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A TIMES OF INDIA PUBLICATION

# lonely planet

JUNE 2020 INDIA

## Pure Escapism

INSPIRATION  
HAS NO  
EXPIRY DATE!

*Dream now, travel later!*

**IN THIS ISSUE:  
YOUR HAPPY PLACES!  
#LPMIMadeWithYou**

**BE DIFFERENT:  
SPOT THE UGLY  
FIVE IN KENYA**

**PLAN A DREAM  
WEEKEND IN INDIA**

**STEAL THE SECRETS  
OF HAPPINESS  
FROM FINLAND**

**TAP INTO THE MAGIC  
OF MAJULI, ASSAM**





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## INSPIRATION HAS NO EXPIRY DATE

Travel safe:  
follow advisories before  
planning and setting off  
on journeys

## editor's note



**Primrose Monteiro-D'Souza**, Editor  
Follow me on Twitter **@PrimroseDSouza**  
& Instagram **@primrosedsouza**

## Escapism in a time of lockdown...

This is a difficult time. A time when we, wanting to fly, are grounded  
in so many ways for reasons of safety and good sense.  
But the mind is unfettered, unconfined...

One of our main features this issue is **My Happy Place**. And it's **#LPMIMadeWithYou!**  
You told us about the places you escape to when you think of travel, the destinations that bring  
a smile to your face when you think back to them, and we're thrilled that you've shared them with us.  
And we've provided more inspiration for this wandering in wonder. Join us on a safari on the  
lesser-known **Mara Naboisho Conservancy in Kenya**, where warthogs are star entertainers  
alongside the Big Five and the Ugly Five. Take lessons in happiness from **Helsinki in Finland**;  
you might find yourself wanting to relocate for a while after all this is done. Discover how  
**Mexico City** is bursting with creativity, and in ways that are accessible and fun. Nearer home,  
**Majuli in Assam** is an island of enchantment, a heartwarming example of a place in which time  
seems to have stood still and in a good way. And, finally, escape into a sweet stupor with  
**Desserts with a desi twist** from some of India's coolest pastry chefs.

This is a difficult time, but, as long as the mind can travel across the planet in the quest of old  
happiness and new discoveries, there is hope. Until then, stay home, stay safe, stay inspired.

### THIS MONTH'S COVER



PHOTOGRAPH: JUSTIN FOULKES

### ESCAPE INTO OUR COVER

If this cover looks even vaguely  
familiar, it's because the Disney  
film *Frozen* used the landscape  
of **Geirangerfjord in Norway**  
as inspiration for Arendelle.  
The only signs of civilisation at this  
UNESCO World Heritage site are  
small farms by the side of the fjord  
that can be accessed on foot or by  
boat. The Seven Sisters Falls in the  
area is another impressive landmark.

## With you...

Lonely Planet Magazine India is with you during these tough  
times, with lots on our digital platforms to keep you entertained  
and updated with the world of travel. Follow us on Facebook,  
Instagram and Twitter – because **#LPMIHappyToInspire!**

Join us in candid conversations with travel influencers and  
bloggers, find out how to cook dishes from different parts  
of the globe, put your travel knowledge to the test with our  
online quizzes and contests, and join us in saluting the  
**#LPMICovidCrusaders**. And, because we always want you  
to interact with LPMI, watch out for our **#LPMIMadeWithYou**  
initiatives, which invite you to be part of our digital issue.  
All this and much more coming up.

### Follow us on:

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Stay safe and **#stayinspired!**





# In this issue...

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Your world from the comfort of home

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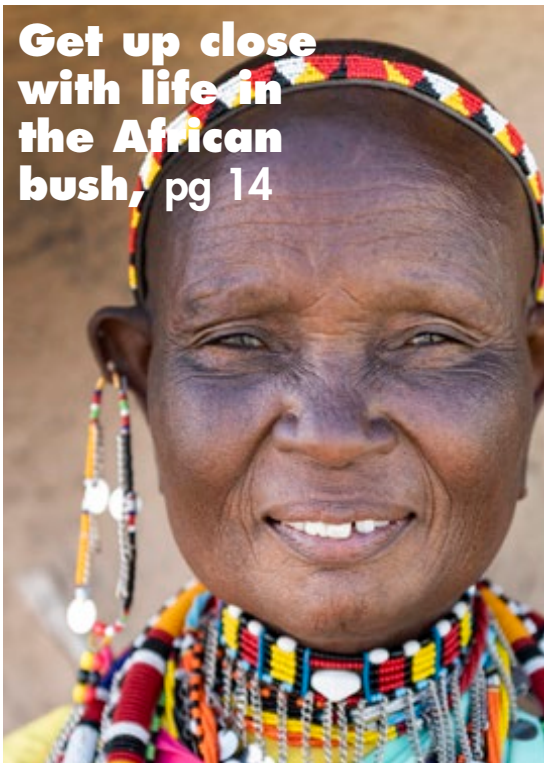
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# explore

THE BEST OF THE MONTH'S TIPS & TRIPS

LOCATION SCOUTING

## Fly another day

A side effect of the release of any new Bond film is the descent of crowds on its key locations. Tempering our disappointment that **No Time To Die** – and Daniel Craig's final appearance in the famous tuxedo – is delayed to November, let us give you advance notice of some spots you should be able to trace his Aston Martin's tyre tracks through. The cover has long been blown for the haunting hilltop town of Matera in southern Italy, and the trailer shows glimpses of Ian Fleming favourite, Jamaica. The scene we're most looking forward to is a promised car chase along the **Atlantic Road** (pictured). This four-mile, island-hopping marriage of engineering and nature is one of several Norwegian locations set to star (<https://en.visitnorthand.no>).

PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCKPHOTO

DREAM NOW... TRAVEL WHEN IT'S TIME! INSPIRATION HAS NO EXPIRY DATE

Inspiration comes in many forms... Filming locations, like this one, can spur many a travel plan. Then, there are the many destinations across India worth rediscovering, and books that transport you to other times and places...



# Desi Dream Weekend Trips

We might still be in lockdown, or slowly emerging from it, but dreams of travel are powerful and inspire hope, giving us the strength to carry on through trying times such as these. The other remarkable quality of dreams is that they seldom age. As we wait for it to be safe to travel again, here's a list of 14 dream weekend destinations across India. Use these suggestions to map your own itineraries, and, remember, when you travel local, it's the nation's economy that you are contributing to, supporting the many lives that are intricately intertwined with the travel industry.

## PLAN TO BE SEDUCED BY HISTORY



### Uncover fascinating legends in Murshidabad, West Bengal

At its peak, Murshidabad was the capital of the Mughal Empire's Bengal state, encompassing modern-day Bangladesh, West Bengal, Odisha and Bihar. While its prosperity has long disappeared, traces of its cosmopolitan past remain and make for a fascinating glimpse into the proud history of the region. Explore monuments such as Hazraarduari Palace and Motijhil, or pick up silk, a craft passed down over centuries in the region.

### Seek out the Stone Age in Chitradurga, Karnataka

This town is steeped in ancient history dating back thousands of years. Artefacts recovered from caves in Chandravalli and from other excavations in the region have revealed traces of humans living here from the Stone Age. There's also the impressive Chitradurga Fort, constructed between the 11th and 13th centuries, and later, expanded by Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan.



### Travel back in time in Orchha, Madhya Pradesh

This ancient city dating back to the early 16th century, on the banks of the Betwa River, has palaces, forts, temples and cenotaphs aplenty. Even if you do manage to soak in all the history in a couple of days, the local hospitality will keep you busy for a few more after.



### Marvel at architecture in Bikaner, Rajasthan

From the Laxmi Niwas Palace to the Junagarh Fort, Bikaner's rulers built many a marvel during their centuries of rule over this city in the middle of the Thar. Although history might be the focus of your Bikaner visit, you'll definitely be distracted by the delightful local cuisine as well.

### Witness timeless traditions in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh

Memories of our colourful past resound strongly across the city of Lucknow, capital of Uttar Pradesh. From the Mughals to the Nawabs and, finally, the British Empire, the influences on the city have been many and are reflected not only in the local architecture but also in the cuisine. It's as enlightening to take a tour of the famed Residency as it is to chomp down on a delectable dish with Nawabi origins. →

PHOTOGRAPHS: MAYANK SONI, VAIBHAV MEHTA, HASHIM BADANI, ABHIMANYU MUKHANDANI, T. KRISHNA PRABAKAR, JYOTHI KARAT, KRISHNA ANGIRA, MAHESH SAGARI, VINOBHA NATHAN, HIMANSHU PANDYA, SAMEER MANGTANI, APARNA NORI, JEREMIAH CHRISTIAN AND RAO, TABA'S TARAPORVALA AND ASHISH PARMAR



# The Sentimental Traveller

Actor and singer **Shona Sharma** has to travel often for work, but, to her, travelling is not just a mundane commute. It's a need that she must fulfill, to feed the flames of the fire that burns inside her, just like in every artiste. She explores every place in her own unique way, picking up local songs, tasting authentic food, and through genuine interaction with the people of the place. She likes to visit places that are significant for great art, rich in history, places which inspire her to channel her creativity.

The other thing she enjoys is the thrill. Any activity or adventure that gets the blood pumping and the adrenaline rushing makes her feel alive and truly lends meaning to what it means to be living life. It makes her understand that she's not invincible, and yet, that emotion in itself makes her feel more powerful and in control of her life and destiny.

Travel also helps her channel her emotions – to filter out the bad and retain the good. Visiting the beach and soaking in the salt water seems to drain out her negative vibes, letting her soul float free after a therapeutic dip. The mountains, on the other hand, focus her positive energies and allow her to forget all the cares in the world.

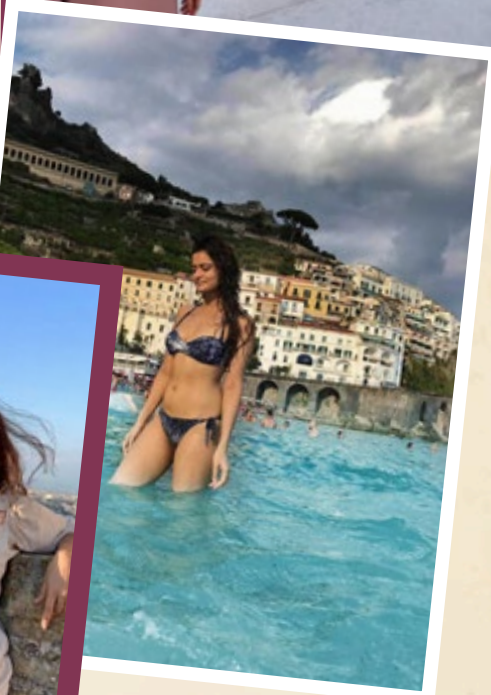
She has visited many places across the world; among them, Italy, in particular, stands out, especially for the friends who are like family to her. Their warm hospitality and genuine interactions allowed her to truly experience what Italy is all about. From the

delicious cuisine in Naples, which has mouthwatering vegetarian options, and the beautiful churches of Amalfi to the haunting architecture of Rome and the gondolas of Venice, the memories of Italy are forever etched in her mind.

In India, Lucknow, where she has spent a large part of her life, and Goa, to which she travels so much to that she could be mistaken for a local, are her favourites.

Travel for Shona is always an emotion. Because of who she is. Her own words best encompass the meaning it holds for her. "I get in a sweet hurry to leave everything behind and just do what pleases my heart. As if there's a robe that I take off and sprint into a mad rush of happiness and abandon."

The words she likes to live by come from legendary musician Mick Jagger: "It's okay to let go as long as you know how to come back."



Follow her on @reflecshon



## PLAN FOR YOUR DOSE OF ADVENTURE

**Float above the world in Bir-Billing, Himachal Pradesh**

These two small towns in the Kangra Valley are famed for paragliding the world over. They draw thousands interested in the sport each year and have even hosted the first-ever paragliding world cup. Do your research to find the best operator you can. Aside from the adventure, there are several Buddhist monasteries and temples in Bir, for those looking for a spiritual getaway too.

**Turn up the adrenaline in Netravalli Wildlife Sanctuary, Goa**

Take on a different side of the coastal state, and discover the heady effects of high-adrenaline canyoning in the Netravalli Wildlife Sanctuary. A mix of trekking, ziplining, rappelling, and even wading through rivers, canyoning is one activity that requires serious levels of fitness and determination.

**Get a bird's-eye view of history in Jodhpur, Rajasthan**

The Blue City might be better known for its forts and palaces, but there are quite a few options for adrenaline junkies too. Zipline right off the heart of the historic Mehrangarh Fort, over its majestic battlements and the desert lakes below. Trekking and paragliding have also picked up in recent years.

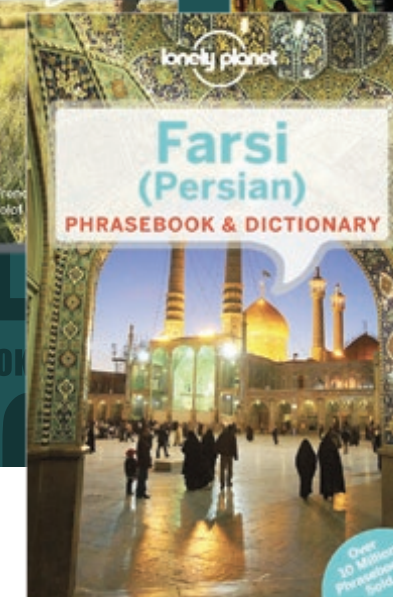
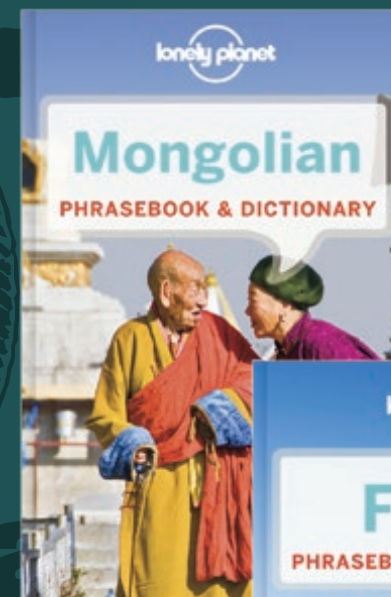
**Escape to a different universe in Puducherry**

While this erstwhile French colony might be well known for its quaint architecture and delectable cuisine, this is also one of the only diving spots on the eastern coast of India. Sign up with one of the many scuba schools in the union territory to experience the magic of the underwater realm. Swim with manta rays and moray eels, spy upon the marine life that lives on a coral reef, and, on a lucky day, even spot whale sharks, dolphins and turtles.

**Discover underground worlds in the Khasi Hills, Meghalaya**

Even if you don't want to engage in hardcore caving, which requires trained guides and equipment, simply visiting the numerous cave systems in the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya will get your adrenaline pumping. The Meghalaya Adventurers Association has been operating since the 1990s and has managed to explore only 5% of the thousands of caves in the state. It takes weeks to explore the underground worlds of these amazing limestone formations. →

lonely planet



## Phrasebooks

These pocket friendly books make language easy with shortcuts, key phrases and common Q&As, so you'll never be stuck for words. Made for travellers who want to immerse themselves in a particular culture!

Available at all leading bookshops, online stores  
Distributed by **HarperCollins Publishers India**



## PLAN TO INDULGE YOUR TASTEBUDS



## Celebrate a community through food in Udvada, Gujarat

From *poro* (omelette), *akuri* (scrambled egg) and *salli par eedu* (egg on fried potato) to *tareli boi* (fried mullet), *dhansak* (dal with mutton) and *lagan nu* custard, the Parsi delicacies in this pilgrimage town for the Zoroastrian community are incredibly delicious. Take a food tour of the numerous eateries, bakeries and dairies here that serve you food with a healthy helping of tales from back in the day.



## Experience culture through cuisine in Hyderabad, Telangana

The food in Hyderabad is an amalgamation of Mughal, Turkish, Arabic, Telugu and Marathwada influences. From the *kebabs*, *biryani* and *sheer khurma* to the Hyderabadi *khichdi*, *mirch ka salan* and *khatti dal*, both vegetarians and meat eaters will find plenty of options to indulge in here.

## Revel in street food in Madurai, Tamil Nadu

The city of temples has a reputation as one of the prime destinations for foodies in southern India, and for good reason. Offering up everything from multi-tiered *dosas*, simple *idiyappams* and *jigarthandai* to *thalis* and *kotthu paratha*, there are several hundred eateries operating in this city, serving up a storm for visitors and locals alike.



## Taste the world in Darjeeling, West Bengal

From cakes, coffee and full English breakfasts to *momos*, *thukpa* and *chaang*, the sheer variety of food on offer in Darjeeling is a revelation. And let's not forget the cuisine from the plains that has invariably made its way here. Indulging in mouth-watering delicacies against the backdrop of the magnificent Himalayas is the experience of a lifetime. 🍽️

## WHEN WE TRAVEL AGAIN: MUST-CARRY ESSENTIALS

Packing certain essentials when travelling is not just about hygiene but health and safety too. Include the following in your travel kit.

**Curiosity and caution:** A healthy dose of curiosity is great when exploring destinations. The more curious you are, the more you're likely to uncover. But, of course, always exercise caution, in all interactions, be it in terms of maintaining safe distance or respecting customs and practices.

**Masks:** Masks are a compulsory accessory these days. While **N95 masks** are believed to be most effective, you could buy any of the other varieties available, or even make a simple, multi-layered cloth mask at home. Use-and-throw surgical masks are also available, but these aren't sustainable for regular use.

**Gloves:** It's very difficult to not use your hands when out and about, especially when travelling. Use gloves to make sure that there's an extra layer of protection between your hands and surfaces. **Latex surgical gloves** can be for one-time use, but we'd suggest getting washable and reusable ones so you generate less waste.

**Sanitation aids:** Cleansing and sanitation is key. A surface disinfectant spray like **Savlon** works to kill 99.99% of all germs and even viruses (170g pack for ₹159), or try the **Savlon Hexa Hand Sanitizer**, perfect for your travel safety (500ml pump pack for ₹250, 500ml refill pack for ₹240, sachet for 50 paise).



