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ISSUE!

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Mongolian eagle hunter in traditional clothing, holding a golden eagle with a yurt in the background

# AFFORDABLE ODES LINATIONS

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#### OLD WORLD

IN EGYPT AMONG
THE PYRAMIDS

#### **AROUND PRAGUE**

THE MAGIC OF THE CZECH CAPITAL

#### LIVING LAOS

GOING SOLO ALONG THE MEKONG

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HACKS FOR A SUSTAINABLE TRIP

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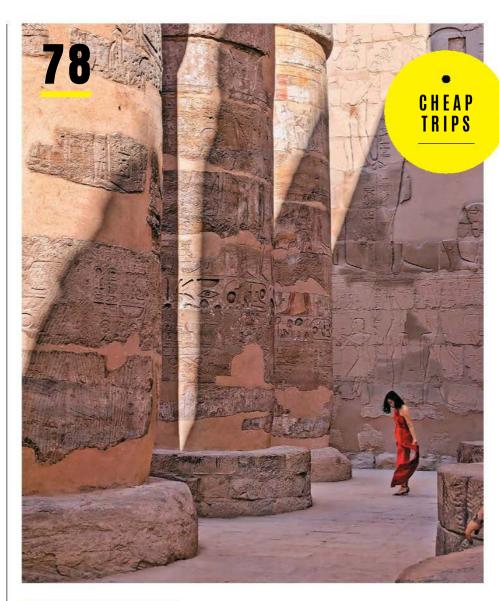
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of England



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### FEED YOUR WANDERLUST



**Anindita Ghosh** 

TÜRKIYE IS A HAVEN FOR CRAFTS, AND YOU CAN PICK UP BEAUTIFUL RUGS, CERAMICS AND FELT AT VFRY AFFORDABLE RATES

#### HEN I TRAVELLED TO TÜRKIYE ABOUT A YEAR AND

a half ago, I was pleasantly surprised that everything was so affordable. From the fresh produce and groceries at the supermarkets to the local fashion brands at high-end districts like İstiklal Caddesi to the fantastic meals at the many establishments specialising in Adana kebabs and

other Turkish delicacies, it was such a relief not to have to keep converting prices in my head—a particularly odious task for someone as terrible at maths like me. With a Turkish lira equivalent to about three rupees, there's a lot you can do on a meagre budget. And your money will go even further in smaller cities like Konya.

I remember walking into a shop laden with sweets like Lokum, Baklava and the utterly sinful Turkish Toluma, jalebi-like deep-fried dough in syrup, and buying boxes and boxes of these sweet treats for friends and family back home without worrying about the cost. Türkiye is also a haven for crafts, and you can pick up beautiful rugs, ceramics and felt at very affordable rates.

In this issue of Outlook Traveller, we have zeroed in on 12 such affordable international destinations where you can have a satisfying "foreign" holiday without going bankrupt.

While Southeast Asian countries are known for being easy on the wallet, we've uncovered some gems like Laos and the Philippines that should be on your radar. And if you are up for a truly off-grid adventure, Mongolia is the place to head to. Our 10-page photo essay will make you yearn for the wide open spaces and the romance of the vast steppes.

The other great discoveries in this issue are picturesque European destinations like Slovenia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, which offer all the experiences of their pricier neighbours on the Continent at a fraction of the price. We've done all the research on your behalf, from visa fees to how much you'll have to pay for accommodation and sightseeing, to the best flight routes, so you really have no excuse not to book that holiday anymore.

Plus, our free 16-page Kazakhstan guidebook has all the information you need for your next trip; the country is one of the most affordable for tourists worldwide.





The Charles Bridge in Prague (Pg 54)

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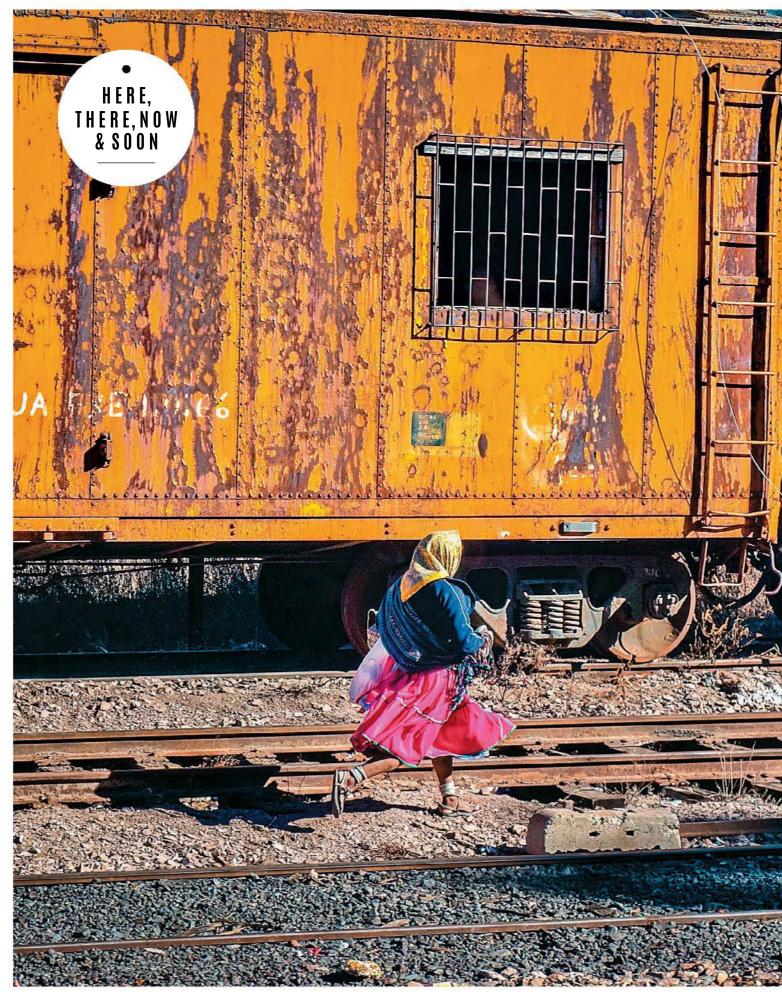
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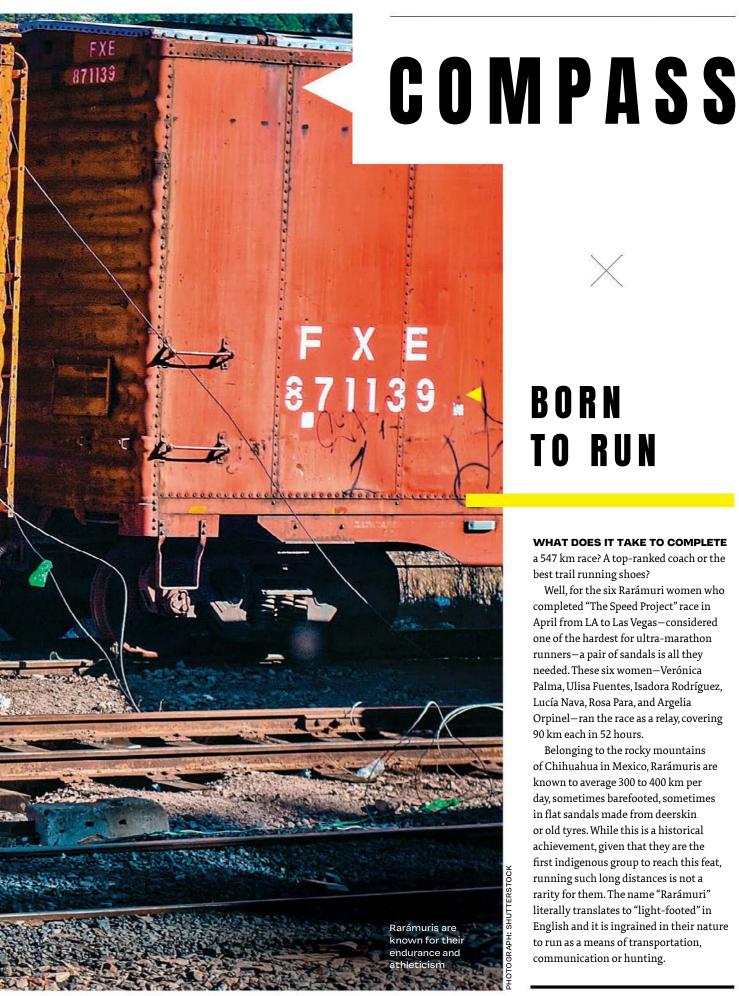


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### **BORN** TO RUN

#### WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO COMPLETE

a 547 km race? A top-ranked coach or the best trail running shoes?

Well, for the six Rarámuri women who completed "The Speed Project" race in April from LA to Las Vegas-considered one of the hardest for ultra-marathon runners—a pair of sandals is all they needed. These six women-Verónica Palma, Ulisa Fuentes, Isadora Rodríguez, Lucía Nava, Rosa Para, and Argelia Orpinel—ran the race as a relay, covering 90 km each in 52 hours.

Belonging to the rocky mountains of Chihuahua in Mexico, Rarámuris are known to average 300 to 400 km per day, sometimes barefooted, sometimes in flat sandals made from deerskin or old tyres. While this is a historical achievement, given that they are the first indigenous group to reach this feat, running such long distances is not a rarity for them. The name "Rarámuri" literally translates to "light-footed" in English and it is ingrained in their nature to run as a means of transportation, communication or hunting.



**NITIN CHAUDHARY** 

### A SLICE OF ITALY

HE FIRST THING YOU NOTICE in Naples is Diego Maradona. His face appears as graffiti on the walls under bridges, as murals covering the side of buildings, painted on café chairs, imprinted on bedroom sheets, and even marketed on energy drinks. Where his face is not watching over, his jersey number—number 10-is present. Souvenir stands are covered in scarves, jerseys, and posters of Maradona with trinkets of red chillies which are considered to be a symbol of luck across the region. Why is Maradona so prevalent everywhere? I wondered aloud while waiting in a queue to grab a slice of pizza.

"Well, he was our saviour," answered a local man standing next to me. "Here we believe we have been robbed for centuries but Diego was a saviour for us."

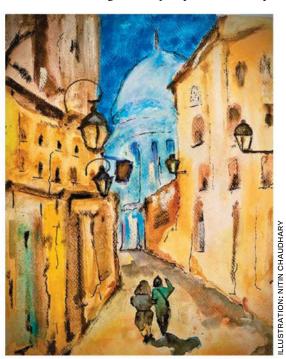
Neapolitans' deep-seated sense of injustice stems from the Risorgimento era—a feeling that Naples got the short end of the stick during the unification between the North and the South. They saw the North as the beneficiary of power and prosperity, while other regions, including their own, were marginalised. In this context Maradona's shortcomings were overlooked as long as he managed to beat the northern teams.

In 1987 Maradona was immortalised in this city when Napoli clinched the elusive double in soccer, a triumph unmatched by any mainland southern team in history. The city erupted into a vibrant mosaic of sky-blue hues as streets were washed with the team's colours in a celebration that spanned weeks. The victory resonated deeply with the people of Naples, underscoring

their unwavering devotion to their team, and elevating Maradona to an iconic status—their God. Since then, the identities of Naples and Maradona have been inseparable.

I came to Naples to eat fresh mozzarella, drink espresso, and soak in the sun. Tourism in Naples has rapidly climbed in recent years. Once feared for violence by visitors, the criminal gangs have been clamped down on by the city authorities, who have done well to invest in the city and restore peace and order. As a result, tourists who once passed through the city and considered it a stepping stone to the pretty islands of Ischia, Amalfi, and Capri, are spending time in the city itself.

Naples, watched over by the Vesuvius volcano, is still a glorious city despite the



Naples has an interesting connection with Diego Maradona

violence that once, and to an extent still, marks it. The best way to appreciate the city is to go to the old parts, marked with narrow lanes that slither through this part of the city. This area of Naples is sprinkled with street food shops, called "friggitoria," and cheap bars that double up as cafés in the mornings.

If you drop in to one of these cafés in the morning the barista will strike a conversation and would soon be doling out tips on what to do in the city. One such recommendation pointed me to Sorbillo, a local favourite pizza shop that serves deep-fried pizza bread stuffed with potato, polenta, and eggplant and served in a paper cone. Food is this city's other love besides Maradona. Here, everything, including pizzas, can be deep-fried. The greasiness and

accompanying lethargy melted away with quick sips of thick espresso that's a must after every meal.

"Soccer and coffee are the two religions in Naples," a Neapolitan friend had warned me before I headed to the city, "you can't escape them. If you don't want to be killed then don't wear a soccer jersey from another team, and when offered an espresso, never say no."

That's what I did for the three days I spent in Naples. I headed to bars for a morning jolt of coffee, followed by slices of deep-fried pizza and of mozzarella bathed with olive oil and decorated with slices of tomatoes for lunch and dinner, before washing away the lethargy with caffeine. And then I stepped out to mingle with the sound of Italian chatter and the melodies of street musicians. So, if you are searching for a place that breathes with frenzy, is bathed in murals, and has an unmatched love for life, try Naples. **>OT** 



# GO FAR WITH HDFC ERGO

Parthanil Ghosh, Director & Chief Business Officer, HDFC ERGO General Insurance, on securing your journey with the right travel insurance policy



W

#### HILE TRAVELLING IS ALL

about embracing the unknown and being spontaneous, the safety net of a comprehensive travel insurance policy ensures that unforeseen circumstances

don't deter you from exploring the new. If you have doubts about travel insurance, Parthanil Ghosh, Director & Chief Business Officer, HDFC ERGO General Insurance, lays out key points to consider.

### Why should I buy travel insurance when I already have a global health insurance plan?

Usually, a family goes on vacation for 10 to 14

days, and based on our experience, medical emergencies are least expected during this period. While the thought of going on a vacation brings excitement, issues like loss of passport or baggage, flight cancellation, etc., can dampen the holiday spirit.

A comprehensive travel insurance plan covers both travel and medical-related crises and is useful for people with a global health insurance plan. Under HDFC ERGO's Explorer travel insurance, one can get coverage against health emergencies, flight mishaps, various in-trip crises, etc.

#### What advice would you like to give someone who is planning to buy travel insurance?

One should consider the following points to buy the right travel insurance policy:

 Not all travel insurance policies cover all destinations. Therefore, it is pertinent to check the list of destinations covered to ensure the country (ies) where you intend to go are covered.

- Ensure that the travel policy covers the entire trip duration, including any stopovers or layovers.
- Those who travel frequently can opt for multi-trip policies, which curtail the hassle of frequent purchases. There are plans for senior citizens and students as well, which one can purchase as per their needs.
- Those planning to undertake any sports activities during their trip should ensure that the travel insurance provides coverage for adventurous sports, and sports equipment cover as well.
- Check if the insurance policy provides coverage for compensation for flight overbooking or bounce hotel booking.
- Check what the policy includes and excludes for a seamless claim experience.
   Do not assume that a travel policy will cover all the unfortunate events.
   Pay attention to specific activities or destinations that may have additional requirements or restrictions.
- Claims are the moment of truth; hence, choose a reputable insurance provider with a good claim settlement ratio and fast turnaround time.
- Look for any additional benefits offered, such as coverage for trip delays, missed connections, rental car protection, dental treatment, etc. and assess if these align with your specific travel needs.
- Look for an insurer with a wide network of hospitals and a 24/7 customer service helpline or online chat support, which

becomes important when the policyholder is in a different geography and time zone. At HDFC ERGO, we have a 24/7 call centre operating in 10 languages, and travellers can also reach out to us via email, WhatsApp or website.

#### Tell us about ways to ensure my claim doesn't get rejected

Having a travel insurance policy is undoubtedly a boon for travellers, and to ensure a seamless claim experience, it is advised to:

- Read your travel insurance policy thoroughly before you travel. Knowing what is covered and what is not can avoid misunderstandings and ensure you have complete knowledge of the claim process.
- Maintain a proper record of all documents, including receipts, medical reports, police reports (in case of theft or loss), confirmation from airlines if the flight has been delayed or loss of baggage, etc.
- Notify the insurer as soon as an incident happens. Many insurance policies have a specific time frame during which it is essential to inform the insurer, as any delay may lead to claim rejection.
- Adhere to the procedure as listed in the policy which includes obtaining required approvals before making a claim, such as before incurring expenses on medical treatment or evacuation, etc.
- Maintain honesty and accuracy while filing a claim, as any discrepancies or false information can lead to the claim rejection.



**ANAND NEELAKANTAN** 

### SECRETS OF SIRPUR

in Raipur, the sweltering sun greeted me with a stifling embrace. Beads of sweat formed on my brow but I couldn't help but smile. Smaller Indian cities hold secrets and untapped treasures for those willing to explore beyond the bustling metropolises.

My visit was to speak on my latest book, "The Asura Way," at the Young Chamber of Commerce's book club. But I knew this trip promised more than just another engagement. Raipur once used to be the gateway to an enigmatic world—the ancient realm of Sripura (or Sirpur), roughly 70 km away in distance and 5,000 years in time.

The taxi grumbled as it slowly departed from Raipur, leaving behind the bustling city

life. We drove past endless fields with rolling hills. Swirls of rusty dust followed our path along the road.

As we neared Sirpur the terrain changed dramatically. The land became verdant with tall trees blocking sunlight. Except for a lone goatherd with his countless goats who briefly held up my journey, I couldn't see a human being for many kilometres. Before I could completely succumb to sleep, we arrived at Sirpur without any indication. This Indian town was unlike any other I had seen, void of the usual sights of tyre repair shops, small eateries, and roadside shrines.

\*

Sirpur, once the magnificent capital of the Panduvanshi dynasty in the 5th century, is now a forgotten hamlet. Its extravagant monuments still stand as mute witnesses

to its faded glory days. Despite being an unpopular tourist spot, it holds an irresistible allure for history buffs like me, especially as it was once home to the famed Chinese-Buddhist traveller Hiuen Tsang.

The place was surprisingly well-maintained with none of the garbage piles that mark Indian pilgrimage places. In a deserted garden, ASI oversees a collection of temples and a museum. I had to wait for an eternity until a drowsy ticket clerk reluctantly appeared and handed me my pass with a scowl. Our indifference to our history and heritage is baffling. Maybe we have too much history and monuments to be excited about anything. In any other country, such a place would be teeming with tourists.

I was struck by the uniquely red laterite stone from which the monuments had been fashioned. Unusual for temples, the deep, rusted hues lent the structures an earthy, primordial quality. As I made my way through the barren ASI lawn, I caught my first glimpse of the Laxman Temple. It stood tall in the centre, stunningly contrasting the otherwise featureless surroundings. The temple was built entirely out of red laterite stone, similar to most other structures in Sirpur. Its intricate carvings and delicate details were a testament to the exceptional skills of the craftsmen who had created it centuries ago.

