



An initiative from the participants of
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CENTRE FOR
ESCALATION
OF PEACE

CEP



Explore Culture

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VIKRAMJIT KAKATI :: NOV 2010

FOREWORD

From The Bhutanese Ambassador to India

V Namgyel



I am very happy that the participants of the India Bhutan Youth Summit are bringing out a magazine called “Explore Culture”. I welcome this initiative by our youth.

The India-Bhutan Youth Summit was launched in 2018 when we held year long celebrations in both countries to mark the 50th Anniversary of the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between Bhutan and India. The youth summit was an initiative of the Royal Institute for Governance and Strategic Studies (RIGSS) and the Centre for Escalation of Peace (CEP) to bring the youth in our two countries together and forging lasting bonds.

I was very happy to observe the enthusiasm of the young participants from our two countries at the beginning of the programme. It was even more gratifying for me to see how well the participants had bonded with each other by the time it concluded. They have come to understand and appreciate each other much more; the similarities and differences of their cultures and traditions, their aspirations as young citizens of their respective countries and the importance of the very close and mutual relations between India and Bhutan. I would like to express my deep appreciation to RIGSS and CEP for this important initiative. Between youth in Bhutan and the youth in India.

India-Bhutan relations are very close and special. This is because we share very close bonds of culture and geography. More importantly, the leaders of our two countries have been committed to building our relations on the strong foundations of genuine friendship and trust.

For Bhutan, India is the land of Lord Buddha and Guru Padmasambhava who brought Buddhism to Bhutan. Buddhism helped to unify Bhutan as a nation state and Buddhism gave meaning and substance to our unique national identity. It is the wish of every Bhutanese to visit Bodhgaya at least once in their lifetime. So it is natural for the people of Bhutan to feel a close bond with India.

As a landlocked country with very high mountains along its southern borders, providing us with access to the outside world. All our trade and commerce is with India or goes through India. Economic ties have reinforced cultural bonds to give strong substance to India-Bhutan relations. At the political level, from the time when India's first Prime Minister and our Third King laid the strong foundations of India-Bhutan relations, all successive leaders in our two countries, cutting across party affiliations, have nurtured and strengthened the exemplary ties of friendship, understanding and cooperation between our two countries.

As Ambassador of Bhutan to India, I am very happy with the excellent state of India-Bhutan relations. I am also conscious that we cannot remain complacent and take our relations for granted because it is so good and special. We must continue to build and nurture this relationship at the political and people to people level. In this regard, it is the young citizens in both our countries who have the most crucial role to play. Our youth is our future and we must look for ways to build close contact between the youth in Bhutan and the youth in India.

Ruchira Kamboj

FOREWORD

From The Indian Ambassador to Bhutan



I am delighted to learn that a group of 21 youngsters from Bhutan and India have penned down their experiences on their participation in the India-Bhutan Youth Summit 2019 in the Explore Magazine.

India and Bhutan are bound in a singularly unique relationship that epitomizes friendship, trust and understanding that has stood the test of time over decades. It has therefore been a pleasure to read through the articles penned down by our youth that reflect their insights into our linkages across the spectrum of culture, history, economics, lifestyle, entertainment, tourism and of course, politics.

I will add that the candid yet substantive thoughts expressed within the pages of this magazine capture the essence of synergies between our two countries and will hopefully also motivate the reader to imbibe the same spirit of bonhomie and camaraderie that defines the India-Bhutan relationship.

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From the Editor-in-Chief's Desk



Vidhi Bubna

One thing which we have probably missed during 2020 the most has been travelling. Travel has been centric to help people explore the cultures of other countries, develop understanding and tolerance towards other cultures. The best way to immerse yourself in another culture and look at things from someone else's "shoes" is to travel in them.

Explore Culture was launched on 26th January 2020 to foster intercultural understanding between India and Bhutan. Much has changed in the last one year with respect to our lifestyles. Think of it, COVID has increased nationalism and has changed the way in which we interact with other nations. Travelling across the world freely is not on the cards anymore. Hence, we need to think of other ways in which we can shape peace, develop understanding about culture and bring a shift to people's understanding of the global world.

This issue has been dedicated to travel and lifestyle. It is important to continue travelling via movies, books, series, conversations, online interactions and other means. Travelling helps us to understand ourselves better and shapes our perception of the world. Now that borders have started opening up again, it's a good time to think about the places worth seeing in our neighbouring countries.

This issue especially focuses on India and Bhutan and travelling to places which are lesser known here. It is important to understand that travelling is not only for intercultural understanding, but also for solitude and the creation of harmony within.

On this note, I would like to thank the Center of Escalation of Peace (CEP) and The Royal Institute of Governance and Strategic Studies (RIGSS) for their continual efforts to involve the youth in matters of international interest. The organisations have initiated youth projects across various countries and are increasing collaboration between the youth worldwide.

I would also like to thank all contributors of this issue and the chief designer, Lakshya Sharma for adding more value to the magazine.

Happy Reading!

Explore Culture – 4th Edition

Thukten Sherab

DZONGDRAKHA

The second Taktsang



Padmasambhava, the famous tantric master from India, who is famously known as Guru Rinpoche, during his second visit to Bhutan, around mid-eighth century, is said to have blessed every inch of Bhutanese land leaving countless sacred and significant spiritual spots. One eminent site of Padmasambhava, in Paro and Bhutan in general, is Dzongdrakha Gönpa. Dzongdrakha Gönpa exquisitely sits on a cliff-side above Bondey valley, under Lungnyi Gewo, in Paro. Owing to its apparent similar location, peculiarly perching on cliff-side, it is sometimes referred to as second Taktsang (Tiger's Nest). The temple towers over the majestic and beautiful Dzongdrakha valley (a name given to the village because of the temple).

History of Dzongdrakha

Padmasambhava is said to have journeyed to Bhutan subduing malevolent forces and anti-dharmic spirits and bound them under the oath to serve and protect his teachings. A similar event unfolded at the crag where Dzongdrakha temple is currently situated. According to legend, while Padmasambhava was visiting the crag, Damchen Dorji Lekpa, who is believed to be an evil force, tried to hurt Padmasambhava through magical forces and illusions. However, his power fell short and he was subdued by Padmasambhava and consequently took an oath to be the local deity. Padmasambhava concealed and buried treasures in the cliff and entrusted them to the care of Damchen Dorji Lekpa. Padmasambhava further prophesied that a temple would be built at the cliff and that treasures would be discovered accordingly.

As prophesied by Padmasambhava, in early thirteenth century, a Tibetan Yogi, Drubthob Gönpa Dorji, following his master's instruction, came to settle in Paro to spread Buddhist doctrines. Legend says that while Drubthob Gönpa Dorji was staying at Changpelri, he saw a five-different-coloured fire at the cliff that looked like a 'fortress on a dagger' in his prognostic dream. It was consequently named as Dzongphurdrakha which means fortress on dagger like cliff. Following the auspicious signs he identified it to be the cliff prophesied by Padmasambhava and moved toward the cliff. Locals believe that his journey was accompanied by a fox, leading the way along the river till the cliff. According to an oral narrative, the local deity, Damchen Dorji Lekpa, manifested into a nanny and offered her milk on a stone to usher the Drupthob. Using the milk, Drupthob inscribed a Six-Syllable mantra of Avalokitesvara (om mani padme hum) on the stone.

Later a Stūpa (popularly known as Om mani Chorten) was built on the same spot enshrining the inscribed stone. One day while Drupthob was meditating at the cliff, Padmasambhava is said to have come in his vision and given him a pair of swords known as 'Mighty Meteoric Sword'.

Drubthob, using the sword, split the cliff into two and a large frog shaped stone fell from the cliff. From the stone, an arrow-length 'Crystal Stūpa' (and three egg-sized statues of Buddha Kāśyapa) were extracted as treasure. After the treasure was extracted, he took the initiative to build a Stūpa called Karmoi Chorten and installed the three statues of Buddha Kāśyapa, in three parts of the stūpa, and the arrow-length 'Crystal Stūpa' as the sacred object inside it. However, the upper fraction — 'Thirteen Rings' of Stūpa, with one of the Buddha Kāśyapa statue in it is said to have been taken to the realm of God while the lower component of stūpa—the 'Three Steps', with a statue to Naga realm—was considered an object of worship and veneration, leaving behind only the middle structure and a statue for human beings. Later a small temple devoted to Goddess Tashi Tsheringma, the eldest of Five Sisters of Longevity, was built. An oral narrative says that Tsherim temple was built by Drubthob Gönpa Dorji to keep the tiny statue of 'self-born' Tsherim. The statue is believed to have been emanated from a rock in a village called Gyabjayna. An identical but bigger statue of Tashi Tsheringma, depicted riding on a snow lion, was constructed inside. Statues of Buddhas of three times (Buddha Dipamkara, Shakyamuni Buddha, and Maitreya Buddha) are also built inside which might be main reason many visitors mistake it for Jowö Jampa temple.

In the fourteenth century, the first Lam Neten the Head of District Monastic body of Paro Dzongkhag, Lam Jangchub Zangpo, built the guru lhakhang which we can see today. As per an oral narration, upon understanding the significance of the stūpa and its relics, Lam Neten made regular offerings to and conducted rituals near the stūpa, supposedly inside the Tsherim lhakhang. His intention to construct another temple must have come about after he thought about the benefits and virtue the temple could bring to people. He is believed to have thought that if he constructed a temple, people would congregate to worship and ultimately lead to the noble path of enlightenment. Lam Neten, with great aspirations for sentient beings, constructed the temple placing a statue of Padmasambhava and his two primary consorts, Kandro Yeshey Tshogyel and Hacham Mendarava, as primary objects and rendered the name Guru Lhakhang. Statues of eight manifestations of Padmasambhava were also built.

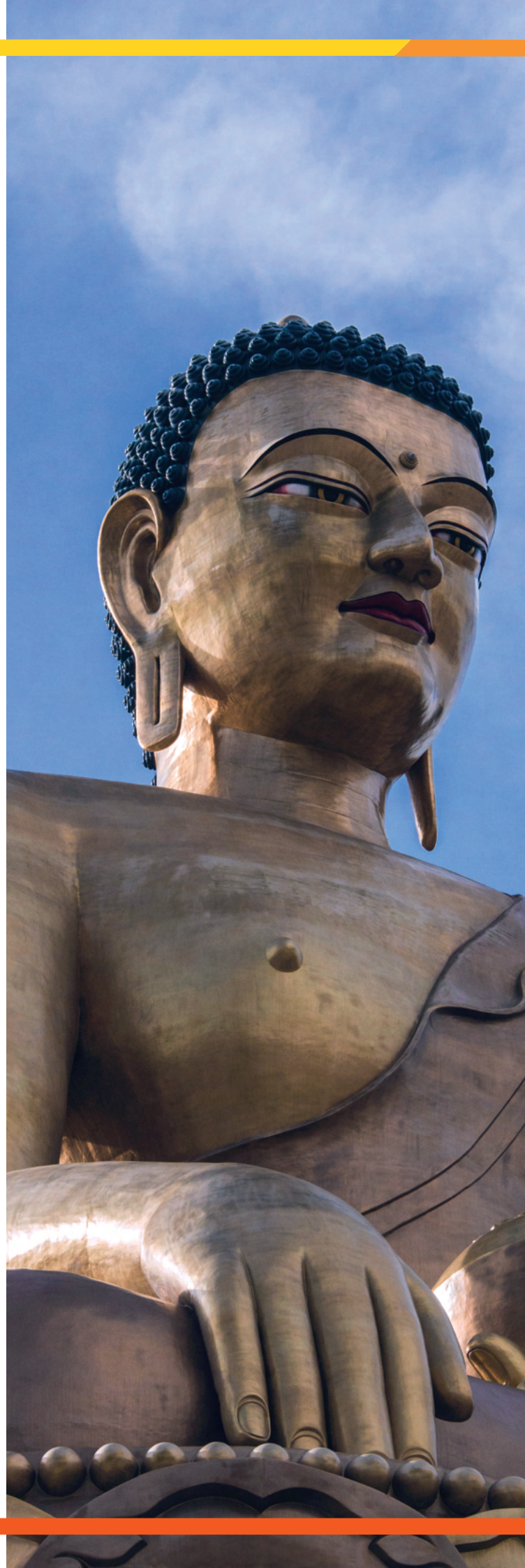
Drubthob passed away at dzongdrahka leaving no biological children. However, it is said that his incarnations started the lineage of Dzongdrakha. In later times Lama Phan Thog, one of his reincarnations, is believed to have built a temple dedicated to Drubthob. Statue of Drubthob (Kundra) was built as the main monument. Another temple was built by Lam Phan Thog installing a statue of Buddha Akṣobhya

Sacred Objects and Relics

Though the place itself is sacrosanct because of its association with Padmasambhava, there are other relics that embellish the significance and sacredness of the place. First is the relics of Buddha Kāśyapa and crystal stūpa extracted as treasure by Drubthob Gönpö Dorji. These two important items are enshrined in a Karmoi Chorten in a secret chamber behind the Guru Lhakhang. It is believed that the crystal stūpa shakes on auspicious occasions, because of which people called it 'Gueshey Karmoi Chorten' literally meaning 'moving Crystal Stūpa'.

