

EXPLORE THE UNEXPLORED

The Traveller Trails

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VOLUME 7 • ISSUE 2 • JANUARY - MARCH 2024

PRICE Rs 150

Alone in
SPITI


Winterscapes of
KASHMIR

Treasures of
AGRA

Frontiers of
RAJASTHAN

SIFNOS
A Cycladic Gem

RESPONSIBLE TRAVELLER RESPONSIBLE TOURISM

A full-page background image showing a diver in black shorts and fins swimming horizontally in clear, deep blue water. Below the diver is a vibrant coral reef with various types of coral and small fish. Sunlight rays penetrate the water from the surface, creating a shimmering effect.

TRAVEL WITH PURPOSE, EXPLORE WITH CARE

Explore the world while making a positive impact and supporting sustainable tourism. Join the movement for journeys that matter.

[#JourneysThatMatters](#)

About Us: The Traveller Trails is your passport to purposeful exploration. Our passionate team uncovers hidden gems, promotes sustainable tourism, and inspires journeys that make a positive impact. With a commitment to making every travel experience count, we invite you to explore the world with care and purpose. Travel differently with Traveller Trails.

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The Traveller Trails

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Rupesh Kumar
Editor

In the vast canvas of our world, where borders blur and cultures intertwine, the UNWTO unfolds a promising report for international tourism. Projections hint at a resurgence surpassing pre-pandemic levels in 2024, an uplifting news amid global challenges.

In 2023, 1.3 billion adventurers explored foreign lands, a 44% surge from the year prior. The Middle East exceeded expectations by 22%, Europe hit an impressive 94%, and Africa triumphed at 96% of 2019's tourist influx. Despite eased restrictions in China, the Asia-Pacific region lags at 65%.

However, the path to recovery in 2024 is not without its cautionary tales. Potential risks loom large, with the pace of recovery in Asia being a big concern. Economic and geopolitical challenges, including the Israel-Hamas war, the Ukraine-Russia conflict, and the uncertainty in the global economy, cast shadows over the optimistic forecast. The UNWTO wisely alerts us to persisting inflation, high interest rates, volatile oil prices, and potential disruptions to trade, all of which could impact transport and accommodation costs throughout the year.

Shifting our attention to the pages of this issue, we are thrilled to present a wide range of adventures, experiences, and discoveries. Ispita Paul recounts her solitary odyssey across Spiti Valley, a nine-day exploration of self-discovery. Swapnil Bhole and Neha Raje guide us off the beaten paths of the Himalayas, unveiling wonders in Pangna, Chaini Kothi, and Chaupal.

Ashis Ghatak whisks readers to Kashmir, portraying the winter wonderland around Dal Lake with vivid descriptions of snow-covered scenes. In parallel, Suraj Dutta tells a unique narrative of Rajasthan forts and borderlands, providing a fresh perspective on the rich history of the region. Anjaly Thomas introduces the serene beauty of Lake Komani, and Gaveride steers us through Sifnos, a Greek island ripe for adventure.

The adventure continues as Masarrath Ali becomes our cultural compass, weaving through the wonders of Agra and unraveling tales that echo through history. Imtiaz Ullah then takes the helm, guiding us to the spellbinding Pangong Lake in Ladakh, where the landscapes paint stories of untouched beauty.

For the seekers of the spiritual unknown, Christopher Heise reveals the clandestine path to attending a Dalai Lama teaching in the mystical realms of Dharamshala. Meanwhile, Ayan Adak's expedition into the cave temples surrounding Mumbai promises not just delight but an immersive voyage through time and architectural marvels.

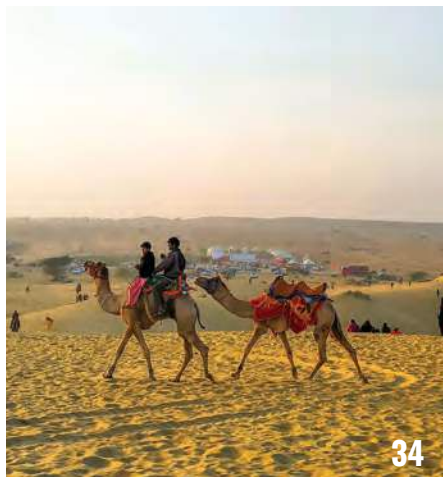
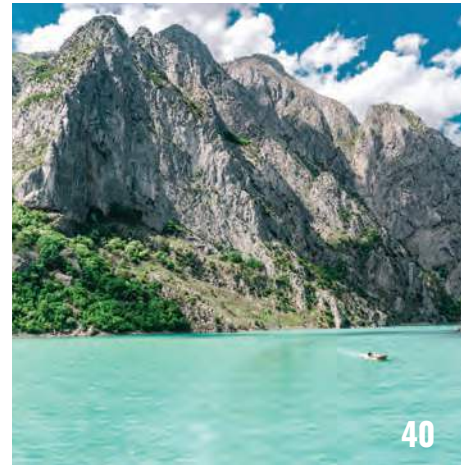
Dr. Sonam Wangchuk invites you to join the vibrant celebrations of the Siachen Folk Festival, a dazzling spectacle of cultural richness. Abhishek beckons you on a concise yet pleasant trip to the Bhimakali Temple, a must-visit place with splendid views of the Himalayas.

This issue is a celebration of the spirit of adventure, unique experiences, and newfound knowledge. As we navigate the ever-changing landscape of global travel in 2024, I hope these stories inspire and kindle the spirit of exploration within you.

Safe travels and happy reading!

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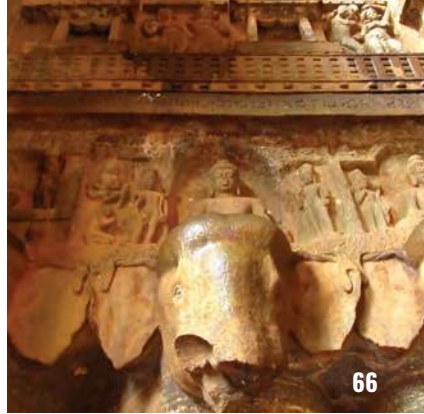
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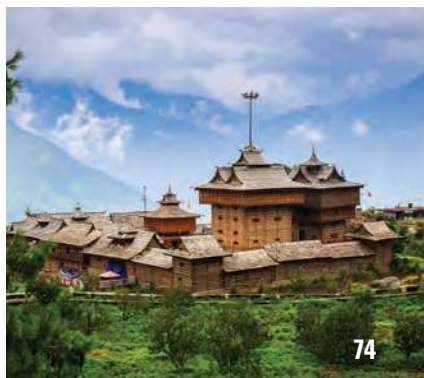
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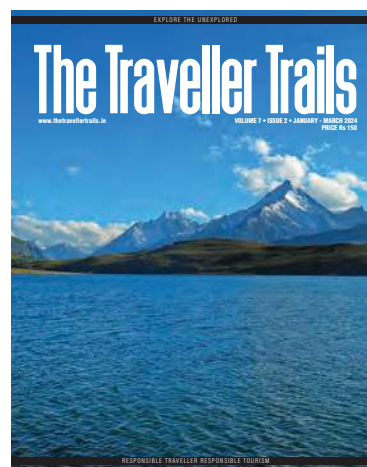
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Cover: Chandra Tal, Himachal Pradesh.
Image by Abeer Barman/istockphoto.com



US Warns Travellers of Crime in Bahamas

The US State Department has issued a travel advisory cautioning individuals visiting the Bahamas due to a recent surge in violent crime. The Level 2 advisory, posted recently, highlights concerns in New Providence (Nassau) and Grand Bahama (Freeport) islands, with a focus on the “Over the Hill” area in Nassau, experiencing increased gang violence.

The advisory follows a notice from the U.S. Embassy in the Bahamas on January 24, revealing 18 murders in Nassau since the beginning of the year, primarily affecting the local population but prompting U.S. officials to caution tourists. The advisory outlines various types of violent crimes, such as burglaries, armed robberies, and sexual assaults, occurring in both tourist and non-tourist areas.

US officials recommend heightened vigilance for tourists staying in short-term vacation rental properties without private security presence. The advisory advises against answering doors or resisting robbery attempts and suggests enrolling in safety alert systems while visiting.

While the Bahamian Prime Minister, Philip Davis, expressed confidence that the U.S. warnings would not significantly impact the nation's tourism industry, the advisory emphasizes potential risks and recommends caution for tourists using recreational

watercraft. Concerns include inconsistent regulation, poor maintenance, and operators lacking certifications. In November, a tour boat with approximately 100 passengers onboard sank on its way to Blue Lagoon Island northeast of Nassau, resulting in the unfortunate death of one US tourist and injuries to two other passengers. A State Department spokesperson did not provide an immediate response to inquiries regarding any potential connection between this incident and the recently issued travel advisory.

Additionally, the advisory cautions against swimming alone and advises individuals to stay within their abilities, referencing recent shark attacks, some of which have been fatal. The statement underscores the discretion of commercial watercraft operators to operate despite weather forecasts, leading to injuries and fatalities in the past.

Homicides in the Bahamas saw an 8 per cent increase from 2021 to 2022, according to the Royal Bahamas Police Force. However, crime data for 2023 is unavailable. Authorities in the Bahamas held a news conference addressing the recent surge in murders, emphasizing that none of the incidents this year have targeted tourists.



Rs 1400 cr to Widen the Spiti Highway

The Border Roads Organisation (BRO) will widen the strategically important Sumdo-Kaza-Gramphu Highway in Himachal Pradesh at a cost of Rs 1,400 crore. The project will improve connectivity to the Spiti Valley from Manali and Lahaul by broadening the current road into a double-lane highway. The work has already begun after receiving funds from the Central Government.

Given the Spiti's proximity to China, the demand for upgraded road infrastructure is imperative. The Central Government is actively prioritizing improved connectivity, not only to facilitate smoother access for the Indian Army but also to boost tourism in the picturesque Himalayan highlands.

Residents of Spiti have long advocated for the widening of the road. The existing 211-km-long road has been in poor condition for many years, requiring over seven hours to travel. However, the

widening project is expected to reduce travel time to nearly four hours between Sumdo and Gramphu and vice versa.

The BRO has set a target to complete the project by 2026, dividing it into four sections — Sumdo-Kaza, Kaza-Losar, Losar-Batal, and Batal-Gramphu. Work is already in progress on two sections, while the widening of the Batal-Gramphu section is scheduled to commence in June, subject to weather conditions. Land acquisition is underway for the Sumdo-Kaza section.

Lahaul and Spiti MLA Ravi Thakur highlighted that the Central Government has approved Rs 1,400 crore to widen the Sumdo-Kaza-Gramphu highway. The project is expected to reduce travel time significantly, provide easier access for the Indian Army to the China border in Spiti, and boost tourism. Additionally, it will facilitate the timely transportation of produce for farmers in the Spiti region.

Odisha Plans World's First Black Tiger Safaris

Odisha is on the verge of introducing an unprecedented experience for wildlife enthusiasts with the world's first-ever black tiger safaris near the Simlipal Tiger Reserve. This groundbreaking initiative, featuring three melanistic tigers renowned for their distinctive dark stripes exclusive to the region, was recently announced by Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik.

The safari site, strategically located near Baripada and in close proximity to the Simlipal Tiger Reserve, will cover over 200 hectares. Among these, 100 hectares will be dedicated to the display area,

while the rest will house veterinary care facilities, staff infrastructure, visitor amenities, and a rescue centre.

Pending statutory clearances, a feasibility study by the National Tiger Conservation Authority, and approval from the Central Zoo Authority, this project aims to not only elevate tourism but also underscore Odisha's commitment to biodiversity preservation.

The Simlipal Tiger Reserve, spanning 2,750 sq km and hosting diverse wildlife, is poised to become a beacon for conservation efforts and a haven for immersive natural experiences.



Himachal Eyes International Hotel Chain to Run Wildflower Hall

In a significant development, the government of Himachal Pradesh, led by Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu, is considering partnering with an international hotel chain to run the historic Wildflower Hall in Shimla. This decision comes after the state government regained ownership of the property following a long legal battle with the Oberoi Hotel Group. The

Wildflower Hall, a former summer retreat of British Field Marshal Horatio Herbert Kitchner, has been entangled in a legal dispute for the past twenty years. Following the Himachal Pradesh high court's order for the Oberoi Group to return the property, efforts are being made to find a suitable partner to manage the luxury hotel.

Chief Minister Sukhu, emphasized the government's commitment to developing and maintaining the luxury property. State Additional Chief Secretary for Tourism Onkar Sharma expressed confidence in their efforts, noting that a caveat has been filed with the Supreme Court in case of any legal challenges from the Oberoi Group.

In June 2023, Himachal CM issued a directive to implement a 2005 arbitration award. This award stated that the Wildflower Hall property, which encompasses an area of 100 hectares and includes a pristine deodar forest, was to be taken over by the Himachal Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation (HPTDC).

HPTDC Managing Director Manasi Thakur Sahay revealed that the Oberoi Group owes Rs 1.67 crore in lease rent, along with statutory interest, under the arbitration award. The high court ruled in favor of the state government, declaring that the Oberoi Group

failed to comply with the award within the stipulated three months, paving the way for the government to reclaim possession and management of the luxury hotel.

The dispute originated in 1996 when global tenders were invited to re-develop Wildflower Hall as a five-star hotel. A joint venture with the Oberoi Group led to the formation of Mashobra Resort Limited. However, the project faced delays, resulting in the termination of the agreement by the state government in 2002.

Records show that Wildflower Hall was originally owned by GHM Batten, who served as the private secretary to the Earl of Lytton during the Colonial era. Unfortunately, the building was destroyed by fire, but Batten rebuilt it and later leased it to Lord Kitchener, the commander-in-chief of the Indian armed forces. After his departure to England in 1909, the property was sold to a British couple who, in 1925, decided to demolish the house and build a three-story hotel with 37 rooms.

After gaining independence, the Government of India assumed ownership of the property and used it as an agricultural school until 1973 when it was handed over to the HPTDC to operate as a hotel. The HPTDC went on to construct 11 cottages, four rooms, a multipurpose hall, and a green room.

On April 5, 1993, a fire, caused by a short circuit, destroyed the building. However, the HPTDC continued running the surviving cottages and rooms until a joint venture between the Himachal Pradesh government and the Oberoi Group was formed to rebuild Wildflower Hall as a luxury hotel.



Japan to Limit Climbing on Mount Fuji

The Yamanashi Prefectural Government, overseeing one of the most popular hiking routes to Mount Fuji in Japan, plans to restrict climbing this summer. This measure is a direct response to concerns regarding the growing litter problem and injuries, especially among inexperienced and ill-equipped climbers. The overcrowded trails, piling waste, and safety-related challenges have compelled the Yamanashi Prefectural Government to enforce a daily cap of 4,000 climbers on the famous Yoshida Trail starting July 1.

Additional regulations include restrictions on climbing between 4 pm and 2 am and introducing a toll to cover maintenance costs and construct shelters. The move has received support from environmental preservation groups, acknowledging the need to address waste management, limited facilities, and safety aspects on the 3,776-meter volcano. The limit aims to ease trail congestion and enhance safety while recognizing potential economic impacts on local tourism.

Mount Fuji, Japan's highest peak at 3,776 meters, is an iconic symbol of the nation and a UNESCO World Heritage site. Renowned for its majestic beauty, the mountain attracts climbers during the summer season and offers stunning panoramic views. Its cultural significance and picturesque surroundings make it a prominent tourist destination.

Oil-Themed Adventure Park to Come Up in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia plans to construct an oil-themed amusement park called 'The Rig' to promote adventure tourism in the country. The project, led by the Oil Park Development Company (OPDC) with financial assistance from the public investment fund, will be located in the middle of the Arabian Sea near Al Jereed island and the Al Berri oil field.

'The Rig' will be a water amusement park designed to resemble an oil rig, combining water sports with adventure tourism. The ambitious project aims to attract over nine million tourists worldwide each year. The park will feature three hotels, 11 restaurants, retail shops, and various thrilling activities both above and below the water. Indoor facilities will include a cinema, a kids centre, a multi-purpose arena, an e-sports centre, and an edutainment avenue.

Additionally, 'The Rig' will offer 72 other entertainment and attraction options, including a water activities centre, an amusement park, a diving centre, and an adventure park. The park can be accessed through unique transportation methods such as fast ferries, seaplanes, helicopters, and yachts. It has been designed to cover a gross floor area that exceeds 300,000 square metres.



India Slips to 5th Spot in Maldives Tourism Amid Diplomatic Tensions

In a dramatic shift in the tourism landscape of the Maldives, India has slipped from its coveted position as the top contributor to the archipelago's tourism industry to the 5th spot, according to recent data obtained as of January 28. The decline comes amidst diplomatic tension between India and the Maldives, highlighting the broader impact of political dynamics on tourism patterns.

At the beginning of 2024, India was the third-largest contributor, with a market share of 7.1%, while China did not even make it into the top 10. However, within three weeks, the situation has changed. According to the latest statistics, India's market share stands at 8%, resulting in a drop to 5th place. China and the UK have now surpassed

India, securing the 3rd and 4th places, respectively, in the top 10 list of countries contributing to tourism. Official data from the Maldivian government ranks Russia at the top with 18,561 arrivals (10.6% market share), closely followed by Italy with 18,111 arrivals (10.4% market share).

As of December 31 last year, India held the top position with 209,198 arrivals, constituting nearly 11% of the Maldives' tourism market for the entire year. However, the recent decline in Indian tourist numbers can be attributed to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's beach excursion to Lakshadweep on January 2 and subsequent diplomatic tensions with the Maldives.

Why Traditional Travel Agencies Still Dominate Vacation Planning

■ DEEPAK JOSHI

“ In an era where technology has redefined the way we plan and book our vacations, traditional travel companies may appear to be less significant. However, they still hold immense value and serve as a dependable resource for travellers seeking a seamless and enriching experience.

Planning a vacation should be the exciting prelude to your adventure, but the sheer volume of choices and decisions in today's digital age can often turn it into a daunting task. Thankfully, travel agencies have mastered the art of making vacation planning not just manageable but truly enjoyable.

Here are the top 10 reasons why travel agencies are the ultimate solution for making your vacation arrangements an absolute breeze. Say goodbye to stress and hello to seamless adventures!

1. Personalized Expertise

The foundation of an unforgettable journey is careful planning. Travel companies employ experts who have a deep understanding of destinations, accommodations,

and local attractions. Their advice and recommendations are carefully tailored to your preferences, ensuring that each aspect of your trip seamlessly aligns with your desires.

2. Time Efficiency

Vacation planning can often be a time-consuming endeavor, especially when confronted with a multitude of online choices. Travel companies simplify this process by presenting you with carefully curated options that match your interests and budget. This not only saves you time but also alleviates the stress of information overload.

