

PRAVEG'S TOURISM ONE

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**BLUE
TOURISM**



**THEYYAM:
THE DANCE OF
THE OPPRESSED**



LINES OF ANTIQUITY



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on holiday, walking on the beach.

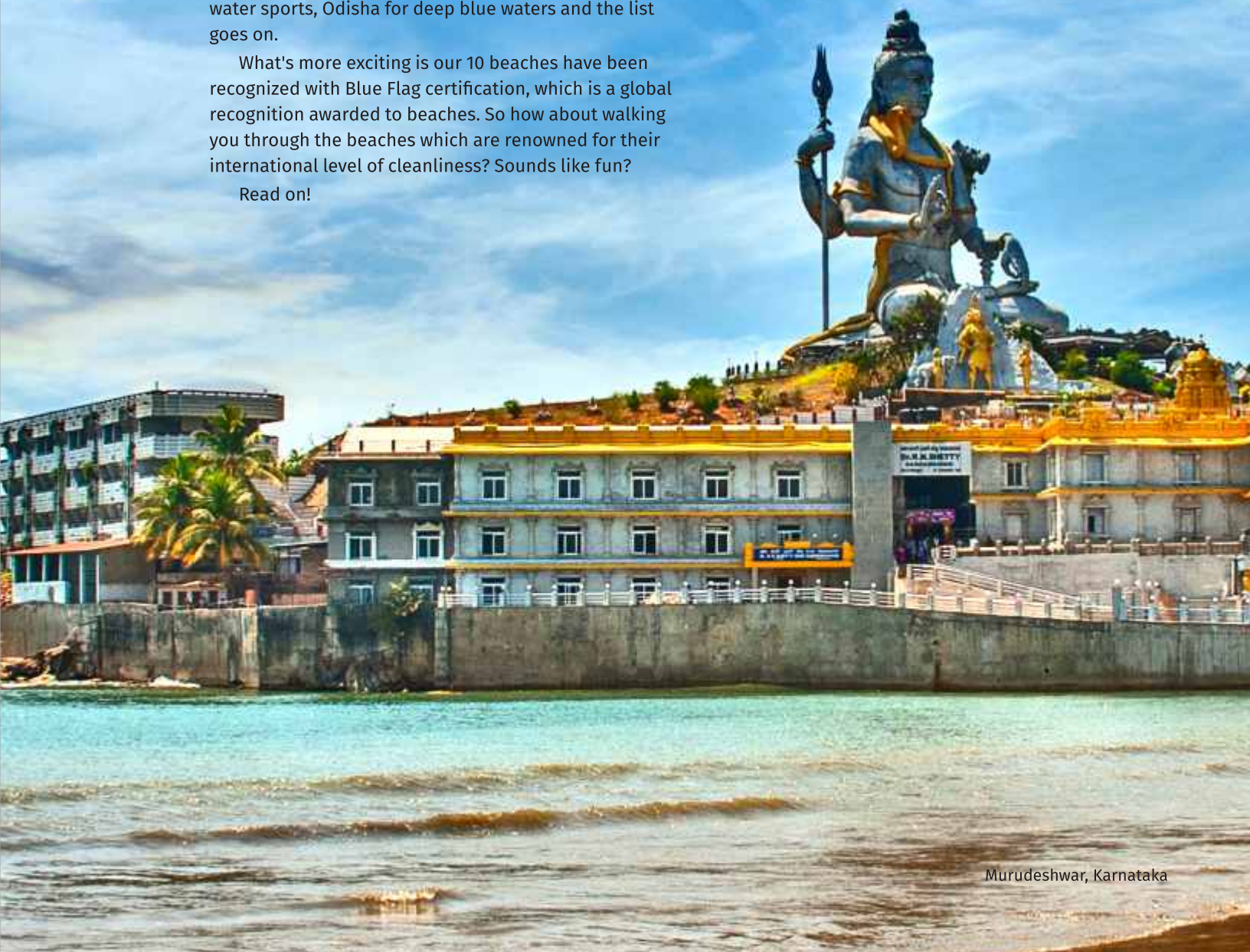
~ Rosamund Pike

Dreamy beaches, silky warm seas, lush scenery, and endless sunshine - these are some of the top ingredients of the ideal tropical vacation. And guess what, we have them all here in India. With 7,517 kilometers of coastline, India is home to some of the world's most breathtakingly beautiful and tourist-friendly beaches.

Every beach has a signature attribute to it. Goa is a paradise for party lovers, Gokarna beach is renowned for rocks and hillocks, Pondicherry beach is a destination to connect with Mother Nature, Kovalam beach has breathtaking views to its name, Andaman for exciting water sports, Odisha for deep blue waters and the list goes on.

What's more exciting is our 10 beaches have been recognized with Blue Flag certification, which is a global recognition awarded to beaches. So how about walking you through the beaches which are renowned for their international level of cleanliness? Sounds like fun?

Read on!