The Padmasambhava statue inside Guru Lhakhang is another sacred object. Locals have a fascinating story about the Padmasambhava statue. The five feet tall Guru statue is believed to have been built by Lam Neten in a day at 'Drakarpo'. Locals have us believe that after the construction, the statue of Padmasambhava came flying to Dzongdrakha from Drakarpo, which is another reason why Dzongdrakha is called second Taktsang. Further, when Lam Neten thought that the guru statue was relatively small and considered building another one, the Padmasambhava statue is said to have spoken, 'You don't need to build another as I am the prophesied one'.

The other sacred objects are the 'self-born' Tsherim statue and the spoken 'Ox Headed Mask'. The fifteen centimetre Tsherim statue self-emanated from a large rock in Gyebjeyna village and flew to the cliff where tsherim lhakhang is currently built. It is displayed to the public from 11th till 15th day of 10th month of the Bhutanese calendar. When all the belongings were taken to Paro Dzong, the 'Ox Headed Mask' is said to have furiously mooed all night because it belonged to Dzongdrakha Gönpa. Considering this as an inauspicious sign, the belongings were taken back to Dzongdrakha.



Dzongdrakha Tsechu

As a gesture of homage and offering to the statue of Buddha Kāśyapa, three days straight ritual and offerings were conducted annually, on 10th day of 2nd month of Bhutanese lunar calendar. Locals say that when the tradition of three-day worth ritual was moved to Paro dzong, because of free-range and spacious area, taking all the religious equipment and materials, the 'ox headed mask' is said to have wrathfully mooed at night. So, the monastic body had to take the burden of taking back everything to Dzongdrakha. However, to patch up both the decisions, even though Tsechu is conducted at Paro Dzong, the Tsechu begins from Dzongdrakha and ends at Dzongdrakha. For this reason people underline Dzongdrakha Tsechu as head and tail of Paro Tsechu. Numerous offerings, rituals, prayers, ceremonies and other religious activities are continuously carried out during auspicious occasions and important days of the Bhutanese Lunar Calendar.

For the Bhutanese, imbued with Padmasambhava's presence, and people of Paro in particular, Dzongdrakha Gönpa is undoubtedly a sacred place blessed by precious teacher, Padmasambhava and established by Drubthob Gönpa Dorji. The composite of Dzongdrakha Gönpa features four temples, a stūpa and a residential house. The temples are connected to each other by a stoned footpath. Currently, Guru and Tsherim temples are taken care by Lam Tashi Dorji of the state monastic body while the other two temples are looked after by Drubthob's progeny. Dzongdrakha Gönpa is not only a sacred site, from where one can get both ordinary and ultimate blessing, but also a mesmerizing scenic spot. One can get blessings whilst enjoy its wonderful view. Visitors have the option to take their vehicle right below the temple unlike the iconic Taktshang where the only way to get to the monastery is by hiking. It takes 20 minutes on an average if one walks and 5 minutes by vehicle.





MUSSOORIE

A luxurious stay at the Queen of Hills

Vidhi Bubna

Cascading trees glowing above the horizon, painted in hues of red, yellow and a merging orange, the beauty of the sunset is unparalleled. I stood right outside the lobby of JW Marriott Mussoorie Walnut Grove Resort and enjoyed the sunset unfazed. Mussoorie is the most beautiful and historic hill station in India. It has its way of diving deep into the heart of travellers where they are mesmerised by its beauty. I visit Mussoorie at least twice a year, so I know the local mountain gossip, untrodden paths, unseen places and everything worth experiencing for a first timer. As I stood outside the lobby of JW Marriott Mussoorie, I knew I was living my best trip ever, amidst the hills and around 200 walnut trees. The sunset captured my imagination, removing every other thought that I had from my mind.

With energising memories of my trek in the morning, I remembered enjoying the beauty of Mussoorie on foot. I started my day at 7 AM, with a trekking pole, ready to explore the woods. We set out on a 2 kilometer path which had open meadows, a gentle uphill walk and grand views of the Himlayas. The snow capped peaks are visible mostly in the mornings, visible only to those who are really on the lookout for it.

Both regions have starkly different cultures and have healthy competition. Rumour goes that Garhwali and Kumaonis boast about the region where they are from often because the competition is rooted in their minds. Back to my trip at JW Marriott Mussoorie Walnut Grove Resort, we tried their Garhwali Thali (local Himalayan cuisine) at the green house. It was beautifully sunlit and the weather was perfect for an outdoor dining session. Their chef had created a fusion of Kumaoni and Garhwali cuisine. This was one of a kind and I have never experienced this in Uttarakhand before. The fusion of Kumaoni and Garhwali was the most interesting local cuisine platter I had ever been served. Bursting with flavour of freshly picked herbs from the greenhouse, the dining experience was nothing short of perfect.

After the meal, I could only go back to the room for some rest. Overlooking a 150 year old Walnut Tree, I felt like I was in the middle of nature. I enjoyed the balcony view of the Himalayas and enjoyed lounging outside with my copy of Shivya Nath's "The Shooting Star" - a book about female solo travel which sparks the travel bird in you.



This was spring in Mussoorie, everything was chirping and growing during the season.

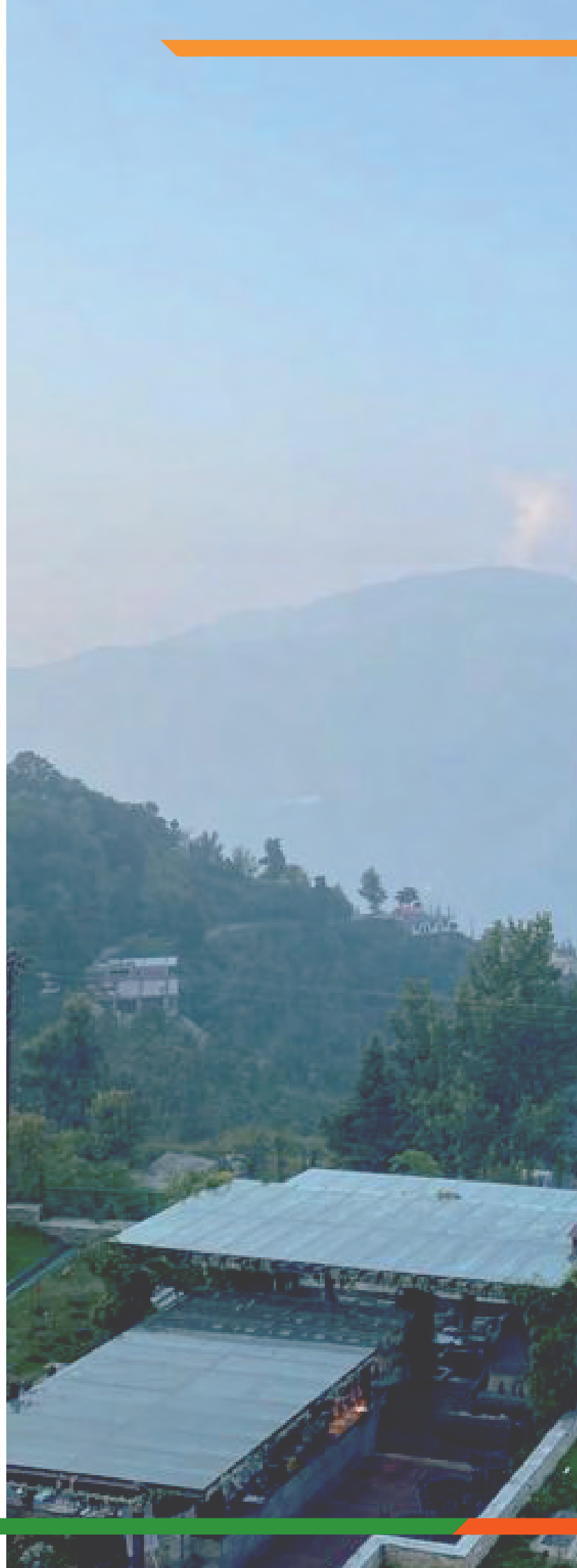
We reached the end of our trek and the guide prepared some amazing Maggi for us in the middle of the woods. Experiencing breakfast in the hills was just the start of the wonderful trip planned for me.


I was famished on my way back. I enjoyed a hearty breakfast, filled with fresh juice, pastries and my favourite Indian cuisine options. Schezwan cheese dosa, Uttapam, idli, ghat ki daal ka paratha and more. Ghat ki daal is a local lentil from Uttarakhand which is stuffed inside the parathas. I was amazed to see how JW Marriott Mussoorie Walnut Grove Resort had amalgamated local culture in their cuisine. They also support local artisans. The cheese which is sourced at JW Marriott Mussoorie Walnut Grove Resort is homemade by a cheese artisan located in Mukteshwar, a hill station in the Kumaon District of Uttarakhand.

On one of my previous trips to Uttarakhand, I was travelling by a local bus so that I could interact with the locals and learn more about mountain stories. I was told that Uttarakhand is divided into two regions - Garhwal and Kumaon.

“Kachri” - an evening get together, is a centric part of the culture in the hills. People get together to listen to music, eat snacks, enjoy a cuppa coffee and bond. With live guitarists playing in the open surrounded by mountains, I enjoyed my evening snack. They had some game sets so that families and friends could bond. It was the perfect place for a stress free yet luxurious and safe vacation. Every moment was serendipity as something interesting was always planned. You just had to leave your room, in the search of an adventure, and you were likely to find one. Or sometimes, even a stranger to connect with to help you trust the world again and feel like it was all going to be okay.

The best part about JW Marriott Mussoorie Walnut Grove Resort was that no matter how modern everything looked on the outside, everything had a touch of local.

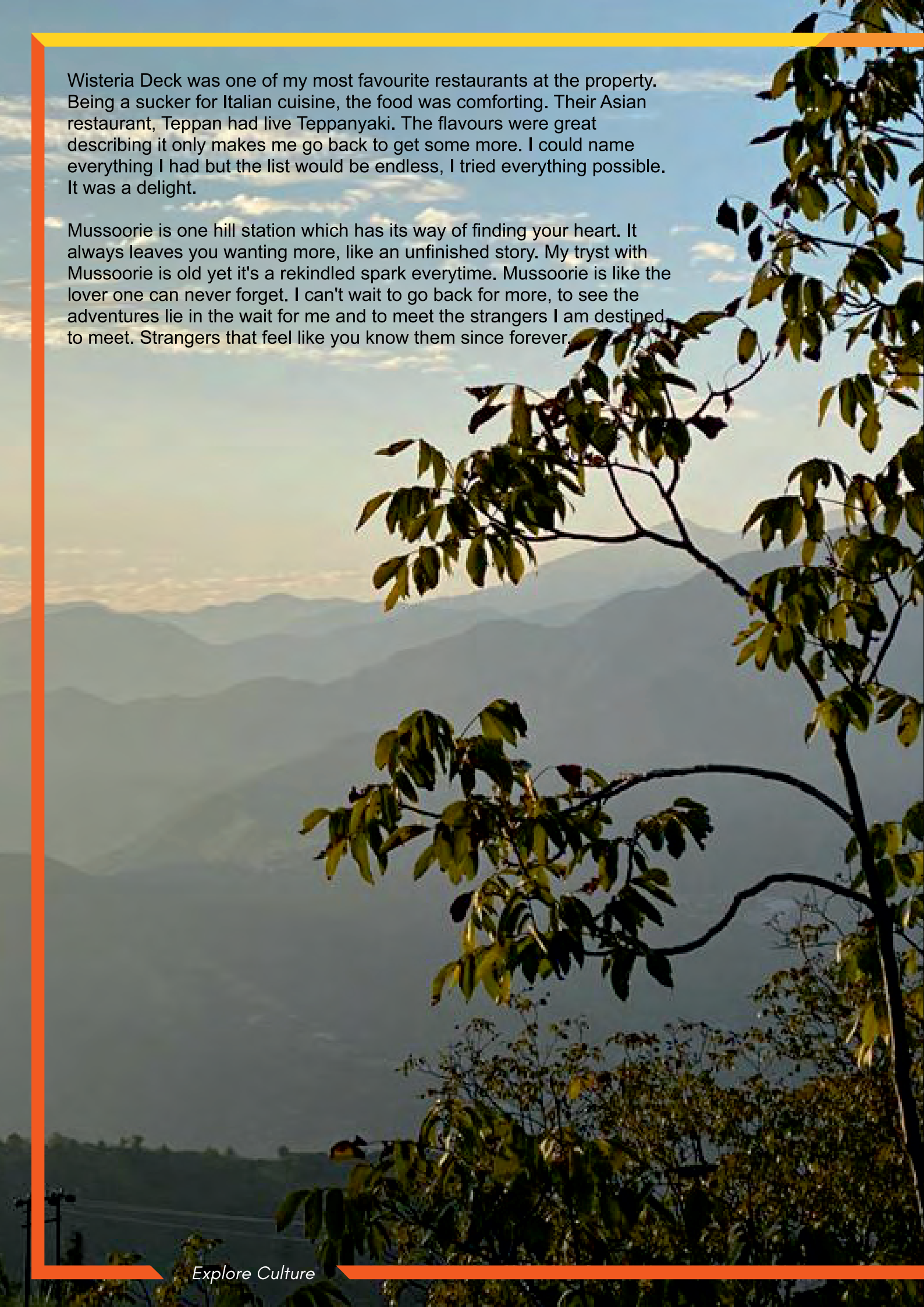




The signature bell at the property is sourced from the oldest church in Mussoorie. It is recreated by a local artist to look like a female figurine which is dancing when it strikes an hour. The resemblance of this bell to the historic clock tower in Mussoorie cannot be ignored.