3. Customization, Not Compromise

Online booking portals may promote a one-size-fits-all approach, but travel companies

excel at customization. They collaborate closely with you to craft an itinerary that reflects your individual desires and requirements. Your dream vacation isn't sacrificed; it's thoughtfully brought to fruition.

4. Privilege to Unique Experiences

Over the years, travel companies have cultivated strong relationships with local associates, hotels, and tour operators. These connections provide them with the opportunity to offer exceptional experiences, upgrades, and amenities that are often beyond the reach of individual travellers or those who book online.

5. Assurance in Uncertainty

Undoubtedly, travelling comes with its fair share of uncertainty and



possibility for disruptions. When you choose to make bookings via a travel agency, you benefit from a competent team that is adept at navigating unforeseen circumstances, ranging from flight delays to sudden changes in itinerary. This kind of peace of mind is truly invaluable.

6. Personalized Customer Service

Travel agencies place customer satisfaction at the front line of their priorities. You are not just a booking reference; you are a valued customer. They are ready to address your concerns, answer your questions, and provide unwavering support from the start of your travel planning until you return home.

7. Value for Money

Contrary to the belief that travel companies are expensive, they often secure competitive pricing through their industry expertise and connections. The additional benefits and reassurance they provide make them a worthwhile investment.

8. A Human Touch

While technology rules the day, travel companies add a personal flair to your adventures. They attentively listen to your aspirations, anticipate your requirements, and provide a level of care and attention that technology alone cannot duplicate.

9. Global Network

Travel agencies maintain an expansive worldwide network covering various countries and continents. Their well-established relationships allow you to explore metropolises or tranquility in secluded paradises. These extensive connections guarantee you'll get the finest experiences, irrespective of your chosen destination.

10. Eco-Conscious Travel

Many travel companies are at the forefront of promoting sustainable and eco-conscious travel. They favor destinations and lodgings that have minimal environmental repercussions, allowing you to

traverse the planet leaving a softer footprint.

While online booking platforms have undoubtedly reshaped travel landscape, traditional travel companies continue to offer a seamless blend



of technology and personalized service. As you contemplate your next adventure, consider entrusting it to a reputable travel company. They provide an exceptional mix of expertise, customization, accessibility, and assistance, ensuring your journey goes beyond the ordinary and becomes a unique chapter in your life.

Your next adventure awaits—unlock it with a trusted travel partner by your side.

Master the Art of Sustainable Travel

Essential Tips for Conscious Wanderers

The pandemic served as a global wake-up call, compelling people to contemplate the consequences of unsustainable travel and recognize the need for responsible exploration.

“Today, there is a resounding consensus among travellers, environmentalists, and communities worldwide. It is widely acknowledged that our planet deserves better, and the time for meaningful action has arrived. This shared sentiment echoes powerfully within the hearts of passionate travellers, igniting a fire of change and responsibility.

As more individuals become attuned to the potential repercussions of irresponsible travel, the demand for sustainable alternatives gains momentum. Travellers are increasingly seeking experiences that not only enrich their lives but also contribute positively to the places they visit.

What is Sustainable Travel?

Sustainable tourism is not only about reducing our carbon footprint; it also involves fundamentally changing our approach to exploration. This means treating the earth gently, appreciating local cultures, and promoting peaceful coexistence between humanity and nature.

The best part is you don't need to entirely revamp your vacation plans. So, how can you begin this transformation? Here is a collection of simple and effective tips to guide you on your journey.

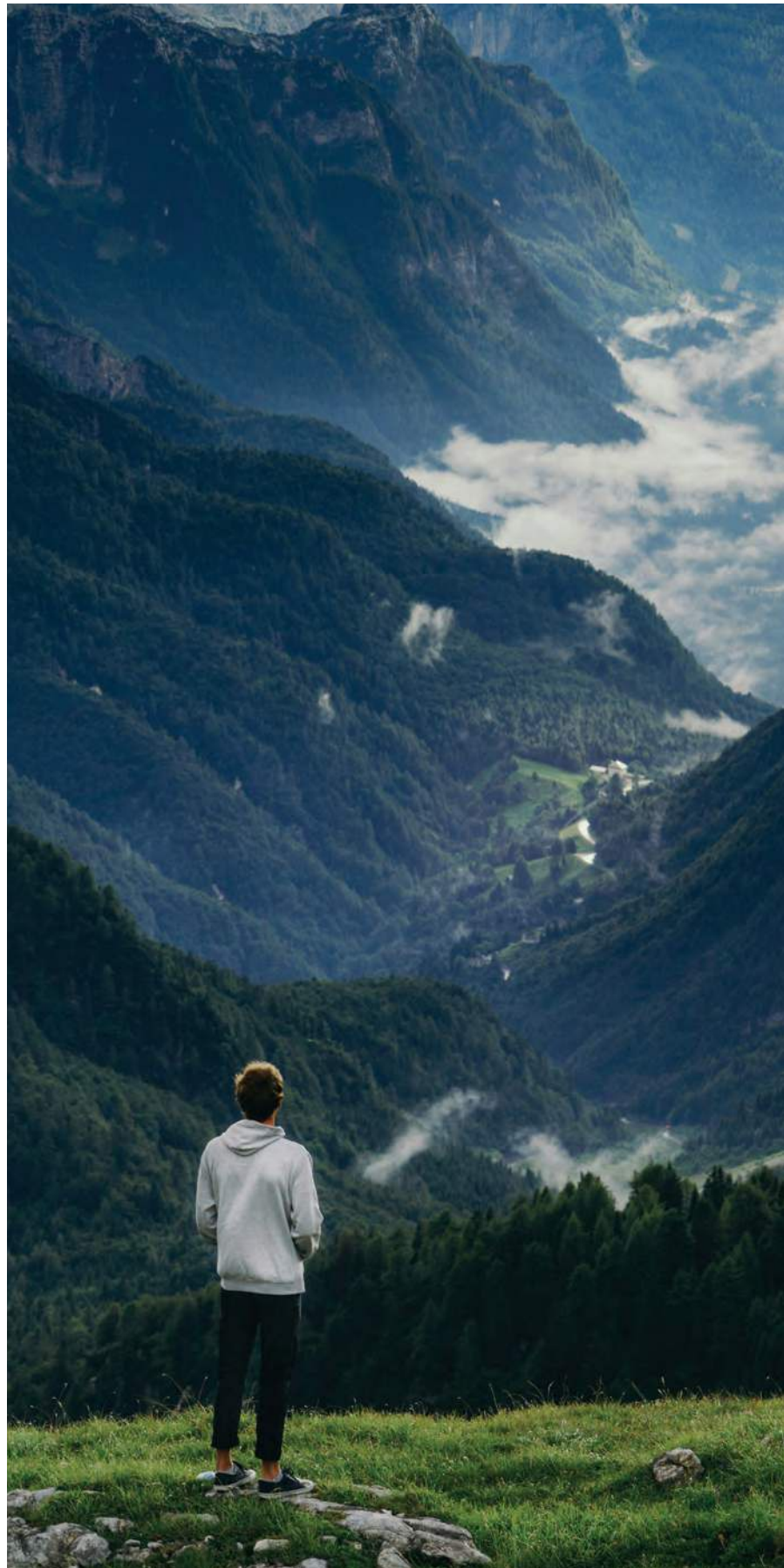
Avoiding Over-Tourism

Discover the Hidden Gems

The world's iconic tourist hotspots now bear the heavy burden of over-tourism, which strains not only the infrastructure but also the very spirit of local communities. Shift your focus towards offbeat, under-the-radar destinations to savor solitude and authentic experiences.

Timing is Crucial

For those iconic attractions etched on your bucket list, consider travelling during the off-peak season. Experience these wonders without the overwhelming crowds, breathing new life into the destinations we cherish.





The Green Oasis of Accommodation

Opt for Eco-Conscious Accommodations

What are eco-conscious credentials? Do any hotels or resorts in the area possess them? These are important questions to ask when booking accommodation.

Check if the place you plan to stay has green initiatives, like energy-efficient practices or a strict policy against using single-use plastic. Look for hotels that offer locally-sourced food in their menus.

Pack Light

Packing light and purposefully is indeed an effective step towards sustainable travel. Reusable items such as water bottles, metal straws, and shopping bags should find a place in your suitcase. Have you considered clothing made from organic and sustainable materials as well? This could be your chance to explore this option.

Use Locally-Produced Resources

Tourism can have a significant positive impact on local economies. By choosing locally-owned accommodations, dining in independent restaurants, and buying locally-made goods, you're supporting communities and generating secondary economic benefits through increased spending.

Choose Efficient Modes Of Transportation

Did you know that your choice of transportation affects your carbon footprint? Often, slower travel methods, like trains instead of planes or bikes instead of cars, are more eco-friendly.

Additionally, exploring on foot or by bicycle, and using public transportation when you reach your destination, can provide a richer travel experience while reducing carbon emissions.

Carbon Offsetting

Lastly, while we strive to minimize energy usage, some carbon emissions are unavoidable. This is where carbon offsetting comes in. It allows you to calculate your carbon footprint using online calculators and subsidies it by investing in projects that reduce carbon or other greenhouse gases. Still, always offset through a reputable provider for maximum benefit.

The journey towards sustainable travel is within our reach. It might require some planning and learning, but as the saying goes, every little bit helps. Isn't it the perfect time to start your sustainable travel journey? Answer the call of eco-wanderlust and be part of the transformative journey toward a more sustainable world.



OTAs or Direct Bookings Which Pathway is Right for Your Hotel?

The choice between Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) and direct bookings is a critical decision for hoteliers aiming to optimize revenue and enhance guest experiences. Striking the right balance between these two methods is crucial for a hotel's success.

In the ever-evolving hospitality landscape, a battle has persisted since the late 1990s when OTAs emerged. However, the pandemic has introduced new uncertainties with staffing shortages, volatile inflation rates, and declining effectiveness of third-party cookies.

Recent studies indicate a shift in traveller behaviour. While reliance on OTA bookings by hotels has remained stable since 2019, there's been a notable increase in hotel direct bookings. Travellers are increasingly opting to book directly with hotels, attracted by discounts, perks, and personalized offerings.

Despite the growing popularity of direct bookings, understaffing in the hospitality sector poses a challenge. Technology and automation are seen as promising solutions to efficiently handle the influx of direct bookings while maintaining personalized service standards.

Benefits of OTAs include broader reach, increased exposure, and simplified booking processes. However, drawbacks include:

- High commission fees.
- Limited control over brand image.
- Potential dependency leading to reduced customer loyalty.

Direct bookings offer higher profit margins, comprehensive guest data, brand control, and upselling opportunities. Limitations include limited reach, marketing costs, booking complexity, and potential challenges in establishing brand recognition, especially for independent hotels.

The winner in the battle between OTAs and direct bookings is challenging to declare, as it depends on the specific circumstances of each hotel. Many hotels adopt a mixed approach, leveraging both methods to maximize reach and profitability while retaining control over their brand and customer experience.

The key lies in finding the right balance. Strategies include:

- Leveraging OTAs as a marketing channel.
- Offering direct booking incentives.
- Investing in booking technology.
- Creating compelling direct booking campaigns.
- Focusing on exceptional guest experiences to foster loyalty.

In conclusion, discovering the sweet spot between OTA and direct hotel bookings remains a perpetual puzzle for hoteliers. A hybrid approach, utilizing both channels, is recommended. By implementing the outlined strategies, hoteliers can effectively navigate the evolving marketplace and achieve the desired results for their business.

Travel Insurance

Your Key to Blissful Explorations

Travel insurance serves as a guardian angel during your adventures, offering peace of mind by covering medical emergencies, trip cancellations, lost baggage, and more. This guide outlines the importance of travel insurance, its coverage, types, and tips on choosing the right plan.

Travel insurance is a specialized policy designed to safeguard against the unforeseen risks of travel, serving as a safety net for trip cancellations, medical emergencies, and lost belongings. It provides peace of mind and financial protection, tailoring its coverage to various travel-related mishaps.

Why Do You Need Travel Insurance?

Protection Against Trip Cancellations and Delays:

Travel insurance shields you from the frustration of flight cancellations or delays, ensuring reimbursement for incurred expenses due to extreme weather, natural disasters, or unforeseen circumstances.

Coverage for Medical Emergencies:

Accidents or illnesses during your vacation can be financially burdensome, especially if your health insurance doesn't cover overseas medical expenses. Travel insurance covers hospitalization, emergency medical evacuation, and even repatriation of remains, offering freedom from hefty bills.

Loss or Theft of Belongings:

In the event of lost or stolen luggage, travel insurance provides compensation, allowing you to replace essentials and continue enjoying your trip. It may also cover passports, travel documents, and electronic devices, minimizing inconvenience.

Assistance in Emergency Situations:

With 24/7 emergency assistance services, travel insurance offers immediate support during unexpected events, reducing the stress of facing emergencies in unfamiliar places.

Financial Protection Against Interruptions:

In the face of personal emergencies, natural disasters, or political unrest, travel insurance reimburses the unused portion of your trip, acting as a financial security and allowing you to focus on the situation at hand.

Types of Travel Insurance

Basic Travel Insurance:

Cost-effective coverage for trip essentials like cancellation, interruption, baggage loss, and medical emergencies. Coverage limits may vary based on the policy and provider.



Comprehensive Travel Insurance:

Provides higher coverage, including emergency evacuation, accidental death, and repatriation of remains. Recommended for adventurous activities and remote locations, offering extensive protection.

Specialized Travel Insurance:

Tailored plans for unique travel needs, covering sports activities, pre-existing medical conditions, or high-risk destinations. Offers customization to meet individual requirements.

How to Choose the Right Travel Insurance:

Consider coverage options, disclose pre-existing medical conditions, evaluate travel frequency, check adventure sports coverage, compare policies, and read the fine print.

Tips for Maximizing Your Travel Insurance:

Read the policy thoroughly, understand the claims process, keep documentation, notify changes to your plans, and have emergency contact information on hand.

Is Travel Insurance Worth It?

While an additional expense, the benefits and assurance often outweigh the cost. Considering potential financial losses, travel insurance ensures you travel with confidence, protected against unforeseen events and hefty expenses.

The Unsung Winter Sport Destination Shimla Ice Skating Rink

The Shimla Ice Skating Club, established in 1920, stands as a historic symbol of India's sporting legacy. Originally a haven for Europeans during the British era, it has evolved into Asia's oldest natural ice-skating rink. However, challenges like global warming and financial constraints jeopardize its existence. The club, facing organizational issues, operates as a club, limiting member participation. To revive its prominence, the government must allocate funds, transform it into an association, and collaborate with other disciplines for off-ice training. This strategic vision could convert the club into a global winter sports destination, boosting Himachal Pradesh's economy and cultural heritage.

■ **Prof NITIN VYAS, Dr PRITI R NAGAL**
HPU, SHIMLA

Shimla Ice Skating Club stands as a testament to India's rich sporting history. Established in 1920 by the visionary Mr. Blessington, this club has evolved from a haven exclusively for Europeans during the British era to a melting pot of diverse sports enthusiasts, irrespective of caste, color, or faith, post-independence. Shimla, adorned in a thick layer of frost, was once nearly silent during chilly winters. The Shimla Ice Skating Club became a lifeline for the town, offering a unique experience as Asia's oldest natural ice-skating rink. However, challenges such as global warming and urbanization have threatened the club's existence, impacting the formation of ice on this naturally occurring rink.

Despite having the potential to meet international standards, the club grapples with financial constraints, internal organizational issues, and weather-dependent operations. The rink has been run as a club for the last 100 years and is not registered as an association (though talks have been happening to form an Ice Hockey Association soon). Because of this, members have no direct participation in any sporting activity from the club.

The athletes have to look up to the Kaza Ice Skating Association to become part of their team to play on national or international levels. The budget is generated through membership fees and the selling of tickets, which is merely enough to meet the club's survival needs. The skating season, which typically ran from the middle of November to the middle of February, has been shortened

from the end of December to perhaps the end of January, reducing the sessions from 200 to approximately 60 to 80. Due to this, the club has not been able to produce committed skaters for many years, and people have started treating it more as a hobby than a promising winter sport. With cracks in the main building and no artificial means for refrigeration, the Shimla Ice Skating Club is in dire need of attention. The dwindling number of active members and the limited income from ticket sales and memberships paint a grim picture.

“Acknowledging the potential of Himachal Pradesh as a burgeoning tourist destination, there is a need to introduce the Multiplier Model. The state's winter sports segment could serve as a catalyst for economic growth. The development project report, suggesting the creation of an enclosed artificial rink, has been presented to the government twice, yet no concrete steps have been taken. In both cases, the funds set aside were not used and were returned to the issuing government body.

The club's development should progress gradually, taking one step at a time. The first step should include budget allocation from the government by considering ice skating as a winter sport and transforming the present club into an association.

The second step should involve alliances with other sporting disciplines and studios to establish an official off-ice training program for dedicated skaters. For example, improving conditioning in dance, plyometric training,

and aerobics would provide significant benefits to figure skaters. The club needs to reach out to schools in Shimla to advocate for ice skating as a sport and increase its media outreach.

The final stage should focus on the long-term vision to involve an indoor synthetic ice rink. Synthetic ice tiles are made from premium polymer material. The club needs to work on an achievable goal of making this rink an international standard winter sports destination, and for those small efforts, implementation needs to start from scratch.

An elaborate vision can be developed for the rink if the club collaborates with tourism and sports academicians to exchange ideas and work on bringing this club to the international map of winter sports destinations. Travel agents and tourist guides need to include the rink in their itineraries, and for that, the rink needs to be fully operational in the winter season, if not year-round, for now. The possession of the rink should be permanently given to the club members, so they have a free hand in the long-term vision for its development.

It's time for the government to view Shimla Ice Skating Club not just as a club but as a potential winter sports destination that could elevate Himachal Pradesh's stature on the global stage. With collaborative efforts, sustainable funding, and a strategic vision, the club could blossom into a thriving hub for winter sports, contributing significantly to the state's economy and cultural heritage.



A Majestic Retreat Woodville Palace

Woodville Palace Hotel in Shimla is a top heritage hotel with British charm and a colonial feel. The former summer residence of the Raja Rana of Jubbal, Woodville, now offers a memorable stay with modern comforts. Rooms and suites have 1930s art deco decor. Dining venues serve delicious global cuisine, and the well-stocked bar is a highlight. The property is elevated at 7000 feet and offers stunning views. The interiors are regal, with beautiful antiques, decor, and period furniture.

The first recorded owner of Woodville Palace was William Rose Mansfield, a Commander-in-Chief of the Imperial British Army, who purchased it in 1866. It served as the official summer residence for the Commanders-in-Chief of India for some time.

Later, it changed hands multiple times and was owned by individuals such as Mrs. Henrietta Ruth Maria Alexander, General Sir Frederick Paul Haines, and Mrs. Eliza Maria Walker, among others. In 1926, it was ultimately purchased by His Highness Maharaja Sir Bhagvat Singh of Gondal State, who then gifted it to his daughter, Rani Leila Ba of Jubbal, in 1930.

