

NOBODY KNOWS THIS WORLD BETTER

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NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC **TRAVELLER** INDIA

WHEN WINTER COMES

DESTINATIONS TO
VISIT WHEN THE
MERCURY DIPS

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ON DITCHING THE
ITINERARY

MAKING ROOM

INDIAN PROPERTIES
REDEFINE 'COOL'

OMAN

AHMEDABAD

BAHRAIN

JAMAICA

THAILAND

GHENT

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SEPTEMBER 2017

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ON THE COVER

Winter does make our days shorter, yes, but it also makes them easier to relish. In this picture, photographer Erin Dillman captures

the delight we feel when the sweaters come out to make us feel a little more hugged. And also, if you're fortunate, there might even be snow.

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About us National Geographic Traveller India is about immersive travel and authentic storytelling that inspires travel. It is about family travel, about travel experiences, about discoveries, and insights. Our tagline is "Nobody Knows This World Better" and every story attempts to capture the essence of a place in a way that will urge readers to create their own memorable trips, and come back with their own amazing stories.

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THE HOLIDAY SEASON



A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Shreevatsa Nevatia".

IT HELPS TO
TALK ABOUT THE
WEATHER. IT AFFECTS
US ALL EQUALLY

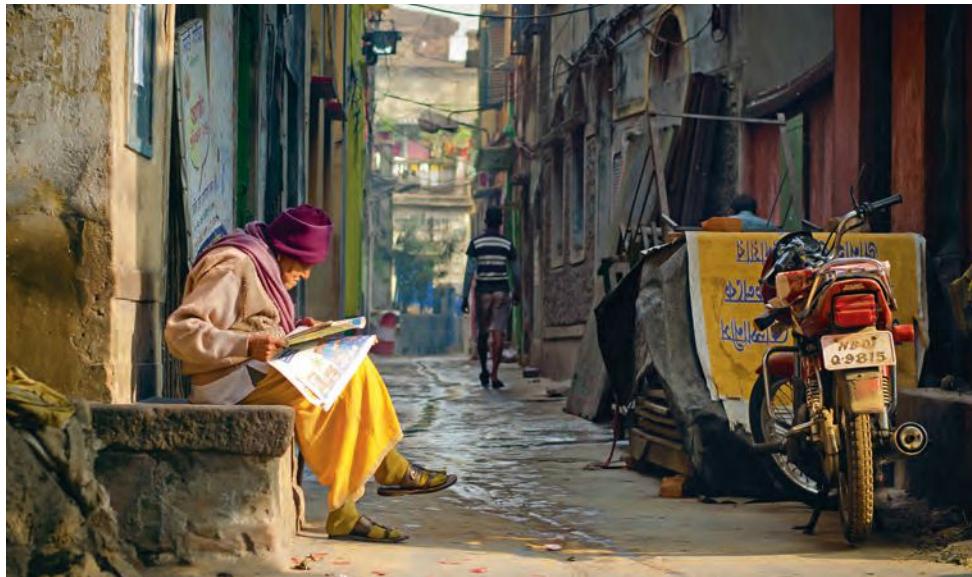
Every September, my father is the first to feel a "light nip in the air." Autumn brings to Calcutta the convoy of Goddess Durga and with her, predictably, comes expectation. Battered by humidity, the city breathes a sigh of relief each time the Puja pandal begins to interfere with its traffic. Winter is coming. Sweaters, blankets and monkey caps all come out when the cold finally arrives in November, but the mercurial Calcuttan does also soften when the temperature allows for more picnics and adda in the sun.

The American novelist Paul Auster had once written that it helps to talk about the weather. It affects us all equally. In Calcutta, nothing breaks the ice better than talk about the fog or the chill. Suddenly a holiday destination for foreign tourists and local travellers, the city puts on a show. Park Street—Calcutta's centre of sorts—is lit like an opulent Christmas tree through the season. Terraces are decked with fairy lights, and the amount of tea Calcuttans consume during this time could well give the British a hangover. Usually not one for moderation, Calcutta does get the permutation of the elements just right.

Wanting to escape the bitter cold waves of the north, my cousins in Delhi would often escape east in December. As children, we sang carols and put stockings on our windows. The cheer of our vacation made it easier for us to

believe we had been good enough for Santa. But even while my hometown supplied us with an abundance of that festive spirit, my parents did at times like to interrupt our winter with a holiday. "Let's go the hills," my father would say. "It's our only chance to see snow." Apart from the one Kathmandu compromise, my mother never did let him have his way. Puri remained her favourite destination. Its beaches, she said, were prettier when the water was cold. Winter was surely the best time to travel. Though places showed us their best side, we were still very glad to return home.

If my father were to pick up this issue, he'd certainly say, "This Ghent looks very promising." My mother, however, would campaign for Ahmedabad. "Gujarat will be too oppressive in the summer," she'd prudently argue. Oman would give my mother her beach and Thailand would give my father his Buddha. Always looking for a ticket to the Middle East, I would hope a gentler sun would make them opt for Bahrain instead, but it would perhaps be Jamaica that would win the day. The odds would sadly be against my mother's favour. Much to her chagrin, Bob Marley's "No Woman, No Cry", is the one song my father and I can both sing along to in perfect unison. I hope that as you sit around your living room, our suggestions for your winter break fuel a similar debate. This time we'd like to heat things up. *



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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DON'T SUSPEND YOUR DISBELIEF

A SENSE OF WONDER—NOT FANCY
INSTAGRAM FILTERS—MAKES
TRAVEL UNFORGETTABLE

So, the other day I went to watch a movie. I won't dignify the movie by naming it (though I can tell you it rhymes with "poilet" and is a terrible film on a very important issue), but the main thing is that I watched it at Raj Mandir in Jaipur, and it was wonderful.

To those who haven't been, it's an art deco-ey building, a Jaipur institution, and most importantly, a single-screen theatre. Remember those? You went inside, knowing there was only one movie to choose from, bought your tickets, and went into a large, surprisingly dark hall. And then the lights came on, and magic happened. It was a nostalgia trip for sure, even without the Simba chips and that little Chocobar cone that represented the height of sophistication and luxury to me at six years old, but what struck me was what an occasion this was. Not just for me, but for everyone there.

When was the last time you dressed up to go watch a movie? Or to get on a plane? And no, those baggy pants around your ankles don't count. I mean your Sunday best, with your face probably powdered up and shining with excitement. When even airline food was so rare that you waited for it?

Yes, I know I'm sounding like a particularly tiresome 70-year-old, but I'm wondering whether we've lost joy entirely. In travel in particular, things are so easy now, there's barely a sense of specialness about it. You travel because cool people travel, because Mark Twain used his Twitter account to say so.

I'm planning a holiday with friends, and I realised I needed to kick myself up the

backside when we were debating between France and Croatia and going "Mmm, hmmm, I'm not sure. Should we do Airbnb?" No, none of us were entirely blasé, but I don't want to get there either. I mean, France! Croatia! Just the fact that you're going, that you have the money and time to go, should be fantastic, no?

We have, obviously, too much of everything, and we get it too quickly. Can't find a book (if you even went to a bookstore)? Order it online. Can't wait for a pizza? Order it online. Haven't

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO ANTICIPATION? WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THINGS BEING RARE AND WONDERFUL AND WORTH WAITING FOR?

travelled to the "in" place this year? Go now, because life's too short, etc, and it's easier to be cool than join those people on the Wall Of Shame who didn't go. Oh, and remember to take a selfie or food-porn shot, because if you don't put it up on social media, it never happened.

Whatever happened to anticipation? Whatever happened to things being rare and wonderful and worth waiting for? The longest wait we'd probably have right now is between *Game of Thrones* episodes, and it's frustrating precisely because we're not used to waiting any more. A whole week,

you say? *Quel horreur!* And there's only one movie playing at the theatre, and it'll probably go on for a month? Somebody call Human Rights Watch!

Don't agree? What would you say if I offered you pasta? You'd go, "Do you have pesto sauce? Because I'm avoiding nuts. Oh, and arrabiata is so yesterday, but I love fusilli, so I'll have it if you have fusilli." Compare that with the little four-year-old I met in the elevator, who was discussing her lunch with her mom. "Pasta!" she said, eyes shining, clearly delighted. That's the reaction we should have, no?

Yes, obviously, it's good to have choices and preferences and to have some things arrive quickly, but I fear we may have passed a point where things don't matter anymore, because you can always get something else, do something else, go somewhere else. We're over-sophisticated adults, pretending we're above it all.

What I want to be is four years old again, or at least pretend to be. I want to look at skies and leaves and places and people like they're the most amazing things I've ever seen. I want to get excited about ice cream because it's ice cream, and I've promised myself one next week. I think life's too short for not getting excited, really. *

VARDHAN KONDVIKAR
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TO RELISH TRAVEL, PAUSE FOR EFFECT

OUR LIVES HAVE BEEN TAKEN OVER BY HECTIC NEWSFEEDS AND BUSY SCHEDULES. ONLY STILLNESS CAN SHOW US THE BIG PICTURE



In the Torah, you will find a long chapter dedicated to the Sabbath—the day of rest. Sages urge their people to “wrap” themselves “in tzitzit (fine robes) to greet the Sabbath, the king.” After creating the world for six continuous days, God created *menuchah* (rest) on day seven. Because, the Sages say, without *menuchah*, “creativity would be unattainable”. In my contemporary world, *menuchah* translates to ‘remaining still’, and in our cacophony, I’m convinced remaining still is an important life skill.

Pico Iyer, traveller and writer, says in his *The Art of Stillness: Adventures in Going Nowhere*, “In an age of constant movement, nothing is more urgent than sitting still.” Travel has now become synonymous with constant motion—places to see, eat, and shop. There are pictures to be posted on social media, and then there is that need to review every site you visit and dish you eat. We are constantly looking to experience more in the shortest time available. We are conditioned to being “productive” even when we are on holiday. Our travels are dictated by Instagram posts and listicles. Our mantra is ‘more’, and somehow we find we are always in demand. Our minds and our bodies are perpetually badgered and on call. In this constant commotion, everything, including our experiences, becomes superficial, undermining the core incentive of travel, which is to see, hear and feel acutely.

Epiphany struck in the unlikeliest of places. It happened at the top of the Whistler Mountain, 7,500 feet above sea level, in Jasper, Canada. The sun was an over-sized diamond embedded in the bluest

sky. I felt I could touch it. Spread before me was an inviting cloudscape. Mt. Robson, the tallest Canadian Rockies peak, was at the far corner. The Columbia Icefield and its jewel-coloured glacier lakes were down below. The panorama was magnificent.

Seeing the awe-inspiring vista through the viewfinder, I, like the rest of the people in my group, was busy clicking photos. Everyone was running helter skelter, trying to get the best shot. I could hear the sound of a dozen shutters drowning mine. As I was zooming in on another shot, I experienced my ‘aha’ moment. There were two men,

THE CORE INCENTIVE OF TRAVEL IS TO SEE AND FEEL ACUTELY

who like an island of calm, were living in the moment. No cameras, no reviews, no commotion. They were simply milking that art of stillness.

It is in silence that you can hear better, see better and feel better. When I put my camera down and remained still, I tasted the sweetness of the mist on my lips; the tenderness of the breeze on the nape of my neck, the fragrance of the clouds (they smell like the ocean), and the warmth of the sun on my skin. The blues became bluer and the whites whiter. In that stillness I could feel my mind declutter. It is said that ancient practitioners of Chinese martial arts would practice the art of standing still to increase their energy levels, their mental and physical powers, and their awareness.

As a child, during summer holidays, I would often accompany my amateur photographer father on his photo-walks in Kerala. He, with his analog camera slung around his neck, and me, with my bag of biscuits and water bottle, would plod through lush green fields and drag our feet on the banks of the river. We’d often stop to stare at the tiny wild flowers on the wayside and the ferns trellising on the moss-green rocks (if you press the fern hard on your forearm, you can get beautiful temporary silver tattoos). We would amble with no destination in mind.

When he came across something he wanted to photograph, Dad would stand still. There was no question of pulling out the camera and going clickety-click. Film rolls were expensive, and you had to be judicious. We would sit and wait for the right light to fall in the right place so that my father could get the shot he had in mind. His nature shots involved a lot of waiting and remaining still. Sometimes it was just about chasing your breath. After those sessions, I always felt more energetic, more alive. I never understood why then. I do now.

Practising the art of stillness while travelling can be likened to stepping back from a large painting. You want to take in the whole picture. *



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art and culture.

BETWEEN FRIGHT AND FLIGHT

TAKING A LEAP OF FAITH OFF THE WORLD'S FIRST BUNGEE JUMPING SPOT IN NEW ZEALAND



The duck-egg blue waters of the Kawarau River in Queenstown are perfectly calm. A massive gorge encloses it like parentheses, its rock face covered with warm yellow tussock, bottle green trees, and some dead grey pines too. A few hundred feet away lies the site where The Pillars of the Kings stood in the *Lord of the Rings*. I stand atop a suspension bridge, a speck in this grand scheme of things.

"Jump. Do it now," whispers X in my left ear.

X is not some voice in my head with a death wish. She is the tiny bungee instructor at A.J. Hackett Bungy, the world's first commercial bungee site, which opened in 1988. X's green eyes are streaked with kohl and her hair reminds me of Khaleesi. Anxiety the size of a dragon eggs rattles in my belly.

"But..." I sputter, peering at the 141-foot, sheer drop that will dunk me in the river (if I ask). "I'm terrified!" What I actually want to say is that I'm sure there's a "wrong" way of falling, which I'm sure I will. There is a possibility of my spinal disc slipping or my contact lenses flying off my eyes. I wriggle my tied-up feet and inch backwards on the plank.

"I would like to back out, thank you," my most polite voice quivers. Khaleesi—I mean X—looks disappointed. But not defeated.

We often assume new identities when we travel. Many a times they are bolder, shinier doppelgängers of the people we are. In different time zones, I, for instance, do things I might not attempt closer home. Two years ago in Toronto, I left behind

two of my travel companions and signed up to walk along the circular, rail-less ledge at the roof of the 1,168-foot-high CN Tower. I leaned forward, saw flying airplanes in the eye, and looked down 116 storeys at Toronto dwarfed and shrunken from my vantage point. While I mostly stick to hikes and treks around my own city, here in New Zealand's South Island, I had signed up for a via ferrata mountain climb along waterfalls and crossed bridges made only of rope, shaking violently above whirling pools.

Where I'd draw the line was bungee jumping. Why, I'd tell everyone, would I have my legs tied, look hundreds of feet down into yawning valleys or freezing rivers, summon my most primal fear of dying with my head cracked open—and pay for it? We don't jump because we are not supposed to invoke some terrors.

And then, this June, I learnt that my flight into Queenstown, the adventure capital of the world, was a 20-minute drive away from the world's first ever bungee site. "So," I told myself, "since I so emphatically squat any term that starts with the word 'bungee,' I should take the plunge."

I wish terrible things upon that voice as I now look down the gorge.

"You wouldn't be human if you didn't feel this way," says X, massaging my arm. She tells everybody this, I'm sure. But then I remember how every single person before me jumped willingly, and whooped so loudly that the crowd standing near the suspension bridge erupted in applause.

And here, my therapy session wasn't going too well. But I jump.

If you are waiting for the part where I say

I felt like a bird, it's not coming. I fall like a rag doll, and feel my stomach lurch up, nay down, to my throat. My hair whips my face and I swing jerkily as if I am going to grab a trapeze. If somebody applauds for me, I don't hear it. When the men in the boat hand me a pole to grab and get into the raft, I am too stunned to move.

But something does happen soon after, which takes the edge off my experience. My memory of that jump is now velcroed to it.

I climb the deserted steps along the cliff face to return to the bungee centre on top. Midway lies a little gate beyond which I see a little boy, his golden retriever, and a bespectacled woman wearing tinkling beaded necklaces and a smile that makes her eyes crinkle. "Ooh you did it!" she waves at me with genuine delight. "It was you we were watching there!" she points to the suspension bridge.

I grin, and she tells me how she is waiting for her daughter who is up next. We turn to look, and see a girl fall, shrieking with glee. "Oh, look at you girls," she beams. I mumble that it was terrifying. "But you leapt. You'll always remember that," she says.

I climb the rest of the stairs shivering in the cold, only this time there's a sunny, egg-yolk-like warmth quivering inside me. *



KAREENA GIANANI
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at *National Geographic Traveller India*. She loves stumbling upon hole-in-the-wall bookshops, old towns, and owl souvenirs in all shapes and sizes.

THE ITINERARY

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DRIVING THROUGH THE SEA

Dhanushkodi seemed right out of *Malgudi Days* until it was uprooted overnight



ANNE OWEN/ROBERT HARDING/GETTY IMAGES

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BEYOND DUBLIN: 72 HOURS IN IRELAND

CASTLES, MONASTERIES AND LEGENDS IN THE COUNTRY'S MEDIEVAL VILLAGES **BY VRITTI BANSAL**

If the Celts were around today, they'd be proud of their land's idyllic reputation; the conservation of its folklore in literature and film. Fortunately, the fictional representations of the Republic of Ireland don't overwhelm its reality. Acres of pristine land are

If the country of leprechauns seems like a fairy tale, it is also a dream that can come true

shrouded in velvety silence. Thatched cottages with ivy clinging to their walls sit cosily amidst patches of lush, green clover, and flower baskets dangle over cheery streets. If the country of leprechauns seems like a fairy tale, it's also a dream that can come true.



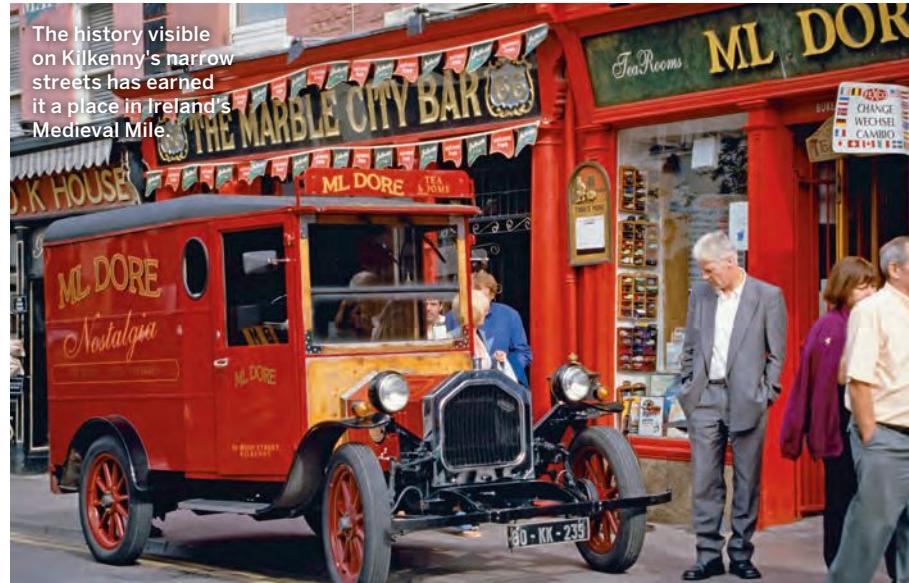
The thatched cottages in Adare were built in the 19th century for workers constructing Adare Manor. They now house restaurants and craft shops.

KILKENNY

An hour-and-a-half's drive or train ride from busy Dublin is Kilkenny, bisected by the River Nore and jellybean-hued, with houses, shops and restaurants painted white, brown, sky blue, bottle green, purple and coral pink. Kilkenny's toytown appearance and medieval importance makes it a pleasant hybrid between city and village. From St. Canice's Cathedral and the 12th-century Kilkenny Castle, to the Kilkenny Design Centre, there's a landmark from every era.



Pubs, galleries and ceramic shops line Kilkenny's streets



The history visible on Kilkenny's narrow streets has earned it a place in Ireland's Medieval Mile.

NOON

With Kilkenny's buffet of winsome eating places, it's advisable to arrive by noon to to enjoy both lunch and afternoon tea. **Anocht** at the Kilkenny Design Centre is a café that appeals to both tourists content with mellow conversation, and Irishmen who don't like the volume of their laughter policed. It's more rugged sailor girl than blushing bride, with whitewashed brick walls and a stone exterior. The seafood chowder is like a welcoming hug, especially if you've endured a cold drizzle to get here. Other classics, like crabcakes with avocado and lime, and seaweed-cured organic salmon, are executed with as much finesse as the fashion and crafts inside the centre (*Kilkenny Design Centre, www.kilkennydesign.com; open daily 10 a.m.-7 p.m.; entry free; Anocht, anocht-restaurant.ie; open Thu-Sat 5.30 p.m.-late*).

LATE AFTERNOON

Walk to the **Kilkenny Book Centre** and browse through the collection of Irish fiction and non-fiction. This is also the spot to pick up inexpensive souvenirs. If you're ready for tea and nibbles, head over to **Mocha's Vintage Tearooms** for traditional afternoon tea. The vibe is a mix of French urbanity and English countryside. But if you're still full from lunch, stroll through the Rose Garden surrounding slightly touristy **Kilkenny Castle** instead. Built with Anglo-Norman stone in 1195, it served as the residence of the Butler family, who arrived in Ireland during the Norman invasion and lived here for nearly 600 years, starting in 1391 (*Kilkenny Book Centre, 10 High Street, Gardens; open Mon-Sat 9 a.m.-6 p.m., Sun 1-5 p.m.; Mocha's Vintage Tearooms, 4, The Arches, Gas House Lane; open Mon-Sat 8.30 a.m.-5.30 p.m.; Kilkenny Castle, www.kilkennycastle.ie; check website for timings; entry adults €8/₹600, children 6-18 €4/₹300*).



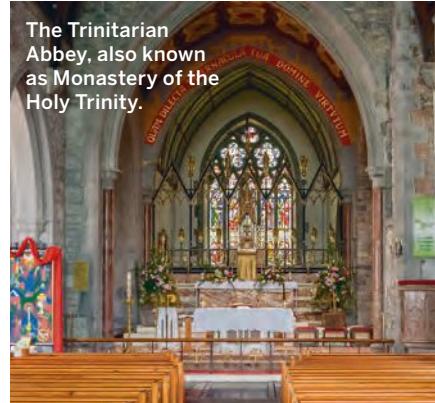
The Nore is one of the Three Sisters rivers that flow into the Celtic Sea.

EARLY EVENING

Wandering along the river before sunset is a chance to see Kilkenny's many beautiful bridges, from the historical John's Bridge and Green's Bridge to the new **St. Francis Bridge**, which opened this year, after a controversy about its traffic flow design was resolved. Once you've formed your own perceptions about it, walk over to the east side, where **Billy Byrne's** and **Biddy Early's** stand. The former's menu is a non-traditional amalgam of European and Thai dishes, the latter is a nice pub with a sunlit verandah for summer nights, when sunset is as late as 10 p.m. The chefs and bartenders are always happy to chat. End the night with a pint of house cider before you retire, or drive on to the next village stop (*Billy Byrne's, www.billybyrnes.com; breakfast Mon-Sun 9.30 a.m.-noon, lunch noon-4 p.m., evening menu Thu-Sun 6-9.30 p.m.; weekend brunch Sat-Sun noon-4 p.m.; Biddy Early's, www.biddyearlyskilkenny.com; open Mon-Thu noon-8 p.m., Fri-Sun noon-6 p.m.*).

ADARE

Adare is an hour and 45 minutes by road from Kilkenny. Whether you've made the journey the night before or in the morning, a day is sufficient to see this "heritage town"—as it has been labelled by the Irish government. Also fondly called "Ireland's prettiest village" by locals, Adare's debonair cottages sport neatly-combed roofs and lawns. A stone plaque in Adare Park boasts its title as the "overall winner" of the National Tidy Towns Competition in 1976.



NOON

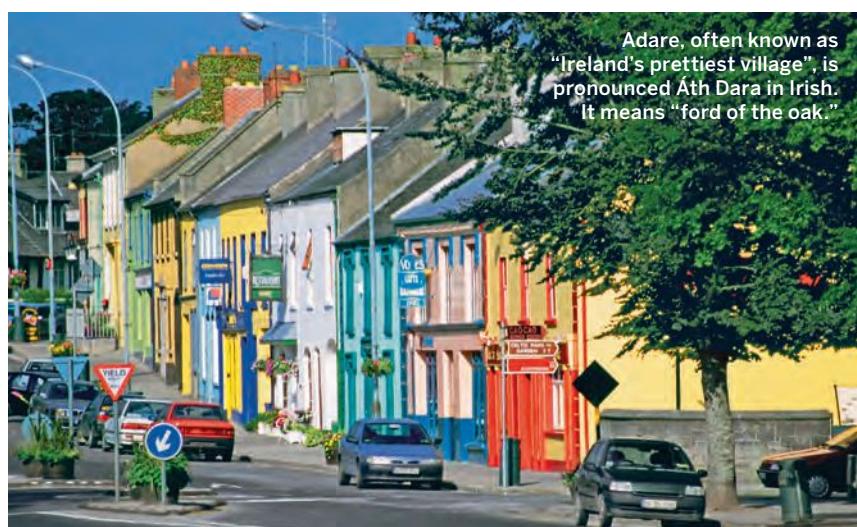
On a sunny day, **Adare Park** is a tranquil place to spend some recreational time. The walkways are immaculate, the shrubbery lush, and a little thatched gazebo echoes the architectural spirit of the rest of the village. A short walk away are Adare's nicest restaurants. **The Wild Geese Restaurant** has old-fashioned dining rooms with fireplaces and bright coral walls. All ingredients are locally sourced; the kitchen's strengths include classics like honey roast ham with celeriac remoulade and a warm mackerel salad with fennel, tomato and coriander dressing. Nearby 1826 Adare and The Blue Door are equally well-known for their rustic setting and use of local produce (*The Wild Geese Restaurant, thewild-geese.com; open Tue-Sat; check website for timings; Sun formal lunch 12.30-3.30 p.m.; 1826 Adare, 1826adare.ie; Wed-Sat 6-9.30 p.m., Sun 4-9.30 p.m.; The Blue Door, www.bluedooradare.com; Mon-Fri 11 a.m.-9.30 p.m., Sat-Sun noon-9.30 p.m.*).

LATE AFTERNOON

Whether you've walked out of the park or a restaurant, Adare is small enough such that you're never too far from the **Trinitarian Abbey**. Many Trinitarian institutions existed in England and Scotland, but this church is the only one of its kind in Ireland. The place has an enigmatic history—all that is known about it is that it was built before 1272. Edwin Richard Wyndham Quin, the man who enabled the church's expansion in 1852 must have foreseen Adare's status as an emblematic "19th-century estate village". The building is among Adare's most intriguing sites (www.adareparish.ie; open daily 8 a.m.-6 p.m.).

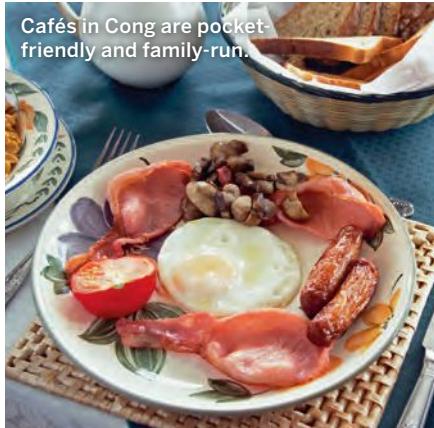
EARLY EVENING

After a dignified sojourn at the Abbey, loosen up at one of the pubs in the town centre. **Bill Chawke's** is large and filled with families. It upholds the reputation of Irish pub grub; from the daily special soup to the fish n' chips, everything is more than satisfactory. Diagonally across from Chawke's, **Aunty Lena's** brags about being the "last watering hole until Dublin." A cold pint of Guinness here is a good excuse to groggily disappear into a neighbourhood B&B, such as Adare Country House. Otherwise, press on to the village of Cong (Bill Chawke's, billchawke.com; open Mon-Thu 9 a.m.-11.30 p.m., Fri-Sat 9 a.m.-12.30 a.m., Sun 9 a.m.-11 p.m.; Aunty Lena's, auntylenas.com; open Mon-Thu 9 a.m.-11.30 p.m., Fri-Sat 9 a.m.-12.30 a.m., Sun 9 a.m.-11 p.m.).



CONG

The 2.5-hour drive from Adare to Cong is one of the most attractive in the country. Travelling early evening or morning gives you the perfect opportunity to photograph the smooth, meandering roads and sheep grazing in the knolls nearby. Towering trees and gentle waterfalls offer a meditative welcome as you drive over bridges and into the village. On Cong's spotless streets are pubs and teahouses where diners babble intimately over pints and porcelain cups. There's something so incredibly pure about Cong—it feels like even the air is cleansed daily.

