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**TourCert Check**  
committed to responsible tourism





KNOWLEDGE IS BASED ON EXPERIENCE  
EVERYTHING ELSE IS JUST INFORMATION

# Come explore with us



Dear Friends,

Ever evolving travel trends and client demands oblige us to innovate and differentiate products along various lines, whether it is indexing our tours on Sustainability or our conviction for CSR or our new Audio-Visual initiative - india handheld creating short films on Destination India and beyond. This edition of Art of Travel focuses on our evolving strategies of differentiation and show case products that echo this sentiment.

We also hope to launch our “Bridging the Knowledge Gap” initiative this summer to empower, educate and share our collective knowledge with our colleagues. This is a Destination Knowledge Centre initiative, targeted, people specific, where we identify gaps and use a multi-pronged holistic approach to bridge the gap; which may involve map sessions with our explorers, understanding products available through our short films, knowledge on the inventory and properties around the area, field trips and study tours to learn first-hand.

It is our endeavor to know the best, invest in our people to support you with their knowledge, giving the guest a genuine experience.

I hope you enjoy our new product ideas and initiatives.

Come explore with us®

Dipak Deva  
Managing Director

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# Get inspired – explore

Sita's product line for leisure travellers, features out-of-the-ordinary tours for everyone. Sita helps the guest explore the great outdoors, local customs and charming hospitality, flavourful traditional cooking, stimulating art, intriguing architecture.





# Walking around in Kangra Valley

## Beyond Dharamsala & Mcleodganj

The 14th Dalai Lama and the spiritual traditions of Tibetan Buddhism are definitely the main draw, but Dharamsala and the Kangra Valley are also great destinations to enjoy the outdoors. The magnificent Dhauladhar mountain range is right there all the time, with you on a clear day, especially during the month of March and April, when the Rhododendrons are in bloom. One can enjoy the terrific mountain views by going on walks in and around Dharamsala which will take you through forests with lanky cedar trees and pretty villages. I would recommend the walk from *Naddi to Dharamkot* and from *Bir to Sherab Ling Monastery*. These two are very easy and a fantastic up-close-and-personal encounter with its lovely people and its stunning landscape.

The walk from *Naddi to Dharamkot* lasts for about 3 hours with absolutely no steep ascent. The stunning views of the snow-capped Dhauladhar range are closer from Naddi than from any other location in Dharamsala. From here the view is almost straight across rather than looking upward. From Naddi we entered the forest with cedar and oak trees, rhododendrons in bloom, listening to the chirping of birds, the lanky cedar trees providing shade and the best part being these characters that would keep appearing seemingly out of nowhere like actors of nature's own cinema. The deep, soothing, sonorous sound of a bamboo flute from somewhere in the woods kept us company when we stopped to take a break.

The walk from *Bir to the Sherab Ling Monastery* - which is a full day excursion from Dharamsala - passes through 2 pretty villages, a small tea garden, a short patch of pine forest and cut across a paddy field. What I really loved about the villages we passed during this walk was the cleanliness all around. They grow rice, wheat, mustard, maize and vegetables. The locals call this walk - "baby trek" - so as you may have rightly guessed - it can be easily done by anyone. The walk starts from Bir, one of the finest spots for paragliding in India which had played host to the Paragliding World Cup 2015. I loved the shop of the Gaddis (Shepherds) at the beginning of the walk in Bir, where they weave and sell lovely traditional shawls made out of sheep wool. The Sherab Ling Monastery where we end this walk is a spiritual tradition as old as Columbus' discovery of the New World. The Monks here are Grammy Award winners for the Best Traditional World Music Album in 2004. Originally located in Kham, Eastern Tibet, the

Sherab Ling Monastery was built in Bir 22 years ago in thirty acres of gentle pine forest. The Monastery, also a seat of learning, has 800 monks and its surroundings with great views of the Dhauladhar ranges have a calm, rejuvenating and welcoming vibe.

On your way back from Sherab Ling Monastery to Dharamsala, you may want to make a quick stop at the 13th century Baijnath Temple which has a really picturesque setting with amazing views again of the Dhauladhar range on a clear day. It is a great place to watch the spiritual tradition of the locals and travellers stopping by, as the temple falls en route to important commercial towns of Himachal Pradesh such as Mandi and Hamirpur. Everybody stops here to pray before they continue with their journey.

### GOOD TO KNOW

- Duration: Naddi to Dharamkot Walk: 3 hours/ Bir to Sherab Ling Monastery Walk: 3 hours
- Grade: Easy.
- Uneven Surface. A Good pair of walking shoes is a must.
- A Walking Pole is a good idea. Bring your own.
- Bring your own Binoculars.
- Best time for Mountain View: March and April.
- Rhododendrons bloom in these parts of Himachal Pradesh in March and April.
- Option of lunch at the Taragarh Palace in Palampur; a heritage property built in the 1930's, after the Bir- Sherab Ling Monastery Walk.
- Naddi is a 30 minute drive from our preferred properties in Dharamsala.
- Bir is a 2 hour/30 minute drive from our preferred properties in Dharamsala.
- The Bir to Sherab Ling Monastery Walk along with a side trip to Baijnath Temple can also be done by clients staying at Taragarh Palace in Palampur. Bir from Taragarh Palace is a 45 minute drive.

THIS PRODUCT HAS BEEN EXPERIENCED BY OUR DKC EXPLORER, KUNTIL BARUWA.



# Day Out in Kangra Valley

## Beyond Dharamsala & Mcleodganj

A full day tour from Dharamsala to immerse yourself in the History, Legend and Art of the Kangra Valley. Another highlight is the short joyride on the Kangra Toy Train; one of two mountain railways that run in Himachal Pradesh, the other being the UNESCO World Heritage Kalka-Shimla Railway.

Kangra Fort exudes sheer strength and energy. The view of the Dhauladhar range is stunning from here on a clear day. One of India's oldest, built 3500 years ago and the largest in the foothills of the Himalayas, it stands atop a hill, surrounded on three sides by steep mountain slopes. The Fort has a fantastic audio tour. The museum here houses a fine collection of Pahari miniature paintings which is a great fusion of Mughal and Rajput miniature techniques and folk art of the local hills. From the time the fort was first mentioned in Alexander the Great's war records to the British Army who occupied it till 1905, the Kangra Fort has changed several hands with each conqueror adding to it. There are 11 gates - tall, unyielding, sinister - impossible to know what lurks behind - and 23 bastions. Apparently men were lowered down the cliffs to remove all undergrowth and polish the cliff surface till it was smooth and slippery, ensuring that no one could approach by climbing these mountain slopes. It remains as forbidding today as it must have been through all those centuries.

From the Kangra Fort, head out to the Kangra Railway Station, a short drive away for a 60 minute joyride on the Kangra Toy Train. Work on this line was started in 1926 and was completed in 3 years. Unlike the Shimla-Kalka train, you spend most of your time going through tunnels, the Kangra toy train gently meanders through hills and valleys, with stunning views of the Dhauladhar range on a clear day. Also unlike the Shimla-Kalka train where your co-passengers are most likely to be tourists, on the Kangra Toy Train used mostly by locals, you could be the only tourist. I loved the slow train ride through the countryside, the pine forests, the terraced fields of the pretty villages and the locals who kept hopping in and out of the quaint railway stations that were once labour sheds.

Post lunch at Taragarh Palace in Palampur continue to the 13th century Baijnath Temple which has a really picturesque setting with amazing views, again of the Dhauladhar range on a clear day. The temple falls en route to important commercial towns of Himachal Pradesh such as Mandi and Hamirpur. Everybody stops

here to pray before they continue on their journey. Baijnath is a terrific low-down on Hinduism and why Hindus do things they do in a Temple. Why do Hindus whisper in the ears of Nandi, the divine bull and the vehicle of Lord Shiva, why do Hindus worship a phallus? Why do Hindus go to the Temple when they have the same idol at home? The Baijnath Temple also has some wonderful stone carvings which can be admired at your own pace. Don't forget to ask your guide the legend behind why Baijnath doesn't celebrate Dushshera; one of the holiest festivals of the Hindus.

### GOOD TO KNOW

- Duration: Full Day Escorted Tour.
- Uneven Surface. A good pair of walking shoes is a must.
- You can't book tickets in advance on the Kangra Toy Train or reserve a seat like you can do on the Kalka-Shimla train. But buying a ticket is easy, so is finding a seat. Your guide will be there to assist you. Expect 15-20 minutes delay. Soak in the atmosphere of the quaint railway station and also see some of the equipment from the days of the British Raj still in use inside the station master's cabin.
- Best time for Mountain Views: March and April.
- Kangra Fort is a 40 minute drive from our preferred properties in Dharamsala.
- Kangra Railway Station is a 15 minute drive from Kangra Fort.
- We will take the joyride from Kangra to Paroor Station (60 minutes).
- Paroor Railway Station to Taragarh Palace where we will have lunch, a 60 minute drive.
- Taragarh Palace to Baijnath Temple is a 20 minute drive.
- Baijnath Temple to our preferred properties in Dharamsala is a 2 hour/30 minute drive.

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# Walking around in Shimla

## Unknown Shimla

Is Shimla crowded? Yes! Is it Touristy?? Yes!! But there is a lot more we can do in Shimla apart from “arriving by the toy train from Kalka – visit the British heritage sites on Day 2- and then next morning proceed to the onward destination”. Shimla is definitely a 3 night destination to begin with, it is best experienced on foot by going out on leisurely walks.

