

Art of Travel

2025 - 2026

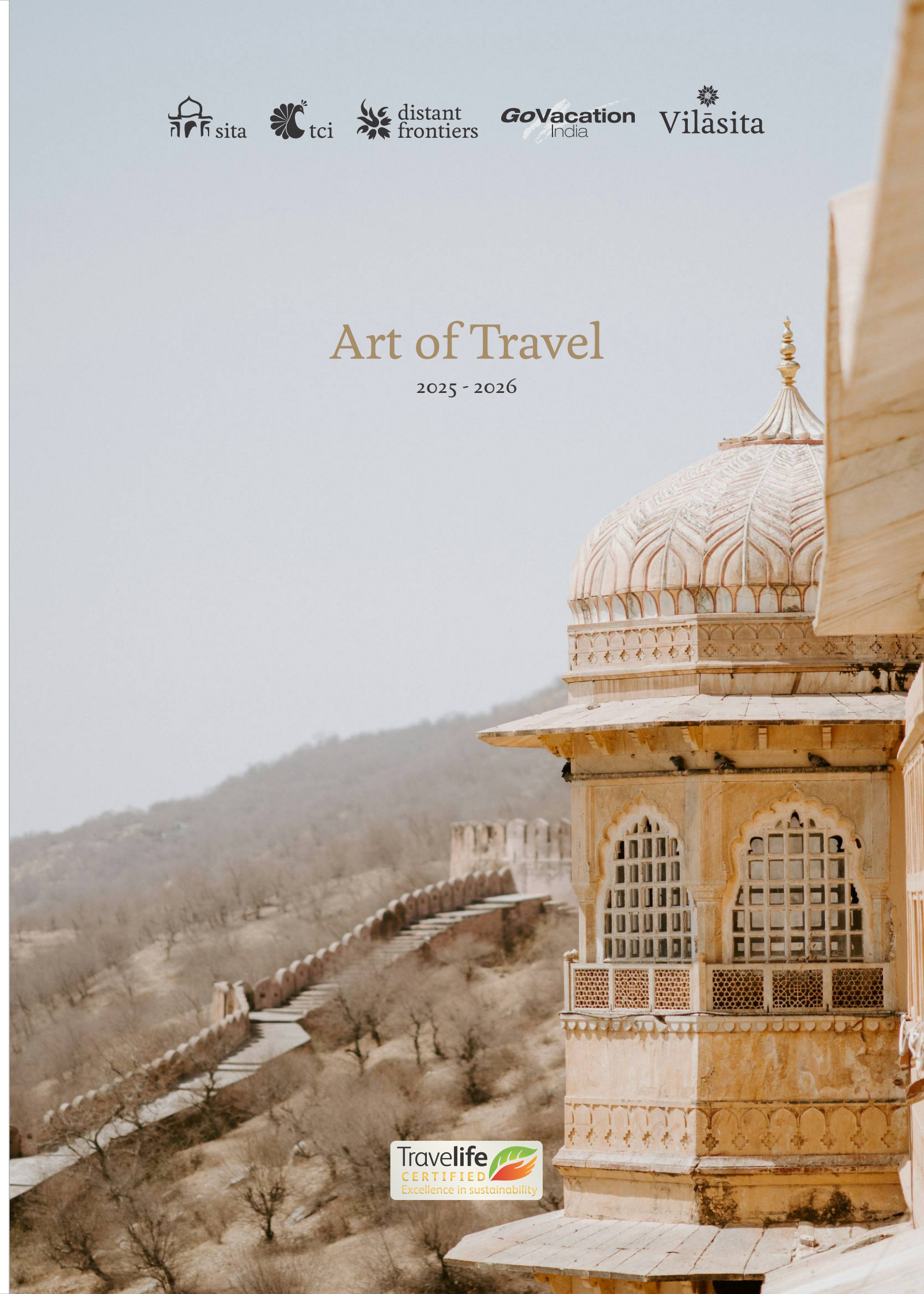


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KNOWLEDGE IS BASED ON EXPERIENCE
EVERYTHING ELSE IS JUST INFORMATION

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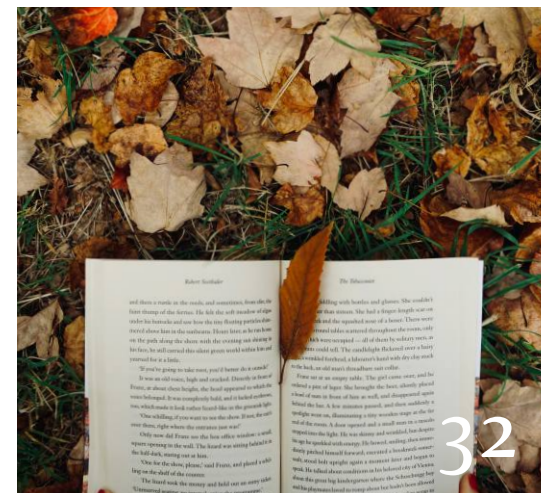
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Get Inspired -
Explore



Hidden Gems of Rajasthan



The Manganiyars of Jaisalmer

From the Rajasthan Travel Diary of Soma Paul

Discover the soulful music of the Manganiyars of Jaisalmer, a community that has preserved its musical heritage for generations, weaving stories, legends, and history into every note. This immersive experience takes guests deep into the Thar Desert to an intimate jamming centre, where they can connect directly with Manganiyar musicians and explore their rich musical traditions.

Guests can try playing traditional instruments such as the khartaal (clappers), morchang (iron mouth harp), and dholak (drum), feeling the raw energy of the desert in every beat. The Manganiyars' rustic vocals and simple yet powerful instruments create a deeply moving atmosphere.

More than just a performance, this hands-on experience offers insight into the Manganiyars' way of life and the vital role music plays in preserving their identity. By supporting the musicians and their village, guests help sustain a living tradition and ensure its legacy for future generations.

Highly recommended while in Jaisalmer.

Hidden Gems of Rajasthan

Bikaner's Heritage Trail

From the Rajasthan Travel Diary of Soma Paul

Bikaner, with its rich history, stunning architecture, and exceptional food, remains one of Rajasthan's hidden gems. Unlike its more famous counterpart, Jaisalmer, Bikaner offers a quieter yet equally captivating desert experience—one that deserves more attention from itinerary planners.

Led by a local, the Bikaner Heritage Trail offers a glimpse into the city's soul, weaving through iconic landmarks, bustling markets, and culinary delights. Guests explore intricate local art, interact with artists, and admire exquisitely carved red sandstone havelis that whisper tales of the past. Wandering through the old city's narrow lanes, they encounter colourful markets, traditional snack-making, and handcrafted souvenirs.

A highlight of the trail is a drink-tasting session at a decades-old shop, offering an authentic taste of Bikaner's unique flavours.

A must-do while in Bikaner.



Women of Odisha

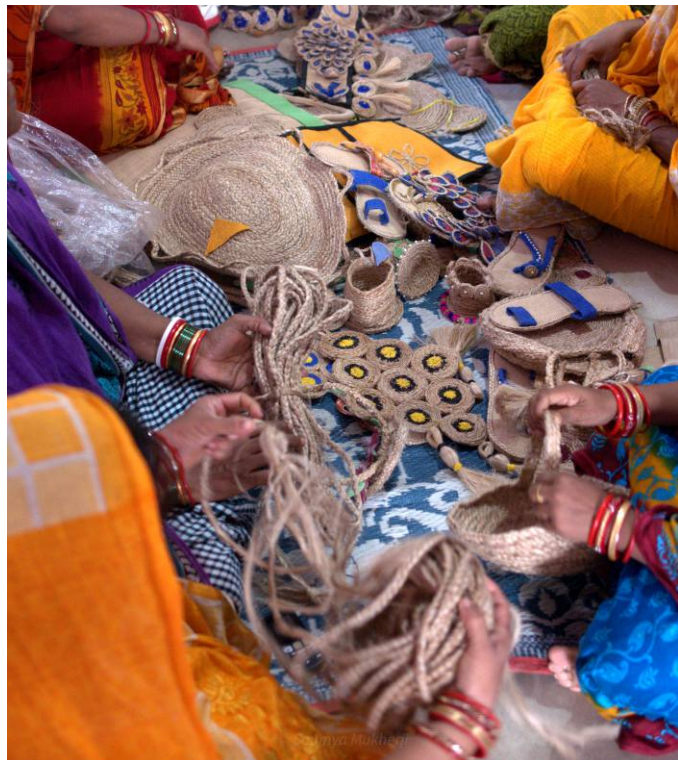
The Artisans of Nimapada

From the Odisha Travel Diary of Kuntal Baruwa

One of my favourite tours in Bhubaneswar, which I highly recommend, is a real treat—it offers a glimpse into the lives of the amazing women of Nimapada, who have transformed their villages into creative hubs. Led by a local entrepreneur, this grassroots initiative has empowered over 300 women artisans across six villages, and the impact is truly inspiring.

