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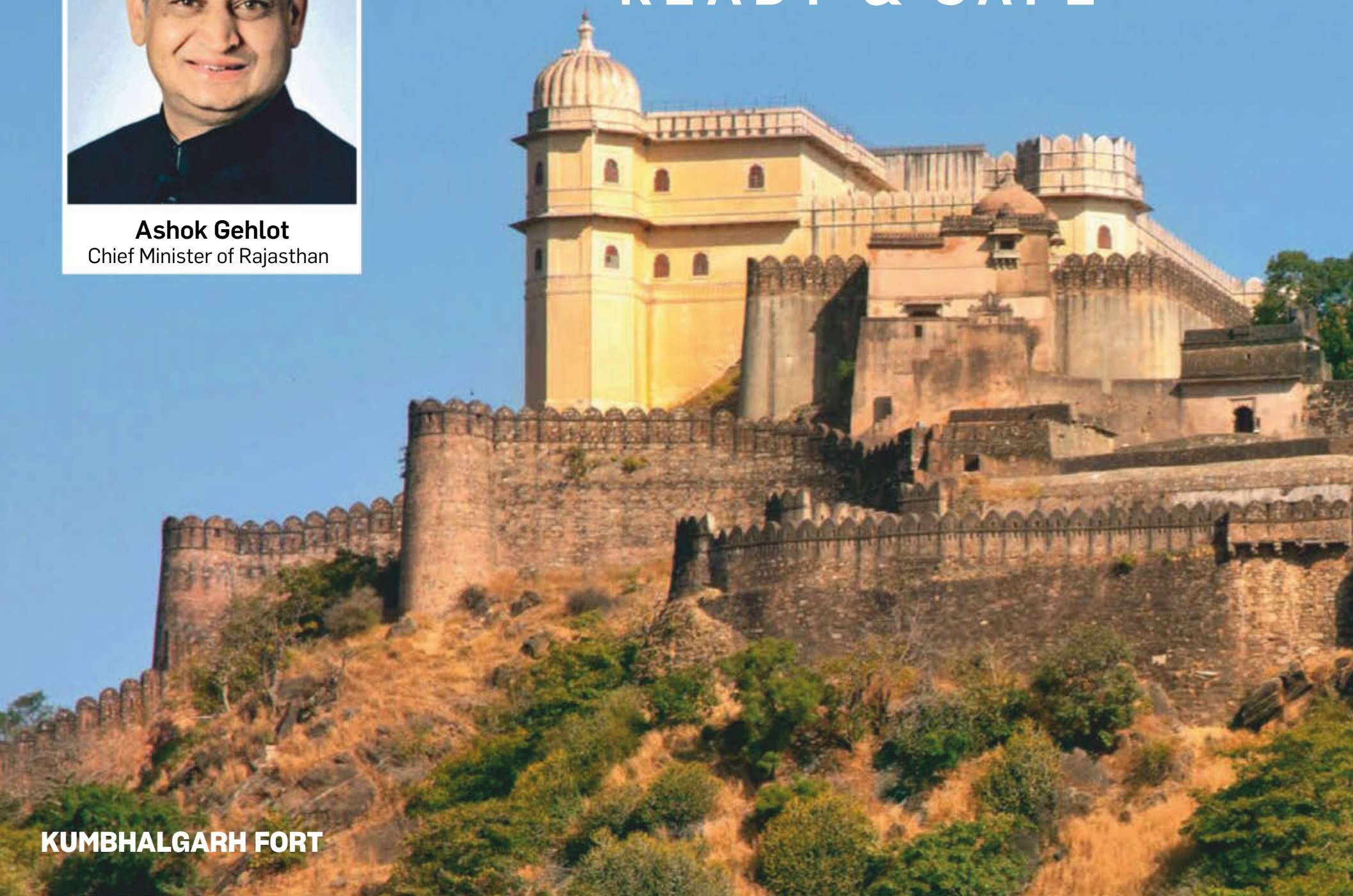
25
**Offbeat
Experiences**
For Fun in the Middle East



Ashok Gehlot
Chief Minister of Rajasthan

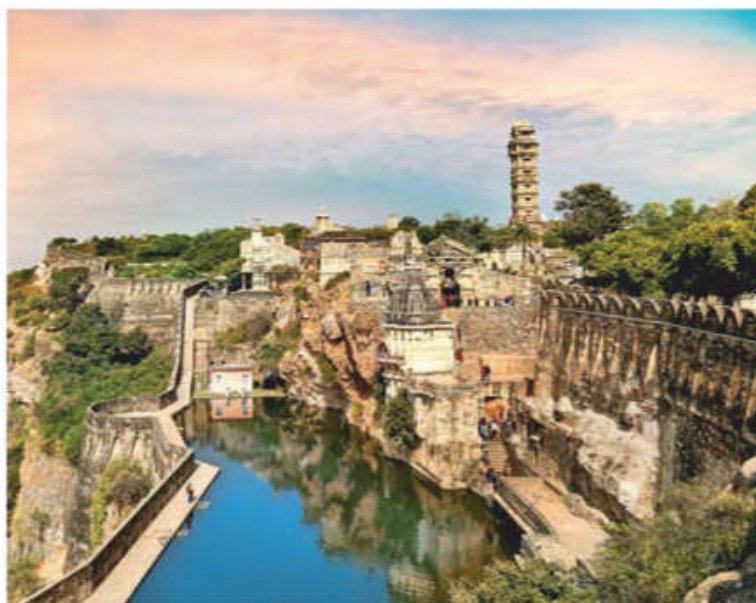
RAJASTHAN

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Rajasthan is home to a treasure trove of UNESCO-certified World Heritage Sites, with the walled city of Jaipur being the most recent inclusion. Six hill forts—Chittorgarh, Kumbhalgarh, Jaisalmer, Ranthambore, Gagron, and Amber—feature on the coveted list. Each of these marvels brims with royal tales, unique architecture, natural defence systems, and ancient motifs.

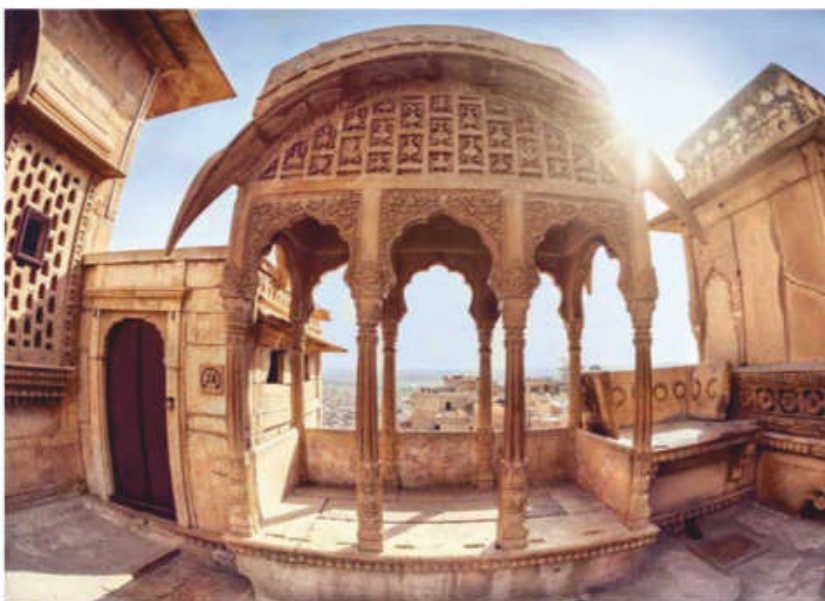
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RAJASTHAN
The Incredible State of India !

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Cover star Nora Fatehi finds many similarities between Indian and Moroccan cultures. (p. 34)

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ON THE COVER

Nora Fatehi in a Middle Eastern avatar.

PHOTOGRAPHER Tejas Nerurkar

STYLIST Maneka Harisinghani

HAIR & MAKEUP Marcelo Pedrozo

ON HER: White maxi dress, **The Flame Store**; headgear, **Marce Pedrozo**; ivory jody earrings, gold reviah cuff, emery bracelet, gold harrieta cuff, and gunmetal KAIA cuff, **Deepa Gurnani**; shell necklace, **Amama**; macrame necklaces and Croatia shell anklet, **Andi Bagus**; silver armlet, **Creyons by Mansi**.

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LETTER *from the Editor*

I TOOK A FLIGHT IN SEPTEMBER, my first in nearly six months. It wasn't a long journey, but the sheer excitement of experiencing what everybody is calling the new normal sunk in. And yes, I felt safe.

According to the latest report of International Air Transport Association (IATA), flights are said to have a much lower COVID-19 transmission rate than buses and trains. As reassuring as that is, it's important that we continue to be careful, responsible, and thoughtful on our travels.

My last overseas trip of this year happened in February, and it was incidentally to the Middle East, specifically the glimmering city of Dubai, where I discovered the art district of Alserkal Avenue (p. 12). With its diverse offerings, Dubai is a microcosm of the Middle East, which houses a treasure of unique experiences. Our focus in this annual special is to shed light on some of these inimitable offerings of the region. For your next holiday, earmark your choices from the 25 most offbeat experiences in the Middle East (p. 80).

The beautiful Nora Fatehi, who adorns the cover of this issue, speaks to us about her Moroccan roots and the country's lasting love affair with Bollywood films and stars (p. 34). In our immersive travelogues, we tread the eclectic landscapes of Jordan (p. 112), explore the wonderful balance of Asia and Europe on Turkish terrain (p. 104), discover the many adventures on offer in Eilat, Israel (p. 68) and Musandam Peninsula, Oman (p. 64), and offer a slick guide to Abu Dhabi that covers everything from theme parks to heritage gems, buzzing beach bars, and sleek museums (p. 16).

Conscious travel is not limited to having responsible experiences at the destination. It also permeates your lifestyle choices, including what you buy. Dubai is a shoppers' haven,



and we've listed out some local sustainable brands that you should check out on your next shopping spree in the city (p. 72).

And since it's October, it's that time of the year again when you vote for your favourites in travel and hospitality so that we may honour and celebrate them in our annual extravaganza. In a year of many firsts, our readers' choice India's Best Awards is going virtual in 2020, in line with health guidelines. This year's honours are even more pertinent as the tourism industry has stood its ground against a raging pandemic.

T+L India & South Asia salutes this resilience and stands with the industry wholeheartedly. Show your support and vote at iba2020.travelandleisureindia.in.

Aindrila

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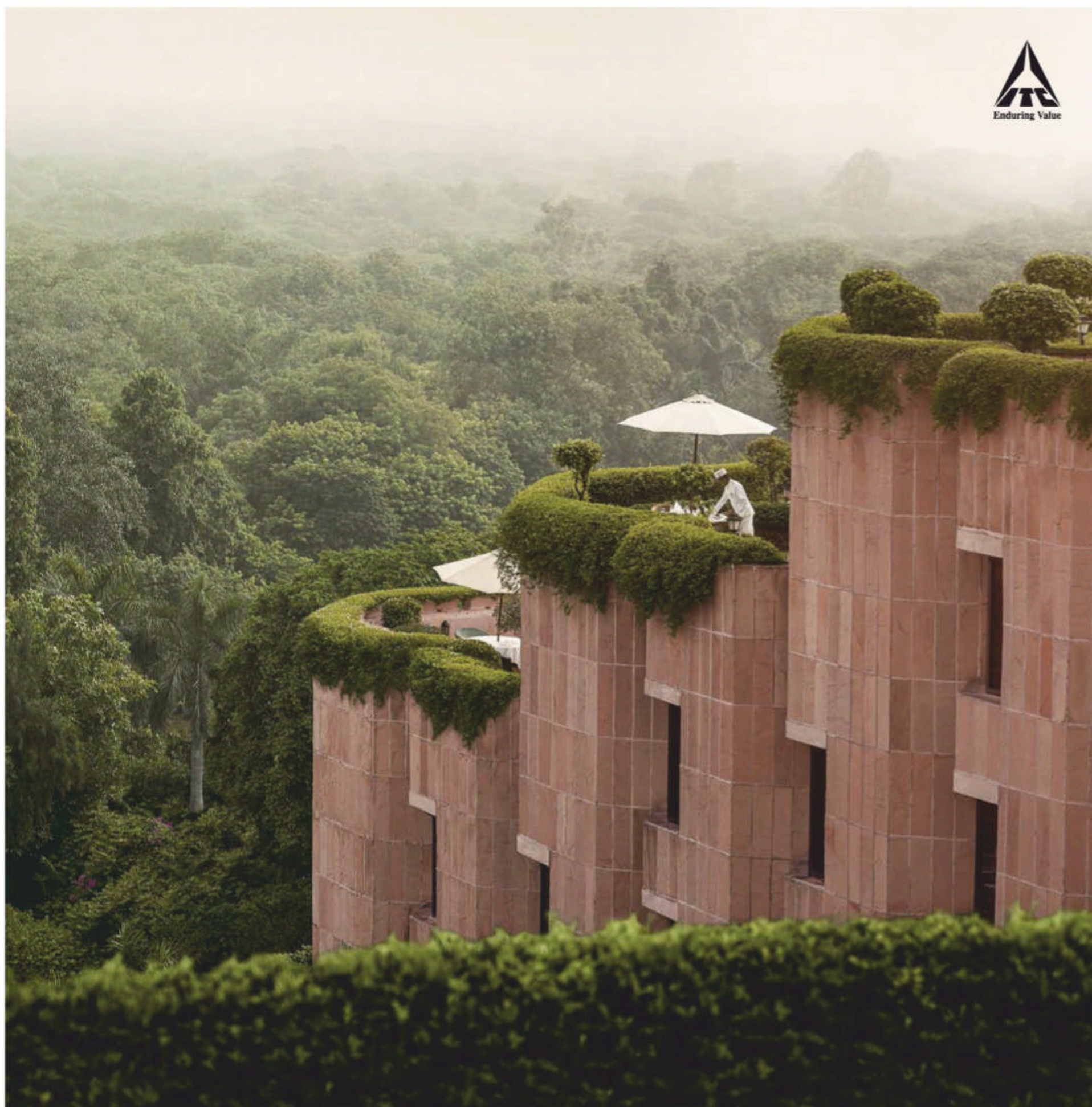
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FROM MY TRAVELS

Anyone who knows me will know that I'm an ardent dog lover. This throwback picture taken in Manali brings back fond memories of a time spent well with treks, food, and dogs for company. As we prepare to hit the road once again, keeping all safety precautions in mind, I know my next getaway will be to the hills.

Please Note: Some of the destinations and businesses mentioned in the magazine may be closed at the moment due to COVID-19. Refer to the rules and guidelines issued by your state government and those in place at the destination of your choice before making travel plans.



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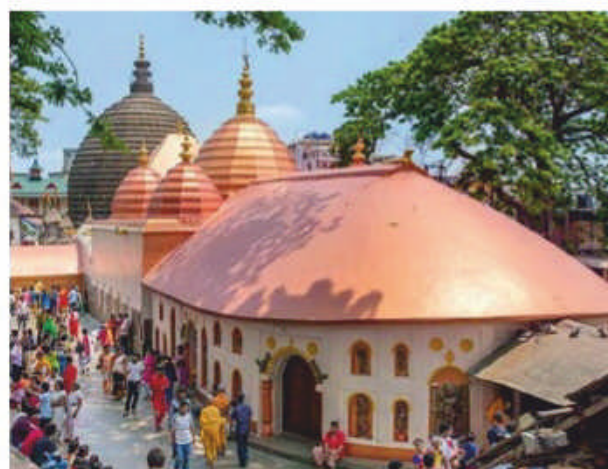
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CELEBRATIONS GALORE

This festive season, brush up your knowledge on these iconic heritage temples across India and bookmark them for your next holiday.



Historic Durga Temples in India

This Navaratri, revisit some of the legendary Durga temples of India and unearth the many folklores attached to them.

travelandleisureindia.in/durga-puja-2020



How Bonedi Bari Durga Puja Will Be Celebrated This Year

Shorter idols, home-cooked *bhog*, sanitised *pushpanjali* flowers, and limited visitors—learn about the new norms of *Bonedi Bari Durga Puja* in Kolkata this year.

travelandleisureindia.in/bonedi-bari-durga-pujas-in-kolkata



Soulful Navaratri Recipes

Here is a curated list of easy and delicious Navaratri recipes for you and your family. Let these nine days of fasting be filled with simple yet delectable flavours.

travelandleisureindia.in/navratri-recipes



SPOTTED

Kriti Kharbanda and Pulkit Samrat recently went on a road trip to Lonavala with their dog.

travelandleisureindia.in/kriti-kharbanda



DISCOVER

Iconic Lakshmi temples of India

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Discoveries

A GLOBETROTTER'S GUIDE TO THE LATEST IN TRAVEL

10 VIRTUAL FESTIVALS TO TUNE INTO

The festive season is upon us, but the social restrictions this year has imposed mean there is little scope for flying out and revelry. But fret not, for there are plenty of festivals that will stream the celebration to your screens. **BY SHRIMAYEE THAKUR**

1

Hong Kong Wine & Dine Festival

The Hong Kong Tourism Board is exploring new frontiers to bring this popular annual culinary event to its audience in a new digital avatar this year. Since this will also allow it to reach a larger audience, unrestrained by geographical boundaries, the festival will be held for several weeks in November this year, instead of four days. The full programme hasn't been released at the time of printing this magazine, but the digital festival promises as much excitement as its real-life version, with exclusive offers from wine merchants, which you can avail once you pick out your favourite wine from themed wine-tasting classes by sommeliers. You can also learn to whip up delicious cocktails with top mixologists, and cook gourmet meals with chefs. discoverhongkong.com



ANTHONY KWAN/GETTYIMAGES



2

Ake Arts & Book Festival

In its eighth edition, Ake Arts & Book Festival is answering the clarion call against racism and pushing for a new Africa—one that's going past its history of colonial abuse and poor leadership to create the continent that its residents have always dreamed of. The theme, African Time, is a celebration of African creativity. Hear authors, including Nobel Laureate Professor Wole Soyinka, speak about their work, or tune into panel discussions on topics ranging from harnessing anger for change, and Africa's cultural response to the novel coronavirus, to the need for feminism in African society. You can also hone your writing skills in workshops organised by the festival that will run from October 22 to 25, 2020. akefestival.org



3

India Science Festival

The organisers of India Science Festival are dedicated to bridging the gap between science and society, and firmly believe that India's advancement in terms of its innovations in the field of science and technology is key to building a bright future for the country. ISF offers roundtables around science policy, workshops with scientists, and discussions with great minds around the world, coupled with art, music, dance, and drama to create a wholesome offering. You can even register to showcase your own invention at this extravaganza. The 2021 edition of this festival will be held in January, and the organisers are inviting you to be a part of the 60-plus sessions from your home. indiasciencefest.org

4 VegfestUK London Online

Explore all things vegan and healthy at VegfestUK, a new concept in vegan events that is being hosted online with exhibitors, shopping facilities, livestreaming, headline acts, talks, debates, activism, workshops, music, comedy, and more. The event is being held over a weekend, starting November 14, 2020. There will also be a Trade and Media Day on November 13, which will be open from 10am to 8pm for bona fide trade and media delegates. vegfest.co.uk





5

Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival

The largest festival of its kind in Southern California, the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival brings out a plethora of intellectually stimulating international films in its 36th edition. The festival is presenting an incredible line-up of 225 filmmakers over five weekends, from September 24 to October 31, 2020, including world premieres for both short and feature films such as Kenya Gillespie's *Michelle*, Patrick Nan's *Stasis*, Mallorie Ortega's *The Girl Who Left Home*, and Yuechen Hao's *One Meal*. Those who receive the festival's Golden Reel Award for Narrative/Animated Short Film will also be eligible to submit their work in the Animated Short Film/Live-Action Short Film category of the Academy Awards. vcmedia.org/festival

6

India Film Project

IFP started in 2011 as a one-of-a-kind 50-hour filmmaking project, where creators across Asia came for a selected weekend to shoot, edit, and present their films. Now, nine years later, it has expanded to include workshops for storytelling, design, music, and filmmaking, along with talks by leading personalities from the industry. The festival also provides a platform for creators just starting out to connect with their peers. This year, it will be held online from October 22 to 25, and promises to be an unforgettable experience. indiafilmproject.co/festival



7

World Architecture Festival

One of the world's most prestigious architecture festivals, WAF is organising a digital segment this year from November 30 to December 4. While there will still be an offline festival organised in June 2021 in Lisbon, the online segment aims to bring together the architecture and design community on a digital platform at a crucial and difficult time. The festival will have panel discussions, special WAF prizes, networking events, and talks. Headline speakers will be Jeanne Gang, founder of Studio Gang, Ben van Berkel, founder of UNStudio, and Sir Peter Cook, founder of experimental architecture collective Archigram. worldarchitecturefestival.com

8

Wildlife Conservation Film Festival

WCFF aims to create awareness and inspire wildlife conservation through the powerful visual means of film. It is renowned for its selection of the finest wildlife conservation and natural history films. The festival is based in New York, and due to the continued closure of theatres in the city, the festival is being held online this year—through the entire month of October. There will be an array of 150 documentary films, along with daily live chats with international filmmakers, advocates, and scientists, all of whom are dedicated to preserving and protecting wildlife around the globe. wcff.org



9

Melbourne International Games Week

Whether you're an avid gamer or a professional game developer, the Melbourne International Games Week has something for you. The festival, which is being held from October 3 to 11, 2020, features online conferences on composition and sound art for gaming, and events for the industry and game enthusiasts. Some examples include a workshop hosted by Girls Geek Academy that will teach girls aged six and older how to make their own games, and Game Connect Asia Pacific, which is Australia's premier professional development and networking event for the gaming industry. gamesweek.melbourne



10

Unsound

An annual music festival in Kraków, Poland, Unsound deals with experimental and left-field forms of contemporary music, and related visual arts. Over the years, Unsound has become a safe haven for music deemed too 'weird' for regular festivals, and prides itself on being a platform where artistic ideas can flow freely among musicians, visual artists, curators, journalists, record label owners, and booking agents from around the globe. This year, the festival is being conducted online from October 1 to 11. Along with the festival, Unsound is also focussing on Intermission, a book and album to be released in November 2020, dedicated to the artistic response to the pandemic. unsound.pl

Art Attack

Dubai's renowned art hub, Alserkal Avenue, is back to delight art enthusiasts with new exhibitions, including a colourful one on Mohamed Melehi.



THE INDUSTRIAL AREA of Al Quoz in Dubai is a playground for artists. Christened as Alserkal Avenue, this 46,451-square-metre area is a melting pot of art, culture, gastronomy, and innovation. Cafes, theatre houses, yoga studios, art galleries, and other ventures thrive here. The pièce de résistance, however, is Concrete—designed by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture—which hosts a collection of warehouses that double as

From top:
An untitled work,
circa 1970, on
display at Alserkal
Avenue; a mural
inspired by
Mohamed Melehi's
signature flame-
wave is part of the
latest exhibition.

exhibition spaces. A visit now would mean catching the latest exhibition, *New Waves: Mohamed Melehi and the Casablanca Art School Archives*. Put up by Zamân Books & Curating, the exhibition tells the story of the radical Casablanca Art School, retracing the artist Melehi's career from the 1950s to the 1980s.

The Dubai chapter of the show exhibits Melehi's photographs from his travels as well as highlights from his graphic design studio SHOOOF, and the remarkable murals of the Asilah Festival, which was co-founded by Melehi in 1978 for avant-garde artists from African, Asian, and Arab countries. Another integral part of this showcase is the experimental spirit of the Casablanca Art School that challenged convention, bringing artists from the studio into the streets and public squares of Morocco. It also explores Melehi's in-depth engagement with Afro-Berber art and craft through the collection of Bert Flint, from which he drew artistic inspiration. The exhibition is open to all until October 10 and follows social-distancing guidelines. alserkalavenue.ae



Know the Artist

Mohamed Melehi is widely regarded as an important figure of postcolonial Moroccan art and transnational modernism. Previously unseen works and archives present Melehi as a painter, photographer, muralist, graphic and urban designer, art teacher, and cultural activist. His work has featured in numerous solo exhibitions including a retrospective at the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris in 1995, and The Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York in 1984. He has participated in group shows in Casablanca, Tangiers, Rabat, Marrakesh, Baghdad, Algiers, London, Paris, Rome, Zurich, New York, Chicago, and Montreal. His work is also displayed in international museum collections such as The Centre Pompidou in Beaubourg, Paris; Tate Modern, London; Institut du monde arabe, Paris; and MoMA, New York.

—RASHIMA NAGPAL



Raising the Bar

A stay at Armani Hotel Dubai means treating yourself to sophisticated comfort and stylish luxury with world-class safety protocols in place.

CONVISED BY ITALIAN designer Giorgio Armani in his signature style, Armani Hotel Dubai occupies the concourse level through to level 8, and levels 38 and 39 of Dubai's iconic skyscraper, Burj Khalifa. Right from the property's design to restaurant menus and in-room amenities, all of the offerings have been carefully picked by the global fashion icon himself. With a total of 160 tastefully done rooms and suites, six innovative dining options, exclusive retail outlets, and a holistic spa, the hotel crafts a unique 'Stay with Armani' experience for its guests.

The restaurants, all hugely popular with guests and walk-in diners, offer global cuisines ranging from Japanese and Indian to Mediterranean and authentic Italian. The three exclusive retail outlets here further add to the charm—Armani/Galleria is the first and only place in Dubai where the Giorgio Armani Privé collection is showcased; Armani/Dolci is a confectionery offering the finest artisan chocolates, spreads, aromatic teas, and more; and Armani/Fiori is a boutique selling exquisite fresh flower arrangements and exclusive vases conceptualised by the ace designer.

In tandem with its sister property—Armani Hotel Milano in Milan—the hotel has partnered with Bureau Veritas, a world-leader in testing,



Clockwise from top left: Every corner of Armani Hotel Dubai reflects the design sensibilities of fashion icon Giorgio Armani; enjoy a memorable dining experience with stunning views of Downtown Dubai at Armani/Amal; the hotel occupies 11 floors of Burj Khalifa.

inspection, and certification services, for rolling out a rigorous protection and hygiene protocol. It includes room sanitisation and disinfection; daily treatment of all high-contact areas using certified anti-COVID-19 products; sensor-based sanitising stations and up-to-date information signages across the property; touchless check-in, check-out, and dining experiences; strict adherence to the latest official health and safety guidelines to ensure relaxing wellness experiences at Armani/SPA; and meticulous back-of-the-house cleaning and disinfection procedures conducted by fully trained ambassadors. armanihoteldubai.com

—SUSHMITA SRIVASTAV



▲ *Dragon Coaster at LEGOLAND® Dubai.*
 Below: Bollywood Parks™ Dubai has live shows based on some of Bollywood's biggest blockbusters.



Entertainment Unlimited

Dubai Parks and Resorts, the first integrated entertainment resort in the Middle East, offers that much-needed break and abundant family fun.

WITH FOUR THEME PARKS and over 100 rides and attractions, Dubai Parks and Resorts takes pride in being the largest leisure and entertainment destination in the Middle East. Garnering immense popularity among Indian travellers since its inception in 2016, this fun-filled resort is home to MOTIONGATE™ Dubai, the region's largest Hollywood-inspired theme park; Bollywood Parks™ Dubai, a first-of-its-kind theme

park that has rides and live shows based on some of Bollywood's biggest blockbusters; and LEGOLAND® Dubai, an interactive amusement park for families. The LEGOLAND® Water Park here is the region's first waterpark catering to families with children aged between two and 12 years.

The emirate is also set to inaugurate LEGOLAND® Hotel featuring 250 Lego-themed family rooms. The themed dining, retail, and recreational hub of Riverland™ Dubai acts as the gateway to the destination and is perfect for guests of all ages. For a comfortable stay, choose from nearby luxury stay options like the Polynesian-themed Lapita Hotel Dubai or the funky family hotel, Rove At The Park. dubaiparksandresorts.com —**SUSHMITA SRIVASTAV**

Oasis of Luxury

Located on Bluewaters, a vibrant lifestyle destination in Dubai, Caesars Palace Bluewaters Dubai is ready to welcome travellers again.

BREATHTAKING SUITES, world-class dining, vibrant nightlife, and regal hospitality define a stay at Caesars Palace Bluewaters Dubai. As the hospitality industry gradually resumes operations, the hotel is all set to welcome guests. To ensure a safe experience, the hotel has put in place The Chariot Program, developed in alignment with the COVID-19

directives issued by local authorities. In addition, the resort has been awarded the Bureau Veritas SafeGuard label for following the highest safety and hygiene measures.

The first venture of the legendary Caesars brand in the Middle East, Caesars Palace Bluewaters Dubai is an immersive destination, perfect for travellers seeking sheer indulgence. When you're here, begin your day by lounging in a private cabana, followed by a pampering session at Qua Spa, where luxurious treatments infused with Japanese technology soothe the mind and body. Gourmands must not miss the resort's unique dining offerings—the highlights



▲ *A One Bedroom Ocean Suite at Caesars Palace Bluewaters Dubai.*

▲ *Treat yourself to drinks and snacks at the Neptune Pool & Bar.*

include Gordon Ramsay Hell's Kitchen, the Michelin-starred chef's second immersive restaurant after the one in Las Vegas. An ideal way to end your evening would be at Havana Social Club, which boasts Cuban-inspired drinks and an enviable selection of cigars. caesars.com/dubai

—**RASHIMA NAGPAL**



Off the Charts

With mesmerising landscapes that make up vast playgrounds for adventure, and over 7,000 years of history to reveal, Ras Al Khaimah promises an astounding holiday.



THE NORTHERNMOST EMIRATE of Ras Al Khaimah is blessed with abundant beauty—pristine beaches, lush mangroves, and the majestic Hajar Mountains—that makes for the perfect vacation excuse.

