

PRAVEG'S TOURISM ONE

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MONSOON TRAILS IN GUJARAT

An island of
Serendipity

RAMESWARAM
WHERE THE EARTH AND SKY MEET



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A Season and A Reason

Monsoon holidays are surely a lifetime experience as the exotic locations leave you spellbound with its beauty. The hills and mountains get carpeted with lush greenery, the lakes overflow with sparkling water, the waterfall sceneries become heavenly to make you fall in love with Incredible India. Gujarat is one such perfect location to travel during the monsoon season. The season is all about visiting the hills and getting closer to Mother Nature. The state has many hill stations and tourist spots to enjoy the rains and get drenched.

Our 'Monsoon Trails in Gujarat' features destinations that will give you the reason to embark upon a journey in this season.

'Rameswaram – Where the earth and sky meet' will take you to the small town in the state of Tamil Nadu that is at the extreme end of the peninsula, Sri Lanka being the next piece of land across the Indian Ocean.

Read on!

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Incredible India

MONSOON TRAILS IN GUJARAT

From the wetlands of the Great Rann of Kutch in the northwest to the forested hills of the Sahyadhris in the southeast of Gujarat, the state has many sites worth visiting in the rains.



Jarani Falls, Panchmahal



DANG

Dang district is stunningly beautiful during the rains. Shrouded in mist, the hills present a pretty picture with lush green forests swathing the slope. The district rises from 50 to 1083 metres above mean sea level offering a mind blowing range of scenery. Driving through the district, you can see thick forested tracts of teak, semi-evergreen and evergreen flora, and a variety of bamboo. Streams flow through the rocks, cascading down steep slopes, and the lowland forests give way to bamboo, teak and flora of the higher hills. At places the ascending road passes rivers like the Ambika, where egrets and herons fish are found in the water bodies. You could see langur monkeys frolicking on tree tops.





Vansda National Park





Vansda National Park



Shabari Dham



Botanical Garden, Waghai

Along the Ambika River, Vansda National Park has towering trees, a profusion of flowering plants and the birds of moist deciduous forests. It forms a contiguous tract with the forests of Dangs on its eastern side and those of Valsad district on its southern side. The Waghai Botanical Garden can be visited on the main road, and from here, you can go to the national park entrance. Here you can hope to see Indian great black Woodpecker, yellow backed sunbird, pompadour green pigeon, Malabar trogon, Indian shama, hornbill, brown-headed barbet and jungle babbler. If you are a serious birdwatcher, it is worth spending time to look for the endangered forest spotted owlet. Another interesting trip can take you to Sabri Dham associated with the Ramayana.



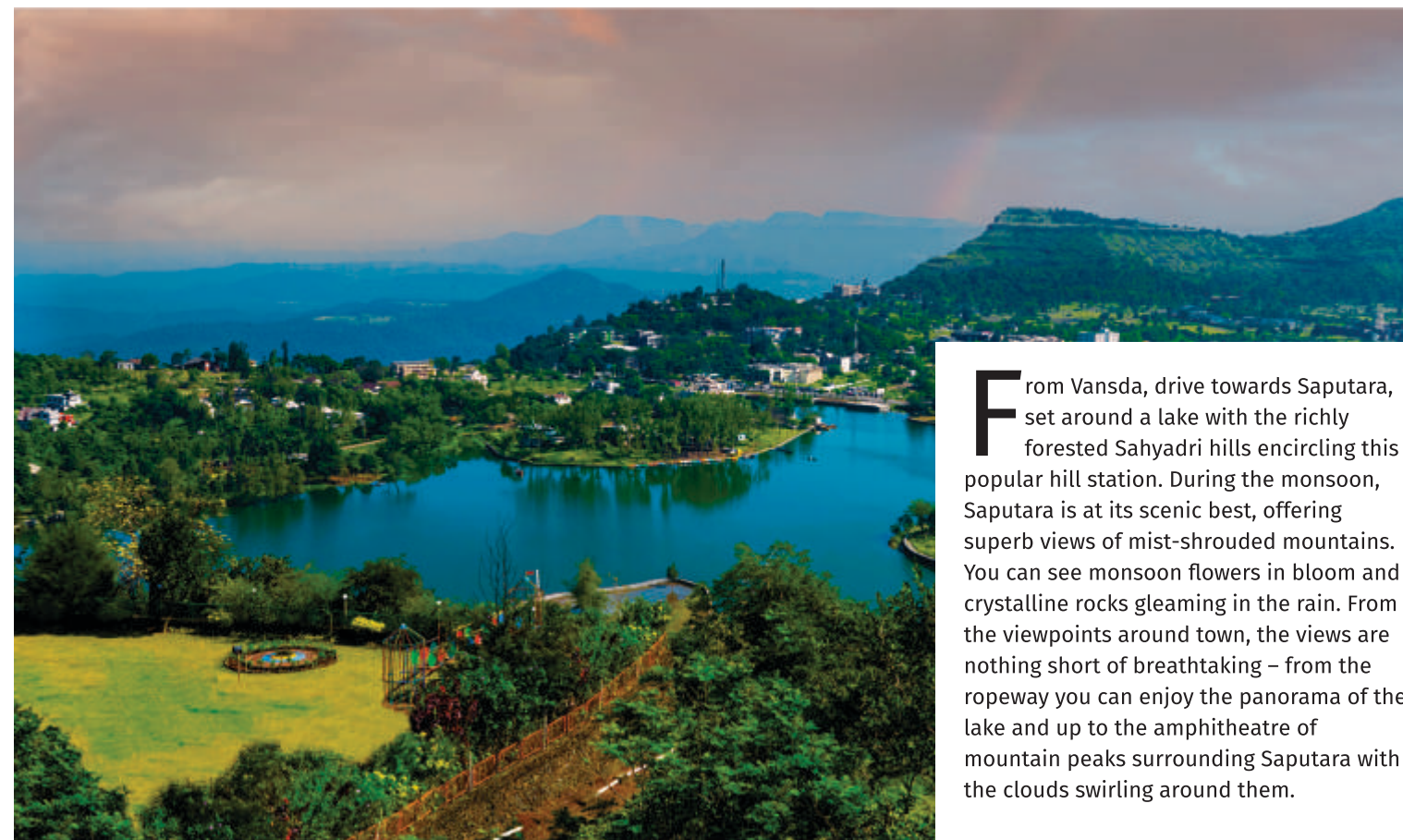
Flower Park - Saputara



Saputara Ropeway



Saputara Lake



From Vansda, drive towards Saputara, set around a lake with the richly forested Sahyadri hills encircling this popular hill station. During the monsoon, Saputara is at its scenic best, offering superb views of mist-shrouded mountains. You can see monsoon flowers in bloom and crystalline rocks gleaming in the rain. From the viewpoints around town, the views are nothing short of breathtaking – from the ropeway you can enjoy the panorama of the lake and up to the amphitheatre of mountain peaks surrounding Saputara with the clouds swirling around them.



