

200+ INDIA HOLIDAY IDEAS

19<sup>th</sup>

Anniversary  
Issue

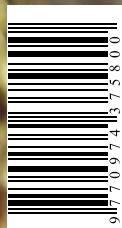
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# India Travel 2015

I feel 19, going on 20 is a great age. When you are on the cusp of teenage and adulthood, when you are raring to go, when you feel nothing can stop you, when you are still learning, changing and moulding yourself to the dynamics of the evolving world. We at Travel Plus find ourself at this age as we bring to you, dear readers our 19th anniversary issue.

Travel Plus has been reinventing and as we take on a new year, we feel we are going to rock this one. A new look and feel, a new team, a new flavour.

What you hold in your hand is an ultimate guide to the 'Big Fat India Holiday'. The book has been divided into three parts: Family breaks, Romantic holidays and Solo travels. The navigation is easy. There are ideas from every single state of India. Whatever kind of travel you may be in the mood for, this is your year-long ready reckoner.

Inside are some beautiful people and their travel ideas; our trademark Plus Secrets, information so exclusive even Google may not give you; and, some stunning vacation plans.

For me, this just may be the 'year of the solo travel'. Like our cover girl Huma Qureshi. India fascinates me, now and forever. Such diverse and stunning landscapes, incredible legends and fascinating history, wondrous wildlife and the local food! I can actually go miles just for the awesome food in this country mine.

I will start my Vacation 2015 at Kanha National Park tracking the tiger. And you?

**RITU AGARWAL**

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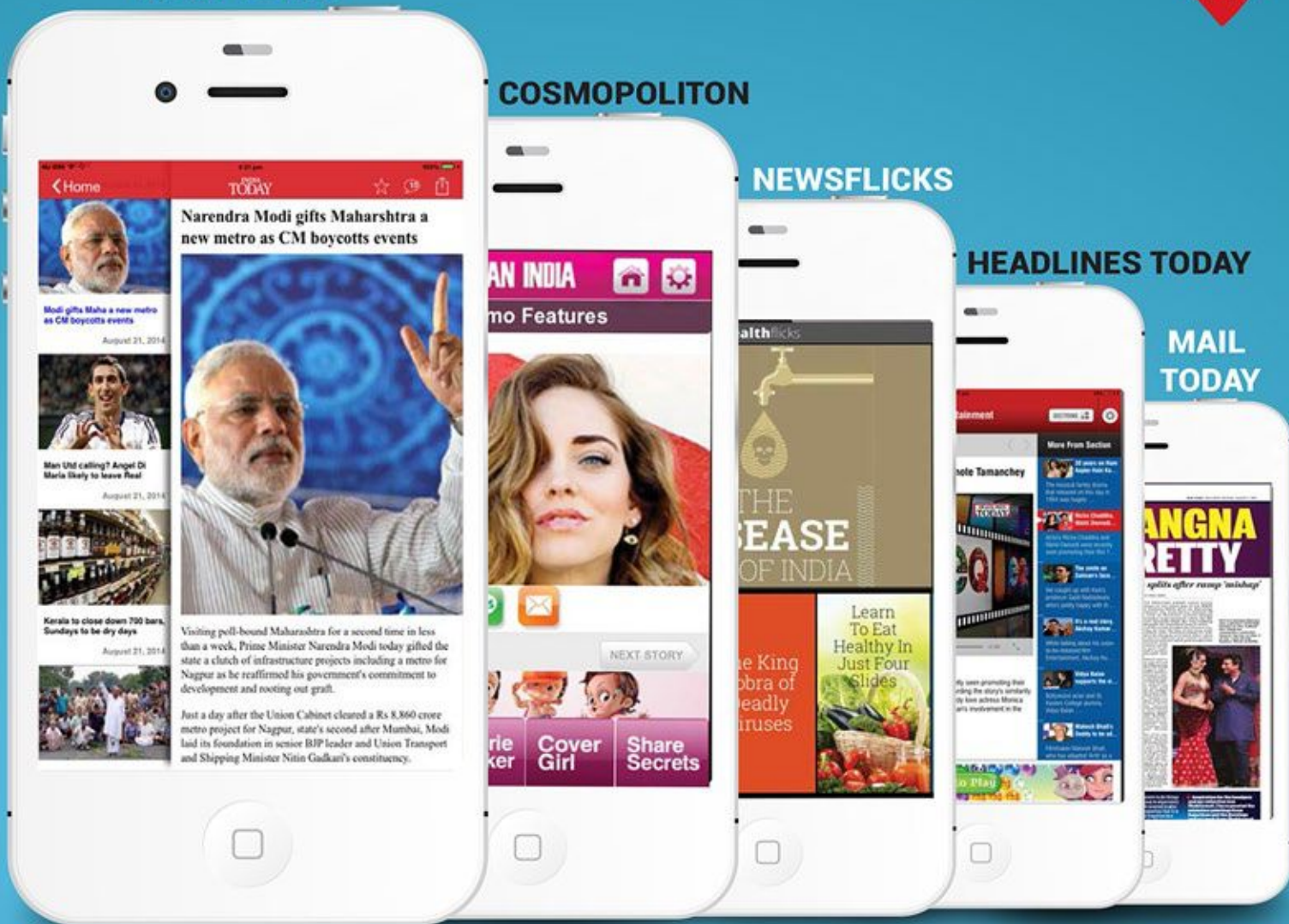


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19<sup>th</sup>

*Anniversary Issue*

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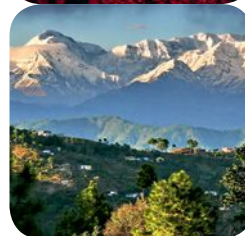
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Cover girl Huma Qureshi goes solo and walks the ramparts of the Korlai Fort and Lighthouse in Alibaug

### COVER CREDITS

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FOR MANAGING TOMORROW

Think Assam and a beautiful state of boundless natural beauty and charm comes to mind. This is the land of the mighty Brahmaputra with a rich, historical past and a glorious culture. While the must-see and must-do lists are known to all of us—Kamakhya Temple in Guwahati, Kaziranga and Manas, shopping for stunning Assam Muga silks and the popular Assam tea—here is information on some of the state's lesser-known places.



SUPROTIK CHATTERJEE

EXPLORING

Tea Garden

# Assam

## ORANG NATIONAL PARK

Though the smallest of Assam's 5 national parks, Orang Rajiv Gandhi National Park, as it is known, is no less significant. The one-horned Rhino and Royal Bengal tiger are the lead denizens of Orang. It is also a birdwatcher's paradise with a variety of resident and migratory birds

**HOW TO REACH:** It is situated at a distance of 140 km from Guwahati, which serves as the nearest major airport and railhead. The nearest airport is at Saloni Bari (Tezpur) at a distance of about 80 kms. The distance from Mangaldai is 70 kms. The park is well-connected by road.

**WHERE TO STAY:** You could stay at the tourist lodge run by Assam Tourism Development Corporation or opt for moderately-priced hotels and guesthouses at the nearby town of Tezpur.

**WHAT TO DO:** The park is best enjoyed on elephant back. Also worth exploring are the nearby tea estates for a more rounded experience of the region.

## HAFLONG AND JATINGA

Haflong is situated at a height of 513 m and said to be the only hill station in the state. It is a quaint town among the misty hills with several viewing points. The picturesque Haflong Lake provides angling and boating facilities besides great profile pictures! Come September, and thousands of birds flock here to perform what has been described as a 'mass suicide', spiraling through the skies

and crashing down to the ground. Various studies have been conducted by renowned ornithologists to unravel the causes behind the Jatinga bird suicides.

**HOW TO REACH:** The town is well-connected by road from Guwahati, Silchar and Dimapur. It is connected by meter-gauge railway to Lumding and Silchar.

**WHERE TO STAY:** Comfortable stay option is available at the ATDC Lodge in Haflong and private hotels in the town.

**WHAT TO DO:** Spend time exploring the town and if in September, travel out to Jatinga Bird Observatory to witness the unique phenomenon with your own eyes.

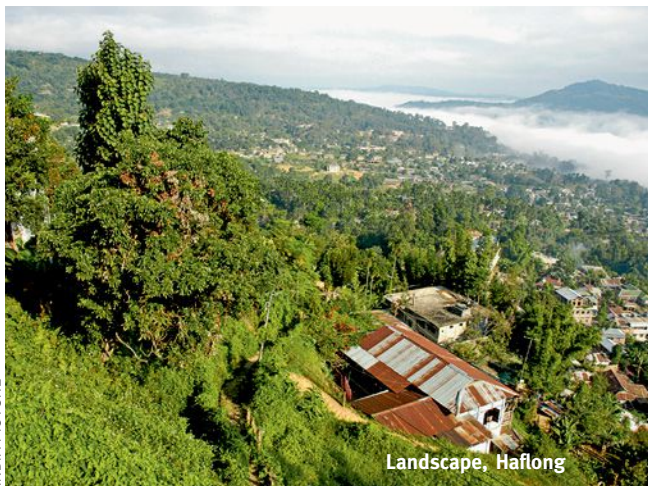
## MADAN—KAMDEV TEMPLE, KAMRUP

Dedicated to Lord Shiva, one of the most beautiful temples in the region, the Madan—Kamdev Temple lies in Kamrup district, 40 kms north of Guwahati. Situated on the top of the Dewangiri Hill, surrounded by lush green foliage is a complex of over 20 temples, the largest of which is Madan-Kamdev. Visiting the site on a misty winter morning can be an ethereal experience as the fog swirls in from the distance, moves over the still,



ANITA RAO KASHI

Orang National Park



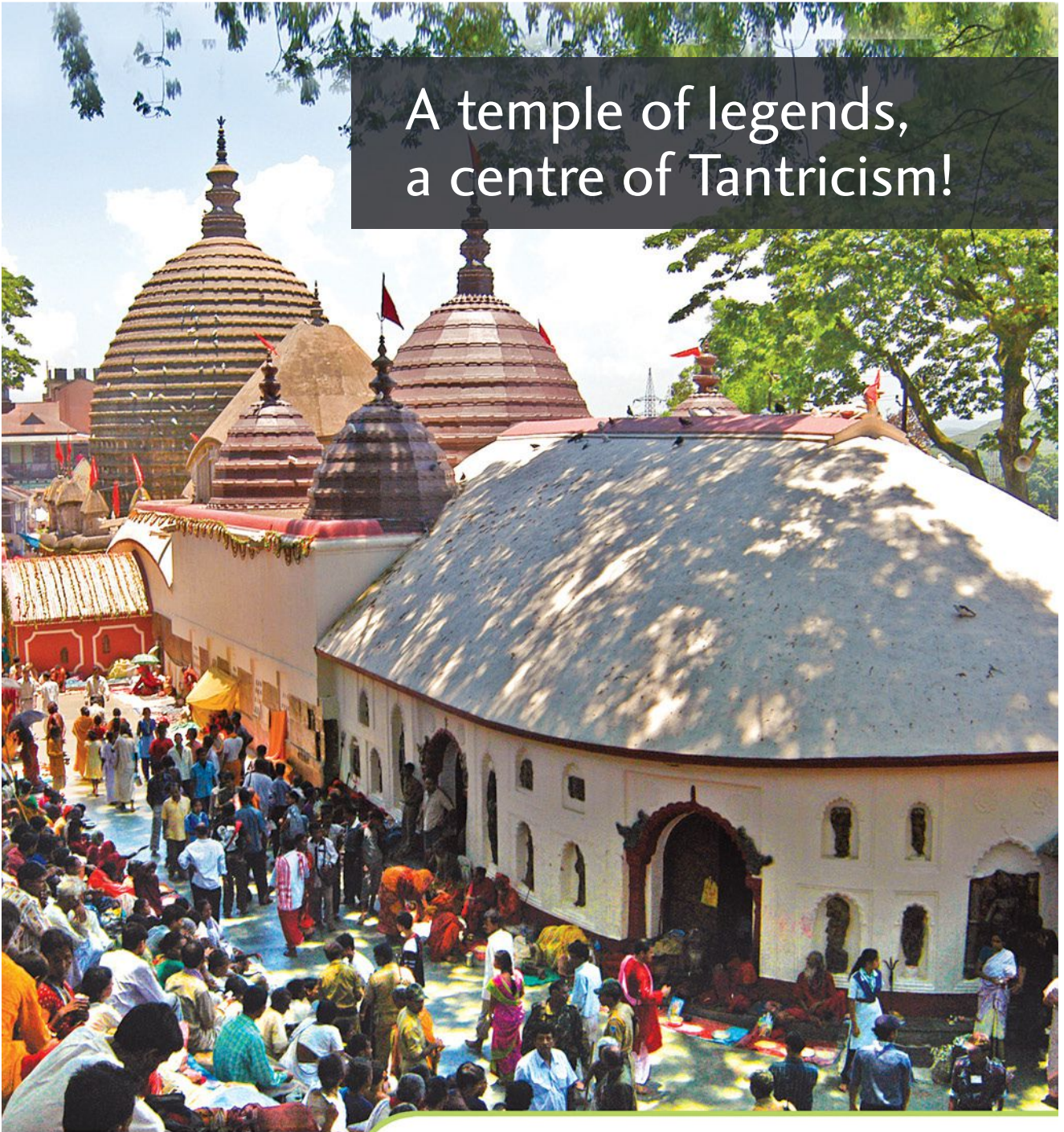
INDIA PICTURE

Landscape, Haflong

ancient stone sculptures and disappears in the surrounding forest

**HOW TO REACH:** By road. NH 52 leads to the northern bank of the Brahmaputra across the Saraighat Bridge onto the crossing of Baihata Chariali. From here, a 3 km drive takes one to the base of the Dewangiri Hill.

# A temple of legends, a centre of Tantricism!



For details please contact :  
Director of Tourism  
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The tantric fertility festival – Ambubachi Mela is the biggest festival at the Kamakhya Temple. During the 3 days, the temple closes its doors.

Kamakhya Temple itself is one of the oldest of the 51 Shakti Peethas in India – an important pilgrimage destination for Hindus and especially for Tantric worshipers.

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[ PROMOTION ]

# The Enchanting Bodh Mahotsava

One of the biggest events on Bihar's calendar, Bodh Mahotsava, jointly organised by the Tourism Department, Govt. of Bihar and the district administration is a festival offering a perfect blend of cultures

The annual event is coming up between January 22nd-24th, 2015 and aims at promoting religious tourism and pilgrimage in the land of Buddha's enlightenment. One of Bodhgaya's biggest treasure is the assortment of monasteries and temples, each offering visitors a unique opportunity to peek into Buddhist culture. It was at Bodh Gaya, where prince Siddhartha attained enlightenment beneath the Bodhi Tree.

A beautiful, sacred spot in the area is the Bodhi tree standing tall in the middle of a gorgeous garden setting. Its roots are supposed to be part of the same soil as its famed predecessor. Multiple monasteries and temples dot the pastoral landscape, built in their individual national style by foreign Buddhist communities. The ambience and feel of this town is mostly an amalgamation of monastic tranquillity and small-town hubbub.

This small town predictably attracts thousands of devotees and followers of Buddhism from around the world every year, who visit this place for meditation, prayers and peace.

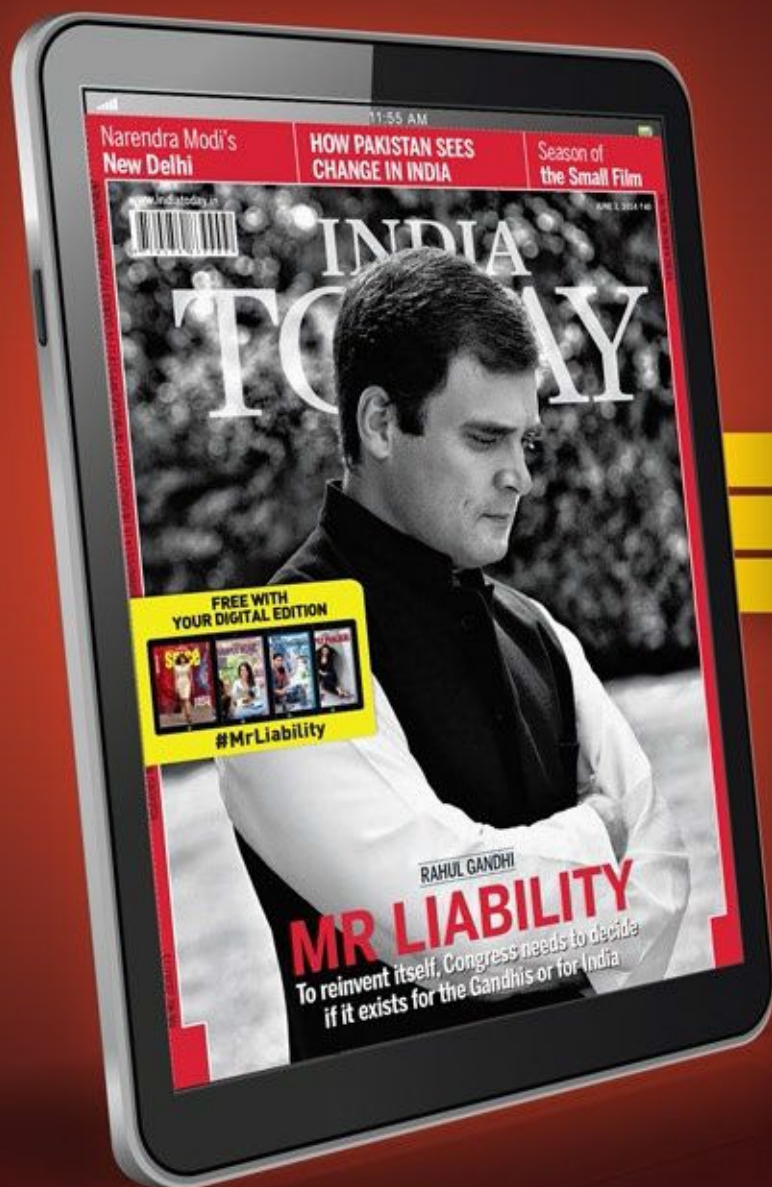
The best time to visit Bodhgaya is from December to January, the time when you can also witness the splendid Bodh Mahotsava. The three-day festival is the most significant event of the country's cultural calendar. Tibetan monks and pilgrims come down for this event from McLeod Ganj in Dharamshala, and if you are lucky enough, maybe you can get to meet the Dalai Lama himself!

**What: Bodh Mahotsava**  
**When: 22nd-24th Jan 2015**  
**Where: Bodhgaya, Bihar**  
**Inauguration by Chief Minister of Bihar, Shri Jitan Ram Manjhi**

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# West Bengal 2015

SUBIR HALDER



## **JANUARY** **GANGASAGAR**

One of the most famous festivals of West Bengal is the Gangasagar Mela. Held in the month of January-February, on the Ganga Sagar Island, it is attended by thousands of pilgrims every year.

SUBIR HALDER



## **MARCH** **SANTINIKETAN** **BASANTA UTSAV**

Started by Rabindranath Tagore at Santiniketan, Holi by the name of Basant Utsav is celebrated with fervour in this state when Spring is welcomed with colours, dance and chanting of hymns.

A number of festivities take place in West Bengal throughout the year. The state comes alive with vibrant hues around these, making it a perfect time to visit and experience local culture and cuisine



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### OCTOBER DURGA PUJA

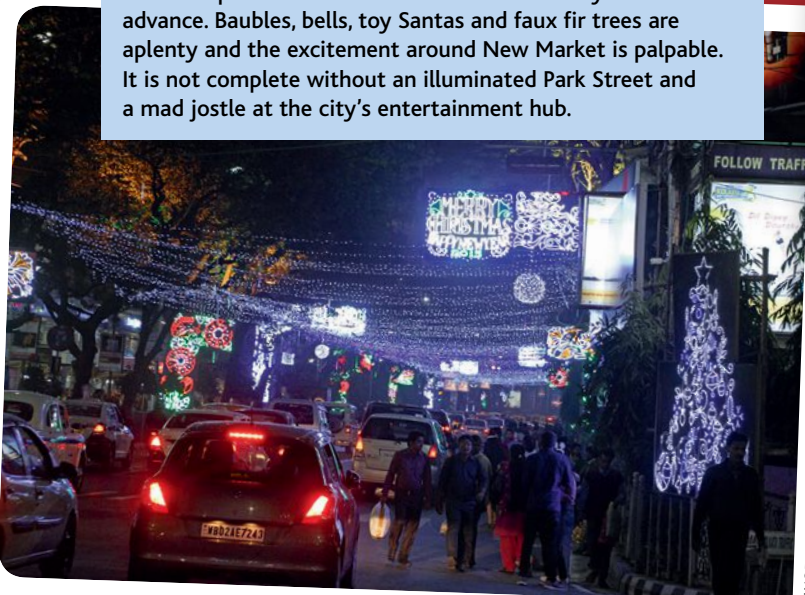
Durga Puja, held during the last four days of Navratri and Dusshera in the month of September/October is the perfect time to catch up and indulge in an explosion of rituals. You can also visit various workshops of the craftsmen as well.

### DECEMBER POUSH MELA

Poush Mela is an annual fair and festival that takes place in Santiniketan, marking the harvest season. Commencing in Poush (December), its key characteristics are live performances of Bengali folk music, notably baul music.

### DECEMBER CHRISTMAS FESTIVAL

The run up to Christmas in Kolkata starts nearly a month in advance. Baubles, bells, toy Santas and faux fir trees are aplenty and the excitement around New Market is palpable. It is not complete without an illuminated Park Street and a mad jostle at the city's entertainment hub.



ANINDYA SAHA



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Anita



Travelling in India is strange conundrum. There's the feeling of being within the comfort zone, a sense of belonging to the land. And yet, it can throw up the most unexpected curve balls round every corner; not just experiences, culture and traditions but also the most incredible sights, sounds and tastes. So despite frequently travelling abroad, there's always more anticipation when I am holidaying in India. For me, travelling within the country is almost always with the family. It brings with it the pleasure of exploring places together and a constant sense of amazement at the diversity that the country has to offer. **Travelling with family** also means figuring out something for everyone but this has rarely been a problem. And so, working on this issue of Travel Plus was easy since it meant sharing with families (or not) the experiences that have been both enjoyable and memorable for me and my family, along with a bucket list of future trips.



Kalyani

My favourite places to holiday in India are Shimla and Bangalore where I return again and again—to Shimla for the mountains and friends and to Bangalore for the food and friends. This time in Bangalore, last month, I ate at five restaurants in two days which were all totally fab. I spent 10 years at Travel Plus hating the anniv issue as an editor, and it was a novel feeling to hate it as one of the writers! Having said that, it's always fun to find out more about the country each time—there's always something new while you are **travelling as a couple**.



Sapriya

I am often undecided as to which city I can call home; travelling solo for more than 250 days in the year can do that to you! I am also uncertain on pegging the tag of 'most memorable experience' of my Indian journeys of 2014. It's a severe tussle between trudging in 3 feet snow to meet childhood hero, Mr. Bond (Ruskin, that is), to a poignant month spent in the foothills of the battered Kedar Valley, taking a swig of salphi with the Chhattisgarh tribals or learning how to make the crunchy red ant chutney at their village. But one thing was absolutely unperturbed—my belief in the fact that knowledgeable drivers are the soundest and most indispensable travel partners. That, Mr. Satnam's countless stories testified on a fantastic road trip through villages of Rajasthan and Gujarat. All in all it's been an eventful year, still safe for **solo women travellers** and one that gave me enough to write for the anniversary issue of Travel Plus.

## December contest winner

'What part of the world would you like to begin your year and why'

The winner of the **DA MILANO BAG** worth ₹2,699 is:

Jenny Paleja from Secunderabad.

She said:

### IN SYDNEY DURING THE FESTIVAL

I would like to begin my New Year in the enchanting and vibrant city of Sydney, Australia with my family. Having visited Sydney more than three times, I have been in love with this city as it has a vibrant buzz like Mumbai. The Sydney festival held every year in the first week of January is exuberant, exciting and a great time to be in the city. It presents the biggest and the best of the world's performing and visual arts that come together in an avalanche of artistic activity. From the central business district to Parramatta, the Sydney festival brings unique spaces to life including the Festival Village in Hyde Park, Sydney Town Hall and The Domain. You can also make the most of Sydney's best venues around this time which includes Carriage works, Riverside Theatres and Sydney Opera House!

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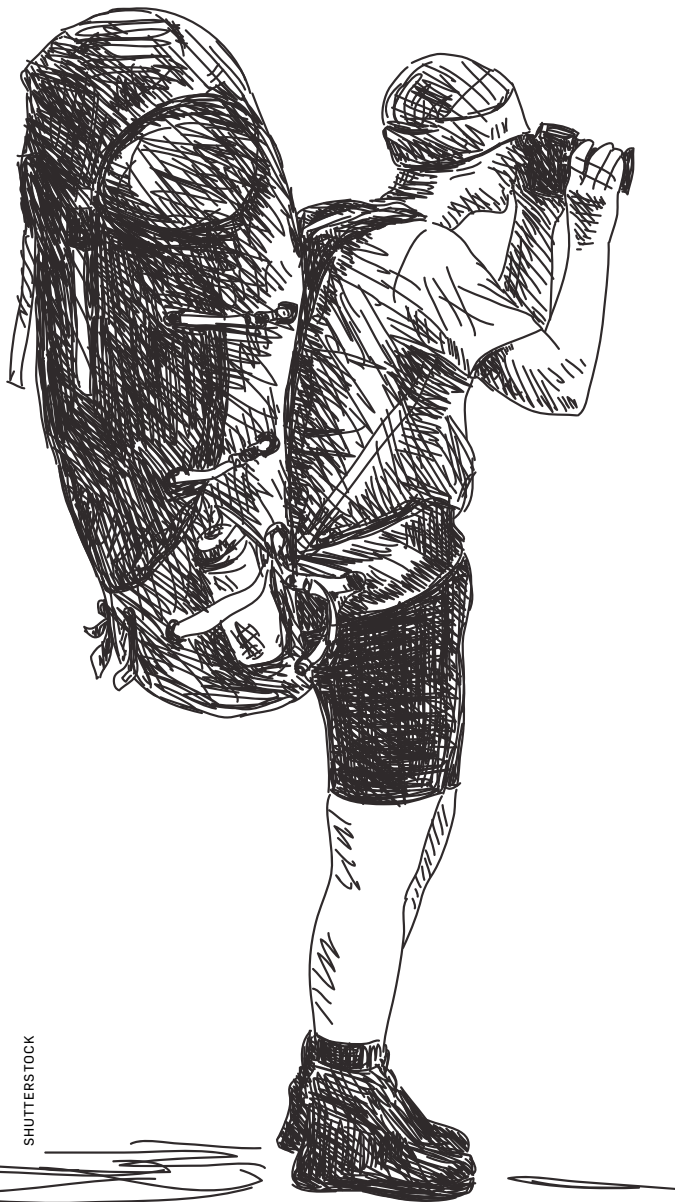
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# TRAVEL TAROT 2015

So you love to travel? The tarot spread can be used to perform a reading on forthcoming journeys. So here goes, let us see what the cards predict about your travels in the year ahead...



SHUTTERSTOCK

## ARIES



### The Emperor

Happy times lie ahead when it comes to your Travel plans in 2015. You will be undertaking travel with family and friends. It will be driven primarily by two important emotions, one out of love for family and friends, the other spiritual. Your travel will be very rewarding for you on a personal level. Make the most of it this year.

## TAURUS



### The Hierophant

The wheels of fortune bring in unexpected sums of money which opens doorway to unexpected travel plans. You will embark on sudden travel plans undertaken with an intention to achieve something new. You will be buzzing with new concepts and ideas in 2015 which will lead to interesting and intriguing travel opportunities.

## GEMINI



### The Lovers

Your travel plans are characterised by positive changes occurring in your professional life in 2015. You will undertake a lot of domestic travels. These travel opportunities will help you balance two important aspects of your life—professional and personal and hence, will work for you wonderfully.

## CANCER



### The Chariot

You will have to watch your back while making travel plans. Beware of robbery or treachery occurring while travelling. Be vigilant and cautious. The good news is I see you making good money this year which will reduce the impact of theft if any in 2015. Travel on the whole looks good and plenty this year.



LEO



**The Strength**

Your travel is mostly associated with problems of settling down. You will travel to move away from stressful situations and circumstances that you would have faced in the time that has gone. You will move to newer places to undertake new activities or work like an apprentice to make a fresh start. On the whole travel marks a new beginning for you in 2015.

SAGITTARIUS



**The Temperance**

Travel in 2015 is going to be an emotional affair for you. You will undertake travels initiated for you by another person or you may take a travel break for another person for personal reasons. In either case travel is going to be driven by your emotions. You may also decide to take a break from work to undertake this travel. This break is a time for you to relax.

VIRGO



**The Hermit**

Travel looks fantastic for you this year. New ventures, new collaborations will be on an upswing which will give you some good travel openings. Use this to your advantage and make the most of it. One little piece of advice, while you undertake travel this year be careful about not overlooking the other important aspects of your life. Balance your hectic travel plans well.

CAPRICORN



**The Devil**

Your travel looks very good in 2015. You will be well equipped to undertake travel plans in the months to come. I see you making some hefty travel investments and these would be hugely gratifying. In the second half of the year travel may seem a distant possibility due to some overwhelming factors but you will eventually give due consideration to your travel calling.

LIBRA



**The Justice**

Your travel is mostly associated with holidays. You may come upon a situation where you may decide to cut off from everything just to undertake a holiday. Do so, as it will go a long way in restoring the lost balance. You will be going through a very emotional phase this year and a travel break will ease out the challenges waiting for you ahead.

AQUARIUS



**The Star**

Travel seems to be a distant possibility for you in 2015. You will have to fight all odds to make travel happen this year and sadly I don't see it going that well for you if made. Travel may be characterised by deceit and robbery and hence caution is advised. Now that you know what's in store, use this knowledge to make the right decisions to better the final outcome.

SCORPIO



**The Death**

You will come upon some interesting thoughts and ideas that will require you to travel and explore new places. However I see some delay in culmination of your travel plans. Well the good news is, in the second half of 2015 you should be travelling and exploring places that will help you widen your horizons and things will move as planned originally.

PISCES



**The Moon**

New ideas and new changes will keep you busy with ever changing travel plans. I see you undertaking travel mostly by air and mostly domestic. These travel opportunities will bring about a positive outlook and help you establish a better understanding of your professional life. Use these travel opportunities to the fullest and make the most of it in 2015.



# Family Vacations



Designer Rina  
Dhaka, husband  
Ajay Sharma  
and son Jai

Madhya Pradesh Uttar Pradesh Orissa  
West Bengal Gujarat Telangana  
Andhra Pradesh Karnataka Tamil Nadu



“

Driving into **Rajasthan** would be easily our pick of favourite family breaks in India. I guess purely because it is such easy access from Delhi and my husband, Ajay, is not a great traveller.

During my early years of marriage, I remember driving to Neemrana quite often, when the roads were not so bad. I have also been to the Amanbagh which is located on the Jaipur highway. It is a beautiful property that we discovered thanks to our friends who invited us there.

We often go to Samode Palace; it is a beautiful yet quick getaway and also we are friends with the family. They have lovely hospitality, they organize unique games and the fact that you are a part of this old world charm, makes it really special. I have been there a few times and always come back discovering something new found. Be it the tents, or the palace in Jaipur, each place they own is magnificent and the food is very good. My sons are like spoilt princes, and prefer luxury. But I, on the other hand, am a true traveller and enjoy going earthy. The villages of Rajasthan hold special place in my travel itinerary because the craftsmen provide a lot of material and inspiration for my design work. We typically plan our vacations during summers, and of course around New Year, when I take a week off. These are my must-do. Last year, both the boys, Keith and Jai, wanted to attend the Sunburn festival and we thought that Jai was too young to be left alone with his friends, so off we went chasing after them! We plan our lives around them now, but Goa is always fun. Even if it is after 10 or 15 years, even though it is cramped and commercial, I love it.

”

**RINA DHAKA**  
Fashion Designer

SIDDHARTH KAPIL/WWW.INDIATODAYIMAGES.COM



If you are looking for a glorious escape to pristine beaches, sink your feet in the sand and explore the lesser known coasts and the hillside jungles, then it is time for your family to pack their bags and head out



## Unwind at Vizag

Museums, hills, beaches and so much more

**What:** One of the most pleasant beach towns on the East coast.

**Why:** Because not only does it have lovely beaches but is a charming and unpretentious city that envelops people in its warmth. Cool sea breeze, briny scents and the fresh air make for a potent combination. Predictably, the beach road is a favourite haunt of tourists and combines two spectacular beaches—**Ramakrishna Beach** and **Lawson's Bay**. Neither of them is crowded during the week and the white, soft sands, with the gently lapping sea water, are ideal for a morning or evening walk. There are also areas for

children to play on the beach. Temples, luxury hotels and a long stretch of park with sculptures makes the Beach Road unique.

About 8 km North of Visakhapatnam is **Rishikonda Beach**. It is popular because it is a vast stretch and relatively peaceful with lesser crowds. Besides, the dramatic backdrop of jutting hillocks makes for quite a scenic setting. Head out to **Araku Valley** on the mountain train that passes through tunnels and carpeted hillsides. Stop at a tribal village, visit a museum and sample their food.

**How:** Fly in or arrive by train into Vizag and use local transport to reach the beaches. Stay at one of the many hotels along Beach Road with stunning views of the sea such as **The Gateway Hotel** ([www.thegatewayhotels.com](http://www.thegatewayhotels.com); (891) 6623670) or **The Novotel Vizag** ([www.novotel.com](http://www.novotel.com); (891) 2822222).



**Carpeted hillside and stunning views of the sea along the coastline of Vizag**



## Hallowed Tirupati

Enjoy the tranquillity at this sacred place

**What:** Known for its Balaji Temple located on the Tirumala Hills, at an altitude of nearly 2,800 ft.

**Why:** Because it is considered to be very sacred by the devout; it is the busiest in the world even ahead of the Vatican and an estimated 30 to 40 million people visit it annually. But even for atheists, it is fascinating to watch a temple which functions like clockwork including allowing for people for *darshan* and the cooking of millions of *laddus* disbursed as *prasadam*. Believed to be in existence from around the 9th century, it was during Vijayanagara Empire (14th and 15th centuries) that it received contributions and became famous. There are many temples on the hill but it is the **Venkateshwara Temple** with its golden gopuram and elaborate complex that attracts the devout from all over.

**How:** Tirupati is in Chittoor district in Southern Andhra Pradesh. It has air, train and bus connections from many Indian metros and

cities. The temple runs many lodges but booking ahead might be advisable, or choose from hotels like **Fortune Select Grand Ridge** ([www.fortunehotels.in](http://www.fortunehotels.in); (877) 2221818), **Udayee International** ([www.udayeeinternational.com](http://www.udayeeinternational.com); (877) 2232222).



HK RAJASHEKAR/WWW.INDIA TODAY IMAGES.COM



## Blissful beaches

Enjoy sun and sand at Suryalanka

**What:** A lovely unspoilt beach on the East coast South of Guntur, that is ideal for a family vacation.

**Why:** Because it is tranquil and there's hardly anybody around. Here, golden sands meet the azure blue waters of the Bay of Bengal. Known only locally, the beach is deserted for much of the week; people tend to flock during weekends, but the beach is wide, long and spacious and does not get congested. The beach is calm and serene and is hence a very popular picnic and weekend getaway. A resort on the beach provides limited accommodation, but is ideal for a break since its rooms offer spectacular views of the sea. **Chirala**, South of Suryalanka, also has a pretty beach but is more famous for its handlooms. Other sights that can be accessed from here are **Bhavani Island**, the **Krishna River lighthouse** and many trekking routes.

**How:** Best time to visit is from late November to early February when the weather is pleasant, though it could get very rough if there is a cyclone. The nearest airport is at Vijayawada (85 km/2 hours) while Bapatla (7 km/15 mins) is the nearest railhead. The only accommodation at Suryalanka is a Haritha Resort run by **AP Tourism** ([www.aptdc.gov.in](http://www.aptdc.gov.in)).



## Wily wildlife

Spot endangered species at Rajahmundry

**What:** A sprawling and bustling city on the banks of the Godavari with a plethora of activities for the entire family.

**Why:** Because of not just the mighty Godavari but also because of the many things that you can do here. By far the Godavari is the biggest attraction and the three bridges that span the river are fun and interesting. Things to see along the way are some famous temples including **Kotilingalu** (literally 10 million Shivalingams), but there's also the unique **Sir Arthur Cotton Museum** dedicated to civil engineering. Go on a boat cruise on the river for a city view or head out to the **Papi Hills** and **Kolleluru Lake**. To get a lowdown on the area's wildlife head to **Coringa Wildlife Sanctuary** located where the Godavari drains into the Bay of Bengal. The park is the second largest in the country and is home to over 65 species of mangrove trees, endangered animals, and 120 bird species.

**How:** Rajahmundry has an airport with limited connectivity from Hyderabad and Chennai, but is well connected by trains and buses. It has a wide range of accommodation options but choose from among **AP Tourism's** ([www.aptdc.gov.in](http://www.aptdc.gov.in)) Haritha brand of resorts since they are strategically located at scenic points.

DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY



### BELUM CAVES

About two hours from Kurnool and Guntakal are the mysterious Belum Caves, a 3.5 km stretch of underground caves believed to be the longest known underground cave system in South India. Located on a flat stretch of land, they are fascinating for their stalactite and stalagmite formations. Illuminated in glitzy colours which bounce off the walls, creating fascinating patterns, music is produced when a wooden stick is gently tapped against them.



From wildlife at Gir National Park to exploring the architectural wonders of Champaner to the gorgeous beaches of Jamnagar, the range of places to explore with the family in Gujarat, is astounding



GUJARAT TOURISM

(Left) Splendid architecture of Champaner  
(Below) Colourful Kite Festival In the Rann of Kutch



### THE MAGICAL WEAVERS

About 25 km north of Bhuj is the tiny village of Sumrasar Sheikh which is home to Kala Raksha ([www.kala-raksha.org](http://www.kala-raksha.org)). A grassroots social enterprise, the organization is involved with preserving local art traditions, especially nine embroidery techniques. Visitors can buy items like bags, blankets and dresses which display these exquisite techniques.



