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**Knowledge** is based on experience, **Everything** else is just information

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### BRIDGE THE KNOWLEDGE GAP

## Get Inspired - Explore

### BONDA TRIBE, ONKUDELLI, ORISSA

Bondas are the first forest settlers who came with the first wave of Africans Migrants 60,000 years ago and are confined to the hill regions to the Malkangiri district of south western Orissa. They are identified by their unique tribal jewellery of thick silver chains and colorful headgears.

Photo Credit: Winner of the Annual Photo Contest 2018 – Ekaterina Belova, Manager, Sita.





## AN EVENING WITH RIDA AND THE MUSICAL FOLKS

Spend an evening with Rida and the Musical Folks after the city tour of Shillong. The music of this Shillong based band has the rawness and earthy quality of folk songs along with a hint of jazz, and contemporary western tunes. Rida Gatphoh, who is the lead member of the band and also the songwriter and composer; juxtaposes the simplicity of the traditional, melodious, harmonious and uncluttered folk tunes of Meghalaya with hard-hitting lyrics about the devastating effects of man's encroachment into nature. But their songs are not doleful and sad. "Shinning" is one song where they still hope for better. Same with "Techno-Centric", which talks about the corporate world and how we need slow ourselves down lest we turn into machines. Not just the lyrics, the instruments that Rida and The Musical Folks use are all made by them from natural objects (like trees and bamboo). So, in a way, their instruments are also an extension of nature.

### GOOD TO KNOW:

- Not good on Sundays.
- The private performance by Rida and the Musical Folks will last for 60 minutes.
- The private session will be a mix of songs (both Khasi – the local language and English) sung by Rida & poetry (about nature) and storytelling (Meghalaya folklore) by a band member in English.
- In between questions are encouraged. Perfect time to get some local insight after the Shillong City Tour and everything that was covered as a part of the sightseeing.

Shillong, MEGHALAYA



## ONCE UPON A TIME IN PANCHAYAT

A Panchayat is a formalised local self-governance system in India at the village or small-town level. Spend an afternoon with a Jaipur local in a countryside farm set up for the villagers to learn about organic farming. It is located 1 hr away from the city centre of Jaipur.

This experience highlights the life of children in government schools, the various schemes which the government is running to help the villagers and to see how an organic farm works. The walk starts at the village school where clients are introduced to the initiatives and schemes run by the government to promote education. During the walk clients get to see various houses, occupations, family life and daily life of an Indian village.

The walk ends with lunch at the farm. A talk on the social fabric of the village is also organized to reflect better on what clients experienced during their walk. Perfect for clients on a busy trip of Rajasthan focussed on her big popular cities.

### GOOD TO KNOW:

- Location: 1 hr from Jaipur
- Timing: Anytime between 9:00 am to 5:00 pm
- Duration: 3 hours
- Minimum: 2 pax Maximum: 50 pax

Jaipur, RAJASTHAN



## TRUCK PAINTING EXPERIENCE

When a traveler comes to India, there are some everlasting souvenirs which stay in mind like the busy streets, the constant flow of people...and the colorful trucks! This experience is the opportunity to meet one of these artists – probably the best one - who paints these trucks. Raja, a professional truck-painter for the past 30 years will meet you in one of the trucks depot of the blue city where him and his team transform classic trucks on real rolling art work.

This experience is the opportunity to know more about an art which is not found in the cultural guide books, but which is definitely a part of the contemporary culture of India. Perfect for families! During this exciting experience, you will help Raja to complete his work and chat with him to understand a little more about the tricks of this particular art over a cup of tea.

After that, when on the road, we bet you will scrutinise these trucks with a different eye!

### GOOD TO KNOW:

- Minimum: 2 paying pax / Maximum- 10 pax
- Timing: Anytime between 9:00 am to 4:00 pm
- Duration: 1.5 - 2.5hrs (depends on the interest of the guests)
- Location: In or outskirt of Jodhpur

Jodhpur, RAJASTHAN



## SPICES AND OTHER STORIES

'SPICES AND OTHER STORIES' is an alternative Spice tour in Thekkady. The tour starts with a short Jeep ride towards a view point where clients will get a bird's eye view of Kumily town, the Periyar National Park, agricultural fields and forests. From here a 10 minutes' drive will take clients to a village where they will spend the next 15 to 20 minutes getting to know about the locals, the spices they grow, the local agrarian economy and the aspirations of the young. The

### REGULAR SPICE TOUR VS ALTERNATIVE SPICE TOUR

Parameters	Regular Spice Tour	Spices and other stories
Duration	½ hour to 1 hour	2-3 hours
Modes of transport	No (plantation walk only)	Cycles or Jeep
Areas covered	Plantation only	A view point (a bird's eye view of Kumily / Thekkady), Village walk and Plantation visit.
Experience	Limited to Plantation walk	Understanding spices, the market and the people involved
Topics covered	Spices grown and variety	Bio-diversity, local people, backyard grown spices, local agrarian economy and aspirations of the young
Interaction	Guide only	Local people and Guide
Snacks	No	Home-made spice tea and chocolate at a spice farmer's home

Thekkady, KERALA



## THE CAPITOL COMPLEX WALK

Walk up to the High Court to see its unique architecture created by Le Corbusier that shades the Office Blocks from scorching sun, heavy rain and keeps the complex cool in summers. Later visit the famous 'The Open Hand' monument – a hand-like structure hoisted up on a pole which rotates like a weather cock and conveys the message of openness, peace and unity.

Walk past other smaller monuments like The Geometric Hill, The Tower of Shadows and The Martyr's Memorial before arriving at the Legislative Assemblies building. Enter the circular Punjab Assembly Hall which is crowned by a massive hyperbolic tower extending above the roofline and providing a sculptural and dramatic look. Interplay of natural and artificial lighting, ventilation and acoustics can be observed here. The last stop is The Secretariat where one can go up to the top floor for a bird's eye view.

### GOOD TO KNOW:

- Visit 'The High Court' from outside; 'The Open Hand' monument; 'The Punjab Assembly Hall' from inside if it is not in session and 'The Secretariat' where you can go up to the top floor if no VIP is visiting.
- 3 batches of not more than 30 persons are allowed at 10:00 AM / 12:00 Noon / 3:00 PM.
- Carry your ID proofs (passport for foreigners) to be shown at The Capitol Complex Tourist Centre before start of the walk.
- Nothing is allowed inside except a purse, a mobile phone and a camera per guest.
- A Guide from Punjab Tourism, a Constable of Tourism Police and a Constable of Chandigarh Police escorts the guests.

Chandigarh, PUNJAB



## HANDUNUGODA TEA PLANTATION

Tea production is one of the main income sources for Sri Lanka and around 20% of the teas sold around the world come from Sri Lanka. While there are numerous Tea experiences here, the legendary Hadunugoda Tea Estate, located in Southern Sri Lanka, is a perfect way to get introduced to Sri Lankan Tea and the famous 'virgin' white tea produced here.

It is said that white tea was exclusively produced for the Chinese Emperor Tsong, which was harvested solely by virgins using golden scissors and collected into bowls, in order to avoid human touch! Hosted by the owner of the Tea Plantation (subject to his availability), guests have the opportunity to walk around the plantation, experience tea plucking and enjoy a visit to the tea factory to see the various stages of tea production before ending the tour with a tea tasting session where they can taste over 30 types of teas including the famous 'virgin white tea'.

### GOOD TO KNOW:

- Location: Handunugoda Tea Plantation, located roughly half-way between Mirissa and Galle
- Timing: 0800 hrs to 1630 hrs all days of the week
- Duration: 1 ½ - 2 Hours
- Minimum: 2 pax
- Maximum: 50 pax

Handunugoda, SRI LANKA



## MEET INDRA, THE KHUKURI EXPERT

The Khukuri holds a unique place in the Nepalese culture as more than just an exquisite example of local craftsmanship, or even a symbol of national pride. This forward-curving Nepalese knife, closely associated with the Gurkhas - the fearless soldiers of Nepalese nationality recruited in different armies all over the world - is also an important spiritual talisman. The shape of the blade represents the Hindu trinity - Brahma - the creator, Vishnu - the preserver, and Shiva - the destroyer who clears away the old to make way for the new.

Indra has been making hand-made Khukuris for more than thirty years and is one of the main suppliers to the shops of the Thamel area and the Nepalese army. You will be taught how to make a Khukuri during this very friendly half-day session from the very first step of choosing the iron (tough or smooth) till the final design.

A very in depth session of a lesser known part of the Nepalese culture during which you will have a very active role. The opportunity to come back

with an everlasting souvenir of Indra's unique smile and your own Khukuri made by yourself!

### GOOD TO KNOW:

- Minimum: 1 person / Maximum -6 persons
- Timing: Between 7:00 am to 2:00 pm
- Duration: Around 4 hrs. Depending upon the iron chosen (tough or smooth).
- Location: Outskirts of Kathmandu (30 minutes drive from the city center)

Kathmandu, NEPAL



## EXPLORING BUMTHANG VALLEY ON CYCLE

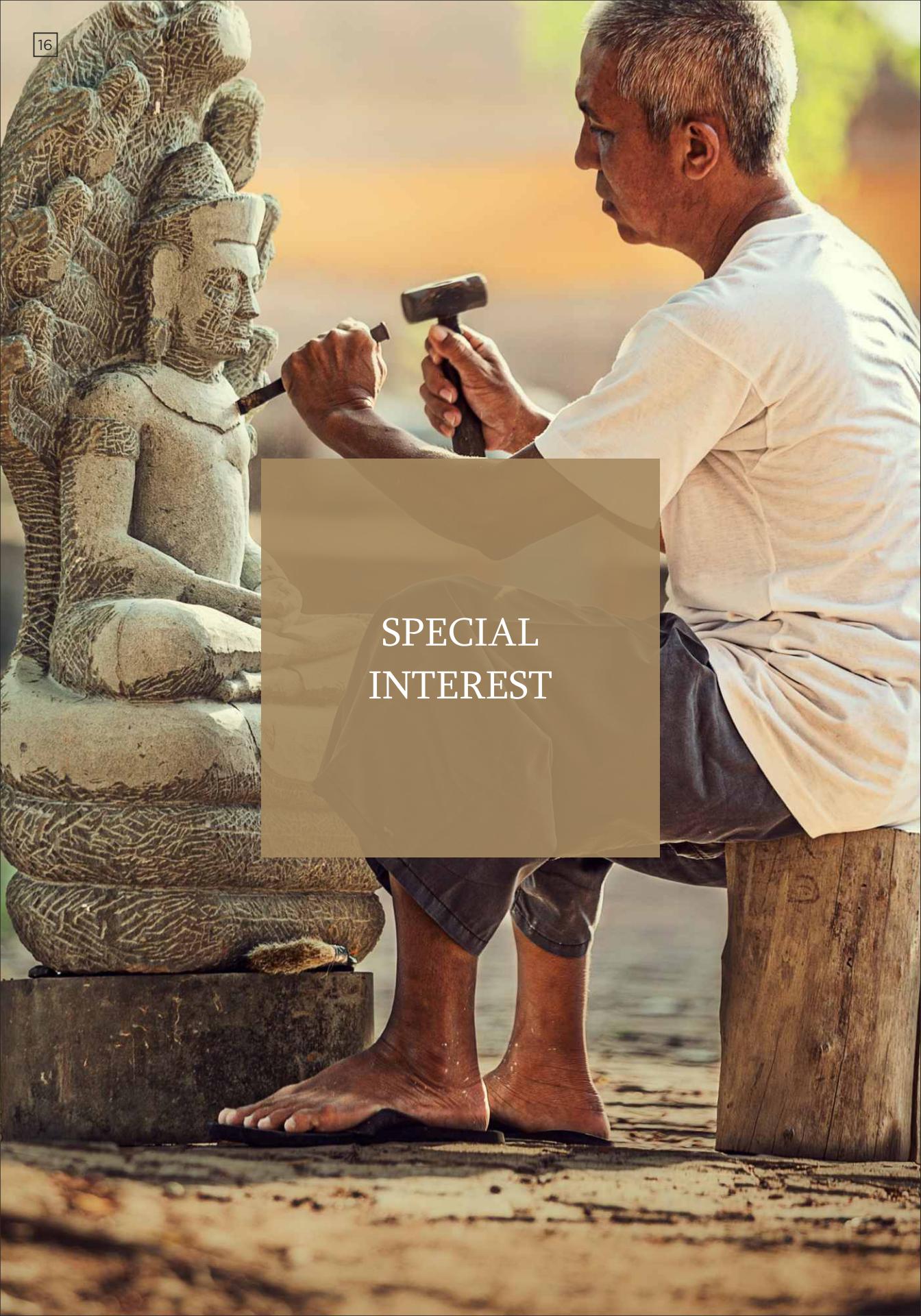
### DAY 01

Post breakfast, head out on a cycling pilgrimage of the spiritual heartland of Bhutan by visiting some of its most important Lhakhangs (temples). Enjoy a traditional Bumthang lunch and also get to see the monks debate in an interesting Tibetan style called Tsenyid (Monday to Saturday at 16:00 hrs). The physicality in such debates is striking, embellished with hand clapping and emphatic gestures.