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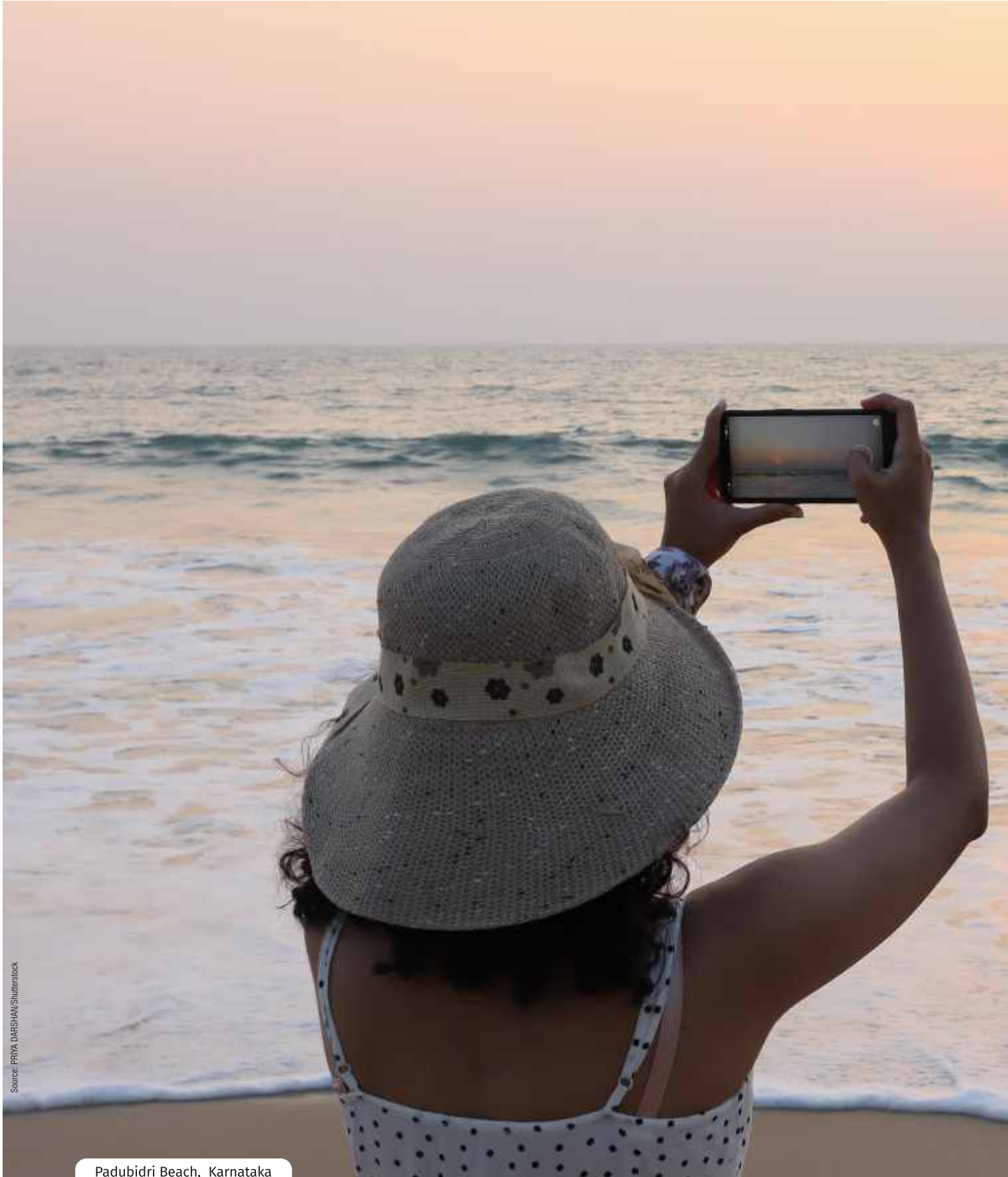
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Padubidri Beach, Karnataka



BLUE TOURISM

While green tourism is well known, blue tourism that relates to the water is a less-known concept. We look at some of the blue flag beaches of India.

The Blue Flag is a certification by the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE) that a beach, marina, or sustainable boating tourism operator meets its standards. FEE's Blue Flag criteria include standards for quality, safety, environmental education and information, the provision of services and general environmental management criteria.

GHOGLHA BEACH

The Ghoghla Beach is one of the finest beaches of Diu, with lovely sands and a good view over the creek to the monuments of Diu. A park has been created behind the beach and there are structures, where you can sit and enjoy the view. Contiguous with Ahmedpur Mandvi Beach in Gujarat, Ghoghla has a long stretch that is good for walking and wading. The sea is safe for paddling, wading, swimming and water sports in some months of the year. This beach has been awarded a blue flag.

While in Ghoghla, you can look for wildlife - nilgai antelope are sometimes seen in the fields around the beach, and the endangered Asiatic lion from the Gir forests venture close to the coastal stretch.

Drive from Ghoghla to Simbor, a small cove about 20km from the island. The drive to Simbor is attractive, passing mango orchards and other groves, villages, temples and ashrams. Simbor comes as a surprise; it is a tiny enclave of Diu surrounded by Gujarat. Historically, it was connected to the rest of the Portuguese enclave by sea.

Today, Simbor comprises two strips of land separated by Rio Vançoso creek. The beach here is lovely, and you can see reef heron (also called western reef egrets), kingfishers and terns catching fish in the shallow waters. The Fort St. Anthony of Simbor, also called Panikotha, was once part of Distrito de Diu and still falls in the Union Territory. Its main purpose was to protect the boats in the Simbor bay.



Source: Bhavin Hareshkumar Bhatt/Shutterstock

Diu Fortress



Ghoghla Beach, Diu

Bet Dwarka



Okha

SHIVRAJPUR

Located near the holy city of Dwarka, Shivrajpur is a beautiful beach with lovely sands and blue water. The water is shallow and suitable for swimming. Kachchigadh Lighthouse is one of the landmarks of the beach.

The beach has developed as a destination for scuba diving, snorkeling and water sports. The gentle gradient of the foreshore is safe for beginner divers to start in shallow seawaters and then move to more open seas. Operators of diving lessons and water-based activities have their tented offices along the beach.

Near Shivrajpur, Rukmini Temple, is a 12th century architectural gem with exquisitely carved walls.

Continue from here to Mithapur, named for the saltworks ('mitha' is the Gujarati word for salt) with Tata's well-planned township. The town is located near a beach declared a no-plastics zone by the Tatas to protect marine ecology. Tata Chemicals runs Okhai, an organization working for the benefit of local craftswomen. You can buy exquisite appliqué and embroidery of Bhopa Rabari and other communities at their shop.

