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NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER

INDIA

THE GREAT
AMERICAN
GUIDE TO GOOD TIMES



WASHINGTON, D.C.
MAKING
CAPITAL GAINS

MEMPHIS
CADILLAC
CHRONICLES

NEW YORK
YOUR PERFECT
WEEKEND



THE CONVERSATION KABIR KHAN | NUCLEYA | KANISHK THAROOR

OCTOBER 2017

VOL. 6 ISSUE 4



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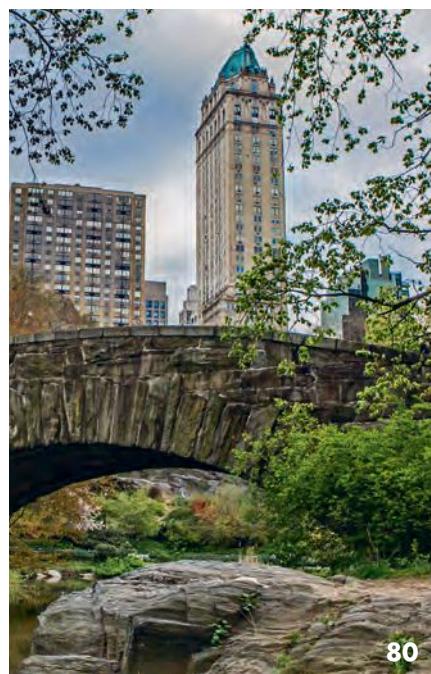
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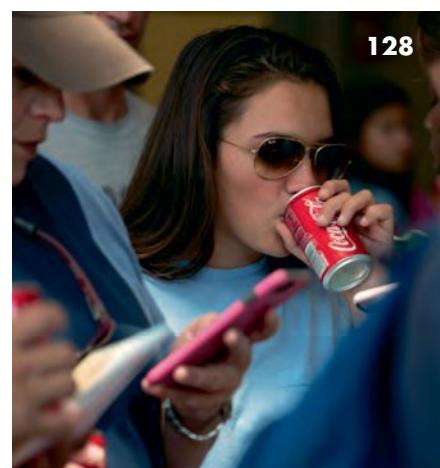
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I'M ALL SHOOK UP



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

FUN, ELVIS
IMPLIED, WAS
ALWAYS A MATTER OF
NOW OR NEVER

Suspicious minds might ask, "Why did you ever want to go to the United States? What did you find there that you didn't know already?" I'd have a 17-day long trip to defend. "I wanted to go to the States because of Elvis," I'd say. My answer would not be deliberate or obtuse. When I was 13, Elvis was my king. His songs gave my life its soundtrack. I'd exaggerate my baritone and practise "Love Me Tender" for my childhood sweetheart. The day we broke up, I played "Always on My Mind". (She really was.) When I found myself in times of trouble, Elvis came to me, and when I wanted to dance, I'd secretly jive to his "Blue Suede Shoes". Elvis was also my America. He'd made me dream the Great American Dream.

As a boy, I had always imagined Graceland as a temple of abundance, and even though it turned out to be a palace of excess 20 years later, I wasn't disappointed. I had touched the piano Elvis played in his living room, and seen the three televisions he watched together. Graceland had even put on display the planes he splurged on and the first Cadillac he bought when he found money and fame. Above the car, you'll find this Elvis quote on the wall: "There's nowhere else in the world where you can go from driving a truck to a Cadillac overnight." The United States, I concurred, was a land of sudden possibility.

Tad Pierson drove us around Memphis in his own '55 Cadillac, and he, not Elvis, is the sole protagonist of the Memphis story you will find in the issue. According to him, "In America, we don't have royalty or mythic gods. What we do have is Elvis. He is our Shakespearean hero, and he is also a superhero, wearing a cape on stage, sacrificing his life for our joy." His fame may not have been kind to Elvis, but it was generous to us. He'd given us a guide to good times. Fun, he implied, was always a matter of now or never.

Even though the United States might be more familiar than exotic, its industry does still extend to its entertainment. It was in Savannah, for instance, that I discovered a latent love for ice cream. Atlanta renewed my passion for Andy Warhol, and New York's bookstores gave me hope. Books had a future. In the U.S., high and low art were served on the same plate. Thankfully, American portions remain massive.

It would be cynical to dismiss America's predilection for pleasure as hedonistic. There is much the country must forget. In Washington, D.C., people now look to restaurants more than the White House. Hurricane Harvey devastated Houston, but it did not make recreation impossible. New Orleans picked up the pieces, and rediscovered jazz and trumpets. So in the end, it is perhaps only levity that'll trump. ■



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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TRAVELS IN A FICTIONAL COUNTRY

DOES THE U.S.A. EVEN EXIST? OR IS EVERYONE THERE JUST A PRODUCT OF A FERTILE IMAGINATION?

Look, don't read too much into this, but I partly fell in love with Florida because of a serial killer. What I mean, of course, is a fictional one: *Red Dragon*, the Hannibal Lecter-universe movie took me to Marathon, a city in the Florida Keys, and a stupendously beautiful place. I could move there and not even bother to pack my bags—white sands, perfect nodding palm trees and not too many people, except of course for the serial killers, who come with the place like fries come with ketchup. But hey, that's the U.S.A. for you.

Well, obviously, it isn't quite like that, but you'd be hard-pressed to tell. More than any other place on Earth, we know about the U.S.A. primarily through fiction, and oh boy, does that make a difference. Everyone in New York is either a cop, a lawyer, in the Mafia, or wisecracking over really sick-making, huge cups of coffee. If you live in L.A., you're either a drug dealer or a struggling actor who routinely gets caught in black-comedic crime capers, or rich and desperate and probably a housewife. Everyone in the South "tawuks lak theeyus," and if you've reached senior-officer level in the police or military, it's clear you're just a brain-dead goof who keeps ignoring the terrific guy working under him, just because he's a bit of a maverick, and is also called Maverick. If you have a British accent, I'm sorry, you're destined to be an arch-villain or a butler or a super-genius nerd, and in any case, your chances of a violent death are astronomical. Oh, and if you have your sweetheart's photo in your wallet, I'm glad you bought life insurance, is all I'm saying.

This applies to places too. It never, ever rains in L.A. (unless someone mentions

the seven deadly sins, and then you really should just get the hell out of there). If you drive out of L.A., in about 30 seconds you're in Utah, where all the rattlesnakes hang out by the side of the road, hissing and striking at your car's tyres as you pass by. (Life hack: when facing a rattlesnake, try very hard not to look like a passing tyre. Hard for some, I know, but important to remember nevertheless.) In New York, it's always either autumn or winter, and there are only three places at all in the city: the Underground, the skating rink in Central Park, and a food cart run by someone who only nods.

WE KNOW ABOUT THE U.S.A. PRIMARILY THROUGH FICTION

It's great advertising, of course—every time I've been to the U.S.A., my travel has been about ticking bizarre things off lists. Salt-water taffy and ice-cream sodas from Archie Comics, driving into the sun on Sunset Boulevard, getting into a high-speed police chase while being involved in a humongous misunderstanding, things like that. What it does, though, is make you forget that there's a real country there with real people, and that there's actually a lot to see beyond what you see on TV. I mean, how often in the movies do you see New England, with its farm-to-table movements and lovely little university towns, or Big Sur and excellent craft beer? California is more than L.A. and S.F.—the redwoods are probably the most amazing thing I've seen, but they don't shoot people, so they don't make for good TV. Oh, and the

Native Americans in New Mexico know a hell of a lot about villages in India, which makes you feel a bit of an idiot for having underestimated them, like every white-man-gone-native cliché.

There's also the flip-side. Case in point: a conversation I overheard the other day, someone telling someone else about not wanting to go to the U.S.A. Understandable. Before I went and let all the pop-culture references get to me, I hated the thought of going there. If anything, the big cities end up sounding unfriendly, the wilds murderous, and the small towns full of Stephen King's imagination, so why would you go? And you know it all anyway, because you have Netflix. Plainly, that's rubbish. If anyone in the U.S.A.'s listening, please make better movies, okay? Or, at least more realistic ones, so we won't be surprised when we come over and see real people. By 'real people' I mean people who don't routinely fight off aliens, blow up terrorists while armed only with chewing gum and some killer lines, or have dogs called Brinkley. I mean, Brinkley.

I might be wrong, of course. If you're single and looking, move to a big American city and become a celebrity chef. It certainly looks guaranteed to work. Just don't put any photos in your wallet, okay? ■



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SHOPPING CAN BUY YOU HAPPINESS

RETAIL THERAPY DOES HAVE ITS CHARMS, BUT WHEN ON THE ROAD, IT ALSO MAKES DESTINATIONS MORE ACCESSIBLE

Years ago, I had brought home a souvenir from my trip to North America, only to discover that it was made in China. My heart broke. It was not about the money. Or wait, who am I kidding? It was about the money I had spent on some 'authentic' North American native art, but more than that, I felt cheated of an experience, of a genuine story. This episode taught me a few hard lessons about shopping when travelling. (1) Never trust your tour guide blindly. (2) Always look for that minuscule but pervasive 'Made in China' sticker before you put down your money on something you think is 'native'.

Shopping is one of travel's elemental joys. Travellers of yore sailed the high seas in search of new worlds, yes, but they did so to primarily shop, to buy silk and spices which they could sell back home for double the price. Through this very act of shopping, they experienced new cultures, saw fascinating places, heard interesting tales and made new friends. (Some of these travellers even married their new friends.) Trade routes were established. Continents were connected. The world opened up. And all this happened simply because a few men had the urge to go shopping in a faraway land.

For me, shopping when on the road is less about designer labels (unless they are those of local designers) and more about experiencing the culture of a place. I veer toward shops you usually wouldn't find in guidebooks. These are places that only locals know. In my experience, you are more likely to find interesting people peddling fascinating wares and stories in

the lanes and by-lanes that are far from the main squares. Little joy can be found in chain stores, shiny malls and arcades as big as football fields.

If you want to appreciate and perceive a place, its people and their ways, try shopping there. The experience can be delectable. Before you embark on a journey, get some native insight about where you can shop and what you can shop for. Social media helps. Lifestyle bloggers know how to ferret information. I usually try and meet them over coffee a day or two after I land. More often than not, they are more than

IF YOU WANT TO APPRECIATE A PLACE, TRY SHOPPING THERE

willing to take me to places known only to locals. The hotel concierge can also be a reliable source. I even talk to waiters, bellboys, the doorman and housekeeping staff. They know their shops. To interact directly with artisans, I have found, visiting the weekly farmer's market helps. Buying art or products directly from artisans not just proves cheaper, but it also ensures that makers get their rightful share of the profits. Besides, you hear stories you'd otherwise never have been able to relish.

It was thanks to a tip from a friend of a friend—a self-confessed shopaholic—that I discovered a restored 20,000-square-foot haveli in Udaipur. Filled to the brim with beautiful heritage handmade textiles, paintings and wooden crafts, the 17th-century building was my candy shop.



Hidden in a narrow lane, I found Ganesh Emporium. Run by its third generation owner, Vipul Shah, Ganesh Emporium sells bohemian bags that have, at different times, been sported by the likes of Beyoncé, Julia Roberts and the Kardashian sisters. The textile and designs are local, but you see why Hollywood buys into their charm.

When you set out to discover a place on foot, shopping becomes an adventure. I usually set aside a day for my walkabouts. On Prince Edward Island, a stroll helped me find handcrafted soap that had been cut with guitar strings. Two doors away, I found Overman Jewellery and Art. Though owned by a champion heavyweight boxer, the store made jewellery that was extraordinarily delicate. There was one walk, though, that soon became a memorable and unexpected shopping expedition. Walking in a forgotten lane near Bangalore's Ulsoor Lake, I found Baby. The 84-year-old man had for five decades been selling homemade curry powders in a shop that had no name. We spoke about life, love and food for an hour, and I returned with 100 grams of his special sambhar powder. He threw in a recipe too. Shopping off the beaten path, you see, has a distinct advantage. You are sure to get a memory, even if not a discount. ■



SUDHA PILLAI
is an artist, photographer and writer. She writes about her encounters with people, places, art and culture.

WHY DIGITAL DETOX DOESN'T WORK FOR ME

TO CONNECT TO PLACES, STAY CONNECTED



I have often heard people of another generation say, "In our time, we had none of this technology. We used paper maps and asked people for directions. Your generation is always glued to the phone."

I have never understood this derision for smartphones, especially considering how hassle-free they have made travel. Google Maps is a necessity on most trips. Checking emails and clicking pictures is very much a part of my vacation. And I do not believe it ruins the fun. There, I've said it.

"Digital Detox" is the rage these days. Essentially, it is a fancy term that tells people to reduce "screen time" and not carry their smartphones on a vacation. The idea behind it, of course, is to encourage people to "live in the moment." The best resorts seem to offer it; there are a host of websites telling you how to achieve this transcendental state of being. Believe it or not, there are even support groups which help you "log off." Over time, I have realised I am simply not that cool.

I often find that I live better in the moment when I have my phone with me. It ensures that I know everything is sorted at work and Mum knows I am safe, thus letting me relax and just be. This in no way means I am glued to my phone. It means I have the choice to check in and then tune out. That choice, for me, is everything.

Recently, I travelled with a friend to Hampi, a boulder-strewn town with limited connectivity, in Karnataka. It was an impromptu trip, which meant that thoughts of work flooded my mind. However, with no network, there was nothing I could do other than fret. When we found a spot which offered us precious little network, the first

call I made was to my colleague. I just needed to know if everything was okay.

The idea of mobile networks is linked to safety, especially for women travellers. For a woman to feel safe on a journey, being connected is important. It is fun to venture into the unknown, but the unknown often requires constant vigilance. We had a great time in Hampi, driving a rickety Activia through deserted roads lined with ruins and coconut trees. Both of us, however, were also trying to commit the roads to memory, distinguishing each lane from the other using the shape of rocks on it, or the number of coconut trees at a crossing. We were two women driving on mostly empty roads, without maps, signboards

I LIVE BETTER IN THE MOMENT WHEN I HAVE MY PHONE

or connectivity, on a vehicle with faulty breaks. What would we do if something went wrong? As romantic as being disconnected sounds, moments like these are when I would prefer otherwise.

Hampi stands out due to its sheer magnificence—millennia-old ruins and boulders fight for attention, coracle rides are a way of life, and the silence, profound. Despite conversation which never stalled, there were moments when the both of us would reach out to our phones to call a mutual friend or to open Facebook to show a link we had thought of showing to the other. Gossip after all is incomplete without pictures. Sure the bigger stays offered Wi-Fi, ours however did not; we could hardly

go hunting for Wi-Fi after dark. We valued our safety higher than any evidence.

A report on StatCounter says 79 per cent of Indians with access to Internet use their phones to connect to it, much higher than the world average of 49.7 per cent. Not surprising when the country has reportedly the world's second-largest smartphone user base. Another poll done by Ipsos finds that 82 per cent of Indians agreed with the statement, "I cannot live without the Internet", once again much higher than the global average of 69 per cent. This, despite having the slowest Internet speed in the Asia Pacific, as per a report by Akamai Technologies. Competitive mobile data rates and cheap 4G handsets are flooding the market, making India today more connected than ever. In this digital India, why are tourist spots like Hampi ignored?

The Indian government's website claims that over 50,000 villages without network will be connected by 2018. The idea that the next time I would visit Hampi, it would be connected will ease my mother's mind. She, who is okay with most of my gallivanting, reached her limit with this one. "You're never going to a place which does not have network again," she decreed.

I am yet to acquiesce. ■



LUBNA AMIR

travels in search of happy places (which invariably involve a beach) and good food. She works as Junior Assistant Editor at *NGT India* and is always planning her next big escape.

THE ITINERARY

28

**WHEN VINCENT PAINTED
THE TOWN RED**

Trailing van Gogh in the historic French city of Arles



BARRY LEWIS/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE

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CHASING BENDS IN BRAHMAGIRI

STREAMS GLEAM WITH CRYSTAL-CLEAR WATERS AND DENSE GROVES CLING TO HILLS LIKE GREEN BEARDS IN THIS MOUNTAIN RANGE NESTLED BETWEEN KARNATAKA AND KERALA BY ZAC O'YEAH

breathe without my tongue getting that dusty-crusty coating and if I clench my teeth, which I frequently must while pulling myself up the steep hillside, there's no grit between them. I'm in the Brahmagiri Mountains, a mere 270-kilometre drive from Bengaluru, but far enough so that no pollution can reach it.

Over two days in the hills, the only filth I see is the cap from a Bisleri bottle that some previous trekker chucked on the pristine green ground. But thankfully, most other trekkers follow the diktat issued by the Forest Department: the Brahmagiri range is a no-garbage zone. And it shows. A few kilometres back we crossed a stream with water so crystal clear, cool and pure that we drank it straight. From there, the trail wound its way through shola forests watered by several more streams, the dense groves clinging to the hills like green beards.

They are apparently something of a hot spot among the world's ecosystems and rife with medicinal plants, which explains why Kerala, abutting Brahmagiri peak, is where Ayurveda first took root. Approximately 2,015 of the flowering species are endemic, or native to this limited geographical area. When I breathe deeply, I sniff

something pungent which I presume to be the scent of wholesome Ayurvedic herbs, until the forest guards quip that it is the reek of wild tuskers lurking outside our vision range, waiting for us to pass by so that they can come out and frolic.

Other than their cannonball-sized poop balls, I spot pug marks of giant tigers, and one of my co-climbers steps on a baby snake by mistake. The white bands on its black body identify it as the venomous common krait, though both trekker and snake survive with a scare. There are also jackals, leopards, sloth bears, wild boars and all the monkeys, birds and butterflies one can wish for. But it appears to be an unwritten law that animals, plants and humans respect one another: the wilder ones allow us free passage as long as we don't trouble them.

High on the spur of a hill, I spot a deer perfectly outlined against the horizon

Over two days, the only filth I see is the cap from a Bisleri bottle that some trekker had chucked on the pristine green ground

and the blue sky, gazing down at us who struggle across the semi-alpine meadow.

Our group of mostly novice climbers started out the previous day at Kodagu's Iruppu Falls, 50 kilometres south of Virajpet, a nondescript town on the Mysore-Kannur highway. From the falls it is a steep uphill trek for five kilometres along a jungle track. We haul up provisions—juicy vegetables like cucumbers, gallons of buttermilk, cooking oil, sacks of rice—each of us carrying upwards of 10 kilos or enough for two lunches, one dinner and one breakfast. I had no idea we humans consume that much. Note to self: A bag of porridge ingredients that can be boiled in fresh mountain water would be the best next time.

A quaint British-era forest inspection bungalow is our overnight halt. There are cots inside for the ladies but the gentlemen sleep on the porch. The bungalow is surrounded by solar-powered electric fences to keep wildlife out, but even so one wall has been rammed by a pachyderm—the spot still visible as a quadrangle of repair work. Next morning my trekking mates complain that I slept restlessly. They should count themselves lucky that my thunderous snoring kept prowling jumbos at bay.



A small peak near the ominously named Tiger Hill affords stunning sunset views.

ZAC O'YEAH



A horned animal skull (left) outside the 100-year-old forest inspection bungalow is a popular selfie spot; The Iruppu Falls (right) is a sought-after tourist destination and a sacred spot due to its association with the Ramayana and Lakshmana; The Brahmagiri Wildlife Sanctuary is a garbage-free area and activities, including loud noise, that may disturb its wildlife are frowned upon (bottom).

We get up at the break of dawn for the ultimate ascent. It is a 7-8 kilometre hike, the last portion of which is extremely steep until... finally! We reach the 5,275-foot-high peak of Brahmagiri. I swoon in a sweaty but happy heap. Though not for too long: the views are so stunning that I want to spend as much time as possible gawking at Kerala's greenery deep below.

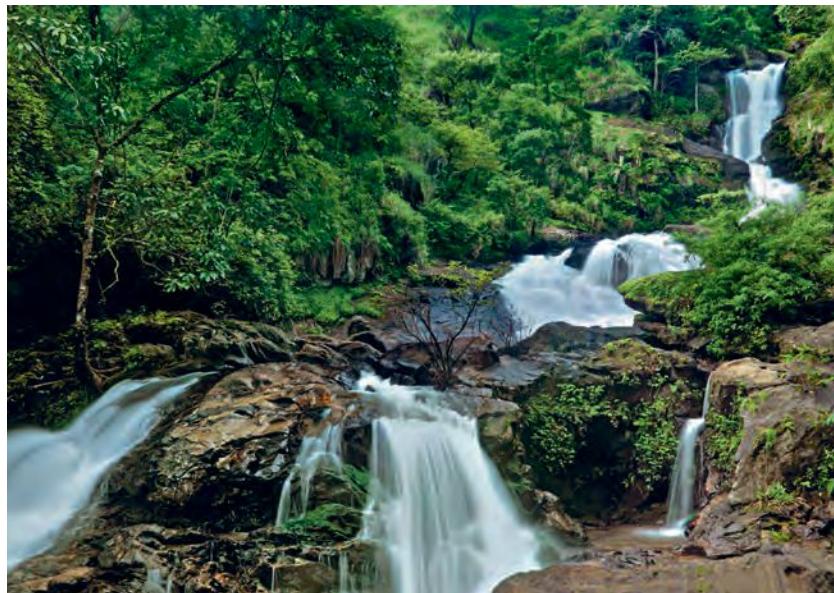
A temple is visible in the distance. It is rather heartening that this hill is blessed by Brahma from a Kerala point of view, while from the Karnataka side we started climbing from a point hallowed by the fact that Lakshmana once visited it.

Other trekkers display more practical mindsets and take quick naps since we have been given a 30-minute break before the descent, which must be completed before the elephants come out to drink at the streams we borrow water from.

A few are deeply engaged in the noble art of taking selfies and have come equipped with the latest selfie sticks. They do their best to get as close to the edge as possible. According to a recent newspaper report, India leads the world statistics when it comes to so-called 'killfies': 60 per cent of all cases globally resulting in the death of the photographer, typically by falling down a hill or waterfall, involve an Indian.

A perhaps bigger danger for me is making my way safely downhill. There's a sheer vertigo-inducing drop before my nose. The gradient is something like 45 degrees—leaning forward a wee bit too much can result in a toppling over which, if a domino effect is created, may affect all the other climbers ahead of me. Secondly, the earth is soft and crumbly, and often yields underfoot.

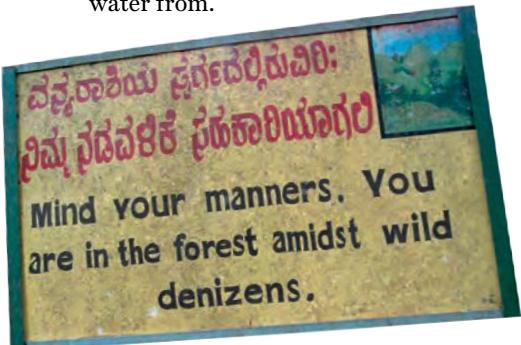
But get down I do. No busted kneecaps. My backbone is lightly bruised and ahead is a gentler 13-kilometre descent. I tumble a few times and cut my knee, some of the others slide down slopes where the dry leaves give way, but everybody makes it home without broken bones. At last, we exit the jungle and gazing back towards the top it feels amazing that we conquered it. As soon as my bruises and insect bites heal, and muscles stop aching, I'm going to sign up for the next available trek. ■



ESSENTIALS

The 27-kilometre trek to Brahmagiri peak begins from Iruppu Falls from the Karnataka side. The hills can also be reached from Kerala. Avoid trekking in the monsoon, though. November to April is the best time, and do hire a guide. A few canteens sell water, hats and snacks at Iruppu Falls, and the surrounding area has a couple of homestay options. Carry a hat, an umbrella and sunscreen lotion. Do pack in drinking water and energising snacks.

Other important trekking destinations in Kodagu include the Talacauvery Wildlife Sanctuary, the Pushpagiri Wildlife Sanctuary, the Kottabettta cliff (near Somwarpet) and of course Kodagu's highest peak, Thadiyandamol. Permissions for most routes must be obtained from the Forest Department in Madikeri, but the Brahmagiri permit can also be taken from the Range Forest Officer (RFO) at Srimangala. Lots of trekking agencies based in the district help make arrangements. Half-day treks start at around ₹500.



ON THE WAR PATH

HONG KONG TRIED HARD TO DEFEND ITSELF DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR. ITS BUILDINGS AND CEMETERIES STILL TELL THAT BRAVE STORY OF RESISTANCE BY BHAVYA DORE

A red-and-blue toy gun in his hand, five-year-old Giovanni Ng races around the small shelf in the hillside, pointing his weapon at the doors ahead. This is Station 10, where barely discernible storage rooms have been shaped into the rock face, some sort of defensive point maintained during the Japanese seizure of Hong Kong during World War II.

"I kill the bad guys," says Giovanni, to no one in particular as he darts through the wooded space. In this particular place, the bad guys have been the Japanese, whose attack on December 8, 1941, through the verdant hills began shortly after the Pearl Harbour bombing. British, Canadian and Indian troops rallied until the city fell on Christmas Day, following 18 days of fighting against a vastly superior force.

"It was a hard time," says John Ng, the boy's father. "I have brought my son here to show him the history. We love Japanese culture but it is important to know both the good and the bad things." This is one of the stops on the Wong Nai Chung Gap Trail that traces key points through ammunition depots, bunkers and firing positions in the Battle of Hong Kong, a battle that saw around 6,000 casualties on both sides.

Second World War history is writ deep in the woods and hills that girdle the heart of the bustling megapolis. Vertiginous towers and busy commercial complexes might be the best established leitmotifs of the city, but long before it became one of Asia's economic tigers, Hong Kong was simply a British

colonial town trying to hold out against a rampaging enemy.

"Today there is virtually no evidence in Hong Kong of the Second World War," writes David Campion in an essay titled "The Colonial Past in Hong Kong's Present". "... It is a truism of Hong Kong that the old is constantly being torn down to make room for the new, and thus it may be easy to forget what happened during the war."

According to a 2015 report in the *South China Morning Post*, the city's flagship English daily, 53 military sites, buildings or structures here are considered historic, and of these 45 are connected to the Second World War. Not all are well preserved, says military historian Chi Man Kwong, who teaches history at Hong Kong Baptist University, but they need to be.

"To me, the most important reason for the preservation of these structures is that they encapsulated a crucial part of modern history: namely the history of the British Empire as well as the history of the rapid technological changes from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century," he says. "Hong Kong is a curious place where you can find military structures built from the Victorian period to the Cold War. Together all these historical sites can be seen as one coherent group of historical structures reflecting that very turbulent age."

A fortnight after the release of *Dunkirk*, one of the year's finest films, it seems especially fitting to comb through Hong Kong's role in the Second World War.



A member of the Canadian Armed Forces places a poppy over the Altar of Remembrance, in Hong Kong's Sai Wan War Cemetery, honouring those who died during World War II.



Wong Nai Chung Gap trail



Sai Wan War Cemetery



Stanley Military Cemetery

Hong Kong University



WONG NAI CHUNG GAP TRAIL

There are 10 stops on this hiking route and they can be visited on foot or by driving around. This trail really is the heart to understanding the impact of the war, with information points at each location in English and Chinese. For instance, Station 1 formed the entrance to the anti-aircraft battery while gun positions were located at Station 2 to defend the valley below. The hills are littered with “pill boxes” or concrete posts from which to fire ammunition. Near Station 10, the final stop, is a small memorial erected in honour of 58 medical staff of the St John’s Ambulance brigade who lost their lives.

SAI WAN WAR CEMETERY

On a sloping hillside that has several cemeteries, the Sai Wan War Cemetery is the main resting place for those who died defending Hong Kong or as prisoners of war. It contains 1,505 Second World War graves, including of 104 Indians, who formed the third-largest contingent. Before the cemetery unfolds downhill, the entrance hosts a memorial with names of more than 2,000 soldiers who died during the war but who have no known grave, including 287 from the Indian army. Hindus and Sikhs, who fought for Hong Kong and were cremated, have a separate panel cataloguing their names. The Indian soldiers’ graves are at the very end and some stand out with Urdu and Devanagiri engravings on their head stones. Some simply state in English, “A soldier of the Indian Army is honoured here.” The Indians buried here had served in the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps, the Rajput Regiment and the Hong Kong Singapore Royal Artillery.

STANLEY MILITARY CEMETERY

The Stanley Military Cemetery and Hong Kong War Memorial is a ground maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. This is much smaller than Sai Wan and was originally set up in the mid-19th century after the British took the city; it features graves from the previous century as also of three soldiers who died in the First World War. It was reopened in the 1940s and contains 598 graves of Second World War servicemen, including those of five Indians.

