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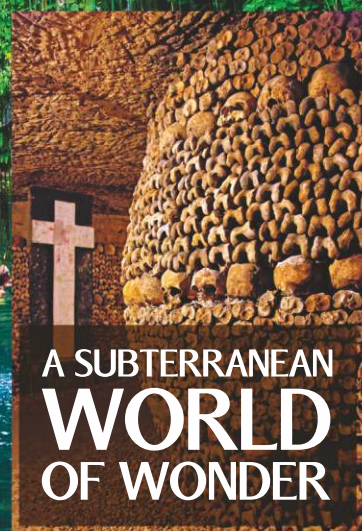
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## REVIVING THE WONDER OF

# THE MAYAN CIVILIZATION

### SIDDI

AN INDO-AFRICAN  
HERITAGE IN GUJARAT



A SUBTERRANEAN  
**WORLD  
OF WONDER**



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February 2023

# LIVE LOVE TRAVEL

**V**alentine's Day is approaching very soon and is the perfect time to let the sparks fly! Interestingly, this Valentine's Day falls on Tuesday this year, so you can take a day or two off and extend your weekend.

So what to do this time? Don't just plan a romantic dinner that's so cliché. Instead surprise your partner with a mini trip to a romantic destination since you can have 4 days off at the cost of 2. So let's make the most of it by spending a romantic luxury time with your loved one! Not sure about the destination? We are here to help you with the list of interesting destinations of Gujarat that are perfect for your weekend getaway.

If you're looking for something worthy of contemplation right now, we take you to Mayan civilization. Interestingly, the Mayan people believed in the cyclical nature of life – nothing was ever born and nothing ever died. And so their lifestyle and architecture is deeply influenced by this belief.

Read on!





**Praveg Communications (India) Limited**  
214 Athena Avenue, Sarkhej - Gandhinagar Highway,  
Behind Jaguar Showroom, Gota, Ahmedabad 382481  
Contact No.: 97129 84895  
e: tourismone@praveg.com  
www.praveg.com

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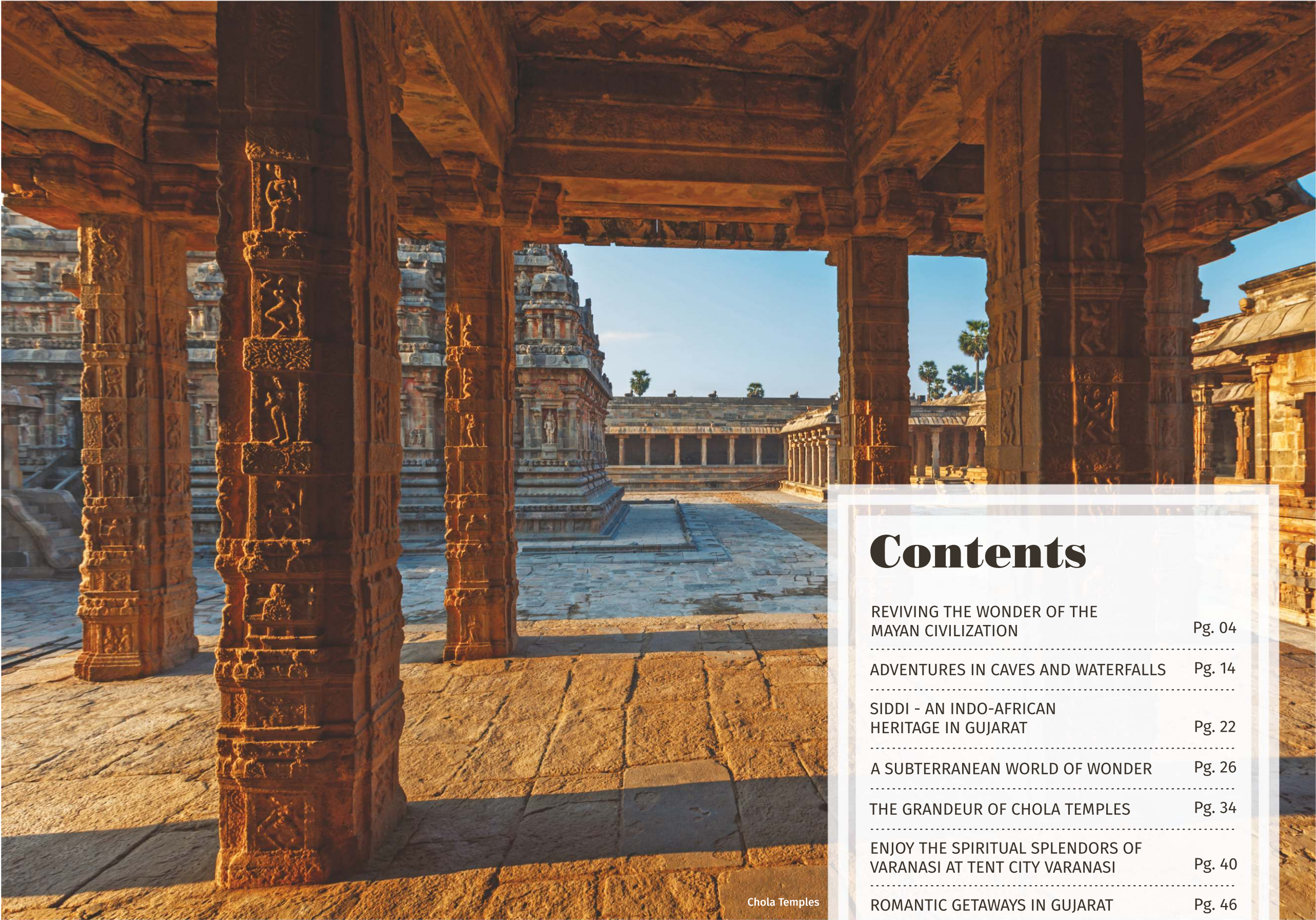
**Editorial Team**  
Priyanka Desai

**Design Team**  
Mahesh Patel  
Yagnesh Bhavsar  
Rakesh Bhavsar

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Mayan Ruins, Mexico

REVIVING  
THE  
WONDER  
OF THE  
MAYAN  
CIVILIZATION



The Mayan people believed in the cyclical nature of life – nothing was ever born and nothing ever died. This belief deeply influenced the architecture and their lifestyle. They were rediscovered and documented sometime in the middle of the 19th century. Their rich legacy is still being explored and discovered. A new train service has been started that would take visitors to the Yucatan Peninsula to many of the archaeological sites. But who were these people? What structures do they leave behind? And why did they suddenly disappear?

The new Maya train will provide easier access to 18 different Mayan ruins. Some of them are the ruins of Palenque, Boca del Cerro, Chichen Itza, Valladolid, etc. The train will start from Palenque, travel to the south-eastern edge of the peninsula and back.

The Mayans existed 1800 B.C. to A.D. 250 and had a thriving civilisation, which disappeared altogether sometime between the late eighth and early 10th centuries. The Mayans were Mesoamerican Indians i.e., people

inhabiting a contiguous stretch of land covering southern Mexico, Guatemala, and northern Belize, which is now known as the Yucatan Peninsula. The south-eastern portion of peninsular land extends into the Atlantic Ocean. The Yucatan Peninsula covers approximately 181,000 square kilometres. It is known for its impenetrable tropical rainforests and jungles.

Much of the Mayan ruins remained hidden for centuries in the dark jungles of the Yucatan peninsula. The foliage was so dense there that very little sunlight reached the ground. In a fight for survival, phototropism or the tendency of plants to grow towards the light kicked in. The plants fought for space to absorb the maximum sunlight for the process of photosynthesis. Any structure on the ground was soon swamped by the plants and remained hidden for centuries.

With the commencement of the train service, forests have been cleared up, and many of the ancient places are now easily accessible for tourists and archaeologists for further explorations and study.



Ik-Kil Cenote, Chichen Itza, Mexico





The Pyramid of Inscriptions, Palenque.

