

Yeh! Hai INDIA

TIKKU'S
TRAVELTHON™

Yeh! Hai
INDIA
I love my India



Introduction:

Yeh! Mera India is a book that came into being after almost 5 years of my travels around the world. During which time I covered almost 22 states in India not to mention the Andaman and Nicobar Is-lands. From Kashmir to Kanyakumari I have cress crossed the country in planes , cars , taxi's local buses , trains on horse backs , camels , Donkeys and even Palki's . I left no mode of transportation using bullock carts and auto rickshaws I crises crossed streets, by lanes and national highways.

My most enjoyable travels where the religious Travelers to Chaar Dhaam, Mansarovar, staying at the Baba Ramdev ashram and of course being with Satguru at his ashram in Coimbatore .The more I travelled within India the more I realized how blessed i was to live in such a vibrant country, so many colors so many religious beliefs, faiths, customs and ideologies .This was an amazing experience not to say very enriching. I Learn so much from these travels , they humbled me , as I spoke to sadhu's saints , sinners , villagers and gentlemen alike . I dined in some amazing Dhaba's and eateries made myself familiar with ethnic dances, local toddy and sweetmeats of west Bengal.

My favorite was a visit to Kashmir and Ladakh, I was able to blend into my roots and see the place of my origins being a Kashmiri it was my first visit to the valley. I went boating on the Shikara, had Kashmiri Tea and enjoyed the best food in restaurants like Fanoo's and Mughal Darbar.

Then there were the Mela's Kumbh and Pushkar were I strode one with a sea of humanity, I realized what it was to be just an ordinary Indian, I was one with the masses here. I felt humbled and was filled with Gratitude. As to how much God has given me already. My selfish desired perished , so what if I did not get the next acting break or made a few lakhs in the next stock market gold rush , I had so much more than the average Joe , the average human being who lives in under Rs 7,000 a. Month , well that is the minimum wage . I had no business to feel sorry for myself,

Yeh! Hai INDIA

as I should feel blessed and should enjoy the boons of nature, why. Feel like a victim.

Yeh! Hai INDIA

When you should always feel that you are a king and have been blessed by the grace of nature itself. Travelling across India was a joy to behold, but. One has be very flexible to be able to do that , you have to be willing to talk to anyone , stay in any place, travel by any mode of transportation and be ready to meet any. Challenges, misadventures that you meet on the way. I became like water, malleable, I would change and adapt to any situation that could come my way and respect the laws of nature. India is infinite and abundant it is like exploring the un explorable.

Yeh! Mera India is My personal tribute to the spirit of India and the vitality and vibrancy of the coun-try of my birth. So enjoy the pictures, the stories as I cress cross the vast land and quaint myself with people have concertinos with nomads and enjoy the Maha blog at it's many. Wondrous temples.

Warm regards

Anuj Tikku

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Index:-

HelpTrip: Dream Trips Made Easy

Varanasi – The Holiest of Cities by Kavita Kumble

The Impact of GST on the Travel and Tourism Industry – India

The Taal of Chandra Taal and the Dance of Khushneen

The Sardars of Shiv Khori

India and the Holy Cow

Trumped Up!

Andhra Pradesh

The Sufi Qawwals of Taj Falaknuma

The Horse Carriages of Taj Falaknuma

The Balls of Tirupati

Hyderabad

Hyderabad ka Charminar

The Mirror of the Sky – Taj Falaknuma Palace

Tirupati

Tirupati Ke Laddo

Delhi

The Land of Druk

Rocking It at the Bloggers Carnival

The First Glimpse of Ushuaia

Yeh! Hai INDIA

Dancing In The Rain

With Debbie and Hubby

In Delhi's Belly

Himachal Pradesh

The Divinity of Spiti Valley

Nako Tabo and Khaza – Burning Tracks On The NH22

The Bikers of the Exotic Spiti Valley

The Taal of Chandra Taal and the Dance of Khushneen

The Mesmerising Snow Peaks of Sangla, Himachal Pradesh

A Glimpse of the Monsoons in Himachal

Chail to Kufri and The Monkey Palace

Shimla to Chail – A Road Trip

Top Ten Places To See In Shimla

Searching for Truth at the Embassy Hotel, Shimla

Shimla All the Way

Shimla by the Mall Road

Shimla with Love

Shimla

Karnataka

Goodbye – Alvida Bangalore

Berried alive in Bangalore

Bangalore Up Side Down

Yeh! Hai INDIA

Kashmir

The Heaven and Hell that is Pulwama
A Hookah, A Houseboat and The Dal Lake
A Quick Head to the Hills!

Kerala

Hurray for Mollywood!
Fishing at the Lake of Eco Park – Cochin
Bollywood and The Athirapally Waterfalls
The Chinese Fishing Nets of Fort Cochin
Discovering the Sidewalks of Cochin as an Eccentric
Rains of Vagamon
The Tea Gardens of Munnar
India Monsoon Travel Dhamaka
Tower House and a Houseboat at Alappuzha
A Lobster, Aircraft Carriers and A Lighthouse in Kochi

Madhya Pradesh

Once Upon a Time in a Forest
Save Forests, Save Yourself
Doing the Bhangra at Durga Puja, Bandhavgarh
The Eye of the Tigress – Eye to Eye with Durga
Sunset at Bandhavgarh

Yeh! Hai INDIA

The Forest Fire – Poem

Tiger Symbolism

Elephant Safari – Riding the Beast

The Bush Breakfast – Bandhavgarh

Gond Art and the Elusive Tigers of Bandhavgarh

The Lucky Gulab Jamun Shop of Bandhavgarh

A Tigress Called Spotty but We Only Saw Elephant Potty

The Villages of Bandhavgarh

Kabir Ke Dohe and Tribal Art at MALAYA

I, Gagan and the Snake of Bandhavgarh

Ek Tha Tiger, Naam Charger

Tiger Tiger Burning Bright: At The Bandhavgarh Tiger Resort

Tiger Zinda Hai!

Maharashtra

The Palkiwalas of Ajanta Caves, Aurangabad

The Magnificent Caves of Ellora and The Grishneshwar Jyotirlinga

Mumbai

‘Mumbai Local’ by Kavita Kumble

Mumbai City’s RoboCop – A Tribute to Himanshu Roy

Rajasthan

Chittorgarh Palace and the Legend of Padmavati

Delights of Udaipur

Yeh! Hai INDIA

The Vintage Cars of Udaipur

The Marvels of Lake View Palace, Udaipur

Tamil Nadu

In The Name Of The Father

Coimbatore

Isha Kriya and the Magic of Dyanalinga

Adi Yogi and Maha Shivaratri at the Isha Foundation

Telangana

Hyderabad – The City of Nizams

Uttar Pradesh

Ghats of India, Part 4

Uttarakhand

Water Sports Banned in Uttarakhand by High Court

Sparrows Wall Art and A Morning Walk in Dehradun

Kwatra and I at Rishikesh

My Dad – My Bheem Shila

A Walk around the Buddha Temple, Dehradun

Witnessing The Ganga Arti in Haridwar

Business Baba

Why Spirituality Works

New Year Beside the Ganges in Haridwar

Baba Ramdev's Garden of Eden

The Violet Sky and a Morning Walk

Yeh! Hai INDIA

The Power of Positive Vibrations

Kamdev Meets Ramdev

The Kings of the Jungle at the Rajaji National Park

HelpTrip: Dream Trips Made Easy

Crowdfunding Travel Portal NOW in India

Hello, people, I am happy to associate with HelpTrip. This is a unique and first of a kind crowdfunding platform that I have decided to support and partner with. For as low as Rs 100 or Rs 250, one can enter the funding pool. With the click of a link, you can pay the entry fee through PayTM and register. On a given date, a wheel is spun and the winner is announced who gets to go to an all-paid luxurious 5-star holiday all for just a 100 bucks or so.

The concept will help people to travel more and encourage others to do the same. I have decided to support HelpTrip and prominently put their logos on my blog for this initiative as their system is transparent and unique. Also, the spinning of the wheel and the entire concept will help those with little money to travel.

So go ahead, enter the crowdfunding pool and win an all-paid exclusive five-star luxury holiday all through helptrip.me.



Varanasi – The Holiest of Cities by Kavita Kumble

Having become Time, itself, I destroy the world here, O Goddess! ~ Shiva, Padma Purana 1.33.14

Varanasi, this holiest of cities for those of the Hindu and Jain faiths, is just the kind of place where even a twenty-minute walk will lead you to a lifetime's worth of travel experience as you uncover an unfathomably diverse range of sights and encounters around every corner.

Varanasi has been one of the most intriguing trips I have made. Never have I felt a city so full of going ons. Just inane, often crazy, some brilliant, another bizarre going ons. Just going on. Like Life. Just going on.

The first thing people tell you when they know you are visiting Varanasi is that it's dirty, flighty, full of garbage and dead bodies floating in the Ganges. But the only reason we all travel is the uncanny ability of these places to throw surprises at us when we least expect. We are left with eyes wide open as we see what we never

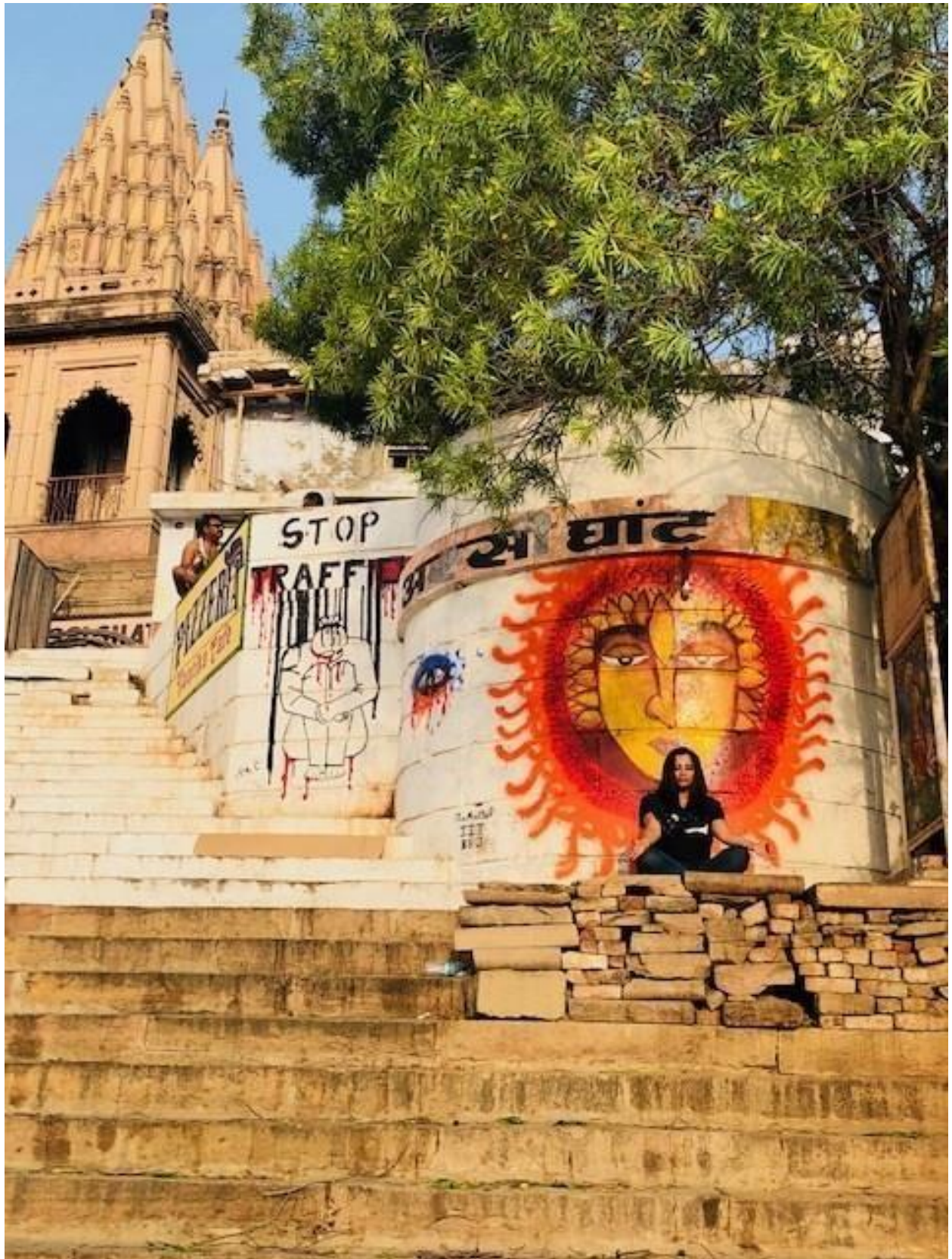
Yeh! Hai INDIA

thought we would find. Sometimes one needs to let go and let the place take you by surprise in its stride.

Here is what I found out:

My first look at Varanasi was at the airport I landed into which was plush and well-equipped. As I collected my baggage and strolled out, I was greeted by the cabbie I had booked in advance. The drive to ghats from the airport is an hour long or so, and in between, one can stop for some awesome Lassi which Banaras is proud of. The city is connected well by trains and flights all over from India.

Yeh! Hai INDIA



Yeh! Hai INDIA

And there I was staring at River Ganges on a hot March afternoon. The river flowed in still and calm, and as I saw it flowing, felt the same calmness in my head. I was suddenly so much in awe of the entire scene I saw. As I sat in my boat to reach the hotel, I bowed down my head to Mother Ganges and slid my hand by the boat to take in some water from her. I forgot the hot scorching sun for that moment and was mesmerised by the age-old ghats floating beside, and I knew that in the next two days, I will be discovering this 3000-year-old magical city. Known as Lord Shiva's abode and the city he built for his wife Parvati, the place had so much of history associated with it. And it was clean and pristine.

I was put up in this 200-year-old heritage property (Guleri Khoti), which was converted into a luxury hotel. It had an age-old world charm to the same and has well curated beautiful rooms which face the Ganges. The only way to reach the place is by a boat which the hotel arranges for. You can, however, walk by the ghats in the city any time of the day.

I ventured out in the evening and my first stop was the famous Manikarnika Ghat. Manikarnika or The Burning Ghats is just one of the many ghats of Varanasi. It is the main ghat where bodies are burnt. You see piles of wood stacked up by the banks which are used to light the pyres. And one sees never-ending bodies been bought here day and night.

On that day as I sat there looking at the pyres burning, I promised to be better and kinder, since the scenes of burning ghats to my left reminded me that the time to be better and kinder is running out.

Varanasi has many facades to it and it was not just the Ganges. The food, the people, the Ganga aarti, the age-old 88 ghats there. I soaked in the place with all this, walked those Banaras gullies with cows at every turn and colourful doors to beautiful homes. In the two days I was there, I loved each bit of my experience. Be it the 'Banarasi Brocade Saree Shopping' where I was helped by strangers on the road to find the perfect saree followed by a 'Tonga' ride in the city in the evening where the Tongas are still pulled in by humans. I also got lost on those roads but obviously found my way back too.

I will follow my series on Varanasi with more posts on each of this.

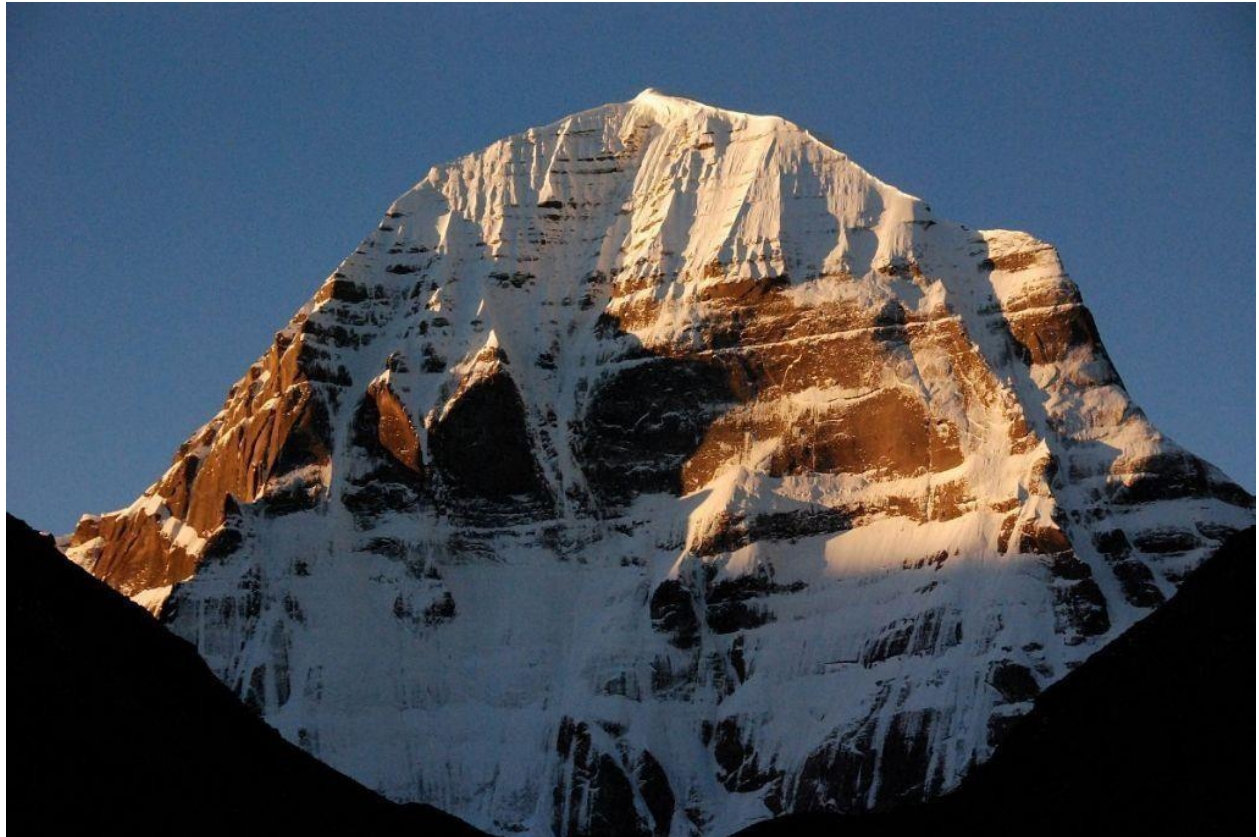
Yeh! Hai INDIA

As you leave this city, you yearn to definitely get back soon. The effect of the place will remain with you for days to come, and one takes time to recover from the magic.

It forces you to see beyond the obvious. Varanasi removes the foils and fixtures that clog our mind. It opens the soul for one to see deep inside. But it's not for everyone, it's for the pupil to be compatible, the guru in Varanasi is open source.

Kailash Mansarovar Yatra

Every year, citizens of India aim for the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra which is organised by the Government of India under control of the Ministry of External Affairs. It starts at the end of May or early June to September. The pilgrimage or 'Yatra' is open to all Indian citizens above 18 years of age who wish to proceed to Kailash and Mansarovar for religious purposes.



The holy Mt. Kailash is situated in the western Tibetan plateau in the northernmost region of the Himalayas. It is also referred to as Mt. Meru and Kang Rinpoche. Some also call it snow jewel. Mt. Kailash is over 22,000 ft. It's also known to be the abode of Lord Shiva. Hindus firmly believe in performing a 'parikrama' which is a 51 km walk around the circumference of Mt. Kailash with a belief that it will wash away their sins.

Mt. Kailash is also the birth place of the four holy rivers namely the Sutlej, the Indus, the Karnali and the mighty Brahmaputra.

Yeh! Hai INDIA

Once you travel south-east of Mt. Kailash, you will arrive at a tranquil blue orbicular lake named Mansarovar. In Tibetan, it's known as the 'precious lake' or Tso Rinpoche. The lake has freezing cold water and pilgrims take a dip in the cold waters for the belief that it has supernatural powers which are also considered spiritually beneficial.

So, this auspicious journey roughly lasts for about 26 days. Visa process takes place in Delhi. Therefore, the pilgrims have to spend an additional period of 4 days in the capital to obtain permissions and complete paper work and obtain medical clearances. The Yatra commences in a group of 60 pilgrims each starting first week of June and goes until the end of September.

Applicants for the Yatra should possess Indian passports. The cost of the journey is paid to Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam and Indo Tibetan Border Police. Few hundred dollars are paid on Chinese side for the logistics support.

The Indian Mountaineering Foundation has termed Mt. Kailash and Mansarovar Yatra as the most treacherous expedition with an extreme risk to life in comparison to the other treks like Amarnath and Vaishnodevi Yatra. The journey is extremely arduous for the pilgrims who are not fit as the conditions are hostile which sometimes leads to mountain sickness which can be life threatening.

Applicants should be physically healthy, medically fit and are required to undergo a comprehensive medical examination in New Delhi. A second medical test to ascertain reactions to altitude trekking is done at Gunji, after 6 days of the Yatra, at a height of 3500 meters.

Complete applications in the prescribed format should be sent to Under Secretary (EA) Room No. 255-A, South Block, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi-110011 in mid-March every year as stipulated by the Government of India.

The selection of Yatris is done by India's Ministry of External Affairs through a computer-generated random gender-balanced selection process.

For further details on the Yatra, please visit the official website of Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam.

The Impact of GST on the Travel and Tourism Industry – India

The new GST tax slabs of 5%, 12%, 18% and 28% are out and the hospitality industry is very disappointed with the announcement of GST. The industry believes that the higher tax slabs will impact and hinder growth, putting pressure on the bottom line and squeezing the margins of industry players. Hotels and guesthouses charging Rs. 1000 per room will pay 5% tax. Hotels charging Rs. 2000 to Rs. 4000 will pay 12% tax. Those charging Rs. 5000 as room rent will pay 18% tax and five star hotels will pay the highest slab rate of 28%. The luxury segment in the industry is specially cheesed off as they will have to bear the heaviest burden of tax. They believe it will drive away tourism in India which is, as it is, low in comparison to countries like Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. Out of witch Malaysia attracts 24.7 million tourists and Thailand about 19 million, we are the second most populated country in the world with only 6.3 million tourists. In comparison to these countries where tax rates hover between 5% to 10%, the higher slabs of 18% and 28% will only decrease the overall profitability of the hospitality and tourism industry and drive away potential tourists from overseas.



Others argue that the much fairer and less complex GST will fuel domestic consumption and increase the growth rate at the same time increase the tax net as

Yeh! Hai INDIA

more people will be willing to pay taxes. It will rationalise the tax system and has been hailed as a major reform for the year which is to be welcomed.

Under GST, entertainment tax will be merged with service tax. Cinema halls, gambling and betting services will all come under the 28% tax bracket. This will be much lower than the current 40% to 45% which these service providers have to bear.

Others argue that the hotel industry is governed by three taxes VAT, luxury tax and services tax. These amount to a total tax of between 20% and 27%. Now with GST, this will be rationalised to around 19%. So in the long run, the hospitality industry will actually benefit. Most pundits believe that GST will have a positive impact in the long term and the trade industry should not try to resist it.

As for the airline industry, the average ticket price for an economy ticket will fall by around 5% to 10% and the prices for the business class will increase by a similar amount. The savings will not always be passed on to the end consumer.

All in all, people should have an open mind about GST and wait for a while till its impact is truly felt.

The Sardars of Shiv Khori

The depression of losing the world cup last night had now gone away and I had to move on from my abode in Chail towards the village of Kuniyaar, where I wanted to see the famous Shiv Temple and the Shiv Khori which is a Guffa with a Shiva Lingam in it. On my way to Solan, I stopped over to courier my passport for my Tibet trip but first things first. I reached Shiv Khori in the late afternoon and, as usual, got off the car with my camera lens all ready to shoot this den of wonders – The den of Shiva. It was a walk downhill for a while as we approached the temple complex. On my way down, I saw a group of Sardars passing by who had just finished worshipping at the Shiv Khori.



I stopped over to chat to them “You all come here to pray? It is wonderful to see Sardars in a Shiv Temple.” I said folding my hands in a namaste “Yes sir ji, the Lord is only one, He has many names and many roopa, but He is all one and truth is also one. For us, it makes no difference whether it is Shiva or Nanak, They are all one and we respect all Dharmas.” I was amazed to see such a broad through on

theology by a group of rustic Sardars, wearing only a vest, torn shirt and trousers. Even at this level, their thought was so profound and really touched a chord. I felt happier and peaceful as I approached the temple. I went into the Guffa that leads from the temple. It was cool with a soft wind blowing, right in the middle was the Shiv Linga. A few ladies were sitting around it trying to meditate with a group of men on the other side, head bowed with respect and devotion. As I ventured into the temple complex, I was invited into the kitchen for some food or prasadam. We sat down to have rice, dal and vegetables. At the end of the meal, kheer was served which I ate to my heart's content. I walked back to my car full and nourished for my journey ahead. My night stay will be in a frugal guest house costing only Rs 1200 a night with a dinner of butter chicken and chapatis. It seems like my journey around the fabulous state of Himachal has just begun.

But today, I bow my hat to the feisty Sardars of Shiv Khori who are a burning symbol of religious tolerance and love for all humanity and religious equality. Even when places in our world burn out of religious hatred and bloodshed in the name of God, the Sardars of Shiv Khori are leading us all from darkness into light.

Feasting In Pal Ka Dhaba and Rocking the Chandigarh Rock Garden

The morning Dakota flight of Jet Airways was the worst that I have ever taken. It took an hour from Delhi to reach Mohali military airport. But man, what a flight! I felt like I was going to crash every minute of my journey. The plane was small and easily got swayed in the bad morning weather. The pilot tried to land twice but failed as it felt like we were sinking in mid-air. Luckily the trauma for me and my fellow passengers was over soon as we managed to land on the third attempt.

But all my aches and pains subsided as I sank into my soft bed at the Taj Chandigarh near Sector 17, the most happening sector of the city. Chandigarh is an architect's delight, it is said to be the best-planned city of our country with the in-your-face Punjabi culture of good food, ample of booze and butter chicken which is the most favourite delicacy of this place. After catching up on lost sleep, I knew that I had to explore the city a bit. So next day, I hired a taxi for 8 hours at Rs 1800 all-inclusive. The rate was half of what I was getting if I had hired a hotel taxi.



A detour around the Rock Garden, which is so famous, was a treat. I enjoyed meandering through these elegant structures made out of rock, stone, clay, glass and other such garbage. With waterfalls and caves, the place looked like bhool bhulaiya. The afternoon heat was getting to me and after taking the customary photographs, I got lost trying to find my way out to the car park. The more I tried to get out of the garden, the more entangled I got in its alleys and galleries. Beer drinking men and dancing statues greeted me all around as I finally found my way back.

Lunch time beckoned and I was told by my driver to go to Pal Dhaba in Sector 28. I wrapped up my lunch, a keema kaleji and tandoori roti. At the reception of the Dhaba, I saw lots of photographs of Bollywood actors like Rishi Kapoor, Raj Babbar and Ranbir Kapoor – actors who had frequented the Dhaba no doubt. I walked up to the owner and showed him a few of my acting abilities along with my showreel on YouTube. That was it, he took a photo with me and his son which, according to him, will soon adorn his wall.

I, then, ventured into Sukhna Lake to walk by the side of the lake and enjoy seeing people boating. Then my eyes fell on a camel. I was very happy to photograph it since it was beautifully adorned with a colourful attire. I even managed to whisper a few words to the beast but he wouldn't budge until his caretaker told him to. I tried to interview his caretaker but he was very professional and said, "Only ride, please Rs 100 for one ride around the park."

India and the Holy Cow

As a traveller and a blogger, I have travelled through the length of India – through the bylanes of Benaras, the hills of Uttarakhand to the desert sand dunes of Rajasthan. I have been there on foot or on a car, the most common view on the streets and muddy bylanes of India is that of the Holy Cow. By the way, it is also a title of a bestseller novel. The cow is omnipresent, urban or rural whatever the terrain, you will find the humble cow there. The holier the city, the greater the number of cows. Hrishikesh, Varanasi, Haridwar, to name a few, all the towns on the banks of the Ganges have cows loitering around. Only in India an animal and man have formed such deep bond of love, reverence and friendship. People offer them food and the passer-by lets them pass first, no one messes with the cow, she is the queen of the street. They can feel free to sit under the shade of a tree in a park or near a footpath, no sweat, no bother, we love our cows. Gau Mata, she is the mother to us all and is a very important symbol in the Hindu and Vedic religion.

She is the symbol of motherhood as she provides her milk and dung as fuel, she is innocent, white and thus, pure. The cow is also a potent symbol of non-violence. This philosophy of ahimsa is imbibed so much by the nature of the cow. In Hindu scripting, the cow was worshipped as part of holy Yagya. Kamdhenu is a special magical cow that came out during the samura manthan, the milk has magical and medicinal qualities. The cow has been part of our folk and religious stories for years. They were given away as gifts and, alas, to the poor Brahmins and are also a symbol of wealth and prestige in rural India. Most of the ashrams that I have visited in India have a cow breeding centre where cows are kept and looked after in return of milk and dung. Cow urine and its medicinal qualities have been used in Ayurveda to cure many ailments and diseases. Cow's urine is also an ingredient used in many pujas and rituals in Indian Hindu homes.

The cow has also always been a controversial topic in mainstream Indian politics. The current ban on cow slaughter, the ban on beef in Maharashtra, that had the upper classes up in arms, not to mention all the five-star hotels who have to serve beef as part of their international menu. The cow has stood for Indians and her scared symbol means that she is to be worshipped, not to be killed for her flesh or

Yeh! Hai INDIA

hide. She has been part of the great divide between the Hindus and the rest of India. Her mystic is steeped into the cultures of RSS, BJP and the Hindu right. Was it not the bold tweets of Shobha Day who proclaimed “I eat beef now come and kill me.” as a figure up to the Hindu right?



She is the symbol of Dharma, righteousness, truth, compassion and above all, a sacred symbol of old and modern India. Embraced by its people for centuries, she will be part of our future and continue to live in harmony amongst us all. So next time you are on a trek through a busy Indian Bazaar and you spot a cow, just fold your hands and pay your respects with the Indian greeting of “Namaste Gau Mata”.

Trumped Up!

The amazing reversal of fortune in the US presidential elections has brought the day alive with Trump coming on top and beating Hillary Clinton hands down. But what does it mean for the changing political landscape in the US and, of course, how does it impact us in India? It is true that Trump ran the most unconventional presidential campaign so far.

He never minced his words when talking against radical Islam and minorities. He is also against foreigners taking jobs away from his fellow countrymen. He has even spoken about building a wall on the border of Mexico. His move against outsourcing of jobs might hurt India as a lot of jobs outsourced by the US land up in our laps.

After all, we are the best source of English and IT literate manpower to America. Well, India will have issues with Trump's policy. Here, he will cut back on visas and outsourced jobs that come our way.

On the bright side, he has stated that he understands India, particularly Mumbai, where Trump has invested heavily with LODHA Builders to build huge towers ala Trump Towers. He has also shown interest in doing defence deals with India.

All in all, as he said "We will be fair to others keeping our interest first", that is the key. It will be hardworking Americans first, then, the rest of us.



Another thing to note is that he is a republican president and they have always taken America to war. Both George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush took the US into a war that cost the country a lot. For me, his flamboyance forthright and sharp messages won the day for him.

The Americans were fed up with the old political establishment and this time voted for a rank outsider, the billionaire Trump. We can be sure that things will be spicy coming the next year and the US political arena will be throbbing with a new wind of change and some fast decision making. After all, Trump has to walk the talk now.

So, Trump it is over the old hag Hillary. More colour, more vibrancy and some out-of-the-box policy decisions, America is headed for an uncertain but yet, a very exciting time ahead in its history.

The Sufi Qawwals of Taj Falaknuma

The evening Qawwali was like a call to Arzan, a call for prayer. A group of half a dozen qawwals sat on the floor with harmoniums, tabla and jingles all set to sing the Qawwali, the most revered traditions of the palace. These guys were the soul of the palace and tied up the mood for the evening. I interviewed them briefly for my video. They were a group called Raja Bayan from the villages of Rajasthan who had been singing folk music for generations, father to son and so on.



“Since the last eight years that we have been in the Nizam’s palace, we have been singing qawwalis and now have turned to Sufi music as it touches our soul the most.” One of them remarked as he played a tune from his harmonium. I asked him to sing a song by Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, my favourite qawwal and the pioneer of Sufi music. As if on cue, the band started singing and it was music all over the place as I swirled my camera capturing the singing qawwals of the Taj Falaknuma Palace. On the other side, the windows were open showcasing the moon-lit night and the blue hue that had formed in the sky. The moon’s light had made the dark

Yeh! Hai INDIA

sky blue and purple with its reflection. People sat on the ledge of the palace jharokhas admiring the sky and the hills. Every night at the palace looked like a Diwali night, a night of celebration. The fountains threw jets of water in the air and the neatly cut lawns made way for the palace guests.

I got so drunk on the Sufi qawwali that I too started moving feverishly to the sound of the voices that at times were godly and at times haunting and empty. I realised the meaning of Sajda and Falk at these points – just music, me and my prayer to my maker. Me in direct contact with my inner god – that is the feeling the music created.