The highest mountain peak in the UAE, Jebel Jais, is the site for an adventure park and makes Ras Al Khaimah a popular destination for adrenaline junkies. There's no dearth of laid-back luxury either in the emirate. From lavish beach resorts to family-friendly hotels, Ras Al Khaimah is home to properties of renowned brands such as Waldorf

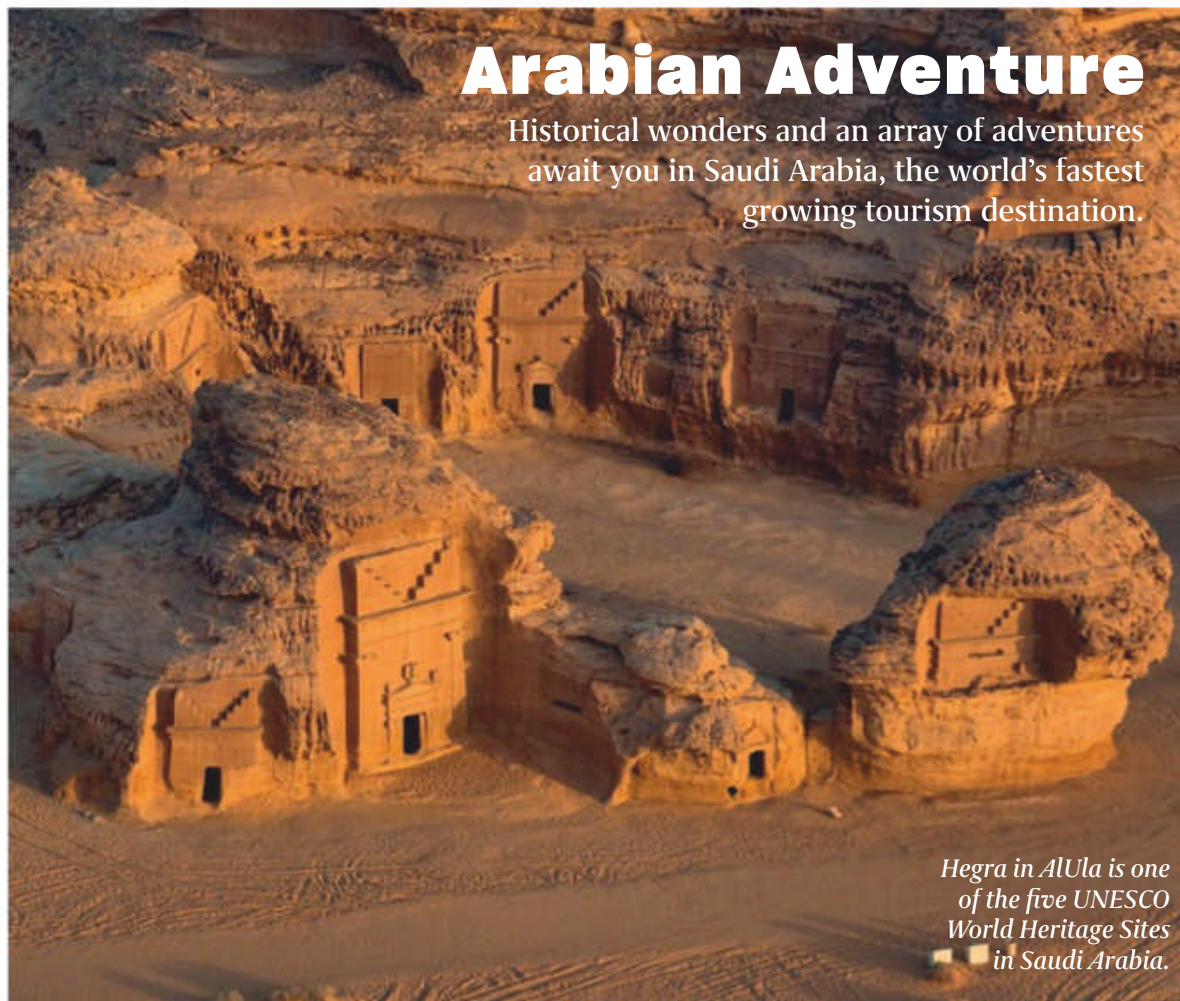
Astoria, Hilton, and Ritz-Carlton. Unparalleled spa experiences like a seaside massage in one of Cove Rotana's beach gazebos make the destination ideal for a relaxed holiday.

In light of the pandemic, the emirate has upped its safety game. The capital is the first city in the world to be certified by leading inspection company, Bureau Veritas, and the emirate is the first in the UAE to secure the Safe Travels Stamp from the World Travel & Tourism Council. visitraskhaimah.com —**RASHIMA NAGPAL**

*From left:
The mountains of
Ras Al Khaimah
are ideal for
adventure sports;
mangroves lend the
emirate a unique
blend of urban and
natural beauty.*

Arabian Adventure

Historical wonders and an array of adventures await you in Saudi Arabia, the world's fastest growing tourism destination.



*Hegra in AlUla is one
of the five UNESCO
World Heritage Sites
in Saudi Arabia.*

HOME TO OTHERWORLDLY landscapes, offbeat experiences, and bespoke hospitality, Saudi Arabia is a treasure trove for the intrepid traveller. The desert kingdom, which threw open its doors to international travellers last year, is ideal for history and adventure enthusiasts, thanks to its vast desert lands, wildlife reserves, and pristine beaches.

Visit the 2,000-year-old mercantile hub of Jeddah, a vibrant metropolis with a fascinating culinary tradition. Jeddah is also home to Al-Balad, one of the five UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Saudi Arabia. Walk along the narrow, labyrinthine streets of the historical town and marvel at the houses built using corals from the Red Sea.

Just 100 kilometres north of Jeddah is the King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC)—one of the country's newest cities—established in 2005. The city offers a range of watersports on the Red Sea, including snorkelling, diving, kayaking, and kiteboarding, and recreational activities including fishing. Head to the Al Souda Mountains in the Asir province for cool mountain breeze and lush greenery.

Situated in the northwest of the country is AlUla, a site of exceptional natural and historical significance. It is home to the UNESCO-honoured Hegra—the ancient city of the Nabataeans known for its 100-plus preserved tombs. visitsaudi.com —**SUSHMITA SRIVASTAV**

The Intelligent Traveller

TIPS AND TRICKS TO HELP YOU TRAVEL SMARTER

Abu Dhabi

THE PERFECT BLEND OF OLD AND NEW

From adrenaline-pumping theme parks to innovative urban museums, buzzing beach bars, and vast heritage treasures, the diverse offerings of UAE's capital never fail to dazzle any kind of traveller. **BY RUPALI DEAN**



The city skyline as seen from Abu Dhabi Marina.

GAVIN HELLIER/ALAMY

ABU DHABI IS AS FLAMBOYANT AS IT IS UNPRETENTIOUS, as avant-garde as it is traditional. When I visited the capital city of the United Arab Emirates, it left me awestruck with its rich history and dramatic evolution—from being a pearling and fishing town to the biggest oil repository in the Emirates to a cosmopolitan hotbed of creativity in the making. Today, Abu Dhabi is recognised not just for its centuries-old heritage and mind-boggling oil reserves, but also for its urban art and design, groundbreaking architecture, and many avenues of leisure. Although there are countless ways to dive into this contemporary yet traditional city, here's a brief guide to its most amazing delights.

GRANDEUR AT ITS BEST

I'M NOT HAPPY about being woken up before the sun has even risen. But this is precisely what my daughter does on the very first day of our vacation. "Wake up and just look outside," she says. As much as I want to drift back to sleep, she's right—the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, gleaming in white marble, is a sight to behold even through my window. Staying true to tradition, we set off early, clad in full-sleeved salwar-kameez and dupatta. The largest, and arguably the most splendid, mosque in UAE is open to the public every day, with tours available at various hours. I am awestruck by the world's largest hand-knotted carpet (5,700 square metres) in the main prayer hall that took around 1,200 artisans two years to create, the Moroccan artwork under the 82 domes, the seven crystal chandeliers featuring Swarovski crystals and galvanised gold, over 1,000 columns around the arcade hand-carved and inlaid with precious and semi-precious stones, and the 96 internal marble columns inlaid with mother-of-pearl vines. Also eye-catching are the four minarets that flaunt a combination of Ottoman, Mamluk, and Fatimid architectural styles. We come back at sunset to see the mosque light up like a dream—its lighting system has been designed to reflect the phases of the moon! szgmc.gov.ae



The columns around the arcade at Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque are hand-carved.

ART ON WATER

DESIGNED BY FRENCH ARCHITECT Jean Nouvel, Louvre Abu Dhabi is a mesmerising medley of concrete, water, and light set up on the sands of Saadiyat Island. Its most stunning feature is a seemingly weightless dome made of 7,850 star-shaped structures that filter the sunlight, much like leaves of a palm tree, and endow the interiors with dappled daylight. The museum features 55 low-rise buildings inspired by the houses of the region, and is surrounded by the sea, thus resembling a medina on an islet. Even inside the 23 gallery spaces, Nouvel's architectural genius shines through. The porticos link with each other exquisitely, telling a cohesive story of human history arranged chronologically rather than geographically. In the wake of the pandemic, the museum has taken ample safety measures, including mandatory pre-booking of arrival time, compulsory masks, social distancing, optional hand gloves, elimination of paper maps and brochures (use the free app), and closure of the Children's Museum. louvrebudhabi.ae



▲ The dome of Louvre Abu Dhabi is made of 7,850 star-shaped structures that scatter the sunlight.

INDULGE YOUR FANTASIES

Warner Bros. World Abu Dhabi is Yas Island's third theme park—an immersive entertainment junction that features five themed lands: Bedrock, Dynamite Gulch, Cartoon Junction, Gotham City, and Metropolis. Join Wile E Coyote in his quest for the Road Runner onboard the Fast and Furry-ous inverted coaster. Or, take on the evil forces of the DC universe with the Justice League on the 5D ride Justice League: Warworld Attacks. Or, immerse yourself in the world of Looney Tunes as you enter the vertical jump tower of Daffy Jet-Propelled Pogo Stick. Feel like a superhero? Teen Titans Training Academy will test and hone your world-saving skills with zip coasters, net climbs, rope bridges, and more. wbworldabudhabi.com



▲ An immersive local experience with an Emirati family in their home.

EMIRATI HOUSE EXPERIENCE

We drive away from the city's twinkling towers into housing areas filled with expansive bungalows. I had found Maitha Essa, a qualified tour guide, on Instagram and booked her Emirati House Experience online. Even as we arrive at the residence, I am not quite sure what to expect. Essa kicks off the evening by serving us a small cup of coffee, accompanied by *khanfaroosh*, an aromatic hotcake characterised by its notes of saffron and cardamom. She asks us to shake the cup to signal when we don't need any more servings. This is just one of the traditional habits and etiquettes of the Emiratis that we learn in the 3.5-hour experience. Essa also shows us the correct way to wear a traditional niqab. This is followed by a traditional local meal of *machboos*, a traditional Arabic rice dish cooked in a chicken broth. There is also *kunafeh*, a dessert made with shredded filo pastry and layered with cheese. This activity is a great choice for those looking for authentic local experiences. airbnb.co.in



WORLD OF HERITAGE

WHAT SETS THE HERITAGE VILLAGE of the Emirates Heritage Club apart from other similar centres I have visited is its comprehensive coverage of the region's history. This old-style interactive desert village looks like a castle made up of museums and informative models. Workshops on metal work, glass blowing, pottery, weaving, and spinning are immersive offerings here. At the end of the village is an imitation of the Hili Archaeological Site, which is famous for hosting some of the richest finds in the area from the Bronze Age. torath.gov.ae

From left: Heritage Village of the Emirates Heritage Club; traditional Emirati jewellery on display at Heritage Village.

MEAL WITH A VIEW

For panoramic views accompanied by afternoon tea and light bites, head to Observation Deck at 300, the highest restaurant in the city. Located on the 74th floor of Tower 2, Jumeirah at Etihad Towers, the place gets its name from its altitude (in metres). jumeirah.com



AT THE BEACH

WE SPEND OUR LAST afternoon at The St. Regis Saadiyat Island Resort. Here, the first ever permanent day-to-night setup of Buddha-Bar Beach dazzles, just like its world-famous seasonal cousins in Baku, Maldives, and the Greek islands of Santorini and Mykonos. The club is divided into four parts: an open deck, a restaurant, a bar, and a lounge. The menu blends pan-Asian flavours with Mediterranean flair, and mixologists whip up dreamy cocktails. I recommend trying an item from the Japanese robata charcoal grill—wagyu makes an excellent choice with a shiso chimichurri, baby corn, and sweet *rocoto* sauce accompanying it. Apart from resident and guest DJs, sunsets at Buddha-Bar Beach are rendered with saxophone sessions. buddhabarbeachabudhabi.com; marriott.com





Regal monuments of Jaipur like Kesargarh Palace wear a shimmer of light during Diwali.

Dressed to the Nines

A bold jewel tone coupled with an understated accent will make you look like a showstopper at any celebration. **BY PRIYANKA CHAKRABARTI**



1. HAIRCARE

Clay Pomade Hair Styler, **Firsthand Supply**, ₹1,469 (88 ml); firsthandsupply.com

2. WATCH

Limited Edition from Presage, **Seiko Watches**, ₹1,78,989; seikowatches.co.in

3. POCKET SQUARE

Multicolour Printed Pocket Square, **Eton**, ₹7,500; thecollective.in

4. CARD HOLDER

Double Sided Zipped Card & Coin Holder, **Aspinal of London**, ₹9,183; aspinaloflondon.com

5. SUNGLASSES

Thomas Pilot Sunglasses, **TOM FORD**, ₹31,371; harrods.com

6. COLOGNE

Vetiver Pour Homme Cologne, **Roja Parfums**, ₹27,845 (150 ml); harrods.com

7. SKINCARE

North For Men Urban Shaving Foam, **Oriflame**, ₹479 (200 ml); in.oriflame.com

8. SHOES

Simon Double-Buckle Leather Derby Shoes, **Santoni**, ₹44,952; selfridges.com

9. CLOTHES

Spring/Resort 2020, **Amit Aggarwal**, price on request; amitaggarwal.com



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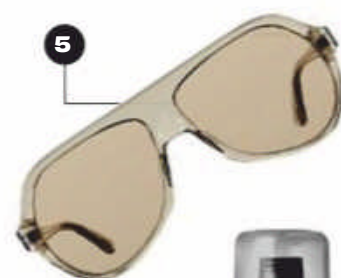
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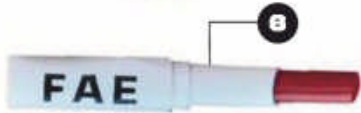
Durga Puja is the most popular festival in West Bengal.



Festive Fervour

This October, let nostalgia weaved with a dash of glam define your style.

BY PRIYANKA CHAKRABARTI



1. NECKLACE

Lord Ganesha Printed Silver Neckpiece, **Sangeeta Boochra**, ₹22,620; amazon.in

2. WALLET

Ikat Wave Women's Mini Wallet, **Zouk**, ₹759; zouk.co.in

3. SKINCARE

Wonder Body Cream, **LR Wonder Company**, ₹2,800 (125 ml); lrwonderindia.com

4. BROOCH

Swarovski Marcasite Green Pendant Cum Brooch, **Somma**, ₹7,200; vogally.in

5. SUNGLASSES

VE 4387 - Medusa Icon, **Versace**, price on request; sunglasshut.com

6. LIPSTICK

Buildable Matte Lipstick, **FAE Beauty**, ₹600; faebeauty.in

7. BAG

Freesia Sling Bag, **The Leather Garden**, ₹6,240; theleathergarden.com

8. EYESHADOW

Konscious Vegan Eyeshadow Palette, **KIKO MILANO**, ₹1,690; nykaa.com

9. CLOTHES

Fanflower Printed Ruffle Sari, **Arpita Mehta**, ₹50,000; arpitamehtaofficial.com



MOMENT OF TRIUMPH

This year, luxury watches have come out in batches due to the global pandemic and ongoing local lockdowns. The last set of watches to be presented was at Geneva Watch Days 2020. Here are five of the hottest launches. **BY MITRAJIT BHATTACHARYA**



1. OYSTER PERPETUAL DATEJUST 31 ROLEX

Rolex recently rolled out four new white Rolesor versions of the Oyster Perpetual Datejust 31 that combine Oystersteel and 18K white gold. On this variant of the collection, a diamond-set bezel surrounds an aubergine, sunray-finish dial with 18K white gold Roman numerals—the VI set with 11 diamonds. The power reserve is nearly 55 hours. ₹10,53,400

2. ALUMINIUM CHRONOGRAPH BVLGARI

This is a reinterpretation of first-generation models from 1998 and speaks a universal language that goes beyond gender, age, eras, and trends. Like the 1998 Bulgari Chronograph, the 2020 model displays a tri-compax layout and panda-style dial with black sub-counters and a warm grey background. The diameter of the aluminium case is 40 mm, and the titanium caseback has a black DLC treatment that is also used on the push pieces and the crown. ₹2,87,000

3. BLAST ULYSSE NARDIN

The new Blast is a robust, open-work, technological wonder that flaunts strong masculine lines. The geometry of the tessellated horns is intentionally reminiscent of stealth aircraft. The new transparent and powerful automatic silicium tourbillon sits in an X-shaped cage. Some brand emblematic codes have been included—the rectangular frame, the three-horned signature fixing on the strap, the smooth coloured bezel, the vertical placement of the movement with the barrel at 12 o'clock, and the flying tourbillon at 6 o'clock.

Price on request

4. COSMOS INFINITY EDITION GIRARD-PERREGAUX

This limited-edition watch features three exceptional complications. Firstly, a lyre-shaped tourbillon cage held in position by the brand's signature Neo Bridge. Secondly, a terrestrial globe positioned at 3 o'clock indicates day and night. Thirdly, a celestial globe displays the constellations of the zodiac. Both globes are formed of polished onyx and decorated by hand. *Limited to eight pieces; price on request*

5. MANERO AUTODATE LOVE CARL F. BUCHERER

This new launch is a joint creation of Carl F. Bucherer and brand ambassador Li Bingbing, and comes in nine variations. Three timepieces from the collection feature vibrant red dials adorned with a fine sprinkling of gold dust. The dial is framed by a case in rose gold, or in the case of the refined two-tone version, in stainless steel and 18K rose gold. The models are complemented by a red Louisiana leather strap or a stainless-steel rose-gold bracelet. All nine models feature a 35.5 mm case along with a delicate leaf motif adorning the small-seconds subdial. *Price on request*



RETAIL REVELRY

The festive season has arrived, as have exciting new gadgets, top-of-the-line gear, and immersive home entertainment options.

BY VAIBHAV SHARMA



1. HEADPHONES

Sony WH-1000XM4

The latest version of Sony's top-of-the-line ANC headset offers larger and lighter ear cups, a proximity sensor for auto-pause, Bluetooth 5.0, quick charging, GPS-based Adaptive Sound Control, and AI-powered DSEE Extreme audio upscaling that makes compressed audio sound even better. ₹29,990; sony.co.in

2. ACTION CAMERA

GoPro HERO9 Black

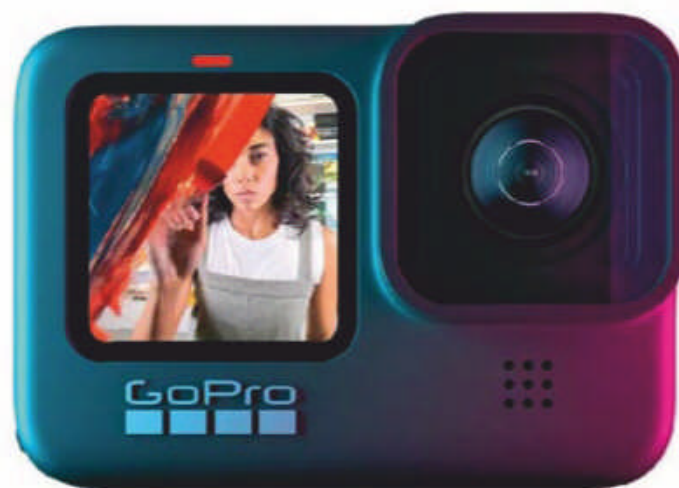
GoPro's latest flagship might be the perfect action camera: the HERO9 Black is built around a new sensor that delivers 5K video (at 30fps), 240fps slow-motion,

and 20MP photos. The new front display should help vloggers get better footage—there's improved stabilisation and time-lapse recording. You can also pick up the optional Max Mod lens to shoot super-stabilised wide-angle footage on your travels. ₹49,500; gopro.com

3. HEALTH TRACKER

Fitbit Sense

Fitbit calls the Sense an 'Advanced Health Watch' for good reason. This new smartwatch brims with wellness features that you'll love. There's GPS, swim tracking, automatic activity recognition, Spotify control, and workout intensity



mapping, all of which is pretty standard for a Fitbit watch, but there's some cool new stuff, too: an electrodermal sensor for stress monitoring, ECG, a temperature sensor, and 'mood logging' via the Fitbit app. ₹34,999; fitbit.com/in

4. TABLET

iPad Air

The fourth generation of the iPad Air is here, and it kicks things up a notch. You get Apple's A14 Bionic processor with its cutting-edge graphics and AI processing abilities, USB-C charging, and in fantastic news for artists who don't want to splurge on the iPad Pro, Apple Pencil support. And yes, it's thin, with narrow bezels and a near edge-to-edge display. From ₹54,900; apple.com/in



CONSOLE CONUNDRUM

Xbox Series X Vs. PlayStation 5

At a time when people are spending more time in their homes, both Microsoft and Sony have unleashed new consoles. The Xbox Series X (₹49,990) and Sony Playstation 5 (USD499.99; India pricing yet to be announced at the time of going to print) are on their way with pretty evenly matched specs. Both come with new ergonomic controllers, powerful processors and graphics chips, support for 8K TVs, and backwards compatibility for games. Sony might have the edge with its platform exclusives, but for some gamers, the Xbox Game Pass subscription service (from ₹489 per month) might nudge Microsoft ahead.





Private Affair

The ultra luxury segment was already an emerging trend in the premium travel space, but it has gained momentum in the post-lockdown era. Private island buyouts, charter planes, and remote destinations are the buzzwords among the affluent.

BY RIAAN JACOB GEORGE

BILLIONAIRES, MOVIE STARS, and oligarchs tend to prefer anonymity and exclusivity on their holidays. Sample these vacations: a leading Indian business family (names withheld on request) chartering a plane to Cheval Blanc's private island in the Maldives, Shah Rukh Khan renting a ₹2.2 lakh-a-night luxury villa on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills through Airbnb, and Lady Gaga's ₹7.3 lakh-a-night Airbnb villa in the California desert. The pandemic may have hit pause on everyone's plans for a bit, but this ultra luxury segment has only seen a discernible spike around the globe post the lockdowns. Big spenders are choosing to fly private, avoid cookie-cutter five-star suites, and travel to exclusive destinations. This spike in demand makes sense at a time when people are seeking physical distancing more than ever before.

TOP: COURTESY OF CHEVAL BLANC RANDHELI



Clockwise from left: Cheval Blanc's private island in the Maldives is an understated property that is seeing a lot of interest from HNIs; Çırağan Palace Kempinski Istanbul is the favourite spot of global political leaders; they often arrive at the property in private choppers.

SECRET GETAWAYS

According to industry experts, the prevailing trends in India—while the super rich wait for European luxury getaways to open up again—involve private charters to domestic destinations (especially Goa), island buyouts in the Maldives, exclusive properties on island destinations and driving destinations around the major Indian cities.

Aparna Manghnani, director of East West Travels & Tours, caters to some of India's leading HNIs, including Bollywood celebrities. She reveals, "What we are looking for these days is 'back of beyond' properties, offbeat experiences, where my clientele can go incognito and fly under the radar of social media." There is even a 'no social media' caveat that she signs with her UHNI clients, which means that for certain hotel recommendations, they cannot post on social media in order to retain the 'secrecy' of her offering and as a general courtesy to other UHNI clients.

Commenting on the increased demand for private charters post lockdown, Siddharth Bhatia, director, FSR Travels, says that the prices have increased by three to four times



because of reduced supply. Bhatia, who manages the travels of leading business families in the country (he is not at liberty to divulge names), adds that the length of stays has gone up, and people want only direct flights. “From three to four nights in the Maldives, my UHNI clients now tend to stay for six to seven nights.”

BIG-TICKET SPENDS

The segment’s demands manifest in the form of island buyouts, super premium all-suite hotels above the five-star positioning, heritage wings, private entrances, exclusive transfers (read helicopters, private jets), butlers, and a strong brand credibility for hygiene. Where, then, are these celebrities, sportspeople, heads of state, and industrialists holidaying? Maldives is synonymous with this clientele, and at the top of the spectrum is the understated Cheval Blanc Randheli Private Island (chevalblanc.com), a four-bedroom villa where you are the only one on the island (a Google search indicates a tariff of ₹3.6 lakh per night in early October after taxes). Similarly, One&Only Reethi Rah’s (oneandonlyresorts.com) three-bedroom Grand Sunset Residence with pool shows a tariff of ₹4.6 lakh (including taxes) per night in early October on Booking.com. Hotelier Sonu Shivdasani, the blue-eyed boy of hospitality and the man behind Soneva Kiri (soneva.com) in Thailand, requires you to take the hotel’s own plane and land on the private Soneva landing strip before enjoying one of the villas. The top



▲ *Big spenders are choosing to fly private to tropical islands for exclusive holidays. Below: The Four Seasons Tented Camp Golden Triangle in Thailand is one of the most exclusive all-villa properties of the brand.*

end of Soneva Kiri’s offerings is a six-bedroom villa, which shows an early October price of ₹9.9 lakh per night on Booking.com. Private islands like the Four Seasons Private Island At Voavah (fourseasons.com), a seven-bedroom experience, are also sought after.

Bhatia shares some examples of Maldives itineraries that he has organised—a five-night full-board stay at Soneva Jani in the Maldives at ₹19 lakh for a couple, and a seven-night stay at the same property with charter from Mumbai at ₹22 lakh per couple. “Now, we are also working with 55-seater private jets where we are able to offer Maldives packages starting at ₹12 lakh,” Bhatia says, adding that there are many takers.



FROM TOP: SHUTTERSTOCK; COURTESY OF THE FOUR SEASONS TENTED CAMP GOLDEN TRIANGLE

This increased demand for ultra-luxe hospitality echoes with other nationalities as well. The Four Seasons Tented Camp Golden Triangle (*fourseasons.com*) in Thailand is one of the most exclusive all-villa properties from the Canadian brand. Long considered to be the favourite spot of global political leaders, Çırağan Palace Kempinski Istanbul (*kempinski.com*) boasts a heritage wing with lavish suites, which is disconnected from its five-star property. Presidents, kings, and Hollywood stars have arrived here by chopper or the wing's private jetty, and enjoyed the comforts of a restored Ottoman suite, private dining experiences, and a royal hammam. Airbnb (*airbnb.com*), too, is seeing takers for its top-end offerings, such as a five-bedroom Parisian apartment close to the Arc de Triomphe at ₹7.8 lakh a night, and a three-bedroom villa on Dubai's Nikki Beach at ₹6.2 lakh a night.

MARKETING AND INVESTING

This area of hospitality also seems more resilient than others, especially in the current challenging times. Madan Prasad Bezbaruah, secretary general, Hotel Association of India (HAI), says, "Even during the pandemic,

One&Only Reethi Rah's Grand Sunset Residence is accessible only by a private road. Below: Remote spots like the Faroe Islands are high on the UHNI list.



there have been openings of luxury hotel properties, which is an indicator of consumer demand on the back of increased spending capacity. While the pandemic significantly dented the industry, the continued resilience of the sector helped in attracting investments within the ultra luxury segment, which was seen as a durable space. We are highly confident in this upper upscale sector of business as it tends to be more recession-proof."

Yeishan Goel, CEO at Travel and Hospitality Representation Services, also sheds light on the post-lockdown consumption behaviour of the UHNI community. "The purchase decision of the uber luxe traveller is obviously influenced by heightened COVID-19 safety protocols, possibility of fast-track transits, availability of contactless experiences, private dining, and dedicated service staffing as much as possible. It is almost paradoxical that responsible tourism and private jet vacations are gaining traction at the same time," he says.

While a major chunk of UHNI bookings comes from brick and mortar travel agents and specialised itinerary curators, a luxury-specialised online travel agency such as Luxury Escapes India (*luxuryescapes.com*), too, has seen a market shift. The country head, Arun Ashok, offers some perspective, "While the travel sector as a whole has taken a beating, Luxury Escapes India recorded spikes in certain categories. Private pool villas have seen a 160 per cent jump in purchases, since most resorts are operating sans swimming pools. Small luxury boutique resort buyouts are par for the course. And flying private to remote spots like Madagascar and the Faroe Islands is the new equivalent of being spotted at the Cannes Festival." Jeorg Dreschel, board member at Relais & Châteaux (*relaischateaux.com*), insists that a niche, filtered marketing strategy is required to target this segment. He is quick to explain that "the criteria of an ultra luxury traveller goes beyond luxury and branded hotel comforts to something authentic and unique."✦





Bala Sarda

EVERYBODY'S CUP OF TEA

Fourth-generation tea entrepreneur Bala Sarda parted ways with his family business to set up VAHDAM Teas at the age of 23. He spills the tea on the global reach of his home-grown brand, making it to Oprah's favourites, and a new travel range.

BY RASHIMA NAGPAL

Were you always keen on carrying forward your family legacy?

While tea has been an integral part of my life, I didn't think of carrying forward my family legacy in the tea business. I have always been very entrepreneurial. Even in the early days, I wanted to create value and do something of my own. In college, I founded two student start-ups. Soon after I graduated, I started looking for my 'big idea'. While I was brainstorming, incidentally, I ended up going to my family's holiday home in Darjeeling—the land where the world's finest teas grow. I visited the tea estates and got a chance to interact with various stakeholders in the industry, including veterans, tea growers, and even the customers. It was then that I realised there was something amiss. I saw an opportunity to add value. To gain a better understanding of the tea industry and its supply chain, I decided to join my family business for a couple of years, and finally in 2015, I launched VAHDAM (vahdamteas.in).

What was the thought process behind VAHDAM Teas?

India grows some of the finest teas in the world. In fact, it makes up 25–30 per cent of the world's overall production. Unfortunately, there has been no home-grown brand to come out of India. Also, most Indian teas pass through multiple middlemen and are exported as a commodity to foreign brands and companies, who then add value and ultimately sell it to consumers globally. Additionally, tea is also the second largest employer of organised labour in India. Due to the absence of a home-grown brand and value addition, this massive industry is plagued with issues like low wages. This is why I decided to create VAHDAM Teas.

What is your first memory of a tea estate?

Most of my earliest holiday memories are, in fact, travelling to tea estates in Darjeeling and staying at the manager's bungalow. I still remember waking up to mist and the fresh aroma of



tea leaves in the air. I would start my day with the freshest cup of tea, walk through the garden, and watch the art of plucking tea.

Which countries do you consistently supply tea to?

VAHDAM supplies to over 100 countries—majorly to USA, UK, Australia, Germany, and India.

Are there any traditional processes or practices that you adhere to?

