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AUGUST 2018 • ₹150 • VOL. 7 ISSUE 2 • NATGEOTRAVELLER.IN

# NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC **TRAVELLER** INDIA

*Country*  
**STATE OF MIND**

HIDDEN TREASURES  
IN HAMPI

CLASSICAL CAFÉS  
IN BANARAS

HYDERABAD'S  
SUFI SAINTS

SERAMPORE'S  
HERITAGE REVIVAL

# AUGUST 2018

VOL. 7 ISSUE 2

54



## 22 VOICES

### 22 CREW CUT

When a hometown trip reveals a longer journey within

### 24 EASEL WORLD

An artist on how biennales push the boundaries of collective consciousness

## 25 THE ITINERARY

### 26 NOT WITHOUT MY BIKE IN BALI

A bicycle ride reveals a mighty volcano and beaches free of tourists

### 30 CROATIA: IN AUTUMN'S WAKE

Golden hues and ancient lore surround 16 lakes at Plitvice Lakes National Park

### 34 SHINE YOUR EYES, THIS IS LAGOS

72 hours in Nigeria's chaotic, vibrant commercial capital

### 40 A DECADENT BINGE IN DOHA

From Armenian samosa to baby hamour ceviche, five food experiences that shape the Qatari capital

### 48 ESTONIA UPGRADING

All digital roads lead to Tallinn, the forward-thinking capital city and innovation hotspot of the smallest Baltic nation

### 50 WHEN YOU'RE HAPPY AND YOU KNOW IT

16 joyful experiences championed by the writers, photographers, and editors of *National Geographic Traveler U.S.*

### 54 ITALY'S RAIN MAN

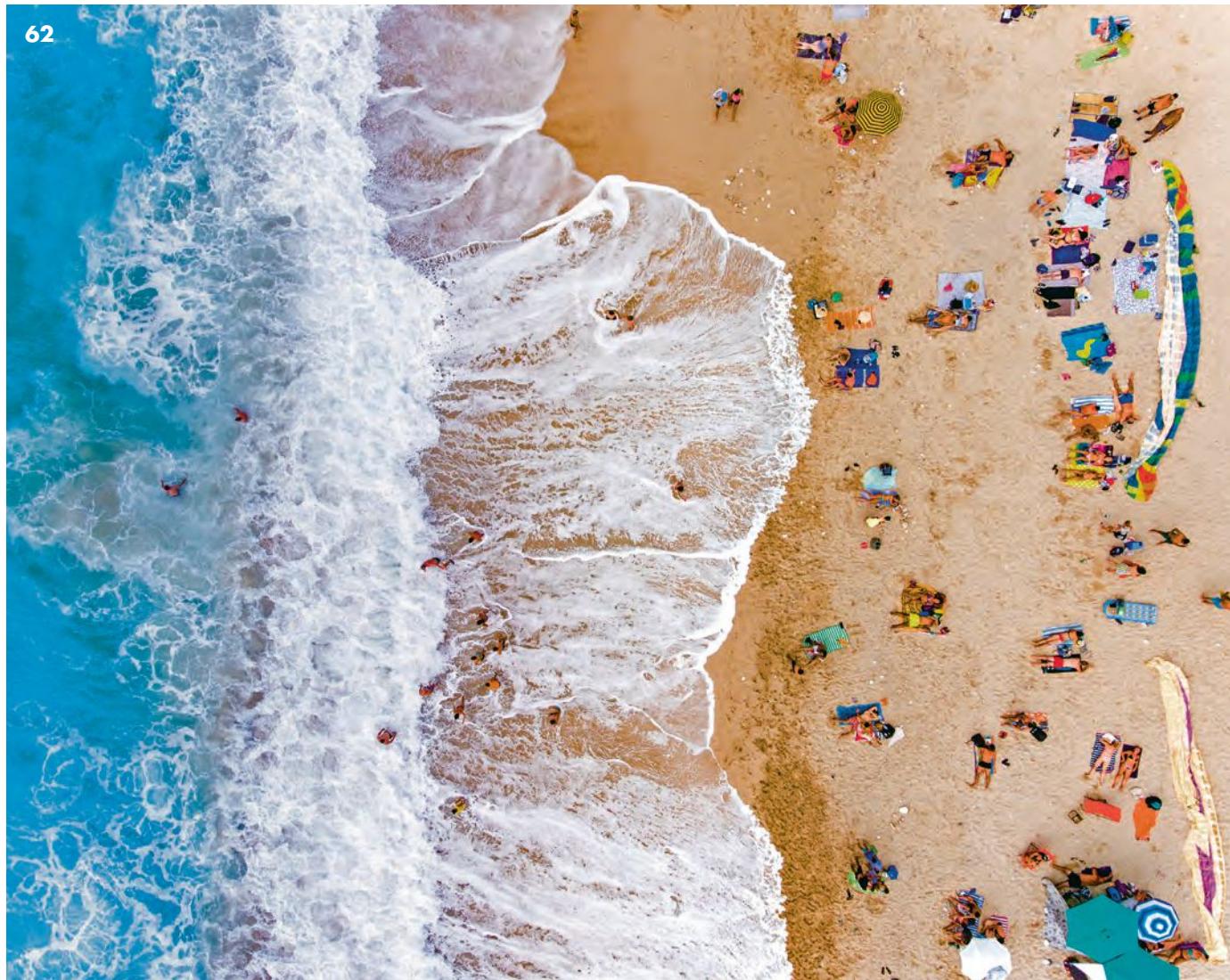
Finding shelter in Naples with a bespoke umbrella maker

### 60 FOLLOW THE FLAMINGOS...

...Even if they lead you to the urban jungle of Dubai



40



## 61 **THE FOCUS**

### 62 NEW GREEK ODYSSEY

A son learns about home, heroes, and Hellenic heritage on a trip with his father back to their ancestral village

82



**ON THE COVER**

The cover of the National Geographic Traveller India magazine. It features a woman standing in front of ancient stone pillars, possibly at the Hampi ruins. The title "NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER INDIA" is at the top, and "Country STATE OF MIND" is at the bottom. The background shows more of the historical site.

In India, travel is the de facto state of being. Whether you are travelling for work or pleasure, with purpose or sans direction—the country has a way of tickling your feet restless. In this picture, **Gardel Bertrand** draws on this sense of wonder that shines on us every once in a while, as it does for the woman marvelling at the ancient ruins of Hampi. The boulder-strewn city holds UNESCO sites as haunting as they are stunning.

## 79 **THE ADDRESS**

### 80 LIFE IN FLOW MOTION

Cocktails and cruises during an intoxicating weekend at The Park Baga River in Goa

### 82 WILD THINGS

Glamping at the edge of Sri Lanka's Yala National Park means befriending the resident wild boar and tarantula

### 84 MONKS IN THE MIST

In scenic Kodaikanal, The Tamara Kodai showcases history, comfort, and architectural elegance



120

# 87

## THE DESTINATION

### 88 LAZARUS BY THE RIVER

Stories of a colonial past and Bengal's intellectual renaissance get a new lease of life in the port town of Serampore

### 94 THE BALLAD OF BANARAS

A first-timer in the holy city traces classical music in four cosy cafés

### 100 ONE TRACK MIND

A training ground with a view —six mountain getaways for the running enthusiast

### 104 SEEKING THE SUFI SOUL

Following the Sufi trail in old Hyderabad unearths a side of the city filled with a wealth of stories

### 110 IN KERALA, AN ANCIENT ART OF HEALING

At Kairali, The Ayurvedic Healing Village in Kerala, ancient science and natural beauty help heal frayed bodies and minds

### 114 HAMPI: PARTS UNKNOWN

Wandering off the beaten path leads to hidden Islamic architectural treasures in the boulder town

# 119

## THE JOURNEY

### 120 DOWN THE SILK ROAD

A cross-country trip in Uzbekistan reveals layers of history, centuries-old architecture, and a Bollywood-loving people



94

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# TRAIN TO NOWHERE

LIKE MILLIONS OF OTHERS, BOMBAY TAUGHT ME INDEPENDENT TRAVEL, IN THE CRUDEST SENSE OF THE TERM

I like a bit of pow-wow in any place. Let me rephrase before you think I am eternally hankering for a fight. What I mean is I would choose crooked streets over straight highways, sweaty mayhem over pristine elegance. This is why no matter where I go in this world, coming home to India, and especially Bombay, is never dull. I blame growing up in the city for my pugilistic predilections. One of the many descriptors that Mark Twain used in relation to Bombay was "pow-wow." The place seemed to confound him: "Bewitching", "Bewildering", "Enchanting", "Arabian Nights come again?"—the man was repulsed and riveted at the same time. It was a place befitting the number of exclamations he used.

At 13, I was yet to be permitted the pleasures of travelling unchaperoned outside Bombay but within its confines, I had free rein to indulge my inner flâneur. I became the weekend loafer, slacking through parts of the city I really had no business being in. My itinerary hardly ever changed: Take the BEST bus to Chowpatty; after filling up on chaat, sample some more at the khau gully in Churchgate; sometimes, pretend to shop for music I could not afford at Kala Ghoda's Rhythm House, where the desperately-trying-to-be-hip hung out in the 1990s. The final stretch was always my

favourite: trudging along to my personal Shangri-La, Victoria Terminus.

At VT, I parsed the sea of faces. I drummed up mind games to fill time like "Who's new and who isn't?" Spotting either was fairly simple. The former bunch bears dazed glances and open mouths. A person gyrating through the mob with minimum physical contact had been practising for the Local Train Olympics for a few years at least. When it was my turn to head back to the suburbs, I warmed up, adopted a stance that would make Usain Bolt proud and dashed off like the Flash into an incoming train. Like millions of others, Bombay taught me independent travel, in the crudest sense of the term. And it prepared me for the swirling madness that lies in the rest of India.

In August, we are showcasing and extolling the allure of domestic journeys. Hampi, celebrated for its ruins, reveals something unexpected after every visit. In Hyderabad, we feature Sufi shrines, some of which abound in nooks you wouldn't notice. Banaras's cosy classical music cafés leave a lasting impression on a newcomer's heart, and in West Bengal, a heritage renaissance seems to be afoot in Serampore. It is incumbent that travellers make forays far from where they live but, every so often, it doesn't hurt to stumble upon surprises in our own backyard. ●



## OUR MISSION

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

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# A HOME FOR THE NON-RESIDENT HEART

**WHEN A BACK-TO-THE-ROOTS TRIP REVEALS A LONGER JOURNEY WITHIN**

**G**rowing up, my summers entailed an inescapable peregrination to my hometown, Mulki, 23 kilometers north of Mangalore. My futile protests to plan an alternative vacation were met with an itinerary of temple touring and guest-hopping. The merciless Southern sun didn't bring much respite either.

When I graduated a few months ago, I had a month-long sabbatical before a day job tied me down. I gloatingly declared to my mother I'd do away with my southward expedition. She teased me, predicting that reality would transpire differently.

As a teenager, our annual tradition felt like a missed opportunity to see more of the outside world. Now, I had a chance to plan my escapade. Instead, I inexplicably ended up buying a ticket to Mangalore for a week. Adulthood had allowed me to retrospect and choose. But nostalgia found my weak spot.

\*\*\*

Swathes of rice fields and backwaters flanked by coconut trees flickered past my window seat in the train. R.K. Narayan's fictional village of *Malgudi* came to life. Earlier, travelling with my cousins, playing charades or UNO, the joy of the journey would double. Now, in the company of my dad, the 16-hour journey was spent listening to entertaining tales of his childhood antics. I shifted between burying my head in a Murakami novel and people-watching. Kids scuffled for the window seat or chattered animatedly whilst miming movie titles. I began to reminisce all that I had taken for granted all these years.

As the train pulled close to Mulki, the scent of the soil wafted through

the balmy air. *Piji*, my great-grandmother, eagerly awaited our arrival by the window of my ancestral home. At 93, her skin is deeply wrinkled, hair salt-and-pepper, and her cotton saree is always neatly draped. She peered at us through milky eyes before recognising each one of us spot on. "Baari bachidh potar, maga. Bonda neer parle (You look tired, child. Drink some coconut water)," she suggested in Tulu. A huge toothless smile lit her face as she embraced me in a hug.

Over the week, I began to see how returning to Mulki was as much about searching for time gone by as it was about looking towards a new beginning. I ambled along the huge courtyard that used to transition into the private cricket ground for a team of under-15s when my cousins and I took over. Every nook unspoiled reels of childhood memories. The makeshift tyre-and-rope swing still hung from the lone mango tree in a corner. Every few years, we'd adopt a different indie pup, but invariably name him Tommy or Tiger. This time, I watched Tiger chase peacocks.

At home in Mumbai, I am neither a morning person, nor do I savour South Indian meals. But in my hometown, the simple mise en scène didn't take long to grow on me. As always, I obediently woke up to the call of the rooster and wolfed down servings of *semige rasayana*, a breakfast of steamed rice noodles doused with sweetened coconut milk. Lunch as always was locavore. Banana leaves from the backyard substituted plates. I feasted on *kori gassi* (chicken curry with coconut paste) cooked in an earthen pot, and gorged on *rotti*—paper-thin sheets of rice crisps. Farm-to-table cooking has been

a way of life here much before themed restaurants sprung up in cities.

My introduction to folklore and mythology lies in my grandmother's stories, long before I laid my hands on copies of Aesop's *Fables* and *Panchatantra*. No visit to Mulki feels complete without an evening spent at Bappanadu Shree Durgaparameshwari Temple situated on the banks of the Shambavi River. Legend has it that it was built 800 years ago by a Muslim merchant, and the place is symbolic for worshippers of both faiths. When we visited this time, the annual nine-day festival was underway. A colossal chariot lay outside the entrance, and the temple was decked with jasmine and marigold. The air rang with the famed *dolu* (drum). Masked local actors enacted myths in Kannada, but the language barrier did not keep me from joining the revelry. It doesn't happen to me in most other places, but Mulki has a way of drawing the best out of me. I thought of the indignation I'd feel before my parents and I set out for these trips, but how I'd eventually soften over the holiday and fancy extending my stay. Years have gone by, my cousins are caught up in academics. New houses have popped up where fields once flourished. But Mulki is the place I seek to revisit my juvenescence. ●



**POOJA NAIK**  
is Junior Writer at *National Geographic Traveller India*. She likes long walks with both hands in pockets; channelling her inner Gil Pender at Marine Drive.



# ART, FOR THE WAYFARER'S HEART

**BIENNALES COME NOT ONLY WITH THE OPPORTUNITY TO CREATE NEW ART, THEY CAN ALSO TRANSFORM HOW YOU SEE A DESTINATION**

**L**et me initiate our dialogue by invoking inaugural working images of two kinds of voyages." This was the exciting opening line in Jitish Kallat's letter, inviting me to make a body of work for the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2014 that he was curating. It was the beginning of a stimulating dialogue that resulted in the creation of a suite of drawings and sound, titled "The Fluidity of Horizons." Spread out across five interconnected rooms at Fort Kochi's Aspinwall House, my installation explored the history of the Malabar Coast through prisms of science and traveller's tales, and suggested how the impulse to travel has become an intrinsic quality of the human condition.

Personal travel, and most importantly, an extended site visit to Kochi, was crucial in creating the work. Yes, I do come from Kerala, but when you visit familiar territory purposed with a new pair of glasses, the gaze is different. I discovered long-lost relatives, a road named after the ancestral *tharavadu* (family house) I come from, and tales of travelling ancestors. I bought history books, visited palaces and museums, and listened to people talk.

Such excursions translated into a series of small-scale cartographical drawings on the six islands of Kochi, which worked as a way-station in "The Fluidity of Horizons." One of these six drawings was of Aspinwall itself—so that visitors gazed at an aerial view of the very place they were standing in Fort Kochi, viewing contemporary art.

Many travellers from far-flung lands landed on the shores of Kochi, including those who came to exchange gold for black gold or pepper—ideas which led to the creation of a vital triptych of the

installation, titled "Salt and Pepper." My imagination was stirred as I tried to re-enact in my mind, the clash of civilisations on these coasts. Both cultures were inevitably changed by the process, a lot of which was pretty bloodthirsty. Vasco da Gama's voyages did redraw world maps, but it was drawn in blood.

But back to Jitish's note and the "second" travel he evoked, one particularly close to my heart. We move to the cosmic realm, where our own blue planet, along with pretty much everything else in the known universe, hurtles through that mysterious thing we call "space."

Where would we be without the scientists and thinkers who facilitate such ideas and explorations? I read how travel from the great Age of Discovery was fuelled by the work of mathematicians and mechanics, and was introduced to a wonderful navigational instrument, the astrolabe. This little instrument from the past, which guided seafarers from the West to the shores of Malabar, found its way onto the surface of my artwork. Sixteen feet long and six feet high, "Astro/Lab" became the iconic central work of "The Fluidity of Horizons."

"Astro/Lab" is a testament to our continuing journeys: from the great sea voyages that used the moon to navigate, all the way to the moon landings and seeing earthrise on the lunar horizon. Events separated by time are allowed to inhabit the same picture plane and to push at the boundaries that contain us.

The 2014 Biennale was spread out over Kochi with public art and artworks installed at eight prime venues. It showcased works by 94 artists from 30

countries and went on for 108 days. Some 5,00,000 people visited the 2014 Biennale and I do believe it is these travellers to the Biennale who completed my works. They brought their ideas to barter with the visuals I had created, and started their own dialogues around the work.

The Biennale itself is an idea that has travelled worldwide from the Venice Biennale, first held in 1895. Today there are over 200 biennales globally, some with a very specific focus, others continuing the grand design proposed at Venice, and yet others closing after a few editions. The Kochi Biennale is unique because it is an artist initiative—the Kochi Biennale Foundation was founded by artists Riyas Komu and Bose Krishnamachari in 2010—rather than an arts event created by a country or organization.

As Anita Dube, curator of the upcoming Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2018 has said, the Biennale is a "knowledge laboratory." Crucially, she has also spoken about "bringing pleasure back into the most serious things." For sure, Art is serious stuff to people like me, but the pleasure principle in creating should not be denied. "What inspires you?" is perhaps the most frequent question I am asked as an artist. The pleasures of travel—in its various forms—form a partial answer. ■

**PARYATHI NAYAR**  
is a Chennai-based visual artist and writer. She was part of the Kochi Biennale (2014–2015) and has displayed her art in India and abroad.



# THE ITINERARY

40

## A DECADENT BINGE IN DOHA

From Armenian samosa to baby hamour ceviche, five food experiences that shape the Qatari capital



JOEL CARILLET/ISTOCK UNRELEASED/GETTY IMAGES

26 NOT WITHOUT MY BIKE IN BALI • 30 CROATIA: IN AUTUMN'S WAKE • 34 SHINE YOUR EYES, THIS IS LAGOS

48 ESTONIA UPGRADING • 50 WHEN YOU'RE HAPPY AND YOU KNOW IT • 54 ITALY'S RAIN MAN

60 FOLLOWING THE FLAMINGOS TO DUBAI

# NOT WITHOUT MY BIKE IN BALI

AWAY FROM UBUD'S CROWDS, A BICYCLE RIDE THROUGH CENTRAL BALI REVEALS LUSH RICE TERRACES AND A MIGHTY VOLCANO **BY ANAND HILLA**

barreled down the inner roads of central Bali as if my bicycle had been retrofitted with an aircraft propeller. Gusts of wind smacked my face. Stretches of mint green fields garlanding the route sweetened my sight. At some point, I surrendered to the quiet and closed my eyes for a fleeting second or two; the wheels carrying my body, my mind shedding all fear. Perhaps, I could have lived that moment anywhere. But it happened to me in Bali.

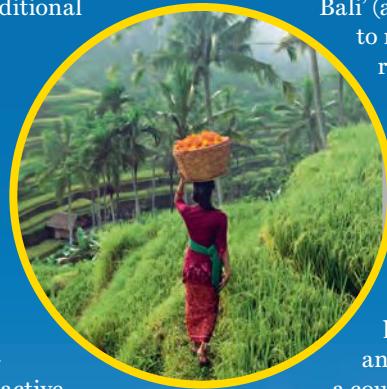
An hour-long drive east of Ubud had brought me to Bangli district in central Bali, a region lush with rice terraces and palm fronds. It is a far cry from touristy Ubud, where I was vacationing. Earlier that morning, Wayan Suardiana, the guide from Bali Eco Tours, picked me up from my hotel for the cycling tour I had signed up for. The 21-kilometre bike ride takes visitors through the heart of the region. Accompanied by two more riders—American travellers Kari Johnson and Priscilla Mok—we drove out of Ubud

towards our bikes.

Barely 15 minutes into the trip, we halted at the Instagram favourite, Tegallalang Rice Terrace. Pointing to the swirl of green peppered with palm trees, Wayan told us how the terraces are still irrigated by traditional Balinese techniques. Another 15-minute drive ahead lay the village of Penelokan, in the highland of Kintamani. We stopped at a breeze-swept restaurant for some Balinese coffee and light breakfast, but also to marvel at the views of 5,633-foot-high Mount Batur. The active volcano last erupted in 2000, and is surrounded by a pitch-black field of dried lava—a vestige of the 1968 eruption—and a crescent-shaped volcanic lake.

We drove on to Seribatu village, and reached a dusty, medium-sized

football field. Wayan handed us bright red helmets and pointed to the bicycles we'd be riding—21-speed, blue-white Wimcycle mountain bikes. We began gliding along the countryside's long, buttery roads, waiting for the 'real Bali' (as Wayan claimed) to reveal itself. A Bali removed from the party pockets of Kuta and Seminyak, largely unexplored and gloriously steeped in green. He first led us to a traditional house in Penglumbaran village. A family of six live in a spacious mud-and-brick home; there's a courtyard, several rooms, common areas and a family temple beside the backyard which houses cattle. Cycling further through back roads, we stopped at Selat Nyuhan village, where women sporting a variety of sun-shielding headgear laboured in paddy fields. We rode on, along more



A half-day cycling tour along central Bali covers the highland of Kintamani and several coastal villages. The ride allows visitors to have an intimate glimpse of the local way of life (inset).

PHOTO COURTESY: BALI ECO TOURS (RICE FIELD); MARTIN PLUDY/STOCK/GETTY IMAGES (WOMAN)



Unlike Ubud, which is fast changing with tourists chasing Eat, Pray, Love-like experiences, villages outside of it (top) still retain their old ways. Be it views of green rice terraces (middle) or the Mount Batur volcano (bottom), no two hours spent in the region feel the same.

rice field strips and inner roads, past giggling children, farmers returning home for lunch, and craftsmen still at work. I began to see how the ride was about appreciating the smaller details—something I mulled over at our next stop: an ancient banyan tree at Selat Pekan village.

The last leg of the ride was also the most rewarding: we cruised through the most eye-popping green expanses, and finished at Petemon village. A car was waiting to pick us up; it was time for lunch at the neighbouring Mancawarna village. But then, like a devious gambler raising the bet, Wayan asked if any of us was adventurous enough to cycle another eight kilometres and meet him for the meal. The uphill adventure, Wayan joked, helped one get rid of the ‘Bintang Belly’. It would have been funny had it not been so embarrassingly true—the number of chilled Bintang beers I had chugged in a week in Bali was baffling. I gallantly agreed, and so did Priscilla, a trained cyclist. Kari, the wiser one, headed straight to the car.

For the next half hour, I struggled phenomenally under the tropical sun. The hitherto joyous road suddenly shape-shifted into a maze of punishingly steep slopes. My core rebelled every minute. After covering barely half the distance, I threw myself and the bike onto the Bali Eco Tours’ truck that had caught up with me. Enough cycling for the day!

After that ride, my lunch tasted divine. My view was all forest as I gorged on mie goreng (fried noodles), sweet soyabean cake, tofu with peanut sauce, while the meat eaters feasted on chicken curry and smoked duck. On our drive back, my mind relived the jaunts through neighbourhoods, the hellos and cheers from strangers, the kids riding alongside our bikes, laughing. It was a joyride in the truest sense. ●

## ESSENTIALS

Bali Eco Tours’ Eco Educational Cycling Tour is a half-day tour and includes pick-up and drop to the visitor’s hotel by car. It takes visitors through the terraces and villages of East Bali ([www.baliecocycling.com](http://www.baliecocycling.com); \$50/₹3,435).

# IN AUTUMN'S WAKE

GOLDEN HUES AND ANCIENT LORE SURROUND THE 16 LAKES AT CROATIA'S PLITVICE LAKES NATIONAL PARK BY ARUNDHATI HAZRA

The hiking trail feels like a path in a mythical garden, a golden carpet of leaves lining the ledge beneath my feet. It overlooks a vast emerald lake shimmering in the late afternoon sun, into which threads of waterfalls descend. Autumn has clothed the trees in kingly hues of red and orange. My friends and I have walked for more than four hours, yet we feel energised by the views. Plitvice can do that to you.

When planning a trip to Croatia with my friends, Plitvice Lakes National Park was at the top of our wishlist. The park is the country's oldest and largest, spread over nearly 300 square kilometres. Inside, 16 lakes form an interconnected network, separated by natural barriers of tufa, or travertine, a form of limestone deposited by mineral springs. I was surprised to learn that Plitvice was a conflict zone in the early

1990s, and guns once rang out amidst the postcard-worthy landscape.

