

TRAVEL LUST

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Trekking Through Torres Del Paine, Patagonia

(Text and pics by Hajira Shaheen Fatima)

Superlative view of Torres del Paine scenery



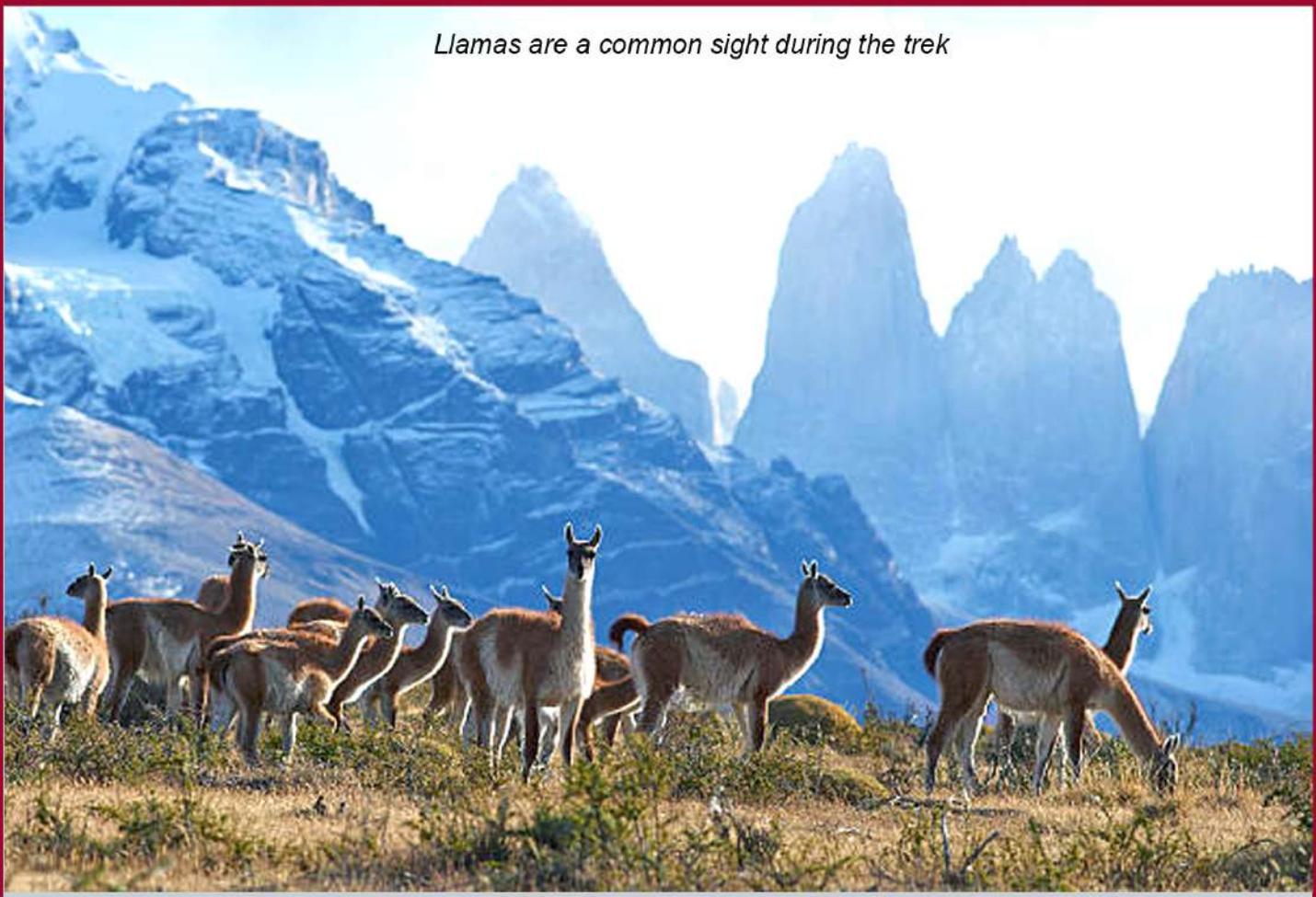
Patagonia is a lovely part of the world and any hiker's dream. I am an avid hiker, however, for some reason it had evaded me for a long time. Once covid restrictions were lifted, I was keen to start traveling again and when my best friend from university reached out to me and said she wanted to do a girls trip, I couldn't say no. Currently she lives in Texas and I in Australia and so the first thing we needed to do was to figure out a location that was easily accessible for both. We tossed around a few ideas and as we were chatting about this, Netflix released a documentary called 'Our National Parks' and the first episode covered Chilean Patagonia. Both of us coincidentally watched it at the same time and realised that would suit us logistically very well!

With the plan made about 5 months in advance, we started researching the area. The plan was to spend three weeks in Chile, however, the highlight would be Patagonia. The W circuit in Torres Del Paine is a very popular 80 kms walk that most people cover in 4-5 days. It's a great multi day walk as there are lodges/refugios along the way. The refugios also provide basic food and catering.