Proceed to Okha, an old port that thrived in the days of the Baroda Princely State. From the jetty at Okha, you can get a ferry to Bet Dwarka, an island in the Arabian Sea much revered by pilgrims. This island also has a good beach, called Dunny Point, which is good for spotting marine life. Walk along the rock pools, where you could see octopus, sea hare, starfish and other marine invertebrates left behind by the tide. Dolphins and gulls are often seen on the crossing from Okha to Bet Dwarka, and there are also chances of seeing sea turtles.

Return to Okha, and if time permits, visit the beautiful beach at Positra fringed by superb coral reefs.



Rukmani Temple, Shivrajpur

RUSHIKONDA

Rushikonda has a wild beauty about it, with sand dunes, rocks and views. The beach is not suitable for swimming but water sports are possible. This is a popular place for food, with places like Sea Inn (well-known as Raju Ghaari Dhaba), which is an iconic eatery for Andhra style seafood prepared by Lakshmi Devi Kakarlapudi using fresh Bay of Bengal catches and Guntur spices, and Hotel Vihar.

This beach is located on Visakhapatnam - Bheemunipatnam Road, which is probably the longest beachside highway stretch in India. It runs almost continuously along beaches for more than 25km offering breathtaking views of dunes and the Bay of Bengal at places. Along this highway, a Buddha statue and a modern gate mark the entrance to the Buddhist archaeological site of Thotlakonda, where a Himayana Buddhist monastery flourished about 2000 years ago. The Thotlakonda hilltop site has the remains of stupas, chaityagrihas, pillared halls, viharas, storeroom, refectory, a drainage system and the tank that once provided water to the site. Buddhism thrived around Visakhapatnam between the 3rd century BC and the 2nd century AD, and an older site than Thotlakonda can be seen at Bhavanikonda further north. Presently, the highway brings you to Bheemunipatnam, which was a port and settlement of the Dutch East India Company along the Coromandel Coast between 1610 until the company's liquidation in 1798. Visit the Dutch cemetery with its obelisk shaped tombs, and see other European colonial remains like the ruined fort, colonnaded houses and British clock tower. A lighthouse at Bhimili Port, which used to guide passenger vessels between Madras (Chennai) and Calcutta (Kolkata) in the 1800s, can be seen from the beach. Another highlight on the Vishakhapatnam - Bheemunipatnam Road is Erra Matti Dibbalu, a coastal red sand dune declared a Geo-Heritage Site by the Geological Survey of India.

Ramakrishna Beach



Rushikonda Beach



Kailasagiri

Kovalam Beach



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KOVALAM

Close to the southernmost tip of India, Kovalam's spectacular beaches, shallow waters, palm fringed lagoons and scenic rocky coves have made it one of the popular beach destinations of India for a variety of tourists from backpackers to the rich and famous, Indian families and foreign groups. The sheltered bay of Kovalam has four beaches separated by a pair of rocky headlands, all the four – Samudra, Ashok, Eve's Beach and Lighthouse Beach – close enough to each other for someone to take a long uninterrupted walk over strips of sands and rocky outcrops along the sea. Over a few days, you will have your fill of sand, sea, beautiful sunrise and sunsets, and warm sunlit days. The beaches offer a variety of options – whether you like lively places with crowds of tourists, sunbathers stretching till the eyes can reach, food shacks and beachside amenities or secluded spaces to get away from the crowds, you will find a strip of sand to meet your requirements. You can also find places for swimming, catamaran rides and water sports. For peace and quiet, head for the northern beaches or south to Chowara.

Kovalam has also become an ayurvedic tourism destination with some of the best spas located on the stretch from Kovalam to Chowara.

Sri Aurobindo Ashram



PONDICHERRY

If you are looking for a place where you can relax in informal cafes and lively restaurants, Puducherry (Pondicherry) is your kind of destination. You can find streets with old world charm and others with a Bohemian vibe, chic cafes in the French Quarter and old coffee houses in the Tamil areas. Stroll along quiet, clean and neatly laid out streets lined with bougainvillea covered bungalows and French buildings, and dine at villa-style restaurants or snack at cute little cafes. In the morning and evening, the boulevards along the sea are pleasant for walks.

For a spiritual escape, you can visit French colonial churches, Sri Aurobindo Ashram and the Auroville commune.

Eden Beach here has a safe swimming zone, seating arrangements, clean drinking water, washroom, changing room, bathing room, toilets for tourists, including for persons with disabilities and parking facilities.





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Golden Beach

PURI

The Golden Beach at Puri stretches about 870 metres from Digabareni square to Mayfair Hotel offering some clean sands with palm shades to enjoy the view of the Bay of Bengal. A visit to this beach can be combined with religious and heritage tourism.

This seaside city is most famous as a centre for heritage and pilgrimage. The Jagannath Temple, which soared some 65 meter high in front of us with the wheel of Vishnu and a flag rising above the pinnacle. As at other religious places, the surroundings of the temple is clustered with shops selling rudraksha malas, idols, pictures of Jagannath with or without his siblings, prayer offerings, textiles and handicrafts for tourists and souvenirs. Our panda explains, "Puri came into the limelight as a Vaishnavite centre after the Hindu reformer Shankaracharya made Puri one of his four 'mathas', attracting holy men from all over India for discussions, a practice continued till this date. The Ganga dynasty enhanced its religious important further especially after 1135 when Anantavarman Chodaganga founded the Purushottama Temple, which was renamed Jagannath, which is Vishnu as the Lord of the Universe by the Gajjapathi dynasty in the 15th century."



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Source: Jeremy Richards/Shutterstock

Jagannath Temple



There are four entrances to the temple, the southern gate has equestrian figures, the northern gate has elephant figures, the western gate has tiger figures, and like all other yatris, we entered by the eastern one with huge moustached lions flanking the gate walking past a 10m high monolithic Aruna Stambha pillar brought here from Konarka in the 18th century in front of it.