After the evening session, I proceeded back to the billiards room but the sounds and music of the Qawwals of Falaknuma palace will forever remain with me.

The Horse Carriages of Taj Falaknuma

The night was another experience as the whole palace was lit up with lights. The many lawns and walkways of the palace glowed as the night set in. Foreign dignitaries were welcomed into the palace as a champagne walk was conducted so that they could get a tour of the place. After a rose petal bath, a champagne walk, that is all one needs. The sky did open up into many radiant stars and the palace showcased its other side at night. Now one could get a better glimpse of the many portraits that adorned the palace walls especially if you walked up to the billiards room or the study. I took a lot of snaps of me with the portraits of the many dignitaries who were hosted here once upon a time. I believe even Ivanka Trump was hosted at the Falaknuma Palace and got a taste of its hospitality.



However, it was the horse carriage, which got me to the palace that made my day. An ancient mode of transport only meant for the kings and royals was now my

Yeh! Hai INDIA

mode of transport. Even while I was leaving, I was taken around by the royal carriage. The only thing left was a 10 cannon salute. They would have given me that too but there were only two cannons kept as showpieces near the central entrance area of the palace.

I got a look at the ancient jewels, dresses, shawls, achkans and other regal wear as Taj had a shop that sold a lot of royal knick-knacks such as these. Lamps, paintings, portraits, feather pens, mirrors, you name it; it was all there all for a fancy price. Now that you know how to live like a Nizam, why not try and look like one too? I am sure they are able to sell these to many foreigners who arrive from South America and Europe.

It is quiet and peaceful with a serenity of a Buddhist stupa. One does feel relaxed and transported into an ancient land that reveals itself to us through artefacts, paintings, decor and heritage. A make-believe world that has lost its relevance but does not want us to forget that it was a thriving kingdom once upon a time with its own Tehzeeb and rules, with its own purpose, rights and wrongs. I, for one, paced up and down and even around the palace.

The pool was fun and so was the beer. I did manage to sip a few pegs of Single Malt at night and chatted to a young couple who had come to celebrate their friendship anniversary in the palace. They had a special dinner prepared for them that night.

The qawwals sang in the evening, clapping and singing with all might and vigour. The whole palace vibrated with the sound of qawwali. I just kept filming on my last day here hoping I could capture as much as I could of the past and present glory of Taj Falaknuma.

The Balls of Tirupati

I was pretty cheesed off for being harassed at Tirupati Balaji as they had refused to give me the Prasad laddo all because I had no money in my pocket at that time. Just near me in the next counter, there were people who were carrying thousands of pure ghee and dry fruit laced laddos in sacks. On a closer enquiry, I found out that these laddos would be sold outside at a premium.

Yes, Tirupati Balaji is a nest for black marketing of laddos. Yes, the laddos of Tirupati, or should I say, the Balls of Tirupati are black marketed like crazy here. Not only that, the proverb that 'money can buy anything' holds true in this temple.

From VIP dharshans to special passes and entries, the rich can get to see, feel and reach God here in their own express ways while all of us mortals have to wait in a 5-hour queue fighting, jostling and even hitting each other with bare fists as our line moved at a snail's pace. All these for what? To see the idol for only 5 seconds. Yes, that is the duration one gets to do dharshan here. However, for the rich, there is a separate route and if you have the money, it will take you minutes to see the Lord.



No doubt, it is the richest temple in the world as the rich donate all their gold to this temple. Sometimes, the lines of dharshan bifurcate into four or five different lines like tributaries. I met a gentleman standing outside the temple and he tried to explain to me his plight. "You see, I have been in line for 6 hours, but I still did not get the dharshan as my line got split into two and I landed outside the temple from some other doorway without reaching the idol area.

Now they say I have to come back tomorrow." he looked dejected as he had to return home the very next day. The common man and his suffering. It seems even the Lord smiles on the rich here and the poor have to go empty-handed, which is strange because it is the poor and the common folk who need the blessing of the Lord the most and they are kind of deprived of it here at times. It saddened me that this ancient temple was so driven by its desire to earn money from its pilgrims that it could even deny me my sacred laddo. What balls, man, what balls!

Hyderabad ka Charminar

After my Faluknuma escapades, I decided to take a cheap accommodation near the centre of the town close to Charminar. I hired a local auto for Rs 1,000 a day and asked the cameraman to be my guide around the many bylanes of the city. The Charminar area reminded me of Chandni Chowk and Jama Masjid areas of Delhi. I stood below the lights of the Charminar and captured its beauty at night panning through its streets and biryani shops most selling beef biryani and chicken shawarma. A shop called Roshan became my favourite as I munched on a shawarma and a biryani. Then it was off to the sugarcane shop to have some juice. Finally, I traded off to the Munna Pan shop to enjoy the pan. All the while, I had my autowala as my guide and he held the camera bag most of the time. The whole night I meandered through Hyderabad but the glee and dazzle of Charminar stayed with me through the night. It was time to enjoy some local mutton with naan back in my hotel room that I had taken for a mere Rs 2500 through OYO rooms.



Yeh! Hai INDIA

I had to book a flight to Tirupati to visit the Balaji Shrine and MakeMyTrip was the best place to do that. At around Rs 2800, one can get a direct flight to Tirupati and it takes only one hour to get to the city of Balaji. They say it is the richest temple in the world. The inner sanctum is made of gold. One has to take a ticket before one is allowed to see the shrine and the tickets are available from the local bus stop only after 12 pm at night. You should make sure you carry your Aadhaar card otherwise, the ticket will not be given to you. On the ticket is given the timing of the Dharshan and mine was in the afternoon. There was still time as I trudged back to my hotel room for a nap.

The Mirror of the Sky – Taj Falaknuma Palace

I was finally there at Taj Falaknuma and I felt like a royal from day one. From the taxi cab that had come to escort me to the two-horse carriage that took me to my room area, the grand welcome with rose petals and scents, I was transported to another era – the era of the Nizam. After all, Falaknuma Palace was the royal residence of the Nizams and was built in 1894. This place is opulent in all its glory and so is the price of its room. Rs 20,000 a night is a bit steep for normal budget travellers but the experience is worth it.

I was helped into my luxury room by the many pleasant and helpful attendees of the palace. I instantly had a hot rose-scented bathtub ready for me to soothe my aches and pains from the flight that I had just taken from Delhi. The palace has a central courtyard with fountains and green carpet grass lawns all across. On either side are galleries with huge white pillars. Behind them are the guest rooms. Each room reeks of luxury and grandiose. The staff are so perceptive and treat you not as a guest but as a family. I had cut my chin while shaving and a staff noticed that the cut was bleeding. She instantly called for first aid and applied an ointment to seal the wound.

Next day, when another staff member brought me my dinner, he noticed I was coughing due to excessive smoking and instantly asked me if he could prepare hot toddy that would soothe my throat at night and heal my discomfort. Within minutes, herbal hot toddy arrived and I was relieved of my throat ache. I have never seen this kind of attention to detail and attention to the guest, even in posh hotels abroad. The level of service and attention to the guest really left me spellbound. However, this was just the beginning.

In the morning, I woke up late and wrapped myself in a fluffy bathrobe to take a dip in the pool enjoying a beer at the same time. The Hyderabadi cuisine was something I really enjoyed. The mutton and chicken biryani, qubani-ka-meetha, haleem – oh! All of it was finger-licking good and served piping hot – a treat for the kings.

Yeh! Hai INDIA

The evenings would be ushered in by the royal qawwals and this time, I was filming them through my Mark IV as they sang a famous qawwali by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. Then it was up a flight of marble stairs to the royal billiards room where I played billiards with a few foreign guests and sipped Bourbon. The night was my favourite time as the whole palace was lit up. The sapphire red of the glittering chandeliers complemented the green emerald light that shone from the doorway. The palace was like a museum frozen in time. Huge portraits of the Nizams and many other dignitaries from around the world adorned the walls on either side of the stairways. King George V and Czar Nicholas II of Russia – they were all there adding to the mystique of the palace reminding us of its great heritage and prestige.



Some of the guests took a guided champagne tour of the palace where they were acquainted with the history of the place. I, for one, skipped that session. I walked instead to the Jiva Spa for a haircut. I also coloured my hair. All rooms are non-smoking zones but one can step out for a smoke.

Yeh! Hai INDIA

The place is full of white marble statues of Greek Gods and little angels with replicas of many masterpieces from around the world. I, for one, found a startling resemblance between Taj Falaknuma and the Mezhyhirya Palace that I had visited on my trip to Kiev. The opulence, the lawns and the marble statues along with the water fountains had a striking resemblance to the Mezhyhirya Palace.

Well, its lights out for now. Enjoy the night photographs from Falaknuma.

Tirupati Ke Laddo

I always wanted to go to Tirupati Balaji and now, I was finally there. This spiritual town of Andhra Pradesh is known for the ancient temple of Tirupati Balaji as pilgrims from around India throng for Darshana at the temple. After getting my temple entry ticket, it was a four-hour fight to get into the temple sanctum to see the actual idol encased in gold. I jostled in long queues. The place was full of children with shaved heads. Even some women had shaved their heads. However, the real fight started as we started getting closer and closer to the idol. Bit by bit, the line would move in struts and stops. Everyone would chant “Govinda Govinda” and then move forward. I too got a bit involved and remembered the songs from the film Sarkar 2, Govinda Govinda. I am sure it was inspired by the pilgrims of Tirupati Balaji. Yes, inch by inch, I moved closer to the temple compound. The temple has a bomb glittering with gold. The inner walls of the temple are also plated with gold. The walls of the temple are lit up with red, green, blue and orange lights giving it a psychedelic effect. I reached the idol finally and could hardly finish my prayers before I was pushed to the side by a lady. You only get 10 seconds to see the idol and ask for your wish to be fulfilled. Luckily, I got all my wishes through in time. The rest of the hour was spent meandering around the compound seeing the artis being performed. But how could I leave without eating the LADDO, the Prasad of Tirupati? I walked into the window of the many counters and asked for the Prasad. To my dismay, my ticket did not have a prasad coupon and so, I was asked to pay for the LADDO.

Yeh! Hai INDIA

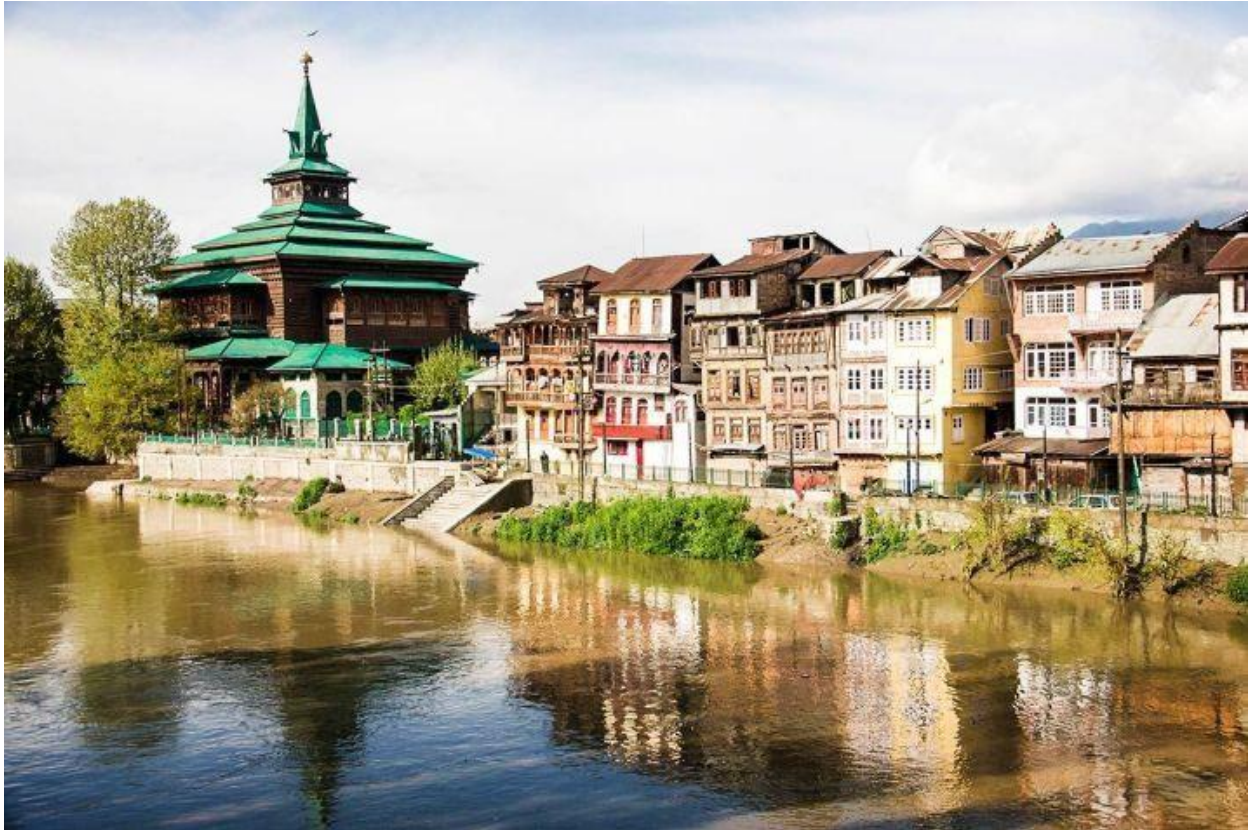


I had no money and so, I begged for the sweet to be given for free. Finally, after some argument with the lady who managed the counter, I was given half a laddo to taste. I finally gobbled it up and marched out of the temple compound to the waiting taxi. Tirupati Balaji is on top at a certain height and it takes one hour by car to get there. The security around the area is good and the temple complex is huge. The energies around the temple are indeed positive, but in no comparison are the vibrations as vibrant as they were in Kailash Mansarovar. Nonetheless, it was a spiritual treat and the laddos really made my day. Man, do I feel blessed!

The Land of Druk

Druk Air is the only national carrier to Bhutan and a Delhi to Paro air ticket can cost you as much as Rs 19,000. If you are taking a car tour around the country, staying in three-star resorts with all meals, a two week trip to Bhutan could cost you around Rs 1.7 lakhs but then, you will be very comfortable. Wifi is available in most hotels but it is a bit slow. Bhutan was a bit chilly even during the first week of April and I realised that I should have brought a light jacket to keep the nippy chill away. The green mountains are full of sheep, horses, buffalos and other beasts of nature. There is public transport like rickshaws and car taxis but as a foreign tourist, I suggest you use a hired vehicle throughout your trip to the country.

At Paro, my driver Roop took special care to show me the hilltop post which is on top of a hill staring at the new Paro airport which the Indian government has promised to build. I clicked away to capture the scene like an excited shutterbug. The other thing to see here is the Administration Building which runs the city of Paro and the entire district. It had a wooden tapestry and a corridor with wooden pillars on either side. I saw a monk walking in haste trying to reach the other end with his maroon robe flowing in the air. He looked divine as I clicked away with my camera.



The other thing that pleased me to no end was that Rajnigandha, my brand of paan masala, was available here and at most shops. I stayed at a resort which was quiet and peaceful. For a few days, I stayed in my room and would wake up only in the late afternoon. I felt relaxed by the air and natural vitality of the country. I would wave at young children running on the street with red umbrellas in their hand.

The architecture and style of houses and monasteries in Bhutan are very similar to the ones that I saw on my journey to Tibet. It is also true that the ancient and almost lost religion of Bon actually originated in Tibet and was brought from there to Bhutan. The use of white, brown, yellow and black paints to decorate the outer walls of the house, the style and intricately carved shapes in the wooden roof of the houses was also classic Bhutan.

So here I was in Druk, the seat of the Dalai Lama and the cradle of the Buddhist faith. Everyone looks like a monk here. Smoking in public is prohibited and you can be fined Rs 500 for it. You cannot smoke even in your car. There are, however, designated places on the street or compounds where one can light up. The food,

Yeh! Hai INDIA

however, is on the bland side and as an Indian, you will miss the spice, the tang and the zing that one is used to in Indian cuisine.

The cradle of happiness and serenity, my Bhutan!

Rocking It at the Bloggers Carnival

Just finished giving a talk at the Delhi's Biggest Bloggers Carnival with more than a 100 people in attendance. The main theme was "How to Make Your Content Go Viral?" After cutting the ribbon and inaugurating the event, I threw myself into the question and answer session. Young and enterprising bloggers who were keen to learn about this art asked inquisitive questions to the panel. It was a very enjoyable affair. Enjoy the photographs and videos from this session.



Yeh! Hai INDIA

The First Glimpse of Ushuaia

Ushuaia is the southernmost city in the world lying on the tip of Argentina. I finally got here in the evening and man, it was one hell of a journey! From Delhi to Amsterdam, Amsterdam to Sao Paulo, Sao Paulo to Buenos Aires and then to Ushuaia all by KLM flight.



It is 10:00 pm at night and still, its daylight here. Enjoy the first photos from my hotel in Ushuaia.

Yeh! Hai INDIA

Dancing In the Rain

Enjoy some of the photos of the monsoons in Delhi. This is the view into the garden in front of my house. Enjoy the genre and the droplets as they slide down bright green leaves, the walking passerby taking refuge in their umbrellas, the penguin USE ME and some rock in the corner of the garden.



This is Monsoon Delhi Style.

With Debbie and Hubby

I started my travelthon with a vision of meeting different people, absorbing their stories, learning from their diverse knowledge and understanding their culture. A year back, I was roaming the streets of Dharamshala chatting to monks trying to understand the history and fate of the Tibetan people. It was then that I bumped into a cute couple from Texas, USA. They were seated in a cafe having breakfast. I sat on the same table and started chatting. I found our conversation on God, fate, religion and spirituality. It was so engaging that I wrote it on my blog. I was not lucky enough to see the Dalai Lama, but Debbie managed to shake hands with the big man and also received words of wisdom from him. The chat in the cafe and our time together was very memorable for me as I explained to them the vision of my travelthon and the reason for travelling the world. Then we parted ways only in a hope that we will see each other again.

Fate, indeed, is a funny thing and destiny plays its silent, yet, sure part in our lives. Just a few days back I got a message on my messenger from Debbie that she was in Delhi. She had been following my blog for a year and had also been actively commenting on some of my posts. I was thrilled and it was great timing as I had just landed in Delhi after celebrating Diwali with my friends in Mumbai. I asked her to send me her number and the next morning, we decided to meet outside her hotel in Lajpat Nagar. Debbie was happy to see me as I took them for a tuk-tuk ride around New Delhi, India Gate and Connaught Place. We had a meal at the Kake Ka Dhaba where we dived into some delicious no-nonsense Punjabi food. Butter chicken, keema and roti were heaven as both of them relished the Indian food. We had ice cream at Naturals and I treated them to a special banarasi paan.

Luckily for me, a fan recognised me as a Bollywood celebrity and even took photographs with me. It gave me the added boost in front of my foreign guests. After all, they were being shown around the city by a Bollywood celebrity.

By the evening, we headed for their hotel where I thanked them for their company. Debbie invited me over to Texas when I decided to go to the USA. She even promised to help with the visas. Surely, I had struck a good friendship with them which will continue as I move forward in my travelthon.

In Delhi's Belly

I felt bright and alive in the morning or maybe I thought as I was waiting to catch the English movie 10 Cloverfield Lane. I had booked it through BookMyShow, a ticket booking portal and it cost me 604 points on my Citi Prestige credit card. I was in Connaught Place; now Rajiv Gandhi Chowk, in no time.

It was hot in Delhi in the afternoon at 42 degree and it is important to keep hydrating oneself. I sipped cool lemon tea and large gulps of Sprite with ice as I strolled around the market place. The eateries like The Host, United Cafe House and Regency all of the landmark diners of CP, Connaught Place of yore had a new and improved look, new logo and brand new decor. But my favourite has always been the earthy Kake Da Dhaba, perhaps since I am resident, citizen as it were of this city! I sat down for the authentic Punjabi taste of butter chicken and dahi meat with kebab's. All this for less the Rs 500 about \$8 and I always thought it is a steal. The place being earthy as it was, the only issues I have are the tight seating arrangement and the long wait at times. Apart from that the food is piping hot, the chicken is tender and the portion's large with free butter and gravy toppings all this to be burped down by a large cola.

The circular design of Connaught Place suit is the easy walking style of tourist's and shoppers, no hurry here, as couples stroll hand in hand window shopping or just enjoying an ice cream. Almost all international clothing brands, fast food outlets and electronics showrooms are in this market. On the sidewalks sit the hawkers selling books, socks, calendars, art, smokes or just smuggled goods. Now of course the place is known as Rajeev Chowk and that is the name of the metro station. Long before the underground rail there existed the Palika Bazar which is as in a true sense of the terms an underground market. This is a market for common folks, with cheap clothes and cheap electronic has abound they say you and get anything in this market for a steal. So if you want to fetch a good bargain and not very fussy about brands, you must try Palika Bazar. I grabbed a kakori kebab (and boy those kababs have history!) from the near by Chacha Kebabs and strolled into the Oden Big Cinema where my platinum seat was awaiting. The movie 10 Clover field Lane seemed like a bit of the M. Night Shyamalan types. It had John Goodman as the

Yeh! Hai INDIA

central character, who has kept two people in his doomsday bunker and according to him helping them live.

Since the world has ended with an apocalyptic attack, the air has been contaminated and they have to be in the bunker for years. That is the subjugation and the chemistry between the characters who are caught up in this suffocating situation is what gives the movie its tempo. Sudden rush of blood scenes and fights give an added edge to the film. Over all a refreshing experience.

It was late in the afternoon and wanted my lunch so I went to the Taj Palace for a buffet brunch and used my Taj Inner Circle Gold card to settle the bill. I got a 50% discount instantly. I topped myself up with lots of lemonade and sherbet to keep myself going in the blistering heat.



All in all another eventful day as I plan for a next league of adventures!

Adam Khan's Tomb!

A Drive through Mehrauli and Peek through Adam Khan's Tomb was all that I thought I needed on a jaded day and I waded out!

Adam Khan was a a general in Emperor Akbar's army and this is a splendid dome shaped tomb built in his memory. The monument is made of sand stone and was built to honour the general in the early 16th century. The tomb is near The Qutab Minar and is round hollow dome structure which stand's bang in the middle of Mehrauli Farm's.



The bustling by lanes of Mehrauli are a remarkable sight especially for the remnants of the old Mughal architecture. The lanes are littered with Mughlai eateries, kebab shops, itar (perfumery) shop's and small establishments selling rose and chaddar (shroud) to pilgrim is who come to pray at these tombs. I also ventured into these lanes and to my surprise ran into a peer (muslim holy man) sitting on the pavement .He looked to me like a soothsayer , so I asked him " Baba tell me my future and also what ice has in store for me ." he looked mighty irritated " mien paanch sau

rupees lunga .” I will take 500 rupees he said and I gave him the money .He looked at my palm forever pressing it with his fingers and then whispered slowly into my ear ”you have a weak sex appetite , you have problem getting it up also . Too much alcohol you drink that’s why .I tell you have one bowl of soft rice in the morning before you go for crap and the in the night have milk with kesar.” I was aghast, I have always prided myself for being a great lover and here was this crazy man mocking me.” Baba ji i have had dozen’s of girlfriends but they have not complaint. “Array Indian women are docile they just take everything lying down, I tell you you have to increase your sex power.” I trudged along thinking I hope no one had overheard that conversation.

I was with another friend Mr. Kwatra who wanted to show me how good the food of Pehelwan Hotel is. We had lunch in Pehelwan ka Dhabba .It was keema , kaleji and korma for lunch with warm roti’s .I must mention that the mutton was Badey Ka (beef) and it tasted great.The portion’s were a bit less but the gravy and flavour was out of this world. After lunch, we walked through the dusty by lanes to get a view of this rather poor neighbourhood .Well it was a village after all, with shop’s selling mithai and sweets from Rajasthan.

We managed to find a Bengali restaurant in the midst of all the din and I bough some fish curry for my dinner. The heat was getting to us by now it was late afternoon. We decided to stop for a sugar cane juice, which bought our freshness back. I liked this little ride of our’s to see part’s of Delhi 1 does not venture into every day. The Mehrauli area also had lots of designer shop’s selling couture from Manish Malhotra to Sabhyasachi; all the designers have some kind of a presence in this place. I was pleasantly surprise to to see the Mexican Italian joint called Olives in this part of the world .Olives is a famous restaurant in Bandra and has now opened up a branch in Mehrauli.

The Divinity of Spiti Valley

I spent more than three weeks in Spiti Valley exploring its dusty and rocky hills and driving almost 6 to 7 hours a day. I was hopping from one guest house to another, sleeping in small rooms costing only Rs 1500. It was a frugal existence, the food was basic rice, dal, vegetables, pakoda and tea and, of course, Maggi. The valley has also huge areas of farmland, which is fertile as the Spiti River runs through this ancient kingdom at Kinnaur meeting the Sutlej River. The Sutlej rises from Mount Kailash in Mansarovar from the Rakas Lake. The important tributaries of Sutelj River are the Bapsa, the Spiti, the Nogali and the Soan. The Sutlej finally drains into the Indus in Pakistan.

Places like Chandra Taal look especially divine beaming with pure energy and a rare freshness that can only be found in the heavens. I am sure the Mansarovar experience will also be similar. Rudyard Kipling called Spiti "A World within a World". It's rugged and a jagged terrain. One could spot an eagle or dove hovering in the sky. I would often stop over at a good view point to take appropriate pictures. Its divinity is omnipresent in its large monasteries predominately Buddhist faith. It is simple yet a proud nomadic race. There is an abundance of fresh water. Most villages and small habitats have a shop or two selling knick-knacks and FMCG. With cascading glacier falls to emerald ponds and lakes, Spiti has preserved its ancient richness. It is like a kingdom frozen in time still waiting for people to discover it. From foreigners to casual Indian tourists, you could meet all types of people here on the way. From army personal to tech company honchos, Spiti was quite an attraction as I could see.



Yes, then there was the sky, vast blue sky with white clouds floating on it like sheep wool or dandelion dust? The air was crisp but thin at times. Walks around the valley did me good as I sat down with the local shopkeepers to talk about the place. “This is a wonderland sir. What is the need for internet and mobile communication here? After all, people come here to escape all that. Here in the valley, you forget all your troubles as you can see divinity in its very soul. Sir, you will lose yourself here or should I say, find yourself here” Most people survive on tourism here renting out rooms, opening shops, driving vehicles, farming or just running the monasteries in the area. You will find petrol stations here but this time, there was a huge diesel shortage which costed me an entire day of travel.

This desert valley has more than 30 Buddhist Gombas and also houses the Rohtang Pass at around 13500 feet. The nearest airport is at Bhunter and you can take a train from Chandigarh or Yoginder nagar. By road, you can come via Manali through the Rohtang pass. Its culture is Tibetan and Ladhakhi and distinctively nomadic.

Nako Tabo and Khaza – Burning Tracks on the NH22

The entire Spiti Valley is a mountainous icy cold area of Himachal Pradesh with a heavy Buddhist influence. With Monasteries like Kay, it is also a special place for the Dalai Lama as he visits key monasteries in the region. The NH22 runs through this rugged and stony terrain as it connects villages like Nako Tabo and Khaza together and is the main road one will travel through.

The main region has a very brown and dusty look about it as nomads and sheep herders stay in houses made out of mud and stone that have their own peculiar looks and architectural edge. The ice glaciers melt during the rainy season causing streams that gush downwards cutting through stones and boulders. The subsequent slush that is formed blocks the path for the vehicles to go and also cause land slide. As if by luck or bad fortune, my SUV got stuck in one of these landslides. That's it, more than 60 vehicles stuck along with me. Lucky for us, there were three dhabas stocked with food nearby and as luck would have it, there were also tents and blankets for us to sleep in case the holdup was more than one night. So it proved to be, I realised that I would be spending the night under the stars. I took the nature's call in nature and then ate at the dhaba a dinner of paratha and subzi. The dhaba had a warm fire in the middle and generally the atmosphere was very cosy. I had struck a friendship with a few army guys who were also held up for the night and they invited me into one of their tents which I shared. This was a great experience as the cool air ran through and across our tent but with sleeping bags and blankets, there was enough protection.



With no phone and no mode of communication available, I was unable to call my friends and grandmother. I had not written and uploaded any photos for six days. Man, I was getting restless! I then bumped into an old acquaintance and gave the obligatory selfie with her as you know that I am a celebrity of some sort, well at least, a small time Bollywood actor. While sipping cups of tea, I chatted with a young couple about the meaning of life and how to fight your inner demons which was all spiritual and philosophical gyaan. Now you know that I have this problem. At times, I talk to myself and at times even loudly so that others can see it. Well, I must have said the word “Rape” to some kid unintentionally. The dad came up to me and said “What rape rape are you saying to me? Move away from me or I will break your face.” I quickly realised that I have to get hold of my constant self-talk and slowly moved away from the angry man. But the experience of being stuck was great as I had nowhere to go, no agendas or deadlines, or an office desk waiting. I was the most relaxed of the lot as some people decided to trek the distance through while others panicked about getting home. I chatted away with my driver about our next stop – the Rohtang Pass and further into Manali.

The Bikers of the Exotic Spiti Valley

Spiti Valley is indeed an exotic remote area in the sights of Himachal Pradesh. It shines like a beacon of exclusivity. The only mode of communication here is BSNL and it has been three days since I contacted anyone at home. I took the time out to tell my nana that I was safe and I was travelling in a region high in altitude with almost zero communication services. I had hired a four-wheeler which was apt for high altitudes to take me through the Spiti Valley. Spiti means Middle Land, the land between India and Tibet. It is the northernmost part of Himachal and is the least populated area of India. It is home to the Buddhist sect called Vajrayana. It is the home of the famous Key and Tab Monastery, the oldest monasteries in the world and the summer abode of the Dalai Lama himself. On the Northern route of Manali, Kulong, the Rohtang Pass all the way to Kunzum Pass, and the valley stretches everywhere and the altitudes range from 13500 ft to more than 1500 ft.

I was like a lost boy in this valley for over ten days. The monasteries were a special attraction for me. Spiti is the home of the semi-nomadic gaddi sheep and goat herders who come from the villages nearby to graze their animals. I put myself in one of the many small guest houses in the valley with a very basic affair. The room cost about Rs 1500. They have hot water facilities with blankets, a warm bed and TV in each room. The food is served in the room or dining halls. The chicken curry and rotis can especially be very nice in this part of the region.



One can also find many bikers who come here from Europe and other parts of the world for biking expeditions which hover around the valley. Only their bikes are Enfields. Some also have Harleys. There is a cafe in Spiti that caters to the westerners with European food as well as Indian delicacies. This was just the place for me as I chatted away to Swedish Bikers who had come over for a hot meal. I told them about my blog and my travels and they listened in with great appreciation. They even took down my URL. An Indian couple dining with us recognised me from one of my Ads – the Shock Laga Laga Ad from Havel switches. I told them about the meeting of mine with Karappa Lama and the questions I had asked him especially concerning my dad’s murder and whether I should ask for the death penalty for those who did it. One of the Swedish guys was saddened to hear my story and insisted that I should ask for the death penalty and that forgiveness was out of the question.

The nights are chilly in the valley and I often got up early in the morning to have a hot water bath before going for long walks to observe the place. Small shops cater to the population and most things like cold drinks, biscuits, baggies, chocolates,

Yeh! Hai INDIA

mineral water and cigarettes are available in even the smaller villages. Oh, but only Gold Flake is available when it comes to cigarettes. The Monasteries, Buddhist stupas and wishing wheels can be seen all around the Valley as I interacted with fellow travellers telling them the stories from my travel diaries. A couple from Chandigarh took a liking to me as I enthralled them with my travel stories.

The Taal of Chandra Taal and the Dance of Khushneen

I had the most heavenly experience in the midst of Spiti Valley when I first set foot on the hills to see the famous Chandra Taal Lake. The scenery was sublime as if it was a picture taken of the heavens. Snow Peak Mountains glittering with their silver light as the blue sky opened above them to throw a hue of colours on the jagged peaks. The mountains remained covered with thick mist that floated in the sky giving the whole place the look of a halo. All that was missing were angels and cupids playing with harps as the site grew dense with vapour.

Right in the middle, there was a crater that was the opening of the Chandra Taal Lake. The water was sometimes emerald green and at times tortoise with a tinge of blue sapphire. The lake kept hovering between these colours as visitors raced around the lake. Some were even taking a dip in its icy waters. The lake was at the bottom of a hill. With a huge thud planted my camera stand in the middle. I fixed my Canon 5D on top of the stand and just went berserk taking pictures of the scenery. I filmed the entire scene. The air was thin but moist and it was a 15 min walk uphill to reach the Taal. I was panting halfway but managed the walk and the climb uphill.