In the evening, when I got back to my room there was a surprise organised for me. They had hot chocolate and my favourite papparoti sent across for me. At night, they had a wonderful tiffin with Indian cuisine sent across to my room. The tiffin looked exactly like those in a Royal Bollywood Film like Jodha Akbar, Bajirao Mastani or the likes. It was Bollywood style royalty brought to life. The food was extravagant and the cutlery was a treat. The air was getting colder outside. I couldn't wait to go out stargazing.

As I lay out on my balcony, I could see the clear view sky and the stars beamed out. I saw 3 shooting stars and the sky was filled with stars above. This was what I wanted life to look like everyday - a sky filled with stars. The night energised me and inspired me to do more. I took out my bucket list and started adding to it. JW Marriott Mussoorie Walnut Grove Resort felt like a place where I could work on my own life and reflect. I had my own space and there were numerous things to do if I wanted to entertain myself.

A scenic view of a mountain range with a tree branch in the foreground. The background shows a series of rolling hills and mountains under a blue sky with some clouds. The foreground is dominated by a tree branch with green leaves, some of which are slightly out of focus. The overall tone is peaceful and scenic.

Wisteria Deck was one of my most favourite restaurants at the property. Being a sucker for Italian cuisine, the food was comforting. Their Asian restaurant, Teppan had live Teppanyaki. The flavours were great describing it only makes me go back to get some more. I could name everything I had but the list would be endless, I tried everything possible. It was a delight.

Mussoorie is one hill station which has its way of finding your heart. It always leaves you wanting more, like an unfinished story. My tryst with Mussoorie is old yet it's a rekindled spark everytime. Mussoorie is like the lover one can never forget. I can't wait to go back for more, to see the adventures lie in the wait for me and to meet the strangers I am destined to meet. Strangers that feel like you know them since forever.

a window to THIMPHU

Anagha Rajesh



Thimphu is the capital city of Bhutan, the little country sandwiched between the giant neighbours India and China. The city is famous for its carbon negative approach, Gross Domestic Index instead of the much common Gross Domestic Product as well as the sheer absence of traffic lights.

Thimphu is all about relishing in the beauty of nature, savouring traditional delicacies and sensing the heartbeat of the world's happiest nation. Here's a brief guide to exploring this unique city.

All Roads that Lead to Thimphu

The only airport in Bhutan is the Paro International Airport. You can catch a flight to Bhutan from Kolkata, New Delhi, Guwahati or Bagdogra in India; from Kathmandu in Nepal; from Dhaka in Bangladesh and from Bangkok in Thailand. From the airport you can travel to Thimphu via a cab or a bus, the cab being the faster option. There are several cabs that can be hired at the Paro International Airport at a rate of INR 1000-1500 depending on your exact destination in Thimphu. The drive will take you approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes.

If you choose to hire the bus, there are two major bus services available- a morning service that departs from the airport at 9:00 a.m. and an afternoon service that departs at 2:00 a.m. The bus ride will cost you approximately INR 200 and will take you to Thimphu within 2 hours.

What is the Best Time to Travel to Thimphu?

1. Spring Season (March – May)

During the months of March to May, the flowers are at full bloom and nature at its best. The temperatures range from 7 to 18 degrees Celcius.

2. Autumn Season (September – November)

The temperatures during this period range from 4 to 20 degrees Celcius. The weather remains calm with clear skies. This is the ideal season for trekking.

Lodging in Thimphu

A highly recommended resort in Thimphu is the Taj Tashi which is nestled in the heart of Bhutan's Thimphu Valley. It is a one-hour drive away from the Paro International Airport (60 km distance) and is located 7 km away from the famous Buddha Point in Thimphu.

Taj Tashi offers guests Stylish rooms with traditional Bhutanese architecture, with select ones providing stunning views of Thimphu Valley. A flat-screen TV, minibar and tea/coffee-making facilities are provided. Suites offer walk-in closets and luxurious bathrooms with a standalone bathtub.

Guests can unwind in The Jiva Spa that offers guests specialized Indian healing therapies. A concierge desk and business centre are available for assistance throughout the day.



4 dining options are provided in the hotel. Chig-jagye and The Thongsel specialise in Bhutanese cuisine, while drinks are featured in Ara and Rimps.

Touring Thimphu

Here are a few of the best hand-picked tourist destinations that no one wishes to miss in Thimphu:

1. National Memorial Chorten

The word Chorten means “Seat of Faith” alluding to the deep Buddhist traditions associated with this landmark. Built in 1974, this monument is the most significant religious structures in the whole of Bhutan. It offers a wholesome window into the philosophies of Buddhism. The Moenlam Prayer Festival, the most important religious festival of Bhutan, also takes place at National Memorial Chorten.

The monument is open to visitors from 9:00 A.M to 5:00 P.M throughout the week. The best time to visit this cultural edifice dedicated to World Peace is during the early hours of the morning before the heat of the sun becomes too intense.

2. Clock Tower Square

This is one of the most picturesque tourist destinations in Thimphu. The Clock Tower consists of four clocks facing in four different directions, with a dragon placed before each clock. The dragons are sacred to the culture of Bhutan and they represent the freedom of the kingdom. Beautifully carved patterns and paintings add beauty to the tower. The Clock Tower Square comprises of several water fountains and 'mani lhalhor' or prayer wheels.

3. Tashichho Dzong

'The fortress of the auspicious religion' or the Tashichho Dzong is an ancient fortress in Thimphu that offers visitors the best possible view of the entire town. It houses the royal throne as well as several offices of the king and his ministers. Decorated with the beautiful mandala paintings, Tashichho Dzong is home to the colorful 'Tsechu' festivities. Tshechus are grand events where entire communities come together to witness religious mask dances which convey several mythological tales, receive blessings and socialize. In addition to the mask dances, tshechus also feature colorful Bhutanese dances and other forms of entertainment. This grand fortress opens its doors to visitors from 9 a.m.- 5:00 p.m. and 5-6:30 p.m. on all weekdays.

**National memorial
Chorten, Thimphu**



Tashichho Dzong, Thimphu



4. Jungshi Handmade Paper Factory

This factory manufactures the most authentic and the best quality Bhutanese paper, which is popularly known as Deh-sho. Handmade paper is made through ancient traditional procedures and visitors have an opportunity to witness this process right from the start to the end. They can also try their hand at traditional paper making and design some greeting cards on their own using this paper. This is an ideal place for tourists to collect souvenirs ranging from lampshades to envelopes and calendars made using Deh-sho.

5. Motithang Takin Preserve (wildlife sanctuary)

Motithang Takin Preserve, located in the Motithang district of Bhutan, is a wildlife reserve area for takin, the national animal of Bhutan. This wildlife preserve offers visitors an opportunity to learn about takins and also revel in the beauty of the natural wild habitat. The tourist can enjoy a short stroll in the nature around the enclosed area and watch these creatures. There is also a small cafeteria where the visitors can enjoy some snacks. The preserve welcomes visitors from 9 a.m.- 4 p.m. from Tuesday to Sunday. The best time to visit is early morning, when the takins gather near the fence for their feed.



Clock Tower Square, Thimphu



Trekking in Thimphu

Trekking is the best way to explore the beautiful landscape of Thimphu. Here are a few of the most popular trekking routes in the city:

1. Druk Path Trek

Druk Path trek offers some mind-blowing sights of Mt. Gangkar Puensum, the tallest unscaled peak on our planet. This is the easiest trek in Bhutan and is the perfect trek for beginners. It offers you an opportunity to fall in love with the snow-clad Himalayas explore the unexplored. The price for the trek ranges from Rs. 52,000 to Rs. 61,000.

2. Duer Hot Springs Trek

The trek is a nine-day long hike which takes the traveller through some of the best landscapes of Thimphu. It culminates in the Wangchuck Centennial Park that is home to seven hot springs. It is from these geysers that the trek draws its name. The highest camp of this trek is located at 3,400 m and the highest point of this trek is Juli La at 4,700m. Duer Hot Springs Trek is no doubt a very challenging journey but it is worth the struggle.

While trekking between Tsochrnchen and Duer Tsa chu, you might get to see a Himalayan bear, musk deer or a herd of blue sheep. Also, the complete tour follows the path of a river named Yoleng Chhu.



Bhutanese Takin

Communicating in Thimphu

Although Dzongkha is the official language of Bhutan, the natives are quite fluent in Hindi, Nepali and English. All signboards feature both Dzongkha and English, so navigation is quite easy. The national newspaper 'Kuensel' is published in three languages- Dzongkha, English and Nepali.

Spending in Thimphu

The official currency of Bhutan is the Bhutanese Ngungtrum. The Indian Rupee is also widely accepted. The US Dollar is accepted by certain hotels and large handicraft stores.

Savoring the Taste of Thimphu

Here are some of the traditional dishes that anyone travelling to Thimphu would love to tick off their food bucket list:

1. Ema Datshi ('ema' means chilli and 'datshi' means cheese in the Dzongkha language of Bhutan)
Often dubbed the national dish of Bhutan, ema datshi is a simple stew made of a variety of chillies and a special yak cheese. The chillies that are used in the ema datshi are really spicy and this dish is served over a bed of red rice.

2. Jasha Maroo (Spicy chicken stew)
A delectable dinner of red rice and jasha maroo is any tourist's dream cuisine in Thimphu. It is a rustic stew wherein chicken pieces are cooked in a medley of tomatoes, leeks and onions, with the warmth of ginger and the fire of chillies adding a unique flavour to the dining experience.

3. Phaksha Paa (Pork curry)
The pork delicacy Phaksha Paa is made of pork slices stir-fried with whole red dry chillies, ginger and Bok Choy. Bok Choy is also known as White Mustard Cabbage or Pak Choy and is peppery to taste and has a celery-like stalk with dark leaves. Mountain vegetables such as radishes and spinach may also find their way into Phaksha Paa.


4. Shakam Shukam Datshi
A rare dish that can be enjoyed only at a handful of local restaurants in Thimphu, Shakam Shukam Datshi is a blend of dried beef (shakam), white chillies (shukam) and cheese (datshi). It offers a unique combination of spicy and sour tastes.



5. Jaju Soup

Prepared from dried turnip leaves and milk, jaju serves as a side-dish to traditional main course meal. In addition, small amounts of onion, ginger, garlic cloves and chillies impart a unique flavour to the soup. It is quite common as turnip leaves are available throughout the year.

This was the city of Thimphu in a nutshell. This little town is all this and much more. If you wish to revel in the beauty of nature while also enjoying a life of modernity, pack your bags and set out to Thimphu. This is the place to be!



Temple of fertility | Kinley Wangmo

CHIIM LHA KHANG

The sacred Chimmi Lhakhang widely known as the “Temple of Fertility” is a Buddhist temple located in the Western part of Bhutan. This place of magic and miracle stands on a round hillock of Punakha District. The temple is located 10 kilometers from Punakha District and a few minutes' walk along the dusty path through paddy and mustard fields leading to a hillock where the temple is situated.

Chimmi Lhakhang was built in 1499. Later it was blessed by Lama Drukpa Kunley, who was popularly known as the Divine Madman for his unorthodox ways of teaching Buddhism by singing, humor and outrageous behavior. Lama Drukpa Kunley carried the thunderbolt of wisdom in the shape of a phallus. Local people religiously pay homage to Lama Drukpa Kunlay as the father of fertility.

Unlike other temples in Bhutan, the temple attracts not only locals but also foreigners due to its unique belief. Childless couples who desire to have children visit the temple in the hope that they will be blessed with a family.

There are numerous anecdotes about non-Buddhist tourists who prayed in the temple to bless them with children. A woman who desires to bear children is made to carry a huge wooden phallus and circumambulate the temple thrice.

The pilgrims are blessed with a wooden phallus, and the bow and arrow which once belonged to Lama Drukpa Kunley. Lama Drukpa Kunlay's way of teaching is peculiar with sexual overtones. He spent most of his time using active sex to spread enlightenment. That is the origin of the temple's alleged fertility inducing powers. The phallus symbols, paintings and carvings are found in the temple and the neighboring villages, originating from the Divine Madman's philosophies. Locals believe that the phallus is a symbol of prosperity, luck and safety. Chime Lhakhang is a unique and intriguing part of Bhutanese tradition.





ASSAM

Gateway to North-East

Anshu Saikia

Explore Culture

When we talk about India, often the word 'diverse' is used. This is of course, to best describe the amalgamation of multiple ethnicities and religions in one nation. My hometown of Assam is one such place where diversity is immense and seen everywhere. From its geographical composition, its cultural population to its biodiversity - with all these distinct blends, Assam certainly makes for one of the most interesting places to visit in India.

Known as one of the seven sisters of North-East India, the state is originally a racial intermix of the Indo-Burmese, Indo-Iranian, Mongoloid, and Aryan descent. A variety of tribes also belong to the region and have their own distinctive cultures and traditions. These include the Kachari, Karbi, Rabha, Boro, Ahom, and twenty-eight other tribes. Out of this, most have their individual languages as well, though the state language of Assam is called Assamese or 'Asomiya'. With several cultural sites belonging to different cultures and religions, 'Satras' and 'Naamghar' are two important institutions of Assam. Satras are religious sites that have been existent for over four hundred years now, whereas Naamghars are referred to as the house of prayers. They both came into existence as a result of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by the Great Saint - Mahapurush Srimanta Saankardeva. He has been one of the most important figures of significance to the history and culture of Assam, and he laid the foundation for most of it. This brings me to one of our tourist sites known as the Srimanta Sankardev Kalakshetra - a famous institute named after Sankardeva. It consists of a cultural museum, library, children's park, and other facilities devoted to the preservation and showcase of various items of art and heritage. It is also a site where many cultural programs are held during occasions and festivities. It has one of the best artistic displays of not only Assam but the rest of North-East India as well.

