

January - March 2016

A high-end quarterly magazine

PRAVEG'S

TOURISM ONE

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What your sun-sign reveals about your travel-style?

Enliven Your Taste Buds with DELECTABLE GUJARATI CUISINE

Say 'I do' in style
IN GOA

The Wonderful West



Magnificent Maharashtra



Mesmerizing Madhya Pradesh



Glamorous Goa



Royal Rajasthan

PRAVEG'S TOURISM ONE | January - March 2016

Set it Free





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Yet another cliché


Sadhus in saffron robes, peacocks spreading their feather tails, a sari-clad woman running in slow-motion, aggressive flocks of beggar, children and skeletal men on crutches and a single-screen theatre. A sense of déjà vu, isn't it? This is typical India portrayed in the western world... be it in the books (let's say Elizabeth Gilbert authored 'Eat, Pray, Love'), films (the poor India in 'Slumdog Millionaire') or even in music video (let's pick recently-released 'Coldplay').

And here begins the ultimate India travel cliché. Oh! Wait, we missed out on a snake charmer on the doorstep. The question here is – why is this 'find-yourself/find-God' or oriental bric-a-brac stereotypical image is conjured up in the minds of global audience about Indian vacation? India, a culturally and geographically diverse country, is a wholesome package of adventure, entertainment, leisure, traditions, religions, nature, art & crafts, architectural and historical wonders.

Endeavor to go beyond the conventional labels. Drift through the sacred water of River Ganges in Rishikesh - the buzzing town otherwise cocooned in a religious image. Or reboot yourself by sitting on a terrace at the centuries-old palace-hotel of Rajasthan - appreciating the desert at sunset, rejoicing the melodious sounds of humming birds and the soft tunes of rustic folk songs down the hill.

To unearth little-known wonders of the vivacious country, Tourism One uncovers novel excursion ideas. This issue takes you through the epic culinary tour of Gujarat, from the high-end restaurants offering traditional cuisine to wide variety of scrumptious street food. Trace the royal era with the photo-feature appreciating splendid palaces of India. And if ocean-side beaches, vibrant night-life, adventurous sports, cruises and tropical islands are all you know about Goa, we're here to spill the beans on the exotic marriage destinations to spice up your wedding vows with the beyond-expression beach flavor.

Read on...



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Have some suggestions for us?

Go ahead and send us your ideas, valuable opinions or topics you would like to see more coverage on

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Contents

Enliven Your Taste-Buds with Delectable Gujarati Cuisine	4
Rajasthan's New West	8
What your sun-sign reveals about your travel-style?	14
BHOPAL: City of Lakes	16
2016: A Year of Holidays	19
5 Cool Travel Gears For Your Next Trip	21
You Can Take A 30-Day Trip to Thailand For Less Than US\$ 750 (or ₹48000) Here's How...	22
Say 'I Do' in Style GOA	26
Palaces of India	30
BOOMING Outbound Tourism Market of India	34
Forts of Maharashtra	36
What's Travelling	39
Press Release	40



Enliven Your Taste-Buds with **DELECTABLE GUJARATI CUISINE**

From the desert plains of Kutch in the northwest to the moist forests of the Dangs in the southwest, Gujarat's geographical diversity is reflected in the cuisines of the state.

Winter is the best time to enjoy Gujarati food. This is the time of the year when many green vegetables are in season. A signature dish of the January to March period - undhiyu is closely associated with Uttarayana or Makar Sankranti. This is a mix of vegetables, muthiyas (a snack named for the way it is made by gripping the chickpea flour in the muthia or wrist) and papdi beans, roasted or fried together.

Gujarat is also famous for farsans (steamed or fried snacks served as breakfast items, tea-time snacks, starters or accompaniments). Some of the popular farsans are - Khandvi or chickpea pasta, dhokla (a savoury cake usually made from a batter blending ground rice and dal) served with chutney or poured over with a rasa (sauce), dal dhokli (wheat dumplings in dal), pandoli (a green gram idli), muthias or chickpea kebabs made with methi (fenugreek) or doodhi (bottle gourd), amiri khamani (split yellow dal cakes), paatra patervelia (colocassia leaf stuffed with a paste comprising chickpea flour, jaggery and chopped coriander), handvo (a spicy baked chickpea and lentils cake with grated pumpkin or bottle gourd), vadas made from bajri and other flours. Fried snacks include - chorafali, farsi puri, ganthia, gujarati chewda, chakri, sev, sakkarpara. Gujaratis also make khichdis from corn or sago as snack items.

A unique aspect of Gujarati food is the variety of 'travel foods' that are made to stay for long, like khakra, dhebra and thepla. Some of the famous sweet and farsan shops have come up with 'export packs' of ganthia and other snacks that stay for very long.

Ahmedabad has a number of restaurants serving Gujarati Thalís. This refers to meals served in thalis (metal trays) with katoris (metal bowls)



Khakhra

placed on them. Typically, a thali meal has one or two steamed or fried farsans, a tuber or a gourd shaak (shaaks are vegetable curries), a couple of shaaks made from seasonal vegetables, a kathol (braised pulses like beans, chickpea or dry peas), a couple of yogurt dishes like dahi, kadhi (yogurt and pulses soup), raita, rice or khichdi, dal usually toor dal, and sweets like halwas, basundi or shrikhand. Accompaniments include sweet, sour and spicy chutneys, pickles, ghee and a salad of chopped vegetables served raw or may be steamed in spices. If you ask for a Jain thali, the entire food would be free of onions, garlic and potatoes. Gud (jaggery/molasses) or sugar is a common ingredient in Gujarati cooking. According to some Gujarati cooks, the sweet flavour is an adaptation to neutralise the slightly salty taste of the water in some parts of Gujarat, and most of the farsans and shaaks are made with vaghaar,

which is a mixture of spices sterilised in hot oil said to have digestive benefits.

What makes a thali especially exciting is the incredible diversity of its content. The sheer variety of colours, tastes, textures and nutrients make a Gujarati meal platter an amazing culinary experience. The yellow of turmeric, the redness of tomatoes, the green of leafy vegetables and herbs, the whiteness of yogurt, the brown pulses and various fruits, vegetables, spices, relishes and pickles adorn a platter with vivid colours. Food textures like coarse, grainy, granular, smooth, uniform, dry and watery are included in a platter, all eaten together – for example 'nylon' khaman, which as the name suggests has a



Thepla

smooth mouth-feel, is served with coarse chutney. And each dish varies in its sweetness, bitterness, sourness, spiciness and heat with some of them having a blend of sweet and sour tastes. The breads in a thali include thick and coarse bajra rotla, thin unleavened wheat rotlis, thick and crisp whole wheat flour rotis called bakhris, parathas, savoury griddle bread called the thepla, deep-fried puris, among others. There are many variations like methi thepla or masala puri within these breads.

While Gujaratis do not follow courses - with everything from the farsan snacks (that would normally be starters) to the sweets (usually be desserts), served in one thali. The rice dishes are usually eaten last with



Khandvi



Khichadi

either dal or kadhi. Khichdis, made by soaking and cooking the rice with dal or beans and adding a variety of spices tempered in ghee or oil, and kadhi is a classic combination, while steamed rice is usually eaten with toor dal. Ghee is sometimes added on top of khichdi or rice before eating. These traditions are still followed in many Gujarati homes. Though these days, melamine and crockery are becoming more common than thalis, and wedding repasts are turning to buffet rather than being served in thalis, which probably require a large serving team to keep refilling the kathoris. The thalis are usually made of steel but also of different metal alloys as copper and brass are said to have their own health benefits. Silver thalis signify the status of the host and often also the importance of the occasion or special guest at a dinner. At Vishalla, the iconic village-themed restaurant of Ahmedabad, meals are served on leaf platters. Rajwadu and Vintage Village are other must-visits for tourists wanting to have a Gujarati culinary experience. Agashiye is a restaurant at Ahmedabad's famous heritage hotel, House of Mangaldas Girdhardas, which offers Gujarati thalis with a contemporary tweak. The oldest surviving restaurant in Ahmedabad, Chandra Vilas near Manek Chowk is about 100 years old and is known for Gujarati food.

Manek Chowk is the centre for many renowned places for

Gujarati sweets and snacks. At night turns into a street food market, where you can get innovative dishes from cheese dosa to pineapple sandwich. In the 'pols' near Manek Chowk, there are many places selling Jain snacks made without onions, garlic or potatoes like the Kelawada, which has banana replacing potatoes.

The Muslim-dominated Khas Bazaar nearby is known for its non-vegetarian street food. Along the street called Bhatiyar Galli, kebabs, curries and tava-fried meats are cooked on 'bhattis'. Kalupur, Jamalpur, Gomtipur and Mirzapur also have many vendors frying meats on griddle pan. In recent years, places serving Arabian fast foods like shawarma and grilled chicken have emerged at Astodia and Juhapura.

Sindhi Market and Revdi Bazaar in this part of Ahmedabad offer Sindhi snacks and meals – pakwan dal and pakoras are favourites. North of these markets, you come to Wadaj, Sardarnagar and Kubernagar, where an extensive variety of Sindhi snacks and dishes are available. Shahibag has many places for Marwari snacks like kachoris.

Maninagar is an area known for its farsan shops. Maninagar- Khokhra Road has a sizable Tamil origin population – one of the first Tamil language schools in northwestern India came up here. As there are many South Indian snack vendors in the area, it is called Idli Char Rasta.



Khaman

In western Ahmedabad, Law Garden is a very popular zone for street food, kulfis, ice-creams and other eateries. Since this is a very cosmopolitan part of Ahmedabad, restaurants serving multiple cuisines and specialties thrive on CG Road, SG Road, Vastrapur Road, Sindhu Bhawan Road, Prahladnagar Road and other areas of western Ahmedabad.

As you head north from Ahmedabad towards Rajasthan, you will find dhabas serving dal bati and other Rajasthani cuisines.

Guajrati Muslim communities like the Ismaili, Khoja, Dawoodi Bohra, Surti,



Vishalla

Memon, Sunni Vohra, Ghanchi and Chhipa are known for their meat dishes. At the Bohravad of Sidhpur, there are families who make Dawoodi Bohra food on prior order. The thal would include kebabs, palidas, kaliya manda, meat pulao and malai na khajla (cream-filled pastry) or muzzafar (saffronised rice). Sagla bagla is a baklava like sweet made in Surat. According to Khoja

Khana, a famous cookbook of the community by Fateema Hooda, Khoja vegetarian food has Gujarati influences but most members of the community have non-vegetarian food daily, which is cooked on dum and coal that lend a smoky flavour. The book also talks about the signature hara masala of the Khojas.

Southeast from Ahmedabad, Vadodara or Baroda was once a Maratha-ruled princely state and has a significant Marathi-speaking population. Sev Usal is one of the popular snack foods of Vadodara. 'Jay Mahakali' near Polo Ground is one of the places to get this hot curry. Jainhind is another famous snacking place in Vadodara renowned for its Sabudana Vada, Sabudana Khichdi, Chakli and Sing Ladoo. Bhakarwadi and Chevdo are fried snacks of Vadodara.

Travel further south from Vadodara to Surat, justly famous for its food. Since Surat and South Gujarat are greener than many other parts of Gujarat, the food here is made with lots of greens, yams like rattalu and herbs. Green garlic is profusely used in Surti cooking. In winter, Surat is famous for its Matla Undhiyu made in an earthen pot. Ponk is another winter specialty of Surat. Farsans are Surat's forte – khaman, locho, coconut patties, kachori and patra are well-known. Rich sweets like ghari are also popular buys from Surat.

A unique culinary heritage of Surat is its Parsee-owned bakeries, some of them over 150 years old. These bakeries date back to the days when the Dutch and British had factories in Surat. After they left, the Parsees started bakeries by modifying the old bakery recipes - thus Farnasu Surti Batasa or Butter Biscuits, Nankhatai and Khari have become must-buys in Surat. Surti families, whether Parsee, Hindu, Jain or Muslim, have these biscuits, often dipped in 'malai' with their afternoon cuppa. On Sundays, an interesting market develops at Rander, where Burmese origin foods are available. Zampa Bazaar is famous for its non-vegetarian food, while the Chowk is a vegetarian street food paradise. You will soon understand why Gujaratis say "Surat nu Jaman ane Kashi nu Maran", eating in Surat is as sure a way of getting to heaven as a funeral in sacred Varanasi.

South of Surat, Navsari, Udvada and Sanjan are important places of Parsee pilgrimage. At Udvada, the dharamshala serves traditional Parsee food. Chicken farcha, patra ni machhi, sali murgi, shrimp



Undhiyu

kolmi no patio, saas ni macchi, jaraloo sali boti, tomato ni russ chaval with mutton cutlets and egg dishes are commonly served. Mullet or boi is one of the popular



Dhansak

fishes. Dhansak is the mandatory Sunday lunch for Parsee homes. At Navsari or Udvada, you can shop for dhansak masala, biryani masala, vinegar and other ingredients for Parsee food. The coastal areas of South Gujarat are known for their sugarcane fields and mango orchards. In the hills, the tribal population makes interesting dishes using bamboo shoots, local mushrooms and finger millet called raagi or nagli.

In Saurashtra or the Kathiawad peninsula, which grows high quality chillies and spices but is generally arid with few green vegetables, the food can be fiery and strong on garlic compared to the relatively mild, sweetish flavoured food of mainland Gujarat. In Kutch, which has vast tracts of desert and grassland, as also in Kathiawad, where livestock is plentiful but agriculture marginal, milk products like chaas, lassi, curd, kadhi, shrikhand or basundi, mawa sweets are frequently served as part of a thali.

The signature feature of Kutchi and Kathiawadi food is the bajra rotla eaten with lasan chutney (a green garlic paste usually fiery with chillies), lasaniya bataka (potatoes cooked in a garlic flavoured curry), sev tamatar (tomato curry with slivers of fried dough), seasonal veggies, onions and green chillies. As Kathiawad is a major groundnut producing zone, food is usually cooked in groundnut oil. You can find these dishes and also thalis at many dhabas on the highways as well as in restaurants.

Across Gujarat, families take pride in their hospitality. It would be rude not to eat well, when invited for a meal as the women of the house would take it as an affront to their cooking skills. Families talk knowledgeably about food for different weather conditions, whether it is light-on-the-stomach dishes, cooling foods and increased use of lime, salt, sugar and tomatoes during the summer months, when dehydration can occur in the hot and arid weather or ingredients that keep you warm during the winter months. ■



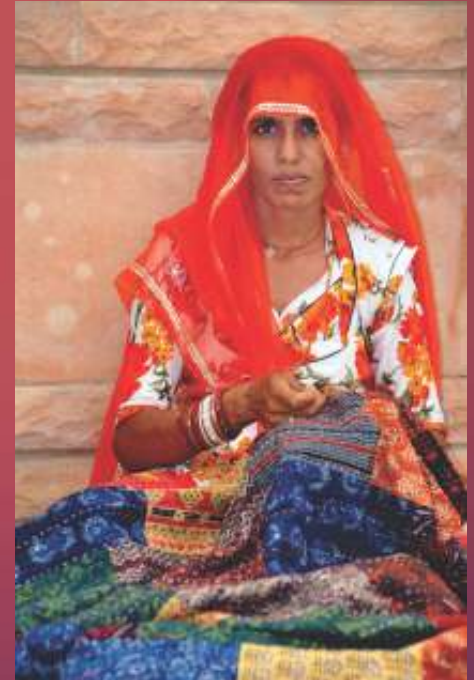


Rajasthan's New West

If you think Rajasthan is done to death, check out the unspoiled southwestern districts of Barmer and Jalore. Off the beaten track of most travelers, Tourism One takes you through the natural, cultural and artistic attractions of this region.