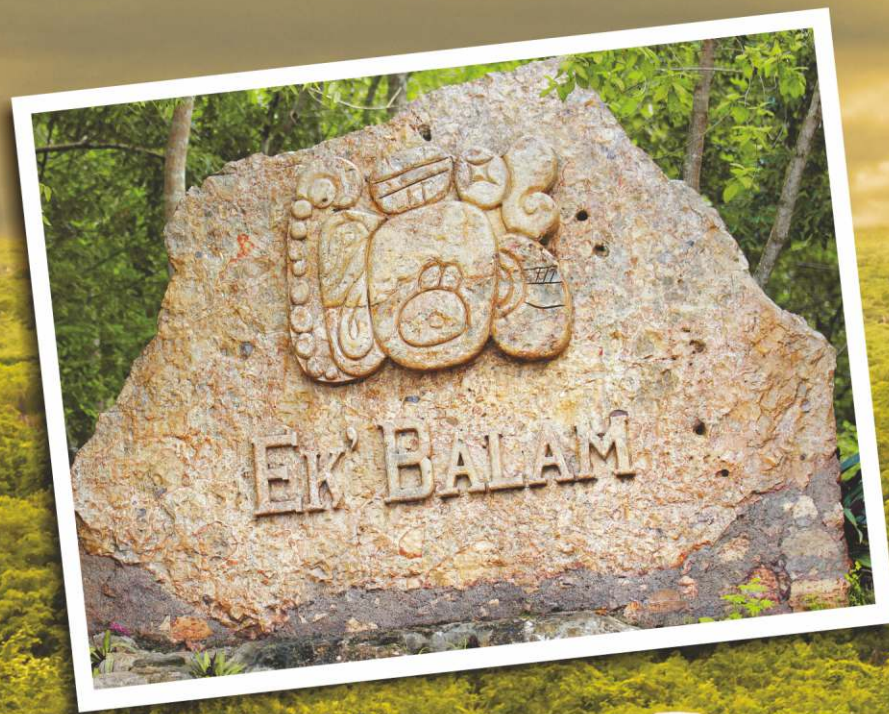
Palenque is an ancient Maya city located about 800 km from Mexico City. It is known for its stunning architecture, sprawling temples, artwork and treasures. The Mayan ruins of Palenque have been designated as a UNESCO Heritage site. Most interestingly, their historical record-keeping of the city through hieroglyphics spans more than 180 years. The city appears to have been occupied as early as 500 B.C.

The Temple of the Inscriptions, which sits on top of a step-pyramid, is about 20 meters in height. It is known for its stunning architecture, sprawling temples, artwork and treasures. It houses the tomb of one of their most famous ruler, King Pakal who ruled in the 7th century AD. His sarcophagus (a stone coffin) was discovered sometime in the 20th century. The Temple of the Inscriptions is an eight stepped pyramid and has since become the most visible structure of the Mayan ruins. It is the

largest Mesoamerican stepped pyramid structure. The Temple of the Inscriptions was specifically built as the funerary monument for the king. The construction of the monument was commissioned by the king himself; a ritual there bore close resemblance to the practice followed by the pharaohs of Egypt.

The Temple of the Inscriptions gets its name from three hieroglyphic tablets, built into the temple's inner walls. These tablets describe the events of the times. A secret passage led to the sarcophagus. The lid of the sarcophagus weighs about 7 tons. It is so big and unwieldy that it cannot be transported through the narrow passage in the pyramid, which has led people to believe that the temple was built around the sarcophagus as the final resting place of the king. Five skeletons were found at the entrance of the chamber.





The Ek Balam ruins are located in the centre of the Yucatán Peninsula just outside the town of Valladolid. The word Balam comes from the Mayan language meaning Jaguar animal. The Mayans believed that the high priests of the temple were descendants of the Jaguar. These animals are seen being depicted in the paintings and carvings. The animal is found throughout Central America.

The ruins date back to 100 B.C., and consist of the main pyramid named El Torre, two palaces and several temples. There is still much left to be dug and explored. The pyramid is 100 feet in

height. The citadel is the largest building that has been restored. It has six levels which were meant for the elite rulers of the city. The citadel has the tomb of one of the kings who ruled the city.

There is evidence to show that the city was abandoned in haste. The half-constructed walls surrounding the city lend credence to this statement. The entire site of Ek Balam Valladolid covers approximately 16 square kilometres, but only 2.6 square kilometres has been excavated so far. There are in all 45 structures within the walled enclosures.

Ek Balam, Yucatán, Mexico



The piece de resistance of the Mayan ruins is Chichén Itzá. 1,500-years ago this ancient Mayan city was the most popular city in the Yucatán Peninsula. The tallest structure is the El Castillo, in the shape of a pyramid, which rises to 30.5 metres. It was probably built between 1050 and 1300 AD.

The number of steps on each of the four sides of the pyramid is 91. The total number of steps is added together with the temple at its summit, it equalled to 365 - the number of days in the Maya solar year. The roof of the temple was used to perform sacred rituals. They believed that the higher the platform of the temple, the closer it brought them to God.

Twice a year, on the days of the equinox, in April and September, thousands of people would gather there. According to legend, Kukulcán, the feathered serpent God, would alight from the heavens, bless his worshipers and then make his way to the underworld. The legend came into being after the people observed that when the sun set during the equinoxes, it would cast a shadow on the northern balustrade of El Castillo that bore close resemblance to a snake slithering down the stairs.

The pyramids here, as in Egypt, were never supposed to be entered by

the people. However, when archaeologists entered the temple, they observed another smaller pyramid inside. Subsequently, archaeologists using imaging techniques discovered yet another pyramid buried within the other two. The plausible reason why the newer structures were built over the older ones is that the later generation of people wanted to outdo their predecessors by building bigger and even grander structures.

Despite the advanced civilization of the Mayans, their decline appeared to be inexplicable. Two theories have been postulated to explain the demise of the once vibrant Mayan society. One reason is that due to climate change as a result of large scale cutting of trees, agricultural activities were drastically affected resulting in exodus of people to other regions. The second reason is that due to internecine warfare with other tribes, the population dwindled or were forced to scatter.

Kingdoms rise and fall, along with it the population, leaving behind deserted cities that once thrived with activity. These cities were soon buried by the sands of time only to be discovered centuries later. Fragments of history are then painstakingly gathered by archaeologists to glean facts about their lives. More often than not the stories reveal intriguing details. ■



Mayan Pyramids, Chichen Itza



Valladolid, Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico



# Adventures in Caves and Waterfalls



Nohkalikai Falls, Meghalaya





Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Meghalaya

Ensnconced between Assam and Bangladesh, Meghalaya comes by many names. Some call it the Abode of Clouds, some as the Cleanest State in India. But these are not the only attributes. It is also known as the land of waterfalls and the land of caves. Recently, the world's longest cave in sandstone was discovered here.

Not many of us are aware that Meghalaya is a land of caves that extends deep into the bowels of the earth. It has more than 1,650 caves out of which about a thousand of them have been explored and mapped. Meghalaya has some of the most intricate cave systems in India. Krem Puri, which in the local Khasi language means Cave Fairy, is the world's longest cave in sandstone. According to

official data, the state has surveyed 491 km of caves. The ten longest caves in the country are all in Meghalaya.

Located near Mawsynram, 69 kilometres from Shillong, the state capital Krem Puri is situated at the base of a steep cliff, overlooking a deep valley. The cave is 24.5km long and covers an area of 13 sq km i.e. almost 870 times the size of a football field or almost 13 times the estate of Rashtrapati Bhawan.

Exploring these caves, without an expert, can be extremely dangerous. Tales abound of amateur speleologists getting lost in the subterranean networks, never to emerge again. Torrential rains can flood these caves, cutting off one's return routes.



The Krem Puri cave is an extremely complex maze of hundreds of passages and corridors forming a gigantic network. It has stalactites and stalagmites.

Most of the caves are either in Jaintia and Khasi hills. Krem Kotsati Cave in the Jaintia hills is 21.5 km long. It is the second longest cave with eight entrances and one entrance is through a deep pool.

