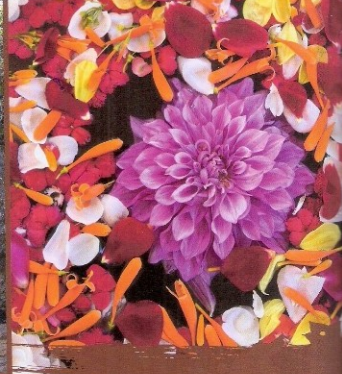




THE EPIC CENTRE

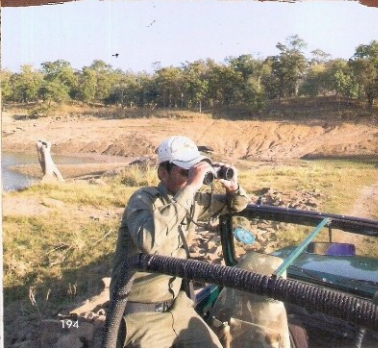
FROM KHAJURAHO'S ART TO BHEDAGHAT'S FALLS, MADHYA PRADESH IS MAGICAL, SAYS SMITHA MENON. PHOTOGRAPHS BY JASPER JAMES

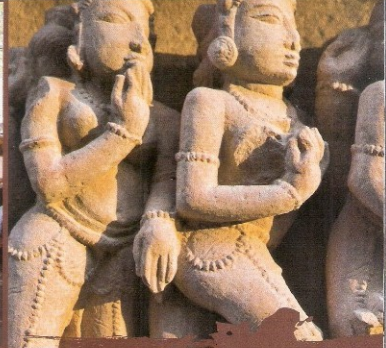


Part of the challenge, and joy, of being a writer is to find exactly the right words to express how you feel. In an industry where powerful stories are increasingly reduced to snappy headlines, I find myself guilty of Internet hyperbole—reaching for the most provocative word to elicit a response. The result? Overly dramatic, unnecessarily emotive clichés. Was that dinner I ate the other day truly magnificent? Did that new video on YouTube actually blow my mind? In hindsight, probably not.

But recently, on a week-long road trip through Madhya Pradesh, I had the chance to understand what these superlatives really meant, and what kind of experiences are truly worthy of them: from

canoeing on the serene Denwa River and watching the sun rise across the water to pondering the evolution of humankind while standing in the remains of the prehistoric caves in Bhimbetka. My journey got me to see the futility of using these exaggerated words to describe a meal or video when there are sights that will actually take your breath away, experiences that will genuinely leave you speechless and, yes, will absolutely blow your mind. I went to the heart of India a slightly jaded travel writer and returned astounded, humbled, astonished and inspired. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but sometimes, a single word conveys what a thousand photographs cannot.





TEMPLE-HOPPING IN KHAJURAO

An elaborate threesome is underway. A woman is suspended in mid-air, her body curved. Next to her, a couple is engaged in cunnilingus. Another woman stands near them, pleasuring herself. I'm at the Lakshmana Temple in Khajuraho, staring at the famous 10th-century carvings on the wall. While my attention remains focused on the art, I can't help but notice the reactions of the other Indian tourists around. Some are giggling, others embarrassed, but most are simply curious.

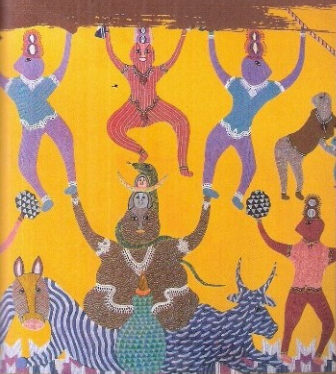
With temples dedicated to Vishnu, Shiva and other gods, as well as a host of other Jain temples, Khajuraho is believed to have been the religious capitol of the Chandela dynasty. The erotic sculptures they built are stunning, both in terms of thought and execution. We all know about the Khajuraho carvings; they are trotted out as an example of India's sexually liberated past in every debate on censorship. But to actually see this incredibly intricate, glorious celebration of the human form is truly special.

We exit the buzzing main temple compound with a multitude of thoughts swirling in our minds, grateful for the sleepy peacefulness of the rest of Khajuraho. We amble along, stopping to take pictures of psychedelic-looking babas and brightly painted doors, and to grab a cup of coffee at **Raja Café** (www.rajacafe.com), one of the town's oldest and hippest spots.

Later, as I watch the sun set over the temple-tops from The Lalit Temple View Khajuraho, I wonder what the Chandelas must have thought of when commissioning these sculptures. I sip my wine, grateful for the richness of our past and the infinite future.

GETTING THERE Fly to Khajuraho with Jet Airways (www.jetairways.com). Stopovers in New Delhi and Varanasi from most major Indian cities.