\*

Between the 5th and 8th centuries, Sirpur was a megacity with substantial influence in the region. It would have easily been one of the biggest cities in the world during its time. During the reign of the South Kosala kingdom, this region blossomed into an influential hub where Hindu, Buddhist,



Stone sculptures at Surang Tila, Sirpur, Chhattisgarh

and Jain faiths intermingled. It was famous enough to attract Tsang to live in one of its *viharas* (a meeting place of Buddhist monks) for many years. I could almost envision him wandering these busy lanes, marvelling at the sacred shrines and *viharas* dotting the landscape. His detailed accounts had first piqued my curiosity about this fabled settlement of many centuries ago. An air of mystery and reverence still clung to the crumbling ruins, remnants of Sirpur's hallowed past.

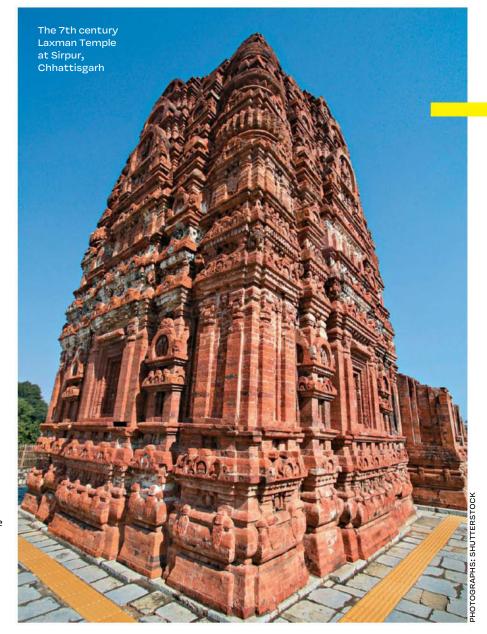
Recent excavations by the ASI have gradually resurrected slumbering memories from the layers of the earth. Twelve Buddhist *viharas*, one Jain *vihara*, and a stunning array of monolithic Buddha and Mahavira statues were among the treasures disinterred.

There is a nice yet desolate museum housed within the premises of the ancient Laxman Temple. Despite its modest appearance, it cradles a remarkable collection of artefacts recovered from Sirpur's hallowed soil.

There are other monuments around the Laxman Temple. The crown jewel of Sirpur was undoubtedly the Surang Tila temple complex, its grandeur humbling even from afar. As I approached, the imposing structure revealed itself—a raised pillared terrace connected to the ruins of an ornate *mandapa* platform below. The *viharas* are now in ruins but it is captivating to envision the past while standing beneath the decaying columns.

A short amble brought me to the serene Gandheshwar Temple situated on the banks of the languid Mahanadi river. The peace was almost palpable, reminiscent of scenes from colonial paintings where Hindu ascetics sat insouciantly by the riverside. I sat under the sprawling banyan tree in the ghat, watching the river flow by. As if on cue, a group of sadhus materialised straight out of a colonial-era painting. I watched, entranced, as a slithering snake momentarily broke the tableau, gliding perilously close to the unperturbed holy men. Neither the snake

THE VIHARAS ARE NOW IN RUINS BUT IT IS CAPTIVATING TO ENVISION THE PAST STANDING BELOW THE DECAYING COLUMNS



nor the holy men were bothered by each other's presence.

\*

As I wandered past the haunting relics, I couldn't shake the profound sense that I was an insignificant speck in the river of ages that had flowed through these ancient stones. Somewhere under the soil lay the remnants of a once-thriving market that would have buzzed with life and commerce along this riverbank.

I closed my eyes, letting the gentle lapping of the Mahanadi transport my mind's eye back through the centuries. I could almost discern the echoing thrum of distant conches and drums heralding the arrival of trade boats heavy with exotic wares. Far away from the hell hole of Indian cities with its pollution, chaos, overflowing drains, honking and madness, such an India also exists.

#### **GETTING THERE**

Raipur is the closest railway station on the Bombay-Howrah main line, while Mahasamund is the nearest stop on the Raipur-Waltair line. Regular buses and taxis are available from Raipur and Mahasamund. The nearest airport, Raipur, is 84 kilometres away and connects with major cities. **>OT** 

Anand Neelakantan is a bestselling author of 17 books, doubling as a columnist, screenwriter, and public speaker



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**SADAF HUSSAIN** 

### JHARKHAND IN A SIP



Small-town India is a great place to discover nutritious and cooling 'desi' drinks

N VAST URBAN SPRAWLS
where life pulsates frenetical

where life pulsates frenetically, we often surrender to the convenience of pre-packaged sustenance. Bottled and boxed consumables populate endless

supermarket aisles, a stark contrast to the cherished rituals of small-town existence where every sip and morsel is steeped in local tradition.

On my recent trip to Ranchi, I embraced

Jharkhand's undulating landscapes and culinary riches. Under the scorching sun of a fierce Indian summer with dry leaves dancing in a hot breeze, the city offered a refreshingly unique tableau of indigenous beverages. Exploring the city's heart, just across Church Complex—a popular local haunt—I stumbled upon a cart bursting with the vibrant green of raw mangoes. The vendor was selling Aam Jhora, a tangy and sweet mango sherbet made with mangoes charred on an open

flame or baked in a traditional clay oven. A hint of smokiness was balanced with spices like roasted cumin, chilli, and black salt. This beloved drink quenched my thirst and served as a local remedy for heat stroke. It embodied the essence of Jharkhand's culinary ethos: irresistible simplicity.

A few steps further I encountered a wooden cart painted in shades of the earth and blaring a Nagpuri song. Adorned with yellow packets of sattu the board read in Hindi:



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**Top and below:** A tribal woman pours Handia for a customer; mahua flowers collected in a pot at Kaptipada, Odisha

"Dinesh Sattu Sharbat." Here, sattu—roasted Bengal gram flour revered as the "poor man's protein"—transformed into a cooling tonic.

Historical accounts suggest that sattu has been a staple in Bihar for over five centuries. In "Indian Food Tradition: A Historical Companion," author K T Achaya cites a 16th-century document that details sattu's role in the diet of the Indo-Gangetic plains. You can use this versatile ingredient

KNOWN TO ME THROUGH THE TREE THAT STOOD OUTSIDE MY RANCHI HOME, THE FLAVOURS OF MAHUA WERE FAMILIAR to make a refreshing cold drink. While it can be sweetened with sugar and blended with cold milk and chopped dry fruits, the savoury version is a local favourite. This variant is enhanced with roasted cumin powder, salt, chopped onions, green chillies, coriander leaves, and other spices.

Through each sip and stir, Ranchi revealed its stories. More than mere thirst quenchers, these beverages are narrators of history, culture, and community—each glass is a montage of local life and well-shared human experience. "Sherbet," however, is a Persian word and in India, during the era of Emperor Babur, it became widely popular. Made from various fruits, flowers, and herbs, these drinks can be sweet, salty, tangy, or spicy, inspired by the diversity of regional ingredients. Thus, it is imperative to explore not just urban

delicacies but also tribal drinks to understand the culinary language of Jharkhand.

I found myself in Open Field, Khunti, a sanctuary maintained by power couple Dr Manisha Oraon and Kumar Abhishek, who preserve and celebrate local and tribal traditions. Here, I made my next discovery-Handia, a sacred tribal brew. More than just a drink, Handia is evidence of the rich history of the Santhals and other tribal communities. Making Handia involves ancient fermentation techniques documented over 3,000 years ago in sacred texts like the "Rigveda." Tribals believe the supreme deity Marangburu introduced the foundational recipe to their ancestors, making it a holy offering in their spiritual practices. This revered drink uses ranu tablets—a mixture of herbs and medicinal roots that facilitate fermentation.

Mixed with boiled rice and left to ferment in clay pots, Handia typically matures in about a week, offering a gentle, aromatic alcohol content that is best enjoyed chilled.

The evening air was crisper now, filled with the rare chirping of birds that had once filled my childhood mornings. I was introduced to Mahua, the spirituous essence of the forest. Known intimately to me through the tree that stood sentinel outside my Ranchi home, the flavours of mahua were as familiar as they were sacred. The Gonds revere this tree as a divine cornucopia, much like the celestial kalpavriksha, celebrating its bloom during the Chaitrai Mahaparv. During Chaitra, the opening month of the Indian lunar year, Gonds celebrate Chaitrai Mahaparv, welcoming the new year and commencing the consumption of seasonal staples like mango and mahua flowers.

The blossoms can only be distilled into alcohol after the Mahua Tyohar, celebrated just before the monsoon season. At social and religious gatherings, the clear, sweet-smelling mahua is a staple known for its fresh, fruity, and potent flavour.

After sampling a wide variety of drinks, I experienced the soul of Jharkhand not just as a traveller but as a son who has returned home. Each saporous glass was a bridge between Jharkhand's many flavours, which can only be experienced when travelling near and far. • ••

Sadaf Hussain is a food columnist, cookbook author, and chef who has been a MasterChef India finalist





A Storied Chettiar legacy in Pondicherry - Maison Perumal



Experience a heritage bungalow's intimate charm - Résidence de l'Evêché



Timeless elegance meets modern luxury - Palais de Mahe

# PONDICHERRY REVERIE WITH CGH EARTH

ondicherry, a timeless gem along the Bay of Bengal, enchants visitors with its blend of history, culture, and natural beauty. With roots of Tamil heritage and marked by its French colonial legacy, this captivating town, with its scenic boulevards and pastel-hued villas, narrates stories of a bygone era, inviting one to explore its vibrant streets where time seems to linger.

The fusion of French elegance and Indian vibrancy weaves a unique tapestry that is both captivating and serene.

At this confluence of myriad versions of Pondicherry, and imbibing CGH Earth's core values of adopting local ethos, benefiting the local community and nurturing environment-friendly practices, the brand offers a distinguished array of stays.

Palais de Mahe, located just 50 meters from the seaside promenade, epitomizes the blend of French and Indian charm with its cool airy high ceilings, traditional roof beams, arched doorways, wooden balconies, and large verandahs, and walls

painted in the storied hue of ochre yellow. The interiors boast a distinctly French character featuring classic designs enhanced by stylish modern touches. Let our skilled chef charm your appetite with culinary delights featuring a mix of Tamil-inspired and European Cuisine. For quieter moments, guests can unwind & relax by the poolside.

Maison Perumal, a 130-year-old Chettiar mansion in the Tamil quarter of Pondicherry, has been transformed into a distinguished boutique hotel. Intricate works of Kolam usher one to this 18th-century house which reflects a rich Franco-Tamil heritage. Featuring a vibrant courtyard garden, every facet of Chettiar novelty is thoughtfully preserved here. Experience an immersive stay in a unique historic ambiance. Let our chefs introduce you to the rich Tamil cuisine, curating age-old recipes and churning unforgettable gastronomic delights.

Résidence de l'Evêché is a historic landmark in the French Quarter dating back to the 1790s. It takes one back in time when the Archbishop's

#### Many shades, one world, discover Pondi like never before

residence was located on the street. The house has seen notable owners like the Goubert family. Restored to exude a calming ambiance, the villa features three bedrooms with private balconies and terraces that open to quaint streets, allowing guests to unwind and step back in time. It is an ideal getaway for a private holiday, a long stay in a home-like environment, or an intimate holiday with family and friends.

Every stay is tailored to capture the true essence of Pondicherry. That's not all, verse yourself with Pondicherry's spirit and history through guided heritage walks, rickshaw rides, or e-bikes. Explore Auroville's sustainable serenity, or choose to experience the unhindered joy of the sea on a sailing yacht. Let the art galleries, boutiques, quaint cafes, and serene beaches, along with the land's cultural expressiveness welcome you to an unforgettable journey. Come explore Pondi with CGH Earth in all its glory.

For bookings: contact@cghearth. com; +91 75940 12555 or log in to www.cghearth.com



FROM THE LEGENDARY STORES IN OLD TOWN TO THE WORLD'S LARGEST CHOCOLATE MUSEUM, FOLLOW THIS CHOCOLATE TRAIL THROUGH ZÜRICH TO DISCOVER HOW A MISTAKE GAVE THE WORLD THE IRRESISTIBLE SWISS MILK CHOCOLATE

Words  $\rightarrow$  SHREYA CHEEMA



# **Z**

#### ÜRICH IS A DREAM FOR

perfectionists. Known as Switzerland's financial hub, no other city makes such a strong case for precision as Zürich does. The trams always leave on schedule. No clocks ever tell the time a second ahead or behind. The barista doesn't take a minute more than promised to get your coffee

ready. Unlike other European cities, there's no time for leisure or a day without a plan—everybody walks like they have somewhere to be. And as a true traveller does, I, too, took on the city's spirit and went against my nature to quickly chart out my day's plan: to sample the best Swiss chocolate. Now, it may seem like an easy task. But in a city that offers a million options at every turn, this undertaking is a serious business.

I began my hunt in the Old Town, also known as Altstadt. With narrow, cobblestoned, and sloping paths zig-zagging in every direction, this part of town remains true to its medieval origins. Rooting it deeper into the past are the pastel-coloured houses lining the alleys and the tiny shops with pretty doors where owners happily offer you a glass of fresh, hand-squeezed lemonade but won't entertain you for a minute when they are supposed to shut down for lunchtime.

Even though it is easy to get distracted in the Old Town, or even confused given how maze-like this part of the city is, I made my way straight to the revered Confiserie Tuescher. Snuck away in the narrow alley of Storchengasse, this tiny shop that opened in 1932 is now present in 19 countries—with a store as far away as Seoul. The sheer variety of truffles you find here—from Baileys and vodka to lemon and pistachio—is mind-boggling. But because it was just the beginning, I restricted myself to just one. And that one—the iconic Dom Perignon-infused Champagne truffle—was just enough.

While that one truffle could have easily powered me through a ten-kilometre walk, my next stop was ten steps away—Max Chocolatier in Schlüsselgasse. Started in Lucerne in 2009 by the König family, this artisanal chocolate boutique



doesn't boast a centuries-long legacy like the other confiseries in Zürich, but its collection does stretch that far. Alongside the classics, Max Chocolatier puts up a tough contest with their selection of unlikely yet irresistible pairings that are somehow perfectly balanced; the basil calamondin chocolate is a must-try. Although it is reasonable to stop at one, do not hesitate to order the "Gugelhopfli" cakes, made with a secret family recipe, to go.

#### THE HOME OF CHOCOLATE

Charged by all the sugar, I embarked on a longer walk down to the side of the Old Town that spills over the River Limmat to Zürich's most high-end street, Bahnhofstrasse. The iconic Sprungli Confiserie enjoys a prime spot in Paradeplatz Square, next to prominent luxury brands and the headquarters of the world's most powerful banks. Had it been any other country, a chocolate shop—no matter how old—with that address may have never rivalled its neighbours regarding footfall, but here it is a different story.

While you will chance upon a store no matter where you go, the one on Paradeplatz is considered prime, having opened in 1859—two decades before Rodolphe Lindt's fateful mistake led to the perfecting of the Swiss chocolate. Although the confiserie is a fitting place to catch up on this intriguing bit of Switzerland's chocolate history while nibbling on their signature Luxemburgerli macarons, I got them packed for my journey to the grand finale of the trail—the Lindt Home of Chocolate, the world's biggest museum dedicated to the decadent delight.

Located in the idyllic suburb of Kilchberg, just 20 minutes away by train from Zürich HB station, the Lindt Home of Chocolate is where Switzerland's chocolate history becomes tangible. Spread over 65,000 sq. ft., the colossal, pristine white complex is home to Lindt's factory, a museum, the world's biggest Lindt shop, a café, and the world's tallest chocolate fountain. The sight of luscious milk chocolate trickling down a suspended whisk from over nine metres high is almost hypnotic, turning every adult walking through the door into a giddy tenyear-old. However, the complex's ingenious architecture, modelled after Rodolphe Lindt's revolutionary conching machine, is even more fascinating. The disc-shaped skylights,

circular staircases, and curved edges fit together perfectly. You feel as if you have been shrunk and thrown into the machine—setting the stage for the rest of the experiences, beginning with a chocolate tour.

#### **BACK TO THE BEGINNING**

Spread into four sections, the tour is a voyage through the different periods of Switzerland's chocolate odyssey. In just 40 minutes, I went from the dense farms of Ghana, where quality cocoa beans are carefully harvested and processed, to the time of the Mayans when cocoa was consumed as a bitter drink, finally ending at its journey in Europe via Spanish travellers, where Swiss pioneers joined hands to give the world a treat unlike any other.

While Daniel Peter invented milk chocolate in Vevey in 1875 using another Swiss invention by Henri Nestle—condensed milk—it was four years later, in 1879, that Rodolphe Lindt stumbled upon the proper technique to transform it into the silky smooth indulgence I spent an entire day relishing.

As the story goes, Lindt forgot to switch off the conching machine (used to refine the ground cocoa into a smooth texture) when







ateria de la constanta de la c

leaving the factory one Friday evening, letting it run all weekend. When he returned to work on Monday, Lindt was surprised that the chocolate's grainy texture had become satin-like. This one little mistake in a city so perfect led to the creation of chocolate fondant that gives Swiss chocolate its distinguishing texture.

This is not just lore in the Home of Chocolate. The museum also houses a miniature version of the conching machine, encased in glass, along with other antiquities such as a fine bone crockery set lent by Dr Rudolph R Sprungli from his collection, and one of the first sealed chocolate fondant bars produced by Lindt. If you are curious whether that one mistake made all the difference, you can also taste chocolate squares made with and without the technique.

The chocolate tour ends on a high note in the tasting room with chocolate fountains, Lindt square dispensers, and boxes filled with Lindor truffles. Safe to say, it is the room I spent the most time in before heading out for a peek into Lindt's pilot plant, where new recipes are developed.

#### **SWEET IMPERFECTIONS**

Although I could have easily spent the entire day sticking my spoon into the chocolate fountain or filling up my shopping basket with countless Lindt flavours like crème brulée and lemon tart in the Lindt shop, I decided to don a chocolatier's hat and try my hand at making the truffles and pralines at the Lindt Chocolateria.

The chocolateria is a huge space with rows of workstations ready with pots of milk and dark chocolate fondant (made with only crème fraiche, sugar and cocoa). The intimidation of such a setting only lasts till the kind and smiling Lindt master chocolatiers patiently guide you through various steps of making the iconic truffle au Champagne and pralines.

