

Travel Links



VOLUME 02 | ISSUE 02

NOV - DEC 2020



Lockdown Wedding | **Romantic Gateways** | **Ramsar Sites**

LENS VIGNETTE | LESSER KNOWN | THE WINE WORLD | ECO FRIENDLY HOLIDAY | LUXURY STAY



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November and December are the months of weddings, festivals and celebrations although this year has thrown us with unpredictable COVID-19 which led us to think, act, react and even mark our occasions in a more toned down yet stylish, personalized, sanitized and in a classic way.

The pattern we celebrate involves a strategic planning, henceforth a theme oriented, with two major aspects-'local is the new vocal' and 'less is more', came as the first choice which led to the curated experiences, without compromising. It may be the hill stations, beaches, remote and romantic corners. All kinds of stays have gone all out to deliver the best experiences to the customers.

International destinations are still very uncertain with many flights not yet completely operational, we feel regional exploration is the key to have a honeymoon and destination travel explorations. We have chosen the most sought after locations for you to plan your holiday. These could be the optional safe travel one could look for.

Our Hotel Review of JW Marriott Mussoorie - Walnut Grove & Spa is shared for you to further plan out the luxuries, style and personalized 'farm to table' experiences this property has to offer. It is not just stay; it's a forever engrained memory of the conscious and exotic staycation which one could have.

For the international destinations, we have a travelogue of Aruba, a Caribbean Island and Playa Del Carmen- a Coastline in Mexico.

Travel Links Magazine has always been focusing on sustainable tourism, conservation and eco-travel; on that front we have covered 'RAMSAR' sites; a conserving wetlands and sustainable use of resources, which are rich in bio diversity. The tropical locations of all these places provide ample opportunities to travel which is clean.

We also have the UNESCO intangible cultural Heritage. Intangible means which cannot be touched or measured. India is proudly represented on the list by 13 cultural heritages which include dance, theatre chanting, craftsmanship and much more. These are the melting points of exploration and experience.

Hope you will enjoy reading the insightful articles. Wishing all our readers a very happy and hopeful festive season.

Stay Tuned.

Editor

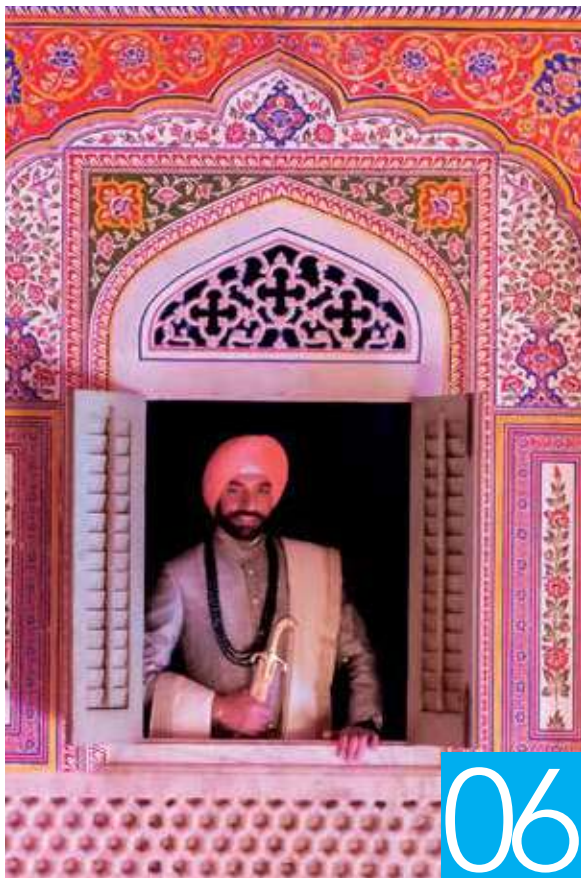
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UNESCO - INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

Lockdown Wedding

BY RITU GHAI

Planning your dream wedding with the radar of Covid fear on you. Seems impossible and unreal. Many questions evade your mind. Is it going to be a normal wedding, or an alliance eclipsed with post event fears? The elaborateness that existed a few months ago will certainly not be there.

This leaves you with only one option. Toned down celebrations, just a few ceremonies and guilty pleasures. In such a situation, its best to keep calm and marry on.

But the whimsical element in you sees no stopping. It is determined to hold a wedding which will be festive, unique, out-of-the-box, very personal and mandatorily close knit. Traditions and ceremonies in a new avatar that captures the timeless

moment with perfection.

'Ritu Ghai' talks to wedding planners and couples about planning the event in the thick of this pandemic situation.

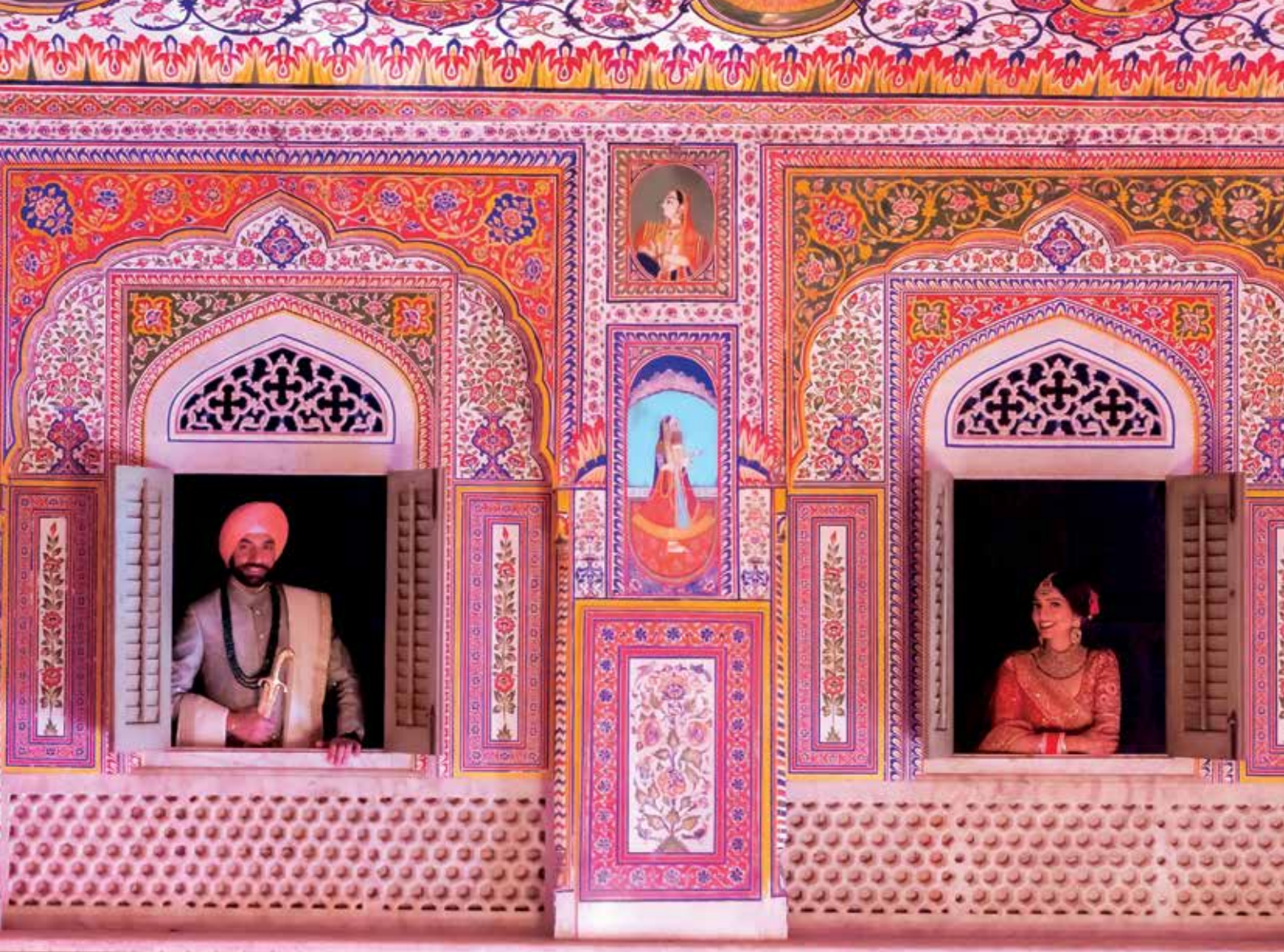
Weddings are intricately woven in the culture of India. A onetime affair where all get-to-gather to connect with their roots. Weddings have also been exploded beyond normalcy by the Hindi movie industry, better known as Bollywood. It is here that marriages turn into mega ceremonies and the entire focus is on the moment. Indian movies play around weddings. Be it "Hum Saath Saath Hain", "Dilwale Dulaniya Le Jayege" or "Hum Aapke Hain Kaun" that showcase opulent celebrations.

Bollywood movies revolving around weddings have always been blamed and famed for influencing people into turning their nuptials into massive filmy-like events. However, when it comes to movie

stars themselves, they prefer quiet, intimate weddings. Take the marriage of Virat Kohli to Anushka Sharma, a hush affair classy affair at the breathtaking Borgo Finocchieto in Italy with close friends and immediate family members in attendance. Earlier weddings of Milind Soman to Ankita Kanwar in Assamese style and Neha Dhupia with Angad Bedi in 2018 were private low-key affairs to protect their personal life. Sounds uncanny but almost like the premonition of how weddings will be in 2020.

Hollywood stars too wed in unique and quiet way. Bindi Irwin, Australian television personality, conservationist, zoo operator and daughter of legendary Steve Irwin, got married to Chandler Powell at the Australia Zoo. A rather unconventional yet quiet way of celebrating their wedding moments at the Australian Zoo, which is family for her.





VINAYAK DAS OF PHOTOTANTRA

Destination Weddings not too far

Weddings are private moments for celebrities at offbeat or quiet destinations. This inspires many couples to plan their weddings at locales far from the madding crowd. But due to travel fears, they have shifted their focus from destinations weddings to intimate ceremonies within the city rather than foreign locations. Unexplored drivable locations are more in demand among families planning a wedding.

Wedding at hill stations is the new buzz. Not only is it budgeted but safe, chiller with open spaces, unfussy with stunning views and completely organic. Creation coupled with recreation for a vacation at the hills where one gets married as well.





THEMEWEAVERS

Trending

The fear of Corona spread has made it mandatory for couples to marry in secrecy. Wedding spirits of people have mellowed down and big fat weddings are now low-key intimate ceremonies.

However let's look at the brighter side.

Recently married Deepak Khatri, a young entrepreneur, attended the wedding of his cousin in August 2020 and was happy to find the event spirit intact. "Even with lot of safety accompaniments like wearing masks and maintaining distance, guests were enjoying the function. The energy and vibe of the wedding was restrained but a surreal experience to watch the function on the big screen and also online. We had to be very careful about maintaining the basic protocols of masks, sanitisation and social distancing as much as possible", says Deepak.

"Although I was lucky to get married in 2019 amidst a huge guest footfall but my cousin's wedding was also celebrated with equal fervour albeit a thin invitee list. The presence of all cousins and close friends ensured that the event was a celebration of two people in love. Infact, I found the celebration more participating and very personal. Safety protocols were observed and there were sanitizers and hand masks all around. Yet people enjoyed. I and my wife, Karishma were surprised at how a wedding with a lean guest list can be so much fun", he describes.

Karishma is quick to comment on the large venue chosen by the couple's family. "A bigger space gave them the freedom of movement and social distancing was easy to observe. We all cousins got together and specified the invitees all the safety measures to observe. Also they were briefed about what to expect at the wedding. Frankly speaking a small gathering in a larger space was easier to organize and stay connected. And we decided to go live with the ceremony so that friends and relatives living faraway could be a part of the weddings. Also for those who did not get the invite. Safety was the first priority on the list although I do confess we made a few enemies that day", she chuckles.

Plan a Covid-free wedding

- Venue is of prime importance. Its best to opt for open large spaces with a layout that allows proper social distancing.
- Graciously uninvite a guest on list. Tell them the necessity of this act. Today, thankfully most of them are quick to understand and many are relieved to be away from the crowd. People rarely feel bad about not being on the guest list.
- Make sure that the medical history of every guest, temperature checks and hygiene protocols are in place.
- Wearing of masks and using sanitizers all around must be compulsory. Share the safety measures with invited guests in advance, You can ask them to carry their own masks while sanitizing facilities will be arranged at your end. Although the idea of wearing a mask on your wedding is not exciting but remember its all about protection at the moment. Have a designed mask to match your dress and look good in the photographs. You can send them an e-invite and spell out every detail.
- Have signs put all over about assigned seating arrangements, masks availability, one way traffic and all safety protocols to keep the function safe. Can have some cute and clever signs like : "Spread Love not Germs", "Distance makes the heart go fonder", "Sanitizing station", "Protect yourself and others –Wear a Mask"



Deepak Khatri continues, "Their initial plans were to delay the wedding but realizing that the pandemic is here to stay for a while, they expedited their plans and decided to get married within one month. Their biggest concern was how to cut short the guest list. Initially they only counted their immediate families. Even we were not on the list", he winks and adds, "Just our parents were to be at the wedding. Suddenly they made some changes, booked a bigger banquet hall and added a few more guests in line with the Government rules. When we received their invite, there were hardly 7 days for us to shop for clothes or get our clothes tailored. Owing to less time, we had to do with whatever party clothes we had for their 3 to 4 functions. But we got our matching masks made, had precautionary medicines before and after the functions and all other protective measures to avoid getting caught with Corona. But people at the function were very casual, removed their masks at the venue and got on with the flow of the event. We then played the role of soldiers and had an announcement made, requesting them to wear their masks and keep everyone safe. It was scary for us to attend 4 events back to back in 2 days. But we had a great time after this long gap of lock down. Everything executed perfectly, each event was full of energy and excitement. Maybe a truncated version of their dream wedding but more practical, safe and in adherence to



THEMEWEAVERS

hygiene protocols. It made me come to this fact that Corona did minimize the list but not the zeal and fun element of a Punjabi wedding”, he says and leaves a piece of advice for prospective couples, “Soon to be wed couples heartbroken at the thought of celebrating their special day in a subdued manner must keep it in mind that its most important to get married”, advises Deepak Khatri who recently attended the marriage of his cousin and used lot of technology to highlight the ceremony. “Broadcasting the ceremony live was a great way to reach out to our well-wishers and include them in the D-Day. Just when my cousin was sad to see the invitee list come down, this aspect excited her as she could have more and more friends and relatives become part of the ceremony. There was social distancing, no fear of the virus attacking and even friends abroad participating in the celebrations”, he concludes.