Chinkara near Dhorimanna



Barmer, Jalore and Jaisalmer form a scenically and culturally interesting triangle in western Rajasthan. The Cairn India's major oil fields in Barmer district and emergence of infrastructure like hotels have expanded tourism prospects in this part of Rajasthan.

HIGHWAY TOURISM

Sanchor is the first major town on the Ahmedabad-Jaisalmer Highway. New hotels are coming up in this prosperous town known for its mercantile families. Further ahead of Sanchor, you can see the dhannis (hamlets) of the Bisnoi community. The Bisnois follow the principles of their medieval spiritual leader, Jamboji, who preached respecting the life of flora and fauna.

You are likely to see herds of chinkara or Indian gazelle and other wildlife around the dhannis. Meghawa has a Jamboji temple with antelope, sometimes seen around it. Dhorimanna is an important area for gazelle. If you prefer to visit craft villages, take the road from here to Chohtan and Dhanau, which lie at the heart of an embroidery producing zone. In the homes of communities like the Meghwals, Sindhi-speaking Muslims and pastoral communities, you can watch women doing fine embroideries. Close to Sindh and Kutch, the embroidery styles of Thar Parkar are predominant in Barmer district.

On the road north from Barmer to Jaisalmer, Aakal Fossil Park is a fascinating place with 180 million years old petrified wood fossils. These are reminders of the days, when the desert was part of the sea coast. The 21-hectar Fossil Park contains about

a dozen fossil wood logs. The longest specimen is 13.4 m x 0.9 m. Wood fossils and gastropod shells of Lower Jurassic period are displayed.

THE MARKETS AND CRAFTS OF BARMER

Set among low hills near sand dunes, Barmer is a bustling city that has for long been a trade centre for the surrounding villages and has been in the news over the last few years because of its large oil basin.

This city in the Thar Desert is well-known for its woodcarvings, block printing, tie-dye and embroidery,



Fossil Park



The exquisite temples of Kiradu

which reflects a variety of cultural influences due to the location of this region on migratory and mercantile caravan routes from western and central Asia to eastern and southern India.

On entering the city, ask directions for Khatriyon Ka Nichala Vas, the quarters of the Khattris who specialize in block printing. Along narrow lanes, these artisans can be watched at work on the intricate art of printing textiles using carved wooden

blocks. One of the major crafts here is Ajrakh, which involves 14 to 16 different stages of a highly evolved process of mordanting and multiple printing to create complex geometric prints on both sides of the textile. JK Fab Crafts on the main road of Mahavir Nagar is one of the workshops in Barmer, where you are likely to watch Meghwal

women doing their fine embroidery in the courtyard or in a hallway. At JK Fab Crafts, you can get a range of fabrics for bed covers, bedsheets, curtains, floor coverings and dresses with really fine embroidery, appliqué or prints. They also source old pieces of embroidery, appliqué textiles and traditional attires from the villages for their collection.

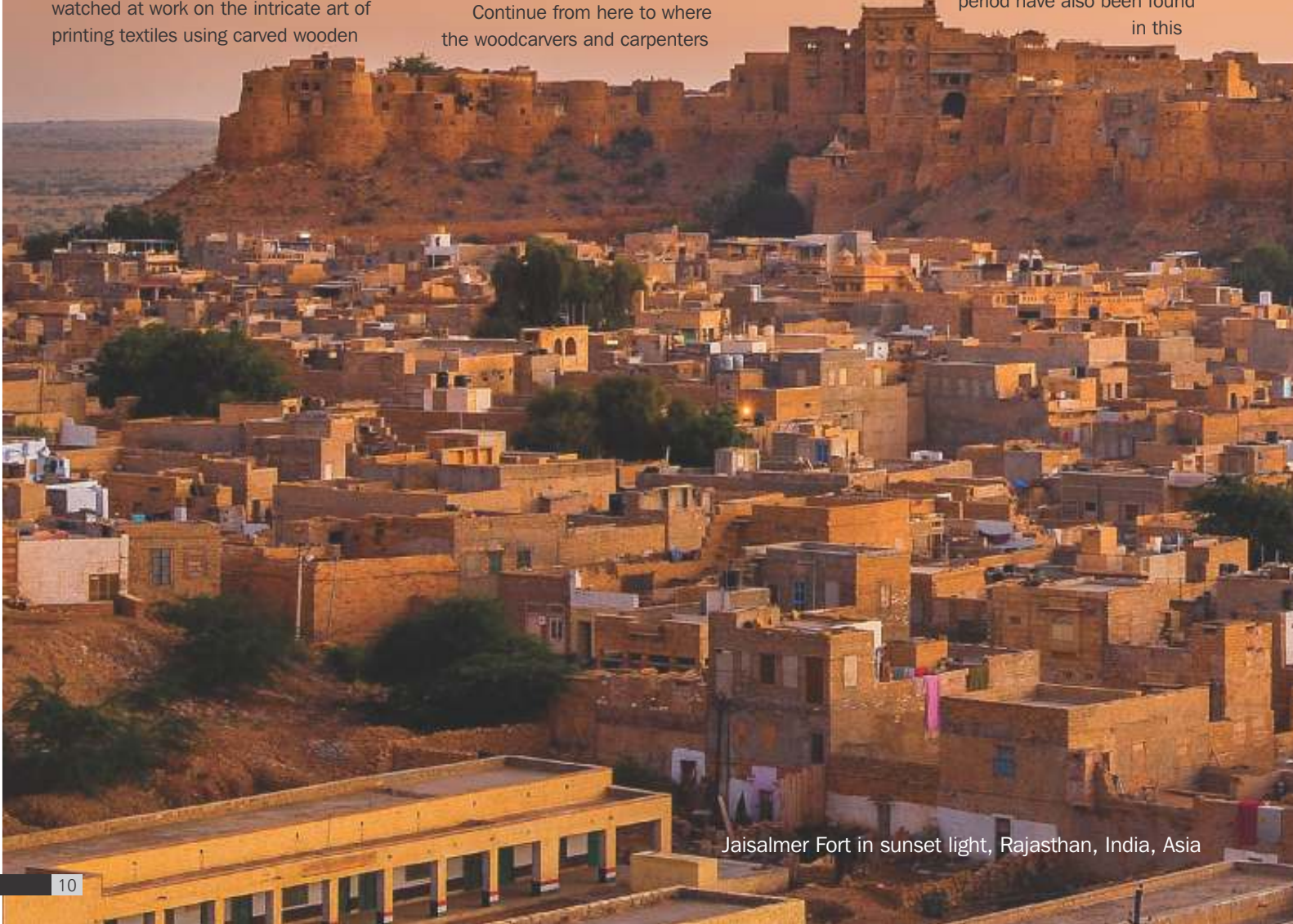
Continue from here to where the woodcarvers and carpenters

work on making furniture. Well-known for its woodwork, Barmer now produces a variety of furniture in contemporary designs and ethnic pieces with traditional woodcarving. Some of the bigger companies sell a huge range of furniture and you can get the pieces transported to your city.

Barmer is a good place for Sindhi and Marwari food – dal pakwaan near Lakshmi Market and kachori from Gandhi market are popular. The Mahasar Sand dunes, a few minutes from the city, are good for sunset views of the sandy desert and a camel ride may be possible.

ARCHITECTURE OF KIRADU

From Barmer, take the road west to the archaeological complex of Kiradu, which contains five temples. These temples date back to the 10th to 12th century period when Kiradu was part of a powerful Parmar Rajput kingdom, though traces of the Gupta period have also been found in this



Jaisalmer Fort in sunset light, Rajasthan, India, Asia

area. Although much damaged, these temples represent an important stage in Indian architectural development combining Marwar and Gujarat styles. The Vishnu temple is the oldest and has largely collapsed except for the carved central columns. The other temples are largely dominated by Shiva. The Someshvara temple, built in the 11th century by Raja Someshvara, is the best preserved, though its dome and shikhara tower have collapsed, with reliefs showing stories from the Hindu epics and naturalistic themes, and a mandapa with intricately sculpted columns arranged in octagonal form. Look in detail at the temple walls to see some fine carvings from the Mahabrahma like one showing Bhishma on a bed of arrows.

LIVESTOCK FAIR AT TILWARA

East from Barmer, the road leads to the textile town of Balotra and the nearby Jain temple of Nakoda. In February-March, a

huge fair takes place at Tilwara, historically known as Khedgarh. This was the land of Rawal Mallinath, a 14th-century folk hero of Rajasthan revered together with his wife, Rani Rupade, as folk saints in Western Rajasthan.

Tilwara hosts the Mallinath Cattle Fair, which is perhaps the largest camel market in India and one of the largest livestock fairs after Sonepur in Bihar. The fair opens with the hoisting of the flag of Rawal Mallinathji and songs praising his valor and greatness.

The Mallinath Fair is a colourful festival with stalls and amusements. The main focus is on the camels, sheeps, goats, cows and horses that are sold here. There is a shrine of Mallinath, where people pray



Livestock Fair

with the belief that their wishes will be granted. If their wishes are fulfilled, it is customary to offer miniature horse statues as a token of thanks to the shrine. One can see wood, brass, and bronze horses being sold by the traders who come from Mathura, Agra, and Aligarh in Uttar Pradesh. There are other shops selling general merchandise, fodder and implements.





Nakoda Jain temple

centuries. The facades are marked with carved wooden balconies, arches and murals. The rooms here have been renovated and appointed with carved furniture, marble floors and durries, and each one has works of art like murals or glass bangle inlay in sinuous patterns, and the en-suite bathrooms have modern fittings.

The centerpiece of the property is the courtyard lawn with seating arrangements, where you can unwind and sip a drink. The swimming pool is excellent for swimming and relaxing under mature trees on the poolside. Ask to see the owners' collection of vintage and classic cars, including World War-2 period four-wheel drive jeeps that are Shiv Pratap Singh's passion – you are likely to find him in the workshop gearing one of them up for his next off-road trip.

JALORE

Even lesser known than Barmer, Jalore district offers a quiet break in rural Rajasthan. Sundha Mata near Bhinmal is a spectacular area with a historic temple and rocky cliffs, where sloth bear abounds. Bhinmal is known for its leather handicrafts. About 55km from Bhinmal, Siana is known for its leopard population.

From here, continue to the historic city of Jalore with its fort and Topkhana. Nearby Ravla Bhenswara is an idyllic heritage property tucked away from the crowds and tourist centres of the state, yet offering a good number of modern facilities. Built about 250 years ago by Thakur Jagat Singhji, a Rathore Rajput, Ravla Bhenswara is run by his descendant Dalvir Singh with son Shiv Pratap Singh and daughter-in-law as a heritage hotel that promises to treat guests in right royal style. The property is set in the village of Bhenswara, near the historic city of Jalore, surrounded by a picturesque landscape of agricultural fields and dramatic rocky hills. As you drive towards the village, you can get glimpses of pastoral life as Raikas herd camels, sheeps and goats in the scrubby countryside. The heritage hotel is entered through a majestic archway with carved gates. Once inside, you find neatly laid out lawns and hedges in the forecourt leading to the facade of the ancestral mansion that has been extended by successive owners over more than two



Ravla Bhenswara, a heritage hotel at Jalore



Safari at Bhenswara



Holi in Jaisalmer

While the property is conducive for a tranquil break, don't miss the jeep safari they offer. It takes you across hilly countryside with great views of the landscape especially at sunset, when cows are coming home from the fields guided by red-turbaned Raikas. You can see the cenotaph of a queen of Marwar (your guide for the safari will tell you many of the tales related to this site), which makes a great foreground for the sunset or enjoy the view of the setting sun among the rocky hills. After dark, the skies over the barren, largely uninhabited hills are limpid and great for star-gazing. This is the time, when denizens of the wilderness are active. Leopards are often sighted in the jeep headlights and small mammals abound. Back in the property, dinner features cuisines of the Marwar region including the owners' specialties and the family members are usually around to tell you more about the history, culture and wildlife of the region.

Ahore near Bhenswara is an important centre for Jainism.

The town is birthplace of Indian Jain scholar Muni Jayanandvijay. It has a Jain library and about eight Jain temples. Holi is a vibrant festival at Ahore. Till a few years ago, Bhata Gair was a ceremony celebrated during Holi. During the ceremony, two teams were formed on the

basis of whether members of team consume or do not consume alcohol. The teams compete to cross a fence between them. It has been stopped by the administration due to injuries and deaths of some people in the game, where stone-throwing was commonly practiced. ■



Sculptures inside Jain temple



What your sun-sign reveals about your travel-style?

Okay, so where to go this time? Maybe Paris because one of your colleagues posted tons of pictures on a social networking site enjoying museums, galleries and monuments (after passing on his share of work-load on you) or Goa as that is the only destination, you can recall from the recently-watched movie 'Dil Chahta he' on TV last weekend. If the idea of choosing 'the perfect holiday destination' from so many options drive you mad, why not to leave it on the stars?

Astrology can predict future to some extent. Many follow it blindly like a God, while others think it as an utter nonsense. If you've ever consulted astrologer, bought an astrology guide or jumped to the 'Day's Forecast' section of any newspaper out of curiosity or belief, this is the piece of your interest. However, if you're not quite-a-believer type, we suggest you to give it a shot. Led by a good enough research, we have come up with personality traits of various sun-signs and travel destinations, which complement their attributes. Read on...



(March 21-April 19)

TRAITS

Bold, Extrovert, Loves to encounter fears

The pleasant and outgoing Aries are very active and full-of-energy. They love places that offer lots of activities. The urge to discover something new through the adventure trips will keep their adrenaline high.

DESTINATIONS

Try out trekking in Mantalai or Ladakh in Himachal Pradesh or enjoy thrilling rides at Amusement Park (How about Adlabs Imagica?). If planning for a foreign trip, safari tours and surfing in South Africa or Australia adventure trip will lift your spirit up with enthusiasm.



(April 20-June 20)

TRAITS

Well-organized, Luxury-admirer, Exquisite taste and self-indulgent tendencies

If it is about describing 'ideal vacation' for Taurean, lavish hotels, fine dining and great services can satisfy the pamper-demanding planners. Pick a place, where you can get all the royal treatments. Have a peaceful indulgence in the lap of Mother Nature, let your hair down and enjoy a nice massage.

