

# Art of Travel

2023 - 2024



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**Knowledge** is based on experience, **Everything** else is just information



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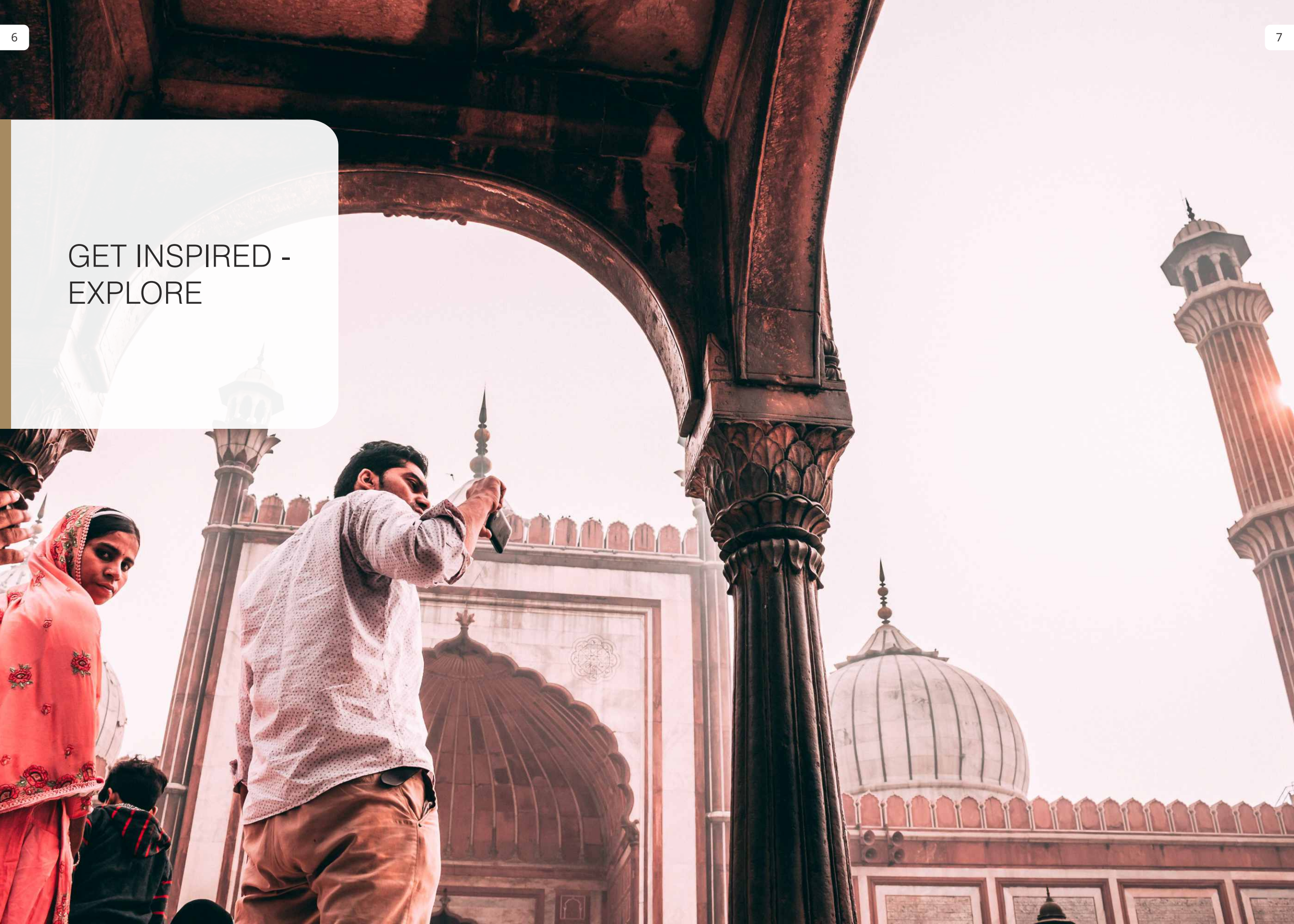
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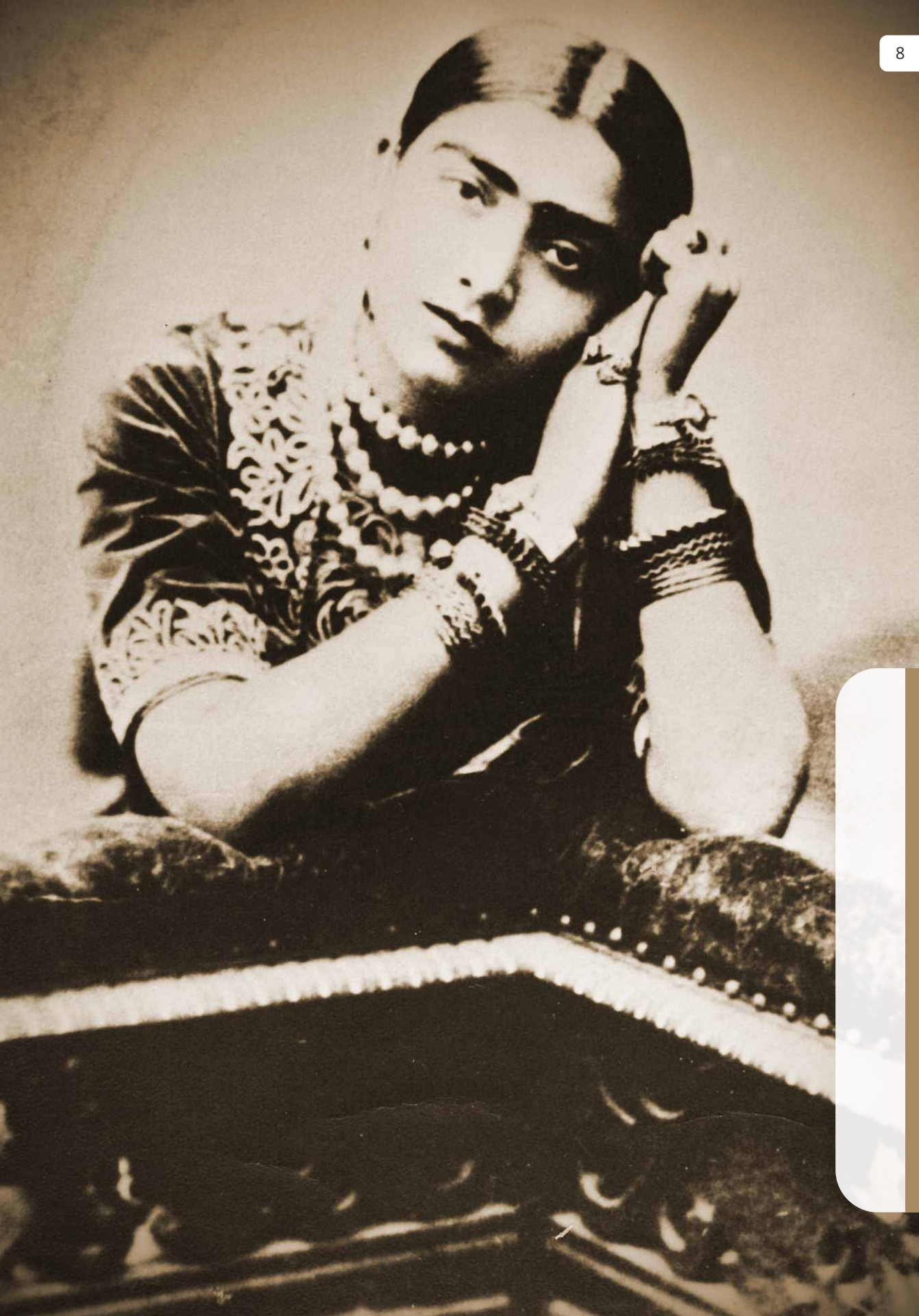
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GET INSPIRED -  
EXPLORE







## UNTOLD STORIES OF OLD DELHI

Delhi, India

Experienced by Inderjeet Rathod, Explorer, Destination Knowledge Centre

This walking tour in Old Delhi aims to dispel many misconceptions about the Tawaif (courtesan) culture prevalent in North India between the 18th and 19th centuries. During the Mughal Era, Chawri Bazar in Old Delhi used to be a promenade street with sprawling Tawaif mansions luring Kings, Nawabs, Poets, and British Sahibs to their doors. Get to know about the Kothas (residence cum performance venues of the Tawaifs) in Chawri Bazar and listen to the incredible stories of the once- celebrated Tawaifs.

Duration: 4 hrs

Best Time: All Year Round





## UNTOLD STORIES OF HUMAYUN TOMB WITH DR. SOHAIL HASHMI

Delhi, India

Experienced by Inderjeet Rathod, Explorer, Destination Knowledge Centre

The Humayun Tomb was the first mausoleum of a Mughal Emperor to be built in India using a combination of Indian and Persian architectural styles. It is a fine specimen of the classical 'char bagh' formation which is a four-square garden representing the four water courses of the paradise in the Quran. Walking with Dr. Sohail Hashmi at the Humayun's Tomb, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is like taking a history lesson on the go, with intriguing stories that no guide book will tell you.

