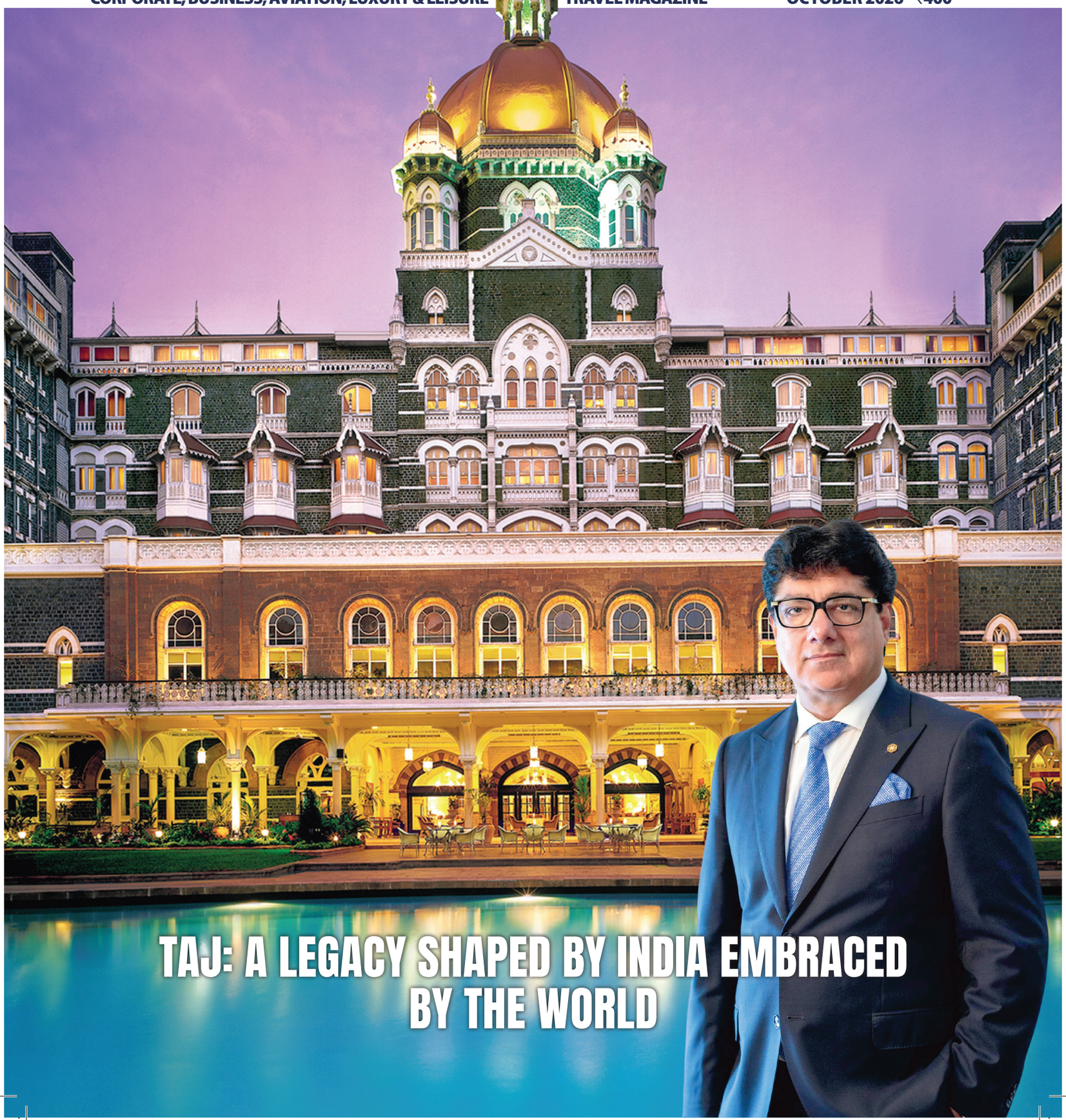
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TAJ: A LEGACY SHAPED BY INDIA EMBRACED BY THE WORLD

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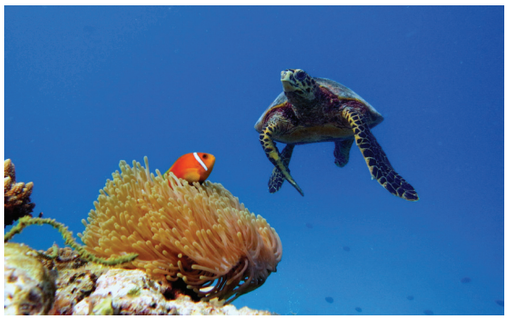
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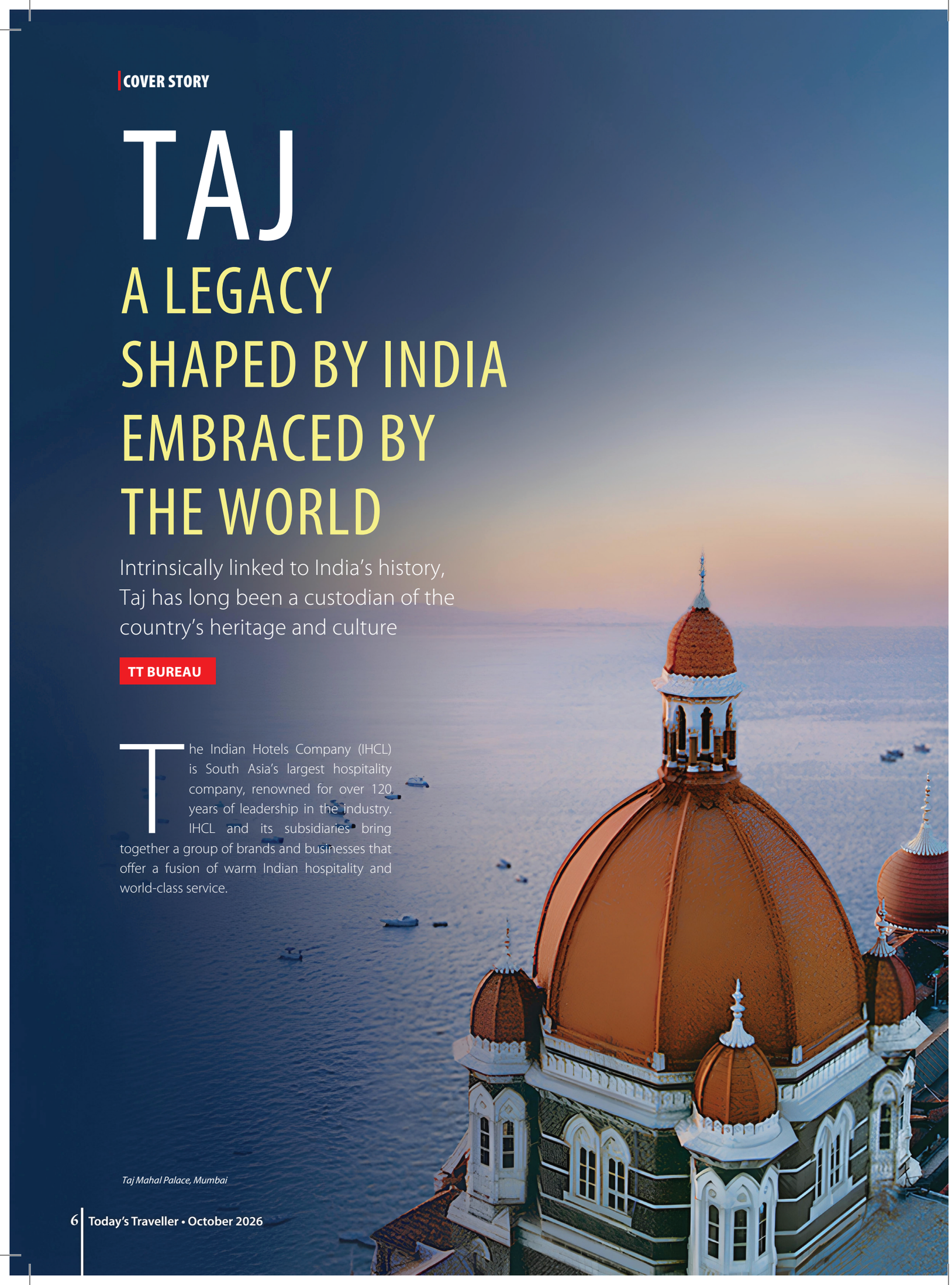
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TAJ
A LEGACY SHAPED BY INDIA EMBRACED BY THE WORLD

Intrinsically linked to India's history, Taj has long been a custodian of the country's heritage and culture

TT BUREAU

The Indian Hotels Company (IHCL) is South Asia's largest hospitality company, renowned for over 120 years of leadership in the industry. IHCL and its subsidiaries bring together a group of brands and businesses that offer a fusion of warm Indian hospitality and world-class service.



Taj Mahal Palace, Mumbai

These include Taj – the iconic brand for the most discerning travellers and ranked as World's Strongest Luxury Hotel Brand 2026 and India's Strongest Brand 2026 as per Brand Finance; Claridges Collection, a curated set of boutique luxury hotels merging elegance with historical charm; Brij, an experiential leisure offering; Atmantan, one of India's leading integrated wellness destinations; SeleQtions, a named collection of hotels; Gateway, full-service hotels designed to be your gateway to exceptional destinations; Vivanta, sophisticated upscale hotels; Tree of Life, private escapes in tranquil settings; Ginger, which is revolutionising the mid-scale segment and amã Stays & Trails, a premium homestay offering.

Puneet Chhatwal, Managing Director and CEO, IHCL, said, "Recognising India's heterogenous market landscape, IHCL has pivoted from a branded house to a house of brands. Today we have expanded our brandscape to 14 major brands across all segments including the onboarding of Claridges Collection, a boutique luxury offering, the acquisition of a controlling stake in Atmantan, an integrated wellness centre, and Brij Hospitality, an experiential leisure offering. Like a string of pearls, each brand has a clearly defined identity and purpose, coming together to create a portfolio that caters to the diverse travel needs of today's consumer. With that, we are a portfolio of 650 hotels including 268 in the pipeline globally across 4 continents, 15 countries and over 300 locations."

TAJ, THE CROWN JEWEL

Incorporated by the founder of the Tata Group, Jamsetji Tata, the Company opened its first hotel – The Taj Mahal Palace, in Bombay in 1903. Built between 1898 and 1903, the hotel was decades ahead of its time, introducing electric lighting, German elevators, Turkish baths, and grand ballrooms.

Today, among the world's largest luxury hotel collection, the iconic brand Taj has a unique portfolio of Grand Palaces, Iconic City Hotels, Wildlife Safaris, Beach and Hill Resorts and Service Residences which is now over ~150 hotels across 15 countries including India, North America, United Kingdom, Germany, Africa, the Middle East, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bhutan and Nepal. Taj celebrates India's cultural heritage, creating unforgettable experiences and shares a distinct emotional connect with its guests for over generations. For over 120 years, Taj has been a symbol of pride not just for IHCL, but also for the country.

With a legacy of pioneering destinations, Taj has played a key role in boosting India's tourism in regions like Rajasthan, Goa, Kerala, the Andamans, the North East as well as Lakshadweep — elevating India's position on the global travel and tourism map while driving economic growth and supporting local livelihoods.

"Taj has long served as an ambassador of Indian hospitality on the global stage, introducing travellers to a distinctive philosophy of hospitality rooted in warmth, authenticity and cultural richness. With a presence across key gateway cities including London, New York, Frankfurt, Dubai, Cape Town and



Puneet Chhatwal, Managing Director and CEO, IHCL

> "Taj has spent years perfecting its craft, decades earning a reputation, and over a century building a culture; Tajness is the soul of our robust hospitality ecosystem that subtly guides all our behaviours. Tajness is the way we do, what we do; our distinctive service ethos."
>
> **- Puneet Chhatwal, Managing Director and CEO, IHCL**

destinations across the Indian Sub-Continent, Taj has showcased the best of India to the world while setting benchmarks for service excellence. This legacy, shaped by India and embraced by the world, continues to define Taj as an enduring symbol of Indian hospitality," added Puneet Chhatwal, Managing Director and CEO, IHCL.



Taj Lake Palace, Udaipur

> "With over 150 hotels globally under the Taj brand, we are strengthening our presence in key international gateway cities while continuing to pioneer destinations and shaping India's travel landscape. As we expand our footprint, Taj remains a proud ambassador of Indian hospitality, taking its timeless service ethos and India's cultural richness to travellers around the world."
>
> **- Puneet Chhatwal, Managing Director and CEO, IHCL**



St. James' Court, A Taj Hotel

A GLOBAL FOOTPRINT

The brand's expansion into international markets has been shaped by its pioneering spirit, opening new destinations, restoring historic landmarks and elevating Indian hospitality. Taj has played a defining role in shaping global perceptions of India's rich hospitality heritage by thoughtfully revitalising historic properties and creating enduring symbols of luxury. In London, St. James' Court, A Taj Hotel and Taj 51 Buckingham Gate Suites and Residences occupy a distinguished address in Westminster, moments from Buckingham Palace and the Houses of Parliament. In the United States, The Pierre, Taj's flagship hotel in New York, continues to uphold its legacy as one of the city's most iconic luxury hotels, blending timeless elegance with the warmth of Taj hospitality.

In Dubai, the brand offers three distinctive experiences through Taj Dubai in Downtown Dubai, Taj Jumeirah Lakes Towers, and Taj Exotica Resort & Spa, The Palm, Dubai, an exclusive beachfront retreat on the iconic Palm Jumeirah. In South Africa, Taj Cape Town is housed within a historic landmark that once served as the South African Reserve Bank, and the brand stepped into Greater Kruger with Taj Bush Lodge, the first of three luxury wilderness lodges.



The Pierre, A Taj Hotel, New York



Taj 51 Buckingham Gate Suites & Residences, London

In Bhutan, Taj Gangtey Resort & Spa in Phobjikha and Taj Paro Resort & Spa in Paro offers a window to Bhutan's soul, while in Germany, Taj Hessischer Hof, Frankfurt combines European grandeur with the hallmark warmth and service of Indian hospitality.

TAJ AND ITS FORMATS

Taj's portfolio is expressed through a diverse collection of experiences that reflect the many facets of Indian hospitality. From iconic city landmarks such Taj Palace, New Delhi, Taj Mahal, New Delhi, Taj West End, Bengaluru, Taj Bengal, Kolkata and Taj Lands End, Mumbai, to celebrated heritage palaces, the brand has shaped travel experiences across India's most prominent destinations.

Building on this legacy, Taj Bandstand in Mumbai is a landmark project that will redefine the city's skyline. Its luxury beach and hill resorts, spanning Goa, Kerala, Darjeeling, Rishikesh and the Andamans, are deeply rooted in their natural surroundings, offering immersive destination-led experiences. Extending its spirit of exploration, Taj Safaris pioneered India's first luxury wildlife circuit, with luxury lodges across Madhya Pradesh and Nepal that combine conservation-led tourism with bespoke hospitality. More recently, Taj has expanded into branded luxury serviced residences through Taj Wellington Mews and upcoming developments in India and international markets.

