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- Maintain safe distance
- Use Aarogya Setu App

Department of Tourism & Civil Aviation, Block No 28, SDA Complex, Kasumpti, Shimla (H.P).
Email: tourismmin-hp@nic.in ; Website : www.himachaltourism.gov.in
For accommodation and packages, visit :www.hptdc.in
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If the winter of our discontent is here, can the spring of our redemption be far behind? Last month, I was back in Punjab, at the same place I had visited after the lockdown was lifted; a place, therefore, that was special. This time round it was for a meditation retreat. Our monastic routine was simple and stern: wake up at 5am, take a bath, step out in the cold under a canopy of stars and head for meditation and yoga (all participants had undertaken a Covid test). That’s how we rang in dawn every day—deep in dhyana. When we stepped out for a break and some much-needed coffee, we spotted frost on the ground. The day continued with sessions of pranic healing and more meditation and yoga in the evening. New friendships were forged and there was a budding sense of community. It was amazing. I have returned calmer, focussed, self-aware and a tad happier—as my beaming portrait will confirm.

It was a good way to bring 2020—a year that has been cursed like no other—to a close. I won’t add to the cacophony of complaints. For me, 2020 was a year of contemplation, a reaffirmation of hope in the face of impossible odds, an opportunity to spend more time at home with family, renew friendships, realise the immateriality of material possessions and recharge my batteries. And—most importantly—appreciate the value of travel which is far beyond that of a mere ‘holiday’.

This issue we look at the face of travel in 2021, as the world heads back to normalcy. Our features, on destinations like Binsar and Pangot, and lake-trekking in the beautiful vale of Kashmir, encourage quiet getaways far from the madding crowds. Here’s to a great year of travel, folks!
Bon Appétit!

We dug deep into the corners of the internet to round up some of the best food shows you can watch right now.

No Reservations
Anthony Bourdain • Join the world-renowned chef as he uncovers the best of cuisines across the world.

Uncharted
Gordon Ramsay • A reality series showcasing local indigenous foods from around the world.

Ugly Delicious
David Chang • A culinary docuseries that uses food as a vehicle to talk about cultural diversity.

Salt Fat Acid Heat
Samin Nosrat • Based on the bestselling book, it’s essentially a guide to the basic elements of cooking.

For more such TV recommendations head to our website.

New Year, New Hopes

Outlook Traveller has been an escape route this year. It’s a weekend staple for me and my family. What I love the best is the choice of destinations. They are always so refreshing and fascinating. I personally loved the pieces on Kabul and Kashmir. I was not only intrigued but also itching to pack my bags and get exploring. I can't even begin to describe how amazed I was with the beauty of Kashmir in autumn! I cannot wait to grab my first copy of the year and see what the team has in store for 2021!

Sanket Gokhale, Puri

Coffee plantations, tea gardens and orange groves. What’s your pick? Kodagu or Coorg is where you’ll find a break from your monotonous city life.

@travelwithapsid The longing that is in the whistle of a faraway train

@wander_with_himanshu Red eyes suit so few

@my_travelaries Reflection is the muse of many

VIDEO Of Monasteries, Mountains And Mist

POLL TO PICTURE
Though there are no wrong answers, these will definitely make you think hard about your opinions

SAUERKRAUT KIMCHI
PAD THAI LO MEIN
HUMMUS GUACAMOLE
DEEP DISH THIN CRUST
RAVIOLI DUMPLINGS
WAFFLES PANCAKES

LETTER OF THE MONTH

@illuminati50333
I've been following @SadhguruJV for many years. It's amazing to see his dedication towards indigenous people. They've endured years of pain, anger and trauma

@imMrSolutionist
This was such an insightful interview. I'm glad you caught up with him. I'm really looking forward to learn what America looked like centuries ago and how the natives lived there
Experience design is all about transforming existing assets through inclusive innovations. At the core of Odisha Tourism’s mission to ‘reveal India’s best kept secret’ is to enrich the experience, towards which each of its initiatives is oriented.

The most outstanding outcome has been the Eco Retreat, conceived as eastern India’s foremost glamping festival. This peak season offering available till 28 February 2021, has been stepped up to five unique locations in its second edition—Bhitarkanika National Park, Daringbadi, Hirakud Reservoir, Konark’s Ramchandi Beach and Satkosia Tiger Reserve. The Eco Retreat, which offers luxurious stays with a host of activities included in its itineraries, has received a bumper response, with the last two weeks of December witnessing 100% occupancy.

The most enjoyable route to discovering Odisha’s hidden jewels is through the state’s excellent road network. The ‘Odisha by Road’ campaign offers tourists diverse itineraries ranging from two to five nights, through beaches, forests, hill stations, tribal hinterlands, cities, varied culinary experiences, heritage, adventure, ethnic encounters, arts and handicrafts, leisure, wildlife and even ecotourism.

Holidays in Odisha promise to be unprecedented in 2021, with Odisha Tourism introducing several niche experiences to be activated. Key among them is the introduction of cruise tourism in the state’s beautiful wetlands—from the iconic Chilika Lake and Bhitarkanika Backwaters to the Mahanadi River and Hirakud Reservoir. “Our plans are progressing fast, with catamarans being taken up for augmentation into night cruise vessels. The Silver City Boat Club will also be inaugurated soon, offering tourists a never-before experienced
Commissioner-cum-Secretary Tourism, Mr Vishal Dev, IAS.

Cuisine will be among the best aspects of travel to Odisha, with OTDC’s foray into premium fine dining in Odia cuisine under the brand name of Nimantran. Three restaurants are set to open in Bhubaneswar, Puri and Sambalpur, which will push up the exotic quotient of the underrated offering.

Not far behind is heritage hospitality, which is seldom associated with Odisha. Several heritage homestays are open to tourists, hosted by erstwhile royal families—from Belgadia Palace in Mayurbhanj to Killa Aul Palace near Bhitarkanika, from Dhenkanal and Gajalaxmi Palaces in the centre of the state to Parikud Palace in the quaint Satapada to Kalahandi Palace in the state’s enigmatic west. Several more heritage hotels may open this year, with the government encouraging this niche experience through a scheme for heritage hotels.

Community-managed ecotourism—Odisha’s most championed segment—is set for an aesthetic overhaul, with the Tourism and Forest & Environment departments working in close coordination to enhance the quality of accommodations and services, while preserving sustainability. The state aims to double its capacity of nature camps from over 300 at present to 600 in the coming years.

Finally arriving at the shores of Kalinga, beach tourism has received a fillip, with the Blue-Flag Certification of Puri’s Golden Beach. Odisha Tourism is on an ambitious drive to get five other beaches certified—Pir Jahania, Haripur, Pati Sonapur, Niladri and Muhan.

For more, visit ecoretreat.odishatourism.gov.in
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The mausoleum containing the grave of the Mughal courtier has been opened to the public after 1,75,000 days of work by master craftsmen. Many seem to have forgotten about the versatile Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan, who wielded the sword with as much élan as the pen, and was one of the nine jewels in Mughal emperor Akbar’s court. However, with the restoration and conservation of the mausoleum, memories of the great man have been revived. On December 17, 2020, the tomb, which is located in the Nizamuddin neighbourhood of Delhi, was opened to the public after an intensive conservation work executed by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) with support from the InterGlobe Foundation and in partnership with the ASI. According to Ratish Nanda, CEO, Aga Khan Trust for Culture India, “This is not only the largest conservation effort ever undertaken at any monument of national importance in India, but also the first-ever privately undertaken conservation effort under the Corporate Social Responsibility programme.” He also emphasised that Indian heritage cannot be the responsibility of the government alone.

The southern and western façades of the mausoleum have been illuminated now. A permanent museum gallery has also been set up within the premises.
The state recently reopened its doors to tourists after nearly nine months. In a bid to boost its tourism sector, Meghalaya reopened its borders to travellers on 21 December, 2020. Visitors are required to download the Meghalaya Tourism app and register on it. This will generate an e-invite which needs to be presented upon arrival. Visitors are also expected to submit a negative COVID-19 test, taken not more than 72 hours before arrival.

As per authorities, RT-PCR, TruNat, and CBNAAT test results are also acceptable at the entry points.

Open Doors

Poland

Poland's Deepsot will be scuba divers' new play arena

Poland can now claim to own the world's deepest swimming pool, Deepsot. The project took almost two years to get constructed. While it might not be an exact replica of the ocean, there are mock Mayan ruins installed underwater. The pool is intended to function as a training site for scuba divers.

A New Realm

Prominent cities like Varanasi, Jaipur, Bodh Gaya and Fatehpur Sikri have been a part of Unesco's World Heritage City list previously.
THE ROYAL ART AFFAIR

Spotting opulent finds, Cymmon’s Auction House is a one-stop shop for everything rare

Finding the rarest of the rare collectibles takes a special and a keen eye. And spotting, collecting and cherishing noteworthy art pieces is not everybody’s cup of tea. Bridging the gap between those who create these rare pieces and ones who cherish them, is Cymmon’s Auctioneers LLP. A full scale auction house, the brand is the brainchild of Krishna Moolagundam, who himself is an avid art collector.

Krishna’s decade-old experience and association with the art and diamond industry and a long cherished plan lead to the inception of Cymmon’s. In a world where technology, online markets and digital buying and selling are a rage, Cymmon’s brings the Midas touch by bridging the gap between diverse cultures living in the same era.

The auction house is aimed at (and very successfully managing) bringing together collectors, galleries, museums and individuals. Always on the lookout for that notable find, the auction house looks at various valuable items across modern and contemporary art and artefacts—such as watches, gems, jewellery, books, wines and much more.

Cymmon’s has a very active global network with representatives across Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata New York, London, Dubai, Hong Kong and Shenzhen. To ensure ease of accessibility, the brand also makes every action available through their official website and application. Those interested just have to tune in to a medium and can get access to catalog viewing and bidding. Not only this, patrons can also be a part of the private sales as the whole experience has been replicated for a seamless and accessible view right from the comfort of your house, work space or any other preferred location, to your fingertips.

Their exhibitions and auctions are one of the most sought after, not just in the country but across the globe. In an attempt to bring the best to their patrons right at the comfort of their homes, Cymmon’s has an upcoming auction on January 21, 2021. Featuring hand-picked South Asian art and jewellery, the online auction will be an ongoing one till January 22 and requires a prior registration to bid.

Some of the highlights of the exhibit include the legendary F.N. Souza’s untitled work which is an oil on canvas; Zarina Hashmi’s piece titled Wall, which is relief paper from collaged wood on handmade paper; along with a carefully selected 262 carat natural Colombian emerald bead necklace; and a GIA certified light pink, pear shaped diamond ring, supported by oval stones and 18k white gold.

For more info, visit cymmons.com

“Cymmon’s is a long-held dream of mine come true; to unite like-minded people and introduce the organization as a one-stop destination to appreciate, engage, and own items that bespeak glory like nothing else. It is my strongest belief that every single individual or organisation who comes to Cymmon’s picks something rare and unique and owns it with utmost delight and profound liking, like I have been doing all this while.”

— Krishna Moolagundam, Founder and Director, Cymmon’s
**Bhujangasana: Cobra Pose**

A back bending pose which is also part of the traditional *surya namaskar* sequence, *bhujangasana* reflects the posture of a cobra that has its hood raised. Considered one of the most powerful asanas, it can help reduce belly fat. While during the initial stages, the practitioner is simply trying to build his/her physical capacity, with time, one starts visualising and imitating a cobra including the sound of its breath.

**Steps to Bhujangasana**

1. Lie on your stomach with your toes flat on the floor and forehead resting on the ground.

2. Keep your legs close together, with your feet and heels lightly touching each other.

3. Place your hands (palms downwards) under your shoulders, keeping your elbows parallel and close to your torso.

4. While taking a deep breath in, slowly lift your head, chest and abdomen while keeping your navel intact on the floor.

5. Pull your torso back and off the floor with the support of your hands.

6. Keep breathing with awareness, as you curve your spine vertebra by vertebra. If possible, straighten your arms by arching your back as much as possible; tilt your head back and look up.

