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ART OF TRAVEL

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GET INSPIRED – EXPLORE

REDISCOVER RAJASTHAN





PLAYING WITH PATTERNS

In this special workshop, learn about the art of wooden block-making from a third-generation wooden carver. Walk around his workshop as he shows his work arena, awards, and his masterpieces. Co-create under his watchful eyes and inscribe a cherished memory. Take home a little piece of Rajasthan with you!

Experienced by Soma Paul, Product Manager, Destination Knowledge Centre

- Location: Rajasthan
- Duration: 3 Hours
- Experience Type: Block Making Workshop
- Skills: All age groups
- Ideal for: Single travellers, couples and a family of 4 (maximum 4 guests)
- Best time: October to March

SOMA'S COMMENTS: "Rajasthan is famous for block printed textiles, with the wooden blocks playing an important role in transforming a simple fabric into an exquisite piece of art! On my last trip to Jaipur, I discovered the ancient technique of wooden block-making. The artist conducting the workshop comes from a 400-year-old family of wooden carvers. The best part of this workshop is that after carving out a unique pattern on a wooden block, you can carry it back home as a souvenir! Although block-printing is popular all over Rajasthan, only a handful of artists delve into the art of block-making. Hence, it is very important for us to support these artists who are still earning their livelihood by keeping these disappearing art forms alive for posterity."

Get in touch with your relationship manager for more details.



FROM THE SEASIDE TO A MASTERPIECE

How can anybody carve out the sea foam? Find the answer to your question and be ready to be stunned by the artsy invention of sea-foam carving, which is unique in its own way. Experience the mysticism of this rare art form from the master artist himself and take home a unique souvenir and memories for life!

Experienced by Soma Paul, Product Manager, Destination Knowledge Centre

- Location: Rajasthan
- Duration: 3 Hours
- Experience Type: Workshop & Life skills
- Skills: All age groups
- Ideal for: Single travellers, couples and a family of 4 (maximum 4 guests)
- Best time: October to March

SOMA'S COMMENTS: "I was fascinated by the innovation of this brilliant artist who creates exquisite artwork from sea foam! Working with this medium demands immense patience and unwavering attention to detail as each intricate design requires meticulous precision. The artist's dedication shines through as he devotes weeks, and sometimes even years, to perfecting a single sea-foam art work, unveiling the extraordinary artistic value hidden within. Even his tools are a testament to his ingenuity and creativity. From humble hairpins to the sharp precision of a shaving blade, from the minute details made possible by a ball pen refill to the delicate control afforded by needles, each tool has been meticulously self-customized, and defies conventional expectations. His story of accidental creativity and dedication left me inspired."

Get in touch with your relationship manager for more details



REDISCOVER DELHI





THE BASTI SISTERHOOD: DELHI RECLAIMED

This transformative tour through the 13th century Nizamuddin Basti in Delhi celebrates women reclaiming their power, defying norms, and building a more inclusive community that is known to be unequal in many ways. Women need equal access to opportunities of employment, education, decision making, and financial independence for an equitable society. This tour offers a glimpse into the sisterhood that is reclaiming these through sustained efforts of the self- help groups of Nizamuddin Basti, breaking age-old patriarchal norms. The tour includes a walk through the Nizamuddin Basti with a woman tour leader from the community who enthrals you with stories about the vibrant neighbourhood steeped in rich history and culture. It includes a visit to the famous Dargah Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, the mausoleum of the revered Sufi saint that attracts pilgrims and visitors from all over the world.

Experienced by Lovleen Sagar, Executive Vice President, Destination Knowledge Centre

- Location: Delhi
- Duration: 3 Hours (Ideal timing 16:00 hrs to 19:00 hrs)
- Experience Type: Culture & Lifestyle
- Skills: All age groups
- This experience is valid for FITs and Small Groups and can be done from October to April.

LOVLEEN'S COMMENTS: "As I walked through the narrow lanes, I loved hearing stories that have been passed down through generations of women who've built this community. Personal stories of the tour leader gave me an insight into her unique culture and struggles. After visiting a few historic sights and learning about some neighbourhood secrets, I got to interact with women who as part of their community ventures are reviving traditional art forms and running successful businesses. I had great fun participating in a traditional art workshop, learning to make paper bags with beautiful decorations. And, tasted a great meal prepared by the self-help group that caters to corporates and parties. I was rather impressed to learn of the transformative impact on the women I met and their families through these self-help group initiatives. I felt inspired meeting very determined, resilient and successful women in spaces that are usually male bastions"

Get in touch with your relationship manager for more details



DISCOVER THE FOOTHILLS OF THE WESTERN GHATS, KERALA





BAMBOO AND CONVERSATIONS

This is a full-day guided trip in the foothills of the Western Ghats in Kerala. Learn about the indigenous techniques and the remarkable skills in Eeta (bamboo) weaving during a hands-on workshop with a local tribal woman. The bamboo basket made during the workshop makes for a unique souvenir that carries not only memories but also the wonderful stories collected during this encounter. Post the workshop, head out to the residence of a local farmer and learn how to cook a meal in bamboo tubes. Enjoy lunch and return to the hotel.

Curated by Kuntal Baruwa, Explorer, Destination Knowledge Centre

- Location: Foothills of the Western Ghats, Kerala
- Duration: 5 Hours
- Experience Type: Workshop & New skills
- Skills: All age groups
- This experience is valid for only FITs (max 4 guests) and can be done from October to April. Ideal for family travel also.

KUNTIL'S COMMENTS: "I was privileged to have listened to the diverse life experiences of the tribal woman during the basket weaving workshop. It was fantastic to know and learn how every aspect of her tribe's life is intricately connected to bamboo, from birth to death. They not only survive but thrive in the forest, armed with nothing more than bamboo and homemade knives. At the farmer's home where I learned how to make a meal in bamboo tubes, the conversation was inspired by the forest, its mysteries, and folklore. It was simply brilliant. And of course, the food –chicken and tapioca - was delicious"

Get in touch with your relationship manager for more details



CHOCOLATES AND CONVERSATIONS

This is a half-day guided trip to a village in the foothills of the Western Ghats, Kerala with abundant birdlife. This tour is a remarkable blend of nature, culture, and delectable indulgence. The adventure begins with a warm welcome from a knowledgeable local farmer, often a woman from the village, who will guide guests through the cocoa plantation. Next, guests will discover the alchemy behind chocolate-making as they observe the intricate fermentation process in rustic wooden boxes with the secrets of perfect timing, precise temperatures, and centuries-old techniques being revealed by the host. The grand finale is a delightful chocolate-tasting session. In a cosy setting, guests get to savour an array of chocolates infused with local ingredients.

Curated by Kuntal Baruwa, Explorer, Destination Knowledge Centre

- Location: Foothills of the Western Ghats, Kerala
- Duration: 2 Hours
- Experience Type: Farming & Lifestyle | Can also be combined with birding
- Skills: All age groups
- This experience is valid for only FITs (max 4 guests) and can be done during October to April. Ideal for family travel also.

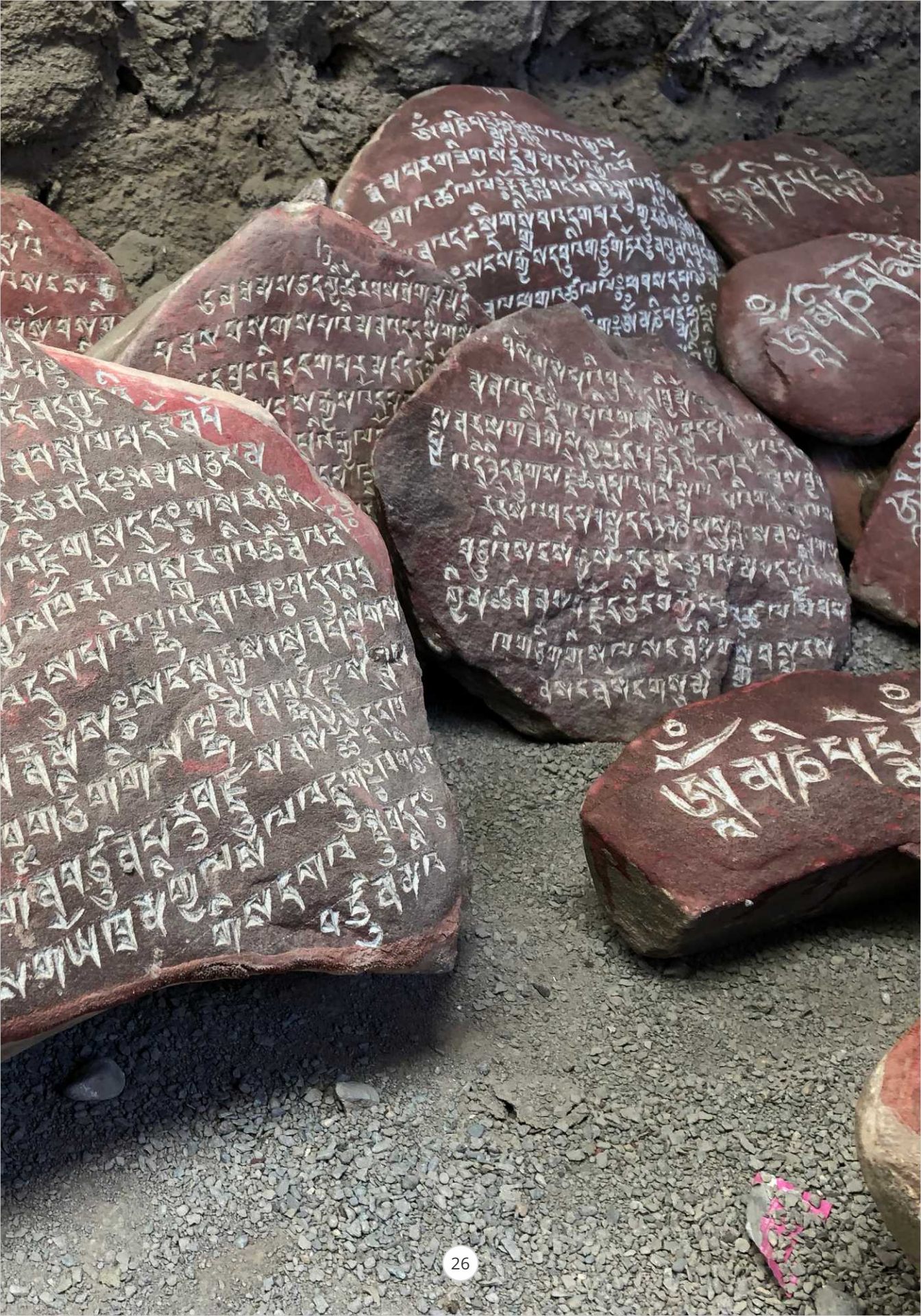
KUNTIL'S COMMENTS: "It is hard to imagine that a Chocolate Factory operated exclusively by skilled women exists in a small village like this. The visit turned out to be a great opportunity to learn more about their daily lives, their dreams, their challenges, and of course, the chocolate-making techniques. Each step is a testament to the craftsmanship, dedication, and sheer hard work of this bunch of women. Not to mention, with 70% chocolate in every bar, each bite unravels a wide variety of flavours, from fruity and nutty to spicy and aromatic and also the rare Sri Lankan Frogmouth that I spotted enroute to the factory was a super bonus!!"

Get in touch with your relationship manager for more details



REDISCOVER LADAKH





FAITH ENGRAVED INTO MANI STONES

Mani stones carved with Buddhist calligraphic mantras and auspicious motifs are found all over Ladakh and the Trans-Himalayan region. On any tour of Ladakh, you are bound to come across 'mani stones'. The universal mantra of the Avalokitesvara Buddha 'Om Mani Padme Hum' is etched into these smooth stones with hammers and chisels. We invite you to immerse yourself in this little-known side of Himalayan culture and discover the dexterity with which the artist transforms an ordinary stone into an auspicious object of prayer.

Experienced by Jean Noel Esteve, Product & Sales Manager at Sita

- Location: Leh, Union Territory of Leh and Ladakh
- Duration: 2 Hours
- Experience Type: Culture, Lifestyle, Workshop & New skills
- Skills: All age groups
- This experience is valid for 10 pax and is subject to availability of the artist. Ideal for family travel also.
- Best time – June to September

JEAN'S COMMENTS: "I was lucky enough to spend some time with Tsering, a Mani stone artist, in his workshop located 8 km from Leh, to understand the significance of these stones and discover the sheer dexterity with which he transforms an ordinary stone into an object of Tibetan prayer. Beyond the aesthetics, spending time in his workshop allowed me to immerse myself in this little-known aspect of Himalayan culture. With a bit of luck, guests will be able to do what I did with the chisel under Tsering's watchful eyes!"

Get in touch with your relationship manager for more details



WORKSHOP WITH LENA, LADAKH – SLOW FASHION

Started by two local women Minglak and Sonam in 2016, LENA is a slow fashion brand that crafts Ladakhi Pashmina products in small batches. Entirely handmade by weavers of the nomadic shepherd community, the Ladakhi Pashmina is deeply interwoven with the history and culture of Ladakh. Made from the soft, downy, winter undercoat of a domesticated local goat breed, this pastoral textile art of spinning, weaving, and natural dyeing entirely by hand which LENA is reviving originates in Ladakh's high-altitude grazing ecosystem. The raw pashmina fibre, rare and one of the most expensive hair fibre in the world, owing to its limited availability, comes largely from the Changthang region of Eastern Ladakh, an important high-altitude grazing ecosystem.

Experienced by Jean Noel Esteve, Product & Sales Manager at Sita

- Location: Leh, Union Territory of Leh and Ladakh
- Duration: One day, Several days or even Several weeks
- Experience Type: Culture, Lifestyle, Workshop & New skills
- Skills: All age groups
- This experience is valid for Max 8 guests
- Best time – June to September

JEAN'S COMMENTS: "LENA is a fantastic story of the revival of ancient and fast-vanishing traditional local skills of Ladakhi handmade textiles. During my recent trip to Ladakh, I had the opportunity to meet Stanzin Minglak, the co-founder of LENA. I was surprised by the unique texture of the Ladakhi Pashmina. Unlike other pashminas, which are so lightweight, Ladakhi pashmina is much thicker. LENA started with 7 weavers in 2016 and is now a close-knit family of 34 weavers who for generations have quietly kept these ancient skills of textile-making alive. LENA organises workshops lasting one day, several days, or even several weeks on this traditional art of spinning, weaving, and natural dyeing. The workshop takes place in the warm atmosphere of their home, on the banks of the river Indus. The workshop is also a close interaction with Nature and the local ecosystem, whether guests are making dyes using flowers straight from the garden, washing the yarns in the stream or drying them in the middle of a green field"

Get in touch with your relationship manager for more details



DESTINATION INSIDER



GOA ALWAYS - UNAPOLOGETICALLY!

By Jay Kumar, Product Head, Destination Knowledge Centre

Falling in love with a place is just as exciting as falling in love with a person. You simply feel more alive as your senses become engaged with the place and Goa is one of the easiest places to fall in love with the relaxed pace of life. However, with the increase in both foreign and domestic tourism, the purists are having a tough time coming to terms with today's Goa! So, given the opportunity to travel to Goa recently, the objective was to unravel the old-world charm of this nostalgic and the most romanticized beach destinations of India, which I am sure has some fond memories for everybody to reminisce with that quirky smile!