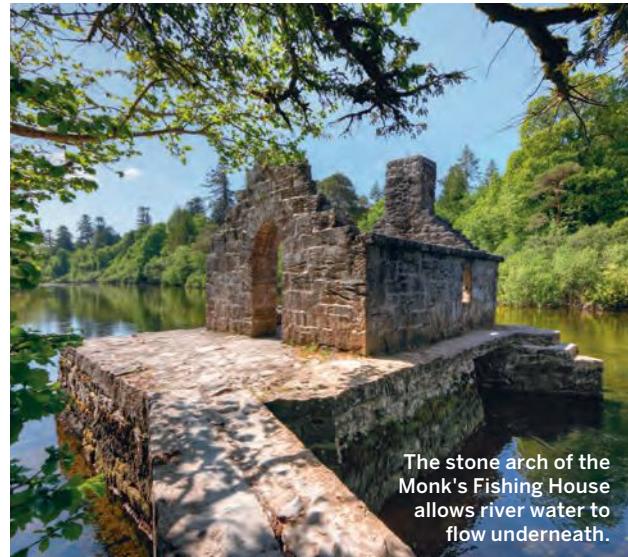


Cafés in Cong are pocket-friendly and family-run.

LATE AFTERNOON

Silence is the common thread between Cong's main tourist sites: the solemn Cong Abbey, the magnificent Ashford Castle, and the **Quiet Man Museum**. The small museum is dedicated to the 1952 film of the same name, which was shot in the quaint village and became a point of local pride. It replicates the movie's 'White-o-Mornin' Cottage and the reproduction of the set's furnishings and artefacts make for a nice dose of Old Hollywood. A two-minute walk away is **Cong Abbey**, which has an attached cemetery and serene woods that lead to the Monk's Fishing House. The latter is a fascinating stone structure

on the River Cong, and was used by medieval monks to catch fresh produce for the monastery kitchen. River fish were a staple of the 15th and 16th centuries, and the Fishing House made them easier to catch (*The Quiet Man Museum, Circular Road; open 1 Apr-31 Oct daily 10 a.m.-4 p.m.; 1 Nov-31 March on request; entry €5/₹375; Cong Abbey, Abbey St, Cong South; open daily 10 a.m.-6 p.m.; entry free*).



The stone arch of the Monk's Fishing House allows river water to flow underneath.

NOON

Sunlight streams into homely cafés as patrons dig into fresh salmon and salad. At **Puddleducks**, one such sanctuary, easy-going lunches are the norm and it's difficult to get up from the wooden chairs once you have sunk in. It is known for its baked treats like lemon drizzle cake and rhubarb pies made using family recipes. Outside is a tree-fringed utopic lake full of ducks and seagulls (congfoodvillage.com; open daily 10 a.m.-6 p.m.).



Ashford Castle was bought in May 2013 and refurbished into a luxury hotel.

EARLY EVENING

A leisurely walk in the woods takes a turn towards luxury as you approach **Ashford Castle**. Expanded over the years and recently converted into a heritage hotel, the castle is an imposing presence over a sprawling golf course. Lough Corrib, the lake beside it, adds to its spectacular scale. Tourists can visit for a small fee, or eat at one of the prized restaurants. **Cullen's At The Cottage**, on the outer grounds, is a thatched dining room with outdoor seating and intimate tables indoors. Only the freshest seafood—haddock, squid or scallops—arrive at your table. It's the perfect spot to end your love-affair with Ireland ([www.ashfordcastle.com](http://ashfordcastle.com); estate grounds and gardens are accessible to non-residents; entry adults €5/₹375, children €3.50/₹260; Cullens At The Cottage; open daily; lunch 1-5 p.m., dinner 6-9.30 p.m.). *



The Ames Room plays with the illusion of size. You see a person shrink or grow in different corners of the room.

THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

DISAPPEARING DOTS, ZERO GRAVITY AND INFINITE SPACE: CHASING ILLUSIONS IN ZAGREB
BY RADHIKA RAMASWAMY

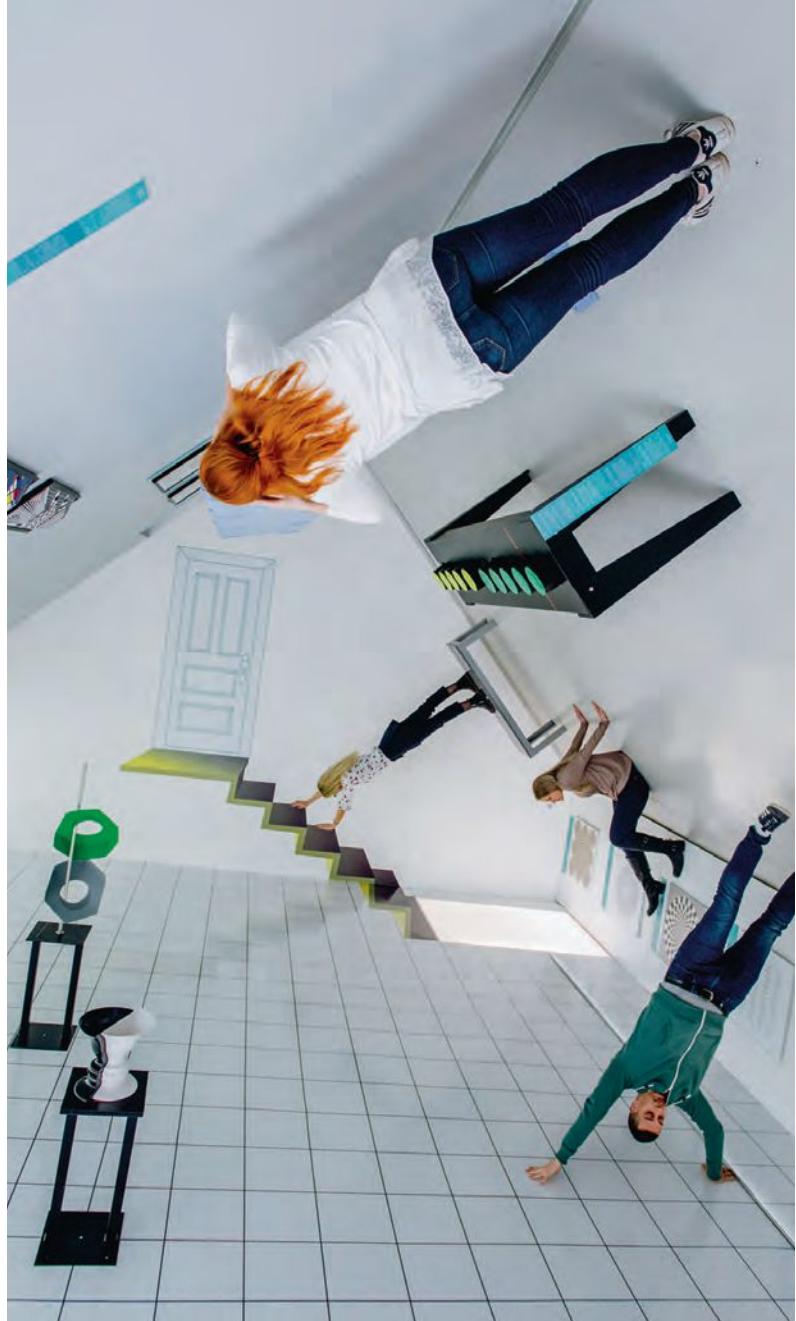
Croatia conjures up images of turquoise waters, idyllic islands, pristine landscapes, Neo-Gothic architecture, and forbidden fortresses. Its capital city, Zagreb, is a charming metropolis; its cobblestone streets lined with cafés. The city's spectacular cathedrals and museums are intrinsic to its character: spunky yet serene. The well-known Museum of Broken Relationships, with its outlandish mementos depicting failed

relationships, may be the city's quirkiest attraction, but just a few blocks away is a mind-boggling sensory adventure.

The Museum of Illusions, inspired by the science behind optical illusions, is a visual roller-coaster. Tucked away in a by-lane close to Zagreb's central square, the two-storeyed museum is a kaleidoscope of colours and a cacophony of sound that leaves visitors dazed, confused, and enlightened. It opened in June 2015 and has over 70 interactive

exhibits, each of which tests the limits of perception and warps the mind. How can you explain your friend shrinking in front of your eyes, or seeing your partner's head on a tray, while their body is invisible?

Flocks of noisy children scurry around excitedly, while adults try to make sense of the maze of puzzles surrounding them. "It's like magic," an 11-year old shrieks in the Anti-Gravity Room, where balls start rolling



At Zagreb's Museum of Illusions, kaleidoscopic installations (top right) line walls and ceilings, cleverly placed mirrors create illusions like disappearing bodies (bottom right) and in rooms like the Reverse Room, objects appear to defy gravity (left).

upwards towards the ceiling. He tries to balance himself, before realising that gravity doesn't exist in here. He slides downwards, the world spinning around him. His friends, on the other hand, are literally head over heels in the Reverse Room next door, where everything appears upside down. Objects seem to float or fly, creating the illusion of levitation. At the Mirror Room, parallel mirrors show visitors infinite space receding into the distance in a small room. Watching my reflection scattered on an endless spectrum is oddly satisfying.

It's hard to resist taking pictures of every illusion that is spread across

the two floors, from rotating rings to fading portraits, disappearing dots, and overlapping spirals and grids. The quintessential horror scene of a head on a platter is neatly brought to life by an illusion with a mirror. As I try to come to terms with my vanishing torso, inside the Ames Room, people grow or shrink in size, depending on where they are standing. This distorted room twists the general perception of scale, turning people into giants and dwarves. The Museum of Illusions feels like an epic *Alice in Wonderland* adventure.

The museum also has a number of wooden puzzles, dilemma games, knots,

tricks and didactic games. Games from this "fitness centre for the brain," as they like to call themselves, are also available at the museum's souvenir shop. No matter how old you are, the Museum of Illusions is like a window to an enchanted world. *

ESSENTIALS

Museum of Illusions is in the heart of the city, close to Zagreb's central square (muzejiluzija.com; Ilica 72; open daily 9 a.m.-10 p.m.; entry adults HRK 40/₹410, children 5-15 HRK25/₹255).

DRIVING THROUGH THE SEA

DHANUSHKODI SEEMED RIGHT OUT OF R.K. NARAYAN'S *MALGUDI DAYS* UNTIL IT WAS UPROOTED OVERNIGHT. YET, A ROAD TRIP IS WORTH YOUR FUEL AND TIME **BY HARI GOVIND NAIR**

Emberging on a road trip whose destination is the last strip of land along India's southern coastline had been on my bucket list for years. After much procrastination, this March I finally hit the road to Dhanushkodi. Perched on the southeastern tip of Tamil Nadu's Pamban Island, Dhanushkodi is the where Palk Strait begins. Sri Lanka's coastal settlement of Talaimannar is barely 29 kilometres away. Apart from its proximity to a neighbouring country, Dhanuskodi's history is the main reason I was keen to explore it; on a road trip nonetheless. Once a bustling town, it was uprooted overnight and reduced to ruins by a monstrous cyclone in 1964. Dhanushkodi has since been declared a "ghost town". Only a clutch of fishermen call it home today and no tourist is allowed to enter the town after 6 p.m.

Even before I left Mumbai I had a vague idea how deserted Dhanushkodi would be—save for a few tourists, majority of whom are pilgrims drawn in by the belief that it was from here that Hanuman, on the behest of Ram, built a bridge to Lanka to free Sita from Ravana. But it wasn't the mythology that had me sold. I was, in fact, eager to experience the calm after the chaos this tiny hamlet has now come to symbolise. So, with chocolate bars, packs of cookies and a crate of water stacked in the backseat, and my brother

for company, I fired up my 4x4's engine for the 1,580-kilometre drive. Three fully charged cell phones and two power banks were thrown in too, for navigation purposes and to record the vistas that would greet us and terrains that would challenge us.

The easiest route from Mumbai is via Bengaluru and then Salem on National Highway 48. After Salem, you'll cross Tiruchirappalli and the heritage town of Karaikudi before reaching Rameswaram. Pamban Island, from where Dhanushkodi is 21 kilometres south, is in Rameswaram. You can also take the Madurai route and make a quick stop at the historic Meenakshi Amman Temple. In the 18-hour drive, you'll whizz past lush green landscapes, gleaming rivers, and giant rock formations.

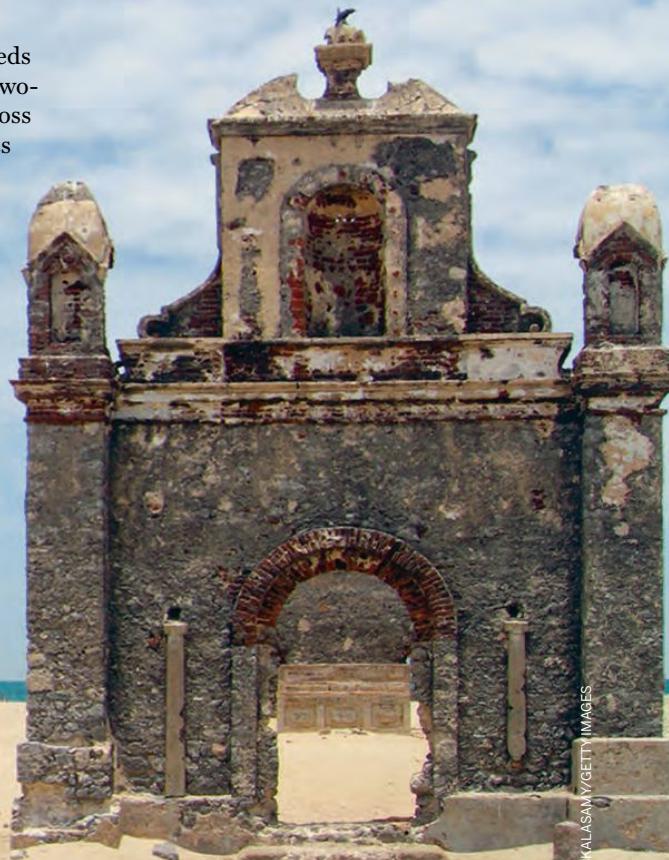
To enter Pamban Island one needs to take the Pamban bridge. This two-kilometre-long railway bridge across the Indian Ocean is what connects

Rameswaram to mainland India via parallel rail and road lines. What's nerve-wrecking, though, is the drive leading up to the bridge. At one point it seems like the sea will swallow the road. When you inch closer to the railing is when you realise where you really are—surrounded by the Indian Ocean on all sides in a car that occasionally sways to the tune of the wind.

After 18 hours of non-stop driving, I finally pull into Rameswaram. Weary from the road, my brother and I decide to spend the night at the Tamil Nadu tourism board's guesthouse.

FINAL DESTINATION

To reach Dhanushkodi at the crack of dawn, I start at 4 a.m. the next



All that's left of Dhanushkodi today are its skeletal remains, like the ruins of this church.





Local fishermen cast their net (top left) for the day's fresh catch (bottom right); After seeing the ruins of an altar (bottom left), a post office and a school, and after manoeuvring through Dhanushkodi's tricky beach, both your vehicle (top right) and you will need some rest.

day, clearing the 15-kilometre stretch to the checkpoint in 20 minutes. Dhanushkodi's beach is another six kilometres from the checkpoint. These final six kilometres, also the last leg of my journey, challenge me to trail tracks carved out in sand; ones that keep eroding every time a giant wave grazes the shore. Thrilled by the temporariness of these tracks, I slow down to savour the moment, occasionally allowing gentler waves to rise and crash against my SUV.

Driving on the beach, flanked by the Indian Ocean on one side and the Bay of Bengal on the other, I make a quick detour to a village where the locals stay. A trip to a nondescript temple here and a chat with the priest led me to photographs of Dhanushkodi before the cyclone ravaged it. In these images, Dhanuskodi looks straight out of R.K. Narayan's *Malgudi Days*. Upon resuming the drive, I finally come face-to-face with the skeletal remains of the structures whose photos the priest had just shown me: ruins of a

church, school, post office, and even an abandoned railway track.

It's only when I step out does it hit me: Dhanushkodi is not for people who travel to a place "to do" something, it's for those who pine the exact opposite. It touches your soul, makes time stand still and, above all, leaves you feeling insignificant in the larger scheme of things. To soak in my surroundings then,

my brother and I lie down on the beach. Once our siesta ends, we dust the sand off our clothes and head in the direction of some stalls selling seashell necklaces. We buy few pieces as souvenirs before settling inside a shack for a quick meal of Kerala parotta dunked in an oniony gravy that tastes like Maggi. This simple meal serves as the perfect closure to an extremely humbling road trip. *

ESSENTIALS

Getting There Dhanushkodi is nestled on the southeastern tip of Pamban Island in Tamil Nadu's Rameswaram district and is 1,580 kilometres from Mumbai via NH 48. It can only be accessed through the Pamban bridge that connects Rameswaram to mainland India. The last six kilometres from Dhanushkodi's checkpoint to the beach are the trickiest to drive. The local police station's permission is needed to access this stretch.

Regular trains ply between Mumbai and Madurai, and then from Madurai to Rameswaram (check www.irctc.co.in for schedules and bookings). From Dhanushkodi's bus stand, private vans charge ₹250 up to the checkpoint. From here, locals offer a tour of the ruins in a van for ₹150.

Stay The closest hotel from Dhanushkodi is the Tamil Nadu tourism board's guesthouse in Rameswaram (www.ttdconline.com; doubles from ₹2,400).

GORGING ON GEORGE TOWN

IN MALAYSIA'S PENANG, STREET FOOD HELPS A WRITER FIND HER WAY INTO THE HEART OF THE CITY
BY KAREENA GIANANI



WOK AND ROLL

CHAR KWAY TEOW AND POPIAH, LEBUH KENG KWEE

She looks older than my 80-year-old grandmother, bent over a wickedly black wok. This is Lebu Keng Kwee street's hawker centre, and the granny is on loop: Toss flat rice noodles into the smoky wok; throw in some deshelled cockles, plump prawns, Chinese chives, and chilli. Pop an egg or two, drizzle soy sauce until satisfied. Flip some pork lard until a resentful hiss emanates from the wok. Her hands are a blur, controlling the wood fire, stirring and clanging the wok with one hand, adding bean sprouts with another.

Later, I will remember



her *char kway teow* every time I sit at a chipped formica-topped table of any hawker centre in George Town. But I don't remember eating three full plates of this Hokkien dish wordlessly, oblivious to the presence of my friend, G. He senses my priorities and dutifully finishes all six pieces of *popiah*: papery rice-skin rolls bursting with turnip, crispy bean sprouts, and sweet and spicy chilli sauce. He nods at the oyster omelette I insisted on before I met my *char kway teow*. You eat it, I tell him with a large heart and a full stomach. It was he who suggested we spend five days eating our way through Southeast Asia's food capital, so he damn well deserves the last shred of skin of that *popiah*.



Char kway teow and popiah (left) are favourites at Lebu Keng Kwee's hawker centre.



There are many reasons to love Penang's capital city as there are ways to get lost in its squiggly alleys. The old town of the city is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and its streets are a museum of shophouses, the colours of a tiered cake. Their facades are window displays of George Town's Chinese, Dutch and Portuguese colonial histories. Flavours from George Town's erstwhile trade with Malay, Indian, and Chinese merchants still peppers the meals here. If it drizzles on a hot May afternoon and you take shelter under a roof, chances are that it is a street stall with steam rising from a wok. George Town asks for nothing but an interested eye and your loosest pants.

ICE IS NICE

CHENDUL, LEBUH KENG KWEE

We emerge from the hawker centre and look around to see where we could walk off our heavy meal. To our left is a wide main street that will take us anywhere. To our right is a stall that reads "Penang Road Famous Teochew Chendul and Ice Kacang. Since 1936." We go right.

The nine people in queue and I look at the guy making the Indonesian dessert commonly found in Malaysia,



Singapore, and the rest of Southeast Asia. He presses shaved ice into a mound in a bowl, and tosses trembly green, pandan-flavoured noodles immersed in coconut milk on one side. Then comes a ladle-full of boiled kidney beans and *gula melaka* (palm sugar) syrup. I take a while to get used to having rajma for dessert, but after the third bite, I warm up to this unusual concoction. G smiles dazedly, which is something because he's grown up eating chendul in Singapore and never thought he'd love another.

NET OF STORIES

ROTI JALA AND SIRAP BANDUNG, LITTLE INDIA

A few hours later, we fish out our city maps and tentatively tap on Little India. Back in Singapore, Little India is a slice of home for my friend, but not quite. It still has a distinctly Singaporean feel, he maintains, and wonders what George Town's Little India is like. As we stand under the gopuram of a temple near stalls frying golden *medu vada*, I see G is feeling at home, saying we could be anywhere in Chennai, or even at Matunga in Mumbai. At a corner, near a *roti canai* stall, we stumble upon a hawker pouring pale yellow batter on his griddle, in the shape of a web. We plonk our bags on the table and order a plate of *roti jala* (jala means "net" in Tamil, which explains its net-like appearance) like the two Tamilian men beside us. They tell us how roti jala is made from flour mixed with egg, milk and turmeric. It is light and fluffy, and served with a plate of spicy chicken curry. The stall owner catches me eyeing the tall fat glasses of *sirap bandung* (rose-flavoured milk) on my neighbour's table, and brings us some. It strangely takes me home too: Chilled rose-milk is my nani's antidote to all wordly troubles,



from homesickness and boredom, to anxieties that would beset me and my sister if lunch was many hours away.

STREET OF TREATS

WAN TAN MEE AND LOR BAK, LEBUH CHULIA

Over my five days in George Town, I stroll streets depending on their backstories: almost every lane has a steel-rod sculpture that depicts its origin, or other cultural trivia. The city has about 50 such sculptures in all; the one in Muntri Street, for instance, marks the place where Jimmy Choo started his apprenticeship; another one in Soo Hong Lane tells the story of how it is the narrowest, five-foot lane in Penang. Unsurprisingly, many sculptures are related to food, and the one at China Street about *tok-tok mee*—a noodle dish named so because its hawkers would strike a *tok-tok* sound to signal their presence—piques my curiosity. It is actually the story of what is commonly called *wan tan mee*, which I then trace to Lebu Chulia, a famous backpackers' haunt. At night, this street lined with antique stores and rattan furniture shops transforms into a theatre of wobbly plastic stools and tables. Our faces are slick with sweat on this balmy night, but heaping springy noodles onto our spoon, orchestrating slurps as we drink brown broth, and dividing the crisp wontons and pieces of barbecued pork makes us smile like greedy little children. It is said that

Anthony Bourdain loved it as much as anybody else. It costs very little, and pickled green chillies and warmth thrown are in for free.

Lebu Chulia is also famous for its *lok lok* (“dip dip” in Chinese). A few metres away from the wan tan mee stall, beyond the street that turns into Love Lane, we spot a stall selling every kind of meat neatly skewered and arranged around a large pot of boiling water. People point at sticks and pick them like candy: fish balls, prawns, meatballs, squid, shrimp, and tofu. The 20-something girl dunks their loot into the water. “*Lor bak*,” says G instead, eyeing some pork pieces and I wonder why we aren’t experimenting more. But when he adds that the meat is marinated in the Chinese five-spice powder (Sichuan pepper, star anise, clove, fennel seeds and cinnamon) and wrapped snug in beancurd (soy) sheet, ready to be fried gold, I am sold.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

NASI KANDAR, LEBUH CAMPBELL

Another sculpture at Ah Quee Street depicts a mundu-clad Tamil-Muslim immigrant hawking home-cooked dishes and rice (*nasi* in Malay) from containers slung on both ends of a *kandar* (wooden stick). In the late 1800s, Nalla Kader was one of them, and in 1907, he set up Hameediyah, which has the reputation of selling the best nasi kandar in town. When we enter, a cook is pouring ladlefuls of oil around

the *murtabaks* (bread bursting with chicken, beef, mutton and vegetables) sizzling on a *thaal*-sized pan. Inside lie giant vats of dishes with little pockets of oil glistening in them: Indonesian beef rendang cooked in coconut milk and spices, roasted cuttlefish curry, grilled quail, and fried chicken. We ask for nasi kandar: a mound of biryani each and a portion of every dish.

SIP OF SURPRISE

PAT POH, ESPLANADE PROMENADE

Like all waterfront cities, George Town's nucleus is the sea, and the Esplanade



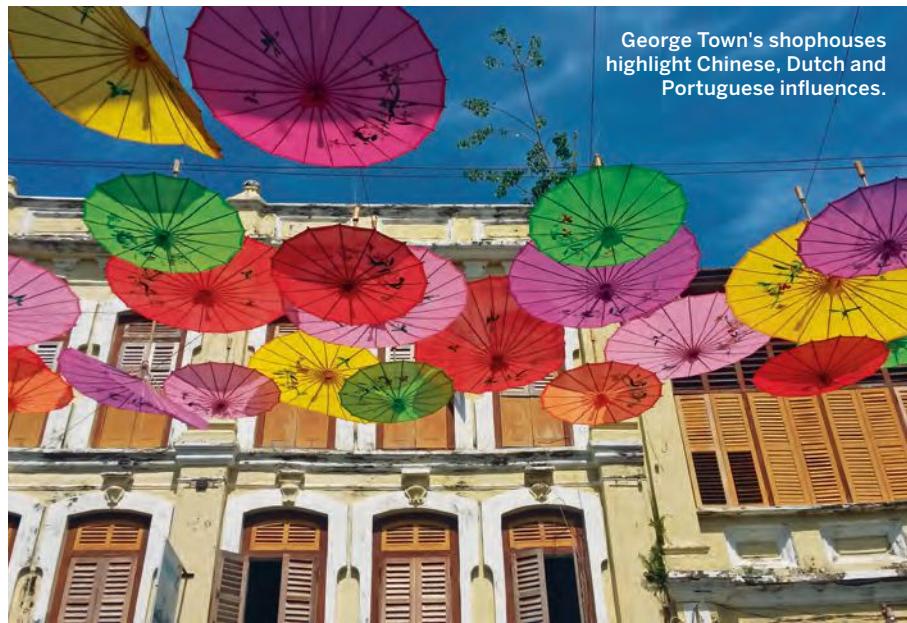
JAINUNEZ81/SHUTTERSTOCK (DRINK) CARINA TETERI/MOMENT OPEN/GETTY IMAGES (COUNTER)

promenade embraces everyone: flocks of teenagers looking to up their selfie game, deathly still men with fishing rods, and the children bouncing and bursting iridescent soap bubbles blown by a hawker. Like every nook of George Town, the Esplanade too has a food court of its own but this one is extra special because it has demarcated Chinese and halal food sections. Scoring a seat by the water, we ask our server for suggestions for a local drink. He grins toothlessly and says he knows just the “herbal concoction”. Before we can protest, he returns with tall glasses of the cola-coloured drink, *pat poh*. Think calamansi lime juice shaken with an eight-herb mix which includes liquorice root, mandarin orange peel, honey, cinnamon, and mulberry leaves. A hit of sweet, tart, and spice in a glass full of ice is what *pat poh* is all about.

SWEET SPOT

CHINA HOUSE CAFÉ, BEACH STREET

On our last night in George Town, G and I stick to our daily ritual of winding down at China House café at Beach Street. In a city where the past peeks out from every corner, China House is a step into the future: a compound of three heritage buildings looped by an open-air courtyard has now been



George Town's shophouses highlight Chinese, Dutch and Portuguese influences.

repurposed into 14 spaces that are modelled like a laneway. We walk into the wood-panelled Kopi C café, which spills into Beach Street Bakery, which in turn opens into an art gallery, live music venue, and so on. Here, happiness for my friend is crayoning while he sips gula melaka-almond milkshake. I linger around a mind-boggling buffet of cakes; about 35 tea cakes, cheesecakes and flaky pastries are baked here every

night. I settle for a giant slice from the basketball-sized tiramisu cake.