We are happy to inform you that quite a few readers travelled to Turkey after reading our October Issue. Many of them were all praise for Istanbul Taxi Service who organised their transport in and out of Istanbul. Their General Manager Mr. Omar, seemed a very helpful person and helped them in whatever way possible.

The contact details of Mr Omar are +90 541 225 45 74, Email; voheyturizm@gmail.com

Llamas are a common sight during the trek



After a bit of research, we decided that the W trek suited all our needs. Having refugios along the way meant that we didn't have to carry our food or much gear - that suited us well as we were aiming to complete the walk in 4 days. With an average of 20 kms a day - the longest day would be almost 30kms. We spent the last few months training - walking with a 5-7 kgs backpack, testing our gear and shoes, and making sure we did some long, endurance walk. We were keen to be in the best shape so we could enjoy the spectacular views the national park promised us!

Finally November arrived and we discovered some volcanoes and the arid Atacama desert before heading off to Puerto Natales for our hiking adventure. Puerto Natales is a pretty, small town, known as the gateway to Torres Del Paine National (TdP) Park. Geared towards hikers and adventure lovers, there were tons of tourists milling around. We picked up some snacks, fruits and nut bars before retiring to our hostel - the next day would start nice and early! Our lovely host had arranged for a taxi to pick us up so we wolfed down our breakfast and headed to the bus stop. Buses from Puerto Natales regularly leave for TdP. We had already booked our tickets on the bus - make sure you do this - sometimes they get booked out especially in the peak season! We withdrew some cash - another good thing to do as some places in the Park only accept cash. You might be able to get away with using USD or GBP, but not all currencies are accepted.

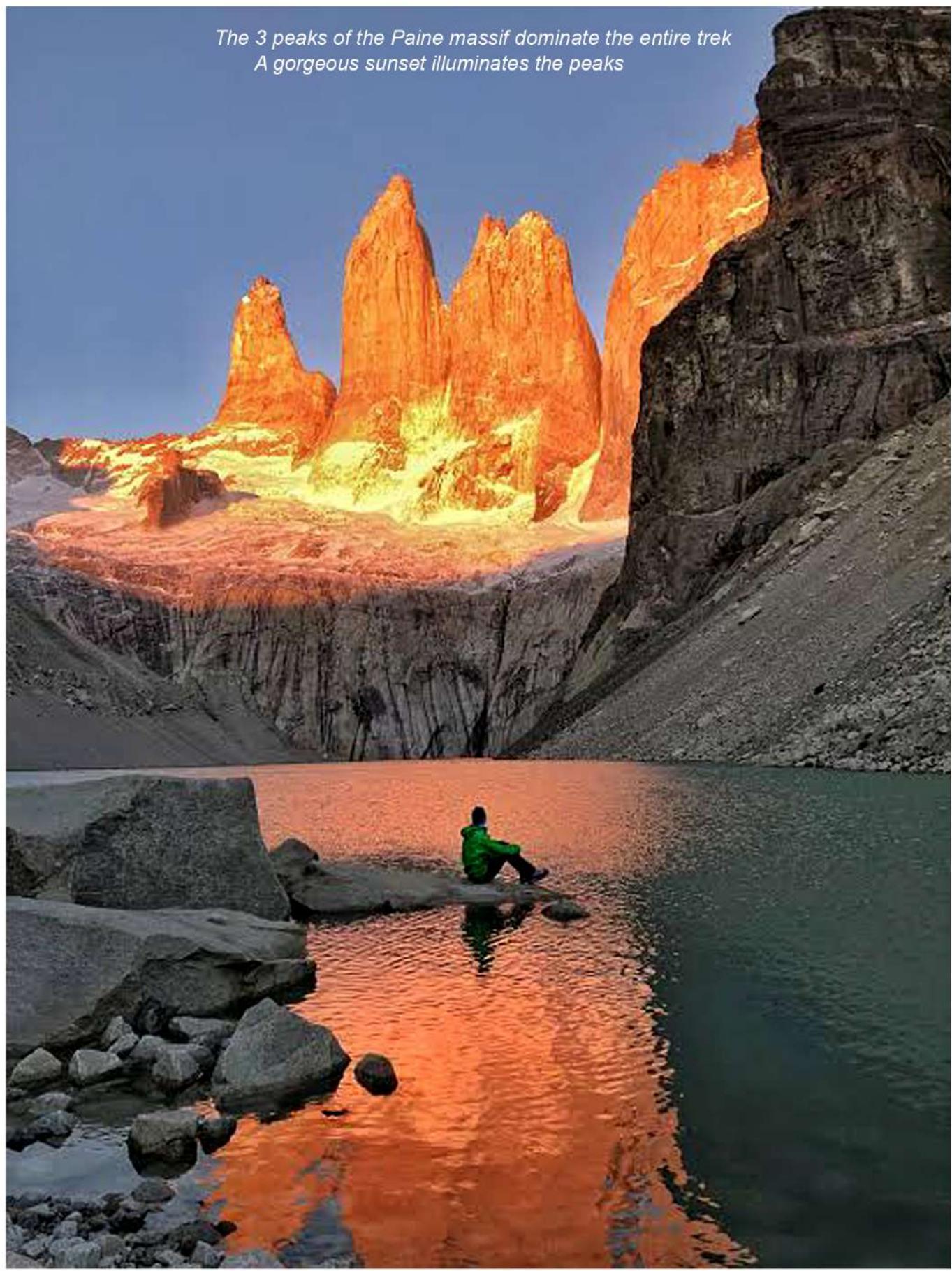
The drive from Puerto Natales to Torres Del Paine is about 90 mins. A beautiful 90 mins ride as farms, grasslands and eventually glaciers started to get closer. We started to see guanacos along the way. These beautiful cousins of the llama can be spotted throughout TdP. Our plan was to do the W circuit starting at the Grey Glacier and making our way to the popular Las Torres. The walk runs up three valleys, creating the W shape that gives it its name. In each of those valleys lies one of the iconic sights of the park. As we pulled into the entry of the National Park, we were told that the rangers of national parks around Chile were on strike. Protesting against the low pay and conditions, the rangers were not at their posts. However, we had already paid for our entry tickets and so we made our way straight to the other side of the TdP park.



