

TRAVEL LUST

AUGUST

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Bipenggou Here I Come

Text and Pictures by Abbas Tyabji



An artistically built bridge in Chengdu lit up at night. Chengdu was the starting point of our Tibetan journey

Travelling from Chengdu to Lhasa on the Tibet Highway, about 1250 km long, had been my fascination for years. I had told my friend in China, Audrey Huang, about this and she kept watch to see when an overland tour was being organized. Just before Covid, she informed me that a company was organising a 10 day tour from Chengdu to Lhasa but we had to make our own arrangements to go back from there. So I told her to book two seats, one for me and one for herself since she would be my guide, philosopher and friend.

I booked my ticket to Chengdu and from Lhasa to India and was all ready to depart for China when she gave me the bombshell news ... the tour was cancelled because no visas were being given for Tibet since there was some problem enroute. For a couple of days, I was in a daze, all my plans shattered.



A Panda busy with his whole time job, eating bamboo shoots

But... as my Uncle from the Navy used to say "Carry on Regardless". I started hunting for an alternate. I could still use my one way ticket to Chengdu and book my return from there, cancelling my Lhasa Mumbai ticket. So I started searching for an alternate route -- lo and behold, God was kind and I came upon a site which said "Tibet Without a Visa". Overjoyed, I went through it carefully to see if there was a hitch, but I couldn't find any. So I forwarded the link to Audrey who did her research and said, yes it was possible.