I strolled around the lake to take pictures as I spotted a sweet little girl jumping up and down the lake with rare abandon as she flung her arms and legs to take faint leaps. Her hair was like the Medusa that bowed up and down in the sky. She was thin but agile, fair and happy with a deep desire to live and an energy that was rare. My eyes met hers and I offered to capture her beauty and energy through my lens. I clicked away as she made poses and jumped even higher. We formed a connection, a kind of an invisible bond of admiration. "You look lovely and my camera seems to have the hots for you. I showed her what I had clicked and we struck a friendship. While strolling down the Taal, she told me her name is Khushneen and she was a Parsi from Mumbai. "Hmm, a Parsi, they are quite mad" I said as I showed her the pictures I had taken. I had her attention as I showed her every frame and choose for her the best pictures I had taken. Khushneen was my new found friend. I liked the girl for her chutzpah and her love for travel and nature. I will send her the pics through her id as a gesture of our friendship.

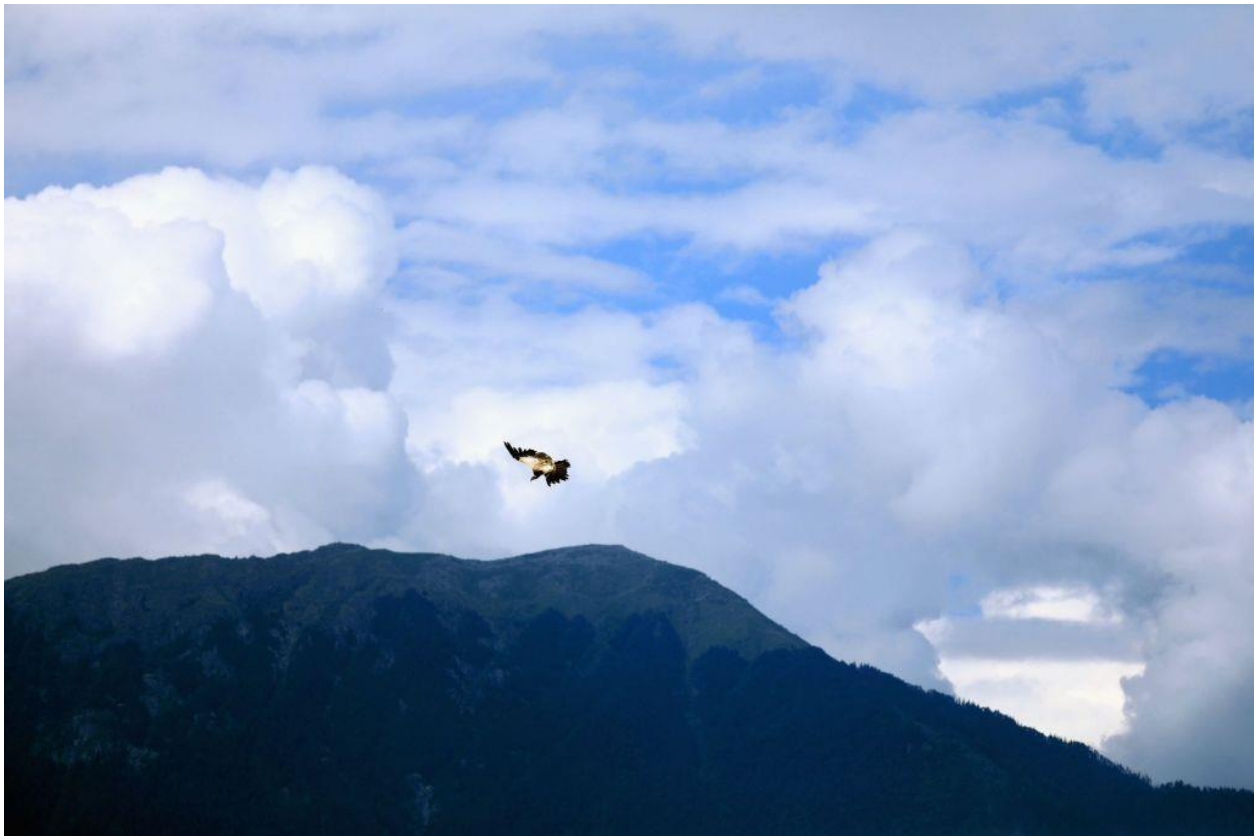
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Night was upon us as it began to drizzle. We all headed towards our tents. Mine was a small cosy affair with blankets. Dinner was served at night that consisted of a basic meal of subzi, oiled paratha, dal and rice. The kitchen was well stocked and there were enough food and beverages to go around. I slept like a log in the night as the temperatures dropped and began to freeze. We were all up early next day as the glaciers began to melt and the water started to flow down through the mountains in the form of small streams. Many vehicles get stuck in these streams. Ours also got stuck but we had help as men with ropes pulled our car out of harm's way.

The Mesmerising Snow Peaks of Sangla, Himachal Pradesh

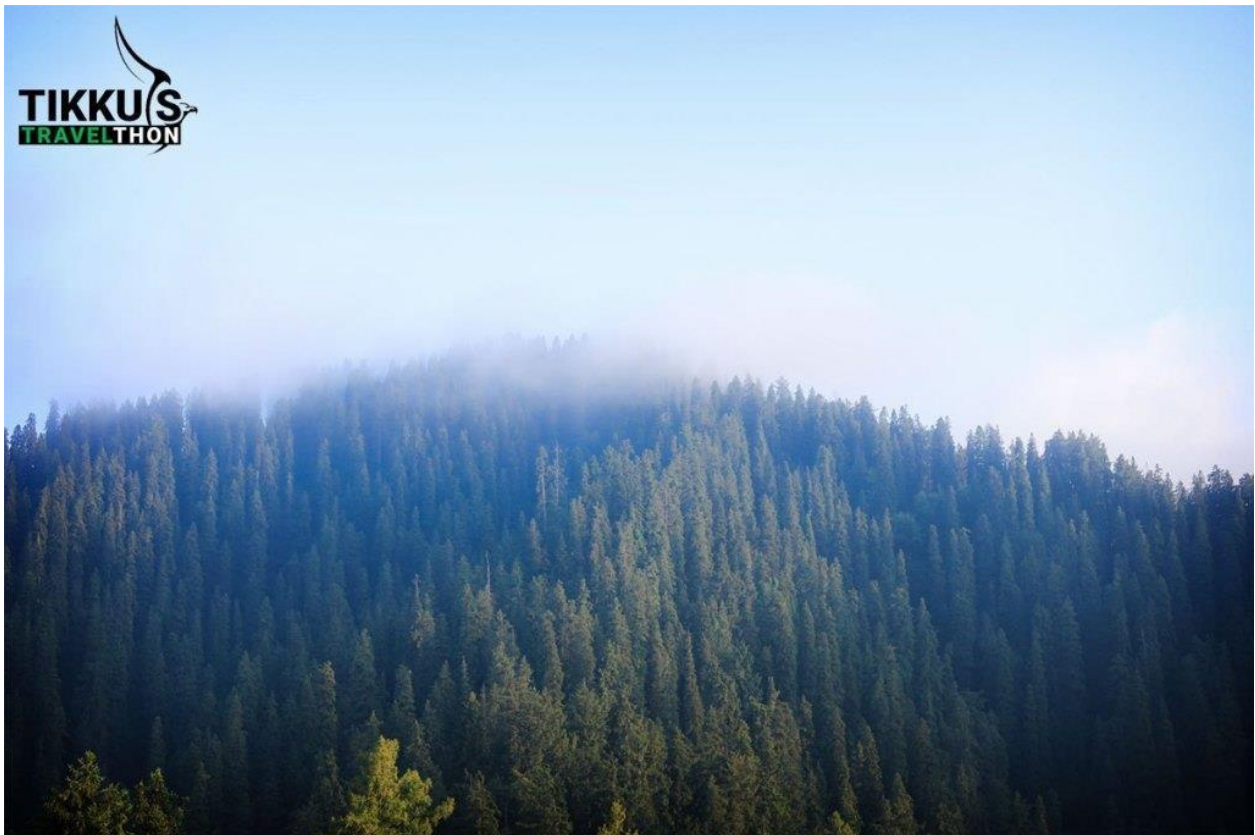
I started my journey towards the hilltop village of Sangla in Himachal Pradesh. There, I saw the best views that the eyes can see. The snow peaks of the mountains were shimmered with a mesmerising glow as the clouds hovered around them and the sun set on the mountains. An eagle soared in the sapphire blue sky flapping its wings and giving me a grand pose as I clicked away to capture its majesty. I loved the view and kept stopping my vehicle to capture the beauty of one spot or another.



We landed just near an outhouse in Sangla on top of a hill near a Buddhist monastery and just finished a dinner of rice and chicken. Tomorrow, I will talk to the local people, discover their stories and also learn how they live in this hilltop village. A peek into their lives is what I will try to capture tomorrow. Till then, enjoy the pictures!

A Glimpse of the Monsoons in Himachal

My road trip started early today. We crossed several villages and small towns in Himachal to reach Sarahan. The rains have started pouring down the mountain path with a heavy mist all around the green mountains. It seemed like multiple clouds were floating above the China trees, nature at its best. I have taken refuge in a beautiful nature resort on a hilltop at Sarahan. The evenings are especially irresistible as the sunsets above the fog and clouds beaming from time to time as it appears and disappears through the mountain peaks. I jumped at the opportunity to capture this dance of nature up in the sky.



I strolled merrily clicking away and capturing the most exquisite sunset as light showers appeared from time to time to make the mist and fog thicker than usual. The peaks of the mountain tops shimmered as the sun slowly began to set and bit by bit, disappeared from the sky.

So enjoy the photographs for now.

Chail to Kufri and the Monkey Palace

Today was my sightseeing day and so, I hired a taxi. We meandered our way through the hills straight up to Kufri. Our first stop was the Kufri Zoo. I ventured in after paying the Rs. 80 fee. They charge you extra for taking the camera to the zoo. So here I was snapping away at the black and brown Himalayan bear. There was a leopard calmly sleeping on a log of wood. Of course, there were also multi coloured pheasants. Some of them looked like a mixed breed between a peacock and a hen. I, nevertheless, liked their red hoods and long white feather tails. I ventured out of the zoo gate as if on cue as it started to rain.

I ran on the side of the road to take shelter under the nearby tapri but realised that I was already wet and so was my camera. In my haste to get to my car, I and my driver slipped on the sidewalk and got dirty all over with mud. I was agitated by now and my driver had to bear the brunt of my wrath “I had asked you to come to the Zoo gate and you are here waiting next to this parking area. Tu tho mujhey barbed karkey rahe ga.” I barked aloud trying to get the mud off my shirt. The driver looked apologetic as he was stunned.

Next stop was Chail Palace which I have rechristened as The Monkey Palace. Yes, it is full of monkeys on the driveway, on the roof of the palace and all over the lawns and parks. After my customary stroll, I ventured into the King’s Dining Hall for lunch. It was very tasteless with paneer, rice and vegetables – all very basic. You know from the meal that it had been supplied by some tourism board.

We did a quick detour to Kali ka Tibba which is a Kali Mata’s Mandir right on top of a hill. It is more famous for the panoramic view it offers to tourists than anything else. The fog was now getting thin and I managed to capture some shots of the landscape and the scenery from the temple site.

As I sat back in the car, I was greeted by my driver’s brother-in-law who was accompanying us on the way back to my Chail Hotel. I tugged back to my room after the excursions of the day. But yes, as the rains approach, the mountains look even more inviting and so green. Just a hue of green and the blue sky with the misty white fog flying over the hills and at times depending on the road too. Full fun Himachal style!

Shimla to Chail – A Road Trip

Wow! India is in the finals of the ICC Cup and will take on Pakistan, this is the ultimate mouth-watering showdown that the fans have been waiting for. I got up in a happy frame of mind and realised it was time to check out of the hotel and head for my next destination Chail. This is another lovely place in the hills that is a bit secluded from the summer rush. I had booked a room in the 21 Resort for Rs. 3600 a night through makemytrip.com. I have found makemytrip.com to be a very helping mistake or a wrong booking. They have a very efficient customer service who are quick to resolve most issues and are willing to impart with all the relevant information that one might require. I gave my customary feedback on all the customer satisfaction survey forms that pop into my e-mail. One can get additional points in one's makemytrip.com wallet for answering these surveys and I even made a few bucks today.



The weather has been cloudy and it seems that it will rain by the evening. I took a taxi that cost me Rs. 2500 right up to my resort in Chail. The journey was through

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the mountain tops with me staring into the valley as usual. We would stop over from time to time to take photographs of the hills and the mountain houses. As Chail approached, we were hit by a drizzle – a light shower. I was in my room in a flash but was disappointed when I was told that the wi-fi does not work here. My room is nonetheless large and spacious with aspirate sitting room and a large king size bed. But the most amazing part is the view from my balcony, it stares right into the green hills and the grey and blue sky.

Till then, enjoy the photos from the balcony of the 21 Resort. Damn it's getting rainy here! Till then, ta ta.

Top Ten Places to See In Shimla

1. Gaiety Theatre

This is located at the start of the Mall Road. It has been partially turned into police headquarters but it still has a lovely theatre with a circular seating arrangement to host plays and shows. It also houses a very active and thriving art gallery. Here, local artists display their paintings and other pieces of art.

2. Shimla Cafe

This is right at the edge of the hill and one can sit on the balcony of the cafe to get a great panoramic view of the hills and the city. The café serves continental food, pizzas and very good cocktails. The one with pineapple and ginger ale is a must have drink. It has a young crowd that frequents it all the time and therefore, the buzz and the energy of the place is fun. With a vintage car parked in the café, it is full go pictures, paintings and memorabilia to give it a hip look. The café reminds you a bit of the famous Hard Rock Cafe.

3. Christ Church

A white cathedral, the most prominent building on the road. The church is built with Gothic European style and is kind of a landmark in Shimla.

4. The Shimla Library

This is situated on top of the Mall Road on a flatter region of the hill. The library is a very prominent building on the flats. Also, a lot of horse riding happens around the building and mostly during the afternoon, crowds gather here to enjoy themselves.

5. The Embassy Hotel

If you want to enjoy a good meal in traditional European style, then this is the best eatery in town. With some intellectual conversation to go with, it is easy to digest and enjoy your food as one enjoys a philosophical conversation with the owners of the hotel. The desserts and pies are to die for.

6. St. Bede's College

This is the best college for girls and became famous because Preity Zinta studied here. I got a glimpse of the place during my current visit.



7. Shere Punjab

This is the best place for mutton and non veg in full Punjabi style dhaba. Brain curry and keema are a must taste. The price is reasonable and the seating is comfortable. The dhaba also provides a window view of the mountain.

8. Viceroy's Palace

The best building in the city – a true master class, a palace for the kings. This was the summer abode for the British Viceroy. With its affluent and plush gardens and green lawns, this is sheer majesty to look at.

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9. Scandal Point

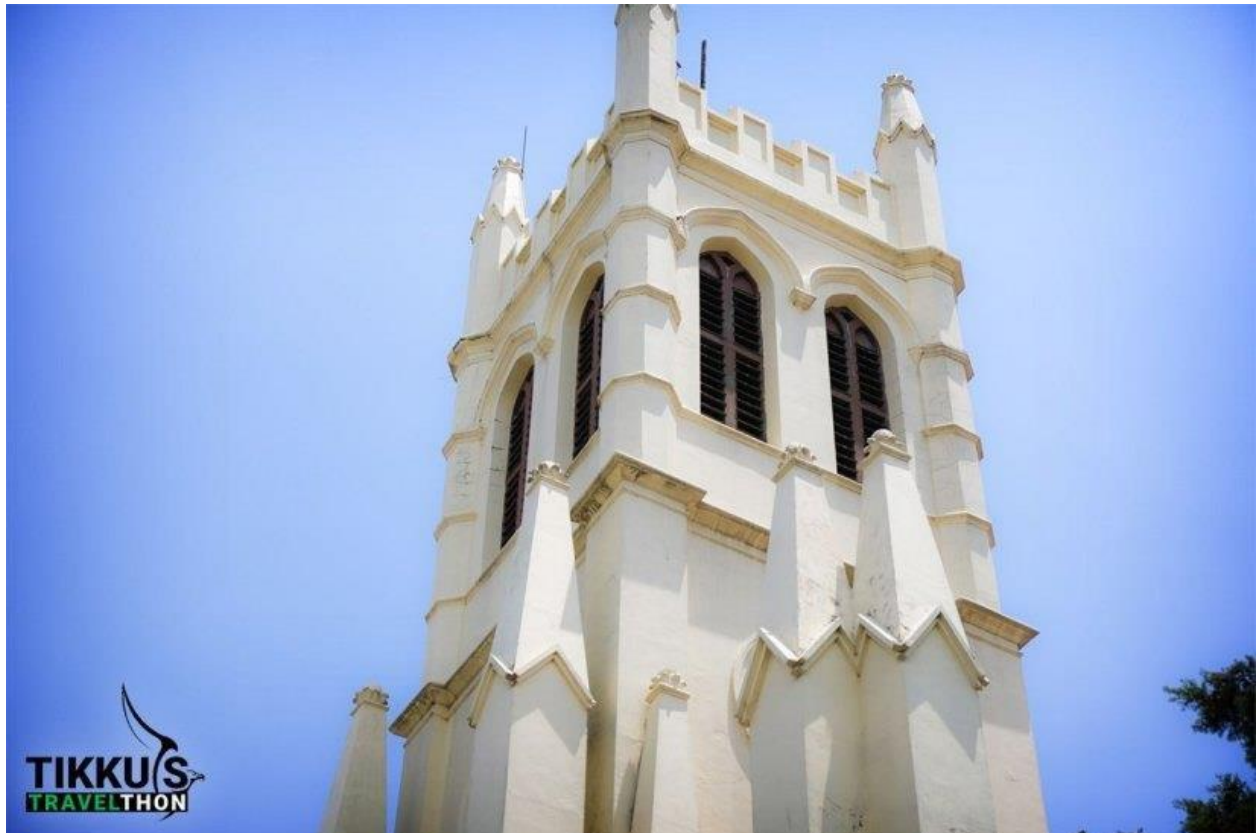
A major lovers point in the city. A place where a lot of lovers jumped and committed suicide.

10. Kali Bari Mandir

This was near my hotel, a temple of peace and a place to get blessings from the goddess.

Searching for Truth at the Embassy Hotel, Shimla

Besides the great weather, beautiful mountains, temples and monkeys, the other thing great about Shimla is the food. I have been feasting on non-veg here for the past few days. My two favourite places being the Shere Punjab Hotel and the Embassy Hotel with a Cake and Icecream Shop. These are situated on the Mall Road just after you pass Christ Church.



I walked into Shere Punjab for lunch and ordered a plate of brain curry and naan. It is a basic place with typical dhaba style tables and seats. The menu is handed to you as soon as you arrive. Meat and chicken are the delicacies of the day, butter chicken and keema being the speciality. The place is run by a Sardar, so it's a bit laid back. The windows in the seating face the mountains and give you a clear view of Shimla Hills. The brain curry is typically spicy Punjabi style with thick yellow tomato and chilli gravy. It is very filling with plain naan. A fresh lime soda to digest the meal and you are ready to go on ahead and explore this jewel of a hill station. My next food stop was the Embassy Hotel which is also on the mall road. The hotel

has an ice cream, sweets and pastry shop at the front and a restaurant as you enter through the pastry shop gates inside the hotel. The whole place is wacky as on the walls are pasted quotes from great philosophers and books like the Upanishads and Life Story of J. Krishnamurti. Wisdom from philosophy and motivational words are pasted on the wall. I was amazed and realised the owner must be a very learned and wise man, someone who is interested in the true meaning of life and is in search for the truth just like me. He too is on a journey to discover himself.

I was greeted by an elderly man who was sitting in the kitchen. I told him that I was a travel blogger and wanted to review the hotel and the feature it on my blog. The gentlemen agreed and served me a chocolate cake with vanilla and hot chocolate sauce. "This is all homemade recipes, sir. The chocolate sauce and the cake are all made and baked at home, no stuff from the store or the bazaars." I was pleased and I dipped into the full plate of dessert. "You are a big fan of J. Krishnamurti Sir. He is all over your wall. Was he as good as they say? I personally am fond of OSHO, I have been heavily influenced by him." I said with the sauce dripping from my spoon. "Oh OSHO, he was just a wild vagabond, he is still attached to things like his Rolls Royce. He made an organisation around the truth, like all of them, he made a business out of the search for truth. No No, Mr. J was the real thing, he never made any organisation and made it clear that you cannot seek truth in groups, you need to find it on your own. You have to go alone and drop the false. When the false is dropped, the truth will emerge and that is different for different people. Listen son, I have made lamb and potatoes for you. You will love it." Having said that, he served the dish to me. Funny, I had never asked for it nonetheless it was tasty. The lamb was cooked well and had a thick coating of gravy, not too spicy but very juicy and chunky. The flavours mingled in the mouth as soon as I took a few bites of it. The potatoes were roasted and well done and complemented the lamb adding to the flavour.

I thanked the old man and took some photos of the hotel with his son too. I told him about my trip to Tibet to see Mansarovar. "You should read that Vikram Seth book. He has spoken about his journey to Tibet in that. Maybe when you come tomorrow, I will give it to you." He waved to me and I wished him luck. Embassy hotel indeed a must go for everyone who comes to Shimla!

Shimla All the Way

I was determined to explore more of this beautiful hill station today and the only way to do it was to take a hired taxi which cost me Rs 1500 for a day. My first stop was the Viceroy House which was the summer palace of the British viceroy. Now it has been turned into an institute of advanced study, what a shame! I walked through the plush gardens of this old British and colonial style building clicking away and taking my customary pictures. The fee structure is Rs 40 to see the place from outside and double to see it from inside. I gave the inside a miss as they don't let you take photographs inside the building.

Then it was a short drive away to a bird sanctuary which was a bit of a disappointment as I only got to see some peacocks and partridges there. Anyway, do take a look at the peacock photos as they have turned out pretty well.

My dear friend Yadwinder Khanna had called "Arrey you must see Preity Zinta's school. It is my favourite spot in Shimla" His words still ringing in my ears, I decided to instruct the driver to take us to the famous St. Bede's College, Shimla. We drove downhill for a while cutting through the hill traffic which was running amok in the middle of the afternoon. This is peak summer time and Shimla seems chock-a-block today. I arrived at the college gate and had to contend with taking photographs of the entrance gate as the guards did not allow me to go in.



Next stop was the Oberoi Hotel of Shimla which is the original Oberoi, the first hotel of the chain. I was welcomed in by a pretty hostess who happened to recognise me as a TV actor and that did my ego wonders. I walked into the fine dining area to enjoy a meal of Goan fish curry, rice and fresh lime soda. All this set me back by Rs 1900 but was worth it to dine in this property knowing very well that this was the birthplace of the famous Oberoi Hospitality Group.

But it's a lazy day nonetheless the afternoon heat can get to you. So I decided to take the u-turn towards my lodge to watch the England vs Pakistan match, my other passion apart from travel blogging. Till then, enjoy the photographs!

Shimla by the Mall Road

Woke up early today. Maybe the enthusiasm of seeing the city of Shimla helped me pop out of bed this early. I had to wait for a few hours as the breakfast at the hotel is only served at 8:00 am in the morning. After a breakfast of idli, cornflakes and paratha, I decided to venture out. The trek up till the Kali Bari Mandir was a bit steep but I was happy to see that the weather was good.



I meandered through the mall road taking pictures till my eyes fell on the wax museum on the side of the road. I paid entry fees of Rs 250 and walked into the museum. Stuffed with rubber statues of our prime minister and Hollywood stars, it was not very impressive to me as I had seen the real thing in London at the Madame Tussauds. Nonetheless, I had to pass some time and get used to walking on the hilly terrain.

The road is littered with shops and eateries as I reached the centre of the city. Then I turned around to take a view of Shimla from the famous Scandal Point. Just on top is the famous Christ Church which looks grand with its huge British gothic

Yeh! Hai INDIA

structure. I will venture into the church tomorrow to take some pictures from the inside. Shimla does seem a bit crowded at this point as a lot of tourists from the plains have arrived here to escape the city heat.

With langurs and monkeys running around the footpath stealing fruits from passerbys, there was a bit of excitement in the air. Apart from that, it looked like any another north Indian hill station, although it is quite big in size. Till then, enjoy the photos of the Mall Road and all the halla bulla that happens there.

Shimla with Love

I took a taxi from my hotel in Chandigarh to Shimla which cost me Rs 3700 and took almost 5 hours to get to the Mall Road in Shimla. The temperature is cool with 23 degrees in the day. But I had a terrible headache and somehow felt a loss of appetite too. Maybe I was still getting acclimatised to the hills as my taxi drove past the huge Mohan Meakin's compound. We finally arrived at the Baljees Regency which is going to be my abode for a few days till I decide to go to Kufri and Chel.

I was exhausted as I had to wait two hours on the highway when my taxi got banged by a truck. It took some time for the cops to come and register a case but I had to wait and wait. So I was tired and just crashed out for the night.

Today, I woke up to some rain in the morning. It was cool with a certain nip in the air but I stayed up in my quilt. I missed the breakfast and then had a late lunch of ali and puri. The India vs South Africa cricket match was on and I knew that I couldn't miss it. Alas, I was also determined to explore Shimla and lose some weight trekking up and down the famous Mall Road. So off I went up and up panting, huffing and groaning as the climb from my hotel was a bit steep, but I got used to it after a few minutes and then my breathing became normal. But yes, it was exhausting. So to take some rest, I sat on a bench sipping a bottle of litchi juice and to my amazement, a family of young monkeys started approaching me. I got a bit restless and before I could react, the bottle of litchi had been snapped away from me. In a flash, one monkey stole it from me and then with his teeth, opened the bottle up and gulped the entire juice. I jumped up and started clicking away from my camera. This was a scene that I had to capture and so I did.



Then it was a walk up hill to the Kali Bari Mandir where the Mall Road begins. The Mandir also gives a panoramic view of Shimla and its hills which looked beautiful on a sunny afternoon. After taking some spectacular shots, I decided to head home.

Can you believe it? I had started to sweat. Man, I am so unfit! I realised that it was a great idea to come to Shimla as my mountain walks will only build my stamina further and help me for my Mansarovar Yatra which I will be undertaking in July. Till then, enjoy the pictures.

Shimla

The first capital of the state of Himachal Pradesh, this hill paradise was named as the summer capital by the British as they liked and enjoyed the cooler climate of this Himalayan hill city. Shimla is, thus, an old colonial heritage town. Neo-gothic churches like the Christ Church or just old Vedic temples can be predominantly seen in the city. Shimla has also got the largest natural ice skating ring in south-east Asia. It has one central road called Mall Road that is the hub and heart of the city. Most of the tourist hotels and lodges are centres around this road and one can see a flood of tourist from the plains of India who reach Shimla every year to escape the summer heat. Himachal is a beautiful valley state surrounded by the Dhauladhar range on one side. It is a land of breathtaking beauty. Places like Chel, Kufri and Solan are all nearby places that one can also explore when one is in Shimla.



Yeh! Hai INDIA

The summer heat was getting to me and I was all booked for a two-week travel vacation to Shimla through Chandigarh. I am putting up at the Taj Chandigarh for three days although I am told that it's 45 degrees in the city. Nonetheless, I will do some city hopping and then head to the Buljee Hotel and retreat in Shimla near the mall road. I will try and cover Kufri, Chel and Solan also on this trip.

So watch out for the next adventure to the summer capital Shimla.

Goodbye – Alvida Bangalore

It has been nearly 10 days of my romance with the city of Bangalore, often now and legally so called Bengaluru, Bean Town. It is coming to an end as I write this and I can safely say it was a trip of my personal achievements. I got an opportunity to be with three of my cousins. Met Ani, visiting then on a business trip from Mumbai and there was wine and dining at five star hotels. My schedule was packed between family, friends, food and some work.



I got a feel of the city weather and it was amazing in this receding summer and for a few hours in the afternoon the city would get hot weather and then suddenly the rain would come for a few hours in the evening to cool things down and this was a repetitive cycle that went. I was told that this was just happening recently and the last few weeks had been arid hot and I definitely did not see anything higher than 34 degrees centigrade maybe. It's like the city has a natural thermostat that keep's the temperature between a certain levels. I enjoyed eating and strolling down 100 ft road and the Jyoti Niwas College street. The crowd here is always exceptional.

Yeh! Hai INDIA

I fully used the services of my Prestige card, be it airport pick up's, Sunday Brunches or free airport lounge facility. Along with that, my Jet Privilege card, which gave me fee tickets and instant web check in, and my Taj Inner Circle card, which helped me, get into Circle special events. Of course there was Arun my cousin, I enjoyed Breakfast with him at ITC Gardenia and got a massage done there too. I must say I have been a tad self indulgent in this trip, I mean I was dropped to my house in a Mercedes Benz.

However, it is a unified vision of Bangalore that I carry with myself. Its lovely pre programmed weather, Ola and Uber cabs, its distinctive auto drivers, its delicious food and free flowing liquor, its bus sling start up culture.

It feels like the San Francisco of India. Yes, I want to keep coming to the city it gives me energy and strength not to mention a very good time too. But that's obvious this is the city of Mallya The King of Good Times and it sure felt that way for me in Bangalore this time around.

Berried alive in Bangalore

It had rained a bit just before I landed but the summer sun was out and Bangalore was shining bright in the afternoon as I ventured out with friend for what was definitely not the right food to have in this weather at Kobe Sizzlers.



We decided to try out the bar on top – My Bar and nothing better to beat the heat than a tall glass of Budweiser beer which we duly ordered. Blowing smoke and making funny faces, the afternoon crowd is awesome lots of young student crowd from the neighbouring Christ University and Jyoti Niwas College chattering away. The girls in summer skirts of blue and red, teen's glued to their smart phone's , some listening to music as they sit around to do idle banter perhaps. A couple of beauties past by me and I dared my friend to go and ask them for a picture, but he wouldn't.

My Bar has a European look with wooden floors, pillars each of them carried a quotable quote, and I struck a few pose aside one of the pictures.

Bangalore up Side Down

Back from Leh with the thought of visa absurdities killing me as I was planning my travel for the rest of the year I was headed for Bangalore. I had a couple of business meetings planned and needed to sit with my dear friend Dhar update my website and plan for some upgrades there and meet my cousins hold some business meetings, play golf and travel for a few days perhaps to some of the to near by hill stations like Coorg etc that I had planned the last time and which I never did get to do. Redeeming 12,000 Jet Privilege Points as usual booked the ticket.

The Concierge service I had access to because of my Citibank Prestige Card comes in handy while getting the right price and booking air tickets since they claim they do this for a living after all! I also availed myself two golf lessons in Bangalore on the 27th and 28th of the month. I also managed to book an airport pick up to my hotel room in a sparkling new Audi which seemed rather surreal. This room I booked through OYO and it cost me Rs 1680, \$ 25 for a night. I have been using their services for a while now and I think they are value for money with great locations. The smartphone app is also very helpful with messages and guidance to the hotel at every step.

I landed here at Bangalore and everything went like clockwork. Like a dutiful son, I was up by 4:30 am, a quick shower and I was ready to take on the world. My Meru cab arrived on time and by 6:00 am I was at the airport. I had web checked into my flight for Bangalore hours before and the check in process was smooth and hassle free. Made a note to remove your laptops, purse and mobile phone before you go through the x ray process. In half an hour I moved into the plush waiting lounge which I was entitled through my Citi Prestige Card, they had provided me a special airport lounge access card which allows me to use their services free of cost anywhere in the world . I feasted my self on the Buffett Breakfast and drinks in the lounge, charged my mobile, read a paper and washed up . I sashayed out on the lounge into the smoking room to light up, the burner didn't work so I had to borrow a lighter to flame up my cigarette.

Yeh! Hai INDIA

The flight arrived in Bangalore on time and the chauffeur driven Audi was waiting to whisk me off to Koramangala where the Hotel Maple Green was located as listed and booked on Oyo! I was looking good I was wearing a new designer Pink Kurta designed by Abhishek Gupta, who runs his own Boutique Showroom in Defence Colony, New Delhi. The Kurta was topped with a Blue Jacket all this on a pair of Levis Jeans and Floaters. Meet up with Prakash and his Boss in their Office and then hit my room.

The Evening was a long discussion on how to structure our blog and possible next steps. The Dinner was at a Malaysian, Indonesian Tamil Restaurant called Nasi and Mee. Nasi means Noodles and Mee is rice in Malaysian – the restaurant's provenance. My cousins came along with their wives and we enjoyed soups and dimsums and prawns along with Garlic Lamb, Honey Root's and rice. This was then followed by each one swallowing a fried ice cream. The evening ended with a Pan and two Thumbs up.

Next morning I ordered Uber Cab through their application for the first time and I found it easy to use and very fast, with my route showing intact. I reached ITC Gardenia just in time for Breakfast where my Cousin Arun Kaul welcomed us with a silk shawl full Maharaja style. I enjoyed the hot and soft idli's with vada and uttamam. Then Mangoes, curd and lassi, followed it. All this with sip's of Nriyal Pani and Coffee. I asked Arun to arrange a meeting of my with their G.M next week, maybe i could do reviews for ITC Food and accommodation reviews and of their other services. A kind of a Barter deal. With a wave, i wandered into the city, snapping away at its contours through my lens.