I landed in the newly inaugurated Manohar International airport in Mopa village, located in Pernem, which has been built on the theme of sustainable infrastructure with a solar power plant, rainwater harvesting, recycling facilities, and a sewage treatment plant. The old airport at Dabolim will remain operational, so one can decide where to land and fly from, depending on whether they are visiting North or South Goa as the new airport is closer for those visiting the North Goa beaches – Anjuna, Morjim, Vagator, Arambol, Mandrem and Baga. The former is closer to the South Goa beaches – Colva, Benaulim, Cavelossim, Agonda, and Palolem.

Change is inevitable, never more so, than in Goa, which in many ways reinvents itself, every time you land up at her door. She looks different in both small and profound ways, each time and every time. But, the most significant and visible reasons for it looking different is undoubtedly derived from the colonial period rule of Portugal in Goa. So, there flowered a unique Indo-Latin culture amongst other influences with its own distinct and sophisticated architecture, music and cuisine. Just looking at the various famous Goan dishes, we gather that Sorpotel is Luso-African, Bebinca from South East Asia and Caju, the famous Goan spirit, came into the Konkan region from Brazil along with the cashew fruit.

We embarked on an e-biking trip (bicycles with a battery-powered assist) to Divar Island, which is not connected by road. We took a 10-minute public ferry service to the island along with the locals on motorbikes and cars on-board the ferry. This island was once home to famous temples of Goa and has infinite stories to tell, as it was one of the first places to be captured by the Portuguese in Goa. As we cycled along the lush green tropical countryside, exploring the peace and quiet of rural

Goa, its fishing villages and its diverse culture, we realised how crudely the destination is being undermined and judged from a myopic view!

Goa's history can also be discovered through its distinctive cuisine, with the Portuguese influence evident in the meaty diets and other delectable delights from its trading relationship with Africa, Brazil and erstwhile Burma. So, we left on a tippler's trail discovering the Feni & Tapas tour starting with a traditional small rustic Joseph bar in the Latin quarters of Panaji accompanied by the jubilant storyteller serving Feni Cocktails with its interesting ingredients and mixes. The bar takes pride in serving their most popular offering the classic iconic Tambde Rosa (translates to Red Rose) cocktail, which has become the most famous local cocktail in Goa. The accompanying snacks are made by local women from the neighborhood, as we gorge on the native delicacies listening to Fados to smooth jazz hopping to Ashok Bar with a quick stop in between at Casa Lusitana. Ashok Bar, a no frills bar in the by lanes of Fontainhas, has been in existence since the colonial era and only serves their famous master craft Xacuti with Chicken and Mutton. We end our evening at Miski, a quaint little dive bar quenching our taste buds devouring some delicious Goan Catholic cuisine food.

As we moved to South Goa, the following morning, the next visit on our list was



Chandor – Houses of Goa tour, which is best known for the 17th century Menezes-Braganza house, the biggest Portuguese mansion of its kind, with its exquisite furniture, tapestries, ballrooms, banquet halls, four poster beds and beautiful Italian marble floors. It also has a 300-year-old chapel with some stunning intricate carvings. The tour ends with a meal at a local family restaurant where you binge on some local delicacies accompanied with some live Goan and Portuguese music exclusively played for you by your storyteller and the host.

Upon return from Goa, while I was wading my way through the daily rut, I stumbled upon a question accompanied with a wry laugh 'What's Goa without the beaches'... I felt, there goes my 'Explorer' bit down the drain, but then we are all restrained with our parochial views at times! But, for an ardent lover of Goa, it cannot be UnGoa'ed, the euphoria remains and will live on irrespective. With her legendary charms intact – and the individual nostalgia we all feel for Goa, at every stage of our life, the fervent traveller will always discern its most essential attributes – the abiding solitude, pristine natural settings, glorious cuisine, gracious hospitality and some sparkling 'joie de vivre' that has fascinated us all, since time immemorial!

[Write to your relationship manager to access my Goa Report](#)





REDISCOVERING RAJASTHAN

By Soma Paul, Product Manager, Destination Knowledge Centre

Jaipur and Udaipur are the crown jewels of Rajasthan. Being the capital city, Jaipur is full of hustle and bustle, fast-paced city life, and vibrant bazaars. On the contrary, Udaipur is a city of lakes, serene, green, romantic, and peaceful. These two cities complement each other perfectly by offering travellers a complete contrast between bustling city life and the tranquility of nature. I travelled to Jaipur and Udaipur recently, the two most visited cities in Rajasthan in search of experiences that involve local communities, and workshops, adding more value to the whole proposition.

Better Connectivity

I travelled on the new expressway between Delhi and Jaipur, making the journey swift and exhilarating. This eight-lane Greenfield Expressway carved its way through rustic farmlands, offering a picturesque route. The newly launched Udaipur-Jaipur-Udaipur Vande Bharat Express train has significantly reduced the travel time offering a comfortable journey, connecting Udaipur, Jaipur, and Ajmer seamlessly. The timetable offers a traveller-friendly schedule, with a total journey close to seven hours.

The Tale of Two Capitals

Tomes have been written about the capital city of Jaipur but very little about Amber which served as the seat of power before Jaipur. The quaint town in the foothills of Amber Fort is full of beautiful temples, stepwells, and ruins of havelis. During my trip, I stayed at Surya Haveli - a 300-year-old property with 6 lovingly restored rooms, packed with plenty of Rajasthani colour and character, offering the best view of the fort. It was fascinating to see Amber come to life, taking a stroll of the Amber town, exploring the magnificent fort, and spending time at the Anokhi Museum of Hand Printing.

Water Stories

The rich and diversified water culture is the one element that unites the entire state of Rajasthan. Despite its tropical desert climate, it was fascinating to hear the stories of Rajasthan's ancient water wisdom set against the backdrop of some of its famous historical landmarks in Jaipur and Udaipur. A tour of Rajasthan is a fantastic opportunity to understand the relationship between water and the history, culture, and creative spirit of the people of this state. A must-do!



From the Desert to the Kitchen

Despite its primarily arid climate and limited resources, the smorgasbord of gastronomic pleasures, both vegetarian and non-vegetarian, is a testimony to how inventive the people of Rajasthan are with their food. An age-old tradition amongst the women in the Rajput community had led to a fine culinary practice in the region – the art of cooking meat outdoors by Rajput men. The 'Bannas', that Rajput men are lovingly called, are some of the finest cooks when it comes to meat preparations. Talk about cooking and their eyes light up just like my host in Jaipur who is into reviving the culinary tradition of game meat from the days of yore. Although hunting is banned now, the traditional style of cooking is a treat to observe and so is the food. A great way to spend the evening in Jaipur!

Deep Diving into the Local Culture

Due to the abundance of forts, palaces, and local bazaars within the walled city of Jaipur and Udaipur, one can still witness remnants of the splendour and allure of the past. I realised that the best way to experience that is to get off the vehicle and hop on an e-rickshaw or pedal through narrow alleys, or on foot. These carefully crafted tours that I experienced first-hand are a great way to learn more about the city's traditional way of life, its people, and much more. During the tour, I found some hidden gems that are affordable and can be easily incorporated into the regular tours to make them immersive.





A Living Heritage

Udaipur was envisioned as a walled city with the City Palace on the western edge next to Lake Pichola and eleven city gates, out of which seven still exist. The havelis belonging to noblemen were developed around the palace to distinguish their dwellings from the common man. It was a rule that no haveli could be higher than the palace. Only the royal priests' domed roofs were permitted to be as tall as the palace, demonstrating their social standing. While strolling through the old city, I discovered such folklore, living traditions, and religious beliefs of this charming town.

The Unsung Heroes of Rajasthan's Art

The hands-on workshops that I did in Jaipur and Udaipur were an eye-opener of sorts about a handful of artists who continue to execute ancient techniques to infuse life into a piece of fabric, a block of wood, or anything you can imagine. Highly recommended and a must-do!

Conscious Choices

In a conscious effort to reduce my carbon footprint, I opted for train journeys from Jaipur to Udaipur and from Udaipur to Delhi instead of using a car or a flight. It helped me reduce my carbon emissions by around 200 kgs (about 440.92 lbs). Train travel is a convenient way to explore these cultural destinations and allows us to experience traveling like a local and enjoy the changing landscape.

Jaipur and Udaipur offer an incredible fusion of history, architecture, cultural experiences, and scrumptious cuisine, making them exceptional destinations in Rajasthan. To see the finest of Jaipur or Udaipur, you will need to spend at least 3 nights in each city. Consider the time you have and your preferences to make the most of your visit. Not to mention, remember to make sustainable choices!

Write to your relationship manager to access my Jaipur-Udaipur Report



MEERUT & BEYOND

By Inderjeet Rathod, Product Manager, Destination Knowledge Centre

If you have a repeat traveller to India who is heading from Delhi to Haridwar, Rishikesh, or the Corbett National Park or even further up to the hills of Kumaon, the inclusion of the Hapur – Meerut – Bagpat circuit can further enhance the travel experience. This lesser-known travel circuit, not too far away from India's capital city, unveils a tapestry of ancient roots, British heritage, rural serenity, and cultural diversity.

Rural Hapur: The Gateway to the Circuit

Hapur holds a hidden gem within its folds – **Shreevanam by Beejom** – a farm stay based on the concept of 'Food Forest' and 'Animal Rescue'. Located just about a two-hour drive from Delhi, it offers a sanctuary of sustainability and rural serenity. This idyllic farm stay invites visitors to discover the allure of a farm stay, where nature, architecture, and mindful living converge to create a unique space.

Meerut: A City of Legends

Explore the remnants of medieval times in Meerut Cantonment / Meerut City at Shahi Eidgah, Shahpeer Sahab Ki Dargah, and the Augharnath Temple. Witness the architectural blend of Mughal and British influences at St. John's Church, a poignant reminder of the city's British past.

Take a detour to Sardhana town to visit sites related to British history. Visit the Church of Sardhana, also known as the Basilica of Our Lady of Graces. The town also has Begum Samru's Palace with its unique architecture which now runs as St. Charles' Inter College.

Who was Begum Samru? – Begum Samru was the supreme commander of 3,000 troops, including at least a hundred European mercenaries, in 18th-century northern India. She held court, wore a turban, smoked a hookah, converted from Islam to Christianity, and dubbed herself Joanna, after Joan of Arc. She married the 45-year-old Austrian mercenary Walter Reinhardt at the age of 14 and the pair teamed up and formed a formidable power couple: mercenaries for hire. After Reinhardt's death, Begum Samru commanded an army and ruled over Sardhana for five decades and was India's first and only Catholic Queen. Mughal kings summoned her when they were attacked by rivals. She had an ever-ready army and a knack for forging deals with anyone who attacked the



Mughals. One Mughal emperor gave her the title Zeb-un-nissa (Ornament among Women).

Mangat Farms in Meerut is a serene nature retreat set on a sprawling 50-acre farm. This farm stay provides an idyllic ambiance for relaxation and rejuvenation. Guests can explore the natural surroundings and, in winter, witness local and migratory avian species, including the majestic Sarus crane. Apart from farming activities, the farm boasts fruit-bearing trees and seasonal vegetables. Ranjit Singh, the farm's custodian, ensures a warm and welcoming atmosphere. Visitors can savour home-cooked meals showcasing local flavors.

Bagpat: Unveiling the Rural Charms

Shikwa Haveli in Bagpat district offers a glimpse of rural life and cultural traditions of a bygone era. Also known as Mehrabon Wali Haveli, the heritage property is nestled on the banks of the Yamuna River. Located 40 km from Connaught Place, Delhi, this Haveli has undergone an extensive 15-year restoration process to recapture its former glory. Today, it stands as a majestic structure adorned with chajjas, chhatris, stone jalis, and exquisite doors. It provides a unique opportunity to experience the grandeur and lifestyles of bygone royalty, with the warmth of contemporary hospitality extended by the owner, Shariq Bin Raza, and his family.

Write to your relationship manager to access my Meerut and Beyond Report which also has a detailed itinerary of this exciting circuit





STORIES FROM INDIA

ARCHITECTURE

DRAVIDIAN TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE

Unlike the North, the South of India, having been relatively free from repeated foreign invasions, is dotted with thousands of temples. Built in the stunning Dravidian style of architecture which flourished between the 7th century to about the 16th century, these temples were not just places of worship but also centres of art, music, dance, and more. They still continue to be hubs of religious, cultural, and social life providing livelihoods to tens of thousands of people.

HISTORY: The Dravidian style of architecture was pioneered by the Pallava Kings who were at the height of their power in the 7th century, reached its peak under the Chola Kings in the 10th century, continued to flourish under the Vijayanagara empire till the 16th century and with its collapse and the declaration of independence of various Nayakas (Chieftains) marked the last phase of this ever-living style of temple architecture of South India. The earliest examples of the Dravidian style of architecture were the iconic rock-cut monoliths of Mahabalipuram and Kancheepuram. It is said that Mahabalipuram served as a laboratory for the Pallavas to experiment with various building techniques. Soon





enough important breakthroughs were achieved under the Pallavas in the form of the Gopuram (temple gateway tower, Vimana (the multi-tiered structure just above the shrine that resembles a stepped pyramid), and the Prakara (the enclosure wall that surrounds the temple) which are unique features of Dravidian Temple Architecture. The Cholas borrowed several concepts from the Pallavas and refined them. The Brihadeeswarar temples at Tanjore and Gangaikondacholapuram are two masterpieces of Dravidian architecture under the Cholas. Constructed out of large blocks of granite, both the temples are massive, not only just in size but also in vision and execution. It is astonishing to know, for example, that the sixteen-storeyed Vimana (the multi-tiered structure just above the shrine that resembles a stepped pyramid) of the Brihadeeswarar temple built more than a thousand years ago is topped by a massive stone weighing eighty thousand kilograms. Whilst visitors are blown away by the surreal landscape of the ruins of Hampi, the Angkor Wat of India and once the capital of the Vijayanagara Empire, a magnificent example of Dravidian architecture during the Vijayanagara era can be seen at the Ranganathaswamy temple at Srirangam in Trichy. It is not too far away from Tanjore and the Brihadeeswarar Temple. The Hall of Thousand Pillars here, beautifully carved with sculptures of wildly rearing horses with riders on their backs, is stunning and not to be missed. The last phase of Dravidian architecture was





witnessed under the Nayakas (Chieftains) who declared their independence after the fall of the Vijayanagara Empire in the 16th century. The southern Gopuram (temple gateway tower) of Madurai's grand and most revered Meenakshi Amman temple is one of the finest examples of Dravidian architecture under the Nayakas.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC-CULTURAL INFLUENCE: The influence of these temples extended beyond the religious and the spiritual. They brought about far-reaching socio-economic and cultural impacts on society. The construction of a temple took several years, often decades, and sometimes spanned over a couple of centuries with each King adding their own to the structure. This resulted in employment for hundreds of people – both skilled and unskilled for generations. The temples, while they were being constructed served as a training ground by the finest sculptors and artisans who enjoyed the patronage of the Kings and didn't have to worry about anything else. Their only job was to create, train, and pass on their knowledge. The daily rituals of the temples also ensured employment for a large section of people such as priests, florists, tailors, musicians, dancers, etc. Pilgrims from neighbouring provinces arriving to pay their obeisance in the temples resulted in thriving businesses to cater to their needs which in turn generated more employment.