After standing unoccupied for 12 years, the property was demolished in 1938 by Raja Rana of Jubbal State Sir Bhagat Chand. He then invested a considerable sum to turn it into a summer palace. The palace served as the residence of the Jubbal royal family until 1977. Eventually, Raj

Kumar Uday Singh, the grandson of Bhagat Chand, converted it into a hotel.

Today, the Woodville Palace is a highly sought-after heritage property managed by the descendants of the Jubbal Royal family. It offers guests a unique experience, with each room reflecting the distinctive character of the 1930s Art Deco era. The rooms are adorned with personal artifacts and photographs of Indian royalty. Adding a touch of splendor, the hotel recently introduced 16 imperial rooms seamlessly interwoven into this rich historical narrative.

Nestled amidst four acres of lush greenery, Woodville Palace Hotel is like an oasis within the city limits of Shimla. The pristine environment and picturesque views create a perfect setting for a rejuvenating getaway.

For Reservations:

Call: +91 76509 23456, 99991 35642

Email: salesgreatempirehotel@gmail.com



Beyond the Mountains

THE JOURNEY OF DEMOCRACY TO SPITI

In 1952, India witnessed its first General Elections, a defining moment in its history. However, the remote enclave of Spiti, then part of the Kangra district, remained veiled from this democratic spectacle due to its formidable terrain and isolation from the mainstream. The absence of viable roads posed an insurmountable hurdle, denying the people of Spiti their fundamental right to vote.

This exclusion persisted even in 1957. While the nation completed its democratic exercise, this secluded Lama Land remained a stark exception.

A twist of fate unfolded when a Member of Parliament challenged the election of President

Rajendra Prasad held in May 1957. The grounds for this challenge stemmed from the unfilled Vidhan Sabha and Parliamentary seats in the Kangra district, rendering the Presidential election null and void.

The President is elected through the votes of all Members of Parliament and State representatives. Spiti had been allocated two seats under each category. The court's verdict mandated an election in Spiti, setting the stage for democracy's unprecedented foray into this isolated domain.

A polling party travelled on mules from Shimla to conduct elections in Kaja and the Pin Valley. The book "Men and Mules on a Mission of Democracy" by Parmananda Sharma vividly captures this remarkable journey and the initial encounters of the Spitians with the democratic process.

Reference:

SPITI ADVENTURES IN THE TRANS-HIMALAYA By
HARISH KAPADIA

MEN AND MULES ON A MISSION OF DEMOCRACY By
PARMANANDA SHARMA

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9 DAYS OF WALKING SOLO **ACROSS SPITI VALLEY**

■ **ISPITA PAUL**

Long-distance hiking is diverse. It brings out the known and the unknown, and the unknown in the known. Those 9 days of walking from Atal Tunnel to Kaza for around 150 kilometres (including Chandratal Lake) and two days of returning to Manali via hitchhiking surely had the beauty of the roads, but the people of Lahaul and Spiti warmed me even at -4 degrees.

The first tingling thought of long-distance walking beyond a designed trek hit me in Nepal. From the open window of the bus, I wished with all urgency if I could walk that 200 km and know the villages that retain their place only through white letters on green signboards. I made up my mind, but the succeeding monsoon wiped out such a prospect from my landscape. There was a pause.

It kept irking me with visionary and adrenaline. That little insect that pesters like a persistence, and sticks to your mind with a heart. I wanted to know Spiti, and the freedom of walking on the most spellbound cold desert mountains of Himachal. It was a privilege to be.

So I drew my own map on a piece of white paper with inaccurate lines and accurate altitudes in an old-fashioned manner.

“ I was giddy at the end-light of the long dark Atal Tunnel, with the heft of my 70-litre backpack, a tent, sleeping bag, and the Buddhist prayer flags giving away mindful shades of the barren landscape of the brawny-brown Lahaul.

The goal was to camp at Village Koksar for the night and explore Guru Padmasambhava's cave over Dimpuk Monastery. And that's the kind of goals I curated for myself. In those burgeoning beginnings, there was no vision of Spiti. Kaza was a name I set up as the end-point. It was more about the little steps, the little stops, by the stones that shine as in sprinkled in whitewash waterfalls. On the smouldering roads of fine cuts, I kept the kilometres at bay, only for 12 km up to Koksar. My body needed to grab the signal, It needed to get accustomed to the ongoing rhythm that lied ahead.

Right by the kitchen of the army base, in the parking lot, I pitched my tent against the black cottage that defused a dark colour in the shootings of the day's last clouds. And from then on, for the next eight nights, I solo-camped all

across the villages of Lahaul and Spiti, and I had never felt more at home! In rain, in the whooping minus-coldness of nights, in the high-altitude wind that semi-promises to blow your tent in shivering length, the fragility of a tent kept me sturdy and lent me the warmth of a home that is Spiti.

Sometimes contributions are momentary. In a moment of curiosity, one may stop for a quick conversation, with a packet of Parle-G, or water, and worst, for photographs! The Royal Enfields would jumpstart and fly by, with the encouragement of a lifetime. Things that are small, to naked eyes, have long legs. Unintended acts done in a fluke can build convictions. As lovely as the lonely roads are, honestly, it's all the people who transduced strength to my feet.

On the second day, near a waterfall between Gramphu and Chhatru



“ The second day was not just about climbing two mountains up and down for 23.3 km at a stretch. Yes, that was the prologue, the vessel that framed all the emotions of that day, but it was the restlessness towards the end, the hope of the beginning for a village...

I couldn't see the village anywhere! In my mind I couldn't assess the remaining kilometres, with the receding light shrinking deeper.

Now that I had climbed down the whole mountain in gravel and pebbles, I found myself completely alone in an open pasture divided up in a narrow path with larger-than-life boulders, smaller rocks and spikier rough edges. It was as if a civilization existed once, no more. Even though I knew the village should be within 2-3 km radius, I still could not spot a single house, and with the dimming sunlight, that got into my nerves.

There were only trucks running. I stopped a truck and asked the driver how far Chhatru was. He said, '10 more km!'

'What?!' How is that even possible!

I confidently told the driver that's not possible, who clearly was trying to misguide me. I asked him to leave. But when you hear that in such a stressful moment, your mind boggles. And therein sprung up the tickling sensation of a need for certainty. I needed to be certain I was close. But I could see nothing!

Five minutes later, a Royal Enfield came from the opposite direction. I finally put myself together, and stopped the bike. 'How far is the next village?' 'You are almost there. One more kilometer!'

Prem Dhaba. A plate of hot Rajma-Chawal. Cooking fire. Milky way. I wasn't dreaming.

My early-morning roads were angsty. With scarce vehicles in passing, I dreaded the trucks. In all the villages, the locals had

cautioned me, repeatedly, not to walk this particular road. It really is the most depressing stretch. Two km prior to Chota Dara, in red-hot heat that burns, I finally asked a South Indian couple for a lift for the last 10 km before Batal.

“ Darjee and Hishe Chhomo, popular among the locals as Chacha and Chachi, have been running the Chacha-Chachi Dhaba for the last 45 years. And they are quite famous now in Spiti for rescuing a group of school kids during extreme snowfall, saving travellers from storms and sheltering them in borderline situations.

Chacha has a keen sense of humour.

– 'Chacha, aapke bare mein bohut suna hai!' ('Chacha, I have heard so much about you!')

– 'Ha, abhi dekh liya.' ('Now you have seen me')

Clockwise from top left: Kunzum Pass. With Chacha and Chachi at the Chacha-Chachi dhaba in Batal. Chandratul Lake. On the way to Chandratul from Batal. Spiti Valley, near Kyato. The beauty of Spiti Valley.



Clockwise from top left:

On the seventh day, close to Pangmo Village. Losar, the first village in Spiti Valley. I camped for two nights on a pea field. They were eating their meals by the roadside and making tea in a chula. They called me from the street and fed me Potato Momo. I was resting on a bench in Hasna. She took me to her home, prepared pancakes, and packed enough for my dinner.

That night I camped just under an iron-bridge, a few meters down the Dhaba. 'The wind would be less fierce there', Chacha showed me the ground. A brick-wall posed as a wind breaker, and the half-bright half-dim mammoth mountains were waiting for the yellow sunset. That night the temperature dropped to -3 degrees. Just around the corner, I unzipped my tent to pee out in the open, and up there was the dreamy map of stars. Numerous connecting dots. The shooting star was falling away!

“

Chandratal is a 15-km-walk from Batal, with non-colors in the colossal shady structures except in the confronting direction which expands in light purple from both diagonals. Down my eyes, the tangled glosses of the lean Chandra River linger in the frame of the quaint visuals. Out of reach. I was still far away. Far, far, far...

Before I spotted the first campsite, 'Moonlake Camps'. The owner of the campsite, not only helped me in pitching the tent in the bizarre rain and wind, we shared deep conversations about the exceptionally harsh life in Lahaul. For the night-buffet and morning-breakfast, Sunny Ji refused any money.

I can still hear the whistling rattle of the ferocious wind of the Himalayas. The sharp pointy sounds piercing from all directions. It was a physical sensation, to be trapped in sounds. Once you reach Losar, the first village in Spiti Valley, the roads change into as flat as pancakes. Walking in Spiti finally escalated my pace, a relief, an aberration from the unfine cuts of Lahaul.

The mudhouses are built in the same pattern all over the valley. The windows are open in width and breadth, more in squares. The Buddhist frames frame the windows. Yak-houses and grass-storages. There

is always a ladder somewhere, lazily reclining against the white walls.

“ Losar, Kyato, Hull... As I camped alone every night on someone's pea fields or rested lazily on a bench, puffing and huffing, they took me to their homes to make pancakes for me, and the farmers shared tea and potato Momos from their containers by the roadside. I would often find myself peeling onions in the kitchen of a mud house, cheering over local alcohol from Kibber and hearing stories of generational Buddhist traditions.

Spiti, you changed me.

Ipsita is a travel writer and a solo female traveller, on the road for 3+ years. She believes in slow and sustainable travelling that imbibes local traditions with minimal carbon footprints. She is an avid hiker, highly immersed in experiential travel journalism.



AN ETHEREAL JOURNEY INTO THE MOUNTAINS

Himachal Pradesh offers a wide palette to choose from for every kind of traveller. From adventurous water sports to wild life sanctuaries, from forest trails to religious shrines, from mountainous treks to historic sites- be it an avid tourist or a traveler on a short sabbatical from the hustle and bustle of the crazy city life.

■ **NEHA RAJE & SWAPNIL S BHOLE**

The tour that we had chalked out for ourselves was specific to lesser explored places which hold high heritage value. The aim was to drive along the scenic roads to uncover the gems with historical significance, knitted together with the very culture and lifestyle of the people residing there. We pursued routes which are usually not taken by the conventional tourists. Consequently, it was not only the destinations but the overall journey which turned out to be a bag of surprising elements.





A view of the village Chaini Kothi. Image by Panki Sood



Clockwise from top left:
View of Village Pangana.
Majestic Pangana Fort.
The internal courtyard of
an old haveli in Pangana.

From Mumbai, we took an early morning flight to Chandigarh and continued till Shimla by road. Despite of having travelled to Shimla multiple times, a childish glee creeps into our hearts every time the ascend beings along the winding roads. And this time the itinerary which we had planned for ourselves was a blend of lesser travelled paths, exploring through the alternating wooded and barren mountain stretches dotted with villages on their steep edges. The promise of clear blue skies at the fast approaching end of monsoons added to our excitement.

Pangana, our destination for 2nd day of the trip is situated in Mandi district. The distance of 102 km from Shimla panned across 4

hours due to difficult, uphill roads. An early start provided us with ample of time on our hands to roam around leisurely through the narrow lanes of Pangana. The by-lanes are lined with old timber and stone houses, springing upon in between are the bold coloured facades of new houses. We were fortunate to be welcomed by a friendly couple who gave us a tour of their haveli. A huge open to sky courtyard in the center was surrounded by habitable rooms on all four sides and charming timber balconies on upper storey. The pride of living in a heritage structure thereby preserving their family legacy was clearly reflecting in their warm hospitality.

A local resident and an elderly scholar - Dr. Jagdish Sharma accompanied us to the old temple in the heart of the historic town. Perched atop a slight slope, this age old edifice is last remaining of

seven such original towers, which were a part of the fort complex belonging to the erstwhile king of Suket state. The fortifications can still be seen today if one looks beyond the colorful flowerbeds edging the garden area. It was way past our lunch time and we could not refuse the homely meal served to us by Dr. Sharma at his residence. Seated amidst the ripening apple orchards, we also relished the bright orange coloured Japanese fruit, a Himachali delicacy. We left Pangana in late afternoon and rested in Mandi town for the night. The town of Mandi holds a fascinating place for those interested in old photographs of Himachal. The renowned photographer, Mr. Birbal Sharma owns a photo gallery which is a treasure trove of innumerable archival photos of old towns, their ritualistic ceremonies and many other culturally rich events.

With an early start the following morning, we headed for **Prashar Lake**. Once again, on the narrow winding roads, we drove upward and upward. Roads were not always smooth, but the dense stretches of towering deodar trees left little room for complain. Most often the photos don't do justice to the immense beauty of nature, especially in Himalayas. And the captivating landscape of Prashar Lake made us realize this even more.

The lake situated in the center of the valley along with its tiny island and the pagoda styled temple complex on one side is a picturesque sight.

The threat of clouds gathering overhead and a consequent possibility of showers made us hit the road again sooner than expected. Our halt for the day was Shobla Cottages at Kullu - designed in traditional Kullu architecture.

Our day three took off with a lot of excitement as this was supposed to be the highlight of our entire trip. On the agenda was Chaini, a small village in Kullu district at an altitude of 2200 m.

Accessible only by foot, one must park the vehicle near the base village, Bihar. With

no more than 200 houses, Chaini village has a tower temple, also known as Chaini Kothi which is a lesser known wonder among the tourists.

The gradual trek to Chaini from Bihar village is a 2 km long ascend through the typical life of Himachali folks. The sinuous trail takes one alongside the various orchards of apples, walnuts and peaches. If one plans a trip in the months of August-September, these trees would be laden with ripening fruits. It is only when one reaches halfway; one can see a tall, linear structure rising above the faraway village settlement, peeping out from the surrounding dense forest of deodar.

“

Standing tall for over **500 years**, **Chaini Kothi is an imposing structure with a soaring height of 25.5 m**. With a live temple of Jogini mata on the topmost level, **it is easily the tallest of its kind in the entire Himalayan region**.

The neck-breaking linearity of the Kothi leaves one awestruck. The most iconic feature of the towering edifice is its monolithic deodar ladder, placed along its external edge on the southern side.

It is approximately three storey high without any handrail support. One may say that Chaini Kothi is a personification of the life in Himachal: sustaining proudly in the difficult terrain with a deliverance of art and pragmatism; and yet beholding the centuries old rituals and traditions. Then there is the Krishna temple in close proximity of the village square. Built in haveli style it is also century's old constructed in stone and timber with a majestic view of the valley.

While descending from the village we took an alternative route which was little steeper than our previous one, but nonetheless enticing enough. That day we halted at Sunshine Cottages in the bewitching Tirthan valley. Named after the Tirthan River, this mesmerizing valley is yet untouched by extensive tourism. The clear water cascading through the valley is a blissful sight along the curvaceous roads. Sunshine Cottages is a cozy homestay situated abutting the picturesque Tirthan River, wherein one can listen to the music of gushing water throughout their stay.



Prashar Lake



Tower Temple of Chaini Kothi



Unending mountain view from Jalori Pass

Next place of interest on our itinerary was Bijat Devta Mandir at Chaupal, Shimla district. This ancient temple complex is at a distance of over 225 km from Tirthan. We planned to break the tedious journey at Theog and spend the remnant of the daytime at 'De Exotica Crest' - away from the main town of Theog, it is a relaxing place with valley view of two sides.

“

There are many roads in Himachal which create an everlasting effect on one's mind due to the altitude, difficult terrain and most importantly the divine aura of nature. One such stretch of road is the Jalori Pass in Kullu district which we crossed on our way to Theog.

At an altitude of over 3000 m, Jalori Pass is one of the highest motorable passes in the country. It offers a 360 degrees panoramic view of various shades of blue skies and green vegetation in its iconic natural surroundings. Almost every view from here is framed by surreal snow clad mountains which can be seen as far as the eyes can travel.

We used to start most of our days early so that we could cover more distance in the morning hours before all the road works of highway construction and repairs commenced in full swing. Often we halted for breakfast and meals at roadside dhabas which never failed to serve us scrumptious food, full of local flavours and aroma. Some of the most popular preparations are parathas, kadhi rice, black lentils dal and rajma.

The beauty of almost all the modernizing Himachali villages lies in their ancient temple complexes.

Although the entire village tends to modernize their residences with newer methods of construction, the temple vicinities fortunately remain as the archives of age old techniques of craftsmanship.

Bijat Devta Mandir is one such masterpiece hidden in the absurdly concretized village. The temple complex has two almost identical towers, each one on either side of the entrance gateway. The gateway opens into the internal courtyard which leads one's eyes to the various mythological wooden carvings on the temple walls.

The most enticing element is the soothing sound made by the elaborate wooden pieces hanging from the eaves board ("jhaller" in colloquial language) of the temple roofs. A complete contrast from the Chaini tower which is an epitome of raw architecture, Bijat Devta Mandir is unique because of its delicately detailed ornamentation.



The entire Himalayan terrain in its central zone offers an extremely diverse variety in terms of visual and spiritual interest.

The tediously long and narrow roads at no point became monotonous. If one's eyes start getting used to the lush green terraced farmlands, the next turn would bring to you the dense cover of deodar forest where the sun struggles to reach the ground. And while the heart happily absorbs in the cool breeze of the shaded air, the oncoming valley could give nothing but barren ruggedness for kilometers to come.

Our last day of the trip was a night halt at Shimla, thus completing a loop. Here we spent the late evening roaming around the Mall Road; collecting souvenirs to take back home, but nothing could come closer to the

memories of the blissful serenity in which we had bathed in the previous week.

Neha Raje and Swapnil S Bhole are practicing architects from Mumbai. They have been passionately involved in research projects and have chosen this path as one of their mainstream career goals alongside working on various interesting architectural and interior projects. They have been doing research in Himachal Pradesh since 2003 and till date have documented around 30 villages including temples, forts, palaces and residences.



In P
line of
mountain
view from
Joshi Pass

Twin towers of Bijat Devata Temple, Chaupal



AS THE VALLEY SNOWS

One is familiar with the most clichéd metaphor of Kashmir being the ‘Switzerland of India’. Some years back when I had a trek in Kashmir, I was baffled and tried to figure out why the diadem of beauty is conferred on the European country alone. And later when I chanced upon Kashmir in winter, it reaffirmed my belief that it could in no way stand second fiddle to any European destination, so to speak.



A lonely boatman

“

The road that led us to the hotel was like the parting of a grey-haired lady. To our left was the partially frozen lake and to our right were the hotels and by-lanes robed in white.

