mural of Ganesha, we raised our limited-edition Mikkeller beers in a final toast to Berlin, accurately dubbed the city of the night.

CARSTEN KOALL/STRINGER/GETTY IMAGES (COOKING); EDEN BREITZ/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (GRAFFITI)



The shophouses of Singapore were built between the mid-19th and early 20th centuries. Today, many have been repurposed as boutiques, restaurants, karaoke bars, and hotels, but still maintain their traditional design and ornamental facades.

SHADES OF FUSION IN SINGAPORE'S PERANAKAN NEIGHBOURHOODS

By Malavika Bhattacharya



Like a newly opened box of crayons,

Koon Seng Road reveals a neat palate of slender, pastel-hued structures. A row of double-storeyed, terraced shophouses borders either side of the street. Their conjoined tangerine, salmon pink, and powder blue facades are a lesson in the art of colour blocking.

It takes me a while to pick out the intricate detailing on the frontages: shuttered windows with venetian blinds, floral tiles, butterfly-shaped windows, colonial-style columns, and ornate Chinese motifs of dragons and beasts.

In a bid to learn about Singapore's mixed heritage, I'm exploring the adjacent neighbourhoods of Katong and Joo Chiat in the east. Early settlers on the island of Singapore mingled with the local Malay population, and the mixed heritage children of these unions formed the Peranakan community. The neighbourhoods were home to a sizeable Peranakan population in the 1900s, and still retain their traditional architecture and vestiges of a mixed culture. I walk through the district with Bhajan Singh of A+B Edu Tours, who tells me, "Peranakan means a child of mixed heritage. It comes from the word 'anak,' meaning 'child' in Malay."

Chinese-origin Peranakans, also called Baba-Nyonya (man-woman), form the largest group here, but there are Peranakans of Indian Hindu and Muslim descent as well.

They lived in shophouses, which accommodated businesses on the lower level, and residences on the upper floor. The Dutch imposed a tax on the width of the entrances, so the shophouses were built to be narrow but deep, with cavernous interiors and courtyards. "Furniture had to be hauled up through windows as it wouldn't fit through the entrance," Bhajan tells me.

The cluster of residences along Koon Seng Road, a street branching off the main Joo Chiat Road, dates back to the pre-

war era in the early 1900s. Their heritage status ensures they are well maintained. Coffee shops, grocery stores, restaurants, and even hostels occupy the ornate buildings scattered through nearby lanes. As I wander through them, I notice a mix of Chinese, Malay, and Indian influences. A five-minute walk from Koon Seng Road is the ornate Kuan Im Tng Chinese temple, dedicated to Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. In another five minutes, I'm at the buzzing Joo Chiat Road. Across the street from a mosque, at the Sha Zah Confectionery, I bite into *epok-epok*, a sardine-and-onion-filled crescent-shaped pastry with crimped edges, strongly resembling the sweet Indian dumpling, *gujia* or *karanji*. A tangy burst of flavour follows. The shape was influenced by the Portuguese empanada, which came by way of Goa, Bhajan tells me.

Foreign influences are everywhere here, and for a dollar each, I load up on Indian-style triangular mutton samosas and British-influenced square beef curry puffs. Two doors down, at the tiny but famous Kway Guan Huat restaurant, I watch as thin sheets of wheat flour are hand rolled to make traditional Chinese popiah skins—the outer wrap for popiah or spring rolls. All around, there are grocery stores and fair price shops with swathes of fabric and cane kitchenware. And among them, tiny shops that sell brightly embroidered kebayas (blouses) and sarongs, the traditional combination worn by Nyonya women.

I reach the end of Joo Chiat Road, and hop across the street to the Geylang Serai food centre, crammed with Malay and Peranakan offerings. Lunch is a traditional Peranakan bowl of coconut-flavoured laksa, followed by colourful *kueh* (sweet snacks) made with coconut and rice flour. The individual flavours are familiar, yet the resulting taste is entirely new, just like Singapore's multifaceted Peranakan culture.

THE VITALS

Along with visits to other parts of Singapore, the Makan Makan—Let's Eat tour by A+B Edu Tours and Travel Pte Ltd offers a glimpse into East Singapore's Peranakan cuisine and culture. Prices depend on group size (www.abedutours.com.sg; +65-63392114).

In Focus | CITY LOVE

In the summertime the lawns outside the Titanic Belfast host an extravagant pop-up picnic, music concerts, festivals, and numerous family-oriented events.





It is a story like no other.

The mother of all ships was built, and it sank a few days into its maiden voyage. Stories of the R.M.S. *Titanic* have captured the minds and imaginations of many generations. Tales of the ship, its survivors, and those who lost their lives with it are the stuff of reality—and the stuff of myth and legend.

The ship that launched a thousand stories has dozens of films dedicated to it, including a blockbuster Hollywood epic. There are countless books, and several museums devoted to it. Entire careers in the modern world continue to revolve around the dramatic sinking of the *Titanic*. As I wander through Belfast's Titanic Quarter, tourists like me are everywhere. The once beleaguered industrial wasteland in Northern Ireland's capital is now a revitalized neighbourhood on the move. Millions of visitors have been streaming into the Titanic Quarter since the Titanic Belfast opened in 2012, one hundred years after the infamous ship sank in the icy waters of the North Atlantic. I can see how important this story has been to the regeneration of this city.



Whenever I'm in a new city, I like to walk its streets. It helps me understand its pulse. Nearly two decades after the end of 30 years of conflict in this region, Belfast is still rebuilding itself. I see a large number of students everywhere, and the atmosphere is lively. I walk the three kilometres from downtown Belfast, crossing the Lagan River via a footbridge, to reach the dock area that is now called the Titanic Quarter. Titanic Belfast, the huge, 126-foot-high silver building that dominates the quarter is stunning in scale and appearance. It is uniquely shaped like four gigantic, angular hulls covered in aluminium panels that shimmer in the afternoon light.

Having read every *National Geographic* account of the *Titanic* with fascination, I know different versions of the ship's story. But it's only inside the museum's first exhibit that I learn that the world's most famous ship was built here in Belfast, at this very spot on the harbour. I walk through exhibits of Belfast's industrial and maritime history from the 1800s to the early 20th century when its economy was booming. Unlike what I've heard before, the focus at this museum is more on the building of the great luxury liner, than on its sinking.

In the semi-darkness, I experience the simulated Shipyard Ride. A six-seater wagon takes us through the process of building the massive ship. The sound effects make me feel like I'm witnessing rivets being hammered into the frame. I can almost feel the heat from the iron being smelted. Standing on a

The fully restored S.S. *Nomadic* (top), the only White Star Line ship still intact, sits in Hamilton Dock, close to the Titanic building. Visitors can tour its interiors as part of the Titanic museum experience. A replica of a *Titanic* lifeboat (left) lies among panels displaying questions and controversies that emerged at the *Titanic* inquiry.

FROM BELFAST: THE SHIP THAT LAUNCHED A THOUSAND STORIES

By Niloufer Venkatraman



JIM ORR/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE



and used to transfer passengers from the shallow dock further out to deeper waters where the *Titanic* was anchored. Circling back I return to the museum building, taking in the bronze sculpture of a woman nicknamed Titanica, in the classic “Titanic pose” made famous by Kate Winslet in the 1997 film. Another bronze sculpture has the words TITANIC spelled out—a spot for visitors to capture a souvenir photograph. Looking upward at the magnificent modern building, it really looks like the prow of a massive ship. I can see why the *Titanic* caused such a stir: building something so mammoth in 1912 represented an act of audaciousness.

I walk a longer route back to my hotel, to stop off at another bronze sculpture called Titanic Yardmen 401. It depicts three workers of Belfast, and is meant to commemorate the city’s shipbuilding workforce. Standing in front of them, it becomes clear how closely the *Titanic* is connected to the history of Belfast city. A few months later, when I read that the Titanic Belfast was Europe’s most visited tourist attraction in 2016, I can see that it is also very much connected to its revival and future.

THE GUIDE

Getting There In Belfast, Northern Ireland, it’s very easy to reach the dockside Titanic Quarter, in the eastern part of the city.
Hours Between 9 a.m. and 7 p.m., varies according to season.
Entry Adults £17.50/₹1,475, children (5-16 yr) £7.25/₹611, under 5 yr free; see titanicbelfast.com.
Tip You need at least 3-4 hours to fully cover this attraction. Entry stops 1 hr 45 min before closing time.

EYE UBQUITOUS/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (POSTERS), JCARILLET/ISTOCK (STATUE)

gantry, I watch how workers built the enormous passenger liner, and listen to commentary on their living conditions. It allows me a tiny glimpse of the city’s shipbuilding history.

Using my audio guide, I spend the next several hours touring the rest of the museum’s exhibits. Exploring mock-ups of the different classes of cabins on board, I get a sense of the luxurious interiors the patrons were meant to enjoy. I read stories of the passengers and crew, and then finally reach the exhibit about the ship’s end. There are so many legends and myths around the sinking of the *Titanic*. They have been told over and over again, but never seem to get old. Even as I am writing this, yet another documentary film has been released that says it wasn’t really the collision with the iceberg that sank the ship, instead it claims, it was a fire that had weakened the ship’s hull.