FEATURES OF DRAVIDIAN ARCHITECTURE: In Dravidian temple architecture, the main structure (i.e. the temple) is surrounded by a Prakara (enclosure wall) and accessed by a grand Gopuram (temple gateway tower) is divided into several sections, each with their unique function. The Garbha Griha (Sanctum Sanctorum) above which is the Vimana (the multi-tiered structure resembling a stepped pyramid) is where the presiding deity resides and is worshipped. The Maha Mandapa (closed hall), Mandapa (semi-closed hall), and Ardha Mandapa (porch) are spaces for the devotees to congregate and also for social functions such as marriages. The Natya Mandapa is for classical dance performances. It is worth mentioning here that many classical dance forms of South India originated in the temples and were once exclusively performed there. Don't forget to look out for the water tanks in a variety of shapes and sizes in the temples for ritualistic purposes and large statues of Nandis (the divine bull who is the mount of the Hindu God Shiva) with a Mandapa (semi-closed hall) of their own – all unique features of the Dravidian Temple Architecture.



ART

AJANTA CAVES

The Ajanta Caves are 29 rock-cut Buddhist cave monuments dating from the 2nd century BCE to about 480 CE. It is located in the Western Ghats hill range, 100 km north of Aurangabad city in the state of Maharashtra. Adorned with paintings and rock-cut sculptures these caves are considered to be the finest surviving examples of ancient Indian art. These caves were utilised as prayer halls (chaityas) and monasteries (viharas) by Buddhist monks for almost nine centuries until being abandoned abruptly. They were lost to history until the year 1819 when they were accidentally rediscovered by a British Officer named John Smith. The caves depict a panorama of life in ancient India and are a source of all kinds of information about that era, such as hairstyles, jewellery, fabrics, musical instruments, architectural details, customs, and so on. A distinct style emerged from this collection of ancient Indian art, which accompanied Buddhism to many parts of the world. The site was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in the year 1983.





BEVERAGE

TODDY, GOD'S OWN TIPPLE

Toddy, the milky white and fizzy coconut wine is Kerala's most loved local tipple. It is a beverage that has ignited an entire sub-genre of Kerala cuisine and is deeply ingrained in the local culture. Toddy is even offered to the Gods as a part of rituals in Kerala. It is indeed God's Own Tipple.

There are close to 4000 Toddy shops in Kerala. Just like the taverns in the villages of Goa, the toddy shops in Kerala began as places for the hardworking rural folks to drop in for a bottle of toddy, sometimes more than a bottle, to chit chat about the day's work, life in general or what's wrong with it and to leave for home, more often than not tipsy hoping for a better tomorrow. From its humble beginning of a shack made of dried palm fronds and held up by bamboo poles, there are now fancy air-conditioned toddy shops with a choice between "Family Room" and "Fun Room"





where waiters will recommend the most appropriate hashtag for your Instagram post or egg you on for a selfie with your food. A Toddy shop sells anything between 100 to 300 litres of toddy every day.

Toddy is tapped from the coconut tree twice a day, early morning and just before sunset, and there are patrons accordingly. Some prefer it in the morning hours and some their sundowners. The toddy tappers who climb the trees with the agility of a cat are from the Thiyya community of Kerala. And they do so without any safety nets or protection from possible attacks by wasps or other insects. Their tools are a big jug which is slung around the back, and around the waists they tie their knives and a large bone – the femur bone of a deer. The knife is used to slit open the bud of the flower of the coconut tree and the bone is used to hammer the stack to make the liquid ooze out. The jug is then left overnight attached to the stalk and collected next morning. Whatever jugs left the previous day are then collected. About 600 ml of sap is collected from each bud. Toddy is best consumed before 11 in the morning. While this may sound like indulging in dipsomania quite early in the day, fresh toddy is sweet and is not intoxicating. If consumed in moderation, fresh toddy is beneficial for health. As the day progresses, it ferments and that is when toddy becomes intoxicating.

In the 1970s, the toddy shops also became bustling kitchens with women doing most of the cooking and fired their subgenre of Kerala cuisine. All ingredients were locally sourced and the dishes were made super spicy so that people consume more toddy. A visit to a toddy shop is guaranteed to awaken all your senses. There is fish fried in red chillies, prawns, and beef tossed in coconut oil and curry leaves, and Kerala's eternal favourite – tapioca for the main course with sardines and fried bananas for dessert- for those looking for a full meal. Toddy shops have survived the temporary ban on alcohol in Kerala in the past decade, but locals say that many of the best ones have folded up. Yet there are still intimate spaces that pop out of nowhere where locals in the know go to eat fresh home-cooked food and to drink their toddy.



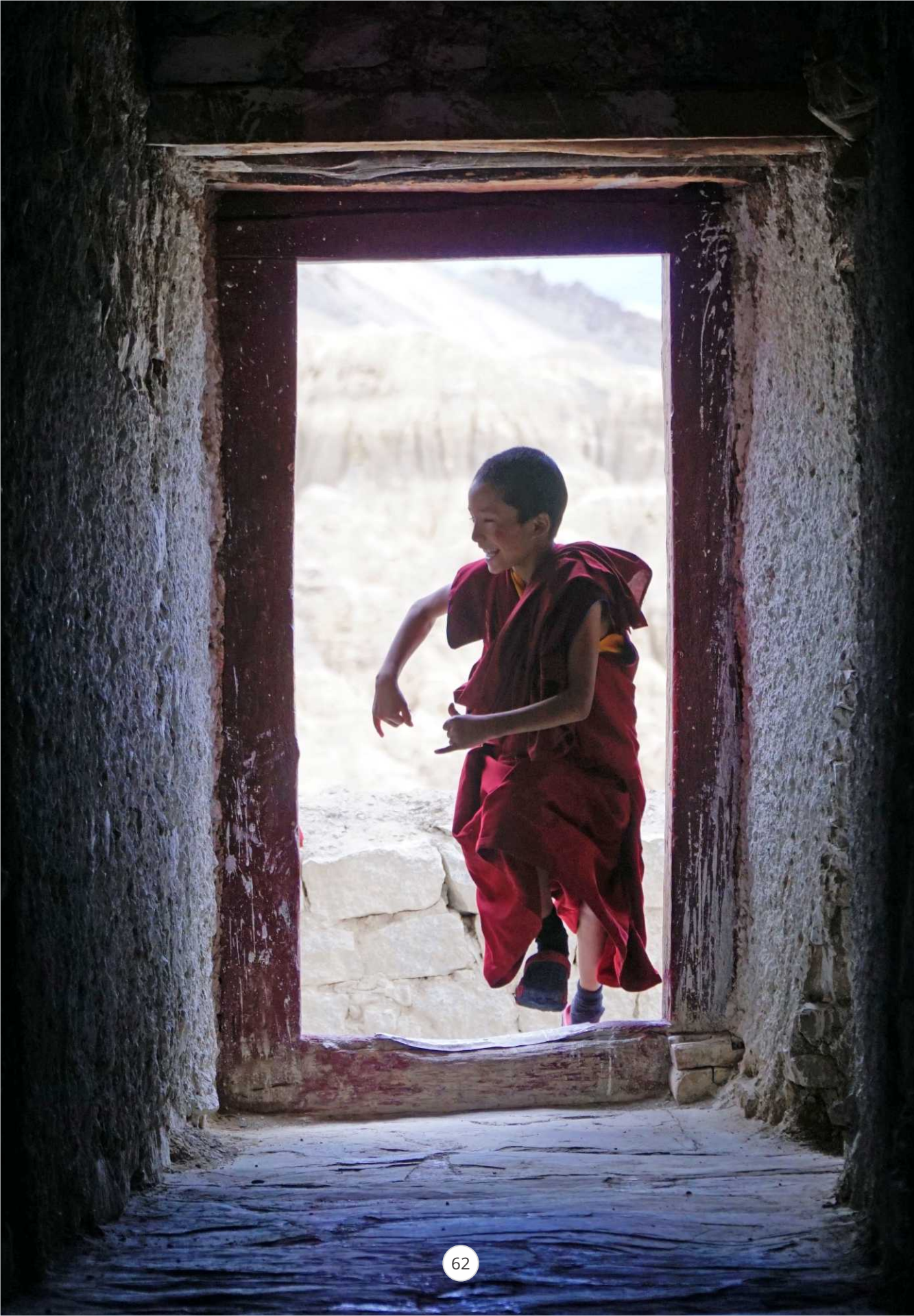
CLOTHING

PASHMINA

The weaving of Pashmina shawls, the fine, warm, and unique fabrics made from the specific breed of Changthangi goats that reside over 14000 feet above sea level at temperatures that dip below -20 degrees, has been known in India and Tibet since ancient times. It travelled across Europe, China, Egypt, Persia, and the rest of the centres on the Silk Road. Roman Emperors Caesar and Nero were aficionados of this fine, warm, and exclusive textile. Napoleon, on his way back from Egypt, brought a pashmina shawl for his wife Josephine who made it a style statement throughout Europe. The value of the shawl came from its weightlessness, warmth, and most importantly its exclusivity. The weaving of Pashmina flourished under the Mughals and Emperor Akbar built several workshops where skilled weavers and embroiderers created masterpieces that were so fine that they were said to be able to pass through a finger ring!

Pashmina shawls fall under four categories – doshalas (shoulder mantels), patkas (sashes or stoles), rumals (square shawls), and jamawars (fully embroidered textiles pieces for making outfits)





COMMUNITIES

PEOPLE OF LADAKH

Ladakh's strategic position on the Silk Road has resulted in numerous ethnic groups and people passing through, settling here, and leaving their mark on the local community. People from Japan, Persia, China, Greece, Eurasian Steppes, Syria, and Central Asia passed through the region trading goods, stories, and most importantly, cultural influences that we can see in the communities that live in the region today. The most ancient of the people who came to Ladakh is the community of Indo-Aryan Dards who today inhabit the villages of Hanu, Dha, Darchik, and Garkone, some 200 km from Leh. The villages together are called 'Aryan Valley' as it is believed that the Dards are the last remaining authentic Aryans left in India. Their beautiful legacy, which some scholars believe to be stemming from soldiers of Alexander's army who had come here 2000 years ago, is as colourful as their elaborate costumes and floral headgear.





CUISINE

PARSI CUISINE

Parsi cuisine is a wonderful blend of Persian, Gujarati, Malvani, Maharashtrian, and British flavours. The Parsis are a tiny Indian community that traces its line to Zoroastrian (pre-Islamic) Iran. They fled to India in the 17th century to escape religious persecution and settled in Western India along the coast. It is estimated there are some 200,000 Parsis worldwide with Mumbai having the highest population of 60,000.

At the heart of Parsi food is the “Masala Dabba”, a segmented box that contains the ground spices of turmeric, coriander, cumin, and red chilli. The must-have ingredients in a Parsi kitchen are Marchu-Lasan (a chilli-garlic paste), cider, or red wine vinegar. Alongside these is the Parsi-style Garam Masala, which perfectly reflects this unique blend of cultures. The earthy warmth of green cardamom, cumin, and black pepper is perfectly balanced by the cinnamon, cloves, and star anise. Parsi dishes reveal traces of their Persian past in their use of sweet dried fruit and nuts such as apricots and golden raisins, almonds, and cashews.

Parsis love eggs, potatoes, and meat. Almost all the vegetable dishes made from okra, tomatoes, or potatoes will have eggs on top. Meat dishes will have potatoes in the form of 'Salli' (matchstick fried potatoes). Dishes like the khichdi and dhansak have lentils that are adopted from typically Indian preparations and given a meaty twist to make them their own. Fish dishes use local seafood like prawns and pomfret, and the use of banana leaf in their preparation shows the skilful adoption of local ingredients and making it their own.

DANCE

SATTRIYA, THE DANCE OF BHAKTI RASA

Sattriya from Assam is one of India's eight classical dance forms which is known for its intense emotional fervour. This over 600-year-old highly stylised dance form combines Yoga with Nritya (dance), Natya (drama), Sangeeta (music), and Abhinaya (acting) as means of ritualistic worship and awakening Bhakti (devotion) Rasa (emotion) in the minds of the audience.

Unlike the other classical dance forms of India, the first generation of Sattriya dancers of the early twentieth century in Assam didn't face any social stigma and were held in high regard by society. Nor was the dance form ever looked down upon by society. The story of Sattriya, however, began as an exclusively male domain in the splendid isolation of Majuli, Asia's largest freshwater river island on the river Brahmaputra, and was performed by the male monks in the Sattras (monasteries)





for nearly 500 years. Sattriya was inspired by the Ojapali, an age-old shamanistic tradition of Assam where the main singer sings and enacts stories of a folk deity, a particular snake Goddess with a group of backup dancers playing small cymbals. Very interestingly the journey of a Sattriya student begins with Mati Akhora which means to exercise on the ground. Mati Akhora has several parallels with the tradition of Yoga and is considered the grammar and structural basis of this highly stylised theatrical dance form. It is only after mastering the Mati Akhora that a student is taught the other dance moves. Researchers opine that there are over 120 Mati Akhoras that focus on utha (rising); boha (squatting), thiyo (standing position), chalana (gait), pak (turns and spins), jap (jump) et al – an entire regime which prepares a student physically, mentally and spiritually for the rest of the journey.

The hastas (hand or finger gestures) and the footwork of Sattriya are accompanied by a vocalist singing the Borgeet (or Great Song of devotion), and musical instruments such as the Khol (a traditional drum) and taal (cymbals). Religious lore and mythology are the main themes of the Sattriya dance and for nearly 500 years this dance form remained confined within the Sattras of Majuli where music, dance, and art are still practiced as ways to salvation. The majority of the Sattras practice celibacy where everything worldly is renounced and religious purity is sacrosanct. This perhaps explains why Sattriya remained an exclusively male domain where even female characters were enacted by males. In the 1920s, a Sattriya Maestro from Majuli named Rasheswar Saikia Barbayan, inspired by Bishnu Prasad Rabha, poet, musician, freedom fighter, and firebrand tribal communist leader of Assam, took Sattriya to Guwahati from the sacred space of the Sattras. His idea was to make Sattriya secular and accessible to everyone, including women, and free it from the shackles of patriarchy. The rest they say is history. Indira PP Bora and her daughter Meneka PP Bora are now considered as the doyens of Sattriya in the urban space. The mother-daughter has not only performed all over the world but has also brought innovation to this sacred medieval dance form in terms of hand gestures, footwork, and other aesthetics.



FESTIVALS

TEMPLE FESTIVALS OF KERALA

Temples in Kerala are primarily considered as abodes of Gods and Goddesses rather than places of worship. The deities like all sentient beings, it is believed, sleep, eat, bathe, and receive visitors in their spare time. Temple festivals of Kerala are occasions when the deities residing in the sanctum sanctorum come out to give blessings and mark special occasions.