## Champaner sites

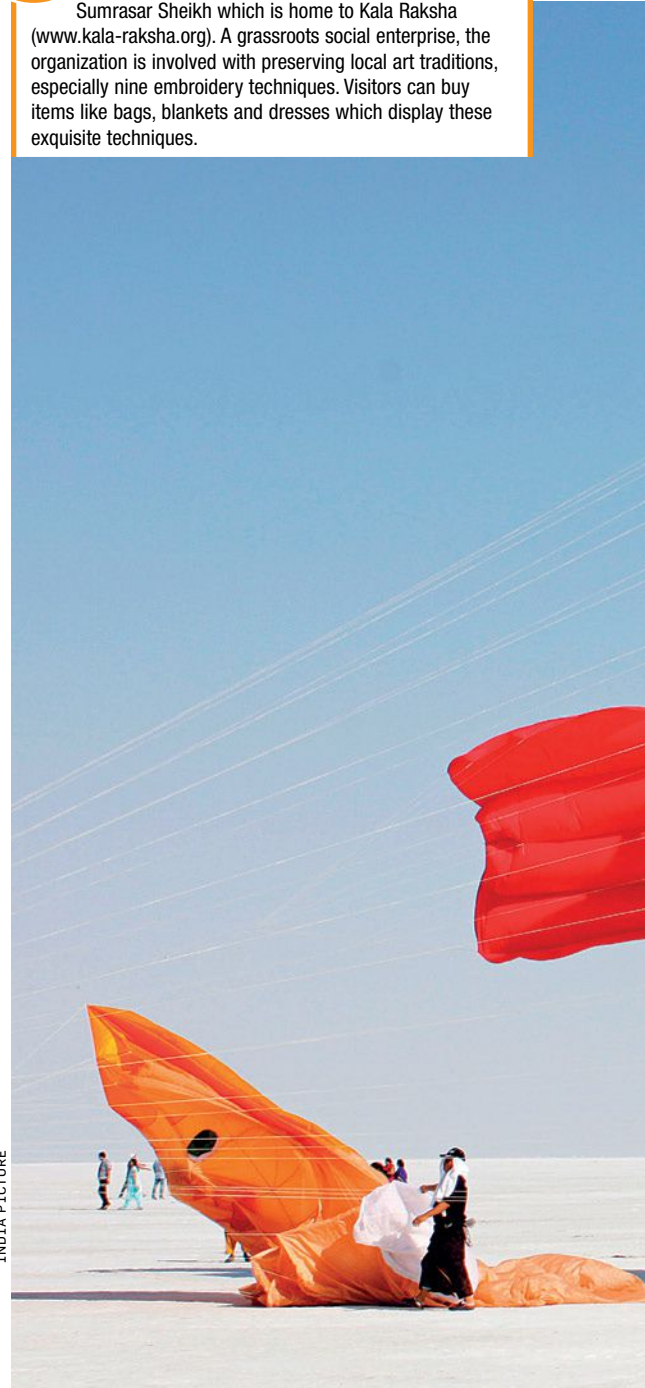
Prehistoric sites and remains of the 16th-century

**What:** A historical city in Panchmahal district that is home to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Champaner-Pavagadh Archaeological Park which has a plethora of fortresses, palaces, temples, mosques and monuments.

**Why:** For the sheer weight of history and stunning architecture of centuries ago. Located around the historical city of Champaner which was built by Sultan Mahmud Begada, the heritage site is filled with forts and bastions starting from the hills of Pavagadh and running right into Champaner city; some of the earlier structures are believed to be over 1,200 years old. The park includes archaeological and living cultural heritage monuments such as a hill fortress and remains of the 16th-century capital of the state of Gujarat. There are palaces, gateways and arches, mosques, temples, agricultural and water structures such as stepwells, vavs and tanks going back to the 8th century.

**How:** The nearest airport and railhead are at Vadodara (50 km/1 hour) it is well connected by buses. Stay at the **Champaner Hotel run by GTDC** ([www.gujarattourism.com](http://www.gujarattourism.com))

INDIA PICTURE





## The other-worldly Rann

Quad bikes, camel rides and spectacular views

**What:** One of the most stunning sights in India, the Rann is a never-ending landscape of salt flats that glisten and gleam especially on a full moon night.

**Why:** Because it is the most stunning sight ever. The road from Bhuj heading towards the White Rann or Greater Rann of Kutch is almost one straight stretch, flanked by flat, barren land broken by the odd shrub and groups of nomadic tribes. Considered to be the largest salt desert in the world, the White Rann, an endless salt marsh, spreads across more than 7500 sq km. It is almost uniformly barren; the ground covered in layers of salt of varying thickness and seems like white wilderness. It gets surreal on the few occasions when the sun sinks in the west and the moon rises in

the east almost simultaneously, creating an eerie effect. There are also quad bikes and camel rides on the salt desert. For a change, head to Kaladungar, a hill top destination for spectacular views of the area and villages such as Birandiyari and Khavda to watch local craftsmen produce clay, leather and wooden artifacts.

**How:** Best time to visit is from September to March, but time your visit during the Rann Utsav which begins in December and runs till early March. The nearest airport is at Bhuj (80 km (2 hours) though it is also a good idea to arrive at Ahmedabad, catch a train to Bhuj and then a taxi to Dhordo, the last village before the flats begin. A tented city comes up temporarily for three months during the Rann Utsav and can be booked through the **Gujarat Tourism website** ([www.gujarattourism.com](http://www.gujarattourism.com) or [rannutsav.net](http://rannutsav.net)). Among the most unique places to stay is **Shaam-e-Sarhad** ([www.hodka.in](http://www.hodka.in)) a village initiative as well as the **Gateway to Rann Resort** ([www.kutchrannresort.com](http://www.kutchrannresort.com)) managed by the Dhordo gram panchayat.





## Wilson Hills

Forests, wildlife parks and sea views

**What:** A beautiful hill station in Dharmpur with breathtaking scenery, stunning view points and thick forests.

**Why:** Because it is a serene and relaxed getaway for the entire family. Standing in a densely forested area near the Pangarbari Wildlife Sanctuary, it is one of the few hill stations in the world from where it is possible to glimpse the sea—in this case the Arabian Sea. With an average elevation of 2,500 feet, it has at least six view points. The place is popular during the summer months since it is cooler and less humid but it could also be dry and dull since everything would have dried up. Go during the rainy season as well as during winter when it can be a fantastic experience for those who enjoy the cold.

**How:** Though summer is the peak season, visit during winter to get the real feel of the place. The nearest airport is in Surat (130 km/3 hours) while the nearest railhead is at Valsad (48 km/1 hour approx) on the Surat-Mumbai line. Wilson Hills can be done as a day trip from Valsad where it is advisable to stay in one of its many hotels, as it's the best stay option.



## Gandhiji's Rajkot

Museums, memorabilia and the Mahatma

**What:** A town in Saurashtra of central Gujarat, steeped in history and closely associated with Mahatma Gandhi.

**Why:** Because it has an amazing spectrum of things to see and do. Kaba Gandhi No Delo is the Mahatma's childhood residence which has been converted into a museum containing some photographs and also artefacts belonging to him; it is called Gandhi Smriti. Outside town is the Aaji Dam, a beautiful reservoir constructed by the British. Children are bound to enjoy the Rotary Dolls Museum which has over 1,400 dolls, collected from all over the world and showcases the culture and tradition from where they originated. Visit also the Watson Museum and Library, located amidst the pleasant Jubilee Garden, which has a collection of human history and culture including precious objects from local history during India's colonial period.

**How:** Time your visit for Navaratri (Sep-Oct) to witness the colourful garba events. Rajkot is well connected by flights, trains and buses. Stay at one of the up market hotels such as **Imperial Palace Hotel** ([www.theimperialpalace.biz](http://www.theimperialpalace.biz); 0281 2480000)



## Bhuj, a town steeped in history

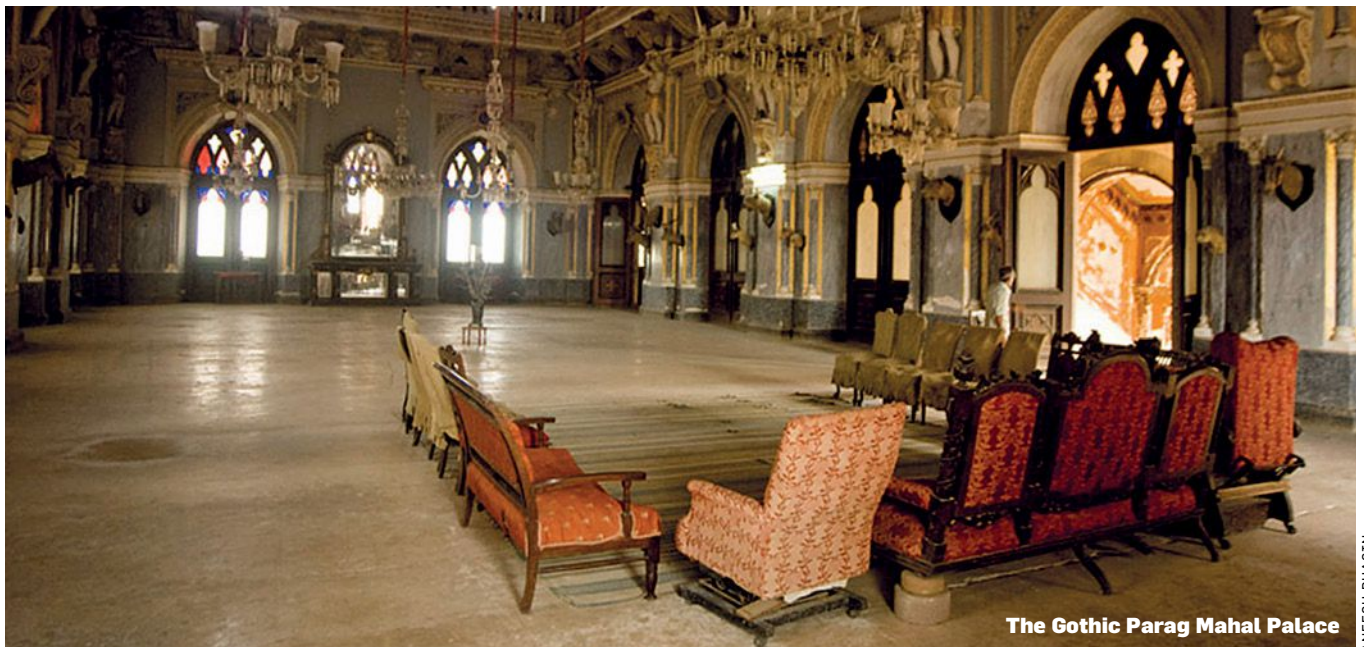
Explore the incredible world of palaces, lakes and art

**What:** A historical city as well as a region in Western Gujarat, it is a treasure trove of heritage, culture, wildlife and scenery.

**Why:** For the astonishing heritage, culture and history of the region. Among the most spectacular places is the Gothic Prag Mahal Palace, partially ruined by the massive earthquake, but still huge in proportion. It was the seat of the rulers of Kutch and depicted many influences but was predominantly Gothic in style. Adjacent to it is the 18th century Aina Mahal Palace, the palace of mirrors. Walk along the streets of the old town to shop or gorge on local snacks and sweets. Less than a kilometre is the Sharad Bagh

Palace with its eclectic collection of artefacts. In the evening, lounge or walk along the Harmisar Lake located in the city centre where thousands of birds come in for the night and create a racket.

**How:** Bhuj has an airport but has very few flights though it is a premium sector. It's also a good idea to fly into Ahmedabad (350 km/6 hours) and take an overnight train to Bhuj. There are plenty of stay options but try some of these unique places: **Kutch Safari Lodge** (099252 38599; [www.kutchsafarihbhuj.com](http://www.kutchsafarihbhuj.com)) overlooking the **Rudramata Reservoir** and **B-Cube Hotel** (02832-230166; [www.b-cubehotels.com](http://www.b-cubehotels.com)).



The Gothic Prag Mahal Palace

ANEESH BHASIN

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Vista from the Mandvi Palace

ANSHUMAN SEN



## Mandvi magic

Quaint heritage town, picnic spots and beaches

**What:** A tranquil beach town in Kutch district with an old city and fort walls providing many points of interest.

**Why:** Because it packs in an unusual combination of beach, palace and fort. Though that combo in itself is not unusual, the fact that it used to be a thriving port but has lapsed into a serene beachside destination that is usually ignored by the hordes makes it quite attractive as a family destination. Visit the Vijay Vilas Palace, a modern royal abode built in Rajput-style and cruise along the Rukmavati River and see the unique 19th century Rukmavati Bridge. Picnic on the banks of the Topansar Lake or relax on the Wind Farms Beach, so called because of the many windmills. Also check out the ship building industry which goes back 400 years. Don't miss the local *dabaeli* (vada pav), which has spread all over Gujarat and Maharashtra, but is believed to have originated here.

**How:** The nearest airport and railhead is at Bhuj (58 km/1 hour) though there are good bus connections to Mandvi. Opt for a beach side resort or hotel such as **The Beach at Mandvi Palace** ([www.mandvibeach.com](http://www.mandvibeach.com); 02834 277597) and **Hotel Sea View** ([www.hotelseaviewmandvi.com](http://www.hotelseaviewmandvi.com); 02834 224481).



## Junagadh lions

Gir National Park, a majestic fort and Buddhist caves

**What:** A historical city on the coast of the Arabian Sea, Junagadh is a mix of heritage, wildlife and artistry

**Why:** Because, apart from the rich history and culture, Junagadh is the only place where the Asiatic lions are found. It draws its name from the fort which is surrounded by tall hills. Other sights include the fort walls that surround the town, the stunning museum, 2nd century Buddhist caves, the beautiful tomb of Bahar-ud-din Bhar, the Uperkot Fort; while children are bound to have a fabulous time at the Sakkarbaug Zoo and the Willingdon Dam. Head out to Girnar a mountain peak and catch a jeep safari to the Gir National Park to see the lions and wildlife such as leopards, sloth bears, hyenas, jackals, chital, nilgai and marsh crocodiles. Junagadh is also a market for gold and silver thread embroidery, perfume, and copper and brass vessels.

**How:** The best time to visit is between October and March. The nearest airport is at Rajkot (100 km/2 hours) but Junagadh is well connected by trains and buses. Stay at **The Lotus Hotel** ([thelotushotel.com](http://thelotushotel.com); 0285 2658500) and **Leo Resorts** ([leoresorts.com](http://leoresorts.com); 0285 2652844).



## Jamnagar

Lush green forests and much more

**What:** A historical city on the coast of the Gulf of Kutch filled with beaches, temples, palaces, forests and marine life.

**Why:** Because it offers an astonishing variety of things to do and see for the whole family; you can choose to have a relaxed holiday or pack it with sights and activities. A seaside town, it is has gained the epithet of the 'Jewel of Kathiawar' because of its palaces, temples, islands and beaches, towering hills in the background, lush forests, and a fascinating Marine National Park. Don't miss the Darbargadh Palace, Lakhota Fort, Pratap Vilas Palace and Willingdon Crescent.

**How:** Jamnagar has an airport and is also a railhead. It is also well connected by buses from other parts of the state and the country. Choose from hotels such as

**Fortune Palace** ([www.hotelfortunepalace.in](http://www.hotelfortunepalace.in); 0288 2720291) and **Hotel President** ([www.hotelpresident.in](http://www.hotelpresident.in); 0288 2557491).



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A charming blend of palaces, beaches, tiger reserves, ancient ruins and legendary hangouts. Karnataka is a heady mix of diverse geographical highlights that will delight your entire clan!



## Hampi for all

A great destination for adventure sports and family fun

**What:** Magnificent ruins of the 15th century Vijayanagara Empire with awe-inspiring structures.

**Why:** Because it's considered to be the world's largest outdoor museum and nothing in the world can quite compare to Hampi. This UNESCO World Heritage Site is breathtaking for its sheer beauty and ingeniousness. Of all the rulers of this dynasty, Krishnadevaraya is held to be the most important and progressive king to have ruled over the region. It comprises royal buildings, temples, fortifications, baths, stables, public places, markets, pavilions and thousands of elegant pillars, each of which tell a story of their own. Though, even a week in Hampi is considered inadequate, landmarks not to be missed are the king's palace, Mahanavami Dibba, Lotus Mahal, the elegant queen's bath, elephant stables, Virupaksha Temple, Vithala Temple, Hazara Rama Temple and the images of Narasimha and Ganesha. Also worth a visit is Anegundi, which predates the Vijayanagara kingdom and is believed to be the mythical Kishkindapuri, the abode of Sugriva from the epic Ramayana. Try a coracle ride; there are ample opportunities for trekking, rock climbing and cycling.

**How:** Nearest airport is at Hubli (140 km/3 hours) but it has limited connections. A better option would be the overnight train journey from Bangalore to Hospet (13 km/25 mins). Hampi has several stay options but it is better to stay in Hospet at such hotels as **Royal Orchid Central Kireeti** ([www.royalorchidhotels.com/royal-orchid-central-kireeti](http://www.royalorchidhotels.com/royal-orchid-central-kireeti); **083943 00100**). For a very local experience, do check out the Kishkinda Trust's heritage home stays ([thekishkindatrust.wordpress.com](http://thekishkindatrust.wordpress.com); **085332 67777** in Anegundi). Also, don't miss having a meal or at least a coffee at Mango Tree, a quirky eatery near the entrance of Virupaksha Temple that has become something of an institution.



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**Soak in the ambience of the calm sea at Karwar**



## Mangalore to Karwar

Deserted beaches, a museum and incredible food

**What:** A leisurely drive from Mangalore to Karwar via Udupi, St Mary's island, Maravanthe, Murudeshwar, Gokarna and Honnavar with the Arabian Sea for company.

**Why:** Because it is probably the best hidden secret, encompassing deserted beaches, unexplored coastline, lovely towns and incredible cuisine. Start the drive, about 320 km, at Mangalore after a stint at Ullal Beach and arrive at the temple town of Udupi for a visit to the

central shrine and breakfast at Mitra Samaj. Continue north via Maravanthe, a surreal stretch which has the Arabian Sea on the left and the Souparnika River on the right, making for a fascinating drive. Head to Murudeshwar for the famous temple under the watchful eyes of the gigantic Shiva statue. Stop at Honnavar to lounge in the calm sea, then continue to Gokarna to see one of the most ancient seaside temples as well as glorious beaches. End at Devbagh Island for a relaxed and beautiful stay.

**How:** Mangalore is well connected by flights, trains and buses. There are plenty of stay options along the way, **Paradise Isle Beach Resort (0820 2538666; [www.paradiseisle.com](http://www.paradiseisle.com))**





## Historical Hassan

Beautiful temples, sculptures, Jain pilgrimage site

**What:** The gateway to a set of 12th century temples and a monolithic granite statue of Bahubali that is considered to be the largest in the world.

**Why:** For the sheer weight of history as well as for the radically opposite but incredible temple architecture belonging to two religions. Often clubbed together, the two 12th century temples at Belur and Halebidu, separated by about 15 km, are classic examples of the exquisite temple architecture of the Hoysalas. The Channakeshava Temple at Belur is a living temple and is characterised by its star shape, magnificent friezes on the outside of the temple bearing stories from the Puranas, mythology and folklore. The most famous of the sculptures are the 'shilabalikes' or celestial nymphs. The Hoysaleswara and Kedareshwara temples at Halebidu are in ruins and the central deity is missing, but the structures are equally beautiful. Belur, reached first, is about 40 km from Hassan. On the other hand, the massive 10th century Gomateshwara statue at Shravanabelagola, about 50 km from Hassan, is a sacred place for Jains and is starkly simple. A long flight of steps leads to the hillock where it stands, while the path is strewn with lovely examples of carved temple architecture.

**How:** The nearest airport is at Bangalore (180 km/4 hours); though Hassan has a railway station, there are just a couple of trains, so it is better to arrive by bus or private vehicle. Stay at Hoysala Village Resort (087172 256764; [www.hoysalavillageresorts.com](http://www.hoysalavillageresorts.com))



Halebidu Temple

**+**  
**SECRET**

### NATURE AT ITS BEST

Nandi Hills near Bangalore is the nearest hill station to the capital and is often ignored because of the hordes which descend there. But a novel way of experiencing it is through a moonlight trek (20 km/8 hours) which might seem daunting but is moderately easy and comfortable for even older children. The trail leads through sleeping villages and farmlands; the last bit is a straight climb up via steps to the hilltop by dawn to enjoy a spectacular sunrise amidst misty peaks.



## Birding paradise Dandeli

Rafting, coracle rides, kayaking and bird watching

**What:** A town which is the gateway to the rushing river Kali and thick forests.

**Why:** Because it is not only packed with forest and wildlife but is probably the only place which allows for intense white water rafting South of the Himalayas. Settle into Kali Resort, located on the banks of the river, surrounded by thick forests and decide whether you want a leisurely holiday or a activity-filled vacation. Gaze upon gorges, valleys, forests and swirling rivers from the sprawling bungalow. Go on long treks along the river or into the jungle while bird watchers can expect to have an eventful stay. If you feel like more vigorous action, trek up to Siroli Peak. Other water based activities that are possible here include white water rafting, kayaking and coracle rides, while land based activities span mountain biking and wall climbing. Wild life enthusiasts can also head out on safaris to see not just the big cats but also black panthers, gaur, sloth bear, hornbills, crested serpent eagles and much more.

**How:** The best way to connect is by train to Hubli (80 km/2 hours), by bus or a private vehicle. Stay at the beautiful **Kali Wilderness Camp** ([www.junglelodges.com/kali-adventure-camp](http://www.junglelodges.com/kali-adventure-camp); 080 40554055) or the **Hornbill River Resort** ([hornbillriverresort.com](http://hornbillriverresort.com); 098806 83323).



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY: KARNATAKA TOURISM



## Chikmagalur

Jungles, coffee plantations, waterfalls and trekking trails

**What:** A verdant district full of rolling hills, forests and coffee estates

**Why:** Because it is one of the two most green and nature-packed districts in Karnataka. It is packed with the greenery of jungles and coffee plantations, providing the perfect backdrop to relax amidst crisp mountain air and the aroma of coffee plants. Opt for a plantation stay for the best experience and go for long plantation walks or ask for a coffee-bean picking tour. For some adventure trek up Mullayanagiri Peak, the highest peak in Karnataka, rising 1,930 ft, or drive up to Kemmangundi. On the other hand you could also head to one of the many streams that flow through the district where water-based activities such as rafting and river crossing are possible.

**How:** Sep to early Feb is the best time to visit. Mangalore (150 km/3 hours) is the nearest airport but Bangalore (240 km/6 hours) has better connections. Well connected by trains and buses as well. Can stay at the luxurious **The Serai** ([www.theserai.in](http://www.theserai.in); 08262 224903)



## Bandipur tryst

A hilltop temple, Nilgiris hills and wildlife

**What:** Bandipur National Park and a tiger reserve.

**Why:** Because Bandipur is one of the best tiger reserves in the country and provides a lovely family outing. It is contiguous with Nagarhole as well as sanctuaries in Mudumalai in Tamil Nadu and Wayanad in Kerala, together constituting the 6,000 sq km Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve. At the last count, there were over 75 tigers and more than 3,000 elephants in this park, making sightings fairly common in this area. With the beautiful mist covered Nilgiris in the background, this park is known for its scenic beauty as well. As a result, there is a heavy tourist influx in season. There are usually two safaris, dawn and dusk, so opt for both to increase your chances of wildlife sightings. During the day, head for a trip to Himavad Gopalswamy Betta, a beautiful hilltop with a temple covered in mists and offering plenty of verdant trekking routes.

**How:** Can be visited round the year. Nearest airport is at Bangalore (230 km/5.5 hours) and nearest major railhead is Mysore (80 km/2 hours). Stay at state-run **Bandipur Safari Lodge** ([www.junglelodges.com](http://www.junglelodges.com), 080 40554055)



## Regal Mysore

Monuments, bustling markets and a hub for premium silk

**What:** A heritage city with regal splendour, palaces, lakes and a host of other sights and activities.

**Why:** This is Karnataka's own city of palaces and a classified Heritage City. The bastion of the Wadiyar rulers, Mysore is best known for its regal buildings, many of which have been converted into administrative buildings. However, the most famous – the Mysore Palace or Amba Vilas Palace – still stands tall and elegant, and is the centrepiece of the city. Wander around the palace to see the exquisite stained glass domes, carved reliefs, artefacts and two museums. Other places of interest include the Jaganmohan Palace, Lalitha Mahal Palace, Folklore Museum, Chamundi Hills, Brindavan Gardens and the zoo. Spend a day at Srirangapatna, about 30 minutes away; the 18th century island fortress was the stronghold of the legendary Tipu Sultan. Other sights here include Dariya Daulat, Gumbaz (where Tipu, his father Hyder Ali and other royalty are buried), the Jama Masjid, Ranganathaswamy Temple, the obelisk and Wellesley Bridge.

**How:** Mysore can be visited throughout the year. The nearest airport is at Bangalore (145 km/3 hours), well connected by trains and buses. Stay at **Lalitha Mahal Palace Hotel** ([www.lalithamahalpalace.in](http://www.lalithamahalpalace.in); 0821 2526100) or **Hotel Metropole** ([www.royalorchidhotels.com](http://www.royalorchidhotels.com) 0821 425 5566).

# Luxury in the heart of the woods

[ PROMOTION ]



The architecturally superior wooden luxury cottages, stilted and perched high above the ground, find a unique way to blend with nature. With individual wide decks that overlook Coorg's evocative landscape, and large glass panels that bring the green valley, its towering trees and the coffee plantation right inside your room as natural wall paper. The luxury and privacy of these cottages and the enchanting chorus of forest birds outside make this a splendid and sophisticated haven for family getaways, honeymooners, nature lovers and anyone seeking an escape from the ordinary.

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**L**OCATED in a coffee plantation adjoining a stunning riverside and Kote Betta mountain in Hattihole around 260 km from Bangalore, in a charming hamlet in Coorg, is just right for a quick escape. With tastefully appointed wooden cottages, a gurgling river, and a backdrop of stunning mountains, **Meriyanda** has a way of making the stress of daily life seem like a distant memory.

entertained and accommodated in a way that is minimally intrusive to the environment. Specially designed walking trails let you get closer to the Coorg spectacular countryside. Explore, or simply sit back and rejuvenate.



From the famous Khajuraho temples to the exotic forts and stupas, Madhya Pradesh is blessed with some of the most stunning architecture and history. It is a perfect destination for a family to explore and unwind

## **Kanha for the wildlife**

Eyeball tigers and connect with your wild side

**What:** One of the biggest and most scenic national parks in Madhya Pradesh, Kanha is home to the Royal Bengal tigers in addition to other flora and fauna.

**Why:** It is believed that Kanha's thick lush green expanses were the inspiration for Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*, something that brings joy to children and adults alike. Spread over 940 sq km, the park is home to tigers, leopards, barasingha, sloth bears, dholes and other animals distributed in an undulating terrain that contains thick sal and bamboo forests as well as meadows and plateaus which are broken by streams that irrigate the national park.

**How:** Best time to visit Kanha is between February to June; the park is closed for the monsoons between July and October. It is open from 6 am to noon and 3 pm to 6 pm. The nearest airport is at Jabalpur (180 km/4 hours) from where you can hire taxis or use local public transport; it is also the nearest railhead, though bus connections are available to Mandla (70 km/1.5 hours). Opt to stay at an **MPTDC resort** ([www.mptourism.com](http://www.mptourism.com)) or more upmarket options such as **Kanha Earth Lodge** ([www.kanhaearthlodge.com](http://www.kanhaearthlodge.com)).

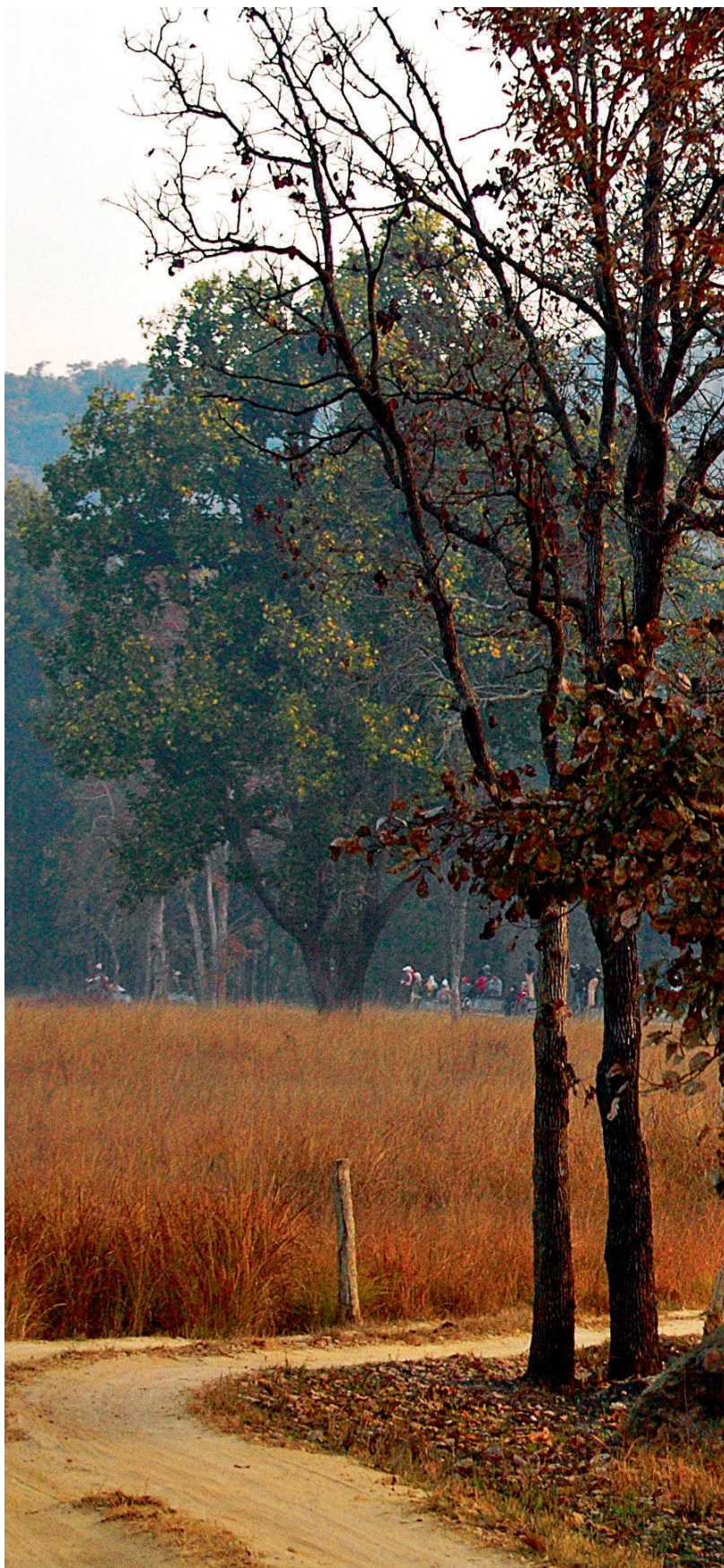
## **Explore Pachmarhi**

Take long walks and absorb stunning scenery

**What:** A hill station with stunning scenery, rolling hills and thick forests interspersed with waterfalls, archaeological finds, temples and stunning view points.

**Why:** It is easy to relax in Pachmarhi, a lovely hill station surrounded by the Satpura ranges. Snaking paths lead into serene forests in which are hidden cave shelters such as the ones in the Mahadeo Hills which display a rich trail of rock paintings dating back to between the 6th and 9th centuries. Take long walks to not only absorb nature but also to gaze upon Victorian houses and heritage cottages that sit with charming ease. Things to do here include trekking to the viewing point at Forsyth Point or to Irene Pool which leads to a cave and an underground stream; picnicking at a shallow pool called Apsara Vihar; enjoying the spectacular waterfalls such as Rajat Prapat, Jalawataran and Jamuna Prapat; visiting Mahadeo shrines or simply catch the sunset from Dhoopgarh, which is the highest point of the Satpura range, or soaking up the beauty of the 19th century Catholic Church and Christ Church.

**How:** Best time to visit is from September to April. The nearest airport is Bhopal and Pipariya on the Itarsi-Jabalpur line is the nearest railhead. You can stay at **WelcomHeritage Golf View** ([welcomheritagehotels.in](http://welcomheritagehotels.in)).





## SECRET

### GINGER HOUSE

Though the River Narmada is omnipresent, do a river cruise at Bhedaghat (Marble Rocks) near Jabalpur on a full moon night for a surreal experience. The multi-hued rocks glow and shimmer in the moonlight as you glide gently on the still water. If you feel like adding a bit of the drama ask your oarsman for commentary; he will usually weave in Bollywood trivia and stories to make the ride more interesting.



Enjoy the jungle safari with the family



## Magical Maheshwar

A fort, a temple town and the Narmada make magic

**What:** A glorious city on the banks of the River Narmada which epitomises the rise of Hindu civilisation with a stunning fort, temples and museums.

**Why:** Because this temple town supposedly finds mention in both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Though obscure for many centuries, it came into its own in the 18th century with the reign of Rani Ahilyabai, eponymous with the fort. The fort complex on the banks of the river is a stunning example of human endeavour with beautiful temples, impressive fort walls, towers and palaces. The scenic fort, the river and its ghats are a favourite with the Hindi film industry and many films have been shot here; for an evening boat cruise on the river for spectacular views of the fort.

**How:** The best time to visit is from January around Makar Sankranti when many river events are held. The nearest airport is at Indore which is also the most convenient railhead. Opt to do a day trip from Indore which has plenty of accommodation options such as **Ahilya Fort (www.ahilyafort.com)**.



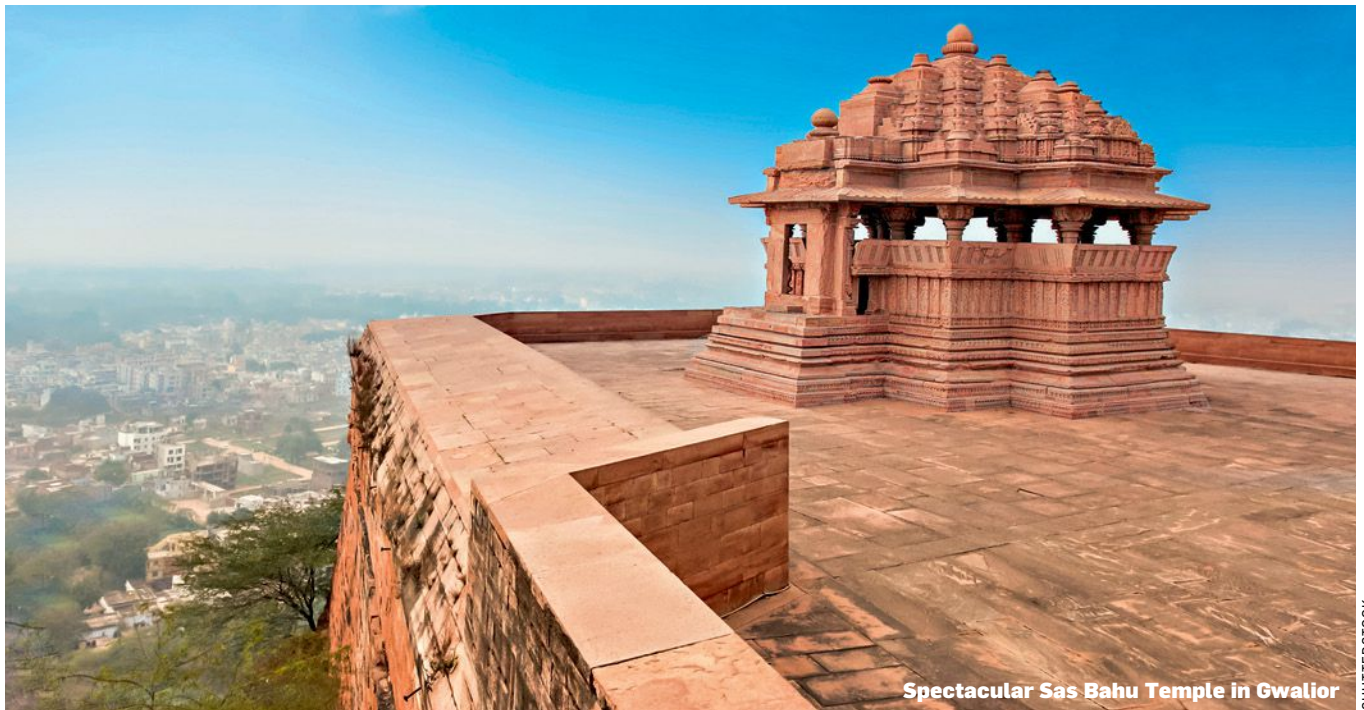
## Chambal River ravines

Bird watching, camping and river cruising

**What:** A set of ravines formed by the river Chambal, it boasts of ravine tourism and plenty of river activities on the Chambal River.

**Why:** Because, not only is this river system a tributary of the Yamuna it is a beautiful place and is part of the mythical kingdom of Shakuni from the Mahabharata, but also comes with its notorious association with dacoits made famous by Bollywood. As many as four dams, rock climbing and trekking routes through a landscape like a miniature Utah, river, jeep and camel safaris, visits to a handful of forts such as Ater and Pinahat, village walks for a glimpse of local lifestyle and culture, and bicycle rides make it a great place for a family holiday. For more fun venture into the National Chambal Sanctuary, a 435 sq km area known for its Gangetic dolphins, crocodiles, turtles and otters among other riverine animals and hundreds of species of birds.

**How:** The best time to visit is between November and March. The nearest airport is at Gwalior while the nearest railhead is Morena. Stay at the **Chambal Safari Lodge (www.chambalsafari.com)**.



Spectacular Sas Bahu Temple in Gwalior

SHUTTERSTOCK



## Regal and royal Gwalior

Into the pages of history and beyond

**What:** A city steeped in history and heritage with forts, palaces and temples is also versatile enough to provide a holiday for the entire family with fun things to do like a 5D theatre, indulging in water sports or watching a play.

**Why:** Going back at least 18 centuries, Gwalior's history is deep and colourful. But its most significant period is from the middle ages onwards when the Tomars established their rule. By far the stunning 15th century fort located on a hillock is the highlight, but do also see Man Mandir Palace, Jai Vilas Palace, other palaces and

temples; take a heritage walk that encompasses all this. Children will love the Gwalior zoo as well as Tighara Dam, a popular spot for picnics as well as water activities. End the evening with a play at Natyamandir or a funky experience at the 5D theatre in Deen Dayal Mall.

**How:** Gwalior can be visited throughout the year but not the peak summers as it gets really hot. Music aficionados should time the visit for winter when the Tansen Music Festival is held. The city is well connected by flights and trains and has a range of accommodation options but opt for a heritage property such as **Usha Kiran Palace (www.tajhotels.com; +91 751 2444 000)** or **Deo Bagh Palace (http://deo-bagh.neemranahotels.com; +91 751 2820357)**.

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## Amarkantak

Beautiful forests, temples and stunning architecture

**What:** A hill station in eastern Madhya Pradesh, Amarkantak is a nice amalgamation of scenic tranquillity and rich spirituality and heritage, offering something for everyone.

**Why:** The Vindhya and the Satpura mountain ranges meet here, lending it incredible natural beauty; it is also a well known pilgrimage centre. The valley births and nurtures many rivers including the Narmada and the Son which in turn flow amidst thick sal and mixed forests which are home to an amazing and diverse range of flora and fauna. Don't miss the Karnamath Mandir with its iconic spire, specially designed to resemble the mythical Mount Meru, and the astonishing details on the temple's facade.

**How:** Amarkantak can be visited throughout the year but it is advisable to avoid the peak summer time when it gets very hot and humid. Jabalpur (240 km) is the nearest airport while Pendra Road (40 km) is the nearest railhead. For basic accommodations you can opt for the **MP Tourism hotel (www.mptourism.com)**.



## Holy Ujjain

The home of Chandragupta, sacred Jyotirlinga and the Kumbh

**What:** An ancient city that jumps out from history books, it juxtaposes temples, a royal palace, the unique and mystical Jantar Mantar and sundial, and the enigmatic Ram Ghat on the scenic Kshipra river.

**Why:** Because it is a holy and ancient city, and also because it is a romantic city and finds generous mention in the works of iconic playwright Kalidas. By far, some of the temples such as the Makaleshwar and Ganesh are the town's main attractions. But there's also the Kaliadeh Palace on the river banks, the Vedshala or observatory, which has the epithet of 'India's Greenwich' since it measures time with the help of a unique sundial, and there are the mysterious and beautiful Bhartrihari caves. Ujjain is also the location for the one of the four Kumbh melas, called Simhastha here.

**How:** Best time to visit Ujjain is between October and May as it can get quite hot during summer. The nearest airport is at Indore (55 km/1 hour) while Ujjain is well connected by trains and buses. For basic accommodation, opt for MP tourism's hotels and lodges (**www.mptourism.com**).



## Mandsaur

Wildlife parks, rivers and lots of natural beauty

**What:** A beautiful and untouched city that lies in the heart of the Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh and offers such varied experiences as a lake, sanctuary, ancient temple and fort.