Way the cookies crumbles

Covid 19 has changed a lot of things around the world, weddings are no exception. Right from the scale of weddings, to wedding planning and celebrations, we have gone from big fat Indian weddings to small intimate affairs. Also from meeting all your friends and family in person to e-meeting them over video calls. Covid has brought everyone to the realization that its more important to be happy than to have lavish weddings only to show others. Infact for many Indian parents, weddings of their children are financially draining and Covid restrictions have saved them from the unnecessary spurge

With the easing of Government restriction on the number of guests from 50 to 100, the coming months looks forward to a boost in the wedding market. Banquet and tent houses owners in Delhi are now

pinning their hopes on the upcoming wedding season. Marriages will still be intimate, cosy affairs but increase of guest list and better safety measure to cope up with is a positive and delightful prediction for this industry, which faced huge losses during lockdown and Covid restrictions.

Catering companies are adopting the safest modus operandi. Servers wearing masks and gloves and complete cleanliness while cooking food is being observed. Unlike elaborate spread, small customized affairs or sit-down dinners with distance observations is preferred. Instead of uncooked food and street food, people are opting for cooked food delivered to the site with all safety gears. Outdoor weddings

Bollywood movies revolving around weddings have always been blamed and famed for influencing people into turning their nuptials into massive filmy-like events. However, when it comes to movie stars themselves, they prefer quiet, intimate weddings.

with lot of space and air flow are where weddings are being held.

Blueprint for weddings.

People are however confused about how to organize a perfect wedding in a limited set-up. The best way is to have a wedding planner customize your wedding. Remember how Ranveer Singh and Anushka Sharma in “Band Baaja Baraat” do fun tasks together by the unreasonable demands of the wedding families. They highlighted the role of Wedding Planners who offer you many options according to your likes and covid restrictions.

Wedding Planner, Toshita Mody Kapoor of Eventara is clear that this isn't a normal environment. “But that should not take away the true meaning of a wedding which is to culminate into a union of two people for life”. She details the wedding actions on radar this season.



- Invite only those who will truly appreciate and derive joy from the ceremony. Tailor your guest list and stay within the Government regulations
- A smaller gathering means you get to live out your dream. Try and stay with just 1-2 functions, rather than more. This would prevent repeated interactions and exposure to the virus;
- Start building your story board on any social media site or better still leave it to your planner to do it for you;
- Build your wedding around 2 to 3 main ideas rather than multiple concepts which makes the event extensive and overdone;
- Ensure all invited guests are tested

prior to attending the event. And not just a 24 hour test prior to travel.

- Set up the event in a way that allows least amount of deviation from social distancing. Tables for 4 to 5 persons only, furniture not to be moved around and much more that would prevent the spread of infection;
- Maintain a registry of guest details, temperature checks, sanitizing equipment, frequent cleaning of touch points and restrooms, distanced seating arrangements. Have pre-plated starters and main courses instead of buffets.
- Catering should be self-service. This would entail additional staff but a compulsory step. Chosen food must

be circulated around in a manner that prevents guests from touching any extra portion. Serve hot food and avoid raw dishes such as uncooked salads and sushi's.

- Chose entertainment that requires guests to sit (socially distanced) and then participate in smaller numbers. Also with a limited guest list, entertainment can be personalized and involve all guests;
- Wedding traditions may have mellowed down due to social distancing guidelines, but shaking a leg in functions is still looked forward to. Avoid a dance floor where guests form clusters and dance in close proximity. Let people dance in a larger area which would allow more space. Have to be vigilant, observe safety protocols
- Provide guests with an online link to choose gifts (items/cash) for you. That way no one walks in with physical gifts or envelopes that need to be touched.
- One can have hand sanitizer infused with lavender and mint to stay away from the alcohol smell while keeping everyone germ-free.
- Ensure a back-up that would handle any emergency, keep an eye on guests, make them feel comfortable and protected with all sanitizing protocols and clean food.

Perna Saxena of Themeweavers elucidates how planning of weddings has significantly shifted.

"There is a lot of uncertainty as well as fear due to lack of control on various elements of a wedding event i.e. physical distancing, avoiding infections etc. Now it's not about big fat celebrations but safety first. Couple are giving top priority to health & safety and all arrangements have to integrate around this element. There is a significant reduction in guest count, right from 400-500 to around 100 guests. This means close relatives and friends and preferably no out of station invitations to reduce COVID risks.

Even Venue preferences have shifted and many couples are planning the weddings either at their home in a more closed and private space or choosing large open venues which are established brands and offer high standards of safety and hygiene. Our role too has made a paradigm shift. We have become creative problem



solvers working with new systems and processes, putting safety as a top priority. We also have an advisory role now, providing guidance on the right actions for a couple's wedding. We have created a detailed SOP document, fully complied by the team and our partners. We ensure all protocols, as per government regulations, such as physical distancing, temperature checks, usage of masks are followed by guests as well as planning team", explains Saxena. Theme Weavers Design team adhere to safety guidelines even while on-site. Ever since the virus has become a threat for every person, cleanliness and continued sanitization of venues has become extremely important. A few changes in how the wedding planners work:

- Pivoting to virtual: A luxury wedding requires coordination across many dimensions and lot of standard processes need to be converted to virtual including, executing designs, and doing diligences on quality, explaining nuances and details to vendors for various elements. Theme Weavers Designs team schedules regular virtual meetings with clients to keep them updated on the progress, take inputs on key decisions, showing actual physical samples on virtual calls to help them decide on themes and elements

Go Local: Due to COVID, wedding planners are forced to expand their local knowledge on what is available within the city or nearby, as its difficult to fly

people from across cities.

"Our recent tryst with a luxury wedding organised for our longstanding client tells us that while the number of people have been reduced but the experience desired and the expectations of a family have not. Fewer guests automatically means more intimate setting. This gives a chance for family and friends to spend quality time together but our clients are nowhere near compromising on the luxury aspect to realise their dream wedding. Even though, the recent wedding we conceptualised and executed in just 15 days with 50 guests; the venue chosen, the elaborate productions and celebrity artists were just like a 300 guests destination wedding", says Prerana and lists a few things which families request now:

- Higher focus on safety and health while delivering a differentiated and intimate experience for a group of 50 people vs. 500—10000 earlier

"There is a lot of uncertainty as well as fear due to lack of control on various elements of a wedding event i.e. physical distancing, avoiding infections etc. Now it's not about big fat celebrations but safety first."

- Maintaining physical distancing within the design element is something we keep in mind as we plan and design events in 2020. For a recent wedding we did, each table was 3 metres apart for guest seating. There were only 4 chairs on a 5 feet diameter round table;
- New themes and trends.

These are challenging times and it will be months before people garner enough courage to gather in large number to celebrate weddings. But once the threat of Corona Virus recedes, the big fat Indian wedding will be back in vogue. [\[1\]](#)

RITU GHAI

She is a seasoned writer for more than 20 years and enjoys reading in her spare time.



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JW Marriott Mussoorie Walnut Grove Resort & Spa

BY PAYAL SAHNI

Road Trip plan and the emotions

After eight months of grilling lockdown due to COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism was slowly restarting with the new norm; people were no more willing to stay indoors. It was overwhelming to be invited by JW Marriott to review the property. We were happy and a little cautious at the same time.

Mussoorie is a second home for most of us living in North India and that's why we felt the safest way to plan is travelling

by a Car/Taxi keeping in mind the current situation. The distance from Delhi to the Resort is approximately 300 kms and takes about 6 to 7 hours by a car.

Reaching the property

You are greeted by a very hospitable, courteous staff, gorgeous, shining and



sparkling clean beautiful lobby and the reception. The entire luggage is being sanitized again for the safety of all.

The JW Marriott Mussoorie gets its name 'the walnut Grove' as it is built around walnut trees and some of them are more than 100 years old and still standing strong and bearing the fruits. The Emblem of The resort at the entrance is the combination of a lion and eagle, which means vision and strength, the property stands true for it. Complete hygiene is maintained and one doesn't need to worry one bit, they ensure it for their staff, entire property and for the guests too.



The Room and the view

All the rooms come with their unique views and the one which we had was facing the valley, garden and the tall walnut tree itself and one could feel the soothing cool fresh breeze the moment one opens the window. What more could have we asked for, a luxurious room, the ultra luxurious and shining sparkling washroom, a personal greeting note with the basket full of handmade chocolates and fruits, a bunch of flowers, the cool breeze soothing your skin and a wine bottle to greet you. I was touched with their hospitality. The rooms are completely sanitized and social distance is maintained, this being the utmost priority of this resort and in the rooms too, this is ensured.

Food curated experiences

Welcome coffee was also unique as the brown sugar was in style coated with honey and served in the lounge itself. Just entering the reception area makes one feel





pampered already.

In-room dining experience was very special with copper 'dabbas' (Tiffins), 'Indian style on demand' - a vegan soul food after a long journey as we preferred the comfort of our room. The meals prepared in the resort are sourced from the local farms and organic produce is tantalizing for your taste buds, the chapattis simply would melt in your mouth.

The breakfast at JW Café is lavishly spread and there is something for everyone - gahat ke dal ka paratha (local produce), egg benedicts, swala stuffed pooris which is extremely light with jhalika seeds, fresh walnut cakes, milk shakes, fruits and ample variety to choose from both national and international cuisines.

The resort also helps boosting job



opportunities as the locals are the part of staff. Some of them have found a place in the kitchen to give a firsthand experience of the fresh food and the himalyan flavours of the region.

Wisteria Deck, our personal favorite spot which has the entire view of the valley, an open air place to sit and the very gorgeous Wisteria plants: The chef 'Pradeep' specially curated mostly vegan Italian fusion dishes from the fresh local produce from the farms itself. We relished on the crushed lemon with plant based natural sugar, the corn soup with the fusion of Italian herbs, 'Zarai'- Mukteshwar cheese pizza made from a special flour (again sourced from the valley itself). The meals were also topped with the use of a plant called the Kandali plant 'also known as a 'bichho ghas' or a 'baal sudharak

booti and the delicious looking Tiramisu, we were pampered by exotic food tasting to the core. It's just not about having a great experience of the property; it is also about the care they give. It was a pleasing and memorable experience to give us an everlasting impression of hospitality.

Evenings there give you a joyful experience of chai, coffee gupshup and some live music in a concept called 'Kachdi By the Hiamlayas' It a moment where all communities get together to share their stories over a traditional cup of Gharwali tea. We had a lovely time chitchatting with Pratyush, who inspite of his very busy schedule took personal care of us and ensured

that we enjoyed each and every moment during our entire stay.

The Traditional thalis: The chef presented us the kumaon thali where all the pulses and vegetables are sourced organically and the 'Devabhoomi thali' in which the entire food is without onions and garlic and the thali felt like a spiritual meal which tasted divine.

Teppan: Signature pan Asian restaurant with Japanese, Thai and Chinese fusion dinner and the chef's with knife- wielding skills, showing us the

These have been curated by our culinary maestros in collaboration with the local farmers in the nearby mountain villages, supporting them in the aim to be responsible in promoting the culture of the mighty Garhwal mountains

teppanyaki-style cooking methods, with Veg sushis, teriyaki sauce, udon noodles, deconstructed minestrone soup with the locally grown corns freshly sourced from Senji Village and a relaxed 'wine and music night' with the romantic feel to it. One is spoilt for choices here.

About the Property;The architecture and interiors has a lineage connection to the British era, the first electrical pictures, the Raj Room, the snooker room with choices of scotch, the artifacts' the books to read in every nook and corner, the sports hub, fully equipped gym will give you a hint of the history combined with the Royalty of the British Era gone by. More than 100 tones of reusable brass is used in the property, most of it will be seen in





door handles, knobs and the iconic bell in the shape of a lady.

My tete regarding sustainable tourism with **Mr. Sachin Mylavarapu**, General Manager of the JW Marriott Mussoorie Walnut Grove Resort & Spa, a seasoned hotelier, Mr. Sachin has almost two decades of proficiency in the hospitality industry. He has been associated with leading hospitality chains, holding key positions, which have served to further strengthen his expertise. His journey as a leader in the hospitality industry started in 2002 as the Restaurant Manager at the Callaway-Gardens, Preserve, Resort and Community at Pine Mountain, Georgia, USA, followed by the position of Assistant Restaurant Manager at the Renaissance Hotel and Convention Center & Marriott Executive Apartments at Mumbai. He takes over his latest mandate as a progression from the post of Hotel Manager at The St. Regis





We have also been advocating the cause of giving back to the community and implementing gender equality amongst our hotel, our belief is that “she” is the first ever chef in everyone’s life, who inspires and motivates us to become successful, kind and strong”.

Mumbai.

He says, “At the JW Marriott Mussoorie Walnut Grove Resort & Spa, we focus on being sustainable. We source all our Himalayan ingredients from the villages within a 100 km radius of the resort. Inspired by the local culture of Uttarakhand, we strive to share our culture with our endeavors to Go Local. He explains about the the Botanical Café – Green House Nursery, a herbal paradise in the Secret Spot by JW with exclusive Botanical Cafe surrounded by natural delights for a healthy indulgence. We have been on the forefront of sustainable innovations and have recently launched the most unique plant protein based offering in the country for our guests to savor’. These have been curated by our culinary maestros in collaboration with the local farmers in the nearby mountain

villages, supporting them in the aim to be responsible in promoting the culture of the mighty Garhwal mountains. With our fresh ingredients, we present an indigenous offering using them to present the healthy indulgence straight from our farms to your table. About giving back to the community , he says ,We have also been advocating the cause of giving back to the community and implementing gender equality amongst our hotel, our belief is that “she” is the first ever chef in everyone’s life, who inspires and motivates us to become successful, kind and strong”.

The team, he says at JW Marriott Mussoorie Walnut Grove Resort and Spa involves enthusiastic ladies from the nearby villages to come and be a part of the culinary operations of the hotel. With a passion in their hearts to learn and our

efforts to hone their skills, this community skill development program is what keeps us achieving more “together”.