One of the highlights of the Dang in the rain is the number of beautiful streams and waterfalls. One of the best is the Gira Falls, one of the most spectacular waterfalls of south Gujarat. The falls lie in a rocky gorge, offering a breathtaking view of the water falling about a hundred feet to a pool on the valley floor. In the monsoon the fall is at its most impressive, crashing down to the floor in a white cascade, the sunlight creating rainbow hues emitting from the droplets. From the falls, you can travel to the Mahal-Bardipada forest reserve with its abundance of orchids and flowering bamboos. Butterflies are prolific in these forests.



Gira Waterfall, Waghai



Zarwani Waterfall



SHOOLPANESHWAR

Shoolpaneshwar waterfalls is one of the largest and most spectacular falls in Gujarat. The falls lie in the Shoolpaneshwar Sanctuary, which has picturesque landscapes of valleys, forest-covered slopes and rocky outcrops. This is a good area to see birds of the Vindhya-Satpura hill ranges. The area is predominantly tribal with Vasavas as the main tribal community and you can see their bamboo houses. In the forests, you can see hornbills, jungle fowl and other birds. These hills are specially known for being the nesting sites of crested serpent eagle, changeable hawk eagle, shikra hawk and other birds. This is also a top site for Alexandrine parakeets.

THE GREAT RANN OF KUTCH



The Great Rann of Kutch is a dynamic landscape that is a salt desert in the dry months and a wetland during the monsoon.

Driving from Rapar to Khadir Bet, you pass the vast expanse of the Rann that is inundated with water during the monsoon like a shallow sea. This is the time of the year when flamingos can be seen in their breeding colours at these wetlands. At places, you can see patches of white salt pans.

White Rann of Kutch



Greater Flamingo at Rann of Kutch



Khadir Bet





Dholavira - An archaeological site at Khadirbet

At Khadir Bet, you approach the archaeological excavations of Dholavira. There is a museum at the entrance to the site that exhibits photographs and artefacts. Dholavira was occupied from 3000 to 1500 BCE, and this is one of the best preserved urban settlements from the Bronze Age in India. Having survived 1500 years, this

site reveals much about the Indus Valley Civilization or Harappan civilization, one of the three earliest civilizations in the world (the other two are those of Mesopotamia and Egypt) and the most extensive of the ancient cultures. Some of the major finds include pottery, square stamp seals, seals without Indus script, a giant bronze hammer, a big

chisel, a bronze hand-held mirror, a gold wire, gold ear stud, gold globules with holes, copper celts and bangles, shell bangles, phallus-like symbols of stone, square seals with Indus inscription and signs, a circular seal, humped animals, pottery with painted motifs, goblets, dish-on-stand, perforated jars, grinding stones, mortars, and stone weights.

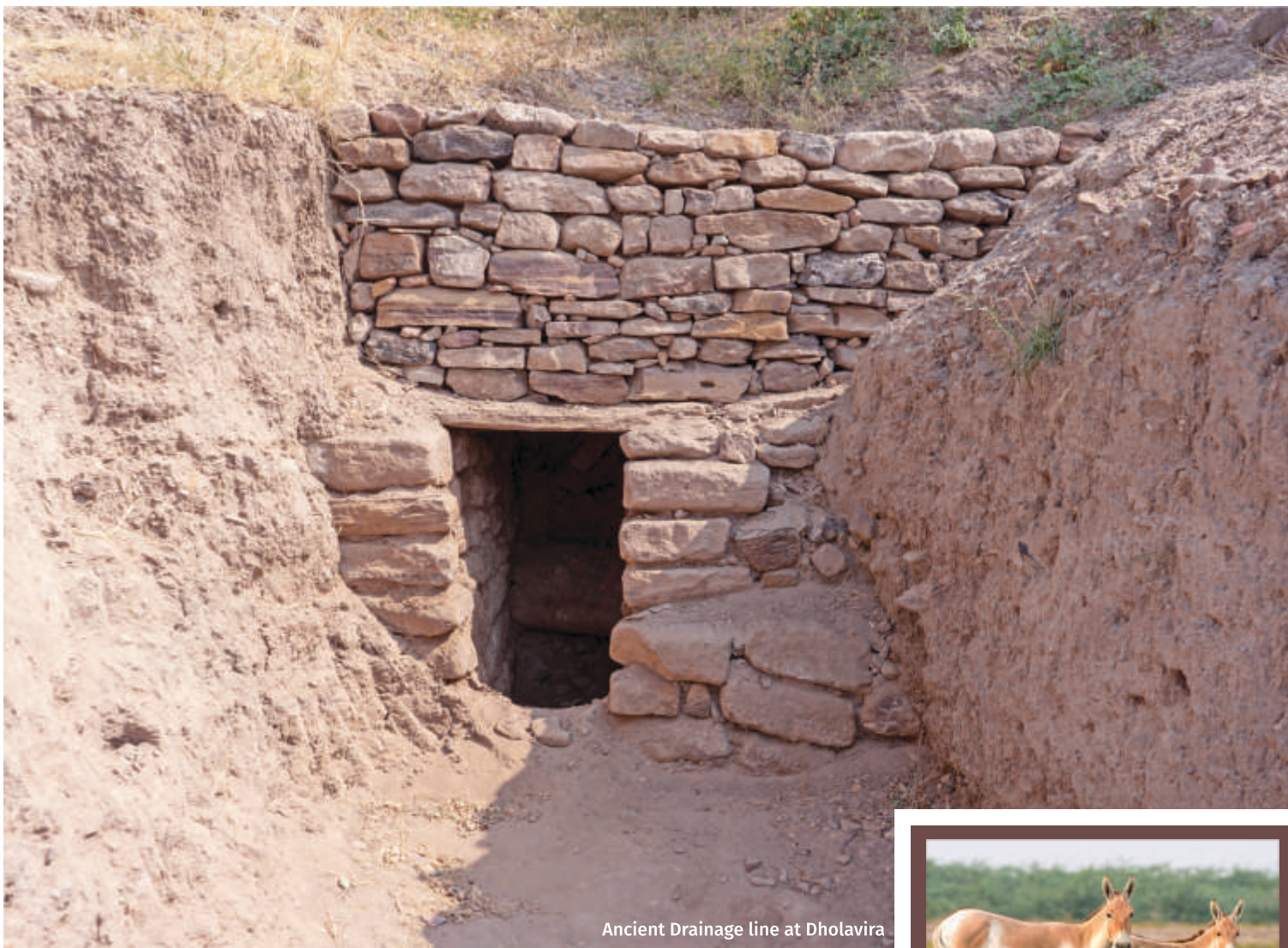


Archaeological Museum



A short distance from the archaeological site is a fossil park that houses gigantic tree fossils from the Jurassic period that dates back to 187 to 176 million years.






