

The Bengal Club
Since 1827

Off The Beaten Track

Travelogues

by

Members & Family of The Bengal Club



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FOREWORD

Dear Members,

Travel is surely one of the best ways to explore the territory of one's mind and spirit. While all of us get burdened by the routines of daily life, we get stale if we stay home too long: travel creates motion, a fine breeze that reveals the contours of our insides, our errors of judgment and wishful thinking, and the possible path of our future selves. Even a stroll around the block can do the trick, for a while anyway.

The recent pandemic has brought significant challenges to travel. The past year may have upset our vacation plans, but certainly not our wanderlust. Many of us continue to imagine where we would travel to, if we only could. The good news is that things are opening up and people have started planning their next holiday hoping that by the end of the year one would be less confined and more open to carefree travel.

Keeping this in mind, the Members of the Communications Sub Committee felt that this would be the most opportune moment to reach out to our well-travelled members and their families who have travelled to interesting or uncommon places, or had unusual experiences that made their vacation especially memorable and share that through their travelogues for all of us to travel through these pages in the comfort of one's home.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's famous book 'The Namesake', Ashok tell his son Gogol that his grandfather used to tell him that reading books is "To travel without moving an inch." With this e-publication from the members of The Bengal Club, aptly entitled 'Off The Beaten Track' we do hope all of you get a chance to travel to exotic locales and see as much of the world you can in the comfort and safety of your homes.

Our appeal to members generated very interesting and unique travelogues which have now been put together in this compilation. Some of the articles have been written by our member's children and grandchildren. The pieces in this compilation are not organised in any particular order.

The Communications Subcommittee would like to thank our President, Vice President, Members of the General Committee and our CEO for their support and encouragement and a very special thanks to Gurudas Mitra, Assistant Manager - Systems for his invaluable help at every stage.

This is our second attempt to release such an e-publication and hope that we have been able to minimize errors but would request all of you to excuse any that remain or might have crept in.

We wish all of you a safe and joyous festive season.

And happy reading!

Sumit Ray, Dr Sandip Chatterjee, Arpan Banerjee and Vatsala Singhal Deb
Members of the Communications Sub Committee, The Bengal Club

October 2021

CONTENTS	PAGE
1. Uzbekistan - Jewel of Central Asia - Chandana Ghosh	3
2. Mexico - A Great Holiday Destination - Sandip Sen	7
3. Streams of Delight - Sarojesh Mukerjee	10
4. Bosnia - The Heart of SE Europe - Giriraj Mall	13
5. Glamping During The Pandemic - Dave Banerjee	17
6. Magical Morocco - Payal Singh Mohanka	19
7. Pompeii - A Mosaic Of Ancient Life - Devdan Mitra	24
8. Wadi Rum Jordan - Ipshita Banerjee	28
9. A Canadian Sojourn - Partha & Indrani Bhattacharyya	32
10. Enchanting Ethiopia - Sumit Ray	34
11. Haya And The Dagger Of Damascus - Sabita Dhar	39
12. Travelogue New York City - Anoushka Saha	43
13. Land Of The Rising Sun - Usha Bubna	46
14. Macedonia Travelogue - Debaditya Chaudhury	48
15. Tranquil Transylvania - Basav Ray Chaudhuri	51
16. Cossimbazar Rajbari in Murshidabad - Abhijit Bandyopadhyay	55
17. Reef 'n' Rainforest - Srayan Gangopadhyay	60
18. Memorable Iran - Prabir Dasgupta	64
19. Following Sir Ernest Shackleton's Footsteps - Viveck Crishna	69
20. Taiwan Tryst - Dickoo Nowroji	73
21. Ever Tried a Tarantula? - Rajdeep Das	76
22. A Pilgrimage To The Shrine Of Julian Of Norwich - Gilchrist A McLaren	80
23. African Safari - Chaitali Choudhury	84
24. Walking On Water, The Chadar Trek In Ladakh - Viveck Crishna	88
25. Tsaparang Of The Lost Guge Kingdom - Dr Manosi Lahiri	93
26. Starry Starry Nights in Zaskar, Himalayas - Chandana Ghosh	98
27. Memories Of A Dreamland - Mala Mukerjee	102
28. A Dream Travel Destination - Anju Das	107
29. A Journey Without A Destination - Shubham Mukherjee	109
30. Yatra Of A Lifetime - Joyjeet Ghosh	112
31. The Walled City Of Toledo - Dr Paramita Mukherjee Mullick	116

UZBEKISTAN - JEWEL OF CENTRAL ASIA

Chandana Ghosh

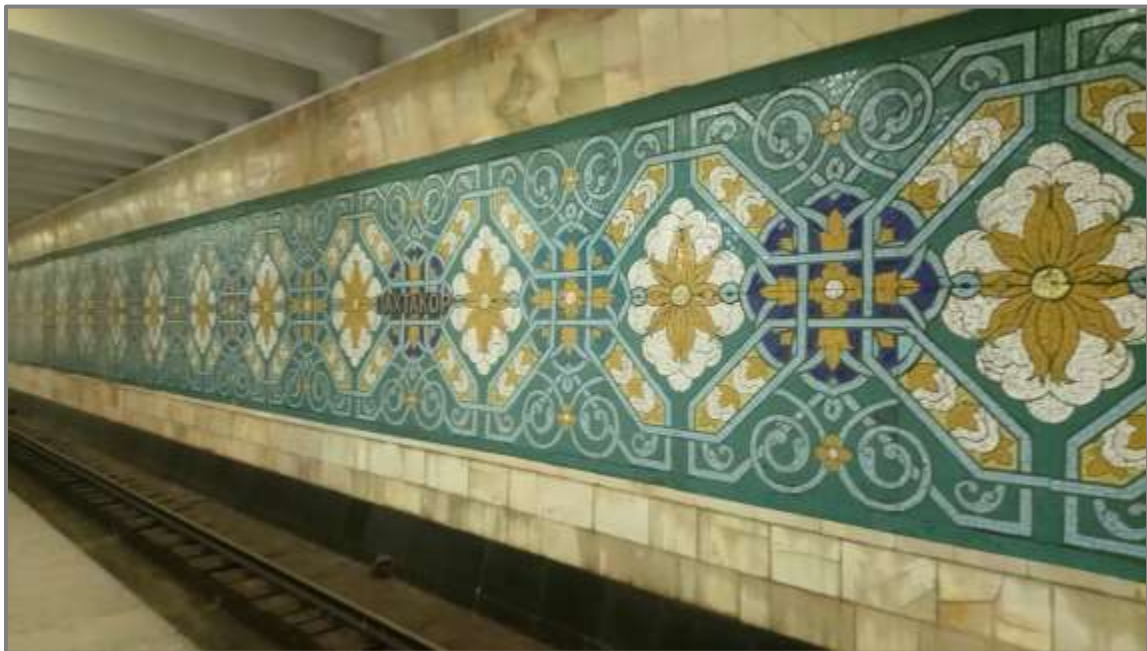
Anybody who is interested in the ancient Silk Route, from China to the Mediterranean, will have heard of Bukhara, Samarkand and Khiva. All three cities are protected by UNESCO and for good reason. The grand buildings with huge blue domes, richly decorated interiors with intricate mosaic works in Registan Square of Samarkand, the museum town of Khiva with its interesting narrow alleys, and Bukhara with its world famous towering mosaic minarets, are all sights to behold.



My husband and I, both inveterate travellers, landed at Tashkent one September morning from New Delhi. The capital city is famous for its modern as well as Soviet era architecture. A huge bronze statue of Amir Temur with imperial regalia, a national hero and the forefather of Babur - the founder of Mughal Empire - graces the center of Tashkent. As you stroll around the manicured gardens in the evenings, the park lights up colourfully with Hotel Uzbekistan, an imposing Soviet style building, as the backdrop. Handicrafts and paintings are sold here. There are also many restaurants offering a variety of Uzbekistan's delicious food. The national dish, Plov, is a culinary relative of our own 'pulao' as are Somsa and Manti to our 'samosa'. Sitting on a Tapchan (Charpoy) and sampling these delights, one's mind is easily transported back 2000 years to what it must have been like for the silk traders stopping for a meal during their journey. Another place to visit in Tashkent is Chorsu Bazar which is impressive both inside and outside. A wide selection of colourful fresh vegetables, succulent honey melons, sweet grapes, figs, pomegranate, dry fruits are all available here.



Although Tashkent gets less tourist traffic than Silk Road cities, one can still enjoy the colourful bazaars, parks and some interesting museums here. The palatial Metro stations of Tashkent can easily compete with the beautiful stations in Moscow. These ornate stations built in marble, carved alabaster and gold leaf reflect the cultural influences of different historical periods.



The ancient historical city of Khiva is like an oasis between the vast Kyzylkum and Karakum deserts - the walled inner city (Itchan Kala) is a 26 hectare spectacular area with golden minarets, twisting alleys, turquoise tile worked Mausoleums and Madrassas. The towering gates of the city walls do not allow cars, so one can enjoy a stroll through the streets full of shops selling local crafts and ceramics.

To reach this city from Tashkent we took a flight to Urgench which is 40 Km from Khiva.



Our next destination, Bukhara, is called a city of hundred monuments. It is wonderful during the day and walking in the old city will make us think that we are in a theme park with ancient mud walls and colourful mosaic tiled minars and mosques. The best way to explore Bukhara is on foot. The old city does not allow any cars and all the major attractions are within walking distance. The historical Madrassas and Mosques have finest work of mosaic tiles and have elaborate minars and ornate interiors which are very skillfully crafted. The original Silk route trading domes are now converted into bustling bazars selling carpets, souvenirs, ceramics and Suzani embroidery (a type of embroidered textile famous in Central Asia.)

About a four hours drive away, is the capital city of Timur's empire in 14th Century. His ambition was to make Samarkand the most beautiful and powerful city in Central Asia with its grand monuments. His tomb Gur-e-Amir - an otherwise modest building - has a beautiful blue dome. Registan Square has some marvellous and magnificent works of Islamic art. This square is flanked by three majestic Madrassas, with vibrant emerald, azure and gold works, both tiles and paint. This was once the main city square with markets and caravanserai (a resting place for travellers on the Silk Route).

Lastly, I must write about the friendly and hardworking Uzbek people. Although very few people speak english this does not stop them from trying to help you. Wherever you go - in bazars, a souvenir store or a monument - and even if your guide is not with you, the local people always try to help.



We also found that the Uzbek people have meticulously maintained their monuments, metro stations and even the local markets - something we should learn from.

My husband and I found Uzbekistan to be a hidden gem on the tourist map. It is easy to get to and our shared history and culture makes it a compelling place to visit.

MEXICO- A GREAT HOLIDAY DESTINATION

Sandip Sen

Most of us frequently travel to USA, visiting friends and relatives. A short flight from USA can transport you to this wonderful country- a blend of ancient history and modernity. Indians holding valid US Visa can get a Mexican visa on arrival.

You may start your Mexican holiday from Mexico City. Situated at an altitude of 2250 metres above sea level, Mexico City is a modern metropolis, where heritage has been so wonderfully preserved. February/March would be a good time to visit, when the weather is expected to be pleasant and comfortable. There are excellent hotels in the 3-star to 5 star categories and you would generally find tariffs, lower than USA, for similar stays. Mexico City is cosmopolitan and you can scout for all types of food. However Mexican food is spicy and tangy and you will miss something if you don't dig into some local Tacos, Enchiladas and Burritos, and of course downed with a few shots of Tequila! Mexico grows some of the best fruits and vegetables, so even if you are vegetarian, you can enjoy your heart's content of wonderful fruits and vegetables, which you can easily pick up from the local supermarkets. The local currency is Peso, (approximate exchange rate around ₹3.50 to a Peso).The US \$ is also freely accepted. The locals speak Spanish and are extremely friendly, warm and fun loving people.

As part of the city tour you must visit Zocalo, the historic part of the city - a grand square dating back to the time of the Aztecs. It is replete with grand old structures like the Presidential Palace, an ancient Cathedral and a lovely square where you will find local people enjoying impromptu street music and dance.



Mexico City has huge lovely parks, museums and many historical buildings which are well maintained.

For local travel in and around the city, you may use the inexpensive Turi Bus - a hop on hop off service, covering the city and its neighbourhood. Alternatively, Uber cabs are easily available and are also dependable and reasonably cheap.

You may spend a day in Puebla, the old town still preserving the colonial heritage of Mexico. Strolling around the quiet streets of Puebla will transport you to a different era.



You should also visit Teotihuacan, a UNESCO Heritage site, which is a 6-8 hour guided tour from Mexico City, with an archaeologist. A short pleasant drive outside the city, a visit to the Teotihuacan Pyramids known as the City of the Gods, is worth it.



There are lots of options and sightseeing tours, in and around Mexico City, and what you do depends on your taste and time availability. Prior on-line bookings, for various local /day tour options are reliable and economical too.

Four to five days in Mexico City should be good enough to cover the major must see locations at a leisurely pace. Mexico has some wonderful beaches. We had been to Cancun, which is a pleasant hour's flight from Mexico City. You will find wonderful beach resorts, on the white sandy beaches of the Caribbean Sea. You can spend a couple of days, enjoying the sun and sea to your heart's content.



While in Cancun you may take a day trip to Chichen Itza. Although it's a hectic day tour, spanning twelve to fourteen hours, but it's worth it. This too, is a world heritage site, steeped in the ancient history of the Mayans.

Mexico indeed has lots to offer and has something for every taste. A visit you won't regret and would indeed be enjoyable and memorable. Last but surely not the least, it's a paradise for shoppers too!!

STREAMS OF DELIGHT

Sarojesh Mukerjee

With profuse apologies to those who like 'rajma chawal', for it is the exception that proves the rule, you don't know what you are missing until it is banned! And so it was with me for I was ill-travelled, and very happily so, before the pandemic, courtesy the long queues and the waits, the crowded airports and vacation spots, and one memorable occasion when we savoured the ascetic pleasures of being stranded on a highway for almost half a day on account of a local demonstration. Peregrinations, even if of others, always seemed so much pleasanter on television screens.

But come the pandemic hour, cometh the travel bug! Which we decided had to be within the state owing to the various and variously changing requirements of quarantine, RTPCR tests and the number of vaccinations for inter-state travel, not to forget of course the horrific eventuality of being grounded in some land of 'rajma chawal' due to a COVID upsurge during the travel duration.

My most recent forays before the pandemic had been to the West Bengal Tourist Department's 'Rangabitan' hotel on the outskirts of Santiniketan in a verdant forest and their 'Balutot' property on the beach at Bakkhali. The common eye-opener for me on both those occasions was the radical transformation of these establishments from the days of yore when they used to be characterised by walls that sported peeling paint of revolting shades, bed linen which might easily have belonged to exhibitions of faded handlooms and of course, the indifferent food and service vying for top honours.

Instead, the hotels were gleaming, had some of the best Bengali food that I have tasted anywhere, cordial and attentive staff and my great personal favourite, a very Bengali nod to our inheritance of genteel pleasure for sound 'adda' and sleep alike - a side pillow in every bed. The 'kismis' on top of this sweet confection was that the charges wouldn't have broken a bank.

These fond recollections were on my mind when I decided that our first post-COVID excursion would be to Gadiara, barely fifty kilometers from Calcutta, over fairly good roads. Brisk walks on the on the bank of the 'Rupnarayan' river, right in front of the hotel, and gazing at the sky and the river's wide expanse separating the districts of Midnapore and South 24 Parganas from your balcony are the only amusements, other than the bonus of flickering broadband. These pictures may speak louder than my words about these quiet pleasures:



Our next excursion was on a lark with middle aged school friends who like to frequently discover again and again, their - our - long elapsed youths, mainly by way of copious conversation and digestion. A similarly close and riparian venue - the 'Mangaldhara' hotel, previously the Malancha Tourist Lodge at Barrackpore - had been selected for the jollities and the hilarities. The highlight of which was an experience that is not usually associated with our 'poor' state, a pleasure to more than one sense - a gastronomic cruise on board the MV Riviera Habitat along the Ganges from Chandannagore.



I think I can honestly say that I was not left wanting for more during either of these sweet escapes into our lush, riverine and utterly beautiful state.

BOSNIA - THE HEART OF SE EUROPE

Giriraj Mall

During my undergrad studies between 1986 and 1990 and subsequent grad studies between 1991 and 1993, the Europe was going through political and economic realignment. The cold war fragmented mighty USSR into Russia and 14 smaller (area wise) countries. The trauma was felt in erstwhile Yugoslavia and East European countries too. Out of all these, the whole world was concerned by the regular ethnic conflicts between Orthodox Serbs, Islamic Bosniaks and Catholic Croats in rapid disintegrating Yugoslavia - the country that I was attracted to. The Bosniaks, culturally and religiously, draw their aspirations from Ottoman.



Summer of 2018, Preeti and I visited the countries of Balkan region namely, Romania, Serbia, Bosnia - Herzegovina (BIH), Croatia and Montenegro. Out of all, we were enthralled to visit Sarajevo - capital city of BIH. As travel guide would say, the best way to know a culture of the city is to walk - and that's precisely we did. We were captivated by the architecture inspired by Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires.

Latin Bridge in Sarajevo is the place where the young Austrian Prince, Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated by a Serb, Gavrilo Princip, leading to WW1. Sarajevo city can be well traveled on feet and it seems each lanes and bye-lanes are revealing the buried secrets. The City Hall, National Library, House of spite and the eternal flame speaks silently about the trauma of the 1461 founded city. Sarajevo exhibits confluence of religions through the Cathedral, Gazi-Husrev Beys mosque and Jewish synagogue, all in walking distance- something that we find in Jerusalem.



I was appalled to walk through the city that had been brutally torn during 1992-95 Bosnian war. Sarajevo is in a valley and is surrounded by Trebevic Mountain. The atrocities of Srpska Army (mostly Serbs of Bosnia territory) was demonstrated by use of sniper killing thousands of the civilians. The city has preserved the places where mortar shell has killed more than 3 people and they termed it as Sarajevo Roses - and there are 200 Sarajevo Roses. We left Sarajevo with teary eyes after our visit to Tunnel spasa (Tunnel of Hope).

