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Art Of Travel



2014 - 2015

we **live and love** travel.

Come explore with us



Dear Friends,

India Tourism is basking in the sun and the best is yet to come! An extremely positive step towards liberalisation of the visa regime, Visa on Arrival will be historic to talk about, once it comes through for 180 countries.

'We Live and Love Travel,' it best describes the core of our business, what drives the performance of our business and the behavior that we support our business with. As an extension of this we have also launched Class by Sita which is a benchmark to raise our services to the next level and beyond, Sita aims to provide, Differentiated Customer Service for service standard implementation. It is an important part of our differentiation strategy!

In this third edition of Art of Travel, I do hope you enjoy the authentic travel stories, up-close and personal, which have personally been experienced by members of Sita's Destination Knowledge Centre.

I would like to leave you with this thought:

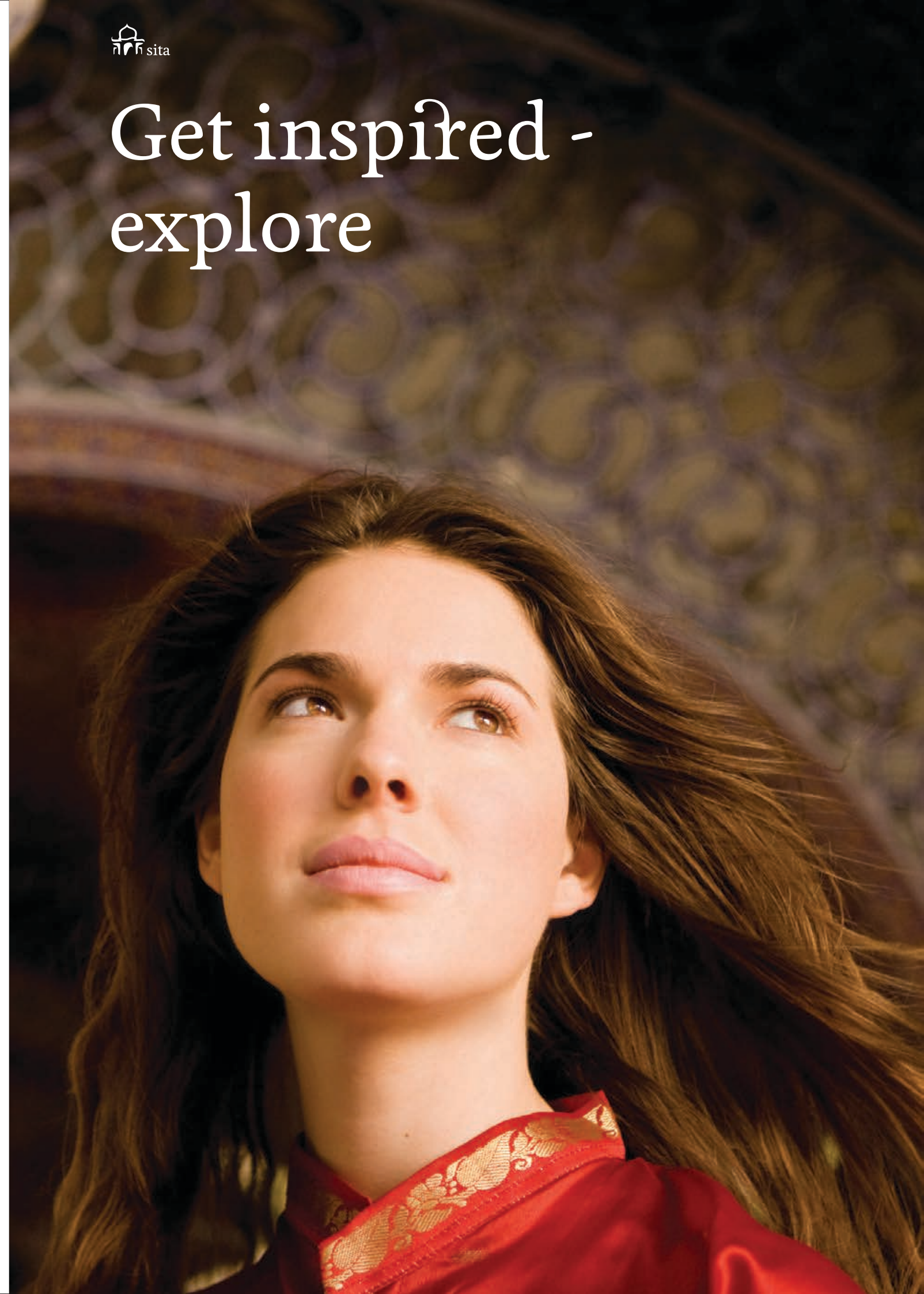
Knowledge is based on experience;
Everything else is just information.

Get Inspired.

Come explore with us.

Dipak Deva
CEO Destination Management
India & South Asia

Get inspired - explore



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get inspired - explore

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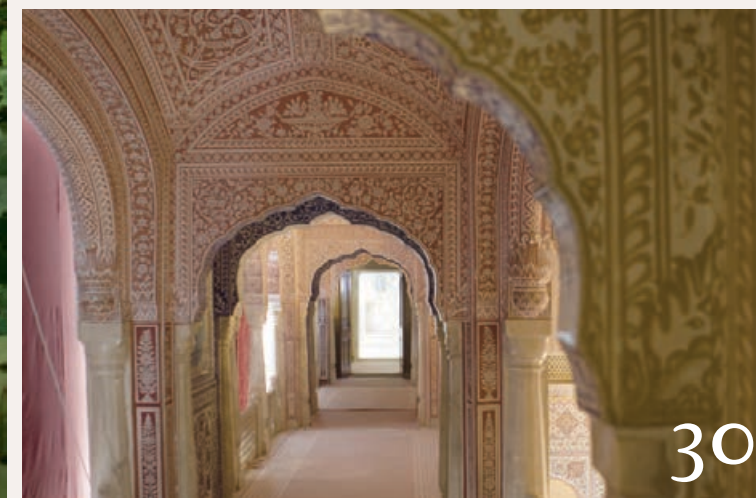


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St George Fort Walk

Stories within the Fort

It was within the high walls of Fort St. George that the modern city of Chennai, earlier called Madras, was born in August 1639. Some of the city's oldest and grandest office buildings are within the Fort. Built by the British East India Company to start a trading centre in the country, the Fort soon saw weavers and traders (predominantly of Telugu origin) settling in George Town, later renamed as Black Town. The walk covers St. Mary's Church, the Clive House, the Secretariat, the Parade Square, the King's Barracks and the Fort Museum, all within the Fort. "For me the highlight of the tour was seeing St. Mary's Church, the Oldest Anglican Church east of the Suez Canal which has survived several wars. Thanks to the unique architecture- the church was built bomb-proof, passing through India's largest army barracks and listening to the story of how the British slowly drove off the Portuguese and the French established their power in this part of the world - a story intertwined with love and romance, political intrigues and bloodshed," says Soumya Mukherji from our Destination Knowledge Centre who took this walk during his trip to Tamil Nadu recently.

EXPLORE CHENNAI

- ▶ Spend an evening with Sabita Radhakrishna while in Chennai. Sabita is a freelance writer, food columnist and broadcaster. She also entertains clients at her house over lunch, where she cooks authentic Tamil Cuisine. A stop at her place for lunch or dinner makes for a good introduction to the Tamil cuisine and way of life. The more adventurous can do a cooking class with her. She has a beautiful house, filled with knick-knacks which the husband and wife duo have collected from their travels. Sabita is also a textile activist and on request will be happy to show you her extensive and rare collection.
- ▶ Early risers can visit Koyambedu Market, Asia's largest perishable goods market, which never seems to sleep. Just on the outskirts of Chennai, it is an amazing riot of colours. A visit to the market early morning is an amazing experience. Made up of three distinct sections - the flower market, fruit market and vegetable market — it deals in vast quantities of perishable goods, all restocked regularly by enormous trucks that drive in and out all through the night. Time seems to fly by while absorbing the atmosphere and the energy of this place.
- ▶ Take a tour of the San Thome Cathedral with Father Kiran, an archivist of Madras-Mylapore Diocese, during your sightseeing tour of Chennai. The hour long tour explores the local history, the church history, its architecture and its lesser known features.

Hidden away in a remote valley

Village Tour at Athoor

TREASURES OF TANJORE

- ▶ While in Kumbakonam, on your way from Pondicherry to Tanjore, meet young children reciting Vedic chants, who are priests in training. Apart from strict conformance to traditions, the children are taught the Vedas (ancient Hindu religious texts) in classes which run from early in the morning till late evening. It takes seven years to complete the education after which they become priests of the temples in the cities they come from. "If you inform the priest in advance, you can listen to a prayer recited by the students of the school. Hearing close to thirty students reciting together with dedication is an experience in itself. You can interact with the students as well with the teacher acting as the interpreter," says Soumya who was in Kumbakonam recently.
- ▶ When in Tanjore, visit a house where they still continue making the Veena, a musical instrument which finds mention in ancient Hindu scriptures. For those not familiar with the instrument, a Veena is about five feet in length consisting of a large resonator (kudam), a wooden bridge (kudurai) and a tapering hollow neck (dandi). You can watch the instrument being hand carved and speak to the owner, whose family has been making Veenas for generations. "The best part of this tour is that it can easily be done after the visit to the Brihadeshwara Temple, the main draw of Tanjore. From here you can also proceed to see a demonstration of bronze idol making- the process of which has not changed much since the times of the Chola Kings (o8-13 AD)," says Soumya who explored Tanjore.
- ▶ Stop at the beautiful Ayyanar shrine on your way from Tanjore to Chettinad, which has more than 1000 terracotta horses. The Ayyanar temples do not fit into any traditional model of temples that you expect to find when you are traveling through South India. Their distinguishing feature is not a structure of any sort, rather shrines that seem to consist of rows of large, gaily decorated terracotta figures ranging from 4 to 20 feet in height; mostly horses. Ayyanar shrines are usually located at the peripheries of rural villages to fight against demons and evil spirits.

