

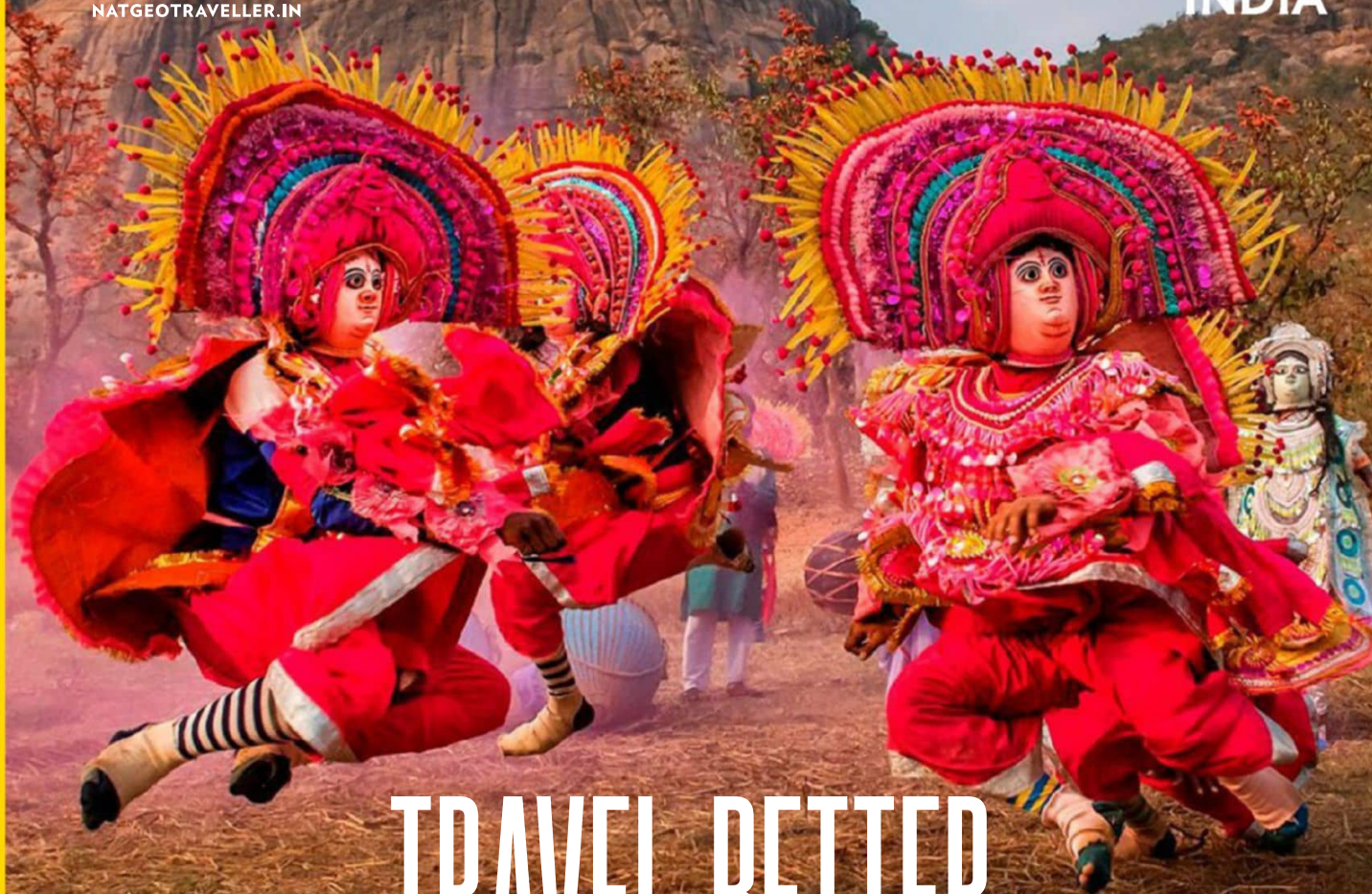
NOBODY KNOWS THIS WORLD BETTER

 NATIONAL
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DECEMBER 2020 • ₹150 • VOL. 9 ISSUE 6
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INDIA



TRAVEL BETTER
IN 2021

ECO-SENSITIVE TREKKING ●
BEST OF REMOTE WORKING ●
NATURE-LOVING GETAWAYS ●

● CONSCIOUS ROAD-TRIPPING
● HYPERLOCAL EATING
● BOOSTING SMALL BUSINESS

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*Geographically scattered islands,
ensuring a safe haven*



* Fly from India to Maldives via
Air India, Indigo, Go Air and Maldivian

REDISCOVER
Maldives *the sunny side of life*

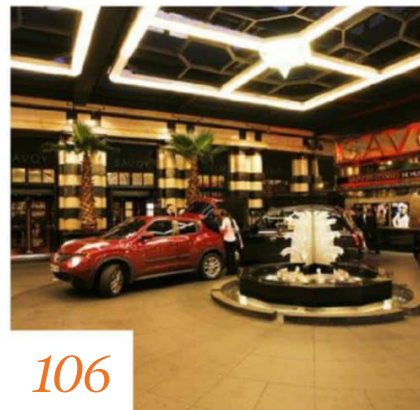
Maldives
the sunny side of life

THE COVER STORY

38 2020 HAS BEEN A BLEAK YEAR FOR TRAVEL WITH VALUABLE LESSONS IN CHANGING THE COURSE OF OUR JOURNEYS, AND SO, OUR WRITERS HAVE DRAWN UP A LIST OF FORWARD-LOOKING ITINERARIES SPREAD ACROSS THE COUNTRY AND EIGHT OVERARCHING CATEGORIES. AS WE MOVE INTO A NEW YEAR, WE MAP THE ART OF TRAVELLING FOR PLEASURE, MINDFULLY →



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ON THE COVER

We've missed travelling sorely this year. So how can we do it better in 2021? Travelling to sustain the art of Chhau mask making in Purulia (photo by Bappa Pabitra), or travelling ethically among the wilderness of Panna, the only way to move forward, is gently.

BAPPA PABITRA/SHUTTERSTOCK (COVER)

LET'S BE LIGHT ON OUR FEET



In a normal year, December is like a Beach Boys song come alive: the month to jettison our straightjacketed work clothes, polish off unlimited daytime cocktails and dream of sandy shorelines. Even if a proper vacation eludes us, the holiday mood is irresistible. We might be clacking away at computers but our minds imagine sweet harmonies where none exist.

2020, of course, cast a forlorn shadow over all traditions, especially holiday travel. Yet, in this quieter-than-usual winding down period, I dare feel hopeful. Consider this year a travel rehab that we were all forced to endure which could do us some good in the long run.

Travel, or at least the kind of travel that mentally uproots us, demands unconditional presence. But many among us adopted it as the ultimate status flex, racking up passport stamps like credit card points, pausing little to understand what was passing before our eyes. Perhaps, a reminder that for the majority of this world travel remains an unspeakable far-off luxury might be what's needed to inject the rarity and pleasure back into it.

Let's reclaim it as a supreme leisure, not to be methodically checked off, but to be savoured to its very last drop. In our final edition of this monumental year, we've corralled a list of Indian destinations for 2021 that beckon you to pitch camp and hang around, rather than drive through. During these heavy-handed months, this is the closest we have found ourselves to the good vibrations of a sun-drenched pop classic. ■

Write to me at natgeoeditor@ack-media.com or Editor, National Geographic Traveller India, 7th Floor, AFL House, Lok Bharti Complex, Marol Maroshi Road, Andheri East, Mumbai- 400059.

LUCAS MOORE/SHUTTERSTOCK (ISLAND); PHOTO COURTESY: JUNGRAU RAILWAYS (CABLE CAR); TONY KARUMBA, AP/GETTY IMAGES (MAN)

TOP ONLINE PICKS



POP CULTURE PICKS ON JET-SETTING LOCALES

Our list of films take you on a tour of multiple destinations: James Bond's secret missions around the world, a grand American road trip and European highlights in Bollywood hits.



THE SWISS MOUNTAIN THAT'S CHANGING FOREVER

Ice melt and a new cableway are reshaping the Eiger experience.



WHY SOME COUNTRIES ARE OPENING BACK UP TO TOURISTS DURING A PANDEMIC

COVID-19 is surging, but with their economies imperiled, some nations are welcoming travellers again.

OUR MISSION

National Geographic Traveller India is about immersive travel and authentic storytelling, inspiring readers to create their own journeys and return with amazing stories. Our distinctive yellow rectangle is a window into a world of unparalleled discovery.

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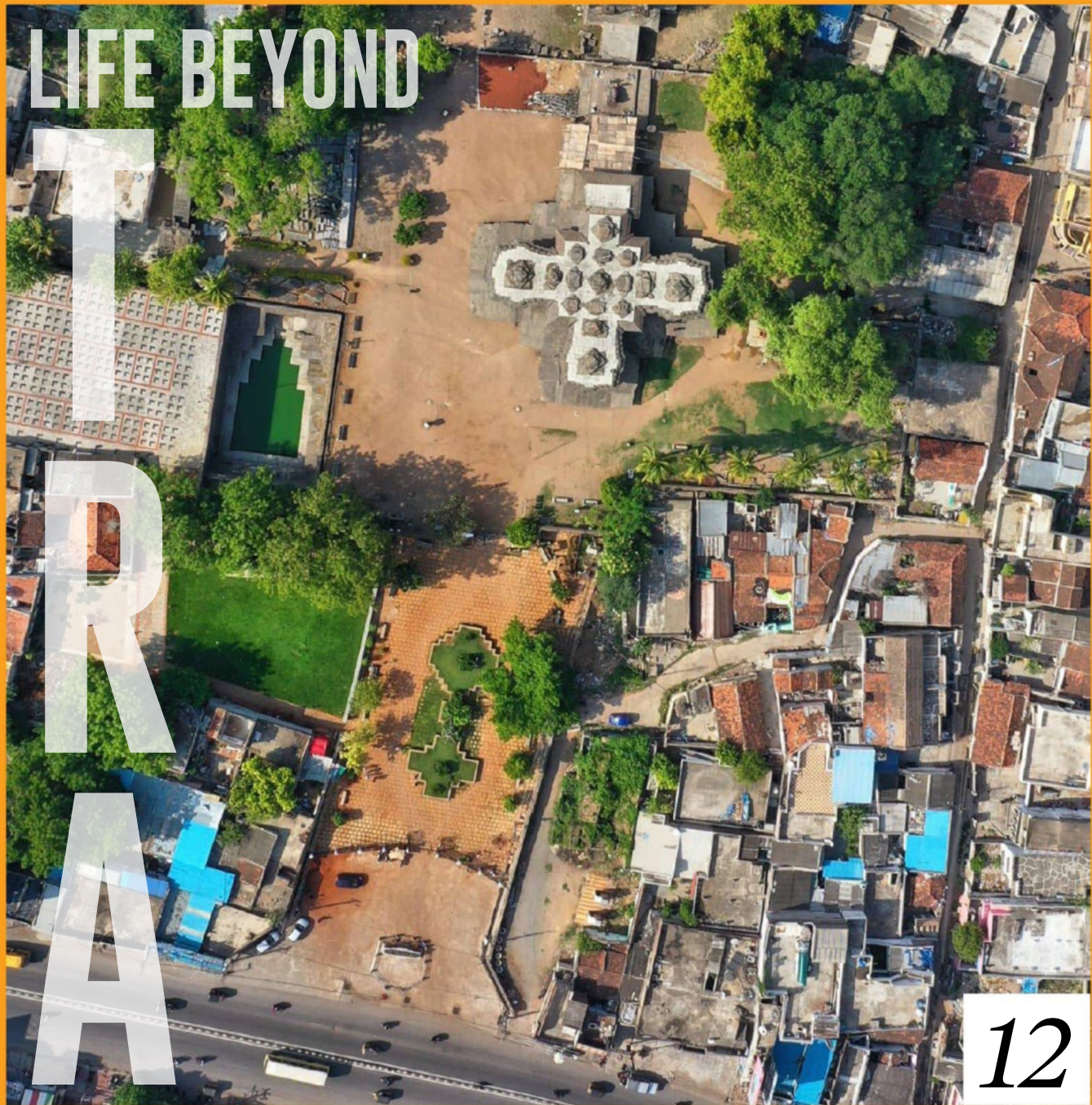
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About us National Geographic Traveller India is about immersive travel and authentic storytelling that inspires travel. It is about family travel, about travel experiences, about discoveries, and insights. Our tagline is "Nobody Knows This World Better" and every story attempts to capture the essence of a place in a way that will urge readers to create their own memorable trips, and come back with their own amazing stories.

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WINNER OF THE SATTE AWARD FOR BEST TRAVEL PUBLICATION IN INDIA



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Where To Find Some of the World's Best Chocolate

ECUADOR'S SUSTAINABLE, LOCAL PRACTICES HAVE HELPED THE COUNTRY MAKE A CACAO COMEBACK—AND CHOCOLATE LOVERS CAN SHARE IN THE SWEET REWARDS

BY SARAH BARRELL

Markets in the Ecuadorian city of Banos offer a repository of sweet delights.

Ecuador sits on a gold mine of cacao. In its 19th-century heyday, the country was the world's leading exporter, but plant disease and global market changes cost Ecuador its top spot in the early 1900s. Recent years, though, have seen the country make a chocolate comeback—thanks to local farmers, sustainably minded businesses, and (before travel restrictions) an influx of foodie tourists.

The nation is now famous for its single-origin chocolate. Such production is time consuming and laborious; it's done mostly by individual growers working on small-scale farms. During the global coronavirus pandemic, these small farmers have been made more vulnerable.

But there's unity and resilience within the cacao supply chain. In Ecuador, private and government initiatives have helped aid the transport of cacao to export and offered financial support to farmers.

"Single-origin chocolate put Ecuador on the map," says Santiago Peralta, co-founder of the organic chocolate company Pacari, which was launched as a way to preserve

Ecuador's native Arriba Nacional cacao variety.

"It would be simpler to buy from a few of Ecuador's biggest producers, but it's the smaller, Indigenous farmers who contribute to the world's genetic bank of cacao," Peralta says. "That's what we want: to preserve species and learn about varieties. We have 20 years of work ahead to understand the flavours alone."

SMALL SCALE, BIG FLAVOUR

Cacao, the tree from which chocolate is derived, is part of the pungent, densely sprouting life force in the rainforest-carpeted slopes of Santa Rita, a small community in Ecuador's northwestern Amazon. It's a place rich with potential—if you have the know-how. Increasingly, Ecuador knows how. In recent years the ways in which farms in Santa Rita produce cacao have changed dramatically.

"Fifteen years ago, people thought fine Ecuadorian cacao was lost," Peralta says. "Farmers were paid poorly to produce bulk cacao for mass export—a mono-crop culture. But, as you can see, this is the biodiverse mother lode of indigenous crops."

Ecuador has become famous for world-class, gourmet chocolate made from native cacao varieties (top); One doesn't have to leave Quito (bottom), the nation's vertiginous capital, to savour sublime chocolate.



JESS KRAFT/SHUTTERSTOCK (PLAZA), KABKYNET STUDIO/SHUTTERSTOCK (CACAO)

At Santa Rita's *maloca* (community headquarters), village head Bolívar Alvarado offers an infusion of *guayusa*, the caffeine-laden plant that fuels Ecuador's Amazon population and flavours some of Pacari's chocolate bars. Alvarado leads tours of the *chacra* (horticultural plot), where visitors learn about Amazonian life and its native cacao, with short treks through rolling tracts of forest and informal tastings of the finished product.

"When we started in 2002, my wife, Carla, and I had no connections or clue about farming," said Peralta. "We learned alongside the farmers, designing equipment to better ferment and grind cacao beans. It gave us a real understanding of how production affects flavours. We began getting fantastic quality." Pacari developed the country's first tree-to-bar, single-origin organic chocolate, among other acclaimed offerings.

Single-origin chocolate is often synonymous with sustainability and fair trade. But, in cacao-producing countries worldwide, this can often be far from the case. You may be able to trace the chocolate back to a single country, region, or even specific farm, but farmers may still find themselves paid poorly for hard-won produce. Even fair-trade agreements can leave farmers working with subsistence income; base market rates rarely fund investments in improving quality, yield, or crop diversity.

Ecuador originated the world's most prized varieties. While some large factory-style corporate farms are better known for growing such monocultures as CCN-51, a cacao variety somewhat infamous for its high yields and poor flavour characteristics, it's the smaller, often Indigenous farmers working in profitable direct trade agreements with craft chocolate producers that have spurred a resurgence of lost varieties.

SINGLE-ORIGIN CHOCOLATE IS OFTEN SYNONYMOUS WITH SUSTAINABILITY AND FAIR TRADE. BUT, IN CACAO-PRODUCING COUNTRIES WORLDWIDE, THIS CAN OFTEN BE FAR FROM THE CASE



This saw the renaissance of the superlative Arriba Nacional—an endangered cacao variety known for its low-yield, but incredibly rich, fruity, and floral flavour profile. The variety is what put Pacari on the map (though today they produce chocolate from many other varieties as well). The success came thanks to the company’s partnership with 4,000 Ecuadorian farmers, including Santa Rita’s Alvarado. “We cut out the middleman,” said Santiago. “We traded directly with small producers back at a time when no one was talking to these guys. They were the losers in the big export game—and no one was talking vegan, biodynamic, or organic. We paid above market price, offering an incentive for quality control and loyalty.”

A SWEET NEW ERA

With the international explosion of interest in high-grade, single-origin chocolate, so too comes a boom in the number of cacao aficionados keen to explore Ecuador’s bean-to-bar luxury chocolate makers.

According to a 2019 report from the United Nations World Tourism Organization, Ecuador saw the world’s biggest increase in visitor numbers—up 51 per cent with 2.42 million visitors, compared to 1.6 million visitors the previous year. While the pandemic has greatly diminished these numbers, the nation is eager to rebound—with chocolate as an incentive.

Ecuador’s remarkable biodiversity springs from its epic landscapes, which range from tropical Amazon basin to snow-capped Andes to sandy Pacific coastline. One of the best ways to explore its varied topography is by bus. Wanderbus offers a variety of hop-on hop-off itineraries in which travellers can call in at small communities in the high-altitude Páramo ecosystem to try a home-cooked three potato soup, or stop off in the Amazon rainforest to learn about medicinal plants and cacao production.

You don’t have to leave Quito, the nation’s vertiginous capital, to savour sublime chocolate. A number of chocolatiers, including Pacari, offer expert-led tastings at boutique cafés in the hippie-chic La Floresta neighbourhood.

But true adventurers head straight to the source. Under the palm-thatched roof of Santa Rita’s maloca, visitors can learn about the range of flavours—Andean rose; blueberries from near Cotopaxi volcano; lemongrass from the tropics—characteristic of the world’s best chocolate.

“Those flavours are great for pairings: passion fruit goes brilliantly with Zacapa rum; guayusa goes well with sherry,” says Peralta, offering a sample of raw chocolate with Cusco salt and nibs. After washing it down with a peaty malt, you’ll be reminded of cacao’s scientific name: *theobroma cacao*, the food of the gods. ■

ELCATSO/SHUTTERSTOCK



Be it Quito’s colourful outdoors (top) or Cuenca’s bustling markets (bottom)—Ecuador offers a wide range of experiences. Facing page: An old man dries cocoa beans.



FOTOS595/SHUTTERSTOCK (MARKET), IRENE/SHUTTERSTOCK (DANCE)

A Traveller's Eyes in the Skies

DRONES GAVE US SOME OF THE MOST STIRRING IMAGES OF A PANDEMIC YEAR, WATCHING OVER OUR BEREFT PUBLIC SPACES AND PLACING THE EVERYDAY IN A STARK, NEW LIGHT

BY SANJANA RAY

A row of neon-blue boats dock at the bay in Uppada, Andhra Pradesh.

PHOTO COURTESY
RAKESH PULAPA



From Hong Kong-based photographer Tugo Cheng's "Water & Earth" series, labourers work a wheat field in Yunnan, China.

PHOTO COURTESY
TUGO CHENG

It was only when aerial photographs depicting the eerie, near-abandoned streets of India's usually hectic cities began to go viral on the internet that the far-reaching fallout of the pandemic became resonant.

While many urban residents were ensconced in their 'silos' pounding away at sourdough or exhausting Netflix libraries, drone cameras zipped through the pin-drop silence outside; chronicling unforgettable scenes of empty flyovers and bus stops, shuttered shops and even a lack of stray dogs on roads, becoming real-time storytellers of our neighbourhoods' surreal transformation.

LOCKDOWN FROM THE TOP-DOWN

Drone photography is hardly a new phenomenon in photography, yet the prolonged lockdowns observed in several places throughout this year perhaps presented a uniquely fertile ground for it to shine. And photographers, along with videographers, took to the conditions with zeal.