Stroll through the village to see a range of beautiful handmade crafts—everything from toys and masks to lampshades, bags, and palm-leaf paintings. Depending on what catches your eye, visits to different artisan clusters—whether it's coir, jute, palm-leaf art, or applique—can be arranged. Want to make a toy? The ladies would love to show you how.

The tour wraps up with a traditional Odia lunch served on banana leaves in a charming temple complex. Don't forget to pick up some souvenirs to support the artisans. A sunset visit to the Konark Sun Temple is the perfect way to end the day.



Women of Odisha

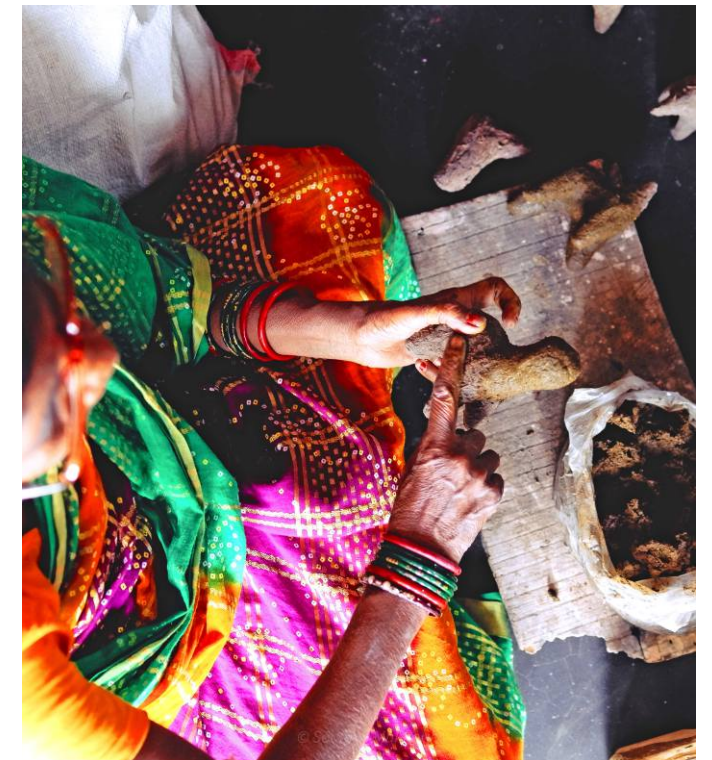
Birds, Boats, and Masks

From the Odisha Travel Diary of Kuntal Baruwa

Another favourite tour of mine in Bhubaneswar, which is a must-do, is a visit to a village where women artisans craft colourful masks from sun-dried cow dung, painted with designs of tigers, leopards, and Hindu deities. You can even create your own toy, guided by a skilled artisan.

Next, head to Manglajodi, one of the six Ramsar sites in Odisha, where a peaceful boat ride offers close encounters with migratory birds. Former poachers now protect these wetlands, and a guide helps spot the diverse birdlife.

As the sun sets, return to Bhubaneswar, carrying memories of creativity, nature, and inspiring transformation.



Lesser - Known Heritage of Tamil Nadu

The Exquisite Mats of Pattamadai

From the Tamil Nadu Travel Diary of Jean Noel Esteve

Located 30 km west of Tirunelveli, Pattamadai is a small village with a remarkable legacy—the art of weaving exquisite mats.

For over two centuries, artisans from the Labbai community have crafted mats known for their softness, lightness, and flexibility. Made from locally abundant korai grass and dyed with natural ingredients, these mats are both eco-friendly and deeply rooted in tradition. Pattamadai mats are cherished gifts for weddings and ceremonies, often inscribed with the bride and groom's names and wedding date as treasured keepsakes.

Around 300 families in Pattamadai sustain this intricate, labour-intensive craft, weaving primarily from their homes. Some mats take up to a month to complete.

For guests travelling through Tamil Nadu, a visit to Pattamadai offers a rare glimpse into this living heritage. Meet the artisans, watch the weaving process unfold, and stop by the local Cooperative Store to take home a piece of this timeless tradition.



Lesser - Known Heritage of Tamil Nadu

The Art of Temple Jewellery-Making of Vadasery

From the Tamil Nadu Travel Diary of Jean Noel Esteve

In the village of Vadasery, on the outskirts of Nagercoil, an ancient craft quietly endures the test of time—a tradition dating back to the 9th-century Chola dynasty. Originally made for temple deities, these intricate jewellery pieces once graced revered temples like Srirangam and Suchindram. Today, temple jewellery remains iconic, worn by Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi dancers and those captivated by the grandeur of the Chola era.

Historically crafted from fine gold and decorated with diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and pavalam (coral), contemporary versions use gold or silver with synthetic stones. Yet, the designs retain their timeless elegance and deep cultural significance. Closely guarded for generations, this specialised craft is typically passed from father to son, with only about 40 families still dedicated to it today.

A visit to Vadasery offers a rare chance to witness this exquisite tradition. Inside homes transformed into workshops, each floor is dedicated to a certain stage of the jewellery-making process. Meeting these artisans as they meticulously bring history to life is more than an appreciation of their skill—it's an immersive journey into Tamil Nadu's living heritage.



Women of Nepal

A Day with Maya Gurung



From the Nepal Travel Diary of Deenam Lamichhane

Maya Gurung's journey is about transforming personal victories into collective progress. On 22nd May 2008, she reached the summit of Mount Everest, joining history's most daring climbers. As a member of the Seven Summits Women Team, the first all-female group to conquer the highest peaks on each continent, Maya's achievements laid the foundation for change. Today, her work spans education, women's empowerment, and tourism promotion, with a special focus on Sindhupalchok, a district in Nepal that was hit hard by the 2015 earthquake.

The day begins at Maya's NGO, the Seven Summits Women Team, in Dhumbarahi, Kathmandu. Here, she trains female survivors of human trafficking to become trekking guides, helping them gain skills and independence. The organisation's efforts to rebuild schools destroyed by the earthquake further highlight its commitment to long-term change. A visit to the NGO's Ayurvedic shop showcases their entrepreneurial spirit and adds another layer to Maya's vision for empowerment.

Lunch at Le Sherpa Restaurant offers a fine dining experience with a modern European menu, set in a cosy, natural ambience. It's a chance to connect further, surrounded by Maya's warmth and candid reflections.

A must-do while in Kathmandu.



Women of Nepal

The Journey of Chanira Bajracharya

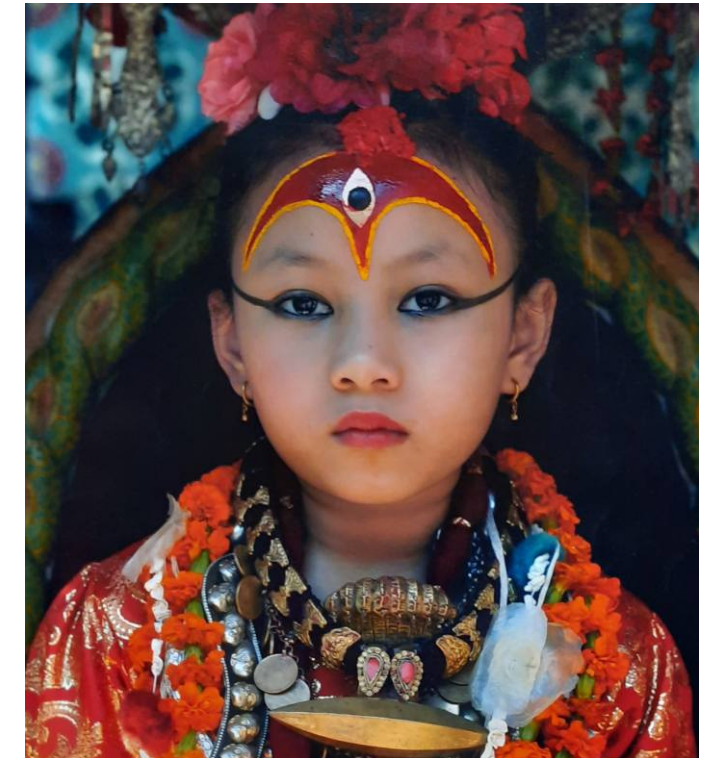
From the Nepal Travel Diary of Deenam Lamichhane

Did you know that in Nepal, a young girl can be chosen as the living incarnation of an all-powerful goddess? Known as the Kumari, she is worshipped as a divine being, her every movement and word considered sacred. Girls aged between 4 and 7 are selected based on strict criteria, including physical attributes and horoscope readings.

Chanira Bajracharya was once the Kumari of Patan, chosen at the age of five. For nearly a decade, she was revered as the all-powerful incarnation of a goddess, seated on a pedestal for worship. Her reign ended with puberty, marking the end of her divine status.

Today, Chanira leads a very different life as a financial analyst. The contrast between her past as a living goddess and her present role is striking. Once surrounded by rituals and devotion, she now manages finances.

A visit to Chanira's home offers a rare glimpse into the life of a former Kumari. She openly shares her experiences and insights, offering a compelling perspective on the legacy of this unique tradition in Nepal.