My guide Audrey Huang walking through snow at Bipenggou Park

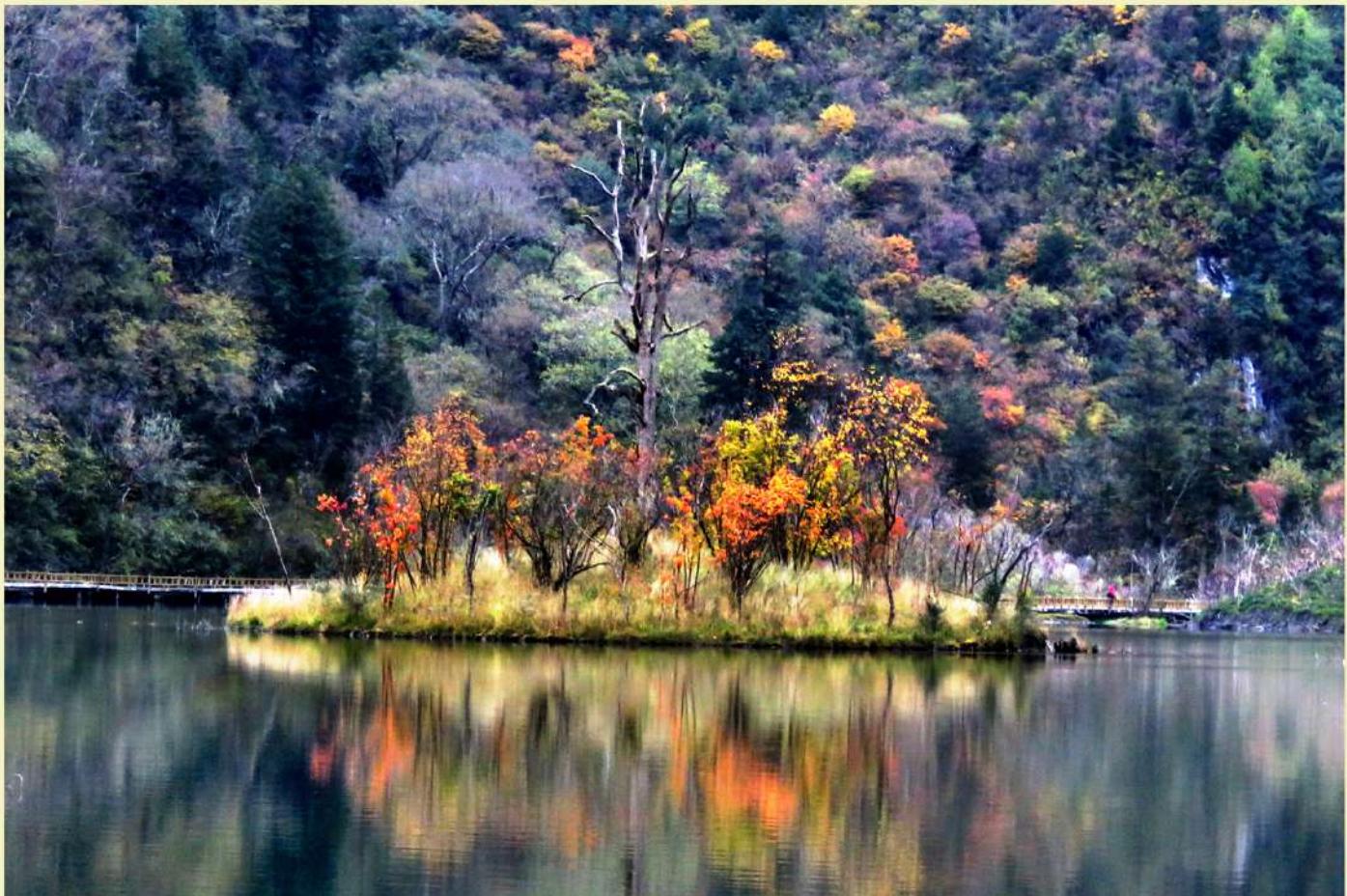


Traditional tower houses and wooden carved exteriors are common in Wenchuan

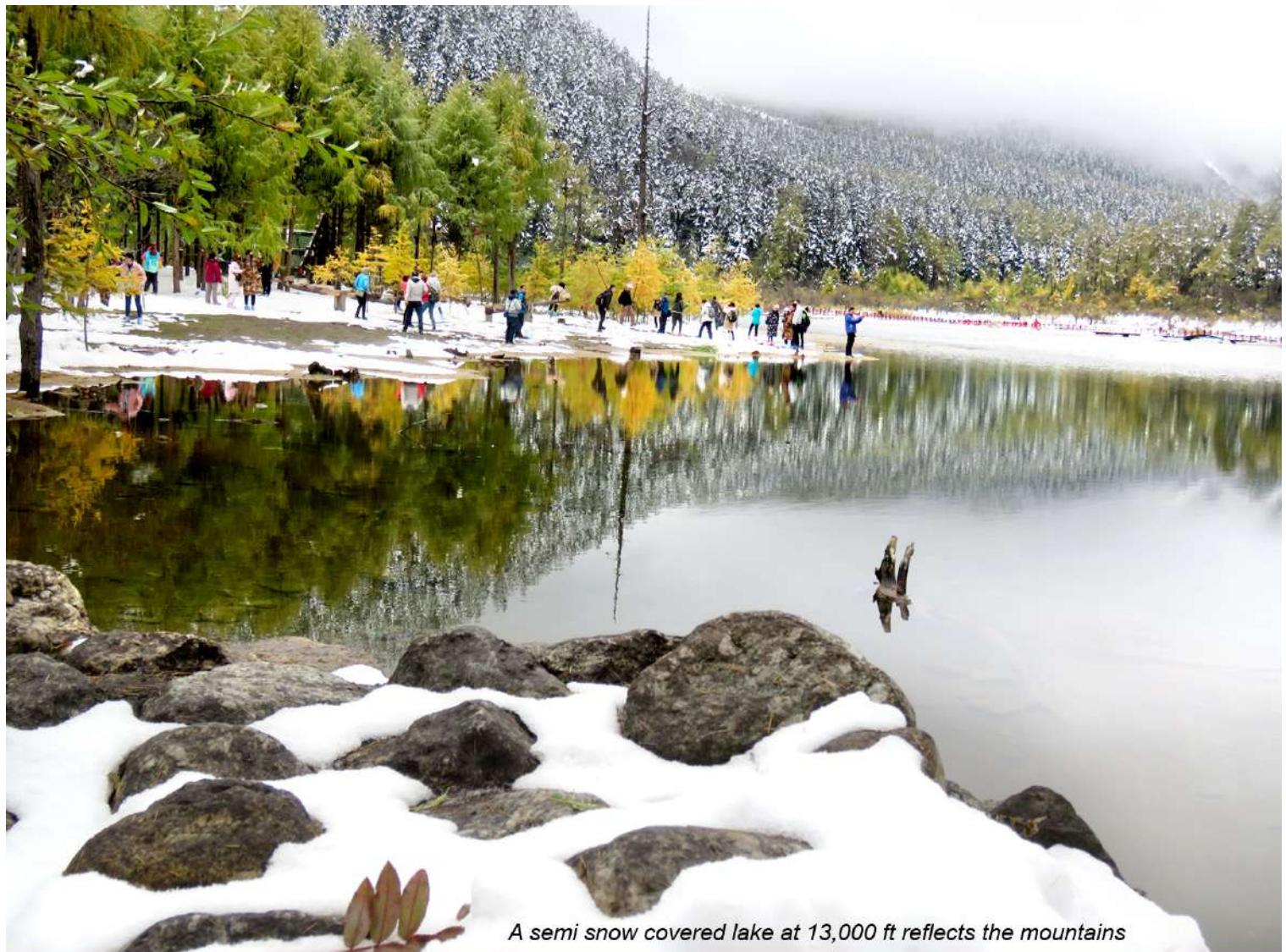


View of the gorge in which our hotel was located

The entire route we would travel was well above 10,000 ft and for a few days it would be around 15,000 ft continuously. She also told me that snowfall had already begun and we should be fully prepared for this.



Autumn colours still visible despite wintry weather at Bipenggou Park



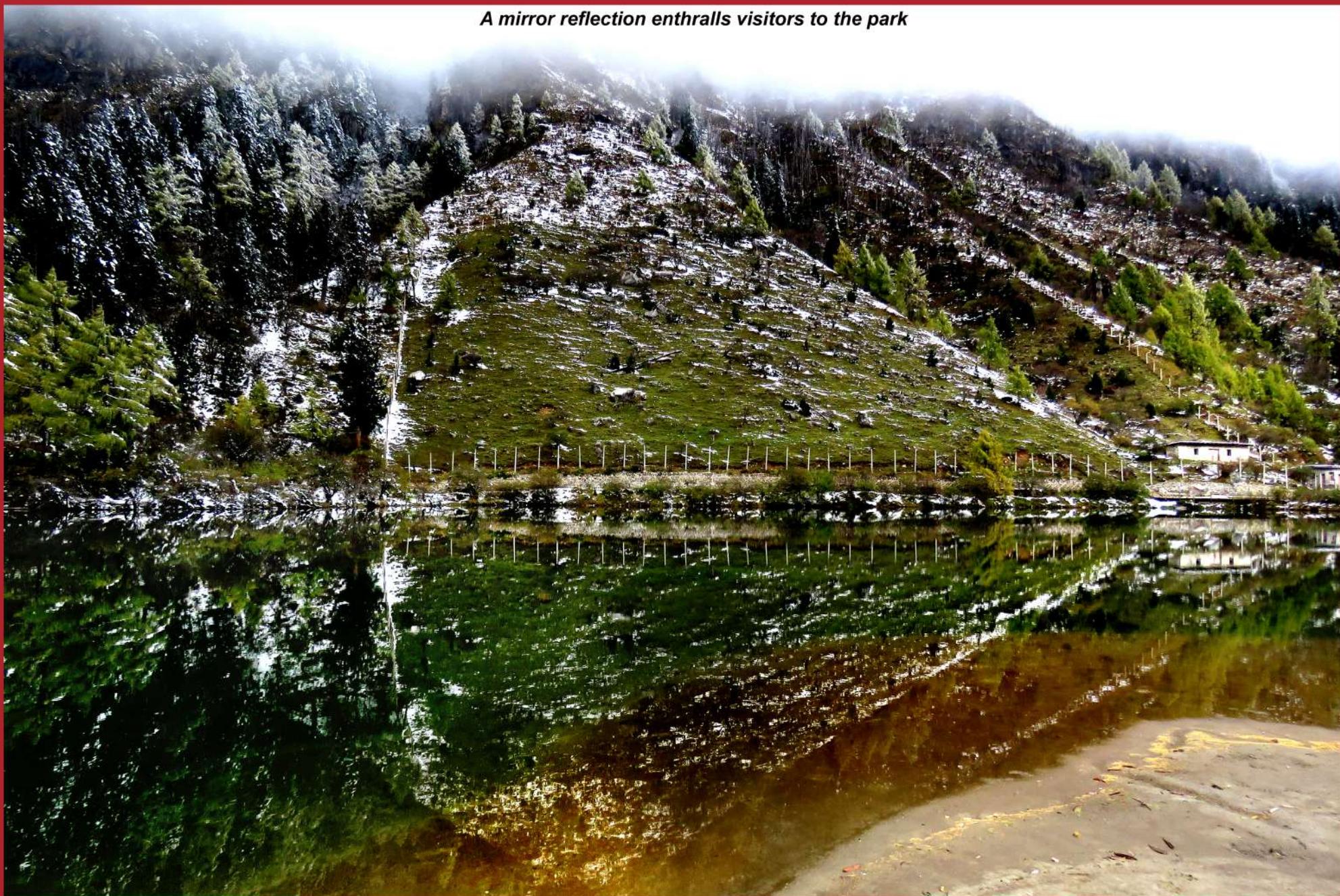
A semi snow covered lake at 13,000 ft reflects the mountains

She located a car and driver and I arrived in Chengdu, an ultra modern metropolis with a population of over 15 million!! While driving from the airport, I was dumbfounded by the super highways that darted in all directions and the discipline of the people. Absolutely no stray walking on the roads, everybody including cyclists, stopping at signals and the cleanliness of the streets impeccable. Really something to think about. We had a whirlwind tour of Chengdu, saw it lit up at night and enjoyed kebabs in the Muslim quarter. Next morning, we packed our car and were off by 7.00 am, bound for our first destination, the Bipenggou.Eco tourism reserve lying at an altitude of over 10,000 ft.