Duration: 4 hrs

Best Time: All Year Round







## BEEJOM - AN ANIMAL SANCTUARY AND SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURAL FARM

Delhi, India

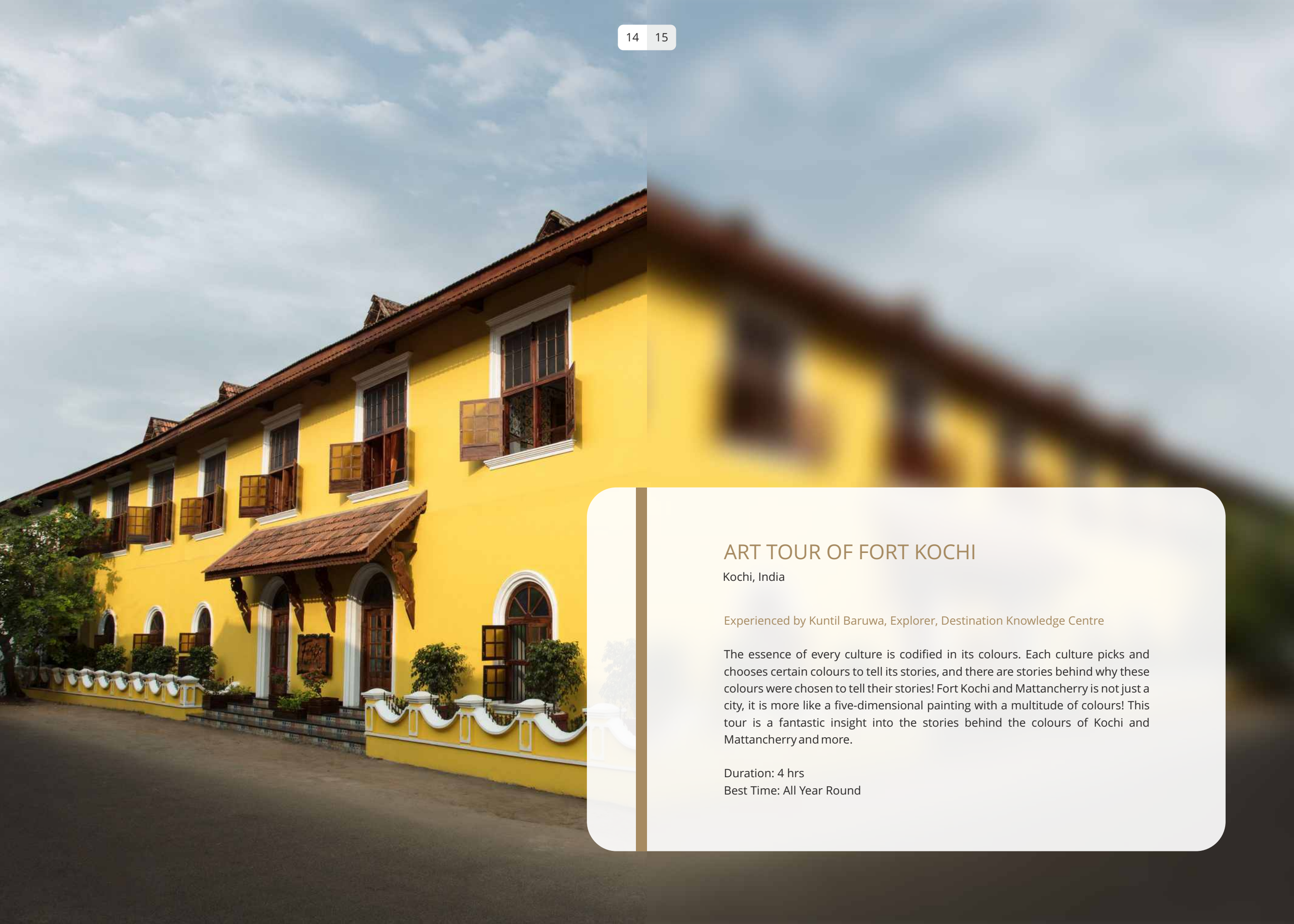
Experienced by Soma Paul, Product Manager, Destination Knowledge Centre

This is a story of a woman, a horse, and a barren land. In 2014, Aparna Rajagopal chose to live responsibly by completely altering her way of living. A lawyer by profession, an artist by nature, a self-taught farmer, and most importantly a nature lover, she accidentally found Beejom to board the lone horse she adopted. Today, Beejom is an institution promoting sustainable organic farming practices, restoring the ancient relationship between animals and farmers while promoting soil and water conservation.

Duration: Full Day

Best Time: October to March





## ART TOUR OF FORT KOCHI

Kochi, India

Experienced by Kuntal Baruwa, Explorer, Destination Knowledge Centre

The essence of every culture is codified in its colours. Each culture picks and chooses certain colours to tell its stories, and there are stories behind why these colours were chosen to tell their stories! Fort Kochi and Mattancherry is not just a city, it is more like a five-dimensional painting with a multitude of colours! This tour is a fantastic insight into the stories behind the colours of Kochi and Mattancherry and more.

Duration: 4 hrs

Best Time: All Year Round





## BENGALURU THROUGH ITS MARKETS - PETE WALK

Bengaluru, India

Experienced by Soma Paul, Product Manager, Destination Knowledge Centre

This tour offers a tasty mix of local cuisine, history, and amusing anecdotes. The story of Bangalore began in an area known as "Pete." A fortified city since its inception, Pete is a bustling market area with labyrinthine streets. As you meander through its winding, narrow, and liveliest markets, discover the unusual approach of making gold jewellery for about 40% less than the market price, enjoy a mouth-watering chutneypudi dosa at a local café, and much more.

Duration: 5 hrs

Best Time: All Year Round





## PRIVATE TOUR OF MoNA

Kathmandu, Nepal

Experienced by Kuntal Baruwa, Explorer, Destination Knowledge Centre

Led by an art curator, this is a private tour of the Museum of Nepali Art (MoNA) in Kathmandu, Nepal. It houses more than 300 pieces of Nepali artwork, exhibiting over a hundred pieces at a time. Also on display will be a few pieces of exquisite artwork from the private collection of the owner just for the occasion. Interact with local artists over drinks and dinner.

Duration: Half Day

Best Time: All Year Round





## A DAY AT UNNATI CULTURAL VILLAGE

Chitwan, Nepal

Experienced by Kuntal Baruwa, Explorer, Destination Knowledge Centre

The Unnati Cultural Village in Chitwan, Nepal showcases the arts, crafts, culture, and food of the Terai region bordering India. This half a day private visit will include a hands-on art workshop, interaction with local artists, a short film screening followed by one-on-one with Nepali change makers, and, of course, food and dance from the Terai region.

Duration: Half Day

Best Time: All Year Round





## A BHUTANESE SOIREE

Thimphu, Bhutan

Experienced by Kuntal Baruwa, Explorer, Destination Knowledge Centre

Spend the evening at an exclusive private event showcasing Bhutan's culture and history. Set in the premises of the Royal Textile Museum in the heart of the capital city of Thimphu, the event will showcase mesmerising mask dances, ancient folk songs, and dances, a performance by Bhutan's only ethnomusicologist and veteran singer, a special appearance by the popular actors of the small but growing Bhutanese Film Industry and a textile fashion show by the Bhutanese youth.

Duration: 3 hrs

Best Time: All Year Round





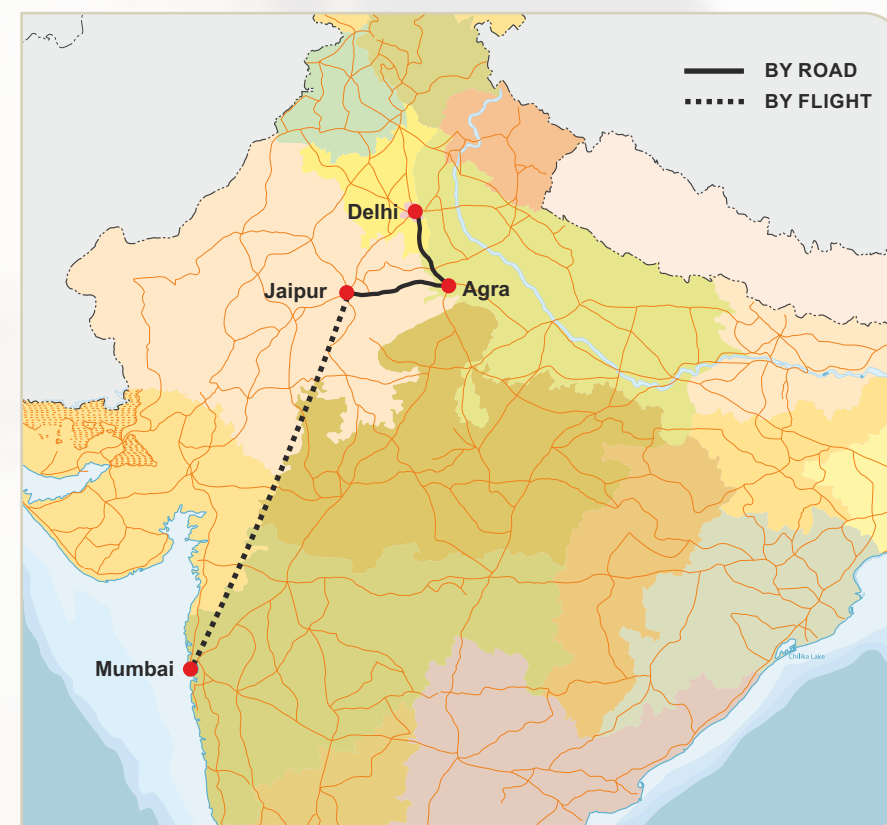
FIXED  
DEPARTURES



Discover India and her beautiful culture through the eyes of two women who have deep reverence and love for it. See a different aspect of this colourful country unfurl before your eyes as you embark on a journey through some of the most interesting destinations in the country. This tour is curated to give you an intimate glance into the heritage, art, architecture, traditions, and cuisines of India that you will not find in any tourist guidebook. Your tour is led by two vivacious women with years of experience in travel, heritage, and art of India and abroad. They are passionate about travel and they will enchant you with interesting anecdotes from their own experiences. There is no lull in excitement when you travel with us!

Dates: September 10 to 20, 2024

Itinerary Routing: Delhi - Agra - Jaipur - Mumbai



THROUGH HER EYES





#### Highlights of the Tour

- Enjoy the company of your Tour Host Lovleen Sagar who is an avid traveller, a history enthusiast, a master of bespoke experiences, and a people person.
- Seema Srivastava, the Tour Leader of the group who is an artist, an art historian, a cultural theorist, and a professor will enlighten you about the 'Art and Culture of India' on the tour.
- Enjoy our Wedding Tour in Delhi to gain an insight into the must-do lists for the bride and groom-to-be.
- Explore the local bazaars of Jaipur to see craftsmen producing and selling fine forms of local art and craft.
- Try your hands on Miniature Painting in Jaipur - a timeless world of art, depicted on an impossibly small scale with incredible detailing.
- Enjoy a cooking demonstration in Jaipur where the hosts make you feel at home with their sense of humour.
- Get up at the crack of dawn in Mumbai for an exclusive peek into the underbelly of the city, and have an insight into what makes this magnificent city tick.
- In Mumbai go for a hands-on 'Zine Workshop' facilitated by a Zine artist and carry the Zine that you have created as a souvenir back home.
- Shake a leg in a Bollywood dance workshop.
- Enjoy a cocktail-making workshop at an urban gastro-pub in Mumbai.
- Savour the thrill of a Dabbawallah-style lunch just like the locals do.