DESTINATIONS

Discover the state of kings and queens – Rajasthan – majestic palaces and delectable food culture. Or enjoy your stay at a posh hotel in Goa. A trip to California - Wine Country, to unwind some superb wine or luxury rental villas and cozy cottages at St. Barths, Caribbean to have a relaxing time.



(May 21-June 20)

TRAITS

Get bored very easily, Curious, Wild

The quick Geminis take pleasure in hopping from one place to another. Long trips are dull for them. A destination that can offer all the extremes – sea, hills, desert, forest - to hold their interest will be ideal.

DESTINATIONS

Backpack to Bali to witness food, culture, happening nightlife, history, beach and many more wow elements to entertain yourself. London is another live destination for Gemini travelers, which has all, from vibrant pubs, art museums to world-class theater.



(June 21-July 22)

TRAITS

Couch-potatoes, Prefers to stay in comfort zone, Safety-seekers

Cancerians like to be in their own shells. So traveling is something out of their comfort zone. If at all they decide to go out, company of family or loved-ones is a pre-requisite for them. A perfect traveling hotspot for these precautionous travelers is the destination, which can provide home-away-from-home feeling to them.

DESTINATIONS

For a change, we suggest Cancerians to take some risk and get going. Experience life at its best, create weird and wild memories, shake your body on trance beats of Goa. If not, have a staycation with family at Devon (UK), the place with serene coastlines and sleepy towns.



(July 23-August 22)

TRAITS

Born-leaders, Loves superlatives and attention

The lions of zodiac are lured by the larger-than-life style. If there is a destination, which is famed for its glamorous quotient and lavish lifestyle, it is surely a part of Leo traveler's bucket-list. Hit the road, walk with panache and lead the trip like a leader.

DESTINATIONS

if it is Leo, it has to be royal. So how about staying at a luxurious Croatian palace or majestic hotels in Dubai? To make your friends jealous, visit the elegant and vibrant Paris, Swiss Alps or Roman colosseum.



(August 23-September 22)

TRAITS

Perfectionists, Planners, Nature-lovers

Virgos like to outline things. If anything doesn't go as per their plan, it stresses them out. They take vacation to uplift themselves. With Virgo, systematic and sensible trip is ensured. They appreciate simplicity and nature. So an eco-friendly tour with itinerary designed by Virgos themselves will be an enriching experience for them.

DESTINATIONS

Getting lost in the God's own country – Kerala, or a yoga retreat in Brazil are idyllic for you. The culturally-rich city of Rome will also appeal Virgo minds.



(September 23-October 22)

TRAITS

As represented by the symbol of the Balancing Scales - The balance-seekers, Easy-going, Loves adventures

Big fans of love-stories, Librans like to explore the places that have something to say on love and relationships. Their cool temperament makes them the best travel companions. Librans are more towards mind - they like things that bring equilibrium and peace to their minds like artistic places or garden tour.

DESTINATIONS

A candle-light dinner in the most romantic city in the world – Paris. Or a tour to Tajmahal, Agra can bring purpose to your holidays. Enjoying garden in San Diego's Balboa Park or wine-tasting in Sonoma will also ensure a good time for you.



(October 23-November 21)

TRAITS

Intensely passionate, Strong-headed, Truth-seekers

Scorpions prefer to read a book in a coffee shop in isolation rather than going to party. As they are inclined towards truth-finding, places that store in them mystery appeal them. For example, walking an ancient trail will provide a room to their imagination.

DESTINATION

As this is a water-sign, destination brimming with beaches must be in their places-to-visit list. Lazing around on the beaches of Goa, staying in tented villas of Maldives or discovering temple ruins in Cambodia will be just what privacy-loving scorpions want.



(November 22-December 21)

TRAITS

Curious, Restless, Independent

A Sagi on tour is like Alice in wonderland. They want to know everything and anything about the place. The born-travelers don't mind if the trip is planned or not. They want to cover all things mentioned in itinerary in one go due to their impatient nature.

DESTINATIONS

backpack through Asia, plan a biking-trip through Spain or head to Chakouri to poke your travel instincts. Mysterious pyramids and ancient history of Egypt will tickle your grey cells.



(December 22-January 19)

TRAITS

Fun, Easy-going, Precautious

Capricorns are good at executing plans. They avoid ambiguity and love to include still time in their trips. The business-minded Capricorns seldom make time for vacation. However, when they make it, destinations with rocks grab their attention as theirs is an earth sign.

DESTINATIONS

Don't think about work while on vacation. Enjoy a relaxing Thai spa or visit Taiwan's largest fresh-water lake. Taking a break from routine will charge you up at the work place.



(January 20-February 18)

TRAITS

Imaginative, Spontaneous, Friendly

'Live, love and laugh' is the mantra for Aquarians. They like stimulating places with happening nightlife, where they can meet all types of people. Discovering unique, uncommon and unknown places get them excited.

DESTINATIONS

Nightlife in Bangkok is lively, where you can turn strangers into friends. Uncovering the mysterious Inca ruins of Machu Picchu, discovering the complexity of Iran or Peru's rich history will elevate the inventor in you.



(February 19-March 20)

TRAITS

Laidback, Dreamer, Spiritual

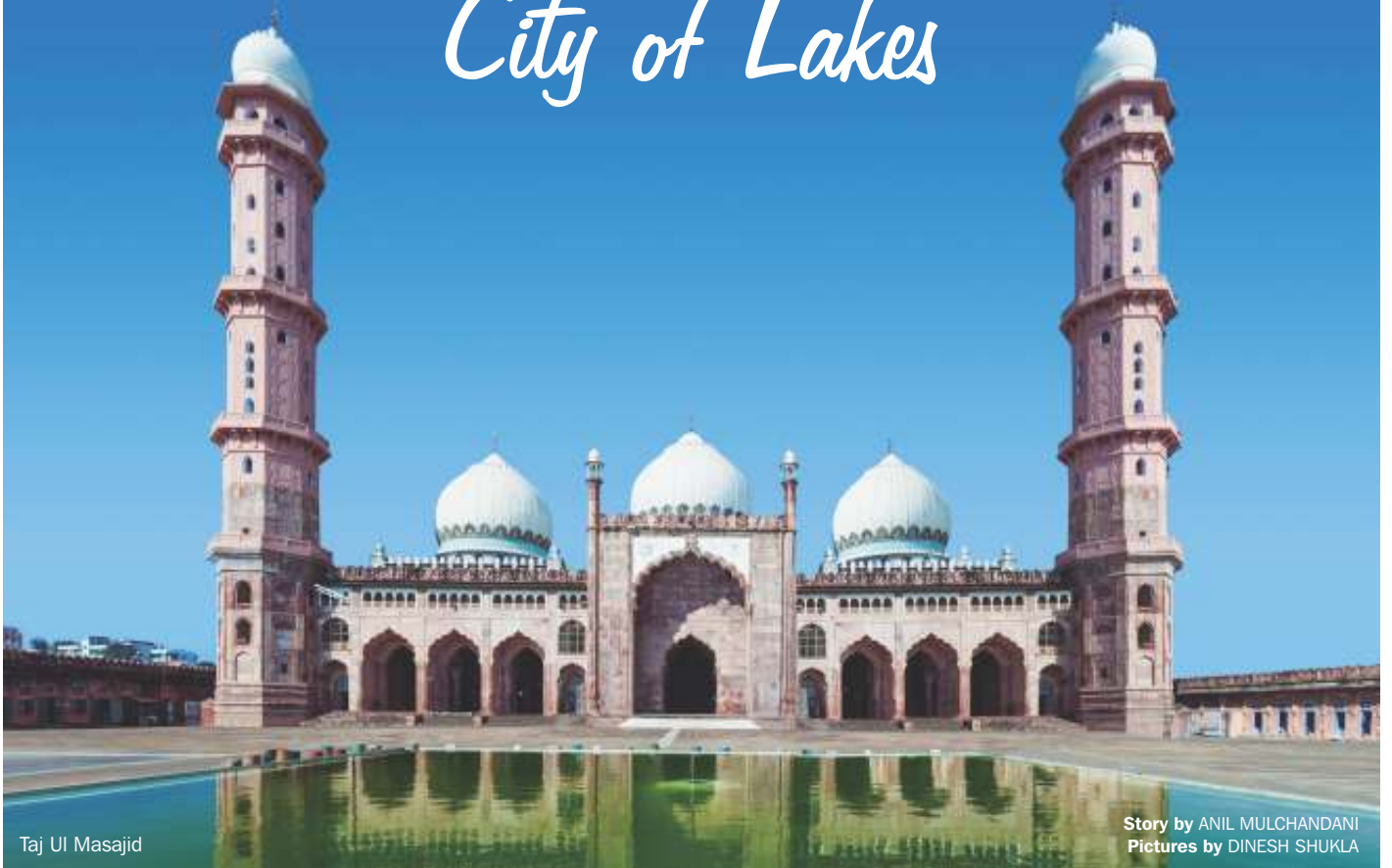
Yet another water-sign loves any place with water-body or expansive view. Wideness invokes the poetic and mystical side of Piscean. The laidback Piscean would love to disconnect their cell-phones and spend their time on the beach. Peace and serenity are what they want.

DESTINATIONS

For pristine waters and sandy beaches, Canary Islands or follow a river in Mongolia, experience sunset on a volcanic beach in Chile or visit Andamans.

BHOPAL

City of Lakes



Taj Ul Masajid

Story by ANIL MULCHANDANI
Pictures by DINESH SHUKLA

While Udaipur has become known as the City of Lakes, Bhopal is equally spectacular and yet remains off the beaten track of most tourists.

Bhopal is probably named for Raja Bhoj, who ruled from nearby Bhojpur. The lake city was created, when the Raja said to have linked up the nine rivers flowing through his kingdom to atone for the death of his mother. The effort was resulted in a dam (pal) that in turn created two lakes, which became the centre for his capital, Bhojpal in the 11th century.

The city was developed by Dost Mohammed Khan, an erstwhile general of Aurangzeb, who carved out his own



Buddhist stupa at Sanchi



Museum of Mankind at Bhopal

kingdom on the ruins of the Mughal empire with this city as his strong hold. During his rule, he commissioned wide roads, gardens and monumental buildings and replanted some of the neglected areas of Bhopal.

The dynasty he started, went onto become one of the most powerful in Central India. The Nawab of Bhopal was awarded a 19-gun salute (only five princes of India were awarded the full 21-gun salute). Loyal to the British, allying with General Goddard in his march against the Marathas in 1778, the Bhopal princely state grew to become very important from the 1857 mutiny to 1926, when it was presided over largely by women rulers called Begums. Holding court from behind the wicker screen of purdah, successive begums revamped the city.

OLD BHOPAL

The old area of Bhopal called the 'Chowk' has narrow streets radiating from the central square with the main markets of the city. At the entrance to the chowk, one of the many interesting buildings is Shaukat Mahal, designed in a blend of Italian, Gothic and Islamic influences by a French architect (allegedly descended from the Bourbon royal family). Nearby, you can see the elegant facade of the Sadar Manzil, where the rulers held public audience, both of which have been converted into government offices.

The Jama Masjid, built in 1837, lies amid a silver market and the Moti Masjid. The latter has slender, gold-topped minarets and sandstone cupolas. The most impressive monument of Bhopal, the Darul Uloom Tajul Masjid, is one of the biggest

mosques in India. It is a striking pinkish red sandstone building with a trio of white bulbous domes over a long facade flanked by colossal marble domed minarets on both sides.

dour brickwork buildings housing workshops, theatres, art galleries, craft galleries, studios, libraries and so forth. A permanent exhibition of modern Indian painting and sculpture occupies a split-level gallery with examples of the 'Company School of Painting' during the Raj commissioned for those 'back home' in Britain to relish the beauty of the sun-bathed subcontinent. One of the most notable features of Bharat Bhavan is a gallery devoted exclusively to adivasi art with pieces collected from tribal areas of Central India. The talent scouts at the centre take pride in having found the remarkable Gond painter - Jangarh Singh Shyam, who has been featured in many books, including Mark Tully's. The collection has masks, terra cottas, wood carvings, ritual objects and utensils. However, the centre has given very little background information on the tribal groups as it is mainly focused on the pieces as the works of art rather than as folk arts.

CULTURAL CITY

Head next to the Birla Mandir, a contemporary Lakshmi Narayan temple standing on a hill overlooking the Lower Lake with a museum housing fine stone sculpture, informatively displayed with explanatory panels in English in the main galleries. Most of the pieces are 7th to 12th century statues sectionalised into Vishnu, Devi and Shiva. The garden offers view of the city around the lake with the minarets breaking the skyline.

The cultural heart of Madhya Pradesh is the Charles Correa-designed campus of Bharat Bhawan, which was part of an Indira Gandhi-led initiative to set up centres for arts in state capitals. The initiative ultimately fizzled out with this one being the only such centre inaugurated in 1982. It has made Bhopal one of the major cultural capitals of India.

The complex has concrete domes and



Birla Mandir at Bhopal

One of the best tribal museums is the Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya. Its aims include exposing city people to the richness of India's indigenous tribal culture and to make adivasis respect their own heritage. The 200-acre site on a hilltop has an open air museum of re-created village houses and a winding and mythological trail, where each tribal group from the state has contributed their own interpretation of the creation. An introductory exhibition hall shows the state's main groups and introduces the visitor to life among the tribes with the daily and ritual elements of each group. The walks through the scrub-jungled hilly routes lead through a botanical trail with medicinal plants, a rock heritage trail with reproduction of prehistoric paintings, shops and research centres. The piece-de-resistance is the tribal habitat, an exhibition of traditional adivasi houses, compounds and religious shrines, built by crafts workers from all over India, using tools and materials brought from their home-states, to show details of their interiors. A thatched gateway similar to the 'youth dormitory' of the Ao-Naga from Nagaland) ushered us to the dwelling complexes equipped with original tools, cooking utensils, baskets and musical instruments, while some are beautifully decorated with intricate murals, mouldings and carved beams. Other details include rectangular designs inside the huts of Orissa's groups. The Warli paintings, which show the tribal fertility goddess Palghat framed by complex geometrical patterns.

Near the tribal museum is the State Museum, also set in the Shamala Hills, with a superb collection of Hindu sculptures, Jain bronzes, prehistoric artifacts and fossils, archaeological finds, epigraphs, manuscripts, paintings, princely memorabilia of Maharajas and Nawabs, textiles and costumes, stamps, coinage, miniature paintings, arms and armoury, and relics of the Indian independence movement.

A short distance from here, the sprawling Regional Science Centre Bhopal (RSCB) campus has a science park with about 60 working models, galleries themed on atmosphere, an observatory and auditoriums. Events are held at RSCB from time to time.