On our way back, we walk past George Town's most famous mural at Armenian Street: a boy and girl on a bicycle. The little boy is squealing with glee, clutching the girl as she drives him around. That is how we too feel in that moment; on a joyride in this wondrous city of moveable feasts and art on streets. *



MANADO/ISTOCK (UMBRELLA), ZOONAR/MTKANG/ZOONAR GMBH RM/DINDIA PHOTO LIBRARY (TABLE)

HELSINKI SCORES A HUNDRED

CELEBRATING INNOVATION AND HAPPINESS IN THE FINNISH CAPITAL



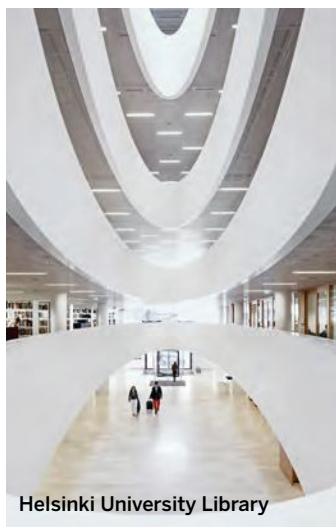
Finland is celebrating a century of independence. Some credit *kalsarikännit*, the Finnish concept of drinking at home alone in your underwear, for this milestone, but the World Economic Forum has another notion. The 2017 *Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report* names Finland as the world's safest destination. The Nordic nation is also the world's fifth happiest country, according to the World Happiness Report. Helsinki, the coastal capital, seems to have turned native son and industrial designer Eero Saarinen's futuristic outlook

into a blueprint for urban innovation that benefits locals and visitors alike. The city is collaborating with think tanks and philanthropies to plan for the rollout of self-driving vehicles. Kalasatama, the old harbour area, is now a revitalised district brought back to life through public-private partnerships. There and throughout the city, creative incubators are at work, growing global acclaim for sustainable cuisine, environmental preservation, and—always—Scandinavian style, making for a walkable city well worth exploring now. —Adrienne Jordan



Helsinki's year-old sauna complex, Löyly, has expansive sea-view terraces and a restaurant.

SOA RIZO



EAT

FOOD HALLS AND DINING FEASTS

Located next to Market Square, the 19th-century **Old Market Hall** has two dozen gleaming stalls offering options like Finnish beef, smoked fish, pho, and jelly doughnuts in the shape of pigs (vanhakauppahalli.fi; Mon-Sat 8 a.m.- 6 p.m., Sun 10 a.m.- 5 p.m.). In the Ullanlinna district, **Chef & Sommelier** has been Michelin-starred since 2014. The five-to-seven-course menu features items such as arctic char, pork neck and beets, and a juniper and blueberry dessert (chefetssommelier.fi; Tue-Sat

from 6 p.m.).

Restaurant Grön uses seasonal Scandinavian ingredients to create dishes such as cod with gratinated leek and grilled buckwheat bread with preserved forest mushrooms (www.restaurantgron.com; Tue-Sat 5 p.m.-midnight).

STAY

SLEEK SLEEPOVERS

Plant yourself smack-dab in the city centre at the minimalist **GLO Hotel Kluuvi** located steps from shopping oasis Galleria Esplanad (www.glohotels.fi; doubles from €221/₹16,400). The modern **Hotel Haven** is adjacent to the South Harbour, where ferries depart to Stockholm

and Tallinn, Estonia (www.hotelhaven.fi; doubles from €224/₹16,600).

Art deco enthusiasts should stay at **Hotel Lilla Roberts**, which was originally designed in 1908 by one of Finland's top architects and was formerly the headquarters of Helsinki Energy. The building opened in 2015 as a hotel with 130 rooms and a restaurant that serves traditional Nordic dishes such as smørrebrød and lingonberry porridge (www.lillaroberts.com; doubles from €197/₹14,600).

PLAY

SOAK UP THE CITY

Built of leftover materials from the country's plywood

industry, **Löyly** is a supersize public sauna and restaurant complex that debuted last year. Here guests can relax in a traditional smoke sauna or a wood-burning sauna (www.loylyhelsinki.fi; check website for timings; sauna sessions from €19/₹1,400). The vaulted-roof Tennis Palace, constructed for the 1940 Olympic Games that were cancelled, now houses a cultural complex that includes the **Helsinki Art Museum** which reopened in 2015 after renovations (www.hamhelsinki.fi; open Tue-Sun 11 a.m.-7 p.m.; entry €10/₹740). **Iittala & Arabia Design Centre** offers an in-depth look at Finland's beloved design and lifestyle brands, Iittala and Arabia, and showcases limited-edition products, to commemorate the country's centennial (www.designcentrehelsinki.com; check website for timings; guided tour €40/₹2,960).

SHOP

AVANT-GARDE ARTS AND CRAFTS

Finnish photographer Katja Hagelstam created **Lokal** in 2012 with the aim to combine a shopping and gallery experience. Visitors can catch revolving exhibitions like the recent "Black Lake," which features custom furniture by Nikari, a Finnish manufacturer of sustainable wood design products, and "Bloom," a collection of art by designers under 30 (lokahelsinki.com; check website for timings). Visit **CraftCorner** to stock up on goods made by local artisans, or stop at **Artek Helsinki** to get a classic custom-made Alvar Aalto stool that you can ship back home (CraftCorner.craftcorner.fi; open Mon-Fri 10 a.m.-6 p.m., Sat 10 a.m.-4 p.m.; [Artek Helsinki www.artek.fi](http://ArtekHelsinki.artek.fi); open Mon-Fri 10 a.m.-7 p.m., Sat 10 a.m.-6 p.m.). *

LONG WALK TO FREEDOM

A GUIDED TOUR IN PARIS LOOKS AT FRENCH HISTORY THROUGH A FEMINIST PRISM **BY BHAVYA DORE**



Philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, with fellow intellectual Jean-Paul Sartre in 1970s Paris, features among the many women stalwarts on Evans's tours.

Inside the Pantheon in Paris's Latin Quarter lie the remains of Voltaire, Victor Hugo, Émile Zola and dozens of other great citizens who helped shape French national identity. Outside the neo-classically designed mausoleum, an inscription reads: "to the great men, a grateful country."

At the monument, the men might be dead but the patriarchy is still alive. Of the 85 who are interred here, only five are women including the scientist Marie Curie, French resistance fighters Germaine Tillion and Geneviève de Gaulle-Anthonioz, and human rights

champion and Holocaust survivor Simone Veil. Curie was the first, inducted as late as 1995, 60 years after her death.

Heidi Evans shakes her head in disappointment as she ponders this.

"For the walking tour, I had an idea of focusing on some women on the left Bank [of the river Seine]. It grew from there"

"It's a real illustration of the inequality there is in the city," she says. "It's not like they're adding women every year to even up the numbers. They're not."

Evans, 27, can't fix burial arrangements, but in her own way she is trying to fix Paris's gender blind spots, one guided tour at a time. A recent British transplant to France, Evans runs feminist walking tours: on-foot explorations of the city's neglected female figures and their impact on one of the world's great capitals.

Her first stops on the main tour? The Pantheon and just beside it,



After kicking off her walk at the Pantheon, Evans (left) usually leads her visitors to Saint-Étienne-du-Mont (right), the church that is a shrine to Paris's female patron saint St. Genevieve. She is currently working on creating another tour through the lively artistic and red-light quarter of Montmartre, home to the famous cabaret Moulin Rouge (bottom).

Saint-Étienne-du-Mont, a church housing the shrine of St. Genevieve, the city's female patron saint. "I knew I wanted to start there," she says. "I had an idea of focusing on some women on the Left Bank [of the river Seine]. It grew from there."

Evans moved here three years ago, working as a guide on more conventional tours that ushered visitors through the city's fabled monuments and historic crannies. "I really enjoyed the job and liked meeting people from all over the world and sharing my passion for the

history of Paris with them," she says, when we meet at a coffee shop in the fifth arrondissement one rainy May day. "But I was also quite struck only after a few months that we talk a lot about all these great men and these bad women."

Women were either missing from stories about Paris or invariably showed up as muses, mistresses or villainesses. Holders of bad reputations included: Catherine de Medici, a diabolical queen with a cruelty-studded resume, and Marie Antoinette, a royal with expensive tastes and an ignominious end at the guillotine. Evans set to work.

"I do a defence of Marie Antoinette," she says, smiling. "Her story is fascinating. She was completely a scapegoat during the French Revolution. The French rather unjustly pinned their hatred on her. And so I explore that and why that happened and what she did wrong. How her life had led up to her role as the queen of France and the problems she had that led to her fate."

Catherine is exhumed and restored to a three-dimensional person. "I don't try to say all these women were incredible and they didn't do anything wrong, because they are human and everyone makes mistakes," says Evans. "Some did terrible things... But I don't want to just focus on the negatives, so I do talk about the positive contributions she



made to fashion, ballet and perfume, for instance. Things we consider to be very French were made popular here through her efforts."

Apart from Catherine and Antoinette and Curie, there's a stop in honour of Josephine Baker, a remarkable but less-celebrated figure in the city's annals. Baker, an African American woman, moved to France in the 1920s at the height of the decadent Jazz Age, became a performing superstar, adopted a dozen children, and overall led a pretty colourful life.

Baker and some of the other figures were news to me, even though I believed after quite a few trips to gay Paree that I had touristied it out within an inch of itself. Although one of the world's most visited cities might have been endlessly canonised in films, literature and people's holiday photo albums, there's a whole vein of history to be unsheathed when it comes to the second sex.

"I created the tour so I would have an opportunity to talk about how women have shaped Paris and also to really bring some gender equality to the tourism industry," says Evans. "I would love tourists to come away from their trip in Paris knowing just as much about Marie Curie as they might know about Napoleon. That would be the ideal outcome of my business."

The second of the two tours Evans currently runs looks at literary figures, including writer Gertrude Stein and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir. The Sugar and Spice tour, as it is known, also has confectionary stopovers; interspersing storytelling with freshly baked goods. So you can digest second wave feminism with a macaron or three.

Evans is now working on creating a Montmartre tour that would take people through that bohemian, artistic quarter and the lives of Paris's unheralded women muses and artists who lived there. It will also look at the women in the adjacent red-light area and the order of nuns who founded Montmartre. "So it's kind of a weird mix of sex and religion and art," she laughs.

Since it was election season when we met, it was hard to avoid asking if presidential candidate, Marine Le Pen, she of the fiery tongue and the demagogic pronouncements, who finally lost to Emmanuel Macron, merited a mention. Evans shakes her



Evans doesn't just shine the spotlight on celebrated figures such as Marie Curie (top) but also lesser-known names. Case in point: 1920s entertainer Josephine Baker (middle). Even Marie Antoinette (bottom), a much-maligned character in French history, is treated with more fairness than has been typically granted to her.

head. "It's always easier to talk about people that aren't current," she says. The motto is to perhaps focus on historic figures, not hysterical ones.

Evans has a degree in literature, but much of what she talks about is self-taught, gleanings from a lot of reading. She speaks with a quiet passion about her initiative on getting tourism to catch up with feminism.

And inequality is often in the tiny details: just 2.6 per cent of Paris's streets are named after women, something Evans draws attention to on her tour. Public spaces are full of statues of triumphant men strapped on horses and kings resplendent in regalia, but women are hardly ever committed to stone. How come a seemingly progressive country like France has a gender imbalance when it comes to history and public memorialising?

"In history we always hear the winner's side. And history was written by men until the last century. Until the last century women didn't vote, they didn't have the same rights as men. It's normal. There is going to be this discrepancy," she says. "I just think that in 2017 we should be doing things to change that." And Evans, in her own small way, is trying to chip away at tourism's glass ceiling.

Meanwhile, she looks forward to a more egalitarian time. "I just would love to walk through a city one day and have an equal number [of statues] of men and women," she says. "That would be amazing. That is my ultimate goal." *

ESSENTIALS

The Feminist Walk stops at the Pantheon, Jardin du Luxembourg, along the Left Bank of the Seine and through the Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

The Sugar and Spice Tour

covers the lives and stories of the women writers of Paris along with confectionery stops along the route. (Heidi Evans organises tours for individuals and groups on request. Prices vary, depending on group size. For more information check www.womenofparis.fr or contact her on: +33788389242 or womenofparis@gmail.com).

NIRVANA FOR A MATERIAL GIRL

ONE WEARY CITY SLICKER WENT OFF THE GRID IN AUROVILLE FOR TWO MONTHS, AND IT TURNED OUT THIS WAS ALL THE RESPITE SHE NEEDED **TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHANDNI DOULATRAMANI**



Auroville has many tree houses (left), perfect for lounging with a book or staring at the sky; A regular morning at Tamarind Bakery for the writer meant spending time with her young friend, Sophia, who was always eager to taste some chocolate batter (right).

The April sky was high and cloudless. It was 44°C and not a blade of grass was moving. But my blithe heart—it was dancing.

In the summer of 2016, I quit my job in Bengaluru, sub-leased my apartment, and with my meagre savings, left for Auroville in Puducherry to volunteer. I managed an arrangement that gave me accommodation in exchange for my services at the Tamarind Bakery and the bountiful cashew farms at the Evergreen Forest Community, a 25-acre stretch in a corner of the township with ambrosial wild berries, organic farms, thoroughbred horses and quaint cottages.

My hosts were Tamar, an inspiring South African woman, Amir, her Israeli husband whom she fell in love with while studying in Jerusalem, and their adorable children, Zohar, Laya, and Sophia. The couple moved here 14 years ago to lead a more nature-friendly life.

Thirteen year-old Zohar did not

go anywhere without his book on Auroville's wildlife. Laya, who was nine, loved to make jewellery out of shells, twigs and beads, and five-year-old Sophia, whose favourite word was "buttocks", had a belly as round and spongy as the carrot cake we baked.

I was put up in a cosy tree house right above the bakery. It included a bamboo shelf, one electric plug point, a fan and a mattress with a mosquito net. This was a huge shift from my spacious one bedroom apartment in Bengaluru, decorated with Led Zeppelin posters, fairy lights and second-hand furniture.

The treehouse, with its rickety ladder, was like the bunk bed I always wanted but never had.

I learnt to wake up with the forest. Most mornings were spent in the bakery slicing apples, zesting lemons and oranges, and mixing sugar, flour, butter, and chocolate with a hand blender. With the help of Kala and Revati—the two

women who worked at the bakery—I would fill the cupcake holders and Bundt pans with accurately measured batter that went into large handmade brick ovens. These desserts were then packed into boxes and sent for delivery.

Phew! I was no longer going *tap-tap-tap* on my laptop for a corporate job. I was happy, to say the least.

The daily work depended on the orders received by the bakery and how much cashew needed to be collected. I was free to decide how I divided my time. On lean days, I read in the tree house under the starry sky or cycled about Auroville's dusty red roads, which turned mucky in monsoon.

The Auroville Library, which has an extensive collection of English and German literature, and everything in between, became my favourite spot, with its neatly stacked books and snug benches by French windows.

Most afternoons Zohar, Laya, Sophia



Matrimandir, a place for yoga and meditation, is the heart of Auroville.

and I swam in the pool full of dried leaves, fish and frogs or climbed trees, lunging from one branch to another. Sometimes we plucked rainbow-coloured *pitanga* fruits (Brazilian cherries) to drench our parched mouths in the summer sun.

The sweet and sour *pitanga* was a refreshing alternative to the cashew fruit that left my mouth uncomfortably dry. Foraging the forest, collecting cashew fruits in wheelbarrows and separating them from the nuts was arduous.

One hard twist of the nut, like that of a key, was all that was needed to separate the two, but the amount of cashew nuts we had to work with left us spent. The nut went into steel buckets and the fruit, either into our mouths or in a corner for compost.

Erumalai, a farmer from Evergreen who had been working in the commune for 20 years, warned me about urushiol, the toxin in cashew shells. Urushiol can instantly burn the skin. It is why cashew is never sold raw.

One balmy afternoon, as I sat on a barren patch and twisted the nut out of the fruit, I reminisced about the trays of cashew nuts that my mother whipped out during Diwali which I would eagerly wipe out. And here I was with Erumalai, in a nook in Tamil Nadu, itching to scratch my elbow from the juice that had leaked from the fruit down my arm.

TRAVELLING TO VOLUNTEER: FIVE PLACES YOU CAN GO

Madras Crocodile Bank Trust works to conserve crocodiles and other reptiles and amphibians and their habitats. You can apply to different departments like research or education and practical work. You can volunteer for two to five weeks. MCBT provides food and accommodation (www.madrascrocodilebank.org; 4, Mammalapuram, 603-104, Tamil Nadu; volunteer@madrascrocodilebank.org).

Lha Charitable Trust in Dharamsala helps Tibetan refugees assimilate seamlessly into India. You can volunteer in a number of areas ranging from teaching English and foreign languages, photography and yoga to creative writing and fashion designing. Lha offers short and long-term opportunities (www.lhasocialwork.org; Temple Road, Kangra District, McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh; 01892-220992 / 98823 23455).

Manav Sadhna in Gujarat's Gandhi Ashram serves the underprivileged. As a volunteer, you can provide your services in fields of women's empowerment, sanitation and community media, among others. You will have to

commit for a period of at least one month. The organisation provides accommodation and lunch (www.manavsadhna.org; Gandhi Ashram, Ahmedabad, Gujarat; 79275 60002; volunteer@manavsadhna.org).

Spiti Ecosphere creates sustainable livelihoods associated with nature and culture conservation. The organisation works with local people and volunteers who share a common passion for conservation, mountain travel and adventure. You will be involved with organic farming and even in the construction of greenhouses (www.spitiecosphere.com; Old Bazaar, Kaza, Spiti, Himachal Pradesh; 94188 60099, 89884 71247, 97119 30168).

Csoma's Room Foundation is an organisation that benefits the Ladakhi community in Zanskar Valley. As a volunteer, you can work on constructing the solar-powered school and teach children. A fee of ₹7,550 will cover accommodation and food (csomasroom.org; Snow Leopard Conservancy, India Trust No 108, Zangla, J&K; 94693 69406, 94693 69614, 94194 55963; csomasroom@gmail.com).



A batch of apple rose cupcakes (top left) from Tamarind Bakery before they were popped into the oven; The writer would often explore the Buddha Garden (bottom right), sometimes with her new friends like Upopo Hausimami, a Slovenian kite surfer; The library (bottom left) has books in eight languages; Inside the commune, it's common to find Brazilian cherries, or rainbow fruit (top right), from the pitanga tree.

Two months in the wilderness, and by now I had seen a snake guzzle a frog, helped Tamar's kids save squirrels, almost swallowed a fish alive and collected eggs from under the soft tummies of chickens. I had even weathered a cyclone in a room with three open sides while babysitting my neighbour's guinea pig, Kanoot. On the nights it didn't rain, I would sometimes wander naked in the forest and realise that I am more afraid of people than of animals.

This urge to volunteer, which started as a need to escape from the drab city life of population, pollution, routines and familiarity, turned into an unexpected adventure in the swaying hammock of Mother Nature, where the people of the forest lived. On my ride back to Bengaluru, I knew the children of the moon had melted my freezing soul with the warm glow of theirs. *

ESSENTIALS

Getting There Auroville is about 16 km/20 min north of Puducherry by road. You can reach Puducherry either by bus (from Chennai/Bengaluru) or by train. From Puducherry, you can hire a cab (approx. ₹400 one-way) or take a bus (₹10).

Eat Cheese egg dosa at La Terraza (meal for two approx. ₹250), confectionery at Dreamer's Cafe (0413-2623143; open daily 8 a.m.-8 p.m.; meal for two approx. ₹200); pizzas at Tanto Pizzeria (0413-262 2368; open daily 12.30-3 p.m. and 6.30-8.15 p.m.; meal for two approx. ₹1,000), sandwiches and cakes at Bread & Chocolate (0413-2623778; open daily 8.30 a.m.-5 p.m; meal for two approx. ₹600).

Stay Evergreen Forest Community (97512 57769; accommodation free if you're volunteering, but you will have to inform them in advance), Eden of Zen (98330 25645; ₹700-3000 for doubles), Gaia's Guest House (94863 63282; doubles ₹1500-2800)

Traveling Hiring a bicycle is a good way to navigate your way around Auroville. If you prefer taking a walk, try leaving your slippers at home. It is common to walk around barefoot.

Work For all rules and regulations on volunteering/accommodation in Auroville, please check the official website www.auroville.org.



A vendor transports yoghurt to the restaurants on the empty streets of old Dhaka, happy to avoid weekday traffic on a Friday.

THE RECIPE NEVER GETS OLD

DUCK EGG OMELETTE, BIRYANI, AND BHORTA IN DHAKA'S HISTORIC QUARTER **BY REEMA ISLAM**
PHOTOGRAPHS BY VINCE BOISGARD

My *dada bari*, or paternal grandfather's house, still stands on a corner of Taher Bagh Lane in Kaptan Bazaar in the old city of Puran Dhaka. My family was based in Libya when I was young, but we visited annually. I have a dominant memory from that time, which is waking up to the distinctly unfamiliar sounds of women shouting orders to servants, a cacophony of crows, and the ringing of rickshaw bells.

Mornings also meant decadent breakfasts of parathas and tiny omelettes made of duck eggs; *mishti doi* or sweet yoghurt with *bakarkhani*

bread, and *achars* that my elder sister would sneak out of our home and buy for me. There was however, no sneaking around for the resident monkeys, who would calmly walk into homes, grab the largest bunch of bananas, and walk out with equal composure.

Puran Dhaka was always redolent with the smells of decay and crumbling, with greying walls and red floors. Beneath the layers of grime and dirt, however, were tales of foreign invasions, revolution, famine, floods and earthquakes. Once brightened by *dhak*—the flame of the forest trees, which possibly gave it its name—the

city emerged during the rule of Sher Shah Suri in the 16th century and grew during the Mughal era.

With Buriganga River serving as its lifeline, Dhaka grew around factories or *kuthis*, churches and schools. Now over 400 years old, the old city is still the busiest part of this capital of 15 million people. Its chaotic streets are also the setting for an exciting culinary journey.

BIRYANI FOR BREAKFAST

Behind the walls of the British Central Jail, which incorporated Sher Shah Suri's older fort, is where the Dhaka of the Mughals, the East India

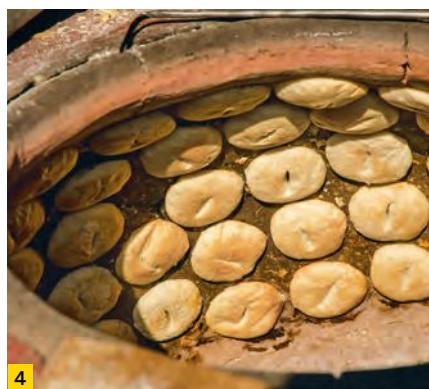
Company, the Armenians, the Portuguese, French and Dutch came together. Friday is a good day to visit the area around the unfinished Lalbagh fort, behind the central jail area. A five-minute walk from this 17th century structure, commissioned by Aurangzeb's son, Prince Azam, is the Royal Hotel (*44 Hornath Ghosh Road, Lalbagh; +880-1912831456; 6 a.m.-11 p.m.*). Dhaka's quintessential *kacha* biryani, in which the meat, potatoes and rice are cooked in one dish, rather than layered together later (*pakka* style) is only available at weddings. But the hotel's mutton *khashi kachi* biryani (*BDT120/₹95*) is the closest casual alternative and my personal favourite. Royal's *doodher shorbot* (*BDT250/₹198 per litre*), which consists of almonds and pistachios in cold milk, is also a popular liquid dessert.

A 15-minute rickshaw ride away is the landmark Haji Biryani (*70 Kazi Alauddin Road, Nazira Bazar; +880-*

My family doesn't live near Puran Dhaka anymore but I love going on a Friday, when people are in weekend mode

1711523505; 11 a.m.-11 p.m.) operating since 1939, when its proprietor returned from the Haj. To date, it has only sold one item: beef biryani (*BDT130/₹95*), in bowls made of dried jackfruit leaves. Sharing tables is the norm at this 20-seater. Another wedding special on the menu is the yoghurt drink *borhani* (*BDT80/₹63*). Made with half-a-dozen spices, including pepper, salt, and mint leaves, Haji's version might be the best in town, and it is certainly the best way to wash down a bowl of spiced meat and rice.

Another popular haunt is Nanna Biryani House (*42 Becharm Dewry, Sardar Bhaban; +880-1726671727*), famous for its chicken pulao (*BDT130/₹87*). Here, huge leg and breast pieces, marinated in a juicy masala mix, with kewra and green chilies, lend their fragrance to the rice.



1 Misthi doi, always a popular dessert.
2 Jorda with mishti, made of sweetened rice with gulab jamuns, is served at weddings.
3 Chicken kebabs doused in masala and barbecued on coals. **4** Crisp bakarkhanis, Dhaka's favourite morning snack.

MASTER COOKS AND BAKERS

No Bangladeshi meal is complete without a *bhorta*, a mashed dish, typically served with plain rice and dal. Nirob Hotel (*Nazimuddin Road; +880-27300265; 6-1 a.m.*) excels at a range of traditional bhortas. The slightly fermented *chepashutki* (*BDT40/₹31*) consists of dried Puntius fish, which is rehydrated, stacked in an earthen pot with fish oil for a few months, then sautéed in mustard oil with onions, garlic and chillies before being roughly mashed.

The list of bhortas on the menu is huge: unripe banana with coriander and chillies; tomato with mustard oil; cabbage with a heavy dose of garlic; simple potato with dried red chillies; beans with chillies; and more dried fish bhortas (*average cost BDT30/₹23 per plate*).

In Puran Dhaka, mornings still mean waking up to fresh bakarkhani (*BDT3/₹2 per piece*) and milky chai. It is popularly eaten with another speciality of Bangladesh, cheese or Dhaka *pioneer* (*BDT950/₹197 for 250 gm*), a rennet product that is high on calcium and low in fat content. Though the bakarkhani is a common Kashmiri delicacy, the credit for its name, at least in Dhaka, goes to Aga Bakar, a general in the early 19th-century army of Nawab Siraj-ud-daulah.

In the same area, on Abul Hasnat Road, there are several hole-in-the-wall shops selling scrumptious puris, with potato or dal mixed in the dough (*BDT5/₹3 & BDT3/₹2 respectively*). On the opposite end of the taste spectrum are spicy *jali* kebabs (*BDT12/₹9 per piece*). The egg drizzled over these beef kebabs gives them their distinct layer of webbing.

BANGSHAL BEAUTIES

About five minutes away by car from the Central Jail area is Bahadur Shah Park, once the venue for the public hanging of mutineering soldiers from the 1857 Uprising. Next to it is the neighbourhood of Bangshal, with lanes like the 300-year-old Shankhari Bazaar, home to Hindu craftsmen who make conch shell bangles.

Walk 10 minutes to Beauty Boarding (*1, Shrishadas Lane, Bangla Bazar; +880-1711439566*), the iconic *adda ghor* or hangout of Bangladesh's pre-

Partition era. This was the setting for many a revolutionary, who lived in its spare rooms, and ate food made by a Sylheti cook at its 20-seater restaurant. Formerly a printing press, the building was turned into a hotel by Tarak Shaha and his family. Though the hotel has recently been the site of intellectual chat and cultural exchange—it hosted the international photography festival *Chobi Mela*—people mostly come here for the food.

Popular favourites at Beauty Boarding include bhortas of *pabda* or catfish (*BDT75/₹59*), *rui* egg bhorta (*BDT10/₹7*), eggs (*BDT10/₹7*), and *nola* (*BDT110/₹87*). The masalas are freshly ground, and except for a few fish items, the menu changes daily. The best dish, however, is the chicken curry, served with a large piece of potato.

Outside, in the narrow alleys, street vendors sell *murali* or fried dough, twisted and sprinkled with sugar and food colour. My father used to gorge on this as a child, and I love it as well. Back through the court area near Pogose School, which was built by an Armenian in 1848, and along Johnson Road, there's another gem of a shop: Beauty Lassi (30/A Johnson

Road, Rayershahib Bazar; +880-1714295621, 8 a.m.-10.30 p.m.). Stop here for a refreshing lemonade with huge chunks of citrus (*BDT15/₹11*). This drink has been a favourite with lawyers for 90 years now; the shop started as a mere stall, but now has seating for about 30 people.

MUTTON UP

Beauty Lassi's lemonade helps endure a further five-minute drive through weekend traffic, down Johnson and Nawabpur Roads, towards Hotel Al-Razzak (29/1 North South Road, Bangshal; +88029566412; 6 a.m.-12 a.m.). Famed for its mutton leg roasts (*BDT170/₹134*), and *bhuna rupchanda* or pomfret (*BDT350/₹276*, depending on the fishing season), Al-Razzak has also, in recent times, become popular as a favorite haunt during Ramadan, for the early morning meal, or *sehri*. The restaurant has cabin seating for families.