### DAY 02

Post breakfast, drive to the Tang Valley. Visit the 19th century Ogyen Chholing, once the country estate of a prominent religious aristocrat of Bhutan for a sneak peek into life in pre-currency Bhutan. Cycle back to the hotel.

Bumthang, BHUTAN



## ASIAN FRONTIERS

A JOURNEY THROUGH INDIA AND MYANMAR



Here's the fantastic news: the Myanmar government has recently changed the border crossing laws. It is now possible to travel overland from India via Kohima and Imphal to Myanmar and even cross over to Thailand. Previously one had to return to Tamu-Moreh to exit Myanmar which was also the entry point. This dusty mountainous trail from India to Myanmar has seen very few tourists in the past seven and half decades after the Japanese Army, during World War II, marched from Myanmar to Imphal and Kohima in a failed attempt to invade India; then a British colony. The Allied Forces handed the Japanese their worst defeat but not before a bitterly fought battle that left thousands dead on both sides. The Veterans have now forgiven each other and meet from time to time at the Kohima Cathedral to pray for peace. For those interested in World War II history, both Kohima and Imphal have several sites that tell the tale of a

forgotten war in the Asian theatre which in many ways turned the tide of World War II.

The recent changes in the border crossing laws resulted in a collaboration with Asian Trails, our sister concern in Myanmar. Together we designed a 16 nights/17 days Indo-Myanmar itinerary. To know things firsthand, Kuntil Baruwa, Explorer at our Destination Knowledge Centre was sent to Kohima and then to Imphal from where he continued to the border town of Tamu on the Myanmar side. Tamu is from where Asian Trails will take over the ground arrangements from us.

In our Indo-Myanmar itinerary, start from KOLKATA (formerly Calcutta) the capital of the state of West Bengal in India's East Coast. Kolkata is busy, chaotic, yet irresistibly charming with its neo-classical and Gothic architecture. An erstwhile trading post of the



British East India Company located by River Hooghly, Kolkata is the largest city of Eastern India. Durga Puja which celebrates Shakti – the divine feminine of Hinduism for 10 days during the month of October is the best time to visit. From Kolkata fly nonstop to Dimapur and continue by surface to KOHIMA the capital of the state of Nagaland where 96% of its population is Christian. Located at an altitude of 1500 metres (5000 feet) Kohima is scattered across several ridges and hill tops. Nagaland - home to 16 tribes of Tibeto-Burman origin has remained largely unknown even to Indians. But thanks to the Hornbill Festival (01-10 December every year) the Nagas are slowly coming in contact with people from diverse backgrounds and contrasting life styles not only from within India but also overseas. The Hornbill Festival is when all the 16 Naga tribes gather in Kohima dressed up in their astonishing and beautiful finery.

It is a great time to be in Kohima. The festive Christmas week is also a beautiful time to be here. From Kohima continue by surface to IMPHAL the capital of the state of Manipur where women have always been at the forefront whether conducting commerce or taking the initiative in socio-political issues. At the 500 year old Ima Kaithal (Mother's Market) of Imphal, 4000 women (aged between 38-62) trade every single day selling everything from handicraft to fish, and from exotic fruits & vegetables to blue lotus flowers. Loktak Lake which is a day trip from Imphal is a nice precursor to the scenic Inle Lake of Myanmar. It is famous for its unique ecosystem called 'Phumdi' (a Manipuri word meaning floating mats of soil and vegetation) which are strong enough to sustain a house. Like Inle, Loktak is throbbing with life though tourism here is still very much in its infancy unlike Inle. Every November the 200 year old Govindjee Temple of Imphal comes alive with the ancient dance tradition of Raas Leela which celebrates the life and time of the Hindu God Krishna. It is a great time to be in Imphal. Govindjee Temple is not too far away from the Kangla Fort – a majestic citadel which was once the capital of the Manipuri monarchs.

From Imphal Valley climb up the steep hills to first reach MOREH on the Indian side and then enter TAMU on the Myanmar side after completing the

immigration formalities. Post Lunch continue to KALE for an overnight. Kale is a fascinating cultural mix - the town is split down the middle between the Chin ethnic community who are Christians and the Bamars, the dominant ethnic group of Mynamar who are Buddhist. There are said to be over 600 churches in Kale. Continue to MONYWA next morning where the forested hills fall away to farmland with its attractive villages.

The Thanbodi Temple with its million Buddha images is the highlight here. From Monywa reach MANDALAY – the Spiritual Capital of Myanmar. There are many splendid pagodas, monasteries and the Royal Palace with its teak pavilions, throne rooms and halls. From Mandalay hop on a boat down the mighty Irrawaddy River to the pottery village of YANDABOO. In the nearby village of Pan No the community harnesses over a thousand water buffaloes to cultivate their land.

It is here in Yandaboo that the peace treaty which ended the First Anglo-Burmese war was signed in 1826. Assam and Manipur became British protectorates as a part of the treaty. Take another boatride from Yandaboo to arrive into BAGAN one of the world's greatest archaeological sites. Between the year 1057 and 1287, the Kings of Bagan built 4450 Temples here out of which 2230 survive, a legacy of the Buddhist belief that to build a temple was to earn merit. From Bagan fly nonstop to Heho and continue by surface to the scenic INLE LAKE famous for its floating gardens and villages and the unique way of life of the locals which is based entirely on the freshwater lake which is 22 kms (14 miles) long and 10 kms (6 miles) wide. From Inle Lake return to Heho to fly nonstop to the last destination of our itinerary YANGON. With its wonderful array of colonial buildings, Yangon (formerly Rangoon) just like Kolkata from where the journey begins, was a key erstwhile trading post of the British East India company. Yangon is also famous for the Shwedagon Pagoda, the monumental golden Buddhist shrine. The city also has an eclectic range of museums, art galleries, restaurants and markets.



## HORNBILL FESTIVAL, KOHIMA

### A FANTASTIC EXAMPLE OF THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF TOURISM



**No 1 – The timing:** Since the year 2000, the Hornbill festival in Kohima; the capital city of Nagaland has been an annual affair. From 01-10 Dec every year, the festival showcases the unique culture of the various Naga tribes. The Hornbill festival ends 2 weeks before Christmas and Nagaland is a Christian majority state (96% of its 2 million population is Christian). The Hornbill festival ensures that locals make good money just before Christmas - the biggest and the most awaited festival of Nagaland and Naga society.

**No 2 – The confluence of cultures – part 1:** The Hornbill Festival is getting popular each year not only in India but globally. The Nagas of Nagaland are coming in contact with people both from other parts of India and overseas. I was really happy to see the Naga lady (from a remote corner of Nagaland) of my homestay making black coffee for a group of French tourists and asking another bunch from South India if they want their coffee black or with

milk. The coffee isn't great but they are getting there. I was also full of joy to see tourists flocking the food stalls of the festival trying Naga cuisine whose flavours are unique and alien even to Indians.

**No 3 – The confluence of cultures – part 2:** Nagas of Nagaland are a misnomer. The Naga society actually comprises of 16 big tribes (and numerous smaller tribes) - each unique in their tradition, food habit, costume, and language. They don't understand each other because each tribe has a different dialect. It is Nagamese -a mix of broken Assamese, Hindi, and Bengali- that helps the Nagas communicate between themselves. So the Hornbill Festival in that sense is also a rare occasion when 16 Naga tribes come together in one place to celebrate their diversity. The Naga tribes in the days of the yore have always fought against each other. Why tribes? Even one village of the same tribe has fought with another.



## IN OUR OPINION

## THIRUVANNAMALAI A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY



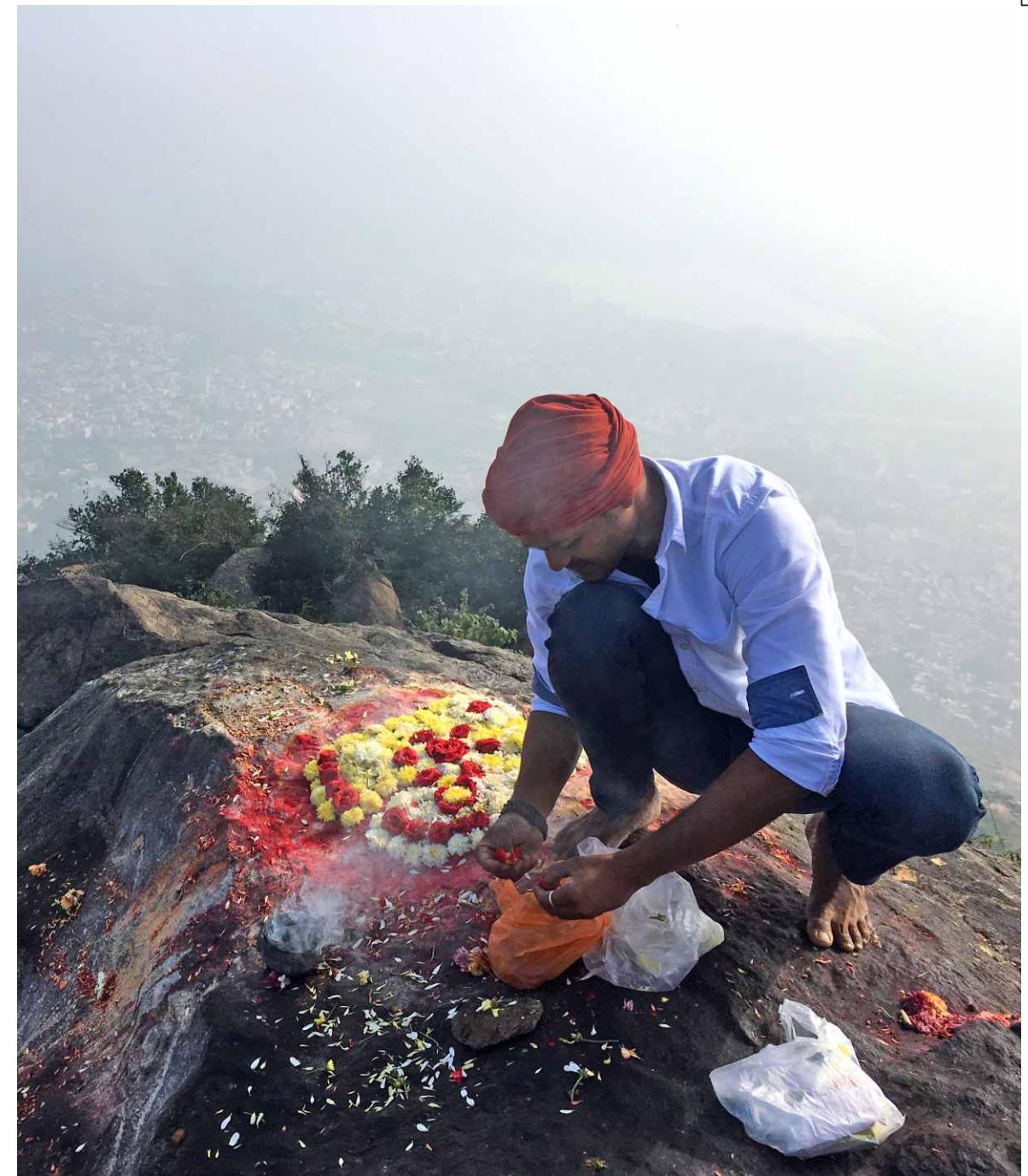
Tejashri Simha is our Explorer-in-Residence, Destination Knowledge Centre, based in Bangalore.

A quick diversion from Mahabalipuram to Puducherry, Thiruvannamalai is a sacred spiritual center associated with the great powers of Lord Shiva. However, off late it owes its popularity to the Ramana Ashrama. Thiruvannamalai is a gateway to those who are looking to seriously further their spiritual journey. Though the hike atop the Arunachala Hill, considered to be a beacon of light, may not be possible for everyone, spending time at the Ashram is a good way to start understanding the philosophies of Sage Ramana on the path to finding oneself. With people coming from all walks of life, Thiruvannamalai almost seems like a global village constituting people of similar frequencies leading to a mystically charged atmosphere. It is one of the best places in Tamil Nadu to propose for yoga and meditation groups.

### THINGS TO DO IN THIRUVANNAMALAI

Ramana Maharishi Ashram: Sage Ramana dedicated his life to be one with the universe and it is here in Thiruvannamalai where he spent 23 years achieving his goal. Many admirers and spiritual seekers come here to learn his teachings at the Ramana Ashram or just spend time in the quite environs of the ashram. The evening aarti followed by a chanting session is one of the activities not to be missed when here.

Arunachala Hike: This is an activity hosted by Sharan who is a spiritual seeker and teacher in his own right. He teaches a technique of meditation a day before the hard hike up the hill. There is no specific path to be followed on this 3 hour hike with stops at some caves where meditation techniques taught previously are practiced. Once atop, the view is spectacular. Here, Sharan performs a puja at Shiva's feet after which the meditation technique is practiced again. This is not a trek for everyone and



should be proposed to a very specific type of clientele.

#### 2 DAYS IN THIRUVANNAMALAI

**Day 1:** Drive from Mahabalipuram and upon arrival rest for a bit at the hotel. Reach the Ashram by 6:15 pm to witness the evening aarti and chanting session. Retire for the evening.