LAKE CITY

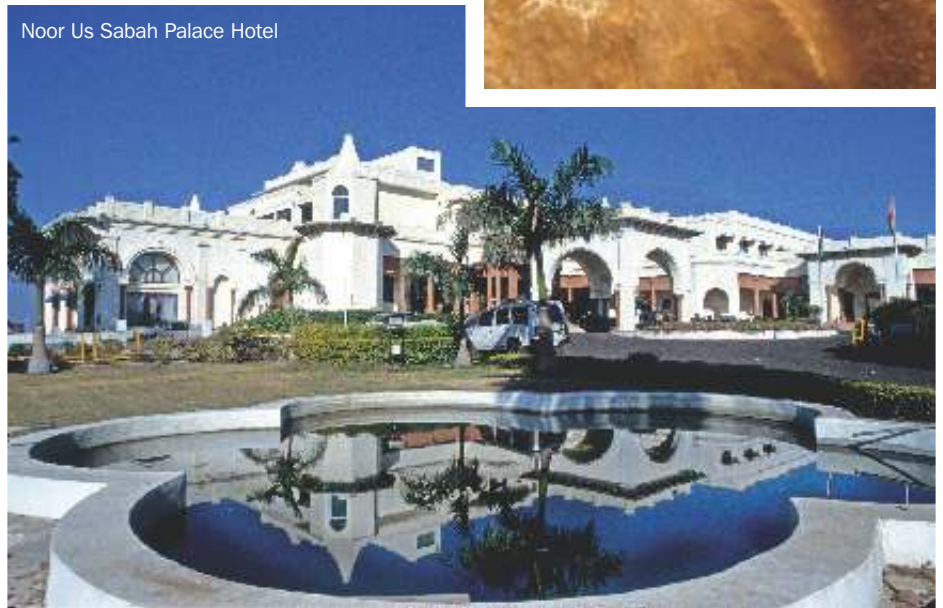
Bhopal's two lakes, Bhojtal and Lower Lakes, are situated on the west central part of the city with Van Vihar National Park on the south, human settlements on the east and north, and agriculture fields on the west. This is a beautiful part of Bhopal with hills in the backdrop. The lakes are rich in birds like ducks, storks and herons. The globally-threatened sarus crane is also seen.

Just near the lake, the Van Vihar Zoological Park is one of the favourite recreational places for many families visiting Bhopal with their children. The driving trail round the five sq km woodland of Van Vihar is really pleasant, as most of it runs along the lake. The zoo enclosures are large and naturalistic to give the look of the natural habitat. Most of the crowds gather to see the white tiger. The safari zones with deer and antelope are unique.

CITY OF PALACES

A major attraction of Bhopal is staying in one of the palaces of the former Nawabs. The Welcomheritage Noor-us-Sabah Palace Hotel was built by Nawab Sir Hamidullah Khan, ruler of Bhopal from 1926 to the accession, for his elder daughter Abida Sultana. It has Italian marble floors, chandeliers and princely relics like a silver polished palanquin. The Jehan Numa Palace Hotel is an impressive palatial property located on the slopes of Shamala Hills, which was built in the year 1890.

Noor Us Sabah Palace Hotel



AROUND BHOPAL

A short drive from Bhopal, Bhojpur, former capital of Raja Bhoj, a noted scholar and patron of architecture, is known for its Shiva Temple. Bhimbetkat has some of the world's most remarkable examples of prehistoric rock art. From the car park, we entered the complex of boulders that rises along scrubby ridges.

Another day trip is to the great stupa of Sanchi, and other ancient sites like Vidisha, the Udaygiri caves and Udaypur temple.

SHOPPING

The Chowk Market and the New Market offer shopping. Local specialties are Chanderi silks, tussar silks, silver jewellery and beaded purses. TT Nagar and Hamidia Road also have some shops. ■

Prehistoric paintings at Bhimbetka



That time of the year again when we're all done with deciding on our new-year resolution (anyone wondering what's that? I forgot mine too), the column that guide us on our future, the upcoming films, and so on. After much-hyped new-year celebrations, going back to routine kills. However, we've something that can lighten up your mood and can also give you a 'feel-good' factor about the year 2016. Ohh, yeah!

The year that commenced on a great note with its first day on Friday gave you enough time to extend your 'abhi-toh-party-shuru-hui-he' mood throughout three days (Friday-Saturday-Sunday). Can new-year get better than the long weekend? There are many such holidays on offer, and for the travel-freaks a yet another reason to keep suitcase ready for more short trips this year. The God has been kind enough to strategically place the public holidays in such a way that by taking a day or two off in between, you can escape the monotony. So what are you waiting for? Let's plan out the days of true freedom (or trips).



7th March 2016

MAHASHIVRATRI on MONDAY

Whoa! Nothing can beat the pleasure of a Monday holiday. Those who are working 5 days a week, get three days off. How about planning a trip to Mount Abu? Beginning your Summer in the lap of Nature by rejoicing the cool breeze of the nearby hill-station is a million-dollar idea. Surely, you need to thank Mahashivratri for this.

24th March 2016

HOLI on Thursday &

25th March 2016

GOOD FRIDAY

For those, who yank chunk of their hairs in the middle of the week, calculating the days left to get the week over, this is a thrilling 'Thirst'day and a much-awaited Friday of the year. Play Holi like never before as there's plenty of time to get rid of those crazy colors. And if you're not a holi-fan, enjoy a 4-day vacation. Good deals might come your way as no rush is expected in hotels during this festive time.

Would you like to experience the royal treatments in one of the palace hotels of Rajasthan? Imagine a day in a colossal

palace-room with 'a call-away' luxurious services and scrumptious delicacies. Sounds epic, isn't it?

14th April 2016

AMBEDKAR JAYANTI on THURSDAY &

15th April 2016

RAM NAVAMI on FRIDAY

How many times have you whiffed away the thought of spending few days with your special one away from daily routine? Now is the chance. Maybe Daman's serene beauty is an ideal option for spending three (or four) carefree days by lazing around on the

beach, visiting church, temple or exploring forts and gardens.

19th April 2016

MAHAVIR JAYANTI on TUESDAY

A holiday on Tuesday calls for a leave on Monday to stretch your weekend.

Let's make it worthwhile by taking a wildlife safari tour to Kanha National Park, Madhya Pradesh. Experience the prolific destination of wild animals, birds and life in lush green forests. Or feel the adrenaline rush by opting for trekking camps in Lonavala. In short, just give a thrilling break to yourself.

15th August 2016**INDEPENDENCE DAY on MONDAY**

Now this is real independence. Again, the Monday-holiday pleasure at its best. Pay tribute to our national heroes and indulge in a self-liberating tour. Heading to city of Mumbai, a place that played significant role in India's independence, is an idyllic holiday destination. Feel the fervor as we re-visit sites (Chowpatty beach, Flora Fountain or Hutatma Chowk) and stories of the freedom struggle. Or just go shopaholic in the buzzing street markets at Colaba, Crawford, Chor Bazaar, Linking Road or Hill Road.

18th August 2016**RAKSHABANDHAN on THURSDAY**

This year, gift your sister a family/spa holiday rather than expensive garments or jewelries. What say? As the calendar is in your favor, tell her to take a leave on

Friday and pamper her with the luxury spa holiday.

5th September 2016**GANESH CHATURTHI on MONDAY**

Ganesh Chaturthi will be a fanfare this year as it will extend our beloved weekend. When it is about rejoicing the unique celebration of Ganesh Chaturthi, Maharashtra tops the list. The city of Pune's 10-day festivity need to be experienced to be believed. Take up the divine invitation to enlighten yourself with the

darshan of Kasba Ganpati. Shreemant Dagduseth Halwai Ganpati is another renowned shrine of elephant-headed God in the cultural city of Maharashtra.

12th September 2016**BAKRI EID on MONDAY**

With Bakri Eid falling on Monday this year, Indians get a long holiday! Make great memories with family and friends by enjoying Bakri Eid at home.

If you're looking to give a twist to your usual celebration, a trip to Ajmer will be just the right plan.

Ajmer is a holy place for both Hindus and Muslims. The presence of revered Dargah Sharif makes Ajmer a place to seek peace of mind.

6th October 2016**DUSSEHRA on THURSDAY**

The win of good over ill can be celebrated with a trip to Kolkata. Be a part of the cultural extravaganza of the city. Get drenched into the spirituality and witness altogether a different color of a happening town.

Temple tour to Ambaji near Ahmedabad has its own religious importance as it is one of the major shaktipeeths of India.

31st October 2016**HINDU NEW YEAR on MONDAY**

Say Happy New Year in style on the glamorous beaches of Goa. A holiday on Monday will give you an advantage of three continuous days of entertainment, enjoyment and excitement.

Don't let the golden opportunity that the year has brought slip by unnoticed. Just call your friends and decide which weekend getaway to strike off your bucket list. Let 2016 be truly a Happy year...■

**Safari Special Pink****Online Travel Product for Women Entrepreneurs**

Axis Softech, a travel portal development company, launched a new online travel product called "Safari Special Pink" - an extension to their existing travel product brand "Safari Special". Since the product is dedicated to women entrepreneurs, the brand name "Safari Special" was extended to "Safari Special Pink" as the color 'pink' is strongly associated with femininity.

"Safari Special Pink" is readymade online travel product specially designed for all class of women such as house wife, working women and others. It provides discount schemes, assistance and

guidance to women entrepreneurs in Air, Hotel, Bus & Holiday Packages. The best part about the product is that it comes with an added subsidy of 40% over and above the total price, which encourages women to establish their own online travel business & thus become entrepreneur.

Features of "Safari Special Pink":

- Online Flight, Hotel, and Bus search cum booking engine and exclusive Domestic and International holiday packages
- Connected with multiple GDS to

procure real time inventory

- User Registration Module, Mark-up, Refund Auto Cancellation Modules is present
- A static standard marquee on home page to display news
- Online Training Facility by Axis Softech
- Auto E-mail module on all Bookings
- Online Booking Support 24 × 7 is available
- Active Technology, Server, Account and Dedicated manager support

5 Cool Travel Gears For Your Next Trip

What to pack and what not to pack – that is the question. The carefully-planned trip can turn out to be a disaster if you miss out on packing ‘the right stuffs’ for yourself. There are some, which add to the overall convenience, others are too fun to miss. Yet there are other smart tools, which can transform you into effortlessly chic and super-organized travelers through their magnificently comfort-giving features.

So let’s pack with precision. Surely, we’re all acquainted with the basic travel-list that includes travel blankets, neck pillows, pens, power bank, ticket-passport holder accessories and USB charger. But there are other essentials that will make your trips easier, safer and simply more fun. Here are 5 cool travel gadgets that will change your travel experience.

Aquaguard On The Go

Venturing in remote locations to indulge in nature?

Appreciating nature at its best without compromising on health used to be difficult earlier as most of the tap waters in India (as well as Middle East, Central America, other



parts of Asia or Africa) are contaminated with bacteria and pollutants. Getting mineral water bottle is one of the solutions, but its availability in far-off areas is again a question.

To avoid this, get not

only your own bottle but a personalized water-purifier. Aquaguard On The Go is one such antibacterial unit in the form of BPA-free plastic bottle. With Aquaguard On The Go, your travel gets worry-free. The purifier, equipped with nano technology filtration unit, lasts till 600 fills. It will slow down the water-flow as an indication of recharge-time. Hesitate not to fill up your purifier with swimming pool water to quench your thirst as the purifier even reduces chlorine levels.

MRP: ₹ 595/-

AVAILABLE ONLINE: *Eureka Forbes and online retailers like Flipkart, Shopclues, Askmebazaar, ebay india*

Hybrid Dual OTG Pendrive

Smartphone is one of the de facto travel companions for the digital nomads. A journey without the background score of your favorite songs, duck-face selfies at every possible places and informative travel applications is unimaginable. However, the need to obtain unlimited entertainment demands extensive storage capacity.

Hybrid dual OTG pendrive offers both blazing speed and exceptional performance to your mobile. Now, move your photos, HD videos and music to your TV, laptop, gaming consoles or other entertainment systems speedily to ensure you don’t miss out on capturing the best moments to come. AXL Hybrid dual OTG pendrive is loaded with features like standard USB 2.0 connectivity, and is compatible with Mac 10.5 & 10.6, Windows Vista/XP/7/8 and devices supporting OTG. It is available in storage variants - 8GB, 16GB and 32 GB. So carry all your entertainment in one portable device with high-speed transfer capacity.

MRP: ₹ 599-1399 (based on storage capacity)

AVAILABLE: *Online and offline retailers*



LUG LOC

Do you know that as many as 42 million passengers on an average have to go through the unease of luggage misplacement by airlines? And who knows how many passengers have their luggage stolen from the hotel or during transportation. How would it be to have something that can track our luggage when it is out of reach?

Lug loc is a device that needs to be placed on your luggage to track it anywhere in the world using your smartphone. The device is connected to your smartphone through the ‘Luglog’ app, which is available for Android devices and Apple iOS. In case of misplacement of the luggage, the Luggage Locator shares the exact location with your ‘Luglog’ app. So let’s travel baggage-free.

MRP: *On request*

AVAILABLE: *www.lugloc.com*



your own healthy food even when away from home. Now drop the idea of picking up unhygienic takeaway parcels and cook anything - rice, noodles, soups or tea. If not cooking, it helps you to boil water, when you run out of drinking water.

The compact design of the cooker fits in your backpack. Nova TC 1550 350-Watt Travel Cooker, operating on electricity, can be easily plugged in to any source of electricity for quick meals anywhere, anytime.

MRP: ₹ 1799

AVAILABLE: *Online retailers (Amazon India, Shopclues, Snapdeal)*

Sleeping Bag Liners

If you’re a budget-traveler, there have been instances, where you might have experienced nasty accommodation. An uncleaned bedsheet can poke you to stay up all night. Even during long-journeys in trains and buses, sleeping on the seats can be uncomfortable for the cleanliness-seekers.

Liners are, thus, an important component of a purpose built sleep system. With Sleeping Bag Liners, you can survive the



Watt Travel Cooker

For those, who are planning to have a long trip to far-away lands or are budget-conscious, this travel cooker is a must-have gear. Savoring local delicacies, once in a while or for some time, is an experience.

However, would you like to make that bread or pasta your staple food for 15 days at a stretch? If the answer is no, include Watt Travel Cooker in your list. This cooker enables you to make

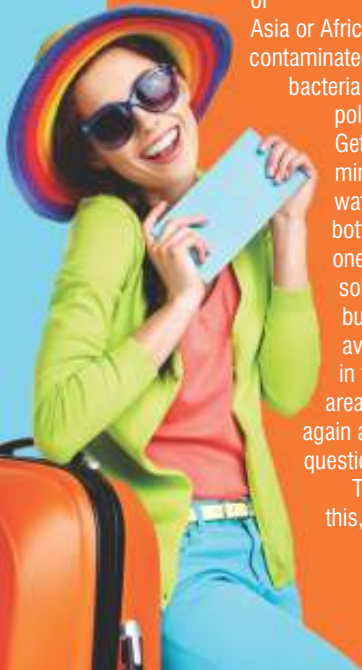


places that offer no blankets or

the ones that offer old and unwashed blankets. Enjoy a sound sleep in any condition. Whether you are looking to add warmth to your sleeping bag, keep your bag clean or need a lightweight warm weather sleep sheet, this will serve all the purposes.