Please [click here](#) to access the detailed e-brochure.





## SAILING ON THE BRAHMAPUTRA

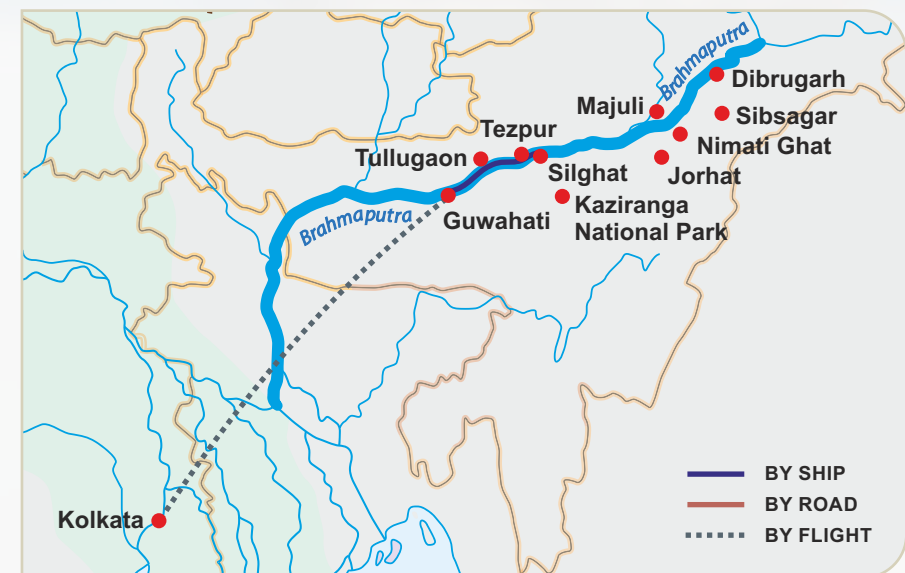
Our selection of boutique river cruises on the Brahmaputra is comfortable, contemporary, and celebratory of Assam's rich regional heritage. They are designed to reflect a sense of homecoming to North East India: the unique objects d'art and handicrafts aboard the ship have been carefully collected and curated over the years, the locally made furniture and textiles are a product of traditional craftsmanship and modern design intervention. Imagine not having to unpack every few nights and yet, the scenery changes every day and so does the stories!!

### About The Cruise Ship

ABN Charaidew II has 18 cabins: 02 spacious deluxe double-bedded cabins and 12 Twin / double-bedded cabins on the upper deck, and 04 cabins with a queen bed each on the main deck. All cabins have en suite bathrooms, a writing desk and chair, a mini-fridge, individual climate control, and storage space. The standard cabins have French balconies, while the two deluxe cabins have private balconies.

### Fixed Departures

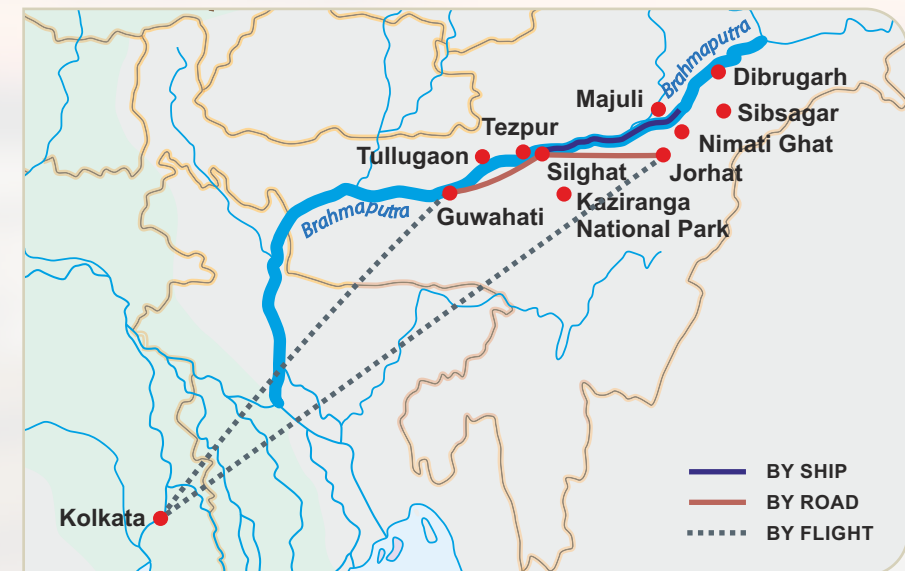
1. RHINO & MORE: 09 Nights / 10 Days  
 Dates: 18 January 2024 to 27 January 2024  
 Itinerary Routing: Kolkata to Silghat







2. RIVER ISLAND CRUISE: 09 Nights / 10 Days  
 Dates: 25 January 2024 - 03 February 2024  
 Itinerary Routing: Kolkata to Jorhat



#### Highlights

- Himalayan river cruising experience through one of the richest biodiversity zones in the world.
- Unique topography and natural history of one of India's last remaining untamed rivers.
- Flora and Fauna of the Brahmaputra Valley, home to 7 national parks and 18 wildlife reserves.
- Indigenous Tribal cultures.
- Unique Monastic and Tantric culture of Assam.
- Largest tea-producing region of India.
- Cultural performances and handicrafts.
- Conscious Luxury with 5% of every booking going towards education, environmental protection efforts, and rural community development.

Please [click here](#) to access the detailed e-brochure.



## DESTINATION INSIDER





A photograph of a lioness and her cub in a dry, savanna-like environment. The lioness is in the background, slightly out of focus, and the cub is in the foreground, looking towards the camera. The ground is covered in dry grass and small plants.

## GIR NATIONAL PARK

Experienced by by Lovleen Sagar, Senior Vice President, Distant Frontiers

Gir's rich biodiversity, success in conservation, and pride in being the last bastion of the Asiatic lion make it an exceptional destination. This patch of forest on the Western edge of India sees a curious coexistence of man and beast, tribal and ranger. With the reopening of Keshod airport and the emergence of numerous boutique properties, Gir has gained popularity as a luxury destination for wildlife enthusiasts.

I had the opportunity to experience Gir in May last year before the park shut down in June. The monsoon season had not yet begun and the greens had dulled to a uniform shade of arid brown. This barren canvas made it far easier to spot the animals.

There are two ways to fly in. The closest airport is in a small rustic town called Keshod which has one airline (Alliance Air) flying thrice a week - on Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays, from Mumbai only. The drive from Keshod to Gir is about two and a half hours. The roads are fantastic and there is hardly any traffic. It is so quaint that wildlife just floats in and out of the airport; I saw a Blue Bull grazing in the front yard of the airport.

The other and more popular option to fly in is via Rajkot which has better flight connectivity to most major cities of India. However, the drive from Rajkot to Gir is much longer, about 4 hours. Though, the road conditions are excellent.

If you are doing an all-Gujarat tour, then Gir just fits in well with the all-drive-through cultural tour, otherwise, you could combine it with an all-wildlife tour flying in either from Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan or Mumbai / Delhi.

One of the luxury properties to come up in this area is Aramness, where I stayed, a safari lodge located on the fringes of the Gir National Park that captures the spirit of Gujarat.

**Aramness** at Gir is an **all-suite property with private plunge pools in each suite**, bordering the jungle. You feel one with nature in a very organic, understated way and not overwhelmed by its luxury. The suites or rather Kothis (small houses) are very spacious with traditional design elements woven





seamlessly with modern sensibilities. The couple who designed the & Beyond Lodges (Nicholas Plewman Architects and Fox Browne Creative) were roped in for their expertise and the aesthetics speak volumes for them.

I loved the **architecture** and little elements of design taken from nature and the surroundings, weaving traditional ethnic Gujarati styles with it. The lattice work on a wall in the reception is actually the patterns of a dried leaf!

Little things like the coasters in the rooms, notes on what to expect in the safaris, birds & animals check-lists, and hand-embroidered table napkins are so well done that you almost want to take them as souvenirs. Little pieces of art!

The property is ideal for individual travellers and small groups. Each Kothi comes with a dedicated attendant who ensures your well-being throughout your stay.

**The library** is a quiet space brimming with vintage books of all kinds overlooking the gardens. The library can be booked for private dinners. The antiquated look almost makes it out to be a set from a Harry Potter film.

**Food** has been curated by Kamini Patel, who is also the brand guardian. Again, elements of traditional Gujarati food mixed with modern world cuisine present a surprisingly varied palate. I loved their baked eggs for breakfast. Even the Thali was rather unique. One must remember that Gujarat is a dry state but you can carry your own liquor and it won't be a problem.

**Naturalists** form an important aspect of any wildlife lodge and Aramness seems to have nailed it with three very experienced professionals. One is an avid photographer and has a busy Instagram handle.

The **Spa experience** was also very nice! The menu is elaborate with Swedish, Balinese, and Ayurveda on offer.

Some of the **experiences** include a picnic high tea in the wilderness, which was my favourite; conversations about a lion roaming those lands made it very exotic. Meeting the traditional Maldhari community who almost live with the lions was also fun. Watched them milk a cow, saw their home, and interacted with them about the man/lion conflict. There are some more activities like cooking with the chef, nature walks, birding, etc. that could fill in your evenings.

The Safari experience was absolutely wonderful and gratifying, having seen 3 Lions, 2 Lionesses, and a pride with 5 cubs in just one safari! The jeeps owned by the lodge are custom-made and state-of-the-art, although, for entry into the park, one has to use the park-provided jeeps. The lodge's naturalists accompany you on the safari along with the park-provided one.