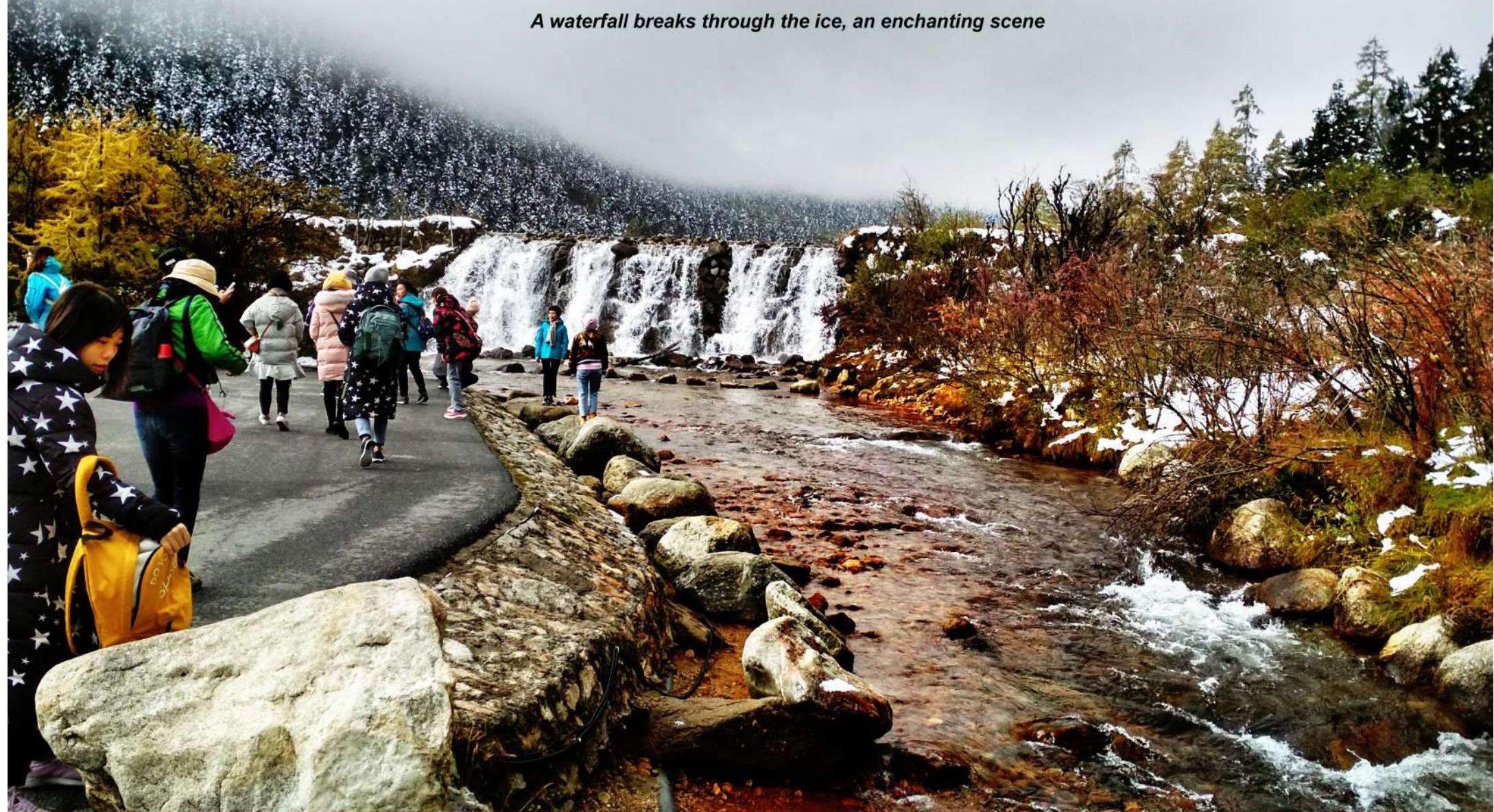
We took a slight diversion to see the Panda Centre, and had some close encounters with these cuddly animals, lazy lumps, eating away to glory! Soon we were firmly in the lap of the Tibetan Autonomous Region. Our first halt was astounding, Wenchuan, where we admired the beautifully carved wooden doors and windows. We were also struck by the "Tower Houses" that began to appear. Driving further THROUGH the towering mountains using tunnels upto 36 km long, we reached the entrance to the Bipenggou Reserve and bedded down for the night in below zero temperatures with snow flakes falling. Despite the cold I got up at sunrise and walked around the hotel to see the view. We were in a gorge surrounded by high mountains with a fast flowing river running by..

Soon Audrey appeared, we had our breakfast and rushed to the entrance gate which we found already crowded by tourists. Audrey bought our tickets and then we had a long walk to the buses, passing through various checkpoints. Grabbing a window seat, I waited anxiously to get a glimpse of this fabled park. The whole route was snowbound, only the road was a black strip in the carpet of white. The scenery was stupendous on both sides till we reached our first halt, a lake surrounded by towering mountains and fall colours still visible at places.