**Day 2:** For those interested in the Arunachala hike,

the day will begin at 5:00 am and end by afternoon 2:00 pm after which the afternoon can be spent relaxing and then they can again come to the ashram for the evening aarti and chanting session. For those who are not interested in the hike, they can head to the ashram for the morning aarti at 10:00 am, spend the day at the ashram either meditating or come back to the resort/hotel and relax. In the evening visit the ashram for the evening aarti and retire for the day after.

## WALKING AROUND IN SHIMLA

### LIFE IN THE HILLS



Sumit Raj Vashisht is a writer and a tourist guide based in Shimla who is passionate about penning life in the hills.

Shimla is one such place in India that constantly keeps receiving all sorts of affection from its inhabitants and the visitors. I have not seen a single person, man or woman, young or old, rich or poor who does not love Shimla. Especially the old part of the town and the surroundings of Shimla offers such an atmosphere to the visitor or to a local that the person immediately feels revitalised. The air, the climate, the foliage, the Victorian villas, the tranquility, the landscape and the spectacular views all collectively hold the entire credit.

Shimla offers lovely walking lanes and trails for people who love to walk. It is absolutely a safe town. Shimla is surrounded by a thick cover of forests where the slopes are dotted with tiny hamlets. These ancient trails are still used by the villagers.

These trails lead you to some really pretty villages that will fascinate you with its stunning views and the warm hospitality of villagers. The forest trails are all through thick woods that provide shelter to birds, butterflies and cicadas.

There are pathways with loose rocks asking you to step on them carefully. Ferns and mosses along with the other foliage make these trails even more attractive.

Another great place to walk around is Shimla's Heritage Zone. The walk transports you directly to a bygone era when the town was the summer capital of the British Raj. The charm of its past is hidden in its gothic villas, swaying cedars, hopping monkeys, pine scented climate, crispness in the air and traffic free roads.

A day hike in the outskirts of Shimla is another option to rejuvenate yourself. Test your muscles a

bit and observe the rhythm of your breath on these slopes. It is promised that once you are on top you will find the view and the hike, both breath-taking!

Or you may go birding with a member of an erstwhile royal family and have lunch with him. An

early morning visit to his house in a village where the British Viceroys once went to hunt, is the perfect time to see birds.



## WOMEN AND THE THIRD GENDER OF MANIPUR A NORMAL LIFE



Kuntil Baruwa is our explorer-in-residence. He travels all over the Indian sub-continent to make friends with locals and use their recommendations to design unique experiences for the inquisitive savvy traveller.

During my recent trip to Manipur in Northeast India I realised women literally run the markets and the streets here. What I also found equally fascinating is that the Transgender community of Manipur has far more social acceptance than their counterparts in other parts of India.

Go to the 500 year old Ima Kaithal (meaning Mother's Market) in Imphal; the capital city of Manipur and you will see 4000 women (aged anywhere between 38-62) trade every single day selling anything from handicraft to clothes to fish to exotic fruits & vegetables to blue lotus flowers – early morning till late evening. Even the money lenders here are women. This is a site and a sight

that you will never see anywhere else in India. The Mother's Market though is less about women rights and more about equality. The market welcomes all women irrespective of their religion and social standing.

And it has always been more than a trade hub. The Mother's Market has served as a meeting point for the mothers to initiate direct action when it comes to any socio-political issues. It is in this Market the Nupi-Lan (meaning Women's War) Movement was born in the beginning of the 20th century. The British were reminded not once but twice by the Mothers that they cannot get away with exploitation. In many ways the Nupi-Lan movement sowed the seeds of social and political reforms in Manipur. In the late 1970s came the Mera Paibis (Women Torchbearers) who would patrol the streets at night carrying flaming torches in their fight against drug abuse, crimes against women and human rights violation.

This is what fascinates me about Manipuri Women. They can be – all at the same time - as graceful as a fleeting butterfly among flowers when they dance in their Raas Leela (Dance of Divine Love) in the Temples and as dreaded as the Mera Paibis with their flaming torches who can bring everything to a grinding halt.

In Manipur's Community courtyard plays or Shumang Leela – an art form which is exclusively

male - women's roles are played by transgenders since the past 100 years. It is almost impossible for an outsider to make out the difference between women and transgenders of Manipur with their embellished effeminate mannerisms. Not just in community plays, the contribution of the Manipur's transgenders in the field of arts, music, dance, fashion and beauty is immense and has a very few parallel anywhere in India. Most transgenders lead a normal life. Some even have children.



## PUNJAB

### EXPLORING THE HIDDEN TREASURES OF THE STATE



Inderjeet Rathod stitches all our findings together into beautiful itineraries, prepares reference documents for the operations team and designs special interest products on demand at the Destination Knowledge Centre.

The name 'Punjab' was coined by a medieval era Muslim traveller Ibn Batuta, denoting a vast fertile land located south-west of the Himalayas and north of the Thar Desert, watered by five major rivers – Satluj, Beas, Ravi, Chenab and Jhelum. This introduction is for someone who doesn't know what or where Punjab is. Nonetheless its people, food, music and culture have reached all corners of the world with none remaining oblivious to its vivacity!

Hospitality comes naturally to the people here, ever ready to welcome visitors into their homes. However tourism never took off beyond Chandigarh and Amritsar due to lack of awareness

and infrastructure. I travelled to some of the unexplored places between these two cities to know what lies beyond that could interest the tourists.

Patiala, an erstwhile Princely State popular all over the world for concocting 'Patiala Peg', has been the cultural capital of Punjab for centuries. Visiting the old monuments with interesting architecture, undertaking a heritage walk in the old town and shopping around for local handicrafts like 'Phulkari' textiles, colourful hair braids 'Parandi' and handmade 'Jutti' shoes in the local bazaar can be great fun. Though the city has one decent hotel to its name, which is the erstwhile home of the Maharajah of Patiala. It is being renovated and should make it easier to stay, though it is easily accessible from Chandigarh for a day excursion (75 km / 1h30 drive).

Kapurthala, another erstwhile Princely State, has a



couple of monuments with unique architecture worth visiting. Jagatjit Palace is modelled on the Palace in Versailles and Fontainebleau while Moorish Mosque draws its inspiration from the Grand Mosque of Marrakesh in Morocco. Jagatjit Palace houses a Military School in its premises therefore can be seen only from outside. Overnight stay is not recommended here too due to lack of a good hotel however the Town is accessible from Hoshiarpur (65 km / 1h30 drive) or Amritsar (70 km / 1h30 drive).

Punjab being an agrarian state has several Farmhouses located amidst agricultural fields. I visited one of them called Citrus County located near Hoshiarpur. Staying here gives one an authentic rural tourism experience. Taking a walk in the village to observe the village life, enjoying a tractor trolley ride through Citrus Orchards, relishing a Dhaba lunch at a rustic location, enjoying cocktails and dinner in the sprawling lawns of the farmhouse was an experience to cherish.

Anandpur Sahib where the "Khalsa" (the present sikh identity) was established has become popular

due to Hola Mohalla festival celebrated here with fervour in March every year. It marks a congregation of up to 100,000 Sikh devotees from all over the country to celebrate the festival of colour and gaiety. The three days festival culminates on the day of 'Holi festival' celebrated all over India.

A trip to Punjab remains incomplete without a visit to Amritsar which has the best of everything Punjabi. Be it food, culture, handicrafts or faith. The Golden Temple located in the centre of the city is the holiest shrine for the Sikhs and visiting it sunset or sunrise is the most amazing experience.

I realize that there is so much more to see in Punjab than what has been on offer traditionally. The glorious history of Patiala, the magnificent architecture of Kapurthala, lovely farmhouses in the countryside, stories of valour and spiritualism in Anandpur Sahib, the authentic Punjabi cuisine and the colourful handicrafts ; all lie unexplored beckoning the tourists to come and discover them. Are you game for it?

## THE SPIRIT OF VARANASI

### THE CITY OF LIGHT



Kuntil Baruwa is our explorer-in-residence. He travels all over the Indian sub-continent to make friends with locals and use their recommendations to design unique experiences for the inquisitive savvy traveller.

Minneapolis bred and living in India for 20 years Jeremy Jai Oltmann teaches Yoga, takes people out on Walks and plays groovy Acid Techno Music in Varanasi.

I was sitting on the verandah of a lovely 160 year old British Bungalow in the hills of the Kumaon Himalayas. With a cold one in hand I was wondering why I am still living in Varanasi after all these years and not in the Himalayas!

I came to India at the age of 25 to serve the marginalized in New Delhi. After a couple years of trying to understand the swirling cultures and languages around me I started feeling strangely

giddy and confused (some say 'kaan fused', or 'fused in the ears', pardon the pun). I left to study Hindi in Mussoorie, a quaint British Hill Station town and then ended up living in Varanasi, the most holy city of the Hindus where I ran an internship program on Hindu studies for 9 years. Varanasi, which is also known as Kashi or Banaras is a place having untold layers of culture, amazing architecture, wonderfully confusing alleyways and is renowned for being a centre of traditional music, hand-woven wedding saris, historic Sanskrit schools and ancient temples along the Ganga river.

I first heard this couplet, one that is never far from the lips of all true Varanasi locals, of whom I now count myself, while I was sitting by the Ganga - "Rand, Sand, Seedi, Sanyasi, Inse Bacche to Sevai Kashi!" A rough translation is, "Widows, Bulls, Stairs, Saints, dodge them all to reach Kashi! (Liberation)". This couplet which is the key to survive and thrive in Varanasi is credited to the famed 15th century local

weaver-poet Kabir. Kabir was born to a Widow and abandoned to escape dishonor, the Bulls wandering in narrow alleys can gore you with a quick flip of their sharp horns, a misguided step while navigating the famous stone steps leading to the Ganga can land you up with a cracked skull and Varanasi's fake Sadhus are always ready to fleece you with their phony spiritualism.

Well, if you don't have enough time to sit by the Ganga your whole life then I suggest you visit the Harmony Bookstore in Assi ghat. Often you will be surrounded by other international and local

browsers, research scholars, budding (or decayed) authors, and university students paging through the colourful coffee table books and vast array of literature.

It was already time to journey back from Kumaon and it dawned on me that I actually never left Varanasi! I realized that the city that is said to sit on Shiva's trident, outside of time and hidden from the Hindu God of Death, Yama, was my home and that sipping a cold beer under the fir trees with the cool breeze of the Himalaya can't hold a candle to living in the great Kashi, the City of Light!



STAYS  
WE LOVED  
&  
STAYS TO  
WATCH OUT FOR



STAYS WE LOVED  
MAINSTREAM, BUT DIFFERENT



CITRUS COUNTY FARMSTAY, HOSHIARPUR, PUNJAB



Citrus County is a large farmhouse located in Chhauni Kalan village in Hoshiarpur district of Punjab. Lying almost hidden due to heavy foliage and tall trees around it, a stay here is all about full hearted Punjabi hospitality. On entering the gates one comes across a two-storied bungalow with a lovely manicured garden.

The property has 3 air-conditioned rooms in the main bungalow and 9 air-conditioned tents in the garden. Each tent is located at a sufficient distance from each other ensuring privacy and comfort of a private zone for oneself in this lovely farmhouse! The rooms in the main bungalow are quite spacious and have minimal furniture in them. Each has a king-sized bed, an attached private bathroom and ample sitting space. The tents are spacious too but smaller in size than the rooms. However they are similarly equipped and have attached bathrooms which are large with running hot and cold water along with rain showers.

The host Harkirat Ahluwalia is a proud Punjabi with a jovial demeanour. He and his wife Jasveen manages the farmhouse with a team of loyal helpers, cooks and drivers. They have two school going children, Zorawar and Partap, who study in Chandigarh. The last but not the least, two Labradors, Rufus and Simba, complete the family.

Harkirat plans the activities for his guests meticulously striking a perfect balance between giving company to his guests and providing them ample time for themselves. Guests can visit the citrus farm where Harkirat is happy to lay out a picnic lunch, go on a tractor ride to the village, cycle around in the countryside, do Yoga in the lovely manicured garden and take cooking lessons from him. From Citrus County, one can also visit Anandpur Sahib (2 hrs one-way) with its amazing museum on Sikh history. Anandpur Sahib is also the venue of the Holla Mohalla Festival which is celebrated three days before and on the day of Holi – the festival of colours. Kapurthala which is an architectural delight takes about the same time as Anandpur Sahib while Amritsar, the holy city of the Sikhs, is an easy drive of 2hrs 30 minutes one way from the farmhouse.

#### ELEPHANT VALLEY, GANESHPURAM, TAMIL NADU



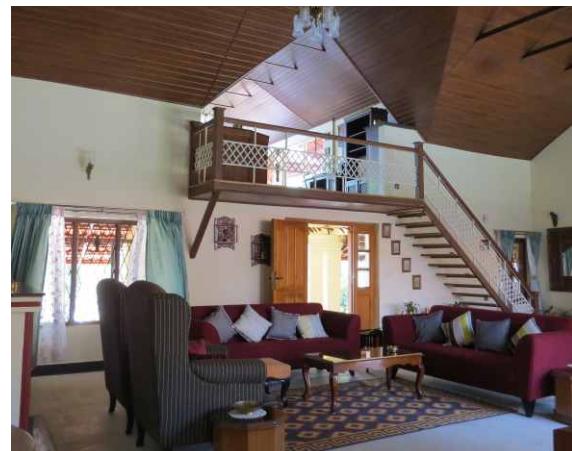
12 kms short of the touristy town of Kodaikanal, a quick detour at Perumal Malai on a semi-bumpy road takes you to Elephant Valley. The tranquility and serenity that permeates the entire surrounding can dissipate the tired bones of even the weariest of travelers. This 100 acre eco-farm hotel nestled in the hinterlands of the elephant migration route brings true sense to living in harmony. The living spaces have replicated local architecture fused with sturdy sustainable eco-friendly material from the outside while the insides scream contemporary style. While this may seem like the apt place for anyone looking for a few days of solitude, it is imperative to understand that Elephant Valley is literally sitting in the midst of nowhere; this is all there is!!