MRP: ₹ 899 onwards

AVAILABLE: *Online retailers*





**THE ODD
TRAVELLER**

You Can Take A 30-Day Trip to Thailand For Less Than US\$ 750 (or ₹48000)

Story by SACHIN BANDARY

Here's How...

As a part of '12 Projects – 12 Months, 12 Countries, 12 Challenges', I went to Thailand. My trip to Thailand was about learning rock-climbing. But even with this objective, I did get to see and experience a lot about the country. In fact, rock-climbing took me to places that normal travelers never get to see.

Another challenge beyond learning rock-climbing was to spend 30 days in the cheapest possible way. I had to use a lot of things learnt from past journeys and try new ways to keep the costs low.

In the end, I spent the entire month in Thailand for just ₹48,000 (or US\$ 750). This includes everything from visa to flights, food & stay, entry fees, some must-do's like going to the snake farm, Thai massage, etc.

Here, I share my financial experience for anyone who wants to backpack to Thailand at the lowest possible cost.

**About 12 Projects - 12 Months,
12 Countries, 12 Challenges**

The 12 Project is a journey of a lifetime that became the launch pad for 'The Odd Traveller'- Sachin, who is on a trip around the world taking monthly challenges.

From '25 trains in 25 days in India' to 'searching positive stories in Sri Lanka'. From 'learning to cook in Mexico' to 'pursuing stand-up comedy in New York', the 12 Project is odd travel at its best, taking the traveler outside his comfort zone.

STEP ONE: FLIGHTS

I started planning this trip a couple of months in advance. That's the least time, you need to allocate to get the best flight prices. I used Skyscanner and Kayak apps to get comparative flight prices to Bangkok from Mumbai. At the same time, I searched for flights from other locations in India. And voila!, from Kolkata, there was a return flight to Bangkok on Indigo for ₹8000 (US\$ 130).

So what would have costed me ₹15-16k from Mumbai, was half the price from Kolkata on Indigo. This was a great offer, but what about getting to Kolkata? If I had taken a flight, the overall cost would have ended up on the same amount.

So considering the option of train (to Kolkata) seemed a better option. Yes, it takes more than a day. But when you save money, you have to spend something. And that is mostly - time.

The train tickets (second-class sleeper) were dirt cheap at ₹740 (US\$ 12) one way. Well, it is not the most comfortable of the rides, but at this price, you cannot expect anything better.

STEP TWO: IN BANGKOK:

STAY

Hostelworld, hostelbookers and bookings.com are all good websites/apps to look for hostels. In my experience, hostelbookers has cheaper of all hostels listed on other websites.

In this case, I went for the cheapest hostel in Bangkok – The

Overstay. At 125 bahts (i.e. ₹250 INR or US\$ 4) per night, it was a steal. The hostel looked like a squat but wasn't as bad as it looked. In fact, it was quite a fun place. There was something happening all the time – rock shows, interesting people and late night conversations. If you dig all that and don't mind patchy air conditioning, this place is definitely for you. But remember, you are paying 4 dollars a night, so don't have lofty expectations.

NEXT, DAILY EXPENSES:

Bangkok is a pretty

cheap city to eat and commute. Let's talk about food first.

If you eat street food (many street stalls have proper sit-down), you will never have to worry about how much you spend. In tourist areas, a meal (rice or noodles with curry) could go up to 120 bahts (₹240 / US\$ 4). If you walk a

little and get outside tourist area limits, you will save even more. I used to pay about 50 bahts (₹100 for my lunch (two portions of rice, two different curries plus a cola). It's a sweet deal, right? I would say a budget of about 80 baht (₹160) for each meal on the street is pretty good. And you can occasionally indulge yourself in something expensive or a nice dessert (which is also quite cheap).

There is a wide variety of dishes to choose from - Pad-Thai (stir-fried noodle

snack), rice with curries, soup dishes, etc. If you are a vegetarian, the choices are less but you won't die of starvation for sure.

Tip: Walk around a bit, get out of your hostel area to discover good deals on food, fruits and many other things.

TRANSPORT:

Bangkok has a very good transport system.

Especially, if you are from India, you will like it even more. Public transport is efficient and absolutely great value for money.

number and the destination. Get someone to write the destinations and addresses for you in Thai. I never paid more than 20 bahts (₹40 / US\$ 0.7) for a single ride. Plus, people traveling in bus were really helpful, so I never faced any problem. It is non-touristic way of getting around Bangkok.

MRT or the underground metro is another way to get around. They are quite good and travel-friendly. Follow the map, know your destination and you will be good. You can either buy tickets from the counter or use easy-to-use

I stayed away from taxis and tuk-tuks because they tend to be far more expensive. Plus shorter distances are fun to walk, because you get to see so much more.

Buses are really cheap – you just need to know the

vending machines. The most I paid was 34 bahts (₹68 / US\$ 1), when I traveled almost the entire line from Bang Sue to Silom.

BTS or Skytrain: This is the over-ground elevated transport service. It is pretty



efficient and probably the most recent addition to the city's transport system. Though the fare is comparatively higher than the charges in buses and metro, it is reasonable. You can also enquire for a pass if you plan to stay for longer. I did not use them though.

Ferry: There are ferry services as well. I did not use them much except to get to Nonthaburi at 20 bahts (₹40 for a beautiful ride on the Chao Praya River is totally worth it).

If you stick to these options, you will spend about 60-80 bahts (₹120-160) on commute on an average day. The most I spent was 150 bahts.

Tip: Bangkok is a huge city. Rather than looking at places to visit, discover localities. That way, you get to see more, walk around to explore the culinary offerings and also save extra money.

STEP THREE: FROM BANGKOK TO TONSAI

I had to get to Ton Sai, a wonderful place to rock-climb. However, to get there, one has to cross Krabi - a popular destination in the south.

I relied on travel agents as suggested by people, but later realized that it wasn't the most cost-effective way to get to the destination. After all, travel agents add their margins. I paid 900 bahts for a ticket that normally cost 600 bahts. So you live and learn.

Tip: The best thing to do is to go to the bus station a couple of hours early and buy your ticket. Apart from long weekends and national holidays, getting a seat should be trouble-free. If you don't like uncertainty, walk around Khao San Road (backpacker area) and look for the travel agents offering the best price.

STEP FOUR: IN TONSAI STAY:

I reached Ton Sai after crossing Krabi, reached

Ao Nang in a tempo and then took a boat to Tonsai. It costed me 160 bahts (₹320 / US\$ 5) to reach Tonsai from Krabi.

Ton Sai is a small beach with trekking trails and rock-climbing routes. It is almost attached to Railay, which is another beautiful set of beaches. You can easily relax, rejuvenate and indulge in some outdoor activity here for a week. I stayed for three days since I wanted to spend more time for rock-climbing.

If you arrive in a low season i.e. post-April, this place is really cheap. For bargainners, it is possible to get a room with a queen bed and a verandah at just 200 bahts (₹400 / US\$ 7). But be ready to negotiate for a longer stay, say at least 5 nights.

I stayed at a small nice place called Pansook Resort. At this place, frogs, lizards and monkeys will pay you a visit, but that is part of the fun in Tonsai. No matter

where you stay, you will find these intruders (or maybe we are intruding their environment).

DAILY EXPENSES

Tonsai & Railay can be reached by boat. So food and stay here is a bit more expensive than in Bangkok. There are not many options available. But it is still pretty good value for money. Plus it will be one of the most beautiful places you will ever see. Bonus - you will also meet the nicest of travelers here.

But setting a budget and sticking to it will help make it even cheaper.

Drinking water is expensive. So buy 20 litre bottle for 60 baht along with 150 baht deposit. It will save you a lot of money than buying 2 ltr bottles regularly.

Food, as mentioned, is not as cheap as Bangkok but is still quite reasonable and delicious. Breakfast should cost 100 baht (₹200/ US\$ 3). Muesli with fruits & yoghurt can be bought for 70 or 80 bahts and a cup of coffee at 30 bahts. You can try other things like rice soup or sticky rice. But keeping a budget of 120 bahts is the highest unless you order three-four dishes for yourself.

Lunch and dinner will have a uniform pattern. If you order a single main-course dish, it will cost around 80-100 bahts and with a really nice & fresh fruit shake to go along, add 50 bahts more. So 150 bahts (₹300 / US\$ 5) should get a comfortable lunch for you.

Choose one of the many small restaurants anywhere



in Tonsai or Railay. They charge pretty much the same. Based on my experience, I will recommend two restaurants - 'Mom's chicken' and 'Sao Legacy'. Both are located in Tonsai. The first one offers great food, especially the barbeque chicken, while the other one is best with quantity. After a hard day at the rocks, Sao Legacy was our preferred place to dine.

Now the important part: Drinks

Everyone loves to drink while traveling, right? I do too. But I tend to drink much less, when traveling than back home. Maybe because I walk so much and prefer to be active that I don't like alcohol to slow me down. Plus it just seems to be a better lifestyle. That doesn't mean I don't enjoy a few drinks on every trip. I do.

But drinking can make your trip expensive. If you don't set a budget and keep a watch on how much you drink, it can become the single biggest expense. I avoid that by making drinking a once-in-a-few-days affair. Pints in Tonsai/Railay cost about 70 bahts (₹ 140 INR/ US\$ 2). So a pint with every meal will cost you around 700 bahts at the end of the week.

I would turn beers into reward points. So for every three-four days of climbing, I would reward me with two pints. Rather than having just one and not even feeling it, I would have two and also feel great about it.

Other drinks are equally expensive if not more.

Expenses	Per Day Average Budget	Total I spent
Visa fees for 30 days (for 15 days – Indians have visa-on-arrival in Thailand)		₹2000 / US\$ 32
Thai SIM card plus top-up		₹700 / US\$ 11
Return flight (Kolkata- Bangkok) + airport taxis		₹8000 / US\$ 126
Airport taxis (Kolkata station to airport)		₹800 / US\$ 13
Train from Mumbai to Kolkata & return (plus expenses on the train)		₹2000 / US\$ 32
Bangkok stay	₹313 / US\$ 5	₹1250 / US\$ 20
Bangkok daily expenses (food + commute)	₹600 / US\$ 10	₹4800 / US\$ 76
Bangkok other expenses (entry fees, massage and on the spot discretionary expenses)	₹200 / US\$ 3.5	₹1300 / US\$ 21
Bangkok – Krabi bus (return – paid less while return)		₹3100 / US\$ 50
Krabi – Ao Nang- Tonsai & return		₹640 / US\$ 10
Tonsai Stay	₹400 / US\$ 6.5	₹8000 / US\$ 126
Tonsai daily expenses(food + drinks)	₹800 / US\$ 13	₹15400 / US\$ 242
Total		₹48000 / US\$ 755

Another cheap option is local rum. Some friends had it and liked it too. I never felt the need to try it out.

STEP FIVE: BACK TO BANGKOK

On my way back, I bought a ticket at Krabi bus station for some 650 bahts (₹1300) to get back to Bangkok. This time, I had an offer from a couch-surfer to host me for two nights, which I delightfully accepted.

Tip: *Couch-surfing did not work that much for me in Thailand. Not sure whether hosts were genuinely busy or preferred hosting westerners & women. Whenever you have time, do send couch requests. But, as a traveler, do not entirely rely on it.*

The same calculations applied in the last few days in Bangkok. This time

Equipment	Cost
Shoes – bought second hand	₹3400/ US\$ 54
Equipment on rent for 10 days (expense was divided among three members)	₹5700 / US\$ 90
Total	₹9100 / US\$ 143

around, I got a massage done (150 bahts), watched a movie (160 bahts) and had a few beers.

So all in all, I ended up spending US\$ 750 (₹48,000) for the entire trip. Above is the table of expense.

Another Expense:

If you want to stay longer and learn rock-climbing, my suggestion is make friends with experienced climbers. That way, it's more challenging and you will go to more places than most classes take you.

If you are buying rock climbing shoes (you will need them) and hiring

equipment, you could try what I did. I asked shops for second hand shoes and one called Tex Climbing Shop in Railay East had one good pair for 1700 bahts.

I even asked around for hiring equipment and got the best rates at Basecamp Tonsai (A shop for traveling climbers). I got less than half of what they would charge for ten days.

This is how I spent thirty wonderful days in a country I wish to return to many more times in this lifetime. Hope my experience gives you some pointers to do a frugal yet fruitful trip to Thailand. ■



Say 'I Do' in Style GOA

- with its stunningly beautiful beaches, lush greenery, lively music scene and up market resorts - has become one of India's premium wedding destinations.



Canacona

If you are looking for beaches that are still not too crowded, head to Canacona at the southern-most point of Goa. The most popular beach here is Palolem, which is truly a paradise beach with swaying palms running behind a long curving golden sand bay stretching between huge rocky outcrop and piles of boulders in the north and the forested slopes of the Sahyadri hills that run towards the sea in the south. The beach is traveler-friendly too with a profusion of shacks and thatched restaurants serving a variety of food and drink. Vendors here offer yoga lessons, massages, alternative therapies, dolphin-spotting boat trips and kayaking in safe waters. This is the place to kick-back and relax on the sandy crescent, swim, watch sea eagles and brilliantly hued kingfishers hovering over the water, spot dolphins surfacing for air and frolicking in the bay. Take a boat ride to Butterfly Island and witness mesmerizing



Story by ANIL MULCHANDANI
Pictures by DINESH SHUKLA

sunsets. When you want to escape the throngs of tourists, wander across the headland to beaches further south like Colom and Patnem. If you have had enough of the sun, sand and swimming, drive out into the Sahyadri Hills to Cotigao Wildlife Sanctuary, just 10km away from Palolem beach. The hilly terrain is good for bird-watching and you can climb into one of the viewing towers to get a close glimpse of the life of hornbills, parakeets, flycatchers, tree pies and other birds in the canopies of the trees.

From Palolem, take the road north to the historic Cabo De Rama Fort standing on a cliff, offering a good view of the sea. The Agonda beach nearby is still not as touristy as most of the others in Goa and is a good place to unwind away from the crowds.

If you are looking for a wedding in budget, there are many small hotels on these beaches that are clean, comfortable and well-situated. If you prefer a big



Park Hyatt Spa Resort is one of the top wedding destinations in Goa

resort wedding, The Lalit Golf & Spa Resort Goa is an all suite resort sprawling across 85 acres with the Sahyadri hills, Talpone River and a beach on three sides. The resort is designed in Baroque-Portuguese style and has its own golf course, spa and six restaurants. It offers 255 suites, including 10 luxurious villas along with eight beautifully landscaped gardens designed by the renowned French landscape designer Oliver Vicchirini. The gardens act as romantic backdrop for wedding ceremonies and receptions.

Salcette

The beaches of Salcette are fronted by some of the most exclusive resorts of Goa, which have become very popular for destinations. Benaulim, Arossim and Mobor have become prime venues for destination weddings.