■ **ASHIS GHATAK**

It

was a casual telephonic conversation between me and Dipankar, my travel partner that ended up in buying tickets to board the flight in 5 days' time. When the Srinagar-bound flight left Delhi, our eyes vied for a space in the windows to catch every passing frame with wide-eyed wonder. It was like the awe-inspiring opening sequence of *Where Eagles Dare* as our flight flew like a crane above the stunning landscape of snow-covered peaks.

The sights of white-roofed huts signalled the presence of human settlements in that enveloping whiteness of downy snow. As the flight taxied on the tarmac, we were greeted into a surreal universe I didn't even dream of. Sunrays were glistening on the heaps of snow and the pigeons pirouetting above our heads belied the infamous stories of a valley continually marred with the scars of war. Sun sets late in this part of the country offering us some extra hours to savour the metamorphosed sight of earth for the people of the plains.

We had our stay beside the boulevard of Dal Lake. The road that led us to the hotel was like the parting of a grey-haired lady. To our left was the partially frozen lake and to our right were the hotels and by-lanes robed in white. The first sight of the Dal and the lazy happy people basking on the dying sunlight was overwhelmingly poetic but real fun started at the death of night. We mistook the sight of something hitting the glass to be a dampening shower at night. But soon we realised that it was snowflakes flying at the window panes at the wee hours.

Once we understood that we rushed out with our cameras and stepped into a wintry wonderland. The wind winnowing its way through the incessant snowfall, bars of light like beacons coming from the headlights of the speeding vehicles illuminating the snow, the excitement of the street dogs, branches of pine trees laden with snow brought us to a make-believe cinematic world. The day dawned in the valley with a murky sky heavily wrapped under clouds. The distant houseboat owners were clearing the fresh snow deposited on the roof of the houseboats. The daily life was under way as usually. Breaking the ice of the frozen Dal with his oar the tea seller was making a thin strip of water-way to ply through to sell his homemade bakery items and flasks of tea.

“ Lanes of old Srinagar were most picturesque. Mosques, old wooden buildings and bridges, little boys frolicking the heaps of snow, the philosophic tailor in his tiny shop stitching clothes and smiling at our thrilled eyes, the tune of azaan floating through the mazes of streets seemed like snippets of an old Ismail Merchant film.

Clockwise from top left:
A deserted Dal Lake in winter.
Javaid, a local at a village near
Sonamarg, arranging games
on snow.
The frozen Dal.
A sleepy village in Dal Lake.

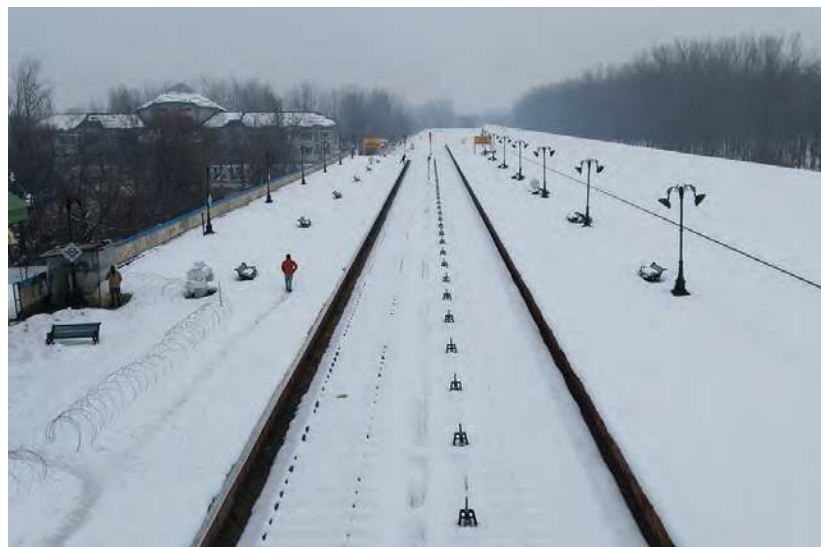
Finding us enthusiastic to take the photographs of man scooping ice with his spade to clear the pathway, someone smiled and said, “better stay back here in the winter months with us, experience the snow and take photographs”. I could feel the underlying sarcasm. We got some prized snaps but as they say, “someone’s loss is someone’s gain”. Life in this valley with water freezing even in pipelines, biting cold numbing all activities, ice fields limiting the scopes of fresh produce, lack of tourist forcing the houseboat owners to lock their doors, small traders battered with prolonged lockdown and the unfortunate offshoots of political imbroglio are the tales that lay buried under the photographs of such a picturesque town.

Boating on the placid water of Dal Lake is the most abiding memory of any old calendar that would don the wall or the films that showcased this town. But boating in the near frozen lake in the peak of winter speaks of a grim tale of survival. We coaxed the shikara driver to take us to inland where generally the tourists are not plied into.

The shikara moved inside the thinner strips of creeks when it left the wide lake that is bordered on the one hand with the boulevard and the colourful houseboats on the other. Tourists were hardly seen there. The floating shops selling garments and floral printed quilts and woollens were all shuttered down. We entered in a floating village where the closed doors and windows made it perennially sleepy. The mellowed translucent sun lulled everything and everyone into a strange silence and frigid inactivity. Only the heaps of snow in front of the homes and over their terraces turned the landscape surreally fantastic.

Frozen sheets of ice made the cultivable lands infertile. Canoes carrying a lone vegetable seller or an old man plying with logs of woods to keep them warm through the winter. Kids with their mothers went past us adding a fleeting slice of warmth. But overall it was a sordid tale of strange forlornness where the very life is hibernating under thick layers of snow. But for the migratory travellers from the cities craving for a snow enveloped world of lifelessness is a kind of perpetrated debauchery.





“ Winter gave us a unique opportunity of visiting the railway station of Srinagar. Train services lie suspended in the winter months because of heavy snowfall and turns the station into a painted scene suspended in a state of timelessness.

One needs to see to believe how a railway station becomes a sight to die for once it puts on the veil of snow. The rows of leafless maple trees beside the platform, the seats for the travellers sticking out their heads amid the carpet of freshly accumulated snow from last night's heavy snowfall, the family of stray dogs running around were picturesque spectacle of old classics where the polar express would chug through billowing curling smoke and splintering snow from its wheels.

The story of the young station master of Srinagar station spoke of the axiom hackneyed with overuse. While the young man told us that he was looking for the earliest opportunity of going back to his home city of din and bustle, we were overwhelmed at the silence of the place. Grass indeed remains greener at the other side.

The vacation was brief but the memories are limitless. We remember the old man who kept serving cups of delightful kahwa till we were done, the locals squatting on the street corners with the cane baskets of fire tucked under their oversized firan, the country lad who treated us with the warmest hospitality when we visited his village in Sonamarg and the sound of ice cracking when the oar of the lonely boatman hit the frozen surface of the lake. With his canoe disappearing at the next bend, the trailing sight of unsold vegetables of the day on its deck spoke me of a different tale.

Ashis Ghatak is a teacher by profession in a senior secondary school of Calcutta. He loves to travel on the high mountains and catch moments with his camera. A playlist of old country songs and musings with his own self are the only companions on his journeys to the hills.



Clockwise from top left:
When it was snowing
incessantly in the morning.
The Dal Boulevard at dusk.
Srinagar Railway Station
covered in snow.
Life is lulled in winter.



A Week-Long **DESERT ODYSSEY**

It is not always that one gets the opportunity to turn the new year weekend into a grand trip. But to welcome the new year, I had the exact plan and opportunity. Earlier I had travelled to Jaipur and Ajmer in Rajasthan. This time I had two options – the Jaisalmer-Longewala circuit or the Udaipur-Chittorgarh circuit. While the City of Lakes (Udaipur) was something I always had on my list, visiting the border and traversing central and North-West Rajasthan seemed more appealing in the moment and I chalked out a 7-day itinerary.

■ **SURAJ DUTTA**



Jaisalmer Fort

Delhi to Jaipur was a breeze! With just one break at McD, Manesar for breakfast, we reached Jaipur flat-out within 5 hours of riding time.

As the customary tourist hangouts of Jaipur like Amer Fort, Albert Hall, Hawa Mahal, Jal Mahal, City Palace, Jantar Mantar were already explored by us previously, we settled to give Nahargarh Fort a visit before the evening set in and tasting some delicious malai ghewar at Laxmi Mistaan Bhandaar sweet shop. The fort staff starts wrapping up after 5 and closes by 6. So it's a prudent thing to explore the fort first and then hang back to enjoy view of the city underneath shrouded in colorful lights. We called it a day after having some mouth-watering chicken cuisine at Taxi Chick-Inn near the Sindhi Camp Bus Stand.



Clockwise from top left: We ride towards Bikaner at dusk with the golden hour ahead of us. Windmills dotting the outskirts of Jaisalmer. A beautiful night in Bikaner. The morning parade by BSF at the Tanot Temple premises. Straight roads in the rugged landscape leading to the border.

On day 2, we set away from Jaipur at a leisurely pace at 11AM with the target of reaching Bikaner by late noon, a distance of roughly 350 kms amidst the Thar desert. It took us approximately 6 hours/ 400 kms via Sikar bypass to reach Bikaner which features tourist attractions like the Junagadh Fort and the Karni Mata Temple nearby.

Day 3 we had the steep target of traversing near 500 kms to reach Tanot Mata Mandir, a border area from Bikaner via Pokhran Bypass-Jaisalmer-Ramgarh. The highway was straight and unbroken. We initially were confused on whether to go via Jaisalmer (Phalodi-Ramdevra route) for Tanot or bypass it (Bhadariya-

Mohangarh route). But on hearing that we might need permits to visit the outposts of Tanot and Longewala, we decided to ride via Jaisalmer while inquiring at the BSF Headquarters for permits.

As luck would have it, at the BSF HQ we were informed that permits for the forward areas aren't being provided by the BSF since about 6 months now and that we could easily visit the tourist areas of the region without any permit. As we made a late exit from Jaisalmer, the sun started sinking in the West. To our company were the huge wind-mills dotting the landscape and the occasional car/ jeep mostly going towards Jaisalmer. We reached the decrepit town of Ramgarh, which was the tactical retreat option provided by Battalion HQ

to Maj. Kuldip Singh Chandpuri in the Indo-Pak battle of 1971 at Longewala. It was already 7PM and darkness had descended. We had a simple dinner at Ramgarh and decided to continue on to Tanot to spend the night there as it was only 50 kms away. The night ride under the stars was an exciting one; our headlights were the only visible source of light till far off. We reached Tanot by 9 PM and upon furnishing valid ID was given sleeping quarters in the BSF operated shelter.

An aarti takes place at the temple at 5 AM in the morning organized by the BSF. People from afar through Tanot to witness the aarti. Soon thereafter soldiers start their daily parade, especially so if a dignitary is visiting.



On day 4, after we were done exploring the Tanot Temple, we set off for Longewala at a leisurely pace since we didn't have to cover much. The road leading away from Tanot towards Longewala was a sandy one and broken at many places. It gradually widened with sweeping curves and steady inclines at places. With nothing but the desert at both the side of the road, riding was exhilarating as we could feel the sets of the *Border* movie which showcased the Battle of Longewala in 1971. We reached the Longewala outpost soon enough as its distance from Tanot was only 50 kms.

The Longewala War Museum was thronging with tourists. It televisions a special show on the war for tourists. The

museum contained detailed prints of the landscape, war time weapons of both side and the valiant deeds of the war-heroes like Maj. Kuldip Singh Chandpuri, Subedar Rattan Singh, Sepahi Jagjit Singh and Mathura Dass, all from the hallowed 23 Punjab Regiment.

Surveying both the insides of the museum as well as the external outpost area which had so many remnants from the 1971 War was a roller-coaster experience and felt as if we were part of the history. The Soldier's Plea and the Officers Prayer illustrated on milestones in the site was an emotional moment as well as a thankful one.

Done with exploring Longewala, we set off for Jaisalmer as we planned to celebrate the New Year's eve there. However, we also

wanted an experience of the sand dunes Rajasthan is so well known for. Accordingly, we took the road from Longewala leading to the much acclaimed Sam Sand Dunes at about 120 kms and only 45 kms from Jaisalmer. The Sam sand dunes are one of the most authentic desert dune site in whole of India, where once can find 30-60-meter tall sand dunes. The color of the sand is so bright and fine that it is described as "golden". If you are an adventure lover, you must not miss this tourist attraction. Booking in advance might be a good idea since tourist through this site during holidays and busy seasons.

After taking a camel ride through the dunes of Sam, we set off for Jaisalmer by dusk. Finally, we felt we were back to the mainland.

Clockwise from top left:
The Victory Pillar of Tanot.
White cloth tied by devotees seeking blessing of the deity.
Tanot Temple.
A sufi shrine coexisting beautifully alongside the temple.
Pakistani shells that landed on the temple in the war but didn't explode.
Longewala outpost.



1



2



3



6



5



4

First thing to visit in Jaisalmer was the **Jaisalmer Fort aka the Sonar Quila** because of its honey-gold hue and being at the crossroads of important trade routes including the ancient Silk road.

The Jaisalmer Fort is a huge structure and is considered as one of the very few “living forts” since the old city’s population still resides within the fort. When it was constructed 800 years ago, the fort was the city of Jaisalmer itself. As population grew, the first settlements sprang up outside the fort walls. Built in 1156 AD by the Bhati Rajput ruler Rao Jaisal, the name of the fort and subsequently the city originates from the ruler’s name himself.

Next up on my list was the grand Jaisalmer War Museum - located 10 kms from Jaisalmer on the Jaisalmer-Jodhpur road. The well maintained humongous museum was a delight to visit because of the sprawling landscape which had enemy tanks and fighter planes displayed all over it in an utmost organized manner. Paying silent tribute to the sacrifice of the brave jawaans

during the 1965 and 1971 war stands a giant bayonet at the center of the site. It is apt to say that this bayonet, cast in steel, represents the steely sense of duty and commitment of every soldier to our great army.

Day 5, i.e. the new year day ended with wrapping up all sightseeing in Jaisalmer and setting off for Jodhpur via the Barmer route. I could not wish for a better start to the new year, with the first day spent on the riding the highways. Setting off from Jaisalmer by 2PM, I reached Barmer at a distance of 150 kms by 4:30 and after climbing Fort Barmer, resumed ride to reach Jodhpur by 8:30 in the evening. About 360 kms done in 6.5 hrs of riding. The next day was gonna be huge as I had earmarked the first half of the day to explore Mehrangarh Fort in Jodhpur.

The first view of **Mehrangarh** filled me with awe. Not for nothing, the hulking red sand stone fort which was built 410 feet above the city is counted amongst one of the largest forts in India. The sheer ruggedness and colossal size of the fort amazes you with its architectural

Clockwise from top left:
1: Exterior of Sonar Quila.
Image 2 to 4: Longewala War Museum.
5: Short halt at a dhaba in Longewala.
6: Camel ride through the dunes of Sam.

prowess and natural defense. Mehrangarh (Fort of the sun) has been the headquarters of the branch of Rajput clan known as the Rathores.

A fort like Mehrangarh was an object of great power and prestige; in today's terms, it would be rather like owning an aircraft carrier.

The purposes of the fort were diverse. It served not only as a military stronghold but also as a palace for the rulers and their spouses. Additionally, it acted as a hub for supporting the arts, music, and literature. With numerous temples and shrines, it was also a place of worship. Many structures within the fort reflect these multifaceted uses.

Ending Day 6 on a high after exploring Mehrangarh and Jodhpur, Day 7 involved riding back to Delhi from Nagaur via Salasar. On the ending lap of the journey, I ensured not to miss the Nagaur Fort. A considerably smaller fort with some very helpful staff, I would have preferred if the fort was maintained or decked up better. Irrespective, the Nagaur Fort should not be missed if you are visiting Nagaur.

Reaching Delhi by the end of Day 7, I clocked a total of 2500 kms approximately while using up 70L of fuel. A memorable trip which shall be enshrined in the memory with the pleasant experience that Rajasthan had to offer!

Suraj 'Sufi Traveler' Dutta likes to think of himself as an avid traveller with



a sweet tooth for trekking to less explored trails. A lawyer by profession, he was introduced to the unlimited vistas of travelling by means of long distance biking expeditions. Solo biking till date remains his preferred means of travelling and he considers the Enfield Thunderbird as his most prized possession. Trekking to the Everest Base Camp remains at the top of his to-do list.



Mehrangarh Fort, Jodhpur



A FAIRY- RIDE ACROSS AN ENCHANTED LAKE

At Lumi i Shales, the deep green waters turn blue

■ ANJALY THOMAS



From the moment I heard of Albania's Lake Komani and Shala River to be precise, I knew how my Albanian visit was going to turn out. Therefore, upon arriving in Albania, I headed straight to Lake Komani and made the discovery of a lifetime.

In short, the lake lived up to its hype, reputation, and my expectation.

Worth every Lek spent on the trip.

The trip and how I fell in love with it

Admittedly the trip was slightly exhausting, even though I did stay overnight on the lake shore guesthouse the night before. I can't speak for other guesthouses, but the one I stayed in had all their stuff produced locally. The trout came from the lake, the honey came from the bee farm one can see along the shore...you get the picture. And this set the mood for the boat ride in the Lake.

Arriving at the ferry boarding point early the next morning is an adventure. One must pass through a narrow tunnel (people walk through it if arriving by private transport) to reach the pier lined with huge ferries carrying people and motor bound for different destinations. My boat with about twenty passengers and a dog was bound for Shala River, accessible only via the Lake Komani. There were not many tourists heading my way, which was quite a relief.

Once the journey began and the boatman started up a brief introduction of the day's itinerary is when I learned that the breathtaking lake was created by humans. To me (and I speak boldly for everyone on the boat), it felt more like a fairyland. Lake Komani's seclusion, the surrounding wilderness, the deep green waters didn't quite scream "human creation" – and when the music died, I felt as though I was sailing in paradise. Except when small villages appeared along the shore did that illusion shatter.

The emerald water, so clear that it looked unreal, meandered through vertical canyon walls before finally narrowing to a width of merely fifty meters. It suddenly turned cold. I swear everyone slipped on a jacket and mumbled. Through this the boat shot through and finally we arrived at Lumi I Shales (Shala River).

Someone thoughtfully named it the Peace Island because any other name would do no justice to it.

The Shala River is also called the Thailand of Albania. The water shifted colours- from deep green to light blue. Tall, lush, unique mountains lined the entire river rising straight out of the water and isolated between the peaks of these mountains with beach spots next to the river was the most magnificent sight I'd seen in all of Albania. In no other place in Albania can one see and explore a vertical landscape that goes from 170 to 1800-2400 meters in such a small area.

And yes, my first thoughts were of being in an enchanted, magical land.



The Shala River is often confused with **Lake Komani** and although they are **attached**, they are **not** the same.