Athoor makes for a perfect end to a hectic Tamil Nadu trip. Alternatively it is a place to relax before entering Kerala via Thekkady (3 hours) or Munnar (4 hours). Stay at the Lakeside Guesthouse in Athoor, which is hidden away in a remote valley just a two hour drive from Madurai and around a three hour drive from Chettinad. It is surprising to find a guest-house here but even more unexpected is the fact that it is run by an English couple. As soon you check into the property, bougainvilleas in full bloom greet you and beyond the periphery is a beautiful lake surrounded by coconut plantations.

"The highlight during your stay at Lakeside is the Village Tour. A must for anyone staying at the property. You will clearly see that a lot of time and planning has gone into designing the tour and identifying what experiences would be of interest for guests," says Soumya Mukherji from our Destination Knowledge Centre, who was in Athoor recently. On the tour, you visit a brick making factory, a village school, a weaver's family, a potter, a coconut de-husking unit and meet interesting people along the way. Since the local community also benefits from these tours, everyone is very happy to see travellers. It is a relaxed tour, where you can decide how much time you want to spend interacting at each spot. When we dropped into the primary school, the children recited poems for us that they had been learning, which was wonderful," adds Soumya. Dorinda (owner) and Kennedy (caretaker) both accompany the guests on the tour and are excellent at explaining the daily life style of the villagers. The tour starts around nine o'clock in the morning and ends almost at lunch time.





Jog Niwas

A Day with Art and Perfume Connoisseurs

If you are planning to buy an out of the ordinary gift to celebrate a special occasion during your Rajasthan holiday head out to Jog Niwas, which is specially handpicked by our Destination Knowledge Centre. It is a 30 minute drive from Jodhpur. The family at Jog Niwas is an Art and Perfume connoisseur and have been into the patronage, development and preservation of the erstwhile aristocratic and royal fine and decorative arts of South Asia. They are happy to entertain you in their salon where you can explore the entire range of mediums they have lovingly revived to their former glory. Choose from the work of 80 different master craftsmen from all over India, some of which are near extinction, yet the family patronises them. We particularly recommend the earrings with Silver and Gold Filigree work on Stained Glass which costs about £200. Then there is Gold Work on Paper Mache to Miniature paintings to choose from and you can also return with a bottle of your signature perfume which your hosts are happy to create for you. This is a shopping experience like no other. Your host is also the author of the book on ‘The Bikaner School Usta Artisans and Their Heritage.’

OF JEEP SAFARIS, CYCLING AND WALKING

- ▶ The owners of Jog Niwas organise jeep safaris in the Jalore Wildlife Sanctuary, which is 3 hours away. It's a privately owned sanctuary by the family, an ideal stop on the way from Jaisalmer to Udaipur. An absolute paradise for the recluse wildlifer. There is no electricity, since the property is located inside the sanctuary and the owners didn't want to strain the surrounding wildlife. The surrounding vegetation is in parts desert, savannah and foothills of Aravalis, where you will be the only ones around! Desert Fox, Asian Wild Cats, Eurasian Vultures, Indian Gazelle and Porcupines can be spotted. If you are lucky you might even spot the elusive Leopard.
- ▶ For your clients who love to cycle, the morning cycling tour of Udaipur is perfect. “What I loved is the unhurried nature of the tour. Most of the times you are cycling downhill, you are relaxed and can soak in the atmosphere,” says Soumya from our Destination Knowledge Centre. The 2 hour tour starts in the Old city, near Jagdish Temple and ends at a local confectionary shop with light snacks. For those looking for a challenge, Jean from our Destination Knowledge Centre recommends the bicycling tour on the outskirts of Udaipur, which he experienced first-hand. “While the bicycle used for the morning tour is basic, your clients will be given Firefox Hardtail bikes for the outskirts.”
- ▶ Explore the quaint village of Samal near Ranakpur that still stands rustic and has retained its rural character intact, conveniently located between Udaipur and the Ranakpur Jain Temples.

Discover Kerala like a local

Life, spice & charm of rural Kerala

HISTORY AND LIVELY EXPERIENCES

- ▶ Visit the Folklore Museum in Kochi which is a treasure trove with artefacts in stone, wood, terracotta and bronze dating back to the early stone age up until now. It is full of jewellery, lamps, masks, tribal folk objects, utensils and more. There are over 4000 exhibits across two floors and the top floor is the country's best ethnic theatre. Each floor is themed after the three architectural schools of Kerala- Malabar, Cochin and Travancore. The Museum was recently visited by Philip Thomas from our Destination Knowledge Centre.
- ▶ Explore the old towns of Fort Cochin and Mattancherry, which is a perfect combination of history and lively experiences. Half of the tour is dedicated to the historical sites of Fort Cochin on foot, followed by a tuk-tuk ride to Mattancherry to experience its lively narrow lanes. “I really liked it. Fort Cochin has more of Colonial and Christian architecture, whereas Mattancherry offers a lively environment and a completely different experience. An excellent walk to propose, it starts at Shantila's Sweet Center, then the Fruit Market, visit a Jain Family who are experts in temporary Herbal Tattoos, visit a Brahmin's house to see Kollam making and lastly the Jew street with its numerous antique shops,” says Jean Noel of our Destination Knowledge Centre who has experienced this walk first-hand.
- ▶ If you are in Trivandrum or Kovalam, drop in for a meal at Villa Maya. You will definitely enjoy your breakfast, lunch or dinner here in the garden of this lovingly restored 18th century Dutch Manor surrounded by water. The atmosphere is good, so is the décor and it takes you back in time to the days of the Princely Travancore state of Kerala, all this for a reasonable price. “Villa Maya is excellent value for money. Ask for the private tables situated on the terrace-garden, discreetly surrounded by mini-canal. Very few tables are available, so it is better to book in advance. I recommend the Njandu Roast Masala (Crab cooked in cream served with steamed rice with Parippu Curry) which is a real delight,” says Jean Noel of our Destination Knowledge Centre, who was in Villa Maya recently.

This is an experience designed to make you feel as a part of the life, spice and the charm of rural Kerala. You will start early and drive to a beach where you will witness all the live action of the fisherman bringing in their fresh catch for auction. En-route visit a coir yarn and mat weaving unit. The tour continues to a quaint farm house in the backwaters, where you will be served breakfast. After breakfast ride with your cycles and start paddling through the countryside, crossing a river on a local country canoe. Continue cycling, watching people going about their daily chores to reach a fish market. Your guide will explain the life and activities around the market. Later cycle back to the farmhouse, where breakfast was served, this time taking a different route, this is where the tour ends. From here you proceed to your next destination by car. “This is a tale of four friends who want people to discover Kerala like a local. Unique products combined with their professionalism on ground will provide your clients a wonderful time,” says Jean Noel from our Destination Knowledge Centre who has experienced this tour first-hand.





Hola Mohalla

The Sikh festival

The Sikh festival of Hola Mohalla is celebrated in Anandpur Sahib, Punjab the day after Holi, the festival of colours. Hola Mohalla was started by the tenth Sikh Guru, Gobind Singh, in 1701 as a gathering of Sikhs for military exercises and mock battles, who was at that time battling the Mughal Empire. It is a time for Sikhs to reaffirm their commitment to the community and involves everyone. As many as 1 million pilgrims and visitors from all over Punjab start converging at the holy town of Anandpur Sahib a week before Holi. Maximum attendance at Anandpur Sahib is on the Hola Mohalla day of the Nihangs. The Nihangs are easily identifiable by their distinctive rich blue robes and large turbans, which are often embellished with small weapons. The Mohalla celebrations kick off with martial arts display, as traditional Nihang warriors treat visitors and pilgrims to impromptu exhibitions of individual prowess with weapons of the yore, keeping alive a skill that would not have survived, had it not been for the patronage that it enjoys from the Sikh masses. At the Holla Mohalla fair one can also observe at close quarters the tradition of ‘Langar’ or the Community kitchen. Different Sikh congregations vie with each other to attract pilgrims and visitors to their Langars. All are welcome irrespective of caste, creed, religion or station in life. This tradition of sharing ones bounty with strangers is integral to the Sikh philosophy, enduring traditions and hospitality.

