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FLIGHTS OF FANCY

The sky is one of my favourite things to look at when I’m travelling to a new place. Every destination has a different canopy by day and at night, and I often carry that image with me when I leave. When I’m home, lying in bed, I can close my eyes and picture the dark grey rain-heavy skies over the Western Ghats in the monsoon just as easily as I can remember the magical azure of Ladakh’s vast celestial vault. It’s similarly impossible for me to forget the glow of the Milky Way and star-studded night sky of the high Himalayas or the incredibly wide red-tinted skies of the American Southwest.

But lately I’ve had the opportunity on my travels to view a place from the opposite side: to take off into the sky and look back on land. Instead of craning my neck to look upward, I’ve had a chance to view places top down, the way the birds do.

In February this year, on my first-ever hot-air balloon ride in Luxor, Egypt, I was spellbound by the perspective it offered. We started out under pre-dawn darkness, but as the glow of sunlight spread across the land below us, the beauty of the Egyptian landscape became even more apparent. There we were, gliding in slow motion over acres and acres of verdant green farmland, floating past sand coloured houses on the Nile’s west bank. Drifting over cotton fields, looking at the river in the distance and the contours of the Valley of the Kings on one side, added a whole new dimension to my travel experience. When the pilot pointed out Queen Hatshepsut’s temple, I leaned over the edge of the basket. Looking straight down at rice fields fringed by date palms, I thought I heard the din of the gas burner, the shrill pitch of a child’s voice calling out to a playmate in a small square backyard below.

It made me think of another kind of flight I had a few years ago, when I went tandem paragliding at Pawna Lake near Mumbai. After the first surge of fear subsided, I relaxed. Soon a gentle wind had us soaring over farmland, the distance turning us into mere spectators of life on the ground. At one point I saw a stubborn bull being coaxed to pull his plough. Soon after we were low enough to spot a group of ravens sitting on a pile of hay.

Looking at the world and life from the sky can add an extra dimension to any place. Last month I had the chance to view the Irish coast and the islands of Skellig Michael (of Star Wars fame) from the window seat of a helicopter. It was that rare day in Ireland when the skies were blue with not a cloud in the sky, and the sun shining bright.

I’ve mostly seen places on the coast and looking out to sea. On coastal drives, scenic lookout points offer fantastic views. But when that view is flipped, it is a captivating sight.

Flying past sea cliffs and lighthouses we admired the endless North Atlantic Ocean. From the air, the steep conical peaks of the two Skellig islands, the stunning coast of Ireland’s Iveragh Peninsula, the 70,000-strong population of gannets, all became even more breathtaking. As we winged our way along the rugged coastline, I watched sunlight glint off the waters, and sometimes even spotted a bird flying below us, nothing more than a tiny speck.

These airborne experiences were completely unlike seeing the world from an oval window of a pressurised cabin on a commercial flight. They allowed me to experience life above the surface of the Earth with the wind in my face, sharing what is normally the exclusive domain of birds, allowing me to feel something of what it might be like to fly.

I discovered that just as I love looking up at the sky, I love the perspective of looking down from the sky. There are no bad views from the sky. From the point of view of a bird everything is lovely, the Earth is gorgeous and photogenic from every angle. Each of my three airborne experiences felt like peaceful, almost meditative voyages. The vantage point from up above seemed to free the spirit, and on each occasion, as we lifted on a dreamlike cruise, most thoughts drifted out of my head, replaced by restful calm. In the sky for those few minutes it appears there are no lines, no borders, I am not in another country or place, I am merely a small cog in the machinery of a beautiful planet.

NILOUFER VENKATRAMAN
BEST OF THE WEB

The Hostel Crowd
From Varkala to Varanasi, there’s a new breed of hostels in India and they’re nothing like the dingy dorm rooms of yesteryears. With quirky wall art, Wi-Fi, and cosy accommodation, these budget stays are both cheap and cheery.
See Getaways>Hotels.

NOTEWORTHY BEACH
Noticed the beach and coconut trees on the back of our ₹20 note? Turns out it’s a real place, at least according to locals in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. See Trip Ideas>Beaches

MUMBAI GETAWAYS
Quiet beaches, rambling forts, and wildlife sanctuaries—we’ve rounded up a long list of trip ideas for a quick, rejuvenating break from Mumbai. See Getaways>Inspire Me!

RAINY DAY SECRETS
The pavements of Boston are covered with invisible poetry that shows only when it rains. Its a public art project that puts local poets in the spotlight. See Trip Ideas>Cities

LETTER OF THE MONTH
Fleeting Beauty
In May 2016, I undertook the three-day Gangotri-Gaumukh Trek in Uttarakhand with five friends. We drove about 280 kilometres from my home in Rishikesh to the Gangotri glacier, and then trekked for about 16 kilometres over two days to reach Gaumukh. It is here that the River Bhagirathi, a tributary of the River Ganga, originates. Along the way, I spotted blue sheep, and kept my eyes peeled for the elusive snow leopard. I have never experienced such serenity before, and still remember how the magical sky captivated me at night. But seeing the glacier was a bittersweet experience: It was beautiful, but has receded significantly. This trek made me want to visit similar places in the country before they disappear. —Shekhar Rawat

THE FIND
Star Attraction
Last August, as I stood in the shop of The Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, Canada, I was torn between whether I should buy the figurine of Frida Kahlo or scowling Vincent van Gogh. Then, I came across this large mug painted with The Starry Night, one of van Gogh’s most memorable paintings. It was the first artwork that truly stirred me when I was in college. Now, every time I look at my mug, I am transported to that obsessive van Gogh phase I experienced a decade ago—when I hungrily read everything I could find about his tumultuous life and art. —Associate Editor, Kareena Gianani

Old Quarter hostel, Panjim

En route to Gaumukh, Uttarakhand.

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Moment in the Sun

I’d arrived at my hotel in Luxor after dinner and while I knew my room at the Steigenberger Nile Palace faced the Nile, I couldn’t see very much under darkness. My bed faced the large windows and a balcony, so I slept with the curtains thrown open. When I awoke, I could see an orange glow in the distance. Curious, I hurried out to my balcony and there it was: The River Nile shimmering in the morning sun and beyond it, on the west bank, the rocky Theban Hills and the Valley of the Kings. The top of the hills was encased in a red glow and some of that reflected in the water. Suddenly, I noticed a speck in the sky, and then another—hot air balloons! It was a fabulous sight to wake up to—the legendary River Nile and the Valley of Kings lit in an otherworldly glow. In that moment I felt cynicism and the dark side of the world didn’t exist, and only the beauty before me mattered. And the next day, which also happened to be my birthday, I went up in one of those balloons for the first time in my life, soaring over this wondrous landscape. —Editor-in-Chief, Niloufer Venkatraman

INSTAGRAM OF THE MONTH

Bridge the Gap

Wildlife photographer Dhritiman Mukherjee took this photograph of a precarious contraption that locals use for their daily commute between the mountain villages of Kibber and Chicham in the Spiti Valley of Himachal Pradesh. Locally called “jhula pul,” this hand-pulled device resembles a cradle strapped to a zip line. Sometimes, up to seven people hop on, to be ferried along the 190-foot-long line, with food, daily supplies, or even possibly a television set in tow. The views are spectacular, but this is hardly child’s play—it is hundreds of feet to the bottom.

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PICTURE POSTCARD

La Isla Bonita

A few years ago, a dear friend moved to Costa Rica for a year, to study environmental security and climate change in a little town called Ciudad Colón, just outside the capital San José. Through her emails and messages, I pieced together a vivid, jigsaw puzzle-image of the Central American country: plates of gallo pinto (rice and beans), toucans outside the window, and lots of music and dance. In my head, everybody cumbia-d everywhere, which is just what makes this souvenir she sent me so wonderful. What’s better than a postcard of a dancing mermaid shimmying under a palm tree? One that has a recipe for Costa Rican ceviche scrawled on the back. —Web Editor, Neha Sumitran
If it weren’t for an SOS call from my sister who lives in Singapore, I wouldn’t have ended up on a two-week visit to the city-state. On arrival, Changi airport greeted me with briskness and efficiency: quick smiles, speedy security checks, formalities completed in a jiffy. Landing in Singapore felt like meeting a bright-eyed, impeccably suited business associate.

However, as I explored central Singapore and the shopping district of Orchard Road, I began to yearn for everyday stories. I wondered where the lives of locals played out amid glass buildings gobbling up slices of sky. I passed endless malls selling uncountable wares, and neighbourhoods so perfect that they seemed Photoshopped. Condos lined squeaky-clean streets filled with men and women who made elegance look effortless.

How—and where—could I get under the skin of a country that doesn’t appear to have a hair out of place? When I travel, I hope the place I’m visiting will shed its layers, and help me slough off some of mine too. I like to plunge headlong into foreign lands and connect with all my senses. But it is easier said than done. Places, like people, don’t always slip their arm into mine the first time we meet. There are language barriers to be navigated, and creases of cultural differences to be respected and accommodated. Striking up conversations with locals usually thaws any initial disorientation I have in a new city, but Singapore’s perfection daunted me.

I first caught a glimpse of the other Singapore when I visited BooksActually, an independent bookstore. It is located in the Tiong Bahru neighbourhood, where spiral staircases rise up the backs of art deco buildings, and laughter spills from trendy stores wedged between hipster cafés. BooksActually promotes local literature and nurtures local poets and writers. I picked up *Making Love with Scrabble Tiles*, a collection of poetry by local poet Joshua Ip. Within its pages I discovered modern-day love stories peppered with Chinese myths, the quirks of Singlish, and a first date spent eating crab delicacies at a local chain. His description of *tow huay*, a pudding-like soybean dessert, led me to uncover it at a stall near Little India. Perched on a plastic chair, I heaped my spoon with sweet, trembling beancurd and savoured Singapore’s soft, warm side.

One evening, on the MRT train from Marina Bay Sands to Toa Payoh, I looked at the sea of bowed heads, eyes locked onto smartphones. I was reminded of a piece I had read that week in *Poskod*, a popular Singaporean e-zine. Its editor, Amanda Lee Koe, recounted her observations on the MRT, of stations missed and people watched. “With these iPads, we can’t see what anyone is reading. How will people fall in love on the train?” she rued. With these lines in my head, even Singapore’s efficient, punctual transport system became a thing of curiosity and amusement.

It was Koe’s essay on Singapore’s red-light district that made me visit the Geylang neighbourhood. Its rows of old Chinese shophouses in the colours of a birthday cake, and brothels with neon signs abutting Buddhist temples aren’t featured on tourist itineraries, but I thought it lovely. Sitting in a traditional *kopitiam*, or coffee house, I watched a wizened man pour coffee from a brass container with a long spout and strain it through a cloth sock. I felt I was being allowed to peek into a side of Singapore now disappearing.

From watching *7 Letters*, a film comprising seven shorts directed by some of Singapore’s best directors like Eric Khoo and Jack Neo, I gained greater understanding of how multi-ethnic Singaporeans shape their identities. Urban alienation, immigrant angst, and other realities of their life that one doesn’t usually think about while strolling in its malls, unravelled on the screen. One film depicting how a young Singaporean Chinese boy bonds with his elderly Malay neighbour over *kueh*, a green-and-white steamed coconut sweet, was particularly striking. Towards the end of my trip, when I picked up kueh at a shop, the memory of the film and the dish lingered long after its flavour left my palate.

With the help of local literature and films, Singapore had slowly opened up to me like a set of Chinese boxes: never revealing its secrets all at once, making me probe deeper to get to its heart. Perhaps this is why, while some other travel memories seem fleeting, or shapeshift with time, I find that my Singapore impressions are only more burnished.

Voices | CREW CUT

Kareena Gianani is Associate Editor at National Geographic Traveller India. She loves stumbling upon hole-in-the-wall bookshops, old towns, and odd souvenirs in all shapes and sizes.
Time After Time

REVISITING A PLACE AFTER DECADES UNLOCKS A PERSONAL TIME MACHINE

When I cross Galway’s narrow Eglinton Canal, a sense of familiarity kicks in: The small bridge, the way the streets intersect, a glimpse of the River Corrib beyond the mishmash of shops and pubs along Raven Terrace. Twenty-five years after the first time I visited the damp west coast of Ireland, the paint on the buildings seems brighter, the businesses more prosperous, and the greenery better kept. But the streetscape itself, the smell of sea air, the light—it all feels right and like a part of me. And there’s the public telephone (rare these days, vital back then) that I used to call home on a whim. As a student backpacker, I had dared the expense of a long-distance call home to Canada just to say hi, and was told that my maternal grandfather had died the night before. It was an emotional moment, but not the sort one can capture with a photo. Still, standing beside the phone a quarter century later, looking across the canal, that painful conversation suddenly comes back to me like a recent memory.

The past, wrote British novelist L. P. Hartley, is a foreign country. But a foreign country also contains the past. The physical environment of our daily life changes routinely right before our eyes. For a while, a local restaurant is where we argued with a friend, then it’s the best sushi on the street, and then where we celebrated our birthday. The constant, gradual flux can smooth out our memories into eras rather than moments. But memories tied to places we visit—with our hearts and eyes open wide—nestle deep in our psyche, uncorrupted until we set foot in those places again. Then they spring open like an overpacked suitcase and the intervening years can melt away. Revisiting past destinations can be the closest thing we have to a personal time machine.

Returning to Kochi on India’s Malabar Coast after a 19-year intermission, I wanted to recreate a particular moment I had had, eating a pastry and listening to a mixed tape on my Walkman during a stroll down the main drag. It took me more than an hour to realize that not only had the bakery disappeared—or was impossible to locate—but that Shanmugham Road, which must have been that main street I recalled, had been transformed. It was wider, and built up with large-scale commercial and residential buildings, a wall against the backwaters and the Arabian Sea beyond. In its details, it was unrecognizable. Still, with an ice cream and an MP3 player as modern substitutes, I faced south on Shanmugham to where it turns into the much more pastoral Park Avenue. I could smell the sea amidst all the bus fumes and felt how the city radiated out from this spot. The present, not the past magic of the historic trading port, was now in charge and yet I knew I could find my way to the train station or the hotel I had stayed at in the 1990s by sheer instinct.

I first visited Berlin two years after the wall came down, when the wound between west and east was still very painful. Amidst all the brownfields, demolition, desolate Soviet-era buildings and the parts of the wall that had not yet been torn down, it was hard to get my bearings and I kept finding myself all alone in what felt like the middle of nowhere. The west had pretended the wall didn’t exist; the east had turned its ugliest face toward it. I was fresh out of university, completely naïve about geopolitics, and all I really wanted was to hang out with some of the more glamorous folks staying at my youth hostel. On my second visit to Berlin, 24 years later, I took a Ringbahn train to the Kreuzberg bar named Madonna after the biblical figure, not the singer, where I had shared pints with a half-dozen of my hostel buddies one festive night. Without Google Maps, this would have been an impossible feat. As a young backpacker, I had been too caught up in our conversations to make note of where we had gone or how we got there. I couldn’t even remember how long it had taken, just the name.

But once I entered the bar, my feelings were so sharp, it might as well have been my second home. The current version of Madonna perfectly matched the images in my brain: The smoke-stained walls, the worn tables and chairs, the cluttered bar, the religious mural on the ceiling, the purposefully grungy crowd. Sitting at the bar, I looked over at the table where we world travellers had talked all night. Three friends, regulars perhaps, were drinking beer. Maybe they knew what an illustrious spot they occupied. Maybe they didn’t. But I knew, and hoped they were creating as fond memories as I had two decades before.

Paul Gallant is a Toronto-based freelancer who writes about travel, business, and social issues for a variety of publications. He can’t help returning to the places that have transformed him.
Dancing with Rio

NOT EVERY VISITOR TO BRAZIL’S METROPOLIS WILL GET THE GOLD, BUT THEY’LL STILL FIND A CITY READY TO WELCOME THEM WITH OPEN ARMS

BY JULIANA BARBASSA

Framed by the oval of the airplane window, Rio de Janeiro seemed ethereal, a bright patch hovering between the vast blues of ocean and sky, weightless under the sun. I smiled. A trick of light and perspective reduced this very real city to what it was to me: a daydream, a figment, something so insubstantial, it looked as if it would float away if not for the great granite peaks pinning it down.

I was born in Brazil, but left the country as a child. For decades, I had clung to this gossamer image of water, warmth, colour, and light, and called it home. Now it was 2010, and I was moving back, a news correspondent tasked with covering Rio as it prepared for the World Cup and the Olympics. Although, or maybe because, I’d lived or worked in more than a dozen cities in nearly as many countries, I also brought with me a powerful yearning to connect with the only place that had remained a constant in my life.

The city I found was a lot more complicated than the picture I’d carried in my mind. A metropolis with more than six million people and its share of problems, Rio comes crashing in through your senses all at once: its beauty, its absurdities, its extremes. The international airport is on an island, the largest one...
Residents of the Madureira neighborhood, home to two of Rio’s samba schools, rehearse their samba dance in preparation for Carnaval.
You can see my city best from the many granite peaks that break up its urban landscape. Some of the most accessible ones are Sugarloaf, with its cable cars, and Corcovado, topped by the renowned art deco statue of “Christ the Redeemer.” But don’t miss a hike up to the less explored viewpoints such as Pedra da Gávea and Dois Irmãos.