Other than the main national park, there is also a smaller park that is fenced all around, housing the rescued, troubled, and problematic lions. The park is called Devalia Park and they also have safaris. The safaris are in canters and jeeps that have iron cages for you! So, you are in a caged vehicle while the lions roam free in a fenced park. Funny but a sure way to see lions if you must!

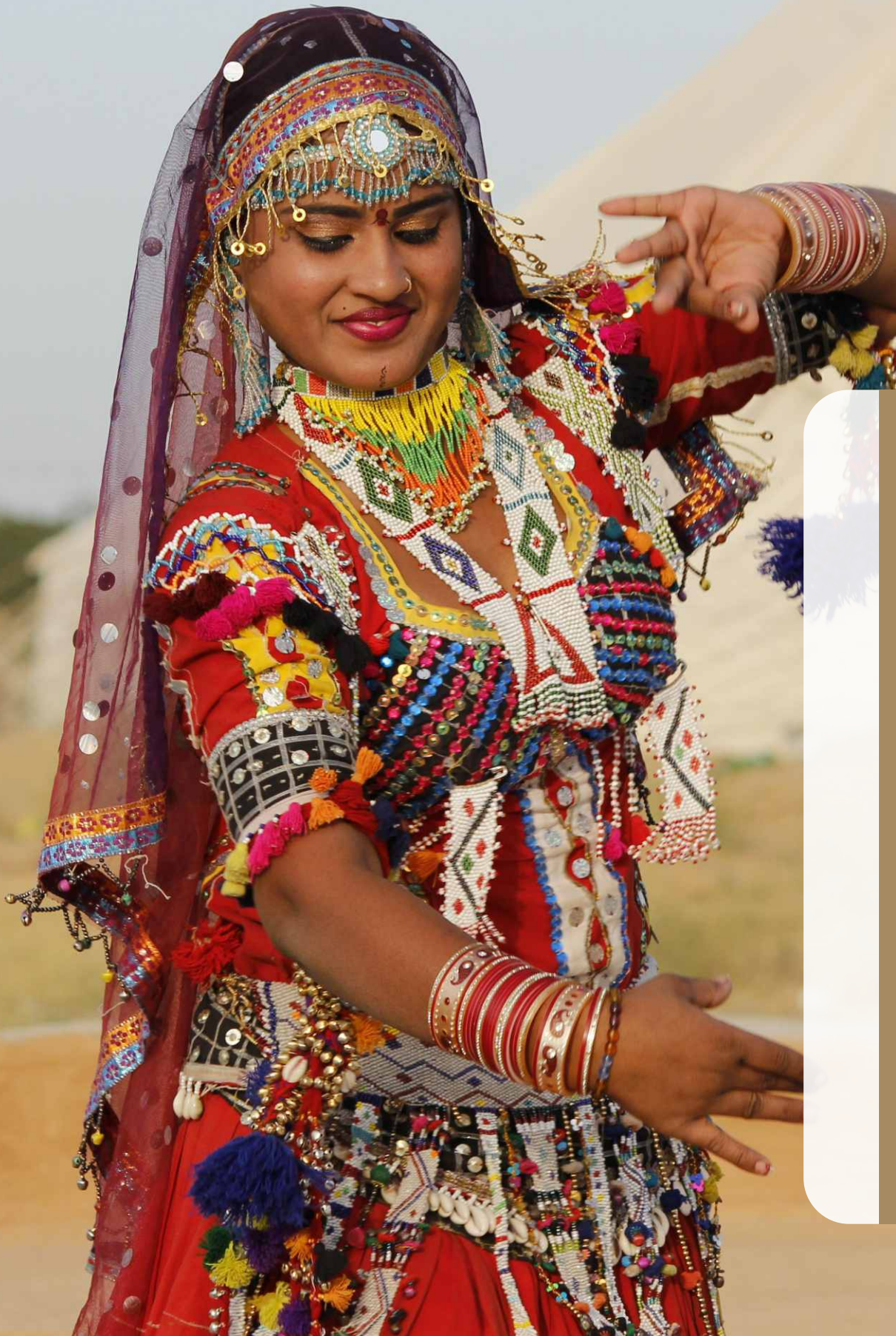
Please [click here](#) to access the detailed e-brochure.



# STORIES FROM INDIA







## DANCE

### From Rajasthan to Spain - The Romani Roots of Flamenco

Did you know that anthropologists and historians believe that the origins of the Flamenco dance lay in the faraway deserts of Rajasthan?

It is believed that Flamenco music and dance came with the migrating Romani peoples from the deserts of Rajasthan who travelled through Spain on their way to Hungary in the 15th century CE. Similarities between the folk dances of Rajasthan, the classical dance of Kathak, and Flamenco are undeniable even to the untrained eyes!

Historically speaking, the Romani people are believed to have originated in India and they then migrated to Europe through Spain, crossing Andalusia, Germany, and Hungary. They took with them their rich and colourful culture, heritage, songs, and dances, one of which evolved into what we know today as Flamenco.

There are also striking similarities in the pirouettes and feet and hand movements of Kathak, the Indian classical dance, and Flamenco. The flare of the costumes, the sheer energy of both dance forms, and so much more bind the Indian subcontinent culturally with the distant shores of Europe for centuries.





## MUSIC

### Jewish Folk Songs of Kerala

What makes Judaism in Kerala very unique is the role played by women. Unlike many traditional Jewish communities, the Jewish women of Kerala were educated, and sang together with men in the synagogues, at the Shabbat family table, and in functions such as marriages. In fact, there is an extensive repertoire of folk songs once sung exclusively by Jewish women of Kerala. They are now preserved in the Jewish Music Research Center at the Hebrew University in Israel. Apart from Biblical narratives, most of these songs in Malayalam, the native language of Kerala, are about how their ancestors arrived by sea and were given land and material by the King to build the synagogues. These songs, sung during weddings and festive occasions were composed and preserved in small notebooks. It was passed down by the mothers to their daughters when they got married. This speaks volumes about literacy in general and the high status of women in particular. 32 such notebooks are now preserved in the Ben-Zvi Institute of Jerusalem.



## ARCHITECTURE

### Temples, Sculptures, and Kamasutra

The art and architecture involved in the construction of a Hindu temple are well defined in the ancient Indian treatise on temple construction called 'Shilpa Shastra'. It mentions three styles of temple architecture – 'Nagara' or the Northern style, 'Dravida' or the Southern style, and 'Vesara' or the mixed style. Khajuraho Temples are built according to Nagara-style Hindu temple architecture focusing on the tall tapering tower (Shikhara) resembling a mountain peak; they are built on a raised platform (Jagati); an entrance porch (Ardha Mandapa) which leads to a hall (Mandapa) and a bigger hall (Maha Mandapa) used for public rituals such as dancing and music; the symmetric repeating structures of Mandapas leads to a foyer (Antarala) which finally connects to the main sanctum (Garbha Griha – or the sanctum sanctorum) where the deity resides. The spire (Shikhara) just above the main sanctum is topped with a pot (Kalash) rising above the shrine.

The temples of Khajuraho are a representation of the life of an ordinary man; the erotic sculptures are concentrated on the lower levels, and as you go higher, they turn from sexual to sensual and ultimately to sublime in a spiritual sense.



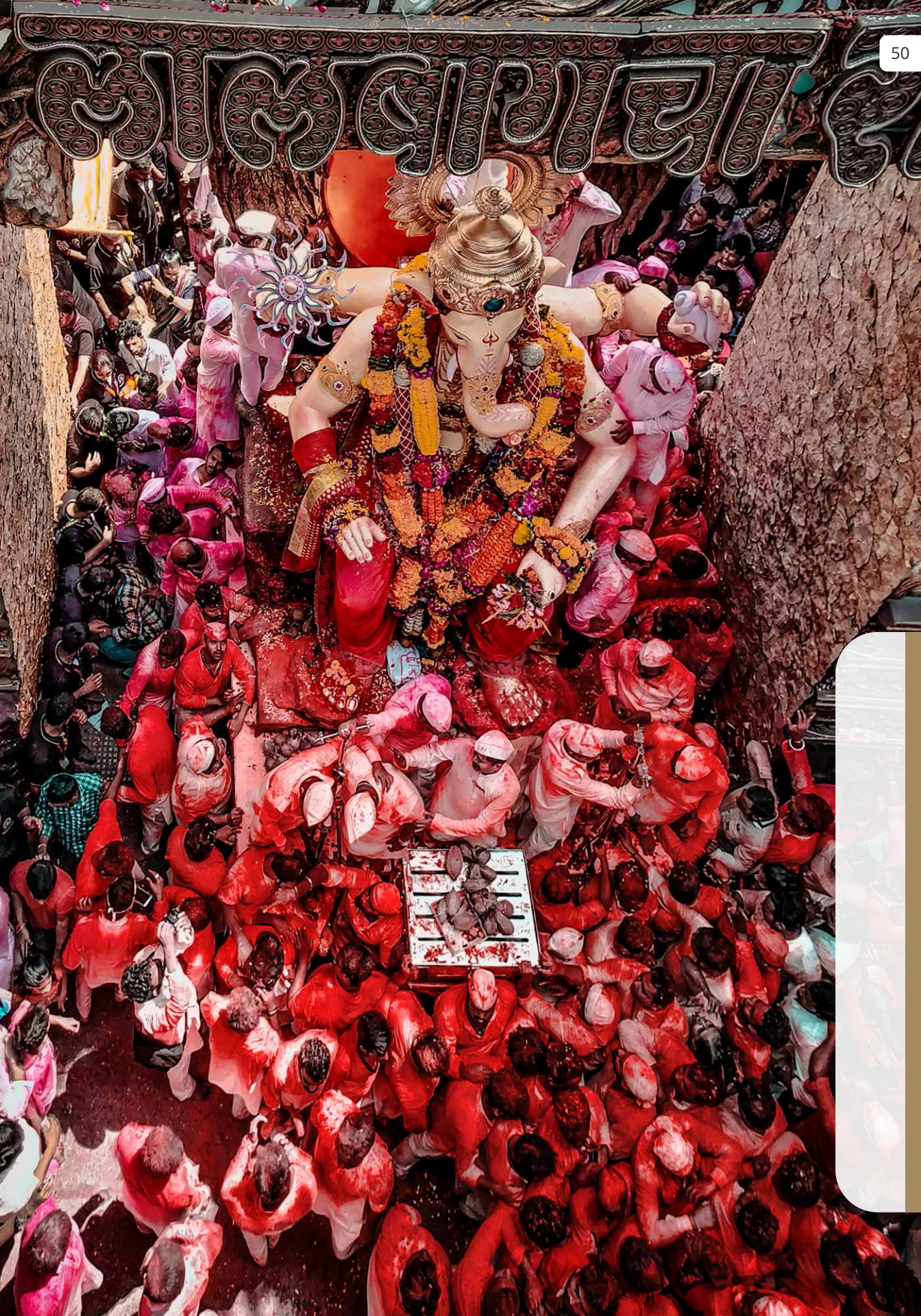


## ART

### Madhubani – A forest of honey

Madhubani, an intricate art form indigenous to the namesake place in the state of Bihar in eastern India has been preserved for centuries and passed down by every mother to her daughter as a legacy. What makes it unique is the identity of every painting is based on the instinct of the artist. In a region where women struggle to earn a place in society, Madhubani art gives a way to express themselves. Almost every home in Madhubani has an artist and a massive painted wall, making the hamlet no less than an open-air museum. The rural and religious motifs are slowly being replaced by socio-economic themes like sustainability, women empowerment, and child welfare. Glimpses of this intricate art can be seen at the National Craft Museum and Sanskriti Museum in Delhi.