Like Rome, Italy and Bhopal in Central India, Shimla is built on 7 Hills. On the first walk, which lasts for about 3 hours, go around one of the 7 Hills – the Elysium Hill, the second highest in Shimla. Once you go past the busy Mall Road, Lakkar Bazaar and the tourists, hear some amazing stories of Shimla, stories about eccentric characters who once lived (and some died) here and inspired the likes of Rudyard Kipling. Go past houses that witnessed epoch making events of Indian history and one of the 15 villages which Charles Pratt Kennedy, the British Political Agent and founder of Shimla had demarcated as its boundary in the early 19th century. Shimla then was a settlement of only 15 hamlets. I was particularly intrigued by the story of Alexander Malcom Jacob, the man who sold the Jacob Diamond, the fifth largest in the world to the Nizam of Hyderabad in 1891. Alexander Malcom Jacob came to Shimla in 1870 and started a business trading in precious gemstones and curios. A handsome man, charming, magnetic and mysterious, Alexander Malcom Jacob was one of the most sought after locals of Shimla – be it by the British or the Royals of India. The character Lurgan Sahib of Rudyard Kipling's novel “Kim”, who lived in Shimla, in a strange house piled with devilish masks was inspired by Alexander Malcom Jacob. This walk can also be done as a pre-breakfast early morning walk for your clients staying at the Clarkes and Cecil Hotel.

If your clients are staying at the Clarkes Hotel, they will cross the Combermere Bridge to reach Scandal Point to meet the guide for our second walk. It was at this very Combermere Bridge the phantom rickshaw and the ghost of his spurned lover, first accosted Theobald Jack Pansay in Rudyard Kipling's – ‘The Phantom Rickshaw and other Eerie Tales’. Whilst Kipling started it all with his Phantom Rickshaw, generations of Shimlaites have grown up hearing stories of the ghosts from the British Raj haunting the dark moonless nights, lonely stretches, mist enveloping hills and valleys. On this walk go past once such

haunted hill. From Scandal Point, continue on foot to cross the Kalibari area which houses the Temple of Goddess Shyamala. Local lore has it that the name Shimla was derived from the name of this blue bodied Goddess. Just below the temple is the house where once lived Rudyard Kipling. It was here he wrote “Kim” and “Plain Tales from the Hills”. From Kipling's house it is a downhill walk, as you go past the village of Kaithoo, one of 15 hamlets of 19th century Shimla and continue to Gol Pahari. Local residents say that the Gol Pahari is haunted. The story goes that a bunch of soldiers during the British Raj were out on their morning parade towards Gol Pahari when a landslide killed them. Locals claim to have seen the ghost of the soldiers marching towards Gol Pahari. Beyond Gol Pahari it is like experiencing Shinrin-Yoku which means “Forest Bathing.” It's a Japanese practice of a leisurely visit and wandering through the forests to improve one's health and well-being. In Japan there are now 44 accredited Shinrin-Yoku forests. Our walk ends here and we will be given a private tour of the art gallery. For those of your clients who are Art lovers, but don't want to walk, the art gallery is a mere 15 minute drive from the Viceregal Lodge and a side trip can be easily organised during the sightseeing tour of Shimla.

### GOOD TO KNOW:

- **Duration:** Walk 1: 2-3 hours/Walk 2 (with packed Lunch): 4-5 hours.
- **Grade:** Walk 1: Easy/Walk 2: Easy to Medium.
- **Vehicle required for both walk 1 and 2.**
- **Uneven Surface. A Good pair of walking shoes is a must.**
- **A Walking Pole for Walk 2 is a good idea. Bring your own.**
- **Bring your own Binoculars.**
- **Best time for Mountain Views: March and April.**
- **Rhododendrons bloom, in these parts of Himachal Pradesh in March and April.**
- **Chocolates, Chips, Juices, Water and Wet Tissues included and will be carried by the Guide.**

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# Explore Maharashtra

## Walking around in Pune

Pune gained prominence in the 17th century as a stronghold of the Maratha warrior King Shivaji and the Maratha Empire that he founded, which in its heydays stretched from Tamil Nadu in south India, to Peshawar (Pakistan) in the north, Bengal and Andaman Islands in the east. Its military significance didn't end with the Marathas. The British Army built the Pune cantonment in 1817 which is now with the Indian Army and Khadakwasla, a mere 14 kms away, now houses the National Defence Academy (NDA), the Joint Services academy of the Indian Armed Forces. Despite its military legacy, Pune is also the “cultural capital” of Maharashtra with its rich history, culture, traditions and its vibrant progressive society which is a great melting pot of communities from all over India.

A great way to explore Pune is to go on the Heritage Walk cum Breakfast Trail in the morning. On this walk you will be taken to some of Pune's known and lesser known sites and hear stories about the Marathas and the Maratha Empire. Stop for breakfast at the famous Shrikrishna Bhuvan, which has been serving authentic Marathi breakfast to its patrons since 1941. On the morning walk, you have the opportunity to see local craftsmen at work and visit the largest fruit and vegetable marketplace in Pune, with 526 stalls and beautiful medley of Gothic features with Indian detailing. End the walk at the Gujar Cold Drink House nearby, which serves the most famous drink of Pune called Mastani and hear stories of Bajirao Mastani of the Maratha Empire.

The evening walk will take you to the Pune Cantonment, as we snack along the way, hear stories about how Pune is a melting point of communities from all over India. The walk starts from JJ GARDEN WADA PAV, which serves the favourite snack of Maharashtra – the Wada Pav, far more crispier and yummiier than anywhere else. The next pit stops are the Zoroastrian or Parsi Restaurants in the area called DORABJEE & SONS (Established in 1878) and CAFÉ YEZDAN. Zoroastrianism, the world's oldest monotheistic religion was once followed by millions in ancient Persia (now Iran). Today there are as few as 124,000 adherents worldwide with Mumbai at its heart. A short walk from CAFÉ YEZDAN will take us to HUSSENY BAKERY, established in the year 1930! They bake rusk toast, bun, puffs, cakes, biscuits and so much more. From here head to the tiny MAHALAXMI KHAMAN

DHOKLA. It serves Dhokla (a Gujarati snack) with different accompaniments like sweet red sauce, green mint sauce, grated coconut, coriander leaves and chilies. The last stop of this walk is MARZ-O-RIN, a landmark eatery in the Pune Cantonment. The most popular item here is the vegetable sandwich served with green sauce, a bit of butter and a small slice of tomato into it. Be warned our evening walk will fill you up with so much food that skipping dinner will be the only option left!

### GOOD TO KNOW

- **Timing for the Morning Heritage Walk cum Breakfast Trail :** 9:00am to 12:00 NOON (3 hours).
- **Distance of the walk:** 2 kms approximately.
- **Grade :** Easy.
- **A good pair of walking shoes along with a sunshade or cap is required.**
- **Inclusive of breakfast in the Morning Breakfast Trail.**
- **Inclusive of entry fees to heritage monuments.**
- **Vehicle required for both walks.**
- **Timing for Evening Walk :** 4:00pm to 7:00pm (3 hours).
- **Distance of the walk:** 1.5 km approximately.
- **Inclusive of food at all the food corners mentioned in the Evening Cantonment Snack walk.**
- **Both walks are inclusive of bottled water.**
- **Only English speaking Experts are available for both these walks.**

THIS PRODUCT HAS BEEN EXPERIENCED BY OUR DKC EXPLORER,INDERJEET RATHOD.





# Maharashtra Up-Close

## Walking around in Nashik

The pilgrim city of Nashik in Maharashtra is situated on the banks of River Godavari with more than a hundred ancient temples located in its vicinity. These temples commemorate the story of the ancient Hindu epic Ramayana and its chief protagonist Rama's sojourn in Nasik, such as Tapovan where he lived with his wife Sita and brother Lakshman.

Take a leisurely evening walk by the Godavari river visiting some of these temples. Just across the river are the main ghats - Ram Kund and Lakshman Kund - where all pilgrims take a holy dip. Right next to the ghats are beautifully decorated stalls, selling idols of Gods and Goddesses made of silver and bronze, incense sticks, bronze containers, sandalwood-bead garlands, small metal bells, camphor tablets etc. A walk in this area is a great insight into how religion supports the livelihoods of the locals. End your evening walk at Ram Ghat by attending the evening Aarti which is a simple affair and later light an earthen lamp to let it float on the River Godavari.

Our morning walk of Nashik will take you to the Saraf Bazaar Street which gets converted into one of the largest Flower Markets of Maharashtra every morning. There are various hues of marigolds, roses of every colour, gerbera, lilies and even orchids. There is an interesting heritage building located right in the middle of the Flower Market which is worth visiting in the morning. It is an 18th century mansion called 'Sarkarwada' belonging to the Peshwas - the erstwhile rulers of Nashik. This old mansion retains its grandness with its unique wooden carved courtyards, distinct carvings on outside walls and decorated windows. Since its windows are located in the east, the sunshine lights up the mansion beautifully in the morning. The Flower Market winds up by 9:00am every day as the shops of Saraf Bazar start opening for the day's business.