Like all Odisha temples, this one too has an assembly hall called Jagamohan, a hall for offerings called the Bhoga Mandapa, a dance theatre for ceremonial performances associated with the Devdasi tradition and the central hallway. The panda shows that 30 subsidiary shrines and a yatra is complete, when you visit three or more of them, and take a holy dip in one of the four sacred tanks, but we avoided the crowds there and after booking our Prasad for the offerings, we filed towards the main shrine and saw the idols of the Lord Jagannath, his brother Balabhadra and sister Subhadra.

The temple employs about 20,000 people, including 6,000 pandas and more than 10,000 others like craftspeople who produce all the materials required for the daily round of rituals and 'servants' who keep the idols clean. The food prepared by about 400 cooks in the temple kitchen, known as mahaprasad, is carried in pieces of broken pots, as Lord Jagannath is the only perfection in this world, and after the blessings of Lord Jagannath, this mahaprasad is given to the priests. You can sample the delicious offerings in the streets around the temple in the evening. For atmosphere, roam the streets around the temple and visit the sacred tanks of Puri.



Arun Stambha



Source: AJMAL MUHAMMED/Shutterstock

KAPPAD

The Portuguese, led by Vasco Da Gama, landed on the Kerala coast at a site believed to be Kappad near Kozhikode in 1498 and subsequently in 1502. After talks between the Portuguese and the Zamorin failed, the Europeans crown and the new Raja of Kochi, effectively making him a vassal of the King of Portugal. This brought about a turbulent period from 1503 to 1584, when there were many power struggles between the Zamorin, with the support of Arabs, Egyptians and other allies, and the Portuguese, resulting in a succession of sea and land battles. Finally the Zamorin sanctioned the Portuguese factories at Ponnani and Kozhikode.

Kappad today is a popular beach with a corniche and park. The park includes a restroom, restaurant and seating.



Source: Derick john shaju / Shutterstock.com



BEACHES OF KARNATAKA

Located about 30 minutes from Murudeshwar, Kasarkod Beach is lined by casuarinas. This is a beautiful beach to walk on, away from the crowds and with some great views.

From here, visit the beachside temple town dominated by the colossal statue of Lord Shiva sitting on the shore with a backdrop of the sea. Take a lift to the top of the Murudeshwar temple for a view.

From Murudeshwar, drive to Udupi. Padubidri Beach near Udupi has a Blue Flag certification.



Murudeshwar Temple



Kasarkod Beach



Padubidri Beach

Source: PRIYA DARSHAN/Shutterstock

Havelock Island



Source: dly13/Shutterstock

Radhanagar Beach

HAVELOCK ISLAND

The passage of about three hours from Port Blair to Havelock is enjoyable as you pass unpopulated islets and islands of Ritchie's Archipelago. You could spot flying fish and playful dolphins sometimes coming close to the boat. As Andaman is one of the world's well-known diving destinations, you will find scuba-diving hobbyists with their equipment among your fellow-passengers. The island's main attraction is the shell strewn snow-white Radhanagar Beach with a curve of sugary sands, teal blue shallows, native forest and a view of jungle hills. Rated by international magazines and TV shows as the best beaches in Asia and among the best in the world, Radhanagar offers a glorious view of sunrise and sunset. 📷







**THEYYAM
THE DANCE OF
THE OPPRESSED**

Night had set in. The dance was in progress and the drum beats were reaching a crescendo. The dancer, a male was wildly gyrating about in his elaborately costumed dress. The crowd with folded hands stood there spell bound in absolute reverence. The flames from the lighted wicks attached to the body of the dancer flickered on the faces of the people around him. Theyyam, the dance of the oppressed, was in progress.

Theyyam is performed in north Kerala and parts of Tamil Nadu. It is performed by the tribal communities, residing in the mountainous regions of these states. These tribal communities were always relegated from the mainstream of the society. The Theyyam dance, a Dravidian art form, is an ancient ritual that finds reference in the Sangam literature. Sangam literature is the oldest surviving Tamil literature believed to have been composed between 400 BCE and 300 BC. Though the genesis of the dance is lost in the mists of time, it finds significant relevance even today, as it probably had then. During the performance of Theyyam, the dancer becomes one with God. In those few hours, the people of all denominations pay their respects to the man, the dancer, the God. It is for this reason, the Theyyam dance ritual remains immensely popular and relevant in southern parts of India today.

In the Theyyam dance ritual, the dancer is possessed by the spirit of God. The dance and the accompanying music project the beliefs of the local tribal people. It is a veneration for the spirits and ancestors. The performers wear extravagant costumes and masks that are brilliantly colorful. The make-up involves painting the face with vivid colors. The costumes are made up of brightly coloured clothes and tender coconut leaves. The elaborate headgear is several feet in height, sometimes as much as 15 ft. Multiple spokes are mechanically attached, in a hub and spoke arrangement, to the body of the dancer. At the end of each spoke is a lighted diya. He will have an evil looking sword in one hand and sometimes a shield on the other. With this ensemble, he would pirouette, swirl and jump, leaving the spectators entranced.

For those few hours, as the story is replayed, the legends of Kerala come to life, as people gather to enjoy the tales of the past. According to an estimate, there are over 400 types of Theyyam.

Theyyam means God in Malayalam. During the performance, the dancer, who belongs to the subaltern class, falls into a trance and becomes the God or Goddess. For those few hours, this ancient ritualistic dance elevates the dancer to the stature of God. The assembled devotees, which also includes the people from the upper class, pay obeisance to the dancer in front of them, praying for forgiveness and well being. People will genuflect and prostrate before him to seek blessings. Though Theyyam is promoted by the upper ruling class, it is performed only by





the tribal community, an exclusive privilege that continues to this day. Theyyam, in a way, was a ritualistic protest against the pernicious effects of the caste system and untouchability.