The Mobor-Cavelossim beach stretch is clean and serene, and flanked by paddy fields and coconut groves. One of the most luxurious resorts in Goa, The Leela Goa is set on a peninsula between the River Sal and the Arabian Sea. With 30 hectares of landscaped gardens and a long beachfront, Leela's piece de resistance is an artificial lagoon. The buildings are inspired by Portuguese and Vijaynagara architecture. From intimate gatherings for 150 guests to a reception for 600, there are many

outdoor and indoor settings for a wedding celebration.

Continue from here to the beautiful beaches of Varca and Benaulim, located in rural countryside with green fields on either side of the road, quiet villages and churches. Taj Exotica beside a tranquil stretch of Benaulim beach is one of the most attractive places to stay in Goa. Sprawling across a lush garden, the resort has rooms and villas looking out to the sea and a sea-view golf course. With 56 acres of gardens and about 700 meters of

beachfront, this is where you can enjoy a theme wedding with Mediterranean and Goan touches.

At Varca, The Zuri White Sands is a 154-room resort that can host a wedding event with 1500 guests in its venues in the resort. With a spa and a casino, there is much for guests to entertain themselves between events.

If you are looking for something less tranquil, Colva is crowded with eateries, beer shacks and vendors. The water is good for swimming and the beach is long enough



Romantic dining arrangements at Leela Goa

for a walk in search of a quieter spot. There are many small resorts here for an affordable wedding event.

Utorda and Majorda have many resorts suitable for the destination wedding. One of the most luxurious resorts at Majorda, Alila Diwa Goa is set among a serene landscape of lush, verdant rice plantations flowing towards the Arabian Sea. You can plan a welcome dinner by the infinity pool, a mehndi or sangeet party with Indian dinner at Spice Studio by a water-body, ceremonies under a banyan tree in the courtyard, cocktails on the lawn, and a grand reception at one of the ballrooms.

Cansaulim and Arossim form a quiet and clean beach stretch, with an excellent location close to Dabolim Airport and the Madgaon Railway Station yet away from the over-crowded beaches. Here you have one of Goa's top wedding venues, Park Hyatt Goa Resort and Spa with about 250 rooms in Indo-Portuguese pousadas, set among glimmering waterways and lush gardens. Some of the rooms have miniature gardens of their own. This is where you can enjoy a romantic sunset party overlooking Arossim Beach, followed by dinner and dance at Salcete, 4,030-sq-ft wood-paneled ballroom that can accommodate 500 guests. The 18 hectares of lush landscaped lawns and gardens offer many venues for an outdoor reception or garden party.

Further north from here, Bogmalo beach is a crescent of fine sand overlooked by a resort-topped low hill. Bogmalo Beach Resort is an ideal venue for a wedding with parties, cocktails, a reception for 400 and get-togethers on the nearby beach. If you have young guests who are the sporty kind, this is the destination for you. With a couple of tiny islands that sit about 10km out at



Vivanta by Taj at Candolim

sea, Bogmalo has Goa's pioneering diving school that provides scuba-diving trips and lessons. Operators also offer a number of motorized or towed water-sports in the Bogmalo bay area like banana boat rides, parasailing and jet-skiing. Bogmalo and Dona Paula are among India's most popular bays for wind-surfing.

Panjim

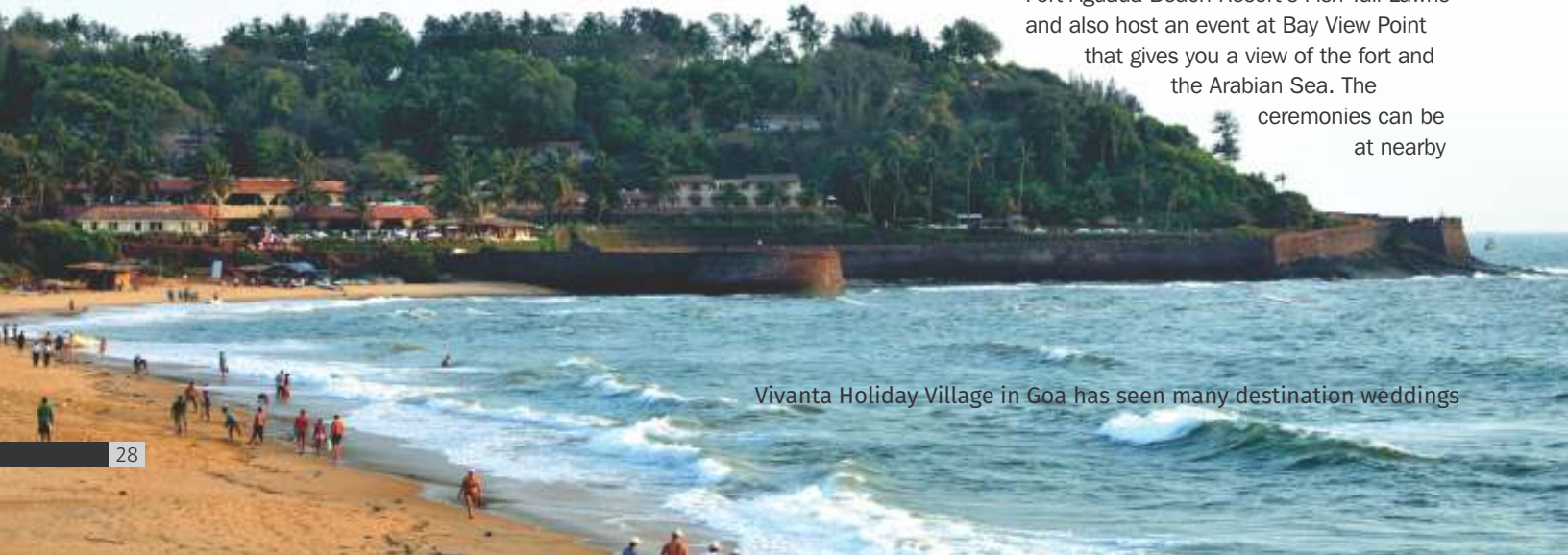
Panjim or Panaji, the capital of Goa, is known for its heritage buildings, beautiful riverfront, old quarters and proximity to beaches. This is a convenient place for a wedding event, where guests do not want to be confined to a resort but wish to explore places of historic and natural importance. There are many small hotels for intimate functions in the town. In the heart of town,

Vivanta by Taj - Panaji, Goa has a good sized banquet hall. It is ideally situated to explore the heritage sites and art centres of Panaji. If you prefer a waterfront setting, Goa Marriott Resort & Spa at nearby Miramar has a Grand Ballroom that is perfect for 420 guests and outdoor venues with spectacular waterfront views for dream beach weddings in Goa.

Fort Aguada

Once you cross the Mandovi River from Panaji, you come to the historic Fort Aguada with its bastions, lighthouse and other monuments. This is widely considered to be the birthplace of luxury tourism in Goa as Taj Groups' Fort Aguada Beach Resort here was the state's first upscale beach property. You can celebrate at Vivanta by Taj Fort Aguada Beach Resort's Fish Tail Lawns and also host an event at Bay View Point that gives you a view of the fort and the Arabian Sea. The

ceremonies can be at nearby



Vivanta Holiday Village in Goa has seen many destination weddings

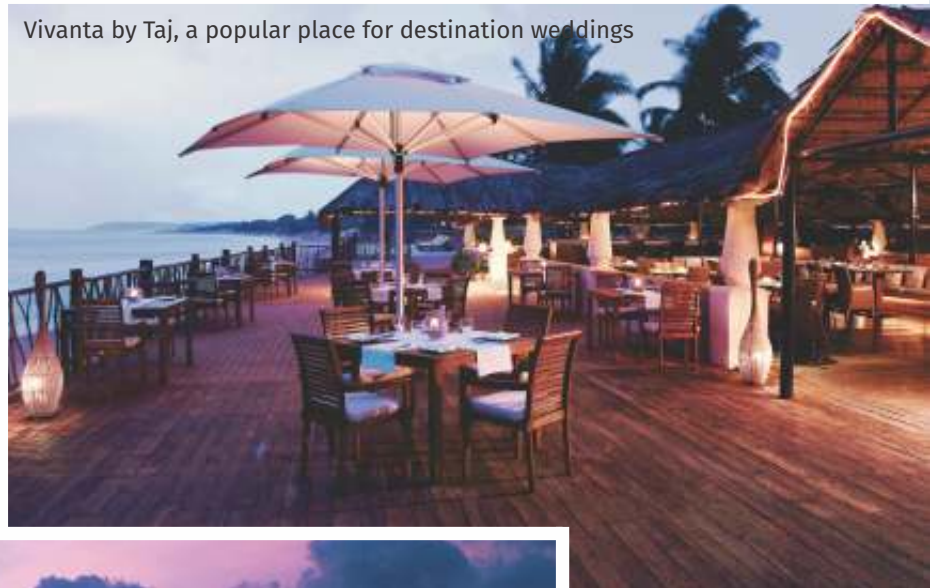


Fort Aguada Resort

Vivanta by Taj - Holiday Village, which has a good banquet hall.

While staying at Fort Aguada, guests can plan to enjoy the lively shack and water sports scene that stretches continuously from Sinquerim to Baga through Candolim and Calangute. This is the area for drinking, dancing and relishing good food, getting a massage, or participating in outdoorsy activities like dolphin spotting boat rides, river cruises in crocodile country, jetskiing, parasailing, swimming and diving.

Vivanta by Taj, a popular place for destination weddings



The iconic Beach House Restaurant at Candolim

Further north, Vagator's broad sandy beach is beautiful with a view of dramatic red stone cliffs, green hills and the red stone ramparts of Chapora Fort looming up on a bluff overlooking it. Further north, Morjim is a nature lover's paradise. Mandrem is a peaceful refuge from the tourist crowds, a good place to sit around with a good book or take a yoga lesson. In contrast, Arambol's beautiful sweeping beach overlooked by cliffs is the place to come if you want to enjoy a lively vibe. At these beaches, there are small hotels that can be good for parties.

Tiracol Fort

Tiracol Fort at Terekol village is the place for an exclusive party away from the crowds. At the northern-most point of Goa, this fort is approached by ferry. Inside is a historic church and other memories of its 17th century past. The seven newly renovated rooms and suites are named after the seven days of the week. Here, you can have an intimate family function with a superb view of the river and beaches. ■

PALACES OF INDIA

During the 1800s and early-1900s, there were about 565 princely states in India. The Maharajas, Nawabs and other rulers of India's majestic states were known for their flamboyance. They commissioned the best architects to build their palaces using the finest of artisans and materials. The palaces were works of art, richly embellished with carvings, mosaics, paintings, chandeliers and artifacts. In this feature, Praveg's Tourism One takes you to some fine palaces across India that are must-sees for tourists.

Photo feature by DINESH SHUKLA



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1. The magnificent palace of Mysore, called Amba Vilas, houses a rich collection of artworks from the collection of the Wodeyar dynasty. The palace designed by Henry Irving in the 1890s has exquisite carvings, domes, turrets, arches, columns and richly decorated durbar halls.

2. The WelcomHeritage Shivavilas Palace Hotel at Sandur in Karnataka is now a heritage hotel. Sandur was one of the few princely states under the Madras Presidency. The rulers from the Gorpade dynasty are respected for having removed discrimination on the basis of caste at temples and institutions.

3. Winner of the prestigious UNESCO Asia Pacific Merit Award for cultural heritage conservation, Chowmahalla Palace is a complex of four palaces, where the Nizams of Hyderabad entertained their guests. With its magnificent chandeliers and artworks, and fine collection of vintage cars and buggies, this palace is one of the top tourist attractions of Hyderabad.

4. Falaknuma is the most flamboyant of Hyderabad's many palaces. The palace, built in 1872, has a Palladian façade, while other buildings within reveal Indo-Saracenic influences.

5. Hyderabad's Falaknuma Palace Hotel, run by the Taj Group, is the most opulent properties of the city. It has European chandeliers, Italian marble, French furniture and furnishings, and Florentine decorations.

6. The Lalitha Mahal Palace was built in the 1930s to accommodate royal guests of the Maharajas of Mysore. It was converted into a heritage hotel in 1974.

7. The New Palace of Kolhapur in Maharashtra was built in the 1880s to replace the old city palace. The palace was designed by Major Mant. A part of the palace has been opened to tourists as the Shahaji Chhatrapati Museum.

8. Like the Kolhapur Palace, the Lakshmi Vilas Palace of Vadodara was also designed by Major Mant but it was completed by Robert Fellowes Chisholm after Mant's death. This extravagant palace with its long façade, domes, cupolas, arches, rich carvings and mosaics is set in an estate that is more than 700 acres in area, which houses a museum and a golf course.

9. The Darbargadh at Gondal encompasses a number of buildings including the Navlakha Palace, which is a festival of stone carvings. The palace now houses a museum.

10. The Ranjit Vilas Palace at Wankaner is among the grandest buildings in Saurashtra. Built in an eclectic style that incorporates Indo-Saracenic, Venetian, Gothic, Moorish, Rajput and Mughal architectural elements, its interiors are profusely decorated with Italian marble, exotic carpets and rugs, Belgian and Venetian chandeliers and a collection of princely memorabilia.

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11. The Darbargadh at Bhuj is a walled complex, housing the 18th century Aina Mahal Palace and the 19th century Pragmahal Palace. The Pragmahal was designed by a British architect Colonel Henry Saint Wilkins.

12. The Vijay Vilas Palace at Mandvi was the beachside retreat of the Maharao of Kutch. Maharao Vijay Singh spent much of summer in this palace, which housed his office.

13. A view of the seaside estate of the Vijay Vilas Palace at Mandvi from its terrace pavilion.

14. The Udai Bilas Palace at Dungarpur is now a heritage hotel. The palace was built in phases from 1800s to 1940s.

15. The Taj-run Lake Palace Hotel was originally built as an island retreat of the

Maharanas in the 1700s. The palace on the Pichola Lake in Udaipur is now one of the world's best known palace hotels.

16. Strung out along the eastern banks of the Pichola Lake, Udaipur's City Palace is among Rajasthan's largest palaces. It contains many buildings erected by successive Maharanas between the mid-1500s and early-1900s.

17. Jodhpur's pink sandstone Umaid Bhavan Palace is one of Rajasthan's most opulent palaces. This palace now has a museum and a Taj-run palace hotel besides the personal residence of the former rulers.

18. At the heart of Jaipur – the pink city, the City Palace has superb examples of Mughal and Rajasthani architecture. Part of the palace is open as a museum exhibiting

paintings, carpets, musical instruments, costumes and arms.

19. The Kawardha Palace in Chhattisgarh is now a heritage hotel. It was built in the 1930s by Maharaj Dharamraj Singh of Kawardha, a princely state of the Chhattisgarh Division in the Central Provinces. Set in 11 acres of gardens, the palace contains fine stonework and Italian marble.

20. The palace at Jagdalpur, the former seat of the Bastar Princely State, is among the finest in Chhattisgarh. It is the centre for spectacular Dusshera celebrations.