### GOOD TO KNOW

- Timing for Evening Walk : 5:00pm to 8:00pm (3 hours).
- Timing for Morning Walk : 7:00pm to 9:30pm (2.5 hours).
- Grade : Easy.
- A good pair of walking shoes is required.
- On Wednesday evenings, one can get to see the Weekly Haat (flea market) which is quite colourful. Some of the stalls sell interesting items like iron utensils, clay-pots, indigenous farm-tools, grounded spices, dried fish, clothes and silverware.
- At the moment only English speaking experts are available for both these walks.

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# Taktsang with Bumdra Trek

## An interesting way of visiting Tiger's Nest

Taktsang or Tiger's Nest is one of the most popular trek in Bhutan. It's normally done as a day's hike - an uphill climb for 3 to 4 hours followed by a 2 hour hike down. For those who love the outdoors and are looking for solitude surrounded by breath-taking scenery, we propose doing this trek differently by exploring the region in two days, pitching camp for the night in a beautiful location.

### ITINERARY

#### Day 1: Sangchoekor to Bumdra

Drive for an hour to our trek point where you will be met by a friend of Sita at the Buddhist Institute of Sangchoekor. The trek commences with a climb for two hours passing through numerous prayer flags alongside the trail. All the way the view of Paro Valley is stunning. A trekker would say that Paro Valley is right in his/her palms. As you continue hiking, reach a local temple from where you can see the Paro Airport to the south and snowcapped mountains to the north. When blessed with a clear sky day, this is an unforgettable sight. It is a perfect place to enjoy a picnic lunch and rest, while enjoying the beautiful scenery all around. After lunch continue trekking through forests of oaks and rhododendrons. These forests are beautiful around the end of April to May, when rhododendrons are in full bloom. These months are also the best time to watch rare pheasants. Reach Bumdra and pitch tents for the night.

Time of trekking: 5 to 6 hours  
Elevation gain: 1000m  
Altitude: 2800m to 3800m

#### Day 2: Bumdra to Paro

Enjoy the great view of the valley below, as you are served an outdoor breakfast. Close by, we have the hermitage and the holy rocks where footprints of hundreds of thousands of angels are seen. The name of the place 'Bumdra' means cliff of the hundred thousand angels. Today's walk is much easier as you would be walking downhill for most of the way. Enjoy views of Himalayan pines and rhododendrons. On the way cross Zangtopelri, one of the most sacred temples in the Tiger's Nest region. Normally

tourists skip visiting the temple due to time constraints. Continuing from here, reach Tiger's Nest and have hot lunch at the Taktsang Cafeteria. Post lunch we hike downhill for less than an hour to where your cars are parked. Drive back to your hotel in your car.

Time: 6 to 7 hours  
Elevation drop: 1520m  
Altitude: 2280m





# The Veddas, Sri Lanka

## Fascinating Inhabitants from the Stone Age

In the heart of Sri-Lanka live the original inhabitants of the country who take immense pride in their age-old lifestyle of hunting, collecting fruits and devil worship. In fact, they treasure their traditions and practice it with pride despite the impacts of modernisation. From traditional dancing around fire, to the ear-piercing music and songs of Veddas, to the chocolate brown faces blessed with sharp eyes, this a heritage that spans hundreds of years. The tale of this fascinating tribe runs back to the founding father of the Sinhalese nation - Vijaya - who married an indigenous princess - Kuveni - giving birth to a civilisation that relates to the Yakkha tribe. This is a clan that takes pride in serving even in the King's Army as Robert Knox explains through his historic episode on Sri Lanka, highlighting them as 'wild men'.

Veddas worship dead ancestors and their religion is based on Animism - a belief that non-human entities—such as animals, plants and inanimate objects—possess a spiritual essence. However, with the multi-ethnic blend that engulfed the country towards latter years, Veddas started venerating the temple of Kataragama, a site where they believe that God Skanda married a local tribal girl born from their same caste.

Walk into the thatched huts of this historic community and partake in their life. Learn how this jungle-tribe adores mother nature with a lifestyle that has bordered alongside its values. If you are lucky stand witness to a traditional ear-piercing cry by Veddas who will dance showering blessings from the gods. Visit the house of the chief and listen as he explains the way of life in his community. He might even offer you some valuable advice which will surely add into your repertoire of homemade medical treatments.

### TRIP HIGHLIGHTS

- Visit to a Vedda Chief's House and the grave of a former tribal chief
- Traditional dance by Veddas

Tour Starts From : Kandy  
Best Time to Travel : November to April  
Ideal for : 1 - 6 pax



# Celebrating Indra Jatra, Nepal

## A summer carnival

Indra Jatra is an annual festival which falls in the month of September coinciding with the last day of Summer on a full moon.

Date: 17th September 2016\* (dates can vary according to the Lunar Calendar)  
Duration: Half Day followed by festival dinner with a local Newar family.

### STORY BEHIND

Indra Jatra is a festival celebrated in honour of Lord Indra, the King of Heaven.

As legend goes, once Lord Indra came down from devlok (heaven) to Kathmandu, disguised as a poor peasant, to gather parijat flowers for Dagini, his mother. While plucking the flowers from a garden he was caught. People took him for a thief and had him bound. Meanwhile, his white elephant wandered the streets of Kathmandu searching for him. His mother also became anxious when he did not return. So, she too came down to Kathmandu to look for him. She discovered him at the city square where people had bound him up. When the people discovered that the person they had bound up was actually Indra, the Lord of Heaven they were very embarrassed. They sought his pardon and later on celebrated his visit to Kathmandu with feasts, processions, singing and dancing. In return for his release Dagini promised to spread dew over the crops for the coming months and to take back with her to heaven all those who had died in the past year. To this very day people of Kathmandu celebrate this occasion with a festival known as Indra Jatra during September.

### CELEBRATION

The festival begins with the carnival-like erection of The Linga (Yasingh), a ceremonial pole, accompanied by the rare display of the deity Akash Bhairab; which sits in a Hindu temple in Indra Chowk Kathmandu, not far from Durbar Square and is taken out once a year on the occasion of Indra Jatra Festival, represented by a massive mask spouting Jaad and raksu (Nepali local liquors). Households throughout Kathmandu, especially Newaris, display images and sculptures of Indra, usually as a captive and Bhairab

(Shiva's manifestation and believed to be a destroyer of evil) at this time of year. This thirty-six feet long wooden pole (The Linga) is chosen with great care from the Nala forest in Kavre district, east of Kathmandu.

Finally on the main day, the Kumari (living goddess), leaves the seclusion of her temple in a palanquin and leads a procession through the streets of Kathmandu to thank Indra, the rain god. The main attraction of the festival is the procession of chariots and masked dancers representing deities and demons. Jaad (Nepali local liquor) flows from the Bahirab statue, which is remarkable to observe at Hanuman Dhoka.

### GOOD TO KNOW

- There are no entry fee for observing the festival however, the client will have to pay the entrance fee to Kathmandu Durbar Square.
- It's good to carry sunscreen and/or an umbrella to cope with the sun or it may rain also (it's meant to be good luck).
- Everything is good natured but there will be a lot of people close to you. Small children and adults alike can get annoying as they push and shove for a vantage point. There's no escaping this but do remember it's all done in good intention.
- A good zoom lens on a camera will help capture things up-close.





# Rising like the Phoenix

## Courage and Faith

Suraj Lamichhane, General Manager, Sita Nepal, recounts the Nepal Earthquake and how the courage showed by ordinary Nepalese citizens, the faith they had for a better tomorrow and the spirit of helping each other acted as a beacon of hope despite the devastation all around.

I tried to stand on the shaking ground surrounded by the chaos; the shuddering houses, the collapsing walls and the screams of people running around to find a safe place. Everything felt like a horrible nightmare coming true. The earthquake on April 25, 2015 brought destruction and fear that Nepal hadn't experienced in years. While I was trying to get a grip on myself, rumours about the old cities of Kathmandu Valley collapsing and casualties of thousands were adding to the woes. Amidst all the turmoil and confusion, the pressing responsibility towards work was catching up and numbing every other emotion. But the commitment and confidence shown by my colleagues gave me hope that we will get through this together.

Our first response after the earthquake was the safety of our guests who were present in Kathmandu. We travelled around the town, visiting each of our guests and making sure everyone was safe and sound. While driving around, we couldn't help observe hopeless faces of people taking shelter on the pavements of the streets. A pressing question rose, "Will we ever be able to rise from all this". The next day, while visiting heritage sites of Kathmandu and watching centuries old monuments and temples crumbled into piles of rubbles, brought some harrowing realisation that our identity and pride had been robbed by the natural calamity. Despite the damage around us, the ray of hope came from the resilience of people around. The courage everyone showed, faith they had for a better tomorrow and spirit of helping each other was the beacon of hope that helped us all to keep moving ahead.

It was immensely encouraging and inspiring to see the youth of Nepal taking the initiative to take relief material to survivors, even before the Government did, to the most affected areas in and around Kathmandu. During that time, I also visited my village which is a couple of hours drive from Kathmandu. While, on one hand there were destroyed households and stories of loss, on the other hand people were slowly getting back to their normal life. Watching smoke rising from the kitchen of houses into the

autumn sky, women working in the kitchen garden, children playing around proved that life still goes on and like everything else this too shall pass. Watching the whole village taking initiative to rebuild the school so that children can continue with their studies was admirable. After a few weeks we revisited the heritage sites. Though, the debris had been removed and people were getting back to their daily lives, we could notice the lack of tourists in those areas. It was heart wrenching. While the Government is trying to help the tourism sector flourish back to its previous glory, private sectors equally are doing their best to continue to promote Nepal as a safe destination. I look forward to renovation and rebuilding of the heritage sites and affected villages.