Manual sorting of teas. We still do it the old way using human skill and dexterity. Even though there are machines available for the same, mechanised sorting can never replicate or match human sorting—only the human eye can differentiate between the golden tip and the brown stalk/leaf.

What are the sustainability practices you follow?

We're a certified carbon-neutral brand. We measure our carbon footprint from the farms in India to our customers' doorsteps, globally. We then make carbon offsets via our investments in renewable energy and energy efficiency initiatives in India. We've been certified by Climate Neutral ([climateneutral.org](https://www.climateneutral.org/)), a not-for-profit based in USA. We're also a certified plastic-neutral brand. We recycle an amount of plastic equivalent to our packaging. Also, we take regular initiatives to reduce our

plastic consumption without compromising on product quality. We're certified by rePurpose Global ([repurpose.global](https://www.repurpose.global/)), an independent body based in USA. Under our TEAch Me® Social Initiative, one per cent of our revenue is directed towards the education of our farmers' children.

Tell us about the tea estates you work with, and the varieties you produce.

We source teas from almost 100 tea estates in the tea growing regions of Darjeeling, Assam, Nilgiri, and Kangra. We offer over 100 blends spread across 150–175 SKUs, including green, black, white, oolong, chai, and turmeric teas. They are a combination of single-estate teas and signature blends crafted by master blenders.

▲ *The company sources teas from nearly 100 tea estates located in Darjeeling, Assam, Nilgiri, and Kangra.*

Sarda wants to see the Northern Lights in Scandinavia.



What is your favourite cup of tea?

A cup of pure, unblended Darjeeling second flush tea, also known as the Darjeeling Summer Tea. A total delight.

What sets the teas of India apart?

There's absolutely no doubt that Darjeeling is the world's finest tea growing region, and it is the first to get a GI indication. Darjeeling teas are popularly known as the 'champagne of teas'. Assam is known to grow some of the finest, full-bodied, malty teas. It gives the world their 'chai teas'.

Your brand featured in Oprah's Favourite Things two years in a row. How did that happen?

Oprah is an inspiration for millions around the globe, and she is a tea connoisseur. She had once said, "The first time I had real chai was in India." No Indian brand had made it to her list, and we couldn't see why it wasn't possible. Even though it seemed far-fetched then, we were very confident and had full faith in our product. Being a tea company from India, we were thrilled and honoured to know that she had found her favourite chai in the VAHDAM Teas collection.

Tell us about your travel range of teas.

After putting in a lot of thought and effort, we designed a collection of travel-based tea gifts inspired by five cities of the world. The boxes showcase the landmarks of the cities, and the teas inside have been inspired by the respective tea cultures. As the brand travels around the world, it collects stories and shares them with consumers. These stories adorn the box.

Is there a country you'd like to explore but haven't gotten around to yet?

One of the Scandinavian countries to watch the Northern Lights. ✦



Tarun Tahiliani

FASHION DESIGNER

A LIFETIME OF CREATIVITY

Celebrating 25 years in fashion, Tarun Tahiliani recently kicked off a digital fashion tour with what was his second online show since the lockdown. He speaks to **SUSHMITA SRIVASTAV** about the new normal and the need for sustainable fashion.

How was your experience of a digital fashion show?

The Blenders Pride Fashion Tour (blenderspridefashiontour.com) has come around in the digital format for the first time, and I completed 25 years in the industry—it was the perfect timing to celebrate the pride we share in using Indian craft in contemporary ways. Fashion has taken me to places I never thought I'd go and taught me things I never knew. It gave me my identity and pride. So it was a wonderful opportunity to celebrate that with *INFINITE: My Identity, My Pride*. A lot of work went into creating it—taking vintage pictures from the past (including that of my mother's), shooting close-up photographs of embroideries, throwing in poetry, questioning identity, showcasing heritage. It wasn't just models walking up and down like our last virtual show.

Your first virtual endeavour was *Pieces of You*. What were the challenges you faced?

The first time, we were a lot more hysterical. We were particular about keeping fewer people in

the room and maintaining social distancing. All the models were given separate rooms; they came out only to shoot. It was like a military operation. But the results were great, because people had been in lockdown and they were hugely appreciative of the show. The most amazing thing about a digital show is that you can connect with so many more people around the world, and you have control over the footage that goes out—the best shots, the best lights, the best angles.

How did you go about finalising 25 pieces to show your journey?

I sketched 25 pieces that were based on the techniques we've loved or the collections that have stayed with us over the years. There were concept saris, lehengas with ornate *odhnis*, caped cholis, and draped dresses. We didn't need to be entirely western or Indian when we could be a good mix of both.

During a global pandemic and nationwide lockdown, where have you been drawing your inspiration from?

I draw my inspiration from my everyday life. I think my next collection might be called *Anarchy*, taking its name from William Dalrymple's book, as I think we are living in an anarchic time. During the pandemic, we are going through an overload of information coming at us from all directions. So, inspiration is never a problem. It's the thought that you need to make it happen.

Thoughts on sustainable fashion?

We are moving towards designs that need mostly handwork. We anyway do not use much synthetic [material] except for a few imported fabrics for designs where we can't use the natural ones. We do a lot of printing digitally because there's not much effluent waste attached to that. There's little use of chemicals. The biggest waste our industry produces is craft fabrics, which we recycle or send to be used by orphanages or women who make blankets or clothes to earn a living. Beautiful handmade things are meant to be treasured. We don't want to discard what's left. We want it to be used and loved. taruntahiliani.com ✦

Gaurav Taneja

YOUTUBER

FLYING HIGH

In the wake of the lockdown, pilot and YouTuber Gaurav Taneja not only managed to launch his third channel—on live gaming—but also broke the world record of gaining the swiftest 1,00,000 subscribers, in merely 98 minutes. **SUSHMITA SRIVASTAV** caught up with the ‘Flying Beast’ to talk about his journey, his love for fitness, and the recent shift in his content.

BRASS TACKS

BUCKET LIST DESTINATION
Rishikesh

LUXURY DESTINATION
Maldives

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS
Laptop and camera gear

MOST MEMORABLE TRIP
Pahalgam, Kashmir

How did you become a YouTube influencer in multiple domains?

It started with a fluke when Facebook launched its live streaming feature. People used to ask me about the science behind my workout routine, as I used to take part in a lot of state-level and national championships while being in a full-time job. One day, a friend randomly started live-streaming my workout routine, and in the evening, I got many calls of appreciation. So, I grew a little confident and started going live during my workout sessions. Soon, I began to make packaged videos, talking about workout plans and fitness tips. Cut to December 2016, FitMuscleTV was born. And a year later, I launched Flying Beast, my channel on lifestyle and travel. Recently, Rasbhari Ke Papa—my live gaming channel—has come into being.

How different is a live gaming channel from your other ventures?

Usually, I shoot a vlog during the day and post it at night. Whatever doesn't work gets edited out. But the same can't be done during a live stream. I love the spontaneity of it. Also, it's a much better way of connecting with people.

Which one do you enjoy the most?

The three are very different in terms of approach and challenges. A fitness video takes me 40–45 minutes. The only catch is to pick which issue to address and give effective fitness solutions. Lifestyle/travel vlogs are largely unplanned but require time for packaging. And gaming live demands that I engage with the viewers and entertain them. It's difficult to pick one, but I think I enjoy [making] fitness videos because it's rewarding to hear that my videos brought a desired change in someone's life.

As a lifestyle and travel YouTuber, how have you adapted your content to this situation?

When nationwide lockdown and travel bans were announced, I felt like the year had gone to waste. But I started posting videos of routine life, and surprisingly, my channel has seen an exponential growth that none of us expected during this period. +

Katrina Fernandez

ECOLOGIST

FOR A GREENER FUTURE

Is it possible to live sustainably in the midst of a pandemic? Ecologist and wildlife biologist Katrina Fernandez, who runs a conservation project in Goa, speaks to **NOLAN LEWIS** about living in harmony with nature.



From left: Katrina Fernandez is the director of Wild Otters Research. The organisation is based on Chorão Island, Goa.

What does your organisation do?

Wild Otters Research (wildotters.com) is committed to understanding ecosystem dynamics and community ecology, with current emphasis on otters, bats, and humans in different habitat types and landscapes in Goa and Karnataka. Our projects aim to fill data deficiencies for various species. Although we primarily work outside of protected areas in semi-urban, human-modified, or human-dominated landscapes, we also work in protected areas in the Western Ghats of Karnataka. Besides pure research, both education and outreach are integral components of what we do. This includes internship programmes and training workshops for students, professors, and even the government.

What are the volunteerism opportunities with Wild Otters Research?

We run an online course every three weeks for people who are interested in learning about ecological research and gaining new skills. At present, we do not

have any on-ground opportunities due to the COVID-19 situation. But hopefully, when the crisis is over, people can visit our field base and sign up for a residency programme, designed in a way that anyone can come, experience, and learn.

What recommendations do you have to live in harmony with wildlife?

As humans, we need to understand that we are not separate from the ecological system. We are very much a working component, and our existence depends on its proper functioning. A shift in the current human-centric thought process would help immensely, and for that to happen, people need to be more aware of the life around them. Identify the wildlife around you—birds, bees, frogs, reptiles, insects—and try to understand their role in the system. Now imagine those animals no longer exist to perform their roles; what happens then? The aim of this

exercise is to create value for our surroundings. As humans, we like to protect what we think has value.

How is the COVID-19 crisis affecting otter habitats?

We need protective equipment to keep people safe, and it is unfortunate that most of it is made of plastic. I've seen latex gloves and masks floating down River Mandovi. This is going to affect wildlife in numerous ways. Also, these plastics break down into microplastics that will later enter the food chain and our own bodies.

Is there a solution to this?

Consumers should be cognisant of the type of masks they buy. The use-and-throw surgical masks should be the last on anyone's list. Buy something that is effective yet reusable. These might have a higher upfront cost, but in the long run, they're much more sustainable, both financially and environmentally. +

Sahar Parham Al Awadhi

CHEF

NO RESERVATIONS

Chef Sahar Parham Al Awadhi gets her culinary instincts from her mother, but she has crafted her own sustainable approach to ingredients. The pastry chef at Burj Al Arab spills the beans on the pressures and joys of crafting sweet surprises at one of the most luxurious addresses in the UAE. **BY SUMEET KESWANI**

You're often called the first female Emirati pastry chef. Was there a glass ceiling you had to break?

Absolutely, three of them: female, Emirati, and chef. To be working in a male-dominated industry as a female chef was a lot of work—physically, mentally, and emotionally. I had to make sure I was breaking the stereotype that Emiratis are handed things on a silver platter. I put in sleepless nights, and my feet have been hurting for six years now!

What kind of food did you grow up eating? Does that influence you today?

Lots of home-cooked meals. My mother is a great cook with an amazing palate. Her traditional recipes are incredible, but she is always adventurous with food (so is my father). Even when we ate out, she would try to replicate it at home, which had a huge influence on the way I looked at food. The most distinct one is a fermented fish sauce called *mehyawa* that she has been making for years. When I was young, I would stand next to my mother just to stir what was cooking in the pot.

Tell us a memorable gastronomic adventure.

The most recent one was in Mumbai at Masque

(masquerestaurant.com).

Chef Prateek Sadhu is changing the way diners experience Indian, particularly Kashmiri, cuisine. The first course was pani puri with pineapple, and the combination just made sense. Another course was a barramundi fish; a few courses later, he used the fish skin to make chocolate petit fours. The whole philosophy resonated with me.

What is your food philosophy?

My food philosophy is centred on ingredients. I am a huge advocate of using local ingredients and taking a sustainable approach. We make almost everything from scratch, and that allows us to do three things: make sure everything we produce is up to our standards; know exactly what we're putting in our products; and follow a low-waste philosophy. If we need parts of a fruit for garnishing a tart, the rest of it will go into making a home-made jam for our scones.

What are the challenges of being the pastry chef at Burj Al Arab?

It is a challenge, but it is also rewarding. The hotel's ethos is 'only at the Burj' (anytime, anywhere, anything), so there is never a dull day at work. People come with high expectations, so it's our responsibility to hold up our

Sahn Eddar in Burj Al Arab offers a sweet selection of desserts.

end of the deal. My duty is to make sure that no matter where you go in the hotel, any pastry you have is absolutely delicious, starting from your morning croissant to the final cookie at the end of your evening meal.

What are your favourite things to do in Dubai?

Alserkal Avenue (alserkalavenue.ae) is great. I love going there to see what restaurant pop-ups are in situ and what the chefs are up to. March is a great art month in Dubai—there are installations all around the city, but my favourite one is the Sikka Art Festival at Al Fahidi district in Old Dubai. And Mobius Design Studio has a rooftop feast as a closing dinner that I love! jumeirah.com +



Nora Fatehi is Canadian-born and Moroccan by descent.

ON HER: Gold thora dress, **Rima Cherfane**; maroon cape, **Pink Peacock Couture**; Afghani choker, long gold Afghani neckpiece, and vintage Afghani earrings used as hair accessory, **Amama**; vintage gold hand cuffs and shell anklets, **Creylons by Mansi**; juttis, **Stoffa**.





From Morocco WITH LOVE

NORA FATEHI ANNOUNCED HERSELF IN BOLLYWOOD WITH THE SONG *DILBAR* AND THEN WENT ON TO CARVE A NICHE FOR HERSELF WITH HER UNIQUE CHOREOGRAPHY AND FIERCE DANCING STYLE. SHE SPEAKS TO **SUMEET KESWANI** ABOUT HER MOROCCAN ROOTS, STRADDLING TWO SIMILAR CULTURES, AND OF COURSE, HER TRAVELS—BACK TO HER ORIGINS AND FORWARD TO NEW FRONTIERS.

PHOTOGRAPHER **TEJAS NERURKAR**
STYLIST **MANEKA HARISINGHANI**
HAIR & MAKEUP **MARCELO PEDROZO**



Fatehi says that Moroccan and Indian cultures are very similar, with many identical elements between them.

ON HER: Gold thora dress, **Rima Cherfane**; maroon cape, **Pink Peacock Couture**; Afghani choker, long gold Afghani neckpiece, and vintage Afghani earrings used as hair accessory, **Amama**; vintage gold hand cuffs and shell anklets, **Creyons by Mansi**; juttis, **Stoffa**.

every few years while I was growing up. I had plenty of revelations of how exotic that culture was and how, luckily, it had influenced my personality.

You once told someone you “feel like an Indian.” What makes you say that?

It’s not easy to explain; it’s something you feel in your soul. It doesn’t take away from my Moroccan roots at all. In fact, Moroccan and Indian cultures are very similar, and there are plenty of identical elements. Maybe, in my past life, I was an Indian artist, who knows, but this inexplicable connection is through art. I am very lucky to be able to feel love and connection to both the countries. The differences and similarities have shaped me as an international artist, and being able to create representation on a platform like Bollywood is huge.

Morocco is big on Bollywood. Your thoughts on that trend?

Moroccans have grown up watching Hindi movies for decades. The biggest impact happened during the eras of Amitabh Bachchan and Shah Rukh Khan. Bollywood was extremely relatable for the Moroccan audience, and many even learnt to speak Hindi. Bollywood songs are played in weddings, parties, gatherings, etc., and there are many die-hard fans of stars like SRK, Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, Kajol, and Madhuri Dixit.

Did Bollywood have a big influence on you while growing up? Was the Hindi film industry always on the cards?

I used to watch Hindi songs on repeat as I was mesmerised with the way music and dance were portrayed in Bollywood. It helped me groom myself as an artist and enhance my way of performing, especially

Q & A

You’re Moroccan by descent. Which aspects of your life reflect those roots?

I am from Toronto, but my ethnicity is Moroccan, and I believe one can notice my Moroccan traits in my daily life, especially when I’m cooking. When I was growing up, my mom used to cook a lot of Moroccan dishes for us, and now, I tend to mirror that as an adult at home. It reminds me of my childhood.

When did you first visit Morocco? What surprised you about the place?

I don’t remember my first visit, because, my mom tells me, I was eight months old at the time. But we used to visit Morocco during our summer vacations

The singer-dancer wants to unite different cultures and languages through art.

ON HER: Regina dress, **Rima Cherfane**; gold face chain, **House of Tuhina**; wooden bracelets, **Rara Avis by Sonal Verma**; gold harrieta cuff, **Deepa Gurnani**.





FATEHI'S FAVOURITES

NOVEL

THE ALCHEMIST BY PAULO COELHO

BOLLYWOOD MOVIE

DEVDA

PERFORMER

BEYONCÉ

COMFORT FOOD

TAJINE, PASTA



Fatehi wants to make the same impact in acting that she has made in dance.

ON HER: Black gown, **Monisha Jaising**; cape, **Falguni and Shane Peacock**; jewellery, **House of Tuhina**; headgear, **Marce Pedrozo**; heels, **Jimmy Choo**.

when I performed on stage in school. The film industry was always on the cards in my head, but I just didn't know at that time which film industry and in which country. Destiny guided me to India. And I knew immediately that this was it.

Ever since *Dilbar* catapulted you to fame, you came to be known for it and many of your later songs have followed a sensual choreography routine as well. How do you feel about that image?

I believe the many songs I've done since *Dilbar* have created a mark in the world of dance. The songs are high-standard, dance performance-oriented visuals with hook steps that will be remembered for decades to come, inspiring non-dancers and dancers to push themselves. It's all about strong dance performances and fierce moves—that's what I'm known for. Sensuality is a part of femininity, and I make sure to package it gracefully. I have raised the bar in dance moves, and that has always been one part of my game plan, along with other things I would like to do here before my time is up as an artist.

What's your dream project?

I have many dream projects! I wish to work with Sanjay Leela Bhansali one day. I also want to make the same impact in acting that I have made in dance. I want to be that artist who leaves her mark as an all-rounder, breaking stereotypes, making her dreams come true, inspiring billions, and representing and pushing for diversity.

You worked with a Moroccan hip-hop group to make an Arabic version of *Dilbar*. What made you take on that project?

This marked my debut as a singer in the Arab and North African world. The Hindi version of *Dilbar* made a record-breaking impact, globally. And I knew that I needed to take this success and open a new market and career path for myself. I came up with the idea of recreating the song in Arabic—singing it and producing the music video independently. I wanted a boy group who would add the hip-hop element, and Fnaïre was the perfect choice. They are legends in Morocco, and they know their craft well. The song blew up all across North Africa and the Middle East, and propelled my singing career. I followed it up with *Pepeta*, another diverse track with English and Swahili lyrics. I collaborated with a famous Tanzanian singer and produced the music video. I want to break borders and unite different cultures and languages through music.

Food, beaches, and weather are the most important criteria for Fatehi when it comes to travel.

ON HER: Silver bodysuit, stylist's own; ivory skirt, **Sophie et Voilà**; fur cape, stylist's own; shein choker and Afghani choker, **Amama**; rings, **Creylons by Mansi**; gold vintage hand cuffs, **Creylons by Mansi & Amama**; headgear, **Marce Pedrozo**.



Your bucket list of travel destinations?

I have added the Maldives, Turkey, Italy, and Cuba to my list, among other places. I also must travel across Morocco and experience the many beautiful beaches and cities that I haven't seen yet.

What draws you to a destination? Any favourite places?

Food, beaches, and weather are the most important criteria for me. I love to go to Agadir (in Morocco) and Dubai.

Five style and beauty essentials that you always carry on your travels?

I always carry my basic make-up kit, which consists of mascara, lipstick, and blush. And I always carry sunscreen and tanning lotion! I'm obsessed with the beach, so I like to carry pretty beach dresses. +

through
the
lens
*Jebel Ali
Racecourse*



OFF TO THE RACES

Between November and March every year, the Jebel Ali Racecourse in Dubai plays host to rip-roaring horse races that are as much about winning and losing as they are about catching up with friends on inviting grass expanses.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY MRIGANKA KALITA



From left: An official awaits the start of a race from a vantage position near the finish line; originally desert warhorses bred by the Bedouins, Arabian thoroughbreds are known for their speed, stamina, loyalty, courage, and gentle disposition.

Clockwise from below: The desert-style track has an uphill finish that reduces the pressure on the front legs of the horses; there are several food stalls to quell hunger pangs; racegoers can opt for the covered stands or the verdant grounds—both are apt for viewing the races and catching up on life.









*Clockwise from left:
A jockey and his horse
need to have complete
faith in each other;
famed for its nobility of
spirit, gentle grace, and
beauty, the Arabian
horse originated in the
inhospitable deserts of
the Arabian Peninsula;
the stands have a seating
capacity of over 2,000
people; the 2,200-metre-
long desert-style track
has a surface that's a
mixture of special
desert sand and oil.*





Clockwise from above: Established in 1990, the Jebel Ali Racecourse is known for its premier racing events; races are held every fortnight between the months of November and March, and attract enthusiasts from all walks of life; people gather to cheer for their favourites and to catch up with each other in a carnival-like atmosphere.





IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN only a handful of horses; seven to be precise. Nothing compared to the guttural roar of hundreds packed in a V8 engine. But as steel-tipped hooves pounded into soft earth, leaving clumps of soil flying through the air and emitting a low but ferocious rumble, it was hard not to feel an immense *primaeval* power. The horses thundered past, manes flying, leashes straining, muscles rippling. In a flash, the first race of the day was over at the Jebel Ali Racecourse (emiratesracing.com) in Dubai. A ripple of excitement coursed through the crowd. The races had begun.

Built in 1990, the 2,200-metre-long racecourse is laid out in the shape of a horseshoe. This innovative thought process extends to the track surface, which was made by mixing desert sand with recycled engine oil sourced from shipyards. This composition makes it easy to maintain, and its uphill European-style finish is kinder on the legs of the horses.

The Jebel Ali Racecourse is the perfect place to experience a slice of Dubai that trots merrily away from the brunch and beach weekend clichés. The sprawling complex ensconced in a green oasis has VIP, private, and public viewing areas. Watching races here is a bit of an intimate affair. Everybody seems to know one another. Families come prepared with overstuffed picnic hampers. Friends shoot the breeze while making notes of their favourites. Young boys and girls do what they do best: scamper around squealing with laughter. The spirit of camaraderie and the environs, sandpapered by time, make one traipse down nostalgia lane to a simpler time.

As racegoers enter the complex through an underpass clutching aforementioned picnic hampers, camping chairs, and wriggly children, they are faced with a bit of a dilemma.

Heading to the stands means they get a great view of the races. Moreover, the roof above shades them from the glare of the scorching sun. But the undulating and rather inviting grassy expanse means after the delicacies are transferred from the picnic baskets to their bellies, a quick snooze between races becomes a distinct possibility. One can also saunter to the railing next to the track and watch the horses whizz past, while also cheering for the favoured one—an act described by racing veterans as good for the horses' morale.

Of course, the VVIP pass holders can head up straight to the private corporate boxes, located at the highest level of the stadium. This is where the finest of gourmet cuisine, served on embossed bone china by a Jeeves or two lurking discreetly, awaits them. It'd be safe to assume that they don't have many objections regarding their space. For the rest, there are stalls that sell everything from traditional Emirati delicacies such as *luqaimat* (a sweet dumpling) soaked in a syrupy liquid to shawarma stuffed with delicately spiced chicken. Add burgers and pizzas to the mix, and yes, cups of strong black tea. Passionate discussions on races and life are incomplete without a steaming cup by the side.

The Jebel Ali Racecourse holds races every fortnight during the racing season—between November and March every year. These are the pleasant months of cool breezes and happy outings. The carnival-like atmosphere attracts people from all walks of life who look forward to a fun afternoon. In the midst of the *bonhomie*, jockeys with focussed faces and magnificent steeds with flowing manes pummel the track at regular intervals as squeals of joy and groans of disappointment fill the air.

A different side of Dubai? You bet. +

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TRAVELLERS' TALES, FROM NEAR AND FAR

IN THE SLOW LANE

You cannot savour the mystical offerings of Arunachal Pradesh on a quick site-hopping tour. **NEETOLE MITRA** chooses to slow down and relish the intriguing tales that permeate the tropical rainforests on the banks of the Siang.



MICHAEL RUNKEL/LAMY

A long suspension bridge made of palm wood across the Siang River in Arunachal Pradesh.



THE LEFT TURN PAST THE Ranaghat Bridge and the pitched National Highway 513 is all but gone, leaving us to navigate a mud trail. The jeep Sukumar Tayeng is driving, rattles. To break the silence of the green overgrowth around us, I ask Tayeng, “How far do we have to go?” He replies, “It’s a very old car.” I look up inquiringly, spot a hearing device plugged into his ear, and fall quiet, musing about the age of the vehicle, even more aware of the rattles now.

It’s finally not raining today after a week of torrential downpours. As the car struggles over wet mud, I think aloud (really loud this time), “I hope we don’t get stuck in this slush!” The wheels squeal, and

the vehicle dramatically sinks to the right. We are stuck. The engine cries for mercy as Tayeng pedals the gas. Eventually, he reaches behind my seat and pulls out a *dao* (a single-edged Chinese sword), smiling at me as he does this.

Tayeng has a faraway look in his eyes. He’s a well-built man in his early 60s, wears a safari hat, has a hunch and a waxy mole on his upper lip, and now, he’s tightening the wheels of his 21-year-old jeep with a *dao*. We are in the middle of the jungle. No one knows I’m here, and both my cellular networks have abandoned

WHAT IS AVAXHOME?

AVAXHOME-

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recent software, latest music releases.

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▲
A bird's-eye view
of River Siang.

me. When he returns to the car smiling at me and raising his weapon-wielding hand, I am already ducking before I realise he's put the *dao* back, and his muddy hands have returned to the steering wheel.

It is probably the stories of the past few weeks that induce these jitters in me as I make my way to Abor Country River Camp, a multi-acre property hidden away in a tropical rainforest on the banks of River Siang. I have just returned from a week of exploring Adi terrain with Holiday Scout (theholidayscout.com). I've spent days filled with incessant rains lurching forward on what can hardly be called highways. Two SUVs juggling nine inmates without mercy, like corn seeds on fire. Our route from Roing to Pasighat to

Boleng to Jengging to Riga to Tuting to Kaying to Inkyong and back has been a blur of forests—turn after turn of unruly growth crawling out as if to touch you slightly before claiming you whole; mossy barks adorned with a million varieties of creepers; something growing everywhere there is any space.

Inside the vehicle, the atmosphere is rife with stories, like a camp on wheels. The lack of fire logs doesn't hinder the myriad narrations about the tribes that live in and off these forests. Neharika, a middle-aged Idu Mishmi woman and my fellow passenger from Roing, tells me about her father-in-law, Lt Buluge Umbrey. "He was a respected man, a priest with special powers." She claims that her father-in-law placed a gigantic rock over River Siang, changing its course forever. "You can still see the rock." I want to laugh it off, but her tone and demeanour tell me this is not a brag but what she believes to be an undisputed fact. The man next to me, Michael Mibang, nods in agreement and gives me a demo with a raised elbow, "If you have a broken bone, the priest would just hold the area and do something, and it would get fixed within a few days."

They are referring to the traditions of *miri* priests, also known as *nyibu* shamans; the name is different in each tribe's distinct language. They come from an ancient lineage of ritualists drawing from the animist traditions practised in the region. The *miri* is said to have the power of clairvoyance and communicates with the good and bad elements of the earth. It's not rare for the natives of the land to go to the priest in case of theft or ailments.

Later, in the silence of Abor Country, the uniqueness of India's eastern frontier comes to life even more vividly. Six luxury tents look out at the river gushing down the valley, mad with the monsoon's feed. Showing me around the property, Tapir Dirang, a guide and adventure enthusiast, says, "A majority of the furniture at Abor Country River Camp is made out of driftwood that the Siang floats up the shore." He points at an armchair in the lounge, which I occupy later in the evening, and adds, "This could be a log from China!" I'm settled in one of the three luxury cottages at Abor Country. My

room is called Siang, and it smells of flowers. Chinese watercolours adorn the cane walls, and the bed is a cocoon of comfort. Fresh towel rolls and a wooden tray with a cup of lemon tea arrive, sealing me into a bubble of joy for the rest of my stay.

Watching the rains, after a hearty meal of vegetables cooked in light spices and dal (made in traditional Arunachali style), I groan audibly when someone from the kitchen fetches a plate of freshly cut pineapples. It's a groan of pleasure. The kitchen at the back is a community space. The fireplace signifies that this is the centre of the Arunachali home. Behind it, the garden supplies most of what is cooked at the camp. The pineapple, too, is grown somewhere in the vast backyard, as is the banana that I will be served in the morning along with the breakfast basket.

A walk in the evening through rain-gnawed trails leads me to the grey-sand riverbank gracefully lined with breezy *kashful* (*kans* grass). In the distance, a wooden bridge connects the two banks. The locals like to test their weight against the wood, making the bridge sway. Newcomers like I linger around for hours in the middle, looking at the water swirling away. One doesn't find Internet or phone connectivity here. Even electricity is elusive. However, there is never a dearth of quiet moments with nature. I spend my time at Abor Country listening to the river sing in the evenings and occasionally indulge in chats with Dirang.

Dirang works with his tribe brother Oken Tayeng (Sukumar Tayeng's younger brother), who owns Abor Country. When not taking travellers around, he spends his time in the forests of Arunachal Pradesh, hunting for WWII US Army planes that couldn't survive the 'hump' (the peaks of Eastern Himalayas) during



▲ The luxury tents at Abor Country River Camp.

Abor Hills and surrounding valleys are the epitome of natural beauty. ▼

their journey to China. He narrates his adventures of surviving the forest, fighting delusional porters, crawling across cliffs, and manoeuvring floodwaters. "We've recovered 22 planes so far. There are more than 600 out there."

More than 600 planes lost along with their pilots. Never found till now. It wasn't just Japanese fighter planes that brought these young men down, but also the unpredictable climatic conditions of the hills over which they were flying. These missing planes are just one of the many mysteries that lie in the folds of Arunachal Pradesh's Eastern Himalayan ranges; waiting, perhaps to be discovered, perhaps to be forgotten at last.