Ancient Drainage line at Dholavira

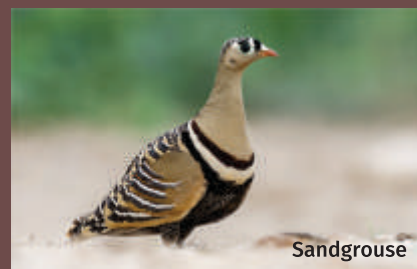
Walking around the site, which mainly comprises a fortified city, a cemetery and a public area, you can get an insight into the urban planning, construction techniques, water management, social governance and development, art, manufacturing, trading, and belief system of the period. Excavations have revealed excellent urban planning and architecture, a remarkable water harvesting system with a number of reservoirs and antiquities such as seals, beads, animal bones, gold, silver, terracotta ornaments, pottery and bronze vessels. The cityscape is divided into the citadel, the middle town and the lower town, with defenses, gateways, built-up areas, street system, wells, large open spaces, two public spaces

said to be 'stadia', and an 'annex'. A series of reservoirs are found to the east and south of the Citadel. The Harappan knowledge of hydraulics can be seen at its best at Dholavira, with sophisticated systems of the conservation, harvesting and storage of water. The citadel had a first of its kind system of channels and reservoir. The massive stone-cut reservoirs for water storage were connected to a planned system of channels for water distribution. A large well also had a stone-cut through connecting it to a drain meant for conducting water to a storage tank. This was an answer to the desert landscape in which it is set.

A huge circular structure on the site is believed to have been a grave or memorial. 



Indian Wild Ass



Sandgrouse

Driving around Khadir Bet, you can expect to see wildlife like the Indian wild ass, chinkara or Indian gazelle, sandgrouse, etc. The marshes are gathering places for large flocks of birds.

Incredible India

RAMESWARAM

WHERE THE EARTH AND SKY MEET



It was a long drive from Trivandrum in Kerala to the island of Rameswaram, but one look at the magnificence of the temple whose beginnings are lost in the beginning of time and the aches and pains of the journey falls off, like the burden fell off Christian's back when he saw the cross in Pilgrim's Progress.

As I gazed at the 126-foot tall gopuram or spire that towers over nine levels, I felt like I was looking into eternity. You lose all sense of time and space and the perspective changes as far as man is concerned – quite an insignificant part of the greater whole.

This small town in the state of Tamil

Nadu is the extreme end of the peninsula, Sri Lanka being the next piece of land across the Indian Ocean. And the temple, the Ramanathaswamy Temple, is what the town is famous for, apart from the fact that it is also where one of India's most popular presidents, Abdul Kalam, was born. The scientist, famous for having put India on the nuclear map, was the 11th president.

The temple, which sprawls across 15 acres – equal to almost 15 football fields – is famous as an example of Dravidian temple architecture. The earliest forms of this architecture can be seen at the ruins of Hampi in neighbouring Karnataka, but here it has been fine-

tuned and perfected to create a place of beauty, calm and peace. Walking through the pillared corridors – the longest of which is almost 4,000 feet in length – is a trip through an island of peace. You can feel all your cares and worries falling away and even grief takes a step backward, leaving you with a sense of inner calm that leaves you feeling refreshed and renewed. No wonder this is considered one of the four holiest of holy places for Hindus – one of the Char Dham or Four Pillars of Hinduism along with Puri in Odisha in the east, Dwarka in Gujarat in the west, and Badrinath in Uttarakhand in the north.





Corridors and Sculptured Pillars, Ramanathaswamy Temple



Source: CRS PHOTO/Shutterstock



Source: CRS PHOTO/Shutterstock

The construction of the temple is said to have started in the 12th Century, but the actual beginning is lost in myth. This is where Lord Rama from the epic Ramayana prayed to Lord Shiva before embarking on the journey to Lanka for the battle with Ravana who had abducted his wife Sita. The shivling that Rama prayed to is here as also the spadika or quartz lingam that we woke up at 4 am in the morning to see. The temple also has one of the 12 jyotirlingas in India where Shiva is worshipped as a spire of light as also the shivling that Hanuman is said to have brought all the way from Mount Kailash, now in modern China.

Prayers at the temple, bathing in water from the 22 wells that are said to contain the waters of India's holy rivers, walks through the innumerable corridors all lined with the exquisite pillars built on plinths, all this takes the better part of the morning. The best part of all this is that despite the thousands of pilgrims who throng the temple every day, there is no sense of a crowd because the temple complex is so huge.



Driving on from the temple, we reach Dhanushkodi, crossing the Pamban Bridge and on either side of the narrow strip of land is the sea. The sea flats extend for as far as the eye can see, across to the open ocean. It is from here where the Bay of Bengal meets the Indian Ocean that Rama is said to have built the bridge to Lanka.

This is today a ghost town with just a few fishermen and makeshift stalls selling trinkets and shells as well as mineral water, Coke and tea. On the way can be seen the ruins of a railway station, a church and a post office, reminders of the tragedy of the devastating cyclone of 1964 which killed almost 2,000 people. The once flourishing port town was reduced to ruins and today the road leads to the end marked by an Ashoka Pillar. A whole passenger train with 110 people on board was carried away by the tidal wave in the wake of the cyclone.

The sea looks calm and peaceful from the car, but get out and winds of unimaginable ferocity hit you, the fine sand feels like thousands of fin needles on your cheeks. I felt that my face got thoroughly exfoliated by the sand. Sensibly I had left my dupatta and scarf in the car. And blessed my dark glasses. My phone quivered in the wind as I took pictures of the awesome expanse of the sea.