Waikiki means 'sprouting waters' in the Hawaiian language

## SPORTING CULTURE

## Surfing in Honolulu

Wide and golden Waikiki Beach, on the east side of Hawaii's capital Honolulu, is the cradle of surfing. It was here in the first half of the 20th century that local 'beach boys' taught visitors to surf, and they took word of their new hobby home, notably spreading the craze to California in the USA and Australia. Riding waves was a traditional pastime in many Polynesian islands, but, for Hawaiians *he'e nalu* ('wave-sliding') also took on aspects of warrior training and religion.

Plenty of modern surfers show a similar devotion to this day.

1

In the strict class system of old Hawaii, the best surfing spots were kept for the *ali'i* (nobles). For kings such as Hawaii's unifier, Kamehameha I (died 1819), surfing skill was a matter of prestige.

2

Many surfboards were shaped from *koa*, a kind of acacia wood that also became a favourite for making ukuleles. In a place where crops grew easily, there was plenty of leisure time for surfing.

3

Social upheaval after European contact put the survival of the sport at risk, though enough Hawaiians kept it up for a visiting Mark Twain to try 'surf-bathing' in 1866. He didn't master the art.

4

The greatest reviver of surfing was Honolulu local Duke Kahanamoku – freestyle swimming world record holder from 1912 to 1922. His visit to Sydney in 1915 helped bring surfing to Australia.

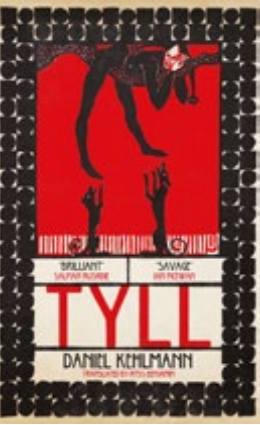
5

Though the wave-lashed North Shore of O'ahu island became surfing's new frontier after the 1950s, Waikiki is still its spiritual home, with a garland-draped statue of Duke Kahanamoku.



NEW BOOKS

Armchair adventures start here

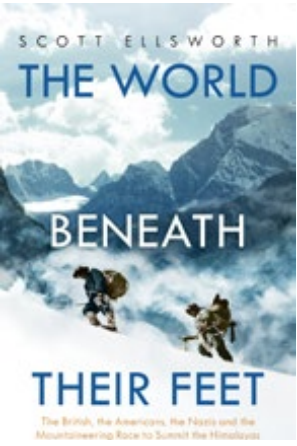


**TYLL**  
*Daniel Kehlmann*

A best-seller in Germany and soon to be a Netflix series, *Tyll* takes place in 17th-century Europe – specifically, the Thirty Years War, a protracted battle between Protestants and Catholics. Despite the context, this is a fun read – its title character, a figure lifted from German folklore, is a travelling entertainer, and his adventures are full of vivid detail that bring the villages, forests and cities of Central Europe to life.

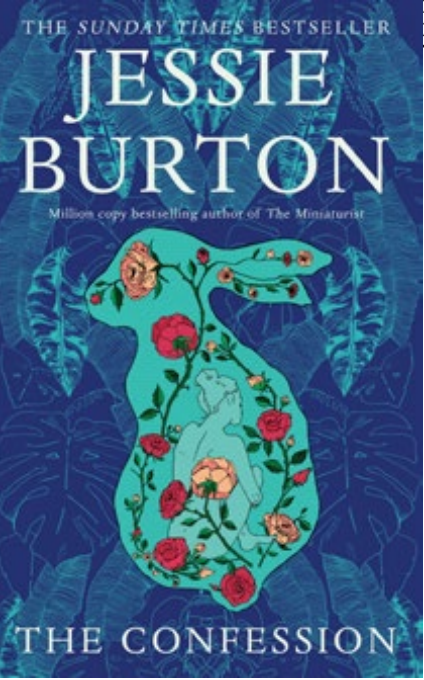
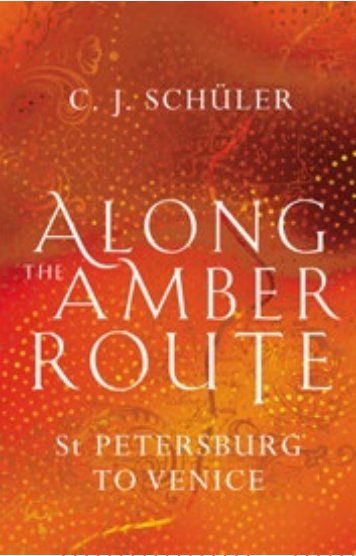
**THE WORLD BENEATH THEIR FEET**  
*Scott Ellsworth*

In the 1930s, with tensions between some of the world’s great nations rising, a power play of a different kind was unfolding in a remote spot in the Himalayas. American, British and German teams had all set up rival camps at the base of the mountains, each hoping to triumph in the race to the summit. The sheer extremity of the environment is well captured in this account.



**ALONG THE AMBER ROUTE**  
*C.J. Schöler*

Following a trade route from the Baltic to the Mediterranean, this travelogue explores the origins of amber and the myths it has inspired – including its role in *Jurassic Park* as a source of dinosaur DNA. Packed with intriguing diversions through former Soviet states, the author’s journey begins in St Petersburg’s Amber Room and intertwines with the story of his grandfather’s flight from Nazi Germany.



**THE CONFESSION**  
*Jessie Burton*

This author’s previous novel, best-seller *The Miniaturist*, made readers feel like they were wandering the streets of 17th-century Amsterdam – and Jessie Burton pulls off the same trick here with 1980s LA and London. Following modern-day millennial Rose Simmons on her quest to uncover what became of the mother she never knew, the story switches between past and present, from pool parties in the Hollywood Hills to winter walks on Hampstead Heath.

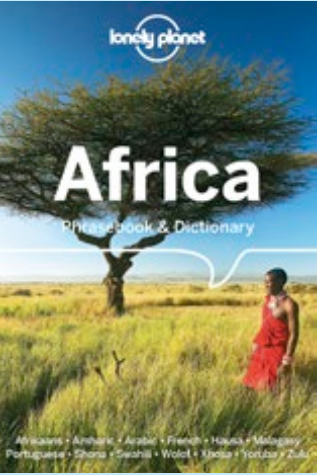
**IN HER FOOTSTEPS**  
*Lonely Planet*

It is often said that women have been written out of history, and built environments reflect their absence from the narrative – statues and street names chiefly commemorate men. This book seeks to contribute to the turning tide, guiding readers to locations around the world where trail-blazing women made their mark – from the home of suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst to the tennis courts where the Williams sisters learned their sport.



**LEARNING WITH THE LONELY PLANET LANGUAGE AND PHRASEBOOK SERIES**

Language is an important part of a nation’s culture. Travelling to new places brings us up close to the language of the people. Knowing a smattering of words or phrases goes a long way in making human connections during your travels and finding your way around. The books in the Lonely Planet Language and Phrasebook series are nifty to carry around and have the most useful and informative words, phrases and short sentences to help travellers across the world when they visit a place with a language not their own. These books cover a range of simple questions about location, food choices, directions and social etiquette, among others. Pick from books for Africa, Fiji and Bulgaria, or for the Czech, Farsi, Hebrew and Hungarian languages, among others, from this series of phrases and words that will prove most useful on your travels (available from online stores and most bookstores; from ₹676 to ₹852).



DREAM NOW... TRAVEL WHEN IT'S TIME! INSPIRATION HAS NO EXPIRY DATE!

From fellow travellers' happy places in the #LPMIMadeWithYou feature, to seeking happiness in Helsinki, the Ugly Five in Kenya, and creativity in Mexico City, there are so many reasons to travel to be found in this section

FEATURES

PHOTOGRAPH: KOTENKO / 123RF



# SIDE BY SIDE

*A herd of elephants makes their way across the conservancy*

*Orla Thomas, on her first-ever African safari, experiences a front-row seat on life itself. From ants to hyenas, and hyrax to lions, she meets the residents of the Mara Naboisho Conservancy in **Kenya** – and learns how the community here shares the precious resources of the savannah*

WORDS ORLA THOMAS  @OrlaThomas PHOTOGRAPHS JUSTIN FOULKES  @justinfoulkes



*A bull elephant*



## **A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO SAFARI**

- ◆ Days on safari are long but there's downtime in the middle of the day as game drives take place when the animals tend to be most active: just after dawn, and just before dusk.
- ◆ The Masai Mara is cooler than you might expect, temperatures ranging from a daytime max of 30°C to around 10°C at night. To keep comfortable in these changeable conditions you'll need to pack both a warm jacket and a pair of shorts, a cosy beanie and a sun hat.
- ◆ You don't need to buy specialist safari clothing: muted colours that blend in with the landscape are fine. When you're in a vehicle, most animals only perceive the car's large shape – the individual humans within it go largely unnoticed.
- ◆ Patience is rewarded on safari. Don't fixate on which animals you'd like to see, but allow time for experiences to unfold. Predators go a long time between 'kills', but witnessing one can be pure (if gory) drama.
- ◆ Safari camps are careful about safety. Vehicles are open-sided, but guides are experienced so you never feel at risk. Tents are fitted with 'panic buttons' and staff chaperone guests between different areas of the camp during the twilight hours when the animals are most active.





1



2

1. A baby elephant rests at her mother's feet  
2. Hyenas have a teddybear look but an unsavoury reputation

The elephant is so close I can hear him chew. His powerful jaws crunch effortlessly through a mouthful of whistling thorn acacia, a tree with the texture of a medieval mace. Another member of the herd is grunting with exertion as she uproots a bush, a procedure being copied – rather ineffectually – by her tiny baby. His stubby legs aren't long enough to manage the twist-and-pull method his mother deploys to devastating effect, and, eventually, he slumps to the ground to rest his head on her giant toenails. I arrived in the Mara just hours ago, but feel far from weary myself. Being so near the group is electrifying, and I sit in the Land Cruiser in awed silence, watching as they make their way across the plains, the sun burning high in a cloudless sky. The collective noun for elephants is a 'memory', and these will be forever etched on mine.

**A**FTER half an hour, the elephants start to move on, leaving a trail of destruction in their wake: fallen tree trunks, branches stripped of leaves. Some of the 30-strong herd brush against the bonnet, others clip the 4WD's tyres with their tails as they swish away flies. It is tempting to reach out to touch a wrinkled hide, but this would be foolish. Though Dumbo, Babar, Elmer and their ilk have established

elephants as benign in our collective imagination, they are among the most dangerous animals in the African savannah. In Kenya alone, they have killed over 200 people in the last seven years.

Nevertheless, in the Mara Naboisho Conservancy, a large conservation area that borders the more famous Masai Mara National Reserve, animals and humans are obliged to coexist. The Conservancy is made up of 50,000 acres leased from Maasai landowners, who pursue their traditional occupation as herders while receiving an income from fees paid by visitors staying at tented camps, like **Hemingways Ol Seki**. This money ensures that the wildlife that tourists come to see remains protected, and guides – like Raffy Rotiken – play an important role in maintaining this delicate relationship. "Here, you grow up knowing how dangerous the animals are. But learning how to approach them in a car, and making sure they feel comfortable with you being so close, that's something that comes with experience," says Raffy. "An elephant could knock down a house like it is nothing. The Maasai villages have a lot of trouble with them."

One such village is **Rakwa**, home to around 60 people. As Raffy pulls up, a group of women

gathers to sing in welcome. He tells me the song used to be performed for warriors returning from a successful lion hunt, but, as the Maasai no longer kill these animals, it's been repurposed. The children of the village observe our arrival curiously, watching the scene from the doorway of their huts. "Here, one village is one family," Raffy says. The Maasai are polygamous, each wife and her children occupying a separate dwelling; constructing them from mud is considered women's work. One of the huts in Rakwa is clearly a cut above the rest, with taller, smoother walls and a neat door made from three wooden planks. It belongs to a woman in her sixties called Noolamala. Her husband, a village elder, died some years ago, but she retains the status of her position as first wife.

**S**HE'S proud of her home, and happily shows me around. Inside, it's cool, in marked contrast to the baking heat outside. And dark, too; the only chink of light coming in through a small porthole above the bed. There is a pervasive, pleasant smell of wood smoke from the fire on which Noolamala cooks all the family's meals. Maasai eat their livestock – sheep, goat and, on special occasions, cows – though not chickens. The fluffy hens that occasionally →

Noolamala estimates her age at 65, but Maasai people tend not to celebrate birthdays







1. Giraffes grow to about eight metres tall  
2. A mini-migration of wildebeest, searching for green pasture



wander into Noolamala’s quarters are around only to keep cattle ticks at bay. We sit in the darkness, Raffy relaying my questions, many of which make her smile, her face lighting up in the gloom. Yes, she had her babies at home – all eight of them – where else? And yes, she hand-made the bright, beaded necklaces that jangle as she speaks.

When I emerge some time later, blinking as my eyes readjust, the men of the village are starting to return. They spend their days moving livestock across the conservancy, seeking out new pasture for grazing, and protecting their herds from the many predators with whom they share the land. At night, the animals are shut into a pen to protect them from hyenas and leopards, the men sleeping in shifts to ensure that two are always on guard. The clothes traditionally worn by Maasai men also speak of a life of vigilance, their vibrant, red-checked cloaks worn to scare off lions.

As we leave Rakwa, dusk is descending. This is when the animals are most active, predators rousing from their languor to hunt. The herbivores are therefore skittish: zebra flee from the noise of our engine, and warthogs scamper into the dust. But Raffy has spotted a more imminent threat: the elephants have returned, and a man stands among them, swaying and steadying himself with his staff. Raffy speeds across the plains, pulling the man through the passenger door. He scolds him in Maa – the language spoke by the Maasai – before returning him to the safety of the village. “He was drunk,” says Raffy, tutting. “And minutes away from being killed.”

LIFE or death rescues are a rarity for Raffy, but the animals provide ample drama. “Every day you see something different,” he says. All his guests want to spot the Big Five: lion, leopard, rhinoceros, elephant and Cape buffalo, but Raffy also has a soft spot for the ‘Ugly Five’: wildebeest, hyena, vulture, baboon – and the warthog, known as Pumbaa. “It’s a Swahili word for a person with a really short memory,” he says. “Sometimes, they’re being chased by lions and, after five minutes of running, they forget why they’re doing it, and stop.” I knew I’d be awed on my first safari, but am surprised to find myself amused, too. Warthogs are the court jesters of the savannah, inherently comical with their squat legs, scampering gait and moustache-like facial hair. Giraffes – everywhere on the conservancy, but no less impressive for their ubiquity – are their spiritual and physical opposite. They move across the plains as though catwalking a runway, their long eyelashes and even longer legs making them seem coquettish. I get the sense that giraffes look down, both →



Hippos seek refuge from the sun





1. A lioness on the prowl  
2&3. Guide Agnes Mako holds a flower from a *Dichrostachys cinerea*, known as sicklebush  
4. A pit-stop to admire a rainbow.




literally and metaphorically, on hippos. Night grazers, by day, hippopotamuses retreat to the cool of the river to keep their skin moist. The pod we find is almost completely submerged: hippos can hold their breath for up to 10 minutes. The beasts give themselves away, though, with their super-sized poos, smelly mounds that bob to the water’s surface. What’s even more surprising is the extraordinary racket hippos make, their exhalations like the sound of someone blowing up balloons.

Raffy is particularly well-attuned to the sounds of the savannah – and he’s a talented mimic, too. He can copy the Frankie Howerd cackle of the hyena, the morse code-like warning call of the oxpecker bird, the guttural grunting of a male impala trying to warn others away from his harem of females. He uses these noises to track game, as well as more modern methods, such as the Naboisho Sightings WhatsApp group, on which guides from the conservancy’s different camps share info on what they’ve seen. The ping of his phone alerts us to a pride of lions, not far away. When we arrive there are already three vehicles, the most I have seen anywhere; here, you can drive for hours without seeing anyone. No one needs binoculars: we’re so close even my phone snaps a good photo. There is a childlike air of excitement among the spectators – all of us talking in exaggerated whispers – but the lions are aloof, padding casually past the cars before disappearing into the long grass. Later, Raffy seeks out a pair of cheetahs, similarly nonchalant. Two brothers,

they loll and yawn in the shade. Raffy hands me a cool beer and we watch them for over an hour. They barely move an inch, indifferent to their reputation as nature’s sprinters.

BIG cats are the undisputed royalty of the savannah, the top of a food chain that cascades all the way down to creatures like the humble cocktail ant. The tiny insect feeds on the whistling acacia tree, puncturing its bulbous thorns to extract the sugary substance within, and leaving holes that flute in a breeze, giving the tree its name. This is something I learnt from Agnes Mako, one of six women guides on the conservancy and a particular specialist in bush walks, helping visitors to experience life here on a more macro level. “When you’re in a car, you don’t see what’s on the floor,” she says as we set out from camp on foot. She moves among the shrubs like a sleuth – albeit a conspicuous one, in her yellow dress. She reaches up to pluck the *Rhus natalensis*, the young leaves of which are given to children to clean their teeth, and frequently drops to the floor to examine dung. Giraffe pellets are laughably small given the animal’s enormous size, but Agnes tells me this is because they’re selective feeders. Elephants, on the other hand, produce big dung because they have a poor digestive system, and eat and defecate copiously. “Elephants cause destruction, but they also rebuild,” she says, pointing out that they will wait for an area to recover before they return, and that their dung is useful for seed germination. “In nature, nothing is wasted.”