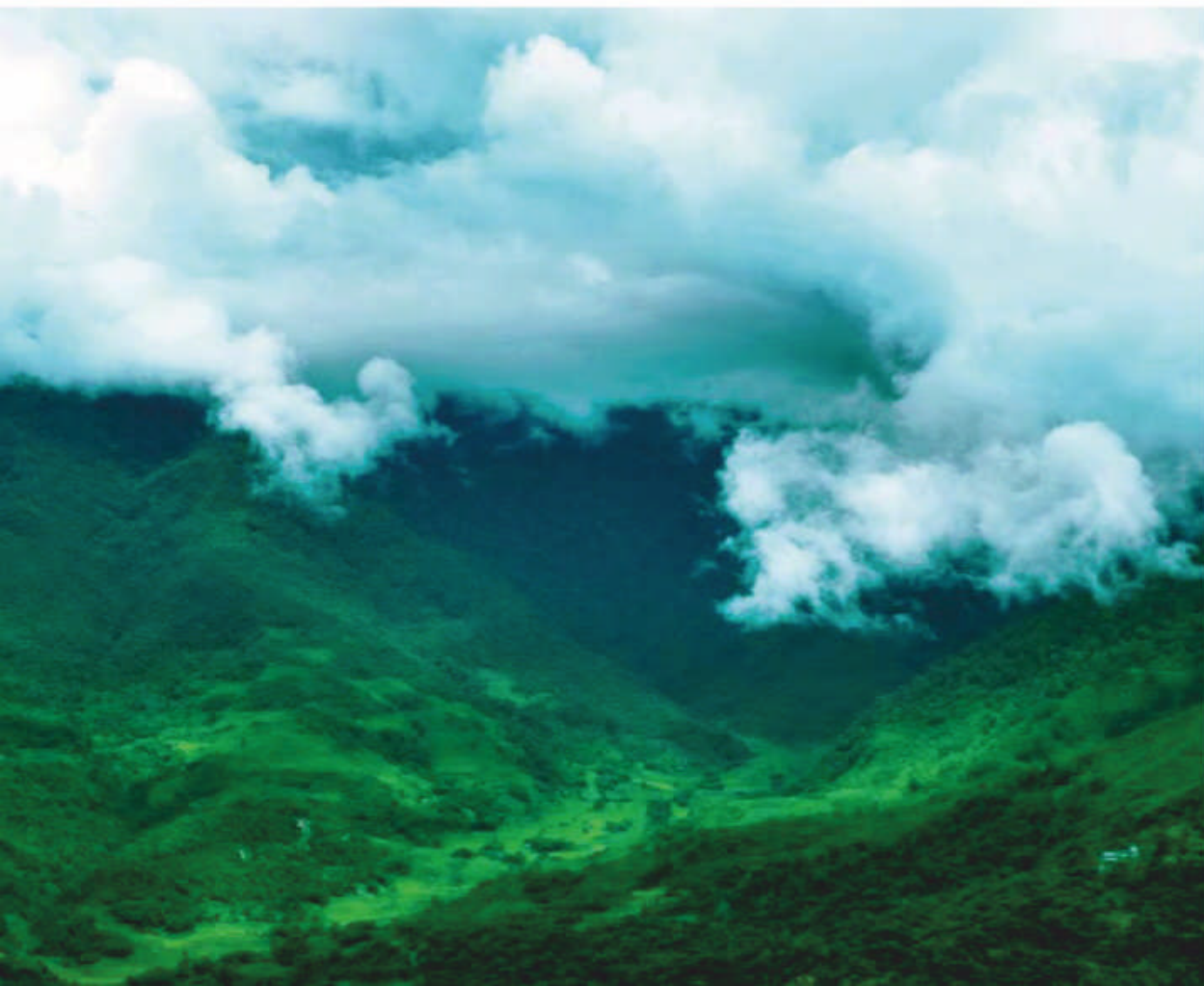
As a white moth dances by the candle flame, an uncanny wave of moth-cricket chorus travels from the depths of the forest around us and grows dramatically shrill, until their treble presses on from all sides—a shamanic omen agreeing with my thoughts. ✦

GETTING THERE

Book a taxi from Dibrugarh Airport to cover the 160 kilometres to Pasighat. Guwahati International Airport is the preferred option for overseas visitors.

STAY & TOURS

Connect with Oken Tayeng of **Abor Country Travels & Expeditions** at +91-8414069777 or +91-9436053870 for enquiries about a stay at **Abor Country River Camp** and tours of the state; aborcountrycamps.in





▲ Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah, built in honour of the Sufi saint Muhammad Nizamuddin Auliya, is usually visited by thousands every week.



▲ Walk leader Asiya Qureshi narrates the story behind Chausath Khamba.

WALKING WITH THE SUFIS

After living in and around Delhi for eight years, **RASHIMA NAGPAL** discovers the poeticism of the city she thought she knew well.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ATIF AMIN

I WAS NOT BORN IN DELHI. Nor did I plan to spend half of my 20s here. But one after the other, eight years have passed, and here I am. I don't know any other city that feels more like home. Somewhat paradoxically, the more I deem it familiar, the more I want to peel off its layers—the old and worn out, the young and vivid, and the many in between. And I do so every chance I get. Whether it's aimless circles around Connaught Place, a stroll in Khan Market, saunters at Mandi House, explorations of Lutyens' Delhi, or visits to dilapidated forts, Delhi almost always has a surprise in store. Earlier this year, it revealed two of its treasures to me.

The third edition of the month-long India Heritage Walk Festival (indiaheritagewalks.org)—organised by Sahapedia (sahapedia.org)—took place in February 2020. In what was my last outdoor work

assignment before you-know-what happened, I signed up for two of the heritage walks. My day began with the buzzing Nizamuddin Basti and concluded in an unexpected downpour at the sylvan Sanjay Van.

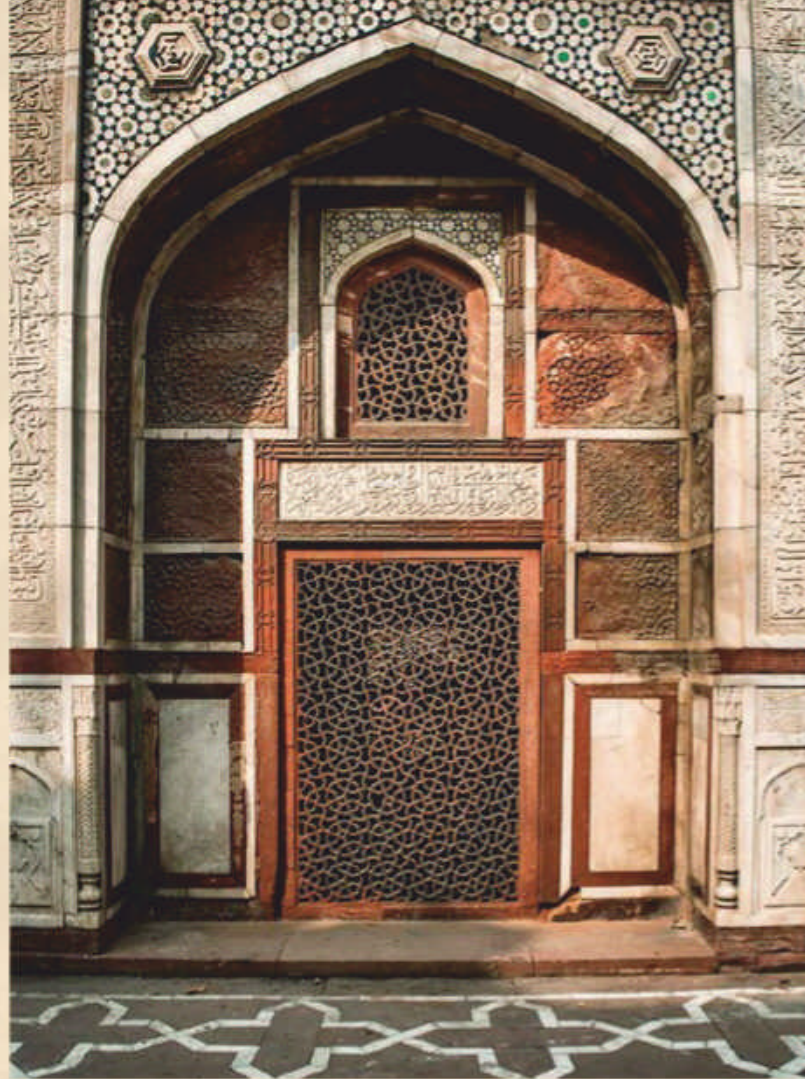
NIZAMUDDIN BASTI

At quarter to nine in the morning, a motley group of 10 people—bound together only by a love for history—gathered around the gateway to the Basti. We were welcomed by an enthusiastic walk leader, 30-year-old Asiya Qureshi. She was one of the five who had passed Sahapedia's unique programme that trained women from the capital's shelter homes as tour guides. After sharing a 'cutting chai' with the group, Qureshi swiftly led us into the narrow winding lanes of the 700-year-old neighbourhood and drew an evocative portrait of its character.

Delhi's Nizamuddin Basti lies at a fascinating crossroads of history, culture, and spirituality. Between the 13th and 16th centuries, when Sufism dazzled the world, Delhi became one of its major centres. Many Sufi saints found solace in the capital, including Muhammad Nizamuddin Auliya, whose dargah is at the heart of the Basti. Hazrat Nizamuddin—as he is reverently called—and his mysticism attracted people across caste, class, and race. And just like that, the neighbourhood became an ever-expanding community of Sufi followers. Many



◀ Muhammad Bin Tughlaq built Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya's dargah after the saint passed away in 1325.



▲ Nizamuddin Basti is also home to the tomb of Ataga Khan, Akbar's prime minister.

of them lived their entire lives following in his footsteps, and some even made sure that they were buried close to him. The various mausoleums that we found in the labyrinthine lanes of the Basti were proof that faith transcends life and death.

Through a web of people, we walked towards an arched passage and into a quaint square, where we could hear peacocks shrieking. Here, the Urs Mahal and Chausath Khamba face each other. The Urs Mahal hosts qawwalis during festivities—especially on the occasion of Urs, or the death anniversary of a Sufi saint. Built in 1623, Chausath Khamba is a 64-pillar mausoleum built by Mirza Aziz Koka, the son of Akbar's prime minister Ataga Khan, as his family's shrine. Marvellously cut in white marble—a prime example of classic Mughal architecture—it was used as an assembly hall much before the tombs of Koka and his family were installed within it. One can also find Ataga Khan's tomb in a corner of the Basti, albeit in a dilapidated condition.

On the other side of the Chausath Khamba, we arrived in another splendid courtyard. While we got busy taking photographs, Qureshi recited a couplet to get our attention, "*Ishq ne ghālib nikammā kar diyā, warna ham bhī aadmī the kaam ke.*" (Ghalib, a worthless person, this love has



▲ Sanjay Van, spread across 443 acres, is one of the greenest spots in Delhi.

made of me, otherwise a man of substance I once used to be). The cue was unmistakable. We were standing at the tombstone of Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib, who lived from 1797 to 1869. Restored in 2009 by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, in partnership with the Archaeological Survey of India and the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, the courtyard is paved with red sandstone, white marble inlays, and ornamental patterns.

I never knew there was also a *baoli* alongside the scores of heritage gems in Nizamuddin Basti. When Qureshi took us to the 14th-century stepwell, I couldn't help but picture the neighbourhood in its glory days.

SANJAY VAN

From the bustling Basti, I landed straight into a scene out of *Dead Poets Society*. In the middle of Delhi's sprawling 443-acre Sanjay Van, a bunch of us sat down with one agenda: Ghalib. Leading this *baithak* were Aditi Saraswat, a video producer with an impressive knowledge of trees, and Kartikay Khetarpal, a research associate with a penchant for poetry.

That day I learnt the fundamentals of Urdu poetry. *Sher* is Urdu for couplet. In any *sher*, the first line is called *misra-e-oola* (*oola* meaning horizon), and the second *misra-e-saanii*. Traditionally, a *sher* is not read but recited. The first line is recited multiple times with great emphasis and long pauses. This is done deliberately to build suspense. Only after the listener

exclaims "*Wah!*" several times is the second line recited—and that is when the magic of poetry happens. Multiple *sher* make up a ghazal.

Ghalib is popular for his ghazals. Apparently, he preferred writing his ghazals in Persian over Urdu, as Persian was the official courtly language at the time. His style of writing was largely abstract and wasn't easily understood by many. This '*mushkil-pasand*' (not easily likeable) poet thus took his time to become popular. Not that he cared much. In fact, he blatantly expressed his lack of desire to please people in one of his couplets, "*Na satā.ish kī tamannā na sile kī parvā, gar nahīn haiñ mīre ash.ār meñ ma.anī na sahī.*" (I do not harbour hope for praise, nor do I care for compense, thus if my lines are meaningless, with them, you may dispense.)

The clouds looming over our heads grew thicker as we walked deeper into the woods and recited more of Ghalib's *sher*. Thunder emphasised each couplet and its impact. Even as it began pouring, we stood resolutely under a tree and made a promise to meet again, just so we could continue where we left off that evening. +



FINDING AUSTEN IN BATH

Spend a day walking around the spa town of Bath in the UK for its golden buildings, hot water baths, and literary monuments of Jane Austen's worlds.

BY BARSALI BHATTACHARYYA

I WAS INTRODUCED TO Jane Austen at the age of 13, when I picked up a dog-eared copy of *Pride & Prejudice* from my school library. With time, our acquaintance became a special one. By the time I went to get a bachelor's degree in English literature, I had read all seven of her works and pinned Bath, where the Jane Austen Centre (janeausten.co.uk) is located, to the top of my bucket list.

More than a decade later, I am on a train to Bath, in Somerset, South West England. Austen is reported to have first visited the town, named after its hot water



Kick off your Jane Austen walking tour at the cobbled Abbey Churchyard.

The Jane Austen Centre, on Gay Street, is a museum tracing the author's life.

of locally quarried golden limestone, a feature attributable to John Wood, a 19th-century architect who owned these limestone mines.

My walking tour kicks off at the cobbled Abbey Churchyard, which is wet and grey but makes a suitable backdrop for the sprawling Gothic church. The building's history goes back to the Middle Ages, when a small town grew up around a monastery that offered accommodation to people who came to enjoy the natural hot waters. The baths were built by the Romans when they arrived in 44 AD. After their departure, the town lost much of its glory, until Queen Anne came to enjoy the waters in the 18th century. Amid a flourish of art, culture, and the good life in the Georgian and Regency eras, Bath flourished as people flocked to the mineral-rich waters, a rare phenomenon in the UK. To keep the visitors entertained, a wide range of social activities, such as evening dances, concerts, and theatres, became popular.

I walk across from the church towards a complex that includes the Roman Baths—unfortunately, the water is no longer fit for bathing here, but you can head to the nearby Thermae Bath Spa (thermaebathspa.com)—and The Pump Room (thepumproombath.co.uk), where you can drink the mineral-rich water. I am told that Georgian visitors drank up to eight pints of this water, but I'm also warned

baths, in 1797, and she came back to live here between 1801 and 1806 with members of her family. She was inspired by the town and chose it as the backdrop for two of her novels, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*.

After three hours on the train, I reach my destination, armed with a physical map and an audio guide downloaded from Bath's tourism website (visitbath.co.uk). The first thing I notice is that most of the buildings are golden in colour, starting from the Tudor-style station to Bath Abbey, the starting point of my self-guided walking tour. Even on a grey rainy morning, the city is shining. The buildings are made





that it might not suit every stomach, so I refrain to avoid any misadventures.

Many of the visitors who flocked to Bath in the Georgian era suffered from rheumatism—just like Austen’s brother, Edward—and hoped for the hot waters to offer some respite. Younger men and women came to explore marriage prospects or simply to engage in the town’s social gatherings. The Pump Room catered to both sets of visitors back in its day. This sprawling room lit up by a giant chandelier is right next to the entrance to the Roman Baths, and gets its name from the fountain that pumped up the coveted water. In here, the gentlemen talked of politics, while the ladies walked about noticing the latest fashion trends. Austen explains in *Northanger Abbey*, “Every morning now brought its regular duties; shops were to be visited, some new part of the town to be looked at, and the Pump-room to be attended.”

▲ The remains of one of the greatest spas of the ancient world are at the Roman Baths.

▼ Grab a pint of ale at The Huntsman, Bath’s oldest pub.

The Pump Room is now a restaurant and quite crowded on the morning of my visit, with tourists eager to escape the rain and drink some tea. At the entrance of the building is a Bath chair, a Georgian-age relic of a vehicle used to carry invalids to the baths. The town centre is teeming with tourists shopping for souvenirs or sitting down for ice cream, and a violinist in front of the Abbey is adding to the merriment. As I get myself an ice cream and continue walking, I begin to understand why Austen, who grew up in rural Hertfordshire (in southern England), and her heroines liked the happening town of Bath so much. In *Northanger Abbey*, the young heroine Catherine Morland tells Henry Tilney, her romantic interest, that she would not grow tired of Bath even if she were to stay for six months. “I really believe I shall always be talking of Bath when I am at home again—I do like it so very much...”

Austen indicates in her novels that social life in Bath revolved around tea and catch-ups in The Pump Room, and card games and ball dances in the evening in the Upper and Lower Rooms, and occasional visits to concerts and theatres. The building that housed the Lower Rooms is unfortunately long gone, but I make my way to The Huntsman (huntsmanbathpub.co.uk), Bath’s oldest pub, and witness the row of Georgian houses to the right where the Lower Rooms were situated. This is where Morland first met and danced with Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*.

I grab a pint of ale and some chips at The Huntsman before walking along the manicured Parade Gardens and River Avon towards Pulteney Bridge. After a brisk walk of about 15 minutes, I am at the Great Pulteney Street,



at the end of which is Sydney Place, where Austen lived with her parents and sister Cassandra during 1801-1805.

Listening to my audio guide, I trace my steps back across the river and pass by Theatre Royal (theatreroyal.org.uk), which Austen's heroines loved to visit. Soon, I reach Queen Square, a large open park to the south of which are a row of Georgian townhouses (on Gay Street) with almost identical facades. Austen moved to a house here (No. 25) with her mother and sister in 1805 after her father's death. This was a step down from the tony neighbourhood in Sydney Place, but the family's finances were strained. The women were supported by their brothers, but they eventually left Bath in 1806. My destination now is 40, Gay Street, which houses the Jane Austen Centre, a museum tracing the author's life.

I buy a ticket for £12 (₹1,110), and queue up for a walking tour, conducted by the notorious Mr Wickham from *Pride & Prejudice*. In fact, everyone in the staff is dressed as an Austen character. The three-storeyed Georgian-style townhouse with an attic is very similar to the one in which the author stayed. The exhibits include wax statues of Austen and her family members, and commonly used items from that era, including a desk with a feathered quill, an inkpot, and some stationery—perfect for penning the first line of your future novel.

A minute's walk away from the Jane Austen Centre, a flight of stairs lead me to the Gravel Walk. As the name suggests, this shaded narrow lane was once a popular destination for walking, especially among lovers. In *Persuasion*, Austen's last completed novel, this is where



▲ Jane Austen's home in Sydney Place, where she lived until her father's death in 1805.

GETTING THERE
British Airways (britishairways.com) and **Air India** (airindia.in) operate direct flights from Delhi and Mumbai to London. Bath is well connected to London; it's 90 minutes by train and four hours by coach.

STAY
For a memorable stay, opt for **Francis Hotel - MGallery**, which occupies seven of the original 18th-century townhouses of the historic Queen Square. It's a two-minute walk from the Jane Austen Centre. *Doubles from ₹12,000;* francishotel.com

▲ Sally Lunn's Historic Eating House is believed to be the city's oldest surviving house and a favourite haunt of Austen.

the heroine, Anne Elliot, and Captain Wentworth reunite after years of separation.

I stop at Bennett Street to see the Upper Rooms, now known as the Assembly Rooms. Austen visited these rooms and mentioned them in a letter to her sister. Once used for drinking tea, playing cards, and dancing, the rooms are decorated with crystal chandeliers. Centuries ago, members of high society gathered here. Attendance at these gatherings was pretty high; a letter from Austen's mother indicates that an event with 1,000 guests was considered a dull affair.

My legs are tired by the time I walk back towards the Abbey, and there is still so much I have not seen yet. I recall that Austen loved walking and would often climb up Beechen Cliff, a small hill in the distance that offers great city views, or walk on Milsom Street. My next and final destination, however, is along the North Parade Passage. Sally Lunn's Historic Eating House (sallylunns.co.uk) is believed to be the city's oldest surviving house and is famous for its brioche buns. Sally Lunn was a Huguenot refugee who came to Bath and became famous for baking the spongiest buns. Down the building's narrow stairs, there is a small museum that offers a glimpse of what a kitchen would have looked like in Austen's time. I opt for a toasted bun with baked eggs, smoked ham, and honey, along with some tea. My savoury dish features a bun that's light, fluffy, and delicious. It's an apt end to my journey as the last chapter of my audio guide describes Austen's love for food and conjectures that she must have been a regular at this bakery. When it's time for my return train journey, I get a bun packed, this time with a sweet topping. +



ONCE UPON A TIME IN DUBAI

Deprived of travel due to the pandemic, **RADHIKA TANDON** reminisces about another year of crisis when she packed up the kids and flew to Dubai for a life reboot.

THIS IS ONLY THE SECOND year in two decades when a 'big' holiday didn't feature in my calendar until August. This time, a global pandemic was to blame. The last time was a personal crisis, my life's lowest point. It involved an ugly divorce, a near-empty bank account, and a ridiculously uncertain future. Caught up in all the unpleasantness, the summer passed by me. Realising that I had to do something to take control, I did what only an insane person would do: I bought three tickets, packed up the kids, and ran away for a holiday to Dubai.

I look back on that reckless, feckless, impulsive trip as an important *Aha!* moment in my life. It taught me three key lessons about why I needed



to travel. Right now, when the only long journeys most of us can take are those that go backwards, in fond nostalgia, it seems like a good time to share this story.

My only agenda then was to have fun with the kids, and for this, Dubai is a wonderland. The malls are hubs of child-friendly attractions, and the omnipresent opulence is jaw-dropping. At the Dubai Aquarium & Underwater Zoo (thedubaiaquarium.com) in The Dubai Mall (thedubaimall.com), we fed sharks



from a dhow on the water, indoors! It blew me away. We also took an ice-skating lesson at a rink on the ground floor. On another day, I dropped off the children at KidZania Dubai (dubai.kidzania.com) for an afternoon and treated myself to some grown-up time, shopping and catching up with a friend. At Ski Dubai (skidxb.com), the 4,500-square-metre indoor snow park in another mall, we spent a happy day taking lessons and playing in the snow park, stepping out periodically to warm ourselves up with hot chocolate. The dancing fountain at the Burj Khalifa was the perfect way to round off long, happy days. We soaked up all of Dubai's unique brand of indoor-outdoor fun, giddy with the

▲ *Dubai Aquarium & Underwater Zoo is home to thousands of aquatic animals, belonging to over 140 species. Left: Meet some penguins, go zip-lining, or take a chairlift ride at Ski Dubai.*

ridiculous, outrageous scale of it all. It was a world away from what I'd left behind, and it brought me back to myself like nothing else could have. That was lesson one.

The other no-brainer kid-friendly activity in Dubai is visiting a waterpark. At Atlantis Aquaventure Waterpark (atlantis.com), we came upon an invitation to 'cuddle and swim with dolphins'. The decision of which waterpark to visit required no further discussion. The dolphin meet-and-greet was preceded by



Clockwise from left: The Atlantis Aquaventure Waterpark has a variety of slides to please every age and taste; sandboarding is a great outdoor sport to try in Dubai; the Dolphin Bay in the waterpark lets you swim with dolphins.



a long safety briefing and donning of gear. We were introduced to Katherine, our dolphin, by her trainer. The highlight of the encounter was when Katherine gave my son his ‘first kiss’—a joke that turned him scarlet with embarrassment at the time, but has now gone down in family lore. It was a fun experience, though a little short-lived and tame for my taste. However, it’s ideal for younger kids and worth every penny of the exorbitant tickets if you walk away with a story like that.

The waterpark too was lovely, with some of the best rides and slides I have seen anywhere, and the kids still talk about the time my daughter nearly got separated from us in the rapids, or how we (okay, just I) finally worked up the courage to take the Leap of Faith, a near-vertical drop that ends in a shark-filled lagoon. We finished the day at the Cold Stone Creamery in the hotel, where waiters juggle and throw scoops of ice cream to each other while preparing your order. I hadn’t told the kids to expect this, and the experience of watching

surprise, incredulity, and delight take over their faces as the performance unfolded has never left me. Atlantis offers several other delights: an aquarium, zip-lining, and a private beach with cabanas for lounging, among others. To this day, given the choice between buying an exquisite souvenir and splurging on a once-in-a-lifetime experience, I'll go with the latter every time. That made up my second lesson: memories make the best souvenirs.

When we got saturated with the city, we headed out for an overnight desert adventure with Lama Dubai (lamadubai.com). Dune bashing involves driving over sand dunes in a four-by-four. It's not for the faint-hearted; there are heart-stopping plunges and near-miss sideways lurches and a great deal of screaming. My kids recall boogie-board surfing on the dunes, an evening of whirling dervishes and belly dancers and henna tattoos, examining a nest of scorpions in the sand, the smell of meat roasting on fire in the cool desert night, and falling asleep under a canopy of stars. All of this was true, but I remember it slightly differently. We were lying next to an enclosure of camels. If you have never had the pleasure, there is a particularly pungent, sickly odour that a caravan of camels can



▲
Dune bashing in a four-by-four vehicle is a thrilling activity.

produce that defies description. It seeped into our blankets, our clothes, even our hair. Then, a large group of British tourists celebrating a birthday decided to crank up the speakers just as we were going to bed. My kids slept through it all as only happily tired children can, but I sat up seething, because my desert idyll was being ruined by raucous tourists and smelly camels.

Finally, unable to take a second more of the racket, I stalked over to the group, intent on giving someone, anyone, a piece of my mind. They greeted me with smiles, invited me to join them, and even took turns to help check on the kids for the rest of the evening. Before I knew it, I was sitting around a fire with a bunch of strangers in the middle of the desert, having a drink and a laugh. That random event reminded me that there was more to life and to me than the burden of pain I'd been dragging around like an invisible cloak. That night I surrendered—to hanging out with complete strangers, to the absurdity of the smelly camels and the blaring music, and the splendour of the stars in the desert sky. It shifted something inside me. I came home from that trip refreshed, able to find the balance and perspective to stop wallowing in victimhood and pick up the pieces of my life. It was a shift so subtle I didn't even see it until much later in life. That was lesson three. Travelling often leads us to new sights and insights, and sometimes, it just helps to uncover the ones we had inside us all along. +

◀
Enjoy a belly-dancing performance after your desert safari.

GETTING THERE

Many airlines, including **Air India** (airindia.in) and **Emirates** (emirates.com), serve flights to Dubai from the major Indian cities.

STAY

Occupying a unique position between the aquamarine waters of the Arabian Gulf and the shimmering Dubai skyline, **Atlantis, The Palm** dazzles its guests with world-class dining curated by celebrity chefs, waterpark adventures, and opulent accommodation. From ₹16,455; atlantis.com



*Sailing in a traditional
dhow on the Strait
of Hormuz.*

MAXIMUM MUSANDAM

The Musandam Peninsula in Oman boasts a fantastical landscape marked by craggy fjords lining a spectacular coastline. **ANANYA BAHL** booked a ticket to this intrepid traveller's paradise to find out if it deserves its moniker, the Norway of Arabia.

M

Y EYES SQUINT UNDER the brilliant sun, trying to focus on something moving on the horizon. We're cruising on a wooden dhow on the Strait of Hormuz, the inlet of water separating Oman from Iran. Before I know it, the distant creatures on the horizon

have become co-travellers—scores of dolphins are now swimming alongside our boat. Indo-Pacific humpback and bottlenose dolphins delightfully porpoise in the waters as I am reminded by the boat's captain to not give in to the temptation of reaching out and touching them. As they swim swiftly in the cerulean waters, I have to constantly remind myself: these are dolphins, and we are, in fact, in the Middle East! I am exploring the Musandam Peninsula, a mysterious exclave of Oman, separated from its home country by the United Arab Emirates to the south. The landscape quickly makes it apparent that this is going to be a very different kind of Arabian sojourn.

Eventually, I decide to sample the blue waters. We dock by a rocky landing, and I jump in. The water laps me up in a warm embrace, indulging me with colourful corals. The strait boasts crystal-clear and calm water, making snorkelling a fun activity for all age groups. I am told that the Strait of Hormuz holds a significant geopolitical



▲ The Musandam Peninsula is a mysterious exclave of Oman, separated from the rest of the country by the east coast of the United Arab Emirates. Below: The Hajar Mountains run parallel to the Strait of Hormuz.



position—a large chunk of the world’s oil passes through it annually. But in the moment, as I float on the azure waters, the only business it beckons me to complete is utter relaxation. After I’ve had my fill of marine life, it’s time for a fantastic meal of roasted local fish onboard the dhow’s bright-red majlis-style deck.

Aptly called ‘The Norway of Arabia’, the Musandam Peninsula basks in the shadow of the Hajar Mountains, a chain of spectacular rocky formations that run parallel to the Strait of Hormuz. Adding to their magnificence are craggy fjords, each of which offers awe-inspiring vistas and strong winds. Most of the mountains tower almost 2,000 metres above sea level and lend themselves to off-roading trails. On one such route, in a four-by-four, I find myself stopping repeatedly to soak in the panoramic views of the fjords. We drive up to the summit of the Jebel Harim mountain, which reaches about 1,600 metres above sea level. Flat and sprawled out, it invites archaeology fiends to uncover the scores of fossils under its surface. Geological evidence suggests that these peaks were submerged in water about 250 million years ago. Today, this is evidenced by fish fossils, shells, and other fossilised marine life that hide under years of dust accumulated on the rocky mountain top. My guide pours some water on parched land, and suddenly, some fossils reveal themselves like fleeting mirages on hot tarmac.