The deity (represented usually by an idol) uses an exalted transport like a caparisoned elephant, a palanquin, or a chariot. Drums and trumpets are used to announce the arrival of the deity to villages - much as they were used in earlier days to announce the passage of Kings. A decorated umbrella and other royal insignias are often carried to indicate exalted stature and divine power over the land. Festivals can and usually last from a day to nine days and almost all of them conclude with a holy immersion of the deity in a water body such as a river, a lake, or the ocean. Ostensibly these water bodies would have marked the end of land over which the deity commanded divine authority. Apart from these rituals, temple festivals have over centuries evolved in cultural and social dimensions. The accompanying drums and trumpets evolved into elaborate percussion orchestras of different flavours and have become independent art forms today. The caparisoned elephants and paraphernalia evolved into elaborate and colourful decorations making the processions unforgettable audio-visual treats.

In Kerala, temple festivals are mostly celebrated from late November to early May. Thrissur is the best place to witness a Temple Festival. It is considered the cultural capital of Kerala, is easily accessible from Cochin, and is home to the famed Kalamandalam, a major centre for learning Indian performing arts, especially those that developed in the Southern states of India, with the special emphasis on Kerala. One can visit Kalamandalam too while at Thrissur. Kalamandalam is closed during the summer break (April-May), Onam holidays (September), winter holidays (December), and public holidays.



HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY

INDIAN HISTORY SHAPED BY ITS GEOGRAPHY

India's unique geography with the mighty Himalayas and the Karakoram ranges bordering the northern flanks and the waters of the Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean, and the Bay of Bengal led to the subcontinent developing a unique history that is rich, ancient, and variegated. India was also an integral part of the Silk and Spice routes, which resulted in exciting cultural exchanges that we can still see today. The opening up of the land route through the north from Khyber Pass saw many invaders and settlers who ultimately assimilated into the cultural tapestry and gave India its diverse history.

To the north of India, we have the majestic and almost insurmountable Himalayas and the Karakoram Ranges that provide a natural boundary to the north and create a sense of security, which led to the creation of a flourishing agrarian culture and unique history.

Towards the South, the waters of the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal, and the Arabian Sea provided both safety and trade opportunities that led to prosperous growth in both wealth and cross-cultural exchange.

Within the country, the Vindhyas formed a natural division between the North and the South, and each region developed over time with its unique cultures, histories, religious beliefs, and traditions. Many dynasties tried to bring the enormous country under the rule of a single king and while few succeeded, most failed to extend their reach beyond certain points.

The Mauryan, Gupta, and Mughal Empires are possibly the most expansive empires that India has seen throughout its millennia-old history and left their indelible marks on it that can be seen even today.



LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

ENGLISH FICTION AND WOMEN WRITERS OF NORTHEAST INDIA

English fiction writing from Northeast India may still be in its infancy but it is different from the rest of India given its themes. The geographic and political isolation of Northeast India, its multi-ethnic and multi-lingual cultures, and issues that are unique to the region's volatile history of political, economic, and social turmoil encapsulate a complexity that makes for brilliant fiction writing. Another interesting fact is that a majority of the contemporary fiction writers of Northeast India are women. They all come from affluent backgrounds and are highly educated with a cosmopolitan view.

Women writers from Meghalaya, Assam, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh have been producing brilliant works of English fiction for close to two decades now. Their literary work revolves around life in their highly heterogeneous societies, kinships, friendships, ancient tribal customs, familial ties, and the conflict that has become





endemic to Northeast India. Tamsula Ao and Easterine Kire are two prominent writers from Nagaland. Ao's "These Hills Called Home" (2006) and "Laburnum for My Head Stories" (2010) and Kire's "A Naga Village Remembered" (2003), "A Terrible Matriarchy" (2007), "Mari" (2010), and "When the River Sleeps" (2014) are a fascinating insight into the tribal ethos of Nagaland which is home to 16 major tribes and many smaller tribes each with their own distinct identity. The writings of Anjum and Daisy Hasan of Meghalaya present an outsider's perspective as they ethnically don't belong to the state. "Lunatic in My Head" (2007), "Neti Neti" (2009), "The To-Let House" (2010), "Difficult Pleasures" (2012), and "The Cosmopolitans" (2015) of the sister duo talk about xenophobia in Northeast India, the angst of the younger generation and biases that people of Northeast India face in mainland India. Another notable name in fiction writing from Meghalaya is Janice Pariat. Her debut collection of short stories "Boats on Land" (2012) is a brilliant intertwining of multiple themes from political turmoil to identity politics, love, longing, and nostalgia, and relationships, to existential crisis, sexual yearnings, and mysticism.

The backdrop of fiction writers Mitra Phukan and Jahnavi Barua from Assam are the insurgency movements and the fragile ecological riches. Phukan's "Terrorist Camp Adventure" (2003), "The Collector's Wife" (2005), and "A Monsoon of Music" (2011) and Barua's "Next Door Stories" (2008), and "Rebirth" (2010) have brought them national and international accolades. Another writer who left an undeniable mark in English fiction writing from Northeast India and inspired many was Mamang Dai (1952-2020). A retired bureaucrat and a pioneering responsible tourism entrepreneur from Arunachal Pradesh, her "The Legends of Pensam" (2006), "Stupid Cupid" (2009), and "The Black Hill" (2014) drew inspiration from the oral traditions and folktales of her tribe.

Some of the upcoming writers of Northeast India are Teresa Rehman of Assam (The Mothers of Manipur, 2017), Yishi Doma of Sikkim (Legends of the Lepchas: Folk Tales from Sikkim, 2014), and Malsawmi Jacob of Mizoram (Zorami, 2014) who writes about insurgency, women in conflict zones, identity politics and other issues related to women in Northeast India.



MUSIC

INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC

The rich reserves of Indian classical music, an ancient discipline passed down for centuries from guru to disciple burst onto the world music scene in the 1960s with the collaboration of the Beatles especially George Harrison with sitar virtuoso Pandit Ravi Shankar. The variety of instruments and ragas intrigued the 'psychedelic' culture and soon ragas and rock were intertwined to create some of the best compositions of all times. The Beatles even made a trip to Rishikesh where they extensively researched on wellness and music.

Piqued by Indian musicians playing Indian classical instruments in a restaurant that they were shooting in, Beatles member George Harrison's interest began in Indian classical music. Long before their much-publicised trip to India, Indian classical instruments, especially the sitar began making appearances in their songs and albums, most notably Norwegian Wood, which was perhaps the first Western song that used sitar in it.

One of the greatest synthesis to come out of this growing milieu of Western Rock and Indian classical music was the meeting, lifelong friendship, and collaboration between Beatles member George Harrison and sitar maestro Pandit Ravi Shankar. Through his collaboration, he introduced Indian classical music to the world and inspired the Sixties 'psychedelic' sound. Labelled "the godfather of world music" by George Harrison, Shankar helped millions of classical, jazz, and rock lovers discover the centuries-old traditions of Indian music. Even today, these collaborations remain some of the best creations of all times.



HOT PICKS

Stays To Watch Out For

SHEL, SHEY, LADAKH

Shel acquired its name from the ancient royal capital of Ladakh – Shey, formerly known as Shel. An experience with a deeply rooted sense of hospitality, Shel is a private home built over seven years using local architectural styles and methods. It is a combination of sustainable luxury, ancestral wisdom, modern design, and natural materials. Surrounded by the raw beauty of the Himalayas and the Indus, it is the perfect gateway to explore the extraordinary mystical mountain region of Ladakh. It consists of 3 en-suite bedrooms with unparalleled views and a minimalistic interior making it a stunning yet functional haven. In addition to the stay, guests can plan their menu with the chef, enjoy a cooking class, take a picnic at the river, walk to the Shey Palace and monastery complex, venture to the picturesque villages of Hemis and Stok, or spend their day relaxing on the rooftop or at a lovely sun-dappled garden area.



THE KYAGAR, NUBRA VALLEY, LADAKH

This 16-key property, owned by Rinchen and Stanzin, is socially conscious, and community-driven. They source the ingredients locally, and everything is powered by solar energy, making Kyagar self-sustaining and leaving as little of a carbon footprint as possible. Reusable thermoses filled with hot and cold water are provided for each room. The kitchen serves a wide range of regional Indian, European, and Asian dishes. Guests staying at The Kyagar can take a stroll around the valley, sip a hot cup of tea at the 250-year-old aristocratic home, travel through space with their state-of-the-art telescope, or spend an evening by the fire. With hundreds of tiny pinpricks dotting an inky blue canvas, Nubra's night sky is magnificent, making for a starry stay.



QAYAAM GAH, SRINAGAR, JAMMU & KASHMIR

Set on a ridge in the Zabarwan Hills is Qayaam Gah, a nature retreat with a Sufi theme located about 40-minute drive away from Srinagar. This is an ideal stay for guests looking for mountain solitude with easy access to the main highlights of Srinagar. The three suites located on a lower terrace offer breathtaking views of the Dal Lake. Surrounded by such natural and cultural bounty, Qayaam Gah exudes a sense of spaciousness and an easy indoor-outdoor flow. The property offers a variety of experiences, from a seven-hour trek up into Dachigam, a guided hike with a picnic lunch, to a morning yoga session with a lovely view of the surrounding hills and greenery. A must do – high-tea on the deck overlooking the Dal Lake with live music performed by a local troupe at sunset!



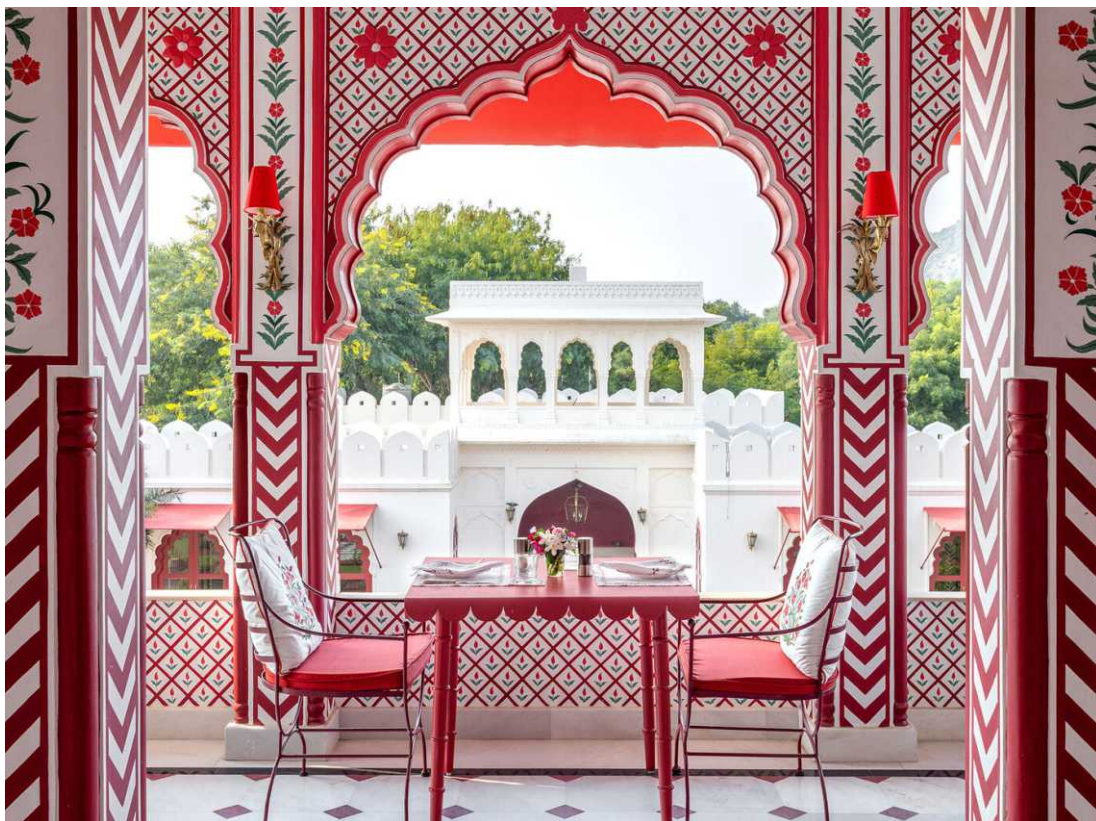
BIJAPUR LODGE, JAWAI, RAJASTHAN

This eco-friendly resort has six luxury suites with king beds and all modern amenities which makes for an ideal secluded break between Jodhpur and Udaipur. Bijapur Lodge provides a perfect balance between the wildlife experience and a glimpse into Rajasthan's tribal culture. Apart from the Leopard safaris, guests can visit a Rabari shepherd's home, choose for a jungle picnic, or end their day with sundowners overlooking the water bodies.



VILLA PALLADIO, JAIPUR, RAJASTHAN

Tucked away on the fringes of Jaipur between Sumel Doongri and Kanota Lake is Villa Palladio Jaipur. The boutique property was initially built in the 1980s as a typical Rajasthani haveli by the late Thakur Abhay Singh of Kanota. A true feast for the senses, Villa Palladio's vivid, pulsing, elegant shades of red adhere to the philosophy of Bar Palladio Jaipur's distinctive understanding of what 21st century hospitality should stand for. In this lovely nine-room house, no two rooms are alike thanks to hand-painted pillars and floral-themed walls. Breakfast is served on a magnificent balcony that overlooks the nearby hills, while lunch and dinner are served on an elevated, covered porch with views of the gardens. Slip into the tranquil waters of the pool surrounded by palm trees, unwind in their meditation room, or let the time pass while reading a good book at the library.