A giant screen in the fascinating last section of the museum takes me to the bottom of the ocean, where the wreck lies, about four kilometres below the surface. The Ocean Exploration Centre has live links to ongoing diving expeditions and up-to-date information on undersea explorations. Besides the footage, there are various interactive exhibits and visitors can get an insight into the high-tech equipment and technology used during deep-sea expeditions.

Stepping back outside, I see the cranes of the shipyard and the dock from where the ill-fated ship was launched. I tour the inside of the S.S. *Nomadic*, another ship built alongside the *Titanic*,

In the early 1900s the White Star Line (top) famously operated steamships that ferried people, cargo, and mail across the seas. A sculpture called Titanica (right) representing a ship’s figurehead sits outside Titanic Belfast. The solemn expression is said to be a tribute to the tragedy of the *Titanic*.



In Focus | CITY LOVE

BEWITCHED BY ANTONI GAUDÍ'S BARCELONA

By Kareena Gianani



Curvy lines, slanting columns, and gardens infuse Park Güell with a fairy-tale feel. This UNESCO World Heritage Site offers lovely views of the village-like barrio of Gràcia.



SABINE LUBENOW/WWW.IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES



With one last grunt,

I heave my bag off the stairs of the train station at Passeig de Gràcia, Barcelona's shopping mecca in the Eixample district. The moment I look up, I see it: a building that looks like a shimmering creature from the wild seas of a Jules Verne tale. Its surface ripples with colourful tiles and discs; its balconies are freakishly skeletal in appearance. I grin at this bizarre, yet utterly captivating structure. Joining a large crowd standing before it, I look up at the roof: a green, blue, purple-tiled oddity, like a dragon's scaly back.

Casa Batlló is one of the seven UNESCO-listed masterpieces of Antoni Gaudí, the Catalan architect who was born in 1852. He magicked Barcelona's cityscape with his wild imagination and ambition. Gaudí's designs were deeply inspired by nature and unfettered by convention, and both awed and infuriated his patrons.

It is Gaudí who has drawn me to Barcelona. I want to trace the memory of a photograph I'd seen online a decade ago. It showed a serpentine terrace studded all over with lustrous tile shards. In my impressionable mind, Barcelona morphed into one large Gaudí creation. I decide his works will be

NATALIE TEPPER/ARCAID IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES (CHIMNEYS), NURPHOTO/NURPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES (CEILING), THE DAKFISH/ISTOCK (ILLUSTRATIONS)



The best way to see Casa Batlló is on a theatrical visit, in which an actor plays Antoni Gaudí and tells stories about this whimsical building. Facing page: Chimney pots shaped like menacing masked warriors (left) are the highlight of La Pedrera (The Stone Quarry), named so because of its resemblance to an open quarry; Nature lover Gaudí built openings in the dome of Palau Güell's Central Hall (right) so sunlight could flood the space by day, and the ceiling resembled a starry sky at night.

my guide to uncovering the layers of this historic city.

It doesn't take me long to figure out an easy thumb rule: if you see crowds milling around a building, it must be a Gaudí. I join one such huddle a few hundred metres away from Casa Batlló. La Pedrera or Casa Milà is one massive undulating wave frozen in stone; an amusing contrast to the straight-backed glass buildings around it. I remember reading about Gaudí's disdain for upright lines and sharp corners. La Pedrera does not have a single linear construction, and was viciously criticized by people and its own residents after Gaudí finished it in 1910. It is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, with display areas open to visitors, as well as private homes and offices.

Inside, I get my first glimpse into the architect's mind. Sinuous inner courtyards are spacious and well-ventilated. Light floods every corner of the model apartment I visit. To make doorknobs ergonomic, Gaudí took clay and pressed it with his hand. The resultant shape became the knob. I begin to absorb his dedication to botany, anatomy, and maths.

La Pedrera's roof takes me on an intergalactic trip. Books and websites have run out of epithets to describe the giant chimney

pots here ("Star Wars characters on acid," "an army of medieval knights"). On some nights, these Darth Vader-like structures are hauntingly illuminated for mini concerts on the rooftop terrace.

Gaudí and his contemporaries left their mark most deeply in Eixample. This part of Barcelona was built in the mid-19th century, connecting the old town in the south with the erstwhile villages in the north. I spend the afternoon strolling down sidewalks, treating myself to endless cups of *café con hielo* (iced coffee). Tables laid out under bright awnings groan under the weight of pasta, paella, and cava, a champagne-like Spanish sparkling wine. It is easy to lose myself even though the district is laid out in a grid. I duck bicycles to photograph fairy-tale balconies and delight in the Gothic-style Casa de les Punxes. Its six towers are shaped like witches' hats. My gelato melts while I try to capture the bulbous-nosed gargoyles, and carvings of bats and knights on other buildings.

Later that evening I chat with the bespectacled man behind the tapas bar I visit in Eixample. "Gaudí? He was quite the crazy creative type, they say. Infuriatingly stubborn. Why, the man wore suits held together with pins!" he chuckles. I think he tells

this story frequently, adding new twists and flourishes when he isn't being interrupted by diners choosing from the array of tapas: golden ham croquetas, grilled cuttlefish, fried eggplant with honey.

The next morning, I walk up to Park Güell in the Gràcia neighbourhood. Though only a few kilometres north of Passeig de Gràcia, Gràcia feels a world apart. Buildings are smaller, with narrow alleys and squares that feel cosier; this was once a separate village outside Barcelona's limits.

I zigzag up a hill, and come to a gate beyond which lie two structures that look like gingerbread houses with roofs of blue-and-white fondant. Gaudí and his patron Eusebi Güell wanted Park Güell to be a housing complex for the rich, but the garden city didn't find takers in the early 1900s, and it was taken over by the city council. The result is a 50-acre public park with Gaudí's whimsical touches, like a mosaic salamander guarding the stairway. I go up to the terrace, and find myself at the spot where the old photograph I'd seen a decade ago was taken. It is shaped like a billow of smoke, far lovelier than I remember. I run my fingers over its *trencadís*, the distinctive mosaic of broken recycled tile pieces that cover all its surfaces.

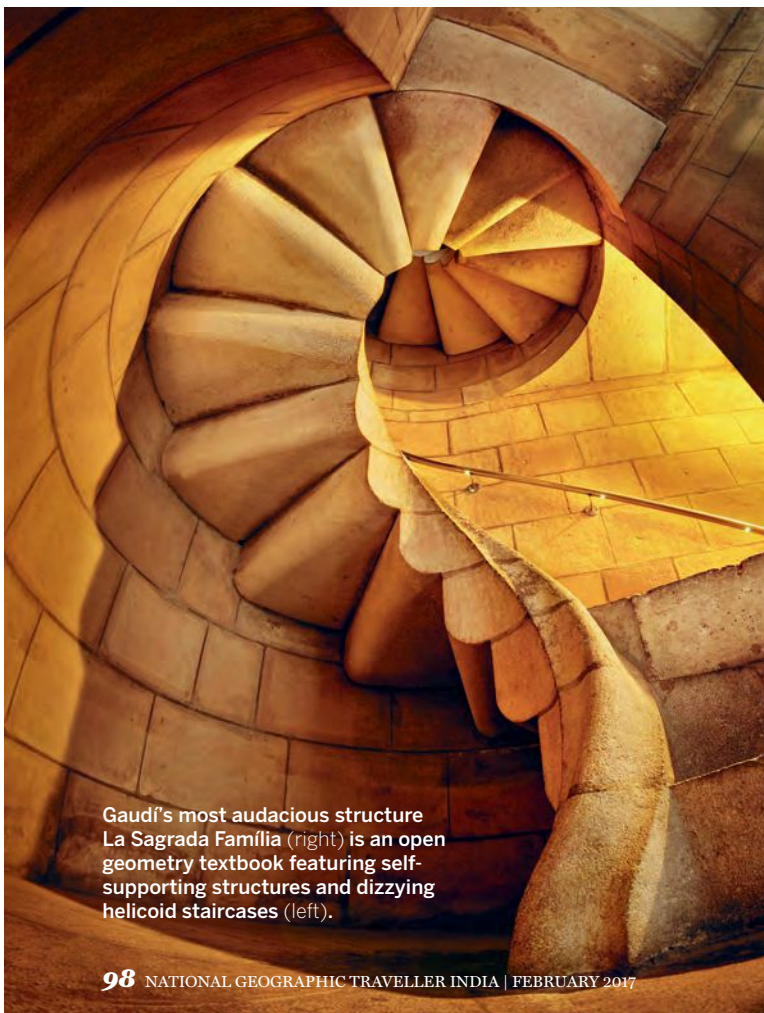
My last stop in Barcelona is also Gaudí's final resting place. La Sagrada Família church looms over every building around it. Cranes slowly move behind its eight 213-foot towers, reaching for the skies in benediction. Work on the church began in 1866, but will be finished only in 2026 when all its 18 towers are completed in time for Gaudí's 100th death anniversary. When people pointed

out to Gaudí that the ambitious church he designed could never be completed in his lifetime, he would respond by saying, "My client is in no hurry," referring to god.