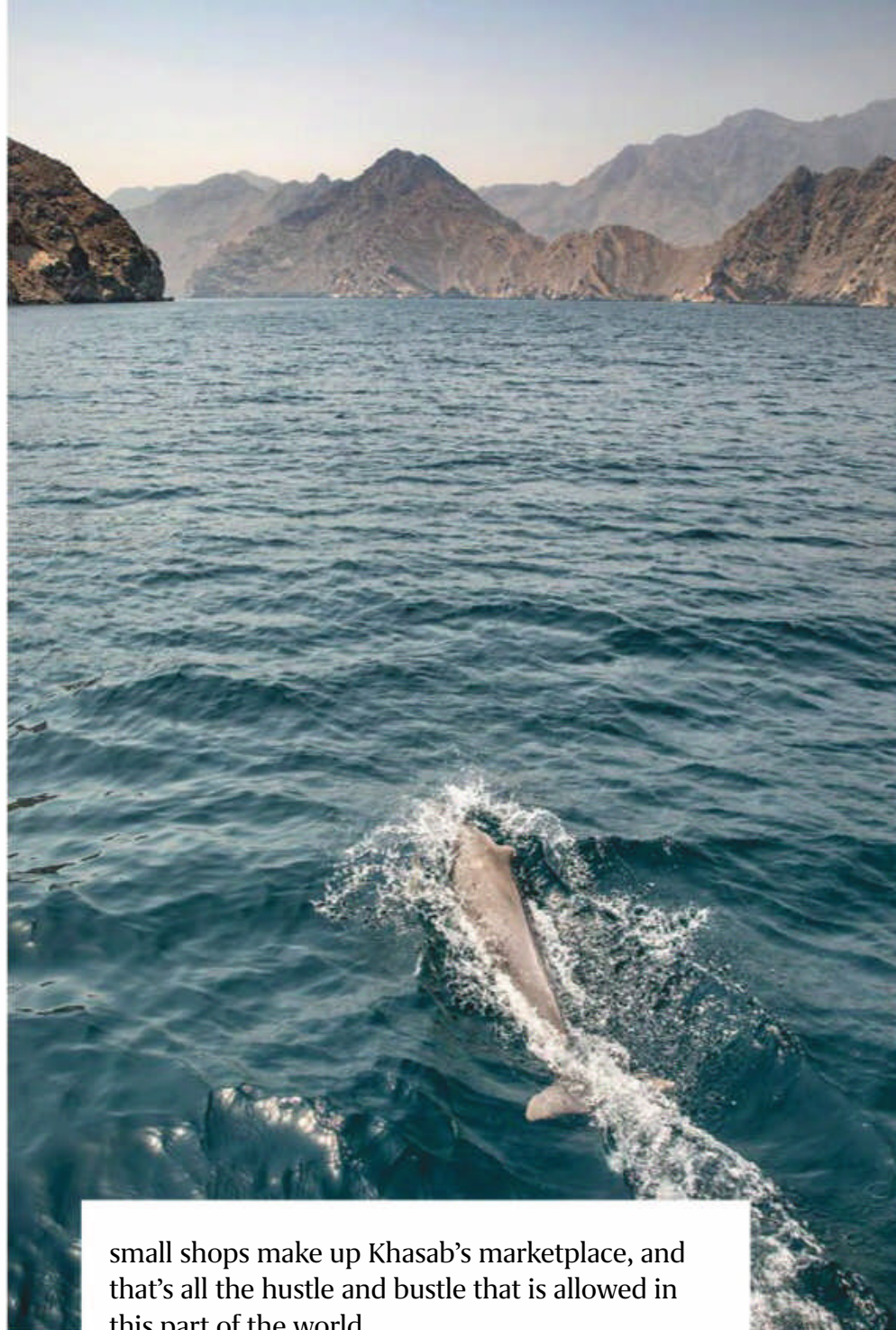


▲ *View of Musandam from the roof of the Khasab Castle.*

From left: Rugged mountains on the way to Jebel Harim; the best way to enjoy the beauty of the fjords is on a dhow.

My home base on the peninsula is Khasab, the regional centre of the Musandam Governorate. Its name is inspired by the Arabic word for fertile soil—something that is in abundance here. Sleepy villages dot this area, and the town mainly serves as a base for adventures high up in the mountains and deep in the waters. The region’s history can be explored at the Khasab Castle. Much of the present-day structure was rebuilt by Omanis on the remains of the 11th-century Portuguese-constructed castle. Its middle tower is a museum containing handicrafts, archaeological items, traditional clothes, ornaments, and furniture. The castle’s courtyard displays beautiful boat models that are typical to the Musandam region. A stone’s throw away is the only large supermarket of the region, providing an interesting juxtaposition of old and new. It actually stands out as an aberration in the vast rocky scenery. Further ahead, a few





small shops make up Khasab's marketplace, and that's all the hustle and bustle that is allowed in this part of the world.

Another unique feature of this land is its collection of villages. Most of them are hidden in the rocky outcrops of the mountains, and it is quite impossible to drive by the region without noticing them. A good example is Qannah. Its stone houses are part of the cliffs. They were built in such a manner so as to serve as the villagers' first line of defence. The local way of life can also be sampled at Lima Village. Surrounded by fantastic rock formations overlooking the sea, it is known for the *al jarz*. A specimen of fine craftsmanship, it is an axe made with local wood (from the indigenous *al majz* tree) and stone. The *al jarz* is used exclusively by the men of Musandam for chopping tree wood, as a tool for climbing trees, as a walking stick, as a means of support for jumping over stones, and of course, as a weapon.

When it comes to the Strait of Hormuz, two lagoons stand out. The Khawr Najd, one of Musandam's largest lagoons, was once used by seafarers to wait out rough weather. This is also why its name is inspired by the Arabic term for help. I witness it reposing in all its natural glory from a fjord 420 metres above sea level. Before the culmination of my trip on this fantastical land, I revisit Khawr Sham, the lagoon where the dolphins had dropped by to accompany me. As I



▲ *The Strait of Hormuz boasts crystal-clear and calm waters, making snorkelling a fun activity. Left: Musandam is a great place to spot dolphins.*

prepare to dive in for one last tryst with the tranquil water, I spot Telegraph Island in the distance. Also known as Jazirat al Maqlab, this islet was used in the 1860s as a telegraph-cable repeater station and was integral to quick communication between Britain and India, then a British colony. It is said that the remote outpost and its hot weather drove men mad. Today, as tourists seek out such lands for their untouched wealth of natural resources, I realise that the world remains largely the same. It is we who change. +

GETTING THERE

Oman Air (omanair.com) connects Khasab with Muscat via daily flights. It takes a little over an hour to get there. Musandam can also be reached via road from Dubai (about 196 kilometres away).

STAY

Atana Musandam is a sprawling resort perfect for families. Designed as a traditional Omani village, it offers 110 spacious rooms with balconies and terraces, a pool overlooking the waterway where local fishermen go about their daily routine, and a charming restaurant. It is a five-minute walk from the Khasab Castle. *From ₹12,000 per night; atanahotels.com*

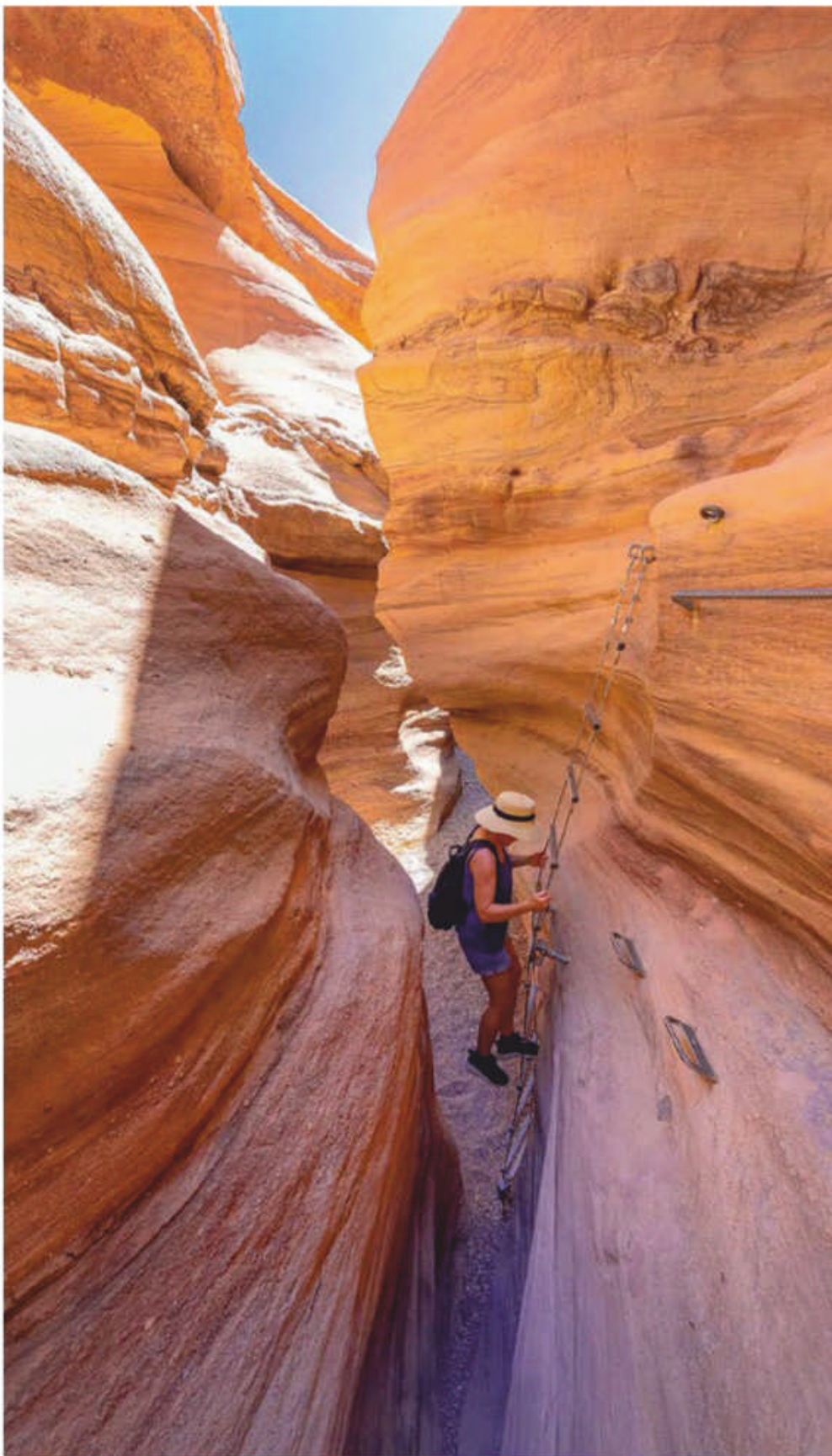
DO

• Overnight camping at Jebel Harim or Jabal Bil Ays is recommended in Musandam.

A tour operator's permit isn't needed, however it helps to hire someone (contact **Salim Al-Maawali**; erc.salim@gmail.com) who can set up the tents, barbecue, and running water, and also arrange a four-wheel drive to get to the camping spot. Be prepared for mountain goats who come foraging for food in the dead of night!

• Enjoy a scenic 27-kilometre drive from Khasab to Bukha that offers spectacular sea views on one side and mountainscapes on the other. The Al Harf village en route offers a peek at Iran.

• The winds in Musandam are perfect for paragliding adventures. Sign up for one at Ziggy Beach, from where you can enjoy views of the Hajar Mountains, fishing villages, and the Gulf of Oman. *From ₹8,600 per person; sixsenses.com*



THE SUNNY SIDE OF ISRAEL

With 360 days of sunlight and 20 beaches, Israel's resort city of Eilat offers an array of adventures—from snorkelling with wild dolphins and kayaking on the Red Sea to hiking in the Red Canyon.

BY KHURSHEED DINSHAW

“T

AKE ONE STEP AT A TIME to the left till you reach the ladder,” said my guide Efraim Katzir. I was gingerly perched on the thin edge of a protruding rock. A few careful steps later, I made it down the ladder of metal rungs firmly fastened to the rock. As we walked on the dry, meandering riverbed of River Nahal Shani, steep rocks formed 30-metre-tall walls on both sides. The further we hiked, the narrower the trail became, with the rocks closing in on us to a point where the route was just one-metre wide. When the sunlight hit the reddish rocks, it was clear why they called this place the Red Canyon.

My outing had begun in the resort city of Eilat, located 20 minutes away on the southern tip of Israel.

FROM EXTREME LEFT: SHUTTERSTOCK; NATURE PICTURE LIBRARY/ALAMY; COURTESY OF KHURSHEED DINSHAW; AGEFOTOSTOCK/ALAMY



The first part of the hike featured an innocuous looking straight dirt road peppered with gravel and pebbles. This path led us to a surreal trail marked by red sandstone typical to the region. The Red Canyon is primarily made up of Nubian sandstone, which gets its rosy hue from iron compounds. A few shrubs growing on the otherwise barren land presumably provided food for the fauna in the area. The vegetation was the kind that can survive for a long time without rain—retama bushes and saltbushes, *acacia raddiana* and *ochradenus baccatus*. Noticing my curiosity, Katzir explained, “Saltbush can adapt to the weather here by throwing out surplus salt while the minute hair on its leaves act as a shield against strong sunlight.” The regularly spotted fauna at the Red Canyon includes

▲ *From extreme left: The Red Canyon in the Eilat Mountains offers one of Israel’s most beautiful hiking trails; you can interact with wild bottlenose dolphins at Dolphin Reef; Eilat offers many schools for windsurfers; witness rare marine life without diving at The Underwater Observatory Marine Park.*

Nubian ibex, red fox, rock hyrax, birds like hooded wheatear and sand partridge, and lizards like the Sinai agama and ornate mastigure. The partridges are difficult to spot since they blend so well with the landscape, but you can hear them loud and clear. The Red Canyon offers two trails for hiking. Though both are circular, the shorter one takes an hour and the longer one about thrice as long. Maps are provided, and there are plenty of hikers along the way to keep you company.

After the trying hike, I opted to cool down by observing marine life at the Underwater Observatory Marine Park



(coralworld.co.il). Eilat is a port on the Gulf of Aqaba and Israel's only outlet to the Red Sea. The marine park makes full use of this strategic location. It is divided into different zones: The Underwater Observatory Tower lets you see hundreds of species of fish and coral in their natural habitat in the Red Sea; the Rare Fish Aquarium allows you to feed rarely seen marine life; and the Turtle Pool and Shark Pool offer an intimate peek into the lives of these elusive creatures.

At The Underwater Observatory Tower, I enjoyed a diver's vantage point by merely walking down the stairs to six metres below the sea level. Since this observatory is situated in the midst of the reef, it lets you see natural life take its course with players like corals, varied fish, sharks, stingrays, and turtles of the Gulf of Eilat. Among the many wonders, I spotted Arabian pinfish, flashlight fish, spotted eagle ray, live sharksucker, Red Sea needlefish, amberjack, flowerpot coral, and blacktip reef shark through the glass windows.

Wanting to get closer to the marine life, we drove to Dolphin Reef, where one can snorkel or dive with dolphins in their natural habitat. The reef on the bank of the Red Sea is home to a school of four bottlenose dolphins—one male and three females. Neo is the 14-year-old male, while Nana is the eldest female at 24 years old. These are not captive dolphins and have access to the open sea. Once you don a wetsuit and collect your snorkelling gear, an instructor takes you through a set of instructions. There is one guide for three people during the 30 minutes that you are in

▲ *Eilat offers a range of water sports like parasailing.*

GETTING THERE

Air India (airindia.in) flies to Ben Gurion Airport from India. The airport is about 20 kilometres from Tel Aviv and 50 kilometres from Jerusalem. A cab can be hired from either city to reach Eilat.

STAY

Leonardo Plaza Hotel Eilat of the Fattal Hotel Chain is a luxury hotel conveniently located on the banks of the Red Sea. There is a beach in front of the hotel. leonardo-hotels.com

the water. During this human-dolphin experience, tourists cannot touch the dolphins. There are ample tropical fish and corals to look at as well. If you are confident enough, scuba diving is also offered at Dolphin Reef. If you don't want to snorkel or scuba dive, you can head to the floating pier to see the antics of these second-generation dolphins whose parents were brought to the reef from Russia.

The next day, we opted for another outing on the Red Sea. A short drive from our hotel, Leonardo Plaza Hotel Eilat, got us to Kisuski Water Sports (kiskuski.co.il). Buttoning up life jackets, we hopped onto a six-seater motorboat with reggae thumping through the speakers. The military port offered us a glimpse of a docked naval ship, while the industrial port held a huge shipment of cars neatly lined up. "These are mostly shipped from Asian countries," Katzir said of the automobiles. We glided past a sole Israeli enjoying stand-up paddleboarding in the sunny weather and admired the strength and skill of a trio of windsurfers. Kayaking, parasailing, banana boats, boat tubes, and jet skis added to the myriad options available. The adventures were just beginning. +



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NEW DRESS CODE

The Dubai Mall is the world's largest mall by land area and is home to the Dubai Shopping Festival.

'Shop till you drop' has always been the mantra of Dubai, but now, local brands are asking people to factor in sustainability. **SUJATA ASSOMULL** uncovers some Middle Eastern fashion treasures.

HERE IS NO QUESTION THAT Dubai is the fashion capital of the Middle East. The city loves to dress up and is home to one of the world's largest and most luxurious shopping centres, The Dubai Mall. Most tourists inevitably indulge in fashion shopping here. After all, you can find the best of Milan and Paris in Dubai. But you must also look out for some responsible homegrown brands on your next trip.



THE NEW WAVE

With Middle Eastern brands waking up to the need to be sustainable, you can now find some unique conscious buys in Dubai. The recent lockdown has only spurred this movement on. Local brands are usually found in smaller malls, studios in Dubai Design District (D3, dubaidesigndistrict.com), or boutiques around the upscale residential area of Jumeirah. Bouguessa (bouguessa.com) is a modern Arab brand known for its sartorial detailing and for injecting a feel of architecture into all its pieces. Sonam Kapoor Ahuja and Priyanka Chopra Jonas have worn the label, founded by the stylish French-Algerian designer Faiza Bouguessa. She says, “I am often told that there is a touch of orientalism in my designs, so maybe the aspect of modern designs with that twist appeals to our Indian clients.” During the lockdown, the designer has worked towards making her brand more responsible. “We had been thinking of working with deadstock to reduce waste for more than a year now, but due to the fast pace of the fashion calendar, I had not found ways to do so. I think the fact that we had to slow down for the past few months gave me the clarity to evaluate how to do so and also to explore these fabrics more creatively and give them a new life.” The result is an eco-conscious capsule collection that includes some easy but well-finished summer dresses that can be



French-Algerian designer Faiza Bouguessa (also seen right) with her display at the Vogue Fashion Dubai Experience held in 2014. Left: Studios in Dubai Design District house local fashion brands.



dressed up or down. You can even add a churidar under some of them to inject an Indo-Western twist to the ensemble. You can find her label on international platforms such as Net-a-Porter (net-a-porter.com) and also at the multi-brand concept store Symphony, in The Dubai Mall (thedubaimall.com), but you must visit her studio at D3 (building 7) to see her full collection. And she does take special orders.



▲ KAGE recently launched a capsule collection using excess stock materials. Left: Blazers are a de rigueur part of the label's collections.

A stone's throw away, KAGE is located in Building 5 at D3. It was founded by Dubai girl Basma Abu Ghazaleh just over a decade ago, as she saw a gap in the market for easy-to-wear separates. At that time, there were virtually no homegrown labels that created such clothes—most labels from the Middle East were all about couture. Today, her label retails from leading concept stores in Dubai such as Etoile La Boutique (etoilelaboutique.com) and Boutique 1 (boutique1.com). She acknowledges that it is not easy for local brands to enter the retail circuit, “Multi-brand stores are particular when choosing local. A local brand is usually looked upon as a second-class label.” Abu Ghazaleh says sustainability in the local market is about upcycled, pre-loved, and timeless pieces of fashion. KAGE recently launched a capsule collection using excess stock materials to make seasonless pieces—from kaftans to sarongs and shell tops, these are separates worn while lounging at home, to the beach, or to an evening soiree depending on how you dress them up. KAGE has always believed in using sustainable fabrics, and its

founder says, “There has been a shift in the way a shopper in the region thinks about making their purchases.” KAGE is also known for its tailored separates, and blazers are a de rigueur part of their collections. “A blazer is a versatile fashion staple that can be worn from day to night. It’s for the cool lady, but also for the sophisticated entrepreneur,” explains the founder.

ESSENTIAL ADD-ONS

D3 was built to be the design hub of the city, and it is dotted with boutiques and quaint eateries, but one store that every discerning traveller must visit is Montroi (montroi.com). The brainchild of Enrique Hormigo and Samir Aghera, Montroi is a Dubai-based design label that celebrates nomadic life. The brand’s name is derived from a village in Europe, thought to be a part of the ancient Silk Route, and showcases a clean yet multicultural aesthetic. Best known for handcrafted leather goods, perfumes, and accessories, Montroi works closely with local artists and can personalise everything from a luggage tag to a trunk. Its bags are made in Italy, the rosewater is from Oman, and perfumes made in Grasse, France.



When it comes to sustainability, the brand's main concern is preservation of crafts. "We benefit from 'being in the right place at the right time' as this region is looking for more depth in their purchases. We create products that age well and tell stories; products that we can treasure for longevity," says Hormigo. The brand encourages visitors to come by and have a cup of tea at its studio located on the street level of Building 7 in D3, so that you can learn the story behind the products. You will also find a selection at its store in Louvre Abu Dhabi (louvrebudhabi.ae).

While in Building 7 at D3, you might want to drop by HALM Design Studio (halmonline.com) and look at some arm candy that combines the best of three cultures. The bags combine Scandinavian minimalism, British pragmatism, and Dubai's love for luxury. Swedish creative director Hanna Ransjo, who has lived in the Emirates for over 25 years, and British project manager Hannah Louise Brewer, who came from womenswear label Temperley London, created the signature bag called the Chilluxe. It works as a perfect day-to-night accessory, and was given the ultimate seal of approval when Queen Rania Al Abdullah of Jordan carried it at her first official engagement of 2019. Ransjo says, "We aim to encourage slow fashion with a fresh twist on aesthetics, such as smaller leather goods or interchangeable straps you can add to each design." It is a mindful approach to design.



Reema Al Banna's label, Reemami, is known for its bold designs. Right: Al Banna likes to inject a feeling of adventure into her designs.



GETTING THERE

You can fly to Dubai from any of the major Indian cities.

Emirates (emirates.com) has the most number of connections. The airport is just five kilometres from the city centre, and cabs are easy to find.

STAY

Vida Downtown (twin room from ₹9,000; vidahotels.com) is an urban lifestyle hotel close to the Burj Khalifa and The Dubai Mall. If you want to stay on the beachfront, **Jumeirah Al Naseem** (doubles from ₹40,000; jumeirah.com) is a contemporary retreat home to some of the best restaurants in the city.

THE ART ROUTE

If you are looking for more avant-garde stuff, drive to Sharjah to visit Reemami (reemami.com). Trained graphic designer Reema Al Banna's label is known for its bold and beautiful designs. "Realising how much waste the fashion industry makes and seeing it first-hand, I had to find solutions to use all the surplus materials," says Al Banna. The brand is rooted in Middle Eastern culture and the founder believes there is an increasing appreciation for local art and design. But it is challenging for local designers to be sustainable. "Designers in the region have limited supplies and limited sources for fabric, and we depend on a lot of suppliers outside the country." The label, which has been worn by Hollywood stars Bella Hadid and Kelly Rowland, is committed to becoming 100 per cent sustainable. "Repurpose, reuse, recycle—that is our mantra. For example, we regenerate some of our samples to make new samples." It is also one of the few local labels to address swimwear. A girl who loves the outdoors, Al Banna likes to inject a feeling of adventure into her designs.

Apart from attempts at sustainability, all these local labels share a dedication to good craftsmanship. As Halm's Ransjo says, "What makes the region so special is that it is a melting pot of exciting backgrounds holding on to traditions that will soon be lost in other areas of the world." +

From left: Montroi is a Dubai-based design label that celebrates nomadic life; the brand works closely with local artists.





The author, Durkhanai Ayubi, with her parents and sisters (clockwise from top left: Zelmai, the author, Fatema, Farida, Zelaikhah, Zahra, Raihanah).

THE LONG ROAD HOME

When **DURKHANAI AYUBI** and her sisters set out to their family's homeland of Afghanistan, they found a trove of culinary inspiration for their restaurant in Adelaide, Australia. In this excerpt from her new cookbook, Ayubi details the experience and reflects on how cuisine connects us to our roots—and one another.

THE MOST STRIKING thing about Afghanistan was its epic landscape, lush and fertile when we arrived in spring. The snow-capped mountains of the Hindu Kush, and the cascading layers of crumpled and velvety peaks that lay staggered beneath them, inspired an overwhelming reverence. The peaks played with light and shadow, creating a rolling spectacle from daybreak to dark, always with an ethereal luminosity. Vast valleys of bright green grass and crops stretched out like gently rolling oceans. The country wrapped us in a warm embrace, as if it had been permanently imprinted with the memory of seeing us come into the world. Many things seemed strangely familiar—from the worn, but still kind, features of its people and the social mannerisms to the sweet smell of the spring air.

It was April of 2012, and my sisters and I had returned to Afghanistan for the first time since 1985, the year our parents had bundled us together and, under a cloud of uncertainty and blind hope, negotiated our way out of the country and into our future. We crossed the border on foot, from Pakistan into Afghanistan through the Khyber Pass, following in reverse the path taken years earlier, when the long and continuous chain of my ancestors' connection to the soil of Afghanistan was first broken. We were pulled by an allure we were yet to understand—perhaps, simply, by a need to know more.

We spent the first few days in Kabul, then made our way to Dari Noor—the “valley of light”—where my mother and her siblings had spent their summers growing up. There, my mother's cousin welcomed us into his home as though we were his own children. Dari Noor is a breathtaking, self-sufficient valley, with clear brooks nestled between endless green hills and surrounded by fruit orchards, banana plantations, and wildflowers.

Our meals were made with ingredients from the valley. There was paneer paired with large,



▲ *Parwana, the Ayubi family's restaurant.*

Preparing bolani, pan-fried flatbreads stuffed with garlic chives and potatoes, at Parwana, in Adelaide, Australia. ▼

purple-tinged raisins; sweet and almost perfumed honey; sabzi, or wild spinach, cooked with native onions and chillies; chai, brewed using pure mountain water pumped from a well; and long breads made with local grains. We were extended the type of hospitality Afghanistan is famed for, which felt even more poignant given that it was unfolding during times of hardship, when people had very little but still insisted upon giving their guests the best they had to offer.

If for us there was room to feel enthralled by the experience of reconnecting with our ancestral lands, there was also a deep awareness of the difficulties of life in a region that, for almost four decades, had been assaulted by attempts at control waged by various regimes. By the time we returned to Australia, we had connected more dots—about ourselves, our parents, our ancestors, the land where we had been born and the paradoxes that define it. We had affirmed a new resolve: if those inside Afghanistan were still making objects of beauty and preserving their heritage in creative ways while bombs exploded overhead, then an ocean away in Australia, we could also contribute to the story of our times in our own way, through creativity and food.

It was an echo of the same realisation that had led my family to open a restaurant, Parwana, in Adelaide in 2009. Parwana's menu came from the recipes and rituals passed to my mother, Farida, by her foremothers and forefathers. There were *mantu*, steamed dumplings dressed with lamb mince and chana dal and layered with a tangy garlic-yoghurt dressing, and the crowd favourite, *banjaan borani*—melt-in-your-mouth eggplant simmered in a rich tomato sauce, perfectly





balanced in acidity and sweetness. Each dish bore the marks of ancient cultural exchanges, melding native ingredients with those from the Mediterranean, India, China, and beyond.

Five years after opening Parwana, and two years after our first return to Afghanistan, my sisters and I opened a second business, Kutchi Deli Parwana. Our deli emerged from the notion that we could offer something that captured our experience as the children of migrants, who, while forever tethered to our history, had spent almost all of our lives in Australia.

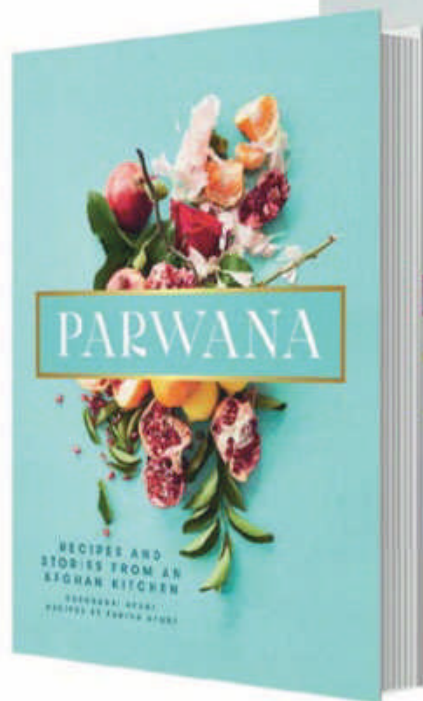
The small lunchtime space also reflected the sights we had absorbed on our travels through Afghanistan. There we had seen bright pops of colour splashed through small food spots, decorated with a mix of fluorescent and incandescent lights, and tiled with geometric patterns. We had seen the street vendors offering piping-hot naans cooked over hot plates; parcels of vegetables, dipped in batter, fried, and served

with herb chutneys poured on top; and deliciously tangy bowls of a vinegared chickpea dish called *shor nakhot*.

On that trip, we'd also gained insight into the ways that food was so closely intertwined with art and beauty in Afghan culture, and so we hand-painted the walls of our little shop with scenes from old Persian miniatures. And, importantly, we had learned more about how food is inseparable from a deep sense of generosity, invitation, gratitude, and honouring one another, with little space left for pretence.

▲ *The Ayubi family enjoys a feast of mantu, pekowrah, and other dishes from the Parwana cookbook.*

We experience, through food, a universal desire to connect, irrespective of perceived differences.



These restaurants hold many layers of significance for us. They tell a story of the unexpected—as those who dine on Afghan food for the first time find themselves surprised by the familiarity of the dishes, hinting at a rich and interconnected history. They tell the story of my mother, raised by a father who encouraged her to pursue her love of cooking from a young age. And they tell the story of how we experience, through food, a universal desire to connect, irrespective of perceived differences—hinting at a future into which we can all move forward together. My family’s story is but one strand in the web of existence in which we are each a part. With deeper consciousness of the extent to which we are all bound together, we can create the untold stories of the tomorrows still to come. ✦

Excerpted from Parwana: Recipes and Stories from an Afghan Kitchen by Durkhanai Ayubi. Reproduced with the permission of Interlink Books, an imprint of Interlink Publishing, Northampton, Massachusetts, USA. interlinkbooks.com



Parwana’s Falooda

In Afghanistan, *falooda* is sold in small, colourful ice-cream shops known as *sheer yakh feroshees*. This milky, rose-water-infused cold dessert comes in a tall glass, with layers of rose syrup, *maghoot* (a jelly dish), ice cream, milk, and nuts.

FOR THE MAGHOOT

- 15 drops yellow food colouring
- 4 tbsp cornstarch

Bring 2 cups water and the yellow food colouring to a boil in a saucepan. Stir the cornstarch with 3 tablespoons of cold water to form a smooth paste, then mix in 2 tablespoons of the boiling water to make a slurry. Slowly add the tempered cornstarch to the boiling water, stirring continuously to prevent lumps. As soon as the mixture

begins to boil again, pour it into a shallow heatproof dish. Refrigerate for 2 to 3 hours or until set. Cut the jelly into small cubes and set aside.