EXPLORE AMRITSAR

- ▶ Walk through the narrow lanes of Old Amritsar with a friend of Sita en-route to the Golden Temple. See the only Gurudwara built by the British in the honour of 21 Sikh soldiers who fought for them against the Afghans. Walk through interesting markets, learn about the Sikh religion and life on the streets.
- ▶ Visit the Golden Temple in Amritsar at the crack of dawn to witness the morning ceremony here, for an insight into how the Guru Granth Sahib, the Holy Book of the Sikh religion is considered a living master who needs to rest as well. Every morning the Holy Book is carried back from the resting place to the prayer hall of the Golden Temple amidst showering of rose petals. Soak in the positive vibrations by watching the sunrise from here.
- ▶ While in Amritsar, take a side trip to a Sarai (resting place for travellers) built by Amanat Khan; the Master Calligrapher of the Taj Mahal en-route to the high octane closing ceremony in Wagah at the Indo-Pakistan border. The land for the Sarai where Amanat Khan lies buried was gifted to him by Mughal Emperor Shahjahan you can also see Amanat Khan’s calligraphy work.
- ▶ Relax at the Punjabiya, which is 2 hours from Amritsar, in the peaceful countryside for an authentic experience of rural Punjab; yet with all creature comforts, great food, in style and at your own pace. Only 4 rooms. Small and Private.

Mumbai Dream

Lights, Camera & Action

PERFECT MATCH

- ▶ How about Sita’s “Perfect Match on Earth for the Perfect Match Made in Heaven” in Mumbai for honeymooners. A cricket match organised just for the two in the mecca of cricket, Mumbai with Lagan Nu Bhonu; the quintessential wedding food of the Parsi community. Cricket is almost a religion in India and the cricketers are treated no less than God themselves. The honeymooners will be first introduced to the game of cricket by a coach. He will tell them briefly about the rules and regulations of the game. Then, there will be an introduction of the cricket kit. There will be two teams, one for the husband and the other for the wife. Once the introductions are over, there will be a toss and the teams will choose to either bat or field. Then a 4 over battle will ensue. Once the game is over and we have a winner, there will be a one over duel between the husband and the wife, with a tennis ball of course. This will allow them to utilize all that they have learnt in the past hour. Meanwhile, the Dabbawalas will ride down with Lagan Nu Bhonu; the quintessential wedding food of the Parsi community of the city, who originally hailed from Iran.

Mumbai Dream celebrates India's most followed religion, Bollywood! This 3.2 Billion Dollar industry has found fans not only in India, but also around the world. You will be met by a friend of Sita who has worked in Bollywood, who will share with you all the latest news, gossip and the history of Bollywood just in time for your first stop; the Bollywood Poster Boys. With the onset of digital printing, Bollywood hand-made posters are on their way out and only a handful of people practice this craft. We will introduce you to one such poster boy who still continues to paint life-size Bollywood posters. For a supplement, we could get one customised for you as well. Post that, you will drive past homes of the famous Bollywood actors. Treated like Gods in India, you will see fans flocking to their homes to get a glimpse of their favourite superstars. From here, you will visit the Bollywood Walk of Fame, where the actors have left a lasting imprint on Bollywood's history. Next up, you will be driven to a studio where you will see a live TV/Film/Ad film shoot. You will be privy to all the finer nuances of film-making and interact with the cast and crew and understand their perspective on the craft. There will also be a small set recce in store for you. We will take a pit-stop at a popular restaurant for lunch. Post lunch you will be driven to a famous production house and get to meet the creative minds behind the content that you saw. You will experience behind the scenes working of a production house and understand the process of content creation. For an extra cost, we can also get you to audition on tape. You will be required to memorise a famous Bollywood dialogue and give a special audition on tape. You will be given the tape as a souvenir! We can organise a special Bollywood dance class for you for an extra supplement. This is a 90 minute class, where a Bollywood choreographer will teach you a dance number from a very popular Hindi song. You will learn all the steps that go into making Bollywood what it is - the world's biggest musical journey!





Human Rights

Corporate Responsibility Initiative

Sita is committed to operate with respect for human rights. This commitment is outlined in our Statement of Commitment on Human Rights published in March 2012. To put this commitment into practice Sita conducted a project on human rights due diligence in the Indian tourism industry.

The project is an extension of Sita’s Corporate Responsibility Initiative and aims at providing a more precise understanding of the human rights context of Sita’s operations and business relationships in India and the actual or potential human rights impacts it may cause, contribute to, or be linked to, as well as existing measures being taken to address them.

Sita is the first company in the travel industry in India to have conducted this assessment. The findings will be available to the general public in the form of a manual.

GUIDELINES FOR SUSTAINABLE EXCURSIONS

- Sita gives strong preference to excursions which take environmental, social and economic impacts into due account and which foster a more sustainable tourism. When sourcing or selling an excursion to our customers, Sita applies common sense judgment in cases in which the best and most sustainable choice needs to be determined. In doing so, we have drafted a guideline for excursions based on, respect in encounters with local culture, heritage and traditions, caring for the environment, caring for animal welfare, providing economic benefits to local communities, providing a fair working environment and employing qualified staff and ensuring customer health & safety and building customer sustainability awareness about their excursions.

Experience Newari culture

Day with a Newari family in Patan

CHEESE AND MORE

- “Cheese, wine and a friend must be old to be good,” this old Cuban proverb is one of François Driard’s favourites. The creator of Himalayan French Cheese and one of the main initiators behind Kathmandu’s food revolution, Francois Driard has all the charm of a French country boy, the only difference being his country of choice is Nepal, not France. In fact, living and working in Nepal on a cheese farm was never part of Driard’s original plan. When Driard hit Nepal, he immediately fell in love with the country. Located in the magical location overlooking the Kathmandu Valley, on a hillside in Tokha, Chandeswhori north of the Ring Road, the farm is humble. Visitors are struck by the tranquility of the place, close, yet a world away from the chaos and traffic of Kathmandu. Visitors are welcome, a tour and tasting costing is a lasting experience.
- Nineteen O Five is built in the neo-classic style found in Rana palaces of the early twentieth century in Nepal. Unique in planning and layout, lightness and informality, distinguish the place. The building rises above water, with the approach across a wooden bridge a romantic setting like the arched bridges, found in Japanese woodcuts. In these woodcuts, an old bottlebrush like an ancient willow tree bends its branches gracefully into the water. Spend time reading a book in the verandah or enjoy a drink at the bar, an ideal place to relax.

This experience takes you to Dhakhwa House - a beautifully renovated old Newari house located in the heart of Patan. Your host Prakash is a veteran mountain biker and Premila is a housewife. After a brief discussion on Newari culture and lifestyle, one of the family members will take you to the local market. It’s a fascinating walk that winds its way through the complex interlinked courtyards and lanes of the old town. This walk is a great insight into the lifestyle and traditional structure of Newari villages, with their many bahals (courtyards), hiti (water tanks) and tun (wells). You will be provided with some local currency to bargain and buy spices, vegetable and drinks at the market. We will stop for snacks in the restaurant owned by your hosts. Back in the Dhakhwa House, Premila will cook Newari food in the kitchen and will also teach you the basics of Newari cuisine. You can try your hands at Newari cooking as well. Post dinner you will return to your hotel.





Kathmandu's Courtyards Bahals

This walking tour with a trained engineer and energy planner, who is a friend of Sita in Kathmandu, is a journey back in time. Your guide for this walk credits the preservation of Kathmandu's art, heritage and culture to the occasional super quakes that rattle the city. As the cities had to be rebuilt every hundred years or so, the skills of the artisans were preserved and passed on during the reconstruction work. Perhaps similar was the history of the 500 years old Chusya Bahal, where contrasting ancient woodworks exist side by side with modern replacements, this is truly a place where the past blends with the present. Almost like a tranquil refuge from the chaos of the raging city. Another interesting stop is Tachhe bahal which is near Ason Chowk, home to the famous Annapurna Temple. Legend has it that the temple dedicated to the Goddess of Plenty was placed there to inspire artists and craftsperson to be more creative. Next is Jana bahal, one of the most amazing examples of medieval Nepali art. This tour is over 2 hours of travel through centuries of history of the old bahals (courtyards) of Kathmandu. On this tour you will see 7 such bahals and each of them has its own unique history and story to tell. To put things into perspective, there are 270 bahals in the Kathmandu Valley with some 150 in Kathmandu City alone.

Courtyards

THE JOY OF GIVING

- Take a walk through the lanes of any of the three sister cities of the valley - Kathmandu, Lalitpur (Patan) and Bhaktapur to get a closer look at the fierce looking oleographs carved on the side struts of the temples of the Kathmandu Valley which give you quite a fright at times. Other times, you are amazed by the watchful and ferocious attitude of these creatures with large eyes, sharp claws and mysteriously flaming wings shooting up from their legs, mouths and tails. These beasts really seem to guard the temple and scare any evil offenders away from the premises. Most of them are pagodas and may look alike, but you don't need to be an archeologist to see that they are not identical. These pagodas have roofs, heavily overhanging from the wall of the temple core. They act as reminders of the masterful and overtly expressive sculptural art of Kathmandu during the rule of the Malla kings (from 12th to 18th century AD).
- While in Kathmandu visit a Seeing Hands massage clinic. Seeing Hands operates as a non-profit-making social enterprise in Nepal. Blind massage therapists are trained by a team of volunteer tutors, once they qualify, they work in the Seeing Hands massage clinic. Part of the fees is used to fund the training and employment of more blind masseurs, because of which this initiative has a long-term sustainable future. The Seeing Hands team is working to create a unique opportunity for the blind in Nepal - one that capitalises upon their inherent skills and offers them real prospects for work at the end of their training.