A mirror reflection entralls visitors to the park



A waterfall breaks through the ice, an enchanting scene





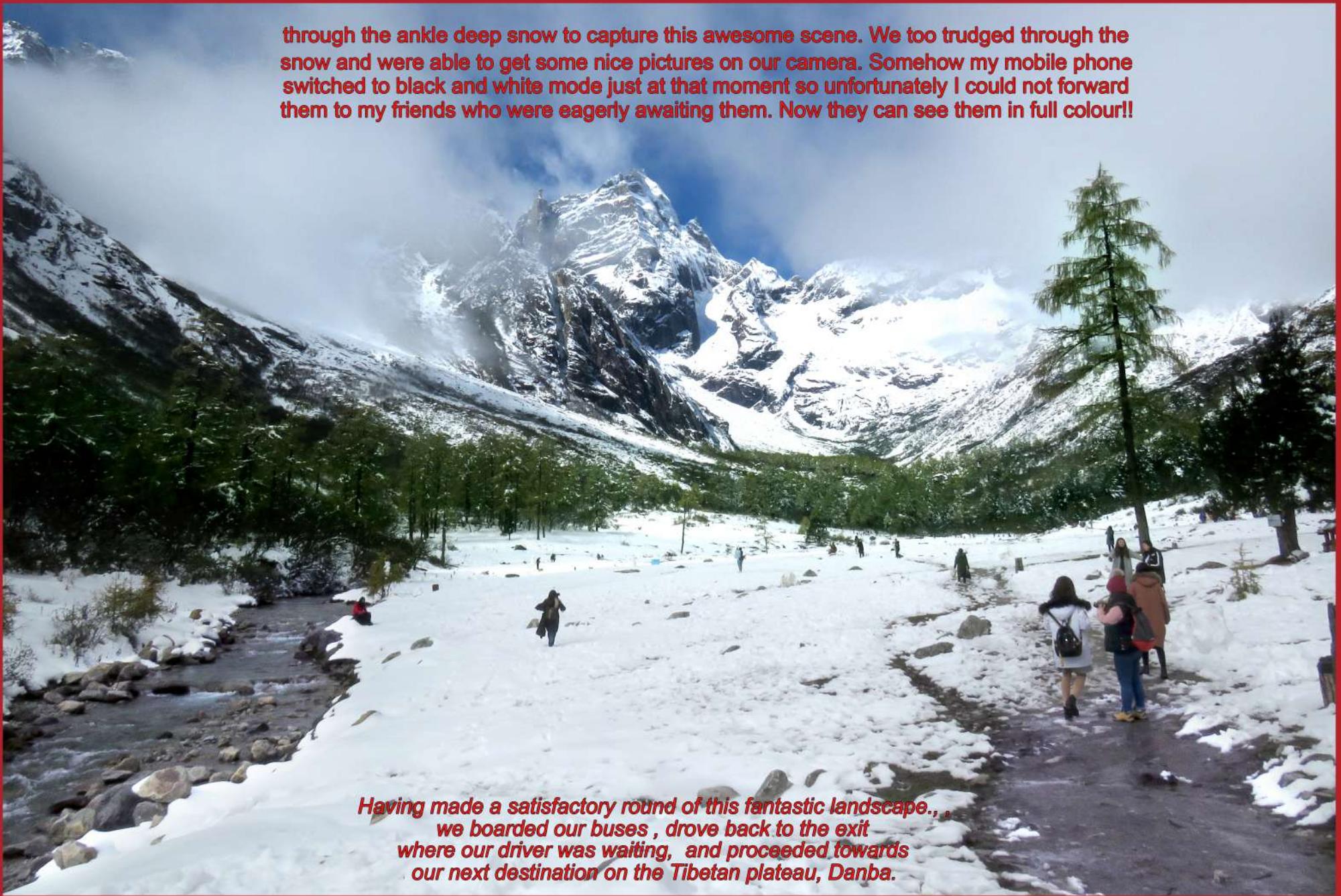
Gorgeous scenery at Bipenggou Park

She told me that the Bipenggou Valley is an original ecological scenic area combining primitive natural landscape, adorable ecological environment as well as various outdoor entertaining activities – hiking, polar expedition, skiing and skating. It becomes most attractive when the autumn dyes the forest yellow, golden, orange, red, etc. it is a natural reserve located in northern Sichuan, about 200km away from Chengdu. It enjoys a full length of 35km and a width of 4km. Because of its unique geographic position, Bipenggou Valley is blessed with typical alpine views, including virgin forest, plateau lakes, old glaciers, snow-capped mountains, tinkling streams and waterfalls as well as primitive meadows. People regard it as the beautiful shadow of Mount Sigunaing.

Apart from its scenery, there is a large range of different species of fauna and flora. With so many things to cherish, Bipeng Valley is honored as AAAA Scenic Area, National Eco-tourism Zone, including the sanctuary of Giant Pandas in Sichuan.

There are many small attractions scattered in Bipenggou Valley and we are going to see a few of them, she concluded. It was really awful weather as we talked about this really epic area of Sichuan but we could not do justice to it as the dreary weather made it difficult to click bright pictures. Anyway we had a round of the huge lake where our bus had parked and took plenty of pictures which did not satisfy us too much.

At a call from the driver we all boarded our buses for the second and final halt at the highest point where buses could travel, about 13,000 ft. Here it was indeed a fairy land of lakes half covered with ice, snowfields stretching to the horizon and a waterfall breaking through the ice barrier. It looked as if the clouds were lifting and we all waited with bated breath for the mother peak Mt. Siguaning, to show up. And indeed we were fortunate as after a while, the sun broke through the clouds and the mountain peeped out in all its glory.



through the ankle deep snow to capture this awesome scene. We too trudged through the snow and were able to get some nice pictures on our camera. Somehow my mobile phone switched to black and white mode just at that moment so unfortunately I could not forward them to my friends who were eagerly awaiting them. Now they can see them in full colour!!

*Having made a satisfactory round of this fantastic landscape,,,
we boarded our buses , drove back to the exit
where our driver was waiting, and proceeded towards
our next destination on the Tibetan plateau, Danba.*

RAMESWARAM - A PILGRIMAGE CUM BEACH DESTINATION

Text and Pictures by Abbas Tyabji



A gorgeous sunrise at Mandapan where our resort was located

We were visiting friends in Madurai, the famous Temple town of Tamil Nadu some time ago and knowing I have a travel bug, they told me to visit Rameswaram, just 110 km away. "Even if you don't want to visit the temple, you will see the bluest water anywhere in India, and the ghost town of Dhanushkodi nearby."

That sealed it. We dropped our other plans and headed to Rameswaram which took us over 3 hours because of the horrendous traffic. We were dumb founded on seeing the seemingly unending rail cum road bridge that connects the mainland to Pamban Island, where Rameswaram is located. All of us were excited seeing a train trundling along and we stopped to click some pictures. The water, as my friend had said, was extremely blue-- as one would imagine in Maldives or Mauritius.

We crossed over to the island and located the Ramanathswamy temple at the tip of Rameswaram. However, it was impossible to park anywhere in the vicinity so we decided to proceed to Dhanushkodi.

The drive was extremely rejuvenating as the road was along a strip of land surrounded by the bluest water you can imagine, with waves from the Indian Ocean lapping on the West and the Bay of Bengal on the east. At the southernmost tip is the Palk Strait that separates India and Sri Lanka, a distance of just 30 km.



The Ramanathaswamy temple with a beautiful seascape in the background



I asked him when this happened and he told me it was in 1964. After that the Government decided that no one should stay here permanently and the houses were abandoned.

I asked if he was not afraid of another such calamity would befall him, to which he replied that it was in Bhagwan's (God's) hands.

When He wanted them to meet the same fate, it would happen. Till they had to earn a living!!