7. Keep your shoulders relaxed. With regular practice you will be able to deepen the stretch.

8. Ensure that your feet are still close together. Don’t overdo the stretch or overstrain yourself.
On Trend: Beer Yoga

Looks like beer yoga is finally here to stay. A unique health and fitness practice that lets you grab a pint and lose the extra flab simultaneously, beer yoga is carried out usually in an hour-long session where traditional yoga poses are performed by incorporating the usage of beer bottles as props. Take a sip from your beer bottle and twist and turn your body in diverse postures. The practice is stepping into all forms of group activities all around the world. Started by certified yoga instructors and ardent beer drinkers, the fitness activity is termed as ‘fun’ but ‘no joke’.

Pandemic Self-Care

We are all in a very vulnerable state these days. This is the most crucial time to take care of your health and not leave it on the back burner. It’s imperative that we spend at least a few minutes in a day focussing on self-care. A few moments of meditation or just sitting silent can help you calm those nerves and get your thoughts under control. Some physical activity throughout the day can really boost your mood and make you more productive. All you have to do is dedicate some time to yourself.

— Radhika Bose, a yoga enthusiast and fitness blogger practicing yoga for more than 10 years
I sit back to reflect on what all happened in the bygone year and how that will change the nature of travel for me (and perhaps for you) in the future.

Exactly a year back, I was celebrating the new year in Lisbon, walking the cobblestoned streets of the Alfama district, the most picturesque labyrinth that I had ever seen. I remember taking the bright yellow ascensors—the 19th-century funicular system that Lisboetas used to go up and down the steep hills—standing shoulder to shoulder with the locals and jostling for space in the crowded tram. Gone are those days as we enter a new reality, which I suspect is here to stay for the years to come, if not forever.

One big change for me, for instance, has been to ditch air travel completely. While it’s not impossible to travel by air even in the current times, the new restrictions and lack of availability of flights have made me consider anything but absolutely essential air travel, as dispensable. Doing so, of course, meant that I could not travel to far-flung places. As a result, down the drain went our plans to travel to Seattle and Australia this year.

Itchy feet, just as mine are, meant that I could not avoid exploring new destinations altogether. A realisation dawned—it had been just so easy to hop on a flight and travel to places halfway across the globe that I had completely missed probing my immediate surroundings. I need to dig where I stand, and that’s what I’ve been doing the past few months.

Doing so surprised me, for I came to realise how little I knew about the place where I live. For instance, only a few hours’ drive from the Skåne region of Sweden is the Unesco World Heritage Site of Stevns Klint in Denmark. On these cliffs, one can see evidence of the hypothesis that the sudden mass extinction of three-fourths of the Earth’s species, including dinosaurs, some 60 million years ago, was caused by the impact of an asteroid. The corroboration is nestled in a very thin reddish layer of iridium settled between two layers of rocks. Such quantities of iridium are not usually found on earth and are speculated to have come from outer space. So here, next door to me was this well-preserved archaeological evidence of one of the greatest mysteries of life on earth and I had not managed to prioritise it this far.

They say that travelling is a great way to learn. However, we have inherently associated travelling with travelling far. But that need not be so, as I discovered this year. I was forced to reduce my range but I still found hidden local gems.
**GULMARG** Water under the bridge has a whole new meaning
@whereisafan

**SPITI** Winters are surreal when you’re basking under the sun
@neha.images

**NAGGAR** A winter retreat nestled amid the woods
@himalayas.in

**LADAKH** Galloping all the way on a snowy trail
@tashi_nurboo

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**Blanket of White**

As the nip in the air turns into biting winds you know winter has officially arrived! These images capture the essence of all the glow and charm.

@travel2dare

**KEDARNATH TEMPLE**
The snowscape adding an extra dose of tranquility

**UTTARKASHI** All in time for the winter solstice
@nilmaniparth

**NARKANDA** Perhaps it’s a frozen state of mind
@9mukesh

**KHAJJAR** Straight out of a dreamy winter wonderland
@nikita_singh_tomar
IN ALL ITS GLORY

A blend of nature, wildlife, recreational activities and an architectural marvel in itself, the Statue of Unity at Kevadia has taken eco-tourism in India to a whole new level.
Spread across the western coast of India, Gujarat draws its name from the term ‘Gurjara’, an Indian subtribe. Formed in 1960 on the basis of a language, Gujarat has plenty up its sleeve for all kinds of travellers.

With Jamnagar’s royal palace, Ahmedabad’s Sabarmati Ashram, Krishna’s abode at the Dwarkadhish Temple and footprints of an ancient Indus city at Lothal, Gujarat, often caters to travellers from all walks of life.

If you speak the language of food, nothing gets better than the Gujarati cuisine with khandvi, dhokla, methi ka thepla, shrikhand and dal dhokli. The state is also big on celebratory and festive cheer in the form of Navratri, Uttarayan and Rann Utsav celebrations. Adding another feather to its hat, the state is now home to the sprawling and mighty Statue of Unity at Kevadia.

A small tribal village in the Narmada district, Kevadia is where the mighty Sardar Sarovar Dam is situated. Even though the dam has been a tourist attraction for a long time, the installation of this one-of-a-kind statue has transformed the area. The recent tourism project has not only garnered national, but also international acclaim.

**AN ARCHITECTURAL MARVEL**

Scaling the skies, the statue is approximately 600 feet tall and is the latest addition to India’s history of remarkable architecture and one of a kind across the globe.

The statue has been erected as a tribute to the Indian visionary and leader, Sardar Vallabhai Patel who was known for his zealous patriotism, ideology of unity and ardent belief in inclusive growth. The statue is not just the world’s tallest and an engineering marvel in itself, but also a visual narrative of the

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About 100 times the height of a five-and-a-half-ft. tall person, one can see the statue from as far away as 8km.
sentiment of unity’. 

Constructed by engineering giant Larsen and Tourbo and built in a record time span of 33 months, the statue was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to commemorate Sardar Patel’s 143rd birth anniversary.

Sculpted from this very sentiment, it is built using 5000 tonnes of iron from farming implements and soil collected from various villages across India. The base is a three level magnificent structure of bronze, equipped with the world’s fastest lifts, a mezzanine, Tent City for a comfortable and luxurious stay and a memorial garden.

Additionally, for a wholesome experience travellers can spot food stalls, gift shops and retail kiosks inside the canopied public plaza, which overlooks the river and the Statue of Unity. A large hall here also exhibits the contributions of Sardar Patel. An amalgam of remarkable engineering and an important historical reflection, the statue speaks volumes about expressions of the sentiment of unity.

BEYOND THE STATUE
The monumental structure is not just an architectural marvel but also a one-of-a-kind experience. Travellers can engage in the magnificent light and sound show, projected at the Statue every evening, except on Mondays. The show is accompanied by a narration of Sardar Patel’s life and his contributions to the unification and consolidation of the Indian states.

For the lovers of nature there is the Unity Glow Garden which is an optical illusion arena spread over approximately 3.61 acres of land. And if looking to take back eco-friendly and sustainable souvenirs, get your hands on seedlings of plants from the nearby Ekta Nursery.

If you are a wildlife enthusiast, the jungle safari at the zoological park will allow you to witness exotic animals and birds. And for those who are interested in palaeontology, the Dino Trail takes
on a visual tour of the recent dinosaur excavations in the Narmada Valley. A botanical garden called the Cactus Garden also creates a beautiful desert ecosystem for the visitors. Vishwa Van, as the name suggests, is another garden created using shrubs, herbs and trees native to different countries and continents and is a reflection of the Indian belief of ‘Unity in Diversity’.

The Sardar Sarovar Dam, the third highest concrete dam in India and the second largest in the world, lies at the heart of your visit to the Statue of Unity. Activities at the dam are plenty and will often leave you spoilt for choice. Travellers can engage in watersports like river rafting and boating, or unwind with a serenading boat ride at the Panchmul Lake. As an eco-tourism initiative by the Government of India, one can also enjoy viewing the Statue of Unity, while on a river cruise.

Falling under the eco-tourism initiative at Kevadia, the adventure zone at Zarvani, is a popular cycling spot, along with a mesmerising waterfall. The Khalwani eco-tourism site, near the Sardar Sarovar Dam, is where you can unwind while enjoying campfires, an amphitheatre, river rafting, herbal colour kits for children, tree houses, a children’s play area and camping in tents.

**NATURE’S BOUNTY**

If being on the road feels like home, then the Kevadia bus tour—through the Circular Route covering 17 sightseeing spots—has been crafted for you.

Nature, healing and sustainability walk hand-in-hand here. The Arogya Van (herbal garden) is another attraction waiting to be explored. Spread over a span of around 17 acres, the Arogya Van comprises five gardens—Garden of Colours, Aroma Garden, Yoga Garden, Alba Garden, and the Leutea Garden—flourishing in medicinal plants. Another enchanting tourist spot is the Butterfly Garden, at the Valley of Flowers, lying...
between the Vindhyas and the Satpura ranges, that houses more than 80 species of butterflies.

Not just nature and its environs, but the world’s first technology driven theme park also finds a home here. The Children’s Nutrition Park is based on the theme of reinforcing the importance of nutrition in the growth years and making the concept interesting for children.

The lovers of traditional Indian handicrafts will also feel overjoyed at the Ekta Mall in the premises, which is a one-stop-shop for buying handicrafts and handlooms. Additionally, there is also a souvenir shop here, along with food courts offering both, international brand outlets and delicacies from the Indian cuisine.

Another major highlight of this experience is the Tent City, which is a luxury housing abode, with 250 tents, including 75 luxury, 75 deluxe and 100 standard ones. The tent city makes use of solar lighting, is completely energy neutral and an environment-friendly place to enjoy living at. Book an overnight stay here and wake up to breathtaking views.

MORE TO EXPLORE
The Statue of Unity, with its magnificent three-level base and a plethora of eco-tourism initiatives, is a destination definitely worth visiting. Not just the premises but also the surroundings make for an offbeat excursion for those looking to escape the grind.

Dediapada, a tehsil in the Narmada district, is home to a variety of wildlife and a beautiful forest rest house. Close to the Sardar Sarovar Dam, is the Ratanmahal Sloth Bear Sanctuary. Find yourself spotting the rarest of the rare species here, such as the civet, sloth bears, four-horned antelopes and a variety of birds. The Shoolpaneshwar Wildlife Sanctuary, near the dam, is also home to the rare flying squirrels.

HOW TO REACH
The Statue of Unity at Kevadia is approximately 90kms from Vadodara, formerly Baroda. Home to the Gaekwad dynasty, and the third largest city of Gujarat. Vadodara is known for its Gujarati khichdi, and is well connected to neighbouring states of Gujarat, via road and rail. The airport at Vadodara has daily and weekly flights to other major cities in the country. Buses and taxis are also easily available here. For an unparalleled experience, fly via India’s first sea plane air route from Sabarmati Riverfront, directly to the Statue of Unity.

The statue is an architectural marvel located an a river island, facing the Narmada Dam, and is equipped with the world’s fastest lifts.
explore

WHAT’S IN STORE FOR 2021? 26
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Starting from clear at dawn to sea green to light blue to inky blue by evening, the lakes of Kashmir signify calmness, serenity, peacefulness and tranquillity. Chir Sar, a lake situated in the north of Kopsar Nag in Jammu and Kashmir is set at an elevation of 3,823 metres. Nestled high up in the mountains, it beckons travellers from far and wide.
As the world inches closer to renewing the normal ways of our existence,

AMEYA BUNDELLU

gazes into the crystal ball and tells us what travel in 2021 will look like
Beginning 2021

On a note of Hope

As I write this piece

A family friend is doing a WFA (work-from-anywhere) in a city in Maharashtra called Shrivardhan. Amongst a variety of beach destinations in Maharashtra and located in the Raigad district of the state, Shrivardhan is a standout. Against a backdrop of steep limestone cliffs, simple and elegant bungalow resorts dot crescents of palm-shaded, bleached-white sand. I can imagine him taking a leisurely walk on the pristine beaches under the early morning sun and cycling through a vast, yet somewhat empty countryside, slowing down to let cattle cross the two-lane road and stopping to order lunch from a local eatery. He is sending me emails and posting Facebook updates and I can feel his excitement and sense of wonder.