**What:** Mandsaur is largely unknown and hence makes for an unusual holiday since its neighbourhood is packed with places of tourist interest. At its heart is the 14th century fort, the Pashupatinath Temple dedicated to Shiva and located on the banks of Shivana River, known for its unique Shivaling with eight faces of Shiva. The Teliya Talab, a picturesque lake with an adjoining park, is a nice place to relax, for children run around and to picnic. Or head to the Gandhi Sagar Sanctuary, a wildlife park with the mighty Chambal River running through it.

**How:** Mandsaur can be visited throughout the year. The town is well connected by trains and buses. The nearest airport is in Indore (100 km/4 hours) from where taxis and public transport is available. There are plenty of basic accommodations options available within the city.



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## Celebrating a timeless culture. Exploring a glorious history. Sirpur National Dance & Music Festival

You know you've come to a sacred haven, imbued with purity and peace, when His Holiness, the Dalai Lama has graced this place with his hallowed presence.

Sirpur, a culturally rich town in the state of Chhattisgarh in India, is acknowledged as a Buddhist pilgrimage site. In the words of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, and we quote, "The history of Sirpur is glorious. I am now carrying the memories of Lord Buddha from here..." Sirpur attracts visitors from all over the world. It's a place you simply don't want to miss.

Perched on the banks of Mahanadi, Sirpur is a small town located 85 km away from the state capital, Raipur. Sirpur is an extraordinarily beautiful travel experience which takes you back in time with its astonishing monuments in the form of temples and Buddhist monasteries (Viharas), all set into a picturesque canvas of exquisite nature and meditative peace.

In the midst of this exoticism and mysticism unfolds the much-acclaimed Sirpur National Dance and Music Festival – held year after year in the month of January, under the auspices of the Chhattisgarh Tourism Board. This festival is the most coveted and successful event of its kind in India, entirely organised by Chhattisgarh Tourism; it is also an international attraction.

You will experience the grandeur of this place a thousand-fold when you witness, first-hand, the union of art and culture in music and dance forms, set into the backdrop of the famous 7th century Laxman Temple, renowned as a national heritage site. Sirpur National Dance and Music Festival is an indispensable part of Chhattisgarh and is celebrated with much spectacle and glory, truly awakening the cultural richness of this place.

Fostering an atmosphere of cultural harmony and brotherhood, the festival's sole objective is to bring as many

artistes into its cultural family and nurture international cultural amity and goodwill. As an initiative, this grand festival brings together the country's varied dance and music forms on one platform, showcasing artistes from across the nation and the globe in a unified cultural celebration.

Amongst the renowned Indian and international artistes to grace the festival this year are Kathak dancer and Hindustani classical music vocalist Pt. Birju Maharaj, English percussionist Peter Robert Lockett, American saxophonist and composer George Brooks, Jazz percussionist Phil Maturano, Indian playback singer Anuradha Paudwal, Indian musician and sitar player Shujaat Husain Khan, Indian classical musician and santoor player Rahul Sharma. With a galaxy of eminent musicians and dance performers from around the world, the Sirpur National Dance & Music Festival has established a unique identity by converging a beautiful fusion of authentic music and dance in the land of glorious culture - Sirpur, Chhattisgarh.

As if this wasn't enough, get ready to be enthralled by a world of pure art, magnificence and devotion at the famous Laxman Temple. The Sirpur Dance & Music Festival is set into the backdrop of one of India's most stunning brick temples - Laxman Temple. One can only imagine the awe-inspiring exuberance of revealing rich Indian history, amidst the surreal ambience of another era – the historic 7th century Laxman Temple – set alight by the regal torch bearers of cultural music and dance from around the world.

So set yourself up for a journey of astonishing moments that will overtake all your previous travel experiences. This season, the festival will be held from the 16th to 18th January, 2015. See you there!



#### Day 1 (16th January 2015):

Timing	Duration	Act
5.35 P.M. to 5.50 P.M.	15 Mins	Dewar Geet by Rekha Dewar
5.55 P.M. to 6.10 P.M.	15 Mins	Danda Nritya by Sampariya & Group
6.15 P.M. to 7.00 P.M.	45 Mins	Inauguration ceremony
7.05 P.M. to 7.50 P.M.	45 Mins	Taal Chhattisgarh - First ever presentation bringing 50 Tribal Percussionists with international Grammy award winner Maestro Pete Lockett and other famous percussionists like Giridhar Udupa (Ghatam), Swaminathan (Kanjira), Anubrata Chatterjee (Tabla) & Umar Faruq (Bhapang).
7.55 P.M. to 8.25 P.M.	30 Mins	Kathak Performance of Raigadh Gharana by Yasmin Singh & Group
8.30 P.M. to 9.45 P.M.	1 Hr 15 Mins	Devotional and light classical songs on Tulsi Ke Ram and abhangs by Shounak Abhisheki (son and disciple of renowned maestro Late. Pt. Jitendra Abhisheki) along with renowned singer Asha Khadilkar.

#### Day 2 (17th January 2015):

Timing	Duration	Act
5.35 P.M. to 5.50 P.M.	15 Mins	Gaur Nritya by Maya & Group
5.55 P.M. to 6.10 P.M.	15 Mins	Panthi Nritya by Uttam & Group
6.15 P.M. to 7.35 P.M.	1 Hr 20 Mins	Milap - A first ever fusion of multi faceted young maestro Rahul Sharma (Santoor) and group with Rajasthani folk Musicians.
7.40 P.M. to 8.10 P.M.	30 Mins	A grand performance of Taiko Drumming, the traditional drums of Japan by Leonard Eto & Group.
8.15 P.M. to 9.45 P.M.	1 Hr 30 Mins	Devotional songs on Maa Durga & others by internationally acclaimed Bollywood singer Anuradha Paudwal & Group
9.50 P.M. to 10.20 P.M.	30 Mins	Odissi Dance Presentation by Purnashree Raut & Lucky Mohanty Troupe.

#### Day 3 (18th January 2015):

Timing	Duration	Act
5.35 P.M. to 5.50 P.M.	15 Mins	Saila Nritya by Tulsi & Group
5.55 P.M. to 6.10 P.M.	15 Mins	Gedi Nritya by Batlu & Group
6.15 P.M. to 7.35 P.M.	1 Hr 20 Mins	Kathak by living legend Pt. Birju Maharaj with senior students in an innovative presentation.
7.40 P.M. to 8.25 P.M.	45 Mins	Closing ceremony
8.30 P.M. to 10.00 P.M.	1 Hr 30 Mins	Vishnamo (Maestros In Harmony) An exclusive Banyan Tree Concept Maestros like Ustad Shujaat Khan (Sitar), Vidwan Vikku Vinayakram (Ghatam), Prasanna (Guitar) & George Brooks (Saxophone) in a powerful presentation.



The beauty of this place is thrilling in itself one can fall in love with it instantly. An amalgamation of serene lakes, frolicking rivers and wildlife parks, Odisha is a refreshing family escape from the frenzied city life



## Gopalpur by the sea

Tranquil beaches, sand dunes and quiet scenic beauty

**What:** A seaside town in the Southern Odisha district of Ganjam with beautiful beaches.

**Why:** Because it is a potent combination of languid deserted beaches against a backdrop of sand dunes and coconut groves. It was once a flourishing port town during the British rule and was an important trade link with Burma. The town however languished after Independence but gained back some its importance in the last four decades and has turned into an enviable seaside destination. The long jetty framed by thick growth of cashew trees is a lovely sight, while the lighthouse with stunning views from the top is a favourite with children. The beach is usually deserted, especially during the day and week, and the wet sand is full of scurrying red crabs. It is also common to see the local fishermen bring in their catch in the morning which are loaded into baskets by the women and sold in the local markets. Nearby is also the Dabaleshwar beach and temple, which is equally scenic.

**How:** Best time to visit is from November to March but time your visit for December when the colourful **Gopalpur Beach Festival** is held. The nearest airport is at Bhubaneswar (180 km/4 hours) while the Berhampur (15 km/30 mins) is the nearest railhead. It has some upmarket resorts such as **Mayfair Palm Beach Resort** [www.mayfairhotels.com/mayfair-gopalpur](http://www.mayfairhotels.com/mayfair-gopalpur); (0680) 6660101 and mid level ones such as **Swosti Palm Resort** [www.swosti.com](http://www.swosti.com)



**SECRET**

### CHILIKA LAKE

Chilika Lake, Asia's largest brackish water lake, is probably the most visited in Odisha after Puri and Konark, and is known for the Irrawady dolphins that are seen here. However, the lake has many islands which go unnoticed. Among them is Birds' Island, a haven for all kinds of birds, almost at the Southern end. The striking feature here are the massive hanging rocks, made more dramatic as they seem to be painted white but are actually due to the folic acid from bird droppings.



## Bhitarkanika National Park

A birdwatcher's paradise as it is home to eight varieties of kingfishers

**What:** This national park in the Kendrapara district, is among the few parks which is home to virgin mangroves.

**Why:** Because of the unique topography which are crucial for ecological management but also because it is home to some of most distinctive animal species. Irrigated by a number of rivers such as Brahmani, Dhamara, Pathsala and Baitarni the park is home to such endangered species as the saltwater crocodiles, Indian pythons, white crocodiles, king cobras, water monitor lizards, and others. It is also a birdwatchers' paradise, home to a stunning eight varieties of kingfishers. Safaris or sightseeing in the park is done by boats licensed by the forest department. Watch for giant saltwater crocodiles some of which are known to grow beyond an astounding 20 feet.

**How:** Best time to visit is between October and March; though the monsoons are spectacular it could get tough to spot wildlife during heavy rains. Nearest airport is Bhubaneswar (150 km/3 hours) while Cuttack is 120 km away. Boats for sightseeing can be hired from the main entrance called **Khola Gate**. Estuarine Village Resort ([www.villageresort.in](http://www.villageresort.in)); (0)77499 60882 is an ideal place to stay.



ARUNJEET BANERJEE



## Hot springs

Take a dip in the sulphur springs or long walks at Taptapani

**What:** A picturesque village which boasts of hot springs with curative properties.

**Why:** For the fascination of observing something so spectacular. Amidst the lush green forests and greenery near Berhampur, are located the hot sulphur springs of Taptapani (literally, hot water). The bubbling natural springs are believed to originate in the forests nearby and are piped into a pond where visitors can bathe. It is believed that the hot water from the natural spring are laden with medicinal properties and the devout even revere it for this reason. The springs overlook the forested slopes of the Eastern ghats are also conducive for long nature walks and treks. A deer park maintained by the forest department is a hit with children.

**How:** Nearest airport is Bhubaneswar while the nearest railhead is Berhampur (55 km/1.5 hours). The only accommodation at Taptapani is the Panthanivas resort run by **Orissa Tourism Development Corporation** ([www.otdc.in](http://www.otdc.in)) with clean cottages, decent food and spectacular views of the forested peaks around.



**Visit the seaside town, Gopalpur, for spectacular sunset views**



Watch Olive Ridley turtles step into the sea at Gahirmatha

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## Beach bonding

Visit Gahirmatha, which is India's home to the Olive Ridley turtles

**What:** A scenic beach and the only place in India where Olive Ridley turtles come to lay eggs and hatch.

**Why:** Not just for the sheer novelty and uniqueness but also because it is such a fascinating quirk of nature. **Gahirmatha** occupies a vantage position between the sea and the Bhitarkanika mangroves, making it ecologically crucial enough for the entire area, of more than 1,400 sq km to be declared a marine sanctuary.

Thousands of turtles arrive with unerring accuracy from distant shores to mate, lay eggs and disappear. Nearly two months later, the eggs hatch and the hatchlings scamper to the sea under a moonless night, find a current and begin their lives only to repeat the cycle every year. Apart from this, the beach and the marine sanctuary itself are also interesting places to visit.

**How:** Best time is between November and March. The nearest airport is at Bhubaneswar (150 km/3 hours). There are very basic, dorm style forest rest houses at **Ekakula**, **Habalikhati** and **Gupti**. The **Orissa Forest Department** ([www.odishafdc.com](http://www.odishafdc.com)) is a good resource for visit and stay options.



## Spot the tusker

Rare sights and breathtaking views at Chandaka Elephant Sanctuary

**What:** A sanctuary dedicated to elephants with scenic stretches and panoramic views.

**Why:** Because it is fascinating to see pachyderms at close quarters. Relatively small at just over 175 sqkm, it spreads over the Khurda uplands in the Eastern Ghats. The forests exhibit at least six types and the vegetation includes bamboo, teak, sal, medicinal plants, ground orchids and mosses. Even though elephants are the main stay of the sanctuary, you will also find chital, leopards, barking deer and rock pythons. Apart from jeep safaris, stop at one of the many watch towers to observe wildlife. The ones at **Kochilaberana**, **Pitagadia** and **Charichhak** are ideal to spot birds and animals.

**How:** Best time to visit is between October and May. The sanctuary is 25 km from Bhubaneswar, where the nearest airport, railhead are located. You can also contact the **Odisha government forest department** ([www.odishafdc.com](http://www.odishafdc.com)) for safaris and stay.



ORISSA TOURISM



## Quiet days

Dig into fresh seafood and see awe-inspiring sunsets at Chandipur

**What:** A small seaside resort town in Baleshwar district on the Bay of Bengal coast that is mostly off the tourist map.

**Why:** Because not only is it beautiful but hardly has any tourists, especially during the week, and hence makes for an ideal relaxed family holiday destination. Also called **Chandipur-on-sea**, the beach is unique owing to a strange phenomenon: the water recedes anywhere from one to four kms during low tide. As a result the beach supports a wide biodiversity such as horseshoe crab. It also supports a fisherfolk community and watching them haul in their catch at daybreak and dusk is an intriguing experience. Interestingly, this is also an important location in terms of the country's defence—the Integrated Test Range from where nuclear-capable missiles such as Akash, Agni, Prithvi and Shaurya have been tested. Don't miss feasting on fresh prawns, crabs and a variety of fish cooked in local style.

**How:** Nearest airport is at Bhubaneswar (210 km/4 hours), the nearest railhead is at Balasore (18 km/30 mins). There are only basic but clean hotels at Chandipur such as Panthanivas. [www.panthanivas.com/chandipur](http://www.panthanivas.com/chandipur); (06782) 270 051/



## Odisha's Kashmir

Coffee plantations, waterfalls at Daringbadi

**What:** A languorous and pretty hill station full of waterfalls, coffee plantations, rivers and a wildlife sanctuary, for a relaxed or activity-filled holiday.

**Why:** Located at an altitude of almost 3,500 feet above the sea level, **Daringbadi** is surrounded by rainforests, pine jungles, sweeping valleys, slopes carpeted by coffee plantations interspersed with black pepper and turmeric gardens. It gained its epithet due to the fact that it is the only place in Odisha where the dew which settles on the grass overnight encounters freezing temperature at dawn and turns the ground into a sheet of ice making it surreal and captivating. The two coffee plantations are lovely places for long walks and are also a birdwatcher's paradise. The **Hill View Point** offers breathtaking panoramic views of the valley. **Doluri river** and **Putudi waterfalls** are scenic and ideal places for a relaxed picnic or short treks.

**How:** The best time to go is during winter. The nearest airport is at Bhubaneswar (250 km/3 hours) and railhead is at Berhampur (120 km/3 hours). Stay at **Utopia Hotel** [www.hotelutopia.in](http://www.hotelutopia.in); (06849) 245 385 or the **DEERS resort** [www.ecotourism.org.in](http://www.ecotourism.org.in); (0) 94384 22452.



ARUNJEET BANERJEE



## Art village at Raghurajpur

Discover the heritage artforms amidst lush coconut groves

**What:** A heritage village near the temple town of **Puri** that is known for its textiles and tradition of crafts, especially for the famous patachitra or watercolour paintings.

**Why:** Because it is among the handful of towns in the country that are defined by the rich tradition of artistry handed down through generations. Not just the handicrafts but the village itself is such a charming and utterly fascinating place. Located amidst lush groves of coconut, palm, mango and jackfruit, the village has two streets with over 120 houses, most of which are decorated with colourful murals in which reside painters who practice patachitra. Walking around, visitors can also find other crafts such as traditional masks, stone idols, papier mache, sculptures, wooden toys and appliqué work items. There are trained villagers who conduct heritage walks and explain the history and tradition of the village so it is a good idea to undertake it and shop for unique items. For a change of scene, head to Puri to see not just the temple but also to lounge by the beautiful beach.

**How:** The nearest airport is at Bhubaneswar (50 km/1 hour) and the nearest railhead is at Puri (10 km/20 mins). Puri has plenty of accommodation options such as **Toshali Sands Resort** [www.toshalisands.com](http://www.toshalisands.com); (0) 99370 03223 or a hotel run by Odisha tourism.

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INDO ARYAN - 2014



# TAMIL NADU

Home to temple towns, forest-clad wildlife, pristine beaches and sweeping hills Tamil Nadu is a wonderful destination to unwind and spend some quality time with your loved ones



Lush green tea gardens of Ooty



**SECRET**

### DINDIGUL BIRYANI

Satisfy your biryani craving in Dindigul, an hour's drive from Madurai, which has earned itself the moniker of Biryani Town. Try Ponram Biryani Hotel, 32/33, Opp Canara Bank, Salai Road; Tel: (0451) 244 1003. These third generation restaurateurs combine special small-grained rice and perfectly balanced spices, together with meat cooked to tender perfection. Recipes belonging to grandmothers are zealously guarded secrets in this township. Round it off with a Kumbakonam degree (possibly from the first degree decoction) coffee, made with the best coffee seeds, slow roasted and brewed in brass filters.



## Dawdle in Ooty

Museums, hills, sunset points and some gorgeous thick forests

**What:** A hill station with sweeping hills, meadows, a lake and lovely walks.

**Why:** Because, even though it is run over by hordes of people for much of the year, it is still the queen among hills and there are still hidden pockets which let you experience it as it was once. Do the touristy things if you must, such as the botanical garden, the museum, boating on the lake and Sunset Point, but head out to such unspoilt places as the Avalanchi Dam which is surrounded by thick forests. Enjoy a leisurely picnic, lounge or go for treks. About 45 minutes beyond is Coonoor, equally beautiful and less crowded with carpets of tea plantations and dotted with view points that provide spectacular views of the Western Ghats and some fabulous waterfalls. It is also good fun to take the Nilgiri Mountain Railway from Coonoor to Ooty for a memorable journey through tunnels overlooking bridges on valleys and hugging the sides of hills with clouds for company.

**How:** Summer is peak season but go during winter for a real feel of the place when temperatures dip to low single digits and misty views linger everywhere. The nearest airport is Coimbatore (90 km) while you can connect through a combination of trains up to Ooty. Opt to stay at one of the many quirky or unusual places such as **Fernhills Palace (0423 2443910; [www.welcomheritagehotels.com](http://www.welcomheritagehotels.com))**, **King's Cliff (0423 2452888/9; [www.kingscliff-ooty.com](http://www.kingscliff-ooty.com))** or **Destiny (0423 2445322, [www.littleearth.in](http://www.littleearth.in))** in Avalanchi.



DINDIGUL PHOTO LIBRARY

DEEP PAHWA



## Vivekananda rock memorial at Kanyakumari



JOSHY MANJUMMEL



## Chennai for all

Plan a beach holiday or a wildlife safari this place has it all

**What:** A sprawling city on the Coromandel Coast that was once the bastion of the British in South India.

**Why:** Chennai is where the ancient and the modern mingle effortlessly and seamlessly. For a taste of history, take a heritage walk starting at the 370-year old Fort George and explore the city's oldest neighbourhoods, heritage houses, temples and churches, all harking back to the British Raj. For a change of scene, head to the Guindy National Park, a 3 sq km park in the heart of the city with a plethora of animals in their natural habitats. Step into Cholamandal Artists Village nearby, a residential commune for artists and watch renowned artists paint, sculpt and produce beautiful pieces of art.

**How:** The best time to visit is from November to early March. It is well connected by flights, trains and buses, and has all kinds of accommodation options.



## Magnificent Kanyakumari

Water parks, beautiful sunsets and boat rides

**What:** India's very own 'Land's End' with beaches and a surreal monument out at sea.

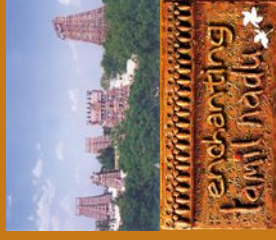
**Why:** Because it is located at the country's Southernmost tip and an unusual place since three bodies, Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, meet here, as do the Eastern and Western Ghats. Hence it is often referred to as India's Land's End, but was capped Cape Camorin by the British.

Interestingly, owing to the location, both sunrise and sunset are visible here but for some reason it is the sunset which is more popular. Against this is set the magnificent Vivekananda Rock on which stands a towering eponymous statue and can be accessed by a boat ride. There are other temples and monuments that dot the city but children will probably enjoy Baywatch, a water-themed park with rides and activities. Don't forget to head to the beach for sunrise and sunset.

**How:** The nearest airport is located in Thiruvananthapuram (90 km/2 hours) but the seaside town of Kanyakumari is also well connected by trains and buses. You could opt for a nice hotel near the sea such as the **Gopinivas Grand** ([www.thegopinivasgrand.com](http://www.thegopinivasgrand.com); 04652 246161) and **Hotel Sea View** ([www.hotelseaview.in](http://www.hotelseaview.in); 04652 247841).



*Thousands of years ago,  
a young princess desired  
the Cosmic Dancer. Of course,  
a girl always gets what she  
really wants. Meenakshi wed  
Lord Shiva and they reign  
happily here to this day at  
the Meenakshiamman Temple  
in Madurai.*

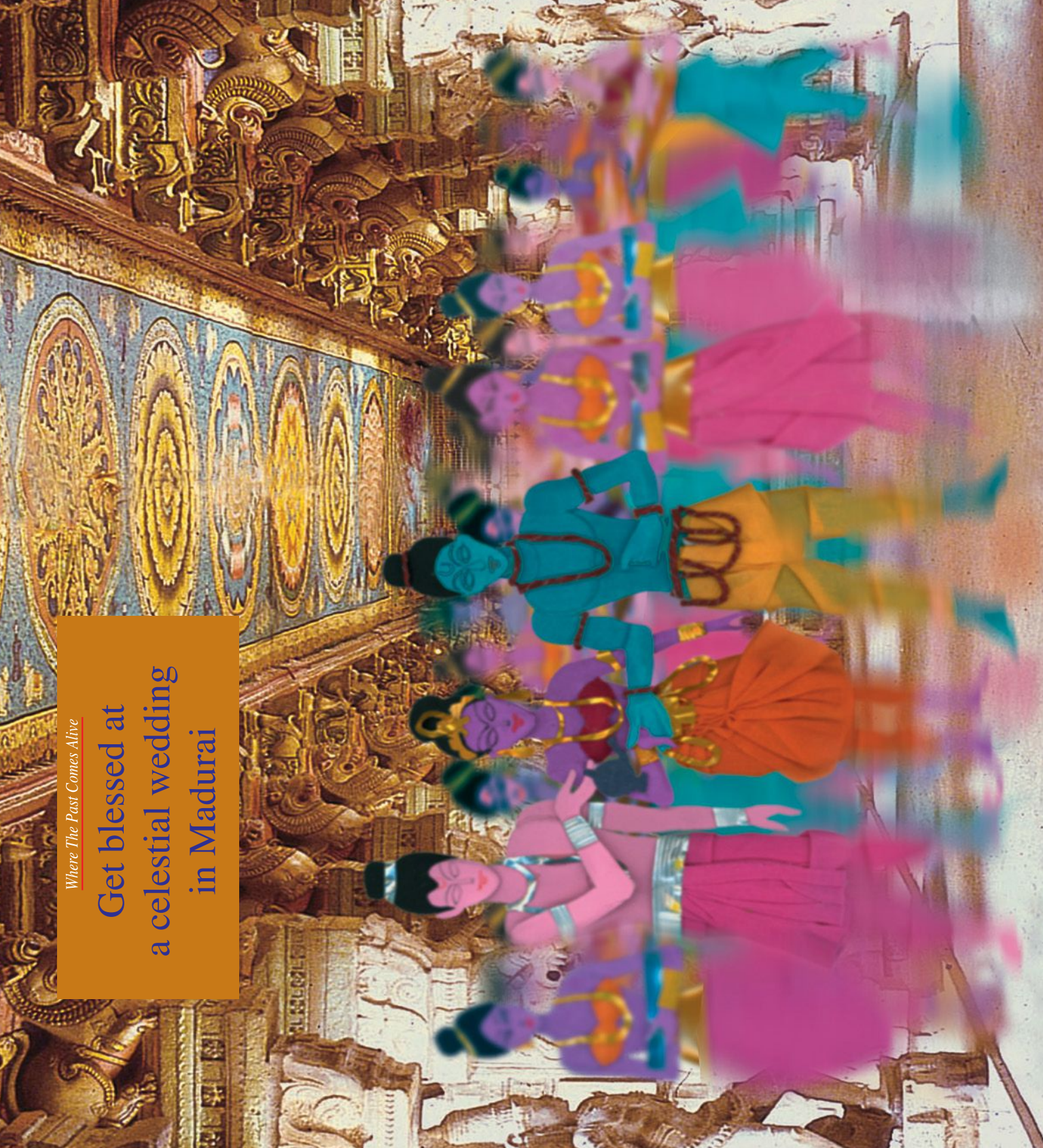


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## Valparai

Wake up to the sound of chirping birds and gurgling streams

**What:** An undulating terrain with tea estates, drives, rivers, streams and waterfalls.

**Why:** Because it is a surreal place with nothing but beautiful hillsides carpeted by tea estates amidst which you can walk or drive for hours. Located in Coimbatore district, Valparai is all about lush green unending carpets of green and roads snaking their way through this paradise. Filled with tea plantations and gurgling streams in the valleys; it is the kind of place where the family can relax and do some nature-based activities. It gets very wet during the monsoons, but is cool most of the year and gets bone-chilling cold during the winter months which are accompanied by fog and mist.

**How:** It is 105 km to the South of Coimbatore, which is the nearest airport and railhead. Opt for a place with views of the tea gardens such as **Stanmore Bungalow** ([www.teabungalows.com](http://www.teabungalows.com)).

## Yercaud

Coffee plantations, orange orchards, panoramic views

**What:** A hill station with scenic drives and activities for a relaxed family holiday.

**Why:** Because it's a hill station that is less crowded and very well suited for family vacations. What makes Yercaud stunning are the mountain roads with an abundance of hairpin-bends which offer breathtaking views. Located in the Shevaroy's hill range, it offers sweeping panoramic views, especially the winding road up from Salem. It is known for its coffee plantations and orange orchards, as well as the thick forests that run up the slopes. Of more interest is the orchidarium run by the Botanical Survey of India which has a host of native orchids. The deer park and a handful of viewpoints are also worth a visit. Yercaud has a charm of its own, making for a fantastic getaway, especially for road trips.

**How:** Trichy (160 km/3 hours) is the nearest airport while Salem (35 km/50 minutes) is the nearest railhead and bus junction. You can opt for **Indeco Hotel** ([www.indecohoteles.com](http://www.indecohoteles.com)).

## Kolli Hills

A perfect destination for trekking and rappelling over hills

**What:** A rugged but beautiful hill station, ideal for a family that enjoys the outdoors.

**Why:** Because it is virtually unknown to the outsider. The hills are a small mountain range in the Eastern Ghats running almost parallel to the coast with peaks ranging about 1,000 to 1,300 mts spread over an area of approximately 280 sq km. Go bird watching or embark on a long trek, tracing your path amidst lush greenery, dipping and cresting over hills and valleys. Trekkers can visit two waterfalls, but the more picturesque one is the Agaya Gangai, which is about an hour's trek. For some more adventures, there's caving as well as rappelling near the falls, which is sure to kick your adrenaline into high gear.

**How:** The nearest airport is at Madurai (220 km/4 hours) while the nearest railhead is at Namakkal (25 km/40 mins). There are not many accommodation options; the most convenient one is **Kolli Hills Camp** ([www.kollihills.co.in](http://www.kollihills.co.in); 09739700059).

## Madurai the oldest city

Sound & Light show, beaches and a palace with stunning architecture

**What:** A temple town whose centrepiece is the famous Meenakshi temple, but there's much else as well.

**Why:** Because not only is the Madurai Meenakshi temple considered to be among the largest temple complexes in the country, it is beautiful in layout and architecture. Among the most striking aspects are the 12 gopurams, with the tallest one in the south rising to a height of 150 metres and dominating the city. Built and added to by many kings, the temple complex nevertheless exhibits a continuity that is both pleasing and astounding. It is also believed that Shiva performed part of his cosmic dance here. While the main deity is a sight to see, the various aspects of the temple are worth exploring, especially the thousand pillar hall. About 2 km from the temple is the Thirumalai Nayak Palace with stucco work, pillars and murals but the children are bound to love the drama that surrounds the sound and light show in the evenings. If you have an extra day, head to Rameswaram for some beautiful temples, beach and the iconic bridge.

**How:** It is well-connected by flights, trains and buses. If you are looking for a local experience opt for **Heritage Madurai** ([www.heritagemadurai.com](http://www.heritagemadurai.com); 0452 2385455).

## Thoothukudi

Beautiful sunrises and some rare aquatic flora and fauna

**What:** Also known as 'Pearl City', it is famous for its pearl divers, churches, temples and beaches.

**Why:** Because it is the most fascinating experience to watch the various aspects of the pearl industry in action. Known for its pearl divers and the pearl industry, it is possible to watch them going about their business. The city has some beautiful temples, churches and mosques. A more surreal sight is the salt pans, stretching unendingly, white till the eye can see. It is also a thrilling experience to head out to see the 21 islands between

Thoothukudi and Rameswaram in the Gulf of Mannar which have been designated as the Marine Biosphere Reserve with over 36,000 species of aquatic flora and fauna.

**How:** Thoothukudi has an airport but has very limited connectivity; it is better connected with trains and buses. Stay at **GRT Regency** ([www.grthotels.com/tuticorin](http://www.grthotels.com/tuticorin); 0461 234 0777).



ANAND SANKAR

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## Novelty of Nizamabad

Museums, temples and 18th century structures

**What:** An ancient city named after the then ruling Nizams surrounded by heritage structures and water bodies

**Why:** Because there's plenty to do in and around Nizamabad and it is not yet on the tourist map. Begin with the fort, built by the Rashtrakutas in early 14th century. The fort is colossal and encircled by fortifications and bastions; its spacious halls and summer house reflect the Asaf Jahi-style of architecture. Also visit the **Domakonda Fort**, an 18th century edifice with beautiful stucco work, carvings and graceful structures. There are two sprawling reservoirs nearby—**Nizam Sagar** and **Ashok Sagar**, which are ideal picnic spots. **Bada Pahad Dargah**, located on a hillock, is a famous pilgrimage centre as are **Basara Saraswati**, one of the two oldest Saraswati temples in the country, and **Dichipalli Ramalayam** dedicated to Lord Rama. The **Archaeological and Heritage Museum** is also worth a visit for its collection from different periods like the **Paleolithic**, **Neolithic** and **Megalithic**.

**How:** Temperatures reach mid to high 40s during peak summer; November to early February is the best time to visit. The nearest airport is at Hyderabad (170 km/3.5 hours); Nizamabad is well connected by trains and buses. Some decent stay options include **Hotel Nikhil Sai International** ([hotelnikhilsaiinternational.com](http://hotelnikhilsaiinternational.com); 08462 236634) and **Hotel Vamshee International** ([www.hotelvamsheehotel.com](http://www.hotelvamsheehotel.com); 08462 234848).



## Compelling Warangal

Palaces, forts, architecture and tales of brave kings

**What:** A famous 13th century fort with beautifully carved ancient temples built by the Kakatiya kings.

**Why:** Because it is not only impressive and breathtaking, but also contains an astounding number of structures within a small area. These include the fort that was built by the Kakatiya kings, with thoran arches, and pillars that are spread over a radius of 19 km between **Hanamkonda** and **Warangal**. It was once an impregnable fort and was considered to be a popular seat of power. The central fort has seven towers, within a radius of 8 km. The main fort has 45 towers, and a temple dedicated to Mother Earth in the middle of the fort; the thousand pillar temple on Hanumakonda hill is also very popular. A legendary masterpiece known as **Khush Mahal**, built by Shitabh Khan, is situated close to the fort while the beautifully carved gateway located within the fort, called Ekashila, symbolises the might and artistic bent of the Kakatiya kings. If you have time, don't miss the **Ramappa Temple** at **Palampet**, about 65 km from Warangal, which was supposed to have been built with 'floating bricks.'

**How:** Try to avoid the area during the peak summers when the temperatures go on to touch the mid-40s. The nearest airport is at Hyderabad (180 km/3.5 hours). Warangal is also well connected by a number of trains and buses. Stay at **City Grand Hotel** ([www.citygrandhotel.com](http://www.citygrandhotel.com); 0870 245 4587), a which is contemporary and comfortable.



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### NIZAM'S MUSEUM

The Nizam's Museum in Hyderabad is often ignored. It contains souvenirs, mementos and gifts presented to the last Nizam Mir Osman Ali Khan, on the occasion of the Silver Jubilee of his reign in 1936. Check out the collection of vintage cars including a 1930 Rolls Royce, the gold burnished wooden throne and the silver coffee cups studded with diamonds.



## Historical Khammam

Temples, tales and ruins

**What:** A 10th century fort town steeped in history.

**Why:** Because the whole town seems frozen in time but without stagnating. Wander around the impressive Khammam Fort, started by the Kakatiya rulers around 950 AD and contributed to by subsequent dynasties including the Qutub Shahi kings. Spread over 4 sq km part of it is in ruins, but visitors can still see the palace.

There's a **Narasimha Swamy Temple** on a hillock which is very popular. For a change of scene, there's also **Lakaram Lake** with an adjoining park for a picnic and where children can run around and play. For a longer trip head north to Warangal (110 km/2 hours).

**How:** Best time to visit is from November to January when the weather is comparatively mild. Khammam is about 200 km east of Hyderabad, which is the nearest airport. The city is well connected by trains and buses. Stay at **Hotel Harsha Residency** ([www.hotelharsharesidency.com](http://www.hotelharsharesidency.com); 08742 226767) a basic but comfortable hotel.



## Adilabad sojourn

For a tryst with nature

**What:** A town and district that is full of natural beauty, forests and waterfalls.

**Why:** Because in the relatively dry and plain Telangana area, Adilabad is like a breath of fresh air. There's nothing much to do in the town itself, but once you head out, nature enthusiasts will be thrilled. Start with **Kunthala Falls**, then head to **Pochera** and **Sadarmat**, all of which are beautiful and nice places for a picnic. For a heavier dose of nature, you can opt for a safari in the **Kawal Wildlife Sanctuary** and/or **Shivaram Wildlife**

**Sanctuary**, and end with a visit to the unique **Siri Emu Farm** that is located just outside Adilabad; it supplies emu eggs and chicks. For those interested in culture and heritage, the **Saraswathi Temple**, the only one of its kind in the country, is located at Basara, which is about 150 km from Adilabad. Other optional pilgrimage centres are the beautiful temples at **Utnoor** and **Keshlapur**.

**How:** It can get very hot in summer so time your visit for end of the year. The nearest airport is at Hyderabad (300 km/5 hours) but Adilabad is well connected by trains and buses. Opt to stay at **AP Tourism's Haritha Hotel** ([www.aptdc.gov.in](http://www.aptdc.gov.in)) or at **Kamadhenu Hotel** or **Raviteja Hotel** near the bus stand.



Warangal contains an astounding number of structures in a small area

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY: TELANGANA TOURISM



# UTTAR PRADESH

India's imperial heartland, this state has it all. From Mughal architecture to divine ghats and some gastronomic high points in Lucknow. This is one family holiday destination that you will find full of surprises



+  
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### A FOOD PARADISE

Awadhi and Mughlai cuisine may be more well known in Uttar Pradesh but also try the more earthy Bhojpuri cuisine, especially around the time of festivals such as Navratri. Taste dishes such as *lobiya* (black eyed beans), *chokha* (curry of roasted veggies), *dal pithouri*, *maakuni* (stuffed parathas), *litti* (roasted wheat balls filled with ghee and veggies), and sweets such as *anarsa*, *khaja*, *gujiya* and *maipua*.



Colourful temples on the banks of the Yamuna River at Vishram Ghat, Mathura

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## Mathura-Vrindavan

Take a walk in the footsteps of Lord Krishna

**What:** Twin towns that are closely associated with Krishna's growing years; full of temples, parks and meadows where he is supposed to have wandered and played with his friends and Radha along with the gopis.

**Why:** Because the towns inevitably invoke not just spirituality but also the fun and gaiety that is associated with Lord Krishna. Mathura is a little town on the banks of the River Yamuna known for its numerous temples. But probably the most important one is the **Sri Krishna Janmasthan**, marking his birthplace. Adjacent to the temple is a poky little room with bars which is believed to be the prison where Krishna was born. Also worth visiting are the **Gita Mandir** and **Dwarikadish Temple**. Like Varanasi, Mathura too has many ghats which are visited and held sacred by the Hindus, including the Vishram Ghat where Krishna is believed to have rested after defeating Kansa. Nearby is the village of Vrindavan, a place which was once full of groves, believed to be the place where Krishna spent his youth.

**How:** The nearest airport is at Agra (50 km/1 hour) while Mathura is an important railhead and bus station. Choose to stay at **The Wingston** ([www.thewingston.com](http://www.thewingston.com); 08126100908) or **Sheetal Residency** ([hotelsheetalregency.com](http://hotelsheetalregency.com); 0565 2412401).



## Royal Lucknow

Indulge in feasts and fun in the city of the Nawabs

**What:** The former capital of the Awadh region, Lucknow stands at the cusp of Nawabi culture and modernity, seamlessly juxtaposing Mughal culture and cuisine with a contemporary outlook.

**Why:** Because Uttar Pradesh's capital is a city like no other and which charmingly ushers you back in time to an era of romanticism and cultural richness. It is famous for its monuments—**Bara Imambara** and **Chota Imambara**, with turrets and white dome built as a tribute to Mohammad Ali Shah, and the **Shah Najaf Imambara**, where the saint Hazrat Ali is buried. For an authentic cuisine, roam the streets of the old town near Lalbagh, Aminabad and Old Chowk to feast on **biryanis**, unique breads like sheermal and an array of kebabs. Don't miss the iconic **Tunde ke kebab**; wash it all down with thick, foaming lassi or shikanji. Fit in a session of poetry reading, music recital or dance performance.

**How:** Ideal time to visit is from October to March. Lucknow is well connected by air, rail and road. It offers plenty of accommodation options from budget to luxury, but choose one of the more elegant options to go with the city's character such as **Vivanta by Taj** ([www.vivantabytaj.com](http://www.vivantabytaj.com); 0522 671 1000) or **Hotel Clarks Avadh** (0522 2616500).





## Allahabad beyond Kumbh

Literature, holy rivers and a tryst with history

**What:** A holy city cutting across religions and hosts the famous the Kumbh Mela every 12 years, Allahabad is also rich in history and a soul city known for giving birth to literary stalwarts.

**Why:** Located at the confluence of three of the country's major rivers Ganga, Yamuna and mythical Saraswati. Allahabad is also known as Prayag and is among India's holiest cities, where the devout come for a dip. Besides which, it is famous for the Kumbh Mela held once every 12 years and which attracts devotees and tourists from all over the world. Also famous is the **All Saints Cathedral**. If religion is not your family's thing, then dip into history at the **Ashoka Pillar** dating back to about 232 BC, the 16th century Allahabad Fort, the Thornbill Mayne Memorial and the many museums. The children will also enjoy a boat ride down the Yamuna and water sports at the Allahabad Boat Club.