WITH Agnes’s insights, I begin to understand that every single thing growing here has its use. She coats my fingers with the sap of *Commiphora africana*, used by humans, baboons and monkeys as a natural chewing gum. She hands me bark from the *Acacia gerrardii*, favoured by elephants and Maasai as a stomach medicine, and also used by the latter to make alcohol. “As we are raised here, a big part of our knowledge is from our parents,” says Agnes, who, through schooling, has acquired skills that are far from traditional. In addition to her impeccable English, to prepare for her work as a guide she learnt off-road driving and mechanical maintenance. “Some would assume I can’t do these tasks, but that is an attitude we have to conquer. Some things are changing, but the Maasai people will never lose their culture.” We walk back to camp, along a track littered with pink quartz and jet-black obsidian, used to make necklaces for Maasai warriors. The stone’s colour is reflected in the sky, as dark clouds gather for a downpour. Soon a rainbow appears on the horizon – at its end, the golden grass of the savannah. ⑩

 **ORLA THOMAS** travelled with support from Hemingways Ol Seki Mara Camp, and learned two Swahili phrases during her trip: ‘*sawasawa*’ (OK) and ‘*jambo*’ (hello).

A sudden downpour fills the air with winged termites, which breed during rainfall







Everyone wants to see the Big Five on safari (numbers 1, 3, 4, 8 and 12 here) but don't overlook the 'Ugly Five' (a more debatable group) and other creatures great and small.

**1** The Masai Mara has perhaps the highest density of lions in Africa. Lions are the most social of all feline species.

**2** The spotted hyena gets most of its food from hunting, not scavenging, unlike the striped hyena also found in Kenya.

**3** The Cape buffalo is the subspecies of African buffalo found in Southern and East Africa. The least threatened of the Big Five, it was most feared by hunters.

**4** The world's heaviest land mammal is slowly increasing in numbers, in Kenya at least. There are more than 2,400 African elephants in the Masai Mara.

**5** The Mwanza flat-headed rock agama (nicknamed the Spider-Man agama for the males' colouring) is a curiously bold visitor to lodges in parts of East Africa.

**6** Warthogs are very adaptable, using abandoned aardvark burrows as a refuge for example. The 'warts' act as a cushion against blows when males spar.

**7** The impala is an antelope that ranges from Kenya to South Africa. Horns on the males make long, S-shaped curves.

**8** Black rhinos are present but rare in the Masai Mara. Strangely, you might have more luck seeing them in Nairobi National Park, in sight of the capital.

**9** Unless you're in eastern Kenya, where the few Grevy's zebra live, you'll see the smaller and thicker-striped plains zebra.

**10** Masai ostrich males see their necks and legs turn a brighter shade of pink when mating season comes along.

**11** Kenya is home to two of the five true species of baboon: the olive baboon (pictured here) and the yellow baboon.

**12** Typically the hardest to spot of the Big Five, leopards like to spend daylight hours hidden up amid tree branches.



## MAKE IT HAPPEN: KENYA

### Essentials

We accept that travel to Kenya is not advised at present; we hope that this information will prove useful again once restrictions are lifted.

#### → BEST TIME TO VISIT

Game viewing is possible throughout the year, but the rains, which normally arrive between May – June and during November, affect access to some areas. August – October is generally thought to be the best time to visit to witness the migration of the wildebeest, one of nature's greatest spectacles.

#### → GETTING THERE & AROUND

Ordinarily, Kenya Airways and Air Arabia both fly to Nairobi-Kenyatta from major metro cities of India. Internal flights onwards to the Mara are also usually available.

#### → VISA

Visa on Arrival is available for Indians for a fee of ₹3,700. Travellers should have a confirmed flight ticket and a Yellow Fever Certificate along with other travel documents.

#### → EMBASSY ALERT

High Commission of India  
Nairobi, Kenya:  
[www.hcinairobi.gov.in](http://www.hcinairobi.gov.in)

#### → CURRENCY

KES 1 = ₹0.71

#### → FURTHER INFO:

Lonely Planet's *Kenya* guide is full of information to help plan the perfect trip.

### WHERE TO STAY

A private camp in the heart of the Naboisho Conservancy, **Hemingways Ol Seki Mara** has ten tents, each situated in relative seclusion with views over the bush. They are all done out in high-safari style, with white linens paired with classic rugs and locally-made soft furnishings, plus proper wooden floors and ceiling fans and en suite bathrooms with flushable toilets and rain showers. There's a pool and a deck for sundowner G&Ts, while most meals are served in the dining tent, where guests sit at shared tables to swap stories. The camp's friendly staff are mostly local Maasai who benefit from professional training that enables them to support their families. The camp can organise a visit to a local community, as well as a day trip into the Masai Mara National Reserve or a hot air balloon or walking safari (stay from ₹34,100/ person per night, full-board including drinks. Includes two-day game drives in Naboisho Conservancy, one 'bush breakfast', one night game drive and return transfers to Ol Seki Naboisho airstrip. Excludes daily Naboisho conservancy fees of ₹8,800/ adult).

Hemingways also has a palatial property in Nairobi, which has a swimming pool and tropical landscaped gardens. The grand bedrooms are named after famous figures associated with Kenya, including authors such as Ernest Hemingway and Karen Blixen, and the brass, mahogany and leather finishes evoke a similarly old-world charm ([www.hemingways-collection.com](http://www.hemingways-collection.com); from ₹44,750).

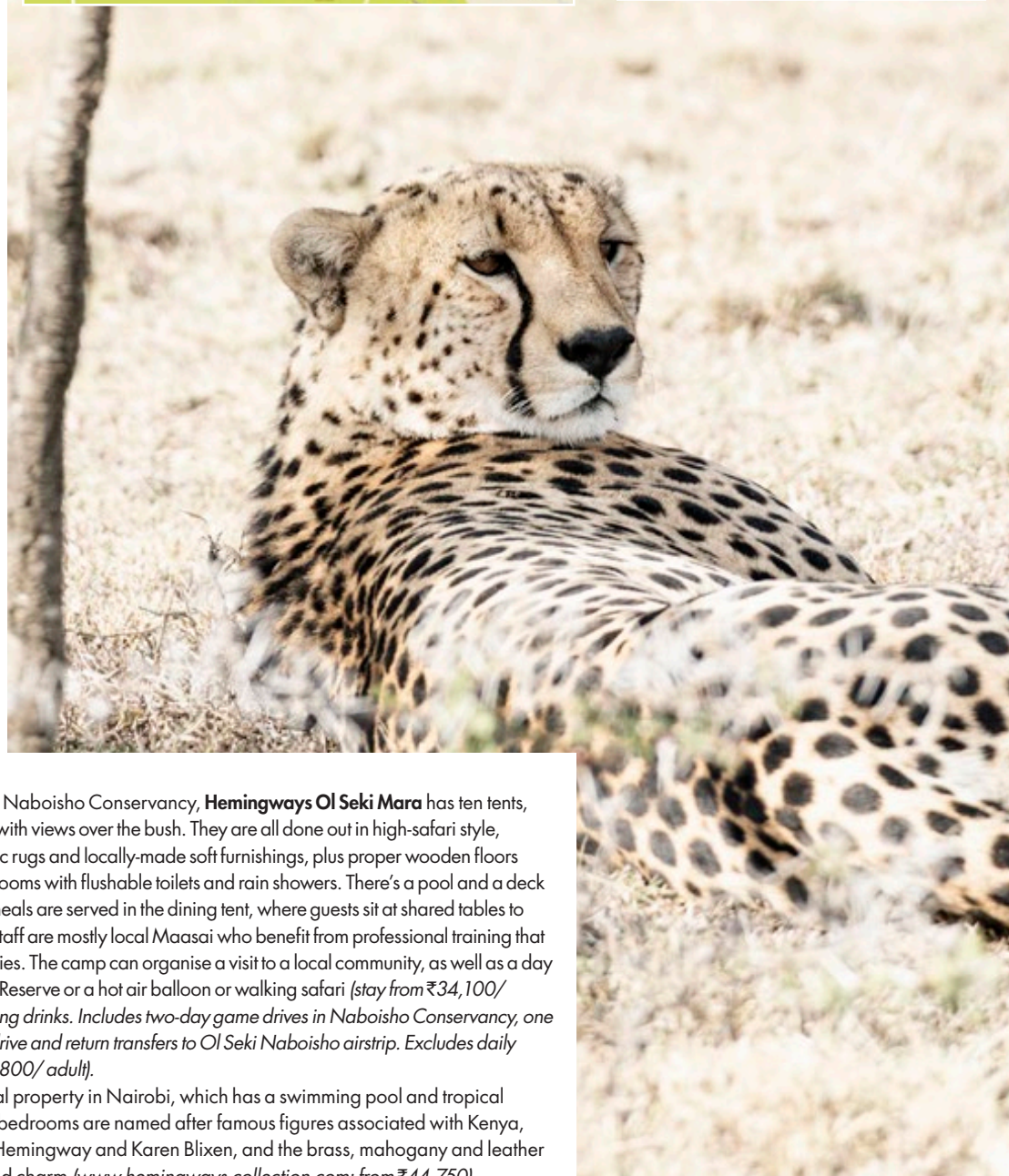


### BEHIND THE SCENES



A fan of animal print clothing, packing for safari was a no-brainer. I took everything from leopard-print scarves to zebra-striped shorts, and every day provided a new opportunity to blend in with the animals of the savannah. My wardrobe was a source of amusement for photographer Justin Foulkes who favours more practical travel wear.

– Orla Thomas



# MY HAPPY PLACE



THAILAND,  
**Raghuvamsh Chavali**

@raghuvamshchavali chavali.raghuvamsh

“ In October 2018, my last international trip to Thailand gave me the opportunity to closely observe and capture the scenic landscapes of Ko Phi Phi, Krabi and Phuket. The incredible beauty of the blue waters and the green habitats was a feast for the eyes. On my ferry ride, I was awestruck by the spectacular bays and cliffs surrounding Railay Beach (pictured). These remarkable panoramic seascapes, the soft, white sand, and the sunsets still come to mind whenever I think back to this trip. When I hear the words 'lockdown ended', I want to teleport to those beaches! ”

We asked our fellow travellers to share stories of the special place to which they dream of returning. We're happy this feature is **#LPMIMadeWithYou**



COMPILED BY AUBREIA FERNANDES &  
PRANJOSE MONTEIRO D'SOUZA  
PHOTOGRAPH: PHEOPORAW





ISLE OF SKYE,  
SCOTLAND

**Dr Parthasarathi Hota**  
@parthasarathihota  
ParthasarathiHota

“ When I think of travel, I always remember a very special trip to Scotland with my wife in May 2017. I took a picture of this hill formation known as the Old Man of Storr on a sunny and chilly morning when touring the Isle of Skye. In local folklore, the standing stone formations are imagined to be an old man and his daughters. This is truly breathtaking scenic beauty. ”



LANDOUR, UTTARAKHAND

**Zenmay Jai Singh Negi**  
@zenmaynegi  
ZenmayJaiSinghNegi

“ The destination that I escape to when I think of travel is Landour, a place I have visited frequently for a very long time. What I love about this place is the peaceful atmosphere, especially when one takes long walks amid nature. Landour inspired me to take up photography; I started my hobby photography here and, ever since, it has kept me enraptured with its charm. ”



MCLEODGANJ,  
HIMACHAL PRADESH

**Pranshu Bansal**  
@snippet\_snap

“ I have never been more intrigued by a place than with McLeodganj, a small town in the mountains of Himachal Pradesh. Beginning the day by greeting Buddhist monks on the streets and joining them for morning prayers in the famous Dalai Lama Temple... Wandering through the market, sipping hot tea at a roadside stall, reading a book in a quaint little café... Getting adventurous, hiring a bike to go all the way to Bir Billing for a breathtaking, once-in-a-lifetime paragliding experience... These are just a handful of things that I experienced on my first trip. And, every time I go back, it surprises me with something new, and that's why McLeodganj holds a special place in my heart. ” →

PHOTOGRAPHS: BENNYWARTY (ISLE OF SKYE), AMIT KUSHWAH (LANDOUR) & AMJAN WATHUR (MCLEODGANJ), AIL 123RF



GOLD COAST, AUSTRALIA

**Kavita Churiwalla**  
@kavitachuriwalla kavita.churiwalla

“ Hanging out on a beach all day or grabbing a surfboard and hitting the waves – this is the epitome of my holiday dream. One of the places that could fulfil this dream was Gold Coast. Dreams do come true and mine did! When I woke up one morning, I was surprised with a pair of air tickets to Gold Coast – a gift from my dear husband for my 40th birthday! My dream destination was jam packed with goodies for a lover of the outdoors like me. We enjoyed seven days amid out-of-the-world beaches, rainforests, crystal-clear creeks, marine life and much more. The best of nature... all in one place. We went on a whale-watching tour and saw dolphins, stingrays, a dugong and more... We indulged in water sports like kayaking, paddle-boarding, jet-skiing, and boating. These experiences were unmatched, and make Gold Coast my happy place. ”



GULMARG, JAMMU & KASHMIR

**Rahul Mistry**  
@thecarabiner

“ Every year, my friends and I go to Kashmir to ski. Gulmarg offers you one of the best snow experiences around the world. There is a ski lift (gondola) till 14,500 feet, which is the second longest and second highest cable car in the world. This place never fails to surprise me, be it summer or winter. I have been going to Gulmarg for six years now, and I can't ever get enough. One can see the entire Karakoram range from the top of Mt Affarwat. How stunning is that, right? ”



SEGOVIA, SPAIN

**Harsha Singh**  
@harsha.s

“ A suitcase opens. Eduard reads the epitaph on the tombstone. The dead man opens his eyes; his face is blue, the colour the sky is missing today. Fairy-tale music fills the air. Eduard rises from his grave and steps out of the suitcase, with the help of the strings manoeuvred by his marionettist... “On a cold, rainy evening, in May, the inanimate have come to life in a quaint, medieval city. In Segovia, an hour north of Madrid, it's time for *Titirimundi*. Pegasus, seahorse and seaplane go round and round as the charming old carousel crafted in metal and leather turns at the foot of the looming aqueduct of Segovia (pictured). My gait changes to that of a happy little girl. It's a magical world: puppets are talking, riding bikes and even playing in a rock band. I am focused on resolving a perplexing Guixot de 8 puzzle, made from reclaimed metal pieces. “Time runs fast. It's dark. I sit down in Plaza Mayor, alongside other kids, to watch Eduard return to his grave. His suitcase snaps close, and so does my laptop, after a day of vicariously travelling to my wonderland. ” →

PHOTOGRAPHS: SIRRAI TASANASARTANON (GULMARG) & SEAN PAVONE (SEGOVIA), AIL 123RF





THE KONKAN COAST  
**Kiran Patil**  
@manukiran14

“When you live in the western part of Maharashtra, the Konkan Coast is the best escape from the hustle and bustle of the city. The four- to five-hour drive through enchanting *ghats* and under a canopy of green is a joy. Serene beaches, the cool breeze and the thundering sea relieve your exhaustion. I find watching the mesmerising play of the waves a meditation. Time slows even a bit more as you watch the sun set over the sea, painting the horizon with spectacular colours. And, just when you start returning from the beach thinking your day is done, Konkani food breathes new life into you. Nights at the homestays and morning walks on the beach and in the village allow you to feel more a part of the Konkan life.”



LADAKH, JAMMU & KASHMIR  
**Polemoni Vinay**  
@vinay\_polemoni

“It had always been a dream for me to visit Ladakh, and, when I got there, I found it even more beautiful than I had imagined it would be. In Ladakh, we felt no worries, tensions... There was a wonderful oneness with Mother Nature. No one should miss out on the beauty of Ladakh.”



FINNISH LAPLAND  
**Aaroohi Shah**  
@travel\_to\_awaken aaroohi12

“Finnish Lapland is a truly phenomenal corner of the world. Located at the northernmost tip of Continental Europe, this area is so special that I don't know where to start when singing its praises. The air is so clear, the water is sugary sweet, the sky sparkles with thousands of stars, and the snow-laden landscape seduces people into thinking this is paradise. It could well be!”



PHOTOGRAPHS: DINODIA (KONKAN BEACH); DANIEL (LADAKH) & ROMAN BABAKIN & SARA WINTER (FINNISH LAPLAND); ALL 123RF



ICELAND  
**Sindhu Govindarajan**  
@wandersin23

“I have travelled to over 25 countries in the last four years, but the 'happy place' I wander to, to seek solace from reality and to take refuge in unadulterated nostalgia, is the magical land of ice and fire, Iceland. I am not a religious person, but my time in this country in the winter, in February 2016, made me understand for the first time the difference between a religious experience and a spiritual one. It made me want to cry with joy and thank someone up there that I was deemed deserving of experiencing this country. The sights made me go weak at the knees and the people made me wish I could steal their spirit in this birth and be born an Icelander in the next. “I had the most unique and pristine experiences amid the magical and wild winter landscape of Iceland. From sitting on a floating iceberg in the Jokulsarlon lagoon, to exploring an incredibly blue ice cave underground, warming up under the Aurora Borealis in the freezing 2am night chill of South East Iceland, to soaking in a natural bath in Myvatn North Iceland under snowfall, every day, every moment, was magical. This particular photo (inset above) was clicked by my brother when I swear I saw elves peep out of this magical waterfall called Godafoss (pictured). “My nostalgia and love for Iceland continue unabated.”



ITALY  
**Neha D Dongre**  
@the\_map\_stalker

“June 2017 marked my first-ever international trip to Europe. I visited so many European cities like London, Paris, Amsterdam, Brussels, Zurich, Vaduz, Wattens and Vatican City, but, if I had a chance to head back, Italy would be top of my list to visit again. “I would love to experience the gondola ride in Venice, but solo this time. I would take more euros with me to take advantage of the affordable shopping. I would visit the magnificent and colourful town of Burano. I would escape back to the cheerful city of Rome, with its ancient Roman fountains, magnificent structures, bistros and street artists in the *piazas*, even its sunflower fields and vineyards... I truly miss strolling the streets near the Trevi Fountain, *gelato* in hand. Also on my list would be the lush green landscapes of Tuscany, and all those culinary experiences, even something as simple as a fresh cappuccino and the traditional margherita pizza. “Italy is my happy place, truly a happening country with a never-ending list of destinations to visit again!”

PHOTOGRAPHS: KOTENKO (ICELAND) & TATIANA GLADSKIKH & WATTILDA (ITALY); ALL 123RF





## SINGAPORE

**Maheshwari Vickyraraj**

@maheshwari\_raj95

“Singapore is my happy destination. I have been there twice. I feel it has such a natural vibe to it that one feels happy just strolling through the city. The MRT is so convenient, and that makes you feel right at home because you can almost *not* get lost.”