FOR THE ROSE SYRUP

- 1 cup sugar
- 1 tbsp rose water
- 20 drops pink food colouring

Add the sugar and 1 cup water to a small saucepan over high heat, stirring to dissolve the sugar. Bring to a boil, and boil without stirring for 2 to 3 minutes,

Falooda, derived from a Persian recipe, is a creamy parfait full of flavours and textures.

or until the syrup thickens and reaches 111°C on a candy thermometer. Stir in the rose water and pink food colouring to combine. Set aside to cool.

FOR THE SABJA

- 2 tbsp *sabja* (basil seeds)

Place seeds in a bowl and pour 2 cups boiling water on top. Soak for about 15 minutes, or until the seeds are sticky and gelatinous. Set aside to cool.

TO ASSEMBLE

- 4½ cups milk
- 6 scoops vanilla ice cream
- Coarsely crushed pistachios and rose petals to garnish


You will need 6 tall glasses. Put 2½ tablespoons of the rose syrup into each glass. Add a heaping tablespoon of diced *maghoot*, followed by a heaping tablespoon of soaked basil seeds. Pour in cold milk to three-quarters full, add a scoop of vanilla ice cream, and top with pistachios and rose petals. Serve immediately, with a straw and a spoon.

Recipe by Farida Ayubi with assistance from Fatema Ayubi.

A full-page background image of a vast desert landscape with rolling orange sand dunes under a clear blue sky. In the lower foreground, a person wearing a hat, a backpack, and trekking poles is walking up a dune, leaving a trail of footprints. The person's shadow is cast long and dark on the sand. The text is overlaid on the upper half of the image, enclosed in a white rectangular frame.

25

OFFBEAT
THINGS TO DO
in the
MIDDLE EAST



A JOURNEY TO THE MIDDLE EAST COMES WITH THE PROMISE OF SURREAL LANDSCAPES, ARCHAEOLOGICAL TREASURES, CELEBRATED CULTURES, MONUMENTS OF HISTORIC CONFLICTS, AND SACRED SITES. WE'VE STEERED CLEAR OF CLICHES AND CURATED A LIST OF EXPERIENCES THAT WILL AWAKEN THE INTREPID EXPLORER IN YOU.

BY SUSHMITA SRIVASTAV & RASHIMA NAGPAL

1

**VISIT THE
EMPTY
QUARTER
IN OMAN**

The enigma of Oman's Rub Al Khali, or the Empty Quarter as it is widely known, is so great that it isn't advisable to venture there without a reliable guide. Thankfully, a few reputed tour operators offer full-day private trips to the gargantuan desertland from Salalah. Viator lets you drive to this untouched region with a guide who can handle off-road trails and will ensure you don't get lost. Go dune-bashing, check out the ruins of Ubar—the lost city that is said to be swallowed by the desert—and absorb the remote emptiness of the land at Thumrait, which was once a famous Bedouin settlement and an important point on caravan routes. [viator.com](https://www.viator.com)

2

GO BACK IN TIME AT ALULA, SAUDI ARABIA

With expansive deserts dotted with gigantic boulders and precious remnants of the most ancient civilisations on Earth, AlUla has always been a hidden treasure, until now. Saudi Arabia finally opened itself to international tourism last year and chose AlUla as the flagbearer of its glorious heritage. The ancient land boasts 2,00,000 years of history and is home to the country's first UNESCO World Heritage Site, Al-Hijr Archaeological Site, which has over 100 well-preserved tombs with elaborate rock-cut facades. There's also Jabal Ikamah, which acts as an open library with hundreds of ancient inscriptions from the Dadanitic and Lihyanic cultures, and the ancient rock city of Dadan to explore. experiencealula.com



3

Take a Private Desert Safari in Dubai

The Private Heritage Desert Safari offered by Platinum Heritage takes you through the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve in a vintage Land Rover.

The private retreat features traditional entertainment and a four-course Arabic dinner, but what sets this safari apart is the presence of a dedicated conservation guide who will make sure that your tour and any encounters with native wildlife are informative and insightful.

platinum-heritage.com



FROM TOP: SHUTTERSTOCK; TIMDAVIDCOLLECTION/ALAMY. OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM TOP: SHUTTERSTOCK; TOLGA TEZCAN/GETTYIMAGES; SHUTTERSTOCK

4

DISCOVER NUBIAN HERITAGE IN ASWAN, EGYPT

Nubians trace their origins to one of the earliest civilisations on the planet. Their ancient homeland, Nubia, once stretched along the River Nile and covered swathes of present-day Egypt and Sudan. Today's Nubians are concentrated in southern Egypt, especially in Kom Ombo and Aswan's Nasr al-Nuba. Visit the Nubian Museum in the city, and sign up for the Trip To The Nubian Village In Aswan offered by Journey To Egypt, which introduces you to a native family and gives you a glimpse of their ways of life. journeytoegypt.com



5

VISIT THE SUMELA MONASTERY IN TURKEY

After four years of restoration, the Sumela Monastery in the northeastern province of Trabzon in Turkey reopened its doors in July this year. The Greek Orthodox monastery is an architectural marvel with mythological significance, and dates back to the fourth century. Perched high in the Black Sea region, at least 1,000 metres above sea level, it hangs like an extraordinary jewel in the Altindere Valley. Various historical incidents, including an 88-year-long pause on religious services and a major fire in 1930, have only added to its legendary standing among Turkish attractions. muze.gov.tr

6

EXPLORE ABHA LIKE AN INSIDER

In sharp contrast to the vast desert wilderness in its neighbourhood, the tiny hill station of Abha in Saudi Arabia is famous for its greenery and misty mountain tops. Take a cable car ride down to Habala, the ancient 'hanging village' built halfway down a cliff face and accessible only by ropes, or visit the decaying Asiri mud houses as you drive up to the Green Mountain. This compact hill town is also the ideal base to explore the Asir National Park, which is home to 170 species of birds. Drop by Rijal Almaa Heritage Village, 45 kilometres west of Abha, for a traditional meal and a glimpse of 60 palaces built from natural stone, clay, and wood. Also visit the nearby town of Khamis Mushayt, famous for its agricultural riches, silver Bedouin jewellery, and coffee and spice crops. visitsaudi.com





7

Find the Abandoned Town of Al Madam in the UAE

Midway between Dubai and Sharjah, the village of Al Madam is rumoured to be haunted. Deserted under unknown circumstances, the last remaining houses of the village—laid out eerily neatly in two rows—and a bright green mosque are flooded with sand today. The village was once home to the Al Kutbi tribe, and the rumours of a djinn having taken over the village adds to its allure. Sign up for the Ghost Town Sharjah Tour offered by Marriott Bonvoy Tours & Activities to find out for yourself. activities.marriott.com

8

RELISH AN ORGANIC IFTAR IN ABU DHABI

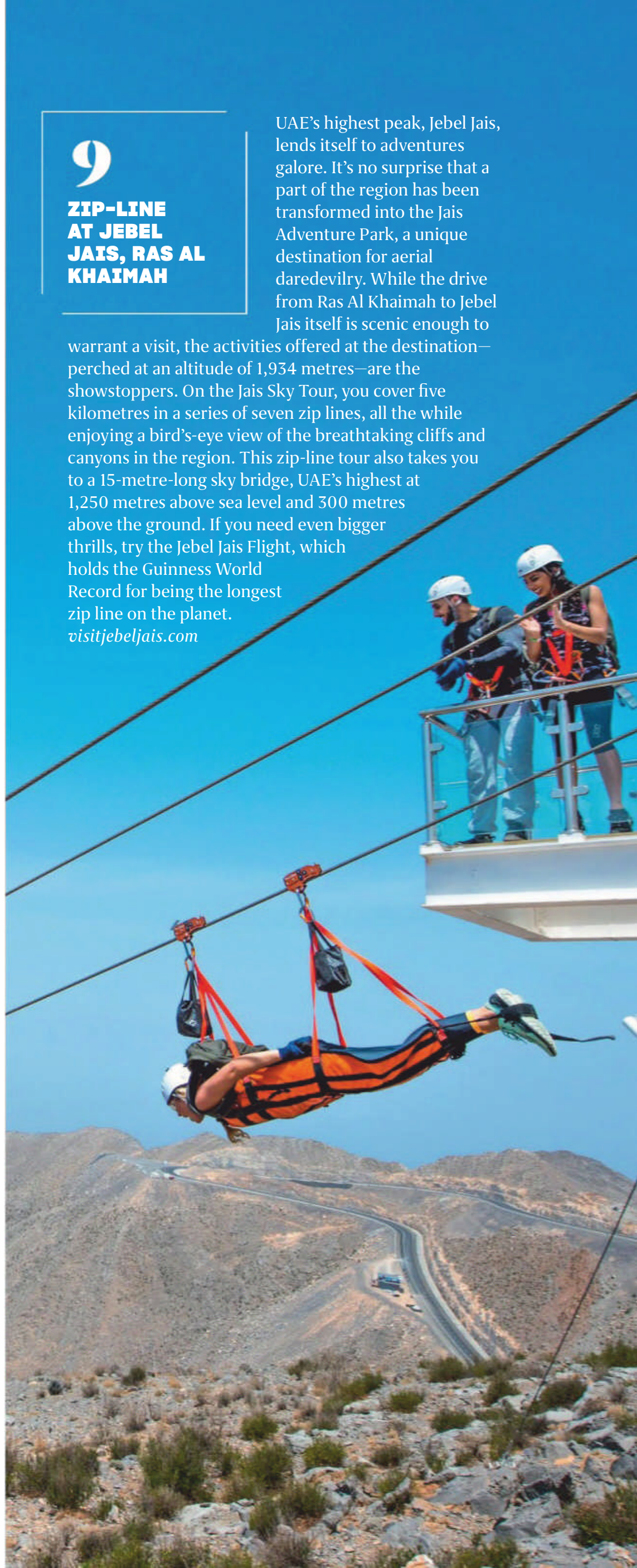
The Emirates Bio Farm in Al Ain is the largest private organic farm in the UAE and an unlikely venue for iftar. Every Ramadan, the organic farm that lies nestled amid sand dunes turns into a sought-after setting for feasts. Start your day with a one-hour tractor tour where you can watch how okra, eggplant, pumpkin, coriander, and other veggies are organically grown. The iftar spread uses fresh produce that you can help in picking, and is served inside a functioning greenhouse. Expect many traditional but organically-tweaked Ramadan dishes such as pumpkin kibbeh, hot mezze, beetroot *mutabal*, and a Bedouin-style lamb dish slow-cooked underground for over five hours. emiratesbiofarm.com

9

ZIP-LINE AT JEBEL JAIS, RAS AL KHAIMAH

UAE's highest peak, Jebel Jais, lends itself to adventures galore. It's no surprise that a part of the region has been transformed into the Jais Adventure Park, a unique destination for aerial daredevilry. While the drive from Ras Al Khaimah to Jebel Jais itself is scenic enough to

warrant a visit, the activities offered at the destination—perched at an altitude of 1,934 metres—are the showstoppers. On the Jais Sky Tour, you cover five kilometres in a series of seven zip lines, all the while enjoying a bird's-eye view of the breathtaking cliffs and canyons in the region. This zip-line tour also takes you to a 15-metre-long sky bridge, UAE's highest at 1,250 metres above sea level and 300 metres above the ground. If you need even bigger thrills, try the Jebel Jais Flight, which holds the Guinness World Record for being the longest zip line on the planet. visitjebeljais.com





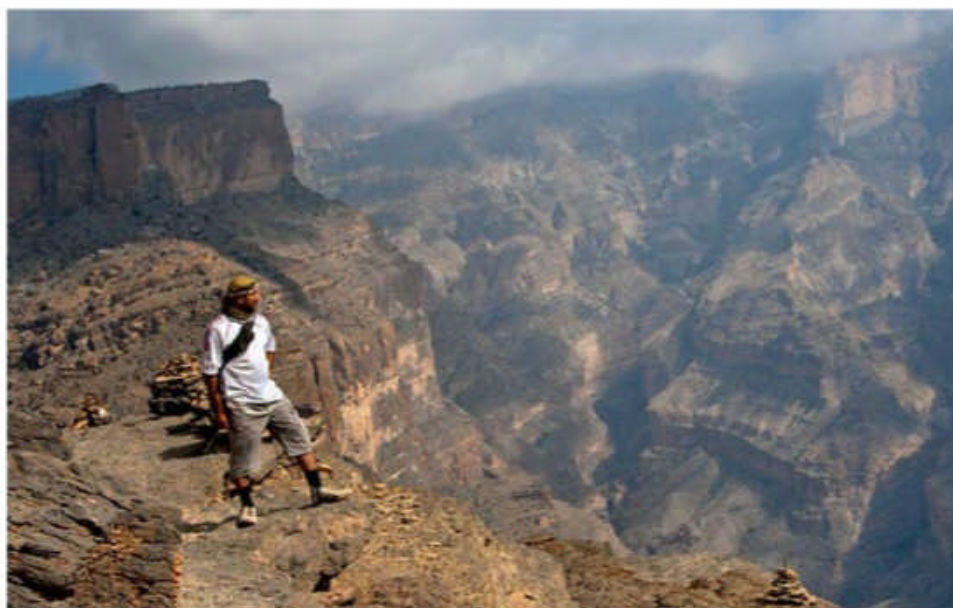
CLOCKWISE: KATIEKK2/GETTYIMAGES; COURTESY OF RAS AL KHAIMAH; SHUTTERSTOCK; GFC COLLECTION/ALAMY

10

GO OFF THE GRID IN SOCOTRA, YEMEN



Somewhere between Somalia and Yemen, Socotra is the main island of an isolated archipelago of the same name in the Indian Ocean. Long protected by the traditions of the Socotrans, the island is now afflicted by geopolitics and climate change. Nevertheless, its extraordinary ecology and stunning coastline make it an excellent offbeat destination. Owing to its far-flung location, Socotra is home to plant species that are now too ‘strange’ for the rest of the world—a third of its botanical life is, in fact, endemic. The main attraction is the umbrella-shaped dragon’s blood tree that lives only within the remnants of the prehistoric dragon’s blood forest and uses its leaves to grab moisture from the misty air. The tree gets its name from the red resin it exudes from the bark when cut. This and other endemic flora make Socotra a nature lover’s paradise. yementourism.com



11

BEAT THE SUMMER HEAT IN MASFOUT, AJMAN

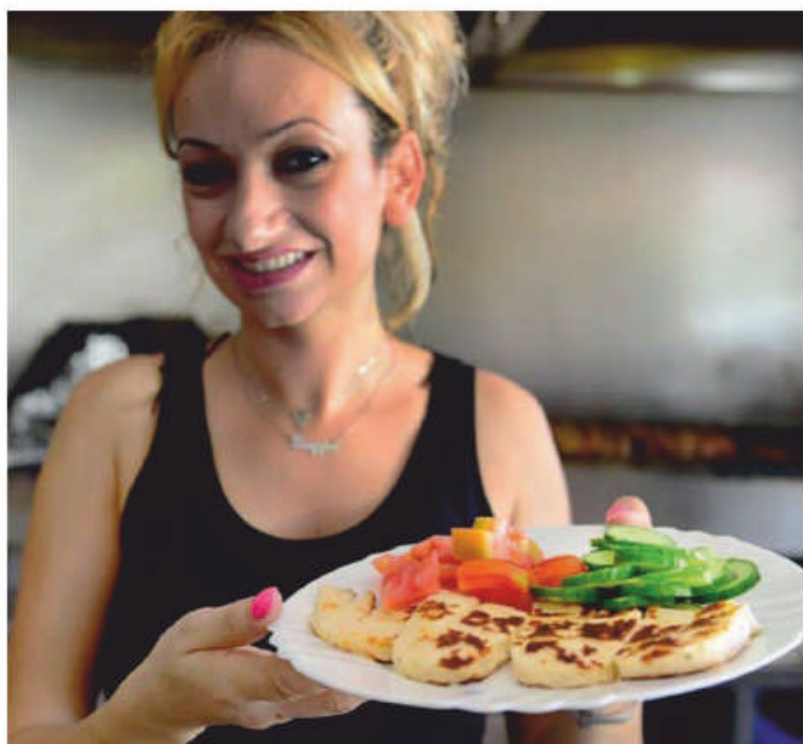
The smallest of all the emirates, Ajman has been the last one to don the glitz of UAE. It’s fairly new to tourism, so it still has some tricks up its sleeve. These include two glorious inland enclaves, Al Manama and Masfout—the former agricultural, the latter mountainous. Masfout, a 90-minute drive from the capital, skirts the Oman border and leads you to the foothills of

the Hajar Mountains. Owing to its high altitude, it offers a respite from the heat. The rugged landscape here lends itself to mountain biking, hiking, and picturesque picnics. ajman.travel

12

KAYAK THROUGH THE MANGROVES OF AL THAKIRA, QATAR

When you're in Qatar, you must explore the Al Thakira Mangrove Forest, around 60 kilometres north of Doha, on a kayak. The four-hour-long excursion starts with a walk or ride through compacted sand and salt flats to reach the fishing village of Al Khor. The dirt track ends on the beach, where the mangrove forest begins. Navigating the wild network of mangroves on a kayak is the best way to study this ecosystem. At Purple Island you can spot unique crabs, fish, and birds like flamingos and herons. If you wish to linger, book one of the 'Sunset to Full Moon Kayaking' events on Viator and enjoy an unforgettable night on the island with a traditional barbecue dinner and camping under the stars. [viator.com](https://www.viator.com)



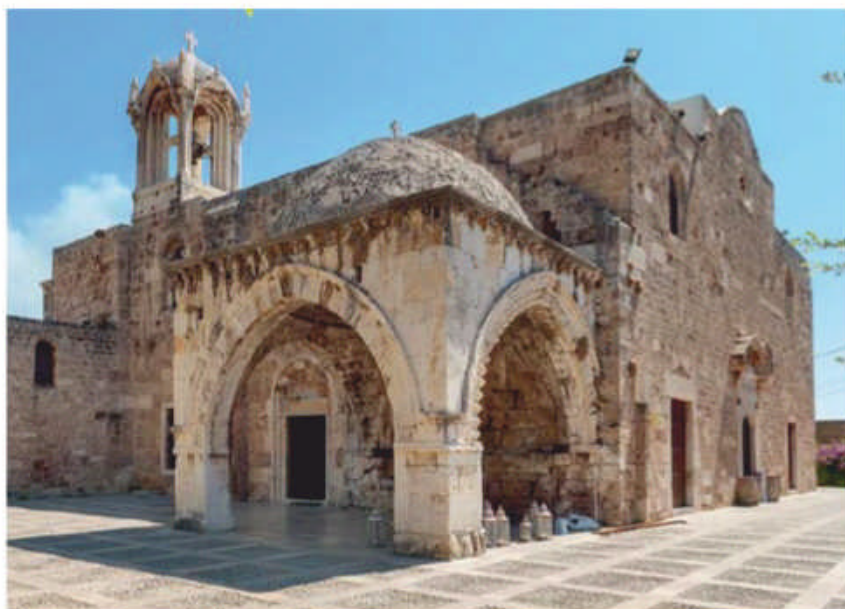
13

TAKE A CULINARY TOUR OF CYPRUS

The island country of Cyprus is home to a compelling culture, and food is a huge part of it. Eating at a *mageirio* is the ideal way to acquaint yourself with the local cuisine. A *mageirio* is a small, lesser-known, casual eatery that serves only home-cooked Cypriot food. Join Gastronomy Cyprus on one of its culinary trails and head to

Nicosia's suburbs to pick fresh local produce at a farm for your picnic basket that you can savour by the Xyliatou Dam. Later, visit the scenic village of Larnaca to sip on the finest Cypriot coffee, get tipsy on a dessert wine called Commandaria at a winery in Vouni, and learn to cook dishes like souvlaki (meat grilled on skewers), *sheftalia* (fire-cooked lamb or pork sausage wrapped in caul fat), and *tiropita* (a cheese pie). [gastronomycyprus.com](https://www.gastronomycyprus.com)

FROM TOP: SORIN FURCOI/GETTYIMAGES; BOAZ ROTTEM/ALAMY



14 WITNESS THE HISTORY OF CIVILISATION AT BYBLOS, LEBANON

About an hour north of Beirut, Byblos is one of the world's oldest continually inhabited cities, bearing witness to the beginnings of the Phoenician civilisation. The UNESCO-listed coastal town has witnessed a stream of uninterrupted construction right from the first settlement dating back to 8800 BC—relics of Bronze Age temples, Persian fortifications, the Roman Road, Byzantine churches, and other historic structures can be found here. Wander through the old souq, marvel at the 12th-century Crusader Castle, tour the ruins of ancient civilisations, and take breaks at the beautiful harbour. visit-lebanon.org



16 ATTEND A POTTERY WORKSHOP IN BAHRAIN

If you are looking to take home some artisanal pots or try your hand at pottery yourself, you must visit the A'Ali town in Bahrain. Pottery is said to have been popular in the island nation since 500 BC, as evidenced by excavations in the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Dilmun Burial Mounds. Deep in the heart of Bahrain, amid these 4,000-year-old burial mounds, stands the biggest pottery handicraft centre. Nada Pottery in A'Ali offers sessions with Maitham, an artisan who's been practising the craft since he was 12 years old. A two-hour session with Go Peep lets you try your hand at an old-school pottery wheel. gopeep.com

15 Go Glamping on your Terms in Israel

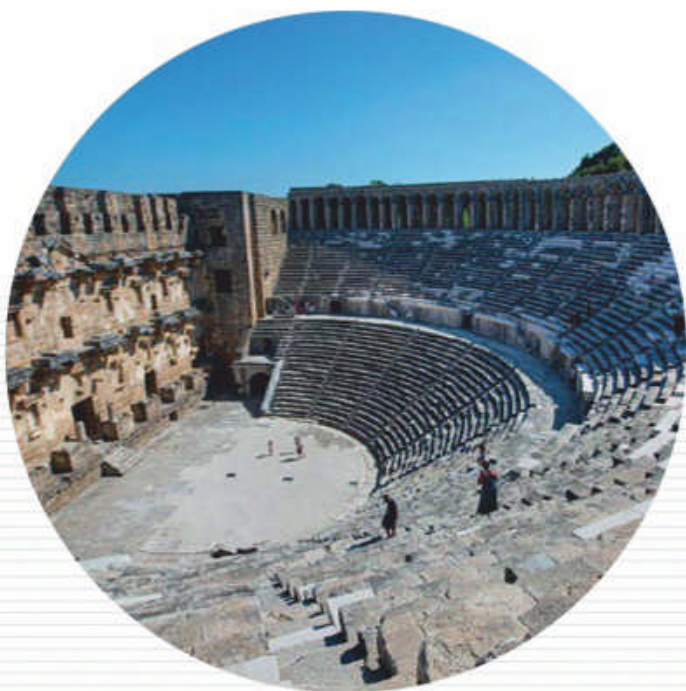
Glamping Israel is reputed for its bespoke glamping offerings and pop-up hotels. Pick the site of your choice (Mitzpe Ramon and the Ramon crater, Arava and Judean Desert, Sea of Galilee, Ella Valley and the Jerusalem Mountains), the group size, and the season. Then, the company recommends the ideal lodging option—teepees, tents, caravans, mud houses—and arranges for everything. Imagine a weekend brimming with wine and gourmet meals while you stay in a vineyard in the middle of the Negev Desert or at the historic Tower of David—you're bound only by your imagination. glamping.co.il



17

TRY BEEKEEPING IN UMM QAIS, JORDAN

Community-based tourism is picking up pace in Jordan, and the little village of Umm Qais offers a range of such immersive experiences. Don a beekeeping suit, and accompany bee enthusiast Yousef Sayyah to the Yarmouk Forest Reserve where you sip on pomegranate juice sweetened with fresh honey as he passionately introduces you to the fascinating queendom of bees with a sneak peek into their hives. As you take a closer look into one of the colonies to search for the queen, hear Sayyah elucidate on their teamwork, ecological importance, the pollination process, and the healing properties of natural bee products. Once you're done helping him in harvesting the honey, you can enjoy the sweet taste of success, literally. Umm Qais is also famous for the ruins of the Decapolis city of Gadara. zamantours.com



18

Catch a Show at a Roman Theatre in Antalya, Turkey

Founded around 1000 BC, the ancient Greco-Roman city of Aspendos is best-known for its Roman theatre, one of the most remarkably preserved of its kind in the world. Designed by Greek architect Zeno and built in the second century AD, the theatre seats up to 7,000 people and is used as a venue till date. Catch the two-hour *Fire of Anatolia* show, which celebrates Turkey's history, myths, music, and dance in summer. Featuring an award-winning 120-strong troupe performing folk and acrobatic dances, ballet, and belly dances, it makes for an experience of a lifetime. getyourguide.co.uk

19

DIVE IN A SINKHOLE IN DAHAB, EGYPT

Once an idyllic Egyptian destination with a laid-back lifestyle by the sea, Dahab owes its new-found popularity to the many stunning diving sites in the area. The most famous of these is the Blue Hole, a 120-metre-deep submarine sinkhole located eight kilometres north of Dahab on the coast of the Red Sea. Only technical divers can access the deeper portions—the site is notorious for diving fatalities—but budding adventurers can explore the outer lip, which brims with colourful marine life. A 20-minute boat ride takes you to the reserve of Ras Abu Galum, home to a blue lagoon where you can swim to the reef wall to interact with a variety of aquatic creatures. For an online glimpse of what awaits you on these shores, take a 360° video tour of the SS Thistlegorm, a British Merchant Navy ship that was bombed by the Germans in 1941 and lies undisturbed on the seabed off the coast of Egypt. thethistlegormproject.com





FROM EXTREME LEFT: SHUTTERSTOCK (2); PHOTOSTOCK-ISRAEL/ALAMY

20

FOLLOW THE INCENSE ROUTE IN ISRAEL

The Incense Route in Israel, a path spanning more than 1,930 kilometres, was used by traders to carry frankincense and myrrh from Yemen and Oman, through the Negev Desert, to the Mediterranean port in Gaza in the third century BC. It is believed that the Nabateans primarily controlled this route. But recent findings of inscriptions and milestones suggest a 'lost part' of the route is allied to the Pertinax and Severus rulers. Set up your base at Six Senses Shagarut and book a hiking trip with them to see what's left of the ancient route—the beautifully preserved city of Avdat known for its Byzantine-era ruins; Haluza, most of which rests beneath massive sand dunes; a network of crumbling churches; the old caravan stop of Khan Saharonim; and the gloriously isolated Shivta. sixsenses.com



21

See the Workings of an Ancient Irrigation System in Iran

For your trip to Iran, you must earmark the Shushtar Historical Hydraulic System. This striking system of caves, pools, dams, and tunnels built into natural rock is a centuries-old plumbing system that is still being used to divert water for irrigation from River Kârun. Its most impressive component is a series of ancient water mills powered by man-made cascading falls.

Water streaming out from different directions at this UNESCO World Heritage Site looks no less than the work of a wizard, considering that it started taking shape in the fifth century BC. The elaborate system of waterworks was completed by different civilisations over centuries of development and modification. inspirock.com

22

DISCOVER ARCHAEOLOGICAL GEMS IN MLEIHA, SHARJAH

The town of Mleiha in Sharjah is home to many ancient ruins and rock formations. Fossil Rock is an ecological landmark rising over sand dunes with marine fossils dotting its crevices; Jebel Buhais is a rocky outcrop with a 2,000-year-old Iron Age fort as well as an 8,000-year-old Stone Age necropolis; the Valley of the Caves dates back to the Stone Age; and there are burial grounds from the Bronze Age on this priceless land. The Mleiha Archeological Centre offers a range of guided treks and tours, offering visitors a deeper understanding of UAE's history and early life in the desert. discovermleiha.ae

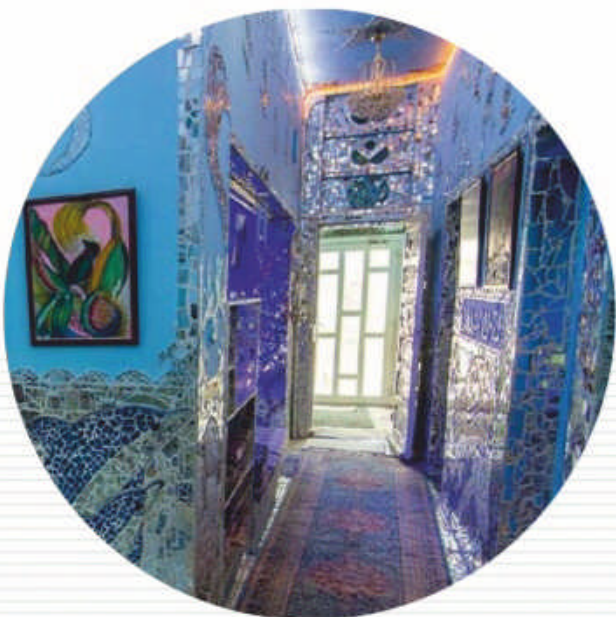


23

MEET FLAMINGOS AT AL WATHBA WETLAND RESERVE, ABU DHABI

The Al Wathba Wetland Reserve, set up in 1998, is the first protected reserve in Abu Dhabi. It is recognised as one of the 2,000 remaining wetlands in the world and popularly called Flamingo City. Many species of flora and fauna thrive here, but the nearly 4,000 flamingos that visit during autumn and spring are the main attraction. Between October and

April, make the 50-kilometre drive from mainland Abu Dhabi to take a self-guided walking trail of up to three kilometres, to observe the flamingos from a designated hide. ead.gov.ae



24

Marvel at the Mirror House in Kuwait

One of the world's richest countries per capita, Kuwait is home to a thriving art scene.

The Mirror House has been pivotal in boosting the artistic image of the nation. It is the home of the husband-wife artist duo Khalifa Qattan and Lidia Qattan. Italian-born Lidia began transforming her house into the piece of art it is today in 1966. The exterior of the house and the interiors of the ground floor are covered with mirror mosaic, while the first floor houses an art gallery. The rooms follow themes like Planet Earth, Zodiac, Universe, Knowledge, My World, Corridor of the Nations, Shark Basin, Sea World, and Stairs to Inspiration. mirrorhouseq8.com

25

VISIT THE PECULIAR PYRAMIDS OF MEROË IN SUDAN

Few know there are as many as 200 pyramids in eastern Sudan, along the banks of the Nile. Considered Nubian, the Meroë pyramids have narrower bases and steeper slopes than their Egyptian cousins. Meroë was once a massive city bursting with traders and masons. It doubled as the capital of the Kingdom of Kush. Today, these dusty tombs, some of which host tombs of kings and queens, stand solemnly as the only proof of the ancient city's prosperity. Built over 2,300-2,700 years ago, they are slowly being reclaimed by the sands of time. Real Sudan offers scheduled, private, and custom tours in the country. realsudan.com +



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WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE

Water has the power to relax the body and soothe the mind. When household chores and work pressure weigh you down, turn to this list of water therapies from around the world that promise holistic rejuvenation.