The Plitvice Lakes Incident (March 28, 1991), which is regarded as the beginning of the Croatian War of Independence, was an armed clash between the Croatian police and the armed forces of the SAO Krajina. In 1991, Yugoslavia was splintered, with Croatians wanting to secede and Serbs opposing secession and wanting to unite with Serbia. The SAO Krajina, a self-declared autonomous province of Serbs within Croatia, sent armed forces to capture Plitvice Lakes and removed the park's Croatian management. In subsequent clashes, one person from either side was killed and several wounded in gunfire, which put the park under siege for several months.

The park's violent history is a distant memory on the afternoon when we

begin our hike after lunch. There are seven well-marked self-guided trails, ranging from four to 18 kilometres; we pick an eight-kilometre stretch that covers most of the park's key attractions. The 16 lakes are divided into two clusters—12 Upper Lakes and four Lower Lakes.

Our trail starts off with magnificent bird's-eye views of the lower lakes—sheets of azure and turquoise against the Velebit mountain range, home to fairies according to Croatian folklore. Milky *slap* (waterfalls, in Croatian) link the *jezero* (lakes), cascading over travertine walls. Each lake has a story behind it—for example, the Gavanovac jezero is believed to have the treasure of a local named Gavan hidden within, while the Milanovac jezero is named after another local, Mile, who owned a mill by the lake. A path ahead



Walkways zigzag through Plitvice Lakes National Park, affording hikers views of the 16 interconnected lakes linked by limestone and mineral barriers.



In addition to seven hiking trails, visitors can take a boat ride along the park's largest lake, the Kozjak (top); Plitvice cradles nearly 1,400 types of plants, and there's no better time than autumn to take in the foliage's most radiant hues (bottom left); The green lizard (bottom right) is among 260 species of fauna found in the park.

leads down to the Veliki Slap (Great Waterfall), Plitvice's highest waterfall, with a stunning 255-foot drop. In winter, the waterfall is nearly frozen, forming a grand ice sculpture; in autumn, the spray is so strong that we are nearly drenched in its wake.

Next, we see the Kozjak jezero (Goat Lake), named after the goats that reportedly drowned in it while escaping hungry wolves; it is the largest and lowest of the Upper Lakes. A leisurely boat ride along it affords us grand views of the autumn foliage—beech, fir, spruce, and Scots pine. George Eliot captured my feeling best when he said that his soul was wedded to autumn, and if he were a bird, he would fly about the earth seeking successive autumns.

The trail slopes uphill, and the Upper

Lakes unfold before us in succession. The Gradinsko, named after the *gradina* (fortified town) that once stood on the hill between this lake and the Kozjak; and the Galovac, deriving its name from a brigand named Gal who was shot down here, are among the larger ones. Wooden boardwalks allow us to walk in the middle of the lakes, and the waterfalls are often close enough to touch. The lakes are crystal clear, allowing us to see all the way to the bottom. Around them I become the typical tourist, blocking the path of other hikers in my excitement at seeing shoals of fish.

Proscansko is the last lake on our trail, and highest among the Upper Lakes, fed by waters from the Crna and Bijela rivers. The water is a deep green

colour, reflecting the forests on the slopes surrounding the lake. According to Croatian legend, Proscansko was the first of the Plitvice Lakes created. After a long drought in the valley left its inhabitants thirsting for water, the people prayed to the Black Queen, a benevolent fairy who lived in the Velebit mountain range, for succour. She responded to their prayer, and the valley was deluged by torrential rain that created the lakes. We stand on the ledge carpeted with golden fallen leaves and overlooking Proscansko and take in the Black Queen's boon to the land. I declare that if my life were a succession of autumn afternoons spent looking over such gorgeous landscapes, I would not be bored, and my friends echo the thought. ●



## ESSENTIALS

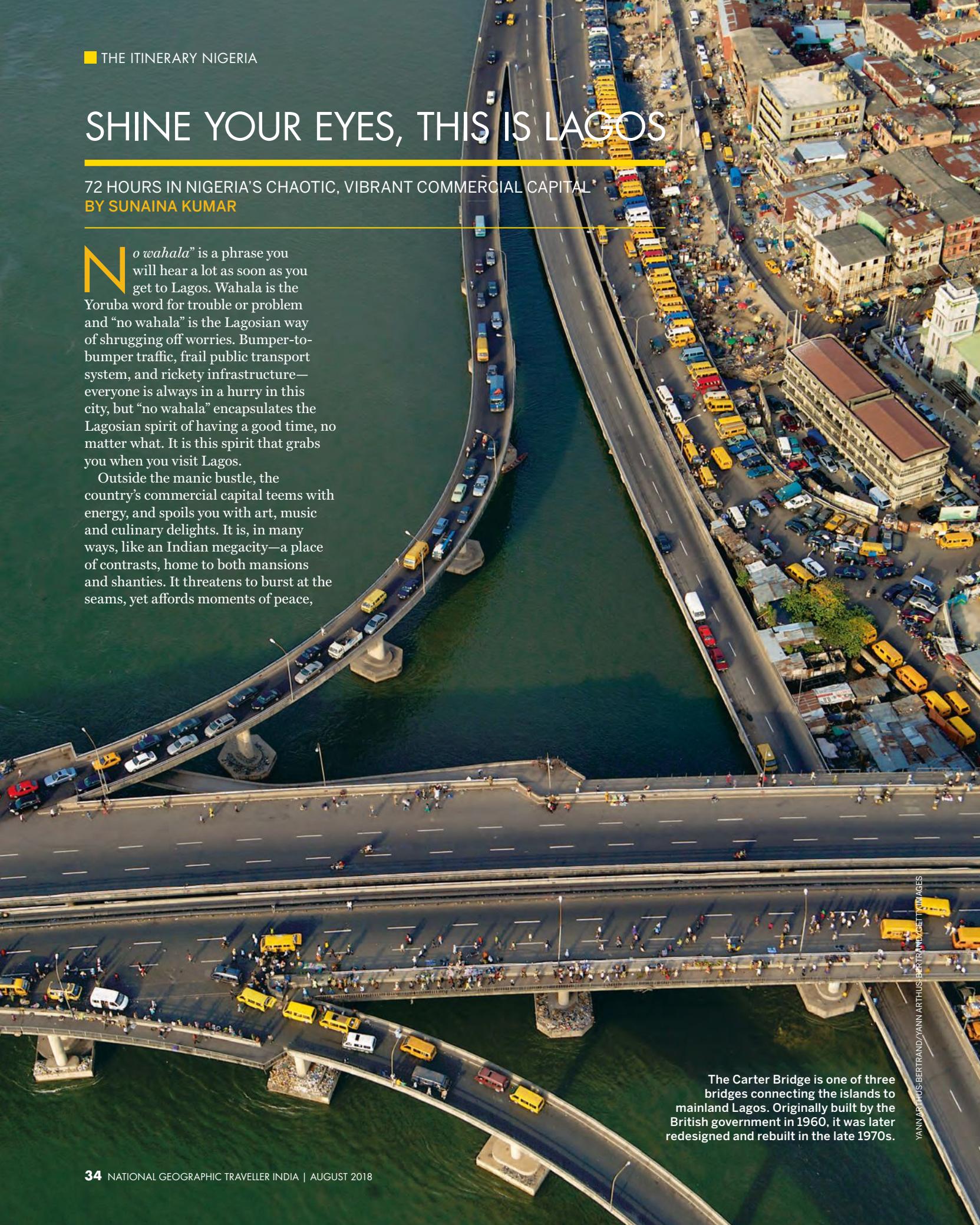
Plitvice Lakes National Park lies 150 km/2.5 hours southwest of the capital Zagreb. Regular daily buses ply on this route ([www.akz.hr](http://www.akz.hr)). The park is open all year round, but hours depend on the season ([np-plitvicka-jezera.hr](http://np-plitvicka-jezera.hr); entry adults from HRK55/₹595, children from HRK35/₹380).

# SHINE YOUR EYES, THIS IS LAGOS

72 HOURS IN NIGERIA'S CHAOTIC, VIBRANT COMMERCIAL CAPITAL  
BY SUNAINA KUMAR

**N**o wahala" is a phrase you will hear a lot as soon as you get to Lagos. Wahala is the Yoruba word for trouble or problem and "no wahala" is the Lagosian way of shrugging off worries. Bumper-to-bumper traffic, frail public transport system, and rickety infrastructure—everyone is always in a hurry in this city, but "no wahala" encapsulates the Lagosian spirit of having a good time, no matter what. It is this spirit that grabs you when you visit Lagos.

Outside the manic bustle, the country's commercial capital teems with energy, and spoils you with art, music and culinary delights. It is, in many ways, like an Indian megacity—a place of contrasts, home to both mansions and shanties. It threatens to burst at the seams, yet affords moments of peace,



The Carter Bridge is one of three bridges connecting the islands to mainland Lagos. Originally built by the British government in 1960, it was later redesigned and rebuilt in the late 1970s.

YANN ARTHUS-BERTAND/YANN ARTHUS-BERTAND/GETTY IMAGES



Fishing remains a primary occupation in Makoko (top left), once a fishing village and now the world's largest floating slum; Apart from many traditional historic artefacts, the National Museum Lagos (top right) also has a veritable collection of Benin bronzes; Jollof rice (bottom), cooked with tomatoes, spices and meat is a popular dish throughout West Africa.

especially when basking by the vast western lagoon after which the city is named and the Atlantic Ocean that hugs the city's southern border.

A true Lagos experience is about soaking in the liveliness and the contrasts, if possible while riding the yellow minibuses or *danfo*. However, these symbols of the city have also often been called death traps so get on board only if you're used to the hustle. And remember to "shine your eyes"—the street slang for being alert and vigilant—when you're in Lagos.

## DAY 1

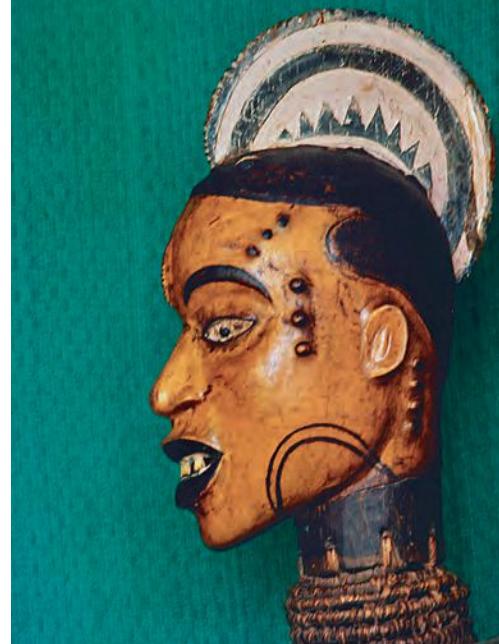
### 3 P.M. DIP INTO THE ART AND CULTURE

Most flights from India arrive in Lagos in the morning. Take the morning and lunchtime to soak in the sights and sounds before you head out to explore. A visit to the National Museum is a good way to get acquainted with the art and culture of Nigeria. The highlight of the museum's sizeable artefact collection is the collection of Benin bronzes, from the erstwhile Kingdom of Benin, parts of which are in modern-day southern Nigeria. Dating back to the 13th century, Benin kingdom was an African centre of power until the British wiped it out in the late 19th century. The other draw, especially for locals, is a black Mercedes with bullet marks, the car Late General Murtala Muhammed, a former Military Head of State, was riding in when he was assassinated in 1976.

After the museum, head to Nike Art Gallery, a 30-minute drive away, to know more about Lagos's buzzy contemporary art scene. Housing over 15,000 works of art—paintings, sculptures and textiles—across four floors, it is more museum than gallery and a great introduction to Nigerian art. If you're lucky, you might meet Nike Okundaye, one of the country's foremost textile artists and the woman behind the magic. On most weekends, Mama Nike can be found with young local artists, who get together and share stories of their work over food and drinks. All visitors are welcome to join the music, dances, performances and masquerades that follow.

### 8 P.M. GET SOME GREAT GRUB

It's time to let your hair down, Lagos style. But first, tuck into the quintessential Nigerian street food, *suya*—spiced skewers of beef or chicken, cooked over a charcoal pit. This Nigerian version of a shish kebab is



said to have been traditionally prepared by the pastoral Hausa tribe in northern Nigeria. Today, it is the country's most popular street food, sold in shops and stalls at almost every street corner.

After the local feast, head over to Victoria Island by the Lagos Lagoon, the hippest place in town crammed with restaurants, cafés and bars serving local and international fare. Yellow Chilli is immensely popular for great local food, while Mexican resto-bar Bottles has local artistes belting out popular English and Nigerian songs every Saturday.

## DAY 2

### 9 A.M. GO WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

In a city as busy and densely populated as Lagos, the Lekki Conservation Centre on the Lekki peninsula close to Victoria Island comes as a surprise. The urban nature park has raised walkways running through 190 acres of wetland that allow you to view the park's wild residents. It is the natural habitat of a number of local animal species such as crocodiles, tortoises and mona monkeys. A 1,300-foot-high canopy walk, also Africa's longest, affords some of the best views of the Atlantic Ocean in the city.

### 1 P.M. LUNCH THE LEBANESE WAY

Lagos has a sizeable Lebanese population—some, third or fourth generation migrants—and there are many well-known Lebanese joints in and around the city. Salma's at Victoria



The traditional Ankara fabric, a type of batik done locally, is characterised by its bright colours and large whimsical patterns.

Island does the Lebanese staples—think falafel, fatoush and kebabs—really well. All this served with a killer view of the Lagos lagoon.

### 3 P.M. CORNER THE MARKET

No visit to Lagos is complete without checking out the local markets on the mainland. Drive back to the mainland over the Third Mainland Bridge for a view of Lagos city and its skyline, a spectacle that highlights the stark contrasts in the city. While the skyline looms in the distance, the lagoon's waters are home to Makoko, the world's largest floating slum. Once a fishing village, Makoko is a complicated maze

of stilt homes and narrow waterways that has attracted the attention of many a photographer and Instagrammer.

Back at the mainland, you are spoilt for choice in markets—Balogum is the biggest open-air market, while Computer Village is known for its electronic goods and the Epe Fish Market is always worth a visit. The busiest and one of the largest is Yaba Market, which sells everything from jeans, suits, and shoes, to Ankara fabric (a type of batik). It is action packed, with speakers blaring local songs, and shopkeepers calling out to get your attention. “Shine your eyes” here for pickpockets though. Like with the city,

if you can remain unaffected and enjoy the chaos of Yaba Market, then you can possibly be called a true Nigerian or *naija*.

### 7 P.M. FEAST ON THE SEA

Of Lagos's many seafood joints, South African chain Ocean Basket is a fail-safe, affordable option. Take your pick from prawns, croaker, red mullet and many other Atlantic specialities. Wash it all down with Orijin, Nigeria's favourite alcoholic beverage, made with herbs and kola nut.

### DAY 3

#### 7 A.M. BE A BEACH BUM

Even though one doesn't think of Lagos as a beach city, it is lined with beaches, both artificial and natural. The white sand Bar Beach, Eleko Beach and Tarkwa Island are among the most popular. Just a 15-minute boat ride away from the city, Tarkwa, an artificial island created along the Atlantic coast, is ideal for a swim, a fresh fish barbecue, or just to rent a table and chair and laze around watching the ocean and surfers.

#### 11 A.M. GET ON A HANDICRAFT HAUL

After spending even a couple of days in Lagos, it's impossible not to lust after African art and want to take some of it back. The city has some of Africa's most exciting art galleries such as the art and culture centre Terra Kulture, and a nascent but arresting street art scene with graffiti and public art installations. For knick-knacks and art keepsakes from Nigeria and neighbouring countries—think replicas of antique wooden windows by the Dogon tribe in Mali or recreations of Benin bronzes—head to Lekki Market. Make sure you pick up at least a few phrases in Nigerian pidgin to haggle with the sellers.

#### 1 P.M. MAKE IT A MEMORABLE LAST SUPPER

The most popular food in Nigeria and most of West Africa, available almost everywhere, jollof rice is a simple dish—tomato-flavoured rice, cooked with some peppers and meat, and a dash of condiments including thyme, bay leaves and curry powder. Head to Terra Kulture for a great plate of rice and the perfect ambience to end your Lagosian adventure. ●

# A DECADENT BINGE IN DOHA

QATAR'S CAPITAL RUSTLES UP A CULINARY STORM. FROM ARMENIAN SAMOSA TO BABY HAMOUR CEVICHE, HERE ARE FIVE FOOD EXPERIENCES THAT MAKE THE CITY DELICIOUS **BY ANANYA BAHL**



Whether in a park or an art gallery, good food hogs a significant share of Doha's social calendar (top); Opal by Gordon Ramsay offers a mix of classic recipes enlivened with visual quirks (bottom). The Opal Wagyu burger is one of its star offerings.

**B**ut butter chicken is on the iftar menu!" announces Hameed, my guide in Doha. His excited declaration, a few days before Ramadan, tells me a lot. Whether the way to a man's heart is through his stomach is debatable, but it is a fairly handy tip when you're in Doha. Breaking bread with the locals (men and women) or simply talking about food is the easiest way to befriend them. Born in Palestine and raised in Doha, with a Syrian-Palestinian wife who can rustle up a mean Indian meal, Hameed is a good indicator of the city's cosmopolitanism.

Over the years, fluid trade relations have ensured that Doha houses a large number of expats. The coexistence means that its culinary milieu imbibes a sea of foreign flavours. Here, you will find yourself in a Moroccan eatery as easily as you might dig into a Lebanese cold mezze platter, as the heady concurrence of Turkish, Indian,

Armenian, and Japanese cuisine (among others) jostle for your attention across the city. Little wonder that gastronomic outings monopolise the average Doha resident's social calendar, serving well to make up for the restrictions on alcohol, or a thriving nightlife. Here are five food experiences that exemplify Doha's mouth-watering culinary landscape.

## THE RAMSAY RELISH

It might be hell in his kitchen, but what's on your plate is nothing short of bliss. Opal By Gordon Ramsay, at the St. Regis Doha, boasts the largest sommelier's collection in the city, but for me, it is the breezy European bistro-like setting and the gourmet pizza station that seals the 'Gordon Ramsay experience'.

The afternoon of my visit, there's a band playing in the al fresco area, its female vocalist crooning a melodious version of Drake's *Hotline Bling*. Around us, guests mill about—ladies

who lunch and couples, families and professionals. I settle down with a glass of rosé, soaking in the à la mode setting over a light kale-and-burrata salad. The wild mushroom and truffle flatbread that arrives next hits the ball out of the park with an olio of truffle cream mixed with mushroom and provolone cheese. The baby hamour ceviche is no less delectable, with avocado, pomelo and fennel flavouring the raw fish. With such high precedent, I didn't have the heart to skip the iconic Opal Wagyu burger, despite a full tummy. The done-to-perfection beef patty, layered with earthy comté cheese



MARE MAGNUM/PHOTOLIBRARY/GETTY IMAGES (PROMENADE),  
PHOTO COURTESY: OPAL BY GORDON RAMSAY (FOOD)



The tart-sweet pop of pomegranate seeds on the *mama ghanouj*—a zucchini-based spin on the famous *baba ghanouj*—elevates this dish from Mamig restaurant (top left); A buzzing checkers majlis is a common community activity in Doha (top right); A den for such majlis, Souq Waqif, acquires its vibrant character from the colourful wares sold across its premises (bottom left); Locals have embraced a milky, sugary avatar of tea called *karak*, apart from their pet beverages of coffee and black tea (bottom right).

and BBQ sauce and capsuled in a brioche bun, was proof that my lack of self-restraint was, in hindsight, an excellent decision. Dessert, as they say, demands its own chamber in the stomach, and I am happy to make room for the chocolate and amaretti pudding, crested with luscious crème anglaise. Tipplers can grab the boozy shakes, or the vodka-based Lemon Drop and Red Ruby cocktails, and for teetotallers,

the minty Charlie Parker is as good a liquid accompaniment as any. A meal for two at Opal costs approximately QAR400/₹7,558, while The Friday Brunch is priced at QAR450/₹8,503, including alcohol.

#### DOUBLE THE DELIGHT

Armenian-Lebanese chef Zarmig's restaurant Mamig channels the vibe of a Lebanese garden on a balmy

summer day. Located in Katara Cultural Village, the space is made charming by snaking bougainvillea plants, and table cloths, serviettes, and ceramic crockery tattooed with dainty flower motifs. It offers ample seating options, ranging from ones styled after traditional Armenian homes to a more contemporary shisha lounge. I choose the floral-themed outdoor terrace overlooking the Arabian Gulf, and trust Zarmig to make the right choice when it comes to my order.

Custom demands that we begin with the hot and cold mezzes, along with a serving of salads. I'm intrigued by the Armenian tabbouleh salad

#### Located in the seaside Katara Cultural Village, Armenian-Lebanese

restaurant Mamig channels the vibe of a Lebanese garden on a summer day

with Lebanese mint: it is warm and packs a spicy punch. The cold mezzes include *panjarov sarma*, or meat-and-rice stuffed vine leaves lathered in a pomegranate-molasses reduction; and rolled eggplant with walnut, dill, Armenian labneh and tahina sauce. The secret, I am told, is in the correct use of spices and fresh herbs brought in straight from Armenia. We move onto the hot mezzes that comprise a delightful plate of the cigar-like cheese-filled Lebanese finger food *rekakat*, Mamig's *chilli vart boereg*—an Armenian version of a samosa—and the star of the show, *soujouk*, a spicy Armenian sausage slathered in tomato sauce. By now, I am beyond stuffed (happens a lot in Doha, you see?) but allowance must be made for the famed Mamig *cherry fishne kebab*—succulent lamb simmered in a sweet-sour cherry sauce, served on a bed of parsley and bread. The dyad of the soaked bread and the tender meat chunks ensures a sweet climax even without dessert. This multi-ethnic experience is likely to leave your wallet lighter by QAR300/₹5,669.

#### CHAI, KARAK

Qatar is deeply influenced by the Indian



From horse-mounted policemen (top left) to souvenir shops, spectacles abound at Souq Waqif; Argan's mixed platter (top right) is a treat, with humble salads of beet, cucumber and spinach made jazzy, Moroccan style; Opulent restaurants bring out the Souq's glamorous edge (bottom).

culture—butter chicken and Bachchan are both popular here. Across the Arab world, it is the black tea that is gulped by the gallon. The same is true of Qatar. However, locals have also embraced a sweet-and-spicy variant that they like to call *karak*. Plainly put, it's a sweeter and milkier version of our masala chai, and is said to be an Indian import from over half a century ago.

Hameed and I stop at Chapati & Karak, a tiny shack-like outlet in the seaside Katara Cultural Village. It's 4 p.m. and I'm craving a caffeine kick. Despite the blistering heat, the cup in my hand cools my travel-weary mind, for just QAR3/₹57. The crisp chapati, which costs QAR2/₹38, can be likened to a sweeter version of the Kerala *parotta*. We do this the local way—drive down with to-go cups to the Corniche waterfront and sip on our *karaks*, as the city's skyline shimmers in the distance.

### SOUQ WITH A SIDE OF SNACKS

When Hameed says he can spend all day at Souq Waqif, a spices and souvenir market square in central Doha, I peg it to his natural enthusiasm. But he's right, time flows in strange ways at the souq, with its dreamy Arabian Nights character, traditional Qatari architecture, and robust choices in restaurants and shisha lounges. A walk familiarises me with its falcon centres, attar shops, traditional clothing stores, checkers majlis—parts that make up the whole kinetic cultural mise en scène unfolding before us.

The souq is lined with al fresco coffee

shops where you can nurse a cuppa joe (try *gahwa*, or Arabic coffee, at Ali Al Nama Coffee; QAR40/₹756 for two), smoke shisha (at *Tajine*) and people-watch. There are handcarts selling everything from Turkish ice cream and samosas to Palestinian snacks, candy, and corn-on-the-cob. Don't miss out on the *khobez ergag*—a super-thin Arab bread laced with Nutella, sold at a market in the souq run by local women. Head to Damasca, a restaurant known for its sumptuous Syrian fare for two priced at QAR150–200/₹2,834–3,779. On your way out, stop for a swig of *tamar hindi*, a drink of tamarind and rose petal, from the vendor outside.

### AN AFRICAN SAFARI

Argan, located within the Souq Waqif Boutique Hotel, is said to serve the best Moroccan food in Doha. Swathed in fine purple and orange tapestry, replete



with majlis, it is reminiscent of a home in Marrakesh. For a change, there is no hummus and falafel—the cuisine is entirely north African. Instead, you're greeted by decadent tagines, crackling couscous, and pastilla.

We start with *zaalouk*, an eggplant and tomato salad, and a carrot salad made zesty with a salvo of secret Moroccan spices. There's also the *bakoula*: with spinach, olives, and pickled lemon. The pastilla, a gorgeous meaty affair, is my favourite. Think chicken braised with ginger, nutmeg, butter, almonds, and orange blossom water, the stuffing enveloped inside a filo pastry sprinkled with icing sugar! A meal at Argan costs around QAR300/₹5,669.