Our chat with **Pratyush Mohapatra**, Marketing & Communications Manager. He is a dynamic and charismatic



individual with new-age thinking and passion. He is recognized in the industry as an astute marketing personality, conscientious in his execution and prudent with his resources. He also possesses great fortitude and vision

which made him the perfect choice for the present role.

He says, ‘2020 for us has been a year of immense learning and exploring new segments like wellness travel, unique experiences, realigning and redefining our luxury offerings and innovating guest’s experiences with new offerings in our award winning Restaurants using local produce and pulses. This has helped us to sustain and grow in an organic environment. We are also reinventing ourselves as the most preferred wedding destination in the region by exclusive wedding experiences such as Adventure Weddings and Himalayan Weddings. It is a clear thought of getting our guests to experience family oriented offerings to make it more personal and exclusive.”

Key points and my final review that makes them one of the best in the class, service and initiatives by JW Marriott Mussoorie

- ✓ **Sustainable**
- ✓ **Self sufficient is the a new luxury**
- ✓ **Safest resort is in their DNA**
- ✓ **Personalization**
- ✓ **Shadi by Marriott**
- ✓ **Unique experience for the individual**
- ✓ **Every lasting memories and the eagerness to revisit again.**
- ✓ **Responsibility initiatives towards local community**

Sought After Honeymoon Hideouts in India - 'a New-Normal'

BY MAJULIKA PRAMOD

Did you have a wedlock in the last six months and are still heartbroken about your derailed honeymoon plan? Well, don't be because you are not alone. Newly-wed couples around the world are nursing the pain and waiting to revive their cancelled plans. In fact, you must pat your back for choosing to not to travel all this while, for adhering to the protocols, and protecting yourself and loved ones. Health is paramount and just as the wedding celebrations became intimate; let your romantic rendezvous be no exception. Celebrate your wedding with

a quirky getaway in a social distanced zone and continue making dreamy honeymoon plans. Planning longingly is also a great way to keep floating together in the days of pandemic and travel restrictions.

In this longest year of isolation, our hearts are still set on our original plans but in the wake of the current situation, it is best to lean towards domestic and regional getaways. There is plethora of options in our vicinity and we must brainstorm some desirable and relaxing options in our own state or neighbouring one. There are no second thoughts about the fact that the pandemic has created havoc and now when some destinations are opening and travel is unfurling its wings again,

we cannot let our guards down. We really don't need to fuss about long distance travels, a more convenient and stress-free approach would be to plan domestic getaways and keep the trips as close as possible.

Regional exploration, probably by personal vehicle, seems safer and more doable. There may be so many places that you may have not seen in your own district or state. The best might idea might be to drive down to those hideouts- which may not be very far but right up your alley. Safe and mindful travel is resuming and many charming home-stays, private escapes as well as top-notch hospitality brands have begun to assure of precautionary



measures, temperature checks and prompt sanitisation. Don't forget to research extensively and even talk to the owners to be double assured. In this era of 'new normal', let us ditch the conventional plans to explore the charms of backyard tourism. Revisit some of the gem of places with a different plan. Just hunker in, debunk the direct route and take a detour to make the best of the road trip.

Here, I share a list of couple of places which require a discerning eye. These regions promise breath-taking views, indulgent experiences and honest hospitality. You may look into these options and check if they can provide the solace & serenity to make up for the lost time of the first half of the year.

Shillong

If you live close-by or have been to North Eastern part of the country, you must be aware that this region permanently resonates with the idea of soulful romantic getaway. One can always go to Shillong because it is not just a pretty capital city, but is a magical spell just like its name- 'abode of the clouds' in Sanskrit. The city leaves you charmed with its lush green valleys, highlands, forested hills, pleasant climate, scenic beauty and diversity. This is also the city of ethnic tribes. Shillong peak is revered as the place where Gods live and it is the highest point in Meghalaya. Shillong is a sought-after destination but

given the restrictions of the pandemic, you must keep to its peaceful environs. If you are driving on the Guwahati-Shillong Road, don't miss to be entertained by the pineapple plantations and pine trees all

along. One may also drive down to some of the pristine villages like Mawlynnong village which are epitome of unspoilt natural beauty. Don't miss the cascading waterfalls like Crinoline falls, Elephant



falls and more. 'Polok Lake' will impress you with its century old tales.

Andamans

What can be a better idea than enjoying the secluded and romantic oceanfront views from a room or a private beach? The combination of sun, sea and sand will enthrall you after this one of the longest 'stay at home' phase. This exquisite island jewel of India can be the perfect oasis of calm, away from the crowds. The islands of Andamans exude immense vibrance and tranquillity that is what you need these days. This romantic vacation will leave you enamoured with its nodding palm trees, azure waters, pristine beaches and the long stretches of white shimmering sand. With aqua-green waters, sparkling beaches, breath-taking natural vistas, and tropical forests, this place is very special. Also, recently, Radhanagar beach has been given the prestigious Blue Flag label (green eco tag). One may indulge into plenty of activities that don't require you to interact with too many people, from soaking in the natural beauty to reading a book to getting tanned in the sun. The underwater creatures and the beautifully coloured corals will give you just the thrill that your heart desired. Don't miss the Corbyn Cove's Beach in Port Blair, Ross Island, Kala Pathar Beach, Neil Island and Radhanagar beach. Couples must make the best of scuba diving, jet-skiing, snorkelling to experience the underwater adrenaline rush.

Mahabalipuram

This one will likely inspire you to take a deep dive down the pages of history. As a couple, if you are interested in ancient architecture, art and sculpture, the historic city of Mahabalipuram or 'Mamallapuram' in Tamil Nadu can make up for your cravings and count as an artistic getaway. On the Coromandel Coast, Mahabalipuram is the place where ancient tradition of stone carving comes alive. The place shines on the UNESCO World Heritage List for its marvellous monuments with sculptural panels, caves, monolithic rathas and temples. You can have your hearts set in the richness and aestheticism of the Dravidian art and architecture and feast your eyes on the gorgeous Shore temple, Arjuna's Penance, Krishna temple and Varaha temple. Some of the places to





explore on the way are Vedanthangal Bird Sanctuary, Thiruporur, Sadras. The closest city is Chennai and you may easily drive down from there.

Idukki

‘God’s own country’ is home to many bucket list destinations but when it comes to immaculate & best located regions, Idukki is less to none. It will give you endless space to hike, nature watch & romance in the fresh air. With weather at its best all-round the year, this one bestows you with splendid green mountains, tea factories, spice plantations and lots of forest area. When you are there, don’t miss the one-of-its-kind wildlife boat-ride or night adventure at the Thekkady (Periyar Tiger Reserve). There are no second thoughts about the fact that Idukki is one

of the most stunning hill stations in Kerala and you will need a wholesome week to see it all. One must see Idukki wildlife sanctuary, the Idukki Arch Dam, Painavu, lavezha Poonchira, Ramakkalmedu and the amazing waterfalls of the region. There are lush green valleys and suburbs all around. It would also be okay to skip the crowded places and rather indulge in a yoga class in your homestay or resort to rejuvenate your mind and body, amidst the greens. Make the most of amazing food and the idyllic neighbourhoods.

Auli

This popular winter destination has everything where one can relax and enjoy each other’s company. It might be wise to skip the touristy points of Uttarakhand and head to Auli for the Himalayan

rendezvous. Nearly 6 km uphill from Joshimat, this one promises great views of both Garhwal and Kumaon peaks. If you or your soul mate area ski aficionado, this is the place for you. Winters are the time to make the most of the snow-covered vistas. However, summers and monsoons are equally bountiful with lush green meadows all around. The adventurer in you will also love to do the gorgeous treks which pass through various rivulets and verdant valleys. The cable car ride and the Aulis’ artificial lake are a must do. Book a beautiful wooden hut and enjoy the views of the Mount Nanda Devi, Nanga Parbat, Dungagiri, Beethartoli, Nikanth Hathi Parbat and Ghori Parbat. On the days you choose to drive in the vicinity, the views of forests of deodar and oak and apple orchards will keep you entertained.



Udaipur

The 'city of lakes' in the state of Rajasthan is high on heritage and royal hospitality. There is an unending list of things to do but you may choose to enjoy your own intimate moments with candle light dinners, boating, requesting puppetry show or simply enjoying the views of Jaisalmand lake. Keeping up with the requirements of social distancing, you may zero on a few places among the most popular -City Palace, Lake palace, Monsoon or (Sajjangarh Palace), Lake Pichola, Jag mandir, Sajjangarh wildlife



sanctuary, Saheliyon ki Bari, Fateh Sagar lake, Gulab Bagh and more. Some of the best hospitality brands have their haven here and you may choose to have a safe and truly remarkable vacation with them. Udaipur is a place where one can enjoy the food, vibes, romance, architecture and mystic of the place, simply by being in a grandeur hotel.

Gulmarg

It always snows in the season and you don't have to settle for anything less. Gulmarg is an excellent place to cherish romantic moments where the outdoor



scenic views find its way inside. This is a paradise where you may spend a couple of days in your quaint resort. Waking up to the mild aroma of kehwa and seeing the snow fall can be the best socially distanced adventure for now. You'll have no trouble finding empty spaces on your road trip sin and around Gulmarg. Enjoy the unforgettable Gondola ride and soak in the vibes. You may not be a morning person but don't miss the chance to check out the

incredible early morning views here. And you must not forget to request the in-house chef of your resort or hotel to prepare Wazwan (multi-course meal in Kashmiri cuisine) for you. A holiday in Kashmir is a dream come true for many.

Ranthambore

Who wouldn't love to wake up in a place where you could enjoy birdsong while sipping on your morning cuppa?



Ranthambore speaks of a deeply personal wildlife thrill. There is beautiful adventure camps bespoke character in idyllic green jungle settings. With abundance of flora and fauna, it is undoubtedly one of the best wildlife sanctuaries in India. Tucked between the Aravalli and Vindhya ranges of mountains, this place is apt for the wildlife enthusiasts, wildlife photographer and the nature lovers. You definitely can't say no to the jungle safaris and be amazed with the natural habitat. The upcoming weather is apt for the nature trail, birding, and camping experiences which Ranthambore offers in plenty.

Panchmarhi

If you are close to Central India, drive down to the city which is also known as the 'Queen of Satpura'. Embellished with a range of flora and fauna, this one will cheer you up with its many off-the-beaten trails. Once, the capital of the Gond tribal dynasty, Panchmanhi will win you over with its heart-warming tribal history, numerous caves, waterfalls, hilltops,



temples and wildlife reserves. Located at the height of 1110 m, it used to be the Pachmarhi used to be the summer capital of British in Madhya Pradesh. Pandav caves, Mahadeo hills, Satpura National Park, Forsyth Point, Panchmarhi Catholic Church, Begum palace ruins, Bee falls are some of the places to choose from. Take a cycle on rent and find your own path in this serene paradise.

Chilika

Its best to remain away from mainland and if you are looking for a place where you can pamper your soul with aboat therapy, curious chirping birds and scenic waterscapes, the biggest inland salt-water lake awaits you in Chilika. The lake which is spread over three districts of Odisha, Khurda, Ganjam and Puri promises unique ecosystem and diverse range of aquatic life. Being part marine, part brackish and part freshwater lagoon and dotted with islands, it is a complete sanctuary in itself. During the migratory season (winters), an immersive array of



birds can be seen here, some from as far as Siberia. The lagoon is also the single largest habitat of Irrawaddy dolphins in the world. Bordered by hills and hillocks of the Eastern Ghats, it makes a great getaway for bird-watching, splashing around in the water and enjoying fishing together. You must visit the Bird island, Kalijai island, Mangalajodi, Nalabana Bird sanctuary and Breakfast island. The nearest city is Bhubaneswar and one may also drive down to the city of Puri which is well connected through road and rail. Golden Beach in Puri has recently been coveted with International blue flag certification.

The monotony of life in lockdown and in these pandemic days have come to affect everyone. The heart is pining for safe and relaxed getaways. Plan a trip to these cities only if they are close-by and the latest Covid cases make them safe for visit. India can spoil you with choices and zeroing on any one is tough but for now, you may go with places that are opening up and are mindful of the Covid-19 requirements.



Note: With travel advisories changing every day, please check for the latest status of the places where we shouldn't go, and also the areas where we need to be extra cautious. It is very important to gauge your own sense of safety until the heydays of travel return. [\[1\]](#)

• MANJULIKA PRAMOD •

She is a telecom engineer, hobby artist, big time foodie and a compulsive traveler. 'PENDOWN' is her personal writing space and she also contributes in magazines and newspapers. She has recently published a book on her lockdown diary called - 'Kaleidoscope of Cheer and Hope'.

Aruba – A Jewel of the Caribbean

North of Venezuela in the southern part of the Caribbean Sea shines a dazzling jewel of the Dutch Caribbean – Aruba. Along with neighbouring islands of Bonaire and Curacao it forms the popularly known trio of ABC Islands. Where A stands for Aruba, while B and C stand for Bonaire and Curacao respectively.