The highlight, for me, of my feast through Puran Dhaka is closer to home, past the small iron monument at Gulistan, marking the centre of Bangladesh, in Kaptan Bazaar. The wholesale market, which is also known

as Thatari Bazaar, does brisk business in meat, spices and dry food items. It also houses Star Hotel & Kebab, a large, basic place with an array of local specialities. I visit it for the mutton *gilassy*, a dish that has its origins in the days of the East India Company. The story goes that the British told local cooks to use as little masala as possible in the mutton, resulting in a white dish with a film of oil, like a looking glass, on top of it.

My family doesn't live near Puran Dhaka anymore but I love going on a Friday, when the streets are emptier and people walk about in a relaxed, weekend mode. Sometimes, a bend in the narrow alley brings back memories of my father shielding me from a swerving rickshaw. The smell of freshly fried dal puri or the tamarind chutneys piled up into tiny mounds on an aluminum tray take me back to the days when we would hide behind the pillars and gasp at the spiciness of these forbidden snacks. Old Dhaka has now been infused with new flavours. Some of the people from my childhood are no longer there too. But just as soon as I am back in its narrow alleyways, I feel right at home again. *



Weekends also mark a busy time outside the butcher shops in Thatari Bazaar.

THE CONVERSATION

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MARGARITA WITH A MAP

For Kalki Koechlin, a truly immersive adventure is about letting yourself go



RIVA BUBBER

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"I TRAVEL TO GET LOST"

Though travel brings alive all of Chef Kelvin Cheung's five senses, taste and smell often trump the others **BY LUBNA AMIR**

Washing dishes at his father's Toronto restaurant is how Kelvin Cheung kick-started his culinary journey two decades ago. Today, the 37-year-old chef runs two of Mumbai's successful boutique restaurants: Bastian, known for its seafood, and the chic gastro-pub, One Street Over. The two kitchens keep this Kendall School of Culinary Arts graduate on his toes. But even whilst he's on a break, "it's difficult to turn off the chef" in him, and his travel companion and wife, Andrea, completely understands why. Chasing aromas, wafting out of both swanky restaurants and humble food stalls, is what now dominates the couple's travel itineraries.

Is travel essential to being a chef?

Not really. You don't need to travel halfway across the world to see what other chefs are plating up. For instance in Japan, which is my favourite destination in the world, what amazes me is how some chefs dedicate their entire lives to mastering one dish. There's a yakitori restaurant in Tokyo, and all it serves is every single part of the chicken, including skin, tendons and even cartilage. In Tokyo's famous Tsujiki Fish Market, a fourth generation boxer family serves only one dish—grilled eel glazed with sweetened soy sauce on a bed of steam rice. Japanese chefs stay in Japan perfecting one dish. This does not make them less or more of a chef; it's how they gain expertise over a dish. Having said that, while travelling isn't essential, it surely helps. For me, travelling makes me more aware of how I observe different dishes, and sample the aromas and flavours that greet me along the way.

Tell us about some dishes inspired by your recent travels.

There are quite a few actually. On Bastian's menu, for instance, we have a dish called Mom's Singapore Curry, which is essentially a Southeast Asian coconut curry served with crab. It's my mother's recipe, and has been on the menu since Bastian's launch. However, when Andrea and I went to Bangkok this June, I had a similar style of curry at a local seafood market. When I came back, I tweaked the recipe. Now the flavour profile of the curry on our menu is a combination of Thai flavours and what I grew up eating.

Since my family lives in Chicago, I visit U.S.A. often, and one of the things I absolutely love there is In-N-Out's Animal Burger, a freshly ground beef burger smothered with their in-house Animal Sauce, which is basically a tangier and spicier version of Thousand Island. It was even served at our wedding in Los Angeles last year. It had to be on my menus because I love it so much. So we do serve my version of the Animal Burger at One Street Over. At Bastian, we serve Animal Prawns, which is a really cool combination. I used to make prawns in my dad's restaurant as a teenager and since I really wanted some part of the Animal Burger on Bastian's menu as well, I added Animal Sauce to prawns.



Toronto-born Kelvin Cheung grew up in Chicago and currently lives in Mumbai, but his thoughts, he says, are always in Chinese.

Why aren't menus of both your restaurants limited to one cuisine?

That's my style. I don't like to focus on just one cuisine. For me cooking is about retaining the flavours of an ingredient. When tomatoes are in season, I happily put some Italian, Thai and Chinese flavours together on one plate. I enjoy the process of combining interesting global flavours in a way that exemplifies and shows off the ingredient and the cooking technique.

How closely are your menus linked to the places you love?

Let's say my entire menu is a combination of my childhood memories, every single place I've worked at, the cookbooks and food blogs I read and, of course, my travels. Right now, for instance, I'm creating a trout dish for which the fish is flown in from Himachal Pradesh. The way I cook it is what I learnt in my first job in Moulin de Lisogne, a restaurant and Bed and Breakfast in Belgium. It had a pond full of French blue trout. Every order there

needed me to run out, catch a fresh trout, butcher and clean it, and then cook it to order. Using the same technique and flavour profile, I have recreated the dish on Bastian's menu as pan-seared Himachal trout, it's served with a white wine butter emulsion.

Since the food you serve is global, many ingredients might not be easily available in India. How do you source them?

Whichever part of the world I'm in, I believe in being an ethical chef and showing support to local farmers. Also, it doesn't make sense to pay ₹1,000 on importing avocados from Mexico when you can source them from Kodaikanal. They may not be as good but, when used correctly, taste just the same. Ditto for seafood. It's taken me six years to find the right seafood suppliers. If I want snapper, I call fishermen down south at 3 a.m. They catch fresh fish and send it by air. It's a beautiful system. I change my menus to focus on what's available locally without compromising on quality.

How rooted are you in China—its food, culture, flavours and sights?

Deeply rooted. Even though I grew up between Canada and Chicago, I'm still very much Chinese. In fact, I think in Chinese first. I last visited China in 2016, when I had a 12-hour layover en route to Toronto. In the little time I had, I sampled the roast suckling pig and it found its way to Bastian's menu. One of my earlier childhood memories is of eating fried stinky tofu on Hong Kong's streets. It's a fermented tofu dish that, well, stinks. Traditionally it's eaten out of a plastic bag with chopsticks but in my version at Bastian, which I call 'Crispy Tofu', it's plated with sesame peanut sauce and chilli oil.

Apart from food, what else do you look forward to when you travel?

Honestly, Andrea and I look to get lost. From our first trip to Goa, we've established a pattern: we wake up early and set out. We go hiking, or visit museums, temples and churches. We just pick a direction and walk as far as we can. Our trip to Japan last year wasn't planned at all. We visited Osaka, Tokyo and Kyoto, and all our meals were in places where we saw locals eat. That's been our holidays everywhere, whether it's Croatia, U.S.A. or Thailand. *



Cheung's favourite souvenir is a set of chef knives he bought at Tokyo's Tsukiji Fish Market, a busy indoor market that's best known for its 5 a.m. tuna auctions.



Cheung and his wife, Andrea, gravitate to local haunts like Kyoto's Shinkyogoku Shopping Arcade, lined with shops selling kimonos and pickles, and stalls dishing out sushi.

TRAVEL BYTES

LAST PLACE YOU TRAVELED TO
OMAN

NEXT TRIP IS TO
BHUTAN

COMFORT FOOD IS
PAPER DOSA

MY SUITCASE ALWAYS HAS
A PAIR OF RUNNING SHOES

BEST DISH HAD WHILE
TRAVELLING
SEA URCHIN-UNI SUSHI ROLL AT
SHOUSHIN, TORONTO

STRANGEST FOODS TRIED
ON A TRIP
UNMENTIONABLE THINGS AT
CHINA'S WILD GAME DINNER



MARGARITA WITH A MAP

A TRULY IMMERSIVE ADVENTURE IS ABOUT CHUCKING AWAY THOSE GUIDEBOOKS AND LETTING YOURSELF GO, SAYS KALKI KOECHLIN

BY LAKSHMI SANKARAN

There are moments when the therapeutic benefits of travel can hit home harder than any of the dispassionate advice received on a shrink's couch. Displacement, in a strictly physical sense, clarifies both mind and body. For Kalki Koechlin, that breakthrough came during a trip to Karuna Farm, a nature retreat near Kodaikanal.

Although she can't quite trace the timeline—it was two-three years ago, she says—the circumstances that accelerated her existential crisis are still vivid. "I was in a state of transition with my divorce and a lot of changes in my personal life," recalls the actor, alluding to her 2015 parting with filmmaker Anurag Kashyap. "Other things were happening at the time too like illnesses in my family and financial pressures."

Kalki and a girlfriend plotted a quick getaway to the south. "During our time at the farm, we went to the top of a mountain nearby and we did mushrooms. I remember feeling like the universe was breathing with me and that I wasn't alone. And that everyone was connected."

By the end of her journey, Koechlin had arrived at "practical solutions" to many of her problems. If this flash of *satori*, Zen-speak for enlightenment, has a Kerouac-ian ring to it, that's because stripped of her glamorous facade, the 33-year-old exudes the air of a happy beatnik.

We meet at her down-to-earth but artsy apartment in Versova, Mumbai. Dressed in a long-sleeved striped tee and jeans,

"I am not the kind of traveller who thinks about where to go next. There are countries I would like to visit once in my lifetime for certain—like Peru—but usually I end up in a place because someone suggested it to me or it just looked tempting at the time," says Koechlin.

shorn of make-up and her hair in a loose post-shower tangle, she answers the door and casually waves me in.

Koechlin is about to eat so she settles down in a chair, a plate of food in one hand and a glass of wine in the other. Between mouthfuls, she starts to talk travel. "For me, a trip has to fall into my lap. By planning too much, you are forcing yourself to have a good time instead of approaching it like you are going to learn from this experience."

(EXCERPTS FROM THE INTERVIEW)

What is your primary motivation to travel?

It happens when I am saturated creatively. I can't read. I can't concentrate or even learn my lines. When it gets to that, I know I need to travel. It's kind of like emptying the cup so that you can fill it up again. Before, I used to work like a headless chicken for a year-and-a-half and then suddenly feel like I am a failure. Then I would take four months off. Now I am trying to take shorter breaks but more often.

Where did you go on your last break?

I went back to my hometown Pondicherry almost two to three weeks ago. I am learning surfing at the Kallialay Surf School on Serenity Beach. I also go horseback riding when I am there, riding horses without saddles and a grip. There's no way of controlling the horse except communicating

with it. I used to ride as a child but stopped completely as an adult. Now I am back on a horse, after almost 12 years.

What sort of travel did you do as a child?

My dad (Joel Koechlin) hitchhiked from France to India in his 20s through places like Afghanistan and Varanasi. Travel was a way of life for him, like it was for many people in the 1960s and '70s. He used to make paragliders, hand gliders and small aircrafts. So my childhood was filled with, you know, jumping off cliffs in a hand glider from the top of the mountain. And then a little later on, I was the one who had to drop him to the top of the mountain in a car and drive down by myself.

With my parents, I remember some distinct trips. One was to the Himalayas. That was the first time I ever saw snow. I think I was eight or nine. We used to do a lot of treks in and around Mudumalai near Ooty, where I went to school. Then when I was older, I made my first trip to France to visit my grandparents. They lived near the Vosges Mountains in eastern France and there I learnt to ski. So yeah, I had a country bumpkin upbringing of sorts.

When did you start travelling alone?

When I was 18, I travelled with my then boyfriend, an English literature student, to Bodh Gaya and Manali among other places. We were both these young boho wanderers in love, going everywhere by train. We had just

KALKI KOECLIN



“For me, a trip has to fall into my lap. By planning too much, you are forcing yourself to have a good time instead of approaching it like you are going to learn from this experience”

read Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* and would write poetry together. Then when I was at university in London (Goldsmiths), I travelled alone across Europe to many places. Spain, Amsterdam—of course (smiles knowingly).

How do you like solo travel?

Initially, I was not good at it. I was socially awkward. I wouldn't know how to make friends. So my early trips were all about going to museums or reading my book at the beach... being a quiet and a good girl. Now I am better at travelling by myself. Two years ago, I accidentally ended up on a solo trip to Sicily. On the short flight there I made friends with this troupe of classical musicians. They were amazing. They took me to their concerts. Then from there, I went to some of the smaller beach towns near Sicily.

Do you plan your travel at all?

I always go with the intention of wanting my own space. It's never about what am I going to do there. I am a nature person so I would much rather go to the mountains and go trekking. But if I am in a place like New York (her favourite city in the world), I want to be watching plays, going to museums, seeing stand-up comedy routines and music festivals. It's about jumping on the bandwagon of whatever's going on that week. There's always someone who connects you to something else. And you find your way. During my recent trip to New York last month, I rode bicycles everywhere. I got to stop where I wanted and see the neighbourhoods properly.

1 Koechlin calls her father a “more seasoned” traveller than her. “He was the kind of traveller who just lived in places like Afghanistan and Varanasi for a year when he felt like it.”

2 A fan of music festivals, the actress reveals that she would like to attend The Burning Man in Nevada once. **3** One of her favourite destinations is Crete. “It's not crowded with tourists and the seaside is so empty and blue.” **4** Spain, where Koechlin shot *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*, was among the happiest countries she has been to. “In Spain, people drink all the time and they are full of joy.”

5 When she was younger, she travelled to Bodh Gaya with her then boyfriend.

6 Last year, Koechlin undertook a 4,000-km biking trip across the Northeast of India.

In Sicily, for instance, I was at a restaurant and seeing me by myself, the restaurateur began to chat with me. After a while, I was with his family—there were about 20 of them—with a grand matriarch sitting on a table. Somebody was playing the piano and there was all this food. It felt like a scene from *The Godfather*. I like it when a trip builds on its own organically.

You also go on regular road trips.

I love it because you have no control over what's going to happen—you may have a puncture one day or you may not reach a place on time. Then sometimes, you end up in a Kafkaesque situation where some uncle tells you that the rubber for your flat tyre is available somewhere else and you are wheeling the tyre on the road with three kids and a chicken runs across the street from you.

In all of this, you are just reminded of life and humanity. You realise that life exists outside your own bubble. And that it's not the same but it's equally difficult. People may think that just because someone lives in the mountains they must be so happy but that's not the case, they have their own struggles. Travel is never about escapism for me.

Speaking of the mountains, what do you like about them?

Once a year, I try to go to the mountains... Kashmir, the Himalayas, the Northeast or in the south. It's about the quietude and the vast expanse. My favourite place are the mountains near

Karuna Farm, a place I find the spiritual. Whenever I am in the mountains, I am more meditative. If I am there long enough, I start writing. I also like going to Pondicherry to isolate myself and study my scripts closely.

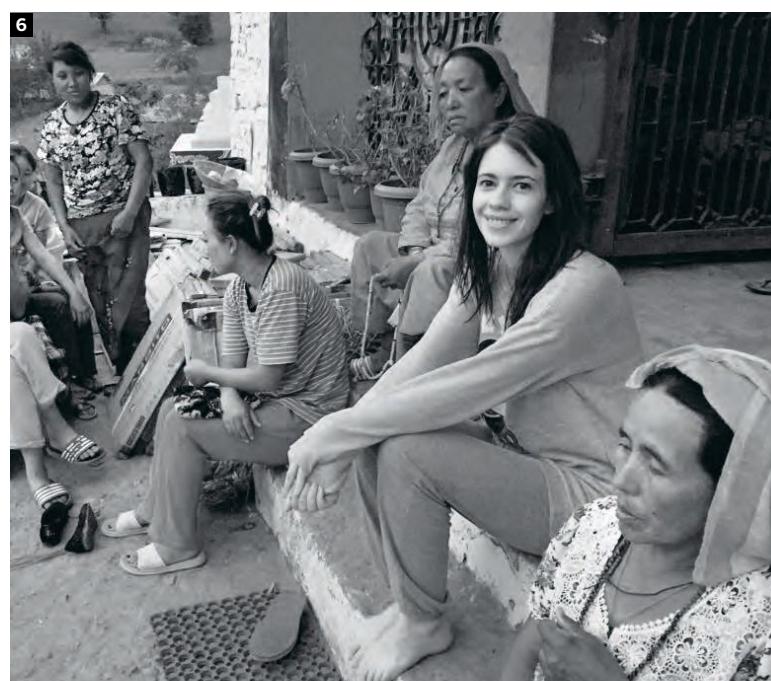
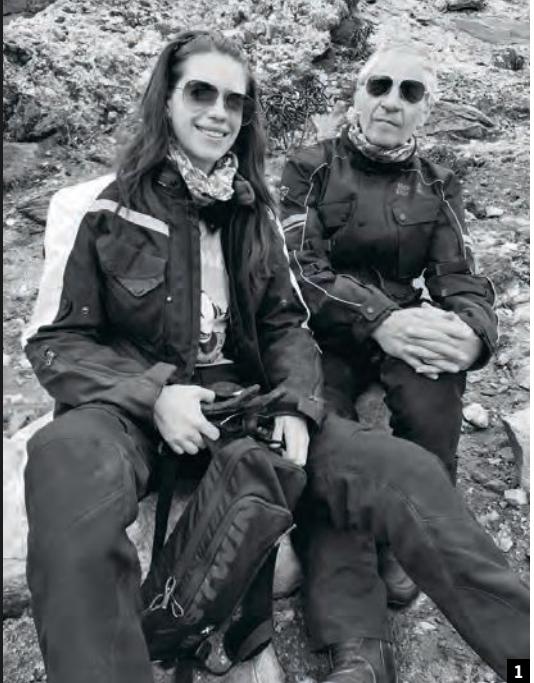
What was the most significant trip of your life?

It was the visit to Karuna Farm I mentioned earlier. I was in a vulnerable place physically and mentally. At the farm, my friend and I met a guy named Hart, who was an out-and-out hippie, living in a thatched hut and everything. We ended up spending a lot of time with him. He went through a whole bunch of healing experiences with me. I returned to Mumbai with a clear idea of what I needed to do.

Going to the mountains might have seemed like I was escaping but at the time, through all the conversations and experiences I had had, I came back with most of the solutions. That was when I decided that from here on, I would travel when I was saturated. It's like that Buddhist tale about the turtle who yearns to be a dragon. But in order to be one, he has to leave his shell first.

So does travel make for a more interesting person?

Yeah sure, but not resort or package travel—that makes a person boring. It should be about making yourself available to the world around you rather than taking your world with you. The idea is to step out of your comfort zone and realise that there is something else happening in this world. *





Fiction, feels Sarnath Banerjee, often gives a traveller a better sense of a place than guidebooks. "If I travel to Shanghai, I'd pick crime fiction set in the city over a travelogue."

HIS WONDROUS CAPERS

FOR GRAPHIC NOVELIST SARNATH BANERJEE, THE JOURNEYS HE TAKES IN HIS MIND ARE AS COLOURFUL AS THOSE TAKEN IN CALCUTTA, CONGO AND BERLIN **BY KAREENA GIANANI**

The first whiff of the great beyond, of lands unseen and unimagined, reached Banerjee when NRI relatives visiting his Calcutta home in the 1980s threw open their suitcases. They carried it all the way from Dum Dum Airport to Banerjee's childhood home, that enchanting transcontinental smell, far out of the reach of a boy who had never stepped onto an airplane.

"That sense of longing for foreign lands came in suitcases the size of a Paris apartment. And when we waved them goodbye from the airport gallery, they took it with them. Many years later, the same smell hit me when I landed at Heathrow airport, and I realised it was the smell of washing powder mingled with perfume!" laughs Banerjee on a phone call from Berlin, a city he calls home since 2011.

WAYS OF SEEING

Banerjee's graphic novels like *Corridor* (2004) and *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* (2007) have a way of looking under the hoods of cities like Delhi and Kolkata, warts and kinks laid bare. At times, they travel to imaginary cities too, documenting rich inner lives and idiosyncrasies of the people who live in them. In reality, Banerjee admits he has a chip on his shoulder when it comes to the way we travel these days. "Being shepherded like sheep into a cramped Ryanair flight, checking cities off long bucket lists, and other miseries of this fast-and-furious kind of travel—I don't identify with it. Neither do I understand the idea of looking at places with margins of another: Barcelona looks like Rome and Rome looks like Naples..." he says with the slightest hint of incredulity. He feels something is lost if he travels across three continents in four days, or when great places become mere landmarks, like the one time in Rome, when a passer-by directed Banerjee to his destination. "He said, 'Take the right from the Colosseum' and I passed it by without as much as a glance!" For him, it all feels too far removed from the wonderment he experienced when he, as a boy, took a train from Kolkata to see his father's family in Delhi; in the simple ritual of his maternal aunt coming to meet their travel caravan at Patna station carrying tiffins of egg curry and parathas, for just 10 minutes of chit-chat.

It is the journeys that he takes in his head that deeply interest Banerjee. And when he thinks of places that have facilitated

them, he thinks Japan. In 2016, walking up and down the rolling hills of Shodoshima, an island in western Japan, felt like air to the stuffy, unventilated sides of his mind. "I did that for a long time, until somebody warned me that inoshishi (wild boars) too roamed those hills." Tokyo too felt much more than a futuristic city. "It becomes a set of small villages at night. And I find Tokyoites deeply mysterious—I found people to be very gentle by nature, yet rapidly going on about their lives. In the evening, they hope to fall asleep in the metro."

Banerjee felt just as rebooted in Nara, the ancient capital of Japan, which lies in Japan's Kansai region. He walked amid its Buddhist and Shinto temples, ancient woods, and a deer park much like the one in Sarnath near Varanasi. "A great silence exists on the edge of the woods in to Naramachi, the ancient town. People whisper around as they clip-clop down the old streets; it makes for the most remarkable evenings," remembers Banerjee. These are the times when he is filled

with longing. Banerjee felt similar joy a few years ago when he walked along the glens of Scotland all by himself, especially in the Isle of Skye. "There were multiple grids of blues and greens, but most of all there was this blankness all around. Or a lonely falcon circling the skies. Moments like these transcend space and time," he says.

DRAWING BOARD

Banerjee's most dramatic travels have involved characters right out of a book—those not very different from, say, Digital Dutta

For most travellers, Berlin is the capital of cool. But Banerjee likes it for the general sense of camaraderie it exudes.



who appears in *Corridor* and *The Barn Owl...*, who has barely ever travelled but learnt all about life, Ibn Battuta and Roland Barthes through the library that has been with his family for three generations. In 2008, when Banerjee was in São Paulo, for instance, his introduction to the city was through the eyes of the Paulistas he was there to interview for a documentary: a night liftman who wrote superhero comics; a bookshop owner who was tormented by the literary characters that appeared in his dreams while he slept in his store; and filmmaker José Mojica Marins who is famous for his character, Coffin Joe, and spine-tingling horrrotica (erotic horror writing). “I also saw the city through the eyes of this couple who ran a detective company called The Perfect Couple, and joined them as they followed spouses who might have been adulterous.” It is in the everydayness of cities—the boring even—that Banerjee finds multiple worlds colliding, and new points of view emerging.

Nothing gives Banerjee a keener sense of place than drawing it. “It is like your metabolism has slowed down, and you can immerse yourself in the psyche of that city. In São Paulo, I lived at the top of a building that overlooked Praça do Patriarca, one of the city’s oldest squares, located in the historic Sé district. Below me was a carnival; there were performance artists and middlemen, cassette peddlers and persistent hustlers. Street preachers assigned sins to passers-by and asked them to ‘repent, repent, and read the gospel while there is still time!’ I felt like I were sitting in a machan and watching the city’s wild side,” feels Banerjee. Because he drew that square over days, he says he can still feel the winter sun streaming down at the city, how the light shone on that square. Photographs, though accurate tools of recording places, flatten out the emotion one feels in them, believes Banerjee. “For me, drawing leaves an emotional record and gives me a tonal understanding of the city I am in, and that is very important to me.” Drawing also engages Banerjee in conversations that move beyond the mundane. “I sometimes catch up with other artist friends over long drawing sessions, and cherish an intimacy that’s tied only to that ritual,” says Banerjee. He fondly remembers a Sunday he spent drawing with an artist friend in a seedy rooftop restaurant in Paharganj. “The place overlooked a market, and we drew how the markets were being set up, that light flirtation between buyers and sellers, some brutal haggling over a bottle of watermelon squash. It made me screen that neighbourhood like I’d never done before.”

PLACES IN PEOPLE

“My relationships are often linked to places,” ponders Banerjee.



Banerjee's sketchbooks are filled with drawings that document travels old and new.

“WALKING, LIKE DRAWING, IS INTRINSIC TO MY RELATIONSHIPS WITH PLACES. I LIKE TO THINK THAT REAL FRIENDSHIPS LIE AT THE END OF A LONG WALK”

“I pin travel and cities to a person. For me, a relationship assumes much deeper meaning if we share the same sense of a city, and the person comes to represent that place for me. For instance, I saw Karachi with my ex-wife, and the place became an amazing landscape of love and longing. We walked in neighbourhoods that had art deco, Parsi baug-like buildings and naval architecture, passing Pathans in embroidered salwar-kameezes selling fruit. I now associate that city with her.” Walking, like drawing, is intrinsic to Banerjee’s relationships to places. “I like to think that real friendships lie at the end of a long walk,” he smiles over the telephone. “I cannot sit in a café and get to know someone; I have to keep moving. Not in glamorous neighbourhoods, but even in the most industrial of areas. I know Indian cities aren’t built to walk, but there’s so much happening; it is entertaining,” he feels.

REALITY CHECK

Banerjee is no stranger to journeys that rip apart comfort zones and cloaks of class privilege. In 2009, he was in Congo’s capital Kinshasa to write about children who were accused of witchcraft and were disappearing. “It was chilling to just be there, I didn’t get out of the room for a whole week because I couldn’t deal with it.” It later struck him that some children back in

Colaba’s streets in Mumbai suffer similar fates, kids younger than his four-year-old son. “Travel gives me a reality check, and we all need that from time to time. Certain biases and prejudices cannot be stripped away if we don’t get out there and face them ourselves,” he says.

Closer home in Berlin, Banerjee feels he has discovered a sense of community. “Many people flock towards Berlin to feel cool. What I like the most about this city is something that I don’t see back home that often: a culture of fixing things. People mend their shoes, their tape recorders, darn their coats, instead of buying new things. People have time for work and play. I see picnics in neighbourhoods all the time, and that reminds me of my childhood in Calcutta. My son gets to ride his bike in the outdoors. When I sit in a café, chances are that the person next to me will be an Arab intellectual, or one from Beirut. Or a writer from Cairo.”

Banerjee isn’t the sort to make long bucket lists, and his travel wish is a curious one: he wishes to do at least one trip with a mass-market oriented tour agency. “Like Kundu Special Agency of Calcutta. I wonder what that bonhomie is like, being in a bus full of Bengalis who demand fish and rice in Srinagar; what conversations I’ll have and overhear. I think the experience will be one of its kind.” *

THE ADDRESS

84

SLICE OF APPLE HIGH

Fruit-picking and valley views during a stay in a Himachali home



SANJAY ASTA

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THE

OLD CITY AND THE SEA



Walk onto the black-and-white chessboard floor at Ayana Fort Kochi, and you immediately sense what a good move it is in the oft-chequered game of travel. Located in the heart of Fort Kochi at Kalvathy Road, Ayana is a refreshing mixture of old and new—it flaunts minimalist, contemporary decor but there are also those gorgeous old Athangudi tiles paved across the hotel, still cleaned with coconut oil and warm water.

Ayana opened its doors by hosting the third Kochi-Muziris Biennale breakfast seminar in December 2016. However, its building has had several avatars in the past: it was a courthouse in the early 1900s and a tea warehouse in the mid-1900s. My uncle and aunt, lifelong Kochi residents, meet me for lunch at The Old Court, the hotel's all-day dining area overlooking a garden patch. My uncle recalls coming to this building when it was a bank, and we consume old stories along with Kerala specialities

such as spicy prawn curry, stir-fried cabbage and steamed rice.

Later, I decide to unfurl my tourist raincoat and step out into Fort Kochi's streets. Ayana is a great place to stay for those who plan to visit the next Kochi Biennale, in December 2018. Exit the hotel, turn right, and you're close to two biennale venues: Pepper House and Aspinwall House. I feel a hint of nostalgia as my auto sputters past the latter, having shown an installation of drawings and sound there called the "Fluidity of Horizons," at the second biennale, in 2014. My chatty auto driver tells me that "biennale" has become a Malayalam word.

I meet Ajitha, my enthusiastic and well-informed guide, who first takes me to the famed "*cheena vala*," Fort Kochi's Chinese fishing nets, to watch fishermen raise their gigantic webs and examine their haul from the sea. We linger at the fish stalls and a low-key fish auction, where crows are shooed away but a tame

cat is fed choice bits of fish offal.