Simple and authentic Village Festivals of Bhutan

IN AND AROUND

- Cut down on the many visits to the massive Dzongs in our Bhutan itinerary. Having visited one Dzong, you can replace the others with our newly designed day hikes in Paro, Thimphu and Punakha. These day hikes can be customised as per the fitness levels and interest.
- Take an early morning walk to the huge Buddha statue overlooking the Thimphu valley and watch the sunrise from there. This 51.5 metre tall Buddha statue made of bronze and gilded with gold is the 17th such largest statue in the world and was constructed at a cost of USD 20 million. Return to your hotel for breakfast.
- Take a morning walk around the Thimphu Chorten, the most popular place of worship in Thimphu, Bhutan's capital city. Watch the locals offer their prayers. Keep a lookout for Tashi Gyalpo. Every morning he collects leftover rice from the police camp across the road and feeds the pigeons. Chat with local children on their way to school while returning to your hotel.

While in Bhutan, don't miss out on a Village Festival, if one is happening. Unlike the popular festivals at Thimphu and Paro which are organised on a huge scale and geared up for tourists, the village festivals of Bhutan are much smaller, simpler, unorganised and happen in remote locations. And that's where the charm lies. "Quite your one love, one world vibe. They are authentic," says Kuntil Baruwa from our Destination Knowledge Centre who had experienced 2 village festivals in Tang and Nalakhar in Central Bhutan. But be aware, most of these village festivals are a bumpy ride away, the locals refer to them as Farm Roads. And if your clients are travelling in a group they may have to walk from the road-head, since larger vehicles may not be suitable to go right up to the festival site. Dances performed by the monks and locals is one of the main highlights of these village festivals and makes for superb photo oppurtunities. It is believed in Bhutan that those who watch a Cham (Mask Dance) are released from the cycle of suffering. Performed only on auspicious occasions such as these village festivals, masks used in a Cham are carved out of wood and painted. Dances apart, these village festivals are an amazing insight into how the locals celebrate. There is gambling and archery. Be happy to go local and participate. You will also find villagers putting up handmade craft for sale - such as bags, shawls and much more. It costs twice as less than a handicraft shop in Thimphu or Paro and the money goes directly to the artisans. There are food stalls selling Bhutanese snacks, cold beverages and beer. You don't have to eat here, but it's wonderful to sit down in these stalls, buy a bottle of soft drink and relax a bit when you want some respite from the sun. It is polite to leave behind a donation to the festival organisers while attending a village festivalwhatever you feel like (the locals have no demand) because they use the money to better the festival next year. And it is perfectly all right to refuse the glass of Aara (rice wine) which is offered to the donor to say Thank You. "I, of course, had two for the Rs 100 I paid and my donation was very warmly acknowledged by the organisers," says Kuntil.



Destination insider

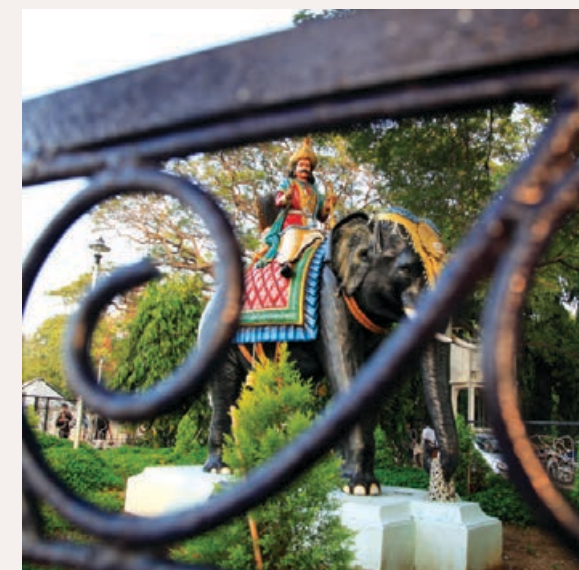
The Chola Trail - Keeping Tanjore as the base of our Trail, we trace the close to 500 years rule of the Chola dynasty. From 8C AD- 13C AD the Chola Kings built close to 5000 temples spread all over South India with a few temples in Sri Lanka, Sumatra and Java. Of these temples, around 250 still survive. We focus here on five temples, each corresponding to one century of their rule - to map the rise and fall of the Chola Empire.

With a
difference

The Chola Trail

Soumya Mukherji from our Destination Knowledge Centre was in Tamil Nadu recently, where he went on a 2-day trail to trace the rise and fall of one of the most illustrious dynasties of Asia - the Cholas.

While on a tour of Tamil Nadu, everyone's itinerary takes them to the major temples built by one of the most illustrious dynasties of Asia - The Cholas. Be it the Brihadeshwara or the Big Temple at Tanjore or the Darasuram or Gangaikondacholapuram, while on the way from Pondicherry to Tanjore. But on the 2-day Chola Trail with Sita, we do things a little differently. "Keeping Tanjore as the base of our Trail, we trace the close to 500 years rule of the Chola dynasty. From 8C AD- 13C AD the Chola Kings built close to 5000 temples spread all over South India with a few temples in Sri Lanka, Sumatra and Java. Of these temples, around 250 still survive. We focus on five temples, each corresponding to one century of their rule - to map the rise and fall of the Chola Empire," says Soumya Mukherji of our Destination Knowledge Centre who experienced it first-hand recently. Beginning chronologically with the Vijayalayacholeswara temple of Narthamalai, the first temple built by this dynasty and ending with Kampahareswarar, the last temple built by a Chola king. The tour is conducted by a Chennai based friend of Sita, who has led tours for the British Museum to India. The highlight of the tour is the rare sculptures, especially in Gangaikondacholapuram where one can see the entire family of the Hindu Gods. During the tour some of the rituals done by the Chola Kings, thousands of years ago are re-enacted and one gets to see coins from the Chola period as well. "We end the Trail with a Chola dinner- a 12th century vegetarian menu, but cooked in a 21st century kitchen in a Tanjore hotel which is yet another highlight," adds Soumya.



Art of Travel

Sita's monthly newsletter brings out the real essence of contemporary India and influences of its past lineage that help the reader explore some more. The newsletter is an extension of what we offer, an Art of Travel with high standards and services. The design and the content have been inspired by the company's core values; Reliability, Authenticity and Passion.

Some of our
favourites

6 THINGS WE LIKED ABOUT - UDAIPUR

- ▶ **Cooking Class at Dakshu's:** Head out to Shikarbadi for an interactive cooking class at Dakshu's. Rakshita and Dakshu will host you at their comfortable home in a leafy neighborhood of Udaipur and will show you how to cook Bharva Baingan, Masala Bhindi and so many other delicious dishes.
- ▶ **Samal Village Walk:** Explore the quaint village of Samal near Ranakpur that still stands rustic and has retained its rural character intact. Stop at Samal to walk around for a couple of hours for an insight into traditional professions that are fast vanishing in Rajasthan and elsewhere in India.
- ▶ **Horse Riding at Kharwa:** Arrive at Kharwa Chanda by a local train from Udaipur, where you will be met by Satyendra Singh Chawra aka Sunny. He has his own stable of Marwari Horses in his mud fort.
- ▶ **Cycling in and around Udaipur:** If your clients love to cycle then the morning cycling tour of Udaipur is perfect. What I loved is the unhurried nature of the tour and how well it is conducted.
- ▶ **Chota Purohit ji ki Haveli:** Tucked away in the old part of the city the Chota Purohit Ki Haveli is a great place for a gala evening for small groups.
- ▶ **Udaipur's Contemporary Art Scene:** Meet some of Udaipur's contemporary artists over cocktail and dinner for a first-hand knowledge of the Contemporary Art scene. Visit their studios and get to know what elevates and inspires them.



Best of art of travel

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF

Arjun Singh functions as a personal butler for guests staying in the 5 room Fort Begu. In fact it is Arjun, who will receive your guest on the highway on his bike and guide their car to the property. At the property, he is your one point contact for everything 24 x 7. Feel free to check out Arjun's working knowledge of over 7 languages. He is more than happy to give you a demonstration.

SPOTTED BY SITA

Kuntal from our Destination Knowledge Centre spotted a water chestnut picker near a lake in Rajasthan. Water chestnut is a water herb that grows in shallow lakes and ponds and produces a black four horned nut which is sweet in taste and has a crunchy texture. Water chestnut is eaten mostly raw in India but the most interesting part is the flour made out of it. When Hindus fast during holy occasions they are allowed to have breads made only out of chestnut flour.

TOP CHEF RECOMMENDS

The 70 year old Rao Sahib, head of the Begu family is a simple man who is a foodie. He plays host, along with his two sons Ajay and Maha during your clients stay at the 600 year old Fort Begu, located after Jaipur and just before Udaipur. He recommends the Royal Mutton as a must try during your stay here. It's a recipe he learnt from his mother. The best way to eat this dish cooked with spices in the most simple way, is to place the succulent pieces of goat meat on top of a roti (Indian bread) and have both together using your hands, preferably. The local way.



Knowledge wednesday

Guest speakers, not only from the travel industry, come and share their knowledge, experiences and of course their expertise to give an insight of what surrounds us today and what awaits us, as an opportunity, tomorrow. An interaction based forum, where employees interact with the guest speaker on a Wednesday.