#### RAINTREE ANNASALAI, CHENNAI, TAMIL NADU



This 5 star hotel is a chic uptown modern hotel bang in the middle of a busy area of Chennai. The rooms are cozy done up in subtle tones with the right balance of color to give it a refreshing look and feel. Although situated right by the road, the noise from the road does not penetrate the rooms ensuring a sound sleep. The service is prompt and warm and the perky ambience is definitely a highlight.

#### KANCHIGAR ESTATE, CHIKAMAGALUR, KARNATAKA



A homestay with just 3 rooms, Kanchigar Estate is a family-run coffee estate where guests stay with the family in their humble home. Nivedita, your host at Kanchigar Estate is a jovial and enthusiastic person who will introduce you to her uncle, a planter with vast knowledge of coffee and its production method. Tucked away in the deepest parts of Chikamagalur, this estate is a home away from home. Pet lovers will have an even better time thanks to the friendly canine population. Their offerings include a coffee tasting session, angling in the premises and picnics.

#### GRANDE BAY RESORT, MAHABALIPURAM, TAMIL NADU



This 4 star hotel has 41 rooms clustered around a large pool. The rooms are spacious and contemporary in design with a front porch. Some rooms are duplex and perfect for accommodating families. The resort is not by the beach but a good 5 minutes' walk outside of the gate through the back but the massive pool more than makes up for this. They have only one restaurant which caters to all kinds of dietary requirements with indoor and outdoor seating. They also have a full-fledged bar in the premises. The staff is attentive and the service is prompt. I would recommend this hotel for groups and FITs.

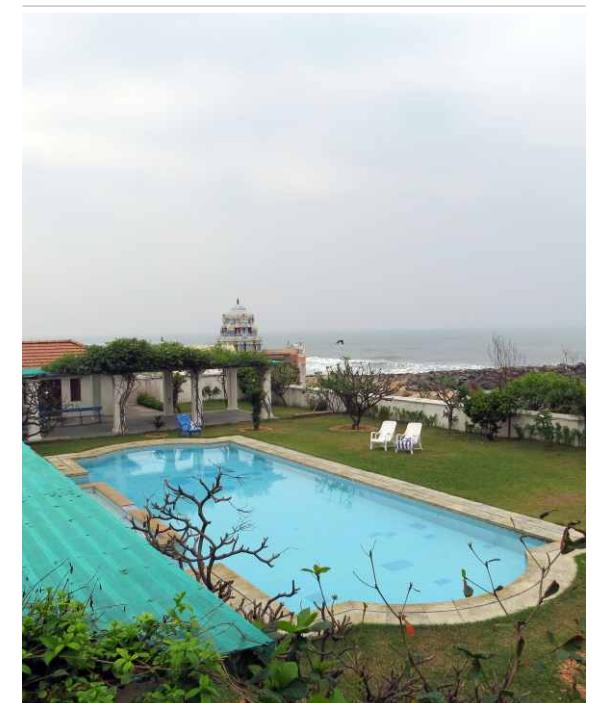
#### MANGALA HERITAGE, MANGALA VILLAGE, TAMIL NADU



Mangala Heritage retreat offers an authentic rural

experience packed with things to do that include Pottery, Village Walk, Cooking Demo, Classical Dance Performances etc. Done up in shades of yellow and blue, this cute little compact abode has a very homely feel to it. This artistically restored house facing a pond offers 4 compact rooms which have no ventilation and soft lighting. Mangala Heritage can be offered only to a select few clients who are looking for truly off-beat experiences for a maximum of two nights where they will be looked after well by a warm staff.

#### BUNGALOW ON THE BEACH, TRANQUEBAR, TAMIL NADU



Bungalow on the beach, needless to say smack on the beach, was the erstwhile residence of the marines of the Danish Naval fleet. The building is typical of European styled buildings with wide arches, high ceilings, tall columns, large windows and sprawling gardens with a view of the tempestuous Bay of Bengal Sea. Their rooms are an attempt to recreating the colonial charm by adding four-post beds, hard wood flooring and antique chest drawers alongside plantation chairs; though of similar sizes no two rooms are alike. To add a touch of the Danish heritage, the eight rooms are named after the Danish ships that docked at the port of Tharangambadi during its Danish past.

### MANTARA KOODAM, SWAMIMALAI, TAMIL NADU



A luxurious resort set in the middle of nowhere, Mantara Koodam offers 30 cottages which are in tune with the green and serene settings. The insides of the rooms are simple yet elegant with well-appointed bathrooms. They also have two homes which can each accommodate a family of up to 4 people. The food they serve is simply marvelous, it is a mix of European and Indian fare with emphasis on the local cuisine. This is perfect for FITs and groups who would like to stay in a resort like set up with ample open spaces and on point services.

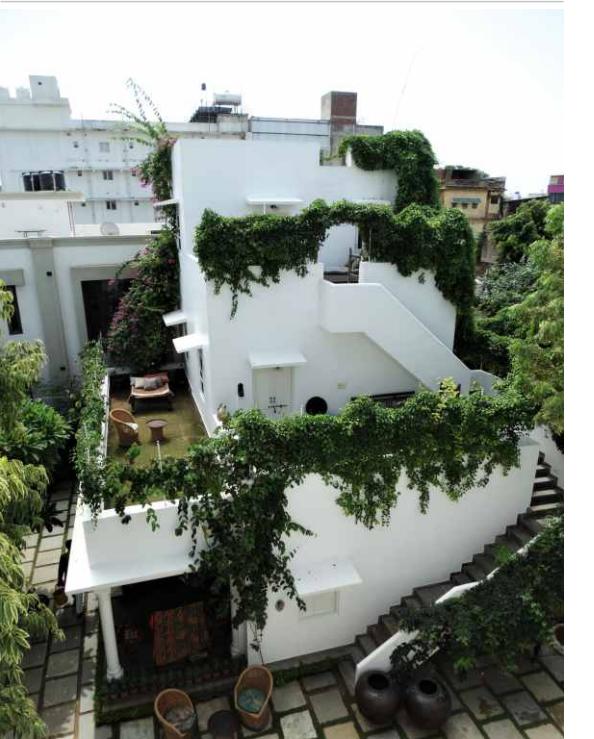
### VISALAM, KANADUKATHAN (CHETTINADU), TAMIL NADU



Rather plain and pale on the outside but exuding warmth and homely atmosphere, Visalam is a 70 year old mansion offering homely comforts and subtle luxury. The 15 rooms spread across 2 floors are spacious yet very simple with furniture that captures the essence of Chettinadu. The 3 meals

are served in different parts of the premises. The experiences they offer around are a fantastic way to get introduced to this region. They also have a pool and a spa on the premises. This place warrants a 2 night stay to soak in the vibes.

### 47 JOBNER BAGH, JAIPUR, RAJASTHAN



47 Jobner Bagh is exactly what you would call a small piece of heaven. Situated within a quiet and peaceful residential area, this 10 room property is perfectly hidden from the bustling atmosphere of the city-center yet a stone's throw from the Hawa Mahal.

Some years back, Shiva and his wife who lived in Milan (Italy) for 32 years (which explains his Italian accent when he speaks!) for business, decided to come back to Jaipur and open a guesthouse. Tired of the luxurious and classic 5 star-hotel, he decided to open 47 Jobner Bagh to provide what he calls real luxury: sincere Indian hospitality and good taste.

Indian hospitality is definitely there; the way Shiva hosts and how he naturally broadcasts warmth and happiness makes you comfortable from the first step inside. The way he has set up and decorated the entire property - Stylish, discreet and non-flashy

is testimony to their good taste associated with having lived 32 years in the fashion capital. Everything here makes you want to stay and relax. You first enter the garden, then the white painted property which is divided in two separate wings; just in front is the reception. The first floor is a room with a small private garden and the second floor is the only Suite, having a private balcony as well. These two rooms make a perfect place for families.

The right wing is bigger and hosts the restaurant and 8 other rooms. Although rooms are all different in shape, the level of comfort remains the same. Some even have a small balcony attached. The decoration is quite simple but nicely done and the bathrooms provide modern amenities. The rooms and the restaurant are decorated with wooden furniture all coming from Jaipur.

The roof top, decorated with plants and kept clean, is used for dinners during winter time. You can enjoy a beautiful view of the city from here. A small fountain (a floor above) which can be used as a small pool for kids is the cherry on top of the cake! All of the above make 47 Jobner House a real gem in the Pink city. Don't hesitate to promote this property - your customers will thank you!

### THE ALMOND TREE HOMESTAY, JODHPUR, RAJASTHAN



Situated on the outskirts of Jodhpur in a countryside environment on the foot of the legendary Umaid Bhawan Palace, Almond Tree is a Luxury Homestay which opened its doors in November 2017. When Chetan's Grand-Mother left

the place, he decided to keep it to convert it into a luxury homestay. Made in Jodhpur sandstone, this three-storey building with impressive pillars proposes very comfortable and elegant rooms (3 Deluxe, 2 Superior and 3 suites) equipped with modern facilities, comfortable beds and windows looking on to a peaceful and green environment. Some rooms are on the ground floor and some on the 1st floor. The restaurant is refined as well. Chetan being a former antique furniture exporter, he has efficiently used his skills to make a very tastefully decorated place.

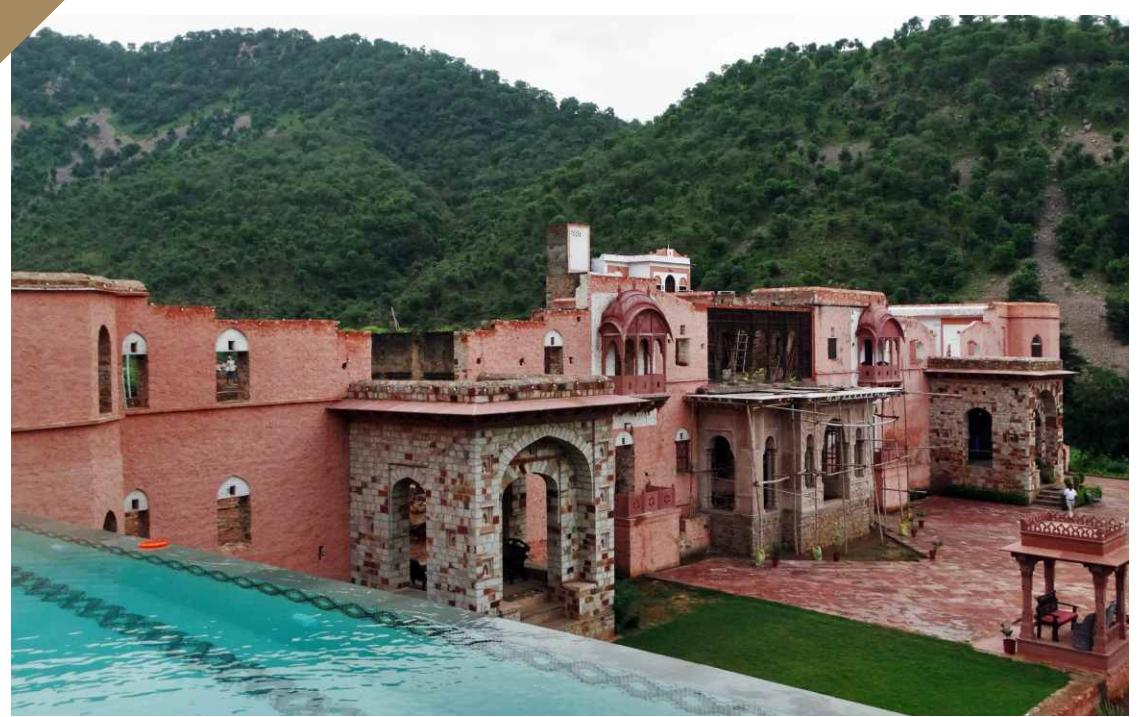
Excellent point is that it is a differently-disabled friendly property. There is a ramp to access the property, and one suite situated on the ground floor has a ramp for the toilet. There is a cubical shower with a small stair for which a wooden ramp can be provided. Doors width is 90cm – bed's height is 52cm - shower entrance 65cm.

The terrace on the roof-top is set with some chairs and tables as well as a jacuzzi - nice place to relax after a busy day of sightseeing!

Important to note is that Chetan and his wife spend the entire day in the homestay but don't live here. For whom: for mid-segment travellers searching for a comfortable homestay-style and ambience but without being obliged to share dinner with the family.