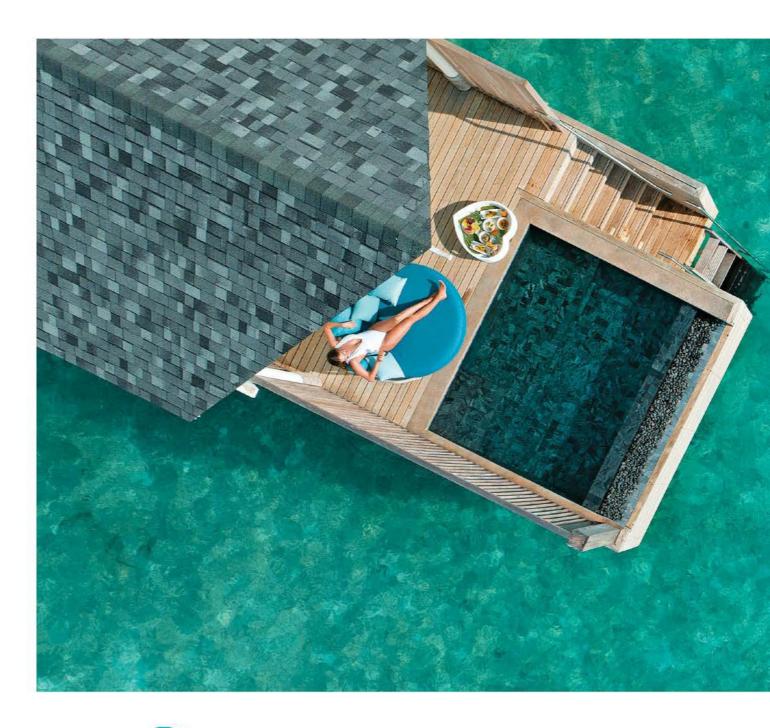
I carefully piped the warm fondant into set moulds and decorated the pralines using almonds, chocolate chips, and hazelnut bits. While the ones I made were far from perfect in a city as meticulous as Zürich, I realised that sometimes imperfection is what adds the magic. **>OT** 

#### **INFORMATION BOX**

- Getting to Zürich: Swiss Air has direct flights from Delhi and Mumbai to Zürich that are typically nine hours long.
   Travellers must hold a valid Schengen visa. Applying for it at least three months prior is advised.
- Reaching Lindt Home of Chocolate:
   You can either take the hourly ferries departing from Zürich Bürkliplatz, or take a train from Zürich HB to Kilchberg ZH. To access all public transport in Switzerland, buy a Swiss Travel Pass
- Tickets To Lindt Home of Chocolate:
  Book your tickets in advance at lindt-home-of-chocolate.com. Individual tickets for an audio-guided chocolate tour cost CHF 10 (INR 913.86), and tickets for a guided tour cost CHF 23 (INR 2,101.57).

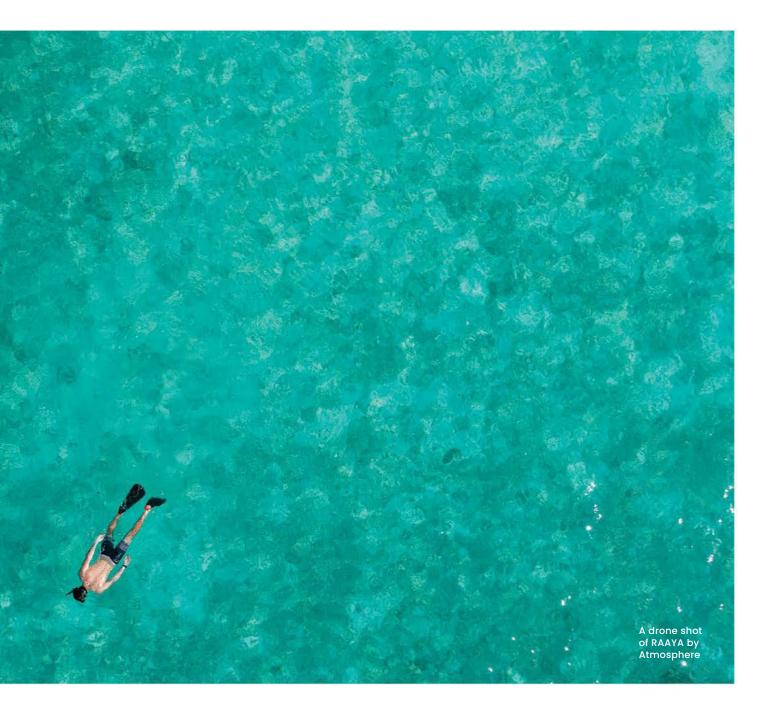
from shh.ch.

 Timings: Visitors can experience the exhibition between 10 am and 7 pm.
 The last entrance is at 5.30 pm.





### A CASTAWAY ADVENTURE AT RAAYA BY ATMOSPHERE



### Nestled in the heart of the Maldives, amidst powdery white beaches and crystal-clear waters, RAAYA invites you to immerse yourself in lush tropical forests and unravel the legend

estled in the azure waters of Raa Atoll, the newly relaunched RAAYA by Atmosphere beckons travellers to satisfy their wanderlust at this exclusive private island getaway. The breathtaking beauty of RAAYA Island reveals itself from a bird's eye view as guests arrive via a scenic 45-minute seaplane ride from Velana International Airport in Malé. At this five-star resort, all guests are on the RAAYA

Plan™. Crafted for RAAYA Island, this Holiday Plan blends the villa stay with the finest world cuisine, endless orders of premium wines and cocktails, healing spa massages, snorkelling at the house reef, ocean excursions, and curated artistic interludes. Inviting couples, families, and groups to experience an engaging island lifestyle, promising relaxation, outdoor fun, and nature exploration.



Water Villa at RAAYA by Atmosphere

#### **BLISSFULLY NATURAL LIVING**

Nature's embrace and architectural grace merge eloquently at this enchanting resort with 167 luxurious beach and water villas. Wrapped in lush tropical foliage and soothing birdsong, the standalone beach villas come with the option of private pools. For couples seeking solitude, stylishly designed Water Villas with the option of a pool are the perfect option. Reminiscent of castaway ships of yesteryear, these villas are elevated with all the comforts of modern furnishing, amenities, and a minibar replenished daily.

Nestled by the beach, the resort's kid-friendly Family Beach Villas come with two inter-connected bedrooms, beachfront cabanas for dining and lounging, and the option of a 19 sq. m. private pool. The majestic RAAYA Residence sets a grand tropical stage for celebrations with loved ones. A path weaving through a garden court leads to this palatial suite boasting two expansive master bedrooms, each with its entry, to ensure absolute privacy. RAAYA Residence guests are pampered



RAAYA Life - All Day Dining at RAAYA by Atmosphere

Nature's embrace and architectural grace merge eloquently at this enchanting resort with 167 luxurious beach and water villas



Beach Villa with Private Pool at RAAYA by Atmosphere

with a private stretch of sandy white beach to relax at, along with a 41 sq. m. infinity pool, a convenient pantry and alfresco dining pavilion, their spa pavilion and a host of other exclusive amenities and services.

#### **INDULGENCE AT YOUR FINGERTIPS**

With exquisite dine-around options, guests at RAAYA by Atmosphere are spoilt for choice. Be it the contemporary all-day dining restaurant, RAAYA Life serves Asian, European, Indian, and Maldivian cuisines, live cooking stations, dim sum, salad bar and delightful fruit and dessert displays. There's the chilledout beachside Seb's Shack for burgers and finger food during the day.

At night, guests can dress up for a sophisticated culinary journey at The Village, a quaint Italian restaurant. With authentic recipes from pasta to gnocchi and risotto, all paired with fine wine, the restaurant offers a feast for the senses. Or immerse yourself in a feast for the senses at Ampers&nd, a charming beachside Pan-Asian restaurant. From locally delectable

seafood, meat, and vegetarian creations to the romantic beachside ambience, handcrafted cocktails, and live music performances, it's truly an unforgettable night.

#### **ART & SOUL OF ISLAND LIVING**

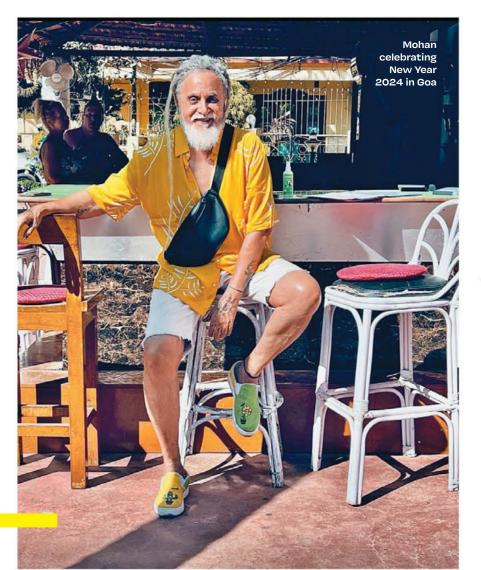
Various outdoor amenities are hidden within the verdant green tropical forests, from a gymnasium and a peaceful open-air yoga pavilion to a mini golf course, a padel tennis court, a football ground, a beach volleyball field, and a Skate Park Circuit. Guests can visit the Artist Zone, mangrove walkway, or a watch tower viewpoint when not exploring the endless array of water sports or out cruising in the ocean. Book a treatment at the EL|ENA spa, which offers a variety of natureinspired massages and relaxing wellness activities such as floating meditation and sunrise yoga.

For little ones, there is the Discovery Den Kid's Club, where children can immerse in complimentary guided arts and crafts activities and explorations in the natural playground with campsites, a zipline, a trampoline and a shipwreck, first discovered by Seb. Immersed within the charming ambience of RAAYA island lies the captivating tale of Seb, an artist who embraced the island as his sanctuary after being shipwrecked. Artworks, installations, and stories flow through the island lifestyle for a refreshingly new adventure in paradise.

#### A NEW EXPERIENCE AWAITS

RAAYA by Atmosphere is the Atmosphere Hotels & Resorts brand's newest addition, expanding the rich portfolio to three luxurious resorts in the Maldives and seven properties coming up in India. Atmosphere Hotels & Resorts curates distinctive spatial experiences inspired by local cultures and natural surroundings. Set off on the trip of a lifetime with your loved ones this year and soak up the inspiring lifestyle of RAAYA by Atmosphere with a special RAAYA Relaunch Offer of 20 percent on a fully inclusive holiday. Start dreaming of your ultimate tropical luxury escape!

For more details, visit raaya-atmosphere.com





MODEL DINESH MOHAN
DELVES INTO HOW HE
CONQUERED HIS MENTAL
HEALTH CHALLENGES,
EMBRACED A HEALTHIER
LIFESTYLE, AND ULTIMATELY
DISCOVERED THE
CONFIDENCE TO WALK
ON THE RAMP

Words → KARTIKEYA SHANKAR

# 60 AND ONAL

# SENSATIONAL

chiselled features. Model
Dinesh Mohan offers a far
more compelling story: a
triumph over depression and
an eating disorder. In a world
obsessed with external beauty, Mohan, in his
sixties, inspires those facing similar battles.

After completing his education in Hisar and Chandigarh, Mohan settled in Gurugram, working as an English professor before choosing voluntary retirement in 2004. However, a personal loss that year triggered a downward spiral, leading to depression. For years, he struggled with this and disordered eating, reaching a peak weight of over 125 kg. In 2009, a medication overdose caused him to lose control of his legs, leaving him bedridden for nearly a year and a half.

But in 2012, there was a turning point. Pushed by his family to improve his health, Mohan stopped relying on medication and committed to self-improvement. With the help of a physiotherapist, he regained his strength. Months of hard work culminated in him walking again. Later, Mohan consulted a dietician and a fitness trainer and claims that he shed around 50 kg over eight months. Today, this "silver fox" thrives as an actor and model.

In this interview, Mohan reveals the key steps that led him from self-doubt to selfbelief and a thriving career. He discusses how he tackled mental health challenges, embraced a healthier lifestyle, and ultimately found the confidence to shine on the ramp.

#### > Can you share a brief overview of your journey with our readers and the key lessons you've learned along the way?

Three points were crucial in my recovery: identifying the issue, accepting it, and then regulating my life accordingly. It's essential for anyone facing similar challenges to go through these steps to overcome depression.

#### > For those going through similar struggles, what advice would you offer?

Communication is key. I learned the importance of being vocal about my struggles and not hiding them. By communicating openly, you allow others to support you and be there for you, which is essential in overcoming loneliness and battling mental illness.

#### > Was there a significant turning point in your journey toward a healthier lifestyle and self-discovery?

Yes, there was. I reached a moment where I realised that I had to take control of my life and not let external circumstances dictate my well-being. This awakening, coupled with the support of my family, marked a significant turning point for me.

#### > Did you have any role models or inspirational figures who influenced you?

One person who stands out is Sudha Chandran, an Indian Bharatanatyam dancer and actress whose resilience and determination in overcoming adversity greatly inspired me. Working with her was a dream come true and a reminder of the power of perseverance.

#### > Did travel play a role in your journey of self-discovery and transformation?

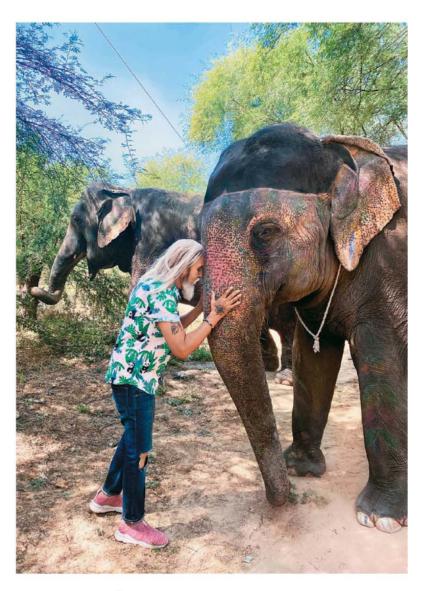
Absolutely. Travelling, mainly my first trip to Goa, played a crucial role in building my confidence and opening up new horizons for me. It allowed me to step out of my comfort zone and experience the world in a new way.

#### > Do you have a favourite travel destination that holds a special place in your heart?

Goa will always hold a special place for me due to its significance in my journey. Additionally, I've enjoyed exploring destinations like Dubai and Thailand, each offering unique experiences and memories.

#### > Have you discovered any hidden gems, whether in India or abroad, during your travels?

Every destination, whether here or abroad, feels like a hidden gem to me. From Dudhsagar Falls in Goa to the serene backwaters of Kerala, each place has left a lasting impression on me. **>OT** 



Mohan at Hathi Gaon near Jaipur, a safe sanctuary for rescue elephants

#### **QUICK TAKES**



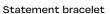
#### → BEACH GETAWAY OR MOUNTAIN RETREAT?

Beach getaway, without a doubt.



- → VEG THAI GREEN CURRY OR UPMA?
  Upma is my go-to comfort food.
- → TIGER SAFARI OR YOGA RETREAT?







- → DENIM JACKET OR BOMBER?

  Bomber, for that commando vibe.
- → SNEAKERS OR BOOTS?
  Boots all the way.





# CAN TRAVEL INSURANCE BE YOUR FRIEND?

TAPAN SINGHEL, MD AND CEO OF BAJAJ ALLIANZ GENERAL INSURANCE, TALKS
ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF BUYING A COMPREHENSIVE TRAVEL INSURANCE
POLICY AND HOW IT CAN ENSURE YOUR MENTAL PEACE

#### Words → **NIDHI SINHA**

us. Bags are being packed and itineraries being drawn as more and more families have started to travel again. While it is common for people to make long lists and plan ahead for the travel season, the one essential thing they often miss out putting on their lists is travel insurance.

In an interview with Nidhi Sinha, Editor,
Outlook Money, Tapan Singhel, managing
director and chief executive officer of Bajaj
Allianz General Insurance, talks about
why it is a must to pack travel insurance
when you are traveling abroad or even to a
domestic destination. Not only this, but what
you should look for when you are buying
such a policy. Here are edited excerpts from
the interview:

#### > What are the features that one should look for when buying a travel insurance?

First of all, let's try answering why we should buy a travel insurance policy. When we are planning a holiday, we never think that things may go wrong. But if things do go wrong, where do we go? Do we know the hospitals? Do we know where to get the ambulance? Do we even know what

number to call? If we require emergency cash, can we get that? Do we have a friend or a relative there? If something goes wrong, we can actually get into a state of panic if nobody is there. But if you have an insurance policy, you can call them up. They have a network of hospitals, a network of people, and they know where to take you and what suggestions to give you. So, I would buy a policy just because I would have a friend at a location where I have no one. And then it's that person's problem to figure out how to help me out.

So, you have policies which arrange, say, helicopter evacuation, take care of emergency cash if you lose your cash, to reimburse the cost of getting a passport if things go wrong, and policies for trip delay and trip cancellation. You have a policy for hospitalisation and for a possible liability also. If, because of you, some third-party liability gets triggered, you have a cover for that too.

And how much does it cost? If your trip expense is Rs 1 lakh, your policy may cost you less than Rs 1,000.

Consider it this way: if things go wrong, who will you call for help? If you don't have an answer, it's wise to get a health, insurance, or travel policy.

#### > What are the essential features one should include in a travel insurance policy when buying it, especially when one is taking a trip abroad?

I buy comprehensive insurance coverage, and I'll explain why. I'd only need specific coverage if I could predict everything that would happen to me. However, I don't limit my protection since the future is uncertain. I invest in insurance so that I won't have to worry if something goes wrong. For instance, I ensure excellent health coverage because medical expenses are high abroad, especially in the US and most European countries. If my coverage were insufficient, it would be incredibly costly. Therefore, I opt for full health and liability coverage, as I can't predict who will sue me or what will go wrong.

I also purchase trip delay insurance because travel delays are common. I buy every necessary type of coverage, viewing insurance not as an expense but as a source of mental peace. Ideally, I won't need to use it, but if I don't, someone else benefits



Tapan Singhel, MD and CEO of Bajaj Allianz General Insurance

from my contributions, and I'm content with that. That's my approach to buying insurance. I see it this way: if my trip costs Rs 1 lakh, and the insurance costs Rs 1,000, that's only 1 per cent of the total cost. Why should I worry about that? If I'm spending so much to enjoy my holiday, why not spend a little more for peace of mind? That's my perspective on insurance.

#### > Does the health insurance component cover pre-existing diseases too?

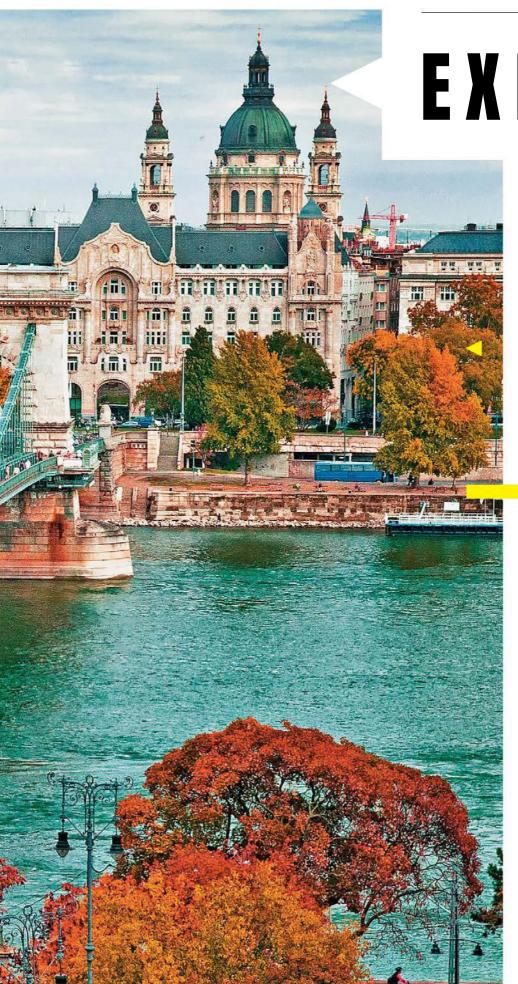
There is insurance coverage for pre-existing conditions as well. Make sure to buy that coverage, too. That's why I say purchase everything. Specify that you want coverage for pre-existing conditions. We'll evaluate your situation in the insurance industry and provide the necessary coverage.