Locals know to skip the crush of Copacabana or Ipanema Beach on a hot summer Sunday and instead check out cooler and less crowded parks, such as Jardim Botânico or Parque Lage.

The foods that best represent my city are bolinhos de bacalhau (codfish croquettes) and crispy, deep-fried pastéis stuffed with meat, cheese, or shrimp. Sample them at the Mercado São José.

The Escadaria Selarón, or Selarón Staircase, is a colourful city landmark crafted with over 2,000 tiles from 60 nations as a tribute to the Brazilian people by Rio-based Chilean artist, Jorge Selarón.

boundaries blur in their own time. No one else was in a hurry: Women walked slowly, hips swaying in a movement that included as much sideways swing as forward momentum. Getting a coffee could be a 15-minute ritual, if you included the obligatory chat with the barista. On park benches, bus stops, in the middle of a crowded sidewalk, couples kissed at leisure, their bodies zippered together by interlocking limbs, oblivious to crowds parting around them. I took note, eased my steps, sunk in.

As months turned to years, Rio offered up its simple pleasures: the deep-fried crunch of bolinhos de bacalhau (codfish croquettes) shared with friends outside Bar Urca; the chants of vendors at the Glória fruit and vegetable market on Sundays; a long, lazy picnic in the dappled shade of centenary trees at the Jardim Botânico, waiting for the occasional toucan or the tiny marmosets that hang in the branches above, ready to swoop down for an unguarded piece of fruit.

Before I knew it, I had a favourite juice stand—you have to find your own—and favourite juices: pineapple and mint, or orange juice and collard greens. For the best acai in town, served thick, creamy, and without sugar, I belled up to Tacacá do Norte, in Flamengo. On rainy afternoons, I took in the free art exhibits at the Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, or whatever was on display at Gávea’s carefully curated Instituto Moreira Salles: posters from revolutionary Russia, ancient maps, turn-of-the-century photography. When I was feeling especially decadent, my boyfriend and I headed to the Bar dos Descasados, set in the garden of a boutique hotel in the bohemian Santa Teresa quarter. We lounged on daybeds, looking out over the city and sipping fusion caipirinhas made with Brazil’s favourite firewater, cachaça, macerated with lychee and basil or passion fruit and pepper.

Rio sets its own pace, and has its own priorities. You learn to love it when you give in to the city, and stop expecting the city to adjust to you.

Juliana Barbassa

WHERE THE LOCALS GO

—Juliana Barbassa
Shillong was a quiet place when I was growing up, with only a few tourists from Kolkata making their way up to it during summer. The cherry blossoms of autumn and the bright sun and juicy oranges of winter were reserved for residents. People walked everywhere, in every season. In the evening, neighbours played various sports together, and during festivals, friends from all sorts of backgrounds gathered to share food. Buckets of rainwater cleansed the town during the monsoon.

Since then, Meghalaya’s capital has become a popular destination, with travellers coming here to hike to the living root bridges, to see Mawlynnong, Asia’s cleanest village, and to immerse themselves in the quintessential hill station experience. Much has changed, yet the familiar sights, sounds, tastes, and smells of the Shillong I grew up in are still recognisable to me, if often missed by travellers. Here are some quintessential Shillong experiences that always fill me with nostalgia.

AROUND TOWN
Shillong offers picture-perfect views of dramatic skies above green valleys and hills. One of the most captivating sights is Dainthlen Falls, a 262-foot-tall waterfall about 55 kilometres south of the city centre. A steel bridge next to the falls affords a great view over the gushing stream. However, most people walk up to the falls along the rocky riverbanks.

The monoliths of Nartiang are also well worth the two-hour journey from the East Khasi Hills to the West Jaintia Hills. Approximately 65 kilometres east of Shillong, these rocks date to A.D. 1500 and were supposedly erected by U Mar Phalyngki, lieutenant to the Jaintia king. The stones are believed to be a way to remember the Jaintia kings and their reign. Though the monoliths are casually scattered around Nartiang’s houses and fields, there is one main cluster which has a large number. There are two types of monoliths: the vertical

ATLAS
Shillong, Meghalaya
Visit the museum at Don Bosco Centre of Indigenous Cultures to get under the skin of the Northeast. The seven-storeyed structure holds exhibits on food, music, languages, art, and history.
menhirs locally considered “male” and called Maw Shynrang; and the horizontal “female” dolmens, or Maw Kynthai. The tallest is about 26 feet high. On a warm summer afternoon, the light filtering through the trees and the shadows cast by the stones are a lovely, restful sight.

A quiet place within the city is the Cathedral of Mary Help of Christians, more casually known as Shillong Cathedral. Located on the road between Dhankheti and Laitumkhrah, the cathedral has an imposing blue facade set with stained-glass windows. Inside, it is peaceful and welcoming and whenever I’m there, I soak in the quietude, and silence assumes a whole new form.

In the outskirts of the city, the groves of tall, evergreen trees of Upper Shillong constantly draw the eye. Drive through these forests towards Shillong Peak for a rewarding panoramic view of the city. Or take the turn leading to the Air Force Museum and 5th Mile to explore the woods further. This wide road can be busy, as it also leads to the popular Elephant Falls.

**JAMMIN’ OVER A CUPPA**

Music is important to Shillong, and house parties and bonfire evenings usually involve impromptu jam sessions. There aren’t too many gigs in public spaces, but one place I do recommend is Café Shillong, my favourite among the city’s coffee shops. Located opposite Akashi Book Depot, the first-floor café has a nondescript entrance. It’s furnished with comfortable couches, perfect for a group of friends sitting down for a chat, and has live gigs on Sundays. Even musician Lou Majaw, known as “Shillong’s Dylan” counts it among his favourites. Don’t miss their velvety hot chocolate.

The smell of coffee pervades the air around Don Bosco Square, or Laimu—short for Laitumkhrah—the city’s café hub, where Swish Café is one of the oldest. It is a trendy spot with comfy books, couches, and free Wi-Fi, and is said to have introduced the “café culture” in Shillong decades ago.

**TASTE TRAILS**

Shillong’s omnipresent aloo wallas—purveyors of aloo muri, the town’s most iconic snack—are the gods of its streets. Easily identifiable by their painted wooden stands, they mix boiled potato with puffed rice and raw cabbage, then sprinkle it with powdered spices, salt, mustard oil, and tamarind water. There are many variations, including one popular derivative that’s served with a thick yellow potato gravy garnished with finely chopped onion, peanuts, and bhujia, or crispy fried gram flour. Everyone has their favourite stand, near schools, tourist sights, the All India Radio station at Hopkinson Road, or at Don Bosco Square; and their own quirks in terms of customisation. Momos filled with shredded cabbage and pork are
another Shillong favourite and these delicious Tibetan dumplings are just as easy to find. Police Bazaar, colloquially called PB, has some traditional momo eateries, but **Laimu** is the main place for these steaming morsels. There are sit-down restaurants, such as **The Wok**, near the Fire Brigade, that have consistently been popular for momos, but I look forward to the joy of gulping them down at the small, temporary momo stands along Laitumkhrah Main Road.

Nothing beats a brown paper bag of hot, sticky, spiral jalebis eaten in the cool air of the hills. The 83-year-old **Delhi Mistan Bhandar** in PB makes the best jalebis in Shillong, fried up right next to its steps by a man who looks as if he’s been there, hovering over the hot oil, from the first day the store opened. **Palace** restaurant nearby is equally famous for its spicy samosas and tea. Try to bag one of the two most sought-after tables overlooking PB’s main intersection, and watch the world go by while you savour your snack.

For heartier fare, stop by **Jadoh** at Laimu Point for a **Khasi meal**, including the restaurant’s namesake, a very popular local delicacy made of red rice and pig’s blood. For a special treat, head to **Royal Heritage Tripura Castle**, nestled in the quiet Cleve Colony neighbourhood. As a child, I remember being smitten by its wooden decor. The heritage hotel is adjacent to the summer palace of Tripura’s Manikya dynasty, the former royals. Its restaurant, **The Rice Court**, has a first floor beautifully decorated with wood, and serves up delicious Chinese meals as well as local Khasi food.

**WALK THIS WAY**

Exploring Shillong inevitably means stretching one’s legs. The steep climb up **Jacob’s Ladder**, which connects St. Anthony’s College to Don Bosco Square in Laitumkhrah, was once pedestrian-only, but one-way traffic is now permitted. Start your walk downhill from the steps of All India Radio, towards the Guru Singh Sabha **gurudwara** and St. Anthony’s College. The incline from here is sharp, but the walk up through the crowds of college students is worth the effort. Reward yourself with a snack at the cafés of Don Bosco Square.

It’s also worth rising early to take the scenic roundabout route on Camel Back Road, from All India Radio to **Ward’s Lake**, which is a much-visited tourist site. The two-kilometre walk takes only about 30 minutes, is amazingly green and scented with pine. Morning is the best time to witness the glistening lake as the slopes around it lose their charm as the tourist taxis begin queuing up.

If your shopping muscles need some flexing, look no further than **Glory’s Plaza**—or GP, as it’s called by fashion-forward locals—a multi-storey shopping complex in Police Bazaar. GP’s plethora of quirky shops carry everything from Tibetan goods to Goth and Rasta style clothing. The dinginess of the building can be off-putting, but if your haggling skills are sharp, you can get away with some choice steals. This is probably where I was introduced to many fashion trends.

**lewduh**, or Bara Bazaar, is the loud, buzzing heart of the city. The wholesale market teems with people, negotiating deals over food and meat products, traditional garments, and local tools like daos, knives, and betel nut cutters, among other things. It is believed that everything is available in this space, if you have the time to scour each stall. This is prime people-watching territory, and also offers great photo opportunities. Complete your retail therapy by sunset or latest by an hour beyond. Shillong winds up early.
A Matter of Taste

TASTING AND SMELLING THE SCIENCE OF FOOD BY NEHA SUMITRAN

“Would a crisp, salty, fried potato chip be as satisfactory if it didn’t make a sound when eaten?” I found myself contemplating this question in front of an exhibit of a human brain. The display, one of many at the Alimentarium food museum in Vevey, deconstructs the senses we employ when we put something in our mouths. Taste is only one of them. We also eat with our eyes, nose, fingers, and on occasion, our ears. In addition to sensory inputs, I learned that my taste for certain foods (juicy Alphonso mangoes) over others (karela juice), is a product of evolution. To early man, who largely foraged for food, bitterness was a signal that a plant might be toxic. So in a way, my dislike for bitter gourd, however inventively my mother cooked it, is embedded in my genetic coding. I couldn’t wait to tell her.

At the Alimentarium everything is a matter of taste. The museum is dedicated to food: where it comes from, how we cook, eat, and digest it, and our attitudes towards it. Outside the two-storey building, there are rows of neatly labelled edible plants. Some, like the heads of lettuce and cauliflower, I could recognise. Others, like carrot and beetroot, I didn’t know at all. It made me realise how little I knew about the fruits and veggies that were regulars at my dinner table.

Inside, the museum has a large selection of exhibits that give food historic, scientific, and pop-cultural contexts. A display charts our species’ evolving relationship with food, from early man who hunted and foraged for his supper, to the junk food generation. I lingered at the section that explained the science of taste, drawn to its interactive installations. At one station, visitors pop coloured pills and answer a touch-screen quiz about the flavours they taste. At another, I sniffed various scents and tried to discern which foods they were.

Though many Alimentarium exhibits may look like they are for children, they offer rich food for thought even for adults. One pyramid-shaped exhibit demonstrated how our consumption patterns have changed over time. We are now eating more rice, bread, meat, and year-round produce, and less fruits, veggies, and seasonal food. It drove home the point that our hunger for global foods has raced ahead, leaving traditional, habitat-happy food behind, with worrying repercussions for the planet.

On another floor, I found a large wooden table in a handsome room with wood-panelled walls and staggering views of Lake Geneva. But not a food exhibit in sight. A plaque offered an explanation: This room—and the entire Alimentarium building—once housed the offices of Nestlé. The multinational food company was born in Vevey. The Swiss town was also where milk chocolate and Nescafé were created.

My favourite section in the museum was dedicated to traditional kitchen equipment from around the world. Little notes explained each instrument and told visitors about the community that created them. There were intricately carved wooden spoons, delicately painted ceramic jugs and bowls, cane implements used to winnow rice, granite mortars and pestles, and brass grinders. In the centre of this kitchen of my dreams were two large platforms where the museum occasionally conducts cooking classes. Unfortunately, there wasn’t one on the day I visited, so I made my way to the greenhouse-café instead, settled by a table near a cacao plant, and ordered a steaming mug of hot chocolate.

The Alimentarium is in Vevey, a 15-min walk from the railway station (www.alimentarium.ch; open Tues-Sun: 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Apr-Sep and 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Oct-Mar; adults CHF13/¥900, visitors between 7-16 CHF4/¥278).
HERE’S THE KEY TO YOUR ROOM

In the age of magnetic cards, hotel keys are an endangered species. Here’s a pick of some unique ones from around the world, proving hotels haven’t completely closed the door on this travel tradition.

1. Deep in the heart of Alpine in Texas, the Old West–style Maverick Inn has key fobs shaped after the map of this southern state (themaverickinn.com). 2. Zanzibar’s Diamonds Star of the East, off the coast of Tanzania, features 11 villas along the Indian Ocean. Keys are attached to a little East African figurine (staroftheeast.diamondsresorts.com). 3. A renovated Victorian manor in Worcestershire, England, Brockencote Hall keeps it old-school—its iron key chains are forged by a local blacksmith (www.brockencotehall.com). 4. The Lake Kivu Serena Hotel in Gisenyi, Rwanda, pays a carved tribute to the simian mascot (www.serenahotels.com). 5. The river that supplies Castello di Vicarello’s pebble key fobs flows right by the Tuscan castle turned hotel, located at the fringes of a vineyard in Italy (www.castellodivicarello.eu). 6. Fogo Island Inn, one of the National Geographic Unique Lodges of the World, offers sea views and sweet dreams on Canada’s Atlantic coast. The key fobs designed by Dutch artist Chris Kabel are based on objects found all around this island (fogoislandinn.ca).

—By Hannah Sheinberg
Free as a Bird

CELEBRATING CAMBODIA'S SAFE HAVEN FOR ENDANGERED BIRDS BY ADRIENNE JORDAN

The local villagers along Cambodia’s Sangke River who once stole eggs from the nests of endangered birds now protect those same species. February 2016 marked the 15th anniversary of the creation of Prek Toal bird sanctuary, located in the northwest part of the river in Battambang province, in northwestern Cambodia. The Prek Toal area is populated by a distinctive community of floating homes, schools, and general stores, and also happens to be the most important breeding ground in Southeast Asia for globally endangered waterbirds like the greater adjutant, masked finfoot, and spot-billed pelican.

Until its fall in 1979, the Cambodian communist regime, the Khmer Rouge, controlled the Prek Toal region and severe poaching of bird eggs for food began when villagers returned. However, the number of birds in Prek Toal has increased dramatically thanks to conservationists who’ve trained former egg thieves to report sightings of poaching in exchange for community development incentives like money for fish farming and restaurant development. Over the past 15 years, the spot-billed pelican population has grown from 200 to 1,000 birds, and the greater adjutant from 20 to 300 birds. During Prek Toal’s dry season, December through May, birdwatchers from all over the world can take guided boat tours through the sanctuary and witness an abundant avian diversity worth saving.

Protected birds flock together in Cambodia’s Prek Toal sanctuary.
In July 2016, UNESCO recognised the world heritage value of three more sites in India: the ancient Buddhist ruins of Nalanda University in Bihar, the Capitol Complex in Chandigarh, and the biodiversity-rich Khangchendzonga (Kanchenjunga) National Park in Sikkim.

This takes the tally of India’s UNESCO World Heritage Sites to 35, which includes 27 cultural sites, seven natural sites, and one mixed site of both natural and cultural value.

NALANDA MAHAVIHARA, BIHAR
Just 84 kilometres from Bodh Gaya is the Archaeological Site of Nalanda Mahavihara (Nalanda University). This ancient seat of learning is recognized as the oldest university on the Indian subcontinent. The archaeological site’s stupas, shrines, and viharas date between the 3rd century B.C. and 13th century A.D., when it was a thriving Buddhist monastery and scholastic centre. The UNESCO website says Nalanda was “engaged in the organized transmission of knowledge over an uninterrupted period of 800 years.” Today, its stone sculptures and stucco art give 21st-century travellers glimpses of an era long gone, and impart lessons of peace, compassion, and tolerance.

Getting there Nalanda excavation site is 84 km/1.5 hr northwest of Bodh Gaya, and 90 km/2 hr southwest of Patna, the nearest airport.

CAPITOL COMPLEX, CHANDIGARH
Geometric and modernist, the Capitol Complex in Chandigarh embodies the architectural style of French architect, Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris, better known as Le Corbusier. The complex is one of 17 structures included in a trans-continental UNESCO site celebrating the architect’s work. Other buildings included are in Argentina, Belgium, France, Germany, Japan, and Switzerland.