Abandoned Town, Dhanushkodi

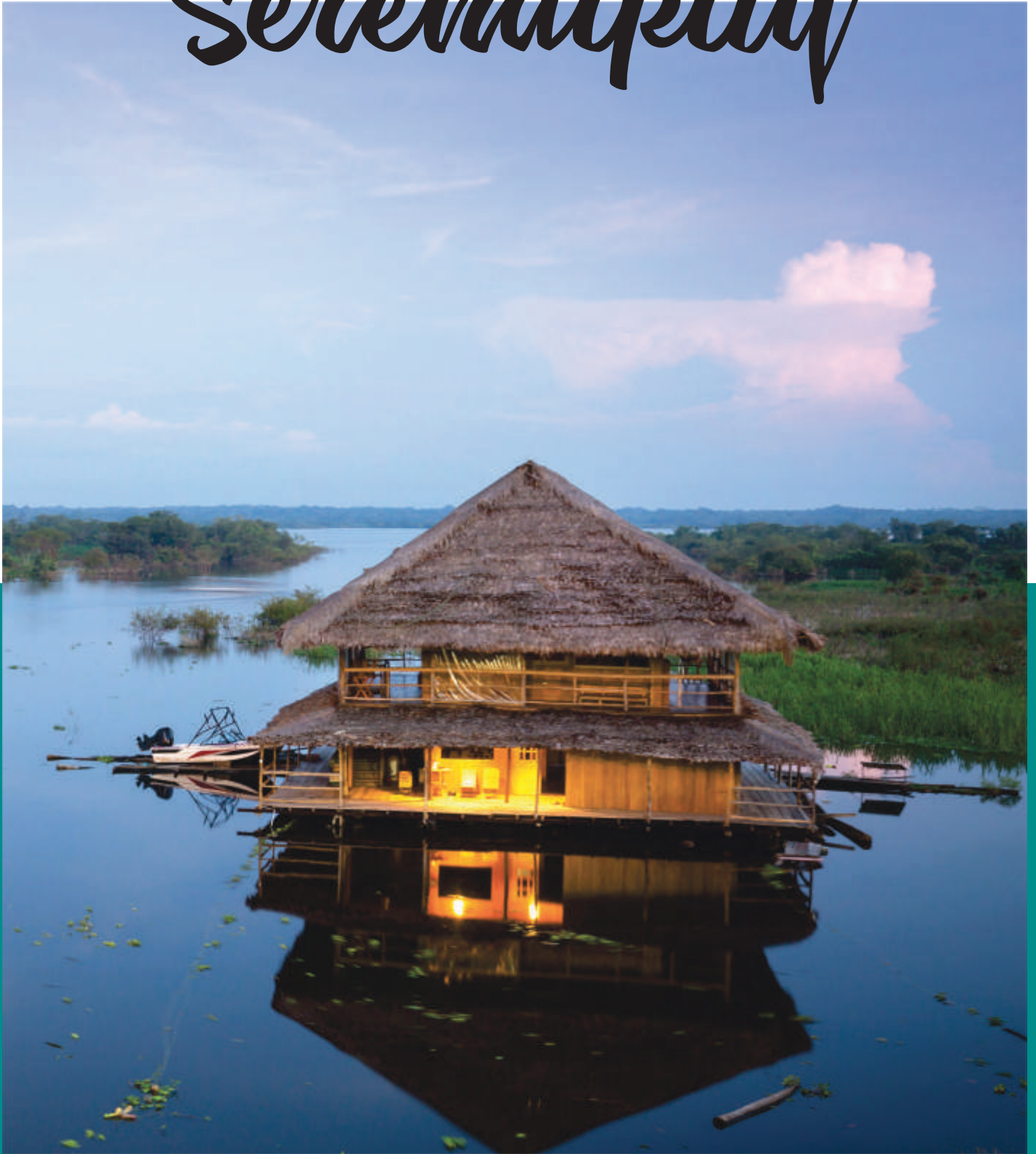




Sending a silent greeting to Sri Lanka, just 30 km away, we got back into the car and took a U-turn around the Ashoka Pillar back to Rameswaram. And all the way back, we drank our fill of the sight of sea on both sides of the road, high waves marking the Indian Ocean and calm waters of the Bay of Bengal. 🌊

Far Far Away

An island of **Serendipity**





Nanay River in Iquitos

This place has earned a few evocative descriptions for itself. It is known as the largest city in the world that cannot be reached by road. It is known as the Capital of the Peruvian Amazon. It is otherwise known as Iquitos. It is an island in the middle of the mighty Amazon River basin, deep in the heart of Peru, surrounded by dense jungles.

Situated in the heart of the Amazon River basin, Iquitos is accessible only by boat or plane. The indigenous people of Peru who live here are the Amerindians. They are believed to have migrated, many thousands of years ago, into the Americas over the land bridge connecting what is now Siberia and Alaska.

Sometime in the early 16th century,

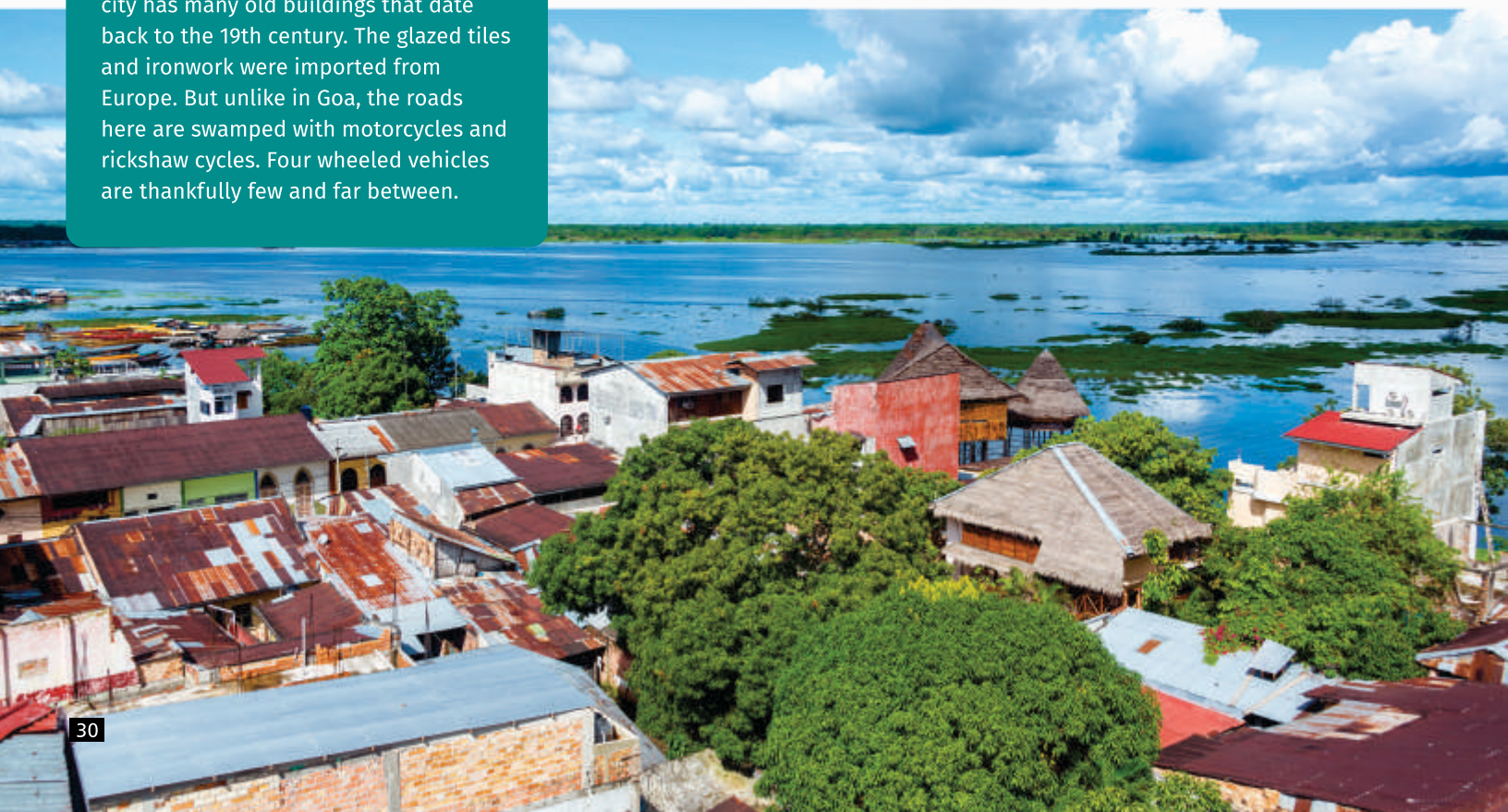
Spanish and Portuguese missionaries arrived in Peru with the intention of proselytising the Indians to Christianity and imposing European culture. The Spanish and Portuguese forcibly relocated the indigenous inhabitants from their colonies into urban settlements modelled along their own lines. In 1757, Iquitos was founded as a Jesuit mission.