IHCL recently announced the development of Taj Sky View Hotels and Residences in Chennai featuring a 253-key Taj hotel; 123-key Taj branded residences and 336-apartments at Taj Wellington Mews, Al Marjan Island, Ras Al Khaimah; Taj Skyscape in Noida – a 150-room luxury hotel alongside 74 Taj Branded Serviced Apartments and foraying into the branded villa segment, Taj Mount Kusur Resort and Villas in Lonavala, an integrated luxury development comprising 32 branded villas and a 100-key Taj resort. Taj's varied formats seamlessly blend heritage, luxury, nature, adventure and contemporary lifestyle experiences under one iconic brand.



Taj Bandstand

LIVING LEGACIES

Intrinsically linked to India's history, Taj has long been a custodian of the country's heritage and culture. With a presence across iconic historic destinations including Udaipur, Jaipur, Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, Gwalior, Hyderabad, Varanasi and Mumbai, the brand is committed to preserving and celebrating the unique cultural legacy of each region. Over the decades, Taj has restored and revitalised some of India's most celebrated pre-independence era landmarks, rekindling the grandeur of the nation's rich past. As India's largest palace operator, Taj takes pride in safeguarding the country's architectural heritage while offering authentic palace experiences that showcase the timeless spirit of Indian hospitality.

The Taj Mahal Palace, Mumbai, the brand's iconic flagship and enduring symbol of Indian hospitality since 1903, stands majestically overlooking the Gateway of India. Equally distinguished are Taj Lake Palace, Udaipur, set amidst the tranquil waters of Lake Pichola and Taj Falaknuma Palace, Hyderabad, a restored jewel of the Nizam era. Both properties were the first hotels in India to be awarded the prestigious Three Michelin Keys in the inaugural Michelin Key Guide for India 2025, recognising them as destinations offering extraordinary stays. Alongside the regal splendour of Rambagh Palace, Jaipur, and the architectural grandeur of Umaid Bhawan Palace, Jodhpur, renowned for its distinctive Art Deco influences, these iconic palaces are living testaments to India's rich history, royal legacy and sense of place.



Umaid Bhawan Palace, Jodhpur

EXPRESSIONS OF TAJ

Beyond its portfolio of iconic hotels, palaces, resorts and residences, Taj extends its distinctive philosophy of hospitality through a range of curated experiences and platforms that reflect the many expressions of the brand. The Chambers, India's most iconic business club with a legacy spanning over five decades, offers an exclusive network and bespoke privileges across landmark Taj hotels in India and international destinations including Dubai, London and Frankfurt. Rooted in India's ancient wellness traditions, J Wellness Circle delivers holistic and immersive well-being experiences that combine indigenous healing practices with contemporary therapies. The Taj experience is further enriched through Khazana, which showcases handcrafted and sustainably sourced products while supporting India's artisan communities.

A defining expression of Taj is its enduring culinary leadership. For over a century, the brand has introduced pioneering dining concepts and global cuisines to India, from Sichuan and

> “Paathya embodies IHCL’s vision of growth with responsibility. It provides a holistic framework that integrates sustainability, social impact and mindful governance into the way we operate and grow. As we build for the future, Paathya will continue to shape our journey towards a more inclusive, sustainable and impactful company.”
>
> **- Puneet Chhatwal, Managing Director and CEO, IHCL**



Skilling - The Paathya Way

contemporary Japanese to Mediterranean, Thai and Vietnamese cuisine. Its portfolio of celebrated restaurants includes Golden Dragon, India’s first Sichuan restaurant; Wasabi by Morimoto, Varq, House of Ming, Souk and Thai Pavilion, each setting benchmarks in their respective cuisines. Taj continues to shape India’s culinary landscape through innovative concepts such as Loya, which celebrates the rich food traditions of North India, and has presence in New Delhi, Bengaluru and Mumbai.

Aligned with IHCL’s ESG+ framework Paathya, Taj offers environmentally conscious gatherings that integrate sustainability into every aspect of the meeting experience.

THE PAATHYA WAY

Leading the industry with responsible hospitality practices, IHCL’s ESG+ framework, Paathya integrates environmental stewardship and social responsibility into the heart of its operations, ensuring that the company’s accelerated growth remains a sustainable promise to all stakeholders.

Through ecological sensitivity assessments across its portfolio, IHCL has strengthened its understanding of environmental impacts and opportunities to support biodiversity conservation and ecosystem resilience across Taj Exotica Resort & Spa, Andamans; Taj Madikeri Resort & Spa, Coorg; Taj Aravali Resort & Spa, Udaipur; and the Taj Rishikesh cluster.



Tajness

Nature-positive initiatives include mangrove conservation and indigenous plantation drives in the Andamans, coral reef restoration in the Maldives with more than 10,000 healthy corals nurtured over the last decade, a zero tree-felling resort at Taj Madikeri, large-scale afforestation in the Delhi NCR and wildlife conservation-led experiences through Taj Safaris.

India’s heritage remains one of IHCL’s most impactful tools for community development, creating economic value while preserving cultural identity. On World Heritage Day, IHCL’s HeritEdge initiative celebrated living traditions through thoughtfully curated experiences across its hotels, including craft workshops, classical music and dance performances, heritage walks, culinary showcases and artisan markets. More than 140 initiatives engaged over 3,900 guests and supported approximately 500 artisans during FY 2025-26 through enhanced visibility and income-generating opportunities.

To support local economic development, the company partners with governments, educational institutions and industry stakeholders to strengthen talent pipelines and create meaningful livelihood opportunities for young people and their families. Bridging the employability gap, IHCL is committed to skilling 1,00,000 youth in India by 2030. It partners and operates a network of skilling centres across the country like Chamoli in Uttarakhand, Tumkur in Karnataka, Chhindwara in Madhya Pradesh, Navi Mumbai in Maharashtra and Ekta Nagar in Gujarat among others, investing in local youth by equipping them with capabilities across core hotel functions, complemented by work-readiness programmes that build essential behavioural and service mindsets. Since 2020, we have trained over 49,000 youth.

Through partnerships with organisations such as Tata STRIVE, the Ministry of Skill Development, CII, Head Held High Foundation and in regions like Jammu & Kashmir, with the Indian Army and REACHA, IHCL is able to scale training and contribute to a growing pool of talent.

JOURNEYS ACROSS THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT SPECIAL 2026





Hawa Mahal, Jaipur. Image Courtesy: Aditya Siva, Unsplash

WHY DESTINATION CLASSICS STILL RULE THE TRAVEL MAP

Fame should have made them predictable. Instead, India's great tourism classics have kept their edge, their scale and their power to draw us back.

KAMAL GILL

We know some destinations before we ever visit them. The Taj Mahal has already appeared in schoolbooks, family albums and films. Jaipur lives in colour, architecture and celebration. Udaipur arrives through water and palaces. Konark is instantly recognisable by a wheel carved in stone. The Rann of Kutch is already a white horizon in the mind.

By the time we finally reach them, they should feel familiar. And yet they rarely do. That is the curious strength of India's great tourism destinations. They have spent decades in public view and still manage to resist becoming background scenery.

I find this remarkable, especially because the traveller has changed so completely.

One generation travelled with printed tickets, fixed itineraries and a camera that allowed 24 or 36 photographs. Another discovered backpacking, boutique stays and the freedom of online bookings. Today, journeys are shaped by food trails, architecture walks, design, festivals, wellness, road trips, destination weddings and a constant stream of recommendations arriving through a screen.

The destination now has to compete with everything the traveller already knows about it. The best ones survive that competition.

The Taj can still silence someone who has seen it a thousand times before. Jaipur begins to look different once you move beyond its most familiar facades and into its bazaars, workshops

and old neighbourhoods. Udaipur changes every few hours with the light on its lakes. At Konark, the scale and precision of stone become far more arresting than any image can suggest. In Kutch, moments arise when almost nothing occupies the view, and that emptiness becomes unforgettable.

These are experiences that refuse to flatten into familiarity.

Delhi, Agra, Jaipur, Udaipur, Konark, Puri, Mahabalipuram, Kochi, Aurangabad, the Rann of Kutch and Bodh Gaya have remained part of India's tourism vocabulary through several generations of travel. Delhi, Agra and Jaipur still anchor the Golden Triangle, one of the country's most established journeys for Indian and international visitors. Elsewhere, pilgrimage towns, port cities, temple landscapes, ancient cave complexes and vast natural terrains continue to hold their place on itineraries that look very different from those of thirty or forty years ago.

What interests me is why.

Age alone cannot explain it. Nor can architectural grandeur. India has an extraordinary abundance of both. Their endurance comes from the fact that they never offer only one story.

Delhi can be read through empire, migration, food, architecture and neighbourhood life. Agra can begin with the Taj and lead into a much larger Mughal world. Jaipur may be approached through forts and palaces, or through gems, textiles, crafts, astronomy and urban planning. Puri is simultaneously pilgrimage, ritual, food tradition and seaside holiday. Kochi opens through maritime history, trade, faith, art and contemporary culture.

The same pattern repeats elsewhere. A monument draws the eye, then the destination expands.

This is why generations can travel to the same destination without really making the same journey. International visitors arrive with one set of references. Domestic travellers often arrive with another. Both can still be surprised.

And that may be the real distinction of a classic destination. The destination stays. The experience keeps changing.

AGRA: THE MONUMENT WE THINK WE ALREADY KNOW

There may be no harder test of a famous destination than the Taj Mahal. Most of us have seen it before we see it.

It arrives through schoolbooks, advertisements, cinema, travel brochures, wedding imagery and innumerable photographs. Its silhouette has become visual shorthand for India itself. By the time many visitors reach Agra, there should logically be very little left to discover.

And then there it is.

Shah Jahan commissioned the Taj in memory of Mumtaz Mahal, with construction of the principal mausoleum taking place between 1632 and 1648; the wider complex was completed later. UNESCO describes it as one of the world's most admired heritage masterpieces. The facts explain its importance. They do not quite explain its effect.

For me, Agra shows the difference between recognising a monument and experiencing its scale, proportion, material, and atmosphere physically. A photograph gives me the dome. Being



Jal Mahal, Jaipur. Image Courtesy: Aditya Siva, Unsplash

there gives me the long approach, the geometry of the garden, the changing character of white marble, the calligraphy that adjusts to distance, the Yamuna behind the mausoleum and the extraordinary discipline of the composition.

Then Agra begins opening outward.

There is Agra Fort, there are Mughal gardens, and beyond the city stands Fatehpur Sikri, Akbar's planned capital of the 16th century, occupied as the imperial capital for only about a decade. Suddenly the destination stops being "the city of the Taj" and becomes an introduction to power, design, imperial ambition, faith, craft and the extraordinary architectural vocabulary of Mughal India.

That is how a classic survives. It gives the first-time visitor an icon and the returning visitor a context.

DELHI: A CITY THAT NEVER ALLOWS ONE STORY TO WIN

Delhi's great advantage is almost the opposite. Nobody could ever reduce it to one monument.

I can begin at Qutb Minar, whose 72.5-metre tower belongs to a complex tracing the architectural transformation that accompanied the establishment of new political power in northern India from the late 12th century onward. I can move centuries ahead to Humayun's Tomb, completed in the 16th century and recognised as the first great garden-tomb of the Indian subcontinent, an architectural lineage that would eventually reach the Taj Mahal.

Then there is Shahjahanabad, the Red Fort, Jama Masjid, Chandni Chowk and lanes in which religion, commerce, food and everyday life refuse to stay separated into neat heritage categories.

That density is exactly why Delhi keeps working across generations.

For an international visitor, it can function as an accelerated introduction to India's historical scale. For an Indian visitor, the relationship is often more complicated and personal. Contemporary Delhi does not stand politely outside its history. Metro lines, markets, restaurants, galleries, neighbourhoods, offices and new architecture run directly beside centuries-old remains.

I think this is crucial. Heritage destinations become fragile when we freeze them into a single historical moment. Delhi remains compelling because time here is untidy. You are never allowed to forget that cities outlive empires.



Konark Sun Temple, Puri. Image Courtesy: Bipulswain, Pexels



Red Fort, Delhi. Image Courtesy: Ranjeet Chauhan, Pexels

JAIPUR: THE PLEASURE OF A CITY CONCEIVED AS A WHOLE

Jaipur gives me a different sensation: order. Founded by Sawai Jai Singh II in 1727, its walled city was deliberately laid out on the plains using a grid, with broad streets, public squares, bazaars and designated urban sectors. Commerce was built into the plan from the beginning, and many of those trading and craft traditions continue.

This matters because Jaipur is frequently consumed as a collection of individual images: Hawa Mahal, Amer, City Palace, jewellery, textiles, block printing, blue pottery, pink facades. The city makes much more sense when I see these pieces together.

Architecture, astronomy and commerce meet here unusually well. Jantar Mantar, built in the early 18th century, contains around 20 monumental fixed instruments designed for naked-eye astronomical observation and remains the most complete and best-preserved of India's historic observatories.

That is one Jaipur. Another exists in its bazaars. Another in its food. Another in the extraordinary continuity of jewellery, gems, textiles, painting and decorative craft. This is also why younger travellers keep rediscovering Jaipur, even though generations before them already did. A grandparent might have arrived for palaces. Their children may have come for heritage hotels and shopping. Today's Gen Z might construct a weekend around design, food, craft studios and contemporary fashion.

The city absorbs all of them. Its heritage has never depended solely on looking backwards.

UDAIPUR: WHERE GEOGRAPHY COMPLETES THE ARCHITECTURE

Some destinations build their reputation on monuments. Udaipur's magic is more collaborative. The palaces need the water. The water needs the hills. The hills need the changing light.

Udaipur was founded in the 16th century as Mewar's new capital. The City Palace developed into a large complex of major and minor palaces above Lake Pichola; Jagniwas and Jagmandir occupy islands within the lake. You can catalogue its architectural details endlessly, yet the enduring image is usually spatial: white architecture against water, the Aravallis beyond, reflections shifting as evening arrives.

That visual composition has given Udaipur remarkable range across generations. It belongs to heritage tourism, certainly. It also belongs to romance, weddings, luxury travel, art, photography and the very simple pleasure of being beside water.



Rann of Kutch. Image Courtesy: Amitrai, Pexels

And because water changes a city by the hour, Udaipur rarely feels static. Morning from a palace terrace is not the same as afternoon on a street in the old city. Sunset from Lake Pichola is another place again. Famous cities often depend on a defining viewpoint. Udaipur seems to possess dozens.

MAHABALIPURAM: A 1,300-YEAR-OLD CONVERSATION WITH STONE

Mahabalipuram, or Mamallapuram, offers yet another proposition. Here, architecture frequently feels like experimentation caught in stone.

Created under the Pallavas during the 7th and 8th centuries, the UNESCO-listed group includes rock-cut caves, monolithic rathas, great open-air reliefs and structural temples such as the Shore Temple. The sculptural traditions developed here also influenced artistic production beyond India, including parts of Southeast Asia.

What holds me is the variety. Walk a relatively compact area and the architectural language keeps changing. Rock becomes shrine. A boulder becomes sculpture. A wall becomes narrative. A temple stands close enough to the Bay of Bengal for sea air and weather to shape its visual character.

It works wonderfully for visitors who know very little before they arrive because the forms are so immediate. It works equally well for someone studying South Indian architecture because these experiments sit at an important point in the development of the Dravidian temple tradition.

And Chennai's proximity has helped keep Mahabalipuram in the lives of domestic travellers. School trips, family drives, cultural itineraries, architecture students, weekend tourists and international heritage travellers keep overlapping.

Sometimes longevity has a very practical ingredient: accessibility.

KOCHI: HISTORY ARRIVED HERE BY SEA

Kochi's appeal comes from a different kind of movement. Ships anchored it. Trade shaped it. Religion layered it. Different communities made homes here.