### PALIGHAR, KALIMPONG, WEST BENGAL

A hidden gem in a well-trodden tourism circuit. Located in the middle of a paddy field in the more scenic part of Kalimpong, Palighar is neither too far from nor close to the main town. And this works really well. The two cottages brilliantly incorporate the fast vanishing local style of architecture and are built using mud-bricks and bamboo weaved on square wooden frames, before being finally mud plastered. The rooms & bathrooms are spacious & clean and the beds really comfortable and the hot shower works perfectly. The food is unpretentious, fresh and delicious served in an outdoor gazebo. There are beautiful walking trails around the property for those who love the outdoors. A rustic experience but in style and comfort, Palighar is a fantastic example of Slow Tourism.



#### RAM BIHARI PALACE, SILISERH, ALWAR, RAJASTHAN

In between Delhi and Jaipur, on the northern part of the Aravalli Range of mountains, nestled between the curve of two hills and overlooking the Siliserh Lake, is the newly launched Ram Bihari Palace. Converted to a small heritage hotel only a few months back, this 200 years-old property hosts travellers with a typically Alwari architecture and Rajasthani sense of hospitality, only 4 hours from Delhi.

In 2016, the owner Mr. Ram Bihari Kaushik, a hospitality professional turned hotelier, took it upon himself to retrieve the lost glory of his heritage haveli. An architectural marvel in its own right - solid and rough aspect all in red because of the color of the local stone (limestone) it is made with - the Palace boasts of the same aesthetics, construction principles and materials used during the times of Rajput kings who inhabited this haveli. We can segregate the entire place in three parts: the right wing where sit 10 tastefully appointed rooms incorporating design principles of vaastu (indian science of architecture), the middle part which is the main entrance hosting 5 more rooms and lastly the left wing where 10 more rooms will be added by the next season only.

All the rooms surround the courtyard and replicate the same elegant local decoration, antique furniture and amenities. Being in a historical place, the size and the shape of the room can differ within the same category. Everything is unpretentious with classy Rajasthani and Mughal décor along with a good standard of comfort.

There are numerous choices of activities provided. Its situation in the buffer zone of the Sariska Tiger Reserve permits the organisation of safaris (40 minutes drive). Being in the midst of the Aravalli range makes several hikes in the mountain possible. Finally, it being a part of the former kingdom of Alwar gives it a historical angle and provides the opportunity to visit the City Palace, the Palace Museum and the Bala Qila (Fort). Some interaction in the form of a visit to a school on the step of the Palace or a session with the potters of the nearby village can be proposed.

Overall, we really liked the charm of the place and its location which is definitely the USP. The attentive and discreet staff combined with excellent home-made food will play an important role in the success of your stay.

#### THE BAMBOO SAFARI FOREST LODGE, TADOBA, MAHARASHTRA



Situated on the edge of the Maasal Lake, around 15 minutes drive from the Kollara Gate on the northern part of the Tadoba Park, the Bamboo Safari Forest Lodge is exactly what you can call an eco-luxury resort. A stark contrast with the rugged jungle outside, the villas and chalet of this place are painstakingly adorned with care and comfort, providing luxury using methods that don't affect the environment.

As far as the main areas are concerned, the lobby and the library are definitely in the wildlife style full of sculptures paintings, books on Tigers and other mammals. You easily imagine yourself reading one of these books comfortably seated in their sofas drinking tea waiting for your evening safari!

A fundamental part of the success of the place, and far to be a detail, is the food. Let's be straight forward, the food served here in the indoor restaurant, elegantly furnished and beautifully decorated with a wall painting representing Tigers in the forest, is absolutely awesome! Prepared using organic vegetables and fruits sourced directly from their own outgrowth ensures that quality is

maintained. The result is refined and tasty food that is a perfect end to your day. The chef will always come once during your dinner or lunch to collect your comments.

Apart from the unavoidable safaris, one can enjoy nature walks into the woods on a guided-walking trail and get closer to nature; astronomy classes are organised as well during a star-gazing session to explore the Milky Way. Set on the edge of a lake, bird lovers can enjoy a bird-watching exploration guided by one of the in-house naturalists. For those interested, a tour to the tribal areas can be arranged to introduce you to their way of living and the peculiar art and craft of the region.

The owner and his team are very actively involved in making a positive impact on the environment and the wildlife population of the region. Their efforts towards ecological conservation and community are seen in many concrete actions for the present and projects for the future. They are, for instance, the only resort in India featured on the cover story of "India Today" titled "Greenovators".

Luxurious and spacious rooms, professional and attentive staff, home-made style food combined with local charm, a must visit for every wildlife lover. It provides all the comfort that you want to have after a tiring but exciting safari!

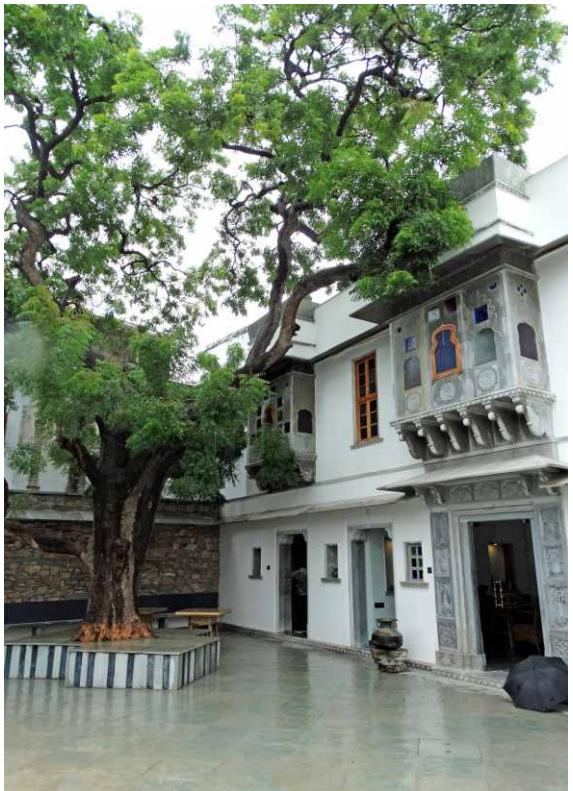
#### THE NEEM TREE, UDAIPUR, RAJASTHAN



Welcome to The Neem Tree, Udaipur - an 8

bedroom boutique retreat located in the heart of the old city of Udaipur created in traditional Indian style with eco-tourism in mind. A new "boutique-retreat" which opened in January 2018, this charming and hidden place is run by Helena - a British lady settled in India for the past 18 years and married to an Indian from Udaipur.

Probably one of the most hidden address of Udaipur, The Neem Tree is perfect for those wanting to stay in a peaceful and comfortable place with a mix of local and English atmosphere.



Local craftsmen have created the ornate exterior architecture which complements the minimalist interior décor. Solar powered heated water, energy saving lighting and wooden and stone materials have been utilised where possible in preference to plastic. The aim is to be sustainable, ethical and responsible whilst providing comfort and a unique experience to guests.

You first enter the place through a small paved-stone path which leads you to the courtyard where, on the right is the small but appealing swimming-pool and on your left the 2 storey-property. In

between, a discreet but massive Neem Tree, of course!

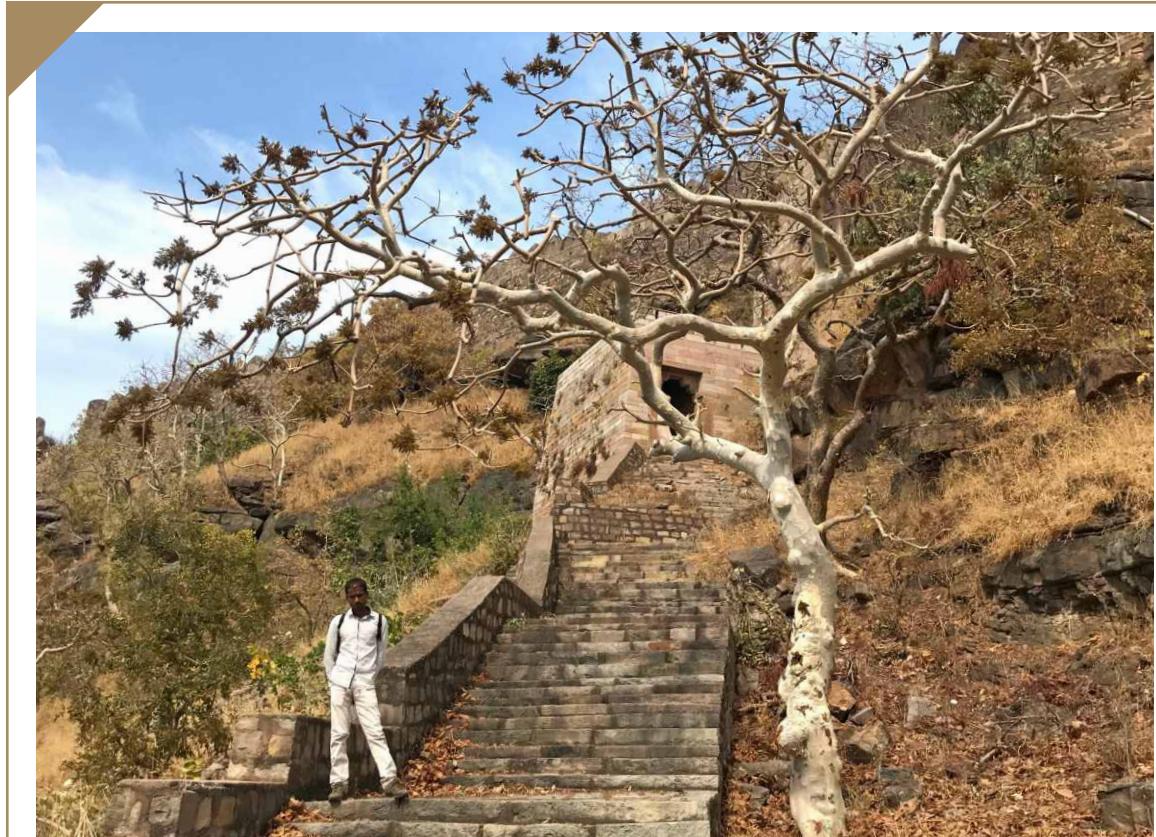
After entering the restaurant on the ground floor, bright and colourful, you have a second courtyard on your right which is surrounded by 4 rooms. The 4 others (8 rooms in total) are above the lobby and the restaurant, and of a similar decoration. The rooms are of a simple decoration but are comfortable and pleasant, clear and clean with a combination of white-painted walls mixed with the grey of the local stone (kota), along with very colourful and red oriented bed sheets coming from Jaipur and hand carved furniture. The whole set up gives a really pleasant and fresh atmosphere. One important note: there is no proper window in any of the room, there are beautifully carved stone windows but from which you can't see the outside.

On the roof-top are set some chairs and tables where one can enjoy some drinks while making the most of a wonderful view of the City Palace.

Overall a very positive feeling of this property with Helena being a perfect host to make you feel at home. Minimum two nights stay is recommended.

#### LIMBOO HOMESTAY, YOKSUM, SIKKIM

A charming homestay with incredible warm hospitality. The two cottages (which I would like to recommend to our clients) are quietly located in a gorgeous little garden which is a lovely place to relax with a cup of tea and a book. The rooms and bathrooms of the cottages are simple yet spacious and super clean. Hot water bags are provided every night to keep you snug and warm. Rani Limboo, the host is an amazing lady and she along with her extended family does a terrific job. She called her sister who runs a restaurant in Yoksum to sort out my lunches. So very thoughtful of her. The home cooked meals in the homestay - though vegetarian only - is delicious and served with a smile by Rani's brother-in-law's school going daughter with a warm smile. I loved the way how the family works impeccably as one unit be it at the kitchen or cleaning the rooms and bathrooms et al. This is the way how a homestay should be run. And when I asked Rani's 16 year old son what does he want to be in life, he said "I want to be happy".



#### KAAFILA CAMPS – BEYOND THE LAST HOTEL

The Kaafila KALINJAR mobile camp allows a discerning few who seek an active holiday, those who have a yen to break away from the crowds - to access these incredible landscapes in reasonable comfort and in the company of extremely knowledgeable and enthusiastic guides.

The campsite is an attractive secluded spot looking out onto fields and forested hills which still support a fair amount of wildlife. The tents are elegant, simple and offer comfort one needs in such a remote setting.

The campsite is about an hour from the main attraction - Kalinjar. One of India's greatest hill forts which has been settled for over 2000 years and contains the countless remains and ruins of the centuries including the Neelkanth Mahadev temple with its stunning bas relief sculptures of Shiva and the giant 'dancing' statue of Bhairava. Various other palaces and temples and water tanks are scattered in romantic isolation amongst the scrub jungle.

Apart from Kalinjar there is also the fort of Ajaigarh for those who enjoy nature and geology. It is a full day walk up the forested valley of the stream that flows behind the camp site with its dramatic landscape marked by sheer escarpments, flat-topped hills and deeply incised valleys. The contrast between the lush green valleys below and the dry scrub forest of the plateau is interesting and the views are just stunning.

The activities around these two forts include two days of hiking, walking & climbing steep steps to see some of the most stunning landscapes & sculptures.

Access: Two hours by road from Khajuraho. Five - six hours drive from Bandhavgarh or Jhansi / Orchha.