HONG KONG UNIVERSITY

Hong Kong University now comprises a warren of variously shaped buildings scattered on a slope, but its centrepiece is a baroque-style building that was completed in 1912. Inside, the main foyer contains a bust of a prominent Parsi businessman, H.N. Mody, who helped the university get off the ground. But when the war hit home in December 1941, this building served as a temporary hospital. It was significantly damaged during those years, its wooden ceiling ripped up and used as fuel. Classes resumed in October 1946.

THE PEAK

The top is reachable by tram—which still curves ominously as it winds its way up. The building that now houses the restaurant was used as a guard post by the Japanese during the occupation. The Peak area itself was a posh residential enclave for the British shortly after the war. Nowhere is life on the peak more charmingly captured than through the eight-year-old eyes of Martin Booth’s narrator in *Gweilo*, his memoir of the immediate post-war years. ■

WHEN VINCENT PAINTED THE TOWN RED

TRAILING VAN GOGH IN THE HISTORIC FRENCH CITY OF ARLES BY DEBASHREE MAJUMDAR



One of the paintings from the "Sunflowers" series, which is considered a hallmark of his genius, sold for a record \$39 million in 1987. To van Gogh, sunflowers embodied one of his most personal works and represented gratitude and hope in despairing times. He called them his "own."

If you weren't seeking it, you'd probably miss it. That's how unassumingly Arles sits on the Provençal tourist map. But if you do set out to explore this sleepy French city, you'll see why it once dazzled Vincent van Gogh. The hotbed of Camarguais culture cradling river Rhône, Arles holds within its ageing walls Roman ruins and leafy squares. Its pastel-hued stone dwellings have, in particular, found immortality in van Gogh's works. The Dutch artist lived here for a few months in the 1880s and produced about 200 paintings, 100 drawings and nearly as many letters.

Despite being the wellspring to many van Gogh classics, strangely enough Arles doesn't own any of them. The

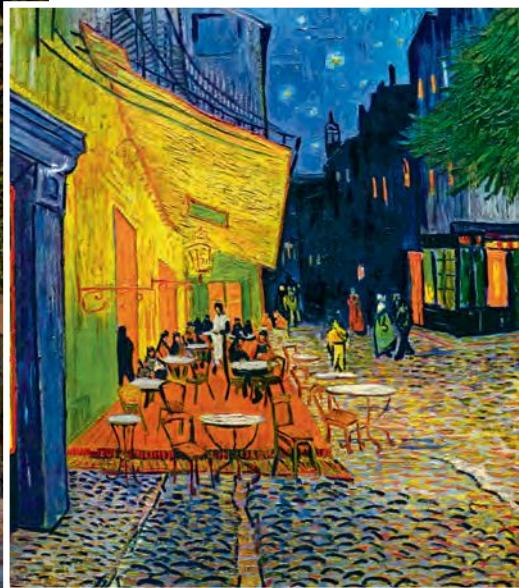
Fondation Vincent van Gogh Arles gallery, however, regularly displays works on loan from Amsterdam. But for those whose hearts lie in the swathes of open fields and fresh air, ditch the gallery tour and trace van Gogh's footsteps instead, taking in the rush of colours and the bountiful landscape that once inspired the post-impressionist artist. From his home, "The Yellow House", which was destroyed in World War II to spots from whose vantage points he unleashed those masterly strokes, guided tours here hold up Arles through van Gogh's looking glass. The trail—dotted with concrete easels displaying photos of his paintings juxtaposed against the

same backdrops as in the artworks—makes for delightful then-and-now comparisons.

Following the tip-off one fine April morning, battling the violent Provençal mistral, my husband and I set out on an exploration of the present day forms of van Gogh's historic muses. Here's a look at five of his iconic paintings committed to canvas centuries ago, and how the passage of time has transformed these scenes in today's Arles.

STARRY NIGHT OVER THE RHÔNE

Van Gogh moved to Arles in February 1888. After the flatlands and the grey windblown surfaces of his native Holland, he found the profusion of



Van Gogh was a regular at Café Terrace at Night (now Café Van Gogh) along with his friend Gauguin and was known among the locals as the red-haired foreigner.

colours and the splendid yellow sun of rural France captivating. He fell into a frenzied spell churning out masterpieces every other day during his 15 months in Arles, a period considered as the most significant phase in his career. The "Sunflowers" series and "The Yellow House" are some of his major works to come out of the time spent in Arles. But it is the "Starry Night over the Rhône" that remains one of his most widely recognised works. In those days he became the first to paint after sunset. The eccentric artist is said to have mastered the art of balancing candles on his broad-brimmed straw hat to paint after nightfall. Currently, the river wall, against which van Gogh had once rested his easel to produce marvellous results, stands holding its own against the tumultuous Rhône.

CAFÉ TERRACE AT NIGHT

Despite the magical landscape of Arles, van Gogh often found its people strange. Lonely from little interaction, he invited his friend and artist, Paul Gauguin, to come and live with him. He had plans of running an artists' commune along with Gauguin where both of them would mentor young artists. That plan never materialised. It was during this period when the two pals would paint side by side through the mornings and hit the bars and brothels at night that he painted "Café Terrace at Night", a painting of a café's al fresco section in Arles's Place du Forum. Today the

café, predictably known as Café Van Gogh, has transformed into a buzzing tourist hotspot.

ENTRANCE TO THE PUBLIC GARDEN IN ARLES

Smitten by the Provençal setting, in a letter to his brother, Theo, van Gogh wrote "this country seems to me as beautiful as Japan as far as the limpidity of the atmosphere and the gay color effects are concerned. Water forms patches of a beautiful emerald or a rich blue in the landscape, just as we see it in the crépons (a type of Japanese woodblock print)". No wonder then in his works in Arles he brought out the swirling blues, rich greens, pale oranges, and blooming orchards. This colour palette is most resplendent in "Entrance to the Public Garden in Arles", a painting that depicts the commonplace, everyday life of Arseliennes in Jardin d'été, a mid-sized park in Boulevard des Lices. A stroll down this park today reveals how little it has changed. A perfect refuge on a hot summer day, the vibe and vistas here still evoke the imagery of the thick canopy of flowering trees and the surrounding luminosity van Gogh had once perfectly captured on canvas.

THE OLD MILL

In another letter to Theo, van Gogh mentions working on the "The Old Mill". He talks about painting it in "broken tones". The finished canvas is said to have been sent for an exchange with

the works of his contemporaries Paul Gauguin, Émile Bernard and Charles Laval to the Pont-Aven School. On Old Mill's trail, hiking up to Rue Mireille, we were thrilled when we finally hunted it down. Non-functional and greatly altered, the mill stands under a rail bridge. The thatched roof has been replaced with tin and the surrounding grassland now serves as a parking lot.

GARDEN OF THE HOSPITAL

Van Gogh painted the view of the garden from his hospital ward as he lay recovering after a violent episode in which he cut off an earlobe. It is said that while he sat drinking absinthe with Gauguin at the café in Place du Forum just before Christmas in 1888, he hurled a glass at Gauguin, who luckily ducked and escaped. A few days later he accosted Gauguin again, threatening him with a razor. Gauguin fled the scene. The following morning a nearly dead van Gogh was discovered in bed, his head wrapped in a bloodied towel. After this meltdown and while still in hospital, in the spring of 1889, he looked out at the lush, flowering garden and made it throb with life putting reed pen, brush and ink to canvas. The hospital on Place du Docteur Félix-Rey is no longer functional. Renamed L'espace Van Gogh, it's now a cultural centre that sells van Gogh memorabilia and souvenirs. A somewhat diminished space, its courtyard flourishes with much tending and the insistent glare of the Provençal sun. ■

BIRDS OF A WEATHER

FLOCKS OF INDIGENOUS AND MIGRATORY BIRDS THRIVE IN AND AROUND THE BANNI GRASSLANDS OF KUTCH EVERY WINTER **TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANJUMAN DEODHAR**



A flock of greater flamingoes make for a striking picture at the Little Rann of Kutch.

You're going birding where?!" a well-meaning friend asked, incredulously. A regular visitor to Kutch on account of his textiles business, he seemed concerned about the state of my mental health. "There's nothing there, buddy. It's all arid land. Hardly any trees even!" he said. I smiled patiently. I was aware of the reputation Kutch had. And to be fair to him, it *is* arid. But he was wrong about the birds. Kutch lies on the migration route of many birds flying south for winter, including the stately common cranes that arrive here by the thousands. And they're just one of hundreds of different species that follow suit.

LEAVES OF GRASS

At the heart of the Kutch birding experience is Banni, possibly the largest natural grassland on the Indian subcontinent. It is about 85 kilometres northwest of Bhuj and spread over about 3,000 square kilometres and hosts an

incredible population of birds, reptiles, and mammals. Come monsoon, large swathes of land are inundated by saline water, which, although shallow, has been instrumental in influencing the flora and fauna of this region.

Human activities in the last few decades have also had a great impact on this ecosystem. These include damming of rivers that help drain the ingress of salt water, salt farming in pans, rampant livestock grazing, and the introduction of the notorious *gando baval* (mad babool). In the 1960s, the Gujarat government introduced this plant across 300 square kilometres of the region to minimise the impact of salt water ingress. Today, it covers more than 1,500 square kilometres of Banni, having displaced many indigenous grass species and reduced the groundwater levels.

Jugal Tiwari, who has accompanied me to Banni, is the founder of wildlife conservation organisation, Centre for Desert & Ocean. He ruefully looks over

the grassland as he narrates a tale of a family of desert cats that had made their home in a small mound of rock. Evicted by constant human movement and plumes of smoke billowing out of the makeshift charcoal manufacturing mounds, Jugal only hopes they managed to relocate successfully. He says they were one of the many species that got displaced by this activity. But it isn't all bad news. In 2009, the forest department prepared a working plan to restore the grassland, 54 years after it was declared a protected forest. Another heartening fact is that the ecosystem of Banni is no pushover. Locals narrate stories of times when this used to be a lush landscape in the early 19th century, when the Indus flowed through. It is said to have changed course after the 1819 Kutch quake, turning the Banni arid. However, soon a whole new ecosystem evolved and the most significant was the growth of halophytes, plants that thrive in saline waters. These plants are the



Comb duck



Common crane



Reef egret



Shikra

reason why the cranes make a beeline for this place. And voyeurs like me, follow.

WING-SIDE VIEW

We have arrived in the end of October, and Banni is still drying out. So we have to make our own tracks through the Chhari-Dhand Wetland Conservation Reserve—an area of the Banni which lies in a slight depression, and retains moisture the longest. As winter progresses, tyre tracks get more pronounced and are easier to follow. For now, I'm depending entirely on Jugal Tiwari. Fortunately, his knowledge of the area is stupendous but even he can't tell where exactly the short-eared owls would be resting during the day. There's a bunch of these migratory birds whose camouflage is working exceedingly well, and we almost plough right through them. Jugal swerves madly at the last second and they take off in a cloud of feathers, accompanied by some disgruntled screeches. I rue the missed opportunity for a shot, but Jugal is quite confident we'll get to see more. And he's right. That's the thing about Kutch; you don't see just one or two individuals of a particular species. If you spot one, you'll probably see plenty more. Except for the great Indian bustard; we see just two of them, but considering that they are critically endangered with less than 300 of them left in the wild, I consider myself extremely lucky.

We set off in the opposite direction the next morning. Barely 20 minutes out, we see a desert hedgehog lying still by the

side of the road. We approach cautiously, and as suspected, it's a roadkill. I move it away from the road and we continue.

Soon we're exploring the toothbrush tree forest in search of the grey hypocolius. Banni is one of the few habitats in India where this species is regularly seen, making the adjoining village of Fulay a favourite haunt for birders. We don't spot one—Jugal had mentioned it was early in the season to spot this visiting avian—but at least now the hedgehog is off my mind. We ramble through the brambles of a tropical thorn forest in search of the white-naped tit, another bird of particular interest to me. Endemic to India, it is only observed in two isolated populations, with rare sightings outside of Kutch. So I am pleased that we get to see it.

What blows my mind however, is the raptor paradise that is Naliya grasslands. Five species of buzzards, seven of eagles, shikras, kestrels, falcons and harriers: this place is like their private playground. Jugal has timed our visit well. It is early evening, and there's a flurry of activity. Dusk comes quickly, though, and we make our way back.

DESERT RUN

The crab plovers look more perplexed than perturbed. Shifting uneasily on knobby knees as if they've been afflicted by a bad case of gout, they seem to wonder what I'm doing on the wrong side of their sand bar. But the beach here slopes gently into the ocean and even 50 feet out, the water's just knee-deep.

I've waded in beyond their safe perch to a vantage point looking back at the shore. On the edges of the Gulf of Kutch, there's a whole set of avian species sporting unusual beaks. The pied avocets have short ones curving upwards at the tip, Eurasian curlews have ones so long that their sole purpose seems to be bragging rights, the plovers have thick, powerful ones that can crack open crab shells, and the great thick-knee that should have been named great thick bill, instead. There's a large congregation of smaller Kentish plovers scurrying about in the sand, a western reef egret squawking like it's got a fish bone stuck in its throat, and a multitude of other waders going about their business with single-minded determination. I make sure I tread lightly. As I'm jotting their names down in my field diary, I notice the list has crossed the magical three-figure mark, and my thoughts turn to my disbelieving friend. I wonder what he'll have to say about all this.

Later, as I tour other parts of the Kutch, I miss Banni and being around someone as passionate about the land as Jugal Tiwari. The pangs of separation settle in and it will be a while before I can overcome the feeling. ■

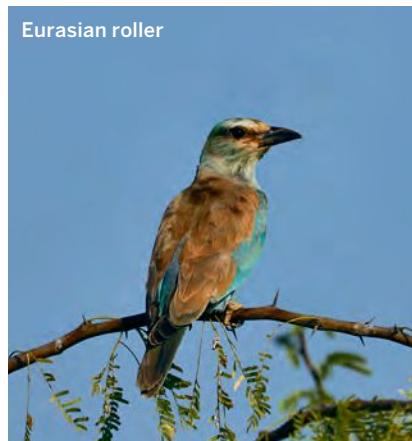
ESSENTIALS Banni is about 450 km/7.5 hr west of Ahmedabad and about 85 km/ 2 hr northwest of Bhuj. Centre for Desert and Ocean has a homestay and organises guided safaris (cedobirding.com; doubles ₹4,500; half-day safaris ₹3,500 for 4 people).



Painted stork



Wasp nest



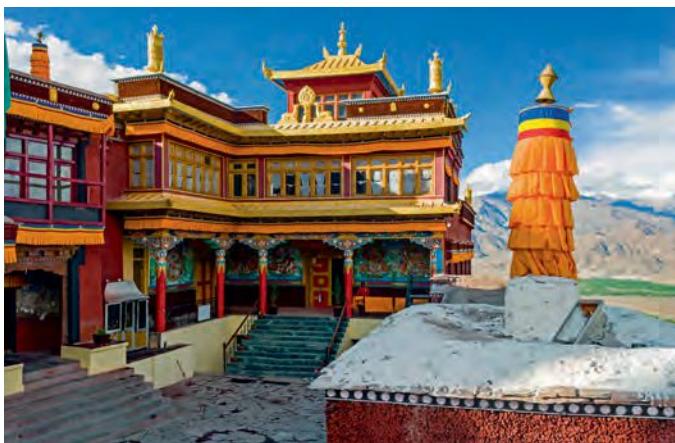
Eurasian roller



Red-necked falcon

THE SECOND COMING OF BUDDHIST ART

LEH'S MATHO MONASTERY RESTORES CENTURIES-OLD THANGKA PAINTINGS TO THEIR PAST GLORY
BY PRACHI JOSHI



Colourful murals (top left) depicting the teachings of the Buddha enliven the walls of Matho Monastery; French restorer Nelly Rieuf (right) trains locals to restore *thangkas* and other artefacts as part of the Matho Monastery Museum project; The monastery's inner courtyard (bottom left) offers stunning views of the Indus Valley and the Ladakh Range.

They and Angmo bend their heads over a 2x1-foot piece of silk cloth adorned with a painting. With skilled hands, they use brushes to bring to life its vibrant blues, greens, and reds. The cloth's border is aged yellow and the painting they are restoring is nothing short of a historical treasure—a 17th-century *thangka* with a centrepiece of a lama imparting his teachings, while the Buddha smiles down on him benevolently.

I'm at the 15th-century Matho Monastery near Leh, lodged high up in the Stok range of the Himalayas, overlooking the Indus River. The monastery was founded in 1410 and

belongs to the Sakya sect of Tibetan Buddhism. It's a sunny summer afternoon in early July but the monastery is quiet; unlike the popular Thiksey Monastery located almost directly opposite across the Indus valley, Matho Monastery is off the tourist trail in Ladakh. But the three-storey Matho Monastery Museum (MaMoMu) in its compound, slated to open in the summer of 2018, could change that.

After touring the monastery, I climb a steep flight of stairs to a large workshop where I meet Nelly Rieuf, the manager of MaMoMu project. Rieuf studied engineering in France but then

shifted to art restoration, training under her aunt who was a *thangka* restorer. She worked in Nepal and surrounding regions for a few years and graduated from the Sorbonne in 2010 with a degree in art restoration and art history. She has been leading the MaMoMu project since 2011, working in coordination with the monastery, the National Museum Institute, foreign NGOs and donors, and volunteers from Matho village. The monastery has a large assortment of ancient artefacts, from bronze statues, Tibetan dance masks, and ritual objects to text scrolls and silks. But the jewel in the crown is its collection of *thangka* paintings,

The 15th-century Matho Monastery is perched on a hilltop overlooking the village of Matho at the mouth of a deep gorge in the Zanskar Range.



the largest such collection in the world. Many of the thangkas go back to the 14th century and the monastery also owns four precious 12th-century works, which were discovered only three years ago near Matho village.

The late afternoon sun streaming in through large windows bathes the workshop in a soft light. Four local women are hard at work on different thangkas. "Before we start the restoration, we document the thangka, because if ever you mess up you have something to reconstruct from. We begin by cleaning the painting either with special erasers or chemicals. The fabric is often torn so we glue the threads together, or if a portion is missing, we make a piece of the exact same shape and paste it. Finally, we apply a primer of clay mixed with glue and then add in the paint," explains Rieuf. She imports paints from countries such as China, Japan, and Germany, much like the times when these thangkas were originally created using Chinese paints and glue from Afghanistan.

We walk over to the table where Ishey and Angmo, both volunteers from Matho village, have mixed paint

on palettes and are brightening up the colours on the thangka. Rieuf thinks the paint is too thin: "I want to see thick paint, like lipstick", she says to the women, who titter. The museum project has been a slow, painstaking process over the past seven years, and Rieuf has trained more than 20 local women in thangka restoration. "It takes me two weeks to a month to restore a thangka; for the girls it's anywhere between three-six months. But you cannot hurry when you take care of culture otherwise you miss out on things," muses Rieuf.

Many of the restored thangkas and other artefacts will be on display at MaMoMu. The museum is under construction, but I get a chance to peep inside. It's designed like a Ladakhi house with three storeys built using traditional methods and materials like mud bricks and poplar wood, with intricately carved beams and window panes. Each floor will have a separate theme—from the origin of different styles of art in Ladakh, to an iconographic guide to the various Buddhist deities, and finally, an insight into monastic life. The museum's rooftop will have

a library and a small café, and one of the best views in the world.

I pick my way carefully through the bricks and beams and come out on to the terrace. The valley is spread below me like a patchwork quilt of green and brown. The Indus flows in a roaring stream through it, and all around me are the snow-capped peaks of the Ladakh and Stok Ranges. I'm already making plans to return when the museum opens—a museum on the roof of the world built to protect the history and culture of the people of Ladakh. ■

ESSENTIALS

Matho Monastery is 26 km / 45 min southeast of Leh by road. There are direct flights connecting Leh to Mumbai and Delhi. Allow at least 2 hours to visit the monastery and the restoration workshop (mathomuseumproject.com; *monastery open daily; workshop open Mon-Fri 9 a.m.-1 p.m. and 2.30-5 p.m. and on the 2nd and 3rd Saturday of every month; entry free*).

BERLIN BREAKS ANOTHER WALL

MANY WORLDS MEET IN THE HUMBLE CURRYWURST SERVED IN THE GERMAN CAPITAL
BY SHREYA SEN-HANDLEY



Grand old Berlin, Germany's most magnificent city, may have been left reeling from two World War defeats but its spirit remained unbroken. For years afterwards, its inhabitants struggled to free themselves from totalitarian rule by escaping over The Wall, until that came tumbling down and with it the regime that held Berlin in thrall. And with that new dawn came new freedoms, a new ethos and a new and exciting cultural flowering. This is particularly evident as my husband and I walk along the mile of avant garde art and paeans to liberation that is the East Side Gallery, the most colourful and stirring section of what remains of the Berlin Wall. This stretch of the infamous wall that once tore a people apart hasn't just been saved as a reminder of the horror of division, it's been transformed into the funkiest artistic tribute to human resilience and love for our fellow man. If that love is captured beautifully in the mural of Russia's Leonid Brezhnev passionately kissing East Germany's Erich Honecker in a pastiche condemning wars, and in the sunny yellow-and-white affirmation that god is not only a woman but one of colour, then it is also to be found in the kiosks clustered on either end of this span of the wall.

These stalls peddling everything from pieces of the wall to global grub (American apple pie and "Indische" mango ice cream) reinforce the message of this gallery. International amity they seem to say, not war, is the need of the hour. And nothing does that better than the largest, most thronged shack of all at one end of this iconic wall, a stone's throw from the commanding **Oberbaum Bridge**—a *currywurst* stall.

Currywurst is not only Berlin's favourite fusion dish; it is currently its favourite dish, with over 70 million units consumed annually. This curry-powder-sprinkled, hot-sauce-slathered snack, which costs between €3-5/₹230-385, is a contemporary take on the traditional *wurst*, a chunky pork or veal sausage, and the backbone of conventional German cuisine. But the *wurst* is no more than pleasant till this potent powder is added to the mix, blended into its tomato-puree coating or drizzled on top, and then *baazinga*, it becomes quite another culinary party.

Currywurst is more than just added zing to the German diet; in its bringing together of the varied, inclusive present with the best of the classical past, it is a sign of the times. Not surprising then that its history is closely allied to the spot we found ourselves standing in next, having wandered from The Wall with *currywurst* in hand. We'd arrived at Checkpoint Charlie, once one of only two entry points from East to West Germany along the wall. It had been the former's window into the western world, and heavily guarded by Allied soldiers, mostly American ones, as a result. But it was their comrades in arms, the British soldiers, who were responsible for the coming of *currywurst*.

With their vast Indian "holdings," and their love of spices and contraband, the British are believed to have smuggled curry powder into Germany for the first time when they marched in at the end of the war. Its journey into German hearts however took much longer, as it was half a century before they'd warmed to the red-hot powder.

Further evidence of this new, broadminded Berlin is to be found on the way from Charlie to the centre of the city. Artificial beaches have sprung up to make the most of the late summer sun and Berlin's perennial party spirit. At each of these sand-smothered watering holes with their abundance of deck chairs and beer (two of Germany's favourite things, we're told), a brightly bedecked currywurst stand enjoys pride of place. And at **Charlie's Beach** in Schützenstraße 2, the least crowded of these, we try our second sausage of the tour. It has the zing and meatiness of the first but it also has the added oomph of a fruity enhancement to its sauce; raisins, the seller assures me, explaining how the currywurst has become a cosmopolitan catch-all for ingredients from the East. Because Kemal, who owns the kiosk, is a Turk he has introduced something from his own cuisine into it.

We swing by what had sounded like an intriguing pit stop on our currywurst crawl, but The Currywurst Museum, a two-minute walk from Checkpoint Charlie, is dimly lit and dull, charging extortionately (€13.9/₹1,060) for nothing more than a stroll through sausage pictures, and we hurry past. At the triumphal arch of the neoclassical, 18th-century Brandenburg Gate in Pariser Platz, we're struck by the majesty of Berlin's heart. The imposing Reichstag, headquarters to Hitler and his Nazis in their prime, is now the bright, glass-domed home of Germany's Socialist parliament. But it still stands divided from the neighbouring Brandenburg, symbol of military might, by the widest crossroads we've ever seen, in a cautionary tableau. Skittering down side streets, we are brought back to the comfort of the more accommodating present. Here, breaking free of the constraints of classical conventions, the architecture has evolved from sophisticated to the strikingly shambolic. From the riverside shanty-bars to the large utilitarian pipes criss-crossing the city, everything has been daubed in the brightest shades. And psychedelia has blossomed on every conservation-friendly, often-deliberately-lopsided wall. A walk down to Gendarmenmarkt, even grander than the centre of the city with its Grecian opera house and gracious churches, brings us to our next currywurst stall, but it is busier than everything else around, from the sidewalk cafés and impromptu wine-tasting pods, to the fancier restaurants elegantly sitting back.

So it isn't before we hit Hackescher Markt, past the cavernous central train station, that we have another chance to feast on currywurst. Emerging from the gloom of the station, it turns out that we have saved the best for last. Swathes of brightly coloured market stalls selling everything from the juicy spiky rambutan to sticky-sweet pistachio-topped baklava greet us. There are stands full of hats and handicrafts,



The storied, modest snack of currywurst is ubiquitous in Berlin. Restaurants (middle) and street stalls the writer visited (top), and even tourist merchandise (bottom left) feature the dish.

and unsurprisingly, half a dozen hawking currywurst. In a quandary over which one to select, we follow our noses into **Weihenstephaner**, an inviting wood-panelled pub beyond the kiosks, just as it begins to rain for the first time on our sun-drenched trip. And there, in the most traditional place we could have tried currywurst, we discover the most delicious one of them all. Our veal sausages are punchy and tangy from the curry-infused tomato sauce, but also hearty with its crisp accompaniment of fried potatoes. This is fusion street food at its best and though we leave a little bit the worse for so much currywurst, we know we will be back. ■



NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND

THE CZECH CITY OF BRNO HAS A TROVE OF CRYPTS, BONES AND COLD WAR REMNANTS
BY JOANNA LOBO



BONE SEASON

Brno, in the eastern historical region of Moravia, has the second-largest ossuary in Europe, after Paris. Yet as I tour the 330-foot-long repository of bones beneath the **Church of St. James**, I'm underwhelmed, at first. Then, I take a closer look at the walls and the pillars of the main chamber and two side passages. They're made up of the skeletal remains of 50,000 people, tinted yellow due to lack of exposure to sunlight. The skulls stare at me, hollow-eyed.

At the entrance is an exhibit of old photos of the church and cemetery. I refer to a pamphlet and several signs in Czech and English, but the sheer volume of the bones does most of the talking. The crypt was built in the 17th century to accommodate remains from St. James' cemetery and along the passages are tombstones from the original graves. The original crypt's

three sections filled up quickly and had to be expanded for victims of plague, cholera, the Thirty Years' War, and the Swedish siege of Brno. Once full, the ossuary was covered and lay in oblivion for 200 years.

In 2001, it was discovered as part of a land survey. Researchers spent a decade gathering the remains, and cleaning and rearranging them before the ossuary opened to public in 2012.

In the central chamber is a creepy chapel with a tall cross, pulpit and "walls" of bones; in the far corner is a stained glass mural. Two glass coffins contain the skeletons of a grown man and a 13-year-old. There are glass cases and thin railings shielding the bones but they're well within reach and some people around me touch them surreptitiously.

At the end of one

passage is a pyramid of skulls, some of which still have teeth, making it seem like they're grinning. A few modern sculptures provide visual relief. The other relief is tonal: sombre, customised music streams over the speakers.

It takes just 20 minutes to tour, but I'm glad to leave. As I walk out, I murmur the Latin prayer on the marble wall outside: "Eternal rest grant unto them." (*Open Tue-Sun, 9.30 a.m.-6 p.m.; tickets from CZK70/₹205*).

TO THE MARKET

According to a legend that I came across in a book, a countess named Amalia—who murdered 13 lovers and hid their bodies underground—still roams in the tunnels under **Zelnýtrh**, Brno's vegetable market, to ensure that her victims remain hidden. She must



be doing a good job, because I didn't spot any bodies during my one-hour tour there. The Labyrint pod Zelnýtrh (Labyrinth under the Vegetable Market) is about 26 feet, or 200 steps, below Zelnýtrh Square, one of Brno's oldest. Its cellars, discovered in the last decade, were reinforced and connected via passageways in 2009.

The audio-guided tour offers insight into the use of the cellars as storage space for food, wine and beer in the 13th century. I learn that liquor barrels were "refrigerated" by placing them on wooden grates. There are also exhibits showcasing life and practices from that time: An alchemist's lab demonstrates medieval medicine, a wine cellar and tavern are reminders of the local winemaking tradition, and sources of artificial light from the first torches to oil lamps are on display.