BY GAUTAM SINGH KANWAL

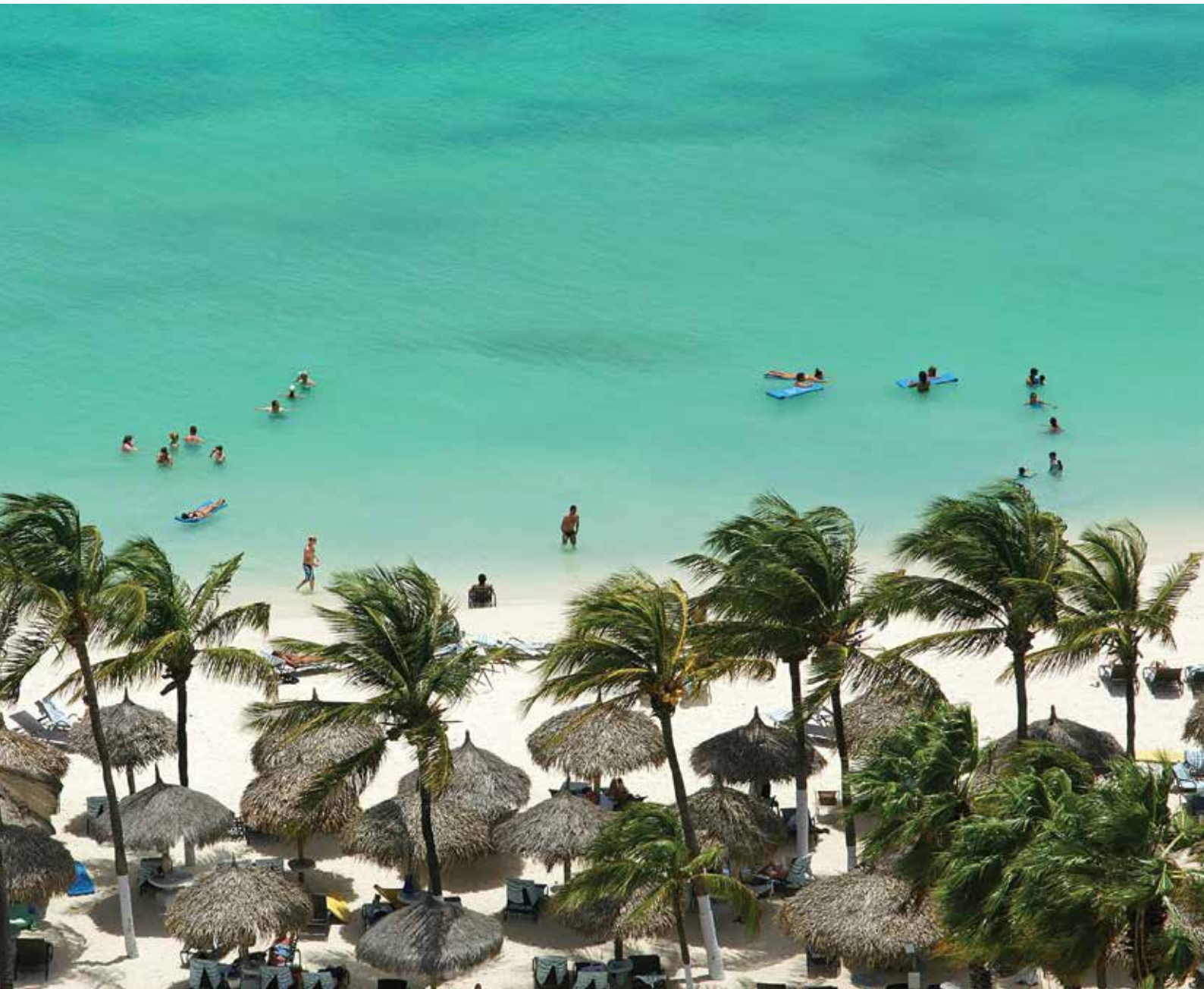
A tiny constituency country of the Kingdom of Netherlands which measures only 33 kilometres in length while being around 9 kilometres at its widest extremity. While most people might even not have seen Aruba on the map as it's too tiny to be spotted, it can engage and occupy a visitor's interest as much as any other major destination across the globe.

Flying to Aruba from New York was a pleasant 4-hour flight though the landing

at Aruba felt quite unnerving. The tiny island has this tiny airport which can hardly be spotted from the air until almost touchdown. It almost appears as if the plane is going to land on a beach. Once you're driving out of Queen Beatrix airport towards the north, one can get a feel of the islands minuteness by spotting a casino right next to the Parliament of Aruba. (which is bang on the road). It just goes to show how they have managed the little space available to them. Else, could one ever think of a bustling casino next to a parliament?



Driving to Noord (the northern part of the island) would light up anyone as you drive past brightly coloured buildings, resorts and casinos. Some of the best street art can be spotted in the Caribbean islands and many of the walls on the streets of Aruba are perfect testimony to that. I was headed for the main resort beach of the island which was Palm Beach and for my stay at Aruba, I was being put up at Holiday Inn Resort (a resort / hotel I've always enjoyed staying at for its sheer ambience, having previously relished its joyful environment at Montevideo, Uruguay and Cape Canaveral, FL, USA).





A beautiful white grainy sand beach kissing the blue water under a steady breeze welcomed guests just across the lobby of Holiday Inn. I couldn't take my eyes of the view for a long time. The complimentary drink served just lay by my side for a long as I was still trying to soak it all in. It was a moment I still think of reliving many a times.

Right there and then I decided not to take a nap or any sort of rest that one would normally do after back to back flights, just wanted to feel Aruba to the bone and off I went after dumping my

luggage in the room. The soft white sand Palm beach across Holiday Inn was too appealing. No one could resist the temptation of lying flat on such a striking beach. Aruba being nice and warm and mostly dry throughout the year does call for a lot of sunscreen. Beaches in Aruba have regularly figured in the top 10 or top 20 island beaches of the world.

Palm beach to Eagle beach (which are connected) is a leisurely 4 km walk that one could enjoy over and over again not enervate. I took that walk a couple of times back and forth without even realising

it. Both beaches are almost similar in ambience as they are connected and have hotels and resorts lined up adjacent to them continuously.

Walking back to Holiday Inn was just in time for lunch. And the sea food was all a fresh catch. A rich blend of sea food and salad is a craving really hard to curb. Discussing with the hotel staff over the meal I learnt of a historical spot nearby which must be visited. It was the Alto Vista Chapel of Noord. Having grown up in a Catholic boarding school I was more than inclined to pay it a visit. The



thought of it being centuries old piqued my interest even further. The Holiday Inn staff arranged an ATV for me to visit the Chapel which was about 5 kilometres away (Travel within Aruba is a bit expensive, and bargaining with cabbies is common, however it is better to hire your own car or ATV if you're comfortable with driving).

The drive to the Alto Vista Chapel takes you along a dusty and muddy terrain lined with tall cactus plants along the road. Not quite the vegetation one would expect in the Caribbean and you get a desert expedition feel by the time

you arrive there.

At first sight the Alto Chapel looked like a colourful drawing from an Enid Blyton children's book. And almost instantaneously my favourite hymn started to play in my mind (All things bright and beautiful, All creatures great and small.....). A hymn we sang most joyfully in school chapel. Interestingly, when this chapel's original structure was built there wasn't even a priest in all of Aruba, way back in the year 1750. The catholic influence on Aruba is said to have arrived from Venezuela. As brightly painted on the

outside, so on the inside. A brief visit inside the chapel, learning of its history and a small prayer made it a meaningful visit.

Riding the ATV back to Holiday Inn was equally fun and I was impatient to get back on the beach. Eagle beach, Palm beach among the other beaches also happen to be popular dream wedding destinations. There are over a dozen wedding organisers in Aruba who plan these dream destination weddings by the picturesque beaches.

And while beaches may be the cynosure of Aruba, it also has other attractions such as the Oranjestad Tram.



Not only is it the first, but also the only rail facility in all of Dutch Caribbean. It is quite popular among the tourists who get charmed by the mere sight of it and one couldn't help hopping on to it for a ride.

The entire track length being under 3 kilometres it is only enough to take you in and around Oranjestaad (Capital of Aruba), but these battery-operated trams is a sure joy ride for visitors. The ticket / pass for the tram is quite reasonable too.

The good thing about making payments in Aruba is that though they have their own local currency (Florin), US Dollars are widely accepted. In fact, USD is more in circulation than Florin. This is also the case in most of the Caribbean islands.

The following day was an early rise to ride the ATV further north to the California lighthouse for watching the sunrise. This is a major attraction specially with the guided tours. Built in the early 20th century it has stood tall for over a century now, guiding ships off the coast of Aruba. It has been named after a ship by the same name which was wrecked in the late 19th century. There is an interesting story of the merchandise onboard the wrecked ship

being salvaged and sold off at the markets at Oranjestaad.

Being open to public for climbing atop (100 feet high) for a panoramic view, it is a perfect point for watching the sunrise. Having worked on ships (from where we often make use of lighthouses for position fixing) for quite some time, this was the first time I went inside a lighthouse so it was quite memorable for me altogether. It is a nice spot indeed for gazing at the panoramic surroundings from atop the lighthouse.

If there is something one wouldn't want to miss out in Aruba, it is the Flamingo Beach or Renaissance Beach. A short 10 minutes boat ride from mainland (though it costs around 100 USD) took us there and as we arrived the area, cohorts of baby pink and off-white coloured flamingos were flocking spontaneously towards the arriving visitors in hope of a treat. The visitors can feed these docile birds of their bare hands for a very reasonable price. Avifauna has always interested me from childhood and I've made school projects on the subject, so the charisma of these majestic birds flocking all around makes it a very unique

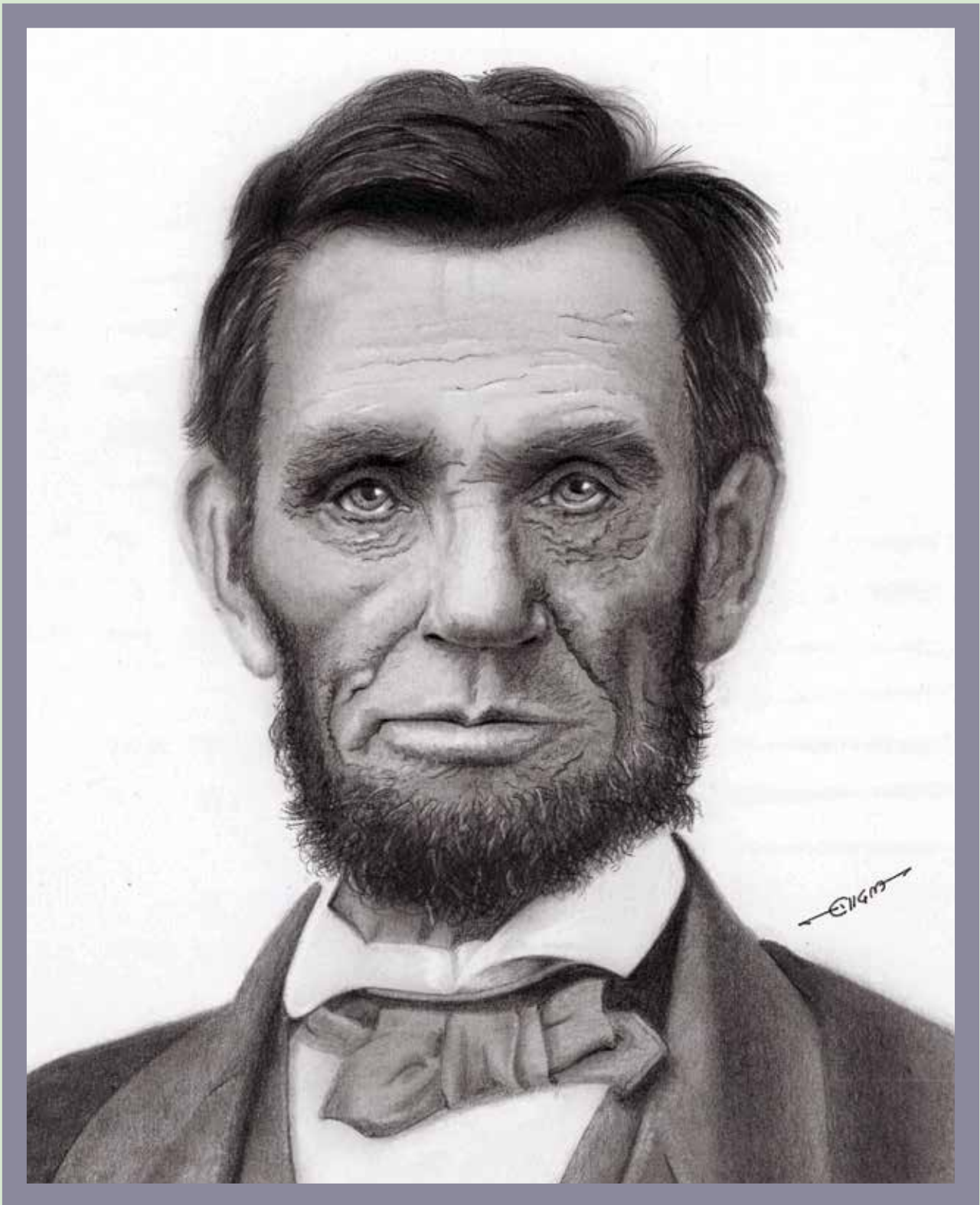
and memorable experience Aruba is also a popular spot for diving, snorkelling, parasailing among other adventure sports which the visitors indulge in.

Having experienced the major highlights of Aruba's attractions was very satisfying before I set sail from this gem of an island. Honestly, I was unaware of this island's existence till the time I was asked to board my ship from here. Hadn't heard of it, hadn't seen it on the map. Even after locating it on the map I remained oblivious towards it. But once I set foot on Aruba, it was fascinated me to a magnitude one couldn't describe. No words in any language could suffice.

Flying in to Aruba and sailing out of it had me in contrasting moods to say the least. Ever since my short visit to Aruba, I've always been planning a vacation there. And I really hope it would happen soon. [\[1\]](#)

—GAUTAM SINGH KANWAL—

The above article is authored by Gautam Singh Kanwal (Master Mariner) who works aboard Merchant Ships and hails from Nainital, Uttarakhand. An avid for travelling, music, art, adventure sports, etc. he is keen to indulge in new experiences every time.



“Badal Tyagi, a software engineer passionate about art, based in the U.S. Part-time artist specializing in portraits and wildlife. Works in graphite, charcoal, pastels, and oils.”

Auroville enlightens!

BY ARVIND PASSEY

If you can imagine a 20 sq km area transforming from a barren expanse of red sand and sparse vegetation into a haven of creative thought, divine consciousness, and sustainable living in a few decades, you have successfully imagined Auroville. This township in TamilNadu was created for the sole purpose of realizing human unity. When I visited the place in December 2018, the creative impulses for writers, artists, and photographers, mind-blowing architectural conversations, and the way the entire world converges here took my breath away.

It is tempting to write a travel article that brings in Puducherry, Auroville, Mahabalipuram, and the ECR or the East Coast Road clubbed into one. However, this simply will not do any justice to this experimental township called Auroville that is around 150 kms south of Chennai and around 14 kms north of Puducherry. We drove to Auroville from Chennai and the numerous water bodies along the route with the roaring sea to the left put us in the right frame of mind for the two days that we had ear-marked for our stay inside the township.