Another historical document, Keralolpathi, gives the origin of the ritual art of Theyyam. A cataclysmic situation of the sea advancing into the hinterlands of Kerala was stalled by Parasurama, the sixth incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Theyyam thus came into being to honor the savior. The privilege of thanksgiving was granted to the tribal people of North Kerala.

Over time, the Theyyam dance underwent subtle changes. In consonance with the changing of times, it incorporated new trends into its fold. There is also an Islamic tone to the Theyyam dance ritual. In north Kerala, the Muslims are generally addressed as Mappla. Thus the Muslim Theyyams are generally known as Mappila Theyyam.

According to legend, an Imam was fishing in a river, when he saw a bright source of light on the opposite bank. Intrigued, he jumps into the river and swims across to explore the source of light. However, when he reached the bank, the source of light had moved to the bank, where he was standing earlier. He dives back into the river again. But midway, he feels a force pulling him down into the murky depths. He struggles in vain but is drowned. It is believed that the Imam was slain by a Goddess who was the local deity of that area. The Goddess conveys the message that the slain Imam had achieved divinity and the same obeisance should be given to him by the people. This scene is enacted during the Theyyam dance. This tale is just an attempt to bring about and sustain the Hindu Muslim brotherhood.

Theyyam is performed al fresco. There is no stage or curtain for the performance. It is performed in front of family shrines in the courtyard or in front of the family deity. The dance lasts anywhere between 12 to 24 hours, reaching the climax in the early hours of the morning.

Hindus constitute about 55% of the population of Kerala, with the balance majorly being taken up by Christians and Muslims, the latter having a slight edge. Despite the preponderance of Hinduism in the state, it is a fact that in Kerala communal disharmony is rare. The fact that Theyyam has evolved to include people of a different religion speaks volumes of the catholicity of the people of this southern state. It is an honor that is fiercely coveted by the people in one of the most religiously diverse states in India.

Theyyam came as a movement against the bane of untouchability. It was a kind of a ritualistic protest against the treatment meted out to the poorest and the weakest sections of society who were manacled for life in servitude of their masters. It was a cry for egalitarianism, which poignantly comes out loud and clear in one of their chants during the dance - "When you bleed, the blood is the same. When we bleed, the blood is the same".







LINES OF ANTIQUITY



It covers a mind boggling area of about 300 sq. km. To appreciate the mammoth scale and its intrinsic beauty, you have to be airborne. Four hundred km south of Lima, Peru, in one of the driest regions on earth, are the intricate lines engraved on the arid desert floor from times of antiquity. These are the lines and Geoglyphs (geo = earth, glyph= engraved symbol) of Nasca, one of the largest geoglyphs in the world that is still intact.

There are straight lines, geometric designs, rectangles and triangles and swirls. There are shapes of a hummingbird, a spider and a monkey. There are a total of over 800 straight lines, 300 geometric figures. There are 70 biomorphs i.e. engravings in the shape of animals and plants. Spiders are believed to be a sign of rain; they are also associated with sacrifice and regeneration; humming birds are associated with fertility. The extremely dry, windless, and the unvarying climate of the Nazca region in the coastal desert

along the Pacific Ocean, had preserved the lines well across centuries.

Some of the straight lines stretch up to 30 miles with perfect geometric properties. Some forms are yet to be identified. Intriguingly, many of the designs appear on potteries and other items excavated from this region. If the total length of all the lines drawn were to be measured, it would extend to about 1300 km, which is approximately the distance from New Delhi to Hyderabad.

A geoglyph is a large design produced on the ground by using materials such as stones or gravel, from that area itself. It can be formed either by aligning stones and other material taken from the surroundings or by adopting the reverse process of removing material from the ground following a particular design. The former is called a positive geoglyph and the latter a negative geoglyph. The lines and geoglyphs of Nasca are negative geoglyphs.







UNESCO has sought to encourage the identification, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding value to humanity. The international treaty called the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted by UNESCO in 1972, encourages countries to sign the World Heritage Convention to ensure the protection of their natural and cultural heritage. The lines and geoglyphs of Nazca in the southern Peruvian desert make the UNESCO list.

A Peruvian archeologist first discovered the existence of these lines in 1926. But standing at ground level, he could not fathom the immensity of the archeological wonder. Four years later, when commercial flights came to Peru that astounding discovery became known to the world.

When were the lines created? How were these lines created and who created them? It has not been possible to precisely date the formation of these lines. It is believed that they may have been created sometime between 200 B.C. and A.D. 500 by the pre-hispanic people. These lines on the ground were carved out over several centuries. The Nazca civilization flourished on the southern coast of Peru between 200 BCE and 600 CE. They settled in Nazca. Their religious center was Cahuachi. At a particular place in Cahuachi, the Nazca River flows underground for a short stretch due to which water was always available despite lengthy periods of droughts. Through a series of aqueducts and cisterns, a constant supply of water was assured. The dwellers of this region had consecrated the area. The sanctity of the place is further evidenced by the lines of geoglyphs on the surrounding desert floor.

The desert floor is covered in a layer of iron oxide-coated pebbles. The iron in the pebbles reacted with the oxygen from the atmosphere to form a layer of





Chauchilla Cemetery

rust colored iron oxide. The ancient peoples created their artistic lines by removing the top 12 to 15 inches of rock, revealing the lighter-colored sand below. The difference in color was quite stark which led them to extend the scrapings to thousands of meters. The scant rainfall in the area preserved their work through millenia. The region is so dry that it rains less than an inch every year.

The discovery galvanized a plethora of theories - from astronomical engravings to track celestial bodies to the work of aliens. However, according to archeologist Reinhard, these lines engraved on the ground indicated a path for a ritual to be performed to obtain water and for good harvest of crops.