The earthquake might have brought devastation and loss but it could not shake the spirit of Nepal and Nepalese. We are resilient and hopeful. We will rebuild Nepal back to its previous glory. We will rise again like the Phoenix.

# Nepal Relief Project

## Corporate Responsibility Initiative

Sita is thankful to friends and family who donated towards the Sita Nepal Relief Fund to help the people of Nepal. The fund is now being used for this project. This would not have been possible without your support. Thank you for your contribution.

Sita is working with Abari, a socially oriented research, design and construction firm based in Nepal to work on a CSR Project using the Nepal Relief Fund that was generously donated by our colleagues, partners and family to support the people affected by the devastating earthquake on April 25, 2015.

Besides the donation collected, Sita organised a charity run for collecting funds for Nepal. The run was organised in Gurgaon, Cochin, Jaipur and Goa on 17 May, 2015.

Over 500 participants from Sita offices, hotel partners, friends and family participated in this charity run across all four cities.

The project with Abari commenced on January 1, 2016 and will run for a period of seven months.

Abari has a strong sustainable presence. They work towards re-examining traditional materials like bamboo and earth so that they can be used in contemporary architectural practices. Abari has designed and constructed earthen and bamboo based houses in Bhutan, Ethiopia, Mongolia, India, USA and Nepal.

Sita is collaborating with Abari, to rebuild Sanjiwani Vocational School in Dhulikhel - 30kms east of Kathmandu which was damaged during the earthquake. The school offers vocational training to students in Grade 9 and 10. Post the earthquake, the school set-up temporary learning centres for the children.

Both organisations are working together to rebuild the theoretical class room and vocational workshop which are used for training the children. Abari aims at constructing thermally comfortable, child friendly, modern, earthquake resistant structures using locally sourced and traditional materials such as bamboo and earth.

Once the classroom and workshop have been constructed they

will be equipped with the necessary furniture and tools for students to receive high quality practical training. A vocational trainer will also be hired for a period of two years to provide theoretical and practical training to the children.

See you soon in Nepal.





# Maharashtra

## A great mix

### Destination insider

Maharashtra; one of the largest and most populous states in India is an exciting new destination with an amazing contrast in landscape, monuments, culture and experiences. While its colourful festivals galvanize its millions into fervent motion, there exist lazy palm-fringed beaches, lofty cool-green mountains, UNESCO World Heritage Sites, impressive national parks and bustling cosmopolitan cities. This is an India which is equally vibrant, colourful and beautiful when compared to some of its well-trodden destinations, yet unexplored.

Inderjeet Rathod our DKC Explorer, recently travelled through Maharashtra; Nasik, Aurangabad, Pune, Akulj and Konkan. He flew in and out of Mumbai.. This circuit is a great mix of history, religion, culture, nature, food and wine. Yes wine!!

The pilgrim city of NASIK (1 night) in Maharashtra is situated on the banks of River Godavari with more than a hundred ancient temples located in its vicinity. These temples commemorate the story of the ancient Hindu epic Ramayana and its chief protagonist Rama's sojourn in Nasik. One can explore all that Nasik has to offer by going on our evening and morning walk.

AURANGABAD (2/3 nights) is on the tourist map, but very few visit this destination which was a place of great importance due to its location on the famous "Silk Route" that traversed across the breadth of Asia to reach Europe. Textiles, embroidered finery and various kinds of beads made in nearby Paithan were exported to the markets of Greece, Rome and Egypt. The Ajanta Caves in Aurangabad, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and whose history dates back to 2nd century BC is outstanding. It was around this time that the viharas (monasteries) were carved out of caves here and the stunning cave paintings made, to be lost and rediscovered in the early 19th century. Another highlight of Aurangabad are the Ellora Caves which are amongst the most splendid examples of rock architecture in India. The carvings in the Ellora Caves track the changing fortunes of three major religions Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism between the 5th and the 10th century AD.

PUNE (2 nights) gained prominence in the 17th century as a stronghold of the Maratha warrior King Shivaji and the Maratha Empire that he founded, which in its heydays stretched from Tamil Nadu in south India, to Peshawar (now in Pakistan) in the north, Bengal and Andaman Islands in the east. Its military significance didn't end with the Marathas. The British Army built the Pune cantonment in 1817 which is now with the Indian Army and Khadakwasla, a mere 14 kms away, now houses the National Defence Academy (NDA), the Joint Services academy of the Indian Armed Forces. Despite its military legacy, Pune is also the "cultural capital" of Maharashtra and our walking tours of Pune are great insights into its rich history, culture, traditions and its vibrant progressive society which is a great melting pot of communities from all over India.

AKLUJ (2 nights) is the new Wine Country of India where Fratelli Vineyards are located. About 240 acres of land owned by Fratelli Wines cultivates almost 12 different varieties of grapes, imported from France to produce one of the finest wines of India.

KONKAN (4 nights) is a narrow coastal strip between the Western Ghat Hills and the Arabian Sea. It is another highlight of Maharashtra. The vast Konkan stretch abounds with scenic greenery. The local vegetation includes fruit-bearing trees like mango, betel-nut, banana, jackfruit and coconut. The beaches of Konkan are some of the widest and cleanest in India. Konkan is also known for its wonderful cuisine dominated by fish. Women here are known for their ability to cook the most delicious fare in a jiffy including excellent vegetarian dishes. I spent my 4 nights in Konkan by staying in homestays (check out the STAYS WE LOVED section) with great hosts and exploring two of the most popular towns of Konkan - Ganpatipule and Sawantwadi. Ganpatipule is a rural settlement, serene, unspoilt and famous for its ancient temple dedicated to Lord Ganesha located right on the sandy beach near the sea. One can enjoy walking around the village or go swimming in the river nearby, trekking in the nearby hill and visit Aare - Ware beach for a swim in the sea. Sawantwadi is a quaint town around the man-made lake called Moti Talao. Some of the interesting experiences in and around are the Sawantwadi Palace constructed in late 18th century, the many Konkani temples with unique architecture, the Pinguli village - a museum of traditional folk arts and crafts of the indigenous tribe and the wooden toy workshops where they make toys out of the light weight 'pangara' wood which is found in abundance here.

Another interesting thing that Maharashtra showcases is the Konkan Railway - a tribute to the unconquerable human spirit of Konkani people which made it possible to lay a railway track over the creeks of the Arabian Sea and the winding rivers, as well as drill tunnels into huge hillocks of the Sahayadri Range. Konkan Railway has in a way changed the lives of the people in the state by offering easy accessibility to the cities of Mumbai and Goa, thereby bringing prosperity into this region. Should you desire, you can take the train back from Sawantwadi to Mumbai or continue to Goa.





# Art of Travel

Sita's monthly newsletter brings out the 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.

## Best of Art of Travel

### Some of our favourites

#### A DAY IN THE LIFE OF

Aagam is a happy man these days. "At first they laughed at me. But today, everyone wants to be in my shoes as they think that I am doing something really cool." Aagam works part time with When in India Tours - a company which has started Rickshaw rides in Old Delhi. When in India - has five customized rickshaws and when you ride a rickshaw you are able to hear the narration of the guide through audio aids. Just a year back Aagam, who is from Bihar, would have never thought his life would take such a turn for the better.

#### LIFESTYLE

The spirit of colours in Rajasthan is deep seated and reflects in every aspect of its daily life; attire, ornaments, paintings, homes et all. If you know the colours of Rajasthan you will be able to identify communities and the social status of an individual. Most of the knowledge on colours in Rajasthan is handed down over generations and it has been rarely documented locally.

#### TOP CHEF RECOMMENDS

These are not your ubiquitous momos, instead this is a sweet dumpling called Modak made of steamed rice (flour) filled with a mixture of jaggery and coconut. Ganesh Chaturthi festival is synonymous with modak feasting since it is Ganesh's : the Elephant Headed God's favourite dish. There is a special way to eat them - break a modak from the middle, pour a spoon of ghee (clarified butter) into it and then relish the taste!

#### 6 THINGS WE LIKED ABOUT MARANAT MANA

- Reaching Maranat Mana : Your clients can travel to Maranat Mana from one of the three approaches in North Kerala - either descend down the forested ghats from Wayanad driving past acres and acres of rolling tea estates or head from Calicut through plantations or take the slow train-ride from Shoranur near Pallakad through the verdant countryside of North Kerala which stops at many small quaint stations.