The city of dawn

When asked why he opted to place Auroville near Pondicherry (now Puducherry), Aurobindo writes that this was the site 'appointed by those who are Beyond'. He called the site as a 'place of retreat, my cave of tapasya, not of the ascetic kind, but of a brand of my own invention'. The name, however, is from the French language where 'aurore' is dawn and 'ville' means city. The City of Dawn was founded by Mirra Alfassa and architecturally designed by Roger Anger. Most of those who have read about

Aurobindo will know that Mirra is also The Mother, and she was the one who thought about the conceptual layouts for the township.

What matters is the experience

Yes, Auroville has everything that any travel enthusiast wishes for – architectural finesse, food that sounds like quaint and exotic music to the tummy, locals with their friendly smiles, graffiti to stare and wonder, and of course the unique signature of the place so far as meditation, yoga, and massages go. All this is besides the workshops, seminars, and impromptu conversations on everything from divine consciousness to the way Aurovillians think.

'It is the overall experience that matter,' said one of the functionaries who we met, 'and the experience is better when one stays in the township and isn't

just a hurried day visitor.' She is right because this township isn't ever in a hurry. The meandering red sand pathways go around in their strange eccentric way with helpful natural landmarks that many outsiders use as a navigating guide because conventional sign-boards are few and spread apart. This, of course, can be a bit unnerving for the typical city dweller who is accustomed to a rush of signboards all around and all kinds of ISPs to take care of online navigation. Despite problems with connectivity, one doesn't feel lost I believe this is because when one is in a 'place of an unending education, of constant progress, and a youth that never ages' and where the caretaker Aurovillians want the place to 'be the bridge between the past and the future', the possibility of fear remains subdued. Just a night or two spent within the township strengthens the feeling that this is where discoveries from





without and within may be possible. But then this isn't a place for those who fear the hot and humid climate that stays on for a large part of the year. We got to know soon enough that a lot of foreigners return to the climate their bodies are accustomed to during the summers and sometimes return during Indian winters. They may of course be doing this to get back to their normal jobs and earn enough to be able to sustain their prolonged stay within the township.

A place like Auroville is rejuvenating for both the mind and the body. I say this because the nearly 2500 residents 52 nationalities and the thousands of tourists who have been here believe this is to be true. Frankly, a 2 or 3 night stay in the township can hardly ever 'rejuvenate' however, the easy-going friendliness around, eating food grown by organic farming, the unhurried yet disciplined culture, the spirit of volunteering that is evident, and over 50 acres of 15 botanical gardens with over 250 species are enough reasons to fall in love with this place. Does this mean there is nothing else to SEE? I mean, the typical Indian tourist wants to SEE things, click selfies, and generally buy handicrafts, agarbattis, khadi stuff, soaps, health products and a lot of pamphlets and



free booklets. Yes, they're all there, so don't worry you will not be returning home empty handed from this cash-free, non-religious place that ignores creed, culture, colour, and nationality.

What do we SEE here?

Most tourists are surprised to find that Matrimandir is just one of the things that one can visit while inside Auroville. Yes, this 29 metres tall gold-plated dome with a large golden near-spherical with red cement lotus petals that has inside it a beam of sunlight falling on a crystal ball is a marvel that captures one's imagination. However, the very concept of Auroville is about living in 'conformity with India's highest ideals and aspirations' and this is reason enough for the Indian government donating more than \$200,000 to this township every year, and UNESCO has protected the township since its birth in

1968. This idea is strengthened when one goes around and discovers neighborhoods here with Tamil, English, French and Sanskrit names like Aspiration, Arati, La Ferme, Auromodel and Isaiambalam. The element of harmony is seamlessly blended with every big and small facet here.

Auroville, by the way, is luckily placed on a plateau region with its maximum elevation of 32 m (105 ft) above sea level located in the Matrimandir area. The website informs us that 'the annual rainfall average is 1,200 mm (47 in) mainly from the SW monsoon (June to Sept.) and NE monsoon (Nov to Dec) with a dry period of approx 6 months. The average maximum temperature is 32.2 °C (90.0 °F), average minimum 20 °C (68 °F)'.

Once a person has been to Matrimandir, where the entry is ticketed and a visit needs to be planned in advance, one looks around for other attractions





beyond this structure that has been given a lot of names like a huge golf ball, an alien spaceship, a massive ferrero-rocher like building. Photography inside Matrimandir isn't allowed because this is a place where even casual tourists are introduced to the cleansing effect of meditation. But once person leaves the precincts of Matrimandir, the choices range between being awed by the 120-seater Cinema Paradiso (where we spent an evening watching a play performed by the kids who stay here) to visiting the Kala Kendra for art activities or Arka for a wellness focus and an introduction to concepts of divinity. There then the Savitri Bhavan, the centre for spiritual education, where we spent a few hours browsing their picture gallery to understand the vision of Aurobindo and The Mother. The township also has 6 Peace tables made from the wood of 300 years old eastern black and walnut trees and one of these is in the Hall of Peace since 1996. Auroville has a lot of varied workshops,



lectures, and classes on yoga, art and craft, and sculpting going on but one needs to know how and when to book a seat in one of them in advance.

Yes, there is also the Bodhi beach and the Repos beach, which is the breeding ground for Ridley turtles. During our stay here the water was choppy and the beaches were deserted.

What about food in the township?

On one of the days that we were here, the township celebrated their Africa Day and we had a nice time tasting a whole

range of delicacies that our taste buds loved. For the more conventional, there are cafes and restaurants like Marc's Café, Greek Café, Tanto Pizzeria, La Terraza, Kopi Bar, and Dharma Swasti for everything from chocolates and wood-fired pizzas to any form of conventional food that we are accustomed to. I must mention here that the cheesecakes at Auroville Bakery and Boulangerie were as good as the ones we had while we were roaming the streets of Paris a couple of years back. The food at the Solar Kitchen is sourced from their own organic farms and is tasty as well as healthy. One does



have the final option of hopping on the hired scooty or motorbike or cycle and zipping over to the more elaborate café and eatery sections of Puducherry. If you're adventurous enough do take a ride in the local bus because this is where you would experience the truth of this part of incredible India.

Have I missed anything vital?

Yes I had almost forgotten to tell you not to miss collecting every possible pamphlet or booklet that has information on Auroville and doesn't cost anything this is how one can fill in the blanks of memory lapses while writing a long piece on a place. You see, I just realized that one of these pamphlets mentioned the original vision when Auroville was being planned. This insignificant looking



piece of printed paper told me that the basic plan was about four zones radiating from the centre. This is why even though conventional roads don't exist inside Auroville, everyone knows the general direction of the 'residential', 'industrial', 'cultural', and 'international' zones. On the periphery is a green belt with a lot of forests, farms, botanical gardens, water catchment bunds, a seed bank, and areas for growing medicinal and herbal plants.

I have also not mentioned that Kalki Kochelin was born in a big house near Auroville near Repos beach and that almost every old Tamilian house in the area is photogenic.

Auroville, the experimental 'universal township' that had delegates from 124

nations during its inauguration ceremony On 28 February 1968, is here to help humanity move towards 'its splendid future by bringing together people of goodwill and aspiration for a better world'. The concept of Auroville as a centre for spiritual excellence would not have been possible had Aurobindo not met Vishnu Bhaskar Lele in 1908. The two discovered their first spiritual experience together by sitting in meditation and not thinking. According to Aurobindo one needs to throw thoughts away from the mind until it is capable of complete silence and he writes: 'I flung them away before they could enter and take hold of the brain and in three days I was free. From that moment, in principle, the mental being in me became a free

intelligence, a universal mind...' As I stood there inside Savitri Bhavan reading this text, I knew that a visit to Auroville is one way of finding the truth of existence. Auroville enlightens. www.passey.info

ARVIND PASSEY

Only writing is on his mind. Travel writing, tech writing, book reviews, and political satire besides hundreds of poems, short stories and essays. His stories and poems have been published in around a dozen readable anthologies of repute. He also blogs and has nearly 1500 articles and poems on his blog ([passey.info](http://www.passey.info)). His writings have been published in The Education Post, The Huffington Post, Business Insider, InsightBuzzar, & MarketingBuzzar. He has been discussing technology on UNBOXED and TownHall on NDTV, moderated a few education-related discussions on DilliAajTak, attended Kumaon Lit Fest and SMVDU Lit Life as a speaker, moderated a discussion on journalism vs blogging with Saeed Naqvi etc. His blog: <http://www.passey.info>

Payal Sahni's interaction with Mr. Akshay Pandit, Executive Chef, Crowne Plaza Jaipur.



Q Please let us know about your earlier journey of your professional life, and what kind of challenges you faced.

It all started with a fascination towards the profession and after completing my hotel school in 2007.

I chose to enter the kitchens of The Leela Palace Bangalore which was known for its finest restaurants and world-class ingredients. This is where I met my world of great Chefs and overwhelming respect towards the profession.

After about a year and a half of culinary skill training, learning to manage kitchens and more importantly learning

the business, I moved back to Mumbai and started taking control of a diverse culinary portfolio including an All Day dining, Executive Club Lounge, Bars, banquets and Fine Dining Kitchens. After about 4 years of mastering the skills of kitchen and managing diverse age groups of professionals, it was time to discover International Hospitality Brands and I was fortunate to open Chennai's first Roof-Top Fine Dining Grill Restaurant.

After having developed a successful fine dining restaurant and making the All Day Dining Restaurant at Westin Chennai being awarded as the Best Brunch in Chennai; I wanted to further explore my profile and take on new hotel openings to understand the whole process right from the scratch.

So I moved on to pre-opening a 273 rooms Marriott property in Kochi. This is where I developed from a hands-on cook to a Chef and understood the meaning of nurturing a team where passion, dedication and attitude were more important than formal education and degrees.

After about a year and a half I moved on to taking control of multiple outlet operations with an upper upscale brand, the JW Marriott Bangalore. This is where I learnt to pace my management and culinary skill set to the requirements of the varied outlets.

By the end of the year 2017 I joined at a multi-property role of a Complex Executive Sous Chef with the biggest and most renowned convention center, Renaissance Hotel and Convention Center and Marriott Executive Apartments with a total inventory of 750 rooms and some

great high potential restaurants.

And now, here I am as an Executive Chef with Crowne Plaza Jaipur where the endeavor is to create never done before culinary experiences for the city of Jaipur.

In terms of challenges, quite frankly there have never been any major challenges with the profession if you are really passionate about what you are doing.

Q How did you overcome those challenges?

It's all about a continuous learning process where one has to better himself every day. There is so much to learn that one cannot complain about challenges. The trick lies in using challenges as opportunities which eventually creates a path for success.

Q Please let us know the advice you would like to give to the budding hotel management students.

Hotels studies are more to do with logic than theories, however culinary predominantly requires excess study are research on ingredients, cooking process, varies cuisines available across the globe and a good knowledge of what's in trend.

Only if you are ready and passionate about discovering food not just on the table but the entire process of how and where it comes from and what you could do with it, should you get into the profession. It takes more than just cooking. A Chef needs to be well informed, multi-tasking, disciplined and highly energetic in order to make justice to the profession. Study and practice not to please but to understand the core of

cooking as anyone can have an opinion on food but only a well-educated Chef knows the difference.

Q Coming back the present scenario, do you think the new way to look at the things should be the outlook going forward, if yes what are those changes.

The present scenario definitely has altered the way we carried out our operations and business as a whole. Hotels have always practiced the highest level of hygiene considering the scale at which we operate. As such the new normal isn't really a new thing when it comes to the hygiene practices in a kitchen. However some of the new measures would definitely be implicated in future when it comes to group dining.

It's more to do with crowd management and a new hygiene parameter of crowd hygiene comes in the picture. The minimal handling of commonly touched surfaces, distanced seating, smaller and fresher individually portioned food or mono-portions is the way forward at least till the time we are ready and comfortable to accept sharing of food which is a common culture across civilizations.

Q What would you like to advice; the key point that could be considered while planning a theme occasion

The present scenario calls for smaller, intimate events and celebrations and avoiding chaotic dining spaces. As a Chef and hospitality professional, these are my recommendations.

- Plan and book the venue well in advance
- Prune the guest list
- Invite the guests well in advance, so that they can plan their travel accordingly
- Do a recce of the venue in advance and discuss in detail the event beforehand with your core team. Given that travel and arrangements may take a while more now-a-days, planning is the key.
- Keep the arrangements seasonal and local. The closer the team is to the

source, the more stress-free you will be in present situation of the new normal.

Q Please let us know your favorite theme or combinations for a wine and food and cocktail parties. (Please let us know more about the vegetarian/ vegan combinations).

Wines are back in trend and not just plain straight up but shaken and stirred. Wine based cocktails are really bringing in some much needed twist to the typical age old cocktail party.

- Typically reds are paired with heavy

The present scenario definitely has altered the way we carried out our operations and business as a whole. Hotels have always practiced the highest level of hygiene considering the scale at which we operate. As such the new normal isn't really a new thing when it comes to the hygiene practices in a kitchen. However some of the new measures would definitely be implicated in future when it comes to group dining.

and whites are paired with light natured food. However when it comes to wine cocktails the combinations need to be made depending on the ingredients of the cocktail.

- I would usually pair strong aromatic ingredients like mushrooms, shallots, garlic, canapés and salads with a crisp dry white wine based cocktail.
- I would keep bakes and gratins with a full bodied whites or a light red fruity and aromatic red wine.
- Indian gravies and biryani go very well with full bodied red wines and fruits are best enjoyed with dry whites.
- There are dessert wines which go terrifically well with Indian desserts too.


Q In your opinion how or what do you think, the occasions should be

planned in a way that it is completely memorable/ classy / yet very safe special occasion.

The best way would be to keep a good mix of personal favourites, current trends and of course, time and location of the venue. Keeping personal favourites will make sure that your occasion will always be a memorable one. We recommend keeping in mind the venue location and season so that the décor can be done appropriately and we can recommend menus that are fresh and complement the occasion. Example a summer brunch mehendi menu will be completely different from an evening menu for cocktails and

sangeet. Trends can be followed but the bottom-line should be to do décor that makes you happy. During this new normal, we have our standard, rigorous protocols for cleanliness and hygiene that are followed to the last bit to ensure a safe and stress-free event for our guests and team.