Yeh! Hai INDIA



I walked into UB City through the Vithal Mallaya road. They had a Mallya Hospital near by also. The liquor baron has left his mark on the city. As I window shopped through the City shop's it was obvious to me this was a place for rich men , The famous Sky Bar was on the 16th floor and i swore to visit it during this stay of mine. As i came out of the UB City an autowallah started hounding me to take a ride with him and see the city, I guess with my camera dangling around, he realised I was a tourist and that now his day was made. I avoided him at first and walked into a near by Saloon and Spa but to my disgust they had not started their services for the day

Yeh! Hai INDIA

it was only 11:30 am in the morning and things were just starting up in the city. I relented to the persistence of my Auto Driver who first took me shopping to the Mysore Silk Factory where I watched how silk sarees were woven and then sold to the masses through the showroom.

After that we rode 13 km to a Shiv Temple which was on the side of the road, I did my day's puja and took some photos, I also did an arti after all Shiva is my favourite GOD. Then it was back to Kormangala for lunch and my eye was set on lunching and the Tunday Kababi. This was where I tasted authentic tunday ke kabob like they were made in Lucknow, they were soft well marinated and browned only the right amount of oil was used and they melted in the mouth, with two Parathas and chutney they were a treat. I washed them down with a Pepsi. For a while, I flirted with the idea of gorging on a Chicken Biryani also but I decided not to over eat. On my way, I lost my way for a bit, which was OK by me as I was in no hurry. Sometimes it feels free to be lost in a new city you can just lose yourself and a sense of time you and your thoughts they are all that one needs for company. I somehow found my hotel and crashed out for the evening. Just booked a Brunch at Hyatt M.G Road for my cousin and his wife, I get a 15% discount though my Citi Gold World Debit Card. This is only if one books through the net. One can go to a Citi bank site sundaybrunch.co.in and book a Brunch at selected restaurants in cities like Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore. I also booked a Beatles night at Taj Vivanta M.G Road for three this Wednesday this was through my Taj Inner Circle Gold Card. They keep throwing events such as this. One can enjoy the event and get 1 plus 1 free drinks. Therefore, my social life in Bangalore was all worked out. I had pre-booked two golf lessons also in Bangalore before I came and will enjoy golf next Friday and Saturday morning. Till then yes sir I am indeed turning Bangalore Upside Down.

The Heaven and Hell that is Pulwama

Pulwama is a very important district of the Jammu and Kashmir region. It is 40 km from the capital Srinagar and is known for its natural and scenic beauty along with the abundance of milk, saffron and fruits that are produced and sold from this region. It is also called the Milk Capital of the region. However, today Pulwama stands as the symbol of a grave terror attack carried out from Pakistan by the Jaish-e-Mohammed. 40 Indian army soldiers were killed in this suicide attack. It has become the focal point of our countries' hate, which is directed towards its perpetrators Pakistan. The hell that burns in Pulwama sends shivers down our spine. However, that was not the case. Pulwama has always been a hotspot for foreign tourists and has some amazing places, lakes, scenic spots and temples for travellers to see. I wanted to explore that side of Pulwama. We have seen the grim side enough lately in the media. What of Pulwama's tourist destinations? What is the background of this place, which has become a flashpoint in the valley today, I wonder?

Yeh! Hai INDIA



In 1979, the Pulwama or Pulgam district had 550 villages each divided into 5 tehsils. Today, there are about 330 villages in the district. As of the last census of 2011, it has over 20,000 people living in these villages. Pulwama was ruled by the Mughal emperors in the 16th and 17th century till the 19th century when the Afghans took over. Its lush green landscape, gushing waterfalls and abundance of milk and saffron makes it naturally a heavenly place to be in. A place hidden amongst the hills of Kashmir, a quite joyous land now stares at being the flashpoint for an Indo-Pak war.

What will be its impact on Pulwama's industries, Zum Zum Milk and J&K Cement, the largest cement plant in the region? Not only that, the produce and trade of saffron and dry fruits will be affected making the region even more impoverished and antagonised. The place known for its beauty will be hit hard on the tourism front. It has some amazing places for travellers to see and explore. All of this will be lost.

Aharbal Falls

The region is full of pine and fir trees and the falls look like milk with gurgling water. Aharbal hills are situated 75 km from Srinagar and are known for adventure sports like fishing, kayaking etc.

Shikargah

A very charming picnic spot with rich flora and fauna full of mountain wildlife. It used to be the favourite of Maharaja Hari Singh who used to hunt here quite often. It is located in the Tral region and is a place you must explore.

Payer Temple

It is located 3 km from Pulwama and is an old temple dating back to the 10th century. It is carved out of a single piece of monolith rock and stone. It is an amazing site to see.

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Awantishwar Temple

It is a Vishnu and Shiva temple built by the then ruler Avanti Varma in the 9th century AD. It reminds us of our past.

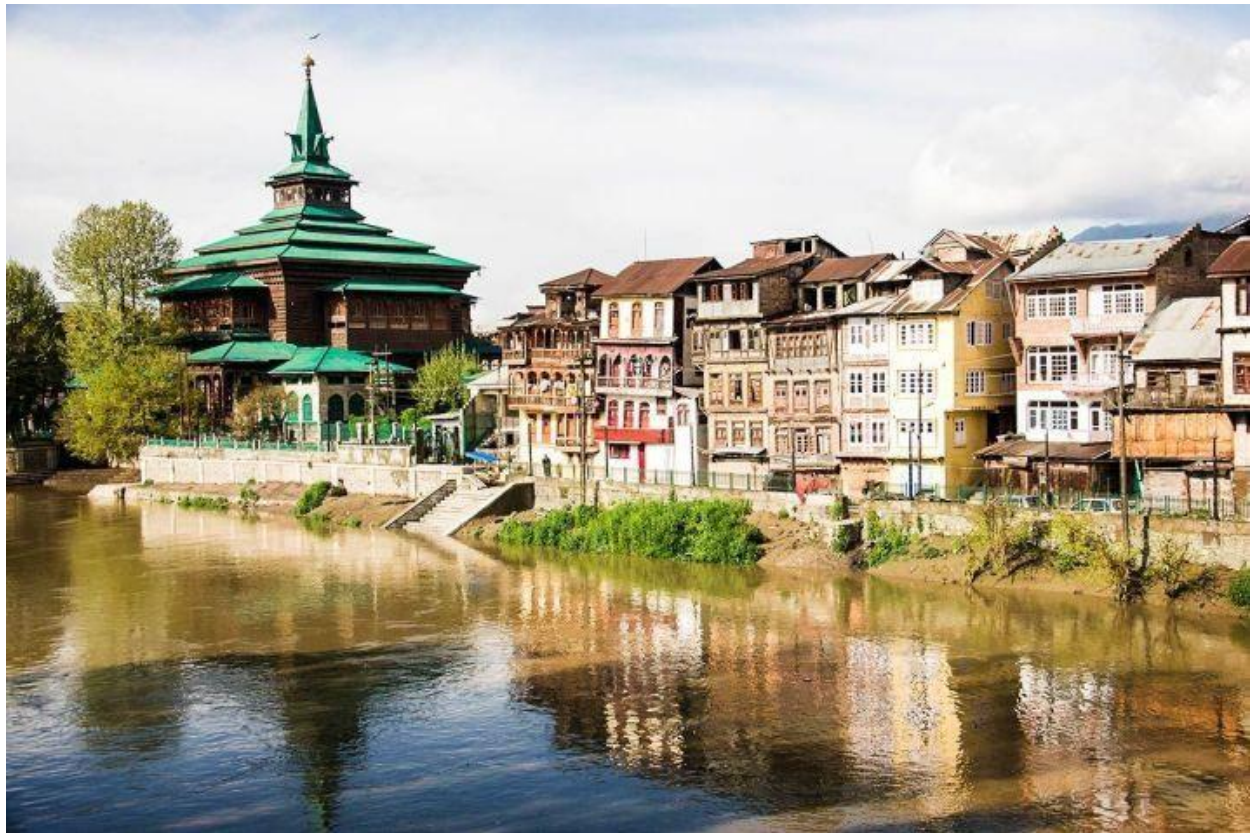
Tarsar Marsar Lake

These almond-shaped lakes can be found in-between the mountains of the Anantnag region of Kashmir and it is one of the most popular trekking routes in the region. In the winter, both the lakes feel as snowfalls in the Aru region. Many kings and poets have spoken on the beauty of the twin sister lakes and this region in their writings.

Now I hope I have given you another perspective of the Pulwama district, its heavenly side, its pristine side, the one that must be explored by a die-hard traveller. However, as of now, my heart goes out to the brave jawans who lost their lives in the dreaded suicide bomb attack. We are witnessing the hell of the place right in front of us.

A Hookah, a Houseboat and the Dal Lake

It was early hours in the morning that I arrived in Srinagar, the capital city of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. We parked into the Sitara Lodge which was just opposite the main road and the vastness of the beautiful Dal Lake. There was a chill in the air and the traffic on the road was terrible as I escaped into the crowd wearing a white sherwani and leather chappals in full Kashmiri style.



As I walked past shops and hippies, I caught the glimpse of the lake. Its stillness and tranquillity were soothing for the eye. Various shikara boats floated on the lake. Some were looking for passengers and some were just floating lazily on the lake. At the back of all these, were houseboats all clumped side by side? Each houseboat had a distinctive name like Bloody Mary, Chaplin, Nausrath, Dawn and other such names. The sun came out in the afternoon and the lake was shimmering with its radiant light. Holidayers and tourists wearing colourful clothes, jewellery and shawls walked side by side enjoying ice cream, kehwa and cold drinks.

Yeh! Hai INDIA

It was time for us to head towards the houseboat called Rose Marry in the middle of the lake. I ventured onto the shikara boat that would lead us to our destination. My tour guide Sagar was with me and we carried booze, chicken, mutton, seekh kabab and a hookah with him. This was my grand gift for the evening – sleeping over at a houseboat on the dull lake while smoking a Hookah.

Our houseboat keeper was a local Muslim fellow called Kasim. He was thin but tall, fair and had a typical long thin Kashmiri Nose. “The militancy has died down now sir. Yes, I know we still have stone throwing, bandhs and lockout especially at Lal Bazar area but those are just pent up frustrations of the local unemployed youth.” he said as he arranged the Hookah for me. He carefully lit the charcoal and then poured tobacco and essence into it. He puffed away with some large pulls to get the Hookah really burning. The smokes filtered through the water in the apparatus as one inhaled and then puffed it out.

The fragrance of rose and sandalwood filled the moist air as I peeked out at the lake from the window of my shikara. “Can we get some stuff like you know, Kashmiri chars?” I asked Kasim with a glint in my eye. “It is possible. I know someone who can get it from the mountains across but it will take time. It’s one hell of a walk.” I gave him money and asked him to get the stuff. So what if I got married to LSD, I couldn’t lose the opportunity to get high on the dull lake.

I waited for my cherished rose as Kasim came back with the stuff. “I used to know a lot of people in the Azadi movement who used to sell this. It was their mode of earning. I used to befriend some of them.” He sprinkled the char as powder on the top of the steel foil on the mouth of the hookah. That’s it. It was lights out from there as I sank into my dreamy world intoxicated by the moonlit night in the shikara on the Dal Lake. The plants, trees and skies looked different now. They almost stood out as if they were trying to reach me. The air grew musty as the smoke of essence coped with chars sent up into the air from our shikara. It was truly Dum Maaroo Dum Rose Marry!

Suddenly, the strange pungent smell of something burning started coming from our room. I jumped up as my Razai was on fire. “Arrey, it’s the hookah you fool! You were so out and intoxicated you didn’t see the charcoal that fell on the carpet. Now,

Yeh! Hai INDIA

the whole thing caught fire! You are lost my friend and now you will have to pay for the damages!”

I was unhappy with the way Kasim rubbed me. After all, I was a guest and accidents like these happen all the time when one is partying or on vacation. I gave him a 100 rupee note for the damage that happened. Then I drank my hot Kashmiri nahi and walked straight to bed still intoxicated with the Dal Lake.



A Quick Head to the Hills!

The sweltering heat of Delhi was getting to me again and I yearned for cooler climates. It was sapping my energy and the house re-decoration is still on and I was getting agitated. I had to head for the hills to escape the heat. I made up my mind in a few minutes and booked a ticket to Srinagar through my Jet Airway's Loyalty Point Program again! A return ticket cost me 20000 Points and this was all Business Class. I was flying Jet Business Class for the first time. Jet Business Class was a good trip. I used the Priority Lounge while waiting for the flight and enjoyed a full Breakfast and Beverages all at no extra cost.

I enjoyed the wide seats and leg rest, there was a special Business Class Menu also which I devoured with relish. I booked two nights at the Al Zahoor Inn through OYO ROOMS at Rs 3800 for two nights.

The service of the portal is fantastic and payment is online. I got a text message from OYO as I landed into Srinagar giving me contact details of the staff and directions too. All paid and clear transaction. Rs 500 to the cabbie who dropped me to the Hotel. At Al Zahoor they were waiting for me and ushered me to the Premium Room. It was nice, tidy and well lit up with all the facilities that OYO had listed. I was impressed.

Yeh! Hai INDIA



The valley was chilly and I bumped into a few fan's of mine who had seen me in Mumbai. I drove around the city across the Dal Lake, sipping coffee and enjoying the nip in the air. At light it was off to my favourite restaurant AHDOOS in Lal Chowk.

I finished a whole Thali of Kashmiri Wazwan all with Tabak Maas, Gushtaba, Mirchi Mass and saag with a large portion of rice all for Rs 700. It was delicious thumbs up to Ahdoos, the restaurant was drowned in the flood.

But it has re opened after some renovation. I salute the spirit of the Kashmiri People. Strolling down the lanes of Lal Chowk, i ventured back to the warm cozy comfort of my room.

Hurray for Mollywood!

Yes, my travels through the Kerala landscapes was fast and furious as I moved with my team from one location to the other and from one hillside to the top of another valley. We maintained our shooting schedule for 8 days non-stop. But there was one thread in our conversations that stood out and that was about the Malayalam Film Industry that I aptly call Mollywood. We discussed the legendary acting skills of Mohanlal and Mammootty. “He was amazing in Company. Mohanlal plays the commissioner of police and there is this dialogue he says to Vivek Oberoi, yeh Saab terry dande ki jaat hei.”



Even our locations at the falls were filmy. Many Bollywood movies had been shot under the majesty of the Athirappally Falls. Movies like Asoka, Raavan and even Dil Se. It was the favourite place for many directors of the south. Even in the sphere of music, Kerala has many firsts like A.R. Rahman and Ilaiyaraaja. The great character actor K.K. Menon is also from Kerala. Films are huge in this part of the world and they have their own stars and local movie celebrities. Kerala film industry is the fourth largest in India and has more than 1100 single screen cinemas. So it has mass

Yeh! Hai INDIA

reach into its hinterland. Even the big hit Vinod Khanna film called Dayavan was a remake of a famous Malayalam film with Kamal Haasan in the lead.

The spices, the ocean and the boats along with the film and music make this place a great vacation. Not to mention the variety of aroma, oil and massage therapies that one can get into to relax the body. I love Kerala for its fish, its mutton cutlets and its greenery. Not to mention, I also enjoyed some Kerala rains as we trekked up hills and through falls to get the perfect location to shoot for our videos.

We even witnessed a live song sequence being shot at the falls. It was Mollywood all the way.

Fishing at the Lake of Eco Park – Cochin

The April heat was on our heads but we persisted with our week-long shooting schedule without a hitch. Our next spot was the Eco Park and its lake on the outskirts of Cochin. There is an entrance fee to enter and you have to pay Rs 250 extra to take the camera equipment. One is greeted with a row of palm trees, huts and tin shelters. On one side is the kitchen that serves lunch and meals. In the middle is a huge muddy lake which has wooden huts with straw roofs right in the centre. One can sit on many benches near the pond and fish. It was the first time I did fishing and, man, one needs a lot of patience for it. I got a lot of fishes and then posed for the camera with one of my fishes in one hand and the fishing rod in the other. I sat on beach swings and spoke about tales of life. But the most fun was taking a bicycle ride around the lake. I loved it and it was also a great exercise for me as I paddled my way in circles around the pond. I almost slipped into the pond but I managed to jump back into the safety of the land.



Yeh! Hai INDIA

The fish I caught was fresh and that was the one I gave to the cooking staff to cook. They made a delicious fish curry and even steamed prawns with the usual Kerala rice and sambar. The Eco Park has been built so that man and nature can live together in harmony and coexist without troubling each other's habitat. Fresh fish is cooked instantly and I had it for supper. All plants and vegetables are grown with natural fertilisers with no chemicals and additives mixed into the soil.

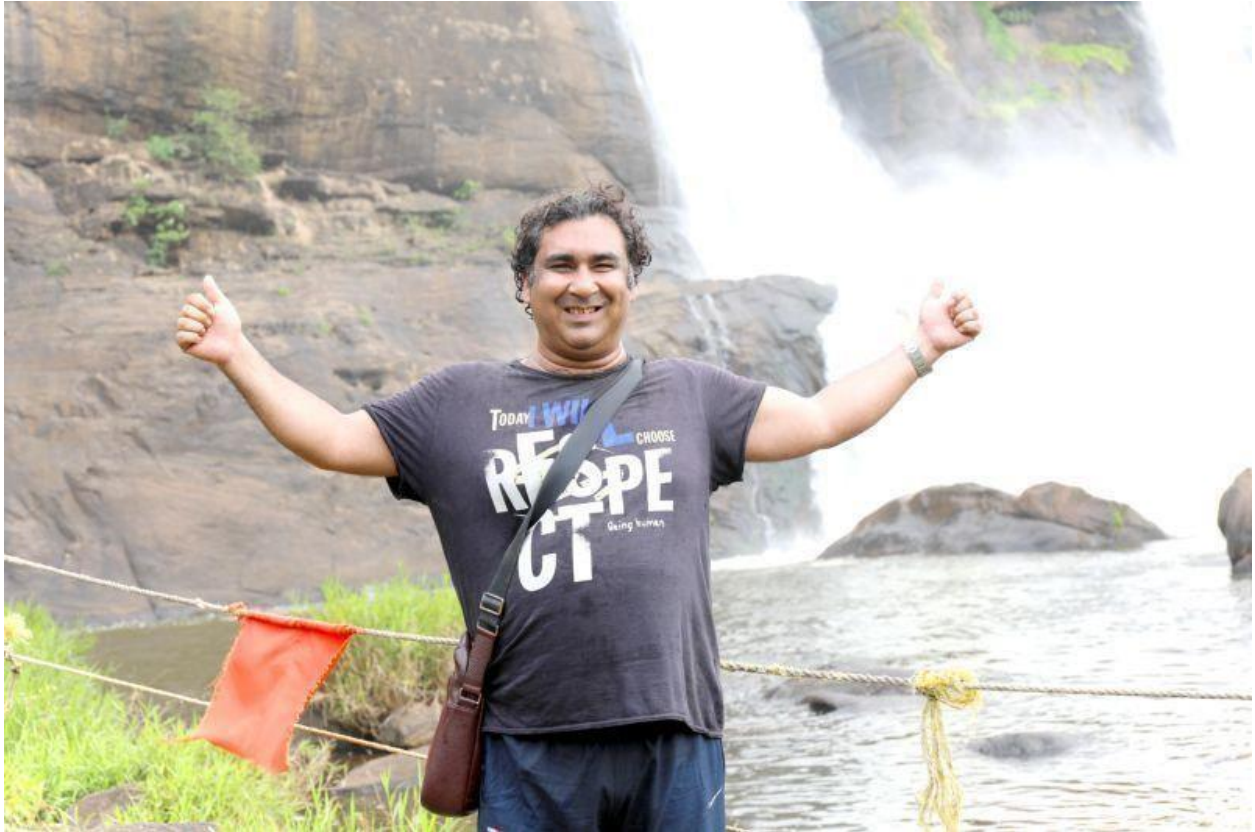
I took long walks around the lake and engaged to do some paddle boating with my film crew. I was spotted by an Asianet news crew who were also shooting a TV show at the Eco Park. I was able to chat with them and told them about my blog www.tikksutraelthon.in. I also showed them my videos and enquired about their shooting equipment. I hope they give me some promotion but still, it was fun to learn from them.

The kitchen was clean with taps to wash up and the food arrived with extra sambar and papad served if one needed it. The bony fried fish was my favourite with green chutney. The sun was about to set and a cool breeze started to flow as we decided to pack up and head back to our hotel after another day of adventure with nature.

Bollywood and the Athirapally Waterfalls

The majesty of the Athirapally Waterfalls has to be seen to be believed. These falls lie in the dense forests and jungles of the Thrissur district of Kerala. We drove more than two hours to reach these exotic falls and had to trek downhill for at least half an hour to reach the waterfalls. I then stood on top of huge rock and stone boulders only to see a shallow pond of fresh water under my feet. The afternoon heat and the excursion to the bottom had left me tired and sweaty. So I decided to take off my clothes and jumped into the cool pool of fresh water to take a dip. It was fun as I went on to take this royal bath in full view of the local passers-by. My team got busy shooting this and soon got some nice shots and expressions from me. I spoke about how Shah Rukh Khan's film Asoka was shot at this very location. The entire song sequence of "San Sanana" was shot under these full as Kareena Kapoor seduces Asoka. Mani Ratnam, another famous director from the south, loves these waterfalls and shot for Raavan here which had Aishwarya Rai slipping down the hills of the waterfalls. It was a very dramatic sequence.

Bollywood has a love affair with this location and that is evident in its beauty. The thick dense forest with bamboo trees give enough shade as one is sliding down, but climbing back to the top is very taxing. With my bulk, I managed to break all the way up but was exhausted at the end.



Our next stop was the Vazhachal Falls. These were just adjacent and is a very shallow waterfall. There were some very rare birds with large beaks that could only drink rainwater when it was falling from the sky. This time, I chose the cooler shades of a large banyan tree just near the falls to deliver my speech. We did a few shots of me walking through the mud lanes into the forest. The trek here took longer. We were walking on flatter ground but it had been a packed day of shooting for us. I must say that I was getting the real feel of Kerala by now with its films, locations and its famous actors like Mohanlal and Mammooty. After all, A.R. Rahman and Ilaiyaraaja are from this region.

The essence of Kerala's cultural and creativity was truly seeping into me and I love expressing my joy through my talks and through my commentary.

The Chinese Fishing Nets of Fort Cochin

Fort Cochin is an area I love. It is bang on the seashore. One can see huge ships and trawlers passing by its green waters. You will always see wooden fisher boats boxing up and down on the seabed as eager fishermen throw their huge blue fishing nets into the sea in the hope of making their first catch of the day. The sea is calm but active as the neighbouring sand bears testimony to the many passers-by who walk the shore every evening. The sun shines bright and builds an orange and yellow rainbow in the sky.

I and my team walked on the sand in the lookout for the perfect location where I could start talking about travelling and the stories I uncover as I move forward in my journey. I spotted an ice cream cart and bought a mango bar which I licked to my heart's content. The cool breeze blew over my moist skin as I delivered my speech one by one in full mood and action.

I drew people's attention to the huge Chinese fishing nets which were hoisted high in the sky by wooden poles tied together by nylon ropes as thick as pythons. It takes more than a few fishermen to work this contraption, but as they lower the net, they know that they are in for a big fish catch. These nets are gigantic with great reach. Add fish food on top of the net and that's all you need. In hours, the nets are pulled up from the water to reveal the real catch of the day.

This is then cleaned and separated. The fish is then washed and put into wooden crates to be taken to the fish market where they are sold for handsome profits. This is the peek into the day-to-day lives of the fishermen and locals living in Fort Cochin. It also has well-built British style beach villas with swimming pools. It is a perfect place to stay.



The beach is full of eateries, shops selling gift items and clothes, ice cream carts and cola vans. It is a place for families to enjoy free time with each other and to take a meditative stroll around the seabed. I spoke all evening till the sunset and we got a lot of footage of ships sailing in the sea with gulls flying in the air. The waste lying on the sea and the shore sand and the pungent smell of fish did put me off this place from time to time.

I seem to be running out of things to say and stories to tell but I still manage to slip in some new anecdote or information in my speeches to keep the audience engaged. But above all else, I will remember the gigantic blue Chinese fishing nets, which to me, is the pride of Fort Cochin.

Discovering the Sidewalks of Cochin as an Eccentric

I have kept my energy levels up at all times during this Kerala excursion and have been ably helped by my Infynith team. We have discussed future strategy, the importance of data mining and microtargeting our readers by using them for brand integrated promotions. But the focus has been on videography and filming for my YouTube video channel. I enjoyed walking near the bay area on the sidewalks chatting to old folks who sat on nearby benches. Needless to say, they were resting there after the evening walks. I discussed the meaning of the word eccentric with them and then sat down with them for a jolly good chat, all the while urging them to talk to the camera so that I could get some funny bits for my Travelthon video. I had a whole orange bar ice cream as I hop about my travels. All the while, I was slurping the juicy bar. The evening sunset excited my crew who grabbed the orange ball sun setting above the sky with boats and small ships sailing in the blue shiny orange water.



I, for one, was motivating my crew all the time with passionate speeches on how Steve Jobs succeeded in business to how we can use applications to capture vital reader data. I was showing them the way as I acquainted them with the grand vision of Tikku's Travelthon. The streets of Njarackal added their own flavour to my voice and act in front of the camera and I took care to look and wear my best for my camera appearance. Now that I have got a role in a Sanjay Dutt starrer film called Torbaaz which also features Nargis Fakhri, I am doubly excited. The weather has been hot and humid in Cochin City and its suburbs but our excursions to cooler areas in Munnar gave me much relief. The toddy, the spicy food, the tea gardens and green meadows with an ever-flowing mountain mist are the key ingredients of Kerala's scenic beauty.

Mix all this with the silent mystery of its quiet backwaters ridden with palm trees. Kerala is a wonder of many faces and moods. Steeped in the tradition of equality to all, it is the last bastion for the Communist party. Yes, Kerala is a red state. It is by no means poor and cities like Cochin have a very efficient transport system. With efficient taxi service moving about the city and suburbs, it was not an issue for us and thus, we got a lot of filming done. Yes, it is me Mr. Eccentric discovering Kerala in my own unique style.

Rains of Vagamon

Vagamon, also spelt Wagamon, is a hill station located in Meenachil taluk and Kanjirappally taluk of Kottayam district and Peerumade taluk of Idukki district of the state of Kerala. Today, we had decided to reach the green hills of this unique Kerala heaven. This sleepy green hill town is full of lush green meadows, pine forests, tea gardens and natural waterfalls. It is cool in climate and the hills carry with them hovering clouds of mist. The town flourished due to the early British missionaries who made churches and schools in this hill town. Vagamon has all faiths, Hindus Christians and Muslims living in this green paradise.

For us, the drive took more than 4 hours to reach from our base station in coach. Today, my cameraman was Rijin from team Infynith along with my GoPro champion. We took an Uber cab this time to and fro and it cost me Rs 5,800 for the trip but it was worth it. There were a few hitches on the way as my taxi stalled while we skidded down a hill. Yes, the car's bonnet went up in smoke and we had to wait for things to cool down before we started for our onward journey. Then it was a hill climb as we reached the town full of meadows and pine forests.

I was in my trademark yellow t-shirt and a brown corduroy jacket with my wavy hair all over the place. It began to rain on the way in the afternoon and we had to stop over at the local eatery that served us fish curry, mutton and paratha. It was a traditional Kerala food, all the way spicy and full of coconut and curry leaves, but man, it is chilli!



We used to frequently stop for ice cream brakes and then shoot on the sidewalks even when the rain was pouring from the heavens above. I narrated travel stories, my vision and meaning of my book Survival. I raised some issues about the social media scene as it unfolds in front of us. I stood on a stone near a lake in the middle of the muddy water and explained to my audience on how to promote and monetise one's blog. I explore technical aspect of blogging as well as give the audience the scenic view of the Kerala hills.

We then stopped to shoot in front of a giant waterfall. I was told by my crew that the entire area covering the waterfalls was owned by one famous Kerala actor. We captured a lot of the greenery of the tea gardens and the meadows.

It became evening as we drove back through the highways capturing the skyline as it set yellow with the coming of sunset and the sky turned from red to tangerine. The drive back was arduous as we were tired from a long excursion and all of us had worked hard to get the shoot done as well as we could. We kept changing locations and went right up to a place called the Flat Hill which is a steep hill with a

Yeh! Hai INDIA

flat top. I gave my two bit of gyaan on life and spoke on philosophical stories. All the collected footage of the day was being downloaded and sent for editing immediately at night so that we could start again with full battery and memory.

The Tea Gardens of Munnar

As I now often have to come to Cochin for my website work, I have really started exploring the wondrous hill stations of southern India. Munnar was just such a heaven, it has the largest tea gardens in the region with TATAs owning most of the gardens. Munnar is lush green and the gardens are covered with mist in the morning. We shot the whole day, driving past the scenic roads of this magnificent hill resort which was built by the British to enjoy during hot summer months. It is mid-April by the way and Munnar was our video destination. This time, we were a crew of three and shot with both the Canon Mark 5 and the GoPro. I made sure that I had got some good clothes with me for the trip and I think I looked fairly good in the shots that were taken. I spoke on technical aspects and the creative aspects of content writing and thus Blogging for Gold videos will start to getting uploaded on the blog soon. I was more expressive in my delivery this time and think I got my content information right all the time. Most of the talking, I was doing out of my head. I pray it all comes out good during the edits. We filmed at almost five to six direct locations, local scenic points and hilltops. Even the local parks were witness to my great oratory as I spread love, knowledge, wisdom and compassion around the streets of Munnar. It is also a great place to enjoy true South Indian Chettinad cuisine. I especially enjoy the chicken and mutton cooked in this really hot and spicy style. The gravy is thick and spicy with not a lot of oil and the mutton tender and succulent. One can also have that with hot appams. I used to often order for appams and enjoyed having them with egg curry.

We stayed in lake view in a hotel named Choice. Then we went up to a place called Top Station to do some more shooting for the videos. This time, we did it professionally and the results will show.



The team aims to shoot over 50 videos in the next ten days or so. That would really kick-start my YouTube channel and I hope to get 10,000 views in quick time. I also spoke about my book *Survival* and why I wrote it. Munnar was always misty and it was nice to shoot from the hotel balcony.

Next day we rolled down back to Cochin which was a three-hour drive. But it was the evening sunset that we captured and the scenic shots of the sun, the horizon and the water that controlled me the most. “You know, Munnar is such a lush green area blessed with great rains and waterfalls. People should try water harvesting here. Just need a flat roof area and you can put a water harvest filler to then bottle the water after purification.” Shiju explained to me. “Yes and then we could sell it to the Gulf countries. There, water is expensive but oil is cheap.” I added my gyaan to the whole matter. It was a pleasant evening and our work went as planned. Most of my videos have now been shot in Kerala and I am loving it!

India Monsoon Travel Dhamaka

Travel industry observers and insiders have reported a jump of 60% in monsoon holiday-related travel. People are moving to cooler places in the hills to enjoy their vacations. Travel portals and financial services companies have also noticed a 60% in their bookings and revenues. The reason being that people are now more open to spending to enjoy themselves and don't mind spending on experiences rather than things. Curated tours, speciality tours, adventure and safari tours – there is a whole host of custom made travel packages and products that have hit the market.



Places like Kerala continue to be a favourite holiday spot for the monsoons along with Kovalam, Varkala, Munnar and Auroville. There is also a huge demand for Bhutan, Ladakh and Pondicherry. People from Delhi are vacationing for shorter durations preferring places like Dharamsala, McLeod Ganj, Mussoorie and Manali.

So folks, time to pack those bags and escape the heat to a hill destination. You can also avail of all the great discount and cash back offers that travel companies are offering to lure customers.

Tower House and a Houseboat at Alappuzha

I was tired after my three-hour flight from Delhi to Kochi. This was Kerala in all its glory. I parked myself in the Tower House which is an old heritage hotel in the Fort Kochi area from the time of the British Raj.

I was there for a few days with my Infynith team to revamp and upgrade my blog. Yes, Tikku's Travelthon is getting a makeover. We are upgrading to the custom WordPress platform.

After giving out a few instructions, we headed for the beach for a feast of fried pomfret, beer, shrimps and chicken. A quick nap and I felt fresh again as I gazed at the sea shore from my window sharing my ideas with the site developer.

Kerala is a communist state and world famous for ayurveda. "You went to Baba Ramdev's ashram. Have you got any contacts there? I want to sell ayurveda to Baba." Shiju asked me with a polite glare "No, not really. I tried getting an interview with him but I failed." Shiju, the boss of Infynith, felt let down. The worst thing about Cochin is the butter chicken. I mean, these guys can't cook North Indian food for nuts. When in Kerala, just try the local cuisine and that will give you all the satisfaction.