Suddenly our interpreter rushed off as his bus had come so we ended our conversation and made our way towards Rameswaram.

Two views of the lavishly decorated interiors of the temple



The wind blowing from both sides was exhilarating as we proceeded to this "ghost town". We drove almost to the tip where we found a handful of almost totally demolished buildings and a few stalls selling coconut water, cold drinks and snacks. The shop keepers were eagerly awaiting the tourists expected to descend by bus loads to view this unique scene...

standing at the tip of India with waves lapping at handshaking distance on both sides!!!. After we had our fill of corn and coconut water, a godsend in the extreme humidity, we asked the coconut seller what was the significance of the place. "See here, gentleman," he said, ".This is the place from where Rama is believed to have flown to Sri Lanka to rescue his wife Sita.,with the help of the monkey God Hanuman."

"Oh, OK, what about these devastated buildings, standing like ghosts? "I asked. "Yes, yes, there was a huge hurricane and waves higher than trees hit these budings and all fell to the ground. More than 100 people died,"he concluded.

I had got a bystander who was waiting for a bus to return to Rameswaram, to act as as Interpreter.



Painted skies at sunrise and sunset enchant the visitors to Rameswaram

Since my wife was unable to walk too much because of knee problems, I parked the car about a kilometer from the temple and walked alone towards it, watching the crowds milling around. I found the temple enmeshed in electric wires. But once I entered, I found a different scene. The beautifully carved temple spire plated in gold, had exquisite carvings of gods and goddesses in different poses which left me speechless. And the interiors left me spellbound. The paintings on the ceilings and walls in vibrant colours were unbelievable. I was admiring these and walking around slowly when I found another person equally in a trance, admiring man's handiwork, so I got talking to him. He told me he was a regular visitor but each time he found it as fascinating as ever..

I asked him to tell me a little about the temple and he readily agreed. He explained that the Ramanathaswamy temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva, and is admired for its imposing structure, majestic towers, intricate sculptures and the highly decorated corridors, which are the longest of any temple in India. and there is also a huge statue of Nandi, about 18 ft in height. Recalling the legend of Ramayana, he said the temple is connected to Lord Rama, who, after defeating Ravana and rescuing his wife Sita from his clutches came back to Rameswaram to pay homage.

He asked where we were staying and suggested we visit the Blue Waters Ocean Paradise hotel situated right on the beach just a few feet from the sea, where we could have our lunch and enjoy wading into the sea. So I picked up my wife and we drove to this hotel and found it at a superb location. We met Mr Ashik Ansari, Manager, who was very courteous, had lunch and my wife had an opportunity to dip her feet in the warm water. After this enjoyable break, we drove back, crossed the bridge to the resort, had a delicious and filling dinner and went to bed to the swishing sound of the waves.



Our resort at Mandapam, Khushi Resorts





Superbly carved pillars and ceilings that enthrall pilgrims



Early next morning I walked through the casuarina trees to the beach and enjoyed a memorable sunrise with the sky painted in unbelievable colours. The ever changing colours with fishing boats silhouetted against this huge canvas made a memorable scene.

After a hearty breakfast we bid goodbye to our ready- to- please host Iyyapoan and departed from Rameswaram with a bagful of memories.

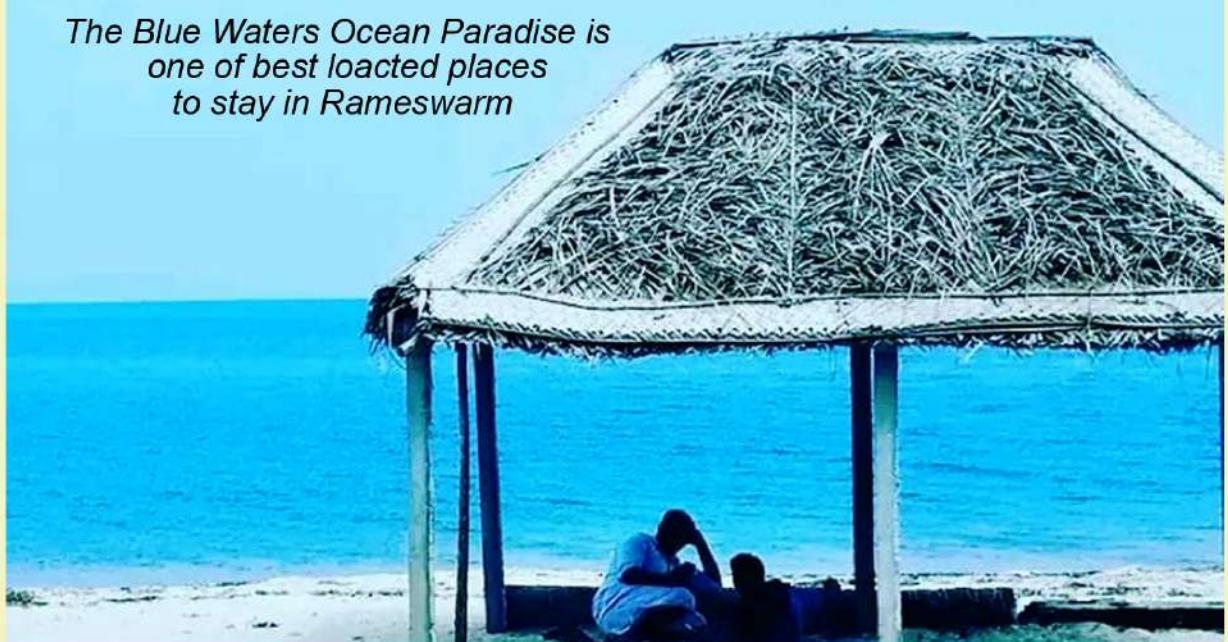
Unfortunately, I had left my camera in the car and my mobile phone created some problems with the result that I could not click pictures inside and outside the temple. So I have borrowed some pictures from my Hindu friends who visit Rameswaram regularly and who agreed to part with them..