- Charming and Authentic : When we reached Maranat Mana from the Tuvur Railway Station, it felt like entering someone's home. A big ancient one at that with probably many stories waiting to be told and listened to. It had none of the tell-tale signs of a Kerala homestay which I had encountered elsewhere during my travels.
- The Live Ganesha Temple : There aren't too many homestays in India which have a live temple or shrine within its premises. At the Ganesha Temple located within Maranat Mana close to 300 devotees turn up every day to pray. Your clients can soak in the atmosphere.
- The Architecture : Maranat Mana is a fascinating insight into the traditional elite architecture of Kerala based on Vastu Shastra. It is one of the last few surviving pathinaru kettu (four inner courtyards) of Kerala occupying a plinth area of 1 acre.
- The Family Residence : A great way to spend the morning in Maranat Mana is acquainting yourself with the 160-year old house; the history and lore surrounding it with Praveen, your host. Built largely of limestone and teak, mahogany and rosewood, the wooden walls within have traditional designs and carvings. The sprawling seems to be caught in a relentless time wrap, yet it is not a museum. Every nook and corner is very much alive with the present. My favourite place in Maranat Mana was the Family Pond where I loved spending some solitary moments with a book.
- The Hosts : Praveen Maranat who has sailed all over the world as a Merchant Navy officer and his wife Vidya, who is a teacher in a local school run by the Maranat family are your hosts at Maranat Mana. They both do a lovely job and make you feel at home in an unobtrusive manner.





# Haridwar Uncovered with Lakshmi

## Life after one dip in the holy Ganges

### Knowledge Wednesday

Guest speakers, not necessarily 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.

Lakshmi is a spiritual disciple of two great Advait philosophy masters. Over the last 22 years she has devoted herself to her gurus and her personal spiritual journey.

Lakshmi Singh is the right person to get in touch with for Haridwar; what Ashram should one propose in Haridwar, are they any good, how does one handle clients who want the spiritual experience yet desire luxury, things to keep in mind when planning a spiritual sojourn, she can help with this and much more.

Lakshmi's own journey began as princess from the royal family of Tikari in Bihar, her father who was the last Maharaja, brought up Lakshmi with the very best of western education; from there Lakshmi went on to work in tourism which was just beginning in India and Nepal. She spent many years establishing and operating high-end luxury wildlife camps and tours. During this period she happened to visit the Maha Kumbh Mela in 1989, one dip in the holy Ganges and from there on - her life changed.





# Maa, Maach & Mama's Boys

## Bengali boys

### In our opinion

Soumya Mukherji travels all over the Indian sub-continent in search of compelling stories to inspire destination travel.

Being a Bengali and part of the larger Bengali community, I cannot help but notice how we seem to live in a different planet altogether. I'm what is called a 'probashi' or a Bengali living outside Bengal and this has allowed me to appreciate the best of both worlds. While the rest of the world tries to blend in with their surroundings, Bengalis stick out like a sore thumb, visible from miles by their habits. These habits become even more glaring during festive times like Duga Pujo.

'Maa' is how Bengali's fondly call Durga, the goddess of power and strength. Unlike North India; especially places like Delhi where everyone comes in search of jobs and all festivals are celebrated with equal gusto be it Dussehra, Ganesh Chaturthi, Dipawali, Holi and Navratri, Bengali's wait anxiously for Durga Pujo. While communities fast on this occasion called Navratri in the North, for us it's the time to eat, dance, make merry and celebrate our roots. There are special melas happening where stalls put up by housewives sell the choicest of Bengali delicacies. Hordes of people can be seen eagerly jumping from one stall to another trying to eat each and everything on offer even though their stomach says otherwise. Pujo is synonymous with khichdi (made from rice and lentils) and Kosha Mangsho (a spicy mutton dish). You will never see a Bengali waiting patiently in a queue other than if it's a queue for Bhog (offering made to God which is consumed later), come to think of it Bengalis and fasting don't gel well. In all these years of growing up in a Bengali family, I never remember anyone in my family say once, they were fasting. We fast only when there is a death in the family. In school, I had a math teacher who kept taunting Bengalis saying 'maach khabey?' meaning will you eat fish? I wish we had the guts to say 'Yes, if you cook it for us'. Fish is an intrinsic part of a bongs life. Eating fish come naturally to us. We don't think of how will the fish bones separate from the fish, we are taught to just put it all in the mouth and bones are what remain. From ceremonies prescribed for expecting mothers to Annaprashan (rice eating ceremony) to pre-wedding rituals, everything involves some form of fish either cooked or raw. I read somewhere the only time you will see a Bengali silent is when a fish bone gets stuck in his windpipe!

But it's not only fish that we go crazy about...it's just food in general. We love fish but also swear by chingri (shrimp) and kaankra (crab), worship our bhetki (type of fish), lust for shukto (a mix mash of raw banana and vegetables) and salivate over pabda, parshe, pomfret and rui (all different types of fish). If you are lucky enough to get invited to a traditional Bengali house you would be amazed to see even now in this fast paced life how elaborate the meal is. Even though it might be the French who made course meal popular, Bengali houses have been following such a pattern for centuries. A meal will start with a course of rice and shaak (steamed or lightly cooked leafy vegetables) followed by Bhaja (fries) with dal (lentils). Then comes the Shukto (a bitter vegetable preparation using Korolla or Uuche/ Bitter-gourd or Banana). This is said to get the digestive juices activated and built appetite for the main course. The main course will contain at least two preparation of fish as well as a meat dish. Finally to digest all this will be some sweets/deserts like chutney, Mishti Doi/ Sweet yogurt, Bhapa Doi/Steamed Yogurt, Payesh/ Sweet dessert made with rice-milk-sugar, Rooshogolla/Rasgulla, Rasamalai, Pantua, Lyancha, Chanar Jilipi, Kalakaand, Mihidana & Shitabhog, Chamcham, Rajbhog, Rasakadambo, Shondesh...this

list is endless. With so much good food tucked into ones belly day in and day out, you would imagine Bengali men to possess a striking psyche and be well built. But alias no such luck for us...The average Bengali male is average in every aspect - average height, average weight and average psyche. Men have the tendency to develop a small pot belly in the later years and go bald. Although the few hair they do have are jet black which gives everyone a false impression that they dye their hair every day. One of the reasons apart from genes for this poor state of health according to me is the fact that every Bengali is plagued with 'Ambol' or Acidity after everything they eat. Their stomachs are super sensitive. So there is a never ending cycle of Ambol-Digene-Isabgol (dietary fiber for regular bowel movements is a carefully timed Bengali ritual to ensure the 'pressure' comes at exactly the right time). In a recent Bollywood movie called Piku, the famous actor Amitabh Bachchan talks in detail about the direct connection between 'emotion and motion'!

Finally lets come to my assertion that Bengalis are Mama's boys. This is a flip side of the importance and the position women enjoy in the Bengali community. When it comes to all the major decisions inside the house women have an equal say. Bengali women are strong, opinionated and generally have the freedom to make their own decisions not just inside the house but outside as well. For example I'm told my great grandmother was a freedom fighter and was in the thick of the independence struggle. She was hardly ever at home and my grandfather was practically raised by his mashi or mom's sister. For Bengali kids this amounts to the fact that most of the decisions are taken by their more than capable moms. Moms make sure that every minute of the day is utilised to make her child the best all round personality - cricket coaching, football practice, Ranbindra Sangeet classes, dance classes, violin tuition and any other classes/tuition which her neighbour's kid might be taking. Till you move out of the house all your battles are fought for you, you have the best meal cooked in the house which is another reason for tensions post marriage as according to Bengali men no one can cook like their moms! 'Street Smart' is not a term you would associate Bengali boys with. I see children from other communities being pushed out of the house much earlier in life and encouraged to fend for themselves. We have it much easier and become accustomed to a comfortable existence. From Khokon shona (what mothers calls their son fondly) to aaijae shuncho (how a Bengali wife calls her husband) is an uphill battle with both the parties thinking that your allegiance is with the other team!

But don't be fooled, once out of their house, Bengalis are also one of the most adventurous people that I know. Easily identifiable in cold climates by their balaclava, half shorts and bare feet in floaters. Almost as strong as the penchant for good food, travel is the next thing that a Bengali lives for. I remember an incident narrated by my dad some years back. He was traveling in remote Arunachal Pradesh for work. It was winters and the weather outside was biting cold. He reached a place near Zero late at night and was checking into its only guest house. Suddenly he see a Maruti 800 (most popular small car in India) and out comes a Bengali family. The husband walks up to the reception and asks if there were any rooms available. There weren't. The family again goes back into the car and drives off in the middle of the night. The next habitable place may have been 100 miles away.

I know I'm being khoob dushtu (very naughty) with my blanket generalisation in the above but as they say where there's smoke there's fire!



# Returning to the unchanged

## The good, bad and the ugly

Kuntil Baruwa is our explorer -in-residence. He travels all over the Indian sub-continent to make friends with locals and use their recommendations to design unique experiences for the inquisitive savvy traveller.

Nelson Mandela once said, “There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged, to see the ways that you have changed.” Every time I go back home to Assam, I visit Majuli – the largest freshwater riverine island in Asia, to experience how I have changed since the last time I was here in its splendid isolation. It is accessible only by a 2 hour long boat ride on the River Brahmaputra. As a kid I used to go annually to watch the Raas Festival. For the past 200 years, Majuli has been playing host to the Raas Festival during the month of Kartik (November) in the local calendar, where various stages of this River Island celebrate the life and times of the Hindu God Krishna, in all- night live performances that last for 3 days. People of Majuli are some of the nicest I have ever met. I remember staying in the homes of random strangers who were more than happy to host me. After the havoc of recurring floods, Raas is the time when people of Majuli forget the pain of loss and celebrate. In that sense, the Raas Festival is also Majuli’s way of healing herself. What I like most about the Raas Festival is how every community of the island participates and involves themselves. Despite its strong religious roots, Raas is a very liberal festival where everyone is welcome, not only to watch but also participate. In the past couple of years, Majuli has seen many foreigners, particularly young girls from France, playing the role of Krishna’s Xokhis (buddies) at various stages during the Raas Festival. Thanks to the effort of French writer-traveller Nadine Delpech and her Paris based Préserver Majuli.