Mawsmi Cave is a major crowd-puller. Spanning a mere 150 in length, it is considered a pygmy. But the cave is brightly lit, allowing one to admire the interiors of the cave at leisure.

Krem Umthloo cave is 13 km long and is considered to be one of the ideal caves for beginners to explore. It is moderately difficult, requiring walking waist deep in water.

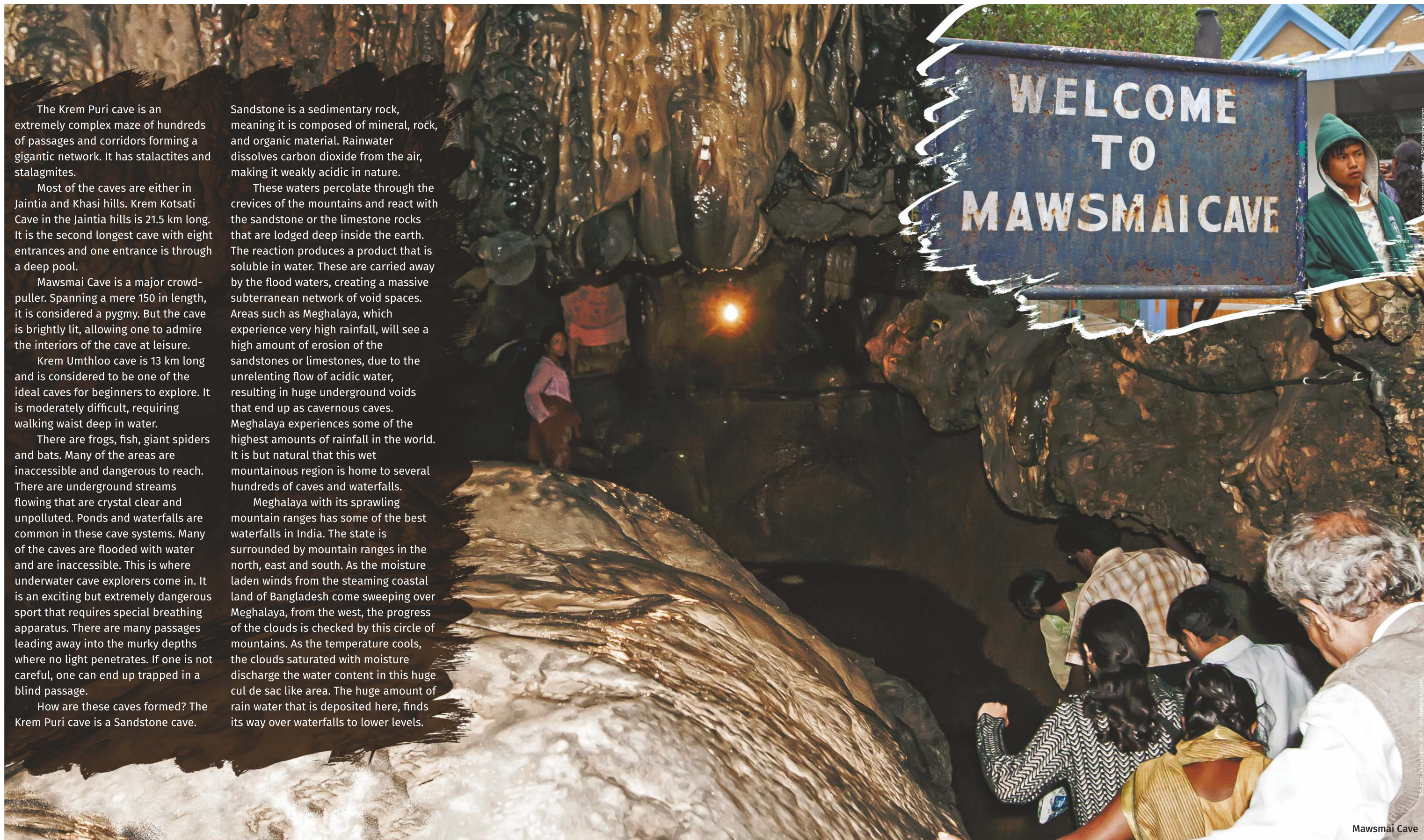
There are frogs, fish, giant spiders and bats. Many of the areas are inaccessible and dangerous to reach. There are underground streams flowing that are crystal clear and unpolluted. Ponds and waterfalls are common in these cave systems. Many of the caves are flooded with water and are inaccessible. This is where underwater cave explorers come in. It is an exciting but extremely dangerous sport that requires special breathing apparatus. There are many passages leading away into the murky depths where no light penetrates. If one is not careful, one can end up trapped in a blind passage.

How are these caves formed? The Krem Puri cave is a Sandstone cave.

Sandstone is a sedimentary rock, meaning it is composed of mineral, rock, and organic material. Rainwater dissolves carbon dioxide from the air, making it weakly acidic in nature.

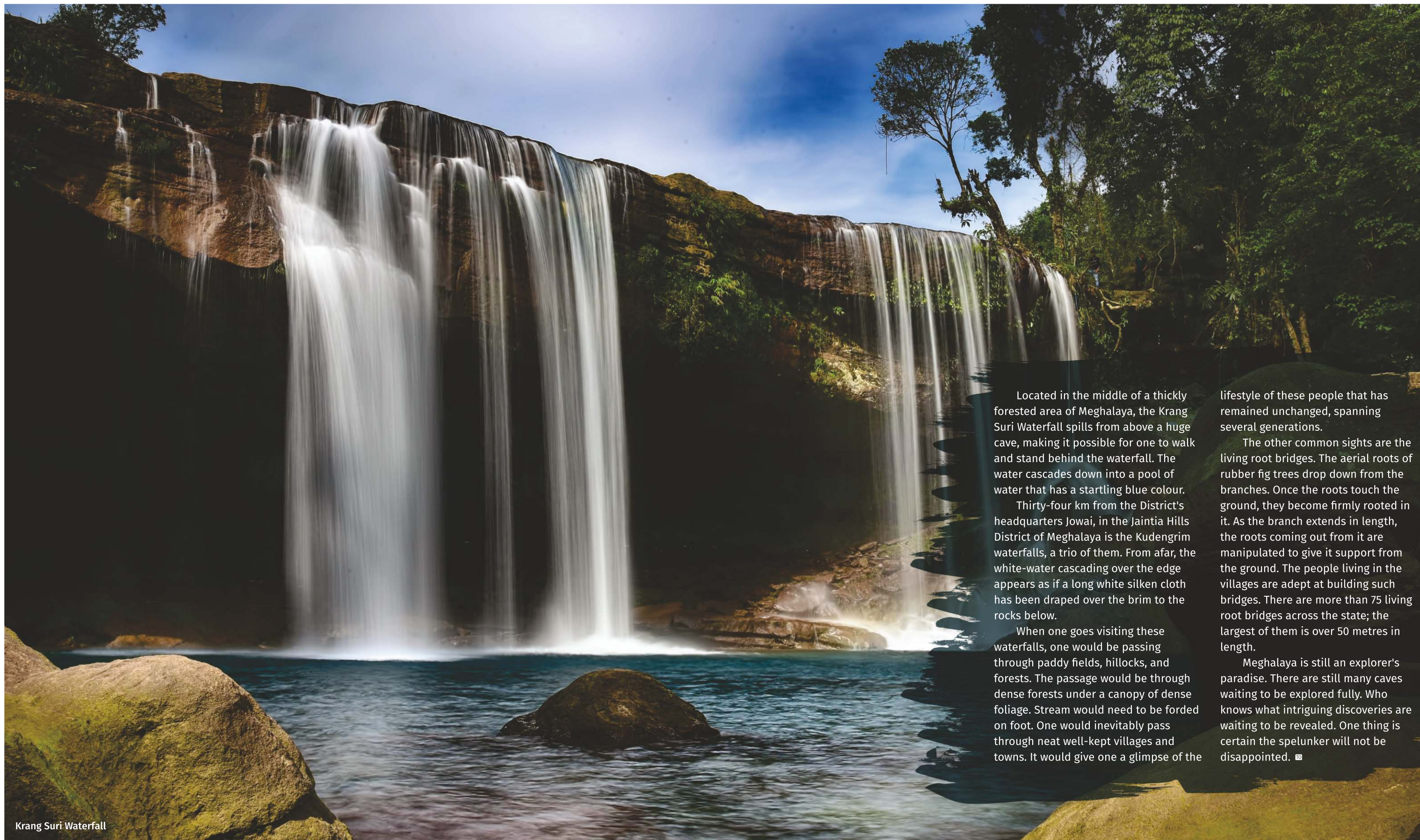
These waters percolate through the crevices of the mountains and react with the sandstone or the limestone rocks that are lodged deep inside the earth. The reaction produces a product that is soluble in water. These are carried away by the flood waters, creating a massive subterranean network of void spaces. Areas such as Meghalaya, which experience very high rainfall, will see a high amount of erosion of the sandstones or limestones, due to the unrelenting flow of acidic water, resulting in huge underground voids that end up as cavernous caves. Meghalaya experiences some of the highest amounts of rainfall in the world. It is but natural that this wet mountainous region is home to several hundreds of caves and waterfalls.