Walk through Fort Kochi and Mattancherry and history appears in an unusually concentrated maritime form: churches, trading houses, synagogal heritage, colonial architecture, warehouses, spice connections and waterfront life. St Francis Church is recognised as India's oldest European church, while the great cantilevered Chinese fishing nets have become one of Fort Kochi's defining visual signatures. Kerala Tourism traces its local presence back several centuries.

But what keeps Kochi contemporary is that its cosmopolitanism does not feel like a recently invented tourism strategy. The city has been looking outward for centuries. That history makes today's galleries, cafés, design spaces, restored buildings and cultural events feel like another chapter rather than an interruption.



Taj Mahal, Agra. Image Courtesy: Sylwia Bartyzel, Unsplash

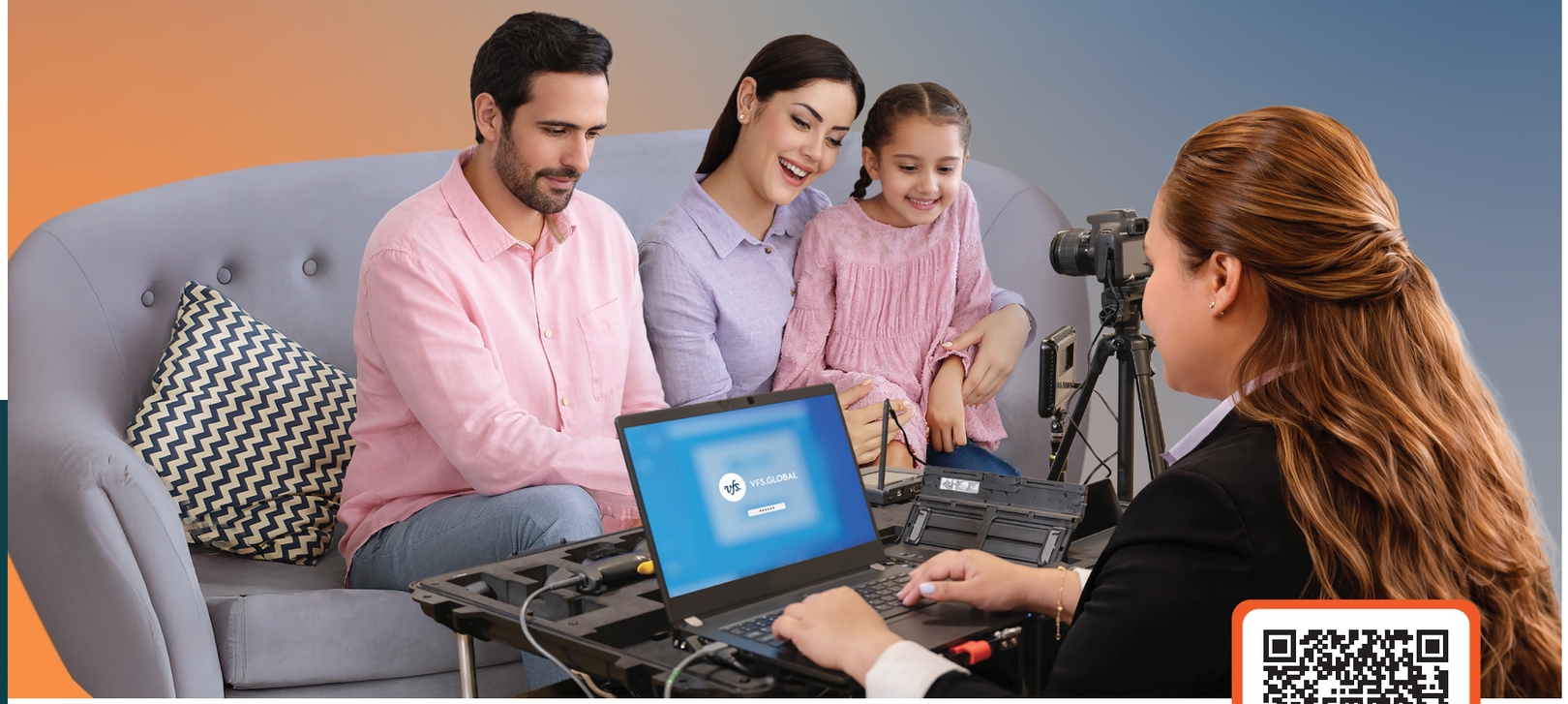
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Shore Temple, Mahabalipuram. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

I find that especially interesting because the modern traveller increasingly wants cities that can sustain wandering. Kochi excels at it. The attraction is not one overwhelming monument. It is accumulation: a church door, a street name, fishing nets against the evening sky, an old trading quarter, spices, ferry journeys, traces of Portuguese, Dutch, British, Jewish, Arab and Kerala histories intersecting.

Kochi encourages curiosity instead of prescribing a single gaze. That ages very well.

THE RANN OF KUTCH: WHEN EMPTINESS BECOMES THE ATTRACTION

Then I reach Kutch, where almost every assumption about India's classic heritage destinations changes. No great palace is required to dominate the frame. The horizon does the work.

The Rann is an enormous salt-marsh landscape, divided broadly into the Great and Little Rann. Monsoon water transforms portions of it into seasonal wetland; after the water retreats, the salt landscape re-emerges. Its inclusion among India's enduring tourism icons is particularly interesting because its mass-tourism identity is newer than that of Agra, Jaipur or Puri. Yet the geographical identity remains ageless.

Kutch demonstrates how a destination can become a modern classic without sacrificing regional specificity. The White Rann supplied the spectacular image. Rann Utsav helped create a recognisable tourism season around it, bringing Kutchi craft, textiles, folk performance, food and local culture into the visitor experience.

The ancient landscape remains the essential event. Standing before a huge, nearly uninterrupted horizon alters your sense of scale. Human activity seems temporarily reduced. At sunset and under moonlight, even colour appears to behave differently.

And then Kutch refuses to remain empty. Move beyond the white salt and the region fills with embroidery, weaving, leatherwork, communities, wildlife, food, historical settlements and archaeological connections.

It is one of the clearest examples of the new traveller rediscovering something old: the value of landscape itself.

THE INHERITANCE OF TRAVEL

The more I consider these places, the less I believe their endurance is accidental.

They possess what new destinations spend years trying to create: recognisability. But recognisability alone is dangerous. Fame produces expectations, crowds, repetition and, eventually, the possibility of becoming a place people visit because they believe they ought to.

India's great tourism classics have survived that danger because the icon is rarely the whole destination. Perhaps that is why the distinction between domestic and international visitor ultimately matters less here than we assume.

The destination has not changed in its authentic self. We see it through different lenses each time we visit. And perhaps that is the greatest strength any classic destination can possess.

Every generation arrives with different questions. The destination still has answers.



Chinese Fishing Nets, Fort Kochi Beach. Image Courtesy: Medhavi Davda



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An Evening at New Market. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

WHERE THE OLD CITY STILL SHOPS

Old bazaars remain among the most vivid places to experience the subcontinent's cities and craftsmanship

TT BUREAU

Old bazaars have their own tempo. A little louder, a little tighter, and far more alive than the polished shopping streets that came later.

They are built from generations of trade, jewellers behind glass counters, spice merchants working from sacks and tins, textile sellers unfolding fabric across narrow shops, food stalls drawing regulars through the day.

Their appeal lies in that overlap. Heritage sits beside haggling, craftsmanship beside convenience, old family businesses beside new customers. Across the Indian subcontinent, the bazaar remains one of the most immediate ways to experience how a city moves, buys, eats and remembers.

CHANDNI CHOWK, DELHI

Dating to the 17th century and closely associated with Jahanara Begum's planning of Shahjahanabad, Chandni Chowk remains one of the great historic commercial districts of the Indian subcontinent. What began as a grand Mughal-era avenue has evolved into an extraordinary concentration of specialised markets, food shops, places of worship and old residential quarters.

Each lane has developed its own identity. Khari Baoli is known for spices, dried fruits and wholesale ingredients, while Dariba Kalan has long been associated with silver and jewellery. Kinari Bazaar is packed with trims, fabrics, embellishments and wedding accessories. Elsewhere, old havelis, narrow lanes and shopfronts sit beside some of Delhi's most recognised food addresses. Parathas, jalebis, chaat, kebabs and traditional sweets remain inseparable from the Chandni Chowk experience. Cycle rickshaws, handcarts, shoppers and traders keep the neighbourhood in constant motion, giving Old Delhi one of its most distinctive street scenes.

JOHARI BAZAAR, JAIPUR

Within Jaipur's historic walled city, Johari Bazaar reflects the city's long association with gems, jewellery and fine craftsmanship. Its colonnaded streets and characteristic pink façades form part of the urban plan that gives the old city its immediately recognisable visual identity.

Generations of jewellers and gemstone dealers continue to work here, with shop windows filled with precious and semi-precious stones, gold jewellery, silver pieces and traditional

Rajasthani designs. Meenakari, kundan and other specialised forms of jewellery making remain closely connected to Jaipur's craft reputation. The surrounding market district extends beyond jewellery. Lac bangles, block-printed textiles, bandhani, embroidered fabrics, mojris, handicrafts and wedding wear fill adjoining streets and lanes. Nearby Maniharon ka Raasta remains associated with lac-bangle makers, while other parts of the old city specialise in textiles and metalwork. Shopping here remains closely tied to the skills and family businesses that have shaped Jaipur's commercial identity for generations.

LAAD BAZAAR, HYDERABAD

Running beside the Charminar, Laad Bazaar is one of Hyderabad's most recognisable traditional shopping streets. Narrow, busy and intensely colourful, it is best known for lac bangles, particularly those decorated with stones, glass and intricate embellishment.

Bangle shops line the market in seemingly endless succession, joined by stores selling pearls, embroidered fabrics, brocades, wedding accessories, silverware and perfumes. Hyderabad's connection with fine textiles and ceremonial clothing is visible in sherwanis, dupattas, embellished fabrics and richly worked garments displayed throughout the area. Traditional craft traditions including Bidri work also appear among the market's many specialised goods.

The setting adds significantly to its character. Wooden balconies, old façades and closely packed shopfronts create a distinctive Old Hyderabad streetscape, with the Charminar always close by. Bargaining remains part of the commercial atmosphere, while nearby food streets bring biryani, kebabs, sweets and Irani chai into the wider market experience.



Johari Bazaar. Image Courtesy: Gaurav, Flickr

NEW MARKET, KOLKATA

Established in 1874, Kolkata's New Market represents a different chapter in the evolution of the subcontinent's historic bazaars. Originally known as Sir Stuart Hogg Market, it emerged during the colonial period and developed into one of the city's most important shopping addresses.

Its red-brick Gothic-style complex, clock tower, covered passages and long arcades give it a strong architectural identity. Inside, the market functions as a maze of specialised shops selling flowers, clothing, leather goods, jewellery, household products, fresh produce, meat, seafood and confectionery. The range is part of its appeal: expensive purchases and everyday necessities often sit only a few doors apart.

Long-established businesses add another layer to its character. Nahoum & Sons remains one of the market's best-known names for cakes and baked goods, while specialist stores



Aerial View of Charminar, Hyderabad, Telangana. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons



Urban Scene in Kolkata. Image Courtesy: Dibakar Roy, Pexels

have retained loyal customers over generations. Surrounding streets expand the experience further, with booksellers, restaurants and shops contributing to an area that remains deeply woven into Kolkata's commercial life.

ASAN BAZAAR, KATHMANDU

Asan has been one of Kathmandu's most important trading centres for centuries. Located at a busy six-way intersection in the old city, it remains a place where neighbourhood commerce, architecture and historic trade routes come together within a remarkably compact space.

Shops and street vendors sell spices, grains, vegetables, dried foods, kitchenware, fabrics, brassware and household goods. Produce is piled high in baskets, spice shops spill colour onto the street and small businesses occupy the ground floors of traditional Newari buildings. At the centre of the neighbourhood stands the Annapurna Temple, surrounded by the constant movement of shoppers, vendors, bicycles and delivery carts.



New Market, Kolkata. Image Courtesy: Pensivelaw1, Flickr

Asan's strength lies in the fact that it remains an everyday market rather than a preserved historic attraction. Kathmandu residents continue to shop here for cooking ingredients and household essentials, while visitors encounter one of the clearest surviving examples of the city's traditional commercial geography.

INDRA CHOWK, KATHMANDU

A short distance from Asan and Kathmandu Durbar Square, Indra Chowk forms another important part of the old city's trading network. Its streets combine historic architecture, long-established shops, temples and busy commercial activity.

Textiles are particularly prominent, with merchants selling fabrics, shawls, blankets and clothing alongside beads, ornaments, traditional foods and household products. The Akash Bhairav Temple dominates part of the square and adds to the dense architectural character of the area. Narrow lanes lead towards other markets and historic quarters, making Indra Chowk part of a much larger pedestrian network across central Kathmandu.

The square also plays a visible role during major local festivals, when streets normally dominated by commerce take on an additional public character.

PETTAH, COLOMBO

Pettah is Colombo's bustling commercial quarter, a maze of streets just beyond the Fort district where wholesale trade, street shopping and long-established businesses come together.

Different streets specialise in textiles, electronics, spices, jewellery, household goods, fresh produce and food, while Sea Street is especially known for goldsmiths and jewellery stores. Historic religious buildings and the Khan Clock Tower add to the area's layered streetscape. With pavement vendors, handcarts and tightly packed shops, Pettah remains one of Colombo's most energetic and distinctive market districts.

Centenary Farmers' Market and Traditional Markets, Thimphu, Bhutan

Thimphu's markets bring together produce, craft and everyday Bhutanese life. The Centenary Farmers' Market is known for seasonal vegetables, chillies, cheese, mushrooms, grains and fruits brought in from different parts of the country.

Nearby craft markets add handwoven textiles, jewellery, bamboo work, carved objects and locally made goods. Bhutanese fabrics, in particular, reflect regional patterns, colours and weaving traditions. Smaller in scale than the great bazaars of Delhi or Colombo, Thimphu's markets remain closely tied to local produce, traditional skills and daily commerce.