The most chilling section is saved for last: replicas of torture devices for criminals. In a corner is the "cage of fools," a low, small iron enclosure. The dimensions of the cage made it impossible to sit let alone stand inside, especially when crowded with prisoners. A few members of the tour group attempt squatting uncomfortably, but give up after a few seconds. (*Open Tue-Sun, 9 a.m.-6 p.m.; tickets from CZK80/₹235.*)

A COLD WAR TIME CAPSULE

The threat of nuclear attack is far from my mind as I enter **10-Z Bunker**. I'm just seeking my room for the night, and a refuge from the cold. A row of thick army field jackets at the entrance confuse me, until I realise that the temperature inside is actually lower. Perhaps I shouldn't have expected so much from a Cold War bomb shelter.

Through dark tunnels, the night guard takes me to my room, which we find after several wrong turns. It looks like it has been untouched since the shelter was completed in 1959. Two steel cupboards hold blankets; a table is strewn with a telephone, used test tubes, bottles and gas masks. The silence is suffocating, broken only by the creaking of the bed as I manoeuvre myself into a sleeping bag. It is difficult to believe I'm just below Špilberk Castle, just off the main road. The next morning, there's no sunlight and the artificial lighting throws eerie shadows illuminating



The WWII air raid shelter underneath Špilberk Castle (top) is now known as 10-Z Bunker; The cellars below Zelnýtrh (bottom) were used to store beer, wine and food in the 13th century.

empty rooms and machines.

The bunker was first built by the Germans during WWII as a civil defence shelter from the American and Soviet bombardment of Brno. After the war, it served as a wine store before being confiscated by Czechoslovakia's Communist regime. The nuclear fallout shelter built in its place was intended to protect 500 of the city's political representatives for up to three days. It opened last year as an 18-room hotel.

During the day the shelter has guided tours, but armed with a map, I set off by myself to explore. There is a diesel generator room, air filtration room, emergency telephone exchange and a decontamination room. Atop ventilators and machinery, tiny televisions screen documentaries about people who built this and took shelter here during WWII, and broadcast local Communist era advertisements. I pass rows of army hats, medicine boxes, gas masks,

an old army motorbike, telephones, typewriters, and in a few places, old sinks and lavatories. The most interesting display is the "cell of death" door, taken from a Brno prison. It is carved by prisoners who were sentenced to death during WWII.

I end my tour at the Milk Bar, lead by Chef Marcel Ihnačák, which serves "Stalinist and wartime specialties," including sundaes and custard cream. It doubles as a hotel common room. On a floral patterned sofa, I listen to the chatter of foreign languages while munching on Russian egg and sweet crépes, and drinking cider and beer.

I leave early the next morning, accompanied by the same night guard. She tells me that in case of nuclear war, entry and lodging here are free. As the gate clangs shut, I hope I never have to return. (*Open daily 11.30 a.m.-6.15 p.m.; tickets for tour from CZK130/₹380; twin room €50/₹3,850.*) ■



NO PUTTING IT PAST INDORE

IN MADHYA PRADESH'S LARGEST CITY, LESSER-KNOWN ARCHITECTURAL GEMS LIE AMIDST BUSTLING LANES OF DELICIOUS FOOD **TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY SARVESH TALREJA**

Indore's biggest draw is its street food. Countless travellers have roamed Sarafa Bazaar and Chappan Dukaan, searching for spicy and steaming carbohydrates. However, the city's gastronomic gifts sometimes overshadow other things Indore has to offer, like its eclectic architecture. Indore's most regal buildings come from its history as a trading post and erstwhile princely state under the Holkars. When feasting on kachoris, pakodas, and dahi vadas in the city's streets, don't miss out on visiting these architectural icons.

LALBAGH PALACE

Nestled in expansive lawns, which once had one of the largest rose gardens in the country, the Lalbagh Palace was completed under the reign



Lalbagh Palace

of Tukoji Rao Holkar III in 1921 after a construction period of 35 years. Once the site of important meetings and gatherings hosted by the Holkars, it now houses a museum. While there is need for maintenance, the stately three-storey structure is still impressive; its European-inspired design is a testament to the architectural sensibility of the era. Thick pillars of Italian marble divide the rooms. In the dining room, a mural of Greek deities dominates the ceiling and a billiards table with thick yet skillfully carved wooden legs, sits in the room next door. Fierce taxidermy tigers inside dusty glass boxes stand in a large hall, once the venue of grand dance parties.

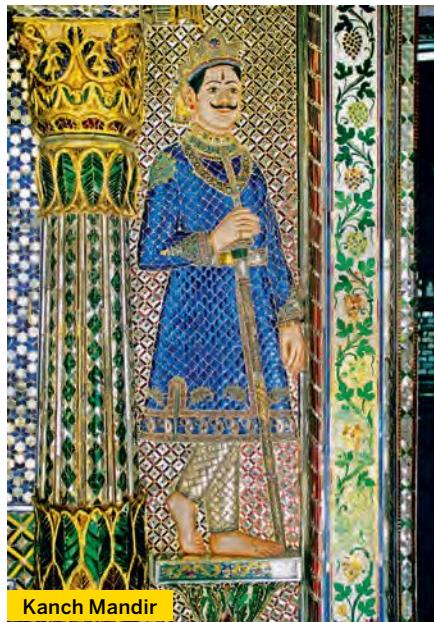
The understated grandeur of Lalbagh Palace, much different from

more ornate buildings makes it stand out. Yet, there is not much that is said about this piece of history tucked away in the midst of Indore's bustle.

RAJWADA

A short walk from the chaotic Sarafa Bazar is the 18th-century Rajwada, also built by the Holkars. The palace has survived three fires, the most recent in 1984, which consumed many of its upper floors. However, the original seven-storey wooden front facade still survives. Heavy wooden doors with iron studs open to a high archway that leads to the inner structure that rises around a central inner courtyard. Arched balconies with *jharokhas* run around a grand hall with gilded pillars, and walking around the hall offers a glimpse of the site's history as a grand palace. Elements of Maratha and Islamic architecture come together in the minimal yet intricate details of the Rajwada.

A breezy weekday afternoon here is bereft of much footfall. However, schoolchildren often visit the first-floor museum for a glimpse of royals' personal artefacts. After a stroll around the busy market and food stalls right outside the rear entrance of Rajwada, visitors often amble in to catch the daily sound-and-light shows. The Rajwada has been painstakingly restored and though it is visited more by tourists than locals, there's a definite place for it among the visual icons of the city.



Kanch Mandir

TOWN HALL

Looking for Town Hall or Gandhi Hall can prove to be a daunting task. The reason is that most locals know this arts and culture venue as "Ghanta Ghar," after its clock tower. Originally known as King Edwards Hall after its completion in 1904, it was renamed Gandhi Hall in 1948. The blocks of Seoni stone that the building is made of give it a reddish-brown colour. The narrow children's park next to the building offers a peek into the airy passageways inside the Town Hall. There is a curious disparity in

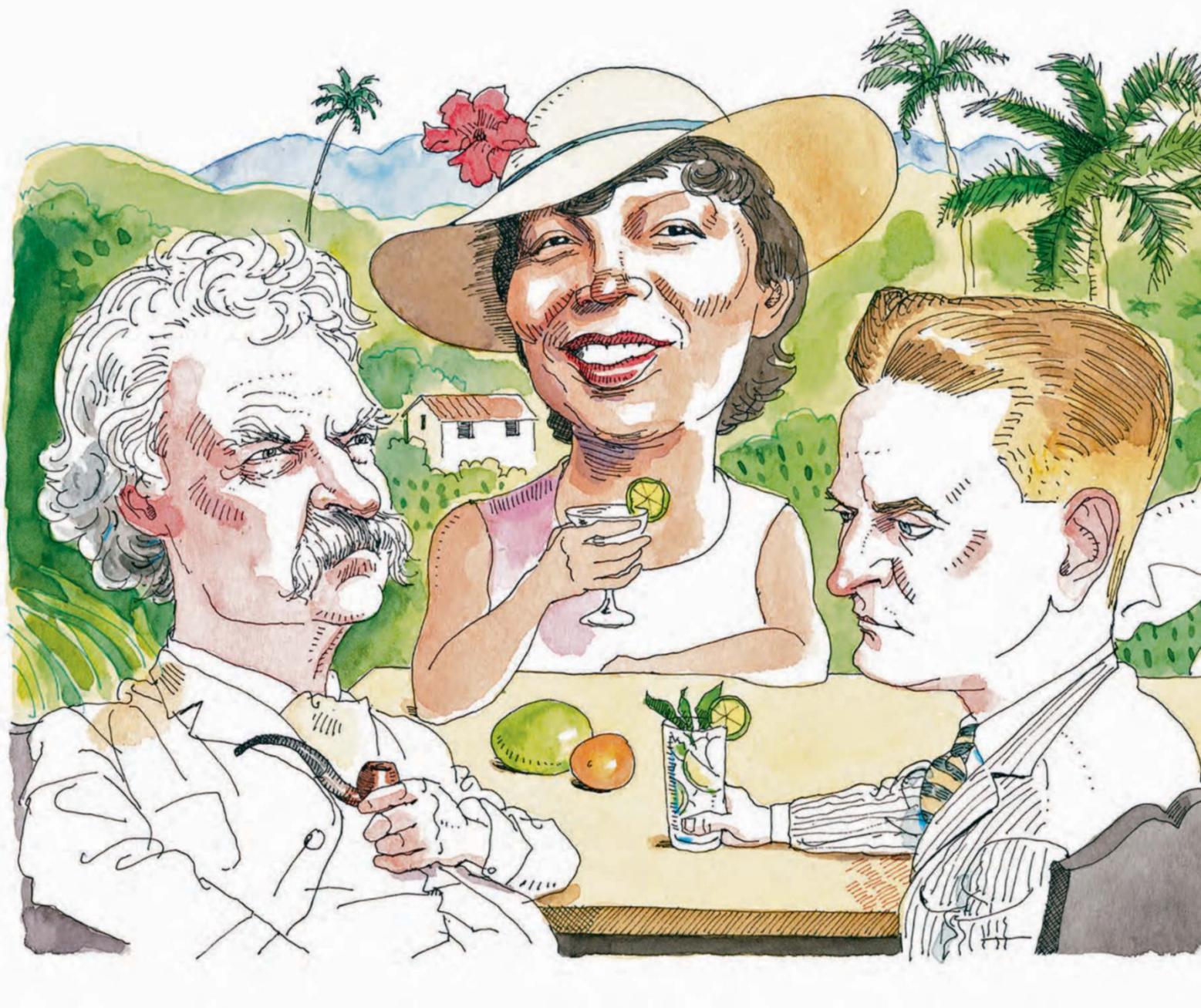
maintenance of the building: while the front facade is nearly perfect, the sides have windows without glass in all panels. However, this building has for years now hosted many a government and private function. While locals prefer to stroll in the park or visit the temple, the painting and book exhibitions and occasional fairs draw the crowds inside.

KANCH MANDIR

Stepping inside the marvellous 20th-century Kanch Mandir could be compared with being enclosed in a crystal bubble. Built by Hukamchand Seth and dedicated to Shantinath Bhagwan, the interiors of the Jain temple have inlaid glass from wall to wall and from ceiling to floor. It is believed that artisans were called in from Iran to help execute the delicate inlay work. The glass canvas is filled with chants, quotes and stories depicted through murals of coloured glass. The slightest movements of reflections on the sunlit glass tiles produce the same effect as broken bangles inside a kaleidoscope.

On Kshamavani or Forgiveness Day, the last day of the Jain festival of Paryushan in August/September, the resident idol is brought out to the street adjoining the temple. A special puja is organised which sees the attendance of a large gathering of devotees. Even on non-festive days, years of tradition unfold in scenes like that of a man who visits once a week with his daughter so they can sing to the idols together. ■





BOOK MARKS THE SPOT

WANT TO VACATION LIKE YOUR FAVOURITE WRITERS?
TAKE A PAGE FROM THEIR TRAVEL ITINERARIES
BY HANNAH SHEINBERG
ILLUSTRATION BY JOE CIARDIELLO

BIG ISLAND, Hawaii, U.S.A.

MARK TWAIN

In his 1872 book, *Roughing It*, Mark Twain wrote that Kilauea volcano, now in **Hawaii Volcanoes National Park**, was "a scene of wild beauty." Twain was on an assignment in the Pacific islands when he stayed at the **Volcano House** in 1866. The 33-room lodge, rebuilt in 1941 after a fire, offers views of Halemaumau Crater (www.hawaiivolcano-house.com).

CARIBBEAN

ZORA NEALE HURSTON

The Florida-based author of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* travelled to **Haiti** in the late 1930s and **Honduras** during the late 1940s for her anthropological field-work. In July 1949, she embarked on a five-month cruise on her friend's boat around the bright blue waters of the **Bahamas**, where she could put her wide-brimmed hat to good use.

CAPRI, Italy

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

The ideal spot to pass the time before the publication of your book? The island of **Capri**. In 1925, Fitzgerald spent two months at **Capri Tiberio Palace**, overlooking the Gulf of Naples. Travellers can still sleep over at this luxurious hideaway and start to plot their own best-selling books (www.capritiberiopalace.it).



PARIS, France

OSCAR WILDE

A former abbey, **Hôtel du Quai Voltaire** hosted the Irish author in early 1883. His stay took place years before he published *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but his digs weren't those of a starving artist; his suite looked out onto the Seine. The hotel's prime location near both the Louvre and Musée d'Orsay makes this a smart spot for Wildean fans (quaivoltaire.fr).

LYME REGIS, England

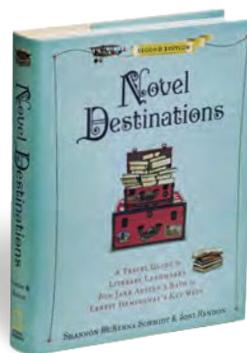
JANE AUSTEN

During the summer of 1804 Austen and her family vacationed in the seaside town of **Lyme Regis, England**. She took strolls along the Cobb, a stone wall around the harbour, and the site became the setting for a scene in her novel *Persuasion*. We recommend stopping at Roly's Fudge Pantry (rolysfudge.co.uk) for a slab of the local sweet treat, clotted cream fudge.

HAVANA, Cuba

ERNEST HEMINGWAY

For a proper Hemingway tour of **Havana**, start with a daiquiri at his former hangout, **El Floridita** (www.floridita-cuba.com), which now features a statue of the author. Sleep off the rum at **Hotel Ambos Mundos**, where he wrote *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in 1939 and lived for seven years. Visitors can see the room he stayed in, number 511 (www.gaviotahotels.com). ■



■ FOR MORE LITERARY-INSPIRED TRIPS, BUY A COPY OF SHANNON MCKENNA SCHMIDT'S *NOVEL DESTINATIONS*.

HOW TO SEE THE WORLD

TRAVEL HACKS FOR SAVING TIME, MONEY, AND SANITY BY KIMBERLEY LOVATO





This whimsical shot of Bolivia's salt flat was created by Dutch artist Scarlett Hooft Graafland. Read on for sweet secrets on iconic places like this.

SCARLETT HOOFT GRAAFLAND



At Damnoen Saduak floating market, in Thailand, it doesn't cost much to sample coconut juice and sweet bananas, then take a canal rowboat tour.



Uluru, in Australia's outback, appears lit from within during sunrise and sunset.

SAVE MONEY

WHETHER YOU'RE A FREQUENT FLYER OR THE ONE-TRIP-A-YEAR TYPE, THESE TIPS DELIVER GREAT VALUE

AUSTRALIA

Uluru

The outback's showstopper, this sandstone monolith sacred to indigenous Australians glows orange and red at sunrise and sunset, but its remote location (462 kilometres from the nearest town) translates to an overnight stay at a pricey hotel. **Ayers Rock Campground**, however, offers six-person cabins with kitchenettes for just \$133/₹8,550 during peak season. Have a tent? Pitch it for \$32/₹2,050 per night (ayersrockresort.com.au).

CALIFORNIA

Napa Valley

Limo and train tours are popular ways to visit the 500+ wineries in the verdant valley, but they'll set you back at least a couple hundred bucks each. If you don't mind a little sweat between sips, pack a picnic backpack, rent a bike for \$45/₹2,900, and hit the recently inaugurated 20-kilometre **Napa Valley Vine Trail** connecting the tasting rooms of downtown Napa to foodie-friendly Yountville (napavalleybiketours.com).

GRANADA, SPAIN

Alhambra

This Moorish palace and fortress built during the Nasrid dynasty (1238-1492) is beyond splendid by day, but skip the time-restricted \$16/₹1,030 night tour and walk through Granada's Arab Quarter to the hilltop plaza **Mirador de San Nicolás**. "I like to grab an ice cream at Helados San Nicolas and watch the sunset over the Alhambra," says Lauren Aloise, owner of Devour Tours. "The view is unbeatable" (devour-granadafoodtours.com).

RATCHABURI, THAILAND

Damnoen Saduak

Floating Market

The network of *klongs* (canals) crisscrossing Bangkok were major commerce routes during the 19th century and are still lined with floating markets. **Damnoen Saduak**, just outside Bangkok, especially lures tourists, but you don't need to get there by expensive motorised boat rental. Roads go straight to the market, where you can browse canal-side stalls, then hop aboard a rowboat tour for much less.

A visit to Myanmar can be chaotic. But to lift your spirits at temple-filled Bagan, float above it all.



UPGRADE YOUR TRIP

IN PLACES WITH SOARING POPULARITY, THESE EXPERIENCES GO THE EXTRA MILE TO RESTORE YOUR SANITY

MYANMAR

Bagan

The capital of the 9th-to-13th-century Burmese kingdom of Pagan was once strewn with more than 10,000 Buddhist temples, pagodas, and stupas. Now roughly 2,200 remain across the vast Bagan Plains. While they can be explored by taxi, by bike, or on foot, nothing compares with the view from a hot-air balloon at dawn, when the grey morning mist clears and streaks of golden sunlight wash over the sacred landscape (balloonsoverbagan.com).

SOUTH PACIFIC

Fiji

The clear turquoise waters and powdery beaches of Fiji's principal island of Viti Levu and the nearby Mamanuca archipelago may understandably draw travellers, but for a deeper understanding of Fiji's natural treasures, visit the garden island of Taveuni. During rainforest hikes, look out for waterfalls, some of the island's 100 bird species, and the *tagimoucia*, the unofficial floral emblem of Fiji (fiji.travel).

OMAN

Rub al Khali

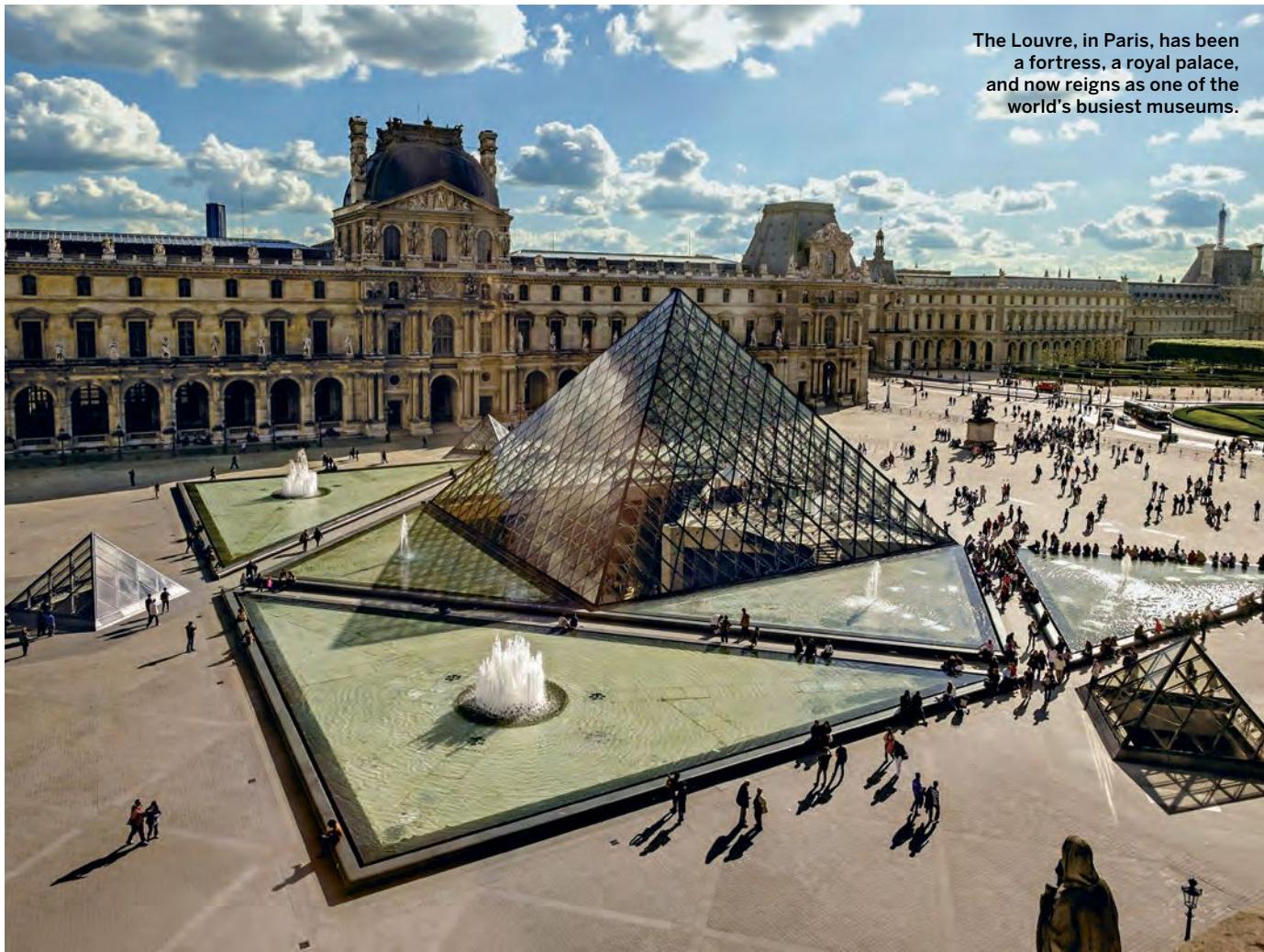
Less than 100 years ago, only the Bedouin experienced the profound silence and wind-sculpted beauty of the world's largest sand desert. Now visitors can discover the so-called Empty Quarter with a camel ride at sunset, an Omani feast under the stars, and a stay in a Bedouin-style tent at Desert Nights Camp (omanhotels.com).

INDONESIA

Bali

With temples and wellness retreats set in jungles and on beaches and mountainsides, Bali earns its title as a top spiritual destination. For a fully immersive experience, visit the sacred springs of Tirta Empul Temple, north of Ubud. Its curative cool waters are delivered via 30 stone waterspouts as you participate with locals in an ancient Balinese ritual of cleansing the spirit (balitourismboard.org).

You'll want to savour every moment you have with the endangered mountain gorillas of Rwanda and Uganda.



The Louvre, in Paris, has been a fortress, a royal palace, and now reigns as one of the world's busiest museums.

MAXIMISE YOUR TIME

YOU CAN'T PACK EXTRA TIME IN YOUR CARRY-ON. USE YOUR PRECIOUS VACATION HOURS WISELY WITH THESE SUGGESTIONS

BOLIVIA

Salar de Uyuni

At the world's largest salt flat, in southwest Bolivia, shutterbugs prefer the rainy season for capturing truly ethereal images. During December to March, a thin layer of water turns the over 10,000-square-kilometre landscape into a giant mirror. A photo guide such as Sergio Ballivian can help maximise your time on-site, because he knows the light, the best time of day, and exactly where to go for optimal shooting (sergiophototours.com).

UGANDA/RWANDA

Mountain Gorilla Country

Since only about 880 mountain gorillas still exist, seeing one up close in their habitats on the volcanic slopes of Uganda and Rwanda can be life changing. The Gorilla Habituation Experience in Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable Forest National Park gives you four hours with the animals (compared with one hour on a traditional trek). Only four travellers join conservationists helping a gorilla family get used to humans (ugandawildlife.org).

PARIS, FRANCE

Musée Du Louvre

Exploring the 6,50,000-plus square feet of the world's largest art museum can be a daunting task, but the recently renovated Pavillon de l'Horloge is a good place to start. "You'll get an overview of the permanent collection, and interactive touch screens help map your way from one masterpiece to the next," says Hannah Seidl, a public relations officer at the Louvre who also suggests downloading its new smartphone app (louvre.fr). ■

KYOTO, JAPAN

Daitoku-ji Temple

Built in the 14th century, the vast Daitoku-ji Temple is one of Japan's most revered centres of Zen Buddhism, comprising numerous temples and sub-temples. For more contemplation time, frequent visitor and *National Geographic Traveler* Editor at Large, Don George suggests heading straight to the sub-temple Koto-in. "In a complex that is extremely touristed, Koto-in is especially atmospheric, picturesque, and little visited." ■

THE CONVERSATION

70

THERE'S ALWAYS THE
NUCLEYA OPTION

It is only during family holidays that
musician Udyan Sagar gets to tune
into the beats of a destination



NISHANT MATT

64 KABIR KHAN IS ALWAYS ON LOCATION • 76 KANISHK THAROOR WALKS PAST THE PRESENT IN ISTANBUL



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THE CONVERSATION

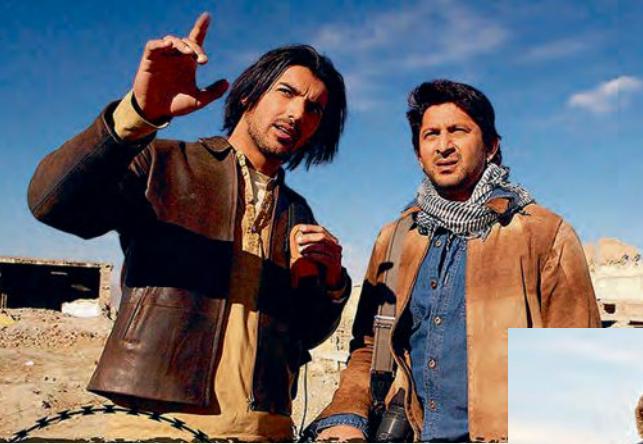


KABIR KHAN

ALWAYS ON LOCATION

IF FILMMAKER KABIR KHAN SEES A MOUNTAIN, HE WANTS TO CLIMB IT AND SHOOT ON ITS TOP. HE DOES NOT WANT VISUAL EFFECTS TO BRING THAT MOUNTAIN TO HIM

BY SHREEVATSA NEVATIA



THE HINDI FILM INDUSTRY'S



obsession with scenes that resemble picture-perfect postcards is well known. Switzerland, for instance, remains a favoured backdrop. Kabir Khan, however, likes his locations more grungy. *Kabul Express*, his first full-length feature film was shot in Afghanistan. *Phantom* took him to Lebanon, and the climax of *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* was shot at the base of Jammu and Kashmir's Thajiwas glacier. The likes of Salman Khan willingly step into freezing lakes for Khan, but the empathetic director does give them deep sea diving suits before they take the plunge. Having travelled to over 70 countries as a documentary filmmaker, Khan knows the hacks that make difficult destinations navigable. Today, he travels to write. Being a Bollywood director, he confesses in this interview to *NGTI*, has fringe benefits.

Let's start with a joke everyone knows about you. It is said that when you want to travel to a new destination, you write a script around it. Is this true?

[Laughs] My answer would have to be 'yes'. If you're writing a script that needs a particular setting, if your story can only unfold in that one place, you do have to fight your hardest to get there. *New York* could only be filmed in New York, and *Kabul Express* could only be made in Kabul. In *Ek Tha Tiger*, I needed Tiger and Zoya to run away to a place where people could not find them. That's when my childhood fascination with Cuba came in. It was perfect because it was somewhat off the grid. We filmed there for a month. So when there's a choice of location, I guess I do include places I have always wanted to go to.

So, locations, you're hinting, are of paramount importance?

As a documentary filmmaker, I travelled to 70 countries, and I had a distinct advantage. Compared to tourists, I got to spend a lot more time in these places. I went into the interiors. I spent time with people and was able to get under their skin. That's why locations have become such an important element for me. Despite all the visual effects technology makes available, I don't like digitising my locations. Much to the dismay of my cast and crew, I still want to go to the top of a mountain and shoot. I don't want to bring the mountain to my studio. My creative juices dry up if I'm sitting on a set, and if I'm not on location. My next project is set in Burma and Thailand. I can easily recreate those jungles in more comfortable places, but I feel the project will be truer if I go there and shoot. I always want to go there.