Meghalaya with its sprawling mountain ranges has some of the best waterfalls in India. The state is surrounded by mountain ranges in the north, east and south. As the moisture laden winds from the steaming coastal land of Bangladesh come sweeping over Meghalaya, from the west, the progress of the clouds is checked by this circle of mountains. As the temperature cools, the clouds saturated with moisture discharge the water content in this huge cul de sac like area. The huge amount of rain water that is deposited here, finds its way over waterfalls to lower levels.



Mawsmi Cave





Krang Suri Waterfall

Located in the middle of a thickly forested area of Meghalaya, the Krang Suri Waterfall spills from above a huge cave, making it possible for one to walk and stand behind the waterfall. The water cascades down into a pool of water that has a startling blue colour.

Thirty-four km from the District's headquarters Jowai, in the Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya is the Kudengrim waterfalls, a trio of them. From afar, the white-water cascading over the edge appears as if a long white silken cloth has been draped over the brim to the rocks below.

When one goes visiting these waterfalls, one would be passing through paddy fields, hillocks, and forests. The passage would be through dense forests under a canopy of dense foliage. Stream would need to be forded on foot. One would inevitably pass through neat well-kept villages and towns. It would give one a glimpse of the

lifestyle of these people that has remained unchanged, spanning several generations.

The other common sights are the living root bridges. The aerial roots of rubber fig trees drop down from the branches. Once the roots touch the ground, they become firmly rooted in it. As the branch extends in length, the roots coming out from it are manipulated to give it support from the ground. The people living in the villages are adept at building such bridges. There are more than 75 living root bridges across the state; the largest of them is over 50 metres in length.

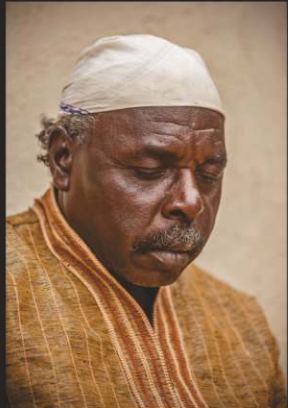
Meghalaya is still an explorer's paradise. There are still many caves waiting to be explored fully. Who knows what intriguing discoveries are waiting to be revealed. One thing is certain the spelunker will not be disappointed. ■





# SIDDI

## AN INDO-AFRICAN HERITAGE IN GUJARAT



Siddis are among Gujarat's most interesting communities. The story of Siddi migration to India is said to have begun in mediaeval times when they landed at the Gulf of Khambhat, which was then a major centre for agate stone mining. According to the Siddis, Baba Ghor came from Kano around Nigeria to Jambur near Junagadh after visiting Sudan and Mecca. He is said to have visited Bharuch along the Gulf of Khambhat to defeat a female demon. Another story talks of him as an Abyssinian military leader who was on a mission from Africa to the Indian Ocean to subdue evil

spirits and black magic in Gujarat.

He is revered by Siddis and others as the one who established the presence of African-origin people in the mining belt around Ratanpur, the village of gems near Jhagadia and Bharuch. By the 16th century, there were 3,000-5,000 Africans along the western coast of India in port cities from Gujarat, Daman and Diu to Kerala. In mediaeval times, a few Africans held great power and control over territories on the western coast such as the fortified complex at Janjira. Malik Ambar was one of the most prominent Habshi or Sidi who wielded great military power as the Prime

Minister of the Ahmadnagar Sultanate. Many of the Siddis are descendants of the slaves as the slave trade operated by Europeans, Arabs, and Gujarati merchants or mercenary warriors. A sizable number of Sidis operated in the Western Indian Ocean as pirates when the Portuguese and other colonial powers took control of the ports.

In the 19th century, after slavery was formally abolished, the British patrolled the Indian Ocean to check the slave trade and monitored vessels owned by Gujarati and Arabs.

Gujarat has a rich heritage of the Siddis that still exists.



Sidi Goma Tribal Man



## RATANPUR

Ratanpur village near Zhagadia (also spelled Jhagadia), an industrial and agricultural area, has a Siddi population. The Mazar Sharif of

Baba Ghor in Ratanpur is the most important site of pilgrimage for the saint's devotees and the Siddis. The shrine is best visited on Thursday when

it attracts a large number of Siddi visitors. You can experience the rituals, music and dance at the dargah on Thursday and other important days.



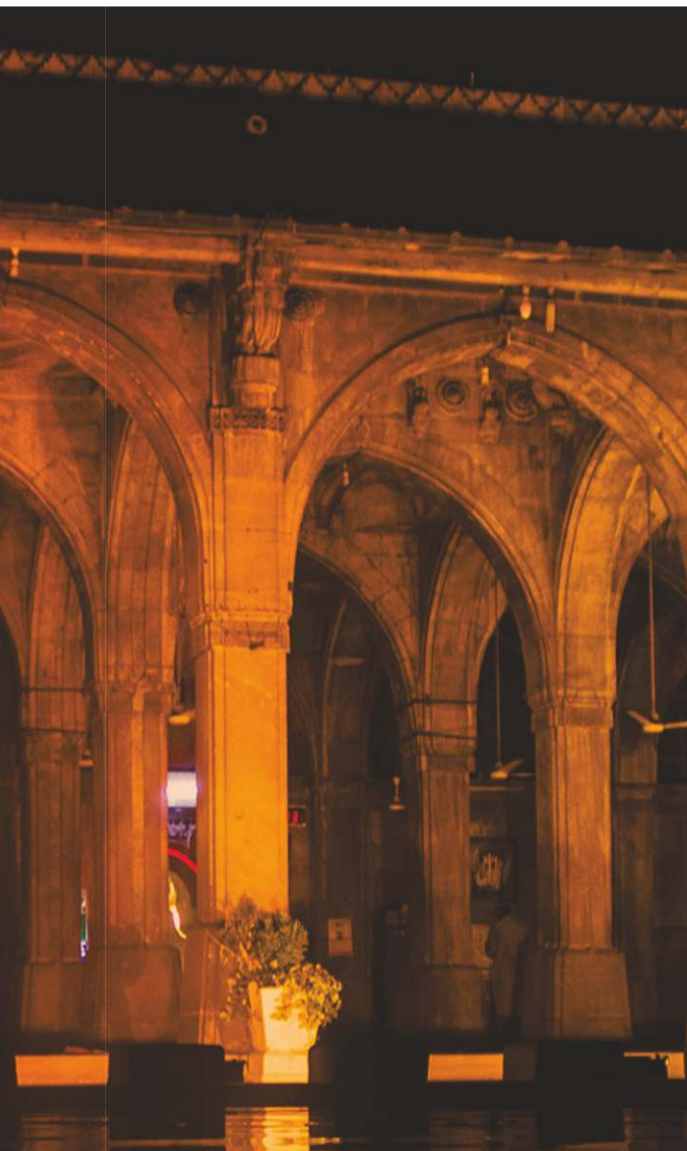
## GIR

The Siddis who live in the Gir forests are descendants of Africans who were supposedly presented as slaves by the Portuguese to the Subhas or governors who later became Nawabs of Junagadh. On the way to Deva-dungar is the village of Sirvan, which is inhabited almost entirely by Siddis. Jambur is another village with a Siddi colony. The colourful dargah at Jambur is its centrepiece.