**How:** Allahabad has an airport but only a handful of daily flights so it is easier to fly into Lucknow (200 km/3.5 hours) or Varanasi (120 km/2.5 hours) and then take a taxi or public transport. Opt for centrally located hotels such as **Hotel Yatrik** ([www.hotelyatrik.com](http://www.hotelyatrik.com); 0532 2260921) or **Hotel Milan Palace** ([www.hotelmilanpalace.com](http://www.hotelmilanpalace.com); 0532 2421505).



## The quaint Mirzapur

Be camera-ready at this picturesque city

**What:** A town in the middle of the Vindhyas, it is picturesque, unknown and packs in three rivers, four forts, hills and waterfalls, and the carpet weaving heritage.

**Why:** Because of the sheer number of things to see and do. Located in the middle of the scenic Vindhyas, the best views of the rivers and hills are the town's mainstay. The Vindhyachal dedicated to Shakti, is a famous pilgrimage centre while a few other temples and mosques are also worth visiting. The River Ganga and the ghats on the banks are a huge draw and a favourite with children as well. In addition, don't miss the **Chunar Fort**, **Vindham** and **Sirsi waterfalls**, the clock tower which is considered to be a sister of London's Big Ben and cave paintings. Shop for earthenware at Chunar, as well as dhurries, carpets and brassware in Mirzapur.

**How:** The best time is during the monsoons (early July-August) and during Dussehra (Sep-Oct). The nearest airport is at Varanasi (80 km/2 hours) while Mirzapur is an important railhead and bus station. There are a few good hotels such as **Hotel Galaxy** ([www.mirzapur.in](http://www.mirzapur.in); 05442 222747) and **Hotel Mark One** ([www.hotelmarkone.in](http://www.hotelmarkone.in); 05442 222001).



Visit the holy city of Allahabad famed for hosting Maha Kumbh

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## Rediscover yourself at Sarnath

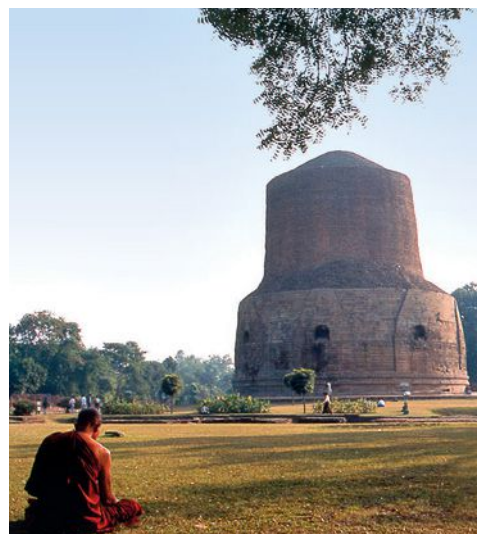
Spend some quality time with family in this land of Buddhism

**What:** A little town located at the confluence of the Ganga and Gomti where Gautama Buddha gave his first sermon and taught the Dharma and the Buddhist Sangha came into existence.

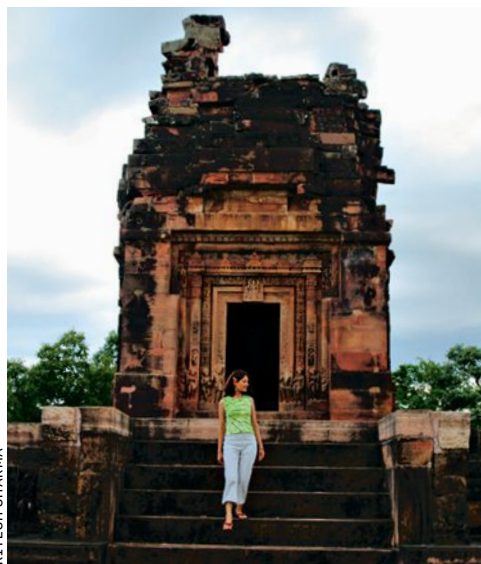
**Why:** Because of sheer weight of Buddhist history, as well as the many sights that are associated with the Buddha. It is here that Gautama Buddha is believed to have delivered his first sermon after he attained enlightenment. Among the places of interest here are the **Dhamek Stupa**, a massive and grand cylindrical stupa dating back to the 3rd

century BC built by emperor Ashoka, the Chaukhandi Stupa, a mound of red brick, the base of a Ashoka Pillar, ruins of a temple where Buddha spent his first rainy season and Sarnath Archaeological Museum which houses the samples of Buddhist art and culture.

**How:** The nearest airport is at Varanasi (25 km/45 mins) while the nearest railhead is Varanasi Cantt (6 km/20 mins). There are basic accommodation options including lodges run by UPSTDC; for a decent stay try the **Golden Buddha (Sarangnath; 098074 74018)**



DILEEP PRAKASH



RITESH SHARMA



## Jhansi, not just for the rani

Lakes, parks, temples and a fort in stunning settings

**What:** A city synonymous with female valour, bravery and gumption, Jhansi is also a historic city and has a lots to explore. Filled with forts, temples, churches, parks and a lake which together make for the ideal family destination.

**Why:** Because the name Jhansi invariably evokes images of valour and women power. But it goes beyond that. The town matches the romantic images that it conjures. It is known more for its 18th century queen Rani Lakshmbai, known as Jhansi ki Rani, who fought the British in 1857. The Jhansi Fort, built by Raja Bir Singh is the most prominent feature of

this place. A museum within the fort gives an excellent depiction of the history of the fort and the area. Also worth a visit are the **Government Museum and Rani Mahal.**

**How:** Best time to visit is between October to April; time your visit for **Jhansi Utsav** (Feb/March) for a taste of local art, culture and cuisine. The nearest airport is at Gwalior (95 km/2 hours); it is well connected by trains and buses. The town has hotels such as **Bundelkhand Pride (bundelkhandpride.com; 0510 2331116)** and **Yatrik Jhansi (www.hotelyatrikjhansi.com)**



## Tiger tracking in Pilibhit

A tiger reserve and abundant flora, fauna

**What:** A stunning and scenic tiger reserve along the India-Nepal border with amazing plant and animal diversity.

**Why:** Because it is among the most important reserves under Project Tiger. Spread over 1,000 sq km, the reserve is among the finest examples of the highly diversified and productive Terai eco system, with over 127 animal species, 556 bird species and 2,100 flowering plants. Among the threatened species found here are Bengal tigers, leopards and swamp deer. Opt for safaris at dawn and dusk for best wildlife sighting.

**How:** The reserve is open from September to early June, but avoid December and January when it can get very cold. The nearest airports are Lucknow (250 km/6 hours) and Delhi (265 km/6 hours). Pilibhit town is also well connected by trains and buses. Villages just outside the reserve boundaries such as Bankatti and Chuka have plenty of guest houses, though larger hotels can be found in Pilibhit and Bareilly.



## Go wild at Dudhwa

Take a walk in the wild at this national park

**What:** A beautiful and scenic national park on the Indo-Nepal border which is also part of a tiger reserve and one of the few that represents the highly diverse Terai eco system.

**Why:** Because the national park, spread over more than 800 sq km is the perfect example of the Terai eco system, a combination of marshy grasslands, forests and savannahs located on the outer foothills of the Himalayas and Siwalik hills in the north Indo-Gangetic Plain. It is located on the Indo-Nepal border with a stunning diversity of flora and fauna. Part of the prestigious Project Tiger, it is also an essential for the protection of the endangered barasingha (12-antlered deer).

**How:** Best time to visit is between January and April. The nearest airport is at Lucknow (245 km/5 hours). There are very few accommodation options so book well in advance; choose from **Jambolana Safari Camp (www.jambolanasafaricamp.com), Dudhwa Tigerhino Resort 09235657585).**

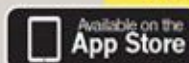
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Where Fashion Gets Personal



# WEST BENGAL

If you are dreaming of a family holiday in the lap of nature with amazing wildlife parks, quaint fishing villages and crystal clear sandy stretches, this is the state to explore





A clear view of snow-clad peaks from Sandakphu



## Sandakphu trek

Views of beautiful snow-clad mountains and meadows

**What:** The highest peak in West Bengal with views of Everest and Kanchenjunga, together with a national park; a vigorous outing for a family that loves the outdoors and is game for roughing it.

**Why:** Because there cannot be a more spectacular sight though the getting to could be a bit of a strain but the end result is well worth it; young children might not enjoy the journey but older children will find it exciting. It is located at the edge of the Singalila National Park on the Nepal border and offers fantastic views of the entire range of snow-clad mountains.

**How:** Sandakphu can be reached either by car or trekking, both of which begin at Manebhanjang. The trekking route goes via Chitire, Meghma, Tonglu, Tumling, Gairibas, Kalapokhri and Bekhe or you can hire a Land Rover though the journey could be quite rough. Manebhanjang is about 30 km from Darjeeling, which can be reached easily from the rest of the country. Sandakphu gets snowfall from mid December to early February so do check routes and access before embarking. There are a few hostels in Sandakphu village but it is better to check with a travel operator who work in the area such as **Yak & Yeti Travels [www.yaknyeti.com](http://www.yaknyeti.com)**



## Deltaic Island Bakkhali

Cycling through beautiful deltaic island townships

**What:** A beautiful and charming seaside town in the South 24 Parganas district, the town is located at the fringes of the Gangetic delta and also has historical ruins.

**Why:** For the sheer location and the surrounding beauty, as well as being the ideal seaside family holiday destination. Located in the South 24 Parganas district, Bakkhali is on one of the many deltaic islands spread across southern Bengal, which are all part of the Sunderbans. What is spectacular is that this has an unbroken seven km long beach stretching up to Frasersgunj, a twin beach and both are washed by gently rolling waves while the inland is lined with casuarina trees making for an idyllic scene. It is ideal for not just long walks but parts are also good for cycling and driving. There are also ruins of the house of Sir Andrew Fraser, Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, which are fun to explore.

**How:** The nearest airport is at Kolkata (125 km/3 hours) while Namkhana (25 km/45 minutes) is the nearest railhead. There are good bus connections too. **WBSTDC ([www.wbstdc.gov.in](http://www.wbstdc.gov.in))** has good accommodation while a variety of basic but decent private lodges are also available.



**SECRET**

### KURSEONG FOR THE TEA

Kurseong is home to some of the costliest teas in the world.

Among the estates here are the world famous Castleton, Ambotia and Makaibari tea gardens which produce the most delicate aromas of all black teas known to mankind. However these are seldom available in regular shops, even in Kurseong, but only at the outlet shops that are attached to the tea estates. Look out for them and stock up on your favourites.

DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY



Radha Shyam Temple, Bishnupur

SHUTTERSTOCK



## Mysticism of Bishnupur

Explore the divine world that lies encapsulated here

**What:** A spectacular town in the Bankura district, Bishnupur is full of striking and beautiful terracotta temples built during the 17th and 18th centuries.

**Why:** Because it is unusual to find so many unique temples in such a riveting material within such short distance of each other. There are almost two dozen temples dedicated to a variety of Gods built of terracotta during the reign of the Malla kings, who ruled over the area prior to the arrival of the British. Important ones include the **Rasmancha, Panch Ratna, Jor-Bangla, Madanmohan**, etc. There are other stunning heritage sites such as the gateway, stone chariot and archways that are worth visiting.

**How:** The nearest airport is at Kolkata (140 km/3 hours); Bishnupur has some good train and bus connections. The temples are within walking distance of each other but you can also hire cycle rickshaws to go from one temple to another, which is a rather convenient way of travelling. There's a nominal fee (about ₹5) to enter each of the temples but check for a combined fee which allows entry into multiple sites. There are no high end hotels but the town has many decent and affordable hotels around such as **Laxmi Park Hotel Balia Para, (03244) 256 353** and **Bishnupur Lodge www.wbtourism.gov.in** run by WBTDC.



## Kalimpong hills

Panoramic views, monasteries and sumptuous food

**What:** A hill station in northern West Bengal with scenic snow-clad hills for a backdrop and strong Buddhist ties.

**Why:** Because even though it is near Darjeeling, it is less crowded and a great place for a family holiday. Forget about haring from one place to another and hunker down for a relaxed and leisurely holiday packing with plenty of walking around, picnics and scenic drives. By far the most important spot is the Deolo hill from where the Kanchenjunga peak is visible on clear days. Wander around the beautiful and undulating golf course and visit the Cactus Nursery or browse through the Kalimpong Arts and Crafts Centre. Intersperse these with some of the popular religious sites such as the Catholic church or do a leisurely 2 km walk to the Zong Dhog Palri Fo Brang monastery from where you can get panoramic views of Kalimpong and the mountains. If you feel like a bit of wilderness head to the Neora Valley National Park. Don't miss the unique local cuisine which is a mix of Indian and Tibetan. Try the momos, especially at Gompus at Dambar Chowk and head to the Himalayan Hotel for a British tea experience. Taste also the locally made Kalimpong cheese, a yellowy crumbly cheese with a mild tang.

**How:** Though it gets really cold in winter, that's the best time to visit to get a true feel of the place, though the mountains are better viewed during summer. Bagdogra (80 km/3 hours) is the nearest airport while New Jalpaiguri (75 km/2.5 hours) is the nearest railhead. The best way to travel from either of these two places is via shared jeeps though you can hire them exclusively as well. There are a variety of accommodation options including homestays and B&Bs. The most upmarket one is **Elgin Silveroaks www.elginhotels.com; (03552) 255 296** but you can also try **Sana Hill Top www.sanahilltop.com; (0)93305 33111** and **Sillery Gaon www.sillerygaon.com; (0)99032 95920**



## Singalila National Park

Camping at an elevation of over 7,000 feet

**What:** A beautiful high-elevation national park on the Singalila Ridge offering such activities as safari, camping, and village visits.

**Why:** Because it is one of the few high elevation wildlife parks, located at a height of over 7,000 feet. The park is delight for campers as it is largely free of vicious animals and snakes, making it the most popular family camping destination in the eastern Himalayas. It has forests of oak, magnolias, bamboos and rhododendrons filled with unique animal species such as red panda, leopard cat, barking deer, pangolin, wild boar, the endangered Himalayan newt and pika or whistling hares. Two lakes within the park, **Jore Pokhri** and **Sukhapokhri**, are beautiful locations to observe newts and a variety of birds.

**How:** Best time to visit the park is from March to May and mid September to early December; it is closed during the monsoons from June to September. Bagdogra (15 km/30 minutes) is the nearest airport and Ghoom (30 km/45 minutes) is the nearest railhead. There are plenty of bus connections to Tonglu which is the entry point to Singalila. There are many log huts and basic accommodation at Tonglu but check ahead for camping within the national park.



The Church of Our Lady of Angels

The Church of Our Lady of Angels.  
*Find beauty outside and peace within.*

As you step inside the Church of Our Lady of Angels, you realize how spirituality inspires art and vice versa. Its beautiful French style masonry, rare paintings gifted by Napoleon take you on a world tour of art. While the sheer devotion with which French missionaries built this magnificent church still resonates in its unique prayer mass done in French. There are several other imposing churches here rich with Gothic architecture and legacy. These quaint and blissful churches add a unique flavor to the peace and beauty of Pondicherry.

CONCEPT

Heritage | Spirituality | Nature | Culture | Cuisine | Adventure

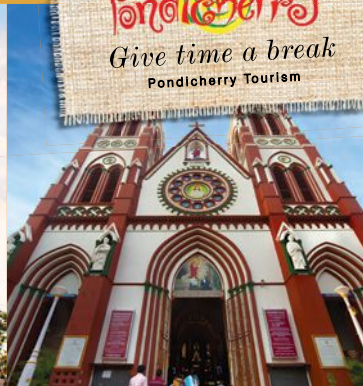
Log on to [www.pondytourism.in](http://www.pondytourism.in)



The Church of Our Lady of Angels



Immaculate Conception Cathedral



The Sacred Heart of Jesus Church



## Panaromic views in Kurseong

Take a walk around tea gardens, discovering old churches

**What:** A hill station with spectacular views, water falls and museums, and still undiscovered by the hordes.

**Why:** Kurseong offers leisure, relaxation and activities that can make for a lovely holiday for the entire family. Located at an altitude of nearly 4,900 ft, the hill station is also known as the land of the white orchids. Take long walks around town along tea gardens and parks, enjoying the fresh and cool mountain breeze. Head to Eagle's Crag (Durpin Dhara) which provides panoramic view of the town and the plains of Siliguri as well as the Himalayan peaks, which are golden at sunrise. Visit heritage churches such as

St Andrew's and St Paul's.

**How:** The best time to visit is between March to May and September to early November. The best and most scenic way to reach Kurseong is from Siliguri (48 km) on the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway. The nearest airport is at Bagdogra (40 km/1 hour). Opt for a homestay in a tea plantation; the **Makaibari Tea Estates** ([www.makaibari.com/stay.aspx](http://www.makaibari.com/stay.aspx); +91 9830768514) have many homestays and an office spreads the stay around providing livelihood to the locals. Other choices include such hotels as **Cochrane Place** ([www.imperialchai.com](http://www.imperialchai.com); +91 9932035660).



## Fisherman village Mandarmani

Catch fish, play volleyball & watch amazing sunrises

**What:** A lovely, untouched seaside village with very few tourists.

**Why:** Located almost at the Northern end of the Bay of Bengal, Mandarmani village has a spectacular 13 km beach which is driveable almost the entire length. The beach has low waves with a few dunes which break up the monotony. So the best thing to do here is to relax, swim, go for long walks and watch fishing folk set out for the day or bring in the day's catch. It would be a good idea to wake up early in the morning to catch some spectacular sunrises over the water. Try some beach activities like fishing, beach cricket and volleyball, or go for boat cruises. There are some resorts which

offer more vigorous beach activities such as quad bikes, jet skis and banana boat rides. Do a day trip to Digha another picturesque beach nearby.

**How:** The best time is between October and February. The nearest airport is at Kolkata (170km/4 hours) while Contai (22km/30 minutes) is the nearest railhead. It also has plenty of bus connections. There are accommodation options across budgets but try the spa resort **Sana Beach Resort** (<http://mandarmonihotels.com>; +91 90077 25066) and **King's Crown Hotel** (<http://kingscrownhotel.com>; +91 9830203066).



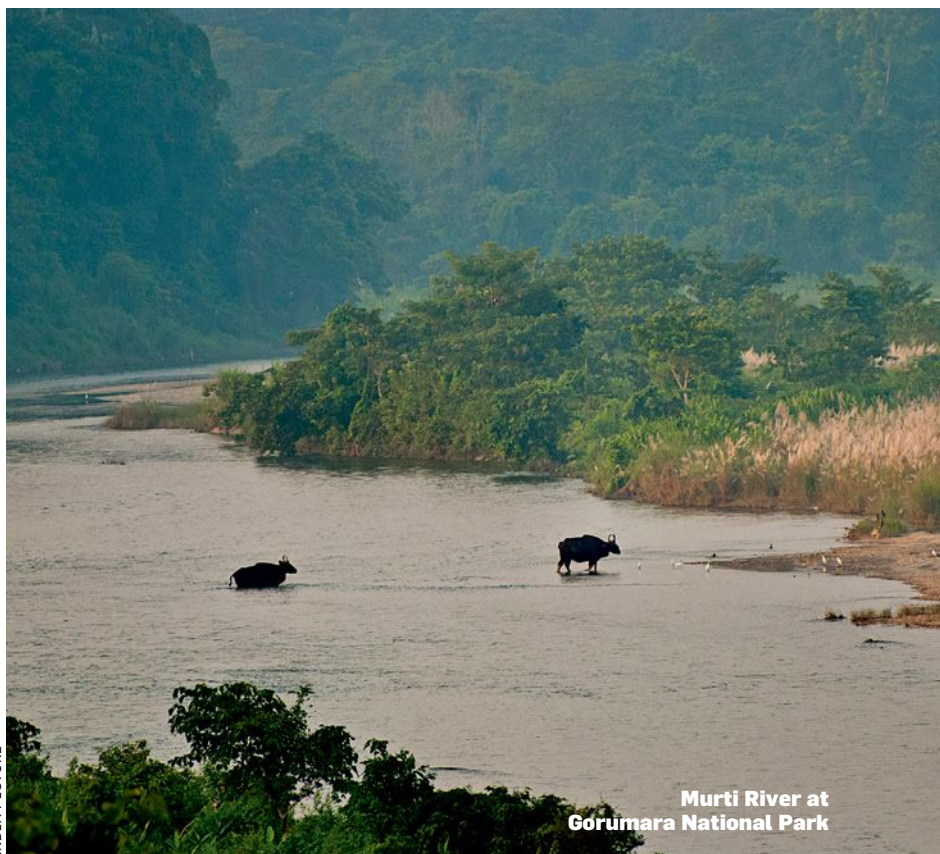
## Dramatic Doors

Encounters with amazing wildlife

**What:** A sprawling 8,800 sq km of scenic floodplains and foothills of the eastern Himalayas spread over many states, with Western Doors lying in West Bengal.

**Why:** Because there's nothing quite like it; with an average elevation between 90 and 1,750 metres, the area is packed with the haunting beauty of mountain streams, tea gardens and forests including the Gorumara national park which is the highlight of the area. The park, lying on the banks of the river Murti with riverine grasslands and savannah woodland, is famous for its population of the great Indian one-horned rhino. Other animals include elephants, bison, deer, turtles, pythons, deer and a variety of birds. Opt for a safari and head to one of the many watchtowers for sweeping views of the forests as well as wildlife spotting. Other places to visit in the area are Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Siliguri and Malbazar.

**How:** The nearest airport is Bagdogra (80 km/2 hours) while the nearest railhead is New Jalpaiguri. It is also well connected by buses. There are basic forest lodges or you can choose the more high end **Riverwood Forest Retreat** ([www.riverwoodretreat.com/gorumara](http://www.riverwoodretreat.com/gorumara))



INDIA PICTURE

Murti River at Gorumara National Park



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# Romantic Getaways



Delhi Himachal Jammu And Kashmir  
Rajasthan Uttarakhand Meghalaya Sikkim Goa  
Kerala Lakshadweep Pondicherry



“

It's quite strange that Gurmeet and I never went to Goa before our first holiday there together as a couple. We were shooting for Ramayan in 2008 and had gone to Goa for some work; we extended our stay by just a day to chill out and fell in love with the place so much that now we go there at least twice a year. Calangute, Anjuna, Vagator... name the beach and we have been there.

We both are complete beach bums, so there's never a conflict about where to go for a holiday. We are also very lazy travellers. Our idea of a romantic holiday is just holing up together and chilling out. We are not explorers. However, we do experiment a lot with the hotels that we stay in. We have stayed at every kind of hotel, right from the Taj to tents. Our trips are typically sleeping in till 10 am, going to a shack to spend hours staring at the sea, enjoying food and drinks, just chatting about nothing. The first few times we went crazy over all the water sports. But now, we just like to do nothing.

Goa is great for togetherness. You can find romance in roughing it out together on treks, camping, biking or you can live the party life and go to the fabulous clubs, pubs and bars. Gurmeet and I don't like discos or pubs so we go for romantic date nights instead.

We go for karaoke. I'm a trained singer I can manage singing fine but Gurmeet gets very conscious about his voice! We've rented open jeeps and have gone driving late into the night or just hung around in our hotel by the poolside. Actually, for us just each other's company is romantic enough.

”

**DEBINA BONNERJEE & GURMEET CHOUDHARY**

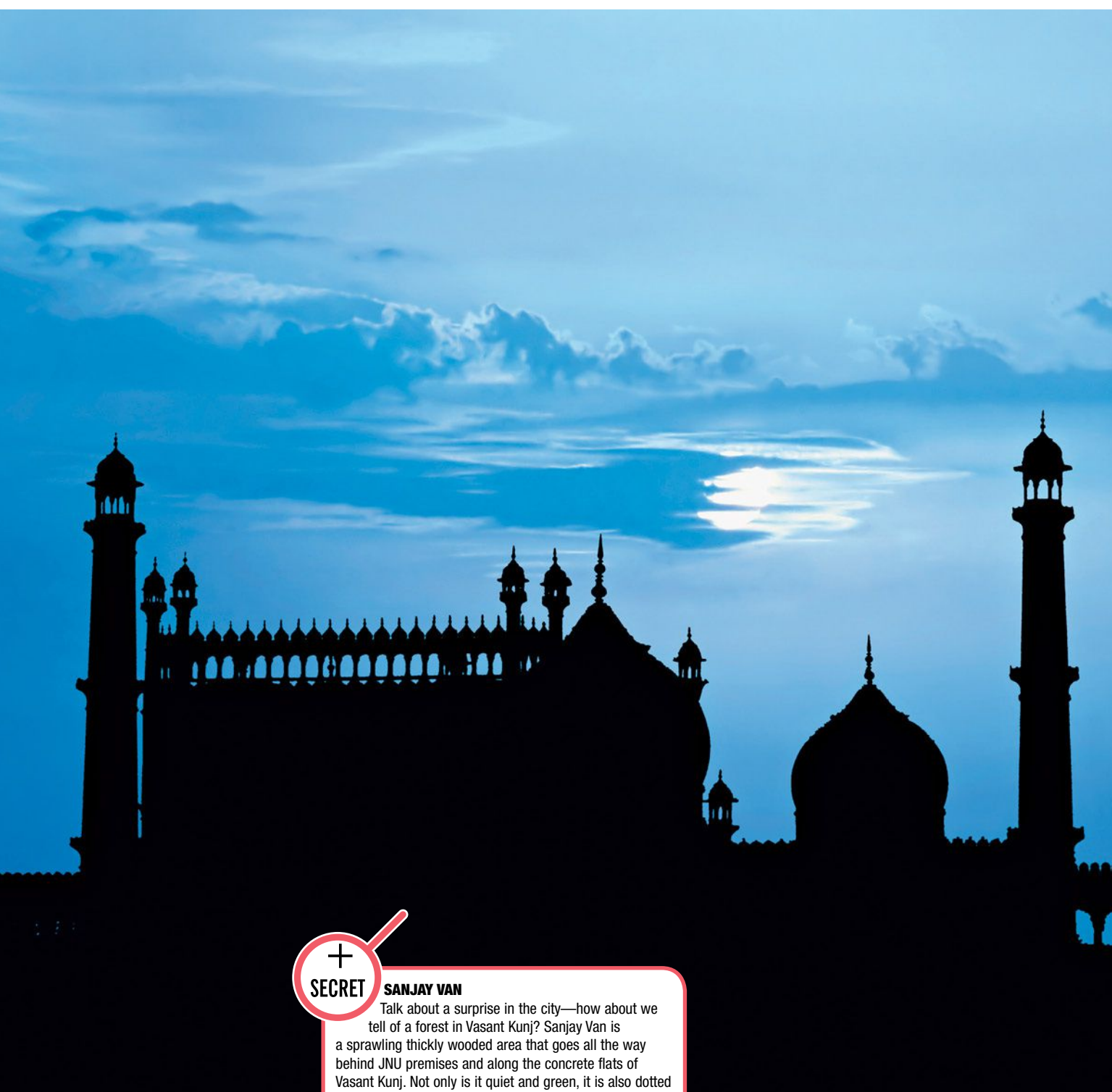
*Indian Television's Hottest Couple*

For the couple, a holiday is a perfect balancing act

SHIVANGI KULKARNI/WWW.INDIATODAYIMAGES.COM



Hidden in the capital's nook and corners, are undiscovered outlets. Step away from commercial complexes and explore the leafy trails and hidden closets that add to the thrill of going on an uncharted journey together



### **SANJAY VAN**

Talk about a surprise in the city—how about we tell of a forest in Vasant Kunj? Sanjay Van is a sprawling thickly wooded area that goes all the way behind JNU premises and along the concrete flats of Vasant Kunj. Not only is it quiet and green, it is also dotted with ruins from an era gone by and a number of species of birds. You will find very few people there, and most of these are avid bird watchers and nature lovers of Delhi.



ANSHUMAN SEN



## Set out on food trails

Fabulous restaurants, finger licking street food and unique walks

**What:** A great holiday for the couple who love food as much as each other.  
**Why:** Delhi is the great new food hub with all the cuisines available in the city. You can plan to eat on different lunches, dinners for up to a month if you like!  
**How:** Where you start depends on where you live but we suggest you book yourself a hotel near the metro line and then all the city's pretty much within access. The main hubs of food are **Hauz Khas Village, Khan Market, Connaught Place** but there are also quite a few gems at Greater Kailash, Green Park, Defence Colony, Meherchand Market and Shahpur Jat. Walking around these areas may introduce you to restaurants that no one knows of. Of the ones you absolutely should not miss are: **Café Lota**, the stylish open air café at the Crafts Museum in Pragati Maidan, despite the name it is a wonderful place for fine pan-Indian snacks such as palak-patta chaat. **Chez Nini** at Meherchand that does European and French food just right. There is no shortage of taste and, depending on how much of the new stuff you are willing to try, eating your way through Delhi can become quite a trip to try together.



## Participate in Delhi walks

Be a part of the heritage, nature and Old City walks

**What:** Discover the city as a city is discovered best—on foot—exploring its bylanes and neighbourhoods with its knowledgeable citizens who make the walk a little more charming by dotting it with their anecdotes. Stop for tea and gossip with a *chaiwalla* for a true Delhi experience.  
**Why:** There are few cities with history as intriguing and layered as Delhi and exploring the city's heritage through its stories gives it a romantic spin.  
**How:** INTACH and India Habitat Centre are two reliable old organisations that conduct heritage walks to Old Delhi and Lutyen's Delhi. If you want something more romantic, opt for a nature walk at the Okhla Barrage or the Trees of Delhi walk where you can spot several species of birds you wouldn't think come to visit a city as busy and noisy as Delhi. The best time for these walks is in the winter, of course, and most of them have a specific calendar.  
**INTACH: (011) 2463 1818/24641304; IHC: (011) 2468 2002.**



## Anandagram culture hub

Steer away from the hustle bustle into the lovely and leafy world

**What:** An oasis of green in the middle of Delhi and Gurgaon that few people yet know about, Anandagram is the location for Sanskriti Kendra, the quiet arts and culture hub of New Delhi.  
**Why:** A vast open green space that stretches endlessly, walking into **Sanskriti Kendra** is like tumbling into a forest in the middle of Delhi's most traffic-filled concrete area: the M.G. Road. The minute you turn off the main road into Anandagram, the traffic noise is put on mute and Mehrauli turns into Narnia. You might be tempted to hold hands as you walk down the leafy path to the end of the lane where Sanskriti invites lovers of arts and culture. Also, there are three museums located within the premises. You can join a yoga or pottery workshops and, if you are a creative couple, you can even stay on the premises.  
**How:** Take the metro to Arjangarh station, and then it's a 10-minute walk down to Anandagram. To book the classes, or more info, call (011) 2650 1796. **Timing: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays closed.**



SHUTTERSTOCK

The moonlight forms a silhouette of Jama Masjid located in Old Delhi



A quiet walk along the beach during sunset or partying all night at the most happening clubs in town, Goa gives you the opportunity to bond over everything, be it the loud festivals or the delicious fish thalis



**A romantic stay for two on Palolem beach**



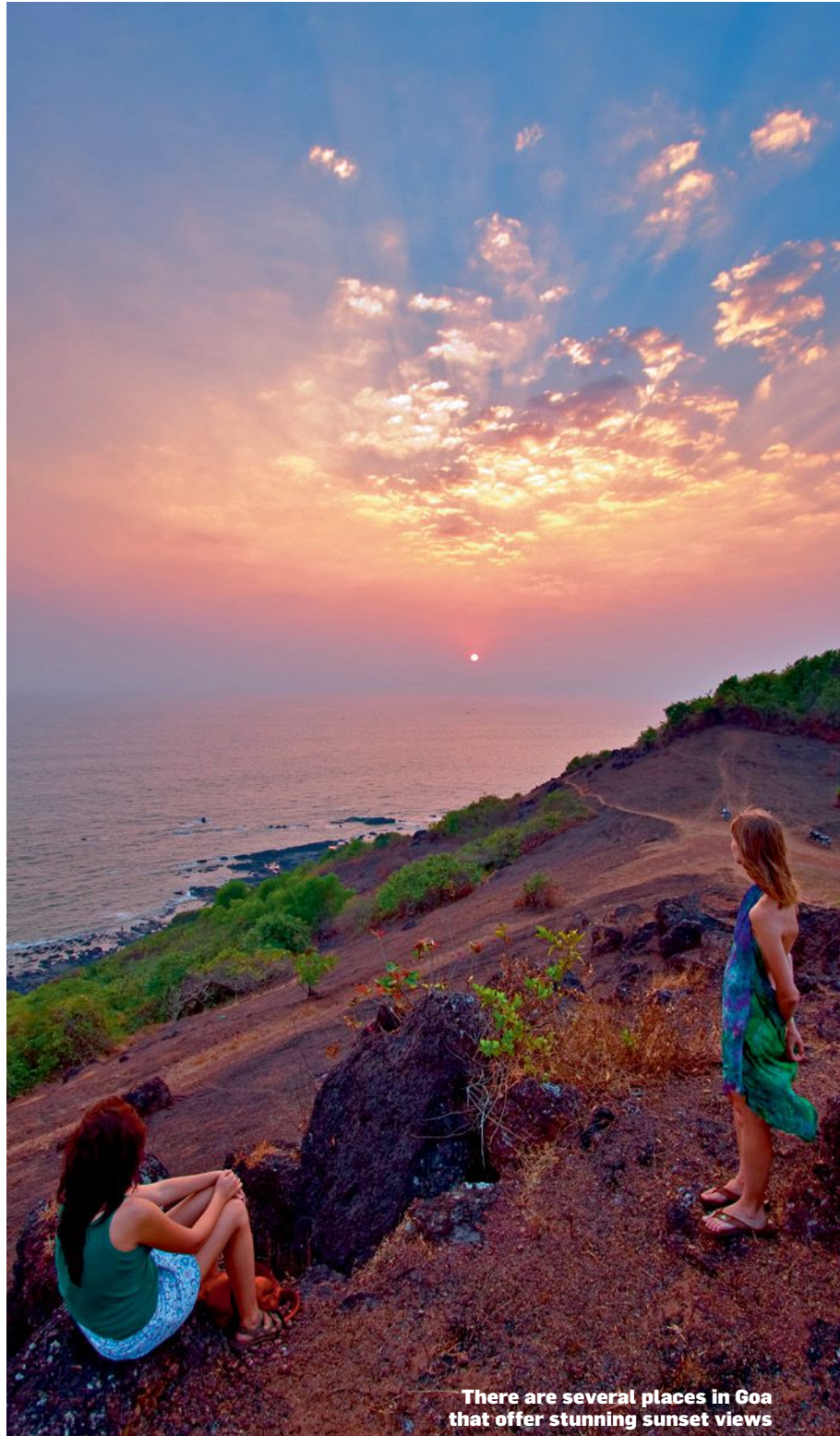
## SECRET

### OTTER CREEK TENTS, ELSEWHERE

It is so secret that they don't even give you the address—yes, all you know is that you will be near the beach and in complete luxury at the Otter Creek Tents, the newer addition to the luxury boutique hotel Elsewhere. Book your tent and then you will be given the directions which you are supposed to keep secret to help preserve the charm and romance of the place for other couples who may be seeking to fall off the map, just like you. [www.aseascape.com/tents.html](http://www.aseascape.com/tents.html)



INDIA PICTURE SHUTTERSTOCK



**There are several places in Goa that offer stunning sunset views**

## Villa stay

Experience the flipside of the hippy Goa in a luxe villa

**What:** Quite a different Goa experience, away from the parties and the food, this holiday is all about giving in to the good life and indulging yourself—but most of all it is about spending quality time together in the quieter corners of the state.

**Why:** If you want the beach within access but don't really care for the crowds, if you want to be able to go out and mingle with people when and if you feel like it but mostly want a quiet retreat from daily life, if you like to walk out of your well appointed room, order a cocktail and take your books to lounge by the pool, then a luxury villa holiday is for you. Gift your partner and yourself a dose of complete indulgence with spa massages, good food and the unmatched company of the sun, sea and sand of Goa.

**How:** There are several villas to rent in Goa, and many of them lovely and affordable, but for a really luxurious and satisfying experience, loosen your wallet at [www.cocoshambhala.com](http://www.cocoshambhala.com), where apart from the villa comfort you also get a tree-top living room, a private pool and free use of car and driver to explore the area.



## Spa resorts

Fresh air, quiet moments in a health and nature resort

**What:** A weekend, or a week of switching off and restoring good health together.

**Why:** Goa's weather is conducive to yoga and ayurveda just as well as Kerala's and quite a number of resorts now offer various wellness packages—and by wellness we don't mean spa massages though that too of course is part of the package! Indeed, there is something uplifting about practising good breathing techniques by the sea, rising with the sun and getting energised by yoga first thing in the morning. A day begun well is a day won, after all. Eat light, follow a proper detox and wellness programme and return refreshed and happy from your Goa break.

**How:** In the isolated beach of Palolem is **Bhakti Kutir**, a health and nature resort where you can check in for a week of wellness and active health. Their ayurveda centre and yoga and meditation centre is popular for those seeking the well being of mind, body and soul. ([bhaktikutir.com](http://bhaktikutir.com)) A slightly more upmarket and stylish option is **La Mangrove**, where you can practise yoga in stunningly located by the sea. [www.lamangrovegoa.com](http://www.lamangrovegoa.com)

## Gourmet city

Indulge in scrumptious seafood, shacks and world cuisine

**What:** Explore the explosive food scene of Goa. As more of the world descends, more of its cuisines find a little outlet here.

**Why:** Food lovers come this way; rest can follow the other holiday suggestions on this page. If you're into food porn, then some real highs come from the little international, local food places that have mushroomed all over Goa. From Goan fish *thali* for ₹100 per person to Japanese food for ₹1,500 per person, the world is on your plate.

**How:** It is probably best to stick to a couple of areas: between **Panjim**, **Candolim** and **Vagator**, you will find some of the best places to eat. Try **Bomra's** in Candolim for Burmese food; **Curlies** in Anjuna for local food; **Sakana** in Vagator for Japanese; **Om Made Cafe** in Anjuna for snacks and everything in between. A really lovely place to dine is the oddly-named **O Fogo** in Panjim that has a charming decor and serves some fab contemporary cuisine.



**Tantalise your taste buds with great food & the freshest seafood**

## Beach tents

Let the waves be your lullaby and chirping birds your wake-up call

**What:** Stay right on the beach and yet in total comfort—shacks are no longer your only option in Goa.

**Why:** If beach is what draws you to Goa, then this is a way to stay closest to it. Imagine waking up and not even having to take three steps to bury your feet into the sand. Beach camps have upped the style quotient of beach stays in Goa which were earlier limited to very basic shack options that are totally no-frills. With the more modern luxury tents, you can stay out by the sea for as long as you wish, eat all the meals by the water, and yet escape into the cool, mosquito-free comfort for those few hours in the day when you want to get a the perfect sleep.

**How:** **Paros** on Morjim is a perfect choice with well appointed tents and great food. You are in Goa's best beach with all the fine dining and partying right at hand. [www.amaryagroup.com/paros-amarya](http://www.amaryagroup.com/paros-amarya)



## Nightlife on the beach

Fabulous beach parties, music festivals and club nights

**What:** Celebrate life with music and dancing with a few nights of revelry, only in Goa.

**Why:** The whole world's a party in Goa during 'season', which is basically December-January, with the last week of the year becoming the peak party time. Recharge your senses as you stay away late into the night, joining in strangers in celebrating the moment.