You shot the climax of *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* amidst hailstorms and in sub-zero temperatures. You might have climbed Mount Kilimanjaro, but are members of your cast and crew as ready for such adventures?

Sometimes, I do get very excited and I want to shoot in places that would otherwise be considered impossible. But then again, I do feel I shouldn't push my cast and crew through brutal hardship. In the end, though, I have realised that as long as I'm not doing anything stupid, and the shoot is logistically possible, my crew also enjoys being in those areas. Ultimately, what you see on screen pays off. If I am taking my crew into



difficult locations, I make sure that they are completely prepared in terms of clothing. They're all acclimatised. So, when we went to the base of the Thajiwas glacier to shoot *Bajrangi Bhaijaan*, I knew the kind of conditions I was stepping into, but I also knew how the shot would look on screen. I felt the pain was worth it. We got hundreds of snow shoes, socks and gloves. And once you are fully equipped, no one complains about the weather. There was a poster I had once seen outside a store in Dublin. It said, "There is no such thing as bad weather. There is only bad clothing." That's so very true.

Did your gaze change when you moved from making documentaries to commercial films? Does the socio-political context matter less?

No, it didn't. And that's why my initial two films—*Kabul Express* and *New York*—are embedded so deeply in the socio-political context of a given place and a given time. *Kabul Express* is of course autobiographical. It is the story of what happened to me and a friend in Afghanistan, and the political situation in the country was a constant backdrop to that story. You

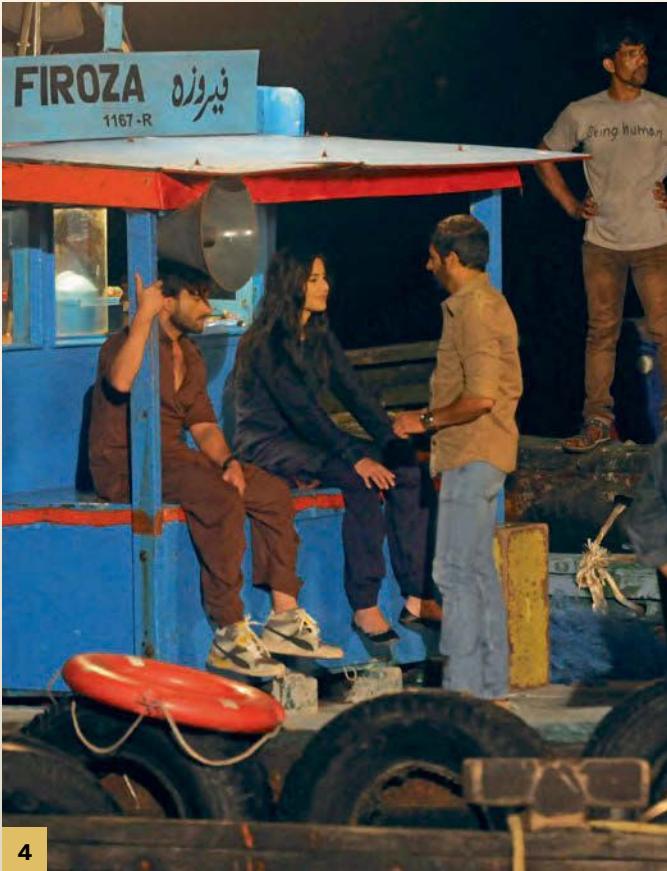




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find that same political significance in *New York*. Even today, when I'm going to my location, or when I'm dealing with a subject that is country-specific, I do try and bring in that nation's subtext. Ultimately, that's what makes a difference.

Some journeys are, of course, more difficult than others, say the ones undertaken by the characters in some of your films like *New York* and *Bajrangi Bhaijaan*. How do your actors cope?

For my characters these journeys are difficult, yes, but they're not as difficult for my actors. For *Phantom*, we were shooting in Beirut, and Lebanon, as you know, is affected by the war in Syria. That brought with it its set of challenges. But having said that, I feel the ground reality is very different from the images you see from afar. Headlines can make places look more dangerous than they are. When you do actually reach the location, you realise that there are problems, but there is a population still living with hardship. And if you're careful, you find a way of operating within those confines. Life does go on.

You've said that for you travel and work are always intertwined. Is there ever a time when you see a place through the eyes of just a traveller, not a filmmaker?

Absolutely, and I must admit that I do that consciously sometimes. Earlier, I used to travel for work mostly. I used to start feeling uneasy the minute I saw the sky was overcast. I was worried about my shot. So, when I was holidaying in London and the sky was overcast, that sense of uneasiness would again come to me, but I was only walking, not shooting. I have now learnt to disengage, though. Because travel has always relaxed



3

1 Having visited Afghanistan as a documentary filmmaker, Khan filmed the autobiographical *Kabul Express* there. **2** Undeterred by the harsh terrain, Khan decided to shoot the climax of *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* at the base of Kashmirs Thajiwas glacier. **3** For Khan, Cuba was a childhood obsession. He eventually chose it as a location for *Ek Tha Tiger*. **4** Though Lebanon was affected by the war in neighbouring Syria, Khan still chose to shoot *Phantom* in Beirut.

me, I leave the country or the city to write. I am always more productive then.

You say you have visited 70 countries. Is there any place still on your bucket list?

I have never been there, but I was told there is something called 'The Club 100' in London. You only get membership to that club, if you have travelled to 100 different, unique countries. That's still the dream.

How far are you from 100?

I'm still in the seventies unfortunately.

You had a Kalashnikov pointed at you in Afghanistan, and it was the song "Mere Sapno Ki Rani" that broke the ice. You were, quite literally, saved by Bollywood. When you travel today, are Hindi films as much of a common denominator? Do people recognise you when you travel?

Sometimes I am surprised when I get recognised. Since places like Dubai and London have a large South Asian population, I do expect to get noticed. But sometimes I get recognised in places that I would normally think are far-off. Actors are

recognisable, but if a director is also known, it means that the country is invested in news about Bollywood. For instance, I was in Germany once, and this man came up to me in a department store. He looked at me. He smiled. I remember thinking, "He looks Italian." He then said he would like a photo with me. I found it hard to believe he knew who I was. "I'm Afghan," he said finally, "and I've seen your film." He turned out to be the manager of the high-end department store, and he extended his employee discount to me. Before I knew it, I was getting 50 per cent off on anything I could lay my eyes on. I felt then that there are fringe benefits to being a Bollywood director!

What made you interested in scuba diving? Which are your favourite diving spots?

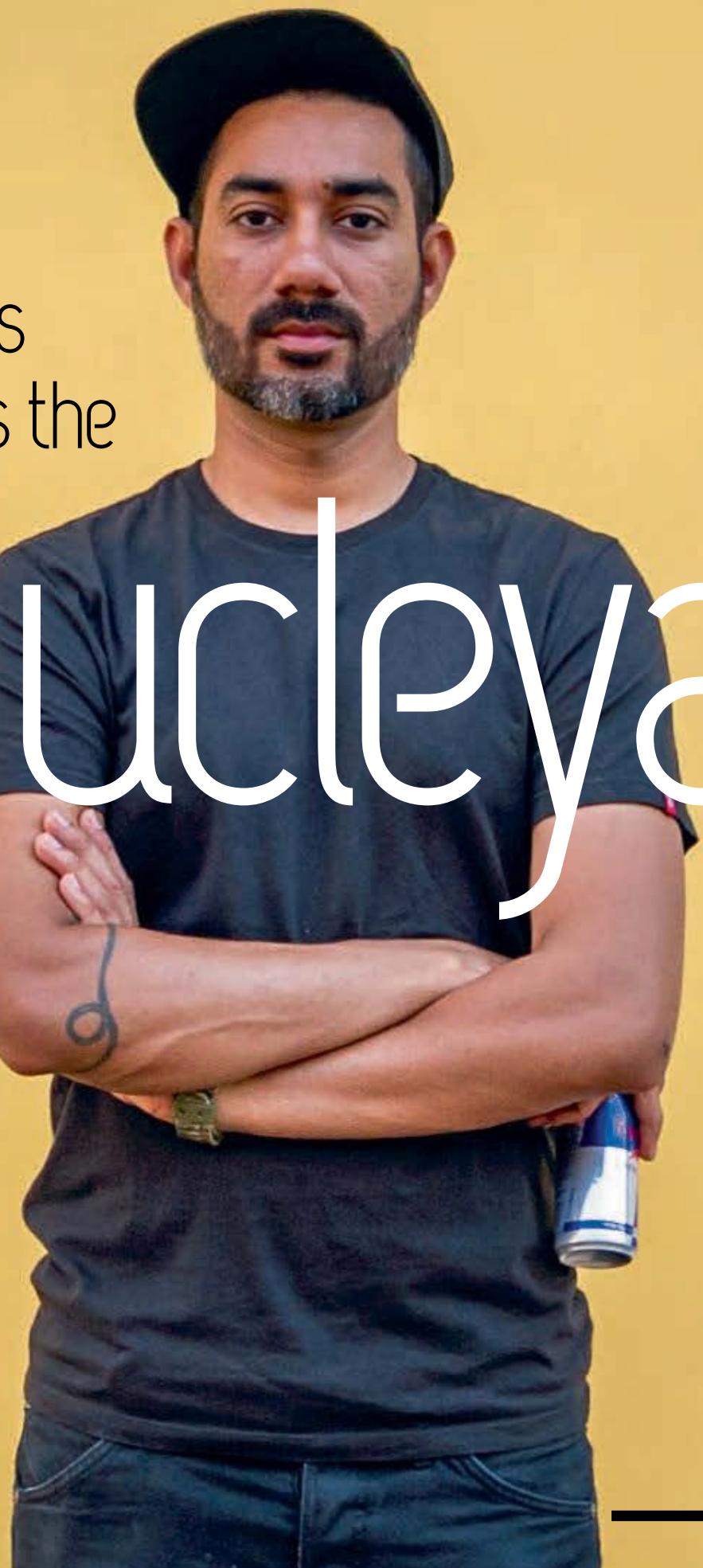
I have been a bit of an adrenaline junkie from my school days. I did a lot of rock climbing and trekking in college. In a way, the next frontier was water, and I decided to go scuba diving. Mini [Mathur, Khan's wife] and I went to this beautiful island called Boracay in Philippines, and this place had 50 kilometres of white sand. Strangely, this place was discovered by a film scouting unit who were looking for these pristine islands. That's how we started scuba diving. Once you go down and see what is lying 50 feet underwater, you really are hooked for life. The kind of colours you see below the water, you can never see on land. It is the closest you ever come to flying because you are literally gliding through the water.

What do you never leave home without?

I always carry my camera. I would never travel to a place without it. ■

There's
always the

Nucleya



“Come on in,”

Udyan Sagar calls out from the balcony of a two-storeyed Goan villa.

A spiral stairwell melts into a terrace garden. Adjoining this lush green patch is a porch where Udyan—best known by his stage name Nucleya—stands barefoot, dressed casually in a pair of jeans and T-shirt. Of the two antique wooden chairs, one quarter the size of the other, he goes for the smaller one. “That’s my son, Guri’s,” he says, smiling. “He turned four yesterday.”

The 37-year-old musician’s reservation about being interviewed is well known. Here’s why: “I make music and tour for six months. The other six months are for my family. Where I go or what I eat and wear... why should that make news? Also, I don’t want to know how big or not I am.”

Goa offers him the privacy he pines for. This Sunday afternoon, for instance, it’s at its *susegad* best—empty roads, shuttered storefronts and barely a tourist in sight. No hippies on bullets, nouppies in Mahindras. Even locals seem to have retreated into the snugness of a post-lunch leisurely nap. The nothingness of a typical Goan Sunday, combined with the thrill of having celebrated Guri’s birthday the previous day, seems to be thawing his reservations, one question at a time.

Having gigged for 15 years, both at home and abroad, and after a clutch of personal holidays, travel for Udyan is now a practised routine. “I’m an ace packer,” he says before listing his suitcase’s contents. “From eight jackets, a hefty toiletry kit, and multiple pairs of shoes and colognes, I have now downsized my packing to two colognes, two pairs of shoes, gadgets and headphones. Jeans, I repeat.”

Probe him for travel-related anecdotes and the man behind the smashing *Koocha Monster*, *Bass Rani* and *Raja Baja* albums scratches his head. “Relating specifics is very difficult for me,” he says, almost apologetically. “Dates, years, names of places, what they look like... all that I can never remember.”

With this disclaimer, he sets the course of the conversation. What this then means is—what stays with him after a holiday is the sum total of the experiences, not the parts that render them memorable. Also, when one’s involvement in drawing up itineraries is negligible, chances of remembering details are slim.

option

All musician Udyan Sagar explores on tours are hotel rooms. It is only during family holidays that he really gets to tune into the beats of a destination

BY HUMAIRA ANSARI



“During the pre-Nucleya days, after maxing out my credit cards in London, I mainly survived on loans from friends. Every single penny has been repaid, though. A Lannister always pays his debts”



Even though Udyan relocated from Delhi to Goa two years ago, he still misses the capital's street food (bottom); Downtime in Goa is now spent building sandcastles and chasing sunsets with his family (top) at one beach or the other.

“Smriti plans all our family holidays,” he says of his wife. An artist and graphic designer, she is also the brain behind the psychedelic pop of colours that mark most Nucleya merchandise, from the mischievously winking, bindi-sporting woman, the face of his album *Bass Rani*, to the moustachioed macho king on the cover of *Raja Baja*.

Concert travel, too, is not his headache.

“That way I'm spoilt,” he says, laughing. “Between my booking agent and touring manager, all organisation is taken care of. I just go, play my music and buzz off.”

From sets at Glastonbury in the U.K. and Electric Daisy Carnival in Mexico and the U.S.A. to opening for David Guetta at Goa's Sunburn and headlining NH7 Weekender in Pune, the co-founder of the now-defunct electronica ensemble, Bandish Projekt, has cracked the code and toured the world. Then, of course, there are gigs across Indian metros and cities such as Ahmedabad and Jaipur.

Takers are everywhere. Some have even initiated Quora threads to demystify Nucleya. His music, for the uninitiated, is characterised by bass-heavy beats infused with copious amounts of Indian folk and street music and glitches from news recordings and radio announcements. What really sets it apart though is that it cuts through the classism of venues. It is played and received with equal fervour inside upscale clubs and packed stadiums, and on Mumbai's streets during festive processions. *Bass Rani*, in fact, was launched during a 2015 Ganesh Visarjan.

By December, he would have cumulatively clocked 150 shows this year alone.

Prick through the bubble-wrapped jet-setting life, however, and the trappings surface. “There's zero time to rest,” he rues. “The only thing you explore on tours are hotel rooms! As for the jets, they are to reach venues in time and to not keep people waiting. You can't book an entire Indigo after all.”

The real unplugging takes place on “real holidays” with Smriti and Guri, and the last such holiday was this June. The three took off to Canada and stayed in a riverside century-old mansion in North Vancouver. “Such a superb trip it was. Just the three of us... no agenda other than doing what we felt like doing,” he says. “We played by the riverbank, walked to the supermarket to replenish our daily supplies, and

cooked and bonded over lovely meals."

From a separate trip to the U.S.A., he is particularly reminiscent about the time spent exploring Universal Studios. Between gaping at life-size replicas of towering castles and chasing costumed performers, the family had a blast hopping from one ride to another, "from a 3D Transformers ride to the one where you hover over Hogwarts."

"But to be honest," he sheepishly adds, "I chickened out of the Harry Potter ride. The thought of my feet dangling mid-air with nothing to rest them on made me damn anxious." Smriti and Guri went ahead nevertheless, dodging artificially simulated magical creatures as they soared, fell, and soared again over replicas of Dumbledore's office and Gryffindor's common room.

LOST IN LONDON

Sometime in early 2000, during the Bandish days, Udyan relocated to Dubai with his then music partner, Mayur. They performed a few gigs there, didn't quite like the scene and soon started touring elsewhere. Somehow they landed a gig in London. "It was a good enough bait for us 20-something indie artists at a time when the indie music scene in India wasn't half as ripe as it is today."

"Little work came our way, though," he says, recalling his pre-Nucleya days. "The pounds were soon exhausted and credits cards maxed out." Somewhere along the way, the two fell apart. Mayur returned to India. Udyan stayed back.

To score an upcoming gig in London, he naively sent his passport with an Indian friend back home for a visa extension. "Those days you couldn't send passports out of India, which I didn't know," he recalls, "and when I did know, it was too late. By then I was stranded in London with no passport and very little money."

Luckily his Gujarati booking agent's parents welcomed him. Stuck in a foreign land at a time when his "English was strictly okay", it was the familiarity of a language he knew—raised in Ahmedabad, he speaks fluent Gujarati—and the comforting aromas of food he grew up eating that kept him going. "They really looked after me," he says. "From cleaning to cooking, I spent a lot of time at their Leicester home."

Right now his villa is being built on some Goan plot (the one he currently stays in is rented), and he has recently



“ This June, Smriti, Guri and I holidayed in a century-old mansion in Vancouver. It was a superb trip. Just the three of us... no agenda other than doing what we felt like doing ”



Udyan's third album, *Raja Baja*, was launched inside Mumbai's NSCI stadium (top) amidst much fanfare and drone cameras; On a family trip to Universal Studios, he enjoyed the Transformers ride (bottom) but "chickened out" of the Harry Potter one.





bought a Mercedes SUV, but back then in London, unwilling to seek funds from home, he mainly survived on loans from friends and friends of friends. “Every single penny has been repaid, though. A Lannister always pays his debts,” he says, cracking up.

FOUND IN GOA

Born in Agra, raised in Ahmedabad, and having played across Dubai, the States and the U.K., Udyan decided to settle in Delhi. Then sometime in 2015 he moved to Goa, lock, stock and barrel.

“I love Delhi. I didn’t want to leave that city but the pollution got to us. Guri was only two, and he kept falling sick,” he says on why the family chose the calmness of the coastal town over the cacophony of the capital. “I contracted sinus. Smriti and I didn’t want to depend on air-purifiers all our life, so Goa it was.”

The only thing he misses about both Ahmedabad and Delhi is the street food tucked away inside nondescript eateries. In *Ride to the Roots*, a documentary chronicling his meteoric success, for instance, he can be seen chomping on *bun-maska*, gleefully dunking it into chai at a streetside stall in Ahmedabad. In another shot, he swoops an entire bowl of *aamras* clean, twice.

“Delhi’s *dahiballa*, *pani puri* and *chaat*... I miss them all greatly. I have grown up on street food. It’s part of my DNA,” he says. “And which is why a trip to Chandni Chowk is still sneaked in, for a quick grub and the vibe.”

But Goa’s air trumped scrumptious street food. There are other add-ons too.

“Half my day isn’t spent commuting. Goa gives me the time and pace to delve deep into a project,” he says. “Till I don’t fall in love with it, I can’t make a song. Goa helps me make my songs.” There’s nothing about Goa he doesn’t like. “People are really warm. I don’t speak Konkani, they don’t expect me to. I have had zero fights here, unlike in Delhi.”

Spare time is spent strolling down Panjim’s promenades, admiring Portuguese-era buildings, vintage lampposts playfully carving out shadows on their bright yellow and deep blue facades. Then of course there are beaches to be driven to and sandcastles to be built. “I don’t want to be a multi-millionaire,” he laments. “I just want to make enough money and have enough time to keep creating small happy memories.” ■

Tharoor in the Washington Square Village complex, in New York, the city where he grew up and now lives.



Walking
past the
present in
Istanbul

KANISHK THAROOR ON ABSORBING THE ANTIQUITY
OF THE TURKISH CAPITAL

By Bhavya Dore

ZAYRA RAY

Work on the Blue Mosque began in 1609 and took seven years. Tharoor says it is perhaps the most beautiful building he has entered in the world.



Istanbul's Sultan Ahmed Mosque rises as if from a height. Its hulking tiered domes overlook the water and its minarets carve out the sky.

When Kanishk Tharoor entered its spacious, sunlit interior as a 22-year-old on his first visit to Turkey, it felt transcendent. He had visited the Taj Mahal before, but this mosque, more famously called the Blue Mosque, seemed to stir in him an unprecedented reaction. "I feel like I'm fairly well travelled and have been to all sorts of places but it remains the most beautiful building I have ever entered in my life," he says, 10 years later, on the phone from New York. "I'm not particularly religious myself but I can understand why people find the sacred within such an enormous exquisite space... I suppose I had an aesthetically religious experience."

The 33-year-old writer and broadcaster, whose debut collection *Swimmer Among The Stars: Stories* was published last year, speaks in a giddy state of rapture while mapping the contours of his time in Istanbul. For years before his trip he had read the books and soaked up the history. When he actually went there it buzzed with the frisson of the new whilst meshing with the comfort of the familiar. "I was just geeking out the entire time," he says. "Everywhere I went I was finding references to things I'd read or references to things I'd studied or written about. Before I came to Istanbul I felt like I had lived the city on the page. And then to be there in real life was just amazing."

Istanbul is about 3,000 years old, and has been ruled by the Greeks, Romans and later Muslim conquerors. It is a city of many names, many layers and many fascinations, and sits in a

country straddling Europe and Asia. For Tharoor, who graduated with a history degree, it had built up in his head over time as a magical, antique Disneyland. "It had been a place I had long imagined. In school I'd studied its Byzantine and Ottoman history. And romantic might be the wrong word—but I always dreamed of Istanbul from quite a young age, so it was such a thrill when I did go."

Not just the Blue Mosque, he visited a series of other mosques, stopped by museums crammed with artefacts and climbed up to a Genoese fort with a view of the river Bosphorus meeting the Black Sea. And of course, there was the Hagia Sophia, a 1,700-year old structure that has moved through phases as a church, a mosque and now a museum. "Hagia Sophia is a very different kind of building. It is huge, it is more sober, it has a kind of dark solemnity inside," he says. "It was first built in the fourth century A.D. and that sense of immediate and visceral connection to the past is something I really enjoyed."

It's not a sensation he gets to be wrapped in often as someone who grew up and lives in New York, an old-ish city in its own way, but one very much crusted over by modernity. "It's very difficult sometimes to get the sense of a connection of a deep past," says Tharoor, who hosts a history programme *Museum of Lost Objects* on BBC Radio 4. "What I love about Istanbul is that it's there helplessly."

Both New York and Istanbul are near the coast and by rivers—the Hudson and the Bosphorus respectively—but it is Istanbul that has vigorously retained its connection with its waters, unlike the American city.



Walking through Istanbul was one of the highlights for Tharoor (top); The Hagia Sofia (middle) was a basilica, a mosque and now has a museum. Tharoor feels it has a kind of "dark solemnity"; The Pierre Loti (bottom) viewpoint offers one of the best vistas of the city.

THROUGH HIS LOOKING GLASS

Tharoor articulates his memories as if drawing scenes from a painting. There are rival groups of football supporters chanting over the police lines as they queue up for the same ferry, the river swallowing the trailing embers of the dying sun at dusk, people fishing off the bridges. "The sun is setting, you have this lovely cityscape: rolling hills, the old city, and spires of various mosques and you hear the azan, and then you see gulls circling around the tips of the minarets. It was an image that remained with me," he says.

Tharoor spent about three weeks there on a holiday with his mother, scoping it out by day and night, by boat and on foot. "I think walking is what makes cities," he says. "Good cities have to be walkable. I know many cities aren't. But Istanbul is pretty walkable." He speaks sometimes in perfectly formed writerly sentences; on one occasion conjuring up an image of magnificence in his meeting with a Turkish intellectual at a café near Taksim Square, the main plaza: "He was a fascinating, evocative guy and had this immense beard, that when he spoke it was like the beard was parting to let forth words."

Tharoor says his twin brother Ishaan has a completely different sense of the city having spent time there as a journalist writing on its political tumult and contemporary upheaval. But for Tharoor it is impossibly suffused with the past. "I wanted to sort of luxuriate in the history of Istanbul. It's a huge city, but I wasn't so interested in the modern metropolis of Istanbul."

Istanbul is also one of the settings of a new novel he is working on. "Even if I hadn't been to Istanbul I probably would still have included it in my fiction," he says. "I believe very much in the fictive power of fiction. It so happens I have been there."

Istanbul the place is now invariably read against *Istanbul* the memoir—Nobel Prize winning writer Orhan Pamuk's portrait that hums with a deep affection and overhanging *hüzün*—the Arabic word for a state of spiritual anguish. "He has this slightly self-obsessed, morose, melancholic sense of the city which I can understand I suppose," says Tharoor. "But I enjoyed it. I found it really uplifting to be there."

Tharoor hasn't travelled much for pure pleasure in the past few years, his trips having been determined by familial or work obligations. When he does travel, it involves a mixture of visiting the canonical sights whilst also just winging off in an unforeseen direction. "When I came to Istanbul I was more than happy just to embrace the clichéd typical things people did because this was what really fascinated me in the first place," he says. "But at the same time just walking around the city without much of a plan... I like just the experience of being somewhere without the compulsion to be visiting sights or doing things. I like soaking these places in."

Tharoor hasn't been back since that visit a decade ago, but definitely hopes to go again. Is it conceivable that any other city would be able to match it history for history, view for view?

"I can't imagine one that would in terms of the sheer age of the city, in terms of the beauty of the city, and in terms of the scale," he says. "It's not just a quaint old ruin. What makes the history affecting is you're not just visiting some museum, you are in the heart of it... You're in a very active and very major modern 21st-century cultural centre. And yet that modernity is enmeshed in the deepest antiquity imaginable. And I don't know if there's anywhere else in the world that really manages both those things the way Istanbul does." ■

THE ADDRESS



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TIDE ME OVER

Time trickles under the rain trees, the hills and the sea around Shangri-La's Rasa Sayang resort in Malaysia

PHOTO COURTESY: SHANGRILA'S RASA SAYANG RESORT AND SPA

THE ADDRESS

INDIA TAKES MANHATTAN



An aerial photograph of New York City, showing the dense urban landscape of midtown Manhattan. In the foreground, the green expanse of Central Park is visible, with its winding paths and clusters of trees. To the left, several large, classical-style apartment buildings stand along the park's edge. A street runs parallel to the park, with numerous yellow taxis and other vehicles visible. The overall scene captures the blend of natural beauty and urban density characteristic of New York.

U.S.A.

An aerial view of
the Pierre, outside whose
entrance (inset) the Indian
tricolour flutters alongside
the American flag.

A TAJ PROPERTY SINCE 2005,
THE PIERRE HAS A NEW YORK SOUL
AND AN INDIAN HEART

BY SHREEVATSA NEVATIA



PHOTO COURTESY THE PIERRE, NEW YORK



Elevator attendants at the Pierre are required to wear white gloves. The hotel's Perrine Pie (below) is the stuff of legend.

Flags are commonplace in the United States. They're hoisted outside homes, convenient stores and government offices. Striped red, white and blue, even shirts aren't spared. In America, people do wear their patriotism on their sleeve. As my cab drove up Manhattan's East 61st Street, I did not expect to see the Indian tricolour, and I certainly did not expect to be overcome by a bout of sudden, alien nationalism.

Since 2005, the Pierre has been a Taj hotel. The flag made sense, but I was looking for a stay that was quintessentially New York. Having opened in 1929, the Pierre, I was told, was my best bet.

The lobby didn't make a fuss about itself, and Anupam Guha, the Taj Royal Attaché who checked me in, hadn't yet acquired an American twang. Anupam worked at Delhi's Taj Mansingh before he was transferred to the Pierre in 2011. He spoke in a manner that was immediately friendly and familiar. "Our clients don't just want the luxury experience. They also want to stay in someplace iconic." After some prodding, Anupam confessed, "Indian clients want the Taj. Europeans and Americans want the Pierre."

Today's Pierre, I found, worked that balance well. My room, for instance, was not hyper modern. Its wallpaper, furniture and lamps would have been comfortable in any era. The only Indian touch here was the soap in the shower. It had been made from Rajasthani sandalwood. I drew the curtain to its side.

I wanted sunlight. The view of East Side Manhattan left me staggered. If I had a cape, this would be my Gotham.

Not just did the Pierre have elevator attendants, they also wore white gloves. Asking me for my floor, Khady Gueye was naturally chirpy. August 24, for her, was an anniversary. She completed 27 years at the hotel. I asked her if anything has changed over time. "Everyone is still beautiful," she smiled. "When they are in my elevator, I hear them call their friends and ask, 'Do you know where I am?' They then very proudly say, 'The Pierre!' Elizabeth Taylor, she tells me, once owned an apartment in the building. "She would come for dinner. Then Dolly Parton and Bobby Brown stayed here. Abhishek Bachchan was here too. I told him his father looks better than him. I just wanted his attention, but he gave me a huge hug."