A viral drone video of Mumbai under lockdown in April has racked up 6,242,325 YouTube views till date. At this year's international Drone Photo Awards, held in September, an entire category was devoted to 'Life under COVID-19.' The winning shot, a picture of Israelis in Rabin Square, Tel Aviv, protesting while also social distancing summed up the collective dystopia of 2020.

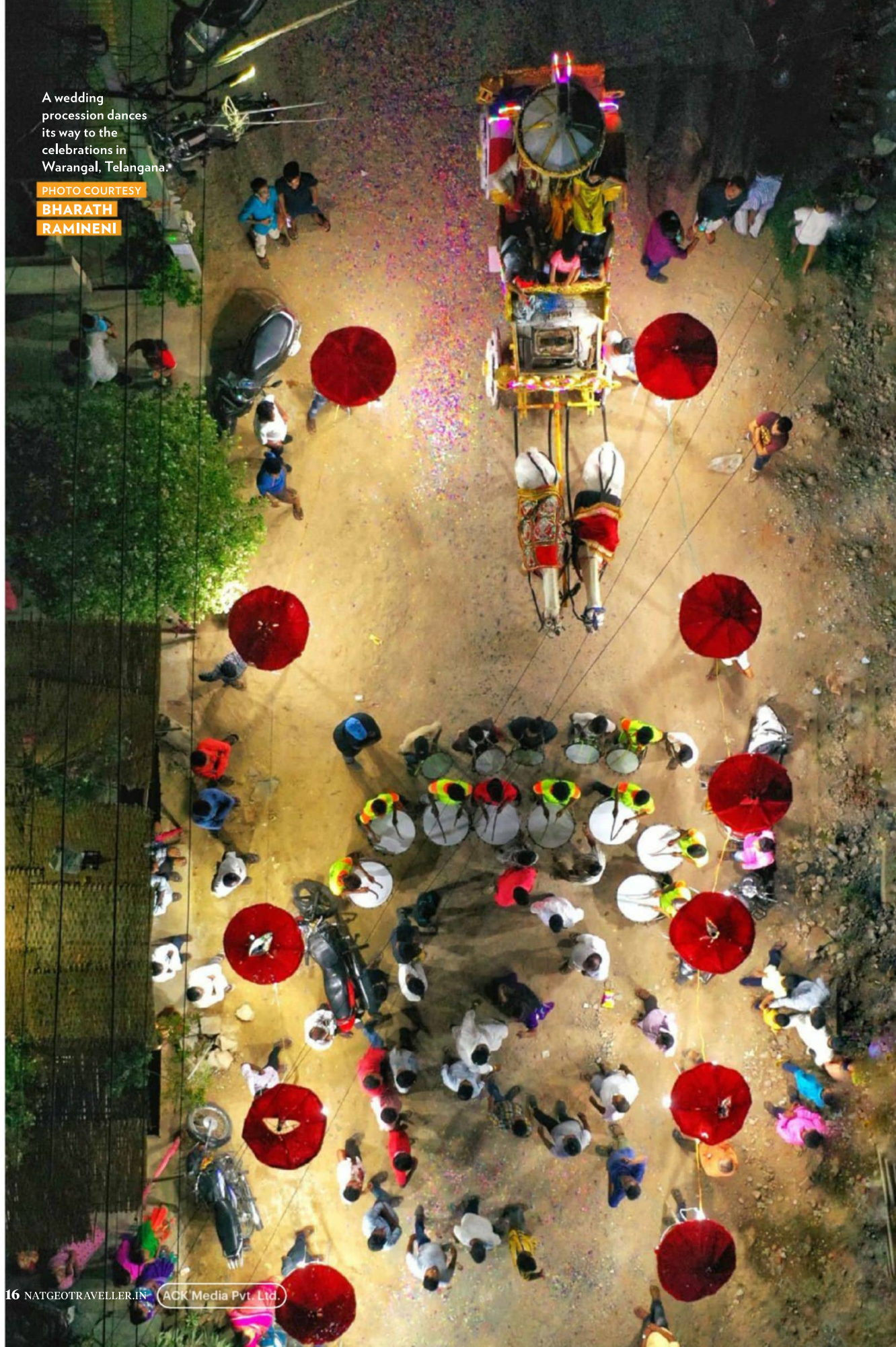
Statistically, it's difficult to pinpoint a high rate of drone usage this year because of how many of them still remain undocumented in India, but, anecdotally at least, there has been a visible ubiquity of photographers favouring drone shots. Some of it came down to an obvious and heightened need to observe safety yet there were other catalysts at work.

"What has happened during this pandemic period is that a lot of cheaper drones have become available on the market. These drones, which are available online on platforms such as Amazon India, are being offered at a discounted price, and packaged with a warranty card and an official receipt," says Archisman Saha, a Kolkata-based photographer, whose drone footage of the city under lockdown was picked up by several news portals.

A quick search on Amazon India backs up Saha's claim. Non-premium drones are available

A wedding procession dances its way to the celebrations in Warangal, Telangana.

PHOTO COURTESY
**BHARATH
RAMINENI**



The ancient hill fortress of the Kondaveedu Fort in the Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh beckons to the curious traveller.

PHOTO COURTESY
RAKESH PULAPA



for as less as ₹13,000. Saha, who bought his premium drone—DJI's Mavic 2 Pro—for over a lakh last year, adds that India's recent dispute with China has also limited the number of drones available in the market. This sends many buyers to black markets in places such as Metro Gully in Kolkata to buy second-hand models.

Other than drones now becoming more accessible to buyers, drone photography during the pandemic months has also been fuelled by a desire to document the mundane in a new light. For Hong Kong-based photographer Tugo Cheng, the lockdown period presented him with an opportunity to capture the many changes brought on by the pandemic—in everyday life.

"In Hong Kong, tourism has taken a massive hit due to the pandemic. As a result, the tourist coaches all remain in their depot, stationary and halted. I've lived in the city for more than 30 years, but I've never seen them at a standstill. So I decided to document this unique event through my drone," he says.

Cheng, whose photo of pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong was the runner-up in the 'People' category of the 2020 Drone Awards, prefers to shoot top-down to offer a wide-span view of the space he's capturing. His latest series "Water & Earth" include roving dispatches from China of humans working in harmony with nature, from labourers working on salt flats and rice terraces, to city-goers lounging on the many layers of urban developments. For Cheng, the additional bonus of drones was he could cultivate the pursuit without navigating crowded spaces.

A SENSE OF 'SPACE' TRAVEL

Cheng also believes drones offer a well-rounded sense of a certain space—a responsibility, which he says, lies with every travel photographer.

"For instance in my picture 'Freedom,' I have attempted to capture how Hongkongers spend their weekends in and by the water: some opt for pool lounges and parties, while others jump in the Victoria Harbour and swim. Through this shot, I've tried to tell a story about both the place and its people."

Rakesh Pulapa, an award-winning travel photographer based out of Rajahmundry, Andhra Pradesh, agrees with Cheng. "As a travel

Parul Sharma picks rooftops over drones for new perspectives to her aerial shots. Her photo of the Gateway of India (pictured) Mumbai, offers a frame not seen before.

PHOTO COURTESY
PARUL SHARMA



A panoramic view of Valparai, a hill station in Tamil Nadu offers sweeping views of lush green vistas flanked by the Koolangal River.

PHOTO COURTESY
RAKESH PULAPA

“I’VE NEVER SEEN TOURIST COACHES IN HONG KONG AT A STANDSTILL.
SO I DECIDED TO DOCUMENT THEM THROUGH MY DRONE”

photographer, I want to come back from a trip with that one shot that gives me that sense of place—one which goes into my travel memory and makes its way into my life’s album,” he says.

Pulapa, who is also a winner of the 2020 Drone Awards, says that it is imperative for travel photographers to do their homework before visiting a new space for drone photography or videography. For instance, he says, he would choose destinations like Bali and Vietnam to visit over Dubai or Jordan, due to the strict laws regarding drone photography that abound in the latter places.

“I pick tourist-friendly destinations like Vietnam and Bali, which do not create much of a hassle regarding drone photography. Which is fortunate, because aerial shots of Vietnam’s architectural delights or Bali’s turquoise beaches are priceless to say the least.”

That being said, he warns, it is important to adhere to a country’s laws regarding drone photography on any photographic expedition.

For avid travellers confined indoors, drone photography was a much-required shot of hope this year. Travel photographers were already capturing stunning, wide-ranging panoramas long before the pandemic, but the need to provide this wholesome, wide-ranging sense of space to those starving for a taste of foreign shores gained momentum because vicarious journeys took on a special significance.

SEEING IS EVERYTHING

On May 2, the Ministry of Civil Aviation of India released an official notification greenlighting drone activities that helped manage the COVID-19 crisis, primarily in the field of surveillance, photographic documentation and public announcements.

Palapa, too, had been approached by the state government authorities for this purpose. In the past, he worked in collaboration with Andhra Pradesh’s tourism and forest departments, flying his device through hundreds of acres of dense mangroves and bushy forests—spots which are otherwise inaccessible to most.

The government’s fast-track approval of drone activity pertaining to the pandemic is surprising, considering that Indian drone regulation laws are not at all overarching. Under the current law, drone operators are expected to enlist their drones on the DGCA website. Once the operator uploads their

Aerial photography has been on the rise across the world put on pause during the lockdown. Parul Sharma captured cyclists facing page (top and bottom) tearing through a deserted National Highway 8 in Delhi.

PHOTO COURTESY
PARUL
SHARMA

Tugo Cheng documented tourist coaches (bottom) docked at depots in Hong Kong.

PHOTO COURTESY
TUGO CHENG

personal information on the site, they will receive an Ownership Acknowledgement Number (OAN), using which they can upload all the information around their respective drone. They will then be granted a Drone Acknowledgement Number (DAN).

While the possession of an OAN and DAN doesn’t officially confer the right to operate a drone in India, the absence of the same can lead to penal action against the operator. As Saha puts it, it’s just better to have these in hand, should the police or other authorities raise any doubts.

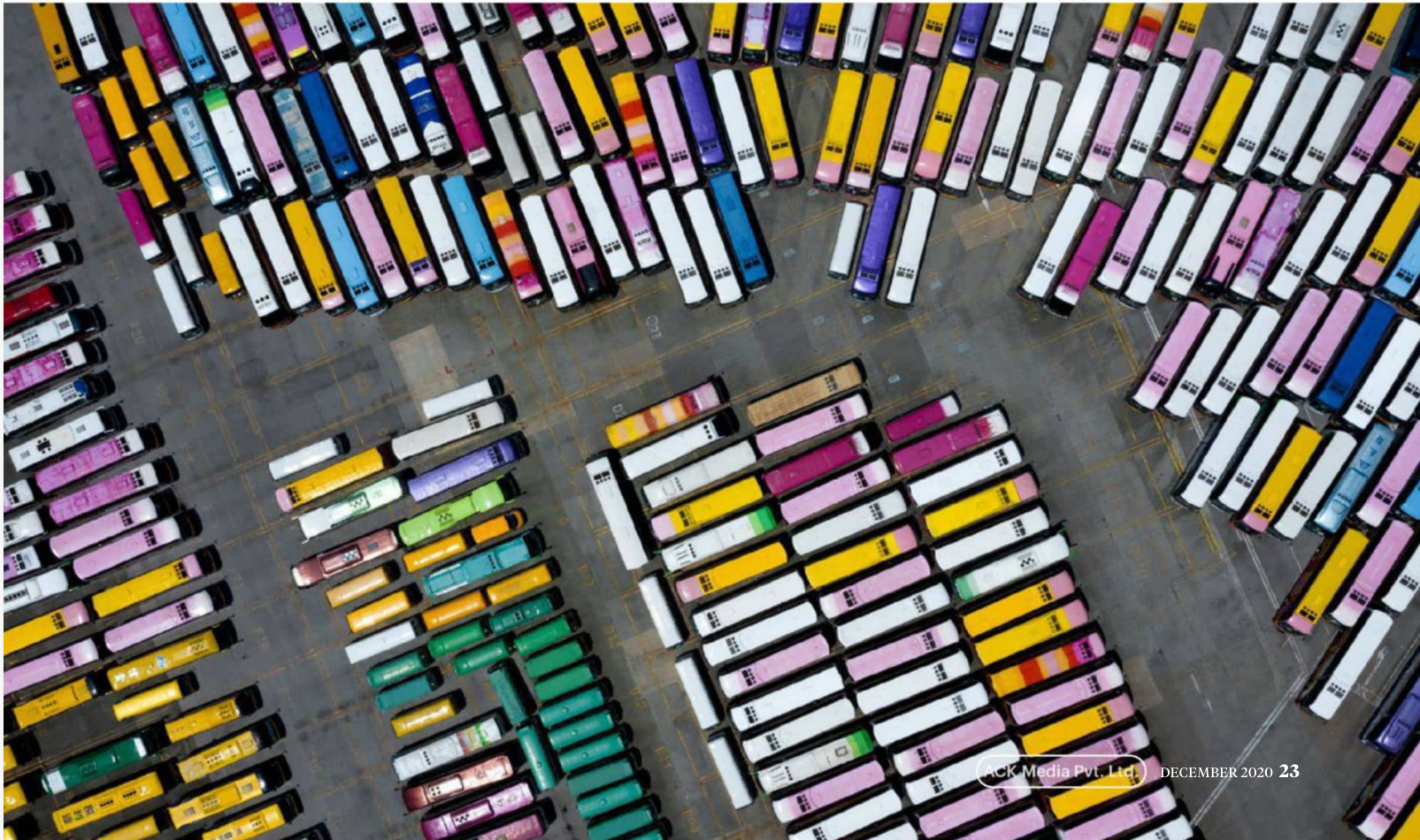
Bharath Ramineni, a photographer in Warangal, Telangana, was savvy enough to loop his local police officials in, before he embarked on his passion project to document his hometown.

“Not too many people know about Warangal’s historical, architectural and cultural delights. By presenting my city through these shots in a whole new light—I hope to share its beauty with the rest of the country, and luck willing, the world,” he says.

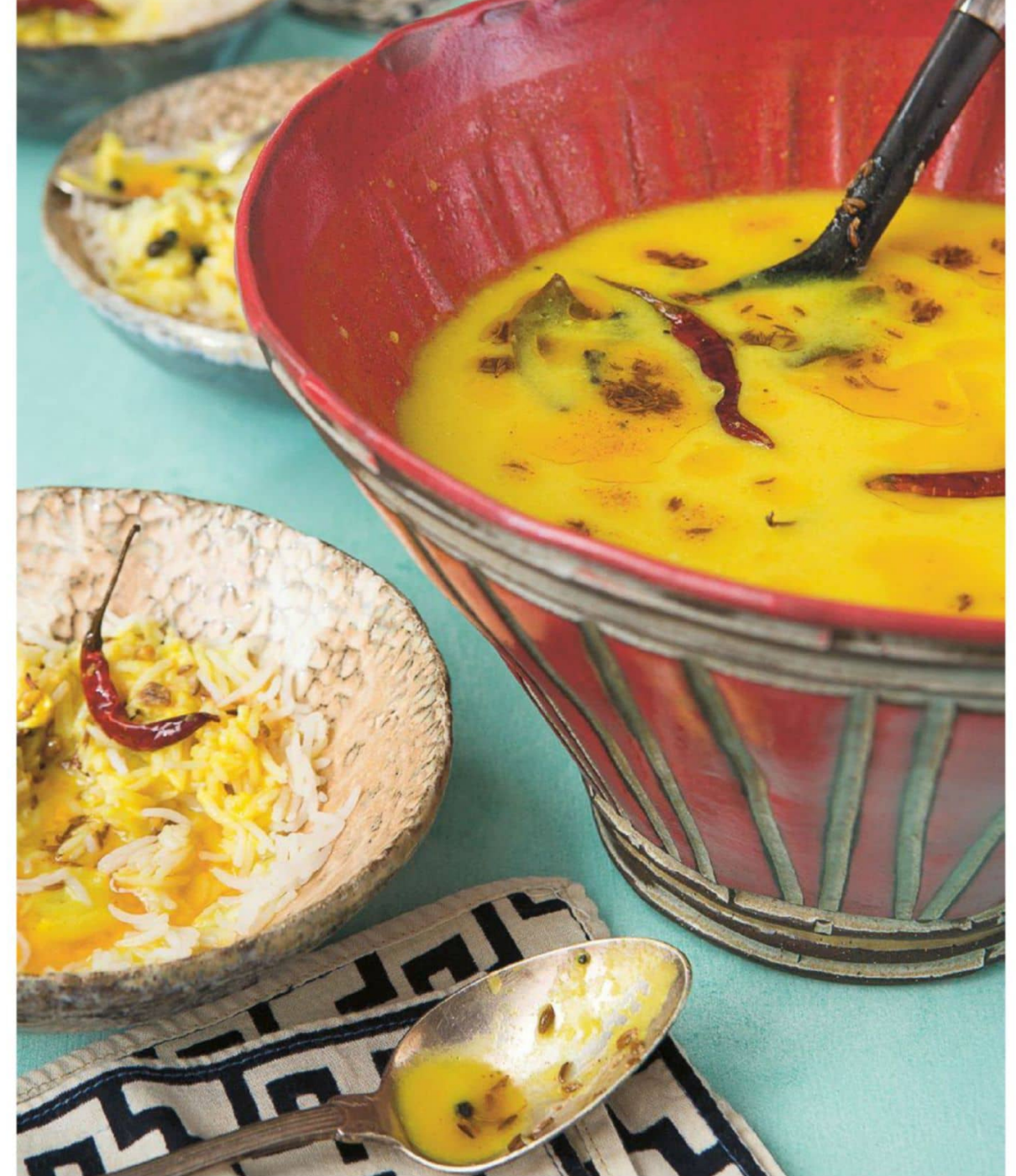
THE CASE FOR OLD-FASHIONED TRAVEL PHOTOS

Some photographers adhere to the notion that using drones to document places has its limitations. Parul Sharma, author of *Dialects of Silence: Delhi Under Lockdown*, explains why she didn’t use a drone for the aerial shots she featured in her book that was released this year. Sharma’s work portrays Delhi’s vacant soul during the lockdown months through intimate portraits, many of them top-view shots clicked from rooftops across the capital, her favourite one being the terrace of the Statesman building. She says, “When it comes to imagery, there’s geometry and architecture to take into consideration. I’ll quote photojournalist Robert Capa when I say: ‘If your pictures aren’t good enough, you aren’t close enough.’ And I suppose that’s why I choose to take my aerial shots from the top of a building instead of a drone, because to me, every single specimen in my shot needs to be documented.”

Despite the debate, however, there is no denying the role drone photography has played in these testing pandemic times. From documenting the deserted reality of our swarming cities to translating the inaccessible beauty of one faraway place to another in unexpected ways, drone photography ensured that even when our world stood motionless, the skies hummed with life. ■



Priya Krishna is a champion of Indian food, and has pushed for the diversity of the cuisine to take its rightful place in the mainstream. Facing page: The food writer swears by a humble bowl of *kadhi*.



Priya Krishna: Cheering on *Indian-ish* food

THE INDIAN-AMERICAN CULINARY WRITER DISCUSSES ALL THINGS CULTURE, CUISINES AND BEING THE PERSPECTIVE SHE WANTED TO READ

BY POOJA NAIK

PHOTO COURTESY: MACKENZIE KELLEY (FOOD); PHOTO COURTESY: EDLYN D'SOUZA (PRIYA KRISHNA)

I tune into *The New Yorker's* cooking segment on their YouTube channel. Priya Krishna, the host, is walking viewers through her Mum-perfected recipes, while revealing the secret behind her favourite Indian food hack—*chhonk*. Cumin seeds sputter in hot oil as Krishna weaves in narratives of her heritage. Growing up in Texas as an Indian-American child of first-generation immigrants, she admits to not being proud of her culture. After an incident where she was told that her lunchbox smelled like rotten curry, she made her Mom pack peanut butter and jelly sandwiches all through her schooling. “It wasn’t until I became a food writer that the shame started to melt away,” says the 2021 Forbes Food & Drink 30 Under 30 list awardee.

THE ROAD PROVIDES/SHUTTERSTOCK



During her trip to Delhi last year, Krishna stopped by at the iconic Karim's for a feast.

Today, the 29-year-old seeks comfort in the fact that the food shaming served a larger purpose of getting her to embrace her brown-girl soul, and eventually landed her a cookbook deal. Krishna's body of work—which has featured in prominent food magazines and YouTube channels—leads a new generation of global writers pushing for Indian food to take its rightful place in the mainstream. Her writing is rooted in her culture, and approachable in method, which is perhaps what makes her voice so uniquely relatable.

I catch up with the writer the day preceding Diwali, while she quarantines at her apartment in Brooklyn. Edited excerpts from the phone interview:

You grew up in an Indian household in Texas. How has the cultural amalgamation influenced your palate?