## FESTIVALS

### Ganesh Chaturthi

Ganesh Chaturthi is one of the most popular festivals celebrated with great fanfare in the state of Maharashtra. Commemorating the birth of the elephant-headed Hindu deity Ganesha, the festival is celebrated for ten days during the months of August – September. Lord Ganesha is hailed as the giver of knowledge, wisdom, prosperity, and good fortune. The households celebrate the festival by installing an idol of Lord Ganesha and worshipping it for over ten days. The houses are cleaned and the idol is brought in with the family members chanting religious hymns. The festival ends with the 'Ganesh Visarjan' ritual where the idol is immersed in the water; it is done as a procession with a huge crowd accompanying the idol along with a lot of music and dance.





## CUISINE

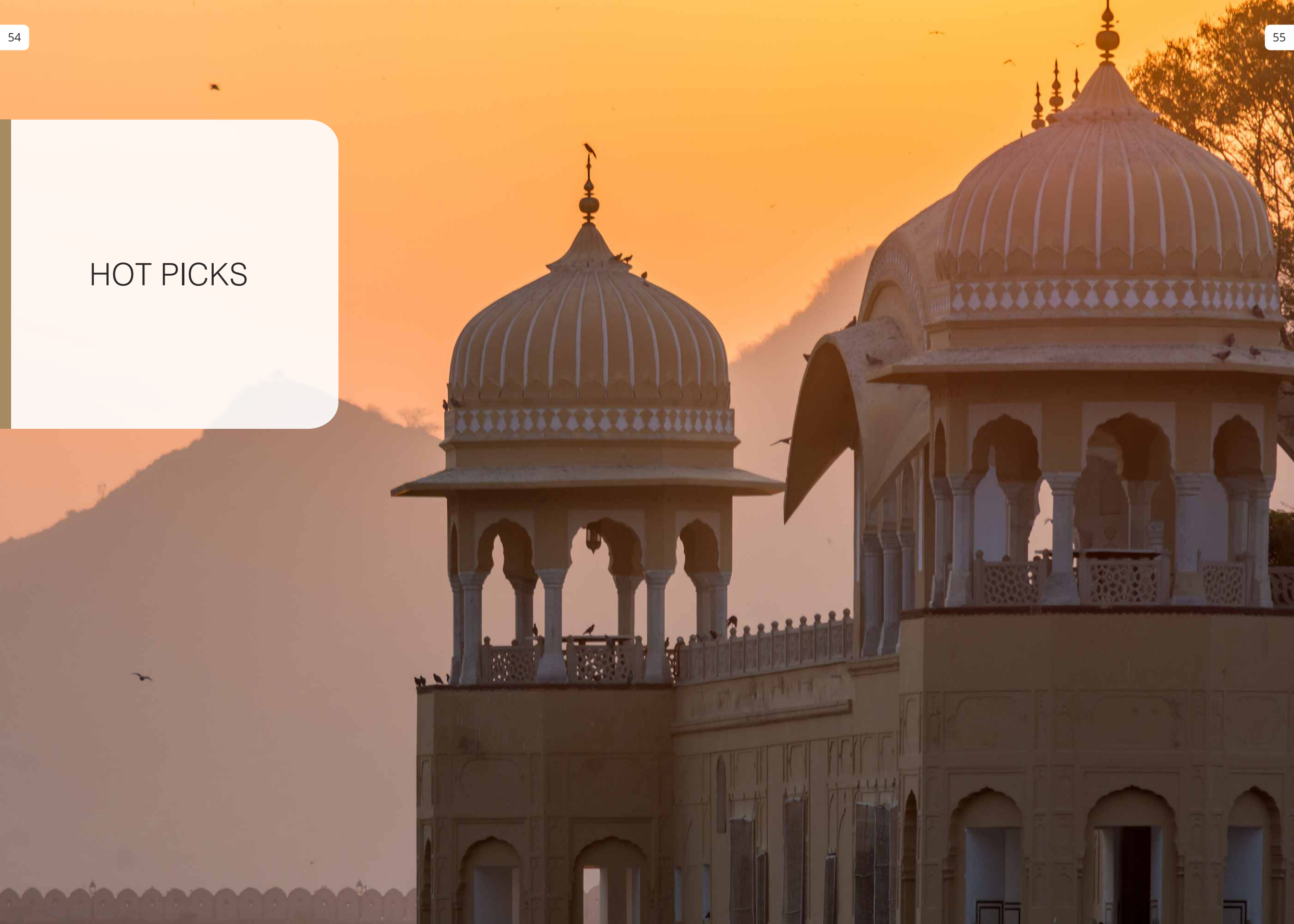
### Tandoor - The Ancient Clay Oven

If Italy has its wood-fired brick ovens and Pizza, India has its Tandoor and Tandoori style of cooking. Charred, smoky flavours mark the essence of India's Tandoori food which originated in its north and northwestern region, now a pan-India and global favourite.

Just like the brick ovens excavated in Pompeii, also the birthplace of Pizza, the Tandoor was found amongst the ruins of the Indus Valley, a Bronze Age Civilisation thus making it an ancient culinary technique. Mesopotamians and ancient Egyptians also used it in different forms. The modern-day Tandoor of India as we know it, however, came with the Mughals. During the reign of Jahangir, a portable version of the Tandoor clay oven was invented to satiate the need of the emperor to be served Tandoori food wherever he travelled.

The importance of the Tandoor, however, goes beyond a simple cooking technique in Sikh history where it was propagated as a community cooking equipment (Sanjha Chulha) to maintain goodwill and remove class and caste barriers.





HOT PICKS





## KANER RETREAT

Jodhpur, Rajasthan

Kaner Retreat is an ode to the Thar Desert and the life that it sustains. The brainchild of Sapna Bhatia, it is the first desert botanical resort nestled in a tranquil hamlet of Dera village close to the sacred grove on the Jodhpur-Jaisalmer highway. Each villa is designed after a native flower and features a private courtyard for guests to unwind. A Mediterranean lunch at the olive farm, a nature walk led by Sapna, a jeep safari across the desert wilderness, and other exclusive, and regional experiences are available to guests. The idea of creating just 10 rooms on a 7-acre land was guided by the conscious decision of avoiding any burden on the local resources and environment; while ensuring that guests could have an exclusive, intimate, and local experience of the Thar Desert.



## DILEEP KOTHI

Jaipur, Rajasthan

Dileep Kothi is the family home of the erstwhile Royal family of Barli. The 16th generation of the royal family has lovingly refurbished this private residence to capture the essence of its illustrious past, present, and future. An all-suite stay with six spacious living spaces nestled in the charming neighbourhood of Pink city. The luxury homestay is close to the famous attractions of Jaipur. Each luxurious suite provides the ideal blend between the traditional and the contemporary. On prior request, the family can organise a specially curated private dining experience from their Royal Kitchen exclusively for our guests.





## RANN RIDERS BY KAAFILEA

Dasada, Gujarat

Situated in a tranquil rural setting near Dasada Village, this eco-village resort, now completely renovated, is a green sanctuary on the edge of the Little Rann of Kutch. The twenty-five cottages, whose style is reminiscent of the local Bajania Kooba dwellings and the Rabari shepherds' bhunga structures, have been divided into three categories. With its primary focus on nature and wildlife, Rann Riders serves as an ideal base to explore the Little Rann with its rich and unique flora and fauna - including the highly endangered Asiatic Wild Ass



## DRENMO LODGE

Drass, Ladakh

Opening its door in April 2023, the Drenmo Lodge experience is woven around the magnificent Himalayan Brown Bear. Situated in the second coldest inhabited region in the world - Dras, Ladakh, it is the first-ever dedicated wildlife lodge in western Ladakh. Warm and inviting rooms that have been thoughtfully renovated with contemporary amenities and classic architectural details are the perfect place to unwind after spending long hours outdoors watching Bears and other wildlife of the region. A local team with a decade of field experience will ensure that guests have the best time while exploring the great outdoors and a comfortable and memorable stay at this three-room lodge. The Drenmo Lodge will be open from April to November every year.





## ARTH

Lohardaga, Jharkhand

Arth is a secluded hideaway nestled amidst picturesque scenery, varied wildlife, rolling hills, and serene water. This four-suite cottage is lovingly handmade by the natives from natural materials in an inimitable style. Here, guests can savour a range of cuisines, starting from authentic dishes to international food prepared using locally sourced ingredients. And of course, there are exciting activities to choose from, offering something for everyone – be it an adventure, nature, culinary experiences, or hands-on workshops. Visit and surprise yourself!!