Educating children in rural Ladakh

17000 ft Foundation is the story of a team of inspired corporate professionals and avid trekkers who left their corporate worlds to embark on a journey of social change. Sandeep and Sujata are adventure travellers turned social entrepreneurs who left their comfortable corporate jobs to start the 17,000 ft foundation. The primary goal of the foundation is to reach each and every one of Ladakh's remote schools, some of which remain cut-off from the rest of the world for six months in a year through technology, research, collaboration and passion to provide opportunities for enhanced learning to each and every child.

Reaching 17000 feet

17000 ft, 3 mountain passes, -20 degree temperatures, 25 horses, 1500 kg of school furniture and a 100 eager, smiling children in one of the remotest schools of rural Ladakh, is where our story began.

We started with just a few schools, today, our programmes are already reaching out to over 300 of the remotest schools of Ladakh.

17000 ft - Is the highest our team has crossed on foot and the furthest we have travelled to reach our remotest beneficiary. A school in remote Ladakh which remains cut off from civilization for 6 months of a year due to harsh winters.

We've seen some incredibly remote schools, in the harshest of terrains, with extremely dedicated teachers and sometimes just a handful of children. Struggling with bare minimum infrastructure and even lesser resources, managing just with determination and the will to succeed, these far-flung little schools of Ladakh are the only hope for the nomadic and rural children of Ladakh.

With 963 schools spread across a 60,000 sq. km. area, 93% of Ladakh's schools are rural and remote. Struggling under the weight of modernisation and the need to retain its centuries old culture, the education system suffers from the sheer inability of the Government to administer remote schools on its own.

We organise Volunteer Travel within a scope of 17,000 ft in Ladakh and also offer opportunities for those who may want to volunteer with us on an individual basis.

Remember, it is all about smiling children.



Unconditional Love for India

Jean Noel Esteve from our Destination Knowledge Centre is a French national and travels all over the Indian sub-continent to keep us abreast of the latest; including hotels and his take on the infrastructure of the various destinations.

When backpackers meet in a restaurant or a bar during a trip, the conversation is mostly about their travel experience. Which country have you visited? Which one do you prefer? It is best not to comment about people's preferences as everyone has their own interest, feelings or other indescribable personal favourites. Usually during this kind of a conversation, names of many countries appear. But, for the question: "Which country has influenced you the most"? I can assure you, India is always mentioned! Why? Well, there is something inexplicable about India that makes it so exceptional. After many trips I finally decided to stay in India in order to understand it better. Here I am! Thanks to a unique job opportunity, I am now living in Gurgaon for more than 9 months.

I cannot say if I know India better now, but in these 9 months I have been brought face to face with India, its people! Finding an apartment and completing all the processes that follow have been considerably facilitated, thanks to the support of my company (without which I won't have been able to manage). Same goes for the furniture, which has been given or leant by some of my colleagues, this reminds me that I am not alone. Here is something that stands out for settling in India -IST has been a challenge. IST? (Indian Stretchable Time) which permits you to arrive leisurely at 1600 hours when you have said 1500 hours, without guilt or an apology or worst case scenario, not turn up at all without bothering

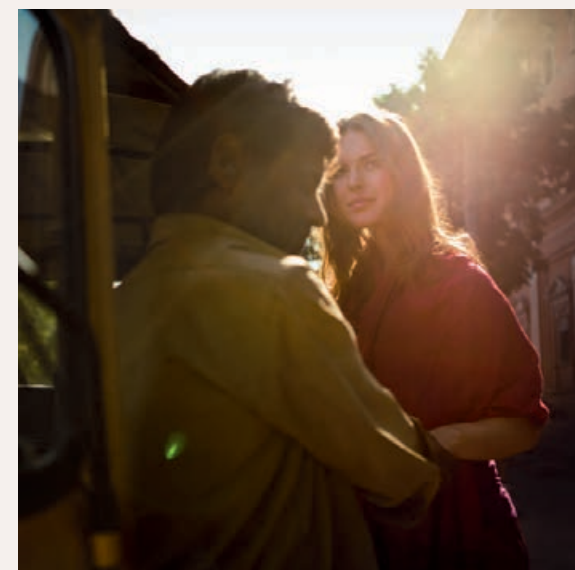
Lost in Translation

to inform. My first experience with IST was regarding the delivery of my mattress. It took one week for the delivery, whereas it was supposed to be delivered in one day. Every day the delivery was postponed for the next. Of course, it was up to me to do a follow up, to know why it was not delivered. This happened so many times! Notion of timing in India is completely different when compared to Europe. Ten minutes is never ten minutes, it is 30 minutes at least or one hour! Whenever, a sales person tells me "it will be ready in 10 minutes," I always reply with a smile "Excuse me, but 10 minutes does not exist in India!" I have learnt now!

The other problem I faced (and am still facing), is more pernicious and more difficult to anticipate. In India, notion of service is very crazy. This means that you often have 2 or 3 people who take care of something for which one person would have been sufficient. It sometimes makes things very complex. For instance, when I wanted a Wi-Fi connection in my apartment, I had to interact with 5 different people and it took one week from my first phone call to the vendor, till the final payment. One person will attend to your calls, one would be coming the day after to your apartment to check something, three more who didn't speak a word of English to install the Wi-Fi and one (the person who attended my calls) comes after a few days to collect the money. There are many more examples for such difficult situations. Like people here often use the phrase 'yes yes it is possible,' whereas you know otherwise. But despite everything, the stress that comes with everything, spices up my life. This is one of the several paradoxes of India by the way, not always easy, yet so appealing.

I do not know who found the name of the international marketing campaign to promote tourism in India but I completely agree: Incredible India!

In our opinion



A thrilling
experience

Rail Fanning

Inderjeet Rathod is an ardent fan of Indian Rail, to the extent that he goes on hikes to photograph some of the most picturesque railway tracks in India. At the Destination Knowledge Centre he stitches all our findings together into beautiful itineraries, prepares reference documents for the operations team and designs special interest products on demand.

Children are fascinated by trains. It's captivating for them to watch a tiny little speck approaching them gradually, taking on a monstrous size and slowly disappearing into oblivion, rolling on the never-ending parallel lines and the rhythmic sound of the rolling wheels, makes it all the more dramatic!

I wasn't any different! I would stand away safely from the tracks for hours together watching the trains come and go. It was my favourite past time. Each passing train would give me a thrilling experience! Visiting our maternal cousins in Ambala, Haryana used to be a delight, since they lived in a Railway Colony!!! I would get to see so much at the Railway Shed - steam engines, diesel engines, goods train wagons, fuel tanker wagons and much more. Once I was lucky enough to see a huge steam engine being flipped manually on a turntable by an army of labourers! What a treat!

While growing up, trains became my favourite mode of travel. The most memorable journeys were when we used to travel long distance from Delhi to Mumbai during summer vacations. The highlight was to see the change of engines at Vadodara Station, where an electric engine would take over from the diesel one. The electric engine's pressure horn would terrify us!

Almost three decades later, while driving down one of the highways near Delhi, my 12 year old nephew insisted that we stop at a railway crossing for him to have a look at a train passing by. That very moment my love for trains resurfaced and I was at it again- this time video-graphing the experience. While uploading this small video on YouTube, I stumbled upon hoards of other similar videos proclaiming their allegiance to IRFCA. I went on google to find out that IRFCA meant 'Indian Railways Fan Club' ('A' being symbolic of its founding which was done in USA by a few Indians out on foreign job assignments). IRFCA describes itself as a hobby group, for discussing all aspects of Railways in India. The website www.irfca.org has comprehensive information about Indian Railways (which even the official website of Indian Railways does not have) such as its history, its operational, technical details, train travelogues, images, videos and latest news about the development of Railways in India. There are now about 8000 fans interacting with each other on the minutest of details of Indian Railways. Interestingly IRFCA has

been holding Annual Conventions since 2006, in cities which are considered to be Railway hubs in the country.

Having found the community, I did not lose much time in becoming its member in 2010. I attended the sixth Annual IRFCA Convention at Bhusawal, Maharashtra in 2011 and had the first opportunity to interact with other rail fans face to face! Being new to the lingo used by the fellow members, I was completely debunked at the convention. Locomotives were being addressed as WDPs WDMs, WDGs, WAPs, WAGs which made no sense to me and the Stations were being addressed as NDLS, NZM, MAS, SBC, BCT, SDAH, HWH; I had no clue. It took me some time to be a part of the discussions, with the help of the information given on IRFCA website I too could join in!

Within the gamut of IRFCA there are many subgroups loyal to one aspect of Indian Railways which they love the most - like the Bangalore group is staunchly loyal to Diesels, whereas the Mumbai and Pune groups root for the Electrics. Each group is like a living encyclopaedia on their subject! Then there is a subgroup which loves to record videos of the rolling stock, while another group sticks to clicking images.

Just like other Railfan Photographers I too dream of clicking images of trains at scenic locations like Dudhsagar Falls (near Goa), Omega Loop (near Gwalior), Thull Ghats (near Igatpuri-Nasik), Pamban Bridge (near Rameshwaram) and so many more.

And may be some day i can videograph the train journey from Banihal to Srinagar in Kashmir!