It's the Moroccan mint tea, and an orange salad with cinnamon, date, and almond, that winds up my decadent romance with Doha. For now. ●



# ESTONIA UPGRADING

ALL DIGITAL ROADS LEAD TO TALLINN, THE FORWARD-THINKING CAPITAL CITY AND INNOVATION HOTSPOT OF THE SMALLEST BALTIC NATION



The “E” in Estonia might as well stand for engagement. Smallest of the three Baltic states, this country is a global leader in digital innovation. It’s the first nation to declare Internet access a basic human right, the first to accept digital signatures for most transactions, the first to institute online voting, and, this year, one of the first nations with crazy-fast 5G network capability.

Estonia’s dizzying shift from Soviet state to high-tech hub has catapulted its capital, Tallinn, onto the world stage. Innovation incubators are seeding start-ups like Starship Technologies, a maker of “delivery robots” launched by the co-founders of Skype (another Estonia invention). The new Telliskivi Creative City hub is drawing crowds to its art shops and cafés. But the headliner this year (into 2020) is Estonia’s centennial as a republic, to be saluted with scores of events and loads of Estonian pride.

*—Maryellen Kennedy Duckett*



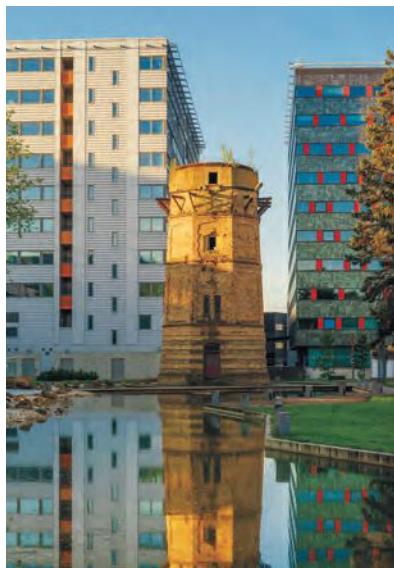
Tallinn's wood-and-brick Juur restaurant celebrates Estonia's natural heritage with dishes sourced from local lands and waters.

LAURILAAAN

## EAT

### NORDIC FLAVOURS

Old Town's **Leib Resto ja Aed**, named for Estonia's prized black rye bread (*leib*), serves such classic Estonian fare as pike perch fresh from Pärnu Bay and venison from the island of Saaremaa. Reserve a table at restaurant **MEKK** for lunch on a weekday, when MEEKK's "modern Estonian cuisine"—creamy salmon soup, smoked pork belly—is an affordable eight Euros (about ₹50). In Tallinn's tech-hub Ülemiste City, treat yourself to Nordic-cool **Juur**'s tasting menu of three, five, or seven courses—rye porridge to moose—all sourced from Estonian forests, fields, and waters.



## STAY

### STORIED HOTELS

Tallinn's, and Estonia's, history is written on the walls of the **Solo Sokos Hotel Estoria**. Each of the 93 rooms tells a story, such as that of Estonian sumo wrestler Baruto Kaito ([sokoshotels.fi](http://sokoshotels.fi)). The historic **Hotel Palace**, overhauled in 2014 and overlooking Tallinn's Freedom Square, blends 1930s elegance with amenities like a fitness centre and a pillow menu ([tallinn-hotels.ee](http://tallinn-hotels.ee)). The minimalist **Centennial**, named for Estonia's 100th birthday (on February 24, 2018), epitomises Nordic style. Book one of the 10 "Zen" rooms, and you can soak the world away in a Jacuzzi bath ([centennialhoteltallinn.com](http://centennialhoteltallinn.com)).



Clockwise from top left:

**Kumu Art Museum** exhibit; Old mixes with new in the Ülemiste quarter; Rotermann quarter's modern face; Tastes of Estonia at Juur restaurant; Kadriorg Park.

## PLAY

### PARKS AND RIDES

Rent a City Bike to explore Tallinn's **Old Town**, then continue to the 173-acre, path-webbed **Kadriorg Park**. Named for its pink **Kadriorg Palace**, built by Russian Tsar Peter the Great in 1718, the park is home to the ultra-modern **Kumu Art Museum**; the **Kadriorg Art Museum**, in the palace, devoted to international art; and the **Eduard Vilde Museum**, which honours the noted Estonian writer. Tallinn's hip heart beats in the 10-building **Telliskivi Creative City**, a cultural and shopping complex—and street art mecca—now flourishing on the site of a defunct factory.

## SHOP

### SWEETS TO SOAPS

Stylish hub of the once industrial Rotermann quarter, **Tallinn Design House** showcases of-the-moment Estonian brands like Uncle Paul (UP) urban athletic shoes. Stock up on organic Estonian cosmetics, such as peat-bog face masks and honey-based soaps, at **Pillerkaar**, in the trendy Solaris shopping and cultural centre. Find foods, antiques, clothing, and flowers at the reopened-in-2017 **Baltic Station Market** (Balti Jaama Turg); here, check out the **Kalev** chocolate shop for sweet treats from Estonia's oldest (1806) candy company. ●



# WHEN YOU'RE HAPPY AND YOU KNOW IT

16 JOYFUL EXPERIENCES FROM THE CONTRIBUTORS OF NAT GEO TRAVELER U.S. BY KEVIN JOHNSON



"Riding the Belmond Hiram Bingham train to and from Machu Picchu. The mood is especially festive on the return, with everyone downing pisco sours!"



"Jumping from the deck of a traditional Turkish sailing gulet into the crystalline blue Aegean Sea near Bodrum, Turkey."



"Having endangered Rothschild giraffes eat from my palm at Giraffe Manor, a lodge on the outskirts of Nairobi, Kenya."



"Taking my dog off-leash in Brooklyn's Prospect Park. It's a real show, with hundreds of happy dogs and owners."



"Seeing someone have their teeth worked on by a foot-powered drill in Hotan, China, and feeling relieved that it isn't me."



"Following mobile jazz bands in and out of bars on Frenchmen Street in New Orleans, Louisiana."



"Watching baby mountain gorillas swing from vines in Virunga National Park, Democratic Republic of the Congo."



"Floating in the Totumo Mud Volcano, an hour north of the port city of Cartagena in Colombia."



"Sipping cava while floating in a hot-air balloon over the lava-sculpted countryside of northern Spain's La Garrotxa Volcanic Zone."



"Snowshoeing while tethered to a sled dog in the frosty alpine woods of Chaudière-Appalaches, just outside Quebec City."



"Savouring the flavours of an authentic *asada* (barbecue) at the Argentinian home of new friends while cheering on the local football team."



"Sitting with a puffin in Scotland's Shiant Isles and realising I'm the one who looks comical and out of place."



"A back-road bike ride in Normandy, France, followed by an impromptu picnic of baguettes and cheese in a meadow by Claude Monet's lily-filled gardens in Giverny. Heaven."



"Night diving into bioluminescent ostracods (crustaceans) in Bonaire. Like swimming through stars!"



"Watching a baby elephant take a frolicking mud bath in Botswana's Okavango Delta."



"Ringing the temple bell of happiness at midnight on New Year's Eve in Kyoto, Japan."

# ITALY'S RAIN MAN

FINDING SHELTER IN NAPLES WITH A BESPOKE UMBRELLA MAKER **BY ANN HOOD**

**J**ust like you, I own seven umbrellas. They are all broken—blown inside out by the wind, torn by my cat, the metal ribs bent at awkward angles or cutting right through the fabric (which varies from cheap and flimsy to overpriced leopard or cloud print). I used to own 10, but three were left in restaurants, on the subway, or in somebody's car. I buy a new one almost every time it rains. About 33 million umbrellas are sold each year in the United States, a figure I'm confident comes from the fact that we lose or break our little fold-up portables all the time. In London, tens of thousands of umbrellas are left on the Underground every year.

I grew up watching Mary Poppins fly with her charmed umbrella and Sebastian Cabot with his proper black English one—an accessory that would not abandon them on a windy day, and one that they wouldn't abandon on a subway or in a car. These were umbrellas of substance. Umbrellas that made a statement. And like Mary Poppins and Sebastian Cabot, I want to throw away my seven broken



Naples, viewed here from the Salita della Pedamentina walkway, has long been known for its artisans.

umbrellas and buy one that will last a lifetime. I don't leave my good winter coat or fancy high heels in restaurants. I want an umbrella that demands the same respect.

Though the umbrella as we know it today—foldable steel ribs under a waterproof canopy atop a cane—was invented by Englishman Samuel Fox in 1852, I don't want an English brolly. I also do not want one of the 500 million umbrellas cranked out in the factories of Songxia, China. And I don't want one of the 5,000 types offered on Amazon.

I want a gorgeous, handmade umbrella that will keep me dry, remain intact, be too precious to leave behind, and even turn a few heads. That means I want an umbrella crafted by Mario Talarico, who is in his 80s. He doesn't sell his umbrellas online. To buy one, you must go to his shop in Naples, Italy, the same shop where his great-grandfather began making umbrellas by hand in 1860, and where Talarico's nephew, also named Mario, is a fifth-generation apprentice.

### I want to throw away my seven broken umbrellas and buy one that will last a lifetime.

I want an umbrella that  
demands respect

And so I buy a ticket to Naples.

I arrive during a record-breaking heat wave, which the Neapolitans have named, fittingly, Lucifer. There is no rain in sight. Just hazy blue skies and a blistering sun. Sweating and slightly miserable, I find the tiny shop on

Vico Due Porte a Toledo, an undistinguished alley in Quartieri

Spagnoli, the old Spanish district

of Naples. The shop is marked by the ubiquitous *cornicelli*—red horns—to ward off *malocchio*, the evil eye. The horns outside Talarico are as tall as a 10-year-old child. Inside sits Talarico himself,



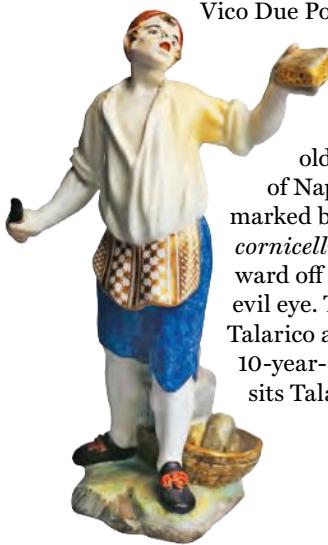
Fourth-generation umbrella maker Mario Talarico sells his one-of-a-kind wares from his snug Naples workshop (in photo); A porcelain statue of a cheese maker, manufactured by Capodimonte (bottom).

carefully shaping the curved cane of an umbrella from the wood of chestnut trees sourced right here in Naples. Talarico's umbrellas are all made from local wood: lemon-wood from Sorrento, the juniper trees on Vesuvius.

Talarico is part of the fabric of Naples, where artisans have been hand carving elaborate Nativity scenes on Via San Gregorio Armeno since the 13th century, and craftsmen like glove maker Mauro Squillace, who hand cuts the leather and sews his gloves on non-electric Singer sewing machines, still thrive.

Talarico smiles at us when we enter but doesn't stop working. He sits on a 200-year-old bench, which has been here since the shop opened, beneath

photos of himself with celebrities as well as a picture of Padre Pio (who died in 1968). Talarico grew up surrounded by umbrellas, even as a child sleeping in the drawers of a chest in the family shop. Using the same methods as his great-grandfather, he is one of the only umbrella makers in the world who still forges the canes himself, slowly shaping the 180-degree curve with steam. He may be the sole umbrella maker to create a solid stick umbrella with a single shave shaft—known as the *asta intera* method—which shows off the wood and leaves it intact in one piece. Those canes are finished with a polished buffalo-horn tip. The canopy, or the sky of the umbrella, is closed with a mother-of-pearl button slipped through



LORENZO FRANCO FOR THE BESPOKE DUDES (MAN), DEAGOSTINI PICTURE LIBRARY/GETTY IMAGES (STATUE)



A street in Quartieri Spagnoli, the old Spanish district of Naples (top); A figurine being hand-sculpted at the La Scarabattola workshop (bottom).

## MADE IN NAPLES

In Naples, perhaps more than anywhere else in Italy, craftsmanship is handed down through centuries. Today Neapolitan artisans are bringing their work into the present, fusing tradition with innovation.

### NATIVITY SCENES

The ceramics workshop La Scarabattola reimagines the *presepio*, the Christmas Nativity scene. Hand-sculpted and painted figures include priests, devils, angels, even mermaids. *Via dei Tribunali 50*

### GLOVES

At Omega, Mauro Squillace and his son continue a glove making workshop founded by Gennaro Squillace in 1923. Lambskin gloves lined with silk or cashmere come in a rainbow of colours. *Via Stella 12*

### PORCELAIN

Flower bouquets, fairies, and Vespa scooters are rendered by Naples's top porcelain artisans at Porcellane di Capodimonte, dating from 1743. *By reservation: capodimonte-porcelain.com*

### TAMBOURINES

Tambourines of all sizes, some hand-painted with scenes of Naples, fill Officina della Tammorra, a traditional musical instrument workshop that also makes castanets. *Vico San Severino 39*

an embroidered ring. And those canopies? Made of a special waterproof blend of silk and polyester that brings to mind topaz and lapis and ruby. It takes seven hours to make one umbrella, start to finish. Only 220 umbrellas are sold a year—one in 2017 was made especially for Robert De Niro—and not one of them looks like any of the others.

Talarico's nephew-apprentice leads us around the corner to an equally small shop where there are even more umbrellas. I have to step outside in order to open one, and when I do, it makes a pleasing snap as the fabric spreads and falls into perfect place. There are stripes and small polka dots, a chartreuse one with a coppery brown underside. All these umbrellas are solid, heavy, stately, and sell for around 200 euros (about ₹16,150) each. For a unique umbrella, a work of art, and something that will get you through every storm, the price seems reasonable.

I choose a royal blue- and gold-striped umbrella for myself, a sky blue flecked with red for my husband. Both are made with local chestnut, the canes showing off the whorls and gnarls. I can imagine navigating rainy streets beneath one of these umbrellas, can almost hear the sound of raindrops dancing across the top, and me safe and dry. As umbrellas around me turn inside out in the wind, as their flimsy metal snaps, I am practically singin' in the rain, owner of a magnificent one-of-a-kind umbrella.

The relentless heat and sunshine await me when I step back outside, but as a sign in Mario Talarico's shop reads, "Give yourself the gift of an umbrella! If it's not raining now... it soon will!" I can hardly wait. ●

# FOLLOW THE FLAMINGOS...

... EVEN IF THEY LEAD YOU TO THE URBAN JUNGLE OF DUBAI BY CHITALI PATEL

**A**winter trip to Sewri—a suburb in eastern Mumbai—to spot lesser flamingos, was an eagerly awaited family event, until we had to move to Dubai last September. At the Sewri mudflats, arriving early is the key to snagging a vantage point, or else you have to stand on tiptoes and crane your neck to get a glimpse of the magnificent birds over a multitude of heads. As I left my city behind, I rued not having watched my daughter squeal in delight as she peered at these pink beauties through binoculars. Little did I know that Dubai, a glistening metropolis, had a secret within its folds. If Mumbai's flamingos are flanked by the smoke-spewing chimneys of factories in the distance, the birds in Dubai can be seen against the contrasting backdrop of the city's jagged skyline. But therein ends the similarity.

While Mumbai's flamingos grapple with a bleak future, their counterparts in Dubai's Ras Al Khor Wildlife Sanctuary await a brighter one, owing to successful conservation efforts. In 2007, the sanctuary was internationally acknowledged under the Ramsar Convention, an intergovernmental treaty for the conservation of wetlands. Spread over an area of 620 hectares, the sanctuary consists of low-lying saline flats, intertidal and sand mudflats, lagoons and mangroves. Three bird reserves located at the fringe of the sanctuary draw thousands of visitors every year. Home to 450 species of fauna and 47 species of flora, Ras Al Khor's key attraction during the cooler months are the groups of greater flamingos that descend here. The sanctuary is an important staging ground or feeding and resting area for

migratory waterbirds along the East African-West Asian Flyway.

A viewing room, part of the sanctuary's two accessible stations equipped with binoculars, allows visitors to get close to the majestic birds without disturbing them. The sound of cars in the distance and the site of construction cranes in the background make the view jarring, but that much more special. Oblivious to the world around, the long-necked beauties gracefully dip their beaks into the shallow waters to feed on polychete worms and other invertebrates. Closer to sunset, rows of pink legs march towards the mangroves in the distance. Some, lazy to walk amidst the crowd, take flight, flapping their large wings. Yet others stay on for one last nibble, turning their heads with tiny pink eyes to survey the scene, before calling it a day. ●

KARIM SAHIB/CONTRIBUTOR/GETTY IMAGES

Greater flamingos take flight at Ras Al Khor Wildlife Sanctuary in Dubai.



# THE FOCUS



**62**

## NEW GREEK ODYSSEY

A son learns about home, heroes, and Hellenic heritage on a trip with his father back to their ancestral village. Plus: An insider's guide to the best of Greece





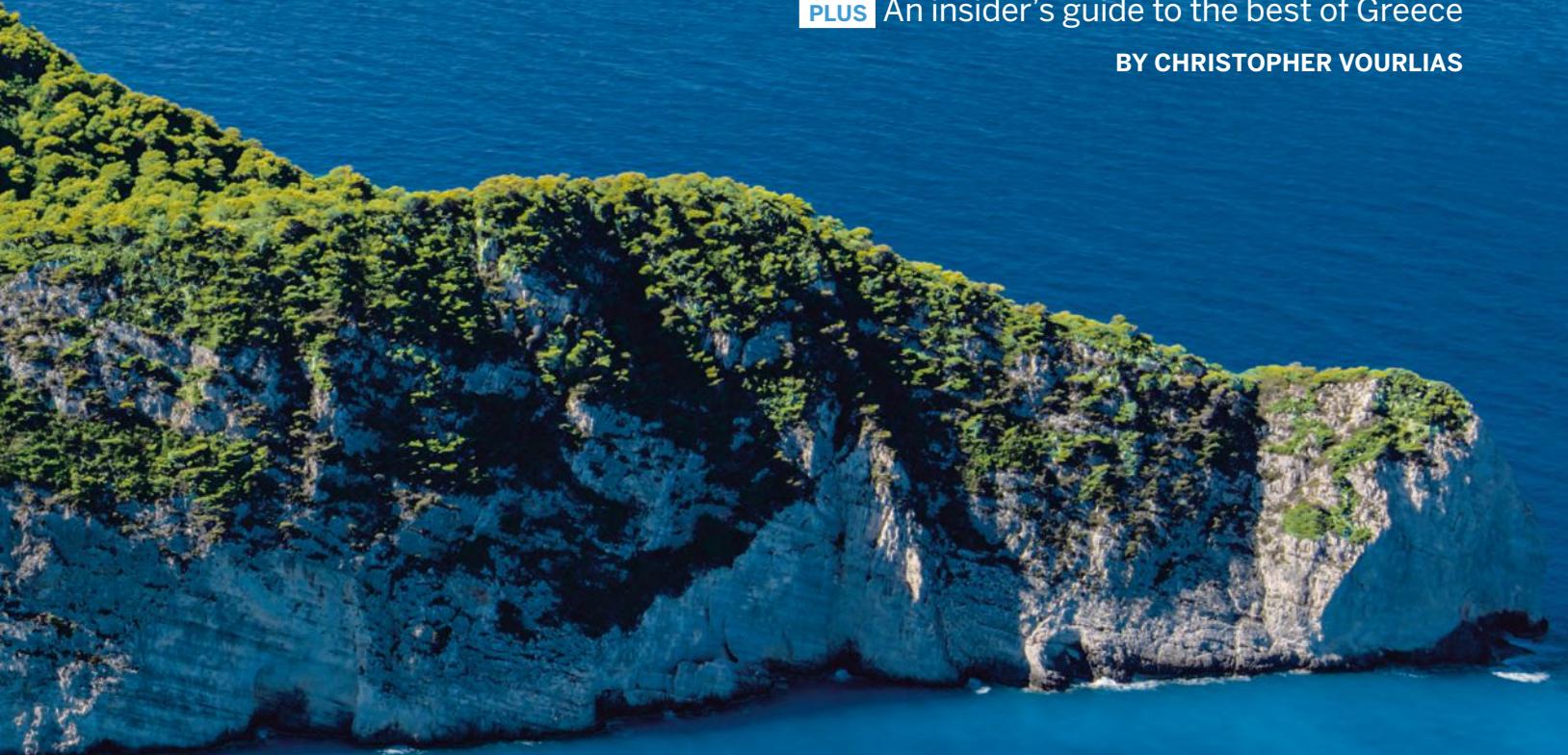
A modern-day Odysseus might never want to leave a spot like Navagio Beach, on the Ionian isle of Zakynthos, accessible only by boat.

# NEW GREEK ODYSSEY

What I learned about home, heroes, and Hellenic heritage on a trip with Dad back to our ancestral village.

**PLUS** An insider's guide to the best of Greece

BY CHRISTOPHER VOURLIAS



# J

The old man's up before dawn—trying, as usual, to get the jump on sunrise. I can hear him puttering around in the guest room, zipping and unzipping his suitcases in the manic, obsessive-compulsive routine I've witnessed since childhood. For as long as I can remember, my dad has been tight-fisted with time: hunched over maps on the kitchen table, tracing the route that might save a couple of minutes on the Garden State Parkway or bypass a bottleneck on the Long Island Expressway. Hardwired by immigrant thrift to wring every ounce of productive energy out of the day, he hoards his minutes and hours the way he used to clip coupons from the Sunday paper.

Two days after arriving in Athens, we're on our way to the Agrafa, a mountainous region at the southern end of the Pindus range that forms the spine of central Greece. The drive should take five or six hours, depending on the mood of both the rental car and the septuagenarian behind the wheel. A different man might've taken things at a leisurely pace: short cups of thick Greek coffee beneath the grapevines in my uncle's garden; fresh-baked bread from the *fornos*; heading north along the coastal road that hugs the Aegean, stopping for ice cream at a resort town packed with toy poodles and sun-flushed Bavarian tourists. But my dad's determined to make good time, even though 10 years into retirement, time is something he has in abundance. At the breakfast table he eats head down, elbows out, shovelling the food into his mouth like a condemned man with minutes to live.

The Agrafa is the place that made him: Buried behind its imposing peaks is the village of his birth. Geographically and temperamentally, the region constitutes a particular strain of Greek stubbornness. The mountainous hinterlands stretching north, toward the Albanian border, have resistance all but baked into the soil. During the 19th-century War for Independence they were the stronghold of the *kleftes*





The Sirens have nothing on the boys in the band when it's time for the annual *panegyria*. This traditional community festival celebrated in villages throughout Greece is pegged to a patron saint's feast day and is marked by music, dancing, feasting, and family.

ANDREA FRAZZETTA



With the Parthenon crowning the Acropolis above, visitors to Athens's Monastiraki Square browse market stalls for souvenirs.



(literally, “thieves”), bandits, and highway robbers who in turn became freedom fighters against the Turks. When Italian troops came marching down from the Balkans in the Second World War, it was my robust mountain ancestors who repelled them. (A short-lived triumph: Outraged by their ally’s humiliation, the Germans would send in their own occupying army, to devastating effect.) These are hard-nosed, hard-headed people. Stubborn, like my old man.

Almost every summer he returns to his *horio*, his village, to reminisce, rekindle old friendships, and nurse the grudges he’ll take back to his New Jersey retirement community, along with a deep farmer’s tan and several gallons’ worth of his cousin Spiros’s homemade honey. Part of my reason for coming to Greece is to better understand the place that shaped him, a man who’d get a root canal from a proctologist if the guy had Hellenic blood. But I also want to see if I’ll recognise something of myself in the toothless yokels I imagine to be populating the local tavernas. That is to say, if I’m indeed my father’s son.

I watch him loading suitcases into the trunk, tendons bulging on his muscular forearms. The breaths come out of his mouth in short, percussive blasts. I’ve seen paramedics rushing gunshot victims to the emergency room with less urgency. We pull out with a brief, ceremonial toot of the horn. My uncle doffs his Pebble Beach baseball cap and flaps it cheerfully into the wind. The GPS’s arrival time moves from 11:48 to 11:49. “We lost a minute,” my dad says, grimly staring ahead.

“TAKE GREECE AWAY FROM THE WORLD—all that they accomplished—and what’s left?” my father says to me, the car bolting past parched olive groves and fields full of dingy sheep. The implicit answer is unwashed Neanderthals keeling over in their caves. “If you look in the dictionary, all the diseases, they have Greek names,” he reminds me.

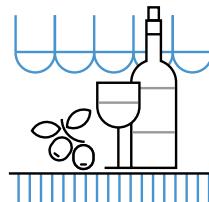
“Pop, I’m sure they could find other names for them,” I tell him. “In Latin, maybe.”

My dad thinks this over and gives a derisive snort. “Architecture!” he says. “Philosophy!”

The road climbs through the foothills. My dad turns to cast a long gaze across the Thessaly valley, broiling under the harsh summer sun. If anything, nearly half a century in the lap of American empire has only hardened my dad’s dedication to the *patrída*. Hellenic greatness, both real and imagined, is as much a foundation stone of Greek identity as Aristotle and the Acropolis, and close to a decade of economic free fall has done little to dent pride in this country as the fount of ancient civilisation. To be Greek is to be endlessly acquainted with that separation and loss. Like the feelings stirred by the melancholy light settling over the Mediterranean each evening, hearts here brim with bittersweet longing for something ineffable, just out of reach.