Although Gujarati Siddis have adopted the language and many

customs of their surrounding populations, some of their Bantu traditions have been preserved. These include the Goma music and dance form, which is sometimes called Dhamal that means fun in Gujarati. The name Goma may be derived from Ngoma drumming. Ngoma drums are musical instruments used by certain Bantu populations of Africa. The dhamal is also said to be derived from the traditional dance forms of the Bantu people inhabiting Central, East and Southern Africa. The Goma also has a spiritual

significance and, at the climax of the dance, some dancers are believed to represent the Siddi saints of the past. The Dhamaal is said to have been a post-hunting dance and also is said to have entertained the ruling families. It is vigorous and exciting, the dancers kicking up coconuts that they break with their heads during the course of the dance. They are even known to walk barefoot over burning embers. Though Siddis have adopted the Gujarati language, African-origin words do enter their songs.



## SIDI SAIYAD MOSQUE, AHMEDABAD

The most famous Siddi of Ahmedabad, Shaikh Sa'id Al-Habshi Sultan or Sidi Sa'id was originally a slave of Rumi Khan, a Turkish general who had come to Gujarat from Yemen. Sidi Sa'id later served Sultan Mahmud III, and upon his death, joined the Abyssinian general Jhujhar Khan after which he became a jagirdar. He is said to have been a nobleman with a library, performed the Hajj pilgrimage, and instituted a community kitchen. He is himself said to have had a large retinue of slaves.

A small mosque is said to have existed at the site where Sidi Sayyid's Mosque was built by him in 1573. This mosque is famed for the magnificent jali (lattice-work) screens called Sidi Sayyid nu Jali that have become enduring symbols of Ahmedabad city. The most famous are the two western screens with floral designs exquisitely carved out of the yellowstone showing the intertwining trees of life. The eastern facade is open with a hall divided by pillars into fifteen areas with superbly-sculpted dome ceilings. ■



# A SUBTERRANEAN WORLD OF WONDER



Wieliczka Salt Mine, Poland





Bochnia Salt Mine, Poland



Wieliczka Salt Mines

It is an underground wonder, incomparable in its uniqueness. The salt mines of Wieliczka and Bochnia in Poland have been in continuous operation since the 13th century. They are the oldest operating salt mines in the world. But the wonder does not stop there. The enchantment begins once you enter these mines.

The Wieliczka Salt Mine reaches a depth of 327 metres. The deepest Stepwell in India, the Chand Baori, is 30.5 metres. It has labyrinthine passages and chambers cumulatively extending to over 287 kilometres, which is almost the distance from New Delhi to Jaipur. The expansion of the mine happened over centuries. It has an astonishing 2350

chambers. The salt mine was in operation till the late 20th century.

The mine was a veritable mini township. It was once the centre of a thriving business activity. The miners worked and earned their livelihood here. Fortunes were made and careers were established. For 700 years, the miners worked in the salt mine complex, extracting the valuable mineral that drove the development and wealth of Poland.

It has an underground lake. There are reception rooms that can be used for weddings and private functions. They even worshipped here in one of the chapels deep in the interior of the earth. A lake, 135 metres below,

completes the picture.

A chamber has walls carved by miners to resemble wood. There is a wooden staircase as well to access different levels in the mine. Visitors have access to about 3-kilometers of the corridor. There are works of art and statues carved in salt that give you a glimpse of the lives, beliefs and customs of the miners in the age gone by.

It has four chapels built deep in the mines. The chapel in the Bochnia salt mine is the only chapel in the world that has a rail track running through it. You can take a ride in the underground train. You can even take the world's only ferry crossing of an underground chamber flooded with brine (salt solution).





St. Kinga's Chapel, Krakow

Source: J2R / Shutterstock.com

The Chapel of Saint Kinga is in the Wieliczka Salt Mine. It has an enormous hall, which is lit by salt crystal chandeliers that took three men 67 years to carve and decorate. It is the world's largest underground church and has been in use since the mediaeval times. It is situated about 100 metres deep below the ground, totalling nearly 465 square metres in area and 11 metres in height, carved completely out of salt. In terms of area, it would be the size of a modern bungalow. Its walls are adorned with salt relief carvings of the Nativity, Last Supper, and the Crucifixion.

How did the salt come about here? About 14 million years ago, this area was under the sea. Subsequently with cataclysmic changes over millennia, the sea receded leaving behind large swathes of area filled with seawater. When water evaporated, it left behind gigantic deposits of salt, very much like the distillation process in the laboratory.

The salt deposit in Wieliczka is a narrow band measuring 10 km in length and about 1.5 km in width and reaching a depth of 350 metres. The deposits vary, from small lumps the size of a fist to huge blocks measuring thousands of cubic metres in volume. The deposits in Bochnia are smaller.

The salt mines of Wieliczka and Bochnia are saga of massive feat of human effort and ingenuity. The late Pope Saint John Paul II had canonised

the chapel on June 16, 1999.

From the subterranean wonder, we move on to subterranean horrors. Paris in France is known for its glam and ritzy plazas and is one of the most influential cities in the world. It is a city that has been specifically designed for the enjoyment of its visitors. Its streets, squares, buildings, gardens and monuments beckon the tourists. It is the city of lights that dazzles. The quaint cobbled lanes, the sweet patisseries, and the cosy bistros beckon the backpacker. However, twenty metres underground is an eerie world of galleries containing skeletal remains of several million Parisians. It is known as the catacombs of Paris.

Back in the late 18th century, due to rising population, the cemeteries in the city of Paris were beginning to get overcrowded. There was a severe paucity of space to bury the dead. The cemeteries became shallow. In the wake of a thunderstorm, the rain washed away tons of topsoil exposing thousands of rotting flesh and skeletal remains of people. The ruling regent, King Louis XV was forced to pass a decree that banned the burial of the deceased in cemeteries within the city limits. Instructions were given to load the human remains in an ossuary (a place where the bones of dead people are kept), which was originally a limestone quarry.



Salt Mine, Wieliczka

Source: Yakov Oskanov / Shutterstock.com





Catacombs, Paris tunnel

Overnight carts of human remains were loaded with millions of human bones and taken to the ossuary, where they were stacked forming the Catacombs of Paris. The visitors are allowed up to 2 km about into the catacomb. However, the actual length of the catacomb is about 300 km. Stacks and stacks of human bones and skulls can be seen neatly piled along the rooms and corridors. The tunnels are dark and the air has an unpleasant odour.

The Catacombs are divided into two parts: the ossuary and the crypt. The ossuary contains the bones and skulls of the dead. The crypt is a much larger area, and it contains the remains of many of the city's famous figures, including Napoleon Bonaparte, Marie

Antoinette and Louis XVI.

The dimly lit Catacombs of Paris look extremely grim and sinister. There have been cases where people have lost their way touring the tunnels. All these coupled with the fact that the ossuary houses millions of bones of the dead, give the catacombs a haunted environment. In 1991, a person went exploring deep into the catacombs. He had a video camera on all the time. In the video, one can see the narrow passage lit by his torch. As he continues walking, he comes across stacks of human bones and skulls, but is unfazed by it. He continues walking. At one point, he suddenly stops. We don't know the reason why he stops. Something spooks him. He instantly turns around and starts sprinting back to the entrance.

In his panic, he drops the camera and does not wait to pick it up, but continues running. Ten years later, a group of tourists who came exploring to the cave found this camera lying on the ground, deep in the catacomb. Surprisingly the camera was in good condition. When they operate the video, they come to realise how the camera came to be there. In the video, they could hear the panic breathing of the person running. But till date, it is not known who the person was and what had so terrified him in the catacombs.