> These days, seniors are also travelling a lot. Do you have any specific suggestions for them? As I mentioned, everyone should buy comprehensive coverage. Always ask yourself, what are you saving? If you don't buy a policy, how much are you saving? Even if you consider the cost, you'll find it insignificant. So, purchase a policy for mental peace, know who to call, and have someone to ask for advice.

You should seek a comprehensive policy. You can easily search online, ask a friend, visit reputable company websites, leave a comment, or call their toll-free numbers. Many people are ready to provide the right advice. Request the specific covers you need, read through them, understand the terms, and know what to do. Don't wait until an emergency happens to review your policy. Once you purchase it, save the toll-free number in your phone as your primary emergency contact and carry a copy of the policy with your passport. These are essential steps to be mindful of.

Just as you spend months planning your trip, spend a few minutes planning your insurance policy. **>OT** 





# EXPLORE

### GO BIG ON A BUDGET

#### **DECIDING WHERE TO GO ON AN**

international holiday is by no means an easy task. Planning for one can get even more confusing, from finding the right vibe to keeping within the budget. According to Skyscanner's report titled "Travel Trends 2024," while 42 per cent agree that their biggest struggle is choosing where to go, value for money remains a key factor, with 26 per cent deciding the destination based on the cost of the flight.

Given that many low-cost carriers connect India to overseas destinations, curious travellers can now explore international hotspots without huge expenses dampening the spirit. However, there's always room for extra savings once you have reached the destination, and we're here to help you with exactly that. Whether you have been dreaming of visiting Europe or exploring a lesser-known gem, we've put together a handy guide to 12 stunning international destinations that offer rich experiences without the hefty prices.

Disclaimer: All rates are based on the prevailing exchange rate at the printing time. All other costs, including flights, accommodation, and related expenses, are approximate estimations









# L A N D O F T H E

MONGOLIA'S VAST
LANDSCAPES BECKON WITH
SWEEPING STEPPES AND
RUGGED BEAUTY, WHERE
NOMADIC TRADITIONS
HARMONISE WITH
UNTOUCHED WILDERNESS

Words  $\rightarrow$  KARTIKEYA SHANKAR



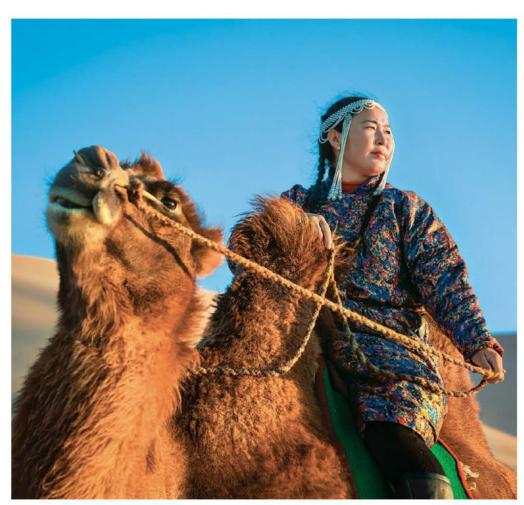


"It was an extraordinary landscape—pale yellow, under a blue sky—extraordinary because it was not a desert, but rather the largest pasture imaginable; here and there a herd of horses, here and there a camel, or a man, or a tent. It was inhabited, but with a sparseness that was impressive."

-Paul Theroux, American novelist and travel writer

#### MAGINE SWATHES OF GOLDEN GRASSLANDS STRETCHING TOWARDS

a horizon painted an endless cerulean. This is the territory of the nomads, where herds of horses dot the landscape. A lone Bactrian camel is silhouetted against the setting sun while wisps of smoke rise from a felt-covered yurt, a testament to a way of life endured for millennia. This is Mongolia, the birthplace of Genghis Khan. Here, the wind sings across the boundless steppes, echoing the hoofbeats of Khan's empire. Join us as we delve deeper into this land of stark beauty, encountering the traditions, resilience, and spirit that define the heart of this East Asian country.

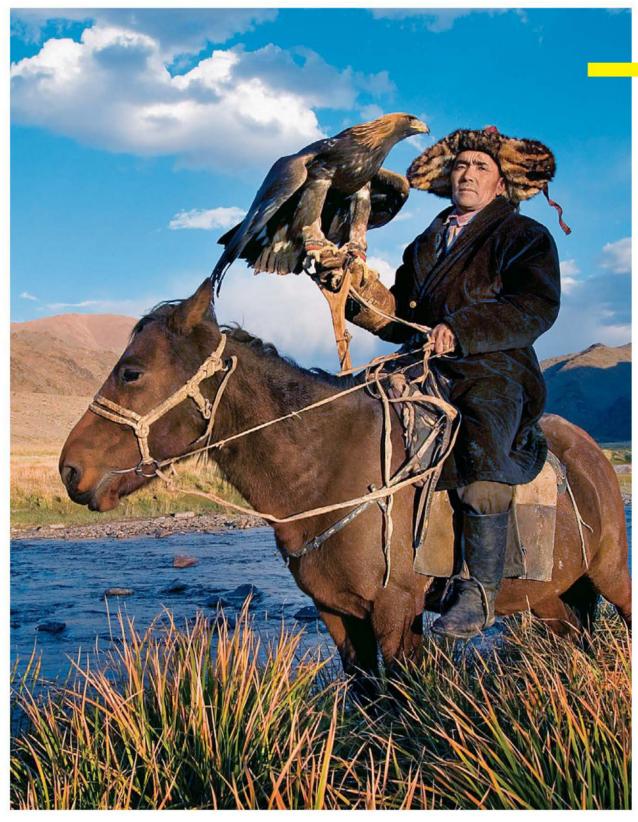


LEFT: Beneath a vast Mongolian sky, cattle graze on a field hardened by winter. The scene reflects the resilience of life in this harsh yet beautiful land



ABOVE: Clad in a deel, the traditional robe of the Mongolian people, a woman sits proudly on her Bactrian camel. This enduring partnership symbolises the resilience of nomadic life

THE LIST A yurt—a portable tent made of a lattice of flexible poles covered in felt or other fabric—stands under a boundless Mongolian sky. This symbol of the nomadic way of life showcases the deep connection Mongolians have with their land **38** • JUNE-JULY 2024



In Mongolia's western steppes, a Kazakh eagle hunter embodies a centuries-old tradition. These skilled individuals partner with golden eagles to hunt during winter, a testament to the bond between humans and semi-wild animals









TOP: Ulaanbaatar's Winter Palace or the Bogd Khan Museum was once the residence of the last Mongolian emperor. It now houses a fascinating collection of artefacts, offering a glimpse into a bygone era



ABOVE: Saishang Old Street in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia's capital, provides a window into the region's heritage. Visitors meander along streets flanked by picturesque Ming and Qing-style architecture, delving into the origins of this city





Above: Standing tall on the banks of the Tuul River, the Genghis Khan Equestrian Statue reigns supreme as the world's tallest equestrian monument

Left: A young Mongolian couple, adorned in 13thcentury garb, stands within a Ulaanbaatar temple



(Opposite page: Top, below) Sun-baked cliffs in Tsagaan Suvarga

A spectacle of Bayanzag's Flaming Cliffs, where the Gobi Desert ignites in a blaze of colour





#### **KNOW BEFORE YOU GO**



→ Visa: There are two types of visas for Indians travelling to Mongolia: urgent and standard. The urgent visa costs INR 2,800 and takes two days to process, while the normal visa costs INR 400 and takes five days to process.



→ Currency: Mongolian Tugrik Exchange Rate: INR 1 = MNT 41.4



→ **Getting There:** Direct flights from India to Mongolia are not available. The most optimal, economical, and efficient route to reach Mongolia is through Hong Kong. A roundtrip flight costs approximately **INR 75,000.** 



→ Getting Around Mongolia: In Mongolia, Toyota Landcruisers and the durable UAZ-452 are the preferred 4WDs for grasslands. Provincial travel includes large buses, while local minivans provide inter-province transport. Western Mongolia, known for its eagle hunters, is best reached by plane.



→ Food: In Mongolia, traditional eateries known as *guanz* offer authentic local dishes like buuz (steamed mutton dumplings) and tsuivan (fried noodles) at affordable prices. Coffee costs INR 160-250, khuushuur (fried mutton pancakes) INR 80, and dinner for two INR 1,600-5,000. A pint of beer at Ulaanbaatar pubs typically costs around INR 250.



→ Accommodation: Accommodation options in Ulaanbaatar vary in price. Dorm beds typically range from INR 800-1,600, while basic rooms for two can cost between INR 5,000-12,500. For a more unique experience, a night in a *ger* homestay (a felt tent) starts from INR 3,200. Bringing your tent is another cost-effective option.



→ Pro Tip: In Mongolia, tour costs decrease per person when more passengers share a 4WD vehicle. Rugged vans can accommodate up to six passengers and are favoured by budget operators. Also, insurance premiums make opting for a car with a driver more cost-effective. Some hotels offer free airport pick-up for guests staying a few days, while the cheapest way to reach the city is via shuttle bus, priced at around a sixth of a taxi ride.



Ulun Danu Beratan Temple, Bali

# NDONESIA

#### Indonesia offers many enchanting wonders,

from the lush jungles of Bali to the vibrant streets of Jakarta. If getting good value for your money when travelling abroad is an important factor, Indonesia is one of the most attractive options. At the time of writing, INR 1 equals IDR 193, meaning Indians can enjoy more spending power in Indonesia.

According to Numbeo, a cost of living database that collects data from around the world, a three-course meal for two in a mid-range restaurant in Indonesia would cost around INR 1,298. In addition, a bottle of local beer at a bar would be around INR 150 to 200, and a regular cappuccino would cost you about INR 160.







#### TOP ATTRACTIONS

Explore ancient temples in Prambanan and the world's biggest Buddhist sanctuary, Borobudur. Witness rare coral species in the Raja Ampat Islands and incredible marine life in the Nusa Islands. Hike through rainforests and rice paddy fields in Ubud and admire Dutch colonial architecture in Belitung. And it's all very pocket friendly. At the Bali Safari and Marine Park, encounter about 400 wildlife species and enjoy the adventure for around INR 4,000. Embark on a night trek to Mount Batur, an active volcano, for an unforgettable sunrise experience for around INR 2,000. Book a whitewater rafting trip on the Ayung River in Ubud for an exhilarating adventure for around INR 3,500.



#### VISA

The tourist visa is valid for a period of 90 days, and you can stay in the country for a maximum of 60 days. As an Indian citizen, you can obtain an e-visa or Visa on Arrival (VoA). Indian citizens are eligible for a 30-day visa on arrival, which can be extended for an additional 30 days. The fee for the visa is INR 2,601.



#### CURRENCY

The designated currency in Indonesia is the rupiah. As per the current present exchange rates, INR 1 equals IDR 193. While debit and credit cards are common, carry cash to avoid foreign exchange markups.



#### FLIGHTS

Several low-cost carriers connect major Indian cities to Jakarta and Denpasar. A round-trip fare typically amounts to INR 40,000 or less, even during the peak season, especially if booked a month in advance.



#### ACCOMMODATION

Indonesia has a variety of accommodations to fit different budgets, including luxury resorts, budget-friendly hostels, homestays, and couchsurfing options. You can share a dorm in a hostel for as little as INR 473, or you can opt for a private room that will cost you approximately INR 2,000 per night. If travelling in bigger groups, Airbnb offers the most value for price, as several come with plunge pools and great views.





#### LOCAL TRAVEL

Travelling in Indonesia is both easy and convenient. Traditional modes of transport include becaks and bemos. Becaks are a combination of a bicycle and rickshaw that can carry up to two people, while bemos are small buses that can accommodate up to ten people. The rates for these modes of transport are usually fixed and affordable. If you're looking to explore Sumatra or Java islands, trains are a great way to do so since they are as quick as buses but cheaper and more comfortable. If you want to travel from one island to another, boats are the best option. You can board a ferry or a speedboat, depending on the route.



#### DINING

Indians can enjoy more spending power while dining out in Indonesia. A meal for two at a mid-range restaurant would cost approximately INR 780 and can go up to INR 2,000. Eating at *warungs* or small kiosks/ streetside stalls is a great way to save money on food, as a plate would typically cost INR 150.



#### SHOPPING

Pick up high-quality coffee, especially the native kopi luwak variant, costing INR 300 per packet. The country is also renowned for its exquisite craftsmanship. The Batik fabrics start from around INR 800 per metre. Visit the village of Tegallalang, a short drive north of Ubud central, for intricately stylised Balinese wooden carvings of the Garuda, costing around INR 800. Also, buy local spices like Balinese vanilla and sea salts.



#### BEST TIME TO VISIT

For the western and central Indonesian islands (such as Bali, Java, the Gilis, Lombok, and Komodo), the best time to visit is during the dry season, which spans from May to September. The wet season is between October and April, with rainfall occurring in short, heavy bursts. On the other hand, the eastern islands, such as Sulawesi, West Papua, Raja Ampat, and the Moluccas Islands, have different peak seasons, mostly between March and May and again in October.

PHOTOGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK



## **PHILIPPINES**

#### The Philippines is the ultimate destination when seeking the perfect

blend of beach retreat, nature immersion, and historical discovery. The archipelagic country in Southeast Asia is also a cost-effective destination for Indian travellers, offering cheaper food, shopping, and lodging options. The Indian rupee is stronger than the Philippine peso, with INR 1 equalling PHP 0.69. Budget travellers can expect to spend around INR 2,500-4,000 per day, including transportation, meals, accommodation, and some activities. However, travel costs vary depending on the traveller's style and destination.









#### TOP ATTRACTIONS

The Philippines offers a variety of unique places to visit. Boracay has white sand beaches and lively nightlife, Palawan is a nature-lover's paradise with an underground river and beautiful islands, and Bohol is known for its Chocolate Hills, tarsiers, and beaches. Siargao is the surfing capital, Cebu has historical sites and waterfalls, Batanes is a peaceful escape, and Sagada offers a tranquil retreat with rice terraces and waterfalls. Davao City is great for nature and wildlife, Camiguin has diverse landscapes, and Manila has a rich history and cultural landmarks.



#### VISA

Indian citizens entering the Philippines for tourism purposes must apply for a tourist visa at the embassy. A single-entry, three-month temporary visitor visa costs INR 3,520. The average visa processing time is 10-15 days.



#### CURRENCY

The designated currency in the Philippines is the peso (PHP). According to the current exchange rate, INR 1 equals PHP 0.69. To save money, consider planning your trip during the off season (June to October) when you can find more affordable accommodations and airfares.



#### FLIGHTS

Major airlines connect India to the Philippines. The flight duration ranges from six to ten hours, depending on the route and layovers. The cost of a single round trip is approximately INR 30,000. You can get the best deals and prices if you travel off-season.



#### ACCOMMODATION

In the Philippines, budget-friendly accommodations start at INR 1,238 per night. Private rooms cost an average of INR 1,418, while dorm beds in Manila average INR 1,668. Whether you're in Boracay, Bohol, or Manila, there are options to suit every budget.





#### LOCAL TRAVEL

The best way to get around the different islands is to hop on a ferry. You can pre-book your spot on one via 12go.com. A ticket costs between INR 371 and INR 600. On land, shuttles, tuk-tuks, mopeds and buses are the dominant modes of transport. Hailing a ride on them costs approximately INR 30, varying according to distance.



#### DINING

In Philippines, you can enjoy a delicious spread without shelling out a lot of money. The average cost for a three-course meal in a mid-range restaurant would be approximately INR 850. Street food costs even less, with a filling meal costing approximately INR 100. If you want to enjoy a beer, the local bar fixes you up a pint for as little as INR 80.



#### SHOPPING

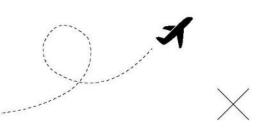
You can return from Philippines with a bag full of interesting souvenirs like colourful woven mats that sell for approximately INR 200. Local sweets like pastillas de leche and hapia are also great gifts and cost approximately INR 71. Other favourite souvenirs include miniature jeepneys, local coffee and coconutbased products—the cost for each ranges from INR 214 to INR 600.



#### BEST TIME TO VISIT

The best time to visit the Philippines is from December to February. During this period, the temperatures are cooler with relatively less rainfall. From March to May, the weather turns hotter. The months following May are still bearable and considered off-season, which means you can find cost-effective flights and accommodations.

PHOTOGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK



## O F F C I R C U I T

FROM THE CITIES TO THE COUNTRYSIDE,
THE OFTEN OVERLOOKED LAOS THRUMS
WITH LIFE AND BEAUTY

Words  $\rightarrow$  SHIKHA TRIPATHI



PHOTOGRAPHS: SHUTTERSTOCK

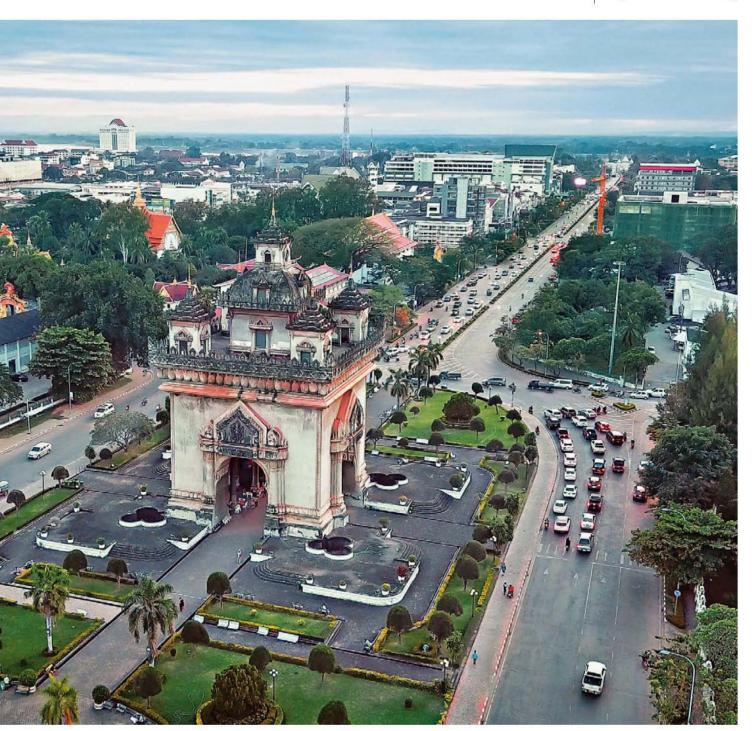
S

#### ITTING AT THE EDGE OF A TURQUOISE LAGOON,

I watch a young boy dive headlong into its waters. He slices the blue neatly like a freshly sharpened sword as his circle of teenage friends burst into applause. The cheering dies and the silence of the jungle takes over again. I continue to soak in the unbelievably pristine surroundings until I get on my rented scooter and ride back to Vang Vieng, my second pitstop on my journey through Laos.