Central Park in Iquitos City

The city of Iquitos feels much like Goa. One can see beautifully designed colonial style buildings. The houses here have elegant arched windows and doors; cantilevered balconies with cast iron grills. Many of the houses are in a state of decay. The city has many old buildings that date back to the 19th century. The glazed tiles and ironwork were imported from Europe. But unlike in Goa, the roads here are swamped with motorcycles and rickshaw cycles. Four wheeled vehicles are thankfully few and far between.





Source: Karal Zahradka/Shutterstock

There is a building in Iquitos called the Iron House. It is believed to have been built by Gustave Eiffel, the French civil engineer who built the Eiffel Tower, in France. Apocryphal or otherwise, the rumour has turned this house as one of the must visit places in Iquitos.

An interesting place in Iquitos is on the riverfront. It is a village called Belen, where one can find houses propped up on stilts, very much similar to those in Southeast Asia. Belen is divided into two districts. The upper zone area is where the market and main warehouses are located. Here the structures are all concrete.

In the lower zone, the wooden dwelling units and shops are all built on stilts. It is a maze of hutments with narrow wooden passageways spidering off in all directions with a series of bridges. One can find stray dogs and cats loitering on the ramps. Some shops can be approached only by executing a fine balancing act on a narrow strip of plank. People have made permanent abodes here, above the water level. When the river basin floods during the rains, people need not shift to higher ground.



Traditional Food Market of Belen

An intriguing and exciting place is the Belen market, the Indian equivalent of a large Subzi Mandi. It has meat, fish, fruit and vegetable sections. Every tropical country in the world has its own brand of traditional medicines that they extract from the jungles. A vast array of concoctions made from medicinal herbs, roots, barks, are available. Dried dead animals, skulls and bones of animals are on display. The roadside shops are neatly arranged with these concoctions, much like the ancient Indian system of medicines of Ayurveda, Siddha, and Unani. Apparently, there are remedies for all kinds of diseases.

An enchanting pastime here is to stroll along the waterfront, especially during sunrise or sunset. There are many cafes with wide balconies and riverfront terraces, where one can watch the sun rise or set over the flat meandering stretch of the river basin.





Humboldt Penguins



Tree Frog



Colorful Parrots



Sloth



Pink Dolphin



Yasuni National Park

Iquitos has one of the most bio diverse areas in the world. Many animals that live here are not seen anywhere else. Many animals that normally live in the ocean can be seen in the Amazon Rivers. Dolphins and manatees can be seen deep inside the rivers in Iquitos. Pink dolphins only found in South America are spotted here. Owing to the diversity of flora and fauna, many forests are protected areas. Reportedly, Allpahuayo Mishana National Reserve contains 500 varieties of trees per 2.5 acres, more than anywhere else on Earth. It has nearly 100 unique plant species. For sheer variety, there are over 1,900 flora species; 475 bird species; 143 species of reptiles; 71 species of amphibians; more than 90 species of parasitic wasps; and more butterfly species than any other site in the world.



Peru is one of the few places in the world that has white sand forests. A sand forest is a type of rare subtropical forest region. It is distinctive due to its unique combination of rare plant and animal species. The sand forests are large swathes of coastal dunes which were separated from the ocean millions of years ago due to tectonic shifting. Pacaya Samiria National Reserve and the Tamshiyacu Tahuayo Reserve are also protected areas.

The rich flora and fauna of the South American region is reflected in the local markets. The markets are filled with all kinds of goods taken from the river and from the surrounding jungles. The varieties of fruits and vegetables are as varied and diverse as any that one can see in a South East Asian market. It is also for these very reasons that the cuisine here is a gourmet's delight.



Wooden Treehouse - Pacaya Samiria National Reserve





The tacacho y cecina is a versatile dish that has green bananas, meat, jerky and sausages. Bananas are available in abundance here and are commonly used in many dishes.

Patarashca de paiche is a steamed fish dish. Paiche is a large freshwater fish. This dish is prepared by wrapping the paiche in a large banana leaf along with tomatoes, onions, and cilantro. It is a delicious mix of eclectic food, bonded together.



Juane is another common traditional Amazonian dish. It consists of a mixture of rice, chicken, egg, and olives, packed into a banana leaf and steamed. The practice of steaming food inside the banana leaves is that the leaf's antioxidants are absorbed by the food during the cooking process. This method of cooking is widely practised in southern India too.

Iquitos has a tropical climate with an average daily temperature of 30 – 32°C and cooler nights of 20 – 22°C. Heavy rains are from December to May. June through November is a season of less rain. However, it is humid around the year.

Iquitos as a city has not developed well economically. In the late 19th century, there was a rubber boom in

Iquitos. The city was the centre for rubber export from the Amazon Basin. The city prospered. However, in the mid-20th century rubber production commenced in Southeast Asian countries undercutting prices of the Peruvian product. This led to a decline of the rubber industry in Iquitos forcing people to leave the place. Iquitos never recovered from this setback. ☐

National Conference of Ministers of Youth Affairs and Sports of States/UTs at Tent City Narmada, Statue of Unity



A two-day conference “National Conference of Ministers of Youth Affairs and Sports of States/UTs” was held at Tent City Narmada, Statue of Unity on 24-25 June, 2022.

The conference was attended by Union Minister for Sports and Youth Affairs Shri Anurag Singh Thakur, Union Minister of State for Sports Nisith Pramanik, Minister of State for Sports,

Youth Services and Cultural Affairs and Home Minister Harsh Sanghvi, Sports Ministers of various states, Central Secretary to Sports Department Mrs. Sujata Chaturvedi, Union Secretary for Youth Affairs Shri Sanjeev Kumar, Gujarat Chief Minister Shri Bhupendra Patel, Principal Secretary to Sports and Youth Services and Cultural Activities, Gujarat Shri Ashwini kumar, Senior officials of

Sports Authority of India, Secretaries, Commissioners of the Department of Sports and Youth Activities of various states.