In the book *Homage to Barcelona*, Colm Tóibín writes about how fiercely private Gaudí was. He disliked being photographed, and his religious faith peaked while working on the Sagrada Família. It is fitting that he is buried in the crypt inside. I switch off my audio guide to marvel at the Nativity facade entrance in silence. Biblical figures depicting Christ's birth are sculpted amid what feel like vats of wax melting down the facade. According to Tóibín, most men, women, animals—even chickens!—sculpted here were made with casts on living models. Jesus was a 30-something worker. King Solomon was a ragman from Eixample. Inside, La Sagrada Família is awash in blues, fierce oranges and pinks thanks to the church's stained glass windows. I join a sea of silent visitors, necks craned skyward to observe the tree-like columns. Sunlight dances on our faces. Later, I take an elevator to the top of the Nativity tower, and watch Barcelona dwarfed below me like a miniature cardboard city. The church was Gaudí's way of making heaven meet Earth. It is said that when completed in 2026, it will be the tallest religious building in Europe.

I too have a task to complete on my last night in Barcelona. Walking over to the La Rambla neighbourhood, I search for the 19th-century Font de Canaletes. "Drink its water, and you will return again and again," the waiter at the tapas bar had promised. I take a sip, and then some more, just to be sure.

NIKADA/ISTOCK (STAIRS), DOMINIGO LEIVA/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES (BASILICA)



Gaudí's most audacious structure La Sagrada Família (right) is an open geometry textbook featuring self-supporting structures and dizzying helioid staircases (left).



JOURNEYS


100 **IRELAND**
Live like the royals at these
five manor houses

112 **NEPAL**
Hikes and highs in the Kali
Gandaki valley



112
Kali Gandaki valley, Nepal

GODONG/CONTRIBUTOR/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP/GETTY IMAGES



Spring is a special time at Hilton Park as guests may get the opportunity to witness the birth of lambs on the farm.

At Home in Ireland

FIVE MANOR HOUSES WHERE YOU'LL FIND
WARM HOSPITALITY AND A YARN OR TWO

IRELAND

The ancestral seat of the kings
of Connaught, Clonalis House
welcomes overnight guests.

BY **TURTLE BUNBURY**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **JACE RIVERS**

If

YOU HITCH A RIDE on the back of one of the black crows that constantly wing through Irish skies, you will spy hundreds of castles and mansions sprawling below. A century ago, Ireland had more than 7,000 Big Houses, as the Irish call these

stately homes. They ranged from handsome rectories for clergy to audacious architectural standouts built by the ruling Anglo-Irish aristocracy. With the creation of the Irish Free State in the early 1920s, these country estates quickly fell out of favour; many were destroyed during the Irish Civil War.

Nowadays it's rare to find one in the hands of the family that built it. As the late Anglo-Irish novelist Elizabeth Bowen said, owning a Big House constitutes "something between a predicament and a *raison d'être*." One way owners have kept their houses going is by opening them up to paying guests. I've long been fascinated with Ireland's vanishing heritage, so I set out over a summer to visit five classic Irish homes in which you can now overnight with the lords and ladies of the manor for a taste of life in a Big House.

HOSPITALITY SPRINGS

Ballyvolane House, County Cork

OH, THERE HAVE BEEN many lively nights around this table down through the centuries," says our Ballyvolane host, Justin Green, fondly patting the mahogany as dinner is served. My fellow guests at Ballyvolane are a family of five Chinese Americans on a whirlwind tour of Europe in celebration of an important birthday for Kitchi, their matriarch.

The long rays of an Irish summer sunset dapple the papered walls of the dining room. Through broad windows, we glimpse Friesian cattle grazing in buttercup-filled meadows and, in a distant haze, the rippling hills of East Cork. "Ballyvolane" translates as "place of springing heifers" and, sure enough, a young cow performs a dutiful skip.

Originally built for Sir Richard Pyne, a lord chief justice of Ireland, and completed in 1728, the wisteria-draped Ballyvolane got an Italianate makeover in 1847 and is now a flagship of Hidden Ireland, a group of family-owned Irish castles, manors,





Despite the ceremonial sword, a sideboard at Hilton Park hints at the convivial entertaining the Maddens have mastered here over 200 years.

and mansions that have opened their doors to paying guests. One of the quirky pleasures of Hidden Ireland hospitality is that all guests dine together.

Kitchi's family turn out to be great fun. It's the last night of their grand tour, and the banter runs ceaselessly. We contrast the lives of the Chinese and Irish emigrants who built North America's railroads. We compare Oliver Cromwell's conquest of Ireland with China's Cultural Revolution.

Justin gamely fields questions and spins fresh ones back. Alongside his wife, Jenny, he's racked up nearly 20 years of looking after guests at hotels and resorts in Hong Kong, Dubai, and Bali, before returning to southwest Ireland to take on the family home in 2004. In addition to the six cosy guest rooms in the main house, the Greens offer furnished luxury tents for rent on the estate grounds in summer. This evening, while Justin hosts the table, Jenny is cooking in the kitchen.

Twelve-year-old Toby Green, the eldest of their three children, has already built up an impressive international network of younger Ballyvolane guests. "He has pen pals all over the world," says Justin.

As the evening draws to a close, Kitchi gives her verdict on the trip: "For me, the big highlight has been...feeding the piglets this morning." The piglets are five saddlebacks that snuffle in a stable adjoining the main house. With their mother and some Muscovy ducks, they are the principal beneficiaries of any excess scraps from the Ballyvolane kitchen.

In fact, the kitchen has vaulted Ballyvolane into the upper ranks of Ireland's places to stay. Homegrown or locally sourced ingredients drive the menus, including the succulent halibut we are eating, recently hooked by a fisherman on the Beara Peninsula. All fruits and vegetables come from a three-acre garden bordered by 14-foot-high sandstone walls. Orderly rows yield asparagus, sea kale, spring onion, rainbow chard, beetroot, and potato. And rhubarb—which Justin so deftly converted into a rhubarb martini when I went for a stroll before dinner, passing under a glorious arch of laburnum that leads to terraced gardens and a croquet lawn with a dovecote at its centre. The ground beneath rolls out a seasonal carpet—snowdrops in February, then daffodils, bluebells, rhododendrons, azaleas, and camellias over the ensuing months.

The following day, Kitchi tells me she feels as though she has "just stayed with friends." Justin isn't surprised. "The advantage of opening up only a handful of bedrooms is that you can give guests your complete attention," he says. With that, he sits in front of a Blüthner baby grand and starts playing an old Percy French music hall tune. Silhouetted between Ionic pillars and classic statuary in a hall the colour of burnt orange, he's still playing when the next guests arrive.

■ ballyvolanehouse.ie; six rooms, doubles from €198/₹14,300, including breakfast; glamping from €150/₹10,835.

ROCK OF AGES

Clonalis House, County Roscommon

IT'S NOT THE SORT OF ROCK you'd ordinarily look at twice. A misshapen chunk of limestone, weighing maybe 130 kilos, sits near the front door of Clonalis House, a 45-room Victorian Italianate villa built in 1878 on a 700-acre wooded estate in northwest Ireland.

But step back a thousand years and this was one of the

most important rocks in Ireland. It's the Inauguration Stone, upon which some 30 O'Connor kings were crowned. As kings of Connaught, they ruled over a realm that ran from the Irish midlands to the Atlantic coast. The last "high king" of Ireland was an O'Connor, and should the kingdom of Ireland ever be resurrected, the O'Connor don—the present head of the family—is considered the presumptive claimant to the throne. Pyers O'Connor Nash, the owner of Clonalis, is not the O'Connor don. But his uncle was. This same uncle, a Jesuit priest, bequeathed him Clonalis in 1981.

Pyers eventually left his job as a high-flying Dublin financier to take on full-time management of Clonalis with his wife, Marguerite, and their three children. A grand piano and gilded mirrors in the drawing room provide a taste of the Hibernian opulence echoed in the four guest bedrooms upstairs.

I'm a sucker for ancestral portraits, and I could barely walk a foot along Clonalis's marble-pillared hall without stopping to consider Phelim O'Connor, who perished horribly in battle 700 years ago, or Hugo O'Connor, founder of the city of Tucson in Arizona, U.S.A. "They keep me company when I'm alone," Marguerite confides, as we sit in the library warming ourselves by an ingenious tripartite fireplace, with compartments each for logs and peat.

The O'Conors also maintain a small museum in the house. I expected rather dull land deeds and a few fossilized horse-shoes. I didn't expect King Charles I's death warrant, albeit a facsimile, complete with the signature "O. Cromwell." Nor did I anticipate the harp of the celebrated 18th-century blind bard Turlough O'Carolan or a copy of the Old Testament from 1550.

A chapel is tucked into the back of the hall, with the original 18th-century altar where the O'Conors secretly worshipped at a time when practicing Catholicism was a criminal offense.