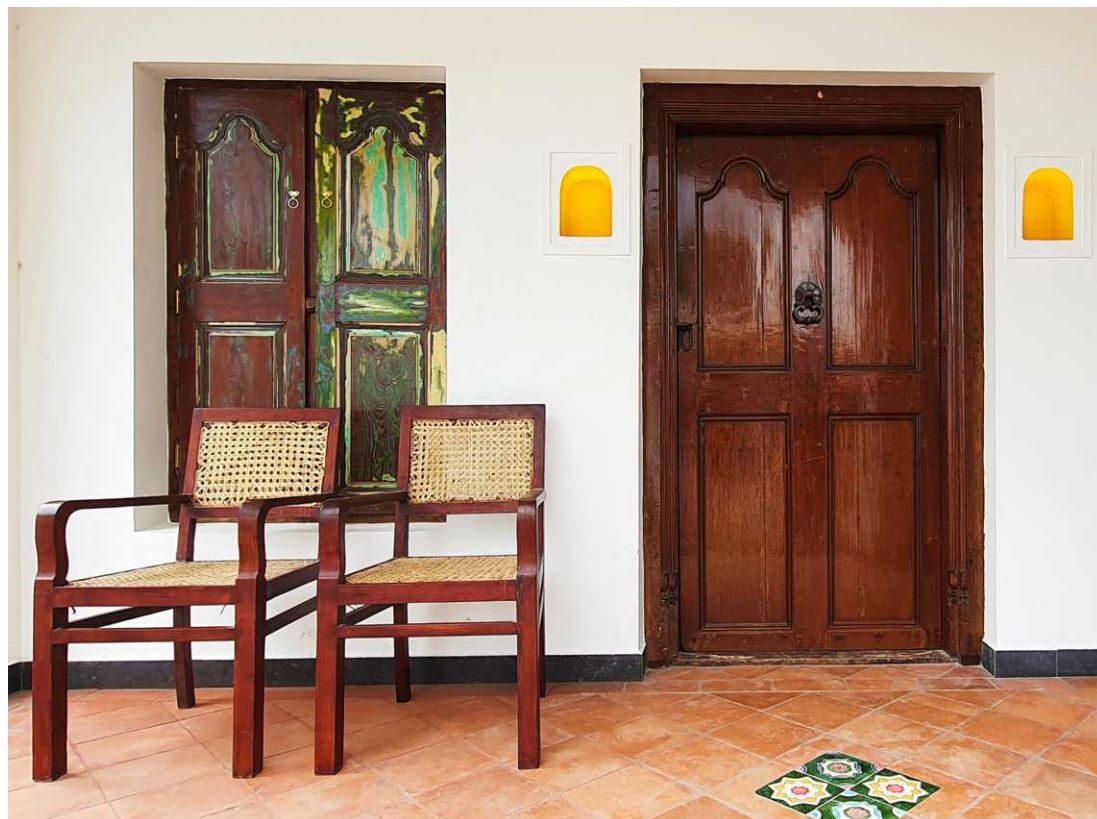
RESIDENCE DE L'EVECHE BY CGH EARTH, PONDICHERRY

If Maison Perumal treats you to a local Tamil experience, and Palais De Mahe offers an experience inspired by the French style and influence, Residence de L'Eveche comes across a little different from the other two as it is an exclusive single-key residence, located at walking distance from the Promenade and Palais De Mahe. It's as good as getting a residence to oneself! Residence de L'Eveche with its rich history dating back to the 1790s has been home to the erstwhile Archbishop of the region and the Goubert family (after whom the famous Goubert market is named). The villa's distinct pink and white façade coupled with the period furniture and contemporary artworks is sure to take guests on a journey to Pondicherry's illustrious past.



ANANTYA IN THE VILLAGE, ALWARTHIRUNAGARI, TAMIL NADU

Nestled in the historic village of Alwarthirunagari on the banks of the river Thamirabarani in Tamil Nadu, Anantya in the Village is a heritage-inspired homestay designed as a traditional village home. This boutique homestay has eight large and spacious rooms that are tastefully furnished to evoke a sense of timelessness. Guests can taste flavourful and simple vegetarian food that reflects the regional specialties of Tamil Nadu. They can spend their days leisurely exploring the quaint surroundings, visiting the temples around Alwarthirunagari, or connecting with the warm-hearted local community to delve into their customs and explore their handicrafts and way of life. It makes for an ideal stopover between Madurai and the Kovalam Beach.



LOCKHART BUNGALOWS BY CGH EARTH, MUNNAR, KERALA

Nestled within Munnar's famous 1500-acre Lockhart Tea Estate, this idyllic retreat by CGH is one of the three colonial-era bungalows of the estate. Lockhart Bungalow features three well-maintained rooms with views of rolling hills and tea gardens. While staying at Lockhart Bungalow, guests can visit the Lockhart factory and museum to see how tea is picked, processed, and shipped, take a scenic drive through forests and tea estates to the Anayirangal dam, enjoy a sumptuous picnic lunch in the midst of sloping tea gardens, or simply walk around the property. The Bungalow is accessible by car and jeep.



NIRVRITI, PALAKKAD, KERALA

The 19th-century Nirvriti is home to Ria and Joseph. For the couple, Nirvriti with its two bedrooms is a culmination of their travel experiences and experimenting with cuisines. After more than two decades of living and travelling across the globe, Joseph and his wife, Ria, along with their two children, Elia and Paul, opted to slow down and return to their home in Kerala. For the couple, food is a passion and they take joy in preparing a range of cuisines from Indian to Italian. Most of the ingredients used are grown on their farm. The homestay experience goes beyond its serene ambience and good food. It promotes local businesses and encourages women entrepreneurs. The Nirvriti store works with local artisans, weavers, bakers, and others to curate a range of products. Guests can spend their time at Nirvriti by practicing yoga in the courtyard, taking a walk along the nearby river, visiting the 10-acre organic coconut farm, or visiting the nearby village with lunch at a small but reputed eatery, known solely for its rice and chicken curry. Evenings can be spent sitting in the courtyard, sipping on a drink, or watching a specially curated art performance of Kathakali or Mohiniyattam.



TAJ GURAS KUTIR RESORT & SPA, GANGTOK, SIKKIM

The Taj Group has expanded its footprint in Northeast India with the opening of Taj Guras Kutir Resort & Spa in Gangtok, the capital city of Sikkim. Nestled in the alpine landscape of Sikkim, the 69-key resort offers panoramic views of the majestic Kanchenjunga. Bringing in the picturesque vistas of the outdoors, each room features a Thangka, the local Buddhism-inspired paintings. Guests can embrace well-being at the J Wellness Circle, trek in the Himalayas, experience the serenity of a Buddhist monastery, or simply relax amidst nature.



SAWANTWADI PALACE, SAWANTWADI, MAHARASHTRA

Located 90 minutes North of Panjim, the capital city of Goa, the 18th-century Sawantwadi Palace is home of the Royal family of Sawantwadi. It is now converted into a heritage boutique hotel with six rooms. Spread over 6.5 acres, every room is adorned with Ganjifa art and the traditional woodwork of Sawantwadi. Experience the old-world charm of the Konkan region with all modern amenities such as the swimming pool and a restaurant offering global cuisines. Sawantwadi Palace is ideal for guests who want to deep dive into the heritage, culture, art, craft and cuisine of lesser known destinations in India.



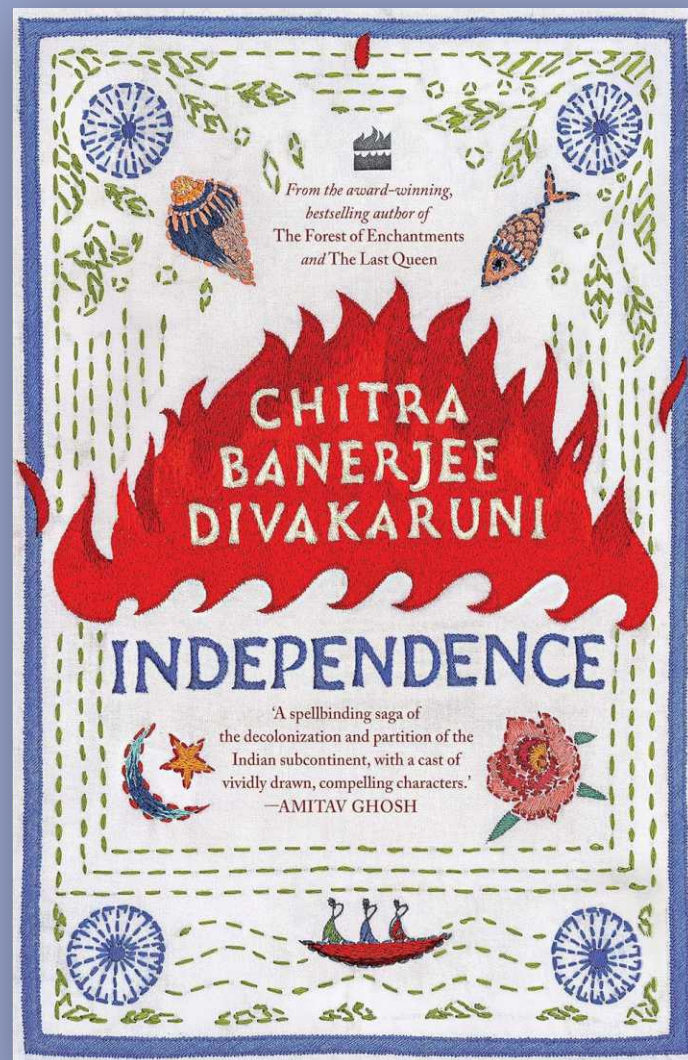
THE POSTCARD HIDEAWAY, NETRAVALI, GOA

About 90 minutes drive from South Goa, Postcard Hideaway Netravali is located in the middle of 20 acres of lush green forest, with only twenty cottages amongst the chirping of birds and fluttering butterflies. The sense of luxury is subtle and understated, but truly ticking all the boxes, required to pamper guests. The cottages are categorised into ten Premium Cottages and ten Luxury Cottages, which are made of eco-friendly pinewood with private balconies and are designed to blend unobtrusive of the surroundings, having wonderful views of the jungle or the surrounding hills. Guests can enjoy the pool, the Spa, and the Jacuzzi, or go on a guided nature trail, or just cycle to the Netravali village, which is 2 kms away. The adventurous kind can opt for a hiking trip to the beautiful Savri or Mainipi Waterfalls inside the Netravali Wildlife Sanctuary. If guests have had enough of basking in the sun, they may opt to have some local Goan fish curry and Rice and doze off on one of the hammocks. The evening here is mesmerising, and it is clearly impossible not to be seduced by the brilliant night sky and the deafening sound of complete silence! There is Wi-Fi available inside the rooms and the reception area.





BOOKS AND FILMS WE LOVED



INDEPENDENCE BY CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

Reviewed by Soma Paul, Product Manager, Destination Knowledge Centre

Here is a river...
 Here is a village...
 Here is a grand old mansion...
 Here is the country that contains them all...
 Everything is about to change.

The book begins with these lines by describing the tranquil landscape of India before its independence and the hardships that the independence was going to bring. The event had a profound impact on the populace as a whole since, except for a small minority; no one was pleased with the shape that independent India took following the religious split.

India's independence served as the inspiration for Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's latest fiction novel. Set against the background of this historical occurrence, 'Independence' is a powerful tale of sisterhood and friendship amidst two dividing nations – India and East Bengal. A poignant exploration of identity, freedom, and the intricacies of personal and political independence, the novel weaves together the lives of three strong-willed sisters and their mother, capturing the essence of India's struggle for freedom and the parallel journey of these characters toward self-discovery after their father's death on the Direct Action Day.

Bina, the mother of the three, reminds me of Mrs Bennet from 'Pride and Prejudice', whose greatest desire is to marry off her daughters to secure their futures. In fact, it is the desire of most Indian mothers. She is a talented quilt maker, much in demand for her wedding kanthas. The lovely cover of the book itself looks like one of Bina's beautiful Kantha works. I have been admiring it time and again.

The beautiful Deepa, the eldest sister, breaks the religious barrier to love a Muslim man. She embodies the spirit of defiance, challenging norms and questioning authority. Her journey is a microcosm of the larger fight for independence, where personal and political struggles intersect.

Through Jamini's eyes, the second daughter, readers witness the subtle but powerful ways in which societal expectations shape a woman's destiny. Her struggles and triumphs in navigating a conservative society showcase Divakaruni's ability to breathe life into her characters.



My favourite is Priya, the youngest of the three and most fiercely determined to break out of prescribed gender roles and make a career for herself. Her sacrifices, unwavering commitment, and the complex choices she makes highlight the broader theme of personal freedom entwined with the struggle for a nation's autonomy. She is intelligent and focused, the kind of woman a nation needs. After all the sacrifices and struggles, she ultimately follows the path of her father and becomes a doctor. Lady Doctors were a rarity in the 1950s in India and she had acquired quite the reputation as women could freely talk to her about their problems.

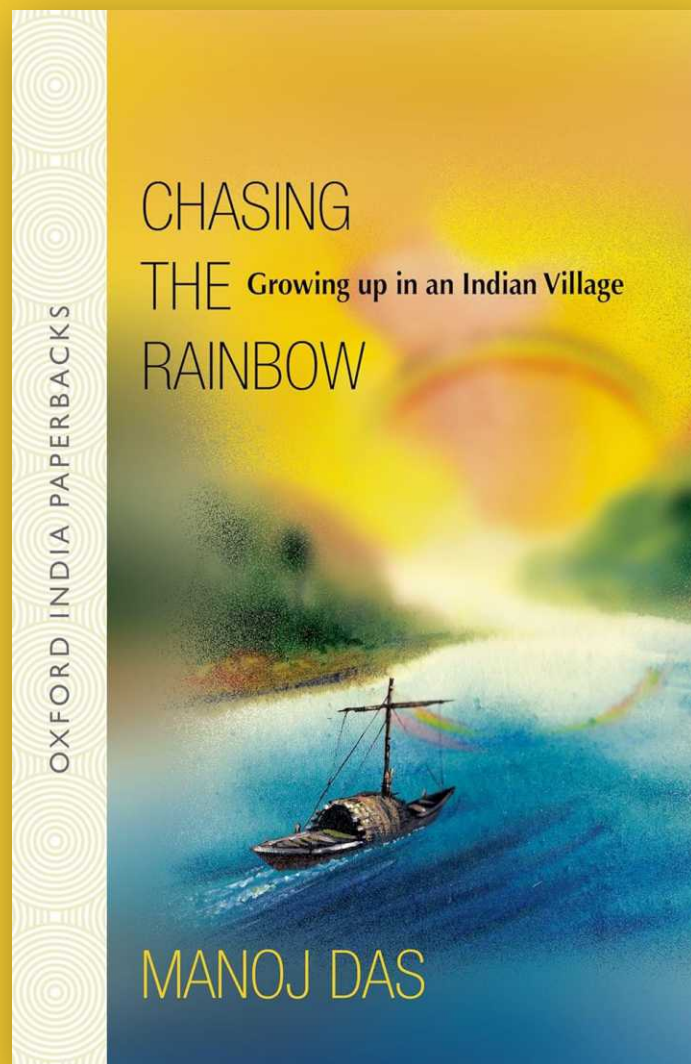
Divakaruni's rich prose and vivid storytelling create a compelling narrative that transcends time and cultural boundaries. She writes in the present tense to convey the interior dialogue of the three sisters. The characters' emotional depth and the author's skilful portrayal of historical events make "Independence" a captivating and thought-provoking read. Feminism, communal amity, empathy, and self-growth are among the requisite qualities she identifies for both a country and a human being to be truly independent. Attainment of these traits may still be a work in progress, but there is hope!

A distinct flavour is added by the romantic, ethnic, and patriotic songs woven throughout the narrative! One thing that caught my attention is a QR code at the start of the book that allows readers to scan and access a playlist of inspirational Bengali songs that influenced the freedom movement.

'Independence' is available in both paperback and Kindle versions on Amazon. There is also an unabridged version of the book on Audible.

I would like to conclude my book review with the beautiful words that Sarojini Naidu uttered to Priya during their brief conversation:

'You are a daughter of Independence, the country's future. Women like you are the ones for whom we fought and died, the ones who will transform India. You must carry the flag forward. You may fall from time to time. We all did. What is important is to get up again.'



CHASING THE RAINBOW

Reviewed by Bene Eapen, Operations Team, Distant Frontiers

“Characters follow the theme of a Story and the words are merely added by the author to represent the thoughts of the character”

In the words of Ruskin Bond: I Observe, Recollect and Reflect.