**How:** North Goa is where you have to base yourself for this holiday. In the month of **December**, pretty much every day is a party, building up to the big night of New Year's Eve. Morjim beach is the official party destination with some thumping clubs such as **Marbela** and lovely lounges like **La Plage**. Sunburn, the three-day music festival at the end of December is another event that you could plan your party holiday around—it is usually held on the last weekend of December in Vagator and from noon to midnight you can hear music and celebration all day long. (Buy tickets in advance.) Anjuna flea market is a good place to hang around where the shacks that line the beach become party zones once the sun sets down.



## Magnificent sunsets

Here are various views to witness different shades of the horizon

**What:** Watch the sun go down from few choice locations all across Goa.

**Why:** What can be more romantic than the sun setting on the horizon, into the vast expanse of sea in front of your eyes, as the sky changes from blue to orange-pink before turning inky dark. Of course sunsets can be watched directly from any west facing beach but there are a number of spots along Goa that especially have lovely views and have become popular just for that. **Taj Fort Aguada's** lobby affords stunning views of the sea, and **Sinquerim beach**, thanks to its location at a little height. Even if you are not staying at the hotel, catching a glass of wine at the lounge before you head out to dinner will be a great idea. If you don't want to go to a five-star then **Om Made Cafe** at Anjuna has an equally fabulous sunset view.

**How:** Plan to be at your location around 4.30, or maximum 5 p.m., to settle in and order a drink before the sun starts setting. Don't forget to book a table and places with the best sunset views tend to be busy.



## Bondla wildlife sanctuary

Explore secluded sanctuaries and waterfalls

**What:** A break to enjoy nature's bounty—and we don't mean just the beach. There is a whole green side to Goa that remains unexplored for those who tend to go here just to party. Take some time to do the different, next time you plan to visit.

**Why:** Because rain here is like nowhere else, a visit during the monsoon is a must for those who enjoy being with nature. It is also the perfect time for a romantic break as touristic crowds stay away from Goa during this season as all the beaches are out of access. A good time to explore a different Goa.

**How:** The **Bondla Wildlife Sanctuary**, about 40 km from Margao, is a practically unknown small sanctuary that has tourist cottages where you can stay. There are a few deer and a lot of roses, but then Goa's sanctuaries are not ones you go for animal spotting.

**Dr Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary** in Charao, next to the Mandovi river, is a place you can spot a wide variety of birds on a fine morning. Apart from the wildlife parks, spice plantations in the Ponda area are a great place to spend a day and have a traditional meal in its lush environs. Try [www.sahakarifarms.com](http://www.sahakarifarms.com)



## Arty side

Walk around the museums, galleries, film and art festivals

**What:** Spend a few days exploring arts and culture, not just of Goa, but from the international vibrant scene.

**Why:** Goa becomes a natural draw to the world's best artists, photographers, writers and thinkers who are constantly looking for a way to recharge their senses. The successes of **International Film Festival of India**, Goa, where international cinema is showcased to much acclaim, and of **Think festival**, which closed after last year's infamous incident, Goa's name has become attached with artsy festivals. Both these events became reasons to visit Goa and now newer arts festivals and events are adding to these reasons. **Goa Literature Festival** is a celebration of books and writing in Panjim, but the latest arts festival that has been making noise is **Sensorium**, which started in December 2014. Held at Sunaparanta, Goa Centre for the Arts, Sensorium is a festival of arts, literature and ideas that host many international celebrities who showcase their talent to the Goa audience.

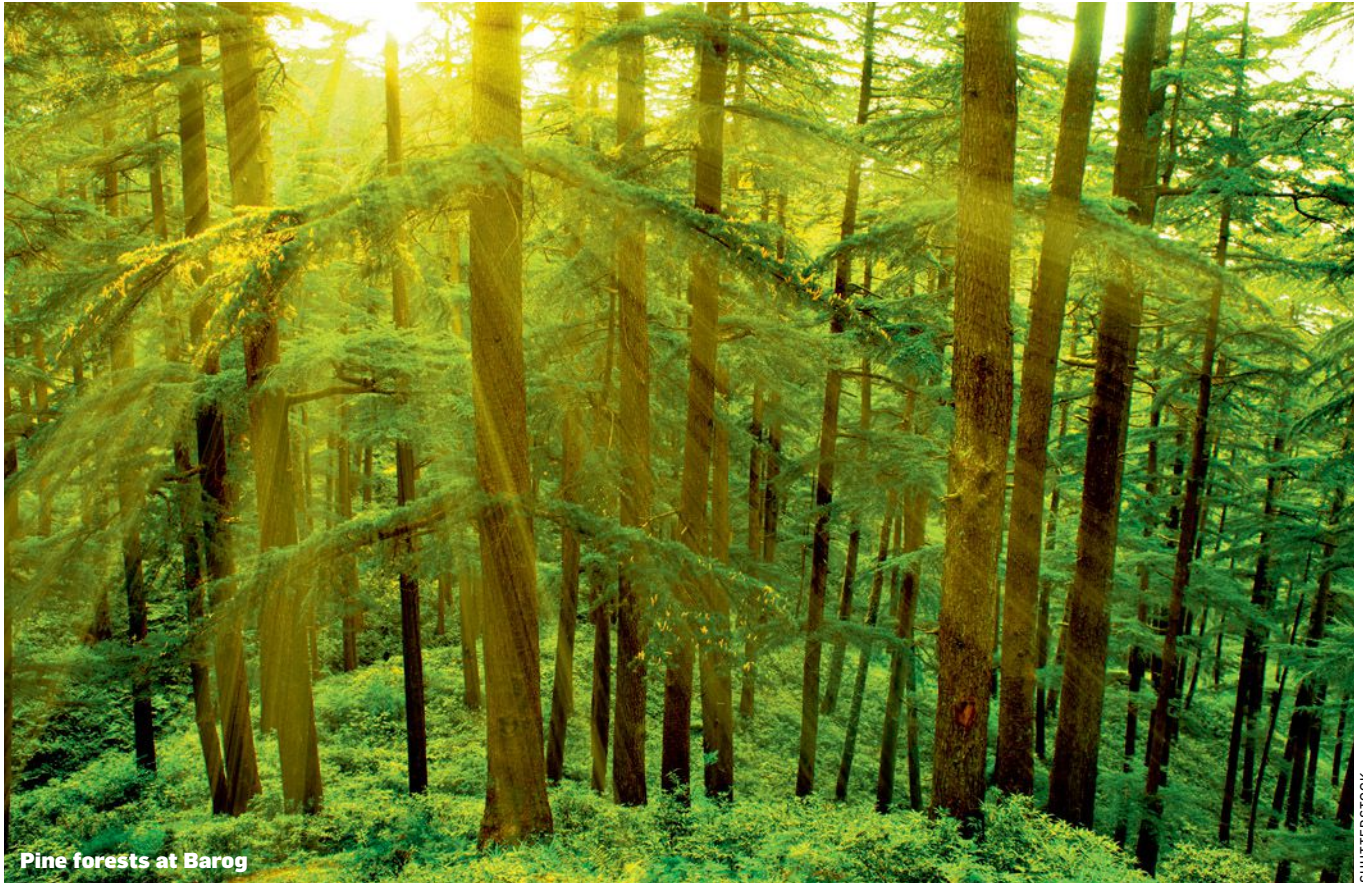
**How:** November to February is the best time to be in Goa at any rate. Sensorium is in its first year, and will be held annually from December to February; [www.sgca.org/sensorium.php](http://www.sgca.org/sensorium.php) International Film Festival of India, Goa, is held every November; [www.iffigoa.org](http://www.iffigoa.org)



HEMANT CHAWLA/WWW.INDIA TODAY IMAGES.COM



Trek on mountainous paths, cozy up in a hill top cafe and journey through the unexplored hills. Located in the lap of the Himalayas, the state gives couples an opportunity to make the most of 'just-us-two'



Pine forests at Barog

SHUTTERSTOCK

## A walk at Barog

Historical treat and long walks through quiet forests

**What:** A pretty, forgotten hill town surrounded by pine forests that beckons you to unwind and leave the bustle behind.

**Why:** Long walks and quiet chilly nights are what you can expect at Barog, where you can find a few fellow travellers. Most people use this little place as a stopover and nothing more, and so when you stay, you can have the whole place for yourselves. A historical treat awaits you in the form of the Barog Railway Station, built in the Scottish style and at the end of the longest straight tunnel in the world—the narrow gauge train passes through it before coming to a halt at Barog.

**How:** Barog is located exactly in the middle of Chandigarh and Shimla, and you can drive down from either. A more romantic way of reaching it is via the Kalka-Shimla toy train that winds its way past the hillsides and stops at the Barog station. There aren't many places to stay here, but **The Pinewood (01792) 238 825** is a clean decent option. For a more romantic stay, Moksha is about an hour away. [www.mokshaspa.com](http://www.mokshaspa.com)

## Idyllic days at Old Manali

For a laidback retreat in the mountains

**What:** Old Manali is where people go spend a few idyllic days in the hipster coolness of this hamlet and soak in its laidback atmosphere.

**Why:** You are high up in the mountains and there is nothing to do but walk around and explore the town together—small cafes, travellers from all over the world with whom you can catch up with at the aptly named **Drifter's Inn café**. Old Manali is that ideal world where no one bugs you and you have nothing on your agenda but relaxing with the mountains in view. You should try the momos and *thukpa* while you are here. Up the romantic quotient with snow by driving up to Rohtang Pass for the day.

**How:** Manali is accessible by road from Delhi. To break the 12-hour journey, you may want halt in Dharamshala. There is an airport near Kullu but flying to Manali is generally avoidable. Stay at the Dragon Guest House.

[www.dragontreks.com/guest-house-manali.html](http://www.dragontreks.com/guest-house-manali.html)



SHUTTERSTOCK



## SECRET THE GLEN

Shimla is no secret and all its little nooks are now old news, but the Glen remains one of its lesser known areas. Only some know that a few kilometres from the Mall is this little spot unfrequented except by trekkers, nature enthusiasts. Surrounded by pine and deodar trees, this is a great spot to bring a picnic.



## The GHNP

A detour into the jungle

**What:** The Great Himalayan National Park (GHNP) lives up to its grand title as this is where you can spot the snow leopard.

**Why:** You are together in the middle of the forest with miles of silence and brooding thick woods—and the big cats are lurking somewhere nearby watching. Can there be anything more romantic than spending a few nights together in the jungle? Apart from the snow leopard, GHNP is home to black and brown bears, the tahr and several other mammals—and over 100 species of birds. The park is almost never crowded, even if you go in the thick of summer, and even if you do meet trekkers, they will make for the most interesting companions. While inside the park, take gentle hikes to explore the fauna; and a fun thing to do is to note down the names of the birds, tree varieties you spot together!

**How:** Drive up to Shimla, halt for the night, then on to Tirthan Valley that is the gateway to GHNP. You can stay in camps or forest rest house if you get permission. **Email:** [dirghnp@gmail.com](mailto:dirghnp@gmail.com); **(01902) 265 320**

DHRIITIMAN MUKHERJEE



The Great Himalayan National Park



## Open up to the Tirthan Valley

Explore the unexplored valley for its stunning greens and dine on the fresh trout in the local restaurants

**What:** A less known getaway in the thick of Himachal, this is also the entry point to the Great Himalayan National Park.

**Why:** It's amazing how people have left Tirthan Valley alone. Well not everyone—those in the know, visit the town around river Tirthan for its quiet and stunning beauty. The turquoise river meanders through the entire valley, giving the green a freshness and the landscape a sweep of vibrant colour. It truly is a stunning, romantic haven for those who are looking for an escape from the madding

crowd. The river is full of trout and you can dine on the freshest fish in local restaurants. Go on a hike, or just chill by the river.

**How:** For a more peaceful journey, break your road trip at Shimla, from where the scenic route to Tirthan Valley is about 180 km. You will be passing the treacherous Jelori Pass, so if you are unsure of your driving skills, then it is best to hire a taxi. Stay at **Riverside Resort** or **Himalayan Trout House (0) 88940 00613**—it doesn't really matter as you will be spending most of your time by the river.



# JAMMU & KASHMIR

The state won't cease to surprise you with its majestic views, stunning surrounds and gorgeous weather which not only brings you closer, but also gives couples a chance to romance nature like never before



## Cozy up in Kashmir

Hold hands in the skating rink or sit back and enjoy a ride in the Dal lake

**What:** A holiday in the lovely town of Gulmarg at a time when few people dare to visit the state.

**Why:** Kashmir is at its loveliest best in the winter, when the crowds leave and snow takes over. As you climb the windy path to Gulmarg, the trees turn from green to white, with snow from the previous night covering its leaves as if with paint. There is a stillness in the air, which is so crisp it could cut your skin—be sure to be carrying thermals—and snow falls with a silence unlike the thunder and lashing of rain. In the winter there is nearly nothing to do in Gulmarg except to watch it snow—and play with it perhaps. Watch the bowl turn into an ice-skating rink as the few co-travellers try their feet on ice. Gulmarg's isolation is great for some couple time but when you want something more, take a day trip to Srinagar and visit its two most romantic sights: Pari Mahal, and the Dal. If you're lucky, the Dal may be frozen (it doesn't freeze over every year) and, god, that's a real treasure to behold and never forget.

**How:** Fly to Srinagar and drive down about two hours to Gulmarg. If you're driving your own car, make sure you are in a SUV with winter tyres, as ice can be tricky to drive on. Stay at Khyber, by far the best and most romantic hotel in town with its glass front showcasing snowy trees all around. [www.khyberhotels.com](http://www.khyberhotels.com)



## Go with the flow by river Lidder

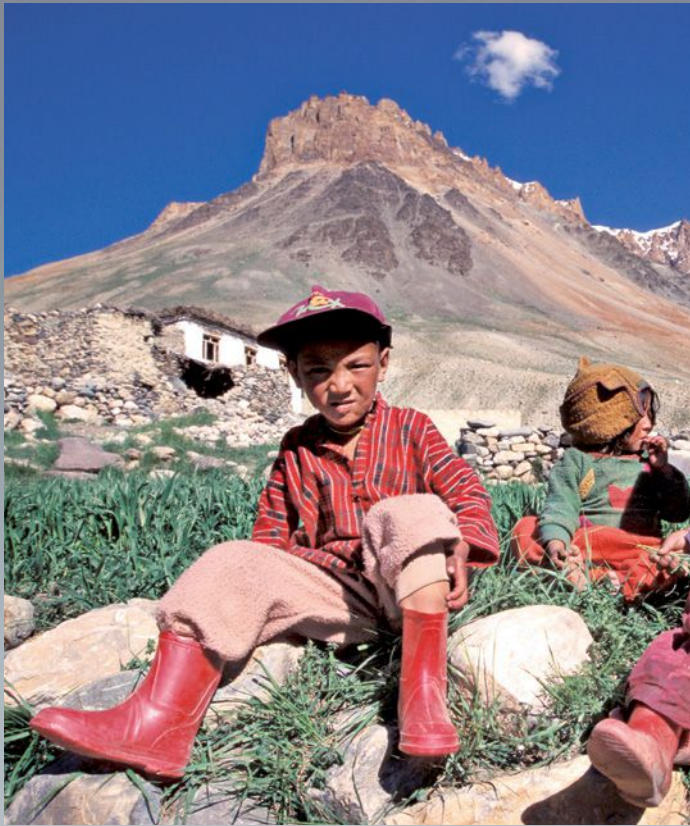
Get an adrenaline rush as you go for hikes together

**What:** A silvery glacial river that is the life source of the verdant Lidder Valley, you will holiday in a place that can truly be called heaven on earth—especially if you go in late spring or summer.

**Why:** Impossibly tall and lush fir trees populate the Lidder Valley through which the clear-as-ice Lidder river flows, lending a light blue to nature's painting. There is no greater romantic escape than Kashmir, that's for sure. Park yourself in Aru Valley, a popular base for trekkers, which is half way between Pahalgam and Lidder

Valley, so that you are ideally placed for a few excursions, should you wish to leave the shore of the river. While the trekkers prepare for long hikes into the forests, you can take tips from them on a gentler walk together. You could also learn to fish, which gives you the perfect excuse to sit for hours together by the lovely River Lidder and just gaze at eternity.

**How:** Aru Valley is about half an hour away from Pahalgam. Stay at **Aru Eco Resort** [www.aruecoresort.com](http://www.aruecoresort.com)



Spend quality time teaching and learning from the local children of Ladakh



**SECRET LADAKH SERAI**

Live like nomads, in yurts and Mongolian community tents, at this eco resort tucked away from Leh—but really nearby, only 7 km—surrounded by apricot and apple trees. This is also an ideal base for treks and walks and, of course, Leh town is at hand when you want to refill any necessities. In Ayu, (01982) 244 063



**Try volunteer tourism**

Volunteer together to promote local products

**What:** Give back a little to the place you love, help rebuild its land and restore its economy as it inches back to normalcy after the recent disastrous floods that wrecked Srinagar.

**Why:** Most of all, when you do something good together, you will feel good about yourself but also because Kashmir can use help of people who believe in responsible tourism—involvement with the land is what makes you a traveller and not just a tourist.

**How:** There are several ways to volunteer. You could start from visiting: just by checking into a hotel and shopping for local products you are fuelling the economy. If you want to take this a step further, you could contribute to Red Cross who run over 30 programmes there. A really good way to combine Ladakh and volunteerism is to spend three weeks in the winter there teaching local children English. You don't need to be an expert to do this, as you are only teaching basic spoken English, and by spending three weeks in a time that very few tourists visit. [www.secmol.org](http://www.secmol.org)

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**Homestay in Pahalgam**

Hakeem family's simple cottage is a great place to bond

**What:** Live with a local family to get a real taste of the region.

**Why:** The Hakeem family's cottage is open for you to rent out, ideally located just outside Pahalgam and near the Overa Wildlife Sanctuary. During your stay in this quiet home, you will be treated to great local food made in the Hakeem household and fabulous views from your room of the stunning mountain landscape outside. For those who like to stay connected, the good news is that this pastoral perfection comes with modern luxuries such as wifi,

though we strongly advise you switch off your phones and spend some together time in this peaceful corner of the world. The family will be happy to organise walks and treks for the two of you, and even bird-watching trips into the Overa sanctuary. The River Lidder is nearby and you can spend a few idyllic days just soaking in the immense peace and quiet.

**How:** You can book Hakeem Homestay via Airbnb or Tripadvisor, or any of several online hotel portals.

BHARAT AGGARWAL/WWW.INDIATODAYIMAGES.COM



If you are looking forward to spending some quality time together, God's own country has all the right itineraries for you. From floating in a ferry to sharing a recipe, this could be just the kind of break you need





## SECRET

### GINGER HOUSE

In Fort Kochi, this is an expansive antique shop done up like a Travancore mansion, housing an enormous old snake boat running down the centre. The door at the end of this tunnel-like room opens to yet another room with a sprinkling of antique tables and chairs. You can sit and dine at the tables and if you so fancy, buy the table when you're done! Go on beyond the door, you find yourself in an open courtyard on the backwaters.



Spend a night in a hut built in the middle of the forest

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY: KERALA TOURISM



Kalaripayattu



## Under the sky

Sleep under the stars on a canopy of trees

**What:** Spending a night or two at the height of trees and that too in the middle of thick forests, is an innovative hotel type that was first made popular in Kerala.

**Why:** At the top of a tree you are not just closer to the stars in the clear sky above, but even better is the fact that you are blissfully away from the people below. Your little room, or hut, is made entirely of wood and blends in quite well between the woods, peeking out from its green carpet in a warm and cosy manner. It is small, intimate and utterly romantic to live in a tree house with your partner as dim lighting makes your home for the night glow in the dark and all you hear are sounds of the night in the jungle that surrounds you. You climb down for creature comforts in the day as you go on various sightseeing tours and eat and drink with other guests at the hotel, but when the day comes to a close, you escape together to your wonderful, secluded, green, haven.

**How:** Though there are quite a few options in Kerala now, Wayanad is the best place to try out living among the trees with the tried and trusted **Vyhitri resort**. ([www.vythiresort.com/tree\\_house](http://www.vythiresort.com/tree_house))



## Soulful spa experience

Ayurvedic therapy and couple massages

**What:** While in Kerala, you really should not return without dipping into the healing well of ayurveda but there is no reason why you should not add a bit of comfort to the process.

**Why:** Ayurveda is not a gentle thing and it is certainly not romantic to be drowning in foul-smelling oil together—no, ayurveda is strictly for the wellness of mind body and soul, and hence the romance and comfort in this holiday must come from elsewhere. Most good ayurvedic resorts are more like hospitals where you go for specific treatments—but you can add some frills to your wellness holiday by opting for a luxury spa hotel where you can get massages other than ayurveda apart from great food, well appointed accommodation and fantastic sea views.

**How:** **Surya Samudra** is a great option in Kovalam. Located at a height, you have fab panoramic views of the sea from your beautiful cottage, and in between yoga and massages, you can enjoy fine cuisine and wine at its three restaurants. Its bar, **Madira**, looks out at the ocean and is known for its cocktails—a perfect antidote to some hardcore ayurveda. ([www.niraamaya.in/kovalam\\_indulge.html](http://www.niraamaya.in/kovalam_indulge.html))



## Stay still

Break the rut and spend some time in these mystic backwaters

**What:** An option where you slow down the pace of life, spend time exploring Kerala's quieter side with each other.

**Why:** The stillness of Kerala's backwaters soothes any jangled nerves immediately. The minute you set afloat on a houseboat, the world becomes a prettier place as all you see is acres of blue, lined by miles of green. The only population is that of swooping birds, though you do see little huts of fishermen who are all away for the day on work. It's the two of you, the lake, the nature and nothing in between. It's just good to be in this lovely tranquil—just breathe in the fresh air and soak in the unhurried pace.

**How:** **Lake Vembanad** is the biggest lake with the most number of backwater cruises to offer—you can get a day package or opt to stay on a state-run houseboat. If you want a little quieter area, **Kollam** is a good option. You could also opt for the backwaters of the **Ashtamudi** in Kollam—cruise in the days, while return for the night and stay at **WelcomHeritage Raviz**, ([www.itchotels.in/hotels/welcomhotelravizashtamudi](http://www.itchotels.in/hotels/welcomhotelravizashtamudi)). For staying on the water, try the **Vrinda houseboat** run by **The Oberoi**. ([www.oberoihotels.com/kerala-backwaters](http://www.oberoihotels.com/kerala-backwaters))



## A break in Bekal

Soak in the breathtaking views as you take a detox break to a seaside fort

**What:** Seaside town and yet undiscovered, for now, **Bekal** is on its way to become one of the most popular destinations in Kerala. Be there before that happens to catch its quiet beauty.

**Why:** Perhaps the only thing that is known about Bekal is its grand seaside fort that is accessible from the highway and has stunning views of the sea. People on their way to elsewhere do stop here for the fabulous view, but often move on ignoring the rest of Bekal. This is where you break away from following the crowds and make the quiet seaside town your home for a few days. You will be rewarded with rich sea views, acres of isolated beach and the unfrequented backwaters of the

**Valiyaparamba** around Bekal. There are hills and ghats that lay between Kasargode district and the sound of silence for company.

**How:** There are some wonderful spa hotels that have come up in Bekal and among them **The Lalit** is a good option as it lies on the banks of the lovely Nombili backwater. Once you are done with walking on the beach, you can lay back in its lap of luxury and gaze at the stars together. Or try the **Rejuve Spa therapies**, you are in the home of Ayurveda, after all. ([www.thelalit.com/the-lalit-resort-spa-bekal](http://www.thelalit.com/the-lalit-resort-spa-bekal))



Spend some time in Kerala's backwaters



Elephants at Periyar National Park



## The wild side

The deep, dark forests of Kerala are teeming with surprises

**What:** A weekend in the heart of Kerala's green belt, in **Thekkady**, where the thrill of spotting the tiger adds excitement to your otherwise peaceful break.

**Why:** A dream for those inclined towards nature and wildlife, Periyar National Park, or Thekkady, is a tiger and elephant reserve spreading over two districts of Kerala, Idukki and Pathanamthitta. But life here needn't be about chasing the wild beasts—though the tiger, the elephant and the endangered Malabar squirrel are the star attractions, you might find the haunting beauty of Periyar Lake a bigger draw as dead tree stumps stick out from placid waters, giving it an otherworldly look. Take a leisurely jungle walk in the morning or go bamboo-rafting with forest department guides. The evening lake cruise is mandatory, given the high incidences of elephant sightings at sunset. Join the Periyar Tiger Trail conducted by a team of poachers-turned-protectors.

**How:** The drive from Thiruvananthapuram, the closest airport, takes about five hours. And you can stay at **Lake Palace Thekkady**, built on an island inside the national park. ([www.lakepalacethekkady.com](http://www.lakepalacethekkady.com))



## A culinary tour

Learn a few recipes of the local cuisine and cook up a meal for two

**What:** A holiday spent learning how to make the cuisine of the state you are visiting, cooking holidays is still a nascent trend in India, with hardly any Indians opting for culinary tours and vacations.

**Why:** Kerala is one of the best places to try this trend as its cuisine is delicate and delicious. Learn to make the local curries and stews as you do everything from shop for vegetables to stir the pan! This way, you not only take memories back with you, but also some awesome local recipes.

**How:** Try the **Pimenta Spice Plantation** culinary tour packages, which give you the option to stay, learning to cook as well as exploring the scenic environs. You can also opt for their 'stay and cook' option, where you cook dinner so you have the whole day to do sightseeing. ([www.thepimenta.in](http://www.thepimenta.in))



## Find a home

In the rural part of the state you can live the age old traditions

**What:** Staying in a traditional home in a rural part of Kerala, with a family that still practices the old ways. The back to basics lifestyle will rejuvenate you and make you think about the benefits of a simpler lifestyle.

**Why:** Home cooked Kerala food could be the only reason one wants to stay in a traditional homestay but there are many more reasons. Get involved with local life of the place you are visiting for a richer holiday experience as you see from up close how rural Kerala works, and what goes into keeping it green and lovely. A homestay comes with its usual advantages of unmatched locations and local information from the family—and the experience is so intimate and bespoke that you can become addicted to this style of holidaying.

**How:** Try the lovely **Thekkanat Parayil homestay at Olavipe**. Located in the middle of a farm, at the Thekkanat Payayil home you are surrounded by green fields and a thousand birds. Early morning walks, bird-watching and cruises on the backwater are all part of your itinerary while anything that is rushed or noisy is shunned away. ([www.olavipe.com](http://www.olavipe.com))



If you and your partner are avid swimmers, this is one destination where you can share some of the most special yet exciting moments together, even as you experience the fragile and ecologically rare islands



## Deep water diving

Explore the crystal clear waters and relax on the beach

**What:** A time for adventure on the island as you enjoy what Lakshadweep is meant for—activities on the water.

**Why:** Not many have gone scuba diving off the islands at Lakshadweep. Exclusivity is the first incentive, followed by the thrill of exploring the crystal-clear, aquamarine waters and the world beneath. **Agatti** and **Kadmat** are the islands where you can enjoy many activities together. The islands are a paradise for adventure sports enthusiasts. Start with Agatti and its beautiful lagoons, full of ornamental fish and turtles. **Snorkelling** sets an easy pace for you to get used to life on these coral islands. Kadmat is renowned for the long silvery sandy beaches and dense coconut palms.

Isolated and unbelievably beautiful, Kadmat has a large beautiful lagoon enclosed by the coral reefs where you can go scuba diving, snorkelling and swimming. **Scuba diving** costs around ₹2,500 for an introductory dive. The open sea dive is around ₹4,000.

**How:** Agatti has the only airport on the islands, with flights from Kochi. It is the gateway to the Kadmat Island; from here Kadmat is about 80 km by sea. The **Kadmat Beach Resort (04897-274 203)** located on the island offers a 6-day **Marine Wealth Awareness Program** tour of the island. The best time to go is between October and February.

**Gorgeous seascapes and sunbathing (above); Explore the world under and the corals (below)**

SHUTTERSTOCK



## Coral reefs

Visit marine marvels and the historical lighthouse

**What:** Five days of discovering the islands of **Minicoy** and **Kalpeni**, taking off from the capital Kavaratti and discovering the wonder world of corals together.

**Why:** Spend days sunbathing on the pristine beaches of these unfrequented islands, or go one step closer to the sea and explore the world under; the corals will astound you with its hues. Take some time out to see the historic lighthouse at **Minicoy island** built in 1885, where the tricolour is still unfurled daily. Set apart from the rest, Kalpeni is not only a beautiful island with a shallow lagoon but has a huge and strange storm bank of coral debris which makes for an ideal location for reef-walking.

**How:** You can stay on the ship, and the cruise takes you to all the islands that includes snorkelling, other watersports. Book through **SPORTS**,  
**tel: +91 484 2666789, +91 484 2668387, 09495984001**,  
**Email: laksports.reservation@gmail.com**

LAKSHADWEEP TOURISM





## Capital Kavaratti

Disappear together in a sleepy town

**What:** Stay aboard on a six-day cruise by opting for the **Taratashi Package** offered by **Society for Promotion of Nature Tourism and Sports** (SPORTS), an organisation affiliated with the Lakshadweep government, which, apart from one of two resorts, is the only way to visit and stay in Lakshadweep currently.

**Why:** This place is so special that the Society discourages too many tourists—which itself gives you a reason to visit. The ecology of Lakshadweep is so beautiful and so fragile that in an attempt to control the influx of tourists, the government has restricted entry and number of beds on the island by routing most of the bookings through SPORTS. Most of the tours that SPORTS organised keep you on the ship, so that the natural resources are not depleted by too many people staying on the islands. Being the capital, **Kavaratti** is the most developed of them all—and in your week-long cruise you can explore the island for its unusual marine life such as giant sea fans, gorgonians, giant trevally, sharks and schooling barracuda. You can go diving or just take a tour on a glass-bottomed boat and watch the underwater life together in childish wonder.

**How:** Book through **SPORTS**, +91 484 2666789, +91 484 2668387, 09495984001,  
Email: [laksports.reservation@gmail.com](mailto:laksports.reservation@gmail.com)



SECRET

### LACADIVES

A diving company managed by Danish couple, Marieke and Torben, Lacadives offers best diving options across the islands. You can choose from day and night dives, and enjoy how the water changes with the light. Contact them in their Mumbai office at (022) 6517 7381; 09619690898; [www.lacadives.com](http://www.lacadives.com)



## Camping in Bangaram

Gaze at the ocean as you live in these luxurious tents

**What:** With all the resorts currently shut in Lakshadweep, your only chance to stay on the stunning Bangaram Island are luxury tents that are run by the Tourist Department.

**Why:** Sunbathe on the tear-drop shaped Bangaram Island, a beautiful and secluded place with azure blue waters and white sands stretching for miles. The Bangaram tents are so eco-conscious that they almost vanish into the surroundings. Luxury takes a backseat to natural beauty here as the cool breeze acts as your natural air-conditioner and palm fronds provide shady nooks from where you can spend time gazing at the ocean. You can quite easily while away an afternoon in your hammock admiring the aquamarine sea. Hold hands and go reef walking—there are small silver beaches to be discovered, so private that you can even go skinny dipping (though it's probably best not to try).

**How:** Double tents cost ₹10,000. You can fly or take the boat to Agatti from Kochi. From here you can travel by sea to Bangaram, which is about 20 km away. Book via **SPORTS**, (0484 2666789, 0484 2668387, 09495984001; [laksports.reservation@gmail.com](mailto:laksports.reservation@gmail.com))

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From momos to monuments, from history to modern luxury, from tribal drums to humming a Bob Dylan song, Meghalaya offers an amazing ambience for togetherness. Soak in its rich yet contemporary culture



Enjoy luxury at Ri Kynjai

## The luxe Shillong

Fancy the chic grandeur of this Northeastern town

**What:** A holiday in the Northeast full of luxuries you would not expect from the region.

**Why:** People still associate the Northeast with rugged territories and bad infrastructure, and while this is sadly true for many regions, Meghalaya's capital definitely does not fall under this category. A spa, golf, boutique hotel, good food, a place to party,

a fine drink—whatever your idea of luxury is, it is available in Shillong. And why choose, we ask, just take it all.

**How:** Choose your stay between **Ri Kynjai** ([rikynjai.com](http://rikynjai.com)) and **Tripura Castle** ([tripuracastle.com](http://tripuracastle.com)), the two luxury hotel options in Shillong. Before you set out to party in the town that has many bars such as Tango and Cloud 9, keep a day for the 18 holes of the historic Shillong Golf Club, which is the world's wettest golf course and one of the few natural courses in the world. With rhododendron and pine trees punctuating its spread, this is truly one of the most scenic greens ever seen.



## Bond during a festive break

Join the club of Bob Dylan fans

**What:** It's always time to celebrate in the hills of Meghalaya, whether it is a festival around food or the season, you could always plan a holiday around one.

**Why:** A festival is a time to witness local culture in its full splendour. This is the time when people dress in traditional attire and you can see the local dances and enjoy the music. This is also the best time to savour some special local delicacies that may not be available otherwise. Most of all, as you become part of the local celebration, it is also a special kind of bonding for the two of you.

**How:** Choose from a large number of festivals. If you like music, then be part of Bob Dylan's birthday celebrations held every year on May 24 in Shillong. At Wangala, the **Festival of 100 Drums** usually held in November, the Garo tribe beat drums and dance to mark the end of the agricultural year. **Shad-Suk Mynsiem**, another harvest festival, this time of the Khasis, is more about flutes than drums. The **Tura Winter Festival**, held in February in the Garo Hills, is more a showcasing of the Garo way of life and a chance to witness the local culture and arts. Last but not the least is Christmas in Shillong, celebrated in the true yuletide spirit.



## Under Cherrapunjee's umbrella

Romance the greenest landscape

**What:** It used to be the rainiest place on earth and even though now it no longer holds that title, Cherrapunjee is still one of the most gorgeous, stimulating and romantic places in the country.

**Why:** Just an hour or so out of the capital Shillong, Sohra, as Cherrapunjee is locally known, is all about rolling hills and green meadows. Known for its limestone caves, old Presbyterian churches, and many waterfalls, Sohra's untouched beauty makes it an ideal place for a weekend of romance. Visit **Noh Sngi Thiang Falls**, where the sun pierces through the water from dawn to sunset, making for a stunning sight. Drive out a short distance to see **Mawlynnong**, Asia's cleanest village, or take a picnic lunch to the natural rock pools of **Khoh Ramhah**. The best time to visit is just after the monsoon, so that the waterfalls are in full flow and the landscape at its greenest.

**How:** Stay at the charming **Cherrapunjee Holiday Resort** where you can get a personalised experience of the hill town... everything from local food to local tips on walks and activities. <http://cherrapunjee.com>



## Let food be the magic

Enjoy the local cuisine and indulge in some special treats

**What:** A chance to savour flavours totally different from that of the rest of India, this holiday option is perfect for those couples who are adventurous in both taste and spirit.

**Why:** Pork is not something most Indians are comfortable with, forget when prepared in the bland ways that you can get in Shillong. Bamboo shoot is another acquired flavour, pungent as it is and really sharp on the tongue. Now combine both together and you get the staple Meghalese smoked pork and bamboo shoot—it is delicious. If you are a food lover, you are sure to enjoy the flavours in Shillong, which keep the spices and cooking subtle (no deep frying or dousing in masala) so that the real taste can come out. Another great staple is Jadoh, a rice preparation with pork—expect a lot of pork as the basic meat everywhere you eat instead of lamb or chicken. You must try the varieties of pickles—from bamboo shoot to fish and meat pickles that you can bring back home too.

**How:** Jadoh is a good restaurant in Shillong town to try the dish, apart from Cloud 9 at **Centre Point Hotel** where you can try some local food.



SECRET

### NAGA MANDARIN

A tiny little place is Naga Mandarin in Laitumkhrah that serves food from all over the north-east. The place only seats 15 to 20 people and the food is served in wooden plates. The thali of the day (₹150) will have two non-veg dishes and an assortment of vegetables. If you don't eat pork then you might be short-changed of the meat dishes. You can also try popular snacks associated with the hills.



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ANIRBAN MAHAPATRA

From top to bottom: Bob Dylan fan club; Limestone caves of Cherrapunjee; Live like a local

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Drenched in French culture and cuisines, offering a seaside boulevard, this quaint town is a mixed bag of unique eco houses, beaches and ashram life that makes it a peaceful spot to have some 'us' time



## Explore the countryside

Cosy stay with the locals, learn their arts

**What:** Away from the French Quarter and the Tamil Quarter it's a different Pondicherry—one that not many take time to explore.

**Why:** If you wish to go beyond the familiar activities and names in Pondicherry, try something different. Rural tourism is fairly new to the town, and it aims to bring Tamil culture back to the villages even as it brings modernity to the villages. Your organisers act as

a bridge between the villagers and you, as you experience local life and culture and opt for a simple homestay with a traditional Tamil family from the village. Not only can you stay with the locals, you can also learn their arts such as Kolam, or martial arts. Experience village life in Pondicherry—one that is quite unmatched by anything else you will witness in the Union Territory.

**How:** Organise your village tour in Sanjeevi Nagar and Alankuppam villages through the Mohanam Cultural Centre which arranges several cultural festivals and programmes in these villages throughout the year. [www.mohanam.org/](http://www.mohanam.org/)



## THE INDO-FRENCH FOOD FESTIVAL

Did you get excited by all the food we mentioned? Great—now you can plan your visit specifically to take part in the official celebration of all that great food! The Indo-French Culinary Week, part of the Indo-French Festival here in March every year, allows you to get a taste of Pondicherry's eclectic cuisine



PONDICHERRY TOURISM



SHUTTERSTOCK



## Go gourmet

Fabulous restaurants and cafes

**What:** Famous for the French influence on its cuisine—or shall we say the Tamil influence on its original French cuisine?—Pondicherry will delight any food buff with several great options.

**Why:** If you want croissants that are as flaky as the ones you get in Paris, if you want a wide range of authentic *dosa* preparations on the same breakfast table as a classic French omelette, if you like your pastries layered and your days full of flavours, don't ask any more questions and just follow our food suggestions. What many people like best about Pondy is the fact that you can choose to do nothing or little, and yet return sated. The promenade is where most people like to begin their day, with the sea breeze adding to the pleasures of walking down the wide road. Combine the kilos of food with a bit of walking so that you can pack in that much more!

**How:** Walk around to explore newer options that open almost every week. Greet the evenings with sundowners at Risque, the stunning bar at the beachfront hotel, The Promenade, which is still a good option to stay.

[www.thepromenadepondicherry.com/](http://www.thepromenadepondicherry.com/)



## Mixed blend

A blend of French and Tamil heritage

**What:** To savour both worlds of Pondicherry's rich heritage through a unique celebration.

**Why:** It would surprise the French as much as you that one of the biggest celebrations in Pondicherry happens on July 14. Yes, to mark Bastille Day or the French National Day. The origins surely go back to the time when the French were ruling, and the day commemorates the storming of the Bastille in France, during the French Revolution. In Pondicherry though, it's an occasion for a lot of colour and sound, as for also demonstrating how foreign influences are adopted by us so charmingly. An Indo-French pageantry is unleashed—the most appealing part—the march by war veterans in their military regalia, singing *La Marseillaise*. Go there on Bastille Day, but do keep time to take in its Tamil heritage. Largely overshadowed by the French Quarter, nevertheless the Tamil Quarter contains some beautiful architectural gems with wooden pillars, courtyard verandahs and tiled gabled roofs.

**How:** Plan your visit around July 14 and stay at the very **French Le Duplex on 5, Rue de la Caserne**, Tel: 0413 222 6999

## Rejuvenate at the Eco Art Village



## Eco art village

Beautiful cottages overlooking a beach

**What:** A unique stay option on the beach, Dune offers residences to artists all year round so you will be in excellent company in an excellent place which is more a way of life than just a hotel.