My guest room turns out to be as spacious as a squash court, with a four-poster at its centre fit for royalty. A crystal decanter full of sherry waits upon a walnut desk. The bedroom windows look over the parklands where a solitary Limousin bull roams. In the morning, the glow of the rising sun rebounds off his tan hide and makes me think of a vanished age in which the O'Conors ruled the kingdom of Connaught.

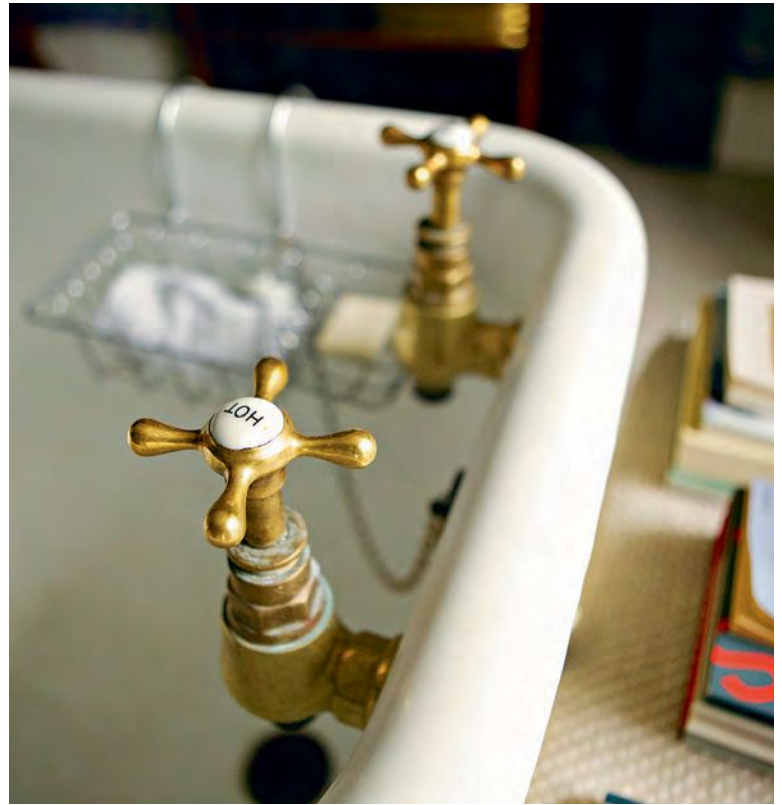
■ clonalis.com; four rooms, doubles from €176/₹12,710, including breakfast.

ARTS HAVEN IN BORDER COUNTRY

Hilton Park, County Monaghan

DANNY MADDEN is not yet six years old, and already he's a dead ringer for his great-great-great-grandfather. I spot this doppelgänger dressed up as a hedgehog shortly after he crawls into Hilton Park's dining room and halts beneath a marble bust of his forebear.

Little Danny marks the tenth generation to have lived at Hilton Park since author Samuel Madden snapped up the land in 1734. Like all Big Houses, Hilton Park was built with entertainment in mind. Approached by a 1.5-kilometre-long avenue, the three-storey sandstone mansion looks like an Italian palazzo stranded in Irish countryside. The house, known locally as "the Castle," achieves much of its aesthetic magnificence from a Victorian porte cochère, topped by a stone carving of the Madden family crest. The present house hails from 1734; John Madden expanded it significantly in the 1870s. The industrious



Hilton Park's guests, who have included Samuel Johnson, can soak in an antique tub (top); Books collected by seven generations of O'Conors line the library at Clonalis House, where a portrait of the owners' ancestor Honoria O'Connor (left) hangs in a corridor.





A mother and son stroll the hillside above Charles Fort, in Kinsale, a County Cork port town popular for water sports, located an hour's drive from Ballyvolane.



John also dug a 135-foot-deep well on the grounds, from which the Maddens still get their water.

The dining room ceiling is stuccoed with oak leaves and braided ropes, a tribute to an ancestor who sailed with Adm. Horatio Nelson, the famous British naval commander. At dinner, my wife, Ally, and I sit around a Georgian mahogany table with Karl and Sonja, a visiting couple from Germany, and Johnny Madden, the evening's host and grandfather of Danny. A wood fire crackles in a Neapolitan marble fireplace. "My antecedents were great fighters," Johnny says. "Mostly among themselves." His father lost a leg battling the Germans in World War II, he tells us. Karl says his grandfather tried to kill Hitler. It's okay to discuss the war these days.

Johnny is an eloquent speaker, holding court on topics from Buffalo Bill to Justin Bieber to the tribulations of a drunken butler who swayed through this very room 12 decades ago. Stick a powdered wig on Johnny's head, and you might be talking to his ancestor Samuel, who tutored Frederick, Prince of Wales, to become one of the 18th century's greatest patrons of arts and architecture.

Thousands of teardrop-shaped humps of earth, called drumlins, mark the landscape here in the north of Ireland, left behind by the last ice age. Local soldiers had barely arrived home from World War I when the politicians drew a line through this boggy frontier to delineate the border between Northern Ireland and what would become the Republic of Ireland. For the most part, the Maddens tended to steer clear of politics. "The only government they were concerned with was here at Hilton," says Johnny.

Johnny and his wife, Lucy, handed over the reins of Hilton Park to their only son, Fred, and his wife, Joanna, in 2011. Trained as a chef in London, Fred has elevated the house's culinary reputation with menus like tonight's scallops atop endive, beef fillet with Jerusalem artichoke, and black currant leaf panna cotta.

After dinner we head down a hall with a vintage harmonium along one side and the heads of slain impala on the walls, to the family living room. As we sprawl upon chesterfields, Fred and Joanna talk about the challenges they face to keep Hilton rolling for another generation. Their sense of duty is absolute: The show will go on.

As we head up a staircase of Riga oak to our antiques-filled but not fusty guest room, one of six at Hilton, we pass rows of books. My wife plucks a title from a shelf and reads from the cover: *The Potato Year: 365 Ways of Cooking Potatoes*, by Lucy Madden. Samuel Madden may have been a bibliophile, but the present-day Maddens take their love of books one step further.

■ www.hiltonpark.ie; six rooms, doubles from €180/₹13,000, including breakfast.

OF KNIGHTS & FALCONS

Temple House, County Sligo

RODERICK PERCEVAL occasionally rows his guests out on reed-fringed Temple House Lake for some pike fishing. "We promise lots of enthusiasm but very little expertise," he warns. But the real catch here lies on the banks of the 200-acre lake: the romantic ruins of an 800-year-old castle built by the Knights Templar, rising up through the morning mist like a panorama from Celtic mythology. Behind the

lakeside castle stands the remaining gable of a 40-foot tower, its ivy-encrusted walls built in the 14th century. To top it all off, a third ruin wraps around both castle and tower, a red-brick manor built in 1627 for a Catholic family.

The Percevals came into these lands in the northwest of Ireland when an ancestor married into the family 360 years ago. They were part of a closely linked network of families, mostly English in origin, that dominated rural Irish life in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Built in 1820, Georgian-style Temple House is one of the largest in Ireland. Roderick and his wife, Helena, have opened up six rooms to paying guests, including my Castle Room, with its view of the 5,000-year-old megalithic Carrowkeel tombs on a far hilltop, and the appropriately named Half Acre room, with its small annex "where husbands sleep if they've been naughty," suggests Roderick.

Roderick has lived at Temple House and its thousand-acre estate most of his life. His sense of ease is contagious. He urges visitors to treat the Big House as if it were their own, so I do. I roam around the farm buildings, meadows, gardens, and ruins. The Atlantic Ocean draws surfers to its shores just 14 kilometres from here. County Sligo's pastoral idyll especially inspired poet W. B. Yeats, who immortalized this part of Ireland in poems like "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" and the play *The Land of Heart's Desire*. In the evening light, the Temple House trees appear at their best, particularly a copse of beech planted in 1798. Roderick regularly adds new saplings. "Every generation has to leave its mark," he says.

If he needs a hand on the farm, Roderick sometimes invites guests to help. During lambing season, some visitors have found themselves out in the fields in Wellington boots, ushering sheep from one pasture to another.

After asking "Have you ever had a falcon land on your hand?" Roderick sends me to an eagle sanctuary on the edge of the estate. "Life is never quite the same again afterwards," he says. I'm treated to an hour-long flying demonstration by regal eagles and owls. The falcon sweeps by my outstretched arm and opts instead for the hand of a teenage boy whose eyes duly widen.

■ templehouse.ie; six rooms, doubles from €170/₹12,280, including breakfast.