Assam is famously known to be the home to the greater one-horned rhinoceros, also called the great Indian rhinoceros. More than 90% of the species reside in one of the most prominent wildlife sanctuaries of the country - the Kaziranga National Park. This brings me to discuss the state's much-celebrated wildlife tourism. There are about eighteen wildlife sanctuaries here that are home to over one-ninety species of mammals, among other animals and birds, including the royal Bengal tiger, hill gibbon, and the golden langur.



Indian One-horned Rhino

**Royal Bengal Tiger**

. The Kaziranga national park is closed during the months from April to October and is best to visit during the winters. Apart from the Indian rhino, many tigers, deers, sloth bears also reside here, among others. It is additionally a site to view a wide range of migratory birds such as the hornbill, fishing eagle, and heron. Located along the foothills of the Himalayas and the only place covered under 'Project Tiger' is the famous Manas National Park. Among many species seen here, some include the wild boar, sambar, and hog deer. The Gibbon wildlife sanctuary and the Sukhowa National park are again other popular wildlife spots that one can visit. The primary attraction of the Gibbon wildlife sanctuary is the sighting of primates and it's gotten its very name from a non-human primate. The Saikhowa National park, on the other hand, is one of the biodiversity hot spots in the works. It is also known for having several rare species along with a wide collection of avifauna.

For food-lovers, Assamese cuisine is a must-try. Due to the abundance of different kinds of plant and animal products in the region, the wide variety of Assamese dishes make the cuisine one of the most interesting ones, though it's still very undiscovered. A wide range of exotic vegetables and fruits are available in Assam that is not found in many parts of the mainland such as pomelos, elephant foot yam, Indian olives, and so on. Rice being the most essential component of the cuisine, is used in making main dishes as well as sweets, famously known as 'pitha'. Moreover, due to the availability of freshwater sources, fish is also eaten here in abundance. Out of the many delightful dishes, my recommendations would be the 'Omita Khar' (a papaya dish with Khar), 'fish cooked in banana leaf' (a steamed dish cooked with fish wrapped in the banana leaf), 'Masor Tenga' (a fish dish with dried mangosteen), and 'til pitha' (a rice flour roll with black sesame seeds, coconut and jaggery filling). Hope you enjoy it!

Amidst the many treasured objects belonging to Assam, silk and tea are the most cherished ones. The famously grown 'Assam tea' is known to tea enthusiasts worldwide. By production, the state has the world's largest tea-growing area. Apart from the largely grown black-tea, green and white teas are also produced here.

Moving on to the popular and indigenously grown silk to the region, the three varieties only produced here are known as 'Muga', 'Pat', and 'Eri'. Muga, unique silk that is known for its durability and unimaginable luster, is a highly demanded material from all around. So much so that, earlier it was only reserved for the royal families! After every wash, the Muga silk only increases in its shine and luster. Known to have a beautiful collection of textiles and jewelry, Assam surely provided an ideal place for shopping as well.

The largest city in the state and location to the capital 'Dispur', Guwahati, serves as the gateway to the rest of North-East India. The entire North-East region has gained popularity amongst tourists only in recent times. However, its unmatched beauty is still very much undiscovered. That is what makes this part of the country special and therefore, the taboo associated with traveling to the region needs to be re-considered. Furthermore, bordered by many states and even two countries, Assam also opens doors for travelers to visit beyond its territory. Consisting of the largest portion of the international border, Assam also shares a boundary of 267 km with our neighboring country - Bhutan. One can take a connecting flight from Guwahati to Pro or even choose to travel by road through car or bus (though, that will take longer).

In my opinion, the best time to visit Assam would be from October to April as this will not include the monsoon season, and winter months tend to be pleasant here. Through the state, flows the great river Brahmaputra, and there lies Majuli, the largest habitable river island of the world. Again, going to Majuli during the summer month would be discouraged due to the humid weather. The island, known as the cultural capital of the state, has great historic significance to the people of Assam. As discussed before, it is the core of the Neo-Vaishnavite culture initiated by Sankardeva. The annual Raas Mahotsava celebrated here attracts people from all over the world. The four-day festival makes this place a pilgrimage site for especially the believers of Lord Krishna. Majuli is mainly famous for the presence of multiple Satras or monasteries preserving ancient items of great relevance. Countless Assamese artifacts, war items, handicrafts, literature items, jewelry, and more are stored and displayed here.



Different Sataras have their specific relevance and are very interesting sites to visit, especially for those with a zeal for history and arts.

Assam is a fascinating place that has a unique charm of its own. There is so much to explore here, so much so, that this article may not even cover a third of what this state consists of. The medley of people from different communities is what makes Assam, very much like India, special. From the numerous tea-estates, wildlife spaces, cultural localities, to the banks of the river Brahmaputra, Assam stands relevant to people visiting from all spheres of life. I hope this article encourages you to learn more about the region, and even better, visit Assam in the future.





Dilwalon ki | Devina Agrawal
DILLI

Delhi has never failed to leave a mark in people's hearts, especially due to its cultural heritage. Diwalon Ki Dili is something Delhi was always known for and will continue to be. It's called Diwalon Ki Delhi because the people of Delhi have very big hearts and even bigger appetites. It's a melting pot of cultures with so many shopping destinations, delicious food items and places to explore that you'll be spoilt for choice. Delhi's culture is not an outcome of one ruler or dynasty but a rich amalgamation of rulers over a vast period of time. The beliefs, values, and traditions of these innumerable rulers and invaders has shaped the fabric of the city we see today. Every ruler that came and went by did not strip the city of its glory but enriched the history and made Delhi what it is today!

The beauty of Delhi is that it has a culture that reflects India as a whole. People who come to this ancient city from different states bring with them their own cultures. On one hand we see Old Delhi living in the past, upholding values of the yore. On the other hand, there is New Delhi being an epitome of western culture. The People of Delhi tend to speak a mix of English & Hindi, usually known as Hinglish. Numerous Festivals and Fairs are celebrated in the city that add to the modern and traditional magic of the city. The Chhat Puja of Bihar is celebrated with as much festivity as the Durga Puja of Bengal. There is also no difference in the celebrations of the Muslim festival of Eid-ul-Fitr and the Hindu festival of Lohri.

Delhi, the capital of India has a strong historical background. It was ruled by some of the most powerful emperors in Indian history. From Hindu Kings to Muslim Sultans the reins of the city kept shifting. The various rulers included the British and the current political parties that have the honour of governing free India. After Independence in 1947, New Delhi was officially declared as the capital of India.

Delhi is the entry point to India for so many visitors and yet despite its charm, people find it difficult to navigate. Many of us arrive in India's capital under cover of darkness – that is to say that many inter-continental flights arrive in the small hours of the morning. Fortunately, the immigration process seems to be much quicker than it used to be – if you have an E-visa, head straight to the far end for quicker processing. In the arrival's hall is where the fun begins.

The best time to visit this bustling capital is from October to March when the weather is at its best. During this period flowers are at their blooming best, the weather is pleasant and enjoyable to experience Incredible Delhi.





So, what should one see in Delhi?

There are plenty of things to do in Delhi – from exploring city's tombs to Mughal architecture, to exploring bazaars and sipping world class cocktails in trendy bars.

Red Fort - Well worth a visit although it is a mirror of the Fort at Agra, and the Delhi version receives fewer visitors. There are some great views over to the Fort from the Jamah Masjid. The Red Fort is included in many Old Delhi walking/tuk-tuk tours.

Humayan's Tomb - Tomb to the Mughal Emperor of Delhi, Humayun, this tomb is a beautiful UNESCO heritage sight, and one of the best examples of Persian influenced architecture in Delhi. Spend an hour or two here wandering the grounds and enjoying the structure – for fewer crowds & better photos come early in the morning.

India Gate & Rajpath - For Lutyens Delhi at its finest and a sense of history, visit the India Gate (not to be confused with the Gateway of India in Mumbai!) and gaze down the Rajpath towards the government of India. The India Gate is illuminated in the evenings between around 7pm and 9pm.

Qutub Minar - Dating back to 1197, Qutub Minar is one of Delhi's oldest monuments, with a beautiful red sandstone tower that is 73m high.

Swaminarayan Akshardham Temple - Located on the East Bank of the Yamuna river, this is the largest Hindu temple in the world and can't fail to leave an impression. Try to visit during the week if you can as it gets very crowded at weekends, especially Sundays. If you have a little more time in Delhi, we suggest exploring the lovely Lodhi gardens – filled with tombs – and nearby Khan market for some shopping.

Some off-beat activities to do in Delhi are:

1. Browse Asia's Largest Wholesale Spice Market - Khari Baoli Road, next to Fatehpuri Masjid at the western end of Chandni Chowk in Old Delhi, is home to the largest wholesale spice market in Asia.
2. Listen to Qawwalis at Nizamuddin Dargah - Nizamuddin Dargah is located in the Nizamuddin West neighbourhood of New Delhi, surrounded by a bustling market and near Humayun's Tomb. Get there just before sunset. On Thursday evenings, its courtyard erupts with the soulful sound of live qawwalis.



3. Admire the Street Art - India's first public open-air art gallery, the Lodhi Art District, is situated between Khanna Market and Meharchand Market in south Delhi's Lodhi Colony. International and local artists have painted more than 50 murals
4. Attend the Changing of Guard - The Changing of Guard ceremony at Rashtrapati Bhavan is one of many similar celebrations that take place around the world. The starting time depends on the day: 8 a.m. on Saturday and 5:30 p.m. on Sunday. The cost is free for all. Enter through Gate 2 or 37, and bring a government-licensed photo identification. Since access to Rashtrapati Bhavan is generally restricted, the ceremony provides a fantastic opportunity to see the architecture of this immense building, once the centre piece of New Delhi.
5. Street Life In Delhi – These tours are guided walks through streets of Paharganj and the area around New Delhi Railway Station. They are led by children who once lived and worked on the streets themselves. This unique tour is recommended as one of the best walking tours in Delhi.

Delhi has a legendary cuisine and the best street food ever! “Foodie's Paradise” is the title bestowed upon Delhi as it is perfect for different appetites, budgets and the insatiable Indian palette. The mouth-watering food always awaits you in Delhi.

So what should one Eat and Where?

One of the Best Places to Eat is **North Campus Area**. Its super pocket friendly as it bustling with students from all over India who have limited pocket money to spend. It is known for Street Food, Sweets, North Indian, Fast Food, Sweets, and Region Specific & Multi-Cuisine. Some of the best restaurants there are Momo's Point, Bille Di Hatti, Chache Di Hatti, Shagun Asian Eatery, Bamboo Hut, and South Indian Café.

Very close the main North Campus area, **Hudson Lane** is one place where you will find one of the finest cafes and best restaurants in Delhi. Mostly serving Italian, Cafe, and Fast Food cuisine, these quirky joints offer an amazing culinary experience at an extremely pocket-friendly price. The best restaurants are: Woodbox Cafe, Mad Monkey, Indus Flavours, QD's, Ricos, and BYD (Big Yellow Door).

Old Delhi is a paradise for people who love street food and sweets. Some of our favourites are Chainaram, Meghraj & Sons, Haldiram, Tiwari Bros, Old Famous Jalebiwala, Shiv Mishthan Bhandaar, and Ghantewala Halwai, Natraj Bhalle Wala, Khemchand Adesh Kumar's Daulat Ki Chaat, Lotan Chole Wala, Jung Bahadur Kachori Wala, and Shree Balaji Chaat Bhandaar and Bishan Swaroop for chaat. Khan Market is not only heaven for die-hard shoppers, it is also one of Delhi's incredible food districts. Some of the best eateries are: Town Hall Restaurant, Big Chill Café, Yellow Brick road Restaurant, Wok in the Clouds, The Coffee Bean & tea Leaf and SodaBottleOpenerwalla.

Where to stay:

To experience a luxurious stay in Delhi we recommend **Pullman Hotels and Resorts**. Hotel Pullman New Delhi Aero-city is Located 200 meters away from the Delhi aero-city metro station. It offers 6 restaurants and bars, a full-service spa and salon, and an outdoor swimming pool. The Worldmark Complex hosts premium offices, shopping outlet and eateries is at walking distance from the property. Being located at a 15-minute drive from Cyber city, the complex hotel with 670 Rooms (including Novotel New Delhi Aero-city) makes it an ideal location for all travellers. Dining options include Farmers' Basket at Pluck, a unique concept of “You Choose, We Cook”. The restaurant is also famous for its lavish buffets and exotic Sunday brunches. Guestrooms are spacious and luxuriously appointed with modern 5-star amenities and complimentary Wi-Fi. A variety of Ayurvedic, Thai and Swedish spa treatments can be enjoyed at the Woo Wellness Spa & salon. A fully-equipped health club – Fit Lounge is available. Now you needn't leave your pets behind while travelling for Business or Leisure. The hotel is a Pet Friendly Hotel.