Awake on a bed of flowers

Philip Thomas is a Delhi born Keralite who lived all his life in the Capital city except for a 13 year period when he did a stint in Tourism in Arabia; The Sultanate of Oman to be more precise and briefly in Dubai. He regrets that Love and Compassion are not subjects taught in any curriculum anywhere in the world and thinks that we are not alone in this universe! He recommends:

Very often, people like us mistake the teachings of a famous Prince, Siddhartha by name, who the world later proclaimed as The Buddha, to be “heavy” and difficult to understand. I have often wondered at the subject of compassion that Buddhism emphasises on, similar to what Jesus Christ of Nazareth publicly exhibited and exhorted others to have throughout his lifetime.

Having tried various “doses” of spirituality after my friendly neighborhood priest at Church (yes I am Christian along with about 30 million of us amongst our teeming 1.2 billion residents) failed to ignite my inner “flame”, I finally decided one day to attend a Vipassana Course. It’s free, requires 10 days of your time and is totally secular. No robes, No Gurus, No Mumbo Jumbo, no kneeling, crawling, chanting, holding hands and all! One will need to empty ones’ pockets at the reception and leave behind your mobile phones, car keys, money, books, wallets and anything else the pockets carry. We go in “light”. By the end of the post lunch session on Day 1, my knees, hips and several parts of my anatomy that I did not even know exist, begin to creak. Naturally, rusty as I am with my sedentary life style, it did make me seriously question if I should withdraw from the course and come back a few months later. Knowing fully well that there was no coach waiting for me to turn me into a fit and trim entity, it took just a few quick seconds to decide to push on. And I did. For 10 days I endured it all, which ended with me crying out loud “Let love prevail”.

The “Middle Path” that Siddhartha Gautama purported, calls for deep compassion in all beings. It was not necessary to gain Nirvana (enlightenment) or fall into the bowels of hell to be touched by a “calling”. It required an equanimous and balanced approach to life and its trappings. Vipassana is one sure shot technique that will make your imagination fly as far as you want it to go. I must confess that I did not turn into a Buddhist follower, nor is my continuance of the practice of Vipassana regular (unlike what is actually suggested) but I can bet my last rupee that it did help me to stay calmer in life and become an “observer”. In moments both positive (in ecstasy or joy) and negative (in sorrow and anger). It helped “deal” with successes as well as disappointments with a more balanced head!

Much wisdom has already been spoken about over

Sound of Silence

centuries of how ignorance and indifference permeates into our social fabric making us often uncaring for our own selves as well as others. In some quarters, it is perceived to be selfish and egotistical to make efforts to look after one’s “self”. I cannot find the best words to describe how erroneous such a thought is. Please do not fail ever to continue to look after yourselves as much, if not more as you look after the ones you love. . But are we ready to do this just the way we are right now? Does all the money and power and position we enjoy, ensure us a good night’s sleep only? Does it also help us to lead a good day’s life? If the answer to either one of these is not a loud and firm Yes, I pray that we may seek the solace that we so richly deserve, in the refuge of Dhamma-a truly universal path free from all sectarianism. And after we have done our work here on earth wont it be great to help everyone we know and care about and don’t care about too, to free themselves from bondage, from misery, from hurt, from resentment and help them fly into a world where their wings with every flap, may add nothing but liberty to their souls and minds?

Just find ten days to fix your life for good; it is hardly a tall task to ask for. And yet, frequently, this world does not allow us so much time at one go. Drop it all once in a while and continue to stay on to this middle path. It is time for our Spirit to be triumphant once again.

May you all enjoy real peace, real harmony and real happiness! Sukho buddhanam uppado. (Happy is the arising of Buddhas in the world)



Stays we loved & Stays to watch out for

Mainstream, but different

FORT BEGU, BEGU, RAJASTHAN

Fort Begu is a 600 year old heritage property with only 5 suites, it is a destination in itself and makes for an ideal stopover after Jaipur, situated just before Udaipur. “After the rather hectic Golden Triangle (Delhi-Agra-Jaipur) with all the press and clamour of the crowds, a stay at Fort Begu with its laidback vibe and 600 year old history, is like a time machine transporting you back in time. It slows you down giving your clients an opportunity to introspect about their time spent in India so far and is the perfect precursor to the romantic Udaipur by the Lake Pichola which is only 3 hours away,” says Kuntil Baruwa from our Destination Knowledge Centre who stayed at Fort Begu. Your clients will love the sundowners organised by the family at their Summer Palace located on the Rajgarh Lake. The Begu family stays in the Fort and plays a perfect host. “During my stay at Fort Begu, the 70 year old Rao Sahib, head of the Begu family cooked a recipe he learnt from his mother just for me. He not only cooked it for me, but also typed out the recipe for me in a type-writer he hadn’t used in the past 20 years. I was overwhelmed. And how was the food? Absolutely delicious. The food served at different locations during your stay here is a highlight of the Fort Begu experience,” adds Kuntil.

CHANOUD GARH, CHANOUD, RAJASTHAN

On the road between Jodhpur and Udaipur, immerse yourself in the sights and sounds of Rajasthan’s countryside by spending one night at Chanoud Garh which is a destination in itself. “This 300 year old fort will charm you with its 7 stylish suites. It is ideal for your FITs and small groups. History apart, Chanoud could almost be called a Homestay Fort, since you are welcomed by the owners themselves who stay in the property. At the end of the day, you can even participate in the Aarti ceremony at the family temple, or have a drink watching the sunset from the roof top, whilst enjoying the panoramic view. Everything is unique at Chanoud Garh,” says Jean Noel Esteve from our Destination Knowledge Centre who stayed at Chanoud Garh.

MALJI KA KAMRA, CHURU, RAJASTHAN

“Churu, a little known destination turned out to be a package of surprises with “Malji Ka Kamra”. We loved the fact that we were staying in this hundred year old ancient Rang Mahal, where each room had a tale of its own,” says Sita colleague Emy Alex who stayed at Malji Ka Kamra with her friends. From the exceptional exteriors to the antique styled décor, it sure did exhibit heritage charm at its best! Spice Court, the in-house

Stays we loved

restaurant serves “home-made” Rajasthani cuisine – a brilliant add on! Some of the brilliant frescos of Churu can be explored at a walking distance from the hotel. But the highlight of the stay is ‘Bonfire at the Dunes’ with the Chef’s speciality served under the starry night! Mr. Deepak Balan (the ever friendly Manager) also organises ‘The Sunset High-Tea at Johra,’ another splendid location painted with crimson skies. “Well, Churu may well be Rajasthan’s best kept secret, as it blossoms beautifully around Malji Ka Kamra,” adds Emy.

OVERLANDER CAMP, RAJASTHAN

Overlander India is a 4x4 off-roading company that offers off-road adventures in Rajasthan. Everything is pre-arranged for you - the vehicle, the fuel, the route and the overnight stay in a wilderness camp. All you have to do is to drive to your heart’s content through the countryside on dirt tracks, camel trails and dry river beds passing through remote villages and the flora and fauna of the region. “After a full day for off-road driving you arrive into a beautifully located wilderness camp right in the middle of the arid landscape and rugged hills. And nothing seems more comfortable and welcoming,” says Inderjeet Rathod of our Destination Knowledge Centre who experienced it first hand and absolutely loved it. Even though the location of the campsite is remote, the tents are a far cry from the conventional camps. They are spacious and airy with three sections to it - the sit out area outside the tent with two chairs; the bedroom section which is twin bedded, a small table and a luggage rack; and the bathroom section with a chemical toilet seat, a bucket with an attached tap on a table, an accessories tray, a metal wash basin and a small mirror. “The campfire is the centre of activities in the evening which includes drinks, dinner and the unending stories about the man and the beast,” adds Inderjeet.





LAKESIDE GUESTHOUSE, ATHOOR, TAMIL NADU

“If I had to rate the most spectacular view at the time of check-in to a property, Lakeside would win my vote hands down. The bougainvillea’s in full bloom and the lake beyond is breath-taking,” says Soumya from the Destination Knowledge Centre who stayed at the Lakeside Guest House. The six individual cottages are spread around the property and are very spacious with an extra bed for the third person (2 air-conditioned). You also have the option to choose air-conditioning just for the night (8pm to 8am) - ideal if you are a budget traveller but still like your comforts. Did we mention they also have a heavenly pool! We highly recommend the Village tour with your host. In the morning walking along the lakeside makes for a pleasant excursion. There are bicycles as well, if that is how you would prefer to explore the nearby village and the countryside.

VILLA SHANTI, PONDICHERRY, TAMIL NADU

Villa Shanti is built in contemporary style and comprises of fifteen rooms, a restaurant and a café bar. Hidden behind a discrete facade, this 19th century house located in the old French town (white town) was renovated by French architects and a new wing was added for the rooms. The use of traditional materials in a modern language provides a modern interpretation of colonial architecture. This harmony of the old and the new works quite well and gives the place its lively atmosphere. Villa Shanti scores high for its excellent location - few metres away from the Promenade, great food and lively atmosphere. “I loved the food at Villa Shanti. The hotel takes great pride in its cuisine which focuses on quality, freshness and seasonal products. The restaurant menu is Head Chef Sarvanan’s own signature creation. Don’t miss the crepe suzette dessert which is brought out with a lot of fanfare,” says Soumya from the Destination Knowledge Centre who has stayed there.