A close-up, low-angle shot of an elderly man with grey hair and a mustache, wearing a white tank top. He is leaning over a wooden loom, focused on weaving a textile. The textile features a dark blue background with a white zigzag pattern and a red border. The loom is made of wood and has various threads and tassels hanging from it. The background is slightly blurred, showing more of the loom and some hanging threads. The lighting is warm and natural, highlighting the man's concentration and the texture of the fabric.

Destination
insider

A Journey Like No Other

By Jay Kumar from our Destination Knowledge Centre

A truly memorable journey isn't just about visiting historic landmarks; it's about connecting with the stories, lives, and secrets of extraordinary characters whose brilliance, passion, and folly defied time. To experience a destination fully, one must slow down and let it unfold naturally. Gujarat, located in western India, offers a chance to do just that, with its rich history, diverse art, architecture, wildlife, and culture.

Picture yourself exploring the medieval 15th-century step-wells and mosques of Ahmedabad; admiring the unique embroidery traditions of Kutch; scaling the historic walls of Junagarh Fort; watching the majestic Asiatic lions roam in Gir National Park; or immersing yourself in the curious mix of Gujarati and Portuguese cultures on the beaches of Daman and Diu.

If you visit during Navratri, Gujarat's nine-day festival of dance and devotion, the streets of Ahmedabad are full of colour, music, and rhythm. This festival transforms the city's cool evening air into a celebration of tradition, fashion, and community. It's a time when Ras Garba—a traditional dance—becomes more than a performance; it's an expression of joy. Ahmedabad is also a food lover's paradise, offering an array of dishes. From the savoury khandvi to the sweet aamras (mango purée), Gujarati cuisine offers something for everyone.

For those keen on history, Gujarat is a treasure trove. The state is home to intricately carved step-wells, stately havelis, grand palaces, and awe-inspiring temples, each with a story to tell.

DISCOVER JUNAGARH - A HIDDEN GEM:

Junagarh offers a quirky, almost whimsical glimpse into history. Imagine a place where Venetian and Mughal influences come together, creating architecture that feels straight out of a fairy tale. From tombs with domes resembling UFOs to some of the most unconventional and beautiful mosques you'll ever see, Junagarh is a hidden treasure waiting to be explored. It is a destination with captivating stories that often go

It's Time for Gujarat!

unnoticed, making it an adventure for the curious traveller.

AN ODE TO LIFE - THE WHITE PLAINS OF KUTCH:

The vast salt plains of the Rann of Kutch are a symbol of endurance. This region has faced devastating earthquakes, cyclones, and droughts, yet its people—known as the Kutchis—have remained steadfast, their spirit unbroken. From their struggles, they have created art that is admired around the world.

Kutchi embroidery is a vivid expression of life, inspired by camels, peacocks, parrots, flowers, and daily activities like women churning milk. Passed down through generations, each stitch tells a unique story. In the small villages surrounding Bhuj, artisans continue to create intricate designs, preserving their traditions with pride and determination. Visiting these villages offers a glimpse into a living museum of culture and creativity.

Driving through Gujarat is a pleasure in itself. The state's roads are among the best in India, winding through picturesque landscapes of white salt deserts, villages, and rugged terrain. A drive through Kutch, often called the "Road to Heaven," offers some of the most stunning views you can find.

WHY GUJARAT?

From the shimmering salt flats of the Rann of Kutch to the sacred temples of Somnath, Gujarat is a destination that combines ancient traditions with modern marvels. Whether you're a history enthusiast, an adventure lover, or an art admirer, Gujarat offers experiences that will stay with you for a long time.

It's time for Gujarat!!



Hot Picks

Stays To Watch Out For



Narendra Nagar, Uttarakhand

Kinwani House

Kinwani House is a charming Art Deco boutique property tucked away in the foothills of the Himalayas. Originally the private residence of a member of the Tehri-Garhwal royal family, this architectural gem was built in 1954. The property features six luxurious suites, each with stunning views of the peaceful valley and majestic mountains. Guests can enjoy a tailor-made culinary experience with a menu curated by the chef, have a cosy evening under the stars, sip on special cocktails by candlelight, and dive into a range of unique experiences that capture the spirit of this tranquil retreat. Kinwani House is about a 45-minute drive from Dehradun Airport and 35 minutes from the new Rishikesh Railway Station.



Aurangabad, Maharashtra

Dhyaana Farms



Dhyaana Farms, located near the iconic Ellora Caves, offers a peaceful retreat that brings together nature's rhythms, a respect for animals, and sustainable living. This off-grid, solar-powered farm stay has four spacious farmhouse rooms and one private cottage. Spread across 14 acres, the fully organic farm grows its own food and generates its own energy, embracing eco-friendly practices. Collaborating closely with the local farming community, Dhyaana Farms provides immersive experiences that reconnect guests with nature, promoting environmental conservation and personal rejuvenation.



Near Kodaikanal, Tamil Nadu

Isla's Ridge

Isla's Ridge, the five-room guest house of designer and stylist Isla Maria Van Damme, is the newest addition to the CGH Earth portfolio. Set in a coffee estate, the property fits seamlessly into a Kerala-Tamil Nadu itinerary, located about 4 hours from Munnar and 2 hours from Madurai, making it an ideal stopover. The twin buildings house rooms, a kitchen, a dining room, and a living space, all striking in their simplicity. Each bedroom, meticulously styled by Isla, has a balcony with views of the hills. The menu features a diverse range of cuisines, including traditional dishes and Isla's own creations. Guests can enjoy activities such as farm visits, birding, yoga, meditation, art, cooking, or simply relax by the pool and take in the magnificent views.



Jaipur, Rajasthan

Laalee



Laalee is a charming blend of colonial elegance and traditional Indian culture, offering nine rooms adorned with hand-painted motifs by skilled Rajasthani artists. The hosts, Shan, an art historian and craft expert, and Devyani Bhatnagar, an excellent cook, are a dynamic duo whose diverse talents and passions enhance the Laalee experience in Jaipur. Guests can relax in the lush green garden, take a dip in the plunge pool, or enjoy a book in one of the cosy reading corners. The on-site vegetarian café adds to the charm, providing a delightful space for guests to savour local and international cuisine.



South
Goa

Mansão Curtorim

CGH Earth has made its debut in Goa with the opening of the much-awaited Mansão Curtorim. This 236-year-old heritage mansion is located in Curtorim village, about an hour's drive from Dabolim Airport. A single-storey mansion, Mansão Curtorim features a charming foyer, a welcoming living room, a dining room with a staircase leading to a mezzanine, six well-appointed bedrooms (five on the ground floor and one on the upper floor), a cosy library lounge, and a spacious kitchen. Be sure to try the fresh catch of the day, a highlight of the destination. There is a pond in front of the property, providing a serene countryside vibe, and a natural seasonal lake that is perfect for birders.



Varanasi,
Uttar Pradesh

Nilay House



Nilay House is a boutique accommodation just a 5-minute walk from Assi, the southernmost ghat in Varanasi. Known for attracting long-term visitors—students, researchers, and tourists alike—Assi Ghat offers a unique cultural and intellectual vibe. The property has three double rooms and one single room with attached bathrooms, all furnished with handmade textiles. Guests can enjoy tea with homemade cakes and cookies in the tea room, which offers a selection of quality teas. The owner lives nearby and personally attends to each guest. The airport is about a 45-minute drive from Nilay House.



Kaziranga National Park, Assam

Kathoni



The 2-room Kathoni, with its tall, brightly painted walls and handcrafted bamboo roofing, is a brand-new property located near the Eastern Range of Kaziranga National Park, renowned for its prolific birdlife, including the critically endangered Bengal Florican. Each room spans 460 square feet and features a spacious king-size bed, a work desk, an ensuite bathroom, and a comfortable living area that opens onto a private balcony with serene countryside views. Kathoni's culinary offerings include authentic Assamese cuisine cooked on woodfire, along with a variety of Indian and Continental dishes. All ingredients are sourced from their organic farm and nearby villages.



Kathmandu, Nepal

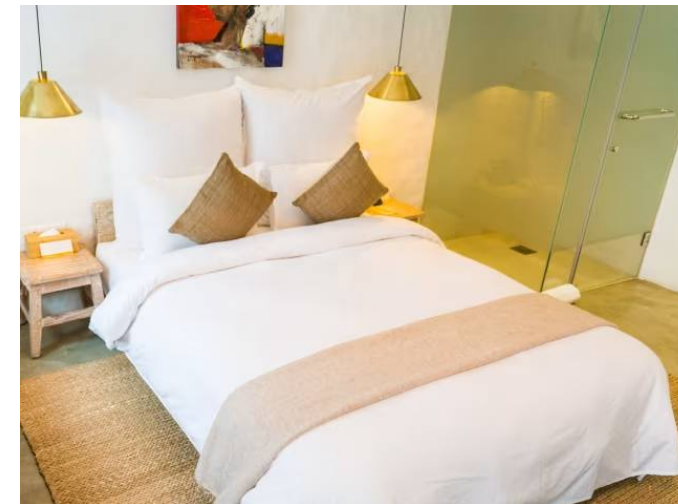
Nepali Ghar

On the edge of Thamel stands a complex comprising the newly built Nepali Ghar and the restored Seto Ghar. The accommodations are divided into two distinct wings, each with its own character. The Nepali Ghar wing showcases traditional Nepali architecture, with 58 rooms. In contrast, the Seto Ghar wing reflects the neoclassical style of historic aristocratic homes and houses three unique suites. The partly open-to-sky verandah and garden seating, Chiya Pasal, serves as their all-day dining, tea bar, and restaurant, offering a fabulous multi-cuisine menu. The meditation room in Seto Ghar provides a quiet space for contemplation.