Probably due to the sanctity of this place, no evidence of permanent residence has been found here. The people who came here were probably pilgrims and had only temporary arrangements to stay. Burial mounds have been found at this place. Ancestor worship was common in the Andean culture. The pilgrims may have visited this place to add new mummies to the tomb.

Cahuachi was abandoned sometime during the mid-6th century CE. Harsh arid conditions due to climate change or tectonic upheavals may have forced the people to abandon the place for better pastures.

The lines and Geoglyphs of Peru are not unique. They do exist elsewhere in the world. But the artistic achievement in the Andean region is unmatched in its dimensions and diversity.

Civilisations rise and decline. Often they leave behind intriguing evidence. Despite the immense size of their works, how were they able to achieve such perfectly straight lines, perfect circles, and near perfect parallel lines? The answer to the enigma of these ancient mysterious lines, continues to elude archeologists.

Incredible India



THE SPRING FESTIVAL OF VASANT PANCHAMI

Vasant Panchami, called Basant Panchami in Eastern India, celebrates the arrival of spring. This day is also celebrated in honour of Goddess Saraswati. It is celebrated about 40 days before Holi, when the spring season comes into full bloom.

Santiniketan, West Bengal

In West Bengal, Basant Panchami is the time to celebrate the birthday of Goddess Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of learning, music and arts. Saraswati puja is celebrated by offering prayers to books and musical instruments. It is also a day to start learning a musical instrument, a new language or art, or to join a new class at school, blessed by Saraswati who is the supreme mother-teacher for all Hindus.

The Naivedya platter offered to the Goddess during puja includes khoi or puffed rice, atap chawal or sun-dried rice grains, five varieties of fruits, including the plum known as "kool", aam shotto or dried mango slices, khejur or dates. This is followed by bhog, offered to the Goddess at the end of the puja, which comprises khichdi, boiled rice with grounded and roasted moong dal and ginger-green chilies, mixed vegetable curry, topped with payesh, a sweet rice pudding made with milk, rice and patali gur (date palm gur). Since the Goddess Saraswati's vehicle is the swan or hansa, some milk with water is symbolically placed in a pot for the sacred swan during the puja.

The best place to enjoy the celebrations is Santiniketan or Shantiniketan, a model institute set up by Rabindranath Tagore based on his principles. Next to his father's ashram, Rabindranath Tagore built a school called Patha Bhavana for primary and secondary education in 1901. The highlight is the paintings by Nandal Bose. Founded in 1921 by Rabindranath Tagore, Vishwa Bharati is recognized as a university and an institution of national importance. The Uttarayana Complex, which lies in the northern portion of the town and is located next to Rabindra Bhavana, features a collection of five houses built by Rabindranath Tagore, called Udayan, Shyamali, Konark, Udichi and Punascha. The gardens in the Uttarayan complex were planned and laid out by Rathindranath Tagore.

At the campus, women and girls dress up in yellow-coloured saris, wear



garlands of yellow marigold flowers and throw yellow colour on each other. The festivities begin from the morning with singing and dancing to Tagore's songs by the students and ends with throwing coloured powders (called 'abir') and expression of festive wishes. After the formal Vishwa Bharati programme, other events begin in the university town.

Vasant Panchami in Varanasi

Vasant Panchami is an important festival in Varanasi or Banaras. This is also a day when people do Pitra-Tarpan remembering their ancestors. This is also an important day to bathe in holy waters. At Varanasi, it is believed to be one of the most important 'snan muhurt' (auspicious days for bath in the holy river) after Mauni Amavasya.

Many educational institutions organize special prayer for Saraswati on this day. Many people wear yellow clothes. The idols of Goddess Saraswati were also dressed in yellow and yellow sweets are distributed as prasad.

The celebrations are vibrant at Banaras Hindu University. On 4th February 1916, which was the auspicious day of Vasant Panchami in that year, Banaras Hindu University (BHU), formerly Central Hindu College and Kashi Hindu Vishwa Vidyalaya, was established by Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya with Maharaja of Darbhanga Rameshwar Singh, Maharaja of Banaras Prabhu Narayan Singh, Sunder Lal and British Theosophist and Home Rule

League founder Annie Besant.

This day is celebrated with fervor and enthusiasm by the students and academic staff at BHU, with musical rendering of the holy books at the Sankat Mochan Temple, prayers and events.



Vasant Panchami in Punjab

Yellow mustard fields are the signature scenery that can be seen when travelling in Punjab during Vasant Panchami. Wearing yellow on this day is considered to be auspicious. People sing and dance to give a joyous welcome to the spring season. The festival is associated with Sufi saints and shrines across the Punjabi speaking regions.

Historically, Maharaja Ranjit Singh held an annual Basant fair and introduced kite flying as a regular

feature of the festivities in the 19th century in Punjab, including fairs at Sufi shrines. Maharaja Ranjit Singh and his queen Moran would dress in yellow and fly kites on Basant. You can enjoy the kite flying activities in Amritsar, and celebrations at Lahore, Kasur, Sialkot, Gujranwala and Gurdaspur. A large fair is organised on the day of Basant Panchmi in the Shiva temple of Bansari and Gudri.

Ferozpur is one of the cities that are especially vibrant during Basant Panchami.





Basant Panchami in Bihar

In Bihar's Aurangabad district, the Deo-Sun shrine was established on Basant Panchami by the king of Allabahad. Since then, this has been an important festival in the district.