Le Corbusier’s connection with India is well documented. Following the Partition, the master architect was enlisted to design the city of Chandigarh as Punjab’s new capital in the 1950s. In addition to designing streets and avenues, he also drew up plans for the Capitol Complex, which is spread over 100 acres and houses the Punjab and Haryana High Court, the Legislative Assembly, and the Open Hand monument, a symbolic structure that is the emblem of the Government of Chandigarh and a

Nalanda is believed to have accommodated about 10,000 students at a time. Visitors can see hostels, teaching platforms, and even bookshelves among the ruins.
recurring theme in Le Corbusier’s work. **Getting there** The Capitol Complex is 40 min/17 km by road from Chandigarh International Airport. Chandigarh Tourism organises a walk in the complex that requires prior registration online (chandigarhtourism.gov.in).

**KANGCHENDZONGA NATIONAL PARK, SIKKIM**

Rich in biodiversity, and spiritually potent for communities in the region, Khangchendzonga National Park fulfils UNESCO’s criteria for both natural and cultural heritage. It is the first site in India to be awarded the status of a mixed World Heritage Site. This Himalayan national park covers 1,784 square kilometres, about a quarter of Sikkim’s geographical area, and is crowned by Mount Khangchendzonga or Kanchenjunga, the planet’s third-highest mountain peak. Its varied ecosystems, from lush forests to rocky mountains, high-altitude lakes, and glaciers are inhabited by endangered species like the snow leopard, Tibetan sheep, musk deer, and blood pheasant. Khangchendzonga is also revered by Buddhists and tied to numerous local legends and rituals. **Getting there** The park is located in northwest Sikkim. The most popular entry point is Yuksom (123 km/5 hr west of Gangtok). Bagdogra in West Bengal’s Darjeeling district is the nearest airport (155 km/5.5 hr south of Yuksom) and New Jalpaiguri is the closest railhead (150 km/5.5 hr south of Yuksom). Park details at www.knpsikkim.in.●
The smallest species of mammal found in India (and also in the world) is the Etruscan Pygmy Shrew *Suncus etruscus*, about the size of a human thumb and weighing only 1.8 gm,” writes conservationist and ornithologist Asad R. Rahmani in *Magical Biodiversity of India*. Wildlife photographer Dhritiman Mukherjee and Rahmani take readers on a stunning visual journey through 15 Indian landscapes. In this book, little creatures are given as much importance as the big stars of the jungle. From lush rainforests and arid deserts to pristine coral reefs and the snow-clad Himalayas, India is a microcosm of the world, home to nearly all the major habitat types. This diversity is charted through Mukherjee’s spectacular photographs and informative insights about creatures big and small, from the fierce big cat to the humble worm. The book explores a land teeming with life where even the simple lichen on a rock is a thing of great beauty.

There are 12 kinds of lionfish—also called zebrafish because of its stripes—each one bright and bizarre, and possessing deadly poison. The conspicuous colours tell potential predators to keep away. This red lionfish was photographed in the Andaman Sea.
The slimy-looking but harmless Himalayan newt (top), also known as salamander, is an amphibian usually found in natural pools and lakes in the mountainous regions of Nepal, India, Bhutan, and surrounding nations; One of India’s most successful wildlife breeding programmes started in the 1970s and helped arrest the rapid decline of the gharial and marsh crocodile, but illegal fishing and pollution have endangered them again (bottom left); The slender-billed vulture is the rarest vulture in the world, found in a narrow belt in the sub-Himalaya from Uttarakhand through Nepal to Arunachal Pradesh (bottom right).
More than half of India’s population of sarus cranes (top) is found in the wetlands of Uttar Pradesh. Despite the onslaught on their habitat worldwide, the loud trumpeting calls of sarus crane pairs are still common here; A whopping 111 of the 154 new species of frogs described in India between 2000 and 2015, are from the Western Ghats. One of the fascinating frog species found in this biodiverse region is the Malabar gliding frog (left). When threatened, it jumps from one tree to another or on the ground, the webs on its fingers helping it cruise through the air; The tiger (bottom) is India’s best known wildlife advocate; exceptionally regal and photogenic, it draws thousands of visitors to national parks each year.
Buy Time, the Cookies are Free
PAY BY THE HOUR AT ST. PETERSBURG’S TRENDY ANTI-CAFÉS

By Prathap Nair

It was a chilly August evening in St. Petersburg, when I pushed open the metal doors and walked into Miracle café. After strolling alongside the Neva River and exploring St. Petersburg’s monuments, I wanted a space where I could sit at leisure and make notes, without condescending looks from waiters or spending a bomb on substandard cappuccinos. My couchsurfing host Alexandr had suggested I visit one of Russia’s anti-cafés. These are social spaces that charge by the hour and not for what is consumed. I was promised a comfortable atmosphere, soft music, and board and video games. Moreover, visitors can drink as many cups of tea and coffee as they want, accompanied by cakes and cookies. Hourly prices are nominal and grow progressively cheaper the longer one stays there.

As a budget traveller, this fit perfectly with my agenda. After exploring the city, I could sit reading for hours, or perhaps meet interesting people, while paying under RUB180/¥184 per hour. Inside Miracle café, however, I found much more. Leather-bound Russian classics lined the bookshelves and the muted green and mustard-yellow upholstery was offset by beadwork cushions. An exposed brick wall featured a Native American wall hanging. The sound of guitar riffs and singing from the French club next door wafted in every time someone walked in.

An art club lecture on avant-garde art and music was in progress, and a grainy clip of American composer John Cage’s piece “Water Walk” was playing. Engrossed, a group of young Russians watched the avant-garde artist create a composition with a bathtub, a water
A bespectacled, middle-aged man with long hair smiled at me, signalling that I should join his group. Though he conducted the informal lecture in Russian, it still felt strangely inclusive to me.

Favoured by cash-strapped students and artists in need of a workspace, Miracle café is one of over 30 such establishments in the city. The concept was born in Moscow in 2011, when the city's commercial establishments were becoming too expensive for freelancers and artists, and gentrification was driving out old businesses. The first anti-café started out in an alleyway in central Moscow, when a group of poetry enthusiasts rented an apartment where people could collaborate. They placed a suitcase near the entrance to promote voluntary donations to run the space. Eventually, Russian businessman Ivan Mitin, who was part of the original group, popularised the concept with his chain of Moscow anti-cafés called Ziferblat or “clock face” where guests are considered “micro-tenants” of the space they use. After spreading to other Russian cities, Ziferblat now has branches in Manchester, Liverpool, London, Prague, and Ljubljana.

St. Petersburg’s anti-cafés straddle the thin line between commercial and community establishments, and some are funded by donations from large-hearted philanthropists. Each has its own identity and patrons. Freedom café, for example, is dramatically different from the cosy Miracle. It has a grand staircase leading up to its entrance and outside it stands an oversized wooden armchair with geometric upholstery. I considered diving into that chair but restrained myself, unsure of proper etiquette. Inside, the well-lit corridors lined with beautiful art deco posters opened to different rooms. There was a pool room, a reading room, rooms for watching television and playing video games, and a café serving unlimited cookies and coffee. I watched a green-haired girl glued to her colouring book, her legs hanging off the sofa’s armrest. At another table, two bearded men sat discussing what looked like a manuscript, flailing their pens in the air, perhaps arguing plot points.

While Miracle nurtures art, Freedom seems to lean towards cultivating creativity. Both of them provide space for people to just be. I did not feel rushed, the waiters were friendly, and I felt no guilt for using hours of Wi-Fi after having ordered only one thing. My time at Miracle also left a lasting impact on me; I was inspired to delve into an aspect of the city’s thriving underground cultural scene that I discovered at these anti-cafés. When I left St. Petersburg, I looked up the artists I had heard about at the lecture, turning what could have been a hazy reminder of an afternoon at a coffee shop into an inspirational memory.

**ST. PETERSBURG ANTI-CAFÉ DIRECTORY**

**Miracle café** Moshkov per. 4, at the corner of Dvortsovaya nab. 20; +7-812-5701314; open Mon-Thu noon to 1 a.m., Fri-Sat noon-8 a.m.; RUB150/157 per hour.

**Freedom café** Nevsky Prospekt 88; +7-812-5795763; open Mon-Thu noon to midnight, Fri-Sat noon to 6 a.m., Sunday noon to 2 a.m.; RUB120/122 per hour.

**Ziferblat** 81 Nevsky Prospekt; +7-960-2856946; open Sun-Thu 11 a.m.-midnight, Fri-Sat 11 a.m.-7 p.m.; RUB180/184 per hour.

**12 rooms** Bolshaya Morskaya d. 19, 2nd floor; +7-812-9237096; open weekdays noon to midnight, weekends noon to 7 a.m.; RUB120/122 per hour.

**Daisy Smoke** Mayakovskogo ul. 27; +7-999-2006719; open daily 4 p.m.-6 a.m.; RUB300/315 per hour.

(Rates at most anti-cafés decrease after the first hour.)
IN FOCUS

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Time travelling through Jerusalem’s many cities

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Thirteen palaces are testaments to a regal past

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Enlightening encounters amid the parched desert
A dream destination
The Western Wall is one of the holiest places for Jews. Visitors write their prayers on little notes and place them between the cracks in the wall.

Facing page: Seen on signs and tourist memorabilia, the original Madaba map from Jordan is the oldest map of Jerusalem dating back to the sixth century A.D.
Invisible Cities

TIME TRAVELLING THROUGH THE MANY CITIES OF JERUSALEM

By Diya Kohli
Jerusalem

is like an archaeological layer cake. The modern 21st-century city is built atop many cities that existed here in different centuries. I see these cities in the catacomb-like labyrinth that extends under Jerusalem. I see them in the sacred Western Wall where thousands come to pray. I see them in the narrow lanes, where stopping suddenly creates a gridlock. Two hooded Roman Catholic monks jostle past me; they could easily be extras from a medieval crime thriller. A little girl stares raptly at a stall with an array of wide-eyed dolls on display. An old lady flashes a toothy grin from behind a mountain of dates, her full set of pearly whites belying her years. I try to absorb the sights and sounds around me even as I am coaxed and cajoled into entering every shop I pass.
Facing page: Jerusalem is the holy land for Christians, Muslims, and Jews and has sites sacred to all three faiths; A Palestinian Arab offers pilgrims and tourists rides on his donkey atop the Mount of Olives, believed to be where Jesus entered Jerusalem.
I'm used to the frenzied pace of Mumbai and yet, as I stroll around old Jerusalem, I feel overwhelmed. Its alleys are seemingly unchanged since ancient times when prophets walked here spreading divine messages and kings built imposing citadels. Even today, these streets throw with a peculiar energy.

My reverie is interrupted by a shopkeeper singing "Ichak dana bichak dana." I pinch myself to make sure this is real. The heart of Jerusalem—one of the most coveted and disputed bits of land in the world—is the last place that I expect to be serenaded by a Bollywood classic. I realise it's just another attempt to lure me into a store.

This is the city about which writer and historian Simon Montefiore wrote: “Jerusalem is the house of the one God, the capital of two peoples, the temple of three religions and she is the only city to exist twice—in heaven and on earth.” Jerusalem finds mention in the Bible (Old Testament), the New Testament, and the Koran. It is one of the oldest continuously settled cities in the world as well as a theatre of great violence through time. Walking around, I realise that Jerusalem might be a single dot on the map, but in reality it is an assemblage of cities past and present, above and below, real and invisible.

City of Kaleidoscopes

According to the Old Testament, the history of Jerusalem began in this tiny corner of the world, otherwise known as the Old City. Oddly enough, all my visual cues for the city so far are from the 2013 action horror film World War Z, where it is depicted as the last safehold against an apocalyptic zombie outbreak. The city I encounter ends up being equally thrilling, it feels like being inside a kaleidoscope. My senses explode with the constantly changing whirl of colours, smells, and sounds in the tiny cobblestone pathways. No matter which monument I keep as my central axis, the lanes spread around it in the same haphazard way, like the hundred arms of a giant octopus.

I enter through the 16th-century Dung Gate, closest to the Western Wall, and in a few hundred metres I am right inside a warren of markets, private homes, and profusion of historical monuments; 220 to be precise. The one square-kilometre of the walled city forms the centre of what we know as the Old City. It is divided into four parts, the Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Armenian Quarters, each with its own peculiarities. It is small enough to walk through aimlessly and map-free, discovering art galleries, archaeological sites, biblical references, and museums at unexpected turns.

In the lanes that make up the Via Dolorosa, the biblical path supposedly taken by Christ on the way to his crucifixion at Golgotha, there are as many camera-toting tourists, and cats rummaging in corners, as there are priests of all denominations. Stations along the path mark significant spots like the place where Jesus fell for the first time, and where a pious woman wiped his face. Today, this is a pilgrimage route as well as a place to see all kinds of self-proclaimed prophets and eccentrics.

Shops sell everything from dates to spice mixes with names that sound like music to my ears—zaatar, ras el hanout, mahlab. At kiosks, I get fresh falafel with the creamiest hummus, and pickled veggies in radioactive pinks and reds. Pita sandwiches are dexterously built with generous scrapings of chicken and lamb from the spit. Shop after shop sells a fascinating assortment of religious bric-a-brac featuring everything from miniature Jewish menorahs to colourful Islamic prayer rugs. The moment I dawdle, I’m deluged by sales pitches. One flirtatious shopkeeper leans out, praises my eyes, and then tries to sell me a giant shofar, a Jewish ceremonial
instrument made out of a ram’s horn. I make a quick exit into yet another lane.

City of the Bible

Negotiating the narrow alleys of the Old City through crowds of pilgrims and tourists, I nearly collide with two jolly looking old men, carrying a tottering stack of books. I pick up a book that falls out and return it to its owners. They smile and one asks, “India?” On learning that I speak English, he starts talking about his travels to the subcontinent and hands me a copy of a book, saying “Keep it. It will help you.” The brightly coloured book cover has no title. I flip it open and see that it is the New Testament. These are the first evangelists I have ever met: Grizzled octogenarians from Texas who’ve travelled halfway across the world with the singular purpose of spreading the word of their god.

As an erstwhile student of literature, I had always viewed the Old Testament as a magnificent epic and a literary reference point. However, in Jerusalem, the spiritual centre of the world, it seems like it truly belongs inside my knapsack with my map and brochures, a bonafide guidebook to this place.

This especially seems true when I visit the City of David, a place where every unearthed find corresponds with events and personages from the holy book, conflating myth and reality. Located outside the Old City’s southeastern gate, in the Palestinian neighbourhood of Wadi Hilweh, this is one of the most excavated places in the entire country. Coins, jewellery, and stone seals found here date back to approximately 1,000 B.C. reflecting the neighbourhood’s historic value. However, like many other sites in Jerusalem, discoveries by Israeli archaeologists at the city of David are often debated as they feed into the idea of Jewish nationhood and help establish historical claim to the land.

I see numerous ongoing digs at the site. In 2005, Israeli archaeologist Eilat Mazar discovered what was believed to be the palace of King David, resulting in a flurry of interest. Despite the many opinions about King David and his mythical or real palace, my tour through this ancient city is charged with excitement. Old rocks come to life as my guide reads from the Bible while taking me around, relating stories of erstwhile inhabitants like some modern-day prophet. I follow him up stairs cut into the side of the hill, down into ancient water tunnels, and out to observation points offering spectacular views over east Jerusalem’s historical spots. I see the imposing Jewish tombs cut into the very rock of the Kidron Valley. This necropolis, the most important burial site in Israel from the 1st millennium B.C., is right below the urban sprawl of Silwan. The living and the dead share the same hillside. Lithe cats skirt the parapets of flat-topped houses. Clothes hung out to dry flutter under the shadow of dish antennae. And below, ancient bones turn to dust in stark rock tombs. Across is the green speckled Mount of Olives believed to be closely associated with Jesus Christ and on its slope lies one of the most sacred Jewish cemeteries. As I take it all in, I can’t shake the feeling that I am walking right through pages of the Bible, one of the greatest stories ever told.

City of Stones

I begin to sense the difficulty in separating the cities of the past from present-day Jerusalem. For every step I take in the now, there is another me, wafting about like an apparition in the invisible cities that lie buried. All that remains of them are their stones. Up on Temple Mount, enshrined in the Dome of the Rock or Qubbat al-Sakhra, lies a single rock known as the Foundation Stone or the Al-Sakhra. It marks one of the
Colourful, chaotic souks sell a profusion of spice mixes, fine carpets, dry fruits, street foods, daily needs, as well as tourist memorabilia in the Muslim quarter of the Old City.
most significant religious sites for both Judaism and Islam. It is said to denote the exact spot where Abraham offered to sacrifice his son Isaac to God, as well as the place from where Mohammed rose to heaven on a divine steed.

In front of its magnificent gilded and blue mosaic exterior, a ginger cat sprawls out lazily. Another friendly tabby rubs against my guide Gaby's legs and jumps into her lap. I take a picture of them, and in the background capture a couple of stern-faced policemen, a permanent feature on this hilltop. In spite of them, this mosque built in the 7th century A.D. remains a selfie lover's dream backdrop.