The river boasts of some of the most scenic views in Albania, making it the perfect place to relax in silence.

The Shala River is a side branch of the Komani Lake and can be accessed only via the boat. The Shala River has its origin in Thethi and flows past Peace Island towards the lake. Unfortunately, most people skip this trip (and head to Valbona Valley National Park or Fierze instead) but I am glad I chose this way.

After drinking in the scenery, I decided to do the short hike to a point that overlooked the Shala River. Understandably, there were only few people with the same idea and I soon knew why. The hike was steep and slippery, and I can't say that I didn't struggle a little, but the overlook to the river was mind blowing. For those enthusiasts, the trail continues upwards into the mountains, which I was told required determination, agility and time. Perfect if you are staying at one of the only two guesthouses there.

Seeing that I was all hot and sweaty, the next thing to do was, naturally to chill in the freezing waters with a cold Peja, Albania's favourite beer, diving into that "happy to be alive and free" feeling.

Did I mention that the waters here are frightfully cold? Easily below freezing! My feet turned numb from the cold. I swear I could see the sun-loungers

smile as I stumbled my way out of the water on through the pebbled beach.

So, I spent the next hour warming myself by the wood-fired oven in the restaurant, inhaling the smoke and smell of grilling meat and fish while the others spent time in the bar in the middle of the blue river.

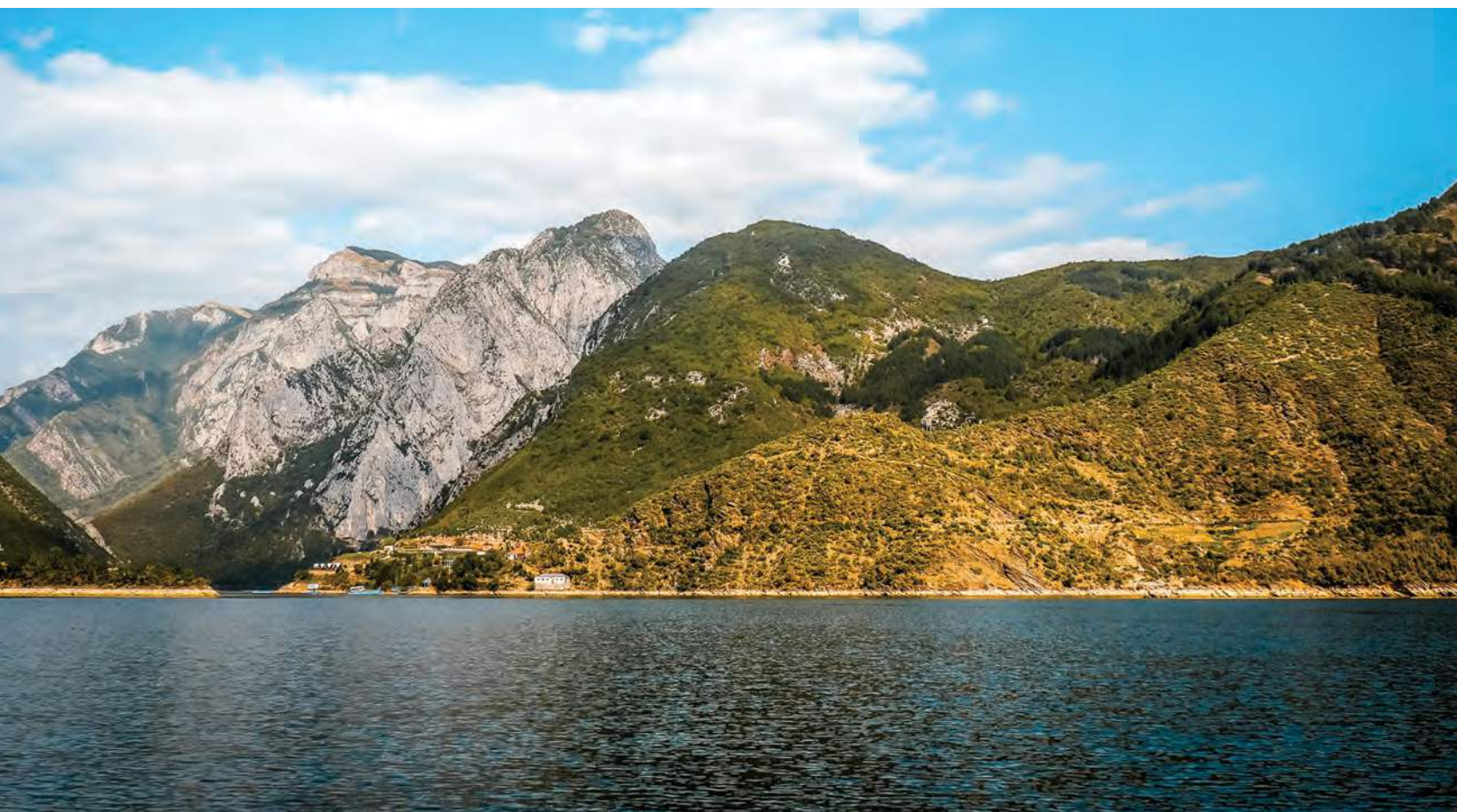


If you are not into hiking, you can rent a kayak and explore the surrounding area.

How the lake came to be

Located in the northern part of Albania, not far from Shkoder and near the spectacular Valbona Valley National Park, is in fact an artificial lake. It was created when the hydroelectric power station was built in the 1980s on the Drin River with the 115-meters high dam on one side, near Komani village (hence the name of the lake). Komani Dam is one of the ten highest dams of this type in Europe, with a height of 133m and a length of 290 m, who has created a lake with a total volume of about 500 million m3 of water.





The crystalline water of Shala River originates in the village of Theth and gets together with Valbona River in Komani Lake. It is as though all the beautiful rivers of Albania are united in Lake Komani giving it an ethereal beauty. These rivers collect alpine waters from the melting snow that flow into the valley.

Inland water transport with ferries and boats for passengers and goods is also developed. The lake is also used for fishing.

Getting there

Albania is a small country, so it is not very difficult to reach places if you think of the distances, but access to certain places, Lake Komani included, a direct transportation is rather limited – or mostly restricted to private means or day trips (in groups).

The places are easily reachable by car, although a big part of the road leading to Lake Komani goes through winding mountainous road and is in a rather poor condition so expect to drive slow. Tirana is around 140 km away (3 hours by car) and Shkoder is 60 km away (1.5 hours by car)

I used private transport from Shkoder as I intended to stay the night on the Lake. However, there are early morning minibus from Tirana departing from the Gazheli Petrol station next to Zogu i Zi roundabout in the center of the city. Berisha Ferry is one of the most popular operators of the ferry. During high season, it is recommended you book early – online booking works well. Transfers are also available from Shkoder and Valbona.

Quick tips:

1. Book your stay in advance if you intend to stay the night.
2. Pack swim wear, warm clothes and rain gear.
3. No need to pack food or snacks – plenty of options for it around.
4. You can drink water straight from the river.
5. Carry your trash back with you. (There is a board by the ferry boarding point that says – Consider this the land of gods. Keep it clean. There is no trash in heaven). It's meant to be taken seriously.

Should you visit? Most definitely yes. When you plan your Albania itinerary be sure to **include Lake Komani in it too.**

The place is also home to numerous species of animals and birds, if you are lucky, you might spot them around when visiting Lake Komani.

If you have time on your hands, stay the night in one of the guesthouses around the lake.

Anjaly Thomas is a lawyer-turned-traveller and writer. She has authored four books to date, including one on North Korea. Currently based in Dubai, she has travelled to over 65 countries.





An Epic Adventure End Of The World Train Ride

The Train of the End of the World, built initially for transporting timber to the Ushuaia prison, now serves as a heritage railroad into the Tierra del Fuego National Park, offering a nostalgic ride through Patagonian lakes, lagoons, and rivers.

The Train of the End of the World, also known as the Southern Fuegian Railway, offers a unique and unforgettable journey through the remote landscapes of Tierra del Fuego, located at the southern tip of South America. Starting from the “End of the World Station” in Ushuaia, the southernmost city in the world, the train winds through the rugged terrain, providing panoramic views and a glimpse into the region’s history.

Ushuaia, the capital of Tierra del Fuego, was used by the Argentinian government as a penal colony between 1884 and 1947, housing some of the country’s most notorious criminals and political prisoners. The only remaining remnant of the city’s dark past is the Prison Museum, where visitors can view maritime artifacts and displays within the untouched confines of jail cells.

In 1902, the construction of the Ushuaia prison began with the arrival of engineer Catello Muratgia. Timber from nearby forests was used to build much of the city’s infrastructure. To assist in transporting materials, including local rock, sand, and lumber, a railroad on wooden rails, known as the Xylocarril, was constructed in 1902 by inmates. Wagons were pulled by oxen along

a narrow gauge less than 1,000 mm wide. A Decauville railroad with narrow metal tracks replaced the Xylocarril in 1910, becoming the most important means of transportation in Ushuaia.

The train used to be called the ‘ten-of-the-prisoners train’ or ‘the prisoner’s train.’ A total of two locomotives were used at that time to transport prisoners to and from work daily to load material collected during the workday.

After leaving the prison in the morning, the train set off for Monte Susana. As the clock struck the end of the day, the train would return, sometimes with prisoners on the load they were carrying, otherwise with prisoners pushing it.

Over time, as wood was exhausted, the railway was extended further into the forest into more remote areas. The road followed the Pipo River valley up into the mountains. With constant building, the prison and the town expanded, with prisoners offering a variety of goods and services. A naval base replaced the prison in 1947.

A large portion of the line was blocked two years later by the 1949 earthquake in Tierra

del Fuego. The government made every effort to clear the line and get the train back in service. However, the service did not prove viable and was closed in 1952. The rail route was abandoned for nearly 40 years until its restoration in the 1990s.

The legendary rail route was revived by Tranex Turismo S.A., which started its operations on October 11, 1994, as the famous “End of the World Train.”

In Ushuaia, the train begins at the “End of the World Station,” located just 8 km from the city center. The passenger cars have heating and an audio system that allows the passengers to relive the journey and the history of the train. The route traces the historic Convict Train route, which is over a century old and leads to Tierra del Fuego National Park. Along the way, the train travels through picturesque landmarks such as Macarena Waterfall Station, Redonda and Estorbo Islands, Sampaio Mountains, Roca Lake, and Condor Hill, before finally reaching the Tierra del Fuego National Park Station.

Overall, it is one of the most beautiful train journeys on earth, attracting travellers seeking a blend of history, nature, and nostalgia.

Sifnos

A Cycladic Gem

Sifnos is medium in size by Greek standards ... approx 15 kms in length and approx 8 kms in width. It has an area of approx 74 square kilometres, with it's highest point being 680 metres (location of the Monastery of Profit Ilias) ... and a permanent population of approx 2,650 people.

It is known for it's traditional pottery and there are many small workshops in the villages ... and it's "hiking trails". It has become the most popular destination in the Western Cyclades. Visitors flock to the island in summer lured by it's charming villages, terraced countryside dotted with ancient towers, Venetian dovecotes and long sandy beaches.

 **GAVERIDES**



Over the years whilst living in Syros, (the administrative capital of the Cycladic group of Islands - Kyklades in Greek), I had heard occasionally from different folks what an attractive and unique island Sifnos was. It was said to have an exquisite dreamlike quality. Not so far away ... Sifnos is in the chain that forms the western arc of the Cyclades, and can be seen from the southern end of Syros some 24 nautical miles away.

Every year I try and venture to two or three of the other islands around Greece ... always somewhere new. In 2021 I went to Kythnos and Milos, both also in this western arc.

And so it was that recently I boarded the charming "Artemis" ferry, one of the smaller boats in the Hellenic Seaways fleet, for the four hour trek to Sifnos. On the way we stopped at Paros and Serifos, before arriving early afternoon.



APOLLONIA

First impressions are often the most revealing and the delightful port of Kamares on the west coast of the island doesn't disappoint. As you enter the deep bay one is taken back by the height of the rocky hills that form a grand amphitheatre effect. On the hill tops are several tiny isolated white dots which I would learn later are Greek Orthodox Monasteries. Typical of the Cyclades it has a dry rocky terrain. It has been this juxtaposition of the dry barren grey rock meeting the royal blue Aegean Sea that has always held an intrinsic appeal and fascination for me.

As you depart the ferry, in the distance (approx 500 metres) on the other side of the bay one can see the outline of a stunning white sandy beach. The many beach umbrellas suggest that the tourists are entrenched and a welcome and necessary part of the island's economy.

As a true backpacker (in search of that youthful feeling of being adventurous and free), I had not organised my accommodation

for the anticipated three nights. So the first stop was the Information Office located on the port.

Because of the internet, sadly gone are the days of the friendly locals welcoming you with their quaint hand made signs ... promoting their accommodation on offer with their broad smiles, and imploring you to "pick me". In my backpacking youth around these unique Islands I had always been amazed at how courteous they were with each other, despite competing for your favour.

A friend had told me that whilst the port of Kamares definitely has a holiday atmosphere with its large beach and waterfront cafes and tavernas, the real action is up near Apollonia ... the island's capital approx 5 kms away to the east. So my budget accommodation was efficiently organised by the delightfully friendly receptionist, after making a few phone calls on my behalf.

Whilst I was very tempted to stay in Kamares which was visually attractive with loads of accommodation to be seen, I decided to stick with the advice received.

My second pleasant encounter with the accommodating locals was the obliging

communicative bus driver, and his attractive teenage assistant collecting the fares.

So far, so good ... my first impression of the locals was pleasant. This came as a relief as Greek bus drivers in the busy summer months on the more touristy islands can be far less communicative. This was definitely in keeping with Sifnos's reputation for being "low key and chilled".

The twenty-minute bus ride up a steep and winding road to Apollonia provided a glimpse of the island's topography. As we ascended towards the center, the rugged rocky landscape interspersed with patches of green Skinos plants. The iconic Cycladic cubic houses, painted in white with blue accents, were scattered throughout the area.

The two-star budget rooms at "Kalarides" with host Yiannis were exactly what I needed. They were clean, tidy, and just a 5-minute walk into the town center. Upon Yiannis's suggestion, I took an evening stroll to the smaller neighboring village of Artemonas. It is a delightful, upmarket enclave with impressive Venetian houses and the charming 17th-century church, Agios Georgios tou Afendi.



KASTRO

The following day I set off on the 3 km one hour walk to the island's biggest tourist attraction, and a must see ... that is Kastro (Castle) on the east side of the island. It offers magnificent panoramic views of the Aegean with Paros and Ante Paros a faint outline in the hazy distance.

Kastro is walled cliff top medieval village that was once the capital of the island. It is a magical place ... a labyrinth of winding ally ways and white washed houses, hanging off the eastern edge of the island.

It is up to this day one of the most important medieval settlements in the Cyclades and indeed all of Greece. It is best to enter the village by using the peripheral path around the sea side, to enjoy the stunning views of the majestic royal blue Aegean ... before sighting the well recognised church below.

The iconic "Church of the Seven Martyrs" is located below Kastro on a neck of land jutting about 50 metres out to sea. Although

small, it is the most symbolic church on the island and one of the most photographed spots in the Cyclades.

In Kastro a coffee or something a little stronger can be enjoyed in the up market "Dolci" Cafe Restaurant perched on the western side of the village, offering panoramic views of the hinterland valleys, I suggest a full day should be devoted to exploring this amazing settlement, with a lunch at one of the few delightful Tavernas. I regret only spending half a day there !

FAROS

Another enjoyable adventure was to take the bus from Apollonia (regular summer time hourly service) down to the attractive beach settlement of Faros approx 6 kms away on the south east corner of the island.

There is a small yachting marina jetty that brings life to the village ... and there are two charming beaches (with several tavernas and cafes) connected by a path through a small headland with houses. Both have tamarisk

trees offering shade for the beachgoers within the horseshoe-shaped bay.

I found my way to the second beach and enjoyed a splendid swim in the crystal clear water. For me the Greek Islands are all about connecting with the truly unique Aegean Sea ... and there is no better way than swimming in the safe clean waters on offer.

PANAGIA CHRISOPIGI

I then noticed the sign that pointed toward the "Path to Chrisopigi." The one-hour walk along the man-made path, which winds about 2 kilometers along the shoreline to Chrisopigi, offers some of the most picturesque views that one can imagine in these exquisite islands. This experience was particularly surreal around 8 pm, as the sun started to set in the west.

The Monastery of Panagia Chrisopigi is one of the well-known landmarks in Sifnos, dedicated to the island's patron saint, Chrisopigi. Built on top of an older church, the monastery rests on a rock, seeming to float above the sea, and is worth a visit.



A SERIOUS HIKING ADVENTURE

Sifnos has developed into a hiker's paradise with 19 designated trails crisscrossing the island. Free detailed maps are available from the Information Offices, and they advertise 100 km of trails ranging from 1 km (20 mins walk) to 15 km (7 hours), and are very well sign posted.

Having thoroughly enjoyed the previous day's sea sidewalk, I felt the need for something more rustic/rural. I, therefore, chose Trail # 5, which starts in Katavati, a neighboring village of Apollonia, heads in a southwesterly direction, ending on the other side of the island in the bay of Vathi, some 9 km away.

Initially, the starting point was a little hard to find, but eventually, the well-marked "red and white" signs were located. Setting off at 11 am on a forecast to be a hot day, I was unprepared for the magnitude of the trek ahead, especially during the heat of the day!

A friendly young Belgium couple coming down from the mountain guided me to the correct starting point. Incredulous that I was

attempting the trek on my own, they warned me of the need for both water and hat, both of which I had. They had been on a separate trail to the mountain-top Monastery of Profit Ilias, which seemed to hang like a cloud in the sky on a distant mountain-top. Good luck they proffered !!

An hour into the walk, I stumbled across an immaculately kept chapel known as Agios Efstathios (Agios means Saint), in such a remote location that I could not understand who would use its divine facilities, let alone maintain it in such immaculate condition, I would see many more such strange phenomenon in the next four hours. It seems the Greeks are very religious folk!

The steep and rocky climb in the valley proved to be a test, making the middle two hours the most challenging. When I finally reached the peak, I felt relieved and enjoyed the breathtaking sea view, accompanied by a pleasant breeze.

While I was only about halfway there, psychologically, I was restored, knowing that the rest of the hike would be downhill to the sea. In the far distance, I could see the faint outline of Kimolos and Milos islands to the southwest.

However, I lost sight of the sea as the track diverted back inland and along another valley. Along this section, however, I came across a fantastic man-made olive grove of approx 20 trees. Such an unusual place ... totally isolated was the small, well-kept white house with no one home.

An hour later, I caught the first glimpse of Vathi Bay, approx two km below in the distance, a welcoming and beautiful sight indeed.

Leaving Sifnos the following morning, I realised that I needed to allocate more time to explore this unique and lovely island. I recommend at least four days, if not more.