Yes the world has changed beyond recognition. And for most people any travel plans in the future remain uncertain with a majority of them living in countries with travel restrictions amid COVID-19. However, people still want an escape from the mundane. And there still is really no downside to taking a holiday, except for maybe fatigued driving, a little jet lag and a dented bank account. Now isn’t that a small price to pay for a multi-sensory experience even in these troubled times? And most importantly does this give us the opportunity to cultivate a slightly out of the box approach to travel that probably defies convention? Especially since travel remains a mix of the unfamiliar and the predictable—a sort of a reminder that even in this global age of a Homogenising COVID-19 world there are still remarkable and wonderful things to behold—some that I hope still imbue that same simple sense of wonder.

So here goes, a few aspects that one needs to keep in mind in 2021. After all travel is also about opening up your mind and probably this is the best time to push boundaries as well.

Look Beyond the Obvious

I for one equate wanderlust to wanderlove something that runs through my veins. And to quote Winston Churchill, “I have never felt an hour spent in the seat of an airplane or a bus or a train was ever an hour wasted.” As a child getting introduced to travel, I realised that the whole big world awaited us every time we locked the front door and piled into the railway station to make
that mandatory trip to our native village, just an hour’s drive from Pune. And what caught my attention over a period of time was the far reaches of an India so big and exotic that it almost felt like make-believe. Drawing from a lifetime of wandering and while following one’s heart and gut when deciding on a place of travel, the lockdown has made most of us realise that there are places within India, even within our respective states that were simply never on our radar. These are a combination of both grand and humble, iconic and sometimes totally unsung. Some of these hyperlocal gems within gems, as I would prefer to call them, were poorly equipped to welcome tourists but today they can guarantee visits that can be a revelation. Yes, we all would want to save these for another day, years from now once you’ve seen and experienced the touristy, popular and the conventional. But as uncertain as the current times are, how many more opportunities are we going to have to compile that slightly unconventional, eclectic and all-encompassing list of some far-flung gems that tick all required boxes given the present scenario. To look beyond the obvious. Yes it’s a challenge for sure, but I believe it is a whole lot of fun as well.

It could just be an untrammeled and lovely island overlooked by tourists for decades or simply a drive that guarantees a scenic odyssey. Look beyond popular destinations to offbeat places in states with tremendous natural beauty.

And also much more than just a visceral response to India and its wonders. So in 2021, revel in the unexplored. By all means do your research on critical parameters like safety and hygiene, but be rest assured that you will enjoy the sense of excitement when sharing a new place, discovery or a secret. It could just be an untrammeled and lovely island overlooked by tourists for decades or simply a drive that guarantees a scenic odyssey. Look beyond popular destinations to offbeat places in states with tremendous natural beauty such as Maharashtra, Odisha and Chattisgarh. Help it catch the world’s attention. Now is the time.

Coming from so many years of travel, I almost seem to have cultivated an internal meter now - a sort of a radar that sets off an alert when I approach a new experience, be it a homestay, a luxury hotel, a local restaurant, at times grand, humble, sometimes iconic and even surprisingly unsung. And mostly it distinguishes itself from the ordinary, just quietly waiting for my attention. At times generic but sometimes personalised without it being both planned or unplanned. As a traveller I have realised a wide world of experiences await us every time we pack our bags and are raring to go.

While travel contributes to making us a better and more aware person, it’s travel with those little personal touches that I believe we should cherish as both a privilege and a gift in 2021. Arduous and challenging. Not really! Not when everyone worth their salt is competing with each other to offer a grab-bag of wondrous options to travellers. And then getting them to try a new experience to lift their spirits and lighten them up. Simply put, just bring
a smile to their face amid the gloom and doom. This then will be the year of hyper-personalised travel.

Now this is also an opportunity of a lifetime for hotels and state tourism boards to position their offerings in a culturally relevant way that is completely unique and unprecedented and truly show the best of their potential. Not only does this capture the spirit of the current times but also comes with a sense of responsibility while ensuring social distancing parameters remain in place. So what are you waiting for? Go get that totally exclusive, maybe solo, maybe not amazing socially distancing holiday of a lifetime in 2021.

No better time than this to Embrace Immersive Travel

My friend decided to move to a small place in Shrivardhan, where an old traditional house was being converted into a homestay and he now (temporarily) owns a boat and a bicycle. Him and his wife chose to move to someplace local at least for the time being, thereby spending more time in a single place instead of just scouring multiple destinations. While they are open to trying other places as well they want to stay in this place longer than usual so that they end up trying everything local that they always wanted to, including learning the finer nuances of the local cuisine (Shrivardhan is an absolute seafood lover’s delight). In fact, they have begun sourcing directly from farmers, fishermen, and artisans to get a complete sense of their way of life. They have already spent time discovering places off the beaten track, while interacting and mingling freely with locals along the way.

In the process, over a period of time they are hoping to contribute to the local economy, keep their carbon footprint low and build a deeper connection with the place. All in all a truly immersive experience at their own pace while slowly discovering its natural beauty. While they wanted to do this for the longest time possible, never was this a priority item on their travel bucket list and one day, a couple of months back they just decided to take the plunge.

The key to travel in 2021 then is an approach that each one of us needs to take with a fresh eye and an inexhaustible reservoir of both patience and enthusiasm. Combined with an unflappable outlook and an optimist’s soul. This while nurturing a new found appreciation for everything that you are lucky enough to feel and experience.
ON THE WINGS OF FREEDOM

*** Nature Treks ***
Discover the most scenic hiking trails

*** Shutterbug’s Delight ***
Capture the feathered beauties in motion

*** Forested Landscape ***
For when you’re in search of solitude and solace

PANGOT
Conservation Reserve nestled on a secluded long ridge above Nainital is a bird lover’s paradise. It is also a nature lover’s haven, with some of the oldest preserved forests of Kumaon straddling this rich belt. Its serene and unspoilt beauty lies undisturbed as it falls off the sightseeing circuit from Nainital, leaving only the passionate birders and solitude seeking individuals to visit. I’d like to believe that I fall into the latter category as I have visited the area not just once but thrice.

Pangot, a small village here is the main hub where most of the lodges of the reserve are located. This time I was heading for the very first birding lodge of India and naturally Pangot’s oldest—the Jungle Lore Birding Lodge.

It takes years of letting wilderness take over to get a true forest feel. Being over 20 years old, Jungle Lore wore its years and its forest feel well. Four cottages that were named after the various pheasants stood nestled in thickets of bushes and trees. Situated on...
the edge of an old oak forest, all kinds of birds frequented the property.

Mohit Aggarwal, the owner, is himself a passionate wildlife and birding expert, who has made remarkable strides in training programs for guides over the years and has worn the conservation cap well. He started the ‘Zero-Waste Pangot Initiative’ with ‘Chintan’, a non-profit group to formulate a plan for waste segregation and disposal. The idea was to also make Pangot plastic free. Several hotel owners have since joined the drive. The other hallmark of his properties is limiting the demands on fragile natural surroundings by making small boutique resorts.

I had gifted myself a Nikon Monarch binocular set only a few months back and Pangot felt like the ideal place for honing my skills to get me going. Little did I know that I was enrolling into a full fledged birding course with the resident naturalist Mahesh Rajput, who was half my age and twice as knowledgeable, at least about the feathered fiends!

It was then a good omen when I turned a bend on the ridge top road only to see a flock of Khaleej pheasants scuttle across the road, enroute to their morning water point somewhere in the dense jungle below. This road that leads to Pangot gets enveloped by forest near Kilbury and continues for 27 kilometres all the way to the last of three British era forest rest houses at Kunjakharak, where it ends. It is a mesmerising ridge top scenic drive that cuts through a sanctuary teeming with birds, leopards, barking deer, civet cats and goral amid a host of other mammals. With 580 recorded bird species, including resident and migratory birds, visits separated by the seasons can bring in great birding opportunities to the table for those looking to spend some quality time in the company of these winged beasts. The winter months from November to March remain the prime seasons for bird watching as the migratory birds coming in from colder climes alongside the residents make for abundant sightings.

After a quick breakfast at the lodge I headed for the hilltop open air temple of Brahmasthali in the midst of this sanctuary, a favourite hour-long walk I have indulged in on every visit. This one wasn’t going to be an exception, except I had Mahesh to show me birds along the way. The walk itself which is a steep hour-long climb felt like a cake walk, immersed as I was in spotting birds. If the rufous-bellied niltava with its brilliant blue crown and blue and orange wing bars and belly was a colourful distraction, the flock of scarlet minivets, a small passerine bird with glaring scarlett (male) and deep yellows (female) dazzled like jewels on the pines.

Brahmasthali is an enchanted spot on a high point of the ridge and offers spectacular views of the Shivalik Ranges and the higher range of perennial snow capped peaks to the north, including Nanda Devi, Trishul, Nanda Kot to name a few. It is an open air roofless temple top with an array of old idols adorning it and a very special 16-headed serpent made of a single slab granite that sits with its aged weight to one corner. The place is energising and the forest of oak, rhododendrons and pines leading to it is quite magical in the flowering season of mid March to April.

The other spectacular hike was to the Cheena peak also called Naina peak at 2,615 metres. Heading gradually upwards through a bespoke forest of very old rhododendrons and oaks it reaches the lovely hill top over a gradual two hour ascent and offers the best view of the mango-shaped Naina Lake and the hill town of Nainital that has developed around it. The return path to the Kilbury Forest Rest House is the quieter, more off beat path down to the Pangot road.

If you don’t mind less comforts and simple food made by the chowkidar, this rest house is really the best place to stay in the reserve. Built by the British in 1890 the forest rest houses of the Naina Devi Reserve enjoy great locations and offer good birding opportunities. The Kilbury Rest House, the first in line, 12 kilometres before Pangot is the ideal retreat. Surrounded by tall deodars, Himalayan cypress and oaks it offers a grand view of the higher snowies. The non stop chirrup of birds and surrounding forest paths makes it an exceptional gem!

I had only two days at Pangot. With birding topping my agenda we spent the following day doing just that. The road to Kunjakharak revealed a prized gem—the Koklass pheasant, also the name of my cabin at Jungle Lore and the most reclusive of the three resident pheasants here alongside the Cheer and Khaleej. Pit stops on the road led to many sightings—the peregrine falcon perched on a cliff ledge with the common kestrels gliding languidly in the skies above. The woodpecker point near the Vinayak Forest Rest House did not disappoint. We spotted our fair share with the rufous-bellied woodpecker, Himalayan...
The black-lored tit, a resident breeder
The blue whistling thrush found along the Himalaya
The lasting gaze of the shy and nocturnal brown wood owl
The distinctive Khaleej pheasant in the foothills
Scaly-breasted munia, a popular cagebird

The black-lored tit, a resident breeder
Shikra, the red-eyed urban raptor
Along the Pangot trail through the reserve
Walking up to the Brahmassthali Temple
The vibrant and vivid turquoise-blue verditer flycatcher
catching a glimpse of the winged wonders at Churani
bells decked up at the Brahmasthali Temple
woodpecker and the greater yellow nape all frolicking about their business relentlessly boring into tree trunks. Ahead of Pangot, Mahesh was dextrous in finding the resident brown wood owl as it sat firmly on a tree branch napping. The claws clasp the branch so steadfast that even a storm will not make them fall off when asleep, a feature common to most birds.

I spent the afternoon at the lodge chatting with the very knowledgeable manager Bhuvan Bisht and peering into the artefacts that adorned the walls and spaces of the tiny and very charming dining hut. A log book of birds spotted in the area doubled up as a feedback journal on sightings and reviews by ecstatic birders who had visited from all over the world. The cottage rooms were tasteful and simple with beautiful sketches adorning the walls and a sit out balcony to each cottage. But I was restless for the outdoors to cap off my last evening at another birding hot spot of the area.

Foraging amid the upper branches of high trees it was not always easy to spot the birds, which is what we had spent the better part of the day doing. For the evening Mahesh decided on the Churani village point. We headed a kilometre and a half below Pangot where a vast bowl immersed in dense forest and sporadic villages perched in their midst opened out. Mahesh who had a keen ear for bird calls stopped us just short of the Hanuman temple. We had chanced upon a hunting pack—an assembly of birds foraging in a pocket. To know that birds of different feathers do flock together was a revelation and a visual treat. All kinds of colourful plumes flitted from tree to tree—finches, flycatchers, fantails, forktails, wagtails and thrushes. The striking great barbet looked pristine in its perch on a high branch. Satiated with the sightings in two days, 56 different birds in all, I strolled leisurely on the forested path ahead of the temple. Mahesh’s nudge broke my reverie. The grey-crowned prinia was scuttling about in the bushes. It is a globally threatened rare species of which Mahesh had so far spotted only two. This time there were three. He was pleased with the statistic. “It means they are breeding”, he exalted with a smile. On that infectious good note I bid Pangot goodbye. There would definitely be a fourth visit and more as I was by now completely hooked to the deeply immersive and meditative experience of birding. To witness the very hand of creation at its vibrant best, was a privilege. For when the birds reveal themselves to us we are lucky to have spotted them.