## TIMILO BOUTIQUE

Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh

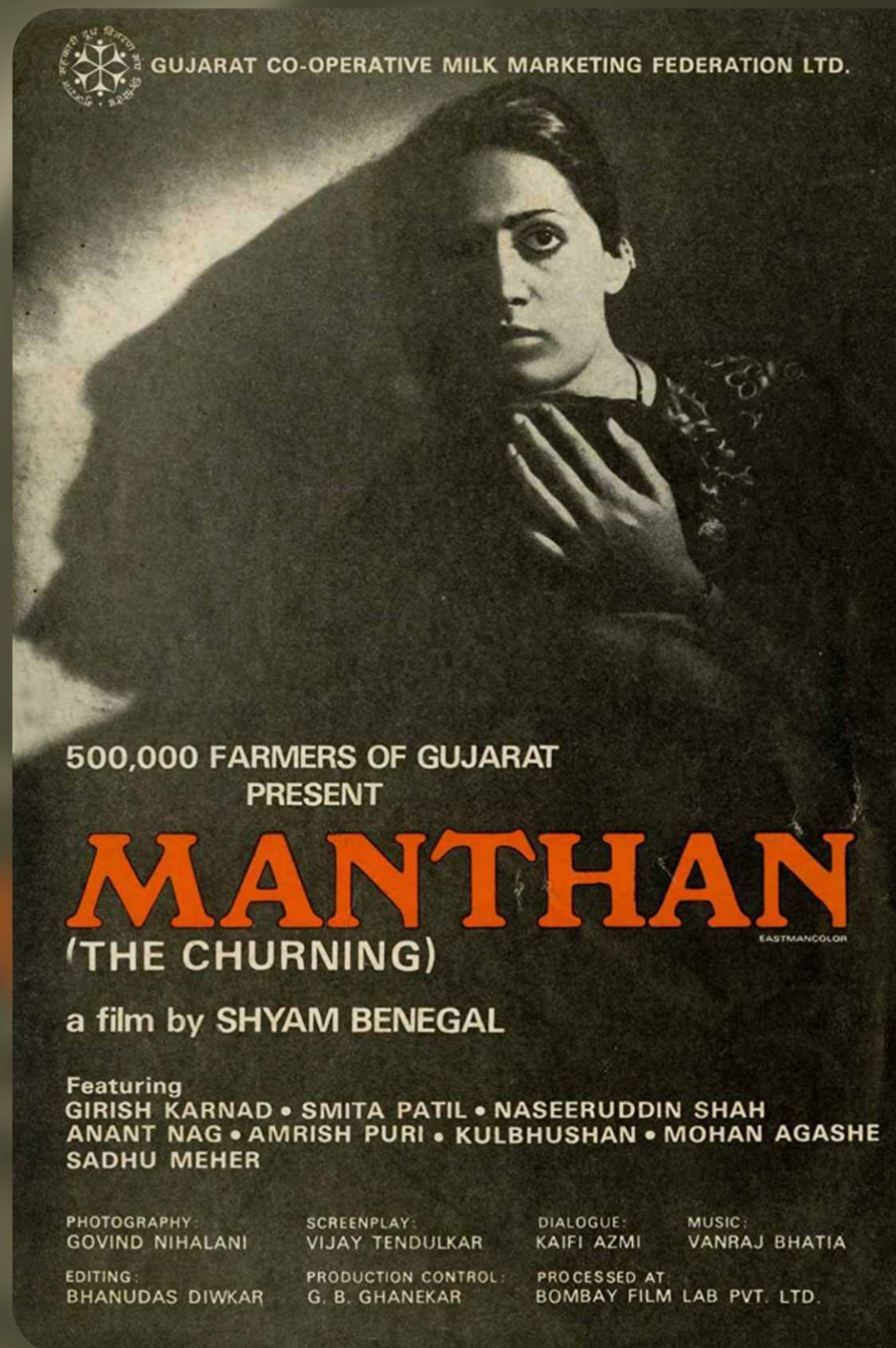
Timilo Boutique is nestled in the midst of panoramic views of the Himalayan mountain ranges on the outskirts of the remote town of Tawang in Western Arunachal Pradesh. With no more than 08 luxurious rooms, the hotel is a perfect place to relax in the lap of nature and enjoy pristine snow-clad views of the Sela Pass. The Buddhist town of Tawang is home to the revered Tawang Monastery, one of the largest outside Tibet's capital Lhasa, and is the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Gyatso. The current Dalai Lama after fleeing Tibet post the Chinese occupation entered India through Tawang and reached the plains of Assam crossing the Sela Pass.



BOOKS, FILMS  
AND PODCASTS  
WE LOVED







## MANTHAN

Directed by Shyam Benegal

Reviewed by Inderjeet Rathod, Explorer, Destination Knowledge Centre

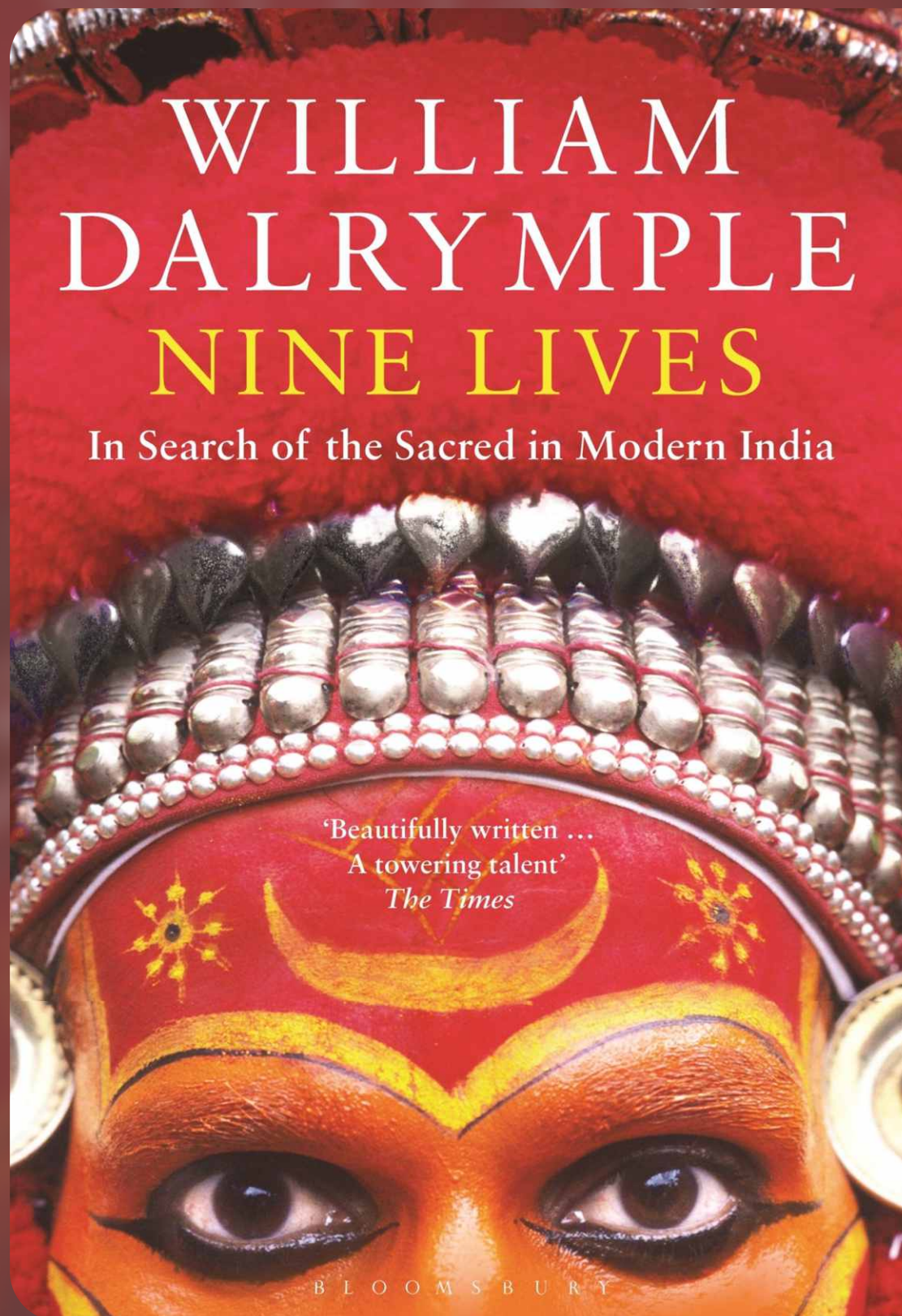
Manthan (meaning 'The Churning') is an iconic film directed by Shyam Benegal, one of the founding members of Indian parallel cinema. The story of the film is inspired by the pioneering milk cooperative movement of Verghese Kurien, the father of the White Revolution in India

The film depicts the experiences of a young Veterinary Doctor, Manohar Rao, who is posted to a remote village in Gujarat to set up a Milk Cooperative Society. The majority of the villagers, who are from a low caste, sell their milk to a privately owned dairy that pays them a meagre price. By explaining to the villagers that a cooperative society will get them higher earnings and also improve their socio-economic status, Manohar Rao and his team of three other members upset all existing socio-economic equations in the village. This is obviously met with a lot of mistrust and scepticism from all sides and creates a churning of sorts — the lower caste community members are afraid that the society will be taken over by the upper caste; the dairy businessman is afraid he'll face losses in his business and gradually lose his reputation in the village; the Sarpanch (Village Head) wants to take advantage of the churning to win an election. The film meticulously details how Manohar Rao and his team try to break through the age-old socio-economic structure, despite many obstacles.

It is an iconic film for multiple reasons. Firstly, it is a stellar cast with some of the best actors in Indian parallel cinema. Secondly, the director and the technicians have meticulously highlighted rural Gujarat, its landscape, its socio-economic structure, and its culture in a very artistic way. Thirdly, the film was crowd-funded by about 500,000 dairy farmers of Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation Ltd for the benefit of the rest of India to adopt cooperative milk production.

Please [click here](#) to watch this film on YouTube.