What was really amazing about living in Texas was that it is a melting pot of a lot of different immigrant communities. So, I was getting to experience Mexican, Vietnamese and Korean food, all while living in Dallas. While the food I had at home was rooted in Indian cooking, my Mom was always eager to try other cuisines and incorporate that into what she was cooking. We were always excited to discover ingredients that were new to us, you know. We were always experimenting with sriracha, chilli crisp, or dumplings.

Has your Mum's style of cooking rubbed off on you?

Yeah, for sure. I mean, my Mom only learned to cook Indian food when she moved here. So, her cooking is very much a product of the U.S. And it's both resourceful and creative. I would say I brought a lot of the same spirit to my own cooking, too.

You associate your dad's version of dal with comfort food, and once Instagrammed about cooking it two weeks in a row. How do you think the recipe fares at any food joints in the U.S. as compared to your father's kitchen?

Honestly, I don't really eat a lot of dal when I go out. And I wonder if that's intentional. Because dal is my comfort food, the food that I associate with my home. Once I've had too many restaurant meals or after I have been travelling for a long time, I come home and I make dal. I feel like my parents' dal is a singular thing. I just haven't tried that many versions of them.

Do you eat a lot of Indian food when you go to restaurants?

I try to eat in a really diverse way, you know. And I try to support as many Indian chefs as I possibly can. But I would say I don't focus particularly on Indian food while going out to eat. I cook a lot of Indian food at home. And when I'm in Dallas, I feel like the best restaurant is my mother's kitchen (*laughs*).

What in your view are some of best food cities in America with a vibrant and thriving culture?

One of my all-time favourites is San Antonio, Texas. I



absolutely love how vibrant and diverse the food community there is. It is just a couple hours from the border with Mexico. So, you can get amazing, unapologetic Mexican food. I loved the carnitas (literally meaning "little pieces of meat") at Carnitas Lonja. I also had the chance to go to Brownsville, also in Texas, which is a little town right on the border between the U.S. and Mexico. Just experiencing all of these regional styles of tacos was awesome. I loved Vera's Backyard Bar-B-Que, which is known for their barbacoa.

Where do you head to chow down on some of the best street food in New York?

I feel like I eat at a lot of sit-down restaurants. Unfortunately in New York, a lot of restaurants have closed. A handful remain open for indoor dining or takeaways. I haven't been to a restaurant since February, but when I did go out to eat, I loved visiting Haenyeo in Brooklyn for Korean fare, Superiority Burger in New York for vegetarian meals, and Uncle Boons (which sadly did not survive the pandemic) for Thai food. But I guess my favourite street food is the Tacos Morelos. They have a restaurant in Jackson Heights and they also have food trucks all around the city. I probably eat at that food truck more often than in any of the restaurants.

You seem to really like Mexican food. I am from Texas (*laughs*).

In the initial phase of the lockdown, Krishna learned to perfect the recipe of *kaju ki barfi*—her favourite Indian mithai. Facing page: New York's food trucks are a quintessential culinary experience of the city's many offerings.

INDIAN FOOD IMAGES/SHUTTERSTOCK

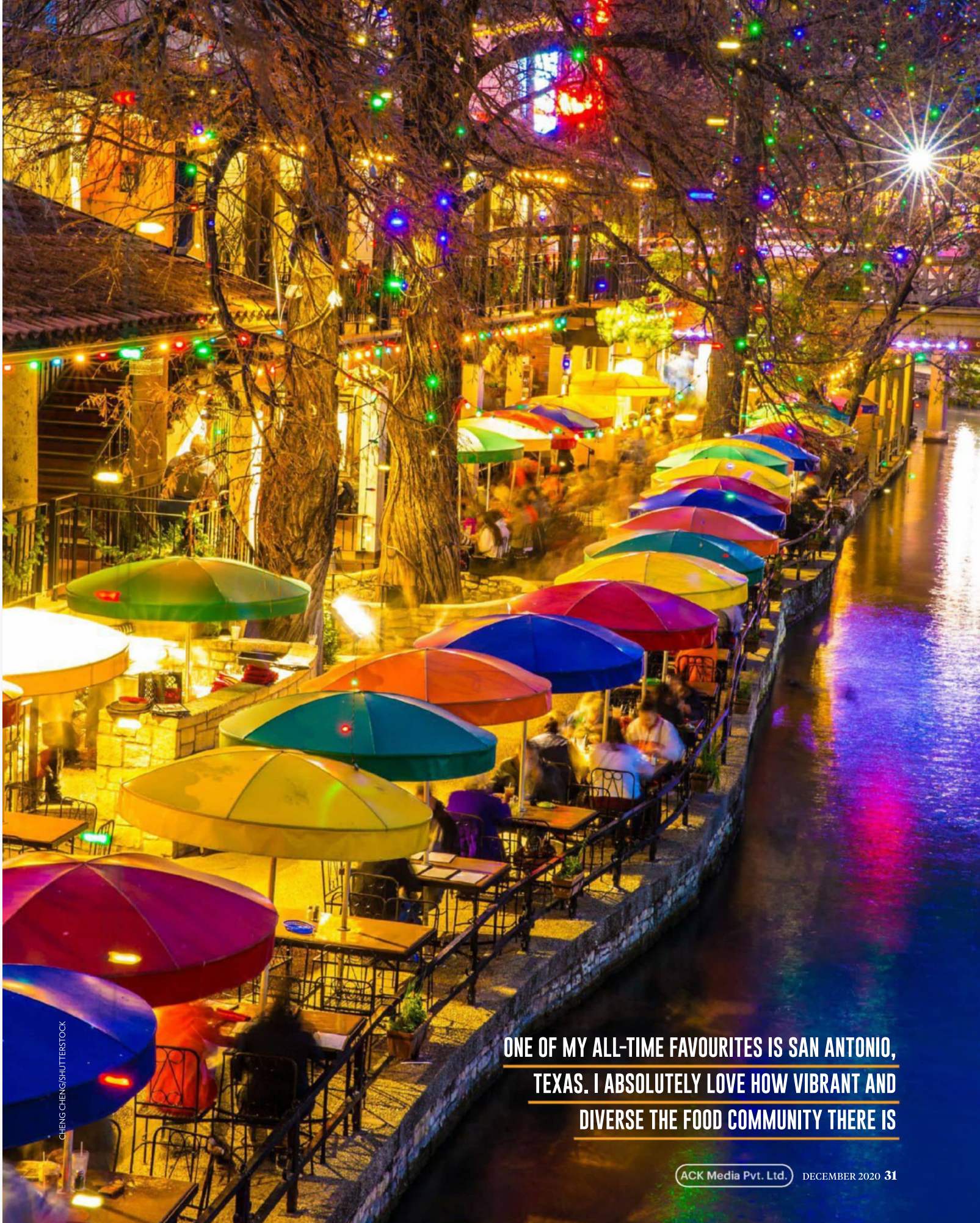


LUCIANO MORTULA - LGM/SHUTTERSTOCK (TAXI), DWI LABS INCORPORATED/SHUTTERSTOCK (FOOD TRUCK)



San Antonio, Texas (facing page) is famed for its unapologetic Mexican food (pictured).

LUNAMARINA/SHUTTERSTOCK



CHENG CHENG/SHUTTERSTOCK

ONE OF MY ALL-TIME FAVOURITES IS SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS. I ABSOLUTELY LOVE HOW VIBRANT AND DIVERSE THE FOOD COMMUNITY THERE IS



ROBERTO GALAN/SHUTTERSTOCK (BROWNSVILLE), NIKOLAY ANTONOV/SHUTTERSTOCK (ISTANBUL)

Do you think traditional cuisines, especially from the East, are whitewashed to a certain degree in the West?

I think traditional or authentic has a lot to do with what you grow up with. When I think about how foods from the East have been codified in the West, a lot of it has been done by white writers. So, in that sense, yes. In a lot of ways it has (been whitewashed). But I'm also really proud to see the number of South Asian and East Asian American writers who are taking the pen and telling their own narratives in their own words. So, that's really exciting to see.

When you travel, what kind of a foodie are you?

I usually spend several weeks asking friends that I trust for recommendations. I'll make a list of great restaurants that I must go to. But you know, I'm not really here for the fine dining restaurants. I'm here to go where I can get the most delicious bite.

Is there a food destination that is high on your list?

I've always wanted to go to Istanbul in Turkey.

Can you think of a region specific cuisine that does not get talked of enough?

In America, I don't think that most people are as educated as they should be about knowing the difference between regional Indian food. The sheer diversity of the cuisines—whether it is Rajasthani, Gujarati or Goan food—is pretty remarkable. I feel like I'm constantly learning and there's still so much to learn. I'd love to see more regional Indian restaurants in the States.

How often have you visited India, and what are some of your fondest memories in the country?

I have relatives based in Delhi and a few hours outside of Delhi. Usually when I'm there, I'm going from family to family. But when I was able to go last year after a long, long time, I got to experience the capital as a tourist. I spent a whole day in Chandni Chowk wandering down the gullies, having dahi *bhalla*, golgappa and parathas. I went to Karim's, which I'd never been to before. My stomach was like a bottomless pit. (*Laughs*). That was such a wonderful day.

Your book, *Indian-ish*, is an homage to modern Indian cooking, and is peppered with family recipes alongside suggestions to substitute ingredients readily available in America. Which are some of your favourite dishes?

I love *kadhi*. That's one of my all-time favourites. Then there is the saag feta, which I probably had to make a hundred times last year when I was on book tour. It is so delicious that I never got sick of that dish. A wonderful fall dish that I can think of right now is my Mom's *kaddu*. It has lots of lime and brown sugar.

Facing page: Brownsville (top) in Texas—adjacent to the border with Matamoros in Mexico—is one of Krishna's favoured American cities for its regional styles of tacos; Istanbul in Turkey (bottom) is high on the Indian-American writer's food destinations to visit.

Community feasts are an integral part of the holiday season. However, with the virus still looming, and with most restaurants having shuttered or adapting to outdoor dining, the celebrations this year look rather solitary. How does the future of the restaurant industry look to you?

I think the next year is going to be incredibly hard. It will require the customers to value labour, and it will require the government to understand that restaurants are one of the biggest employers in the country. In order for the restaurant industry to become more sustainable, I'd like to see the government invest in the restaurant industry itself and for restauranteurs to invest in their staff.

The pandemic and subsequent lockdowns have resulted in an explosion of 'at home' food experimentation and culture. What has that journey been like for you? Anything that you have enjoyed learning to cook or recreate?

I absolutely love desserts, but I'm not into making them. Although, I will say the one dessert that I taught myself to make and am really proud of is *kaju ki barfi*. It's my all-time favourite variety of mithai. I spent the first part of the lockdown with my family, and one day we decided to make the sweet. It's a bit technical, but it's rather easy since there aren't that many ingredients. We found silver foil that my Mom had brought from India in the 1980s to go on top of the barfi. That was cool. And then we went to drop it off at all my uncles' houses.

You've earned bylines in some of the most prominent publications including *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*. What advice would you give to budding food writers?

I would say that persistence is important and it goes a long way. Many a times I was able to get assignments just by following up. It's also about quality over quantity. I had a tendency to fire up as many pitches or applications as possible. But I feel the best strategy for me was to focus on a few places or a few ideas that I was really passionate about. I would go all in and be a bit more thoughtful about those rather than send a blitz of emails.

Your exit from *Bon Appétit* brought to light some of the underlying issues of racism and wide wage gap. As a journalist of colour, what reformations would you like to see in food criticism and writing?

I would like to see more people of colour in leadership positions who have decision making powers. Because I think, until we see more diversity and equity at the top, we're not going to see a trickle-down effect.

What is next on the work front for you?

I will continue to contribute to a bunch of different publications from *TASTE* to the *New York Times*. I am also working on a cookbook with chef David Chang. There are a few other projects and I'm excited about what's ahead.

PRIYA KRISHNA'S HOME-COOKED TREAT



SPINACH AND FETA COOKED LIKE SAAG PANEER

Here's a familiar Indian takeout staple—saag paneer—but with the ingenious substitution of large cubes of feta for paneer (a bit of inspiration from our 1998 family trip to Athens and near continuous consumption of Greek salads, which in Greece are just... salads). The first time I tasted it, it was like when I discovered you can do the nine times table with your fingers in third grade, which is to say, I just about lost it. Not only is my Mom's spinach gravy infinitely more complex than that of most versions of saag paneer (I have been known to steal sauce swipes out of the pan when my Mom isn't looking), but I also love the way the feta gets all soft and pseudo-baked, soaking in all the spices and melting a little into the gravy. And then you hit the pan with the oiled-up cumin and red chilli powder, which add a whole other level of richness. I would go as far as to say that I now want all future saag paneer I eat to be with feta. And I bet you will, too.

SERVES 4

- 1/4 cup + 2 tablespoons ghee or olive oil, divided
- 2 tablespoons coriander seeds
- 2 green cardamom pods, or 1/4 teaspoon ground cardamom (freshly ground is best)
- 1 small yellow onion, diced into 1/2-inch pieces
- 1 tablespoon roughly chopped fresh ginger
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 450 grams fresh baby spinach (10 to 12 cups)
- 1/2 tablespoon fresh lime juice (from about a quarter of a lime), plus more if needed
- 1 small Indian green chilli or serrano chilli, roughly chopped
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 170 grams feta cheese, cut into 1/2-inch cubes (a little over 1/2 cup)
- 1 teaspoon cumin seeds
- 1/4 teaspoon asafetida (optional, but really great)
- 1/4 teaspoon red chilli powder

1 In a large pan over medium heat, warm, 1/4 cup of the ghee (or oil). Once the ghee has melted (or the oil begins to shimmer), add the coriander and cardamom and cook, stirring, for about 2 minutes, until the seeds start to brown. Add the onion and cook until it is translucent, 5 to 6 minutes. Stir in the ginger and garlic and cook for 1 minute more. Add the spinach and cook until it is just wilted, 4 to 5 minutes.

2 Remove the pan from the heat and add the lime juice, green chilli, and salt. Let cool for 5 minutes. Transfer to a blender and blend into a chunky paste. Return the spinach mixture to the same pan and set it over low heat. Stir in 1/2 cup water, then gently fold in the feta, being careful not to break up the cubes. Cook for 5 to 7 minutes more to soften the feta slightly and allow it to soak up some of the spinach sauce.

3 While the feta cooks, in a small pan or butter warmer over medium-high heat, warm the remaining 2 tablespoons ghee (or oil) for 1 minute. Add the cumin seeds. As soon as (emphasis on *as soon as*—you don't want your cumin to burn!) the cumin seeds start to sputter and brown, about 1 minute max, remove the pan from the heat. Immediately add the asafetida (if using) and red chilli powder.

4 Pour all of the ghee (or oil) mixture into the spinach and feta once that is done cooking. ■

Adapted from INDIAN-ISH: Recipes and Antics from a Modern American Family © 2019 by Priya Krishna with Ritu Krishna. Photography © 2019 by Mackenzie Kelley. Reproduced by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. All rights reserved.

PHOTO COURTESY: HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT
FACING PAGE PHOTO COURTESY: MACKENZIE KELLEY



A recipe of spinach and feta cooked like saag paneer (pictured) appears in *Indian-ish* (facing page), Krishna's cookbook.

THE COVER

STORY



38

PHOTO COURTESY: MOTORHOME ADVENTURES

MINDFUL TRAVEL FOR 2021

THE YEAR OF THE PANDEMIC HASN'T BEEN
KIND. IT TRAPPED THE ELDERLY COUPLE
THAT SAVED ALL YEAR FOR THEIR ANNUAL
JAUNT TO DARJEELING IN A STATE OF
ANXIOUS HOUSE ARREST. IT STOPPED THE
ASPIRING WRITER FROM DISCOVERING HIS
NEXT NOVEL AT A GOAN SHACK. FOR ALL
THE TRIPS AND TENDER MOMENTS LOST,
WE LOOK AT 2021 WITH A LITTLE HOPE, AND
LOTS OF KINDNESS. COME NEW YEAR, MAY
TRAVEL HOLD HANDS WITH COMPASSION
FOR FELLOW MEN, NATURE, ENVIRONMENT,
AND OURSELVES. BE IT **CONSCIOUS
WILDLIFE TRAVEL, TRAVEL TO REVIVE SMALL
BUSINESSES, OR JUST TRAVEL TO RESTORE
AND RECONNECT** WITH YOUR JADED
SELF, WE EXPLORE THE MAGIC OF MOVING
GENTLY—ACROSS 8 CATEGORIES.

For 2021, our
hope for travel is
sustainability, and
travel which leaves no
trace and supports
local enterprise.

MINIMAL FOOTPRINT

"IN 2021, LET THE HIMALAYAS BREATHE AND
PLAN SOME LOW CARBON FOOTPRINT ADVENTURES
IN THE SAHYADRIS OF MAHARASHTRA."

—Tanay Gokhale

Take the ultimate sustainable trip in
the Sahyadris—carry your tent and
sleeping bag, and go by cycle, and
ensure you leave no plastic behind.



BENGALURU MAKES CAMPING COOL

KARNATAKA

The good thing about living in Bengaluru, apart from the ease of living and generally low metropolitan rent, is the plethora of trekking and camping options just outside of the city; and, there's always room for more. Opened in July 2020, Rusty is a shipping container converted into a guesthouse, just 90 minutes from Bengaluru. Inside the Ragihalli State Forest, the seriously adorable tiny home is built from an upcycled container that was originally made in Bermuda, reveals Arsh Bansal, architect and owner of the stay. It's camping—but with creature comforts like a well-equipped kitchenette where you can cook your own meals, a hot shower, and a bed. Arsh even sends a playlist to guests to keep them company on the drive to Rusty. Inspired by Ruskin Bond's *Rusty Runs Away*, a weekend here is for those who want a break from city life with no AC and no Wi-Fi; there's a copy of the book inside the cabin. This is an intimate stay with a capacity of three people—and is pet-friendly.

Travelling with friends? At Linger's several campsites around Bengaluru, you won't be short of options. Whether it is staying in tents at Devarayanadurga Hill, in a completely organic, 15-acre active farm, a permaculture forest-farm, or in a jungle camp, there are several places you can go to, depending on what you want to do. Linger prides on 'do nothing' getaways, and while that is an option, one can do everything from trekking, kayaking, cycling, birdwatching, and learning about vermicomposting and rainwater harvesting, depending on where you stay. Social distancing and sanitising is reportedly ensured at the stays, and if you're travelling in a big enough group, you can book the entire stay. Plastic-averse, the properties are very strict about city garbage going back to the city. Go for a rustic weekend with hearty local cuisine, with or without cellular network. —**Lubna Amir**

Doubles from ₹3,700 not including meals and taxes, tenpy.co/rusty. Doubles from ₹5,250 inclusive of taxes, all meals and activities, linger.in; rates vary as per property and accommodation; all campsites are pet-friendly.

PHOTO COURTESY, LINGER (BOTTLES, PILLAR); FACING PAGE PHOTO COURTESY, TENPY (CAMP); PHOTO COURTESY, LINGER (CAMP)



Linger's many campsites around Bengaluru (facing page, bottom) are run by local villagers who handle the cooking and operations, and no plastic is a must (facing page, top); Rusty (top) is a shipping container stay 90 minutes away from Bengaluru.



Walk back in time with a visit to Chettinad's many historical, and intricately built, mansions.

BALAJIRIVASAN/SHUTTERSTOCK

CHERISHING CHETTINAD'S CULTURAL MANSIONS

TAMIL NADU

Born in Burma and carved in Karaikudi, the grand teak doorways and pillars that span the 70-plus, manor-filled villages peppering the plains of Chettinad in Tamil Nadu exemplify the delightfully eclectic nature of the region's illustrious trading past. The interiors of the *nattukattai* (land fortresses)—that have seen better years since the erstwhile merchant community's 19th-century halcyon days—may even feature Italian marble, Belgian mirrors, English Raj motifs, Hindu murals, and the possibility of Japanese, Spanish, or Athangudi tile work. The azonic flow of the structures is equally intriguing, from the *valavu* (open-air courtyards) surrounded by *patalai* (the covered and raised section of oft residential courtyards) to the ornate and welcoming *thinnai* (the front verandah).

While you can still step inside many of these manors for a modest entrance fee or opt for a heritage stay—most notably in the Karaikudi, Kanadukathan, and Athangudi areas—their beauty can also be safely appreciated from village lanes, where you can spot colourful domes, grand stucco depictions of Gajalaxmi, and painted reliefs of East India Company officers guarding Hindu deities from the outdoors. Experiencing the manors from a social distanced vantage point still affords visitors the opportunity to enjoy the structures' juxtaposition of a rich heritage melded with a strong architectural attachment to home. Just remember, it's recommended to self-drive from village to village (most a short distance from each other), as well as carry plenty of water and sunscreen or parasols.