Shopping Malls in Delhi like DLF Promenade, Emporio and Ambience are located within 5 km of the complex. Rashtrapati Bhavan is 10 km from Pullman New Delhi Aerocity, while Jantar Mantar is 12 km from the property.

Delhi is one of the best places to visit and experience all that India has to offer. For best results get up early to see Delhi's sites in the magical morning light, complete with plenty of birds. Delhi gets uncomfortably hot outside of winter months (and surprisingly cold during winter!) so be sure to check the weather and pack accordingly. Happy Travelling



Explore Culture – 4th Edition

LANGDURBI

Yoezer Choki

The perfect picnic spot



Bhutan is a land of beautiful landscapes blessed with many sacred places to visit. The land is not only blessed by divine beings but also with unique species of flora and fauna. Each dzongkhag in Bhutan has its specialty in different cuisines and scenery, but the most beautiful place that resides in my heart is my village Langdurbi, under Zhemgang.

Langdurbi is located in the lower part of Zhemgang dzongkhag, with a farm road connecting all the houses and electricity lighting every household in the village. Though the place is known to be in a rural area, what fascinates and keeps me close is the people in the village. The people of Langdurbi are very hospitable and greet newcomers who visit the village with an offering of tea on the way to the village known as Dongchang. Earlier they used to greet visitors with wine but now they serve tea because they believe that new visitors bring luck and wealth to the village.

After tea, guests are served traditional food that is fried cheese with butter, paa (meat dish), and whatever else they can afford to provide. Even with the limited means, they provide the best they can with warmth. When the night falls, the villagers entertain their guests with local dances and songs.

After that, they take their guests on a tour of their small village, and there we can see the exquisite nature and the sumptuous village area. Then on the night before the guests leave the village, the villagers give the guests little offerings so that the guests leave the village feeling delighted.

Langdurbi has a festival in October every year known as Chotpa where masked and traditional dances are performed. The masked dances are performed by the villagers not by the monks which is unique to other dzongkhag. At the time of the festival, the villagers cook their best dishes to share and wear the best dress to show their interest and portray their gratitude to the village land and their deity (protector of the village). There may be better places in Bhutan to live in because of the availability of facilities but I feel that Langdurbi is the best place to be stay connected with nature and live with people in harmony. Indeed, people at Langdurbi are happy as they share what they have and receive what they don't have.



Explore Culture - 4th Edition

PUNAKHA

Country of Clouds

Subharthi Chatterjee



In the country hidden among the clouds and mountains, it is all beauty uninterrupted. A kingdom so beautiful which still retains its culture as a pride and wears it on sleeve. A country that judges itself with the parameter of gross Happiness Index (GHI). You can well imagine the hospitality of this country's people! Right from the moment you step on its soil, you can feel their self-sufficiency. As an Indian, you could not have been luckier as a trip to Bhutan saves you from the hassle of visa permit. You do not even need to convert your Indian currency as it is acceptable.

Squeezed between India and China, this kingdom never let its reputation be squeezed out as it stands apart with its harmony and peace. Inside the heart of this country, resides a city, towering 50 thousand feet above the sea level, the ethereal city of Punakha holds its pillar at the meeting point of the Pho and Mo rivers. The city's beauty lies in a rural setting and its scarce population which gives you a respite from the hustle and bustle of the city life. The water is so remarkably clean you can differentiate the rivers by the colour of the water. The city resonates the journey of Bhutan as a whole, towards urbanisation. From being an isolated kingdom to opening on the late twentieth century, this country has come a long way. The coexistence of humans and nature will make you crave for the atmosphere and its gust of wind even more. It is a best short trip which is women friendly too. So, if you are planning to pack your bag and just take a trip alone. Its danger free. The people here mainly speak their local dialect so its handy to go around with a tour guide. You can simply spend days without counting while you let your soul graze through the green meadows very much comparable to the idea of heaven etched in our mind.

Its link to the royal history of Bhutan makes the place stand out and attractive. The wedding of royal family only adds to its fame. It is a hotspot for art enthusiasts. Just as the name suggests it is a place to find the happiness that the soul has exhausted itself from. It proudly shelters the sacred statues related to Tibetan Buddhism.

In the month of march, you can also catch the Punaka Tsechu and Drubchen Festival celebrated by the locals staging folk dance. It is celebrated to mark the annual protection of Buddhist documents.

Due to its optimum high range with pleasant weather makes the location perfect for winter hiking. The trail starts from Thimphu and ends at the majestic Punakha valley.

With only 3500 m height and no steep slopes, hikers enjoy a slice of adventure with nature without any safety concern. One will cover breath-taking valleys, green fields, dense jungles and golden rice farms leading you to witness Phajoding monastery and beautiful Sinchula Pass. The Khamsum Valley Namgyal Chorten is a monastery at the top of the ridge of Panakhu valley. The four storeyed architectural and artistic marvels were built by Bhutanese carpenters, painters and sculptors in a timeline of nine years. Adding to that, you can visit free of cost.

Torsa Nature Reserve

Jewelled with alpines and cedars, a day spent in the very few reserves of the world not destroyed by urbanisation is a return to the relationship of man with nature. The Rufous necked hornbill which houses itself here will not only steal the show but also your animal loving heart. Sitting by the lake, Sinchulunga you can experience the serenity and tranquillity of your existence away from the chaos. The Sangchen Dorji Lhuendrup Nunnery in the laps of Punakha valley is a magnificent temple which shelters the 14 feet bronze statue of Avalokiteshvara. Its a place with a view that makes tranquillity seep through your mind. A place away from everything.

The Punakha Suspension bridge is a sight to behold. Built over the river Po Chu, this wooden bridge connects the Punakha Dzong with the city of Punakha. IF you are an adventure lover, this place is destined for you.

What is the best season to visit?

The winters are chilly. So, if you want to play with snow, its perfect time for you to visit Due to its soothing weather in the season of snow, it is called the winter capital of Bhutan. On the other hand, spring is dry but pleasant. Avoid monsoon at all cost.

How to get there?

It is a 3-hour drive from Thimphu. It is connected to the mainland by a wooden bridge and must pass a stretch of mountain.

By Air: You can get a flight from New Delhi, Kolkata, Guwahati to the international airport of Bhutan, Paro. Its obviously the fastest and efficient way of reaching your destination and a shared cab from there to Punakha Valley .Its 123.8 km away from the airport and the journey is the start of your spiritually ecstatic joyride.

By train: You can have a pocket friendly journey by hopping on a train from Kolkata to Hasimara. A seventeen km long journey crossing the border from India to Bhutan is a visual treat.

Where to stay?

There is nothing better than living in a slice of nature which lets you channel your inner peace and brings you sustainable stay throughout your visit. While taking pride at its first-class service it also delivers its responsibility towards mother earth by preserving and protecting the green landscape around it.

The best way to pay a visit Himalayas is to take fun in the journey through it rather than reaching it. To pause, think and introspect.

You can choose from the variety of options for our staycation homes like the lodge suits and villas each facing the stunning valleys. The gigantic windows and balconies let you feel the gusts of winds straight from the mountains. With unlimited Wi-Fi and private minibar.

The one-bedroom villas are nothing short of ecstasy as they offer you optimum amount of privacy merged with openness to the lush green valleys of Punakha. With indoor dining and outdoor living room, it is all that your dream trip comprises of!

What to eat?

Top ten restaurants you can try to savour your taste buds while you stay at punakha. Dochula Restaurant if you crave some home food. Its lip-smacking Indian dishes will make you feel at home. The Reven Restaurant delivers the Asian delicacies on point with a nice panoramic view to make your dinner outing memorable yet serene. But if you are keen to try on the local food, Lobesa Village Restaurant is the top choice. Besides, the view and the hygiene would coax to repeat this restaurant as well as recommend it to others. If you are longing for quick pizza, you can hit 10zin pizzeria. For a mug of coffee to freshen up yourself from touring, you will be spoilt for choices to visit. Rinchenling cafeteria, old Town Café, Chimi Lakhang Cafeteria.

Lastly, it is the serene silence that teaches you so much. It makes you learn how to find happiness in the little things. That life is not just about surviving but also living it. It is a place that you will never forget!





AN OASIS

Anoop Keshari

in a not so deserted land of sand,
a hue in Pink of The Pink City



As travel restrictions are easing out and the holiday season is just around the corner, it is time to pack up and take a royal break now—what better place to explore than Jaipur. The city never ceases to amaze me. Surrounded by Aravalli hills and besieged walls; the city is full of fascinating architectures, royal heritage and well-preserved buildings. The modern metropolis offers every luxury, yet it retains the vintage royal charm. The architecture combines Rajputana and Mughal influences of the time, with stunning palaces, hillside forts and rich hospitality. You'll also understand why this is nicknamed "The Pink City", the colour pink is also the symbol of hospitality that the city offers and makes for a marvellous spectacle to behold.

History:

Jai Singh II, the Raja of Amber, founded Jaipur in 1727 on the principles of Vastu Shastra. Vastu Shastra, the ancient architectural science that guides the design and construction of buildings with the help of simplistic natural laws that govern the universe.

Jaipur extends a plethora of options for travellers to stay. For those like me, who are searching for a royal getaway from the city rush can bunk in Hotel Fairmont.

An oasis in a not so deserted land of sand, a hue in Pink of The Pink City—Hotel Fairmont; designed like a fort and a palace all at the same time; the architecture echoes a seamless combination of proportioned Mughal and Rajasthani decor with contemporary amenities.

The stay here feels like an exquisite fantasy, offering peace and joy with a royal tint. Apart from the visually spectacular walk up to the reception, the experience begins with the *Five-Senses* welcome they extend, which involves the loud sound of traditional Indian instruments, the rose petal shower, and the welcome drink.

The whole experience feels mesmerizing and perfect for me. The reception area has hues of gold, and red on the walls and extravagant chandeliers embellish the ceilings. One can spend quite some time efficiently in the reception lobby discerning at all the Shekhawati vintage furniture and silver artefacts. The room is as extravagant as it can get; you wouldn't want to leave that bed. It has the largest stone bathtub that I have ever experienced at a hotel.

The food here is top-notch, Zoya is the main restaurant at the hotel where they serve their breakfast as well as have an ala-carte menu and buffet option for the meal.

Zarin is stunning and has the ambience of the court of a Mughal emperor. The red and gold inlay work is worth noticing. Their Rajasthani thali is delicious, and it is one of the biggest Thalies that I have ever tried. Anjum is for tea lovers like me; offering the quintessential 'Adrak Wali Chai' and signature cocktails.



Fairmont comes under the Accor; the European hospitality behemoth. Keeping Pandemic in mind, they have introduced ALLSAFE an aggregate health and safety measure to ensure the safety of its employees and provide the most enjoyable experience for its guests. Accor has also put in place a 24-hour in-house medical assistance for guests.

Amber Fort

A must-visit site, Amer Palace Fort sits atop a small hill and is one of the most magnificent palaces in India. This majestic building built with pale yellow and pink sandstone with white marble looks marvellous. Its maze-like passage and winding staircases is an architectural masterpiece. Amer Fort is home to some underground tunnels that connect Amer to Jaigarh Fort. A restored part of the tunnel is now open to the public. The beautiful light and sound show inside the Fort encapsulates its history. Getting a picturesque elephant ride up to the palace's courtyard is a sought after activity. The Amer Fort was enlisted into UNESCO World Heritage Site as part of the "Hill Forts of Rajasthan" along with five other forts.

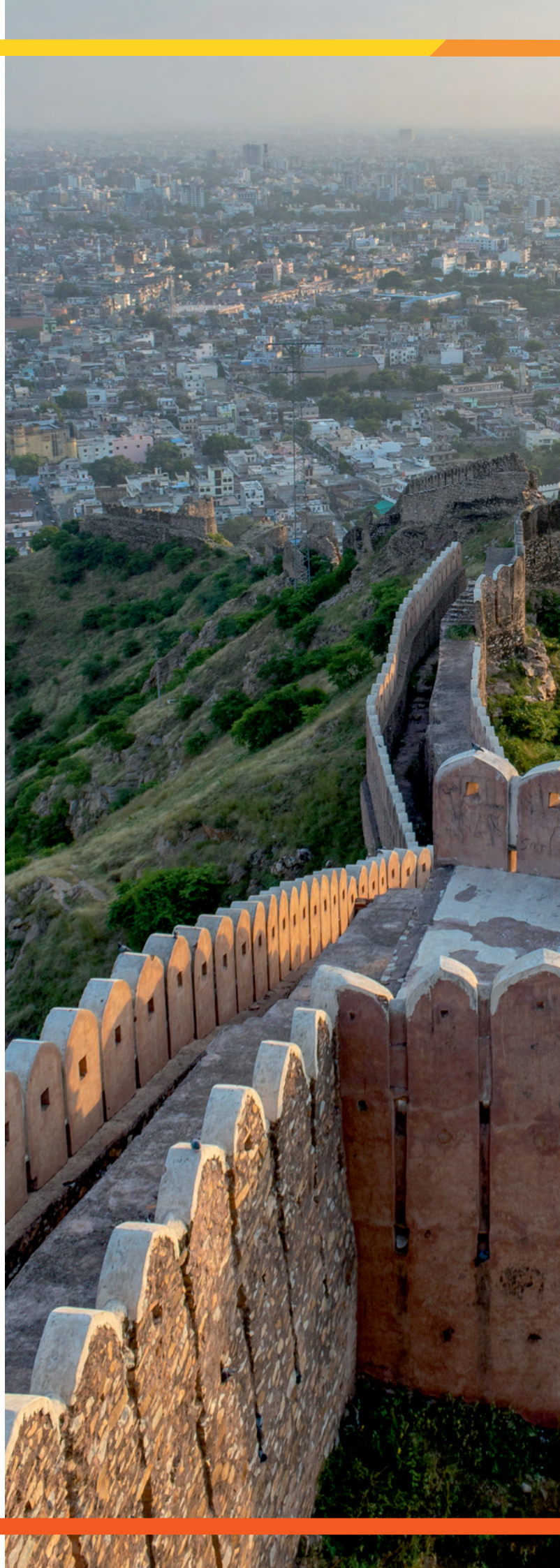
On Walking distance from the Fort is **Elefantastic** an Elephant sanctuary. It offers an incredible experience by building together with the guests a safe, enjoyable, authentic and share-worthy journey. The host is going to tell you all about how the elephants here are well cared for and loved; it is a pleasure to observe and spend valuable time with these magnificent creatures.