Trekking rhrough the park provides gorgeous views all round (above and below)



*The 3 peaks of the Paine massif dominate the entire trek
A gorgeous sunset illuminates the peaks*



The massive Grey glacier is a sight to behold





Our first stop was a ferry point. We jumped on the ferry, and made our way to the first night's accommodation - Refugio Paine Grande. The 30 minute boat trip offered fantastic views of some of Torres del Paine's most notable peaks, including the unique Cuernos del Paine (Paine Horns) and the glacier-covered Cerro Paine Grande. It was a stunning introduction to the two mountains that are prominently featured on the French Valley hike.

We had booked in dorm style hostel beds for the entire trek and were pleased to find that we had a private room for the first night. Refugio Paine Grande is one of the largest refugios in tap. As the starting point of the W and the O treks as well as easily accessible by ferry, most visitors to TdP stay at this refugio. We were pleasantly surprised at how well maintained the lodging was! There were colorful tents for anybody camping and a huge dining area with buffet meals.

We dropped our bags at the refugio and picked up a day pack with water and snacks for our first day of walking! The walk around Lago Grey (or the Grey Lake) is stunning! And windy! Its a pleasant meandering walk with high mountains as the backdrop. Around midway in the walk, we stopped on the way and had our packed lunch - a sandwich, some fruit and a muesli bar.



Water across the tap is safe to drink from the water sources. Just dip your bottle into its several creeks and rivers and you have the safest,purest water in the world! Throughout our time in the national park, that's what we did. The water tastes slightly different as it does not have the added minerals as the tap water, but it was perfectly safe - cold and natural!

Continuing our walk, we reached the Grey Glacier the enormous glacier that stretches out towards the ice cap. Its a stunning view to look at the majesty of the glacier and nature in general. At that point it was really windy and we were being almost lifted off your feet. So we decided to call it a day and made our way back to the refugio.



Mountains and lakes keep your eyes pinned

Early dinner, and we were off to bed. Tomorrow was the biggest day of our walk. Close to 30 kms and an ascent of almost 750ms. The day was beautiful and we had a breakfast of eggs, bread, muesli and hot chocolate (!), chatted with other hikers on the trail and waved goodbyes planning to catch up for dinner at the next refugio at the end of the day. Day 2 started off with a lovely, boardered walk through green trees, flitting birds around us and views of stunning Lakes Skottsberg and Pehoe.

The weather was perfect and a merino shirt and a fleece was all I needed. The next leg of the trail followed along the shore of Lago Skottsberg before arriving at a small “forest” of dead trees. It was an interesting change of scenery to be surrounded by these narrow, white trunks and their thin, crooked branches. The scenery was haunting in a way, making it one of my favourite parts of the trail.



Wild horses roam the steppes



Another view of a glacier (above) and looking across a huge lake (below)

After walking for about an hour we reached Camp Italiano where we swapped our full packs for a day pack as we began the ascent through the French Valley. This marks the start of the French Valley and second part of this hike. This last leg is more difficult than the first because the trail is much steeper and very rocky with boulders to maneuver around.. The French Valley is a stunning lesson in geography- surrounded by trees, following the course of a mighty river that melts from the gorgeous mountains and joins the turquoise lakes at the end.

Its a steady ascent until you reach the first lookout - Mirador Frances. We had a small snack at the Mirador taking in the views and resting a bit before heading out to the final leg of our journey up - Mirador Britanico. The walk up to Mirador Britanico is even more stunning if possible. It is much less traveled and you often have the trail to yourself. Another hour of slow climbing surrounded by mountains, glaciers and crossing more rivers before the last scramble up rocks to Mirador Britanico which has 360 degree views.



We sat at the top for a bit longer, had our lunch and took lots of photos before starting our way down. You follow the same trail back down so we followed the path down without any breaks, picked up our big bags from Camp Italiano and started to make our way to Refugio Cuernos - our lodging for the night.

The path was straight forward to follow and we were enjoying the walk back. About 5kms from the refugio, my foot slipped, and I landed on my ankle. Instantly as I stood up, I realised I had sprained it.