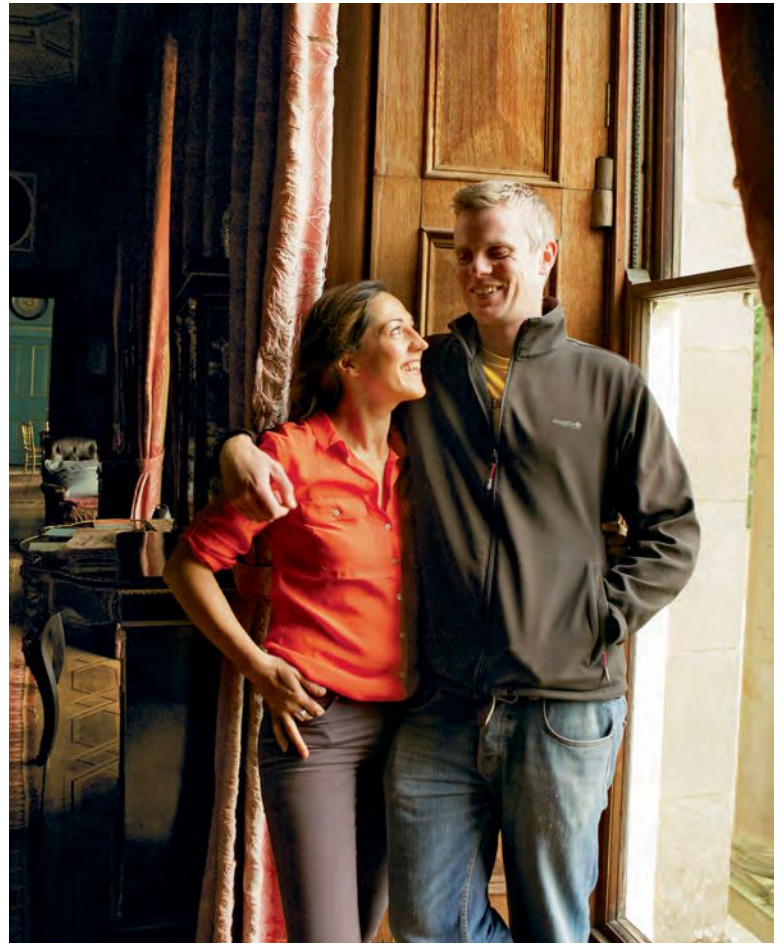
THE GODDESS IN THE DUNGEON

Huntington Castle, County Carlow

THE PAIR OF EGYPTIANS painted on the door should have given the game away. But I'd passed them several times without noticing the handle. Alex Durdin Robertson pushes the secret door open and turns to me with a mischievous smile. "Come on down."

When you find yourself in a 17th-century castle like Huntington, you're entitled to expect a dungeon, with maybe a few rusty iron chains dangling from the damp stone walls. What you wouldn't necessarily anticipate is a temple dedicated to Isis, the ancient Egyptian goddess of motherhood and fertility.

But that is precisely where Alex has led me. For the next 30 minutes, I amble uncertainly around an incense-scented array of golden centaurs and exotic urns placed alongside zodiac drapes and shrines to the Virgin Mary, Lakshmi, and a host of other feminine icons. "My great-aunt Olivia had a powerful dream that God was a female," explains Alex. "She interpreted



Ballyvolane offers upscale camping in bell tents (top left) during the summer months, when homegrown bounty includes potatoes (bottom right); Fred Madden and his wife, Joanna (top right), are the hands-on hosts of Hilton Park; Windows at Temple House (bottom left) look out on terraced gardens.



JAN PALDWIN (FOOD POLES)



County Carlow's Huntington Castle occupies the grounds of an abandoned medieval priory. Visitors can still explore the ruins.

it as a vision. My grandfather agreed, and together they set up the Fellowship of Isis in 1976.”

Huntington has always had an otherworldly ambience. As family lore goes, just over a hundred years ago, shortly before Olivia's birth, a meteorite fell to earth and landed near the avenue of French lime trees that leads to the Big House. The rock reportedly glowed for weeks, providing a warm perch for crows which, as any Isis devotee will tell you, are the avian messengers of Morrigan, the ancient Irish goddess of battle and strife.

Set in the Slaney Valley at the foot of the Blackstairs Mountains, the Jacobean castle is located just off the main street of the winsome village of Clonegal. Battlements surmount the fairy-tale fortress, topped with a heraldic Irish flag. This was the view that first grabbed filmmaker Stanley Kubrick's attention when he zeroed in on Huntington as a location for his 1975 film *Barry Lyndon*.

The original tower house was built in 1625 for Sir Laurence Esmonde, an ancestor of Alex who was among the most influential landowners in southeast Ireland. He covered the costs by placing a toll on a nearby bridge across the River Derry. And for any troublemakers who didn't pay, the dungeon was also his idea.

The Blue Room, where I sleep, features oak panelling, intricately embroidered curtains, and a 17th-century four-poster. Change the light bulb to an oil lamp, and it could be 1625. This

is one of just three guest bedrooms, pitched within a warren of creaky corridors, dark alcoves, and zigzag stairwells bedecked in oriental oddities, chain mail suits, and faded tapestries.

Alex pops his head through the dining room door moments after I have forked in the last of my breakfast of scrambled eggs. He's been up for hours, helping his wife, Clare, get their two toddler sons ready for the day ahead.

“Let's go see the champions,” he says. I assume he means the pot-bellied pigs, Boris and Hamlet, both as grey as the turrets above us. But the champs turn out to be over a dozen oak, hickory, and buckeye trees, hailed for girth and height alike. A flock of Lleyn sheep nibble the grass beneath.

As we walk and talk in the arbour, it is clear that for Alex, life is all about his wife, his two sons, and keeping his castle going for another generation. “Inherit, improve, and pass on,” he says. “That's the unofficial motto. It's a lot of work, but that's okay if you don't mind working.”

■ www.huntingtoncastle.com; five rooms; doubles €180/₹13,090, including breakfast. ●

TURTLE BUNBURY lives in County Carlow and is a historian and the bestselling author of the *Vanishing Ireland* series. Austin-based photographer **JACE RIVERS** has travelled to 45 countries and finds Irish people “among the friendliest in the world.”

THE GUIDE

	<p>Orientation</p>	<p>The Republic of Ireland lies in the Atlantic Ocean, in northwest Europe. It shares its northeastern border with the country of Northern Ireland, which is part of the United Kingdom. Great Britain lies to the east of Ireland, the Celtic Sea to its south.</p>
	<p>Getting There</p>	<p>Flights from New Delhi and Mumbai to the Irish capital Dublin require at least one stop at a Middle Eastern hub like Abu Dhabi or a European gateway like London or Paris. There are convenient bus (www.buseireann.ie) and train routes (www.irishrail.ie) for getting around the country.</p>
	<p>Visas</p>	<p>Indian travellers require a visa to visit Ireland. The application form must be filled online at www.visas.inis.gov.ie. This is followed by a biometrics appointment and occasionally, an interview as well. A single-entry visa costs ₹4,100 (plus ₹1,655 service charge for biometrics), and takes at least 15 working days to process. Those travelling to Ireland via the UK (even in transit) must mention this in their visa application form, so as to get a British-Irish Visa Scheme (BIVS) stamp, which allows entry to the UK. For visa forms and other details visit www.vfsglobalireland-visa.com/india.</p>
	<p>How to Book</p>	<p>Most Big Houses are part of either the Hidden Ireland (www.hiddenireland.com) or Ireland's Blue Book (www.irelands-blue-book.ie) networks, which between them account for more than 60 historic castle and manor houses open to overnight stays. Also browse <i>The Good Hotel Guide</i>, John and Sally McKenna's <i>100 Best Places to Stay in Ireland</i>, and the Discover Ireland website (www.discoverireland.ie). Book ahead as these houses have a limited number of rooms.</p> <p>Dinner at the manor, which is sometimes a group affair, can also be reserved at booking. Some houses, particularly those with gardens, welcome day visits, whereas others offer guided tours of the house interior, generally by appointment only.</p>
	<p>Best Time To Go</p>	<p>May, June, and September are usually the sunniest, mildest months to visit Ireland. But always be prepared for rain.</p>
	<p>Etiquette</p>	<p>Act as if you're staying with friends of friends, and you're most of the way there. You're not expected to make your own bed, but bear in mind your host may be the one cleaning up when you're out. If there's a hired cleaner, you can leave a tip in the room. Hair dryers and toiletries are usually provided, but you might want to bring your own slippers. In some houses, dogs are free to roam the lower floors. If you're headed for a walk, consider offering to take the dog along as well.</p>



What to Read

The Big House has its own genre in the rich world of Irish literature. The writing duo Somerville and Ross inject considerable humour into The Irish R.M. series, Elizabeth Bowen conveys poignant gravitas in *The Last September*, and Molly Keane produced dark comic gems such as *Good Behaviour*. Coffee-table tome *The Irish Country House*, by Desmond FitzGerald and James Peill, is lushly photographed by James Fennell.



Staying at an Irish Country House

Many grand estates that take in paying guests are privately owned homes (only a few of which still belong to their original families), so don't necessarily expect typical hotel amenities such as reception desks and room service.



Atlas



- In designing the White House, in Washington, D.C., Irishman James Hoban was inspired by Leinster House in Dublin.
- Castletown House, Ireland's largest Palladian-style manor, was built for innkeeper's son William Conolly, who became the wealthiest man in Ireland.
- When Sir Edward Pakenham of Tullyally Castle was killed at the battle of New Orleans in 1815, his family shipped him home for burial preserved in a barrel of rum.