—**Julian Manning**

Chettinad is a 75 km/1.15 hr drive and a 100 km/2 hr drive from Tiruchirappalli and Madurai airports respectively, two of the closest accessible by car.

LANGZA, A DISTANT DREAM

HIMACHAL PRADESH

We would wake up to puffs of smoke curling up from the chimneys of whitewashed homes. On their roofs were stacks of hay drying. The mornings were filled with the sweet soundtrack of local Spitian language and the bleating of goats and sheep. A hilltop statue of Lord Buddha kept vigil, as it has for years.

My partner and I were on the edge of nowhere, in the little village of Langza (population 150 souls), located at 14,500 feet in a remote fold of Spiti valley in Himachal Pradesh. On most mornings, after a breakfast of flatbread with butter and *chaza* (butter tea), we would join the kids nearby as they skipped around lush chequered fields. Once we hiked up to nearby Fossil Hill to spot marine fossils embedded in rock, and later trekked up to a wind-lashed mountaintop dhaba for chai.

The owner of our homestay would join us over dinner in his traditional dining room, warmed by a bukhari and colourful throw rugs. He told us that in Langza, most villagers live as they have done for hundreds of years: tending fields, looking after their livestock, and preparing for the bone-chilling winters, stocking up on food and animal hide blankets. The villagers own small parcels of land and homes with eco-friendly dry toilets. They eat what they grow—barley, peas and potatoes—while livestock provides meat, milk, and wool. Later, the night would bring millions of stars to the backyard for us to gaze at for hours.

In the high-altitude wilderness of Langza, one is compelled to tread softly.

—**Gustasp and Jeroo Irani**

The village of Langza is an hour's drive from Kaza, Spiti's largest town. Although Kullu Manali airport lies 250 km/5.5 hr west of Kaza, Chandigarh airport (500/12.5 hr south) has better connections and is more convenient. Lara's Homestay in Kaza offers comfortable rooms (doubles ₹4,500, including meals).

Tread softly in Langza, a remote village in the high reaches of Spiti.



AMIT KGS/SHUTTERSTOCK

A GRAFFITI RUN

INDIA

Spend a bit of time in any of India's major cities, and odds are you've seen some snazzy street art. From pop culture murals and gargantuan graffiti tags to stylish stencil-work and political commentary, India's five largest cities—in addition to many parts of Goa—offer a host of street art hotspots, most of which have been extensively documented and enjoyed. However, a burgeoning wave of street paintings has also found a home in many of India's smaller cities.

Prayagraj (Allahabad) hosts a flurry of bold colours and sadhu symbology in its rapidly growing selection of street works (check out Civil Lines/Devotion Street); Puducherry offers a taste of trendy stencil graffiti and retro caricatures in the old French Quarter, along with a smattering of bright portraits in the old Tamil Quarter—the laid-back vibe of these illustrations all add to the territory's borderline insouciant charm (check out Rue Dumas/Canal Street); the jumble of walls that frame the contours of Fort Kochi's winding seaside lanes are painted with incredible portraiture, be it local faces or the wry smile of superstar Mammooty, paired with rather technical and abstract works featuring everything from panthers to planets (check out Mattancherry Spice Market); in Hyderabad, an entire neighbourhood of modest residences has been transformed into what seems to be an al fresco gallery of impressive proportions (check out Maqtha Art District); and Hampi's small Hippie Island boasts a bounty of graffiti which somehow found a place near a touristy strip in the centre of the UNESCO site.

—**Julian Manning**

ELENA ODAREVA/SHUTTERSTOCK (GRAFFITI ARTS)



Several cities across India boast of graffiti bold and beautiful, some with social messages and some without, but all exemplary, like these in Fort Kochi.



Stay in treehouses and go trekking, swimming under waterfalls and fruit-picking, all in Spice Valley Camp's expansive 200-acre site.

PHOTO COURTESY, SPICE VALLEY CAMP

IN KODAI COUNTRY

TAMIL NADU

In Kodaikanal's lush green hills and valleys, treks and camps are not unheard of. But for city folk, they hold a charm like no other—especially when that includes camping in orchards. Spice Valley Camp, a 200-acre organic farm, gives guests the chance to trek amongst passion fruit, avocado, orange, coffee, cinnamon, and pepper plantations, relax by a waterfall (yes there's a private one!), and stay in a tree house (or a tent or stone cottages). "Our camp is run entirely on solar energy, and we employ locals who know these Palani Hills like the back of their hand," says Balu, owner of the camp. "When going on guided treks, take the long route (almost 10 kilometres), and you'll get a chance to learn about every (regional) medicinal plant and herb along the way," he adds. While in non-pandemic times there

were over 50 people here at one go, now the maximum occupancy is 25 people to ensure absolute safety.

This is also ensured at The Pear County, a farm stay and campsite where no more than 30 people can lodge at one time, less than half of the total occupancy. At this operational pear orchard, guests between mid-May and August, can pick luscious pears straight off the trees and munch away freely. Other months, you'll find everything from potatoes to cabbage blooming on the farm—and on your plate. Adventure seekers can use mountain bikes and go off-roading, or go for long treks in the property. Packing your bags already? Me too. —**Lubna Amir**

From ₹1,400/day per person inclusive of a tent stay, all meals and trekking, taxes extra; rates for the Treehouse start from ₹5,000, and it can house up to 15 people; spicevalleycamp.com. From ₹1,750/day per person for a tent and meals, inclusive of guided treks and mountain bike rentals, taxes extra, thepearcounty.com.



PHOTO COURTESY, SPICE VALLEY CAMP

TRY CYCLE: FOUR TRIPS FOR SUSTAINABLE SOJOURNS

ETHICAL ADVENTURES IN THE SAHYADRIS

MAHARASHTRA

While the Himalayas up north work like a charm for adventure seekers, overcrowding in recent years has deeply altered the region. In 2021, let the mighty peaks breathe and plan some low carbon footprint adventures in the Sahyadris of Maharashtra—sans the tourists and hefty bills. Sandwiched between the Deccan plateau to the east and the Konkan strip to the west, the picturesque range is ideal for short cycling and trekking getaways.

Take on the challenge of the Panshet Parikrama, the 160-kilometre cycling expedition organised by RAW Adventure Solutions over two days in January. Bike through winding mountain passes and dirt tracks en route the Panshet reservoir near Pune, and then camp overnight by the lakeside. The highlight? A morning bike ride along the rim of the reservoir, just as the first rays of the sun set Panshet's waters aglitter.

Alternatively, mountain junkies can scramble their way up the peaks of Kalsubai and Alang-Madan-Kudang, hike through the craggy water-carved canyon at Sandhan Valley, or scale the sheer cliffs of medieval hill forts like Dhodap and Harishchandragad for a no-frills trekking adventure.

Every year, RAW also organises an epic, nine-day road trip from north to south Maharashtra through the Sahyadris. Panoramic views of the Arabian Sea stretch out to your right as you weave in and out the densely forested hills—an introduction like no other to the bounty of the Sahyadris and Konkan. —**Tanay Gokhale**

RAW Adventure Solutions' Panshet Parikrama is an overnight trip starting from ₹3,500 per person. Trekking trips start from ₹1,200, and the road trip from ₹20,000, rawadventuresolutions.com.

Panshet Parikrama is a 160-kilometre cycling expedition in Maharashtra's Sahyadris, organised by RAW Adventure Solutions.



PHOTO COURTESY: AMIT KULKARNI

INDORE CYCLES FOR CHANGE

MADHYA PRADESH

After winning the ‘Cleanest City of India’ tag several years in a row, residents of Indore have set their sights on a new tag: being the most cycle-friendly city in the country. While there were always enthusiasts and randonneurs (expert long-distance cyclists) in the city, the pandemic has given rise to a cycling frenzy—with people of all ages and genders hitting the road, and a long waiting in stores to purchase cycles. “The last time I cycled was when I was in school, and now I cycle over 50 kilometres in one go,” says Farzana Arif, owner of Titles N Chapters library, Indore. “We meet someone new on the road every day, and my favourite is the group of older gents who wave us on and cycle with name stickers which include their emergency contact details and blood group,” she adds. There are also several virtual cyclathons, and the city administration is encouraging citizens to make the two-wheeler a part of everyday transit with the #Cycles4Change movement. As the lockdown didn’t allow for public transport, the 12-kilometre-long BRTS (City Bus) special corridor running through the city became a cyclist and jogger hotspot. Now, cyclists have permission to stay in the lane till 8 a.m. Other cycle-friendly morning trails include Ring Road, MR 10, and the Bypass. And on weekends? “You’ll find several groups, including ours, hitting scenic spots such as Tinch Falls, Mhow, Hathyari Khoh and Mohadi Falls,” signs off Arif.

—Lubna Amir

GOA’S E-CYCLING EUPHORIA

GOA

From the spice plantations of Ponda to the mesmerising manors and cottages of Nerul, Goa is loaded with great cycling routes. The state’s network of ideal rides, however, often have the drawback of a few high-density junctions, dotting the otherwise sparsely traversed lanes. In these brief sections of high-traffic areas, wearing a mask is especially advisable. Yet, while huffing and puffing in the coastal heat, wearing a mask for a decent spin can be rather taxing for the average cyclist, which is why e-cycles offer a helpful solution. When bottlenecks occur, riders can let the machines take over, relaxing their level of exertion so that donning their mask does not encumber their ability to navigate the traffic safely.

Purchasing such a machine can be expensive, which is where b:live, an e-cycling rental operation that has partnered with the Goa Tourism Development Corporation (GTDC), comes in handy. The outfit has implemented pandemic protocols to adapt their 15 Goa-based, e-cycling experiences and tours, so that their services now include entirely socially distanced private tours with masks and other hygiene protocols. Their trails will lead you to velveteen villages in Benaulim or Cavelossim, heritage houses of Old Goa, and hush-hush food haunts along the bay. The e-bikes feature GPS systems, and one charge can last a bike up to a distance for 50 kilometres at a top speed of 25 kilometres on the throttle—suffice to say, they are a breeze on the breathing.

—Julian Manning

Tours from ₹2000, www.blive.co.in

PUDUCHERRY: A PEDALLER’S PARADISE

PUDUCHERRY

Puducherry is no stranger to compliments. Kind words are often spoken of its fine, French fare and fusion, or of its de rigueur, teak doorways that dam floods of courtyard greenery grasping at the pavement. But a true treasure, one that lives in both the old Colonial and Tamil quarters, is its cycling culture. It seems almost everyone in this coastal cradle is capable of riding a cycle, and many do so on a regular basis. From daily commuters to an exceptional number of groups and tours, the people of Pondi pedal, perhaps more avidly than the citizenry of anywhere else in India.

Enthusiasts can freewheel from the fishing village of Kuruchikuppam to Old Lighthouse on Beach Road and the New Lighthouse tucked in the Duppuypet locality for an easy four kilometre coastal jaunt. Another relaxed ride is a two kilometre sally to the 16th century Sri Kamakshi Amman Temple (Hindu Quarter) to Meerapalli an early 18th century mosque (Muslim Quarter) to the late 18th century Immaculate Conception Cathedral (French Quarter). Those looking for a more ambitious ride should venture to Auroville, explore the area’s bucolic ochre trails, and bike back to Pondi, a minimum of a 30-kilometre ride.

Beyond the charm of its languorous lanes, the most pleasing aspect of the area may be the visibly equal ratio of female-to-male cyclists. There, saris are often bought to match the colour of one’s ride. The sight of draped pastels rippling past deco buildings of similar brilliance is not some exotic happenstance—it’s *comme il faut* of this corner of the world, a common occurrence in a beautiful place that begs to be bicycled. —Julian Manning

Facing page: Puducherry’s roads (top) have an almost equal ratio of male to female cyclists; The pandemic has gotten residents of Indore (bottom) to dust off their cycles and take to the streets.

JULIAN MANNING (LANE), ARAVIND TEKI/SHUTTERSTOCK (CYCLISTS AT SUNSET)



Smaller businesses have been hit the hardest in the pandemic, and travel to these locales help in supporting them.

TRAVEL TO REVIVE SMALL BUSINESSES

“PLUNGED INTO ECONOMIC DISTRESS IN 2020, CHARIDA’S CHHAU-MASK-ORIENTED ECONOMY AWAITS A NEW LEASE OF LIFE. SO SNAG SOME PAINTED VISAGES, JUST THE DRAMA FOR STAID URBAN SPACES.”

—Sohini Das Gupta

Go local and let the smaller surf clubs around the Karnataka and Tamil Nadu coast guide you to your first surfing experience post lockdown.

CATCHING THE BIGGEST WAVES

KARNATAKA & TAMIL NADU

Post pandemic, going small is the kindest thing you can do for the environment and local businesses. Miss the waves? Head to Mulki, an unassuming town near Mangalore in Karnataka known for its temples, delicious coastal fare—and pristine beaches.

Mantra Surf Club on Mantra beach offers water sport activities such as stand up paddle, water skiing, and jet skiing. But surfing remains the most popular even amid the pandemic. The site doubles as a homestay and is ideal for a workation—it adheres to hygiene guidelines, has hired more instructors certified by the International Surfing Association, and has switched to serving meals in paper cups and leaf plates.

In Tamil Nadu, make a splash at Kalliyalay Surf School (KASS), located halfway between Puducherry and Auroville. Run by brother-duo Juan and Samai Reboul, KASS recently reopened and prioritises safety. They offer only private lessons (also for non-swimmers and kids under 14) at Serenity beach.

If you're up along the east coast, head to Mahabalipuram. Golden sand and big waves await at Mumu Surf School, and the beloved on-site Sandy Bottom Cafe, is slated to reopen along with a homestay in early 2021.

Further up north en route to Chennai is Ocean Delight Surf School in Kovalam beach. Founded by Appu, who hails from a local fishing village, the establishment won at the Covelong Point Festival in 2019. An on-ground property is being built here, and the club enlists locals to eliminate plastic and waste with their Beach Ocean Life initiative.

— **Pooja Naik**

At Mantra Surf Club, private and group lessons for a batch of up to 25 people from ₹6,600 per person for 3 days; doubles stay from ₹3,900, surfingindia.netsurfingindia.net. Kallialay Surf School offers private lessons for ₹2,000, www.surfschoolindia.com. At Mumu Surf School private and group lessons for a batch of two from ₹1,200, mumusurfindia.com. Ocean Delight Surf School offers private and group lessons for a batch of five or more people from ₹1,200, oceandelight.org.



PHOTO COURTESY: TUOPHEMA TOURIST VILLAGE

A TASTE OF TUOPHEMA

NAGALAND

A 40-kilometre drive from the Naga capital of Kohima lies Tuophema, a quaint hill station that affords visitors the rare opportunity to experience the Angami way of life. Established in 2001, Tuophema Tourist Village is designed, conceptualised and managed entirely by the local community—a model of sustainable tourism in the state. Visitors can choose from 12 cabins that resemble traditional Angami houses, sample local delicacies like pork with bamboo shoot and fried tapiocacooked over an open fire, and chug home-brewed rice beer, a regional speciality.

Also on offer are guided tours through the village, hiking trails through the surrounding hills and a walk through Tuophema's 500-year-old history at the village museum. The best season to visit is from October to April, but the village is especially abuzz around late February, when it hosts *Sekrenyi*. This annual Angami festival is the perfect way to witness Angami rituals and discover the colourful myths and legends that characterise their animist faith. —**Tanay Gokhale**

To plan a visit, write to mezhuviz@gmail.com or call +91-8132869654/7085651017.

PHOTO COURTESY: TUOPHEMA TOURIST VILLAGE

Enlivened by indigenous festivals and traditional architecture (facing page), the village of Tuophema in Nagaland is the beautiful home of the Angami tribe.

KHADI HAUNTS FOR COOL JAUNTS

INDIA

The hardest hit during the pandemic lockdown were perhaps the khadi artisans of our country. As soon as travel opened up, I headed to the village of Heggodu, halfway between Shimoga town and Jog Falls in Karnataka. Rural Karnataka's charms apart, the sparsely populated village without any known COVID cases, felt extremely safe.

Originally famous for its drama school Ninasam, Heggodu is where some of the biggest stars of South Indian cinema trained. Nowadays, it is also a centre for reviving traditional handloom textiles founded by the Gandhian guru Prasanna. While Charaka, the women-led industrial cooperative society headquartered in the village, runs some dozen shops called Desi in South India, the advantage of visiting them in Heggodu is that one gets to see how the clothes are made. Several village boutiques sell both ready-to-wear and cloth-by-the-metre at affordable rates, so I upgraded my wardrobe with fine pure cotton shirts, patterned with natural colours from vegetable dyes, in the process contributing, however marginally, towards the safekeeping of the craft. It doesn't hurt that India's naturally 'air-conditioned' cloth is organic, sustainable, and on most days provides a cool look—quite literally. The Malenadu village also hosts an array of cultural festivals (set to be revived in 2021), and is dotted with simple eateries serving local fare such as spicy puliogare and melt-in-the-mouth bhajjis.

Another Karnataka khadi haunt worth a dekho is the village of Melkote, 50 kilometres/1.5 hours north of Mysuru. The village has pilgrim's inns, old-fashioned vegetarian canteens, and the famous shop Janapada Khadi, run by the Hosa Jeevana Dari Training Centre, which has a knack for organising interesting workshops on their pretty campus. Across the border there is Dastkar Andhra in Secunderabad, Telangana, another NGO rallying for grassroots handloom. —**Zac O'Yeah**

Heggodu lies a 370 km/8.5 hr KSRTC bus ride away from Bengaluru. Book a stay in advance at Charaka's Shramajeevi Ashram. The nearest hotels are 9 kms away in Sagar.



Painted faces of gods, tribal folk, mythical beasts and other colourful characters lend a splash of drama to the masks of Charida, used in Chhau dance (facing page).



FINDING PURULIA'S MAGIC MASKS

WEST BENGAL

Hugging the Ajodhya Hills in Purulia district, amid rust-red soil and ponds packed with water hyacinths lies the 'mask village' of Charida. On most days, *Chhau* mask artists pore over papier-mâché moulds, natural dye, and flashy beaded ornaments in front of the workshops that line the home of 300-odd families. Some specimens are modelled after Hindu gods, while others mimic snarling mythical beasts, but they are all used to tell stories from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* through the tribal dance form, Chhau. Most find their way to the dance troupes that wander village to village during Chhau season (March-June), and a smaller number travel to handicraft fairs in Kolkata, where they're reimagined as edgy wall accents.

Plunged into acute economic distress in 2020, Charida's economy awaits a new lease of life. When appropriate, tour the village on foot as the mask men offer a default live stream of the esoteric process. Snag a generous haul of painted visage to add drama to staid urban spaces. Miniature gift item to hulking pièce de résistance, they're priced between ₹100-5,000. —**Sohini Das Gupta**

Charida is 300 km/6 hr drive from Kolkata. Nearest railway stations are Purulia and Balarampur, but the nearest big junction is Purulia, 61.5 km/2 hr away. Accommodation is available in nearby Khairabera and Muruguma regions. Enquire in advance at local stays, www.palashbitan.com.

RETRO REDOLENCE AT PANJIM'S ROSMOS

GOA

On Panjim's Corte Oiteiro Road, next to the Patto footbridge, Rosmos Typewriters offers a sense of nostalgia many new businesses in the capital are desperate to capture. Step inside, and you leave the sun-baked street for a dimly lit, tinkerer's paradise. Polished, vintage typewriters from around the world line the walls, waiting for someone to pick them off the undusted shelves and try out their well-greased keys. To do that, however, you'd have to remove the array of tiny tools and ink-stained rags that cover the rickety wooden furniture of the workshop.

Since the 1970s, the owner, Mr. Rosmos, has been tuning-up and selling typewriters. At its peak, Rosmos' enterprise would service thousands of machines a year, but these days, their allure does not extend beyond the virtual realms of Pinterest and Instagram, for most, making 100 repairs per annum a new reality for such a business. Still, Rosmos, now a one-man-team, has diligently stuck with his passion, caring for the contraptions that have given him a long and well-spent career. Unless you call the number painted on his storefront, there's a good chance Mr. Rosmos won't be in the shop, so schedule an appointment, and pick up an old tool that makes you feel young as you *tip, tip* away.

—**Julian Manning**

Find Mr. Rosmos at Corte Oiteiro Road, opposite Vilstar Ventures and near old income tax office, Panjim, Goa 403001.

TRAVEL IN A PERSONAL BUBBLE

Road trips in campervans offer the ultimate luxury in pandemic times: travelling across the country with a core group, with minimal outside interaction.