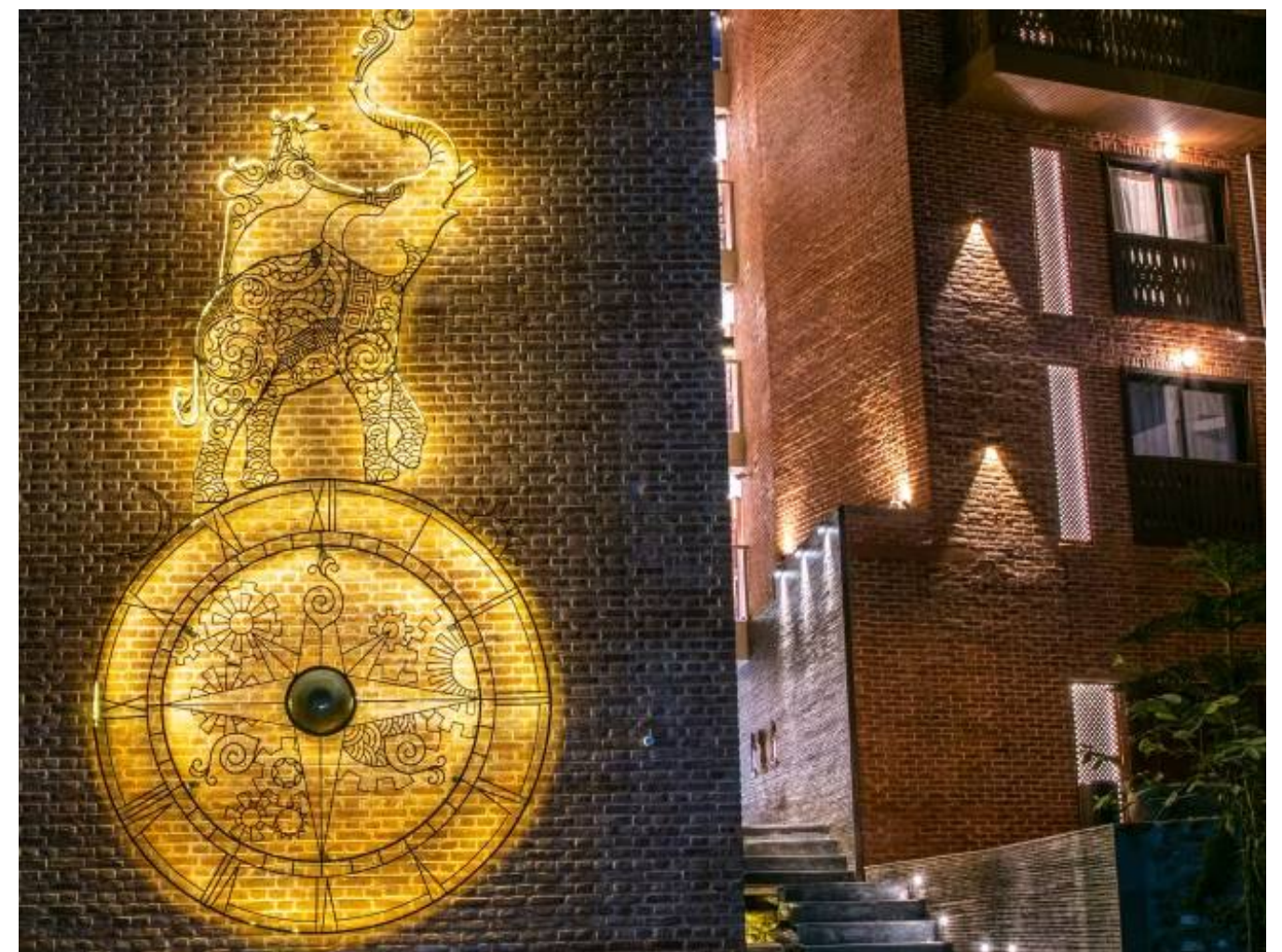


Bhaktapur, Nepal

The Nanee



The Nanee Bhaktapur is a charming boutique hotel in the heart of Bhaktapur, Nepal, within walking distance of the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Bhaktapur Durbar Square. The hotel offers easy access to the city's cultural attractions and local life. It features 18 beautifully decorated rooms and suites. Bara Shop, a traditional Nepalese restaurant, specialises in authentic dishes, including thalis, curries, and momos, while The Community serves a fusion of Nepalese and international cuisine. Guests can enjoy storytelling in the hotel's amphitheatre, yoga and meditation sessions, culinary tours, visits to local artisans, and regular excursions.



Books and Films We Loved

Robert Seethaler

and there a rustle in the reeds, and sometimes, from afar, the faint thump of the ferries. He felt the soft meadow of algae under his buttocks and saw how the tiny floating particles shimmered above him in the sunbeams. Hours later, as he ran home on the path along the shore with the evening sun shining in his face, he still carried this silent green world within him and yearned for it a little.

‘If you’re going to take root, you’d better do it outside!’

It was an old voice, high and cracked. Directly in front of Franz, at about chest height, the head appeared to which the voice belonged. It was completely bald, and it lacked eyebrows, too, which made it look rather lizard-like in the greenish light.

‘One schilling, if you want to see the show. If not, the exit’s over there, right where the entrance just was!’

Only now did Franz see the box office window: a small, square opening in the wall. The lizard was sitting behind it in the half-dark, staring out at him.

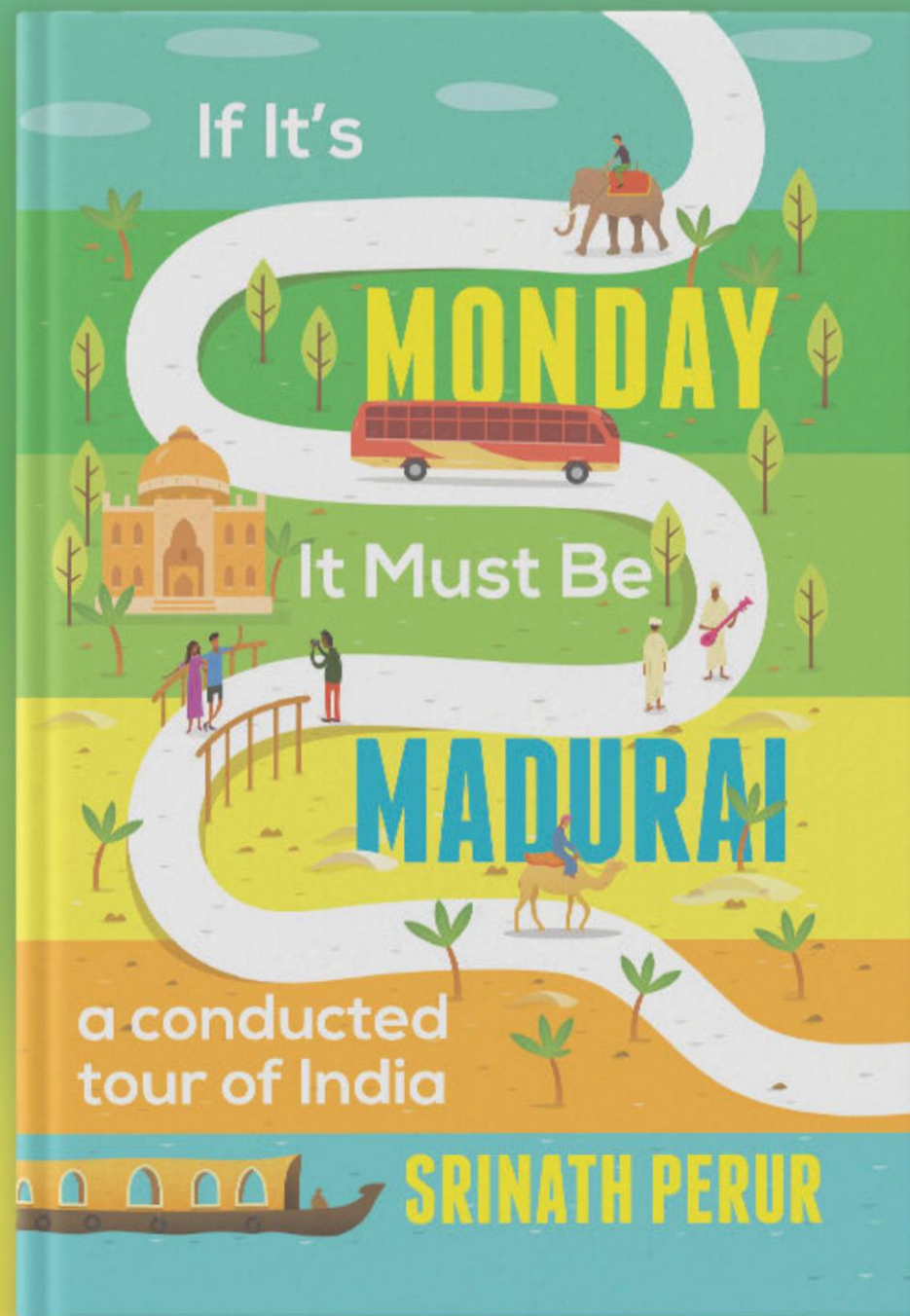
‘One for the show, please,’ said Franz, and placed a schilling on the shelf of the counter.