These days I avoid the 36 hour long train and fly to Assam in 3 hours. I haven’t watched Raas for a long time, haven’t stayed with random strangers. Now, I need my space and flexibility where I can plan my day, so I like to hire an exclusive boat, when I travel to Majuli. I want a clean comfortable bed, hot and cold water and a western style toilet. And yes!! The Location of where I stay is important. Me: Po Okum which means Happy Home is where I stay when I visit Majuli. Despite being basic, it is neat and clean and has everything I want, including power back-up and a great location. It is right inside the village, with the River Luhit; one of the tributaries of the Brahmaputra flowing right next door. The

people of Majuli haven’t changed. I got invited for dinner by a random stranger after I kept on bumping into him during my many walks in and around the village. He would pass by my cottage with his cows every day. Post dinner, after the customary offering of betel pan and nut, my host said, “Eh Hotelot nu kiyo thakibo laage. Aamar Ghorotei Thakibo Paril Hoi,” (Why did you have to stay in a hotel. You could have stayed with us). It was past midnight when I reached Me: Po Okum. I saw two young foreigners leaving for their guest house, which was 2 kms away in a Xatra. My driver Naba chatted with the girls briefly in Assamese; yes they spoke the local language ! Xatras in Majuli, the first one established in 15th century, are centres of religion, spirituality, education, theater, dance, music and art and craft, where monks stay and devote their entire life, some leading a life of celibacy. “Is it safe for these girls to cycle now? We didn’t see a soul on our way back,?” I asked Naba. “Safe? Of course. These girls are from Israel and have initiated a community based project with the weavers and farmers here. They return every year and are family now. We will kill anybody who dare look at them in a wrong way,” Naba said. Then there was Lily, a Chinese national who barely managed English and was traveling solo. “I like it here, people leave me alone with my bicycle,” she said, when I met her by the River Luhit during an evening walk.

There are talks about building a bridge over the Brahmaputra to Majuli from Jorhat, my home town which also has an airport with daily flights from Delhi and Kolkata. The bridge will cut down travel time from 2 hours in a boat to only 20 minutes. Life in Majuli is difficult with the River Brahmaputra every monsoon, ripping through the crops, turning seed to waste, the essence of life of these simple folks who have made its banks their home. Once the bridge is built they won’t have to take the water ambulance (a converted mechanised boat with basic medical facilities) at their own risk anymore, for medical emergencies during the monsoons to shift the ill for better care in a Jorhat hospital. “Nobody seems to be asking the locals if we need that bridge or not,” Naba said. “No we don’t need that bridge. I make enough by driving around tourists and from my farm. I don’t need any more money. With that bridge; along with the good will come all kinds of evil, which we will have no control over. It will spoil Majuli and its people,” he adds. The bridge and everything with it – the good, bad and the ugly – is going to come one day or the other to Majuli. But I hope until then Majuli and its people stay this way. At least in my lifetime.





# Responsible Tourism

## Leave no traces

Kaushik Bajibab is a friend of Sita and specialises in wildlife and nature based workshops and tours for children families, and individuals.

So, what is responsible tourism? What does it really signify? Adopting sustainable means of travel, leaving less carbon footprints, 'leave no trace', make choices that are eco-friendly and so on...

What most people take for granted is the segment of "wildlife tourism". We humans don't abide by the first basic rule of the wilderness - while on their (wildlife) turf, abide by their rules.

Being one of the 17 mega diverse countries in the world, India has 515 animal sanctuaries of which 48 are tiger reserves. We have our own "BIG 5s" and several of other rich and diverse wildlife - a few endemic and many endangered (unfortunately) in our forests and seas. While the conservationists and the government recognise the role of eco-tourism in conservation of wild species - it's not just the tour operators and people involved in the business who are responsible - each and every individual - all of us are and should be made responsible.

We have witnessed several examples of "wildlife tourism" gone wrong. Blaming unethical tour operators or greedy resorts won't suffice. It's the role of every traveller to be more cautious and selective with their choices. Do a thorough research on companies that offer wildlife experience trips before signing up with them - what to check for? Their practices (how ethical/ wildlife friendly) and the kind of establishments they support. Secondly, if you frequent national parks and sanctuaries - you can do your part by encouraging establishments (resorts/homestays/guesthouses) that offer great holiday experiences, at the same time exercise serious commitment to conservation of habitat and wildlife. Remember, we are motivated and thrilled that there are more and more people interested in wildlife and the wilderness - we will be ecstatic when you choose to make right choices while you enjoy your travels.

Without sounding too preachy or a drag - I would like to list out a few of my observations in the past. I am sure all of you are familiar with the basic guidelines to follow whilst in the forest - like the

need to speak in soft tones, no littering and being extremely cautious and observant of your surroundings.

Firstly - coming to the most sought after experience by most tourists - the safaris. While on safaris, it's critical that people don't get off the vehicles and don't incessantly talk in loud voices - these actions can either alarm or agitate a wild animal. Also, remember - never stress an animal for a "longer sighting" or a "better picture". Secondly - the need for ethical photographers. Using flash, whistling and calling out to animals to grab their attention, demanding guides and drivers to move closer to the animal and baiting are a few definite no-nos.

Thirdly - littering and feeding! On every single drive inside national parks, tiger reserves and sanctuaries I have found litter - bottles, plastic covers and all sorts of garbage discarded carelessly on the side of the road. And countless number of times had to politely request people not to feed wild animals like monkeys and occasionally, chitals.

Lastly, it's good to support community-based wildlife tourism. Most often, villagers living closer to forests interact with wildlife regularly and most often are intolerant and fearful. Eco-tourism has worked a great deal for the farmer/locals as an alternative occupation. Hostile locals, now allow free roaming of wildlife around the fringe of their properties and reserves.

This inclusive conservation effort encourages locals to protect wildlife and work in harmony with the land. If you come across well-reviewed homestays or camp sites run by locals, it's always good to give them the first preference. By doing so, you will encourage locals conserve wildlife. The wilderness is a sanctuary, offering perfect abode for any restless, excited or a bored soul. While we are there, it's only righteous to accept its inhabitants as fellow beings. If you love wildlife and wild lands - the only way you will enjoy the experience is by being a part of the place and allowing the world of the curious and magnificent, happen to you. Having run several hundreds of wildlife education and awareness programs in the past 10 years, I can assure you that a little education can go a long way. And maybe, the lack of which has caused several untoward incidents in forests by tourism.





# Stays we loved

## Mainstream, but different

### Stays we loved & Stays to watch out for

#### FRATELLI VINEYARD, NEAR AKLUJ

“Staying at Fratelli Vineyard for a couple of nights is like escaping to the dreamy world of leisure, far away from the rush hour,” says Inderjeet Rathod of our Destination Knowledge Centre who stayed here recently. Fratelli Vineyard is located in Motewadi village near Akluj, a small town lying off the Pune-Solapur Highway. The white coloured 'Glass-House' encased Winery gets into sight from faraway, with FRATELLI written on it in big bold letters. On coming closer, one gets to see the vines planted neatly in a linear pattern on a large tract of land, gently sloping towards one side. Fratelli Wine is a late entrant into the Indian Wine Industry from 2004. They started wine production in 2009. The state of the art Winery installation has been constructed in an ultra-modern glass and steel frame and finished completely in white, the exterior is undeniably classy. There is a Guest House attached to it with 4 spacious double-bedded rooms done up quite tastefully. Past the corridor of the rooms lies the Lounge (common area) of the Guest House. It faces the scenic Vineyards on one side and the Winery on the other. A Pool table rests in one corner and a 4-seater Coffee Table sits in another. A huge 10 seater dining table lies in the remaining corner. Attached is an ultra-modern modular kitchen and a well-stocked up double door refrigerator. A small team of workers at the Winery take care of the hospitality in the Guesthouse. The ground floor of the Guesthouse accommodates a sports room with facilities to play indoor games. The cook at the Guesthouse prepares simple Indian or continental dishes, which he confirms with you before preparing them. The adjacent room is a Wine Tasting Room with a square table in the middle surrounded by a few bar stools. For outdoor activity there are bicycles and ATVs to go around the Vineyards. You can also use Fratelli's open-top Jeep to visit the other Vineyards located 10 - 15 km away.

#### ATITHI PARINAY HOMESTAY, GANPATIPULÉ

Atithi Parinay is a beautiful 2 room Homestay located in Kotawde village near Ganpatipulé, amidst green hills dotting the Konkan coastline of Maharashtra. It is built with red laterite stones, local to the area surrounded by 4 acres of lush green land, having mango, coconut, banana, jack fruit trees and other medicinal plants. “The

mother-daughter duo, Vasudha and Medha who own Atithi Parinay are your hosts here. Medha is an Interior Designer by profession and a die-hard nature lover. Both mother and daughter interact and take care of all guests in a very friendly and homely manner. Medha comes across as an affable person who readily shares her vast knowledge about the local culture, history and cuisine. Time permitting; she also accompanies guests to interesting places around her property. An important member of the family is their Labrador dog - Rene, who gives company to the guests taking a leisurely stroll in and around the property. Though they serve only vegetarian food, the cuisine here is really special, authentic Konkani and home cooked, sourced from selected village houses nearby,” says Inderjeet Rathod of our Destination Knowledge Centre who stayed here recently. While staying here one can do yoga in the morning, take a stroll in the farm, relax on the hammock, take a walk around the village or to the nearby stream, go swimming in the river nearby, try fish pedicure in the river, go trekking in the nearby hill and of course visit Aare - Ware beach for a swim in the sea.