"IN A PANDEMIC, IT DOESN'T GET SAFER THAN TRAVELLING IN A PERSONAL VEHICLE—WHETHER TO ESCAPE OR TO SEE FRIENDS AND FAMILY ACROSS THE COUNTRY. TRAVELLING IN A CARAVAN OR A CAMPER VAN IS THE PERFECT, MOST EXCITING SOLUTION."

—Lubna Amir

EXPLORING THE EVERGREEN BHANDARDARA MAHARASHTRA

The pandemic might have foiled travel plans to distant destinations, but don't let that stop you from exploring regions closer to home. Bhandardara—located on the banks of the Pravara River—is the perfect getaway from major cities in Maharashtra, and ideal for a nature retreat.

Whether you drive down from Mumbai or Nashik, the roads are flanked by verdant Western Ghats. And what better time than monsoon to cover the stretch when

undulating hills are draped in a veil of mist? There is no dearth of activities to choose from at Bhandardara: the most popular is the trek to Kalsubai peak, Maharashtra's highest at 5,400 feet. The four-hour route (one way) is relatively easy, but you'll need a good operator who fixes steel railings, chains, and ladders at sections where the climb is rather steep. Alternatively, a trek to the 400-year-old Ratan Fort (also a part of the Kalsubai range), is a lesson in history—it is believed to have been conquered by Shivaji. While you're there, stroll by Arthur Lake and Wilson Dam for lovely vistas.

Bhandardara lies in Maharashtra's Ahmednagar district and is a 165 km/4 hr drive from Mumbai and 75 km/2 hr drive from Nashik. —**Pooja Naik**

Just a few hours from Mumbai, trek Maharashtra's highest peak, Kalsubai peak in Bhandardara, or stargaze at night.



SATISH PARASHAR/SHUTTERSTOCK

THE ROADIE RAGE INDIA

In a pandemic, it doesn't get safer than travelling in a personal vehicle—whether to escape or to see friends and family across the country. Why not make that journey comfortable, and reduce contact with other people at the same time? Travelling in a caravan or a camper van is the perfect, most exciting solution. There are now several outfitters across India which give you the flexibility to rent one of your own for journeys. While some like Motorhome Adventures have been around for 25 years and offer campervans which can seat from two to 11 people, there are also newer companies like LuxeCamper, which started in June 2020 and haven't looked back.

"We have been gladdened by the response from people ever since we launched," says a representative from LuxeCamper. Currently, they have built two luxurious caravans powered by solar energy with leather seating, a kitchenette, and modern toilets, which can seat up to four people. You can book an existing trail or customise one as to your preference. The only caveat? They're solely available for lucky Bengaluru peeps as of now, since all the tours start from there.

Fret not, for Motorhome Adventures have a range of customised caravans on offer, and itineraries taking you to Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, and even Ladakh, and they're open to their caravans travelling anywhere in the country (their longest rental has been 540 days!). All caravans are fumigated and sanitised before each trip, with a separate cabin for drivers. The vehicles come fully-equipped with



kitchenettes and bathrooms, but the size and comfort facilities vary—and there will soon be a caravan with an in-built jacuzzi for those who want to live king-size on the road.

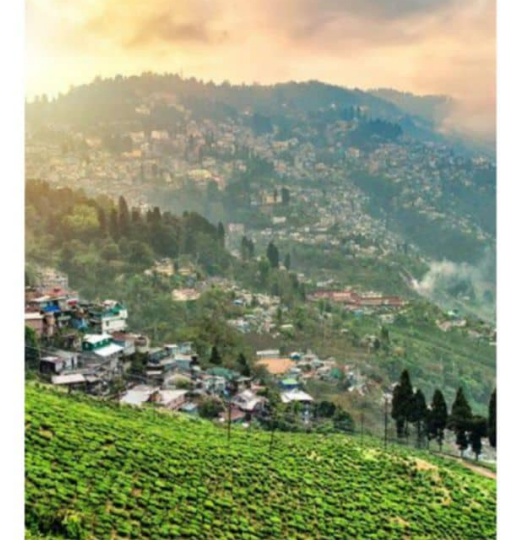
—**Lubna Amir**

Camper vans come under heavy vehicle license in India, and neither company offers a self-drive rental. luxecamper.com; starting from ₹20,000 a night for a caravan inclusive of all meals. motorhome.co.in; starting from ₹10,000 a night for a two-person caravan, rates vary as per package with per kilometre options also available.

Camper vans range from those which have a capacity of two to bigger ones which can sleep 11, and can be as luxurious or rustic as you have the budget for.



Follow long-standing Kolkata tradition by travelling to hilly Darjeeling, and lovers of road trips can traverse the over 600 kilometre journey by car.



THE LONG ROAD TO DARJEELING

WEST BENGAL

Come winter and Kolkattans—especially overexcited Bengali families—don their monkey *tupis* and mufflers and set forth on what is an almost annual pilgrimage: a visit to the hilly climes of Darjeeling. At any other time, you'd have taken the hour-long flight between Kolkata and Bagdogra or the overnight train (Howrah to Jalpaiguri). But in these times, form your pod and take the long road to Darjeeling—the lush green views, broad highways and roadside dhabas and *cha* stalls won't disappoint.

Once at Darjeeling, the surreal sight of the Kanchenjunga basking in the sun, the flurry of shoppers prowling the subsidised markets at Mall Road, breakfast at Keventers, and baked goodies at Glenary's, make for a wholesome experience. Early risers can tread to Tiger Hill—the highest point in Darjeeling—to catch a dazzling sunrise along the Kanchenjunga, and if you're lucky Mount Everest too. A visit to the Queen of Hills in the winter means a significant drop in temperature, so don't forget to carry your fat share of woollens! —**Sanjana Ray**

A road trip from Kolkata to Darjeeling typically entails a 16.5-hr drive over 614 kilometres. A popular route is Krishnagar–Malda–Islampur–New Jalpaiguri–Siliguri–Kurseong (Hilly Road)–Ghoom (Hilly Road)–Darjeeling (Hilly Road).

CONSCIOUS WILDLIFE TRAVEL



“AS WITH ANY INTERACTION WITH NATURE, THE ONLY WAY TO DO IT IS TO BE MINDFUL OF NOT TAKING UP MORE SPACE THAN ABSOLUTELY REQUIRED.”

—Sutirtha Lahiri

A PHOENIX CALLED PANNA

MADHYA PRADESH

When you next go tiger-spotting, go to Panna Tiger Reserve, the inspiration behind *The Jungle Book*.

The tale of Madhya Pradesh's Panna is one of deep lows and a flush of success—it's a story of a wildlife sanctuary that started with 40 tigers at the turn of the century, and a decade later lost them all to hunting, poaching or natural deaths. In the last decade, forest officials worked closely with the NGO Last Wilderness Foundation (LWF) to rehabilitate tigers in the reserve. LWF worked with the Pardhi tribe, originally hunters, to train and re-educate them, opening up other avenues for work, which do not involve hunting the tiger. Today, they lead several walking tours in Panna's buffer zone. The reserve now has 54 tigers, which has only been possible due to conservation efforts.

These very efforts have been lauded globally, and the tiger reserve is now a UNESCO Protected Biosphere Reserve as of this year, making it the twelfth such in India. The tiger state of India has justifiably held on to its crown. —**Lubna Amir**

Panna Tiger Reserve is a 290 km/8 hr drive from Kanpur, and 385 km/9 hr drive from Bhopal.

SUSHIL KUMAR/CHIKANE/SHUTTERSTOCK
FACING PAGE: SRINIA CHOWDHURY/CLICKSHUTTERSTOCK



Panna Tiger Reserve's (left) tiger conservation programme has received global applause.

Just a few kilometres from Delhi, go gull-spotting in the Yamuna.



YOGESH GUPTA (SHUTTERSTOCK (BOAT)), M. ROHITH BHAKAR (SHUTTERSTOCK (BIRDS))



LAUGHING WITH THE GULLS OF YAMUNA

DELHI

Flying over a calm winter Yamuna, the gulls produced sounds of immense diversity. While some were nothing more than harsh, irregular *chack-chacks* and some resembled a cat's purring, other calls sounded a lot like human laughter. As if the entire white-vested platoon was guffawing at some great absurdity of life! Our early-morning guide classified the calls as the "drawn-out *peeeeeer*," "hoarse *kra-ah*," "deeper *kuke*," and "nasal *gagaga*." As one of them called out, the entire lot responded with an increasingly intense orchestra of 'laughter,' and soon, our flock of eight odd gull-watching humans joined the cackle.

This scene was playing out not at some far-flung exotic birding destination, but within the city limits of our smoggy Indian capital. Wazirabad or Yamuna Khadar in Delhi, popular among local birders, bears witness to the section of the river where it is at its cleanest. One can easily travel there from any part of the city, preferably between 6-9 a.m. or 4-6 p.m., and pick a vantage point to witness—nay, partake in—this off-key laughter club.

As with any interaction with nature, the only way to do it is to be mindful of not taking up more space than absolutely required. Don't visit in large groups; remember to not litter the waterfront; and maintain chink-proof silence, so the gulls can be the only ones to break it. You won't regret it. —**Sutirtha Lahiri**

Wazirabad is 17-20 km from the city centre. Best months to go gull-spotting are October-March. You can go alone or with one of the many city-based birding groups.

BEDAZZLED AT BORI SAFARI LODGE

MADHYA PRADESH

The newest kid on Madhya Pradesh's wildlife block, Bori Safari Lodge, opened its doors in February 2020, and the pandemic hit Indian shores. Picking up the pieces, the eco-luxury lodge reopened, with COVID-19 protocols in place, in October 2020. Just 150 kilometres from Bhopal, the property holds the distinction of being the only one in Bori Wildlife Sanctuary, which is one of India's oldest forest reserves and borders the more famous Satpura National Park. With

eight rooms and seven-and-a-half-acres, the staff and guests both maintain necessary distancing with ease. And there's always the lure of the tiger. The property has been receiving a steady stream of guests from the more drivable hubs of Indore and Bhopal, revealed Aly Rashid, Director, JehanNuma Wilderness. Go for the tiger, but stay for the village walk to learn more about the neighbouring villages, and how they've settled here after a voluntary relocation done to promote and protect the wildlife in the area. —**Lubna Amir**

Doubles from ₹22,000 inclusive of all meals and taxes; safaris start from ₹8,000; jehannuma.com/bori-safari-lodge.



The Bori Safari Lodge offers the unique luxury of being the only wildlife lodge in the Bori Wildlife Sanctuary.

Be one with nature in Assam's Orang National Park, on the banks of the Brahmaputra river.



WOOD-SIDE
WONDERS AT ORANG
NATIONAL PARK

ASSAM

On a trip to Orang National Park on the northern banks of Brahmaputra River in Assam, my family and I stayed in an Inspection Bungalow in the heart of the wild. The modest two-room circuit house faced the thick jungle and had open grasslands as its backyard. So as to not impact animal activity, the IB depended on dimly lit solar-powered lamps at nightfall. After dinner, we sat outside facing the grasslands. Without artificial light, our senses were doubly alert to the swishes of the swaying elephant grass, the brightness of the stars above, the odd cry from the wild, and a constant song of crickets. The prospect of elephant-back safaris, which is usually the highlight of such trips, paled in comparison to our more natural, magnified sense of being one with nature that night. —**Paloma Dutta**

Orang National Park is a 110 km drive from the Guwahati airport, where taxis and rental cars are available. The Divisional Forest Officer, Mangaldoi Wildlife Division, and Range Forest Officer, Orang National Park, can be contacted for booking government accommodation within the park (forest.assam.gov.in/). November-March is the best time to visit. Entry fee is ₹200 per head and safaris operating between 7.30-9.30 a.m. and 2-3 p.m. can be booked at the park gate.

TRAVEL FOR WORKATIONS

"COTTAGES OVERLOOKING THE PANCHACHULI RANGE OF THE HIMALAYAS, OR WOODEN CABINS ALONG TARKARLI BEACH—YOU WON'T MISS A GOOD VIEW WHILE REMOTE-WORKING FROM A HOST OF CONTEMPORARY INDIAN STAYS."

—Kareena Gianani

The beauty of workations is the felxibility to work out of anywhere: from the Himalayas to coffee plantations.



PHOTO COURTESY: OPUS TRAIL

ENTER, CURATED WORKATIONS

INDIA

Cottages overlooking the Panchachuli range of the Himalayas, wooden cabins along Tarkarli beach, and a cosy haunt at the foothills of the Nilgiris—you won’t miss a good view while remote-working from a host of contemporary Indian stays. Take for instance the stays accessible through OpusTrail, a company that organises remote work retreats across India. To that end, they have tied up with about 45 properties spanning eclectic landscapes of the country to curate workations for solo travellers, couples, and larger teams of organisations, keeping sustainable practises and local workforce at the centre of the experience.

“We ensure that the properties we tie up with have everything a person working remotely might need: high-speed Wi-Fi, work-friendly areas, ample personal space, pet-friendly stays, and good meals,” says Co-founder and CEO Raghavendra Pratap Singh. The idea is to mix up locales: Mountain views, beaches, riverfronts, and jungles—so remote-working guests don’t all end up in one kind of place, and are free to workation-hop, meet other freelancers, network or just hole up. Some of Singh’s favourites are Glampeco in Manali, where cottages come with mud walls and overlook the region’s snow-capped peaks; and Jalori House in Jibhi, a cliff-side property amid pine forests. —**Kareena Gianani.**

OpusTrail’s property partners are spread across Goa, Kannur, Bir, Pangot, Pushkar, and beyond. It offers packages for 7-, 15-, and 30-day stays. Doubles for a private room in Glampeco cost ₹13,090 for a week, including breakfast. Jalori House provides all meals to a couple for ₹30,800 for a week’s stay. www.opustrail.com

PHOTO COURTESY: OPUS TRAIL



Take your pick of desk view through the novel experience of curated Indian workations, and you can get silver snow and blazing sunsets like in Glampeco in Manali.



WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE INDIA

With workations being the new norm, it is not uncommon to hear of working professionals temporarily relocating to the Himalayas or to Goa's inviting beaches. But, it is refreshing to hear of a workation option in the jungle—one which is both luxurious and eco-friendly.

After a successful run with their Work from Mountains model (which offers a workation in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand), outfitter Travel the Himalayas has launched a Work from Wilderness option. Established in association with Pugdundee Safaris, the option offers a stay at any of Pugdundee's well-equipped jungle stays in Madhya Pradesh, located in each of the state's star tiger sanctuaries: Panna, Satpura, Kanha, Pench and Bandhavgarh. The properties all offer naturally distanced cottages, which come equipped with kitchenettes, plus ample space to avoid any crowding.

"Not everyone can withstand the Himalayan cold, or travel there in the winter with a family in tow from across the country," says Prashant Mathawan founder of Travel the Himalayas. With the option of working out of a jungle lodge, Mathawan has seen a lot more families being a part of this novel travel idea. "Don't teach kids how to code, teach them to be one with nature," he quips. —**Lubna Amir**

Doubles from ₹6,000 per night, inclusive of all meals, taxes and nature/jungle walks with a naturalist; rates vary per property; travelthehimalayas.com/work-fromwilderness.



PHOTO COURTESY, ARCHANA SINGH (WOMAN); PHOTO COURTESY, TRAVEL THE HIMALAYAS (SUNSET)

Thanks to creative travel outfitters and a burgeoning work-from-home culture, a wilderness workstation is no longer a distant dream for Indians—be it in King's Lodge Bandhavgarh, Kanha Earth Lodge or Tree House Hideaway, Bandhavgarh (facing page).

A lingering retreat
at the cosy Doi
Homestay in
Nathuakhan
promises to be some
work, and some play.

NATHUAKHAN, NOT OUT UTTARAKHAND

If your idea of a workation is to settle into a homestay nestled deep in the Himalayas, then Doi Homestay in Nathuakhan, Uttarakhand is for you. A humble home run by Sambit Dattachaudhuri and Disha Kapkoti, the vibrantly-coloured house opens to the mountains on one side and a fruit orchard on the other. With all meals prepared in-house (some with veggies and fruits right from the garden), and only four rooms, the couple manage to provide guests with the warmth of home. Currently, they're only accepting bookings for a minimum of a month, and require negative RT-PCR test results before arrival, but Dattachaudhuri hinted at shorter stay options opening up soon. —**Lubna Amir**

Doubles from ₹35,000 for a month inclusive of all meals and laundry, thedoihost.com/doi-homestay.

BUILDING CASTLES IN COORG

KARNATAKA

When a short spell of work from home turns into a more indefinite stretch rife with possibilities, who wouldn't like some workstation options beyond the same old? And what fits the bill better than a plantation stay nestled in the hills of Coorg? Spread across 250 acres, The Porcupine Castle in Coorg is a lush coffee plantation where one can also find jackfruit, bananas, cardamom and pepper growing. With stunning mountain vistas to wake up to and spacious chalet (or treehouse, if you're lucky) rooms, it makes for the ideal work-vacation. In your free time, you can go trekking, bird-watching and off-roading or brush up your skills at a variety of indoor and outdoor games like carrom, volleyball and tennis. The property follows a strict COVID-19 protocol, keeping guests' safety paramount. Checks all the boxes, doesn't it? — **Lubna Amir**

Non-AC doubles ₹2,500 per day (all rooms are non-AC), including breakfast. Minimum five day booking required, and taxes and other meals are extra; porcupinecastle.com.

PHOTO COURTESY: SAMBIT DATTACHAUDHURI



PHOTO COURTESY: NAMEET POTNIS

WORKSTATION BY THE WOODS

HIMACHAL PRADESH

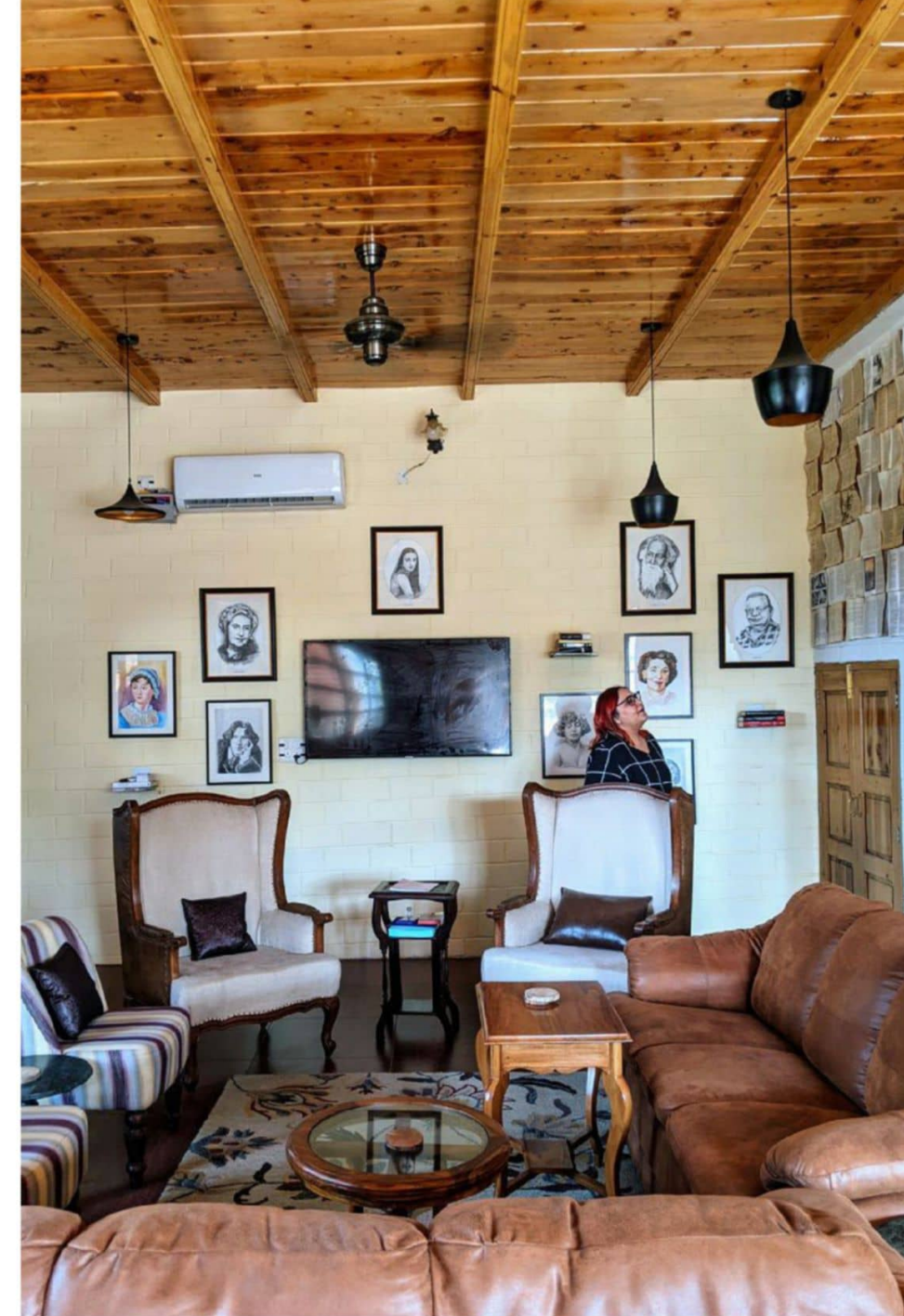
Snuck deep into the pine forests on the foothills of the Shivaliks is Bantony Cottage, a three-room heritage stay in the town of Nahan, Himachal Pradesh. It is also the temporary home of Radhika Mehta and her husband Nameet Potnis, who've been living at and working from the property after being locked up in their Gurgaon flat for months. "With all our 2020 travel plans cancelled, we decided to try out working remotely for a week. That was in October—we never left," smiles Mehta, a communications specialist. Potnis is a fintech professional, which meant the couple could work from any place with an internet connection.