Best time of the year: Feb to April (late winter-early summer)

Camp Is Open from: Nov to April



## STAYS TO WATCH OUT FOR HOT PICKS



### RED EARTH TADOBAL, MAHARASHTRA

Red Earth has come up with a new resort which has opened in October 2018. Its location is quite unique in the Tadoba landscape of resorts. Firstly because it is located near Zari Gate which is in the South-Eastern end of the Park where no other resort has come up as yet. Red Earth is the only one to be located close to that gate (around 15 minutes by car). The number of daily safaris allowed from this gate by the government is much less as compared to the other gates.

The second USP of the property is the concept of reviving the traditional way of construction. The bamboo structure which supports the elephant grass ceiling of the outdoor areas comes from a dying tradition of Wayanad. Same applies for the floors which are of oxyde work.

This 15 acre property comprises of 19 individual cottages which are separated from the lobby area

by a river that one has to cross using a suspended bridge. These cottages have a simplistic style along with a good level of comfort which gives it a refined and pleasant ambience. The cottages are all overlooking the forest thanks to a bay window. A small private terrace with a plunge-pool completes the view. The pool area surrounded with a semi-circular ground floor white building is where the very nicely made dining-room is.

It is recommended for travellers searching for a good level of comfort with refined style and simple decor. The only property in Tadoba which matches up to the comfort level of Red Earth however located in a warmer area is – Bamboo Forest Lodge, situated on the northern side of the Park, completely opposite to Red Earth's location.

### WAYANAD WILD, WAYANAD, KERALA

Situated in the heart of the rainforest, Wayanad Wild is the latest addition to the CGH family that

boasts of rooms peeking out of the treetops and an infinity pool tipping over into foliage. They offer numerous hands on activities which involve exploring the forest on foot and reconnecting with the outdoors bringing you closer to nature. Engage in light treks into the woods, hiking to neighbouring hillocks, cycling, and an engaging tour of the neighbouring tea factory. Zip lining and bamboo rafting in the river can be arranged outside the resort on request.

#### POSTCARD HOTELS, GOA



The postcard chain of hotels have opened 3 new unique addresses in Goa which are true to their experiential style. The Postcard Moira, is in one of the state's four heritage villages. The Postcard Velha, set amid 300 acres of coconut plantation and The Postcard Cuelim in South Goa, with a beautiful 350-year-old chapel. Get ready to explore a new way of travelling devoid of the mundane and rule based style where you get a round-the-clock check-in and check-out, local welcome drinks and food that is a little hatke (different).

#### SARAI AT TORIA, PANNA, MADHYA PRADESH

Sarai at Toria on the River Ken is an ideal getaway for Khajuraho, Panna, Ajaygarh and Kalinjar.

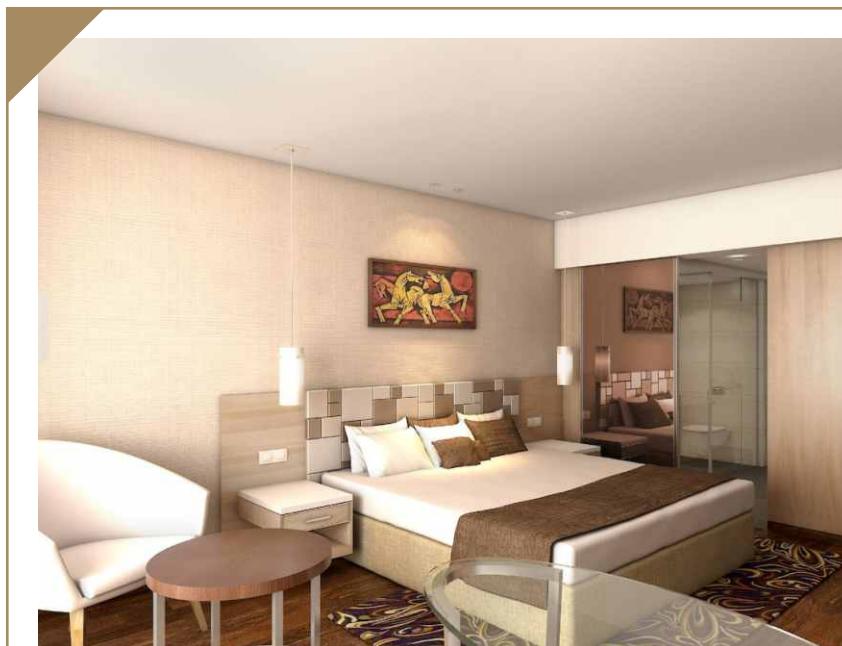
The Sarai is a simple lodge built with a great balance of detail, design and ecological perspective. Traditional mud cottage constructions are inspired by local architecture with thick mud walls and roof made of tin and grass. Inside, the rooms are large, high, well-lit and cool while the attached bathrooms almost as large as the room itself have smooth mineral oxide-finished floors. Solid, uncomplicated

furniture with comfortable mattress and warm duvets, furnishings of Indian fabrics, all requisite amenities in place, make inviting living spaces. While the sit out that allows you to bask in the late winter sun or watch the fire flies at night will be your favourite place to curl up with a book or just snooze.

One of my favourites was the home recipes of Dr. Raghu Chundawat, simple, elegant and very tasty! His presence & spontaneous bird watching is infectious. I also loved the fact that they are reliant on solar power, minimal landscaping and simple decor that neither compromises on the aesthetics nor comfort.

Set in 11 acres of stunning landscape, Sarai offers many dining choices like breakfast by the river, lunch under the spreading Ficus tree and dinner by candle light under a star-lit sky. The open pavilion overlooking the river doubles as a lounge and dining.

A walk from Rajgarh, an imposing castle a short drive from Sarai to Taparian village through lovely farms and plantation of Ber (*Zizyphus mauritiana*) a fruit indigenous to India and Malaysia nicknamed as the 'poor man's apple'; trips to the Ajaygarh fort, a river safari on the ken to watch birds or a walk along the banks of the Ken. There is much to explore in this region while on a 2-3 nights visit, excursions may be accompanied by naturalist guides trained by Raghu and Joanna.



#### COURTYARD BY MARRIOTT, MADURAI, TAMIL NADU

Courtyard by Marriott has opened their door to travelers in Madurai. The luxury hotel boasts of spacious, modern accommodations, a state-of-the-art lobby, plenty of thoughtful amenities and views of downtown Madurai.

#### TAJ RISHIKESH RESORT AND SPA, UTTARAKHAND

Opening end March 2019, the 79 room Taj Rishikesh Resort & Spa is positioning itself as a luxury retreat featuring local arts & design. Spread over 13 acres, the property is a 60 minute drive from Rishikesh considered the Yoga capital of the world.

#### TAMARA, KODAIKANAL, TAMIL NADU



A British District Judge's home, a Monastic Retreat for priests and now a heritage resort. Nestled 6,500 ft. in the hills of Kodaikanal, Tamara at Kodai is a swanky upscale 5 star resort that houses well-appointed suites with wooden flooring and colonial interiors featuring a bedroom, living room, and of

Savor a meal at the signature restaurant, grab a snack to go at their Lounge or sip a cocktail with friends at Balcony -the vibrant bar. The hotel offering includes a 5-star spa, an indoor pool, a fitness center and a whirlpool. Although not the closest hotel to the attractions of Madurai, this is a good 5 star option available to travelers located in the town.

course, a large balcony. They have 2 restaurants, a ballroom, a fitness center and a spa. The highlight, however, is the Levinge Lounge which houses a 40 ft. temperature controlled pool and a bar with the best views from within the property.

#### TAJ ARAVALI RESORT & SPA, UDAIPUR, RAJASTHAN

The newly opened Taj Aravali Resort & Spa in Udaipur is spread over 27 acres of land at the foothills of the Aravali ranges. It is located 15 kms away from the city centre. The property has 93 Rooms, including a pure vegetarian restaurant.

#### CAMEL CARAVAN, SHEKHAWATI, RAJASTHAN

Opening April 2019, Camel Caravan is owned by the family who runs the hugely popular boutique hotel Dera Mandawa in Jaipur. This 9 unit property (5 rooms and 4 tents) with a swimming pool designed like a Stepwell is spread over 80 acres of land. Camel Caravan is envisaged to be an up-close-and-personal encounter with the Camel who is still the lifeline for many in Rajasthan – still the mode of travel for many, still the means to plough agricultural fields for many and provider of wool, yarn and sometimes, even dairy for many.



## BOOKS AND FILMS WE LOVED

### INDIA AND IT'S STORIES

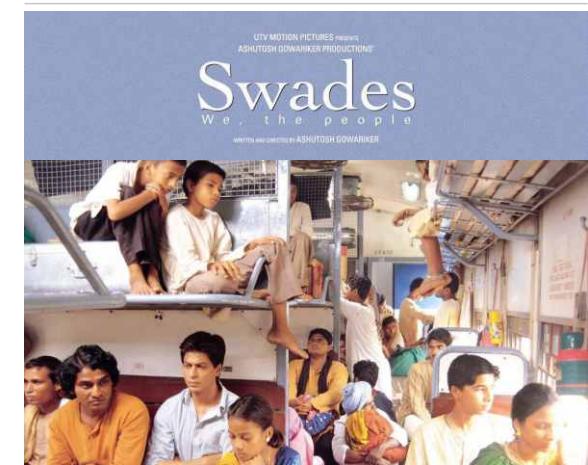


#### SWADES

Reviewed by Tejashri Simha  
Explorer, Destination Knowledge Centre

Swades is an emotional and turbulent movie that subtly and beautifully represents rural India in its idealist form. The story revolves around Mohan Bhargava, a NASA scientist working in the US who returns to India in search of his childhood nanny, Kaveri Amma. He finds her in a remote village named Charanpur and tries to convince her that there is a better life waiting for her in the US with him. She refuses to leave and in the process of having to convince her during his month long stay, every incident turns into a perspective changing journey for him. The movie battles with the moral dilemma of a successfully employed youth to return to his native country to do something good for it without the expectation of being remunerated. The movie is a well-rounded approach that brings to the

fore various draconian issues that plague rural India. Visually, it captures the realm of a village spot-on whether in terms of costume, location or people.

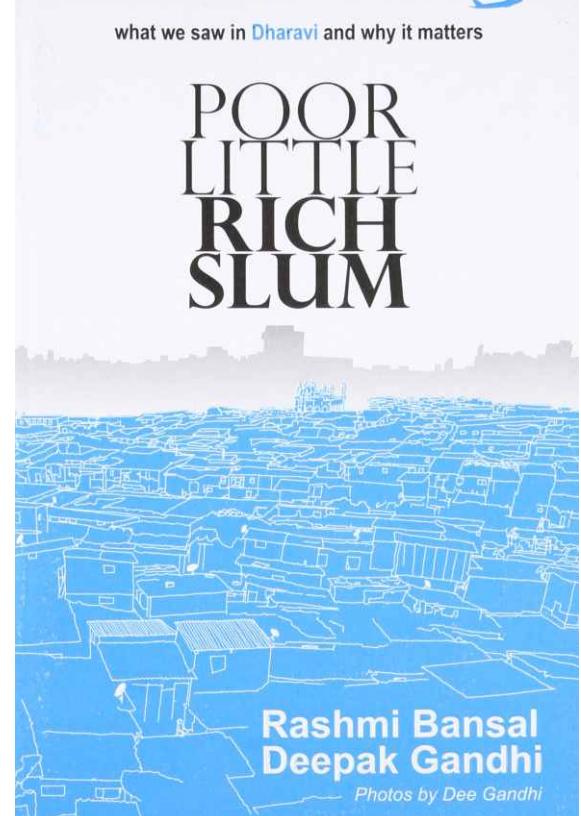


I recommend this movie to those who would like to delve beyond the commercial bubble gum pink Bollywood and get a taste of the Rural India that still exists.

"POOR LITTLE RICH SLUM" - RASHMI BANSAL AND DEEPAK GANDHI

Reviewed by Tejashri Simha  
Explorer, Destination Knowledge Centre

When one thinks of Dharavi – the largest slum in Asia located in the fast paced city of Mumbai, they think of apathy and poverty, of a slum that is full of despair. But little do they know, that every nook and cranny of this slum is about entrepreneurship. Dharavi's annual turnover has been estimated at over US\$1 billion. Poor little rich slum speaks through the residents of this popular slum as much as it portrays the authors' perspective.



A combination of witty quotes, life stories of the residents of Dharavi and photographs that warm the heart, this book is a refreshing change to the pity filled shrugs that accompany the mention of Dharavi. The authors not only focus on the lives of the people of Dharavi, but also the organizations that have taken a stand to support the people who have made Dharavi what it is today – a teeming industrial revolution waiting to take over the world.