“I went during the holiday season last year, and got to see the country completely decked up like a Christmas tree, which lifted my mood right up.”

“Singapore is very special to me because it’s where I realised there is more to life, and we shouldn’t be living a frog-in-the-pond existence.”



## MOUNTAINS



**Sharvani Musandi**

@sharvani\_m

“I believe there’s magic in mountains. My photograph (*inset above*) was taken at Kodachadri, the second highest peak of Karnataka. We took a longer route to trek this mountain, which was almost 25 kilometres long and took five hours. At some point, I slipped and fell, I had no energy to take another step. My legs were trembling, my knees hurting, my feet cramping. I broke down and cried. But I didn’t stop, and, in the end, it was all worth the effort. The greenery, the calm breeze... it was so serene and peaceful that I felt alive again. Sometimes, we need to climb a little higher to find ourselves and happiness. It’s not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves!”



**Neha H Timande**

@stroll\_the\_world\_with\_neha

“Mountains are my happy place. The mountainous north of India is where you find the vibrant Himalayan range. These mountains feel so unreal, but they are real, a splendid example of India’s unique topography. The mountains crown the magnificent beauty of our country. Every year, I make a trip to Leh-Ladakh, which changes me and my perspective on life in every possible way. Each year, I rediscover nature and myself. Nature heals and gives you and your life a new perspective. The mountains are where I am continually reborn.”

PHOTOGRAPHS: SERGIO DELLE VEDOVE (SINGAPORE), & PIST KHAMBUBPHA (MOUNTAIN), ALL 123RF



## SIKKIM

**Vijendra Singh**

@vijendras

“When it comes to travel, my family and I really love the mountains. It had been a childhood dream of mine to visit Sikkim, and we really loved it! Starting from the journey between Bagdogra to Gangtok, the stay near the main city, the visit to the many monasteries, the shopping on the famous MG Road... we liked everything. And we cannot fail to mention the humble and friendly locals who made the journey even more beautiful.”



**UTTARAKHAND**  
**Kunjal Karaniya Ganger**

@karaniyakunjal

Kunjal.Karaniya

“Uttarakhand makes me happy every time. There’s something about this place. Getting lost amid the mountains, rivers and nature is pure bliss! I travelled across the Kumaon region a few years ago, and my last trip before lockdown in February 2020 was through the Garhwal region; I explored the banks of the beautiful Ganga at Haridwar and Rishikesh (*above*) along with enjoying the winter line in Mussoorie. That trip was a perfect mix of the spiritual, natural and the adventurous! I love Uttarakhand so much that I wish to build my holiday home there soon!”

## NATURE

**Kshitij Tiwari**

@rustic\_wanderer

RusticWanderer

“When I think of travel, it’s not a physical location or destination that comes to mind; it’s more a place that gives me access to raw, untouched nature. I have hiked mountains like Mt Fuji, trekked forests like the Black Forest and gorges like the highly-underrated Samaria Gorge in Greece, and absolutely adore the colours of autumn. Recently, I was in Malta and I swam in the Mediterranean – that was quite awesome too. So, in short, it’s nature, and not the location itself that makes me happy. I don’t want to pick between mountains and oceans; if it were up to me, I would take them both; I do love a refreshing swim after a tough hike.”



PHOTOGRAPHS: PAVEL SIPACHEV (SIKKIM), TATIANA CHEKRYGINA (RISHIKESH) & ALIUSANDR SICHABINA (NATURE), ALL 123RF





SEOUL,  
SOUTH KOREA

Mitul Kansal  
@mitulkansal

“N Seoul Tower, also called Namsan Tower, in Seoul, South Korea, is my favourite destination, since I visited two years ago. You get a great view over Seoul from the top, and the stores are great for souvenirs. This amazing place is the number one reason I want to go back to Seoul. Since opening to the public in 1980, the tower has become a much-loved city landmark. Seoul has a number of viewing platforms from where visitors can enjoy the nighttime cityscape or gaze out onto the Han River, but the tower’s Digital Observatory is unique, offering an astonishing 360° panorama over the city, and 32 LCD screens recounting the 600-year history of Seoul. The Roof Terrace is a spacious wooden viewing deck that is very popular with lovers. Several years ago, a TV programme’s main characters visited the terrace and attached two padlocks to the fence as a symbol of their undying love. Today, tens of thousands of love locks can be found hanging around the terrace. These can be bought from the souvenir shop, though some couples bring their own with them. I left my heart at Seoul Tower.”



KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

J Arun Prakash  
@apjp

“When it comes to travel, my happy place is Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in the heart of South East Asia. It’s a city I consider a home away from home; you don’t miss friendly Indian faces or food here. To me, this global city reflects the image of a developed India. I love the beautiful cityscapes, paired so well with the abundance of nature; where else can you do a jungle walk among tall trees in the world’s only thriving rainforest located in the middle of the city? “The city has so much to offer in terms of culture, parks, recreation, malls, shopping and food destinations, all connected seamlessly by the MRT and monorail system that takes you throughout this city. The food culture doesn’t just reside in the umpteen food courts in malls; the street food scene is so vibrant it extends beyond the city. My morning runs in the natural shade of the KLCC Park (pictured) definitely help me burn all the calories added by the delicious food I devour. Now all I wish and pray for is that international travel can be resumed for me to plan another visit to explore KL, along with Penang this time.”

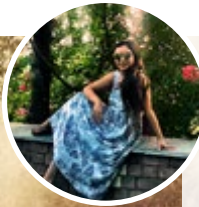


LAS VEGAS, THE USA

Kapil Kumar  
@kapilricky

“When it comes to Las Vegas, two things come to mind: casinos and the Strip. Inspired by an interesting blog post about a road trip to Death Valley, I decided to explore further afield. I picked up the Ford Mustang convertible from the airport, and we set off at 8am, late considering you have to drive 550km to get there. It took us three hours from Las Vegas to our first stop, Badwater Basin, with the best landscape along the route. All stops in Death Valley offer free parking and toilets. We spent an hour at Badwater Basin, before the 30-minute drive to Devil’s Golf Course, where we took 15 minutes to shoot photos and videos. Our third stop was the Golden Canyon, which you need some serious energy to explore. It has a walking trail of almost two kilometres with colourful rock formations and spooky locations. A 15-minute drive on got us to Zabriskie’s Point (pictured); the different terrains and colours will make you fall in love with this place. We spent 30 minutes admiring the landscape before heading back to Las Vegas, a two-hour drive away from this stop. Although we missed the Rhyolite Ghost Town, Artists Palette, Dante’s View, and the sand dunes, I feel great satisfaction that we were able to drive through the vast expanses of Death Valley. That is my happy place.”

PHOTOGRAPHS: ALEXEY PEIKH (KUALA LUMPUR); ANEK SUJANNAPHOON (SEOUL); MARTIN MOICAN (DEATH VALLEY); ALL 123RF



KASAULI, HIMACHAL PRADESH

Dr Deepti Singh Gupta  
@globalpitara

“I fell in love on the road to Kasauli. The balmy weather, the rolling hills, the picture-postcard locations with innumerable hiking trails, vivid flowers nodding their dainty little heads as the breeze gently caressed their cheeks, the colours exploding in all their glory and the tranquillity broken only by the chirping of birds and buzzing of pesky insects flitting from flower to flower – all these contributed to my love. “I have been to Kasauli many times since that first tryst. Each time has been special. Conversations fly over spoonfuls of *pahadi* chicken and roasted cumin baby potatoes; tea and toddy warm musical bonfire nights, and the air is always thick with the scent of pinewood. Endless kaleidoscopic vistas await in Kasauli. The place beckons you, charms you with its quaint looks, seduces you with its cozy comforts.”

HONOLULU, HAWAII

Aeshwarya Chaturvedi  
@dsrlrbunny



“Honolulu is your typical island getaway, but with the hustle and bustle of a city and lots of history thrown in for good measure. There is something for everyone on this island. You can hike in the mountains, dive into the ocean, browse through WWII history, or surf the waves while having tropical fruits and *poke* bowls. The rich marine life and clear blue waters around Hawaii make it a perfect spot for scuba diving. On my first scuba dive, I swam with turtles who reminded me of Crush from *Finding Nemo*. They mirror the island life with their laid-back attitude and penchant for water-based activities. To immerse yourself into the rich culture and history of the islands, there is the Bishop Museum, Pearl Harbour National Memorial, and Honolulu Museum of Art. And, don’t forget to shop for vibrant Hawaiian shirts and learn the hula dance. Honolulu is a true paradise.”



CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA

Anita Fernandes  
@anitafernandes10

“During this lockdown, my mind has been wandering off to the different places I’ve travelled to, but it invariably dwells on the fantastic memories of my trip to Cape Town in 2013. There’s no better way to travel than to see a place through the eyes of someone ‘local’. When my close friends Jotika and Andrew invited me to visit them in Cape Town, I didn’t hesitate as I knew that it would be a special trip. “Cape Town has everything one could wish for in a city, and a lot more – majestic mountains, breathtaking views, pristine beaches, beautiful botanical gardens, a vibrant culture with Dutch and British influences, penguins, excellent food and wine (of course!) and unpredictable and windy weather. Every day in windy Cape Town was a ‘bad hair day’ but I didn’t mind one bit. “Over a period of 12 days, I visited the Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens, Table Mountain, Camp’s Bay, Cape Point, Boulder’s Bay (to see penguins), Elgin for a wine-tasting, Hout Bay, Betty’s Bay where I saw dolphins, a farmer’s market at the Old Biscuit Mill, and enjoyed a leisurely evening on the V&A Waterfront. We even managed to squeeze in an overnight trip to Hermanus for some spectacular whale-watching! “My memories of my days in Cape Town with my friends are incredibly joyful ones and that’s why Cape Town is my ‘happy place’.”



ALL VIEWS ARE THE AUTHORS’ OWN. LPMI CANNOT BE HELD LIABLE FOR ANY MISHAPS ARISING THEREOF. PHOTOGRAPHS: SCORPIO IMAGES (KASUALI); SHANE MYERS (HONOLULU) & AFRAM & CAIARE FOCCHIO (CAPE TOWN); ALL 123RF



# The pursuit of happiness

A quest that starts at rush hour in the Finnish capital, **Helsinki**...

WORDS AMANDA CANNING [@amandacanning](#) PHOTOGRAPHS JONATHAN STOKES [@jonathanstokesphoto](#)

If you would like to feel the pangs of instant lifestyle envy, simply hang around the waterfront in Helsinki for an hour on a Monday morning. People head to work or take their children to nursery on bikes, gliding through streets empty but for the cheerful yellow-and-green trams that rattle along them. Hardy swimmers complete pre-work laps of the Allas Sea Pool as the day's first ferry from Suomenlinna Fortress chugs into the harbour behind them, its passengers ambling off to the city's offices and coffee shops. No one seems to be in a hurry. I compare this to my own frantic, wild-eyed Monday commute and make a mental note to make more effort to enjoy the start of the week. It's just one lesson to take from the Finns, a people who have nailed the nebulous concept of happiness so completely that Finland frequently tops 'the world's happiest' polls. For a fuller education, I meet up with four locals and ask them to spill the beans.

Quayside red-brick buildings in front of the Uspenski Cathedral on the Katajanokka peninsula





# THE BIKE GUIDE

LESSON: EMBRACE LIFE'S CONTRASTS

It's hard to imagine that Riku Nurminen ever feels glum, or even just slightly mediocre. For the last half hour, we've been cycling through Helsinki, and he hasn't stopped smiling, or talking. "I love this," he shouts over his shoulder, "meeting people, riding my bike, enjoying the short summer and seeing my city."

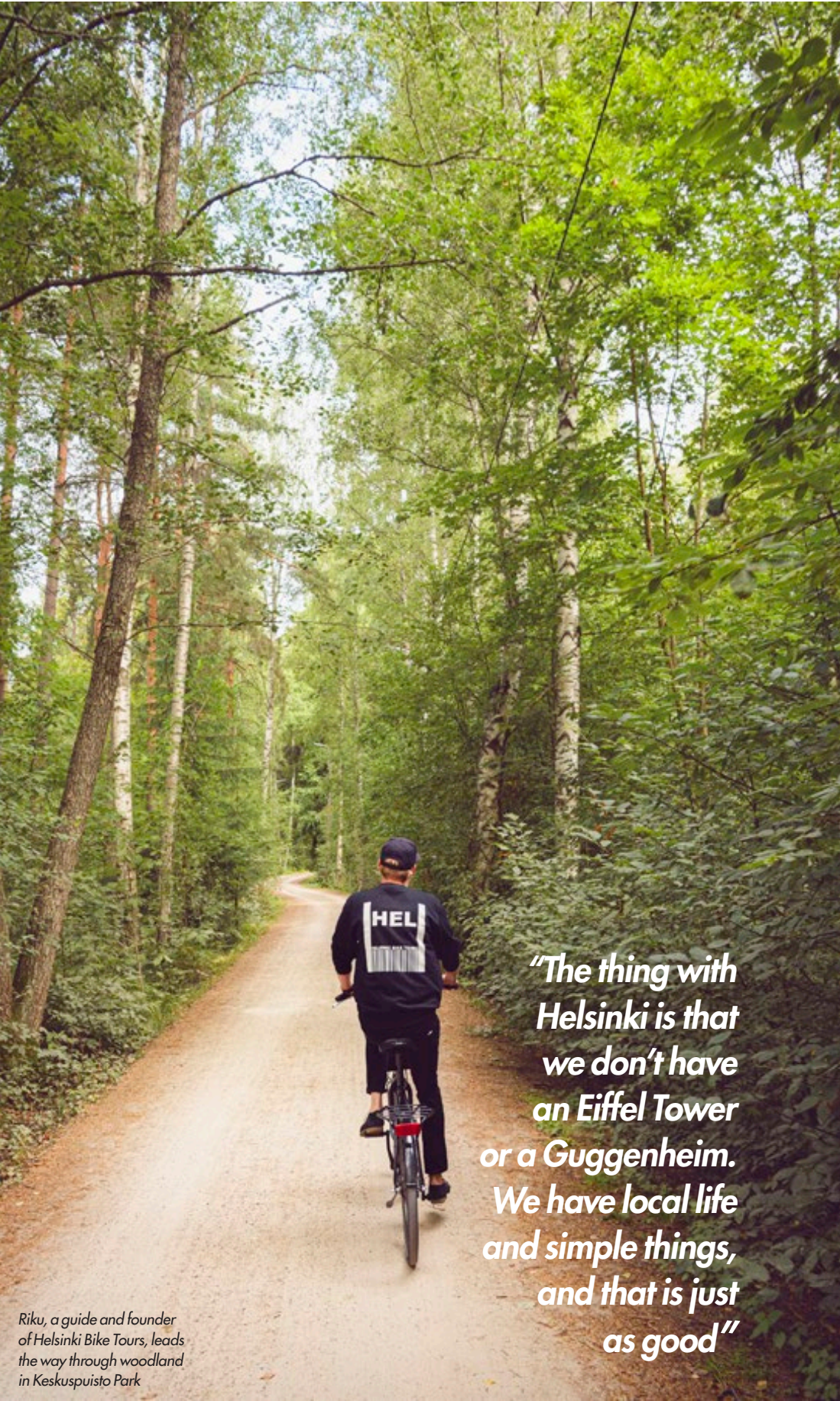
Riku founded **Helsinki Bike Tours** in 2014 and – when not working as a hotel concierge, opera performer or sports massage therapist – shows his hometown to guests that have included Bill Gates, former Finnish presidents and the Chinese Olympic snowboarding team, circling through topics as diverse as Russian history, the music of Sibelius, and the invention of Angry Birds as he goes.

On single-speed Helsinki-made Jopo bikes ("the most sold and stolen bikes in Finland"), we pedal along quiet cycle lanes, swerving only to circumnavigate a stray goose as we skirt **Töölö Bay**. Having taken in the underground art gallery **Amos Rex** – the lumps and bumps of its roof drawing skateboarders and selfie-takers in equal measure – we head out to Riku's favourite bit of Helsinki: **Keskuspuisto**. "We don't make a lot of noise about this place," says Riku as we enter the park, swooping beneath a canopy of spruce. "But it's pretty unique to have a forest right inside the city. You cannot believe we're still in Helsinki."

We glide along shaded paths lined with bracken and silver birch trees, enjoying the pine-scented air with joggers, dog walkers and power-walkers. "It's extreme here, so you enjoy the contrasts," Riku explains as we pass a cluster of tiny, unaccompanied children taking a rabbit for a walk on a lead. "You really appreciate the summer if you've spent six months indoors watching Netflix. No one leaves Finland now," he says. "It's daylight all the time and there's too much to enjoy."

Before heading back into town, we stop for blueberry cake and cartons of birch water in a clearing given over to allotments. Around us, people diligently tend to their redcurrants, gooseberries and runner beans in the sunshine. "As you can see, nature is important to everyone in Finland, and it's available to everyone," says Riku. "If you are rich or you are poor, you enjoy it just the same."

[www.heltours.com](http://www.heltours.com); bike tours from ₹5,500



Riku, a guide and founder of Helsinki Bike Tours, leads the way through woodland in Keskuspuisto Park

*"The thing with Helsinki is that we don't have an Eiffel Tower or a Guggenheim. We have local life and simple things, and that is just as good"*



1. Juho and Romany are the owners of Chapter restaurant  
2. The Havis Amanda statue in Market Square

## THE RESTAURATEURS

LESSON: TRY SOMETHING NEW

"Helsinki is at the start of becoming something very big," says Romany Ekegren, sitting down with a cup of coffee. "People here are open-minded and not afraid to try new things. Stores, bars and restaurants are opening all the time, and the city is very supportive – it's pretty epic!"

Romany and husband Juho should know. Three years ago, at the ripe old age of 24, they opened their first restaurant together. "We're crazy young," says Romany with a laugh, "but I think you should embrace being young and having so many ideas in your head that you can't contain them."