Q Any last words to keep the momentum going?

As they say, fortune favours the brave. The current ongoing pandemic has been a complete unseen crisis that has forced us individually and collectively to rethink our work and resources. We really have to adapt to a new normal and have faith and keep moving forward to build up momentum for future growth. It will not be an easy route but the tough roads do lead to amazing destinations. 



RAMSAR SITES- TOWARDS CONSERVATION OF WETLANDS



BY SRISHTI VERMA

The year 2020 came with a host of novelties for humans, plants, animals and the environment. While we are learning how to be live, work and travel safely in the pandemic, a portion of a delicate ecosystem was recently devastated in fires in the South American country Brazil. The fires were exacerbated by the unusually dry conditions that engulfed more than 10% of Pantanal wetlands. This has once again brought to notice the state of wetlands at present. An area where soil is covered by water round the year or for varying times in an year is called a wetland. Thus, areas saturated with water, such as marshes, estuaries, ponds, lakes,



lagoons, mangroves etc. are categorised broadly as wetlands.

In 1971, UNESCO established an intergovernmental treaty to conserve wetlands. Wetlands of international importance were placed in this list to be conserved better and for sustainable use of their resources. The Convention on Wetlands was signed in the city of Ramsar in Iran, hence lending the name Ramsar Convention. 10 new Ramsar sites were added to the list, giving India a total of 37 Ramsar sites. Let's look at the Ramsar sites in India.

Jammu, Kashmir, Ladakh

Home to beautiful valleys and snow-clad peaks, the union territories of Jammu and Kashmir are home to Hokera wetlands, Surinsar-Mansar lakes, Tso Moriri and Wular lake. Hokera wetland fosters more than 60 species of waterfowl and the endangered White-eyed Pochard which migrates from Siberia and Northern Europe along the Central Asian Flyway. Located close by is Wular lake, the largest freshwater lake in India. Tectonic activity had led to the creation of this lake which is fed by waters from the Jhelum river. It has

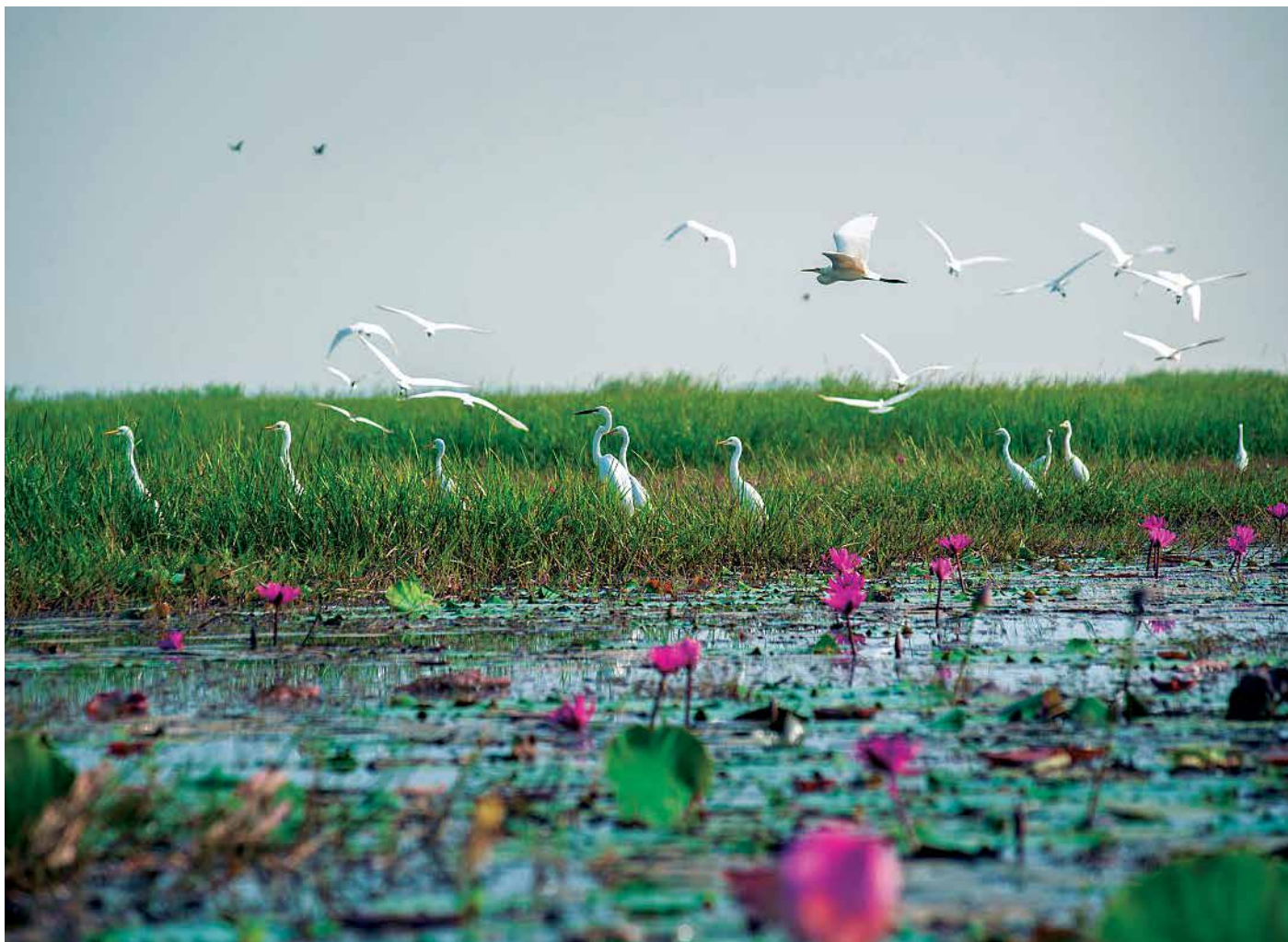
been referred to as Bolor by the Iranian scholar Al-Biruni. 'Wul' is a Kashmiri word which means a fissure, indicating to the origins of this lake.

About 42km from Jammu are present the twin lakes Surinsar-Mansar. A wildlife sanctuary is also located here. Thick mangroves, beautiful pine trees and the scenic hills add to the charm of floating lotuses here. Bird watchers are in for a happy treat as well here. Towards the east is Tso Moriri, a lake frequented by people in the Ladakh region. Situated in the Changthang plateau, this is where Changpa tribe acts as guardians to the pashmina goats whose soft fur keeps us warm all winter round.

Himachal Pradesh

Chandra taal, Pong Dam and Renuka are the three Ramsar sites located in the mountainous state of Himachal Pradesh. The crescent shape of the Chandra Taal located in Spiti valley draws travellers from far and wide. To add to the beauty of the pictures clicked here, mother nature gave us Chandra Bhaga mountains in the backdrop. A sweet water lake, Chandra Taal is situated on the SamudraTapu





bird sanctuary has previously hosted the rare Siberian white crane and the river Garra flows near it. Sarus crane have given the name to the Sarsai Nawar Wetland, which is the largest area for their roosting. Samaspur bird sanctuary is a lowland marsh, established in 1987. Over 250 bird varieties can be spotted here, including migratory species who come here during winters. The first wetland declared in the state was the Upper Ganga River from Brijghat to Narora. It is a habitat for Ganges river dolphin, ghariyal, turtles, otters and fishes. It is also revered in the Hindu mythology, and is a freshwater wetland.

Gujarat

The solar state of India is known for its Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary. Declared a Ramsar site in 2012, Nalsarovar is dotted by

a lake and numerous marshes which house migratory birds in winter and spring. The endangered wild ass and the black buck are also found here. We strongly suggest going here early at dawn to watch birds waiting for food in flocks.

Madhya Pradesh

Bhoj wetland, situated in the capital Bhopal has two lakes- Bhojtal and Lower Lake, the former is named after Raja Bhoj, the ruler of Malwa region who had established the city of Bhopal, while the latter was created by Nawab Chote Khan in 179. Many water birds have made their homes in the Bhoj wetland.

Maharashtra

Nandur Madhyameshwar Bird Sanctuary is rich environment for many species of

plants and animals. It has been formed by the shallow backwaters of Nandur Madhyameshwar dam on the river Godavari. The threatened Indian Spotted Eagle, leopard, and the fish Deolali Minnow are found here.

Kerala

The state of Kerala proudly hosts the longest lake in India- Vembanad Kol. It is the second largest Ramsar site in India, and is famous for the Nehru Trophy Boat Race. As the Central Asian flyway passes through it, hundreds of migratory birds come here. Sasthamkottalake is a freshwater source in the midst of hills. It gets its name from the Sasthamkotta Sree Dharma Sastha Temple located close by. Ashtamudilake gets the highest number of visitors in its backwaters. The lake has 8 branches, lending it its name. This lake and its shores



have inspired artists, including the poet Thirunallloor Karunakaran. Don't forget to take your notebooks and pens with you when you visit, you never know when the inspiration may strike!

Tamil Nadu

Point Calimere Wildlife and Bird Sanctuary is situated along the Palk Strait. Many watchtowers are accessible to the public for panoramic views of the sanctuary. The area is rich in biodiversity and its flagship species is blackbuck antelope- the near threatened species. Bottlenose dolphins

and the endangered olive ridley turtles are also found here.

Andhra Pradesh

Kolleru Lake in Andhra Pradesh is the largest shallow freshwater lake in Asia. Situated between Krishna and Godavari deltas, Kolleru Lake is an important site for migratory birds, including Siberian crane, greater flamingos and painted storks. Pallava dynasty's two copper plates have been found in the lake. We strongly suggest to visit here between October to March for the best bird watching experience.

Odisha

Chilika Lake and Bhitarkanika Lake are the two Ramsar sites in the coastal state of Odisha. Bhitarkanika is a mangrove wetland in the river deltas of Brahmani and Baitarani. It is during January to March that olive ridley turtles come here for nesting. Saltwater crocodile is also found. To the east is the Gahirmatha Marine Wildlife Sanctuary which consists of Gahirmatha Beach, where olive ridleys lay eggs, and a section of Bay of Bengal. Chilika Lake, at the mouth of Daya River, is the largest coastal lagoon in India and



is second to The New Caledonian barrier reef of New Caledonia in south Pacific. It is the largest wintering ground in the Indian subcontinent for migratory birds, hosting avian species from Caspian Sea and Lake Baikal to Aral Sea and Russia. It has the Nalaban Island bird sanctuary and many other islands of tourist attraction.

West Bengal

The Sunderbans is a UNESCO World Heritage site and Ramsar wetland which extend into India from Hooghly river to Baleswar river in Bangladesh at the



confluence of Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers. The revered forest goddess here is Bonbibi. Endangered species of Royal Bengal Tiger, Gangetic dolphin, estuarine crocodile and olive ridley turtles are found here. The East Kolkata Wetlands are the largest sewage fed aquaculture in the world and a complex of natural and man-made wetlands. The area is rich in flora and fauna, and the nutrients in it sustain fish farms and agriculture in the region.

Assam

The only state which borders every other northeast state, Assam is home to Deepor Beel wetlands in Guwahati. It is a freshwater lake in Brahmaputra valley and was a major dockyard of Mughals and Ahoms. The hills of Rani and Garbhanga surround the beel, and is rich in biodiversity, including about 70 migratory bird species.

Tripura

The Rudrasagar lake in Tripura is at a distance of about 52km from the capital Agartala. Situated at the Tropic of Cancer, this lake is a natural sedimentation

reservoir and home to the endangered Baer's Pochard and rare Ferruginous Duck.

Manipur

Loktak lake in Manipur is an important wetland in India and is listed in the Montreux records. It has the world's only floating national park and houses the endangered Sangai, only place in the world to do so. The lake has many Phumdis, which are floating islands in the lake.

India is rich in biodiversity and its tropical location provides ample opportunities for flora and fauna to flourish. The designation of Ramsar sites are an important step in conservation of wetlands and the biodiversity that they protect. It is important that we, as tourists, not only conserve but ensure that our travel here is sustainable and clean. Happy travelling to you! 🇮🇳

SRISHTI VERMA

She is a Delhi-based freelance travel writer. She loves reading and travelling, with a special place for lofty mountains in her heart. When not studying, she can be found trying to understand the dynamics behind the human motion and watching dog videos.



Yoksa Rides Part 2: Embracing the call of destiny.

BY BALAJI DEVANATHAN

In part one of this travel experience, was all about riding along the crystal clear waters of the Dibang river and then along the turquoise, mystical Siang. The Mouling National Park is flanked by Siang in the east and the river Siyom in the west. In this part of the ride, I had set

out to ride along the gurgling Siyom to eventually reach the magical high altitude valley of Menchuka. The objective was to pay tribute to a family that had hosted me in Menchuka couple of years back.

Aalo: The Rite of Passage.

Aalo (Along) is the HQ of West Siang District. It's a small town, bustling with

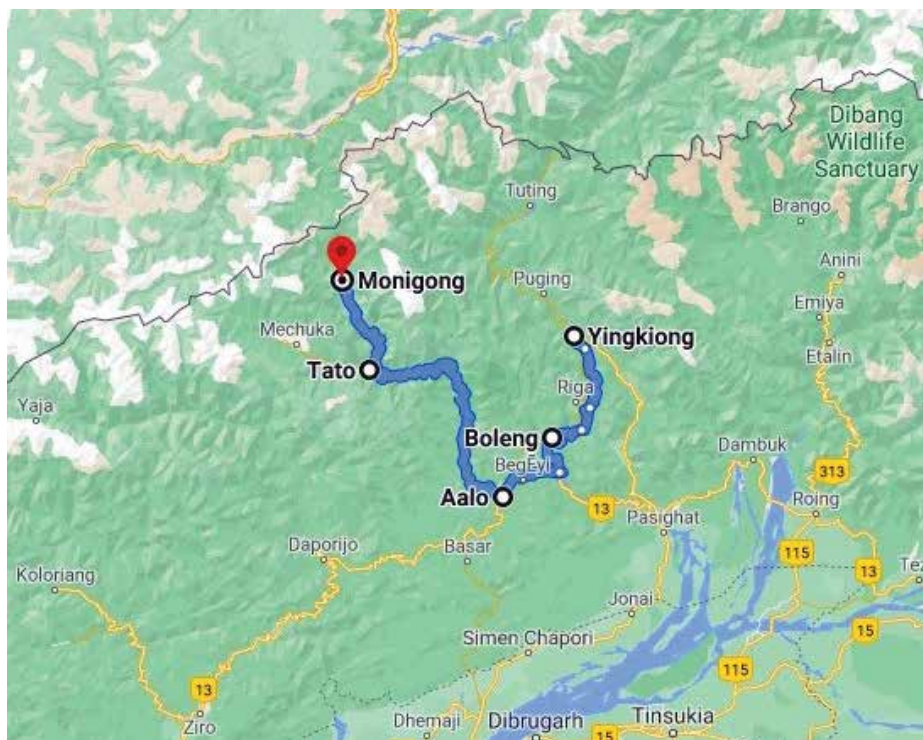
commercial activity. This is the main logistical hub and bazaar for all the smaller towns, villages and remote bastis, East and North of Aalo. It has commercially run hotels and some are nice too. However, I recommend out of town home-stays. Kick off your traveller boots and soak in the greenery, birds singing and the gurgling of Siyom.