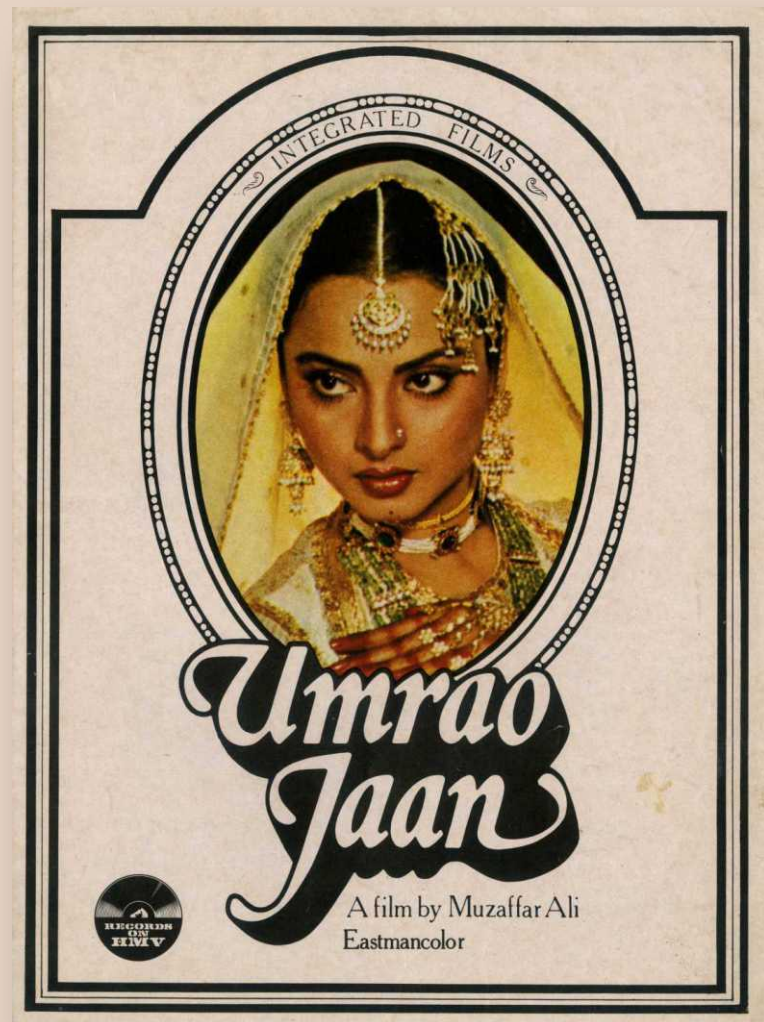
According to me, Manoj Das is an extremely versatile and prolific writer, who happens to be at the zenith among the list of India's foremost short story writers.

He writes in English and Odiya (Oriya) with equal elan. Manoj Das was born in a small coastal village named Shankari in Balasore district, Orissa State. Since 1963, he has been living at Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry.

Chasing the Rainbow is a vivid account of the childhood experiences of the author. The book leads us to a serene and quiet life of a village by the sea and the enchanting worlds of a few rural spots wherein a dreaded butcher turns out to be a messenger from a Goddess. The author paints a scenic description of village life. He creates an intricate melange between the sea and the village nearby through his interesting stories. He takes us along to his village Sankhari district Balasore, bordering Midnapore district of Bengal or to the time spent in his uncle's home in Koraput bordering Andhra Pradesh.

The author narrates enthralling tales from his childhood. Sizeable stories are from before India's Independence. He mentions that he lived in a village in Odisha which was left unperturbed from the stirrings of the freedom struggle of the nation. A 'gora' (white Englishman) had never set foot in the village and neither did they witness a vehicle being driven. The village administration was headed by the President, a person appointed by the British to govern around twenty villages. And the author had the privilege of being the President's son.

Even though his father was appointed as a President, they lived a very humble life and the author wandered to every nook and corner either alone or with his friends. Each story accentuates on the escapades with charm and delight a child experiences while discovering new places and encountering new challenges. The book has around 28 stories and is covered in 160 pages which do not act as a daunting task for readers to read it with ease.



UMRAO JAAN

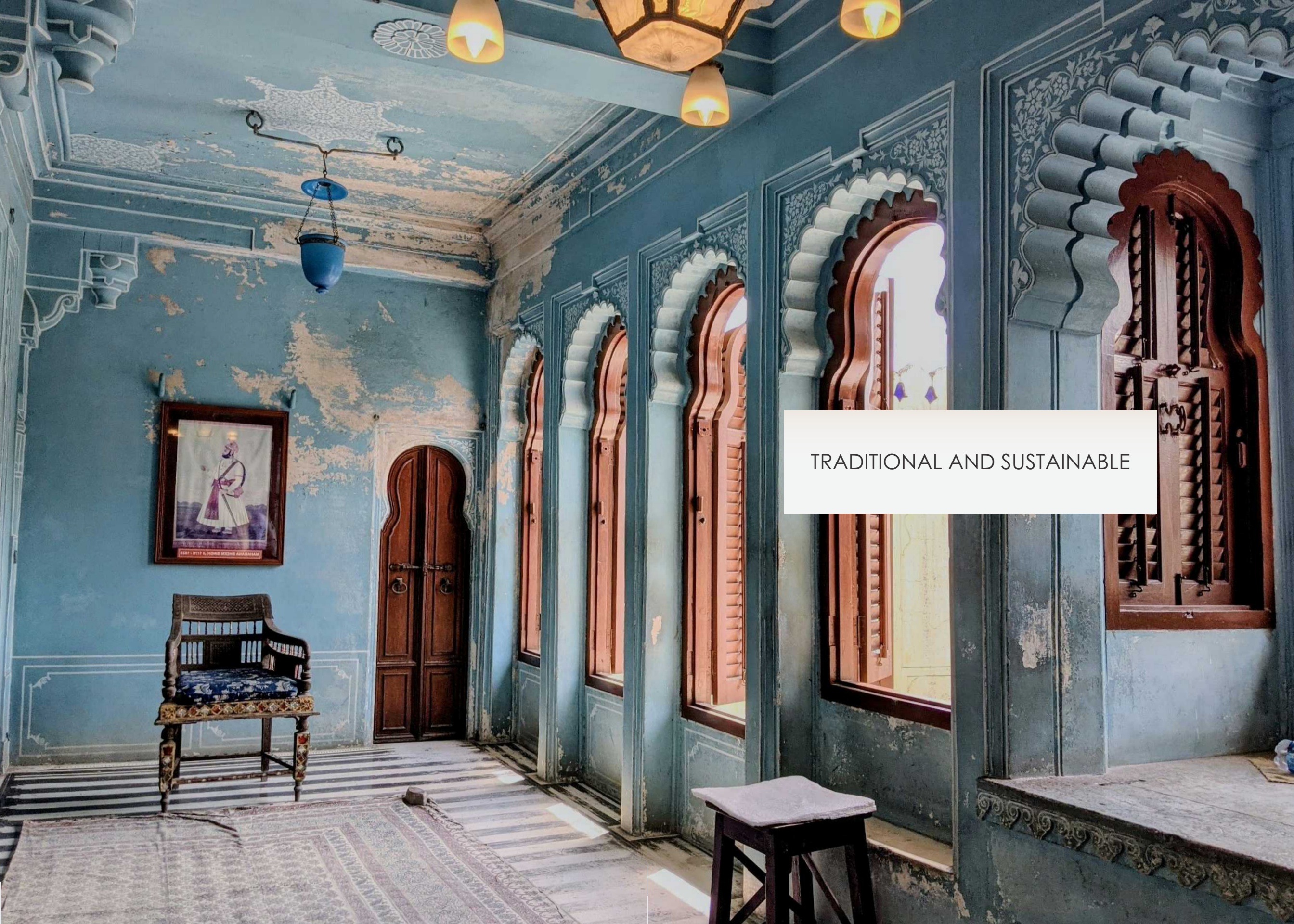
Reviewed by Inderjeet Rathod, Product Manager, Destination Knowledge Centre

'Umrao Jaan' is a cinematic masterpiece that delves into the poignant tale of a courtesan's life in the 19th century Awadh region (present day Lucknow). Directed by Muzaffar Ali, this film is a portrayal of love, loss, and the resilience of the human spirit, set against the backdrop of the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857.

At that time courtesans were a band of highly skilled female singers and dancers showcasing their art in front of kings, rich nobles and British Officers seeking patronage. They were referred to as 'Tawaifs', which was a term of respect rather than contempt at the time. The film revolves around the life of a young girl, Ameeran, who is abducted and sold into a 'kotha' (residence cum performance venue of the Tawaifs). She is given a new name, Umrao Jaan by the kotha owner and trained in Hindustani classical music, Urdu poetry and Kathak dance. Once she becomes an adult, Umrao Jaan becomes a renowned courtesan, captivating the hearts of the nobility with her beauty and talent. However, her life takes a tumultuous turn when she falls in love with a young Nawab (nobleman), leading to a series of trials and tribulations that test her resilience and strength. The character was brilliantly played by Rekha, one of the most prominent actors of the Indian film industry.

One of the film's most striking aspects is the visual grandeur. Muzaffar Ali's meticulous attention to detail brings the opulence of Lucknow to life, with elaborate sets, intricate costumes and stunning cinematography that transports the audience to the bygone era. The film's music, composed by Khayyam, is another highlight, with soul-stirring melodies based on Hindustani classical music that complements the narrative beautifully, enhancing the emotional depth of the story.

At the heart of 'Umrao Jaan' lies actress Rekha's mesmerising performance. She embodies the character of Umrao Jaan with grace and depth, portraying her journey from innocence to maturity with remarkable nuance. Rekha's expressive eyes and graceful movements convey a myriad of emotions, making Umrao Jaan a character that lingers in the viewer's mind long after the credits roll. The film's narrative unfolds at a leisurely pace, allowing the audience to immerse themselves in the rich tapestry of emotions and experiences that define Umrao Jaan's life. With its exquisite visuals, haunting music, and stellar performances, this film remains a classic example of Indian cinema at its finest!



TRADITIONAL AND SUSTAINABLE



COEXISTING WITH NATURE

NORTH-EAST INDIA'S VERNECULAR ARCHITECTURE

By Kuntal Baruwa, Explorer, Destination Knowledge Centre

Not all Kings (or Queens) built things ostentatious. Despite being home to one of the longest-running dynasties in India – the Ahom Dynasty of Assam – who ruled for nearly 600 years, Northeast India doesn't have any stunning forts and places. Architecture in Northeast India has always been about tradition, community, climate, and functionality – even for the royals who didn't build anything grand that can be called an architectural marvel. The British who colonised the region at the beginning of the 19th century were quick to adopt the vernacular architecture of the region. The Chang Bungalows (Bungalows on stilts) that still dot the landscape of Assam, particularly the tea estates, for example, were an adaptation of tribal dwellings built keeping in mind the wet climate of Assam and the annual flooding during monsoon. Another example is the fast-vanishing “Assam Type House” made with walls of bamboo or reed mesh (known locally as ikora) and plaster set in a wooden framework. They have a light tin roof and wooden floors that are highly earthquake-resistant. It is worth mentioning here that the entire region of Northeast India is a highly earthquake-prone zone and has experienced devastating earthquakes in the past.

The robust vernacular architecture of Northeast India is one of India's earliest examples of sustainable building designs. The region's luxuriant flora is handy for constructing houses suitable for its climate, as well as for its geographical conditions. The varieties of bamboo that constitute the primary construction material for dwellings are almost uncountable. To these should be added the various kinds of cane, grasses, and palm leaves used to make joints and thatched roofs. Depending on its location – on a sloping hill, on the bank of a river, or at the foot of the Himalayas – each tribe possesses a distinct model for houses. Just like their textiles, their dwellings are also an assertion of identity. In most of the tribes, they are not simply an assemblage of materials, but rather living bodies that age and catch diseases, the reason behind many tribes changing their foundations regularly. Houses, it is believed, also have souls and are the dwelling place of the ancestors. Many tribes believe that spirits can shift from an ancient style to a modern one. Whilst some tribes believe that they do not live in the house, the house allows them to live by providing a gathering place to eat and to sleep; some of the dwellings made with materials meant to last for more than a hundred years are big



enough to accommodate a hundred people. The exteriors of these fairly large houses are decorated with skulls of the buffalo and until recently human skulls, given the region's headhunting tradition, particularly among the Naga Tribes of Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. In the Buddhist part of Northeast India, particularly Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh the centuries-old monasteries were constructed without any drawings or architectural plans but with spiritual inspiration from the Head Monk. The "Namghor" (community prayer hall) of Assam is a mélange of architectural elements borrowed from the different local tribes and even Southeast Asia, the original home of the Ahom Kings who used fish oil, duck eggs, and sticky rice as building materials.

Northeast India's vernacular architecture is also a lesson on community. The bamboo and cane suspension bridges over the rivers of Arunachal Pradesh are fantastic examples of the community coming together and building it with their bare hands using bare basic tools. Even now it is a practice among many tribes where relatives travel long distances to help their family members build a new house where the community also pitches in. But the most fascinating part of Northeast India's vernacular architecture is man and nature co-existing in harmony. The Living Roots Bridges of Meghalaya is a fine example of this symbiotic relationship. The bamboo bridges built to cross streams and rivers in Meghalaya couldn't bear the brunt of the heavy monsoons. They would rot and break, leaving the people stranded. So, the locals devised a clever method. They built suspension bridges made by shaping the living roots of rubber trees that were native to Meghalaya. It took 15 to 20 years for a surreal, strong web of tangled root bridges to connect two banks which grew extraordinarily sturdy with each passing year and lasted for centuries.



CULINARY WISDOM

THE SIL BATTI OF INDIA'S KITCHEN

By Soma Paul, Product Manager, Destination Knowledge Centre

Ever since my mother moved to Gurgaon with me, she has been missing the taste of freshly ground spices in her food. In today's world when everything is available in stores or online, who cares the strenuous process of grinding spices or chutneys manually in a grinding stone?

Imagine entering a traditional Indian kitchen, filled with the aroma of spices. The rhythmic sound of grinding echoes in the kitchen as the lady of the house skillfully rotates the pestle on the mortar, turning the spices into a fine paste. This method is appreciated for its ability to retain the authentic flavours of the spices and is widely used by many households in India even now, despite the difficulty in procuring them and the wide availability of modern appliances.





The 'sil batta', a flat rectangular piece of stone and a cylindrical rounded stone, played an important part in my mother's kitchen. I remember her grinding masalas, rice, lentils, and chutneys using the grinding stone with so much patience and passion, uncomplainingly. It was hard for me to comprehend from where so much strength came to those hands. After all, she wanted to serve the best food to her family!

While grinding, she used to narrate the stories from her childhood, recalling how my grandmother never allowed her or anyone in the kitchen while cooking. She was very particular about her cooking techniques and always handled everything single-handedly. My mother somehow managed to learn cooking and grinding just by watching her. She always emphasised on the connection between the traditional method of grinding spices manually and the depth of flavour it imparts to the dishes. The conversation used to be a blend of memories and culinary wisdom, making the simple act of grinding spices a cherished tradition passed down through generations. She still feels that the mixer with its steel blades is no substitute for the stone mortar and pestle. And I cannot agree more, as I still miss the taste of the food that my mother used to cook.