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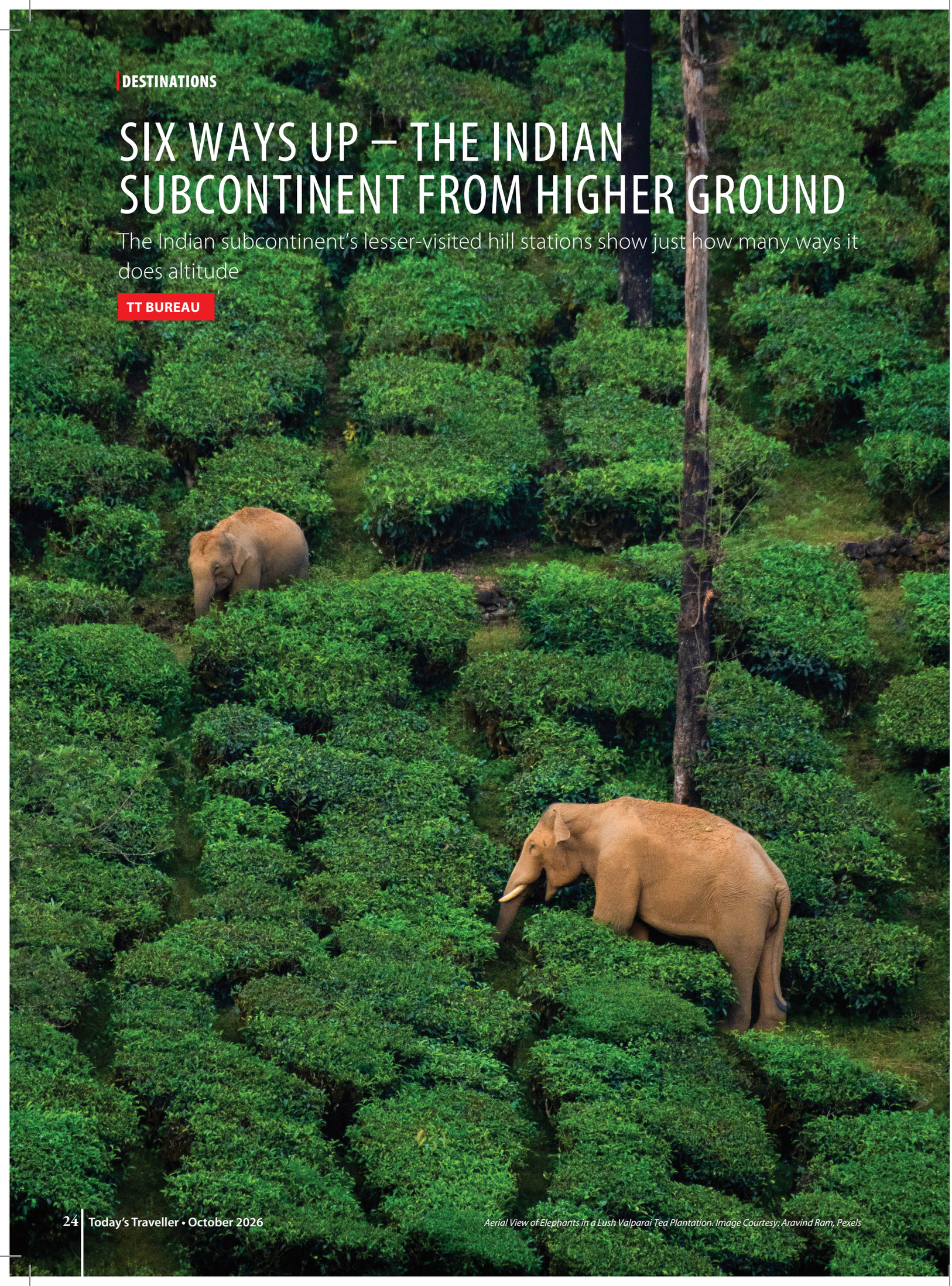
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SIX WAYS UP – THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT FROM HIGHER GROUND

The Indian subcontinent's lesser-visited hill stations show just how many ways it does altitude

TT BUREAU



Aerial View of Elephants in a Lush Valparai Tea Plantation. Image Courtesy: Aravind Ram, Pexels

Climb higher, and the subcontinent begins to change. Roads curl tighter, forests deepen, fields climb slopes, and clouds begin to move at eye level. With every rise in altitude, the landscape resets itself, bringing a new rhythm to architecture, agriculture, weather and daily life. Some hills feel lush and tropical, others austere and alpine; some open into wide valleys, others gather around ridges and old market streets. What connects them is the pleasure of arrival, that unmistakable moment when the plains fall away, and another version of the subcontinent begins.

CHINDI, HIMACHAL PRADESH, APPLE COUNTRY

The road to Chindi keeps climbing through the Karsog landscape as orchards appear beside forest, terraces step down the slopes, and deodar and pine gather in dark green folds around the valley.

Chindi is small enough that the surrounding countryside holds the eye. The pleasure lies in the scale of things, a bend opening onto orchards, wood-carved temple details, a village lane, a cold morning that smells faintly of earth and cedar.

The Karsog Valley has long been associated with orchards, fertile fields and old temples, and Chindi sits easily within that landscape.

Nearby, Mamleshwar Mahadev and Kamaksha Devi add another layer to the hills, where sacred sites feel embedded in the geography. This is Himachal at its most unhurried, with the mountain day measured in shadows, woodsmoke and the changing colour of the orchards.

KALUK, SIKKIM, KANCHENJUNGA AT THE WINDOW

Kaluk begins with the horizon. On a clear morning, Kanchenjunga rises beyond the layered hills, its presence rearranging everything around it. The settlement sits in Sikkim's Soreng district, close to Rinchenpong and Sribadam, with forested slopes, cultivated land and small mountain communities scattered across the ridges. Roads curl around the hillsides, prayer flags flash between trees, and houses seem positioned to catch either the mountain or the valley.

Nearby Rinchenpong Monastery, also known as Sang Ngag Yangtse Monastery, dates to around 1730 and is considered among Sikkim's oldest monasteries. A short distance away, Sribadam's Phuntsok Choeling Monastery belongs to the Kagyupa tradition and grew from a small local shrine established in the 20th century. Morning mist drifts across the lower slopes before revealing Kanchenjunga again. Tea arrives hot, clouds move quickly, and the great white range becomes part of breakfast.

VALPARAI, TAMIL NADU: THE HILLS TURN TROPICAL

The climb to Valparai announces a different kind of altitude. From Pollachi, the road passes Aliyar Dam and begins its famous run of around 40 hairpin bends into the Anamalai Hills. Coconut country falls away below as the air cools and forest presses closer to the road.

At roughly 3,500 feet, tea and coffee estates spread across the slopes, broken by rainforest and tall shade trees. Near Chinnakallar, one of the region's highest-rainfall pockets, the landscape stays intensely green, while Sholayar Dam opens into broad views of water, plantation and forest.

This is also elephant country. The Valparai landscape forms part of the wider Anamalai wildlife habitat, home to lion-tailed macaques, Nilgiri tahr, langurs, wild boar and leopards. At Kavarkal Estate, a statue remembers planter Carver Marsh, closely associated with the development of Valparai's early tea estates.

The atmosphere lives in smaller scenes: estate buses taking bends through mist, tea workers moving across a slope, rain collecting on leaves, and forest suddenly reclaiming the edge of the road.

TANSEN, NEPAL, LIFE ALONG THE RIDGE

Tansen is a hill town built for walking slowly. Set on the southern slope of Shreenagar Hill at around 1,372 metres, it gathers itself along steep streets and the old Tansen Bazaar, also known as Makhan Tole, where Newari houses, workshops and shops selling Palpali Dhaka cloth and brassware keep the town's trading character alive.

The streets lead towards Tansen Durbar, once the palace of Palpa's rulers, entered through the imposing Baggi Dhoka gateway. Nearby, Amar Narayan Temple and Ran-Ujjeshwari Bhagwati Temple add to a townscape shaped by centuries of Newari and regional architecture.



Chindi, HP. Image Courtesy: Apna Himachal, Facebook



Haa Valley. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

Beyond town, Rani Mahal sits dramatically beside the Kali Gandaki River, built by Khadga Shumsher Rana in memory of his wife Tej Kumari. Higher up, Shreenagar opens into sweeping views towards Dhaulagiri, Annapurna and the Himalayan ranges. Cobbled lanes tilt, carved windows look down, and daily life unfolds across slopes, courtyards and stairways. In Tansen, the history is everywhere, yet the town still feels entirely lived in.

HAA, BHUTAN, BEYOND THE HIGH PASS

The road from Paro to Haa climbs towards Chele La, nearly 4,000 metres high, where prayer flags snap in the wind and mountain ridges fill the horizon. Then the road drops through forest until the Haa Valley opens below: broad fields, scattered farmhouses, pine-darkened slopes and a river threading quietly through the valley floor.

Haa carries a sense of enclosure that gives the landscape unusual focus. Traditional houses sit among fields, and village life feels closely tied to season and terrain. At the southern entrance stand Lhakhang Karpo and Lhakhang Nagpo, the White and Black Temples, sacred sites associated with the seventh-century Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo.



Chindi. Image Courtesy: Unpredictable Photographe, Instagram



Grey Malabar Hornbill at Monica Garden Tea Bungalow, Valparai. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

Their presence gives the valley a spiritual geometry, with mountain, settlement and shrine held in the same frame. Haa opened to foreign visitors in 2002, and its seclusion remains part of its character. Evening arrives early behind the ridges; smoke lifts from houses, the temperature falls quickly, and the valley seems to draw its edges closer.

HAPUTALE, SRI LANKA | ABOVE THE TEA LINE

Haputale feels as though it sits on the rim of the island. Perched in Sri Lanka's Uva highlands, the town looks across tea-covered slopes that fall sharply towards the southern plains, with clouds moving quickly enough to erase and return the view within minutes.

The railway is part of the experience. Haputale lies on Sri Lanka's Colombo Fort–Badulla Main Line, travelled by named services such as the Podi Menike and Udarata Menike. West of town, the tracks run towards Idalgashinna, just over seven kilometres away, threading through mist, cuttings and steep green hillsides before continuing towards Ohiya and Nanu Oya.

Tea defines the surrounding landscape. At Dambatenne Tea Estate, established by Lipton interests in 1890, the factory still processes tea from the surrounding slopes. Above it, the estate road climbs towards Lipton's Seat, around 1,900 metres high, where Sir Thomas Lipton once surveyed the country below.

Early morning belongs here: tea bushes catch the light, estate paths begin to stir and cloud gathers below. Between Haputale station, Dambatenne and Idalgashinna, railway, plantation and mountain seem to run on the same rhythm.

SIX VERSIONS OF THE HILLS

Across these six places, altitude keeps changing its accent. Together they make a more curious map of the Indian subcontinent, one drawn through smaller towns and quieter roads. The reward is the feeling of arrival itself: the moment the air cools, the horizon shifts and the hills begin to reveal a character entirely their own.

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TRAILS UNDER OPEN SKIES: HIKING THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

Once the road ends, the subcontinent opens differently, across alpine lakes, high passes, flower-filled valleys, old village paths and tea country made for walking

TT BUREAU

There is a point on a mountain journey when the vehicle becomes irrelevant. The road thins, the last settlement falls behind, and distance begins to mean something else. A kilometre is measured in breath, weather, gradient and the weight of the pack. Lunch may happen beside a stream. The evening address could be a tent beneath a pass, a teahouse in a Himalayan village or a bed somewhere among Sri Lanka's tea slopes.

Across these landscapes, walking opens places that roads only hint at. Kashmir gives you lakes hidden behind successive ridges. Ladakh strips the mountains back to rock and sky. Uttarakhand turns botanical in summer. Nepal stretches the experience across entire mountain cultures, while Bhutan keeps the high camp part of the romance. Farther south, Sri Lanka replaces glaciers with tea, eucalyptus and tropical mist.

THE GREAT LAKES OF KASHMIR

The Kashmir Great Lakes trail begins near Sonamarg and rises through meadows and conifer forest towards Nichnai Pass, around 4,100 metres. Beyond it lies Vishansar, an alpine lake at about 3,710 metres, with Krishansar close above it and Gadsar reached after another high crossing. Farther on, Satsar appears as a chain of mountain lakes before the trail reaches Gangabal and Nundkol beneath Mount Harmukh. The Sonamarg route to Gangabal crosses high passes, with Gujjar and shepherd camps appearing along the way.

The mood changes by the hour. Morning can begin with sheep moving through wet grass and end beside a lake turning steel blue under evening cloud. Around Vishansar, small glaciers sit in gullies above green summer meadows. Krishansar lies higher, framed by snow-marked ridges. By the time Gangabal



Two Hikers Trek along a Snowy Mountain in Nepal. Image Courtesy: Jen Madhi, Pexels

appears, the trail has become a sequence of water, stone and sky. Tents look temporary against that scale, which is exactly the point.

MARKHA VALLEY, SKYU, HANKAR AND KONGMARU LA

Ladakh changes the palette completely. The Markha route moves through Hemis National Park and settlements such as Skyu, Markha and Hankar, following the river between ochre cliffs and dry slopes. Cultivated fields around the villages look startlingly green against the mountain desert. Mani walls, whitewashed chortens and traditional houses appear along a route where settlement is sparse but deeply rooted.

Past Hankar, the trail opens towards Nimaling, a broad high pasture used by herders beneath Kang Yatse. From here, trekkers heading towards Kongmaru La climb above 5,000 metres before dropping through a narrow gorge. A lone walker can be reduced to a dot beneath cliffs and open sky, while river crossings and long stretches between villages give the journey its rhythm. Evenings are simpler. Boots come off, tea appears, and the dry Ladakhi light turns the mountains violet before darkness arrives.

VALLEY OF FLOWERS AND BEYOND

In Uttarakhand, the trail begins at Govindghat and climbs to Ghangaria, the base for both the Valley of Flowers and Hemkund Sahib. From here, one path enters the protected valley, where summer snowmelt feeds streams and alpine flowers spread across meadows beneath sheer mountain walls. Another climbs steeply towards Hemkund Lake, set at over 4,000 metres beside the Sikh shrine.

The wider landscape continues beyond these better-known routes. More demanding treks such as Bhyundar Khal and Gupt Khal push deeper into high-altitude terrain, bringing glaciers, passes and longer stretches of wilderness into the journey. The result is a trekking region that extends far beyond the flowers themselves.

ANNAPURNA, GHANDRUK, MANANG AND THORONG LA

In north-central Nepal, the Annapurna region stretches around the Annapurna massif, with routes beginning from the Pokhara side and moving deep into the Himalaya. Shorter walks pass through Ghandruk and Ghorepani, while the Annapurna Circuit climbs towards Manang, crosses Thorong La at 5,416 metres, and descends towards Muktinath and the Kali Gandaki corridor.

Gurung, Magar and Thakali villages give the trail its lived-in character. Forest paths, terraces and stone settlements gradually give way to dry, exposed high-altitude terrain, while teahouses provide warmth, food and company at the end of long walking days.

LANGTANG, SYABRUBESI, BRIDDIM AND KYANJIN

Langtang lies around 130 kilometres north of Kathmandu, close to the Tibetan border, and the trail moves from lower forest into a valley dominated by Langtang Lirung. Syabrubesi is a major starting point, while the Tamang Heritage Trail passes through Gatlang, Chilime, Thuman, Timure and Briddim. Briddim, at



A Snow Leopard at Valley of Flowers. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

about 2,229 metres, is known for homestays that place travellers directly within Tamang village life.

The main Langtang route continues towards Kyanjin, where the valley opens into high pasture, glacier country and enormous mountain walls. Forest gives way gradually. Rhododendron and pine thin, yak country begins, and settlements become smaller. You notice the landscape changing because you have spent days inside it. By the time Kyanjin arrives, the scale has shifted completely, and the lower valley feels very far away.

BHUTAN, DRUK PATH, JANGCHULAKHA AND JOMOLHARI

Bhutan keeps camping central to the trekking experience. The Druk Path connects Paro and Thimphu through alpine forest,



Red Panda Siblings in Langtang National Park. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons



Pilgrims Hiking to Visit Gurudwara Sri Hemkund Sahib. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons



Vishansar Lake in Kashmir. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

ridges and lakes, reaching elevations of about 4,200 metres. Jangchulakha is one of its high points, with clear-weather views towards Jomolhari and other snow peaks. Camps sit in open country where the temperature falls quickly once the sun leaves the ridge.

Jomolhari country takes the landscape farther. The routes reach around 5,000 metres, moving through high valleys, yak pasture and remote settlements beneath one of Bhutan's defining mountains. Here the camp becomes part of the memory. Horses are unloaded, tents rise on open ground, water is collected nearby and prayer flags pull in the wind. Then cloud lifts unexpectedly and Jomolhari appears above everything, close enough to stop conversation.