**Why:** Because it is as lovely as it is crazy, with each of its 55 bungalows designed differently. Choose to stay at a bungalow resembling a colonial house or a Chettinad mansion, live in artsy

hipster rooms or elegant and plush pads... At the Dune eccentric design takes centre stage as most of its guests are visiting artists and architects who leave their impressions and signature behind. It's an eco-village, so you can expect low power consumption and organic food and furnishings. No matter what time of the year you visit, there are sure to be some resident creative people from whom you can take impromptu painting or pottery classes.

**How:** Located on the Coromandel Coast, a short drive out of Pondicherry, you can reach Dune in about 15 minutes from the Auroville beach. [www.thedunehotel.com](http://www.thedunehotel.com)



# RAJASTHAN

Dwell in the desert, lakes and oasis to experience the lives of the royals as you set out on a journey together to explore romance amidst history and some stunning heritage



Live the royal dream together



### SILVER SPURS EQUESTRIAN FARM

If you thought farm stays were niche enough as a holiday option, how about we go a step more bespoke and suggest you stay at a horse farm? The lovely Silver Spurs Equestrian Farm in Jaipur is run by a cavalry officer from the Indian army and his hospitable wife and has well-designed modern rooms. Animal lovers will be joyous to meet thoroughbreds, a pair of fat turkeys, billy goats, a grey African parrot and an assortment of dogs. [www.silverspursjaipur.com](http://www.silverspursjaipur.com)



The Farm Jaipur



## Lake city Udaipur

Stay afloat in a luxurious palace

**What:** A holiday of total indulgence where you don't think of sparing any expense to live the real good life.  
**Why:** Live the royal dream by inhabiting one of the suites flaunting sculpted marble columns, archways, floral artwork, ornate furniture and exquisite artefacts. Sail into the sunset on a 150-year-old ceremonial barge or take a heritage walk with a royal escort armed with caviar, pate and champagne. Take dining to another level, with personalised menus engraved on wood, marble, glass or handmade paper. Spend hours on the terraces and lookouts, captivated by views of the City Palace, **Lake Pichola** and the Monsoon Palace and indulge in traditional Rajasthani cuisine. Take a cruise on a ceremonial imperial barge across Lake Pichola, illuminated with candlelight. Sip a cocktail and sample a live grill under a canopy of stars.  
**How:** Choose from any of the fabulous resorts in Udaipur—the **Taj Lake Palace** [www.tajhotels.com](http://www.tajhotels.com), **The Leela, Udaipur** [www.theleela.com](http://www.theleela.com) or **Oberoi Udaivilas** [www.oberoihotels.com](http://www.oberoihotels.com).



## Arty hotel

Quirky creativity at The Farm

**What:** About half an hour away from Jaipur is this experimental art hotel that offers you a different perspective on life and living.  
**Why:** Enjoy the quirky philosophy and design of The Farm as you spend a few days within this haven away from the noise and crowds of Jaipur. Expect the unexpected with crazy decor all around—an old bike installation, a model truck parked in your room—and cheerful and colourful rooms. A lot of art enlivens the interiors as the sheer vibe of the place exudes positive energy. There is nothing much to do here but the large grounds of the farm do have over 50 species of birds and the kitchen is open for you to walk in and cook together if you so wish. There are books and movies and yoga and fresh air and, if you absolutely must do something, Jaipur and its world of shops are right at hand.  
**How:** The Shatabdi Express is the best way to reach Jaipur from Delhi though if you want to have the flexibility to drive around, you can drive down in the same time from Delhi as the train takes. Other big cities have direct flights. [www.thefarmjaipur.com](http://www.thefarmjaipur.com)



## Shekhawati havelis

Relive history while you live in heritage hotels

**What:** An area that has remained a great pull for those interested in history and art, the dusty lanes of Shekhawati are now dotted with several lovely hotels ideal for a getaway.  
**Why:** Popularly known as the 'open-air art gallery' of Rajasthan, the Shekhawati region comprises the districts of Jhunjhunu (182km) and Sikar. Traditionally the turf of Marwaris who amassed great wealth in the 18th and 19th centuries, it is the site of some grand havelis built by them. Their walls are a riot of colour thanks to the splendid frescoes that seem to cover every inch of space available from walls and facades to arches and doors. A few days in Shekhawati will be a great time to learn about a culture together.  
**How:** Stay at **Vivaana Culture Hotel**, a restored painted haveli where you can get your Shekhawati experience in the comfort and luxury of a modern and stylised space. If you are feeling too lazy to step out you can see the painted frescoes of Shekhawati within the hotel itself! The rooms portray the grandeur of the Shekhawati region with intricately carved wooden furniture and courtyards double as virtual art galleries. [www.vivaana.com](http://www.vivaana.com)



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Wildlife spotting at national parks



## Jungle safaris

Amalgamation of wild, sculpted fortresses, Ranthambore is a must

**What:** A break in one of the best national parks in the country—this is your best chance to spot the tiger.

**Why:** Before it became a National Park, Ranthambore was for many centuries the hunting grounds of Jaipur's royal family. The park brings together a uniquely romantic combination of fortresses, temples that are still in use, wild beauty, and a chance to spot a wild tiger during the day. Defended by tall jagged cliffs, Ranthambore Fort has towered over the park's forests for almost a thousand years. But the real attraction here is the forest that is home to a large number of rare flora and fauna, and a safari through the park will be a thrilling together-experience. When you are done with being out in the wilds, you can complement the roughing it out by staying at a super luxury hotel and enjoy a bit of pampering.

**How:** For a wildlife experience of a kind that you will never be able to forget, opt for the high luxury of **Sher Bagh**, a design-heavy and fabulous stay option right in the middle of the forest. Think infinity pools under the shade of droopy trees and whiskeys in the all-wood library. [www.sujanluxury.com](http://www.sujanluxury.com)

Get lost in the wilderness of Ranthambore National Park

## A 'deserted' hill

Take the road less travelled to Mount Abu and its colonial past

**What:** Forget the palaces and the desert and known lakes for once and opt for something different. Explore the only hill station in Rajasthan, Mount Abu, which is often forgotten in the fact of more popular regions and hotels, and come away charmed.

**Why:** Getting to Mount Abu is the not the easiest thing, and perhaps that is why so often people just ignore this part of Rajasthan. It is the only spot in the state that can truly be called an all-year destination, being it's only hill station. Don't get carried away by the word hill, but still the change in topography from rest of Rajasthan alone is well worth making the journey. With gently rolling hills and a lovely lake in the centre of town, Mount Abu offers the simple charms of an old world hill station—any minute you expect Englishmen to come out in all their fineries and start talking about high tea. Take a cruise on **Nakki lake** and visit the exquisite Ranakpur temples nearby. There are a surprising number of things to do together at Abu—the Guru Shikhar viewpoint is about 15 km from town and has the distinction of being Rajasthan's highest point. And that is not all, the **Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary** is home to a number of bird species (and some say they have spotted panthers too). You can visit in the summer but it will probably be best to visit in the winter.

**How:** The nearest airport is Udaipur, from where Mount Abu is about 200 km by road. Stay at the heritage building Connaught House for a charming experience of an old-style English cottage. [www.welcomheritagehotels.in/hotel-overview/connaught-house-mount-abu](http://www.welcomheritagehotels.in/hotel-overview/connaught-house-mount-abu)

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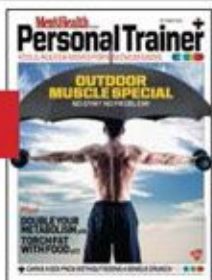
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Lakshman Sagar makes for an isolated escape amidst luxury

## Go organic

Isolated space, organic food—the right recipe for a romantic break

**What:** Lakshman Sagar, a 19th-century hunting lodge that is now a stunning stay option that makes for one of the topmost romantic escapes in the country.

**Why:** Some spaces are made for romance and this is definitely one of them. The location of **Lakshman Sagar**, perched at the edge of a lake, competes with its design to wow you as you enter its design interiors and walk into another era altogether. Bright pinks and yellows in curtains and cushions brighten up the mud and stone structure and the whole lodge is about providing a visual feast—stunning niches on rooftop offer peaceful views of the lake in the day and in the night you can sit here and gaze at the star-filled sky into the wee hours of the morning. Feast of another kind comes in the form of traditional food cooked using organic and farm-fresh ingredients. This is a holiday that should mark a special occasion or the beginning of a new journey together, as it will most certainly become part of your unforgettable memories together.

**How:** Lakshman Sagar is located close to Pali, about two hours from Ajmer and Jodhpur both. [www.sewara.com/property/history-lakshman-sagar](http://www.sewara.com/property/history-lakshman-sagar)

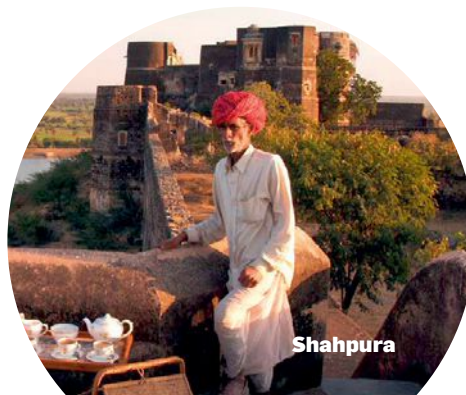
## A palatial home

Let the royal families who retain their havelis invite you in

**What:** Opt for the more intimate experience of a homestay with an erstwhile royal family—by consequence their 'home' is a haveli and you get the best of both worlds.

**Why:** Rajasthan is so much about its royal past that no holiday is complete without experiencing it. Many old royal families still retain their estates and though most turned them into hotels, the new trend is to offer a cosier and more bespoke homestay experience, where they invite you in.

**How:** **Shahpura**, in district Bhilwara is a good option. You can take the Ajmer Shatabdi from Delhi and they can arrange for a pick up. The journey is a bit long but once you reach the oasis, any tiredness just washes away. There are two separate bungalows, so you don't have to stay with the family but you eat with them. Visit [www.shahpurabagh.com](http://www.shahpurabagh.com)



Shahpura

## Chattra Sagar

Kick off your shoes by an oasis and enjoy luxury camping in the desert

**What:** A gem in the boutique resorts of Rajasthan, Chattra Sagar is where you can witness how luxurious the humble tent can be.

**Why:** For those who imagine Rajasthan to be a barren and brown desert state will be surprised by how green some of its areas are. The dam at **Nimaj**, where the luxury tents of **Chhatra Sagar** are located is one such corner of Rajasthan which literally gives meaning to the phrase: an oasis in the middle of a desert. The luxury tents by the water capture the very essence of romance by providing an atmosphere of utter quiet and seclusion and discreet and near-invisible service. You could spend the days visiting nearby villages and interacting with the local people, exchanging stories over cups of sweet tea and making life a little bit richer. And the evenings should be spent by the water, sipping on fine wine and soaking in the stillness of your unbelievable surroundings. In the winter, a camp fire adds further romance to the experience, as you sit around it enjoying local cuisine under the splendour of the night sky.

**How:** The camp is located about 100 km from Ajmer. [www.chhatrasagar.com](http://www.chhatrasagar.com)



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## Valley of flowers

The flowery trail of the Yumthang Valley

**What:** Sikkim is not all about mountains and treks—you can even have a soft adventure together. Time spent in Sikkim's own 'Valley of Flowers' will be one of most romantic things you have done as you, quite literally, smell the roses together.

**Why:** Yumthang is situated at the tree-line, the altitude above which there are no trees, and this makes the spread of the **Yumthang Valley** unique. The valley is known for the many varieties of flowers that grow here—iris, primulas and poppies, as well as the beautiful mountain staple of rhododendron. The scenic Yumthang Valley offers breathtaking views of the **Eastern Himalayas**. Apart from the flowers and solitude, the Yumthang Valley is also known for the **Shingba Rhododendron Sanctuary**.

**How:** It takes about three hours to reach from **Gangtok**. Yumthang is closed between December and March due to heavy snowfall. The rest of the year is fine, though it is most recommended between April-June.



### SIKKIM FROM THE AIR

Try a helicopter ride from Bagdogra Airport to Gangtok and get a bird's eye view of the stunning terrain. It's ₹1,500 per person and the chopper gets you there in 45 minutes. You can also book a special scenic flight over the flowery meadows of West and North Sikkim. Contact Sikkim Tourism (03592) 203 960 to organise your tour.



## Journey to Pelling

Explore the hills and visit monasteries, get cosy

**What:** The wind in your hair and the road your own—a drive to **Pelling**, a quaint little town in West Sikkim, becomes even more rewarding when done in the company of someone you love as you take in the snow-covered mountains and crank up an old melody on the radio.

**Why:** Driving is the best way to explore the hills of Sikkim, where you can't always depend on local transport, and where the scenic mountains call you to explore the territory on whim. Once you have the car and hit the road, you can go anywhere you fancy, be it the high-altitude lakes or the passes. We suggest a short drive to Pelling, which is scenic yet not too far from Gangtok. The painting-like landscape you'll drive through makes every steep hill and hairpin bend you navigate worthwhile. While in Pelling, a lesser known monastery worth the trek is **Sangachoeling Monastery**, about 45 minutes on foot.

**How:** About four hours from Bagdogra Airport, Gangtok is where your scenic drive begins till you reach Pelling which is about 120 km further up. You can stay at **Summit Newa Regency**; **Tel: 09733077825/09547715555**



## Pemayangtse Monastery

A hill top holiday in the shadow of a monastery

**What:** Sometimes all you need to do together is just be and take in the silence of your environs. Spirituality is so connected with Sikkim, with its several famous monasteries, that you cannot go there and come away without a brush with heaven. However, to add local flavour to your spiritual holiday, it is best to pick a big monastery festival and plan your visit around that.

**Why:** For moments spent in reflection and quiet together, a visit to the monasteries is highly recommended. The stunning Pemayangtse, is considered the holiest monastery in the state and is located just three kilometres from Pelling. Apart from an air of solitude, it offers fabulous views of the mountains from its hilltop location. The **Pemayangtse Monastery** one of the oldest monasteries was founded in 1705. Inside the monastery are beautiful murals and on the top floor, an amazing seven-tiered model of the Rimpoche's dwelling called the Zandog Palri. About 25 minutes from the monastery are the ruins of Rabdentse, one of Sikkim's old capitals.

**How:** There are several festivals and an equal number of monasteries to choose from. A fine example of a monastery festival is **Phang Labsol** held at the Pemayangtse Monastery that takes place at the end of August. Masked dancers portraying a mystic deity perform to the backdrop of the majestic **Khangchendzonga**, which is also represented in the dance. You could stay at **Norbu Ghang Resort**; **Tel: (03595) 258272** nearby.



## The local flavour

Village-style homes can be romantic

**What:** For a unique Sikkim experience, stay in a farm for a few days and get a glimpse of the local way of life.

**Why:** Staying in a farm is a rustic village-style homestay option where you can experience the local flavours of Sikkim, be it the way the houses are decorated in their holistic style of living or the simple and nutritious food. In a farm stay, there is greenery all around and you can get great views of the surrounding mountains. A great bonus is always the sumptuous food, which is freshly prepared with farm produce and the recipes are all local—all in all a top bespoke experience.

**How:** **Yangsum Heritage Farm** is a great option. The 44-acre mountain farm is run by members of the Tsechu Tharpa family and is just 2 km from **Richenpong Bazaar**, was built in 1833 and is surrounded by tall pines, Himalayan alders, chestnuts, and beautiful flowering magnolia and cherry trees. Old world rooms and acres of green provide comfort as you can gorge on Sikkimese cuisine and also learn to cook it! If you thought Sikkim cuisine was only momos and thukpa, be prepared for a few surprises. [www.yangsumheritagefarm.com/farm.html](http://www.yangsumheritagefarm.com/farm.html)



Young lamas of Pemayangtse Monastery



From lake houses to wildlife sanctuaries, from colonial bungalows to the scent of pine trees, from wellness breaks to music in the mountains, spend quality time with your partner in the hills of this magical state



## Bond in Bhimtal

Stay in charming boutique hotels overlooking the lake

**What:** If you want a holiday in the lake district of Uttarakhand but also need to be away from the most crowded of its hillstations, Nainital, the hill town of Bhimtal becomes a good option that is near the buzz yet just far enough.

**Why:** Imagine a boutique hotel on the edge of a lake in the middle of the hills that serves fine cuisine, wine and cheese and has outdoor dining space with cheerful pink linen mantling its rustic furniture. You can sit around and look out at the lake, watching the scenery change from rejuvenating to relaxing as the day slowly progresses towards romantic inky nights.

**Fishermen's Lodge** was started by a family and you can see the personalised touch everywhere in its charming rooms and public spaces. Outside the lodge, you can hire bikes and explore the mountainside or take a cheesy romantic boat ride on the lake. Nainital is a short drive away, when you want a little more buzz and romance. You can also have a cosy Maggi noodles lunch together in the hills.

**How:** Bhimtal is about an hour's drive from Kathgodam, which is the main railhead to reach all the hillstations of Uttarakhand's Kumaon region. The drive from Delhi, takes about 7 hours through the most beautiful and breathtaking scenic beauty.

[www.thefishermenslodge.com](http://www.thefishermenslodge.com)



Fishermen's Lodge

Mukteshwar's fabulous mountainscapes are a real treat



+

### SECRET SYALSAUR

You have probably never heard of the place and yet this little hamlet on the banks of the Mandakini River is a worthy stop for those who are looking for places off the beaten track. There is nothing but acres of silence here and you can enjoy quiet walks by the river and spot some birds along the way. A perfect place for a short break, get to Syalsaur before everyone else discovers it. There is a government rest house here that you can book via [www.gmvl.com/or](http://www.gmvl.com/or) 01364-258228



## A break in Binsar

A wildlife sanctuary and pine tree forests

**What:** You might wonder what we mean by green break, because when you are in the mountains isn't everything green? Wait till you get to Binsar and witness nature at its best.

**Why:** Twisty mountain roads, cool bracing air, the scent of pines in your lungs and sunset dappled mountain peaks fill your journey as you approach the destination. All the shades of green await you at Binsar, the greenest corner of this green state, where you can enjoy a few days of tranquillity in the wilds of the forest, under a cloudless blue sky. A haven for bird watchers and nature lovers the **Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary** has over 200 species of birds—the Thrush, Wagtails, Sunbirds and Redstarts to name just a few. A walk up to Zero Point is a must. A watch tower here gives you a panoramic and breathtaking view of the Himalayan peaks of Trishul, Nanda Devi, Kedarnath and Badrinath. Walking is a great way to explore the wildlife sanctuary and spend some quality time with each other—Put on your backpacks and walking shoes and follow your guide who will fill you in with the history of this rustic green haven of Kumaon.

**How:** Binsar is about 120 km from Kathgodam Railway Station. You can stay at the atmospheric and breathtaking **Mary Budden Estate**.

[www.marybuddenestate.in](http://www.marybuddenestate.in)



Mary Budden Estate



## Wintry tales

Seclusion in the hills adds to the charm of a romantic getaway

**What:** A break in the offseason for a chance to be all alone in the mountains.

**Why:** To be among the highest mountains of Uttarakhand at a time that few dare the cold, so that you can be quite alone to enjoy **Mukteshwar's** stunning mountainscape. Trek through various mountain trails, ride a bicycle through picturesque paths or organise a picnic at an apple orchard—you could even explore the enchanting village of **Dhanachuli**, a few kilometers from Mukteshwar. Take out time to follow the **leopard trail** that runs through the Sargakhet village. Snowcapped peaks make for romantic vistas all around and with some luck you will catch fresh snowfall—Now what can be more romantic than that? Just make sure you pack adequately for chilly weather. Choose a great stay option that offers spectacular views and you probably would not do anything but sit back and enjoy Nature's splendour with endless cups of hot tea.

**How:** You can reach Mukteshwar in about two hours from Kathgodam by rail and about 7 hours from Delhi by road. The road to Mukteshwar can get snowed under so do check before you set out on the holiday. Stay at the **Te Aroha Resort** in Dhanachuli. [www.tearoha.in/dhanachuli](http://www.tearoha.in/dhanachuli)

SHUTTERSTOCK



Relax your mind at the International Yoga Festival

COURTESY: PARMARTH NIKETAN ASHRAM

## Soul salvation

Learn healing practices from the experts in stunning surrounds

**What:** A break for mind, body and soul in the mountains.

**Why:** Amidst sal forests, overlooking the Ganga, Uttarakhand is the ultimate spa and spirituality confluence that offers a range of wellness experiences. Your experience here can be as high-end as you want or as one with nature.

**How:** Choose your kind of yoga break from ashrams such as **Parmarth Niketan Ashram (www.parmarth.com)** that organises the **International Yoga Festival** every year in March where you get a chance to learn healing practises experts from India and the world. If your idea of wellness is more spa than yoga, then choose a spa resort set in the beautiful mountains. Ananda in the Himalayas is of course an old favourite but you might want to try something newer, such as the stunningly designed **Vana Malsi Estate. (www.vanaretreats.com).** A visit to the holy River Ganga and taking part in the daily evening aarti is an experience that will add to your holistic wellness break.

## Hill villages

Go back to the roots and opt for a village experience

**What:** A chance to live in mountain villages, in humble homes redone to make your stay more comfortable.

**Why:** Everyone stays in luxury hotels and boutique properties but it takes a special couple to want to discover how life off the map feels like. There are no TVs, no newspapers, no Internet, no cellphone network, and there are very few frills in the village homes that you will stay at—but you will have everything that you will need to make living in an actual village home a possibility. As part of your village experience, you go on walks between different mountain villages and visit temples, local schools and markets. This holiday gives you a chance to totally immerse yourself in local culture—and give a new meaning to taking a break from routine. An adventure of its own, this is guaranteed to be one of your most unforgettable holidays together.

**How:** Book the village experience through **www.shaktihimalaya.com.** You may want to extend your holiday by ending your village homestay with a dollop of luxe at 360° Leti.

## Arty itinerary

Attend music, art and other festivals amid mountains

**What:** A chance to get away to the hills to be with likeminded people exploring art and culture.

**Why:** If you like art, music, literature and the finer things in life, and often attend music concerts and festivals that happen at concrete stadiums or highway locations, then a good way to up the romance quotient to these experiences is to take that experience to a mountain. In Uttarakhand, it is possible at various times of the year to be part some cultural event—be it dance, music, writing or arts—there is something for every taste.

**How:** Be a part of the music and festivities at the **Escape Music Festival** held every summer on the banks of the scenic Naukuchiyatal Lake. For three days life becomes one big party as big artists from all over India come here and perform their music. Or just attend the quaintly named Mussoorie **Writers' Mountain Festival** in Landour Dehradun had its own very popular literary festival in November. There may be another edition soon.



View from Kalmatia Sangam



## Kalmatia Sangam

Charming and elegant, a stay in this estate is nostalgic and romantic

**What:** A lovely hill resort that has some unmatched views, the Kalmatia Sangam remains one of the country's most romantic nooks.

**Why:** Nestled amid lush mountains of Almora, in the **Kalmatia estate**, this beautiful resort is the stuff of everlasting memories. Discovered in 1867 by Britisher E.S. Jackson, who built his home here, the estate was sold at the end of the century to Edward Thomas Chowdhry, the then District Commissioner of Kumaon. The estate and resort were run by his granddaughter Geeta Reeb until recently before being sold to its current owner. In new hands, the resort retains its charm, its elegant cottages charmingly named after birds such as the Himalayan Magpie, Cuckoo, Goldfinch and so on. Each room has its own special charm and breathtaking views of the surrounding mountains. Windows and skylights allow unhindered views of the snow-clad Himalayas, while the restaurant, where you can eat

some great wholesome preparations, doubles as an art gallery. Make an excursion to the Bright End Corner's to take in the sunset ablaze in a thousand shades of orange.

**How:** Its a long drive from Delhi in about 7 hours. From Kathgodam rail head, it will take about only 2 hours approx.

[www.kalmatia-sangam.com](http://www.kalmatia-sangam.com)



## Jeolikot

Have a cosy stay at this old English country house

**What:** A lesser known getaway in the mountains, The Cottage is a most charming little stay option, full of old world character and loveliness.

**Why:** If you're going onto Nainital or Mukteshwar, you will pass by Jeolikot, barely noticing the nondescript crumbling signage along the way. You might do well to reconsider that and stop here instead, for at 4,265 ft, it offers the best of the hills and plains and it can be reached without too many heady twists and turns of the mountain road. Jeolikot has been put on the tourist map by **The Cottage**, a building styled after an old English country house, which was originally part of the erstwhile Vergomount estate. The property, nestled in the side of the mountain amidst tall trees and unkempt undergrowth, has an almost fairytale appearance and inside it is cosy and intimate, making for the most perfect getaway for couples.

**How:** The Cottage is only a half an hour drive from Kathgodam.

[www.thecottagejeolikot.com](http://www.thecottagejeolikot.com)



# Solo Travel



**Huma Qureshi  
chats with local  
fishermen at  
Kihim Beach**

Chandigarh Haryana Chhattisgarh Punjab  
Arunachal Pradesh Assam Bihar Jharkhand Manipur Mizoram  
Nagaland Tripura Daman & Diu Dadra & Nagar Haveli  
Maharashtra Andamans & Nicobar



“

India has so many options for the traveller, that I feel we're spoilt for choice. However, for a busy Mumbaiiwalla, Alibaug is such a convenient spot to simply disappear to. It's unbelievable that in just 40-minutes you can get transported into a completely different world all together. You can take a the boat trip from Gateway Of India in Mumbai to Alibaug (via Mandwa) and that journey is also the fun part. The place is sprinkled with these tiny little cottages and homestays, like the Mango Beach House, where you can simply lay back and fall off the radar. I particularly like the modern minimalistic Mediterranean-style architecture and the fact that the owners are trying to recreate an ecological haven here. It is hidden gems such as these that make the travel experience all the more interesting. And if you're a beach bum looking for a secluded stretch, then five minutes is all it takes to hit the sands from the hotel. I, for one, am a complete beach person and every opportunity I get to take off, I make sure the destination has plenty of sun and sand. There are plenty of options around Maharashtra like Kashid, another costal retreat and the absolutely stunning Murud Janjira, which has one of the most beautiful coastal forts that I've seen, along with a small, pretty fishing village on the glittering sandy coastline hemmed with coconut groves.

”

**HUMA QURESHI**

Actor

PHOTOGRAPHER: ROHAN SHRESTHA  
MILITARY GREEN JUMPSUIT: KENNETH COLE  
FRINGE SLING BAG: STEVE MADDEN



# ANDAMAN & NICOBAR ISLANDS

The mélange of golden brown, azure and bright green expanse here are yet unexplored, mysterious and hold promises of paradise for solo travellers who wish to disappear on their own



## MRS DINAZ NOBLE'S HOMESTAY

An out of this world tip for the adventurous traveller points straight into the direction of Mrs Dinaz Noble's homestay in the Andamans. The 'Waterhouse' makes for the most scenic stay with cinnamon and clove plantations. The nights are especially unique; walk down the pier and see it light up with the plankton and algae. tel: (0) 94742 08233; [www.andamanhomestay.com](http://www.andamanhomestay.com)



Aqua adventures



An unusual rock formation near Saddle Peak

INDIA PICTURE



## Ride to thrill

Trek in Saddle Peak National Park

**What:** Any outdoor enthusiasts' consensus will tell you that a holiday made of trekking trails to dizzying heights, active mud volcanoes, and turtle nesting grounds is hard to be trumped. An excellent choice to explore Andamans is by hopping onto a ferry or a local bus from Port Blair to Diglipur. Base yourself at Kalipur beach to explore the areas around. A thrilling adventure is the arduous climb to Saddle Peak and peep down from a height of 732m. Else ride up to **Lamia Bay** and enter the Saddle Peak National Park for a thrilling trek.

**Why:** The company of towering trees hustling straight towards the sky, offer the perfect haven for travellers who prefer solo jaunts. The clear beaches beckon for some breezy relief, as they must to the turtles that nest here in December and January.

**How:** Buses (4:30 am onwards ₹240), ferries (Mon, Wed, Sat ₹100, Sleeper ₹300), helicopter (Tuesdays, ₹4,125), sea plane (all days except Sundays, ₹4,999); Stay at **Pristine Beach Resort tel: (03192) 272 532; www.andamanpristinehotels.com**



## Beach bumming

Catch up on some reading in the sun

**What:** The biggest advantage about travelling solo is that no one prods you to wake up at a certain hour. There could be no better beach destination in India to be an absolute beach nut and do nothing! A good book to catch up on, toes dug deep in the soft sand, a mild breeze and an azure colour that makes you sigh each time you look up, is all you need to fill up the days. There are scores of beaches to discover here—each one a paradise on its own. Hop across to Ross and Smith twin islands, Lakshmanpur at Neil Island or even the most popular Havelock sands that skirt the island to get ample sun and aqua marine vistas.

**Why:** No matter which way you head, there is no disappointment. Infact you can plan an entire trip, trailing the laziest beaches starting from the North Bay Island, to Ross Island, then Viper Island before finishing the trail at Havelock. A ten-day itinerary around these bases is a great way of exploring the Andamans.

**How:** Go during the non-monsoon months. Use local ferries and buses to hop from one place to another.



## Aqua tours

Reef watching in the deep

**What:** There is no better destination for an otherworldly experience of the ocean. So don't think twice before packing your scuba suit and snorkelling gear when heading to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Scuba, snorkel and kayak into the ocean from different sandy havens that dot the archipelago. International instruction standards and world-class equipment offers a sense of security to the travellers. Most suggest ditching the more 'touristy' Port Blair and explore less-trodden ones like **South Button Island** and **Henry Lawrence Islands** for snorkelling and scuba diving.

**Why:** Here, snappers, surgeonfish, octopus and morays are commonly found playing hide and seek in the coral gardens. The less-frequented Dixon pinnacle and Johnny's Gorge are also great to access the shallow reefs. A stay at the exclusive **Nobel Island** should be booked well in advance for taking kayaking excursions to Viper Island.

**How:** From October to March. Contact **Barefoot on (0) 95660 88560; www.diveandamans.com**



## Bio-vacation

Volunteer for biodiversity workshops

**What:** If you are a proud nature geek and can rattle off the scientific names for most tropical spiders, chances are that you will fit in with ease at **The Andaman and Nicobar Island's Environmental Team** or just ANET. This trip could alone encompass a number of wildlife related activities to add a special spin to your solo journey. The focus is to actively contribute towards the conservation of the islands through education, research and the development. For this, ANET holds a number of workshops ranging from organic farming, wildlife photography and environmental awareness. You can also volunteer on some projects.

**Why:** Ready yourself for a world of jungle adventures, working with school kids or just simply building a tree house at ANET. More so, for a solo traveller, the experience gives you an opportunity to understand the biodiversity of Andamans better and make resilient friends along the way.

**How:** Contact: **ANET at (03192) 280 081** for a workshop or volunteering programme. Best done in the winter months from October-December. **www.anetindia.org**



The more intrepid the journey, the more exciting the destination. If this is the mantra that you follow as a solo traveller, then the higher reaches of Arunachal Pradesh are bound to draw you deeper



## Riding the rapids

Tumbling down frothy rivers of Kameng River and Subansari

**What:** White water rafting is one adrenalin pumping activity that tops the list of adventures in Arunachal Pradesh. Whether it's the frothy Kameng River that flows on the Indo-Tibet border or the restless Subansari, treat yourself to riding the rapids. Go through the rigours of tumbling down up to Grade IV rapids and be rewarded with stunning views. The four options include **Kameng (Seppa-Bhalukpung route)**, **Subansiri** (Tahila to North of Daporijo), the entire **Siang and Dibang** (Anini to Assam border).

**Why:** Rafting down world-class white water rapids is just one part of the experience. Add to this trip, an interaction with the local Nishi tribe, an immersion in the rich biodiversity and luxuriant untrodden rainforests and you have a trip that is hard to forget. Camping by the Kameng and small hiking trails in virgin forests further amp up the experience.

**How:** Sign up for a trip between November and March. Contact: **Great Indian Outdoors** (0)94111 10855; [www.gio.in](http://www.gio.in)



## The town of Ziro

The magical bylanes of Hapoli and Old Ziro

**What:** It's amazing how much character a 15 km radius can encompass. The soul-captivating town of Ziro captures the simple living and the ethereal surroundings of Arunachal. For those who don't like to pack in the days much, just visiting the areas between Hapoli and Old Ziro should be enough. The fact that you can do it all on foot, at your own pace, is an added advantage that the solo traveller will love. Get lost in the Apatani plateau and interact with the local namesake tribe.

**Why:** Whether it's trekking in the Talley Valley or roaming the vast grazing grounds of Taiyiñ Lañpii, the stunning views and the simple living of Ziro are nothing less than cathartic. A place that resonates with solo travellers' need to unplug from urban life or live like the locals, Ziro is tailor-made for those who like some solitude.

**How:** The closest airport to Ziro is in Tezpur and railhead in North Lakhimpur. Local buses or cabs are the only option to get to Ziro from these nodes. An Inner Line Permit is essential for all international and Indian travellers. The summer months are most viable to travel in.



## Wildlife spotting at the reserves

Keep an eye for the elusive snow leopard!

**What:** Exploring the vast inimitable spread of wilderness here, is a trip that counts as once-in-a-lifetime. If you are on 'time-be-damned' kind of journey with plenty of weeks in hand, then do nothing less than **Namdapha National Park**, **Eagle Nest Sanctuary** and **Mehao Wildlife Sanctuary**. Given the travel time between these, the trip may stretch to several weeks, but it will be well worth the effort.

**Why:** You will have to be relentlessly patient to spot the four species of the cat family at Namdapha. Leopards, snow leopards, clouded leopards and tigers easily camouflage themselves in the thick foliage here. In fact the ludicrous amount of green that surrounds you spikes up the mystery about the animal kingdom even more. Both Eagle Nest Sanctuary and Mehao Wildlife Sanctuary also give you the perfect ambience to crane your neck to see a large array of birds, the Asian elephant, Asiatic Black Bear and if you are lucky, the Red Panda.

**How:** It's best to explore the jungle trails between October and April. Contact: **Greener Pastures** (0) 94357 47471; [www.thegreenerpastures.com](http://www.thegreenerpastures.com)



## Village hopping

Get a glimpse of the lives and colours of the local Khampti, Singpho and Tangsa tribes

**What:** The rich tribal culture of Arunachal Pradesh is a huge draw for travellers. If the hook is enticing enough for you, then pack your bags for about two weeks to visit the land of Adi Padam, Idu Mishmi, Digaru Mishmi, Khampti, Singpho, Tangsa, Lesu and Chakma tribes. A peek into the world of these lesser-known communities makes for an enriching trip.

**Why:** The exotic colours of clothes, headgears and the unique socio-religious rituals of the tribes of Arunachal are an undisputed high point of the visit to the region. The far-flung villages around

Roing, Miao, Tezu and Hayuliang give one the opportunity to see the homes of Idu Mishmi tribes, unique religions like Theravada Buddhism and Donyi Polo, isolated huts of the Mishmis and elephant clusters near Khampti.

**How:** Start the journey at Dibrugarh and take a car to swing around the region. It is, by far, the best mode of transport while exploring this wonderful state. The best time to visit is from April to June. Plan the accommodations around the fairly bigger pit stops and plug the days with village visits.



**SECRET**

**SESSA ORCHID SANCTUARY**

When visiting the Eagle Nest Sanctuary, plug in the Sessa Orchid Sanctuary as well. This houses more than 200 species of orchids, many endemic to the region. It's best to go between October and April and explore the 100sqkm area, rich with striking colours, shapes and sizes of the flower. The idea of seeing entire hillsides with orchids is enthralling for any nature lover.





Sandwiched between the foothills of the Himalayas to the north and the lower hills of Meghalaya to the south, there is no dearth of green here. Tea carpeted hills keep you company throughout your solo wandering



### KAZIRANGA NATIONAL PARK

While in Jorhat, detour west for a 1.5 hour/km drive to the Kaziranga National Park. An elephant or jeep safari takes you through the grasslands of the national park, where spotting a one horned rhinoceros is almost certain. Plan in such a way that you can do this in the early morning for more dramatic views of the jungle.



## **Chai trails**

Self pampering the colonial way

**What:** There is no better way to explore the tea clad hills of Assam other than living the plantation life. Think boots, wide sun caps, a four-wheel jeep and inspection walks at 6 am. Many high ceilinged, wooden floored plantation bungalows, reminiscent of the colonial times have re-emerged as boutique accommodations. **Why:** From whetting your taste buds for tea tasting, spotting exotic bird species and seeing local life at close quarters, each bungalow experience is enriched with locational nuances.

**Mancotta Chang Bungalow** in Dibrugarh can be used as the base to explore traditional Assamese temples, **Wathai Heritage Bungalow** in Tinsukia to use as a birding base, while the **Burra Sahib's Bungalow** in Jorhat to hit the golf greens and visit Kaziranga.

**How:** Fly to Jorhat and start your journey at Burra Sahib's Bungalow and the making your way to Dibrugarh and Tinsukia by road. Contact [www.kazirangagolfresort.com](http://www.kazirangagolfresort.com) (**Burra Sahib's Bungalow**), tel: (0373) 2301 120 (**Mancotta Chang Bungalow**) and +tel: (0) 94351 30014, [www.assamteatourism.com](http://www.assamteatourism.com) (**Wathai Heritage Bungalow**).

## **Temple visits**

Witness monks dance to Krishna's tunes

**What:** Slow meandering queues on the Nilachal Hill in Western Guwahati are a common sight. Thousands of devotees make way to the famous Kamakhya Temple, dedicated to the ten forms of Kali. Trundle up the hill with a view of the Brahmaputra River to witness the zealous spirituality in the air. This, and a trip to **Majuli Island**, off Jorhat, to see the first Vaishnava Satra (monastery) make for a unique theme.

**Why:** As one of the 51 Shakti Peeths related to Sati, the **Kamakhya temple** is one of the most significant Hindu pilgrimage sites in India. A must visit is the supposedly-haunted Hindu crematorium close to the temple; sit on the steps and take in the vivid spiritual vibe. At the river island of Majuli, visit the Uttar Kamalabari, Auniati, Dakhinpat and Garamurhsatras, built by the 16th century saint, Sankaradeva. Here, young monks immerse themselves in dance, music and poetry dedicated to Krishna.

**How:** The best time to visit both destinations is between October to March, though the Majuli Raas Mahotsav, a cultural extravaganza, is plugged in November every year. Fly into Guwahati to visit Kamakhya Temple and then make way to Jorhat to access Majuli.

INDIA PICTURE

Sail to Majuli Island to explore new themes

## **Tracking crafts**

The lives of Assamese craftsmen

**What:** The expression of a destination is truly represented in the traditional crafts of the place. If you are the kind of solo traveller who travels light to only pack in more souvenirs on your way back, following a craft trail of Assam could make for a riveting itinerary.

**Why:** Reminiscent of Gandhi's swadeshi drive, the clacketing handlooms in **Saulkuchi villager** is around 35 km from Guwahati and is the perfect background score while sauntering through the village. The japi, a traditional Assamese sunshade is something you will encounter all over. But to see its fascinating construction, you can travel towards the south of Guwahati to Silchar. A world of toys, brooms, containers and even furniture sprawls in front of you. Watching artisans hunched over products, brows furrowed in concentration is a captivating scene indeed.

Across the Brahmaputra, around 40 km from Guwahati, visit **Hajo** for a peek into the lives of bell metal artisans.

**How:** Keep Guwahati as your base to visit the weaving colony of Saulkuchi. From here a local bus or a cab can easily help with a detour to Hajo. Silchar is about 380 km away.

## **Fishing and more**

The Golden Mahseer fishing experience

**What:** For a devoted outdoor junkie, a trip to Assam is worth the visit to whet your adventure skills. From angling in the rivers like Kapili, Jia Bhoroli and Manas to camping in the outskirts of **Nameri National Park**, this is the place to unplug from the hustle bustle of the city life and let the magnificent wonders of nature enthrall you and calm the senses.