Sarajevo had hosted 1984 winter Olympics. It was sad to see the devastated huge track which is now decorated with graffiti and is a tourist attraction. Of course, it is non-functional. On the same slope of Trebevic mountain is the largest Jewish cemetery in the Balkan region that was used as an artillery position by the Srpska Army during Bosnian War that eventually damaged huge part of the cemetery.

Bosnia is not all about war. It has some of the best nature walks and waterfalls. We drove to Mostar - one of the oldest town of East Europe. Old bridge of Mostar is a must-see place and at some hours of day, there are local divers who please the tourist with their talent by diving on clear river Buna flowing underneath. The eateries around the bridge are idle setting for a romantic dinner. While at Mostar, we did visit dervish house of Blagaj and the Islamic culture and architecture work at Počitelj.



We took a day drive to Bihać while we were at Plitvice Nature Forest in Croatia. Bihać is situated on the river Una and has a fortress that protected the city for long. Stracke buk water fall is the most amazing sight and words cannot describe the enchanting natural beauty. The gushing sound of water and chirping birds, in midst of fauna and shades of green forest is unbelievable - surely an inspirational excursion of creative mind.

The cuisine of Bosnia is an excellent blend of Balkan, Mediterranean and Turkish food. Bosnia offers gluttony trip for someone as foodie as we are. The local food uses spices moderately and is usually cooked. Local food joints use lot of home-grown cream called 'pavlaka' and 'kajmak'. Because of Islamic dietary rules, only beef, lamb and chicken are consumed in meat. Cevapi is Bosnian version of Turkish kebab that goes well with local wine and 'somun' - a rich cousin of the Mediterranean pita.



Bosnia is a melting pot of different cultures and languages. People are nice, humble and helpful. English is widely understood, but not spoken. We did not face any issue with language as we had to stop on few occasions in rest area for coffee. On a lighter note, because of the Latin alphabets, reading the road sign had not been challenging.

All good things come to an end, so did our trip - five days in the beautiful country and wished we had more time to explore its countryside. As Bosnians exclaim "on meni nema Bosne" - dare he tell me there's no Bosnia - dare we do not miss visiting the lovely country.

GLAMPING DURING THE PANDEMIC

Dave Banerjee

As a dual resident of both the US and India, I am particularly impacted by the pandemic.

In February 2020, my spouse left for Kolkata in February to tend to and attend her mother's 90th birthday with family visiting from around India. The pandemic was in its early stages and there was no lockdown in effect. Soon however the pandemic took a turn for the worse and governments including the US and India imposed lockdowns. She was stuck. Finally she was able to avail of an evacuation flight organized by the US embassy in Kolkata on an Air India/United flight to San Francisco in August 2020.

This provided me with a window of opportunity to take advantage of local travel unhindered by opinions and family constraints. I opted to spend a few days in the wide open outdoors at the Cleveland National Forest along the coast of California between Carlsbad and San Diego. This particular wide body was severely impacted by wildfires a few years ago and the natural vegetation was just taking a fresh rebirth.

Being of advanced age and with diabetes, I opted not to camp by myself, but to avail of established glamping sites. Never having had such an experience before, I found it unique. The pictures below show what it was like. The tent itself was well appointed, but lacked air conditioning, so it was seriously hot during the afternoons and then quite cold during the nights. For those that have yet to experience glamping, I would strongly recommend one on your bucket list. I spent four nights during which I roamed the forest aimlessly searching for wildlife (none) and bird watching (plenty). The ground cover was thick and the air scented with vegetation. No cell phones coverage (carried a sat phone), nobody for miles and peace and tranquil.





MAGICAL MOROCCO

Payal Singh Mohanka

Time and space seem to flow seamlessly as I soak in a bird's eye view of the medina, the old city in Fes. A virtual concrete jungle as 'riads', traditional Moroccan homes, huddle close to each other. The ancient city's 1200-year-old existence makes a striking landscape. Its medieval texture is dotted with satellite dishes, a stark reminder of our contemporary reality.

Caroline, the proprietress of our guess house, serves us breakfast on the terrace, a delectable fusion of Arabic and Mediterranean fare. Two years ago, she bought one of the decrepit homes in the medina and converted it into a guesthouse. She made Maroc, as the French refer to Morocco, her second home.

Fes is the second largest city of Morocco with a population of 1.1 million. It has two old medinas. The Fes el-Bali is the largest medieval city in the world with its incredible maze of almost 10,000 winding pencil-thin lanes.



City of Fes

Caroline loved Morocco's proximity to France and the fact that its culture was so different from her own gave Morocco an exotic appeal. What made her feel totally at home was that after Arabic, French is the most popular language in this north-western African country. Morocco was a French Protectorate for 44 years.

Towards the close of 1955, Sultan Mohammed V, the grandfather of the present king, negotiated the gradual restoration of Moroccan independence within a framework of French-Moroccan inter-dependence. Morocco was transformed into a constitutional monarchy with a democratic form of government. Today, Morocco is a unique blend of Berber (its original natives), Arabian and European cultural influences.

Morocco's history is reflected in its food as well. Nomadic North African Berbers created the country's cuisine which gradually got infused with several foreign flavours.

The last several years have seen foreigners buying 'riads' in the medina, renovating them and converting them into guesthouses attracting hordes of tourists. French, English, Australians and even Americans own 20 per cent of the almost 200 such guesthouses in the medina. Residents of Fes gladly swap their dilapidated homes for a modern apartment in Fes' ville nouvelle or new city.

A UNESCO world heritage city, Fes was founded in the 9th century and it reached its height of glory in the 13th and 14 century when it replaced Marrakesh as the capital. While the political capital was transferred to Rabat in 1912, the old monuments we see in the medina, the magnificent madrasas and mosques have ensured that Fes is regarded the spiritual and cultural capital. Our guide, Abdullah, greets us with a cheerful 'Sabba Kher', Morning of Goodness, he translates.

It was in Fes that the Islamic sun rose in Morocco, he points out taking us through a soulful journey, the magnificent Bou Inania Madras and the Mosque of Moulay Idriss II, who brought Islam from the middle-east to Morocco in the 9th century. This city is home to the oldest university in the world, University of Al-Karaouine, founded in 859.

As we proceed on our walking tour, we leave the 9th century behind. Abdullah informs us that the bustling bazaar where we are standing dates back to the 14th century. We look suitably impressed as he points to a minaret in the distance and says, "When we reach that mosque we will be in the 17th century." We savour every step of our segued walk back across centuries.

The four stately Gates of Fes with their distinctive Moroccan tiles conjure images of another time, another place. A colourful collage of congested, chaotic narrow lanes bursting with women dressed in colourful kaftans and scarves covering their heads and men in the djellaba, a loose fitting unisex robe, merchants and craftsmen sell a wide range of goods such as olives, dates, figs, spices, oils, rugs and carpets, We wind our way through narrow alleys soaking in the smells and sounds of Fes. In the midst of the clutter a pair of mules laden with goods manoeuvre their way up a slightly steep alley while their owner chats on his mobile phone. As we turn we are greeted by the rhythmic pounding of copper beaters while a stack of copper urns are displayed on the side.



Copper Utensils

We head towards one of Fes' tanneries, the 1000- year- old Chouara Tannery. A view from the terrace is stunning. The process is the same as it was in medieval times, manually done without modern machinery. Enormous stone vessels are filled with several dyes and liquids. Workers stand waist deep in dyes. The hides of cows, sheep, goats and camels are processed and transformed into premium leather products.



Chouara Tannery

An almost four-hour train journey away is Morocco's chief port and economic capital, Casablanca which means 'white house' in Spanish. Our sightseeing begins with the imposing King Hassan II Mosque, the largest in the country and among the top three in the world in terms of size. Designed by a French architect Michel Pinseau, it has the world's tallest minaret. On the west side of the Mosque is Casablanca's famed Corniche dotted with hotels, night club and cafes.



King Hassan II Mosque

A truly charming port city is Tangier in northern Morocco. The 20 mile-wide Strait of Gibraltar separates it from Spain. Its medina with its crisscross maze of narrow alleys and its sprawling souk selling traditional ceramics, jewellery, filigree bronze Moroccan lanterns as well as the metal and glass ones.



Moroccan Lanterns

From Tangier, we take a bus tour to Chefchaouen. Situated in the Rif Mountains just inland from Tangier, the walls and buildings of this mountain village are painted in shades of blue. As we walk through the village, we come across a community oven. A 13-year-old boy comes rushing with his tray of ready- for- the- oven cookies. The baker puts it into the oven, while the boy waits eagerly for the finished product. Our guide tells us that women do the preparations at home but the final baking is done in the community oven. The baker is usually paid in kind...a few of the ready cookies or some of the bread he has baked. An endearing image of rural life.



Chefchaouen

The high point of the bus tour is the stop at Cape Spartel. This is the north-western point of mainland Africa. We are greeted by a beautiful sunset with the lighthouse keeping silent vigil. This is the point where the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea merge. It was here that Europe and Africa were separated by the Strait of Gibraltar. According to mythology, the Rock of Gibraltar was one of the pillars of Hercules, who separated Europe and Africa.



Cape Spartel

To the average Moroccan, India means Bollywood... 'pyar' and 'mohabbat' are two words they greet you with. If they are older then it is Raj Kapoor, Shammi Kapoor, Shashi Kapoor and Dilip Kumar. For the young it is Amitabh Bachchan and Shah Rukh Khan.

As we browse through a colourful collection of ceramics, the owner makes a brave effort to converse in stilted English. The moment he learns we are from India, he bursts into a song picturised on yesteryears' legend, Raj Kapoor half a century ago... "Mere mann ki Ganga... tere mann ki Jamuna ka... bol Radha bol Sangam hoga kay nahin...." The lyrics make me smile. Here we are awed by the union of the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, while this warm elderly Moroccan gentleman is singing about the union of hearts and two of India's famed rivers.

Morocco wraps you in its affectionate embrace.

POMPEII, A MOSAIC OF ANCIENT LIFE

Devdan Mitra

In 1599, the architect Domenico Fontana was commissioned by a local Count to carry out reclamation work along the river Sarno in southern Italy. Fontana had dug a channel underground when he discovered some buildings with decorated walls. He documented his find and left it at that. Little did he know that he had re-discovered the lost city of Pompeii, buried by the volcanic ash that erupted from Mount Vesuvius and devastated it in AD 79. Excavations would not begin until 1748 and it was left to the fascist ruler Benito Mussolini to actually give the archaeological work a major thrust in the 1920s.

When my wife, Ritu, and I visited Pompeii – around 240km south of Rome and 25km from Naples – a year before the pandemic began, the first thing that struck us was its sprawling size. The ancient city is large enough to get lost in; and one can be clueless without the help of a guide. And as we found out, only about two-thirds (around 44 hectares) of the once great city has been excavated. The rest – 22 hectares – is still covered in debris from the eruption some 1,942 years ago.

Ironically, this 20-foot blanket of volcanic ash preserved the ruins as the city remained untouched and unseen for nearly 1,700 years.



The amphitheatre at Pompeii

The well-preserved ruins are what make Pompeii fascinating, giving a lot of insight into the lives of people back in time.

In the ancient world, Pompeii, known for its wine, fertile farmlands and Mediterranean port, was a flourishing destination for the wealthy and distinguished. Pompeians lived in lavish villas built on the roadsides; some even had balconies on the first floor. Visitors entered the villa at the atrium, at the centre of which was a sunken pool to collect rain water. Some of the larger houses had their own water supply and public fountains were everywhere.

The excavations have thrown up several such houses, some of which are surprisingly well-preserved, their mosaic and coloured walls still incandescent.

Our guide took us on a walk of the place. Entire buildings, objects – including uncooked loaves of bread in an oven in what was presumably a baker's shop – and wall paintings are intact. These frescoes also throw light on the daily life of Pompeians.



The well-preserved mosaic at the House with the Large Fountain (Casa Della Fontana Grande)

Also discovered were human-shaped voids. These cavities have since been filled with plaster and resin to create casts of the victims who were going about their daily lives in the afternoon of AD October 79 (some historians give the date as August but that has been contested now) when disaster struck. There are casts of babies and adults and even animals. About 1,000 bodies have so far been found which also indicates that a vast majority of the Pompeians may have been able to escape the destruction.



A cast of one of the victims who was in crouching position when the eruption occurred

We learnt that the residents of Pompeii, especially the wealthy ones, were business-minded. The front of a villa, for example, often served as a shop and they are identifiable by the remains of the sliding shutters which the people used to close their storefronts at night, much like shopkeepers do now. One of the most popular stores was the bakery, as were the bars. Archaeologists have also discovered houses which possibly served as brothels – they have small cubicles and wall paintings detailing the services offered.

Pompeii also had a modern laundry where people sent their clothes for washing and to be pressed. Clothes of the well-heeled became dirty easily, one of the main reasons being they ate with their hands and wiped them on their togas.

The digs have also shed light on the eating habits of the residents. The poorer ones would usually dine at street shops while the wealthy would do so in their own villas. We saw one such house of a wealthy resident who had his own triclinium, or dining room, so-named for the three couches arranged along the perimeter. Men and women would recline on these couches to feast on their sumptuous meals which were served by slaves. One wonders if we get the term “laid-back” from here.

Scientists and medical experts have found that the residents’ teeth were excellent for that time. The explanation being offered is their good diet, which was rich in fresh food, as well as the high levels of fluorine owing to the volcano.

Before its destruction, Pompeii was a bustling city that was home to around 12,000-15,000 people. It had a complex water supply system, an amphitheatre that could seat around 20,000, a gym and a network of about hundred roads. The streets had stepping stones to keep Pompeians' feet dry from rainwater as they crossed but were low enough for the large carts to navigate over.



Ritu on one of the stepping stones that dotted the streets of Pompeii. These stones allowed the residents to keep their feet dry from rainwater or when the streets were being washed

Archaeologists and scientists are continuing to unravel the mysteries of Pompeii though the pandemic has hampered their efforts. Before Covid-19 struck, some 3 million visitors would visit the UNESCO World Heritage Site annually to explore the great city amid the shadow of the Vesuvius.



The house in Pompeii with the words "Cave Canem" inscribed on the mosaic. This is from where we get the phrase "Beware of Dogs"

WADI RUM -JORDAN

Ipshita Banerjee

“Not all those who wander are lost.” J.R.R. Tolkein’s words resonate in my ears, often multiple times in a day. Never less so while on vacation. Now the family has always loved vacations. I love to travel alone too. Just me and my backpack and I am good to go, destination unknown. But. When it comes to family holidays, plans must be made, bookings must be in place and things are more organised. Over the years, we have visited multiple destinations and enjoyed our experiences, sometimes more so in retrospect!

Now, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, or, *Hashemiya Urduniye* as my Palestinian friends in college called it, has always been on my bucket list of places to visit. And then suddenly, in 2015, a friend of mine came to me asking me to help plan a trip for him in the region. He was off to Dubai and wanted a short holiday nearby. With gusto, I began to plan and as I did, my excitement must have shown because before I knew it, our holiday plans were changed and we were all going to Jordan for a holiday.

Well, what can I say? Other than it was one of the best adventures of my life. We visited many places: Aqaba, Amman, Petra, Madaba, Mount Nebo, The Dead Sea etc. Much has been written and said about these places... but what stayed on that vacation was our trip to Wadi Rum.



We landed in Amman and rushed off to Aqaba that very day. The next day we travelled a short distance to Wadi Rum, also known as the Valley of the Moon, a large valley cut into the sandstone and granite rocks in southern Jordan. Made famous by T.E. Lawrence, it is said Wadi Rum (which may have gotten its name from Iram of the Pillars, a lost city mentioned in the Koran) has been inhabited from prehistoric times. It was once inhabited by the Nabataeans (one of the many nomadic Bedouin tribes) who left their mark in the form of temples, inscriptions and rock drawings. The Bedouins who live there now have been in this land of dry sands and extreme temperatures for many years, although with more modern comforts as we soon found out.



It was everything we had heard of and more. We were met at the Visitor Centre by the people who managed Mohammed Mutlak Camp, one of the many camps in the desert. Me being me, I wanted to take a camel into the desert but I was voted out, seven to one! Even the kids did not feel like agreeing with me. And don't tell the others but I am so glad we took the jeep, it was a long, long way into the desert and I don't think swaying on a camel in the desert for about four hours was anyone's idea of fun! Anyway, there we were and taken on a safari where we clambered over rocks, gaped at caves, slid down bright red sun dunes and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. It was fascinating and vibrant. Huge columns of rock carved by ages of wind and sand stood out, it could well have been carved by hand, only Nature did it somewhat better.



We looked around awestruck. As evening fell, we returned to the camp where a huge carpet had been laid out for the guests. We chattered with people around us. They did not serve any alcohol but did not mind when we produced our bottle of whisky and shared it around. Dinner emerged from the sand. Marinated meat and vegetables had been buried and slow cooked and that resulted in succulent kebabs and sides, it was truly delicious and had us returning for more. Meals were always a delight in Jordan, I could never get enough of the hummus or tabbouleh or olives that accompanied each meal.

As dinner was wrapped away, a few of us hung around the fire and sat in the night, watching the stars. It was a cold and gorgeously clear night. Slowly, people drifted away to their tents. I decided I was going to stay right there, under the stars. I asked and the camp owners had no problem with us sleeping outside. So, we dragged out our blankets and slept under the stars. Speaking for myself, 'slept' would be wrong. I think I just dozed and woke and dozed and admired the stars, watching as they flit across the sky. Yes, there were shooting stars too.

I wish photos could do justice to that night, they don't. And some images are for the heart to keep. By day break people were moving about... we walked around in the half light, fueled by the vista. That magnificent desert was everything I dreamed of and more and places like these always make me feel how insignificant and small we humans are in the timelessness of nature.