The lizard took the money and held out an entry ticket.

The Tobacconist

fiddling with bottles and glasses. She couldn’t be older than sixteen. She had a finger-length scar on her cheek and the squashed nose of a boxer. There were round tables scattered throughout the room, only a few of which were occupied — all of them by solitary men, as Franz could tell. The candlelight flickered over a hairy forehead, a wrinkled forehead, a labourer’s hand with dry clay stuck to the back, an old man’s threadbare suit collar.

Franz sat at an empty table. The girl came over, and he ordered a pint of lager. She brought the beer, silently placed a bowl of nuts in front of him as well, and disappeared again behind the bar. A few minutes passed, and then suddenly a spotlight went on, illuminating a tiny wooden stage at the far end of the room. A door opened and a small man in a tuxedo stepped into the light. He was skinny and wrinkled, but despite his age he sparkled with energy. He bowed, smiling, then immediately pitched himself forward, executed a breakneck somersault, stood bolt upright again a moment later and began to speak. He talked about conditions in his beloved city of Vienna, about this great big kindergarten where the Schuschnigg boy and his mother hadn’t been allowed



Author:
Srinath Perur

If It's Monday, It Must Be Madurai

By Kuntal Baruwa, Explorer, Destination Knowledge Centre

Srinath Perur's *If It's Monday, It Must Be Madurai* is an insightful, yet unconventional exploration of tourism. The book takes a deep dive into the people and cultures encountered along the way, with a good dose of humour. Perur takes us through a series of conducted tours, from the temples of Tamil Nadu to the slums of Mumbai, and even to Europe and Uzbekistan. His sharp wit and keen observations reveal the sometimes absurd realities of modern day tourism—think slum tours where tourists are disappointed to find families with TV sets and children going to school, or sex tourism that's less about culture and more about "vacation fun."

The author also critiques the superficiality of conducted foreign tours, where the goal isn't to experience a place, but to check off a list of landmarks and boast about having been there. On a more thoughtful note, Perur highlights how tourism is also

preserving folk music and indigenous knowledge in some places. *If It's Monday, It Must Be Madurai* is a thought-provoking and often hilarious read for anyone interested in the quirky, sometimes uncomfortable, intersection of travel, culture, and human nature. But if you're looking for practical travel tips, you might want to look elsewhere—this book is all about the stories behind the sightseeing!



SATYAJIT RAY'S
FIRST HINDI FILM
FROM THE SHORT STORY
BY PREMCHAND

SHATRANJ KE KHILARI



Directed by
Satyajit Ray

Shatranj Ke Khilari

Reviewed by Inderjeet Rathod, Product Manager,
Destination Knowledge Centre

Imagine if the decadence of pre-Revolutionary France in *Marie Antoinette* (2006, directed by Sofia Coppola) met the political intrigue of *The Crown* (the historical drama series on Netflix) and the reflective artistry of Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* (1985). That's what Satyajit Ray's *The Chess Players* offers—a gripping tale set in 19th-century India, at a time of looming colonial domination and aristocratic decay.

The story unfolds in 1856, as British colonial forces prepare to annex the princely state of Awadh, now part of Uttar Pradesh, home to the famous Taj Mahal in Agra. At the centre of the narrative is Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, a ruler more interested in music, poetry, and dance than governance. The Nawab's kingdom is slipping away as British forces advance, yet he is lost in his passion for the arts. Amjad Khan, best known as the villainous "Gabbar Singh" in the Bollywood masterpiece *Sholay* (1975), portrays Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, a ruler out of sync with his time, but deeply compelling in his vulnerability.

The second thread focuses on two aristocrats, Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali, played by Sanjeev Kumar and Saeed Jaffrey. Sanjeev Kumar, a legendary actor in Indian cinema, was known for his remarkable versatility, playing complex, multi-dimensional characters. Saeed Jaffrey, celebrated for his roles in both Indian and British cinema, is perhaps best known for *A Passage to India* (1984, directed by David Lean). Together, they bring to life two men so consumed by their game of chess that they retreat into it while the world collapses around them. Their obsession is both tragic and absurd, adding a layer of humour and emotional depth to the film.

The antagonist here is not a person, but the British East India Company, represented by the coldly calculating General Outram (played by Richard Attenborough, the director of the 1982 movie, *Gandhi*). His quiet manipulation is a stark contrast to the naivety of the

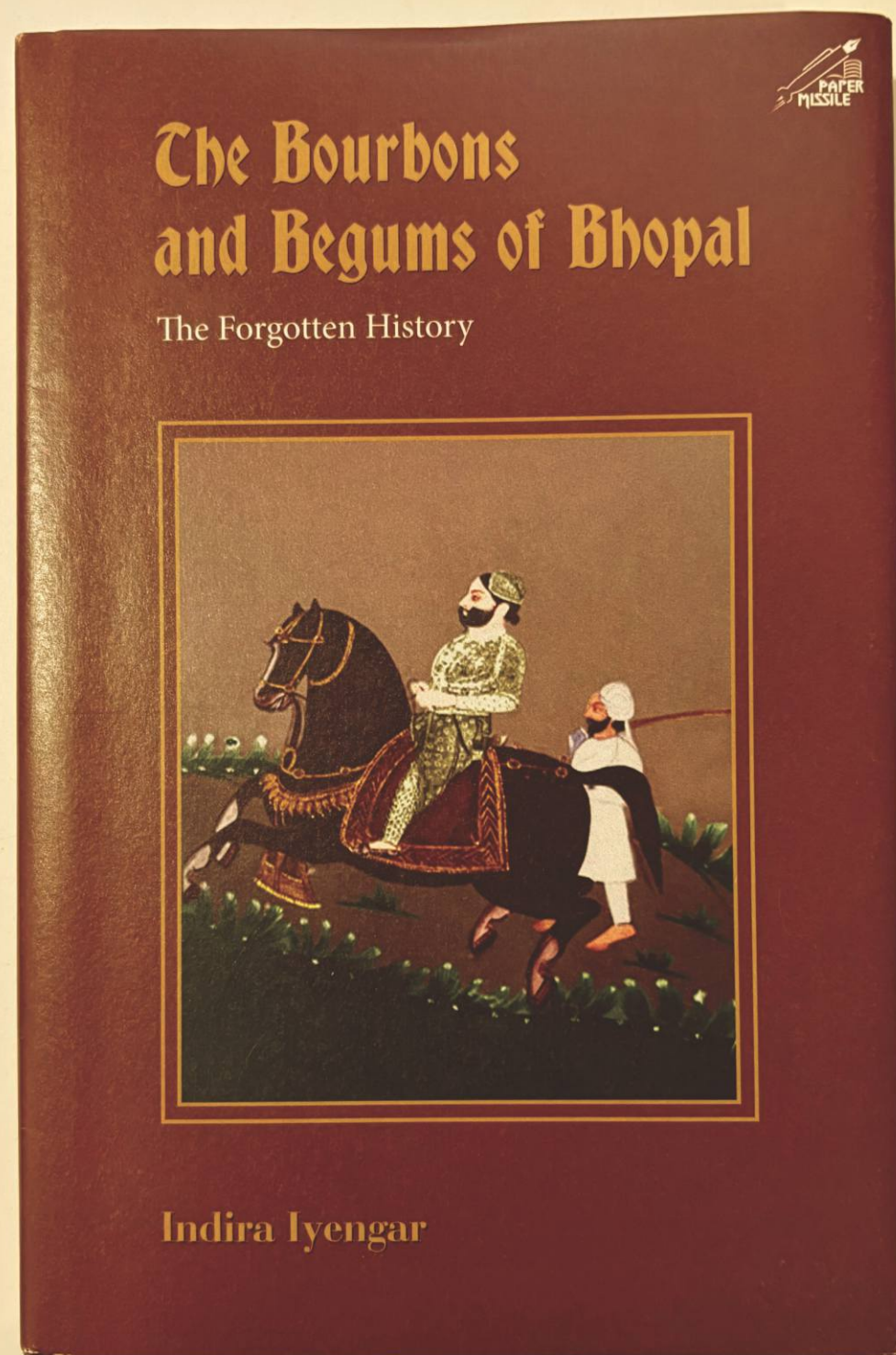
Nawab and the aristocrats.