Gaverides is an Australian now living in Greece. Over the past 20 years, he has traveled extensively to Athens, throughout the Greek islands and the more remote mainland areas of this wonderful country. He enjoys writing about his adventures in Greece, and in particular, the journeys that take him there.





INSPIRATION

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The Magical PANGONG TSO

It was magical, I was spellbound, for sure there was a calming tranquility, was it some sort of wonderland with some divine powers that cast a spell upon me as if I was hypnotized.

■ IMTIAZ ULLAH



Pangong Lake is a beautiful high-altitude lake situated in the Himalayas, on the border between India and China. It sits at an elevation of 4,350 meters above sea level and stretches approximately 134 km in length. More than half of the lake is in China. The lake is known for its crystal-clear blue waters and stunning scenery, surrounded by snow-capped mountains. It's a popular tourist spot, but permits are mandatory due to its sensitive border location.

The drive to Pangong Tso from Leh is really challenging. During the journey, one has to cross Changla pass. It is situated at an altitude of 5,360 meters (17,590 feet) above sea level and is one of the highest motorable passes in the world. The pass is located on the route from Leh to Pangong Lake and is a popular tourist destination.

The road to Chang La Pass is steep and winding, and the weather can be unpredictable. It is advisable to carry warm clothing and to check the weather forecast before embarking on the journey. The pass usually remains open, but it is important to check the road conditions before planning a trip. The pass offers stunning views of the surrounding mountains and is a must-visit destination for adventure enthusiasts and nature lovers.

Luckily, for us the pass was open even in December 2023, this year until now Ladakh has received very less snowfall. One word of caution- you can feel the dearth of oxygen in this region because of the extreme height. It is advisable to check your medical condition before embarking on this journey especially during the winters and don't spend much time at the Changla pass as you may be hit by AMS. Enjoy this miracle of nature but stay safe and take precautions.



If

you are planning to visit Pangong Tso during winters, here are some tips:

- 1. Dress in layers:** Wear warm, insulated clothing in layers to keep yourself warm. Make sure to wear a good quality jacket, gloves, hat, and boots.
- 2. Carry necessary equipment:** Carry necessary equipment like snow boots, crampons, and ice axes if you plan to trek on the frozen lake.
- 3. Stay hydrated:** It is important to stay hydrated even in cold weather. Carry a thermos with hot water or tea to keep yourself warm and hydrated.
- 4. Plan your itinerary:** Plan your itinerary carefully and make sure to include enough time for acclimatization. The high altitude and cold weather can be challenging,

During winters, the lake freezes over and the surrounding areas are covered in snow, making it a unique and picturesque destination to visit. However, it is important to note that the temperatures can drop to extremely low levels, sometimes even below -30°C , so it is essential to be well-prepared for the cold weather.

so it is important to take it slow and give your body time to adjust.

- 5. Book accommodation in advance:** Make sure to book your accommodation in advance as many hotels and guesthouses may be closed during winters.
- 6. AMS medication caution:** One can take a Dimox tablet to encounter AMS, however, it is strictly advisable to consult a medical practitioner before taking the medicine and get your medical health assessed.
- 7. Sun protection:** Sunglasses and sunscreen lotion are needed to avoid strong UV rays at the high altitude.
- 8. Safety first:** Driving on snow is extremely dangerous and one needs experience. Therefore, it is advisable that one should hire a local taxi with an experienced driver and anti skid chain is a must while driving on snow.

Overall, visiting Pangong Tso during winters can be a unique and unforgettable experience, but it is important to be well-prepared and take necessary precautions to ensure a safe and enjoyable trip.

DISPUTE OVER PANGONG LAKE

Pangong Tso, also known as Pangong Lake, is located in the Ladakh region of India and is a disputed territory between India and China. The conflict originated from the Sino-Indian War of 1962, when China seized control of Aksai Chin, including the region of Pangong Tso.

More recently, tensions have heightened, leading to a violent clash in 2020 that resulted in casualties on both sides. Both countries have tried to resolve the confrontation peacefully, but progress has been sluggish, and tensions remain high.





The experience of witnessing **Pangong Tso** is a feeling that is hard to express in words.

HOW TO TRAVEL TO PANGONG LAKE FROM LEH

Pangong Lake is located about 160 km from Leh, the capital city of Ladakh in India. Here are the ways to travel to Pangong Lake from Leh:

1. By Car: The most popular way to travel to Pangong Lake is by car. You can hire a taxi or rent a car in Leh and drive to Pangong Lake. The journey takes about 5-6 hours and passes through some of the most scenic landscapes in Ladakh.

2. By Bus: There are daily bus services from Leh to Pangong Lake, but the frequency of buses is limited. The journey takes about 7-8 hours and the buses are not very comfortable and centrally heated even in winter months.

3. By Motorcycle: If you are an adventure enthusiast, you

can rent a motorcycle in Leh and ride to Pangong Lake in summer months. The journey is challenging but rewarding, as you get to experience the stunning landscapes of Ladakh up close.

4. By Trekking: For those who love trekking, there are several trekking routes that lead to Pangong Lake from Leh. The most popular trek is the Spangmik to Pangong Tso trek, which takes about 3-4 days to complete.

Best time to visit pangong lake

The best time to visit Pangong Lake is during the summer months from May to September. During this time, the weather is pleasant and the lake is accessible. However, it is important to note that the temperature can drop significantly at night, so it is advisable to carry warm clothing.

Additionally, it is important to check the weather forecast before planning a trip as the region is prone to sudden weather changes.

Imtiaz Ullah is a Corporate Attorney and Travel Writer with The Traveller



Trails. Also, he serves as an advisory member of the NGO Sarvahitey. Additionally, he is the founder of the travel website www.nomadlawyer.org. His travel philosophy involves exploring new places, meeting new people, learning about different cultures, and trying local cuisine, all while maintaining a full-time job. He always believes in the idea- "Don't just be a traveller, but a Responsible one."

A Comprehensive Guide to Agra's Treasures

■ Md MASARRATH ALI KHAN

Agra is an ancient city on the banks of Yamuna River. The epic Mahabharata refers to it as Agravana, meaning Paradise in Sanskrit. Sikandar Lodi (1487-1517 AD) was the first Sultan of Delhi to shift his capital from Delhi to Agra. After his death, his son Ibrahim Lodi held the fort for 9 years until he was defeated and killed in the Battle of Panipat in 1526 AD.

After Humayun's defeat at Bilgram in 1540 AD, Sher Shah of the Sur Dynasty occupied the fort and garrisoned it. It was the capital of the Mughal Empire in the 16th and early 17th century. It witnessed the rise of the pomp and pageantry during the rule of the great Mughal kings Akbar and Jahangir but reached its pinnacle of glory during the reign of Shah Jahan. Agra's importance as a political centre ended with the transfer of the capital to Delhi, but its architectural wealth secured it a place on international map. Agra is a treasure trove of historic monuments which are a reminder of the opulence of the Mughal Empire.



A

must see place on any tourist's bucket list is the Agra Fort - one of the most robustly built magnificent masterpieces of the Mughals. Akbar arrived in Agra in 1558 AD. He commenced the construction of the Agra Fort in 1565 AD in red sandstone on the right bank of river Yamuna, on the remains of an ancient site known

as Badalgarh and got it completed in 8 years. Shah Jahan raised white marble palaces and three marble mosques in it - Moti Masjid (the Pearl Mosque), Nagina Masjid and Mina Masjid. Aurangzeb imprisoned Shah Jahan in the fort for 8 years until he died in 1666 AD and was later buried in the Taj Mahal.

After Shah Jahan's death Agra lost its grandeur and Aurangzeb died in 1707 AD. The 18th century history of Agra Fort is a saga of sieges and plunder during which it was held by the Jats and the Marathas and finally

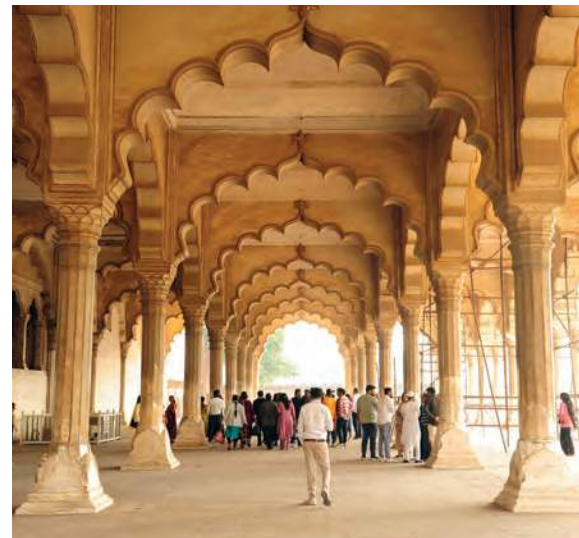
the British captured it from the latter in 1803 AD.

“ The fort is crescent shaped, flattened on the east with a long, nearly straight wall facing the river.

It has a perimeter of 2.4 km and is ringed by double castellated ramparts of red sandstone punctuated at regular intervals by huge bastions. A 9m wide and 10m deep moat surrounds the outer wall. An imposing 22m high inner wall imparts a feeling of invincible defensive construction.



Exterior view of Agra Fort



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After passing through the massive interior gates, the tourist is attracted towards the Jahangiri Mahal.

J

ahangiri Mahal has an impressive façade decorated with geometrical designs inlaid with

white marble on a red sandstone background. The private pavilion meant for relaxation and leisure - Khas Mahal - is ranked amongst the most beautiful creations of Shah Jahan. It consists of three pavilions. The pillars and arches of the central hall are elaborately carved.

The southern and northern pavilions were the residences of his two daughters Jahan Ara Begum and Roshan Ara Begum. The Jasmine Tower (Musamman Burj or Octagonal Tower) is a miracle of marble filigree work inlaid with

colourful semi-precious stones, the excellence of which is very admirable.

The 40 pillared Diwan-i-Aam (Hall of Public Audience) was built to the orders of Shah Jahan and it was completed in 40 days in 1627 AD.

The Mausoleum of Itimad'ud Daula (tomb of Mirza Ghiyas Baig) marks an important transitional phase in the study of Indo-Islamic Architecture and provides a 'connecting link' between the robust red sandstone buildings of Akbar and delicate marble-palaces of Shah Jahan.



Ghiyas Baig was a Persian who had obtained service in Akbar's Court. His mausoleum was built by his

daughter Mehrunnisa (Nur Jahan), the Queen of Jahangir in 1628 AD.

The main mausoleum is placed in the centre of a four-quartered garden on a plinth of red sandstone. Octagonal towers are attached to the corners of the square building. The interior is composed of a central hall housing the cenotaphs of Nur Jahan's mother Asmat Begum and father Itimad'ud Daula. Marble screens of geometric lattice work permit soft lighting of the interiors. The profuse and lavish embellishment abounds in flowing designs consisting of cups, wine-vases, flower vases, human and bird-motifs. Peacocks, fish, dogs and lions are also depicted. Semi precious and rare stones are used in decoration of its marble surfaces and the tomb is a forerunner of the Taj Mahal.

Clockwise from top left:
Front view of Jahangiri Mahal.
Khas Mahal in Agra Fort.
Diwan-i-Aam or Hall of Public Audience in Agra Fort.
Musamman Burj or Octagonal Tower.
Mausoleum of Itimad'ud Daula.

“

The Taj Mahal is a shining jewel in the crown of Agra and marks the pinnacle of glory of Mughal Architecture. It overlooks the Yamuna River on the northern side.

Clockwise from top left: John Hessian's Tomb. Garden at Taj Mahal. The main entrance to the Taj Mahal. Mosque to the west of Taj Mahal - interior view. Exterior view of the mosque to the west of the Taj Mahal. Late afternoon view of the Taj Mahal. Arabic calligraphy and marble inlay work on the panels of entrance into the mausoleum.

JOHN HESSING

John Hessian (1739-1803 AD) was a Dutch Soldier who served in the troop of the Marathas in Agra, and was given the command of Agra fort by Daulatrao Scindia in 1799 AD. The British Army attacked the Agra Fort in 1803 AD and John Hessian was killed in the battlefield trying to defend the fort. His wife Ann Hessian commissioned a red sandstone tomb - on the design of the Taj Mahal in the memory of her husband. It is housed within a Roman Catholic cemetery called Padretola or Padresanto. Also known as Red Taj, John Hessian's tomb is a hidden gem worth a visit by all means.

S

hah Jahan built it in memory of his beloved queen Arjumand Banu entitled Mumtaz Mahal. It houses the tombs of both Shah Jahan and

Mumtaz Mahal. Its construction began in 1631 AD and was completed in 1653 AD. The Taj Gate admits the tourists into the Taj Garden which is divided into four equal quarters by means of two shallow canals running from north to south and east to west. At the meeting point of the two canals, stands a large ornamental lotus pond, sunk into a white marble raised platform in the centre.

The main tomb of the Taj stands on a raised plinth and is basically a square with chamfered corners. Four detached minarets facing the chamfered angles provide a perfect balance to the tomb-building. The Taj is exactly as wide as it is high (55 m) and the height of the domes is the same as the height of its arcade

façade. A red sandstone mosque on the western side and a mehman khana on the eastern side impart an aesthetical colour contrast and balancing effect for the whole scheme. The Taj Mahal has some wonderful specimens of polychrome inlay art all around, both in the interior and exterior. Delicate carvings in marble vie with gorgeous Pietra Dura for attention.

The Taj presents a different picture and ambiance in different timings of the day. The color of the translucent marble keeps changing from dawn to midnight giving it a magical allure in keeping with Shah Jahan's vision that the tomb and garden should represent Paradise on Earth. Though Agra is famous as the City of Taj, there is more to it than the Taj itself. Other monuments worth a visit in and around Agra are Jami Masjid, Ram Bagh, Chini Ka Rauza (the tomb of Afzal Khan), Akbar's Mausoleum and Tomb of Mariyam Zamani at Sikandra. Not to be missed is a visit to Fatehpur Sikri, the capital city of Akbar, 40 kms from Agra.





TAJ MAHOTSAV

18-27 February, 2024

The much awaited Taj Mahotsav will be celebrated from 18-27 February 2024 against the backdrop of the iconic Taj Mahal at Shilpgram in Agra. A paradise for the connoisseurs of arts and handicrafts, this 10 day cultural fiesta celebrates the enduring love story of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal and showcases the country's rich diverse art and culture. The whole city gets involved in the celebrations, not to mention thousands of domestic and foreign tourists who plan their visit to coincide with this festival.

The cultural programmes include: Hindustani Classical Music, light music, musical nights, Bollywood Star nights, Qawwalis, Kavi Sammelans, Mushairas (poetry recitals), comedy nights (laughter shows), mimicry shows, dramas, ballets, dance dramas, art exhibitions, paintings exhibition, seminars and the list is endless. And there are a host of entertainment activities for children too. The event aims to identify and bolster the cultural talents of the regional artists, craftsmen and culinary experts. Marble work and Zardozi from Agra, Zari work from Benares, shawls and carpets from Kashmir

and Gujarat, Chikankari from Lucknow, wood carvings from Saharanpur, sculpture and pottery from Haryana, lacquer bangles from Jaipur, clay work from Azamgarh, carpets from Bhadoi, wood carvings from Tamil Nadu, Appliqué work from Orissa, jute work from West Bengal, blue pottery from Khurja, brassware from Muradabad, and glassware from Firozabad.... all find a place in the stalls and are up for sale at the most reasonable prices.

The inaugural Taj Mahotsav took place in 1992, and the upcoming event marks its impressive 32nd edition.

DATE: February 18 to February 27, 2024

PLACE: Shilpgram, Agra

ENTRY: INR 50 for adults. Free for foreign tourists and children below the age of 5

Md Masarrath Ali Khan is an experienced freelance writer. He writes on tourist destinations, art, culture, heritage, monuments, festivals and wildlife of India.



Pin-Parvati Pass

Location: Himachal Pradesh

Altitude: 5,319m

The Pin-Parvati Pass was first discovered and crossed by Sir Louis Dane, a British explorer, in August 1884. He followed the Pin River to its source, climbed over the ridge that separates it from the Parvati Valley, and descended to the Mantalai Lake. He then continued down the Parvati Valley to reach Manikaran and Kullu. This was a remarkable feat of exploration that opened a new route between the two valleys.

F. Skemp crossed the pass again in 1906, following Dane's route. H. Shuttleworth was the first to cross the pass from Kullu to Spiti in 1921. The pass is renowned for its scenic beauty, diverse flora and fauna, and the cultural contrast between the two valleys.



A group of trekkers on Pin-Parvati Pass. Image by Vaneet Rana



Attending a

Dalai Lama Teaching in Dharamshala

As an American, I'd often wondered what it would be like to see His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama – a living spiritual legend – not in a large Western venue like an outdoor sports stadium or a concert hall (where I'd seen him before), but intimately, on his home turf. Happily, I had the chance to do exactly that recently, when I found myself in Dharamshala, India – where His Holiness resides in exile – while he was giving a two-day teaching. Suffice it to say, the conditions there for seeing him are nothing like those in the West, and I'd like to share my experience and explain how to go about attending one of his talks for anyone who may have the desire to do so.

■ CHRISTOPHER HEISE

If you're asking yourself why the head of Tibetan Buddhism resides in the hill regions of India and not in his native land, it's because he made a precarious flight over the Himalayan Mountains many years ago (in 1959) to escape the Chinese invasion of Tibet. Upon arriving in India, he was granted political asylum, and he's lived there ever since (unfortunately, the conditions of oppression and cultural destruction in his homeland have haven't changed much in 60-plus years), while the Tibetan government-in-exile followed him there along with countless refugees. His Holiness currently resides in The Tsuglagkhang Monastery (also known as the Dalai Lama Temple Complex), which is in McLeod Ganj, a part of Dharamshala that's higher up the mountain than the town of that name. Perhaps because of this

unique situation of a renowned spiritual master living in exile in another country, security measures are especially tight.

As a foreigner, the first thing you have to do if you want to attend a teaching is register at the Branch Security Office of HH the Dalai Lama – a little building on Bagsu Rd in McLeod – a few days before the teaching.

Once you get there, you'll likely have to stand in a barely moving line in a cramped courtyard with a bunch of other foreigners, many of whom – with their long locks, full beards, colorful woven cloaks and hand-stitched bags look like they just stepped out of the Biblical era – in order fill out a brief form and then have your info entered into a database and your picture taken inside a dilapidated office, after which you're issued a

simple passcard/ID that you have to pay a nominal fee of 10 rupees (12 US cents) for.

Personally, I got lucky when I went to apply for my pass because I was spontaneously shuffled upstairs with a couple other folks to a less crowded admin area, where the guy issuing IDs soon went on lunch break (I was his last 'customer'), and I didn't have to wait as long as some others (when I came back down the stairs to the courtyard space, it was like entering a tense hippy party zone with scores of people in sandals and loose-fitting clothing waiting around).