## NINE LIVES

In Search of the Sacred in Modern India by William Dalrymple

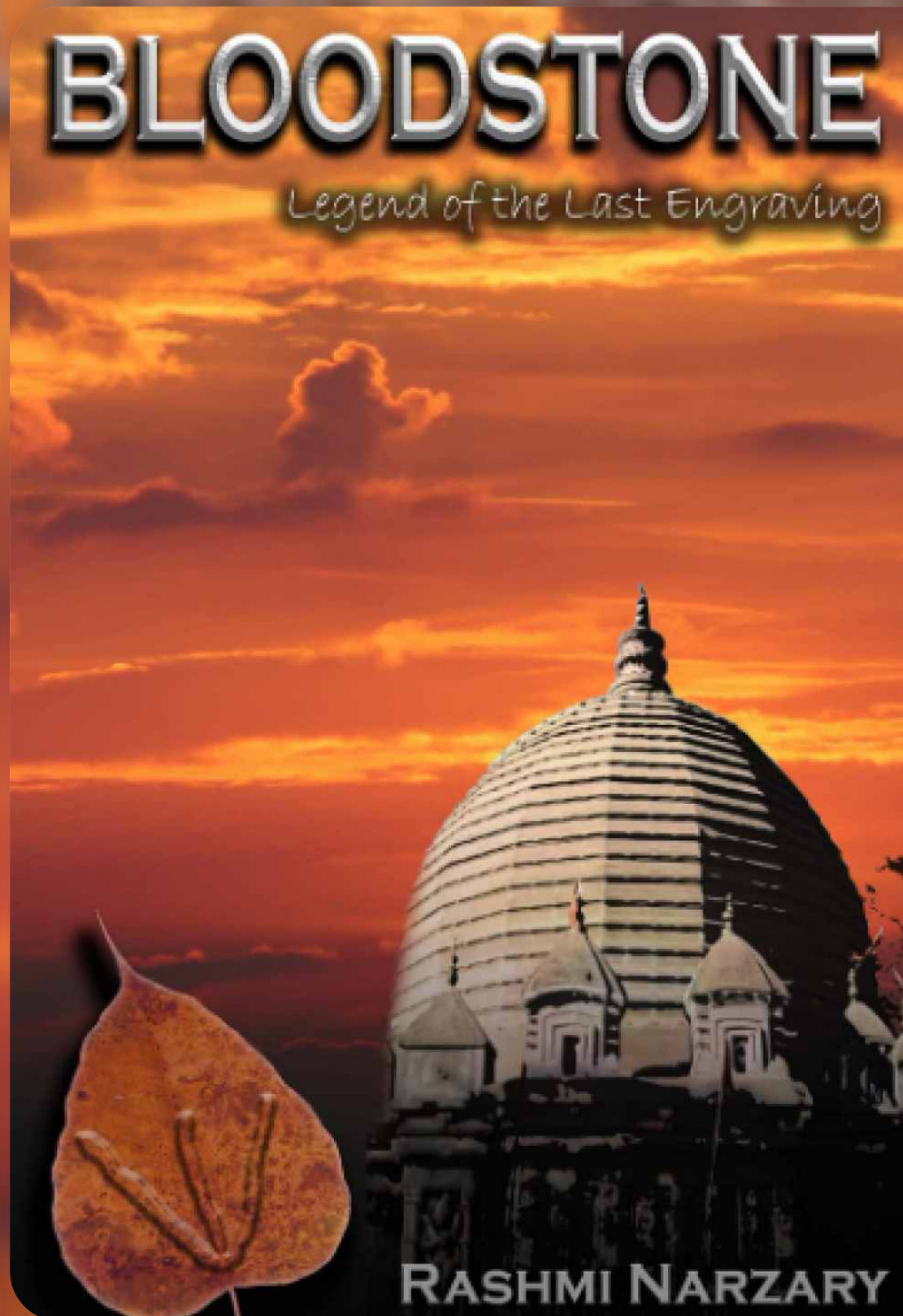
Reviewed by Soma Paul, Product Manager, Destination Knowledge Centre

India has surpassed the United Kingdom to take over as the fifth-largest economy in the world and is on the verge of overtaking Japan to become the third-largest. In a country that is fast transforming, the true pearls of wisdom can be found when you dig a little deeper and look past the obvious discrepancies. And it is interesting to know that the diverse and syncretic Indian subcontinent offers a stupefying spectrum of surviving sects and rituals at a time when religion is fast becoming more conformist and intolerable.

When William Dalrymple authored *From the Holy Mountains*, he set out to write an Indian equivalent of his work. However, after digging deep and meeting these extraordinary people, he made the decision to write *Nine Lives* in a slightly different way. A well-builder cum prison warden who is worshipped as a part-time god between December and February; a female mystic who inhabits a cremation ground at one of the holiest places in India, drinks from skulls; a Tibetan monk who takes up arms to defend the Buddhist faith, a storyteller who keeps alive a four-thousand line sacred epic and a few other intriguing subjects. These are not characters in lurid fiction, but a sample of the devotees William Dalrymple encountered in his absorbing *"Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India."* An exquisite, mesmerising book that distills the author's twenty-five years of travel in India, taking us deeply into ways of life we might otherwise never have known existed.

I find the stories surprising, grotesque, and they are supported by pertinent and interesting history and generous knowledge. Dalrymple's interaction with these nine interesting people has answered many questions that people are always curious to know. The narratives Dalrymple unearths show the continuity of long-standing customs in intriguing and even deeply touching ways. This is the India we seldom see, populated by obscure people whose lives are made vivid by their eloquent struggles and reckless piety. A beautiful travelogue that captures both place and spirit!





## BLOODSTONE

Legend of the Last Engraving by Rashmi Narzary

Reviewed by Kuntal Baruwa, Explorer, Destination, Knowledge Centre

During the Summer Solstice, the Kamakhya Temple in the Nilachal Hills of Guwahati, in Northeast India celebrates the unique festival of Ambubachi Mela. Devotees believe that the Mother Goddess menstruates during this time. Whilst to believers it is a celebration of the menstruation of Goddess Kamakhya, the festival at the onset of monsoon is an homage to the fertility of Mother Nature which comes alive with the rains. With the Ambubachi Mela cancelled for two consecutive years during the pandemic, Rashmi Narzary, the author of "Bloodstone – Legend of the Last Engraving" had said "I just hope what I had penned as a work of fiction does not come true but at times fable takes over facts and at other times, facts are so fascinating that they are mistaken for fable"

Narzary's "Bloodstone – Legend of the Last Engraving" is a riveting read against the backdrop of the Ambubachi Mela where she brilliantly weaves the legends of Goddess Kamakhya with the story of a Newar family in Nepal where the Mother Goddess is equally revered and worshipped. While I wouldn't like to give out much, the plot of the book revolves around a copper engraving etched by a Princess in Nepal while mourning the death of her only friend. Centuries later, the engraving is unearthed threatening to alter prehistoric beliefs. "Bloodstone – Legend of the Last Engraving" is impeccably researched. Rashmi Narzary's personal experience is evident whilst she brings alive the rituals and the energy of the Ambubachi Mela. "Part of the story developed as answers to some of my own questions and honestly, it did not strike me then that I was writing a fictional work on a Goddess who has such a huge influence, not only on me but people across the region and beyond," Narzary said.

"Bloodstone – Legend of the Last Engraving" is a fascinating story of motherhood and human faith that has also inspired research papers on gender studies. A must-read, which leaves more for the reader to imagine and savour, long after, the legend of the bloodstone reveals itself.





## EMPIRE

A history podcast hosted by William Dalrymple and Anita Anand

Reviewed by Madhubanti Rakshit

Are you, like me, a history buff? Are you, like me, exhausted by the daily rigmarole of life and putting off reading those hefty tomes that have been on your TBR since God-knows-when? Well, allow me to let you in on my secret... of how I indulge my love of the bygone days and escape to the past with just a few clicks on my phone and a pair of good earphones.

I'm talking about a podcast, of course. But not just any podcast. This one is very close to my heart because it comes from my favourite historian and author, William Dalrymple. It's called Empire, and he hosts it with fellow writer and historian, Anita Anand. The conversations between Dalrymple and Anand, two facets of India's colonial legacy, offer a balanced and often enlightening glimpse into a much-debated chapter of history. Excerpts from their books – letters from Ghalib giving break-up advice to his friend, an Indian princess-turned-suffragette, and much more – keep you hooked and wanting more.

Series One of the podcast is dedicated to the history of the British in India, starting with the rise of The East India Company and ending with the Indian independence. In between, various episodes of the podcast delve into notable events, artefacts, and personalities that helped shape us as a nation.

Empire offers an irresistible glimpse into India, something that you will not find in guidebooks, and may not have the time to glean from those books I mentioned earlier. Listening to the masters talking about their areas of mastery, it is easy to lose yourself in how our great-grand generation lived, and get a feel of India's richly tapestried history. My personal favourite is the set of episodes that discuss the Koh-i-Noor. Who knew the bright diamond had such a murky past.

The podcast has also got the travel bug in me curious to visit the places where, I'd like to think, I may be able to discover a portal to the past. Which places, you ask? Why don't you listen to Empire first, and then we can compare our bucket list?



# TRADITIONAL AND SUSTAINABLE







## LESSONS ON ECOLOGY FROM ZIRO VALLEY

by Kuntil Baruwa, Explorer, Destination Knowledge Centre

The Apatani tribe from Ziro Valley in Arunachal Pradesh is known for its paddy cum fish agriculture. They practice this as well as other sustainable water management techniques that allow them to coexist and thrive.

Ziro Valley, which figures in the tentative list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites as a unique cultural landscape, sits at a height of 5600 feet in Arunachal Pradesh. With every aspect of Apatani life deeply connected to the sacredness of their landscape, the traditions and systems of their everyday life and livelihoods carry great lessons on sustainable natural resource management.

Ziro is named after one of the clans that first came to the valley about 500 years ago and have since practiced permanent wet rice cultivation. While the neighbouring tribes practice shifting cultivation, the Apatanis practice a unique system of paddy cum agriculture with an intricate network of canals and channels laid across fields in the entire valley where it is believed that every object in nature is sacred. Keeping that firmly in mind, the entire farming process takes place without the use of any animals or machines. Domestic waste such as rice bran, animal excreta, decomposed straw, and remains of burnt straw after the harvest is used to enhance soil fertility and also serve as feed to the fishes. Elaborate rituals mark the advent and closure of the cultivation cycle.