#### KHAS BAGH, NORTH OF JAIPUR

Khas Bagh is located 45mns north from Jaipur on the way to Delhi. Opened as a hotel in January 2015, this property is built on the lines of the local architecture in the middle of a large and very well maintained lawn. The owner is a former professional Polo player and lives here with his family. The property - which has one floor with 18 rooms and an open courtyard in the center - is very elegantly decorated. The rooms are comfortable with nice furniture and modern bathrooms. There is a large terrace on the first floor which offers a panoramic views of the area. The rooms on the first floor are very bright compared with the ones of the ground floor. It has a relaxing beautiful swimming-pool too. Polo and horse riding, horse safari, elephant safari, make this place a 2-3 nights destination-hotel. “The property is stylish, elegantly decorated and the family is very welcoming. Good option for travelers who want to discover Jaipur but want to stay in a peaceful and relaxing countryside environment with comfortable rooms. Very good choice for horse lovers as well,” says Jean Noel Esteve of our Destination Knowledge Centre who recently stayed here.





# Stays we loved

## Mainstream, but different

### RAJ MAHAL PALACE

“Entering Raj Mahal was like being transported in time, with subtle 40's jazz floating in the common drawing room, replete with black and white pictures of the Royal family posing with international celebrities, in silver frames. Very Art Deco, Victorian furniture, William Morris styled wall paper and a Bearer with crisp white and gold uniform completed the picture. The beauty I saw was surreal, as if I was transported in a painting or a film set. I quickly checked my attire, if I looked the part! It was magical and indeed looked like a real palace I would have imagined as a little girl. A riot of colours on the wall papers, so beautifully paletted, associated with Rajasthan and Jaipur especially, looked regal. Indian, yet very British, as was the norm in those days,” says Lovleen Sagar from our Destination Knowledge Centre who recently stayed here.

The Palace belongs to the present princess Diya Kumari's mother Rani Padmini Devi of Jaipur. She came here as a bride and it was her first home in Jaipur. In her welcome letter to the guests staying here, she says, “to honour that moment and extra ordinary inheritance, I was committed to its (palace's) restoration and reinvention in celebration of our enduring historical legacy, to bequeath it to the young modern day, polo playing Maharajah.” Adil Ahmad, the highly acclaimed ex-creative director of Good Earth stores and prodigious designer with a passion for culture was entrusted the task of restoring the Palace with his fine sensibilities. Combine this with the high standards of Sujana Luxury and you have an unbeatable product! “I would highly recommend this to people who want to be transported back in time and experience the regalia of the times gone by. Do remember to look the part!” says Lovleen.

### ART ICHOL, MAIHAR

Art Ichol is the last place you would expect to stumble upon in the rural small town setting of Maihar, which adds to the charm of the place. Ambica Beri, the owner of Calcutta's Gallery Sanskriti envisioned a place which would be a world class multi-arts centre where everyone from artists to craft enthusiasts, writers and photographers can gather and collaborate. What I liked about Art

Ichol which was also echoed by the resident artists is the open and welcoming nature of the place and the Beri family. Every night, irrespective of where I was sleeping ( they have 3 retreats open to guests) I would come back to Maihar Heritage Home for some mouth-watering home cooked food, lively conversation with the family,' says Soumya Mukherji who stayed there as part of his road trip from Gwalior to Varanasi. Maihar is also famous for Baba Allaaddin Khan and the Maihar Band formed by him which is one-of-its-kind Indian classical music orchestra with its own ragas (melodic modes), style and written compositions. At the centre of this orchestra is a unique musical instrument called 'Nal Tarang' made out of gun barrels.

Insider's Tip : Ask for a private Nal Tarang performance by the Maihar Band during your stay at Art Ichol. Listening to the band perform in the open under a clear sky is an unforgettable experience.



# Stays to watch out for

## Hot Picks

### FRAGRANT NATURE, COCHIN

The recently opened Fragrant Nature, Cochin is a stylish designer hotel overlooking the harbour mouth and walking distance from the Jewish Synagogue, Dutch Palace and Jew Street. It has a total inventory of 41 rooms with a swimming pool, a fine-dine restaurant and an Ayurveda spa.

### THE BHUJ HOUSE, BHUJ

The 4 room Bhuj House is a 150 year old traditional home located in the heart of Bhuj in Gujarat. Owned by Jehan Bhujwala who has marked out a niche for himself with his lodge in Kanha National Park -Sher Garh, all guest rooms of Bhuj House open out to the inner courtyard, which is a peaceful retreat from the neighbourhood's bustling environment. Each room is individual in terms of size and space. At the centre of the courtyard is an open pantry where breakfast is served, you can help yourself to drinks and snacks anytime as well. The property is located, just a walk or short tuk-tuk ride away from Bhuj's historic sites and shopping bazaar. Bhuj is an ideal base to explore the larger region of Kutch.

### THE WILDERNESS CAMP AT DERA AMER

The Wilderness Camp, set up in a private camp in the foothills of the Aravallis has four well-appointed, comfortable tents with attached bathrooms. Intended for a single group to stay, be it two or eight people. Arrive at the medieval Gopalji Temple and receive a traditional Indian welcome, before being seated on your elephant, with a flute of sparkling wine and then transported by the gentle giant to the camp. Your personal chef will prepare the evening meal while a local musician entertains you with traditional ragas, passed down to him through the generations. Wake up in the morning and spend some quality time with your elephant. Enjoy an early morning walk, listening to the gentle rumble of the elephant as she sashays along, as you stroll to the nearest village.

### FATEH SAFARI LODGE, KUMBHALGARH

The Fateh Safari Lodge with its 35 rooms is located in Kumbhalgarh, the most picturesque area of Rajasthan, amidst the natural surroundings, on the edge of the Aravalli Hills, at 1100



meters above sea level. It is an ideal base for exploring the stunning 15th century Kumbhalgarh Fort, a UNESCO World Heritage site, whose walls extend over 38 km, making it the second-longest continuous wall after the Great Wall of China.

### TIJARA FORT PALACE, ALWAR

The Tijara Fort Palace was built in the early 19th century by Maharaja Balwant Singh of Alwar. Masons from imperial Delhi and Kabul in Afghanistan came to build it. But he died before it could be completed. Tijara Fort remained an unfinished marvel of three structures, built in the Rajput-Afghan style with early colonial influences. Now lovingly restored by the Neemrana Hotels, the Tijara Fort Palace opened its doors to guests in the winters of 2015 with 21 Suites. 100 kms from Delhi international airport, it can be an ideal place for some relaxing time after a Golden Triangle itinerary.

### TAJ SAFARIS LODGE - MEGHAULI SERAI, CHITWAN NATIONAL PARK NEPAL

Located in Chitwan, Meghauli Serai is Taj Safaris' fifth and newest lodge, located in the Terai lowlands of Nepal surrounded by 3 rivers. 16 luxury villas in pastel hues create a calming sanctuary in the heart of the jungle and have private plunge pools and en-suite massage tables. The other 12 contemporary rooms have balconies overlooking the Himalayas and the savannah grasslands below. Unlike other parks in Meghauli Serai, you cross the river by a boat and get onto a waiting customised Taj Safari vehicle to start your jeep safari. Experiences at the lodge range from private elephant safaris, jeep safaris, walking safaris, canoeing, village visits to sundowners on the banks of the river or in the bush.

### ORANGE COUNTY, HAMPI

Situated close to the protected site of the ruins and designed on the theme reminiscent of the Grand kingdoms of Vijayanagara, the property is an all-suites resort. A luxury offering which ensures staying in Hampi is now more comfortable than ever before. The resort plans to have knowledgeable historians who could be used to accompany guests on tours to the monuments and impart meaningful information on the mighty kingdom in ruins. The resort is expected to be open by March 2016.





# 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.

## Books we loved

### India and its stories

Parents often wonder how to introduce India to their children and often there is hesitation with regard to travelling in India with children. Times have changed....our infrastructure, hygiene levels and travelling in between cities is much friendlier now. Destinations are easily accessible and there is plenty for children to do. From enjoying a beach holiday to exploring the jungles and partaking in the festivities of Indian culture, all members of the families can enjoy. Hotels have activities for the young ones, they provide nannies and baby-sitting options. There are even food menus customized for children.

A nice way to excite the children about the destination and make them part of the decision process is to introduce them to Indian stories. Inspiring Indian authors for children include the contemporary Anushka Ravishankar, Shals Mahajan, Gita Wolf, Indu Harikumar, Mala Dayal..there are so many... and the classic ones like Satyajit Ray and Mahasweta Devi.

Not to forget, the quintessential Indian comic books we all grew up on, Amar Chitra Katha series. And, the first audio books covering the Panchatantra stories from Buddhism, Karadi Tales, narrated in a simple yet engaging manner by well-known artists.