**Chapter** restaurant occupies one of Helsinki's oldest stone buildings. The windows on the saffron-coloured façade point straight to the city's wedding-cake Lutheran cathedral, while those at the back look onto a festoon-lit courtyard. Each of the rooms has a different mood – some light-filled and plant-strewn, others dark and cocooning. Romany and Juho

designed the interior themselves, filling the space with photographic prints from friends, crockery and glassware from grandparents, and books and magazines from flea markets.

It is a place to while away whole evenings, and many diners do, coming early for a cocktail at the bar and staying until closing time. "If you're comfortable and happy, you don't want to move," says Romany. "We want people to enjoy dinner at their own pace."

The reason to stay is the frequently-changing five-course menu that contains ingredients I've not ever heard of in combinations I hadn't imagined: sourdough made with fermented beetroot, served with meadowsweet and tomato tea; Arctic char with grilled gooseberries; lamb sweetbread with black garlic and pak choy. A lot of the produce comes from a small biodynamic farm that the couple has shares in, or from their own garden. "We're not 100 per cent Finnish, or local, or organic," says chef Juho, "but that's

the direction we're heading in." The dishes are served by the cooks straight from the kitchen, each spending time chatting with the diners and answering any questions about the food on the plate. "Most ideas for a dish start with a single ingredient," says Juho, tweezering delicate flowers onto a plate of tightly-swirled leeks. "Every time I go into the countryside, I come back so inspired by my time in the forest or just by a mushroom I found. I can have it on the menu straight away – it's exciting that we can change things like that."

It's an approach that's struck a chord in Helsinki: Chapter won best new restaurant in Finland in 2018 and its tables are fully booked every night. "Some people don't understand what we do here," says Romany, getting ready to shut up shop for the day. "They just want potatoes and meatballs, and that's fine. But the culture is changing – and it's changing for good." →

[www.chapter.fi](http://www.chapter.fi); five-course menu from ₹3,700



**“We’re not in competition with the restaurants that serve reindeer steaks. We’re friends because we’re all here for the same reason: to show the best we can on the plate”**

A glazed courgette ‘flower’, summer peas, pea emulsion and a sauce of white asparagus and pea pod oil, with edible flowers at Chapter

### 3 THE SAUNA OWNER

**LESSON:** CLEANSE BODY AND SOUL

It’s a hot day in Helsinki. On the roof terrace of Löyly, young Finns sit on beanbags, beer in hand, sunglasses on, chatting with their friends and watching the sailing and cargo ships out at sea. Beneath them, the pine- and glass-clad restaurant hums, families and friends sitting down to bowls of salmon soup and glasses of wine. Jasper Pääkkönen weaves amongst them, and all eyes in the room swivel his way. Most well known outside of Finland for his parts in the TV series *Vikings* and the Spike Lee

film *BlacKkKlansman*, Jasper has many more strings to his bow in his native city, not least among them his role in bringing the public sauna bang into the 21st century. “Helsinki used to have a very lively public sauna culture before private plumbing was common,” he says as we wander outside to the deck. “There were over 100 in the city, but, 10 years ago, there were only a couple left.” When the opportunity arose to buy a derelict bit of land on a rocky bay and build a public sauna, he and his former business partner →

Löyly’s terrace is the perfect place to catch the last rays of sunshine



didn't hesitate. "The idea was crazy, but we were naïve and ambitious enough to try it!" he says with a laugh. "Fifteen of the construction companies we contacted said it couldn't be done. The 16th said yes."

The result is a striking, angular building that sits like a pale wooden iceberg on the waterfront. It has quickly become a landmark in the city, and that derelict patch of land is fast becoming home to new bars and restaurants. "Our aim was to build this stand-out architecture and to combine it with part of the culture that's heart-and-soul Finnish," says Jasper as we watch a couple gingerly climb down metal steps and into the cold water of the Baltic Sea. "Finnish people in general are quite quiet and reserved, but, when you go into a sauna, everything changes. Everyone starts talking to each other. It's a very deep connection here. We're at our most comfortable in the sauna."

His earliest and fondest memories are of the rituals of the sauna: lighting the wood with his father; listening to the hiss of steam as water hit the rocks; breathing in the warm smoke. "I compare it to church. For the average churchgoer, the silence and the purity is important. Finland is very secular, so we get that from the sauna. It's mental cleansing." Scientific research has also revealed the medical benefits, with a daily sauna and cold-water plunge shown to reduce blood pressure and the risk of heart attacks and dementia in some studies. "We've always instinctively known it's very good for you," says Jasper. "In these days of wellness, we have something ancient that is proven to be healthy."

I don't need more convincing to try it myself. My eyes take a while to grow accustomed to the dark of the smoke sauna and to spy an empty place on the benches ringing the room. When a fellow occupant pours water on to the hot rocks, the heat that rushes towards me is tangible. It's difficult to breathe. When I'm quite certain my eyeballs and lungs are melting, I waddle outside to the water and plunge in. The temperature is wince-inducingly icy at first, but quickly warms up to merely cold. In that moment, I am hooked – there's nothing for it but to join the Finns and do it all over again.

[www.loyllyhelsinki.fi](http://www.loyllyhelsinki.fi); two-hour sauna session from ₹1,500



1. Jasper Pääkkönen outside his sauna, Löyly  
2. Helsinki residents enjoy the rituals of the sauna



## 4 THE DESIGNER

LESSON: BE CREATIVE

In **Kaapelitehdas**, the elegant Art Nouveau buildings and broad streets that are a mark of so much of the city centre are replaced by imposing warehouses set around courtyards. Hidden within the complex are galleries and kung-fu workshops, bookshops and dance studios, a radio station and a cinema. And on the fifth floor of **Waterhouse B** is Helena Mattila, and Helena Mattila's laugh.

It soon becomes apparent that Helena does not stop laughing. She laughs when she shows me around her design studio, and when she talks about her childhood. She laughs when she shows me sketches of products she's creating, and when she reminisces about her previous life as a lawyer. "When you're happy, you laugh a lot," she says, laughing. "Maybe, as a child, I was dropped in a happy pool!"

She has run **Everyday Design** from the complex for the last 11 years, working on prototypes at a desk stacked with tubs

of paintbrushes, pencils and scissors. Large metal windows at the back of the studio look out over the courtyard and, if you lean out slightly, the sea. The room is filled with shelves, and the shelves are filled with suitcases and folders, sample materials and finished products. "Marketing says 'buy this and you will be happy', but, when I was a child, we made these toys, just pinecones with little legs, and we were happy," says Helena. "We didn't need branding, we just had good products or bad products. Now I want to make good products that last a long time and help people with their lives."

The designs range from the highly practical (metal wall-hooks, plywood mirrors, storage trolleys) to the whimsical (house-shaped candle-holders, and an artificial snowball that crunches in the hand like snow). All are made locally, using recycled materials wherever possible. Her most popular design is one of beautiful simplicity – a recycled



metal bag-holder, used to stow laundry, recycling, toys and groceries. "I don't do products that are only beautiful or only functional. If they are not beautiful, people don't use them."

The approach clearly resonates far beyond Helsinki, with international design awards flying Helena's way, and her products being displayed in London's Design Museum and MoMA in New York. "If you want to be creative, you have to be kind of a child and get excited by small things," she says, pulling a suitcase off a shelf and opening it to reveal a felt Christmas decoration, a wicker ball and an antique dish-washing brush. "Everything I own brings me joy."

As the final subject in my investigation into happiness in the capital of the world's happiest country, Helena seems well placed to definitively answer the question: 'what is the secret to a happy life?' After a short pause to reflect, she says, "People think that money, reputation and fancy houses make you happy, but then you compare to others and you always want more. In Finland, we live a good, simple life influenced by nature. That is enough."

Wisdom absorbed, I descend back to the courtyard and stop for a moment to enjoy the warm sun on my face and the vague tang of salt carried on the air. If I listen very carefully, I'm fairly sure I can still hear laughter. ☺

[www.everydaydesign.fi](http://www.everydaydesign.fi); paper bag holder ₹3,400



AMANDA CANNING visited with support from the Helsinki and Finnish tourist boards. She now wants to move to Helsinki.



Essentials

We accept that travel to Helsinki is not advised at present; we hope that this information will prove useful again once restrictions are lifted.

GETTING THERE

Lufthansa, British Airways and Turkish Airlines, among others, fly from all major Indian cities to Helsinki (return fares from ₹45,190).

GETTING AROUND

With a flat inner city and well-marked cycling paths, Helsinki is ideal for cycling. Rent a bicycle from **Bicycleclean Helsinki** ([www.bicyclecleanhelsinki.com](http://www.bicyclecleanhelsinki.com)).

VISA

Indians visiting Finland will require a Schengen visa. It usually takes around 20 to 30 days to process and costs around ₹6,300 ([www.vfsglobal.com](http://www.vfsglobal.com)).

EMBASSY ALERT

Embassy of India, Finland and Estonia: [www.indembhelsinki.gov.in](http://www.indembhelsinki.gov.in)

CURRENCY

1€ = ₹ 83.97

VEG OUT

**Samrat Indian Restaurant** is well-known for its delicious Indian food (00-358-96-110-01; [www.samrat.fi/fi/](http://www.samrat.fi/fi/); Eteläesplanadi 22C, 00130).

FURTHER INFO

Pick up a copy of Lonely Planet's *Pocket Helsinki* guide (₹750). For information you could also visit the tourist board's official website [www.myhelsinki.fi](http://www.myhelsinki.fi).



MAP KEY

- 1 Allas Sea Pool
- 2 Basbas & Staff
- 3 Chapter
- 4 Helsinki Cathedral

- 5 Helsinki Swimming Stadium
- 6 Kaapelitehdas
- 7 Kauppahalli
- 8 Keskuspuisto

- 9 Löyly
- 10 Temppeliaukio Rock Church
- 11 Töölö Bay
- 12 Uspenski Cathedral

SLEEPING

- 13 Hostel Suomenlinna
- 14 Hotel St George
- 15 Hotelli Helka



Reindeer products for sale at a stall in the Old Market Hall

WHERE TO EAT

To sample traditional Finnish specialties such as reindeer, local cheeses, smoked ham and rye bread, head to **Kauppahalli**, the Old Market Hall, by the sea ([www.vanhakauppahalli.fi](http://www.vanhakauppahalli.fi)). Twenty five traders operate out of the beautiful brick-and-glass building, open since 1889. For a sit-down meal in the market, try **Story**, with dishes ranging from veggie burgers and soups to pork cheek. It also does a decent brunch on the weekend. It gets busy – you might need to loiter for a table ([www.story-restaurants.fi](http://www.story-restaurants.fi)).

WHERE TO STAY

The **Hotel St George** occupies a grand 19th-century building that has housed both the Finnish Literature Society and a printing house in the past. There are 148 rooms and five suites on offer here, each decorated in muted tones, and with blonde parquet flooring, L:A Bruket toiletries, local artwork and classic, bespoke furniture as standard – if you're keen on the latter, you can buy your own at the **Finnish Design Shop**. The hotel is big on providing local tips, with its own newspaper, *St George Journal*, providing plenty

of ideas for guests. There's also a bakery, bar and a restaurant serving the intriguing combination of 'Nordic-Anatolian' food ([www.stgeorgehelsinki.com](http://www.stgeorgehelsinki.com); rooms from ₹18,500).

**Hotelli Helka** is one of Helsinki's best mid-range hotels, with friendly staff, Alvar Aalto-designed furniture, and excellent facilities, including saunas and a rooftop terrace ([www.hotelhelka.com](http://www.hotelhelka.com); from ₹9,250).

A brilliant alternative to staying in central Helsinki is to lodge at the **Hostel Suomenlinna** on Suomenlinna island. Once a Russian primary school, then a barracks, the red-brick building's dorms occupy bright, high-ceilinged classrooms, with cosy private rooms available upstairs ([www.hostelhelsinki.fi](http://www.hostelhelsinki.fi); double room from ₹5,550).

LOCAL TIPS FOR A HAPPY VISIT

RIKU NURMINEN, HELSINKI BIKE TOURS

"Go to the outdoor swimming stadium, which was used in the 1952 Olympics. The Functionalist-style stadium is legendary. Every morning, Helsinki queue up – they want to be among the first to jump into the water. You can feel the atmosphere of the Olympics." ([www.myhelsinki.fi](http://www.myhelsinki.fi))

ROMANY EKEGREN, CHAPTER

"Eat and drink a lot, of course! **Basbas & Staff** has a restaurant upstairs and a wine bar downstairs, and it's so relaxed: you can go with your kids, your dog, your cat. You sit down and have great wines and super-comfort food. Way is a similar style – nice wine, nice staff." ([www.basbas.fi](http://www.basbas.fi); [www.waybakeryandwinebar.fi](http://www.waybakeryandwinebar.fi))

JASPER PÄÄKKÖNEN, LÖYL

"Take the ferry and venture out to the little islands surrounding the city and wander around. Suomenlinna is the easy one to see, and it has a nice combination of history, walks and cafés. The smaller ones are good for nature." ([www.visitfinland.com/article/escape-to-the-helsinki-islands](http://www.visitfinland.com/article/escape-to-the-helsinki-islands))

HELENA MATTILA, EVERYDAY DESIGN

"Go and have a look or participate in a concert at **Temppeliaukio Rock Church**. It's close to nature and is so unique, it really doesn't feel manmade. The church gives you the idea that you are just one small part of a long chain: you are not on your own. In this hectic world, it's a place that gives you an idea of eternity." ([www.temppeliaukionkirkko.fi](http://www.temppeliaukionkirkko.fi))



The Allas Sea Pool





# Desserts go *Desi*

Escape to happier times  
on a sweet note,  
with international desserts  
given an Indian tweak —  
and, as a bonus, an Indian  
fave given a Gallic twist





**RACHEL GOENKA**  
Rachel is the CEO and founder  
of The Chocolate Spoon Company  
@rachelgoenka | @RachelGoenka

“Tea cakes are extremely popular all around the world. England is famous for its Victoria sponge and Battenberg tea cakes, Australia for lamingtons, Scotland for its Dundee cake, and India for its *mawa* cake. This particular recipe marries the familiarity of a traditional tea cake with the flavours of India. The brown butter adds a rather nutty flavour profile, while the rose gives this cake its floral notes. *Chai* is synonymous with India and, in some regions, tea is flavoured with nuts and roses, particularly the colder regions of India. This cake is one of those delicate tea-time accompaniments that is light to eat yet bursting with flavour!”

## Brown Butter, Rose & Chai Cake

*This cake looks stunning garnished with dried rose buds or even sugared flowers.*

**SERVES: 10**

**Ingredients**

**For the cake:**

- 2½ tbsp black tea leaves
- 165ml milk
- 228g flour
- ¼ tsp baking powder
- 1 tsp baking soda
- 1 tsp salt
- ½ tsp cardamom powder
- 160g yoghurt
- 200g castor sugar
- 130ml oil
- 1 tsp rose water

**For the glaze:**

- 180g icing sugar
- ½ tsp cardamom powder
- 60g unsalted butter
- 2ml rose essence
- 2 tbsp milk

**Method**

1. Preheat the oven to 170°C. Line and grease a 8.5x4.5 loaf pan.
2. Brew the tea with 165ml milk first. Bring it to a boil, remove from the heat, and keep it covered for three to four minutes to allow the tea to steep. Strain through a fine mesh sieve and bring the milk tea to room temperature before using. You need two-third cup of tea.

3. Sift together the flour, baking powder, baking soda, salt and cardamom powder together and set aside.
4. In a large mixing bowl, whisk the yoghurt and sugar for a few minutes. Add the oil and rose water and whisk for another few minutes until the mixture is creamy.
5. Add the sifted dry ingredients and the milk tea to the batter. Gently fold in the dry ingredients with a spatula. Pour into the greased loaf tin and bake for 35 to 40 minutes.
6. While the cake bakes, make the glaze: sift the icing sugar and cardamom powder together and set aside.
7. Cook the butter in a saucepan over a low flame for five to eight minutes until it browns. Be careful not to burn it. Strain the browned butter to remove any impurities.
8. Add the icing sugar, a little at a time, and whisk to combine. Add a few teaspoons of milk and rose essence to thin the glaze, so it's a pourable consistency.
9. Remove the tea cake from the oven and allow it to cool completely on a wire rack. Carefully run a knife around the edge of the pan to loosen before unmoulding.
10. Once the cake is completely cooled, drizzle the glaze on top.



**SHIVESH BHATIA**

Shivesh is a food blogger, author and food stylist, who, eight years ago, took the world of desserts by storm at 16 @shivesh17 | @bakewithshivesh

“A French dessert, a *madeleine* is traditionally a small cake prepared in a shell-like mould (*dariole*). This beautifully-textured sponge cake variation originated in the Lorraine region of northeastern France. The basic recipe is similar to that of a Genoise sponge, but, somehow, it's lighter and fluffier when baked. The French have perfected their desserts and are so peculiar about them that people are somewhat scared to change or mess with the recipe, but I'm curious; I wanted to Indianise it. What could be better than saffron in this case? Saffron is a staple in so many Indian *mithais*. This match was made in heaven, and in my kitchen!” →



## Saffron-infused Eggless Madeleines

*Dip these madeleines in melted chocolate and sprinkle with pistachio shavings.*

**MAKES: 12**

**Ingredients**

- ½ cup butter + extra to grease madeleine mould
- 1 tbsp honey
- ½ tsp saffron
- 1 cup flour
- ½ tsp baking powder
- 1 tbsp flax seed powder
- 2 tbsp water
- ½ cup castor sugar
- 6 tbsp milk
- 1 tsp vanilla extract

**Method**

1. Preheat the oven at 180° C and grease your *madeleine* pan well with butter.
2. In a saucepan, melt the butter with the honey on a medium-low flame. Once fully combined, turn off the flame, and add the saffron to the honey-butter mixture. Set aside.
3. In a bowl, whisk together the flour and baking powder. Set aside.
4. In another bowl, mix the flax seed powder with the water and let the mixture rest for five minutes.
5. Once the flax seed mixture has rested, add the castor sugar to it and beat with a hand- or stand-mixer until pale and fluffy.
6. Gently fold the flour mixture into the flax seed and sugar mixture using a spatula. Alternate the flour mixture with the milk, and fold in gently.
7. Once the flour is mixed in, gradually add the butter and honey mixture and mix until well combined.
8. Add the vanilla extract and mix.
9. Transfer the batter to a piping bag and pipe it into the prepared *madeleine* pan.
10. Bake at 180° C for 12 to 15 minutes or until golden brown.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY RACHEL GOENKA

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY SHIVESH BHATIA





**HEENA PUNWANI**  
Heena is Pastry Chef at O Pedro, Mumbai  
@opedromumbai

“The idea for this dessert was to highlight all the beautiful, seasonal Indian summer produce. Inspired by the markets of Mapusa, the dessert consists of a mix of ripe seasonal summer fruits (mango, *tadgola*, tender coconut, litchi, candied water chestnut). While the ingredients are completely local, we showcase them using international techniques. The techniques used to prep the water chestnuts and a chilled coconut milk soup have East Asian influences.”