How to reach Delhi to Pangot via Nainital (315km by road). You can either board the Kathgodam Shatabdi or the overnight Ranikhet Express. Pangot is nearly 50km from Kathgodam

Getting around Local cabs are available from ₹2000 per day. The sanctuary has a secluded road cutting right across the ridge. Besides this there are several walking trails as well

Where to Stay

- **Jungle Lore Birding Lodge** is the first birding lodge of India. It has four cottages with rooms built like British bungalows and located on a hillside overlooking the vast open forest
- **Pinewood Cottage** is 15km from Nainital and offers facilities like bird watching, trekking, rock climbing, rafting, and night safari
- **Kilbury Forest Rest House**, built by the British, is equipped with all modern amenities. The walk from Pangot to Kilbury Forest Rest House is very popular as it traverses through thick oak, pine, bamboo, cedar and rhododendron forests

- Do not play recorded bird sounds to attract birds. This causes undue stress on the birds and interferes with their normal activities.
THE MAGNIFICENT LAND OF FORESTS

Home to some of the country’s most incredible spots, the spectacular state of Jharkhand beckons you with its unparalleled charm and serene landscapes

Jharkhand is a state with immense natural beauty, which is also evident from its name, literally translating to the ‘land of forests’. In a world of checklist-style tourism, where pictures of moments are valued more than the moment itself, Jharkhand allows one to step back, relax and soak in its charm.

The state is not just home to forests that haven’t been chartered and are virtually unknown but also lush hills, with a myriad of animals living in them. If you wander close to these natural wonderlands, you will be treated to the sight of gurgling waterfalls that swiftly morph into vibrant rivers and streams that wend their merry way through the land.

Never too far from the bountiful wealth of nature, you will find a village full of hardy residents eking out a living from the fertile land. Deeper in the forests are indigenous tribes, unsullied by the corruption of our modern existence, their lives governed by traditions that were formed in the depths of time.

Few regions in India can compare to the state when it comes to sheer natural bounty and lushness of the landscape. Charming tribals, engaging cultures and soothing greenery all around. What’s not to like? And the capital city Ranchi, itself is a land of waterfalls and verdure and serves as the perfect gateway to some of the state’s most incredible spots.

The sylvan state is also home to some of the most gorgeous temples in the country. Embarking on a spiritual...
journey around the verdant state can be a truly enriching experience. Jharkhand may be a fairly new state but as a land it’s as ancient as they come, steeped in spirituality and mythological lore.

Home to tribal communities as early as 1000 BCE, it was also part of the legendary Magadha kingdom, as well as the empire of the Mauryas. The region’s rich history has left a mark on its architecture, particularly the temples that dot this state, as well as a culture deeply rooted in the soil.

From the old world colonial charm of pristine hill stations like Netarhat and the wilderness of Betla National Park to the spiritual fervour of much revered pilgrimages like Baba Baidyanath Dham, Rajrappa and Parasnath and the architectural heritage of destinations like Terracotta temples of Maluti and structures like the Palamau Fort.

Jharkhand is a sheer delight for the discerning traveller.

The state government is putting its best foot forward to boost tourism in the state and towards developing Jharkhand as an ecotourism destination. According to the ecotourism policy, the tourism department of the state government will facilitate activities for the development of biodiversity rich areas, promotion of ecotourism and conservation of wetlands that house migratory birds.

The state government passed a total budget of ₹32,000 lakhs for the development of tourism in the state. The state government’s eco circuit project would also be launched with an estimated budget of ₹52.72 crores.

It also rolled out the PRASAD (Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spirituality Augmentation Drive) at Baba Baidyanath Dham in Deogarh. The Swadesh Darshan Scheme of the state government aims at developing the Dalma-Chandil-Getalsud-Betla-Mirchaya-Netarhat circuit. It is also developing the Rajrappa tourist area and the tourism area in Lugu Buru in Bokaro.

Development of tourism area in Chandil is also taking place with funds worth ₹4 crore. A visitors’ gallery is also being developed in Chutupalu Valley, while a museum and open air theatre is being built in Dumka. A food craft institute is being set up in Deogarh and a tourist guest house in Patratu Dam is also under construction.

The tourism department has also proposed new schemes like Dhurwa Tribal Theme Park, Handicraft Tourism Centre in Sahibganj, Saraikela Kharsawan and Dumka districts and Rural Tourism Centre in Dumka and Ranchi. Then there’s development of the Rajmahal-Sahebganj-Punai Chowk Ganga Ferry Circuit.

Adventures tourism activities are proposed to be developed at Shivgadi, Sahebganj and Massanjore, Dumka. At Netarhat’s Magnolia Sunset Point, a Valley of Flowers has also been proposed and so has the construction of wayside amenities at Basukinath.

Visit Jharkhandtourism.gov.in

Did you know that megalithism is still a living tradition in Jharkhand? It is home to some of the most incredible megalith sites in the country.

Clockwise from facing page: the serene terracotta temples of Maluti; the magnificent Patratu Valley at night Temple; Netarhat at dusk; and a glimpse into the tribal way of life in the state of Jharkhand.
MERRY GENTS OF Binsar
I will have found out what this wildflower that speckles the slopes of Kumaon like fireflies of the day is called only later. Their fluid, buoyant grasp sucks us in every now and then, and our city knees, fresh out of a lockdown, swoon readily before their practised charms. We wade through their midst and their ensuing sighs have turned these fields all auburn.

The walk down is often a trail that curves in the manner of a solid vortex, needing jerky leaps and rounds of scurrying that leave you looking like Chaplin’s Tramp. I am growing weary, expecting Sunaoli and Govind’s house at every turn. Spending two-thirds of the year in lockdown has left me envisioning our destination as a clump of tiny rural houses donning slate roof caps and genial bovines grazing. This is despite us having taken an early coffee break.

We arrived at the Nine Furlongs Estate the previous evening, bent double and on our second changes of facemasks. The drive from Delhi to the Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary was a long one, the roads once we were past the entry gates circuitous, and the six kilometres to get to the pick-up point tantalising. The good folks at the estate fixed us supper, got a nice fire going and we slept away in our luxurious forest bungalow. Earlier this morning, as I flopped on the recliner beside the glass wall, witnessing the golden sun slowly sliding over the faraway mountain slopes, I said to myself, “Boy, all bad things do come to an end, don’t they?”

The Nine Furlongs Estate is spread over several peaks of a mountain, with bungalows for different purposes, all constructed in the 19th century as residence, guest house and office of Henry Ramsay, Kumaon’s fabled British Commissioner. Kakarkot is named after the barking deer found in these parts, while Saulkot, the two-storey writer’s bungalow, is a nod to the porcupine, and also where the Italian writer Tiziano Terziani lived for four years in terminal illness after being given only a few months. Terziani’s corner in the bungalow offers an equally bewitching view of the snow-capped Himalaya far away.

This morning, we are on a hike organised by the estate, which does quite a few of these on the gentle-for-the-most-part trails crisscrossing through the sanctuary. At the moment, my inspection of a really long traditional boundary wall is interrupted by a voice...
booming from behind. “How much longer?” This is another guest and our companion on the hike. “Bas dus minute,” a voice whose owner is now in a thousand Anaphalises’ arms, responds. This is Narendra Roy, the General Manager at the estate—a prophetic man who makes you want to pick up Sun Tzu every time you see him. “Maidaani dus minute ya pahadi dus minute?” the first voice booms again. I can discern Govind smiling bashfully under his mask. Fecund environs, jocund company, what more could one want? Well, except, of course, for Govind’s house to show up, which it does, rather fortuitously for the first-timers. As we land into the courtyard, our eyes are left bedazzled by the happy sunshine ricocheting off the bright turquoise façade of Govind’s two-storey house.

We settle on the parapet, which is a cordoning-off fence at the edge of the terrace, soak up more sun and thirstily chug on our buraans sherbet. Last evening, when Govind brought two warm decoction-style shots of it at the bungalow upon our arrival, they had felt restorative and even somnolence-inducing. Now, as a cooler, the same beverage feels uplifting enough to make us march around like marauding philistines. Thankfully, we are brought to our senses by the persistent admonitions of the family dog. There is another, whining plaintively, almost competing with the indifferent winter stupor of the kitten, who, I know, has its eyes set on the feast being brought before us.

we have relished the goodness of freshly pressed juices, fluffy poha, delicious sandwiches and muesli, not to forget the exquisite mutton raan. There will be an early Christmas dinner with some fine smoked ham and should you feel nauseous after the drive, there’ll be khichdi. At Govind’s house, the sun-drenched Kumaoni specialties on offer (mandua rotis, saag, paneer bhurji, kheer and sinful Almora chocolate, or bal mithai) will return you all your lost sleep in the long vigil of the lockdown.

In warmer weather, these lunches are done indoors on the floor, Narendra informs, adding that plans for adding accommodation for overnight stays for travellers looking to spend more time here, are afoot. The service at luxury estates such as Nine Furlongs...
Kasar Devi, a rural hilltop hamlet 16 kms away from Binsar, is popular with backpackers for its location on the Van Allen Belt—a gap in the radiation bands surrounding the earth. Every year, travellers flock to the clutch of meditation and wellness retreats spread around the area, earlier known as Crank’s Ridge. Illustrious visitors include controversial psychologist Timothy Leary, Swami Vivekananda and Bob Dylan.

in these parts is on another plane but it is at once clear that even the most exclusive experience can’t hold beyond a certain point if the local community is not encouraged to step up. With travel having come to standstill in times as uncertain as these, domain expertise is set to become a buzzword and these professionals, both well-versed in hospitality and rooted in the practicalities of their native places, seem to show the way forward.

Right from receiving you at the pick-up point and driving you up a thrilling, steep path (the eponymous nine furlongs) that’ll have you typing out your bequest (in a handsome, fixed-up Willys MB, no less), to materialising in your midst in less than a minute should you feel sick in the middle of the night and need a quick snack—these individuals show boundless skill and inspiring alacrity. It’s reassuring to see residents reclaiming this space, becoming vital cogs in establishments’ day-to-day operations.
Deepak again takes us up the steep trail in the jeep, using deceleration and gear shifts deftly. Covering this 1.8 km on foot takes an hour, as we will discover the following day. For now, it’s just us, Kakarkot and the endless mountains, almost a ring, of snowy, pointy peaks, all brothers of the sublime grandeur of the Nanda Devi. We fashion a sauna session for ourselves in the cavernous, vintage-style sunken bath, washing our feet and making jokes about how much fat we are going to lose while here. Deepak, a really skillful man behind the steering wheel, again takes us up.

The Binsar Forest Is Home

to quite a few trails with varying gradients—even heritage bridle paths that exist since the British era and have seen their carriages pass. The following day, we are out a little earlier, breathing hard the pine-scented morning air on our way to Zero Point. The trek to the vantage point has a lot of steep ascents, but navigating the trail using walking sticks provides some good, old-fashioned, picnic-style fun. Zero Point materialises before us as a two-storey, stone-and-concrete machan. As we clamber up the structure, Govind brandishes the mugs again—it’s coffee, with sandwiches and some really good banana cake, and you can polish it all off looking at the 300-km-long chain of peaks, which as of now look as if they exist in another world. In the night, these peaks are visible only as a faint band of light under the eerie night-sky. Cowering at first, one looks transfixed at the vast darkness, and the stars, like children, come out to play—slowly poking their needle-point bodies at
the thin blanket of the sky. Sunrise turns these mountains into distant salt lamps, and if you don’t wish to step out on the lawn to witness them aglow, do it from the living area or the bathroom.