Just as large-scale as the conference, its venue Tent City Narmada left no stone unturned in providing professional event management and hospitality services, which in its own way contributed to the success of the event. 📌



Saga of an intrepid king





Rising like a phoenix from the placid waters of an artificial lake, the tomb of Sher Shah Suri floats majestically in the placid waters. Here lies the man who had the gumption to take on the Mughals and come up trumps. Here lies the Pashtun leader who easily ranks as one of the greatest mediaeval kings of India. Here lies the man who at the very end of his life could claim that he achieved what he had desired for.

Sher Shah or Farid as he was then called was born in Sasaram, a remote grubby town of Bihar. His family however, came from the highlands of southern Afghanistan. His father was a commander in the Lodi army. Farid had an unhappy childhood and a chequered youth. He however, took keen interest in his studies. Not much is known about his youth, but he enjoyed a prominent position in the provincial government. He soon became a Jagirdar or a Revenue Collector. In one of his hunting expeditions, when he single-handedly managed to kill a tiger, the awestruck people rechristened him as Sher Khan. He excelled in administration and steadily rose up in the ranks. All the while, he was gaining respect and stature from the people around him.

Just as water finds its own level, so is the destiny of people. When Sher Shah observed the ineffective and pallid ways of the Mughals, he began to harbour in his mind the audacious idea of driving them out from India. He began to believe that the mighty Mughals could be beaten. When he broached his idea among his fellow Afghans, they only laughed at him. However, when the Mughal king Babur observed Sher Shah, he was immediately struck by demeanour and was intimidated by his presence. Babur called his minister Mir Khalifa and asked him to arrest Sher Shah. Mir Khalifa demurred and before any action could be taken, Sher Shah who sensed that something was amiss, escaped from the clutches of the Mughals to Sasaram.

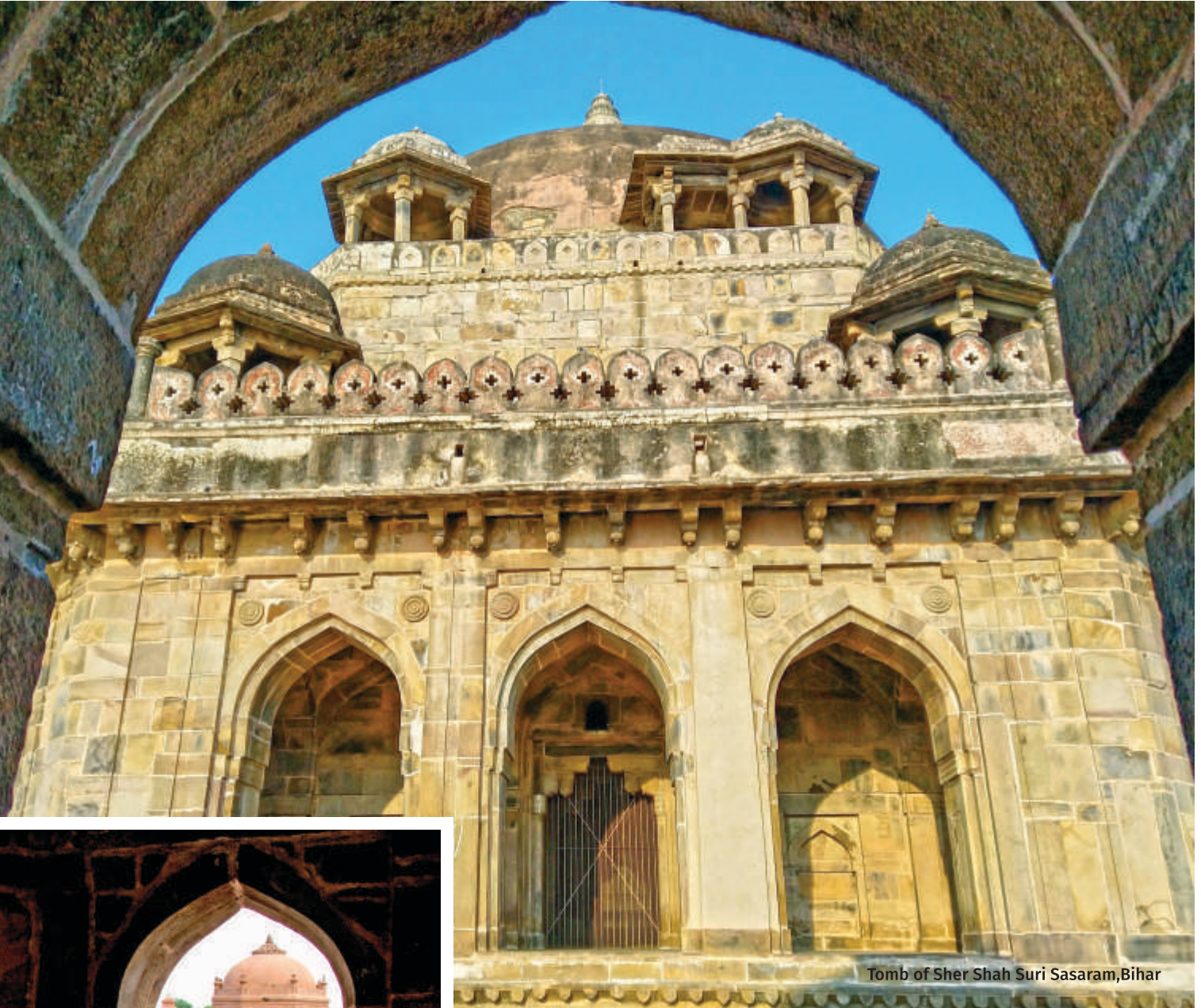
With time, Sher Shah became more

powerful. He managed to amass a large army. With these dedicated men, he began to harass Humayun, which led to a series of battles. Sher Shah Suri was Humayun's *bête noire*. Whereas Humayun was dilatory in his quest, Sher Shah was a crafty adversary, scheming and always endeavouring to be one step ahead of his rival. The world was too small a place for either of them to coexist. Such was the animosity that existed between the two.

As a regent, Sher Shah led a strict regimental life. It was not for him to indulge in a slothful way of royal life. His day began in the early hours of the morning and was spent in prayers. He was a devout Sunni. The mediaeval historian Abbas had claimed that he always had breakfast in the company of pious men. Sher Shah claimed that it was incumbent upon the king to give grants to imams. The prosperity and population of the cities of Hind were dependent upon imams and holy men. He was fair and just with regard to the treatment of Hindus.