A CANADIAN SOJOURN

Partha & Indrani Bhattacharyya



One of the foreign destinations, we love for a longish vacation is Canada. There we have our very close and loving friends among relatives - my sister-in-law Nandini and her husband Prof Anamitra Shome extending at all times a warm and open invitation to stay with them. They invariably adjust their schedules to maximize the time that we spend together. Their adorable daughter Urbee, Son in Law Bhashkar Pal and the little granddaughter Ishani greatly enhance the fun, pleasure and cordiality of living together!

It was more than five years we visited Canada. We, therefore, decided to pack our bags for a Canadian Sojourn and left Kolkata on 11th Oct 2019, early morning to reach Toronto same day afternoon (all times local!). We stepped out to find Anamitra and family at the exit gate ready to drive us to their residence at St Catharines (near Niagara Falls) about 120 kms from Toronto airport!

From 11th to 18th and again from 26th Oct to 7th Nov we lived with them. The notable event during the 1st phase of stay was a splendid Thanksgiving party hosted by Urbee and Bhashkar at their residence. Between the two phases of stay, we spent a week in Vancouver where we lived at the Fairmont hotel in downtown. We toured the Vancouver city and suburbs extensively, visited my friend Barry Claridge who is turning 90 next Feb and his family, as well as our old friends from India, Madhu and Dr Ramesh Kamath. We took time to visit Whistler as well as Victoria. Took pictures of the magnificent fall colours and loved every bit of our stay!

Barry and I were great friends for a decade and a half but only over phone! He is a very kind hearted warm gentleman, always keen to walk the extra mile for friendship. He drove 40 kms to pick us up on our day of arrival at Vancouver airport but we missed each other as Air Canada preponed our flight from Toronto at the last minute. He drove back from the airport to the hotel and we met for the first time. What followed over the next few days was his driving us extensively in, around and out of the city, besides inviting us for a gala dinner with his extended family of loving daughters, sons in law and grandson!

Let me share a compelling episode around Barry. On 22nd Oct we decided to visit Whistler - a place much colder than Vancouver. Barry could not join as he was engaged in taking his younger daughter to hospital for treatment of a complicated disease. We decided to take a luxury bus leaving barely 200 metres away from the hotel. He insisted that we put on heavy winter gear which he brought for us on the previous day. However, we forgot to take it from him before parting while he also forgot to give. His residence was about 40 kms away from the hotel close to the ferry terminal for cruises to Victoria. On 22nd at 6 am he called up to regret the lapse and assured to deliver well before the departure of the bus. He refuted our repeated requests to drop the idea. Later we felt that without the gear it would have been indeed difficult to stay safe & secured.

Barry drove to the hotel at 5 am on the morning of 24th Oct for an hour to take us to the ferry terminal for Victoria, which is barely 5 minutes' drive from his residence! While returning, he insisted again to drop us back to hotel! Both Indrani & me refuted the offer and instead asked him to drop us to the taxi stand near the terminal. He kept on saying 'This is not what friends do to friends'. Finally, we saw him unable to overcome onrush of sleep. That's when he agreed to consider our suggestion! Can't imagine a 90 year old person displaying such unique stamina, all for friendship. Born in Feb, 3 days prior to my birthday, he wished that next birthday when he turns 90, I should turn 70! I told him that while this will not fructify as I am younger to him by 21 and not 20 years, the wish we intend to pursue is to visit him in the summer of 2030 after he turns 100! He found in that statement an inspiration to live on!!

Just before we left Canada, I received a very touching mail from him that will remain in my archive as an 'Ode to Friendship'!

Moving on, we witnessed from the window of our hotel room at downtown Vancouver, the massive turnout of 8000 persons to hear Ms Greta Thunberg speak on Climate Change. The event was telecast live on most Canadian and US television Channels.

Back to St Catharines after Vancouver we, along with all members of Shome & Pal families dashed to Fingerlakes in US in district NY for two days to stay in a fascinating Airbnb facing the lakes. On the way back we visited the Letchworth - the State Park ranked #1 in America! It was indeed spectacular!

Last but not the least were our multiple visits to Niagara Falls, including a drive inside the falls with the Hornblower cruise. That was an incredible way of experiencing the Niagara fury.

In between we sampled food of diverse cuisines at fine dining restaurants of St Catherine, Niagara on the lakes, Vancouver, Victoria and Fingerlakes.

We returned to Kolkata on 10th November, not before spending a night at the lounge in Hong Kong airport, courtesy the storm 'Bulbul'!!

Update: Sad to share that our dear friend Barry left to meet his creator on 25th September 2021. Our promise of visiting him in 2030 to celebrate his centenary will remain an unfulfilled dream'

ENCHANTING ETHIOPIA

Sumit Ray

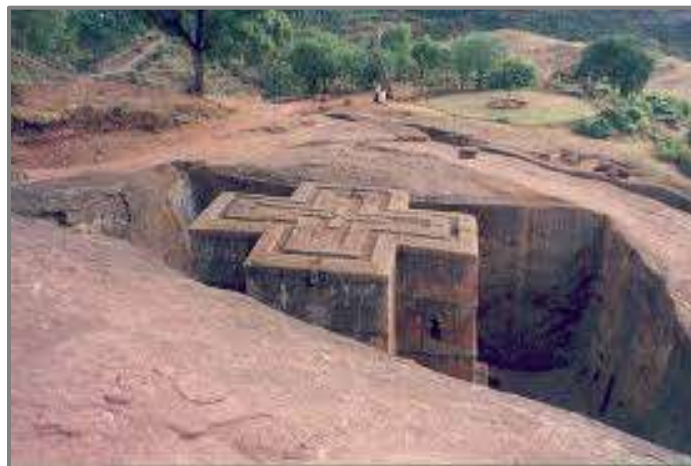
When my wife announced in early 2019 that she was being transferred to the World Bank office in Addis Ababa, I was left with mixed feelings and memories of what Ethiopia meant to me. The first was of the famous concert 'Live Aid' held in July 1985 when I was in college to raise funds for relief for the 1983-1985 famine in Ethiopia. I asked her sheepishly 'Do we really need to go there?' I then started 'googling' every possible article about Addis Ababa and Ethiopia and by the time I was done, I realized that the country seemed like a 'hidden gem' in the horn of Africa that many knew little about.

Having lived in Addis for the past two years, the only regret I have is the constraint on travel due to the pandemic and the current civil unrest in Northern Ethiopia. But the little that I have seen and the lot that I have heard from my local friends is good reason to share with all of you why your next holiday destination should be Ethiopia when the time is right.

From the soaring peaks of the Simien Mountains (the Roof of Africa), to the plunging depths of the Dankil Depression (the lowest and hottest place on Earth), Ethiopia straddles a bewitching landscape. And no less than 11 UNESCO World Heritage sights! Add to this redoubtable canvas wild coffee plantations, active volcanoes, hot springs, cool underground caverns, rugged gorges, spectacular waterfalls, rivers and shimmering lakes that will leave you wanting more.

Ethiopia is Africa's only non-colonised and independent country and a living kaleidoscope of people drawn from different ethnic backgrounds who speak 80 different languages. Their genuine warmth towards guests visiting their land of which they're so proud is also unmistakable. The fact that it is the only country in this continent that was never colonised gives its people a legacy of pride, dignity and self-confidence.

Intriguingly, history and legend are so entwined in Ethiopia, it's tough to figure out where one ends and the other begins. Lalibela, is a place where one can immerse oneself in Christianity in its most raw and powerful form. The rock-hewn Churches of Lalibela are truly magnificent with the complex boasting the largest monolithic church in the world, a maze of passageways and tunnels and intricately carved reliefs.



Rock-Hewn Churches Lalibela

The spellbinding Simien Mountains are like nowhere else in the world and offer stunning views of awe-inspiring jagged and sharp peaks. Its Gelada Baboons are amazingly friendly, and one can see them at close quarters.



Simien Mountains



Gelada Baboon

The city of Bahir Dar in the north is the source of Blue Nile that flows from the great Lake Tana while the 17th century capital city of Gondar is a strategic city and was the crossing point of several ancient trading routes and it boasts intriguing Art Deco architecture as a result of its occupation by the Italians during WWII

The town of Axum known for its tall, carved obelisks, relics of the ancient Kingdom of Aksum. Axum has so much to offer such as the Church of Zion (the final resting place of the original Ark of Covenant), the stone inscription of Ezana, the Tomb of Kaleb and Gebre Meskel and the Swimming Pool and Palace of the Queen of Sheeba.

The Adwa Mountains are where numerous Ethiopians lost their lives in 1896, after a courageous battle (which they won!) against the Italians.

Known as the "Land of Origins", Ethiopia's story could also be that of humankind. At the National Museum in the capital city of Addis Ababa, I'm transfixed by the 3.2 million-year-old homonoid skeleton of Lucy, known to be man's original ancestor. A wealth of archaeological sites and treasures, the oldest tools in the world, the remains of ancient civilisations are all showcased beautifully in this museum. Apparently, Ethiopia has over two millennia worth of ancient treasures strewn around, from the giant obelisks and hidden tombs of the legendary Queen of Sheba, to castles that would make Camelot jealous.



'Lucy'

Apart from being the capital city, Addis Ababa or "New Flower" (in local Amharic language) was founded in 1887 by Emperor Menelik II. Not only is this bustling city Ethiopia's commercial nerve centre, its wining dining playground, home to the headquarters of the African Union, it hosts one of the largest diplomatic missions in the world. Situated at 2,355 meters (7726 feet) – Addis, as the locals lovingly call it, is also a cosmopolitan hubbub of East and West, where quaint churches and museums co-exist alongside chic new cafes, global hotel chains and eateries. Ethio-jazz is very popular as is Ethiopian art which is now become a collectors delight.



St. George's Cathedral, Addis Ababa

Of the many festivals in Ethiopia such as Easter, Christmas, Timkat, Kiddus Yohannes the one that I have participated in is 'Meskel' held each year in September close to the Ethiopian New Year. The feast of Meskel commemorates the discovery of the True Cross by the Roman Empress Helena (Saint Helena) in the fourth century. The festival is known as Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross in other Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant churches. The feast is held in Meskel Square in the capital city of Addis Ababa. Religious and civil leaders preside over the celebration, and public figures give speeches and reference biblical themes and stories.

The Meskel celebration includes the burning of a large bonfire, or 'Demera', based on the belief that Queen Eleni, as she is known, had a revelation in a dream. She was told that she should make a bonfire and that the smoke would show her where the True Cross was buried. So she ordered the people of Jerusalem to bring wood and make a huge pile. After adding frankincense to it the bonfire was lit and the smoke rose high up to the sky and returned to the ground, exactly to the spot where the Cross had been buried.



The 'Demera' being lit at the Meskel Festival in Addis Ababa

Ethiopian food is one of the most diverse on the planet, with the foundation of almost every meal which includes 'injera', a pancake-like flatbread with a slightly sour taste that contrasts beautifully with the sauces, mounds of spicy meat stews and tasty vegetable curries that usually accompany it.



Injera and its accompaniments

Finally, did you know that the coffee bean is believed to be first discovered in Ethiopia? According to an Ethiopian origin story, they were discovered by a shepherd named 'Kaldi' when his goats became hyperactive after eating the beans. There is no doubt that coffee has been part of Ethiopian culture for centuries.



Ethiopian Coffee Ceremony

Having spent over two years in Addis Ababa, I can truly say that Ethiopia is an enchanting country that will etch its soul in you when you leave.

HAYA AND THE DAGGER OF DAMASCUS

Sabita Dhar



The dagger which I shall always treasure

It was the year 1998. Every year my husband and I took our customary fortnight's leave from work. It was a lifesaving breather from the demands of our careers, a time to forget patients, students and even children (who were left under the hawk like supervision of their grandmother), inhale the oxygen of far away, exotic lands and come back refreshed, carrying a treasure chest of precious memories.

Syria was not a common travel destination in those days for Indians. The world was taking its first faltering steps towards globalization, which would eventually in the coming decades rob countries of their unique cultural identities. And, had we only foreseen it, cause the wildfire transmission of deadly diseases.

My first impression as we entered the city of Damascus was that we had travelled from the airport not in the ramshackle taxi but in a time machine, which had transported us back to biblical times. This impression of being in a bygone era grew as we explored the old city with its interweaving twisting and narrow streets dotted with numerous mosques and souks (the market places of the Middle East). Damascus has a turbulent history and has seen the intermingling of Christian, Muslim and other cultures which have left their indelible, sometimes arrogant and often tragic stamp on this once important ancient city. There is no place here to describe the many architectural wonders of Damascus, so I shall restrict myself to only a couple of places which jostle for permanent place in my recollections, one of them being the great Mosque of the Omayyads.



The Great Mosque of the Omayyads



The Al- Hamadiyah Souk

Loitering in the Al- Hamadiyah Souk of Damascus is an unforgettable experience! As I entered from the Grand Entrance, my senses were assailed by a medley of unfamiliar odours and fascinating sights. Every imaginable object under the sun was on display, a dazzling array ranging from delicate damask table linen to garish souvenirs for tourists. The unwary buyer was enticed into buying textiles, rugs, perfumes and spices by the cajoling vendors.

I had participated animatedly in a highly stimulating intellectual exercise of haggling for an ornamental dagger which had caught my eye, but unable to agree on the final price, had left the shop in a pretended huff, hoping that the shopkeeper would call me back. To my surprise, a young girl came up panting behind me, holding up my purse, which I had left behind in the shop. I marveled at her honesty, thanked her profusely and offered her a reward. She shrugged and refused. From her (her name was Haya), I gathered that no one would dare to steal anything because they all suspected each other of being an informer for the government, a grim reminder of the atmosphere of suspicion and fear prevailing during the dictatorship of Hafez-Al Assad, whose huge posters of himself flanked by his two sons all over Syria did nothing to allay the fear and awe of the people.. Ashamed of my own *behaya* haggling, I went sheepishly back and paid the price asked by the shopkeeper. The girl was beautiful and when I came back to Kolkata, I painted a portrait of Haya, the quintessential Syrian beauty.



Portrait of Haya

(The portrait of Haya has actually been painted by me and exhibited in an exhibition at Birla Academy in 2016)

When in Syria you must pay the customary homage to Saladin, the legendary warrior who had fought to defend his land against the crusaders in the middle ages. He lies buried in the mausoleum behind the Great Mosque. Legend has it that when Richard the Lionheart lay dying after having been wounded in a fight against the formidable Saladin, Saladin secretly visited him in his tent with fruits and the highly efficacious Arab medicines, because his chivalry would not allow him to take unfair advantage of his worthy adversary. The fight was resumed once Richard had recovered. Whether the story is true or a hallucination induced by Richard's delirious state is hard to tell but adds to the aura surrounding the legend.

From Damascus we traveled by local bus to Aleppo, once the commercial hub of Syria. We stayed at the famous Baron Hotel, a quaint place which reeked of fake old world charm. Its walls were lined with faded posters of the Orient Express which travelled from Baghdad to London. Here the legendary Lawrence of Arabia had lived for a few months, lending the hotel a formidable reputation and enabling its owners to successfully cash in on it. The self-important manager ushered us to a bedroom where, he assured us, Lawrence had slept during his stay. My cynical feeling was that the wily man made this claim of all the bedrooms to all the hotel guests! Agatha Christie had also stayed there while writing one of her books, adding weight to the hotel's claim to fame.

From Aleppo we travelled to Palmyra whose well preserved Roman ruins have suffered wanton destruction in recent times. The historical city will henceforth exist only in dusty books and in the faded memory of those who were fortunate enough to have seen it in its magnificence before its tragic destruction.

I must include Bosra in this account because its Roman amphitheatre is the best preserved in the whole world. You have only to close your eyes and you can see the hungry lions being released from their cages on to the arena and hear the cheers of the bloodthirsty crowd, eager to see the mangled remains of the hapless men cowering in terror, waiting to be torn to pieces by the hungry beasts.

The Syria I remember and describe does not exist anymore. I doubt if tourists will in the near future venture to set foot on its strife torn soil. But the image of the Syria I saw is untarnished in my mind, untouched by the destruction of its cultural heritage. My vivid memories will find their final resting place in my grave.

TRAVELOGUE - NEW YORK CITY

Anoushka Saha

Like every year, we were planning the destination for this year's summer vacation. After a short discussion, we unanimously agreed on ... guess what, The Big Apple - New York!!!! There was plenty of excitement in the room: what will we do there, which are the places for sightseeing, what will be the weather like, how long is the flight etc. And then the packing began! Yes, we were going to be off as soon as the vacation began, and no one could wait!

Finally, the day arrived and we were taking off to the city of dreams, to the city that never sleeps, to the city of sky scrapers! It was a long 24-hour travel from Kolkata-Delhi-London-New York. What struck me first is that the JFK airport in New York was buzzing with people of several origins, people with different hair colour (purple too, if you may!), and all comfortable in their own skin. That taught me something about NY - it accepts all, the way they are, no judgement.

We soon arrived at our hotel - Holiday Inn Express in Manhattan. Small, yet warm and cosy rooms and we just crashed, with all the exhaustion and jet lag. The next day was fun, we roamed around Manhattan and enjoyed the hustle-bustle of Times Square. I was overwhelmed by the large number of people gathered at the same place, so many bright lights and fanfare made every moment spent there worthwhile. We also saw the magnificent Empire State Building - that lights up in different colours at night.



At Times Square

We window-shopped at the Fifth Avenue and collected souvenirs along the way. The next day, I made waffles for myself for breakfast in a do-it-yourself equipment in the hotel coffee shop - and you would be surprised to know that a Chinese lady taught me how to - friendly people in New York, I must say. Then we headed out to see the Statue of Liberty. We went in a ferry and saw the Lady with the Torch and heard the remarkable stories of the people involved in erecting this symbol of freedom.



At the Statue of Liberty

We also saw the Charging Bull, a bronze sculpture on the famous Wall Street, which represents stock market optimism! Well, after that, we settled down at Juniors, a splendid restaurant offering the best cheesecake ever!