In the luxuriant forest of the Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary, sunlight casts a magical glow on trails canopied by flushing maples, the dappled forest floor gleams with lily pads all around and stray ferns that seem to be playing kikli. The riot of colours in the forest at this hour, from the colder tones of green on creepers clinging to the ringal trees to the luminescent yellow of leaves that look like white alder, is priceless. The fallen leaves of different colours that I salvaged from being crunched under us merry gents’ feet, are still safe in my jacket.

Our second adventure for the day,

Juicy and sweet-to-tangy, the Kafal is a local berry that is immensely popular among the young and the old. The popular folk song ‘beda paako’ refers to the kafal ripening only in the March–April period (chahta). Also try spotting malta trees, which are found laden with the fruits in profusion during the winter.

How to reach: Pantnagar (139kms) is the closest airport. Or take a chopper—Tatik helipad is a 30-minute drive. Or drive from Delhi and come via Nainital. Don’t forget your negative COVID-19 test results (not older than 72 hours)

What to do

- Trek up to the Zero Point, a refurbished colonial-era vantage point and behold the majestic Nanda Devi, Trisul and Panchachuli cluster of peaks radiant—best time is early morning
- Looking to get some sanity back after coronavirus? Drive up to Kasar Devi and try meditating. Spot a rock jutting out of the mountainside and access the guided trail to reach it.
- Leaf-collecting is a rewarding activity when out on walks in Binsar. These trails teem with rhododendrons, pines, chestnuts and maples. However, avoid plucking—stick to the ones strewn on the forest floor. Put Google Lens and LeafSnap to good use
- Hit up Kumaon Grameen Udyog’s Kilmora outlet in Kasar Devi and pick up hand-knitted scarves, mufflers and neck warmers and jams and chutneys
- Don’t forget to sample the local delights—juicy, tangy kafals and sweet rhododendron crush

What to eat

- In Almora, pick up bal mithai and singori from Khem Singh’s Sweet Shop. Nosh away at the hole-in-the-wall Baba Cake and Dolma’s in Kasar Devi
- While in the wildlife sanctuary, eating is where the staying is. Nine Furlongs dishes out appetising, homely meals (Indian and Continental) and freshly pressed juices at the estate and does no-fuss traditional Kumaoni village lunches, with local delights such as mandua ki roti, bhang ki chutney and lauki kheer
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Where to stay

Binsar has several privately owned estates with colonial log cabin-style bungalows and cottages and community-run homestays. Nine Furlongs offers two self-sufficient, solar-powered heritage bungalows. KMVN’s Nanda Devi Tourist Rest House has clean and cosy cottages and is a nodal point for many forest walks. The Forest Rest House is at the heart of the sanctuary and offers good privacy.
Kashmir and Counting 100
Looking back on a glorious year of trekking and a memorable milestone.

Text and photographs by

MAHMOOD AHMAD SHAH
long walk in the mountains of Kashmir for me, and every trek has brought heaps of happiness. While people count the years of their lives, I count the lakes I trek each year. 2015 was the most gratifying year for me. That summer I was able to trek to my 100th high-altitude lake.

Kashmir has seen its share of misfortune. For over two decades, turmoil and strife have remained unrelenting, but they have left me undeterred in my mad pursuit into the mountains of Kashmir. For an ordinary countryman, Kashmir epitomises a place of conflict where venturing out invites trouble and going into the mountains is scary. But to me, these misunderstood mountains are like a mother’s lap where I have always found solace. Meanwhile, my photo library continues to swell, forcing me to buy a 4-TB hard disk to store the images I have so diligently collected across the crags and cliffs of Kashmir, never ever thinking of deleting a single shot, even if horrible.

None of the high-altitude lakes of Kashmir are accessible by road. Like rare gemstones, they lie hidden deep in the inhospitable recesses of the mountains, snowbound for seven-eight months in the year. For the rest of the time, the weather remains hostile and, ironically, unfriendly for photography. So every year it requires careful planning to trek to each lake. Still, unexpected glitches crop up spoiling the applecart—malfunction of GPS, camera, batteries, hostile weather, misleading trails, communication gaps, stubborn local guides, lack of terrain knowledge and official exigencies among them.

Despite all odds, I was to keep my rendezvous with the elusive figure. At the end of 2014 I was at the 93 mark, and was able to trek up to 7 lakes in 2015 to complete a century. Hence, 2015 become a watershed year for me. However, like every batsman, I was nervous. Nineties Syndrome!

Purani Ganga (4,000m) is a lake located east of Gangabal, the largest high-altitude lake of Kashmir with an area of 167 hectares. It is an important waypoint of the Great Lakes Trek. The trek to Purani Ganga starts 4km short of Naranag from a village called Martahoi. A zig-zag trail leads over to the lake. But there was a twist in the tale. The altitude of Martahoi is 2,100m. Therefore, a climb of 1,900m is required to reach the lake. While we had been doing 1,300-1,500m of up-and-down regularly, doing this one required utmost fitness. Hence, I started to concentrate on my fitness and began to feel confident.

The Nilmata Purana describes Kashmir as Satisar, a huge mountain lake where Parvati used to sail in her pleasure boat until it was drained. This 5,440 sq km-long valley over time came to be known as “paradise on earth”.

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It was September 11 when I started on the trail with a few of my trekking buddies. As a thumb-rule in Kashmir, the trail starts from a village, goes through forest up to the alpine zone (most trails start in the 2,000m zone) and then extends into forest from 2,000m to 3,500m. Thereafter, the alpine zone gradually merges into the permanent snowline.

The Nilmata Purana describes Kashmir as Satisar, a huge mountain lake where Parvati used to sail in her pleasure boat until it was drained. This 5,440 sq km-long valley over time came to be known as “paradise on earth”.

The Nilmata Purana describes Kashmir as Satisar, a huge mountain lake where Parvati used to sail in her pleasure boat until it was drained. Anand’s huge plough share divided the mighty chain of the Himalaya flanking towards the west into two parts allowing the waters of Satisar out, making the valley habitable for the Nagas. This 5,440 sq km-long valley over time came to be known as “paradise on earth”. Geologists have their own tectonic theory of the draining of the valley. The fact remains that this erstwhile Satisar—the mega lake—disappeared only to leave behind a huge progeny scattered across the mountains. National Wetland Atlas figures indicate that Jammu & Kashmir has about 2,104 high-altitude lakes, which aggregates to about 1,10,131 hectares of water surface. We are followed by Arunachal Pradesh, which has 1,672 high-altitude waterbodies.
huge alpine meadow with a gradual incline, that the true grandeur of the Kashmir Himalaya was unveiled. The last stretch to the lake was over a rock, boulders and moraine deposits. While boulders have been mellowed to a roundness by the weather vagaries, these very elements make moraine deposits razor sharp. A careful manoeuvring is required over these glacial deposits, which litter Kashmir’s alpine zone. Legend has it that an annual yatra used to take place to the Purani Ganga Lake but was decimated centuries ago by a rock slide truncating its area considerably, making yatris abandon it in favour of its sibling sitting at the foot of Harmukh mountain, the mighty Gangabal. Hence the lake became known as Purani Ganga. The trek up to the lake took six hours. 1,900m in 6 hours was a pretty fast ascent and a shot in the arm for me. Clear weather, a brief breather and a rapid burst of the camera are the most pleasing aspect of a trek—these are the moments that can make or mar your expedition. One of the most conspicuous mountains of Kashmir is Harmukh (5,145m). It was climbed in 1856 by Gen. Montgomery, the Surveyor General of India. He is credited with discovering K2 from Harmukh while marking the peaks of Karakoram during the survey in the order of K1, K2, K3, K4, etc.
Durinar Lake in the Sind valley is one of the highest lakes of Kashmir. There are two more lakes above it.
Later, it was proved that he had discovered the second-highest peak in the world from this mountain. The skyline of the Purani Ganga trail is dominated by Harmukh. As we sat around Purani Ganga, enjoying lunch, we were intent upon crossing the pass in the vicinity. The Gumbergali Pass is at an altitude of 4,210m, which meant an additional ascent, then a frustrating descent to find the camping ground. The shorter duration of September daylight was at the back of my mind as I munched my bread. Contemplating, I heard distant thundering sounds; the weather seemed to be closing in and we were short on time. Hurriedly, we saddled up the horses, putting the luggage upon them and started a tiresome hike up the Gumbergali. An hour later, the pass seemed in sight and a distant view of Harmukh shrouded partially in cloud and the blue expanse of Gangabal at its foot looked phenomenal. A rare sight indeed.

The sight of the pass was panoramic with Sagput making an impressive ridge line. Sagput separates the Gad Sar valley from Kashmir. These ridges have not been climbed and can prove to be an impressive climbing ground in coming days. The walk down the pass provided ample camping ground around Gumber SAR, a sizable lake just below the pass. I felt elated on recording my 99th high-altitude lake and eagerly awaited the arrival of the next morning to complete my century, as another lake was located just a ridge across.

Late night, it began to snow heavily and our tent buckled down under its weight. We had to leave its warm confines several times to clear the snow. Expectedly, I was nervous. A heavy snowfall could spoil my apple cart. Later in the night, the snow stopped. Next morning, a feet of snow lay on the ground and the sky was cloudy. But a pleasant surprise awaited us. We began to hear a whistling sound from the surrounding ridges as we started to scout the slopes. We spotted a dozen snow partridges around the pass, my first encounter with the elusive bird.

As our guides packed up the horses with the wet baggage for the descent down the valley we took a slight detour up the ridge to make the rendezvous with my 100th lake, Salma Sar, an enigmatic name for a small lake that drains into Martchoi Nalla. Its outpour meets the Gangabal waters at Dumail, 10km upstream of Naranag.
travellers have left a wealth of travel information, paradoxically demystifying my own motherland Kashmir for me.

Compensating for time lost to the strife, from 2004 onwards I began my serious wandering in the mountains, climbing, trekking and hiking every summer. Like a migratory bird, I felt caged during winter time, getting restive with every summer thaw. Making quick forays into the mountains have been like encounters with divinity for me. I have felt a spirit, an aura lurking around each lake, leaving an indelible impression both on the mind and soul. No doubt divinity looms large at these places, and no wonder all our prophets have been shepherds.

It has been a story of sweat, sweat and more sweat in spite of the fact that I have lost count of the blisters and damaged toenails. It’s a cyclic seasonal rhythm now: I damage toenails in summertime only to regrow them back the following winter.

Now, when I stand on the century mark I yearn to add up to this score. Years back, when I embarked upon my wanderings in the mountains, never did it cross my mind that I would be achieving this elusive milestone.

Now, having achieved this three-figure mark, I challenge my aging body to brace for more wanderings to pile up the lake figure (in 2020, the count was 112). I don’t know how far I will go and what my final count will be before I get out. For now it seems that my appetite for the lakes of Kashmir remains unsatiated. To me it is like the line from the soft drink commercial: “Yeh dil maange more”.

The mountains are infectious—they make you stubborn in the most humble manner.
THE Musli

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**Tryst with Islam**
Senegal, Tunisia and Ethiopia

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**The Kenyan experience**
Turbulent history and esteemed visitors

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**Revisiting the faith**
Malaysia, Jordan and Turkey

↑ Catching a glimpse of Ethiopian life in Harar
Tunisian man committed a terrorist attack in Nice in October, I was startled by the timing. Just two weeks prior, I was travelling throughout the north African country, absorbing the Islamic architecture against the crêperies from France, once an occupier.

France’s Prime Minister Emmanuel Macron declared that it is “France which is under attack,” while the Interior Minister stated “we’re at war, against an enemy who is both inside and outside,” hinting at the country’s six million Muslims and their values.

And yet, from March to October, I have lived in largely Muslim areas in Africa—the Kenyan Swahili Coast, Senegal, Tunisia and Ethiopia—prior to which I witnessed the Shaheen Bagh protests in New Delhi. During my time there, I observed a warmth and tranquillity that has attracted many Europeans to live there, which made me ponder: why is there such a different perception in the media versus reality?

For nearly three months, I was locked down in Lamu, Kenya, a coastal town of 25,000. Despite its turbulent history between Portugal and Oman, Lamu is ‘Africa’s Most Captivating Artists Retreat,’ as the WSJ. magazine called it, akin to an ‘opium dream,’ citing the influx of visitors since the 1970s, including Princess Caroline of Monaco, Sting, and Mick Jagger.