Satyajit Ray, a master of neorealism in Indian cinema, directs with precision and depth. The cinematography by Soumendu Roy, the man behind the lens in 22 of Ray's films, including 18 features, beautifully captures the opulence of Awadh's aristocracy. Detailed costumes, intricate set designs, and traditional Indian music immerse you in a world that is both deeply Indian and universally human, exploring themes of decline and resistance.

What truly sets *The Chess Players* apart is its tone. It combines sharp humour with biting social commentary. The absurdity of the two aristocrats' obsession with chess evokes laughter, but it's quickly tempered by the sting of their indifference to their crumbling world.

Even without knowledge of India's colonial history, the themes in *The Chess Players* are universal. Just as *Parasite* (2019, directed by Bong Joon-Ho) used a Korean household to comment on global class struggles, *The Chess Players* uses the fall of Awadh to explore privilege, power, and apathy. It's a film for anyone who loves cinema that challenges, moves, and provokes.

Whether you're drawn to historical dramas, political intrigue, or exceptional storytelling, *The Chess Players* belongs on your watchlist.



Author:
Indira Iyengar

The Bourbons and Begums of Bhopal

Reviewed by Soma Paul, Product Manager, Destination Knowledge Centre

Bhopal, my hometown, is a city of lakes with a fascinating French connection.

Most people don't know this, but the city's history is deeply intertwined with the rule of its Begums—four remarkable women who broke the norms of their time and ruled with power and vision. For over a century, they shaped Bhopal into what it is today. Right alongside them, the Bourbons, descendants of the French royal family, contributed with their bravery, wisdom, and diplomacy to the city's development.

The Bourbons weren't just well-connected; they were fiercely protective of Bhopal. Their military skills helped defend the city during wars. In the Begums' court, they were key advisors, steering the city through some of its most difficult times. They acted as mediators between Bhopal and the British East India Company,

ensuring the city's sovereignty remained intact. Their influence didn't stop there—they left a lasting imprint on Bhopal's architecture. The Shaukat Mahal, with its mix of French and Indo-Islamic styles, still stands as a reminder of their legacy.

In *The Bourbons and Begums of Bhopal*, Indira Iyengar traces this remarkable history, drawing inspiration from her mother Magdaline Bourbon's stories. The book explores the family's arrival in India in the 16th century, their integration into Bhopal's culture, and their role in its development. As someone who grew up in Bhopal, reading this book was like walking through my memories of the city—a place rich in history, character, and unique connections.

If you're ever in India, don't just rush through—take a moment to truly experience the magic of Bhopal and its untold stories.



A NETFLIX DOCUMENTARY SHORT

THE ELEPHANT WHISPERERS

A SIKHYA ENTERTAINMENT PRODUCTION DIRECTED BY KARTIKI GONSALVES
PRODUCED BY GUNEET MONGA & ACHIN JAIN

ONLY ON **NETFLIX** | 8 DECEMBER

Directed by
Kartiki Gonsalves

The Elephant Whisperers

Reviewed by Saurabh Rai, Deputy Manger, Destination Knowledge Centre

The Elephant Whisperers is a gentle, heart-warming short documentary that feels like a quiet antidote to the chaos of urban life. Directed by Kartiki Gonsalves, it draws us into the serene world of Bomman and Bellie, a couple in south India caring for two orphaned elephants, Raghu and Ammu. Their bond, built on trust and love, feels like a rare, almost impossible kind of connection in the fast-paced city life.

What struck me most was the film's simplicity. There's no attempt to dazzle with dramatic twists or overwhelming visuals. Instead, it lets the natural world breathe, inviting us to slow down and notice the small, quiet connections we often miss. Watching Raghu nuzzle Bomman or Ammu playfully seek attention reminded me of moments of unspoken understanding I've shared with loved ones—moments that feel precious amidst the demands of daily life.

The lush landscapes and the elephants' expressive eyes—filled with mischief, joy, and vulnerability—felt like a gentle reminder of how rich life can be when we allow ourselves to be present. Bomman and Bellie's care and patience seemed like a blueprint for a kind of living that values connection over convenience, something I often find myself yearning for in the hum of urban routines.

In its quiet way, The Elephant Whisperers asks us to reflect on our relationships—with each other and the world around us. It's a reminder of what we might carry from a story like this into our own lives: a little more love, a little more presence. For anyone feeling caught in the rush of modern life, this film offers a pause—a chance to exhale and rediscover the beauty of connection.





Traditional and Sustainable



Traditional Indian Instruments with a Green Soul

By Inderjeet Rathod, Product Manager, Destination Knowledge Centre

India's musical traditions stretch back thousands of years, intertwined with its spiritual and cultural identity. At the heart of this music lies a vast array of instruments. Often crafted from locally sourced materials such as wood, bamboo, and clay, these musical instruments serve a dual purpose: creating beautiful sounds while honouring the environment. These instruments are about more than just music—it's about listening to the earth and finding its voice in the rhythms and melodies they create.

STRING INSTRUMENTS: NATURE'S RESONANCE

One of the oldest and most iconic string instruments in Indian classical music is the Veena. Picture a large, elegant instrument with a long neck and a rounded body, traditionally carved from the wood of the jackfruit tree. Its sound is as rich as its shape—full-bodied, deeply resonant, and with the ability to express emotions tied to time, seasons, and moods. The Veena is like the spiritual cousin of the guitar, but with far more meditative tendencies.

Then there's the Ektara, a one-stringed wonder that's as minimalist as a bamboo stick with a gourd at one end. Its sound is so soulful, it could almost convince you that it's narrating ancient stories from an old nomadic bard. The Ektara is common in devotional songs and spiritual gatherings, singing its simple tunes like wise elder recounting tales of devotion and life. It's all about simplicity and soulfulness.

The Rabab, popular in North India, is shaped like a tiny wooden boat with thin strings stretched across it. Its soft, mellow sound feels like a gentle wave—perfect for accompanying stories and poetry, especially in the mystical world of Sufi music. It is less "loud and proud" and more "quietly profound," but don't be fooled; it can stir the deepest emotions when you least expect it.

WIND INSTRUMENTS: THE VOICE OF THE WIND

India's wind instruments have a way of capturing

Melodies from Nature

nature's beauty in sound. Take the Bansuri (bamboo flute), for example. It's a slender tube of bamboo, often with holes that are strategically placed to release melodies that are as sweet as the wind's whispers. The Bansuri is a constant companion in Indian classical music, where it plays Raagas—complex patterns of sound that express time, mood, and nature. If you've ever wanted to feel like the wind itself is serenading you, the bamboo flute is your ticket.

Next, we have the Shehnai, a wind instrument with a wider, flared bell at one end. This one's reserved for weddings and festivals, where it creates an atmosphere that's both celebratory and spiritual. The Shehnai plays its role as a bridge between earthly joy and divine blessing, doing its best to keep everyone on the right spiritual track while also having a good time.

For something even more unique, meet the Pungi, the wind instrument played by snake charmers. Made from bamboo and a dried gourd, the Pungi has a distinctly captivating sound. The high-pitched, eerie tone it produces is enough to make you feel like you're in an ancient ritual, perhaps on the brink of meeting a wise sage or a very confused snake. It is strange, and enchanting.

PERCUSSION INSTRUMENTS: RHYTHMS OF THE EARTH

India's percussion instruments are a world of their own, complex, rich, and—at times—impossible to resist tapping your foot to. The Tabla, consisting of two hand-played drums, one higher-pitched and the other deeper, is crafted from wood (often rosewood) and goat skin. The Tabla isn't just an instrument; it's a communication tool. It plays an essential role in Indian classical music, accompanying Raagas with rhythms that can make you feel like your heart is dancing.