However, as we were in the middle of the trail, we kept walking. Hikers are a lovely community. As people passed us by they noticed I was limping and was offered some pain killers, hiking poles and a compression bandage to tie around my sprained ankle. I accepted each of them with much gratitude.

I finally arrived at our lodge much later than planned and with my friend's support. A late dinner, and some ice packs later, we decided that we would have to continue on Day 3 walk as planned. There was no shuttle, ferry or bus to transport us to the end of the track.

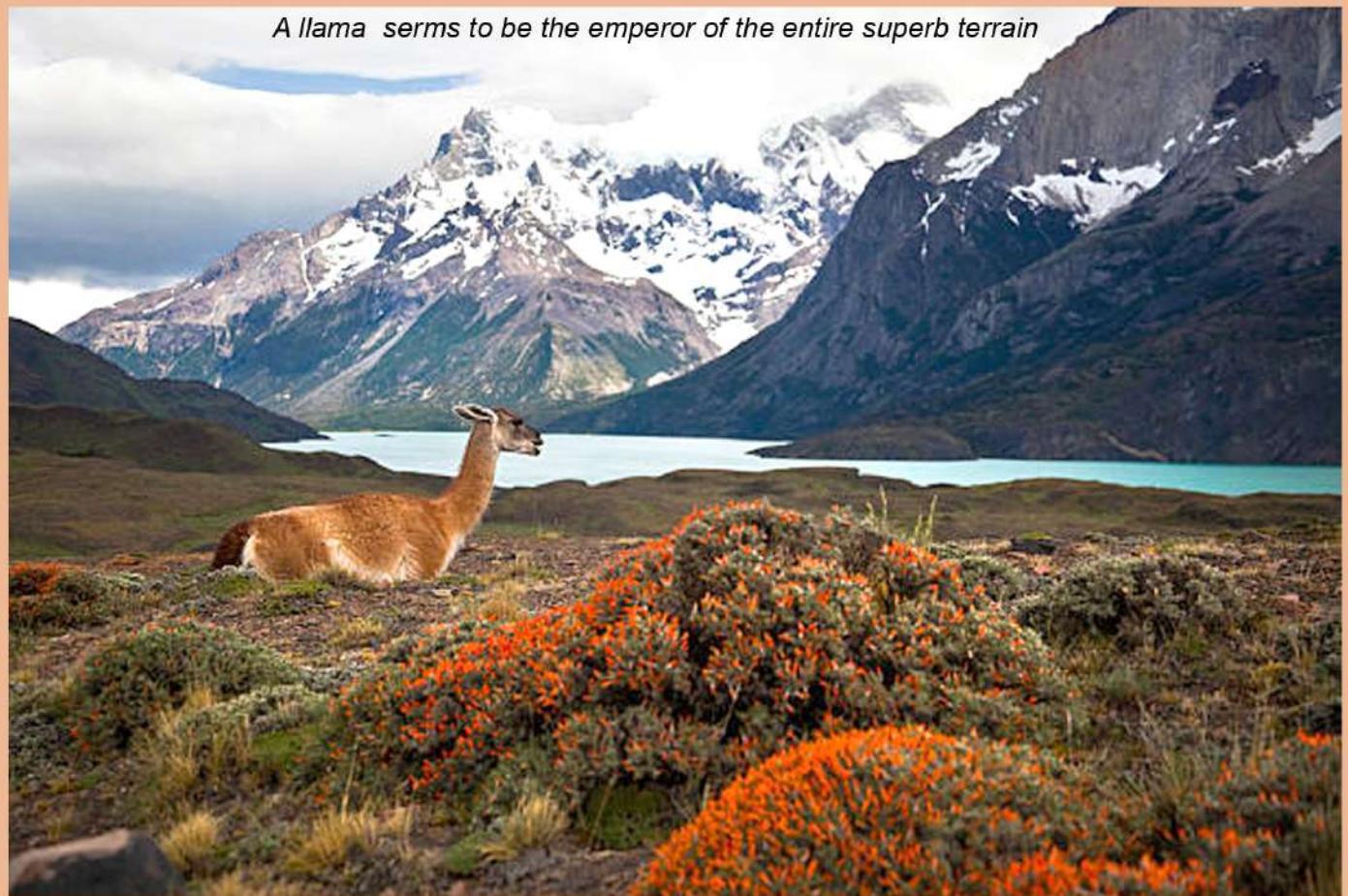
Dosed up on ibuprofen, we started Day 3, which thankfully was only 15kms long with no high ascents. However, we were in the mountains and there were constant ups and downs. The wind was strong enough to lift us off our feet sometime but the views continued to be stunning.

Most of Day 3 is by an undulating walk by series of lakes or river crossings. This was quite fortunate as it gave me a chance to soak my very sore ankle into the ice cold water! We reached Refugio Paine Grande by afternoon, where I was finally able to take off my hiking boots and had a delicious lunch! From there we caught a shuttle back to Puerto Natales. A celebratory (and very carby!) dinner was in order before we caught the flights back!

Patagonia is a very special part of the world. With its glaciers, rivers, lakes and high mountains, there is never a moment of less-than-jaw-dropping beauty. There is a high reward to effort ratio and a walk totally worth doing. And one to be remembered forever.