Sri Panchami at Vijayawada

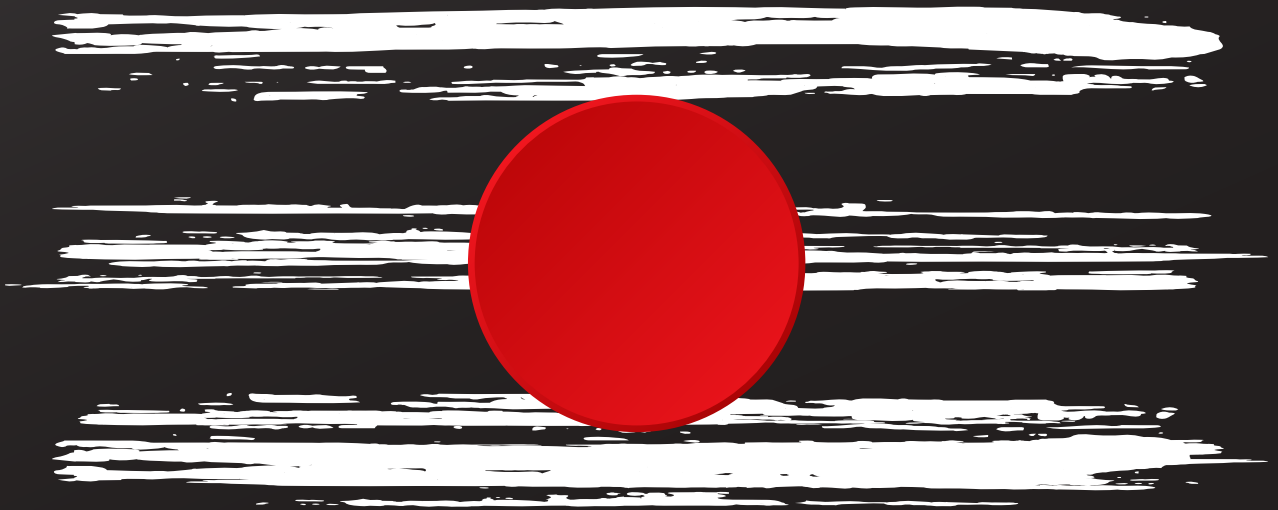
Basant Panchami is celebrated as Sri Panchami in South India. Andhra is a major centre for celebrations. At Vijayawada, Kanaka Durga temple atop Indrakeeladri shrine has great significance as the presiding deity is adorned as the Goddess Saraswati Devi on that day.



Words by ANIL MULCHANDANI

SHIVRATRI TRAILS

**Three interesting places
to visit for Shivratri.**



Bhootnath Temple, Mandi

Bhootnath Temple is in the heart of Mandi town of Himachal. The temple has a Nandi bull statue that faces the deity from the ornated double-arched entrance. The temple is the focal point of the seven day Shivratri festival called Swarnim International Shivratri Fair.

The festival was started by Ishawri Sen, ruler of Mandi who was held a prisoner for 12 years after he lost his kingdom in the war waged by Sansar Chand of Punjab, in 1792. Afterwards, the Gurkhas' restored the Mandi state to Ishwari Sen. He was given a reception on the occasion of his return to Mandi. This day happened to be the Shivratri festival day.

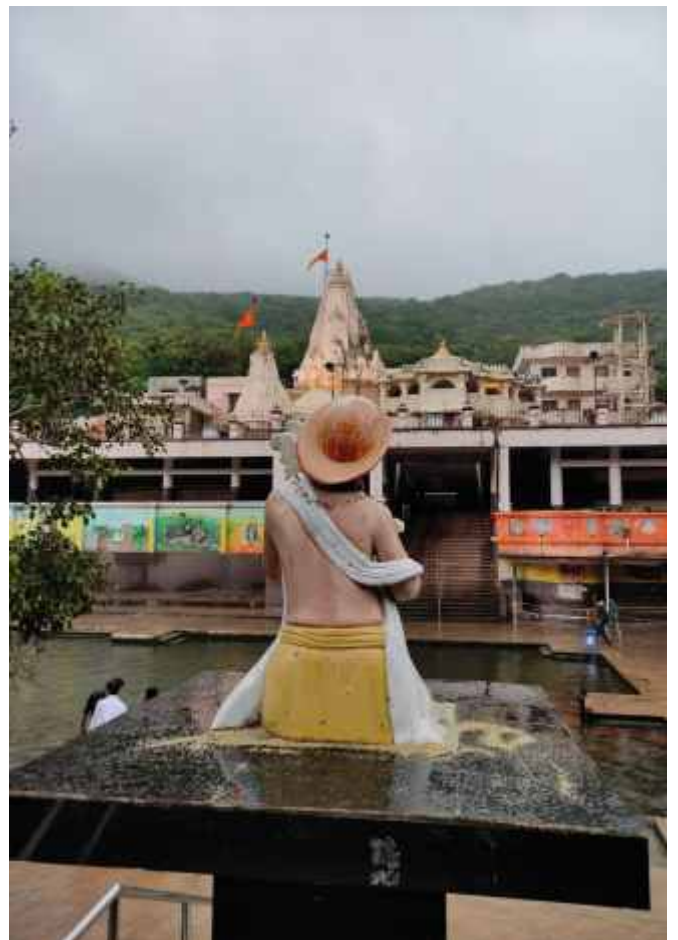
The images of deities are carried to Mandi to pay homage to the temple and the erstwhile royal family. Each image is decorated with glittering embroidered drapery. The procession visits the Madho Rai Temple first to pay obeisance to Lord Vishnu and then proceeds to the palace in a colourful procession called the Sobha Yatra, known locally as 'Zareb,' to honour the former rulers. The ruler thereafter pay obeisance to Lord Shiva at the Bhootnath temple where the main festival of Shivratri is held. The palanquins of the deities are swayed to the drum beats and folk music to indicate their happiness after visiting the temples of Vishnu and Shiva. A pageant of gods with folk bands, dancers and brightly-dressed devotees is held at a large open ground at the confluence of the Beas and Suketi rivers. Some 200 deities arrive from shrines around Mandi town and are assigned places at the Paddal grounds. Stalls sell wool, honey, walnut, ghee, etc from various regions and the market also sells handcrafted jewellery of the region. At the end of the festival, there is music and dance with a nightlong worship. Chadars or blankets are offered.