After I demanded a tour, I was taken to the Cotillion Ballroom where a blind Al Pacino had danced the tango in *Scent of a Woman*. The brash and talented executives of the television series



Mad Men had once made the Pierre's room 435 their temporary office. Coco Chanel, Priyanka Chopra and Robert Downey Jr. had all been guests. Even Audrey Hepburn had checked in when filming *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. It was, however, only in the Tata Presidential Suite on the 39th floor, that my jaw dropped as quickly as all those names. Standing at its window, I could see the exact point where Central Park bordered the East Side, separating it from Manhattan's west. It was like someone had drawn a neat line between a forest and the city. I felt I had seen New York at its most beautiful. I was not wasting my time.

The Two E Bar/Lounge near the reception downstairs was empty when I walked in. I had chosen the wrong hour. On Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, a jazz band plays at night. I believe if you close your eyes real tight, concentrating on the double bass, you feel transported to the decades when the space used to be a Gentleman's Lounge. The smell of bourbon and cigar smoke has to be conjured. If you visit Two E Bar at the time I did, you are more likely to smell scones

and jam. Its evening tea is very popular.

With its recently restored murals, the Rotunda Room is the perfect setting for a romantic dinner date, but if like me, you find yourself single in an otherwise tempting Big Apple, you are advised to bite into the food at Pierre's signature restaurant, Perrine. I was respectful of its French-American menu, and so I first ordered the tuna tartare. I hardly had to chew on the fish. It was soft enough to melt. But I was still feeling hungry, and the chicken curry appealed to my newly acquired nationalistic sentiment. The curry compared to the best butter chicken I had ever eaten. Despite being satiated, I did devour my dessert.

The next morning over breakfast, I caught up with the Pierre's Executive Chef, Ashfer Biju. "I'm from Kerala," he said. "I am a true-blue Malayali who grew up on very good food." Ashfer first helped reopen the Pierre in 2009, and then moved to New York permanently in 2011. He told me the curry I had eaten the night before was made using a recipe that was nearly 65 years old. "In the 1950s, the Pierre housed an Indian restaurant called The Grill Room, and

we have only tweaked its preparation a little." The chef then confessed to adding spice to his sea bass: "I'm adding a little love." I went on to ask, "So Chef, is this an Indian or New York hotel?" He laughed. "We are a New York hotel that serves *idli* for breakfast." ■

ESSENTIALS

The Pierre has 140 guest rooms and 49 suites with views of New York's Central and Manhattan's East Side. (taj.tajhotels.com/en-in/the-pierre-new-york; doubles from \$500/₹32,500).



Looking out of the Tata Presidential Suite window, you see Central Park and Manhattan intersect. Other suites like the Rajput (top) are equally sumptuous.





Udaipur

BEYOND THE LAKE

By promoting Rajasthani art, The Royal Retreat Resort and Spa breaks the mould and takes luxury a step further

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY
SUDHA PILLAI



Royal Retreat Resort's landscape is dotted with art and handicrafts from Rajasthan and around the country. A restored South Indian temple chariot serves as a dining space while artworks collected by Periwal over three decades (facing page) fill the reception area.

In existence since A.D 1362, Lake Pichola is something of a fixture for all of Udaipur's opulence—its hotels and addresses. I wanted delight and bliss, yes, but I wanted to avoid the touristy three-kilometre wide lake, its palaces and predictability. So, seven kilometres away, I reached the outskirts of an obscure village called Badi Hawala, and tucked away on a thin road I found The Royal Retreat Resort and Spa. Mountains of the Aravalli Range surrounded the property. They are tall, ancient, older even than the Himalayas.

The double doors at Royal Retreat's entrance seemed as tall as two-storeyed buildings and had rows of iron spikes neatly arranged on them. Incidentally, in the age of kings, gates would have iron spikes to prevent battle elephants from charging right in. These spikes would be arranged in a nine-by-eight grid at the height of an average elephant's head. Reminiscent of those bygone defence systems and palace *darwazas*, the antique gate of Royal Retreat only set a tone for all that lay behind it. My stay at the resort eventually led me to discover a different 'luxury'. I even had to reorganise my thoughts about art.

All of 10 acres large, the resort has, in recent years, become a popular bespoke wedding destination, but back in 1995, when antique dealer and art lover Hemant Periwal bought this land to build a modest farmhouse, it was nothing more than untamed jungle. Periwal, a consummate host, began to throw parties here for his foreign clients. Business grew, and so did the number of clients. The farmhouse soon became a 20-room guest house, and then, in 2015, it turned into The Royal Retreat Resort and Spa. The resort is



now spread over 11 blocks with 100 rooms and two presidential suites, three swimming pools and four dining areas. It showcases traditional art on a grand, and sometimes overwhelming, scale.

A mixture of old and new—that-is-made-to-look-old art can be found in every nook and cranny of the property. The space has grown organically, so it does not sport a homogenous design, but what holds it together is the art—paintings, sculptures, installations and architecture. Doors from old palaces and windows from dilapidated *havelis* morph to become bar counters or decorative pieces. At the open-air restobar, The Lounge, stone and marble sculptures are seen jostling with wooden horses.

The resort has four dining areas, and though you can treat your palette to cuisines ranging from continental and oriental to Gujarati and Sindhi, it is the resort's Rajasthani cuisine that proves memorable. In particular, I was taken by the *laal maas* and *kheema baati* made by the Rajasthani chefs. For a more romantic and private dining experience there is, of course, the Chariot with a stunning backdrop of the Aravalli mountains, and on most days a background score of peacock calls. The Chariot is surprisingly a real temple chariot that Periwal had found discarded in South India. He then restored the decrepit wooden chariot and turned it into an intimate dining area. I decided to skip the meal at the Chariot and instead opted to spend time in the lawns. I sipped

on my hot masala chai and tried to spot a leopard or two in the Aravalli Mountains. (A vain, but interesting pursuit, in the end.)

Guests stay in little cottages that are locally referred to as 'bungalows'. Each one—named after birds of the land—is unique in style with carved doors, and brass handles that are shaped like elephants, horses and mermaids. The trellised balconies overflowing with flowering creepers remind you of *Romeo and Juliet*, while the intricately carved columns and windows whisper *Bajirao Mastani*. The Royal Suites are extravagant with their silver furniture and beds, private outdoor plunge pool, jacuzzi and barbecue pit.

I found myself in a Retreat Room with hand-painted doors, a living room with its own balcony, and a bedroom that was bigger than a one-room apartment in Mumbai. It was, however, the Pichwai paintings in the room that had me besotted. The resort has a stunning collection of Pichwai art. Furthering a 400-year-old tradition from Nathdwara near Udaipur, the paintings are made on starched cloth with natural dyes, and in an earlier age, they would adorn the walls behind Hindu idols in temples. Lord Krishna is indisputably the primary subject of these intricate and colourful paintings.

The resort has a unique feature. You can buy anything that catches your fancy—paintings, sculptures, furniture, even their balconies, doors and

windows. Royal Retreat doesn't quite pluck the permanent structures and FedEx them. They instead make replicas in their workshop. Now part of the resort folklore is the tale of a Gujarati businessman, who fell in love with the entire bungalow he was living in. He is said to have bought everything in it—the silver furniture, wooden columns, doors and windows. I would've much preferred to courier myself the Sheesh Mahal. A little bar attached to the restaurant, Durbar, Sheesh Mahal is over-the-top, colourful, whimsical and really, much fun.

A break comes in the form of outdoor activities. Even a picnic by the lake is made hedonistic. A horse or camel will take you to the spot, while the resort staff will follow with food and a picnic table. There are other options too. You could, for instance, watch the sun go down the horizon on Lake Pichola from Jagat Sagar, a luxury boat. In truth, though, what I enjoyed most was a ride in a 1936 vintage Austin Morris to the Fateh Sagar Lake. Here I drank delicious *kullad* coffee, sitting on the lake bund, watching the world go by. If luxury means not having to lift a finger, the folks at Royal Retreat ensure you don't. ■

Essentials

The Royal Retreat Resort and Spa is located in Badi Hawala village, about 7 km/30 min northeast of Udaipur's city centre. A Standard Deluxe Room costs ₹4,999, while a Royal Suite costs ₹35,332 (royalretreatudaipur.in; 0294-665 6000).

THE ADDRESS

Tide Me Over

TIME TRICKLES UNDER THE RAIN TREES, THE HILLS AND THE SEA
AROUND SHANGRI-LA'S RASA SAYANG RESORT IN PENANG

By Kareena Gianani



I wake up with a start, but am almost

lulled back to my nap by the sound of waves swelling and breaking at Batu Ferringhi beach. I squiggle in my hammock in the garden of Rasa Sayang Resort and Spa, glimpsing boats and jet skis in the waters of the Strait of Malacca beyond the gate, a few metres away. Today, Penang Island's largest beach (its name means "Foreigner's Rock" in Malay) is uncannily quiet. I hear these waters teem with jellyfish. But what do snoozers like me, happy to loll in hammocks and rows of recliner chairs dotted across the garden, care?

It isn't the sea that keeps me here; I keep returning to this spot for the rain trees. Eight of them lie sprawled across this 30-acre garden, stealing the thunder from the betel nut palms and ketapang trees. Too many hotels are strung along Batu Ferringhi, but only Rasa Sayang has these two-centuries-old trees, making me suspend time and disbelief.

From the inside, Rasa Sayang's well-oiled hospitality isn't too different from other luxury hotels. There are the requisite plush rooms, a golf ground, swimming pools where kids perch on their fathers' shoulders to play ball, restaurants and cafés overlooking the gardens and facing the beach. Yet, some details stand out, such as the hotel's curved timber roof, a nod to the traditional architecture of Malaysia's Minangkabau ethnic community; or the gamelan, a traditional Indonesian instrumental ensemble displayed in the lobby, played by a few talented staff for an hour every Friday evening.

The touch I like the most is a chunk of *shat kek ma* that awaits me in my room. A sweet-and-crunchy Malay snack, it is made of egg, flour and molasses and looks like *chikki*. The *shat kek ma* is placed under a *tudung saji*, a traditional conical cover Malays use to cover food in their homes. Like all others, the pink-green-yellow one in my room is woven from the strands of mengkuang (screw pine) leaves from the pandanus family. The leaves are cut into strands, dipped in colourful dyes, dried and softened to be plaited into geometrical shapes.



In Rasa Sayang, solitude and comfort are easy to find, be it in the company of old, lush rain trees in the gardens (facing page & bottom) and around the pool (top); in its spacious rooms (facing page & top right); or on the shores of Batu Ferringhi beach (facing page & top left).

For me, Rasa Sayang is a good break from walking around the UNESCO heritage city of George Town, a 20-minute drive from the resort. After three days of tracing murals and bingeing on some of Southeast Asia's best street grub, I am here to do nothing and eat what is served. I barely scan the menu for breakfast, and order fluffy pancakes and French toast. My friend and I opt for a casual lunch by the beach, tucking into creamy pasta with strips of beef, onion soup, and Cajun-spiced fries. Dinner, however, is a larger affair. Served in the Spice Market Café, it is an array of sushi, cold cuts, Indonesian and Malay cuisine. I heartily tuck into oyster with tomato cheese, baked lobster with curry mayo, and fish head curry cooked in Baba Nonya style. My friend and I devote a lot of time to creamy cheesecakes, mousses and cakes because we find the pastry chef sweet, excitedly telling us about his kitchen experiments. Back in my room that night, I lounge in the balcony beside the giant open-air bathtub, making a mental note to soak in it the next morning.

When the sun is out, my friend and I decide to hit the beach. We skip the water sports in favour of exploring the strip beyond our own resort. I spot hills in the distance, which lie in the neighbouring state of Kedah. Batu Ferringhi is quite the tourist spot but it is only May and families from other Malay cities and from neighbouring Singapore haven't arrived yet, so for now, the waters are ours. We flip our chappals off to trace shapes in the sand with our toes. When we stumble upon modest little shacks ahead, we spend hours chatting and sipping various combinations of soda, lemon, and colourful syrups.

Back at the resort, we follow a winding, tree-lined path that leads us to Chi spa. All sound, except that of trickling water from fountains around me, fades away. The spa offers regular massages, hot stone and acupressure treatments inside 11 private villas. Done up in wood and stone, they are flanked by artificial ponds dotted with glistening lotus leaves. Though the architecture shows Malay and Peranakan influences, the stone water basins and the odd *shishi-odoshi* (bamboo fountain) outside some villas make me think of lush Japanese gardens—every inch woody, covered in green, and punctuated with water bodies.

Later that evening, we attend the cocktail hour in the main lobby. By the time our little feast of canapes, cheeses, candied fruit and wine comes to an end, sunlight outside has dimmed and the sky is a candy orange colour. I return to my hammock one last time, but this time I pass the nap and tune in to the muzak of the waves. ■

Essentials

Rasa Sayang Resort and Spa is located in Penang Island in the state of Penang in Malaysia. It lies about 12 km/20 min northwest of Penang's capital city, George Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Rasa Sayang has 304 rooms in two wings that overlook the gardens, the pool, or the sea (www.shangri-la.com/penang/rasasayangresort; doubles from MYR550/₹8,320).

WHO NEEDS MEN?

CHECK IN TO THE FUTURE AT THE ROBOT-OPERATED HENN NA HOTEL IN JAPAN **BY KALPANA SUNDER**



The scene at the reception hall is surreal, something out of a science fiction movie. A furry pink-and-green robot with an oversized head welcomes me in lilting tones. At the reception desk, a toothy velociraptor in a bow tie flexes his talons, bows slowly, and tells me to push a button on a touchscreen and swipe my card to check in. Beside it sits an eerily realistic female android wearing a bellhop's cap and a constant smile. She flutters her eyelashes at me, but only speaks Japanese. I look around to see window-cleaning robots glide about the sprawling, minimalistic lobby. An orchestra of small robot musicians play at regular intervals, alongside a player piano. Outside, I can see a robot cutting the grass, moving through the lawns effortlessly.

Henn na Hotel, which opened in 2015, is the world's first hotel manned by robots. Fittingly, it is located in the country at the forefront of innovation in robotic technology. The 144-room property is in the town of Sasebo, near Nagasaki, within a theme park called Huis Ten Bosch, which is devoted to all things Dutch. Windmills, fields of tulips, meandering canals, gabled homes, replicas of Dutch buildings, and souvenir shops filled with cheese and wooden clogs all hark back to Nagasaki's history as a Dutch trading post.

Allen Lee, a marketing manager for Huis Ten Bosch, shows

Touchscreens, devices with face recognition software, and Yumeko, the humanoid lady with blinking eyes, greet guests at the reception at Henn na Hotel.

me around the hotel. He explains that Henn na has done away with standard room cards, since rooms open with facial recognition: your mug is scanned and saved by cameras at check-in. On one side of the lobby, enclosed in a huge glass cube, is a cloakroom where a large mechanical arm picks up luggage left in a drop-off window for guests with early arrivals or late departures. A robot concierge tells me about breakfast timings and can even call a taxi if required. Rechargeable luggage trolleys equipped with sensors crawl slowly alongside you while playing loud music as they take your luggage to the room.

Opening the room with just a glance thanks to the facial recognition software, I enter to see Churi San awaiting me. A pint-sized feminine robot, also dressed in pink and green (she is apparently inspired by a tulip),



Churi San is perched on the bedside table. When spoken to in Japanese or English, she can control lighting, forecast the weather, set a wake-up alarm, and even sing a song on request.

The room is no-frills, with a large bed, wooden cupboards and light furnishing. Instead of a television, there's a tablet. The bathroom has a toilet that washes, dries, plays music and has a seat fitted with sensors that lifts automatically in a person's presence. The hotel has done away with conventional air-conditioning, instead using radiation panels, special bricks, angled roofs, solar panels, reflective paint and a sensor to adjust the room's temperature according to your body.

The hotel's staff is predominantly robotic; only 7 per cent are humans, mostly engaged in housekeeping tasks (room cleaning costs extra), as well as manning the security cameras to keep an eye on the expensive robots, and assisting in case of glitches. The restaurant has a basic menu, with staples like rice balls and hot dogs, as well as vending machines for drinks and coffee.

For those who equate hospitality with the human touch, robots may seem like a kitschy gimmick. But according to Henn na's founder and CEO, Hideo Sawada, the hotel takes a bold step towards artificial intelligence while reducing

accommodation costs. The property is energy efficient without compromising on quality of service. In a country with a shrinking, ageing population, where shops and restaurants already employ androids, it seems like a logical extension.

The word "hen" means strange or weird in Japanese, but it's also the word for change. For some, the hotel is simply an offbeat experience for the traveller searching for local quirks. For others, it signifies the future—not only of the hospitality industry, but of the world. In a lighter vein, Allan Lee jokes that, "One great advantage of this hotel is that customers can't complain to robots." I answer with a smile, "And as a guest, I don't have to tip them." ■

The robotic velociraptor is the English-speaking attendant at the hotel's reception (top left), where an orchestra of robots (top right) plays at regular intervals; The glass cloakroom has a mechanical arm (bottom right) that retrieves suitcases from a window and places them inside lockers; Henn na's rooms are housed in minimalist low-rise buildings overlooking manicured gardens (bottom left).

Essentials www.h-n-h.jp; doubles from JPY7,000/₹4,100 including breakfast. The hotel also offers rental cars and bicycles.

THE DESTINATION



96

MAKING CAPITAL GAINS

Beyond its politics, Washington, D.C. is making history with its modern museums and scrumptious food

SUPRIYA KANTAK

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■ THE DESTINATION

R AMERICA

Wander anywhere in the United States, and you'll still find somewhere to explore, something to contemplate

By
Aditya
Sinha

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Translucent American lakes invite you take a swim, or go boating or fishing.

JP GREENWOOD/TAXI/GETTY IMAGES

Americans love water so much that their country must be Cancerian. Their Independence Day is July 4, after all. This

spring I made my way westward across the U.S.A., perhaps not as lyrically as Jack Kerouac or Lana Del Rey have, but still easy riding across the physical immensity of these continental States. At one end of my trip was rural lakeside New Hampshire; at the other was the aquamarine Pacific Ocean. It is both a cliché and a truism that America is coast to coast.

My last lakeside visit was more than a decade ago when I visited a Cornell University physicist who was once my college roommate. We drove to Ithaca, located on Cayuga Lake, one of those that comprise the Finger Lakes region in upstate New York. The elongated lakes point away from Lake Ontario and Niagara Falls. Not surprisingly, American lakes are blue and translucent: no bathing buffaloes, no cement factories. Lakes here remind you to go swimming or boating or fishing; or just laze and take in the beauty of the New World. On the way we even stopped at the Corning Museum of Glass, in Corning, New York, famous for Corningware. The Museum is, perhaps intentionally, a surrealist palace of optical illusion; and a must visit. Glass, glassy lakes: something sparkles about America.

This April I drove up to my friend Em's cabin in New Hampshire, on French Pond in Henniker, a lake that was only about a square kilometre big. It wasn't the first time I stayed at a lake in New Hampshire; during the summer before I went off to college, I spent a week at my friend Craig's family cabin at Lake Winnipesaukee, at the Lake Shore Camp in Gilford (the commercial centre is Laconia). Lake Winnipesaukee is New England's third largest lake: about 180 square kilometres. Besides the innumerable barbecued frankfurters and hamburgers, I spent the time either swimming (you had to shower at the public shed before going in) or surreptitiously out on the family's motorboat that Craig knew to drive. One evening we went as far as Rattlesnake Island, which I had till then mistaken for the opposite shore. Lake Winnipesaukee, after all, has 258 islands. The lake was transparent at our patch, so we had no idea how deep it was when we walked in. At sunset it looked like a TV screen in outer space, filled with orange and blue electronic noise. American liberals really do know how to preserve natural beauty.

This time however I went to Em's cabin because it was close to the place I needed to visit: Keene, New Hampshire, near the Vermont border. Keene is a small college town, with a population under 25,000—and one of those residents was my high school buddy Richard, who was dying, and whom I went to see.

What a beautiful place he spent his last years in. Besides being the town where *Jumanji*, starring Robin Williams, was filmed, it is laid out with colonial houses (it was settled in 1736) and a town square that reminds you of a Norman Rockwell painting of unspoilt New England heritage: pristine Americana.

Keene is surrounded by hills and nearby is Vermont, which looks pretty wild from the highways—the natives keep their lands as untouched by blade as possible. It was convenient to stay with Em just under an hour away, at French Pond, where I could spend dawn contemplating the gentle waves lapping the wild shore, in the way that a life travels to its arc's completion. Families of ducks swam as if swimming were an end in itself, and the occasional blue-headed heron passed low over the centre of the lake before returning to its nest, perched high on a pine. It is a wonder how much nature Americans get to chew on. America is a place where you could simply get off the tourist track and wander anywhere and still find somewhere to explore and contemplate.

After Richard passed away, I visited my daughters in San Diego. I went from lakes to an ocean. The best anyone can do in writing about the Pacific Ocean is to surf on the foam of one's own speechlessness. Mrinalini, my elder daughter, took me for



**“IT IS A WONDER HOW MUCH
NATURE AMERICANS GET
TO CHEW ON”**



San Diego is home to 19 beaches and almost all of them teem with surfers (top); A stay at the cabins lining Lake Winnipesaukee is incomplete without hamburgers and barbequed frankfurters (bottom).



a hike on the oceanside Torrey Pines State Reserve, north of La Jolla, and one thing about the Southwest U.S. is that whenever you trek, you encounter the omnipresent cactus. Cactii come in all sizes and weird shapes—as if they were people from different cultures arriving at New York’s airports. Or like the people on their mid-morning jog through Torrey Pines. The reserve has a variety of trails leading up to the bluffs overlooking the magnificent Pacific.

Earth’s largest ocean seems to calmly lap up gigantic wave after gigantic wave onto the pebbly beach below. I like to play a game that I’m sure many others do: I look as far as my eyes will travel and catch the white crest of a wave as it forms in the distance and grows while moving shoreward. At this point in life I experience a tinge of sadness where I wonder why I never built on my mathematics degree to study oceanography, instead of becoming a hack. In any case, watching the green waves is mesmerising and it becomes apparent why Californians are so laid-back.

Seeing how much I love the ocean, Mrinalini takes me to some beaches in San Diego. The city is home to 19 beaches and its coastline stretches up to 111 kilometres. We go to the more popular ones—Ocean Beach, Pacific Beach, La Jolla; and everywhere, youngsters are surfing. Watching someone surf is less exciting than actually surfing. “I’m going to learn to surf,” Mrinalini announces. She then shrieks because a tern waddles towards us in inquiry. I think about the cities I have lived in with beaches—Chennai and Mumbai—and though the hidden ones on East Coast Road (south of Chennai) are a treasure, the public ones would be so much better if they were litter-free like California beaches. And here, everyone walks around unabashedly in chappals.

One morning the daughters—Mrinalini and Anya the activist—and I go out to watch whales. We go about 17.6 kilometres into the ocean, and the waves are so huge that our vessel, *The Privateer*, a double-deck whale-watching boat bounces high into the air, causing the girls, and most of the other guests, to vomit their breakfast. Much of the three-hour journey was spent on top of an underwater canyon, waiting for the whales that hang out there, but they refused to show up. (I suspected they



“GLASS, GLASSY LAKES: SOMETHING SPARKLES ABOUT AMERICA”



“HERE, EVERYONE WALKS AROUND UNABASHEDLY IN CHAPPALS”

were right under the boat, following us around surreptitiously.) We did see some sea lions and we did get a coupon for a free trip again, but I don't think the vomiteers are going back.

There's one day I avoid the beach: April 22, Earth Day, when Mrinalini has to lead a women's hackathon north of the city. Since San Diego abuts the border with Mexico, Anya the activist and I plan to visit Tijuana. But I can't take my rental car across the border, and in any case, as Mrinalini says, “Tijuana is like Delhi, all built up.” The real Mexico is further in, requiring a separate holiday, and I no longer get excited by the prospect of entry stamps on my passport. So instead, Anya the activist and I decide to explore the embarcadero (the marina located downtown) and perhaps go out to the Coronado Island where the naval base is. We take selfies and scratch our heads at a Falun Gong stall.

Suddenly we see people walking with banners. They are arriving from all directions: women, men, children and even dogs. They are converging at the San Diego City and County Administration Building (alias the civic centre), yet another structure that reminds me of the TV series *Breaking Bad*. Anya the activist and I decide to join the crowd and suddenly we're surrounded by around 15,000 Californians who are annoyed with President Donald Trump and his rejection of climate change, his rejection of General Science, and his rejection of intelligence generally. I see a dog in a white lab coat; I see effigies of Trump, which incidentally are always an improvement on his actual self; I see all sorts of genius signs: “The oceans are rising and so are we,” “I'm with her” (pointing to an icon of Mother Earth), “Keep your tiny hands off our data” (my favourite), “Atoms make up everything, just like Trump” and many more. Americans are truly inventive. The rally, held in cities across America, was the ultimate in people-watching; and that's exactly the point of tourism—to see people, as well as nature and monuments.

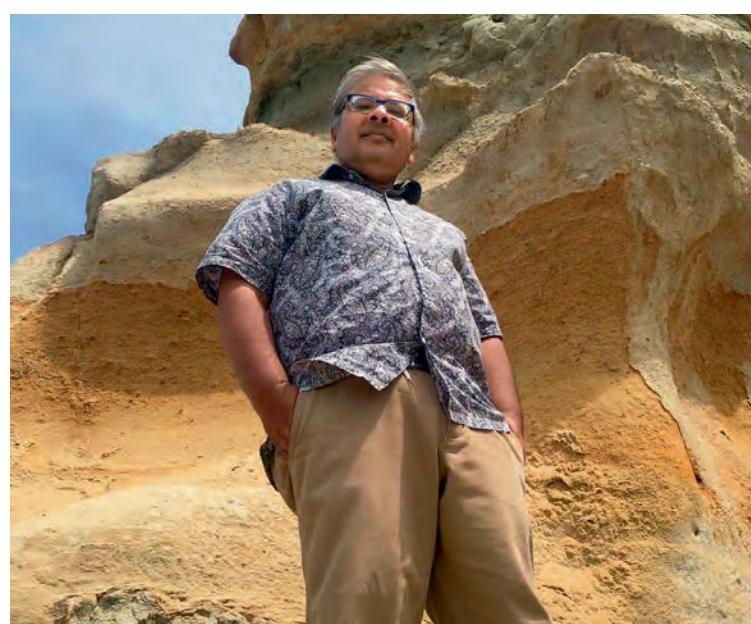
It is a morning well spent and afterwards we treat ourselves to a tasty soup and sandwich up in the hipster section of San Diego, North Park (where there's even a deli and health foods shop for dogs and cats). And the next day, it was back to the beach.

Everywhere you go in California there is a place to just bask in the sun and watch people. In a way it is a counterpoint to the East Coast, where everything looks to the past, because on the West Coast, everyone is trying to invent the future. And that's the thing about America—every single patch of it is a fascinating study of people and nature. It truly is the land of milk and honey, from sea to shining sea. ■

Aditya Sinha is the author of *The CEO Who Lost His Head* (2017), *Kashmir: The Vajpayee Years* (2015, with A.S. Dulat); *Death of Dreams: A Terrorist's Tale* (2000); *Farooq Abdullah: Kashmir's Prodigal Son* (1995). He is a regular columnist for *Mid-Day*, *Khaleej Times*, and *Provoke* magazine. He is currently working on a memoir set in lower Manhattan's Stuyvesant High School in the late 1970s.



From rallies in Chicago to California, Donald Trump effigies (top) always look like an improvement on his actual self; The Corning Museum of Glass is a must-visit for the sheer variety of objects it displays, like these 19th-century whisky bottles (middle); A hike to Torrey Pines State Park (bottom) is dotted with cactii that come in all sizes and weird shapes.



Making Capital Gains

BEYOND ITS POLITICS, WASHINGTON, D.C. IS MAKING HISTORY WITH ITS MODERN MUSEUMS AND SCRUMPTIOUS FOOD



From POV, the W. Hotel's rooftop bar and restaurant, guests are treated to an unhindered view of the Washington Monument and the White House.

A photograph taken from an elevated position, likely a balcony or terrace, looking out over a green lawn towards the Washington Monument. The monument is a tall, light-colored obelisk. In the background, the white dome of the Jefferson Memorial is visible across the Reflecting Pool. The foreground shows the dark railing of the balcony and some architectural details of the building.

TEXT BY SHREEVATSA NEVATIA
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SUPRIYA KANTAK

Driving to our hotel from the airport, Supriya turned to me and said, "You told me you were bringing me to the States, but look outside, you've got me to Chandigarh." She was being facetious.