On the last day of my stay in Kochi, we moved to Alappuzha where we had hired a houseboat for the night. The whole day was dedicated to taking pictures and feasting on fish that we caught from the river.

In the evening, I went for a swim in the saline waters of the canal. It was wonderful as I saw kids jumping into the water to escape the heat. This was truly God's Own Country with its palm trees, wooden boats and green waters of the bay.

Yeh! Hai INDIA



The whole team had a great time strolling in the nearby farmland area taking pictures of birds and various other water bodies. It was business and pleasure rolled into one. Salman, a member of team Infynith, and I sat down for a chat about married life and what one should think of before one takes the plunge. He was very keen to invite me for his wedding. Next morning, we all got up in a hurry. It was like the wild beasts had just been woken up. There was chaos all the way as I was late to catch my flight. We rushed into the car and Shiju drove me to the airport in a hurry. I was pleased with this trip to Kochi as I felt that I had accomplished my goals and vision for Tikku's Travelthon. It was time to take it to the next level!

A Lobster, Aircraft Carriers and A Lighthouse in Kochi

I landed in God's Own Country, Kerala, a few days back for a meeting with the team who manage my blog. Infynith, as they are called, put me up in the Park Central Hotel near their office. After our meeting, I and the team which included Shiju, Salman, and the boys strolled down the Marine Drive area of the city. Kerala is a green heaven and a coastal area popular for its Ayurveda, oil massages, herbs, spices and of course its seafood. I dined, walked and strolled around the city with my blog team. I enjoyed climbing up the Vypin Lighthouse in Puthuvype to take a panoramic view of Kochi. This lighthouse started functioning at Fort Kochi in 1839 and was shifted to Vypin Island in 1979.

Marine Drive was fun as we took a jetty to the seaport to get a glimpse of the great Indian aircraft carriers INS Vikramaditya and INS Vikrant. The two towering ships stared at us from afar showing off their intimidating size and strength. It was my first glimpse of these majestic beasts. While INS Vikramaditya was a Russian-made aircraft carrier that entered the Indian Navy service in 2013, INS Vikrant is the first aircraft carrier being built by the Cochin Shipyard for the Indian Navy. This giant aircraft carrier starting being built in 2013 and is estimated to complete around 2023!

I felt happy now as me and my team meandered to a local eatery for some lunch, full Kerala style. Rice, fish curry, and vegetables all served on a banana leaf. I gobbled up the sadhya with my hands in the local style enjoying the flavours of my cuisine.



Not only is Kerala the first communist state in India, it is also the first state in the world to win the general elections and form a communist government through democracy in 1957. E.M.S. Namboodiripad became the Chief Minister and laid rise to the root of communism that still runs deep here. People take pride in their communist ideals. It was only in the last elections that BJP won its first seat here.

I noticed that women of Kerala generally turn to become nurses or nuns and men fly out to Dubai to work as labourers on sites or as workmen on factory shop floors. The weather, although cool, is always a bit humid and the suburbs are littered with banana trees.

I, of course, could not leave Kerala without seeing Vasco da Gama's Tomb, which has now been converted into a church. I am told his son came here after 14 years of Vasco da Gama's death to take his father's ashes back to his hometown.

My friends had said that I must dine in the Casino Hotel Wellington Restaurant when visiting Kerala and I did exactly that. With Shiju, the head of my blog team, I ventured into this exquisite dining place for a meal of fish, lobsters, and prawns as

Yeh! Hai INDIA

we chatted about all things from the downfall of Vijay Mallya and the Sahara Group to the philosophy of life. We even had a long conversation on South Indian films, especially about Santosh Sivan, the chief cinematographer of Mani Ratnam. The meal was a tad expensive as we drank a lot of single malt whiskey making a total bill of Rs 10,000. But with such delicious prawns and lobsters, it was worth it!

Once Upon a Time in a Forest

It was almost dawn as Basha was woken up by a loud and rude knock on his door. He was staying in a hut near a rice field deep in the forest area. There was a village near the area called Kala but it was a 10-minute walk from his hut. He was woken up by one of the villagers who had bicycled all the way from the village of Kala to serve Basha his bed tea and remind him that it was his duty to watch the jungle today. "Sahib, chai! Please be ready, the first jungle safari leaves at 6:00 am. All the jeeps will be waiting for you. They have been given permission by the forest department yesterday." He handed Basha his tea. Our man rubbed his eyes and wrapped a towel around his waist. He was all bare-chested as he picked up his morning tea and biscuits. Basha was a short man with big shoulders and had a potbelly. With his black thick moustache, he looked apart. He sipped his tea and looked at his watch. His motorcycle was parked outside. He knew he was going to be late.



The forest was moist today. A thick early morning mist had engulfed the trees and could barely be seen. However, Basha had more urgent things to attend to. He could admire Mother Nature when he entered the forest and then made sure the track was safe for the safari jeeps to come in with the tourists. He carried a stick with him, the famous cane of Basha, which he used to scare away deer and sambar. According to his own told legend, Basha had also chased away wild tigers with his stick. He had been with the forest guard for over five years and was an expert in identifying animal calls, tracking pugmarks and looking for fresh tiger trails. He was also good with elephants and they responded to him. Basha was the freewheeling king of the Jungle. "I have fought many forest tigers and even the ferocious Charger. I chased him away with my stick and stones. He never crossed my path again." These tales of great valour were told by him to his fellow rangers during morning cups of tea as they stood near the jeeps to open the gate of the forest. After the usual checking of the tourist IDs, he would drive away on his Enfield Bullet motorbike and lead the jeep caravan thick into the forest navigating the many watering holes and streams. His bike was an Enfield Bullet used by most rangers in the area. To communicate with others, he also carried a walkie-talkie. This was also a way for others to inform the pack if there was a tiger spotting in the vicinity.

This was his trial as he looked deeply into the mud road for pugmarks in the sand or tiger poo. He was looking for any clue that would give away the tigers whereabouts. He would stop the jeeps from time to time and wait for the tiger growl. He would ask the elephant mahouts for clues and trails. He had been doing this route for years and knew every corner of the forest including the burial ground of the great Charger, the king of Bandhavgarh. He would ride his motorbike until the Vishnu's statue and then back again to the picnic ground or the halfway ground to have breakfast with the local villagers and tourists. Always dressed in an immaculate crisp khaki uniform, he looked at ease and in control. That was Basha, the forest guard of Bandhavgarh.

Today, he sat under the tea hut on a wooden bench. There had been no tiger sightings for months. It looked like the tigers were resting or just tending to their cubs. Even the watering holes were empty, just a few deer and jackals but no tiger. "Sala kai dino se nahi deekha, tourist bhi pareshaan sala Bandhavgarh ka tiger

kahan gaya?” The teashop owner tried to explain as he handed an aloo bonda and a cup of tea to Basha. “Sala jungle ka raja wohi nahi deekha tho safari ka kya karna?” Basha took a sip from his hot stainless steel glass as he whipped clean his moustache. There were langurs with huge pointed tails and black faces loitering around for scraps of food and some even played with broken water bottles. Families gathered around to have their hot breakfast on the bonnets of their safari jeeps as drivers took time out to take a leak. The sun had come up now and it was getting dry and hot. It was the right time for flies, bees and insects to whizz in the air. Yes, this was truly forestland as one could hear the rustling of trees and barks of deer roaming in the area trying to pry into the world of man. Basha preferred to be a loner. He had left his wife with his mother near a village in Jabalpur and preferred to stay alone in his hut like a hermit. His only entertainment was the jungle and his mission to find the tiger every time he went out. Thus, he was deeply disappointed due to the lack of tiger sightings recently. “Who ma apney bacche KO doodh pila rahi hogi, Osaka Naam hei potty, bahut time se nahi dikhi.” It felt like something was amiss in the forest. “Gora tourist bhi ab kam ata hei yahan!” The boy of the shop said as he sat down to boil eggs. Suddenly a jeep started. Breakfast time was up and it was time to move on for the second leg of the safari. Basha started off on his bike again but stopped over to chat with Seema, the elephant rider who was coming down the track with his elephant Bhola. “Kya bhai! Tiger deekha kya, Bhola se poncho.” Basha asked inquisitively to Seema. “Nahi re, tiger sota kanhi Pani Ke paas, bahut try kiya nahi dikha.” Basha knew that something was amiss. He trudged on a bit further across the bamboo groves of the forest, and then he stopped near the thin flowing water stream. The water had almost dried up. Only slush and red mud could be seen. In fact, the sand had turned red almost a quaint wine-like in colour. As if on cue, he got off his bike to investigate if a tiger had been around but he saw no paws. The colour of wine became thicker as he walked on the thin stream of flowing water. It was quiet. Not a sound, the animals and even the birds had fallen silent. Basha stopped and turned around. He had left his bamboo staff on the bike. He returned to retrieve it. He needed protection. What if a jackal attacked him? Now armed with his stick, he walked swiftly towards the trail of burgundy red. His sandals were now covered with red mud and clay. He got a glimpse of a green kurta and then another orange piece of cloth lying on the

grass torn and in tatters. There had been a kill here last night and no, it was not another deer or wild boar, it was a human. As he gazed further down, a four feet long naked body of a girl lay head first in the grass. There was blood all over the ground and bushes. Basha could hear the buzz of flies, bees and mosquitos as he approached the frail and small body of a naked Adivasi girl lying head first in the ground. The body was still and cold. Basha shook it with his stick but no response. She had been dead for some time. There were claw marks on her back and neck and her shoulder was half eaten. The wound was not raw now. She had been dead for some time. It was too late. She was hunted down as she came to fetch water for her family. Near her legs lay a steel pot to fetch water, now empty and abandoned. Her amulet had come off and lay beside her, along with a mala of goddess Durga. The girl was dead all right. Not only had she been hunted down, but she had also been preyed upon by a tiger. The very tiger Basha had been trailing trying desperately to get a sighting for his tourists. He had already seen tiger paws on the edges of the stream. He had been here presumably to have a drink and spotted the girl fetching water from the same stream. Unaware of the tiger's presence, the girl persisted and then from nowhere, the beast attacked her and ripped her apart. That could be the only logical explanation he could find in his mind. Basha loosened his belt for a while as his forehead went giddy and began to perspire. He was now standing near a dead body of a 12-year-old Adivasi girl. He needed time to absorb all this. The scene was too grotesque, frightening and gory. The air was dry and the body had gone stone cold, almost grey. The colour of the stream had turned red. There was a peculiar stench in the air. Basha looked heavenwards towards the trees and then slowly sank down on his knees. He was in a state of shock and panic now. In all his time as a forest guard, this was the first time he saw a human dead body. He had seen dead bodies of sambar, deer and even birds in the forest but a live kill of a human being, that too, by a tiger. That was new to him.



What did it all mean? Had the tigers of Bandhavgarh become man-eaters? There was no sign of that ever before and no history of tigers eating or even hunting down humans. They did attack the village cows and goats, as they were easy kills. The tigers never killed any villagers and were generally chased away by sticks and stones. This was different. Here, the girl was small, frail and inexperienced. She was an easy prey and defenceless to the charge of a tiger. She was dead meat as soon as the beast saw her. But wait, it was not a male but a female tiger. A tigress had done the deed. Basha got hold of himself as he sprinkled the stream water into his eyes. With this thought buzzing in his head, he got up with a jolt and started walking back to see the tiger's trail. On closer investigation, he realised that the paws were smaller, more slender and tapered at the end. Yes! He was sure it was a tigress that had done the human kill. They were a female's pugmarks. A sudden panic took over him as he dropped his bamboo staff and ran towards his bike. He quickly retrieved his walkie-talkie and got in touch with the Forest Guards office outside the forest enclosure. "Sir, me, sir, Basha, sir. I am in the forest. Today my duty, mein forest

mein patrol kar raha tha jab ek ladki ki dead body mili. Kya Gaya usey, oh no, sir, ek sherni hei, please come with help and support.” Basha tried to explain the scene as much as he could. His voice was shaking and choking with mortal fear. “We are coming, forest guard, aap wahin rahoo hum backup bhej rahein hein.” A prompt reply came from the head office. Basha stopped to take a breath and then opened his thermos flask to have a sip of water.

Meanwhile, the jeep caravan that Basha had been escorting was almost in a panic. It had been over half an hour and our forest guard was nowhere in sight. He had ventured into the jungle looking for tiger marks but still no news of the fella. “Where has that man on the motorbike wandered off too? Man, Indians, they cannot get anything right. We have been here months and still have not seen a tiger. I should ask these guys for a refund.” A tourist from the UK expressed his dismay as to how the safari was progressing. The elephants had also decided to join in the show as one of the elephant drivers shouted “Basha, Basha, tum kahan ho?” The elephant slowly trudged past the caravan and walked right through into the dense forest. Langurs could be seen hanging on trees and jumping from branch to branch, but there was apprehension in the air. Something was going on as the langurs started to growl.

Suddenly, dust began to rise and two Scorpio jeeps approached the caravan. Six men from the forest guards, two with guns in hand jumped out and started walking briskly on the dirt track. They moved swiftly into the dense forest and then started walking towards the thin water stream as Basha waited for them near his bike. “Sir, bad, sir. Tiger killed the girl, pura kha gaya only body left.” Basha pointed towards the other end of the stream. Soon the men were near the eaten body of the little girl. To them, the kill was made before sunrise as some of the blood was still thin and a bit warm but the body was stone cold as one of the guards turned the dead body around. As if in repulsion, everyone took their eyes away from the face of the girl. Her cheeks were torn. Her neck cut open. It was a gruesome sight, not to mention the flies who had gathered around. They started making all sorts of buzzing noises. “Right, Basha, call for the village ambulance. The body is to be taken for post-mortem and we need to register the case in the Thana. The girl is dead. Identify her and inform the villagers about the man-eater. Also, inform the girl’s

family. They can come and take the body for cremation later.” The chief told his men. “Arrey, someone cover the girl with a bed sheet and wrap the up the body.” He barked his last order before heading back towards the jeep.

Basha knew that the news would spread soon into the village through the elephant mahouts and other forest guards. There would be fear all around. After all now, anyone was open to an attack. “Sir Ji, one more thing, it is not a male, it is a female tigress. I have seen the pugmarks.” Basha shouted out at the chief. “Well, that is even more dangerous. The female is a better shikari and an even deadly poacher than the male. This tigress could spell doom for the villagers.” Said the chief.

JAGAN

He was buried deep in his desk trying to make sense of the patterns of Gond art that was scattered all over the desk. Next to him was his white Dalmatian called Spotty sat wagging his tale. The morning tea lay on the desk still piping hot with tea biscuits on the plate. Jagan had been running a forest resort called Sherghar for over a decade. Slowly, his client base grew over time and the tiger population flourished in the area as more foreign tourists arrived. More tourists meant more money. These tourists started buying Adivasi and local art and crafts. A new line of business opened up for resort owners. Soon Jagan opened his own NGO and started selling and exporting Gond art and craft. He had well and truly made his passion his life and business. This was a forest love in the true sense. He too had abandoned his family, wife and two sons for a hermit’s life in the forest. This is something he always wanted to do, but due to family and society constraints, he could not do it at an early age. Now he was a true tiger lover and his keen knowledge of the forest and its history made him an excellent resort owner who always kept his customers engaged and happy. If he were not serving jungle breakfast for them, he would be taking them on wild elephant safaris or giving them a peek into the temples and village life of the local villagers.

The locals knew him as Jagan Thakur. Yes, Thakur was the title given to him, as he was always dressed regally with a silk scarf, jungle shirt and loose khaki trousers. Indeed, Jagan looked like a Thakur when he jumped out of his Gypsy on the dusty track trying to look for tiger paws, his favourite pass time. His time was spent on

packing Gond art, giving instructions to the staff for meals and booking the morning safari for his guests. His pet Spotty was always in toe. However, what Jagan liked the most was to admire the sunset of the jungle. To him, the orange blob of light was what gave him his energy and it was the dance of nature around him that gave him his purpose. He would teach in the local Kala School in his free time and read books about the ancient Indian mystics at night. This was his world and he was the king here.

“Sir, the tourists are ready. One family from Bengal and two gentlemen from the UK. They are all very keen to see the tiger today.” A servant boy entered Jagan’s writing room and asked him to hurry. In a flurry, Jagan got into action, picked up his zoom lenses and his Nikon camera. He almost forgot his mobile phone in haste. “Six months chey mahiney ho Gaye no tiger. Sala Kanwar extinct ho Gaya, lag ta hei Kenya se Lion export karna hoga then only we will get some sightings.” Jagan said feeling a bit amused. Yes, it had been a long spell of dry sightings in the jungle. No one had seen a tiger for some time. Some said it was time for the tigress to give birth. Some said poachers had killed the tigers, but no proof to that had been found. No one had reported a natural tiger death. The temperature of the village and the forest region had gone up during the years and the heat had effects on the farms and the jungle flora and fauna. The streams had dried up and even the ponds were at a low water level. Had the tiger disappeared due to lack of water or forest cover? Was there some kind of a mass tiger migration that had taken place? Why else would the sightings be reduced to almost zero?

Jagan started his jeep and drove his guests towards the forest compound. There was a lot of activity happening down there. The jeeps had been stopped and tourists wandered around the road looking lost and exasperated. Forest guards had invaded the area and there was an ambulance waiting nearby. Jagan stopped his jeep in the middle of this morning pandemonium. “Sir, Jagan, sir, you have to stop here. No safari today. There has been a kill. Yes, little girl from the village. Name, Hemlata. She was killed by a tigress in the morning near the stream. So whole area had been shut down for further investigation.” A forest guard said as he stopped his jeep. “What?! There has never been a human kill ever in this forest, not that I can remember. A man-eater in our forest? No chance. How are you sure she was

killed by the tiger?” Jagan wanted to know. “Sir, I am doing my naukari. Ap Basha se poncho, he was the one who saw the body first.”

Jagan walked down to the motorbike parked on the side of the dusty road. “Basha ji, kya ho Gaya? Salla tiger khoon kar ne Laga ab.” He wanted to know the entire story. “Sir, very bad, little girl tuk de tut de kar die uskeey.” Basha painted a graphic picture of the killing. The tourists were advised to head back to their resorts as the crowd was asked to disperse by the local police so that the ambulance could carry the dead body to the local hospital for post-mortem. “Naam kya tha ladki ka?” Jagan asked Basha. “WO koi Hemlata thee baar painter hei, Kala mein family hei farming wale log hein.” Basha gave out the details of the dead girl. Jagan heard the name and his eyes popped out. His face became stiff and his lips grew red. “Hemlata?” He asked aloud again. “Kyon aap jantein hei uske parivar ko?” Basha quizzed Jagan. Meanwhile, our man had found a stone bench to sit on. He was in a daze and looked lost. Jagan was seeing visions from his past.

“B for ball, C for Cat, E for egg.” Jagan was taking the afternoon class at the village school in Kala. “Hemlata, aaj aap sabko apni drawing dikhayein Ge.” He handed over the paints and the drawing paper to the girl as she went about from desk to desk showing her Saraswati painting to the other kids in the class. The classroom was small with scabby and worn out walls. There were barely 20 kids in the room as the headmaster wandered in the playing field tending to the stray cattle. Hemlata was Jagan’s favourite. She was the best dressed wearing an immaculate bindi and amulets and had boundless energy. She did all the household chores and still had the energy to attend school and fly kites with the boys in the evening. She is also good at riding a bicycle. Even at her height, she could ride a full-size Hero bicycle. Jagan somehow saw in her a daughter he never had. She was his pet and he would get her the best fruits from his orchards to eat and enjoy. He used to take a lot of his guests to see the house of Hemlata’s folks just to give them a feel of the tribal life. Her hut was strong, made of tree trunks, and baked clay and tree branches. The floor was flat and made of clay. The walls were made of mud, cow dung and stone. The hut had a pump but it hardly gave any water especially in the summer months. The family worked on a paddy field for its survival. They also had chickens, goats and cattle kept in a yard adjacent to their hut. An entire family of

ten lived in the hut and lived for generations doing farming and making Gond art. Hemlata's father Ramu was a painter and made exquisite Gond art. Jagan used to buy everything he made and then sold them at a premium to his foreign guests who were happy to pay the extra buck.

In fact, he had just taken a few guests for a jungle walk to show them Hemlata's hut. She was not at home then, but while talking to Ramu, he was told of a bad omen by which the forest was hit. "Sir, all my parrots have stopped speaking. They used to speak first but now they have all gone silent. We have a Shiva temple in the village with a cobra snake down on its wall, because a cobra would come there every morning. My wife would leave milk for him to have, but for some time now, the snake has stopped coming for his drink of milk. Something is not right." Ramu had said as if he was reciting a prophecy. Jagan had taken his words lightly. His only concern was to make sure that his guests go happy after a tiger spotting, which had not happened for a while. For him, that was his bad omen.

"Sahib, we have to return. No safari today. That little girl, she was killed by the tiger." Jagan was shaken up by his servant boy as he sat on the stone bench almost frozen. He was yet to recover from the news that the victim was known to him. "Chal, let us go to the police station and find out any news, I want to know the cause of death. Damn, I knew her she was my student." Jagan was almost choking as he said this.

KALA

The village near the forest with the largest number of tribal population was Kala. More than a 100 families lived in this small village. Most of the villagers had encroached neighbouring forest land area and had started doing agricultural farming there. The watering holes were used and water diverted to the farms. Kala was a village at the heart of man and nature conflict. It is as if man was learning how to live with the forest. The local government had provided a school and given money to the local panchayat to build toilets and water wells. There were shops selling knick-knacks and FMCG products and even a post office. The cluster of villages near Kala survived on what they produced and what they sold to the local

Mandi, which was always full of fresh vegetables. One highway from the neighbouring town was the only connect Kala had to a city.

It was hot in the afternoon but the sunset and sunrise were colourful, bright and very soothing to the eyes. Water came through wells and hand pumps with many ponds and watering holes around. There were a few streams that would flow from the forest to the village farmland that could help in irrigation as the farmers mostly grew paddy, which requires a lot of water. The local tribals worked as help in the jungle resorts. Now many had cropped up in the area. There were also semi-skilled artists who drew Gond art or made pottery with clay and terracotta. Some women specialised in making papad and pickle for local brands. Many NGO had opened up here and were working for the uplifting of the villagers who were still the poorest of the poor. The place was riddled with strict caste structure. Untouchability still existed in the remote villages, where the Sudras stayed separated away from the rest of the villagers and had the worst houses and poor hygiene. They were allowed to grow and farm pigs and eat pork. The village had small shops selling local brew called Mahhua, a vodka-like drink made out of the flowers that grew on the Mahhua tree. The forest was dense with bamboo trees and Sal tree being dominant.

Typical village family had at least eight or nine members in them. The women folks stayed indoors and the kids went to the school ferried by a bus, at times, that would be late on most days. The rest of the villagers went farming or doing odd jobs at the jungle like riding and taming elephants or working on the teashop at the middle point deep inside the forest made to feed the tourists. There were attacks by tigers before as they preferred to hunt and eat the local cows. Their favourite pet was the village dog. Most families in the village had a dog or two to guard the cattle and the house. Also, most of them kept parrots in cages hung near the entrance of the hut. This was some positive omen or charm for the villagers who were worshippers of Durga and Lord Shiva. Both of these Gods are associated with the Jungle. Shiva for the Serpent and the Goddess Durga for the Tiger. The villagers also slept on the farmland at night on lofts made out of tree branches and wooden staffs. They would be on the watch for tigers. Many had also fought tiger attacks in the past with fire torches, sticks and stones just like in the tale Basha used to tell.

Here, man lived in peace with nature and the equilibrium of the forest. But today, something had gone wrong for the first time. A tigress had become a man-eater and that spelt doom for that equilibrium.

The local hospital also acted as a dispensary handing out medicine and health aid to the villagers with its own ambulance. Doctors and a few active nurses – it was all the villagers had. The best medical aid apart from this was only available in a town three hours from the forest area.

A man-eater was about in the forest and a girl was dead half eaten with her mangled remain being taken for an autopsy. “Yes, it was a tiger attack, but the doctor has found something strange. The organs of the girls are missing – her hair, kidney, lungs, eyes etc. Now how is that possible?” The nurse informed Jagan after the post-mortem was done. Jagan went quiet, his mind spinning at the agony the girl must have gone through. Come to think of it, he knew her. He had taught her a few times. “I knew her, I had bought her at the local school, I must meet the family and express my grief.” He replied back to the nurse.

He started his jeep and headed for the resort. On the way, there were local men chatting away about the incident. People had gathered around trees and old Puja Pandals to discuss their fate and the fate of the forest. Some talked about a curse given to the village by the Goddess. She is displeased with them, it seems. “Nahi nahi ho salta hei ki she ne mara ho, par dil, grade phi gayaab hei ladki ka.” A voice said after some thought.

CATS Foundation in Bandhavgarh National Park

Tigergarh Resort has existed in Bandhavgarh National Park for now seven years. We have been very conscious of our sustainable and responsible existence here.

To strengthen the idea we have created a NGO by the name of CATS Foundation. CATS stands for Conservation, Arts, Training and Sustenance.



Projects under CATS will be aimed at creating a sustainable livelihood for the village-folks living around the reserved forest area.

Our first project will target the need of electricity and water in these villages. The first village where we are trying to address this need is the village Ranchha, just adjoining our resort Tigergarh in Bandhavgarh National Park.

Ranchha village has 200 houses with a population of about 800 people. The village is spread in an area of approximately 2sq km. The villagers have small farmlands from .5 Acres to about 4 acres on an average.

The requirement is of two transformers to cater to the electrical load for houses and farming. The approximate cost for two transformers will be about Rs 150000.

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To cater to the need of water for the village about 5 bore-wells are needed or a central storage tank with supply pipes can be developed. Cost for which will be approximately 4-5 Lakh rupees.

The total project cost for water and electricity fulfillment is Rs 6.5 lakhs.

We urge our friends to help us in giving this village a sustainable life by contributing generously monetarily.

Our other projects include teaching the villagers skills such as stitching and training in hospitality in order to develop alternate means of livelihood.

The bank account details for CATS Foundation are as below:

Account Name – CATS FOUNDATION

BANK- ICICI Bank, Hathibarkala Branch, Dehradun

Account Number – 016405006738

IFSC – ICIC0000164

For any more details you can get in touch with me on below co-ordinates:

Gagan Gahlot

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9922820103 / 9407583050

Save Forests, Save Yourself

CHAHIYE SIRF APKE PAANCH HAZZAR (We Only Need Your 5000)

Hi Friends,

I call upon all of you well-wishers and followers of my blog www.tikkustravelthon.in to help in my effort in rebuilding the lives of the 10,000 villagers/tribals located in 40 villages in Bandhavgarh, Madhya Pradesh. I have been doing the rounds of this area and the fantastic tiger sanctuary with my friend Gagan Gahlot who runs a resort called Tigergarh here. We want to start a community-building program for the tribals and villagers of this region starting from installing an electric transmitter for the village to facilitate power supply in the region. We also want to train the unskilled people of the village in making artefacts, paintings, straw baskets and handicrafts. This will require one specialist teacher to teach the villagers. We will use the resort area as our community hub. The entire community drive has one mission "Save Forests, Save Yourself". We want to help restore harmony in the forest and make sure that its interdependent relationship with man flourishes.



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I have pledged Rs 50,000 from my pocket and from my grandmother's side. I seek your charity in this matter "Save Forests, Save Yourself". The entire community upliftment drive will be captured on camera and a mini-documentary of the achievements made and how your donations were put to good use will be mailed to you. Each donor will have his name and photograph on the documentary. As a token of your donation and support, a handmade tribal handicraft piece will also be couriered to your doorstep.

I along with my ex Welham Boys' batchmate Gagan Gahlot and his staff will drive this initiative and will be promoted through my blog and partners.

I ask for your donation, a minimum amount of Rs 5000 per household. We are targeting 2 lakh rupees and have already initiated our first project to get a transmitter put in the village.

Kindly come forward and support by donating at least Rs 5000 to this noblest cause of protecting our forest and uplifting the lives of our rural and tribal people, who are in most need of our help and generosity.

Kindly send your donations on the accounts below: Minimum Rs 5000

PAYTM

Name: Anuj Tikku

Mobile: +919650799479

Keep reading updates about our initiative "Save Forests, Save Yourself" on my blog www.tikkustravelthon.in and Facebook Page.

Doing the Bhangra at Durga Puja, Bandhavgarh

It has been a very lazy day and as usual, I have been having showers one after the other to escape the heat. As the evening approached, I was woken up by sounds – a cacophony of drums, trumpets, bells and flutes. It was the last day of the Durga Pooja as it was time for the villagers to perform a grand arti next to the forest lake before immersing the idol. There were villagers and tribal people with masks throwing colours at each other and dancing behind two tractors, which carried the Durga idol. The tractors moved slowly on the gravel road and then turned into the fields moving swiftly towards the lake.

I got some good shots of the village's youth dancing and celebrating as they dismounted the Durga statue for immersion. She looked fearsome with the sword, the trishul and the tiger beside her with a red chunni wrapped around the head. The priests were performing their rituals and chanting mantras as we all danced through the narrow dusty lanes of the village huts to reach the immersion spot. Here again, there was a huge party happening, nagadas being played full throttle.

The pooja was being performed as the pandits burned diyas and fire to appease the Goddess. The colour of her face turned red as embers from the fire flew skywards. With the noise of the drums and the nagada, the atmosphere was electric. Village kids joined the festivities as the women folks dressed in their best clothes and bridal ware sat on the side holding large green grass in their fists. This, no doubt, was a symbol of fertility of both a mother and the land on which the villagers survived.



I, for one, got busy dancing to the loud noise of the drums. It was delightful as I danced myself into a frenzy. All the kids began to watch my movements and slowly joined in to clap and egged me on. This was 'party all night' and I got into the act with the locals. I even got pally with the witch doctor who had worn all black clothes and donned a black mask of Kali. He also held a weapon aloft. He was the village shaman or the witch doctor, the man who could talk to spirits and understand strange signs in nature. He, along with the Durga idol, made a lethal pair and I stood just next to them in between enjoying the chants of mantras. From time to time, I would dance and do the bhangra as the nagadas started to play. There was a point when I even started to do the Tandav of Shiva. All in all, it was great exercise for me and I feel refreshed after watching the immersion of the idol. I was cleansed again and the air had done me good. But the Village witch doctor – he will forever remain etched in my mind.

The Eye of the Tigress – Eye to Eye with Durga

So, it was another morning at Bandhavgarh. Every day I decide to leave the forest and every day I stay back again to see another sunrise. Today was my fourth safari and I had sworn to Gagan that it would be my last. We had to see the tiger. After all, Durga Poojas were in full fervour in the village. It was time for the Goddess, The Sherun Wali Mata, to give us Darshan during the morning safari.

We started off on a familiar jungle territory. The first was the sunrise, a perfect one today, and then a merry stream of deer, wild boars, peacocks and elephants. I was a bit sleepy, as I would nod off to sleep from time to time. I even almost fell off the jeep once. Then it happened out of the blue. We had stopped our jeep next to the pugmarks and straight past us walked the tigress. She was big and magnificent and not concerned at all that we were watching her awestruck. I started to shoot immediately as I knew I had little time. I had to shoot her before she crossed off the dusty road into the dense forest on the other side. I got the angle from behind and then my jeep moved to get her lateral poses.



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I had captured enough of the beast as it disappeared into the woods. We turned the jeep around to get a look from the opposite direction. Here too, I was in close proximity to her, around 10 meters or so. I clicked away as the tigress swished her tail and moved from side to side.

That's it. In a few minutes, her Darshan was over and Durga, as I have renamed her, vanished back into the forest amongst the bushes and sal trees. This was the WOW moment of the entire forest safari. I sat back into the jeep to take a breath and enjoy the moment. I felt triumphant at last. After two weeks of waiting, we finally spotted the tigress in all its glory and man, did she pose for the lens. But for me, it was over too quickly. I wanted more and we searched the forest if we could find her cubs or her mate. We found nothing. She had done the catwalk and that was all for the day.

I drove out of the forest happy and content that my mission of spotting the tiger was a success and I had finally captured the beast in my lens. The jeep drivers got a reward of Rs 200 each from me today for the sightings. The images of the proud Durga will remain with me now forever. The Goddess has smiled on me. It was as if she had blessed me. To me, spotting the tigress today was like a good omen as if I was receiving an auspicious blessing from the Gods. After all, it was only yesterday that I had walked into the neighbouring village and did Pooja at the local Ma Durga Pandal. I also had the Prasadam that the local village girls gave me. The blessing surely bore fruit today.

Sunset at Bandhavgarh

“Hey, come over and watch this. It’s the sunset over the forest.” Gagan called out to me excitedly. I had barely come out of the pool and was wet all over. On top of that, I had a camera in one hand and a cucumber sandwich in the other. Yes, it was a round orange ball, the sun, as it set over the forest in the neighbouring horizon far across the paddy fields and several watering holes. A clear orange ball spreading its red and orange hue through the blue and grey sky. I watched it for some time all still. At times, I would walk towards it but it would go even farther as if to tease me. Still, it was a treat for the eyes – as soulful and full of vibrant light as it slowly set into oblivion.