When I first picked the country, I was shortlisting places that met my checklist—a country I had not been

to, one that offered visa-on-arrival, was pocket-friendly, and women-friendly. I kept missing it on the map as it was tucked in between the popular Thailand-Cambodia-Vietnam circuit I had traversed years ago with a friend. I planned to go solo this time, and just like the missing piece in a puzzle, Laos fell right into place. The country is incredibly affordable for Indians, with INR 1 equivalent to Laotian kip 256. While many travellers choose to fly directly to its most magnetic district, Luang Prabang, I was in favour of relishing the destination slowly on a



two-week trip that allowed me plenty of time to fit in smaller places. So, I started with its often overlooked capital, Vientiane.

The riverfront is Vientiane's most popular stretch. It runs parallel to the Mekong, the lifeline of Laos, which runs through six major countries of the Indo-China basin. I took in its calm views on a mile-long stroll down the waterfront. The stretch turns lively in the evenings with open-air cafés and bars, barbecue joints with giant lobsters on the grill, and vendors selling pork cuts lining Hs hard not to get in honour of the who fought independence from France from F

Patuxai was built in honour of those who fought for independence





the sidewalk. The stretch ends with a typical Southeast Asian night market being set up. The Patuxai, or "Victory Gate," in downtown Vientiane, which I see later on my way out, lies in stark contrast. The exquisite

I wrap up the night after struggling to place my dinner order again in a country that speaks little English, but communicates more with heartwarming smiles.

monument is more a haunt for Laotian

families than travellers.

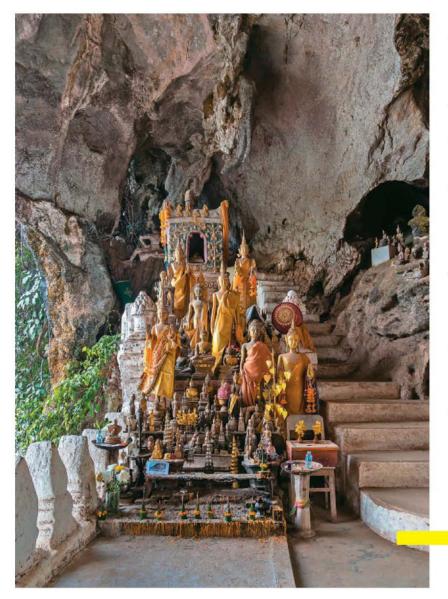
This gradually reduces as I move to places more familiar to travellers such as Vang Vieng, where I find the bluest of lagoons, stellar views atop the Nam Xay peak, and finally, the cultural buzz of Luang Prabang, which is just four hours away by road.

On day one itself I understood what draws travellers to this UNESCO town. It's hard not to get floored by all that Luang Prabang has to offer, with the Old Quarter's Lao-French architectural heritage; coffee shops, hotels,

and department stores run out of traditional homes; magnificent *wats* (Buddhist temple) like the Wat Xieng Thong; the National Museum (and former Royal Palace), which is a World Heritage Site; and Phousi Hill, which boasts stunning views of the city dissected by the Nam Khan River.

Top and bottom: A tributary of the Mekong River called Nam Song; Wat Xieng Thong was built between 1559 and 1560 by King Setthathirath





#### **KNOW BEFORE YOU GO**



→ Visa: Indians can avail a visa-on-arrival costing INR 4,200 for a single-entry.
You only need a photograph and a valid passport.



→ Currency: Laotian Kip Exchange Rate: INR 1 = LAK 256



→ **Getting There:** Reach Vientiane, Laos, through Ho Chi Minh City. A round trip flight costs approximately **INR 38,000**.



→ Getting Around Laos: In cities like
Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Pakse,
rent a cycle for INR 40-200/day. Tuk-tuk
fares are around INR 200 to and from
airports and bus stations and INR 120200 around town.



→ Food: A meal at a mid-range restaurant with a beverage, a starter, and a main course costs INR 400 per person. Throw in a dessert and you have a treat for under INR 500.



→ Accommodation: Laos offers accommodations for all budgets. A decent double room is easily available for under INR 5,000.



→ Pro Tip: Hot air ballooning in Vang
Vieng is a great budget-friendly bucket
list experience, costing INR 8,354 for a
45-minute ride, including hotel pickup
and drop-off. Away & Co (awayandco.
com) offers unique experiences like
personalised cooking classes, offbeat
boat trips, and local ceremonies for
those seeking something different.

**Left:** Pak Ou Caves are noted for miniature Buddhist **sculptures** 

All of this is more or less on the riverfront. Running parallel to it is a busy night market that merges into a street with lively bars and upmarket dining spots. The night market spoils you for choice with its many souvenir shops and a food section offering vegetarian and vegan choices, which is a relief. This is where I make up for the lack of options in other places and go to town with multiple portions of lotus stem and bok choy salad, grilled mushrooms of all kinds, mango sticky rice, and handmade coconut ice cream.

Away from the epicentre of Luang Prabang, the town's vibrant atmosphere slowly dissolves into paddy fields, tropical jungles, and unparalleled limestone waterfalls. I ride my rented bike around the countryside—where even my translation app is no

good—on lone tarmac stretches with endless mountains and the wind in my hair.

I watch lazy moon bears chew on bamboo, get up close with the azure waters of the Kuang Si and Tad Sae Falls, and watch the gargantuan Mekong navigate its route silently and gracefully like a colossal blue whale. I'm mightily impressed by the bouquet of visual feasts this tiny, power-packed country has to offer, but what stayed with me is the sunset over the Mekong. When I sail down its length for one final tryst, stopping at the Pak Ou Caves, homes where I am welcomed with traditional ceremonies, villages where women sing and dance, and the men sell fresh river weed, I know that the Mekong is at the heart of this culture. As much as the people consider it their lifeline,

the river, too, chooses the people of Laos.

Back on its banks, I disembark beside meditating monks at ease with the lively prattle surrounding them. Both equally capture the essence of Laos and I am grateful for getting a taste of this deep calm that stems from its chaos.

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## NEPAL

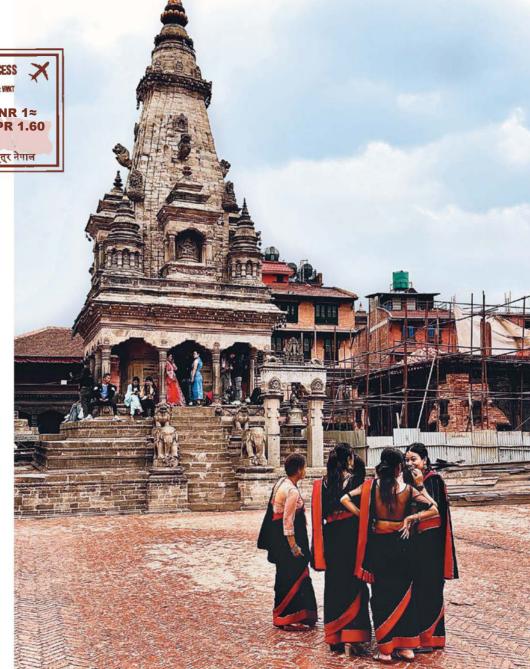
Patan Durbar Square, Kathmandu



#### A land with the highest

mountains in the world, the birthplace of the Buddha, national parks with a diverse array of flora and fauna, and some of the most delicious food you can find in Asia—Nepal is a paradise for trekkers, adventure seekers, religious pilgrims, and those simply looking for an immersive experience. While Nepal may at first seem familiar for Indians because of cultural similarities, it is offers a completely novel experience.

This multiethnic and multilingual nation relies heavily on tourism, and Indian travellers are its biggest market. It helps that INR 1 is equivalent to about NPR 1.60. This means that you will get the most bang for your buck as you explore this landlocked country from top to bottom.





PHOTOGRAPH: ANJAN DAS



#### TOP ATTRACTIONS

Kathmandu will keep you busy with a stop at the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Durbar Square, populated with over 50 temples and stupas with intricate wood carvings. Elsewhere in the country, the Annapurna Sanctuary, Everest Base Camp, and Langtang Valley routes are the most popular hiking trails. The trek to the base of Kanchenjunga is worth undertaking for the sheer beauty of the landscape. Chitwan National Park is a World Heritage Site famous for the diversity of its fauna. Do not miss out on a visit to Lumbini, the birthplace of Siddhartha Gautama. This World Heritage Site is filled with temples built in a variety of architectural styles by Buddhist communities from around the world. Other must-visit places are Bhaktapur, the former capital of a Newar kingdom, and Nagarkot in the Kathmandu Valley, where you can catch a stunning sight of eight Himalayan ranges, including Mount Everest.



#### VISA

Indian nationals don't need to apply for a visa to enter Nepal. However, they have to carry a valid Indian passport, voter identification card, or an emergency certificate issued by the Embassy of India in Nepal to move inside the country.



#### CURRENCY

The designated currency in Nepal is the rupee. As per the current exchange rates, INR 1 equals NPR 1.60.



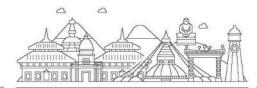
#### FLIGHTS

There are direct flights from New Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, and Bengaluru to Kathmandu's Tribhuvan International Airport. A round-trip fare would cost you approximately INR 13,000.



#### ACCOMMODATION

Where you stay depends on the vibe you want. Thamel is the tourist and nightlife hub of Kathmandu, Naya Bazaar favours those on a budget, and Lazimpat is best for families. A two-night stay at the Fairfield by Marriott Hotel in Thamel starts from INR 4,916, while a room at the Hotel Le Himalaya in Lazimpat starts from INR 3,464. For hostels, consider WanderThirst, Alobar1000, and the Thamel Hostel and Spa.





#### LOCAL TRAVEL

The mountainous terrain of Nepal means buses are the cheapest and most popular way to travel. Bear in mind they can be slow and uncomfortable, too. Tourist buses ply the route between popular destinations. They are faster but more expensive. For instance, a trip from Kathmandu to Pokhara starts from INR 749 on a tourist bus, but a local bus will cost about INR 249. Check *nepaltouristbus.com* for more information. Hop onto a motorbike or hire a car with a local driver to get around the country at your own pace.



#### DINING

Travellers can sample authentic Nepali cuisine in bhojanalayas, food joints which cater to local residents, and roadside stalls. Dinner for two people starts from INR 333, while Nepal's famous chiya (tea) is roughly INR 83. Make sure to try gorkhali lamb, dal bhaat, momos, thukpa, sel roti, and gundruk.



#### SHOPPING

Thamel and Asan Market in Kathmandu, Mahendrapul Bazaar in Pokhara, and the Pottery Square of Bhaktapur are the places to go shopping for souvenirs to take home. Bargaining will seal you a good price for souvenirs like hand-carved singing bowls, *khukris*, ethnic jewellery, wooden sculptures, *thangkas*, pottery, Nepalese tea, a *bagh-chal* board game set, *lokta* paper, and Tibetan prayer flags called *dar cho*.



#### BEST TIME TO VISIT

October to November is a popular time to visit Nepal due to the warm and dry weather. The shoulder season of March to April is the best time to see wildlife and blooming rhododendrons. The off-season of June to September and December to February is good for cheap deals, but the monsoon rains during the former window and the chilly winters of the latter period can put a spanner in your itinerary.





## WALKING AROUND PRAGUE

IN PRAGUE, EVERY STROLL IS A JOURNEY THROUGH TIME, AND EVERY VISTA IS A MASTERPIECE PAINTED WITH THE BRUSHSTROKES OF CENTURIES PAST

Words → UTTARAN DAS GUPTA





#### ISWARJYA BASU, 29, USUALLY GETS INTO A BAD

mood around her birthday. So, she did not have any great expectations from the day, December 30, 2019, when she found herself in Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic.

"We were staying at a hostel in the centre of the city for EUR 7 a night," recalled the assistant professor of law at O P Jindal Global University, Sonipat. "Besides the two of us (Basu and her cousin, Sayantani Ghosh, 33), six French boys were in the room. Only one of them knew English."

When the boys learned it was Basu's birthday, they went to the Burger King nearby, stole a large menu card, and inscribed a birthday wish. "They also got a lot of liquor," said Basu. "I got quite drunk and then threw up in the bathtub. But the receptionist at the hotel did not make me clean it nor charged me extra—all because it was my birthday."

Basu and Ghosh took a cruise on the Vltava River the

next day. "Everything was so bright," said Basu. "I think it was the brightest day of my life."

The two young women stayed in the Czech Republic from December 24, 2019, to January 2, 2020.

Basu, a frequent traveller in India and abroad, believes that Prague is probably the most beautiful place she has visited. "The only exception would be Vietnam," she said. "But Vietnam has natural beauty. Prague is beautiful because someone made it so."

She also recollected spending Christmas and New Year in the Czech capital—often described as one of the best times in the year to visit the city. Unlike many European cities, such as Berlin, Paris, or London, Prague had endured less damage during the cataclysms of the 20th century, like World War II. Its medieval spires, clock towers, opera houses, and cobbled streets are lit with a thousand lights.

Snow adds a touch of magic.



Clockwise from right: The Old Town Square is the oldest square in Prague's historical centre; the Head of Franz Kafka is an outdoor kinetic structure; the Prague tramway network is the Czech Republic's largest tram network; Charles Bridge connects the banks of the VItava river









Exploring Prague's many streets on foot is the ultimate way to experience the sights of the famed 'City of a Hundred Spires'

Basu's description reminded me of novelist Nirmal Verma's "Ve Din." Set in Prague—an uncommon landscape for an Indian novel—in the early 1960s, it narrates a doomed love story between an unnamed Indian student and an Austrian woman. The events in the short novel occur over three days during a cold Christmas holiday when other students have gone home, but the Indian remains in the city.

Both the student and the woman are acutely aware of how short their relationship—if it can be called that—is destined to be. "The very temporariness makes it more intense," writes critic Jai Arjun Singh in a review of the English translation of the novel by Krishna Baldev Vaid.

Verma went to Prague in 1959 at the invitation of the Czech Institute of Oriental Studies to initiate a programme to translate Czech literature into Hindi. He lived in the city for much of the 1960s, witnessing the Prague Spring uprising led by students and workers against the Soviet-backed communist regime. The brutal suppression

of the uprising by the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies left Verma disillusioned with socialism.

Verma was on my mind when I reached Prague on an early morning train from Vienna in the summer of 2018.

Besides Verma's book, the other one I had carried in my bag was Milan Kundera's "The Unbearable Lightness of Being." Kundera, arguably the most well-known post-World War II Czech writer, also set his novel during the 1968 uprising in Prague.

Later, in a piece for Granta, Kundera wrote about how the Prague Spring led to a flowering of Czech literature and culture: "The films of Miloš Forman, Jiri Menzel, Vera Chytilova, the theatrical productions of Otomar Krajča and of the brilliant Alfred Radok, the plays of the young Václav Havel, the novels of Josef Škvorecký and Bohumil Hrabal, the poetry of Jan Skácel and the philosophical works of Jan Patočka and Karel Kosik all date from the 1960s. European culture has known in our country few better or more dynamic decades than

the Czech sixties."

One of the first places I visited in Prague was Wenceslas Square, the central town square of Prague. It has witnessed many historical events, such as anti-Nazi demonstrations in 1938 and anti-Soviet protests in 1968. In 1969, when Czechoslovakia's ice hockey team defeated their Soviet rivals, there was a massive celebration at this venue.

As I walked up the gradient, I muttered a line I remembered from "The Unbearable Lightness of Being": "They may crush the flowers, but they can't stop the Spring." On reaching the top of the gradient, I came across a Bata showroom. I had always imagined that Bata was an Indian brand.

If you are of a literary bent of mind, like I am, you will look up everything to do with Franz Kafka, who was born in the city on July 3, 1883, and lived there for many years.

American artist and writer Renée Reizman describes Kafka as a brand in Prague, where his face can be found on t-shirts, postcards, coffee mugs, wall paintings, and anything





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Clockwise from below: Steamed meat and vegetables is a popular street food; Charles Bridge is a popular attraction; a tourist at Wenceslas Square



#### **KNOW BEFORE YOU GO**



→ Visa: Indians need to take a shortterm Schengen visa (up to 90 days) to visit the Czech Republic. The visa fee is INR 7,200.



→ Currency: Czech Koruna Exchange Rate: INR 1 = CZK 0.27



→ **Getting There:** You can book a connecting flight to Prague from Mumbai, Delhi, or Bengaluru. Fares are approximately **INR 55,000.** 



→ **Getting Around Czech Republic:** Most cities have good public transport. Buy the Prague Visitor Pass (*prague. eu*) to enjoy unlimited travel on public transport.



→ Food: While there are fancy hotels and restaurants, Czech cities are also full of cheap pubs and cafés. You would not have to spend more than INR 3,500 on food per day.



→ Accommodation: You can save money on your stay by opting for hostels (most of them have private rooms) or BnBs.



→ **Pro Tip:** Explore Prague with free walking tours (find them on freewalkingtourprague.eu)



you can imagine.

"The Kafkaesque feeling of seeing Kafka as a tourist attraction," she writes.

But I was a tourist. I took great pleasure in identifying everything to do with Kafka.

Indian tourists often prefer Western Europe—Paris, Amsterdam, Barcelona, Copenhagen—or Mediterranean countries like Italy and Greece. Eastern Europe is not high on their list of places to visit.

But those who do wander into Prague, Bratislava, Budapest, or Krakow are often rewarded with an out-of-the-ordinary experience. These cities are less crowded with tourists and accommodation is usually cheaper, as is the food. As post-communist urban centres they often have excellent public transport. Also, they are often much safer than their Western counterparts.

It is like walking onto the set of a Wes Anderson film—slightly kitschy, full of nostalgia. • ••

Uttaran Das Gupta is a New Delhi-based writer and journalist

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#### **MISSION LIFE**



The Mission Lifestyle for Environment (Mission LiFE) stands for the understanding that Indian culture and way of living are intrinsically sustainable. Through the medium of Mission LiFE, a call to action for individuals and communities for adapting sustainable practices is aimed for. It all started way back in October 2022, when Secretary General Antonio Guterres and Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a global plan of action to mitigate the impacts of climate change. However, for the world it may be 2022, but for India it goes

back to the Atharva Veda, as PM Modi said, "Mata Bhumih Putroham Prithvih" meaning that the earth is our mother and we are her children. Even the G20 Summit that was held under Indian presidency also highlighted adoption of Mission LiFE.