From the dark and dank interiors of the catacombs, we now travel to the more pleasant environs of bacchanalian paradise - the famous champagne wine caves in northeast France.

This is the champagne region of the world. Beneath the rolling hills and quaint villages are hundreds of kilometres of underground cellars. It is here that the sparkling wine was developed in the early 17th century. The wine has since become an indispensable ingredient for any celebratory event. The champagne region is just an hour's drive from Paris.

The champagne makers use a 200-kilometre network of cellars and tunnels dug into the chalky soil and bedrock to make and store the wine. The chalky soil creates just the environment that gives the wine its special qualities.

Deep underground, the temperature in the cellars hovers around 11 degrees Celsius. Thousands of bottles line the

walls. These were once quarries from which chalk was extracted during Roman times around 80 B.C. Many centuries later, in the 1600s, local winemakers used these caves to store the champagne, which provided the right temperature, humidity and protection from sunlight.

The cellars of Château de Meursault date from the 14th and 16th centuries. The cellars were originally dug by the monks of Cîteaux and can hold up to 700,000 bottles and more than 2,000 wine barrels.

The Taittinger mines trace back to the fourth century and are located nearly 60 feet below the earth's surface. The mines were recently named a UNESCO World Heritage site. Here the

wines are aged in crayères, meaning chalk pits, which have a 5 km underground network of chalk caves. Originally dug by the Romans, the caves provide the perfect conditions for cellaring wine.

Ruinart's famous champagne caves in Reims are a network of 8 km of intersecting tunnels and caves 125 feet below ground. Originally dug out as quarries in the Early Middle Ages, these chalk caves hold the distinction, where the world's first Champagne wines were aged.

Built for a purpose, the catacombs, or the ancient mines are mired in history. Pleasant or unpleasant, dark or revealing, they give an interesting insight of how things were in the era gone by. ■



# THE GRANDEUR OF CHOLA TEMPLES



Famous Chola Architecture

The Brihadeeswara Temple, the Gangaikonda Cholapuram Temple and the Airavatesvara Temple, all in Thanjavur District of Tamil Nadu, stand out in the Chola's coffer as the finest temple of their kind when they were constructed. Called the Great Living Chola Temples, they make the cut to be on the list of UNESCO world heritage sites. Who built these temples? What makes them so special and why were they built at all?

The Chola Dynasty was a Tamil thalassocratic empire of Southern India, i.e. it was a kingdom that expanded into an empire to far-flung areas in the Indian Ocean due to its naval superiority. It mostly confined itself to coastal regions. The Chola kings had a powerful naval fleet whose influence extended to a number of countries in the Far East, including Sumatra and Java. Sri Lanka and the Maldives were also annexed to the Chola Empire.

The city of Thanjavur or Tanjapuri, as it was then known, is located 350 km from Chennai. In 850 CE, it was captured by Vijayalaya Chola and their kingdom continued uninterrupted till around 1285 CE when it was captured by another Dynasty called Pandya. For the next several centuries, the city was occupied by different kingdoms, but each of these dynasties had made important improvements to the temples, all along maintaining the sanctity of their original layout. Throughout history, this temple had remained the royal temple of the incumbent dynasty.

The Brihadisvara Temple in Thanjavur was the first to have been built by the Cholas and forms the template for the construction of others in later years. This temple was built by the Chola emperor Rajaraja-I who reigned from 985 to 1012 CE. It was inaugurated by the regent himself and at that period of time, the temple stood out as the grandest creation of the Chola Empire. Thanjavur city became their capital.

The temple covers an area of 44 acres. There are 2 Gopuras at the entrance of the temple. The base of the Gopura is made of stone and the superstructure is made up of brick and mortar with images of gods and goddesses. On entering the temple through the Gopura, you come to a wide enclosure at the end of which is the Garbhagriha or the sanctum sanctorum. The tall Vimana (the temple tower) above it is 213 ft in height. The Garbhagriha houses the Lingam. Its walls have paintings of Shiva and saints that date to the era of the construction of the temple. There are several inscriptions in Tamil that record the contributions made by the kings and their families.

What makes the temple so special is that the Vimana was built entirely of granite stone. Granites are hard, compact rocks that are intractable to cutting and handling. Considering the antiquity of the time, the construction of the temple was an architectural feat involving complex logistics.

Brihadisvara Temple, Tamil Nadu



The Linga is 12.5 feet tall and stands on a pedestal that is 55 ft in circumference. It is one of the largest Shivalingams in India. The Bhadishvara temple was the tallest structure to have been built in south India at that point in time. It was also the first of its kind, and is considered an architectural landmark in the evolution of Indian temples, on account of its distinct form and beauty.

The Shiva temple in Gangaikonda Cholapuram was constructed during the reign of Rajendra-I, son and successor of Rajaraja-I. It is situated 70 km from the Thanjavur temple. This temple was constructed to commemorate his victorious march to the Ganges. After his victory in the Gangetic plains, he demanded that the

defeated kingdoms send pots of Ganges River water and pour it into the well of the temple, to sanctify it.

Though the temple at Gangaikonda Cholapuram is similar in design and structure to the Thanjavur temple, there are striking differences between the two. Whereas this temple has only one Gopura the Thanjavur has two Gopuras. Though the main temple is dedicated to Shiva, there are other Hindu deities such as Vishnu, Durga, Surya, etc. This temple is often referred to as the feminine counterpart of the Thanjavur Temple. Many sculptures were brought from Andhra, Karnataka, and Bengal as war trophies and preserved around the temple. However, many of them have

been stolen.

The temple has sculptures of outstanding quality. The bronzes of Bhogasakti and Subrahmanya are masterpieces of Chola metal icons. The sophisticated and beautiful bronze casting reached its zenith during Chola rule. The process of metal casting developed during this time is still being used today in workshops. The workmanship has been passed down through generations from the time of the Cholas.

The Lingam here is 13 ft tall and the base has a circumference of 59 ft. The Vimana is 180 ft high, which is about 9.8 ft smaller than the Thanjavur Temple.