The season of ritual and prayer is upon us and the villagers have gotten busy singing bhajans to appease Goddess Durga. There are pooja pandals all over this place. You can hear the cacophony at night as some villagers offer prayers. You can hear the chants of the poojari. The whole atmosphere of the forest reverberates with the smell of spiritual fervour, something so untamed that the forest adds to the

wildness of the experience. The sounds of arti mingle with the sounds of night owls and bugs. The forest adds its own mystic to the whole thing. The villagers and tribals have a special dance for these poojas where men dress up in women attire and dance around a bonfire. The villagers worship the snake and Shiva Linga alike. However, it is the aloofness and serenity of the forest that attracted me and kept me here much longer than I had planned.

It has been almost ten days now and I just want to be here more and more. My diet has improved, I get up early, I read and write more – it is as if I have expanded my awareness by being one with the forest. I sleep in the afternoon, swim in the evenings, go for safari in the morning, then go for village rides with Gagan while video filming my journey. In my room, I read and just drop my mind from any worldly distractions. The many books and tourist tales from the staff keep me in good cheer and the average villager is intrigued by my presence.

Most of the time, we talk about how to promote this place and what we are going to see and shoot tomorrow.

The silence of the resort was broken today with the arrival of new guests from the local area and more will follow. It will keep the staff busy and I might not get the attention from my hosts as much as I used to. But, that's ok, I am happy being with myself, contemplating what it would have been to be in the times of Adiyogi. The healthy collection of books in the Tigergarh resort keep me occupied. Yesterday, I lay all afternoon. At times, I would stare into the bamboo shoots smoking and sitting on the wooden chairs outside my room. The garden lights switch on in the evening helping one to find the way from the room to the dining area. I do some emailing and net surfing before dinner. Most of my writing is done during the day. At night, I just dream, dream to stay one more day in these forests.

The Forest Fire – Poem

It burns orange with a crackling sound
Engulfing leaves, bushes, straw and tree trunk
It bellows hot black smoke in the air
You can see it from afar
This burning inferno eating everything on its path
Deer, sambar, hyenas all alike run for cover with all their might
Yes! Fire, fire, in the forest, the birds begin to howl with fright
It travels far and with great haste, this orange ball
As it burns like a giant flame
It's hot, it's dry, the smoke relentless
Man, the damn thing burns in my eye
The forest fire, the forest fire
It engulfs everything in its sight
It leaves behind coal and soot
Dry black patches of charred wood
As it circles the forest all around
Leaving death, dust, and destruction in its wake
Now you see the forest bake
This forest fire is one mighty inferno
It carries on from end to end
Shaving the forest into a pile of hay
The flames burn up into the sky

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Destroying nests of birds perched on trees
As sounds of chirping birds resonates in the air
Panic, panic, its panic all around
As animals flurry for cover from the flames
This is another one of that nature's game
Fire, fire, it's the forest fire



The villagers run into their farms
Try dousing it with water from buckets and pots
The more they try, the more they fail
The fire roars and burns brighter at their every attempt
This is nature showing man its contempt
It's time to appease the Gods, some say

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That is the only way to keep the forest fire at bay

Chant to Shiva and the holy serpent

All sit down, pray and for their sins repent

Save us oh, Mother, from this frightful fire

Bless us, as our need is dire

Soon a miracle in front of them appeared

The roaring fire doused suddenly and disappeared

Yes, without a word, all was gone

No smoke, no flame

That, alas, was the end of the game

The heavens were appeased and the villagers were free

To dance and rejoice once again

That the Goddess had saved them from great pain

Tiger Symbolism

Today is my tenth day at Tigergarh and after three safaris, including an elephant safari, I still have not been able to spot a tiger. No sir, only pug marks, tiger growls and tiger potty for me so far. However, for the last two days, many other travellers have been coming to the resort – some company people, a family from Bengal and even local tourists. And guess what? They have all been able to see the tiger. Some even saw six of them. The Bengali family saw the tiger cubs and looked thrilled to bits. Everyone managed to see the damn thing except me, someone who has been here for a while and has done three safaris. Was it just my bad luck? A way for the forest to keep me here longer? After all, I was tempted to go for my fourth safari. Maybe, I will be lucky this time.

I have seen all that I can from these villages – the art, the tribes and the farmlands of this place, but the tiger still remains elusive to me. Why so, I ask? The others have seen it in one shot. I have been yearning to see the beast for days and days. Is it a message from the jungle to keep me here, a wee bit longer? Do the forests of Bandhavgarh want me to stay back? If I had seen the tiger earlier, maybe I would have left to see other places. Is it the mother's way of keeping her son a wee bit longer in her bosom? Yes! It is decided, I will go for my fourth safari tomorrow. The sighting of the tiger has now become something very auspicious for me as if a good omen or a visit to a famous shrine or temple. The tiger, after all, is the vahana of Goddess Durga, sheeron wali mata. It is the symbol of fearlessness, wild nature, beauty, grace and agility. It is so amazing. According to the Chinese horoscope and lunar charts, my year of birth 1974 is also the year of the tiger. A symbol of virility and potency according to the orient culture. There is something very ancient and Indian about the tiger. It is, after all, only found in the sub-continent.



Now, I must wait and watch. It was the Festival of Durga. Will mother smile on me? By finally giving me her Darshana, will I see the great tigress of Bandhavgarh with her cubs or will I be left disappointed again to try some other time?

The tiger has been used as a brand symbol for many products in India. Some of the successful brands that have used the tiger as a symbol are,

Tiger Balm: the headache cream that is a market leader

Tiger Biscuits: These biscuits promoted for their tiger energy and goodness

Tiger Chai: This brand was also famous.

Men have used the word Tiger for their names or as pet names to show off their masculinity and agility. You have Tiger Shroff, Tiger Pataudi, Chota Tiger, and Tiger Nawab and so on. Kings have used the symbol to show off their territorial power and flex their muscles. It has been used as symbols for the Asian Games and even the Olympics. That powerful is the imagery of the tiger. Tiger bones were crushed and used to make medicines especially aphrodisiacs to help potency enhancement

Yeh! Hai INDIA

and sexual powers. The tiger is poached for its skin, claws and teeth, which are sold at huge prices. Many aestheticians including the Adiyogi use tiger skin as cloth to wrap themselves or cushion them when they are meditating. Yes, if you have the tiger, you are on top of the food chain. However, for me, sighting the tiger is a pilgrimage.

Elephant Safari – Riding the Beast

So it was settled. Today was going to be my first elephant safari. The folks of Tigerghar had pre-arranged it for me. This was a rare treat as there are only a few elephants and only VIPs get to ride them and take the jungle tour. One gets limited time – half an hour per trip, but I had never been on top of an elephant and so, this was a rare treat. We were up before dawn and headed for the jungles of Bandhavgarh.

Today, I spotted many deer and sambars and got up close to them. We moved swiftly through streams of flowing water and small watering holes in search of a female tigress who had just given birth to a few cubs. She was supposed to be deep in the bush surrounded by bamboo trees. The elephants and their mahout had got a whiff of them. We stopped our jeep and suddenly, loud noises and calls from deer and langurs broke the silence in the air. Yes, sir, there were tigers around and not very far from us. Then, as if from nowhere, loud growls of the tigress herself reverberated in the jungle air. These were followed by shrill growls of the baby cubs. She was feeding them her milk, as they were too small to have meat. She was lying down on her back milking her babies. The forest guards were informed not to go near her or disturb her until the cubs were grown. The only way to get to her was through the elephants and my safari time had come.



The mahouts are elephant keepers and drivers. By pressing their feet on the left and right ears of the elephant, they can manoeuvre the beast and guide it through the jungle where there are no paths. They stomp on the head of the elephant to make him stop. It is like pulling on the brakes. I climbed on my jeep and then into the saddle, which was more like an iron cage. Now, I could see the entire jungle with an aerial view from a vantage point. The elephant moved about lazily from the dusty tracks into the shades of the forest. It would pluck out or break tree branches with its trunk just to make sure no high branches hit me on the head. They took that much care of me. All the time, the mahout whispered instructions into the ear calling out her name. Yes, the elephants were trained to respond to name calls and simple instructions. However, one thing that they made a mess was potty. They would shit at any time. I even tried to bribe my elephant rider that I will give him a gift if he helps me spot the tigress or even her baby cubs.

We walked through streams and thick bushes, but no tiger in sight. We could hear jungle calls and suddenly, the langurs would get into action jumping from tree to tree, but no, the Queen of Bandhavgarh remained a shadow, at least for me. After

Yeh! Hai INDIA

the time was up, my elephant headed back for my jeep. “Not to worry, nahi, come in January. Winter time, you will definitely spot the tiger.” A local jungle guard dressed in khaki police uniform told me. I gleamed from ear to ear and started to take his interview. This was my first forest guard interview and the man had even fought with a tiger using sticks and stone and chased it away from the road.

On the way back, we saw a peacock and another herd of sambars. This place is full of them. The taste of elephant safari gave the entire safari a fulfilling experience but my most prized catch still eluded me – the Tiger of Bandhavgarh, when will I see thee.

The Bush Breakfast – Bandhavgarh

I think the Gods heard my prayer, as I had to cancel my return flight to Delhi. My scheduled meeting for the evening stood as cancelled and now, I could spend more time in the jungle. I immediately cancelled my flight and got Rs 3000 refund from MakeMyTrip. They have a fantastic cancellation policy and you can get 50% of the ticket value even 2 hours before the flight takes off. The procedure is simple. You can cancel through phone or through a web link that comes in your email id. A few clicks and the job is done. The money is credited into your account within 3 to 12 working days. If they delay in paying you the money, Rs 1000 refund for each day delayed will be added to your account. It is a MakeMyTrip policy. I was back to the jungle zone and decided to stay back a bit longer.

Next morning was a special surprise as we drove into the heart of the jungle passing through the villages and the small paths into a dense forest area next to a shallow stream, which was a favourite watering hole in the area. Many tourists had seen the tiger come to quench his thirst in the vicinity of the stream. There we were, having a bush breakfast near the wild stream. “I get a lot of foreigners here. They enjoy eating in the bush and observing the birds and the insects. See, that dung is better when under the sand. Its job is to plough the fields so that the dung and its minerals really dissolve into the heart of the jungle.” Gagan explained in a professor’s tone to me. “That’s the touch-me-not plant. See, touch the leaves and they will close up quickly.” He pointed to a purple flower in the grass. I had begun to understand the value of even the littlest things in nature and how important it is to keep the balance of the forest and the universe going. Yes, this was the forest life, an ecosystem where man is interdependent with nature. More the harmony, more the balance restored and more the forest thrives.



At a distance were pandals being built for the Durga Pooja. Yes, Ma Durga is the Devi for this forest. She also sits on a tiger and that is why, symbolically, she is the dearest to the villagers of Bandhavgarh. Every village had its own temple, which are white washed with its temple art drawn on the walls. Images of snakes are prevalent in these temples as the villagers are also fond of Shiva here, the God of snakes. Yes, Bandhavgarh village is also home to many species of snakes. The cast system is prevalent in the villages of Bandhavgarh and cast segregation is part of the social norm here. Gagan went on to explain to me about the social topology of the region.

Our next stop was the middle school made for the village and tribal kids in the Ranchara village. This is the only school for the neighbouring villages to send their kids. A bus picks the kids to and fro from the middle school. I saw the headmaster and there were three teachers teaching the kids Maths, Hindi and Science. The school was small with a large playground that was fenced but unkempt. Food was served once and the meal was a vegetarian affair but wholesome. There were only three classrooms and one room for the headmaster. Teaching was done on

blackboard and through art paper. As if to inspire the kids, there was a huge painting of Ma Saraswati painted on the entrance wall of the building. I chatted with the teachers and the kids who looked happy and welcomed me. The local school indeed is vital for the health of this area and connects them further to the mainstream.

We drove through lush green paddy fields and I noticed quite a few wooden type bed strung from trees or supported by bamboo. The villagers sleep open in their farms to safeguard against tigers and other predators. The forest is full of shallow circular ponds making sure every being gets water adequately. Stream and shallow water tributaries further take the water deep inside the jungle terrain making sure the jungles remain green and dense. "We should do the elephant safari tomorrow. That way, we will get a better chance to see the tiger. I mean an elephant can manoeuvre deep inside the forest and can actually defend against the tiger better. Let's try the elephant safari." I egged on Gagan to let me ride elephants inside the forest. He said he would try but no promises. Alas! I have another chance in sighting the elusive tigers of Bandhavgarh.

On our way back to the resort Tigergarh, I photographed an old cow herder wearing a short white dusty dhoti grazing his cattle, which were feasting on fresh green forest grass. He even posed for me and gave me a toothy grin. The village life is so simple and laidback. He looked almost meditative to me. As our jeep climbed over a small hillock, I spotted a tribal woman in a colourful saree trudging past on the road. Yes, that was another Kodak moment. One of so many today. Yes, truly, these forests are calling me.

Gond Art and the Elusive Tigers of Bandhavgarh

It has been October and the afternoon would get hot as we would return from our many escapees around the forest area. I would have something or the other to write about and would retreat for my shower. Taking a shower is the best remedy for afternoon heat in Bandhavgarh. The air is dry, so the shower would really soothe me. Then it was off to writing after my lunch with Gagan.

The evenings were mostly spent in the pool enjoying tea and sandwiches as Gagan poured over the history of the place and how he does his sales and marketing. “There is a lot of scope to uplift the lives of local forest dwellers and Adivasis of this region. Although they do not want much, one could really improve their earnings and learning by investing in corporate-backed community building projects.” Gagan explained his vision for the forest and how many NGOs have been involved in rural marketing drivers and buildings of small-scale village enterprise in this region. I, for one, was attracted to this idea and pledged that I will involve my management trainees in doing rural marketing and community-based projects in and around a cluster of villages in Bandhavgarh. That would be a starting point along with young people gaining experience in rural marketing. They could also help in getting buyers to buy Gond art and other local artefacts from the many tribes in the area.



Apart from supporting Gond art, Gagan also sells books of some famous wildlife enthusiasts and tiger watchers. These, he sells to the tourists and jungle buffs. Many like the Gond art and take it back home to resell it. Each Gond artist has his own pattern and texture and replicates it repeatedly throughout his drawing or painting. That is his signature. Although they look similar, every art piece has its own distinct signature. These pieces, which are immaculately stored and packaged, are sold for a few thousand. Something to carry back for the guests. Then there are wooden masks and birds carved out from tree trunks. The tribal feel is all around and gives you glimpses of real native art and craft. It is their identity, their culture, their essence and the tribes and villagers of the region have kept it alive for generations. This is part of their distinct identity. Lose this and they lose their purpose.

The light has gone today for the first time in six days, but the inverter backup works wonderfully. As I said, electricity is not an issue in this place. Yes! Finally, today is my last night at this tiger jungle. It has been a smooth ride and very soothing. Just the thing one needs to escape life and begin a journey of rediscovery. Places like

Yeh! Hai INDIA

this also bring a shift in perception. Tomorrow, I head for my flight back to Jabalpur and then onwards to Delhi. However, I will be taking the forest with me and with that, a hope to return to search the tiger that has still eluded me.

The Lucky Gulab Jamun Shop of Bandhavgarh

Today was my last day at the Tigergarh resort in Bandhavgarh. I decided to take things leisurely after a slow and quiet breakfast of fry eggs, toast and fruits. We decided to go for a drive through the villages near the forest to capture the life of the villagers as they go about their day. It does become hot in the afternoon as temperatures soar above 36 degrees. I took shots of women folks walking on the roadside carrying water in their pitches as the others tried to keep their little ones in check. You had motorcycles, bicycles and rickshaws being used as the local mode of transport. However, it was the houses of the villagers that fascinated me. Most of them were made out of mud, cow dung, sticks, branches and wood. Toasted clay bricks were used to make the roof waterproof. There were small cigarette shops as dogs sniffed around the villagers who were busy having their tea. It was hot, dusty and slow. Everything was in slow motion at a relaxed pace. We were even driving that way as Gagan took me through the small village to get me a real feel of the village life in Bandhavgarh. Some had unique ways of sleeping and had made beds out of tree branches and bamboo sticks that perched high above the ground so that they could sleep and guard their farms at night from tigers and poachers. Women folks fetched sticks and wood to cook a meal and used wells and ponds to fetch water. Most villagers wore lungi and shirts or vests. Some roamed around bare-chested mostly carrying long staffs or sticks with them to scare away animals.

There was a local higher secondary school where the kids went to study. It had its own toilets, which did not function due to lack of water pipes. There was a local temple with a statue of Ma Durga and Shiva being worshipped as the pandit recited the arti. Most houses had a courtyard where the whole family could sit in the evening and watch the forest. Food grains and cow dungs were left to dry here as most farmers grew their own food produce. Most of them kept cattle and goats and had dogs to guard them.

There was a cluster of huts and mud houses deep inside the village. These were the lowest cast of villagers – the untouchables, the people who did the most menial work in the village. These were removed from the rest of the villagers. Now, these

Yeh! Hai INDIA

people even kept pigs and farmed them to be later slaughtered for meat. Most of the villagers on the farm were vegetarians.

Our main attraction today was the Lucky Gulab Jamun Shop. This was a famous tourist spot where hot sweet gulab jamun was served with rich cream all for Rs 20 each. They made a sale of Rs 1500 every day. Not bad for a villager. Even with a profit of Rs 500, it was a good income in this place. The entire family lived behind the shop as the mother slaved over a mud oven cooking warm gulab jamun. There were wooden benches kept in the mud hut. The roof was held aloft with thick bamboo. On top was a thatched roof made out of hay and brown grass. The owner's son played with his mobile phone. The young are well versed in internet and mobile technology. The gulab jamun was a mouthful and after paying for them, we decided to drive up to Tala, the village nearby to get some Classic cigarettes, which I was craving for. Mostly, only chota Gold Flake is smoked in this area.



There are about 40 medium sized 10 to 12 room resorts in this area each competing for a handful of animal and wildlife lovers. The competition is stiff but Gagan has a

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well-mannered and trained staff. The chef and the other helpers have been with him for a long time and can look after the entire resort on their own. With two Gypsy jeeps and a Scorpio, our man has a fine automobile collection. Add to that his pet Dalmatian dog. Gagan is no less than an olden day zamindar himself ruling the Bandhavgarh villages and forest like a tiger.

Taj also has a luxury jungle resort here and most people rely on TripAdvisor or Booking.com to get customers and room bookings. A handful of trusted travel and tour operators in Delhi also keep sending some traffic, but here, the agent commission is around 15% to 20% most of the time. I, for one, had learnt a lot about the forest and how to run a resort.

A Tigress Called Spotty but We Only Saw Elephant Potty

Today was our last morning jungle safari. It was a five-hour drive through the thick Bandhavgarh forest covered with green sal trees and thick bamboo. The jungle was awaiting us. The sunrise sky had a pink and purple hue. One could see glimpses of the orange fireball, the sun, trying to break free from the dark shadows of the mountains. After showing our ID at the forest department office, we queued up to get inside the forest area. Our mission was to spot the tiger. We followed a new route today.

The muddy tracks gave the first whiff of the tigress of Bandhavgarh called Spotty. She had mothered three cubs who could barely walk and survived on her milk. She has been moving about the forest making tracks on the dusty roads. Ahead was a thin water stream flowing through the rocky terrain of the jungle still covered in dense foliage and thick leaves.

Suddenly, we were greeted by four elephants who marched past us one after the other as I took my ultrazoom lens to take pictures. They were carrying people who wanted an elephant safari. It was easier for them to get into the forest as they were tall and big and could cut easily through branches, bushes and dense foliage of the jungle. We had to wait on the dusty road and hope that the lady tigress would cross over the muddy road and walk towards the eastern section of the jungle. All we could do was wait as the motorcade fell silent in anticipation of what was to come. Everyone wanted to spot the tigress first and people climbed on top of their jeeps to try to get a look.



It was pin drop silence but the beast was deep in the forest. Yes, she had made a kill. A young sambar was her food today and she was eating it while lying on the bare grass. We got the signal that the elephant men had spotted her. She was having her meal. “Well, if spotty is there, her cubs must be nearby only. Let’s try and see them.” Gagan asked the driver to drive on and we moved further in search of Spotty’s family.

More forest and more dust. Spotted many animals today – white spotted deer, black langurs, and sambars running for cover. It was the dance of nature as I spotted a few peacocks that were also dancing. It was bright and sunny by now but the jungle felt cool especially when we drove through dense green areas. Nature was at its best. There were small streams, ponds and other watering holes for the thirsty animals to quench their thirst.

We stopped over at the halfway point for our sandwich, tea and fruit. Then we started off again in the hope of finding out Spotty, the female tiger. The elephant men had a treat and managed to get an aerial view of the tigress but we could not

See a damn thing. Then the elephants came back. Man, I wish I had asked for an elephant safari today. I would have even got some good shots of the tigress.

Then there was sudden pandemonium as a tourist shouted, "There she is, near the bushes, there!" As if on cue, the jeeps roared ahead in hot pursuit. The first two jeeps saw her walk past the sal trees towards somewhere near the stream. However, as we got there, she had vanished again. This kept on happening a few times without any sighting of the tigress. Yes, I did see the tall elephant's shit dung on the road. I laughed and told Gagan, "Salla! If not Spotty, at least we saw elephant's potty today." That, I guess was the only consolation today for us as we laughed aloud on our bad luck.

We drove back towards the ruined fort of Bandhavgarh, which is closed for tourists now. I saw old ruined horse stables where the kings and rulers of this place would keep their horses. On a steep height was situated the sheshnag idol. After walking a steep flight of stone steps, there is a huge pond with a waterfall flowing into it. Inside the pond is the stone idol of Vishnu sleeping on the sheshnag. On the extreme left is the Shiv Linga and the Trishul. After saying a prayer, we marched on towards the exit of the park. Gagan also showed me small shelters made of tree trunks, which were used to keep the elephants during their training sessions. Some were tied in chains. These were used as labour to pick up trunks, fetch water or clear up roads. They were taught to respond to name calls, sounds and navigate jeeps and other traffic.

How five hours passed, I did not know, but I do know that we did get a lot of jungle footage and did see many animals, not to mention, elephant potty.

The Villages of Bandhavgarh

Bandhavgarh is a forest area and a wildlife sanctuary situated in Madhya Pradesh. It is almost a three-hour ride from the city of Jabalpur. The area has a village called Tala with a local bank, vegetable market and stores. The infrastructure is good and most places have adequate wifi connectivity. However, it is the surrounding villages and villagers, who live within the forest due to encroachment, that form the heart of Bandhavgarh, the interdependence between man and forest. Most villagers raise cattle, ride bicycles and do small-scale farming. Some even paint and make local handicraft. Many NGOs are active in these villages funded by the MP state tourism board. They train the locals to organise fairs and festivals to promote local art and handicraft. Many of the village folks have been given 2.5 lakh rupees from the government to make their houses pakkaa as they live in kaccha houses even now. There is a local school and the villagers have been given toilet facility. However, they still prefer to do it in the open. Water has to be fetched from the wells and nearby ponds.



Women also participate in making papad, masala and pickle for local companies. People are figuring out more ways to lift the standard of life of a villager in Bandhavgarh, or so it seems. However, ask the average villager – he is content and happy in his slow, less-complicated life. He is in peace with the forest and has learned to live with it and even tame it. You do hear stories of tigers who come and eat the cows of local farmers or a group of villagers fighting the tiger with sticks. Overall, they live in harmony and in peace with each other. Near the mud houses by the side of the farms, one can see little children playing in the dust or just flying kites, as women sit in front of their doors chatting away just washing clothes or cleaning up their mud houses. These form the images and sounds of the villages of Bandhavgarh. It has Shiva temples, Kabir Panthi ashram, tribal art, a vast forest and, of course, its pride – the tiger, the animal who keeps the tourists coming and makes safari a fulfilling experience. The tigers of Bandhavgarh is written on the walls of village homes and on the billboards in front of every forest cottages.

It goes on like this from dawn to noon to dusk, villagers herding their cattle crisscrossing the rugged dusty and muddy forest terrain, happy that Mother Nature watches over them all. Insects, wasps, bees, ants, bugs and scorpions come out and play at night as one can hear the sounds of night owls, crickets and the wailing of the forest. The villagers live with these sounds and have learned to read them as calls in the jungle to know when a tiger or a predator is nearby. These are warning calls to all the mammals and birds in the jungle that the tiger is on the prowl. Villagers tie their cows inside their huts at night to save them from tiger attacks. They also carry large bamboo sticks and staffs to beat predators like jackals and wild boars. It also helps them climb up and down the rugged forestland. Safari gypsies criss-cross the road and one can see the steady flow of trucks bringing food and the much-needed supply to the region. Sidewalls are painted with tribal art and paintings of tigers.

Bandhavgarh indeed has its own majesty and its forests have been their unique habitat coexisting with man from the time of the Vedas.

Kabir Ke Dohes and Tribal Art at MALAYA

Today was dedicated to seeing the ashram of the Kabir Panthis or the followers of the poet, philosopher Kabir, who lived in this area for a long time forming his own ashram, which was later taken over by his followers. Not only Kabir, the famous singer Tansen also lived in this area in the olden days. The ashram of Kabir is an old white cemented building with a veranda and a few rooms where the caretaker of the ashram Gareeb Das had been living for a few years. His job was to spread the word and the doctrine of Kabir to others. He was like the head mahout of the ashram. I took some time to interview him and he was kind enough to recite some famous dohas from Kabir. He, basically, spoke of peace, love and universal brotherhood. Not very different from what I have been preaching. Well, that makes me the Kabir of the social media and blogging world. I took some shots of the murti of Kabir, the idol of the great philosopher and handed the mahout Rs 100 for his troubles. He was hesitant to take the money as he explained he was just doing his job and taking the great man's name forward by reciting his preachings. However, a man cannot just live on peace, love and brotherhood. I asked him to take it and eat prasad with it.

Next stop was to meet Gagan's good friend Neelam Verma, a sweet old lady who loves the forest and sells tribal art of the area in her shop called Malaya, which means the mountain in Sanskrit. She is also a traveller and travels in her car for three months in a year collecting tribal art, which includes Gond paintings and other local artefacts. This, she sells from her shop called Malaya which is situated in Tala on the main road near the post office in Bandhavgarh. She has some amazing paintings, books, hats, stuffs made out of bamboo and other artefacts. I assume the tourists and foreigners that come here are ready to pay a good price for them and that keeps Neelam busy and her business growing. I did a small video tour of her shop and she was kind enough to share some lemon tea and Wifi with me. So, if you are looking for tribal art and local handicraft, Neelam Verma and her shop of tribal art called Malaya, is just the thing you need. She is open all days and her friendly manner and knowledge of local arts will help you buy the right kind of stuff you need to spice up your living room and your house.

Yeh! Hai INDIA



We had been driving around the forest area filming for five hours now and decided to head to the Tigergarh resort for lunch. This time, we decided to have lunch under a tribal hut in the garden and I managed to film us having our lunch as well. I think I am getting the right kind of footage for one hell of a documentary of Bandhavgarh. All we need to sight is the tiger. Let us see if we get lucky tomorrow as we head for the second morning safari.

I, Gagan and the Snake of Bandhavgarh

We sat down for our drinks that consisted of single malt liquor and peanuts followed by dinner that was chicken and baingan bharta. Gagan did mix the menu with continental stuff that included baked vegetables and toasted sandwiches along with fresh tomato pasta. He mixed the menu up well and always kept the food light and non-spicy making sure that the cooking was perfect home style. At night, we would use torchlights and lanterns to light up the place. I admired the wall Gagan had crafted just by using old beer bottles. The wall came out green and brown in colour and reflected sunlight in the afternoon to give the wall its sheen and glitter. The insects, bees, birds and reptiles of the forest come out at night and it can be tricky walking around the lodge area barefooted. You never know which insect could bite you. There were huge bugs, beetles and moths. Trees had huge spider webs and nests where birds rested at night. It all felt like you were in the jungle and not away from it. Near the Tigergarh resort is a huge water pond with trees in the centre coming out of mud islands inside the pond area. Looks like a fantastic place to shoot a video.



However, the excitement for the night was yet to come as Gagan delivered his monologue on nature, forest and the balance that needs to be maintained. “You see yaar! We, as a species, have only screwed around with the balance of nature, forests and glaciers. We caused the greenhouse effect with our machines and now we talk about saving trees and villages. Man, due to his evolved mind and intelligence, has managed to play havoc with the earth. Otherwise, everything in nature is as it should be. It is our greed and desire to hoard the natural resources, provided to us by the mother, screwing up things. Without man, life would run perfectly and the world will not miss us human beings.” He paused to have a drink. I, for one, was getting into the groove and enjoying forest life. There was a special trinity in this place. I am sure Ram’s Kutiya during vanvas also had the same buzz. After all, many wise men, creative artists, musicians and philosophers have spent large parts of their lives in the forests or the mountains to understand the secrets of the universe. Why should I be left out? You can contemplate a lot in and find your balance in places like these.

Suddenly there was pandemonium from the kitchen staff of the resort as people ran into the garden. Yes, someone had stepped on a snake. A black slippery snake about three feet long all coiled up on the grass. They were trying to catch it with sticks but it kept coiling up. I ran to get my camera and take a few pictures as Gagan tried to reason with the snake. Lucky for us, we had the torchlight and I got a better view of the reptiles. It had white circular scales on its black shiny body. I could barely see its face, which was jet black too. This was a rare treat of the jungle – snake in the resort. Real jungle mein mangal for us all.

Yes, snake of Bandhavgarh had appeared to say hi to us all. It looks like this forest has many more surprises in store for me.

Ek Tha Tiger, Naam Charger

I plonked out of my bed at 5:00 am in the morning and tea was served to me by 5:30 am. We were in our safari open jeeps used by most resorts in the Bandhavgarh wildlife sanctuary and, mind you, there are 40 odd lodges and resorts in this area. I wasted no time in loading my mega zoom 200×400 lens in my camera. After all, I had to catch all the animals and birds up close and that is exactly what happened.

The sun came up as we entered the forest reserve area. We took the dusty road into the dense forest full off bamboo trees and green shrubs. At the onset, I was lucky to catch a glimpse of the white spotted deer, the sambar, the jackal and the 12 horned deer called the Barasingha. We followed the pugmarks of a tiger on the dusty tracks and trailed the beast.

However, we could not get a glimpse of the animal, as it would disappear deep into the woods. We tried many times. We even tried to hear the morning calls of the animals, especially the monkeys and the deer to give us a clue if the tiger was nearby strolling in the vicinity. The forest was very quiet today and it was chilly with a nip in the air. I had forgotten to carry my jacket, which is a must for morning safari.



“You know, Charger was the most famous tiger of Bandhavgarh. He was ferocious and ruled the jungle for a decade. He was big, strong and ferocious. He was the pride of the jungle as everyone wanted to see ‘Charger the tiger’ when they came to the forest for safari. He would walk fearlessly on the road and dirt tracks. At times, he would stand in front of the tourist jeeps from where he would charge and attack the jeeps. That is why he was called Charger. It was his way of showing off his dominance as if to say that the road and the forest belonged to him. He lived till the age of twelve and then died.” Gagan explained to me in great detail on the history of Charger the famous tiger of the forest. “So where did he die?” I asked. “Oh, just behind there.” Gagan pointed toward a grassy patch. As if on cue, our jeep driver drove us to the very point where Charger died. There was a huge signboard in his memory. “Looks like he did wonders for the tourism in this area.” I saluted the beast and his legacy.

Yeh! Hai INDIA

It was getting hot now and we decided to stop for breakfast. In the forest, there is a resting point where you can sit on your jeep and have breakfast. The local villagers serve tea and snacks. Families can be seen having a picnic. It is a kind of halfway safari point. The morning safari is from 5:30 am to 11:00 am. So, we decided to dedicate our last hour looking for the tiger. This time, we tried the ponds and the watering holes of the forest and tried to follow pugmarks. However, the beast remained elusive and shy and did not show up in spite of our efforts.

It was back to the resort by 11:00 am. I was happy to get some great snaps of birds and some other animals including the langurs. Nevertheless, it was the story of Charger, the pride of Bandhavgarh that stayed with me. Indeed, Ek Tha Tiger, grrrrhh grrhh grrhhh...

Tiger Tiger Burning Bright: At The Bandhavgarh Tiger Resort

So it was settled. An old friend from my Welham Boys' days called up and invited me to his luxurious tiger resort called Tigergarh in Madhya Pradesh, which is a mere three-hour drive from the city of Jabalpur. This sleepy MP town, famous for OSHO, is the birthplace of Bhagwan Rajneesh. For me, it was like going for a pilgrimage. I was excited to see the enlightenment banyan tree where OSHO gained enlightenment similar to the one in Bodh Gaya where Buddha became the awakened one. I wanted to capture this tree and shoot it, but alas, the garden where the tree stood was closed in the afternoon and would only open in the evening. My Spice Jet flight costing Rs 6000 arrived at Jabalpur in the afternoon from Delhi and I had to miss the tree. I was happy to be in the city of the master.