21. Cooch Behar Palace, also called the Victor Jubilee Palace, is an impressive palace of West Bengal. This elegant palace was constructed in 1887AD during the reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan. ■

BOOMING

Outbound Tourism Market of India

By ANJALI GUPTA (Director, Y not Travel)



The travel and tourism industry has emerged as one of the largest and fastest growing economic sectors globally. The growth in the Indian travel and tourism industry is driven by a combination of rising income levels and changing lifestyles, development of diverse tourism offerings, and policy and regulatory support from the government authorities. Over the past year, this

growth has reflected overall segments of tourism. The sluggish economy and poor sentiments did not have any adverse impact on the Indian outbound tourism market. India is one of the fastest-growing outbound travel markets in the world. Despite drastic fluctuations in rupee value recently, number of outbound tourists departure from India did not take a hit. India has emerged as

the world's fastest growing outbound market and in absolute numbers, it is second only to China. With more than 1.1 billion inhabitants and GDP increasing by more than eight per cent every year, India offers enormous potential for future growth in outbound travel. Whether it is to meet a relative settled abroad, a shopping trip, a global sport event or just for leisure, Indians are increasingly travelling abroad. Personal and Official Travel for holiday/leisure, business and MICE tourism are the most significant contributors for growing outbound travel.

The foreign tourism boards are gearing up to meet the growing number of Indians who are travelling abroad. While many of the National Tourism Organizations also have established their own offices in the country, others are making use of representations or their embassies/cultural desks to test the waters, before taking the plunge.

The UNWTO predicts that India will account for 50 million outbound tourists by 2020. While business travel, holiday and VFR trips dominate outbound volumes, people are also opting for niche products like sports tourism, luxury travels, MICE, honeymoon packages and cruises.

Thailand, Singapore, United States, and Malaysia are some of the most preferred tourist destination for Indian travelers. Indian tourists have now started exploring new destinations as well. Among the emerging countries, Sri Lanka, Nepal, China, Japan and South Africa are becoming the destination of choice for Indian tourists. Japan is also focusing on plans to triple the number of tourists traveling from India to the country by 2020 from the 2013 level. Countries like Indonesia, Philippines, Mauritius and Egypt are also seeing an increase in influx of Indian tourists. Increased promotional activities by travel agents will further drive outbound departures to many new destinations in the years to come.

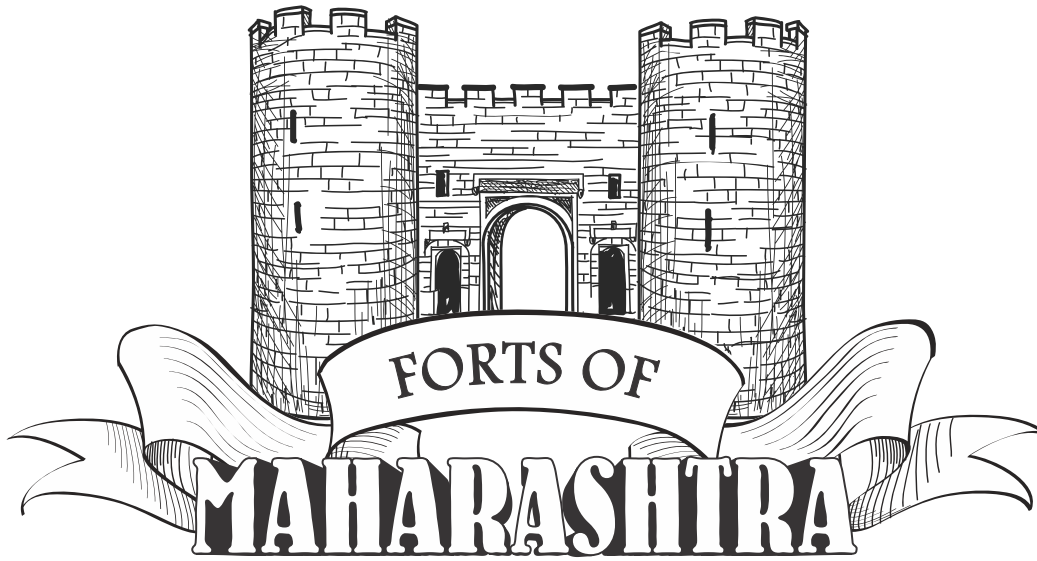


Factors that are driving tourists to go out of country

- Much of India's outbound growth may be attributed to increasing disposable income, decreasing cost of international airfare and availability of affordable travel packages. In particular, the rise of low cost carriers (LCCs) in India has impacted the way Indians travel as they now have more alternatives, beyond domestic travel, when planning for short holidays.
- The proliferation of the internet has also significantly changed the way Indian travelers now plan and book their trips. The availability of information on the internet has instilled greater confidence among Indian travelers to look farther, when planning their travels. With information readily available at the click of a mouse, consumers are no longer dependent on traditional travel agents. However, feedback and recommendation from travel agents is still held in high regard.
- The Indian film industry has significantly influenced Indian culture. According to an estimate, almost 14 million people in India enjoy Bollywood movies on a daily basis. Bollywood has always been recognized as having the strongest influence for potential Indian travelers. For example, Bollywood films such as Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge, Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham and Mujhse Dosti Karogi have all presented Switzerland in a new light to Indian tourists. Example: with the popularity of Bollywood blockbuster Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara (ZNMD), Spain witnessed a surge in the number of India tourist arrivals in 2012 and 2013.

However, there are many challenges. In India, companies tend to specialize in either inbound or outbound; few do both successfully. The skill sets and experience needed for both segments are unique and not complementary. The average Indian travel agent deals with customers who are extremely price sensitive and are inherent shoppers.

Bargaining is a cultural trait. In general, agencies in India are not equipped or trained in charging fees. Another hurdle for Indian outbound tourism market is the rupee depreciation that has become a very big hurdle for Indian outbound tourism. Destinations such as United States, Canada, London, France, Italy and Switzerland have seen a dip in bookings due to rupee depreciation. ■



Visit the forts of Maharashtra, the land of great rulers like Shivaji and Peshwa Baji Rao.

The 17th century was a turbulent period in the history of Maharashtra that saw the rise of Portuguese power in western India, the arrival of the British East India Company, and most importantly the initiatives of Chhatrapati Shivaji towards the re-establishment of Maratha rule in the state by launching an offensive against the Mughal Empire. As a result, Maharashtra's coast and the Western Ghats are dotted by forts.

Forts were Shivaji's key strategy that drove the Maratha campaign for Hindu rule over Maharashtra and other parts of the Deccan. He conquered and re-used existing forts besides building new ones. Based in these fortifications, the Marathas who had a formidable reputation for hill warfare launched their assaults on the Mughal armies.

Story by ANIL MULCHANDANI
Pictures by DINESH SHUKLA



Baji Rao's Shaniwar Wada at Pune

PUNE

Start your tour of forts from Shaniwarwada, a fort built in 1732 as the heart of Pune. As the Marathas grew to become the major national power on the fall of the Mughal Empire, the fort became the center of Indian politics in the 18th century. This was the headquarters of the Peshwas until 1818, when the



British took over the Deccan. On February 27, 1828, a great fire destroyed the palaces in the fort but you can still see the heavy granite ramparts, strong teak gateways, deep foundations, ruins of the buildings, and the remains of the gardens, which once had countless fountains. The palace's north-east corner was where Mastani lived with Bajirao. She had her own entrance doorway called Mastani Darwaza before Bajirao built a separate residence for Mastani at Kothrud in 1734.

Just outside Pune, Sinhagad is a fort that was once ruled by Muhammad Tuglaq and later taken by Malik Ahmed of Ahmednagar. This formidable fort was successfully entered by Tanaji, Shivaji's army commander, who scaled the cliffs at night – it is said he

threw a monitor lizard such that the large reptile clung in a niche of the fort and then climbed the rope tied to its tale. The fort is roughly triangular with high basalt walls on the cliffs to the north and south for added protection. The wall continued across a gorge creating a water tank. Another spectacular fort is Rajgad southwest of Pune. Another worth-visiting fort, Purandar Fort, figures repeatedly in the rising of Shivaji against the Adil Shahi Bijapur Sultanate and the Mughals. About 50km southeast of Pune, Purandhar fort stands 4,472 ft. above the sea level with a commanding hill location. Named for Purandara (Indra), the fort divides into Vajragad at the lower level and Purandhar at the upper level, controlling a narrow pass through the hill between them. The fort was defended by a long curtain wall with three gates and six bastions. Parts of the fort are said to date from the mid-14th century.



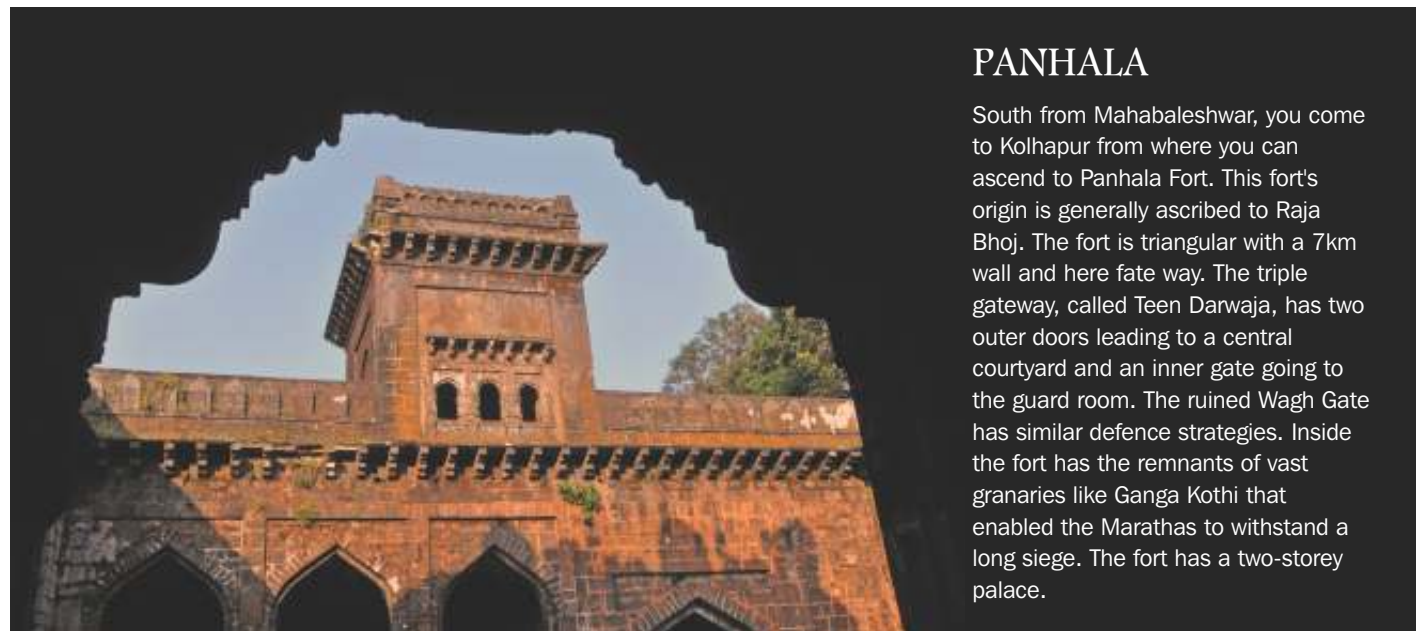
Replica of Mastani Mahal at Pune

MAHABALESHWAR

From Pune, drive to the hill station of Mahabaleshwar where you can also visit Pratapgarh. Sited on a summit, the fort comprises a dual wall with corner bastions, entered through gateways studded with spikes to repel elephant attacks. Within the lower wall is the Bhavani temple, which has two lamp towers with projections that must have been used to hang lanterns. This is believed to have acted as beacons for those in the hill below. The fort also has a Shiva temple in its upper walled portion.



Pratapgarh Fort at Mahabaleshwar



PANHALA

South from Mahabaleshwar, you come to Kolhapur from where you can ascend to Panhala Fort. This fort's origin is generally ascribed to Raja Bhoj. The fort is triangular with a 7km wall and here fate way. The triple gateway, called Teen Darwaja, has two outer doors leading to a central courtyard and an inner gate going to the guard room. The ruined Wagh Gate has similar defence strategies. Inside the fort has the remnants of vast granaries like Ganga Kothi that enabled the Marathas to withstand a long siege. The fort has a two-storey palace.

RAIGAD

From Kolhapur, drive to Amba Ghat and then down to the Mumbai-Goa highway towards Mahad-Raigad. Shivaji made his headquarters at Raigad, a hilltop site with a fort dating to around the 12th century, which he took in the mid-17th century. This became the site of his coronation as Chhatrapati or ruler in 1674. Take the ropeway to this hill fort. The fort has a magnificent gateway, about two-third up a hill, flanked by two tall turrets, one concave and one convex. There are two outer curtain walls below the flat hilltop on which the town was located. The plateau on which the town was situated is contained in a bastioned wall. Within this is the extensive palace and the queen's chambers, which had private baths with plumbing, placed between two tanks and watchtowers, strategically placed near the water sources. The public hall was acoustically designed to aid hearing from the doorway to the throne. The fort was self-sufficient with dark chambers believed to have been granaries, water tanks and a market. The central market had two parallel rows of shops. The market was designed to be convenient also for equestrian shoppers.

A statue of Chhatrapati Shivaji is erected in front of the ruins of the main

Fort Jadhavgadh



market avenue that eventually leads to the Jagdishwar Mandir and his own Samadhi (tomb), besides that hat of his dog Waghy. During Shivaji's time, Raigad was regarded among the strongest forts in all of India.

SEA / ISLAND FORTS

From Raigad, drive down to the beautiful beach resort of Murud-Janjira. The Janjira Fort was built on an island offshore from the coast. This fort was built in the 16th century by Siddis, Africans who came

to India as warriors, slaves and traders. The fortress has high ramparts, 22 bastions and granite walls joined with lead to withstand the forces of the sea. Steps lead to the stone gate, where a panel showing a lion holding six elephants in captivity symbolise Siddi victories in battle. The fort was successful in resisting Portuguese, Maratha and British attempts to capture it. The fort contains mosques, the remains of a five-storey palace, and water bodies. The rampart has canons guarding niches.

Further south in Sindhudurg district lies Vijaydurg Fort, a historical fort site from the 11th century commanding a river was expanded by the Sultan of Bijapur and strengthened by Shivaji, who added three layers of fortifications. The fort has 27 bastions, an inner moat and water sources. It was the base of Maratha admiral, Kanhoji, who plundered European shipping in the 1690s and early-1700s. The fort successfully withstood European assaults.

Shivaji's sea fort at Sindhudurg, just off the coast on a low-lying island, has high ramparts and many shrines. A visit to Sindhudurg can be combined with scuba diving, snorkelling, dolphin spotting and holidaying on Tarkarli beach. ■

Janjira Fort



What's Traveling

No scheduled commercial flights on 24 Indian airports

As reported by Economic Times, 24 airports in India do not handle scheduled commercial flights. The 24 unused hubs operated by Airports Authority of India (AAI) include three in Punjab, six in Maharashtra, three in Rajasthan, while others in Karnataka, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, West Bengal and Delhi.