Fort Kochi is peppered with cafés, boutique hotels and leafy rain trees whose saplings are believed to have been brought from Brazil by the Portuguese. Ajitha points out heritage structures that have centuries-old stories to tell. St. Francis Church, for instance, is said to be the first European church built in India, and was the original resting place of Vasco da Gama for 14 years after his death in 1524, before his remains were taken to Portugal. A 15-minute rickshaw ride takes us to Jew Town's 16th-century Mattancherry Palace, whose walls are covered with Ramayana- and Mahabharata-themed tempera paintings. The nearby Paradesi Synagogue seems as opulent as it must have been when it was built in the 1560s, thanks to its Belgian chandeliers and blue willow-patterned Chinese floor tiles.

In the evening, I head to the Greenix Village cultural centre. I am fascinated by the mixed performance of kathakali,

MODERN AMENITIES AND OLD-WORLD CHARM
MEET AT AYANA FORT KOCHI **BY PARVATHI NAYAR**

Some rooms and the tea lounge at Ayana (middle and facing page, left) overlook the sea and Fort Kochi's streets; The hotel is centrally located, and guests can conveniently catch a kathakali make-up session (left) and performance, sail the backwaters on a boat cruise (facing page, right) or score some nutmeg tree fruit from a local riverside farmer (right).



mohiniattam and kuchipudi, which includes an hour-long opportunity to watch a kathakali dancer apply make-up.

After a long day, it is a relief to return to Ayana's cosy, well-appointed room. Its deep—and trendy—duck-egg blue walls complement the chequered floors and the ivory-and-gold colour scheme reflected in the artwork, frames, and bed linen. I see the same hues reflected in the swimming pool open to the skies and The Tea Lounge upstairs that was once the courthouse. It flaunts a high wooden ceiling, and its decor is uncluttered, with a single *deepa stambha* or pillar of lamps placed at the centre of the room.

The next day, I go further afield, to the suburb of Vaikom that lies about 43 kilo-metres southeast of Fort Kochi. Shajas, my guide during the backwater boat cruise from Vaikom, is full of tales about Kerala's history and life in these backwaters. He points to a toddy tapper sailing in his boat, armed with knife and a piece of buffalo bone, his instruments

of trade. Shajas explains how he climbs the coconut tree to drain the sap of the coconut flower bud—the basic ingredient of toddy.

The boat cruise takes in the wide Muvattupuzha River as well as narrow, private canals, almost all the way up to Vembanad Lake. Shajas points out the fauna and flora—wild jackfruit, pandanus, neem, tapioca, nutmeg; Indian pheasants, stilts, blue kingfishers. I am delighted to have skipped the mechanised boat; there's a lovely rhythm created by the two boatmen who pole us along.

I break the 1.5-hour-long drive back to Fort Kochi by stopping at the small town of Thalayolaparambu, where the potter Ramakrishnan shows how the little pots for capturing the sap are thrown on his wheel. I also visit the peaceful Vaikom Siva temple on the way, and later treat myself to supper in my room: flaky Malabar parotta, fish curry and dry roasted chicken. I relish how well-located

this place is, irrespective of what a guest would choose to do. It is the monsoon, and I have gambled much with the weather. But I have also stumbled upon fewer travellers. God's own country feels like my own personal getaway. *

ESSENTIALS

Ayana Fort Kochi is at Kalvathy Road in Fort Kochi. It lies 40 km/1.5 hr southwest of Cochin airport and 12 km/40 min west of Ernakulam South railway station. Ayana has 12 rooms and four suites (www.ayanahospitality.com; doubles from ₹8,000). The hotel organises 3-hr culinary tours for guests to sample Kerala specialities cooked in locals' homes (₹1,500 per person), and 4-hr heritage walks across the city (from ₹1,500 per person).

HAMMOCK IN THE HILLS

A HIMALAYAN RETREAT WITH LADAKHI CHARMS, LEH'S SHEY BHUMI

EVEN MAKES GOOD OF BAD WEATHER **BY LAKSHMI SANKARAN**

Shey Bhumi is the kind of place that sends the “panorama” feature on smartphones into overdrive. To be fair, that could also double as an accurate general assessment of Ladakh’s beaten-down and barren magnificence, which seems to evoke inexhaustible astonishment from any vantage point. Shey, in particular though, is unlike many of the other stay options available in Leh, Ladakh’s focal city nestled in the Himalayas. Most hotels or guest houses here are located in and around the central shopping square, and as is wont in so many hinterland towns of India, they strive for urbanity. I, however, was headed to an escape removed from all the hubbub.

From the airport, it took nearly 30 minutes for my pick-up to drive past the property’s unfussy iron gates on a narrow road in the tiny hamlet of Chuchot-Yokma. My arrival here had coincided with truant weather. It was supposed to be summertime in Leh—usually a vibrant visual palette of crystal-blue skies and icy peaks bleeding into a landscape of dusty brown slopes

and willowy plains. But as I scampered out of my vehicle, I met my worst fear: the steady drizzle of rain and the lashing force of the wind.

Shey’s manager Rupesh Sawant, a cheery and gregarious host, was at hand to greet me. Without missing a beat, he glanced up at the skies and chided, “Looks like you brought the Mumbai monsoon with you.” I did not have time to register my disappointment or my surroundings. I was quickly ushered up the steps to the terrace of a traditional Ladakhi structure. Sawant ducked his head to enter a small wooden door and I stepped in behind him.

The place I found myself in, located centrally in the property, was once the ruin of an old Ladakhi home, as per Sawant’s recounting. Now restored, it served as Shey’s communal dining area with a kitchen downstairs. I took in some of the newer decorative touches, like the bright red wooden columns hand-painted by local monks and the comfortable floor-seating flanked by antique dining tables. They were adequate as adornments

without diminishing from the house’s ancient provenance.

Breakfast wrapped up, I then made my way to my private cottage, a little farther from the dining hall. Standing in the doorway of what would be my home for the next two days, Shey Bhumi finally came into sharp focus. I was struck by how nature had been allowed to take its own course here with bare minimum interference, even for a property that advertises its rustic bona fides.

The six-acre property included 10 cottages, in the local folk mode of a white-stoned square facade with a flat roof, lined with red beams on its borders. As opposed to a manicured landscape neatly designed for a postcard, each cottage was separated by wild grass and uneven bushes of sea buckthorn. Through the grassy outgrowth, there were makeshift wooden paths to each cottage, lined with lanterns intermittently.

Inside the cottages, wooden floors, vintage chests, spacious beds with dragon motifs and carvings, subtly reinforced the theme of elegant outback

Every cottage in Shey Bhumi affords scenic views of Zanskar and Ladakh mountain ranges.





The communal dining space (top left) and cosy rooms (bottom right) are done up using traditional Tibetan and Ladakhi furniture; From atop the dining hall terrace, you can spy Thiksay Monastery (bottom left) in the distance; Leh market (top right) is 20 minutes away from Shey.

ALEXEY/ISTOCK (STREET); ~USERGU15632539/ISTOCK (MONASTERY). PHOTO COURTESY KAYA DORJE (LIVING ROOM, BEDROOM)

comfort. Still, I imagine what visitors must come to Shey Bhumi for was the money shot: a stunning and expansive view of the mountains, which flanked the retreat on all sides. My private cottage opened out to the Zanskar range while from the dining hall, you could spot the Ladakh range. To my dismay, a gloomy, grey filter had been pulled over both these scenes.

It was only a day and a half later that I got my photo finish. Sawant had asked me to look out for a trifecta of colours—the azure blue sky, punctuated with snow-capped tips, and muddy tan slopes, sometimes with a hint of purple. Walking out onto my front porch, there it was: the multi-coloured swatch that had eluded me so far. Panorama shot, check.

There is, of course, more to Shey Bhumi than mountain-gazing. Inter-

mittent rain had played spoiler on my itinerary with the entry by road from Leh to Nubra Valley and Pangon Lake blocked. But I gleaned some cultural enrichment, devoting an entire day to Ladakh's famed monasteries—Hemis, Thiksay and Spituk—all at a 20-30 minute ride from the property.

In retrospect, I am glad because the seclusion only heightened Shey's faraway appeal. I remember chancing upon *Ancient Futures*, a treatise on the Ladakhi people by Helena Norberg-Hodge, in the dining hall book collection. Norberg-Hodge celebrated the resilience of Ladakhi people, hoping that the modern life didn't edge out a simple culture that cherished contentment. During my visit, everything had not gone as I had wanted but in the end, I was certain I left contented. *

ESSENTIALS

Shey Bhumi is nearly 18 km/30 min from Leh airport. Each cottage on the property offers a down-home Ladakhi experience (www.sheybhumi.com; open Apr-Oct; doubles from ₹15,000, package tariffs customised). The retreat also offers three different (3-day, 5-day and 7-day) itineraries to visitors. Longer packages include a picnic to Pangong Lake (212 km/4 hr) and a visit to Nubra Valley. During your stay, you can feast on hearty Indian and continental fare. Spare one evening for a visit to The Blue Lotus, the property's fine-dining restaurant in Leh market.

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LUXURY GETS A CONSCIENCE



Break for coffee at Kaldi Kappee, the resort's lakeside coffee shop.

A COORGI RESORT COMBINES COMFORT WITH A
SOUND ENVIRONMENTAL APPROACH

BY ARUNIMA MAZUMDAR



The Ibnii's wooden villas (left) overlook the verdant coffee plantations and the property also has an open-air reception area (right).

It is only after our car pulls up on the rain-drenched driveway that I wake up from the slumber of a 5.5 hour-long drive. The sound of the forest—crickets to be precise—comes alive as dusk begins to slowly set in.

At The Ibnii resort and spa in the Madikeri district of Coorg (Kodagu), Karnataka, the mountain air is nippy. The onset of monsoon means everything is pervaded by the scent of petrichor. It is only while sipping some warm *chukka kaapi*, resort-grown coffee flavoured with honey and spice, that I realise my phone hasn't picked up a signal ever since I arrived.

Just then, Babita, the front-office manager, asks me to hand over a plastic water bottle I'd been drinking from. "No plastic on our grounds, please," she says, smiling, as she hands me the key to my cottage.

While every city races to become the world's best concrete jungle, the trend of green lodging and eco-friendly accommodations is fast catching on in the realm of tourism. Serious travellers are embracing and encouraging sustainability wherever they go. The Ibnii prides itself on being India's first eco-luxe resort to receive the Indian Green Building Council's (IGBC) platinum certification, and it's evident that it works hard to be worthy of this prestigious title.

Over dinner, I meet Sherry Sebastian, director of the property, who explains what it's like to envision and bring to life a "green" project like Ibnii. "I strongly believe in karma and the universe," she says. "We take so much from nature so we must return the favour. Only then does life come a full circle."

The server brings us a fresh round of kebabs, at the resort's Masi-kande restaurant as Sherry elaborates on how she quit the automobile industry to help her father, Captain Sebastian, set up the mammoth property. "He bought this property in 2004 from a Kodava"—a Coorgi man—"but he had no plans of turning it into a resort until 2009," says Sherry. "The dense population of trees was like a dream. There are almost 400 trees spread across the 120 acres, and we've not cut a single one. We simply trim a twig, if at all necessary, in case a branch is blocking a cottage view," she adds. Her father named the resort after the village, Ibnii, which means dew in Kannada.

Sherry talks as if preserving nature and being environment-friendly is the default way of life. She spends a lot of time learning about sustainability, and this research is evident.

Every morning, the staff assembles in the courtyard to take an eco-pledge to go plastic-free in every way possible. To begin with, The Ibnii is a car-free zone—the staff moves around the property in electric Revas or buggies (guests too can request these, but exploring the property on foot is highly encouraged). The resort also has its own natural spring, created from harvested rainwater. Nearly five million litres of water are harvested every year at their facility. In the kitchen, only steel crates are used to cut down on plastic on-site and most of the produce is sourced from the chemical-free garden.

There are some creative ideas to fully ban plastic. For example, there's a plan to replace the plastic toothbrushes available in rooms with neem twigs with

organic bristles. Already, the resort's in-house tailoring unit makes the bed and bath linen from recycled fabric, and also designs bags from cement sacks and bubble wrap.

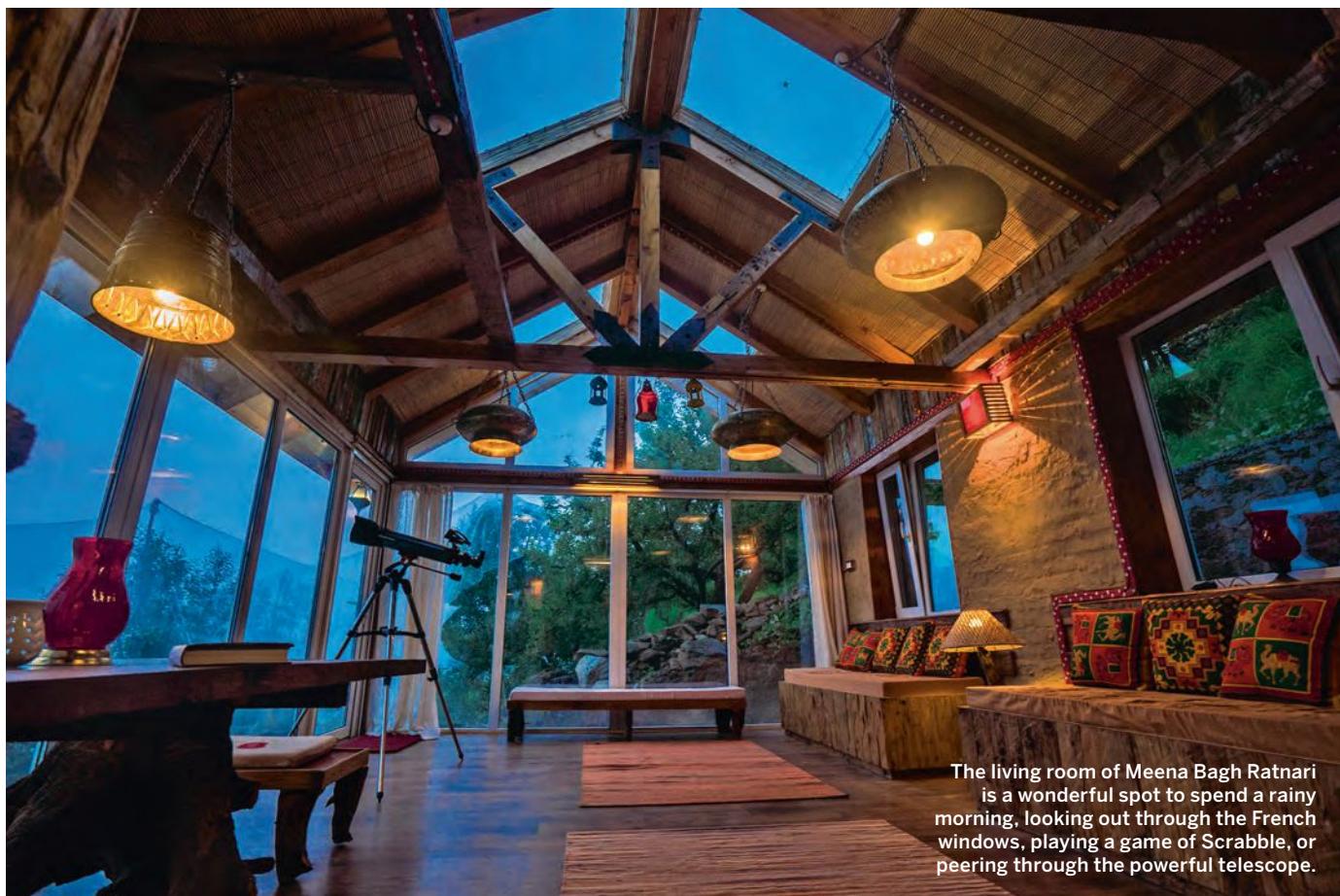
I ask Sherry about a dead tree, shapeless and twisted, almost supernatural, which I encountered during a stroll earlier in the day.

"Oh, they're left uncut," she explains. "They decay naturally, just like they do in a forest."

The frogs' soft croaks keep me company as I walk back to my cottage in the silence of the night. The forest is pitch dark and impenetrable, and the only thing visible in the thick of the woods is the beautiful glow of fireflies. It is a city-dweller's dream, this night. No mobile network. No artificial light. Just some living things going on with life. *

ESSENTIALS

The Ibnii resort and spa, Coorg is about a 5.5-hour drive from Bengaluru airport and a 2.5-hour drive from Mangalore airport. There are 22 private pool villas, 10 wooden cottages, private residences, and a premium suite in the resort. Pool villas cost ₹19,000 (plus taxes) and wooden cottages cost ₹9,000 (plus taxes). For more information, visit www.ibnii.com.



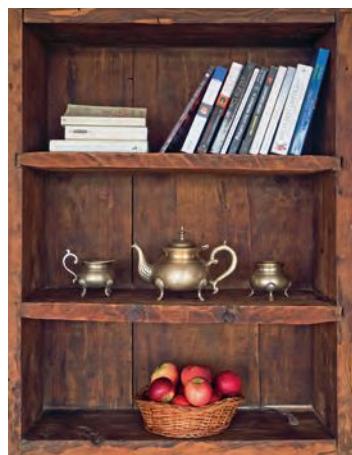
The living room of Meena Bagh Ratnari is a wonderful spot to spend a rainy morning, looking out through the French windows, playing a game of Scrabble, or peering through the powerful telescope.

SLICE OF APPLE HIGH

FRUIT-PICKING AND VALLEY VIEWS DURING A STAY IN A HIMACHALI HOME **BY NEHA DARA**

Looking out the French windows that fill two sides of the living room, I see the threat of rain looming over the valley which was sunny just a few hours ago. Big clouds that are every shade of grey between delightful wisp and thundering rain fill the sky. Below them, the branches of apple trees heavy with half ripe fruit, streaks of red beginning to run through the green, seem to quiver in anticipation. A susurration runs through the much taller deodar trees in the forest beyond the orchards.

Monsoon in Himachal Pradesh's sunny apple belt is a magical experience. It's also the perfect time to enjoy the charms of Meena Bagh Ratnari, an almost 65-year-old stone-and-wood



A basket of fresh apples is always at hand for any hunger pangs.

cottage set in the orchards that has been renovated to welcome guests with a delightful cocktail of rural rustic and modern comfort. The wooden floor is worn, and the bare walls show the layers of wood and stone that are typical of traditional construction in these parts. Bright pop-art cushions and bedspreads liven the space, creating cosy nooks in the sitting rooms that run along the front of the cottage, with windows overlooking the orchard-filled valley.

Sitting in one of these, biting into a tart and juicy golf-ball sized Tydeman apple (one of the early varieties grown in the orchard around the cottage), I watch one daring cloud descend from the pack and brush flirtatiously with the tree



The bedrooms' (left) window seats are great reading nooks; The surrounding orchard's apple trees (bottom) are 50-60 years old and laden with fruit from July to October.



tops, before racing back to join its side like a successful, if breathless, kabaddi player. I can hear a few dogs bark, the sound of birds, the murmurs of orchard workers. We're just 17 kilometres from popular Narkanda, but my husband and I are thrilled to have finally escaped the crowds that claim dominion over the Himachali towns and villages along National Highway 5 (formerly NH22) during the summer. No strident honking, speeding car with Delhi license plates, or loud music interrupts my communion with the clouds.

With a breeze holding the rain clouds in check, we step out for a stroll. Numerous trails lead off the road in front of the orchard into the surrounding forest. Choosing one that seems well-trodden we shortly find ourselves in the village meadow, a flat stretch of green punctuated by a muddy streak that is the local cricket pitch. No game is in progress, but we can hear the distant murmur of a stream and look for a path leading to it. The trail is narrow and covered in deodar needles. It leads to a rickety wooden bridge over a stream, continuing beyond into more apple orchards. A gentle drizzle begins to fall and before it can turn into something more, we quickly retrace our steps to the cottage.

We're only too happy to return. Lingering briefly to admire the wild flowers that grow along the path to the cottage, we resume our exploration of the property itself. Every aspect of it is informed by the aesthetic of owner Sanjay Austa, a photographer and writer, who also spends time looking

after the family orchards. One wall is filled with framed photographs from his travels around the world. Another, with some of the souvenirs he's picked up on those travels, showcased in a display case made from used wooden apple crates. In the living room, which is one of the new additions to the old house, along with the generous bathrooms that adjoin the two rooms, the walls and benches are lined with strips of waste wood. Sanjay points out that the same waste wood has been used to make serving trays, the racks for cups and glasses in the kitchen, and even a couple of stools. Looking up, I see that the light fittings hanging from the sloping wooden ceiling

are fashioned from old brass cookware Sanjay found in a local scrapyard, some still with the names of their former owners painted on the side.

The overall impression is of a cosy, yet elegant home with enough beauty within it, and around it, to make doing nothing a delicious prospect. The home-style Himachali food that cook Deshraj makes for us, seals that feeling. Before going to bed, I slip outside for a quick look at our home for the night. It shines like a yellow jewel lit from within, an inviting bright spot between the shadowy apple trees, and the evening fog slowly descending from the forest to encircle it like a soft blanket. *

ESSENTIALS

ACCOMMODATION Meena Bagh Ratnari has two rooms in a cottage surrounded by apple orchards. However, more people can easily be accommodated on single beds and extra mattresses that can be placed in the three sitting rooms in the front of the cottage. The rooms combine modern comforts with rustic decor, while the bathrooms are quite large and luxurious, complete with bathtubs. While Deshraj the cook is always around, and happy to cook up meals to suit individual tastes, guests can also saunter into the kitchen themselves to rustle up a morning cuppa (meenabaghresorts.com; Ratnari Village, Kotkhai Tehsil, Shimla District; 98106 72755; for reservations write to sanjayausta@gmail.com; ₹15,000 for both bedrooms/4 adults; includes meals and activities like apple picking and guided walks.). Sanjay welcomes guests with pets, and offers a generous discount to writers, journalists, artists and those involved in conservation activities.

GETTING THERE Meena Bagh is in Ratnari, a village about 17 km/50 min east of Narkanda. About 10 kilometres of this is on a narrow mountain road winding through forest, best navigated in an SUV with 4-wheel drive (though locals also drive their sedans there). The cottage is a 150-metre walk up from the road. Narkanda is 62 km/2 hr northeast of Shimla, and 174 km/5.5 hours northeast of Chandigarh. Chandigarh has convenient flight and train connections with major cities, including daily Shatabdi trains from Delhi.

BOHEMYAN RAPSODY

Heady scents and rustic luxury at a campsite in Alibaug

BY CHAITALI PATEL

As I stepped into my tent at the Bohemyan Blue Stay in Alibaug, my nostrils filled with a soothing yet robust scent. The charming campsite had won my heart the moment I'd set eyes on it and the olfactory satisfaction further sealed the deal. I made a mental note to ask the owner Albert Bangafoe about the fragrance later. The interior of the tent was a profusion of prints, an ode to Albert's wife Sunanda Gupta's love for textiles. A distressed-wood headboard, a teal cabinet and other small pieces of furniture handpicked by Sunanda, filled the room.

A designer, Sunanda's strong sense of style is visible in little details around the campsite. But it is the gardens beside the tents that are her pride and joy. On a walk around the property she explained how all the water from the bathrooms flows into the garden. Specific plants have been planted to ensure that the



groundwater is recycled. The couple put in months of effort to convert the acre of barren land on which the property stands into a thriving patch of green.

If the tent and its smell had me hooked, it was a lily pond in the centre of our garden that had my daughter transfixed. She spent most of her time throwing pebbles into the pond. I worried that the pond would be more pebble and less water by the time we left. During our overnight stay, my husband and daughter did not venture outside the campsite choosing instead to play a game of badminton, lounge on the hammocks strung between trees, and swim.

My favourite site at the property was the al fresco dining-cum-lounging area, which had a collection of eclectic benches and tables. Bunches of magenta bougainvillea in glass bottles, a stash of books and board games, and soft

instrumental music coax you to linger longer here. Mealtimes at Bohemyan were leisurely and relaxed. While there's a small on-site kitchen, the main meals are cooked at Sunanda and Albert's home, a short walk from the campsite. A fabulous cook, Sunanda, along with her team of local women, whips up both Indian and international fare.

When it was time to leave I did ask Albert about the fragrance and his eyes lit up knowing his experiment had worked. A trained aroma therapist, he lets guests choose the fragrance they would like lingering in their tents to add a special touch to their stay. He took a guess with us and hit the right note, as the calming cedar oil had cast its spell perfectly. *



The interiors of the tents (bottom) and the carefully cultivated garden (top) at the Bohemyan Blue Stay reflect the owners' tastes and aesthetic sense perfectly. With air conditioning, western toilets, showers and televisions, camping here is a luxury experience.

ESSENTIALS

Accommodation Bohemyan Blue Stay has 10 rustic luxury tents with a little veranda in the front. The tents by the kitchen have verandas facing the garden at the edge of the property (bohemyanbluestay.com; 077982 66600/077982 66622; doubles from ₹5,300 including breakfast).

Getting There Bohemyan Blue Stay is in Zirad, Alibaug. Alibaug is 98 km/3 hr south of Mumbai by road via the Mumbai-Goa NH-66. A quicker option is taking a ferry from Gateway of India to Mandwa jetty. Ferry operators run shuttle buses to Alibaug town (ferries operate daily except between Jun-Sep; approx 45 min; from ₹125 one-way, including shuttle-bus fare).

THE DESTINATION



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WINTER IN WONDERLAND

Old meets new on Ghent's sweeping bridges and in its tall legends

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88 IN THE SULTANATE OF PLENTY • **92** AHMEDABAD, LOST AND FOUND • **96** BAHRAIN IS THE NEW DUBAI

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In the Sultanate of **PLENTY**

With great landscapes, heritage, food and hotels, Oman ticks all the boxes and yet is blissfully free of touristy clusters

By Kalyani Prasher



Not many Indians travel to Oman for leisure. In fact, this

Middle Eastern country, bordering the U.A.E., Saudi Arabia and Yemen, isn't a conventional tourist destination at all. Step out of the capital city of Muscat and you hardly see a soul. Most roads slice through mountains and are empty for most part of the day and night. Not a car in sight for hours. Barring Muscat, which receives a handful of business travellers, much of Oman still remains a relatively uncharted territory for Indians. After sampling what the sultanate has to offer on a week-long trip last December, I find it surprising that so many well-travelled Indians on the lookout for offbeat destinations have not yet found Oman; barely a three-hour flight from any major Indian metro.

Once a powerful kingdom, owing to its location that remains strategically important even today, Oman continues to flourish under monarchy. Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said, having ruled the country for 47 years, is also Middle East's longest serving monarch. Under his rule the country's currency has grown stronger, one Omani rial roughly equals ₹165, and

its infrastructure has improved tremendously. With roads smooth as butter, a two-hour journey doesn't even leave an impression on the body, even if you were to cruise at 120 kmph. Located at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, Oman was also an important trading centre with links all the way to India. In March 2016, for instance, archaeologists discovered ancient Portuguese coins used in trade with India on the shipwreck site of *Esmeralda* on an island 40 kilometres south of the Omani coast. The Portuguese had ruled Oman for more than 100 years between the 16th and 17th centuries and were eventually defeated by the Arabs in 1741. Besides its history, what makes Oman fascinating is the country's topography: most of central Oman, roughly the size of Madhya Pradesh, is just vast tracts of uninhabited desert. Between Muscat in the north and the southern province of Dhofar, there is zero sign of any life. This empty expanse encompasses parts of Rub'al Khali, the largest contiguous sand desert in the world, more famously known as the Empty Quarter.

Oman isn't a sell-out destination, but it surely is catching up. In 2014, the World Tourism Council voted it as one of Middle East's fastest growing tourism economies. With mountains in the north, desert in the centre and sea at the bottom, Oman has a wonderfully diverse landscape. This diversity is what attracts tourists from other gulf countries, most of whom come chasing that one elusive thing: rain. There's more to Oman than rain though—some expected, some not.

MUSCAT

a low-rise city walled by mountains, carpeted with the sea

Oman's capital Muscat is its most popular destination and perhaps the only place where you might bump into other travellers. Since no building can go beyond 10 storeys, Muscat is a city of low-rises. The twin ancient forts of Al Mirani and Al Jalali, built by the Portuguese in the 1580s, rise over the city's harbour to carve out a lovely historical skyline that's otherwise consumed by Al Hajar Mountains. The one thing that lends Muscat its biggest charm, though, is its natural topography: you can see the mountains when you are beside the sea.