THE PEKOE TRAIL, HAPUTALE, ELLA AND NUWARA ELIYA

Sri Lanka changes the idea of a long-distance mountain trail. The Pekoe Trail crosses more than 300 kilometres of the Central Highlands in 22 stages, linking tea estates, forest, railway towns, vegetable country and old plantation tracks. Around Haputale, stages run through Horton Plains, Udaweriya, St Catherine's and Makulella before continuing towards Ella. Farther east, the route reaches Demodara and Hali Ela, then turns through Uda Pussellawa and Kandapola towards Nuwara Eliya.

The scenery is greener and more inhabited than the Himalayan trails. Tea bushes run in precise lines across hillsides, estate roads curve around valleys, and trains appear unexpectedly through mist. At Demodara, the railway loops around the hill and passes through a tunnel beneath the station. Elsewhere, eucalyptus, cloud forest, tea factories and vegetable plots keep changing the texture of the walk. There may be no glacier or 5,000-metre pass, but moving slowly through this working landscape is just as transporting.

THE CAMP AFTER THE WALK

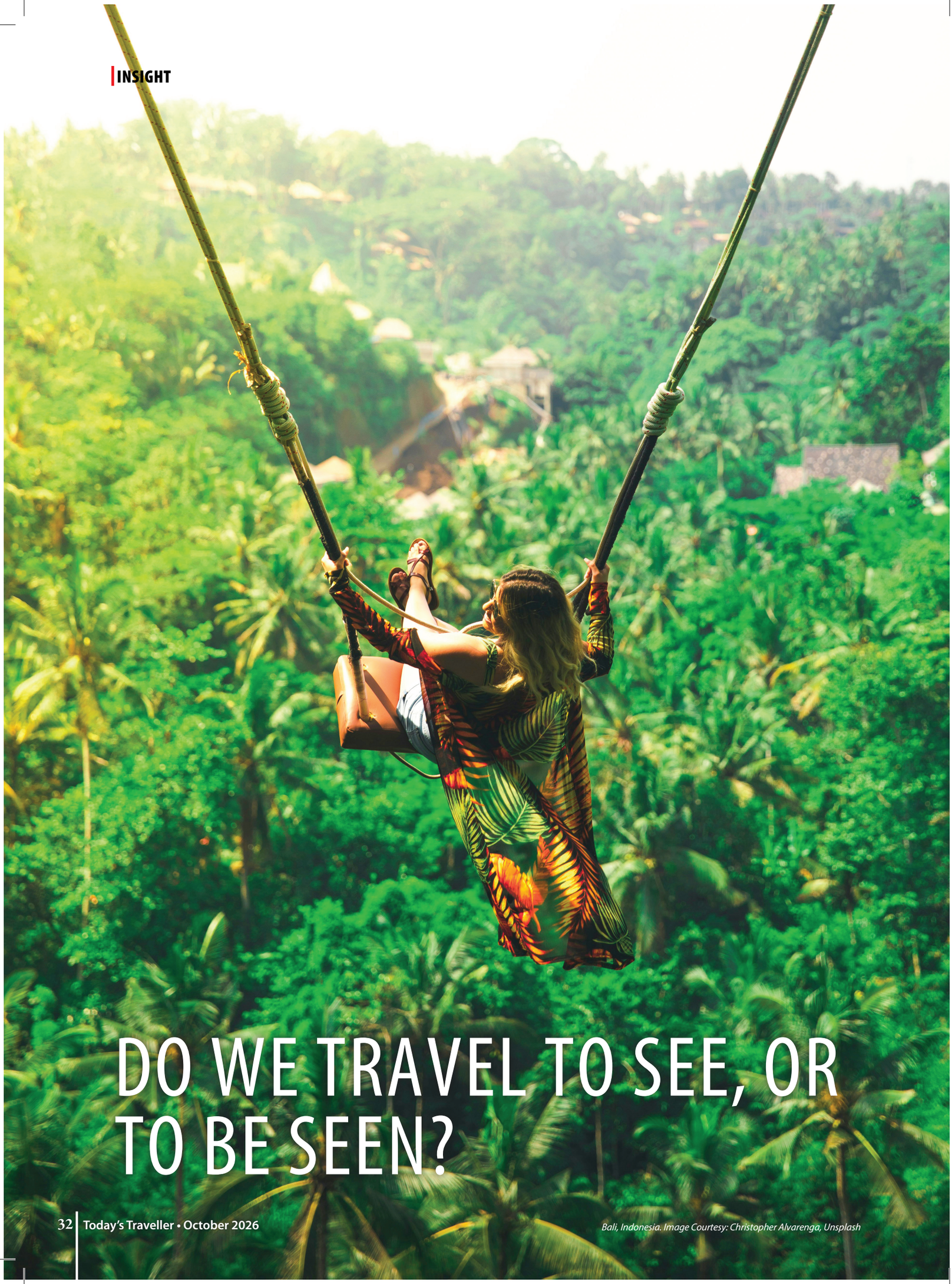
Every trail ends the day differently. Kashmir offers tents beside alpine meadows. Ladakh alternates between camps and village stays. Ghangaria becomes the base for the Valley of Flowers. Annapurna and Langtang revolve around teahouses and homestays. Bhutan keeps the mountain camp alive, while the Pekoe Trail folds each walking day back into Sri Lanka's hill towns and estates.



Hankar Village at an Altitude of 4100 Meters, Markha Valley Ladakh. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons



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DO WE TRAVEL TO SEE, OR TO BE SEEN?

Bali, Indonesia. Image Courtesy: Christopher Alvarenga, Unsplash

The destinations we choose increasingly reflect curiosity, taste, status and cultural fluency

TT BUREAU

Travel has always carried proof. Eighteenth-century Grand Tourists came home with paintings, antiquities, and portraits that signalled education and access. Postcards later turned landmarks into portable evidence of arrival. Holiday albums carried the ritual further. Each period found its own way to decide which places mattered and how a journey should be remembered.

Today, that process starts earlier and moves faster. A 2025 global traveller study found that 61% of surveyed travellers used social media for trip inspiration, up from 35% in 2022, while 73% said influencer recommendations affected a booking decision. Indian research found travellers using an average of seven touchpoints while planning, with 68% turning toward online video and 41% relying heavily on influencers. Travel content now shapes destinations, hotels, neighbourhoods and sometimes even the image people hope to make once they arrive.

THE JOURNEY AS SOCIAL SIGNAL

The Grand Tour offers a useful bridge because travel already carried performance centuries ago. In eighteenth century Rome, commissioning a portrait by Pompeo Batoni became close to a rite of passage for wealthy European travellers. One young sitter appears beside books on Rome, Homer's Odyssey, an armillary sphere and a classical sculpture. The message is easy to read: he had travelled, studied and acquired cultural polish.

The contemporary feed works with a similar instinct. The symbols have changed. A private villa signals access, while a ramen counter in Tokyo, a weaving workshop in Kutch or a difficult Himalayan trail can communicate taste, curiosity or insider knowledge. Cultural fluency now carries social value alongside spending power.

A 2026 study of 606 young adults examined travel as a conspicuous experience and linked online self-presentation with materialism, conformity and value expression. Few people consciously book a holiday as a branding exercise, yet destinations often become shorthand for personality. Patagonia suggests adventure. Kyoto can imply cultural curiosity. A pilgrimage route carries another kind of meaning. Travel becomes part of identity long before the caption appears.

THE POSTCARD NEVER REALLY LEFT

Postcards show how long travel has depended on recognisable images. In the early twentieth century, a visitor could send home the Colosseum, Niagara Falls, a Swiss railway or a seaside promenade with a few handwritten lines. One flattering view stood in for an entire place.

Holiday albums followed the same logic. Families rarely preserved missed trains, dull lunches or queues. The strongest moments survived. Digital media carries that selective instinct into continuous circulation, where one traveller's image can shape another person's itinerary almost immediately.

Photography itself deserves a fair reading. Experimental research has found that taking pictures can increase enjoyment by sharpening attention. The bigger change arrives when a future audience influences the present moment. Then certain visual habits spread quickly: the floating breakfast in Bali, the palace doorway in Rajasthan, the train window at golden hour, the figure facing a mountain.

A 2024 tourism study found that travellers who relied heavily on social platforms followed more concentrated routes and produced more similar visual content than those who used official destination maps. Their movement narrowed, and satisfaction could fall. Access to endless information can still lead large numbers of people toward the same places and the same frame.



O-Circuit, Torres Del Paine National Park, Chile. Image Courtesy: Skyestoury



Woman Taking a Selfie. Image Courtesy: Kirill Lazarev, Pexels

WHEN AN IMAGE BECOMES THE ATTRACTION

Sometimes a photograph becomes powerful enough to alter a destination. In Fujikawaguchiko, Japan, a view of Mount Fuji rising behind a convenience store went viral. Crowds gathered for the same composition, creating traffic, litter and road safety problems. Local authorities eventually blocked the view with a large screen in 2024.

The striking part was the composition itself. Mount Fuji had drawn travellers for centuries. The viral appeal came through the visual contrast between an iconic mountain and an ordinary convenience store. A single frame created a new stop on the tourism map.

Bali offers another example. Purpose-built selfie parks now use swings, viewing platforms and staged backdrops as part of the tourism product. The photograph is built into the experience, and businesses design around the appetite for shareable scenery.

THE HIDDEN GEM RACE

The phrase "hidden gem" captures another part of modern travel culture. Social media has given small restaurants, rural homestays, craft communities and overlooked landscapes access to audiences once dominated by guidebooks, tour operators and large campaigns. A family run stay in a remote valley can now appear beside an international hotel in the same feed. That choice now carries social meaning.



Concert Audience. Image Courtesy: Luis Quintero, Pexels

Success can quickly change the conditions that created the appeal. An empty beach attracts attention because it appears empty. A village feels special because few outsiders seem to be there. Once thousands save the location, scarcity begins to disappear.

A 2025 global travel survey found that 44% of respondents would avoid tagging a lesser-known destination because they feared social media crowds. Yet 47% of Gen Z and 44% of millennials said they might reconsider visiting somewhere if location tagging was unavailable. The desire to protect a place and the desire for recognition after finding it can exist side by side.

Indian research makes the cycle more concrete. A 2026 study of 466 millennials aged 25 through 40 who followed travel influencers on major visual and video platforms found influencer credibility and social media engagement positively associated with overtourism-linked behaviour. Fear of missing out partly shaped those relationships.

This helps explain the urgency built into travel content: go before everyone finds it, save this place, visit while it is still quiet. Scarcity drives attention, attention brings visitors, and the next secret enters the feed.

WHEN REALITY MEETS THE FEED

Every travel medium has edited reality. Grand Tour portraits ignored rough roads. Postcards preferred blue skies. Family albums favoured smiling faces. Travel brochures polished destinations further. Social media accelerates the same selective habit.

A city can now be reduced to its strongest thirty seconds. Rain disappears, queues vanish, roadworks sit outside the frame. Travellers arrive carrying polished references, so the beach competes with its empty online version and the hotel room competes with its best angle at golden hour.

Researchers have begun examining social media-induced travel anxiety, where idealised content and constant comparison create unease around personal experience. The doubt can be surprisingly ordinary: wrong neighbourhood, missed viewpoint, wasted afternoon, less impressive trip.

A countercurrent is visible as well. One recent global study found that 24% of surveyed travellers were switching off social media more often during trips, even as 27% said they were taking more holiday videos. The record still matters, though the live audience sometimes recedes.

The medium keeps changing, and travel continues to carry a public life. Portraits, postcards, albums, guidebooks, and feeds have each shaped how journeys are presented and remembered.

Today, that public life begins earlier, often before departure. The deeper question concerns influence: how much of what we seek has already been shaped by the image we expect to carry home?

FRANCK MULLER

GENEVE



Art Meets Its Match

VANGUARD LOES VAN DELFT

A playful collision of colour, character and Swiss watchmaking.
Made for wrists that were never meant to blend in.



Painting a Traditional Puja Idol. Image Courtesy: Kolkatar Chobiwala, Pexels

WHEN THE STREET BECOMES THE GALLERY

Across the Indian subcontinent, festivals redraw familiar places through procession, performance, craft, food and collective memory

TT BUREAU

A city feels different when celebration takes over its public spaces. Familiar roads lead to processions, squares gather music and crowds, monastery courtyards become performance grounds, and island streets fill with drums, food, and movement.

The change may last a few hours or several days, yet it gives the place a different texture. Architecture acquires movement, food becomes part of the route, and customs usually held within communities unfold in public.

KOLKATA AFTER DARK

Durga Puja gives Kolkata an entirely new map. By evening, neighbourhoods are linked by pandal trails, crowds stream through lanes late into the night and dhaak rises above traffic and conversation. Temporary structures built from bamboo, fabric, light and sculpture range from traditional interpretations to ambitious exercises in contemporary art and design. UNESCO, which inscribed Durga Puja in Kolkata on its Representative List in 2021, describes it as a major public convergence of religion and art.

The spectacle begins months earlier in Kumartuli. In its narrow workshops, artisans cover straw frames with clay, gradually shaping them into images of Durga and her family. Clay, craft, neighbourhood patronage and the Hooghly all sit behind the finished pandals.

Pandal-hopping stretches the city beyond its familiar landmarks. North Kolkata's older neighbourhoods, large south Kolkata installations, food stops, sweet shops and smaller para pujas become part of the same evening. The festival draws visitors through parts of the city they may otherwise pass by, with each detour adding another layer to Kolkata's cultural geography.



Kandy Esala Perahera (Festival of the Tooth), Sri Lanka. Image Courtesy: Villasinsrilanka, Instagram

DHAKA IN APRIL

Pahela Baishakh changes Dhaka through colour, sound and public gathering. Around Ramna and the university district, the Bengali New Year brings music, seasonal food, fairs and crowds into spaces with strong cultural associations.

Mangal Shobhajatra gives the day its most distinctive visual language. Giant masks, painted animals and sculptural forms emerge from Dhaka University's Faculty of Fine Art and move through the streets. The procession began in 1989, while its imagery reaches into older Bengali folk traditions. UNESCO inscribed it on the Representative List in 2016, recognising its folk vocabulary and place in Bangladesh's public culture.

The surrounding city matters as much as the procession. Pottery, cane work, sweets and traditional foods sit alongside student art and live performance. Dhaka's density becomes part of the atmosphere, with the New Year drawing art, food and community into the same urban current.

KATHMANDU AND THE LIVING SQUARE

Further north, Kathmandu brings the story into a dense historic centre where ritual and architecture remain closely connected.

During Indra Jatra, Basantapur and the streets around Durbar Square fill with chariots, drums, masked Lakhey dancers and crowds gathering on balconies, temple steps and street corners. The eight-day festival belongs deeply to Newar culture, with the ceremonial pole at Basantapur, the Kumari chariot procession and nightly performances forming part of its distinctive rhythm.

These rituals give Kathmandu's architecture a lived context. Courtyards, shrines, palace squares and narrow lanes become connected through movement, revealing how closely the old city was shaped around gathering and ceremony.

Stone, brick and carved timber remain part of everyday Kathmandu. During Indra Jatra, those spaces carry another layer of meaning, bringing historic architecture and contemporary city life into the same frame.