Within three hours, I reached the forest area of MP and was invited by Gagan to take a walk around the Tigergarh lodge. It is a very well done setup with eleven fully AC and fully equipped luxury rooms for elite guests. The place has a small pool and you get the glimpse of the forest area from the jungle lodge. Every day, there are

Yeh! Hai INDIA

morning and evening safaris that run deep into the jungle in search of the sacred tigers. My sole purpose here is to catch a glimpse of the tiger and photograph the animal. Let us see if I succeed.

At Rs 4000 a night all-inclusive with the meals, it is a reasonable affair and does not hurt the wallet of a budget traveller. One pays a bit extra for the safaris – 5k or so for each trip. However, if you get to see the tiger, the trip is worth it and real value for money. The neighbouring land has water reservoirs where the villagers get their water. One can see cow herders and local farmers walking up and down the various jungle walkways. The villagers use bicycles to move about as most ladies on the village stay indoors to do the household chores and look after the kids. The government has installed toilets in the local village schools but no one uses them. The kids still go outdoors for the loo. This is due to the lack of water and pipes connecting the toilets. The villagers complain that toilets stink at night. While going to the loo outside, the smell just evaporates into the air. I think we need Akshay Kumar to visit this place and teach the villagers about hygiene, as his message of public toilets is yet to catch up in the villages of Bandhavgarh.

We walked out to the village in the evening. I, for one, was fascinated with the huge orange sunset that stared at me from the sky. The villagers were walking their cattle back home after feeding them. Yes, the jungle feel was sinking in. I am happy that I have not booked a return ticket yet. I might just stay here a wee bit longer.

The dinner today was a homemade meal of chicken, chapati, dal, Gobi vegetable and shahi tukda for dessert. Gagan was quick to teach me how to hear the jungle sounds. I have begun to differentiate between the night sounds of owls, deer, birds and insects. The jungle has its own sounds and noises in the night and I was getting to know them.

But it is the roar and walk of the majestic tiger of Bandhavgarh that I really want to see.

Tiger Zinda Hai!

It was a lazy morning for me as I was woken up by a hard tap on my wooden door. Gagan was already waiting for me to get up. It was 8:30 am and I was yet to get dressed. My camera kit was ready, as I had polished all the lenses in the night. "Let's shoot a mini-documentary." I looked at Gagan. "Yes, we can take shots of the resort with the pool and then the entrance. I have booked a jeep that will take us to the nearby villages and forest areas. I have to take you to the Mani Bagh temple. It is a Shiva temple and has the same carvings as the temples in Khajuraho." Well, guess that was the bait.



I was up and ready after a quick shower. We had a leisurely breakfast of poached eggs, juice, and coffee, toast and aloo bonda to get the gastric juices flowing. Then we started our drive towards the villages through the forest area towards the temple. Gagan was shooting all the way from the back seat of the jeep, as we needed more footage. I would fall asleep at times, as it would get hot during the afternoon. I did explore the walls of the Mani Bagh temple and captured some

photographs of carvings depicting lovemaking. Yes, this was Kamasutra on the walls. I gave my regular monologue here and spoke about the temple and the carvings it depicted.

The nearby villages have a local market with shops selling most household and FMCG items. You will find shaving creams, soaps, cigarettes and coke. There is a branch of ICICI bank and only one ATM near the branch, which is out of money most of the time. So make sure you bring enough cash if you are coming to Bandhavgarh. The network is a bit slow in the resort but after a five-minute drive, you can get the Airtel network and can use the internet.

We meandered through the market area and hit a smooth jungle road. We were in luck as I saw a group of black-faced langurs jumping up and down on trees. Right behind them was a family of sambar deer.

We were back by 4 pm and had our lunch – paneer, rajma, bhindi, curd and rotis that were perfect for me, as it will keep my tummy in check. To escape the heat, I took a dip in the pint-sized pool at the resort as Gagan told me details about the forest and his work for NGO. “There are 20 mammals and 350 bird species in the Bandhavgarh forest, and guys like Tansen and Kabir have stayed here.”

The night was upon us and the sun was about to set. I, for one, walked back to my room happily, as we had a great day of exploration. I was also excited about the next morning safari.

The Palkiwalas of Ajanta Caves, Aurangabad

I had to get up early today. After all, it was my last day in the city of Aurangabad and all that was left for me to explore was the Ajanta Caves. The Ajanta caves were a 2-hour drive from the Bagga International Hotel where I was put up. I slept most of the way and as usual, we were greeted by tour guides and touts at the entrance of this famous world heritage site. I picked up a guide for Rs 500 and was soon escorted to a bus inside the compound. The bus drove us right up to the caves and then it was a trek up on the rocks which were a bit steep. For at least 15 minutes, one has to walk. I was ready for the climb, I had my water bottle and my guide.

As I started my climb, I was interrupted by a couple of Palkiwalas who urged me to use their services as they needed the money. It was not a very good tourist season so far. Just looking at the poor souls in ragged shorts, trousers and chappals made my heart bleed. “We walk every day from the top of the other hill to make some money, so we can feed our family, sir. We will take you to the caves and then back again.” One of the Palkiwalas urged me again. I was in no mood to use their services as I thought I was fit enough to climb, but to keep them happy, I relented.

Yes, like a grand maharaja, I sat on the Palki with four Palkiwalas lifting me above the ground. In no time, I was on top and now could enter the cave. It is a mammoth structure carved out from black ancient rocks. Caves, doors, tunnels, wall paintings, stupas, carvings – this place had all the wonders one can do with a rock. I loved walking into a cave one after the other feeling the coolness and a special vibration, a loving reverberation from the rocks around me. I captured the wall paintings that go back centuries. A lot of their shine and colour was still intact and gave me a gripe into their Buddhist roots. There was a cave with a giant stupa which I managed to touch. Special echoes came from the walls of the cave as I made funny noises while shooting its many ancient pillars.



On the other side of the caves are green mountain tops and in-between is a deep valley with water flowing through its many rocks and boulders. My palkiwalas took me from one cave to another. My helpful guide tried to tell me tales of the Ajanta caves but I shut him down most of the time.

I just wanted to explore things on my own and stayed away from his historic chatter. Some of the pillar carvings and sculptures are still very intricate and show off the workmanship of that time. The paintings on the wall are still well-etched with their colours reminding one of a silent, peaceful and melodious age.

This is where Hinduism, Buddhism and the Jainism faith all merged into one. A Triveni of the three great eastern religions or religious ideologies. The landscape is vast and green with hills and mountains staring into the blue sky. Yes, Ajanta was a blissful experience for me. The journey was made even more comfortable by my palkiwalas and, not to mention, my guide. After spending the entire afternoon exploring this great hermitage wonder, I decided to drive back to the Bagga International Hotel.

Yeh! Hai INDIA

It has been a modest stay, Rs 2000 for the night. The taxi to and from Ajanta cost around Rs 3000. The palkiwalas will take Rs 2000 and the entry ticket is the cheapest at Rs 30 only. For me, I will always remember the Palkiwalas of Ajanta Caves.

The Magnificent Caves of Ellora and the Grishneshwar Jyotirlinga

So here I was finally at Aurangabad, the city of the Girishneshwar Temple which is the twelfth Jyotirlinga and houses a magnificent Shiva Linga. Worshipped by many, it is a very auspicious place especially Shiva bhakts like me. There is also the Nandi statue in the temple. As part of the ritual, you can only enter the central shrine when you have taken off your shirt. Men have to walk into the shrine and can only touch it bare-chested. I did the same after leaving my shoes at the entrance. I walked without my t-shirt to the centre where the black Shiva Linga was placed. I chanted a few prayers for my dad's soul and mother's soul. May they rest in peace. Then I touched the Shiva Linga to absorb the energies. I also kept my head under the falling water and took a sip of it. Now thoroughly cleansed and vitalised, I decided to take the taxi to my next destination – the magnificent Ellora caves, a world heritage site. It was a half an hour drive from the temple.



I met my guide Madhusudhan Patel at the entrance of the Ellora Caves just before the gardens. He reminded me that I could take my camera in and not the stand

after paying the entrance fee of Rs 100. I decided to trek up to the grand caves with Patel in tow with my other camera lenses. "The most unique thing about these caves is that it is carved out of one big single structure. One big rock with no external elements. That is why it has such positive energies and is so cool inside." Patel explained to me why the caves are so important. "You see, the entire Ramayana is chiselled on the walls. That's the Vali and Sugriva fight and that is Ravana's chariot." As my guide spoke, I zoomed into these carvings, at times, even admiring the many towers and sanctums carved into one huge rock. I especially liked the carvings of Shiva doing the tandav and then there were these huge elephants right in the middle. On either side were gigantic black rocks engraved with amazing carvings each telling a tale which has been repeated over time for centuries, almost for all eternity. The caves are cooler inside and have lots of breezes and positive energies. Inside the cave was a giant Shiva Linga, again my favourite. As you climb up to the top, one is greeted by black-faced langurs with white fur and huge curly white tails. They almost reminded me of the lemurs of Madagascar and they were equally fascinating chewing bananas given to them by the tourists. There was less light in the caves on top and the giant light of the lamps gave a new texture to my photographs. I was able to capture the wall paintings made on the ceilings of the rock. The caves were hypnotic as if a new Vedic city with Dravidian and Hindu culture seeped in its walls and structures. This monument spoke about India. Yes, the real India with roots and with grace. I wandered around for a few hours smoking in the walls that were telling me so many tales. At the side chanted my guide who at times got out in the wonders of caves himself.

The cool evening was upon us and we trekked back to my car. I, for one, had enjoyed the enriching spiritual experience of the temple and then the architectural beauty of the Ellora caves. I paid Mr. Patel Rs 1600 and drove past the monuments basking in its wonder and great heritage that ranked even higher than the Petra Caves of Jordan which were recently destroyed by the ISIS and other Islamic fundamentalist groups. But that has been the strategy of Islam and the Mogul to destroy heritage buildings and monuments. The Ellora caves were also attacked but yet survived to tell a tale of an ancient but wondrous world.

Yeh! Hai INDIA

'Mumbai Local' by Kavita Kumble

'Ae Dil Hai Mushkil Jeena Yahan, Zara Hatke Zara Bachke Yeh Hai Bombay Meri Jaan'

That is a couplet from the film C.I.D. produced by Guru Dutt and was sung by the legendary Mohammed Rafi and Geeta Dutt way back in 1956. I wonder how the writer, who penned down this, would react to the Bombay we see today after almost six decades.



Bombay, as we see it today, to the many millions who reside here for ages, or who have migrated over here to make a living, this city is no less chaotic than they have ever seen before. Its home to almost 25 million people and these trains carry around 8 million people to work daily. It's known as the Financial Capital of India and so rightly it is. Time is Money here and every minute is as precious. There are many faces to this city, Marine Drive Façade, the South Bombay Heritage Buildings,

Yeh! Hai INDIA

Juhu Beach to Bhel Puri, Colaba Causeway to street shopping there, Bollywood's abode, slums of Dharavi and so many more.

However, the lifeline of this city remains in its local trains.

This city swears by it and breathes to it and is its biggest identity. For those residing next to these railway tracks, listening to the clatter daily has become their way of life. It feels like Mumbai's heartbeat. No trip to this city is complete if you have not travelled in one of those. To those millions who travel in these daily for work, it's never the less as daunting and is a huge challenge mentally as well as physically.

The first railways here was built in 1853 by the British which connected Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus with Thane over 34 km, and today it runs over 3000 services every day, making it one of the largest suburban rail networks in the world.

So you will find yourself navigating between human masses to try and get into an 8:34 am Fast Local to another 8:38 am one. And missing your regular train to work would turn catastrophic. I recollect taking the 8:48 local en route to work from Andheri to Churchgate, to walk to Citibank, Fort Branch where I worked some years back. Initially, the crowd may feel intimidating but once you are a regular, each one knows the other. I took those trains daily in and out for almost 6 years. Andheri Station at peak hours is swelled, sometimes not an inch to spare if those trains are late or if it's a rainy day. All you must do is stand on that platform and you will automatically get pushed into one of those compartments where all are packed like sardines in a tin box.

I knew exactly where the woman sitting by the window would get off, so I would quietly board trying to find my way in to park next to her to grab the seat. And if you are absent for a few days, they would politely inquire about your well being too once they see you back after the gap. You will end up making train friends and they occasionally, in all that crowd, celebrate 'Pot Luck' and various other festivities. So if it's 'Dusshera' they would all discuss which colour code to be followed for the saree next day and accordingly follow that.

You will find celebrations in there in whatever small way it is, like a childbirth, a wedding, kids scoring good marks, and other festivities. There are stories you will

Yeh! Hai INDIA

hear every day, some happy, some sad. If you are one of those unfortunate ones, you will see some gory fights too, which may be over the fourth seat that someone wants to sit in or that elbow push someone got.

There are many who travel almost 4 hours daily on those trains.

You should not be surprised if you see a woman cutting vegetables in those while travelling back home, and there are devotional songs sung by groups. That's the way life is built in around them. Today, there are also air-conditioned trains, but for me in those days, I got a huge high and an adrenaline rush just by standing on the gate of those trains by the footboard feeling all the wind in my hair. The stations got developed over the past years. Now we also have escalators instead of stairs on those platforms, and the ticket counters are replaced with vending machines. There are many foot over bridges that enable the commuter to walk directly into the station instead of trying to squeeze in through those small gateways outside the stations.

I miss travelling on local trains today as my workplace is closer to home and I take the road now, but I always grab that opportunity on weekends. I don't miss a chance if I am travelling to town to get into one. It's as exhilarating as ever to sit in them today too and I automatically have one of those broad smiles on my face as old memories flow in. All those seasons, all those rush hours, running behind one which almost left, squeezing in that tiny space where you are hardly able to breath.

The trains of Bombay demonstrate what this city stands for – courage, determination and grit to get moving in life and get ahead in life.

Mumbai City's RoboCop – A Tribute to Himanshu Roy

It was heartbreaking for me to hear about the sad and tragic suicide of the real Robocop of Mumbai, Himanshu Roy. A man no less than Bhisma Pitama of Mumbai police, this man was instrumental in catching Chhota Rajan, the most feared underworld don. Not only did Himanshu catch Chhota Rajan, he also got Rajan convicted for life. He was the one who first busted the IPL betting scam and rounded up a lot of people including Vindu Dara Singh. A man of a broad and commanding presence and a splendid moustache, he was feared by criminals and crime itself.



Himanshu was an IPS officer of the 1988 batch and was in love with his job and duty. He had an astute sense of crime and understanding of criminal psychology. I met him for the first time after my father had been murdered when I was back to Mumbai from Chiplun. We were taken to the head office of Mumbai police at the town centre. I had a cop holding me by the hand all the while. We were driven there in a white police jeep. I remember asking the cop holding me, “Am I a suspect?”

I was zapped and totally dishevelled. I was not sure what had happened. I was also not sure if my dad was really murdered. In such a confused state, I was taken to his

office. He sat me down on a chair and then interrogated me for half an hour. “We are your friends, don’t worry.” Then he went on to ask his routine questions while taking notes in his diary. He asked about my background and where I was all this while. He was authoritative like a principle of a college and instantly he commanded my respects.

He looked like a man who knew his beat. While the other senior officers who interviewed me looked puzzled and suspicious, it was Mr. Roy who first came out and gave me a clean chit. This was during the media conference held after I had been interrogated. He explained the entire background of the story after giving me a clean chit. He added his intuitive power and knowledge of the crime. “I am extrapolating, I fear the criminals would have done away and killed Anuj too.” This was a killer insight which only a man of great wisdom and knowledge of his job can give.

A month later, my suicide note was discovered from the locker of the killers. His intuition was bang on! Truly a Robocop if any! It is truly sad to hear that he had shot himself in the mouth and busted his brains out at the age of only 53 years leaving a wife behind. My heart goes out in prayer for this man and his beloved family. I pray for the soul of this beautiful man. A life celebrated for its achievements, he did get his share of media acclaim and was a celebrity cop in his own right.

Why did it have to end in his surrender? Two years of battling cancer took a toll on his health. When the pain became unbearable, he did the unthinkable and shot himself. I can understand his feeling and his anguish. I have been in this hell a few times and it’s not a very pleasant feeling. In the end, he was too good for us and our society. We take men like Mr. Roy for granted. These people are a treasure and should be honoured forever. I say give this man a Bharat Ratna for the work he has done and the way he cleaned up crime in Mumbai, a real son of the soil.

Chittorgarh Palace and the Legend of Padmavati

Chittorgarh is a two-hour drive from Udaipur and is famous for the Jauhar that was committed here by Padmavati when it was attacked by Alauddin Khalji. Yes, we have all heard about it at the beginning of the year. The famous movie Padmaavat came under controversy for not showing the valour of the famous queen in the right light. I went to see the dusty part of rural Rajasthan. I stayed in a local hotel costing me only Rs 3000 but I had only one night there as I had already booked a cab to take me to the famous fort palace in the morning. I was eager to see the palace where the famous queen once loved and then died in a ball of fire. The drive up to the fort is long, dusty and full of traffic jams. It was all narrow town streets littered with auto rickshaws, bicycles and motorcycles. We decided to see the palace on a Sunday and so, it was even more crowded as families and students trekked up to the Chittorgarh palace to enjoy a stroll or a picnic.



The green gardens inside the fort area was where the Jauhar fire was ignited. Now, it was lush green in colour as kids played on its lawns. The inside of the fort area

was a mix of old ruins and broken walls and horrors made out of red and cream sandstones. I took a local guide to add to the excitement. He was my anchor and cameraman both and did a lot of the live commentary that I captured there on my lens. Kids from the local school had gathered in the fort trying to unravel its history and legend. The sati prat also has its origins from here as widowed brides used to be burnt on a pyre with their husbands. The truth was that most of them were drugged or drunk when they were brainwashed into burning themselves on the pyre with their husbands' bodies. Rajput women were not allowed to remarry then and the sati prat was very famous here till it was banned by Raja Ram Mohan Roy.

I photographed the many passages and underground stairways where the queens would go into the pond to bathe. There was a pond in the fort area for the commoners and other subjects to bathe and cool off in the hot summer afternoons. Stalls serving street food and drinks littered the streets that lead to the palace. All in all, the fort is semi-intact. Its walls are pale and damaged due to several attacks and erosion. But the splendour and grandeur still exists here but only in the shadows. You can see the entire city of Chittoor from several vantage points from the edges of the fort.

Then it was off to the victory fort to see some real langurs or black monkeys with huge tails. Yes, you can spot many of these monkeys in the fort area. They also can be seen near the famous Vishnu Temple that I visited. Near the temple is a huge pond full of green water. People have stopped bathing in its waters some time back. My guide giving his running commentary was the highlight of my video. At times, I thought his ramblings made no sense. I think he even got his dates and names jumbled up but what the hell, this was his only way to make a living. I was stopped from using my camera stand by the local guards as they said professional photography was forbidden inside the fort. I, like a shameless tourist, went on filming until they had to throw us out.

Delights of Udaipur

Apart from the traditional Rajasthani decor, there was a local shop where one could buy all the traditional stuff from kurtas to pagdis. One can buy local statues and hand paintings. My favourites used to be the lunch and dinner in my room that were served right in front of my broad window that stared away at the lake. I loved the biriyani that I had on the first day followed by butter chicken with naan and lime juice. But my favourite was the desserts and I tried almost all of them. The pista and rose kulfi just melted on my mouth. I used to order ras malai at times and kept it in the fridge till it was chilled up. But the most enjoyable was rabri in the traditional style. The fridge was always stocked with chocolate and other fizzy drinks. The afternoons would get sunny and hot. I used to sleep for three/four hours in the afternoon only to wake up just before the sunset. 6 pm was the boating time as a few of us would whisk off in the wooden motor boats all tucked up in our safety survivor suits. The hotel looked like a floating island and sounds of temple bells and flute rang in the air. The dance of the courtesans would start just before the sunset and her pink ghagra would swirl in the air. It was like watching the Sufi siblings at the OSHO outlet.

Yes, I had a short banter with a couple from Palestine as they joked about the local flavours. The lady was dressed in a black kurta with a huge silver serpent-like bindi on her forehead. She was having a great time. The courtyards in front of the lake were huge and had marble benches with cushions on them so one could actually sit down to enjoy the local dance.

The dinner was full maharaja style with music playing live inside the dining room. One could taste the best Rajasthani cuisine from Bara roti to laal maans. I used to make sure that I had a light breakfast always choosing South Indian stuff like idli, upma and paper dosa. Sometimes, I would indulge myself in aalu puri with rich curd. I would often grab a chikoo or an orange in the evening after having my chaat.



The City Palace, built by Maharaja Udai Singh II, and the Durbar Hall are the other things to see in the city along with the City Museum. You could also lose yourself watching handcrafts and local paintings being made by the local artisans. Or you can just wander into the parks and have a roasted bhutta.

The hotel had full Wi-Fi connectivity and very well-trained and polite staff with humble manners and a helpful attitude. A staff member would carry the royal umbrella to give me shade whenever I would walk out towards the boat waiting to take me back to the other side. Oh! Udaipur is definitely a city close to my heart. It was like living in a painting or in a pristine novel for a while. It was like I was a character in the famous Gita Mehta novel called the Raj which I read during my university days in Manchester.

I was transported in time to an ancient age full of vintage cars, palaces, food and ghagra dances. Udaipur transported me into another land, into a picture-perfect painting and it felt as if I was part of the painting.

The Vintage Cars of Udaipur

On my first day, I decided to have a full body 2-hour massage at the Jiva spa and health centre built exclusively for the Taj guests. It was an exhilarating and relaxing affair that was carried out in full Taj luxury style. I meandered right to the top and stared down from the balcony at the shimmering lake. There were boats gliding on the water. Pigeons and eagles were flying with abandon in the sky. It was like watching Venus in full flight. The local musicians played their instruments and the sound was filtered through the courtyards of the palace. It was an evening to behold. Wine and liquor were in full flow as the guests mingled, played chess or just enjoyed the view. Udaipur did have its distinctive maharaja's touch. The fountains were lit up in the night shooting jets of water in the pond adorned by thick trees and plants in the courtyard. You could hear sounds of chants and mantras coming from afar. Yes, it was a small white marble temple which housed the Lord Ganesha as the local pujari did his evening prayers. I was told that the palace had an in-house Astrologer so that the guests could get a glimpse into their future.



Next day, I woke up to a running documentary on the maharajas and their ways of life, queens, jewels, opulence and cars. It also explained their fascination with elephant polo and their relationships with the British elite. The documentary went on constantly in my room as I spent many hours staring outside my room window at the calm lake in front of me. Then, I ventured out into the city to see the famous vintage car exhibition. This was a car collection of almost twenty cars and a few horse carriages all dating back to the 1940s and even 1920s. The Rolls-Royce and Mercedes were the most visible and beautiful vintage cars in the garage. I did my video shooting with some help from the car driver. The entry fee was Rs 350.

I went for a stroll in the local garden. Udaipur is indeed the city of lakes and I stopped over a lake to take the view. This time, I used my camera stand and the microphone together. The city is full of glory for Maharana Pratap, the legendary king who took on the Mughals with his horse Chetak. It is the Maharana's city with statues and paintings depicting this God-like figure brandishing his swords while sitting on a galloping horse. The main maharaja's place, which is the largest one in the city, is on the other bank of Lake Pichola. It is made of stone and is huge in structure. There were windows and roshandan to let the sunlight into the majestic castle. Yes, I was getting the scant of Udaipur, a royal city seeped in the floor of kings, maharajas and princesses.

The Marvels of Lake View Palace, Udaipur

I had decided to pack my bags for the marvellous city of Udaipur and check out the great Rajputana city situated in Rajasthan. The city, hailed as one of the capitols of the region, was a fortress for the great king Maharana Pratap. Many battles were fought for this exquisite city of lakes. This is where the Rajputs fought with the Mughal invaders for supremacy. The Lake View Palace is in the middle of the great Pichola Lake in the midst of the Aravalli Hills. A marble white property run by the Taj group, this is the jewel of Udaipur. A one night stay costs Rs 30,000 per room per night. The hospitality, the décor, the exquisite paintings and the wall carvings that adorn the Lake View Palace bring to us the great heritage of Rajasthan, the land of kings and the maharajas. A flight from Delhi with a hop stop at Jaipur takes one to Udaipur. I suggest choosing Jet Airways or SpiceJet. The ticket cost me Rs 4500 all-inclusive. The flight can be a bit choppy though, but as you land in Udaipur, all your aches and pains will disappear. The city is much cooler than the rest of Rajasthan and very tranquil. Its tranquillity hits you immediately. The Lake Pichola shimmers in the sunlight as I was guided into a motorboat that took me to the white marble wonder situated in the middle of the lake.



The room rent is steep but this palace, now turned into a luxury hotel, is worth the rate it charges. The courtyards, the alleys and the balcony facing the lake add to its mystic flavour. The sunset can especially be very picturesque. I captured it to the fullest. The evenings were spent watching the traditional Ghagra dance performed in the courtyard of the palace hotel. The shimmering lake in front formed a perfect foil for the exquisite orange skyline that shone as the sunset at the Aravalli Hills.

I played chess with a few local friends of mine and also managed to capture a Palestinian beauty through my lens. The mornings were the most beautiful as I woke up to see the vast expanse of the lake. But it was the chirping of the birds at the courtyard that excited me the most as I wandered towards the fountain which threw jets of water into the man-made pond. Yes, this was the very spot where the famous Bond film Octopussy was shot with Kabir Bedi playing a Sardar and Roger Moore as James Bond 007. The movie made Lake Palace famous and it has been a favourite spot for many foreign tourists who thronged to Rajasthan. Some even dress up in the traditional Kurta and headgear to soak in the local flavour.

Yeh! Hai INDIA

There is an ample flow of liquor and fine dining all in the trusted Taj style. I enjoyed Laal Maans, the traditional mutton delicacy of Rajasthan with lots of lime juice and lassi. But the lake is what kept me hooked. Evenings were the best when I took a boat ride around the lake and soaked in the fresh and tranquil air of Udaipur.

In The Name Of the Father

I woke up early today and wandered into the garden taking photographs.

I was fascinated by a bunch of colourful peacocks wandering around the area.



These exotic birds would fly up to a machaan and sit on top of it as they walked their necks juttet in and out dancing in the morning sun. Nearby, some ducks were hovering near the gaushala.

A huge pond filled with lotus flowers lay in front of me as the morning birds sang their customary song.

I went to the Isha Foundation welcome centre and made a donation of Rs. 40,000.

As I was doing so, I told them about the brutal murder of my father and the death of my mother through cancer.

I was pleased that they suggested that they will do a puja at the Linga Bhairavi.

Yeh! Hai INDIA

They will perform the ritual and Shanti path for the dead and also appease the Gods to get their blessings. I went ahead to the Linga Bhairavi to give them the details of my father.

I was asked to send my father's photo through e-mail which I will duly do so that they can perform the prayers for seven years in a row.

This is one of the several places around the world where I have prayed for the soul of my father and asked for his forgiveness.

I hope this is one more step away from my redemption and if there is a God somewhere, He will answer my prayers and will give peace to my father's soul.

Isha Kriya and the Magic of Dyanalinga

As I wandered around the spacious campus of Isha Foundation, the first thing I was asked was to take a dip in the Kund (energised water pond) on the extreme right of the entrance. It is a place where the water is energised by mercury that will help to give relief to the bathers. I went in, draped a lungi around me and then took a dip in this energised water. With a statue of the Naga right in the middle of the pool, I did feel a difference and just melted into the experience.

I, then, swam to the left and stood under a cascade to further cleanse my body, mind and spirit. A few meters away is the very stone statue of Nandi, the bull, painted in black. Behind Nandi was the Dyanalinga. This is the main area reserved for people to do dyaan and meditate around a huge Shivalinga. You have the statue of Bhairavi at the other end where worshippers can offer prasad and light a diya.

Dyanalinga is a perfect place to sit silently and meditate as well as a brilliant place to go inwards. Mediate means to sit silently by just watching your thoughts and not interfering with it. No holding them back but just watching them like a silent witness. You can also do japa or chants but you just need to watch your breathe or be in shunyata, total sense of nothingness.

The whole idea is to reach this nothingness, this state of no mind and no thought, just the silent witness. When the body and the mind both collapse, only the witness remains. This moment is the real you and this is where you feel one with the whole existence. This is also called inner engineering. I tried this for a while but got a bit restless and walked away to offer prayers at the statue of Ma Bhairavi.

I, then, strolled into the dining area for my dinner which was a meal of appam and tomato rice served in the style of the Bandar like they have in the golden temple.



We all sat cross-legged as food was served on our plates. After a prayer where we all had to hum and recite 'Om', we started our meal. Each one had to clean their own plates and very silently, walk out.

The facilities here are excellent. The rooms are small but very well lit with an AC and bathroom. There is a cafeteria, bookshops, shops selling artefacts, soaps and clothes, and a grocery shop so that you are well-fed throughout the day. Food is vegetarian and one is advised not to smoke and consume alcohol during the stay. For a donation amount of Rs. 2550 for six nights, I think it is a steal and a great bargain.

Lots of foreigners patronise this place unlike in Baba Ramdev's ashrams. Sadhguru is popular amongst the westerners. After all, his book "Inner Engineering – A Yogi's Guide to Joy" is a New York Times bestseller.

Adi Yogi and Maha Shivaratri at the Isha Foundation

So here I was all set to take a Jet Airways flight to Coimbatore to see and partake in the festivities of Shivaratri. The statue of Adi Yogi Shiva, which stands 112 metres tall, was unveiled as huge crowds gathered on the field in the outskirts of Coimbatore. It was a huge affair with crowds from all over India. The security was strict and no one was allowed to take their bags and cameras inside the festival area as Prime Minister Modi himself was there to unveil the statue of Shiva.



The heat was a bit too much in the afternoon and the arrangements, according to me, were not up to the mark. Drinking water and food stalls were limited and there was chaos in the stands. I, however, managed to get some photos of Shiva from afar.

Next day, I had a throbbing headache due to the heat and was bed ridden the entire day. I managed to reach Isha Ashram the following day.

The ashram has excellent facilities and attracts a lot of foreigners. The foreigners come here to understand Indian spirituality and to partake in the festivities. Once I

Yeh! Hai INDIA

checked into my room, I took a stroll around the Ashram. I sat in the cafeteria, had rose milk and chatted with the local people. In the middle is the large statue of Nandi, the bull, which is made of black stone.

On the opposite side is the water pool energised with mercury water where men can bathe and cleanse their body and soul. It is spiritual and made for the well-being of the common man.

The vibes were very positive here and I enjoyed every bit of it. But it was no different than being on the banks of the Ganga in Haridwar or Rishikesh soaking in the fresh air.

Here, we were in a more synthetic surrounding. It was not a natural setting but a man-made one. My camera clicked away at will capturing the sights and sounds of the place as devotees strolled in the walkways and garden area.

With shops selling ayurvedic products and books, there was enough money to be made in the ashram and it looked to be flourishing.

Hyderabad – The City of Nizams

I am way too excited. After all, I fly out to Hyderabad tomorrow by an afternoon Jet Airways flight. A to-and-fro ticket cost me Rs 4500 which is not much and it looked even less when I paid for it through my Jet points. Web check-ins are great. One can select a seat on the plane, give meal instructions, order a wheelchair or other related services all online and with just a few clicks. In two minutes, I had my boarding pass all set in my iPhone to show as I board the flight.



At Hyderabad, I have checked into the Taj Falaknuma, a premier property of Taj in Hyderabad. They also own the Taj Banjara. I thought this would be a great place to relive the era of the Nizams who ruled this city for centuries and have, no doubt, added a distinct cultural flavour to Hyderabad, not to mention the local cuisine, the Hyderabadi Biryani and Haleem being the favourites. You have the Golkonda and the Charminar. The city is littered with many bazaars doing bustling trade in diamonds, spices, perfumes and clothes.

Yeh! Hai INDIA

The places of the Nizams and their state houses are other things to explore in the city. No doubt, I will try to capture the essence of Hyderabad and bring it to you through my blog and videos.

In the last few days, I will go on an excursion to visit and pray at Tirupati Balaji. It is a 10-hour journey by road. Until then, watch this space, folks!

Ghats of India, Part 4

There are an estimated 87 to 100 ghats in Varanasi. Most of these were built after 1700 A.D. when the city was part of the Maratha Empire. Even now the patrons of the ghats are Marathas, such as the Shindes (Scindias), Holkars, Bhonsles and Peshwes (Peshwas). Many ghats are associated with mythological legends and many are privately owned.

The best view of all the ghats is from the river. An early morning boat ride on the Ganga across the ghats is a popular attraction for visitors. A highly recommended, although touristy thing to do, is to take a dawn boat-ride from Dashashwamedh Ghat to Harish Chandra Ghat.

Assi Ghat is where the Ganga meets Assi River. Located at the extreme southern end of the main ghats, it is not as crowded as some of the other ghats. It is important as pilgrims bathe there before worshipping the huge lingam of Lord Shiva under a nearby peepal tree. The shops and cafes attract tourists. Hotels at the ghat are popular among long-stay travellers. Dashashwamedh Ghat is a 30-minute walk along the ghats.