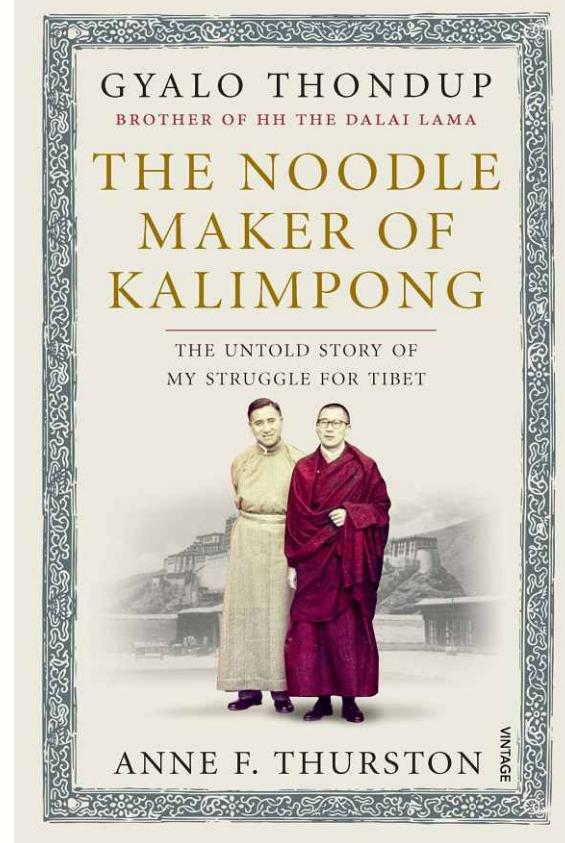
The beauty of the book lies in the inspiration that it can instill in anyone reading it, whether it is through the strength of the dreamer who has made Dharavi his home or the people who have given up the comforts of their cushy jobs to help the future of the industrious India make others' dream come true.

While most books in this genre tend to get preachy at times or go overboard with descriptions, this book does true justice to Dharavi and leaves an impact on the people through powerful yet short chapters which also make it an easy read. Poor little rich slum is a 166 pages of happiness, inspiration and joy that most of us who have been wrapped in a bubble of comfort need to read.

THE NOODLE MAKER OF KALIMPONG: THE UNTOLD STORY OF MY STRUGGLE FOR TIBET

Written by Gyalo Thondup and Anne F Thurston

Reviewed by Kuntil Baruwa  
Explorer, Destination Knowledge



Tibet's struggle for freedom needs no introduction but this is an untold story of Tibet – a compelling account of international intrigue involving China, Russia, India and the United States —told through the eyes of Gyalo Thondup, the Dalai Lama's elder brother. Together with Anne F. Thurston, Gyalo Thondup shares his journey from his village in Amdo to Lhasa, India, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the United States and then back to the compound of the house he lives in today in Kalimpong where he earns his living by making noodles. For over half a century, nobody in Kalimpong knew who Gyalo Thondup was. It was not until 2010 that his true identity was discovered. After Tibet was overrun by the Chinese in 1951, Thondup was the go-to Tibetan intermediary between the Tibetan freedom fighters and the CIA, KGB and R&AW — but they all betrayed him in the end. His remarkable account is also an insider's take on the Dalai Lama, his immediate family, as well as the power struggles within the Potala Palace - the once seat of power in Tibet.

KOHINOOR

Written by William Dalrymple & Anita Anand

Reviewed by Lovleen Sagar, Senior Vice President, Destination Knowledge Centre.

This is the story of the World's most infamous diamond, the Koh-i-Noor (Mountain of Light), arguably the most celebrated and mythologised jewel in the world. Parables, history, religion, and culture intertwine to give you a treasure trove of information, not only of the jewel itself, but on the society, land, and historical events interwoven with its meandering and unexpected existence. The book has two parts. The first part is written by Dalrymple and the second by Anita Anand. While the first part focuses on the diamond in Mughal era, the second part covers its intrigues while with the rulers of Punjab.

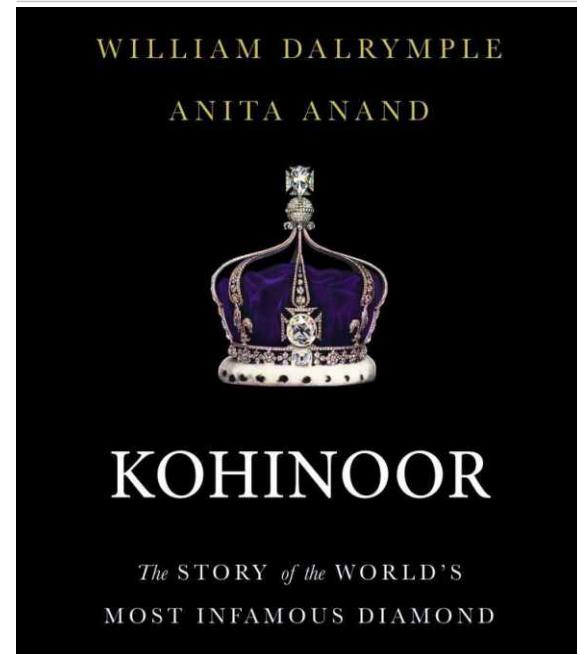
Dalrymple notes: The Mughals, perhaps more than any other Islamic dynasty, made their love of the arts and their aesthetic principles a central part of their identity as rulers. They consciously used jewellery and jewelled objects as they used their architecture, art, poetry, historiography and the

bedazzling brilliance of the court ceremonial to make visible and manifest their imperial ideal, to give properly imperial splendour and even a sheen of divine legitimacy.

The accounts of jewelled thrones, clothing, daggers and other luxurious objects are a fashion designer's dream come-true. The funny part is that diamonds were not even the most desired at the time, with emeralds and rubies holding the top spots. Undoubtedly, this was one of the largest and most beautiful pieces of diamonds in the world at the time and the author compares other similar diamonds of the times.

In the second part, conflict and death surround the Koh-i-Noor much more. Greed, treachery, murder and torture muddy its sparkle until it finally reaches the crown of Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother. The resulting controversy of colonialism and appropriation continues to date where many Indians and Pakistanis remember the diamond which became a symbol of the colonial loot.

Both the authors tell their tale with verve and honesty. Authoritative and scholarly, this is history at its most compelling and invigorating. If you get a chance to hear Anita Anand in person, reading from the book, it is the most dramatic and fascinating experiences, which I was fortunate to be a part of.



## INVESTING IN THE FUTURE



Last year in August, we organised our very First Overseas Sales Conference - "Investing in the Future" on 27th & 28th at the Taj Mahal Hotel, New Delhi. The participants included all the company's Overseas Representatives and the Management Team here in India. It was a time to get together and celebrate the success of the company and to learn from each other by sharing our experiences. The two day conference provided a platform for each representative to show their respective marketing scenarios, learn about the latest from the company's perspective, exchange ideas and of course a personal interaction on both sides.

The conference was inaugurated by the Guest of Honour K.J. Alphons, Honourable Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Tourism who addressed the audience on Tourism in India.

Our special Guest Speakers for the event included Vir Sanghvi, Print and Television journalist, columnist & talk show host and Puneet Chhatwal, Managing Director & Chief Executive Officer- The Indian Hotels Company Limited.

Here they are in conversation with Dipak Deva, Managing Director, Sita.





## K.J. Alphons

Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Tourism

**How do you see the Government's role going forward in promoting tourism?**

The Government's role is simple, we are basically here to make things simpler, make things easy, make things possible for you.

**Your Government has done a lot of work in the Travel By Air Scheme, what would you say about that?**

With this we have connected 60 new destinations, we take people where they want to go and bring them back to where they want to. In fact 4 of our airports are in the list of top 10 in the world; Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore and Hyderabad.

**You've been in the Indian Administrative Services and Politics, do you like the Tourism Business?**

I love tourism, I think it is the most exciting job to bring people to India.



## Suman Billa

Joint Secretary  
Ministry of Tourism

**What does India's growth story look like?**

India's ranking at The World Economic Forum -Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index has moved from rank 65th in 2013 to rank 40th in the year 2017. That is an incredible jump of 25 places. Travellers are coming to India like never before, staying longer and spending more than the global average.

**How is the Indian Aviation market growing?**

We are one of the fastest growing aviation markets in the world.

The World Civil Aviation Market ranked India at number 9 in 2016, by 2020 we are targeting the 3rd slot. 20 out of the 50 airports in the country are International Airports. We hope to have 250 airports by 2020.



## Vir Sanghvi

Print and television  
journalist, columnist and talk show host

Vir Sanghvi is the best-known Indian journalist of his generation. His career straddles print, television, books and now, new media.

### What do you like about travelling to a destination?

I like the idea of history, I like the idea of seeing something I haven't seen before, of immersing myself in a world that is alien from my everyday experience.

### What will make India a global A-listers holiday destination?

The problem is that the travellers are getting tired of glamour and luxury, since they can get that anywhere in the world. Everybody who comes to India wants to feel the real India and the real India is wonderful.

### If you were not born an Indian, would India be on your bucket list?

Absolutely, I think it is very hard to say but the complexity of experiences India offers, that same mixture of beauty, of history combined with world class hospitality is actually very hard to find. Also, many of the problems traditionally associated with India have eased.

### Your favourite Indian dish that is unique to the world?

It has to be the dal.



## Puneet Chhatwal

Managing Director & Chief Executive Officer  
The Indian Hotels Company Limited

On the 6th of November, 2017, Mr. Puneet Chhatwal joined IHCL as the Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer. He is a global professional with over three decades of leadership experience at highly acclaimed hotel groups in Europe and North America.

### In the continent of Europe we don't have the presence of any Indian hotels, is that an opportunity being missed?

The challenge why no one has ventured into Europe is that our people are very good in speaking English, when it comes to speaking Spanish, German or French we are not so good. I don't think you can do business in a country if you don't speak the language. I think the way forward is to acquire small groups so that you get the infrastructure along with the group.

### An exceptional hotel according to you.

The Taj Mahal Palace Mumbai is the first in everything that has happened in this country. It has been judged as the best hotel in the world by Trust You, won by a big margin. It is a hotel which has proven that when the hotel was under terrorist attack, the staff put themselves in front of the guests, there are Harvard case studies on it. Most iconic and most profitable. The entire street maintenance outside the hotel is done by our staff as a part of CSR.



Set on the Bay of Bengal, Puducherry (formerly Pondicherry) is a must visit for its laid back vibe, charming layout, interesting history and chic environs. The former Capital of French territories in India, the town of Puducherry oozes quaint and rustic charm while showcasing a splendid mix of colonial and local flavors. The French Quarters covers the area between the promenade and the canal which is dotted with white and mustard coloured colonial buildings, churches, parks and chic cafes. In contrast, the area beyond the canal which was once the Tamil quarters where the locals lived has Tamil Franco style houses, bustling markets and tree-lined streets. Some people here retain their French lineage giving a glimpse into the fading colonial era. The contrast of large boulevards, brightly painted houses with high compound walls laden with bougainvillea, clean, well-laid streets with French name plates and Parisian looking cafés in the White Town and the multi-ethnic structures clustered in the Old Town gives Puducherry a very distinct character. The confluence of numerous cultures is so tangible in Puducherry that it can effortlessly overpower all your senses in just a day.



#### 10 SECONDS TAKEAWAY

Puducherry is ideally a 3 night's destination to soak in the Boho-chic vibe of the place and include a multitude of activities. It would be a perfect 2 night destination for those not wanting to do any activity and instead just wanting to take a break and unwind. Propose a local half day sightseeing only if clients specifically ask for it because it is pretty easy to discover the town on one's own. Instead propose a couple of interesting experiences which will be a shift from the run of the mill itinerary proposed by almost every tour operator.

#### GETTING TO PUDUCHERRY

Puducherry is about 3½ hours by road from Chennai and about 2 hours by road from Mahabalipuram which is the usual second stop in classic Tamil Nadu itineraries. Here is a quick low-down of how you can spend 3 Nights in Puducherry

#### DAY 1

Arrive in Puducherry by lunch time. Post lunch, do the French Connection walk which starts at 4 pm and ends at 6 30 pm. It provides an excellent introduction to Puducherry, its history and funny stories that very few have heard. It is an interactive session riddled with stories and walking around the lanes of the French town. The walk starts at the promenade and ends at the promenade covering the important sites of the French town which have interesting stories which are intriguing. After this walking tour, walk along the promenade which is bustling with activity and settle down in a café around here to take in the true spirit of Puducherry.



#### DAY 2

Start early today and go on a cycling tour with a Puducherry local who is fluent in English and French. This 2 hours cycling tour covers the Tamil Quarters, Muslim Quarters, Goubert Market, Fishermen's Quarters and the French town. Stops are made to admire the different architectural styles, visit a church, hear the story of a mosque that was moved and then walk around the bustling Goubert market to see its daily going ons before heading back for a sumptuous breakfast. You can choose between a French breakfast and a south Indian breakfast (both are equally good) while you indulge in a conversation with your host or companions from the shared tour. Start your Creole cooking class (a mix of Tamil and French cuisine) at 11 am. The cooking demo hosted with a Puducherry local begins with a quick ride to the Goubert market in a tuk-tuk where you will be introduced to the various ingredients in general. The shopping cart finally laden with the required masalas, vegetables, meat and banana leaves, head back to get started on a lip smacking creole meal. The menu comprises of a salad, a starter, a meaty curry with rice and a dessert. Aprons et all is provided whilst you are taken through the various steps involved in making of the dishes. Enjoy the meal you cooked with your host on a banana leaf.

Post lunch visit the Puducherry Museum - housed in the lovely old Law Building with a great collection of artifacts, furniture and paintings from the French era; the Aurobindo Ashram - houses a vibrantly decorated Samadhi of Sri Aurobindo (Photography

inside is prohibited) before visiting the Sacred Heart Basilica and the Immaculate Conception Cathedral. Late in the evening explore the cafes that dot this charming town and indulge in some refreshing cocktails and delicious food.