I crack the window to whiff the pine trees climbing the mountainside. Fifty years ago, when this was just a narrow, unpaved strip of gravel and goat excrement, my dad and his

Clockwise from top left: A Santorini stray; A plate of fried sardines at Babis restaurant on Aegina; Freshly caught octopuses in Santorini hung to dry for evening grilling; Sidewalk pastels on Syros.



## Best of Greece

### FOOD + DRINK

Meals in Greece start late—midnight appetisers, anyone?—and tend toward the long, loud, and unruly. Picture a happy commotion of small plates, spilled wine, and extra chairs marshalled into service for those tardy arrivals.

### ATHENS

#### Ta Karamanlidika tou Fani

Housed in a refurbished neo-classical building behind city hall, Ta Karamanlidika tou Fani is a riff on the traditional Byzantine *pastomageireio*, a boisterous deli cum taverna where shoppers can load up on cured meats, homemade sausages, and aged cheeses or else enjoy heaping portions of the same on the spot. Not to be missed are the house versions of *kavourmas*, a beef sausage pan-fried with spicy peppers and potatoes, and *sudjuk*, a Turkish sausage spiced with cumin and served in a tomato stew with a fried egg.

### VOLOS

#### Kavouras Tskipouradhiko

*Tskipouro*, a hard-edged Greek grape distillate produced locally in terrifying quantities, is roughly equivalent to downing a shot of scouring pads. The best way to seek out its elusive pleasures is at one of the dirt-cheap *tskipouradhika* near the Volos waterfront, such as Kavouras Tskipouradhiko. For the price of a minibar-size bottle of hooch, the mezes are free, whether stuffed grape leaves, grilled octopus, smoked mackerel, or *skordalia* garlic dip.

### SANTORINI

#### Selene

Tucked into the heart of Santorini’s wine country, Selene is Hellenic haute, with an inventive menu accompanied by a wine list that includes some of the island’s famous Assyrtiko. Go for Selene classics such as squid and fava risotto or shrimp ravioli in almond sauce.

### TINOS

#### To Thalassaki

To Thalassaki, in the island port town of Isternia Bay, is the sort of seaside taverna that pops up in the fever dreams of Mediterranean travel agents: The tables are crowded so close to the waterfront that a random wave might make off with the appetisers. The menu is full of local flourishes, like goat’s cheese with pollen culled from the island’s beehives. Hungry tourists have been known to take a speedboat over from neighbouring Mykonos, just for the cuttlefish risotto.

### THESSALONIKI

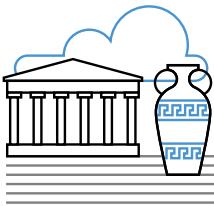
#### Sebriko

At Sebriko the food is priced for a cash-strapped clientele; many of the ingredients sourced from small, local producers can be bought off the shelves. Try the *spalobrizola* (flank steak) marinated in truffle oil.





The neighbourhood of Anafiotika feels like a quiet rural village, but it lies on the northeast slope of the Acropolis in buzzing Athens.



## Best of Greece

### HISTORY + ARTEFACTS

Travelling in Greece, you'll be reminded at almost every turn how much of Western civilisation was built on Greek foundations.

#### EPIDAURUS

##### Great Theatre of Epidaurus

The crisis might've bottomed out much of the Greek economy, but one of its most resilient sectors has been the theatre—a testament to dramatic traditions still trundling along since the days of Aeschylus. Pay homage to the art's ancient roots in Epidaurus. Built in the fourth century B.C., the site's amphitheatre overlooks a wooded landscape, with natural acoustics that would be the envy of today's most highly trained sound engineers. To visit during the summer's wildly popular Athens and Epidaurus Festival, it's best to book weeks in advance.

#### ATHENS

##### Agora

In its ancient heyday, the Agora was the heart of Athenian public life—an all-purpose space where locals voted in civilisation's first democratic elections, caught a play, debated the latest rumblings from Sparta, or listened to learned discourse from Plato. The ruins aren't Greece's greatest, but it's still stirring to stand in the very spot where a crude template of our own democracy first took shape.

#### CRETE

##### Aptera

"Ancient Aptera is the next big thing in Crete when it comes to archaeological sites," says the island's vice-governor for development, Dimitris Michalogiannis, of what according to Greek mythology was the scene of an epic battle between the Sirens and the Muses. The Cretan government is heavily invested in putting Aptera on the map, developing the site and adding events like last year's full-moon concert—the ancient theatre's first in 1,700 years. Cultural tourism in Crete is still dominated by cruise-ship crowds mobbing the Minoan ruins of Knossos, so you'd do well to visit Aptera while it's still largely undiscovered.

#### OLYMPIA

##### Stadium

The ruins at the site of the first Olympic games have been standing for 3,000 years. Yet wandering beneath the stone arch leading into the ancient stadium, I could almost hear the cheers of Greek nobles ringing in my ears.

#### EPIRUS

##### Oracle of Zeus at Dodona

The ancient Greeks considered Delphi the centre of the universe, but Dodona's oracle predates Delphi's by more than a thousand years. It's a spectacular site, ringed by mountains in the remote northern hinterlands of Epirus. Few tourists stray this way unless they get lost on their way to the famous, skyscraping monasteries of Meteora, but it's worth the detour.

brother would plod eight hours down into the valley and lead the family donkey to Karditsa, a clamorous town of tough market women and Gypsy traders that had all the charm of a Port Authority bathroom. It's an incredible story to hear—imagine my dad, with twin Volkswagens in the garage, with a generous pension plan, with a flat-screen TV that makes his den look like the control room at Cape Canaveral, urging on his jackass like a peasant in a Russian novel.

As a toddler, my dad was forced to leave the village while civil war decimated the countryside. Handling the perilous switchbacks leading to the horio, he tells me about the orphanage where he spent the war years, and the Communist guerrillas who kidnapped children and sent them to training camps in the Soviet bloc. He tells me about the death squads that roamed the villages, and the partisan betrayals that tore families apart, and the German withdrawal in 1944: a scorched-earth campaign whose atrocities are still bitterly remembered by the Greeks.

The longer he goes on, the more the Greece of my dad's childhood sounds like the fractured places I've encountered in my travels: Guatemala, Lebanon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I'm stunned by how little I knew about my father's country, and about his past. Somehow the dad who'd spent more than four decades rooted to the same zip code, toiling with clockwork precision season after season, had had one of the most interesting lives of anyone I knew. Why, I wondered, had it taken so long for him to share this with me? And why hadn't I ever asked?

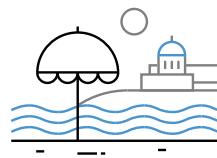
MY ANCESTRAL VILLAGE is about the size of a truck stop, no more than a couple dozen houses built along a scraggly hillside and ringed by peaks whose names my dad can't remember. Arriving on our cousins' doorsteps, we're welcomed with outpourings of rustic hospitality: fresh yogurt, homemade preserves, candied desserts made with fruits plucked from the orchards out back. When lunchtime comes, the tables are loaded with roast lamb, spinach pies, goat cheese, olives the size of a newborn's fist. The paradox about these rough mountain hinterlands is that, while among Greece's poorest, they've weathered the economic crisis better than most: Just about everything goes from farm to table in the span of 20 steps. The land is fecund, the gardens so abundant you just have to shake a few stalks for a hearty salad to plop onto your plate. As we leave the house of an old woman baptised by my grandfather, the village cantor, more than 70 years ago, she fills our arms with tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, figs. "*Ti allo theleis?*" she asks my father. What else do you want? Pausing outside, she stoops to pick two sprigs of basil and presses them into my hand.

The memories of my childhood visits come back to me. *Xenia*, that particular brand of Hellenic hospitality, is perhaps the essence of the Greek experience. It conjures images of joyful tumult, of feasts on saints' days, of reckless abundance. No wonder the philhellene bug bit so many generations of travellers. Lord Byron was a regular one-man chain gang when it came to clearing the scrubby fields of Greek provincialism in order to lay down the fertiliser of high romanticism. "If I am a poet," he declared, "the air of Greece has made me one."

## THE FOCUS

The Cycladic island of Milos is known for its fine beaches, including Sarakiniko on the northern coast.





## Best of Greece ISLANDS + BEACHES

Tourist arrivals in Greece broke records last year, and the tourism industry has almost kept the country afloat through nearly a decade of recession. If there's one thing the Greeks can brag about, it's the timeless pleasures of a Mediterranean summer.

### ATHENS

#### Apollo Coast Coves

Wised-up Athenians skip the city's price-gouging beach resorts in the summer and travel down the "Apollo Coast," where a series of hidden coves hugs the road between the resorts of Varkiza and Vouliagmeni. Here, the democratic right to sun and sea still applies. Do as the locals do: Park your scooter in a patch of shade, clamber down the hillside, lay your towel on a rock, and dive in.

### CRETE

#### Falasarna

The beaches at Falasarna lie along a remote stretch of coastline in the northwest of Crete, wedged in by acres of olive groves. There's a full-fledged archaeological site about a mile from the beach, where the sandstone towers and ramparts of an ancient settlement rise above the harbour. Head farther north to reach one of the most idyllic beaches in the Mediterranean, Balos, where white-sand beaches surround an impossibly turquoise lagoon.

### CYCLADES

#### Syros

Sure, it doesn't have the name-brand appeal of Cycladic neighbours like Mykonos and Santorini. But thanks to a large year-round population, Syros is lively and lived-in, and hosts an excellent film festival every summer. With Venetian-built mansions perched along the waterfront, Ermoupoli is one of the Greek islands' most atmospheric and elegant ports. The best of the island's beaches is at Kini, on the western shore, with a protected, crescent-shaped cove.

### HALKIDIKI

#### Sithonia

Viewed from above, the three-fingered Halkidiki peninsula looks like it's reaching into the Aegean to scoop up some soft, powdery sand. This is where Greeks from across the north flock for their summer vacations. There are miles of beaches to explore on the two fingers nearest Thessaloniki. Kassandra is the busier of the two—think thumping beach clubs and spring break-style all-inclusives—so rent a car and head to Sithonia, where you can pull to the side of the road and pitch a tent under the palms.

### PELION PENINSULA

#### Papa Nero

A mountainous, forested spit of land jutting out between the Aegean Sea and the Pagasetic Gulf, the Pelion might be the Greeks' best kept secret. For proof, head to Papa Nero, which has some of the widest, loveliest beaches in the Pelion, if not all of Greece.

Fine words, to be sure. But it's one thing to breathe Greek air and another thing entirely to have a Greek family. It doesn't take long for me to realise that behind the doors swung open by cheerful cousins are dark corners cobwebbed with village intrigues. At every house we visit, our relatives pour out their grievances: over backstabbing neighbours, or wily in-laws, or stingy cousins in far-flung provinces. My father soaks up these complaints like he's settling into a warm bath. Through the years he's rigorously catalogued the ways he's been wronged. Nothing seems to animate my dad like the sense that someone's played him for a fool, and here he finds an audience made all the more captive by the fact that they're likely to start gossiping about his own tight-fistedness as soon as they usher us out the door.

There's a single taverna in town, Voula's, which my father circles past every hour, looking for familiar faces. By late afternoon the tables are full of ruddy men shovelling back plates of bean stew and sausages; they drink prodigiously, shot after shot of village rotgut. Though most are old enough to collect whatever meagre pensions the government can still offer, they have a look of mountain vigour about them: strong hands, big appetites, laughter that rattles the roof beams. Judging by the empty carafes of moonshine soon cluttering the table, I suggest to my dad as we leave that we'd gotten on famously. His jaw tenses. "They all seem nice," he says to me, "but they're probably fighting like cats and dogs."

**SUNDAY MORNING.** Church bells are Dopplering across the valley. The morning's Byzantine church service, recited in its archaic, ecclesiastical Greek, has probably been performed without amendment since the Great Schism; we breeze through in time for the communion wine. Afterward, as the congregation gathers by the door, my dad slips on a pair of shades with the word "Ironman" branded on the frame. "When you go outside, you have to put your sunglasses on so they can't see your eyes," he says to me.

This isn't exactly how I'd pictured the week unfolding. Driving up from Athens, I'd imagined a triumphant return to a village I haven't seen in 30 years, when my brothers and I were pint-size celebrities—the little *Amerikanakia* in tube socks and short shorts, pumping drachmas into the arcade games in the back of cousin Pericles' store. But throughout the week we have to steer clear of certain homes. The enmities are, in the manner of most family dramas, timeless and of obscure origin. Zigzagging our way past his estranged sister's house one afternoon, I think about how every slight through the years has made its way into my dad's moral ledger. It's possible that what I'd imagined to be a personality tic is in fact rooted in the horio. To see him here, among the generations of grumps and grouchies who populate our family tree, is to recognise the source of a temperament as coarse as the Greek gravel crunching beneath our feet.

But I meet a different man here too, reminiscing over shots of cheap village hooch: an animated storyteller, hands shuttling the air in front of him, the way a weaver works his loom. All week long the stories come gushing out. My

Clockwise from top left: A server at Zampanó restaurant in Athens; View from the Acropolis; Cleaning fish on Aegina Island; Athens's Temple of Hephaestus, the Greek god of fire and crafts.



## Best of Greece

### CULTURE + PEOPLE

*Philotimo*, that indefinable Greek blend of duty, pride, and honour, can still be found in abundance, whether Greeks are thumbing their noses at EU creditors or opening their doors to refugees. So can *philoxenia*, that famous Hellenic hospitality.

### ATHENS

#### Art Galleries

For a few months in 2017, as Athens played host to Documenta, the prestigious contemporary art exhibition, you might've been understandably surprised to see Icelandic hipsters pedalling past the Parthenon and displaced Brooklynites thumbing through their phrase books for the Greek word for "kale." Although the exhibition came and went, it underscored the fact that Athens is having a moment in the contemporary art world. Particularly lively is the scene in rough-around-the-edges areas like Metaxourgeio and Kerameikos, thanks to pioneering galleries like Vamiali's, Rebecca Camhi, and The Breeder.

### EPIRUS

#### Zagori

Travelling north along the spine of the Pindus range, you'll eventually reach Zagori, a rugged, mountainous chunk of the Epirus region that borders Albania. The spectacular, UNESCO-listed Vikos Gorge—more than 10 miles long and roughly a half mile deep—is the main attraction, offering some of the best hiking in Europe, but the whole region is worth exploring. The landscape is cleaved by canyons and

dotted with traditional stone villages and centuries-old monasteries.

### SANTORINI AND CRETE

#### Wine Country

*Krasi* (wine) is a way of life in Greece, which has some of the most ancient wine-producing regions on the planet. The country's oldest and best known export, retsina, tastes to some palates like it might've disinfected wounds in the Peloponnesian Wars, but more sophisticated varietals abound. Visit Santorini to get a taste of its distinctive Assyrtiko: crisp, dry, acidic, with a mineral hint that conjures up the island's black volcanic soil. In Crete, head to the sprawling wine region around Heraklion to sample local varietals like the fragrant Vidiano, or Marouvas, a sherry-like red that is unique to the island.

### TINOS

#### Our Lady of Tinos Church

Wild, windswept Tinos is home to some impressive phenomena, but none more so than the pilgrimage to this famous shrine. Built around an icon said to have been revealed by a vision of the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Tinos is one of the holiest sites of the Greek Orthodox Church. Pilgrims travelling to Tinos to kiss the icon will drop to their knees just a few steps from the port, crawling along the length of a scruffy red carpet that, less than a kilometre later, ends at the doors of the church.





Typical Athenian street scenes include ruins like these near the Roman Agora, the main market during Rome's rule; Greek tavernas are communal spaces, perfect for a game of backgammon (facing page).

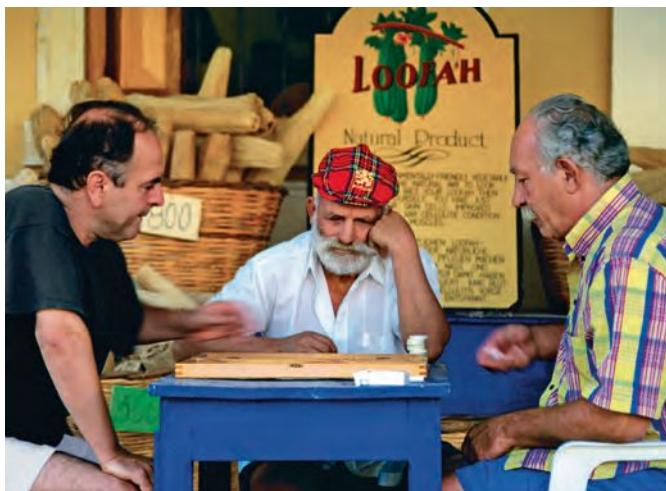
dad's face seems younger, bright-eyed and mischievous, transforming him into the village prankster of 70 years ago. "I remember..." he'll say to me, stopping outside an old stone house, a riverbed, a nondescript pile of rocks. The Greece that had always seemed as distant to me as the land of Homer and Sophocles comes alive in the horio, so that the sheep pens and poplars and homemade beehives remind me of a place I've always known. Even a language I can speak only in simple sentences sounds more fluid here, its very cadences stirring something deep inside the hippocampus. All of this, I realise, is part of my life's story—an inheritance that, much like my thinning hair, is scripted into my DNA.

One afternoon we climb the back roads to the village cemetery. The gate is loose and squeaks on its hinges. My dad swings it open with a disapproving grunt. He goes sloughing through the overgrown grass, pausing at each of the headstones to recite the names and deeds of the dead.

I stop to think about that summer night almost 50 years ago, when as a young seaman my dad decided to jump ship in Perth Amboy, New Jersey. Though in his telling he leaped headlong into his new American life that night, the truth is that a part of him never left the horio. He's been bound to this place by love and longing, no more able to shake it than he could the heavy, telltale accent that's stayed with him through the many years of his American exile. Somehow none of this felt so obvious before. I had to travel halfway around the world to meet my Greek father for the first time.

Tramping through the grass, I stop beside a grave with our surname chiselled into the headstone. Written in Greek, it's somehow both my own and something else entirely. Nearby two peroxide blondes are stooped behind a grave, rummaging through a wooden cabinet full of cleaning supplies. The tombstones are scrubbed down daily by widows and sisters and daughters who meticulously plump the plastic floral displays and tend to the brass lanterns, keeping their candles burning. My father says a few words to them and then introduces his American son. I don't catch their names, but I know they're family, still. ●

**Brooklyn-born and Athens-based Christopher Vourlias** is a freelance journalist specialising in African film and TV, travel writing, and narrative non-fiction.



## Best of Greece STAY + PLAY

### WHAT TO KNOW

Greeks can be smug about many things—this is the nation, after all, that brought you the word "hubris"—but the boasts about their Mediterranean climate are well deserved. Warm, sunny weather arrives in Greece as early as April and lasts into October, although you should avoid the peak summer months of July and August, when temperatures and prices soar.

The economic downturn has put a strain on many households, and the refugee crisis sadly shows no signs of ending, but travellers are rarely affected. Protests against the government are common—and strikes occasionally disrupt air and sea travel—but Greece is still a remarkably safe, easy, and friendly destination.

### WHERE TO SLEEP

If the rooftop views of the Acropolis—an olive pit's throw away—don't seduce you at *AthensWas*, a boutique hotel in the capital's historic heart of Plaka, then arty flourishes such as Le Corbusier armchairs and Jacob Jensen phones will do the trick (*athenswas.gr*). Visitors to Crete should skip the dreary resorts outside Chania and check into the Ammos Hotel, where traditional, whitewashed walls hide colourful and playful nods to contemporary design (*ammoshotel.com*). On Tinos, the family-run Crossroads Inn, in the hillside village of Tripotamos, gets high marks from guests for its seven self-catering villas built from restored buildings, including an old raki distillery. Ask for a tour of the vineyard run by the husband of the inn's proprietor (*crossroadsinn.gr*).

# THE ADDRESS

82

WILD THINGS

Glamping at the edge of Sri Lanka's Yala National Park means befriending the resident wild boar and tarantula



PHOTO COURTESY: WILD COAST TENTED LODGE YALA

# Life in Flow Motion



Cocktails and cruises make for an intoxicating weekend at The Park Baga River in Goa

BY POOJA NAIK



**I**t was a little past 6 p.m. as we set sail along northern Goa's Chapora River. Palm trees dotted the shore and ferries bobbed along the waves. I was on the Baga River Cruise, organised by The Park Baga River, the luxury boutique hotel I stayed in over a summer weekend. After settling into the ferry, I made acquaintance with the eight other travellers on board. Peppy music blared from speakers as platefuls of bruschetta and quiches did the rounds. The crew helped us to chilled beer bottles, while I indulged in a glass of *urange*, the hotel's signature cocktail made with the Goan urak, coconut water and orange juice. The cloudy concoction struck my palate with a pungent flavour, as a burning sensation glided down my throat, growing on me with each sip.

As the sun began to set, we made a quick pit-stop at an unnamed private island. The caramel sandy patch appeared sparse, but I was enticed at

the prospect of dining to the symphony of a warbling river. The sky turned from glistening gold to sorbet pink, mirrored in the river as we approached the shore.

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A delayed flight from Mumbai and an hour's drive later, I'd arrived in Baga at The Park Hotel's second Goan property earlier that afternoon. The three-storey facade of The Park Baga River stands amidst a quiet neighbourhood near Tito's restaurant on Arpora road. The strategic location offers two views—the Baga River and the village of Arpora, flanked by palm trees and colour-blocked houses, stretching beyond the hotel's suntrap pool. As I entered my river-facing suite, my eyes shifted from intricate patterns of Portuguese tiles at the entrance to an arresting yellow accent on the living room wall. I headed to the balcony, but the humid air made me retreat. A mural of a sunset by a beach on one of the bedroom walls



River-facing bedrooms (top left) lend a coastal charm to the property (bottom left); The ferry along the Chapora River is a swoony experience where you can sip on cocktails while watching pink sunsets (right). Facing page: The Park Baga River lies in close proximity to the famed Baga beach in north Goa (top); A tour of artist Subodh Kerkar's Museum of Goa is part of the activities on the hotel's roster. A collection titled 'Oysters on the Plate,' one of the exhibits at the museum, is about a cluster of seashells that was submerged on the ocean floor for six months (bottom).

interrupted the otherwise grey-and-white monotones.

At the resort, the days started early. I snoozed through alarms for an early morning yoga session by the poolside, but made up for it with a bicycle tour of the countryside, à la Alia Bhatt from *Dear Zindagi*. In the afternoon, it was time for a tour of the Mapusa market, 30 minutes from the hotel, in the town centre. Makeshift stalls lined the lanes, buzzing with customers sampling spices, dried fish, port wine and home-made bebinca. Most of my day was taken up playing the wide-eyed tourist through the market. It took a midnight walk through the old Latin Quarter, Fountainhas, for Panjim to reveal its more discreet charms. Old fashioned Portuguese homes stood along deserted lanes, swept up in a glimmer of dimly lit lamp posts.

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Meals at Saltwater, the hotel's in-house restaurant, were a festive affair. A

group of friends were the only other attendants apart from the lot of us. The Park Baga River, launched in January, also happens to be their first adults-only venture. "We're carving a niche for couples and honeymooners looking for a beach getaway," said Saurabh Khanna, a senior member of the property staff.

The chef had cooked up a gastronomic storm with dishes typical of Goa's Konkan, Catholic and Muslim communities. The spice-scented aroma got my appetite racing. I am partial to perennial Goan favourites *xacuti* and *vindaloo*. However, for this meal, I made an exception and gorged on *chicken cafreal*. I paired the cilantro and spice-infused curry with *poi*. The mildly sweetened loaf balanced the picante flavours of the green paste. Overwhelmed by the generous proportion, I was left with little room for dessert. Regardless, I gave into my sweet tooth and called for a serving of

*serradura*, which translates to sawdust in Portuguese. Sweet and crunchy, it is aptly named so for the fine crumbs of Marie biscuits layered with whipped cream. Retreating to my room later, I hung around in the balcony to admire the moonlit river. Sleep came easily that night. I departed from Goa the next afternoon.

As I passed by the bright hues of the coastal setting, it wasn't hard to guess why Mario de Miranda didn't have to wander far to seek inspiration. ●

## ESSENTIALS

The Park Baga River is located in north Goa's Baga region at a distance of 39 km/1 hr from Dabolim airport. The 28-room property also offers recreational excursions at an additional cost ([www.theparkhotels.com](http://www.theparkhotels.com); doubles from ₹12,000).

# WILD

## THINGS

Glamping at the edge of Yala National Park in Sri Lanka means befriending a resident wild boar and tarantula **By Kalpana Sunder**



**I**t's pitch-dark by the time I arrive at Wild Coast Tented Lodge, on the dramatic southern coast of Sri Lanka, seven hours from Colombo. I cannot discern much of my surroundings in the darkness, and peer at the board outside the restaurant:

"(The lodge) is not fenced off. Elephants, leopards, sloth bears, wild boar, crocodiles and other denizens of Yala National Park could enter the lodge... We request you not to walk around in the night unless accompanied by a staff member."