BY SNIGDHA BHOWMICK

I HAVE ALWAYS ENJOYED my time in water. Although I did not learn how to swim, it never stopped me from frolicking around in pools, lakes, or even oceans as a child. And this always earned me reprimands from my mother. Today, years later, I take to the water to heal myself. Poonam Saha, manager of the spa at The Leela Palace New Delhi (theleela.com), once told me how different therapies offer distinct advantages. “Geothermal spas and baths, for example, detoxify and smoothen the skin, while reducing muscle ache and joint stiffness, and eliminating toxins.” This got me thinking, and I set out to look for other water therapies that can help one replenish and rejuvenate one’s mind and body.

Māori Magic in New Zealand

THE ACIDIC BATHS deep inside the Māori territory in Rotorua, New Zealand, are just as unique as the region. The hot springs here, known as *waiariki*, are considered a blessing of the gods. At Polynesian Spa (polynesianspa.co.nz), the therapeutic waters in the 28 hot pools come from two different natural springs. These slightly acidic waters not only act as a balm for aching joints but also replenish energy. Established in 1972, this spa has now become famous for its bubbling mud pools and hissing fumaroles. Although apprehensive at first, I decide to try one of their mud therapies. Rich in minerals and silica, this treatment helps revitalise the skin and boost immunity. I lather up and slip into the warm water. It’s oddly comforting as the cool mud insulates my body against the heat, while I gaze at the rugged mountainous terrain in front of me.

GETTING THERE: The nearest airport is Rotorua Airport, which is a two-hour flight from Auckland. **Cathay Pacific** (cathaypacific.com) offers connecting flights from Mumbai and Delhi to Auckland.

PRICE: Starts from ₹3,000





CLOCKWISE: COURTESY OF 100% PURE NEW ZEALAND; COURTESY OF VISIT JORDAN



Dead Sea Therapy in Jordan

FOR THOSE DRAWN to mud-based therapies, the Dead Sea in Jordan should be on the bucket list. Its mineral-rich, hyper-saline water offers unparalleled health and beauty benefits. As it is located nearly 420 metres below sea level—it is the lowest waterbody on Earth's surface—harmful UVB rays are scattered before reaching the water, thus making it one of the safest sunbathing venues on the planet. Apply some of the silicate- and phosphate-rich mud, and float on the lake. Since the water is eight times more saline than the ocean, there's no chance of sinking. Instead, you'll bob around like a piece of cork! The Kempinski Hotel Ishtar Dead Sea (kempsinki.com) has a private beach that allows you to make the most of the experience—breathe in the clean air to unclog blocked sinuses.

GETTING THERE: Gulf Air (gulfair.com) operates flights from Delhi and Mumbai to Queen Alia International Airport in Jordan.
PRICE: Around ₹6,000 for day tours; private tours from ₹15,000





THE ONSENS OF JAPAN

I'M REMINDED OF an episode of *Animal Planet* where hundreds of snow monkeys take a dip in hot geothermal waters and wear a look of absolute bliss on their faces as steam rises up around them. As I pursue their sense of relief, I find out that the Land of the Rising Sun has similar activities for humans. Known as onsens, Japanese baths tap into the volcanic waters that crater this land and offer a smorgasbord of baths, each with unique characteristics.

One of the best places to enjoy an onsen soak is a ryokan in Noboribetsu, Hokkaido. Loosely translating to 'inn', a ryokan is a traditional Japanese bathhouse offering an experience of tatami-matted rooms, communal baths, and scrumptious Japanese food. Noboribetsu is a small town dotted with hotels, some of which have up to 20 different hot spring baths. Spend a couple of days here to take in the sights of Jigokudani (Hell Valley), while taking multiple dips in the all-day baths. You can choose the type of treatment you want: the alkaline baths smoothen skin while the sodium-rich baths keep your body warm. But my favourites are the classic sulphur pools that cure skin diseases. As I slip into these milky waters multiple times over my two-night stay, the warmth and serene environs ensure a deep slumber.

GETTING THERE: Japan Airlines (jal.com) flies from Delhi to Sapporo via Tokyo. From Sapporo, Noboribetsu is 1.5 hours by road.
PRICE: Starts from ₹5,000



A Steamy Affair in USA

COLORADO'S BUBBLING HOT geothermal waters are harnessed as steam. At Yampah Spa & Salon (yampahspa.com) in Glenwood Springs, vapour caves create natural steam baths. Members of the Ute tribe, the oldest residents of Colorado, used to partake in rituals and therapies in these caves. They called it the 'big medicine' or *yampah*. Today, the mineral-rich water of the Glenwood Springs seeps in through the walls of the caves and fills three dimly-lit underground chambers, which can be easily accessed by visitors. Sit on marble benches and let the hot steam—loaded with sulphites, nitrates, and zinc—do its job. As the waters reach up to 45°C inside, it is advised to step out every few minutes for some cool mountain air.

GETTING THERE: Air India (airindia.com) flies from Mumbai and Delhi to Chicago, from where you can catch a train to Glenwood Springs.

PRICE: ₹1,028 for a day pass





The Royal Baths of Istanbul

IF YOU WANT TO bathe like a sultan, head to the Ayasofya Hurrem Sultan Hamam (ayasofyahamami.com), which boasts walls trimmed with gold and bedecked bathing bowls. This luxurious way of bathing dates back to the 15th-century Ottoman Empire and stands out from the Roman style by using cold chambers to relax at the end of the bathing ritual. A typical hammam consists of three interconnecting rooms. I start my ritual in the *sicaklik*, a hot room with a large heated marble slab known as *göbek taşı*, while the large glass-domed ceiling lets the sunlight in, to create an ethereal ambience. All around me, a sea of Marmara marble is broken by the gold trimmings of bowls and an



impeccably polished wooden staircase. I'm provided with a *pestemal* (a silk and cotton wrap), which I wrap around me before lying down on the warm marble and pouring warm water over myself. An assistant scrubs me from head to toe with a *kese* (a goatskin exfoliating mitt). Next, they squeeze out tiny soap bubbles from a special cloth for the *köpük*—a long, dreamy bubble wash. I finally end my ritual with a cup of fiery red Turkish tea in the *soğukluk*, or the cold room, and feel the weariness of a crazy shopping trip through the Grand Bazaar undertaken earlier slowly melt away.

GETTING THERE: Istanbul Atatürk International Airport is well connected to India's major cities. **Turkish Airlines** (turkishairlines.com) offers non-stop flights from Mumbai and Delhi. **PRICE:** ₹990 for entry and ₹1,490 for a basic spa package; premium package from ₹6,098

ICELANDIC ADVENTURE

ALTHOUGH MOST COUNTRIES have spas and springs surrounded by beautiful landscapes, one destination trumps them all: Iceland. At the Blue Lagoon Spa (bluelagoon.com) in Grindavik, about an hour's drive from the capital city of Reykjavik, the blue of the water merges seamlessly with the chalky white of the horizon. Put on an algae face mask to rehydrate and take in the austere beauty of nature as you immerse yourself in algae-rich baths. If you time your visit correctly, you might even get to see the Northern Lights. ✦

GETTING THERE: **Air India** (airindia.com) offers connecting flights from Delhi to Keflavík International Airport, 20 minutes from Grindavik.

PRICE: ₹3,118 for entry; spa packages from ₹5,184





THE SCRUB STORY

Gift your skin the natural rejuvenation routine that it deserves, with these home-made body scrubs.

BY SUSHMITA SRIVASTAV



GREEN TEA WITH TURBINADO SUGAR FOR TAN REMOVAL

Ingredients

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- ▶ 1 cup turbinado sugar
- ▶ ¼ cup extra virgin coconut oil
- ▶ ½ cup hot water
- ▶ A few drops of essential oil of your choice

Method

Place the teabags in hot water until the tea cools down. Mix turbinado sugar and coconut oil thoroughly in a bowl to

avoid lumps. Add the tea to the bowl (make sure that the tea is cool enough to not dissolve the sugar). You can add more oil if the mixture is too crumbly, or more sugar if it's too soggy. Once you get the desired consistency, transfer the mixture to an air-tight container. Use this scrub twice a week for three weeks to get rid of that stubborn suntan. The shelf life of this scrub is one month.



VANILLA WITH ROSE FOR DRY SKIN

Ingredients

- ▶ 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- ▶ 15 fresh rose petals
- ▶ 1 ¾ cups granulated sugar
- ▶ ¼ cup extra virgin coconut oil
- ▶ 1 teaspoon organic honey (optional)

Method

Mix the sugar and coconut oil in a medium-sized bowl.

Add vanilla extract, crushed rose petals, and honey to the mixture, and mix well. You can use a combination of fine and coarse sugar for sensitive skin. Loaded with Vitamin C, Vitamin E, and antioxidants, this body scrub moisturises your skin and leaves it soft and supple. Store it in an air-tight jar at room temperature, and use within two months, preferably in weekly massages.



BERRIES WITH LEMON FOR DULL SKIN

Ingredients

- ▶ 1 cup berries of your choice (strawberries, blueberries, etc.)
- ▶ 1 teaspoon fresh lemon zest
- ▶ ½ cup granulated sugar
- ▶ ¼ cup extra virgin coconut oil
- ▶ A few drops of almond extract (optional)

Method

Use the back of a fork to squash berries in a bowl. Add

sugar, coconut oil, lemon zest, and almond extract to the bowl. Use your hands to mix the ingredients thoroughly. This body scrub smells heavenly and revitalises dull skin. The combination of berries and lemon reduces blemishes and gives you a natural scent. Since the ingredients used are fresh, you should use it within a week or store it in an air-tight container in the refrigerator to keep it fresh for a few weeks.

CHICKPEA WITH APPLE CIDER VINEGAR TO REDUCE PIGMENTATION

Ingredients

- ▶ 1 cup coarse chickpea flour
- ▶ ¼ cup apple cider vinegar
- ▶ 1 teaspoon dried peppermint leaves
- ▶ 10 drops of tea-tree oil

Method

Mix chickpea flour and crushed peppermint leaves in a bowl. Alternatively, you can grind dried chickpeas to make a coarse powder. Add apple cider vinegar and tea-tree oil, and mix well. While chickpeas are great for dark patches and pigmented skin, apple cider vinegar acts as a spot treatment for flare-ups and blemishes. Peppermint helps in reducing bacteria on the skin. Use twice a week to get desired results.





PAPAYA WITH SEA SALT AND ORANGE TO IMPROVE BLOOD CIRCULATION

Ingredients

- ▶ 1 cup mashed papaya
- ▶ 2 tablespoons fresh orange juice
- ▶ ½ cup sea salt
- ▶ ¼ cup sugar
- ▶ ¼ cup sunflower oil
- ▶ ½ teaspoon lemon zest

Method

Add all the ingredients in a medium-sized bowl and mix

well with a spoon. You can replace orange juice with 10 drops of orange essential oil. This zesty and citrus-infused scrub boosts collagen in the skin and reduces the effects of extreme cold weather and lack of sunlight. It helps in improving blood circulation and skin regeneration. You can use it once a week and store it in cool temperature for over two weeks.

COFFEE WITH ACTIVATED CHARCOAL

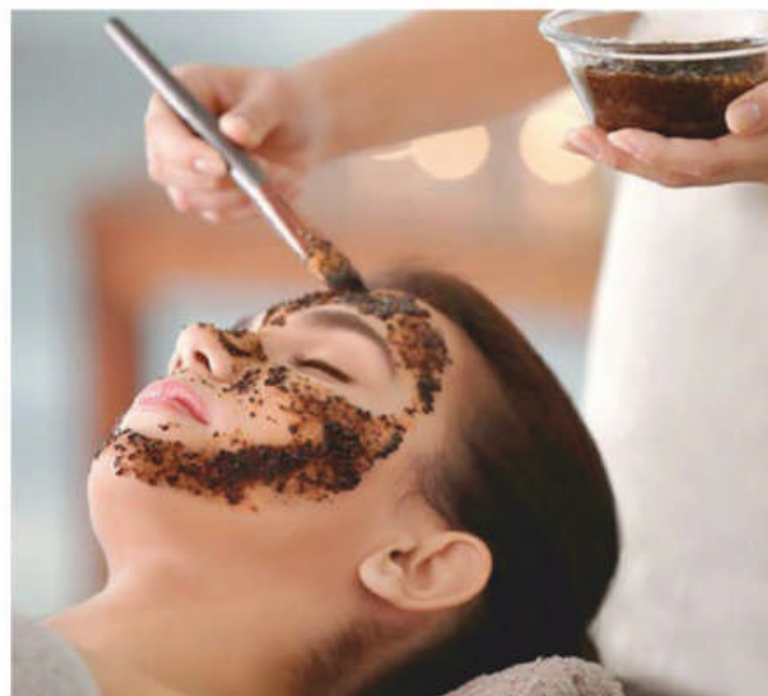
TO REMOVE CELLULITE BUILD-UP AND STRETCH MARKS

Ingredients

- ▶ 1 cup coffee grounds
- ▶ ½ cup activated charcoal powder
- ▶ ½ cup organic sweet almond oil
- ▶ ½ cup brown sugar
- ▶ A few drops of cinnamon oil

Method

In a large bowl, add all the ingredients and stir well to combine. Massage gently in circular motion to break the cellulite. Caffeine and charcoal help in the dilation of blood vessels and tightening of the skin. Use weekly for at least three months to see a visible reduction in cellulite and stretch marks. If refrigerated in a glass or high-quality plastic jar, it can be stored for as long as a year.



RED WINE WITH HONEY FOR AGEING SKIN

Ingredients

- ▶ ¼ cup red wine
- ▶ 1 tablespoon organic honey
- ▶ 1 ¼ cup brown sugar
- ▶ 1 tablespoon extra virgin coconut oil

Method

Combine brown sugar and red wine in a large bowl, then add honey and coconut oil in the mixture. Add more sugar in case the scrub is too

watery. Mix well. Red wine is known to bless your skin with a healthy glow. It comes packed with antioxidants like flavonoids and tannin, and fights fine lines, wrinkles, and free radicals by restoring collagen and elastic fibres. Honey moisturises your skin and soothes inflammation. Use this scrub within two days as the wine can turn sour. +



HOLISTIC HEALER

Accredited with certifications in courses such as neuro-linguistic programming and reiki, actor-turned-wellness entrepreneur Pooja Bedi's work in integrated healing stems from her years of studying mental, emotional, and physical well-being. She talks about her latest venture that encapsulates all her wisdom.

BY BAYAR JAIN



Tell us about your life journey.

It has been a fascinating ride—the fame of being an actor, the experience of a talk-show host and columnist, all the while being the granddaughter of celebrated healer Baba Bedi and a Buddhist nun [Freda Bedi], to being the founder of Happy Soul (happysoul.in).

What does Happy Soul offer?

This website comprises products, services, knowledge, and experiences related to wellness. You will find vendors who represent quality organic food, chemical-free skincare products, essential oils, and other products. You can also access the world's best healing and metascience practitioners, as well as recipes and information on wellness destinations.

How does sustainability fit into the purview of wellness for you?

A healthy mind, body, and planet are all intrinsically linked. We've got eco-friendly holidays as part of our travel offerings. Yoga mats featured

on our website are made from cork, jute, and other sustainable materials. The candles are made of soy, and the beeswax and vegetable wax are chemical-free.

Any tips on how one can ensure mental wellness?

Mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual health are layers of a web, each leading to the other. There are many products, techniques, therapies, and trainers on our website that cater to all aspects. For example, aromatherapy stimulates your limbic system and NLP (neuro-linguistic programming) trains your brain to think positively.

Indians are proud of their age-old wellness therapies and are often reluctant to try new methods. How do you resolve this?

Ironically, age-old therapies are now considered new-age! Whether it's homoeopathy, Ayurveda, yoga, a vegan lifestyle, sound-bowl healing, reiki, or pranic healing, it is a return

to our roots. Wellness believes in curing ailments from the roots, instead of just deleting symptoms.

What are some of the workshops you offer?

I conduct workshops on personal transformation, spiritual connection, corporate wellness, and catharsis. Masters of healing, shamanism, and Bach flower remedies are available as well.

How do you tackle the fear of close-contact wellness therapies during a pandemic?

The most incredible aspect of energy healing is that it isn't defined by time and space. Online sessions are as beneficial as in-person sessions.

What is the future of wellness in the post-COVID-19 world?

People are wising up to the fact that viruses aren't the issue; immunity is. Fear and stress affect immunity, and to conquer these emotions, wellness options must be explored. +

EVERYDAY GLOW

From a luxe shower oil to a glossy lip colour, these handpicked beauty essentials will help you ace the festive look.

BY PRIYANKA CHAKRABARTI



Vitamin Enriched Face Base, **Bobbi Brown**, ₹5,600 (50 ml); sephora.nnnow.com



Powder Kiss Liquid Lipcolour, **MAC Cosmetics**, ₹2,200; nykaa.com

Lip Scrub, **Vilvah**, ₹290 (15 gm); vilvahstore.com



Green Tea Seed Serum, **Innisfree**, ₹1,950 (80 ml); innisfree.com

Vitamin C Clay Face Mask, **WOW Skin Science**, ₹599 (200 ml); buywow.in



Play Color Eye Palette – Trench Coat Showroom, **Etude House**, ₹1,950 (15 gm); nykaa.com



Bright Years Cell Renewal Serum, **Plum**, ₹1,575 (30 ml); amazon.in



Tea Tree Purifying Face Wash, **Kaya Derma Naturals**, ₹250 (50 ml); nykaa.com



Clarifying Body Cleanser, **Conscious Chemist**, ₹925 (250 ml); consciouschemist.com



Almond Shower Oil, **L'Occitane**, ₹1,900 (250 ml); in.loccitane.com



Help your skin retain its glow this season.

OCTOBER 2020

TURKEY TRYST WITH TURKEY P. 104

JORDAN MEN, MONSTERS, AND MESSIAHS P. 112



▲
The Library of Celsus is the defining sight of Ephesus in Turkey.

*A vantage point above
the resort village of Ölüdeniz
offers spectacular sunset views.
Right: A two-deck boat offers
half-day cruises from Ölüdeniz
to Butterfly Valley.*



TRYST



with Turkey

Straddling the continents of Asia and Europe, Turkey played a significant role in the history of the world. Cruise across the country and discover war monuments, ancient ruins, and delicious food, all the while surrounded by kind and generous locals. **TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY RISHAD SAAM MEHTA**



Turkey's Aegean coast is peppered with restaurants that serve fresh catch. Below: Simit is a Turkish staple and goes well with tea.



I AM STARING INTO THE turquoise waters of Dardanelles, the strait that connects the Aegean Sea to the Sea of Marmara. My car and I are on a ferry across the waterbody, from Çanakkale to the Gallipoli Peninsula. Today, the waters of these narrows are peaceful and sublime, but in 1915 this was a war theatre, playing out a long and bloody campaign that caused half a million casualties.

Eager to beat the stalemate on the western front that had already left a million men dead, Winston Churchill, serving as the First Lord of the Admiralty at the outbreak of the First World War, suggested an attack on Istanbul through Dardanelles. This would clear the way for supplies to Russia from the Mediterranean Sea through the Bosphorus and across the Black Sea. With his usual pompousness and scant regard for the prowess and bravery of people who were not white, Churchill gravely underestimated the resilience and determination of the Turks to protect their homeland. He had disregarded the Ottoman Empire as 'the sick man of Europe', but the Allies' navy, the British, and the ANZAC troops involved in the campaign were in for a cruel shock. Mines destroyed warships, and the troops who landed on the peninsula (mostly ANZAC) were almost entirely decimated on the beaches.

Today's Gallipoli, a beautiful green peninsula with tranquil beaches, is a place of pilgrimage to pay homage to the bravery of troops—on both sides. I am here in search of the graves of Indian infantrymen who had taken part in the campaign. As I drive the well-tarmacked roads on a beautiful

April day, I stop at museums and monuments and am overwhelmed by the stories of compassion and companionship that knew no sides. The most poignant, immortalised by the *Respect to Mehmetçik Monument*, is the story of a Turkish soldier raising a white flag and then carrying a wounded Australian soldier back to the Australian lines before crossing over and resuming firing.

I find the graves of three Indian muleteers at the Ari Burnu Cemetery that looks out at the North Aegean Sea. Here, etched in stone is the famous letter that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk wrote to the Australian and Kiwi mothers who had lost their sons at Gallipoli. When Atatürk became the president of the newly formed Turkish republic in 1923, after the Ottoman Empire was dismantled, he went to great lengths to apply diplomatic salve on the wounds inflicted by Gallipoli so that they wouldn't fester over the years to come. This is why ANZAC day services commemorating the fallen of Gallipoli are carried out on April 25 every year, not only in Australia and New Zealand but at Gallipoli as well. There is even a road in New Delhi named after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

I spent the first three days of my Turkey trip in the mysterious and mediaeval, yet modern, city of Istanbul that straddles the continents of Asia and Europe. Since it was my first time in the

*Built in the 17th century, the
Sultan Ahmed Mosque, or
The Blue Mosque, is a
UNESCO World Heritage
Site in Istanbul.*



historic city, previously called Constantinople, I spent my time walking around and observing the dexterity of cheeky ice-cream vendors and the efficient cast iron juicers used to squeeze out every drop of ruby juice from pomegranates. The usual sights were ticked off, and I crossed over often from Europe to Asia on the busy commuter ferries that ply the Bosphorus. I then drove from Istanbul to Çanakkale, and am now heading away from Gallipoli towards the ruins of the ancient city of Troy made famous by the mythical beauty of Helen, which is said to have launched a thousand ships. The story of how Helen of Sparta stowed away on Paris's ship to Troy and led to the Trojan War is the premise of Homer's *Iliad* and many modern interpretations of it. But whether the mythological Troy is actually geographically located on Turkey's west coast, 30 kilometres south of Çanakkale, is an ongoing debate. However, as I find out, it is an interesting place to visit for its excavations that tell, by way of artefacts and constructions unearthed, a timeline that stretches from 4000 BC to 300 AD. Driven by a lifelong ambition to find Homer's Troy, German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann started excavation digs here in 1870, and in 1873 he stumbled upon a horde of gold and silver jewellery that he claimed belonged to King Priam, the tragic last king of Troy and the father of Hector and Paris. The loot was carted away for display in a Berlin museum but vanished during the Second World War. It turned up again in the Pushkin State Museum (pushkinmuseum.art) in Moscow in 1996. It remains there to this day, even though efforts are ongoing by both Germany and Turkey that it is returned, with each claiming to be its rightful owner.

I surreptitiously stay close to a group of school children out on a field trip in the hope that I can hear some interesting stories from their guide, but he delivers the insights in Turkish. Soon, he's on to my game and starts repeating the most interesting titbits in English with a smile in my direction. It is the first of many such gestures of graciousness that I will encounter during my days in Turkey. From Troy, I point the nose of my car south towards İzmir, 300 kilometres away, and arrive at half past nine in the evening. My Airbnb host is a soft-spoken college student who helps me unload the car and then tells me that he'll watch over my luggage as I find a parking spot. When I arrive 15 minutes later, he has already carried my bag up three flights of stairs to the apartment that has staggering views of the Aegean Sea. He also tells me that a 10-minute walk will take me to the Karataş metro station. The next morning I am riding the tram from Karataş to Konak İskelesi, which is in the heart of İzmir's Konak suburb and adjoins the historic bazaar district of Kemeraltı Çarşısı.

From top: Kebabs, yoghurt, peppers, and a side salad make for a quick but wholesome roadside lunch; the Spice Market in Istanbul entices with its heady aromas.



The Library of Celsus is the defining sight of Ephesus, and is now 2,400 years old.



I have an appointment with Celaledin Arpat, a college professor and foodie whom I had approached on Instagram for local gastronomic recommendations. He had kindly offered to show me around. The day I spend with this pleasantly mannered gentleman quickly becomes one of the highlights of my trip. We start with a delicious breakfast of hot crusty bread with *bal kaymak* (clotted cream doused with honey), and as the day progresses, we snack on *borek* (wafer-thin filo pastry filled with spinach and cheese), *simit* (a pretzel-like bread), *pide* (mince and onions and spices set on a flattened dough and baked), fried *çiger* (pronounced *jigar*, meaning liver), and *kokoreç* (prepared like doner kebab, but instead of meat, it's lamb intestines wrapped around the revolving spike). Arpat knows the best places for local food and steers clear of touristy joints. In fact, the owners of these hidden restaurants and snack houses welcome him like an old friend, often refusing payment.

Over the next few days, I continue to drive south, and while I find Fethiye and Ölüdeniz pretty like paintings but very touristy, it is the ancient city of Ephesus that leaves me mesmerised. The scale of creation in this great city,

which was built 300 years before Christ, is mind-boggling. It was founded by Lysimachus, who succeeded Alexander the Great. But it was during the Roman rule that this city grew to become one of the most important trade ports on the Aegean. I arrive early thinking I'll beat the crowds, but South Asian tour groups have had the same idea. Chattering tourists notwithstanding, the soft morning light shines beautifully on the Library of Celsus, endowed with statues of Sophia (wisdom), Arete (valour), Ennoia (intelligence), and Episteme (knowledge) that are graceful 2,000 years on; the Temple of Hadrian; and the Ephesus Great Theatre.

Ephesus has whetted my appetite for forays into the past by way of enigmatic ruins that stand silent and resilient. So I punch in ancient Lycian names into Google Maps: Patara, Pinara, and Letoon. Located in southwestern Turkey, Lycia was an important geopolitical state during the Greco-Roman era. All three sites have magnificently



A picture-postcard tea shop on the way to Kaş.



Clockwise from top left: The Respect to Mehmetçik Monument in Gallipoli depicts a Turkish soldier carrying a wounded ANZAC soldier during WWI; a war cemetery on the Gallipoli Peninsula; Gaziantep lies close to the Syrian border.

preserved theatres. I enjoy Pinara the most because I am the only one there, and the man at the ticket counter waves me through without asking me to purchase one. Pinara's amphitheatre sits in an open meadow with the snow-capped Taurus Mountains looming over it. A big shaggy dog appears from behind one of the ruins and seems to beckon me to follow her. I comply, because she seems to know her way around. At a ruined temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, I see that the ancient builders had a cheeky sense of humour—a phallus is carved into one of the steps. Further ahead, as I follow the dog past pillars and columns—some preserved, some forlorn—I come to a rock face that is honeycombed with tombs. It feels eerie since I am all alone; the dog has disappeared as soon as the tombs have come in sight.

I hotfoot it back to the ticket office, taking a path through the ruins of an agora (ancient marketplace). The man at the counter invites me in for a glass of tea and

some bread. Alleviating my concerns about the disappearing dog, he assures me that she is very much real and has many hiding places among the ruins. I stay overnight at Kaş, which is popular with British tourists, who often turn lobster-red after sunning themselves on the beach. The Aegean looks really beautiful from here, so after days of being on the road, I spend a day on a deck chair with a glass of cold raki by my side.

The next day, I leave early because my destination is Gaziantep, in the southeastern corner of Turkey. It's a 1,000-kilometre drive that I manage to complete in around 13 hours. Since the city is very close to the Syrian border, I get stopped at checkpoints as I near Gaziantep. The police and the army are very thorough and very polite. I once get stopped for speeding too, but the jovial policeman whose wife is a big fan of Indian TV soaps waves me off with a wagging finger as a warning.

Gaziantep is a beautiful city of gardens, open spaces, and glorious food. There is food you eat in Turkey, and then there is food you eat in Gaziantep. My friend, Celaledin from İzmir, has given me a list of places that I must try. On the top of the list is Kebapçı Halil Usta (kebabcihalilusta.com.tr), literally meaning 'the kebab place of Chef Hali'. *Usta* means masterchef in Turkish, especially for kebabs. Each *usta* has his own secret ingredients that go into the mince mix, and he uses his expertise to gauge the texture of the mince so that the kebab stays firm on the



skewer but crumbles under the fork. Then there is Ciğerci Ali Hydar Usta, who is known for his succulent liver kebabs served for breakfast on flatbread with sumac, parsley, onions, and a squeeze of lime. But Gaziantep is best known for its baklava, *katmer*, and *künefe*—all sweetmeats that use the big pistachios that are unique to the region. For the *katmer*, I go to Katmerci Cumaali Usta. *Katmer* is a thin flaky pastry that is filled with pistachios and clotted cream made from the milk of a water buffalo. When I press down on it with a fork, the cream comes oozing out. *Künefe*, on the other hand, is made with shredded wheat, margarine, and soft white cheese, drenched in sugar syrup, and coated with pistachio dust.

Satiated with meat and sweetmeats, I decide to pack in some sightseeing on foot to work some of it off. Gaziantep's most interesting attraction is the Zeugma Mosaic Museum (muze.gov.tr). The mosaics kept in this museum were unearthed at Zeugma, a city that was founded by Alexander where a bridge of boats crossed the Euphrates in modern-day Gaziantep. The star of the museum is a mosaic called *Gypsy Girl* that was buried away for centuries under rubble. It is somewhat of an enigma because no one seems to know for certain whom the mosaic represents. Some scholars have suggested it is Alexander the Great.

From Gaziantep, it is another 1,000 kilometres back to Istanbul, the drive cutting right across the heart of the country. The roads are fantastic and the traffic well behaved. In fact, at pit stops I get invited by truckers to share lunch with them that is mostly kebabs, peppers, and yoghurt. My road trip in Turkey has been haphazard and unplanned, but the generosity and unfailing kindness of its people has made sure that I will return. +



Weave Your Way Through History

Getting There

Many airlines fly to Istanbul, including **Qatar Airways** (qatarairways.com), **Emirates** (emirates.com), and **Etihad Airways** (etihad.com). But the most convenient is **Turkish Airlines** (turkishairlines.com) that flies non-stop from Mumbai and Delhi.