BHUTAN IN FESTIVAL DRESS

Bhutan shifts the public stage into dzongs and monastery grounds. During tshechus in places such as Paro, Punakha, Trongsa and Thimphu, masked dances, ceremonial music and traditional dress fill spaces framed by painted timber, whitewashed walls and mountain valleys.

Paro Tshechu has been held since the seventeenth century and remains one of the country's major festivals. Sacred and folk dances unfold in the grounds of Rinpung Dzong, while the unfurling of a giant thongdrel remains among its defining moments. The dzong and surrounding valley give the gathering much of its visual character.

Drametse Ngacham adds another layer. UNESCO traces the sacred mask dance to the sixteenth century and records its continued performance during the Drametse festival. Drums, masks, choreography and religious meaning remain closely connected, with the surrounding valleys and monastic architecture placing the tradition firmly within Bhutan's landscape.

The setting is central to the experience. A performance inside a dzong courtyard belongs to the valley around it, the community gathered there and the religious traditions that have shaped the place over centuries.

KANDY AFTER SUNDOWN

In Sri Lanka, moves through the narrow streets of the hill capital over successive nights. Kandyan drummers, dancers and ceremonial groups follow established routes connected to the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic and associated shrines. The festival carries centuries of religious practice into a city that remains one of the island's most important cultural destinations.



Kumari Jatra, Nepal. Image Courtesy: James KC

The procession makes Kandy's sacred geography visible. Roads that appear separate during the day join through ceremony, while the temple, shrines and surrounding streets become part of one moving cultural landscape.

Kandy's hills, lake and historic core give the event a setting distinct from any other festival in the region. As the streets fill after dark, the city's identity as a pilgrimage centre and cultural capital comes sharply into focus.

Colombo offers another expression during Vesak. Lanterns glow outside homes, temples and businesses, and large illuminated pandals narrate Buddhist stories. Dansal distribute food and drink throughout the evening, adding generosity and community participation to the city's night-time routes.



Dancer at Paro Tshechu Festival, Bhutan. Image Courtesy: Noor Din, Pexels

The capital becomes a temporary circuit of light. Residential streets, commercial districts and temple areas are linked by lantern displays and public movement, giving Colombo a softer night-time character shaped by neighbourhood participation.

THE MALDIVES BEYOND THE RESORT

Bodu Eid opens a different view of the Maldives. On inhabited islands, Bodu Beru drumming, games, communal meals and street performances bring village spaces into celebration.

Bodu Mas adds a striking visual element, with islanders carrying a giant fish made from woven coconut palm leaves, followed by Maali Neshun performers in costumes linked to local folklore. The materials and settings are distinctly island-based: coconut leaves, drums, narrow roads, courtyards and open spaces close to the sea.

These traditions reveal a side of the Maldives shaped by year-round community life. Festival days draw people into shared spaces and give rhythm, storytelling and folklore a visible presence beyond the country's familiar resort landscape.

The contrast in setting also enriches the wider journey through the subcontinent. Kolkata works through dense neighbourhoods and temporary architecture; Dhaka through public art and civic celebration; Kathmandu through historic squares and chariot routes; Bhutan through monastic courtyards and mountain valleys; Sri Lanka through procession and illuminated streets; the Maldives through island rhythm and communal performance.

Across these destinations, festivals give culture a physical geography. They bring memory into streets, courtyards, squares and village spaces, allowing place and tradition to be experienced together.

The installations eventually come down and the routes return to everyday use. What remains is a stronger sense of the destination itself, shaped by the people, landscapes and traditions that bring it to life.

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KANDLA SPECIAL ECONOMIC ZONE

Kandla Special Economic Zone bearing the distinction of being the first SEZ in the Asia-Pacific region, was inaugurated by Late Prime Minister Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri on 7th March, 1965 as an Export Promotion Zone which was seamlessly converted into a Special Economic Zone in 2006. KASEZ has been awarded as "First Green Industrial City of India" in Platinum Category for the year 2021-2026, under IGBC Green Cities rating for existing Cities in industrial cities category. This zone is home to 281 exporting units providing employment to over 28,000 persons.

Kandla Special Economic Zone offers opportunity to set up new manufacturing units in various sectors such as engineering, pharma and chemical, Textiles, timber and plywood and new emerging technologies including E-Vehicles and their accories. 36.92 Ha (100 Acres) is being developed into 75 plots of size ranging from 2800 sqm to 6300 sqm which is an opportunity ready to be seized by investors.

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WHERE THE WATER CHANGES COLOUR

These shores move between reef, rainforest, cliff and tide, each with a distinct coastal personality

JEET BHATTACHARYA



Scuba Diver & Sea Turtle Swimming in Komodo, Indonesia. Image Courtesy: Tom Fisk, Pexels

Some beaches are defined by sand. Others by what surrounds them. Forest at the waterline, coral beneath the lagoon, cliffs above the surf, a seabed that appears when the tide retreats, or a reef where manta rays gather when currents bring in plankton. Across India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, the coast keeps changing character. White becomes gold, turquoise becomes deep blue, palms give way to laterite cliffs, and a day by the sea can mean anything from swimming in a sheltered bay to walking across an exposed ocean floor.

RADHANAGAR BEACH, ANDAMAN ISLANDS

On Swaraj Dweep, Radhanagar Beach arrives as a long sweep of pale sand with dense tropical forest pressed almost to its edge. The water moves through shades of turquoise and blue, while the broad shoreline gives the beach an unusual sense of scale. Also known as Beach No. 7, it lies around 12 kilometres from the island's jetty.

The forest changes the mood. Little of the built-up beachfront defines many mainland coasts. Walk towards the northern end, and Neil's Cove brings lagoon-like water and another pocket of greenery. By late afternoon, the sun drops directly towards the sea, the sand cools, and the forest behind the beach begins to darken before the water does.

BANGARAM AND AGATTI, LAKSHADWEEP

Lakshadweep feels less like a coastline than a meeting of reef, lagoon and sky. Bangaram is an uninhabited island of just 2.3 square kilometres, surrounded by a shallow lagoon enclosed by coral reef. Nearby Thinnakara and Parali sit within the same wider lagoon system, turning the water between the islands into an extraordinary palette of pale aqua, turquoise and deep ocean blue.

Agatti, the air gateway to this part of the archipelago, is long and narrow, with a lagoon covering around 17.5 square kilometres. Coral growth and reef fish fill the shallows, while the reef shelters the lagoon from the open Arabian Sea.

Here the beach is only half the landscape. Much of the beauty begins where the sand disappears beneath the water.

PALOLEM AND AGONDA, GOA

South Goa softens the state's familiar beach energy. Palolem curves between two headlands, creating a naturally enclosed bay where fishing boats, kayaks, palm trees and small beach stays occupy the same frame. The coast's shape gives it an almost amphitheatre-like quality, particularly when viewed from either end of the sand.

A short distance away, Agonda stretches for roughly three kilometres, with palms and casuarinas behind a much more open shoreline. A hill anchors its southern end, while Cabo de Rama lies farther along this section of coast. Together they show two versions of Goa within a relatively small distance. Palolem gathers around its bay. Agonda lets the horizon do most of the work.



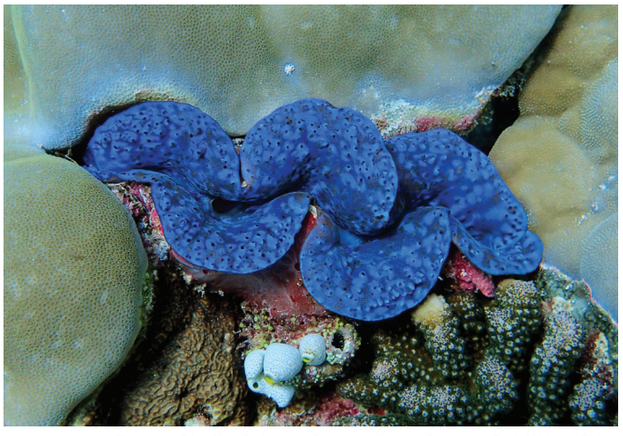
Maldives, Surrounded by Turquoise Waters. Image Courtesy: Asadphoto, Pexels



Bangaram Island, Lakshadweep. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons



Baa Atoll Maldives. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons



Fishbank DiveSite, Dhigurah Channell. Image Courtesy: Chris Wright, FLickr



Weweldeniya Market, Western Province, Sri Lanka. Image Courtesy: Dilantha Walpola, Pexels

VARKALA, KERALA

Varkala has geography on its side. At Papanasam Beach, pink and rust-coloured laterite cliffs rise directly above the Arabian Sea, topped with coconut palms, paths and cafés. The result is a beach experienced on two levels: first from the cliff edge, then from the sand below. Papanasam also carries religious significance, with ritual bathing and connections to the nearby Janardana Swamy Temple adding another dimension to the coast. Yet Varkala's strongest impression remains visual. From above, the shoreline forms a thin pale ribbon beneath the cliff. At sunset, the laterite deepens in colour while the sea turns metallic below. It feels unmistakably Kerala, yet unlike almost any other beach in the state.

CHANDRABHAGA AND CHANDIPUR, ODISHA

Near Konark, Chandrabhaga is an expansive Bay of Bengal beach where sunrise has long been a draw. Its proximity to the Sun Temple gives this stretch of coast a cultural presence that goes beyond the water, and its broad sands create an uncluttered horizon. Farther north, Chandipur does something altogether stranger. At low tide, the sea can retreat by as much as five kilometres, exposing a vast temporary seabed. Starfish, sea urchins and horseshoe crabs are among the life associated with this tidal environment. Then the water returns and the landscape disappears again. Chandipur turns the beach into something mutable. You do not simply walk beside the sea. For a few hours, you walk where the sea was.



Aerial View of Luxury Overwater Villas. Image Courtesy: Ishan, Pexels

MIRISSA AND TANGALLE, SRI LANKA

On Sri Lanka's south coast, Mirissa wraps itself around a curved bay backed by coconut palms. It is also one of the island's principal bases for whale watching, with excursions heading towards the deeper waters off the southern coast around Dondra Point, where blue whales and dolphins may be encountered in season. Continue east, and the coast loosens around Tangalle. Long stretches of sand alternate with smaller coves, rocky edges and palm-backed bays. The water can be more exposed here, giving the coastline a wilder energy than Mirissa's enclosed curve. The south is at its most settled between roughly November and April, when calmer conditions return to this side of the island.

NILAVELI AND THE EASTERN COAST, SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka effectively moves its beach season across the island. As monsoon conditions change, the east coast comes into its own. Nilaveli, near Trincomalee, offers pale sand and access to the waters around Pigeon Island. Farther south, Pasikuda spreads around a broad bay known for comparatively shallow water. Then Arugam Bay changes the rhythm entirely, with the southeast coast opening towards surf and a beach culture organised around waves.

The contrast is what makes the east compelling. Nilaveli feels spacious and marine, Pasikuda sheltered, Arugam kinetic. Three beaches along the same side of the island, each reading the Indian Ocean differently.

DHIGURAH, MALDIVES

Dhigurah, in South Ari Atoll, is a lived-in Maldivian island that tapers towards a long white sandbank. Dense tropical vegetation runs along its centre while the shore narrows until there seems to be almost nothing between you and the lagoon.

Offshore lies the South Ari Marine Protected Area, a 42-kilometre stretch of sea famous for year-round whale shark sightings. Dhigurah is one of four local islands facing this protected marine zone, making the beach a starting point for an underwater landscape every bit as compelling as the one above it.

BAA ATOLL, MALDIVES

In Baa Atoll, the idea of a beautiful beach expands beneath the surface. Designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 2011, the atoll contains reefs, lagoons, seagrass beds, mangroves and dozens of low-lying islands surrounded by an overwhelmingly marine landscape. The reserve includes around 250 coral species and 1,200 reef and reef-associated fish species.

Then there is Hanifaru Bay. Seasonal currents concentrate plankton inside the bay, attracting extraordinary aggregations of reef manta rays and, at times, whale sharks. The western monsoon drives this marine spectacle.

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WILD COUNTRY, CHANGING GROUND

Floodplains, high mountains, mangrove forests and coral seas hold some of the region's most remarkable wildlife

TT BUREAU



Lion Cub, Gir National Park, Gujarat. Image Courtesy: Navlakha, Pexels

Wild country in the Indian Subcontinent is shaped by terrain, weather and season. Assam's floodplains carry tall grass, shallow wetlands and animals adapted to land that floods each year. In Gujarat, dry forest and scrub support the last wild population of Asiatic lions.

Forest dominates the Bhutan–India frontier before the land fragments into the tidal creeks of the Sundarbans. Farther south, Sri Lanka's dry zones and the coral waters of the Maldives add entirely different habitats to the picture.

Habitat gives each protected area its character. Rhinos depend on floodplain grass and access to higher ground. Snow leopards follow mountain prey through broken ridges. Manta rays gather where seasonal currents concentrate plankton.

GRASSLANDS IN MOTION

Kaziranga National Park in Assam takes its shape from the Brahmaputra. Seasonal floods refresh wetlands, spread sediment and keep large stretches of grassland productive. The park holds the world's largest single population of greater one-horned rhinoceros, along with Asian elephants, wild water buffalo, eastern swamp deer, tigers and Ganges river dolphins.

Early mornings can be deceptively quiet. Fog settles low over the grass, rhinos appear near shallow wetlands and winter birds feed along the water's edge. Beneath that calm lies a system in constant adjustment. Channels shift, grazing areas change, and familiar sections of the park can look different after a single flood season.

High water also changes the routes animals use. Many move towards the Karbi Anglong hills, making the corridors outside the park especially important. A visitor may spend an hour watching a rhino near a beel. The larger story sits in the animal's ability to move through land that extends well beyond the safari track.

Chitwan National Park in Nepal feels denser and more enclosed. At the Himalayan foothills, the Terai once formed an extensive belt of sal forest, riverine woodland and grassland linking present-day India and Nepal. Chitwan preserves one of its strongest remaining sections.



Golden Gibbon. Image Courtesy: Optical Chemist, Pexels

Rhinos are a familiar presence here as well. Bengal tigers share the park with gharials, sloth bears, deer and rich birdlife. Rivers open through the grass, then disappear behind sal woodland. Decades of protection and anti-poaching work have helped the greater one-horned rhinoceros recover strongly in Nepal, making Chitwan an important refuge.

LION COUNTRY

Gir has a drier, more open character than many of the region's wildlife reserves. Across Gujarat's Saurashtra, teak forest thins into scrub, grassland, rocky slopes and seasonal riverbeds. Summer pares the landscape back further, concentrating activity around the remaining water and making movement through the forest easier to read.

The Asiatic lion gives Gir its global significance. Once reduced to a small population in western India, the species has recovered steadily, with the 2025 estimate recording 891 lions across the wider Saurashtra landscape. Their range now extends well beyond the core protected forest.

Inside Gir, lions often appear against remarkably open country. A male may emerge beside a dusty track or rest beneath sparse shade through the afternoon. As temperatures rise, prides are increasingly drawn towards water. Pale grass and exposed earth give these encounters a character quite different from the greener forests elsewhere in the region.



Kiangs, Hemis National Park, Leh-Ladakh. Image Courtesy: Incredible India



Indian One-Horned Rhino, Kaziranga National Park. Image Courtesy: Kaustav Chetia, Pexels

There is plenty happening beyond the lions. Leopards share the forest with chital, sambar, nilgai, four-horned antelope, wild boar and marsh crocodiles. More than 300 bird species have been recorded here, and rivers, reservoirs and smaller water bodies become especially active during the dry months.