"Radhika is extremely particular about hygiene, so we were looking for standalone rooms, fewer guests, regular sanitisation, and minimal interpersonal interaction—Bantony fit perfectly," adds Potnis. The two start their day with a long walk in the forests, and spend mornings and afternoons working in sunny outdoor spots where Wi-Fi is uninterrupted. Furry cats keep them company during long Zoom calls; simple meals make them feel at home. At night, Potnis obsessively shoots the star-splashed sky before everyone at Bantony comes together around a bonfire chat. "We were worried about social distancing but sorely missed nature. This is going to be home at least until this year-end," says Potnis.

—Kareena Gianani

Bantony Cottage is located in a private forested estate in Nahan. It is a 2-hr drive from Chandigarh airport and a 6-hr drive from Delhi. Doubles from ₹6,500, including breakfast and Wi-Fi. [instagram.com/sirmurpalace](https://www.instagram.com/sirmurpalace); book at letsmiago.com.

PHOTO COURTESY: NAMEET POTNIS



A Gurgaon couple's impulsive leg and soul-stretching at the beautiful Bantony Cottage (pictured) in the lush Himachal town of Nahan (facing page) soon turned into an indefinite workation.

A luxe nature retreat by Kerala's Athirappilly Waterfall might just be the way to break free from pandemic blues.

CUBICLE BY THE WATERFALL

KERALA

From Amritsar to America, the days of remote-working have turned the term workation into quite the 2020 buzzword. The secluded, boutique hospitality sector, in particular, has taken over social media feeds, a sphere of bespoke hamlets where vistas of wildlife come with a side of Wi-Fi and style. Rainforest: An Experiential Resort, is such an example, the kind of place where warblers whistle outside your window, playing a melody against the harmony of Athirappilly, Kerala's largest waterfall. Here you can spend your work days on the terrace with lofty, unobstructed views of the natural wonder thundering across a verdant gorge; and when it's time to clock out, take hikes, go birding, or lay down with a good book in a treehouse abode. The Rainforest experience comes at a hefty cost, but those who can afford it will surely appreciate this ratified realm where wonder wafts into your week.

—**Julian Manning**

Rainforest, by the Athirappilly Falls, is a 75 km/2 hr drive from Kochi International Airport, accessible by both bus and private vehicles. The nearest railway station is Chalakudy, roughly 28 km away. Doubles from ₹14,800 including breakfast and tea, rainforest.in.

TRAVEL TO EAT HYPERLOCAL

Set meals at local restaurants or specialty goodies from highway hotels, India is dotted with a treasure trove of food haunts.

"COIMBATORE OFTEN SEEMS TO BE OBSCURED BY THE CULTURAL SHADOW OF CHENNAI, BUT HARI BHAVANAM, A KOVAI CLASSIC SINCE 1971, PROVIDES AN UNADULTERATED TASTE OF THE SURROUNDING REGION'S CUISINE."

—Julian Manning



CHAPEL-SIDE PORK CHOPS

GOA

Going to church isn't for everyone, but almost all will cherish a visit to Teixeira's Fast Food. The side-chamber-turned-restaurant at Goa's Nossa Senhora de Remédios Chapel sits in the town of Ribandar and serves pork chops that transcend into the divine. They aren't the largest cuts you'll ever see, nor are they particularly beautiful, at least until you bite into them. They are perfectly permeated with a sub rosa-prepared marinade that makes dining at the four-table joint no less than seraphic, from 6 to 6 p.m. everyday except Sundays.

The chops are so popular that their once-modest price has almost doubled in the last five years, and often sell out within the first hour of business, even with a house-rule barring bulk takeaway orders; given the narrow interior, ordering take-out is a much safer way to enjoy the dish these days. This unfortunately means newcomers won't get to experience the wonderfully, random paper clippings that serve as the joint's decor, a barrage of bulging bodybuilders surrounded by cutouts of cherubic Caucasian children, the prime minister, and notable members of the animal kingdom.

—**Julian Manning**

Ribandar is a 7 km/10-15 min drive from Panaji, and roughly 25 km/45 min by car from Dabolim airport.



A HIGHWAY TREAT AT AHURA HOTEL

MAHARASHTRA

It isn't difficult to spot Ahura Hotel on NH-48, the highway to Ahmedabad from Mumbai; the red, yellow and white sign board beckons from afar. The no-frills restaurant is a biker favourite, as the roads are buttery smooth and the fare, inexpensive and mouth-watering. Run by a Zoroastrian family, the restaurant specialises in Parsi-Irani cuisine, making Sunday breakfast rides worth it, if only to lust over fancy bikes. To add to the deliciousness, there's also a bakery and spices shop run by the company right next door. Opened in 2015, the shop's shelves are lined with buttery *khari* and rusk, spicy ginger biscuits, crunchy on the outside and goeey inside chocolate chunk cookies, and all kinds of masalas, including Parsi dhansak and Irani tea masala. Leave early enough to catch sunrise on the road, and you'll be back well before noon. —**Lubna Amir**

Ahura Hotel is a 110 km/2 hr drive from Mumbai.

JULIAN MANNING (FOOD); PHOTO COURTESY: HUSSAIN GABAIWALA (AHURA SIGNBOARD)



A SWEET ESCAPE TO RABRI GRAM

WEST BENGAL

Imagine an entire village dedicated to perfecting the art of making one sweet--house after house of expert confectioners, all thickening and sweetening milk that would glam up to be creamy, luscious layers of *rabri*. Sounds like the stuff of children's stories, right? Not in Rabri Gram, originally named Ainya or Gangpur.

The small, somewhat hidden village in Hooghly can be a one-stop destination for travellers with a sugar bug, should one be willing to sweat for their sweet. Unlike Saktigarh, the sole authority on *lyangchas* (a cylindrical, east-Indian cousin to gulab jamun), Rabri Gram is not widely toured. Put on the map only recently by inquisitive food bloggers, the village's residents are used to backstage oblivion, quietly preparing and selling the coveted dessert wholesale to pedigree sweet shops in Kolkata. So don't go in expecting clear road signs and guided tours. You can instead rely on online maps

and some good old-fashioned roadside queries to locate the dusty lane leading into Rabri Gram, some 15 minutes off the census town of Masat/Mosat.

Once there, gently seek permission from locals to walk around the 40-odd households. While most may not agree to photo or video documentation, you'd likely find someone who'd be up for a chat about their history. On your tasting spree, you'll realise how the dish has evolved in flavour and texture on its way from Varanasi to Bengal. Over the years, some confectioners have stuck to the classic version while others have introduced more contemporary flavours and garnishes, but the residents will insist that the quality in each household is superior at par, the result of a highly supervised, labour-intensive process.

—**Sohini Das Gupta**

Rabdi Gram/Ainya-Gangpur is a 40 km/2 hr drive from Kolkata, convenient for a day trip with your base in the city.

The aroma of freshly made *rabri* wafts through the tiny village of Rabri Gram in West Bengal. Facing page: Chomp on a mean pork chop (left) at Teixeira's Fast Food in Ribandar, Goa; Spicy ginger biscuits and rich chocolate cookies make a trip to the highway-side Ahura Hotel (right) worth your appetite.



Rabbit, turkey, pigeon—
summon your choice of
interesting meat at a typical
spread in Coimbatore's
Hari Bhavanam.

JULIAN MANNING

HEARTY FARE AT HARI BHAVANAM

TAMIL NADU

Outside Tamil Nadu, Coimbatore often seems to be obscured by the cultural shadow of Chennai, that is, unless you're a foodie—better yet, a gourmand with the culinary bloodlust and curiosity of the late Anthony Bourdain. Hari Bhavanam, a Kovai classic since 1971, provides an unadulterated taste of the surrounding region's non-vegetarian cuisine. Think fried (or fricasseed) country hare, the gamey meat suffused with a blaze of masalas tossed with cumin, coriander, and mustard seeds, best enjoyed with a drizzle of lemon juice and the crunch of uncooked onion rings; or, even better, sample congealed, tender morsels of lamb blood, quickly stir-fried with golden gobbets of chana dal and an aromatic mixture of garlic, ginger, fennel seeds, curry leaves, and green chilli. Those interested in eating house specials other than rabbit (*muyal*) masala or blood fry (*ratha poriyal*) can opt for a variety of turkey, pigeon, and quail dishes.

You can still dine in the original mess hall of the eatery, near Gandhipuram Bus Depot, but the operation has gradually expanded over the years to a total of four locations in Coimbatore, from a sum of three employees to an army of 900 today. Turning a classic eatery into a chain seldom goes well, but Hari Bhavanam remains exceptional in more ways than one. —**Julian Manning**

Hari Bhavanam's four outlets in Coimbatore are at Gandhipuram, RTO Office, Peelamedu, and Goldwins, www.haribhavanam.com.

SLOW TRAVEL

“SOCIAL DISTANCING WASN'T AN ISSUE ON THE TRIP, AS THERE WAS HARDLY ANYBODY ELSE OUT IN THE WINTRY JUNGLE, EXCEPT FOR SOME LEECHES.”

—Zac O'Yeah

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SLOW-TREKKING THROUGH THE WESTERN GHATS

INDIA

The slowest form of travel has got to be walking through mountains, I thought as I climbed uphill, which took forever, until I finally stood atop the Western Ghats. At the very edge of the Deccan plateau, I enjoyed a breath-taking view of lush Kerala foliage. This was also the point of no return. Another 14 kilometres to go, but it was to be such a steep downhill trek that the forest guard warned me—it would be impossible to climb back up. So, after a brief rest, I headed down steep *ghat* slopes, through dense jungle into deep valleys, across brooks with tasty crystal-clear water, where the air was crisp and rich in oxygen. It was like walking through heaven, except for the handful of times I lost my footing and rolled towards Kerala faster than what seemed safe!

The Western Ghats stretch for over 1,500 kilometres from Maharashtra to Kanyakumari, so there's plenty of trekking to be done within the mountain range—in Karnataka one may go from Kukke Subrahmanya temple to Sakleshpur; through the picture-pretty Kudremukh National Park; or do a downhill stroll from Londa across to Goa. Elsewhere in South India, I've heard of hardy trekkers making it from Kodaikanal (Tamil Nadu) to Munnar (Kerala), or following the narrow-gauge railway tracks from Coonoor down to Mettupalayam station, or traipsing across sections of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve in hilly Wayanad. And of course, there's always the Matheran to Neral hike in Maharashtra. As for my unhurried expedition—if one can call a one-day 9-hour trek that—it took me up to the Nishanimotte peak in Karnataka, via Talacauvery Wildlife Sanctuary, and finally into the verdant heart of Kerala. The trip made me stop worrying about pandemics, as there was hardly anybody else out in the wintry jungle, except for some leeches that leched onto me. The elephants kept out of sight and the only signs of their presence were the huge dung balls, so-called pachyderm *laddus*, lining the path.

DILCHASRYAN/SHUTTERSTOCK
FACING PAGE: SUGITAS/SHUTTERSTOCK



On the far end of the slow sojourn, a hot rustic dinner in the village of Chandatkolly, near the temple town Parassinikadavu, tasted better than any meal I'd ever had, my leg ache subsided by and by, and life was generally perfect. —Zac O'Yeah

Trek season spans from November to April. Skip the rainy months so as to avoid slippery slopes and leeches. Enlist a guide from the forest departments of relevant districts, since it's easy to get lost. Start out at sunrise so as to reach the bottom of the ghats by nightfall. A decent fitness level and good shoes are recommended. Private agencies and home stays in Kodagu help arrange treks and necessary permits. Coorg Trails, opposite Town Hall in Madikeri town, and Youth Hostel Association of India (yhaindia.org) are good options to contact.

Treks in the Western Ghats offer stunning views, and the chance to stumble upon fort ruins (facing page) and meet an expansive range of biodiversity.

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AT HOME IN
RONGMESEK
MEGHALAYA

It isn't too difficult to travel to the beautiful hills of Meghalaya and set up base in a historic village like RongmeseK. The viewpoints overlooking lush flora, the vivid blue smears in the Northeastern sky, the slow mornings at the misty Phrut Dak Lake by the steps of the only two guesthouses around—there are ample takers. But to truly get to know the people of RongmeseK, their cuisine, culture, and way of life? For that, one needs ample time. The Karbi tribe calls these hills their home and staying with the hillside

community, I was fortunate to witness a range of experiences over many days: a fashion show showcasing local textile, a cooking class in traditional recipes and techniques, and the star of my no-rush trip: the Jhum Cultivation festival in May, when the village busts a move in elaborate celebrations. The homely, if temporary, co-existence with the locals (who took me in like I was one of their own) gifted me with insights and wonder, and of course, many finger-licking feasts of bamboo shoot gravy, fried cicada chutney, and my favourite: their staple milky, sweet rice beer, free-flowing all around. —**Varud Gupta**
RongmeseK is a 60 km/1.5 hr drive from Guwahati. Albinus Timung, chef-cum-conversationalist, can be the point of contact. He can be reached at 87878 80858.

Slow travel offers the joy of forming lifelong connections and partaking in community living, like the author experienced in Meghalaya.



REALITYIMAGES/SHUTTERSTOCK

TRAVEL TO
RESTORE AND
RECONNECT

“WE JUMPED OUT OF THE CAR TO SPOT BLUSHING PINK AND MILK-WHITE LOTUSES, RISING FROM MURKY WATER AND BRINGING TO MIND: ‘FROM DARKNESS STEMS LIGHT’.”

—Lubna Amir

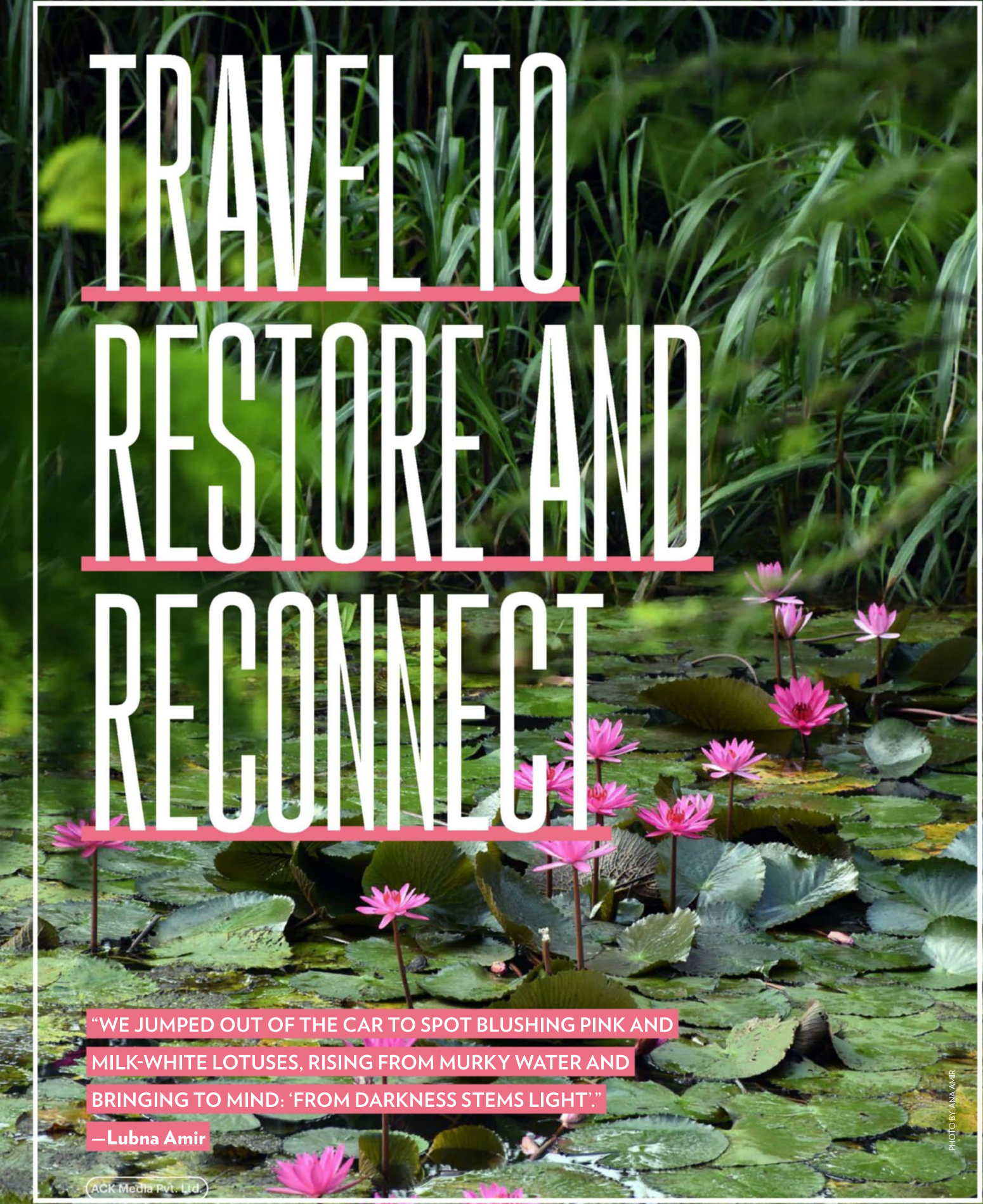


PHOTO BY ANA AMIR

IN A CHAUKORI STATE
OF MIND
UTTARAKHAND

My friends and I were crestfallen to see black billowy clouds over the dreamy KMVN rest house upon our arrival at Chaukori, a languid hamlet tucked amid lofty Kumaon Himalayas in Uttarakhand. Though it provided for a dramatic setting, we could not help but feel disappointed since we had carefully chosen our stay at the KMVN rest house, situated in a bowl-shaped valley, solely for the wide vistas of the gorgeous Nanda Devi, Nanda Kot and Panchchuli mountain peaks. Risking getting caught in a storm we headed out to the nearby forested area, and our travellers’ luck

slowly turned. First the clouds dissipated to reveal the full arches of a double rainbow over a verdant meadow. We were only taking in the magnificent sight when a local passerby excitedly indicated that we should look behind us. As we watched on, the dark clouds over the mountain ranges gradually parted and glistening snow peaks emerged in all their glory. The elation we felt at the magic nature revealed to us that day, and the lesson on how quickly situations change on the road, has stayed on since. —**Paloma Dutta**
Chaukori is a 173-km drive from Nainital. The closest railhead is Kathgodam, at a distance of 180 km, and Pantnagar Airport is 205 km away. The author and her friends stayed at the KMVN rest house (kmvn.in), currently shut for tourists due to COVID-19, and tentatively set to reopen after March 2021. Doubles from ₹1500.

The peak-fringed hamlet of Chaukori is a meditative retreat for those looking to escape the urban din.



RAILWAY ROMANCE
IN BAROG
HIMACHAL PRADESH

Exiting the darkness of Tunnel no. 33, the longest in the UNESCO World Heritage-accredited Kalka-Shimla narrow gauge hill railway route which contains a staggering 103 tunnels, one is immediately struck by the quaint, bright white-and-cobalt blue, colonial buildings of the Barog Railway Station. The sloping-roofed structures stand dainty at the side of the flower-lined tracks, something out of a children’s book. Railway stations are usually not destinations for tourist halts. But a stay at the Shivalik cottage with French windows atop the picturesque Barog station amid a pine forest means tuning in to birdsong mingled with the chug of engines. It is rewinding your

clock to the timetable of the ‘toy trains’ that enter and exit during the day and enjoying the in-between lull where the entire station, including the shops that sell tea and the famous Indian Railways’ ‘breakfast cutlets’, shuts down. After dark, once the last train has passed, and the wind has picked up a tune among the rustling foliage, one can enjoy the rich calm that a station snuggled at the bottom of two hills offers.