The bluest water in India can be seen at Rameswaram





*The Blue Waters Ocean Paradise is
one of best located places
to stay in Rameswaram*





The sea ravaged town of Dhanushkodi at the tip of India



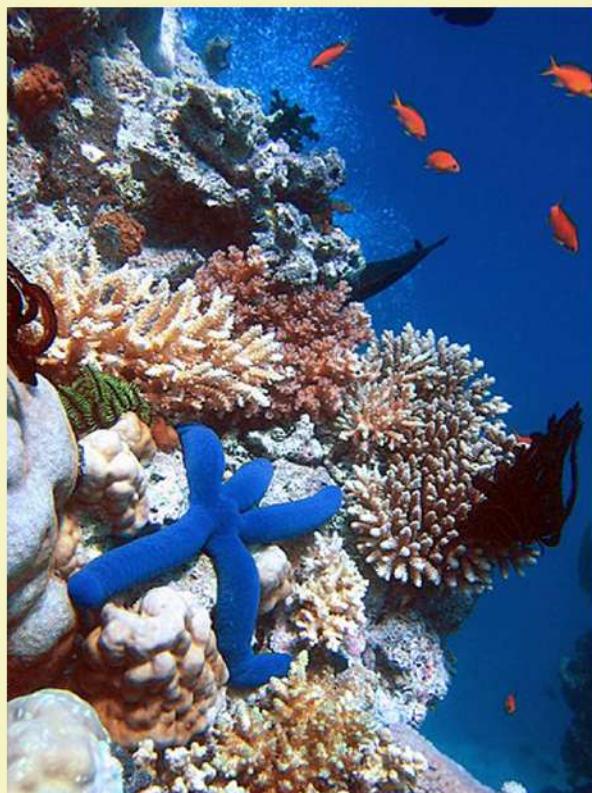
GULF OF MANNAR- WORTH VISITING

When you are in Rameswaram, it would be ideal to visit the Gulf of Mannar via glass-bottom boats available there



The Gulf of Mannar Marine National Park is a protected area of India consisting of 21 small islands (islets) and adjacent coral reefs in the Gulf of Mannar in the Indian Ocean. It lies 1 to 10 km away from the east coast of Tamil Nadu, India for 160 km between Thoothukudi (Tuticorin) and Dhanushkodi. It is the core area of the Gulf of Mannar Biosphere Reserve which includes a 10 km buffer zone around the park,

including the populated coastal area. The park has a high diversity of plants and animals in its marine, intertidal and near shore habitats. Public access inside the park is limited to glass-bottom boat rides. It was established as a National Park in 1986.



AL-BALAD-- ANCIENT HEART OF JEDDAH

Text and some pictures by Syed Maqsood and Ayesha Alladin



The Floating mosque,a landmarks of Jeddah

I knew that Jeddah is very famous as the major entry point for pilgrims to Mecca and Madinah. It is also an ultramodern metropolis with stupendous views of the Red Sea. However, it was only after I had spent quite some time in this city that I was told there is another Jeddah, the old city known simply as Al Balad or The Town. This area is witness to ancient civilisations with a history dating back to the 7th century.

When I had some time to spare I requested my cousin, who had been living there for many years, to accompany me to visit this OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN OF JEDDAH. Entering from Bab Hadid we wanted first to look around the various markets which, we were told, were very atmospheric. On entering Al Balad we were astounded to see houses built of huge rocks cut to shape, with wooden construction and ornamental doors and panels. The lattice windows in different colors struck us as something unique.... it is of no surprise to learn that Balad had been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site way back in 2014.

We first entered what we were told was the Bedouin market as in the past, these inhabitants of the desert would come to buy their necessities here including cardamom and grains. Pilgrims bound for Hajj or Umrah also buy their necessities here as prices are low and quality good.

As we walked along we found textile shops, tailoring establishments, and shops selling various other goods imported from India, Pakistan and China.