## Chilled Summer Fruit Sundae

This sundae lets summer fruit and flavours shine.

**SERVES: TWO**

**Ingredients**

Ripe summer fruit: mango, litchi, tender coconut, peach, plum, muskmelon, etc, chopped  
Summer ice cream flavours: mango, coconut, pineapple, mint, etc  
Toasted pistachios, to garnish

**For the coconut milk mix:**

1 cup coconut milk  
1/3 cup water  
1/2 cup castor sugar  
1/2 tbsp arrowroot powder (sifted)

**For the water chestnut rubies:**

1/2 cup water  
1/2 cup castor sugar  
200g water chestnuts (peeled)  
A few drops of red food colouring gel  
1/2 cup tapioca starch

**Method**

- 1.** To prepare the coconut milk mix, combine all the ingredients in a saucepan and cook over a medium-low flame, whisking constantly, until thickened like a sauce. Chill completely in the refrigerator.
- 2.** To prepare the water chestnut

rubies, make a simple syrup by heating the water and sugar together until the sugar dissolves and the mixture thickens to a thin syrup consistency. Cool to room temperature. Toss the peeled water chestnuts with the food colouring until ruby red in colour. Place the tapioca starch in a large bowl. Toss the coloured water chestnuts in the tapioca starch, then place in a strainer and shake so that any excess starch falls off (the water chestnuts should only be lightly coated in starch). Bring water to boil in a large saucepan. Drop the coated water chestnuts into the boiling water. Strain them out as soon as they float up (10 to 20 seconds). Place them in the prepared simple syrup and store refrigerated.

**3.** To assemble, strain the water chestnut rubies from the syrup. Mix together the chopped ripe fruits and top with the water chestnut rubies. Top with summer ice cream. Pour the chilled coconut milk over. Garnish with the toasted pistachios.



**CHEF SANJANA PATEL**  
Sanjana is Co-Founder, Creative Director and Executive Chef, La Folie  
@chefsanjana @theclassroombylafolie

“Everyone loves *kheer*; it’s a perfect dessert for summer. It’s also a family staple in many households across Indian states and a festive favourite. *Kheer* is also prepared as a common after-meal dessert. I wanted to give a western twist to this traditional dish. Inspired by the French pastry ‘*riz au lait*’, I prepared a bite-size verrine glass dessert that looks modern and has a wow factor, but with traditional flavours. It comes off as familiar to our Indian palate, making it a hit for people of all age groups. It’s also very easy to make. Although *kheer* is served at room temperature, I wanted to serve this cold since it’s a mousse-based recipe with an extremely creamy texture. To top it up, because French desserts always have an almond vanilla *tuile* or *nougatine* as a cracker, I thought of pistachios and cardamom being traditional to our culture. I added a *tuile* as a crunch element, which is reminiscent of the Indian-inspired crispy *nougatine* we know as *chikki*.”



## Kheer mousse with saffron orange blossom water and a caramelised pistachio

This is an interesting spin on an Indian dessert staple that we know so well.

**SERVES: FOUR**

**Ingredients**

300g whipping cream  
20g sugar  
4g agar agar  
2 to 4 saffron strands  
300g readymade *kheer*  
40g chopped toasted almonds  
40g chopped pistachio  
15g chopped cashews  
1g cardamom powder  
30ml orange blossom water (optional)

**For the pistachio tuile:**

52g milk  
100g butter  
52g glucose  
128g sugar  
3g jam pectin  
25g all-purpose flour  
144g lightly toasted almonds and pistachios chopped

**Method**

- 1.** Warm the cream in a saucepan. When it starts to simmer-boil, add the sugar and agar agar. Whisk continuously until the cream thickens. Blend this cream base with a hand blender. Add the saffron strands, pour into a bowl and allow to cool in the fridge. Once cold, whip up the agar agar cream base with a whisk until light and fluffy.
- 2.** Fold the whipped cream into the *kheer*, add the chopped nuts along with the orange blossom water (if using). Mould the *kheer* in a cylindrical mould or set into a shot glass.
- 4.** To prepare the pistachio *tuile*, heat the milk, butter and glucose until lukewarm. Add the sugar and jam pectin, and cook to 112° C on a candy thermometer. Fold in the flour and nuts. Spread the batter very thin (around 2mm thickness) on a silicon mat, and allow to cool for 10 minutes in the fridge. Bake at 160° C for eight to 10 minutes. Cut into different sizes to decorate the mousse.



# MODERN MUSE



From conquistador poets to Frida Kahlo, **Mexico City** has inspired generations of artists. Join a local journalist on a culture-focused tour and find creativity around every corner

WORDS **JORGE PEDRO URIBE LLAMAS** [@jorgepedro](#) PHOTOGRAPHS **LEILA ASHTARI** [@ashtaripfoto](#)

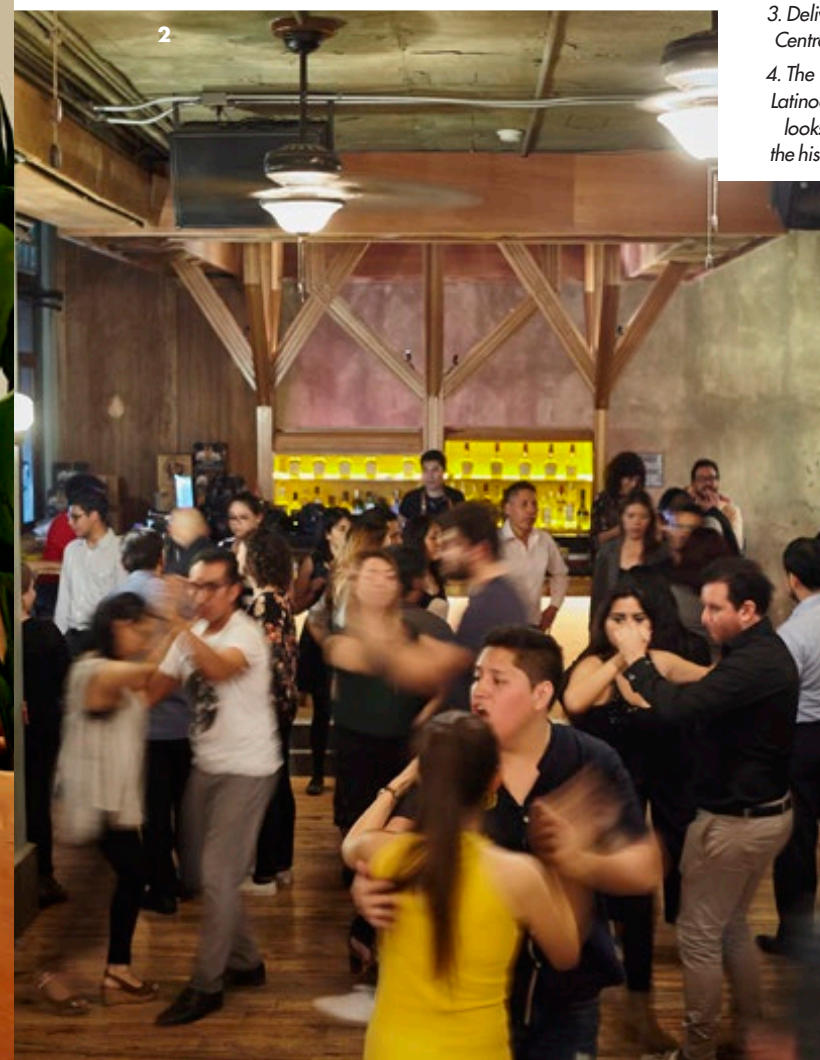
Mid-century  
furniture at  
Clásicos  
Mexicanos



TRANSLATION BY VORLA THOMAS AND BAILEY FREEMAN



1. Chicken soup, steak with guajillo chilli, quesadillas and more at Cantina Salón Española  
2. Dance club El Babalú



3. Deliveries in the Centro Histórico  
4. The 1950s Torre Latinoamericana looks out over the historic centre





Mexico City's artistic scene goes far beyond its most celebrated daughter, Frida Kahlo, whose distinctive self-portraits appear on everything from notebooks to coffee cups the world over. Filmmaker Luis Buñuel and painter Leonora Carrington made their names here, and Seville poet Juan de la Cueva wrote of 'six things of excellent beauty' in the city of the 16th century: *casas, calles, caballos, carnes, cabellos y criaturas bellas* – houses, streets, horses, meats, hair and beautiful creatures.

World Capital of Design in 2018, Mexico City's appeal lies also in the creativity of its people. You can see it in public design: our Metro icons, designed in the late '60s by Lance Wyman, and Alameda Central, the first urban park in the Americas.

You'll find creative Mexico City in some surprising places, not just its inspiring museums and traditional crafts, but also in its bars, restaurants, down dimly-lit streets, and among peeling façades.



Cultural centre  
Tetetlán's restaurant  
serves uniquely  
Mesoamerican dishes

#### Stop 1:

##### FOR A ONE-OFF SPACE

Mexico City combines all kinds of architecture. A half-hour taxi ride along streets embellished with elegant jacaranda trees might take you past neocolonial houses and small Beaux Arts palaces, via Art Deco buildings and Baroque churches. The city's Modernist masterpiece is Luis Barragán's **Casa Pedregal**, a vibrant pink building designed as a private home. Located at the side of the property, in its old stables, is the cultural centre **Tetetlán** ([www.tetetlan.com](http://www.tetetlan.com)). Its name means 'place between stones' in Nahuatl, one of the languages of the Uto-Aztecan people, because the property was built on a bed of volcanic rock.

"Any work of architecture that does not express serenity is a mistake," architect Luis Barragán once said. And Tetetlán does feel like an oasis – it's as though nothing exists beyond its boundaries. For lunch, the centre's restaurant serves uniquely Mesoamerican dishes – roasted *cuitlacoche*, an edible fungus that grows on corn, and a cut of lamb served with grasshopper sauce. Even the circumspect couple at the table next to mine enjoys the food. The Tetetlán's library is one of the most complete on Mexican art and history, but its shop is more accessible to those who don't speak Spanish, and sells pieces from every state in the Republic. →



PURE ESCAPISM CREATIVITY IN MEXICO CITY

Billionaire Carlos Slim's  
Soumaya Museum  
as seen from Jumex  
Museum



Stop 2:  
FOR BEAUTIFUL  
MUSEUMS

Outwardly the **Jumex Museum** ([www.fundacionjumex.org](http://www.fundacionjumex.org)), designed by architect David Chipperfield, resembles a factory – but it contains one of the largest collections of contemporary art in Latin America. I walk its pale corridors exploring exhibitions that draw from a collection of around 2,600 works. Previous shows have featured big-hitters like Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons, as well as Mexican artists such as Gabriel Orozco and artistic *émigrés* like Belgian-born Francis Alÿs. “Mexico is, has always been, the crossing point of European, North American and Latin American cultures,” says chief curator Kit Hammonds as he shows me the collection. “Our programme couples blockbusters with shows that explore younger artists, particularly from Latin America. The Jumex foundation also supports Mexican artists and designers through its grants scheme, playing an important role in the creative ecology.”

As far as artistic ecosystems go, the wealthy neighbourhood of Polanco is particularly rich. From the first floor terrace, I have a clear view of the institution next door – the curvaceous **Soumaya Museum** ([www.museosoumaya.org](http://www.museosoumaya.org)), the private collection of Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim. Tiled with countless aluminium hexagons, it is ultra modern in appearance but more expansively historical in content, with paintings by everyone from the French Impressionists to Salvador Dalí and sculptures by Auguste Rodin. “Jumex is part of a cultural hub,” says Kit. “In the wider area, there’s also the Museum of Modern Art and the Sala de Arte Público de Siqueiros, an art space in a modern artist’s former studio.” He points out that – in general – artists’ studios are concentrated in cheaper neighbourhoods. “At the moment, Mexico City is attracting attention as a place for international artists to live and work: it’s affordable, intense and energetic.”

Stop 3:  
FOR MEXICAN MID-  
CENTURY DESIGN

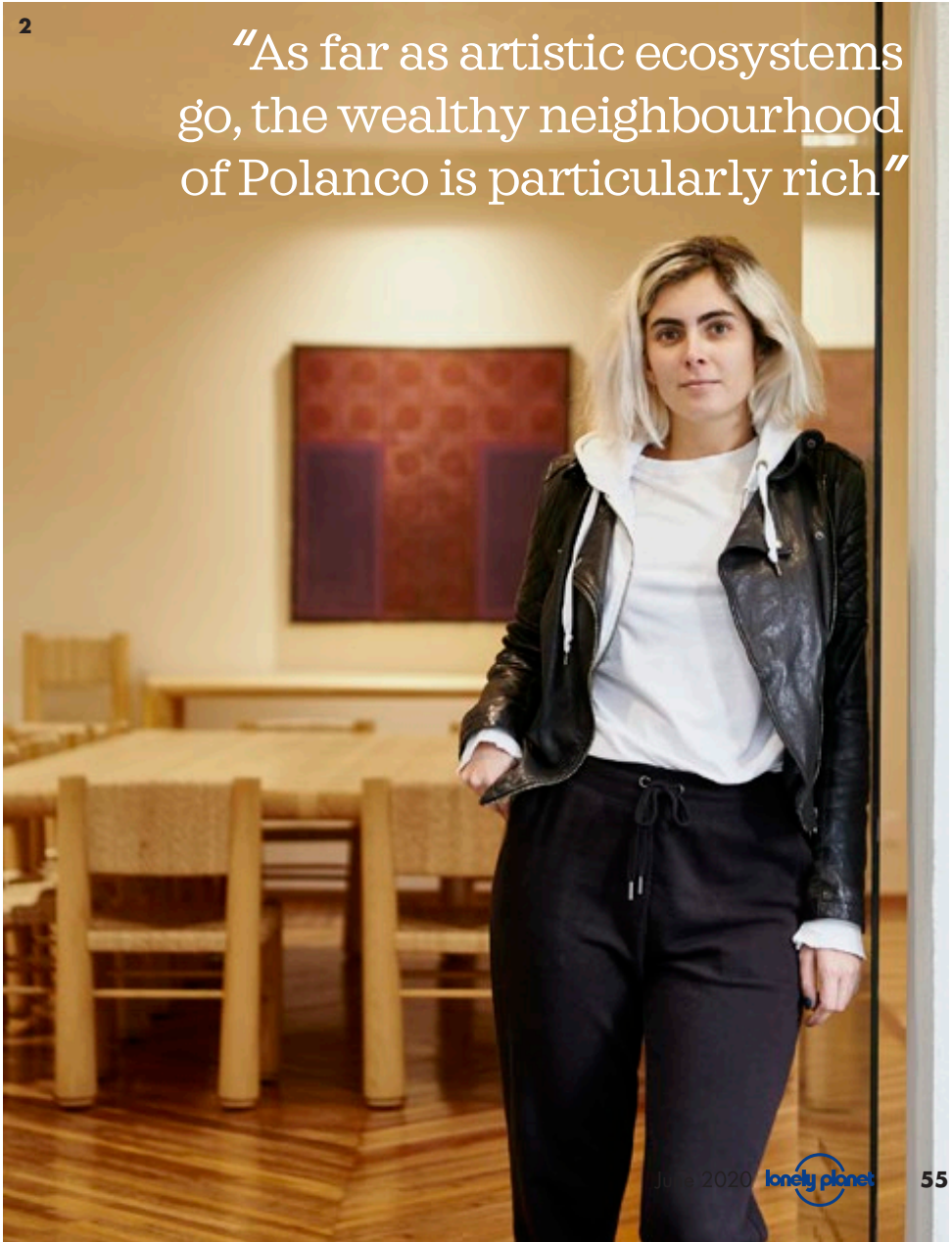
A similar enthusiasm for design can be found at the furniture gallery **Clásicos Mexicanos** ([www.clasicosmexicanos.mx](http://www.clasicosmexicanos.mx)). Its director Mónica Landa tells me about the reproductions made by her partner, Aldo Solano, with the goal of reviving designs from the Mexican Modern movement. “Mid-century design is not only beautiful but functional,” says Mónica, as we walk around the gallery in which chairs are displayed against stark

white walls. “The designers looked for better exploitation of materials and how they could benefit from industrial processes.”

The gallery’s exhibitions change regularly, but, for Mónica, the most interesting piece in their current display is the S2C by Armando Franco. “He is not well known because he made his career as an academic, and, now, he’s 98 years old,” she says. “He designed the chair in 1955 as part of a project to industrialise handcraft designs – the leather seat works as a canvas in the wooden structure.” Only two of the original nine survive, and Clásicos Mexicanos have recreated the prototype for the first time in six decades. These, like all the gallery’s designs, are for sale – prices start at £750 (₹69,000) – and, while some pieces are →



1. Furniture museum  
Clásicos Mexicanos  
2. Mónica Landa,  
director of Clásicos  
Mexicanos



“As far as artistic ecosystems go, the wealthy neighbourhood of Polanco is particularly rich”





1. Squid and chickpea starter at Rosetta  
2. Elena Reygadas, head chef at Rosetta



1. Teatro del Pueblo, a cultural centre beside a market in the Centro Histórico  
2. Cantina Salón España offers 180 tequilas  
3. Traditional serving of tequila with sangrita at Cantina Salón España

open editions, others are closed editions of 10, 60 or 100, depending on the licence agreed upon with the original designer. This is furniture with history, but Mónica is eloquent on Mexico City's current creative golden age. "That the city is in an international spotlight encourages more creatives to design and innovate," she says. "There's more competition, and people are migrating here from all over the world – that brings fresh views and pushes the scene to grow. Every day, there is something new and exciting. It feels like we're all moving faster."