**Why:** The legendary waterways of the Jia Bhoroli River are home to a large population of the Golden Mahseer. You are virtually guaranteed to be able to test your skill on more than a couple, given that the catch and release rule is adhered to. When one is surrounded by such intense greenery and uninhabited wild areas, patiently waiting for a hook is even more enjoyable. This is one fishing experience that even beginners would like to go back with!

**How:** Get in touch with **Nameri Eco Camp**; tel: (03714) 292 644. It has accommodation just outside the national park. Expect basic facilities and help with angling gear along with well-organised trips into the jungle. Best time to visit is in November when the Assam Bhoroli Anglers Association organises the annual angling competition here.



There may be seemingly lesser in order for the solo traveller other than the hallowed Buddhist circuit in Bihar, but it's the unexpected surprises that will truly mesmerise you. Keep your eyes and mind open



## The colours of Madhubani



Watch artists at work on traditional Mithila painting

**What:** Keeping Darbhanga as a base, explore the splash of colours at Madhubani in Bihar. While we are all familiar with the paintings that adorn many urban walls, it is a different experience to see the artists at work from close quarters. With Madhubani art as its main draw, the town is known as the cultural heart of the Mithila region of Bihar.

**Why:** Also known as Mithila painting, the origins of the style of art can be traced to the time of the Ramayana, when King Janaka of Nepal ordered for his kingdom to be decorated for his daughter, Sita's wedding to Lord Rama. The mud walls of villages were traditionally the canvas for the village women, before the art became commercialised. Now, many local households are engrossed in keeping this art alive and have made it their prime source of income.

**How:** Darbhanga is connected via road and rail to major cities in North India. Madhubani is only 57km from here and can be best accessed by road. The town of Madhubani can be visited any time of the year.

DINDOIA PHOTO LIBRARY



## The sufi circuit

Dargahs, festivals, strains of sufi music and a lot more to experience

**What:** A sufi circuit is a unique way of covering cities of Patna, Vaishali, Jehanabad and Nalanda, which are tinged with the historical antiquities of the sufi culture. Strains of sufi music can be heard in the Dargahs and every monument relates stories from ages ago. The annual 'Urs' festival is a significant day on the calendar when thousands descend on Bihar to experience this trail.

**Why:** Visit Maner Sharif and **Phulwari Sharif** in Patna along with Khankah Emadia and Dargah Sharif. Head to Hajipur Karbala in Vaishali, **Hasanpura** in Siwan, **Bibi Kamaal Sahiba** in Jehanabad along with Bari and Chhoti Dargah in Nalanda. The whole circuit can take up to ten days but gives you a vivid picture of the work of the sufi saints that lived in these cities and propagated the sufi philosophy.

**How:** The sufi trail can be started in Patna, which is well connected by air, rail and road to major cities in India. It is best to avoid

public transportation and hire a reliable cab to make this trip. Prepare an itinerary, so that you don't miss anything. Book hotels up ahead to have a veritable base in each city.



BIHAR TOURISM



## In the footsteps of Buddha

Pit stop at Gaya, the place of Buddha's enlightenment

**What:** A trail that covers Ashoka's monuments and other Buddhist monasteries is the key hook for many travellers to Bihar. This includes Pawanpuri, Patna, **Rajgir, Jehanabad, Gaya, Champran, Nalanda and Bhagalpur.** Reserve more than a week to traverse the route on which Ashoka established many monasteries and monuments.

**Why:** Buddhism blazed through the state of Bihar from 5th to 11th century and was patronised by many kings. The religion is still revered and adopted by many, ensuring the much sought after trail is still abuzz with tourists and devotees. Of all the towns, Gaya holds maximum importance, as it's here that the Buddha achieved enlightenment.

**How:** Arrive in the capital city of Patna, which is well connected by rail, air and road to major cities in India. Though it is best to do the trail in the winter months from October to February, aligning with Buddha Jayanti will ensure a lively ambience to your trip.



**SECRET**

### HARMANDIR SAHIB, PATNA

If the tranquil surroundings of a Gurudwara and the delicious *langar* is what you crave, detour to Harmandir Sahib in Patna. Bihar is one of the holiest cities for Sikhs with 11 significant holy sites attributed to the religion. Of these, the birthplace of the Tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh is most important. The Gurudwara of Patna is built for his commemoration. An experience of visiting this is known to trump even Golden Temple for a few.

INDIA PICTURE



## Valmiki Tiger Reserve

Camping in the forest by a shimmering river

**What:** The Valmiki Tiger Reserve is far from diminutive in its expanse and sighting opportunities. With a dense forest cover of 899 sqkm and the shimmering River Gandak flowing at its edges, the tiger

reserve is a hot spot for both flora and fauna. The forest is replete with barking deer, spotted and hog deer, sambhar, hyenas, leopards, monkeys and flying squirrels.

**Why:** Apart from the wildlife

wanderings one can also spend time, camping, trekking and bird watching. In fact the reserve also houses 26 hamlets inside the forest known as the 'Done' area. Places of interest around the tiger reserve include the **hermitage of sage Valmiki, Sofa temple, Nardevi temple, Madanpur Devi Asthan** and the Sameshwar temple.

**How:** The sanctuary is situated on the on Gorakhpur—Muzaffarpur rail route, which is easily accessible from key cities in North India. The best season to visit is in the winter months of October end to April. Information about forest houses and safaris can be obtained from **Chief Wildlife Warden (0612) 2545 366.**



In search of Le Corbusier's legacy or simply an induction into '*daal makhni and naan*', the solo traveller will be nothing short of enthralled by vibrant Chandigarh



## A step back in time

Museums, art, culture and so much more

**What:** Contrary to what one might think of the modern city of Chandigarh, it is an unusual destination to discover the repository of artifacts from undivided India. If the history of the subcontinent interests you, use this filter to explore Chandigarh by hopping from one museum to another. Start the trip with the poignant Government Museum and Art Gallery which houses a great collection of beautiful paintings, artifacts, and objects that were once a part of the Central Museum, Lahore, the capital of Punjab before partition. A sprawling array of Lahori vestiges, Mughal miniatures and Gandhara sculptures are on display here.

**Why:** On the same trail, also stop by two other museums—the Museum of Evolution of Life and the International Dolls Museum. While the Dolls Museum houses a collection of more than 250 dolls from all over the world and India itself, the Museum of Evolution of Life is a recap of the events in history, starting from Indus Valley Civilization to present times.

**How:** You can visit these museums at any time of the year. **Government Museum and Art Gallery (0172 274 2010; 10 am-4.30 pm)**



VIKRAM SHARMA/WWW.INDIATODAYIMAGES.COM



## Le Corbusier's city

Walk about a brilliantly planned city

**What:** With a wordy name like Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris, one would think that the Swiss-French architect, designer, painter, urban planner and writer's creations would be more complex and elaborate—leaning almost towards flamboyance. Instead, the urban planner, better known as Le Corbusier, gave India's its neatest and most immaculately planned city—Chandigarh. Architectural shutterbugs and history enthusiasts will love to explore the city with the 'Corbusier' signature touch.

**Why:** This is where Le Corbusier drew plans, thought futuristically of urban needs and infused them with ingenuity, giving India its living laboratory of modern architecture. Explore the buildings such as the Palace of Justice, the Secretariat Building, Governor's Palace, Palace of Assembly and Chandigarh College of Architecture.

**How:** Best time to visit the city is November to February if you plan to walk around. It is well connected to Delhi via train and bus and is even easy to self drive (250 km/4 hours). **Le Corbusier Centre (0172 277 7077)**



Chandigarh is also great for vegetarian fare

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**SECRET** **CATCH A PLAY**  
Sangeet Natak Akademi in Chandigarh is the best place to catch a play by the famous theatre person, G.S Channi, who is the chairperson of the Akademi. If you happen to be in the city check out the local papers for any scheduled show. You will definitely find one of his productions listed, and if you get really lucky, you may be able to catch a memorable performance by the veteran actor and director.

## Chandigarh for shoppers

Shop for classic phulkari, Punjabi juttis and also check out some modern boutiques

**What:** Another way of exploring Chandigarh is through its amalgam of new and old markets. While the annual 'Vanity Fair' at **Whispering Willows Resort** might be a gala for the discerning travellers and shoppers, there are others that throw you right in the middle of some local buzz. Be it touristy mementos or something classy, you can hit some local markets of Chandigarh to see the city through a prism of bargains and

brands. Get yourself to Sector 17D, more for the vibe than the brands. Here, make a stop at 1469, a store that gives a kitschy spin to Punjabi souvenirs. Be it cheeky verbiage Tees in the local language or a simple keychain with the classic **phulkari** work, you are likely to leave the shop with a lighter wallet than you intended to. Other meanderings could have a backdrop of the favourite Sector 22 where you can lay your

hands on anything from big brands to local crafts.

**Why:** Typical Punjabi *juttis* distressed junk jewellery, ethnic clothes and souvenirs, Chandigarh has some great, well planned markets. It is a good way to spend a weekend. Shopping and cafe hopping in this pretty city can be fun.

**How:** The city is great to walk around from the months of October to March. Markets are open from 10.30 am to 8 pm.

## Foodie's paradise

The city is not just about butter chicken

**What:** From traditional fare to more contemporary hangouts, the essence of the city is best represented by its food. Locals will point you to one of the oldest contemporary food joints called Hot Millions or 'HM and

Hot Mills' for regulars. Also drop in Backpackers' Café for a more chilled out ambience and new age food. Those with a sweet tooth can head to Gopal's Sweets & Restaurant in Sector 35 and to Pappa Ji Dhaba for

staples like *daal makhni*, cheese *naan* and *butter chicken*.

Contrary to what the vegetarians might think, Chandigarh is also great for veg fare; Sundarams in Sector 26 can dish out the perfect South Indian *sambar* while Pal Dhaba is the place for your dose of *paneer butter masala*.

**Why:** The cosmopolitan vibe of

Chandigarh is well entrenched in its food joints. From street stalls, to hip hangouts and old favourites, spare a couple of days to discover these haunts with an extra zeal for different flavours.

**How:** Best explored in the winter months from October to March. The old city is easily accessible on foot.

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# Women's Health

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The endless green of swaying paddy fields, the shimmer of sinuous rivers clinging to silted banks, dark stretches of verdant forests and torrential waterfalls gushing down cliffs, this is tailor-made for offbeat travel



## Wildlife spotting

Kanger Valley National Park and caving

**What:** The Kanger Valley National Park in South Bastar is the main draw for wildlife and nature enthusiasts. The ancient stalactites and stalagmite formations in the **Dandak, Kailash** and **Kutumsar caves**, along with the wildly thick undergrowth in the park, makes this one of India's most coveted forest destinations.

**Why:** An encounter with bears, leopards, snakes, deer, hyenas, water buffaloes, and a variety of birds provide great excitement. The same goes for **Barnawapara**, close to Raipur. The thick canopies of pristine copses provide refuge to nearly 50 resident leopards and sightings are pretty common. Udanti, Sitanadi, Indravati and Bhairamgarh national parks are relatively untreaded tracts of jungle but complement Kanger Valley National Park with their expansive green cover.

**How:** Arrive in Raipur, which is connected by air, rail and road to major metros and cities. The most convenient way to get there is by car. Book a cab through Ice Cubes, starting from ₹8/- per km, plus driver allowance. **Kanger Valley National Park** can be accessed between 8 am-4 pm from 1st November to 30th June. (Entry: Indian/Foreigner ₹25/150, car ₹50, guide ₹50, lights for the caves ₹25)



## Art galore

Bell metal craft and tribal paintings

**What:** The innate talent of the tribals with metal, wood, clay and other natural produce transforms into stunning artefacts, which has shaped the handicraft industry of the state. For those interested in this array of crafts, one can plan an itinerary around this theme.

**Why:** Exploring different crafts can be done in Narayanpur, Kondagaon and Jagdalpur, south of Raipur. Small cluster of homes are often engaged in crafts like bell metal work (*dhokra*), wrought iron craft, terracotta, cowrie shell work, sisal and bamboo products, weaving, stone carving, wood craft, Kosa silk production, Tumba art, Godna printing and tribal painting.

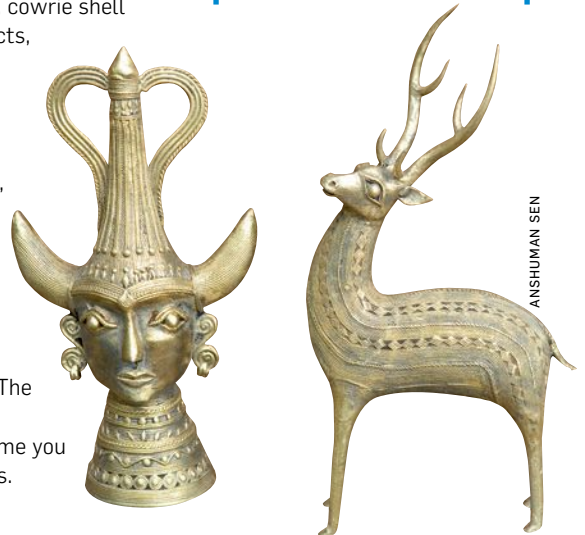
**How:** Local guides and Saathi, one of the most longstanding and trusted establishments in Kondagaon, can help access these villages. You can get in touch with them at (07786) 242 852 between 8 am-6 pm (Sundays closed). The guide fee is ₹500 onwards, depending on the amount of time you want to spend in these villages.



SECRET

### THE WEEKLY MARKETS

Known as *haats* these are undoubtedly the best interface that a traveller can have with the colourful tribals. Every day of the week is assigned to one or more regions for a particular *haat*. Yellow, orange and blue troupline-hued shades cover small shops with vegetables, toiletries, local liquor and even cock fight rinks. The market is set up and raring to go till 3.30-4 pm, when they pack up and return to the villages.



ANSHUMAN SEN

## Breathtaking Chitrakote falls



## The waterfall circuit

Powerful and gushing, the falls around Bastar enthral

**What:** The riveting waterfall circuit of Bastar lies around the city of Jagdalpur and can be plugged along with the famous Chitrakote falls. Lesser-known wonders like Mandawa Tamara Ghoomar Chitradhara and Tirathgarh offer plenty of reasons to fall in love with them.

**Why:** The paddy fields flanked roads, the fact that they are pleasantly isolated from a swarm of tourists and the view of gentle rivers that plummet down deep into the narrow valleys is nothing less than gorgeous.

**How:** Base yourself in Jagdalpur and then travel to the waterfalls by car. You can stay at the **Devansh Residency** [www.devanshresidency.com](http://www.devanshresidency.com); +91 7782 221199; from ₹1,500 onwards) and visit the falls. These are at their glorious best just after the monsoons in the months of late September and October.



## Tribal zone

Experience a different way of life

**What:** The heart of Chhattisgarh, Bastar, is occupied by seven major tribes known as Bison Horn Marias, Murias, Abhuj (or Hill Marias) Murias, Bhatras, Dhurvas, Halbas, Dorlas and Gadbas. The Bastar region starts from Kanker district but the actual interaction with the tribes starts from beyond the Keshkal Valley, that leads to Kondagaon and Narayanpur. Plan a trip with a local expert to have a

sensitised interaction with the tribes.

**Why:** To experience even a part of the ancient tribal culture is of colossal value for travellers. These tribes, some more elusive than the others, were possibly the first occupants of the region, living off the land for thousands of years.

**How:** It is recommended to hire a guide for your trip, especially if you are interested in accessing the tribal villages. Local life and special dance performances can only be done with the help of local knowledge for which, **Awesh Ali (0)94252 44925; ₹1,500 per day,** is the most credible resource.



Dance with the tribals

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY: CHHATTISGARH TOURSIM



The coastal enclaves of Daman, Diu, Dadra and Nagar Haveli offer you an uncharted territory to explore. The soul-warming sun, sandy stretches and the Portuguese backdrop to Silvassa are all in the same vicinity



## The beach circuit

Relax and gaze at spectacular sunsets

**What:** The coastline of Daman and Diu does not sprawl over kilometers, but is packed with glorious views. Gentle winds lure the traveller into a long walk with vignettes of fishermen, Hoka trees and weathered monuments. The solo traveller is ushered towards dramatic sunsets. The coastline from Devka to Jampore is just 9 km strip of sand but replete with glorious views.

**Why:** Weekends are avoidable in the northern beach of **Devka** in Daman as it's a beehive of activity with local tourists. Arrive on a weekday to have the beach to yourself, or possibly the company of fishermen bringing in the catch. This makes for a great photographic opportunity. Jampore on the far end is much quieter—perhaps the perfect spot to catch up on a good book.

**How:** Vapi, which is well connected by train to Vadodara, is the nodal point to enter Daman from where it is only 10 km away. Auto



Jampore beach

DAMAN AND DIU TOURISM

rickshaws charge anywhere between ₹100-150. Stay at **The Golden Beach Resort** ([www.thegoldenbeachresort.in](http://www.thegoldenbeachresort.in); +91 260 2405000; ₹6,000 onwards) for fantastic views. Daman is pleasant to travel through the year.





## Adrenaline junkie

Speedboat rides, skiing, water zorbing and much more

**What:** Taking the thrill factor a notch higher, water sports are organised at the **Nagoa** and **Ghoghla Beach** in Diu, attracting hundreds of tourists who like an action packed holiday. In addition to activities like parasailing, water scooter and boat sailing by the beach, the Diu administration also organizes an evening cruise for the travellers. You can probably give the evening cruise a miss, as the only charming thing about it is the sunset and the orange sky. The rest of the experience can be a little tacky, but then it varies from person to person—you might even like it.

**Why:** The water sports are reasonably well organised by local instructors who are part of the Diu administration. You may want to arrive at the venue early in the morning to cut the rush during the peak season. You can also choose to try speedboat rides, jet skiing, banana boat, bumper boat, water zorbing, and may be even a dolphin trip.

**How:** The best season to make the most of the water-based activities is summer. Timing of water sports at Nagoa and Ghoghla Beach are from 9:30 am to 1:00 pm and from 4:00 pm to 6:30 pm. Though the sun is harsh during this time, it also helps in drying you early, which is kind of a plus point as well. The monsoon months are not recommended for this. In fact, the services close down during the rains.



## Drop off the map

Pack books, your camera and get lost on your own

**What:** While this may be a tempting option, it takes a lot of practice to ease your mind and do practically nothing. Perfect for the weary solo traveller, the historic town of Dadar and Nagar Haveli or the beaches of Daman and Diu give you an opportunity to really unplug.

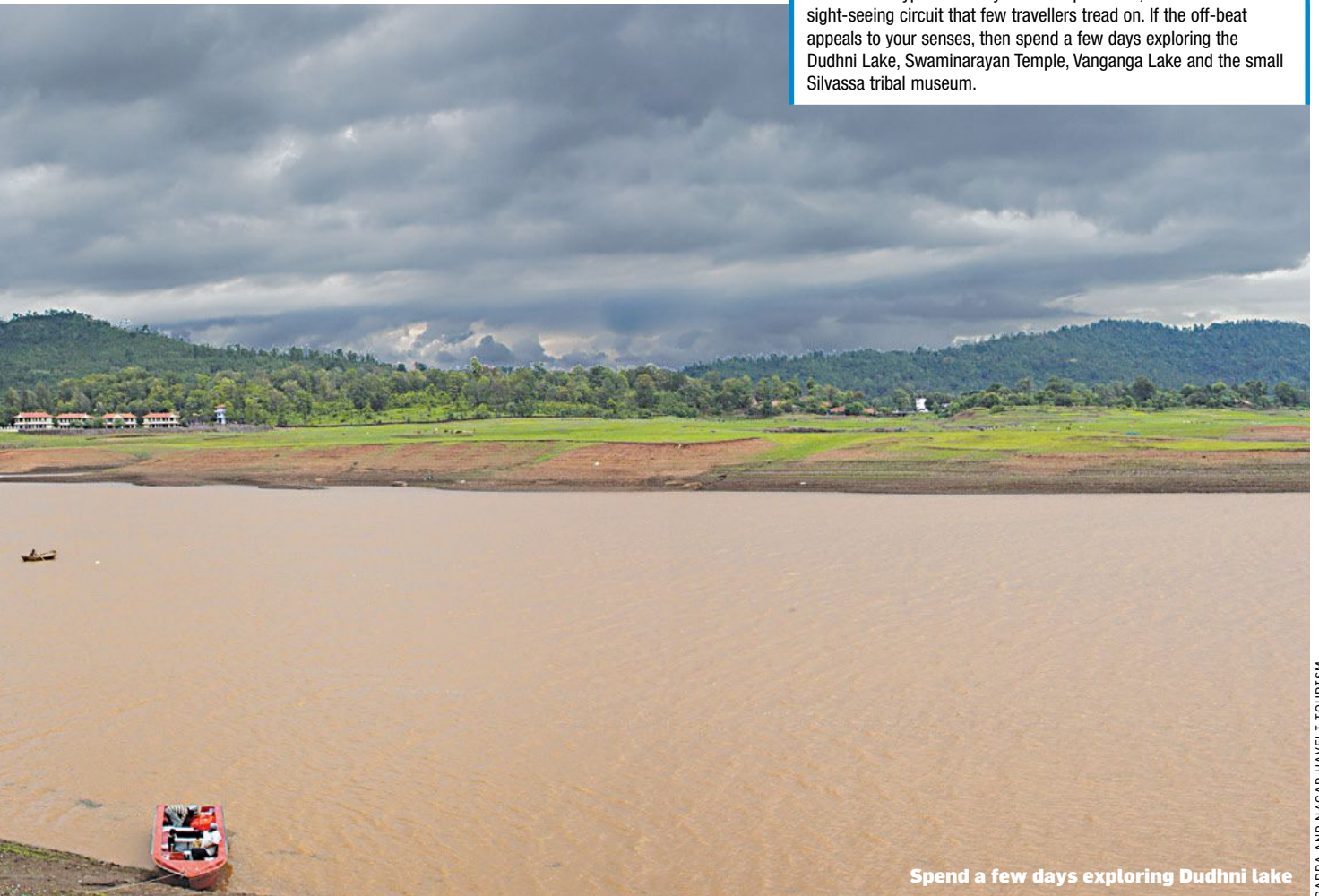
**Why:** This trip will need you to pack some extra books, a new playlist on your iPod and ditching the laptop for the camera. Make this trip all about you and not a pursuit to write a fascinating blog entry; catch up on calls or have your day packed with a hectic itinerary. This holiday is all about waking up when you want, spoiling yourself silly and doing absolutely nothing!

**How:** Pamper yourself by staying at one of the finest hotels of Daman, **The Deltin Hotel and Casino** ([www.deltingroup.com](http://www.deltingroup.com); +91 260 6699999; ₹20,000 onwards for 2 nights, 3 days). Daman and Diu can be visited any time of the year, but winters are more pleasant than the other months.



### SECRET GO SIGHTSEEING!

Though Dadra and Nagar Haveli has not etched itself on the typical touristy travel map of India, it does have a sight-seeing circuit that few travellers tread on. If the off-beat appeals to your senses, then spend a few days exploring the Dudhni Lake, Swaminarayan Temple, Vanganga Lake and the small Silvassa tribal museum.



Spend a few days exploring Dudhni lake

DADRA AND NAGAR HAVELI TOURISM



Though Haryana conjures up images of beehive-like offices and the condos of Gurgaon, hardly making a backdrop for a holiday, but the state also throws up surprises for short getaways. Here are some chosen ones



## The eco trail

Presenting a mosaic of different eco systems

**What:** Nature and wildlife enthusiasts will love the eco trail of Thapli, Morni Hills, Kalesar, Adibari, Chuharpur and Ban Santor. Haryana is wedged between Northern India's Siwalik Hills, the Aravalli Range and semi-desert sandy plains of Rajasthan in the south and the Yamuna-Ghaggar plains in the east. This makes it a unique mosaic of bio-diversity, perfect for solo travellers who lean towards nature and wildlife.

**Why:** The eco trail is planned around nature camps that can be

booked to stay, while exploring the jungles replete with wildlife and flora. Expect to spot black buck, panthers, nilgai, fox, jackals, deer, wild dogs, parrots, peacocks and pheasants. The trail lies in its untouched splendour, barely explored by travellers, ensuring that you are unlikely to bump into hordes of tourists. The eco trail gives the solo traveller an opportunity to switch off from the city bustle and retire into serenity.

**How:** To book a stay in the Nature camps along the trail, visit [www.haryanaforest.gov.in](http://www.haryanaforest.gov.in) or contact on **0172-2794610**. The entire trail is more than 900 km from Delhi, but with sufficient breaks in between; it is recommended to do it as a self-drive trip. The winter months are recommended for travel.



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## Wild wonderland

Bird sanctuaries, wildlife parks and more

**What:** Pack in those binoculars, walking shoes and sunscreen, as this particular trip will be about staying outdoors. The **Sultanpur Lake and Bird Sanctuary, Kalesar** and **Saraswati wildlife sanctuaries** make for a great wildlife triangle for the solo traveller. A bird watcher's paradise, the Sultanpur Lake and Bird Sanctuary was first discovered by Peter Jackson and was much loved by India's most famous ornithologist, Dr. Salim Ali. Till date, it continues to hold a coveted spot in the minds of most of the birding enthusiasts.

**Why:** Along with Sultanpur, the birder also has another option in the dense copses of Kalesar Wildlife Sanctuary. Morni Hills and Saraswati Wildlife Sanctuary are also havens for animals such as wild boars, blue bulls, jackals and monkeys along with a variety of avian species.

**How:** Self-drives in a good vehicle are the best way to visit the three wonderful wildlife hot spots since they lie close to the NCR. There is a basic accommodation at **Sultanpur at Rosy Pelican complex** run by **Haryana Tourism (01272-85242)**.



### SECRET CAMP WILD DHAUJ

If you are missing pitching a tent in the wilderness and sipping hot tea around a bonfire, check into Camp Wild Dhauj near Badkal Lake in Faridabad. The campsite is only 55 km from Delhi and makes for a convenient short break from the city. Activities around the campsite include rock climbing, balance walk, monkey crawl, Burma Bridge, rappelling and wall climbing.





## Panipat rewind

History, battle fields and tombs!

**What:** Take a trip down memory lane with a visit to the ground where, not one, but three bloody battles of Panipat were fought. While that may be the stronger historical hook, now the city is known for its weaving community and fabrics. Reminiscent of its Mughal history, one can still re-live the times with a monument trail that covers the **Kabuli Shah Mosque, Ibrahim Lodi's Tomb and Dargah of Bu Ali Shah Qalandar.**

**Why:** Chalk out a day's trail, starting with museum, which houses arts, craft and remnants of the Mughal times. Built from *lakhori* bricks, the tombstone of Ibrahim Lodi is a major attraction of the city. The Mughal style mosque of Kabuli Shah wedged in the middle of a sprawling green garden is yet another sight that one must not miss. The tranquil atmosphere of Dargah of Bu Ali Shah Qalandar is where one can end the day, as devotees pour in.

**How:** Panipat is well connected by rail and road to major north Indian cities like Delhi and Jaipur. Panipat is only 90 km from Delhi and makes for an easy day trip as well.



## The Retreat

Beautiful boutique and resort getaways

**What:** Haryana's boutique stays have everything that your heart desires for a restful retreat from city life. Think soothing spas, saunas, lush gardens and the blissful swimming pools. This holiday is strictly meant for some 'me' time so choose to ditch the laptops and phones and sink into pampering. Tikli Bottom's cheeky name adds just the zing to your otherwise tranquil holiday in a farm setting, with a pool, golf course, bird watching opportunity and a day picnic outing to the Sultanpur Bird Sanctuary.

**Why:** Apart from Tikli Bottom, you can opt for Tarudhan or Westin Sohna, or better still, all three if you have time. From golf greens to spas and farm stay, this holiday will be one that redefines luxury travel for you.

**How:** **Tikli Bottom** ([www.tiklibottom.com](http://www.tiklibottom.com)), **Tarudhan** ([www.tarudhanvalley.com](http://www.tarudhanvalley.com)) and **Westin Sohna** ([www.starwoodhotels.com](http://www.starwoodhotels.com)) lie under 4 hours driving time from Delhi. Hire a cab to get here. The best time to do this is in the winter months from November to February.



Unwind and relax at Westin Sohna



In one of the youngest states of India, one expects little to see as a traveller. But the fabulous waterfalls, the inimitable world of Munda tribes and outdoor adventures will surprise the solo traveller



## The legacy of the Tatas

Visit the Jubilee Park, Hudco Lake and Tata Steel Zoological Park

**What:** **Russi Mody Centre of Excellence** should feature in the itinerary to see the trajectory of events that made Tata Steel what it is today. Start the city trail of Jamshedpur with this, along with other sightseeing options. In fact Jamshedpur is also known as 'Tatanagar'. The centre gives a detailed perspective of the evolution of Jamshedpur as a modern township and heart of the operations of the company along with the Tata's own trajectory into becoming a leading company. Its sprawling well-manicured gardens and architectural excellence will be rewarding for any traveller.

**Why:** Add to this experience, the Jubilee Park,

Hudco Lake, Tata Steel Zoological Park, Bhuvaneshwari Temple, Dimna Lake and the luxuriant hills of Dalma and you can spend a great weekend in Jamshedpur. The Dalma Hills also encompass the Dalma Wildlife Sanctuary which is home to several rare and endangered species of wild life like leopards, sloth bears, elephants, porcupines and even tigers.

**How:** Stay at the The Sonnet Hotel to explore Jamshedpur ([www.thesonnet.com](http://www.thesonnet.com); 91 657 6619000; from ₹5,000 onwards). The Russi Mody Centre of Excellence can be accessed between 10 am-5 pm. The best season to visit the city is in winters.



SECRET

### THE BANDANA FESTIVAL

If you are visiting in the month of October, a local flavour should be on the cards with one of the most unique festivals of Jharkhand—Bandana. This is celebrated to commemorate animals. With a longstanding connect with animals, it is a popular festival for the tribes of Jharkhand, but it has made its way to urban life, where even pets get a fair share of attention on this day. In the villages, you can see the cows and bulls decorated with natural colours and decked in various ornaments.



## The sanctuaries

Try to spot wild bears, nilgai, civets and if you are lucky, even the tiger

**What:** Carve out an itinerary, which helps you explore the outdoor wonders of Jharkhand. A mix of the best waterfalls and wildlife sanctuaries dispels any thoughts of the fact that most travellers only peg a single hook to the destination—that of industries and business.

**Hundru Falls, Jonha Falls, Betla National Park and Dalma Wildlife Sanctuary** are great inclusions for a nature-specific trip.

**Why:** With this itinerary you can use Ranchi and Jamshedpur as the base and explore the Hundru and Jonha falls and Betla and then the wildlife park near Jamshedpur. While the cascading white waterfalls offer a restful time, the wildlife parks are full of adventure and anticipation of spotting animals like sambar, chital, wild bears, nilgai, civets and even if lucky, even the tiger. Interestingly, Betla is an acronym for bison, elephant, tiger, leopard, axis-axis (deer).

**How:** You can start the trip in either from Ranchi or Jamshedpur and then trace your way through these destinations. The best time to visit the falls would be after monsoons, but if you are combining this with the wildlife sanctuaries then it's better to visit the place between December and April. While the falls may not be at their fullest best, there will be better chances for wildlife spotting.



## The Munda villages

Tribal lifestyle, stunning silver jewellery and unique festivals

**What:** Jharkhand is home to more than 32 tribes, of which the Mundas are the most popular. Access to many tribal villages is not encouraged by the government to preserve their culture and not make them vulnerable to an insensitive gaze. But a trip to the **Tribal Research Institute Museum** in Ranchi followed by a sojourn into the Munda villages is one the most unique offerings of Jharkhand.

**Why:** Take a swig of the local brews Tari and Haria at a local Munda village. This can only be done with the help of a group who has close associations with them. Reticent and not used to mingling with an urban population, it is best to visit with a sensitive orientation. The short curly hair and different facial features, exotic silver jewellery and unique festivals of the Mundas infuse a sense of intrigue.

**How:** The Tribal Research Institute Museum is a great way of understanding the tribal culture of the state. The admission is free. (0651 2541824; 8 am-6 pm Mon-Fri, 8 am-1 pm Sat). The museum is one of the key highlights of the city of Ranchi. Eco India can help organize a trip into the **Munda villages** ([www.ecoindia.com](http://www.ecoindia.com); [info@ecoindia.com](mailto:info@ecoindia.com))



SARVESH



## Wondrous waterfalls

A lovely circuit off Ranchi of Hundru, Jonha, Panchghagh and Dassam coupled with beautiful views

**What:** For a nature and outdoors enthusiast the waterfall circuit off Ranchi is recommended on the itinerary. Though subjected to heavy footfall on weekends and holidays, the white frothy falls of **Hundru, Jonha, Panchghagh** and **Dassam** are still worth your while to see them pummel down and crash into a deep dark pool. Enjoy sitting at the banks and getting drenched with the spray.

**Why:** The loop around the Hundru, Jonha, Panchghagh and Dassam offers unmatched views and a respite from the bustle of the city. Try going here on weekdays for a more tranquil retreat. While a 320

feet drop of the Swarnarekha River creates Hundru, Jonha's speciality lies in the fact that Lord Buddha is believed to have bathed here. Panchghagh is a culmination of five falls and Dassam is formed on the Kanchi River with a 144-foot drop.

**How:** Arrive in Ranchi by air at the Bhagwan Birsa Munda Airport, rail or road. The waterfalls are best viewed just after the monsoons, so reserve a trip only during that period. Chanakya BNR Hotel is a reasonable choice ([www.chanakyabnranchi.com](http://www.chanakyabnranchi.com); **0651 2461211**; from ₹3,500 onwards).





If you want to oscillate from the manic city bustle to secret beaches and a ludicrous amount of greenery, sample the wonders of Maharashtra as a solo traveller. It leaves with you with one feeling—When will I be back?



## Mumbai musings

Food, bazaars, shrines and lots of adventure

**What:** Be sufficiently prepared to be jostled, hurried, incessantly chatted to and be suffused in the trendy yet vintage vibe of the city; we assure you that the concoction of this will be intoxicating! A week may be too little to savour the flavour of the city with mornings by the sea, alternative new age cafes, historic buildings, the rush of great bargains and a memorable nightlife.

**Why:** Reserve a morning to trawl through the labyrinth of criss crossing perpendiculars draped in bright Bohemian art on mossy walls around Chapel Road in Bandra. The hip kitschy hangout reveals its 200 year-old history in subtle nuances like overhanging balconies from colonial homes and wooden crosses announcing its decidedly Christian composition. Keep time to get lost in the streets of Chor Bazaar, pack in red fizzy Pallonjis raspberry drink and berry *pulao* in Parsi joints of the Fort area, make your way to the Haji Ali shrine (5 am-10 pm) and end the evening in the pubs of downtown Colaba.

**How:** Visit in the cooler months between October to February to not let the humidity wear you out. Centrally located **Le Sutra** ([www.lesutra.in](http://www.lesutra.in); +91 2266420025; from ₹6,950 onwards) is recommended for a boutique ambience stay. Enjoy a Parsi meal at **Britannia** (Fort; 11.30 am-4 pm, Sun Closed), roam the streets of Chor Bazaar between 10.30 am and 7.30 pm. Worthwhile stops include **Oriental Arts and Crafts** (09819489585) for antiques, **A 1 Corner** (09223439284) for Bollywood collectibles. A trip with Be The Local Tours and Travels is the only way you should opt to explore. ([www.bethelocaltoursandtravels.com](http://www.bethelocaltoursandtravels.com); 09930027370; ₹1,000 onwards)



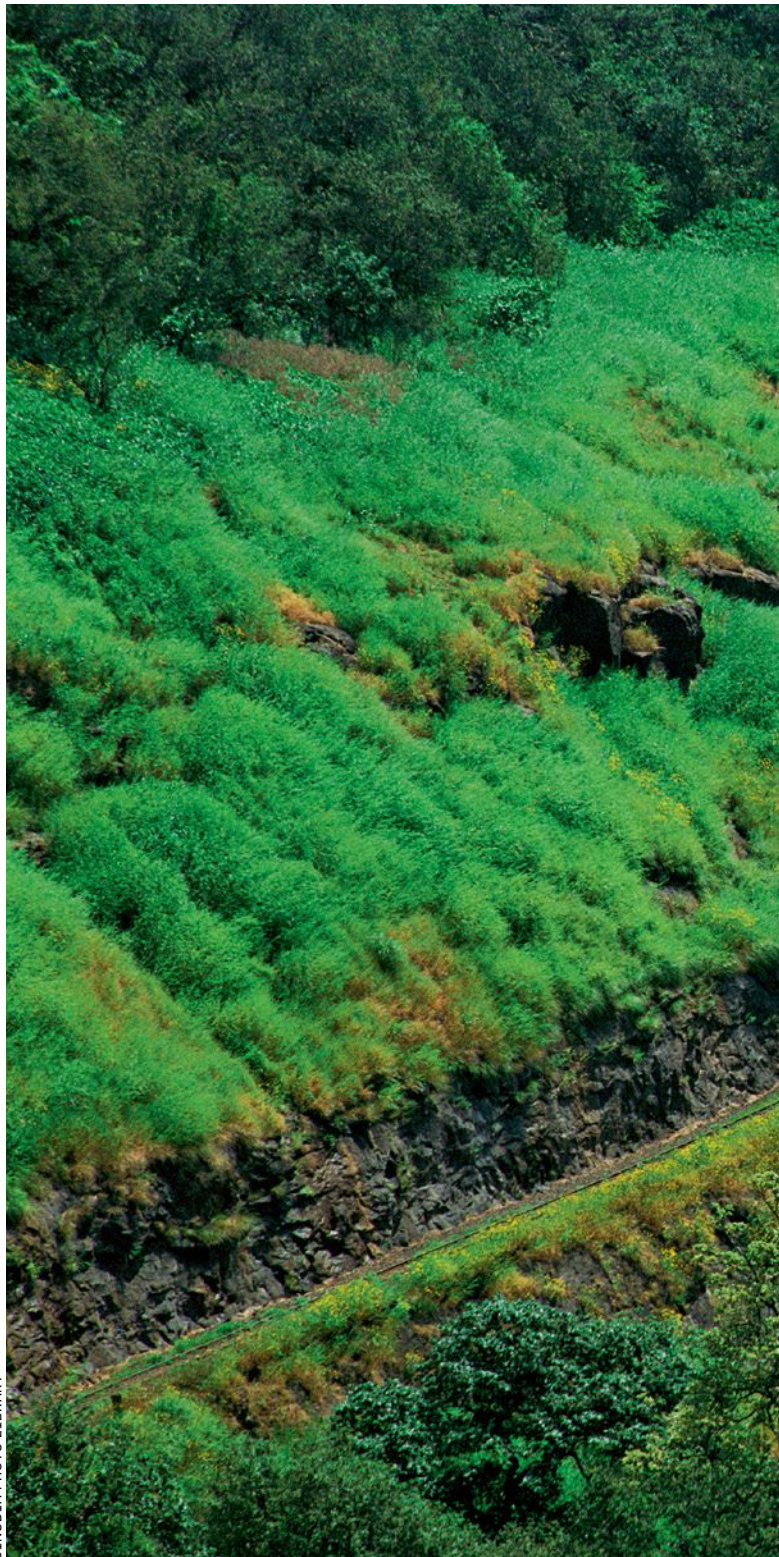
## Wander in the wild

Jungles, jeep safaris and rare species of reptiles

**What:** If your goal is to potentially spot a tiger, dhole, hyena, sambar, spotted deer, chital, nilgai and at least twenty species of reptiles and birds, then a wildlife trip beckons from the deep jungles of Maharashtra. An immersion in a thousand shades of green awaits at **Tadoba National Park**, the oldest in the state. Add to that trips to **Bor, Melghat, Umred** national parks and you are sure to have your fill of wild company.