View of Modern Jeddah



One of the bulidings in Al Balad

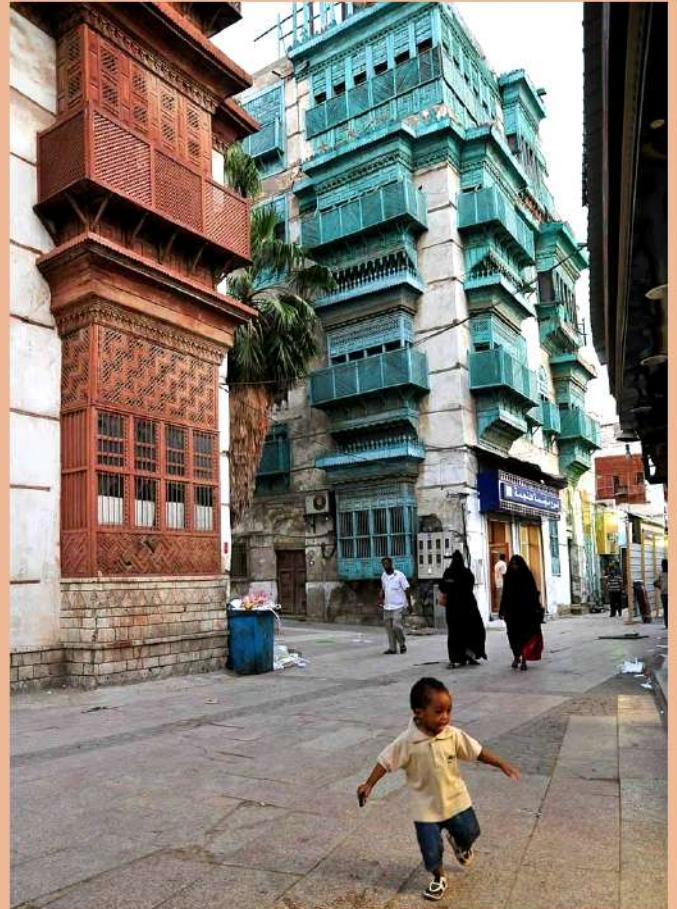


Interior of Shafei mosque

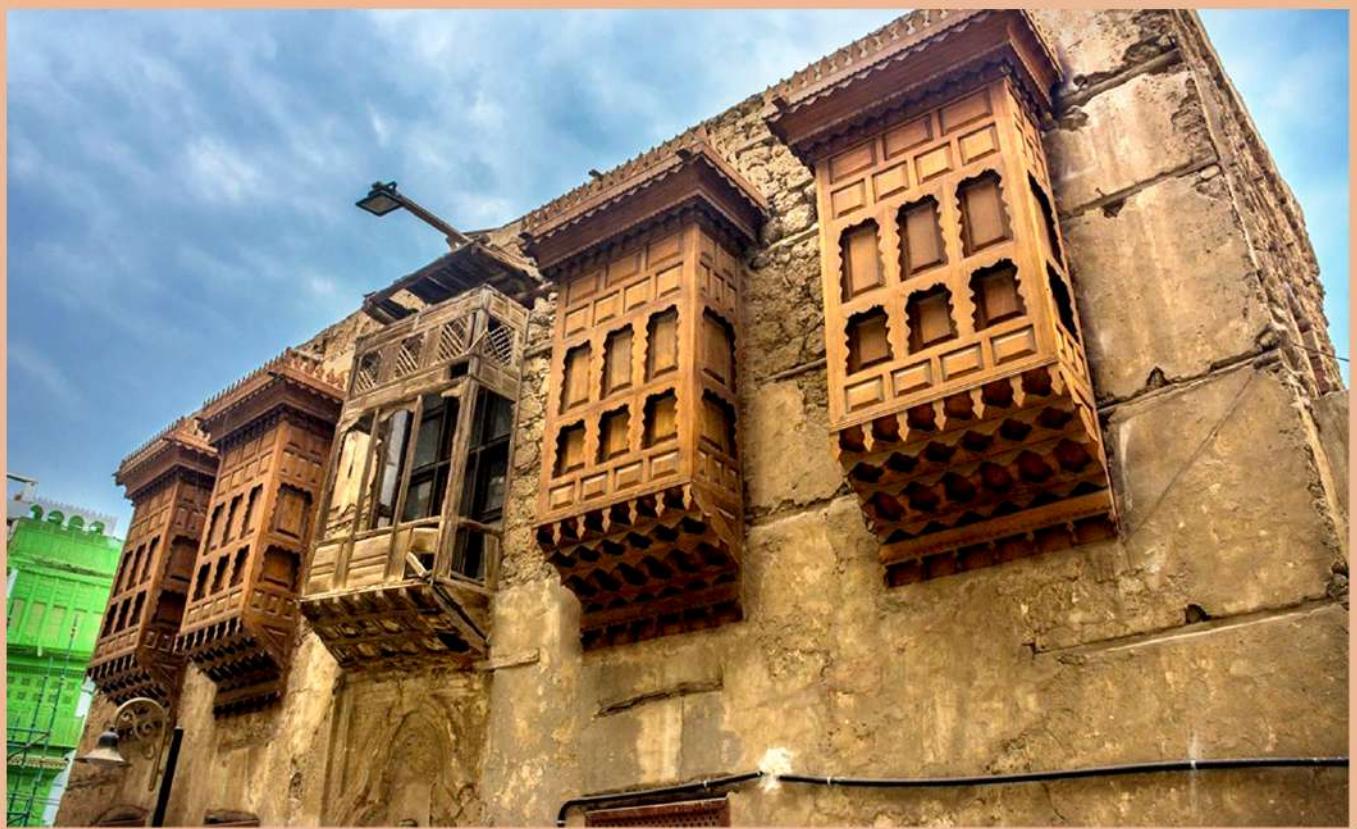
Along the way we were invited to share a cup of Kahwah with some locals who told us a little about the history of Balad. Having been founded in the 7th century, Balad has seen the rise and fall of many dynasties. It has some buildings which are over 500 years old, most of which are being restored under a 13 billion USD project spearheaded by Mohammad bin Salman himself. We were curious to know if Balad ever had walls to protect it as we had seen in many old towns. Yes, they told us. Defensive walls had been built but were torn down in the 1940s. Most of the original inhabitants had moved out as other areas of Jeddah developed into more prosperous looking neighbourhoods. What about these old buildings then? we asked and were told most have become hotels or other commercial establishments.

People praying at Shafei mosque





Houses built of stone blocks with beautifully carved laticced windows line the streets of Al Balad





Bab Al Hadid, one of the entrances to Al Balad

We also asked about the other markets in the area and were told about Souq Al Alawi, which is famous for spices, and Souq Al Qabil named after a merchant who did business here and became a household name. Souq al Nada, on the other hand, was famous as the food market where fruits, fish and mandi restaurants did roaring business. Currency exchange and gold shops could also be found here we were told.

The minaret of Shafei mosque is visible for miles



Having had umpteen cups of Kahwah and heard a lot about Balad. we decided to visit some of the ancient mosques in that area.

The first mosque we visited was also the oldest , the Shafei mosque. It has a huge open courtyard for ventilation and beautiful interiors. Its minaret, we were told, was built in the 7th century. The mosque has undergone renovation over the centuries

Another mosque we had been eager to visit, was the Otthman bin Affan mosque,which has a long history and is also called Ebony Mosque because two very long masts of ebony wood are to be found here. Its minaret,we were informed, is one of the largest in the area.

Satisfied with our discoveries and opportunity to meet locals in a cordial atmosphere,we made our way back, getting a glimpse of the Floating Mosque, built on the sea. Its silhouette against a radiant sunset was an excellent curtain-down for our interesting tour.



Outdoor and indoor dining is available in Balad



Walking the streets of Balad



Shops selling spices, food and a variety of items line the narrow lanes of Balad



Interiors of some shops are lavishly decorated



Two visitors pose with a highly decorated door



Walking the streets of Balad



Travel experiences good and bad

By Vasant Sukhatme

My wife Monika and I love to travel and we have been fortunate in having had the opportunity to travel to numerous countries. Each trip has been a unique experience and we have been enriched by the places we have visited, the sights that we have seen, the foods that we have eaten, and the people we have met. Monika and I talk frequently about our travels and what we have enjoyed about our experiences and we also spend a lot of time talking about where to go next. We decide together where to travel, when to go, and with whom to travel. We have made trips by ourselves or in the company of family such as our grandchildren and our siblings and their spouses.

Our travels have taken us to a wide variety of places. We have been to many of the major cities of the world, including New York City, Athens (Greece), Tokyo (Japan), Beijing (China), Copenhagen (Denmark), Paris (France) and London (England), Cairo (Egypt), Casablanca (Morocco), and Rome

The New York skyline is really impressive



The Statue of Liberty at sunset

(Italy). We have traveled to sites of political or historical significance in the various countries or places we have visited (for example, the Gettysburg battlefield in the state of Pennsylvania, the site of a famous battle during the U.S. Civil War and also memorialized as the place where President Abraham Lincoln gave his eloquent and unforgettable speech; and the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum in Vietnam's largest city, Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon); places of great natural beauty and scenic vistas (such as the Grand Canyon in Arizona, for example, or the Matsushima region near the Japanese city of Tokyo and long-settled, old cities (such as the blue city of Chefchauen in Morocco).



The Andrew Cuomo Bridge

We make every effort to eat the local cuisine during our travels and consider ourselves adventurous in the selection of foods. This article describes our trips to three major cities in the world in the past 15 years where we have been the victims of a pickpocket artist or being careless with my wallet: losing my wallet during a St. Patrick's Day parade in New York; losing and then recovering my wallet at a train station in the delightful city of Copenhagen; and experiencing a quintessential Japanese experience after dropping my wallet accidentally inside a taxi in Tokyo, just as I was exiting the taxi upon reaching our destination. Each of these experiences has colored our memories of these places and not at all in a bad way. These incidents have provided material for conversations with friends and family and have underscored the importance of keeping one's documents and wallets secure. Even so, we consider ourselves fortunate that we have not had to deal with a serious injury or illness during our travels and we remain grateful for that.

Monika and I have also experienced similar kinds of incidents in Rome, Athens, Beijing, and other places. After a string of these incidents, my wife has become the *designated carrier of important documents* such as our passports, credit cards, and cash during our travels. Each of these incidents has taught us to be prepared specially during international trips.