Jal Mahal

The only monuments in Jaipur that remains accessible after sunset, Jal Mahal is a fascinating sight to behold. Build in the heart of Man Sagar Lake, Jal Mahal is one of the most magnificent architectural palaces built by blending the Mughal and Rajput styles of architecture. The entry inside the premise is prohibited, but the view from a considerable distance while boating is enough to mesmerize you. During the evenings, the reflection of the Fort in the lake is gorgeous. With its impressive beauty and laid-back ambience, the Jal Mahal is a real delight. Try munching the street food available outside the mahal to invigorate your senses.

City Palace

The City Palace is one of the essential visits, and it was once the seat of the reigning monarchs. The vast monument includes several buildings, courtyards, and gardens including the Chandra Mahal and the Mubarak Mahal.





Hawa Mahal

Constructed from red and pink sandstone, Hawa Mahal sits on the edge of the City Palace and visiting this peculiar architecture is one of the most sought-after things to do in Jaipur. Been built by Maharaja Sawai Pratap Singh in 1799, the structure has a resemblance to the honeycomb of a beehive, with 953 tiny windows, also known as 'Jharokhas'. These small windows let air circulate throughout the palace, keeping it cool and airy even during peak summers. The primary reason behind the palace's construction was to provide the women of the royal house to witness the festivities on the streets whilst being unseen from the outside. The place is now accessible only from the small alley around the back.

Nahargarh Fort

Nahargarh Fort is a massive structure based on 'Indo European' pattern of the architect. The whole building erected by red sandstone and decorated with white marbles. Most of the royal families lived here. One can see the entire Jaipur city from the top of the Fort. The 'Maota Lake' lies down the foothills of the lake adds more to its beauty. Inside the Fort, the beauty of Indian arts, crafts and Marble works are breathtaking to see. Trekking up the castle and enjoying the view is one popular activity here. But for a stubborn hiker, the trail will not give any into-the-wild experience. Another attraction is the Nahargarh Biological Park, which is an asylum for majestic Asiatic lions, tigers and leopards.

Jantar Mantar

The Jantar Mantar in Jaipur is part of collection of 19 architectural astronomical instruments built in 1734 by the king Sawai Jai Singh II. It features the world's largest stone sundial and has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It's an enigma to understand them until explained, or you read the content shown on display. It consists of a series of small and large stone structures which are unique and defines some measurements related to astronomy. Just in case you are curious, its accuracy is plus or minus two minutes.

Albert Hall Museum

Albert Hall Museum functions as the central museum and is one of the oldest one in Rajasthan. The museum located in the central point of Ram Nivas garden is an excellent example of Indo-Saracenic architecture. The passageways of the museum ornamented with paintings in a variety of styles comprising the Ramayana, Persian paintings and an extensive collection of artefacts, carpets, ivory, stone, metal sculptures, and works in crystal.

The garden here is a perfect place to relax with the stunning view of Albert Hall in the backdrop. At night, the entire building glows with yellow lights, and the museum takes on a whole new facade which presents a suitable setting for photo ops. It is undoubtedly a great place to get a peek into the history and ancient culture of India.

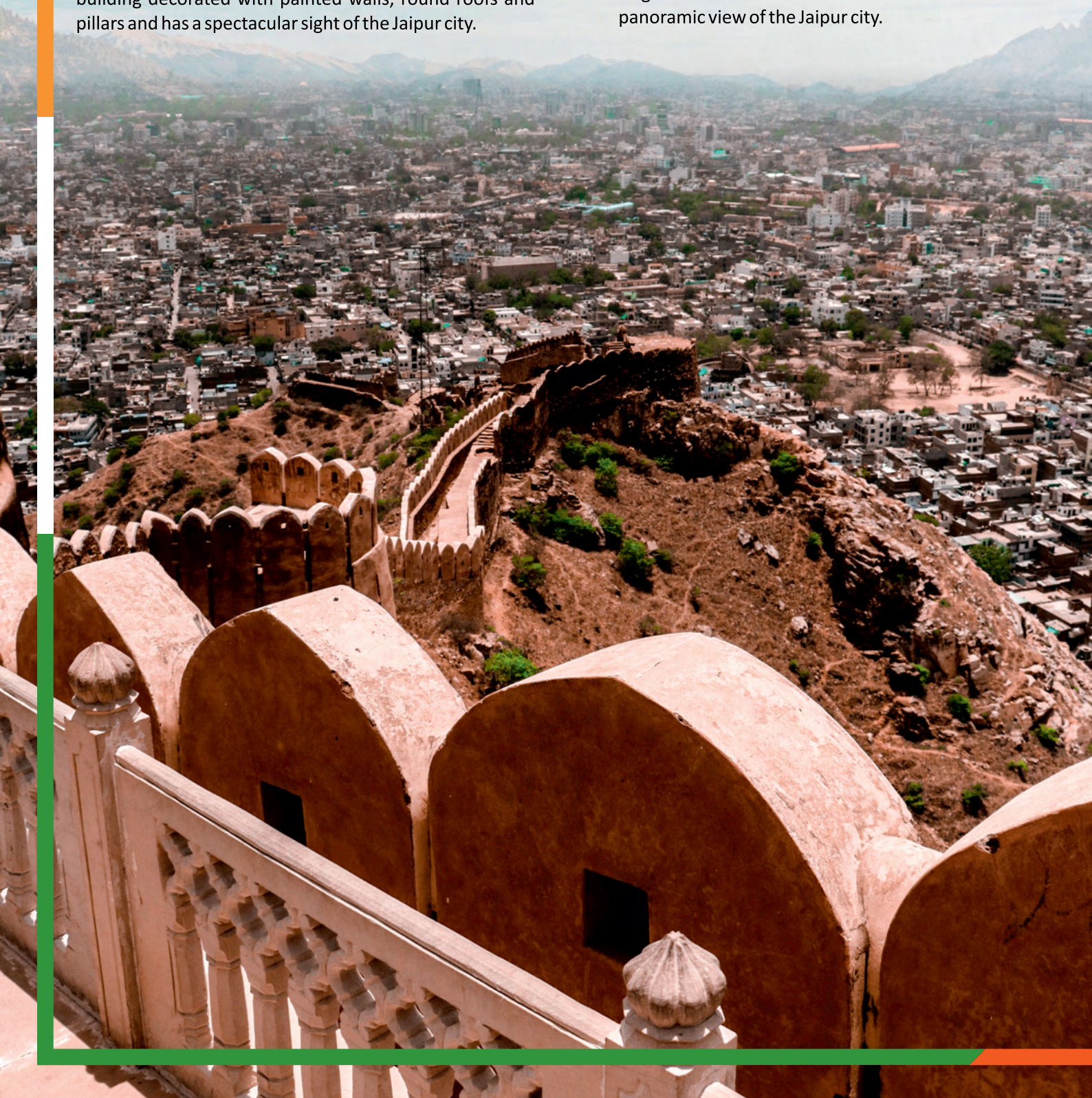
GALTAJI TEMPLE

Located at the outskirts of the royal city, Galtaji Temple is a prehistoric Hindu pilgrimage site. Built using pink sandstone the Temple has natural freshwater springs, seven holy 'kunds' or water tanks and a sacred shrine. All contained in a steep rock valley—this remarkable building decorated with painted walls, round roofs and pillars and has a spectacular sight of the Jaipur city.

Often referred to as the Monkey Temple because of the many colonies of monkeys that live here. The Temple has a scenic and gorgeous landscape featuring rich green vegetation and offers a peaceful ambience to tourists.

JAIGARH FORT

Jaigarh Fort is a royal throttlehold, and an important historical monument also termed as 'Fort of Victory' as no one ever conquered it. The Fort cradled on the top of the cliff, palatial structure bounded by flourishing greenery and massive battlements. The Fort houses the world's largest cannon on wheels – 'Jaivana' and offers a panoramic view of the Jaipur city.



SOLO TRAVEL

Why I believe in

Shruthi
Raghavendra



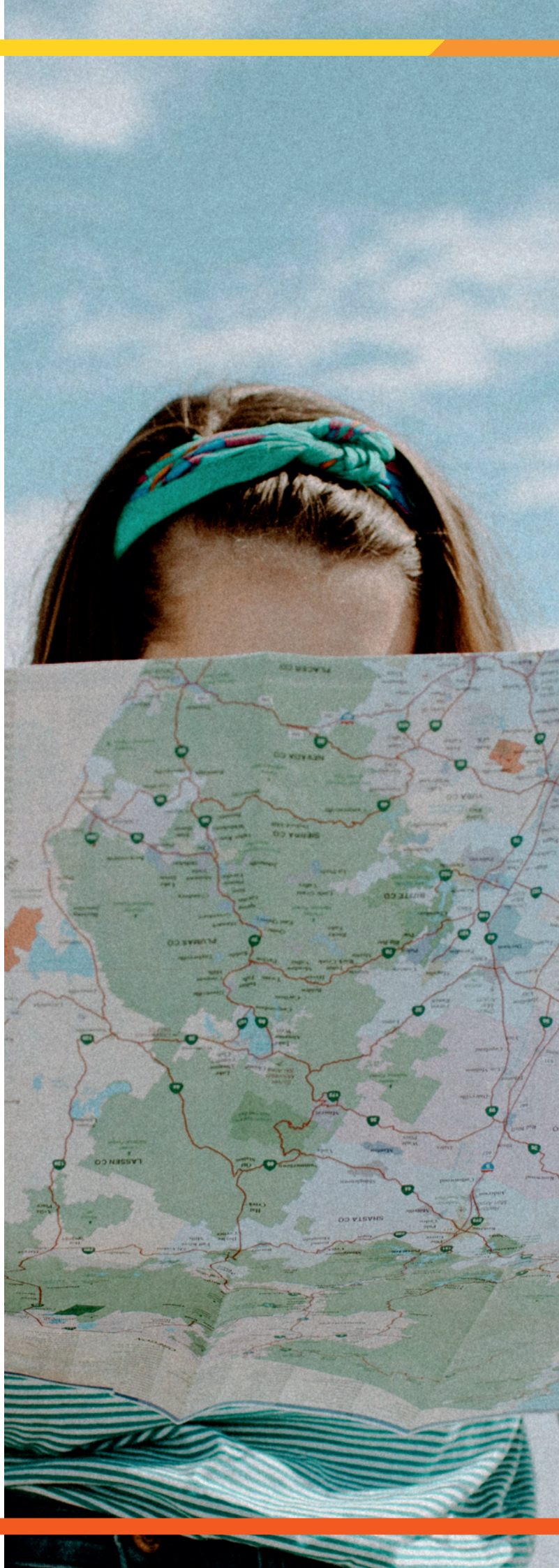
Explore Culture

Of Solitude And Motorboats

In the summer of 2019, I visited the tiny mesmerizing hamlet called Palolem in southern Goa. It was my solitude trip meaning I had to keep aside my extrovert self and just try to be alone, reflect upon my life, spend days doing 'nothing', and of course, indulge in some wining and dining! It was what they call an off season period meaning less crowd and more serenity at the beaches.

One day, while taking a walk on the beach, as I was gazing into nothingness of the vast sea (just adding a bit of travel-and-solitude drama!) a rusty voice called out to me from behind. When I turned around, I saw a man wearing a bright blue shirt and a white navy cap donning a hopeful smile. He was a local tourist boatman and he asked me if I cared for a boat ride to visit the islands in the distance. I hadn't planned for it but since the opportunity presented itself I thought why not. So off we went on his motorboat and we headed to far off Butterfly Island and Honeymoon Island (in case you became curious here, the name has nothing to do with the attributes of the island. It's just a name!). It was a beautiful feeling to just stay still while the boat glided across the water. Raju uncle (the extrovert in me gave up) told me about his life in Goa; how for 6 months fishermen and tourist guides in Goa spend their time working hard and earning a livelihood and then once monsoon hits the state, they spend the other 6 months of the year, resting at home, traveling, celebrating with family, and putting the hard-earned money to use. He was so shocked that I, being a woman, was traveling alone and at the same time also hoped that his daughter Sana would one day, grow up to do the same. By the time we returned, he had agreed to teach me to steer the motorboat and taught me some basics.