The Mridangam, used in Carnatic music from South India, is a large, cylindrical drum made from



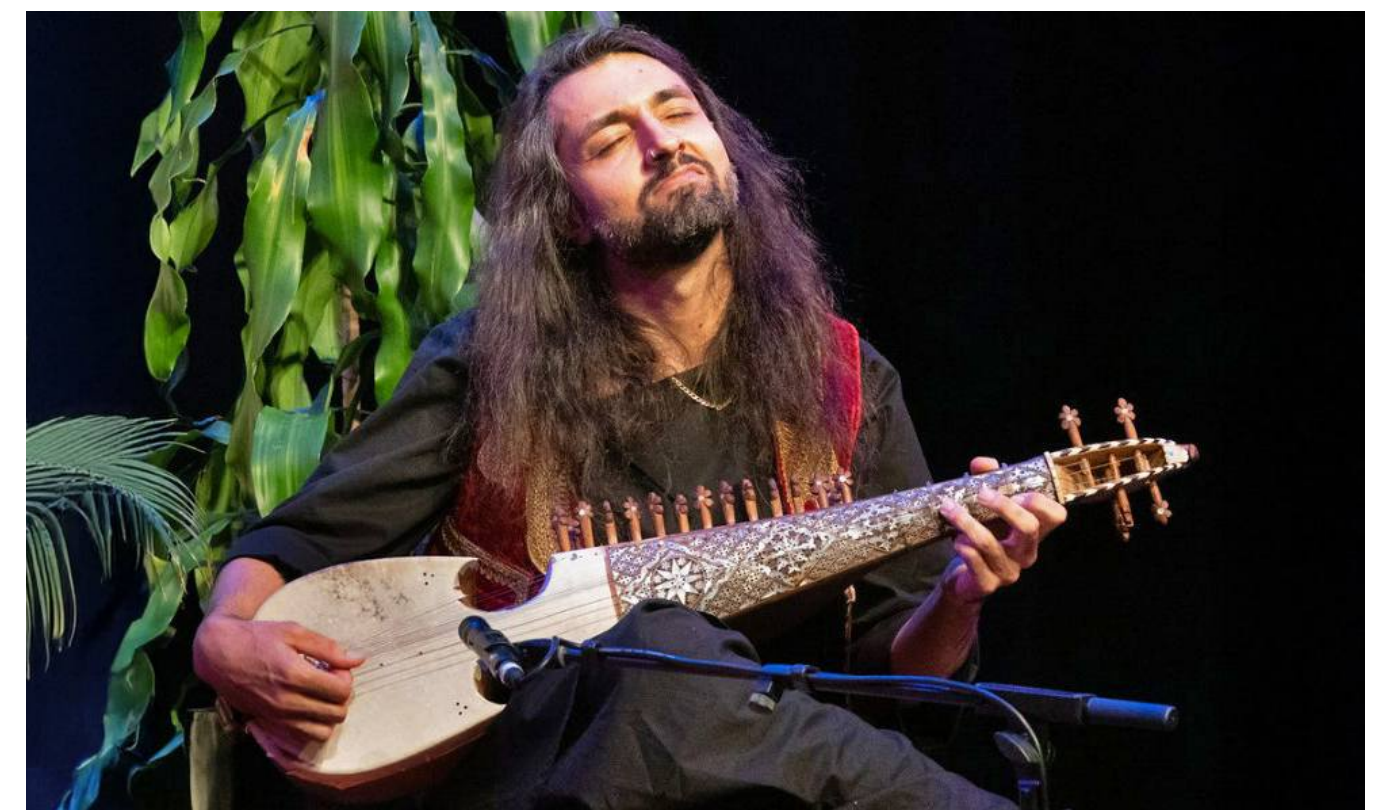
jackfruit wood. It's built to produce sounds as earthy as the soil itself, a perfect companion for the precise rhythms that define Carnatic music. If the Tabla is the chatty cousin, the Mridangam is the calm, collected uncle who quietly commands respect from the room. Both are incredibly skilled at keeping time—but one's more likely to throw in an unexpected twist.

And let's not forget the Ghatam, a large clay pot that sounds like a heartbeat when struck. This humble pot adds a solid, grounding rhythm to Carnatic ensembles, reminding us that music can be as simple as tapping the earth itself. The Ghatam might not win any beauty contests, but it sure knows how to keep things lively.

ASYPHONY OF SUSTAINABILITY

These traditional Indian instruments are more than just instruments—they are a direct reflection of the harmonious relationship between culture and the environment. Whether it's the somber tones of the Veena or the energetic beats of the Tabla, each instrument brings nature's voice into our world. It's as though the earth has been singing for thousands of years, and we've only just started listening.

In a world increasingly focused on sustainability, these instruments offer a perfect reminder: it's possible to make timeless music while honouring the planet. After all, if the earth is going to keep singing, we'd better make sure we're listening—and playing along.



A Symbol of Culture and Spring

By Soma Paul, Product Manager, Destination Knowledge Centre

As I travelled through Rajasthan's vast, arid plains, I kept noticing a particular tree that stood out against the harsh landscape. It wasn't just its ability to survive that intrigued me—it was the stories people shared. They called it the "Tree of Life." Also known as the 'Desert Teak' for its durable wood, the Rohida (*Tecomella undulata*) thrives in extreme conditions. With deep roots that prevent soil erosion, it plays a crucial role in maintaining the fragile desert ecosystem.

Beyond its ecological role, the Rohida has its own cultural importance. Families plant it near homes and temples, believing it brings good fortune. Every spring, from March to April, it bursts into bright yellow blooms, signalling hope and renewal. Farmers traditionally used this blooming as a natural indicator of the approaching monsoon, planning their crops accordingly—a practice still followed in some villages. The Rohida's beauty has earned it the title of Rajasthan's state flower.

The tree has its place in Rajasthani folklore and traditions. Its presence comes alive in stories and songs,

Rohida

such as this soulful piece performed by Mahesha Ram Ji from Jaisalmer just for me:

Rohide ro phool kahije re phootro
(The Rohida flower looks lovely)
Todan jaaijo re mati
(But don't pluck it off the tree)
Je lyaave tode gun baahiro
(If you do, you'll see it's useless)
Baas nahin aave ek ratti
(It has no fragrance)

This song, part of Kabir's oral tradition, carries the region's values of humility and balance. It's kept alive by the Meghwal community, who have passed down poetry by bhakti poets like Kabir for generations.

The Rohida isn't just a tree. It's a symbol of spring, a cultural icon, and a reminder of the deep connection between humans and nature in Indian culture. So, if you find yourself in Rajasthan and spot the Rohida tree, take a moment to appreciate its significance—its role in nature, its place in the heart of local traditions, and the stories it continues to tell.



Photo Credit: Mharo Khet



Lessons of Wisdom and Sustainability

By Kuntil Baruwa, Explorer, Destination Knowledge Centre

The Morungs of Nagaland may lack the lustre of their yesteryears, yet they refuse to fade away. These institutions, once the heartbeat of Naga villages, remain etched in the collective memory. Though their physical presence may have diminished with time, the values they represented continue to resonate, offering timeless lessons in wisdom, community, and sustainability.

In their prime, Morungs were more than just dormitories for young bachelors; they were finishing schools where boys as young as eight learned the intricacies of personal and communal living. These communal values were instilled through lessons both practical and moral, preparing the youth to live in harmony with their surroundings. The wisdom imparted in these spaces reflected a deep understanding of sustainability, both ecological and social.

Naga author Easterine Kire Iralu captures the teachings of these spaces in her novel "A Naga Village Remembered": "If you are at a community feast and take more than two pieces of meat, shame on you. Others will call you a glutton; worse, they will think, 'Has no one taught this boy about greed?' This is the key to right living—avoiding excess in everything. Be content with your share of land and fields. People who move boundary stones bring death upon themselves."

These words highlight a deep ethos of moderation and respect. The Morung was where young men learned to reject greed, value fairness, and uphold the community's shared resources. This philosophy is as relevant today as it was then, offering a guide for sustainable living in a world that often prioritises excess and individual gain. Beyond its role as an educational hub, the Morung was the cultural and spiritual nucleus of the village. It served as a repository for weapons, a centre for art and craft, and a venue for community entertainment. It was also the stage for

The Morungs of Nagaland

important rituals and decisions, reflecting the interconnectedness of daily life with the spiritual realm.

As Iralu writes, "The full moon was declining, and on the decline of the full moon, the ritual of making peace with the spirits was held. 'We have come to solicit peace between man and spirit. Let there be no destruction and calamity, no death and disease and plague. Who is honest, you are honest. Who is honest, I am honest. We will compete with each other in honesty.'"

These rituals reflected the Naga belief in maintaining balance—not only within the community but also with the spiritual and natural worlds. Such practices, rooted in gratitude and accountability, align seamlessly with the modern principles of sustainability, reminding us of our responsibility to nurture and protect the environment.

Today, while the Morung may no longer shine as brightly in its traditional form, its spirit endures. It stands as a powerful reminder of the values that support sustainable living: moderation, respect for resources, and the interdependence of individuals and their community. As we face contemporary challenges, the legacy of the Morung offers an invaluable guide, urging us to remember that the wisdom of the past can inspire a balanced and equitable future.

Easterine Kire Iralu, a poet, writer, and novelist from Nagaland, is widely regarded as one of the finest storytellers from Northeast India. Her novel, A Naga Village Remembered, was the first-ever English novel by a Naga author to be published. She has authored several books in English, including collections of poetry and short stories, offering a rare glimpse into the lives of the Naga people, whose culture remains mostly unknown to the wider world.

Sustainability and Us





We are Travelife Certified

We are delighted to have received the Travelife Certified Award this year. The award is a recognition for the long-term efforts and frontrunner position of our company regarding Sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility.

The company complies with more than 200 criteria, related to an operators' office management, product range, international business partners and customer information. The Travelife standard is covering the ISO 26000 Corporate Social Responsibility themes, including environment, biodiversity, human rights and labour relations; and is formally Recognised as in full compliance with the UN supported Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria.