A view of St Patrick's Day parade in New York



The Gettysburg plain where a decisive battle was fought during the American Civil War and a photo of a Union soldier (right)



St. Patrick's Day is a particularly important day for Irish Americans and in major cities such as New York, Chicago and Boston where the Irish diaspora is particularly prominent and numerous. The celebrations in honor of the patron saint of Ireland include a large parade along a major thoroughfare of the city (for example, Dearborn Avenue in downtown Chicago or along Fifth Avenue in New York City). Participants in the parade usually wear green clothing and accessories and include high school marching bands, some military, and several youth organizations among others. The parade along New York's Fifth Avenue attracts a large number of spectators. The celebration was on March 17; we lived in Minnesota and were visiting visiting our son and his family who lived in New York. Our first grandchild was then about 2 years old. While our son and daughter-in-law were at work (ah, those pre-Covid years), I took it upon myself to go for a walk with my grandson in a stroller. This was mid-March and it was a sunny but brisk day in New York. I put the child in the stroller and tied the seatbelt and I put on my winter coat, gloves and a cap.

My son's apartment was not far from the route of the parade and we were soon at the parade in the middle of a sizable crowd lining the sidewalk. After about 20 minutes I could see the young child get a bit restless and decided to back out from the front facing the street and head back home. I backed out, turned west at the next block and headed down Sixth Street. I walked briskly and was home in about 15 minutes. My wife was home and she took charge of our young grandson, gave him a snack

Two views of Matsushima Bay, a must see in Japan





Chefchoufan, the Blue City of Morocco is a highlight of any visit to that country

and put him for a nap. It was while she was doing that that I took off my winter coat and realized that my wallet was missing. I frantically thought that perhaps I had left it at home when I went to the parade but concluded, with a horrified expression, that I had lost it or had my pocket picked while watching the parade.

The seriousness of our situation doubled when I realized to my horror that the very next day we were scheduled to fly back to our home in Minnesota. In this post-9/11 world, it is impossible to check in for a flight, let alone board a flight, if one doesn't have an ID card such as a driver's license. My wife had her license since she had not gone out to watch the parade but I had just been pickpocketed and so was sans sans any official form of identification.

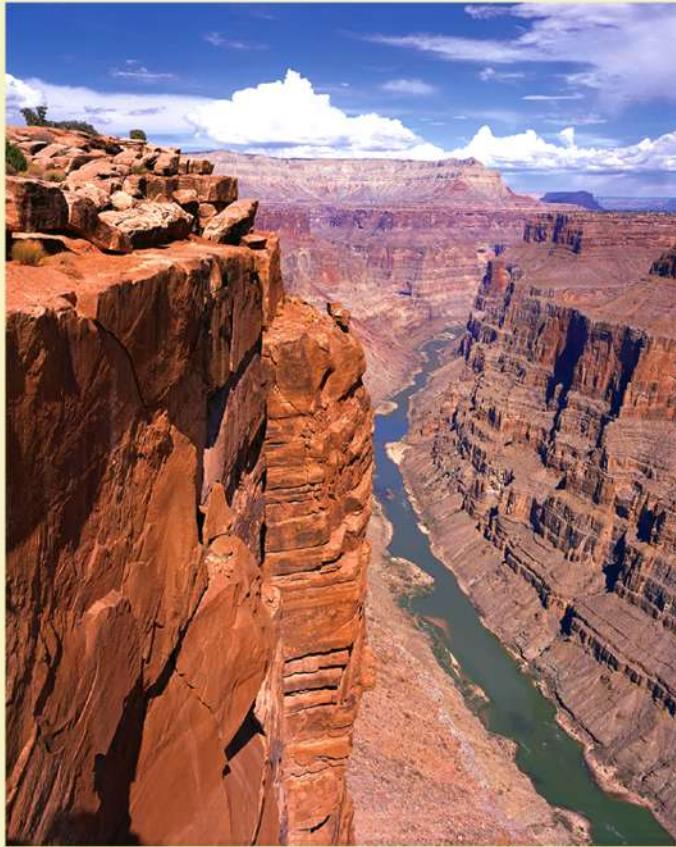
I immediately called the local police precinct and thought no one would answer the phone since everyone would surely be at the Patrick's Day parade and no one would be available to address this relatively minor crime. But to my utmost surprise, a young-sounding voice answered the phone and listened to my predicament. He asked me to go to the police precinct and file a detailed report. I did all that he requested; the police officer then gave me a document which he said would allow me to board my flight the next morning bound for Minnesota. Morning came, we left for the airport, were able to check in and board our flight. But, unfortunately, the end was not that simple! I had to get a new driver's license,

new credit cards, a new faculty ID card at my university, a new health insurance card, and so on. Obtaining all these new documents took nearly a month to accomplish. Overall, a very costly experience!

Having been burned once I was particularly aware of my circumstances in all my travels after New York. A couple of years after that I had to go to Copenhagen (Denmark) for a conference. My wife and I decided that Copenhagen would provide the ideal place to piggy back on at the conclusion of my conference and visit Sweden. Hence, we made the following plan: I would fly into Copenhagen and attend the conference; a few days later Monika would fly to Copenhagen and we would spend a few days in Denmark and then go to Stockholm in Sweden.



An arch in blue leads to a market in the town



The Colorado River flows through the Grand Canyon

We wanted to see the port city of Maalmo and also the crystal-making region of Sweden which is well known for important makers of various types of vessels such as water goblets, wine glasses, flower vases, and decorative pieces.

I flew into Copenhagen and reached without any incident. Copenhagen is a truly lovely city meant for walking along its main canals and it is a relatively flat area. Copenhagen airport is a bit of a distance from the city but there is very good train service from the airport to the city. I landed in Copenhagen, cleared passport control and customs and made my way to the train station. In short order, I boarded a train for the city's main train station in central Copenhagen. At that station the train comes into the lower level and one then needs to take an elevator to get up to street level where taxis and other public transportation are available.

(to be continued in next issue)

Horseshoe Bend of the Colorado River, upstream of the Grand Canyon



COLOURFUL BLOOMS IN HOLLAND

*Han Blaakman from Holland sent these stunning pictures of tulips in his country.
If you visit Holland during the month of April or May you are likely to view
these marvels of nature. Han has travelled to more than 100 countries*





WE HOPE OUR READERS WILL CONTRIBUTE ARTICLES /PICTURES AND FORWARD THIS MAGAZINE
TO THEIR CONTACTS SO THAT MORE PEOPLE CAN READ AND PERHAPS BENEFIT FROM IT
*This magazine is Edited and Designed by Abbas Tyabji with the assistance of Talla Goutham of Charm Photo Inn
Send information / pics and request to be added to FREE MAILING LIST on Whatsapp No: 0091-9391010015*

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