“I am very happy here,” said Sandy Bornman, a South African-born designer, who arrived over two decades ago. “When I arrived as a single mother with two little girls, we were made to feel welcome and safe. The whole village took care of us from the start. The people here are kind, generous and warm. We stick together but respect our differences. I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else.”

During my time, I conversed with an American investigative journalist, an Armenian documentarian, a British historian and an Egyptian businessman, all of whom have become residents, and valued the sense of community, ubiquitous donkeys, and fresh seafood.

“I’ve felt drawn to Dakar and the country of Senegal for a long time,” writes Sebastian Modak in The New York Times (NYT), citing the music, street art and history, calling it “an oasis of political stability and democracy in a region infamous for coups and supervillain dictators.” This West African cool includes the tall,
The Roman Empire brought ideas of government and urban planning, revelled in the complex sewer systems and in the six-storey buildings made for nearly 300,000 residents, one of the largest cities in the world at that time. Further, on its founding the Prime Minister’s “enlightened platform included the passing of a then-radical women’s-rights legislation, and a booming tourism industry, making Tunis an exotic bohemian centre,” writes Nikhil Saval, a newly-elected Pennsylvania State Senator in NYT. Tunisia “is a country that has one foot in political fervor, and the other in a dolce far niente lifestyle,” with nearly 10 million tourists arriving in 2019, two-thirds of its population size, making it one of Africa’s wealthiest countries.

In 1880, French poet-turned-gun-runner Arthur Rimbaud arrived in Harar, Ethiopia, and its hive of over 200 mosques and shrines, and limestone walls and maze-like paths, transformed him: “a drunken, filthy, amoral homosexual teenager who becomes a rangy soccer-jersey adorning adolescents who run along the sea-facing promenade for ‘vanity reasons’, as one of the locals told me.

On Ngor Island, I visited a Danish-run surf camp along with a friend, Zarina, who previously spent six months there. She witnessed the explosive growth of the sport, originated by the 1966 documentary, The Endless Summer about two Californian surfers. “We don’t practice localism here,” the national surf coach told Vice, reflecting the teranga or hospitality. “As I immersed myself in this Senegalese way of being, my western walls melted away,” writes Colette Coleman in the BBC. “Openness, generosity, warmth and familiarity,” she notes of the shared dishes and material possessions. “I constantly felt like the 16-million-person family of Senegal was welcoming me home.”

And yet, France’s film industry has created a cottage industry of negative depictions of Senegal, with Cannes-winner Atlantics (2019) focusing on an employment crisis, provocative Sundance-winner Cuties (2020) revealing a Muslim girl clashing with her mother over her orthodox and traditional upbringing; and Oscar-nominated Les Misérables (2019) impressing Macron so much that “he asked the government to take measures as soon as possible to improve life in lower-income neighbourhoods,” writes Jack Dion in France’s Marianne magazine. “We have to believe that he has never heard of the Borloo plan (social development proposal) on the suburbs that he himself buried.”

“The problem with Tunisia is that we don’t have an identity,” said the owner of Johnny’s Bikes to me in the upscale La Marsa in Tunis, the capital city, filled with gelato shops and whitewashed mansions. Nine years ago, I lectured at York University on the Arab Spring, and here I was just kilometres away from its origins. “When you are in a dictator system, your mind is sleeping. You don’t allow yourself to see all your abilities…’Now, people, you are completely free’—the creativity of everyone completely exploded.”

“When you are in a dictator system, your mind is sleeping. You don’t allow yourself to see all your abilities…’Now, people, you are completely free’—the creativity exploded”
The cobbled streets of La Marsa near Tunis
a reserved, hard working, responsible and respectable (if misanthropic and disgust-ridden) adult merchant and explorer,” writes NYT’s Richard Hell. He was a restless soul, but felt unexpectedly at home as his “unexpected enthusiasms set him apart as much as his colour—his facility in Arabic, his knowledge of the Holy Quran, his innate skill as a photographer,” notes Paul Theroux.

And yet, a recent petition to Macron to include Rimbaud among the literary greats has fuelled arguments about diversity, inclusion, national pride. The NYT notes that Rimbaud spent “most of his adult life abroad and denigrated the French... he called them ‘an inferior race,’ one that ‘has never risen, except to plunder.’”

I wasn’t always open to re-visiting my understanding of Islamic countries, but travels to Malaysia, the UAE, Jordan, Turkey...
and southern Spain, made me reflect on the incomplete stories shared. “I don’t visit museums,” Zarina, a black South African with a Persian name meaning golden, told me as we walked along a Tunis medina. “Because I know who are the people creating these narratives, and they’re largely remembering only conflict and war.”

“I thought about how little the Islam of Saudi Arabia resembled the version of the faith I’d witnessed as a child while living in Indonesia,” former US President Barack Obama writes in his just-released memoir, A Promised Land.

“In Jakarta in the 1960s and ‘70s, Islam had occupied roughly the same place in that nation’s culture as Christianity did in the average American city or town, relevant but not dominant. The muezzin’s call to prayer punctuated the days, weddings and funerals followed the faith’s prescribed rituals, activities slowed down during fasting months, and pork might be hard to find on a restaurant’s menu. Otherwise, people lived their lives, with women riding Vespas in short skirts and high heels on their way to office jobs, boys and girls chasing kites, and long-haired youths dancing to the Beatles and the Jackson 5 at the local disco. Muslims were largely indistinguishable from the Christians, Hindus, or college-educated non-believers, like my stepfather, as they crammed onto Jakarta’s overcrowded buses, filled theater seats at the latest kung-fu movie, smoked outside roadside taverns, or strolled down the cacophonous streets. The overtly pious were scarce in those days, if not the object of derision then at least set apart, like Jehovah’s Witnesses handing out pamphlets in a Chicago neighborhood.”

In 2012, Martha Nussbaum, the University of Chicago’s esteemed philosopher, was interviewed by the Boston Review about her new book, The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age. She noted how fear paralysed the brain, meant for survival, preventing “reflection and balancing,” while allowing for “narrowness” in thought. As I traded emails with her, I now understand it was my way of seeking to change my perspective.

A week before I began my travels in early 2020, I visited the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, an architectural wonder built by the local affluent and business-savvy Ismaili Muslim community, many of whom were former classmates and colleagues. I learnt about Mansa Musa’s 14th-century West African kingdom, once considered the richest man in the world. “However, his riches are only one part of his legacy,” National Geographic states, “He

“My name? Emmanuel Macron.”

is also remembered for his Islamic faith, promotion of scholarship, and patronage of culture in Mali,” noting his religious tolerance, love of learning and generosity.

Musa isn’t the only political leader hoping to challenge our beliefs. In 2016, disenchanted with the status quo, one man launched a ‘political movement’, with a focus on developing ‘new ideas’. A lover of Rimbaud, he grew up dreaming of becoming a writer, but later championed social justice. “Perhaps his most fundamental belief is in the primacy of individual rights,” The New Yorker wrote. His name? Emmanuel Macron.
A creek too far
I Decided That My First Stop

Therefore, should be a British cemetery marked on a map in my recent guidebook. I took a taxi down to Moscow Lane, at the very tip of Colaba Causeway and began walking past cannons and Connaught Barracks, past an "officer's mess" and "Single Officers Accommodation" bungalows—all the way down to an abandoned lighthouse. Not seeing any sign of English tombstones, I turned into the Indian Institute of Geomagnetism and asked a passing geomagnetist where they might be. He asked a passing non-geomagnetist, found out that the cemetery was now a high school, and said rather gallantly, “Good bye my dear” as I trooped off. Behind us, in the back of the old army school, a man was standing solemnly in khaki shorts, in the middle of a huge patch of empty grass, practicing “Reveille” on his trumpet.

—Pico Iyer in his essay, ‘Bombay: Hobson-Jobson on the Streets’

It was in the early 19th century that the antelopes and jackals of Colaba were seriously disturbed for the first time. The Colaba Cemetery was built in 1816 and served as a final resting place for soldiers and victims of shipwrecks. Then the Colaba Observatory and Lunatic Asylum were built in 1826—close to where the US Club stands today.

The Colaba Lunatic Asylum was a doleful place where patients were beaten, compelled to sleep on sacks of straw and forced to have cold showers. 'The tiny island of Colaba, with its ideal view of the Bombay harbour and the surrounding countryside was an island of paradoxes,' wrote Sarah Ann Pinto in Lunatic Asylums in Colonial Bombay: Shackled Bodies, Unchained Minds. 'A noisy village covered a part of the island, while two burial grounds (English and Muslim) covered the other. On its western shore lay the Colaba Lunatic Asylum...The pleasant views from the Colaba Lunatic Asylum, however, contrasted with the sounds emanating from it. John Murray, in his account of Bombay city, observed that the English cemetery, “though tolerably well kept, was rendered dismal by having a lunatic asylum adjoining it...and walking about to examine the tombs the cries of the unhappy inmates are constantly heard”.'

SHABNAM MINWALLA
provides a riveting glimpse into Colaba’s eerie but always interesting past.
Photographs by DINESH PARAB
Christianity had begun to assert itself in Bombay, and as Archdeacon Nix-Seaman remarked, Colaba was ‘stirred by the same awakening’. First came the little Catholic chapel near Colaba Post Office that was later used by the Portuguese Government to house officials on their way to Goa. Then came the RC Military Church, best known because it is the southernmost bus terminus in the city.

Not to be outdone, the Church of England began to fuss about the spiritual well-being of its flock in remote Colaba. The beleaguered authorities agreed to contribute Rs 28,151—not a paisa more, not a paisa less!—towards a Protestant chapel, but this was considered inadequate. After much haggling, a temporary church with a thatched roof and without chairs was cobbled together—scandalising the Bishop of Calcutta who, in 1835, refused to ‘consecrate so rickety a building’. Eventually it was replaced by the serene Afghan Church in 1858.

Despite the spurt of activity, the Lunatic Asylum and Bring-Your-Own-Chairs church were not exactly a draw for house hunters. Especially after Colaba’s reputation as the healthiest spot in Bombay was overturned by a deadly malaria epidemic that had the authorities grousing that it was the ‘most unhealthy station for European troops’.

The 1826 census found that the population of Colaba was a measly 2,578—less than 2 per cent of the 1.3 lakh inhabitants of Bombay. To make matters worse, Colaba was depicted as a veritable den of menacing criminals, dangerous animals and single-bite-and-it’s-all-over snakes. Jackals slunk around the Colaba Observatory and boldly wandered into bedrooms. Snakes were regular worshippers at the Afghan Church, coiling around its pillars and hiding in the organ. While Mr Forjett—possibly the same gentleman who gave his name to Forjett Street—even shot a tiger near Backbay.

In 1828, a huge shark was spotted near some bathers. Two decades later, a finback whale was driven to shore. The Gentlemen’s Gazette reported that, ‘All along the road from the Fort to Colaba was a perfect fair. The stench was felt from the town side of the causeway from where it lay at the back of Colaba church. Jawbones taken away.’

More troublesome than the snakes and smelly sharks even, were the ‘Maharatta gallivants’. In Glimpses of Bombay and Western India, James Douglas—who was once the sheriff of Bombay—recounted that ‘On October 14, 1798, a stranger happening to be in the Colaba Light House, observed that a peaceable dinghy was being attacked
The Church of St John the Evangelist, better known as the Afghan Church
off the harbor by five Mahratta gallivants, throwing in shots, burning her to the water's edge, when she blew up leaving her crew the choice of the flames or a watery grave.’

So pesky was the Bandar Gang that prowled around the Backbay, that a floating police force was established to tackle it. Meanwhile, the terrestrial police force had its own set of villains and woes. In 1827, for example, one Mrs Sparrow was returning from church in her carriage when she was attacked by a mounted Armenian who shot away her coachman’s ear. ‘About that time, a gentleman was deterred from buying the “Wilderness” because it was so remote, and exposed to the attack of robbers,’ remarked Douglas.

Clearly, Colaba—with its mosquito-riddled mangroves and criminal-infested bays—was an undesirable spot in the early 1800s. So, it's startling to read Henry Moses’ enthusiastic description in 1848, just twenty-one years after Mrs Sparrow’s poor coachman lost his ear. ‘It is considered a healthy place of residence, being freely exposed to the sea breeze; and its beauty is greatly enhanced by the charming view which it commands on all sides,’ wrote Moses in Sketches of India: With Notes on the Seasons, Scenery and Society of Bombay.