As lions have spread through Saurashtra, conservation has moved beyond the sanctuary boundary as well. Farmland, grazing areas and village edges now form part of their wider range. Habitat links and coexistence with local communities have become central to the future of a species whose recovery is increasingly visible beyond Gir itself.

FORESTS ACROSS FRONTIERS

Royal Manas National Park occupies Bhutan's southern foothills, where tropical and subtropical forest connects directly with India's Manas landscape. Tigers, elephants, golden langurs, clouded leopards, gaur and rhinos use this wider forest system.

Bhutan has linked many protected areas through biological corridors, giving wildlife room to move between habitats as food, rainfall and seasonal conditions change. Large ranging species benefit most clearly. Smaller animals also depend on intact forest beyond the main reserve boundaries.

That sense of continuity gives Royal Manas much of its appeal. Rivers, woodland and animal routes carry through one protected area into the next. The forest feels larger than the map suggests.



Irrawaddy Dolphin. Image Courtesy: Greater Sundarbans

WHERE FOREST BECOMES TIDE

The Sundarbans overturn any familiar idea of a forest safari. India and Bangladesh share this immense mangrove system at the mouth of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna. Creeks divide into smaller channels, mudbanks emerge with falling water, and mangrove roots crowd the shore.

Royal Bengal tigers have adapted to this saline environment, swimming between islands and moving through muddy forest shaped by the tide. Estuarine crocodiles occupy the waterways, Ganges and Irrawaddy dolphins use deeper channels, and birdlife changes with the season.

Human life remains closely tied to the mangroves. Fishing and honey collection continue around the forest, and cyclones repeatedly test settlements across the delta. Rising salinity and altered freshwater flows add pressure. The mangroves also soften the force of major storms, giving their survival importance well beyond wildlife tourism.

THE SEA AS SANCTUARY

Hanifaru Bay in the Maldives shifts the wildlife story underwater. Part of the Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve, the bay becomes especially active during the western monsoon, when currents gather plankton in dense concentrations.

Reef manta rays arrive in large feeding groups, circling through nutrient-rich water. Whale sharks may appear as well. Tide, current and plankton density change the character of each encounter.

Visitor activity is tightly managed because the site is sensitive. The spectacle depends on a marine system that can be disturbed quickly by heavy traffic.

SRI LANKA'S WILD EDGE

Yala National Park carries a very different kind of intensity. Dry forest, scrub, lagoons, rocky ground and coastline create habitat for Asian elephants, sloth bears, crocodiles, water buffalo and the Sri Lankan leopard.

Dawn brings dust over the tracks, deer near waterholes and painted storks along the shallows. Elephants may cross open stretches with little warning. In quieter sections, lagoons and coastal flats open the landscape and bring the Indian Ocean into view.

Leopards have become Yala's defining attraction, particularly in Block 1. Their popularity has also increased safari traffic, with vehicles sometimes clustering around sightings during busy periods. Visitor management now sits firmly within the conservation conversation. Yala is best understood by looking beyond the cat and paying attention to the wider dry zone ecosystem.

By the end of such a journey, wildlife feels inseparable from the ground beneath it. Floodwater sends rhinos towards higher country. Summer draws Gir's lions closer to shrinking water sources. In the delta, mangrove roots hold vulnerable shorelines together. Offshore, seasonal currents gather manta rays into Hanifaru Bay. Terrain and season still set the pace in these wild places. That may be the strongest impression they leave.






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Continental GT Mulliner. Image Courtesy: Bentley

THE DRIVE BETWEEN WORLDS

Five journeys, five cars and a landscape constantly changing beyond the windscreen across the subcontinent

CHANDRUTPAL DAS BORO

A long drive lets a region unfold at its own pace. City edges loosen, roadside food changes, the air shifts, and architecture begins speaking another language. A few hundred kilometres can carry a traveller through several moods.

The cars bring presence and performance, while the road keeps shaping the experience. Rajasthan carries craft into dry open country. Sri Lanka moves between coast and tea hills. Bhutan folds travel into valleys and passes, while Ladakh expands into altitude and bare rock. Nepal closes the arc with a slower climb through the hills.

RAJASTHAN IN A ROLLS-ROYCE PHANTOM

Jaipur begins with colour and craftsmanship. Gemstones, meenakari, textiles, carved façades and old havelis keep the eye busy, while newer hotels and galleries add another layer. The Phantom sits easily in this world of detail. Its 6.75-litre twin-turbo V12 develops 563 bhp and 900 Nm, though the deeper appeal lies inside, where bespoke veneers, embroidery and commissioned artwork can turn the cabin into something intensely personal.

As Jaipur gives way, the road opens, and the colours dry out. Jodhpur arrives beneath Mehrangarh, its blue houses gathered below the fort while the western landscape stretches into scrub and sun. Umaid Bhawan Palace adds another period, carrying Art Deco influence into a royal residence built for the twentieth century.

South of Jodhpur, Ranakpur cools the palette. Marble replaces sandstone, and the Jain temple draws attention through intricacy. Its 1,444 carved pillars create an extraordinary interior. The surrounding Aravallis begin softening the landscape before Udaipur arrives.

By then, water has entered the story. Lake Pichola changes the mood, City Palace rises along the shoreline, and Sajjangarh watches over the city. After the dry expanses around Jodhpur, Udaipur feels almost lush. The Phantom carries that progression with ease, giving the road a sense of occasion while leaving enough quiet for Rajasthan to hold the scene.

SRI LANKA IN A BENTLEY CONTINENTAL GT MULLINER

Colombo slips away gradually. Traffic eases, buildings thin, and the Indian Ocean begins appearing through palms and low rooftops before staying close beside the road. The south coast has an easy rhythm, shaped by railway lines, fishing villages and flashes of open sea.

Galle brings the road into a denser historical setting. Inside the fort, churches, merchant houses, courtyards and cafés sit along compact streets shaped by centuries of maritime exchange. Early in the day, the walls still hold some coolness.

Beyond Galle, the coast loosens again through Weligama and Tangalle. Fishing boats rest high on the sand, surfers gather around the breaks, and seafood appears naturally across menus. Hoppers, crab, fish curry and sambols add their own rhythm. The Bentley Continental GT Mulliner brings 771 bhp and 1,000 Nm through its 4.0-litre hybrid V8, giving the car immense reserves of pace.

The more memorable shift comes inland. Elevation rises near Ella, palms begin thinning, tea estates spread across the slopes and mist gathers lower across the hills. By evening, the sea can feel surprisingly distant. Sri Lanka compresses several landscapes into a short span, and the Bentley carries coastal light, winding roads and cooler hill country inside one long day.

BHUTAN IN A RANGE ROVER SV

Paro feels broad and composed, with fields across the valley floor and farmhouses beneath steep mountain walls. Thimphu adds cafés, traffic and a denser pulse, though the surrounding slopes keep the capital visually contained. Once the road leaves the city, forest gathers around the climb towards Dochula.



Mercedes-Maybach GLS. Image Courtesy: Mercedes-Benz

The 108 chortens appear across the ridge, and clear weather can open long views across the Himalayas. The descent into Punakha changes the climate almost immediately. Air warms, terraces step down the hillsides, and vegetation thickens around the road.

Punakha Dzong stands where two rivers meet, giving the journey a strong architectural pause. Beyond it, the route grows quieter. Range Rover SV feels entirely at ease here. Its 4.4-litre mild-hybrid V8 produces about 607 bhp and 750 Nm, while the elevated driving position and composed ride suit repeated climbs, broken surfaces and long hours on winding roads.

Phobjikha arrives with a sense of release. The forest gives way to a broad glacial valley, farmhouses sit far apart, and black-necked cranes arrive during winter. After hours of bends and changing gradients, that openness feels generous, with the Range Rover moving through it almost effortlessly.


Range Rover SV. Image Courtesy: Land Rover



Continental GT Speed Ombré by Mulliner. Image Courtesy: Bentley

LADAKH IN A FERRARI PUROSANGUE

Srinagar begins softly, shaped by water, gardens and tree-lined avenues. Near Sonamarg, mountains draw closer while meadows and green slopes hold on a little longer. Then the terrain hardens. Drass and Kargil feel more exposed, settlements thin out, and rock begins dominating the view.

The Ferrari Purosangue brings a different energy. Its 6.5-litre naturally aspirated V12 produces about 715 bhp and 716 Nm, supported by Four Wheel Drive and active suspension. Four proper seats and four doors give the car a broader sense of possibility, especially on a journey where altitude and distance matter as much as pace.

Lamayuru creates one of the strongest visual moments on the road. The monastery rises above pale, eroded formations at around 3,510 metres, while the surrounding terrain carries the sculpted quality that has earned comparisons with a lunar landscape. Farther east, villages sit low within the valleys and monasteries punctuate bare slopes.

Food changes with the scenery. Kashmiri flavours gradually give way to thukpa, momos, breads and butter tea, while the cultural language around the road shifts as well. By the time Leh comes into view, the Purosangue remains dramatic, though the mountains have long since taken command of the scale.

NEPAL IN A MERCEDES MAYBACH GLS 600

Lumbini begins low, warm and open. The birthplace of Siddhartha Gautama sits within a broad sacred landscape, with monasteries created by Buddhist communities across Asia adding architectural variety to the plains.

The road climbs into Palpa, where Tansen feels tighter and more intimate. Cobbled streets, an old bazaar and traditional Newari houses carry traces of its trading past, shaped by movement between plains and hills. The shift in elevation changes the air and pace before the Himalayas appear.

The Mercedes - Maybach GLS 600 brings roughly 550 bhp and 770 Nm through its 4.0-litre V8. Rear seat comfort remains central, while the SUV proportions suit the rising terrain and longer stretches between towns.

Pokhara arrives with a wider horizon. Phewa Lake spreads across the valley, and clear mornings reveal Annapurna rising behind it with theatrical precision. Lumbini's heat and Tansen's enclosed streets feel far away by then.

Across these journeys, certain details begin to attach themselves to the cars: marble glowing inside Ranakpur, sea light near Galle, cedar forest around Dochula, bare rock past Kargil, the first clear sight of Annapurna. The machinery matters, but memory works differently. It keeps the road, the weather and the landscape moving long after the engine has gone quiet.

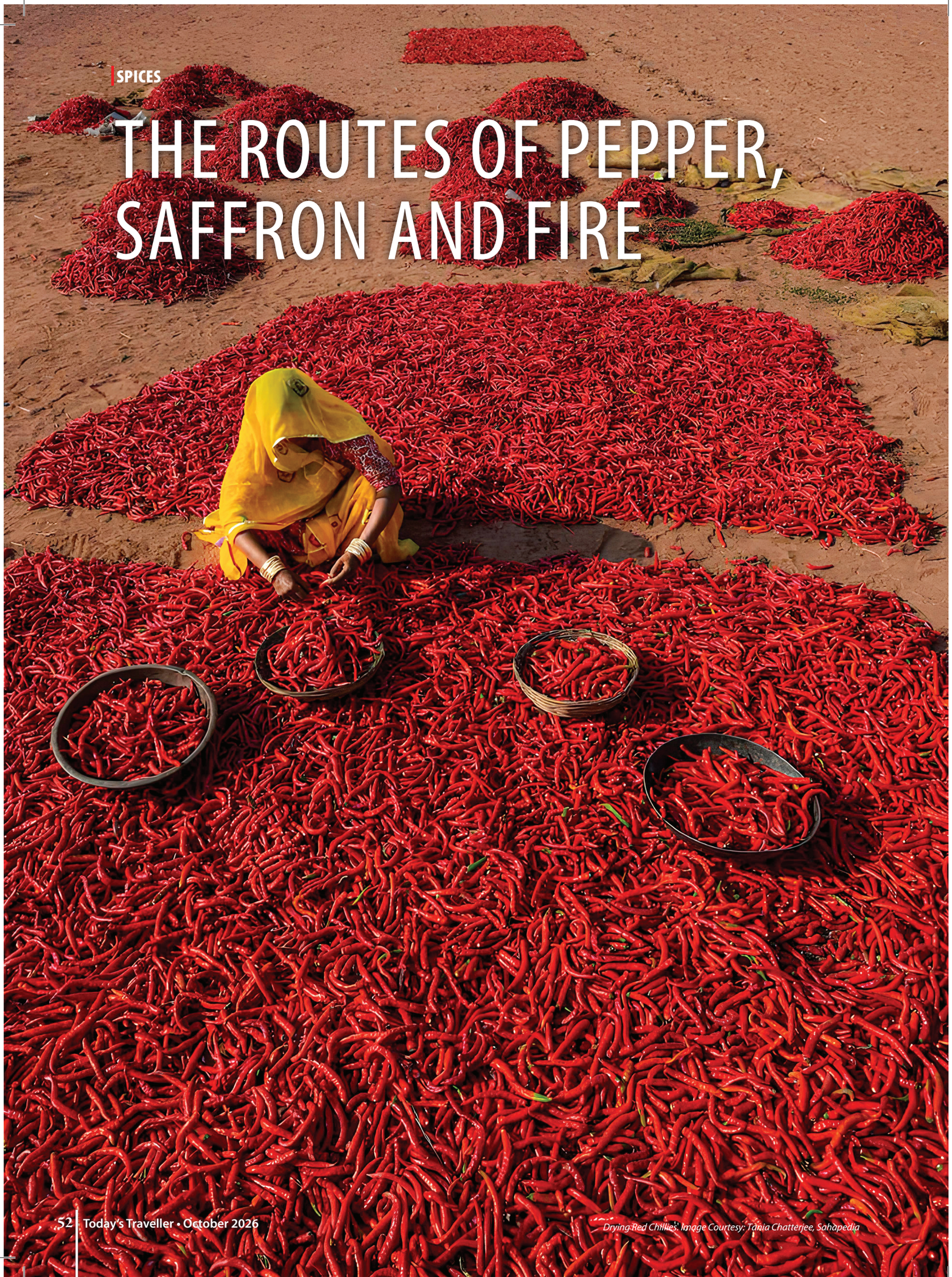


Purosangue. Image Courtesy: Ferrari



BIANCHET ULTRAFINO MASERATI

THE ROUTES OF PEPPER, SAFFRON AND FIRE



Drying Red Chillies. Image Courtesy: Tania Chatterjee, Sahapedia

Pepper, cinnamon, saffron, cardamom and chilli still lead travellers back to the landscapes that shaped their character

TT BUREAU

Long before travellers crossed the vast Indian subcontinent in search of food stories, its spices were already moving across seas and empires. Pepper from the Malabar Coast reached Roman kitchens. Sri Lankan cinnamon became a commodity powerful nations competed to control. Kashmir gave saffron its rarefied identity. Large cardamom took on the cool, smoky character of the eastern Himalayas. Chilli arrived from the Americas and became deeply embedded in Indian regional cooking.

Today, those histories remain visible at source: in Mattancherry's spice warehouses, in the hands of a cinnamon peeler near Galle, across Pampore's autumn fields, inside a Sikkim curing shed and under the desert sun at Mathania. For travellers interested in food, the journey gives flavour a geography. It also reveals how closely ingredients are tied to landscape, labour and local knowledge, long before they reach a restaurant kitchen or household spice box.

PEPPER AND THE COAST THAT CHANGED TRADE

Kerala's pepper story starts on the Malabar Coast. Ancient Muziris, near present-day Kodungallur, connected to Mediterranean trade when Roman merchants bought pepper in remarkable quantities. Sangam literature records ships arriving with gold and leaving with spice, and pepper acquired the old epithet Yavana Priya, "dear to the Romans".