#### Stop 4: FOR CULINARY CREATIVITY

There are dishes that define this city. *Chiles en nogada*: poblano chillies in walnut cream. Anything cooked in *mole* – a rich, velvety sauce. The century-old restaurant Bellinghausen's *chemita* fillet, a simple meal of beef and potatoes, and – a more recent addition – **Rosetta's** *tagliatelle* with Italian sausage and *chile de árbol*. The chef behind the

last entry on that illustrious list is Elena Reygadas, who believes the city has one of the most vibrant creative scenes in the world. "There are multiple reasons for it," says Elena, who can often be found wandering among Rosetta's tables, chatting to customers about their menu choices as well as more cerebral matters ([www.rosetta.com.mx](http://www.rosetta.com.mx)). "Perhaps one of the most important is that Mexico has a 1,000-year-old culture that, in recent times, has been questioned without being sidelined. We have learned to radically reinterpret our past, making it contemporary. This creates a unique energy and dynamism – a dialogue between each generation." There's dialogue, too, during the restaurant's busy lunchtime service: tables are full of regulars deep in conversation and often becoming rhapsodic over the exceptional seasonal food: simple, fresh dishes like ravioli made with ricotta, lemon and thyme. But the creativity isn't limited to the cooking here. Both the outside and the inside of the property, a charming, colonial-era townhouse, is beautifully styled and adorned with trees and plants.

#### Stop 5: FOR A CLASSIC CANTINA

I set out on the Paseo de la Reforma towards the city's historic centre, a UNESCO World Heritage site. The Torre Latinoamericana sky scraper towers above wide sidewalks, where tree roots strive to break through the concrete. As I enter the Old Town on foot, I pass buildings with estipite columns made from the strong, light tezontle rock; palm trees; street food stands and ceramic-tiled 18th-century mansions. **Cantina Salón España** was established here at the beginning of the 20th century ([www.facebook.com/cantinaSalonEspana](http://www.facebook.com/cantinaSalonEspana)). Its menu offers 180 tequilas, and the server recommends one from Arandas, Jalisco. As I sip it, I wonder if muralist Diego Rivera came here on his lunch break when he was working on the Simón Bolívar Amphitheater back in 1922. What might he have eaten? Today, the options are chicken soup with chickpeas, steak with *guajillo* chilli, or *quesadillas*. Every Friday, they serve the specialty: *chamorro* (pork shanks). As I accept a second tequila, a guitarist starts up, smiling while he plays a slow-tempo bolero. →



“There’s more competition, and people are migrating here from all over the world”







“Bars selling *pulque* coexist with kosher supermarkets and vegan restaurants”



## Stop 6 FOR AN ARTISANAL MARKET

Although many visitors to Mexico City stop at the **Mercado de la Ciudadela** to buy handicrafts, I first came here to drink coffee. The **Ocelotl** coffee shop has been owned by José Alonzo and his family for over 55 years. They serve coffee from Chiapas and chocolate from Oaxaca, and know pretty much everyone in the market. They recommend the textiles made by Ranulfo Barrientos and his granddaughter, located in aisle five, whose rugs and throws come in the boldest designs and colours. They direct us, too, to Doña Petra, who dedicates herself to the art of stretched glass – a process not to be confused with glass blowing. Her store is a tiny zoo of miniature animals. Later, I fall in love with the guitars made by Agustín Enríquez, found in aisle four, who has been making the instruments for over six decades. A luthier from Paracho, he comes from a town well known for its guitars. He tells me that it takes up to a month to make each instrument, and that children’s guitars have been a surprise growth market. “I have sold many more thanks to the success of the movie *Coco*,” he says ([www.laciudadela.com.mx](http://www.laciudadela.com.mx)).



PURE ESCAPISM CREATIVITY IN MEXICO CITY

Salsa instructor  
Lucía Carrere  
at El Babalú  
dance club

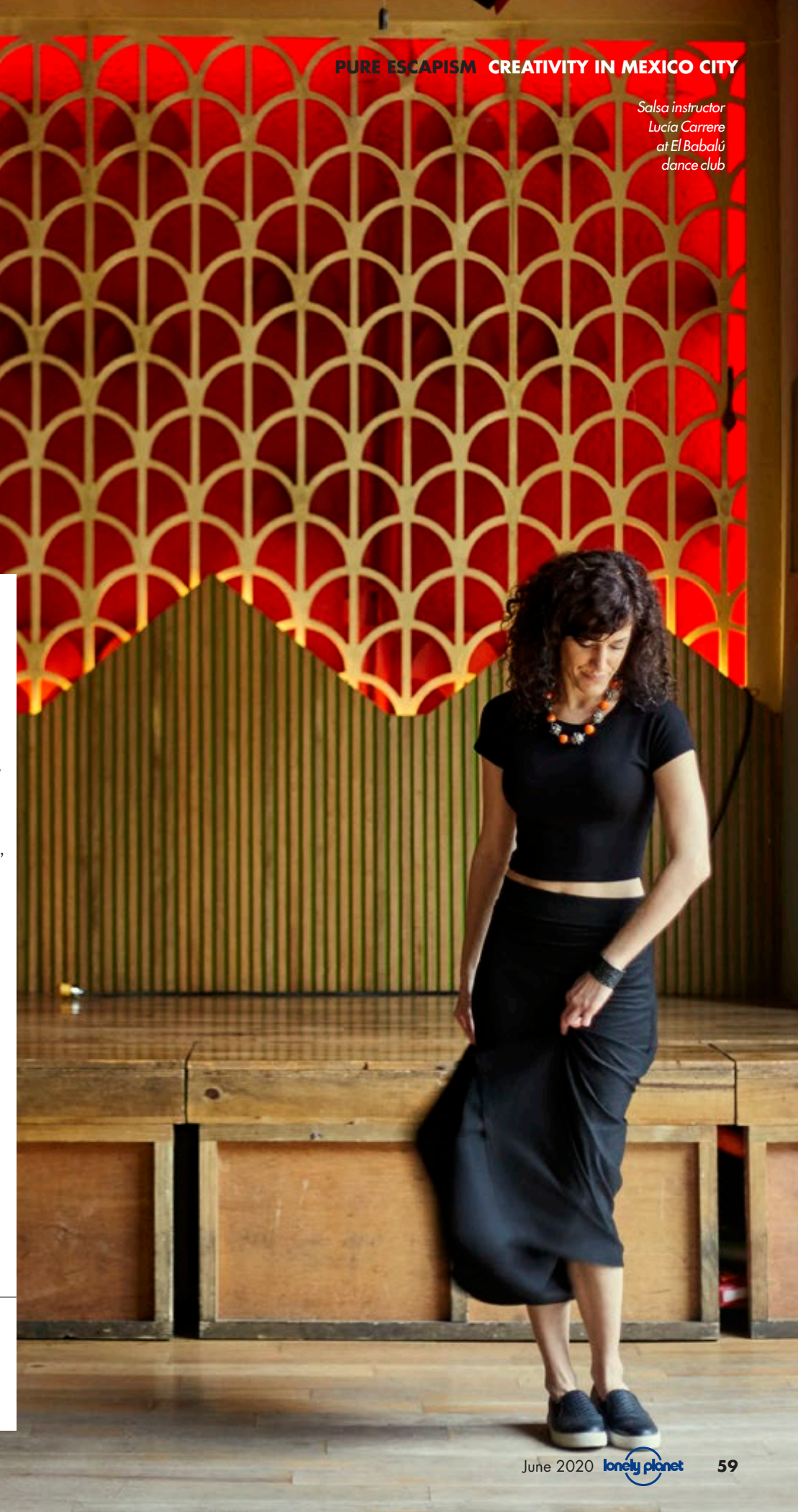
## Stop 7 FOR A MUSIC-FOCUSED COCKTAIL CRAWL

Finally, I want to raise a glass to the good health of the city’s creative scene. I begin with a negroni at speakeasy **Parker & Lenox** ([www.facebook.com/parkerandlenox](http://www.facebook.com/parkerandlenox)), the drink glowing like a lantern in the inky recesses of this dark bar. I take a seat on one of its velvet chairs in front of the red-curtained stage, where live blues, rockabilly or bluegrass bands play night after night. Next, I move on to jazz club **Casa Franca** ([www.facebook.com/Lacasa\\_merida109](http://www.facebook.com/Lacasa_merida109)), located above a taco shop, and a cocktail called the Louis Armstrong. It’s a Mexican version of a pisco sour, instead made with *mezcal*. Walking to my final stop, I pass the neon fountains of the Glorieta de los Insurgentes, and feel glad that my home is a city where bars selling *pulque*, made from the fermented sap of *magüey* (agave), coexist with kosher supermarkets and vegan restaurants. I am heading for **El Babalú** ([www.facebook.com/elbabalu](http://www.facebook.com/elbabalu)), a dance club, and a salsa lesson. In a confessional moment, my joyful teacher Lucía Carrere tells me, “Dance saved me.”

Tonight, I, too, will seek my salvation on a dance floor filled with strangers. 🍷



**JORGE PEDRO URIBE ILLAMAS**  
is a journalist and author.  
His latest book is *Novísima  
Grandeza Mexicana*  
(‘Newest Mexican Grandeur’).





## MAKE IT HAPPEN: MEXICO CITY, MEXICO

### Essentials

We accept that travel to Mexico is not advised at present; we hope that this information will prove useful again once restrictions are lifted.

#### → BEST TIME TO VISIT

The city is remarkably calm in March and April, when locals clear out for the Easter holidays. May is the month to catch the last of the warm weather before the rainy season begins, or wait until November, when the city comes alive with colourful Día de Muertos festivities.

#### → GETTING THERE

Lufthansa, Air Canada and United, among others, fly from major Indian cities to Mexico City with a stopover either in Europe or Canada (return fares from ₹1,29,000).

#### → GETTING AROUND

Mexico City has an inexpensive, easy-to-use metro and an equally cheap and practical bus system plying all the main routes. Taxis are plentiful, but it's safer to ask your hotel or restaurant to book one (or use Uber) than to hail one.

#### → VISA

Citizens of India visiting Mexico for tourism or business do not require a visa as long as they hold a valid United States visa, or have permanent resident status in Canada, Japan, The United Kingdom, or Schengen countries.

#### → EMBASSY ALERT

Embassy of India, Mexico City:  
[www.indianmexico.gov.in](http://www.indianmexico.gov.in)

#### → VEG OUT:

**India Town** in the Centro Histórico area of the city is a go-to place if you want to have delicious Indian food! Try the *dal makhani* and *jeera* rice combo or call for a chicken *tikka masala* to fill up with a hearty dish (16 de Septiembre 79, Centro Histórico de la Cdad. de México, Centro, Cuauhtémoc, 06010 Ciudad de México).



#### MAP KEY

- 1 Cantina Salón España
- 2 Casa Franca
- 3 Clásicos Mexicanos
- 4 Contramar
- 5 El Babalú
- 6 Jumex Museum
- 7 Mercado de la Ciudadela
- 8 Páramo
- 9 Parker & Lenox
- 10 Rosetta
- 11 Soumaya Museum
- 12 Taquería Orinoco
- 13 Tetelán
- SLEEPING
- 14 Chalet del Carmen
- 15 Condesa Haus
- 16 Downtown Mexico

#### WHERE TO STAY



- \* Eco-friendly **Chalet del Carmen** strikes a warm blend of Mexican and European. On offer are five rooms and two suites with antique furnishings and brilliant natural lighting. Guests have use of a kitchen, and bicycles ([www.chaletdelcarmen.com](http://www.chaletdelcarmen.com); from ₹3,750).
- \* Owner and host extraordinaire Fernando took an Art Deco home and turned it into one of the most stylish boutique hotels in Mexico City. Each room of **Condesa Haus** has a different theme and decor, without feeling kitschy. Be sure to check out the original tiles and stained-glass window in the Puebla room ([www.condesahaus.com](http://www.condesahaus.com); from ₹7,500).
- \* **Downtown Mexico** is in a 17th-century palace, former seat of the Counts of Miravalle. Among the ornate

stonework and wrought iron is a mural by Rodríguez Lozano (pictured left). The bedrooms are similarly Modernist, featuring geometric patterns and industrial light fittings. There's a lovely pool and roof terrace for end-of-day drinks – from where you can gaze over the Centro Histórico ([www.downtownmexico.com](http://www.downtownmexico.com); from ₹15,750).



#### WHERE TO EAT

- \* **Contramar** is a stylish dining hall with impeccable service (pictured left). The specialties are grilled tuna fillet swabbed with red chilli and parsley sauces, and creamy tuna *foxtada* appetiser, topped with avocado. Make a reservation ([www.contramar.com.mx](http://www.contramar.com.mx)).
- \* **Páramo** is named after a Mexican novel about a ghost town. Tacos such as *huasca* (wild boar in beer reduction) and seared tuna in honey set a high bar, but shrimp, meatballs, and vegetarian-friendly hibiscus flowers are also delicious. Make a reservation or wait with a drink – the *pepino* (cucumber) *mezcal* cocktail is excellent ([www.facebook.com/ParamoRoma](http://www.facebook.com/ParamoRoma)).
- \* For a taste of the north, try Monterrey-style **Taquería Orinoco**. It's buzzing with locals after a night out, but a queue forms by even 10pm. Quite different to usual Mexico City offerings, the *chicharrón* (fried pork fat) is the specialty here – the creamy *costra* (toasted cheese) *quesadilla* is also special. Order and pay at the entrance, but, once seated, you are free to start a new bill ([www.taqueriaorinoco.com](http://www.taqueriaorinoco.com)).

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM PHILIP TANG

#### BEHIND THE SCENES



When the photographer Leila Ashtari and I were in the Salón España, two men at a far table beckoned us over. They spoke in English, despite us telling them we are Mexican. We asked Toribio and Mauricio, as they were called, what we could do for them, and they said: "We just wanted to toast with you," and, raising their glasses, one made a short, poetic speech: "Cheers! And we must remind ourselves that yesterday doesn't exist, tomorrow is unknown, and all that's left is to enjoy the present." It's the kind of experience you could have only in a *cantina*.



Mexico City Metropolitan Cathedral is built over what was the sacred Aztec precinct near the Templo Mayor



## LIFE BECOMES SIMPLE WHEN WE STEP OFF THE PLANE IN JORHAT...

We walk out of the Defence airport into a world of bamboo fences. On the way to the ferry point, we drive past dry paddy fields, the playground of short-legged goats and an unidentified avian character that looks suspiciously like Big Bird. Under a powder-blue sky dotted with fluffy, very white clouds, we crawl behind bands of straggling cattle. And, then, suddenly, the Brahmaputra is beside us, with massive sand bars putting up a last stand before the annual showers will force them to disappear under the surface of the mighty river.

### A FERRY WAITS AT NEEMATIL...

We must share it with two-wheelers and cars. There's a good-natured party going on in the hold – mothers and children, couples, guys in identical tracksuits all crammed together. It's chilly on the river, but refreshingly so. The sun glints on the wave caps as we chug away from the bank and toward the centre of the river. A little boy shares his snack with us. The 70-odd people on board spend the one-hour ride to Majuli without digital aids, entertained by babies who charm everyone, blowing flying kisses at virtual strangers under the indulgent eye of their parents.

### MAJULI WELCOMES US BY TESTING OUR IMPATIENCE...

Our car is the last to roll off the ferry. After the 75 passengers, the (seemingly) 3,000 bikes, their riders and the rest of the world. We smile as we wait and mean it. Then, Jagat speeds us to **Jyoti's Cottages**, sitting like rustic jewels topped with the pink illumination of the coming night. The monkeys pound on the tin roofs, the crickets set up a chorus; in the distance, I hear the shouts of men and boys enjoying a last game of cricket in the dying light. Loath to waste any chance to soak up the atmosphere, Krishna and I walk down to the market. The trees form an unthreatening canopy above us, older children are being coaxed to take toddlers 'double seat' on full-size bikes. An elderly lady, urging her cows to their tethering for the night, looks at us askance till we begin oohing and aahing over her cattle. We stroll back in the gathering dusk. We walk a path of perfect calm.

WE ARE ON ISLAND TIME... →

# Island of enchantment

**Majuli** in Assam transports you to a simpler world that soothes and stimulates

WORDS PRIMROSE MONTEIRO D'SOUZA @PrimroseDSouza

PHOTOGRAPHS KRISHNA PRABAKAR T @krishnaprabakar

An early-morning ride on the Lohit, the other river in Majuli, is an eye-opener



1. Majuli is green
2. Chai and snacks at Dutta Hotel near the Kamlabari Bridge
3. Siddharth shared his dried noodle snack with us on the ferry
4. You will see many cottages on stilts across the island





1. Jyoti Sarma wants visitors to leave Majuli with a smile  
2. A bamboo cottage at Jyoti's  
3. Putting cattle to rest for the night



**J**YOTI Sarma's father is a monk of the Garamur Satra, a family monastery that allows married men to be monks. In 2001, as Jyoti and his childhood friend Danny cycled back from college, they came upon a backpacking couple from France.