A few streets down from the Temple Mount, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre encloses the most significant rocks in all Christendom. I see hundreds of pilgrims of all ages climb the steep stairs to see the Rock of Calvary below an ornate Greek Orthodox altar, believed to be the exact site of Jesus Christ's crucifixion. Serpentine lines form around the shrine over the rock tomb where, it is believed, Christ was buried and rose to heaven. The third stone is the large Anointing Stone where Christ's body was apparently prepared for burial. The air thrums with the collective prayers and religious fervour of hundreds of pilgrims. Like them, I too place my hands on the heavily perfumed stone slab and feel the cool surface, shiny with scented oils.

The next day, viewing the city's skyline from the top of Mount Scopus, a hill in northeastern Jerusalem, I encounter yet another type of stone—the monochromatic limestone that is the city's basic building block. At first glance this is not a conventionally beautiful city, and yet there is something riveting about it. It's a desert city, with uniform buildings clumped around spired churches, skinny cypresses, and clumps of pine trees. In the midst of it all, the imposing dome of the Qubbat al-Sakhra glitters in the morning sun. Further west lie newer neighbourhoods studded with ultra-modern towers. Everything is cast in the neutral palette of Jerusalem stone, cloaking the differences in age and time, of Jewish and Palestinian neighbourhoods, in an ageless garb.

City of Tunnels

An extensive subterranean network exists underneath Jerusalem's Old City, running along the length of the Western Wall. Down in this underground city, I leave 2016 far behind. It is a remarkable site with well-preserved halls and cisterns as well as explanatory exhibits and audio-video installations. The tunnels offer valuable insight into the history of the city and form a piece of the larger jigsaw of Jerusalem's ancient blueprint. No excavations are permitted in the Temple Mount area where the holy sites of the Western Wall, the Dome of the Rock, and Al Aqsa mosque are centred. This makes these tunnels even more important in terms of the historical perspective they provide.

Just as I start getting used to the slight dankness in the air, I get a strong whiff of perfume and fresh flowers. A small entourage jostles past me. It comprises a beautiful young girl in her bridal finery, her giggly bridesmaid carrying a wedding bouquet, and the bride's mother, who shepherds them along. This seems like an unlikely place for the trio, but the mystery is solved when I see them make their way to the Western Wall, which is the spot considered closest to where the Jewish Holy of Holies once existed. I follow them down the path, one ear tuned to my guide's narrative. The history of the tunnels is nearly as dark as the place. It carries the weight of three millennia of wars, destruction, and
bloodshed, and the intertwined histories of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The bride’s excited chatter echoes through the place and fills it with a momentary lightness.

City of Night

It is by serendipity that I find a friend from my college days in Jerusalem. A post-doctoral fellow in history at the Hebrew University, he has been living in the city for two years and has an interesting perspective on its goings on. He shows me Jerusalem by night. With a vague idea of the end destination, we set off on another Old City jaunt, splashing through puddles, past shops with half-closed shutters. This seems like a new city, different from the one I have seen so far by day. I am thrilled to discover my country’s longstanding connection with the city as my friend tells me about an 800-year-old Indian hospice, a one-time dwelling place for Sufi saint Baba Farid, and a place for Indian Muslims to stay on their way to a Mecca pilgrimage. Exiting Old Jerusalem through the arched Damascus Gate, I turn back for a final look. The mist curls around the yellow street lamps just inside the gate, bathing the place in an other-worldly glow. In my mind, this is what a time portal would look like. Walk through and poof...you are in another era.

We walk down rain-slicked Jaffa Street and into the modern city that has grown around Jerusalem’s ancient core. We pass dog walkers, kids practicing tricks on their bicycles, and folks under bobbing umbrellas. Our next destination is Downtown Jerusalem for its buzzing nightlife. Restaurants, cafés, movie theatres, and bars line the various squares of this 21st-century Jerusalem, trying to be a mirror to young and trendy Tel Aviv. It is post 9 p.m. but still far too early for this place to really get going. We wend our way from the main road to chic Aristobulus Street, known for its cool grungy bars and edgy graffiti. At 4:20, a local dive with oodles of character and easy camaraderie, I try arak, a sweetish aniseed liquor, and the Israeli lager, Maccabee. The night stretches into the wee hours lubricated with drink, easy banter with the friendly bartenders, and my companion’s propensity for obscure Hindi film songs. There are lone night crawlers tapping away at their smartphones and groups of friends discussing life and knocking back shots. In this very modern Jerusalem, the night belongs to the young and restless.

Jerusalem is much like a matryoshka doll. There are cities within cities and some of these are real while some exist only in stories. And sometimes, when the line between them blurs, everything from a miracle to an apocalypse seems possible.

There is a psychological phenomenon called the Jerusalem Syndrome. Before I visited I read of numerous instances of it but thought it absurd—a woman who thought she was giving birth to baby Jesus, a man who thought he was Samson and could rip the bricks out of the Western Wall, another who wanted his hotel to cook him a Last Supper. But now, having glimpsed these several cities for myself, I can begin to understand how the impossible can seem possible here. In this tally of cities, I too have added my own. And the Jerusalem that I have consigned to memory is this city of words, one that is perhaps as mythical as the real one.

Diya Kohli is Senior Associate Editor at National Geographic Traveller India. She loves the many stories of big cities. For her, the best kind of travel involves rambling walks with plenty of food stops along the way.
ORIENTATION
Jerusalem is to the west of the Palestinian territory of West Bank. Its political status is contentious with both Israelis and Palestinians staking claim on the city as their capital. Eastern Jerusalem is regarded as Palestinian territory by the international community while Western Jerusalem is the Jewish part. However, these boundaries are nebulous and change as per the latest negotiations between the two nations as well as Israeli occupation of certain zones. At the centre of Jerusalem lies the Old City, considered its spiritual heart. It is surrounded by a four-km-long wall with seven gates, 34 towers, and a citadel. It is divided into four quarters—Christian, Armenian, Jewish and Muslim—each with religious sites, shops, and private homes.

GETTING THERE AND AROUND
There are direct flights from Mumbai to Ben Gurion International Airport which is the closest airport to Jerusalem. To get from the airport to the city there is the Egged bus service (ILS21.50/₹372), licenced private taxis (about ILS280/ ₹4,850) as well as shared vans called sherut (ILS65/₹1,125). Night trips via taxis cost 25 per cent extra (9 p.m. to 5.30 a.m. daily; from 4 p.m. onwards on Fri and holiday eves). Within Jerusalem visitors can travel by bus, light rail, or metered taxis. The Old City is a car-free zone during the day, easily traversed on foot.

VISA
Indian travellers can download a form from www.israelvisa-india.com and submit it at an Israel Visa Application Centre in New Delhi, Mumbai, or Bengaluru. A passport valid for six months is required, along with listed documents. Processing time is 5-7 working days and costs ₹1,500 plus a service charge of ₹900.

NEED TO KNOW
• Israeli security protocol can be daunting and visitors are subject to detailed questioning and numerous checks.
• Visitors can request for their passports to not be stamped upon arrival in Israel. Instead, they can fill a form which is stamped on entry and exit. This is to prevent any potential problems travellers may have visiting countries that don’t have good political relations with Israel.
• Carry USD, the preferred currency to exchange for ILS (Israeli New Shekel) at a money changer.
• Shabbat is the Jewish day of rest which begins at sundown on Friday and ends at sunset on Saturday. As Jerusalem is a religious centre, Shabbat is observed fairly strictly in the Jewish parts of the city. Most Jewish businesses, shops, and restaurants are closed and buses and light trains do not operate. Only taxis ply. The city becomes quite traffic-free and conducive to exploration on foot.

SEASONS
Jerusalem has two main seasons—summer and winter with a few weeks of spring in April. Summers (June-Sep) are hot and dry with temperatures going up to 40°C. Winters (Dec-Mar) can get chilly with temperatures hovering around 0°C at night.
including the elimination of set of food restrictions apply flaky pastries to compensate. sorbets, baklavas, and other delicious milk substitutes, however there are plenty of restaurants don’t serve dairy- hotels eschew cold cuts. Most breakfast spreads in Jewish dairy and meat and most sausage while in Israel. any ham, bacon, or pork among Muslims. Don’t expect laws, which stipulate what can and cannot be eaten, are complex. Here are a few basics for visitors. Pork is non-kosher for Jews as well as a forbidden food among Muslims. Don’t expect any ham, bacon, or pork sausage while in Israel. It is non-kosher to mix dairy and meat and most breakfast spreads in Jewish hotels eschew cold cuts. Most restaurants don’t serve dairy-based desserts like ice creams. However there are plenty of delicious milk substitutes, sorbets, baklavas, and other flaky pastries to compensate. During Passover, a different set of food restrictions apply including the elimination of bread from the Jewish diet.

Food Facts
- When in Jerusalem, especially in the western side of the city, a lot of stuff on your plate will conform to Jewish dietary laws. The Jewish kosher laws, which stipulate what can and cannot be eaten, are complex. Here are a few basics for visitors.
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- During Passover, a different set of food restrictions apply including the elimination of bread from the Jewish diet.

Tower of Light
Aply named The Night Spectacular, the Tower of David’s sound-and-light show is an unmissable extravaganza. The display uses the historical structures as a backdrop for 3D projections and graphic reconstructions. Epic sound effects and light wizardry add to the spectacle recreating from antiquity to modern times (www.tod.org.il).

Lord of the Drinks
Tucked away in a lane, off the arterial Jaffa Street, lies the bustling family-run bar and restaurant, Barood. It has cheerful tables in the courtyard, a well-stocked bar, endless Guinness on tap, a daily-changing menu, and a relaxed vibe. Open late on Fridays and Saturdays, Barood hosts some of the best bands in the country (31 Jaffa St. Feingold Courtyard; +972-02-6259081).

Gates Galore
There are eight historical gates leading into Jerusalem’s Old City. The main entrance is through the Jaffa Gate built in the 16th century by Suleiman, the Ottoman sultan. Herod’s Gate leads into the Muslim quarter. The grandest of these, the Damascus Gate on the northwestern wall, leads into a bustling marketplace. The ancient Dung Gate was once used as the exit through which the city’s garbage and waste matter was carted out and is also the closest to the Western Wall. Lion’s Gate opens into the Via Dolorosa and has big cats on its crest. Golden Gate, also called the Gate of Mercy, is built into the wall of the Temple Mount. Sealed for centuries, this gate is supposed to open miraculously when the Messiah arrives. The 16th-century Zion Gate leads to the Jewish and Armenian quarters. New Gate is the eighth gate of the city which was built in the 19th century to allow Christian pilgrims easy access to their holy sites.

Bible Brainer
The Hebrew Bible is also known as the Tanakh, an acronym of the book’s three main sections—Torah, Nevi’im, and Khetuvim. The Tanakh overlaps with the Christian Old Testament with a few differences in categorization and arrangements of the different books. The Christian Bible also includes the New Testament which chronicles the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and the spread of early Christianity.

Hattitude
When walking around the city, several kinds of headgear can be seen. From the tiny knitted kippahs worn by modern orthodox Jews to black kippahs and fedora hats of the conservative Haredi Jews and the large furry caps known as the shteimel worn by married Jews of the ultra-conservative Hasidic group. Apart from ethnic and racial diversity, Jews are divided according to their approaches to Judaism and the headgear they sport. While not strictly headgear, the Jewish propensity for payot and long and fascinating side curls is another characteristic feature that varies from group to group.
Ceremonial meetings and gatherings were held in Mysuru Palace’s massive 155-foot-long Durbar Hall. It has marble floors, gilded arches, and stout columns, and contains a collection of French lamps and paintings by Indian artists including Raja Ravi Varma.
Palaces around India are varied and diverse. They range from the gigantic and stately to the modest and homely. Some have been turned into heritage hotels that draw the who’s who of the celebrity world, while others still serve as residences for descendants of erstwhile royal families. Still others have opened their doors to visitors so they can gawk in wonder at their opulence. But India’s palaces are more than architectural marvels. They abound in legends and ghost tales, boast rich collections of art and royal artefacts, and are living testaments to India’s regal past. Journey back in time through some of these royal heritage wonders with this photoessay.
**BANGALORE PALACE**

**BENGALURU, KARNATAKA**

**MEDIEVAL MIX** Inspired by Windsor Castle and Tudor architecture, the palace has turrets, fortified towers, gothic windows, and ivy-covered walls.

**CURIOS CURIOs** Rooms are predominantly yellow and contain artefacts ranging from stools with deer-hoof legs to blue, orange, and red chandeliers.

**ROCK ON** Famous bands and musicians like Aerosmith, Iron Maiden, Elton John, and David Guetta have had concerts on the palace grounds. There is also an amusement park here.

**PAST PRESENT** Descendants of the Wadiyar family, the erstwhile royals who own the palace, still live here. Visitors can explore some areas with audio guides (**open 10 a.m.-5.30 p.m.; entry ₹275**).

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**HAZARDUARI PALACE**

**MURSHIDABAD, WEST BENGAL**

**NAME GAME** The 19th-century palace gets its name from the 1,000 real and false doors, and vast corridors that were created to confuse an army in case of an attack.

**SIZE MATTERS** Big enough for an elephant with a howdah to pass through its gates, Hazarduari Palace resembles the Greek Parthenon. Thirty-seven stone steps, the lowermost of which is 108 feet wide, lead up to the door.

**TREASURE TROVE** With 20 galleries displaying over 1,000 antiquities, the Hazarduari Palace Museum is enormous (**open Sat-Thu; 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; entry ₹5**).
**CHOWMAHALLA PALACE**

HYDERABAD, TELANGANA

**INDO-PERSIAN** This 200-year-old structure built by the Nizams has plenty of cupolas and long, arched corridors.

**HOST WITH THE MOST** The Nizams didn’t live here; the palace was built in the mid-1800s to accommodate their guests.

**LIGHT UP** Nineteen stunning Belgian crystal chandeliers adorn the Durbar Hall or Khilwat Mubarak.

**MANPOWER** Nearly 1,000 attendants kept the palace running.

**ROYAL RIDES** Don’t miss the vintage Rolls Royce cars, including a rare yellow one. Some have barely travelled 500 kilometres in a century.

**VERSION 2.0** The palace was restored and opened to the public in 2005 (open Sat-Thu, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; entry ₹50). It’s a popular venue for weddings and events.
COOCH BEHAR PALACE
COOCH BEHAR, WEST BENGAL

RENAISSANCE TOUCH Inspired by the Italian Renaissance style of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, this 1887 palace is an unusual sight in the Bengal countryside.

ROOM APLENTY Some of the 50 rooms and halls form the seven galleries of a museum showcasing memorabilia (open Sat-Thurs; 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; entry ₹5).

CRADLE OF BEAUTY Maharani Gayatri Devi, considered among the world’s most beautiful women, belonged to the Koch royal family and grew up here.

UJJAYANTA PALACE
AGARTALA, TRIPURA

WHITE MAGIC The Manikya dynasty kings of the princely state of Tripura built this marble palace in 1901. Its 800 acres include vast lawns and Rajbari Lake.

FOREIGN HAND Artisans from China crafted the ceiling of the Chinese room. Don’t miss the Durbar Hall, Throne Room, Library, and Reception Hall.

FINER PURSUITS Used as the Tripura Legislative Building until 2011, it is now the Tripura State Museum showcasing the region’s history, art, and culture (open 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Tue-Sun; entry ₹10).

WHAT’S IN A NAME The palace is said to have been named by Rabindranath Tagore, a frequent visitor to Tripura.

UMAID BHAWAN
JODHPUR, RAJASTHAN

RECORD BREAKER Umaid Bhawan is the world’s sixth largest private residence. Descendants of Umaid Singh, the Maharaja of Jodhpur, still live here.

EPIC TASK Over 5,000 workers took 16 years to build the sandstone palace.

RICH & FAMOUS Taj Hotels runs a super luxury hotel here that has hosted international celebrities like Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie, Bill Gates, and Madonna (tajhotels.com; doubles from ₹35,000).

ROYAL TURN A museum showcases the life of royalty. It also has a collection of strange and beautiful clocks (open daily 9 a.m.-5 p.m.; entry ₹15).
LUKSHMI VILAS PALACE
BARODA, GUJARAT

MELTING POT Built by Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III in 1860, this structure is a beautiful blend of Mughal domes with Jain temple-like canopies and intricate jharokhas.

ROYAL RESIDENCE The palace continues to be the residence of the Gaekwads, but a significant portion is open to visitors (open Tue-Sun, 9.30 a.m.-5 p.m.; entry ₹225, including audio guide).

INNER LIVES Inside the brick and red sandstone facade, Lukshmi Vilas flaunts grand staircases with Italian sculptures, ornate chandeliers, and European artwork.

Cynosure With its Venetian mosaic floor and Belgian stained-glass windows, the Durbar Hall is a sight to behold. Nearby are fountains in an arched courtyard.

STATE OF THE ART Located in the palace grounds, the Maharaja Fateh Singh Museum holds a breathtaking collection of Raja Ravi Varma paintings and Sayajirao’s collection of European art (open Tue-Sun; 10 a.m.-5 p.m., entry ₹80, audio guide ₹30).

TEE OFF A golf course on the grounds was originally built in the 1930s. It was renovated later and opened to public (www.barodagolf.in).