Wild Coast is situated in the buffer zone adjacent to the Yala National Park, a hotspot with one of the largest leopard populations. My temporary home is a glass-

fronted, cocoon-shaped tent that looks like a UFO which has inadvertently landed in the jungle. But look inside and you see that the lightweight structure of polyester has teak floors, porthole windows, slatted blinds and a distinctly colonial decor—four-poster beds, vintage-style trunks that double as mini bars, and leather planter chairs. But the show-stopper is the claw-foot copper bathtub in the bath tent, which was crafted in Jaipur.

Wild Coast's architecture strongly reflects its ethos of having porous borders, and blends seamlessly into its surroundings. As I walk out of my room through meandering tree-lined paths and aloe vera bushes, I see how tents are arranged in clusters. Each group



has a mossy water body at its centre, designed to attract wildlife. Some ‘cocoons’ face the beach and have private plunge pools, while the Family Cocoon Suite comes with an adjacent ‘urchin’ outside—smaller tents for children. The browns and the sepia in the decor mirror the craggy egg-shaped boulders and sand dunes outside.

The entire resort is laid out in the shape of a leopard’s paw. Luxury pampers in every corner, but the space is eco-friendly too. Use of stone and bamboo, solar power, composting of organic waste, recycling grey water, the way heat generated by air conditioners also powers the water heater—these details stay with me as much as the creature comforts I enjoy.

The centerpiece of the property is the restaurant, whose vaulted ceiling reminds me of a rustic cathedral. I’m told it was built with the help of local fisherman who wove the thick strands of bamboo for support. The rest of this open-to-the-elements space is crafted from tawny bamboo and teak shingles, and has a pebbly, sandy floor. From the restaurant’s open arches, white plumes of the crashing sea and the lawn with sun loungers and canopies are framed like an Impressionist painting. A free-flowing pool of salt water meanders through the restaurant and bar. I laze in the nearby library, browsing through hardbound issues of the National Geographic from the 1960s and ’70s, and coffee table books on tea, sipping on a divine concoction of mango, coconut milk and cinnamon from the bar.

Wild Coast is an unabashed paean to nature. The surf-lashed, boulder-strewn beach, the friendly resident wild boar that lounges on the lawn, the monitor lizard that slinks past you in the reception area are all reminders that you are part of the land. At dinner, a British guest suddenly shouts out that he has found a tarantula behind the cushion, which crawls on to his T-shirt before he dramatically flicks it off onto the sand.

Come sunset, the place acquires a magical look. Hurricane lamps light up the lawns, leading you to sundowners on the beach. The bamboo and teak domes loom like prehistoric monsters and the only sound is of the sea. I feast on Sri



Guests at the Wild Coast Tented Lodge near Yala National Park live in cocoon-shaped tents (facing page) with a distinct colonial feel (top right); Meals at the resort are a mix of modern and local cuisine such as Sri Lankan rice and curry (bottom); Elephants and crocodiles teem in Yala, but its main draw is the stealthy leopard (top left).

Lankan rice and curry with an assortment of vegetables and salads, from piquant cucumber and dhal to curries cooked in creamy coconut milk, and okra stew.

I am often tempted to linger in the library or loll on the sun lounger, but Wild Coast is dedicated to safari experiences. One afternoon, a group and I set off into Yala. The ranger in our vehicle, Pratibha, has a deep, abiding love for wildlife and the country; she has climbed Adam’s Peak 18 times and though she has a degree in I.T., she followed her heart and trained as a naturalist. She engages Sam, an 11-year-old American in a fun way—discussing leopard sightings and jungle fowls, and pointing out bee eaters and painted storks.

We drive on bumpy trails through scrubland, ironwood and tea trees, and rocky monoliths interspersed with brackish water bodies. Kingfishers swoop down in the waters; egrets plod in the mud flats. Yala National Park unfolds in cinematic splendour before our eyes—mongooses slink past, cheeky macaque monkeys swing from branches, jungle fowl dart across the path and a herd of wild elephants trample through the bushes. We watch out for the elusive leopard without luck. The last morning I flout the cardinal jungle rule—I oversleep and miss my safari call. I later learn that my group spotted two leopards, one of which was stalking a buffalo. But I have no regrets. As I leave the camp after a puja ceremony with the staff for the Sinhala New Year, I know I have experienced a place close to Sri Lanka’s heart. ●



## ESSENTIALS

Wild Coast Tented Lodge, a Relais & Châteaux property, lies adjacent to Yala National Park, about 230 km/7 hr southeast of Sri Lanka’s capital, Colombo. Cinnamon Air flies from Colombo to Hambantota airport, which lies 60 km/1.5 hr from the lodge ([www.resplendentceylon.com/wildcoastlodge-yala](http://www.resplendentceylon.com/wildcoastlodge-yala); tents from \$600/₹41,350 per night, inclusive of all meals and beverages including select spirits and wines, in-room mini bar, one daily game drive, limited laundry, Wi-Fi, taxes and service charge).

# Monks IN THE MIST



Three monks gather around the entrance of The Tamara Kodai, the Tamara group's newest property in Kodaikanal, Tamil Nadu. The dark marble figures stand in communion, their figures denoting peace, reflection, meditation. The statues pay tribute to the monks who used to live in the older avatar of this building on St Mary's Road, built in the 1840s as the Baynes Bungalow. Originally owned by a British district judge, and sold and renovated in 1860, the building later emerged as La Providence—a rest house for priests from Nagapattinam.

The handcrafted statues, designed by the property's architect Mahesh Iyer, speak to history but have a modernist aesthetic; they are abstract, without faces. If they had them,

they might proclaim the surprise of these early inhabitants of La Providence, who would never have dreamt of such luxury, let alone a temperature-controlled pool that allows its occupants to swim in the cool Kodai mist. With its 53 plush suites, The Tamara has used about eight acres of prime land to create a landmark resort in the Western Ghats.

The aesthetic is simple yet impressive. Sleek, wooden Indonesian furniture, railway sleepers forming the entrance to some of the rooms, elegant drapery, and large, graceful exteriors—the place is full of classic, old-world charm. A restful pastel green features in all the signage and the fortitude of stone is showcased wonderfully throughout the property. The high-ceilinged lobby, full of spacious fireplaces,

# An upmarket addition to the scenic Kodaikanal, The Tamara Kodai showcases history, comfort and architectural elegance

BY RAJINI GEORGE



The resort rooms are spacious and comfortable, with wooden floors, room heaters and minimalist interiors that work well in Kodai's cool climes (left); The placid Kodai lake is located close to the resort (right); Built in the 1840s, the building that houses The Tamara Kodai (facing page) has seen its share of makeovers. At present, its 53 plush suites sprawl over eight acres in the Western Ghats.

gives way to conference rooms, restaurants, and a halcyon pathway, bordered by cottages.

The rooms, at about 450 square feet (all luxury suites, superior luxury suites are slightly larger), are comfortable and spacious—a partition separates the living room from the bedroom when you want to retreat. With its wooden floors, room heaters and traditional yet minimalist interiors, this is the kind of space which works best in Kodai's cool climes. Tranquil watercolour paintings depicting local scenes decorate the walls, and each room opens out to a verandah, where you can sit and watch the inevitable afternoon rain. The daybed is another charming feature, the perfect spot to curl up and read, and a writing desk offers space for work or reflection. All that's missing is a yoga mat and turndown service with verses from Rumi.

"We wanted to create a space in Kodai for the luxury traveller", says Tamara Leisure Experiences' CEO, Shruti Shibilal. "La Providence seemed to have it all—a rich history, a unique experience we could offer our guests, a diverse flora and fauna in the surrounding Shola forests, staggering views

thanks to its elevated vantage point, easy accessibility and the space to expand." The group is one of the most ambitious operators in Kodai's small but burgeoning hotel scene, and has multiple properties operating and in development across South India.

The property's biggest draw for locals is the rustic wine cellar and its multi-cuisine restaurant, Bistro 1845, which is scheduled to serve alcohol soon, says The Tamara. La Providence, the stunning dining room, features formal table settings, framed vintage prints and a centrepiece made up of a few dozen atmospheric lamps—a beautiful modern take on the chandelier. When we visited, it was filled with an uncanny chanting that evoked the history of the building (a recording, the staff told us, but the effect was surreal). The walls of this building are skilfully renovated to retain the look of the original, though the decor might feature one antique telephone too many.

Among the standout dishes here are *ennakathirakkai*, or eggplant simmered in a tamarind-tomato gravy; hearty mutton *shorba* (served elegantly in a cast iron pot whose soupy



contents are poured over flavourful morsels of meat); jungle curry, an oriental medley of baby corn, chicken and bamboo shoot; and Stuffed Mushroom Kumbh, in a sinful north Indian-style gravy. Everything from local Dindigul cuisine to Italian and Malayali fare is on offer on this menu, probably the most diverse variety on offer in Kodai. While some of the dishes on the menu (such as the risotto) weren't available, this can be put down to the minor teething issues that mark the outset of any new venture. The service, too, needs some fine-tuning, but the staff are wonderful and warm, many of them from nearby areas.

Situated outside but at walking distance from the hubbub of the centre, the resort is close to both the central Kodai lake and some of the town's green spaces. It is a veritable oasis

in what has become a noisy, over-crowded town during the months of April-May every year. Kodai may follow the lost parades of Shimla, Nainital and Ooty, if measures to limit footfall and pollution are not taken.

There are few things as surreal as staying in a hotel in your hometown (I grew up here). What is special about The Tamara is that it truly makes you feel like you are elsewhere; both visitors and locals will feel transported. This, after all, is the ultimate goal of a hotel. Especially memorable was the sensation of being in open water in a cold place and not freezing! Add to this the easy access to hiking I took the trail to Vattakanal, a half hour walk with flying squirrel spottings, and lazy, purposeless walks within the property. Resorts tend to parachute into small towns. Many prefer boutique hotels when it comes to authenticity, but they don't always acquire the critical mass necessary to survive. This is a venture that appears to be trying to integrate with the surrounding township, and not just in the painstaking restoration of the building it began with.

While the standards it brings to the cosy hotel scene in Kodai are wonderful, it remains to be seen if The Tamara will implement the many programmes it has in mind, around garbage management in the vicinity and entertainment programmes incorporating the customs of Kodai's indigenous people. The signs look promising. ●

## ESSENTIALS

The Tamara Kodai is located in Kodaikanal, Tamil Nadu, and is a 3-hr drive from Madurai airport and 4.5-hr drive from Coimbatore airport ([www.thetamara.com](http://www.thetamara.com); doubles from ₹19,840).

Kodai's quaint but colourful character is reflected in old buildings like the Sacred Heart Church (top) and its misty groves of mountain trees (bottom).

# THE DESTINATION



JOHN HENRY CLAUDE WILSON/ROBERT HARDING/GETTY IMAGES

**94**

## THE BALLAD OF BANARAS

A first-timer in the holy city traces classical music in four cosy cafés

**88** WEST BENGAL: LAZARUS BY THE RIVER • **100** ONE TRACK MIND: MARATHONS AROUND THE COUNTRY

**104** SEEKING THE SUFI SOUL IN HYDERABAD • **110** IN KERALA, AN ANCIENT ART OF HEALING

• **114** IN HAMPI, PARTS UNKNOWN





# *Lazarus by the River*

STORIES OF A  
COLONIAL PAST  
AND BENGAL'S  
INTELLECTUAL  
RENAISSANCE ARE  
GETTING A NEW LEASE  
OF LIFE IN THE PORT  
TOWN OF SERAMPORE

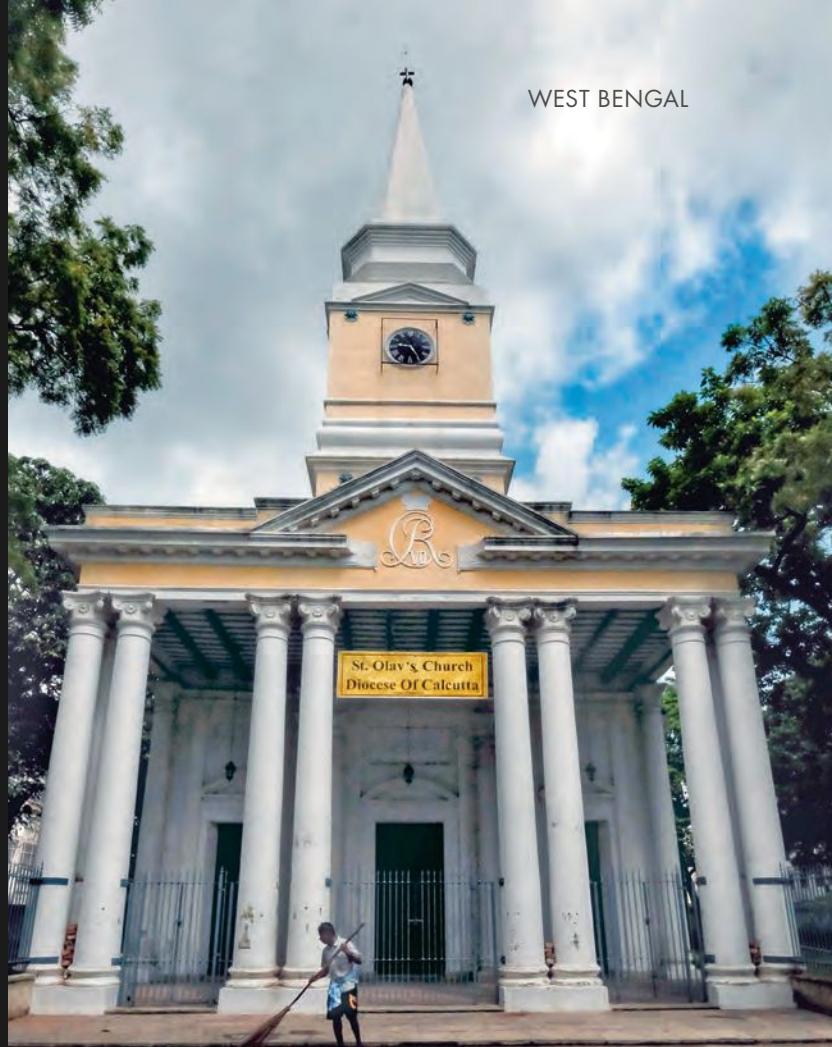
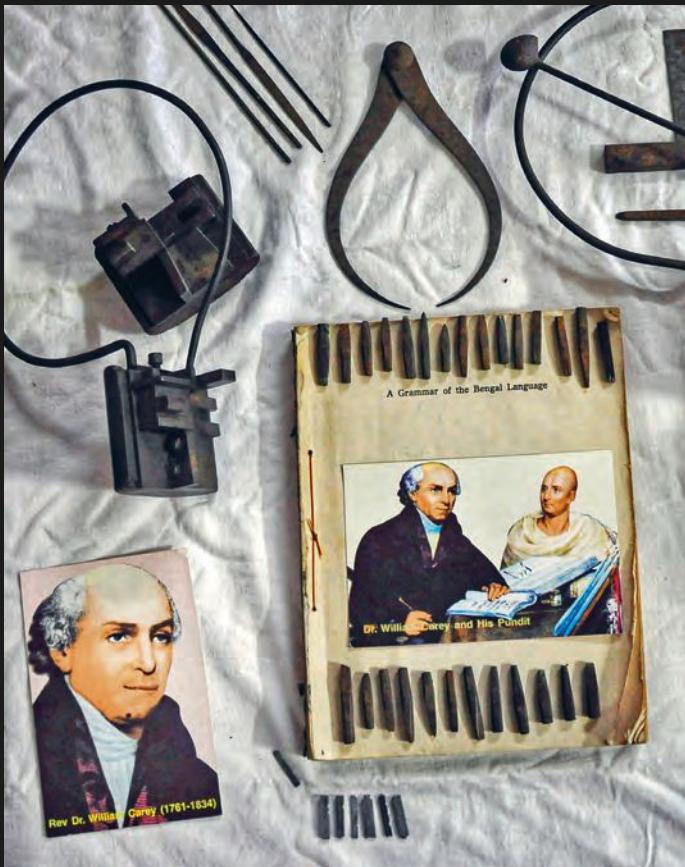
Text &  
Photographs By  
Kounteya Sinha



A former Danish and British colonial city, Serampore (or Srirampur) is a historical treasure trove. It was once known as the cradle of the Bengal Renaissance and the state's intellectual movement. The Bengali font type was invented here and one of the state's first local language newspapers published here. The looming mansions, heritage institutions and a 300-year-old Durga Puja tell a story of aristocracy, culture and erudition. Today, thanks to Danish restoration projects, an active interest in revival and the camera lens of the Bengali film industry, the city is making a comeback.



The fervour of India's freedom movement still hangs heavy in Serampore. The walls of buildings here, including children's hostels, flaunt motifs of revolutionaries such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Bhagat Singh, and scenes of anti-British protests and public executions of freedom fighters.



One of the five Brahmin families invited by the king of Gaur to settle in Bengal were the Goswamis. The wealthy family settled in Serampore and even offered to buy the then Dutch colony of Fredericksnagore, from the Danish crown for ₹11 lakh. The Danes refused and in 1845 sold Serampore to the British East India Company for ₹12 lakh. The Goswami's story lingers in their sprawling aristocratic home, or *rajbari*. Today, a section of the *rajbari* is a kindergarten school called Bunch of Flowers (Opening Spread); Serampore's Panchanan Karmakar and Gadadhar Karmakar became sought-after men in the late 1700s. They created the first Bengali types, which were used to print Nathaniel Brassey Halhed's *A Grammar of the Bengali Language*, published in 1778 (top left). English missionary William Carey, who started Serampore College in the 19th century, also printed Bengali translations of the Bible with their help. The brothers later created metal types for 40 languages including Arabic, Persian, Marathi, Telugu, Burmese and Chinese. Today, seventy-year-old Biman Mallick, a descendant of the brothers safeguards the fonts along with the tools used to print Halhed's book and old manuscripts (bottom left); Dating back to 1806, St. Olav's Church, or the "Danish Church," is one of the most significant relics of the Danish era. While the church bells no longer chime, one of them has the inscription "Frederiksvaerk 1804," indicating it was made in a Danish iron factory. A conservation project funded by the Danish Ministry of Culture, which won the 2016 UNESCO Asia Pacific Heritage Awards, is helping restore the building that was used by the local congregation for years before it shut its doors to protect the interiors.



Seventy-two-year-old Malati (top), who came to Serampore from her village in Andhra Pradesh four decades ago, still holds on to some things from her hometown, like her elaborate gold nose rings. She worked at the historic Unique Lodge for about three decades and many locals know her as *buri ma*. An interest in reviving the dying architecture and heritage has led to old families opening up their homes to visitors and the 150-year-old Unique Lodge (bottom) is one of them. Interestingly, its name comes from a “unique” architectural feature: four pillars holding up a front balcony, an element novel to the time it was built in as special permissions were taken to construct pillars on a public road since Serampore had no pavements. Built by local Raj-era philanthropist Durga Prasanna Bhattacharyya, the house is a treasure trove of stories and memorabilia, such as a rare collection of marble statues, porcelain artefacts, Burma teak furniture and clocks.





Brightly painted motorboats (top left) ferry passengers to the city on the banks of the Hooghly River. Travellers can also rent an entire boat for an hour and sail past ancient riverside mansions. The promenade in front of the Danish Tavern (bottom left) is popular among young couples. The recently restored 235-year-old tavern houses a café, handicrafts shop, and hotel, courtesy a project by National Museum of Denmark, the State Heritage Commission, and the non-profit heritage conservation organisation INTACH. At the 400-year-old Goswami rajbari, family descendant Debajyoti Adhikary still offers prayers at the Radha-Madhab temple (bottom right). Apart from the setting of 2012 Bengali film *Bhooter Bhabishyat*, the mansion is famous as the venue of a 300-year-old Durga Puja, one of Bengal's oldest. A 100-year-old English cottage piano (top right) graces the *notun sadar*, where Satyajit Ray and Sir David Ezra once sat, in 76-year-old Padmimi Bhattacharya's home. The granddaughter of Dr. Charu Chandra Chattopadhyay, after whom Kolkata's Charu Market and Charu Chandra College are named, owns a prized collection. Amongst them are dog show trophies—the family imported dogs from Britain. ●



THE DESTINATION

A FIRST-TIMER IN THE HOLY CITY GETS AN INTIMATE TASTE OF ITS CLASSICAL MUSIC TRADITIONS IN FOUR COSY NEIGHBOURHOOD CAFÉS

TEXT BY CHANDNI DOULATRAMANI  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY HARRY BOEKI

# The Ballad of **Banaras**



Uttar  
Pradesh



UTTAR PRADESH



At the Brown Bread Bakery,  
Anshuman Maharaj and  
Ram Mishra entertain patrons on  
the sarod and tabla respectively.

# In Banaras, music is everywhere.

It trickles out of the gently lapping waves of the Ganga, from the city's 84 *ghats* and the chaotic streets choked with autorickshaws, motorcycles, cows; and from the ancient houses that have accommodated generations of musicians. Hindustani music is one of the city's most time-honoured traditions; chances are there's an exponent in nearly every family. For the aficionado versed in every alap and raga, Banaras offers abundant cultural enrichment, from the Sankat Mochan Music Festival and Dhrupad Mela to Ganga Mahotsav, which are among the more popular concerts held here. But to the uninitiated listener, these gatherings could feel daunting and even monotonous. Not to mention, tickets to the more high-profile evenings sell out in advance.

During my maiden trip to the city a few months ago, I was struck by how steeped its classical music culture was. I was sojourning there as a volunteer, helping curious backpackers navigate their way around. On many of my aimless walks through its winding gullies, I acquainted myself with the city's cafés that always seemed to be teeming with tourists.

For a newbie, these are ideal venues to experience classical music. Amidst a steady throng of hippies and hipsters, most cafés offer intimate live music evenings for free. The musicians here are more accessible, the small venues are informal and exude the feel of your own private concert.

## Ganga Fuji Restaurant



**P**eople come to Banaras because it's old and that's the charm. Nobody wants to see new things here. So we give our guests a taste of old Hindustani classical music," says Kailash Prajapati, owner of Ganga Fuji restaurant. Its homely vibe derives from a cosy set-up consisting of a basement arrangement that accommodates guests and a mezzanine floor that turns into a makeshift stage for two musicians.

Along the white-tiled walls of the café are framed

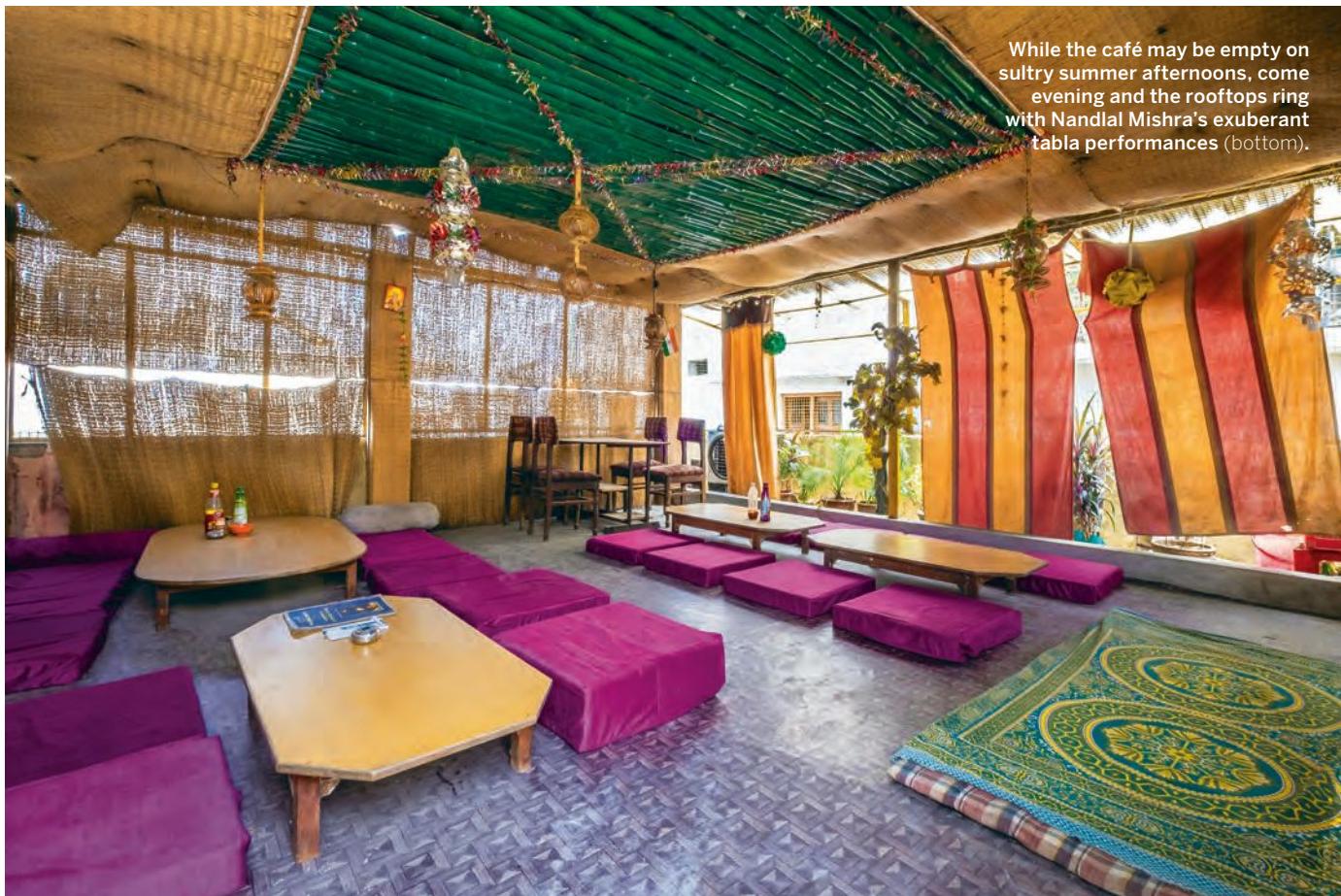
paintings of Banaras with notes from travellers. Prajapati, 55, started the café in 1988 and two years later, it was hosting daily live Hindustani classical performances. One of the Ganga Fuji's two stars is Bipin Mishra, 65, who has been playing the tabla here for 22 years. Mishra's family has a longstanding connection to the café as his older brother performed here before him. Flautist Pandit Anil Prasanna, 35, is his compadre in daily musical endeavours. The latter has been performing here for five years. Prasanna and Mishra hail from families devoted to music and seamlessly incorporate the orthodox with the new. Their repertoire includes ragas like Shivranjani, Rupak, and Pahadi. Listeners who can catch Prasanna's plaintive rendition of

"Aaoge Jab Tum" from *Jab We Met* are in for a treat. Ganga Fuji's popularity with Western tourists is well known. It is reflected in the food, which includes Spanish and Japanese fare—some are recipes shared by visitors from these countries. Try the *egg yakisoba* (stir fry soba noodles with egg) and *om rice* (omelette and fried rice, topped with ketchup). Prasanna and Mishra, too, contribute to the cultural mash-up, often training westerners in classical music when they are not belting out the high notes.