#### DAY 3

After an early breakfast make your way to the countryside (45 minutes one way from Puducherry) where you will spend half the day doing various activities and taking in the rural charm of Tamil Nadu. This half day experience gives a glimpse into the rural life around the town of Puducherry. You will be taken to a potter where you get a hands on experience on pottery. All along the drive there are stretches of fields where you have the liberty to interact with farmers working in the field. Another stop is made at the brick makers who will happily show you the process of making a brick, you can try your hands at it if you want to get down and dirty. The last stop and the most intriguing one is at the temple of the thousand dolls where you will get to know the history behind why this temple came to be called so, as well as a glimpse into the pious mind sets of the people here. You will also get to interact through the host with the doll maker who creates these varied dolls of different sizes and shapes. Come back and the rest of the day is at leisure to indulge in the charming vibes of Puducherry which comes alive in the evening. Puducherry also has some amazing boutiques and stores to purchase incense sticks, perfumes, clothes and leather. Walk around the cobbled roads of the French town to discover these hidden gems.

#### STAY RECOMMENDATIONS

1) Dune Mansion Calve: Dune Mansion Calvé Heritage Hotel is 150 year old Tamil mansion with influence of French and Baroque architecture located on a quiet street in the Tamil quarters. It is located about 5 minutes on foot to the heart of the French town. They have just 10 rooms divided into 2 categories spread across the two floors. The interiors of the rooms are done up with period furniture and have an old world charm to it. This is perfect for guests looking for an authentic stay experience which can accommodate families and small groups. Excellent for people who like absolute quiet and heritage charm, the only drawback being, there is no swimming pool on the premises.

2) De L'Orient: Located in the heart of the white town and bang opposite the Cluny Embroidery Center, this boutique hotel is a 15 minutes' walk to the heart of French town. The rooms are very spacious and replicate the look of a traditional chettinadu style home. Some rooms have balcony and some don't. The common areas are restricted to the open air dining area, but the food is excellent. They do not have a swimming pool.

#### RESTAURANT RECOMMENDATIONS

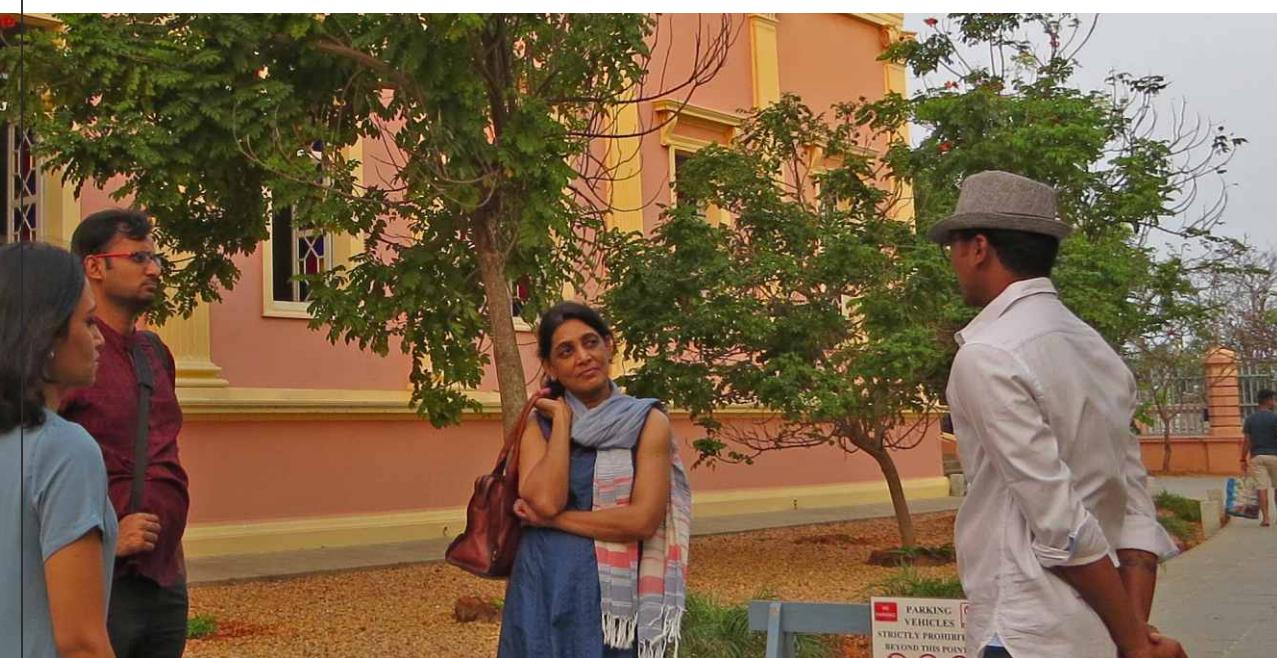
1) Coromandel Café at La Maison Rose: A posh place in the heart of the French town, they have indoor and outdoor seating. The Indoor seating is rich in hues of maroons and the chandeliers are exquisite. The service is quick and the polite staff is happy to recommend the best on the menu to suit your palate. Pink and posh is simply delicious and considered the best in town downed with a couple of beers. The outdoor seating is very dimly lit but a perfect setting for a romantic evening in the open air but mosquitoes may be a point of concern.

2) Palais De Mahe: Palais De Mahe is located in the French town which has a marvelous rooftop restaurant. It is well lit and the sensibly spread out tables give a nice touch to the place. You must try the Virgin Pina Colada here, it is so very refreshing. The food has an assortment of European, Kerala and Tamil Nadu cuisines. It is almost always crowded, so it is better to book a table in advance to ensure you get the best of the services. Alcohol is also served in the restaurant.



3) Dune Mansion Calve: Dune Mansion Calve is a heaven for foodies. The simple yet delicious fare is something one must not miss when in Puducherry. Everything that is made here is with fresh organic ingredients. The 4 course meal is the most refreshing meal based on the farm to fork concept. Their pumpkin soup and the fresh in-house curated salads are to die for!

4) Villa Shanti: Hidden behind a discreet façade like many other hotels in the white town, the charming posh Villa Shanti houses one of the most popular restaurants in the town. This is also a go to place to try out some authentic French dishes though the Indian cuisine does not disappoint either. They have a fully stocked bar too and the desserts are heavenly!!



#### HIGHLIGHTS

- Experiencing authentic French culture in India
- These 3 nights are a good balance of activities and leisure and suitable for every age group
- The village tour is a fantastic add on to see how life is spectacularly different beyond Puducherry.
- The possibility of exploring the town yourself on foot or by cycles

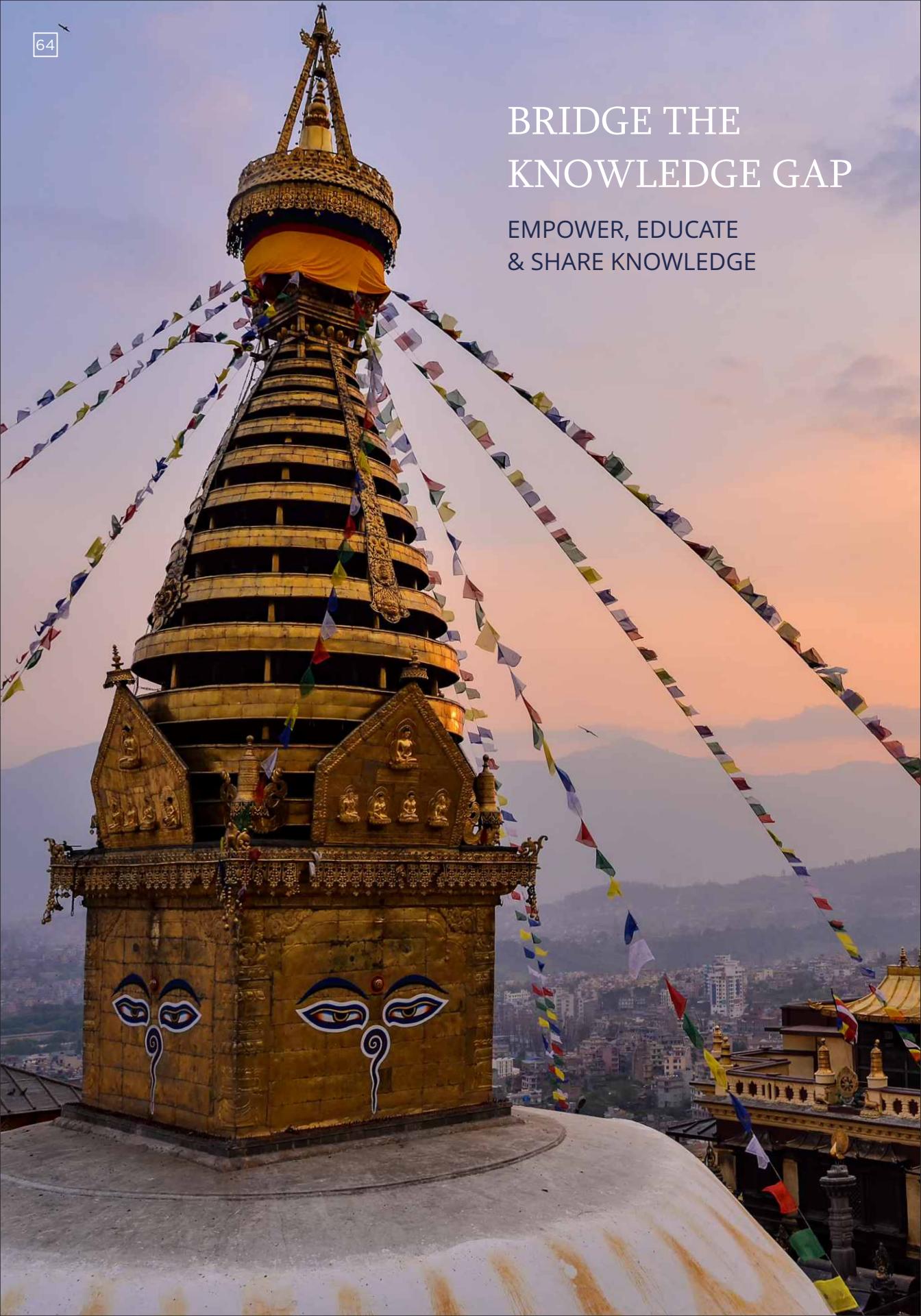
#### GOOD TO KNOW

- The months between November to March are the best time to visit Puducherry
- Minimum pax: 2; Maximum Pax – 10

#### COST INCLUSIONS

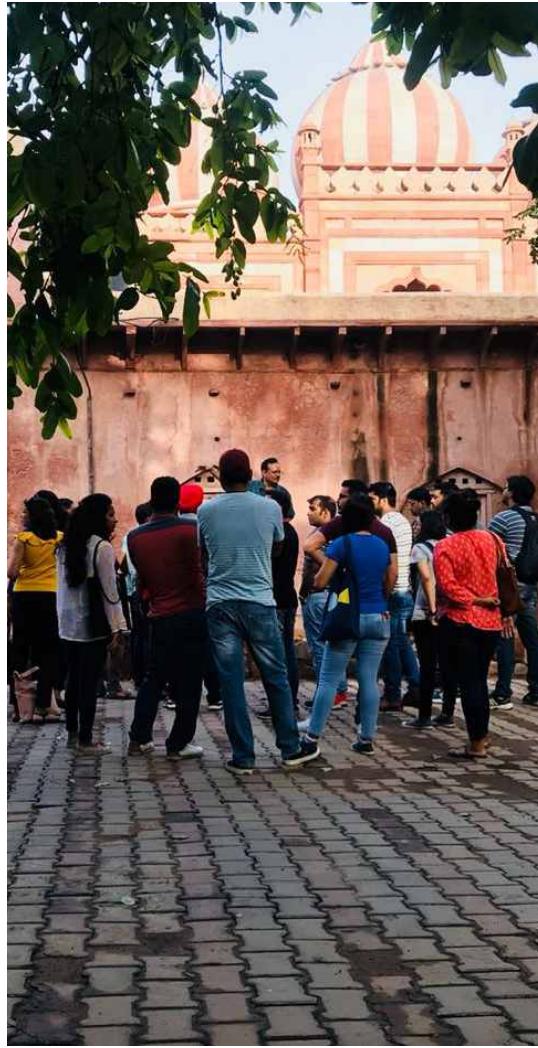
- Transport cost (by road)
- English speaking local guide (if required)
- All experiences as mentioned above
- Accommodation
- Breakfast on all days

Get in touch with your relationship Manager for cost related queries.



## BRIDGE THE KNOWLEDGE GAP

EMPOWER, EDUCATE  
& SHARE KNOWLEDGE



Bridge the knowledge gap is a new initiative that we launched two years back to empower, educate and share the collective knowledge of travel experts with our colleagues.

Last year Kerala, Rajasthan and Nepal, were the destinations that were covered with a week of intensive in-house training each, followed by study tours for the participants.

Each tour comprised of various activities and tasks specially charted out for the participants, they experienced and explored several products and hotels for an in-depth knowledge of the destination.

We are very excited about this ongoing initiative.

## OUR COMMITMENT

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Experiences and impressions of particular intensity and profundity, instants that endure and can leave a lasting positive impression. They are unique and memorable, at par with appreciating a great work of art. Sita is intent on making those moments happen.



Come explore with us<sup>®</sup>