Crossing a rickety wooden bridge



A llama seems to be the emperor of the entire superb terrain



Another lake and river we crossed enroute



Along The Ho Chi Minh Coastal Trail



Entrance to the grand palace in Hue

The highly decorated pavilion in the palace



From the time I was in high school, I had been fascinated by India's influence on South Asia, about which we had read a little in our history books. I did a lot of research on this subject, checked numerous articles and magazines on this subject and had an ambition to write a book on this fascinating part of Indian history. However, other pressures did not permit this to happen, but it remained at the back of my head.

Recently, I had a choice either to visit Vietnam or Cambodia which were both influenced by India, and I selected the former. My reasons were that Vietnam had enormous diversity of landscapes, its coastal highway, part of the Ho Chi Minh trail, was considered the most scenic in South East Asia. Also, Vietnam was less crowded compared to the hordes that descended on Angkor Wat and other parts of Cambodia...

We started our tour in Hanoi then travelled to the northernmost mountainous parts of Vietnam bordering China and then drove along the highway all the way to the Mekong, delta, a distance of about 2000 kms, touching Ho Chi Minh city (Saigon) enroute. After visiting the hidden gem of Vietnam, Ninh Binh, with its water caves and beautiful rice paddies, we drove to Hue, the most historical city of Vietnam, and its former capital. We drove into Hue around dusk and noticed numerous ancient monuments during our journey to our traditional hotel.