ROYAL PALACE
THANJAVUR, TAMIL NADU

HOME GROUND Locally known as Aranmanai, the 16th-century Royal Palace was built in part by the Thanjavur Nayaks and partly by the Maratha dynasty that ruled Thanjavur after them. The Maratha descendants still reside in a section of the palace.

GRAND INTERIORS Though not very large, the palace is an odd mix of ruin and renovation. Not to be missed is the Durbar Hall, with its bold colours: Pillars painted in oranges, blues, yellows, and reds, and intricately carved arches and ceilings.

FOR ART’S SAKE Over 200 twelfth-century sculptures and Chola bronze idols are displayed in the palace’s Art Gallery (open daily 9 a.m.-1 p.m., 3-6 p.m.).

PAPER TRAIL Saraswati Mahal Library has well-preserved ancient palm leaf manuscripts and Maratha king Serfoji II’s personal collection of treatises, ranging from ancient atlases and maps to works on Ayurvedic medicine and Chinese torture (open daily 10 a.m.-5.30 p.m.; entry ₹50).

QUIET REPOSE The six-storey tower called Madamalagai was built by the Nayaks as the king’s private prayer hall.
AMAR MAHAL PALACE
JAMMU, JAMMU AND KASHMIR

FRENCH INFLUENCE This 19th-century red sandstone palace was built by a French architect in the style of a royal chateau, for the Dogra king Raja Amar Singh.

GOOD AS GOLD Its star attraction is a gigantic golden throne weighing 120 kg.

FINE STROKES Converted into a museum in 1975, the palace has an impressive collection of modern Indian art and a library with over 25,000 antique books (open 10 a.m.-12 p.m., 3-7 p.m. Tue-Sun; entry ₹5).

FROZEN IN TIME The erstwhile queen’s room is preserved just the way it was in its glory days.

BIRD’S-EYE VIEW Located on the bank of the River Tawi, this palace-museum offers magnificent views of the Shivalik Hills.
**JAHINGIR MAHAL**
**ORCHHA, MADHYA PRADESH**

**OCHRE GLORY** Considered Orchha’s finest, this three-storeyed sandstone palace was built in the 17th century by Bundela king Bir Singh Deo to honour Mughal emperor Jahangir (open dawn to dusk; entry ₹10).

**FIRST IMPRESSIONS** Stone elephants holding bells in their trunks flank the palace’s ornate gateway.

**WALL ART** The outer walls are decorated with lapis lazuli and turquoise tiles, while the insides are covered in carvings.

**SPACE CASE** The square palace is built around a central courtyard with 132 chambers on different storeys, and nearly as many rooms underground as well. Some rooms form a small museum with exhibits.

**STANDING UNITED** Hindu and Islamic sensibilities seamlessly unite across Jahangir Mahal’s pavilions, chhatris (domed cenotaphs), murals, and carvings.

**GRACEFUL TOUCH** Eight domed pavilions have apartments beneath them. The domes and cupolas give the palace an ambience of royalty.

**PRIME SPOT** The palace is located on the bank of the Betwa River, with views of the surrounding farmland and thickets. Visitors can learn the palace’s history through a sound-and-light show in the evening.

**THE ROYAL LIFE** Book a room at Sheesh Mahal, a section of Jahangir Palace that is a heritage hotel (mptourism.com; doubles from ₹2,590).

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**PUTHENMALIKA PALACE**
**THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, KERALA**

**MANE MATTERS** Also known as the horse palace, this 18th-century mansion built by the Travancore king Swathi Thirunal is named after the many horses carved into the eaves.

**STYLE FILE** Traditional Kerala-style architecture is seen in the sloping roofs, pillars, and intricate wood carvings.

**SOUND OF MUSIC** A special stage inside Puthenmalika Palace hosts the annual Swathi Sangeethotsavam, a ten-day festival of music celebrating Swathi Thirunal’s compositions. Stars of Hindustani and Carnatic classical music have performed here.

**MUSEUM CALL** The palace museum displays artefacts ranging from hunting gear to art. One of the works is a portrait of a maharaja painted by Russian painter Svetoslav Roerich (open Tue-Sun 8.30 a.m.-1 p.m., 3-5.30 p.m.; entry ₹10).
**MYSURU PALACE**
**MYSURU, KARNATAKA**

**CITY OF PALACES** Mysuru has seven palaces, but this one, located in the Old Fort and seat of the Wadiyars, is the most famous.

**ROSE TINT** Built in 1912, the three-storeyed palace has pink marble domes, a 145-foot-high tower, and a distinctive seven-arched facade (open 10 a.m.-5.30 p.m. daily; entry ₹40).

**FAN FARE** There’s a grand procession with decked-up elephants and floats during Dussehra celebrations each year.

**ARMCHAIR TRAVEL** Can’t make it to Mysuru? The official website has a Virtual Tour section with 360° panoramas (www.mysorepalace.gov.in).

**IN A NEW LIGHT** On Sundays and public holidays, the palace is lit up for 30 minutes from 7-7.30 p.m.

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**PADAM PALACE**
**RAMPUR, HIMACHAL PRADESH**

**CALM OASIS** Padam Palace is next to the bus station in the middle of bustling Rampur, in Shimla District.

**VIP CONNECTION** The 1925 palace belongs to Chief Minister Virbhadra Singh of the erstwhile royal family of Bushahr, a princely state during the Raj.

**SET IN STONE** The two-storey building has high stone arches on the ground floor, carved wooden screens on the first floor, and distinctive turrets on the roof.

**ROYAL CHECK IN** Live regally at the adjoining, smaller and older, Nau Nabh (nine queens) palace, renovated into a heritage hotel (www.hotelnaunabh.com; doubles from ₹3,500).

—By Diya Kohli, Kareena Gianani, Neha Dara, and Rumela Basu
Leap of FAITH

ENLIGHTENING ENCOUNTERS IN THE PARCHED DESERT OF JORDAN

BY NEHA SUMITRAN
Al-Khazna is lit by candles for Petra by Night. The hour-long show uses music and storytelling to introduce travellers to the ancient sandstone city.
Petra shimmers like an apparition. Before me, and the hundred others sitting cross-legged on mats on this cold Jordanian night, the ancient city glows by the light of a thousand candles. The Al-Khazna, the most iconic of its structures, towers over us, and above its sandstone columns rugged cliffs loom, casting brooding shadows that flicker with every whisper of the desert wind. Sitting here, beneath this atlas of stars with the sand in our hair and the murmurs of the wadi in our ears, the stories of djinns seem more credible than the rationale of men.

Petra has many stories. The sandstone city, over 2,000 years old, abounds with myths of queens, crusaders, and blood-thirsty deities, of bounty hunters convinced that its tombs still hold ingots of gold. The UNESCO World Heritage Site lends itself to such mystique. The only way to reach it is to walk through a narrow, two-kilometre-long chasm in the rock called Al-Siq. Sandstone walls rise up to 80 metres on each side of the passage, and sometimes, the rocky path is just three metres wide. To get to Al-Khazna for the Petra by Night show, our group of travel writers and foreign correspondents had to weave through the winding ravine lit only by candles and moonlight. Chatter was high at the start of the walk, but as the night seeped under our skin, a hush descended. Then we turned a corner at the last canyon and set eyes on Al-Khazna, gleaming like gold.

Petra’s charisma only magnifies in the light of day. The following morning, we explore its excavated sites with our guide Saalah, craning our necks to soak in the scale and artistry of its structures, tall as modern buildings and carved entirely by hand. There are ruins everywhere, and yet Petra remains largely a mystery to archaeologists. We know it was built by the Nabateans, an ancient Arab civilisation of nomads-turned-traders, but little else is known. Some say it was a necropolis lovingly crafted to ensure the departed were treated fairly in the afterlife. Others say it was a caravan city, famed for its textiles, spices, and frankincense, now sold at dusty stalls near its visitor’s centre. And until 1985, its caves were home to Bedouin nomads native to this region, who have since been rehabilitated in houses outside.

Petra is only one of five UNESCO Sites in Jordan. The stamp-sized country—less than half the area of Gujarat—has a lot going for it. There are Biblical sites, Jewish monuments, waters rich in coral, and desert landscapes that have moved poets and kings and yet we encounter few travellers.

Tourism in Jordan has declined tremendously in the last year, a consequence of sharing borders with countries simmering with political unease. To the north lie Syria and Iraq, household names across the world for all the wrong reasons. In the east is oil-rich Saudi Arabia and in the west, across the Dead Sea lie the State of Palestine and Israel, with whom Jordan has a tenuous relationship despite a peace treaty signed in 1994. As the crimson stain of ISIS spreads and news of the refugee crisis floods television channels and Facebook feeds, travellers to Jordan’s peaceful olive groves have dwindled to a trickle.

On the streets of Amman, Jordan’s capital, however, life goes on as normal. In malls, young women in hijabs and cut-off denim shorts laugh over chocolate-chip gelato, gesturing with French-manicured nails crafted to cut glass. Shopkeepers entice walkers into stores brimming with silky scarves, trinkets, and the promise of a deal of a lifetime. In parks, families break bread stuffed with meat and tuck into lunchboxes of salad, garnished with sumac and zaatar. Their generosity is disarming—every time I ask for directions, something is tucked into my palm: a handful of olives, a beaded necklace, a piece of kheema-naan.

I feel this same openness in Al-Maghtas too. Bethany, as Al-Maghtas is colloquially called, is a Biblical site of monumental importance to Christians, consecrated as the place where Jesus of Nazareth was baptised by St. John. Archaeologists have excavated the remains of more than 20 Christian sites here, including chapels, a prayer hall, and baptismal pools, that have been inscribed a UNESCO World Heritage Site as recently as July 2015. But there are new monuments too, Salaah tells us, pointing to a Greek Orthodox Church with golden domes that dazzle in the sun. Our guide, like the majority of Jordanians, is a practicing Sunni Muslim, but the pride he feels for Jordan’s Biblical heritage is palpable.

The church has striking frescoes and cool stone floors but the real draw of Al-Maghtas—the Arabic word for “immersion”—referring to the baptism of Christ—is the riverbank where people from near and far come to take a dip in the chai-coloured waters of the River Jordan. Once over 60 metres wide, the river at this location is but a snaking strip about two metres across. It is also the border between Jordan and Israel, and a thick, knotted rope runs along the centre, neatly—and futilely—dividing the water into two equal halves. On either bank
Pilgrims immerse themselves in the River Jordan (top), where it is said that Jesus of Nazareth was baptized; About 20 minutes away, tourists slather themselves with the mineral-rich muck from the Dead Sea (bottom), before soaking in its healing, saline waters.
The dunes of Wadi Rum (top) have appeared in numerous films, including *Lawrence of Arabia*, *The Martian*, *Transformers*, and *Krrish 3*. But the desert landscape also has immense heritage value: Rock faces in the Rum bear ancient rock art, thousands of years old (bottom).

poker-faced armed guards watch tourists laugh, cry, and sing. It’s a bit like the Ganga *snaan* in Varanasi, but less colourful.

On our side, Jordanian families gingerly dip their fingers in the water, touching it to their lips and to the foreheads of their squirming children. Empty bottles are filled with holy water, for those who could not make it. Across the river, on the Israeli bank, affairs seem more solemn. I see a group of men and women dressed in thin, white muslin robes like hospital gowns. An elderly priest and a young boy with a guitar accompany them, whispering hymns of encouragement to the silver-haired pilgrims slowly making their way to the water. Some laugh nervously, clutching at each other for support, others mutter soundlessly to themselves, and I notice a couple dancing in the water, arms outstretched, faces turned skyward, as if they have glimpsed the heavens.

One woman in particular catches my eye. She is old enough to be my grandmother, and has the same look of fierce concentration I’ve seen on my ammama’s face when we visit the temple near her home in Kerala. This lady, cheeks sallow, hair cropped, and eyes clamped shut, is frantically immersing herself in the water. Again and again and again. She has one hand on a metal banister, and the other on her heart with her fist clenched so tight, I can feel her nails digging into her palms. Nobody around seems to notice her—there are others wailing loudly—but I can’t tear my gaze from her frail, wrinkled body, sheathed only in wet muslin. Her catharsis is riveting. Watching her, at once fierce and vulnerable, I wonder about the nature of faith; a force so powerful, it can move mountains or attempt to erase entire civilizations, as is happening in Syria next door.

The day before we visited Al-Maghtas, we partook in a ritual cleansing of a different kind. As our minivan ate up the miles on the smooth highway from Amman to the Dead Sea, we soaked in views of the flat, vast desert, punctuated by green, life-affirming olive groves. Along the road, shaggy trees bent by the wilful desert wind seemed to bow in welcome, complementing the signboards ushering us into the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and reminding us that we were fast approaching the lowest point on Earth.

Like most travellers to the Dead Sea, our agenda for the day was to float in the mineral-rich water body, known for its healing properties. No swimming, no snorkelling, no diving. Just floating. At first I thought it sounded rather absurd, but later, as I lay...
In the seaside city of Aqaba, travellers and locals soak in cool breezes and views of the Red Sea (left); Jordanian meals begin with a spread of salads and dips, followed by a main course like maqlooba (right), similar to a biryani and served upside-down.

on the ripple-free waters of the enormous, saline cradle, I began to understand its appeal. Above me, a soufflé of clouds drifted lazily across the sky. If I craned my neck far enough, I could see the brown, flat-topped mountains of Israel on the other bank. I was weightless. The water’s buoyancy allowed me to float without moving a finger. All the Dead Sea demanded was that I stay very, very still. Sudden movement meant splashes, and nobody wants the water of one of the saltiest lakes in the world in their eyes.

The Dead Sea lives up to its name in many ways: It’s too salty for most marine life, deathly calm since there are no currents, and as Salaah informs us, it is also dying. “Shrinking by over a metre each year,” he said. The more Earth’s temperature rises, the quicker it will evaporate. By 2050, he wagers, this lake so vast it has been knighted a sea, may be no more than a puddle.

For a country that’s largely desert, a surprising number of Jordan’s draws have to do with water. In Aqaba, a stylish city on Jordan’s coast, we spend a windy morning swimming and sailing in the Red Sea while snacking on plates of grilled fish, hummus, and salad. Another evening, we visit the Mai’n hot springs, nestled in the craggy mountains near the Dead Sea, where I discover another facet of Jordan’s natural heritage. The springs are set amidst an oasis of fig and olive trees and fed by a roaring, steaming waterfall where I spend a blissful half hour soaking. Letting the water pummel my neck and back feels invigorating, but it’s the setting that really moves me. Sitting here, beneath a sky studded with solitaire stars, by mountains, tall and hulking, I feel I have found my cathedral.

My time in Mai’n is followed by an unanticipated turn of events. The foreign correspondents in our group tell me that they are visiting a Syrian refugee camp on the outskirts of Amman and ask if I’d like to accompany them. Over long drives and evening drinks, I have listened to them discuss the rise of ISIS, the global refugee crises, and the ties that bind Syria, Iraq, and the U.S. The journalist in me jumps at the chance to visit the camp, but I’m undeniably nervous.

A few hours later, we are driving through the barbed-wire gates of Zaatari Camp, home to approximately 80,000 Syrian refugees, and among the largest cities in the country. Jordan, I learn, has taken in more refugees than all of Europe put together, and Zaatari is only one of its camps. Inside, the dusty roads are lined with neat rows of clinical white homes, fashioned from pre-fabricated shipping containers with small windows and dissonantly colourful graffiti of smiling stick figures and sunflowers. There are large water tanks, empty, dusty basketball courts, makeshift schools, and children scampering about happily, waving furiously as we go by.

Towards the centre of Zaatari is a market with stores selling snacks, dolls, sneakers, and cardboard sheets of shiny hairclips.
In the heart of Amman lies the King Hussein Mosque, named after the former king of Jordan. The country is now ruled by Abdullah II, his son, whose portrait hangs in most stores and hotels.
There are more people here, smoking cigarettes, buying fruit, drinking coffee from flimsy paper cups. At the end of the street, a modest shop with a hand-drawn signboard advertises wedding dresses. Outside, twirling on a hanger in the breeze, is a full-length fuchsia dress fringed with frills.

I had always thought of a refugee camp as a temporary halt, but in Zaatari, I spoke to families that had lived here for years. I spoke to couples that had met, married, and had children within its fences. I played with their chubby babies in their backyards, by their chicken coops and cycles. But of everything I saw that day, it’s the image of the dress, undoubtedly a garment of celebration, unabashedly shiny with optimism, that lingers in my mind.

I see Jordan with new eyes upon my return to the city. While haggling for fridge magnets at a street stall in Amman the next day, I notice a cloth handbag with “I (heart) Refugees” imprinted on it. By the hotel swimming pool, I chat with a Palestinian doctor celebrating her daughter’s birthday. Within minutes of meeting me, she scribbles her phone number down on a paper napkin, and tells me to call her if I have some free time. “We’ll get drinks,” Dr. Sue says. “I haven’t had a girl’s night out in a while.” At a hole-in-the-wall restaurant, one of the waiters tells me he is expecting his friends from Syria any day now. The more people I meet and talk to, the more I realise that this warmth and eagerness to share—if only a piece of bread—is an intangible part of Jordanian heritage.