D 5/8, Vishwanath Galli, Kalika Galli, Lahori Tola (Near Kashi Vishwanath Temple); 9839614340;  
open 8 a.m.-10.30 p.m.; live music 7.30-9 p.m.

# Monalisa



While the café may be empty on sultry summer afternoons, come evening and the rooftops ring with Nandlal Mishra's exuberant tabla performances (bottom).

**O**pposite Brown Bread Bakery is one of the oldest cafés in the Bengali Tola neighbourhood. Sheetla Prasad Upadhyay, who often lures passers-by to Monalisa with his sonorous "namaste," started the restaurant-bakery in 1994. Between 1997 and 2005, he organised musical evenings at a nearby temple. After that stint ended, he stopped coordinating concerts. But in a bid to continue what he started, he introduced daily Hindustani classical performances at Monalisa last year.

"Music breathes life into my café," says the 68-year-old. Percussionist Nandlal Mishra plays the tabla, the sitar and the flute. A musician since childhood, the 40-year-old started playing regularly at Monalisa only a few months ago. With three young kids to raise, Mishra says the gig here helps him with a small income and Upadhyay treats him with respect, which he values more than the money. Mishra is the fifth generation of percussionists from his family. "Who cares about music these days? This

art form is slowly dying. Musicians have to play anywhere nowadays to make a living, and, even if that doesn't come by, this is at least some form of practice," he says.

Every evening, the café reserves its rooftop space for Mishra's stylings. Visitors relax against snug purple mattresses, lit by amber bulbs, in an atmosphere tinged with the fragrance of sandalwood incense. Audience sizes don't matter to the musician; he wishes for more rapt ears though. "I left school quite early. I am where I am only because of my *riyaz*," says Mishra.

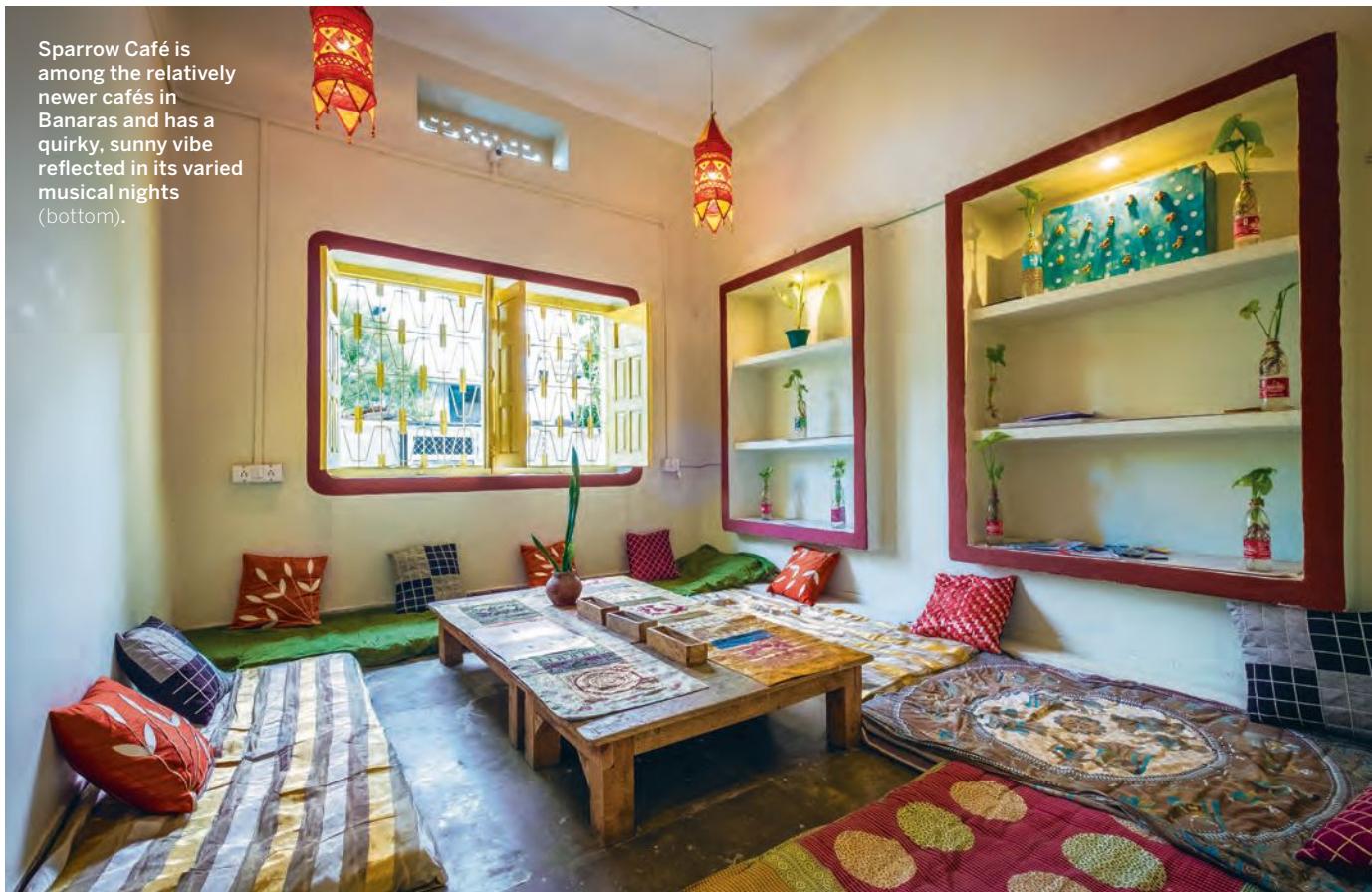
To ensure the proceedings never sag, he keeps his playlist versatile—pure classical renditions mingled with bhajans and ghazals. The best moments in his day are when he can immerse himself in Teentaal, a taal that he believes listeners enjoy for its simplicity. Monalisa is a Banaras fixture and the perfect spot to watch the city's ambling rhythms. The menu is hearty and homely with staples like apple pie, Korean kimchi fried rice, and wood-fire pizzas.



Bangali Tola Road, Pandey Ghat; 9451557533; open 7.30 a.m.-10.30 p.m.; live music: 7.30-9 p.m.

# Sparrow Café

Sparrow Café is among the relatively newer cafés in Banaras and has a quirky, sunny vibe reflected in its varied musical nights (bottom).



**S**parrow Café feels inviting at the very first glance, with soothing off-white walls, upholstery in quirky ethnic prints, and a spacious front porch. It has also adopted a unique approach to live classical music by crowdsourcing some of its performances. Unlike other cafés, the roster of artists here is dynamic. Musicians can either collaborate with local artists or independently perform at the café. In addition to this, there are henna art workshops, experimental gigs, documentary movie nights, and painting workshops. Artists typically take centrestage in the foyer of this bungalow-turned-eatery. “These events become a place for people to interact and make new friends,” says 28-year old owner Sakshi Shrivastava, who did her masters in international business from Banaras Hindu University (BHU).

What will also please bohemian souls is Sparrow Café’s food, especially the vegan options such as coffee with fresh coconut milk, and falafel served with hummus and tahini. On a regular basis, a set of 11 musicians perform here alternately,

about five times a month. These performances are usually planned around auspicious Hindu days such as *Ekadashi*, *Purnima*, and *Ram Navami*.

One of the 11 regulars here is flautist Mohan Dubey, 26. Dubey comes from a family of doctors, lawyers, and engineers but his interest in music led to a detour and he trained in the Prasanna gharana of vocal music. The youngster has also studied the Vedas from BHU. Now he offers lessons in flute and the Vedas to those interested.

Although entrenched in the Indian classical milieu, Dubey also feels at home with western classical music. “Local visitors love the Indo-Western fusion style of music while foreign tourists prefer pure Hindustani classical because of its novelty,” he says.

Dubey has a penchant for preceding his acts with ceremony and his enthusiasm for setting the stage sometimes supersedes his performance. “I can play an alap for five hours, without even hitting the first note of the raga. I am quite happy with that,” he says.



Assi Ghat Road, Near Dumrao Park Road; 7080453798; open 7.30 a.m.-9.30 p.m.; live music 7.30-9 p.m.

# Brown Bread Bakery



Eleven years ago, Michael Schmid, a German, hosted a handful of local artists in his organic café as an impromptu gesture. Since then the music has never stopped. The BBB's daily evening concerts are as integral to the establishment's appeal as its selection of in-house bread and organic cheese, sourced from all over India. Schmid moved to Banaras from Berlin in 2002 and set up the café in 2005. In its current avatar, the BBB is a three-storeyed guest house with an indoor café on the ground floor and one on the rooftop. For the last seven years, visitors frequenting the café are treated to the enchanting *jugalbandi* between Anshuman Maharaj, 32, and Ram Kumar Mishra, 34. Maharaj plays the sarod while Mishra accompanies him on the tabla. Maharaj, a seventh generation practitioner of the Maihar, Seniya and Banaras gharanas, has played across India and Europe, while Mishra, from the Banaras tabla gharana, belongs to a

lineage with 14 generations in music. Artists from prestigious gharanas don't typically deign to perform at cafés but for Maharaj, it is a form of riyaz. "We love playing for audiences who understand Hindustani classical, but it's more fun to introduce it to first-timers, especially foreign tourists," says Mishra. Both men enjoy improvising, depending on the nature of the audience. Connoisseurs will be pleased that they know their way around a Charukesi or Puriya Kalyan raga but the musicians are not averse to modern influences. If the occasion demands, they can just as easily switch to songs from *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, complete with Hindustani inflections. At heart Mishra, who also plays the *mohanveena* and the *pakhavaj*, is a purist. But Maharaj has convinced him to give up some of his strictures and play lighter tunes. "I had to force Ram to play here because he's such a purist, but I think he enjoys it now," says Maharaj taking a friendly jibe at his friend. ●



Sonarpura Road, Pandey Ghat, Bangali Tola; 9838888823; open 7 a.m.-10 p.m.; live music 7.30-9 p.m. All proceeds from the café go to Badi Asha, a non-profit run by Schmid and his life partner Nicole Seregni.

# One Track M I N D

A TRAINING GROUND WITH A VIEW—SIX MOUNTAIN  
GETAWAYS FOR THE RUNNING ENTHUSIAST

By Shrenik Avlani



**I**ndia's rich geographical diversity means there's always a hill station relatively close from any big city. Not only are they ideal spots for a short trip away from the everyday hustle, these picturesque high-altitude towns can be the perfect training ground, whether you're a newbie attempting your first 10-kilometre race, an ultra-marathoner going for a 100-mile race, or anything in between.

## **Lonavla and Kamshet, MAHARASHTRA**

Apart from being conveniently close to both Mumbai and Pune—two cities where running communities are quite big—Lonavla and Kamshet are also relatively free from the pollution and traffic that is a regular feature of the cities. The Western Ghats are cool but not as much as the hill stations of the north, so early-morning or late-evening runs are ideal.

The comparatively cooler climes of the Western Ghats attract running enthusiasts from the city. In fact, in Lonavla, you might bump into model-turned-fitness evangelist Milind Soman. Veer away from the main roads and turn to trails around Rajmachi Fort or Shirota Lake to avoid tourists who throng the place on weekends.

If Lonavla seems too crowded for your liking, drive about half an hour east (towards Pune) to Kamshet and Pawna Lake. The tar road up the hill and through the villages or the muddy paths around the lake where paragliders learn to fly from October to April makes it a picturesque setting for runs.

**Watch out for** Tourist cars and cabs on main roads.

## **Coonoor, TAMIL NADU**

Iten, in western Kenya, is considered prime training ground by many distance champions. Back home, however, most of the country's elite runners head to Coonoor. At about 6,000 feet, the sleepy town's rolling hills and gentle slopes are just right for runners of all abilities.

Running in Coonoor comes with stunning views of lush tea gardens while evergreen trees line several stretches of the road providing shade from the mild afternoon sun—temperatures rarely go above 25°C during summer afternoons here. The green cover shelters an array of local fauna and it is common to spot deer, boar, rabbits or even bison.

Apart from the well-known Sims Park and Bedford Circle, one rarely encounters crowd or traffic in Coonoor—it remains far enough (about 35 kilometres) from the humdrum of Ooty. For a moderate to long run, take the road from Orange Pekoe resort in Kotagiri to Sims Park. The 21-kilometre route passes through a football field and cricket ground, and

a few local villages marked by a cluster of homes that seem to disappear behind the towering trees when you turn to look back at them, before snaking past the Highfields Tea Factory. For those who fancy a longer run, the route continues beyond Sims Park and past Coonoor Club. It cuts through a scenic golf course before leading to the cantonment area of Wellington. One of the most beautiful sections of the track is a three-kilometre uphill stretch flanked by towering eucalyptus trees along a reserve forest from the gated community of Drummmela to the Bandisholai bus stop.

For a break from training, pack a picnic and head to Emerald Lake, Lamb's Rock or Dolphin Nose, or drop by the Open Kitchen for their scrumptious pizzas.

**Watch out for** Bison, as they tend to wander into fields and roads early in the morning to look for food. Avoid running in the dark.

## **Yelagiri and Javadhu Hills, TAMIL NADU**

What a difference few hundred feet of elevation makes. The Yelagiri and Javadhu (or Javadi) hills—about three hours by road from both Chennai and Bangalore—provide much-needed

Ruins of Lohagad Fort, Lonavla



relief from the year-round heat and humidity of the plains

About 60 kilometres apart from each other, the ghats of Yelagiri and Javadhu have rich forests with hiking and trekking trails, waterfalls and camping spots spread out over the hills for miles. Not only does that make it ideal for runners of different capacities, there is little vehicular traffic, and the elevation also means that except peak afternoon, the weather is cool. Running through these hills are red mud trails that often cut between villages and paddy fields.

Though not marked, it is not difficult to find these routes. At Javadhu, narrow trails branch out from either side of Jamunamarathur Main Road towards Vaniyambadi from Athipet village. The trails on the right take you to the village of Erukambatu, about 25 kilometres away, with everyday rural scenes, and smiling locals greeting you at intervals.

Starting from the YMCA or the town centre at Yelagiri will lead you to courses that crisscross through fields of green paddy, and past big and small lakes including the Yelagiri Lake.

Yelagiri and Javadhu are fast becoming favourites with runners who look for alternatives to tar roads—the scenery of forests and pastoral life makes for a good vacation spot as well.

**Watch out for** Monkeys along some trails. Do not feed or get too close.

## Mashobra, HIMACHAL PRADESH

When you are done with Delhi and the city's traumatic traffic snarls, head straight to the hills and don't stop until you get to Mashobra. Though close to Shimla, it is still far enough to stay away from the chaos that is now a permanent feature of Himachal Pradesh's capital and largest city.

These Himalayan slopes are not as kind as the western and southern mountains, and some climbs can knock the wind out of even the best runners. Trails of black clay soil are peppered with black and slate rocks, and the beauty of the landscape lies in the stark nature of menacing cliffs with dark rock faces.

If you are not familiar with running on such trails, take it easy at first—the steep climbs and thin air need some getting used to. Purani Koti is a good starting point for some of these inner routes, and the area is perfect for an introduction to the terrain before you proceed to uphill trails at nearby Kachha Pani for some tough-love training. From Purani Koti, a 25-kilometre stretch passes via Ghorna and leads to Baldian, while an 18-kilometre route runs via Zero Point to Baikali. The flat expanse of Baikali is great for speed training before heading back to Purani Koti. The rigorous nature of the training is what really helps when running here.

Delhi-based entrepreneur, ex-army man, and one the top-ranked amateur triathletes in the 45-50 age category in



Early morning at Coonor;  
Hiking in Mashobra (top).

India, Arun Malik comes to Mashobra very often. He usually stays at the Khanabadosh homestay, which caters specifically to running enthusiasts and athletes coming to Mashobra to train.

"I have been training here for Ironman. The altitude as well as the weather conditions are perfect. There are enough trails for adequate hill training as well as flat stretches, which you will not get in mountain regions anywhere else," Malik says. When the top dog puts it like that, why argue?

Don't forget to sample the piping hot parathas at almost any roadside joint.

**Watch out for** Loose soil or rocks.

## Narkanda,

### HIMACHAL PRADESH

Also close to Shimla (about three hours by road), and set amidst apple orchards, emerald slopes and deep woods, is the town of Narkanda.

In the winter months, a layer of snow blankets it all but the mild summer has ideal running temperature. The burst of red proliferating the green, thanks to blooming rhododendrons, only adds to Narkanda's charm.

Only an occasional truck or car zooms past on the highway and main roads here, so running along these routes—exercising caution of course—is a plausible option and can make for a moderately taxing course. To up the difficulty level, take the smaller unmarked village roads—dull lines of ochre slicing through swathes of green—many of which lead to gurgling streams after passing along sharp drops and climbs of the Kotgarh Valley.

On your day off, visit the lake at Tanni Jubbar or trek up Hatu Peak to see the popular Hatu Mata temple. You could also just simply sip a cup of chai or slurp on some soupy Maggi at one of the stalls while looking out at the sunset.

**Watch out for** Some vehicular traffic on the main roads. Despite being fairly remote, there are some trucks and cars that drive through Narkanda. Run in the day and be alert.



Schoolchildren in Mirik (top); Running through village trails in Yelagiri (bottom left); Hiking in Narkanda (bottom right).

## Mirik,

### WEST BENGAL

A slight detour from the popular eastern Himalayan vacation town of Darjeeling will take you to Mirik. Compared to the northern Himalayan slopes, the ones here are more gentle and blanketed in tea estates. The lakes and brooks punctuating the topography is Mirik's special offering.

The easiest and most convenient running route in the quaint hill station is the one around Mirik Lake, while the more adventurous trails go down to Marma Valley from Mirik. One of these passes through an orange orchard and the village of Gopaldhara before running through a tea garden to finally end in the valley. If you wish, you could also go to Kurseong, about an hour's drive away, and explore the trails there.

Mirik Lake is a good spot to visit when you're not training as well and the nearby market has stalls selling plates of delicious momos and thukpa.

**Watch out for** Tourist vehicles in certain stretches. ●



THE DESTINATION

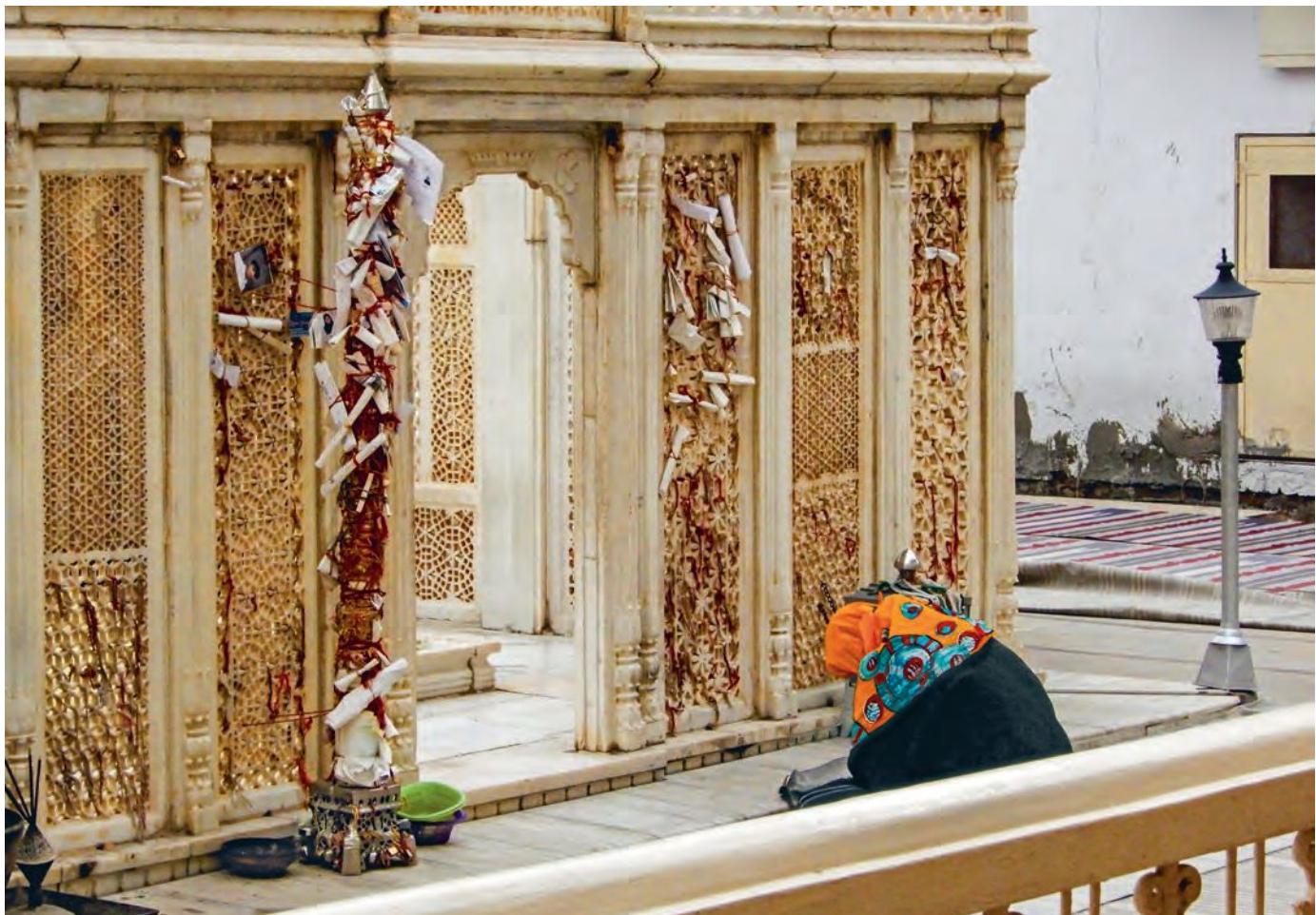


# *Seeking the* **SUFI SOUL**



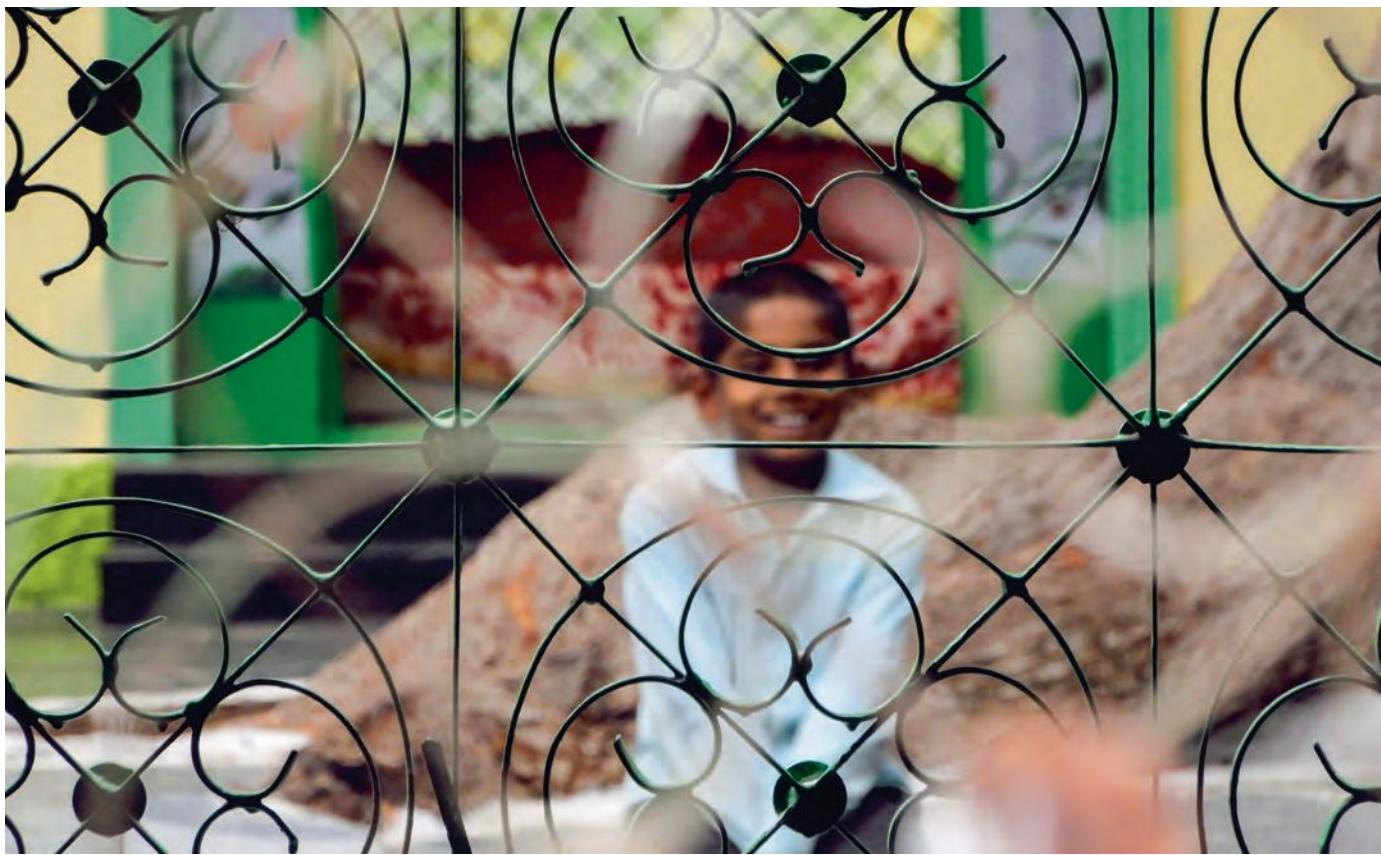
*Past the glass and chrome of modern Hyderabad, lies a city that owes much of its character and charm to the Sufi saints who settled here centuries ago. Following the Sufi trail in old Hyderabad unearths a side of the city filled with blooming flowers, historic tombs, and a wealth of stories*

## TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALI ABBAS AHMADI



The story of how Sufism originated in Hyderabad often varies from legend to legend. According to the caretaker of Pahadi Shareef, the shrine of Hazrat Baba Sharfuddin Sohrabandi, near Hyderabad airport, Baba Sharfuddin was instrumental to its proliferation. He arrived in Hyderabad in 1190, years before the city was officially founded in 1591. Among the Sufi dargahs, spread across Hyderabad today, the Hazrat Shah Muhammad Hasan Sahib Qibla in Aghapura, or Agha Dawood Saheb as it is locally known (facing page), is one of the most picturesque. It has been maintained well enough to retain its old-world splendour, evident in intricate woodwork and geometric patterns on the pillars, reminiscent of Kerala's Chettinad temples. Inside, the dargah is lit with many-hued chandeliers, including a 150-year-old Baccarat piece, and its interiors feature intricate zari and silver work; Shaikh Ji Hali Abul Ulai migrated to Hyderabad from Rajasthan at the age of 14, and is believed to have started the Sufi tradition of qawwalis during the reign of the third Nizam of Hyderabad. A mausoleum of Makrana marble was built over the grave of the revered saint after his passing in 1817. A devotee prays outside the main shrine at the dargah of Shah Mohammed Qasim alias Shaikh Ji Hali Abul Ulai, in Urdu Galli near Pathergatti (top). Women are typically not allowed in the inner sanctums of most shrines. Devotees clamour to leave behind souvenirs of their prayers: hall tickets, passport photos, visa applications are fastened everywhere in the sanctum. Urdu Shareef, as it is locally known, is also one of the few dargahs in the country that celebrate the festival of Basant Panchami.

■ THE DESTINATION



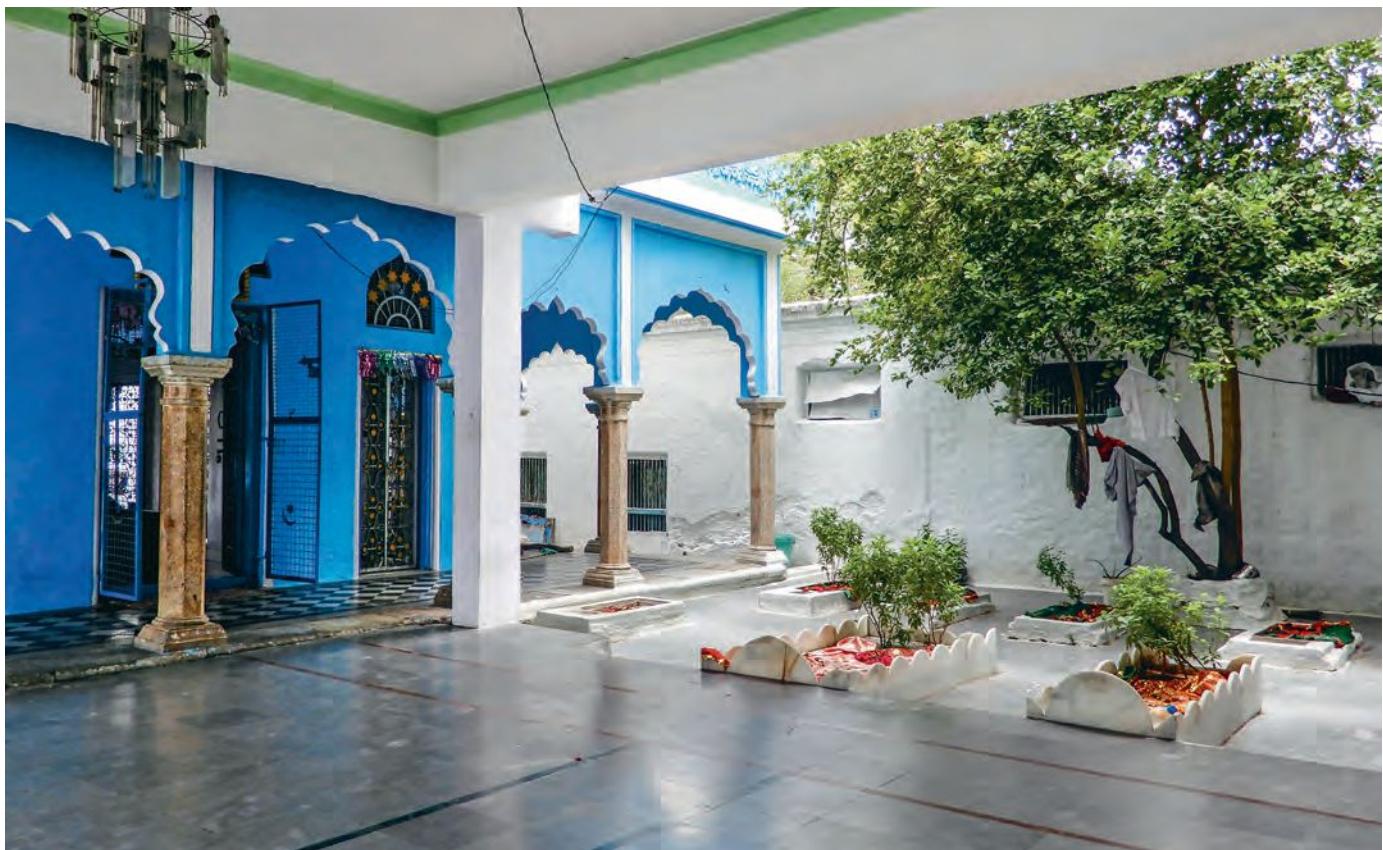
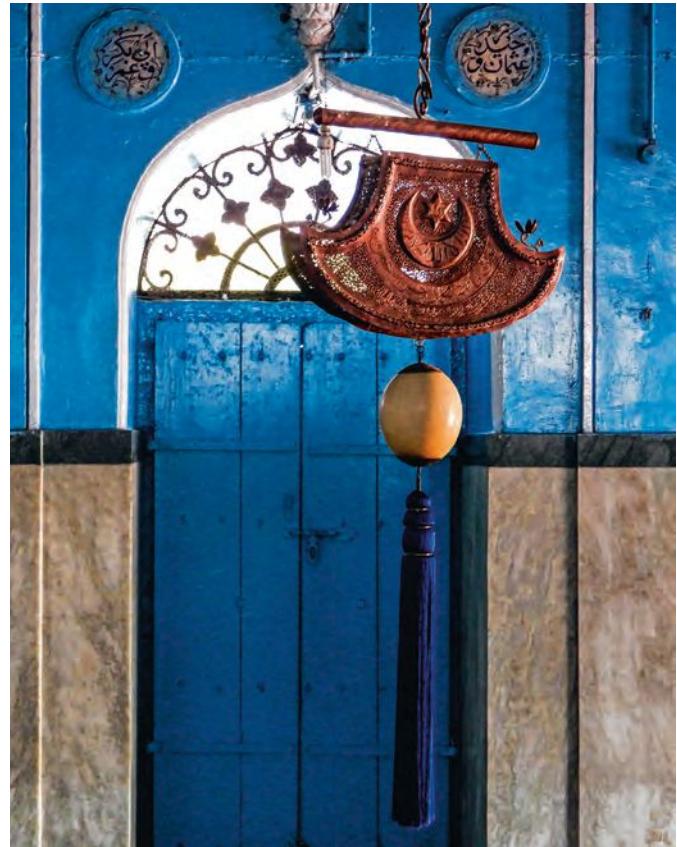


The story of two brothers Yousuf Baba and Sharif Baba is linked to Hyderabad's history. According to oral histories, it was with the help of these two, who were commanders in the Mughal army, that Aurangzeb captured Golconda Fort from the Qutb Shahis. Dargah Yousufain in Nampally is their resting place—one of the most popular of Hyderabad's dargahs. Outside it is also a bustling bazaar where pendants of Allah are sold alongside those of Superman and Batman (top). The brothers reappear in the story of Barhane Shah Sahib, who was a saint in Hyderabad during Aurangzeb's seige. His dargah in Santosh Nagar has a special place in the community (facing page, top). In Urdu, *barahnaa* means nude and the saint famously never wore clothes. However, the day the conquering army entered the city, Barhane Shah Sahib put on his robe—as a mark of respect to the piety of Yousuf Baba and Sharif Baba; The Sufi lineage (*silsila*) traces itself back to the son-in-law of the Prophet, Hazrat Ali. On the city's northern fringe, beyond Secunderabad, lies Maulali (facing page, bottom), a dargah atop a hill that is believed to contain the handprint of Hazrat Ali himself, and possess healing properties, making it a popular pilgrimage site. It is easy to reach the location by road, but be prepared to climb the 300 steps to reach the dargah and take in the stunning view. As an essential part of Sufi rituals, devotees offer flowers to the shrines, and sellers throng the area around dargahs, including the shrine of Hazrat Khurshid Qadri (R.A.) in Ramnas Pura (bottom). While the dargah may not be in the best condition at present, the disciples of Shah Raju, as he was affectionately called, included Tana Shah, the last king of the Qutb Shahi dynasty.





The dargah of Sufi saint Hazrat Mirza Sardar Baig Sahib (facing page) is in the Aghapura district of Hyderabad. Sardar Baig migrated here from the Afghani town of Balkh, which was also the hometown of the Sufi saint and poet Rumi. Aghapura is home to a number of shrines. Some, including the dargah of Sardar Baig, have delicate lattice work windows and white domes that almost melt into the sky. While the exterior of the dargah is a pale-white, often appearing a light blue on cloudy days, the inside is painted in a warm, welcoming shade of blue. Above the grave of Sardar Baig hangs an ostrich egg, a familiar sight in various Sufi shrines. The eggs are a symbol of rebirth and purity and have been used for centuries in mosques and burial grounds (top). It is common to find graves of disciples close to, and sometimes, in the same burial ground as the shrines of the saint. The hope is that the saint intercedes on their behalf in afterlife; Hazrat Sultan Ali Shah Bukhari, a disciple of Sardar Baig's, is buried in a mausoleum right across the street (bottom). The warm blue interior in Sardar Baig's dargah is mimicked in that of his disciple's. Sufi saints have left their mark on Hyderabad, right from the conquest of the city by the Emperor Aurangzeb. Today, people can visit these shrines, dotted across the city, for free. The bigger ones sometimes host qawwali nights on Thursdays, which can go on till the wee hours of Friday morning. However, if you ask passers-by for directions, not all of them will be able to help. Luckily though, most dargahs can be mapped via Google Maps. While many of these markers have faded with time, the ones who look past the chrome of the city can still find themselves in thrall of the mystical Sufi legacy. ●



■ THE DESTINATION



# THE ART OF ANCIENT HEALING

AT KAIRALI, THE AYURVEDIC HEALING VILLAGE IN KERALA, ANCIENT SCIENCE AND NATURAL BEAUTY HELP  
HEAL FRAYED BODIES AND MINDS **BY ARUNIMA MAZUMDAR**



I wake up at the crack of dawn and grabbing my yoga mat, head to the tennis court-turned-yoga podium. Several people have already assembled and are following the yoga teacher's movements. With morning lethargy seeped deep into my being, I join in—reluctantly at first, but slowly surrendering to the serene setting. We're facing east, so the rising sun warms our faces and the birdsong fills the air. Soon, I am doing the Bhujangasana like a pro.

An hour later, fully awake and with a post-workout high, I feel fresher than ever. Most of the feeling is attributed to where I am this morning—amidst lofty coconut trees and nature brimming with exuberance, I have switched off my mobile data and begun to slow down. A quick shower later, I am ready to start my day at Kairali, the Ayurvedic Healing Village.

Tucked away amid the winding lanes of the sleepy town of Palakkad in Kerala, Kairali, at first glance, comes across as a striking luxury resort. However, it is not just a retreat but a recognised healing centre and hospital. While some guests are here for serious treatments like pain management, digestive disorders, and skin diseases, others indulge in general rejuvenation therapies and wellness programmes. Patients come here from around the globe. Kairali is sought after for treatments of arthritis, skin diseases, stress-related illnesses among other things and every person who comes here is prescribed a certain diet and medication by the in-house doctors.

Spread over its 60-acre area are cottages designed according to Vastu Shastra and keeping in mind astrological components, which means that your cottage will match your birth star—it is believed to restore an individual's curative powers. Inside every room, a Valampuri conch is strategically placed to induce positive vibrations. Acupuncture slippers, yoga mats, and little jars full of Ayurvedic toiletries, including dental powder, shampoo and body wash from Kairali's own cosmetic shop, grace the bathroom shelves. Outside, the private porch is ideal to curl up with a book and take in the sights and sounds of the lush grounds, the stream that runs through the property and melodious chirping.

Meals at Kairali are served in the



**Days at Kairali usually begin at the crack of dawn with group yoga sessions (facing page); While treatment packages at the Ayurvedic Healing Village include daily traditional massages, the hot-oil therapies are often also prescribed as part of the healing (top). A stream dotted with lotus flowers runs through the expansive property.**

dining hall located at the centre of the property, next door to the library. Most of the produce for all their meals comes from a farm, just a 10-minute walk away. I meet Gita Ramesh, Managing Director of The Kairali Group for breakfast at this adjoining farm, "We are the only ones in the Ayurvedic healing industry who have a hospital licence," she tells me over an elaborate spread of freshly cut guavas and pomegranate, jugs of fresh papaya and watermelon juice, the Kerala breakfast staple of *puttu kadala, idiyappam* with *avial*, a mix vegetable preparation, and coconut water to wash it all down.

"We grow all our fruits and vegetables here and try not to source anything from the markets. Currently, we have 42 different kinds of fruits. There are also vegetables like pumpkins, spinach

and a variety of gourds, along with spices and herbs. We've just started keeping bees too," she adds while handing me *The Ayurvedic Cookbook*, a book she has authored.

Mrs. Ramesh went on to explain that the farm-to-table approach that Kairali adopts is not just a recent culinary fad, but an almost 5,000-year-old Ayurvedic concept that stresses on consuming freshly made food using fresh ingredients. Refrigeration, unfortunately, is a necessary evil and it takes away the nutritive value of the cooked or uncooked food that we eat today. "Following Ayurvedic routines like oiling your body, and exercising the body and mind, are very essential to keep the mind, body and soul in unison," she emphasises.





The grounds of Kairali are lush, and a walk around the property or simply curling up with a book outdoors, is an experience in itself (top left); Following a farm-to-table concept, most of the produce and ingredients used in meals is grown in Kairali's own nearby farm, which also has a beekeeping facility (top right); Palakkad's verdant landscape (facing page) is the ideal setting for the sprawling 60-acre property of Kairali.

Hunger satiated, I take some time to learn about the food I was gorging on. Every dish is carefully prepared to complement the Ayurvedic treatments. While the use of spices—mostly cumin, turmeric and coriander—is understated, the flavours are enhanced by generous use of coconut in all forms along with freshly ground black pepper. The curries and vegetable preparations are served with fibre-and-magnesium-rich red rice, which is excellent for

preventing migraines and osteoporosis, and lowering blood pressure.

It may sound grim but that's far from true. The simple food is delicious and the assortment, tempting. From the choice of soup—baby corn, spinach, or spring onion and dal—to the vegetable of the day—snake gourd curry, cauliflower *bhajias*, colocasia masala, brinjal curry, coconut-milk based mushroom *mappas*—there's something new every day. Unfortunately, the



concept of evening tea or coffee doesn't exist here but I find that during my stay, I have happily replaced my nicotine and caffeine addiction with a ritual of sitting back and sipping coconut water.

After a sumptuous lunch of pumpkin coriander soup, and mix veg *thoran* with *chapatis* and rice, I gear up for my appointment with the doctor. The cottages and green, open spaces of Kairali might be part of a hospital where hundreds flock to receive holistic treatment, but nothing looks or smells like hospitals usually do. In fact, my doctor's appointment has me feeling quite kicked.

I am meeting the chief physician and the most senior doctor here, 80-year-old T.R. Chandrasekharan, who is respected and loved by all and sundry. He checks my pulse and analyses my *prakruti* or the physical and mental constitution of a person, and recommends a few dietary supplements. Meanwhile, my masseuse, Rekha, is waiting for me to begin her glorious hot oil Abhyangam. A resident of Palakkad, she has been with Kairali for seven years and within the first few minutes of meeting her I feel like I am in the hands of an expert. She has with her an assistant and it is only when they begin the massage that I realise the need of a secondary masseuse.

For the uninitiated, Abhyangam is a hot oil (medicated with herbs) synchronised massage, which means both Rekha and her assistant's hand movements are synchronised on my body. Up and down, round and round, up and down again. This is done to ensure that each body part gets evenly massaged and the blood circulation remains uniform. The massage is

followed by a steam bath in wooden cabins and a shower with *uptan* (a concoction of curd, ground lentils and turmeric used as body wash) and herbal shampoo.

The massages last for about an hour (including steam bath and shower) and usually take place during mid-mornings. And relaxing is an understatement. It feels as if every nerve in my body has been touched and made alive, such is the effect. The lunch that follows a massage is normal—dal, rice, vegetables, curries—unless you're here for treatment. Evenings are generally free except for the one-hour meditation class.

The languid pace of the day is a

welcome change from the frenetic city life where breakfast often becomes lunch, lunch becomes an evening (fried) snack, and midnight cravings end the cycle. Not here, though. It's hard to notice the changes in one day but as the stay progresses, I find myself less attached to my phone. Email notifications are on hold and Instagram stories no longer matter. The silence is welcome and so is the buzzing of crickets. My daily post-lunch siesta on the hammock surrounded by coconut groves makes me realise the importance of slowing down. For a change, I don't want to do anything—read, talk, browse, or even think. I want to unwind by simply being in the moment. ●

## THE FARM-TO- TABLE APPROACH IS NOT JUST A RECENT CULINARY FAD, BUT AN ALMOST 5,000-YEAR- OLD AYURVEDIC CONCEPT



## ESSENTIALS

**Getting There** Palakkad is 50 km/about 1 hr by road from Coimbatore airport and 140 km/2 hr from Kochi airport. Palakkad Junction railway station is well connected to major cities.

**Best time to visit** Kairali receives visitors throughout the year, but the cooler winter months of Nov-Feb are the best time to visit. Monsoon (July-August) is also considered a good time, because according to ancient Ayurveda traditions, the weather opens up the pores of your skin, making the therapies more effective.

**Accommodation and treatment** The cottages are divided into four categories—Deluxe, Classic, Royal and exclusive Maharaja suites. Therapy and treatment packages range from 3-21 days and begin from ₹30,480. This includes double occupancy accommodation, all meals, consultation with an Ayurvedic doctor, one Ayurvedic treatment a day, a lifestyle evaluation session, and complimentary yoga and meditation sessions.

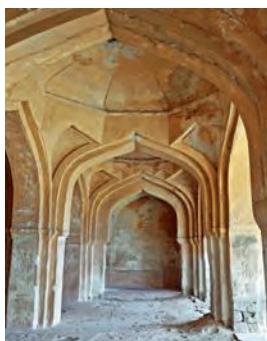


WANDERING OFF THE BEATEN PATH WILL LEAD KEEN-EYED TOURISTS TO SOME HIDDEN ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURAL TREASURES IN THE BOULDER TOWN  
**BY BASAV BIRADAR**



# Hampi:

## PARTS UNKNOWN



The more famous sites of Hampi include the Vijayanagar ruins (facing page, left), the Bhima's gate, which has lovely carvings (bottom left) and the Hazara Rama Temple (top left) but there are a few nameless monuments to be found here also, some of which are mosque-like structures (middle left) with arches.



In the last 10 years that I have been visiting Hampi, I have learnt one thing—any attempts to experience the entirety of this medieval city in one trip is futile and bound to leave you exhausted. You have to let it grow on you. It is a relationship which needs to be nurtured. Every time you think you have seen enough, it teases you with new revelations and intrigues you to plan another visit.

It is no surprise that most scholars and travellers interested in demystifying Hampi have been visiting the place for several decades. Although my relationship with Hampi hasn't been as long, it is now my quest, to see, experience, and attempt to understand almost all of the ruins of this capital city. Ahead of the monsoons this year, my visit was triggered by learning of the existence of few monuments along a two-kilometre-long offbeat trail. Last year, I had also chanced upon large prints of Alexander Greenlaw's photographs of Hampi from 1856 in the office of the Deccan Heritage Foundation.

It is well known that the ancient kingdom of Vijayanagar was at war with the Muslim sultanates of Bijapur, Ahmednagar, Golconda and Bidar from the time of its founding in 1336 till the defeat in 1565. But perhaps a lesser known fact is that the need to strengthen the cavalry meant that a number of horsemen were enlisted by Vijayanagar, and most of them were Arab-Muslims. Eminent historians say that a large number of them—native and immigrants from Central Asia—were employed by the kings. This is confirmed by reports of early foreign visitors and also the presence of several Islamic quarters in the city. These horsemen rose up the ranks in the famed army and held important positions. Today, ruins of some of the structures hinting at the presence of Islamic noblemen remain. Hoping to see this magnificent chapter of history in person, I embarked on an overnight bus from Bengaluru to Hampi.

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**I** remembered to pack A. H. Longhurst's 1920s publication *Hampi Ruins Described and Illustrated* along with John Fritz and George Michell's famous guidebook to the city. In the footsteps of Colonel McKenzie—the amateur antiquarian of the British Empire who was the first one to survey the ruins of Hampi and create a map in 1799—I intended to stay in the island of Anegundi, the base for his explorations. I took a state-run bus service from Hospet to Kamalapur, and after a short tea break and a bargaining exercise, hired an autorickshaw to the Talarighatta riverbank.



An eight-minute boat ride later, I reached Anegundi. I got in touch with my local friend, apprised him of my plan for the day and asked him to arrange an auto for me. Prabhu, the auto driver, picked me up from the riverbank and thus began our adventure.

Our first stop was the Talarighatta gateway, a two-storeyed structure in the erstwhile fortification on the public road from the riverbank to Kamalapur. I remembered Alexander Greenlaw's famous photograph of this gateway—one of the sixty views of the Hampi ruins he photographed in 1856—and

tried my own hand at recreating the shot. Some portions of the upper chambers of this gateway have survived the test of time and revealed the remains of what once was beautiful artwork in lime plaster. While the gateway itself was made of stone slabs supported by lotus corbels, the upper chambers seemed to have been constructed using brick and lime mortar.