Her smile was a dead giveaway. I could see Supriya's point, though. Like Chandigarh, Washington, D.C.'s streets were spotless, its parks manicured. Only monuments and government buildings were more conspicuous here.



Georgetown is Washington, D.C.'s all-purpose neighbourhood. The district has high-end shops, trendy restaurants and renowned bars. The buildings here are pretty, and their graffiti and murals inventive.

"More Delhi than Chandigarh, no?" I asked gingerly. Capitals, I argued, all resembled each other. The architecture was stately. Even if their leaders didn't have towering personalities, their buildings did. Though she was the photographer, I did take to Instagram more often. I was at a geopolitical epicentre.

The next morning, sitting atop a double-decker tour bus, I felt peeved. "I am not a tourist", I wanted to moan sanctimoniously. The view, perhaps expectedly, placated me. As we passed the Washington Monument, the White House and the F.B.I.'s headquarters, I looked on with some marvel. Neither CNN nor popular culture had

done them adequate justice. Ron Wright, our 69-year-old guide, quacked when he saw ducks, and grew more excited when he saw a convoy. "Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you the President of the United States," he said, pointing to a passing motorcade. Sadly, Ron was quick to puncture the momentousness of the occasion: "There was no ambulance at the back. That wasn't him."

Suddenly, Ron looked up from his handkerchief and said into his mike, "The thing about Washington City is that it is a made-up place." The Washingtonian, it turned out, was too proud to be pejorative. He was simply stating fact. It was only on July 16, 1790, that the Resident Act approved



“THE THING ABOUT WASHINGTON CITY IS THAT IT IS A MADE-UP PLACE

—RON WRIGHT

its creation. Unlike other great cities of the world, Washington was something of an afterthought. Later that afternoon, Supriya and I decided to visit the U.S. Capitol. We wanted an inside view. Tom Fontana, director of communications at the Capitol's Visitor Center, met us outside. "The senators left at 2.30 a.m. Be prepared to see very bleary-eyed folk," he said, moving quickly through the Center's lobby.

Tom had a story to tell about every corner of the Capitol, even the restroom. "A few days ago, a father and son went in there, and the son looked at all the marble and asked, 'Where are we?' The father declared, 'This is *our* Capitol, son.' That's the kind of loyalty this place inspires." As Tom walked us through to the Capitol's separate wings, he spoke at breakneck speed. We had only a few seconds to gawk at the building's statues and at frescoes which rivalled that of Sistine Chapel's. Standing on the balcony where U.S. Presidents are sworn in, Tom said, "Every four years, this is where it all begins." Our guide, we soon realised, was not altogether immune to irony. In the lobby of the Visitor Center, we stopped to see a replica of the Statue of Freedom that sits on top of the Capitol's dome. After holding forth about its significance, Tom leaned in and whispered, "The Statue of Freedom was built by a slave."

Both Supriya and I often looked beyond museums when travelling. Culture, we agreed, is usually found in an elsewhere that isn't curated or air-conditioned. D.C.'s museums, however, told their compelling stories in buildings that were seductive, even from afar. For instance, the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture (NMAAHC) proved hard to miss. Its pagoda-like structure was quirky, though not out of place. Much like the 10 other Smithsonian museums on the Mall, the National Museum of American History did not charge its visitors,

but unlike its somewhat imposing neighbours, it also did something altogether spectacular. On the museum's first level, you feel sucker punched. Exhibits and installations take you back to the 1400s, to ships and plantations where African slaves were beaten, exploited, even killed. You see train carriages that were segregated and stone blocks where men and women were auctioned. The edges of history have not been smoothed here. They have been sharpened.

Other levels were cheerier. We found Louis Armstrong's trumpet, author James Baldwin's inkwell and a floral yellow dress that civil rights activist Rosa Parks had sewed. Refreshingly, the NMAAHC was also in the habit of talking back. Located on the second floor of the museum, the Robert Frederick Smith 'Explore Your Family History' Center used photographs, oral histories and artefacts to draw connections between American history and the stories of black families and communities. The Center's digital archives and genealogical research made the NMAAHC experience both interactive and deeply personal. Few museums addressed so directly the fissures of society. I heard a guide say, "African American history *is* American history." My own deductions were similar. American history is African American first.

America, it must be said, does know how to come together. At Newseum, a museum that traces the evolution of news media and communication, the 9/11 Gallery housed the broadcast antennae from the top of the World Trade Centre. Watching a 9/11 documentary in the audio-visual theatre, I saw a woman sob. The museum's effect was visceral. Upholding that journalistic ideal of neutrality, Newseum stopped short of comment. It only documented the past and present. Back at Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, however, critique was more conspicuous. For his solo



“I THINK A LOT OF TRAVELLERS

LIKE ME DO EVENTUALLY

**FIND THEIR WAY TO
WASHINGTON, D.C.**

—CHAE YI

WHERE WE ATE



BEN'S CHILLI BOWL

The chilli dogs, milkshakes and half-smokes are essential. Also, Obama ate here.



CAFÉ BONAPARTE

The crab benedict at this Parisian café in Georgetown would make Napoleon stop.



BIDWELL

Located in the remodelled Union Market, Bidwell's food is organic and delish.



RASIKA

Indian street food—chaat, kebabs, sweets—are given a fine dining twist here.



Ai Weiwei's solo project "Trace" is showing at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden till January 1, 2018. The Chinese artist has used Lego parts to draw portraits of the world's political dissenters.

project, "Trace at Hirshhorn", the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei had used Lego parts to draw portraits of the world's dissenters. Until January 1, 2018, at least, D.C. will be a stage for wily theatrics, yes, but it will also see Weiwei's defiance.

Nate Glusenkamp, a friend I went to college in Britain with, has lived in Washington for nearly a

decade. He met us on 7th Street NW, at Rocket Bar. "It's the real deal," he told me. The dive bar was suitably dark. It made for a reunion that was unhurried. Nate still wore the baseball cap he did nine years ago, and was over the moon when he heard that Supriya and I had gone to see the Washington Nationals play the Colorado Rockies. "A truly bipartisan experience," he laughed. Nate and I were in the same room when Barack Obama became President in 2008. We had hugged. Politics was now something we glossed over. "Down with the electoral college, man," he waved his hand. When we were three drinks down, I asked Nate why he still lived in Washington. "Work, obviously," he said, "but the city is so walkable. It is easy to get around, and despite being a big city, it feels like a town." He was not done. "People come to the U.S. and go to Florida, Vegas and New York. We should add D.C. to that list."

Though Nate had given up smoking, he did light my cigarette. "Where you staying?" he asked. "We're put up at the W. Hotel." He was quick to tease and say, "Fancy!" His taunt was warranted. The W. was plush. Called the Washington Hotel from 1917 to 2007, the property moved from being old-world to trendy after a 92-million dollar renovation. From POV, its rooftop bar and restaurant, you got an unhindered view of the White House and the Washington Monument.



“
**NEIGHBOURHOODS NO ONE
WOULD EVER VISIT ARE NOW
THRIVING CENTRES OF ART
AND CULTURE**
—MARLON NORMAN



Elvis stayed here in 1970, and some employees still talk of a secret passageway that gives presidents uninspected entry. "I did hear about that, but I have never seen it," confessed Marlon Norman, the 'W. Insider' at the concierge desk.

Born in Washington, Norman then began to talk of the city with an infectious enthusiasm. "Because it had a majority African American population, D.C. was nicknamed 'Chocolate City', but gentrification changed that reputation. If you ask me, some of that was a good thing. Neighbourhoods no one would ever visit are now thriving centres of art and culture." Norman led us to Blagden Alley. "It was once considered unsafe, but you need to look at it now," he said. Most buildings in this lane had been painted over with murals. There were cafés, galleries and bars everywhere. One of these, Columbia Bar, was voted 2017's Best American Cocktail Bar at Tales of the Cocktail, a yearly New Orleans trade conference.

District Distilling, a combined bar, kitchen and distillery, should perhaps vie for a prize or two of its own. The littleneck clams and seared scallops here were sumptuous, and the drinks—tasty as they were—did not encourage moderation. CEO Chae Yi was not envious of Columbia's success: "It only confirms D.C.'s claim of being a culinary destination. The city is historically important, but it's also contemporary cool." Yi was born in

Korea. He lived in Connecticut as a child, then went to New York for college, spent many years in Vermont and later moved to D.C. "This is the story of many Washingtonians," he said. "It's the story of travellers, and I think a lot of travellers like me do eventually find their way to Washington, D.C."

Having grown up and worked in Delhi, restaurateur Ashok Bajaj first travelled to Washington in 1988. "Washington was only a small Southern town then, but it had no fine dining Indian restaurants, so I opened the Bombay Club, and I have not looked back since," he said. We met Bajaj on the day the Restaurant Association Metropolitan Washington was awarding him a lifetime RAMMY for his achievements. Sitting in his restaurant Rasika, Bajaj was talkative. "Things really changed for me after Bill Clinton came to the Bombay Club in 1993. Barack and Michelle Obama ate out a lot too. They even made arugula popular." Bajaj kindly insisted we eat lunch at his restaurant. Seeing palak chaat on our table, Supriya said, "I told you, Chandigarh!" I laughed. The States would always be my known unknown. ■

Supriya Kantak poses as a photographer so she can travel. She is happiest at altitudes 1,000 metres above sea level. She posts on Instagram as @routes_and_shoots

(Clockwise from top right) A boy uses an interactive feature at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture; Supporters of the Washington Nationals wait for their team to score against the Colorado Rockies; From the balcony of Newseum, you get a clear view of the Capitol.

THE DESTINATION

According to news reports, parts of Houston received over 50 inches of rain from Hurricane Harvey, the highest recorded for a single tropical storm in the United States.

AFTER THE FLOOD



Houston represents the best of America—a welcoming ethos, soaring aspirations, a confluence of cultures and, now following a devastating hurricane, the grace to overcome

BY SUKHADA TATKE



The city has an eclectic palate with restaurants and cafés dishing out food from Vietnam to Guatemala and Eritrea to India.

From above, it was nothing as imagined. No overflowing rivers, panic-stricken movements or signs of a disaster. But then, distance doesn't always promise perspective.

The ride back home from the airport under a clear blue sky, along the web of large freeways that festoon Houston, began to reveal the extent of the wreckage Hurricane Harvey had caused while I was away. My taxi driver pointed to an underpass and said, "This was completely under water." She then reached for her phone and passed it to me, the photo gallery open. "Scroll down," she said, adding that the images were from her neighbourhood where she had been stranded. High waters. Floating cars. Uprooted trees. People on rooftops.

Only a few days earlier, I had witnessed, from across the seas, Harvey's assault on my adopted home. From afar, I had seen the waters rise and rise, slaying Houston one gush at a time. Then the rains came to Mumbai where I was. Both my home cities, hitherto separated by time and distance, merged into a single ravaging cascade of deluge and high winds, in conjunction with all their concomitant trauma, despair and destruction.

Many of my significant experiences in Houston will go down as rain-swept memories. Waiting for buses that never came; being stuck without a car at the Battleship Texas site close to the port of Houston; driving in the darkness of a stormy morning. On all these occasions rain pounded mercilessly. Before the downpour, the familiar routine—the moisture-laden air and the melting heat—and finally, that sweet aftertaste of the first raindrops feeding the parched earth. All of this reminded me of Mumbai, of home.

A first-time visitor could be fooled into believing Houston is everything that Texas represents—large swathes of unoccupied land, strip malls, pick-up trucks, houses flaunting not just the American flag, but also the Lone Star Texan one. If Texans are not bashful about flaunting their pride at being, well, Texans, Houstonians, in addition to this, wear Houston on their sleeve.

The Houston story, however, is not about what it is, but what it is not. A radical departure from the conservative ideals of the rest of the state, H-town defies Texas stereotypes.

Founded on the banks of the sluggish Buffalo Bayou in the 1830s by two New York real estate developers, Houston gradually exploded to become the country's fourth largest city. Buoyed by robust petroleum and shipping industries, a thriving medical centre, and its proximity to the Gulf of Mexico, the metropolis emerged as a magnet for those who had faith in the American dream of untrammeled growth and endless possibilities. Houston, while offering both, has also long provided refuge to those fleeing life-threatening conditions in their home countries.

Call it the future of the U.S.A., as some posit Houston to be; a future which sees minorities as majorities; a future in which people from Vietnam and Guatemala, Eritrea and El Salvador, South Korea and Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Iraq, Syria and Iran, and beyond, outnumber white people; the kind of future that puts the likes of Donald Trump ill at ease.

THE DESTINATION

In Houston, you find everything and its opposite. Walk along the narrow Europe-like bustling streets in Midtown (a new model for development with pedestrian and bike-friendly designs), and contrast it with the adjoining Freedmen's Town—a place steeped in history. If Midtown projects the gentrified future of Houston, Freedmen's Town tries to hold on to its last remaining homes and brick streets built by one of the earliest communities in the city: the freed African American slaves.

I live at the confluence of such contrasts. If I said I lived in River Oaks, I'd be confused for a rich white person doing things like having a pass to the rich white exclusive kingdom of the River Oaks Country Club, inhabiting a mansion or a stone house from the Victorian era, probably with a fence so high you'd wonder what it shielded within, and eating at the upscale Tex Mex Armando restaurant or Eddie V's Prime Seafood.

But I live in neighbouring Montrose. Montrose of the relaxed bars and cafés brimming with life; streets laced with trees and small cottages with large porches coming alive thanks to the various synergies of people from everywhere; rainbow flags fluttering—a nod to its contribution to bringing the LGBTQ community together—signalling that everyone is welcome here.

If you want to travel the world, come to Houston. With anywhere between 85 and 150 spoken languages, and no ethnic or racial majority, the city—more diverse than New York and Los Angeles—is an oasis in the large state of Texas.

"We don't have to wait to go to Brazil to give you a taste of it," a friend from Porto Alegre said one day. Off we went to an authentic Brazilian restaurant—Emporio Brazilian Grill—where I tried my first chicken stroganoff and feijoada. Every expatriate I have met here, has tried to recreate an authentic version of their homeland through food. Our Iranian car insurance provider pointed us to Garson, his favourite Persian restaurant in town. "Don't leave without trying their *koubideh* and *shishleek*," he said, an order we happily obeyed. Over the years, many a happy meal has been had: Turkish, Mexican, Ethiopian, Greek, Vietnamese, Argentinian. On my part, I have journeyed with people on their discoveries of Indian cuisine at Hillcroft (christened Mahatma Gandhi District a few years ago), my home away from home.

Food aside, Houston, which until not too long ago was a marshy swamp, throws up unexpected bucolic moments. The city is far from a walker's paradise, and yet, some roads lay out magical walking pathways—sheltered by canopies of live oak trees whose leaves cast a shadow on the ground, a cooling carpet on a summer day. Then there is Hermann Park, the nearly 400-acre lung smack in the middle of the city. This tract is flanked by other salubrious parcels of land: the Rice University campus and the Miller Outdoor Theatre where one can sit on a grassy hill and absorb theatre, dance and music performances.

Houston may not be a match to New York, Los Angeles or Washington, D.C. when it comes to museums, but the museum district with its internationally acclaimed Museum of Fine Arts and Museum of Natural Science, and the lesser-known Children's and Health museums cannot be easily brushed off.

But outside this district, in a territory of its own, is the intimate Menil Collection mirroring the complexity of the city. "It exemplifies the quiet intimacy of Houston with its weird juxtapositions of the ordinary and the monumental," my friend Raj said of it once. A few metres down, is a sacred shrine.



1 Houston's economic and social progress is a true microcosm of the American dream. **2** The Rothko Chapel is a shrine to the artworks of Mark Rothko and this sculpture, "Broken Obelisk" (a dedication to Martin Luther King Jr.), greeted visitors to the chapel until 2016.

3 Houstonians, like most Texans, take pride in their barbecue culture. The city also hosts annual festivals celebrating this tradition. **4** Even as H-town reeled from the devastation of Hurricane Harvey, residents found moments of normalcy and sweetness.





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Rothko Chapel is not for everyone, and yet, it invites all those who dare to confront an eerie stillness and calm. Within the modern octagon structure are dark monochromatic paintings by Mark Rothko. A single source of light beams from the roof. If the unusual experience leads to a few disconcerting moments, it also forces you to look inward, as silence and meditation do.

Houston is a place that makes you look beyond yourself, encouraging you to embrace the unknown. It is, after all, the city that sent man to the moon. It was here, at Rice University's packed stadium, that president John F. Kennedy delivered his famous "we choose to go to the moon" speech. While the workings of the universe are uncertain, what's certain is that a visit to NASA's Space Centre can leave you wanting to orbit it. You don't need to know about the Apollo missions to marvel at the command module of Apollo 17, the last to land on the moon; or be obsessed with our faithful satellite to be hypnotised by its dust.

The various life-giving bayous that insidiously crisscross the city—including the Buffalo Bayou, along whose path Houston's skyline presents itself as you hit downtown—also take on life-snatching avatars when they swell during the rain. In a series of punishing storms over the years, Harvey delivered the final salvo that wrecked Houston. The unrestricted growth that makes the city what it is, can also break it.

Recently, walking around downtown—where poems on Houston by locals are plastered on billboards in front of tall glass buildings, a fitting one caught my eye. "The city ebbs and flows a route, an action, a set of gestures repeated." Houston, like many cities, has risen and fallen and risen again; what else can cities do? But its recent trauma, brought to the surface a layer that a sceptical new entrant like me needed to see.

Before Harvey's devastating landfall, I had had a hard time seeing the good in Houston—now my home for three years. I complained about the faltering public transportation, inability to walk, dependence on cars and a missing sense of community. While most of those complaints are likely to remain, something has changed.

Distance did offer perspective. My heart grew fond of Houston as I saw it lose precious bits of itself. Landing home after four months of being away was like returning to an old love whose value you understood only as an urgent presentiment, when you stood to lose what you didn't know you cherished.

The difference in Houston before and after Harvey is subtle but palpable; to the connoisseur it's the difference between the prosaic and poetic. So come to Houston for its green spaces, its art, its independent bookstores, its pork ribs and briskets; but come especially for the people, the backbone of this city that almost broke as it took on the burden of keeping the rest upright and erect.

In the aftermath of its worst devastation, Houston is now a picture of ourselves: exhausted, and yet, unwilling to bend; shattered, and yet pregnant with hope. In NASA speak, "Houston, tranquility base here. The Eagle has landed." The eagle will soar; Houston is meant to reach for the moon. ■

Sukhada Tatke is a Mumbai-bred, Houston-based writer. She tweets as @ASuitableGirl.

New York

AS GOOD AS A WEEKEND GETS



A sensory overload of food, art, culture and fun through
the greatest city in the world

BY SHEFALI PANDEY

There are few cities in the world that can always be relied on to provide a jolt of adrenaline to the aerial onlooker from an airplane window. There are the plastic blue rooftops of Mumbai and its thrum of human activity, or Paris's Eiffel Tower and its cafés and artistic whimsy. And then there is New York City, whose intimidating and well-recognised skyline can give one goosebumps quicker than any other city.

The visceral thrills of New York may be lost on homebodies. For a truly riotous time, prepare to give up sleep and make your way through our 72-hour guide to this Red Bull of a city.

FRIDAY

6:00 p.m. THE JANE HOTEL



As you make your landing on Friday evening, do what the survivors of the Titanic did and head for a stay at this fancy nautical-themed establishment. Situated along the West Village waterfront, and known as the Seamen's Relief Center in the earlier half of the 20th century, the hotel has small ship cabin-like rooms for the budget conscious while the affluent can splurge on the larger captain's cabin. Come for the affordable rooms and stay for the chic Wes Anderson feel. An added bonus is the grand ballroom with views of the Hudson River and all kinds of antique knick-knacks, including a life-size portrait of Maharani Gayatri Devi (www.thejanenyc.com).

7:00 p.m. ANGEL'S SHARE

Walk or cab it to the East Village to find an unmarked door next to the Japanese restaurant, Village Yokocho, to enter this dark and hard-to-find speakeasy. Then get your evening going with Japanese-style cocktails such as the strong and delicious Flirtibird, with barley shochu and yuzu nectar, or the dramatic whiskey-based Smoke Gets In Your Eyes (nymag.com/listings/bar/angels_share).

9:00 p.m. IPPUDO NY

Before you head to Angel's Share, put your name down on the waiting list for ramen at Ippudo, a few blocks away. The menu includes some of the most flavourful fatty pork, chicken and beef broths in the city. Vegetarians too are surprisingly spoilt



for choice with multiple miso and vegetable broth options. However, be prepared to share tables or sit at the bar and slurp your noodle with strangers, while watching the chefs whip up ramen and steamed buns (www.ippudony.com).

11:00 p.m. COMEDY NIGHT



Tummy now full, it's time to satisfy your funny bone. There is the legendary **Comedy Cellar** basement, seen in the opening credits of the TV show *Louie*, where stand-up headliners such as Amy Schumer and Chris Rock sometimes show up unannounced. Or experience the best of improv at **Upright Citizen's Brigade (UCB)**. There are also smaller and wackier shows to be enjoyed like the New York Neo-futurists on 4th Street above KGB Bar in the East Village. For more free-flowing and ribald humour, attend a late-night stand-up show (www.comedycellar.com; uebtheatre.com; www.nyneofuturists.org; kgbar.com).

1:00 p.m. DIVE DOWN

A night in the East Village is incomplete without cheap drinks served by a sassy bartender in a dimly lit dive bar with graffiti-splattered bathrooms, ripped leather seats and the air reeking of alcohol, chlorine and body fluids. Choose between the punk vibe of **Manitoba's** in Alphabet City, the **Double Down Saloon** that has a famous shot of Ass Juice, said to be a mix of all the previous night's leftover drinks, or the B-movies projected over the bar at **The Library**, near Houston Street (nymag.com/listings/bar/library; doubledownsaloon.com; www.manitobas.com).

3:00 p.m. BELGIAN FRIES

If you have a case of the post-midnight munchies, **Pommes Frites** on MacDougal Street is the place for you. Choose from a list of fruity mayonnaises and curry ketchup or simply keep it simple with basic vinegar to accompany your chunky golden Belgian fries (www.pommesfritesnyc.com).



SATURDAY

9.00 p.m. **HIGHLINE PARK**



Build up an appetite for brunch with a walk through the elevated Highline Park, built on a disused railway track, starting at the Lower West Side through the Meatpacking District and Chelsea, all the way up to Midtown. Marvel at the city's traffic from a higher ground and take notes on how to turn a discarded bit of urban industrial infrastructure into a much-loved public green space (www.thehighline.org).

11.00 a.m. PAOWALLA

The restaurant is the creation of chef Floyd Cardoz, the man behind Mumbai's Bombay Canteen. An ode to his Goan roots, this is his second foray into the competitive NYC food scene after Tabla, which closed in 2010. Favourites on the menu include good old *paav* with Goan chorizo bacon butter; the chef's *Top Chef Masters* winning upma polenta; and Barkha's bebinca, based on his grandmother's layered cake recipe. There's even a *gulab nut* with cashew cream on the menu for Bombay Canteen devotees (www.paowalla.com).

2.00 p.m. GIVE ME SOME DIM SUM

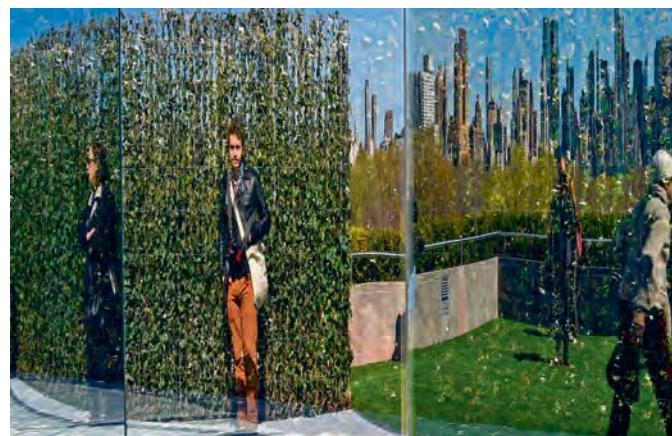


From Paowalla in SoHo walk over to Chinatown's **Prosperity Dumpling** on Eldridge Street for their chive and pork dumplings. The other option is to head to **Lam Zhou Handmade Noodle** for a bowl of noodle soup or to **Vegetarian Dimsum House** on Pell Street for savoury and sweet dumplings and vegetarian variations of every imaginable meat dish (prosperitydumpling.com; nymag.com/listings/restaurant/lan-zhou-handmade-noodle; vegetariandimsum.com).

4.00 p.m. MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Skip the usual MOMA and MET tour, get on an MTA city bus from Chinatown to this lesser-known museum on 103rd Street in the Upper East Side. An excellent place to learn about the history of New York's buildings, people, political movements and countercultures, you will come out of here knowing a thing or two. For instance, the word 'Manhattan' comes from the Native American Lenape word 'Manna-hata' meaning 'island of many hills' (www.mcny.org).

6.30 p.m. **CANTOR ROOF GARDEN BAR**



If you are visiting between May and November, walk a few blocks down 5th Avenue to the Metropolitan Museum. Head straight to the seasonal rooftop bar overlooking Central Park as it's only open until 8.15 p.m. on Saturdays. Sip your martini, take in the view of Central Park and behind it, the sun setting on the skyline, and now think about how you are generally #winningatlife (www.metmuseum.org).

9.00 p.m. CARMINE'S

If there is one touristy thing you allow yourself to do, let it be a trip to Carmine's near Times Square. Leave the photo ops to first-timers and settle down into the loud and noisy dining room at this Italian restaurant with massive portions. Try the lobster with penne or basic spaghetti with marinara sauce. Order extra calamari and bread and don't worry about getting your hands dirty (www.carminesnyc.com).

11.00 p.m. JAZZ FEST

While at this point, most tourists will make a beeline for a Broadway show, be a rule-breaker and head to one of the city's legendary jazz bars instead. You could pick the hole-in-the-wall vibe of the underground **Smalls Jazz Club** in Greenwich Village or, if you are early, the slightly more upscale **Iridium**, in Midtown West, where legends such as guitar virtuoso Les Paul and fusion maestro R. Prasanna have played (www.smallslive.com; theiridium.com).



SUNDAY

9.00 a.m. BAGEL BITE



What could be better than contemplating life while chewing on a fresh sesame bagel with scallion cream cheese, in between sips of an Americano, while alternating between people-watching and reading the Sunday *NYT*, in Washington Square Park. To

kick off your weekend morning joy, pick the bagel wisely—either from **Murray's** on 8th Avenue in Chelsea and their selection of extra giant bagels. My favourite is **Brooklyn Bagel**, one block up the same neighbourhood, with cream cheese flavours like honey bacon sriracha, diavolo chipotle and birthday cake cream cheese (www.murraysbagels.com; bkbagel.com).

11.00 a.m. BROOKLYN BRIDGE



Once you are done lingering and relishing your bagel, jump on the A, C or N, R trains to Brooklyn Bridge City Hall Station. The pictures and the views are worth it. Start from the Manhattan side of the Brooklyn Bridge and walk towards Brooklyn, while looking up from under the bridge's magnificent arches, and all around to the strength of the steel cables holding up this suspension bridge, and the glorious skyline behind you.

3.00 p.m. MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

From Brooklyn make your way to Queens for a visit to this fun museum archiving almost everything we know today as entertainment. Film and television fans hold steady thy heart, there are iconic pop-culture artefacts including Robert De Niro's Mohawk wig from the *Taxi Driver* and Star Ship Enterprise jerseys with the gold insignia from the original *Star Trek*. The exhibitions include a permanent Jim Henson exhibit to please the Sesame Street loving muppethead, as well as a temporary video arcade exhibit where you can play games such as Pacman and Donkey Kong (www.movingimage.us).

6.00 p.m. JACKSON HEIGHTS, QUEENS

Switch to the 7 train at Queensboro Plaza to make your way to Jackson Heights, the headquarters of all things desi in *Amreeka*, before the move to New Jersey and beyond. Visit **Raja Sweets** for the best aloo parathas outside of my mom's kitchen. Then

head beyond the grocery stores and over to the Pakistani joint, **Dera**, for the best *kulfi falooda* with a side of *rabri*. For authentic Nepali goat, step into **Thakali Kitchen** or **Hamro Bhim's Cafe**. And for rasgullas pick from a host of Bangladeshi sweet shops. Welcome to all of South Asia crammed into a few New York blocks (www.yelp.com/biz/raja-sweets-and-fast-food-jackson-heights; www.yelp.com/biz/dera-restaurant-jackson-heights; www.yelp.com/biz/hamro-bhims-cafe-jackson-heights).