Centuries later, European demand for direct access to spices helped change maritime trade. Vasco da Gama reached the Malabar Coast in 1498, opening a new phase of European competition in the Indian Ocean.

Kochi still holds the atmosphere of that trading world. In Mattancherry, old warehouses, merchants' shops and sacks of pepper, cardamom, cloves, ginger and turmeric keep the spice economy visible. Nearby Jew Town and the Paradesi Synagogue recall communities that connected this coast with markets far beyond India.

Inland, the story becomes agricultural. Around Kumily, Thekkady and Murikkady in Idukki, pepper vines climb through humid plantations alongside cardamom, cloves and nutmeg. Fresh pepper appears in compact green clusters, far removed from the familiar black grains at the table.

Green, black, and white pepper come from the same fruit yet deliver distinctly different aromas and heat levels. In Kerala's meat dishes, seafood and pepper-rich broths, the spice has both fragrance and presence. Plantation visits also reveal another side of the ingredient, showing how harvesting, drying, and processing determine what finally reaches the kitchen.

CINNAMON AND THE ISLAND EVERYONE WANTED

Sri Lanka's cinnamon country lies across the warm southern and western lowlands, including areas around Galle and Karandeniya. Here, one of the world's most recognisable spices is tied to a long history of cultivation, trade and specialised craft.

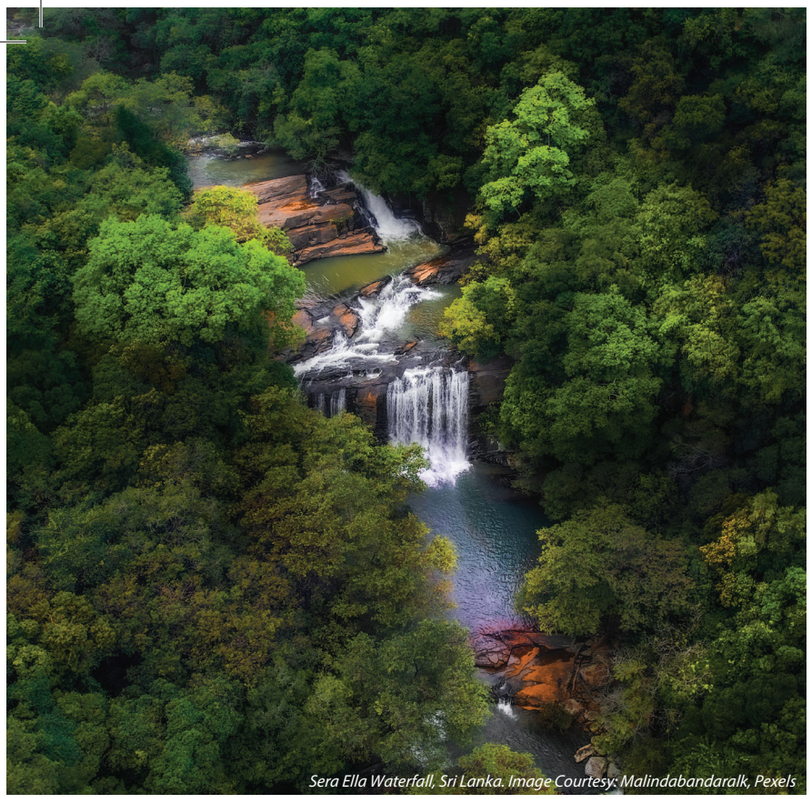
By the medieval period, cinnamon had already made the island commercially important. Portuguese and Dutch colonial powers later sought control over its production, while wider cultivation expanded during the nineteenth century.

The process remains highly skilled. The outer bark is scraped away, the stem carefully worked and the inner bark lifted in fine strips that curl as they dry. High grades such as Alba produce slender, delicate quills, markedly different from the thicker cassia bark sold widely elsewhere.

Cinnamon gardens in the south and spice-growing areas around Matale bring travellers close to that process. The spice then returns to the table in curries, rice dishes, tea and sweets. In Galle Fort, the maritime history behind the trade remains part of the setting, making the journey as much about commerce and craft as flavour itself.



Saffron Farming, Kashmir. Image Courtesy: Lok Shakti 24x7



Sera Ella Waterfall, Sri Lanka. Image Courtesy: Malindabandaralk, Pexels

SAFFRON AND KASHMIR'S BRIEF PURPLE SEASON

In Pampore, saffron becomes a landscape. During a short season in October and November, crocuses spread violet across fields outside Srinagar, turning an ingredient normally sold by the gram into something visible at scale.

The labour explains its value. Each flower carries only three crimson stigmas, picked and separated by hand. Thousands of flowers pass through that process before saffron reaches the small boxes and jars most travellers encounter.

Several traditions describe its beginnings in Kashmir. Some accounts point to Persian influence; another well-known story credits two Sufi saints with introducing saffron corms to the valley. Whatever the precise origin, Pampore's identity has been closely tied to the crop for centuries.

Srinagar gives the journey a wider setting through Dal Lake, the Mughal gardens and the old city. South of Pampore, the ruins at Awantipora add another historical layer.

At the table, saffron works gently. In kahwa, it sits with cardamom and nuts; in rice, kheer and phirni, it brings perfume, colour and restrained richness. Kashmir Saffron's GI status formally protects a provenance growers have long valued.



Sorting Green Pepper Seeds. Image Courtesy: Nandhu Kumar, Pexels



CARDAMOM IN THE HIMALAYAN SHADE

Large cardamom grows in a very different climate. Across Sikkim's humid slopes, it is cultivated beneath tree cover, often where forest, village and field sit close together.

Dzongu is one of the strongest places to understand it. Lepcha villages, streams, forest paths and cardamom farms shape the region, while homestays bring travellers closer to agricultural life. Mangan provides access to northern Sikkim, and Hee-Bermiok in the west offers another rural setting with farms and views towards Kanchenjunga.

Freshly harvested large cardamom is green. Its familiar dark colour and deep, resinous aroma develop during curing, traditionally with heat and smoke. Inside a working curing shed, the connection between process and flavour becomes immediate.

The crop also extends into eastern Nepal and Bhutan, following suitable altitude and climate across borders. Disease and changing weather have challenged production, prompting efforts to improve planting material, cultivation practices and farm resilience. That makes cardamom country a useful reminder that culinary heritage also depends on the continued viability of the landscapes producing it.

MATHANIA AND THE CHILLI THAT BECAME MARWARI

Chilli reached India from the Americas through maritime exchange in the sixteenth century. Rajasthan gave it a distinctly regional identity.

Around Mathania, roughly 35 kilometres from Jodhpur, the harvest changes the winter landscape. Red chillies are spread under the sun to dry, their colour running across courtyards and fields against the desert's muted tones.

Jodhpur provides the city connection. Sardar Market, beneath the Clock Tower, is dense with spice sellers and everyday commerce, while Mehrangarh rises over the old city nearby.

Mathania Mirch is valued for the heat, colour, and flavour it brings to Marwari cooking. Laal maas is its best-known expression, where the chilli gives the gravy its deep red colour and characteristic intensity. It also appears in chutneys, pickles and household recipes across the region. A GI application filed in 2025 remains under examination, reflecting growing attention to the chilli's geographical identity.

FOLLOWING FLAVOUR HOME

These routes show how trade, climate, labour and local cooking have shaped familiar spices over centuries. Kochi keeps its connection to the port. Around Galle, cinnamon survives through a highly skilled craft. Pampore is defined by a short saffron season. Sikkim gives large cardamom its smoky depth. Mathania turns chilli into a marker of place.

For the gourmet traveller, that context changes the eating experience. A spice becomes more specific once its field, climate, market and makers are visible. The flavour was always there. Travel gives it an address.

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Mutton Rogan Josh with Rice. Image Courtesy: Shameel Mukkath, Pexels

THE KITCHEN ROUTE: FLAVOURS ACROSS INDIA

A journey across India through the foods that define its regions, climates and cultures

TT BUREAU

Across India, cuisine moves with the landscape. Mountain kitchens lean into warmth and slow cooking; desert food draws character from grain, ghee and preservation; river regions bring fish, mustard and freshness to the plate; coastal belts fold coconut, tamarind, kokum and seafood into everyday meals. As the terrain shifts, so does the appetite, creating food cultures that feel intensely local even within a few hundred kilometres.

KASHMIR, SAFFRON IN THE VALLEY

A Kashmiri meal carries warmth in its fragrance. Fennel, dry ginger, cardamom and slow-cooked meat fill the room with deep, rounded aromas that seem perfectly matched to mountain air.

Rogan Josh arrives glossy and red, with tender lamb carrying the perfume of its spices. Rista brings soft lamb meatballs in a rich gravy, while Gushtaba has a velvety yoghurt base and finely pounded goat meat. Yakhni is delicate and fragrant, with yoghurt, cardamom and cloves creating a gentle tang.

Wazwan, the multi-course meal in Kashmiri cuisine, turns the table into a feast. Tabak Maaz offers lamb ribs with crisp edges and succulent meat. Dum Aloo brings potatoes steeped in spice. Modur Pulao is fragrant with saffron and carries touches of sweetness from dried fruit.

Each dish seems to hold the cold outside at bay. The flavours are warm, aromatic and generous, lingering after the plate has moved on.

RAJASTHAN, DESERT, DIALLED UP

A hot baati cracked open at the table changes everything once ghee begins to sink into its coarse centre. Dal follows, rich and spiced, with churma adding a grainy sweetness to the plate. Dal Baati Churma feels substantial from the first mouthful.

The desert leaves its imprint everywhere. Ker Sangri brings together hardy berries and beans in a preparation full of tang and spice. Gatte ki Sabzi places gram-flour dumplings in a



Misti Doi. Image Courtesy: 143Deepak Maurya, Pexels



Reparation For Sorshe Ilish. Image Courtesy: Masuma Rahaman, Pexels

smooth yoghurt gravy. Bajre ki Roti has an earthy nuttiness that sits beautifully beside stronger flavours.

Laal Maas brings heat and depth, with mutton cooked into a chilli-rich gravy that gathers intensity with every bite. Pyaaz Kachori delivers another kind of pleasure. The pastry gives way with a crisp crack, releasing a hot onion filling fragrant with spice. Rajasthan fills the table with texture, ghee, chilli and deeply satisfying flavours.

MAHARASHTRA, COAST MEETS FIRE

Along Maharashtra's western coast, coconut, chilli and kokum move easily through the kitchen. Malvani fish curry brings them together in a bowl that is creamy, tart and hot, especially good when spooned over steaming rice.

Kombdi Vade pairs a robust chicken curry with crisp, puffed vade that soften beautifully once they touch the gravy. A glass of cooling solkadhi nearby carries coconut milk and kokum, its pale pink colour hiding a sharp, refreshing acidity.

Further inland, Kolhapur turns towards deeper spice. Tambda Rassa is fiery, red and aromatic. Pandhra Rassa has a smooth richness from meat stock, coconut, poppy seed and cashew.

Misal Pav piles sprouts, spicy gravy, farsan, chopped onion and bread into a plate full of crunch, softness and heat. Bharli Vangi gives small brinjals a thick filling of peanut, sesame and coconut. Puran Poli rounds things off with soft flatbread, warm jaggery and a sheen of ghee.

One state, several landscapes, and a plate that keeps changing with them.

TAMIL NADU, HEAT, TANG, RHYTHM

A Tamil kitchen comes alive through sound and scent. Mustard seeds crackle in hot oil, curry leaves release their fragrance, dosa batter hisses on the griddle, and tamarind slowly deepens in a pot of kuzhambu.

Chettinad cooking draws on peppercorns, fennel, cumin, cinnamon, cloves, star anise and kalpasi. Chettinad Chicken carries these spices in a dark, aromatic masala that clings closely to every piece.

Kongunadu cooking brings pepper, cumin, coconut and local grains to the everyday table. Pongal is soft and comforting, with rice, lentils, ghee, pepper and cumin creating a bowl that asks to be eaten slowly.

Kothu Parotta brings theatre to the griddle. Flaky parotta is chopped rapidly with masala, egg or meat, gathering crisp edges and richly coated pieces along the way. Kari Dosa arrives hearty and deeply savoury.

Then there is Jigarthanda: chilled, creamy and sweet, with the kind of finish that makes the afternoon heat feel very far away.

BENGAL, MUSTARD, RIVER, SWEETNESS

Mustard fills the senses quickly. Its sharp fragrance rises with green chilli and mustard oil, especially when hilsa is involved.

Shorshe Ilish brings rich fish together with a pungent mustard gravy, coming alive over hot rice. Chingri Malai Curry



Chettinad Chicken Served with Soft Idli. Image Courtesy: Saveurs Secretes, Pexels



Churu Ker Sangri Masala. Image Courtesy: My Indian Products

surrounds prawns with a smooth coconut-based sauce. Kosha Mangsho takes its time, with mutton cooking until the gravy turns dark, glossy and concentrated.

Aloo Posto has its own quiet indulgence. Potatoes sit beneath a creamy coating of poppy seed paste, with green chilli adding a gentle lift. Luchi arrives puffed and golden, soft inside and perfect for dragging through the last streaks of gravy.

Mishti Doi cools the palate at the end. Thick, softly caramelised and gently sweet, it has the kind of texture that makes the spoon return almost automatically.

Bengal leaves behind mustard, river fish, slow-cooked meat and sweetness in equal measure.

ASSAM, CLEAN, SHARP, UNEXPECTED

In Assam, the plate often feels fresh and uncluttered. Rice anchors the meal, surrounded by greens, fish, vegetables and flavours that draw their character from sourness, fermentation and local produce.

Khar has a distinctive alkaline quality and occupies a special place in Assamese cooking. Maasor Tenga brings fish into a light, tangy gravy where tomato, elephant apple, raw mango or lemon may provide the sour note. It is bright, clean and especially satisfying with steamed rice.

Aloo Pitika is simple comfort: mashed potato with onion, green chilli and herbs, soft enough to mix straight into rice. Duck with ash gourd is richer and warmer. Xaak brings leafy freshness to the table, while Ou Tenga introduces the unmistakable tartness of elephant apple.

Til Pitha closes the meal with rice and sesame, gently sweet and nutty.

The flavours stay clear and precise, leaving the palate refreshed and ready for another mouthful.

NAGALAND, SMOKE SIGNALS

Smoke hangs close to many Naga kitchens. Meat takes on the fragrance of the hearth, bamboo shoot brings fermentation and acidity, and axone contributes the deep savouriness of fermented soybean.

Smoked Pork with Bamboo Shoot has extraordinary depth. The pork is rich and tender, the bamboo sharp and tangy, and the smoke runs through the entire dish. Pork with axone goes further into fermentation, with an aroma and flavour that stay firmly in the memory.

Across Angami, Ao, Sumi and other Naga food traditions, local greens, chillies, smoked meats and fermented ingredients shape the table in distinctive ways.

Anishi, made from fermented and dried taro leaves, brings an earthy intensity to preparations with pork or fish. Galho combines rice, vegetables and meat in a warm, comforting bowl. Sticky rice provides a gentle base for stronger flavours.

Fire, forest produce and fermentation sit close together here. Each brings its own texture and aroma, creating food with a powerful sense of place.



Grilled Pork Served in Bamboo. Image Courtesy: Huỳnh Như Mavi, Pexels


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