The Indian Institute of Technology, Goa is creating a Mission LiFE Centre, initially as a cell, to highlight the interdisciplinary character of research, outreach, capacity building, education, and training connected to Panchamrit as stated in Glasgow COP 26.

#### THE MEN WHO SHAPED THE MISSION LIFESTYLE FOR ENVIRONMENT (LIFE) CENTRE



#### PROF. DHIRENDRA S. KATTI

Prof Dhirendra S. Katti is the Director at IIT Goa. He is well known for his research in the realm of biomaterials, tissue engineering and drug delivery systems. His achievements are not limited to national boundaries but extend internationally as well. Prof. Katti served as Assistant Professor (Research Track) at Drexel University and then as Assistant Professor (Tenure Track) at University of Virginia before joining the Biological Sciences & Bioengineering Department at IIT Kanpur in April, 2004. Prof. Katti served as the Dean of International Affairs at IIT Kanpur before joining IIT Goa as the Director in May 2024.

#### PROF. B.K. MISHRA

Prof. B.K. Mishra served as the first director of IIT Goa from March 2017 to May 2024. Prof. Mishra has numerous accolades in fields ranging from extractive metallurgy and mineral processing to powder technology. He has been awarded the National Geoscience Award and is an esteemed member of the Indian National Academy of Engineering. His other achievements include the VASVIK Award for his contributions to industrial research and development and the CSIR Technology Award (team award). Additionally, he is a distinguished alumnus of NIT Rourkela.



#### SHRI. SUNDEEP NAYAK

Shri. Sundeep Nayak, Professor of Practice in IIT Goa, is a 1988 batch IAS officer and a prominent thought leader in the Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) domain. He retired as Secretary in Government of India and as the Director General of the National Productivity Council, Ministry of Commerce and Industry. He has also served at senior leadership positions in the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration, the Ministry of Mines, the Ministry of Health, and the National Security Council. Winner of the Prime Minister's First Prize district award, he is well known for his pathbreaking work as District Magistrate in the Kashmir valley districts of Srinagar and Budgam during 1992-97.





**PRESENTS** 



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#### **CHIEF JURY**



**DR. SUKUMAR DEVOTTA** 

Professor of Eminence (Hon), Anna University, Former Director, CSIR-NEERI, Nagpur, Chennai, Tamil Nadu

#### THE JURY -

**PROF. B.K. MISHRA**Former Director,
IIT Goa





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Partner & Leader, Sustainability & ESG Practice, BDO India





SUCHETANA RAY Editor- Outlook Business and Chief Strategy Officer, Outlook Group

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Flame Towers in Baku, Azerbaijan



#### Positioned at the crossroads of

Europe and Asia, Azerbaijan is a transcontinental nation of 11 million people. Since the turbulent post—Soviet era of the 1990s, Azerbaijan has transformed, thanks to its oil wealth. Now a notable global player, it hosts events like Formula 1 races and Europa League football matches, which have boosted tourism. In fact, Skyscanner's Travel Trends 2024 report highlights a 438 per cent increase in searches for Baku, the country's capital, in 2023.

Ankur Talwar, a PR professional from Delhi, chose Azerbaijan for his vacation in late 2023. He found it to be an excellent choice, with budget-friendly rates, including five-star hotel stays at just INR 6,246 per night. "A full-day chauffeur-driven city tour was a mere INR 3,331, while round trips to destinations four hours away were a steal at INR 8,329. Azerbaijan proved to be a haven for a budget-conscious traveller like me," Talwar told OT.





PHOTOGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK



#### TOP ATTRACTIONS

Baku, Azerbaijan's capital, blends ancient heritage with modern opulence. Influences from Turkish, Russian, Persian, and European cultures converge here. The city's oil wealth fuels its contemporary skyline, notably the iconic Flame Towers. İçəri Şəhər, the Old City, features historic sites like the Maiden's Tower and the Palace of the Shirvanshahs. Modern attractions include the Heydar Aliyev Centre and Şəhidlər Xiyabanı. Baku offers a vibrant nightlife, including Agabala, Balagan, Enerji Club Baku, and Hashtag Bar. Beyond Baku, visit Nakhchivan, GanjLand in Ganja, Baku Zoo, and Sheki for varied adventures. Explore vineyards in the Caspian shoreline, Shirvan foothills, Ganja, Karabakh, and Lankaran-Astara.



#### VISA

Azerbaijan has an electronic visa system. The process involves three steps: applying through the government portal, completing the necessary information and payment, and receiving the visa via email within three days. The cost for the e-visa is INR 1,600.



#### CURRENCY

The designated currency in Azerbaijan is the manat. As per the present exchange rates, INR 1 equals AZN 0.020. While debit and credit cards are common, carry cash to avoid foreign exchange markups.



#### FLIGHTS

A flight from Delhi to Baku typically lasts approximately five hours. Round-trip tickets generally amount to around INR 30,000.



#### ACCOMMODATION

Azerbaijan boasts numerous luxury hotels, including nearly 250 in Baku alone, such as The Merchant Baku and Winter Park Hotel Baku, with rates starting from INR 9,000. The country also offers diverse accommodations, from upscale to budget-friendly dormitories with bunk beds. For example, A & F HOSTEL in Baku caters to solo travellers with bunk beds priced as low as INR 683. Additionally, moderately priced options like Cityland Hotel Baku, located in the capital city and well-rated, offer rates starting from INR 5,000.





#### LOCAL TRAVEL

Transportation within Baku is quite affordable. A single trip on the metro or bus costs approximately INR 10. Travelling from Heydar Aliyev International Airport to Baku City Centre (28 May Metro Station) typically amounts to around INR 73. Meanwhile, public transportation like *marshrutkas* (minibuses) and trains are cost-effective for moving between cities. Fares for journeys between destinations typically stay under INR 668, and shorter distances might only cost around INR 160.



#### DINING

Dining out doesn't usually exceed INR 1,600 per person daily. You can explore local eateries for authentic dishes, where a satisfying meal with a beverage costs under INR 800. Restaurants around Baku's Nizami Street and Fountain Square tend to be pricier. For budget-conscious travellers, opting for supermarket purchases and self-catering can keep daily expenses under INR 400.



#### SHOPPING

Food lovers shouldn't overlook Yashil Bazaar in Baku, renowned as one of the largest food markets in the Caucasus, brimming with diverse culinary treasures. For those keen on shopping, Baku offers an array of options, from exploring malls to browsing local markets, where you can discover everything from costume jewellery and traditional antiques to spices and designer attire. Venture into craft shops in Sheki or engage in *kelaghayi* (four-cornered silk shawl) making in Bagsal for distinctive shopping adventures.



#### BEST TIME TO VISIT

The best time to visit Azerbaijan is just before summer, between April and June, for blooming flora and lush greenery or in October for autumn. While the lowlands can be scorching during summer, higher elevations offer moderate temperatures. Despite the chilly winter, you can still enjoy Baku's New Year celebrations. •••



## PEARL



## D A N U B E

WITH AFFORDABLE ATTRACTIONS, IMPOSING ARCHITECTURE, EXCELLENT STREET FOOD AND VIBRANT NIGHTLIFE, BUDAPEST MAKES FOR A VALUE-FOR-MONEY EUROPEAN DESTINATION

Words → RANJAN PAL





B

#### **BUDAPEST IS HUNGARY'S CAPITAL AND**

crown jewel. Its architecture is an amazing mélange of Romanesque chapels, Gothic cathedrals, and Baroque palaces.

Buffeted by the vast winds of change which brought it under the sway of the Austro-Hungarian empire, followed by the Nazi occupation of WWII and captured as part of the Soviet Communist empire until its liberation in 1991, this beautiful city has only just begun to reclaim its rightful place as the "Pearl of the Danube."

Once, there were two cities, Buda and Pest, on either side of the Danube linked only by a single Chain Link Bridge, and it was not till 1873 that they were united. Both their geographical and cultural characteristics set them apart. Buda is the more sedate, residential side with a clutch of palaces and churches built on a series of hills, while Pest is flat as a pancake, where all the tourist action is, with happening bars, restaurants and cafés.

Since my wife and I are staying on the Pest side, we decide to take the free walking tour (guruwalk.com), which starts at 11 am from the plaza in front of St. Stephen's Basilica and comes highly recommended. There, we find our guide, Pisti, a dead ringer for Conan O'Brien with the same sharp features and fast-talking style, waiting under his trademark green umbrella.

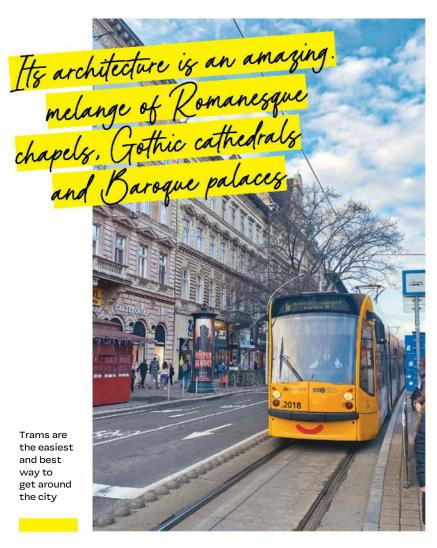
Our group gathers under the towering shadow of the Basilica, which is dedicated to the holy king St. Stephen, the founder of Hungary. It has the most ornate interiors, with beautiful altars and chapels made of jasper and marble and walls covered by glorious frescoes.

Pisti quickly shepherds us to the Liberty Square, which has several controversial monuments, including the German Occupation memorial and the Soviet War memorial, two successive regimes that oppressed the Hungarian people until their liberation in 1991. Pisti is a great storyteller with an ironic sense of humour, which enlivens Hungary's recent history. He takes care to point out things we would have otherwise missed, like the Stumbling Stones—tiny brass plaques embedded in the city's pavements, encapsulating the stories of each Jew before they were deported and exterminated during the Holocaust.

Finally, we arrive at the broad panorama of the Danube, which is dominated by the imposing bulk of the Hungarian Parliament building, the third largest of its kind in the world and more like a splendid imperial palace than anything else. Why such a gigantic public structure for such a small country is the question in my mind, but it is certainly a popular attraction, with crowds queuing up for the 45-minute guided tour of its magnificent ornate interiors (double the price for non-EU citizens at USD 30, i.e. INR 2,498).

The tour ends on the Danube promenade, where the group almost stumbles across 60 pairs of rusted iron shoes set into the





#### **KNOW BEFORE YOU GO**



→ Visa: Indian citizens can easily visit Hungary on a Schengen visa (INR 7,200).



→ Currency: Hungarian Forint Exchange rate: INR 1 = HUF 4.3



→ Getting There: Flights with layovers in Dubai and Istanbul start at approximately INR 30,000 (one-way). You can also fly into Vienna and continue your journey by train.



→ Getting Around Hungary: In Budapest, choose from single-journey tickets, or travel passes covering all BKK transportation from INR 584/day. The Budapest Card, starting at INR 2,618 for 24 hours, includes transport and attraction entry. Use the MOL Bubi bike rental via the app, starting at INR 9/minute.



→ Food: A meal at a mid-range restaurant with a soup, main course, and a drink would cost around INR 1,000 per person. Street foods, such as sausages and lángos are cheap and delicious.



→ Accommodation: Budapest offers accommodations for all budgets. A double room in a three-star hotel should cost about INR 5,428. Stay on the Pest side if you want to check out the nightlife.



→ **Pro Tip:** Due to the more favourable exchange rate, it would be a better deal to pay in HUF than in EUR—which is freely accepted—in smaller outlets. Also, the most inexpensive and scenic tourist ride is Tram No 2, which glides the length of the Pest embankment.

concrete. This is an incredibly poignant memorial to the Hungarian Jews who fascist Arrow Cross militiamen shot into the Danube during the winter of 1944-45. The Jews were forced to remove their shoes, which had scarcity value to their killers, before they were ruthlessly executed and swept away by the icy river. There are no words to describe our feelings when confronted so abruptly and immediately by such unspeakable horror.

In the evening, we cross the Chain Link bridge to explore the Buda side. The quaint old wooden funicular is an easy way to the top of Buda Hill. The first thing you encounter is the Disneyesque Fisherman's Bastion, from where you can watch the sun go down on the dramatic Pest skyline.

Overlooking the Bastion is the Matthias Church, which dates back to 1255 and is a fine example of neo-Gothic architecture. You can admire its colourful roof tiles and the art nouveau frescoes and mosaics within. Dominating the top of Buda Hill is the Royal Palace, the former home of Hungarian kings, built in a grand Baroque style. If you visit during the day, you can tour the Hungarian National Gallery and the Budapest Historical Museum, which it now houses.

You must try their most famous dish, goulash, a rich stew prepared with meat and vegetables and lots of paprika. We went to the mid-range Rezkakas Bistro right next to the Basilica, which lived up to its reputation for great ambience and live gypsy music. Another classic dish specific to Budapest is halászlé, a spicy delicious fish soup made from carp caught in the Danube and flavoured with paprika. We were entertained by a chatty Turkish waiter who dished out, in liberal measure, his menu recommendations and his low opinion on all things Hungarian!

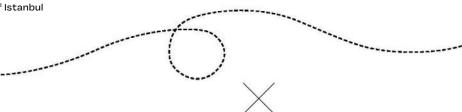
Budapest has a long-running love affair with jazz dating back to WWI, when a blanket closure of New Orleans bars led to a mass exodus of unemployed musicians to seek their fortunes in Europe. Today, the Budapest Jazz Club is the city's finest destination for the most prominent international and local stars. We caught a performance by the six-piece Hot Jazz Band, who played an eclectic selection of hits to a delighted audience and enjoyed dinner at their chic bistro afterwards. **>OT** 

Ranjan Pal is a freelance travel writer and photographer

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Aerial view of Istanbul



## ÜRKIYE

From the gorgeous turquoise coastline to the ancient ruins of the Roman period, Türkiye has everything that one loves about a European getaway but with slashed prices, all thanks to the Turkish lira's depreciating value. Given that the lira's value has been forecasted to dip even further against the US dollar this year, there's no better time than now for keen Indian travellers to take advantage of the favourable conversion rates. Add to that the increase in the number of lowcost carriers flying to Istanbul, ample options for budget stays, affordable street food, and a thriving network of public transport systems, and you've struck gold. So, without further ado, get planning your dreamy holiday to the country of fables and beauty with our budget hacks.







#### TOP ATTRACTIONS

Begin in the atmospheric city of Istanbul, home to many grand remains of the Byzantine Empire such as Hagia Sophia, the Blue Mosque, and Topkapı Palace. In addition, go souvenir-shopping from one of the 4,000 shops in Grand Bazaar, hop on a sunset cruise along the Bosphorus, and unwind at the 16th-century Kılıç Ali Paşa Hamam. From Istanbul, you can go on to explore other popular destinations across Türkiye such as Cappadocia and Antalya, as round-trip flights to these places are cheap and cost approximately INR 6,000 if booked in advance. For sightseeing, buy the MuseumPass Türkiye, available on *muze.gov.tr*, which gives you access to almost 300 museums across the country for INR 14,784.



#### VISA

Indian travellers can apply for an e-visa on evisa.gov. tr only if they have a valid Schengen, UK, Ireland, or US visa. Others must apply through an authorised agent or at the embassy with supporting documents to obtain a sticker visa. The e-visa costs approximately INR 3,718, and the sticker visa costs INR 17,635 (excluding appointment fees).



#### CURRENCY

The official currency used in Türkiye is the lira. As per current conversion rates, INR 1 equals TRY 0.39. Even though debit and credit cards are widely accepted, use cash to avoid forex markups.



#### FLIGHTS

Istanbul Airport is well-connected to major cities like Mumbai and Delhi. Depending on the airline, non-stop return flights typically cost between INR 41,000 and INR 58,000.



#### ACCOMMODATION

A centrally located four-star hotel in Istanbul would cost approximately INR 5,000 per night—Stay Inn in Taksim Square is a good option. You can also consider private rooms or dorms in hostels. A few top-rated hostels close to the centre are Cheers Hostel, Archeo Hostel, The Local, and Jumba Hostel. Meanwhile, BnBs are more affordable in destinations like Cappadocia, Bodrum, and Antalya.





#### LOCAL TRAVEL

Türkiye offers an extensive and affordable public transport network. Buses and trains are economical options for inter-city travel, although they take longer. Kamil Koç buses are popular, with tickets available for pre-booking online. Train tickets can be booked at tcdd.gov.tr/en. Domestic flights are cheaper for shorter travel times, with low-cost carriers like Pegasus available. In cities, the metro, tram, and bus are ideal for getting around, and the IstanbulKart provides access to all modes of transport. The card costs INR 1,808 and can be topped up as needed, with approximately INR 1,289 lasting a week.



#### DINING

Street food is your best bet when in Türkiye if you want to save money. A typical day of eating out and enjoying popular delicacies, such as simit, borek and midye dolma would cost approximately INR 515.



#### SHOPPING

Türkiye offers a treasure trove of souvenirs. From beautiful Turkish rugs (small ones averaging INR 4,000-8,000) to sweet treats like lokum (around INR 400-800 per kilo), there's something for everyone. Don't forget to pick up an evil eye charm (INR 500-1,000) for good luck, and remember to bargain in the bazaars for the best deals.



#### BEST TIME TO VISIT

The optimal time to visit Türkiye is based on your preferences. April, May, September, and October offer pleasant temperatures ranging from 20°C to 30°C, ideal for exploring the country's ancient wonders. Summer (June to September) brings scorching heat, which is perfect for beach relaxation but uncomfortable for site visits. From late October temperatures cool down, with November to March being colder, prompting coastal hotel closures.

PHOTOGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK











### 0 F

# MOUNTAINS



SLOVENIA IS A CHARMING EUROPEAN GETAWAY
WITH LOVELY CITIES, SPA TOWNS, NATURE
PARKS AND COOL PARTY HOTSPOTS AT A PRICE
THAT WON'T MAKE YOU BANKRUPT

Words → **MAMTA CHUGH** 

A N n

L A K E S



Below: Summer tobogganing on Straža hill

#### ET'S GO BOLD, TAKE THE LESSER-KNOWN PATHS,

and leave the trail for others to follow!" I proclaimed, trying to convince my cousins to go on an adventurous holiday to an unconventional European destination— Slovenia. "There's beach, mountains, a lake, a buzzing city vibe, delicious food, and plenty of Instagram-worthy spots. We can toboggan amidst the Julian Alps, and it's all very wallet-friendly." My pitch did the trick; my cousins didn't require any futher convincing.

I was clear about what I wanted for my perfect summer vacation: a European country brimming with character, diverse landscapes, fewer crowds, and affordability. Slovenia, a hidden gem that's still off the radar for many

tourists, checked all these boxes. In the vibrant landscape of Eastern Europe, Slovenia is known for its unforgettable charm. Many of us assume that travelling to Europe is prohibitively expensive, but Slovenia proves otherwise. Despite having the euro as its currency, it remains more affordable than other European destinations.