With the sea, come the beaches. Do spend time exploring them, especially the Qurum and Qantab beaches. Ideally, choose a hotel with a private beach. A good option is the Al Bustan Palace, but many other hotels come with private beaches too. Keep a day just for the beaches—swim, go on a boat tour, play volleyball, read a book or simply laze around. Muscat is also the home of the famous Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, a beautiful ode to Islamic architecture in the centre of the city. You will need at least an hour to walk around its large and peaceful compound, admiring the intricate motifs and carvings. From the carpets and tiles to the flooring, everything here is elegant and beautiful. Sultan Qaboos's central prayer hall can accommodate up to 6,000 people and its eight-tonne crystal chandelier is a true marvel of design. A visit to this mosque works like a soothing balm on the soul.

ESSENTIALS Muscat is a 3.5-hr flight from Delhi. Al Bustan Palace, 40 min east of the airport, is a good beach hotel option (www.albustanpalace.com; doubles from OMR140/₹23,300).



Nestled amongst Al Hajar Mountains and cradled by the Gulf of Oman, Muscat is a city of low-rises (facing page) with pretty minarets and mosques dotting its skyline; The Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque (top) is a beautiful ode to Islamic architecture.



NIZWA & BAHLA

a charming souk, and two townships built around forts that sport Omani architecture

Muscat's Muttrah souk is grand enough for anyone who loves shopping in old bazaars but wait until you reach Nizwa. This beautiful city, 160 kilometres southwest of Muscat, is famous for the magnificent Nizwa Fort that looms over a fascinating souk. You may have toured oriental bazaars in Istanbul and Cairo but this souk beats them all. Navigating it makes you feel like you have strolled straight into the 18th century, where traders have just brought in dates and figs on horseback and are bargaining with cranky old merchants in starchily dishdashas. There are beautiful silver necklaces, *khanjars* (traditional Omani daggers), old rifles, lamps and candle stands, dates, figs, nuts, pots and pans, and hundreds of other beautiful trinkets to buy. You need at least a day to explore all that the Nizwa souk offers.

Set aside another day to explore the two forts, Nizwa and Bahla. Built in the mid-17th century, Nizwa Fort is a reminder that the city once served as Oman's capital and was also its strongest city. Cocooned by thick walls, and with a 112-foot central tower, Nizwa Fort is a great example of typical Omani architecture characterised by geometrical layouts and the use of mud bricks and stone. About an hour away, the sand-coloured Bahla Fort is another fine testament to Oman's rich



heritage. Of the more than 500 castles and forts in Oman, this is the only fort to have made it to the UNESCO World Heritage List. One of the oldest forts in the country, some estimates say parts of it are from A.D. 500.

ESSENTIALS Nizwa is two hours from Muscat by road. Private cabs at the airport charge approximately OMR3/₹500 per 10 kilometres. A reasonable stay option is the Golden Tulip Nizwa (www.goldentulipnizwa.com; doubles from OMR40/₹6,600).

AL JABAL AL AKHDAR

a mountain that overlooks Oman's Grand Canyon

Muscat's cacophony gets drowned as soon as you enter Route 15 leading into the Green Mountain, or Al Jabal Al Akhdar. An area of great natural beauty, the jagged mountains loom over you the entire way, the sun glinting through them creating mirages on the road. The Al Hajar Mountains, within whose range is nestled Al Jabal Al Akhdar, are itself truly magnificent—stark and beautiful as I had imagined them to be. Diana Point, one of the most popular tourist spots here, is now part of the Al Jabal Al Akhdar Resort by Anantara, which is currently one of the best places to stay here. Named after Lady Diana, the point pays homage to the spot where Diana once stood admiring Oman's very own "Grand Canyon". With layers of withered rock and a sheer drop, the spot offers



A local rose water maker at work in Al Jabal Al Akhdar. (Facing page) Shop for earthenware and Omani daggers at the quaint Nizwa Souq (left), explore Al Jabal Al Akhdar's mountain range with abseiling (top right), or spot herds of cute camels in Wadi Darbat (bottom right).

panoramic views of Al Hajar Mountains.

Apart from relaxing at your mountain resort, eating typical Omani meals of grilled meat and dips with *khubz* (Arabic for pita) and star gazing, the mountains are a great opportunity for outdoor activities too. Try abseiling or rappelling, do a cliff-edge walk, or go for a village walk in the mountains where you can explore Oman's old way of life, where olive trees give a beautiful break to an otherwise rocky landscape. Explore the ancient water-irrigation system in the thousand-year-old villages of al Ain and Laqar and navigate the many narrow parapets, locally known as *aflaj*. With the ever-present danger of slipping off these parapets into shrubs dotting the shallow waters below, this activity is quite thrilling. It also throws your way some breathtaking vistas capped by Jabal Akhdar's spotless deep blue sky.

ESSENTIALS The Al Hajar Mountains are two hours from Muscat by road. The Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar Resort offers exploratory and adventure activities (www.jabal-akhdar.anantara.com; doubles start at OMR108/₹18,000).

SALALAH

Oman's Goa, although quieter, less crowded

If you close your eyes in Muscat and open them upon landing in Salalah, you will never guess that it's the same country. Is it Goa? It could be, except there are not those many people.

Salalah is in Dhofar province, a 1.5-hour flight and a whole world away from Oman's capital. The seaside city has swaying palms, endless stretches of pristine beaches, great seafood, historical sites, and for those who like the adrenalin rush, water sports. Until last year there weren't great hotel options but then Al Baleed Resort Salalah came up in December 2016. Named after the historical Al Baleed site, the resort is close to major tourist attractions. This of course includes the Land of Frankincense museum, where you can learn about the importance of frankincense, the currency that Oman used for trade between seventh century B.C. and second century A.D.

The Al Baleed Archaeological Park, adjacent to the hotel, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site where evidence of a historical port city was recently excavated. This scenic open site is best explored on foot, especially on a wintry afternoon. About an hour from here, another heritage site, Khor Rori, is home to the Hadramite kingdom's fortified town. At both these sites which date between 4th century B.C. and 16th century A.D., you can see pillars, walls and sections intact from centuries ago. This feeling of discovery is absolutely fantastic. There is a lot to do in and around Salalah too, including a trip to Wadi Darbat, about an hour away by road, where you can spot Oman's diverse desert wildlife, including herds of cute Omani camels.

ESSENTIALS Salalah is a 1.5-hr flight away from Muscat. Al Baleed Resort Salalah is a good option because of its proximity to major tourist attractions (www.salalah.anantara.com; doubles from OMR140/₹23,000). *

THE DESTINATION

Ahmedabad, LOST AND FOUND

Badshah no Hajiyo, the
tomb of Ahmed Shah II
dates back to the 1450s.

BEHIND THE DOORS OF THE WALLED CITY, HISTORY IS AN UNEXPECTED FIND

BY SHEFALI PANDEY | PHOTOGRAPHS BY NIKITA WANKHADE



Ahmedabad is the city I have called home for the longest period of time. This is where I struggled through Physics in high school and learnt to distinguish between North Gujarati and Kathiyawadi accents in college. It is also where I live now, after having spent a decade in New York and later Bombay.

While those great cities are steeped in heritage and culture, Ahmedabad, in comparison, doesn't quite seem to be dressed for the same party. Despite its recent UNESCO World Heritage City tag, a first for India, the city might seem underwhelming to someone not looking to scratch beyond the touristy surface.

Ahmedabad, I am discovering in this homecoming, makes you work hard. A city with a documented history of rulers and invaders as far back as the 11th century, it has the architecture and culture—one just has to look beyond the obvious.

For writer Esther David, born and raised in the old city on the east of the Sabarmati River and now resident of the newer western side, the challenge is defining and navigating the city's historical sites. "How does one navigate the part of the city that is considered heritage? If I start from Bhadra Fort

and Teen Darwaza, how do I walk from there to Sidi Sayeed mosque to Rani no Hajiro?"

THE BY-LANES OF HISTORY

For those passing by or just beginning their exploration, one way to navigate the history is through guided walks. Along with the temples, mosques, and buildings, the walks also take you to the city's *pols*, old gated communities with one main street lined by houses characterised by their heavy wooden doors and carved brackets. The House of MG, a 20th-century haveli-turned-boutique-hotel conducts a night walk. For a closer look at the sites and the lives of people inhabiting the historic lanes, opt for the early morning walks conducted by the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation. These take you through the *pols* as the residents go about their morning rituals. The walk on the older eastern side of town begins at the brightly painted Swaminarayan Mandir in Kalupur, whose facade resembles South Indian temples, and ends at the Indo-Saracenic structure of Jumma Masjid.

The easily digestible two-and-a-half-hour walk starts with did-you-knows about the *pols*. "Did you know that the *pols* have one of the earliest

implementations of a modern sewage system? Did you know that most of the wooden facades are made from Burma teak because it is naturally termite resistant? Did you know that all the houses are interconnected so that people could escape easily if Muslim and Maratha invaders attacked?"

Walking with a group comprising Indian and foreign tourists, you will probably notice the wooden house with eight dusty windows that are always open, or the curious old woman stooping in the wooden doorway of the Kala Ramji temple, in Haji Patel ni Pol near Calico Dome. You might also spot Kalupur's Ramesh G. Darji, as he sets up his tailoring shop earlier than the rest of Ahmedabad, perhaps in a bid to outrun the slow demise of his profession. They go about their chores with nonchalance, unaffected by the spectators watching their everyday routine, for whom their life is a part of the city's living heritage.

From the *khadkos*, *khanchos* and *surangs*—by-lanes, nooks and hidden passageways—that make up these pols, you make your way to Manek Chowk, the resting place of the saint, Baba Maneknath. Vegetable sellers and vendors of *mukwas* or traditional mouth fresheners, crowd here by day, and by night street food shops sell old Gujarati favourites like bhaji-pao and masala chai as well as the more recent chocolate sandwich and Nutella-pineapple pizza. The nearby Bhatiyar Galli, or "cook's lane" caters to meat lovers and is known for its Afghan-style cuisine. Crowd favourites include *bara handi*, parts of a goat cooked 12 ways and in 12 pots, from a rich *nihari* and *paya* (trotters) to *pichota* (rump and tail) and *nalli* (bone marrow). Manek Chowk is also home to the original building of Ahmedabad Stock Exchange, India's second-oldest after Bombay and no longer operational since the ASE, like most things, has gone west and digital. The ornate building, which was going to be torn down a few years ago, might have a different fate now.

In the last leg, after passing by Badhshah no Hajiro, Ahmed Shah's tomb, the walk ends at Jumma Masjid. Shah's queens are entombed at the facing Rani no Hajiro, part of the night walk. A solitary (non-Friday) morning at Jumma Masjid might make you wonder why the 15th-century mosque is not better known. The architecture is a unique amalgamation of Islamic, Hindu and Jain styles with intricate filigree work and Arabic calligraphy juxtaposed with carvings of an occasional *kalpavriksha* and *kalash* made by the mosque's local Gujarati craftsmen.

Soon after the walk however, you might realise what Esther David meant when speaking of her dilemma of navigating Ahmedabad's heritage. Some important sites are not part of the walk. These include Bhadra Fort, the city's 12 gates like Teen Darwaza, Lal Darwaza, Dilli Darwaza, and Sidi Sayeed mosque, famous for its intricate lattice work which inspired IIM Ahmedabad's logo. Many of them are in areas now crowded with



Sarkhej Roza's courtyards (left), known for its stone trellises, is a favoured reading spot; The houses within the pols often have elaborate doorways (top right); The old Ahmedabad Stock Exchange building at Manek Chowk (bottom right) now lies abandoned.

traffic and people and unsuitable for lingering walks in large groups, while some others are not within walkable distance.

Ancient and medieval rulers did not play within modern city boundaries and many historical sites lie outside the main city. About nine kilometres southwest of the city lies Sarkhej Roza, a 15th-century Indo-Saracenic mausoleum built by Ahmed Shah upon the death of his friend and Sufi saint Shaikh Ahmed Khattu Ganj Baksh and hosts Sufi performances in the evenings. To the north of the city, between Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar, is Adalaj ni Vav, a 15th-century, five-storey stepwell built by the Vaghelas to harvest

Louis Kahn's modernist brick work, you can step inside the Indian Institute of Management's building.

The work of people like Le Corbusier and Kahn is a heritage left behind by some of Ahmedabad's powerful textile mill owners. The wealthy businessmen invited the best architects and artists of the 20th century to design public and private spaces that created the city's modern architectural heritage. This legacy is also preserved in the many havelis, some of which have been converted into museums. The Calico Museum, once home of the Sarabhai family, is now a museum showcasing the history of the textile industry in Gujarat and India. The Kasturbhai Lalbhai Museum next door, houses a collection of over 2,000 years of Indian art handpicked by the Arvind Mills patriarch Kasturbhai Lalbhai in the erstwhile family home.

A CITY OF LEGENDS

Legends are interwoven with history in Ahmedabad. One of the most famous is about Ahmed Shah, who laid the foundation of the city. Supposedly, the ruler decided to stay back after he saw a hare chasing a dog on the banks of Sabarmati and was intrigued by a land where the usually timid displayed bravery. Another legend outlines the reason behind the city's prosperity. It is said that while she was leaving the city, Goddess Lakshmi was stopped at the gates of Bhadra Fort by a guard who made her promise to wait until he returned with permission from the Sultan. He then cut off his head to keep the goddess from ever leaving. In remembrance, the Muslim guard's family began lighting a lamp in a small nook in Teen Darwaza, a tradition that continues to this day. Ahmedabad's legends also talk of Baba Maneknath and Sufi saint Ahmed Khatthu of Sarkhej, who sparred with rulers in mystic ways to guide them.

The more recent legends include those of Passport Hanuman, a temple in Desai ni Pol. In a state known for its obsession with going abroad, it claims to bless visitors with 100 per cent visa approvals for even the toughest cases. Esther David's favourite however, is the legend of "Hasti Bibi nu Gokhlo" or the "cavity of the laughing saint." Hasti Bibi was a rotund Muslim woman who attained saint-like status because of her supposed ability to cure children's ailments with laughter and even today, parents bring their kids to her shrine in the Old City and place them in the cavity briefly to, as Esther quips, "often rid them of excessive crying."

The deeper you dig, the more stories and alternate histories you find in Ahmedabad. The city's heritage is in many ways defined by its people, in the legends they create and the stories they choose not to forget. For Esther, it is in the memories of growing up in the old Lal Darwaza area and all of the walled city's tales that she has accumulated in her lifetime. According to her, "The Walled City of Ahmedabad is not behind those walls anymore, but really in my mind." *



rainwater. Once a popular picnic spot, it is now an Instagram favourite because of the visual perspective offered by its symmetrical inner chambers.

BEYOND THE OBVIOUS

Contemporary artist and Ahmedabad resident, Amit Amabalal, believes that the idea of heritage has to be expanded beyond the usual suspects of mosques, temples, pols and stepwells. "Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn did some of their finest work here. Their work too should be protected and enjoyed," says Ambalal. He lists the public AMC building, Sanskar Kendra, the Mill Owners' Association Building, and the private Villa Sarabhai and Villa Shodhan as examples of Le Corbusier's modernist architecture. Interestingly, most of Corbusier's works are part of the heritage list in countries like Switzerland and France. But it is not so in Ahmedabad. To see some of



Bahrain is the

Bahrain's sunlit sea shimmers as my airplane slices through its clear skies. Peering down, all I see are island clusters dotted with palm trees and glittering skyscrapers. In the 30-minute drive to the hotel, Maseratis and Audis whizz past me, and I am flanked by blingy hoardings of Bahrain's Formula-1 racing circuit and those advertising 'indoor skydiving'. I also pass by gigantic malls. "Very glamorous, no?" my guide Abdul Nabi remarks, trailing my gaze. "All big labels and latest collections. People from Dubai come to shop here now."

The Kingdom of Bahrain, like Dubai, is built on reclaimed land, and in the mirrored facades of this island nation's modern buildings I do see a hint of Dubai. And yet in my five days here, I realise one thing: Modernisation in Bahrain seems measured. Bahrainis take pride in their smooth infrastructure and manicured cityscape, but they are also very passionate about preserving their heritage.

The Bahrain National Museum is my first stop, and also my first window into Bahraini history. It is here that I learn that Bahrain traces its roots

to the Dilmun civilisation, one of Middle-East's oldest civilisations. Seals, crockery, coins and other artefacts, excavated as recently as the late 1950s, and now showcased behind glass panels at the museum, offer me a glimpse into the Dilmun era.

But what really handholds an outsider like me through the country's cultural evolution are life-sized installations. An entire floor is dedicated to these installations, so I take my time and hop from one model to another. I see, for instance, an oriental bazaar recreated using figurines of bakers, potters, spice traders and vegetable vendors. Other works bring to life the everydayness of Bahrain: I see weddings, young mothers, and children at a madrasa. An installation in the next room introduces me to the country's millennia-old pearl history. Bahrain, is also called the "The Pearl of Gulf". Historical accounts relate how Bahraini pearls have been sought after since the Indus Valley Civilisation. Alexander the Great wanted to conquer Bahrain for its pearls. The work that's sprawled in front of me is that of a dhow, a ship with one or two masts used in the Arabic region



new Dubai

The island nation has glitz skyscrapers and a rich heritage **BY LUBNA AMIR**

for fishing, and it shows divers scouring for pearls in the depths of the Persian Gulf. After seeing this sculpture I make a mental note to check out the neighbouring Gold City Mall, known for the best pearl and gold jewellery one can find in the country.

Up next, on a walk through the old capital Muharraq, I see restored houses that once belonged to pearl divers and pearl merchants. The 3.5-kilometre-long path, also a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is nestled within Muharraq. It takes tourists through refurbished houses, store-fronts, coffee shops, a mosque, oyster beds and a fort. The trail's shorter version, the one I am here for, includes only restored houses and coffee shops.

Navigating through Muharraq's narrow white-washed streets makes me feel like I have strolled straight into the 19th century; a time when pearl harvesting drove Bahrain's economy. Each house I enter in Muharraq offers me a peek into Bahrain's many flavours.

The Sheikh Isa Bin Ali House, the seat of the royal family up until the 19th century, welcomes

me into its open courtyards that are laced with *badqeers* or wind towers for ventilation. Its rustic wooden doors are adorned with intricate carvings. Few metres away, the walls of Abdullah Al Zayed House are plastered with framed copies of old Arabic newspapers. In one corner of one of the many rooms that make up this house sits a vintage typewriter. On the walls hang photographs of the century-old house before it was restored. This place is named after Abdullah Al Zayed, a poet and writer who brought out Bahrain's first newspaper in 1939. Proficient in Arabic, he also travelled to India in 1929 to learn English. A little further away on the trail is the Kurar House. This single-storey structure showcases the skills of Bahrain's local weavers behind the famous 'kurar' work, burnished gold thread embroidery on garments. The Kurar patches laid out in front of me remind me of zardozi outfits hanging in my closet back home.

The pearl trail brims with fascinating stories of how this milky jewel has shaped Bahraini identity.

"With pearls created under controlled circumstances being banned in Bahrain, jewellers often

“
Bahrain has
as many
layers as
it does
Snapchat
filters



The Bahrain Fort (left) and A'Ali Burial Mounds (bottom) are remnants of Dilmun era, with their history displayed at Bahrain National Museum (right).



JD DALLET/ARABIANEYE/GETTY IMAGES (FORT), PHOTO COURTESY: BAHRAIN TOURISM AND EXHIBITIONS AUTHORITY (STATUE, MOUNDS)

wait for months to source a matching set of pearls to complete a pair of earrings, or any other piece of jewellery for that matter,” says Nabi, who is also third-generation pearl diver. “We go out in the night to collect pearls, so no one can follow us. The best pearl diving spots were passed on to me by my grandfather.”

Pearl diving today is strictly regulated in Bahrain. But licenced divers, Nabi tells me, still prefer to dive and hunt in the same old way; without any equipment, only a clothespin clipping their noses.

Savouring Nabi’s company and stories, I conclude the trail with a cup of *gahwa* (Arabic coffee) at Bu Khalaf Coffee Shop, a traditional Bahraini coffee house filled with wooden benches which are covered with *daris* or hand-woven rugs.

With its relaxed laws, freedom to not wear a hijab and many cinemas, I can see why Bahrain is a weekend destination for residents of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Saudi Arabia, Bahrain’s immediate neighbour, does not have a single cinema.

Brimming with expatriates, for Bahrain was occupied by both the Portuguese and the British, and was the first GCC country to discover oil, Bahrainis only ask newcomers their name and where they are

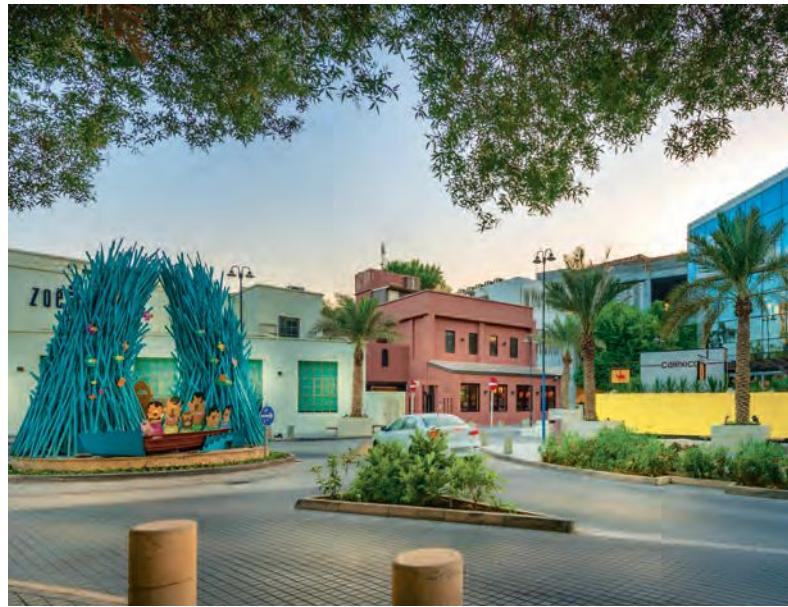
from. “This helps us to talk to a tourist better. We don’t ask anyone their religion. Everyone’s faith is their own,” says Zahra, my enthusiastic 24-year-old guide. Her statement affirms all that I have seen thus far. Bahrain is perhaps more liberal than most Islamic states.

And its people love to shop, whether it is in the capital’s famous Manama Souq known for its spices, antiques, carpets and abayas, or uppity malls. Seef Mall, the country’s second biggest mall for instance, exemplifies Bahrain’s love for high-end fashion. Men in heavily perfumed dishdashas mill around here. Women in trendy abayas and smart casuals (minus hijabs), flaunting perfect make-up and hair make me feel underdressed. In Bahrain, I glean, presentation is everything. When I leave the mall around 6 p.m., I see the streets outside Seef still overflowing with weekend tourists lugging around huge shopping bags.

Another slice of Bahrain’s contemporary culture is nestled in Block 338, Adliya. This district is dotted with cafés, restaurants, graffiti, public art installations and art galleries.

Surrounded by sand-coloured buildings and steely skyscrapers all this while, Adliya is where I find the reds, mauves and blues splashed boldly across





promenades that make up this buzzing art avenue.

"Bahrainis are great patrons of art," Zahra tells me. "This is a very hip district." I can see groups of abaya-clad women chatter over macaroons and coffee at a pretty pastry shop. With cafés lining the streets, sitting here with my cup of cappuccino reminds me of sitting at an al fresco street side café in Paris—the milieu is similar.

Mesmerised by the culture and vibe of Adliya, I decide to stick around till dinner, and Zahra joins me. We choose Florence, an Italian restaurant. Its pastel green walls, antique furniture and floral upholstery present the perfect setting for a prolonged meal.

People in Bahrain have a zest for life, and especially for food. During the course of my stay, I have eaten Arabic, Japanese, Italian, French and Indian cuisines. "We love food," exclaims Zahra. Spaghetti Bolognese is her favourite dish and Snapchat her favourite pastime.

Over dinner that lasts three hours, we chat about our lives, friends, families and cultures, and sometime during the course of our conversation comes up Snapchat. I then discover how Snapchat in Bahrain has more filters than what the app offers me back home. The many filters of Bahrain are, for me, just another example of how layered this island nation really is.*

ESSENTIALS

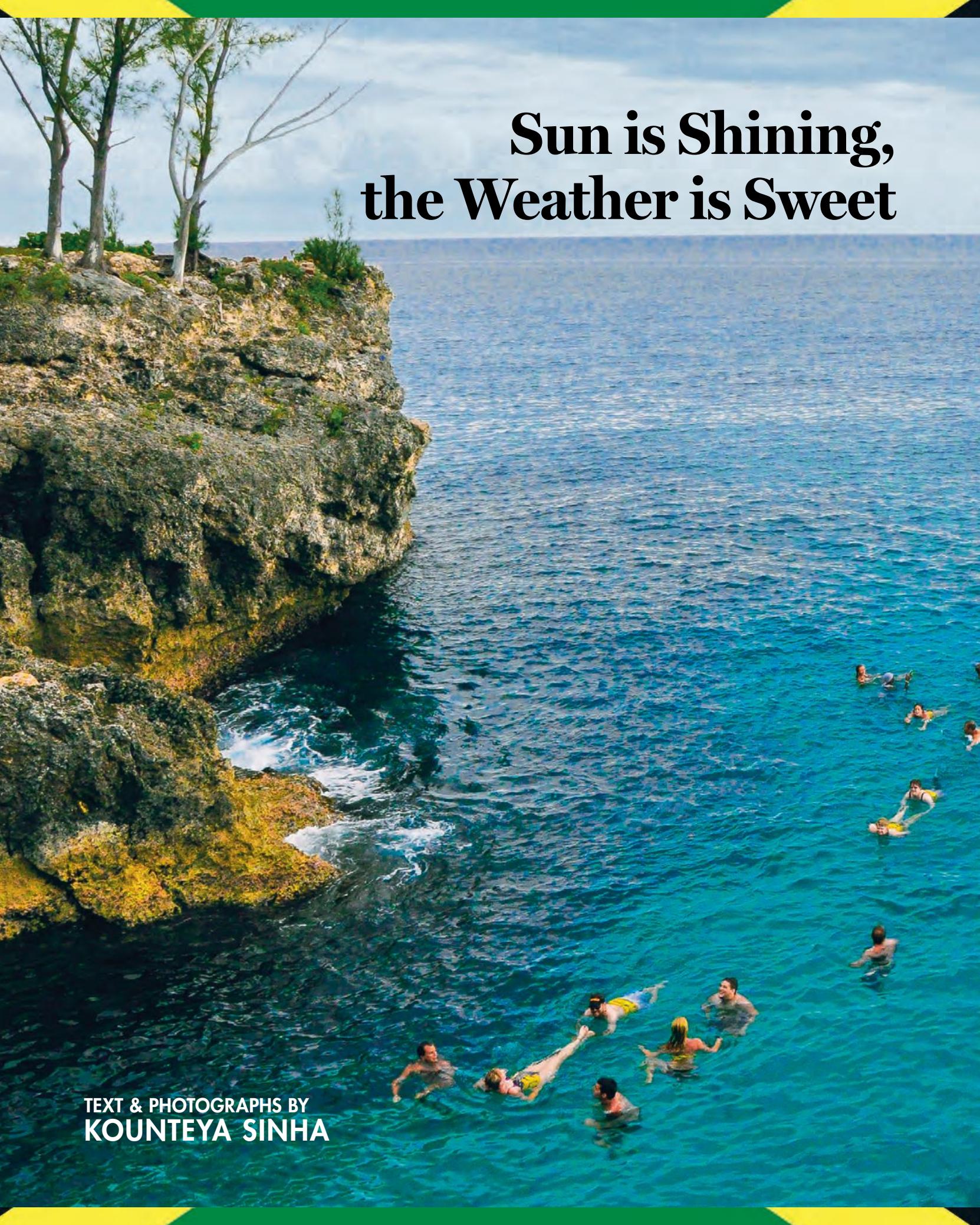
Getting There Gulf Air operates daily non-stop flights from Mumbai and Delhi to Bahrain International Airport in Muharraq, 9 kilometres away from the capital Manama.

Visa Indians can apply online for a tourist visa (www.evisa.gov.bh). A multiple-entry visa costs BD29/₹4,933 and is valid for three months with a maximum stay limit of one month. Travel documents, including details of the itinerary, need to be submitted with the application.