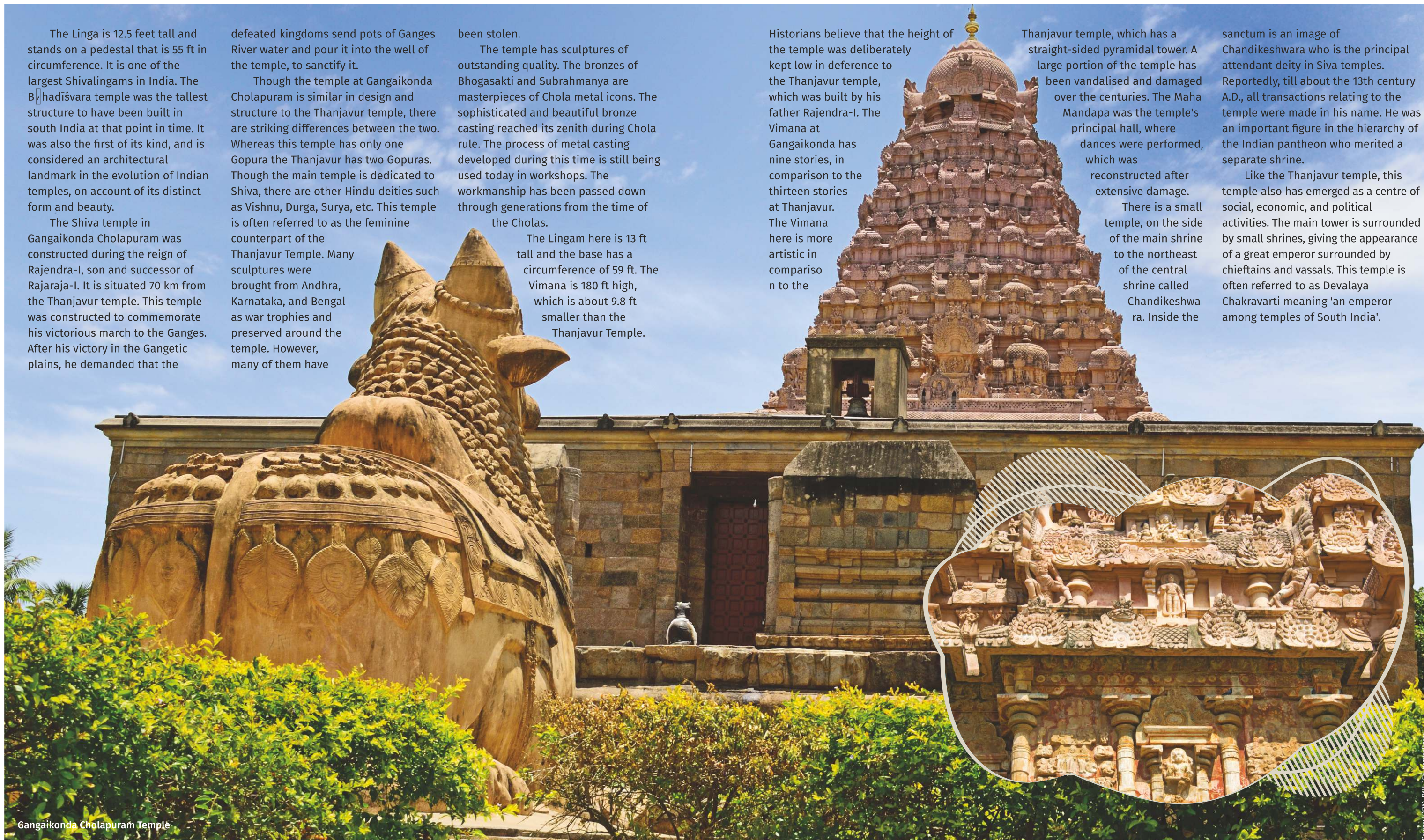
Historians believe that the height of the temple was deliberately kept low in deference to the Thanjavur temple, which was built by his father Rajendra-I. The Vimana at Gangaikonda has nine stories, in comparison to the thirteen stories at Thanjavur. The Vimana here is more artistic in comparison to the

Thanjavur temple, which has a straight-sided pyramidal tower. A large portion of the temple has been vandalised and damaged over the centuries. The Maha Mandapa was the temple's principal hall, where dances were performed, which was reconstructed after extensive damage.

There is a small temple, on the side of the main shrine to the northeast of the central shrine called Chandikeshwara. Inside the

sanctum is an image of Chandikeshwara who is the principal attendant deity in Siva temples. Reportedly, till about the 13th century A.D., all transactions relating to the temple were made in his name. He was an important figure in the hierarchy of the Indian pantheon who merited a separate shrine.

Like the Thanjavur temple, this temple also has emerged as a centre of social, economic, and political activities. The main tower is surrounded by small shrines, giving the appearance of a great emperor surrounded by chieftains and vassals. This temple is often referred to as Devalaya Chakravarti meaning 'an emperor among temples of South India'.



Gangaikonda Cholapuram Temple

Source: KARAN RAVI / Shutterstock.com



The third temple, Airavatesvara temple at Darasuram was built by the Chola king Rajaraja II who reigned from 1143 to 1173 CE. The temple is a testimony of the talented achievements of the Chola kings in the field of art, architecture, sculpture, painting, and bronze casting. The temple is located 310 kilometres from Chennai. Airavatesvara is believed to have been derived from Airavat The white elephant that was the vahana of Indra. The Airavatesvara Shiva

temple has a water tank that is connected to a channel that brings water from the Cauvery River. According to legend, Airavata had turned black after being cursed by Rishi Durvasa for disrespecting him. However, Airavata sought the intervention of Shiva. Shiva Asked Airavata to take a dip in the water tank, which it did and regained its white colour. This legend is carved in stone in the inner shrine. The pilgrims believe that taking a holy dip in its waters will cleanse them of all their sins.

It is classified as Karakkoil, a

temple. There are nine types of Hindu temple structures. Karakkoil is one such type. Here the Vimana is fashioned after temple chariots, which are taken in procession around the temple during festivals. The hall is provided with stone horses and wheels.

The Agra-mandapa, the front hall of a temple has an attached porch. Outside the main podium, is the Bali Pitham i.e. an altar for the placing of offerings to deities. There are seven carved flights of steps leading to the Bali Peetam. The Steps are called the Musical Steps or the

Singing Steps. Reportedly when one walks or even taps them, they separately produce the 'swaras' or notes of music. The seven steps of this staircase represent the seven musical notes of music.

Although this temple is much smaller than the Brihadeeswara Temple or the Gangai KondaCholapuram Temple, it is more detailed in architecture, delicate, and the most complex.

The Airavatesvara Temple was much bigger than what it is now. Most of the main architecture and other structures

of the temple are now in a crumpled state with the Gopurams entirely in ruins. However, the court with the main shrine and the associated sanctums still stands today.

In these temples, no binding material was used. The male-female stone concept was used to bind the different stones together, much like a plug-and-socket arrangement.

Ancient temples are treasure houses filled with a fascinating history. The workmanship of these temples is of astonishing detail. Visiting a temple is akin to visiting a library. It is not a mere place of worship. It is there waiting to

tell you a story. A story that is now long forgotten. You need to be silent, patient, and observant. All temples have a story to relate. ■



Airavatesvara Temple





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Varanasi has been one of the most popular tourist destinations in India due to its endless ghats, the holy River Ganga, fascinating rituals, famous temples and vibrant religious festivals. The spiritual and cultural capital of India is all set to take tourism to the next level for local and foreign guests with its new tourism hotspot, Tent City Varanasi by Praveg.

In tune with Hon'ble Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi's vision to give a fillip to tourism in the region, Tent City Varanasi by Praveg was inaugurated in

January 2023. The magnificent tent nestlings by the Ganga, spread across 20 hectares, lets you experience the river-side life and offers the right view of spiritual splendors of Varanasi.

An initiative of Varanasi Development Authority, the river-facing resort is developed and managed by Praveg Limited. It comprises 140 luxurious tents and villas, categorized into Ganga Darshan Villas, Kashi Suites, Premium Tents and Deluxe Tents.

The 900-square feet Ganga Darshan Villa is an exclusive attraction for the

tourists with its king size living area, private beach and plunge pool. The ultra-luxurious villa offers panoramic views of the serene ghats, temples and historic palaces with steps. "Ganga Darshan Villa was an iconic stay arrangement like none other. We believe this is the only resort in Varanasi with such scenic views of the Ganga and ghats. The ambience here is divine with melodious tunes of chants and aarti playing in the distance," shares a Guest.





Other than the premium stay and scenic view, Tent City Varanasi by Praveg is also equipped with amenities of all sorts like floating kund for Ganga Snan that ensures safety of the guests while offering them the experience of Ganga Snan. With Ganga Watch Tower, the

guests can catch the panoramic views of the River Ganga. Cultural Performance featuring 'Banaras Gharana', Spa & Gym, Art & Craft Bazaar, Conference Hall (Capacity: 800 Guests) and Yoga by the Ganga are among the other engaging activities at the Resort.

With generous hospitality and a wide range of package options that offer Kashi Vishwanath Darshan, Ghat Darshan by Boat, Sightseeing Tours like Banaras Hindu University and Sarnath Stupa, Tent City Varanasi by Praveg is the place to be for your next visit to this ancient city. 📍



# Romantic Getaways in Gujarat

Gujarat has some beautiful and secluded places for those who are looking for a Valentine's break.



## SANTRAMPUR



Shri Zoraver Vilas Palace

In the Aravalli hills of Mahisagar district, Shri Zoraver Vilas Palace enjoys an enviable location on the shores of a lake with forested slopes on the opposite side. Entered through the hall, which has plush furniture, the property's windows and doors look out to the lake. The rooms are real Art Deco beauties with original 1920s European furniture and other period pieces. One of the highlights of the palace is the dining room, which has exquisite meenakari and zardozi work. The owners have developed their own distinctive

dishes based on the royal recipes of the Santrampur family and their relatives, making their cuisine too unique. The Maharani's Santrampur Field & Flowers is a venture that fashions the forest produce of the area to make food and spa products.