The following day was the visit to the Rockefeller Centre where we went to the Top of the Rock - the observatory. It was a breath-taking 360-degree panoramic view of New York. We also walked around Central Park - the largest park I would have ever gone to - we just walked and chatted - we saw the stunning Shakespeare Garden with the most beautiful and colourful tulips, and we saw the cute Turtle Pond, and we also went to the zoo and saw red pandas, snow leopards and the grizzly bear. My mother was keen, so I sat and had my pencil portrait made too! That took a while, but it turned out to be splendid and a treasure for keeps.



Atop the Rockefeller Centre overlooking the Empire State Building

One of the days, we also visited the One World Trade Centre - New York's tallest skyscraper. The site of the erstwhile Twin Towers is now converted to a picturesque memorial. It was heart-warming to see the kind of homage paid to the victims of world terrorism, and I salute the New Yorkers for that. Soon after, we went for a Broadway Show, 'The Mean Girls', it was so lively and electrifying. We loved it! And well, so the days passed with lots of walking, chatting, laughter, good food, exotic experiences, and absorbing New York's eclectic vibe!

New York is incredibly extra-ordinary. It was fascinating. If I had to go to any place in the world, it would be New York. I look forward to visiting New York again soon!

Anoushka Saha is the daughter of our member Vikram Saha

LAND OF THE RISING SUN

Usha Bubna



My husband was one of the leading distributors of Escorts Ltd. for their Two Wheelers and Farm Equipments. In the early seventies they collaborated with Yamaha World's second largest producer of two wheelers. Escorts Ltd. was the first company to introduce Sales incentives in the form of foreign trips, perhaps first time in India. Top sixteen dealers of the company with wives were awarded a trip to Japan for 15 days.

I was really excited. I had been a teacher of Economics at Loreto College and went to Germany on German Government Scholarship. I had studied in Germany and London School of Economics and during that period visited the various foreign tourist locations of Europe, but had no idea of Japan. After Hiroshima and Nagasaki how Japan recovered was astonishing. Their technology could compete with US and Europe. The Japanese Automobile industry was giving tough competition to US and Europe. Therefore I was looking forward to the trip.

Japanese culture was totally different, to the western world. A simple example was that there was never a crowd outside schools. Children went to the schools by Bus or car, but were dropped a few hundred meters before the school and then walked to their respective schools. No congestion no crowding Discipline is inculcated from the beginning.

We landed at OSAKA and from there drove to Tokyo. The first shock was upon reaching the hotel. After registration at reception counter a room was allotted to us. We asked for the keys of the room only to be told that there are no keys, rooms are just shut without locks. The safety standards were so high.

In this confusion of checking in our camera was left on the counter of the hotel. In the evening when I was checking the luggage I found that camera was missing. I went down to the hotel reception to report the matter and was very pleasantly surprised to see that the camera was still on the counter where we had forgotten.

The following day we proceeded to Hamamatsu the town where Yamaha factory was located. We visited the Yamaha factory to our utter surprise, no worker was looking at us to see sari clad Indian lady. What a work culture! We were told that absenteeism is zero in the factory and if any worker is absent due to emergency, there are workers waiting outside to be hired. Therefore production does not suffer. We also saw the Yamaha Museum which has lined up the production from the inception of the factory.

We experienced the traditional Japanese tea ceremony. Saw Geishas performing in traditional kimonos.

In the evening the weather was very pleasant. After dinner we decided to go for a stroll to see the neighbourhood. After a little distance we saw a small shop selling motorcycle and accessories. Out of curiosity we went inside. There was a lady who was very polite and welcoming to us. On the wall, we saw a very beautiful clock, battery operated with a nice picture of Honda Motorcycle (In India those days such battery operated wall clocks were not to be seen), we wanted to buy it. The lady called her husband, (the family lived at the back of shop). To our utter surprise the whole family came out, the gentleman very politely said that it is a gift from Honda Motorcycle Company to them and they cannot sell it. They said that since we are guests of their country, they can present it to us.

We had no choice but to take it as a GIFT. We then bought some very useful items from the shop. On return to India we send them a statute of BUDHA. The clock was a novelty in India at that time. No company was manufacturing such clocks in India. ESCORTs LTD. got to develop a clock by a watch maker with a photograph of RAJDOOT Motor cycle as a gift item.

Our group was taken to witness the famous tea ceremony and opera. We were taken for a ride of world famous Bullet Train. Next to us a lady was sitting with her 5/6 year old daughter. We were charmed by her look and gave her a picture post card of Victoria Memorial. They thanked us and took out a chocolate and presented it to us. Japanese culture of exchanging the gifts is well known.

The politeness of the people of Japan can be illustrated by our experience, one day on the street. We were looking for a particular address & had lost the direction. Suddenly we saw a man running in our direction. We stopped him to ask for our destination. He was in a hurry to catch the local train for his office, but he stopped and helped us to find our way. A foreign visitor was always treated as a guest.

Such incidents always remind us of our trip nearly half a century ago. It was in 1977. The memories are still fresh.

MACEDONIA TRAVELOGUE

Debaditya Chaudhury



Everyone who knows me knows how much I love travelling. I love visiting new places, discovering new local music, trying new food, and taking home a plethora of new knowledge. This year I had the opportunity to strike off Macedonia from my bucket list. Lost among the pages of history books, Macedonia is so much more than just the legacy of Alexander the Great. Its culture, scenic beauty, and heritage have long been overshadowed by the more popular European countries of Italy, France, and Spain. I honestly would not have believed just how beautiful and rich the land is, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes.

I was fortunate enough to visit the country after my friend, Namit Bajoria, was appointed the Honorary Consul of The Republic of North Macedonia. Needless to say, I did not have much of an idea about what to expect, since my only knowledge of the place, much like most of us, is limited to school-level history books and few hours of internet research. All I knew about present day Macedonia was that it is fairly close to Italy, Greece, and France and is famous for its statues, monuments, special dairy products, and that it was Mother Teresa's birthplace.

We landed at Skopje airport, and my first impression of it was that it is not as big as the other European airports. However, the fresh, naturally purified air that filled our lungs the moment we stepped out of the airport was a pleasant welcome.

The first place we went to upon landing was the Macedonia Square, by the Vardar River, where our hotel was. It is situated at the heart of the city, surrounded by shops and restaurants, and houses a large statue of Alexander the Great. Children playing by the fountain, people eating, shopping, taking pictures - the square is always buzzing with people, regardless of the time. The place is a tourist's paradise. It reminded me very much of the Champs-Élysées of Paris. I was astonished to find that of the many tourists, none were Indian, and only a handful were Asian. It was then that I realized what a hidden jewel Macedonia is. One has to see it to believe it.

From there we went to the Archaeological Museum by the Stone Bridge, where we learnt even more about Macedonia. Each display had a unique story to tell, which gave us more insight into the country's history. While crossing the bridge, we also spotted the Opera House which is situated across the Vardar River.

Then we walked to the Mother Teresa Memorial House, which is built on the exact spot where she was baptised. After spending some time there and learning more about the place and its connection to Mother Teresa, we went back to the Square for dinner. We had our dinner at one of the many local restaurants by the Vardar River. We tried the popular local dish Burek, as well as some seafood. The seafood we tried was interesting to say the least. It was very fresh and tasted very different from anything I've tried before.

The first day was spent in and around the Macedonia Square, spotting the many statues and monuments spread across the city, all very well maintained. We also spotted red double-decker buses, which are characteristic to the streets of London.

At the top of my list for the next day was the Old Bazaar of Skopje, which is connected to the Macedonia Square by the Stone Bridge. To say I was awestruck would be an understatement. With a stone road running down the centre, and small local shops on both sides, the Old Bazaar was quite the sight. We saw a large number of leather shops, souvenir stores, antique shops, and bakeries. What caught my eye was the unbelievable number of Macedonian coffee shops, which remain open day and night. Tourists and locals are always drinking coffee, no matter the time of the day. So, later when I found coffee carts all over the city, I was not surprised; it was clear that Macedonians love their coffee. So much so that the walls of the bazaar even have funny quips and quotes on coffee drawn on them. I was also quite taken by the quaint antique stores, which had vintage cameras, coins, jewellery and much more on display. There were some small used-book shops overflowing with books, but unfortunately for me almost none were in a language I read. But I did manage to find some books on music and food to take home.

We had our lunch in the Bazaar, at a local eatery called Cafe Borz. We ordered a kebab platter, which though similar in appearance to our Seekh kebabs, was made of beef and tasted completely different. We then cleansed our palate with some local coffee, which tasted heavenly, to say the least, and I'm not even a coffee person! I tried what they suggested was their best brew, and loved it. The musician in me did not miss out either. There were many street musicians playing local tunes, and some western classical tunes. The whole atmosphere was very welcoming and laid-back. Some sunny spots were covered with make-shift shades, and people were chatting, singing, eating under them. Water fountains there dispense real spring water, the freshness of which was unmatched. After lunch, we explored the bazaar some more and found the oldest microbrewery of Macedonia, Temov. Outside it was a pyramid-like structure made of beer bottles which made for quite a quirky piece of art. The bazaar is also home to the 600 year old Hamam, or Turkish bath, named Daut Pasha Hamam. Unfortunately, my wish to experience a Hamam bath remained unfulfilled as we found the Daut Pasha had been closed down many years ago. The unique dome shaped structure is now The National Gallery of Macedonia.

That evening we visited the Bohemian street of Debar Maalo. On the way we spotted the Porta gate, which resembles the Arc de Triomphe of Paris. At Debar Maalo, drinks, food and music were in abundance. Besides local Macedonian delicacies, here we found numerous restaurants which serve signature European items like Steak, Burger, and Pizza. There were also many local pubs with live bands, either playing old rock and pop covers or local Macedonian music. One such pub had a guitar-accordion-saxophone trio playing local country music, which sounded very similar to Arabic music, perhaps due to shared Ottoman roots.

The next day, we took a ride on the famous ropeway to the Millennium Cross on Mt. Vodno. Just like the Eiffel Tower, which is visible from practically everywhere in Paris, the giant Millennium Cross too is visible from pretty much anywhere in Skopje. The otherwise safe ropeway ride was made even more interesting by the fact that we had a beautiful bird's eye view of the entire city. With mountains touching the crystal blue skies on one side, and mirror-like rivers on the other, the city is a blend of it all. It was a 15min ride to Millennium Cross. And you guessed it! More coffee shops here too! We spent about half an hour here, drinking some more delightful coffee and admiring the tall iron figure, before heading back down. We also stopped by the Matka Canyon, another place I really wanted to visit. And I was not disappointed. We took a boat ride down the Canyon and were met with a breathtaking setting, reminiscent of the Amazon forest. We passed several caves, as well as a few monasteries and churches which have a long historical past. The Matka Monastery, for example, apparently had been rebuilt in 1497, thereby suggesting the date of its actual construction many decades prior to that.

That evening I found myself back at the old bazaar for dinner. This time, we tried Tavče Gravče, a preparation of baked beans, which is another popular local delicacy. We also tasted some local desserts, of which I liked Baklava the most.

Each city is 2hrs, no more than 3 hours away from the other. So we were able to add a couple more cities to our itinerary. The next city on our list was Ohrid, which is a UNESCO heritage site, named after the deepest lake in the Balkans. On our way from Skopje to Ohrid, we stopped by the Tikves Winery and tasted some wine. Now, I'm no wine connoisseur, but I loved their specialty Alexandria red wine; perfect for a teetotaler like me. Upon reaching Ohrid, we first visited the St. John Kaneo Church, which overlooks the Ohrid Lake. We found some mind-blowing seafood restaurants by the Ohrid Lake, where we had lunch. After lunch, we took a boat ride across the lake, and admired the view of the city. The entire city of Ohrid is atop mountains, and the view from the lake was very similar to the Amalfi Coast of Italy.

The next city we visited was Tetovo. Our stay here only lasted a couple of hours and we soon left to go to Gevgelija, the Vegas of Macedonia. By the time we reached, it was already dark out, so we could immediately go Casino hopping. We went to some of the famous casinos like Apollonia Casino and Casino Flamingo. Luckily for us, the food served at these casinos was great, and we spent our last night revelling in Gevgelija.

We went back to Skopje early next morning, from where we took a flight back home. All in all, the place was unlike any other I have ever been to. Skopje, with its many tourist attractions, multi-cuisines restaurants, local eateries, great hotels, and thriving nightlife seemed well prepared to welcome any tourist from any part of the world. The other cities too had a lot to offer. Their local cuisine, wine, coffee, and music was by no means inferior to that of the more popular European countries'. I would suggest everyone to visit Macedonia at least once, to experience the rich culture and heritage of this nearly forgotten land.

TRANQUIL TRANSYLVANIA

Basav Ray Chaudhuri

Barely does the word “Transylvania” need to leave your lips before people have visions of Dracula and vampires. Nothing could be farther from the truth! To set the record straight, Vlad III (also known as Vlad the Impaler) was not Transylvanian at all! Although extraneous circumstances meant that he was born in the Transylvanian town of Sighisoara, Vlad was actually a Wallachian (a different province of modern-day Romania) and spent his life as their ruler. Bram Stoker, an Irish author who had never set foot in Romania, constructed a completely fictional account of Vlad in his book *Dracula* published in 1897. Bran Castle is touted as Dracula’s Castle, which is totally made up. It just happens to be the castle which best fits Stoker’s description in his book!



“Dracula’s Castle” in Bran, Transylvania

Having put the Dracula story to bed, let us turn to a brief history of Transylvania and what it offers.

As is the case with many European lands, Transylvania has changed hands a few times. The earliest records (2nd century BCE) show the land being occupied by the Dacians (the ancient inhabitants of Romania). Subsequently, the Romans, the Huns, the Gepids and the Bulgarians came and went, until the Hungarians absorbed this area as part of their kingdom at the turn of the millennium. Eventually, the Habsburgs ended up controlling Transylvania through their Hungarian crown and consolidated it as part of the Austro-Hungarian empire right until the end of World War I.

All of these exchanges have resulted in a rather mixed demographic. In Transylvania today, you have Romanians who swear allegiance to the Eastern Orthodox Church living together with Roman Catholic Hungarians and Lutheran Saxons. Not only does this give you a diverse architecture of churches and ancient citadels, but also a delicious mélange of foods and lifestyles. Combine this with the outstandingly beautiful countryside, and you have the recipe for a visit to die for!

The historical capital of this region is Cluj (German: Klausenburg, Hungarian: Kolozsvár). It grew from being a small fortified town and was the birthplace of Matthias I Corvinus - the King of Hungary in the mid-15th century. Its mixed heritage is evident in the architecture and today, it houses a couple of leading universities and is also considered to be the software capital of the country. There are direct flights to Cluj from most European capitals, but also from Dubai and Abu Dhabi - and it could form the first port of call when visiting this fascinating region.



Traditional and modern architecture flirt with each other in Cluj

The charm of Transylvania, though, lies not in its towns but in its villages and countryside. And ideally, you need to drive! Renting cars in Cluj is easy and inexpensive - and this is not a part of the country with high speed traffic (or, indeed, a particularly large volume of traffic!).

Viscri (German: Weisskirch, Hungarian: Fehéregyháza) has achieved fame by being a village sponsored by Prince Charles. There's a well-preserved Saxon fortress dating back to the 13th century and when you visit, you'll be left feeling that time has stood still here. You get the same feeling when you visit the villages of Malancrav (German: Mallenkrag, Hungarian: Almakerek) and Biertan (German: BIRTHALMEN, Hungarian: Berethalom). Of special note is the lock in Biertan's fortified church - it's actually 19 locks in one - an engineering marvel which won 1st prize at the Paris World Expo 1900. If you're travelling in a large group, you can also book the entire Apafi Manor in Malancrav - an 18th century abode of local nobility.



The church at Biertan

There are also some fairly exclusive retreats around Transylvania, if that's your thing. You have the spectacular Raven's Nest, situated on a hill top offering stunning views of the Carpathians. Mikes (pronounced Mick-esh) Palace in Zabola allows you to indulge in wildlife and nature. Of particular interest to Bengalis is that Katalin (Countess Mikes) married Shuvendu Basu Roy Chowdhury of Ulpur! Their sons Grigory and Alexandru now run the estate. Conacul Secuiesc (Hungarian: Szekelyko) is situated bang in front of Piatra (rock) Secuilor offering you an opportunity to climb this rock from the sleepy town of Rimetea. Intriguingly, Rimetea also has a quaint jam shop - their jam with rum and sour cherries attracts buyers from miles away. Beware - the rum content is high!



Conacul Secuiesc (Szekelyko Mansion) overlooking Piatra Secuilor

No write-up is complete without food. A typical meal in Transylvania always starts with a shot of tuica (pronounced 'tsveeka') - a plum liqueur. This could be followed by a ciorba de perisoare (a sour meatball soup), accompanied by smantana (sour cream) and ardei iute (chilli). Note that soups are called ciorba (pronounced chiorba) - a direct influence of Ottoman rule, from where they got the word (similar to shorba in India - same etymology). A hearty meat course (typically pork) follows, mopped up by bread and polenta. And finally, you have potato plum dumplings (gomboti). All of this, of course, is washed down with Transylvanian wine.

A friend of mine - the son of an Italian count - who owns a cosy little restaurant in Bucharest said it best. Transylvania is the new Tuscany. And you'd better believe it! We have lived in Bucharest for 6 years now and Transylvania continues to enchant and draw us back like a magnet. It has something for everybody - history, mountain treks, spectacular scenery, luxury retreats, biking trails, hearty home-cooked meals and an immersion into life from 500 years back. And the best part? Most tourists go to "Dracula's Castle" and leave the rest for us to enjoy!



Tranquil Transylvania - Rimetea

COSSIMBAZAR RAJBARI IN MURSHIDABAD

Abhijit Bandyopadhyay

We were determined to go out during puja holidays like all other years, albeit Covid; but wasn't able to manage a suitable place to stay. If we decide on a place, we wouldn't get a suitable accommodation. Keeping in mind the Covid safety precautions, we decided not to stay in a big hotel with centrally air-conditioned rooms...and not to go to a place where you get a big crowd! Luckily, we got a room in Cossimbazar Roy's Rajbari in Murshidabad.