See Bahrain National Museum (open daily 8 a.m.-8 p.m., entry BD1/₹170); Old Houses of Muharraq (check www.shaikhebrahimcenter.org for timings, entry free except for Sheikh Isa House BD1/₹170); Bab Al Bahrain (open daily 9 a.m.-10 p.m., free entry); Manama Souq (open daily 9 a.m.-12.30 p.m. and 4-7.30 p.m., entry free). Visit Bahrain (www.visitbahrain.bh) and At-Bahrain (www.at-bahrain.com) offer guided tours starting from BD30/₹5,100 per person.

Winter does not mean snow in Bahrain, but City Centre mall (left) likes to believe otherwise; Block 338, Adliya (right) is where the colour lies in the country.





Sun is Shining, the Weather is Sweet

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY
KOUNTEYA SINHA

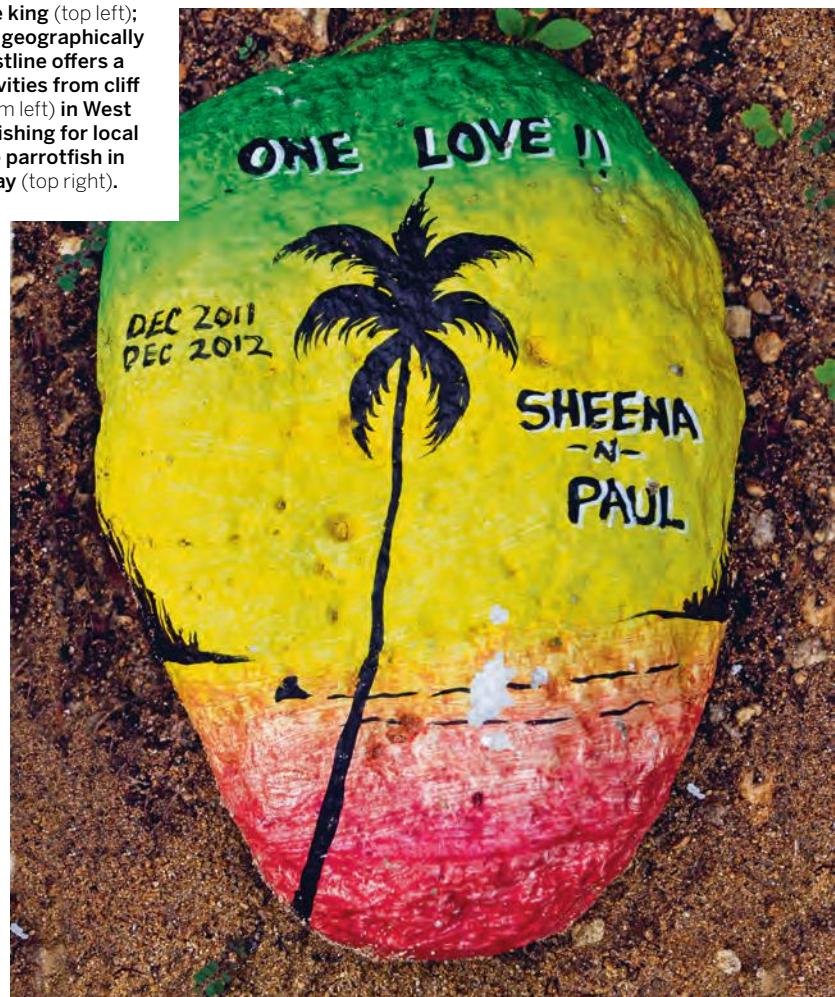
A land that celebrates both James Bond and Bob Marley, the Caribbean island of Jamaica is home to reef-lined sandy beaches, rugged cliffs and lush rainforests

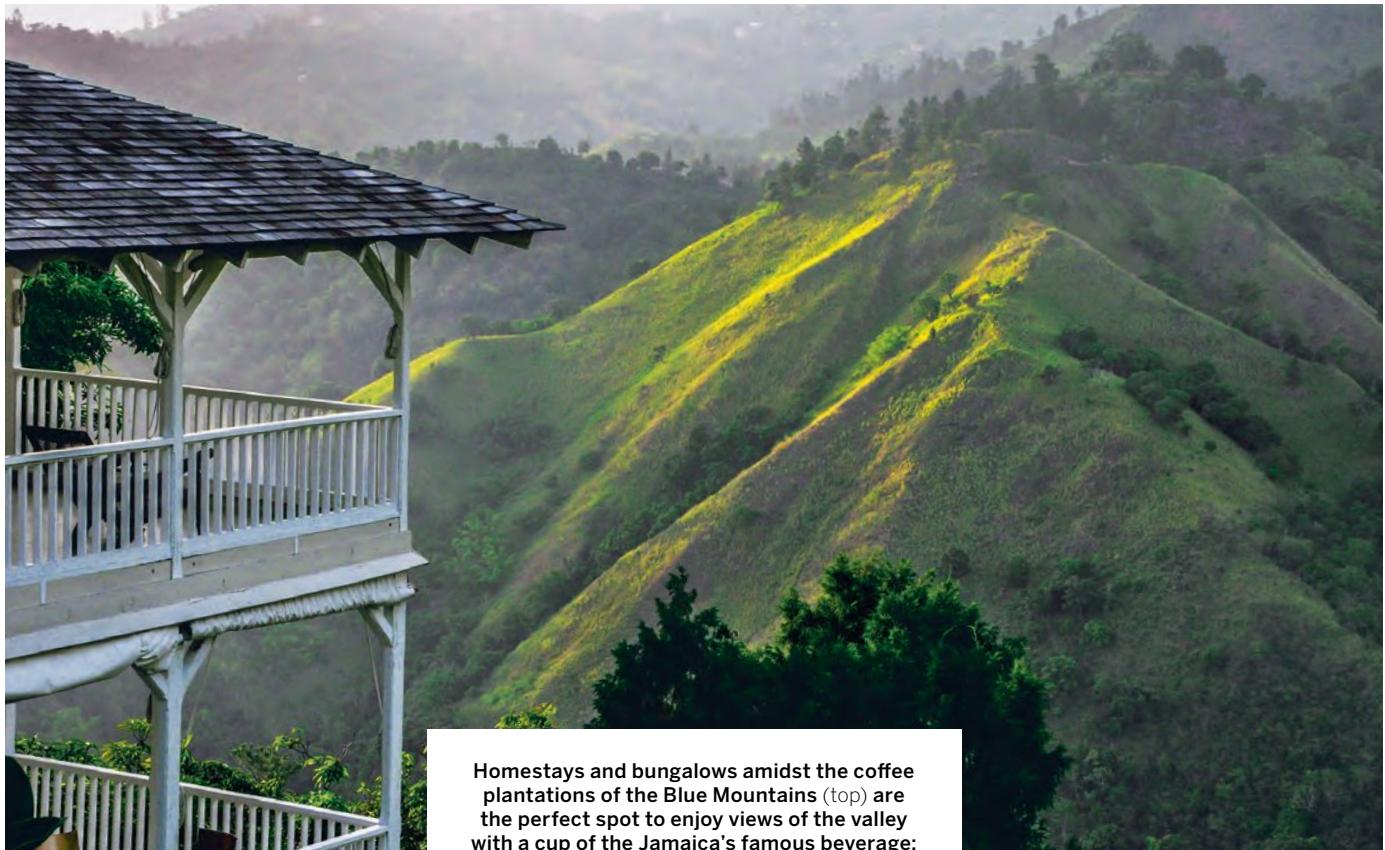


At Jamaica's famous beach town, Negril, the clifftop Rick's Cafe has been welcoming guests since 1974. A well-known hot spot, it was the first public bar and restaurant of its type and boasts of some of the best sunset views.



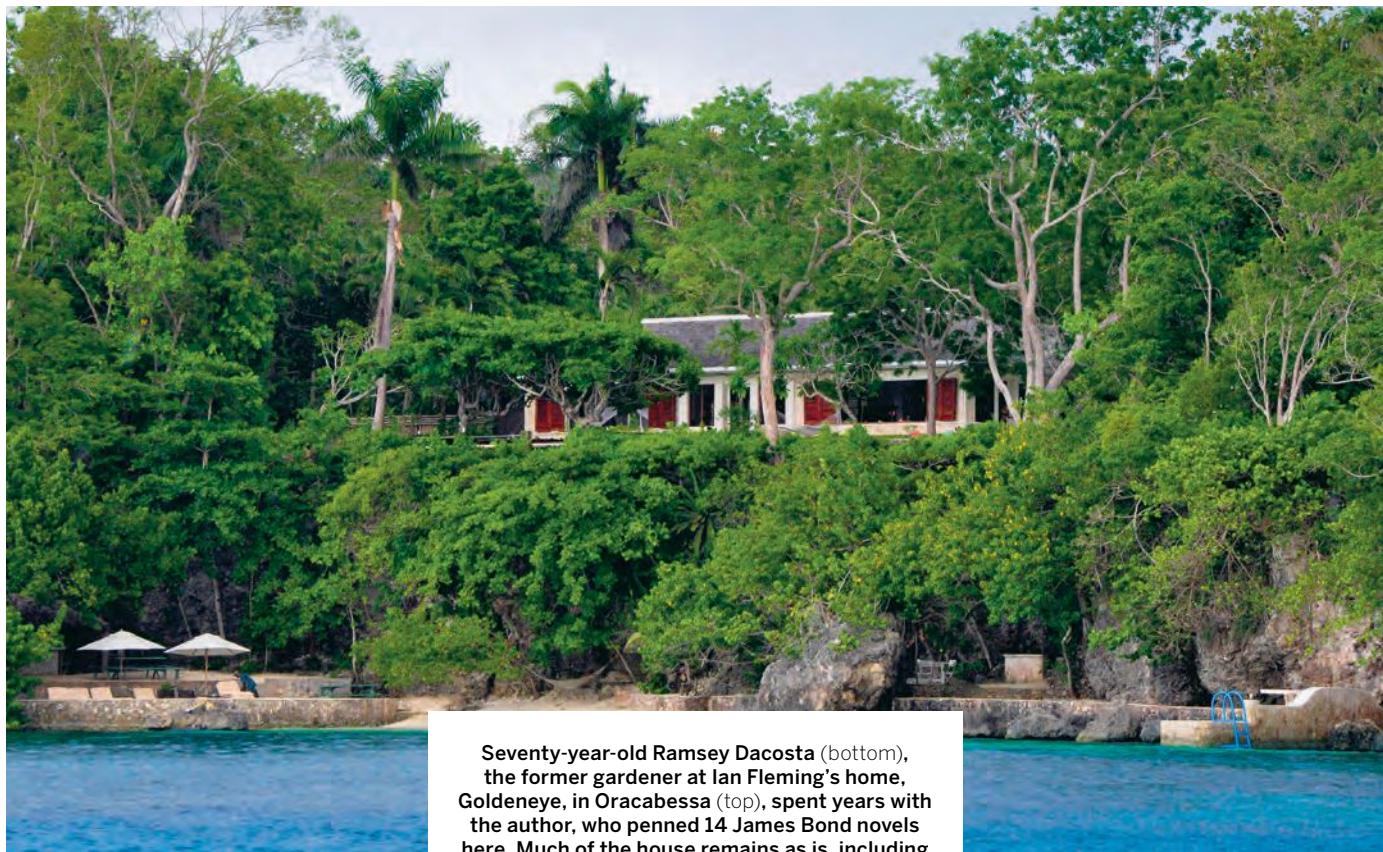
Jamaica loves Bob Marley. People etch important dates and words on roadside stones all over Jamaica (bottom right) and fans flock to his home-turned museum in the capital, Kingston, where they are greeted by a life-size statue of the Reggae king (top left); The country's geographically diverse coastline offers a gamut of activities from cliff diving (bottom left) in West End Cliffs to fishing for local produce like parrotfish in Montego Bay (top right).





Homestays and bungalows amidst the coffee plantations of the Blue Mountains (top) are the perfect spot to enjoy views of the valley with a cup of the Jamaica's famous beverage; Hummingbirds flap their wings 50-80 times a second making it difficult to see them in flight. A drop of sugar syrup is used as bribe to spot the swallow tail hummingbird (bottom), one of the country's national symbols.





Seventy-year-old Ramsey Dacosta (bottom), the former gardener at Ian Fleming's home, Goldeneye, in Oracabessa (top), spent years with the author, who penned 14 James Bond novels here. Much of the house remains as is, including Fleming's bedroom (now named 007) with his triangular writing desk. According to Dacosta, who was privy to the author's life and habits, "Commander Fleming smoked 50 cigarettes a day and liked an occasional rum punch."



WITH A MONKEY ON MY BACK

AWAY FROM THE MADDING CROWD, IN A TRANSIT CITY, THE WRITER FALLS IN LOVE WITH THAILAND

BY TUNALI MUKHERJEE

There are two kinds of monkeys in Thailand.

I met the first kind at Phi Phi—a troupe of cliff-diving beach bums that put on a show for the tourists and then got to work. Furry hands had fished through my bag, the contents of which were never seen again. One monkey scored a bottle of whiskey from a tourist's beach shorts. What followed cannot be published in print. That day monkeys secured a spot on my list of "Things to stay away from in Thailand."

The second kind I find lounging in a temple in Wat Tham Pla in Chiang Rai under a sign that reads, "Beware Monkeys: Do not feed". Of course I will

not, after learning from the previous encounter. Feeling a gentle tug at my pants, I look down into the big, round eyes of the sweetest macaque—it must have had training in begging from puppies. Polite Monkey leads me (and his pack) to a handwritten signboard that reads, "Feed monkeys. Bananas: 10 THB". I'm ashamed at my lack of resolve, but we all know how this ends.

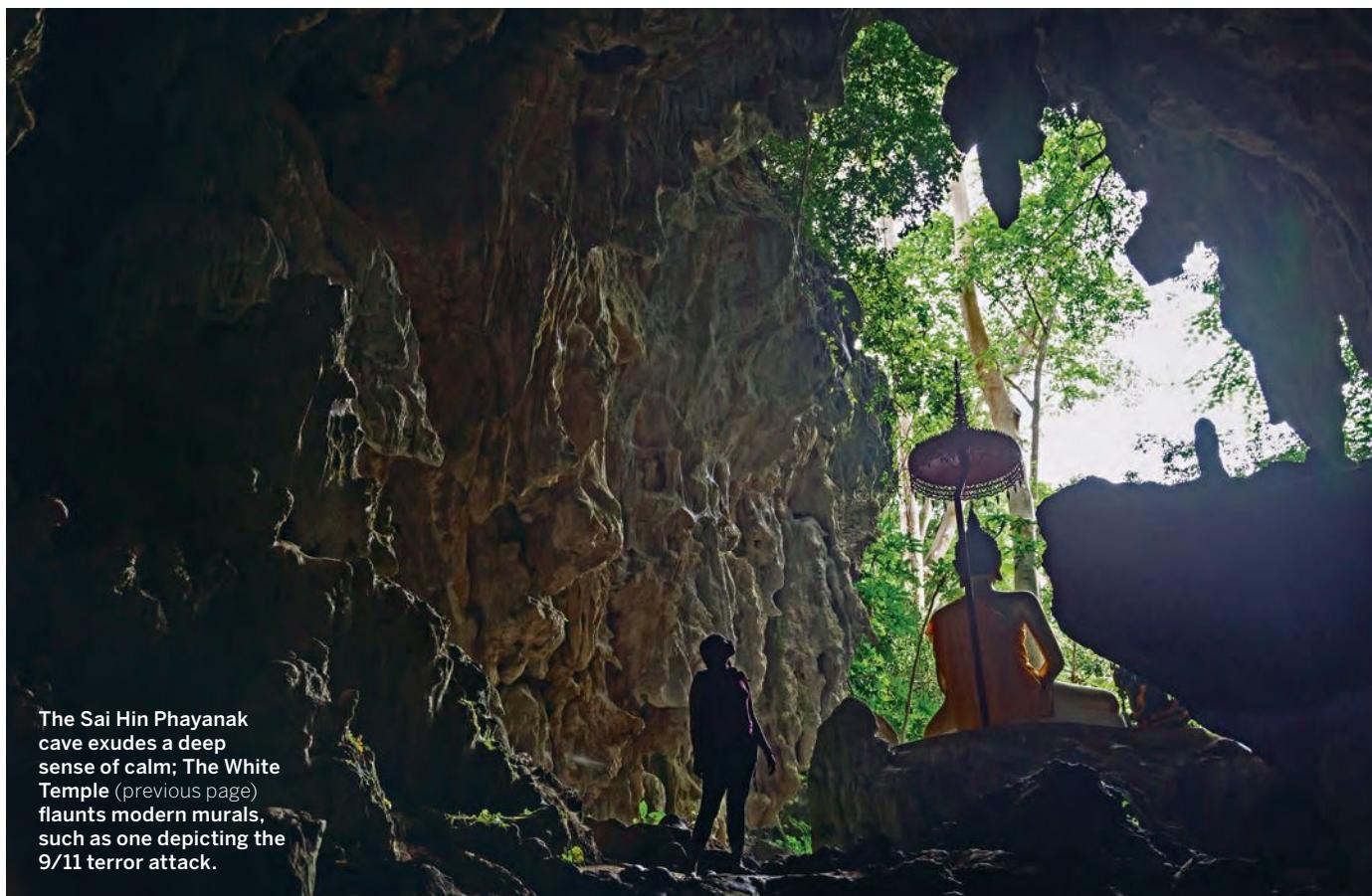
My wallet many baht lighter, I had an important realisation about Thailand: here, you can judge a place by its monkeys. So far, I had visited Bangkok and the south of the country, but the Thailand I was looking for had eluded me. Now I decided Polite Monkey suited

my travelling style, and began looked for less rowdy places.

TRANSIT TOWN

A short drive from the expat haven of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, I hoped, would be an escape from the usual. Thousands of travellers visit the city each year but mostly to transit through. Within 100 kilometres from Mae Sai, Thailand's border town to Myanmar, and Chiang Khlong, the border crossing into Laos, Chiang Rai is a convenient base for the Myanmar-Thailand-Laos overland crossings. There are travel agencies everywhere, with colourful





The Sai Hin Phayanan cave exudes a deep sense of calm; The White Temple (previous page) flaunts modern murals, such as one depicting the 9/11 terror attack.

posters advertising day trips to neighbouring countries. The shops are pocket-sized, catering mostly to take-away orders.

I had walked the city for half a day without coming across loud music or drunk tourists. The only thing I saw dancing and singing was a shiny golden clock tower in the middle of a traffic roundabout. Chiang Rai felt different from any Thai city I'd been in, and I wondered if geography had anything to do with it. The promise of other countries just a short ride away is constantly present and reinforced with the heavy military presence and fighter jets flying overhead. Even the local cats know better than to get too attached to visitors, most of whom take the first bus out.

Before I could be tempted to book a Golden Triangle tour to Myanmar and Laos, I'd headed away from the city, to the Mae Kok River only to be informed by yet another colourful flyer that this very river originated in Myanmar. As I watched the sunset by the Mae Kok, my thoughts drifted to the stories the

river must have of her journey through two countries. If she could speak, I wondered what she would say about our fascination with man-made borders. Maybe I would retrace the Mae Kok's path into Myanmar soon, but I had some exploring to do in Chiang Rai first.

IDOL THREATS

Two of Chiang Rai's most famous buildings can be attributed to the eccentricity of billionaires, Chalermchai Kositipipat and Thawan Duchanee, who made the city their playground.

The White Temple or Wat Rong Khun, is often described as Thailand's most iconic temple, and at first reminded me of a Disney palace. Built by visual artist, Kositipipat, the temple is a vision in white, with glass embellishments shining like diamonds in the sun. I could see how Hollywood would use the setting to maximum dramatic effect. However, to focus on the sanctity of the place, I tried to keep in mind Kositipipat's interpretation of the glistening glass being the glow of Buddha's wisdom.

I couldn't sustain this for long, though. The temple guardian at the entrance looked like the love child of Optimus Prime and the Predator. I continued further into the complex, to find more artistic renditions of famous real and reel-life pop culture idols and villains spread across the sprawling property. Gollum meets Elvis, meets *Eternal Damnation* in the middle of what seems like nowhere. If this was a temple, I must be a religious fanatic.

The path to the inner sanctum of the temple was through installations based on the "Cycle of Life". At the start of the path is an installation of hundreds of hands reaching out from the ground to the heavens depicting temptation and greed. Poetic as it may sound, the sculptures can make you uneasy. Further on, at the end of a white bridge, which symbolises a journey away from greed and towards Nirvana, are doors to the inner sanctum. Here, Buddha shares a mural with other famous leaders: Harry Potter, Spiderman, Doraemon, Michael Jackson, Neo from *The Matrix*, and Po from *Kung Fu Panda* to name a few.

This is set against the backdrop of everything evil in our world, represented by the 9/11 attacks and manicured hands reaching out for mobile phones among other things. At the White Temple, religion is about battling your demons, and those who win are gods.

The other famous building, the Black House or Baan Dam, a creation of Chiang Rai's resident artist Duchanee, is more creepy than kitsch. A symbolic representation of the sadness, death and decay that set Prince Siddhartha on the path of becoming the Buddha, this series of structures left me on edge. It incorporates a thousand animal remains, like ominous horned skulls, the skeleton of an elephant, and a gruesome snake skin table runner. The White Temple and Black House are completely different, but nowhere else had I seen such vivid interpretations of Buddhism.

MYSTIC MOUNTAINTOPS

I am crawling on all fours, hyperventilating and straining to look ahead in the complete darkness. The earth smells fresh. I can hear my heart beating as I imagine presences and creatures around me. Deep inside the Wat Tham Pla cave, I feel strangely close to the suffering, which is at the heart of Buddhism.

Wat Tham Pla is one of the gorgeous wild caves in Mae Sai, about an hour away from Chiang Rai city. In these hills, the Buddha is a cave-dweller. I explored the scenic Sai Hin Phayanak cave first. At the entrance, a golden statue of the Buddha stood guard. I was unsure if I should walk in—it meant walking around the Buddha and felt like an invasion of his space. I kept turning to see his glistening back getting smaller as I made my way further in. I expected a watchman with a whistle to come after me, chiding me for venturing too far. However, no one came, and I continued in, up rusty old ladders that led nowhere, and around bends that took me to bat-filled dead ends. When I stepped back into the sun, I felt different from the person who had ventured into the cave.

Elated by the experience of letting go of my inhibitions, I decided to take the experience a step further at the adjoining Wat Tham Pla. Though the experience of being on all fours in the dark is harrowing, it is also exhilarating.



Created by Thai artist, Thawan Duchanee, The Black House displays skin, bones and taxidermy of animals, and is believed to represent the idea of hell.

The Tham Luang caves, a short drive to the north, present another challenge. My senses are heightened in the darkness, and somewhere far above I hear water flowing. Was that a stream? How far below am I? Am I going to run into some ancient creature? My cinephile mind began conjuring scenes of the cave falling apart, water gushing in, and me dramatically drowning in the unknown. I'd be stuck, like the climber in *127 Hours*; Superman wouldn't be swooping in to save me. I took a deep breath of the musky air (was it even safe to breathe?) and realised that this closeness to the unknown was what I had been craving. There is no light; no maps, no guides, and no souvenir shop waiting for me at the end of the cave. There is no Internet connectivity to make an Instagram post about what is happening. And yet, I have found the raw and real Thailand I had been looking for.

In the afternoon, from atop a hill in Mae Sai, I marvel at the view of Myanmar. Looking at the golden pagodas so typical of Myanmar in front of me, I think, that journey will come, but not today.

I take the longer scenic route back to Chiang Rai, zigzagging through the hills, clouds and heavy mist. When I realise I don't have an iconic photo to mark the moment that I first saw Myanmar, I figure my friends and family will just have to take my word for it. But when I pull over to one of the many military checkpoints on the road, a young soldier calls out to me after letting me through, and says, "In case you want a photo of the border, we have a photo point up ahead near the military barracks." Sure enough, up on the edge of the mountain is another signboard: "Border of Thailand and Myanmar".

It's here, right at the edge of Thailand, that I fall in love with it. *

THE DESTINATION



A large Ferris wheel with colorful lights against a blue sky.

BELGIUM



Winter in Wonderland

*Old meets new on Ghent's sweeping bridges,
in its tall legends and riverside pubs*

By Humaira Ansari

Down Ghent's rabbit hole,
winters are all about snowy
skating rinks, pop-up Christmas
markets and Ferris Wheels
laced with fairy lights.

Three hours before my day-long walk

in the city of Ghent, I am sprawled across the soapy bathroom floor of my hotel room in Bruges. That terror-filled split second in which I lose balance is what hits me harder than the throbbing bruise on my thigh.

However, to reach Ghent in time from postcard-pretty Bruges, I rein in the philosophising and get going.

Compared to the medieval buildings towering over Bruges' crammed streets, Ghent's skyline feels more open and breathable. Lacey white drapes adorn windows of apartments nestled within medieval low-rise stone buildings. Bottle green and navy blue doors mark their entrances; their stepped gable roofs are capped in shades of tan and orange. Trams and Teslas criss-cross Ghent's historic canal-ringed centre. Founded on the confluence of rivers Leie and Scheldt, this capital city of East Flanders in north Belgium thrums with tourists even on a nippy day as this.

"The city is best explored on foot," my guide, Maxime Watteyne,

"Murals and graffiti are splashed all across Ghent. But in the narrow alleys of Werregarenstraat, graffiti is also legal"

announces to our group of five with a warm smile, and we step out onto Ghent's cobbled streets. I concur: It is the kind of place that almost makes me forget about the nasty bump I am nursing on my leg.

We begin walking towards St. Michael's Bridge arched across the Leie. Watteyne points out to the city's two famous quays: Korenlei, flanking Leie's left bank, and Graslei to its right. Used to unload grains in the 13th century, the guild houses lining the two docks have now been repurposed into pubs, cafés and souvenir stores.

"Korenlei and Graslei also comprise Ghent's city centre," says Watteyne, as we inch closer to the bridge. "Always teeming with tourists; sometimes with students high on the lovely beer we Belgians are known to brew."

His last statement breaks the ice and thaws my reservation about being stuck with a guide who'll throw dates of historical events at me with the speed of light. In fact, the enthusiasm and pace with which Watteyne is plating up his city, peppering it with anecdotes, I can't wait to savour it. Ignoring the occasional stinging in my leg, I zip up my jacket, adjust my scarf and brace myself for the walk ahead.

St. Michael's Bridge offers panoramic views of Ghent's cityscape. I gravitate to the bridge's ornate neo-Gothic railing and look down. Spread below me is the Leie, and sailing on its waters are families, couples and

PHOTO COURTESY: VISITGHENT



Ghent's cobbled streets and medieval facades are best explored on foot or a bicycle.

Gravensteen, or the Castle of the Counts, looms over Ghent's historic city centre like a giant elephant.



backpackers eager to make the most of the morning sun.

To my left and right are spires of towers and churches specking Ghent's skyline. From one spot on the bridge, I admire the famous three-tower row—St. Nicholas' Church, whose bluestone turrets resemble inverted ice-cream cones; Belfry, the 300-foot-high tower which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site; and St. Bavo's Cathedral, which houses Flemish artists, the van Eyck brothers' 1432 legendary altarpiece, "The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb."

Tugging at my jacket's sleeve to keep my hands warm, I step away from the group to soak in more sights. Trams rising and falling along the bridge's bend, splashing ads of brands I don't recognise in a language I don't understand; impeccably pruned vistas; and spotless promenades dotted with flower beds. In winter, says Watteyne, the walkways are dusted with snowflakes.

As I try to visualise a snow-crusted Ghent, he chimes in again: "Best vantage point for all that Instagram stuff." Watteyne, I realise, is much like his city: in on both the old and the new.

We get off St. Michael's Bridge and walk towards St. Bavo's when a sculpture of a man suckling a woman's breast catches my eye. It sits atop a Gothic building adjoining the Belfry. "Dirty old man having a good time, right?" Watteyne asks, trailing the group's collective gaze. The work depicts the famous legend "Roman Charity," the story of a father-daughter duo, Cimon and Pero. Cimon was condemned to die of starvation. Since he wasn't allowed food, his daughter, Pero, a new mother,

"Count Philip of Alsace built this stone castle in 1180 to show the locals who the boss is"



Gravensteen is all dolled up during Christmas.

breastfed him in secrecy during her jail visits. When the authorities found out, they were so touched by Pero's love for her father that they released him.

Pointing at the structure, Watteyne says, "This building, named Mammelokker after the sculpture, used to be Ghent's Cloth Hall. In Dutch 'mammel' means breast and 'lokken' means suck. But when the cloth trade declined sometime in the 18th century, this annex was used as the entrance to the city's jail."