It has been deduced by some scholars that the upper chamber was a shelter for the guards. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) signboard elaborated that this was a toll gate. About half-a-kilometre from this gateway, we reached a



Facing page: Boats ferry people from Talarighatta riverbank (top) to Anegundi; The unnamed structures often feature plaster artwork (bottom) on their walls; West of the Hazara Rama Temple (top) is the Mohammedan Quarters; Hampi's stark ruins (bottom) have inspired the works of generations of historians.



## *The structures I found reminded me of early 14th-century mosques in Bijapur with similar features*

mud trail parting away from the main road, which has been mentioned in the guidebook. After a couple of hundred meters, we sighted an early 15th century mosque. Prabhu, the driver bid adieu after we agreed on where to meet in few hours. From the outside the structure looked like a mandapa with squat columns, but, a prayer niche in the rear wall was a sign that it was a mosque instead. I was reminded of two early 14th-century mosques in Bijapur with similar features. The mosque stands tall amongst dense banana plantations on an elevated base. Although the guide book says the mosque was built by Ahmed Khan—a military commander under King Devaraya II in 1439, the Karnataka Department of Archaeology signage makes no mention of it. Right next to the structure is what looks like a tomb, the size of which tells us that it might have belonged to an important person. Although the layer of plaster which possibly had stucco carvings has been lost, the domed structure still retained its beauty. A latched door at the rear indicated that the tomb was still under use. All the four sides of the tombs have a tall arched niche flanked by two smaller ones. I wondered why there is not much information about these two monuments.

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**A**s per the book, if I followed the mud trail for another 1.5 kilometres I would reach the royal citadel. I looked around and found only banana and sugarcane plantations on both sides of the trail with huge boulders in the background. After a brief moment of contemplation, I started to follow the narrow trail in the hope that I will find more monuments. A little further away, in a field behind a barbed wire fence, I spotted the familiar green signboard of the Department of Archaeology. I squeezed through an opening in the fence and tried to see what was hidden behind a pile of banana leaves. Although I couldn't see anything, I realised that this must be the octagonal well which one of the books mentioned. It seemed as though the well was in use and the land owner did not want the visitors to trespass, and hence, had covered it on all sides.

Upon continuing my journey, I sighted what looked like a temple upon a boulder and yes, there was a signboard. The temple had used one of the rock boulders as a roof and the gopuram was built on top of the boulder. As with all of the monuments on this trail, there was no information about the name of the structure or the history. On the other side of the narrow patch, amidst thick banana plantations, a huge temple complex rested within a fenced enclosure. Again, there was no information about the temple except for the standard protection signage. The numbered pillars inside the temple

**1 Ahmed Khan's Mosque. 2 Talarighatta Gateway. 3 Octagonal pavilion in the Mohammedan Quarters. 4 Numbered pillars indicating recent restoration.**



The beauty of the monuments in Hampi are enhanced multi-fold by the rugged landscape.

indicated that it had been recently restored and the only iconography was that of Garuda on the doorway.

By now, this trail had been quite a revelation, but it did not seem to end. After some distance, the trail split into two directions, and there was nobody in sight. For few minutes I lost hope and was thinking of returning along the path I had walked. But, in the nick of time, I heard a goat's bleating and quickly followed the sound and was relieved to meet Mahantesh, a goat herder. We exchanged pleasantries, and after another kilometer of hike, where I followed his directions, I reached the royal citadel. I made a note to search for more details of the four monuments.

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**P**rabhu was entertaining himself with some loud music underneath a tree when I found him. The next stop was what is known as Mohammedan's quarters. This enclosure lies to the west of the famous Hazara Rama temple and is rarely visited by tourists, although it is a considerably big enclosure. As per historians, this enclosure is where the military commander-in-chief resided. A nine-domed structure, which some historians claim to be a mosque, is the most prominent one in this enclosure. The absence of a *mihrab* (a niche in the wall) makes me believe others who have discerned it to be a reception hall. Each of the bay's beautifully carved ceilings reminded me of the Bahmani buildings up north in Bidar and Gulbarga. Since this was an Islamic quarter, it might have been that this hall was used for meetings between the appointed representatives. Its

proximity to the royal enclosure probably means that the residents in this quarter were close to the king and his family. Adjacent to this is a two-storeyed octagonal pavilion. The structure remarkably seems to be in the same state as it was in Greenlaw's photograph. The arched niches are decorated with roundels on either side and brackets adorn the base of the first storey. These two structures along with a domed watch tower in the north western corner of this enclosure are the most prominent remains of the Islamic architecture here. By now, Prabhu was visibly tired and looked up to me earnestly suggesting we call it a day. I managed to ignore his hints and asked him to drive to Kadirampura, approximately 2.5 kms from the Mohammedan quarters on the way to Hospet.

Here in Kadirampura, there is a huge enclosure which seems to have been used as a burial site for muslims of repute. I came upon two large Bahmani-style tombs. The influence of Bahmanis on the Vijaynagar kingdom was significant since there was a marriage of Firoz Shah Bahmani with King Devaraya I's daughter. By this time, I was certain that Prabhu would have lost his patience. We rode back to the Talarighatta riverbank just in time to catch the last boat to Anegundi. Prabhu wanted to know the itinerary for the next day, and I obliged. He was visibly excited since this time he knew all the places I mentioned—Bhima's gateway, an octagonal bath and the Ganagitti Jain temple. He said "Sir, 9.30 a.m. sharp." Satisfied with my day of discovery, I hopped on a peaceful boat ride back to Anegundi. ●

# THE JOURNEY



**119**

**DOWN THE SILK ROAD  
IN UZBEKISTAN**

A cross-country trip reveals layers of history, centuries-old architecture, and a Bollywood-loving people

## ■ THE JOURNEY

Uzbekistan is a land of stunning monuments and people brimming with warmth. While Tashkent is more westernised, women outside the capital often dress up in traditional attire.

Facing Page: Shah-i-Zinda Necropolis in Samarkand is a sprawling complex of tombs and mausoleums ranging from the ninth to the 15th centuries. Many of Timur's relatives, including his sister and niece, were laid to rest here.



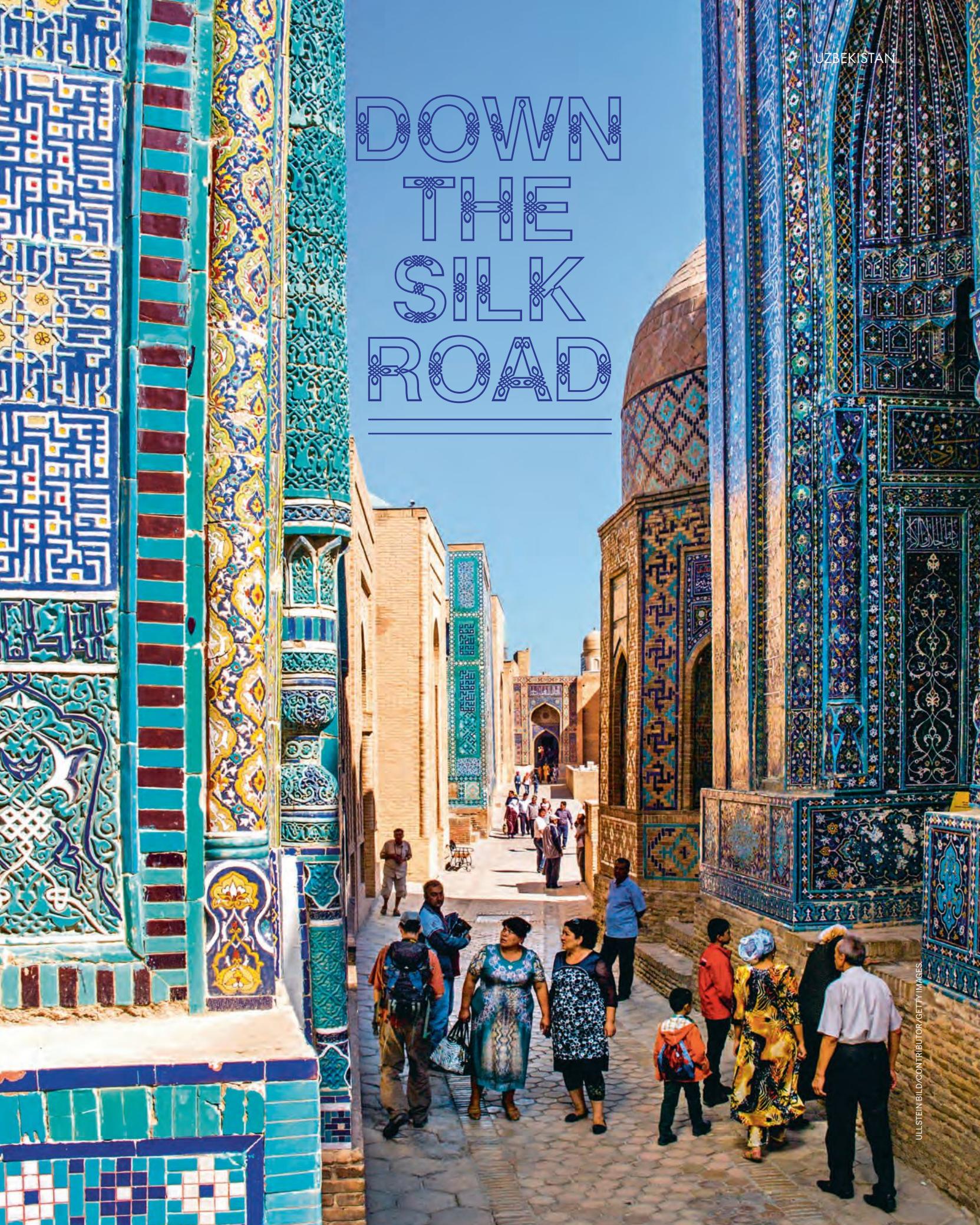
FRIEDRICH SCHMIDT/PHOTOGRAPHERS CHOICE/GETTY IMAGES

UZBEKISTAN

# DOWN THE SILK ROAD

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# A CROSS-COUNTRY TRIP IN UZBEKISTAN REVEALS LAYERS OF HISTORY, CENTURIES-OLD ARCHITECTURE, AND A BOLLYWOOD-LOVING PEOPLE

By Prachi Joshi



Uzbeks have a special place in their hearts for India and Bollywood, and it isn't uncommon to hear them reel off names of actors and movies, or sing Hindi songs to a tourist.

“

Hindustan? Shah Rukh Khan! Photo?”

It's a rapid-fire round, interspersed with a smiling “Namaste!” I'm in Samarkand, mid-way through my 10-day journey across the Republic of Uzbekistan, and I know the drill by now. Everyone, from schoolchildren and teenagers to middle-aged men and women, has accosted me for group photographs. Now, as I sit on the steps of Sher-Dor Madrasa to take in the sheer grandeur of the surrounding Registan complex, two teenagers magically materialise on either side,

while a third takes our picture. I thought this only happened to white women.

The Uzbeks seem to love India and Indians, and Bollywood is obviously a big part of the attraction. I have had a waiter in a Russian restaurant in Tashkent sing, “Main Shayar toh nahin,” from *Bobby*, while a cabbie in Samarkand reeled off names of the Kapoor *khandaan*, from Raj to Kareena. I bet they are ecstatic that the latter has named her son Taimur; to the Uzbeks he is, after all, the Great Emir Timur.

# TASHKENT

## CAPITAL IDEA

I begin my trip in the capital city of Tashkent, enshrined in our history books as the place where a peace agreement was signed to end the Indo-Pak war of 1965. My guide Khurshid Turgunov takes me to the spot where the agreement was signed by the then Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri. While the building has been replaced by a newer government office, the surrounding **Independence Square** remains one of Tashkent's major attractions. It comprises a sprawling park with administrative buildings, a recreation area with landscaped gardens and fountains, and a monumental archway adorned with sculptures of storks. I'm impressed

domed **Chorsu Bazaar** in the old city. A market has existed here for hundreds of years, likely going back to the ninth century. I wander past rows upon rows of fresh fruits and vegetables, heaped sacks of spices, and shelves groaning under the weight of dry fruits. Heavenly aromas of baking waft from the separate bread section; a central hall is lined with meat cuts ranging from lamb to horse, the latter a much-loved delicacy in Uzbekistan. The market spills over into the surrounding narrow alleys, chock-a-block with stalls selling clothes, household wares, and kitchen knick-knacks; there's even a fellow selling live turtles (presumably as pets),



KRISTIAN CABANIS/AGE FOTOSTOCK/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY

by the city's wide, tree-lined roads, but much less so by its Communist-style building blocks. However, the **Hazrat Imam Complex**, a five-minute drive northeast of the square, is a must-see thanks to its collection of blue-domed mosques and madrasas built between the 15th and 21st centuries. A 20-minute drive away lies the striking, pale-blue-and-white, 19th-century **Russian Orthodox Cathedral** with golden onion domes.

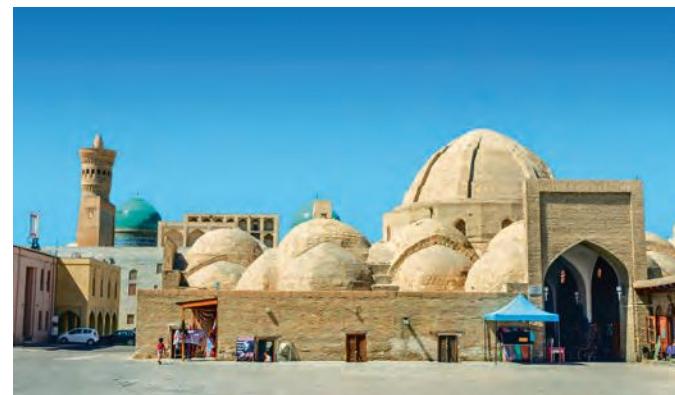
My favourite Tashkent spot is the massive aquamarine-

**Chorsu Bazaar** is at the heart of public life in Tashkent. Locals shop here for fresh produce, meat, poultry, and above all, their daily bread, *non*.

and more bread vendors hawking freshly made *non* (tandoor-baked flatbread, a denser version of naan) of assorted shapes and sizes. I meet brother-sister duo Tulkun and Dildora, who enthusiastically offer me a taste of their *non*: warm bread, golden and crusty on the outside with a chewy crumb within.

# BUKHARA

## STANDING TALL



The heavily fortified Ark of Bukhara (left) houses a palace and archaeological museum; Clay figurines (top right) of traditionally dressed Bukharans are great souvenirs; The Kalyan Minaret (bottom right) is surrounded by covered medieval-era bazaars that are now shopping areas.

**I** fly over snow-clad mountains and azure lakes to arrive in Bukhara, a city that is said to be over 2,700 years old, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Along with Samarkand, it was one of the great cities of the Silk Road. Intricate Suzani embroidery, gold weaving, wood carving and ceramic making still thrive here. The town of **Gijduvan**, 50 kilometres northeast of Bukhara, is especially known for its unique style of hand-painted green-and-brown pottery. Here, at the workshop of Alisher Narzullaev, a sixth-generation ceramicist, I get a demonstration: Every piece is hand-painted with bird, flower, and leaf motifs; and covered with glaze that is mixed in a massive grinding stone turned by donkeys—a process unchanged since six generations. The pieces are fired upside down, which causes the paint to run down and dry into teardrop patterns, a distinctive mark of Gijduvan pottery.

Back in Bukhara, the most iconic monument is the **Kalyan Minaret**, a 12th-century, 150-foot tower built of sandstone-coloured bricks, topped with an arched rotunda. Back in the day, muezzins would summon the people to prayer from here. “A hundred years later, Genghis Khan sacked the city but spared the tower; he threw dissenters off it,” says Turgunov. This practice continued well into the 20th century, when criminals were executed from here. The **Po-i-Kalyan Mosque**

(‘mosque at the foot of Kalyan’) dates to the 16th century, and has an inner courtyard surrounded by arched galleries.

The next morning, I head to see the **Ark of Bukhara**, an imposing mud-and-brick fortress built on an artificial hill in the city centre. Parts of the fortress date to the fifth century with elements added over time, including a fortified outer wall, soaring towers, latticed balconies, and a throne room. Later, I visit **Samani Park**, a five-minute drive from the Ark, to see the oldest still-preserved monument in Bukhara—the ninth-century **Ismail Samani Mausoleum**, the only surviving monument from the Samanid dynasty (the last Persian dynasty to rule Central Asia, between the eighth and ninth centuries). The shrine is a curious combination of Zoroastrian and Islamic styles with an intricately carved facade. Nearby stands the 13th-century **Chashma Ayub**, also known as Job’s Well, a brick structure topped with a conical dome, which contains a mausoleum and a holy spring. “When the people of Bukhara were suffering for lack of water, Prophet Job (Ayub) struck the ground here and a well was formed,” explains Turgunov. Water problems were frequent in Bukhara and the city built several ponds. **Lyab-i-Hauz**, a five-minute drive away, is one of the few that remains—a 17th-century pond surrounded by three stunning madrasas, as well as several cafés and restaurants.

# SAMARKAND

## SIX FEET UNDER

My next destination is Samarkand, a name that has always evoked the romance of the Silk Road in my mind. And I'm off to a great start on the so-called **King's Road**, an arterial part of the route in the 11th century, now the M37 Highway connecting Bukhara and Samarkand. I stop at **Rabat-i-Malik** where a *sardoba* or water reservoir dating to the 14th century stands a couple of feet below the road level. The structure resembles an igloo made with bricks and it stands over a water body, which was used for drinking and washing. Across the busy road are the ruins of an 11th-century **caravanserai**. Unfortunately, the 1968 earthquake that shook Uzbekistan levelled off most of the remains. Yet, my guide paints me a vivid picture of the carved arched portal bearing Arabic inscriptions, foundations of individual rooms where the merchants must have retired for the day, the sunken bath houses, the dance podium surrounded by remnants of columns. I can almost imagine the bustle and revelry at this centuries-old motel (of sorts).

Samarkand's history stretches beyond the Silk Road; it was founded as Afrasiab in the seventh century B.C. "You're standing over 27 levels of Samarkand's life," says Turgunov as I contemplate a hilly grass mound, which is an archaeological site and all that remains of Afrasiab before it was completely destroyed by a marauding Genghis Khan in 1220. The adjoining **Afrasiab Museum** has an excellent collection of

excavated artefacts, as well as colourful seventh-century frescoes depicting festivals and processions from China, Iran, and India. Nearby is the **Shah-i-Zinda** necropolis complex that sprung up around the (purported) grave of Kusam ibn Abbas, Prophet Muhammad's cousin. The necropolis houses ritual buildings from the ninth to the 15th centuries in a glorious mish-mash of architectural styles ranging from the simple tombs to elaborate, palatial mausoleums.

Timur was born in a town near Samarkand and he made the city his capital in 1370, constantly building and beautifying it, giving rise to the Timurid style of architecture—spectacular domed buildings whose facades were decorated with turquoise and blue tiles sporting geometric and floral patterns. While the **Bibi Khanym Mosque** near Siyab Bazaar in Samarkand built with the spoils of his India conquest, is mostly in ruins, the **Registan Complex**, a short drive away, with its lavish mosques and madrasas is quite the centrepiece of Samarkand.

Don't miss a visit to the bustling **Siyab Bazaar**, the largest market in the city and one that dates from the times of the Silk Road; the highlight is the bread bazaar where dozens of women sell the famed Samarkand bread, a flat, round bread with a shiny, glazed top that is said to be edible for three years. "Just sprinkle some water and warm it in the *tandir* (tandoor). Even Babur craved for this bread when he went to India," Turgunov declares proudly.



The 17th-century Sher-Dor Madrasa is part of the Registan Complex in Samarkand. The tiger mosaics and sun-face depicted on the arch are at variance with traditional Islamic-style architecture that forbids images of living beings in places of worship.

HERMES IMAGES/AGF RM/GFTY IMAGES

# FERGANA

## GREEN VALLEY



Rishtan pottery (left) is known for its intricate geometric and nature-inspired patterns, and vivid blue and white colours; At the Yodgorlik Silk Factory in Margilan (right) everything is still done by hand, from silk spinning and dyeing to ikat weaving.

Uzbekistan's connection with India goes beyond Timur's infamous sack of Delhi. His great-great-great-grandson, Babur, was born in Andijan in the fertile **Fergana Valley** in eastern Uzbekistan. Today, this dusty, industrial city holds little more than memories of the first Mughal. The **Babur Memorial Park** in the heart of city is a welcome respite from the summer sun as is the little house-museum in it, that showcases Babur's life and artefacts. His pensive statue sits in the middle of the garden while his symbolic grave stands behind the museum (he was buried in Kabul). The only surviving structure from his time is the madrasa that he studied at. It's in a woeful state, much to my surprise and disappointment, and contains a forgettable museum.

But Fergana is more than just about Babur. I travel 75 kilometres west to **Margilan**, a town supposedly founded by Alexander the Great. This was an important stop on the Silk Road and its high-quality silk was in much demand then.



At the **Yodgorlik Silk Factory**, I get a peek at the traditional method of silk-weaving and ikat work where everything is still done by hand. Further west, in the town of **Rishtan**, I visit the workshop of Rustam Usmanov who makes the famed blue-and-white ceramics, another handicraft that's a legacy of the Silk Road.

I return to Tashkent by train, the route cutting through the **Kuramin Mountains** (Chatkal Range, part of the Western Tian Shan). The stark mountainous landscape gives way to small settlements, rolling fields with horses languidly grazing away, bountiful fruit orchards, and mulberry-lined streets. It's not difficult to see why Babur waxed eloquent about this land in the *Baburnama* and why everyone from Alexander the Great to Genghis Khan set out to conquer it. For me, however, the abiding image of Uzbekistan will remain of its ever-smiling, gregarious people clamouring for a photo with me, a stranger from a foreign land connected to them by years of history. And Bollywood. ●

## ON THE PLATTER

### A SMORGASBORD OF UZBEK SPECIALITIES WORTH TRYING

- Assorted *non*—it's worth sampling this flatbread hot off the tandoor. Each city and town has its own style.
- *Samsa*, a cousin of our samosa—buttery, flaky pastry filled with spiced (usually) lamb meat baked to golden brown perfection.
- *Shashlyk* or *kabob*—succulent meat kebabs.
- *Manti*—meat- or vegetable-filled dumplings.
- *Shurpa*—meat and vegetable soup, sometimes served in a bowl of hollowed out bread.
- *Dimlama*—a hearty meat and vegetable stew.
- *Plov*—a lamb and rice dish similar to our biryani.
- Uzbek cuisine is traditionally meat-heavy and vegetarians may have to make do with breads, soup, salads, and pasta.



**Plov** is a popular Uzbek dish made by simmering rice in a broth of meat and vegetables. It's available at most restaurants and roadside eateries.

## ESSENTIALS



GRANT ROONEY/AGE FOTOSTOCK/DINDIA PHOTO LIBRARY (FOOD); XDINOZZAZER/SHUTTERSTOCK (STREET)

Uzbekistan Airways has direct flights from Delhi to Tashkent thrice a week. The major cities of Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, and Fergana are well connected by air, rail, and road. Asia Hotels is a mid-range chain of hotels with presence in all four cities ([asiahotels.uz](http://asiahotels.uz); doubles from \$85/₹5,800). In Tashkent, City Palace Hotel is a centrally located 4-star hotel ([citypalace.uz](http://citypalace.uz); doubles from \$135/₹9,300), while the cosy, boutique Hotel Platan ([hotel-platan.com](http://hotel-platan.com); doubles from \$105/₹7,300) is a good choice in Samarkand.

# TRAVEL QUIZ

TEST YOUR TRAVEL IQ



WHICH SOUTH INDIAN VILLAGE IS KNOWN FOR LOCAL PRODUCTIONS OF WORKS OF SHAKESPEARE AND MOLIÈRE, AMONG OTHERS?

INDIA'S 37TH UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE, INSCRIBED IN 2018, IS IN THE HEART OF A CITY.  
WHAT IS IT?

THIS EASTERN HIMALAYAN NATIONAL PARK, THE HIGHEST IN WEST BENGAL, IS HOME TO THE ELUSIVE RED PANDA.



OLDER THAN THE HIMALAYAS, THIS MOUNTAIN CHAIN IS HOME TO OVER 300 THREATENED PLANT AND ANIMAL SPECIES.

DURING THIS DELHI-BASED FESTIVAL, FLOWERS ARE OFFERED TO YOGMAYA TEMPLE AND THE TOMB OF BAKHTIYAR KAKI.

THERE ARE FIVE JANTAR MANTARS IN INDIA. THE GRANDEST OF THEM ALL IS LOCATED IN THIS CITY.

ANSWERS 1. HEGGODU, KARNATAKA 2. VICTORIAN GOTHIC AND ART DECO ENSEMBLES OF MUMBAI 3. SINGHLILA NATIONAL PARK 4. WESTERN GHATS  
5. PHOOL WALON KI SAIJ 6. JAIPUR

IGOR BULGARIN/SHUTTERSTOCK (1), ANIL/SHUTTERSTOCK (2), KOUSHIK BHATTACHARjee/SHUTTERSTOCK (3), MINTFRANS LANTING/MINT IMAGES/DINOSA/PHOTO LIBRARY (4), FOTOS93/SHUTTERSTOCK (5), WALTER BISCHOF/AGE FOTOSTOCK/DINOSA/PHOTO LIBRARY (6)