‘In consequence of these advantages it is crowded with English, Parsee and Portuguese bungalows; which are all detached residences, surrounded by luxuriant gardens, redolent of sweet flowers...The boundary hedges are enriched by a charming creeping plant which bears a scarlet and sometimes a rich mazarine-blue pea flower. When in full bloom the plants add greatly to the beauty of the gardens.’

What happened in two short decades that so completely transformed Colaba? The answer is simple: Colaba Causeway.

The dictionary defines a ‘causeway’ as ‘a raised road or track across low or wet ground’. Colaba Causeway was exactly that. The elevated road had been proposed for decades, but it was only in 1838 that Old Woman’s Island and Colaba Island were connected to Bombay by a simple strip of stone, mud and timber. The impact was immediate and the price of land in Colaba shot up by 500 per cent.
The spectacular Colaba sea face
in a single decade.

Till 1838, travelling from Bombay to Colaba had involved crossing a smelly creek. At low tide this could be traversed 'dry shod'. But at high tide the journey could only be made by boat. This was why Mrs Postans, that most observant of travel writers, dismissed the southernmost island as a pretty but dull spot, favoured only by those who preferred 'quiet to the gaieties of the sister land'.

'Many have been the luckless wights who, returning from a festive meeting, heedless of Neptune's certain visit, have found the curling waves beating over their homeward path, compelling them again to seek the banquet hall deserted and beg a shakedown at the quarters of their host,' she wrote. 'The more impetuous have sought to swim their horses across the dangerous pass and lives have been lost in the attempt. This inconvenience so severely felt led at length to the erection of a solid and handsome vallade with a footpath protecting the elevated and level road.'

Reading Mrs Postan's words, a piece of a historic puzzle falls into place. Whenever you are next near Regal Cinema, take a good look at the Office of the Director General of Police which, when it was first built, was the Royal Alfred Sailor's Home. The pediment of this chunky building features Neptune brandishing a trident and frolicking with sea horses. Suddenly his presence at this busy, traffic-clogged intersection makes sense. Not so long ago, all this was a creek. The God of the Sea is merely keeping tabs on his former territory.

Just as Regal Cinema is merely continuing the tradition of drama that this spot witnessed. Take, for example, the tale that Henry Moses relates in the purpliest prose:

'A melancholy and romantic story is still told of Colabah...A young girl of the Mohammedan faith was on her road to pay a visit to some natives who resided in Colabah; and having arrived in her bullock gharry just when the tide was rising in this place, she thought, that as the water was not deep, she might cross without danger, and ordered her syce or driver to order the timid bullocks across the stream. He did so; but before they had proceeded many yards, the animals became restive
and obstinate and refused to go one way or another; the wheels became entangled among the rough stones; the gharry was upset and the poor girl being thrown into the rapidly increasing current, was swept out into Back Bay. This scene was witnessed most fortunately from the Colabah side, by an Englishman, who had upto this moment been a passive spectator. In an instant his coat was off and he was breasting the foaming tide after the drowning girl; whom, at the risk of his own life he succeeded in bringing safely to the shore. He accompanied her home to Bombay where he received the thanks and benedictions of her parents. Strange to say, though not more strange than true, an attachment sprung up between the young Englishman and the Hindoo lady whom he had rescued from a watery grave; and many were said to be the private meetings that took place between the two lovers—unknown, of course, to the unsuspecting parents. At length the Englishman, though he knew that his religion would be an impenetrable objection, determined to solicit from her father, the Mohammedan girl’s hand in marriage. He did so, and the haughty man of high caste at once indignantly spurned his proposals. He acknowledged that he loved the fair Englishman but never could be one of his people; so he bade him depart in peace. The sequel was very sad. The Hindoo maiden disappeared. Rumours were current, in Bombay, that she had been privately murdered by her enraged relatives…"

The Englishman died of a broken heart. The family left the island.

What happened to the bullocks and the syce—stuck in the foaming, rising waters—is not known. Nor is it known whether the unfortunate maiden was ‘Mohammedan’ or ‘Hindoo’. But this story is an apt precursor to the Bollywood blockbusters that would one day be screened at that very spot—on the big screen of Regal Cinema.

(Colaba Lesson for Life—Through much of the 19th century, there were strict restrictions on the use of iron and electricity in Colaba. This was to ensure that the magnetic readings of the Colaba Observatory were not vitiated. In fact, electric trams were given permission to run only after a replacement observatory was built in Alibag and tested in 1907. Alibag was deprived of electricity all the way till 1954. It’s unnerving to think of what Colaba might have been today if the Observatory had not been moved.)

EXTRACTED FROM COLABA: THE DIAMOND AT THE TIP OF MUMBAI (SPEAKING TIGER, 499)
FAB CAFE BY THE LAKE

Sunder Nursery

The al fresco dining experience that we’ve all been eagerly waiting for

They say dining at its finest can be found in dramatic outdoor settings. It simply cannot be replicated within the confines of a walled and roofed structure. Well, there is no denying the allure of bistro-style seating. And FabCafe By the Lake, nestled between the lush greens of Sunder Nursery and scenic heritage of the Mughals, exemplifies this to the tee. All geared up for celebrating a season of food and fresh air, the lakeside café is all the rage this winter. Basking in the sun with a lakeside view, it offers an ideal retreat in the lap of nature. Enjoy a mix of sunshine and shade as you choose from a delicious selection of lighter bites and hearty grill options. An integral part of the FabCafe Experience Centre, their latest offering steps out of the box to provide patrons a wholesome experience. The menu strongly holds on to the FabIndia DNA. Redefining the traditional Indian cooking in more ways than one, the ‘gluten-free’, ‘dairy-free’ and ‘oil-free’ motto is at its core. “Our aim was to give a modern interpretation to what we were generally doing in terms of food, and that’s how FabCafe evolved”, says Chef Sunil Chauhan, the man of the hour and the brain behind the bold and healthy menu. Our picks from the wide selection are the spinach, spring onion and water chestnut momos, chicken tikka makhani, kathal quinoa biryani, caramelised banana cake and the mixed berry ‘n’ cashew cheese ice cream.

► Open all days; 8am-6pm; Cost for two ₹1200

—ROSHNI SUBRAMANIAN
January 2021

Sheetal Saxena & Nishant Sinha

All about Cacao

» What are the challenges that you had to overcome?
The lack of information available was definitely one of the major hurdles that we had to break through. The experts in the field didn’t want to reveal the tricks of the trade. We wanted to overcome this so that more people in the future who want to get into the craft chocolate industry don’t have to face these issues.

» How did your experience in the coffee industry help you out?
Nishant is the first and only cacao roaster in India. So that really helped us. He’s also a certified sensor and understands the notes behind coffee and now the notes of cacao. He played a vital role in setting up the recipes and understanding the acidity part. His contribution was of great help especially in terms of getting our technicality right.

» What has been the impact of the pandemic on business?
For us this was never business. It’s a completely product-driven place. Our main aim was to educate people on the bean-to-bar concept and open the industry in whatever little way we can. Things got delayed a bit for sure. But this wasn’t a bread earner for us, otherwise we wouldn’t have opened during the pandemic.

» What according to you is the USP of COLOCAL?
I believe it’s the product, the quality, the people and our transparency.

—ROSHNI SUBRAMANIAN

A new indulgence for the chocoholics, Sheetal Saxena and Nishant Sinha’s artisanal brand, COLOCAL is all set to school you on the craft chocolate world

» How did this Willy Wonka world come about?
It all started with an inquisitiveness. Once we were scrolling through Instagram and saw something getting roasted, which was not coffee. It was cacao. We didn’t know anything about the craft chocolate industry. So, we did a lot of trips to educate ourselves. We took a trip for 20 days to the whole of south India to meet the craft chocolate makers there. After coming back, the first thing that we did is we bought ourselves a small grinder and started making chocolates on our own. I feel all you need to have is strong dedication.

» There must be a lot of groundwork involved. Tell us a bit about the travels you had to undertake?
We went to Pondicherry. And then to Coimbatore, Udumbannoor, Chikamagalur, Bangalore. Though it’s mainly known for coffee, they also grow cacao there.

» Could you please explain the term craft chocolate to us?
Craft chocolate is a lot like speciality coffee. The makers handle the entire process from the bean to the final bar. They do it on a small scale following all the processes. Each one of them has their own representations in terms of the chocolate that they want to present to the world.

GLUTEN-FREE TWICE-BAKED CAKE

I am very proud of this recipe and it has worked wonders. I’m not your conventional baker but this cake is a really simple dessert and complements the chocolate so well

CHEF RECOMMENDS
SHEETAL SAXENA’S PICKS FROM THE MENU

55% Dark Chocolate

Made with in-house chocolates, some milk and the right amount of sweet and spicy notes, the rich texture of the drink makes it more soothing, apt for the biting winters
Hyatt Regency Delhi has pulled off the impossible—or at least unimaginable—by opening a new restaurant during the pandemic. To be honest, their Mediterranean and Levantine cuisine outlet—named Syrah after the Shiraz grape varietal—had been in the works when the lockdown struck and delayed the opening. Designed by Dubai-based interior designer Michelle Evans, the restaurant’s blue tones impart a casual yet chic vibe. There’s lots of outdoor seating by the pool, which seems in tune with the times. As for the food, it’s a lot of healthy options from the eastern Mediterranean, which seem deceptively simple, but pulling off the correct flavours requires skill and experience. This is where Hyatt has scored an ace—or two, shall we say—with its expat chefs: chef de cuisine Mohamed Hussein Ibrahim Kasem and sous chef Abdulkarim Kurdieh. At the opening, Julian Ayers, General Manager, Hyatt Regency Delhi, said, “Hyatt Regency Delhi has a long history of serving great food. We expect Syrah to follow in that tradition. To ensure authenticity we are sourcing both our chefs and our ingredients directly from the bazaars of the Near East.” The menu features refreshing salads, inviting grills and expansive mezze platters, with top-notch straight-from-the-farm ingredients. There’s a sophisticated drinks menu with signature cocktails and, of course, excellent wine at hand. But really the best part is the sweet finish, with the most delectable umm ali this side of the Arabian Sea.

—AMIT DIXIT

Syrah

Delhi

Levantine cuisine now has a home in the Indian capital

Hyatt Regency Delhi, Bhikaji Cama Place, Ring Road, Delhi

- 7pm-11.30pm (Wednesday to Sunday) and Sunday brunch

- Must try farrouj moussahab (pic) and Aleyna, the signature cocktail
What’s hot in the food world?
FROM STREET FOOD TO GOURMET MEALS, TRY IT ALL!

$100 Wagyu

Gordon Ramsay’s burger in London becomes famous for its pricey wagyu

Michelin-star chef Gordon Ramsay has stirred up the food world again, this time with his pricey Wagyu. The master of Hell’s Kitchen is opening a restaurant titled Gordon Ramsay Burger in the Harrods Department Store, in London. Ramsay claims that with this restaurant, dedicated to burgers, his aim is to provide people with the ‘taste of America’. The pricey Wagyu set at $106 is already making the headlines. This dish comprises a beef patty, seared wagyu sirloin, truffle pecorino cheese, cep mayo and fresh black truffles. There are other delicacies as well, relatively cheaper than the Wagyu burger, like the lobster and shrimp burger at $56, Hell’s Kitchen burger at $33 and the cheapest burger being the basic American burger at $28.

Awesome Sauce

GI tag for the local hot sauce of Himachal Pradesh

Apart from its famous temples, local art, textiles, and picturesque views, Chamba, a small town in Himachal Pradesh is also recognised for its distinct chutney—chamba chukh. Prepared using locally grown Chitrali chillies of Chamba Valley, the Himachal Pradesh government wants this generation-old traditional dish to be given the GI tag. Traditionally prepared using sun-dried red or green chilies, chukh is blended with an extract from local citrus fruits and further cooked with spices to make a paste. From cooking it in garlic, honey, and dry fruits to serving it hot without any sweetness, chukh is fondly savoured in different variants across local regions in the state.