Most of these books can be ordered online. Here are some of our favourites:

Kuntal Baruwa is an explorer and travels all over the Indian sub-continent to make friends with locals and in search of compelling stories to inspire destination travel. He recommends:

#### THE COMPLETE ADVENTURES OF FELUDA BY SATYAJIT RAY

As a teenager I have had my fair share of Enid Blyton, Nancy Drew, Hardy Boys and other staples, but Pradosh C. Mitter, aka Feluda, the criminal detective created by Satyajit Ray, the Oscar winning Indian film director 50 years ago, holds a special place in my heart. The enduring beauty of Feluda books is that they would talk about anything that is India- from local Rajasthani customs, poetry, nesting habits of peacocks to Indian classical music. The vivid imaginary along with the fast paced stories full of adventure, hidden treasures and crime would transport you from Calcutta, to the hills of Darjeeling to the desert of Jaisalmer and the Ghats of Varanasi. No other children's writer has taught me so much about India so effortlessly, without ever deliberately attempting to do so.

Feluda has appeared in graphic novel adaptations, in radio plays, in theatre and on television. His film outings are box office hits like Shonar Kella (Golden Fort), which is one of the best children's movies ever made in India which showed the Jaisalmer Fort as the magical 'Sonar Kella'. Watch the movie to see glimpses of Rajasthan and Kolkata in the 70's. Feluda is enjoying, somewhat of a revival with these books being translated into English albeit without Ray's brilliant illustrations. They lose a bit of magic without them but are still good. If you are fond of the highly popular drama 'Sherlock' running on BBC, do pick his complete work to see Feluda play Holmes and Watson aptly played between his cousin Topshe and the very Bengali, bumbling pulp writer Lalmohan-babu, whilst Maganlal Meghrajia is the villain as masterful as James Moriarty.

Recommended for children of 13+ years.

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.

#### AMAR CHITRA KATHA

Amar Chitra Katha, one of the India's oldest comic series, is our Aesop's Fables and a great way of introducing children to lesser-known stories from India. On my recent trip to the World Book Fair in Delhi held every year around January, I ended up spending more time browsing through the latest collections of Amar Chitra Katha than at any other stall. The Amar Chitra Katha series has created and preserved values and belief systems for generations now. Pick up a comic of Amar Chitra Katha and you are transported into a magical land. The series includes Indian epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, folk tales from different corners of the country as well as stories of Kings, Queens, Gods, Goddesses, freedom fighters and role models from India et al. Tinkle is my favourite from the series. The stories are light hearted, drawings vivid and colourful with quirky characters whose exploits still make me laugh. I still love the character of Shikari Shambu - a famous but extremely faint hearted hunter who ends up getting credit for acts of bravery which happen by chance. With Amar Chitra Katha titles now available on iTunes, Amazon as well as Red Patang (their official US partner) it is very easy to order/read them from anywhere in the world. Highly recommended as pre-departure reading for your young ones, if you are planning a vacation to India with kids in tow.

Recommended for children between 6-8 years.

Lovleen Sagar loves to discover small things on her travels and how cultures across the world are somehow connected; how each one has influenced the other over centuries of history. She is a self-proclaimed Queen of Trivia on the subject! She recommends:

OUR INCREDIBLE COW - BY MAHASWETA DEVI  
(The original story is in Bengali, translated by Paramita Banerjee and adapted by Tulika Publishers.)

Mahasweta Devi is a well-known activist and one of India's foremost regional writers, whose work always raises issues of politics, gender and class. Her work with the Santhal tribals of West Bengal is well acknowledged. When writing for adults, she is serious. But her stories for children are full of funny incidents and unforgettable characters.

Nyadosh, the clumsy cow in this story, has a fierce gleam in her eyes and a manic appetite. She chomps on children's textbooks, feasts on frocks and devours anything blue in colour. But once this incredible cow gets onto the ilish fish, there's just no stopping her...This comical story of a common cow with uncommon taste is a tale to relish. Nyadosh's extraordinary appetite unfolds through vivid photo collages and doodles by Ruchi Shah. Along with the almost unbelievable true-life story, they give the young readers a hilariously different depiction of what we usually think of as a mild mannered animal.

This true story of a "Not so holy cow" is incredible indeed!!

Recommended for children of 6+ years.



# 12 Days in the lap of the Vindhya

The Vindhyas loom large in the geology, geography and history of India. In both mythology and geography it forms the demarcation between the North and South India. A discontinuous chain of mountain ridges, hill ranges, highlands and plateau escarpments; the Vindhyas stretch from Gujarat in the West to Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh in Central and North Central India. In its shadows flow rivers which have formed the backbone of civilisations where master architects built invincible fortresses, as well as temples with sheer splendour.

## GWALIOR (2 nights)

Day 1 - Explore the main sights of Gwalior such as the medieval 8th century hill top Fort, the 11th century Saas Bahu Temple and the 15th century monoliths of the enlightened souls of the Jain religion. From the 15th century Man Mandir Palace enjoy a bird's eye view of the city before heading to the elaborate Jai Vilas Palace, the historic seat of the Scindias. Day 2 - Head out to Morena. See the beautiful sandstone temples of Padawali, Mitawali and Bateshwar, built between the 8th and 10th century which still remain unexplored despite their sheer splendour.

## ORCHHA (2 nights)

Day 1 - Head out to Orchha, visiting Sonagiri and Datia enroute. Orchha literally mean 'hidden'. Located on the banks on the Betwa river this small town dotted with palaces, royal cenotaphs, temples and ruins seems to be straight out from pages of a story book. The atmosphere of the place is laid-back and hassle-free, which makes for a relaxing stay. Post dinner we will walk down to the 16th century Raja Ram Temple to attend the evening prayer ceremony. Day 2 - Spend the day exploring the town on foot or on cycles. The sunset with the royal cenotaphs in the foreground is a sight not to be missed.

## KHAJURAHO (2 nights)

Day 1 - Drive to Khajuraho - a UNESCO World Heritage site - for a slice of history, temples, sculptures, erotica and Kamasutra. Stop for a home cooked lunch enroute in the private residence of a friend of Sita. Spend your afternoon admiring the stunning architecture of the temples of Khajuraho built in the 10th and 11th century. They are largest group of medieval Hindu and Jain temples in India, famous for their erotic sculptures. Day 2 - Today you may want to return to the temples of Khajuraho or spend time with the villagers of Mehalwar getting to know more about the traditional ways of farming, their culture, lifestyle and food or head out early to a rarely visited wonderful hilltop fort of Ajaigarh that has equally rich and even older temples and carvings than Khajuraho.



## MAIHAR (2 nights)

Day 1 - Maihar is famous for its Indian classical music orchestra, the Maihar Band and the Nal Tarang; a unique musical instrument made out of gun barrels. Visit the home of the Maestro Baba Allaiddin Khan who founded the Maihar Band and made the first Nal Tarang. We would be staying at an art residency sharing space with in house artists and meeting the family under whose patronage Maihar has become a heaven for artists, craft enthusiasts, writers and photographers. Day 2 - Explore the Art Residency, get to know the concept behind it and the various art installation with a friend of Sita who will take you around. We will also enjoy a private Nal Tarang performance by the Maihar Band during our stay here.

## CHITRAKOOT (1 night)

Start early to Chitrakoot today - a dreamy world of ashrams, springs and the Indian epic Ramayana. On arrival we head straight to the Gupt Godavari which are stunning rock cut caves and listen to the story about the second longest river in India - the Godavari. In the evening we witness the Aarti ceremony on the banks of the River Mandakini. Watch out for the multi-coloured boats competing with one another for the best decorated one.

## ALLAHABAD (1 night)

More famous for being the site of the Maha Kumbh Mela, the largest religious congregation in the world is held every 12 years, Allahabad is also interesting for its buildings from the British Raj, the legacy of India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Mughal Forts and Tombs. Our interesting day of sightseeing today includes a short boat ride on the River Ganga, Allahabad Fort, Alfred Park, Allahabad University, Khusro Bagh and All Saints Cathedral Church ending with the evening Aarti held at Ramghat.



## VARANASI (2 nights)

Day 1 - After driving for about 3 hours we will board our row boat near the Chunar Fort to conclude the rest of the journey sailing on the Ganges. We sail on the Ganges propelled by intermittent wind and gentle rowing. As you sail, you will come across villages, people grazing their animals, cultivation on the banks of the fertile river, fishermen and flock of migratory birds. Lunch and refreshment will be served on-board. The boat ride lasts for about 6 hours and ends at Assi Ghat, the southernmost Ghat of Varanasi. Day 2 - Start your day by visiting Sarnath, where the Buddha gave his first sermon. Later in the day visit the Benares Hindu University spread over 1350 acres and the Bharat Kala Bhavan with its outstanding collection of paintings, sculpture and textiles. Witness the evening Aarti ceremony by the River Ganga. The Hindus believe that the purifying water of the river absolves them of their sins. Day 3 - We begin our day at the break of dawn for a boat ride on the River Ganga to witness hundreds of locals and pilgrims performing age old rituals and praying to the Sun. Fly to Delhi/Mumbai in the afternoon for your onward journey.



# Faith Moves India

The Aghori Sadhus of Haridwar are devotees of the fierce manifestation of Lord Shiva and live by themselves on the fringes of society and spend their days in pursuit of moksha (liberation) from the cycle reincarnation.

Photo Credit: This photograph has been shot by Ekaterina Belova, a Sita team member.