The ID, though the info on it is basic, is essential for getting into the teaching, because without it the security team at the temple won't let you in. Also, the pass allows you to go through the foreigners line at the gate and bypass the (longer) one for locals.

Besides this all-important foreigners' entry pass, which is only valid for the dates of the current teaching (if you want to attend another one at a later date, you have to re-apply), there are several other essential items you'll want to take with you to the event. (I had no idea about any of this when I first got to Dharamshala, but luckily I talked to a couple 'in-the-know' people beforehand). The first is a cushion. You're not in the land of movies theaters and churches anymore, so there aren't any chairs – you have to sit on the floor. And while there are mattress-like pads strewn across the ground of the temple, unless you're OK sitting Indian style flat on your bottom, you'll want to put a cushion under yourself to make things more comfy. Conveniently, they sell just the kind of cushion

you need – a flattish square one that folds in half and has a strap for easy carrying – everywhere in McLeod (mine cost 250 rupees [approximately \$3]).

Another thing you should acquire if you want to get anything out of the teachings (given that they're in Tibetan, a language you most likely won't have studied in high school; though I have met multiple Westerners learning it here), is a radio. That's because all the translations are made on it, at different frequencies, so if you bring one with you, all you have to do is tune into the correct 'channel' for English, for example, and pop in your headphones (don't forget to pack those either).

Many shops in McLeod seem to cater to people attending the teachings, you can find

small portable radios throughout the main shopping areas (I bought mine for 330 rupees [roughly \$4]).

Finally, it was suggested that I bring a cup. Yes, a simple cup. Why? Because after the lecture begins, the local monks and nuns distribute snacks (balep korkun – a Tibetan flatbread – and packages of sweet rolls) and hot milk tea to those who want them.

Actually, they also distribute paper cups for the tea, but as they're prone to run out (or so I was told), it's better to play it safe and invest in your own. And while the milk tea is a bit on the salty side, it's also fairly tasty and refreshing if you arrive on an empty stomach like I did.

I bought my cup/mug at a fancy Korean-type shop (called Miniso) that I was surprised to

Clockwise from left:
His Holiness Dalai Lama.
The room in which the Dalai
Lama teaches (the chair is
covered in saffron cloth).
The streets of McLeod Ganj.





find existed in McLeod, for a mere \$1.50 (120 rupees). Besides that, you can also pack a notebook and pen for taking notes if you like, along with some breakfast food of your own, apparently (the guy sitting next to me brought and ate a bowl of homemade gruel both days). Also, you should take along a mask if you don't want to buy one at the entrance of the temple; and make sure not to bring your smartphone – they're not allowed inside!

As those are the basics of preparing for a Dalai Lama teaching in Dharamsala, the next question becomes: What do I do after that? And, what's it like to attend?

The immediate following step is to show up bright and early on the day of the teaching – between, say, 6:30–7am – in order to claim a half-decent seat on the floor (the lecture itself begins around 8:30 and ends at 10).

Basically, if you come at that hour, by the time you get through the security checks and everything, the place will already be

swarming with people (monks, nuns, Tibetans, Indians, Westerners and sizeable groups of Asian laypeople trailing behind flag-waving leaders as though they were touring the Louvre), and finding a spot to sit will be challenging and chaotic but still possible.

A lot of folks arrive the night before, write their name on a piece of cardboard and tape it to one of the pads on the ground, claiming their spot in absentia, but as I had neither the will nor the resources to do that, I just showed up and winged it.

On the first day, wandering around in a groggy, short-tempered daze, I got booted from several seating areas by the head 'reservee' of each section before eventually finding a vacant, unpadded spot near the 'oil lamp hall' on one side of the upper floor of the temple. Fortunately, someone left during the teaching and I was able to move up onto the bench outside the hall, which was a much more comfortable situation.

While teaching, the Dalai Lama

sits on a throne-like chair beneath the temple's main Buddha statue in a limited-capacity central room, so that – if you're among the hoi-polloi listeners (like myself) – you won't actually be able to see him while he's talking. Instead, you can watch his image on one of the many screens around the temple while listening to him on your radio.

Once the teaching begins, things sort of settle down as everyone listens, and it's not until it's over again that crowd-control measures are put in place and the levels of excitement reach a fever pitch as His Holiness walks from the teaching area to the elevator through a section of the crowd.

Even if you're not so interested in Buddhism, attending a teaching will probably still be a memorable experience, given the singular atmosphere inside the temple, with Tibetans (old and young) dressed in traditional garb, scores of hippy-seeker-backpacker types and the vast number of Asian monks and nuns in attendance, while it's also a rare



Clockwise from left:
Main gate of the Dalai Lama Temple complex.
Entrance to the Branch Security Office of HH the Dalai Lama.
The place where the writer sat during the teaching (on the bench against the wall).
Leaving the Dalai Lama Temple Complex.

opportunity to see a kind of living saint up close and personal. If you are interested in Buddhism, all the better, as the Dalai Lama will no doubt hammer home the core tenets of his specific brand of that religion, which focuses on: (1) bodhicitta (the cultivation of a mind of infinite altruism and compassion) and (2) emptiness (the notion that nothing in existence – including ourselves – has a permanent, unchanging essence, meaning in reality there's nothing to cling to). The topic of the teaching I went to was the classic Tibetan Buddhist text *The Supplement to the Middle Way* and *The Explanation of the Supplement to the Middle Way* by the 7th-century Indian monk and scholar Chandrakirti, but if you don't have time study up on it beforehand, no worries, as His Holiness frequently goes off-topic to touch on more pressing issues, like the causes of suffering (karma and a distorted mind) and how to avoid depression (maintain a broad perspective of the world so you don't get overly elated or down about one thing).

When the teaching ends and the Dalai Lama – escorted by the two attendant monks he leans on while

walking – finally descends the elevator and disappears from view, you may breathe a sigh of relief mixed with profound gratification that the tumultuous affair is over and you were able to have this precious experience and learn something from it, because – given His Holiness' advanced age (87!) – it's unclear how much longer he'll be addressing the public like that. But perhaps if we all pray for his long-life – as many attendees at the teaching did – he will continue making appearances for years to come and you too will have the opportunity to see him in the unique Indo-Tibetan environment of Dharamshala.

Christopher Heise grew up near Philadelphia, USA and has spent the past 15 years or so traveling throughout the world. He's lived and worked in Germany, Venezuela and Taiwan among other places, and once had the surreal experience of celebrating his birthday on a different continent four years in a row. He's deeply interested in Buddhism and meditation as well as foreign languages, and he can be contacted at cjhj17@gmail.com.

The Cave Temples of Mumbai and Beyond

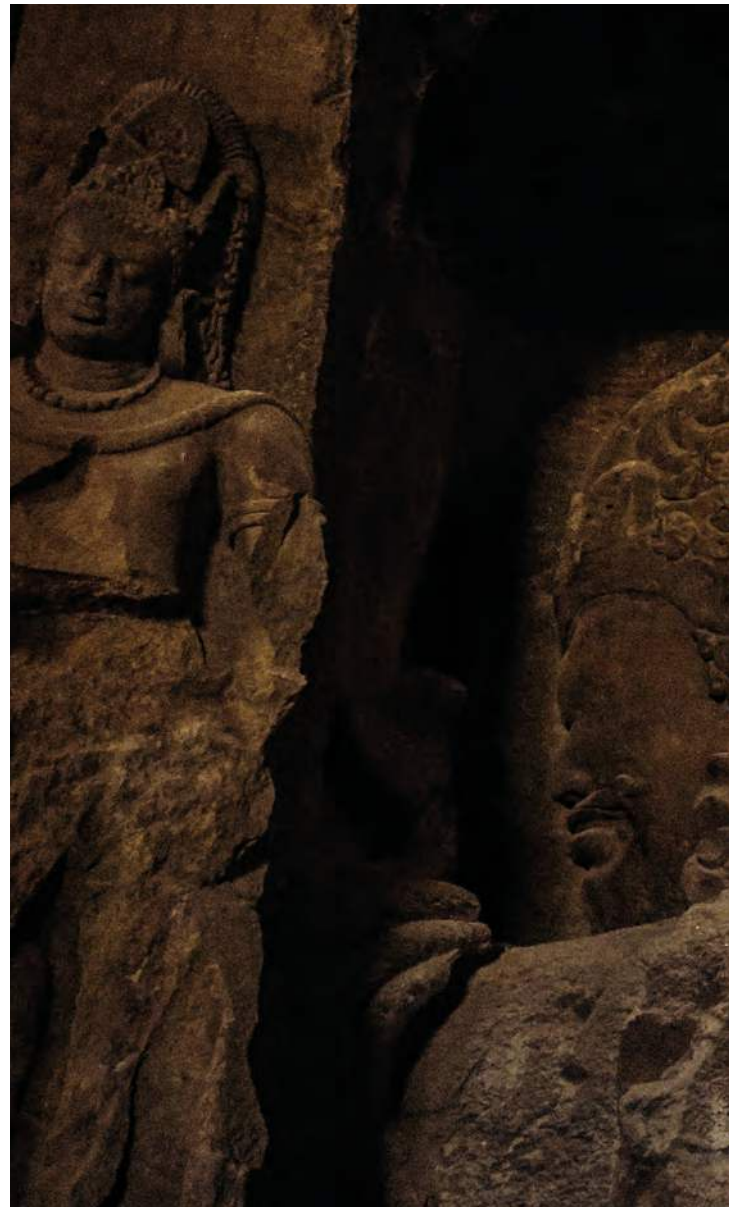
■ **AYAN ADAK**

Mumbai, the bustling metropolis of India, is known for its vibrant culture, stunning architecture, and historical landmarks. Among its many attractions, the Cave Temples of Mumbai stand out as fascinating archaeological wonders. These ancient caves provide a glimpse into the rich heritage and architectural brilliance of the region.

It is a hot unforgiving day in Mumbai – I am in Andheri, a bustling hub in the west of the gigantic cosmopolis, but here in the basalt, rock-cut cocoon of the **Mahakali caves**, time seems to have been trapped in a bubble. The skies are silent, blue, and only interrupted by the flight of a coppersmith barbet. The red gulmohur trees sway gently, and the rocks feel surprisingly cold inside the caves - in the darkened silence all around, they seem to be meditating exactly as their inmate monks would have, about 2000 years back.

On first glance, these 19 Buddhist caves seem uninteresting, belittled by the high-rises of the 21st century all around – there seems nothing spectacular, but closer inspection will reveal minimalist viharas (cells where Buddhist monks used to meditate, and incidentally the term that gave the state of Bihar its name), a slightly larger *chaitya* (prayer hall where the monks would congregate) containing a pockmarked stupa (hemispherical structure that would in larger ancient monasteries contain relics) – the triumvirate that completes any Buddhist monastery.

Further scrutiny will reveal dilapidated rock-cut sculptures standing as silent sentinels over two millennia since the times of Ashoka, cisterns for rain-water harvesting and inscriptions in Pali, a language older than Sanskrit. It was in this time bubble of the Mahakali or Kondivite caves (apparently named after a Kali temple nearby with the stupa often mistaken for a shiva-linga) that I first realised that, besides the pinnacle in Ajanta and Ellora, there were scores of rock-cut caves strewn all over the Deccan, many to be found right here within the city. The Mahakali caves were, in a way, a revelation or a prologue to my quest to further understand more of these rock-cut shards of history that lie unobtrusively in Mumbai and beyond.



The Elephanta Caves

Perhaps the grandest of all the Hindu caves around Bombay is the Elephanta Caves (others being Jogeshwari and Mandapeshwar, though much smaller in scale). It was possibly a Buddhist site first evident from a few Buddhist caves, but it is largely famous today for its Shaivite sculptures, perhaps developed after the 5th Century AD by the Kalachuri dynasty. The statues showcasing various stories from the Shiva Purana are grand both in size and exquisiteness.

The Elephanta Caves is one of three UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Mumbai (the gargoyle laden CST station and the art deco buildings in the Fort area being the others, while Ajanta and Ellora complete the UNESCO list for the state of Maharashtra).

Three-headed Trimurti or the Sadashiva, Elephanta Caves



gestures and almost arising from the rocky walls on which they were carved.

Of these, the *magnum opus* is the three-headed Trimurti or the Sadashiva (the eternal Shiva), a depiction of Shiva with three heads and symbolising the trinity of creation – preservation – destruction all within himself.

There are many other depictions of Shiva in this cave of grandeur – there is the exuberant multi-armed depiction of Nataraja, the divine dancer; then there is the graceful Ardhanarishwar – the androgynous version of Shiva that conjoins male and female. Mahadeva is also depicted as the Gangadhar Shiva, where he receives Ganga from the heavens on Earth to cleanse and redeem the sons of Bhagiratha.

There are very few places in the subcontinent where the stories of Shiva are brought to life in this grandeur in a rock-cut montage.

A day spent in Elephanta will surely rekindle your interest in the Puranic stories, if not in the wider realm of Indian rock-cut architecture where this small island undoubtedly joins the likes of Ellora and Mahabaleshwar.

O

nce called Gharapuri (the village of caves), travellers to Elephanta

will definitely find the ferry journey from the Gateway of India delightful. As I felt the salty breeze of the Arabian on the journey, it felt quite mystical to sail this far to see medieval Hindu caves, but I reminded myself again that this was once, archipelago land. The name, Elephanta, came from the statue

of an elephant that once used to stand on this island, and was used as the most important landmark for disembarking boats – today, the reconstructed and renovated elephant statue can still be seen at the Jijamata Udyan.

The grandest sculptures in Elephanta can be seen in what is called the Great Cave – complete with 4 entrances, guarded by gigantic *dwarपालs* or gatekeepers, and full of larger-than-life sculptures of Shiva in his various forms. There is almost a sense of poetic fluidity in these sculptures – dynamic, full of

Clockwise from top left: Three-headed Trimurti or the Sadashiva, Elephanta Caves. Mahakali Caves. Gigantic dwarपालs at Elephanta Caves.



The Kanheri Caves were maybe Buddhism's reply to Elephanta and are today located near Borivali in the western part of Mumbai within the Sanjay Gandhi National Park – one of the largest urban national parks (housed within a city) in the world.

Clockwise from top left: A colossal Standing Buddha in Kanheri Cave 3. Kanheri Caves: Depiction of a Naga. Main Chaitya hall, Kanheri Caves. A wall depicting the Buddha, Kanheri Caves.

The Kanheri Caves

Today, the urban sprawl that is Mumbai has swallowed the forests around the National Park, but centuries back, the pilgrimage to these caves at the top of the Krishnagiri (or Kanhagiri, thereby Kanheri) would have been as big an adventure as sailing over to Elephanta. On the crest of a volcanic hill, crossing dense forests, criss-crossing rivers and waterfalls is part of the excitement in reaching this time-bubble that has thankfully been preserved quite well. Lasting over a millennium from the 1st century to the 10th century AD, the precinct has over 100 caves, the scale a representation of the importance of Kanheri as a Buddhist centre in medieval India – apparently

also visited by Chinese traveller Hieun Tsang in his Buddhist pilgrimage across India.

Developed over three hills, Kanheri is enormous – and if you go with the curiosity of an explorer, every inch of the carved caves will fill you with excitement and amazement.

While Kanheri is large and austere, it also has sections with incredible sculptures – rock cut figures of donors, exquisitely carved pillars with rich capitals, a cavernous *chaitya* hall, stupas and entire walls decorated with depictions of the Buddha and the bodhisattvas and Nagas – in fact, giant statues of the standing Buddha greet you towards the very beginning at Cave 3 and may remind you of Bamiyan with its similar standing Buddhas, carved out of a rocky mountain face.

If you visit Kanheri, do take some time to sit down and look at the sprawling city as well. Parts of the Mumbai skyline make a valiant effort to bring you back to the present while the Global Vipassana Pagoda at Gorai glint gracefully in gold (based on Myanmar's Shwedagon pagoda) and remind you that the message of the Buddha is still alive, relevant and offering a source of strength even today after centuries.

There are other Buddhist caves in Mumbai, much smaller in scale – such as the Magathane and Jogeshwari caves, though some of these have heavily dilapidated over time. Nonetheless, if you are still thirsty to pursue Buddhism and its cave temples, you will need to head out of Mumbai, towards Pune, following the ancient trade routes where more surprise, subtlety and sublimity await in the Sahyadris.



Clockwise from top left:
Series of 15 octagonal pillars
in the main Chaitya hall, Karla
Caves.
Elephant sculptures at Karla
Caves.
Karla Caves Chaitya hall: The
wooden umbrella on the stupa
and the wooden beams are
still intact, making it the best-
preserved and largest Chaitya
hall in India.
Karla Caves, rendered green in
the monsoons.
Elaborate sculptures at the
entrance of Karla Caves.

The Karla Caves

Just 10 km away from the tourist hotspot of Lonavala, 90 km south east of Mumbai lies yet another spectacle – the Karla or Karli Caves. The Mumbai-Pune expressway zips nearby, but time will tell you that this modern-day superfast highway has only built on layers of the past – this was indeed an important trade route in the Deccan leading to frequent travels by traders and merchants – and prompting the development of Buddhist monastic caves that not only supported and sheltered these traders but also benefited from their benevolence. This is what led to the rise of the Bhaja caves, the Bedse caves and

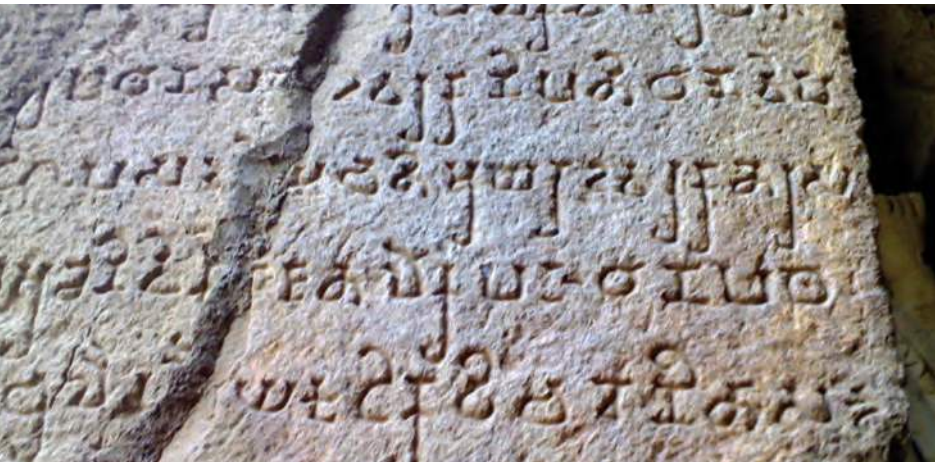
the grandest of them all, the Karla caves, dating from the 2nd Century BC to the 5th century AD.