Overcome by curiosity, they asked the visitors many questions and discovered they had no place to stay. They took them back to the *satra*, and invited them home to dinner. A seed had been sown. With 10 like-minded people, they put together some money and, with the help of a local MLA, set up an office in the market, which became a tourist information centre. In 2003, Jyoti went on to study tourism and tribal management in Guwahati, and came back to become a respected freelance guide, not just in Assam, but in the greater Seven Sisters. In 2009, he registered a small company, Majuli Tourism, with Assam Tourism. In 2017, he put together Jyoti's Cottages, five bamboo cottages with cowdung-plastered walls, basic but charming, and with western loos. Two more contemporary cottages have also just been built, for those who eschew such rustic charm. "I want more people who visit to leave Majuli with a smile," Jyoti says. He started training other youngsters to be tour guides. Twenty-six became tour guides in 2014; seven are active today. One of them is Montu, who will be our guide around Majuli. He comes from a farming family. Like most in Majuli, they cultivate paddy, mustard, black dal, but it is a seasonal occupation. When Jyoti saw him hanging about, he asked him to join him, and Montu has never looked back.

**AT DINNER** on our first night, a solo traveller from Nashik is complaining: Majuli has nothing but *ashrams*, he says. And he misses his *chapatis*. That whine lingers in the air as we drive to the first of our five *satra* (monastery) visits. At the end of the day, we will know two things: Majuli is a place that needs a guide, and the Assamese *thali* – no *roti* in sight – is a thing of wonder. "Rice is important to us in Majuli," Montu tells us. "We eat it at breakfast, lunch and dinner." At the beginning of the day, especially at weddings and on festive days, cooked rice is soaked in hot water till it becomes soft and even plumper, to be relished with *dahi* (yoghurt) and local *gur* (jaggery).

The morose Maharashtrian gentleman is right about the other thing, too: there are a lot of monasteries, not *ashrams*, in Majuli: 32 in all. They are of two types – for bachelors and family men. The **Sri Sri Uttar Kamlabari Satra** is one of the five of the former type. Established by Sankaradeva back in 1673, it cocoons 100 *bhokots* (monks), living in *bohas* (quarters), each headed by a senior monk. The *satradhikari* (head) Janardhana Dev Goswami is supervising the clearing up of the hall after a workshop on mythology and mask making. We wander through the monastery, grateful to have Montu with us to explain a world and way of life very different from any we can imagine.

Boys join the monastery between the ages of five and 10 years. They are brought by their parents because they might have been promised to Lord Vishnu; some might come from poor families – but there is always an element of choice. The young monk is then assigned to a quarter in which there is a slot open, and then grows and flourishes under the senior monk's guidance. In time, he grows to become a senior himself, responsible for the care and wellbeing of the now-ageing monk who raised him. Each quarter has its space courtesy the *satra*, but upkeep, electricity bills, the kitchen fire and what is cooked on it, are all the collective responsibility of the five to seven monks who form it. The young boys attend regular school and college, the men go out to work at the usual occupations, always wearing the distinctive *dhoti* and *kurta* that they must be clad in outside the *satra*, and never cutting the hair on their head, except when mourning the loss of members of their birth family or their quarter. According to their inclination and ability, they are trained in *satranritya* (dance), *bhavna* (drama) and *sangeet* (song), another way they can

contribute to the quarter's earnings. This *satra* is particularly renowned for its performances; its performers have travelled across India and all the way to Germany, France and the USA.

The people of Majuli believe that prayers offered at the *satra* temples are more likely to be answered. It's easy to see why. We listen, transfixed, as a monk storms heaven (or its equivalent) with clashing cymbals before his spiritual brothers join in with song, others clapping in rhythm. The *satras* are devoted to Lord Vishnu, but Sankaradeva did not believe in idols, so the *Bhagwad Gita* is enshrined in this sanctum sanctorum.

We find Krishna Ram Hazarika in his quarter. He joined the *satra* when he was four and now, 32 years later, he is the principal dance teacher here. He has his own school of dance, and a dazzling motorcycle, and he assures us that no one is here against their will. "You can go to the monk and ask to be released from this way of life," he tells us. "Your time with the *satra* is over, but there are no hard feelings."

When each quarter is responsible for its own upkeep, how does the *satra* itself keep going? The *rajas* gifted the *satras* land, and the monastery now allows locals to cultivate that land, and receives half the earnings from their endeavours. It collects no rent, because it is exempt from taxation. The monks earn in another way as well: when a couple marries, the bride and groom must become *shishyas* (disciples) of a monk to mark the start of their life together. Their new spiritual advisor receives something in cash or kind from the new *shishyas* – he keeps half for his quarter and gives half to the *satra* fund. The *bhokot-shishya* relationship is for life, one that both sides respect, supporting each other. The *satra* fund also helps ailing and indigent monks. →



1. Garuda has pride of place in the *satras*  
2. Each quarter at a *satra* is quite distinctive  
3. Rice is a staple in Assam  
4. Principal dance teacher Krishna Ram Hazarika at the Sri Sri Uttar Kamlabari Satra





**W**HEN the flood comes, life stops; Majuli holds its breath. And the flood comes almost every year. But, with the true optimism of the islanders, Montu tells us that the rich silt that it leaves behind means that the crops need no chemicals. Flowing unusually from east to west, the mighty Brahmaputra takes away in one season, and gives back in the next. In June and July every year, it will flood its banks and put entire areas under water. It's the reason why the tribals build on stilts, and even *they* sometimes underestimate the swelling of the river.

When the water recedes, it leaves boats behind on high land; fish, similarly stranded, make their way to the ponds at the corner of each field – a captive repository of the fish that the people of Majuli think of as staple to their diet. “The river is everything in Majuli,” Montu tells us.

**BROUGHT** to a grove of *auni* (betel creeper) trees from Jagannath Puri in 1653, the Gobind avatar of Lord Vishnu has pride of place at the *namghar* (prayer house) of the **Auniati Satra**, marking it as one established by Raja Jaydhas Singh in 1653 rather than Sankardeva who eschewed idols. In this, the oldest *satra* in Majuli, 400 bachelor monks live in 54 quarters under the guidance of Dr Pitamber Dev Goswami, who is the 16th *satradhikari*. As always with these monasteries, we walk barefoot through the complex, visiting a quarter to see this *satra*'s specialty: hand-held fans made of bamboo cane, with betel-nut wood handles and velvet decoration. These are presented with great pride to visiting VIPs, but can also be purchased for ₹1,000; it takes a week to make one. The museum on the premises showcases Ahom Dynasty artefacts (₹10; *photography not permitted*).

**UNESCO** has stepped in at the **Dakhinpat Satra**, and not a minute too soon. This is the third location for this monastery that enthrones the Yadhavrai avatar of Lord Vishnu. Erosion forced each move, before the leader was inspired in a dream to write the script of the *Raslila* from the *Mahabharata*; the accompanying promise of protection against denudation has kept the *satra* here for 82 years. People flock to watch the monastery's free performances of the mythological drama in November each year. In the temple, UNESCO has recognised the ancient pillars of *tulsi* and sandal – the story goes that, when these need to be replaced, the time a suitable log will come floating down the river is revealed to the head monk in a dream.



1. Abhokot walks a corridor in the Dakhinpat Satra  
2 & 3. Priceless Ahom artefacts at the Dakhinpat Satra, displayed by the light of a hand-held lamp



1. Aids to contemplation and prayer at the *satras*  
2 & 3. Master mask-maker Dr Hemchandra Goswami demonstrates the stages of the art, and a Ravana mask with a moveable jaw  
4. An Assamese meal is a showcase of fresh produce and fresh fish

We are not suitably dressed to get close to the idols, but a side door reveals a lamp that has remained lit for 356 years. We meet Deepak, the *satra*'s *pujari* and *ijyotish*, who heads a quarter with four boys, and to whom people come to have their lives foretold. He's been here for 26 years, and our avid curiosity is rewarded with warm *kheer* as *prashad*.

We see a 200-year-old house transplanted from Kolkata in the garden, but the real antiquity lies in nonchalant non-splendour in the oldest concrete house in Majuli. In it are artefacts from the Ahom Dynasty to boggle the mind. There are UNESCO tags on all the pieces, each more precious than the other, made more dramatic by the showing by the light of a hand-held lantern. The proposed museum cannot come too soon for this treasure trove.

the freshness of the fish shines through. Ritu used to have a business, which, he reveals matter-of-factly, “flopped”, and now he farms his small allotment and feeds hungry visitors like us. Everything is organic, and Junu is a great cook, and we enjoy the meal thoroughly (₹250 for a veg meal with fried fish).

**OFTEN**, when the world thinks of Majuli, it is masks that spring to mind. Dr Hemchandra Goswami makes bamboo sculptures, paints the greats like Bhupen Hazarika with enamel paint on hardboard, and enjoys wood carving and sculpture as well, but he is best known for mask-making – or ‘maks’-making as the locals in Majuli adorably mispronounce it. The **Samaguri Satra**, of which he is the *satradhikari*, has been making masks for 400 years, and Dr Goswami is the best of the best – a National Award-winning mask maker who has his creations in the British Museum. He shows us the process of mask making – starting with a bamboo frame, layered with fabric and pottery clay, then cowdung and clay, then fabric, before the final moulding into a distinctive face, and the staining with mineral colours. In 2000, Dr Goswami contributed the moveable jaw to the tradition – making Garuda's face a thing of even more startling drama. Animals and demons must always have masks, he tells us, and the masks are of two types: *mukh mukha* (face masks), and *bora mukha* (larger-than-life masks), in which the actor wears the massive structure that towers over him, while he peers at the world through a screen in its midsection. Dr Goswami has had many students, and, as we speak, one of them comes to place his Garuda effort in the glass display section. Despite his obvious genius, he is a humble, soft-spoken man, and it takes a more vociferous visiting relative to point out his works in progress. →



**E**ATING in Majuli is a delightful affair. We eat at a home in the **Bengunaati** family *satra*. Ritu Khatanar and his wife Junu lay out a spread with well-deserved pride in the produce. As always, the base is a veg meal – we have rice, *dal* (often made piquant with elephant apple), and dishes of baby potatoes, mixed cabbage, and beans, all cooked in the local mustard oil. On the side by special order are slices of fish, the *masala* so light that





1 & 3. Makoon Kolita adds decorative touches to her hand-shaped pots  
2. A typical Mishing house is built of bamboo on stilts



**S**ALMORA gaon used to be by the river, where the potters could easily source the river clay for their creations, but the erosion that plagues Majuli has brought them more inland. Today, 500 families live together to earn their living by shaping pots completely by hand – without a potter’s wheel. The most-used clay utensil is the *dahi matka*, in which upto 10 kilos of milk are set into yoghurt; it is used only once for *dahi*, and then repurposed to store rice and the like. In each compound in the village, you will find a house on stilts; though the potters are not tribals, this raised-residence format gives them a place under the house in which to store their pots. Each compound has a pit in which the precious mud from the river has been brought and stored, covered with earth to keep it from drying out. The women shape the pots, the men bring the clay and sell the pots. Much of all this is a cooperative affair; two or three families get together to fire the large kiln by the road, all contributing an equal number of pots to be baked, then sharing the expenses to take the finished products down the river by boat to sell in Jorhat, Dibrugarh and Shivasagar about thrice a year.

Makoon Kolita is a sprightly woman with salt-and-pepper hair, who is probably quite a few years older than the 60 she thinks she is. She’s been making pots since the age of 10, and her hands are sure and firm as she demonstrates how she shapes them using a variety of wooden and clay tools. Her husband, Ghana, is at least 10 years older than her, probably in his eighties; he is only a little put out that we seem so much more interested in her than him. Makoon starts on at least 50 new pots a day, and each must dry for a day before being worked on again the next day. It seems so much work, but she smiles through it, giving us *boras* to eat, asking about our families, wondering why I don’t wear *sindoor*. The next time I visit, she says and Montu translates, I must have rice, *dal* and pickle with her; it is an offer made with such spontaneous generosity that it almost brings tears.

**P**EOPLE on Majuli live simply; there is no wine shop – only the tribals have their own brews, and everything quieters down when the sun sets. Which makes it easier to wake very early to hit the water. On the Lohit River, which separates Majuli from the mainland on the other side of the island, we step into a boat to watch the Mishing tribe bring in their catch. One of the favoured methods is to herd water hyacinth

together, secure the whole floating island of vegetation with bamboo to indicate ownership, and allow the fish to make themselves comfortable in their new home among its roots. At the appropriate time, the fishermen come and enclose the water hyacinth with nets trailing upto the bottom of the shallow river and then carefully discard the water hyacinth, gathering the trapped fish for consumption and sale. It’s not unusual for the Mishing to have fish for lunch and dinner; often, all it takes is a *chalni* (bamboo sieve) to pan for small prawn by the banks, or to collect what bounty has been captured in hollow bamboo tubes or cages left earlier under the surface of the water. In the early morning, Brahminy duck, always in pairs by day but separated at night, grumble indignantly at our approach and then rise from the water together.

**FARMING** is another thing the Mishing are known for, and no man seems to be better known for it than Kamla Kanto Kaman. Where are you from, he wants to know, and, in turn, is delighted to let us know that he’s been to Mumbai and the World Trade Centre many times to display and sell his organic red rice, brown rice and sticky rice and the weaving skills of the Mishing tribe. At his invitation, we climb into a typical Mishing house, set on stilts. Inside, the floor is just bamboo, and our city feet struggle to find footing at first. In the centre of the home is the hearth on which Deepika – married to Kamla’s son Uday, our boatman that morning – is cooking our lunch. To one side, his wife Swarnalata is making *apong* (rice beer). We sit on a low bamboo couch on the porch, and Kamla Kanto squats easily

in front of us to chat. He first made this house in 2007, and he changes the thatch every five to six years. It’s not an easy life, he avers, but he’s proud to showcase the traditions of the Mishing, their worship of the sun and the moon, the *ridhing* amulet made from a creeper on the ground that they wear for protection, and the *apong* they make. “There’s nothing like a bowl of *apong* after a long day in the fields,” Kamla says. “Others drink tea, we drink *apong*. *Apong* will give you new life.” We sip on the elixir between bites of boiled potato dipped in salt, and chicken cooked in a leaf parcel in the coals. Our lunch, eaten sitting around the smoky hearth, is huge quantities of home-grown rice with black *dal* and a buttery fish curry with wild leaves. Kamla Kanto tells us meals are simple – rice, *dal*, seasonal vegetables, and fish, if available. Below us, a healthy if exhausted sow wanders about, trailed by innumerable piglets just waiting for her to lie down so they can suckle. Kamla Kanto tells us they eat pork only on Wednesdays and Sundays.

**MONTU** never wants to leave Majuli. The tourism work is very sporadic, and people come less than six months a year, he says, but just ₹5,000 is what you need for a family monthly. “Majuli has no crime, no crowds, why would I not love Majuli?” he asks, rhetorically, and adds confidently, “And 99.9% of the people here feel like me.”

1 & 3. Kamla Kanto shared a Mishing meal and apong with us  
2. Water hyacinth, dreaded otherwise for choking oxygen out of waterbodies, is put to good use in Majuli  
4. Montu loves showing visitors his Majuli





## MAKE IT HAPPEN: MAJULI, ASSAM

Sunsets on Majuli are always serene and spectacular



### Essentials

We accept that travel to Majuli is not advised at present; we hope that this information will prove useful once restrictions are lifted.

#### → BEST TIME TO VISIT

Avoid visiting Majuli from July to September when the Brahmaputra is in full spate. October to March is ideal. November is a great time to visit if you are interested in the *Rasilila* festival at the *satras*.

#### → GETTING THERE & AROUND

SpiceJet, Vistara and IndiGo fly to Dibrugarh Airport, three hours away from Majuli, while IndiGo flies to the Defence airport at Jorhat, two hours from the landing stage at Neemati.

Hiring a car is ideal to take you around, although public transport is known to run fairly efficiently.

#### → GOOD TO KNOW

**Kipepeo** organises journeys into the North East (like the one detailed in this feature). Choose from ones that cater to different interests or work with Piran Elavia to tailor-make your own exploration (00-91-99300-02412; [www.kipepeo.in](http://www.kipepeo.in))

### WHERE TO STAY

**Jyoti's Cottages** are perfect for a stay immersed in nature. There are five bamboo cottages, with little sit-outs and en suite bathrooms with Western loos (bring your own toiletries if you need anything beyond the basic). Everything is very clean, and there are nets to keep the mozzies away. Breakfast is served in the communal dining room, straight off the kitchen, and dinner can be ordered (00-91-94356-57282; *Garamur Satra*, Majuli 785104; from ₹1,000).

### WHAT TO BUY

The traditional *mekhela chador* and other hand-woven items are available from stores and a weaving cooperative in Majuli market (from ₹750).

Ask to stop in at a mustard oil press.

Apart from the opportunity to buy very good oil (from ₹65/500ml), you will also see the whole gritty process. After the oil has been extracted, the pulp is used in chutneys and fish feed.

Outside the *satras*, you will find stalls selling local jaggery (₹40/500g). Pick up a round if you're adding to your stash of foodie buys.

You can also buy the beautiful handmade fans at the Auniati *satra* (from ₹1,000).



### WHERE TO EAT

Let's put this out there to start off: Food on Majuli is simple and unpretentious, and very fresh and tasty. Do stock up on some snacks and other edibles if you tend to get hungry out of meal times.

On the way from the airport to the Neemati ferry stop, **Relaxy Inn** could be your first taste of an Assamese meal. Order the veg *thali* (₹100) and then add on the non veg if you must (duck curry from ₹100; local chicken curry from ₹120; mutton curry from ₹110). Prep time could be 20 to 30 minutes; don't expect fancy decor (Jorhat Bypass; 11am – 11pm).

Ask Piran (see *Good to Know*) or Jyoti (*Where to Stay*) about booking a meal with **Ritu Khataniar** at the Bengunaati *satra*. This meal also offers a glimpse into a typical home in a family-style *satra* (from ₹250 for a veg meal with fried fish). After looking down at the unofficial sanctuary for whistling ducks off the bridge on the way to Kamlabari, step into **Dutta Hotel**, known for its tea and snacks. Everyone drops in here for a cuppa and *nimki* (savoury fried pastries) or *goja* and *khaja* (sugar-glazed fried pastries), all under ₹10.

It makes sense to book the evening meal with your stay option, since Majuli seems to shut down early for the night.



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