THE DESTINATION

On closer inspection, I notice the barred windows surrounding Cimon in the sculpture, and the chain snaking around his feet. This reminds me of my own bruise which, by now, is pulsating with pain. A quick peek confirms one thing: this injury will last longer than my stay in Ghent.

"This harbour is absolutely the place to be," exclaims Astrid, our boat steerer and guide for a 45-minute ride along the Leie. We're finally flanked by what we've been hearing about all morning, the Korenlei and Graslei quays. With them at eye level, I glance up at St. Michael's Bridge. It looks gorgeous, arched above the glinting waters.

Blessed by the warmth of the afternoon sun, I first lose my scarf and then my jacket. Dipping an almond cookie into my Earl Grey and biting into bitter Belgian chocolate, I immerse myself in the nuggets of trivia Astrid is throwing my way. It feels like a tea party on a boat, with her as my host, captain and guide, all rolled into one.

Besides 250-plus bridges, Ghent has seven waterways, two rivers and five canals. It is also Belgium's largest student city, adds Astrid. The University of Ghent was started in 1817 with four faculties and 90 students. Two centuries later, it admits 73,000 students from across Belgium and beyond. Sailing past the university, Astrid says: "Students make Ghent a young and vibrant city. A bit

noisy and dirty too. But it's still nice to have them."

When Protestants and Catholics were sparring sometime in the 16th century, the Protestants raided the university's library and tossed more than 30,000 books and manuscripts into the Leie, relates Astrid. "There were so many books floating in the water that the entire riverbed could be crossed without wetting one's feet. We don't have those books anymore. But we do have very intelligent fishes."

Astrid, on a roll with her punchlines, expertly swerves the boat on the waters she's very familiar with. The best bit about the boat ride is that it sums up Ghent, its smell, sights and sounds, in under an hour, offering me glimpses of important buildings. One of these is the 16th-century Old Fish Market that's now Oude Vismijn, a swanky restaurant rustling up Flemish cuisine cooked with fresh local produce. One such ingredient is the mustard it uses from Ghent's iconic Tierenteyn-Verlent store, a few metres away. I remember crossing Tierenteyn's green facade during the walk. The pungent aroma wafting from

this 150-year-old store reminded me of the mustard fish curry made by a Bengali neighbour back home. Back on the boat, Tierenteyn's mention once again makes me crave the dish my neighbour used to generously share.

The boat ride saves the best for last—our final passage overlooks the facade of Dreupel Kot pub. Dreupel means "tear drop" and Kot is "cottage" in Dutch. "So it means a pub where

"Protestants
once flung 30,000
books into the Leie river.
We don't have those books
anymore but we do have very
intelligent fishes"

CHRISTIAN KOBER/AWL IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

Graslei and Korenlei, the two quays flanking the Leie river, are great hang-out spots.





Every nook and cranny of the city is lit up during The Light Festival, held every three years.

you get a drop of gin. Or many drops of gin," winks Astrid. One of Ghent's most iconic pubs, it is known for some mean gin-based cocktails. The red hot chilli pepper cocktail "is absolutely painful." Then there are others that come infused with chocolate... "those are for the kids. We call it 'initiation.'"

Later that evening, circled around Karel, our last guide for the day, we ogle at the grandiose Gravensteen or the Castle of the Counts. In the heart of the city centre, the grey stone castle looms over Ghent like a giant elephant.

During winter, says Karel, when Ghent sets up a skating rink, a Ferris wheel and a pop-up Christmas market—when its monuments are illuminated to paint a fairy tale picture—the Gravensteen is renamed "Winter Wonderland Castle." Ice sculptures of polar bears, reindeers, pines bathed in fairy lights, streamers hugging the stairwell, and a bar to soak it all in, transform the castle into a delightful Christmas destination.

That's the good bit, but the castle has been in the news for all sorts of reasons. Count Philip of Alsace built it in 1180 to "show locals who the boss is." Citizens were almost up in arms against the count, refusing to pay taxes they regarded unfair. The castle has been stormed thrice since, last on November 16, 1949. Agitated by a hike in beer prices, 138 angry students marched in, climbed up to the roof and threw rotten fruits out at the city. "Since November is really cold here, a little bit of hosing by the firemen did the trick," says Karel. The dramatic siege lasted six

"Our city centre is always teeming with tourists, and sometimes with students high on the lovely beer we Belgians brew"

hours and made front-page news.

In 1959, students called for a celebratory reunion. But instead of 138, 400 showed up claiming to have been part of the 1949 storming squad. "The thing with legends is," remarks Karel, "they only grow bigger and bigger."

Later that night, it's the city's pulse that lingers longer than the memory of the morning's fall, as I sit dangling my feet along Graslei, watching Ghent dim the lights and down its shutters. *

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE The closest international airport is in Brussels. Regular flights with one or more stops at a Middle Eastern or European gateway ply between all major Indian cities and Brussels. Ghent is 30 min by train from Brussels South Station and one hour by road from the airport. Nine shuttles leave daily from the airport (€15/₹1,130 one-way).

VISA Applications for a Schengen tourist visa can be made in person to one of the VFS centres. It takes 15 days to process the visa (www.vfsglobal.com/Belgium/India; €60/₹4,500).

TOURS For details of walking tours and boat rides visit www.visitflanders.com

THE JOURNEY



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MANIPUR'S GAME CHANGER

The glamorous game of polo is trying to save the endangered Manipuri pony

ASHIMA NARAIN

122 IT'S ALWAYS SUNNY IN SEVILLE

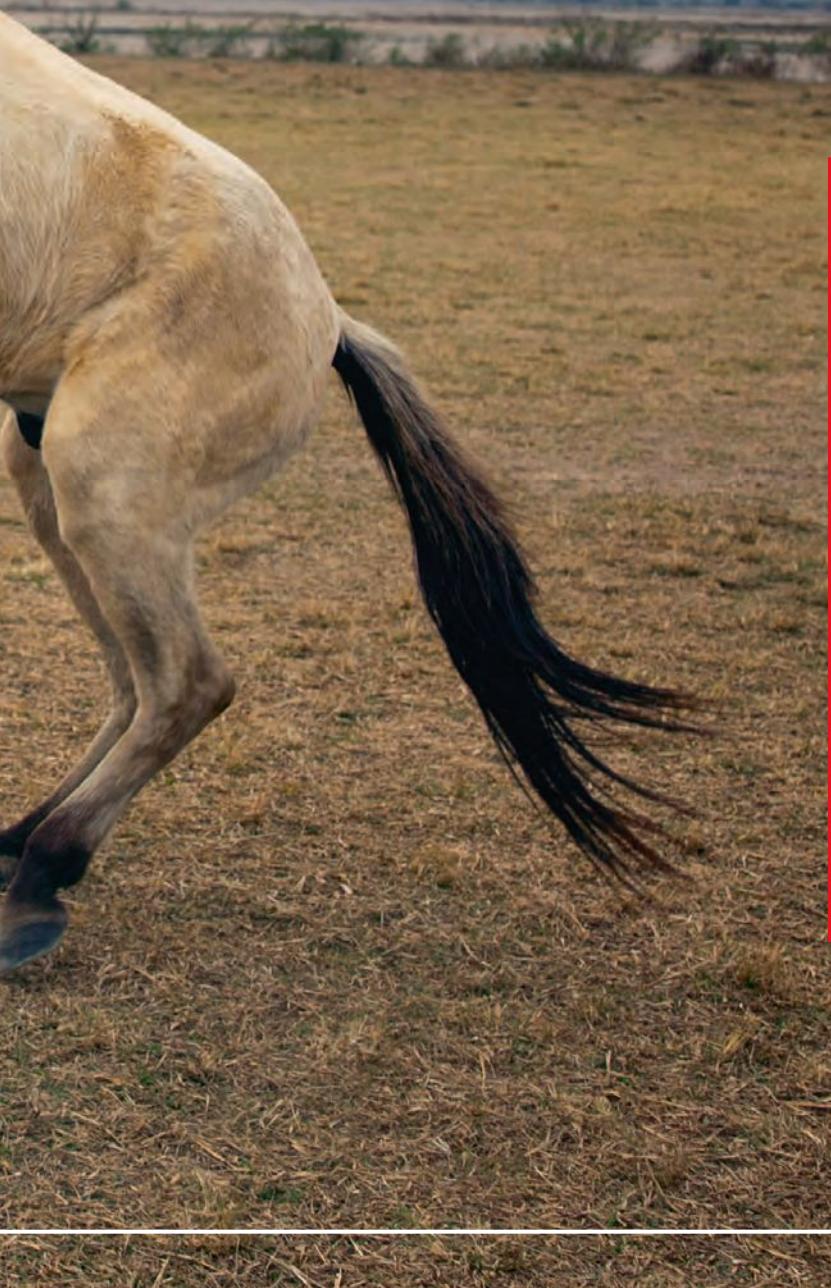


In Manipur, polo is an egalitarian sport, played at the village level by players who often come from humble means. Here, Soibam Komol, a polo player from Tekcham village in the central valley of Manipur, warms up his horse before the game.

MANIPUR'S GAME CHANGER

ONCE A SACRED ANIMAL, THE INDIGENOUS MANIPURI PONY SUFFERED A PITIFUL FATE UNTIL RECENT CONSERVATION EFFORTS. NOW, THE GLAMOROUS GAME OF POLO IS TRYING TO SAVE THIS ENDANGERED ANIMAL

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY ASHIMA NARAIN



The elite image of polo belies its humble origins. Few know that the game has its roots in Manipur; according to local conservationist L. Somi Roy, when the Manipuri king was in exile in Assam in the mid-1800s, some British soldiers watched the king's soldiers play "horse hockey." The British too joined in, and soon the game spread to Calcutta, and from there to Britain, where they recorded the rules for the game at the prestigious Hurlingham Club, and called it polo.

The indigenous, semi-feral Manipuri pony is the original polo animal. It was sacred to the Meiteis, Manipur's largest ethnic group and not used for domestic work, but only for sport, ritual and war. Over decades, as unrest mounted in Manipur, the storied pony lost most of its grazing areas, and was found roaming the streets and eating garbage.

In 2013, Roy, a film curator in the U.S., returned to Imphal after three decades. Moved by the Manipuri pony's plight, he recognised the need to preserve the rare breed and restore its pride in the state. With the support of the United States Polo Association (USPA), Roy forged an international partnership to highlight the plight of the animal using the glamorous appeal of polo. The state government too joined hands and began organising international games and training camps to create awareness about the animal and elevate the game of modern polo in Manipur. In fact, the sign at Imphal's polo stadium reads "Manipur Gave The World The Game of Polo." And hearteningly, the Manipuri pony finds a place once again in aspects of Manipur's culture, society, and economy.



In preparation for Manipur's famous Lai Haraoba festival (which involves the re-enactment of the valley's stories of creation), Thoudam Sanajaobi, a polo player from the Chingkhei Hunba Polo Club, brings the club's ponies to the outskirts of Imphal (top). The animals will then lead the procession to the Lai Puthiba shrine in nearby Langthabal. Two-thirds of Indian women polo players hail from Manipur. With the help of Roy's Huntré! Equine and the USPA, the state hosted India's first international women's polo tournament in January 2016, and women's teams have toured cities like Hyderabad and Jaipur since; Almost everyone from the community around the shrines of the deities, Umang Lai, participates in Lai Haraoba. This procession (bottom) sees dozens of women carrying fruit, or sarong-clad girls who perform for the gods.

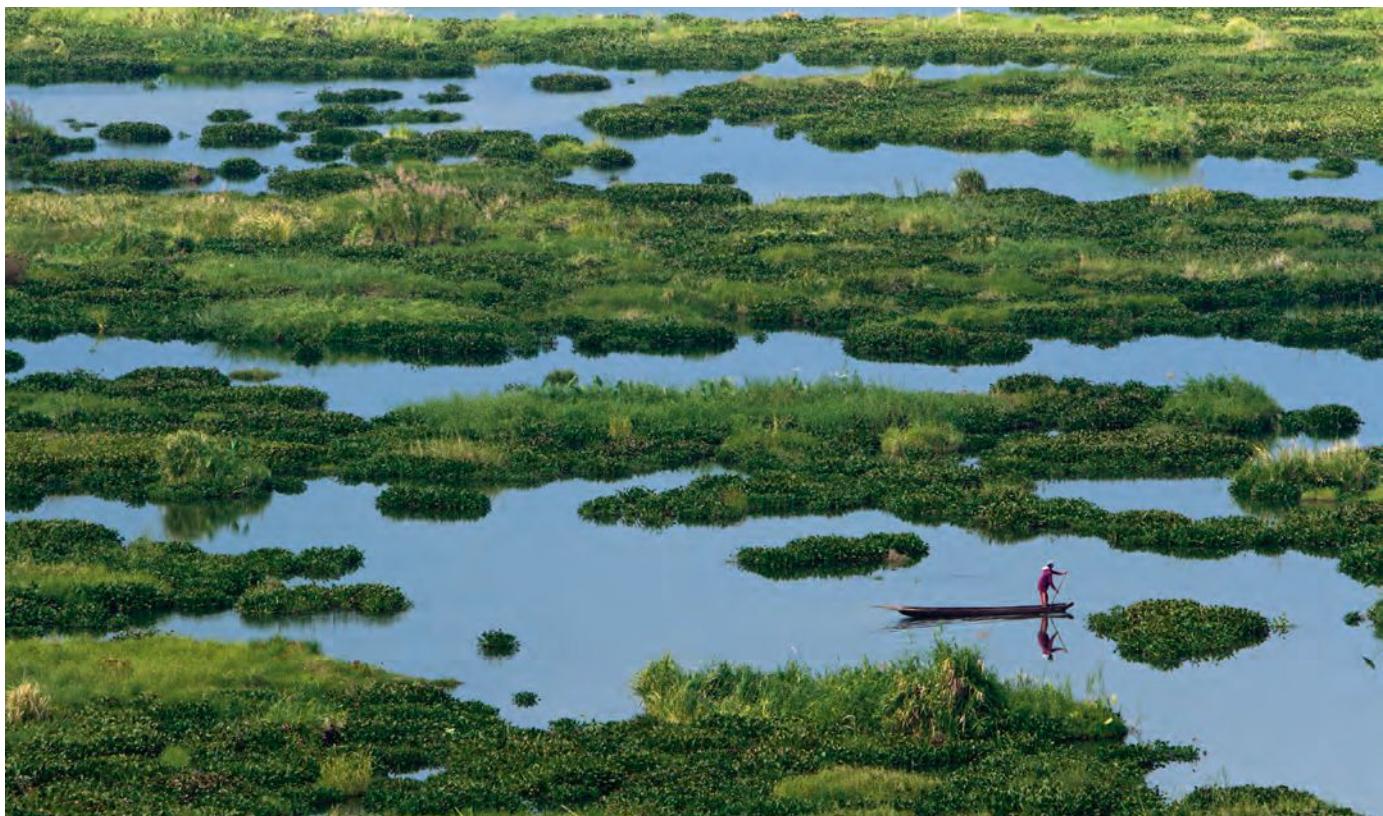




A dancer prepares to take stage at Manipur's Sangai Festival. Held every November, it showcases multiple facets of Manipuri culture, such as traditional dances, the martial practice of *thang-ta*, horsemen aiming darts called *arambai*, and the annual men's international polo tournament with teams from U.S.A., U.K., Thailand and Australia.



A caretaker (top) looks after a pony near the shrine of Ibudhou Marjing—a deity with a flying horse—in Heingang village. In 2013, to bring Manipuri ponies off the streets, a preserve was built at the foot of the shrine, but was temporarily closed soon after. Its construction has resumed this year; Manipur's resplendent Loktak Lake (bottom) is the largest freshwater lake in Northeast India. It contains large floating masses of vegetation called *phumdis*. Select types of this vegetation are taken into Imphal and sold as pony fodder.





Imphal's Mapal Kangjeibung, located in the heart of the city, is believed to be the oldest polo ground in the world. It is common to see the stadium's stands packed with thousands of hollering, hooting spectators when the Manipuri team, India B, competes with international teams such as the U.S. or Australia.



THE JOURNEY

IT'S
ALWAYS SUNNY IN
SEVILLE

FIESTA IS OPTIONAL HERE
BUT SIESTA IS A NECESSITY

BY SARITHA RAO RAYACHOTI



Even Triana, a lively and bohemian part of Seville, wears an empty look in summer.



Seville's main sights include the palace of Alcázar (bottom left) and the Barrio Santa Cruz (top right and bottom right). The best way to spend evenings is to catch a flamenco performance (top left).





the fading light of a balmy Sunday in August, the San Pablo airport resembles an abandoned hangar from a Bond movie. We've just arrived by the last flight coming into Seville. We are the last passengers to exit, we've missed the last bus, and all the taxis have been taken by passengers not travelling with a flamenco guitar in a hard case with a 'Fragile' sticker on it.

Twenty minutes later, a taxi finally careens into the empty driveway. As it nears, the Bond movie analogy is complete—we will be driven to our rental apartment by Javier Bardem's doppelgänger. The word for "menacing smile" is beyond my fledgling Spanish vocabulary. I brace myself for a ride with Raoul Silva, with only my husband's well-filed flamenco-playing nails as protection.

My husband, not prone to flights of wild imagination involving Bond villains, attempts a question in Spanish. The taxi driver's face first softens and then rearranges itself around a sweet smile of the kind that his *abuela* would have doted on. His delighted response skids over the familiar cadence, skips a few syllables, and slaps on a rasher of the Andalusian lisp. We barely grasp what he says, but outside the taxi window, night has fallen and with the flip of a switch, stone and brick, cement and glass, and cobbles and concrete, all acquire eloquence.

Perhaps some of the allure is also because the streets appear desolate. It's a little past 10 in the night. Traffic is sparse and the trams seem to be running nearly empty. Shops, bars and restaurants are shut. In the Seville we know and love, one would find people sauntering out of a bullfight in the wee hours to stop for a nightcap with friends at a neighbourhood bar.

Where were the *sevillanos*?

SOUNDS OF SILENCE

There are no door numbers. We've stayed at this apartment on a previous trip, and only remember a restaurant next door. Raoul lets us off at the end of the street and, as we wait for the executive from the rental agency to arrive with the keys, we look for a place to eat.

The restaurant across the street is open, but has only potato wafers on offer. There's another restaurant down the other end of the street, that has a device spraying a mist of cool water on passers-by. We go on to discover that this is a common feature here in summer. But even as we make our way over, the faucet is abruptly turned off, and the lights go out one by one. We ask if we can dine there—even *tostada* with a chunk of cheese is good enough. "*Lo siento*", they say regretfully, and with a firm hand, the owner pulls the shutter down.

The young woman from the agency arrives and leads us to a nondescript door. Among traditional Sevillian houses, even apartments, it is common to have a courtyard or a patio garden. Some buildings have even managed to carve out an elevator shaft in what looks like an ancient structure. Our building has

neither courtyard nor elevator, and we trudge up the tile-lined stairway for a late dinner of instant noodles from the emergency food stash that we had hoped to take back home untouched.

It turns out that we've arrived during the collective summer vacation in July, August and well into September, when people in the city move en masse to cooler parts of the country. A bartender in Jerez de la Frontera would later call it the *vacaciones colectivas* although no sevillano I know has been known to use the phrase. This vacation, in addition to the numerous festival holidays in Spain, perplexes productivity fiends but local folks are known to unapologetically pack laid-back and feisty in the same breathy sentence.

Late the next morning, we walk over to a bar across the street that was closed the previous night, but now incongruously serves breakfast. Three *bomberos*, firefighters, still in their dark blue uniforms, saunter in and noisily greet the owner of the bar. While our day has just begun, with strong *cafe con leche* and crusty *tostada*, their workday just ended with beer and *fritas*.

The day is not yet as intensely hot as predicted and strolling along pedestrian streets, we find few of the retail outlets in Calle Sierpes open. When the heat rises off the flagstone paving, the dark, cool confines of the Santa Maria de la Sede, the largest Gothic cathedral in the world, are particularly inviting.

The structure was once a mosque built by the Moorish royal dynasty, the Almohads, in the 12th century. The cathedral was constructed after Ferdinand III of Castile conquered Seville in 1248. Inside, Arturo Melida's tomb for Christopher Columbus is held aloft by four coffin bearers representing the kingdoms during Columbus's times: Castile, Leon, Aragon and Navara.

The Giralda is the cathedral's minaret-turned-bell tower; its spiralling ramp was designed to be ascended by the muezzin on horseback. From atop the tower, there is a breathtaking view of the city. Looking down into the cathedral, there is a simplicity in the symmetry of the Patio de los Naranjos, a courtyard with orange trees irrigated by water from a nearby fountain.

In the late afternoon, our apartment echoes with the *bulerias* (flamenco tunes) that my husband practices on his guitar. We discover that we are the only residents in the building in this off season. How else does one explain the inexpensiveness of the rental space and the agency's nonchalance about a flamenco guitar being played all afternoon in a country where siesta is religion?

As darkness falls, we make our way back to the now



Barrio Santa Cruz, a maze of historic and narrow streets, is the old Jewish quarter of the city.

PHOTO COURTESY: INSTITUTO DE TURISMO DE ESPAÑA

THE JOURNEY



The architecture in Seville (bottom) evokes many influences. The Plaza de España (top left) has Renaissance stylistic touches while the Alcázar (top right) is a nod to Moorish heritage.

magnificently illuminated cathedral where we gaze at the drama of light and shade on the numerous statues of saints. The cathedral is the hub for tourists like us, and understandably, also the cluster where horse-drawn carriages, kitschy souvenir stores, restaurants, bars and buskers wait patiently for customers. At one of the restaurants, a young waiter tries to woo us to an al fresco table by speaking in English. We ask him to help us practise our Spanish, and also feast on modest spread of fat olives and grilled peppers served in earthenware tapas plates.

HERITAGE HAUNTS

The next day, we visit the Real Alcázar palace complex, first built in the 12th century, and later evolving into a profusion of medieval styles including Moorish, Gothic, Mudéjar and Renaissance. It is a harmonious blend of horseshoe arches, patios, indoor fountains, balconies and exquisitely crafted domed ceilings, especially in the Ambassadors' Hall. We gape awestruck, not for the first time, at the exquisite calligraphic stucco and hand painted *azulejo* tiles on the walls—stylistic details that the Alcázar has in common with the Alhambra fortress in Granada.

Serving as a liminal space between the opulence of the palace and the stark simplicity of the garden, the Galería del Grutesco has niches with dreamy frescoes in the Italian Mannerist style of the 16th century. The garden is an example of Islamic horticulture, with a grid of paved paths, each square with trimmed hedges and trees, usually orange or palm. In the shaded intersection of the paths, there are water fountains, harking back to Moor's origins in Arabia, where water was considered luxury, and having a fountain, even a small one, was a statement of affluence.

One evening, we navigate the maze of streets that is the Barrio Santa Cruz, a predominantly pedestrian neighbourhood with flagstone paving, whitewashed houses and a profusion of flowering plants and orange trees. It's a labyrinth that neither the mapmakers of yore, nor the app makers of today are able to capture accurately. A friend is performing this evening, and we find the venue after a few wrong turns: an inner courtyard with arches, surrounded on three sides by folding chairs. A wall of trailing creepers forms the backdrop to the performance, in which a male flamenco dancer uses a walking stick as a prop to complement his deft footwork to the resolute tone that only a flamenco guitar can produce.

Another evening, we cross Puente de Isabel II over the river Guadalquivir that links into the Triana locality. Here, the absence of *sevillanos* is even more conspicuous. The famed ceramic shops of Triana, which manufacture tiles, dados, panels and finials are firmly shut, as though reminding us that work isn't everything in life. The exquisitely painted cherubs on their signboards smirk at us for the timing of our visit. A bar is open, but reluctant to serve us.

We visit the church of Santa Ana, where we learn about an amusing legend: seven shoe taps by a woman seeking a husband, to the head of Basque saint, Inigo Lopez's, ceramic-clad *lauda* or tombstone, assured marriage. Going by the state of the tile portrait, the shoe taps appear to be a popular practice.

THROUGH THE HEAT WAVE

Our days follow a familiar pattern. The warmer hours of the day are spent indoors, either ensconced in the air-

conditioned apartment or in a heritage structure with naturally cool interiors. The evenings are spent outdoors, walking through a locality that we have not visited, taking in concerts and dance performances, or simply sitting by the river—but always, always ensuring that the evening's entertainment doesn't come in the way of dinner plans at restaurants that close early in this season.

We nod at the regulars we meet and collect vignettes of the mundane in a different land. The vendor at the vegetable store next door, who waits patiently for me to flip through my Spanish-English dictionary to find the word for "basil". The homeless woman with the handwritten cardboard sign that reads in Spanish, "I am hungry". The band of students who perform at the Plaza Nueva. The bespectacled elderly man at the neighbourhood bar who sits ramrod straight on a bar-stool with his morning glass of wine.

Most of all, we remember our conversation with the owner of a modest bar with none of the mounted bull heads and framed flamenco posters that have come to characterise the Andalusian *cerveceria*. He lamented staying behind in Seville while his family vacationed in their hometown up north, in A Coruña. He poured us *tinto de veranos* and together, as we cribbed about the restaurant menus in *Inglés*, and the Chinese grocery stores that stay defiantly open through siesta. *

ESSENTIALS

Orientation Seville, on the banks of the river Guadalquivir, is the largest city in the Andalusia region in the south of Spain. It is 530 km/5 hr from the capital Madrid.

Getting There There are no direct flights from India to Seville's San Pablo airport. All connections require at least one stop at a European gateway. Budget airlines such as Ryanair, Vueling and easyJet do not feature on most Indian flight booking websites but often have good connections from places like London.

The fastest and most comfortable way to get from the capital, Madrid to Seville is on the high-speed AVE train which gets you there in 2.5 hours and can be between €30-60/₹2,264-4,528 each way. Tickets can be booked up to 60 days in advance and combined with other journeys with the Spain Pass.

Visa Indians travelling to Spain need a Schengen visa. A 90-day multiple entry tourist visa costs ₹4,300. Applicants must have a return ticket and a confirmed itinerary. For application forms and documentation details, visit india.blsspainvisa.com. It is best to apply for a visa at least 15 days before departure.

See A leisurely visit to the the Real Alcázar along with the Jardines del Real Alcázar takes half a day. Better still, look for a night visit option or a dramatised visit. A summer concert series—Noches en los Jardines del Real Alcázar—is held at the Alcázar between June and September every year. Be sure to also visit Catedral de Seville or Santa María de la Sede, the world's largest Gothic church.

TRAVEL QUIZ

TEST YOUR TRAVEL IQ



WHICH AMERICAN LAKE HAS ARTIFICIAL REEFS CREATED BY OLD CHRISTMAS TREES IMMERSED ANNUALLY OVER 20 YEARS?



THIS SNOW FIESTA HELD IN JAPAN IS FAMOUS FOR ITS MASSIVE INTERNATIONAL SNOW SCULPTURE CONTEST.



WHERE IN THE WORLD CAN YOU FIND FATHER CHRISTMAS' POST OFFICE THAT REMAINS OPEN ALL YEAR?



A PARADE OF GIANT LANTERNS IS HELD IN THIS FILIPINO CITY ON THE SATURDAY BEFORE CHRISTMAS.



WHICH PERUVIAN FESTIVAL INVOLVES PILGRIMS TREKKING TO A GLACIER TO GATHER SACRED ICE?



THIS SIBERIAN SPORT RESEMBLING ICE HOCKEY IS PLAYED ONLY IN THE SNOWY WINTER MONTHS.

ANSWERS 1. LAKE HAVASU IN CALIFORNIA AND ARIZONA 2. SAPPORO SNOW FESTIVAL 3. DRØBAK, NORWAY 4. SAN FERNANDO 5. QOULLUR RITI OR SNOW STAFR FESTIVAL 6. BANDY

MATTHEW MICAH WRIGHT/GETTY IMAGES (LAKE) KAZUHIRO/AFLO/DINODIA PICTURE GALLERY (ICE SCULPTURE); MARCINKADZIOLKA/SHUTTERSTOCK (POST OFFICE); DONALD WATATA/CONTRIBUTOR/GETTY IMAGES (LANTERN); ANADOLU AGENCY/CONTRIBUTOR/ANADOLUAGENCY/GETTY IMAGES (MOUNTAIN); VASILY MAXMOV/STAFF/GETTY IMAGES (SPORT)