Despite his short reign of five years, he left a firm imprint of his administration that is visible across the span of centuries. The system of administration he evolved was so efficient that it remained unchanged till the British came to India. He restored the ancient imperial Grand Trunk Road running from Chittagong in Bangladesh to Punjab. At frequent intervals along the road, he erected resting places for the travellers. Milestones known as Kos Minars were erected all along the route. These are round brick pillars, approximately 30 feet in height. By today's standard, the brick pillar has been erected approximately 2.2 km apart. Many of the Kos Minars have survived the onslaught of time and are still visible along the GT Road. It can be seen at the National Zoological Park in New Delhi. The merit in his system of governance was recognised and acknowledged even by the emperor Akbar. Akbar's system of government was largely based on that of Sher Shah.





Tomb of Sher Shah Suri Sasaram, Bihar



The imposing tomb of Sher Shah Suri is in Sasaram. The three-storied mausoleum stands higher than the Taj Mahal. The mediaeval structure is made of fine sandstone. The mausoleum rises from a large stone terrace. The elevated terrace is enclosed by a parapet wall with octagonal domed pavilions at four corners. In the centre of the terrace stands the mausoleum on a low eight-sided plinth. The building consists of a large octagonal chamber surrounded by a wide veranda. The main dome has eight pillared cupolas on the

corners of the octagon.

A small arched recess on the western wall of the mausoleum, the mihrab, indicates the direction of the Kaaba in Mecca. Above the mihrab is an inscription recording the completion of the tomb by Salim Shah on the 7th day of Jumada, A.H. 952 (16th August 1545 AD). The mausoleum was completed three months after the death of Sher Shah Suri.

The tomb of his father Hassan Shah and that of his son Salim Shah are some other monuments at Sasaram.



Purana Qila, Delhi

He also built a new city and a mosque close to the bank of Yamuna River in New Delhi, which today is known as the Old fort or Purana Qila. The mosque was once known for its lavish decoration.

According to historian Abraham

Eraly, he had retained a fair number of Hindu officers in his service. His infantry was almost exclusively made up of Hindus.

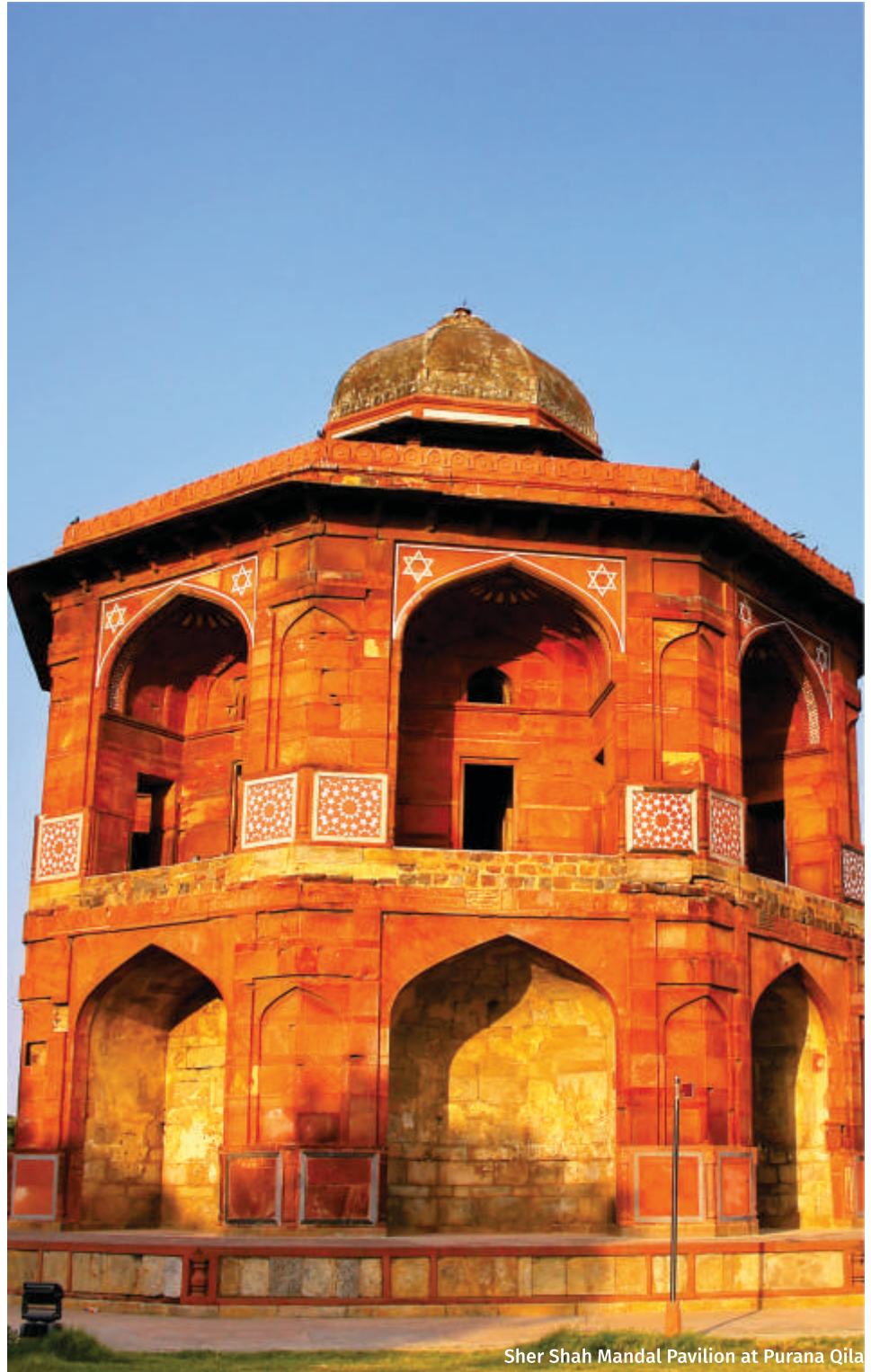
Sher Shah Suri remained undefeated. In May 1545, Rana Udai Singh of Chitor surrendered without a

fight to the forces of Sher Shah Suri. The king then proceeded towards Kalinjar in Bundelkhand, which turned out to be his last conquest.

But what made him veer to Bundelkhand? According to Abbas Sarwani, a historian of that era, Sher



Shah was enticed by the notoriety of a dancing girl of Raja Kirat Singh. Sher Shah besieged the fort and expected a meek surrender from the Raja. But the Raja hung on. Sher Shah was supervising the firing of hookah or rocket grenades, when one of them exploded on him.