The snow-clad massifs of the Dhaulagiri Himal and Tukucho that rise above Muktinath are in sharp contrast to the barren splendour of the region.



MUSTANG SALLIES

PURPLE HAZE AND ETERNAL FLAMES
IN NEPAL'S KALI GANDAKI VALLEY

BY SUGATO MUKHERJEE



I've been told that the rooftop restaurant at Pokhara's small airport offers a lovely panorama of the Annapurna range. But at the moment,

all I can see through the glass panel is the smudged, slate-coloured sky. The weather is unusually inclement for late October, and has thrown flight schedules off gear.

It is mid-morning when the weather clears, and my flight is announced. The 20-seater aircraft will take us from this bustling Himalayan town, across the mountains to the solitude of the Trans-Himalayan range, specifically to the upper reaches of the Kali Gandaki valley.

Some of my fellow passengers are on a pilgrimage to Muktinath Temple, and a large group of intrepid trekkers are on their way to trek the Annapurna Circuit. I'm planning a bit of both: a leisurely hike through the medieval villages of the Lower Mustang area, to soak in the indigenous Thakali culture that survives in these remote parts of western Nepal.

Long, corrugated mountain ridges appear dangerously close to the window as the plane swerves between them along a curving valley. Shimmering below in the morning light is the Kali Gandaki River, which flows through one of the deepest gorges in the world.

Fifteen minutes later, the plane lurches and we are descending, then jolting and heaving to a stop on a tiny, wind-pummelled airstrip amid an immense, sun-brown desolation.

I have reached Jomsom.

On the Jimi Hendrix Trail

The town of Jomsom (9,055 feet) straddles the Kali Gandaki River and is the headquarters of the Mustang district, but it looks and feels like a charming village. Standing guard above it is Nilgiri North (23,166 feet), one of the loveliest mountains of the Nepal Himalayas—its three peaks crowned in radiant snow.

Most backpackers do not linger in Jomsom to soak in its rustic charm, but I have reason to explore the town. After a quick lunch of a succulent yak burger, washed down with some strong Mustang coffee (a curious blend of coffee and *raksi*, the locally brewed rice wine), I head towards the northern part of Jomsom, past a row of guest houses with their backs to the sheer limestone cliffs. I cross a rickety iron bridge over the Kali Gandaki and arrive at Thak-Khola Lodge. Jimi Hendrix is said to have stayed here in 1967, while following the hippie trail to the Annapurnas during the swinging sixties. Room No. 6, with its blue door, is named after the rock legend.

I ask Norbu Thakali, the sinewy old owner of the teahouse, as lodges in this area are known, why Hendrix was here.

"Must be purple haze," Norbu replies, his eyes crinkling with good-humoured wrinkles as he smiles. "Purple haze is a particular variety of cannabis that grew here. Purple in colour and very strong. The hippies loved it." A little ruefully, he adds, "you won't find it anymore."

I know of Hendrix's chartbusting single, "Purple Haze," which released in 1967. But if it is true that the song had a Jomsom connection, Hendrix did not choose to describe it; he died three years later of a drug overdose.

A Zen Monk in Apple Country

The next morning, I set off early towards Marpha, a two-hour hike south of Jomsom. The trail runs flat over the riverbed of the Kali Gandaki, now partly dry, and the rock-strewn floor is easy to navigate. On my left, the craggy silhouette of one mountaintop after another rises above the horizon, topped by the magnificent Nilgiri, which leans casually against a cerulean sky.

I walk past a wall of *mani* stones inscribed with Buddhist prayers and enter Marpha village. It is an oasis of green amid the ochre starkness of the mountains surrounding it. A flagstone-paved street meanders through the village, lined on both sides by typical Thakali architecture: whitewashed houses with flat roofs, where heaps of apples dry in the autumn sun.

Somewhere down this lane, fresh apples are sizzling with cinnamon, sugar, and butter. I follow the smell, walking past old men shuffling down the path with baskets of buckwheat strapped across their foreheads, and children playing hide-and-seek. I squeeze through a tiny maroon-framed door into the courtyard of a bakery. Four tables are neatly laid out in the sunlit space.

Sasi Hirachan serves me some of the delicious apple crumble she has whipped up. "Marpha is the Nepal's apple capital," she says. I tell her that I have read about Marpha apples in *Three Years in Tibet*, a book by Japanese monk Ekai Kawaguchi in 1909.

Her face lights up. "But he stayed just next door!" she exclaims. Sasi leads me to a sprawling mansion. A yellow sign above its elegant wooden facade commemorates the visit of the Zen monk, who left his country to explore the world and stayed here for three months in the summer of 1900, in the guise of a Tibetan

SHALIGRAM STORY

Revered by Hindus as manifestations of the god Vishnu, *shaligrams* are spiral-shaped black stones. They are actually fossils of ammonites, extinct molluscs estimated to have lived 140 to 165 million years ago, before the Himalayas were formed. Shaligrams are mentioned in ancient Sanskrit texts and in the writings of the seventh-century Hindu philosopher and reformer Adi Shankara. The profusion of shaligrams in the upper reaches of Kali Gandaki makes it a holy river.



SHIKHARBHATTARAI/ISTOCK



The skilled Thakali riders of Mustang navigate the roughest of terrains, and horses remain the preferred mode of transportation in the valley (top); The tiny medieval village of Jharkot (bottom) is a pit stop for trekkers on the way to Muktinath or Thorung La.



SUGATO MUKHERJEE



1



2



3

1 The huge clay effigy at the Thakali village of Kagbeni is lovingly called *meme* or grandfather by residents.
2 Locals eat hard yak cheese or *chhurpi* like candy.
3 The Muktinath temple complex has 108 water spouts shaped like bull heads.
4 It is common to see hardy Thakali women go about daily chores with their infants strapped on their backs.
5 In the apple district of Marpha, wealth is often gauged by the number of apple trees a person owns.
6 Kagbeni has several rooftop restaurants which offer spectacular views of the Kali Gandaki River and valley.



4



5



6

lama. Upstairs, I find a small museum that houses his personal belongings. On a shelf is a tattered copy of Kawaguchi's book. Mentioned in it are his host, the village headman of Marpha, who helped him on his secret journey to Tibet, the sophisticated Thakali culture, and of course, Marpha's apple orchards.

I retrace my steps to Jomsom, my knapsack a little heavier with the weight of crisp green apples. Sasi told me they would come in handy during my hike to Muktinath over the next two days.

Medieval Whorls of Kagbeni

Thick, sweet Thakali bread made without yeast, and a generous helping of homemade yak cheese make up my breakfast the next morning. Later, I embark on the long ramble to Kagbeni, the village that is the first night's halt on the way up to Muktinath. The dusty trail looks like an ugly scar on the face of the mountain. After crossing a footbridge, I descend into the wide riverbed. The austere, dun-coloured hills in the windswept upland around the trail resemble colossal abstract sculptures, twisted out of proportion by their creator.

A few public buses and service jeeps raise dust, rattling up what is considered one of the world's most dangerous roads. Mustang horsemen ride past the long file of pilgrims and backpackers. Between protecting my camera from the dust with a silk scarf from Marpha, and trying to capture the landscape during moments of calm, I scour the river basin for ammonite fossils called *shaligrams*. I'm hoping that some might have escaped finding their way to the little village curio shops that sell ethnic jewellery, stones, and knick-knacks. Men have been collecting these prized fossils for centuries, and expectedly, I find none.

But the search slows my pace. Just before reaching Kagbeni, a wind begins to stir along the riverbed, quickly building into an unrelenting gale. Throwing caution to the wind, I run helter-skelter over the boulders, race across a footbridge where a stream meets with the Kali Gandaki, and barge into a large red house with a hotel sign dangling from a window. It is around midday.

After the gale blows over in the afternoon, I wander through Kagbeni, a delightfully lively but antique place. Residents, visitors, and horses fill a labyrinth of lanes that are interspersed with chortens and prayer wheels, and lined by crumbling mud houses with red-bordered windows and ground floor stables.

In the cobblestone alleys, I keep bumping into Peter Hopkins, an anthropologist from New Zealand who is staying at my hotel. He shows me a huge, fierce-looking, permanently aroused clay effigy attached to a wall in the village square. "This one predates Buddhism in the valley," he says. This ancient guardian deity of Kagbeni is believed to date back to a time when ancient salt traders settled here.

Later in the afternoon, Peter and I clamber up to a brick-red monastery, perched atop a ridge above the village. A wizened monk takes us into the chapel, which is thick with the smell of centuries of melted yak butter. Shafts of sunlight stream in from skylights to light up old murals. The old lama shows us an ancient text, written in gold, which was apparently brought here from Tibet when the monastery was founded in 1429.

Autumn Splendour and Muktinath

The gradient is steeper the next morning, providing beautiful views of the gently rolling fields of golden buckwheat and barley nestling in the wedge of land that juts above Kagbeni. The vista has changed: past the rugged desert mountain zone, I walk

through farmland and meadows gurgling with small rivulets. As if on cue the sky turns dark, casting shadows as I reach the medieval village of Jharkot built on a gradually sloping ridge that drops abruptly at the other end. The citadel with its monastery looks spectacular with the mountains as backdrop.