Getting the "preferred" mortar and pestle wasn't a simple chore. As we were living in Bhopal, my mother was never happy with the grinding stone available locally. Hence, we used to get one all the way from her hometown in West Bengal.

The 'sil batta', now weathered from years of use, symbolises more than a kitchen tool; it embodies a cultural heritage, a link to the past, and the essence of home-cooked meals in India. It is a story told through the hands of those who have lovingly ground spices for decades, preserving flavours and traditions.



TRADITIONAL UTENSILS OF INDIA'S KITCHEN

By Inderjeet Rathod, Product Manager, Destination Knowledge Centre

The use of sustainable materials in traditional Indian utensils is rooted in the country's rich history and diverse cultural traditions. Over generations, artisans have perfected the art of creating utensils that are not only durable and practical but also environmentally friendly. This harmonious blend has made these utensils, often made from materials such as clay, copper, brass, banana leaves, and wood, not only serve functional purposes in cooking and serving but also embody a cultural heritage that values sustainability and resourcefulness.

In this context, exploring the usage of traditional utensils in India not only offers insights into the country's cultural heritage but also provides valuable lessons in sustainable living.

Clay or Earthenware Utensils: Clay pots, pans and other utensils have been an integral part of Indian kitchens for generations. Their porous nature allows for natural cooling, making them ideal for storing water and cooking, while also adding





a unique flavour to certain dishes. This natural cooling property makes them especially useful in hot climates, serving as eco-friendly alternatives to modern refrigeration.

Copper Utensils: Copper utensils, valued for their antibacterial properties, are commonly used for storing water and cooking certain dishes. The use of copper utensils is believed to have health benefits, adding to their appeal in traditional Indian households. Additionally, the longevity and recyclability of copper make it a sustainable choice for kitchenware.

Brass Utensils: Brass utensils, known for their aesthetic appeal and durability, are often used for special occasions. Their use in serving food adds a touch of elegance to the dining experience, reflecting the cultural significance of food in Indian traditions. The durability of brass ensures that these utensils can be passed down through generations, reducing the need for new production and minimising waste.

Wooden Utensils: Wooden utensils such as ladles, spatulas, and rolling pins have been used in Indian kitchens for centuries. Their gentle nature makes them suitable for various cooking tasks, and their natural aesthetic adds a rustic charm to the culinary process. The use of wooden utensils also reduces the reliance on plastic alternatives, contributing to a more sustainable kitchen environment.

Banana Leaf Plates: In many parts of India, especially in South India, banana leaves are used as plates for serving meals. Not only are they biodegradable, but they also impart a subtle flavour to the food, enhancing the dining experience while minimising environmental impact. After use, banana leaves can be composted, making them a zero-waste alternative to disposable plates.

These traditional utensils, deeply rooted in Indian culture, embody the principles of sustainability by utilising natural materials and minimising waste. Their continued use in Indian households reflects a commitment to preserving traditional practices while embracing eco-friendly alternatives. As the world seeks sustainable solutions, these age-old utensils serve as a reminder of the wisdom of the past and a guide to a more sustainable future.

An aerial photograph of a narrow, calm river flowing through a dense tropical forest. The river is dark blue, reflecting the surrounding greenery. On the left bank, several palm trees are prominent, their fronds casting shadows on the water. A small, light-colored boat is visible near the top left, and a blue boat is further down the river. The right bank is covered in thick, lush vegetation. The overall scene is serene and untouched.

FROM OUR EXPLORER'S DIARY



KERALA SLOWLY 2.0

Curated by Kuntal Baruwa, Explorer, Destination Knowledge Centre

VENGOLA - NERIYAMANGALAM - KAMBILIKANDAM - BISON VALLEY - KODIKULAM - KUMARAKOM - MARARIKULAM

Duration: 19 nights/20 days

DAY 01, 02: I landed in Kochi during desperate times. Kerala was experiencing one of its driest monsoons in over 100 years. As I started my journey to the homestay at **Vengola** which was a 30 - 45 minutes drive from the Kochi airport it began to rain. My chauffeur compared me to a saint from Kerala's folklore credited with bringing rain to the land during one such dry spell in the distant past. This cosy one key homestay is tucked away in a landscaped nutmeg garden and it made for a perfect soft landing before my Kerala adventure. Constructed using treated mud, laterite and recycled wood, the homestay has 2-bedrooms with all modern comforts and is





also ideal for families and friends traveling together. I was delighted to note that my charming hosts, a financial consultant and a former HR professional, though new to the hospitality business, are hands-on when it comes to running the homestay. **I loved the delightful home cooked meals, the escorted walks in the countryside which was a fantastic opportunity in getting up and close with rural agrarian life of Kerala, and learned about how a nutmeg plantation works from my hosts.**

THE HIGHLIGHT of my stay was this unique cooking class which was a curious mix of music and good food. Facilitated by a professional singer with over 800 performances in 16 different languages (even Assamese, my mother tongue) and an accomplished cook, I was introduced to the elements of crafting a fine Kerala dish, including the ingredients that are used, the process and the final presentation, accompanied by musical references that are topical to what's being used and the dish that is being made.

The session started with an introduction to the dishes and the ingredients. At each stage, the expert included songs or snippets that are relevant such as an Arabic ingredient was accompanied by an Arabic song, or a dish from Alleppey evoked memories of many film songs set in the picturesque backwaters including my favourite **Kuttanadan Punjayile**, a traditional Kerala boat race song. I had so much fun singing along. This was followed by the cooking process of a Kerala dish with simple step by step instructions and a detailed demonstration. Finally, the dish was presented for a tasting, with tips and suggestions on how I could make a solo attempt. I didn't attempt anything and was happy with all the good food and my rum and coke, but our guests have the option of trying their hand at making the dish, closely supervised and with assistance from the expert who happened to be a close friend of the host couple from their school days.

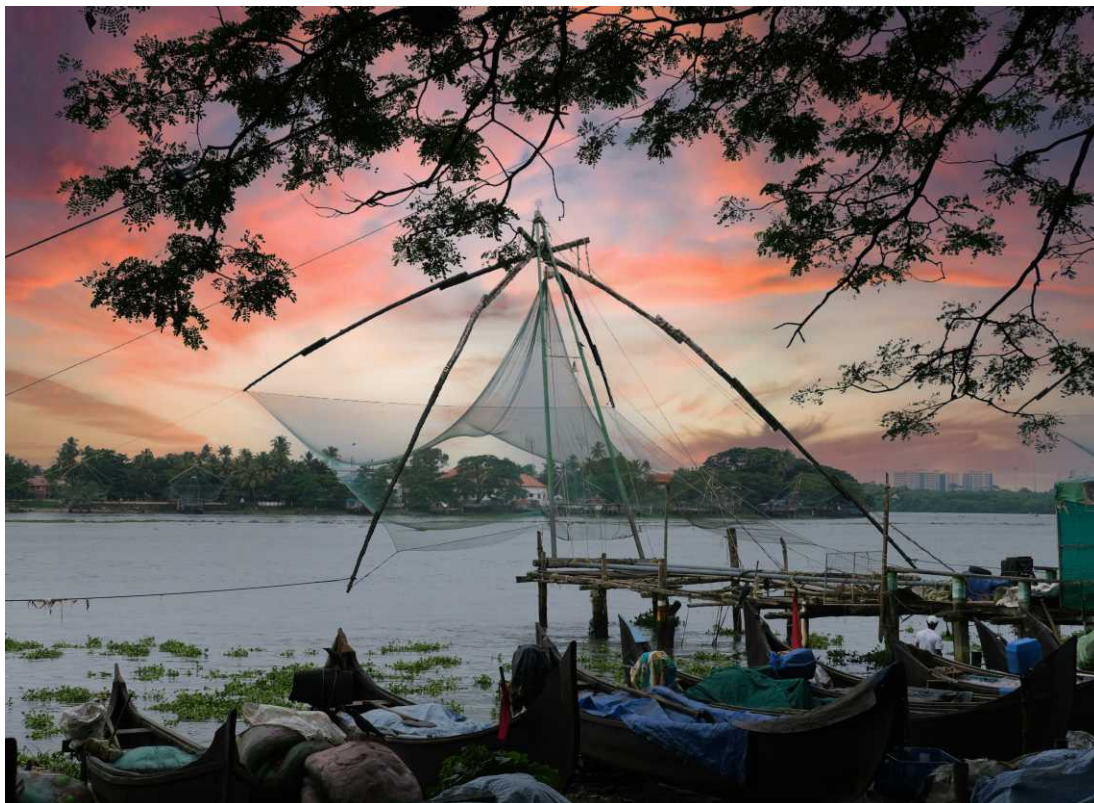
What a finale to my stay!! Brilliant!!

DAY 03, 04, 05: Neriya Mangalam, my next destination enroute to Munnar that most itinerary planners give it a miss, was just an hour's drive away. So it was a leisurely morning and an extended breakfast with my hosts who decided to join me for feedback and inputs. I got a bag of spices from the spice garden of my hosts as a parting gift with clear instructions written on a note about what the spices are, how to use them, where to use them, how much to use, how to dry them, when to dry them etc. Wonderful!!

I split my stay at Neriya Mangalam at the Amritara Riverside Luxury Tents and the Windermere River House. If guests are into birding and active experiences such as cycling and kayaking Amritara Riverside Luxury Tents is recommended. For Guests who are more leisure focussed Windermere River House is recommended.

GOOD TO KNOW: Located on the banks of the River Periyar, **Hornbill Camp**, Thattekad, started by Navy Commanders Sam and Thomas Zacharias of Kalypso Adventures in 2006, has been taken over the Amritara Group and **is now Amritara Riverside Luxury Tents**. The tents are spruced up (17 in total/all twin bedded), the beds are comfortable, the mattress and the linen and furniture new. Amritara plans to redo the bathrooms and Gazebo during the offseason of 2024. The resident naturalists are brilliant. The Gazebo at night is a treat with all the nocturnal birds coming out.

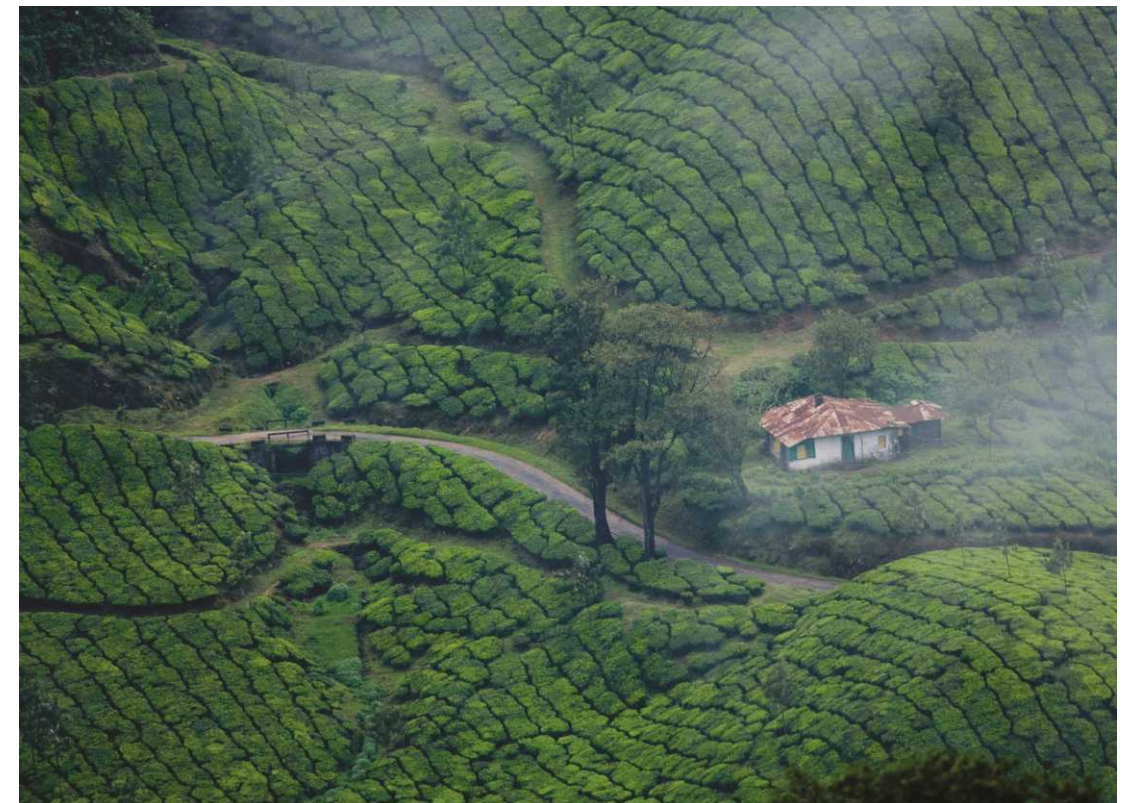
With the help of a bunch of enthusiastic storytellers and local naturalists I have curated **3 experiences in Neriya Mangalam** that foster a deep and intimate connection with nature, agriculture, the local ecosystem, and the entrepreneurship of the local people. **Please get in touch with your relationship manager to know more about how to weave them into your Kerala itineraries. 2 out of 3 experiences can be done enroute Cochin to Munnar provided guests have 2 nights in Munnar. One of these 3 experiences have been curated keeping groups in mind, while the other 2 are for FITs only.**



DAY 6, 7: After a leisurely breakfast I checked out and drove for 90 minutes to another homestay located amidst a cardamom plantation in the hills of **Kambilikandam**. Here I was hosted by a lovely couple who are close friends of my hosts at Vengola where I spent my first two nights after landing in Kochi. I arrived right on time for lunch and decided to take it easy for the rest of the day to enjoy the peace and the quiet and the stunning views. I enjoyed the easy nature hikes in the hills of Kambilikandam which can be done by all age groups. Highly recommended!!

DAY 8, 9, 10: Munnar is just 90 minutes away Kambilikandam. My homestay for the next 3 nights was at Bison Valley, away from the press and clamour of the crowds, where I was hosted by an eminent Psychiatrist and former Professor of King's College London and his wife. I went on a day trip to Munnar which is not too far away (30 minutes one way) and spent the day walking around in a tea garden, participating in a private tea tasting session, and visiting the tea museum before returning to the homestay.

DAY 11, 12: From Munnar I drove to Kodikulam where I stayed for 2 nights at one of our favourite family run properties, Dewalokam. Here I was hosted by Professor of English Literature Jose Alilakuzhy and his wife Sinta. The river front property,





enveloped by the rain forests of Kerala, produces milk and honey, fruits and vegetables, eggs and meat all in a truly organic way. Guests have access to a wide variety of free activities, such as swimming in the river, cow milking, bamboo rafting, village walks, spice hikes, and temple visits. Or they can just unwind in a hammock with a book like I did!!