Chet Singh Ghat was the site of the 18th century battle between Maharaja Chet Singh and the British. An old fort marks the spot of his defeat.

Darbhangha Ghat has impressive architecture, featuring a palace built in the early 1900s by the royal family of Bihar. Adjoining it is Munshi Ghat, constructed in 1912 by Sridhara Narayana Munshi, finance minister of the erstwhile Darbhanga State.

Dashashwamedh Ghat is one of the top attractions in Varanasi. Every evening the famed Ganga aarti is held here, one of the oldest and holiest ghats of Varanasi. From dawn till dusk a carnival of pilgrims, priests sheltering under thatched umbrellas, flower sellers hawking wares, goes on. It is so absorbing that one can sit and watch the melee for hours without getting bored.



Man Mandir Ghat is eye-catching and is named after Maharajah Man Singh of Jaipur who built his palace in 1600. Sawai Jai Singh II added an observatory in the 1730s. The astronomical instruments are in good condition.

Bhosale Ghat, a stone building with small artistic windows, was built by the Maratha ruling family of Nagpur.

Scindia Ghat is near Manikarnika Ghat and has a peaceful atmosphere. The partially submerged Shiva temple at the water's edge had sunk during the ghat's construction in 1830. Many of Varanasi's important temples such as Vishwanath temple are located in the narrow maze of galis or alleyways above the ghat.

Manikarnika and Harish Chandra Ghats, also known as the burning ghats, are where the living bring bodies of their dead relatives for cremation as Hindus believe that when this is done in Varanasi the departed soul is liberated from the death-rebirth cycle. These ghats are perpetually covered in smoke and flames emanating from the burning wood. Encasing on the curiosity-quotient of outsiders are priests/guides who, for a charge, take them to the roof of a nearby building to dispassionately view the proceedings.

Water Sports Banned in Uttarakhand by High Court

Water sports including white water rafting in the Ganges and paragliding have been banned in the Uttarakhand region until the government can formulate a policy to regulate them in terms of service, price and safety. Uttarakhand, home to mother Ganges, is a favourite spot for spiritual travellers for centuries. It has the Char Dham and holy places like Haridwar and Rishikesh which are ancient Vedic cities built on the banks of the Ganga.



Adventure sports like rafting, bungee jumping and paragliding are a big money spinner for the state and very popular with foreign tourists. Because it is lucrative, many private operators have entered the market among which most are unregulated and do not conform to any safety or price guidelines. Because of this, all adventure sports has been banned in Uttarakhand till a common policy is derived and agreed on by the government.

Till then, all you travellers and adventures, tough luck. Guys, you will have to look at other pastures. Do enjoy adventure but Uttarakhand is a no-no as of now.

Sparrows Wall Art and A Morning Walk in Dehradun

I had been writing all night and just could not sleep at 5 am. I decided to take a morning walk across Inder Road in the Dalanwala area of Dehradun. It was a still morning with a bit of faint drizzle around as elderly people walked the start for their morning walks. I had my camera in my hand and was happy to capture pictures of beautiful sparrows and people walking their dogs.



As I approached Welham Boy's, my old school, I caught a glimpse of some wall art on the outer walls of Welham Girls'. I duly clicked some photos. The mornings are so fresh, pleasant and very peaceful. No traffic, just a wide empty road staring at me. Just you and your thoughts as I used my latest 100×400 mm zoom lens which was very effective in capturing everything in sight. Suddenly, a security guard with a splendid moustache passed me by and I requested him to give me a pose. Then there was a girl walking her dog and also an elderly lady taking a brisk walk throwing her arms about.

So enjoy the pictures and get a flavour of what the mornings are in the Dun Valley.

Kwatra and I at Rishikesh

Delhi, the heat was really getting to me, so I decided to venture upwards for some cooler place and choose Dehradun with my Nani being there. It is a valley that I am very familiar with. My man Friday, butler cum helper, Mr Kwatra felt utterly bored with me not being there in Delhi and he too decided to follow suit. He came to Dehradun too and we touched base for lunch of mutton at a local eatery. Dehradun had cooler weather as it rained often which would drive away the afternoon heat bringing temperatures down. My walks started to get together as I walked 4 to 5 km every day in the morning. But there was an urge to explore further, so I and Kwatra hatched a plan to go to Rishikesh for the day.

Things moved like clockwork from the go, we got a hired sedan to Rishikesh right up to the Laxman Jhula all for Rs 1500. It was a steal as I loaded my camera bag in the car's back seat. I and Kwatra walked across the crowded lanes of Rishikesh inhaling the holy essence of its shops and narrow alleys littered with temples, ashrams, yoga centres, meditation music and cafes catering to a very foreign and upward clientele. We walked through the stoney and pebbled banks of the Ganga for a holy dip. The water looked muddy and dull to me but it was flowing fast and that gave me comfort that the water was good for bathing. As I took a dip, I saw rafts floating past me with people in full gear rowing away. I walked back to the bank to load my camera, to capture this beautiful sport of river rafting which is very popular in this town. The city is full of tour operators and adventure travel including bungee jumping and paragliding. The flavour of the city lies in its location on the banks of the Ganga, seen as the symbol of pioussness, Mother Nature and purity. This gives Rishikesh its divine and holy seal steeped in the Vedic religious movement, the city is ancient and yet unexplored.



We walked back after our dip through the maddening crowd past the Laxman Jhula and, of course, across it. It was amazing that a sea of people was on this suspended bridge trying to pass through from either side, each jostling the other for a position. The heat was getting to me by now and we stopped over at a cafe cum German bakery for some callers and shakes along with pizza. I got the opportunity to capture some amazing acrobatics being performed by the local street kids. The girl was very flexible and she jumped on a bench like a gymnast.

Kwatra's fascination with food was evident throughout the journey as he kept taking one food or the other and discussing the qualities that are present in humus. It was getting late as I had more or less captured the science of our short journey into the holy city. I had the snapshot and, of course, a new adventure story for my blog.

My Dad – My Bheem Shila

As I wandered around the banks of the Ganges, I stopped at Haridwar and Rishikesh, the Vedic towns of India. By lacing steep into spirituality, these towns did wonders to my health and vitality. I used to bathe in the river early in the morning and then go for long walks as I admired the ancient traditions and cultures of the place. My first major religious journey was to Char Dham which consists of the four spiritual pillars of the Uttarakhand region namely Gangotri, Yamunotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath.



It was Kedarnath and its snow peaks that fascinated me the most as I reached there by helicopter. The temple is made of grey stone and in the middle lies the Shiva linga. This linga is crooked stone with many edges and not your typical Shiva linga which is round and cylindrical. Outside the temple is a huge stone statue of Nandi. Near the entrance sat a group of fierce looking aghori. They were covered in ash, tridents, tiger skins and were smoking and puffing away at their ganja leaves

through their mighty chillums. I too got pulled towards them as I sat myself down amongst them to share a smoke.

The air was chilly, dry and a bit thin but the sub-zero temperature was bringing the fast breeze from the Sumeru Mountains. "You know, life can be strange and one has to go through it to understand its meaning and decipher the many experiences that one goes through." I said as I looked at the most fearsome aghori who sat opposite to me. "We are the outcasts. We are just lowly beggars. I am happy that a man like you came up to us to talk and share a smoke." he said with a smile as he passed his smoke to me. I took a puff and bellowed in the vicinity as, slowly, thin and fluffy snowflakes started falling from the sky. It was as if the boards wanted to shower us with his blessings. "You know, Bhola saved this temple from ruin and destruction. When the floods came in the river Ganges, the Mata roared across the hills. It turned the mud and the stones upside down. Trees, houses and huts all washed away. Man and animal buried under the same mud. It was sheer distraction except..." he looked around as some pilgrims offered some money to him. He bought a cup of tea with the money and started sipping it to feel warm again. "Except what... Yes, I believe this place has a story. A shila rolled over from the mountain and stopped right in front of the temple." I said with faint recollection.

"Yes, the shila broke the path of the flow of the Mata and the river passed from the side of the temple. It kept the temple complex totally safe and unharmed by the landslide and flash floods that destroyed these hills a year back." The aghori smiled with self-admiration as if he was gloating on his knowledge. I said "Well, I am here also after a major upheaval in my life. My dad got murdered and I was left all alone by the horrific incident. Somehow, I blame myself for his death which could have been prevented. This guilt has brought me here in search of redemption and some peace."

"Your father... Ahh, he was a brave man, very brave. He fought two of those guys with no weapon in his hand. He was strong." the aghori said with pride as his eyes swelled. "Yes, he saved my life by sacrificing his as those people were going to kill me next." I said with some panic in my voice as I tried to recollect the horrid incident. The aghori put up his arms as if he was blessing me and said "Bheem Shila,

Yeh! Hai INDIA

don't you get it? The meaning is so simple. It stares you in the face. Your father was your Bheem Shila. He protected you from death and sacrificed himself so that you could live." As he said those words, a bulb lit up in my head "Yes, indeed, Dad was my Bheem Shila. He was my rock and he saved me to the very end." I looked up to the skies and prayed for peace and his soul.

Business Baba

My stay at the Baba Ramdev Ashram at Yog Gram revealed a lot to me about the business acumen, foresight and the vision of Baba Ramdev. In just over a decade, Baba has propelled Patanjali Yog and therapy into a household brand eating chunks from the market share of brands like Dabur, Himalaya, and even the mighty Unilever. He has taken away consumer durable business from these brands to his fold. He has raised his image in the eyes of the public and has become a champion of Ayurveda and alternative medicine. As a close friend of mine, Mirnal Mathur who worked as a director with Dabur puts it like this, "People go to him when they have lost all hope from traditional forms of medical care and treatments. Where allopathy failed, Baba steps in with his brand of Naturopathy."

Herbal remedies coupled with natural treatments have worked wonders for Baba and have transformed people who come to him. His brand of yoga is very popular with the masses. He looks to heal the body, mind, and soul with his therapies. There is a sense of seva in everyone who works for the Baba and the staff is courteous yet strict.

Baba is not only an expert marketer but also a brilliant person with backward integration. His farms in Haridwar provide the needed diet for his patients. He breeds horses and cows in his backyard.

Products like milk and mattha come from these holy cows. The strict vegetarian diet also does wonders for the mind and body. The farms at Pokhri and the greenhouses provide the natural herbs and flowers that go into producing the various remedies.

The factories turn out these remedies and package them into products under the Patanjali Brands. The mollah then start raking in when the products are sold through branded company stores. Each of these stores houses a doctor to give advice and prescription.



He has the backward integration and supply chain all tied up under his umbrella. Baba's swadeshi rhetoric coupled with Davy media acumen helps with the promotion of the brand, as he has become the face of the entire movement. An army of yoga pracharaks promotes yoga at the local as well as the district level. Two huge ashrams, phase one and two have been built to cater to the growing demand of patients and seekers.

From mud batches to ozone therapies, blood tests to dental treatments, there is space for every sort of remedies as Baba is also taking on the traditional notion of a hospital and allopathy medicine. He is taking the market from the Apollo's Medenta and Max type of hospitals. Even the old and young sow under the one-fold of yoga, bhakti, Desh Seva, and treatment.

Acharya Balkrishna is an allotted pillar of this revolution. He looks after the finances as Baba promotes the brand as its ambassador. Together, they have formed a great tag team that has propelled this juggernaut to great heights with cash registers also gangling.

Yeh! Hai INDIA

All in all, success plays in their backyard. They also give results as they truly heal people. This is one of the major factors. Traditional advertising coupled with word of mouth and direct sales efforts have given rich results. All in all, he truly is The Business Baba.

A Walk around the Buddha Temple, Dehradun

Today was a lazy day for me but I was excited as there was an air of enthusiasm. I realised that I had to go out into the street to test my new Canon 5D Mark IV camera. I had just bought it a few days back along with a powerful zoom lens to boost for 3.57 lakhs with discounts included. It was now time for me to test my new baby and what better place to wander in Dehradun than the Buddha Temple.



The temple is situated near the ISBT bus terminal on the outskirts of the city. This was a sleepy and peaceful Tibetan heartland in the valleys with the huge temple bang in the middle. It reminded me of some of my excursions to Dharamsala.

The temple had a huge garden area with the grand stupas and wishing wells. A huge portrait of the Buddha stood tall at the apex of the building. Monkeys ran amok in the garden and looked like the army of Hanuman had raided the place. I took out my camera from the bag and began clicking one shot at a time.

I tried the zoom lens to get closer to my object and at times, took help from Bhartu, my helper, to get better angles of some of the shots. We meandered through the

Yeh! Hai INDIA

calm and quite stairways of the temple soaking in the peace and enjoying the cool breeze that hit us from time to time.

A few hours and I felt hungry again. We strolled down to a Tibetan cafe for a meal of soup and momo. I enjoyed every bit of the stuff but the chillies were a lot and I felt the need to sip a lot of water at the end. The evening was approaching us and it was time to head back home to see and admire the new photos I had taken. My home was a 30-minute tuk-tuk ride away where my grandmother eagerly awaited with tea and cookies to greet me.

Witnessing the Ganga Arti in Haridwar

One of the most spectacular sites is the evening Ganga Arti at the Ghats in Har Ki Pauri in Haridwar. This is a daily ritual that is watched by thousands as they gather around the banks of the Ganges. They witness the arti or a ritualistic prayer offered to mother Ganga by the head priests of the temples. Here, fire and Vedic chants are offered to the Ganga. Fire represents the symbol of purity as it burns all evil and purifies the soul.

The Vedic chants with the ringing of the temple bells form the forefront of the arti. The chants vibrate in the air along with the sounds of bells resulting in the air becoming intoxicated with spiritual fervour. The sounds of the chanting hums in the air as pilgrims sit on the banks to witness the high priest offer fire to the river in copper urns. Many passersby stop to stare at the spectacle as some lit diyas and drop them in the river with flowers as if to offer a special gift to mother Ganga.



The whole ritual lasts for around 20 minutes while the pilgrims offer prayers and ask for blessings. Essence sticks burn and spread their perfumes in the air. I enjoyed

Yeh! Hai INDIA

the sight and captured it through my lens as I strolled amongst the crowd to get a real feel of the arti and savour the intoxicating air of our ancient Vedic religion.

Ganga symbolises the mother, the provider, the nourisher, the one whose bosom is so large enough that it can engulf all the sins.

Surrounded by food stalls and sadhus, the place felt vibrant and electric. I stepped out for a meal of aloo puri from my favourite joint, Mohan Puriwala, and then flushed it down with a cold glass of lassi. Now my taste buds were really giggling as I savoured Suji Ka Halwa, a famous Indian sweetmeat.

Strolling past the bank on the several bridges that litter Har Ki Pauri, I saw some magnificent gulls hovering in the sky. I took some good shots of these babies flying with a care-free abandon.

Haridwar is a pilgrim's delight with a beacon for our ancient Hindu religion. You can see a sea of sadhus here and everyone seems to be a yogi. Ancient coins and plastic cans litter the place in which holy water is carried. The whole place is bustling with a crowd as if there was a weekly carnival going on. I am lucky to be a part of this magnificent arti at the start of the New Year. Indeed, I have washed away all my sins by just being here.

Why Spirituality Works

I saw the wonders of spirituality, seva and purity of heart at Baba Ramdev's Yog Gram Ashram for myself. It was a great feeling to have achieved my goal of losing 7 kg here in only eight days. The reason I was able to succeed was because I had pure and honest intentions. I threw myself wholeheartedly into the routine of the ashram with a clear sense of surrender within me. By surrendering myself to the ashram, the therapies worked wonders for me. I believed in all the activities they asked me to go through.

Whether it was waking up at 4:00 am taking my enema or following a strict diet doing the therapies and massages, I was generally cheerful as I went on to these activities. The shank pachaaran was my favourite. In this therapy, one has to have 10 glasses of water and then we are made to do yoga that put pressure on our stomachs. The result was a pure cleansing of the intestines and the cleaning of the bowels. This gave me a sense of relief and made me feel light and pure.

The diet of juices and fruits made me lose weight and I also developed a taste for vegetables and fruits. I also lost weight because of the 8 to 9 km walks that I took every morning into the farm. This I did with dedication and a pure heart. I mingled well with the ashram administrators and the various people who were my co-patients. Keeping a positive attitude and then spreading it around also helped a lot. There was no sense of cynicism in me as I took my frustration of remaining on a liquid diet for 5 days in my stride.

The pleasing and dedicated staff helped me overcome my hurdles. They were helpful and empathetic yet strict and made sure that I adhered to my diet and schedule. They all performed their jobs admirably. I got instant results and kept me motivated in my weight loss program. I also got my blood test and took a dentist appointment to clean my teeth. Not smoking and drinking also helped immensely as I realised I could leave these habits at bay if I wished to.



The vibrations of the ashram coupled with its natural beauty only added to the sense of serenity and calmness that I felt within me. Each day I felt purposeful and each yoga session opened up all my muscles and joints making them supple and flexible. I was here to make a difference to my life and that is exactly what I did. With Desh Bhakti songs, lightings of the diya and spirituality sermons, this was one uplifting place and lifted my spirits too.

Spirituality works wonders which no amount of going to the gym did and now I can travel the world with twice the spirit. It was just the tonic I needed to recharge myself and usher in the New Year.

New Year beside the Ganges in Haridwar

What better place to celebrate the new year than to celebrate it on the banks of the river Ganges in Har Ki Pauri in Haridwar. It was the greatest new year of my life as I strolled around Haridwar in search of peace and redemption. With a prayer in my heart, I stepped out of Baba Ramdev's Yog Gram Ashram. Having lost 7 kg during my treatment here, I felt vitalised and rearing to go. I felt a new energy and charge and decided that the Ganga air will do me a lot of good.



I stepped out of my taxi into the sea of people who had come to pay homage to the holy mother and bathe in her bosom. The place was crowded with people from all parts of the world. Some were taking a bath while the others prayed for their dead ancestors.

A large part of the crowd ate putt and sabsi at the local eateries. I could not resist myself and dipped into a plate of aloo puri at a famous eatery. Then I stood in the middle of the bridge and took out my camera stand. I started shooting what can only be described as a maddening crowd of pilgrims and sadhus.

Yeh! Hai INDIA

There were lame beggars begging, sadhus smoking ganja, shopkeepers and kids selling holy ornaments and others enjoying themselves in the sunshine. A mass of proud Indians was walking and striding towards the Ganga as bhajans rang in the air. The melancholic sounds of the temple bells rang aloud to vibrate the entire place.

Women, dressed up in bright sarees and ornaments, danced their way through the crowd. I filmed the entire scene with my camera and captured the kids jumping into the river for a holy dip. The whole place smelled of essence sticks as the smoke from the temple hawans bellowed into the surrounding air.

The sages walked through the sea of people with painted faces and one of them smiled when I photographed him. Many beggars throng this place haggling the passer-by for money and loose change. I gave them generously in the name of my father and prayed for his departed soul.

This is truly the Dev Bhoomi, the land of gods, the seat of prachin India, the hotbed of Vedic culture and religion. Pandits sat cross-legged as fortune tellers told people their future. Pilgrims prayed and offered alms to usher in the new year. Women and men both rang the temple bells praying for good luck and prosperity for their family. I stood amongst all this din and captured it beautifully through my lens.

Strolling down the bridge, I realised my camera battery had run out. It was time to pack up and move back towards my hotel. I turned around to take a look at this pious place and decided to visit it the next day in the evening to capture the splendour of the maya arti.

Baba Ramdev's Garden of Eden

The most spectacular thing about the Yog Gram Ashram is the number and variety of flowers that are grown in the gardens. I was pulled towards these beautiful flowers every day as I strolled around the ashram and the surrounding farms for my ritualistic morning walk. The flowers add so much colour to the place and are so pleasing to the eyes. They have a soothing and hypnotic impact on the patients. The greenery that surrounds the ashram gives it the much-needed oxygen, energy, and charge that revitalises broken bodies and bleeding souls. The various smells that emanate from them charges and reinvigorates the body and mind.



An army of gardeners and Malis look after the gardens, the flora, and fauna, which brighten up the ashram premises. It is an advisable and silent way to cure disease, eradicate stress and relieve people from the cities of their day-to-day problems and fears.

The ashram also has a nursery where different varieties of orchids and rare flowers are grown. Montu, who is the keeper in charge of Baba Ramdev's Garden of Eden,

Yeh! Hai INDIA

took me for a stroll around the gardens and nursery as I interviewed him. He explained to me in great detail the therapeutic value of these flowers and orchids that litter the ashram and also their importance in the entire therapy that is provided here.

Montu, the expert gardener, said “This is nothing sir. You should come here during the spring and see the flowers they grow and bloom to their natural size. It is such a pleasing sight.” I, for one, have enjoyed capturing these beauties through my lens and can’t wait to feature them on my blog.

Pokhri is another village 300 km from here where most of the herbs and jade buti are grown which go into making the various medicines and herbs that are prescribed by the doctors of the ashram. I have seen the beauty of this place and the magical powers of her colourful flowers. They have done wonders to my health and really energised me. In the last 10 days, I have even lost 6 kg. I have been walking almost 8 to 9 km every day. This, for me, is truly Baba Ramdev’s Garden of Eden.

The Violet Sky and a Morning Walk

Got up at 4:00 am in the morning. The sages say that this is the best time to get up as it is the Brahmamuhurtha. After a cold water bath and some yoga, I ventured out in search of the perfect sunrise with my camera dangling around my waist. By 6:30 am, the sky suddenly burst out with colours of violet, pink and purple as the sun brought the morning to the world today.



I took some shots trying to get close to the sky and reach some sort of perfection. As I was busy capturing the colourful sky, a young man tapped me on the shoulder. “Hari om sir, you want to see the sunrise? Why don’t you come with me for a walk into the farmland around the ashram near the water canals? You will get a much better view from there.” He said with a big smile on his face. “I think I will do just that. What is your name? Do you work here in the ashram?” The man introduced himself as Ramesh Kumar and he was a co-worker at the ashram. That was it. I decided to follow him in search of the violet sky.

Yeh! Hai INDIA

Ramesh took me to the back of the ashram where the rest of the staff are put up in a huge hall. From there, we meandered through into a farm by walking on a dusty road built near a canal. As I walked through the dense mist, I could see bursts of colour in the sky and as if on cue, I started taking photos of this breathtaking vision. My breath became deep and long as the sky started to dance with a hue of vibrant colours.

I kept showing my photography skills to my guide, Ramesh, who was very impressed with my skills. All the fresh air was doing wonders for my health and my lungs and I had not smoked for a week and hence, my lungs felt light. Then suddenly, the sun came out as if it was tearing through the violet silhouette like an orange ball piping up out of a silk handkerchief. I started shooting again. Oh, I so much wished to have a longer lens to get closer to the sun but, alas, I had only the 24mm to 70mm lens.

This was one hell of a morning walk. Ramesh then took me to the top of the staff quarters building on the terrace to get a much better view of the sunrise. I was then able to shoot these beautiful scenes to my heart's content.

With a smile on my face and a song in my heart, I danced my way back to the room to see the images and efforts of my morning walk.

The Power of Positive Vibrations

At the ashram, the most important thing that I noticed was the power of positive vibrations. These vibrations really energise the body and the soul. The first few days of fruit and juice diet as well as regular enema cleanses the bowels and regulate blood circulation. One gets at 4:30 am in the morning and really frees the body of all the collected toxins and other depression causing ingredients that the body ingests over a period of time. The morning yoga and laughter therapies make one's insides like a hollow tube all the while making positive vibrations resonate from within you. The body becomes like a flute or a didgeridoo and once you blow air into it, it vibrates and hums with its own rhythm.

I was amazed that the greenery around me and the colourful flowers that grow in the gardens of the ashram had such a wondrous impact on me. My breathing has become regulated and deep. I have not smoked for a week and that has helped the accumulated harmful chemicals in my lungs to be thrown out of my body. The body has become hollow and the morning Surya Namaskar and Yoga have made it soft and supple. I walk on the green grass carpet in the morning to soak in the morning dew. This is a great therapy and it feels like giving myself acupuncture through the sole of my feet. There are more than 70 varieties of flowers in the ashram and each one bloom and dance to the tune of the wind. I also tested my photography skills by capturing them through my lens.



Getting up at 4:00 am now seems easy once you get into the routine of things. Capturing the sunrise through my camera is another thing that I enjoy doing. I weigh myself twice in the day, first at morning and then at late evening. I have lost 4.5 kg in one week and that is an achievement. I am motivated now to finish the course and achieve my goal of losing 10 kg at the end of the day.

Humming and singing all day being in the vicinity of such positive energies is a healing process in itself and that is a thing that one gets plenty at the ashram. From the laughter therapy to the Desh Bhakti songs, there is something for very one to enjoy, relate to and savour in this place. For Rs. 2000 a day, all inclusive, it is a bargain. It is like a service centre for the body and soul and a must-try for everyone to come and rejuvenate themselves. I give two thumbs up to the ashram, its helpful staff, knowledgeable coaches and great administrators. This is a must-visit place for anyone who wants to enjoy yoga and rejuvenate themselves.

Want to know more about yoga? Here is a guide that is even more detailed, updated and comprehensive on 18 amazing health benefits of yoga. It is over 7,000

Yeh! Hai INDIA

words and packed with practical tips and advice. You can find it here: <https://www.jenreviews.com/yoga/>. Big thanks to Jen Miller, a writer at Jen Reviews.

The Magical World of Baba Ramdev

Baba Ramdev is a brand indeed, revered and followed by millions in India. He is, of course, very close to the current government and is the flag bearer of the current Patanjali revolution. A revolution that I came to see and be a part of.



It has been six days at the Yog Gram and I have already lost 4 kg. The diet, the therapies, the yoga and the pranayama, all have resulted in me achieving my goal. I came here skeptical about the place and the results I would get. My friend Janak mocked "You will be running out of the damn place in two days. No cigarettes, no alcohol, no non-veg, no sugar and no masala." Man, it is going to be tough. I, for once, changed that perception. I have put up with all the treatments that Patanjali and its doctors could throw at me for the past 6 days. Now, with the routine falling in place, it is only going to get easier as I have gotten used to the diet and the place. The fruits, juices and dates of the place are all that I get to eat. I go to morning and evening therapies that consist of massages, steam as well as ozone baths and calf

Yeh! Hai INDIA

stretches. The yoga hall is where I do my morning yoga and Pranayama. Not to mention, the morning starts at 4:30 am with an Enema.

I also enjoyed some horse riding yesterday but the highlight was the massive cramps I had in my stomach which forced me to go to the doctor. I thought it was due to the lack of food and the hunger but I was pleasantly informed that my intestines were churning out all the waste that had collected in them and would throw them out the next morning when I take a crap. I was asked to take 10 glasses of water and wait for the morning to come.

Today, I feel light-classed and rejuvenated in such a way that I have been singing all through the morning therapy rituals. I really felt like I was on top of the world, especially when I weighed myself in the morning and was surprised to find out that I had already lost 4 kg.

This place has a lot of vibrant energies and positivity. The staff is very polite and encouraging. There is also a degree of strictness maintained so that the patients follow the entire process and exercise of therapy.

I made a few friends who are from Banaras and took their photos with my new camera in the afternoon. They promised to smuggle a few packets of biscuits to me today. I told them I need something sweet. The biscuits are still awaited.

The Baba landed in the ashram the other day and I was frantic to get an interview with him. I was told to be patient but the Baba left early and I was left stranded. Forget the interview, I couldn't even get a photo of him.

I am determined to lose at least 10 kg in this place and the way things are going, I think I will achieve my target easily.

Kamdev Meets Ramdev

So, here I was at the insistence of my grandmother at the Patanjali Yog Gram in Haridwar due to my ailment. Well, it was obesity. I am 97 kg which is almost 20 kg overweight according to my height. The registration process is fairly simple and one can do it all online. Even the payment can be done online and the forms are simple and easy to follow. But the real magic of Baba Ramdev's Patanjali Yog Gram really begins when you arrive at the centre which is situated in a dusty farmland on the outskirts of Haridwar.



It is a vast campus with gardens and flowers. The rooms are basic but clean and well maintained. I parked myself in the maharishi room. Our bags were checked to see that we have not got any cigarettes or gutka into the ashram. The evening passed with a meeting with the doctor and a quick briefing for everyone new to the ashram. Each was given a health card which carried details of our diet and treatments during our stay. The ashram consisted of a huge yoga hall at the centre

Yeh! Hai INDIA

with a bhojnalaya (dining room), a store to buy all the Patanjali yoga products and treatment centres behind the residential complex which houses all the patients.

Man, life is tough here especially for a smoker and someone with no specific routine like me. I had to get up at 4:30 in the morning for a morning enigma and cleaning of the bowels. Here, one is made to drink lots of water to cleanse the bowels so that the morning ritual is done. Yoga and Pranayama start in the morning and go on till 8:00 am. Breakfast is juice with almonds, dates and fruits. I, per say, have been on a diet of fruits and juice throughout the day. I have not eaten rice, dal, vegetables or roti even once.

Morning treatments consist of various massages, steam baths and other therapeutic razzmatazz like peet lappet where a cloth is tied to your calf muscles and stomach. Following these is the neem lapse where the concoction of neem is put on body parts that suffer from allergies. Evening treatment comprises of much the same with a thanda garam treatment and gargling with steam. All the treatments are very stimulating and ensure that the body is rejuvenated and get the blood circulation going.

The yoga hall is active all day with various yoga teachers performing their exercises and rituals. There are laughter therapy, meditation and even bhajans and artis to top it all. The spirituality adds a lot to the place's halo and has a psychological impact on the patients.

Guess what? They have given me permission to shoot a documentary on the ashram which I will do as the course moves along.

The Kings of the Jungle at the Rajaji National Park

The Rajaji National Park was my next destination as Janak Singh, my friend from Welham Boys' coaxed me into a trip to see the wildlife of this place. Situated in Rishikesh, about an hour's drive from Dehradun, it is an old wildlife reserve. Janak was a director at the park and helped develop the park during his younger days. So, needless to say, we easily got a booking and all the staff had come forward to make our stay a memorable one. "You see Anuj, the animal safari in Africa that you just saw is nothing compared to the tigers of the Rajaji Park. Now you need to observe and admire the Indian jungles and what better man to take you there than me. I have been the director of the park for a few years and I know it like the back of my hand." He said boastfully.

We had packed 3 kg of mutton and stopped over to shop for fruits and vegetables on the way. We reached the park in the afternoon and dumped our stuff in the bungalow provided to us.

Janak was busy chatting with the local staff and the game wardens as I strolled around trying to test my new Canon Mark IV camera taking shots of the sunset and monkeys that ran amok in the garden near our bungalow.



We lighted up a huge bonfire and the cooks got busy cooking the mutton in the kitchen as I opened a new bottle of single malt and offered the liquor to all in the sundry.

It was great to see everyone enjoying the night near the fire. After all, it was getting a wee bit cold. Discussions centered on the Beatles and the Maharishi Ashram for which Rishikesh is very famous for.

The locals wanted to do a film and a cultural festival for which they wanted to invite important directors and other celebrities. I got an invite too and promised to do a documentary when I come to the park next time.

Next morning was rock and roll time as we took a gypsy with gunmen inside the jungle and navigated its thick foliage and muddy terrain. After some time, we started walking on foot as we had to climb a bit. It was there that I first saw the pug marks of the tiger and the marks of its claws on the bark of a nearby tree.

It seemed that the tiger had been trailing a buffalo, the one owned by the Gujjar family who lived in the forest. "These bloody vermin are a curse to the jungles.

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These Gujjar Naiads from Kashmir come into the jungle and destroy it by cutting trees and letting their buffalos go amok. We have tried so many times to relocate them but they don't listen. They keep coming back and destroy the natural habitat of the forest." Janak said angrily.

The climb was steep and I had to navigate small streams to move ahead. Luckily, we were able to sight bucks and deer at the banks of the dry stream. The climb back was uphill and a bit steep but I managed to make it. It left me exhausted but the trip was worth it. With monkeys and langurs on the way, we managed to get a good look at the wildlife of the area.

At midnight, we did a night safari and went deep into the jungle. Someone had left a scooter in a ditch nearby and looked suspicious. One of the forest guards took action and noted its number to report its sighting. Suddenly, a Sambar ran out on the road and Janak took a snap of it. With the headlight shining on it, it was a rare shot.

Now, I am being tucked into bed with a glass of warm whiskey all set to visit the Maharishi Ashram in the morning.

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Yeh Mera India! About the book:

Yeh Mera India! Is an e book that I have created from my travels around India. It talks about my journey around more then 22 states in India, rich with stories and anecdotes from my Indian Leg of my Travels, it will enthrall you and make you think and ponder abut the great country we live in and the freedom we enjoy .Our heritage that we take for granted and indeed how blessed we are to be living in this wondrous land.

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Book Lovers Reviews

“ Anuj has used his personal tragedy to transform himself and others through his books. ”

- Raju Srivastava

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