Bhavnath Mandir, Junagadh

According to a legend, when Shiva and Parvati were traveling over the Girnar Hills, their divine garment fell over the present Mrugi Kund, making this place an auspicious site for lord Shiva worshipers. This kund is where naga bavas bathe before joining the Mahashivaratri procession for the Bhavnath Fair.





The Bhavnath fair is a 5-day Shivratri festival that culminates in a great Shivratri prayer. Devotees trek around the holy Girnar peak during this period. The holy Naga sadhus' Hatha yoga and such occult practices are spectacular. The procession is spectacular with music and blowing of auspicious conch shells, tungis, and turis, with the Naga Sadhus on their elephants, holding Hindu religious flags in their hands, preceded by a decorated statue of Lord Dattatreya, in a palanquin.

From Bhavnath, you can proceed to the Jyotirlingam temple at Somnath by the sea.



The Jyotirlingams of Malwa

Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh has two Jyotirlingam, Omkareshwar and Mahakaleshwar.

Omkareshwar Island is 2-km long and 1-km wide sandstone outcrop with ravines cut into the sides that enhance its spectacular appearance and Aum-like shape that gives it the name. The pilgrimage begins with a ritual bath at the Sangam of Narmada with other rivers, before climbing the sand beach and the rocks to the plateau atop the island. From here, the 'parikrama' begins at the ghats below Shri Omkar Mandhata Mandir, which is more like a cave except for the shikara that rises over the sanctum, and has a hallway with intricately carved pillars and a finely carved upper half leading to a low-ceilinged sanctum natural shrine



worshipped as one of the 12 jyotirlingas of Lord Shiva. From here, the pilgrims travel clockwise around the island. Some of the highlights of the island are the decorous Surajkund arch flanked by 3-metre figures of Arjun and Bheema leading to the Siddesvara Temple, built around the 10th century, with attractively-carved doorways depicting mainly apsaras and a plinth with an elephant frieze, the medieval Sidhnath Temple caved with a frieze of elephant sculpture more than 1.5m high and some finely sculpted apsaras, and many old Hindu and Jain temples.

After Omkareshwar, you can visit Maheshwar, where there are beautifully carved temples along the Narmada. You can bathe at one of the riverside ghats, take a boat ride to enjoy the views, and visit the historical Ahilya Fort, which has a heritage hotel within. Maheshwari sarees are woven near the river.

From here, proceed to Ujjain. Largely known as one of the holiest cities for all Hindus, Ujjain is a historical city. In Hindu mythology, Ujjainyini is said to have been the place of Lord Shiva's victory

over the demon king of Tripuri.

The most visited temple in Ujjain, Mahakaleshwar Mandir is one of the 12 shrines where Lord Shiva is worshipped in the form of a Jyotirlingam or Lingam of light, whose essential energy (shakti) is "born of itself", rather than from the rituals performed around it, making it very sacred to Hindus. The temple is an 18th century reconstruction of the original destroyed by Iltutmish in 1234, and looms over from its location on a rise over the Shipra River with its saffron tower. The temple complex has marble courtyards, water tanks and fountains in the forecourt, and the subterranean chamber where the lingam is considered one of the most powerful in India, especially by Tantric followers, due to its unusual south-facing position.

From here, go down the hill past the Rudra Sagar tank to the Harsiddhi Mandir, which is one of the 51 shaktipiths, places of worship consecrated to the mother goddess. The temple site is one where Sati's elbow fell to earth while Shiva was carrying her burning body from the sati pyre.

According to the Skanda Purana, Shiva called upon Goddess Chandi to destroy Chand and Prachand, and on being pleased bestowed upon her the epithet of Harsiddhi, 'one who vanquishes all'. At the entrance to the temple are two lamp towers, a feature of Marathi architecture, while inside is the shrine, erected by the Scindias, with images of Mahalakshmi, Annapurna and Saraswati.

The marketplace of Ujjain, with the

Chattri Chowk in the heart of the city market, has Gopal Mandir, another Scindia initiative. The temple is typical of the eclectic architecture that prevailed in India during the 1800s with Moghul domes, Moorish arches and Indo-European features. The temple tower looms over the surroundings, and the silver-plated doors were placed here by the Scindias who are said to have rescued stolen silver doors looted from temples. The marble sanctuary has a profusion of silver and mother-of-pearl decorations.

There are many more temples in Ujjain and for devotees a tour of this temple city is incomplete without a bath at the ghats on the Shipra. Shipra is a symbol of "purity". The Puranas, or ancient Hindu texts, suggest that the Shipra originated from the heart of Varaha, Lord Vishnu's incarnation as a boar. Legend has it that once Lord Shiva went begging for alms, using the skull of Lord Brahma as the begging bowl. Nowhere in the three worlds did he manage to get any alms. Ultimately, he went to Vaikunth, or the abode of Lord Vishnu, and asked Lord Vishnu for alms. In return, Lord Vishnu showed Lord Shiva his index finger, which enraged the latter. Lord Shiva took out his trishul, or trident, and cut Lord Vishnu's fingers. The Preserver's fingers began to bleed profusely, and the blood accumulated in Brahma's skull and soon overflowed from it. The flow became a stream and finally the Shipra, one of the seven sacred rivers. The river rises in the Vindya hills and flows through the Malwa plateau to reach the Chambal Basin. There are hundreds of Hindu shrines along the banks of the river Shipra and the elaborate riverside ghats are major centres of worship.

Also on the banks of the Shipra is Sage Sandipani's ashram or hermitage where it is said Lord Krishna, Lord Vishnu's eighth incarnation, had once studied. The Kaliadeh Palace built by the river during the reign of the Sultans of Mandu has a central dome in Persian architectural style. ■



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