My wife Nandini and our two sons Abhishek and Ahom wanted to avoid travel by train or air, so we drove down our own car with packed food, tea in flask and enough water. It took us almost six and a half hours to reach there starting early in the morning. We took Durgapur highway and then Katwa road. The road after the highway was moderately rough and full of patches intermittently. The distance covered was 244 kms. While returning back, of course, we took a chance and followed NH 12/34 via Krishnagar, Ranaghat, Naihati, Barasat and believe me, our gamble yielded....it took us only five hours to reach home at Tollygunge. The road was very good. There were plenty of food joints and restaurants on the way but, of course, we decided not to stop over.

The Roy legacy has a large property there and is continuing with a more than 300 year old Durga Pujo. The whole property is excellent and very well maintained by the owner Mr PK Roy and his son Pallab Roy. The palace was erected in 1740 by Dinobondhu Roy in the reign of Alibordi Khan. They were Chattopadhyays family, his father was conferred title Roy by the King. Some of the descendants got titled Raja by British viceroys. There are so many old antiques in the Palace...some of those are simply lying here and there, nor even recognized. We stayed there for all four days of Durga Pujo, participated in the Pujo like their family members, had Anno bhog every day during lunch and danced to the tune of Dhak. All four course meals were typical Bengali dishes and food was sumptuous, thanks to the Chef.



Cossimbazar Roy's Rajbari



Durga Dalan at Rajbari



Arati at Sandhi Pujo - between Maha Ashtomi and Maha Nabomi

We took a round at the city for sightseeing and saw Hazarduari, Imambara, Kath Gola, Katra mosque, Jagat Seth's house, Nasipur Rajbari. Roads inside the city were narrow and all the places were highly crowded. People in the city were enjoying Durga Pujo, with a joyous mood, hopping from one place to another with new dresses...and often without masks!



Hazarduari-The Palace museum exhibits beautiful artefacts, paintings, weapons used by Nawabs of 18th century, like Siraj-Ud-Daula's swords, statues and vintage cars



Katra masjid-Nawab Murshid Quli Khan, the founder of Murshidabad built it in 1723-the largest caravanserai in India. He was buried under the entrance staircase. The most striking feature of the structure are the two large corner towers having loopholes for musketry.



Jagat Seth's house-now a museum, showcases possessions of Jagat Seth like coins of the bygone era, muslin, Banarasi sarees embroidered with gold and silver threads. Jagat Seth, originally known as Mahatab Chand, was into business of banking and money lending in Murshidabad during the time of Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah.



Meher-un-Nisa's Tomb. She was better known as Ghaseti Begum, eldest daughter of Alaverdi Khan, Nawab of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa during 1740-1758.



Nasipur Rajbari of Nasipur Raj Family was built by Raja Kirti Chandra Singha Bahadur in 1865. It was the Court of Raja Debi Singha, the tax collector during the British Raj.



Kath Gola-Venue where the Mir Jafar conspiracy was hatched with the British. It is here that William Watts met the traitor Mir Jafar, just three days after the battle of Plassey in 1757 to discuss the payment promised to him before the historical battle.

The entire trip was very enjoyable, relaxing and satisfactory. We do recommend this Rajbari for a weekend trip. The Rajbari organizes package trip by own small bus for 3 days-2 nights including stay at the Rajbari, all meals and sightseeing of the historical places at Murshidabad.

REEF 'n' RAINFOREST

Srayan Gangopadhyay



Our Easter holiday this year was filled with wonderful and unique experiences in Cairns in Tropical Northern Queensland. With both the world renowned Great Barrier Reef and the Wet Tropics Rainforests within easy reach, Cairns is a hotspot for wildlife.

On our first day there, we had a quick breakfast, and then headed off to the Reef Fleet Terminal, where we were to board Osprey V, a catamaran, to sail to the outer reefs of the famous Great Barrier Reef.

The Great Barrier Reef is a bit like an underwater wall made of coral. The Reef is made up of lots of smaller reefs - Inner Reefs close to the shore, and Outer Reefs, much further away. Also within the reef are sand cays, or islands, such as Green Island, a popular tourist destination near Cairns. Beyond the outer reefs is the Inter Continental Shelf. This is the 'edge' of the Great Barrier Reef. This is much deeper than the Reef, and is home to most of the sharks. Coral reefs themselves are largely shallow because the zooxanthellae or algae that provide the coral with energy to survive require sunlight. Deep down, the sunlight can't reach coral, so corals tend to grow higher up.

The Reef is unique because of its inhabitants. It is home to a vast variety of sea-creatures that wouldn't survive without coral. For example, anemone fish, better known as 'Nemo' clownfish, live amongst sea anemones. The anemone is covered with stinging cells that would instantly kill most small fish. The anemone fish covers itself in saliva, which protects it from the stinging cells. In this way, the fish is protected from predators. Without the anemone, the anemone fish would be hunted down by larger fish or sharks.

The outer reefs that we visited involved a 2 hour boat ride, and on very choppy waters too! I felt a little bit seasick on the way. For a long time, all I could see around me was the deep blue sea. As we approached and backed up onto the reef, I noticed a clear change in the water colour. Instead of the same dark blue as the rest of the sea, it changed to a light turquoise, then a little bit of brown.

Our first stop was the Saxon Reef. The crew of the Osprey V lowered the back deck of the vessel into the water so that people could just slide straight in. I felt too sick to snorkel, so I stayed on the boat and watched people snorkel and dive. When my parents came back to the boat, they told me of the fluorescent colours, weird and wacky fish, people waving their hands over giant clams to make them close and lots more. I tried to imagine it but I just couldn't.

A little bit later, some of the crew brought some prawns to the back deck and threw them into the water. Within moments, shoals of brightly coloured fish swam right up close to the boat and started eating the torn-up prawns. Along with the fish came a barracuda shark. It was a small shark, grey in colour and very close to the boat! It just didn't look like it belonged amongst the smaller colourful fish!

Hastings Reef, our next stop, was shallower than Saxon, so the crew of Osprey V could start operating their glass-bottomed boat. Our guide, Phil, told us that due to the recent cyclone Yasi, their old semi-submersible had been torn apart. He said that the crew found their glass-bottomed boat washed up on a beach, but in perfect condition.

Apart from television and books, this was the first time I had seen coral. It really was stunning. According to Phil, advertisements and pictures are often 'touched up', so I was surprised to find that bright reds, oranges and yellows were rare. Although looking at coral for real wasn't as colourful, it was much more wonderful! There were so many different varieties of fish, sea-cucumbers, jellyfish, giant clams, nudibranchs, and of course, the coral itself! It took my breath away just looking through the glass. It's like a new world that can't be seen from above (well, it can be seen from space...!). The Great Barrier Reef was an absolutely wonderful experience. No wonder it's a world heritage listed site...

Luckily, to make the return journey more enjoyable for everyone, wine, juice and cheese and crackers were served while Lucky Phil played happy tunes as the boat sailed west towards Marlin Wharf Marina in Cairns. I was happy to put my feet on solid ground after that!

The next morning, refreshed after a well-deserved sleep, we were picked up from our hotel in Cairns by Trek North Tours for a day tour of the Daintree Rainforest and surrounding areas.

Our driver and guide was Mario. He first drove us down the Captain Cook Highway towards Port Douglas in the 4x4 minibus. Port Douglas is a small, tropical town which is popular with the rich and famous. This is the only place in Australia which boasts a six-star hotel! There were palm trees everywhere! There was a marina and shopping arcade, where we had a small walk-around. At the marina, there were loads of catamarans owned by tourism companies that went to the Reef. Quicksilver, a large reef tourism company, is based there.

After a short break there, we all piled back into the minibus to continue to Mossman Gorge. I was starting to feel really hot as we travelled further and further into the tropics! Mario showed us a mountain, above which there was a man-shaped rock, held sacred by the Aboriginal people who live there. They believe that if the rock ever breaks, bad spirits and chaos would come to the land.

Mossman gorge was bursting with wildlife! At one look-out point, we even saw a brush turkey strutting around! There were many colourful butterflies flying above us and fish swimming in the creek. We all looked around expectantly, just hoping to see some cassowaries amongst the trees.

After following some of the boardwalk through the forests, we crossed a suspension bridge over a raging creek. It felt rather strange being on a wobbling bridge directly above fast-flowing waters! After seeing all the wildlife that we could see in the limited time we had, we headed onwards to the Daintree River Cruise Centre.

Although it is known for being a crocodile spotting cruise, we saw much more than just that! During the hour long cruise, we managed to see a 3 metre long female and a month old crocodile floating on a log, a python, frogs, lizards, exotic birds and beautiful butterflies fluttering by.

The guide told us a story of feral pigs being introduced to mangrove swamps, and him actually seeing an estuarine crocodile eating a feral pig. He also told us not to hang fingers, arms or cameras over the side of the boat, as crocs have been known to be able to jump out of the water by half their body length. I could imagine the size of the crocodiles on the Daintree River because I had already seen a five-meter long one in Sydney Aquarium. We also saw a strange tree with spherical fruits that were broken up into geometric shaped fragments when they fell into the river. These pieces only came together to form a sphere again when reassembled in a very specific manner, just like a natural 3D puzzle!

We then drove to an Entomological Museum to look at a vast collection of rare species of beetles and butterflies. I had no idea there were so many different kinds of insects! There were stick insects, butterflies, spiders and beetles; the entire collection having been put together by one man. Amazingly, that same man made a prize-winning mask made fully out of insects and butterflies. It had Ulysses butterflies on the head, gold beetles around the edge and different insects carefully placed to form the face. On the grass outside the museum, Mario showed us a 'Cassowary Plum'. It is a large, purple fruit with an almost indestructible flesh. The strangest thing of all is that it relies on a large, flightless bird, the Cassowary, to germinate. The bird swallows the fruit and its digestion system breaks up the hard flesh. The seeds then get spread around the forest floor... or wherever the Cassowary's toilet happens to be!!!

Outside the museum, there was a butterfly enclosure. The Ulysses, a beautiful blue and green giant species of butterfly was most common, but many other different species fluttered around the net enclosure. Sadly, butterflies only live for 1 week. At one end, there was a clutter of dying and dead butterflies. I called it the dying hole!!!

Down at the bottom of a field leading away from the museum, was a quiet, peaceful creek full of tiny little fish. Above it was a picnic spot, where our group enjoyed freshly cooked, wild barramundi and salads. Once everyone had finished, we grabbed some fish food and ran down to the creek. At first, none of the fish were interested, but when I made ripples in the water with my hand, some fish edged closer. Soon, we saw snake-like eels, Barramundi and tiny tadpole sized fish shooting up to take the food.

After that, we headed to our penultimate stop, Cape Tribulation. Mario told us that Cape Tribulation is the furthest north the road goes on the East Coast of Australia. It's just dirt tracks from there up to Cape York.

Tribulation means trouble. The trouble that gave this place its name was Captain Cook's ship hitting the coral of the Great Barrier Reef. The coral made a hole in the wood, so Captain Cook was forced to land here and start mending his vessel. Cook used a very clever method called fothering. This is where the hole is bandaged by a sail, and then pulled tight to stop water seeping into the ship. It was risky, but amazingly, it stayed in place until Cook sailed to a place where he could make proper repairs to the Endeavour.

When we got to Cape Trib, we took a leisurely stroll down a beach. At the entrance to the beach, we spotted two very odd signs: Crocodiles inhabit this area - attack may cause injury or death, and Marine Stingers may be present in this area during the summer months. That was really reassuring! It's no wonder that you don't find people bathing or playing near the water.

There is also a creature called the Cone Shell or Geography Cone. It looks like an ordinary and very pretty shell... but it's dangerous!!! It contains toxic venom, and injects it into people who mistake them for harmless seashells!!! Luckily, we didn't run into any of these. However, we spotted several, small holes dotting the sand in pretty patterns that looked quite like Aboriginal art! Surrounding the holes were small pieces of sand. We discovered they had been made by minute crabs digging to make a home. Quite harmless, really... for once!

Apparently, the further north you go, the closer the reef is from the coast. When I looked towards the sea, I could clearly see the same change in water colour as I had the day before - it looked amazing! On three sides of the beach, there were loads of mangrove trees. I thought it looked a little bit like a maze in a theme park! It seemed to go on forever!

Just as we turned back south to Cairns, we did one final boardwalk, the MARDJJA boardwalk. It went over lots of mangrove swamps, where we saw some Fiddler Crabs scuttling from side to side. The walk also took us to where two creeks, Noah Creek and Oliver Creek met. Looking down from the bridge we spotted an Archer Fish and plenty of small Barramundi.

We also saw an example of the strangulation effect, where parasitic creepers curl round a tree, then eventually strangle it until it dies. It leaves only the creepers, so it looks a bit like a hollow tree with lots of big holes. It was fascinating!

Sadly, it was soon time to head southward back to Cairns, and then fly home to Sydney. Luckily, we got one last glimpse of the Reef as the Jetstar A320 turned southwards to Sydney Domestic Terminal. I had had a wonderful time, seeing more nature than ever before in just two days! Both the Reef and the Rainforest had been unforgettable experiences.

Srayan Gangopadhyay is currently a third year student of Physics in the Imperial College, London. He was ten years old when he wrote this article. He is the grandson Subhrendu Gangopadhyay.

MEMORABLE IRAN

Prabir Dasgupta

Iran, formerly known as Persia, is a close neighbor which deeply influenced India over the centuries. From the 16th to the 19th century, Farsi or Persian, was the lingua franca of India—similar to what English is today. Even Hindu kings communicated with each other in Farsi and its influence on the growth of Urdu and Hindustani is significant. Persia left its mark also on our architecture, dress, food, music and social etiquette. Scholars aptly describe this period as India's 'Persianate Age'.

To get a flavor of this history two of my travelling friends, and I, decided to visit Iran in 2017. They were Prosenjit Dasgupta, my batch mate from Presidency College, veteran traveler, and author and Monojit Dasgupta, Bengal Club member, another intrepid traveler. Our team of six—including my wife Ratna, sister-in-law Rita and friend Supta, left for Iran on 3rd October on a 10 day trip meticulously planned by Prosenjit. Our tour began at Tehran (4th) with visits to Golestan Palace, quite incredible and National Museum, exhibiting a stunning panorama of Iran covering over three millennium. Both were extremely educative and provided an excellent introduction to Iran.



Golestan Palace

Iran is twice the size of France with a population of 85 million. Teheran, the capital, is a modern city of 9 million with elegant buildings, chic shops, fancy restaurants, handsome people and women in head scarves, called 'chador.' Women constitute a significant presence in Iran and outnumber men (60%) in universities! People are uniformly courteous and helpful.

Until mid- 7th century Persia was a Zoroastrian Empire following a monotheistic faith founded by Zarathustra. Around 660 CE, the Muslim Arabs conquered Persia which threatened its culture and language. With time the Persians accepted Islam and the Arabic script. In the 10th century Ferdowsi composed 'Shah Nama' a ballad in Persian extolling the heroics of Persian kings, which resurrected a national pride and renaissance of Persian language and culture eg. celebrating 'Nav Roz'. It also saw acceptance of Shia Islam by Persia.

Our main Iran tour started on 4th evening when we flew into Shiraz, a city close to the Persian Gulf that was famous for its wines. We stayed in a quaint hotel, built traditionally with a central courtyard and garden. High on our agenda was the Nasir-ul-Mulk mosque, also known as the 'Pink Mosque' built in the 19th century. This beautiful mosque with its stained glass designs, intricate blue tiles and 'five concaved' architecture is considered a national heritage.

We also visited the tomb of Hafiz, a 14th century Sufi mystic poet who greatly influenced Rabindranath Tagore. During his state visit to Iran in 1932, Tagore visited Hafiz's tomb and said that Hafiz was known to him since childhood, as his father Debendranath, well versed in Farsi and admirer of Hafiz used to recite Hafiz to him as a child.

Our itinerary from Shiraz involved a 1500 km drive in a deluxe tourist coach with planned stops at Yazd, Isfahan, Kashan, Qom and finally Teheran. Most of Iran is at an altitude of about 1000 metres with cities well connected by excellent highways mainly built through arid, desert landscape. Our driver-cum-guide, Mohammad who met us at Shiraz, spoke English and was very helpful.

On the way to Yazd, we visited Persepolis once grand capital of the Achaemenid Empire, founded by Cyrus and built by Darius the Great in magnificent style in 6th century BCE. In 332 BCE Alexander conquered Persia and razed Persepolis - a major blot in his career. Even today a visitor is awestruck by the enormous ruins of Persepolis with its wall friezes depicting gifts being offered to Darius by his vassal kings.



Persepolis

Our next stop was Yazd, an extremely interesting city with well-preserved clay and baked mud structures many centuries old. Ancient travellers like Marco Polo visited the city, known for its wind catchers mounted on houses, tall minarets, silk textiles, carpets and an ancient water supply system from nearby mountains, called qanats. The front doors of old houses had separate knockers for men and women! While walking down the narrow lanes we came across a Jewish temple where a prayer service was being conducted. Yazd also has an active Zoroastrian population with centuries old Tower of Silence and Fire Temple. Though officially an Islamic Republic, Iran now recognizes monotheistic faiths such as Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism; there is even a Gurudwara in Tehran!



Yazd Hotel



Fire Temple Yazd

Our destination next was Isfahan, Iran's most beautiful city with wide boulevards, gardens and palaces that Shah Abbas built in the 16th century. The Naqsh-e-Jahan, a vast rectangular square with gardens, fountains, artistic shops, with the exotic blue-tiled Loftollah and Shah mosques, were breath taking. A brief discussion on philosophy and theology with a cleric under a tree was a bonus!



Naqsh- Jehan Isfahan

We had a glimpse of Tepe Sialk at Kashan, an archaeological site dating back to 6000 BCE before driving to Qom, the Vatican of the Shia faith, with impressive mosques, theological seminaries, clerics and jammed with pilgrims!