Walk out of the palace doors to the patio facing the lake for a relaxing sit-out or a forest walk during which you can watch birds or spot crocodiles on the lake. You also take a scenic drive to the hilltop Hawa Mahal for a sweeping view of the hills with the palace and lake nestled below.



## WANKANER

The Ranjit Vilas Palace rises up from Gadhi hill in the town of Wankaner. The palace can be seen looming up on the hill from far away in the flat Kathiawad countryside. The palace was built in the early-1900s by His Highness Amar Sinhji with a blend of European, Mughal, Moorish and Rajput architecture. The interiors are equally impressive with Italian marble, Burma teak furniture, Murano blown glass chandeliers, Belgian chandeliers and mirrors, and hand-woven carpets. You can stay at the adjacent Khengar Bhawan built in the 1800s. The rooms are appointed in

colonial style with four-poster beds and British-style chairs.

Another option to stay, the Royal Oasis is an early-20th century summer palace set in lime and guava orchards by the Machu River. The river takes a bend here, making you realise why the town is named Wankaner – the town at the bend of the river. The rooms are furnished in 1920s Art Deco style and the bathrooms have beautiful mirrors and tiles. The mansion has an indoor swimming pool built in the early-1900s.

Don't miss visiting the step well located in the orchards.



Ranjit Vilas Palace, Wankaner

## GOPNATH

Gopnath is a picturesque seaside spot, about 80km from Bhavnagar. Here, the Gopnath Bungalow of the Maharajas of Bhavnagar is a quaint 1940s British colonial period cluster of cottages and buildings. The bungalow offers accommodation in 10 rooms with

their rear windows looking out to the sea. This is the place to enjoy an unending view of the sea, with rocks on one side, a lighthouse and a historical temple nearby. If you are lucky, spotting dolphins, peregrine falcons and coastal birds are possible.

## KADWAL

Built in 1897 by the Parmar Rajput dynasty, the palace complex at Kadwal is an attractive property with Doric columns and other European architectural elements.

The surrounding grounds have fruit trees and shady vegetation. The palace offers a good view of the hills, with woodlands inhabited by wildlife.



Gopnath Bungalow





## JAMBUGHODA

The forests of Jambughoda are a wildlife sanctuary, preserved for leopards, flying squirrels and other wildlife. Here, you can find many beauty spots like dams, reservoirs, waterfalls, streams and rocks. 'A Home for Nature Lovers' is located in the palace complex with a forest view. The owners of the property are

keen nature-lovers and organic farmers. Stroll in the grounds to see the fruit tree groves, farms and woodlands. The palace also has a swimming pool and recreational facilities. The family takes pride in serving its traditional recipes, and you can opt to lunch under a shady tree.



## DANTA

Bhavani Villa at Danta is a homestay located in the precinct of the country house of the royal family of Danta. The property is located on a hilltop with a panoramic view of the hilly countryside on all sides. The rooms are good-sized and furnished in colonial-period style with verandas looking out to the wooded hills. The

family personally attends to guests and often joins them for a home-style meal featuring their Rajasthani and Gujarati dishes. Enjoy a long walk in their nearby farm where the family has its stable of prize-winning Marwari horses and dairy farm. The woods are rich in birds, and you could spot hornbills, barbets, francolins and quails.







MANDVI BEACH



Mandvi in Kutch is among Gujarat's finest beaches with lovely soft sands and shallow shore waters. Take off your shoes and enjoy a walk on the sands. During the low tide, you can enjoy a wade in the water. One of the quietest of the beach

stretches is located within the palace estate of Vijay Vilas Palace. The palace is grand with umbrella-like domes, cupolas, turrets, carved balconies and latticework screens. From the domed terrace, you can enjoy a view of the estate and the beach.

VIJAYNAGAR



Vijaynagar is a village-town set in the Polo forests. In the town, Vijay Vilas is a colonial guest house run by descendants of the Polo Rathore Rajput rulers. The British-style building has rooms with teakwood furniture and old pictures. The family offers home-

style food in the dining room featuring Rajasthani and Gujarati dishes. From here, you can get a good view of the hilly forests while sitting out in the galleries. Make a base here to visit the mediaeval temples and scenic sites of the Polo forest. ■







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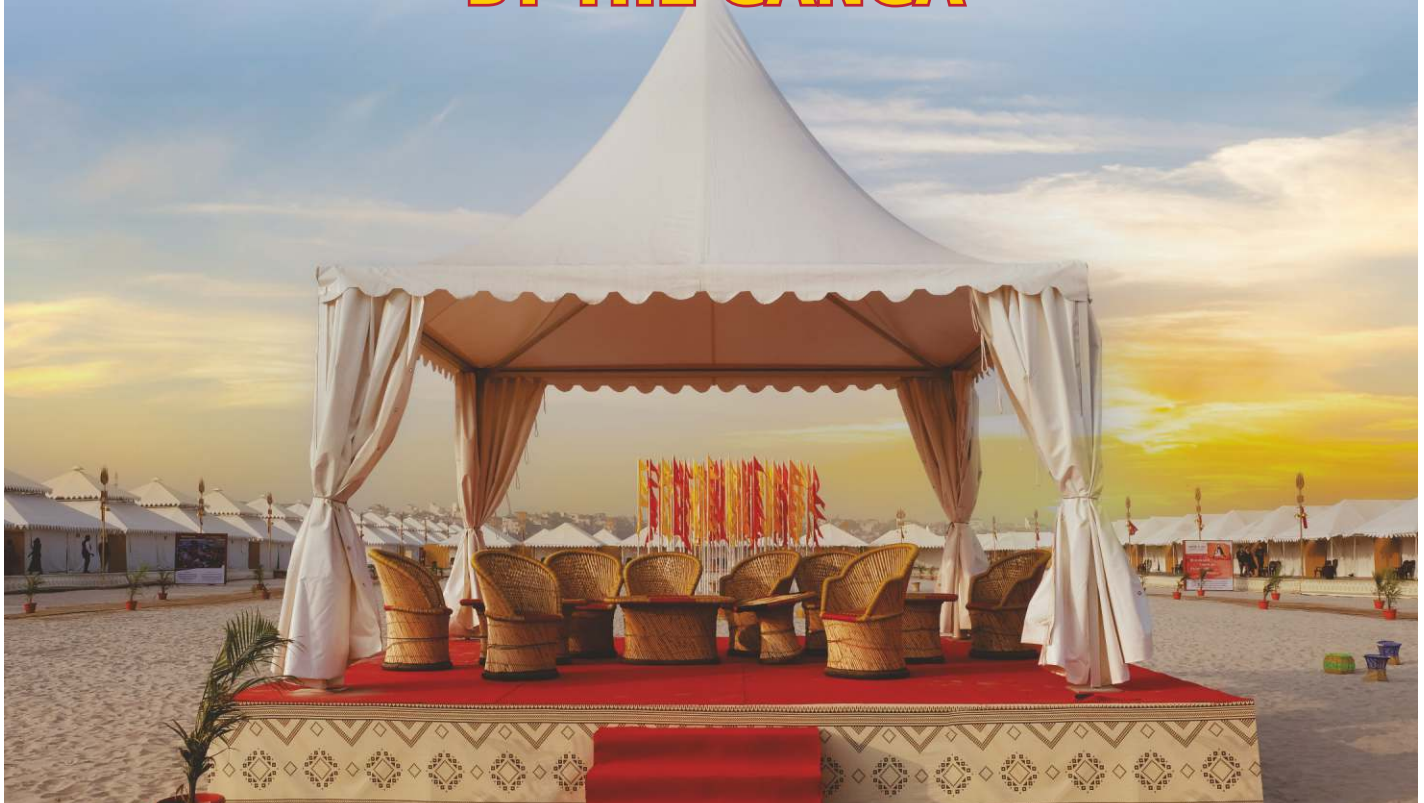
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