Walking through Petra’s canyons earlier in the week, I remember Saalah telling us the various theories about Al-Khazna. Some believe it was once a treasury, others say it is a tomb built for a Nabatean king. Still more suggest that the handsome structure, like the monasteries nestled in Petra’s crevices, were meant for travellers, to let them know that their arduous journey was over, that they could fill their casks with water and their bellies with food. It is a sentiment that has endured in the people of Jordan.

One of our last stops is at Wadi Rum, a seemingly infinite desert landscape just 40 kilometres east of Aqaba, with petroglyphs indicating 12,000 years of human occupation. On a jeep safari around its dunes and terracotta-red mountains, we examine a rock face with ancient doodles featuring a line of camels. “Directions for travellers,” our guide said, “The camels face in the direction of the nearest settlement.” A staggering fact, when I stop to consider it. Here I am, looking at drawings made thousands of years ago on a rock face that took millions of years to shape. It makes my life feel like a grain of sand.

Later, over platters of grilled meat at a Bedouin-style camp, we meet Mohammed Ali, a blind musician who helps put my visit
In Focus | LIVING HISTORY

The town of Madaba is known for its mosaics (top), which are elegant, detailed, and painstakingly made from pieces of granite and sandstone; in its churches, travellers can examine life-sized works hundreds of years old, that depict the life of Christ (bottom).

To Zaatar in perspective. A member of the Bedouin tribe native to these parts, Ali plays soulfully on his rebab, a traditional string instrument made with camel hair, drawing us in like a storyteller.

Between Bedouin folk songs and riffs on Mohammed Rafi tunes, he tells us he was schooled in Jerusalem, studied philosophy in Damascus, learned music in Lebanon, and now lives in Amman. But every now and then he makes a trip to Wadi Rum with his son, to sit under the night sky, feel the cool sand between his fingers, and reconnect with the land and heritage of his people. “To feel,” Ali says, “is more important than to see.” In his raspy voice I sense the same spine-tingling intensity of Petra by Night.

Faith runs deep in Jordan. It is in the mosques of Amman, the sandstone sculptures of Petra’s temples, and in the hearts of pilgrims immersing themselves in the River Jordan. A place of salvation in a region riddled with conflict. Jordan’s abundant heritage is protected now—but much outside its borders is threatened, or destroyed like the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Palmyra in Syria, bombed to rubble less than a year ago. Why play in a deadbeat camp in the middle of nowhere, someone asks Ali between songs, “Because,” he replies softly, without missing a beat. “It is my soul, my joy, my message of peace. Perhaps I will succeed and perhaps I will fail, but I must try.”

Neha Sumiran is National Geographic Traveller India’s perpetually hungry Web Editor. She loves exploring food markets, and hopes to have a farm near the mountains someday.
Two members of the Jordanian desert police share a light moment in front of Al-Khazna in Petra. These guards are of Bedouin origin and sport the community’s traditional keffiyeh in red and white checks.
THE GUIDE

Officially called the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, this small Middle Eastern country in Asia is bordered by Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Israel, the State of Palestine, and the Red Sea. Its capital is the cosmopolitan city of Amman. There are no direct flights from India to Jordan. All routes require at least one layover in a Middle East gateway city.

Orientation and Getting There

Indian travellers require a visa to visit Jordan. A month-long, single-entry visa to Jordan costs JOD40/₹3,700 and requires proof of hotel bookings and return tickets. However, visa fees are waived if travellers book their trip using a Jordanian tour operator—or if they purchase the Jordan Pass and stay for at least three consecutive nights. The Jordan pass is available online at www.jordanpass.jo and costs between JOD70 and JOD80 (₹6,600-7,500). Having the pass grants entry to 40 sightseeing attractions in Jordan, including Petra and Wadi Rum.

Visas

Tourist season in Jordan is from March to May, when days are warm (around 25°C), and the evenings are around 13°C, cool enough to require a light sweater and hat. The weather gets progressively warmer from June when summer sets in, and stays that way until August. Summer day temperatures in places like Petra and Wadi Rum can be upwards of 40°C but off-season deals are plenty. Winter creeps in after September, bringing cold weather, sometimes even snow. Day temperatures in the plains range between 15-4°C, but night temperatures are colder still in the desert.

Seasons

History's Mysteries Set aside at least one entire day—longer if you’re a heritage nut—to explore the magnificent sandstone city of Petra. Check into a hotel near the visitor’s centre, and start as early as 6 a.m. to avoid crowds. It’s best to do Petra by Night preceding the day exploration of the site.

Sands of Time The dunes of Wadi Rum are spectacular by day, but the desert takes on an ethereal quality after dark. Spend a night at one of the many camps in the region to soak in its splendour. Accommodations and food are basic but the views are stupendous. Wadi Rum is great for hiking too.

Into the Blue The waters of the Red Sea, off the coast of Aqaba, are a treat for divers and snorkelers. Dive centres—there are about a dozen—are clustered around the South Beach area, close to Aqaba Marine Park, a protected ocean area.

Salt of the Earth While soaking in the Dead Sea is worth a morning, there’s not much else to do in the area, so best to limit your stay here to a night. Word of advice: Do not shave for at least a few days before swimming here; the salt makes even the smallest abrasions smart unbearably.

Tuck in Jordanian meals are bountiful affairs, where tables are laden with salads, dips like labneh and baba ganoush, grilled meats, and naan-like breads. Meat eaters shouldn’t miss mansaf: a dish of rice, cooked in stock and served with a delicate yoghurt-based meat curry.

Souvenirs Jordan is known for its intricate mosaics—of saints, wildlife, and motifs like the Tree of Life—made from matchstick-sized pieces of sandstone and granite. They’re beautiful, handmade, and quite expensive (upwards of ₹5,000 for a notebook-sized mosaic). Dates, pistachios, cheese, silver jewellery, and embroidered jackets also make great gifts.

Top Picks

Wadi Rum has many desert camps run by the Bedouin people, nomadic groups that traditionally roamed the deserts of the Middle East.
BULGARIA
A childhood stamp collection leads to exotic landscapes

U.S.A.
Taste trails through Northern California

Veliko Turnovo, Bulgaria
Postmark
Bulgaria

His childhood stamp collection propels the author to a far-off land of monasteries and memories.
Sheepskin hats and elaborate embroidery dress up celebrants on Bulgarian Unification Day.

It’s my backside that feels Bulgaria first, through the seat of a taxi as it speeds over cobblestones in the capital city, Sofia. “This country is like the Piccadilly Circus!” my taxi driver exclaims in rough, if enthusiastic, English. “Everyone comes here. Goes round and round!” He removes both hands from the steering wheel to illustrate Bulgaria as the whirlpool of civilizations. I picture us ploughing into the church looming suddenly, like a glittering Christmas ornament, in our windshield.

What he says is trenchant: Everyone, it seems, has come to Bulgaria. The Thracians, with their gold. Rome, with its legions. The Asiatic Bulgars, the country’s namesake. Also Huns, Slavs, Jews, Turks, with their many traditions. In the past two decades they’ve been joined by hordes of holidaying Brits with a thirst for cheap beer and a good time.

I’ve come with old postage stamps.

THE ATTIC FAN rumbles in a Michigan house, sucking out the humidity of a muggy June day as three ten-year-old boys sift through a hillock of stamps at a table.

“Purple Liz,” my brother, Fred, says, dropping the British queen atop the heap of empire.

“Pink head,” blurs my friend Shawn; it’s our name for the portrait of Belgian King Baudouin.

My turn. “Another orange Franco,” I mutter glumly. What I really want us to look at are the colourful images in the smallest pile, for Bulgaria, a country at the time sequestered behind the Iron Curtain. Its stamps are large, with faraway scenes of craggy mountain ranges, ancient hill towns, duelling knights. The one
Ancient Rome left a mark on Plovdiv, including stone walls built when the city was a provincial Roman capital. That most intrigues me shows a richly decorated monastery that could be out of a book I’m reading about dwarves, elves, and castles in a place called Middle-earth. Bulgaria, with its wild landscape, exotic people, rugged fortifications, and runic Cyrillic lettering, has become, in my imagination, a land from The Hobbit.

I’ll travel there someday, I know then, and find that monastery.

IT’S ALMOST MIDNIGHT when the taxi pulls up to my hotel. I pay the driver, who then roars off into the night, his open window trailing notes of chalga, electrified Bulgarian folk music. I look around. Dark windows on belle époque facades stare back. Then I notice something familiar about the building across the street—the bulkiness of its neoclassic exterior, its spire thrusting upward like a Stalinist spindle. I rifle through my stamp envelope, excited. The miniature engraving I extract, tinted a Marxist red, is identical to what sits in front of me: Sofia’s old Communist Party headquarters. My stamps and I are off to a good start.

I meet my Bulgarian translator, 25-year-old Polina Simeonova, the next morning. She looks like the dark-haired ballerina on my stamp of a Bulgarian ballet duet, though thoroughly 21st century with her smartphone and jeans. “Everyone under age 30 here learned English watching the Cartoon Network,” she reassures me. “Trust me.”

We plunge into Sofia, a city of more than a million that has all the pediments and pillars, pastel colours and classical details of a proper Old World capital, spiced with Ottoman touches, a vestige of what Bulgarians refer to as the “Turkish Yoke.” The Turkic Ottoman Empire conquered the Empire of Bulgaria at the end of the 1300s; the land would form part of the Ottoman dominion for 500 years, endowing Sofia with Islamic mosques, minarets, filigree, and a hammam, or Turkish bath. A more recent empire endowed Sofia with another architecture: large apartment blocks, now coated with soot and spray paint.

“See? Soviet architecture and American graffiti,” Simeonova deadpans. She also points out the new, thrusting office towers clad in glass and capitalist sass, a reflection of Bulgaria’s accession in 2007 to the European Union.

As Simeonova shows me her hometown, I spot another landmark pictured on my stamps. The multi-domed Cathedral of St. Alexander Nevsky, a glorious stratocumulus of neo-Byzantine cloud, billows up in front of me, unchanged from the image I pull out. A small group of families stand around a tour guide, who recites the facts. Construction started in 1882; the cathedral commemorates the 1877-78 Russo-Turkish War; with more than 34,000 square feet, the building accommodates 10,000 worshippers.

A father reaches out to gently realign his son’s head toward the guide. “Listen,” his gesture says. “This is important.” I’m beginning to regret that I’ve allowed only one day in Sofia; eager to see as much of Bulgaria as possible, I have packed a lot into my itinerary. Simeonova and I hoof it to different neighbourhoods, where she introduces me to vendors selling cupfuls of fat raspberries, like a pasha’s collection of rubies; points out skateboarders busy “shredding” at the
base of the grey Soviet War Memorial, whose stone soldiers were repainted in 2011 as comic-book heroes (that didn’t last); and treats me to a chopska salad, a mix of onions, peppers, tomatoes, and cucumbers complemented by fresh, tangy farm cheese. As I wolf it down, she eyes me and wryly comments, “You’ll have plenty of chopska tomorrow, in Veliko Turnovo.”

A TWO-AND-A-HALF-HOUR drive east from Sofia the next day brings me to the setting for another of my stamps, a place Bulgarians consider a national icon: the Tsarevets fortress, a stronghold that protected the town of Veliko Turnovo (also Tarnovo), capital of the Second Bulgarian Empire, until it succumbed to Ottoman invaders in 1393. "You like it?" The inquiry comes from behind me. "I give you good price."

"No thanks." I set the clock back down. Bulgaria was a reluctant ally of Germany in World War II; faced with the threat of a Nazi invasion, it signed a pact in 1941. That year, Germany forced it to declare war on America; in 1943, the U.S. bombed Sofia, destroying much of the city and killing more than a thousand people. Interestingly, despite being Nazi allies officially, Bulgarians saved many Jewish citizens. As with everything in this strategically located land, its history is complicated.

A MORE DISTANT HISTORY, and another stamp, transport me to Bulgaria’s second-largest city, Plovdiv, southwest of Veliko Turnovo. Tracing its settlement back 6,000 years, Plovdiv—slated to be a European Capital of Culture in 2019—may be best known for what an expanding Roman empire left behind, including a series of arcaded aqueducts and a good-as-new Roman amphitheatre in the Old Town.

"They say the acoustics here were so exact, you could drop a coin on stage and it would be heard in the back row," says a moustachioed Bulgarian in English as I step onto the temporary wooden floorboards. Around us, a perfect half circle of white marble tiers stacked like sugar cubes rises, attesting to the wealth that once flowed through this land. Built by Emperor Trajan in the second century, when the city was a major Roman settlement, the theatre hosts performances to this day. I watch attendants place cushions on the seats for tonight’s show, the Verdi opera Nabucco.

As I step into Rila Monastery’s inner courtyard, I’m flung into another era. The transition feels almost physical, like a shove back to the Middle Ages.
Kitted out in traditional garb, a bagpipe player (facing page) waits to perform at a Plovdiv wedding; Market wares in the old town of Veliko Turnovo include an item that intrigued the author: a clock (top) decorated with a swastika and five coloured rings to commemorate the 1936 Berlin Olympics.
Shuffling through my stamps of Plovdiv, I find a set of intriguing half-timbered houses in the cobblestoned Old Town, my next stop. Built mostly in the 1800s by rich businessmen, the houses sport coats of vivid blues, purples, and ochres. Knockers of braided iron hang on oak doors. I enter one residence, a museum known as the House of Nikola Nedkovitch, to find ornate wood furniture and embroidered fabrics that speak to the flowering of a native pride suppressed by the Ottomans.

Making my way from the Old Town to Plovdiv’s main avenue, Tsar Battenberg Boulevard (named for the first regent of modern Bulgaria), I pass the 15th-century Dzhumaya Mosque, one of the oldest Ottoman religious structures in the Balkans. Its geometrically patterned minaret appears on one of my stamps, and I dearly want to see the sumptuous interior, with its floral flourishes and quotes from the Koran. But the shadow on the mosque’s sundial reads 4 p.m., giving me just a few more hours of daylight to wander through the town, joining the pedestrian crowds as they stroll past restored 19th-century buildings and fountains. Taking in the swarms of fashionable men and women, their eyes hidden behind designer sunglasses, I become a boulevardier in what the first-century Greek writer Lucian dubbed “the largest and most beautiful of all cities.”

THAT NIGHT I SPREAD my stamps on my hotel bed and zero in on one I’ve saved, like dessert. It depicts Rila, my Middle-earth monastery—and tomorrow’s destination. Guided by a GPS navigator I nickname “Garminovka,” I’ll head west of Plovdiv on a three-hour drive into the Rila Mountains, the highest peaks between the Alps and the Caucasus range. I’m beyond eager to see the real version of the monastery that so seized my imagination as a ten-year-old.

I make good time until the road begins to narrow and trees grow dense. Garminovka starts babbling. “Recalculating,” she finally says, then lapses into silence. I’ve come into a deep, wooded valley. Yellow butterflies pirouette across the road, and the sound of the rushing Rilska River overpowers the engine’s grumble. In the distance, I make out mountains, dizzyingly steep and felted in a sage green. They greet me as they did pilgrims and monks in the tenth century, when the original monastery was founded by Ivan (John) of Rila, a hermit who would become Bulgaria’s patron saint.

Ivan chose his site well. The complex, a quadrangle walled on all sides by monastery buildings, sits on a wooded knoll in the middle of nature. I park, then walk past a knot of Japanese tourists to traverse the passage connecting to the inner courtyard. As I step through under a bright noonday sun, I’m flung into another era. The transition feels almost physical, a shove back to the Middle Ages.

My stamp depicts the monastery only in outline; the reality that faces me is an explosion of columns, arches, crosses, and carved wooden balconies in rich reds and umbers and charcoals—an apotheosis of “Bulgarian renaissance” architecture. In the centre of it all rises the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Assumption, fronted by columns striped black and white in the Islamic Mamluk tradition. I step under the cathedral’s portico and find detailed

**Vestige of a bygone political order, the Buzludzha Monument was a tribute to the birth of Bulgaria’s socialist movement.**
Contributing editor Andrew Nelson returned from Bulgaria a fan of its red wines. Contributing photographer Aaron Huey, who is based in Seattle, also shoots for National Geographic Magazine.
TO MARKET  Browse vintage artefacts, icons, nesting dolls, and more at the antiques market near Sofia’s Alexander Nevsky Cathedral. Prepare to haggle for what catches your fancy.

PARK IT HERE  Just south of Rila National Park—almost an extension of it—is Pirin National Park, and its resort town, Bansko, where visitors hike, bike, and ski. Lodgings include the luxe Kempinski Grand Hotel Arena, but increasingly popular are stays in centuries-old farm homes.

GOld DIgger  The Thracians, who inhabited ancient Bulgaria, had a way with gold. See their handiwork—including a golden mask of Thracian King Teres, discovered in 2004—at Sofia’s National Institute of Archaeology.

HISTORY IN STONE  Famous for vivid frescoes, the Rock-Hewn Churches of Ivanovo—scores of chapels and sanctuaries carved out of hillsides by hermits in the 1100s—have earned UNESCO World Heritage status. One church is open to the public.