Though there are only 16 caves here, it is the grand Chaitya hall of Karla that earns it, its laurels

At a height of 14m, and running 45m long, it is the largest *chaitya* hall in India, complete with a series of 15 octagonal pillars on each side, topped with exquisitely designed capitals and filled with sculptures of men, women and animals. It is said that the artistry of the *chaitya* hall was improved over centuries first at Bhaja and Ajanta, then at nearby Nasik Caves, Bedse caves to eventually be perfected at Karla. The *chaitya* hall at Kanheri was made later and is a replica of Karla. Not just large, Karla also retains the *chaitya* in its original form, replete

with the wooden semi-circular beams supporting the roof (and making one feel as if he is inside the ribbed belly of a leviathan). Not just that, the wooden umbrella (indicative of enlightenment akin to halos on Christian saints) atop the rock hewn *chaitya* still remains intact from its original times.

Outside the *Chaitya* is a large facade carved with windows ensuring ample illumination of the structures within. There are large statues of elephants within the caves (reminiscent of Elephanta) and are also amply represented on the capitals of the pillars carrying men and women. There are inscriptions on the caves reminding of the donors, particularly the Satavahan kings, while mention of Yavan donors (Greeks or Greek speaking people) remind us how cosmopolitan was this place even two thousand years ago.



Clockwise from top left: Elephanta Caves: Shiva depicted as Nataraja. Incredibly beautiful sculptures at the entrance of the main Chaitya hall, Karla Caves. Kanheri Caves: a wall with Pali inscriptions.

If you travel around the Sahyadri Ghats of Mumbai and Pune, you are sure to come across some of these fascinating caves that will take you back in time. Perhaps besides the popular names and finds, there are many more that have been obscured and are yet to be found.

New caves in the Kanheri complex were discovered as recently as 2016, while some were found in Nasik in 2021.

I still remember I was hiking in the hills of Igatpuri (100 km from Mumbai) when I stumbled upon an old cave dripping with the monsoons, clad in moss but still full of sculptures and pillars. I later found that these were Jain caves, with carvings of Rishaba, and though derelict, they were revered by the locals.

Perhaps the ease of carving volcanic basalt from the Deccan traps is what contributed to the proliferation of these cave temples. It is also possible that factors like the Indo-Roman trade or religious tolerance and the desire for religious merit played a role in the establishment of these cave temples. Whatever be the cause, their existence in the 21st century is

reason for celebration enough and we should make every effort not just to preserve them but also learn from them the tales of history. So the next time you find yourself surrounded by these cave temples, either inside or outside the bustling city of Mumbai on a hot sunny day, take your time to look beyond their rocky exterior and allow the caves to whisper to you. They have been whispering for centuries, reminding us that time flies, but eternity is written on these very rocks...

Ayan Adak is a business consultant by profession and loves travelling, writing and photography in his spare time.



Kangra Tea

Every sip tells a tale

The history of Kangra tea is as rich as its flavor. It all began in 1849 when Dr. Jameson, the superintendent of the Botanical Tea Gardens, declared the place ideal for a tea plantation. A Chinese variety of *Camellia sinensis* was planted across the region, and the production turned out to be successful in Palampur and Dharamshala despite initial challenges in other locations.

By the 1880s, Kangra Tea was considered superior to tea from other parts of India and was even sought after in distant lands like Kabul and Central Asia. The excellence of Kangra Tea was further acknowledged when it received gold and silver medals at international conventions held in London and Amsterdam in 1886 and 1895.

However, history took an unexpected turn in the form of a devastating earthquake in 1905, which forced the British to sell their tea estates and leave the region. For several decades, tea production dwindled as there were few factories to process it. But the story of Kangra Tea is one of resilience and revival. After experiencing a decline in the previous century, research

and techniques are being promoted to increase production and restore Kangra Tea to its former glory. A regional office of the Tea Board of India was opened in Palampur, which is a significant step towards incorporating the Kangra region back into the mainstream of the Indian tea industry. With renewed passion and the support of the Tea Board, Kangra Tea is reclaiming its position on the Tea Map of India and moving towards its previous grandeur.

Kangra tea is more like a full-bodied wine; its bold taste comes from its higher liquor character. The demand for Kangra tea has been increasing steadily as more and more people are becoming health conscious and choosing to consume more healthy drinks and substitute their sodas with natural alternatives, either hot or cold, internationally and in domestic markets. When brewed, the flavor is very vegetal and unique with its very pale liquor, which can be well described as the Cup of Golden liquor.

What's more, tea tourism in Kangra is gradually gaining momentum. Across the rolling hills of Palampur and the serene corners of Dharamshala, numerous tea estates and factories have opened their doors to curious visitors.

This is just the beginning of a promising journey, where every sip, every tour, and every story shared signifies a resurgence of Kangra Tea's rich heritage and a hopeful future.

Let's go to the SIACHEN FOLK FESTIVAL

Siachen Folk Festival is marked to celebrate the glory of the ancient Silk Route that passed from the heart of Nubra Valley. Also, it carries a message to promote and preserve our cultural heritage by promoting sustainable tourism and sensitizing the present and upcoming generations to their cultural heritage and its significance.

■ **Dr SONAM WANGCHUK**

“The aim of the festival is not only to attract tourists to Nubra Valley but also to educate the local people about the importance of their culture and heritage. The festival is a very lively and colourful affair. Different cultural groups from the village as well as from outside come together to participate and showcase the beauty of their culture. Local food stalls, cultural programmes, traditional sports, local handicrafts, etc. are the main attractions of the festival. The festival offers a unique experience of the Ladakhi village's cultural and traditional lifestyle.

In an effort to preserve the legacy of the heritage silk route trade, a two-day Siachen folk festival is organized on the first weekend of June every year. This year, it falls on June 1st and 2nd, 2024. The festival has provided an opportunity for domestic and foreign tourists to have a look into the rich cultural heritage of Ladakh.

Before 2019, visiting the Siachen Glacier was restricted to the public. However, a civil tourist facility near the Siachen Base Camp has recently been opened for travellers. Therefore, it is our moral duty to promote sustainable tourism in the region to preserve the integrity of this place. Such festivals are instrumental in raising awareness among both locals and tourists about the local culture and heritage.

The main objectives of the Siachen Folk Festival are to celebrate the cultural diversity of the region, revive the dying culture of the area, educate present and future generations about their cultural heritage and its significance, and promote sustainable tourism. The unity and cooperative system followed in Chamshen village without any generation or other gaps, especially



to organize the Siachen Folk Festival, is an example for other villages. As the founder of the Himalayan Cultural Heritage Foundation (HCHF), I believe that as long as the villagers unitedly organize the festival with purpose, HCHF will support it each year in any way possible. The Siachen Festival, in my opinion, is instrumental in fostering interest and appreciation for our cultural heritage among the Ladakhi people, especially the youth.

The celebration aligns with the essence of the Ladakhi festival, marked by feasts, dances, traditional sports, and music, all while ensuring that the ecological sensitivity of the region is not disturbed.

Cultural programmes by villagers and schoolchildren, traditional archery competitions, traditional food stalls in willow wattle sheds (tsele), and painting competitions for schoolchildren are the major highlights of the festival.

The archery competition is organized separately for traditional bows and arrows as well as for modern bows and arrows to spread awareness, particularly among the younger generation, and to revive the centuries-old sport of Ladakh.



SIACHEN FOLK FESTIVAL

Date:

1 & 2 June 2024

Venue

Polo Ground, Chamshen, Nubra valley, Ladakh
(The venue used to be a polo ground on the famous silk route during the silk route trade and it is being revived to host the Siachen Folk Festival).

Organizers

1. Chanskyong Chotsogs Tsogspa Chamshen (Youth Association of Chamshen Village)
2. Himalayan Cultural Heritage Foundation
3. Chamshen Village Community

Whom to Contact

The Heritage Himalaya Trails is organizing tours to Nubra Valley and other parts of Ladakh during the festival. For booking and the unique itinerary, write to heritagehimalaya23@gmail.com or contact Ms. Dechen at 7051197063.

Rediscovering the Charm of Tsele Huts

Tsele, or willow wattle sheds, were once very popular in Nubra and Baltistan. Every house would have a willow wattle shed, especially for the summer months. During the hot summer months, family members would live and cook in the hut. However, with the introduction of concrete buildings, people started to dismantle these huts.

The organizers of the Siachen Folk Festival are trying to revive the skill of making huts. During this festival, the local food stalls are operated in various sizes of Tsele, made by the villagers before the event. This site is exceptional, even by Ladakh standards.

NUBRA VALLEY

Nubra Valley is situated north of Leh and is accessible by road via Khardongla, the highest motorable road in the world at

18,380 feet. The Nubra Valley has an average altitude of 10,000 feet above sea level. It is located between the Karakoram Mountains to the north and the Ladakh Mountains to the south.

The valley is renowned for its rich cultural heritage, picturesque villages, stunning sand dunes, majestic mountains, and a river basin adorned with vibrant seabuckthorn bushes and their bright berries. In addition to the notable monasteries of Deskit and Samstanling, the valley is also home to numerous other historical and religious monuments.



A Road Trip Home

In the abode of the mother goddess

Travel is ever-evolving; it's an art. You just keep getting better at it over time. Putting up in the concrete cities, we always feel a sense of void. In such a case, the call from the mountains need to be answered.

■ ABHISHEK PRINCE ROHTA

It was the last day of the extremely adrenaline-pumping year 2023, a friend's call to welcome yet another adventurous year 2024. With a sense of love for travel and a zest for life, our road trip began. Three of us (We, the troubadours) got on the road. From Chandigarh to Baghi (The best in the world), a Himalayan hamlet in the upper reaches of the majestic Himalayas.

It was about 222 km drive. The great stretch took us from the plains to the hills. About a seven to eight-hour road trip was enough to fuel our fire of exploration and going places. Homecomings to date are my favourite aspect of travel. Welcoming the new year in the lap of nature and the embrace of our loved ones, we headed to our final destination on the first day of 2024. A road trip to Sarahan, Bheema Kaali Mandir. A 111 km journey was so enticing and quaint we literally felt the mountain's ever so-loving embrace. We had our experiences during this odyssey. Had exceptionally amazing food at Rampur, Bushahr.

Our halt for a quick bite was totally worth it. Striding ahead, we almost took a wrong turn and were redirected to the district border; we almost touched Kinnaur. Sometimes, it's the wrong turns which take us to the right places. Rerouting back to our plan A, we reached Bheema Kaali temple in the evening. Winter sunsets are god's way of telling us that it's all so excellent towards the end. Revelling in the captivating charm and vibe of the mother goddess' abode.

We spent an incredible time at the temple, soaking in all the positivity and praying for yet another breathtaking chapter in the Book of Life. After getting the best of the views and hues of this shrine and getting some Instagram-worthy pictures, we headed back to square one.



Bhimakali Temple

The Bhimakali temple is one of the fifty-one shaktipeeths in the cosmos. The temple shrine is situated in Sarahan, about two hours drive from Rampur. The temple is dedicated to the goddess Sati. It is believed that Sati's ear fell at the site while Shiva performed the tandava (the dance of death). The temple consists of two shrines; one is an embodiment of the goddess Sati (the widowed), and another is a temple dedicated to the goddess Kali (The mother).

This temple is one of the most visited religious sites in the valley. There's an adjoining museum here, displaying the antiques and the kingware. This temple is geographically placed in a beautiful setting. The view from the temple is a treat to the eyes. The pooja is performed twice every day, early morning and late evening. The devotees believe the goddess to be wish-fulfilling and always the bestower of strength, courage and enlightenment.



Clockwise from left:
Panoramic view of the
Bhimakali Temple complex.
Padam Palace, Rampur.
Approaching Narkanda.
Apple plantation at Sarahan.

All good things come to an end, we sipped our scintillating coffee at Nau Nabh Heritage Hotel, Rampur. The Padam Palace was at its gothic best. It felt like a spooky destination. It was spine-chilling. I had to clench her hands tight. Our heartbeats aligned, and with the mountainous valour, we continued our journey. The Himalayan pilots literally glide their vehicles on the road. A stretch of about two hours, in formidable competence with our hilly hurricanes, cruising the lord Alto as a Formula One car; within an hour, we were at Narkanda, A beautiful place in the hills. Extremely grateful for the good roads, We glided our wagon smoothly.

Now, it was time to choose the road not taken. We had to make a

choice at a crossroads: whether to spend some more time in the hills or rush to the frantic plans. There are no prizes for guessing. We made the right choice. Heading home, the heart of the Himalayas.

Being the romantically aroused highlanders that we are, rather than being in the cozy embrace of the warmth of the home, we camped out. At -7 degrees, we were quivering around the bonfire and enjoying the trance of time. Bedazzled with the best, the vibrant air acted as an aphrodisiac to our wanderlust and made these golden words, in a heartfelt way, realised and relinquished. "Home is where the heart is".

A night under the stars was all we needed to thrive in the concrete jungle of jingoism and conformity.

With a heavy heart and a soul filled with solace, tranquility and ebullient contentment, we drove all the way to the city beautiful.

Abhishek Prince Rohta,
an educator
from Shimla
based in
Chandigarh,
specializes

in training students for language assessment exams. He is passionate about AI, data science, and storytelling. Abhishek holds a master's degree in English literature and is pursuing a bachelor's degree in education. His top priorities include environment protection and nature restoration.



The Silk Heritage of Assam

■ IMTIAZ ULLAH



The silk heritage of Assam dates back to ancient times, and it is believed that the art of silk weaving was introduced to the region by the Chinese. The silk produced in Assam is known as Muga silk, Eri silk, and Pat silk, and each of these varieties has its unique characteristics.

Muga silk is the most famous variety of silk produced in Assam. It is

known for its natural golden color and is considered to be one of the most durable and resilient silks in the world. Muga silk is produced by the *Antheraea assamensis* moth, which is native to Assam.

Eri silk is another variety of silk produced in Assam. It is also known as Endi or Errandi silk and is produced by the *Philosamia ricini* moth. Eri silk is known for its soft texture and is often used to make shawls, scarves, and other clothing items.

Pat silk is the third variety of silk produced in Assam. It is produced by the *Bombyx textor* silkworm and is known for its glossy texture and vibrant colors. Pat silk is often used to make sarees, shawls, and other traditional clothing items.

The silk industry in Assam is an important source of livelihood for many people in the state. The weavers who produce these beautiful fabrics are highly skilled and have been practicing their craft for generations. The government of Assam has taken several initiatives to promote the silk industry in the state and to provide support to the weavers.

Here are some of the best places for silk tourism in Assam:

- 1. Sualkuchi:** Known as the 'Manchester of Assam', Sualkuchi is a small town located on the banks of the Brahmaputra River. It is famous for its exquisite silk products, especially the Muga silk, which is unique to Assam.
- 2. Guwahati:** The capital city of Assam is a hub for silk trade and commerce. The city has several silk emporiums and markets where you can find a wide range of silk products.
- 3. Jorhat:** Jorhat is another important silk hub in Assam. The town is known for its production of Eri silk, which is also known as Ahimsa silk.
- 4. Dibrugarh:** Dibrugarh is a major commercial center in Assam and is known for its production of Muga silk. The town has several silk weaving centers where you can witness the process of silk weaving.
- 5. North Lakhimpur:** North Lakhimpur is a small town located in the northern part of Assam. The town is known for its production of Pat silk, which is a fine variety of silk.

These are some of the best destinations for silk tourism in Assam. You can visit these places to witness the rich silk heritage of Assam and buy some of the finest silk products in India.



Image by L Shyamal weekipedia.org

A forgotten legacy Rothney Castle

Perched high up on Jakhoo Hill in Shimla, behind Holly Lodge, lies a storied relic of colonial grandeur - Rothney Castle, also known locally as *Sheeshe Wali Kothi*. Constructed in 1838 by Colonel Rothney, this magnificent estate has witnessed a rich history of ownership and opulence before falling into a state of haunting neglect.

Passing through various owners, the estate eventually found itself under the care of notable individuals such as P. Mitchell, C.I.E., and A.O. Hume, a renowned figure who transformed the house into a majestic palace.

Hume, the founder of the Indian National Congress Party, spared no expense in creating a luxurious paradise. He invested much money into the grounds and structures, constructing expansive reception halls suitable for extravagant parties. European gardeners were called upon to create a stunning garden that became a source of pride for Shimla. Hume's open-door policy turned the estate into a center for guests seeking his generous hospitality.

Hume's passion for ornithology led to the establishment of an extraordinary museum within

the castle walls, housing more than 82,000 bird species. Hume departed from India in 1894 and settled at The Chalet, 4 Kingswood Road, Upper Norwood in South London. He passed away at the age of eighty-three on July 31, 1912. In 1973, the Indian postal department commemorated his contributions by issuing a stamp featuring his portrait, and in 2013, a special cover showcasing Rothney Castle was released.

The castle exchanged ownership among British dignitaries before being acquired by the scion of Lala Chunnamal in 1938. Presently, Rajesh Mohan is the owner of this estate, which once stood as a symbol of grandeur and elegance. The current condition of the castle is a stark contrast to its former status. The government rejected the proposal to transform the property into a luxury hotel due to its classification as a heritage property.

As of now, Rothney Castle is in a state of disrepair and neglect, resembling a forgotten #garden. Nevertheless, flowers still bloom, and birds gather at the location, seemingly paying tribute to the remarkable soul who once graced these grounds.



Kath Kuni

Earthquake-Defying Design of the Himalayas

In the earthquake-prone region of Himachal Pradesh in the western Himalayas, a traditional building technique called kath kuni has proven to be resilient against seismic activities. Structures built using Kath Kuni survived a deadly earthquake in 1905 that destroyed a majority of the concrete buildings in the region. The technique involves fitting deodar wood with locally sourced stone, creating structures that can resist earthquakes without needing mortar.

The term “Kath” originates from the Sanskrit word “kasht,” meaning wood, while “Kuni” is derived from the word “kona,” signifying corner. In some regions, this technique is also known as kath-kona and kath-ki-kanni. This architecture, well-suited to the seismically active Himalayas, incorporates small doors and windows with heavy wooden frames to reduce stress during earthquakes. The design features thick slate roofs, fewer openings, and double-layered walls for stability. Additionally, the

technique aligns with the region’s rural lifestyle, reserving the ground floor for livestock and utilizing upper storeys as living quarters.

Despite its efficacy, the tradition of kath kuni is facing challenges. The rise of the concrete industry, driven by lower costs and quicker construction, has led to a decline in demand for traditional structures. Limited access to resources, changes in forest ownership, and difficulties obtaining raw materials have further contributed to the fading of Kath kuni. The concrete trend, however, has proven less durable during seismic events.

Efforts to preserve and promote kath kuni include initiatives by organizations working with local artisans and exploring alternative materials like bamboo. Boutique accommodations allow tourists to stay in Kath kuni-style homes, fostering education and appreciation of local architecture.

Despite these efforts, challenges persist, and the future of kath kuni faces uncertainties. Local experts express concern that improved road connections may introduce cement to villages, potentially altering traditional construction techniques. However, the commitment to preserving these structures remains, emphasizing the enduring strength of Kath Kuni homes against seismic challenges.

Himachal Calling

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