Fraternal Tea Break, Kahsan

The last day (11th) was spent visiting the Iran Jewellery Museum, at Iran Central Bank, exhibiting a dazzling collection of Persian state jewels from over the centuries. Probably the greatest such collection in the world!

We returned to Kolkata (12th) completing a tour beyond expectation!

We had some initial misgivings about Iran. They were unfounded. Iran is a major oil and gas producer with a middle level GDP per capita and high literacy. Bazaars, shops and restaurants were crowded. Women were prominent everywhere. Iranian winners of Nobel Prize and Fields Medal are both women! Religion was practiced quietly with no public calls for prayer and we unfailingly received warm welcome into mosques and Fire Temple.

Iran has a lot of history, culture & World Heritage Sites, excellent roads and airlines network connecting the country, great food and lots to see, admire, enjoy with friendly, hospitable people in a safe environment. Plan a trip to Iran - soon!

FOLLOWING SIR ERNEST SHACKLETON'S FOOTSTEPS

Viveck Crishna



Antarctica, the Seventh Continent

Early winter conditions went against Ernest Shackleton in January 1915, when his ship, *The Endurance*, lying trapped in thick sea ice, slowly drifted west in the Weddell Sea for eleven months before it sank on 21 November 2015. He managed to lead his 28 team members to safety and in the process re-wrote the book on inspired leadership. They group endured bitter weather, freezing cold, hunger, physical and mental illness before Shackleton was able to bring them all back alive in August 2016. The epic journey took place in the middle of the First World War, at a time when telecommunications at the bottom of the globe were virtually non-existent.

Following Shackleton 100 years later, we sailed for a day and a half from the southernmost port in Argentina, Ushuaia, first to the Falklands, dropping anchor off two of the outer islands, Westport and Saunders, trekking overland to see the nesting sites of the Black browed Albatross and several different Penguin species, among other wildlife, at close range.



Black-browed Albatross nesting pair in the Falklands

After 24 hours in the capital, Port Stanley, we sailed for three days to South Georgia which at 54 degrees South lies inside the region of convergence which separates cold Antarctica waters from the warmer waters to the north.

Approaching the island we saw the first of many icebergs that constantly break away from Antarctic glaciers and then drift in the circumpolar current around the ice continent until they melt. They presented a mesmerising sight in size and beauty.

South Georgia is a large crescent shaped, rocky island covered in ice, which was the epicentre of the industrial style slaughter of whales a hundred years ago; in a period of 30 years from 1904 to 1935 more than 3 million whales were butchered for oil from their blubber. The rusting remains of the whaling stations still stand as mute testimony to that brutal period.

The island rises abruptly from the sea floor with Mt Paget reaching the dizzying height of 9682 feet above sea level, and is a haven for wildlife both on land in the sea in incredible numbers. Here too we went on several expeditions on foot to see the bird and seal rookeries first hand which coexist in the thousands



King Penguin rookery -the brown fluffy birds are the chicks

Some of us also climbed over the spine of the island from west to east as Shackleton had done, only he did it in winter when it was covered in snow and ice and we arrived in the summer when it was largely free of ice, leaving us to negotiate acres of scree and glacial moraine. Climate change and global warming fuelling the retreat of the islands glaciers, was apparent everywhere.

After three nights we sailed further south and anchored off Elephant Island, situated at 61 degrees south, where the crew of the Endurance were stranded for 6 months. A bleak, jagged piece of black rock, snow and ice, the only level area where they were camped sits exposed, barely above sea level, it was difficult to imagine the privations the men must have faced staying alive for so long, confident only that Shackleton would return at any cost to pick them up.



Greetings from floating sea ice, Prince Williams Sound, Antarctica

We went on to make three landings on the 7th continent at different points and once actually walked on sea ice in Prince Williams Sound, which left me with a tingly feeling, knowing full well that there was a serious drop to the bottom of the icy Weddell Sea beneath my boots, if the floating ice suddenly disintegrated! There were numerous sightings of whales and several species of Antarctic seals and penguins at all the points where we disembarked.

We sailed further south to get off the boat at different spots along the Antarctic Peninsula, including Deception Island on a grey gloomy day, where the shore was still an ominous black from the relatively recent volcanic eruptions in 1967 and 1969. My elder brother Vijay opted to go in for a 'Polar Plunge' there, which entailed stripping down to his underpants before striding into the dark waters in a stiff, cold wind! The water temperature ranged from lukewarm near the shore, because of volcanic activity underground, and then abruptly dropped to close to 0 degrees, 10 metres further out.

Finally after three weeks afloat, having made 23 outings off the ship, we sailed back to Ushuaia through the notorious Drake's Passage which squeezes through the relatively narrow gap between the Antarctic Peninsula and South America, where the combination of wild wind and water generates some of the roughest seas in the planet throughout the year. Fortunately, I have reasonably good sea legs, and the weather held its peace, so we were able to catch our flights back home on time.



Rock Hopper Penguin, the rock stars of Antarctica

TAIWAN TRYST

Dickoo Nowroji

Ilha Formosa said the Portuguese sailors in 1544 when first passing Taiwan on their way to Japan. This meant Beautiful Island. And so it was when I visited in 2016 courtesy my friend Roma, she the modern day hippie making my absorption of the culture much easier. I arrived just a magnificent typhoon was scheduled to, and believe me you haven't seen one if you've never been there. Palm trees bending, wind lashing the windows with Roma planning a friend's vegan wedding the next day, open air. I said no way was I going out in a gara in that storm. She said wait and see.



The next day was divinely clear. Food laid out, handsome groom a pop singer of Taipei his bride a nutritionist married in true style. After that I could believe anything was possible. Next venture, going around the city and to the Chiang Kai Shek Museum. When CKS knew the chips were down in China he escaped to Taiwan, but not before loading several elephants with rare artworks and bringing them to Taiwan by boat, creating a maze in the mountains and storing them there lest they meet with the fate of the Bamiyan Buddhas. What a selection. The piece de resistance is the Jade Cabbage, the Mona Lisa as it were. Signages everywhere saying speak in whispers. Chinese are as garrulous as us! If you leave the museum for a snack, your hand is stamped so that you may re-enter. The most precious gift to buy amongst many is the gorgeous wall calendar which depicts twelve portraits of the Year it happens to be according to the Chinese Zodiac.



The culture in Taiwan is the best of the East and the West. The major religion is Buddhism and Taoism although there is no state religion. Its major language is Mandarin Chinese. It is also a strongly scientifically bent country, having great science universities. Taiwan currently has a Vice President who is an epidemiologist, which greatly helped the country in coping with the Coronavirus epidemic. It has a forward-looking woman Prime Minister bringing a highly respected level of governance to the country.

The people are gentle and caring and honest. They go out of their way to help foreigners and I was the recipient of their kindness. The attitude towards elders is also very respectful. I remember youngsters leaving their parents at a park where they play a chess-like game together during the day. After work they collect them and take them home. The food in Taiwan is noodle based. I met a chef who took me out to a rare mountain retreat-a tea village- and the cuisine was exotic. Now a tea village it was once a gold mine, with locals forced into mining.



One weekend we travelled up North by a river to a beach town resort. Everybody was out relaxing, a plethora of poodles are the favourite dogs. All basketed with hair shorn stylishly, they are trotted out with care and hygiene.

One day we see an advertisement of the famous Argentinian pianist Murray Perahia playing at the Chiang Kai Shek Hall in Taiwan. We manage to get some expensive tickets and are treated to the most glorious concert. On walks this short man to a concert grand piano in this largest of large halls. He plays a Brahms Fantasia, Mozart and then after the interval rips through Beethoven's Hammerklavier. No encore and off he goes. We were breathless. Roma tried telling the organizers that the President of the Calcutta School of Music would like to meet him. Surprisingly it cut no ice.

The Chiang Kai Shek Memorial Hall is dedicated to the generalissimo, his life and achievements. The War Museum contains much memorabilia, including his fancy car, reminding me of Netaji's getaway. Last day in Taiwan and Roma insisting we go to a spa. We land up unexpectedly in a nude Ladies Only, but what a relief for sore knees. An experience worth having, and then off to the airport for my journey back. An unusual place I shall never forget.

EVER TRIED A TARANTULA?

Rajdeep Das

Think of Cambodia and Angkor Wat is the first thing that comes to our mind. And why not? It's the world's largest Hindu temple complex. Thousands of tourists from all over the world flock here to see this architectural masterpiece. My experience of Cambodia, however, started with something much scarier.



On the way to Spider Market

We visited Cambodia in the Puja Vacations in 2019. After spending a few days in Phnom Penh, the capital, we drove to Siem Reap. On the way, we stopped at a town called Skuon, 75 kilometres north of Phnom Penh. I was wondering why we had stopped at a dusty village in the middle of nowhere when my mother said, "Do you know why we stopped here? There's a big market here which sells fried spiders - the Skuon Spider Market." I was wondering whether she was joking when I saw the shops on the street side. Nothing could prepare me for what I saw there.



To eat or not to eat?

Imagine a regular bazaar in Kolkata selling fruits and vegetables. Then replace the fruits and vegetables with fried spiders. That's precisely what we saw there. Piles of big, hairy, juicy, fried tarantulas dripping with soya sauce and garnished with chillies and lemongrass. And it didn't stop at spiders. There were mounds of scorpions, cockroaches, grasshoppers, crickets, dragonflies and every other insect you can name. And the occasional roast duck in between them all.



A tarantula on my mother's palm just before it gets fried and put on my father's plate

Our guide told us that the whole concept of eating spiders started during the rule of the Khmer Rouge, an authoritarian regime that ruled Cambodia for around forty years. When people were driven into the jungles during the political turmoil, they started hunting for spiders and scorpions due to a lack of food. The habit remained, even after the regime's collapse. After finishing his story, our guide munched on a juicy tarantula and walked away, smiling.



Little Songha with a tarantula on his head

I thought I had seen enough when suddenly an old lady came with a small boy. My eyes were glued to the boy's head, however - not because of his hairstyle, but because of the fat spider sitting on top of his head. My mother told her to take it off, else the boy would be stung, but she just laughed and said that its fangs were removed, so there was nothing to fear. She offered to let us hold it. As usual, my father was the first to take it, followed by my mother. And then they insisted that I hold it too. I find arachnids slightly disgusting, but I still closed my eyes and held it. It felt funny - fat, soft and hairy, like a ball of wool with legs. I made sure to wash my hands in the washroom at once.

I didn't eat any spiders, of course, but the place itself was a wonder to me. The experience has remained etched in my memory. Who knows, I might even try a spider or two if I ever revisit Cambodia!



My aunt with Spidey

Rajdeep Das is in Class XI, DPS Newtown, Kolkata and is the son of our member Shibu Das

A PILGRIMAGE TO THE SHRINE OF JULIAN OF NORWICH

Gilchrist A McLaren

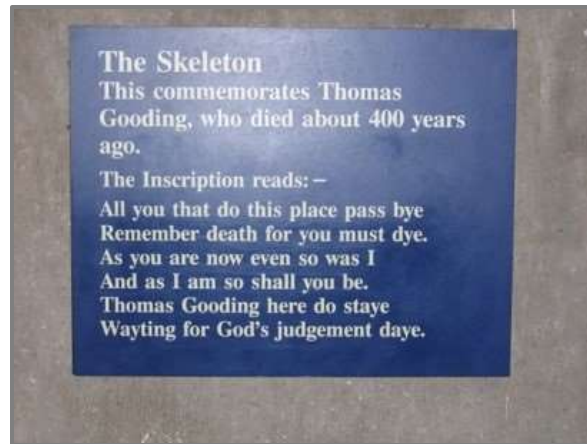
During our visit to England one summer, Barbara and I made a pilgrimage to the shrine of Julian of Norwich. An ancient city, Norwich is about 185 km northeast of London. It was prominent and thriving, when London was but a small village. In the city, apart from the magnificent Norwich Cathedral, there are lots of Churches and lots of pubs. It is said that there is a church for every week of the year, and a pub for every day of the year. So, there is always redemption available for "sins" of the previous week.

Incidentally, Barbara and I did imbibe some 'spiritual' nourishment and a delicious supper at an ancient pub called 'Adam and Eve,' named after a tale as old as time. It was founded by Benedictine monks in 1249, when it was used by the workmen building the cathedral nearby. During our supper the bar maid thrilled us with ghost stories, particularly of Lord Sheffield, the resident ghost who was hacked to death on August 01, 1549 in the infamous Kitt's Rebellion. She told us of several other ghosts who haunt the premises from nearby Monk's cemetery. We decided not to seek an appointment with Lord Sheffield or his friends, and hurriedly left well before dark!



Outside an Ancient Pub 1249

Anyway, we had dreamt of this pilgrimage, and having settled ourselves in a B & B, we ventured out to find the shrine. To our great disappointment nobody seemed to know anything about her. And we had thought that she would be well known, being one of the more famous of that city, and revered all over the world. Needless to say, that the other famous son of the soil, Lord Nelson is adulated by all of England - at Norwich they were even selling chocolates wrapped in portraits of Lord Nelson. Barbara's maiden name was Nelson, so she quickly bought chocolates for all her numerous relatives. But of Julian of Norwich, nobody had a clue.



Plaque in the Norwich Cathedral

Eventually, an elderly taxi driver of the many that we enquired of gave us rough directions, and offered to take us there. We arrived at the small church, tucked away on a side road. The heavy wooden door on the chapel was closed, and appeared to be locked. But when we gave it a gentle push it creaked open, and we went inside. It was dimly lit with a few candles burning on the altar, but there was a sense of holiness about the place. Two young women were kneeling in the front pew saying their prayers in deep devotion. We also sat in silence, for silence is the first language of God, to absorb the overwhelming presence of the Divine.



Gilli at St. Julian's Church

Julian was born in 1342, same year as Chaucer, though I doubt they knew of each other. There is a side room to the chapel, which was her cell, where Julian, once she became an anchorite, lived out her life in prayer. She was called an anchorite, and was sealed into her cell, called an anchor hold, by the then Bishop Dispenser, according to the traditions and customs of that time.

This is the prayer on the wall of the sanctuary:

*Most Holy Lord
The ground of our beseeching
Who through your servant
Julian
Revealed the wonder of your love
Grant that as we are
Created in your nature
And restored by your grace
Our wills may be made one with yours
That we may come to see you
Face to face
And gaze on you forever
Through Jesus Christ
Your Son our Lord
Who lives and reigns with you and the
Holy Spirit
One God forever and ever
Amen.*



Julian's statue at the entrance to the Cathedral

She wrote but one work, *A Book of Showings*, yet through this one work, with its subsequent revisions, she stands out as a brilliant writer, scholar, theologian, and spiritual guide. Please bear in mind that this was the end of the 14th century, when women could not read or write. She probably came from a wealthy aristocratic family, and therefore had the benefit of higher education. She is cited as the first English women of letters, and the first theologian to write originally in English.

Thomas Merton, (1915 -1968) Trappist monk, mystic and prolific author wrote, *“There is no doubt that Lady Julian is the greatest English mystics. Not only that, but she is one of the greatest English theologians in the ancient sense of the word.”*

Here is an excerpt from her ‘A Book of Showings’:

“I saw full clearly that one God made us. He loved us, which love was never slacked, nor ever shall be. And in his love our life is everlasting.”

I find that Rabindranath Tagore (1861 - 1941), and he wrote almost 500 years later, echoing a similar theme about a God who loves us. He wrote poignantly: *‘While God waits for His temple to be built of love, men bring stones.’*

Julian’s fourteenth century world was as marked by aggression, insecurity and change as is ours today. Her most famous words, born of intense personal suffering, are as needed and as true now as when she wrote them. She said:

“All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well”

AFRICAN SAFARI

Chaitali Choudhury

It was the first week of June, we were in Nairobi and were ready to go out for a long weekend in the famous African safaris of Serengeti, Ngorongoro and Lake Manyara. The team comprised of our family of four and two of my husband's friends, who were staying in Nairobi.

Drive to Serengeti though a long one, was quite thrilling. First, we crossed the international borders of the state of Kenya and reached a town called Arusha in the Tanzanian side and changed the vehicle. We boarded a vehicle, which is suitable for jungle safari. Our first destination was Ngorongoro Crater, and then we went to Serengeti and lastly Lake Manyara. On our way Ngorongoro to Serengeti, we stopped at a place called Oledupai. There is small museum in Oledupai where Louis and Mary Leakey did research work on the origin of mankind for many years and found the evidence of earliest existence of mankind in the nearby gorge.

Then we learnt to our surprise that the forest called Masai Mara in the Kenyan side is an extension of the game park called Serengeti in Tanzania. We were impressed by simply assuming the size and length of the forest and thereby our expectations of watching larger games during the drives also increased. However, we were not disappointed as we drove deep inside. Though the trails were narrow we managed to watch a bunch of lion cubs munching on a kill and guarded by their mothers while the Lion king lazed in the sun.



After a while we spotted a cheetah cautiously advancing towards a swarm of deer munching on the sweet, green grasses in the open field unaware of the imminent danger. Our driver stopped the car engine and we too followed the hunter noiselessly. And then it happened! The swarm fled as soon as the cheetah broke into a run, only the hapless one was targeted and was soon brought down. That was a sight, very rare. On our way back to the lodge we watched a herd of Elephants, very majestic, yet very disciplined, moving slowly but steadily towards a water hole.



Morning came in the forest shining through the thickets and chasing us away from our morning slumbers. We were up in no time and were racing for our morning game drive. Everything seemed to be at peace and tranquility seemed to prevail.

Very soon we encountered long-necked giraffes busy munching on the leaves off a thorny plant. By virtue of their incredibly long legs and longer necks they could reach almost the top! It was a sight worth taking snaps.



We were rolling very slowly when suddenly the car stopped and we almost banged our heads against the seats. Then we realized that a snake was crawling away slowly. Thereafter, we met with a sight of which we have heard of stories but never set our eyes on—a pack of zebras grazing in the open field (Africa is the only place where zebras reside).