DAY 13, 14, 15: From Dewalokam I continued to **Philipkutty's Farm**, one of our favourite homestays in the backwaters of Kerala. **I made a very interesting stop enroute in a village** which is the native of a colleague of our Kochi office. **The villagers here have designed a very interesting tour** which is a great introduction to the Temples of Kerala; its unique architecture, and music and dance that originated from it. The tour includes a 60 minute concert by artists from the village and a sumptuous home cooked lunch with a local family from the Knanaya Christian Community whose ancestors migrated to Kerala from Mesopotamia in 345 CE. Philipkutty's Farm in Kumarakom is just 60 minutes away from this village. Set on an island, which was reclaimed from the backwaters of Lake Vembanad in the early 1950's, I was hosted here by Anu Mathew and her mother Aniamia.

While at Philipkutty's Farm, I would recommend a Day Cruise on the Backwaters (where a canoe ride is also included to explore the narrower canals), disembark post lunch and return to Philipkutty's Farm. Guests can also explore the backwaters with its coconut groves, narrow canals and paddy fields on a canoe, on foot or on bicycles. The sunset canoe ride here is magical and highly recommended.

I would also recommend a day trip to Kottayam (30 minutes one way) to visit the Syrian Christian Churches from the 16th century with their peculiar architecture – a combination of the traditional temple architecture of Kerala and Portuguese/European style. Christianity came to Kerala the same time it went to Europe and the Syrian Christians were the first converts of Kerala who were high caste Hindus. The 1200 year Thazhathangadi Mosque built in Kerala style with exquisite wood carvings is another highlight. Islam came to Kerala when Prophet Mohammed was still alive with the Arab Merchants. They carried Spices from Kerala to the rest of the world through the sea route. **On the way back from Kottayam I made a stopover at the pretty backwater village of Aymananam – the backdrop of one of my favourite novels Arundhati Roy's 'God of Small Things'**

Guests can also take lessons on Syrian Christian Cuisine from Anu and her mother during their stay at Philipkutty's Farm. The Syrian Christians' contribution to Kerala cuisine has been manifold and the most noted are the Hoppers, Duck Roast, Meen Vevichathu (red fish curry) and the Istew (stew).

DAY 16, 17, 18: My next and the last destination of the itinerary was Marari Beach Resort (40 minutes one way)



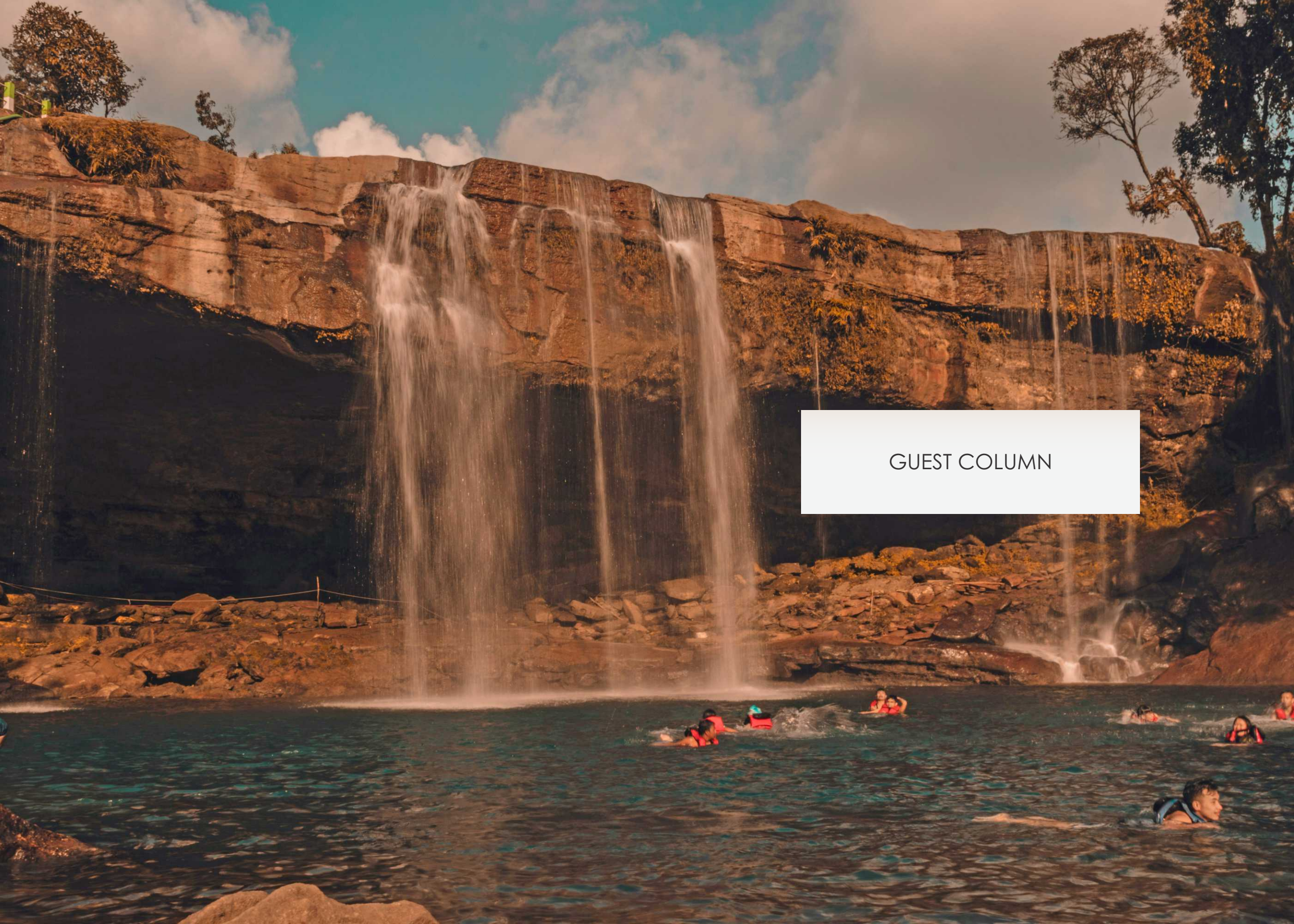
While at the resort, **I would recommend guests rise early for a walk on the beach to witness the local fisherman return from the sea with their catch.** They can explore the neighbourhood of Mararikulam on cycles, swim in the sea, spend time in the Butterfly Garden or take an Ayurveda Massage in the Spa (on direct payment basis) to get introduced to one of the world's most sophisticated and powerful mind-body health systems.

I went on a day trip to Fort Cochin and Mattancherry which is not too far away from the Marari Beach Resort (1 hr/20 minutes one way). **I took a local train ride from Mararikulam up to Ezhupunna** (30 minutes) and did the rest of the journey to Fort Cochin by car. While at Mattancherry I would definitely recommend guests spend time at Little Queen Embroidery which is a treasure trove of rare embroidery work that came with the nuns from Europe. Some of the embroidery tradition here dates back to the middle ages. It is now done by women from the fisherman community of Mararikulam.

GOOD TO KNOW: Should guests decide on staying a couple of nights in Kochi, I have curated 2 very interesting experiences that I would like to highly recommend. **One tour is an interesting twist to the city tour of Kochi** that not only takes in the must-sees of Fort Kochi and Mattancherry but also celebrates its diversity and ability like never before through authentic encounters with creative people and spaces where diverse cultures can interact freely, where connections can be made, experiences shared, and new skills learned. **The other tour offers a fantastic insight into the unique way of life on the living islands north of Fort Kochi** and is a rare opportunity to connect with the heart and soul of the vibrant community who inhabit these islands. **Another tour that I would highly recommend is the Rediscover Fort Kochi tour** which offers a fascinatingly different lens to view a familiar destination. The tour is a very interesting mix of Art, History, Coffee, Conversations and More. I spent half-a-day meandering through Fort Kochi's picturesque laneways with a local as he expertly weaved in and out of different stories of the colours around us, linking each to the eclectic mix of nationalities and religions that left their mark over the last 500 years on Kochi's culture, architecture and much more. **Please get in touch with your relationship manager to know more about how to weave them into your Kerala itineraries. These 3 experiences are curated for FITs only.**

DAY 19: After a leisurely breakfast I checked out from the Marari Beach Resort to board the flight back home from Kochi airport (2 hrs one way from the Marari Beach Resort)

Get in touch with your relationship manager for more details on the Kerala Slowly 2.0 itinerary



GUEST COLUMN



EAST BY NORTHEAST

By Natasha Sinclair, Founder, IndAfrica, New Zealand

In November 2023 I escorted a group of 16 adventurous and predominantly 'young at heart' travellers from New Zealand and Hawaii to Assam and Nagaland to explore the culture, food, wildlife, and natural beauty of these two North-Eastern states of India. The tour was specifically timed to coincide with the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland, but we were fortunate as the dates aligned for us to also attend the Raas Leela on Majuli Island in Assam.

The Hornbill Festival is unlike many other festivals in India. It is not tied to religion or the lunar cycles but instead it is a 'cultural extravaganza' organised by Nagaland's Department of Art and Culture that brings together cultural groups from 18 of Nagaland's distinct tribes.

In contrast, the Raas Leela held on Majuli is a religious celebration and depending on the lunar cycles can fall at any time from October to November. The island is home to a number of Satras (Hindu Monasteries) whose monks' mastery of religious script, art, music and handicrafts are brought to life in all night performances that celebrate the life and times of the Hindu deity Krishna.

GUWAHATI

Our North-East adventure started when we landed in Guwahati. It may be Assam's state capital, but its interest lies beyond the busy streets of this compact city.

I was keen to showcase Assam's rich tradition of handloom textiles and indigenous silks including Golden Muga, White Paat and Eri (Peace Silk) and some of the best examples are produced in villages just outside of the city.

After lunch (our first taste of the fresh and subtly spiced home style Assamese food) we visited what our seasoned travellers described as one of the most fascinating temples they had ever visited in India. Dedicated to the mother goddess Kamakhya, the temple is a sacred shrine for Tantric Shaktism, a branch of Hinduism where the metaphysical representation of God is as a woman.

The temple itself has some stunning iconography and despite its dedication to the mother goddess, we soon discover that certain areas are sacred to different traditions whose pilgrims peacefully worship side by side. A valuable lesson for the wider world at this time!



KAZIRANGA

Leaving Guwahati, the gods must have been smiling on us! We were rewarded with views of the Eastern Himalayas on our drive to Kaziranga, as well as every morning and late afternoon during our stay. Usually obscured by a natural haze, the sky cleared to give us clear views of the Gorichen range in the neighbouring state of Arunachal Pradesh with its highest peak a towering 6858 metres. Impressive!

Kaziranga National Park is unbelievably beautiful especially when bathed in the golden light of the morning and late afternoon. Seeing so many one-horned Rhinoceros took our breath away. For those who have been to Africa, it certainly was a surprising sight when you see large groups of the Indian species grazing, sleeping, wallowing and wading. We may not have seen a tiger but were rewarded with numerous sightings of other wildlife.

MAJULI

From Kaziranga's undulating sea of Elephant Grass we journeyed to the shore of the mighty Brahmaputra River to take the ferry to the world's largest river island, Majuli. During Raas Leela accommodation is extremely limited and when the Assamese Chief Minister and his acolytes have nabbed the only good guest house on the island, you do need to be prepared to rough it for a couple of nights in accommodation that is only suitable for those who are adventurous.

What we lost in comfort; we were rewarded in culture. Attending one of the performances at a Satra was magical as was the time we spent visiting a village of the Mishing people and discovering (and devouring) their local food as part of a special lunch and dinner. Mostly prepared over hot coals in the centre of a bamboo walled kitchen the Mishing's food is largely steamed, smoked or in some cases fermented. You have to remind yourself you are still in India as the flavours are closer to those of South-East Asia.

THE HORNBILL FESTIVAL & KOHIMA

After a brief overnight stop in Dimapur we drove into the misty hills to the large town of Kohima. Here houses are clustered into the slopes of the forested hills connected with winding narrow roads and steep paths.

The Hornbill Festival itself is held at a purpose-built site. On the first day you attend you must be in the amphitheatre for the 'roll-call' when each tribe answers with a war-cry yell or ululation. An unforgettable experience.

The festival site offers something for everyone. The group loved having the freedom to watch the performances, browse the craft stalls, art exhibitions and visit the World War 2 Museum that is on site. There is even a coffee shop serving Nagaland



grown and roasted espresso coffee with cinnamon scrolls. Others, like me, spent time visiting each tribe's Morung (meeting house). Not only could you get an up close look at the exquisite traditional dress but also there were people available to answer questions for those wanting to know more about a tribe's beliefs and culture. A few Morungs also had kitchens attached serving up favoured local dishes like smoked pork axone – yum!

Outside of the festival we also explored the World War 2 cemetery, the impressive Kohima Cathedral with its panoramic views of the town. At the Angami village of Kigwema we got a glimpse into the modern lives of what is one the larger Naga tribes.

GOOD TO KNOW:

- Kamakhya Temple closes each day from 1:00 pm to 2:30 pm for cooked offerings to be made to the deity.
- Majuli Island can be visited as a day trip from Jorhat for those who are not willing to make potential compromises on accommodation, but it is worth at least a two-night stay.
- Don't plan on attending the first day of the Hornbill Festival. The performances start on the second day.
- There are no big vehicles in Northeast India that meet our standards, so we used cars for the group.
- It is hot in the sun during the day at this time of year, but the temperature drops when the sun goes down. A warm and windproof jacket is essential.
- Accommodation standards are varied. Staff are friendly and genuine in their service but don't expect the polished standards of the well-travelled routes. The food is excellent!



PHOTO CONTEST WINNER

PICTURE CREDIT: SHEFALI SAINI

Bus conductors in India play a crucial role in the country's extensive public transportation system. Often seen as the unsung heroes of the bustling streets, these individuals hold a unique position, ensuring a smooth and orderly journey for passengers.

Dressed in their distinctive uniforms, bus conductors are responsible for collecting fares, issuing tickets, and maintaining orderliness among passengers. Their job requires a combination of multitasking skills, patience, and a deep understanding of the diverse communities they serve.

In the chaotic rhythm of Indian traffic, bus conductors navigate through crowded buses, managing transactions with efficiency. They are adept at handling the varied demands and queries of passengers, providing assistance with routes, schedules, and other travel-related information.

Beyond their operational duties, bus conductors often become the face of the bus service for commuters. They develop a familiarity with regular passengers, creating a sense of community on the daily commute. In rural areas, conductors may be well-acquainted with the local population, fostering a friendly and personalized travel experience.

The life of a bus conductor is not without challenges. They endure long working hours, exposure to the elements, and the demanding nature of their responsibilities. Despite these challenges, they continue to contribute significantly to the accessibility and affordability of public transportation, connecting people across diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

In recent times, technological advancements have brought changes to the profession. Electronic ticketing systems and modern communication tools have streamlined operations, making the conductor's role more efficient. However, the essence of their job remains rooted in the personal touch and human connection they bring to the journey.

Bus conductors in India are emblematic of the spirit of resilience and adaptability. Their unwavering commitment to ensuring a safe and comfortable travel experience for passengers reflects the integral role they play in the country's transportation landscape.



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