Beyond Jharkot, the path ascends quickly to the string of hotels in Ranipauwa village at the base of the Muktinath shrine. One of these is called Hotel Bob Marley, and its funky decor draws me inside. I grab an early lunch of pasta sprinkled with local herbs, just the thing to fortify me before the short walk, past the Tibetan traders and sadhus, to Muktinath.

The shrines of Muktinath lie scattered amid surprisingly thick alpine groves for this altitude of 12,170 feet. I step carefully over the watery traces of last night's snow to the Jwala Ji shrine in the temple complex. Inside burns Jwalamai, an eternal flame caused by natural gas seeping out of rock fissures. This shrine has attracted Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims for centuries. The high notes of the temple bells of the pagoda-styled Vishnu shrine merge with the Buddhist chants of the monastery on its right. The sky turns a deep delphinium blue to expose the majestic cliff of Dhaulagiri, the world's seventh highest mountain, at a far corner of the horizon.

Prayer flags criss-crossed atop the shrines start snapping in the strong breeze that starts blowing from the north. I begin my slow descent over the stone path that leads to the valley below. I am looking forward to another evening of walking through those lanes around the village square of Kagbeni before catching my flight to Pokhara the next day. A part of me hopes the wind blowing in will delay my departure. ●

SUGATO MUKHERJEE is a Kolkata-based writer and photographer who loves travelling off the beaten path and experimenting with local cuisines. His first coffee-table book *An Antique Land: A Visual Memoir of Ladakh* was published in 2013.

THE VITALS

Getting There A few private airlines operate in the Pokhara-Jomsom sector, flying 20-seater crafts. (*The writer flew Tara Air, \$113/₹7,680 one-way. Others include Buddha Air and Yeti Airlines.*) Book in advance in the high season (*Apr-May and Sep-Oct*). Hiring a jeep or taking the bus that runs the 18-km stretch from Jomsom to Muktinath once daily is a bone-rattling, but shorter alternative to walking. Biking the windy road is another option.

Do the Trek The trek from Jomsom (9,055 ft) to Muktinath (12,172 ft) and back requires 4-5 days of easy hiking. There are teahouses along the way in the villages of Jomsom, Kagbeni, Jharkot, and Ranipauwa. These are family-run guest houses that offer basic but comfortable accommodation for ₹300-1,000 a night. Food choices are wide, from hand-tossed pizzas, yak steak sizzlers, and homemade pasta, to apple pie and crumbles. This can be washed down with some Mustang coffee or fresh sea buckthorn juice.

Travel Tips As the route falls within the Annapurna Sanctuary, you need to get the Annapurna Conservation Area Permit (ACAP) before leaving Pokhara. Plan for an extra day in Kagbeni if your schedule permits. Rooms are charged at a higher rate if you do not eat meals at the guest house.

FACING PAGE: DAVE STAMBOLIS/AGE FOTOSTOCK/DINODIA (EFFIGY), PRAKASH MATHEMA/STRINGER/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (CHEESE); FRANK BIENWALD/CONTRIBUTOR/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY IMAGES (SPOUTS); HADYNAH/E+/GETTY IMAGES (WOMAN); SHIKHARBHATTARAI/ISTOCK (APPLES); TAYLOR WEIDMAN/CONTRIBUTOR/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY IMAGES (RESTAURANTS)

SHORT BREAKS

118 **FROM AHMEDABAD**
Maritime wonders and
double roti in Mandvi

120 **STAY**
A farm stay in Maharashtra is all
about life's simple pleasures



The 20th-century red sandstone Vijay Vilas Palace is built in Rajput architectural style, but also has domed bastions and stained-glass windows.

Memories of the Sea

MANDVI IS A MELANGE OF KUTCHI TRADITIONS AND RICH AVIAN LIFE | BY AMBIKA VISHWANATH

Located right on the Gulf of Kutch in Gujarat, with the Rukmavati River flowing on the east, the town of Mandvi has a rich history. A fortress was established here in the late 16th century and the town itself was a bustling sea port and trading centre. Its landmark temples and mosques drew people

from all over the kingdom of Kutch and beyond. Today it is a slower, calmer place known for its soft sand beaches, whispered legends, and migratory birds. Though not as famous as its northern neighbour Bhuj, Mandvi remains a great place to soak in history and enjoy Kutchi hospitality, all at a leisurely pace.

THE VITALS

Getting There Mandvi is located in southwestern Gujarat. The nearest airport and train station are in Bhuj, 60 km/1 hr northeast of Mandvi (*taxis cost about ₹1,500 one way*). **Stay** A short drive from town is the shoreside **Serena Beach Resort**. Rooms are Swiss-style tents equipped with modern amenities and a large balcony to enjoy the view. The resort showcases Kutchi culture, art, and history in its decor (*www.serenabeachresort.com; doubles from ₹7,000*).

four ways to explore

A MARITIME LEGACY

The 400-year-old **shipbuilding yard** on the bank of the Rukmavati River is testament to the town's maritime past. In its heyday, this yard probably resounded with the sound of hundreds of men at work. As ships became larger and more modernised, Mandvi gradually faded from prominence. Today, the shipbuilding tradition continues on a smaller scale as expert craftsmen from the Kharva community carve out large wooden ships entirely by hand. Although they make only a few a year, each vessel is a thing of beauty brought to life from hardy sal wood.

Back in the day, Mandvi's merchants sailed to Southeast Asia, Arabia, Africa, and even as far as England. From their travels they brought home stories, treasures, and interesting architectural influences. The palatial homes they built often incorporated different European styles. Take a walk around the narrow lanes of the **old town** inside the remaining bastions of Mandvi fort and marvel at the eclectic architecture. Traditional Gujarati homes are embellished with delicately carved angels, balconies with flowered trellises, baroque motifs, and stained-glass windows. Despite the damage suffered during the 2001 Bhuj earthquake, it isn't hard to imagine their erstwhile grandeur. Friendly residents will often invite you in for tea and chat about their ancestors and colourful history.

ON THE WATERFRONT

Mandvi's wetlands, mud flats, and coastal areas provide excellent **birdwatching** opportunities for amateurs and seasoned ornithologists alike. Winters are especially great as hordes of migratory birds arrive in and around the Gulf of Kutch. Go early to catch the sunrise along Mandvi creek and spot flamingos, brown and black-headed gulls, demoiselle cranes, and sandpipers among others.

Dhrabudi beach, half an hour east of Mandvi, is an unusual spot; it has a host of statues, broken pillars, and religious idols. As many old temples and homes that were destroyed during the earthquake were rebuilt, there were elements from the original structures which could not be restored. Somehow these pieces found their way to the beaches. Initially, many of these were deposited straight into the sea or strewn on the beach, but eventually locals collected them and placed them in a central spot. Today, a makeshift temple has sprung up here, making this stretch of sand a curious space dedicated to these bits of Mandvi's past.

THE ORIGINAL DOUBLE ROTI

Said to be the birth place of the famous snack **dabeli**, Mandvi has several street vendors and shops that claim to offer the best version of it. The dabeli is a Kutchi take on a burger or sandwich. It contains potatoes mixed with spices, topped with chutney and roasted peanuts, all stuffed in a **pao**. Apparently, it was invented in the 1960s by a local vendor called Gabhabhai. While many shops in Mandvi claim to make the best dabeli, **Joshi Doublerothi Wala** near



Shipwrights are dwarfed by their creations (top) at the centuries-old shipbuilding yard in Mandvi; From about November to early March, Mandvi plays host to greater flamingoes (bottom) and other migratory birds; Though **dabeli** (bottom left) is a classic roadside snack, Mandvi's **dabelivalas** create new flavours to suit changing taste buds.

the water tank in the old town and **Jayesh Rotivala** near the bus stand are known for their delicious and authentic versions (prices start at ₹10).

REEL ROYALS

Built as a summer resort in the 1920s by the then Maharao of Kutch, **Vijay Vilas Palace** is a beautiful red sandstone structure fusing Rajput architecture with colonial elements. It is set amid sprawling landscaped gardens with marble fountains and water channels. The upper terraces and ground floor are open to visitors, and walking through them feels like travelling back in time. Both the palace and its grounds have been used in several Bollywood films, including *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* and *Lagaan*. With the sea as the backdrop, the large terrace with **jaali** work and colourful tiles is the perfect setting for visitors to re-enact their favourite scenes from the movies (open daily 9 a.m.-6 p.m.; entry ₹40). ●

STREAMING SILENCE

LIFE FLOWS GENTLY AT A FARM STAY IN MAHARASHTRA | BY CHAITALI PATEL



The simple pleasures of living on a farm: Sitting outside the cottage spotting birds, trees, and insects keeps the kids entertained for hours.

For city dwellers, silence is a rare commodity. And quietude was what I was looking for on a weekend trip to Maachli, a farm stay in Vengurla in Maharashtra's southwestern district of Sindhudurg. When I closed my eyes on my first night there I was enveloped, not by silence, but the calming lullaby of crickets chirping, and insects and larger creatures rustling. Closer to dawn the sounds of crickets gave way to a variety of birds: the calls of shrill sunbirds and red-whiskered bulbuls occasionally interrupted by a loud quacking, almost like a distress call.