Aalo can easily be reached by road from Pasighat, but I had ridden in from Yingkiong, across the Siang.

Riding the last 30km leading in to Aalo, is a “Rite of Passage” that becomes especially difficult after rains. And it rains almost every day. The craters and slush pools on the road look like it was subjected to heavy aerial bombing. Clear this stretch and you would have proved your determination to go on to experience the magic of Mechuka.

I reached Aalo in time for a late lunch of Thukpa. Locals here have a taste for very very spicy food. So it's important to specifically request them to be frugal with chillies. I choose to check in to a low rent hotel in the baazar, because I had to replenish supplies and also fix some minor problems with my motorcycle.

As always I set off at dawn the next day. Nose pointed towards Mechuka. The road leading out of Aalo is fantastic. Although one has to watch out for





surprise speed bumps. After about 70km the road narrows down and starts hugging the mountains sides as it gains altitude. Scenery becomes spectacular and concentrating on the road becomes difficult.

Monigong: Destiny reveals its plans.

About 5 km before a village called Tato, is a cafeteria that serves superb Chai. While chatting with a couple of locals over chai, they talked of a place called Moigong and how they fear travelling on the treacherous cliff hanger roads going up to Monigong. My destiny was revealed. Menchuka was abandoned and Monigong embraced, even before I could blink.

Monigong is about 65km from Tato. The road lives up to its reputation of being a true cliff hanger. Spectacular and treacherous as the same time. Definitely not for the faint hearted. I rode almost none stop for about 4 hours in cold rain.

Wet, cold, shivering and hungry, is how I reached Monigong. The sun was setting quickly and I had no place to stay. After about 10 mins of enquiry, I bumped

One last wave of my gloved hands and I rode away, home bound. I was carrying loads of memories and emotions, but strangely felt lighter. Embracing this little twist of destiny turned out to be one of the best experiences in life.

in to a gentleman who was the local school teacher and spoke flawless English and Hindi. He called some of his students, passed on some quick instruction and sent them in different directions. In a while I was served hot cups of sweet tea. Building up heat and energy in me. The sun had set, temperature was plummeting. I desperately needed a place to change in to dry clothes and get something to

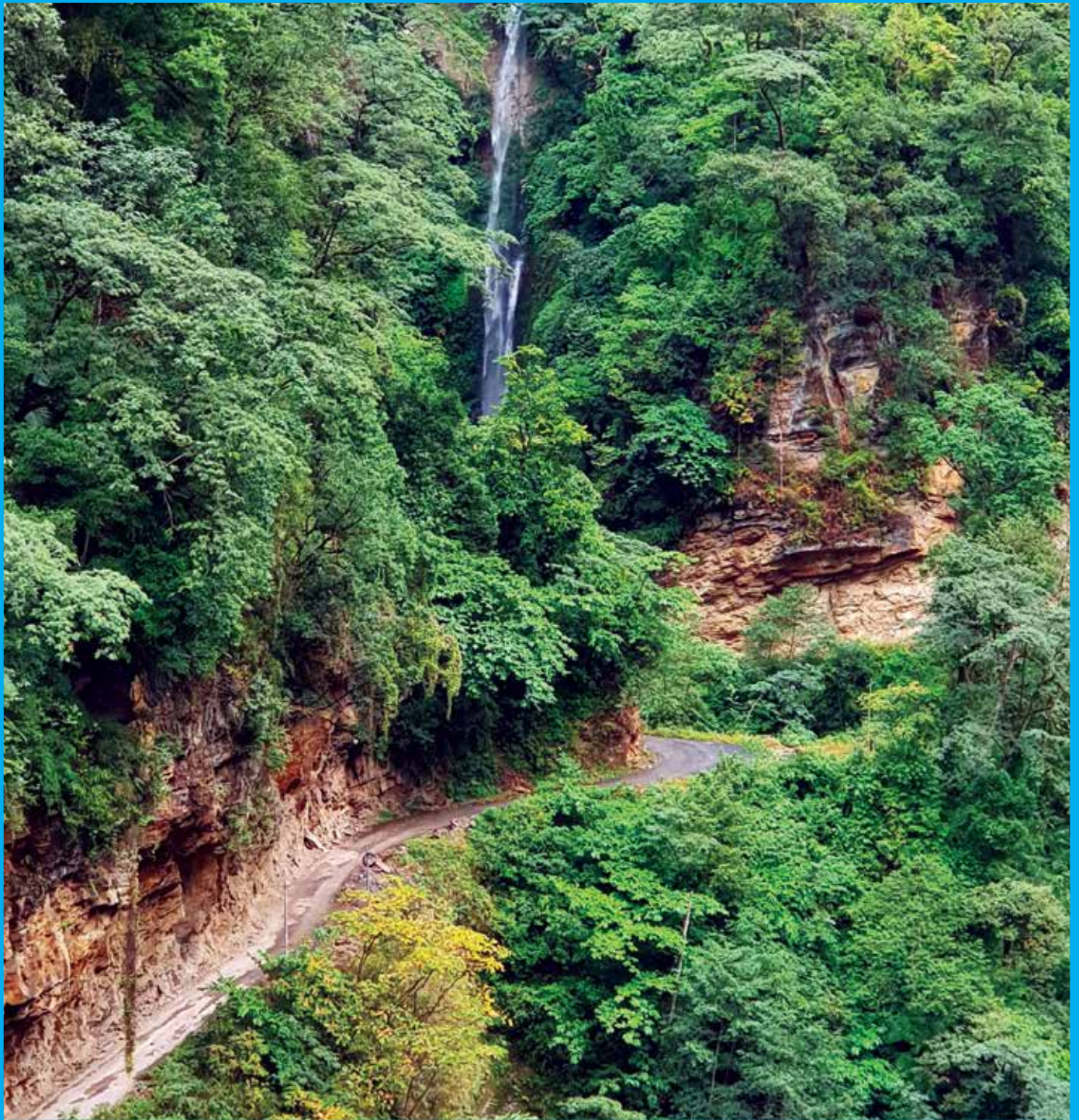
eat, before the temperature went below freezing. Some kids returned and what they said disappointed their teacher. Turned out that the guy with the key to the Inspection Bungalow had gone off to another village to attend a wedding. Some more instructions were shot out in their local Boker language.

One of the kids returned with one Mr. Dupu. He said he will take me in to his home for the night and feed me too.

Those kids helped me park the motorcycle safely and settle in, around the kitchen fire in Mr. Dupu's home. He also insisted that I must stay over one extra day to be able to explore their village and surrounding mountains.

I have said this before and will say it again. In this life, I have seen angels and they don't have wings; just very big hearts, in to which they welcome and shelter those in need on one.

That evening Mr. & Mrs. Dupu fed me hot rice, local beans, some veggies and boiled eggs. It was a brilliant meal, but they refused to eat till I sat around the fire, saying they will eat later. I excused myself and went off to sleep. On the second night, we became more



comfortable with each other and started talking freely. Only after I had shared stories of my travel to some of the other remote parts of Arunachal, that they offered a local delicacy. Smoked jungle rat for dinner. The night earlier too, they had prepared smoked jungle rat for dinner, but did not bring it out, since they were not sure how I would react. This gesture touched some of the deepest parts of my

heart.

Mrs. And Mr. Dupu spoke at length about their lives, customs, construction of houses, faith, etc and how all that had changed since their village got connected by a road in 2013. Before that they had to trek 3 days down to Tato and trek 5 days back up, carrying rations. Before 1962 (the war with China) they had active trade with Tibet. That mule trail exists till date,

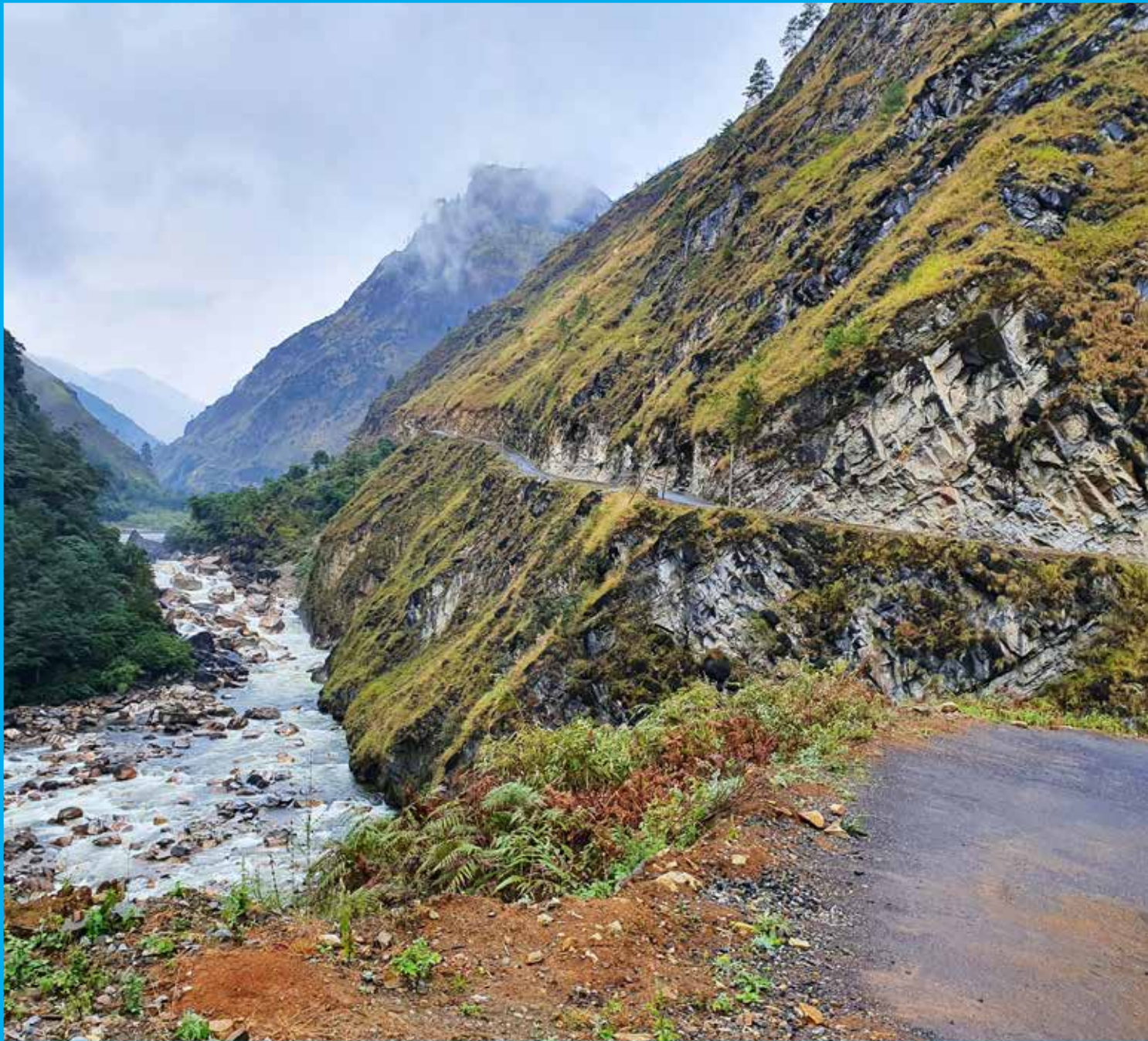
just that no body uses it any more.

The last civilian settlement along that road is Tadodigi. Past that is an ITBP check post and beyond that is a dirt trail for another 2km that ends in a Military helipad used for medical emergencies. I was instructed to stop at the ITBP post. They could not believe that casual traveller could have come this far, alone on a motorcycle. I was passed up



the ranks till the commanding officer. I shared with him some of my travel stories and photos. He was so thrilled that he would not let me go till we had lunch together. He decided that their normal mess food was not good enough for a guy who had travelled so far and set about cooking a special meal for me him and a visiting veterinary doctor. (ITBP patrol these mountains on mules and horses). This soldier turned out to be a splendid cook too.

On my way back to my host's home, I met the Circle Head Gram Budha. Every village has a village elder (Gram Budha or simply GB), who is the final say in all matters, in that village. The village elders of about 10 villages in the vicinity of Monigong, get together and elect a Circle Head GB. This is a very powerful



and responsible position. Even the Indian Army has to take permission from the Circle Head GB to set up camps in these mountains.

This Circle Head GB, was obviously a very respected and loved man. He spoke slowly, softly and clearly in a powerful demeanour. To my surprise, he was not only well informed on national and international current affairs, he also had a well thought out opinion on them. All this at an age of about 80, in a place that did not have newspapers or mobile

connectivity. His source of information was SW Radio. After chatting for about 45 mins, he permitted me to take a picture with him, blessed me for safe ward travel and invited me to come back again.

On the second day, at the break of dawn, I bid farewell to my hosts. As a token of my appreciation, I insisted that they take one of my most precious belongings, a real sheep skin. It was a clear day and the warmth of the rising sun, started to melt away the over-night frost. One last wave of my gloved hands

and I rode away, home bound. I was carrying loads of memories and emotions, but strangely felt lighter. Embracing this little twist of destiny turned out to be one of the best experiences in life.