9.00 p.m. LIPS NYC



Once Queens is on the itinerary, can a drag show be far behind? Head to Lips NYC in Midtown East for lip-sync performance combined with good-natured vulgar comedy and over-the-top costumes. In your last few hours in the city, raise a toast and get roasted by a drag queen on stage (www.nycdragshow.com).

12.00 a.m. FINAL HURRAH



For last-minute cravings, run to the **Katz's Delicatessen** in the Lower East Side or **Joe's Pizza** in the West Village. If you are homesick, there's *kadhi chawal* to be had at **Punjabi Deli** across from Katz's. End with one final drink at **Jane NYC**. Raise a toast to this alpha city with the soul of a hustling artist (www.katzsdelicatessen.com; www.joespizzanyc.com; nymag.com/listings/restaurant/punjabi-deli). ■

Shefali Pandey travels, writes and makes websites. She is sometimes found in New York, Bombay or Ahmedabad, but always found on Instagram @shefalipandey.

THE DESTINATION

Joggers aside, the mood at Forsyth Park is laid-back. Dog owners bring their pets here for a walk, buskers play their guitars, while children play ball. Forsyth's primary attraction, though, is its fountain.



HIGH ON SOUTHERN COMFORT

Savannah takes things slow. The obvious beauty of this city can be intoxicating. Its people have big hearts and perhaps an even bigger appetite

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
SUPRIYA KANTAK

TEXT BY
SHREEVATSA NEVATIA



Once a Greyhound station, the Grey (top) redefines Savannah's idea of cool. The wine list here is extensive and the food—country pasta, spicy roasted eggplant—is both Southern and fresh.

If Willie Wonka really did have a factory, it would perhaps look like Candy Kitchen (left). Its counters have on display everything from pecan pralines to salt-water taffy.

For tourists and locals alike, Leopold's Ice Cream (right) can become an essential, everyday stop. With flavours like Rum Bisque and Peanut Butter Chippy, there's something about Leopold's that makes a child of every visitor.





Seafood in Savannah is unavoidable and scrumptious. At the popular Crab Shack (left), tables have in their middle a round hole with a large bin underneath. You need somewhere to throw all your crab and mussel shells. Given the size of even their smallest platters, you soon develop an appetite as large as your table's pit.

It is hard finding a table at Mrs. Wilke's Dining Room (bottom). For \$22, the establishment offers an all-you-can-eat spread. Their fried chicken and barbecue pork fill the stomach, but their sausages and macaroni only worsen your insatiable greed.



THE DESTINATION



The people of Savannah know *Forrest Gump* inside out. Scenes of the film were shot here. Its opening sequence, for instance, has made one steeple (left) iconic.

The Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) keeps the city young and hip. The work of the students can be purchased at shopSCAD Savannah (top).

Savannah has a reputation of being America's most haunted city, and the 17Hundred90 Inn was voted by CNN as its favourite haunted spot. Anna, a ghost immortalised by its window (bottom), has a clear penchant—frilly underwear.





Driving from downtown Savannah, you reach Tybee Island in just 20 minutes. In the words of a Tybee resident, "This is where Georgia comes to chill." Restaurants in Tybee have grown in number, but it is still the beach (left) that is the island's main draw. On most days, you can see people surf and sunbathe. Children build their sandcastles, and time moves slowly.

Sometimes when fishing at the Tybee Pier (top), a shark rises to the bait. Because a 2001 ordinance made shark fishing illegal, they are all returned to the sea. There is, worryingly, always time for a quick photo shoot.

■ THE DESTINATION



French Quarter is the heart of New Orleans' jazz scene. Facing page: Clubs like The Maison (bottom) on Frenchmen Street pulse with swing bands and dancers; The city is famous for Mardi Gras, a festival marked by wild parties and carousers (top) in costumes.



There is a House in New Orleans

... and all that jazz, food and revelry make it as hopeful as the rising sun

By Gautam Joseph

I'm still a stranger to Mumbai than Holi, when I chase the sunset to an unmarked fort. And in the shadow of the Bandra-Worli Sea Link, I find music that takes me back two years and across oceans to New Orleans. I'm exploring the parapet of a 17th-century British fort when I first catch the strains of Master Simon's saxophone. As I follow it down to a boatshed that is filled with the instruments of Koliwada's village brass band, Master Simon, his son and grandson, greet me with their music and disposable chai cups. The cups are brimming with McDowell's rum. It is here, singing, dancing, and sharing earphones with Master Simon, that I remember the joy of finding the Spotted Cat Music Club on Frenchmen Street. Live bands and swing dancing; another world in what looks like any other street of bars. The oddities of New Orleans—the voodoo and ghost stories, the French balconies, the steamers up the Mississippi, slave tales and Mardi Gras lore—come together to make you tap your feet, and dance your late-night loves.

I'M IN NEW ORLEANS IN 2013, at the start of a month-long backpacking trip. The saxophone is the Pied Piper's flute that draws me there. And it's at the Spotted Cat, in a quiet corner of the heritage area,



JCARILLET/STOCK (WOMAN), FRANZ MARC FREI/LOOK-LOOK/GETTY IMAGES (MAN)
FACING PAGE: GTS PRODUCTIONS/SHUTTERSTOCK (ILLUSTRATION)

■ THE DESTINATION

that I fall in love with jazz. The band plays on a stage next to a window, overlooking the street. The saxophone has a visceral sound—speaking like a human voice, coaxing me past the dissonance I feel with English lyrics, into the heart of song.

There's a girl in a flowing white dress, red camellia in dark curly hair, parting the crowd with her tango. Jack and Hanna, whom I meet at the hostel, break into swing dance. Hanna's friend, Tee and I awkward-dance, her goofy faces making me swoon. The four of us go back four nights in a row, the musicians and dancers spilling onto the street with beers and smokes, everyone chatting everyone else up.

Back in my Worli room, I use Google Street View to trace my old paths through New Orleans' French Quarter. I find my Bermuda triangle—the site of many wrong turns in search of The Spotted Cat, and that spot where a clarinetist has been playing for 30 years. And these memories blend with images from hours before: Master Simon, his face coloured purple, blood red eyes, dark fingers jabbing brass keys, his body green and swaying, with those long sax solos where rhythm takes him places. Something clicks. Jazz is a way of seeing, of thinking about travel, especially for someone from the Global South visiting places whose grandeur might oppress.

What drew me to New Orleans was a need to say goodbye to the U.S. after four years of study, and a desire to find in stories of black resistance a way to place myself in relation to America, as a minority, as a privileged immigrant who can turn tourist, and a stranger from elsewhere. I travel the loops of these questions, like a musician with a tune stuck in his head, improvising as I meet others.

JACK, THE ASPIRING BLUES SINGER, is the one who leads us off the kitschy strip of bars on Bourbon Street. We go to a quiet neighbourhood on the edge of Faubourg Marigny, following his memory from many years back. And among its jazz clubs with exotic names—Café Negril, Blue Nile, Snug Harbour, The Maison—I first spot The Spotted Cat. On Frenchmen Street, jazz needs no explaining. It flows through bodies, reminding you why it sizzled and stretched sexual mores.

You pop in and out of clubs, getting a beer, and dropping what you can into hats passed around after gigs. Young bands that pay homage to the roots of jazz bring a sense of possibilities—of glitzy stages in New York and Chicago waiting around the corner. There is no trace in their music of elevator lobbies and malls, of cafés and movies that are nostalgic for a more elegant past. But it is in the Spotted Cat—its wood floors scratched by dancing heels, soaked in beers spilt over laughs, between walls echoing the most beautiful late night song every night for years on end—that jazz becomes my own.

IT'S NOT LONG AFTER I run into Master Simon in Mumbai that Beyoncé's "Formation" music video is released. I watch it on loop. The video is full of those run-down New Orleans blocks I'd first seen without the music that lets you into their pain. I pass those shotgun houses and creole cottages on the bus from the airport into downtown. I chat with a middle-aged man with two kids, returning alone after 10 years. As he points out landmarks from his childhood, he remarks on others that

have gone missing. And slowly goes quiet. There was first the devastation of hurricane and then the mortgage foreclosures.

INDIA HOUSE, THE HOSTEL, is my first taste of the motley mix that laid-back New Orleans offers tourists. Everyone here is passing through. I meet my fellow explorers here—Jack, Hanna, Pete, and Tee, among others. Jack is the blue-eyed chisel-jawed Californian you'd know from your teenage romance, a vegan farm boy who went to Buenos Aires to learn the cobblers' trade, but learnt to play guitar instead. He is looking for bars where he can sing the blues. Pete is from Glasgow, travelling the East Coast, learning the nuances of jazz. Hanna and Tee are on a *Lonely Planet* loop. There are a brother and sister, covered in piercings and ink, riding Harleys across the U.S.

While the nights are reserved for jazz and dance, the days help me explore the French Quarter, the square mile of heritage architecture with its grid of streets leading down to the Mississippi. There are two main arteries from the Canal Street tram stop as you walk toward the historic town centre—Royal Street and Bourbon Street. Royal Street is where I catch Yes Ma'am, the country and blues band, performing with washboards and banjos in the middle of the street one afternoon, and later

the same evening, I find Doreen Ketchens with her band.

She has played at jazz festivals, taught courses, performed before four U.S. presidents, but every week, she can be found standing at her New Orleans street corner with a changing group of musicians.

Thanks to Tee and Hanna, I find the yummy parts of the French Quarter—crawfish étouffées with light gravy served over rice; its close cousin, the gumbo stew; the shrimp po'boy sandwiches; donut-like beignets from Café Du Monde with chicory coffee; the simple but delicious rice and beans cooked with ham (a Louis Armstrong favourite).

The food hunt is an excuse to see every corner of the district. Every street has its share of old eateries—Mother's Restaurant, Central Grocery, Johnny's po'boys—along with boutique hotels and restaurants riding on the beauty of cast iron balconies. There are also art galleries, Cajun spice stores, voodoo trinket stores, and gift shops. Closer to the river, the streets converge on a French Cathedral with elegant spires, and an imposing Spanish courthouse (Cabildo), both overlooking the manicured green of Jackson Square—with its statue of Andrew Jackson, the anti-abolitionist president who authorised the removal of Native Americans from the South.

New Orleans is prone to caricaturing its troubled history for consumption. Cajun dinners are served on steamboats up the Mississippi. You can ride a horse carriage on cobbled lanes lined with flowering French balconies. Haunted houses tell stories of brothel patrons with exotic tastes. A history of slave ships is hinted on in the sale of African voodoo. Then there are the Mardi Gras floats and festivities that reference French traditions while banking on day-drinking college students on Bourbon Street, and bachelor's parties in strip clubs. And off the French balconies, men throw bead necklaces, and partying women flash them in turn.

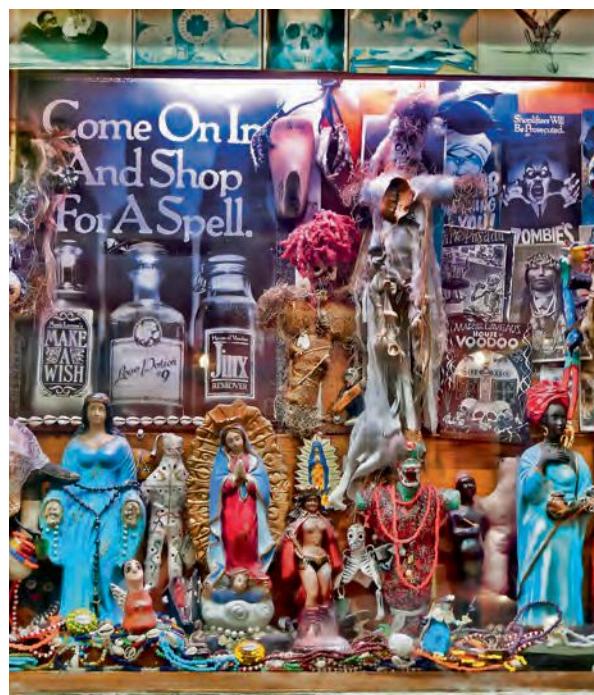
To wander the French Quarter is to be complicit in history as an excuse to titillate. And it is the noise of history thus touted





Royal Street and Bourbon Street (top left) make up the teeming town centre of New Orleans. There is historic art and architecture here, jostling for attention with splashy antique stores, voodoo artists (bottom right) and neon-lit bars (top right). For jazz lovers, The Spotted Cat (right) in Faubourg Marigny is a must-visit. The club often hosts big-ticket performers such as Meschiya Lake and the New Orleans Cottonmouth Kings. However, to experience the roots of New Orleans' jazz tradition, there's no better venue than Preservation Hall (bottom left).

Facing page: Étouffées, made of shrimp or crawfish, are a highlight of Creole cuisine.



■ THE DESTINATION

that makes jazz in the quiet corners all that more precious.

Wondering about French Quarter's heritage, I find a sliver of history that connects jazzy New Orleans to Master Simon's Mumbai—a moment in the 1860s when New Orleans' decline as global cotton capital made for the rise of Bombay. New Orleans, once the centre of the booming Southern economy, suffered naval blockades during the American Civil War. Meanwhile, enterprising Bombay cotton mill owners expanded production to fill the gap in exports to Europe, birthing the mill compounds that have recently been redeveloped into office towers and microbreweries in Master Simon's Worli backyard. The end of slavery sealed New Orleans' fate as a more regional economic hub, but the 19th-century cosmopolitan glory of the old cotton capital, together with its vices, continued to draw willing tourists. It also paved the way for the birth of jazz that takes me back from New Orleans to Mumbai and back again across time.

PETE IS THE ONE WHO convinces me to pay \$30 to watch Jason Marsalis on the drums at Preservation Hall. He feels I should listen to "real jazz", not the dance-able tunes on Frenchmen pitched at tourists "who don't know better." Preservation Hall was started in the mid-'60s with an aim to retain New Orleans' jazz heritage in the face of rock 'n' roll. Now the Marsalis brothers of New Orleans, known for guiding jazz back to its roots, are at the centre of this effort.

That day, we wait in line outside Preservation Hall, not too far from where Doreen Ketchens performs. Inside the small old hall with wood floors and benches, pillars and dark oil canvases that all quiver with music, time slows. Floating on music, there is a moment I turn to catch the awe on Pete's face. It is here that Pete meets Jason Marsalis who lets him onto the New Orleans jazz scene.

One night in New Orleans, we hunt for late-night eats. Stuffed with shrimp po'boys and giddy with joy, we stumble back to the boardwalk next to the Mississippi, finding a spot with a breeze on steps that lead down the levee to the edge of dark water. Jack tries to chat with a man carving graffiti into the wood pilings at the bottom. And this is how we meet Mr. PB&J, who got his name when handing out peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in the months after Hurricane Katrina. He comes here once a month to mark the day the river breached the levee and took his brother. Mr. PB&J and his brother had grown up a few hundred miles north. The brother moved to New Orleans to play jazz. He moved to New York and California

to work as a music producer. They lost touch. When Mr. PB&J arrived in the aftermath of Katrina, he had lost his family to divorce and his brother to the hurricane. He remembered the music and stayed.

I meet Abe from Cameron in the slump after Hanna and Tee leave for Chicago and play guide to him on Frenchmen Street. Abe works for the World Bank. He has a big map of the U.S. in his car with a necklace of towns marked out. He too is on a minor secular pilgrimage. He makes me think about why we travel, how the American South reminds us of places we both come from—the dysfunctional-ness and the warmth. The oddness of finding patches of the developing world within the U.S. How the history of the Civil Rights Movement inspires—the music so close to the heart of the resistance: you cannot begin to fight without giving voice to your pain.

Jazz has its roots in bands that performed at funerals, and later in bars and brothels around New Orleans, at a time when few employers hired freed black men. Jazz started at the confluence of European instruments with Western African rhythms, the pain of the powerless in the language of the master—the pain slowly reshaping the language. It is not lost on me that a leading jazz pianist of our time is a South Asian immigrant—Vijay Iyer.

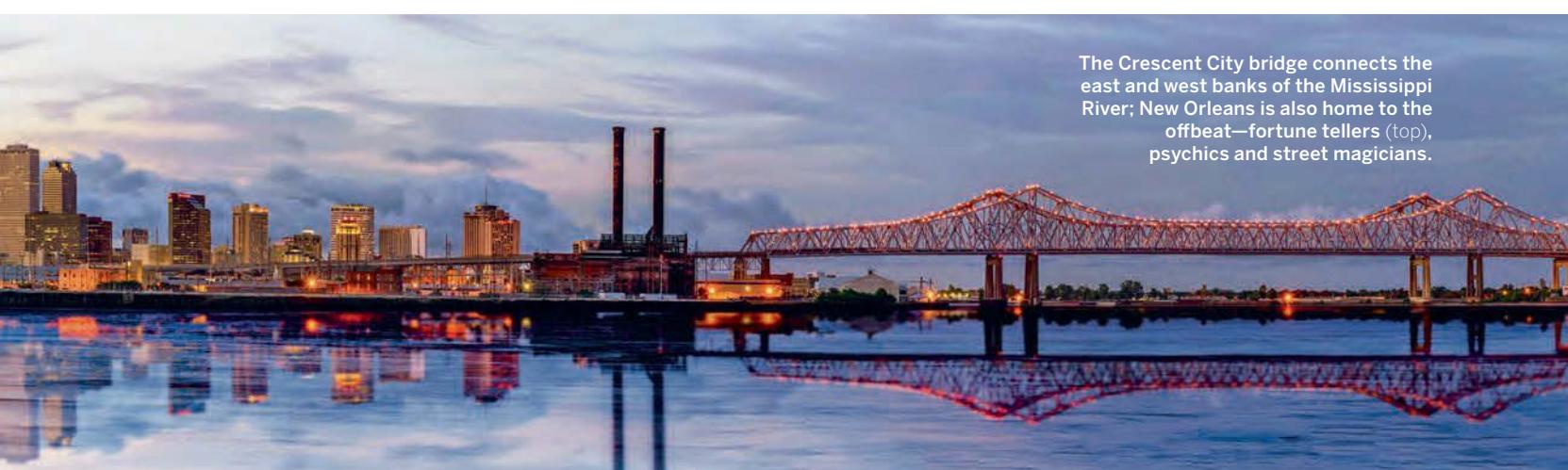
AFTER EVERY FEW SONGS, Master Simon joins me with a drink, looking out toward the lights of Bandra-Worli Sea Link. He talks about starting the village brass band, about the grand Mumbai weddings he has attended, and the film stars who were there. And all the while, my mind is flooded with memories of New Orleans. I play on my phone a YouTube clip of "The Crave" by Jelly Roll Morton—one of the fathers of jazz from New Orleans. And he listens, before waving it away.

He then gets up to play something different. It's slow, deep and sad, and when he senses I do not know what he is referencing, he sings for me the 1970s Marathi tune he grew up with.

In that moment I see how that other history of jazz is irrelevant, how for Master Simon (and the men in New Orleans), jazz starts right here (and there) with the songs they grew up with. What they do is take the saxophone and make it their own. ■

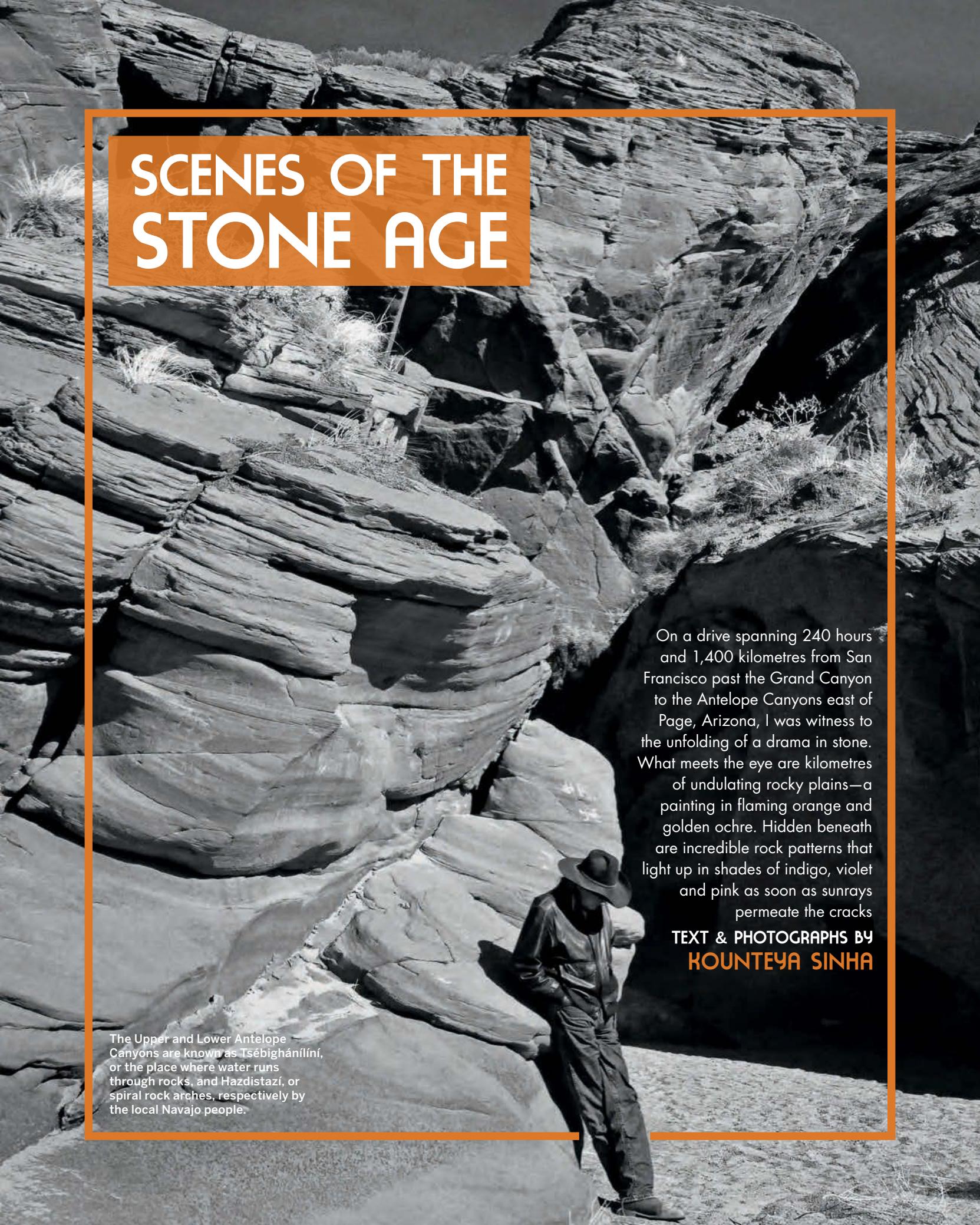
Gautam Joseph was in Egypt during the Arab Spring, and backpacked across Western China with a Mandarin phrase book. He has worked in India, and is now a post-graduate student of writing in Singapore.

ATLANTIDE PHOTOTRAVEL/CORBIS DOCUMENTARY/GETTY IMAGES (STREET); AMRITENDU MAJU/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES (BRIDGE)



The Crescent City bridge connects the east and west banks of the Mississippi River; New Orleans is also home to the offbeat—fortune tellers (top), psychics and street magicians.

SCENES OF THE STONE AGE

A black and white photograph showing a person standing on a rocky outcrop. They are wearing a dark shirt, dark pants, and a wide-brimmed hat. The background is filled with massive, layered rock formations that resemble ancient stone structures. The lighting highlights the textures and shadows of the rocks.

On a drive spanning 240 hours and 1,400 kilometres from San Francisco past the Grand Canyon to the Antelope Canyons east of Page, Arizona, I was witness to the unfolding of a drama in stone. What meets the eye are kilometres of undulating rocky plains—a painting in flaming orange and golden ochre. Hidden beneath are incredible rock patterns that light up in shades of indigo, violet and pink as soon as sunrays permeate the cracks

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY
KOUNTEYA SINHA

The Upper and Lower Antelope Canyons are known as Tsébighánílíní, or the place where water runs through rocks, and Hazdistazí, or spiral rock arches, respectively by the local Navajo people.



1



2

1 Billions of years of Earth's geological history are exposed in the Grand Canyon. The river valley in Arizona's Colorado Plateau stuns with its size: 488 kilometres long, 29 kilometres wide and about 5,250 feet deep. For me, photographing the Grand Canyon was like watching a spectacular natural sound-and-light show. Over a canvas created by shades of browns and emeralds, clouds invade like an army of ghosts and the strong wind howls like a pack of wolves.

2 About 225 kilometres from both the South and North Rims of the Grand Canyon is the Horseshoe Bend. In a span of six million years, the Colorado River eroded the stone and tectonic activity caused the land to lift to form the picturesque, entrenched meander. Ancient sand dunes from the Jurassic Age were hardened and transformed to sculpt the Horseshoe Bend. A hike to reach the edge of the Horseshoe Bend is a great way to see how the rocks and the river change colour depending on the time of day.

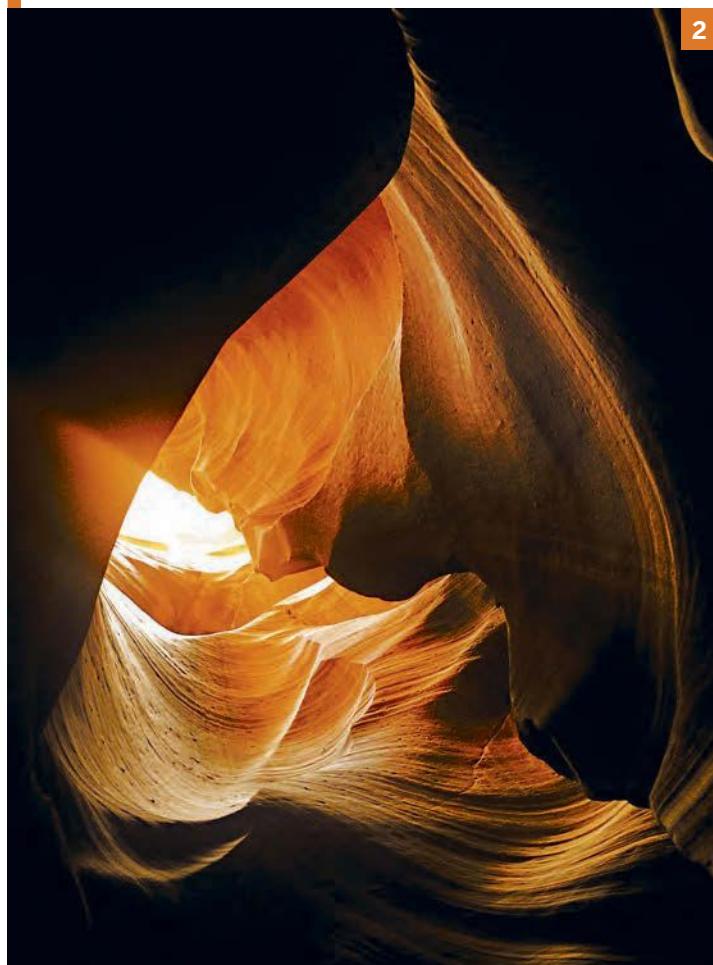
3 On the smooth highway, I was accompanied by the music of American icons like Johnny Cash and Willie Nelson. You don't realise how fast you're going unless you peek at the speedometer as the rugged Arizona landscape unfolds dramatically along the route.

4 Thanks to my Navajo guide I explored non-touristy haunts. One such stop was the town of Sedona, which is where I bought a much-loved souvenir—a Red Dirt T-shirt. Locals use the iron-rich red soil of Sedona to dye these T-shirts which have local quips, Native American design or Southwestern scenery etched on them. For someone who collects T-shirts from all his travels, it was a prize.

**4**



1



2

1 Driving through this terrain, I felt like I was introduced to both the beauty and fury of nature: An awe-inspiring landscape sculpted by flowing water continuously chipping away at rock and petrifying sand into shale, sandstone and limestone. The swathes of exposed rock are punctuated by clumps of green in a terrain which is difficult to photograph but offers numerous moments of drama.

2 The artistry of the landscape at the Antelope Canyons truly unfolds beneath the rocks when during the summer months the sunlight passes through cracks in the rock. The play of light and shadow create vivid patterns like the "Heart of Stone."

3 The Colorado River is not only the sculptor of the landscape but has also been an important source of water for the local Native American tribes. Its calm water and lashing waves during floods have moulded jagged ends of rock into smooth contours and passageways. Some of these are kilometres-wide and others so narrow that one cannot pass through comfortably with a backpack. ■

Kounteya Sinha is a mountaineer, explorer and an urban nomad with a compulsive knack of running away from home since the age of five. After being a journalist for 16 years, his latest medium of storytelling is through images that he says nourishes his soul.