MANGALA HERITAGE HOME, NAGAPATTINAM, TAMIL NADU

Mangala Heritage Home is the perfect place to break journey on a hectic temple tour between Pondicherry and Tanjore. The building itself is a restored, traditional Tamil style house with a very austere looking exterior, which is in direct contrast with its cosy interiors. The four air-conditioned rooms with attached bathrooms are

beautifully decorated. Arun, who is the caretaker of the property, takes very good care of guests. “The highlight of my stay had to be the food,” says Soumya from the Destination Knowledge Centre, who stayed at the Mangala Heritage Home. The cook who comes from the local village, cooks excellent authentic vegetarian cuisine. Since the property is located in the village itself, you are surrounded by lush green paddy fields all around. There is an interesting local temple to visit as well. After enjoying a restful stay at Mangala, you can proceed to Kumbakonam or Tanjore from here. The charming Danish port town of Tranquebar is also a little over an hour’s drive.

RAJAKKAD ESTATE, PALANI HILLS, TAMIL NADU

“It came to me as quite a surprise that such a beautiful place existed so close to the city life in the plains. And it is literally off the map. There are no signboards to indicate the location of Rajakkad Estate in Dindigul district of Tamil Nadu, which is a destination in itself,” says Soumya Mukherji from our Destination Knowledge Centre who stayed at the Rajakkad Estate. Rajakkad sits in the heart of plantation country, surrounded by forest, amidst undulating fields of pepper, coffee, lime and avocado. The house is a reminder of traditional Kerala architecture - wooden panels and carved beams, which has been dismantled, transported and placed on this hill top. Rajakkad has seven rooms and each room has a sliding panel (instead of a wall) with an unobstructed view of the surrounding garden and landscaping. The rooms are luxurious and the bed is perfect to doze off with a book in hand. None of the rooms have air-conditioning but the climate is pleasant enough at this altitude. Just to add, there is no pool. The food is garden fresh and organic. There is a main dining area but more cosy intimate tables can be arranged if you wish. WiFi is accessible in the public places, not in the rooms. Rajakkad is a place that offers a chance to sit still and take in all that the place has to offer. Don't go if you expect an activity filled stay. The most you can do and should be doing, is walk in the forest or just pick up a book (they have an excellent library) and relax in one of the many hammocks.

Hot Picks Stays to watch out for

JAWAI LEOPARD CAMP, JAWAI, RAJASTHAN

We are excited about this new luxury camp in Rajasthan, Kuntil Baruwa from our Destination Knowledge Centre had visited Jawai in 2010 and had this to say, “If you want your clients to experience an India that is fast vanishing, Jawai is the place to be, it can be easily incorporated in a Rajasthan itinerary between Jodhpur and Udaipur. Jawai is the home of Monarch and Zara, Rajasthan’s most adorable Leopard couple. Perfect place for an evening barbeque.”

VANAASHRAYA, SARISKA, RAJASTHAN

Experience relaxed camping in pristine nature at Vanaashraya, 4 hours and 30 minutes from Delhi. Set amid a sprawling 12 acres of lush landscaping and surrounded by a lake, Vanaashraya has 27 camping suites, each one of them is fitted with air-conditioning, private washroom and showers with running hot and cold water. The inclusion of Vanaashraya, makes for a great rural Rajasthan itinerary for repeat clients with Tigers (at Ranthambore), Leopards (at Jawai), staying in a Fort (at Ramathra), hospitality of Rajput families (hosts family at Ramathra and Shahpura Bagh) and Bollywood (in Mumbai) as the highlights. The routing is; Drive from Delhi airport to - Vanaashraya (2 nights)- Ramathra Fort (2 nights) - Ranthambore (2 nights) - Shahpura Bagh (2 nights) - Jawai Leopard Camp (2 nights) - Udaipur (2 nights) - Mumbai (2 nights).

JEHAN NUMA RETREAT, BHOPAL, MADHYA PRADESH

The Jehan Numa Retreat, the latest offering from the Jehan Numa Hotel in Bhopal. An exclusive getaway, located just within the boundaries of the city and almost an extension of the Van Vihar National Park, this is an intimate collection of low slung room blocks, uniquely designed as aesthetic village-style cottages, filled with colours from the earth and stone of the region. Kuntil Baruwa from our Destination Knowledge Centre is staying at Jehan Numa Retreat in April, 2014. Stay tuned.

SOURENEE TEA ESTATE, MIRIK, WEST BENGAL

The Bungalow with 6 rooms sits on a small hillock, surrounded by tea bushes and trees at an elevation of 5000 ft. It’s an hour’s drive from Bagdogra Airport, an hour and half drive from New Jalpaiguri Railway Junction. Clients will get an opportunity to observe the manufacturing of world famous Darjeeling Tea in the Tea Factory culminating in a ‘Tea Tasting’ session. Kuntil Baruwa from our Destination Knowledge Centre is staying at Sourenee Tea Estate in April, 2014. Stay tuned.

VANA MALSI ESTATE, DEHRADUN, UTARAKHAND

Located in Dehradun on the lower foothills of the Himalayas, an ancient sal forest surrounds much of it with its 21-acres dotted with mango and lychee orchards, herb and vegetable gardens. The private living spaces consists of 66 rooms, 16 suites and 4 villas. Vana aims to create a personalised wellness program for each guest and may well be serious competition to Ananda-in-the-Himalayas in the coming years.

ABODE, COLABA, MUMBAI

This quaint boutique property is located in the back-lanes of Colaba, behind the famous Taj Mahal Hotel of Mumbai. “It’s comfortable, homely environment adds a certain charm that is missing in the hotels in and around Mumbai,” says Harshvardhan Tanwar, our friend in Mumbai who inspected it on our behalf. The gracious hosts even help you plan your itinerary or go out drinking with you. It is reminiscent of the Hostel and Homestay culture in the west.

LA VILLA, PONDICHERRY, TAMILNADU

A 19th century structure, refined while keeping the spirit of its colonial past, features six suites, a swimming pool and a restaurant that offers all the facilities of an urban hotel. A sense of colour and details, choice of materials, give this exclusive villa a distinctive feel of non-ostentatious luxury. Keep a watch out for this one.

THE ULTIMATE TRAVELLING CAMP

It may well be India’s first mobile super luxury camp, taking travelers to exceptional destinations from Ladakh in the Himalayas to Nagaland in the remote northeastern part of India. Your clients can combine a tour of Ladakh and Kashmir since both the TUTC camps at Thiksey and Srinagar, run concurrently and there is a flight from Leh to Srinagar every Wednesday. Kuntil Baruwa from our Destination Knowledge Centre stayed at TUTC’s Lakshmi Kutir at the Maha Kumbh Mela in February 2013 and has this to say, “they are not just super in creature comforts but also do an excellent job when it comes to services, which includes great guides and great food.” He plans to stay at TUTC’s Srinagar Camp this summer. Stay tuned.

ABN RAJ MAHAL

The latest offering from Assam Bengal Navigation, the 22 cabin vessel has been specially designed with extra-shallow draught, triple engines and low air draught, to cruise between Patna and Varanasi and vice versa. These 7 night cruises will operate in August and September 2014, the only two months when river conditions make it possible. Kuntil is sailing on the Raj Mahal from September 20-27, 2014 to experience it firsthand. Stay tuned.

A trip to India is
what travel stories
are made of

Books we loved

Inderjeet Rathod stitches all the findings of the Destination Knowledge Centre together into beautiful itineraries, prepares reference documents for the operations and designs special interest products on demand. He recommends:

Around Indian in 80 Trains by Monisha Rajesh.

Author Monisha Rajesh (a British citizen of Indian origin) attempts to discover her motherland by traversing the country in trains. She went up to a count of 80, taking cue from Jules Verne's famous tale, Around the World in 80 Days. Monisha had spent just two years of her childhood in Chennai with her family in the early 90s, before she had to move back to London. Twenty years on, she had an inner desire to see the country through the eyes of a tourist. Intrigued by the huge network of Indian Railways she chose to undertake 80 railway journeys across the length and breadth of the country. Travelling in all types of trains; ranging from a regular inter-state Express to 'Indian Maharaja' - a luxury train, to a local train in Mumbai and the 'Joy Express' children's toy train at National Rail Museum Delhi, she managed to endure every nuance of the wearisome train journeys in India. This book isn't about trains only, it is more about the experiences Monisha gathered while being on some of them! She narrates incidents of interacting with general public, in and outside the trains, in a wry and witty way. Her own 'Passepartout' is a photographer friend from Norway keeping her company throughout her four-month travel around the country. The book leaves one smiling and longing to jump aboard Indian Railways!

Jean Noel Esteve of our Destination Knowledge Centre travels all over the Indian sub-continent to keep us abreast of the latest; including hotels and his take on the infrastructure of the various destinations. He recommends:

A Princess Remembers: The Memoirs of the Maharani of Jaipur by Gayatri Devi

An outstanding memoir of the stunningly beautiful last Maharani of Jaipur. Born in 1919 in London, Gayatri Devi, the young princess of Cooch Behar, in North Bengal, lived a happy childhood with her sisters and brothers. Smart, modern and westernised, Gayatri Devi was passionately in love with the Maharaja of Jaipur. She convinced her parents who were, at the beginning very reluctant and got married to Sawai Man Singh, the powerful Maharaja of Jaipur in 1940 to become his third wife. We progressively discover in the book that Gayatri Devi dedicated her crown in the service of women as well as the poor. The death of her husband in 1970 was the turning-point in her life, but she continued her

political career more for her friends than for her own motivation. Luxury, trips to Europe, Education, The British Raj, Partition of India and Independent India constitute the framework of this touching story of the life of Gayatri Devi. To read unrestrainedly!