— BALAJI DEVANATHAN —

Forty Eight years old; retired as an engineer turned commodity trader, believes that "travelling by motorcycle, gives no certificate to hang on a wall, yet it is by far the best education in life". It teaches one to "accept the unexpected". His larger purpose in life is to enable others to dip in to the true wonders of this world

Playa Del Carmen

Fun ... Upon a Coastline in Mexico





BY GAUTAM KANWAL

If there was a place which remains evocative to the senses for a long time after. If there was a place which proffers its visitors with a heavy summative dose of history, leisure, beauty, cultural insight and adventure in equal proportions. If there was a place where the fervour of festivities and holidaying remains on full throttle, I would identify it as the place which lies diametrically opposite to India in the Northern Hemisphere and shares similar historic importance with respect to ancient civilisations – Mexico.

Now when someone happens to discuss Mexico as a holiday destination, some of the places that would naturally come to mind riding on popularity are Tulum, Cozumel and Cancun among others (Chichen Itza of course). And rightly so. However, there happens to be a colourful beach town, Playa Del Carmen, which is almost equidistant from Cancun (to the North), Tulum (on the South) and Cozumel (with the island on its east) in terms of time taken to travel which is approximately 45 minutes from each of these locations, and is also a major tourist spot with not as much mention as Cozumel, Cancun and Tulum seemed to have received.

I've had my fair share of numerous trips to these parts of Mexico and its never enough. Playa del Carmen, a village of fishermen at one point of time (formerly known as Xaman Ha in the olden days), has turned into one of the most coveted beach holiday







destinations in Mexico with its own unique allure.

Located on the Yucatan Peninsula along the coastal stretch of Riviera Maya, waters with various hues of blue and turquoise complement its stunning white sand beaches lined with queues of palm trees making it the perfect setting for holidaying and partying.

Driving to Playa del Carmen town from the port is a short 10-minute drive and as that journey progresses, the scenes get more and more charming up to the time Playa arrives. Elizondo, a local cab driver (who regularly drove us in and around Playa del Carmen) told me that there are almost 3 dozen UNESCO world.

Heritage sites all over Mexico and some of them are not very far from here. What could be more convenient than that for those who want to experience the history and culture of the place while indulging in the exuberance of the beach side life. Some Mayan archaeological sites in and around are a sure treat for the history lovers, while the natural beauty in abundance is much captivating.

While moving around the places here you're likely to spot iguanas (reptile species endemic in this region). These might look dangerous at first appearance but are rather harmless and happen to eat plants and fruits mainly (I remember shuddering when one went past





me at a close distance and how the locals cheered me up with their laughter of expressions of camaraderie). The various colours and patterns on the iguana's body is a great work of art in itself.

The coastline here forms a part of the 2nd longest coral reef in the world, the Meso-American Barrier Reef, which makes it a paradise for divers and snorkelers. Many Hawksbill (currently endangered species of turtles) and Loggerhead sea turtles can be sighted in the region a little south of Playa del Carmen. Intense diving and other waterborne action can be experienced in Cozumel (the very popular island destination) for which passenger ferries run back and forth from Playa del Carmen.

The local people, their customs and the vibes of their culture are very enthralling. The people are fun to talk to here. Mexico happens to be the most populous Spanish speaking country in the world so it wouldn't hurt to learn a few Spanish terms while



getting around the area (as some people do not speak English that fluently). One can notice that the language has a certain sweetness when spoke in Mexican accent.

The bars, shops and restaurants along the 5th Avenue (Quinta Avenida) is one of the most fun things to do. 5th Avenue is mostly traversed on foot as motorists are kept out of 5th avenue for most of the time and its best that way for the tourists. A wide range of eateries, resorts and entertaining activities cater to the numerous tourists (who are mainly European and American) that pour in to Playa del Carmen. Street artists dressed colourfully on 5th Avenue entertain the crowd extremely well.

Walking through the streets can really keep your ears occupied as you hear various live musicians performing on the streets, in the pubs and restaurants.

As you walk through these streets you can see colourfully dressed traditional Mariachi bands and hear them playing





the retro Mexican folk songs, once you pass them and they are out of sight, their music fades away in the distance, but in all likelihood a Spanish blues rock band will emerge and can be heard playing the finest rhythms and solos which is probably inspired by the great Mexican- American musician Carlos Santana and when you are past them the classical flamenco style stringed instrument musicians can be heard and seen playing on the street in front of a cheerful crowd. That passes and you're likely to hear a rock and roll band too and when you are in proximity of a disco you hear techno and trance music. That much variety of music in one place is truly an extravagance for the ears and an automatic uplifting of mood is experienced. One of my most memorable moments was when I performed with a blues rock band–



Brothers in Arms (who invited me from the crowd when during their break they learnt from my companions that I am a bit of a guitarist myself), and played the rhythm guitar on a 12-bar blues instrumental.

Various skilled painters and artists perform their work on the streets where you can procure some of the prettiest art works (glass paintings / portraits / piñatas, etc.) as the perfect souvenir from the land.

Live Salsa dance shows take place in some of the beach side pubs and the guests as well are encouraged to join the dancers after some time. Blue parrot, a very popular beach side pub and discotheque regularly hosts such shows. One of the most eminent shows of Blue Parrot is the live fire show performed late into the night on the beach. Daring artists perform breath taking stunts and other visual treats



using fire.

Mexico can proudly boast (and everyone would acknowledge) of giving the world some of the most popular delicacies in the word such as tacos, tortilla and burritos, but I only found out here that one of the most common snacks - popcorn too happens to be a gift from the Mexicans. Ximena, an attendant at Senor Frogs (a hugely popular restaurant – bar chain throughout Mexico and also some other places in South America and the Caribbean) told us with much pride in her voice that there are at least 60 different varieties of naturally grown corn in Mexico and popcorn is a brainchild of the Mexicans. The ferry for Cozumel leaves from the maritime terminal which is right next to Senor Frogs. That makes a lot of tourists come by Senor Frogs, keeping it one of the liveliest restaurants in Playa del Carmen even during the day. Their pina colada varieties are quite popular and I can't remember how many litres of those I've gulped down during my myriad visits.

Playa del carmen has also hosted some international golf tournaments which is a major attraction in itself for lovers of the sport.

The world's largest cruise line company (Carnival Cruise) intends to build a terminal for cruise ships at Calica (which happens to be a limestone quarry and a port in close proximity of Playa del Carmen), and that must be owing to the city's own growing popularity as well as its proximity to other popular destinations.

I really can't think of reasons why one shouldn't visit these places. However, it is advisable to avoid visiting in the hurricane season as the area is susceptible to hurricane damage. Parts of Mexico are prone to getting flooded post the hurricane sweep. Pablo, a local fisherman who supplied fresh fish to us on many occasions also explained to us that Mexico is situated in a precariously active seismic region. Otherwise there's no worry at all for the travellers.

Mexico can brag of so many famous peculiarities such as having the smallest volcano in the world, having the oldest city in all of North America (Mexico City – their capital), being the inventors of Colour television among many others. But mention Mexico to me and Playa del Carmen flashes first to my mind.

Leaving from Playa del Carmen is quite hard on the visitors and so it was for me each time I headed back to the port to sail out. No matter how many times I docked here each visit to Playa del Carmen was as refreshing as if it's my first visit.

So much of entertainment, beach fun, leisure activities, food and drinks varieties available in one place itself gets you seriously high on satisfaction. That's what Playa del Carmen does to you. And the hang over lasts for a long long time. [iii](#)

— GAUTAM SINGH KANWAL —

He works aboard Merchant Ships and hails from Nainital, Uttarakhand. An avid for travelling, music, art, adventure sports, etc. he is keen to indulge in new experiences every time.

UNESCO

Intangible Cultural Heritage

BY SRISHTI VERMA

The United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organisation in 2003 organised a convention on Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Anything which you cannot touch, measure or see is intangible. From the limitless moonlight overlooking the sky to the warmth we feel on our skin when we step into the Sun, the nature has blessed us with more intangible assets than we can account for.

Over the years, as humans formed communities, culture began to develop. This was the thread that bonded the group and gave them a way of life, a sense of uniqueness. UNESCO World Heritage Sites are renowned for their architecture and design. The oral, performing arts, rituals, knowledge of nature and traditional craftsmanship are the heritage that needs



preservation and awareness in order to demonstrate how diverse our cultures can be and to provide them the safeguard that they need.

The list for these intangible cultural heritages was made in 2008 under three banners. These included the ones in need of urgent protection, those related to humanity and the ones which act as good safeguarding practices. India is proudly represented on the list by 13 cultural heritages, which include dance, theatre, chanting, craftsmanship, health practices and fairs. Let's look at them from North to South.

Buddhist chanting: In the region bounded by Himalayas and snow blankets, Buddhist chanting is very popular and bestows upon the Ladakh valley the blessings of Buddha. Sacred texts are

recited here and you would be delighted to converse with a Buddhist monk, dressed in maroon and orange robes. They are welcoming and would be happy to share their learnings with you.

Ramman: South of Ladakh is the Garhwal region where Ramman is celebrated. The festival is celebrated in honour of the guardian deity Bhumichetrapal, also called BhumiyalDevta in the Saloor Dungra village of Chamoli district, Uttarakhand. A procession is carried out and barley plants offered to the deity to seek prosperity of agriculture and forest. This ten-day festival is celebrated nine or ten days after Baisakhi.

Copper and brass utensil making by Thatheras of Punjab: We cannot mention Baisakhi without talking about Punjab. From the land of five rivers comes the traditional utensil making skills of the Thatheras of Jandiala Guru. They work on brass and copper using mud-brick kiln, traditional tools and hammer the metals into utensils, which are believed to be beneficial for health.

Kalbelia dance: Cross the border to the southwest to enter the desert state of Rajasthan. Here, the Kalbelia tribe



performs the Kalbelia dance. Traditionally catching snakes and trading in their venom, the Kalbelia dance resembles serpent movements. They are nomads and renowned for their dance and songs based on folklore and mythology. Dressed in black skirts embroidered with red and other colours, the women dance and twirl their skirts in a mesmerising fashion to the tune of Pungi, daphli and dholak (musical instruments) played by the men.

Kumbh Mela: We will now talk about the largest religious congregation in the world. Held every twelve years, the Kumbh Mela comprises of a ritual dip, religious discourses and mass feedings. The Kumbh Mela is held alternately at Allahabad (Sangam of Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati), Haridwar (Ganga), Nashik (Godavari) and Ujjain (Shipra). The next Kumbh Mela is expected to be in Haridwar next year.

Ram leela: With a dip in the temperature these days, what comes to our minds is the celebration of entering the winter months. Ram leela is the traditional performance of Ramayana, held during the Sharad Navratri days. Fairs dot the cities and villages as numerous people turn up to enjoy the enactment of Ramayana on stage, and to enjoy the food and game stalls that are present at the fair.

Vedic chanting: Next in list is the tradition of Vedic chanting in India. Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samveda and Atharvaveda have been passed down



since 1500 BCE orally. Comprising of hymns and verses, Vedas are recited orally pan-India and this has earned a spot on the intangible cultural heritage of India. It is believed that the sound and pronunciation of the hymn be retained for maximum effect.

Chhau dance: We will now move towards East to look at Chhau dance from Bengal, Jharkhand and Odisha. The dance can be based on martial arts, festive



themes, acrobatics, all performed in tribal and folk traditions. Chhau dancers enact stories from Ramayana, Mahabharat and Puranas. People from all walks of life come together in this celebration in the spring. Masks are worn by dancers, the knowledge of making which has been passed down orally over generations. Men perform this dance in a akhara, to the tunes of dhol, mohuri and shehnai.

Sankirtana: Let's travel further

East on our journey to reach Manipur. Sankirtana is a singing, drumming and dancing performance in the temples and homes of this north eastern state. Embraced in devotion, energy and emotion, these performances are based on the life of Lord Krishna and is mainly practiced by Vaishnava inhabitants. The highlight is the Nata Pala which is performed in Manipur. At home, Sankirtana is offered in the form of a

prayer at all ceremonies of life-cycle.

Nowruz: Nowruz is the Iranian and Persian New Year celebrated by the Irani and Parsi communities in India, and all over the world. Nowruz has Iranian and Zoroastrian origins, and is celebrated by people from various faiths. It is a holy day for Zoroastrians, Baha'is and some Muslim communities. It marks the beginning of spring in the northern hemisphere, on the day of equinox. It is thus celebrated



on March 20, 21 or 22. Various rituals are observed worldwide to mark the festival, including Kampirak and Haft Mewa in Afghanistan, Amu Nowruz and Haji Firuz in Iran, and Khoncha in Azerbaijan.

Mudiyettu: We will now trail towards southern India for the ritual dance and theatre of Kerala, Mudiyettu. Also called Mudiyett, the mythological tale of goddess Kali and demon Darika is enacted in Bhadrakali temples between February and May. The performance requires 16 people, and the entire community comes together to contribute and participate. The survival of this art form is relying on Guru-Shishya parampara because there are no formal institutions imparting it.

Koodiyattam: Koodiyattam was the first art form from Kerala to be added on the list of intangible cultural heritage from India. It is performed in Kerala as a combination of ancient Sanskrit theatre and Koothu. It is performed in temples to the tunes of Mizhavu drummers by Chakyars and Nangyaramma for 120-150 hours, spread across several nights.

Yoga: All the revelry and celebration might take a toll on health. To avoid it, use the next intangible cultural heritage from India, Yoga. Yoga is a practice involving

physical, mental and spiritual aspects, meant for awareness. The postures in yoga are often believed to ease pains, train the mind and body, and improve meditation and mindfulness of the being by imparting a sense of inner peace to the practitioner.

As seen, India is a melting pot of culture and its intangible heritage is formally listed in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. Sometimes, feeling and experiencing are much better than looking



and touching. Transcending into the experience can be uplifting and introduce our minds and hearts to various cultural practices. So, pack your bags and head to the destination to delve into the sheer joy and happiness that these practices provide. Happy travelling to you!

→ SRISHTI VERMA ←

She is a Delhi-based freelance writer. She loves reading and traveling, with a special place for lofty mountains in her heart. When not writing, she can be found working on her book and looking at pictures from when she was 2 feet tall.



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