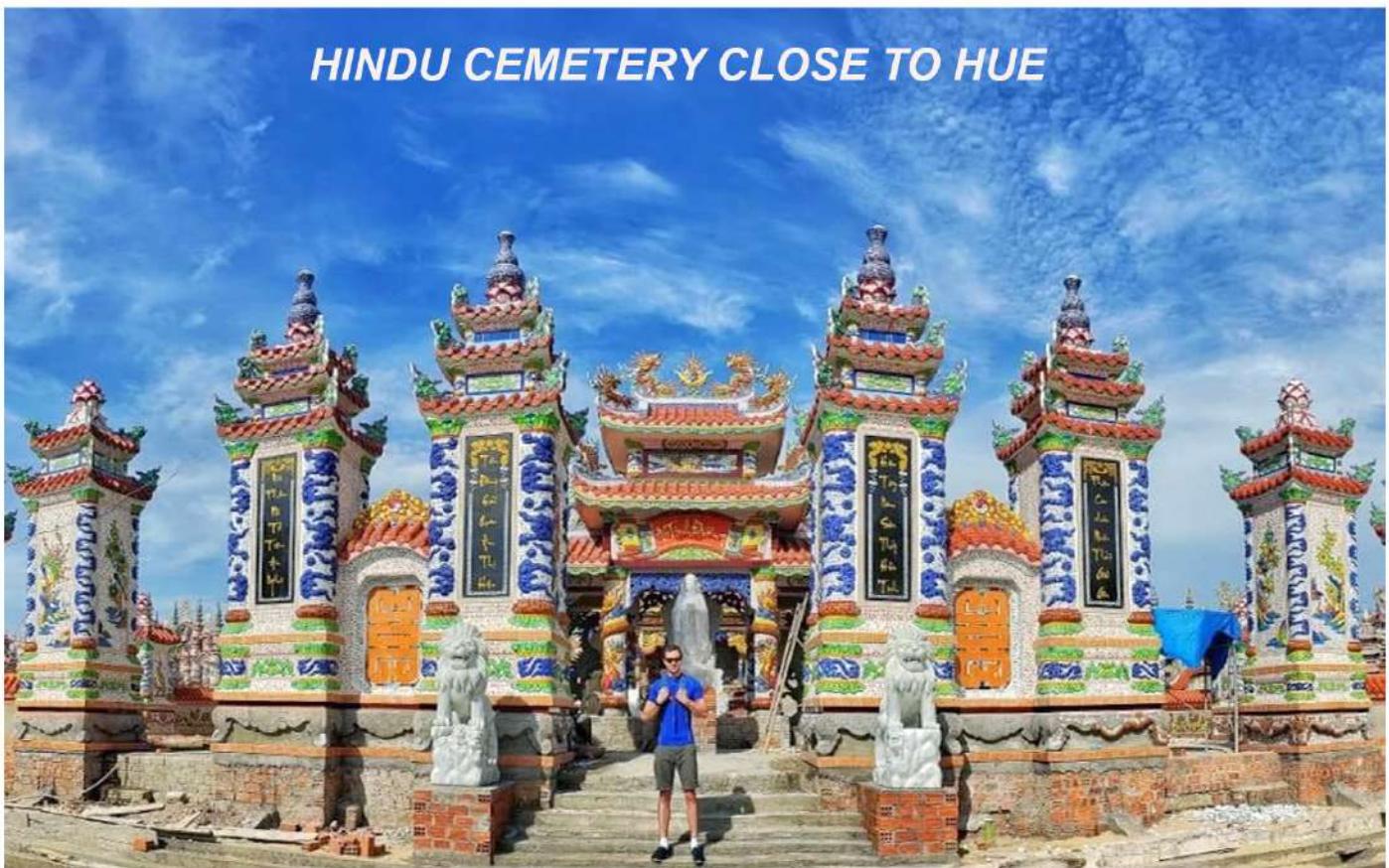


A rickshaw takes tourists past the well adorned gate

A close up of the entrance to a pavillion



HINDU CEMETERY CLOSE TO HUE



Views of a Hindu cemetery near Hue

OVERVIEW OF HUE

Hue is a city chock-full of stories. The Kings of the Nguyen Dynasty built their feudal capital along Hue's fertile riverbanks and atop its forested hills, but their imperial legacy is just one of many reasons to visit. Hue's refined cuisine is the stuff of legend, and its leafy streets are lined with mossy pagodas, art déco mansions, and eye-popping markets. Through the whole scene flows the Perfume River, setting a languid pace the rest of the city is happy to follow.





Another superbly decorated gate

The next morning we started our tour, starting with the palace complex. We had a very interesting interaction with the rickshaw pullers who were charging a bomb. So we decided to start walking and allow the rickshaw pullers to come after us. In the end this happened and we got our round at less than half the price. Entering the lavishly decorated entrance, we went around the huge complex. Satisfied with our round, we drove to the other marvel of Hue, the hilltop residence of one of the former kings.

After climbing the umpteen steps to the palace, we were dumbfounded by the decorations on the ceiling and walls, as also the beautiful altar in the entrance room.

We could not visit all its attractions as we had to visit Danang and then proceed to Hoi An for our night halt. The drive along the coastal highway to Danang enthralled us, with superb views of the South China Sea. Danang was famous during the US Vietnam War, and it was the border of South Vietnam controlled by the US forces, and North Vietnam ruled by Ho Chi Minh and the Vietcong.

Our main interest in Danang was the Marble Mountain in the heart of the city. This huge mountain had a cave with various colours on the walls and steps going to the top from where we could get a panoramic view of the city. I was the only one in our group who opted for the climb, but the stairs were extremely narrow and after going up half way there was no railing to hold and every chance of tumbling all the way to the ground. And the hectic jostling with people going up and down using this single stairway made me nervous and I decided to return, luckily safe and sound. It had been one of the most terrifying experiences of my life!!



Interior of a palace in Hue



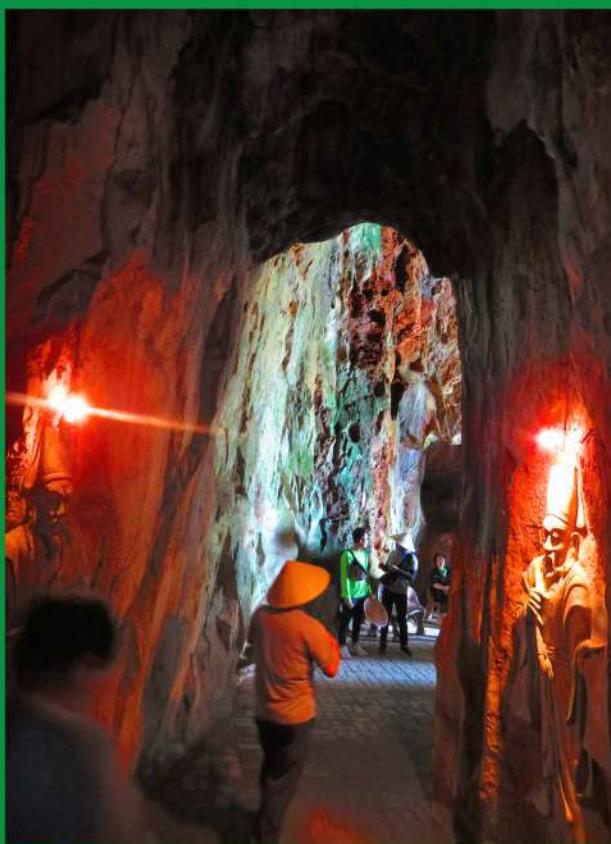
A vegetable seller with a decorated temple in Hoi An



Interior of a palace in Hue



Hindu temples in the Hue area (above)



The caves at Danang are not to be missed (photos below)

General view of Danang with the massive hills sheltering caves dominating the skyline



Fishing nets can be seen along the coast

The flyover at Danang is a piece of art





A dhow on the beautiful greenish blue sea near Danang



A Buddhist temple graces the forested hills just outside Danang



A different way to catch fish near Hue



Shades of greens seen below the pass that connects Da Nang to Hoi An



Boating on the river at Hoi An is a pleasurable experience, especially around sunset

As we drove a little further from Danang we were stunned at seeing a colourful complex right next to the road. When we asked our driver Mr Thuy, he said it was a Hindu cemetery. I entered the and found some beautifully carved and gaily painted graves belonging to former Hindu nobles of the Chola and Pallava dynasties..

Later we visited, Son My, another very huge Hindu cemetery in hilly forested terrain which provide, an interesting glimpse into Indian influence on Vietnam.