He invited me in the evening for a free ride where I could take charge of the boat. Imagine my shock when he believed that I could ride the boat and take it to the islands! In the evening, we had a family of 7 traveling from Gujarat as guests, and I played the role of a polite travel guide plus boatman for them. While Raju uncle sat with me as he was still the captain of the boat, I steered it all the way to the islands and back. The best part of this journey was when he believed that I could do it when I wasn't so sure of it myself. When we reached the shore, I thanked him with all my heart for giving me one of the best evenings of my life, and also for reinstating in me, that anyone can do ANYTHING, even if it takes a complete stranger to just BELIEVE in them.



Bread, Jam And Laughter!

As part of my work, I travel frequently to different places, and so once, after a tiring day at work, I was running towards the New Delhi railway station. It was late at night and I had to catch the 11.25 PM Durgam Express. As soon as I reached my seat in the A1 compartment, I realized that in rushing to the station, I had missed my dinner.

It was too late to get down and get some food so I thought of inquiring the coach attendant about the food situation. Each luxury AC train, any Rajdhani or Durgam train in India has one coach attendant in each coach who also happens to bless you with the food prepared in the pantry car. So when I called my coach attendant and asked him in a hushed tone (as everybody else were already asleep), “Bhaiya, apke paas kuch khaane ke liye hoga kya? Main dinner nahi kar paayi.” (Brother, would you have anything to eat? I couldn't do my dinner). He looked at me and sighed as it was way past dinner time and they usually did not provide food at the starting point on that train. He said he would try his best and he walked off towards the pantry car.

The train started moving slowly and I was absorbing the landscapes of Delhi, the bright white lights from the road, the chaos on the earth and the silence in the air above, the stories past and present, and the stillness of the night. As I bid my own goodbye to the beautiful city, I heard footsteps and I turned around to see my coach attendant coming my way. Yay, he had something in his hands, I thought. He had managed to sneak out a packet of breakfast bread and jam! Before I could thank him, I heard more footsteps - only this time, hurried and enthusiastic. In came another coach attendant and upon glancing at my face, he became happy and smiled at me! “I knew it would be you!” he said. Recognition dawned on me that I knew this coach attendant too from my previous trip to Delhi.

He looked at my coach attendant and said, “It's her only, I told you!” and then he looked at me and said, “Jab isne mujhe bola ki abhi raatko ek madam ko khaane ke liye kuch chahiye kyunki vo kha nahi paayi, mujhe laga hi tha ki vo ap hongi! Apko yaad hai, main B4 se hun.” (When he came and told me that a madam wanted to eat something because she couldn't do dinner, I knew that it had to be YOU. Do you remember me from B4?).

I said, “Yes, of course!”. I remembered how just a month ago, on the same train, at the same time, when the same old exhausted me missed dinner and had asked her coach attendant for some food, he had sneaked in some bread and jam for me! The three of us had a good laugh about it and I thanked both of them profusely and promised that next time I take the Durgam Express from Delhi, I would have my dinner and come. Before sleeping that night, I wrote this incident in my journal and expressed gratitude towards complete strangers again, for keeping me safe, remembering me (and knowing me so well!), for not letting me go hungry, and most importantly, for sharing the most beautiful laughter there is!



Why I Believe Every Woman Should Travel Alone Atleast Once:

As a woman, every time I step out of home, I am free. However, during these times of uncertainty where sexual harassment is rampant, people advise girls and women to stay inside the walls of their homes. So when I step out, I invariably make a statement. It is a revolution in itself when a woman steps out, no matter who she is, where she is from, where she is headed to or what she intends to do.

So, when I first started traveling in Mumbai, I was told to be safe. I was given a list of DOs and DONTs, 'wear-s' and 'don't wear-s', routes to take and routes not to take, time to go and time to come. Eventually, I meandered my way through these lists and rules and restrictions, and managed to claim my right to mobility. My right to travel. My right to take my safety into my own hands. And my right to freedom. Slowly when I started traveling far from home, I realized that there was an immense power within me that I had never experienced before. This power grew with each trip I went on, with each flight I boarded, with each train seat I booked, and with each bus I alighted from. This power was me changing and growing into a different human being. Every time I came back home after a trip, I came back a new person.

Once I discovered this, I started traveling more and explored the idea of solitude trips. It was something that I was encouraged to do in the organization I work for - The Gender Lab. "Go Shruthi, go on a solitude trip every year." I understood what it meant to be independent. Being independent does not just mean doing whatever I wanted to. You need to view it as a way of life - taking ownership of my decisions, health, safety, growth, and dreams. I understood that when people saw a woman traveling alone, it intimidated them. When I traveled to Varanasi and Lucknow last year in December, the locals I met just could not believe that a woman all the way from Mumbai could be roaming the streets of Varanasi alone. I understood that in those parts of my country, women did not have access to safe public places. I understood that society still did not fully 'permit' women's freedom and autonomy. On the other hand, I also realized that when people saw a woman traveling alone, for many young girls and women out there, I was a role model!

They shared that they wanted to do what I was doing. I understood that when you travel to a place, the culture of that place absorbs you as much as you absorb it. Some people will remember you forever and I realized that if I was able to inspire even a few young girls to start traveling just by coming in contact with them, then why not!

Visiting places also made me realize that my country is bountiful in unimaginable ways. I started visiting smaller and lesser known places in search of stories. When I spent a lot of money on visiting certain places while spending only half of it when visiting others, I started understanding the economics and politics of my country and how they play out differently in different regions. I learnt my relationship with my money. I acknowledged my strengths and weaknesses, faced up to my own prejudices, and was able to work on my fears. Most importantly, I can now take care of myself and do the things that I love to do.

When I look back at all the journeys I have had, both alone and with company, I feel grateful. Grateful to have traveled and more grateful to be a woman traveling. It is such an important aspect of life and learning just to be able to move freely and learn about the world. And one day, every girl and woman out there will just pick her bag, step out and start exploring every nook and corner of this world.





Travelling through Uma Manda

SHIMLA

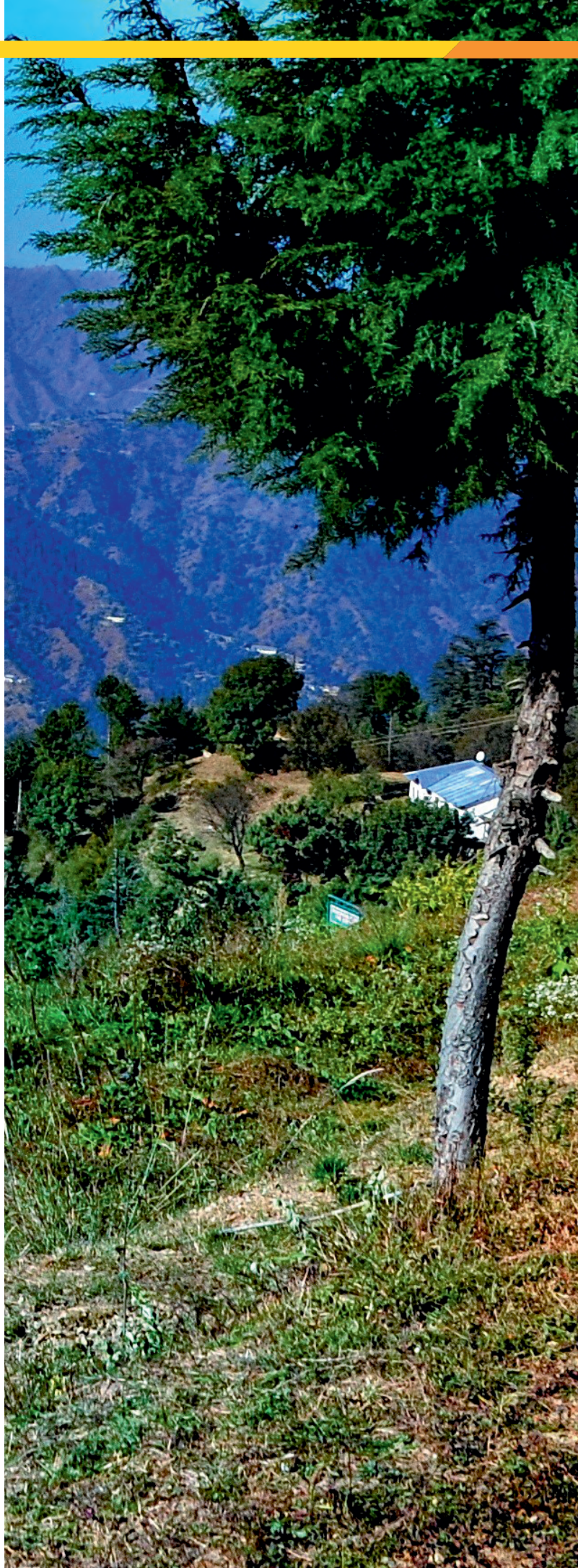
Explore Culture

The mesmerizing city of Shimla

The erstwhile summer capital of India, Shimla is arguably one of the most popular hill stations in India. It is not only home to natural beauty but also to many sacred shrines and temples. The city is bustling with visitors all of summer since it gets very cold in winters, hence making it very hard for tourists to stay there then. The most ideal time to visit the place is from March to July. Dotted with cafes and buildings dating back to the British colonial era, Shimla has transformed to suit the needs of the tourists. It is quite surprising to know it that the Pahadi food, which is typical in the Himalayas, are nowhere to be found in Shimla. A picturesque city, Shimla is the right place for photographers, trekkers, backpackers and nature lovers. It is budget-friendly and anyone can have an affordable vacation here.

Way back in the 1700s, Shimla was mostly all woods and trees. The only dwellers there were a temple and a few huts here and there. This small place was called Shimla, after the Hindu goddess, Shyamala Devi. The British took this land according to the Sugauli Treaty after Bhimsen Thapa of Nepal who ruled before they came. In the early 1860s, John Lawrence, the then Viceroy of India, shifted the summer capital of British India to Shimla so as to be able to put up with the hot summers in India. Post the formation of the state of Himachal Pradesh in 1971, Shimla became a part of it and was declared as the state capital.

In Himachal Pradesh, life is a long festival. Every month, there is something new that is being celebrated about. And each community has something to be celebrate. Along with the rest of the country, Himachal Pradesh also celebrates Baisakhi, Holi, Shivratri, Dussehra and Christmas but apart from this, there are many fests endemic to this state. The Buddhist festival of Losar is celebrated in Lahaul. It is full of dances and has many costumes to mark the victory of good over evil. Summer festivals and fairs are held in places like Shimla and Kangra Valley so as to commemorate the beginning of the prosperous time. There are around 20 state-level fairs (Naina Devi fair, Lavi fair, Renuka fair, Chitpurni fair, Chrewal fair and Nalwari fair being a few of them) that take place in Himachal Pradesh and are recognised by the state government.





How to get there

Shimla has an airport but there aren't many planes flying to the city. So, the best option would be landing in Chandigarh and then traveling to Shimla by a bus. The highway connecting Shimla to Chandigarh is very good and it takes only three and a half hours to reach the destination. If one plans to travel by rail, the nearest railway station is in Kalka. It is about 90 kilometers from Shimla and one would have to take the toy train up the mountain in order to reach Shimla. Also, the Himalayan Toy Train is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is one such thing that must be experienced. From Delhi, it would take about 8 hours by road.

Places to see around

Shimla has a myriad of attractions that tourists are sure to love. Ranging from natural attractions to vibrant bazaars (markets) and from exquisite cafes to tranquil temples, Shimla has got it all. The following are the most famous among them and must be on your bucket list:

- Natural attractions: Himalayan Bird Park, Chanshal pass Green valley, Jakhoo hill, Tattapani and Chadwick falls and Shimla Reserve Forest Sanctuary are a few of the many natural beauties in and around the city.
- Temples: Mansa Devi temple, Tara Devi temple, Kali Bari temple, Sankat Mochan Hanuman temple, Hatu Mata temple, Bhimkali temple, Laxminarayan temple and Jakhoo temple are the most popular temples situated in Shimla.
- Markets: Mall road, Lakkar bazaar, Tibetan market, Himachal Emporium and Lower Bazaar. The most famous souvenir to be bought in Shimla are hats, woolen items, jewelry, wooden items and handicrafts.
- Heritage attractions: Shimla was a favorite destination of the British. They built many buildings that are now known for their architecture. Viceregal lodge (also Rashtrapati Niwas), Gorton Castle, Shimla Heritage Museum and the Church on the Mall road are the heritage buildings in Shimla that have a pinch of British influence and are sure to be a feast to the eyes.



Local food

Due to the huge influx of tourists at all points of a year, Shimla offers a wide range of food options. It has all kinds of cuisines one can see in India. The most famous items that one can find in Shimla are thukpa, madra, siddu and babru. Thukpa is a stew or soup combined with noodles. Madra is a curry made of curd, kidney beans black eyed beans and chickpeas. Siddu is a different kind of bread, though made out of wheat flour. Finally, babru is almost like a poori except for it that it is stuffed. The Aunty's, Bihari Lal Sharma Stall, Gol Gappa Wala, Kewal Ka Dhabba, and Silver Oak are some the most famous restaurants and dhabas in all of Shimla. Himachal Pradesh is called The Fruit Basket of India and Shimla, too, has many fruits like apples, grapes, mangoes, cherries and plums.