SHORE EXCURSION  

Sea, Sand, and Sights

Beachgoers flock in summer to Bulgaria’s Black Sea Riviera, popular for its 378-kilometre coast and family resorts. Also here: the millennia-old city of Nesebur, which was built on a stony promontory in Thracian times. Conquered by the Greeks—whose acropolis remains—it later became a significant Byzantine settlement centred around a still standing basilica.

SOuVENIR  

Rose Oil  Most of the world’s rose oil comes from Bulgaria. Visitors can buy rose products at Shipka, an “organics” shop in Sofia, and the Rose Museum, in the town of Kazanlak.

LODGING  

Arena di Serdica  Stay at Arena di Serdica, a Sofia hotel built over Roman ruins uncovered during construction (arenadiserdica.com, doubles from €92/₹6,750).

FLAVOUR  

Breakfast Bun  Start the day with a banitsa, a pastry of phyllo dough filled with an eggy cheese mixture.

EVENT  

Unification Day  Bulgaria’s national day, 6 September, is celebrated with fireworks and parades.
Orientation Bulgaria, more accurately The Republic of Bulgaria, lies in southeast Europe on the western shore of the Black Sea. It shares borders with Greece and Turkey in the south and Macedonia and Serbia in the west. To the north is Romania with the River Danube dividing the two countries.

Getting There There are no direct flights between India and Bulgaria. Daily flights connecting New Delhi and Mumbai to Bulgaria’s capital, Sofia, require a layover at a hub like Dubai or Istanbul. Sofia is well connected to other Bulgarian cities like Plovdiv and Veliko Turnovo by bus and train. Plovdiv is about 3 hours southeast by train (www.bdz.bg; tickets from BGN9/t340) and 2 hours away by bus (tickets from BGN14/t525). Veliko Tarnovo is a 5-hour train journey away, with a stopover at Gorna Orjahovica (tickets from BGN19.40/t730 one-way), and a 3-hour bus ride away (tickets from BGN22/t825).

Visa Indian travellers to The Republic of Bulgaria require a tourist visa. The application form can be downloaded from www.mfa.bg and must be submitted with relevant documents including travel itineraries and financial statements. The application must be submitted at the Bulgarian embassy in New Delhi personally or via a travel agent. Visitors might be called in for a personal interview at the embassy. The visa costs ₹4,800 and can take 7-10 working days to process.

Seasons Bulgaria is a sunny country with four distinct seasons. In the months of spring (mid-Mar to May) and autumn (mid-Sep to Oct) temperatures range between 10-25°C. Summers (Jun to Aug) are moderate and temperatures remain almost the same, though highs can go slightly above 30°C. Winters (Nov to early-Mar) are cold with substantial snow and the mercury staying mostly around 0°C, though it occasionally dips to -15°C.

The Rila Mountains, shaped by glaciers and dotted with lakes, form the backbone of Bulgaria’s largest national park.
THREE TASTE TRAILS IN THE FOODIE-EST PLACE IN AMERICA

BY ANDREW NELSON
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LEAH NASH AND CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT

Wine and olive oil tastings at the DaVero Farms & Winery in Sonoma are accompanied by al fresco lunch in the vineyard.
Sonoma
Ridgely Evers says this as he and I survey DaVero Farms & Winery, 67 acres of olive groves, orchards, and vineyards in Northern California’s Sonoma County that Evers owns with his wife, Colleen McGlynn. “And you won’t sit at a table like this,” he declares, “anywhere else in America.” Evers clearly is partial to this land of tawny hills and lofty redwoods bordering the more fame-conscious Napa County, yet his words ring true.

Sit at a table in Napa, and chances are it’ll be set with fancy china and polished silver, in the great hall of a mansion. In Sonoma, your dinner may well be served under the stars on a simple wood plank set with mismatched cutlery and candles stuck in old wine bottles. Goats may bleat in the background and chickens may cluck underfoot, but the meal will be magnificent.

Dusty and down-to-earth, Sonoma reaps its star power from its affable authenticity. Here, an hour north of San Francisco, soil is valued more than silicon. The seduction is subtle, lingering in the flavours of home-cured pork salumi, the intense aroma of a goat brie, the blackberry bouquet of an Alexander Valley Pinot Noir.

Napa can have its super chefs; in Sonoma, celebrity comes from being one of the cheesemongers, olive pickers, pig farmers, and grape growers who have turned this county’s 4,580 square kilometres into what may be America’s best test kitchen.

A hundred years ago, Sonoma resident and The Call of the Wild author Jack London gazed out at the landscape around his ranch and wrote, “I am all sun and air and sparkle.” Sonoma will have the same effect on you on the taste trails that follow.

ATLAS
Sonoma County in Northern California is famous for the winemaking region of Sonoma Valley. The county’s eponymous city is an hour’s drive north from San Francisco’s iconic Golden Gate Bridge.
Valette, a rustic-chic restaurant in Healdsburg, changes its menu with the season, featuring dishes made using local produce and meat. It's known for its cold cut platters.
he history of Sonoma’s gnarled olive trees intertwines with that of the Golden State. Spanish missionaries brought the first olive cuttings to California in the 1700s, planting them on the grounds of the 21 Franciscan missions that they established along the Camino Real, a route that extended from San Diego to the town of Sonoma. Fast-forward to the 1990s, and the growing sophistication of American palates clamours for this nutritional condiment. Local output of olive oil expands. California now presses 99 per cent of the nation’s olive oil, with Sonoma County—focused on distilling the most refined grades of extra-virgin oil—one of the state’s biggest producers.

This renaissance is due in part to Ridgely Evers, who journeyed to Tuscany to find the perfect olive trees to plant on his DaVero land. Today Evers and his wife, Colleen McGlynn, cultivate more than 5,000 trees on their spread in the Dry Creek Valley. Add those to the 18,000 Tuscan olive trees the Kendall-Jackson wineries have planted, mostly in the Alexander and Bennett Valleys, and Sonoma is a promising new branch for a fruit with an ancient lineage—as attested here by our olive trail.
Farm-to-table restaurant and wine bar, Barndiva (top), offers wonderful Sonoma wines and goat cheese croquettes; DaVero Farms’ “olive whisperer,” farm manager Juan Valladares (bottom), has been a part of the establishment since the 1980s.
Healdsburg’s town square (top) is a hub for buskers, and also the best spot in town for a meal and wine; The family-run Achadinha Cheese Company farm, now managed by the family’s third generation (bottom), is known for its goat cheese.
Western Sonoma County traditionally has supported many family dairies and creameries, thanks to a temperate climate that nurtures plenty of sweet clover for livestock to graze on. More recently, a number of farmers have diversified by crafting all manner of artisan cheeses, buttery to sharp to crumbly. “It’s a multigenerational obsession, with families working together to sustain the old business and the land,” says Sheana Davis, a noted cheesemaker in the town of Sonoma who consults for other fromage start-ups. Today these family enterprises are found throughout the county, turning milk into wheels of cheddars and blues.

Their secret begins with the relatively small size of their farms; most support 200 to 250 animals. “A car is only as good as its engine—an idea we apply to our goats, sheep, and cows,” says Lisa Gottreich, cheesemaker and owner of Sebastopol’s Bohemian Creamery. “We have happy animals producing happy milk, which makes great cheese.” Indeed. President Obama and the first lady nibbled on Gottreich’s Boho Belle cheese while in San Francisco. This Cheese Trail proposes other places that will please your palate.

1. Freestone Artisan Cheese Store
2. Wild Flour Bread Bakery
3. Achadinha Cheese Company
4. Kendall-Jackson Wine Estate and Gardens
5. Kenwood Inn and Spa
“I am all sun and air and sparkle.”

—Jack London

Green hills meet blue waters in Sonoma Coast State Park, which is skirted by Highway 1.
A PERFECT PLACE FOR A PICNIC

Guerneville
Hit the Big Bottom Market for ready-to-go bag lunches and meander to nearby Austin Creek State Recreation Area, to lunch among rolling, tree-covered hills.

Bartholomew Park
Tucked between Petaluma and Napa, this private park (part of a winery by the same name) offers hiking trails with views of green meadows, shaded woods, and, on clear days, San Francisco Bay.

Dry Creek Valley
Snap up picnic eats—cheeses, salamis—at the tasting room of the Truett Hurst Winery, then head over to its seating area by Dry Creek to eat and sip the winery’s Petite Sirah as fish swim by.
Sonoma sizzles, chances are it’s the bacon in the skillet. The county is a centre for such heritage pig breeds as the Tuscan Cinta Senese and the Mangalitsa, a Hungarian hog with rich meat marbled with fat. Whatever the heirloom breed, these animals lead what Front Porch Farm, a practitioner of sustainable animal husbandry in the Russian River Valley, calls a “fully expressed life.” Says Sonoma farmer/butcher John Stewart, who with his wife, Duskie Estes, owns the Black Pig Meat Co.: “Our pigs have only one bad day.” They permit their animals to forage in open pastures right up to the time they become menu items at Zazu, Stewart and Estes’ convivial Sebastopol restaurant. “There’s a family behind every business here,” Estes says. “I call it ‘Sonoma soul.’”

**PORK TRAIL**

ABOUT 80 KILOMETRES
Roughly an hour and 15 minutes driving time from Broadway in Sonoma city to Guerneville

1. The smoker starts early and puffs all day long at the Schellville Grill, five kilometres south of Sonoma. Get here for breakfast and your eggs come with homemade smoked paprika sausage. If you’re a late riser, sally in for a lunch of pork ribs or the cooked-ten-hours barbecue pork and grilled cheese (www.schellvillegrill.com).

2. Motor north to Santa Rosa to snag some sausage, bacon, and jerky at the roadside Sonoma County Meat Co. shop, where you also can try your hand at carving. When he’s not grinding grass-fed local beef into hamburger meat, co-owner and head butcher Rian Rinn teaches classes in sausage making and bacon curing (www.sonomacountymeatco.com).

3. A 15-minute drive west from Santa Rosa brings you to Sebastopol, where you can fortify yourself with a BLT at Zazu. Located in the Barlow, a cluster of food- and arts-centric warehouses, this restaurant and bar is sleek but with the friendly vibe of a fish fry. Try the “rodeo jax”—bacon and caramel popcorn—or the house version of chicharrones, a dish made with fried pork belly or pork rinds. Then marvel at the items for purchase, such as light-up pig pens and lard lipstick (zazukitchen.com).

4. Top off lunch with berry pie crowned by a scoop of Nimble & Finn’s bacon-accented maple bourbon brittle ice cream at Chile Pies Baking Co., in Guerneville, north of Sebastopol. Both Chiles Pies and Nimble & Finn’s are housed in the historic Guerneville Bank Club building. Afterward, amble down Main Street to find out what’s on at the River Theater, a performance hall popular for its line-up of music acts (nimbleandfins.com; www.chilepiesbakingco.com).

5. Hit the hay in another piece of Guerneville history, the Dawn Ranch, built in 1905 on the banks of the Russian River. Fifty-three cabins and cottages dot the property’s 15 acres, which also support an apple orchard and kitchen garden. If you find you haven’t yet had your fill of pork, the ranch’s restaurant, Agriculture Public House, will be happy to cook you up a Berkshire pork chop or pulled-pork ravioli (dawnranch.com).

About 80 kilometres
Roughly an hour and 15 minutes driving time from Broadway in Sonoma city to Guerneville

National Geographic Traveler’s (U.S.) Editor-at-Large Andrew Nelson has travelled the U.S. in search of great tastes. Photographers Leah Nash and Christopher Onstott contribute to numerous publications.
The free-roaming Front Porch Farm pigs (top) spend most of their day foraging for acorns; Healdsburg’s Jordan Vineyard (bottom) produces tasty wines and extra-virgin olive oil, and affords beautiful sunset views.
On the banks of the Vishwamitri River, Vadodara brims with heritage. The enduring architecture from India’s medieval and modern periods is testimony to the progressiveness of the city’s various rulers, particularly while it was the capital of the erstwhile princely state of Baroda.

The city passed through the hands of the Gupta, Rashtrakuta, and Solanki dynasties, held by the Sultans of Delhi and Gujarat, and then the Mughals, before finally being claimed by the Marathas of the Gaekwad dynasty in the 1720s. The legacy of the Gaekwad rulers was firmly established by the popular and visionary ruler Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III (1875-1939), who transformed Baroda into an educational, industrial, and commercial centre with thriving art and architecture. Vadodara is crammed with landmarks from this period, such as libraries, hospitals, and museums, which are a reminder of the dynasty’s institution-building prowess. It also has a cluttered walled city, historically known as Kila-e-Daulatabad, now referred to as Old Baroda. Here, medieval bazaars, shrines, and century-old tenements can be found in the labyrinthine lanes. Beyond these walls, old-style bungalows and small houses still remain despite the newer high-rises. The city’s etymological roots—the Sanskrit word *vatodar* translates to “in the heart of the banyan tree”—are evident everywhere, with a profusion of oval leaves shading its streets.

Like the architecture, the locals are a harmonious, cosmopolitan mix of people of different faiths, from different states. They proudly call Vadodara “Sanskarnagari,” or “the cultured city,” and it lives up to this sobriquet.

**Vadodara’s Layered Past**

**HISTORY, ARCHITECTURE, AND FARSAN IN GUJARAT’S CULTURAL CAPITAL | BY KAVITA KANAN CHANDRA**
Baroda Museum (top left) has impressive European masterpieces and Indian artefacts; The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda (top right) is one of the top educational institutes in India; Baroda Central Library has a two-foot-high cabinet with a collection of 73 miniature books (bottom).

Baroda Museum

MANISH CHAUHAN

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EXPLORER

HYBRID HERITAGE

The moment I step out of the railway station, Vadodara’s past is spread out before me in the form of the sprawling Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, established as Baroda College in 1881 by Sayajirao III. The imposing 144-foot-high dome atop the Faculty of Arts building is the second largest masonry dome in India. A little further is Sayajirao garden, earlier called Kamatibaug, where the Baroda Museum and Picture Gallery is located in a heritage building built on the lines of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London.

I take cabs and autos between various landmarks, as they are scattered around the city, just a few kilometres from each other. Most bear the Maratha stamp, with the notable exception of the 16th-century Hajira Maqbara, the tomb of Mughal general Qutubuddin Muhammad Khan. Many historic buildings have offices inside and visitors require permission to enter. For example, Nyay Mandir, built in 1896, now houses a district court. Pratap Vilas Palace is a railway staff college, but college groups and tourists can visit on Saturdays with prior permission. It has a fascinating rail museum.

Sayajirao III was well travelled and fond of European architecture. His vision was realised in Baroda by architects such as R.F. Chisholm and city planner Patrick Geddes. Besides the Victorian Vadodara Museum, there’s the Kothi Building (1922), inspired by Scotland’s Balmoral Castle, where the district administration’s head office is located. A little further is Kirti Mandir, also known as Temple of Fame, a memorial for deceased members of the Gaekwad family. It has a series of small rooms with marble busts, and a main hall with murals by artist Nandalal Bose. The influence of Indo-Saracenic architecture is visible in the structure of the Sayajirao Gaekwad Hospital, near Kala Ghoda Circle.

Sayajirao III’s interest in urban planning is evident in places like Khanderao Market, a palatial building from 1906 that buzzes with vegetable and fruit sellers every morning. His most cherished construction was the earthen dam in Ajwa village, which provided clean drinking water to people at a time of frequent cholera outbreaks. It is a nice drive to Ajwa reservoir, which is about 23 kilometres from the city, and still supplies water to a large part of Vadodara. On weekends, the gardens surrounding the reservoir have illuminated fountains and make for a pleasant walk.

PALACE SPLENDOUR

Lukshmi Vilas Palace, built in 1890 by Sayajirao III, dominates the city skyline. At the time, it is said to have cost about ₹1.8 crore to build, and was one of the largest and costliest private residences.

Imposing from a distance, the 150-room palace is even grander up-close. I’m awestruck by the nine-storey tower, and the architectural smorgasbord of onion-shaped Persian domes, chhatris, chhajjas, and Venetian and Gothic arches. The architectural styles from Europe, Persia, and Rajasthan somehow meld together beautifully.

The complimentary audio-guide takes me through an hour-long history of the Gaekwads, Indo-Saracenic architecture, and the relevance of each room. I grasp the significance of the weapons in the armoury, the Coronation room hung with Raja Ravi Varma masterpieces, the ornate durbar hall, the hathi room where the king alighted from his...
elephant, and the marble courtyard with fountains and sculptures.

Not all areas of the palace are open to visitors as members of the royal family still live here, but my disappointment quickly dissipates as I relax by a fountain with a cup of masala chai and a sandwich. (www.gaekwads-of-baroda.com; 0265-24111022; open 9.30 a.m.-5 p.m., Monday closed; entry ₹225, includes audio guide in English, Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, or French.)

At the Maharaja Fatesingh Museum in the palace compound, I see Raja Ravi Varma's paintings of Maharaja Sayajirao III in full regal attire, and his sister Princess Tarabai. The portraits are so detailed and nuanced that they could well be photographs. I take my time examining the maharaja's collection of European art, including pieces by Italian sculptor Augusto Felici, Wedgewood bone china, Doulton collectibles, Tiffany wares, and Orrefors glasses. There are also fine Chinese and Japanese porcelain vases, some with entire battle sequences painted on them (0265-2426372; open 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Monday closed; entry ₹80, audio guide ₹30).