Tea Trails

New Delhi

A quaint neighbourhood’s convergence with a chic patisserie-cum-tea lounge

New Delhi’s Vasant Kunj is all set to witness the extension of Roseate Hotels and Resorts with the launch of its chic patisserie-cum-tea lounge. With a view of Vasant Vatika’s extensive foliage, coupled with a specially-curated menu, Roasted by Roseate concocts hand-crafted pastries, macaroons, scones, tea cakes and a number of delectable and exclusive items like the Mississippi mud cake to satiate a dessert lover’s sweet tooth. Hors d’oeuvres, too, pepper the diverse menu. Quiche, handmade puffs, open and regular sandwiches, and salads are a few options that one can choose from. Apart from fostering an environment ideal for business rendezvous, it also serves as a great spot for family outings and get-togethers.

You can dine-in, order takeaway, or place a home-delivery request with them
It is an authentic recipe straight from the Kashmiri kitchen, distinguished by its red sauce

The Kashmiri kitchen is celebrated, nuanced and moreover an exotic melange of spices. Traditions, flavours and memories go into the making of an exotic Kashmiri spread. The aromatic flavour of the variety of dishes, particularly seasoned with saffron, has become an integral part of Kashmiri cuisine, making it more enticing among gastronomic enthusiasts. Mutton Rogan Josh, an authentic recipe straight from the Kashmiri kitchen, is distinguished by its thick, flavourful red sauce and tender meat. There are two different versions of this dish. Kashmiri Muslims prepare it with onion and garlic while the Pandits use only yogurt to make it.

Mutton Rogan Josh

RECIPE FOR MUTTON ROGAN JOSH

- On a muslin cloth put 1 bay leaf, 2-3 whole green cardamoms, 1 petal of mace, 1/2 tsp coriander seeds, 1/2 tsp cumin seeds, 1-inch cinnamon stick; bundle it and keep aside
- In a small bowl add 1 tsp asafoetida, 1/2 tsp dry ginger powder, 1 tbsp fennel seeds powder, 1 tbsp Kashmiri red chili powder, 1/2 tsp red chili powder along with 3 tbsp of water. Mix it well and keep the paste aside
- Take a heavy bottom pan and pour 4 tbsp ghee and heat it on medium to high flame. Then put 2 pieces black cardamom into it and roast it for 1-2 minutes
- Now add 1/2kg mutton, chopped in pieces, in the ghee and fry it
- When the outer coating is caramelised add the watery spice mix to it. Cook it for a minute or two
- Now add 1/2 tsp saffron, salt to taste and pour 2 cups of water in it
- Put the whole spice bundle into it. Cover and cook it on high flame for 5 minutes and let the mutton simmer.

After 5 minutes turn the flame to low and let the mutton cook with spices for 40 minutes on low heat
- After 45 minutes open the lid. You will find the gravy has turned into rogan (red), thick and oily. Now add 1 tsp garam masala powder along with 2 tbsp of whisked curd
- Mix it well and again cook it while it's covered for another 30 minutes on low flame. After 30 minutes open the lid and remove the spice bundle from the gravy
- Serve hot with rice or naan

This dish gets its fiery red hue from powdered Kashmiri chili peppers which have more colour than heat.

Kashmiri Pandits also use ratan jot or alkanet root to attain the signature red colour

The coating of the meat should be brown. Stir and turn the pieces to cook it evenly.
LE DUPELIX 76

THOMAS PERUZZO 77

HOTELS, HOSTELS AND NOTHING LIKE HOME
Vibrant yet subtle, dramatic yet sophisticated. All in all very Dilli, it’s a matter of how you see it.

**NEW DELHI**

I felt the icy Delhi air caressing my face after what seemed like an eternity. It was as though I was sitting in an auto for the very first time. Usually an auto ride in Delhi is a mix of rejection, haggling, partial agreement and ultimately driving to the destination. But today, none of that happened. This evening I was being all touristy in the city I call home, courtesy IHCL SeleQtion’s latest offering, the Connaught’s, *Dilli Darshan*.

The hotel—merely a stone’s throw away from the boisterous Connaught Place—is luxury juxtaposed with art deco charm. Think sprawling lobbies, opulent chandeliers and a floor lined with rich green motifs. While the first floor sports conference rooms in soft pastel colours, the 104 rooms—none like the other—are spread across the rest of the six floors. A bit of personal advice? Opt for the ones at the back on the 7th floor for an unobstructed view of the Shivaji Stadium.

Even though my evening was spent in the bylanes of the city, the afternoon was under warm winter sun by the pool, followed by a hearty lunch at the ‘Hub’, the doors to which conveniently open right next to the pool.

To appreciate the character, sophistication and all that the hotel has to offer, one definitely needs an eye for detail.

—SIMRRAN GILL
PUDUCHERRY

LE DUBLEIX
Puducherry, approx. 150km from Chennai International Airport
» 14 colonial-styled rooms

SOJOURN » The restored 18th-century colonial villa lies in the heart of the old French Quarter, each room with a lingering aroma of old Burma teak

ENGAGE » The al fresco restaurant, the Courtyard, has an organic and sustainable global cuisine with Creole, Japanese and French influences

MARVEL » Retaining the French architectural charm, the interiors have been restored using traditional construction methods. With each room individually designed, all original woodwork has been retained, and is adorned with artefacts and antique items such as lamps and chandeliers

Escape

Barely a five-minute walk from the property is the much sought after Promenade Beach. Catch the sunrise here or head for a casual evening stroll.
* First job?
It all began with a sales manager job at a hotel in Kamen, Germany.

* How does it feel to work in the tallest building in the world—the Burj Khalifa?
It is extremely exciting. I think about how unique the hotel is and how honoured I am to be a part of its continuous success.

* Favourite corner of Armani Hotel?
There is something magical about our restaurant terraces. When the weather is pleasant, there is nothing better than having dinner al fresco on one of the terraces overlooking the Dubai Fountain Show. It is truly a magical experience.

* You sound very driven, where does that passion come from?
My passion is driven by the amazing team members that surround me. We work very closely as a team to make guests’ stay unique and memorable. And there is no other way than teamwork to achieve it. There is nothing more satisfying than knowing you’ve put a smile on your guests’ faces and that we’ve made their stay memorable.

* Most unique thing about staying at the property?
Apart from being able to stay in the world’s tallest tower, it is the first hotel ever to be built and designed personally by Mr Armani. Staying here is like experiencing his home.

* Any crazy guest demands?
No demand from any of our guests is crazy. Our Lifestyle Ambassador philosophy is built around meeting guests’ needs. Upon check-in, a Lifestyle Ambassador is assigned to each suite and they are at hand for the guests around the clock to fulfill all their needs even if they seem bizarre or demanding.

With a Danish and Italian lineage, he’s recently moved from Germany, where he was raised and upheld many senior management positions for several brands.

His journey as a General Manager spans not just across two long decades but also across borders. Thomas Peruzzo began his journey in the hospitality sector at the age of 27 in Düsseldorf, Germany. Today he is associated with one of the most esteemed properties in Dubai, the Armani Hotel. Responsible for various operations across marketing and administration, he is known for his innovative approach, while ensuring strong levels of productivity and efficient use of resources.

—Rupali Dean
Each year, balloons of various sizes and colours can be spotted in the skies of Chennai and Pollachi. With an aim to bring forward a unique concept of family amusement via means of hot-air balloon rides, the Tamil Nadu Hot Air Balloon Festival is organised each year in the month of January. The preparations for cleaning the balloons—including clearing the soot off the farthest end of the balloon—in order to get them ready for flying begins days in advance. The global festival also aims to increase tourism in both Chennai and Pollachi.
— BOOKS —

Feral Dreams: Mowgli & His Mothers
Taking Mowgli’s story forward in a newly independent India

— GEAR —

Skin care, mini travel steamer and foldable toothbrush
The monthly roundup

— BACK IN TIME —

Sanchi Stupa
Revisiting India’s historically and artistically significant structure

PHOTOGRAPH: UDAYAN SANKAR PAL
A boy who rides the matriarch of an elephant herd and who rubs shoulders with langurs. The one who understands the language of wild animals but no human beings and who is christened Mowgli. Stephen Alter’s new novel takes the Mowgli tale to a new dimension and turns it into a question of identity. His wild boy—who is terrified of tigers and not in the least feral—hates the idea of being identified as a human being. However, life changes when he is adopted by an American missionary who can tote a rifle and shoot a nilgai when required. Miss Elizabeth is not a great believer in any god and she also befriends dacoits—including a Christian dacoit who is close to her—but she gives Mowgli, now rechristened Daniel, a new life and worldview.

There are different voices in the novel—the omnipresent author who escorts the boy through his jungle encounters, Elizabeth’s and ultimately Daniel’s. Elizabeth’s comes through the notes in her diary as she tracks the boy’s relationship with the other children she is bringing up in the mission. From the beginning, she is drawn to Daniel, possibly because of his strange upbringing and she trains him to speak, a word at a time, through Hindustani and English. She also documents the conventional missionary attitude—the boy has been rescued from the wild and needs to be brought into the fold of Christianity and thereby civilised through baptism with various Old Testament quotes about Nebuchadnezzar lying down with the wild beasts and chewing grass.

There is also the transition from matriarchal elephant to missionary mother—Mowgli’s wolf mother is only present in Elizabeth’s readings—both of whom adopt the boy in their different ways to the rage of young elephants and young humans alike. Only the monkeys seem to be unruffled by all this constant transitioning.

The dreaming jungle with its healing herbs and dangers that stalk rather loses out by way of comparison. Dacoits and innocent missionary meddling brings in an undercurrent of the current day with its urban Maoists who are frequently handcuffed and dragged away by the police. Elizabeth has the benefit of her American background to ensure that she does not moulder in an Indian jail.

—Anjana Basu

Feral Dreams: Mowgli & His Mothers
by Stephen Alter
Aleph Book Company ₹699
Mini Travel Steamer
This mini travel steamer is a 7-in-1 multi-use one. Its light weight makes it ideal for travel and 240ml capacity permits 15 minutes of continuous, wrinkle-free steaming.
» From $25.99
• amazon.com

The Switch Fix
The products—shampoo bars, hair oils, etc—are plant-based, vegan, promote a zero-waste lifestyle and are packed in recycled paper.
» From ₹299
• theswitchfix.co

GUM Travel Foldable Toothbrush
- tri-fold design for convenient storage
- comes with multi-level antibacterial bristles
- patented antibacterial agent to maintain bristle hygiene
- available for various dental needs such as restorations, orthodontics, etc

» Available in sets of 2, 6 and 12
• amazon.com

Kaya Youth Skin Relief Range
This paraben- and sulphate-free range—face cleanser, a pre-mask face gel, and an overnight recovery cream—for post-mask care retains moisture and stimulates cell renewal.
» From ₹249 • kayayouth.com

No Compromise Period Box
This comfort box comes with period tea and chocolates, eco-friendly sanitary pads, a menstrual cup and a soothing roll-on to help deal with cramps, bloating, and energy levels.
» From ₹1097
• andme.in

Postcard
Bringing all authentic Indian snacks under one umbrella, the brand offers 25 varieties of snacks that come from heirloom recipes and without any preservatives. The snacks, delivered across the country, come with original ingredients while retaining all local flavours passed over generations.
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Luminox x Bear Grylls Eco Series 3703
- made of 100% recycled plastic from the ocean, and weighs 72g
- sapphire glass with anti-reflective coating
- 45mm diameter, sapphire crystal, and one-way diving bezel
- comes with permanent lighting for up to 25 years and 2 years of international warranty
» ₹35,511 • swisswatchcompany.in
India’s ancient structures have always been of great interest to historians, artists and the masses in general. The Sanchi Stupa in Madhya Pradesh is one of the oldest stone structures in the country and has piqued the psyche of travellers since its inception. Essentially, stupas do not contain relics, rather only Buddhist teachings. However, the Sanchi Stupa houses many relics of Lord Buddha. The original design commissioned by Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE was a basic one. It was only in the 1st century BCE that the toranas (ornamental gates) were added to the structure. These toranas, sometimes called the achievements of the structure, were believed to be of great artistic value, and also serve as an architectural highlight. The intrinsic work here as a whole draws inspiration from the various life events of Ashoka, legends of his previous birth as well as early Buddhist beliefs and values. The design of the monument is equal parts symbolic and intricate with deep stone carvings that seem to float against the harsh Indian sun.

—Simrran Gill
Chhattisgarh Full of Surprises!

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A change of Air

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It's time to step out into Kerala.