Stay

In Istanbul, **Shangri-La Bosphorus** is centrally located and close to the Beşiktaş ferry terminal, from where ferries can be boarded to plenty of locations in Istanbul. *Doubles from ₹27,901; shangri-la.com*
In İzmir, **Swissotel Büyük Efes** offers a spectacular view of the Kordon Promenade. *Doubles from ₹8,295; swissotel.com*
In Gaziantep, **Divan Gaziantep Hotel** is the perfect base for exploring the ancient city. *Doubles from ₹5,751; divan.com.tr*

See & Do

Istanbul has its share of famous sights like Hagia Sophia, Topkapi Palace, The Blue Mosque, and Dolmabahçe Palace. Then there's the Galata Tower and the Basilica Cistern. At Gallipoli, it is impossible not to feel more than a little touched by the stories of bravery that abound at the interpretation centre, the museums, and the commemorative monuments. Then there are the cemeteries with rows and rows of crosses and headstones. There are more Greco-Roman ruins in Turkey than in Greece, and on a road trip, you can even reach the ones that are way off the

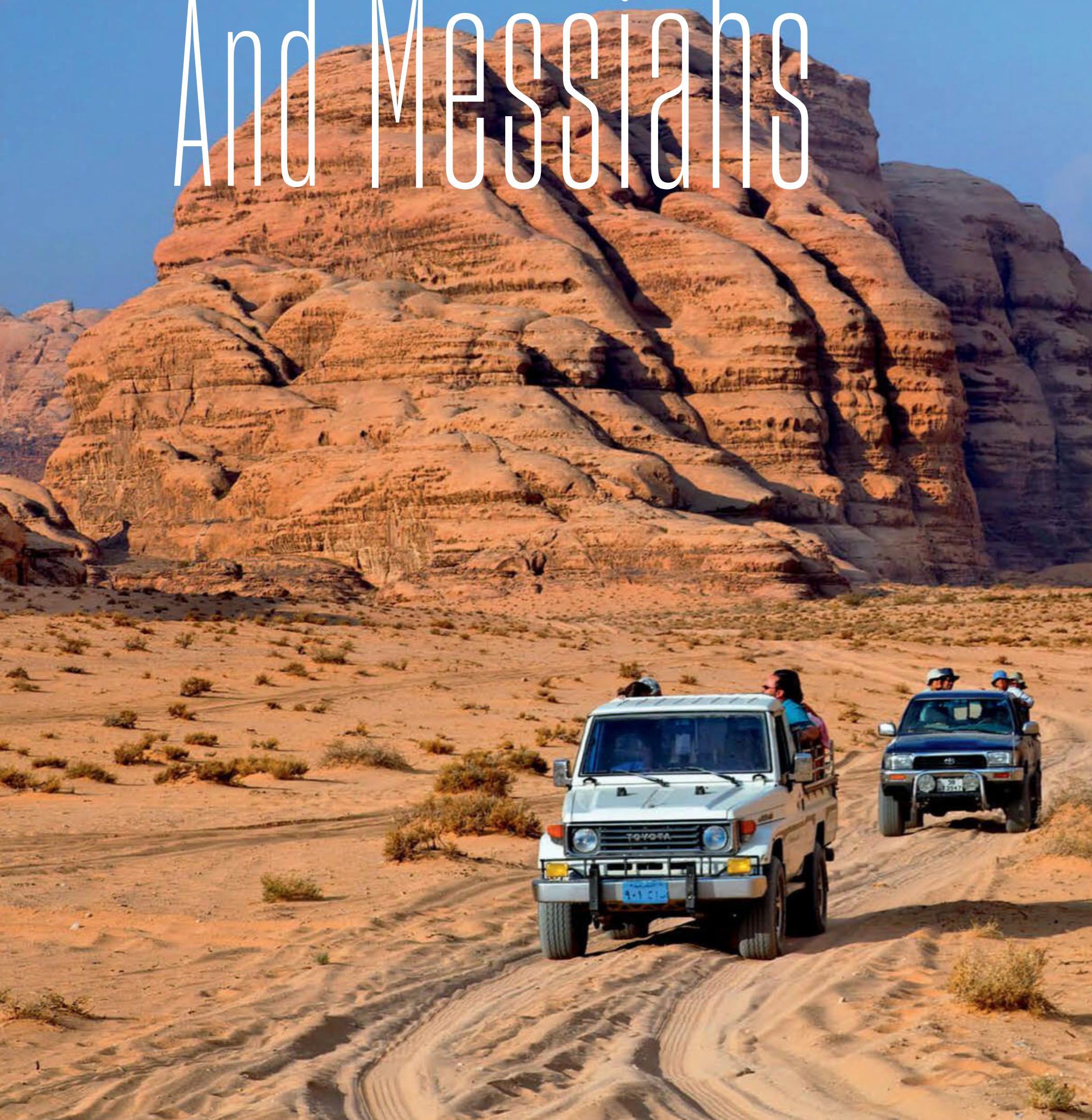


tourist trail. Pinara and Letoon are perfect examples. Bodrum, Fethiye, and Ölüdeniz are seaside resort towns, and the latter two have beautiful beaches where the Aegean Sea laps at golden sand. A short boat ride from Ölüdeniz is the Butterfly Valley, which is worth visiting. Take a boat as the land route down to the valley is treacherous. Kaş is great for a day out kayaking to hidden coves along the coastline.

Eat

Food is one of the biggest factors that has endeared Turkey to me. Besides the usual tourist fare of doner kebab, try steamed mussels stuffed with rice sold by the sea in Istanbul. Then there are *adana* kebabs that are served with roasted peppers and yoghurt with hot spiced oil poured over. Snack on *çorba* (hearty soup), *gözleme* (stuffed pancake), and *borek*. There are also liver kebabs and *sucuk* (a cured beef spicy salami) that is sliced and fried and then cooked with eggs over it. *Menemen* is a simple one-pan dish with eggs, tomatoes, and green peppers. There are endless cups of black tea to be sipped. If you want a lighter version, ask for *achik* chai.

Men, Monsters, And Messiahs





JORDAN MAY BE
SMALL, BUT THE
COUNTRY'S SURREAL
LANDSCAPES AND
RICH HISTORY
MAKE FOR AN
EPIC HOLIDAY.
BY MERAJ SHAH

ROBERT PRESTON PHOTOGRAPHY/ALAMY

*A desert safari is standard
fare in Wadi Rum and
lets you explore different
areas of significance.*

‘Beware the ides of March’

In *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare famously wrote about a real-life soothsayer who tried to warn the Roman emperor of imminent danger. On March 15, 44 BC, on the steps of a Roman amphitheatre, a group of mutinous senators assassinated Julius Caesar. Nearly 2,000 years later, almost to the day, as I marvelled at the grandeur of Gerasa, an ancient Roman city in Jordan, that old prophecy came back to haunt the world in a far more virulent manner. I had been in Jordan for a week when the novel coronavirus’s shadow began looming over countries in the Gulf and Africa. I’d been guilty of ignoring travel advisories when I’d landed in Amman a few days back. A 10-year-old’s imagination had been fired up by David Lean’s epic, *Lawrence of Arabia*, and I’d wanted to visit Jordan ever since.

In Amman, skyscrapers share the skyline with ancient Roman citadels. The capital city of Jordan exemplifies the country’s fascinating blend of the modern and the historic. It is the latter that interests me; for a taste of that, as well as a slice

of local life, all roads lead to Downtown. Chalky, box-like homes blanket the hillside in the city’s older, more traditional eastern quarter. Fridays are weekly holidays in Jordan, and Downtown is swelling and ebbing when I visit. Milling families shopping at souks together, street-food vendors busily handing out shawarmas, and buskers perched on street corners singing lilting Arabic melodies that rise above the hubbub. Things to buy here, if you are so inclined, are spices: there’s sumac, which you’ll find sprinkled on hummus; and za’atar, which is a blend of sumac, thyme, roasted sesame seeds, marjoram, and oregano that makes simple pita bread taste like a delicacy. In Jordan, the ubiquitous shawarma is nothing like anything I’ve ever had. This Middle-Eastern street staple has been honed to an art form here.

Jordanians are friendly and curious; one

The ruins of the colonnaded forum of Jerash, or the ancient city of Gerasa.





The Treasury, one of the most elaborate temples in Petra, is carved out of a sandstone rock face. Below: Knafeh is a sweet pastry dish made of thin strands of filo dough and a cheese filling.



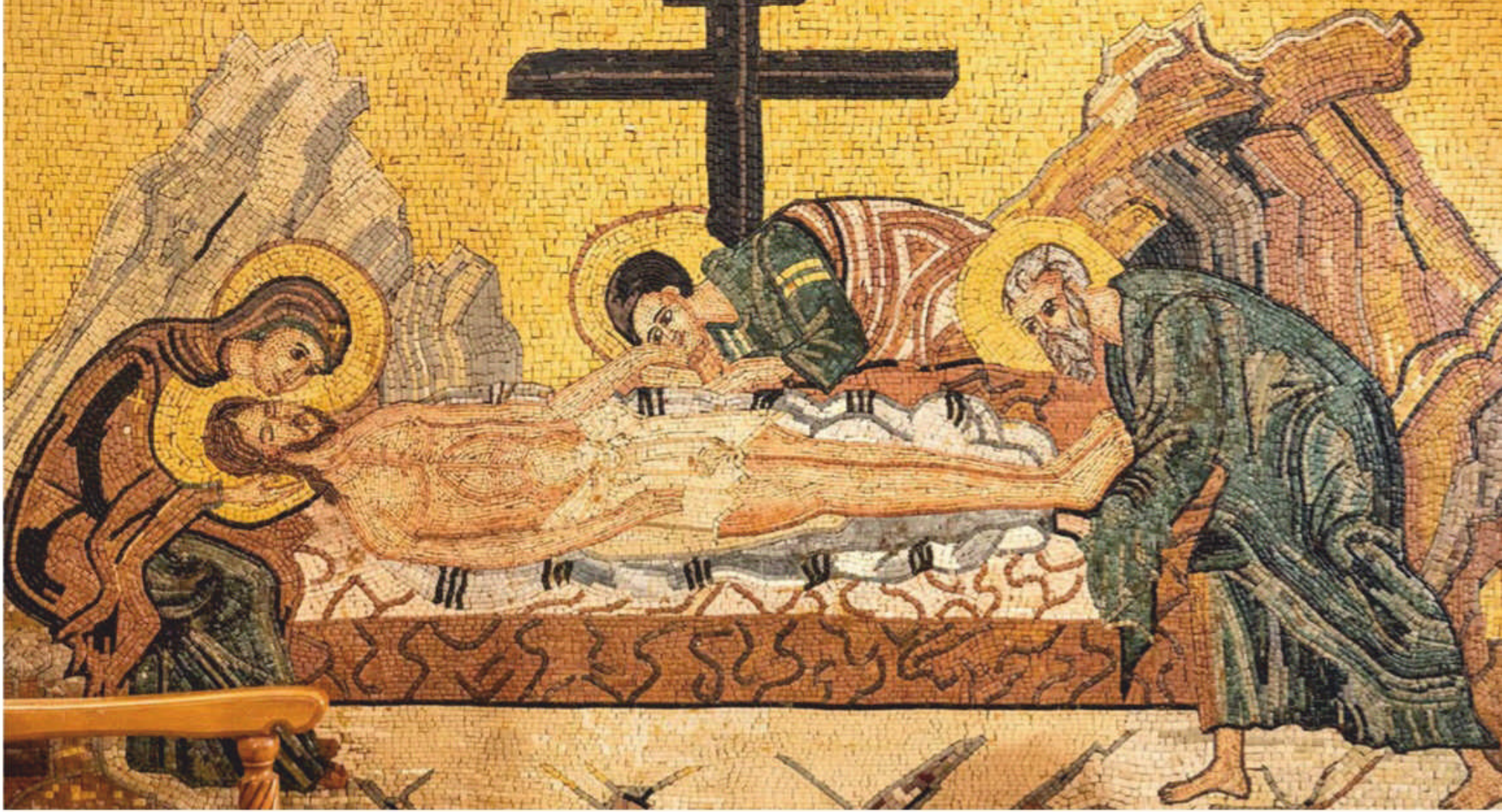
group takes pity on me waiting in a serpentine line to get a plate of *knafeh*—Jordan’s favourite dessert—and I’m duly moved up to the counter. After a quick introduction, I’m invited for a concert at Rainbow Street, which is a popular hangout spot among locals and tourists alike. There’s going to be live music, and apparently, the coffee is to die for. I’m reluctant because the next day I plan to head to the Dead Sea at the crack of dawn, but when you’ve got just one night in Amman then it seems silly to be smart about it.

The story goes: Cleopatra got her lover, Roman emperor Mark Anthony, to invade the region just so she could have her dose of the Dead Sea’s famous black mud. The lowest terrestrial point on Earth has continued to be one of the world’s favourite getaways for rejuvenation and beauty therapy. Still jet-lagged from my 20-hour journey from India to Jordan, I’m only too happy to fall into this hypersaline lake’s buoyant embrace. My reverie is broken by a concerned beach marshal who suggests I

stop splashing about. “The salty water can blind you if it enters your eyes,” he says admonishingly. It might be a dream cocktail for spa enthusiasts, but apparently, the water can even choke a person who happens to swallow a fair bit. You’d better be dead serious in the Dead Sea.

A ‘rose-red city half as old as time,’ wrote John Burgon, a 19th-century poet fantasising about the ancient city of Petra in modern-day Jordan. Unbelievably, Burgon never visited Petra, but the 2,000-year-old settlement in the desert occupied his imagination, as it has for writers, adventurers, and explorers through the ages. Entry to the ancient city of Petra is via Wadi Musa, a spectacular valley with sheer barren mountains within which lies a town by the same name that literally translates to the ‘Valley of Moses’. As soon as I hit the walkway to Petra, a number of caves and tombs come into view. These were built by the Nabateans, an Arabian nomadic community from the Negev Desert. The Nabateans lived between the fourth century BC and 106 AD, and became wealthy through frankincense trading.

The natural gorge that winds through a fissure in the sandstone mountains at Petra pretty much nails a visual dramatisation of the phrase, The Holy Grail. Called the Siq, this gorge was shown, literally, as the holy grail in the Harrison Ford classic, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. The Siq has water channels, stone carvings, camel caravans, and *betyls* (god blocks) set in niches. But these elaborate carvings are merely a prelude to one’s arrival into the heart of Petra, where the Treasury (or *Khazneh*), a monumental tomb, waits to impress even the most jaded visitors.

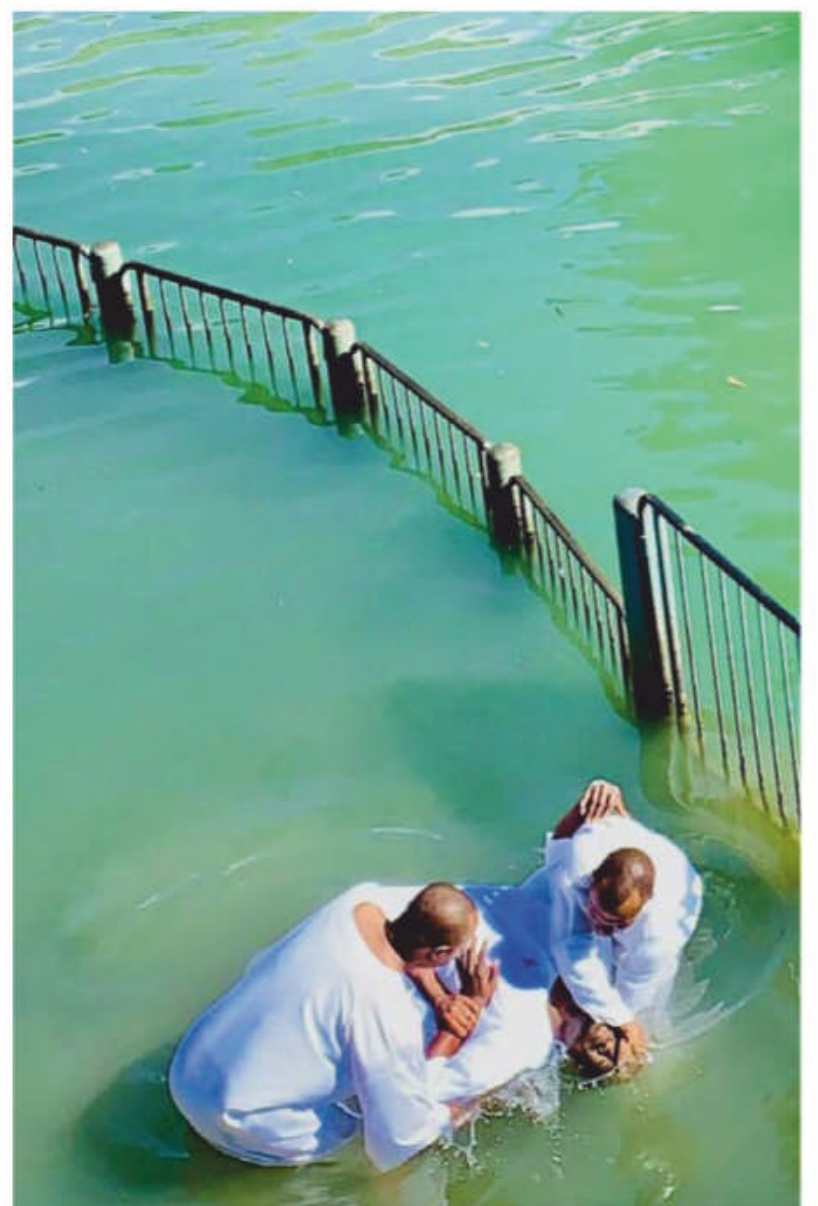


Now, a chalice with the promise of eternal life is hard to beat, but visitors walking through the Siq are greeted with a dramatic reveal of Petra's most magnificent edifice. Carved into the rock-face in the first century BC, the Treasury is superlatively monumental. From the Treasury, the 'street of facades' leads to a large open area. On one corner lies the Great Theatre, which has obvious Roman influences in its architecture, and on the other side lies the impressive urn tomb. The Monastery, one of the largest structures in Petra, was actually a large dining hall. Petra was a Hellenistic city with over 800 structures that housed over 20,000 inhabitants. Forget about seeing it all in a day, it would be near impossible to do so in a week. Petra is expensive, and the difference between a day pass and anything longer is nominal. Opt for the latter.

Jordan's religious and cultural pluralism is reflective of its long historical significance in different faiths. The life and times of one figure in particular stand out. Moses, or Musa ibn Imran, spans the faiths of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, and is believed to have died and been buried at Mount Nebo. According to the *Bible*, Jesus of Nazareth was baptised by John the Baptist in River Jordan. The baptism site is considered one of the most important sites in Christianity. Given that fact, it's no small surprise that Madaba, a small town an hour's drive from Amman, is in fact considered Jordan's most important Christian site. I'm on my way to Mount Nebo via Madaba when the heavens open up. Jordan's weather takes a leaf from the dramatic landscape. It turns chilly and hot within the same day, and golden sunshine gets washed out by pouring rain in a matter of minutes, or kilometres if you're on the road.

Madaba's relevance lies inside the Byzantine-era church of St George, specifically on its floor: a map made from mosaic tiles that was discovered in the late 19th century. The map lists out 157 major Biblical sites including areas north of River Jordan and the Dead Sea. Two-thirds of this sixth-century mosaic was destroyed by an earthquake in 746 AD, but the ancient cities of

▲ A mosaic on the floor of St George's Church in Madaba mentions 157 major Biblical sites.
Below: According to the Bible, Jesus of Nazareth was baptised by John the Baptist in River Jordan.





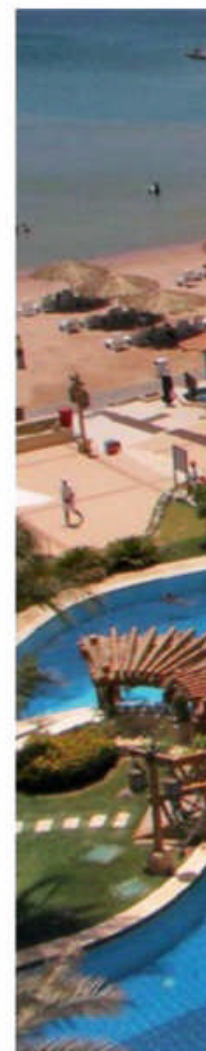
Jericho, Jerusalem, and Bethlehem can be clearly seen.

The gods smile by the time I make my way to Mount Nebo. The heavens clear up, and I'm witness to what looks like a mythological scene. According to varied religious texts, Moses and his followers reached Mount Nebo where they had their first glimpse of the promised land. The Jordan Valley stretches out in front of me with a hint of the Dead Sea revealing itself to the west, Israel, Jordan, and the West Bank in the distance. As we drive north, the topography changes and we make our way into the desert that makes up almost two-thirds of Jordan. The North Arab Desert stretches into Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, but is at its most spectacular in Wadi Rum that literally translates to 'Valley of the Moon'. Wadi Rum lies in the far south of Jordan, and east of the Rift Valley. It's a protected region stretching across an area almost as large as New York City. What differentiates Wadi Rum are its spectacular sandstone arches, towering cliffs, and natural gorges: all coming together to create a spectacular landscape. It was here that T E Lawrence—a young English military intelligence officer—convinced a ragtag army of Bedouins to traverse the valley and attack the Ottoman stronghold of Aqaba in the early 20th century. Wadi Rum had never been crossed by camels before, not even by the Bedouins. The rest, as they say, is history.

The 'desert safari' is standard tourist fare in Wadi Rum today, and is well worth the time—I spend almost an entire day being ferried about in an SUV to different corners. The petroglyphs carved in prehistoric times are especially spectacular, with the



▲ According to varied religious texts, Moses and his followers reached Mount Nebo where they had their first glimpse of the promised land. Top: The Dead Sea's water lends itself to wellness therapies.



arid weather having preserved every line etched on the rocks. For me, a side trip to an etching of Lawrence's face carved into a rock face by the Arabs, to formalise his inclusion into their ranks, is accommodated on special request. "Not too many people remember that film," muses my guide. But everyone remembers Matt Damon's *The Martian*, and you'll find a queue of selfie-seekers waiting to park themselves on a rock that Damon's character sat on while pondering his fate after being marooned. Great as that film is, it can't hold a candle to Lawrence's real-world exploits. As astonishing as Wadi Rum is, that feat of human endeavour is what this desert will always be remembered for.

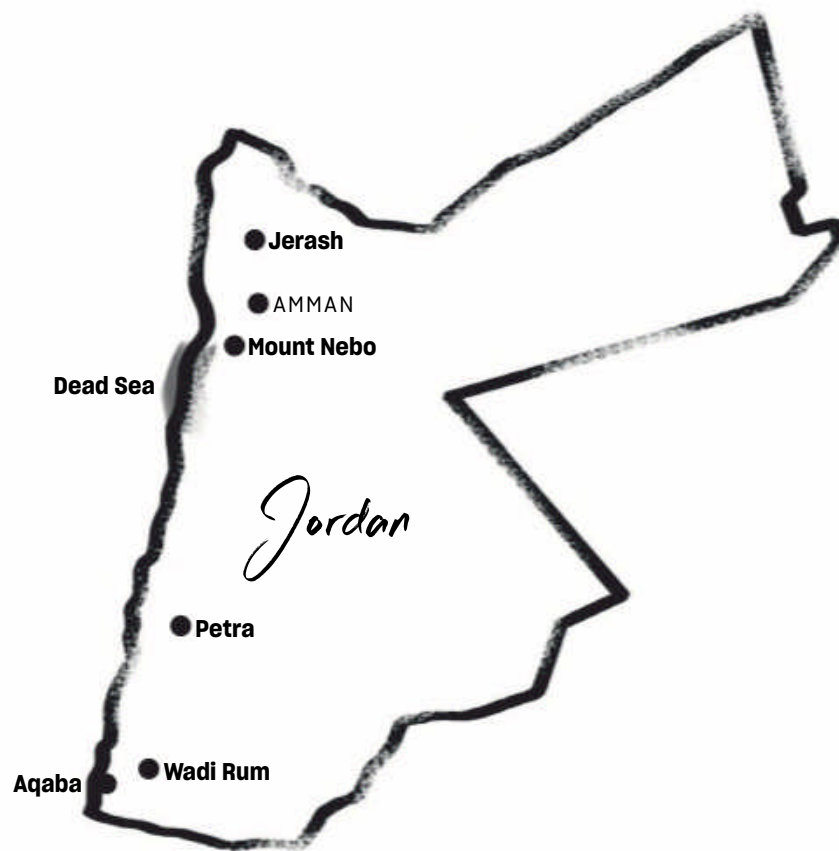
The Martian has contributed to a slew of otherworldly campsites that now dot this landscape. I'm staying at one, and it does look like a colony on another planet. Repasts, though, are traditional Bedouin affairs. For dinner, the chef prepares a *zarb*, a subterranean barbeque that's been simmering for over three hours. Back in the day the nomadic Bedouins needed to cook with minimum equipment and burying meats in an oven with hot coals was the norm.

The valley is also a fantastic setting for stargazing. The expansive night sky mirrors the sweeping firmament of Wadi Rum that has remained largely unchanged through the millennia. To Jordan's credit, there are no massive concrete resorts, no touristy shops selling trinkets here. Wadi Rum is still much bigger than the men who inhabit it. The next day

begins with a long drive to the city that Lawrence attacked. Jordan's favourite holiday destination, Aqaba is all about sun-kissed loveliness, and you can see Israel and Egypt clearly, lying across the water on the other side of the Gulf of Aqaba. Aqaba's striking cocktail of Middle-Eastern culture and laid-back beach holiday vibe is refreshing. The beaches are lined with resorts, and day-visitors can pay a daily fee to use the facilities. Home to some of the most pristine coral reefs in the world, the Red Sea is a Valhalla for diving and snorkelling. If you're looking for the holiday vibe, head straight to Aqaba, which also has the country's only other international airport. I drop off the rental car and take a flight back to Amman.

Just about an hour's drive out of Amman lies the city of Jerash, which takes its name from the ruins of an ancient city that lies within it: Gerasa. For centuries, Gerasa thrived by leveraging its location on the King's Highway—an ancient trading route in the Levant. One of the easternmost outposts of the Roman Empire, Jerash was the most impressive of the Decapolis, the 10 semi-autonomous city-states under the Empire. Historical accounts describe

Spend your night under the stars in one of the many luxury tented stays in Wadi Rum. Below: The beach resorts of Aqaba are popular for windsurfing and other watersports.



Chasing the Wonders of Jordan

GETTING THERE & AROUND

There are no direct flights to Jordan from India, but there's no paucity of airlines, from **Air Arabia** (air-arabia.com) to **Emirates** (emirates.com) and **Qatar Airways** (qatarairways.com), to consider when planning your trip. Possible stopovers include Abu Dhabi, Doha, Bahrain, and Sharjah. In Jordan, hiring a car is the best way to get around as long as you're comfortable driving on the right side of the road.

STAY

Tourism is the biggest single contributor to Jordan's economy, and the country is packed with hotels, B&Bs, and resorts. The **Amman Marriott Hotel** (from ₹8,930; marriott.com), where I stayed, is exactly as comfortable and generic as you would expect it to be. **Hayat Zaman Hotel & Resort** (hayatzaman.com) near Petra is a wonderful recreation of a mediaeval settlement. Aqaba's coastline is awash with sprawling resorts boasting private beaches like **Mövenpick Resort & Spa Tala Bay Aqaba** (from ₹11,300; movenpick.com), while the Dead Sea has some of the world's most highly rated wellness resorts—**Kempinski Hotel**

Ishtar Dead Sea (from ₹13,497; kempinski.com) is situated on the edge of the salt lake, houses the biggest luxury spa in the region that employs Dead Sea minerals in its treatments. Wadi Rum's experience isn't complete unless you stay at a Martian-style campsite. For instance, **Wadi Rum UFO** (from ₹14,430; wadiru-mufo.com) lives up to its name with pods that look extraterrestrial.

TIPS

Jordan has officially opened up for visitors on September 8. Entry requirements vary from country to country; check visitjordan.gov.jo for the latest updates. The country's popularity as a global destination has also spawned a number of scams to swindle tourists. At gas stations, make sure that the gas doesn't stop being dispensed while the meter keeps running. Most souvenir shops are overpriced, and bargaining is considered acceptable. There have also been a number of cases of handsome Bedouins charming women and looting them. Best to keep your heart and wallet locked away.

it as a monumental city. Not hard to imagine given how astonishing it still is. Two massive temples, one dedicated to Zeus and the other to Artemis, occupy the vantage points looking down at an oval plaza that leads to a colonnade, amphitheatres, and residences.

The Temple of Artemis was one of the few structures to survive the earthquake that destroyed the city in AD 749. It was converted into a fortress by soldiers from Damascus in 1120 AD. The very next year, Baldwin II, the King of Jerusalem, conquered and destroyed the temple. The ruins have survived natural catastrophes, wars, fires, and destruction wrought by men. Unlike all the great empires and kings who created, ruled over, and tried to destroy Gerasa, the city has endured, cocking a snook at human frailty.

It's a sobering thought, especially in the context of the global catastrophe that has engulfed the world this year. It was on the steps of a Roman amphitheatre in Gerasa that I got a call from the Indian embassy. I was to be repatriated to India the very next day, unless I wanted to risk getting marooned in Jordan. On the return flight, I thought about what we're doing to the planet and how much that's responsible for the pandemic. Today, it's clear to everyone that the damage our race has inflicted on the environment will reverse itself in our absence. All we'll leave are cities like Gerasa—striking reminders of humanity's astonishing capabilities and monumental follies. +



YOUR BEST SHOT

THIS AERIAL PHOTOGRAPH WAS TAKEN at Baldiha Dam, which is nearly 17 kilometres from Baripada, a city in the Mayurbhanj district of Odisha. The construction project on River Palpala was undertaken during the rule of Maharaja Sri Ram Chandra Bhanjdeo and finished in 1912 by the then state engineer Jarnold Martin Loe. The best time to visit the dam is monsoon, when it looks ethereal.

—**DEBASISH MISHRA ON HIS PHOTOGRAPH, SHOT ON A DJI MAVIC 2 PRO IN AUGUST 2020**

Debasish Mishra was an entrant in our ongoing 'Your Best Shot' contest. Submit your best shots at tplus@burda.in, or hashtag [#telltnlindia](https://www.instagram.com/telltnlindia) and tag [@travelandleisureindia](https://www.instagram.com/travelandleisureindia) on Instagram, to stand a chance to get featured on this page.

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Odishaaah!

The mesmerising horizon of **Malkangiri's Balimela Reservoir** has a much deeper impact than 240 MW hydropower.



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