Sher Shah Mandal Pavilion at Purana Qila

Grievously wounded, Sher Shah tenaciously hung on, exhorting his men to fight on. As he lay dying, the news reached him that the fort had finally fallen. It was only then that the king eased his grip on his life. According to Abd al-Qadir Badayuni, a historian in the

Mughal Empire, the king's last words were, "Praise be to God, this was my very desire". These were the words of a king who had a fulfilling life till the very end and who left a lasting legacy to earn a name as one of the greatest kings of India. ■

THE PARSEE TEMPLE TRAIL IN GUJARAT

Following persecution in Persia, a Zoroastrian group called Parsees or Parsis fled to Gujarat more than 1000 years ago. The sea and land routes to Hind or India were well-known to the Zoroastrians because of trade between the Persian speaking lands and the Indian coast. According to the mediaeval text called Kisse-i-Sanjan the Zoroastrians landed and settled first in Diu Island and then set sail for Sanjan which they are believed to have reached in the eight century. During a storm enroute, the Zoroastrian group promised to build an Atash Behram, a Parsee temple with the highest grade of ritual fire.

The Parsees approached the ruler named Jadi Rana to settle at Sanjan. According to the story, the Rana was reluctant to give permission and sent a

bowl of milk to indicate that his kingdom had no place for new settlers. The Parsee priests added sugar to the milk and returned it, a message that they would not interfere with the culture of the area but instead enrich it like sugar does not increase the quantity of milk but sweetens it. The Atash Behram was consecrated using 16 fires, including Asfan which is fire by lightning.

While Parsees prospered at Sanjan and nearby towns along the Gujarat coast, the Islamic invasion of Sanjan led to their fleeing with the fire to the caves of Bahrot. After this, the fire was housed in Navsari for centuries and for a short while in Surat, before it was moved to Udvada in 1742. The sacred fire was first housed in the residence of Mr Bhatthela and then moved to a small house of Seth Minocher Bahman from Nargol.





Modi Atash Behram Parsi Fire Temple, Surat

The Parsees became prominent citizens of Gujarat with their mansions and institutions coming up in many cities from Bhuj to Bhavnagar to Bharuch.

Ahmedabad has many prominent Parsee families who settled in the city during the 1800s. Just near the Khamasa Gate, the Vakil Anjuman Adran is an agiary or Parsee Fire Temple established first in 1846 and rebuilt after floods in 1977. The temple stands in front and behind it is the Parsee Panchayat office. Walk around this area, you can find bakeries and shops where you may be able to get Parsee masalas and baked goods.

Continue from here to Kankaria, where the second Parsee Agiary was built. The Zoroastrian Hall is nearby and hosts many events and private ceremonies of the community members.

From Ahmedabad, drive to Surat. Surat has a number of schools, hospitals and other institutions built by Parsees.



The fires of the Modi (Shenshai) Atash Behram and the Vakil Atash Behram in Surat were both consecrated in 1823. Surat was a prominent Parsee stronghold during the Mughal period. After the Mughal Emperors allowed the

British and Dutch to establish their factories in Surat, Parsees were employed in the European trading bases. While in Surat, you can shop for bakery products from many Parsee owned bakeries.

About an hour from Surat's fire temples, Navsari has the Bhagarsath Desai Atash Behram set in a temple built in 1765 AD surrounded by palms. According to Parsees, their ancestors found the city's atmosphere to that of the Sari region of Iran, and so the NAO SARI or New Sari came into being. Many prosperous Parsee families of today trace their origin to Navsari and Valsad. You can see the heritage house of the Tata family in Navsari, birthplace of Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata. Nearby is a house that has been converted into a museum dedicated to Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy, 1st Baronet, merchant and philanthropist of the late-18th and early-20th century who made a huge fortune on the opium trade between India and China. He endowed hospitals, schools and charitable shelters in Mumbai, Navsari, Surat, Pune and other cities of India. First Dastoor Meherjirana Library in Navsari has a huge resource of information on the Parsees.



During the 19th and 20th centuries, Zoroastrians played a notable role in Indian industry, the arts, theatre, cinema, entertainment, sports, the freedom struggle, and the post-independence governance of India. Many of them distinguished themselves in the Indian armed forces.



Dadabhai Navroji House Museum

Proceed from Navsari to Udvada, where the Sacred Iranshah Atashbehrām is the most important place of pilgrimage for all Parsees because it houses the highest grade of ritual fire holy to Zoroastrians. Most of the heritage buildings and Parsee residences are in the core area of Udvada. The Sacred Iranshah Atashbehrām Fire Temple has figures of winged bulls with human heads, considered auspicious for all Parsees. The purpose-built temple was first constructed in the 18th century by Seth Edulji of Surat and expanded in 1812 by Seth Jamdhedji Guzder. In 1830, Seth Dadabhai and Mancherji Wadia built a new structure. The present day Udvada fire temple was constructed by Lady Motlibhai Wadia in 1894, replacing the older buildings. The architect and builder of the temple was Dinshaw Dorabjee Mistry from Mumbai. The temple structure has been built spacious and well decorated. The façade of the temple is in the typical eclectic style of Parsee buildings, with Iranian, European and Indian features.

On festive days like Behram Roj or the annual Navroz celebrations, you can see a flow of Parsees, some of them dressed in traditional clothing, coming and going through the entrance. The anniversary, known as sālgiri, corresponding to the date of establishing the Atash Behram in Udvada and also in other Atash Bahrams in India, is celebrated every year according to the Shenshai Zoroastrian calendar on the day (called Ādur) of the month (also called Ādur the ninth Zoroastrian month and the ninth day of the month); pilgrims visit not only on the day of the month but also throughout the Ādur month. Shops and vendors sell sandalwood, ritual objects, religious artefacts, Parsee food products, hand-made ice-creams and souvenirs on weekends, festive days and auspicious days when there is enough flow of pilgrims.



Iranshah Atashbehram Fire Temple



Atash Behram Fire Temple



Around the temple are other historic buildings like the Dastur Baugh and the Petit Dar-e-Maher, built by first Baronet Sir Dinshaw Manekji Petit in 1891. Some of the old hotels, near the fire temple, like Globe and Ashishvang also retain their old facades. The Mirza memorial hall, Unwalla Library and other historic buildings can be seen on the way to the fire temple.

As the fire temple is not open for non-Zoroastrians, the Zoroastrian Information Centre nearby offers information about the Parsee rituals.

This centre was conceptualised by Foundation for Development of Udvada with inputs from trustees like Homai Modi and Dr Homi Dhallā. The architects Pankaj Joshi and Jamshid Bhiwandiwalla restored a colonial-style building that was in a dilapidated condition for this centre. This is a museum set in grounds with a shop at one end selling Gara embroidery and Parsee objects. The centre has five rooms that offer an insight into various aspects of the Parsee legacy. Here you can see visuals depicting the intricate Navjote

Ceremony after which the child is viewed as a member of the Zoroastrian community, models and informative panels that show rituals in the sanctum, and a display of costumes like the Jabhla, which is like a silk kurta and the Gara (embroidered saris).

In one of the rooms, there are panels depicting the history of ancient Persian dynasties. Another set of panels explain the contribution of Parsees like JRD Tata, Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy, Homi Baba, Madam Cama, etc. to the development of India. ■



Words by ANIL MULCHANDANI
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