Saying goes, that if one is very lucky one comes across a pride of lions. So we were expecting something to happen and were not very disappointed for in no time we spotted three hyenas dragging on the leg of a deer which was the killed by carnivore. We deduced that there must be a kind of big animal ahead of us. The driver asked us to keep quiet and he also switched off the engine. The car rolled on noiselessly. Very soon we gazed at a pride of lions and lionesses to our awe. The car stopped and we looked hard at something rarely seen. It was a mixture of fright, delight and awe. Some were lying on the ground, cubs scurrying hither dither but lion the jungle king was sitting in the middle enjoying the morning sun and the loving attention showered by the lionesses.

After a while again our car slowed down and we were amused to see a baby elephant crossing the jungle road accompanied by a huge tasker. The latter was scary but they went their way nonchalantly. Then we headed for the lodge.



The afternoon drive was meant to be very significant as immediately after sunset, darkness engulfs the region and the big animals may become very active. So we took a short rest after lunch and headed for the forest again.

It was so peaceful there in the forest. A light breeze was blowing and an eerie silence prevailed. Very soon, while going through the tall grasses two Leopards sprang out in the open. The sight fascinated us for they were totally camouflaged by the grasses.

Then we came upon a medium sized water-body totally infested by Hippopotamuses. The sight was unnerving as we have never seen so many of them together. Then we saw flocks of Masai cows grazing in the open with Masai men and boys guarding them with a single stick in their hands. When asked, the driver informed that the wild animals are scared of the Masais, which explained how they stay in their little villages in the heart of the forest. Having taken all such rare sights etched in our memories and captured in the cameras, we headed for the forest lodge as darkness began descending upon the open forest.



The evenings in the lodge were quite entertaining as the Masai men and women came in groups and danced in the hotel lobby with drum beats. The boarders also danced with them and it was a lovely and thrilling sight to watch; for in the heart of the dense forest of Africa we were being entertained by the original inhabitants of Africa. The experience was something unique and out of the world. Even after we returned to Nairobi, the safari experience remained in our memory like a dream we will never forget.

WALKING ON WATER - THE CHADAR TREK IN LADAKH

Viveck Crishna

As someone who has wanderlust coursing through his veins, the urge to go up into the mountains has been a primary attraction.

In the heart of winter, heavy snow closes access to the Zaskar valley in Ladakh. Over the ages the only way Zanskari villagers could travel to Leh was by walking there on the frozen Zaskar river. Originally a one way journey of 14 days from Chilling to Padum, now because the Border Roads Organisation is in the process of building an all-weather road into Zaskar, the ice quality and thickness on the river has deteriorated significantly, and the total distance that can be traversed is truncated, extending only upto Nyerak village and the round trip can be completed in 6 days. 'Chadar' refers to the blanket of white over the entire landscape of the journey.

On the 22nd of January 2016 I flew into Leh. The flight was uneventful as the weather was clear. We were treated to the white snow carpeted panorama of the Himalayas below us and the Hindu Kush to the left extending into the distance before turning into the browns of Tibet and Asia. As the flight began to descend into Leh the brown increased and the snows seemed to be restricted to the peaks on either side of the valley.



The Great Himalayas from the air

Delhi in the early morning was cold but not freezing, around 10 degrees Celsius, while Leh at 3500 metres, experiencing a temporary warm spell, the thermometer hovered around zero degrees. The airstrip was largely free of snow when we landed around 10am in bright clear sunshine, and there were only patches of dirty, melting snow on the ground in the shadows cast by buildings and hillocks in the town.

The next two days were spent in short walks around Leh to get our legs and lungs used to the thin air. Then last evening the weather changed and it began to snow steadily.

It was pitch black when we left Leh by road at 5 am, before sunrise. It was still snowing and the temperature was now around minus 20 degrees an hour later when we turned off the highway to enter the Zaskar river valley. As the road climbed the surface quality deteriorated and we were soon on a rough, un-metalled section still under construction. On the left there was a sharp drop down to the river far below and on the right the mountain sides rose vertically. After an hour and a half of bumping along slowly, a fresh rock fall damaged the sump, and we had to get out and walk for three or four kilometres before descending to the riverbed at Tilat Sumdo. Our baggage was transferred to wooden sledges at the jump off site by our Zanskari porters, as we ate a hurried breakfast, then pulled on our gumboots and committed ourselves to learning how to walk without slipping and falling on the uneven surface of the ice.



It was a surreal experience walking on the river as it meandered its way down from its source, winding along the path it had eroded through the earth's crust that had been thrust up by the collision of the subcontinent into the land mass of Asia, 70 million years earlier. Each bend and turn brought different colours and textures into view as the light changed when the sun broke through the clouds.



The primordial beauty of Zaskar river valley

Occasionally there were frozen waterfalls emanating from caves high above the river that seemed to have become a part of the mountain side. The river itself was sometimes thoroughly frozen over and at other times there were sections of open water and only a narrow section remained to walk on, and we had to take care not to slip and slide into the cold waters rushing past us our boots.

At night we camped in tents on sandbanks. The first night the porters gathered drift wood and we had a roaring fire around which we ate dinner. The second night the campsite was gloomy, shrouded over by overhanging crags, and the temperatures plunged, registering between minus 25 to 30 degrees, with a freezing wind blowing down the river's icy surface adding wind chill to the mix. On the mountain side opposite our camp, three of our porters climbed 100 feet up what looked like a vertical rock face without ropes, to retrieve driftwood they had stored from earlier trips, an amazing demonstration of mountaineering skills on the job learned from childhood.

The third day was dark and forbidding, and with snow falling incessantly, visibility was affected. Walking became decidedly treacherous as thinner ice sections were masked by the accumulating snow on their surface. And temperatures dropped further to minus 39 degrees, so much so that if you stopped walking to take a breather, your toes began to lose feeling!



Snow begins to blanket both sides of the Zanskar

That coldest night was spent indoors in a wooden hut at Nyerak. Fortunately, on the three day walk back to Tilat Sumdo, weather conditions gradually improved and walking became easier, even though temperatures remained low at minus 29 degrees.



The magnificent frozen waterfall at Nyeruk

Leaving Leh a week later at 11am, the temperature on a bright sunny morning at the airport was minus 17 degrees, positively warm, compared to what we had endured on the Zaskar.

At Delhi at 12.30 pm it was 12 degrees, and on landing in Bangalore at 5 pm, the thermometer registered a toasty 20 degrees.

A difference of 8000 feet in elevation and 41 degrees change in temperature in one day.

Climate change in action, I thought to myself.

Wonders never cease to amaze, and adventures never end.

TSAPARANG OF THE LOST GUGE KINGDOM

Dr Manosi Lahiri

A couple of decades ago, along with three friends, I travelled to Tsaparang in Tibet. Far from any tourist circuit, hidden away to the north of the Himalayas, it lies on the southern bank of the Sulej River. There was only one approach by road through the town of Zada (Tsamda) at the Sulej gorge.

Forgotten by the world today, the Tsaparang ruins and caves are the remnants of the Lost Guge Kingdom and a reminder of the civilization that flourished for a few centuries on the strategic route between Ladakh and eastern Tibet. Its heydays were between the 10th and 16th century. Except for a short while, it was a vassal of the Kingdom of Ladakh, which was for long the strongest of the western Tibet monarchies. To keep the powerful kings of Leh happy, Guge sent large tributes of gold from its mines, turquoise, mountain coral, yaks, horses, sheep and weapons.

Tsaparang, the capital of Guge, was a citadel perched on a high hillock, which still boasts chapels, prisons, private and public residences and a hilltop palace, all carved into its soft rocks. It is separated by a short distance of about 35 kilometers from Toling, the ancient monastery by the river. Tsaparang's fame was not for its military might but for the initiatives in the revival of Buddhist religion, art and architecture. It was the easy access route from the west that led to its temples, palaces and monasteries being plundered and destroyed several times over in history.



Mural in Toling Monastery

Tsaparang and Toling are places of interest to the student of Buddhist art and paintings. In Toling, we saw the exquisite original forty-two wooden pillars in the White Court. The roof, lintels and walls were replete with motifs picked from Buddhist texts and Indian myths. Ornaments worn by the dancers, birds, fish, lions and flowers embellished wooden frames. The floral and animal motifs and the human forms had strong resemblance to Kashmiri paintings. Murals depicted voluptuous dancing apsaras, strong muscular men carrying heavy weights, people celebrating in gardens, a burial site with corpses and funeral pyres, hermits in prayer, and musicians. On one wall were images from the life of Sakyamuni Buddha and another had an almost perfect mural of Atisha.



Detail and intricacy were the hallmark of these fine paintings

The road ended at Tsaparang. Steep steps led up. The contrast between the hot whitish world of the outside and the cool darkness inside the caves was striking. Within the sombre empty enclosures, the warm colours of the wall paintings suddenly became visible in the flashlight.



Tsaparang: A deserted and forgotten city

The paintings on the walls of the chapels were in fairly good condition though statues had been maliciously destroyed. The looters were more interested in the jewels and precious stones, which were stored in the core of the idols. The vibrant murals, made of natural dyes from minerals and vegetables, remain a valuable part of the cultural heritage of Tibet.



Enormous protector deities on either side of the White Chapel in Tsaparang



Stunning figure of deity in the White Chapel showing distinct Indian influence

About halfway up the hill, is a tunnel that transports the unsuspecting to a magical world. Beyond the tunnel lay the hidden freshwater springs, secret hiding places and the path that connected to the king's protected Winter Palace at the pinnacle of the seemingly impregnable fortress. Part of the palace was dug into the mountain to protect it from chilly winter winds.

It is doubtful if the Guge Kingdom could ever have been very large, either in terms of numbers or extent, chiefly because it was in one of the driest places on earth. Jesuit priests from Goa had in vain made several attempts to establish there. They have left behind records that speak of poverty of the land where agriculture was limited to the riverbanks, high prices of imported food and palace intrigues that finally ruined the kingdom.

Travelling to Tsaparang is not easy even today. If you should want to read about our journey, I have written about it in my book *Here Be Yaks*, available on Amazon.

STARRY STARRY NIGHTS IN ZANSKAR HIMALAYAS

Chandana Ghosh

Travelogue: Travel to Pensi La (Kargil District, Ladakh) by road from Leh - September, 2021.

I was rooted to the ledge, like an icicle; frozen. The gusty winds whistled past my ears, threatening to dislodge me. I could barely hear the voice calling out to me, to move aside. One of my hands tightly gripped the tripod, while the other clutched at the camera that was ready to fly off the mount, disregarding how securely I had placed it. We were at an elevation of about 15000 feet, facing the Drang -Drung glacier of the Zanskar Range, in Ladakh. We had ventured on a photography trek to capture the magic of the night sky in the land of mountains and glaciers.

The golden light of the setting sun played with the shadows of the passing clouds, creating patterns across the landscape that was bathed in white ice. The Doda Peak at 21490 feet mocked us, scattering away the clouds around it. The temperature was dropping fast, and with the wind chill factor, it felt quite close to subzero. It was my first photography trek, and I soon realized that clicking the coveted “night shot” against the backdrop of Drang Drung, would not be a piece of cake for me by any means. I was finally shaken out of my stupor by the voices calling out, from behind me. I was in their picture frame and this was preventing my fellow photographers from getting a clear shot.



Sunset at Drang Drung Glacier

Drang- Drung, a river of ice, wound its way through the Himalayan Mountain ranges creating a picture-perfect landscape. It is one of the longest glaciers in Ladakh, next to Siachen Glacier, measuring 23km. The Kargil - Zanskar Road that traces a path alongside this glacier is a delight for photographers and passersby, as it offers magnificent viewing opportunities of the glacier. We had camped quite close to the glacier, near the Pensi La mountain pass. Pensi La is also known as the Gateway to Zanskar, and is surrounded by pristine blue lakes that are bejeweled with the colors of the mountain reflections. On a clear day, the mountains stand out proud and bold against the blue skies, painted in a variety of colors of lichens and wild flowers- red, yellow, blue and violet, just to name a few.



Mountain Reflections at Pensi La



Lakes and Lichens at Pensi La

Having captured the sunset, we raced back to our camps to have a quick dinner and then double back for our “night shots”. It was a new moon night (Amavasya). This was not by chance, the entire trip had been carefully planned to ensure that we were at that spot at that time, to ensure the best sighting of the celestial bodies- the stars, the planets, the nebulas. And that was not all. That day the path of the Milky Way was above the Drang Drung glacier, for about an hour, starting 8.30pm. The three conditions to see the Milky Way with the naked eyes, are a clear, cloudless sky; minimal light pollution and of course a new moon night. All these three conditions exist in Zanskar, and that’s why it offers one of the best views of the Milky Way.

As we drove up to the same vantage point, facing the glacier, I was surprised to find how dark it was. I could barely glimpse the person standing next to me. Across from our ledge, the ragged silhouette of the mountain range could be seen. As I looked up, I witnessed a canopy of stars - some brighter than the others, elbowing at each other, jostling for their space in the sky. And then from above the top of mountains, an arm of spiral shaped, gaseous body reached upwards- sparkling and hazily illuminating the night-sky as they created an arch. It was hard to believe I was watching the Galaxy that includes 100 to 400 billion stars and maybe an equal number of planets. The Galaxy with an estimated visible diameter of 100000 to 200000 light years. The Galaxy which has been at the center of discoveries by Galileo and Hubble. And that which includes the solar system. Before the moment could sink in- the night clouds started marching in.



Milky Way above Drang Drung

I did my best to capture the view in front of me. Aperture at f/2.8, shutter speed at 25 sec, ISO 6500. I remembered the settings instructions. But then it was about focusing to infinity. And that did me in. While I fumbled in the dark, with my head torch, to get the settings to perfection, the clouds conquered the mountain peak, capturing parts of the Milky Way as well.

After returning back to our camp, I looked up to the sky to catch a shooting star. Yes, my wish had been granted. Indeed, on a Starry, starry night, I had seen the swirling clouds in violet haze, and that will continue to remain etched in my mind.



Milky Way and shooting star from a Camp site in Zanskar

MEMORIES OF A DREAMLAND

Mala Mukerjee

I was day- dreaming of travel. Will things ever improve enough? How long will this embargo last? What if I scream, “To hell with caution”, and start packing my bags? I remembered my Guru’s stirring call:

“Go out I must, I must
Should Lakshmi frown on me
Alakshmi will surely
Bless my wanderlust”...

Memories came wafting in with the aroma of wonderful places and people, of travel on boats on the blue seas with a thousand sails unfurled.

This is when the letter from the editors inviting me to share experiences in exotic lands interrupted my reverie. I remembered an occasion when I had boarded a cruise ship from Piraeus and spent a leisurely week floating on the turquoise waters of the Aegean Sea.

The ship had taken us to several beautiful places on the Cyclades and the Dodecanese group of islands. The romance of exotic islands such as Mykonos, Patmos, Rhodes, Crete and Santorini flooded my senses with nostalgia.

What about writing about that voyage? Would a cruise on the Aegean Sea be considered sufficiently exotic? I decided to take a chance anyway. But there was one problem. The Editors had clearly said that no more than 5 photographs would be allowed. But I have so many memories of so many places. How will I overcome the 5 picture barrier? As a photographer that I happen to be, my heart sank. Will only five pictures do justice to the splendour of what I had seen?

Obviously not. So I was forced to think laterally. Finally, much to my regret, I decided to confine this piece to only one island on that trip and leave out the other places. It was not an easy choice, but it had to be made.

The island I finally chose for this piece is the one that had enchanted me the most - Santorini. Named after Saint Irene seven hundred years ago, its earlier name was Kalliste which, appropriately, means ‘the most beautiful one’. I was told its antiquity goes back to the Minoan days back to circa 3500 BC.

Formed of enormous deposits of volcanic ash from a major eruption, Santorini is now one of the most treasured leisure destinations in the Aegean Sea.

Surrounded by deep blue waters, it is located on the top of a volcanic hill dotted with quaint houses, inns, restaurants, shops and churches. Most of these places are painted in friendly colours, mainly blue, yellow and white with a tinge of reddish brown thrown in occasionally. I was told that the Greeks consider these colours ecologically friendly.



Supertime

Santorini was to be our last stop before returning to Athens. The cruise Company had arranged a bus for us that would take us to Fira, capital of Santorini, located at the top of the island on a volcanic rock.



View from the sea

Once in Fira, we would be free to roam about the place and do whatever we chose to. However, there was one condition. We had to return to the bus after two hours so that the cruise ship could leave on time for Piraeus.

And so we were dropped at the bus stand at the city centre. Some of my fellow passengers formed small groups and ventured out to explore the place. I know from experience that my tendency to get engrossed in taking pictures often delays others and causes friction. And so I chose to be on my own.

I was aware of Santorini's reputation as a picturesque place, but nothing had prepared me for the splendours that would invade my eyes and senses as I started probing the place. The hours passed by far too rapidly for me. I walked and walked, getting lost among the paved lanes and labyrinthine contours of the place. Adjacent to Fira is Imerovigli, a village fondly referred to as "Balcony to the Aegean", known for its quaint lanes going down to the sea.



Balcony to the Aegean

Its beautiful sights kept distracting me continually as the deep blue sea played hide and seek with me at unexpected nooks and corners.



Steps

Words obviously cannot capture what I want to convey. I only hope that the accompanying pictures will give you a flavour of what I had seen. Memories of Santorini continue to haunt me. I would love to go there again, not for a whistle stop tour like the one I had then, but on a more leisured visit where I will have time to stand and stare and, not the least, take more photographs!



Late Afternoon

By the way, the story ended in a bit of drama. I had lost all sense of time in my quest for capturing what I had seen on my camera. When I came back to the city centre huffing and puffing, I could not find our bus. Luckily, a kind fellow passenger found me at a spot that was only about 100 metres from where our bus had been parked. I could see how relieved the tour operators were when I arrived. My mumbled apologies were drowned in celebratory noises.

I can now confide to you that I had forgotten to write down the registration number of our bus. Believe me, all the buses there, painted in colours the Greeks call eco-friendly, looked remarkably alike.