#### BY THE SEA IN PIRAN

Our adventure began in Piran, a tiny town along Slovenia's modest coastline. Its charm lies in its Venetian architecture, medieval atmosphere, and pastel-coloured homes. Strolling through winding, cobblestone streets with a bar of sea salt chocolate-a local delicacy-was pure joy. "This town is unbelievable. Every corner looks like a postcard!" my cousin exclaimed as we scrolled through our photos sitting beside a window overlooking the ocean in our Airbnb.

The next day, we ventured to Portorož, a nearby spa town just seven minutes away by bus known for its luxurious resorts. We indulged in a spa session at Terme Portorož, enjoying ten types of saunas and treatments for only INR 1,800 per person.

#### **GLAMPING AT LAKE BLED**

Our next stop was the iconic Lake Bled, with its emerald waters and a charming church on an islet. For the first half of our trip, we stayed at Camping Bled, glamping in stylish wooden huts with plush beds and private wood-fired hot tubs in the forest. We paid INR 8,100 per night for two, including a private hot tub and breakfast. We followed this with a stay in a townhouse called Bled Apartment Kirsch in a fairytale neighbourhood called Kumerdejeva Ulica. A luxurious three-bedroom accommodation for six people cost us INR 32,000 per night.

Each morning, we woke up to a delightful breakfast basket outside our tent brimming with fresh, locally sourced treats-crusty bread, a variety of cheeses and cured meats, croissants, farm-fresh eggs, seasonal fruits, homemade jams, and freshly brewed coffee.

Our adventure in Bled also included visiting the church on the islet on a traditional pletna (a wooden boat resembling a gondola), which cost INR 1,200 per person for a return ride, including wait time. We cycled around the lake with postcard views and visited the Bled Castle





# **READ.THINK.UNDERSTAND**











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(INR 800 entry) before exploring the Vintgar Gorge (INR 900), known for its waterfall and walking trails. The adventure continued with a toboggan ride (INR 1,000 for adults) at Straza Bled, that's open only during summer.

We had a memorable meal at Gostilna Pri Planincu, a traditional Slovenian restaurant that has been serving delicious local cuisine for over 100 years. Here, we savoured Idrijskižlikrofi (Slovenian dumplings), ajdovižganci (buckwheat spoonbread), and kranjskaklobasa (Slovenian sausage). Incidentally, Slovenian wine is outstanding, and we relished it with every meal.

# AN ODE TO LJUBLJANA

Our final stop was a week-long stay in Ljubljana, which amazed us with its warmth, variety of food, pretty cobbled streets, happening cafes, and a young vibe.

At the city's historical centre, the river elegantly divides the ancient old town from the bustling new. Visiting the Ljubljana Castle was noteworthy, and a free walking tour (booked through jubljanafreetour.com) revealed the city's rich history, layer by layer.

Entry to the castle costs INR 900, and the funicular ride to reach it costs INR 270 per person. I highly recommend visiting the iconic Špajza restaurant in Old Town for an authentic Slovenian meal, with an average meal for two, including a glass of wine, costing INR 7,200.

From Ljubljana, we ventured on unforgettable day trips. For thrill-seekers,

**Left:** Mountain bike tour in Kranjska Gora; Vintgar Gorge canyon near Lake Bled

# **KNOW BEFORE YOU GO**



→ Visa: To visit from India, you need a valid Schengen visa. The cost is INR 7,200 plus the processing fees.



→ Currency: Euro
Exchange rate: INR 1 = EUR 0.011



→ **Getting There:** Flights from Delhi to Ljubljana cost around **INR 65,000.** Flights to Venice cost approx. **INR 45,000.** A bus from Venice to Ljubljana, costs **INR 1,800.** 



→ Getting Around Slovenia: Travelling in Slovenia by car would come to INR 3,000 for about 120 km. Travelling by bus costs INR 900-1,400 for 100-120 km. Hire a car for bigger groups through transfer.si.



→ Food: The average cost for a meal for two at a high-end restaurant is approximately INR 6,300; at a mid-range restaurant, it is around INR 2,700.



→ Accommodation: Slovenia offers accommodation for all budgets.

Recommendations include Barbara

Piran Beach Hotel (INR 11,000 per night),

Hotel Piran (INR 18,000 per night), Saint Ignatius Retreat House (INR 7,000 per night), etc.



→ Pro Tips: For gifts, visit Nika's tiny shop in Piran. The artist creates hand-crafted Piran-style houses made from driftwood. Visit Mercator in Lake Bled, the local supermarket, and shop for shower gels from Afrodita Cosmetics, a local brand. Shop for souvenirs and knick-knacks at the Bled Island Gift Shop on the islet on Lake Bled.

Bovec in Soča Valley offers an adrenalinefueled escape. We explored Postojna Caves, accessible via a unique cave train revealing geological wonders. Entry tickets, including the cave train ride, cost us INR 2,400 per person.

If you're seeking a European adventure that combines natural beauty with a rich cultural tapestry and is relatively easy on the pocket, Slovenia should be at the top of your list.

I found the Slovenian people to be one of the warmest and most welcoming people in Europe, and that makes all the difference to your experience of the country.

Learn a few phrases in the local language. Though English is widely spoken, people will greet you with a jaunty "dober dan," which means "good day." **>OT** 

# TRI-VALLEY'S WINE COUNTRY

# Discover California's Tri-Valley and go on a wine trail across its thriving wineries

he Tri-Valley encompasses a group of three valleys in California's Bay Area, namely Amador, San Ramone and Livermore Valley. Drive 35 miles east of San Francisco and you'll be greeted by one of the oldest wine regions of California with lots of beautiful stretches of natural area for fun outdoorsy activities and a warm Mediterranean climate. One of the most enticing features of the region is the Livermore Valley Wine Country. With 50 wineries and tasting rooms, guests can expect unique experiences and flavours. Here's a trail of the best wineries and tasting rooms in the Valley.

# **CELLAR DOOR**

The Cellar Door is run by restaurateur Terri Terry who brings out an innovative wine list with creative food pairings.
The Cellar Door offers visitors seminars on winemaking and live music on weekends, and you can sample over 30 wines by the glass from a rotating wine list. Hand-selected from the Central Coast, the wines of Cellar Door pair excellently with their artisan cheese platters and freshly baked bread.

ADDRESS: 4469 Railroad Ave Pleasanton, CA 94566

# **CONCANNON VINEYARD**

For lovers of Cabernet Sauvignon, Concannon Vineyard should be a definite pitstop at the Livermore Valley. The multi-award-winning California wine pioneer is known for their famous Cabernet Sauvignon and Petite Sirah, introducing the latter as America's first and Cabernet Clones 7, 8 and 11. Tasting prices start from USD25.

**ADDRESS:** 4590 Tesla Rd, Livermore, CA 94550, USA





Top and bottom: The Ruby Hill estate; Livermore Valley is known for its thriving wineries

### **BENT CREEK WINERY**

At Bent Creek Winery, you can sample varieties of red, white, and Port wines. Sit outdoors amidst lush vineyards as you sip on some aromatic glasses of reds and whites starting at USD20 per person. The winery was established in 2002 and produces around 3,500 cases of wine annually, with the owners working on every aspect of wine production.

**ADDRESS:** 5455 Greenville Road, Livermore, CA, USA

### **GARRÉ WINERY AND CAFÉ**

At Garré, you don't just sample their brilliant wines but also get to step back in time and trace the family's winemaking traditions back to the early 19th century. Take your pick from their extensive flight of wines with options of indoor and outdoor tastings starting at USD25. From their bestselling Chardonnay to the fruity

Tempranillo and their dessert wine Red Velvet Port, there is a lot on offer. Pair your glass with a choice of some bites bursting with flavours of Old Italy from the Garré Café.

**ADDRESS:** 7986 Tesla Rd, Livermore, CA 94550

# **RUBY HILL WINERY**

Established in 1887, Ruby Hill is one of the oldest wineries in Livermore. The sprawling 150-acre vineyard has eleven varieties, including Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Chardonnay, Zinfandel and Petite Sirah. You can book a table outdoors for 90 minutes for USD25 per person for a selection of four wines. Savour their elegant, handcrafted wines at the estate, or put together from their gourmet deli.

**ADDRESS:** 400 Vineyard Ave, Pleasanton, CA 94566

For more information, visit visittrivalley.com



A herd of zebras at Masai Mara



# KENYA



visiting Kenya should be on your bucket list. What's more, this East African nation is also a very affordable destination for Indian travellers. Kenya, although termed a "developing nation," has witnessed considerable economic growth over the past decade, with the government investing in tourism and infrastructure. This growth has led to increased competition among businesses in the tourism sector, driving prices down to attract more visitors. According to a report by a New Delhi-based media conglomerate, the influx of Indian tourists to Kenya increased by 14 per cent in 2023 compared to 2022. Visiting Kenya will give you a chance to take advantage of its many offerings without trying to save too much.





# TOP ATTRACTIONS

At the heart of Kenya's allure lies its breathtaking wildlife, showcased in iconic national parks and reserves such as the Masai Mara National Reserve in southwestern Kenya along the Tanzanian border, Amboseli National Park in southern Kenya, and Tsavo National Park in the Taita-Taveta County. The snowy Mount Kenya, Africa's second-highest peak, offers great trekking opportunities amid stunning alpine scenery. You can also take a tea tour with lunch at the Kiambethu Farm in Limuru in Nairobi under INR 2,800 or enjoy the beautiful beaches in the coastal town of Watamu north of Mombasa.



# VISA

Indians need to apply online (etakenya.go.ke) for an electronic travel authorisation before travelling to Kenya. The cost of the eTA is INR 2,900 and is processed within seven business days.



# CURRENCY

The designated currency in Kenya is the shilling. As per the present exchange rates, INR 1 equals KES 1.62. You can get your Indian currency exchanged at airport kiosks and other local exchange places. Travel during shoulder season and compare flight fares and stays via multiple sources.



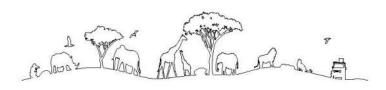
# FLIGHTS

Flying is the fastest and most popular way to reach Kenya. The primary entry point, Jomo Kenyatta International Airport (NBO) in Nairobi, serves flights from various global destinations. Alternatively, travellers can opt for Moi International Airport (MBA) in Mombasa. Non-stop flights to Nairobi from Delhi start at INR 34,369 for a round trip.



# ACCOMMODATION

If you are visiting Masai Mara, the lodges on the park's outskirts are much more affordable than options inside the park. Budget accommodations in Nairobi start from INR 2,253 depending on the season. Mid-range hotels or homestays (from INR 5,000) and luxury hotels (from INR 14,200) are also options. Private budget safaris start from around INR 17,500, and go up to as high as you can afford.





# LOCAL TRAVEL

If you want to travel in Kenya the local way, take advantage of their well-connected bus services. These long-haul buses connect most cities, including like Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu and are cheap, costing approximately INR 2,080. There are many private operators nationwide so it's best to ask for the most recommended ones. If you are travelling to Mombasa from Nairobi and have time, the Madaraka Express is a non-stop night train. Tickets can be bought online on *krc.co.ke*. To get around in a city, you can easily take a taxi or a *matatu* (minivan) at reasonable rates.



# DINING

While on your Kenya vacation, enjoy local delicacies such as irio (potatoes and vegetable mash), nyama choma (grilled meat), ugali (a starchy, spongy side dish), kuku paka (chicken curry) and the popular Kenyan snack, mutura (stuffed intestines). Don't forget to try mandezi, a popular sweet fritter, which is often eaten with coconut milk. The cost of eating out at popular restaurants like The Carnivore Restaurant and Mawimbi Seafood Restaurant & Café is approximately INR 2,000 per person.



# SHOPPING

You can shop to your heart's content at one of the many flea markets in Nairobi. Various malls, such as The Junction and Galleria Shopping Mall Market, host flea markets throughout the week. At these markets you can buy affordable clothes and other souvenirs to take home.



# BEST TIME TO VISIT

If you are visiting Kenya to enjoy a safari, anytime between June and October is ideal. If you want to witness the famous migration of the wildebeest across the Masai Mara, travelling in early September is recommended. May is ideal for some great wildlife photography. •••

PHOTOGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK

The Great Pyramid of Giza is the largest Egyptian pyramid

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Siva came as a promised land, offering a chance to disconnect from the world and reconnect with myself

# EXPLORING EGYPT'S WONDERS BEYOND THE GREAT PYRAMIDS OF GIZA

Words → NABIHA TASNIM

F

# OR MANY YEARS, I ASSOCIATED EGYPT WITH THE

Great Pyramid of Giza. But as I read more about the country, I got drawn to the saltwater lakes of Siwa, viewing Luxor from a hot-air balloon, and diving with dugongs along the Red Sea coast. And so, my solo trip to Egypt revolved around these experiences. I began with Siwa.

Tucked away in the western end of Egypt, along the border with Libya, Siwa's main draw is its crystal-clear, emerald-green saltwater lakes, where the high salinity (almost 95 per cent) makes it impossible for one to sink.

Siwa came as a promised land, offering a chance to disconnect from the world and reconnect with myself. I stayed at Talist Siwa, a completely off-the-grid property built over a decade by architect Nabila Aziz and her family. Talist is a self-sustaining home with a private natural pool. It's surrounded by the Dakrour mountain range and has incredible views of the Siwa Lake.

Hosts Ihab and Lydia took me to a hot water spring and offered me a hydrotherapy session. They also invited me



The Siwa Oasis is an urban oasis in Egypt

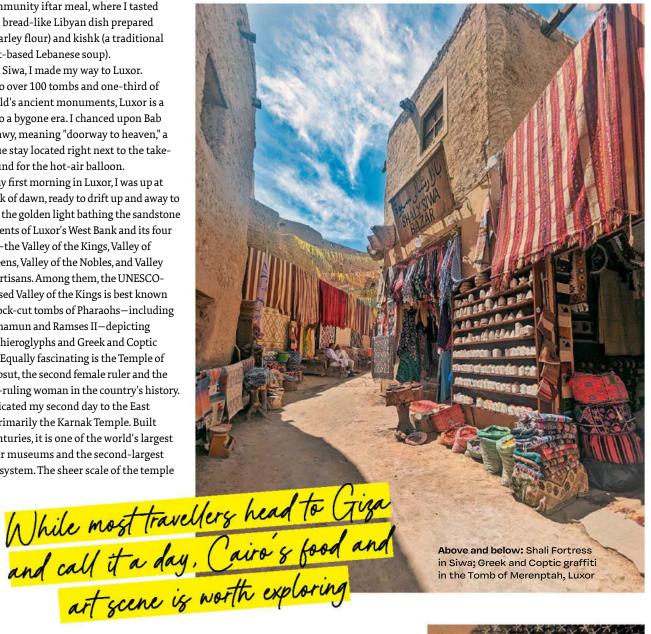


to a community iftar meal, where I tasted bazin (a bread-like Libyan dish prepared using barley flour) and kishk (a traditional yoghurt-based Lebanese soup).

From Siwa, I made my way to Luxor. Home to over 100 tombs and one-third of the world's ancient monuments, Luxor is a portal to a bygone era. I chanced upon Bab Al Samawy, meaning "doorway to heaven," a boutique stay located right next to the takeoff ground for the hot-air balloon.

On my first morning in Luxor, I was up at the crack of dawn, ready to drift up and away to witness the golden light bathing the sandstone settlements of Luxor's West Bank and its four valleys-the Valley of the Kings, Valley of the Queens, Valley of the Nobles, and Valley of the Artisans. Among them, the UNESCOrecognised Valley of the Kings is best known for its rock-cut tombs of Pharaohs-including Tutankhamun and Ramses II—depicting vibrant hieroglyphs and Greek and Coptic graffiti. Equally fascinating is the Temple of Hatshepsut, the second female ruler and the longest-ruling woman in the country's history.

I dedicated my second day to the East Bank, primarily the Karnak Temple. Built over centuries, it is one of the world's largest open-air museums and the second-largest temple system. The sheer scale of the temple



complex, comprising massive gateways or pylons and a hypostyle hall, is awe-inspiring. I spent hours watching the sun filter through and illuminate the vibrant hieroglyphs documenting centuries of history.

Next on my bucket list was the gateway to Nubia-the seat of one of the earliest civilisations of ancient Egypt, dating to 2500 BCE. To experience the Nubian culture up close, I skipped downtown Aswan for a stay at the locally-run Heissa Artie Nubian Guest House on Philae Island, located near the First Cataract on the Nile.

Staying on the island allowed me to take several rides on the felucca, a traditional wooden sailing boat with a single sail. In

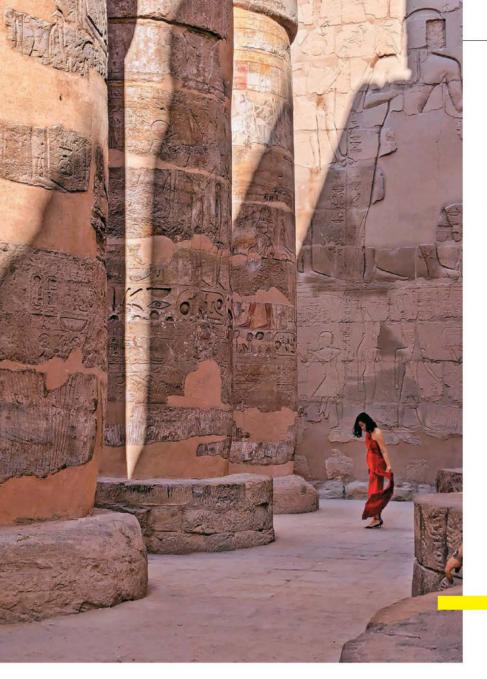
between those rides I found time to walk around the bustling Sharia el Souk, take in the spectacular views of the Nile, explore the Philae Temple, and watch Agatha Christie's "Death on the Nile" come to life at the Old Cataract Hotel where it was written.

For the final leg of my journey, I left behind mainland Egypt for another adventure in the small town of Dahab. located on the Sinai Peninsula.

A harbour along the Gulf of Aqaba, the coast of Dahab is where you get the unique opportunity to spot highly endangered dugongs and the most beautiful coral reefs. Dahab is considered a diver's dream. I hopped onto a boat that took me to El Bells, a crack in







# **KNOW BEFORE YOU GO**



→ Visa: Egypt offers a single-entry e-visa costing INR 2,700. Additionally, they require a letter of authorisation from a local travel agency.



→ Currency: Egyptian Pound Exchange rate: INR1 = EGP 0.57



→ Getting There: You can fly directly to Cairo from Delhi and Mumbai. A round-trip costs approximately INR 40,000.



→ Getting Around Egypt: Travel by train to explore the Nile Valley. Take a dahabiya cruise between Esna and Aswan. Book early with Nile Dahabiya or Nour El Nil. Taxi or hotel-hired drivers can take you on day trips. Uber is also available.