We reached Hoi An in late afternoon and we decided to take a stroll along the river which divides the ancient picturesque town. It was famous for its streets and houses decorated with colourful lanterns. We walked quite some distance enjoying the interesting scenes that unfolded. We saw a number of typically dressed people who bowed to us as we passed.

The next morning at sunrise, I walked, along the seaside and watched the colourful fishing boats getting ready to depart on their journey to catch fish. I had some interesting sign language conversations with the fishermen who were interested to learn I was from Hind, as they call India.

After breakfast we proceeded along the coastal highway to Nha Trang where I was interested in seeing the Hindu temples built over a thousand years ago. Their upkeep made me wonder how a foreign country had maintained the monuments in a much better way than what we ourselves are doing.

Thus ended our journey along the Central part of the Ho Chi Minh trail.

More travellogues on Vietnam will follow in future issues.



A typically dressed couple cross a bridge on the canal at Hoi An

Fishing boats line the river at sunrise, awaiting the tide



A superb view of the surroundings from top of the pass near Danang

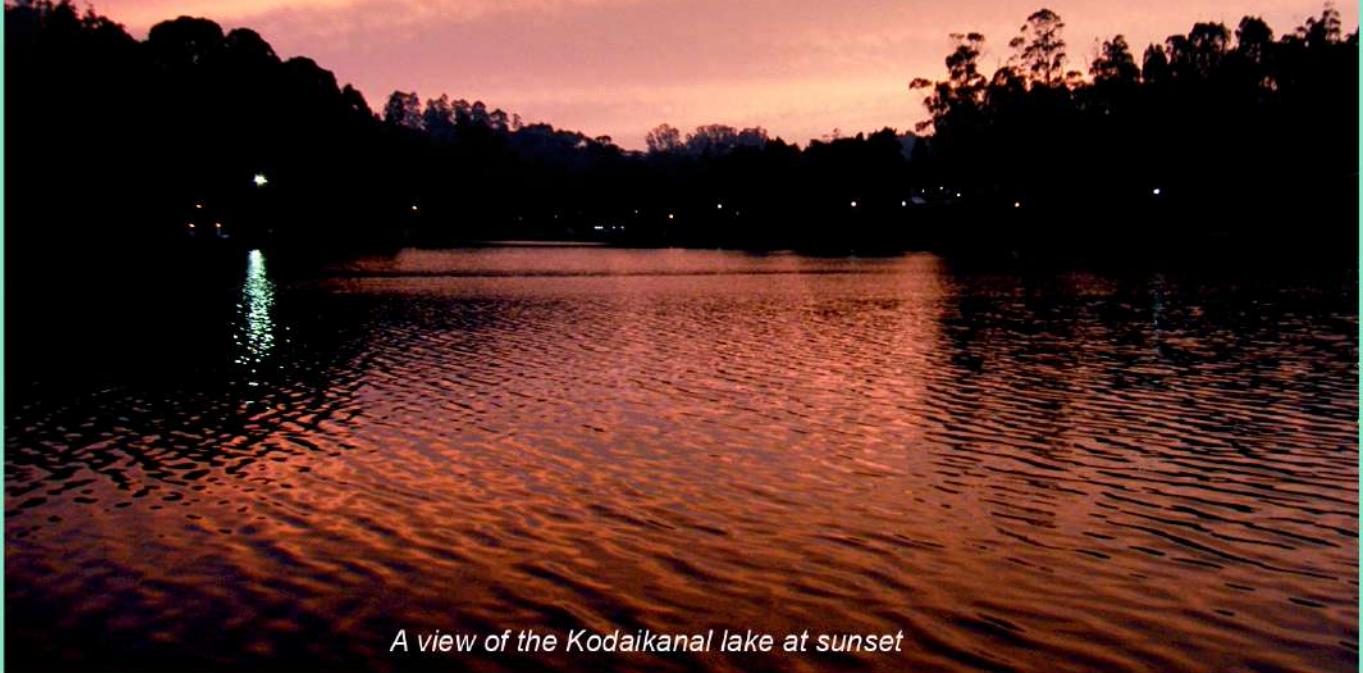


A hindu temple at Nha Trang attracts many visitors



Khandil Vanam A Stay Unlike Most

Text and some pics by Fatima Mehdi, some pics by Abbas Tyabji



A view of the Kodaikanal lake at sunset

The story of Khandil starts a long time ago when both Mehdi and I were studying in Sholai School, Kodaikanal. We studied and worked on multiple projects together and this friendship eventually led to our engagement and marriage. Both of us were from completely different backgrounds, I was from Tamil Nadu speaking Tamil at home, and he from Hyderabad speaking Hindi. Our school was located at a very scenic spot in the same hill range as the well-known hill station of Kodaikanal in Tamil Nadu and we were both in love with the hills. Even after getting married and living in Hyderabad about 1000 kms away, the hills called out to us and we made it a point to go back to Kodai (Short form for Kodaikanal) every opportunity we got.

At long last after the covid house arrest, we decided to rearrange our priorities and build a farm cottage in the wilderness of our beloved hills. And so.... Khandil Vanam came into being, merging our two cultures and the Hindi word Khandil meaning lantern with the Tamil word Vanam meaning forest. I'll tell you a little about Kodai. It is probably the highest hill station in India at an altitude of over 7000 feet but unfortunately without any snow views, which has reduced its popularity some what....but in the southern part of India, it is the "King of Hillstations"!!!