Travelife is the leading international sustainability certification for the travel sector. More than 35 national travel associations are promoting the scheme to their members including 20 European Travel associations. Since 2012, more than 1500 tour operators have been trained in CSR and more than 500 tour operators have been awarded.

Our signing up to the globally recognized Travelife system and now receiving the Travelife Certified Award, marks a further milestone in implementing our sustainability strategy. We continue to maintain an open dialogue with all our stakeholders and involve them to ensure the sustainability of our business.

Sustainability remains a cornerstone of travel. Travellers increasingly seek meaningful, locally-driven engagements that benefit the places they visit. It is no longer about ticking eco-friendly boxes but about creating genuine connections and preserving cultures and environments.

We see this collaboration as crucial to our continued success. The Travelife Certified Award will further strengthen our commitment to ensuring a better travel product and will inspire other companies in India to follow the same path.



From our Explorer's Diary



A Love Letter to Kolkata

By Kuntal Baruwa, Explorer, Destination Knowledge Centre

Kolkata has a way of layering its stories, and one of the most surprising chapters of our **Bridge the Knowledge Gap Study Tour** was hidden inside the unassuming Metcalfe Hall. At first glance, the "Ami Kolkata" (I Am Kolkata) exhibition seemed like just another cultural showcase. But as we stepped inside, it quickly became clear—this wasn't just an exhibition. It was a celebration of the city's soul.

Sure, the exhibition has seen better days. The alponas (traditional floor art) leading up to the hall have faded, the interactive screens no longer work, and the lack of air-conditioning can be a challenge on a humid day. Yet, despite these flaws, "Ami Kolkata" was one of the most heartfelt experiences of our Study Tour.

The exhibition is laid out like a love letter to the city, with each section exploring a different layer of Kolkata's identity. It takes you from its colonial beginnings to its modern-day chaos, weaving in stories of its multicultural communities, festivals, literature, and food. The staircase, lined with quirky vintage posters—Horlicks ads, old movie classics, and even a nod to Kolkata's Chinatown breakfast culture—instantly made us smile.

What really struck us, though, was how beautifully the exhibition captures Kolkata's diversity. You get a glimpse into the lives of communities like the Armenians, Jews, and Chinese, who all left their mark on the city. There's also an entire section dedicated to the Bengali Renaissance, where the spotlight is on the thinkers, poets, and activists who gave the city its intellectual edge.

But what truly makes "Ami Kolkata" special is the way it tells the city's story. It's not just about monuments and milestones; it's about people. From the grandeur of Durga Puja to the everyday joy of sipping tea at a roadside stall, the exhibition reminds you that Kolkata's magic lies in its ability to embrace contradictions.

Why 'Ami Kolkata' Shouldn't Be Missed

Our guide, Navpreet, added so much to the experience. Her stories tied the past and present together seamlessly, bringing the displays to life. She pointed out details we would have otherwise missed—like how the vintage Kolkata Biryani poster hints at the city's unique culinary history, shaped by the exiled Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Lucknow.

"Ami Kolkata" isn't perfect, but maybe that's what makes it so quintessentially Kolkata. The city has its cracks and imperfections, yet it still shines. This exhibition is a reminder of why Kolkata continues to hold a special place in the hearts of its people—and anyone who visits.

If you want to truly understand the spirit of Kolkata, this exhibition is a must-do. Come for the stories, stay for the nostalgia, and leave with a deeper appreciation of a city that's so much more than just a destination.

Bridge the Knowledge Gap is an annual summer training programme that the Destination Knowledge Centre (DKC) has been organising since 2017. It aims to empower, educate, and share the collective knowledge of the DKC with the Tour Operations staff. The programme consists of a five-day in-depth classroom session in our Gurgaon office followed by a two-week on-ground study tour, ensuring that participants not only learn about destinations but also experience them first-hand.



Guest Column





A World Between Earth and Sky

By Dagmar Marrocco, Senior Regional Product Manager, Kuoni UK

Our adventure began right from the start with the Delhi to Leh flight. Flying over the Himalayas with some of the most spectacular mountains we'd ever seen, everyone had their phones pressed up against the windows. Arriving at Leh Airport was unexpectedly chaotic, as it serves not only travellers but is also an important Indian military base. However, once we navigated through the initial hustle, we found peace in the Indus Valley, with its Tibetan Buddhist influences, soaring snowcapped peaks, fast-flowing rivers, arid desert-like slopes, ancient forts, and magnificent monasteries perched atop hillsides.

GENERAL TRAVEL INFORMATION

Leh, the largest city in Ladakh, is located on the Indus River. For centuries, it was an important stop on the famous Silk Trade Routes between Kashmir, Tibet, India, and China. Today, for travellers, it acts as a central hub from which you can venture over the mountains and along valleys to various destinations.

Using a private guide and driver gave us flexibility from the start, especially when we experienced the effects of high altitude. This made it easy to amend our plans and not miss out on anything. It's strongly advisable to spend the first two days in Leh with minimal activity to acclimatise. At 3,524m, many travellers, including us, experience exhaustion or mild altitude sickness, which subsides completely after 48 hours. Thinley Lundup, our guide, and Tanzen Stanzin, our driver, were both outstanding. They were welcoming and insightful – we laughed a lot and loved spending time with them!

High season runs from June to September, with warmer weather, while July and August are the busiest months. We travelled in the last two weeks of September, which was quieter and sunny but cool. A fleece or light jacket was sufficient during the day, while nights were cooler but didn't require heavy winter gear. The sun was strong, so don't forget your hat, sunscreen, and sunglasses. We stayed in a mix of owner-run guesthouses and smaller

Exploring Ladakh

hotels. Our hosts were incredibly hospitable and happy to share their culture and knowledge with us. However, standards are not to the same level as elsewhere in India.

The local cuisine is simple and delicious. Expect hearty meals of rice, vegetables, chicken, and mutton, featuring Indian, Ladakhi, and Kashmiri spices and flavours. Apricots are extensively grown, so you'll find apricot jam, stewed apricots, and dried apricots everywhere. Don't miss the momos, thukpa, and butter tea – they're all must-tries!

MUST-VISIT EXPERIENCES

Deciding which monastery to visit can be challenging, as each has unique attributes. Thiksey Monastery, known for its early morning prayers with the resident monks, was a perfect start to the day. Sharing in the prayer rituals and butter tea felt spiritual – arguably, this was my favourite experience.

Hemis Monastery, tucked away in a gorge, is the largest in the region and features a museum with Buddhist artefacts and relics. It's highly recommended – try to visit in the afternoon when it's quieter. Other notable mentions include Alchi Monastery, with its captivating murals; Lamayuru Monastery, the oldest in Ladakh, dating back to the 11th century; and the serene Charasa Palace in the Nubra Valley, where we were the only visitors!

In Leh, the main thoroughfare, Leh Bazaar Road, is a wide pedestrian shopping street with general and trekking stores and a Tibetan market. The Leh Palace towers in the background, and the more recently built Shanti Stupa Peace Pagoda offers stunning views of the town below, making it a sunset hotspot. Our visit coincided with a colourful Buddhist festival, and we marvelled at the masked dances and festivities. Magnetic Hill is a well-known tourist spot where vehicles seemingly defy gravity and roll uphill.



The Khardung La Pass, at 5,360m, connecting Leh to the Nubra Valley, was more than a highlight. It's a heart-pounding journey through some of the world's most challenging terrain. The pass cuts through the enormous Ladakh mountain range, with peaks averaging 6,000m. It's a favourite among motorcyclists and cyclists, offering dramatic views everywhere you look. Everyone requires a permit to travel, and passports are frequently checked.

The road was in decent condition but can close suddenly due to landslides. The Border Roads Organisation (BRO) has workers stationed every few miles to ensure it's navigable again as quickly as possible. The pass is strategically important to India for supplying the Siachen Glacier. BRO has also erected unique and amusing road signs to encourage cautious driving. At the summit, we climbed the final few metres and enjoyed adding our prayer flags to the many already there.

Descending into the fabled Nubra Valley, meaning "valley of flowers," was spellbinding. It is carved out by the Shyok River meeting the Siachen River to form a large valley separating the Ladakh and Karakoram

mountain ranges. It's an ideal place to relax and marvel at the expansive views and the night sky.

Here, we explored on foot - the Yarob Tso Lake, petroglyph sites, sand dunes, and the Panamik hot springs. We saw double-humped Bactrian camels and wandered through local rural villages.

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

Ladakh is ideal for anyone seeking an off-the-beaten-track experience with opportunities to enjoy nature, experience friendly cultural interactions, or find adventure. You'll encounter a diverse mix of tourists - domestic and international, motorcyclists, trekkers, and backpackers. It's not about luxury or slick service but about learning, connecting, and experiencing the rich tapestry of life in this extraordinary part of the world.

We can't wait to go back and explore more!

Thank you to the GoVacation Team, Thinley, and Tanzen.



Our Commitment

Experiences and impressions of particular intensity and profundity, instants that endure and can leave a lasting positive impression. They are unique and memorable, at par with appreciating a great work of art.