**Why:** Relatively high on population, the **Tadoba National Park** is where you are likely to hear the roar of a lion quite easily. Spend early mornings and evenings stalking the animals in jeep safaris and stay close to the jungle for easier access. Even the other jungles are wedged on the eastern part of the state, spanning not more than 500 km.

**How:** The best season for a wildlife trip is in the winter months from October to March. Strictly avoid the monsoons as the national parks are closed during this time.



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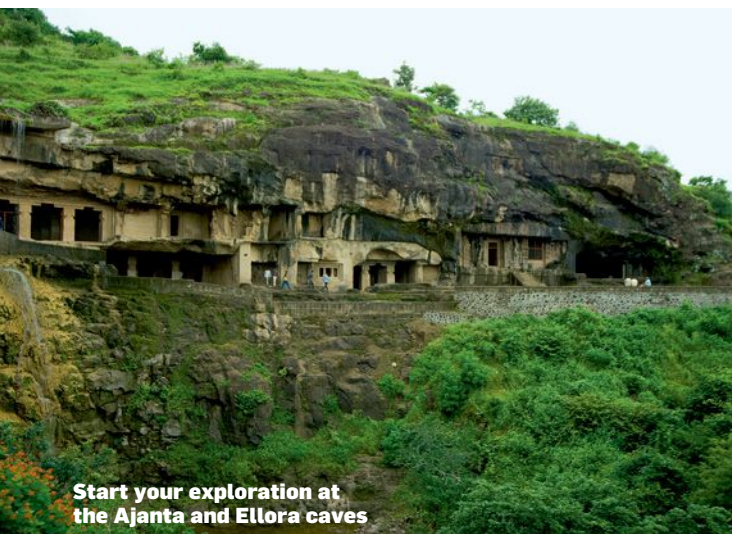
**SECRET**

**MATHERAN TOY TRAIN**

It's difficult to contain ones excitement when the Matheran Toy Train approaches the 'One Kiss Tunnel' that falls enroute Neral to Matheran. The story goes that the tunnel is just long enough to steal a quick kiss with a loved one. Whet the legend or get drowned in the buzz and giggles as you cross the short dark tunnel. The excitement slowly ebbs away as the train chugs towards Matheran, Asia's only automobile-free hill station.



**Experience the excitement of travelling  
in the Matheran Toy Train**



ANEESH BHASIN

Start your exploration at the Ajanta and Ellora caves



## Rock marvellous

Tripping on history and spirituality

**What:** While **Ajanta** and **Ellora** caves have already etched a deep place in travel guidebooks and itineraries, combine the wonders of **Bhaja**, **Elephanta**, **Bahrot** and **Bedse** for a historic appeal. A unique tinge to your exploration, a cave themed trip can be enlightening.

**Why:** Though you need at least a week to cover the 600 km cave trail of Maharashtra, it is sure to throw enigmatic insights and a peek into the illustrious history of the state. These craggy rockscapes offer an amalgamation of history, spirituality, intrigue, meditation and adventure.

**How:** Start your cave exploration in Ajanta and Ellora off Aurangabad, and then loop down to the Bedse and Bhaja caves. Continue northwest to base yourself in Mumbai for Elephants caves before ending the journey in Bahrot. The best season to do this trip is in the cooler months from October to March.



## Eco hot spot

Enter the rustic lanes of Amboli

**What:** You wouldn't want to blink in Amboli! Undoubtedly, one of the most serene spots in the **Sahayadris**, **Amboli** feels like its rising out of a postcard. The thickly wooded forests, hasty waterfalls, relaxed creeks and great accommodation options are reason enough for a short rustic break for the solo traveller. Reserve this break for the monsoons, when traversing the Amboli hills offers enchanting shades of green and swollen waterfalls.

**Why:** Developed by a British officer in the late 19th century as

a summer retreat, Amboli might have now lost its colonial charm, but that's no reason for scores of tourists to ditch this over the weekends. Stick to the weekdays to avoid the weekenders. Detour to **Sawantawdi**, (30 km away from Amboli) peering through a foggy ride against the mosaic of green surrounds. Waterfalls, high viewing points, valleys full of rich bio-diversity and angling are in order at Amboli.

**How:** Amboli lies about 500 km south of Mumbai and is connected by road. Plenty of buses ply from the capital. There are a few decent options to stay here. Settle in at Whistling Woods for its proximity to the forest (**09970735635**; [www.amboliww.com](http://www.amboliww.com); ₹2,000 onwards)



## Vineyard hopping

Get high, or simply chill by gushing streams

**What:** Get drenched in India's lush wine country, **Nashik**, for an indulgent solo trip. Having taken the country by storm with its revolutionary outlook towards making the beverage a popular accomplice for having a good time, the city's vineyards are the new destination for a flavour of luxury.

**Why:** Spirited sessions of wine tasting, trips to the vineyards and even an annual festival attributed to the wine culture of the country, this is the place for you to spoil yourself silly. Apart from wine, the trip can be spruced up with cycling around the vineyard flanked narrow roads, a picnic by countryside streams, kayaking in still lakes or just settling in with a good book.

**How:** Book yourself at **Beyond Vineyard Resort** (+91 253 3027777; [www.sulawines.com](http://www.sulawines.com); ₹5,500 onwards) close to the Sula vineyards in Nashik. The resort promises unplugging from the urban bustle to be soaked in all things wine during your stay. Nashik is 185 km from Mumbai and is well connected by rail and road. The Sula Fest will be held on the 7th and 8th of February.



## For the love of outdoors

Skydiving, snorkelling, scuba diving and a lot more

**What:** Adventure capital of India' is a befitting moniker to the western state with its umpteen options for outdoor enthusiasts. Skydiving, snorkelling, scuba diving and rafting down on a rushing river are some of the things that the *active* traveller can plug into an itinerary. From the dare-devil tryst with gravity while skydiving to a rendezvous with the otherworldly marine life below the sea, this is the perfect destination to amp up the adrenalin rush.

**Why:** One of the most professionally run sky diving schools in Pune gives you the opportunity to dive mid-air from the dizzying height of more than 10,000 ft. The **Phoenix Academy** is equipped with top-of-the-line equipment and instructors to usher you into a sport of ultimate thrills. For scuba diving and snorkelling, head to **Tarkarli**. If hurtling down the rough rapids of the Kundalika River is your idea of adventure, then head in the direction of Kolad.

**How:** All the adventure activities are weather dependent but the best period to explore are the months between October and March. Pune's Phoenix Sky Diving Academy is just four hours from Mumbai (**09822097452**; [www.phoenixskydivingacademy.com](http://www.phoenixskydivingacademy.com); from ₹33,000 onwards for courses). For ocean adventures, book with **Tarkarli Scuba Diving** (**09167571732**; [www.tarkarliscubadiving.com](http://www.tarkarliscubadiving.com); ₹1,500 onwards). White water rafting on the rapids of Kundalika can be experienced with **Kolad Rafting** (+91 9820 60 66 88; [www.koladrafting.com](http://www.koladrafting.com); ₹1,400 onwards).



## Live the village life

Switch off technology and live like a local

**What:** If books have been your only insight into the villages of India, its time you took a solo trip into the very pulse of the country with those who know the place the best. Maharashtra's well thought out and sensitively crafted rural tourism programmes are the best in the country. Whether you are seeking a brush with voluntourism or just plain insight into simple living, this is the state for you.

**Why:** Maharashtra's rich countryside still remains largely untreaded. Those with an offbeat palate will appreciate rural tourism in **Jawahar** or the **Purushwadi Fireflies** viewing trip with Grassroutes. If you are taken in with the village life then you might just want to spend a night in the door-less village of Shani Shignapur, located about 35 km from Ahmednagar. Jawahar is often given the tag of 'Scotland of India' for its green expanses and unassuming ambience. A couple of days in the low mountains offer a near-cathartic break for city slickers. Come May and the valleys of Purushwadi turn into a canvas of stars—look closer and you have millions of fireflies for company. Leave your wallet, camera and any other valuables to serendipity or just divine custody at Shani Shignapur, as the village doesn't have doors.

**How:** Plan your village wanderings with Rural Mania for **Jawahar** (+91 99673 58853) and **Grassroutes** ([www.grassroutes.co.in](http://www.grassroutes.co.in); ₹1,500 onwards). For **Shani Shignapur**, travel about 300 km inland, beyond Ahmednagar. The best time to do this trail is pre-monsoon in late April.

DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY



## Sandscapes

Eat, pray, love on these pristine sands

**What:** Framed by a flat stretch of golden sand, swaying palms and spiraling Sahayadris in the backdrop, the Maharashtra beach trail exemplifies the beauty of the state. Start from **Gorai**, hopping all the way to **Alibag**, **Kashid**, and **Diveagar**, then heading south to **Ganpati Pule** and then finally making a dash to **Tarkarli**. The 600 km stretch can be broken into a couple of days at each destination or use one base to cover a few. For example, Alibag makes for a veritable pit stop for Kashid and Diveagar too.

**Why:** Although weekenders descend on these destinations by droves, you can still find paradisiacal spots along the stretch. Alibag is especially equipped with top of the line resorts and boutique stays for you to enjoy the wide swath of sand but come back to be indulged in luxury. Tarkarli challenges the adventurer in you, with a wide offering of ocean sports.

**How:** The trail is well connected by local buses or one can take a cab for the entire trail. Recommended stay in Alibag includes the Mango Beach House ensconced in the tropical surroundings (**09820008899**; [www.mangoalibaug.com](http://www.mangoalibaug.com); from ₹7,000 onwards)

Admire the sandy stretch at Alibag Fort



A departure from the mundane itineraries, book yourself a ticket to Manipur if an untrodden path is what your heart desires. Walk through the Buning meadow or visit local markets, this is a soloist's dream



## Experience Tamenglong's magic

Take a trip to the heart of Manipur and experience nature at its best

**What:** Sometimes visiting only a part of the state but immersing yourself in it completely, is better than hopping from one destination to another.

The Tamenglong district alone offers a variety of experiences for an induction into Manipuri history and natural sights; Zeilad Lake at Makoi, **Barak, Thalon cave** and the **Buning meadow** make for a wholesome trip.

**Why:** Tamenglong gives the traveller an opportunity to journey into the heart of Manipur, diving into experiences like caving in Thalon,

walking through the sprawling golden yellow Buning meadow and standing at the edge of the stunning Zeilad Lake. You can base yourself in Tamenglong city and take day trips to see the blessed land, rich with rivers, mountains and dense forests.

**How:** Tamenglong is only 140 km from Imphal. Local buses or a personal cab can be hired to reach town. The best season to visit Manipur are the months from November to March, when there is a slight chill in the air.



## Unique markets

Make a pit stop at Ema Keithel

**What:** With a visit to one of the largest women-run markets in India, **Ema Keithel** will open your eyes to a world of self sufficiency, creativity and zeal amongst rural women. Manipur's women mostly run fruit, flowers and vegetable markets, a concept that was started as early as 1533 AD. Born out of a need for a will to survive rather than an economic set up, these markets are used by thousands of women in Manipur.

**Why:** 'Ema' which translates into 'mother' is where the name of the markets comes from. You can visit the one in Imphal, roaming the network of shops that sell fish, wild locally cultivated vegetables, cooked pork and a special *chutney* known as *ironba*. The vibe of this all women market is invigorating and adds a unique touch to your holiday.

**How:** Imphal is easily connected to major cities in India. The Ema Keithel is 7 km from the airport in the heart of the city. The best time to visit Manipur is between October to March.



GAUTAM SHARMA



COURTESY: MANIPUR TOURISM



## Mission adventure

Camp under a starry sky

**What:** The salubrious climate of Manipur allows for the outdoor traveller to dream of mountain trails and camping under the stars. With natural beauty in abundance, Manipur is well suited for all those who would like to explore the state with a filter of adventure activities in its exquisite landscape.

**Why:** Think canoeing, para sailing, trekking, camping and rock climbing in the wilderness. Being a solo traveller, though it is not safe to jump into these adventures on your own, but you can sign up with an established operator for safety and expertise.

**How:** Sign up for short-term courses with The **Manipur Mountaineering and Trekking Association (MMTA)**, a long-standing establishment, which pioneered adventure activities in the state. **Tel: (0) 98630 78472** and book a slot as the courses are set against a specific timetable. **www.mmtamanipur.com**

**+ SECRET** **RICE BEER**

If your palate is as adventurous as your travel needs, then try the local rice beer of Manipur. Traditionally liquor is an important cultural ingredient in the lives of Manipuris. Detour 20 km from Imphal, to Sekmai, to taste the local pungent brew, which is relished by the locals.



INDIA PICTURE



## The Loktak lake

Live like a local and admire the natural beauty of this fresh water lake

**What:** If you are struggling to chalk out an itinerary and all you know is that you want to immerse in local life and natural beauty, a trip around the largest fresh water lake in the North East is worth considering. The Loktak Lake, also known as the 'floating lake' due to the floating vegetation and soil, spreads over 980 sq km. Apart from being an integral water source for the state, it encompasses around it an entire livelihood and an eco system.

**Why:** The Loktak Lake serves as a source of income for rural

fishermen and a biodiversity hot spot, where the endangered Manipur brow-antlered deer is also found. Travel around the lake, touching the three districts of **Thoubal, Imphal West** and **Bishnupur** to get a deep insight of life around the water system.

**How:** Imphal is easily connected to major cities in India so flying in is an easy option. Thoubal and Bishnupur diverge to east and west of the lake from here, forming a triangle between the cities. The best period to travel is between November to early March.



The stunning Loktak lake



A significant departure from the ordinary, Mizoram is yet to become entirely travel savvy. Waterfalls, tiger reserves and trekking trails woo lone travellers with some of the most magnificent landscapes



## Jungle lore

Get lost in the drama of majestic triangular forests of the east

**What:** Enclosed in the dramatic folds of the dense forests of Mizoram, the **Dampa Tiger Reserve, Phawngpui Blue Mountain National Park** and **Murlen National Park** lie in a triangular shape, but the trip helps you cover a large part of the state keeping wildlife in mind. The shadowy jungles, gurgling streams and rustling sounds made will transport you to a world of majestic forest cover.

**Why:** Established in 1985 and declared a Tiger Reserve in 1994, Dampa is the most coveted hot spot for wildlife enthusiasts. Home to leopards, Indian bisons, gibbons, slow loris, wild boars and a variety of reptiles and birds, the tangle of deep forests gives you an otherworldly ambience. The same goes for the southern Phawngpui National Park, which covers only 50 sqkm and Murlen to the east of Aizawl.

**How:** Arrive in Aizawl, the capital city of Mizoram and use this as a base to cover both Dampa and Murlen forest reserves. Phawngpui National Park can be reached by road from Aizawl. Permission is required to enter.



## Hiking holidays

Walk the magical trails of Lengteng and Mawmrang

**What:** The legendary trekking trails of Mizoram may challenge even the most accomplished hiker, but the sense of achievement to scale some of the highest peaks of the state is exhilarating. The most popular trekking route is one that meanders through the Blue Mountain National Park. If that does not fill your appetite, then Lengteng and Mawmrang trails are surely going to amp up the outdoor experience.

**Why:** Hiking through the towering trees and thick undergrowth in the Blue Mountain National Park is nothing short of ethereal. Once you hit the peak and look down at the clouds filling the valley, you will truly get a bird's eye view to the divinity that resides in these forests. The caves, troughs and peaks of the Lengteng and Mawmrang trails are also spectacular.

**How:** You may arrive as a solo traveller to Aizawl, but its best to join conducted treks by locals. Contact **Youth Hostels Association** of India for details on treks in Mizoram ([www.yhaindia.org](http://www.yhaindia.org); **0389 2325263**). The organisation hold treks every November, which can be booked in advance.



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY: MIZORAM TOURISM



## Hmuifang and Reiek Tlang

Explore the biking and hiking trails of the hills

**What:** If you feel that you belong to the mountains alone, explore the most eminent hill stations of Hmuifang Tlang and Reiek Tlang in Mizoram. Whether you choose to explore the hill stations on a mountain bike, a local bus or foot, the spirit of the solo traveller is fully satiated only once you peep down these hilltops. Both Hmuifang Tlang and Reiek Tlang can be accessed easily by Aizawl and offer an insight into local life in the villages other than the jaw dropping views.

**Why:** Reiek Tlang lies 12km west of Aizawl and rests on a 1,548m

elevation that offers great views of the surrounding mountains and valleys. Hmuifang Tlang is about 50km from Aizawl and is a hotspot for biking, hiking and enjoying the biodiversity of the region. Hmuifang Tlang is also the venue for the annual harvest festival in the month of November.

**How:** Both Hmuifang Tlang and Reiek Tlang have clearly chalked out routes so one does not need to go with a guide. Keep Aizawl as the base to explore the two hill stations but do not forget to obtain an Inner Line Permit once you land.



## Shimmering Vantawng falls

Rejuvenate your senses with leisurely picnics

**What:** Be it waterfalls or lakes, camping close to one or even picnicking for an entire afternoon with your feet dipped in water is nothing less than therapeutic. Visit the Vantawng falls south of Aizawl and head further down to the Palak Dil from here. Equally stunning views await at the **Tam Dil**, a reservoir lake close to Aizawl.

**Why:** The highest waterfall of the state, Vantawng lies 137 km off the capital city of Aizawl. The Vanva River plunges down in a rush from a height of 750ft or possibly more as one cannot see the head

of the falls clearly in the forested hillside. One can stand at the bottom and enjoy the spray from the deep fall. Another glistening delight is the Tam Dil Lake, 86 km east of Aizawl. The Palak Dil Lake is the largest in the state and a part of the Palak Wildlife Sanctuary. Spotting unique birds and fauna is not uncommon here.

**How:** Arrive in Aizawl and take the Inner Line Permit required for all travellers. All the spots are best done via road. The closest point to the Vantawng falls is Serchip and the best season to see it in full glory is just after the monsoons in September.

**Surrounded by lush greenery Vantawng fall is named after an ace local swimmer**



**SECRET**

### MIZO HANDICRAFTS

Bag yourself a 'Mizo' look with a traditional ceremonial hat called *Khumbeu*. This is prepared using the rainproof wild leaves of *hnhathial*. You can get this at the Luangmual Handicrafts Centre, 7 km from Aizawl, about half an hour away. The pit stop also encompasses an insight into the other crafts of the region.



Explore this land where folklore is an essential part of life, where age-old traditions still come alive during festivals. Nagaland is perfect to get lost in if you are disappearing alone



DEEP PAHWA/WWW.INDIATODAYIMAGES.COM



## Naga weaves at Hornbill festival

Tribal motifs, colourful shawls and headgear

**What:** Whether it's making baskets or colourful hand-woven shawls, the Nagas have magic in their hands when it comes to craft. Most of the women take this up after cultivation, so there are no major centres to see this. From basketry and weaving, to woodcarving, pottery and metal work, you can find a little of all in most of the Naga villages. The best place to see this under one roof would be at the annual Hornbill Festival held in the first week of December.

**Why:** A plethora of colour unfolds when you visit the Naga villages; colourful shawls, jewellery, headgear, bags and jackets with bright colours and tribal motifs are quite a sight to behold. The solo traveller can trail through the districts in search of the most beautiful designs. Explore the stalls at the Hornbill Festival or the Diezephe Craft village in Dimapur. The micro-financed workshop cum store gives an insight into these local skills. There are plenty of souvenir options that are alluring enough to take home as presents.

**How:** Fly into Dimapur and visit **The Diezephe Craft Village ([www.dimapur.nic.in](http://www.dimapur.nic.in))**, 13 km outside the city. If you are planning on attending the Hornbill festival, then book ahead to stay near the venue at **Kisama Heritage Village**, off Kohima.



## Home stay hopping in villages

Of kitchen fires to beat the cold and endless stories

**What:** Nothing exceeds the soothing experience of huddling around a kitchen fire, with cold meat pieces sizzling slowly above it and the resident cat having monopolised your lap, while listening to local Naga gossip. The best part of Naga homes is the large kitchens, where friends and family congregate in the evenings to beat the cold around the kitchen fire and catch up on the day. If a 'local' experience is what you are looking for as a solo traveller, home stay-hopping across the villages is your best bet.

**Why:** One can hop from Kohima, Khonoma, Tuophema, Mopongchuket to Mon, to experience the local hospitality in Naga homes.

The journey is long and arduous but one that will be filled with adventure and insightful conversations about local culture. Bring along small gifts for your hosts which will be highly welcomed.

**How:** Contact The India Trail, a boutique travel company offering a treasure trove of local experiences and opportunities to explore the unexplored (**rohan.abraham@indiatrail.org**; [www.indiatrail.org](http://www.indiatrail.org))



## Kohima museums

Visit local museums to learn about its history and don't miss Tuophema village

**What:** From Kohima State Museum's invaluable treasures to Tuophema's priceless souvenirs at the Tourist Village, the story of Nagaland's tribal people is best understood at the museums and monuments of the state. Also visit the tower that commemorates the illustrious love story of Jina and Etiben, in Mopongchuket.

**Why:** At the museums, one can travel back in time when Naga valour was represented in the number of feathers in a headdress or hunted scalps were worn as a necklace. Apart from the imbrued history of strife between the tribes, also view the traditional costumes, utensils and objects of daily use.

**How:** You can enter through Jorhat in Assam, making your way to Mopongchuket and then heading south towards Tuophema and then Kohima. October to March is the best time to visit Nagaland when there is a chill in the air. Use public transport or get in touch with [www.aldertourstravels.com](http://www.aldertourstravels.com);  
**Tel: (0) 94360 11266** to help organise personal transportation.



BHARAT AGGARWAL/WWW.INDIATODAYIMAGES.COM



## Wild Northeast

Experience unique tribal customs and traditions

**What:** Visit the land of the Konyaks in the Mon district, to submerge yourself in the remote villages of the easternmost edge of Nagaland. The elusive former head hunters have safeguarded their culture so well that it is not uncommon to see tattooed faces in traditional attire. Amongst other sightseeing options at Mon, visit the largest village, Longwa, which is situated right on the Myanmar border. In fact, the border bisects the chief's house longitudinally, each half in India and Myanmar.

**Why:** Traditional learning centres called Morungs, the Aoleong Monyu festival in April, trophies of animal and human skeletons and roaming through tea estates are some of the experiences you can expect here. If you love the outdoors, then each village has a short trail to hike around.

**How:** You can access Mon through Jorhat in Assam and from Kohima. Hiring a cab is the best way to get around as the local buses take extremely long due to untarred roads. The best season to visit Mon is between October to April. An Inner Line Permit is required for all travellers.



SECRET

### ADRENALINE RUSH

Just 25 km from Kohima, the Dzoukou Valley in

Nagaland is close to divinity for outdoor enthusiasts. Situated at the height of 2,462 m, the low hills of the valley are carpeted in white and red flowers at the end of winter and spring season.

October and March are the two windows when this inexplicably beautiful sight is available to see.

INDIA PICTURE

Konyak Naga warrior in traditional dress in aggressive mode





Long fabled amongst travellers for its serene Golden Temple, langars at scenic gurudwaras, authentic farm-stays and delicious street food, Punjab could be the highlight of this new year for your solo wanderings



## Farm stays

Soak in the winter sun on a charpoy

**What:** Bright green fields topped with yellow mustard flowers is a scene that one might almost always associate with Punjab. There are no better environs than a span of sprawling vegetation around you to relax and unwind. Top it with the warm Punjabi hospitality and you have a perfect lazy holiday planned for you. The farm stays of Punjab, offer just the experience to nudge you towards pacing down and enjoying the simple way of living. This is perfect for city slickers who want to slow down the pace of life.

Be it **Punjabiyaat** farm stay near Amritsar, A Hotel off Ludhiana, **Citrus Country** in Hoshiarpur or **Deep Roots** in Ranjitpura, the options to get your hands dirty in the farmland or tending to cows are plenty.

**Why:** Nothing trumps the crispy air of the countryside along with every dish prefixed with 'fresh from the farm' before you dig into your meal. The solo traveller can sink deeper in solitude and enjoy a good book or a chat with the farmers.

**How:** Punjabiyaat is amongst the most well known farm stays of Punjab with an authentic touch of local living. Contact: (0) 98187 05508; [www.itmenaaanlodges.com](http://www.itmenaaanlodges.com)

## Langar hopping

Spiritual journey with a twist

**What:** More than religious inclination, many travellers are fascinated by the *langars* served at the Gurudwaras. Simple yet memorable, skip from Golden Temple in Amritsar

to **Takht Sri Keshgarh Sahib** in Anandpur and Tarn Taran to sample the tranquil environs and the brilliant food that they serve to all.

**Why:** While it is impossible to

visit all gurudwaras, visiting a few gives you an essence of the religion that took shape under the ten Sikh gurus, each with a unique characteristic of bravado and kindness. While Golden Temple is considered the holiest, Anandpur Sahib is where Guru Teg Bahadur stayed and Tarn Taran's Goindwal

Sahib is where even Emperor Akbar stopped for *langar*. It's also famous for a *baoli* (step well).

**How:** Between October to March is the best time to visit Punjab. Plenty of local buses connect the cities; else one can hire a cab for a speedy trip. Avoid overnight local buses.



## The nationalistic twist

The Indo-Pak Sarhad experience

**What:** Punjab is undoubtedly one of the key states that was affected by the poignant separation of the country in 1947. Till date, it bears testimony to the severe rift that was created almost six decades ago. Nationalistic tourism seems to have created a niche for itself. Whether it is the beating retreat ceremony of the Wagah Border or lunch at the heart warming **Sarhad Restaurant**, the constant reminder of an unbroken cord with the land across the border is hard to miss.

**Why:** While the Wagah border is bubbling with excited visitors on either side during an exaggerated mock rivalry show by the guards, a restaurant like Sarhad bridges the gap between the two countries. The restaurant not only imports spices, recipes and even a Pakistani beer but even aesthetics from across the border. The restaurant is a refreshing break from the unpleasant association that nationalistic themed tourism can bring. Other spots like Pul Kanjri and the border villages are also veritable spots.

**How:** Amritsar is well connected to Delhi by both flights and train. Explore the city during winters for a pleasant weather. Wagah border ceremony takes place from 5 pm to 6 pm/entry free. Book a table at **Sarhad, tel: (0) 98155 55931**



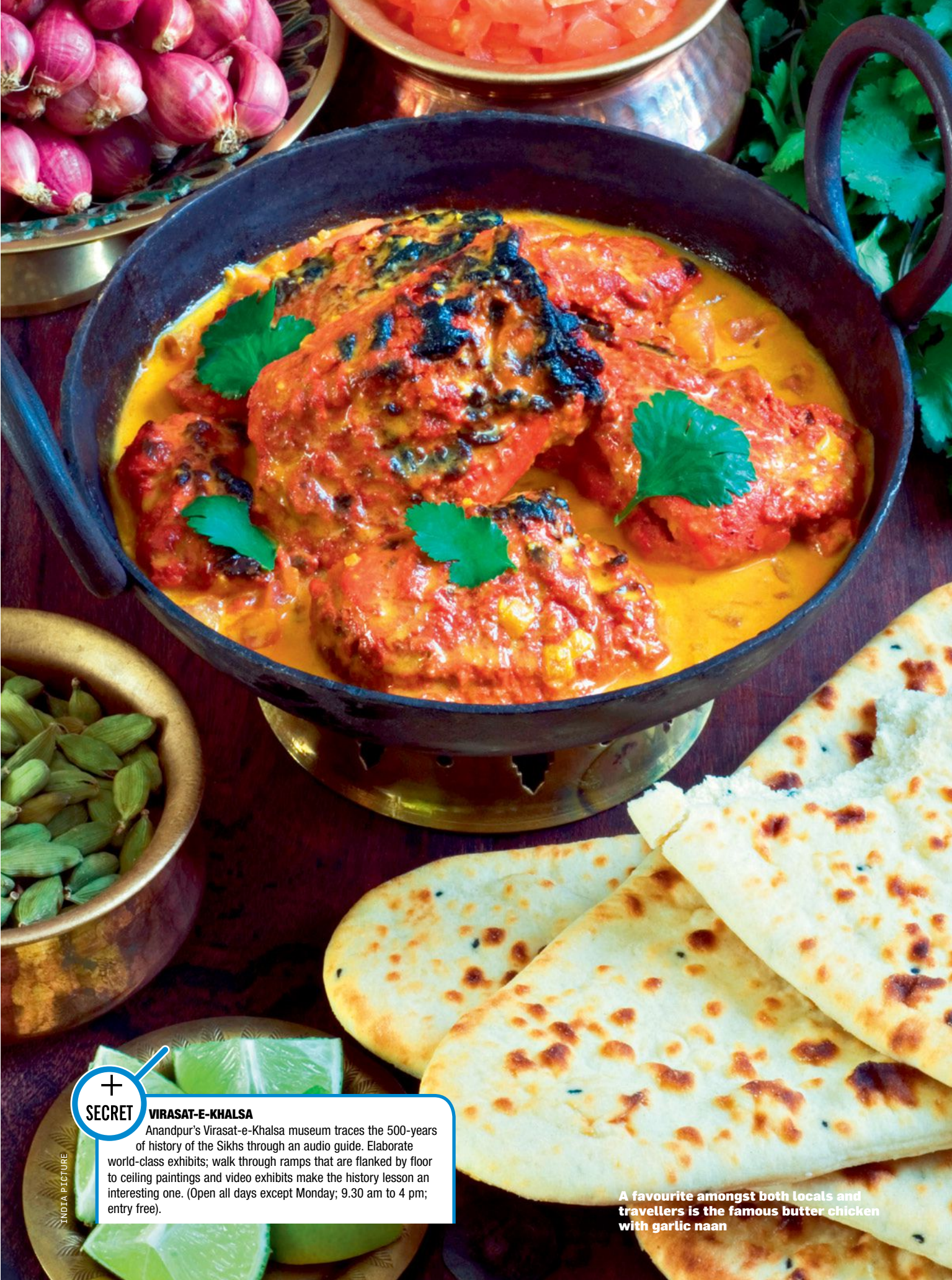
## Food fetish

Sign up for a heritage food walk

**What:** This trip should be a single-minded endeavour to go back with some extra kilograms. Warm up with a hot cup at Gurmit Singh's tea stall, which has been around for 58 years and then make your way to the sinful Makhan Ka Dhaba for staples like boneless sole fish. Neutralise the spices with Ahuja's kesar wali lassi before taking a short break. The evenings call for Amritsari machi, mutton tikka, and tandoori chicken at Surjit Chicken House or Kesar Da Dhaba for its signature maa ki daal. You will need another day to try other local delicacies like pudina kanji at Brijwaasi, the pure ghee thali at Bhrawan Da Dhaba and the specials at Pappi Dhaba.

**Why:** Ditch the calorie count and dive into the heady mix of *paranths*, *lassi*, *Patiala wale chhole* and the best *chai* cup you would ever set your hands on, in the bustling streets of Amritsar. Soaked, dipped and sizzling in fatty splendour, one this is for sure; you will never view street food without thinking of this city.

**How:** Sign up with **Davinder Singh Chawla (0)99885 03458; [www.punjabtourism.gov.in](http://www.punjabtourism.gov.in)** for an Amritsar Heritage Walk themed around food.



**+ SECRET**

**VIRASAT-E-KHALSA**

Anandpur's Virasat-e-Khalsa museum traces the 500-years of history of the Sikhs through an audio guide. Elaborate world-class exhibits; walk through ramps that are flanked by floor to ceiling paintings and video exhibits make the history lesson an interesting one. (Open all days except Monday; 9.30 am to 4 pm; entry free).

**A favourite amongst both locals and travellers is the famous butter chicken with garlic naan**

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Still inching slowly towards creating a spot for itself on the travel map of the Northeast, Tripura remains pleasantly away from tourist clichés. Running to its own rhythm, for those going solo, it is as offbeat as it gets



## Shopping

You can pick up a few home-made crafts with traditional motifs

**What:** Cane, bamboo and wooden products are the three main highlights of the craft sector of Tripura. Densely woven cane baskets and exquisite household products created out of wood and bamboo can be seen commonly in the shops. Distinct tribal motifs and styles appear on different products, giving them a unique touch and character. The best way to see the crafts in the making is to visit the small clusters of homes in different villages, which are known for their local handicrafts.

**Why:** Since tourism is at a relatively nascent stage in the state a lot of planning can be done on the ground, depending on local contacts. It's mostly in regions like **Sadar, Tamakdi, Mohanpur, Churilam, Sonamura, Melaghar, Khowai, Kailasahar** and **Belonia** that the industry thrives in households. These villages lie in a small radius around Agartala.

**How:** To see the craft sector at close quarters keep Agartala your base. Connected to key cities by air and rail, it is not difficult to reach. Visit during the winter months when its most pleasant for your explorations.



## Countryside bliss

Get acquainted with Jampui Hills' dramatic history

**What:** Tripura's pristine countryside offers places like the **Thaidawr Peak** and **Jampui Hills** make for great getaways—ones you would never want to come back from. Carpeted with thick forests and abundant fauna, the same hills are also home to rich cultural diversity. Thaidawr Peak and Jampui Hills, coupled with Agartala's sightseeing options make for a wholesome trip for the solo traveller.

**Why:** The Jampui Hills are particularly interesting given their



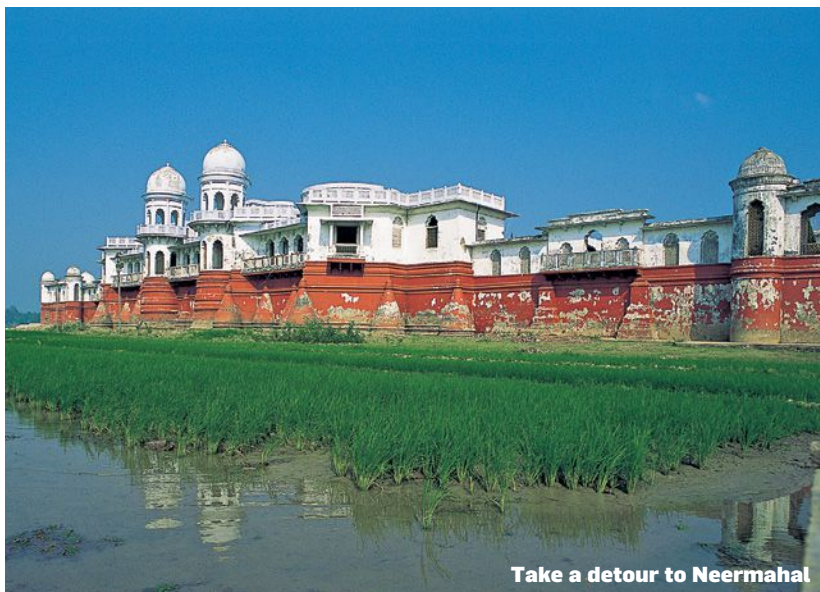
## The royal life

Soak in Tripura's architectural delights

**What:** Use the filter of royalty to create your Tripura itinerary, focusing on **Neermahal**, the summer palace of the Maharaja and the **Ujjayanta Palace** to get a glimpse of Tripura's history. You can take a detour from these destinations for more sightseeing options.

**Why:** King Bir Bikram Kishore Debbarman built Neermahal or the 'water palace' in 1930. The unique architectural style with Hindu and Islamic influences is the biggest draw for travellers. The reflection of the palace in the Rudra Sagar Lake is a classic image that one associates with the palace. Situated in **Agartala**, the Ujjayanta Palace is the former royal palace of the princely state of Tripura. Well-manicured Mughal gardens surround the white palace grounds, which house Hindu temples dedicated to Lakshmi Narayan, Uma-Maheshwari, Kali and Jagannath.

**How:** The two palaces are easily accessible from the capital city of Agartala, with Ujjayanta Palace within the city limits and Neermahal just 60 km away. The best season to travel to Tripura is in the winter months of October to April.



Take a detour to Neermahal

ANSHUMAN SEN

dramatic history. The Mizo people once occupied the hills in the 16th century and slowly started to migrate westward into Tripura. The exodus continued over the next hundreds of years till a dreaded disease called Zawngghri finally chased the Mizo community away. Even then, a handful continued to stay back in Jampui Hills. The culture of the hills is vividly different from that of the rest of Tripura. Heading that side, you can reserve November for the Orange Festival in the Jampui Hills.

**How:** One has to travel 206 km east of Agartala to reach the Jampui Hills. Cabs and local buses are available from the city. Book yourself at **Eden Tourist Lodge Tel: (0381) 2325 930** at Vanghmun Village for basic facilities and matching cost.



## Wonders etched in stone

Chase legends engraved in massive rocks at Unakoti

**What:** Zig-zag through the sinuous hills of Tripura, 135 km north east of Agartala, to arrive at the **rock carved figures** from 7th-9th centuries. The massive rocks that bear carvings of gods and goddesses punctuate the sprawling green topography. The legend goes that Lord Shiva set out to find Kashi with a troupe of a crore deities and rested here for one night. He asked his coterie to wake up early before sunrise the next morning. When no one but himself woke up early, Shiva cursed them to become stone idols and carried on the journey.

**Why:** **Unakoti Hill** is often combined with Agartala's sightseeing options such as the Neermahal Palace, Tripura Sundari Temple, Ujjayanta Palace and the state museum. A trip to Agartala is not complete without the detour to Unakoti, so spare a day for the visit.

**How:** Agartala's airport is a small one but has connections to major cities in India. There is also a railway station that serves as the major nodal point of the state. Arrive between October to March and hire a cab for 'out of city' tours.



### SECRET

#### TRIPURA SUNDARI TEMPLE

The gruesome legend of Sati has its traces in Tripura as well. Visit the Tripura Sundari Temple, which was constructed in 1501. Dedicated to Kali, it's visited by a stream of devotees who come to commemorate the Goddess whose right foot is said to have fallen here while Shiva danced with her mutilated corpse. Animal sacrifices are common but the intense religiosity is what one experiences richly.

KALYAN CHAKRAVORTY

Discover the history behind the rock carved figures of Unakoti Hill

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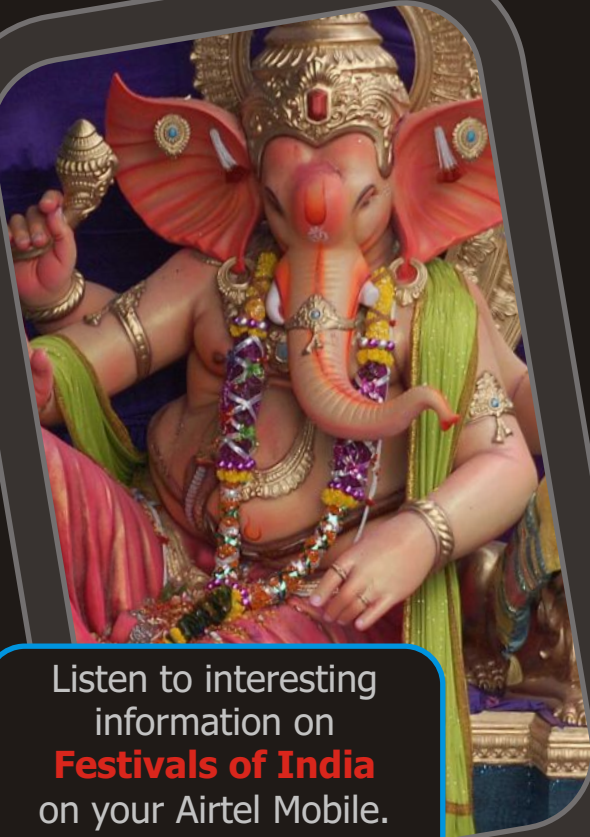
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