Things to do

Shimla is a heaven to adventure lovers and there is plenty of activities that one can indulge in. Ice skating, trekking, hiking, river rafting and paragliding are some of the most popular activities among tourists. Also, there are lush green forests wherein one can go trekking. There are many waterfalls that give a great experience too. Some of the offbeat activities that you might want to try are:

- River rafting from Chhabba to Tattapani
- Riding the toy train
- Historical walk at Kuthar fort
- Golfing at Naldehra
- Skiing in Kufri
- Paragliding near Kangra valley
- Skating at the only natural ice-skating rink in all of India
- Visiting Chadwick waterfalls (Chidku Jhaar)
- Camping Chirgaon, Shoghi or Sandasu
- Visiting the Shimla Ridge
- Be mesmerized by the sunset at Scandal point
- Cycling to Catchment Wildlife Sanctuary
- Visiting Kiala forest
- Picnicking in Hassan valley

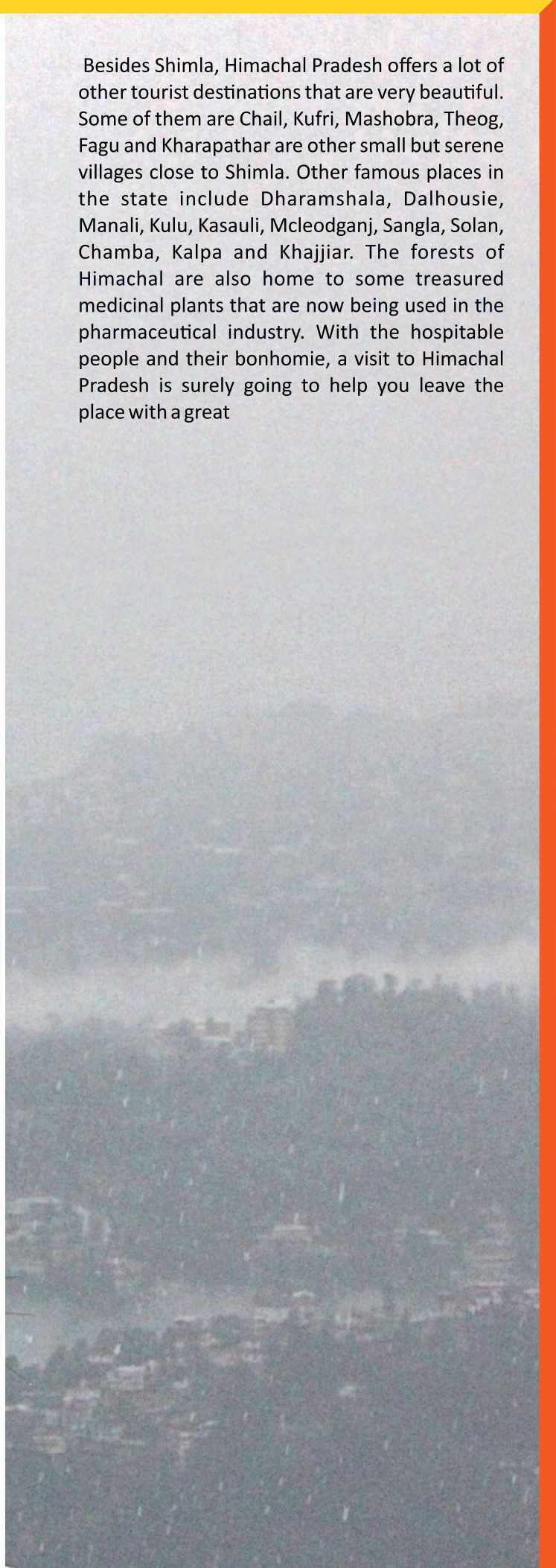
Where to stay?

To experience an eco-friendly homestay in a luxurious Himachali farmhouse, Meena Bagh Ratnari is the perfect place to be in. Meena Bagh Ratnari is an Apple Orchard Bungalow which is located in the quaint town of Bagi. Though away from the hustle-bustle of the city, it is very close to the main city of Shimla and would ideally take around 15 minutes from the bungalow to the city. It is an elegant villa in the midst of apple trees and provides all the facilities that one would ever want while on a trip. The serenity all around is jaw dropping and the view from the terrace is beyond words. There are many vogueish amenities such as a private bathroom, free Wi-Fi all around, BBQ, laundry service, continental breakfast and a library. Also, pets are allowed in the premises. There are bicycles that are provided for rent. The rooms are very clean and is very ideal for a vacation. For people that miss homemade food, there are shared kitchens wherein food may be cooked.

The villa has four rooms and is huge enough to accommodate a decent number of friends. It has place for two people in each room while 7 others can be lodged with the sofa beds. For someone that loves animals, the farmhouse also has dogs, chickens, sheep and other farm animals to play with. There are binoculars provided here so as to facilitate birdwatchers for a wonderful experience. A guided walk along the River Girir Ganga is also provided. The experience of the cold breeze outdoors coupled with the warmth of the fireplace is very memorable. Though the villa is more than a hundred kilometers away from the Shimla airport, there are shuttle services provided so as to make one's journey comfortable. There also is parking facility available here.

The town of Narkanda, which is nearby, is a wonderful place to do some shopping at. There also is Hatu peak (which is the second largest peak in Shimla) nearby that is ideal for trekking and can satisfy the hunger for some adventure while providing magnificent views of the city below. The village market of Bagi is just a kilometer away from Meena Bagh Ratnari and has wonderful souvenir to take back home. It is a great place to have a stroll while being surrounded by crowds. A hike by self to Jaw-bagh is also a must try here.

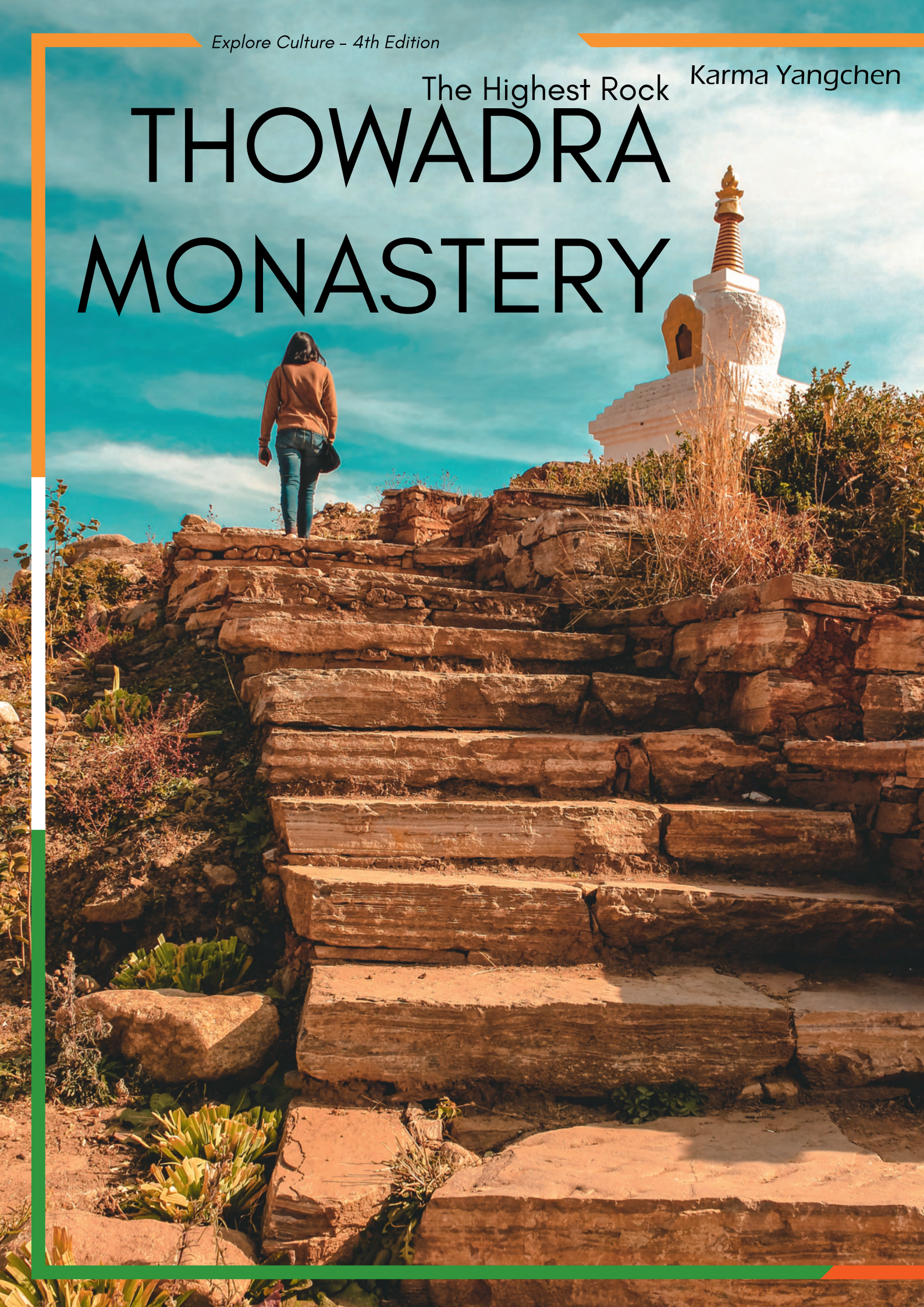
Besides Shimla, Himachal Pradesh offers a lot of other tourist destinations that are very beautiful. Some of them are Chail, Kufri, Mashobra, Theog, Fagu and Kharapathar are other small but serene villages close to Shimla. Other famous places in the state include Dharamshala, Dalhousie, Manali, Kulu, Kasauli, Mcleodganj, Sangla, Solan, Chamba, Kalpa and Khajjiar. The forests of Himachal are also home to some treasured medicinal plants that are now being used in the pharmaceutical industry. With the hospitable people and their bonhomie, a visit to Himachal Pradesh is surely going to help you leave the place with a great



Explore Culture - 4th Edition

The Highest Rock Karma Yangchen

THOWADRA MONASTERY



Thowadra monastery is one of the most sacred places in Bhutan. The monastery is like a mini Tiger's Nest located on top of Tang Valley in Bumthang Dzongkhag with an altitude of 3400 metres above the sea level. It is a three hours uphill walk from Ugyencholing. Its history dates back two to three thousand years ago in a small cave where a noted nun Gelongma Pelmo, daughter of the Kashmir King Triten Gyalpo, plagued with leprosy, meditated and achieved enlightenment. The place was then consecrated as a supreme sacred place. Later, the site was blessed by Guru Padmasambhava, who came to meditate during 8th century and subdued the vicious demons and rakshasas (srin po). Thowadra is widely known as one of the four great cliffs, the sacred place of Guru Padmasambhava, where he left his body print and footprints as a foundation of faith for future generations.

The present monastery was built by Lam Sherab Jungney, the first Choedrak lam under the patronage of first Trongsa poenlop (governor) Chogyal Minjur Tenpa in the 16th century. It is built of struck earth walls and spiritual paintings on wooden frames decorate the walls, thus reflecting traditional Bhutanese architectures. Attractive carvings and lively colors adorn the wooden inner components of the Lhakhang. Since the completion of construction, the monastery has had an influx of visitors of both Kagyu and Nyingma schools. It still remains a religious hub for both residents in the region and meditators. It is also home to the current lam Pema Sherab Dorji who manages the place.

Highlights:

Thowadra monastery serves as an important place to the visitors from various place and specifically the villagers of Tang. The relics of Guru Rinpoche and Gelongma Pelmo are preserved in the monastery. It is believed that an individual can attain liberation by viewing them. The place is blessed with many sacred sites. One can get to drink the holy water blessed by Guru Rinpoche and Gelongma Pelmo which comes out of a rock. Visitors can also take a look at boulders believed to be Dakini's bath and Guru Rinpoche's throne. The cave where Guru and Gelongma Pelmo meditated is also still intact.

Various rituals are held every year. Nyungne (fasting and praying) is organized on the first month of the Bhutanese calendar in memory of Gelongma Pelmo. Recitation of religious text containing one hundred thousand verses is conducted on the second month of Bhutanese calendar.

Zhingdrup (ritual to Amitabha) is conducted for 5 days on the fourth month of the Bhutanese calendar, and Ganachakra feast gathering (Tsogkhor) is witnessed on the tenth day of the fifth month. This is followed by Drupchen, a traditional form of meditation retreat which is conducted on the seventh month of the Bhutanese calendar. It is led by a renowned Rinpoche and is considered to be a very powerful practice to act as a remedy to the harmful forces and to bring peace in the world. Peoples from various places attend Drupchen and is believed that the merit of attending Drupchen is equal to the merit accumulated as a result of seven years of solitary meditation retreat.

Anyone lucky enough to visit Thowadra monastery will find plenty to see and do. The scenic beauty of this place is beyond description. The breathtaking view of the Tang Valley and the landscape can be admired along the way to the monastery. One can enjoy the panoramic views of the snow-capped mountain peaks in winter while views of the green glade and multi coloured rhododendrons paint the chirpine forest in spring. Purple and amber-red coloured leaves of autumn from Thowadrak pepper the landscape and a variety of bird species and butterflies can be spotted as you walk along the pine leaves-carpeted track which can tempt any photographer in the world. Thowadrak is highly recommended as a sacred and blessed pilgrimage site and is a perfect place for backpackers and mountaineers who are hungry for adventure.