**WALLED CITY**

In Old Baroda, early one Sunday morning, I'm sipping hot tea with Chirag Munjani, who conducts urban and rural heritage walks in Gujarat. A leisurely stroll is the best way to explore this fortified city, which was built in 1511 by Muzaffar Shah II, the son of Mahmud Begada of the Gujarat Sultanate.

The city's original walls have disappeared, but its four imposing gates, one for each cardinal direction, radiating out from the Mandvi Gate, still exist. The Champaner, Gendi, Laheripura, and Pani gates reflect a blend of Islamic and Maratha architecture. The triangular projection jutting out of the main arch of Pani gate is an iconic symbol of the city; Barodians call it "Baroda nu naak," implying "Baroda's honour."

We begin our walk from the central Mandvi Gate, the hub of activity in medieval times and still a bustling market. Chirag points out the first branch of the Bank of Baroda, built by Sayajirao III in 1908, with a new extension beside it. The Central Library next door, built around 1910, is a four-storey structure with large windows and two-inch-thick Belgian glass tile flooring. I browse the treasure trove of centuries-old books and admire the pictures of Sayajirao III's foreign sojourns.

We turn into a narrow lane where the past seems preserved in compact tenements supported by carved Burmese pillars with iron oil lamp holders, doors, window grills, and jharokhas. Each pol, or cluster of houses with a common entrance through one lane, was named after a specific caste, trade, or landmark.

In one of the pols is the Narsinhji temple, where the old city still celebrates the 275-year-old traditional procession of “Narsinhji no varghodo,” which celebrates the marriage of Vishnu’s avatar to Tulsi on the 12th day after Diwali. It is a haveli and not a typical temple. At the Govardhan Nathji Haveli, I spot a 50-year-old Pichvai painting depicting the Raasila.

**FARSAN AND FASHION**

Good upmarket restaurants and street food are plentiful in Vadodara. The old city, Fatehgunj area, and Vadodara’s other bazaars offer a huge variety of farsan or snacks. See usal is the most popular of these staple street foods, which also include kachori, chevdo, bhakarwadi, jalebi, papdi, papdi, khaman, and idada. Most of these snacks are easy on the pocket.

During a shopping spree for a chaniya-choli outfit and Navratri jewellery at Nava Bazaar,
locals direct me to the famous Pyarelal Ki Kachori in Mangal Bazaar, a small shop doing brisk business in newsprint-wrapped kachoris stuffed with puffed rice, onion, sev, peanuts, dal, tomato, potato, chilli paste, and oozing with a sweet-and-spicy chutney.

Another local favourite is Mannmohan Farsan, a hole-in-the-wall near the Kothi building, I am drawn by the whiff of frying samosas and bhajias which floats above the din of the crowd.

Barodians snack from morning to evening. Near the railway station, Jagdish Farsan Mart starts selling its famous bhakarwadi at 6 a.m. (₹60-80 for 200 gm). At Duliram Peda in Raopura, a fresh batch of sweet peda is made every hour (₹360 per kg).

Complete the culinary experience with the city’s sugar-tinged Gujarati thalis, and the more savoury and spicy Kathiawadi thalis. I like the decor and Gujarati thali at the Mandap in Hotel Express Tower at Alkapuri. A cloth mandap hangs over each table, and the food is served in copper-plated utensils. The green tomato curry remains my favourite (92278 81135; thali ₹299). Also in Alkapuri, Sasumaa Gujarati Thali has basic but clean interiors, and meals are served in delightful extra-large steel thalis and an array of small bowls (₹5746 52652; thali ₹240).

Both restaurants serve delicious seasonal Gujarati vegetables, served with bajra na rotla, or millet rotis smeared with pure ghee. Only the dal and kadhi are sweetened, and for fussy eaters, there are Punjabi versions of each dish.

My search for an authentic Kathiawadi thali leads me to Kismat Kathiawadi Dhaba on NH 18, replete with charpais (thali ₹90), but for a more comfortable dining experience visit Shree Kathiyawadi Khadki’s new, air-conditioned restaurant in Sharnam Fortune Mall on Race Course Road. It serves Gujarati thalis at lunchtime (₹270) and Kathiawadi à la carte in the evening (meal for two ₹500).

Shiv Shakti Kathiawadi Hotel near the Vishwamitri Bridge opposite a Mahindra tractor shop is equally popular (0265-2342414; both Kathiawadi and Gujarati lunch limited thali ₹90, evening only Kathiawadi unlimited thali ₹170 with a churma ka laddoo. The laddoo is made on alternate days and is in high demand). Both restaurants serve the Kathiawadi specialities of sev-tameta nu shaak, ringan nu bhartu, masala khichdi kadhi, dhokla, bajra and makai na rotla, and of course, chaas and papad.

SHOPPING AND UNWINDING

When I need to relax, I don’t have to look too far to find one of the city’s numerous parks. Sayaji Baug is the city’s largest garden and houses a zoo, museum, a planetarium, an amphitheatre, and a toy train. It has good walking tracks, and during festivals, cultural events are held here, with stalls serving local delicacies.

I spy peacocks, woodpeckers, kingfishers, rose-ringed parakeets, and other bird species in Vadodara’s vast open expanses. During Navratri, these fill with a different kind of plumage, with garba revellers flocking to dance into the night. Uttarayan is another festival when the entire city is out celebrating.

Vadodara’s shopping is equally satisfying. For handicrafts and handlooms, visit the Khadi Bhandar (a short walk from Kothi Char Rasta), and head to Baroda Prints for handprinted textiles. Alkapuri has large showrooms for saris and designer chaniya-cholis at shops like Thakur’s and Sequinze.

For more earthy wares, visit the town of Sankheda, 55 kilometres southeast of Vadodara. Here, the Kharadi community makes wooden furniture lacquered in shades of orange and brown. In the city, JJSankheda Furniture in Alkapuri (sankheda furniture.com) carries some of these beautiful pieces, including Gujarati jholas.
This is the Terai, land of the endangered one-horned Indian rhinoceros. It’s a subtropical lowland region in the Himalayan foothills teeming with life. Sitting near the plunge pool on the porch of my villa at the Meghauli Serai safari lodge, I watch a variety of insects hop and thrum around the dry elephant grass. A kingfisher flies past, I hear a call and wonder if it is a barking deer. My luxurious accommodation is at Taj Safaris’ newest jungle property in Meghauli at Chitwan National Park in Nepal.

When it’s time for my jeep safari I walk some 50 feet from my room down to the edge of the resort, which faces a bend in the Rapti River. A canoe and our guides are waiting for us at the bottom of a short flight of stairs. We must cross the river in the canoe to get to the opposite bank where the core area of the UNESCO World Heritage inscribed Chitwan National Park lies. The canoe ride starts in a calm section before the boatman manoeuvres the wooden craft into the fast-flowing Rapti. Before I’ve even registered how lovely the setting is, our keen-eyed wildlife “spotter” Buddhi points out a gharial on a sand bank. It’s only after we travel another 20 feet closer that I spot the fish-eating reptile. So still, it could easily be mistaken for a heap of rocks. But I know we are being watched because as we draw closer, the shy gharial slides gently to the river’s edge and disappears under the grey waters. “Was it a male or female?” I ask. “You’ll have to come back in a dozen years,” naturalist Pradeep Mahato answers light-heartedly. It’s only after the gharial reaches maturity that the male develops a gada or hump on its snout, making it the only crocodile with a visible feature identifying its sex.

On the safari drive we traverse two of Chitwan’s three habitats. We start in the grasslands along the riverbank where we spot a few of the 600 one-horned rhinos that inhabit this park, slowly foraging on the grass. Chitwan is Nepal’s first national park and now a shining example of a conservation success story.

Next, our jeep moves into the riverine forest and within seconds I can feel the temperature drop by at least five degrees. Pradeep points out the smooth trunked rhino apple tree named after the animal’s love for its fruit. We see red silk-cotton or kapok trees with their prickly bark alongside the hardwood sals. The third area of the forest is a Ramsar wetland though we don’t visit it. On our two-hour safari drive we spot at least a dozen one-horned rhinos of different sizes including a little calf. The
The forest is throbbing with birdlife, insects, a variety of deer, and even the Bengal tiger though it remains one of the park’s most elusive beasts. Instead, we see a barasingha deer with very large antlers, a quickly disappearing barking deer, and a variety of birds though I miss seeing the hornbill.

Arriving back hot and dusty from the safari, I’m pleased to see the lodge’s staff waiting on the bank with cold towels and a thirst-quenching lime-and-mint drink. Meals at the restaurant-bar are a pleasure. I try a few dishes of the Newari community, served on a banana leaf placed on a slab of grey slate: chatamari, a flattened momo, gundruk ko jhol, fermented spinach soup, and chicken or oyster-mushroom choyla (cooked with masalas), served with thekri, a lightly sweetened puri with a hint of coconut. Meals at Meghauli Serai can range from a simple porridge before a quick dash for an early morning safari, to an elaborate Tharu thali created from the cuisine of the local Tharu community. This can be accompanied by a dance performance at the faux Tharu village and restaurant created on the property. There’s also Rapti Kinara, a wooden deck overlooking the river where the resort’s chefs whip up a candle-lit barbecue.

To enjoy the forest in a variety of ways the lodge offers safari walks with a naturalist, and an elephant safari on animals that they ensure are well looked after. Guests can also enjoy the elephant safari on animals that they ensure are well looked after. Meals at the restaurant-bar are a pleasure. I try a few dishes of the Newari community, served on a banana leaf placed on a slab of grey slate: chatamari, a flattened momo, gundruk ko jhol, fermented spinach soup, and chicken or oyster-mushroom choyla (cooked with masalas), served with thekri, a lightly sweetened puri with a hint of coconut. Meals at Meghauli Serai can range from a simple porridge before a quick dash for an early morning safari, to an elaborate Tharu thali created from the cuisine of the local Tharu community. This can be accompanied by a dance performance at the faux Tharu village and restaurant created on the property. There’s also Rapti Kinara, a wooden deck overlooking the river where the resort’s chefs whip up a candle-lit barbecue.

To enjoy the forest in a variety of ways the lodge offers safari walks with a naturalist, and an elephant safari on animals that they ensure are well looked after. Guests can also enjoy the company of Anjali Kali, a resident elephant who absolutely loves the water; we feed her and join her when she takes a dip. Besides this, an experience I relish is the chance to have high tea and a quiet evening on a floodplain at the confluence of the Narayani and Rapti rivers.

Despite the lure of the forest, I do manage to get back to my spacious bedroom for a little downtime. Lying on the large distressed-wood four-poster bed, I admire the hand painted mural on the wall. It’s a scene from the jungles around, the work of Durga, a talented local artist.

Unravelling myself from the exquisitely soft pashmina blanket I step into the massive bathroom. A family of three could all be bathing at the same time without bumping into each other in this huge space: One in the clawfoot bathtub, another in the glass-enclosed shower area and the third at the outdoor rain shower. My favourite part of the bathroom is a stool, a section of a tree trunk painted with the stick figures of Tharu art.

The use of local materials like thatched grass roofs, reed or patua mats, and elephant grass carpets gives the resort a warm and inviting feel, while maintaining the stylistness expected at an upmarket property. When you enter the hotel, you walk into a sunken living room that looks out onto a plane of water (the infinity pool), and then to the river and jungle beyond. When I leave, however, I have thoughts only of the bustling grassland, the snort of a rhino, the rumble of an elephant, and the soothing dense green of a flourishing wilderness.

The Vitals

Accommodation

Meghauli Serai has 16 Rapti Villas (doubles low season from ₹12,000, high season from ₹25,000), each with a plunge pool. There are 13 rooms (doubles low season from ₹9,000, high season from ₹18,000) overlooking the Terai grassland (www.tajsafaris.com).

Safari

The resort organises half-day jeep safaris (from ₹2,700 per person) and elephant safaris, canoe rides, and walking safaris (each from ₹800 per person) into Chitwan.

Getting there

The closest airport to the property is Bharatpur (28 km/1 hr on barely-there roads) connected to Kathmandu via Buddha Air and Yeti Airlines (fares from ₹1,950). The resort arranges pick-up and drop services from both airports. The airstrip at Meghauli is likely to reopen soon, making travel to the resort more convenient.

Visa

Indians do not need a visa to travel to Nepal. But they must carry a valid government issued photo ID such as a passport or driver’s licence.

All Meghauli Serai rooms have a hand-painted Tharu art mural on a wall (top left); A wooden canoe (top right) takes visitors on a cruise down the River Rapti; Nepali food is given pride of place at the resort (bottom right); Meals can be served in many outdoor locations (bottom left).
Dubai’s malls are wish-granting hubs, even when the wishes are for snow and penguins in the desert. In addition to over 560 stores featuring a variety of international brands, the Mall of the Emirates holds the Middle East’s first indoor ski centre, Ski Dubai. Snow blankets this 2,42,190-square-foot space where instructors help adults and children learn skiing and snowboarding. Zip liners soar like birds about 50 feet above ground, while bobsled runs and tobogganing hills in the 32,290-square-foot Snow Park keep families entertained. The star attractions of Ski Dubai are however its gentoo and king penguins that come out for marches several times a day.

The city’s cultural pulse can be felt at the mall’s Dubai Community Theatre & Art Centre. It has a 543-seat theatre, 18 art studios, and a gallery that supports emerging experimental artists. Families love Magic Planet, the mall’s indoor entertainment centre with online games, a racing simulator, and RoboCoaster, the robotic arm that takes visitors on a stomach-clenching ride. Not surprisingly, the Mall of the Emirates attracts over 36 million visitors per year (www.malloftheemirates.com).

—Kareena Gianani
Every inch of Milan’s Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II elicits gasps of wonder, from its mosaic floors to the glass-and-cast-iron dome. By day, sunlight floods the mall through its vaulted glass ceilings bringing the friezes and caryatids into sharp focus.

Built in 1867, the four-wing arcade connects Piazza del Duomo and Piazza della Scala, and is famously nicknamed “il salotto di Milano” or Milan’s drawing room. It’s the perfect place to watch elegantly dressed Milanese go about their day, swinging shopping bags from designer labels. Or to spot the elite set soaking in old-world splendour at Savini, the famous gourmet restaurant and bistro that opened in 1867, or Camparino, a bar historically associated with the famous aperitif Campari.

Walking out of this grand arcade, take one last look at the decorative floor mosaics depicting the emblems of Milan, Rome, Florence, and Turin. Chances are you’ll see some visitors step on the privates of the mosaic bull (Turin’s symbol) and spin on their heels. It is believed to bring good luck (www.ingalleria.com/en).

—Kareena Gianani
Spread over a whopping 5.3 million square feet, West Edmonton Mall in Edmonton city, in southwest Canada, is regarded as the largest shopping centre in North America. Beside 800-odd stores and services, the mall has one of the world’s largest indoor amusement parks, a rollercoaster, and an indoor lake. The triple loop rollercoaster in Galaxyland makes thrillseekers whoop with delight. In the Deep Sea Adventures section, visitors marvel at the artificial lake and the replica of the Santa Maria, Christopher Columbus’s famous ship from his first voyage across the Atlantic in 1492. Colourful fish, reptiles, and amphibians abound at Sea Life Caverns, the mall’s underground aquarium. The fun doesn’t end there; there’s also Crystal Labyrinth, the maze of mirrors, an ice skating rink, and thrilling water slides that plummet straight into a gigantic indoor wave pool (www.wem.ca).

—Kareena Gianani
TRAVEL QUIZ
TEST YOUR TRAVEL IQ

1. WHICH RARE MARINE ANIMAL INHABITS THE WATERS OFF ABU DHABI?

2. WHAT DID VENETIAN OFFICIALS BAN FROM ST. MARK’S SQUARE IN 2008?

3. WHICH ENDANGERED ANIMAL IS ENDEMIC TO AND RESIDES IN CHINA’S QIONGLAI AND JIAJIN MOUNTAINS?

4. IN WHICH COUNTRY IS THE PHRASE, “SAME, SAME, BUT DIFFERENT,” MEANING “SIMILAR” COMMONLY USED?

5. WHAT DOES “HONG KONG” MEAN?

6. WHERE CAN ONE SEE THE ROSETTA STONE, WHICH HELPED DECODE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN HIEROGLYPHS?

7. WHERE IS ROCK LEGEND JIM MORRISON’S GRAVE LOCATED?

8. A TOWN CALLED “MONSTER” LIES IN WHICH EUROPEAN NATION?

9. WHICH COUNTRY HOSTS THE BOISTEROUS GUCˇA FESTIVAL, WHERE THOUSANDS OF BRASS BANDS TAKE TO THE STREETS?

ANSWERS
1. DUGONG
2. FEEDING PIGEONS
3. SERBIA
4. PÈRE-LACHAISE CEMETERY, PARIS
5. THE NETHERLANDS
6. THE MUSEUM OF ART DECO, BRUSSELS
7. THE UNITED STATES
8. EGYPT
9. SERBIA