It is noteworthy how the Apatanis share a deep relationship with their land, forests, water, and agriculture and use their resources judiciously. It is not just paddy and fish, but every inch of cultivable land is used to its fullest. One can see millets grown on the bunds constructed in between paddy fields. Also, as a single small river irrigates the paddy fields in the entire valley through a network of irrigation channels; the system ensures that the water is given back to the river to irrigate more fields in the valley downstream!





## TRADITIONAL FLOOR PAINTINGS OF INDIA

by Soma Paul, Product Manager, Destination Knowledge Centre

One of my fondest childhood memories of Lokkhi Puja (the festival honouring the goddess of wealth and prosperity) is the way the entire home seemed transformed. I have watched my mother handle all the preparations on her own, and one custom that she never skipped was the custom of Alpona before placing the ghot (a metal pot filled with water and topped with a coronet of mango leaves and a coconut) in front of the goddess. The little footprints painted across the floors and entrances symbolised the arrival of Goddess Lakshmi. I could always sense a joyous mood in everyone.

Alpona is a Bengali ceremonial art form that is mainly created by women of the home using a liquid paste made of rice flour on special occasions - be it festivals or weddings. Using their imaginations, women draw a range of patterns, such as a meandering trail around the house or a combination of hollow and solid geometric shapes, floral patterns, and paisleys. My grandmother taught it to my mother, who passed down the tradition to me as I had a passion for painting. When I grew up, I recall how, amid all the pandemonium, my mother would still manage to prepare me a white paste of rice flour and sneak it into my hands and say "Go! make something beautiful," with a smile on her face. I used to rush out the door and sit down to create intricate patterns, footprints, and lovely swirls covering the expanse of a porch or verandah.

An ancient tradition, this ritual of painting geometrical or free-hand motifs on floors with the fingers dates back thousands of years and various kinds of ephemeral floor paintings still thrive as traditions across India. The earliest visual traces of floor paintings are found in one of the seals of Mohenjo-Daro. There are no written instructions or books on how to draw them. The practice of this art can be therapeutic, and it allows women a chance to express themselves while simultaneously strengthening their bond as a community. Unlike framed artwork that will remain on the wall indefinitely, the art of floor painting is short-lived and as such only comes alive during major festivals. Much of this wisdom and tradition has now been lost to time. Very few people offer to teach this art formally. For an art form that unites the community, and celebrates togetherness, one can only hope that it will continue to be practiced for many decades to come.





## BHUNGAS, THE SUSTAINABLE MUD-HOUSES OF THE RANN OF KUTCH, GUJARAT

by Inderjeet Rathod, Explorer, Destination Knowledge Centre

The Kutch region of Gujarat is renowned for a particular type of mud house in the countryside known as Bhungas. These traditional mud houses, circular in shape and covered with a thatched roof are said to be climate-proof! They not only protect the inhabitants from sandstorms and cyclonic winds but also keep the interiors warm in winter and cool in summer. The most important feature of the Bhungas is that they can stay intact even in the event of an earthquake, keeping the people inside and their belongings safe.

In fact, the origin of Bhungas goes back to the devastating earthquake of 1819 in the Kutch region. Though the quake lasted only three minutes, there were multiple aftershocks all over causing considerable damage. The destruction led the people of Kutch to design circular mud houses called Bhungas, which can withstand earthquakes, and they have been in use for 200 years now.

The people of the Kutch region build these Bhungas using locally available materials like clay, bamboo, timber, etc. The walls and floor are made using clay mixed with the dung of a cow or camel or horse. A typical Bhunga has a single cylindrical-shaped room with a conical roof that is placed on two thick wooden posts across the circular walls bearing the weight of the roof. The thatched roof is built on top of the walls resting on a spiral frame using bamboo sticks to form a cone. These sticks are tied together with dried grass rope and a thick layer of grass is placed on the roof. The walls of a Bhunga are also made of bamboo sticks which are held together with dried grass ropes. Then cow dung and mud are used as the wall plaster. Wooden framed windows are set at a lower level for cross ventilation. The low-hanging roofs cover the walls against direct sunlight and add to the insulation from the environment. The exterior walls are adorned with colourful paintings while the interiors are decorated with exquisite white mud and mirror work called mattikam. This use of mirrors enhances the light inside the mud house and white clay makes it appear spacious.

Bhungas showcase the knowledge and wisdom of the people of Kutch of integrating climate, social life, crafts, and architecture in building sustainable homes for themselves to live in.



FROM OUR  
EXPLORERS'  
DIARY





## GOA OUR WAY

by Saira Vaz, Vice President, Sita Goa

### DAY 01: IN GOA

#### HALF-DAY TOUR (For guests staying in North Goa hotels)

Start with a drive to Panjim, the capital city of Goa, which is an amalgamation of the old and the new. Walk through the narrow lanes of Fontainhas to different cafes and taverns that are more than 100 years old, to savour Goan Portuguese delicacies. Thereafter take a scenic drive to Fort Aguada. End the day with a tour of Goa's first museum dedicated to alcohol and a Feni tasting session that delights the palate and makes one adore the Goan way of life! The remainder of the day is at leisure.



#### HALF-DAY TOUR (For guests staying in South Goa hotels)

The day begins with a scenic drive through the villages in South Goa. Upon arrival in Margao, proceed for a walking tour past the majestic mansions belonging to the erstwhile aristocratic Goans. Visit one of the oldest churches of Goa, the Holy Spirit Church which is more than 450 years old. During the tour listen to stories about Margao and its people. Thereafter drive to Cansaulim village to see a small chapel situated on a hill popularly called '3 Kings Chapel' or 'Our Lady of the Mont Chapel'. Locals celebrate the Feast of the 3 Kings at this site on the 6th of January every year with unique rituals. The view from here is breathtaking - the vast expanse of the Arabian Sea, and the lush green fields of Cansaulim. The remainder of the day is at leisure. Guests may want to opt for a sundowner by the seaside at Zeebop and enjoy a variety of seafood that is on offer at this shack.

### DAY 02: IN GOA

#### FULL DAY TOUR (For guests staying in both North and South Goa Hotels)

Begin the day with a drive to the town of Ponda. Start with a visit to the 400-year-old Shri Mangueshi temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva and built in the unique Goan-





style Hindu temple architecture. Continue to another famous temple – Shri Shanta Durga temple situated at the foothill of Kavalem village. After the temple tour, proceed to a Spice Plantation to learn about the various spices, fruits, and vegetables grown in Goa. A sumptuous lunch will be served here in earthenware. After the meal continue to Old Goa to witness the Portuguese heritage in its finest glory. Listen to the many stories about the beautiful churches here such as St. Cajetan Church, Se Cathedral, and St Francis Xavier at the Basilica of Bom Jesus. End your day with a scenic bicycle ride to the island of Divar which includes a ferry ride.

### DAY 03: IN GOA

#### **HALF-DAY TOUR (For guests staying in both North and South Goa Hotels)**

Today's program is dedicated to exploring the sea. It starts with an early morning drive to a boat jetty from where all the adventure begins – sailing through the sunrise; trying hands at fishing, spotting a dolphin or two, and enjoying the Arabian Sea in all its glory. Alight at a secret island and try cooking the fish caught during the fishing activity on the boat. Enjoy a sumptuous seafood lunch with local refreshments on the island. The remainder of the day is at leisure.

### DAY 04: IN GOA

#### **FULL DAY TOUR (For guests staying in both North and South Goa Hotels)**

Start the day at dawn and drive to the ferry point to go to the island of Chorao. It is one of the most prominent areas in Goa for birding. Enjoy a boat ride into the mangroves to observe the rich birdlife of the island. Later proceed to visit the Shri Devki Krishna Bhumika Mallinath temple which offers spectacular views of the island. Enjoy a delicious Goan Portuguese lunch in a heritage home. End the day with a sunset cruise on the Mandovi River.

### DAY 05: DEPART GOA

Continue to your onward destination





## DARJEELING OUR WAY

by Kuntal Baruwa, Explorer, Destination Knowledge Centre

### DAY 01: ARRIVE DARJEELING

Fly to Bagdogra from Kolkata and continue by surface to Darjeeling.

Go for a leisurely stroll in the afternoon on the Mall Road (no vehicle zone) with a storyteller. Listen to the many stories of Darjeeling, visit iconic institutions such as the Darjeeling Gymkhana, and meet interesting locals.

End your day with a visit to the Himalayan Tibetan Museum, a hidden gem which is a community-based initiative. All monies spent here go back to the Tibetan community.

Guests may opt to browse through the collection at Hayden Hall which is a fair-trade shop started by Fr. Edgar Burns, a Canadian Jesuit, in 1969 to empower the local women of Darjeeling.

### DAY 02: IN DARJEELING

Enjoy the magnificent views of Mt. Kanchenjunga during sunrise from the viewpoint at Chaurasta.

Continue with the storyteller to the Mahakal Temple, revered by both Hindus and Buddhists. This is where the story of Darjeeling began.

Post breakfast, head to the Darjeeling Railway Station and listen to the stories of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway followed by a quick visit to the replica of Nepal's Pashupati Nath Temple located nearby the station. Take the Toy Train from Darjeeling to Ghoom with the storyteller.

From Ghoom continue to a village located inside a wildlife sanctuary (cycling to the village is also possible for active guests). Walk around the village, interact with the villagers, and enjoy a simple home-cooked lunch.





The tour ends with a musical performance by the Gandharva Brothers, farmer-musicians who are keeping alive the oral traditions and stories of the Himalayas despite the many challenges.

### DAY 03: IN DARJEELING

Visit the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, the Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoological Park, and the Tibetan Refugee Centre, a centre of art and craft.

Continue with the storyteller to the Ging Tea Estate.

Walk around the tea garden; interact with the workers, and visit the factory to see how tea is processed which will be followed by a private tea-tasting session.

Lunch today will be authentic Nepali cooked by the Chef of the Ging Tea Estate.

### DAY 04: DEPART DARJEELING

Continue to your onward destination





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