GEORGIA'S OWN MAYI

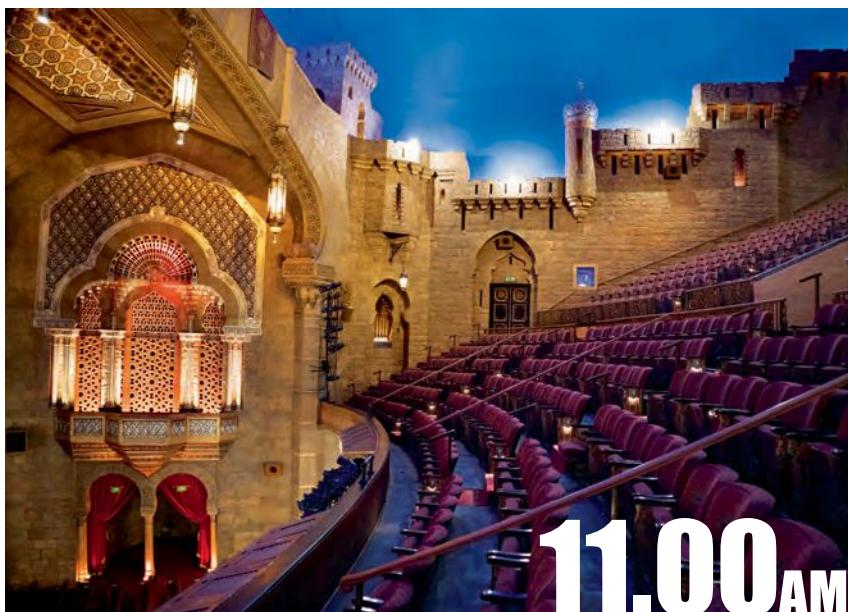


It is hard to catch your breath in Atlanta. In the past few years, the city has developed enough to make its opportunities for recreation diverse. History, art, architecture—there is too much to consume here, but here's our 36-hour guide. Be warned, though. Time in Atlanta is slippery. You can never have enough

CITY

TEXT BY SHREEVATSA NEVATIA
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SUPRIYA KANTAK

DAY 1



FOX THEATRE

The Fox Theatre, from a distance, does look peculiar. Its minarets and domes seem plucked out from somewhere in the Middle East. Looking at ablution fountains and gold-painted columns in its foyer, you inhabit again the worlds of *Aladdin* and *Arabian Nights*. This must be how they lived. The Islamic architectural influence is easily explainable. Initially planned as a Yaarab Shrine Temple, the building only became a movie palace in 1929 when motion picture mogul William Fox stepped in with funds the Shriners could ill afford. The ornate ballroom upstairs resembles a Ramses II temple in Egypt. Tables in the ladies lounge have sphinxes attached to them, their chairs mimic thrones, and everything is grand. The auditorium itself seats 4,665 patrons. The 96 crystals embedded in the ceiling look like stars, and its Bedouin canopy only boosts the theatre's faultless acoustics. Fox's October line-up is testament to the venue's versatility—*The King and I*, Wilco, author David Sedaris, and then Hillary Clinton in November. But even if you don't catch one of these acts, do sign up for one of Fox's tours. A week before he passed away on April 21, 2016, Prince had performed here for the last time. This performing arts venue still makes history. foxtheatre.org



PONCE CITY MARKET

It has retail outlets, restaurants, food halls, but since it opened in 2015, Ponce City Market has never felt like a mall. Sears, Roebuck & Co., a department store chain, originally used this building as a warehouse, office and shop, but stretched over 2,10,00,000 square feet, the premises were always of a size that could fit all. The brands—many of which are international and recognisable—have enough space to carve an individual identity without feeling stifled. Eating in food halls can feel claustrophobic, but the high ceilings of Ponce and its ample tables leave one with enough room to savour Atlanta's renowned H&F burger, Korean steamed buns from Simply Seoul Kitchen, and even Botiwalla's almost authentic *vada pav*. City Winery has its own lines of wines available on tap, and if their buzz does not prove enough to take the afternoon's edge off, you're advised to trek up to the market's rooftop. Skyline Park has amusements for children—a skyline slide, a heege tower—and a beer garden for weary parents. The market not just offers a valet service for your bicycles, but also one for those lonely dogs. poncecitymarket.com



BELTLINE

Walking onto the BeltLine from Ponce can be somewhat disconcerting. The procession of Atlantans running up and down this stretch might leave you filled with shame. There is little chance of you ever being as fit. Once a railway corridor, the BeltLine is now being developed as a multi-use trail, and tells a story of Atlanta's revival. By 2030, the 35-kilometre BeltLine loop will of course have a streetcar, but for now, walking down the four already opened trails segments can be an experience that is arguably complete enough. The Enota and Maddox Parks are being expanded, giving the area and its joggers a much larger green cover. Art installations—some obtuse, some breathtaking—now line the once barren corridor. Graffiti artists have also reclaimed the line's walls and bridges. No matter how long you spend here, there will remain something more to see. There's something for everyone here. This is where Atlanta hangs out. beltline.org



4.00 PM

HIGH MUSEUM OF ART

Usually gigantic, the works of British sculptor Anish Kapoor often take over the rooms they are installed in. Having taken over half a wall in the High Museum, Kapoor's "Untitled" (2010) does something marvellous. Its many mirror fragments multiply your reflection a few hundred times over. Your voice reverberates, and space suddenly adds to itself an extra dimension or two. While a selfie is a must here, High gives you plenty of other opportunities to bring out your phone. The museum's collection of over 15,000 works goes back to the 18th century, and you find on display the paintings of Frnacesco di Giorgio, Nicolas Tournier and Benjamin West. As you walk High's spiral staircase, art becomes manifest, an era at a time. high.org

THE VORTEX

Though the giant phallic sculpture near its entrance is gauche, it does help The Vortex Bar and Grill set its tone of decadence and permissibility. If you ask nicely, the bartender will even let you smoke at the bar. An "official idiot-free zone" since 1992, Vortex is where Atlanta comes to drink its night and sorrows away. On the weekends, the establishment closes its doors only at 3 a.m. The walls have hilarious bumper stickers, and skeletons hang comically from the ceiling. The affable waitresses dress provocatively, and they all recommend you try the 'Vortex Burger'. It is large, sloppy and sinful, but the word in midtown Atlanta is that it is also the city's best. thevortexatl.com



6.30 PM

DAY 2

**MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE**

For any defender of freedom, Atlanta can be a bit of a pilgrimage. Martin Luther King, Jr. was born here. Stepping into the 35-acre Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site, the first thing you see is familiar—a large statue of Mahatma Gandhi. For King, the Mahatma was an abiding inspiration. He had once said, “If humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable.” The visitor centre you soon enter has on permanent display a multimedia exhibit—“Courage to Lead”—which follows the life of King and also the path of the civil rights movement. Spend half an hour here, and you’ll learn how one man can change the world and stop time. A clock here deliberately doesn’t move. It has been stopped at one-past-six. King was assassinated at that time on April 4, 1968, and America was never the same again. Seeing King’s grave—the tomb stands in a pool of water—is a sombre experience. A few metres away, King’s childhood home is humble, but it’s the Ebenezer Baptist Church that is the National Park’s highlight. King was a pastor here. When you sit in its pews, you will hear his voice deliver a persuasive sermon. Your spine *will* tingle. nps.gov/malu

LITTLE FIVE POINTS

Alternatively described as “eclectic” and “hipster,” Little Five Points is everything Atlantans tout it to be. In this East Atlanta district, all the men have beards, and all the women have coloured their hair. Their tattoos are works of high art, and the lines of stores confirm the area’s reputation as the bohemian centre of America’s South. The Junkman’s Daughter, for instance, sells everything from multicoloured wigs to frilly lingerie. A smoking store called 42 Degrees looks after all those ‘toking’ needs, and in Criminal Records, you’ll find that one album you had thought was out of circulation. The Little Points Halloween Festival is predictably the stuff of legend, but in recent times, Little Five Points is gaining the reputation of being a ‘food district’ too. Vortex has a branch here, but we’d recommend the **Porter Beer Bar** (see pic). Their popcorn has salt and vinegar, and their pretzels all squirm when you pull them apart. littlefivepoints.net

**WORLD OF COCA-COLA**

America, we all know, has exported half its culture overseas, but the most omnipresent of these exports would have to be the Coke bottle. So proud is the Coca-Cola Company of its global heritage, they have made a museum that enshrines their contribution to the world’s happiness and calorie quotient. The lines at the World of Coca-Cola are usually long and winding. If you do, however, manage to squeeze your way inside, you will first be taken to ‘The Loft’. There are 200 artefacts here, amongst them a syrup urn that dates back to 1896 and beach pants that were worn first in 1970. A series of 10 galleries maps the history of Coke, all the way from the soda fountain to the can. A polar bear comes to hug you out of nowhere, and just in case you were missing your Thums Up and Limea, there is a ‘Taste It!’ beverage lounge where you can sample all of the company’s drinks that are sold in over a hundred countries. There is even a vault where the secret formula for Coca-Cola has been secured. It’s just begging for a crafty *Mission Impossible* heist. worldofcoca-cola.com

CNN STUDIO TOUR

On June 1, 1980, the American media mogul Ted Turner dedicated to America the news channel, the Cable News Network (CNN). Since then the channel has grown exponentially, and for followers of world affairs, its anchors Anderson Cooper, Wolf Blitzer and Christiane Amanpour are all household names. CNN's journey—one which took it to all parts of the globe—began in Atlanta. Perhaps less consequential than its Washington and London counterparts now, CNN's Atlanta studio still exudes something historic. A 50-minute tour gives you a behind-the-scenes look of how a television news channel does its business. You see the hundreds of cables hidden in the floor. You hear editors whisper into the ears of presenters, and you are able to witness the chaos of a newsroom. The tension here is sometimes palpable. If you're lucky, you may even see big news break. tours.cnn.com



4.15PM



5.45PM

ATLANTA BOTANICAL GARDENS

You don't have to be a botanist to be able to relish Atlanta's Botanical Gardens. Its Fuqua Orchid Center, for instance, is home to America's largest collection of species orchids on permanent display, and even the most hardened of observers will be forced to acknowledge its splendour. Strangely, though, green is not the first colour you remember when you leave the gardens. Nearly 100 cut trees have been planted across the grounds. Thinned from a tree farm, these bare trees have been coloured pink and purple. Even horticulturalists in Atlanta have their quirks. Life-size sculptures—a gazing unicorn, a friendly ogre, a pair of gigantic cobras—have all been made from plants fitted into steel frames. Even from a distance, one spots the 25-foot-tall green sculpture of a goddess who rises with your gaze, slowly from the earth. atlantabg.org ■



WITH A BLUES-EYED BOY

For Elvis Presley and B.B. King, Memphis was home. You come here to find America's music and its source. Sitting in a '55 Cadillac only betters that possibility of discovery

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **SUPRIYA KANTAK**

TEXT BY **SHREEVATSA NEVATIA**



Everyone in Memphis knows Tad Pierson. The beige '55 Cadillac the 67-year-old drives is conspicuous, and Tad is also very affable.

After having founded a tour company called 'The American Dream Safari' in 1989, his job has perhaps required him to be personable. In 1995, he says, he swapped his '50 Buick for a Cadillac because he wanted his clients to have a "more immersive Memphis experience". "Besides," he adds, "if you're living the American dream, you have to buy a Cadillac. I didn't know this when I bought my car, but the first thing Elvis did when he had the money was buy a Cadillac. The car is a symbol of having made it." His laughter is infectious. When Tad speaks about Elvis, you listen. He knows both, his blues and his rock and roll. Bluesmen James Cotton and Bobby Rush have sat in his car. They have signed the doors and backseat. The dates he rattles off are accurate. (We checked.) History is novel when oral, and Memphis is best when seen through Tad's Cadillac. The captions for the photos here were provided by Tad himself because he knows best. "We have a magnet in Memphis," he says, "and we call it music."



STAX MUSEUM OF AMERICAN SOUL MUSIC

If someone was looking for a symbol, something that pointed to black and white musicians playing together in harmony, they should perhaps be pointed to the Stax Museum first. Stax, a recording studio, opened in 1959, and went out of business in 1975. But for 16 years, they had a tremendous run. The list of Stax artists included the likes of Otis Redding and Isaac Hayes. It was too bad that reality had to strike. „



WILD BILLS

You've heard the term 'jukebox'—a machine that plays music when you put in some money—but the less popular term is 'juke joint'. Typically, the juke joint is a club, usually on the outskirts of town, which plays the best blues. Wild Bills is perhaps the most authentic juke joint in Memphis. It's a small room. You get 60 people in there and the place is packed. There are long tables there, so you might be sitting down next to a friendly stranger. You guys are chatting, and then suddenly, he gets up on stage, takes the microphone and kills a blues song. He's *that* good. Plus, you'll always find cold beer and hot chicken. „



THE DASHBOARD

I like to think of my '55 Cadillac as a rolling classroom of sorts or even my rolling museum, so on my dashboard I have stuck some pictures. (**Points to far right**) That is Robert Johnson. He is the famous bluesman who sold his soul to the devil. (**Second from right**) That picture is one of W.C. Handy. He was writing his music in 1905, and is considered the father of the blues. (**Centre**) The next picture is of Elvis and Brook Benton. 'Rainy Night in Georgia' was written by Benton and it inspired Elvis greatly. That music, for me, exemplifies the exchange between black and white artists. (**Second from left**) That's Woody Guthrie. He was a folk musician much like Bob Dylan. (**Far left**) That last one is Bessie Smith, one of the first artists to ever sing the blues. They called her the 'Empress of the Blues'. She was singing about broken hearts in the 1920s, and this was no sugar-coated love. She was lamenting, and it was brutal. „



CHELSEA AVENUE

This half-a-mile long grey concrete wall on Chelsea Avenue had a very straight purpose. It was built near the river to control flooding. But slowly, a group of artists came along, and painted on it something that looks like graffiti, but is in fact great art. Apart from musicians, there are a lot of artists here in Memphis. **,**



CLUB SUPERIOR

Club Superior used to once be called Club Manhattan. Willie Mitchell was one of the best musicians to come out of Memphis, but at Club Manhattan, he was simply part of the house band. Willie went on to own a recording studio. He was the first to record Al Green. If you go into Club Superior today, you'll still feel that authentic Willie Mitchell and Manhattan authenticity. Fifty years and it has not changed a little. **,**

BEALE STREET

Segregation was America's apartheid, and before integration, Beale Street was Memphis' black commercial street. This is where the black community had its shoe stores, bowling alleys and movie theatres. African Americans could walk and shop freely here. For a brief period in the 1960s and 1970s, Beale Street fell on hard times, but it was soon revived as an entertainment district. This is the same street that greats like B.B. King have walked on. B.B. King died two years ago, but prior to that, he would play in a Beale Street club twice a year. They've named the club after him, and it is magic. B.B. King was the *king* of the blues, man! The past, present and future are all here. It's where the blues was born. **,**



SUN STUDIO

“(Pointing to the wall of a building) If music were a religion, this would have to be its Wailing Wall. Sun Studio is the birthplace of rock and roll. Before Elvis walked in here, the likes of Ike Turner were already regulars. Because the studio's owner, Sam Phillips, couldn't get black artists like Ike on mainstream white radio, he was looking for a white artist who could sing the blues like a black musician. And then he found Elvis Presley. Johnny Cash and a bunch of others followed. You heard one explosion after another. **”**



B.B. KING'S HOME

“B.B. King was originally from Indianapolis, Mississippi. In 1948, he moved to Memphis with his wife Martha. They lived at the address '1955 Frisco'. It was here that B.B. King and Memphis found each other. **”**



BARBECUE

“Memphis is famous for its barbecue, and the Memphis barbecue usually means pork. You are either eating pork ribs or pulled pork. Everyone has their favourites. Barbecue is a subject that generates a lot of passion. Each place has its own flavour. Sauces are sweeter here, a little spicier there. What's the best barbecue in town? I wouldn't know. There isn't even a worst. **”**



HUMES HIGH SCHOOL

“ Humes High School was built in 1926, and this is where Elvis went to school. Surprisingly, a number of accounts suggest that he was an introvert in school, a very shy boy. His classmates have said they don't have vivid memories of him because he was the kid who always sat in the back of the class, the guy who got chased home and bullied after school. He graduated from Humes in 1953, and his grades weren't very good. In 1954, however, he recorded his first song at Sun Studio, and by 1957, he was paying \$100,000 for Graceland, in cash! It is staggering that four years back, not one soul thought he had talent. ”



GRACELAND

“ For Elvis, Graceland was the shining mansion on the hill. For him, it was the big American dream. Today, Graceland gets 600,000 visitors a year, and they are all there to see his stage clothes and gold records. The place is a shrine to Elvis, but it's also maybe a shrine to the excess of success, to all that Elvis acquired—his Cadillacs, his motorcycles. He had a physical appeal that crossed cultures, yes, but there was also a bit of sadness towards the end. He had all this success, but he was lonely, alone in Graceland. In America, we don't have royalty or mythic gods. What we do have is Elvis. He is our Shakespearean hero, our subliminal Greek tragedy. He is also a superhero, wearing a cape on stage, sacrificing his life for our joy. Isn't that what people from all over the world come here to see? ”

'THAMMA IN THE CITY'

A writer wheels her grandmother down the bay and bridges of San Francisco

By ISHANI CHATTERJI

Beware of the seagulls at Fisherman's Wharf, one of San Francisco's most popular attractions. The feathered creatures love a bread bowl of clam chowder as much as tourists.

What do you remember of San Francisco?" I asked *thamma* over a recent phone call, three months after our whirlwind family trip across New York, S.F., San Diego and Los Angeles.

"I remember everything: the lopsided roads of Lombard Street, the big bridges. And the beggars..."

"The homeless?" I blinked in surprise.

"Yes. I had always thought the U.S. as the land of plenty, the West as somewhat 'superior'..." she trailed off.

Thamma's memories of San Francisco might be bittersweet, but that trip was her leap of faith. She travelled with a recently injured leg, took it all in her stride, and made the most of it. And

I, wheeling her around in a chair, saw the streets and marinas anew, through the eyes of a first-time visitor to the United States.

<>

Jayanti Chattopadhyay, my 74-year-old paternal grandmother, taught Bengali literature at Delhi University until 2005. Over the past 12 years, she has travelled across the country, attending seminars and selecting potential lecturers and readers for universities in West Bengal and Assam. But she had never ventured abroad.

Earlier this year, after much coaxing and emotional blackmail, my father convinced her to get a passport and a U.S. visa so she could accompany my parents

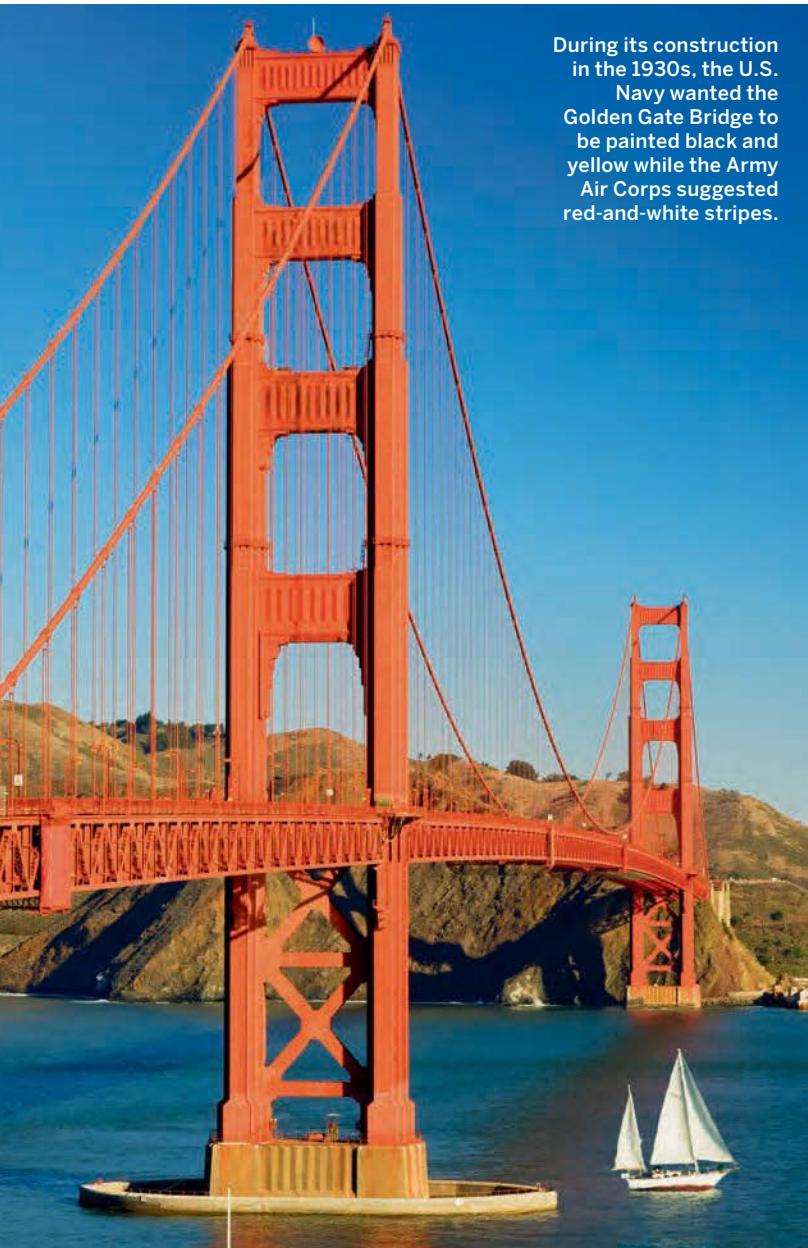


“

*The memories
of San Francisco
are bittersweet,
but that trip was
her leap of faith*



Thamma's idea of the U.S.A. was heavily based on movies like *The Apartment* and books like *The Great Gatsby*.



During its construction in the 1930s, the U.S. Navy wanted the Golden Gate Bridge to be painted black and yellow while the Army Air Corps suggested red-and-white stripes.

and I to watch her grandson graduate from the University of California in San Diego. After we quelled her fears that nobody would mock her for wearing a saree, and that walking shoes weren't a terrible idea, she caved. When the visa officer asked her whether she had ever travelled out of India, she quipped, "No, my passport is fresh out of the oven to visit the United States."

From the time we reached San Francisco, I noticed that Thamma is the sort of traveller who sits back and quietly soaks herself in a new place, unlike some of us who need to know every last detail of the itinerary. She, however, is hard to please. I discovered that over dinner at The Slanted Door, one of San Francisco's finest Vietnamese restaurants, in the Ferry Building marketplace overlooking the bay. We praised the rib-eye steak, seared tuna and caramelised pork belly, but Thamma remained poker-faced, unimpressed. One night in our shared hotel room, after another meal of fresh crabs and clam chowder at Lou's Fish Shack at Fisherman's Wharf, she turned to me and tut-tutted about how she much preferred the butter-garlic crabs served at Trishna restaurant in Mumbai. I

wondered how she would take to the rest of this city I had been hopelessly in love with for a decade.

«»

We spent 72 hours in the city that the veteran S.F. journalist Herb Caen nicknamed "Baghdad by the Bay," referring to its bright, multicultural residents. Thamma, however, saw things differently. "I love these beautiful homes with colourful front yards and walls," she said on a drive down Bay Street. "But where are the people?" San Francisco, for her, seemed to pale in comparison to buzzy New York. I was amused to see that the city reminded her of those fairy tales where towns were "sleepy," the kind that had the townsmen running for a siesta in the afternoon.

It was at Pier 39, the marina at Fisherman's Wharf chock-full of shops, restaurants, and street performers that I finally saw Thamma wide-eyed in wonder. A place I found touristy, Thamma explored with childlike curiosity, picking handmade body-and-bath products, curious crab magnets, and socks splashed with Edvard Munch's "Scream." "This is a different land," she beamed. "There is no poverty, everybody is happy and smiling;



With eight hairpin turns, Lombard Street is often called the "crookedest street in the world."

everything is so beautiful. It is a wonderful life." When I took her to my favourite area Pier 39, where roaring, squabbling sea lions lie sprawled on the docks, she reacted with a nonchalant "*Eta ki* (What is this)? I don't know what you see in them!"

In many ways, San Francisco was the city where I discovered different layers to our relationship with thamma; how playful she and my father could be, exchanging inside jokes and feigning exasperation at each other's stubbornness. Or how she sprang a surprise on me by saying she'd love a dress from an outlet mall in Livermore, which lies 65 kilometers away from the city (she didn't end up buying one because "they all had holes at the back"). Throughout the trip, thamma marvelled at how comfortable my 21-year-old brother and I seemed to be in a land she found so foreign, or how nobody seemed to judge anybody, "not even a lady in a wheelchair." In

San Francisco, our roles reversed—thamma, who had taken care of us as kids, slowly let us take over.

The Pacific Ocean's magnanimity was something she has talked about over and over again since our trip. An hour-long boat cruise took us by the piers, passing Alcatraz prison, and finally under the Golden Gate Bridge. While the bridge did fascinate her, just as it would any first-timer who set their eyes on that international orange architectural marvel, it was the ocean that stayed with thamma. So did the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge, especially because she was filled with pride to have her grandson drive her on that "unending journey."

"San Francisco will always be special," she told me later. But it wasn't because it was her first time on the steep, winding Lombard Street, watching cars zigzag down lopsidedly. Nor was it because it was her first experience with a city that looked so different from

Delhi, where she has lived all her life.

"I remember San Francisco for the colourful plants overhanging from balconies, the wind flicking my bob-cut hair on the cruise." But, most importantly, San Francisco

is etched in thamma's memory because "this is the only time, in a long time, that I have had my son so close. And I watched my little grandchildren turn into adults, taking decisions for me." ■

When **Ishani Chatterji** isn't travelling or documenting her journeys, she can be found indulging in Bollywood movies, watching plays and gobbling sushi.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE Regular flights, with one or more stops at a European or Middle Eastern gateway city, connect major Indian cities with San Francisco International Airport in the San Mateo County. The easiest way to get to downtown San Francisco from the airport is by the BART train (www.bart.gov; 30 min; \$8.95/₹575 one-way).

VISA Applications for a U.S. tourist visa must be made online. It is followed by a personal interview at the embassy. It takes between four days and three weeks to process depending on the season (ceac.state.gov/genniv; ₹10,880).

STAY With its dainty floral upholstery and claw-foot bathtubs, the **Golden Gate Hotel** is full of old-world charm (www.goldengatehotel.com, doubles from \$225/₹14,470).

Argonaut Hotel has a nautical theme and is fittingly located right by the sprawling Fisherman's Wharf (www.agonauthotel.com, doubles from \$270/₹17,400).

TRAVEL QUIZ

TEST YOUR TRAVEL IQ



WHAT IS STATE ROUTE 375 IN NEVADA, A SUPPOSED SITE FOR ALIEN SIGHTINGS, POPULARLY KNOWN AS?

THIS FAMOUS MANHATTAN TRAIN STATION HOSTS REGULAR ART EXHIBITIONS AND SHOWS IN A WING CALLED VANDERBILT HALL.

WHICH LODGE IN VIRGINIA WAS THE LOCATION OF THE 1987 FILM DIRTY DANCING AND HOSTS MOVIE-THEMED WEEKENDS?



IN WHICH YEAR WAS THE NEVADA DESERT'S ANNUAL BURNING MAN FESTIVAL FIRST HELD?

LOUIS' LUNCH, RECOGNISED AS THE BIRTHPLACE OF HAMBURGERS BY THE U.S.A'S LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, IS LOCATED HERE.

MUSTARD CANYON, DANTE'S VIEW AND ZABRISKIE POINT CAN BE VIEWED FROM WHICH CALIFORNIAN NATIONAL PARK?

ANSWERS 1. EXTRATERRESTRIAL HIGHWAY 2. GRAND CENTRAL STATION 3. MOUNTAIN LAKE LODGE 4. 1986 5. NEW HAVEN, CONNECTICUT 6. DEATH VALLEY NATIONAL PARK

PETER UNGER/GETTY IMAGES (ROAD), OZGURDONNAZ/ISTOCK (STATION), THE HOLLYWOOD ARCHIVE/DINODIA PICTURE GALLERY (COUPLE), PVHAAS/GETTY IMAGES (FAMILY), CAROLINE PURSEY/GETTY IMAGES (BURGER), EZZA SHAW/STAFF/GETTY IMAGES (TREE)