E-tourists make up 10% of arrivals to India

The e-visa system contributed to 10% of arrivals in India in November 2015. As per the data revealed by the Ministry of Tourism, 83,501 out of total 815,000 foreign travelers preferred e-visa during November. Visitors from the UK accounted for the highest number of e-tourist visas (23.9% of the total), followed by the US (16.3%), Russia (8.2%), France (7.6%), Germany (5.6%), Australia (4.8%), Canada (4.7%) and China (3.3%). And the majority of the e-tourist visas were issued at Delhi Airport (45.0% of the total), followed by the airports in Mumbai (17.7%), Goa (14.6%), Bengaluru (5.6%) and Chennai (5.2%).

India plans to boost lighthouse tourism

A group comprising the Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of Shipping, the Indian Coast Guard and other stakeholders has proposed to develop tourism on the islands and coasts of the country. As per the report, 78 lighthouses can be developed as tourist attractions. Thirteen of the lighthouses are located in Goa and Maharashtra, while 10 are in Gujarat, 12 are in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, 8 are in mainland Kerala and 10 are in Kerala's Lakshadweep islands. Others are located in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Puducherry, West Bengal, and Odisha.

India Tourism aims UK with new representative

In an effort to move its promotional efforts in UK, India Tourism has appointed a new PR representative in the country. McCluskey International is appointed as new tourism rep for UK for a period of 2 years, starting from December 2015. To promote India to UK visitors, a full-fledged consumer and trade PR programme will be implemented to appeal a wide range of UK travelers - adventure seekers, nature lovers to family travellers.

Indian cities top Asia-Pacific rankings on TripAdvisor

Delhi and Bengaluru received TripAdvisor's Travellers' Choice awards for "Destinations on the Rise". The two Indian cities got positive feedback by TripAdvisor users in terms of restaurants, accommodation and attractions. Delhi was described as a vibrant tapestry of historical relics, cultural display, satellite neighbourhoods and mega malls. The city also experienced a 28% year-on-year rise in booking interest, measured in terms of 'meta clicks'. While Bengaluru, breathtaking locales that provide a relaxing respite from the bustling city centre", registered a 46% jump in booking interest.

India signs tourism partnership with Colombia

India and Colombia have signed a new Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which will enhance tourism cooperation between the countries. The step will enable both countries to enter into a constructive dialogue for development and promotion of tourism in each other's country for the economic development of the two nations. Thus, increasing bilateral cooperation including the creation of exchange programmes for tourism workers, fam

trips for tour operators and the media and exchange of tourism information and data.

Asia Pacific Travelers lead the world in leisure travel

According to Global Travel Intentions Study 2015, Asia Pacific travelers took more leisure trips in the past two years than any other countries in the world. In the past two years, travelers from Singapore took the most leisure trips (95%), followed by those from Hong Kong (92%), South Korea (90%) and Malaysia (90%). The love to explore international destinations, coupled with rising disposable personal incomes, has led to travelers from this region driving the increased desire for more trips, leading to more travel spending.

Sharjah to lure more tourists from India

Sharjah is focusing on India as a major market after recording a 23 per cent increase in the number of Indian tourists visiting Sharjah in 2014. Sharjah has been organizing promotional tours throughout the year targeting a range of markets to strengthen the emirate's leading position as a global tourist destination that attracts visitors from around the world.

Less than 1% of annual world's tourists arrive in India

As said by Tourist Minister, India hosts less than 1% of foreign tourists. The average stay of international tourists has also come down by two days. On an average, foreign tourists in India used to stay 20-22 days at a stretch in 2011-12, which has come down to 18-20 days now.

Indians leaning towards 'unbundled packages' instead of set itineraries

December, 2015 - Cleartrip expects local 'Activities' to generate 15% of revenue in FY'17. Cleartrip's Q2'15 Mobile Insight highlights an interesting trend where Indian travelers are choosing more of the 'unbundled' itineraries, replete with interesting and unique hyper-local experiences that they can indulge in at their convenience, in the city they are holidaying at, or staying in. As per Cleartrip's Q2'15 Mobile Insight, early traction in the leisure markets show that the trend of an 'unbundled' package is on the rise.

Subramanya Sharma – Chief Marketing Officer – Cleartrip said, “We are seeing travelers increasingly opting to create their own travel itineraries, instead of sticking to conventionally pre-fixed, boxed itineraries. With Activities, Q2 marked another big milestone for us. We're thrilled to share that Cleartrip's Mobile traffic recently crossed the 60% mark last quarter, stamping an impressive 25% QoQ growth in our air + hotel transactions. The total transactions on Cleartrip Mobile are now nearing 50%. With numerous long weekends attracting high customer engagement on Mobile, our retention stood at approximately 25% higher than desktop. We are very excited to see our 'Activities' product reap early success. This gives us more inspiration to innovate and extend our mobile leadership.”

Cleartrip Mobile is now almost everything travelers need, in the palm of their hands. We launched “Activities” on Cleartrip mobile last quarter. Present across 50 cities with over 5000 curated, hand-picked experiences, 'Activities' already contributes to a 15% of Cleartrip's mobile traffic within 2 months of launch.

Under a myriad range of over 150 themes, 'Activities' includes Culinary classes, Food walks, Segway tours, Luxury bike rentals, Yachting, Adventure, Go karting, Photography trails, Hiking, Kids activities, Day outings, Night treks and much more – There is something available for everyone with 1/3rd of the transactions in the sub Rs. 500 range.

So far, Tier I cities like Bangalore, Mumbai, Hyderabad & Gurgaon have seen the most traction, while Goa leads the pack considerably in the leisure segment.

Source: ClearTrip

Favourite Leisure Destination' at Readers' Travel Awards by CondeNast Traveller India

'Most popular domestic destination this winter' by Trip Advisor

Panaji, November, 2015: Goa bagged yet another honor when it was voted 'Favourite Leisure Destination – India' at the Readers' Travel Awards organized by Condé Nast Traveller India.

The awards, announced and given away at a glittering ceremony in New Delhi, was received by Mr. Dattaram Sawant, General Manager, Finance, GTDC on behalf of Goa Tourism.

This is the fourth time that Goa has won an award at the Readers' Travel Awards. With the introduction of the Hot Air Balloons, Sea Planes and Amphibious Vessels (Duck tours), Goa has added more attractions for tourists to enjoy during their trip here.

Meanwhile, Goa has also been rated as the “Most popular domestic destination this winter” according to the Winter Vacation Value Report by Trip Advisor. Goa has been ranked at the top while competing with 10 other leading destinations having colder climates and finding favour with the Indian Travelers, which includes Jaipur, New Delhi, Manali, Shimla and Agra. The Report also reveals rankings in other segments such as Most Affordable Weeks, Average Pricing and Savings during the winter.

Mr. Dilip Parulekar, Hon'ble Tourism Minister of Goa said “I am happy to see Goa receiving so many awards and titles. The fact that these are endorsed by travelers only goes to add to the credibility factor.”

Mr. Nilesh Cabral, Chairman, GTDC said, “Goa has a lot to offer this season. Along with festivities like Diwali, Christmas and New Year, we have the new tourism activities such as Hot Air Ballooning, seaplanes, seagway tours and Duck tours many of whose full-fledged operations will begin in December. We are confident that this will add a lot more value to the entire Goan holiday experience.”

Source: Goa Tourism

635.8% Growth in tourists arrival on e-tourist visa in December, 2015 over the same period in 2014

UK Continues to Occupy Top Slot Followed by USA and Russia Amongst the Countries Availing E-Tourist Visa Facility

January, 2015 - A total of 1,03,617 tourists arrived in India on e-Tourist Visa in December, 2015 as compared to 14,083 during the month of December, 2014 registering a growth of 635.8%. UK continues to occupy top slot followed by USA and Russia Fed. amongst the countries availing e-tourist visa facility.

Commencing from 27th November 2014, e-Tourist Visa facility is presently available for citizens of 113 countries arriving at 16 Airports in India.

The following are the important highlights of e-Tourist Visa during December, 2015:

(i) During the month of December, 2015 a total of 1,03,617 tourist arrived on e-Tourist Visa as compared to 14,083 during the month of December, 2014 registering a growth of 635.8%.

(ii) During January- December, 2015 a total of 4,45,300 tourist arrived on e-Tourist Visa as compared to 39,046 during January- December, 2014 registering a growth of 1040.4% .

(iii) This high growth may be attributed to introduction of e-Tourist Visa for 113 countries as against coverage of earlier ETA enabled TVoA scheme for 43 countries.

(iv) The percentage shares of top 10 source countries availing e-Tourist Visa facilities during December, 2015 were as follows:

UK (23.81%), USA (19.59%), Russian Fed. (9.33%), Australia (5.44%), Germany (4.86%), France (4.44%), Canada (4.40%), China (3.10%), Republic of Korea (1.83%) and Ukraine (1.67%).

(v) The percentage shares of top 10 ports in tourist arrivals on e-Tourist Visa during December, 2015 were as follows:

New Delhi Airport (36.23%), Mumbai Airport (21.90%), Goa Airport (16.54%), Bengaluru Airport (5.54%), Kochi Airport (4.68%), Chennai Airport (4.21%), Kolkata Airport (2.74%), Hyderabad Airport (2.68%), Trivandrum Airport (2.05%) and Ahmedabad Airport (1.79%).

Source: Press Information Bureau

Northern Ireland celebrates 2016 as the 'Year of Food and Drink'

January, 2016 - Northern Ireland will be celebrating 2016 as a Year of Food and Drink by dedicating 366 leap-year days to its artisan producers, chefs and delicacies. With 366 days of foodie experiences, there will be no better time for visitors to enjoy a true taste of Northern Ireland.

Considered as one of Europe's best foodie's destinations, Northern Ireland has built a strong reputation for excellence in food production and hospitality. The region's epic landscapes, traditions and people make its food heritage very unique. Thanks to its wild coastline, endless green fields and famously fickle weather, the country produces some of the world's finest and freshest ingredients – from fabulous seafood to rare meats and iconic breads, organic vegetables, artisan cheeses, premium spirits and craft beers.

All through 2016, Northern Ireland will host special food events, festivals, money-off deals, pop-up restaurants, unique tastings, cookery class and food trails galore. A wide variety of delectable culinary art will be displayed through different themes every month. Northern Ireland has a wealth of talented and emerging chefs. The artisan food and drink producers are reaping international recognition from food critics and the media.

For foodies in India, it's a delicious opportunity not to be missed.

Jet Airways and Bangkok Airways enter into frequent flyer partnership

Members of Jet Airways' JetPrivilege loyalty programme will be able to earn and redeem JPMiles on all eligible Bangkok Airways flights

Mumbai, January, 2016 - JetPrivilege, the award-winning loyalty and rewards management programme and frequent flyer programme of Jet Airways, India's premier international airline, has entered into a reciprocal frequent flyer partnership with FlyerBonus, the loyalty scheme of Bangkok Airways.

JetPrivilege members can now earn and redeem JPMiles, when traveling across the Bangkok Airways network including popular destinations like Samui, Krabi, Phuket and Luang Prabang via Bangkok. Similarly members of Bangkok Airways' FlyerBonus programme can also earn and redeem their

miles across Jet Airways' extensive network in India and key international destination in North America, Europe, Middle East and SAARC.

Jet Airways operates three daily flights to Bangkok from its hubs in India – two from Mumbai and one from Delhi.

With the introduction of its 29th frequent flyer airline partner, Jet Airways is offering its loyal members with greater choice and additional value when travelling with partner carriers.

Mr Gaurang Shetty - Sr. Vice President, Commercial, Jet Airways, said : "This partnership with Bangkok Airways will offer exceptional value to our guests. The new codeshare destinations with Bangkok Airways are an important extension to the Jet Airways international network, enhancing our product offering and providing greater choice and convenience to our guests."

Mr. Prote Setsuwan, Vice President - Marketing of Bangkok Airways, said : "We are delighted to partner with JetPrivilege, the frequent flyer programme of Jet Airways. This will bring significant benefits to passengers of both airlines. As Bangkok Airways always continues to offer our FlyerBonus members more value and options, we hope and trust that this partnership will enhance their traveling experience with us."

Manish Dureja, Managing Director, JetPrivilege, added: "We are pleased to add Bangkok Airways as another partner for our JetPrivilege members to earn and redeem JPMiles. Enhancing reciprocal reward benefits for our JetPrivilege members will enable us to deliver to them a seamless experience when flying domestically and internationally across the combined networks of Jet Airways and Bangkok Airways. This is an exciting start to the new year for JetPrivilege, as we continue to focus on expanding the choice of airline and non-airline rewards for our members."

Source: Jet Airways

Air India introduces 'Order to Chef' service

December, 2015 - In yet another novel offering, for the first time, Air India has introduced 'Order to Chef' service for its premium class passengers, on selected international flights out of Delhi. In association with its in-flight catering partners TajSats and Sky Gourmet, the 'Order to Chef' Service lends a personalized touch to the selection and ordering of menu by First and Business class passengers.

A dedicated 'Order to Chef' cell has been set up in Delhi and an Air India team reaches out to these passengers before the flight to seek their meal preference from the existing menus. The desired choice of meal, is then ordered in advance, for the premium class passenger. Feedback to the newly introduced service has been positive, with passengers expressing their delight at the gesture.

Currently available for passengers of the daily Delhi-Chicago and Delhi-New York flights and three daily Delhi-London flights, Air India plans to extend the 'Order to Chef' service to other international flights shortly. Air India offers two major meals and one high tea on the Delhi-Chicago and Delhi-New York sector, whereas travellers relish one major meal and snacks on the Delhi-London sector.

The in-flight menu offers an exciting assortment of the best of Indian cuisine, a wide variety of continental and seafood recipes.

Source: Air India

The Gateway Hotel Gir Forest reopens its doors to guests

Gujarat, December, 2015 - The Gateway Hotel Gir Forest, located at the edge of the world-renowned Gir Forest is now open for guests. The hotel, set in an idyllic environment is perfect for a relaxing holiday.

Mr. Farhat Jamal, Senior Vice President - Operations (West India) & Africa, Taj Hotels Resorts & Palaces said, "We are pleased to welcome guests once again. It is the ideal time of the year to watch the majestic Asiatic lion and wildlife or indulge in a cultural expedition to interesting historical places like Junagadh and Gondal."

The Gateway Hotel Gir Forest, is the nature lover's getaway. With its rich surroundings of dry deciduous and tropical thorn forests, the hotel faces the Hiran River to offer a picturesque and serene setting, away from the bustle of the city. Home to the Asiatic lion, the Sasan Gir Forest is one of the only two natural habitats of this subspecies around the world. The latest census recorded the lion count in Gir at 411. The leopard, jungle cat, rusty spotted cat, cheetal, sambhar, four-horned antelope, wild boar and hare are also easy to spot here, along with over 200 species of avifauna.

Also integral to the experience will be the jungle safaris the hotel will provide in an open Gypsy.

Source: Taj Group



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