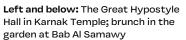
→ Food: A meal at a mid-range restaurant with a beverage, a starter, and a main course costs INR 700 per person. Street foods are as cheap INR 20.



→ Accommodation: Egypt offers accommodations for all budgets and great value for money for hotels on the higher end. A decent double room usually costs around INR 4,000.



→ Pro Tip: Download Google Translate on your phone as most people speak Arabic. Cover your shoulders and knees, especially outside major cities and beach towns. Don't hesitate to ask questions to the locals—they are happy to help.





the reef table with a nearly 30m vertical drop. From the reef, I drift-dived to the Blue Hole, a coral-fringed submarine sinkhole known to be one of the world's most tricky diving sites.

After that breathtaking rush of adrenaline, I cooled off by roaming the town's quaint lanes, shopping for intricate beadwork by Bedouin women, and watching the sunset over the Red Sea. A travelogue on Egypt is incomplete without a mention of its pulsating, cosmopolitan capital city, Cairo.

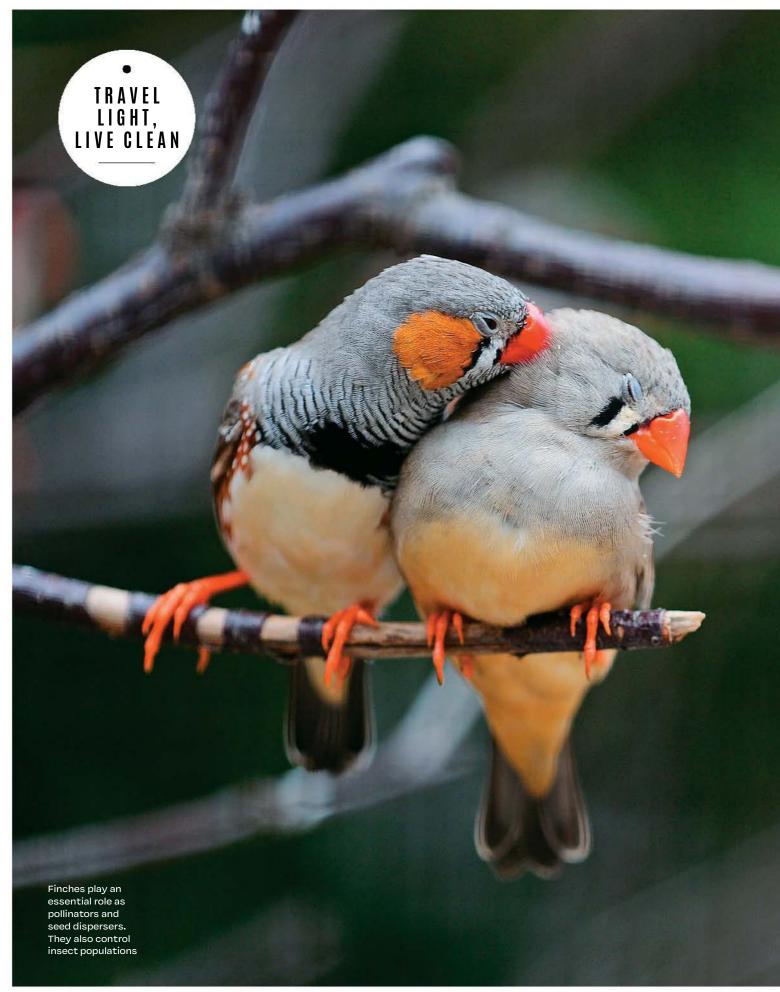
While most travellers head to Giza and call it a day, Cairo's food and art scene is worth exploring. Zamalek, a small island within the metropolis is home to over 40 public and private art galleries featuring modern and contemporary Egyptian art.

Try the local delicacies like taameya and karkade at Zooba, ful medames at Tabali, koshary at Abou Tarek, molokhiya at Fasahet Somaya, and basbousa at Simond's.

The city hides truly unique experiences in plain sight. **>OT** 



rescue in case of loss/delay of checked-in baggage.





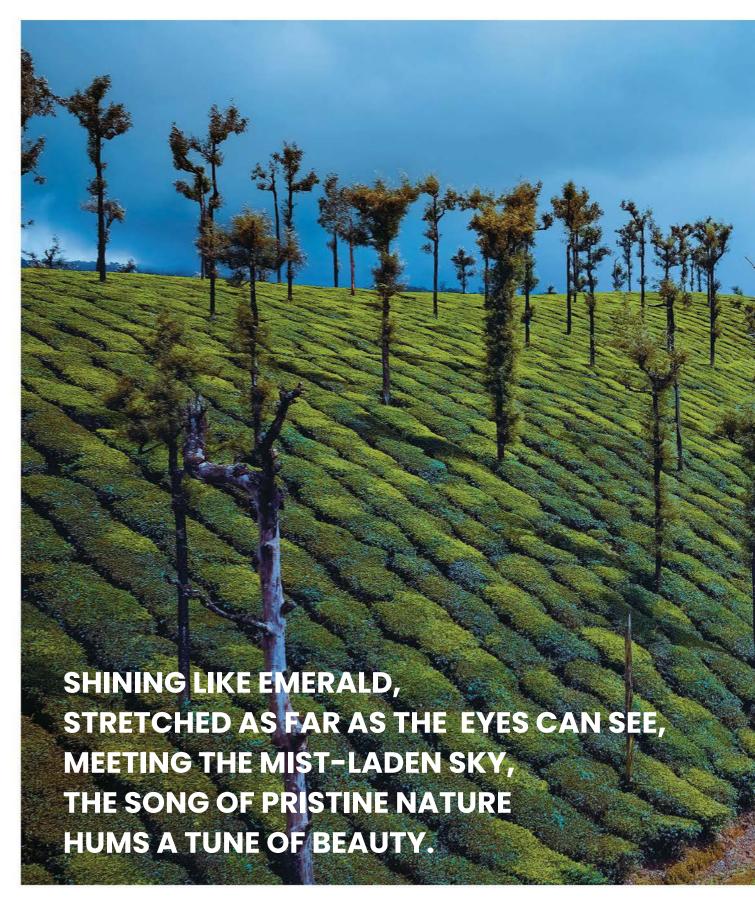
# G R E E N L I V I N G

# FINCHES FIND FAVOUR

# THE GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS ROLLED

out the red carpet to welcome back five types of finches as efforts to restore the natural ecology of the archipelago bear fruit. Floreana Island in the East Pacific Ocean is listed as an Important Bird Area by BirdLife International, a non-governmental organisation, which conserves bird populations and their habitats. A successful campaign to eliminate invasive species like rats, mice and feral cats was undertaken from October-December 2023 on the island to pave the way for the eventual reintroduction of 12 locally extinct species. Finches play an essential role in the island's ecosystem, acting as pollinators, seed dispersers and controlling insect populations. They are one of the creatures said to have inspired Charles Darwin's seminal book on natural evolution, "On the Origin of Species."

A number of the 510 finches were fitted with radio transmitters to monitor their movements in real-time.



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**ANANDA BANERJEE** 

# MONSOON'S GLOWING GIFT

infested wilderness after a sumptuous dinner would not appeal to most people on a holiday. However, an invitation to see something

extraordinary at night can push anyone with even a faint interest into discovering the wonders of the natural world.

A few years ago, Nirmal Kulkarni, the well-known herpetologist and Goa-based wildlife conservationist, took me on a night trail through Chorla Ghat, Goa—a section of the Western Ghats in the Sahyadri mountain range. The monsoon had been bountiful that year, making the dense forest resplendent with hues of green. With just the aid of a torch beam, we scrambled up a slippery slope with only frog calls for company. After a short hike we came to an abrupt halt in the middle of nowhere. We promptly switched off the torch lights to immerse ourselves in pitch darkness,

and suspense followed. Once our eyes got adjusted to the deep, dark forest, it began to reveal its secrets.

First, on the left, we saw a faint glow of "fluorescent" green coming onto a portion of a dangling branch. It slowly began to spread and intensify, although unevenly, and some even faded away. Similar glowing patches appeared on the right and the forest floor ahead. At a distance, a tree trunk glowed in a similar fashion. Soon, we were surrounded and captivated by the mesmerising display of light and sound. These were not fireflies or glow worms (also present in this landscape) but bioluminescence fungi and mushrooms that occur only during the monsoon season. Unlike what I initially thought, bioluminescence is not the same as fluorescence.

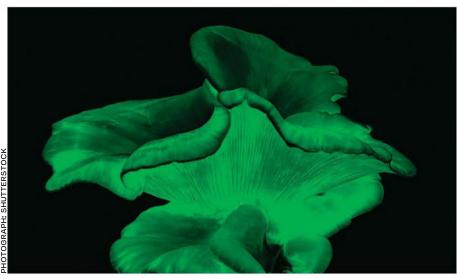
While fluorescence does not involve a chemical reaction, most bioluminescence is a chemical reaction involving luciferin, the light-producing compound, and luciferase, an

enzyme. The phenomenon of bioluminescence requires a certain threshold of rain and moisture for these organisms to flourish on the forest floor. The glow increases or decreases depending on the pattern and consistency of the monsoon rain. The monsoon forecast looks good this year, with predictions of aboveaverage rain due to the La Niña phenomenon in the Pacific Ocean. But with the ongoing climate crisis and changing rainfall patterns, it's hard to predict what the future holds for this nature's spectacle. While we know that living organisms use bioluminescence for hunting, defending against predators, or finding partners to procreate, we do not fully know the exact conditions and nature of the glow, or even the ecological role they play in the complex scheme of nature.

These days, a fair number of people travel to Goa during the monsoon season but very few get out from the pull of the beachside to explore Goa's fascinating natural history. Goa's eastern side, around 600 sq. km of the biodiverse Western Ghats, is worth exploring-from Mhadei Wildlife Sanctuary to the Cotigao Wildlife Sanctuary. Once the showers drench the mountains, the emerald forest comes alive with bird and frogtoad song, endemic species of orchids and carnivorous flowering plants of the coastal laterite plateaus, psychedelic crabs, and jawdropping waterfalls. Interestingly, several new species have been discovered (and rediscovered) from this part of the state.

However, despite the rich biodiverse treasures, Goa never got a place on the wildlife destination map. But change is not far, with more and more people getting a taste of the adventure that Goa's wild has to offer.

Ananda Banerjee is an author, artist, and wildlife conservationist



Bioluminescent mushrooms glowing in the dark



# 7 WAYS TO TRAVEL SUSTAINABLY

ZERO-WASTE AND SLOW TRAVEL ADVOCATE
SOUMYA MANTHENA ON KEEPING YOUR
CARBON FOOTPRINT LIGHT



### THE BIGGEST MISCONCEPTION WHEN IT COMES TO SUSTAINABLE

travel is that it is expensive. It is most often thought of as "luxury travel," and that is far from the truth. Choosing trains, opting for off-season travel, avoiding plastic water bottles, and choosing local cuisines and accommodations instead of big-name chains are great ways to make your travel more budget-friendly. Responsible tourism is a choice you make. It may not be the most popular choice, and it does take a little extra time and research, but it's not as expensive or elitist as it is touted to be.



# TIP 02



Pick your destination according to your interests, and don't let those "most popular travel destinations of the year" posts on social media decide your place of travel. Choose destinations and experiences that are likely to enrich your understanding of the world, which is what



travel is meant to do.



Embrace slow travel or offseason travel. Try spending more time absorbing the culture and essence of a destination instead of just ticking off a to-do list. Offseason travel is also a great option as it puts less pressure on the local ecosystem and gives you a wholesome and relaxed experience with fewer crowds.



# TIP 03

Avoid air travel whenever possible. Take a train or a bus instead of flying, as it cuts down emissions by nearly 90 per cent. Trains are also more comfortable and pocket-friendly.

# **TIP 04**



Look for eco-conscious accommodation. Hotels that consciously avoid single-use plastic, have systems for recycling their solid waste, practise rainwater harvesting, and run on renewable power are better choices. Similarly, locally owned accommodations and homestays leave a minimal impact. Plus, your money will go into local residents' pockets.



# **TIP 05**

Avoid single-use disposables by carrying your own water bottle, coffee mug, carry bag, etc. Water can be easily refilled at cafés, restaurants, or accommodations. Also, pack your own soap, shampoo, toothbrush, toothpaste etc. The toiletries offered in hotels mostly come in tiny plastic bottles or sachets, which have a very small chance of being recycled.

# **TIP 06**



# Bring back your trash.

If you do end up using some single-use plastic, make sure to bring it back to the hotel or carry it back home to your city. This is especially important if you are travelling to eco-sensitive or remote areas which don't have concrete recycling facilities. The plastic we leave behind ends up choking the surrounding environment.



# TID

**TIP 07** 

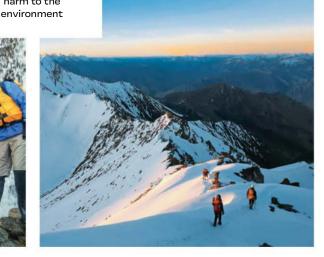
Support the local economy by eating local cuisine to reduce your food miles and keep the culinary heritage of the place alive. Support local craftsmen and opt for place-specific experiences and guides. Contributing to the local economy is an often overlooked but important part of sustainability.



# FROM INTENT TO A C T I O N







IT'S DIFFICULT TO
CONVINCE TRAVELLERS
AND INDUSTRY
PLAYERS TO PRACTICE
SUSTAINABILITY.
CAN THE FIELD OF
BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE
SHIFT INDUSTRY-WIDE
ATTITUDES TO MAKE
SUSTAINABLE TOURISM
THE NORM?

Words  $\rightarrow$  EISHA GUPTA



# AS MORE TRAVELLERS UNDERTAKE

journeys that have a minimal negative impact on the planet, hospitality businesses and tour operators are waking up to the economic and planetary benefits of travelling responsibly. However, it takes work to change mindsets and convert travellers and those in the travel industry to sustainable practices.

Behavioural science—a field combining anthropology, psychology, and sociology to study the workings of the human mind and people's interactions with the world—could help change attitudes by understanding the motivations behind human behaviour and harnessing them for change.

# **MAKING SUSTAINABILITY EASIER**

Dr Milena S Nikolova, the founder of Behavior Smart, a Bulgaria-based organisation studying behavioural science methods in the sustainable tourism industry, said to OT that most tourists are mindful of their actions but often perceive sustainability as challenging to practise.

"Many of today's decision-makers were trained to treat sustainability as a niche market segment, so the way the tourism economy operates today makes sustainability difficult, complicated and requiring much effort," she said. "Someone on holiday is seeking to get away from the responsibilities of daily life. They are eager to enjoy some time off and share memories with close ones. We cannot expect them to put that aside and focus on responsibility."

Travellers' (mis)perceptions about sustainable tourism tend to solidify cognitive barriers and biases that turn them away from exploring how meaningful and fulfilling it can be. Booking.com's "Sustainable Travel





Report 2024" says 47 per cent of Indian travellers felt that time spent travelling is too precious to warrant factoring in sustainability as a primary consideration when drawing up their plans.

Furthermore, 52 per cent of respondents felt the damage already done to tourist destinations is irreversible and their travel choices will not change the state of affairs.

"The effort should be on the side of the industry. We should stop hoping demand can drive sustainability and focus on making it possible through supply. The best way to travel sustainably is to choose travel companies and service providers that have made an effort to make responsible choices easy," said Nikolova.

# A RESPONSIBLE CHOICE

Aquaterra Adventures, founded by Vaibhav Kala, is a company that has gone the extra mile in making tourism responsible, sustainable, and easy for travellers. This adventure travel outfitter was launched in 1995 to fill a gap in customised treks and river rafting experiences in the Indian Himalayas and beyond. Some of the measures they have undertaken to reduce their impact on the fragile ecosystems they visit are: limiting their group sizes to 12 people for treks and 16 on river trips; camping away from water bodies to ensure that used water does not flow into them; installing slow showers to minimise the use of water in their fixed camps; carrying solar lamps on trips and using batteries solely to power UV water filters; banning motorcycle trips and limiting the use of jeeps on their expeditions; and carrying all solid trash from their trips and burying biodegradable wet waste like peels, egg shells and wasted food.

Finally, all their trips are run with the



necessary permits to aid conservation and support clean-up operations, and over 95 per cent of their staff hail from the Himalayan regions. "Choose the destination well, choose your operators, speak to your guide and ask questions so you know your travel will not degrade the destination or erode its USP." said Kala.

# REAP THE REWARDS BY GOING THE EXTRA MILE

Greater transparency around sustainable travel choices can soften the cognitive barriers against travelling responsibly. "When people can clearly understand how sustainable tourism practices benefit the businesses and cities they patronise, such as by improving their infrastructural development and social services, then they will be supportive and proactive about sustainability initiatives," said Nikolova.

Thus, sustainability initiatives should treat the entire destination—along with residents, entrepreneurs and visitors—as one ecosystem in which the behavioural patterns of different groups work towards a common goal. If locals are careless towards the natural world and contribute to the wastage of resources and the generation of waste, then visitors cannot be reasonably expected to be more responsible and respectful than them.

Ultimately, understanding traveller motivation holds the key to change.
"Travellers embark on a journey to create memories and enjoy an experience they will discuss with their friends and family. This will never change, so if we want to make tourism truly sustainable, we need to ensure that responsibility never conflicts with the joy of travelling," said Nikolova.



# OT HALL OF FRAME



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### **₩ MAYANK RAJORIYA**

I wanted to create a captivating image of Jaipur's Patrika Gate, highlighting its embodiment of beautiful architecture and countless untold stories

@ @MANMAUJI\_YAYAWAR

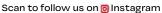


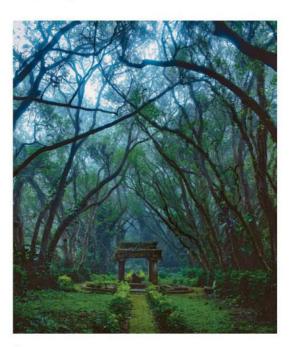
# **♦ SUBODH SHETTY**

A lioness in Kenya's Masai Mara National Reserve carefully picks up her little cub by its scruff

@ @subodhshettyy



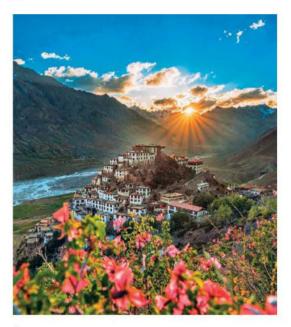




# **† SHIVU GOUDA**

This Nandi sculpture, dating back over a millennium, is inside an ancient temple in Nandi Hills, Karnataka, and rests beside the waters of Amruth Sarovar

@@SHIVU\_GOUDA45



# ↑NISHCHAY BHARATI JAIN

In July 2021, after a 500–metre hike in search of the ideal vantage point, I finally captured Spiti's Key Monastery

@MEINBHIPHOTOGRAPHER





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