Over cups of hot ginger chai, Prathamesh Samant, who runs the farm stay with his parents Pravin and Archana, told us that the quack was the call of a Malabar pied hornbill, commonly found here. Father and son designed the farm's six cottages to resemble *maachli*—shelters built using local techniques and materials. During cultivation and harvesting, farmers stay in such shelters for days, tending to their crops. The cottages at Maachli have large sit-outs that open on to the farm's lush

plantation of coconut and banana palms, and a variety of spice trees. The local microclimate keeps the place cool, even in summer.

With mobile connectivity sketchy at best, and televisions and Internet thankfully absent, the enticements of the natural world beckoned. Prathamesh assured us that we would spot the regal hornbill during our stay, and it was with this hope that we set off on a walk with him one bright, sunny morning.

We climbed up a gravel path overrun with weeds, and soaring mango, betel nut, teak, and arjuna trees for company. The landscape was a carpet of green, with grass and moss colonizing every available cranny; though the monsoons had arrived a little late, this region had received a good spell. Finally, the climb flattened at a rolling plateau, where farmers were busy cultivating their kharif crops; some ploughed fields with their oxen to sow groundnut seeds.

We continued on, accompanied by the rustle of the wind in the leaves and the occasional loud



NATURE



RELAXATION

call of the red-wattled lapwing. We sat for a bit, watching a few village children splashing in a pond fed by a gurgling stream.

When we got back to the farm, Prathamesh's mother had whipped up a feast with the help of local Malvani ladies. They served us puri-bhaji, and three kinds of *poha* (flattened rice): *tikat kanda poha* with spicy onion, *gode poha* made with jaggery, and *kalo lele poha*, which has a smoky flavour.

Subsequent meals at Maachli were just as good, with fresh ingredients like coconut, pepper, bananas, breadfruit, and nutmeg coming from the farm. Most of the other ingredients were sourced from the nearby village market. Almost every ingredient, from country chicken and freshwater fish, to a wild plant called *taikala*, was made using traditional methods and implements. The food was served in earthen pots, and we ate our meals on *patravali* or leaf plates.

The dining area—a few large tables and benches under a thatched roof—lies between the kitchen and the freshwater stream, the highlight of the property. In fact, one of the ways to enter the property is by wading through the stream's shallow waters. During our stay, the children never passed up a chance to head to the stream to spot fish, float paper boats, or take a dip.

While skilled cooks sated our appetites and the stream provided simple entertainment, the hornbill continued to elude us. Finally, on a walk around the village with Prathamesh, we were chatting with a local potter when our conversation was interrupted by a quack. Three hornbills flew above us from tree to tree. Large in size and loud in volume, they were a spectacular sight and a great find—like much else at Maachli. ●



Accommodation

Though minimal, Maachli's six cottages have everything needed for a comfortable stay, including a modern bathroom. Copper bottles and tumblers for drinking water and a large copper bucket in the bathing area create a rural ambience (www.maachli.in; doubles from ₹3,800; ₹950 for an extra person; ₹350 for children between 5-10 years, without extra bed). Meals cost extra (breakfast ₹150, lunch/dinner ₹450; discounted for children). Food can be customized for specific dietary requirements.

Getting There

The farm is 550 km/ 9.5 hr south of Mumbai, and 93 km/2 hr north of Panjim, Goa. The closest railway station is at Kudal (19 km/ 30 min by auto or taxi), where trains from Mumbai to Mandovi and Mangalore make a stop. The nearest airport is at Dabolim, Goa (116 km/ 2.5 hr south).

Meals at Maachli feature fresh ingredients cooked using traditional equipment such as *chools* or mud stoves (top); Every aspect of the farm stay has been designed to blend in with nature (middle); A favourite with the adults and kids alike is the stream that runs through the property (bottom).

PHOTO COURTESY: MAACHLI (FOOD & WASHBASIN), CHAITALI PATEL (PEOPLE)



DAVID BEN
GURION
CULTURAL PARK
PACHUCA DE SOTO,
MEXICO

Mexican artist Byron Gálvez's gigantic masterpiece is one of the highlights of the David Ben Gurion Cultural Park in Pachuca, north-east of Mexico City. Gálvez's creation is one of the largest pedestrian murals in the world, covering a massive area of 3,45,000 square feet. Created as a homage to women, the walkway's 16 modules show 2,080 female figures in scenes of motherhood, love, beauty, and more. The striking 1,310-foot-long mural is a melange of over seven million pieces of ceramic in vivid colours.

Gálvez also worked on the master plan of the park spread over 65 acres that's dedicated to David Ben Gurion, the founder of Israel. The park comprises the Museum of Contemporary Art, a convention centre, concert hall, hotel, and shopping centre. It was the artist's last major project and one that he worked on from 2001-2005. Gálvez felt that art should be an important part of everyday life, and as people run, cycle, or walk on his mural, his belief has turned into reality (*open 7 a.m. -8 p.m. daily; entry free*).

—Chaitali Patel





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DUOMO DI SIENA SIENA, ITALY

Most masterpieces have to be viewed from a safe distance, protected from visitors by glass cases. In the Duomo di Siena, the Cathedral of Siena, the masterpiece is under your feet. The inlaid marble mosaic floor is covered to protect it, and uncovered for public viewing for a few months each year. Even then, some sections considered too valuable are barricaded to prevent visitors from walking on them.

Covering the apse and nave of the cathedral, 56 panels of varying sizes and shapes form an interlocking marble carpet. It has intricate depictions of biblical scenes and allegories that combine with the cathedral's soaring pillars of black-and-white marble stripes to create a breathtaking effect. Various artists worked on the floor between the 14th and 18th centuries, using techniques known as *graffito* and *marble intarsia*.

Domenico Beccafumi, a renowned Sienese artist, created several masterpieces in the floor during the early 16th century. Look out for his frieze of Moses striking water from rock and scenes from the life of Elijah. (www.operaduomo.siena.it; uncovered floor viewing 29 Jun-31 Jul and 18 Aug-26 Oct; open 9.30 a.m.-5.30 p.m.; entry €7/₹500.)
—Chaitali Patel



VOLUBILIS MOROCCO

The ruins of the city of Volubilis offer a peek into a glorious past of the erstwhile kingdom of Mauretania. Founded in the 3rd century B.C., it was the capital city and an important outpost of the Roman Empire, with many impressive buildings, built on the riches of a thriving olive trade. Ravaged by an earthquake in the mid-18th century and later plundered, this city in northern Morocco covering an area of 104 acres, lay in ruins for many years. Archaeologists began excavations in the late 1880s.

While only skeletal remains of once grand structures are seen today, the true riches of Volubilis are its collection of remarkably well-preserved mosaics. Ruins of stately mansions have floors covered with exquisite mosaic art. Themes of Greek and Roman mythology dominate as do motifs of Africa's rich flora and fauna.

The stately House of Venus mansion has mosaics in seven corridors and eight rooms. The most notable of these is a depiction of the legend of the hunter Actaeon, who stumbles upon the goddess Diana and her nymphs bathing. According to the myth, the furious goddess turned Actaeon into a stag, who was then ironically chased and killed by his own hunting dogs.

—Chaitali Patel

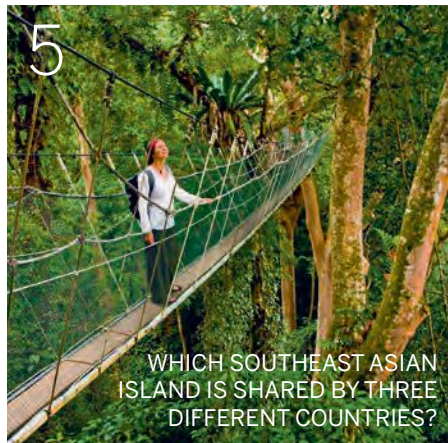
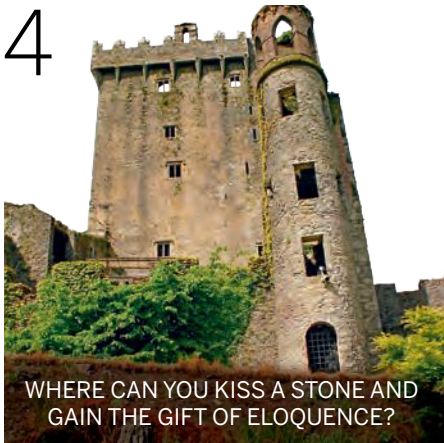




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TRAVEL QUIZ

TEST YOUR TRAVEL IQ



ANSWERS 1. THE BUDDHA'S TOOTH 2. JAPAN 3. NEW DELHI 4. BLARNEY CASTLE, IRELAND 5. BORNEO 6. ICELAND 7. A SUPERHIGHWAY LINKING DELHI, MUMBAI, CHENNAI, AND KOLKATA 8. KOLKATA 9. MALAYSIA

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