—**Paloma Dutta**
Barog town is a 60 km/60 km/1.5 hr hr drive from Chandigarh. The best way to reach the station is by a train on the Kalka–Shimla route. Schedule of trains originating in Kalka (30 km from Barog) may be updated as per evolving COVID-19 protocols. At the Barog Railway Station, in addition to retiring rooms, there is a specially designed cottage known as Shivalik Cottage. Doubles from ₹750. Bookings can be routed through the station superintendent.

Expect hilly wildflowers, colonial-style cottages, and a drowsy calm at the Barog railway station.



IMAGES OF INDIA / SHUTTERSTOCK

BALAJISRIIVASAN / SHUTTERSTOCK

Sweeping vistas of the Kanchenjunga and quaint Buddhist temples grace Deolo in Kalimpong.

UP, ABOVE IN
DEOLO'S HILLS
WEST BENGAL

After months of being cooped up, reviving your spirit amid the hills might be just what you need—and doing so responsibly isn't impossible.

At about 5,590 feet, Deolo is one of Kalimpong's highest points, offering panoramic views of the majestic Kanchenjunga. If you're looking for healing those frayed nerves through some spirituality, visit the nearby Dhok Palri

Phodang, a Tibetan Buddhist temple located atop Durpin Hill. Seeking an adrenaline rush? Sign up for paragliding and hang-gliding at Delo Park, atop Deolo Hill. A smattering of eco-friendly resorts and lodges ensure a comfortable stay—pick any one and you'll find yourself amid dreamy walking paths with views of green vistas and mountains. Memorable meals in Deolo often comprise steaming plates of momos at local restaurants. A few days in this hill town and you might never want to return to the city again. —**Sanjana Ray**

The easiest way to reach Deolo from Kolkata is to fly to Bagdogra and drive 3 hours to the hill town.



IN THE VALLEY OF LOTUSES

MADHYA PRADESH

One pandemic September morning, my parents woke my sister and I up early for a drive. Now this was a routine we'd tried to maintain—long drives out of the city at least once a week to waterfalls, forests and dams dotting around Indore, all bursting to life after monsoon. This morning was going to be different.

We drove for around 25 kilometres towards Hatod, when the sign boards leading to one Lotus Valley started popping up. A few wrong turns through Gulawat village, and cow-on-the-road blocks later, we were driving on a narrow one-lane road lined with farmland. Further ahead, the green turned deeper, to that of a bamboo forest, and suddenly my sister exclaimed, "Lotuses!" And true enough we jumped out of the car to spot blushing pink and milk-white lotuses surrounding us, rising from murky water and bringing to mind 'from darkness stems light' clichés. As we walked ahead, we came to the main Gulawat bridge road, and understood why it is called the Lotus Valley—there were lotuses and lily pads as far as the eye could see, rising from the morning mist, and melding into the thick forest around: a surreal sight. We spotted a young girl boating, to collect lotuses to sell by the road. In non-pandemic times, the lotus valley was a popular local haunt, with a swing, snack corners and a lot of pre-wedding photo shoots. Now, however, there wasn't a soul in sight.

The flowers bloom in the backwaters of Yeshwant Sagar Lake, Indore's first IBA (Important Bird and Biodiversity Area), and is also a birder haunt. The wetlands are home to several resident and migratory avian species like sarus crane, greater flamingo, whiskered tern, greater spotted eagle and Madhya Pradesh's state bird, the Indian paradise flycatcher. Another popular birder spot, and IBA in Indore, is Sirpur Lake which has an interesting landscape of water, scrub forest and a garden. Here, one can spot short-eared owl and a host of winter migratory ducks. My father was definitely glad he carried his binoculars. —**Lubna Amir**

Lotus Valley is a 25 km/1 hr drive from Indore. ■

A series of fortunate wrong turns led the author and her family to the Indore-adjacent backwater beauty called Lotus Valley.

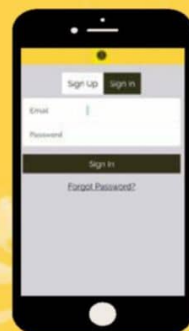
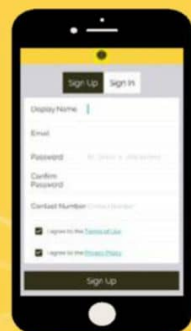
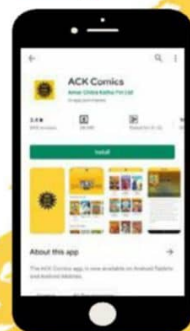




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THE A D D R E S S

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106 MODERN LITERATURE AND GRAND HOTELS AROUND
THE WORLD

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PHOTOS COURTESY: ROOMS HOTEL KAZBEGI

MODERN LITERATURE & GRAND HOTELS



The Plaza Hotel might have been Fitzgerald's true love, while Ritz Paris had Hemingway's heart. Why did glamorous hotels evoke such passion in the greatest writers of a generation? We run through years of colourful history

BY JULIAN MANNING



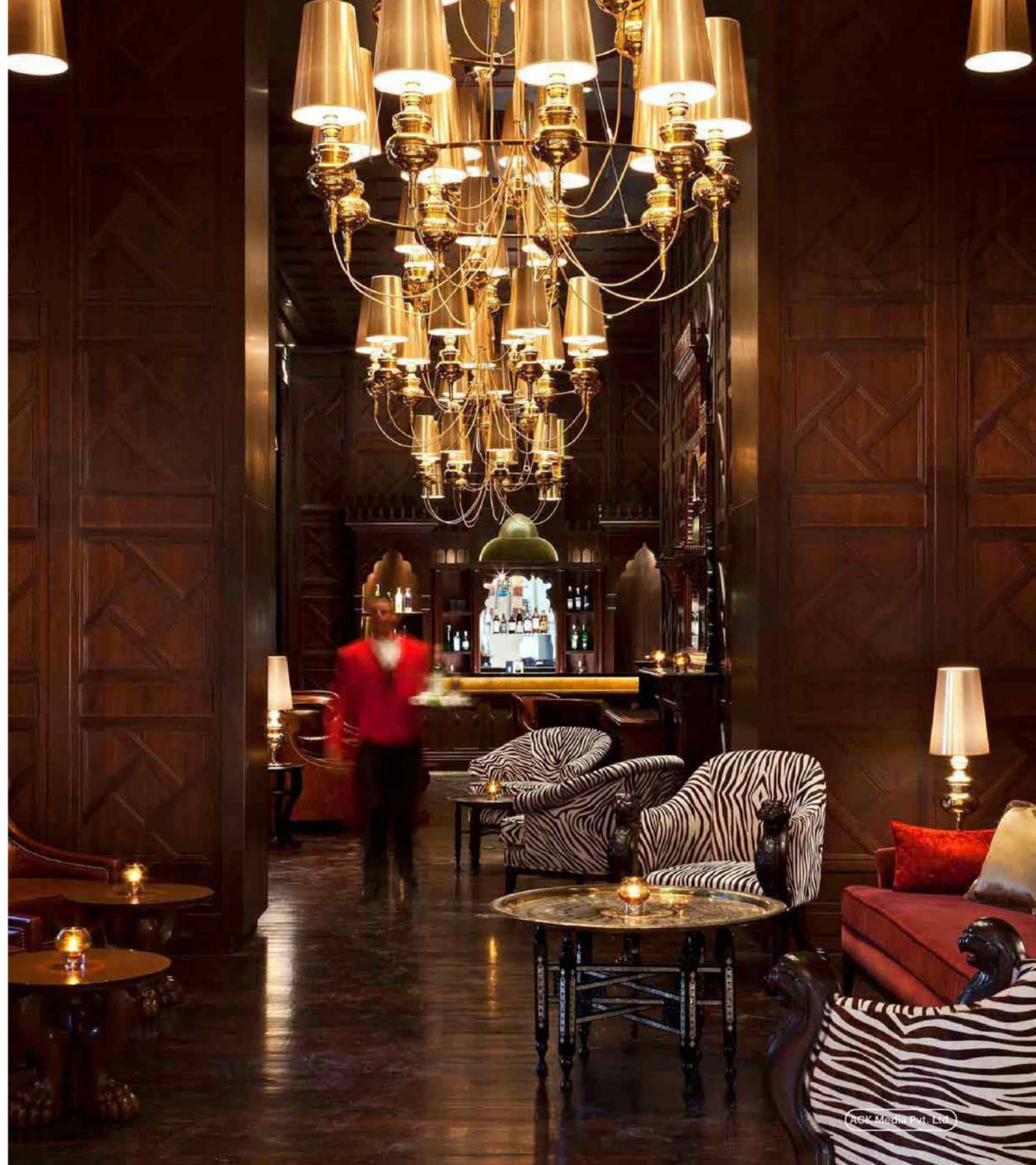
EVERETT COLLECTION/SHUTTERSTOCK (FITZGERALD), SPATULETAIL/SHUTTERSTOCK (CHRISTIE)

The Plaza Hotel (previous spread) has a suite named after writer F. Scott Fitzgerald (top left); Agatha Christie (bottom left) featured atmospheric hotel settings, much like the Old Cataract Hotel (right) in Aswan, Egypt, where she often lodged.

The nostalgia that warms the lacquered lobbies of the world's surviving grand hotels is potent: as inviting as cognac on a cold night. These hotels came to life circa the mid-19th and early-20th centuries, the likes of **The Cecil, London** and **The Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok**, standing as well chiselled epitomes of modernity. A century later, and they still maintain a voguish quality, although the appeal is now a sentimental one, anchored in the legacies of the modernist writers that once flocked to these lavish institutions; for instance, if you want to stay in a suite named after **Ernest Hemingway**, you'll have to choose between the **Ritz Paris**, **Istanbul's Pera Palace**, **Old Havana's Hotel Ambos Mundos**, and many more.

These hotels became such a big part of some authors' lives, it's difficult to talk of their work extensively without referencing the hotels they called home—some for days, others for years. Hemingway once said of his friend **F. Scott Fitzgerald** that “[W]e can take your liver out and give it to the Princeton Museum, your heart to the **Plaza Hotel**.” To understand how these love affairs came to be, one must travel back to the first industrial revolution, to a time before widespread travel was considered grand.

PHOTO COURTESY: SORITEL LEGEND OLD CATARACT ASWAN
PREVIOUS SPREAD: PHOTO COURTESY: THE PLAZA, NEW YORK





PALACES AND PAPERBACKS

The early 19th century brought increasing modern luxury to the hotels in North America: **Boston's Tremont House** (1829) was the first hotel in the world to provide indoor toilets and room locks, **New York City's Holt's Hotel** (1832) was the first to install a steam-powered elevator, and **Chicago's Palmer House** (1870) was the first to provide telephones in all its rooms. Similarly, in Europe, the rise of the hotel was in full swing. The-then largest hotel in Europe was created, **Le Grand Hôtel Paris** (1862), and **Vienna's The Palais Württemberg** (a real palace) was turned into **Hotel Imperial** (1873). The Paris landmark, now **The InterContinental Paris Le Grand**, was inaugurated by Empress Eugenie, wife of Napoleon III. Impressed by its grandeur, she remarked, "This reminds me of home!" These hotels became more than lodging, they were miniature fiefdoms within cities, hosting battalions of cooks, bell boys, and tailors.

America and England's publishing field also changed lucratively during this time. Pressmen went from printing a few hundred high-cost sheets an hour to several thousand affordable ones with the invention of the rotary press.

Reading was no longer a pastime for the gentility. Scullery maids and butlers now read some of the same literary material as their affluent employers. Just as railroads and steamships began to take over the Western landscape, they ferried the likes of **Charles Dickens**, **Mark Twain**, and **Frank L. Baum**—allowing them to tour the world, giving lectures and writing in hotels that were rapidly becoming de rigueur.

Ernest Hemingway (inset) was a regular at Hotel Ambos Mundos (left) in Old Havana, Cuba. He wrote many of his popular titles in a small room on the hotel's fifth floor.

ANTON IVANOV/SHUTTERSTOCK (BAR), OLGA POPOVA/SHUTTERSTOCK (INSET)

GOLDEN GOOSE, GILDED EGG

Charles Dickens best incarnates the dawn of hotel-adoring literati. While his childhood was impoverished, once successful, he adopted fine hotels as provisional clubhouses. On his American tour, **Boston’s Omni Parker House** became Dickens’ favoured haunt, where he enjoyed gin punch with peers such as **Thoreau, Emerson, Longfellow,** and **Hawthorne**. These meetings came to be known as the Saturday Club, and on one such occasion, Dickens first performed *A Christmas Carol*. The comingling of a grand hotel and literary figures stirred up much fanfare, to the extent Dickens’ room had to be regularly guarded from overzealous fans.

Decades later, Frank L. Baum was one of the first writers to complete a significant chunk of a major work in a hotel. As Baum clacked away on his Smith Premier No. 2 typewriter, he found the grandeur of **California’s Hotel del Coronado** (now operated by Hilton) so captivating, it inspired the Emerald City in *The Wizard of Oz*. The enchanting aura surrounding grand hotels had begun to cement itself in literary history, for they were now being characterised.

By 1893, the Swiss founded the first school for hoteliers, Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne, just as the much-awaited **Waldorf Astoria** hit the streets of **Manhattan**, the first hotel to offer room service. The palatial hotels of the early 20th century spread to cities like Starbucks in the early 21st century—**The Savoy** in **London**, **La Mamounia** in **Morocco**, **Hotel Metropole** in **Brussels**, and **The Taj Mahal Palace** in **Bombay**. While the industrial revolution shows how modernist writers were positioned to be the illustrious patrons of these hotels, an Irish playwright best demonstrates why they were so attached to these haute havens: a dalliance with excess, that sometimes bordered on infatuation.



PHOTO COURTESY: THE ALGONQUIN HOTEL, NEW YORK (PAINTING): WANGKUN JIA/SHUTTERSTOCK (ENTRANCE)



In its heyday, New York’s famous literati schmoozed the hours away at the Round Table restaurant (left) inside The Algonquin Hotel (right).

Hotel del Coronado
in San Diego inspired
author Frank L.
Baum to fashion the
Emerald City in *The
Wizard of Oz* after it.



WILDE, WILDE, COUNTRY

In 1882, six years before his flurry of major works, **Oscar Wilde** received an all-expenses-paid tour of the U.S.A. He was meant to promote an operetta (*Patience*)—in which he had been satirised— across America, while playing a caricature of himself. Wilde got a taste of luxury at the **Grand Hotel** in **N.Y.C.**, and soon realised to fully capture this moment for a lifetime he had to popularise himself above the play he was meant to promote.

His wit, velvet smoke jackets fitted with a green carnation, and long cavalier locks won over the American public, and he returned home with fame he was keen to turn into fortune.

Wilde would go on to pen extraordinary popular works, and earned handsomely during Britain's Decadence Era. He became a regular at **The Savoy**, and soon became intimately acquainted with young Lord Alfred 'Bosie' Douglas. The pair took adjoining rooms on the third floor, only interrupting their

festivities for champagne room service.

His life would soon be a cautionary tale: hotels did not ensure one's privacy like a home, and just as one's triumphs were lauded, one's 'falls' were equally, if not more, celebrated. In 1895, when Wilde was charged for committing acts of 'gross indecency', many of the key witnesses were employees of his beloved Savoy. **The Cadogan Hotel**, where Wilde soon after resided, was raided, and he was shackled in room 118.

After two years in jail, a depleted Wilde moved

to Paris. He had lost everything except his penchant for grand hotels, and housed in **Hôtel d'Alsace** (now **L'Hotel**), a 5-star establishment, following his credo, "I have the simplest taste. I am always satisfied with the best." He died there at 46,20,000 francs in debt. When he had been previously faced with his bill, Wilde wrote to the hotel manager, maintaining his waggish voice: "I am dying as I have lived: beyond my means."

The bill now lies framed in L'Hotel's **Oscar Wilde Suite**.

PHOTO COURTESY: HOTEL DEL CORONADO,
SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA



MODERNISTS TAKE THE MANTLE

After WWI, modernist writers took over the literary stratosphere, making many of them the new celebrity custodians of the grand hotel. New York was the throbbing heart of this attraction and **The Algonquin Hotel** was its epicentre. The hotel hosted eminent figures like **Gertrude Stein** and **Maya Angelou**, and by 1919 it hosted almost daily lunches by a group known as The Round Table, featuring **Robert E. Sherwood**, **Dorothy Parker**, and **Edna Ferber**, among others. These writers personally referred to their meetings as the Vicious Circle, no doubt referencing the acerbic wit that was hurled across the table with alacrity.

Much of the post-WWI literary themes that influenced Hemingway and Fitzgerald were born around this table, which can still be reserved by the general public at the namesake **Round Table** restaurant. Guests at the hotel particularly liked to eavesdrop on Dorothy Parker, the playwright and poet frequently spouting wry odes of excess, which often mentioned the beverage that was currently balanced in her graceful grip. A champagne flute would inspire “Three be the things I shall never attain: envy, content, and sufficient champagne,” and a Martini glass could spur, “I like to have a

Many of Hemingway’s unpublished writings were found in the basement of Ritz Paris (top), while London establishment **The Savoy** (facing page) remains a favourite with many writers even today.

Martini, two at the very most. After three I’m under the table, after four I’m under my host.”

She defined the apex of The Algonquin, and even got to witness Harold Ross—for whom she would later write—take such a large poker pot, that he was able to found *The New Yorker* magazine with his winnings. Today, guests at the hotel receive a complementary copy of the magazine, but the best tribute is paid at the **Blue Bar**, in the form of the Dorothy Parker: a brilliant gin cocktail of St. Germain, honey, lemon juice, and basil leaves—strong enough to slap you awake, and smooth enough to send you to sleep.

Much like Parker, Hemingway was a lifelong patron of several posh hotels. He sipped on cocktails at Istanbul’s Pera Palace, which would cameo in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, wrote significant portions of *Across the River and Into the Trees* at **Venice’s Gritti Palace**, as well as *For Whom The Bell Tolls* in room 551 of Hotel Ambos Mundos, where he lived for seven years in Old Havana. Hemingway was particularly smitten with the Ritz Paris, saying, “When I dream of afterlife in heaven, the action always takes place in the Paris Ritz.” Here was a man who had the idea of weaponising jai alai players in an elaborate plan to sink German U-Boats, lapping up luxury like a spoilt kitten. Apparently, he





EDITORIAL HEAD/SHUTTERSTOCK (ENTRANCE), PHOTO COURTESY: THE ALGONQUIN HOTEL, NEW YORK (MARTINI)

adored grand hotels almost as much as he hated fascists.

Hemingway was particularly fond of telling the story of how he “liberated the Ritz” in 1944, driving a jeep on the property with a rifle in tow, after which “he took command” of the bar and wine cellar. In the hotel basement lay a trunk full of manuscripts and notes, containing the beginnings of *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Moveable Feast*.

These hotels also became a grave indulgence for those long-suffocating under the plush pillow of booze and glamour. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s hotel-filled life often mirrored the tragic stories he wrote: his wife **Zelda Fitzgerald** would spend much of her later life in psychiatric wards, and he would die at 44 due to hard living.

Fitzgerald was briefly stationed in Louisville, Kentucky, during his stint in the U.S. army. On weekends he visited **The Seelbach’s USO**: a grand hotel bar that entertained officers. While *The Plaza* features centrally in Fitzgerald’s masterpiece, *The Great Gatsby*, it was The Seelbach that first inspired Fitzgerald to capture the essence of a grand hotel in a novel. The characters Tom Buchanan and Daisy get married in the hotel ballroom, and the property is characterised as a magical and modern place: “*There was a ripe mystery about it...radiant activities taking place through its corridors and of romances that were not musty ...but fresh and breathing and redolent of this year’s shining motor cars...*” In real life, he was thrown out of Seelbach three out of the four weekends he visited for drunken behaviour.



Pera Palace Istanbul (left) was where Christie penned the book, *Murder on the Orient Express*; At the Algonquin’s Blue Bar (right), Parker is so beloved that a martini is dedicated in her name.

In 1921, the newlyweds started getting kicked out of hotels together, beginning with **The Saint James Albany** in **Paris**. The couple achieved some remarkable engineering by attaching a belt to the elevator cord on their floor so they no longer had to wait for the hotel lift. Still, lavish hotels inspired more than just shenanigans in Scott; while he was writing *Gatsby*, they stayed at **Hôtel de Paris** in **Monte Carlo**, a place that reminded him of, “a palace in a detective story.” 1930 marked a significant decline in Zelda’s mental health. Scott stayed in nearby hotels during her long-term hospitalisations, but no view of the alps at **Lake Geneva’s Hôtel de la Paix**, nor vista of the ocean at the ‘Pink Palace’ (**The Don CeSar, Florida**) could stop him from drinking himself into an early grave.