Soumya Mukherji is an Explorer who travels all over the Indian sub-continent to connect with local experts in search of compelling stories to inspire destination travel.

Teatime for the Firefly by Shona Patel

A historical fiction set in the intricate world of Assam tea plantation when India is on the brink of Independence, Teatime for the Firefly is Shona Patel's first novel and I enjoyed everything about the book. Although the characters are all fictional, she does draw inspiration from her parents who are fondly remembered and respected in the tea circle. The story gives us an insight into the Indian society around 1940's, the practices and intelligentsia. Layla is a young woman of seventeen, who is brought up by her grandfather, an educated man who believes in the importance of educating women so they have choices. Layla's birth time and the death of her parents have led many traditional Indians to believe her to be bad luck and she resigned herself to never marrying. The entry of Manik Deb a young man changes the hand that fortune has dealt her. Her grandfather often hosts guests and the Russian author Boris Ivanov is a frequent visitor. Layla and Malik both grow through the challenges and circumstances that their lives bring at them. A perfect light hearted book to pick up for those who like period fiction. You will love how easily the writer covers themes both light and intense.

Urvashi Walia maintains the Digital Photo Library of the Destination Knowledge Centre and assists the team with content writing. She recommends:

Waterhouse Albums: Central Indian Provinces by James Waterhouse

A coffee table book that traces the life of remarkable photographer James Waterhouse and his journey in 1862, where he spent almost an entire year photographing and documenting the people of Central India. Not just princely rulers and nobility but people from different social and ethnic groups. From indigenous tribes to merchants, to holy men to slaves to farmers. All photographs are accompanied by detailed notes from the legendary photographer himself. Waterhouse Albums : Central Indian Provinces contains 120 photographs out of which are perhaps the first photographs of the now UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Buddhist site at Sanchi and a series of rare extraordinary portraits of the Begums of Bhopal; its women rulers who ruled with an iron hand for over 150 years of Bhopal's 240 year old history.

Books we loved

Our Destination Knowledge Centre team provides new ways to experience travel. They have passionately searched for deep insights into different traditions and cultures and bring for our customers authentic encounters with lasting impressions. Here are some of the books they loved during their travels in the Indian sub-continent.

4 Days in Mumbai

Day 1

Of Curries, Museums and Henna Tattoos

Start in the afternoon from the Lalbaug Spice Market to get an understanding of the spices that go into making the perfect Indian curry. We learn about their origin and observe how these whole spices are bought and roasted in a big wok and crushed into a fine powder, depending on the customer's blend of choice. Learn about the textile mill culture in the city and how it is umbilical in making Mumbai the populous, the most eclectic metropolis in India today and also get to know some of Mumbai's food, which owes its origin to the mill workers.

Visit Bhaudaji Lad Museum - Mumbai's

oldest and arguably, one of the finest contemporary and multi-awarded Museum in the city. Enjoy one of the best views of Mumbai city coming to life from AER, the 34th floor Lounge of Four Seasons Hotel, while sipping cocktails. We end our day with dinner in a local family home to taste the quintessential coastal cuisine of the Malwan region, sandwiched between Mumbai and Goa. Malwani cuisine is dominated by fish. Women here are known for their ability to cook the most delicious fare in a jiffy, including excellent vegetarian dishes. Your host will also introduce you to the traditional Indian art of Henna Tattoo painting, Rangoli - use of dry colour design on the floor and Saree Draping, with their significance in Indian homes.

Mumbai and Good Food

Kuntal Baruwa from our Destination Knowledge Centre recently travelled to Mumbai to design a 4-day tour in the city which will take your taste buds on a journey from Mumbai to Kerala via Goa, Mangalore and all in between. The itinerary is a mix of detours and food that will not only give you a flavour of India's West Coast, but also the flavour of Mumbai and its dwellers. Facilitated by a Mumbai local, who is a foodie, loves to eat and a friend of Sita, it is ideal for FITs and small groups (6 pax maximum) and a Sita exclusive which is not available to competition.

Day 2

Mumbai at dawn

Start your day at the crack of dawn to understand the logistics of food that come to Mumbai. For breakfast, stop at the famous Mysore Café - famous for its Udupi breakfast from coastal Karnataka which has changed the way India eats breakfast. Udupi breakfast uses ingredients, namely rice in all forms, coconut, pumpkin, bengal gram, lentils, semolina and peas. Dosa, the famous South Indian pancake made from a batter of lentils and rice, served with lentil soup and a chutney, a popular breakfast dish in India. Later visit St. Thomas Cathedral, the first Anglican Church in Mumbai, mix of Byzantine and colonial-era architecture. End with dinner at a local

Zoroastrian Restaurant, sampling typical Laganu Bhoonu, an assortment of dishes served at a Zoroastrian wedding, enjoy the Patra ni Machchi (pomfret seasoned with coconut chutney and steamed in banana leaves). Zoroastrianism, the world's oldest monotheistic religion, was followed by millions in ancient Persia, today having 124,000 adherents worldwide. Mumbai has the largest concentration, about 70,000. The Zoroastrian's culinary forte may have been their historic undoing; the Arabs who invaded Persepolis in the 10th century realised attacking the warriors after their traditional Sunday lunch of Dhansak was best. The thick mutton stew served with cardamom-scented brown rice is extremely heavy and lulls its eaters into a peaceful siesta afterwards.



Day 3

Marathi food - meat lovers delight

Start your day with a traditional vegetarian breakfast of the Marathi community, known for its meat, fish and fiery non-vegetarian savouries, Marathi food is a meat-lovers delight. But early morning, it has a softer side too, where semolina, chick-pea and rice are used with rich Indian spices, to create wholesome dishes that readies you for a power-packed day ahead. This breakfast, has evolved over the years and the textile mill workers in part, have contributed to it. These workers toiled for over eight hours in the mills, doing exhausting manual labour. In order to consume energy rich food, they ate street food that was high in carbohydrates. We have included some of the mill workers food today in your breakfast.

We continue to Bandra, one of Mumbai's plushest and trendiest suburbs to get acquainted with East Indians Community. Today, though Bandra is the Beverly Hills of Mumbai, there still exist small villages that remind you of the Bandra of yesteryears, which was inhabited by the Portuguese. Take a walk through Ranwar and Pali village and get an insight into the East Indian architecture, history and culture. Meet an East Indian family and understand the changes that Bandra has experienced in recent times. In between our tour, enjoy lunch at a local restaurant where we sample Goan food known for its vast use of rich and diverse seafood, meats and curries along with local ingredients and spices. Goan cuisine is known for its daring yet humble flavours influenced by its Hindu origins and 400 years of Portuguese rule.

Meet a Bollywood insider who will share gossip of the Bollywood film industry over drinks and coffee at the lovely Bandra Bandstand promenade.

Drive to a restaurant in a 5 star hotel for dinner, where the Executive Chef has prepared a special menu combining the flavours of North and South Kerala. North Kerala's Malabari Muslims and their cuisine is still distinctly influenced by their Arab ancestors who came to trade on their wooden ships making it so very interesting. And as you move inland into South Kerala and its backwaters with its drenched greens and coconut palms, the Syrian Christians, the predecessors of the first Christian converts will tell you that their contribution to the Kerala cuisine has been manifold, the most noted are hoppers, duck roast, meen vevichathu (red fish curry) and the isthew (stew).

Day 4

The Dhobi Ghaat

Start your day by meeting a unique breed of Mumbai, the Laundrymen at the Biggest Open Air Laundry in the World - The Dhobi Ghaat. With most of Mumbai's washing done here, it comes as little surprise that these people can be safely christened as the 'Washing Machines' of Mumbai. We continue to a lesser known gem of Mumbai to spend some time at the Japanese Buddhist Temple; an oasis of peace and quiet.

Later drive to Worli Village for an insight into the life and times of the Kolis; the original inhabitants of Mumbai, its fishermen folk. A walk through this village transports you to the land of

stories. What's fascinating is that nothing has changed since the time of the first settlement - be it the way they make their nets, catch their fish, do their business, their beliefs, the custom or age-old traditions.

From Worli Village, we proceed for lunch to sample coastal cuisine from Mangalore region. Incomplete without rice and fish, their distinct flavour is associated with the generous use of kokum, tamarind, curry leaves, coconut and several spices. Start with Sol Kadi; a drink made out of Kokum infused with spices, herbs and garnished with cilantro. Post Lunch, meet your personal shopper, who is a fashion designer for some shopping at the Colaba Causeway, before returning to your hotel.



Day 5

Proceed to your onward destination.

Our commitment

Experiences and impressions of particular intensity and profundity, instants that endure and can leave a lasting positive impression. They are unique and memorable, at par with appreciating a great work of art. Sita is intent on making those moments happen.

Photo Credit - This photograph has been shot by Amit Thakur, a Sita employee, showcasing a Bull Race at Chithali, Palakkad in Kerala.