A DREAM TRAVEL DESTINATION

Anju Das



Here is a short recollection of my memorable holidays to Czechoslovakia, a dream travel destination for those who love the mountains. I had the great fortune of visiting this wonderful country twice. Once in 1978 before its division when Prague was the capital, and then again in 2012 after two new countries had been formed peacefully - now known as the Czech Republic and Slovakia. My husband had spent some years there in the late sixties after completing his span at IIT Kharagpur, for advanced education. He was always keen to share his love for this country with his family - so there we were totally mesmerized by the beauty of this spectacular country.

The then capital of Czechoslovakia - Prague, known for its history and cultural heritage dating back to the 5th century, where the medieval heart of Europe can be felt in its cobblestone streets. The famous well-preserved castles, Baroque and Gothic cathedrals and a medieval astronomical clock in the old town square, which gives an animated hourly show, where tourists flock over to watch. Nightlife spots, dreamy bridges, lively arts scene, tram rides through the city. There was even a hot spring and specially mentioned here are the cut-glass art pieces. A visit to the factory where this beautiful technique of production of unique art pieces and jewellery is a must buy for the visitor. I still have a collection of these pieces in my home.

Czech food is amazing for those who have a gastronomical craving for good food. And the brew? The country is famous for its lively and crowded 'beer garden' where one can drink to one's heart's content. Pretty waitresses appear even before your mug empties, to refill, marking your table the number of mugs consumed. You wonder at the dexterity with which they carry around ten full mugs in both hands while doing the rounds of the table.

Our second visit was in September 2012, a good time to visit because the weather is mild. The country generally has a chilly climate. This time we had an extensive tour. After attending the InnoTrans (International Trade Fair for Transport Technology) exhibition in Berlin by road, through Poland on to Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia.

The awe inspiring full range of the Carpathian Mountain is visible on the right, which also created a natural border between the two countries and trees laden with ripe seasonal fruits - apples and pears.

Slovakia has an incredibly rich history, spectacular sights, mountain caves, medieval castles, folk architecture and of course ski resorts. Special mention are the Tatra mountains, where skiing is the most popular and favourite sport. There are a number of different slopes that cater to the different abilities from beginners to the most seasoned advanced ski-er.

Majority of the inhabitants are Slovaks, who are predominantly Roman Catholics - friendly people, proud of their hometown. Maybe in no comparison to the majestic extent of the Alps in Europe - the Tatra Mountains are equally attractive in its own splendour. Definitely worth a visit, especially tourists looking for something new and different and easier on the pocket. Slovakia is a safe tourist spot. Then there is the River Danube which flows directly through the city. Remember the melodious waltz of the 'Blue Danube'?

The most memorable experience of a lifetime was a visit to the 'Vysoke Tatry' (as it is known). A town at the foot of the Slovak part of High Tatras in Slovakia which includes most of the well-known resorts in that region.

Tatrasanka Lomnica - a well-known skiing destination offering slopes for skiers of all categories. There are many more hidden gems.

Though we dared not brave the ski-ing, we did ride up the cable car for a panoramic view from the top. On a different level we did brave a scary ride in an open bench type, with only a safety rod in front, hanging on desperately for dear life. This was not the gondola type cable car!

Silently gliding over and above the thick foliage of the pine trees, the stillness and eerie silence of the atmosphere hits you and you dare not look down. Then at last be quietly thankful when you reach your designated point.

In Slovakia we met up with a business colleague who accommodated us in his luxury hotel 'Tatra' at a much-discounted rate. So we spent the next couple of days relaxing, refreshing, visiting places, generally wandering around with his delightful family, and of course having business talks once in a while.

Our holiday continued as we opted for the day train ride on to Zurich, witnessing the undulating beautiful countryside and plentiful castles along the way. But that is another recollection of memories. Many summers have long since passed, but the memories of beautiful Czechoslovakia are as fresh as yesterday.

This article is a loving tribute to my beloved husband with whom I had spent 48 years together, who groomed and showed me the world.

A JOURNEY WITHOUT A DESTINATION

Shubham Mukherjee

There are bucket lists, there are wonders of the world and now there are statues! Not too long ago, I experienced the joys of cutting through that noise and venturing into uncharted territory on a trip - not by design but by lack of choice. But it is also something which has stayed with the entire family despite many memorable trips across the world.

It was initially planned as a summer holiday to Kerala booked through a popular travel website. When the details arrived just a couple of days before traveling it just included hotel stays and no air tickets. Now, with just 2 days to go, air tickets for Mumbai to Kochi were already on fire. We promptly cancelled it. But the challenge was to ensure that we had an alternative lined up as the kids were really looking forward to a holiday. By the next day, we had narrowed our search down to a road trip to Dandeli, a wildlife reserve in Karnataka, right on the border with Maharashtra.

Cruising down the expressway

The route, which takes you through the Mumbai-Pune Expressway, is a breeze. It's probably one of the best combinations of great roads and delightful hill views anywhere in the country. It comes alive during the monsoons with a lush green cover and innumerable small waterfalls. But even during the summer it's a delight to drive here.

The Pajero quickly ate up the miles but we soon realized that we would reach Dandeli much later at night if we were to cover it the same day. We therefore made an unscheduled pit stop at Kolhapur, 375 kms from Mumbai. Kolhapur has a few temples of consequence but we chose to save it for another trip.

Swaying on the hammock

We reached Dandeli by lunch the next day and found that the resort was outside the forest and not particularly exciting. The Dandeli Wildlife Reserve itself is a bird watchers paradise with around 200 species including the Great Hornbill. The Black Panther too can be spotted on rare occasions. On a Jungle Safari, later that afternoon, we realized that though nature was at its abundant best monkeys were the only wildlife visible.



Cottage on stilts inside the Dandeli Wildlife Reserve

However, we did spot a riverside resort and a most fascinating tree house. Unfortunately, both were sold out. But we were lucky to find an equally alluring state tourism-run property with cottages on stilts amidst green lawns and a few inviting hammocks. We moved in there the next day and my younger son promptly occupied one of the hammocks, as did we all.

Chirping with the birds

The fact that it was a great choice was apparent when we were woken up at dawn by what seemed to be a loud but incredibly soothing music. It turned out to be the chirping of thousands of birds in the dense forest behind us. We tried to mimic but our whistles were of no match.

Floating with crocodiles

The Western Ghats is a global biodiversity hotspot and is home to the most amazing wildlife in the country. Later that afternoon, we floated on the adjoining Kali River. Yes, floated! That's because the villagers had actually built round floating objects from jungle weeds, to serve as boats for tourists. The river water itself was pitch black - partly due to the dense vegetation underwater and depth. Ironically, the river also offers excellent white water rafting facilities.

What's more, it's got crocodiles too. Thankfully we didn't see any while floating! Much later, in a different section of the river, we spotted probably hundreds of them together in their natural habitat. This is the same neighbourhood where a video went viral of a crocodile ambling along the village roads, just 3 months back.



A crocodile in the Kali River at Dandeli

Chasing dolphins in the midday heat

That day we had also picked up this very interesting information about an island resort in the Arabian Sea just off the coast of Karwar, a major naval base. Karwar is about 100 kms from Dandeli and we decided that's where we will spend our next day. It took us about 3 hours on relatively bad roads, followed by a short boat ride. Once again it was nothing like what we had experienced before. Great food, white sandy beaches and rows of casuarina trees, which provided some relief from the burning sun. Tourists have the option of many activities such as beach volleyball, water sports and even Dolphin viewing. We did opt in for all.



Boating for kids at the Island Beach Resort at Karwar



Sunset on the Island Beach Resort at Karwar

Swinging by the beach

Along the way, we had also spotted that Goa was just 75 kms away. So, the next day after breakfast we were off to Goa. We love Goa and its vibe and can go there any number of times. We found a nice place on Vagator beach where we cooled off, had lunch and a siesta in the true Goan tradition. The evening was spent lazing at the Anjuna beach, also home to a wide array of water sports. Then we capped it like any discerning traveller by partying at one of the snazzy North Goa eateries with some great music.

Watching the sun go down

In the same tradition of staying in a new place every night - which became our theme for the trip - we started off for Chiplun the next morning, a small town on the River Vashishthi, about halfway to Mumbai. The 300-km drive from Goa to Chiplun passes through hilly, meandering roads with some picturesque views. A trifle tired, that evening was spent just watching the sun go down on the river.

A journey but not a destination

We were back home the next evening rounding off one of the most memorable holidays ever. In an era where everything is carefully planned, we picked a new destination every day on the fly keeping off the beaten track, but exploring nature in its entirety.

YATRA OF A LIFETIME

Joyjeet Ghosh

The sky shone a brilliant azure overhead, the air crisp and cool. The frozen lake far below in the valley a magnificent sight. My horse insisted on walking along the edge of the road, too close for comfort. A misstep would send us plummeting hundreds of feet down. Yet, I felt a calm I had not felt before. After all, this was where Shiva had explained the secret of immortality to Parvati. Mortal frailties suddenly seemed inconsequential in these surroundings.

The air resonated with chants of “Har Har Mahadev” and “Jai Baba Barfani”. This was why I was here. To soak in the positive energy created by the faith of the millions who had undertaken the same journey through the years. To walk along the path that so many had traversed before me with the single-minded resolve to witness God manifest Himself in our physical world. The terror of the Pulwama attacks still fresh, Amarnath Yatra wasn't a choice everyone endorsed that year. Yet, I felt that pull, that urge that makes one do things beyond reason.

I had taken the easy way out. My flight to Srinagar from Delhi was uneventful. A drive to Sonmarg and an overnight stay later, I had taken the helicopter from Sonmarg to Panchtarani, the ‘base camp’ for Amarnath Yatra. There are three ways to get to Panchtarani. From Sonmarg, Baltal or Chandanwari. Many choose to trek the entire distance. Helicopters are available for those who prefer a less arduous experience. Security was paramount here and Panchtarani is where one needs to submit health reports and permits for the yatra. The ten-minute helicopter ride was thrill and chill combined. Flying between steep mountains on either side and the river below, breathtaking is what the ride was, in all senses of the term.



Pleasant morning at Sonmarg before start of the yatra

Once in Panchtarani, pilgrims have a choice of how to continue till the final shrine, the cave of the ice shivling. Horseback, on Palkis or on foot. In Panchtarani there are scores of locals who pounce on you immediately upon reaching with ponies, palkis, chairs etc. to reach the top. Very poor yet honest and straightforward, these people are mostly Muslims whose only source of income is helping the pilgrims during this small window of a few months during the Amarnath Yatra.



Sindh River in Sonmarg

I decided upon a pony to take me to the top and my point person explained how to adjust my body while negotiating the terrain during the journey. In mid-July, there still was some snow on the ground. The horses are experts, but it does take a while for a novice like me to get comfortable on horseback.



Beginning of the Yatra

Amidst chants of Har Har Mahadev, the climb started. As I climbed, I saw people young and old, able and otherwise, sadhus, women, and children taking the arduous journey just on faith. These are people who have been walking for 14 days just for a glimpse of Amarnath.

An hour or so later, I reached a clearing peppered with tents, shops, langars - in short, a milieu of sight and sounds. Here, you can rest a while, keep your phones, footwear and valuables before trekking the next kilometer to the final destination - the cave where the ice shivling resides. Otherwise, you can get on a carriage made of chair.

This last stretch of the path has ice on the road and if not careful, it is easy to slip. This stretch is probably the most difficult because of the incline. The sun reflects on the snow causing a glare which is difficult to negotiate if you don't have sunglasses on.



No words to describe this - breathtaking landscape

The mood at the entrance of the cave is solemn. The energy is at a crescendo. There are army jawans every 10 metres carrying automatic rifles. You are frisk searched one last time before you enter the cave.

The ice linga is well protected by a steel cage and rests on a bed of ice. The sight is indeed beautiful. Devout pilgrims are seen crying, praying and seeking blessings. It is here that you realise that the true meaning of 'darshan' is not merely to see but to imbibe what one sees. This is why the word 'darshan' also translates to "philosophy". Photography is not allowed in the cave. The experience remains in the mind and the heart; so vivid that one can recall every detail with their eyes closed.

It is usually not possible to spend a lot of time in the cave, but I did manage to spend a while, soaking in the energy of the place and praying for the wellbeing of my immediate family and the world.

The story goes that when Shiva had explained the secret of immortality to Parvati, there were a couple of pigeon eggs in the cave. These pigeons when hatched, became immortal as they had learned the secret too! When one comes out of the cave after the darshan, one does indeed get to see two pigeons, and you know that your trip is complete.

On the descent, the faces of the pilgrims glowed with contentment. Happiness, joy and peace are the expressions that I could fathom.

I stopped at one of the many langars for a quick bite before getting on the horse. I was quite amazed to learn that the many horsemen, palki bearers and helpers are not entitled to the free food because they are not Hindus. One would have thought that Hinduism was far more tolerant and generous than this.

On the way down atop my horse I could get a much better view of the people who were on their way up. We were getting down around midday and the maximum traffic was ascending at that time.

Once I reached Panchtarani, I was on the helicopter again, on my way back to Sonmarg. As it is with all pilgrimages, the universe works in mysterious ways. Days after I came back, the Yatra was cancelled mid-way. Kashmir plunged into month's long lockdown and political upheaval. Ever since, there have been no more yatras due to Covid. Would I go back once more? It all depends on whether I am called again.



THE WALLED CITY OF TOLEDO

Dr Paramita Mukherjee Mullick

Our wanderlust has been stopped because of the Covid situation. So, writing about my travels is a great solace.

In May 2018 we went to Toledo, a city in Central Spain. It is 70 km away from Madrid. We booked a tour bus from Madrid and left around 9 in the morning. Leaving behind the Spanish parliament on the right and Sabatini gardens to the left, we took the F30, a tunneled road and then took the National Highway 42.



The ancient walled city of Toledo came into view. These walls are the most fortified complex systems of the Middle Ages in Europe. We saw ruins dating back to 3000 years. This city on hills has seen several different cultures sweep over it. Toledo was ruled by the Iberians and then the Romans took over. The Visigoths followed and then the Arabs came. After an influx of Jews, Alphonso, a Christian king conquered Toledo in 1085 AD. History has seen Toledo to be the capital of Spain twice. It had a population of hundred thousand when it was the capital for the second time. In 1561 King Philip shifted the capital from Toledo to Madrid.

Toledo is a UNESCO world heritage site and designated so in 1986 for its rich culture and extensive monuments and historical buildings and the harmonizing of Christians, Muslims and the Jews.

We went up the hills. Thankfully now they have escalators. Got down from the escalator and lo and behold! The ancient walled city came into view. We walked through its narrow lanes and came to a square which is locally called by the name of a fast-food chain.

Spanish flags were stretched in front of all houses around the square. Red rectangular banners were hanging from a few houses. Then we walked through the widest road of Toledo but (Ha! Ha!) It wasn't wide at all. Our guide, a red-haired Spanish girl tried her best to give us a feel of Toledo in her broken English.

Jewellery shops and souvenir shops lined the wide road. Then we came to a juncture of five lanes. Although they still call it a juncture of four lanes. The shops were selling religious artefacts of both faiths- Christians and Jews. There was a cathedral which had a clock with one hand. Nobody has fixed the clock as it served the purpose of showing the time of the mass.



We then came to another square. We saw a tiny colourful train, the Toledo Trainvision going around with tourists. The pink Toledo flag was fluttering on top of the City Hall. The beautiful Santa Maria Cathedral was there. It was made in the 13th Century and is of Gothic style. There are three doors, the central is the door of Forgiveness used by Kings and Bishops; the Hell door on the left and the Final Judgement on the right. Like many other cathedrals in Europe this cathedral is asymmetrical.

The bell tower on the left is very tall with no complementary tower on the right. Initially there were thirteen bells in the tower. The seventeen-tonne bell which was the largest broke. Many funny stories circulated like the bell doesn't ring because the people of Madrid had complained about its loud noise, some said it doesn't ring because the glass panes of the surrounding houses broke. Basically, the authorities wanted to deny the breaking of the bell. This square called Plaza de Zocodover was an animal market in olden times.



Again walking down the lanes, we saw different kinds of swords displayed in the shop windows. Toledo was famous for its swords in olden times. It was a mark of distinction to own a Toledo sword. Suddenly I got back my childhood when I saw marzipans or marcepans being sold in bakery shops. These are sweets of almond paste and sugar. According to Toledo history nuns of the convent of San Clemente invented marzipans. After a battle in 1212 there was a terrible famine and a scarcity of wheat to make bread so the nuns made marzipan with almond paste and sugar which had ample supply, for the nourishment of the poor. Some bakery windows had nun dolls enacting this history which melted my romantic heart. My daughter and I loved the marzipans.





The colourful flamenco dance fans lined up in the shop windows was a feast for our eyes. A shop with old models of guns caught my husband's attention. Knives and scissors were also on display.

The church of Sans Salvador is a good example of the different phases and cultures which swept over Toledo. It is at a site of a 9th Century Mosque. Within its walls are Roman and Visigoth constructions. We saw a pillar dating from the early Christian or Visigoth period on which are depicted the scenes of the life of Christ.

At the bend came the Jewish quarters. The two synagogues which remain till date are the Synagogue of El Transition and Synagogue of Santa Maria la Blanca. The first Jewish settlers were exiles from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. Only a small population of Jews remain now. The shops lining the lanes of the Jewish quarters were selling Hanukkahs and Star of David and other religious artefacts of the Jewish faith. In 1368-69 when King Pedro entered Toledo, numerous Jews were killed. Gradually their population dwindled. Thankfully both the Synagogues are well maintained. We visited only the Santa Maria la Blanca Synagogue. The ornate pillars, the stain glass windows and decorative dome was a feast for our eyes.

After an awe-inspiring overwhelming day, we went back to the gates of the fort. On the way back we ate tasty chicken and cheese Empanadillas.

In the way back to Madrid in the bus I was thinking a visit to Spain would be incomplete if we had not seen this ancient walled city of Toledo.