In his anthology of posthumously published personal essays, *My Lost City*, Fitzgerald admits his world view was shaped by the vantage point of the grand hotel, writing, “*it had been tradition of mine to climb to the Plaza roof...the beautiful city extending as far as the eyes could see.*” However, when he visits the new Empire State Building, he discovers a “*crowning error*” that contradicts his fantasy world. Atop the skyscraper Fitzgerald realises the real world is vaster than the limited, metropolitan circle of glamour he shelters himself in, and “*the whole shining edifice that he had reared in his mind came crashing down.*”

The theme of alienation was strong with modernists, but through their prose and kinship to hotels their memory never walks alone. However, it took the marquee name from a completely different oeuvre—**Agatha Christie**, not a modernist—in reimagining the hotel’s place in the world. Christie was a leading figure in the Golden Era of detective writing. This literary wave featured the



Oscar Wilde homages (far left and right) are present throughout L’Hotel Paris, where the author spent his final days; Fitzgerald had a soft spot for Hotel Don CeSar’s (middle) ocean views.



same dystopian plot elements (war, technological advancements, and consumption) like most of modernism, and Christie also patronised, characterised, and wrote in grand hotels. She penned segments of *The Murder on The Orient Express* at Istanbul’s Pera Palace and at **Baron’s Hotel, Aleppo**, completed and featured *Death on the Nile* at **Aswan’s Old Cataract Hotel**, and based the setting of *At Bertram’s Hotel* (1965) on **London’s Brown’s Hotel**.

In terms of implication, however, most modernists saw the world as hopelessly crumbling, and while Agatha didn’t shy away from societal evils, she used her protagonists to make the world a reassuring place—some refer to this style as reverse modernism. In her books, the grand hotel became a place to vindicate the downtrodden and catch the greedy, who were most often murderous.

She sucked the anxiety out of grand hotels, paving the way for the likes of **Ian Fleming**—who thought up the line “shaken, not stirred” at **London’s Dukes Hotel**—to also use them as exciting locales where justice would always prevail. Christie’s and Fleming’s work would inspire a mountain of movie and TV adaptations, keeping the grand hotels fresh in the eyes and hearts of the public. Recently, **J. K. Rowling**, **John le Carré**, and **Pico Iyer**, have all written in grand hotels. After all, what would Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby say? “Can’t repeat the past? Why of course you can!” Perhaps, that’s why couples who take up the Plaza’s Fitzgerald suite receive monogrammed ‘his and her’ flasks. ■

UNDER THE MOUNTAIN SHADOW

A remote and
modern Georgian
hotel goes out of
its way to show off
the spectacular
hinterland that
encompasses the
property

BY CHAITALI PATEL



Past the gently flowing Terek River, the verdant slopes of the Caucasus, and the clear blue skies, features characteristic of summertime in Stepantsminda, our car turned a corner and Rooms Hotel came into view—I felt my heart sink. My husband, six-year-old daughter, and I, along with another family, were on a five-day holiday to Georgia. The Eurasian nation, once a part of the erstwhile Russian Empire, and later the Soviet Union, was both a short flight away from our home base in Dubai, and offered a much-needed respite from

PHOTOS COURTESY: ROOMS HOTEL KAZBEGI

the heat. While most visitors head to the capital Tbilisi, and during the winters to Gudauri, a popular skiing destination, I suggested that we go deeper into the northeastern heartland, beyond to Stepantsminda, a mountain town still commonly referred to by its former name, Kazbegi. Photographs of the region's 14th-century Gergeti Trinity Church had previously fascinated me. It stands on a hillock of sylvan charm, framed by the imposing stratovolcano, Mount Kazbek. No matter the season, the setting appears majestic; during summer the slopes are a shock of green, and in

What lends the hotel its mystique is the colossal mountainous backdrop.

winter they lie hidden, blanketed under thick snow. What was meant to be a three-hour journey from Tbilisi to Stepantsminda stretched well over five-hours because of the route's winding, bumpy roads. Once we crossed into Gudauri on the historic Georgian Military Highway, despite the beautiful scenery and perfect chai-and-pakora weather, we were desperate to get to our hotel. A member of the reputed Design Hotels network, which includes a selection of privately owned and operated hotels around the world, I had high expectations for Rooms Hotel Kazbegi. But here it was, the most



lackluster hotel exterior I had ever seen— just a large, rectangular brick-lined building with metal balconies, and seemingly no entrance to boast off.

Once we stepped inside, though, vistas of the emerald slopes of Mount Kazbek and the Gergeti Trinity Church, encased perfectly by the floor-to-ceiling windows of the lobby, foretold better things to come. The location of the 155-room property is unbeatable, and it opens itself up to its illustrious environs from within.

Designed by young, Tbilisi-based designers, Nata Janberidze and Ketii Toloraia, the hotel has helped put Kazbegi in the modern spotlight, attracting more visitors to the region over the years. Chic, modern, and minimalist, their aesthetic celebrates the Asian and European heritage of Georgia in subtle ways. The spacious lobby, restaurant, stunning indoor swimming pool, and casino all face the breathtaking Caucasus. The bare facade is intentional, as are the industrial design details that abound within, such as repurposed timber floors, a neutral colour palette featuring varying shades of brown and tan, and an extensive use of metal from bar stools to light fittings. These elements work in tandem to create a modern mountain-lodge atmosphere that tactfully complements its spectacular location. The structure is not competing with the surrounding landscape, but rather acts as a bespoke frame, intent on showcasing a serene setting that has been drawing travellers for centuries.

Up in our room, sunlight filtered through the

RUSTIC BOOKCASES STACKED WITH DOG-EARED NOVELS ARE SMARTLY USED TO CORDON OFF SEATING SECTIONS, CREATING COSY NOOKS

French windows, and outside Mount Kazbek dazzled in the early evening light. Small in size, the room offered all creature comforts. Bright orange curtains added a burst of cheer to the earthy tones of mushroom and taupe that dominated the walls and furniture. The balcony, with wicker chairs and netted metal railings, offered unhindered views of the hotel's lush lawns and the massif whose shadows stretched towards them. The mountains felt so close; I was sure I could touch them if I got on the tips of my toes, leaned out against the balcony railing and stretched out my hands.

The lobby opened out onto an expansive terrace, the beaming heart of the hotel where guests soak up the sun. As darkness descended and guests, mostly groups of friends and couples, returned to the hotel after sightseeing and trekking, the lobby was abuzz with cheerful chatter. Rustic, wooden bookcases stacked with dog-eared novels are smartly used to cordon off seating sections, creating cosy reading nooks. Traditional Georgian Kilim rugs, featuring bold, rustic colours and ornamental, geometric motifs covered the timber floors. Though carefully put together, the atmosphere didn't seem overly contrived— it wasn't trying too hard, and overall

Once inside, the hotel is awash in wooded, rustic and dark colours that accentuate its inviting seating areas.

PHOTOS COURTESY: ROOMS HOTEL KAZBEGI

exuded a very lived-in vibe, which rather suited the chilly evenings underneath the snowy peaks.

Once we found our ideal spot in the lobby, we did not budge, even ordering dinner there. We had sampled a few Georgian staples in Tbilisi, but Rooms was able to take the classics up a notch through a dash of little details. My *lobio*, a kidney bean stew served with warm, flattened cornbread called *mchadi*, was improved by a dusting of local mountain herbs. The kitchen makes a point of using locally foraged and farmed produce that is organic and sustainably grown. After our hearty fare, the star-spangled sky and dim, orange glow of the Gergeti Trinity Church cast just enough light to illuminate the stoic silhouette looking down on us from an elevation of over 16,400 feet. Its mesmerising nature during the day is only matched by the mystery nightfall gifts this gigantic volcanic cone built upon strata—layers of hardened lava.

I woke up early the next day, eager to see the morning light cast its spell on the mountains outside my room. As the sun lit up the slopes, I sat on the balcony taking in the calm before undertaking my mission to further explore the hotel, hoping to enjoy the space minus other guests. I made my way to the lobby and found only the hotel staff about, busy setting things in order for the new day. In the open-dining area besides the bar, I watched breakfast being laid out. A large table in the centre was soon covered end-to-end with plates overloaded with fresh fruit, jugs of brightly coloured



The cuisine highlights modern spins on Georgian favourites (inset) but the real treat is to be able to feast on the shimmering slopes of Kazbeg (bottom) from anywhere in the hotel.

juices, homemade granola, golden-hued Georgian honey, freshly baked bread, a variety of cheeses, cold cuts, and eggs. As tempting as the food looked, I just grabbed a coffee and went to the sprawling sun deck to enjoy the view outside in complete silence.

As I sat soaking in the pristine mountain views and the gentle morning breeze, I knew I had to come back. Rooms had more than met my expectations, and I certainly hadn't had my fill. One night wasn't enough to adequately take in the dreamlike location, or the hotel's many other charms. It begged for slow travel, where every moment is savoured in the serene setting. ■

Essentials

Kazbegi or Stepantsminda village, where Rooms Hotel Kazbegi is located, is about a 150 km/3-4 hr-ride from Georgia's capital Tbilisi. While there are no direct flights from India to Tbilisi, most flights from Mumbai, Delhi and Bengaluru to the city usually have a Middle Eastern layover. Visitors can book a shuttle from Tbilisi airport to the hotel at an additional cost. Post-pandemic, the hotel has implemented all the necessary health safety protocols as per guidelines issued by the World Health Organisation and the Georgian government. (roomshotels.com/kazbegi; doubles from \$102/₹7523 minus taxes, including breakfast)



THE BUCKET

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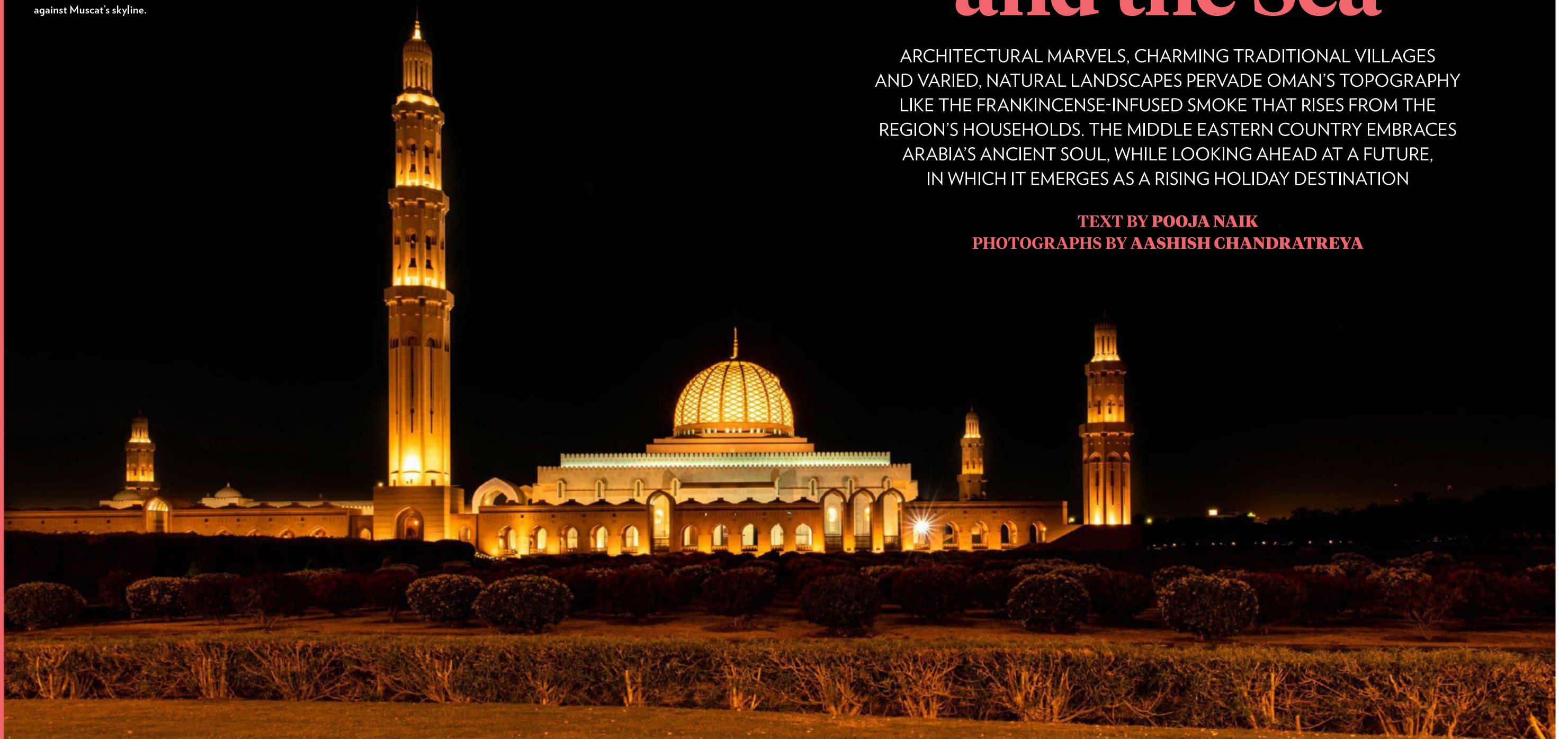
AASHISH CHANDRATREYA

The imposing Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque is a fine blend of Islamic, Middle Eastern and Omani architecture. Its central dome, 165-feet tall, and five minarets—which represent the five pillars of Islam, with the tallest minaret scaling 300 feet—are hard to miss against Muscat's skyline.

Of Sun, Sand and the Sea

ARCHITECTURAL MARVELS, CHARMING TRADITIONAL VILLAGES AND VARIED, NATURAL LANDSCAPES PERVADE OMAN'S TOPOGRAPHY LIKE THE FRANKINCENSE-INFUSED SMOKE THAT RISES FROM THE REGION'S HOUSEHOLDS. THE MIDDLE EASTERN COUNTRY EMBRACES ARABIA'S ANCIENT SOUL, WHILE LOOKING AHEAD AT A FUTURE, IN WHICH IT EMERGES AS A RISING HOLIDAY DESTINATION

TEXT BY POOJA NAIK
PHOTOGRAPHS BY AASHISH CHANDRATREYA



A sundowner-dhow cruise (pictured and facing page) is a quintessential Omani experience. The wooden boat sets sail on the Gulf of Oman—the northwestern arm of the Arabian Sea. The tour typically lasts for two hours, allowing guests ample time to sip on *kahwa*, while soaking in Old Muscat's harbour-front marvels such as the Al Alam Palace—the official ceremonial palace of the Sultan of Oman.

If the U.A.E. is the Middle East's futuristic face, Oman is the window into its ancient soul. The latter is a land that straddles the region's rich heritage, nomadic Bedouin ethics, and frankincense-trading and metalworking history. Landscapes here are as sigh-inducing as they are varied. Jagged mountain ranges, which lead to traditional villages, dominate the interiors. The contrasting northern coast, however, draws visitors to sample a taste of the seafront Muscat. Aashish Chandratreya was no exception to its charms.

The photographer travelled to the country's port capital with his parents last March, just as the relatively pleasant weather was on the brink of departure. The family's first international holiday packed in an itinerary rife with the nation's cultural highlights and architectural landmarks, while peeling back the curtain on Arabia's strong societal identity. He returns with this precious memorabilia of a digital catalogue.



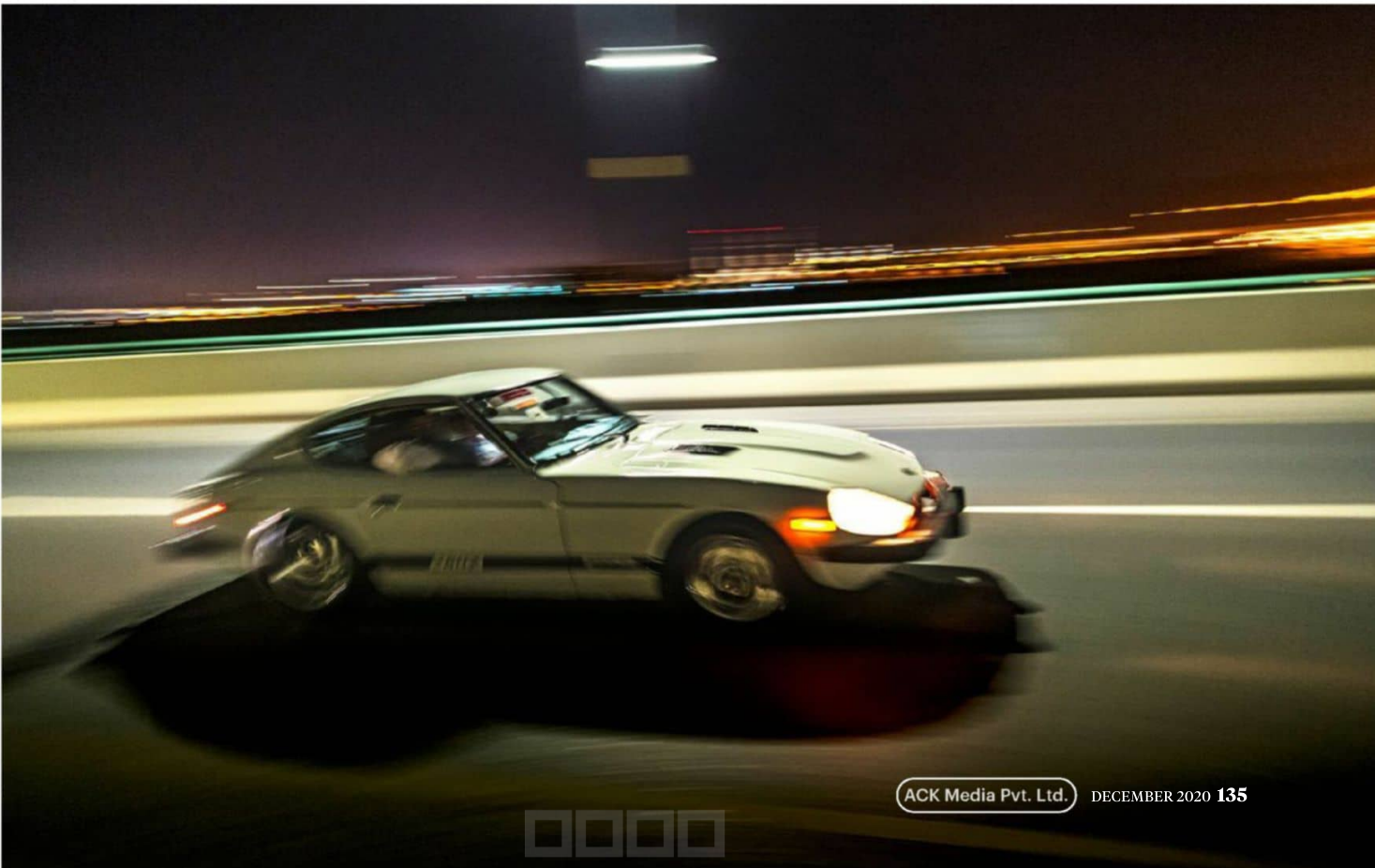
The historic town of Nizwa—160 kilometres from the capital—is located on an erstwhile key trade route and is now the second-biggest tourist destination in Oman. The area's eponymous 17th-century fort (pictured) has been restored in recent times and is filled with artefacts and collectibles that celebrate its past. At its entrance, tourists are welcomed with a ceremonial sword dance and traditional music.



Inaugurated in 2001 by the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said to commemorate his 30th year of reign, the Grand Mosque was built over six years and can accommodate up to 20,000 worshippers. The main prayer hall is breathtaking, but the 46,748 square foot, single-piece, hand-loomed carpet and the 45-foot long chandelier are the real showstoppers. Both the artefacts in the mosque once held a world record for being the largest of their kind. The titles have since been overtaken by Abu Dhabi's Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque.



Nizwa is a gateway to the Wahiba Sands Desert (top). The region is home to Bedouin people, who tend their donkeys, goats, and camels in this arid landscape dusted with rolling dunes; On weekends, automobile enthusiasts take their cars (bottom) for a spin down Muttrah Corniche's Al Bahri Road that runs parallel to the main souk.





Temperatures can soar up to an uncomfortable 40°C during the day. For many, post-sunset hours are preferably the best time to get a feel of the place in a different light.

BEST OF #AUTUMNDIARIES

From joggers' parks in cities covered in fall foliage to sweeping mountains engulfed with the season's brightest colours, readers sent in their favourite photographs of their autumn diaries.



1st

2nd



3rd



1 On her way to Tso Moriri in Ladakh, Ritu Saini caught the essence of fall at night. Bright yellow autumnal trees accentuated the brown of the majestic lakeside mountain.

2 Armed with a drone and a vision to capture fall at its peak—Abhik Mondal got lucky with an aerial shot of Smuggler's Notch in Vermont, flanked on either side by nature's bounty.

3 Pooja Choksi witnessed fall in all its glory at Wyoming's Grand Teton National Park with its bright aspen trees standing juxtaposed with snow-capped mountains.