A bison eating trash just off the walkway that overlooks the plains



Paddling along the Kodaikanal lake

A mesmerising true reflection of a beautifully located building in the Kodai lake



It is nestled around an extremely picturesque lake with most of the activities like horse riding, cycling, children's games, small snack stalls etc all around. Many of the hotels and restaurants are sited within walking distance with quite a few of them overlooking the lake, so that you can enjoy the superb scenery without stepping out !! The Coakers walk, which is a favourite for people interested in early morning walks, provides panoramic views of the plains while there are numerous Sholas(forested areas,) cut by waterfalls sprinkled around. The Bear Shola is probably the most visited as it is the closest and many streams cut through it, creating an extremely picturesque ambience.

The Berijam lake, about 10 lms away is another popular picnic spot, surrounded by thick forest all around. For the adventurous, there is a jeepable road that connects the two famous hill stations of South India, Kodai and Munnar and many people hike the distance of about 60 kms, camping along the way. For golfers, there is the beautifully landscaped golf course where many national championships are held. Our farm however located, about 2.5 hours away from Kodaikanal, is not that high in altitude, situated at about 4,000 feet above sea level so it doesn't get as freezing cold as Kodaikanal and is much cooler than the plains, placing it in a very comfortable climate range for extended stays.

Surrounded by the wilderness and a spectacular view of the plains and their night time city lights. We have grown to call it home. Being on a road less travelled we have our own attractions away from the maddening crowds and not so well known sights to see and are ideal for those who wish to slow down and take in the breathtaking beauty of nature, and as such it is the perfect complement preferred by many after a rigorous sightseeing tour of Kodaikanal.

We have plenty of treks and huge rocks on our farm that are just waiting for someone to climb them. All within the privacy of our own 50 acre farm. While it is raining we can see 21 waterfalls on the hill opposite our guest cottage on one side and the Athur dam all the way in the plains on the other. There are picturesque waterfalls to visit a short distance away and Dolmens, which are small houses built by ancient men from the stone age. With thick virgin forests all around a visitor to Khandil Vanam is assured of a very peaceful and silent atmosphere except for the chirping of birds which are plentiful. A wildlife lover would "freak out" here with numerous species hidden in the forests, waiting to be spotted. Bison are almost a sure shot, in fact we spot one of them so often we even named him Bob.



Khandil Vanam about 50 kms away from Kodaikanal, has a superb view of the plains

Hikers and trekkers will want to be around for weeks as there are so many unexplored spots around. Plenty of trek trails, ranging from amateur level to those that will challenge all but the most experienced trekkers. Trekking to the Pulla Velli falls and the dam are of course high on the list. And.... the best part of your visit here is that we have only a couple of rooms so no disturbance. We provide all meals and can guide you during your treks. So what are you waiting for,? Reawaken the adventurer within you,

Khandil Vanam is calling!!

Our contact: +91 8008002703 (PHONE / Whatsapp) Ishrati@gmail.com



A view from just outside Khandil Vanam



Khandil Vanam is located in a fully forested area



A bison roaming in the vicinity of Khandil Vanam



The Palani plains seen from Khandil Vanam



You can take a rejuvenating trek to the Pulla Velli falls which are a sight to behold, specially in the monsoons (above) while the stream which flows down from the falls is equally eye catching (below)



ABOUT THE EDITOR

Abbas A, Tyabji is a Hyderabad, India, based photo journalist, who left Tata Motors, one of the largest auto makers in India after heading the Publications Division of the Company over a career spanning nearly 3 decades.

During his tenure he travelled all over India and to neighbouring countries like Nepal, Bhutan, Mauritius and the Middle East on photo journalistic assignments. His articles, pictures and photo features appeared not only in the Company publications but in national and international magazines.

He was invited by the then People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (S Yemen) to photograph the natural and man made wonders of that ancient land and prepare publicity material for their govt. The effort was appreciated by Govt officials and even India's Ambassador to S Yemen wrote an appreciation letter to Tatas on his efforts.

He is the recipient of over 50 national and international awards including:

The President of India's Award for Excellence in Designing and Printing on TWO OCCASIONS

Best Feature Writer Award from the Association of Business Communicators of India 4 times

Best Photo Feature Award from the Association of Business Communicators of India 5 times

The internationally circulated magazine "Bus Ride" from the US found his pictures so exceptional that they selected 2 for the First Place Award in their 1989 Worldwide photo competition, the only time in their history that two pictures were given this honour.

Almost half a dozen of his pictures appeared in Japanese calendars and dozens have graced Indian calendars.

He has also published a book on Hyderabad, for which the text, photography and design was done by him.

For his photo journalistic achievements he has found mention in "Who's Who of India", and "Reference Asia".

He also operates guided, customised tours from Hyderabad and is listed in LONELY PLANET as a Tour Guide.

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Abbas Tyabji receiving the President of India Award for Excellence in Designing and Printing from then President of India Dr. N. Sanjeeva Reddy