WHERE TO STAY The Lalit Temple View Khajuraho (www.thelalit.com); doubles from ₹8,500. Stop en route at Ken River Lodge (www.kenriverlodge.com) for lunch and a nature walk. →



The Dhuandhar Falls. Top row from left: Pachmarhi's Bee Falls; flowers at WelcomHeritage Golf View, Pachmarhi; the reception at Reni Pani Jungle Lodge, Satpura; carvings at Khajuraho. Bottom row from left: Golu, a forest guide at Satpura Tiger Reserve; a sloth bear and her cub in the reserve; artwork at the Tribal Museum, Bhopal; Previous pages: the Khajuraho temple complex







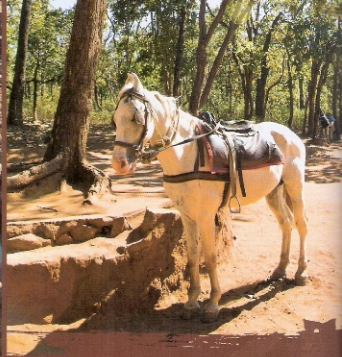
BOATING AT BHEDAGHAT

Awesome is a word I use at least a dozen times a day. But for the first time, in a long time, while rowing past the marble rocks that rise 100ft on either side of me at Bhedaghat, I am actually struck by awe.

One of the few water bodies in the country that flows from east to west, the Narmada forms a natural border between North and South India, cutting across Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat. Having carved a natural path over the years through soft marble rock, the river flows peacefully across the gorge and eventually tumbles into the powerful Dhuandhar Falls, an apt name for the hazy illusion created by the sheer force of the water. Before getting into the boat, I'd had to ride a ropeway, a simplified version of a cable car, from my hotel to the point where the rocks rise. As I clung to the sides of the swaying contraption, below me, the river gushed over rocks and thundered into the falls. The energy was high, yet the effect was calm.

Back in the boat, Rajesh, my guide, points out the faces of Parvati, Shiva and countless other Hindu gods and goddesses within the rock formations, and, almost in the same breath, rattles off the names of famous Bollywood films shot in the area. His is a lilting, entertaining script with crude rhymes, learnt by rote and recited about eight times a day across the 12km stretch of water. Warm yellow sunshine bounces off the white rocks and is reflected in the water, causing iridescent patterns on the smooth marble. Birds chirp and monkeys squeal as they dart across the rocks, coming in close to inspect us. As we float on the calm river, my heartbeat slows to normal after my daredevilry on the ropeway. I look around, the wild, roaring rapids behind me, the peaceful scene ahead, and I am reminded of how truly small I am, how little I've seen, how far I can still go.

GETTING THERE Fly to Jabalpur with SpiceJet (www.spicejet.com) from Mumbai or New Delhi. Bhedaghat is 25km away. →



JATA SHANKAR CAVE IN PACHMARHI

The ground is eerily cool and the air is still. Incense stick smoke rises in a long, thin stream. Going 50 steep steps underground, I enter the Jata Shankar cave in Pachmarhi. Inside a deep ravine, the sacred cave-shrine gets its name from a rock formation that resembles the matted hair of Shiva, and is believed to contain 108 naturally formed Shiva lingams.

As I go deeper into the cave, it gets colder. My head begins to feel heavy and I sense a strange, magnetic force pulling me forwards. My heart pounds and the walls begin to feel like they're closing in on me. Brushing it off as claustrophobia and a lack of oxygen, I quickly pay my respects; seek the blessings of the priest and head out.

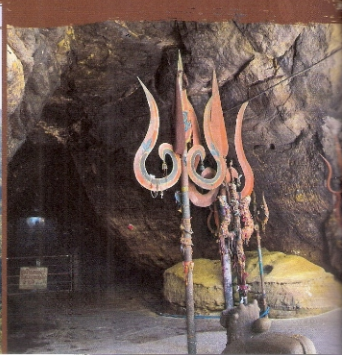
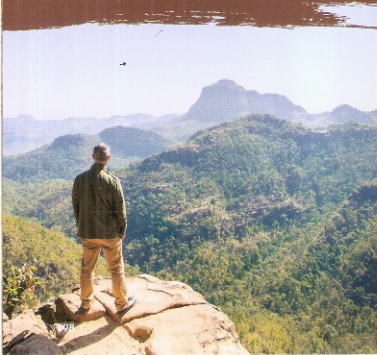
Vijay, my driver, asks if I felt anything at the temple.

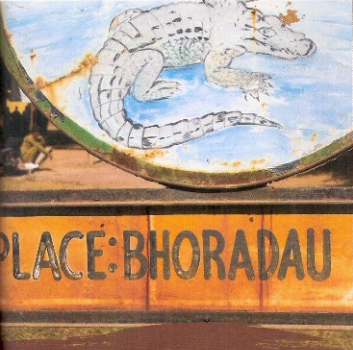
At my surprised confirmation, he nods. "Jata Shankar is known for its powers," he explains. "One shouldn't stay too long down there. You never know what can happen," he trails off mysteriously, as we drive towards the picturesque, urban Pachmarhi I know.

With waterfalls, caves, gardens worthy of Enid Blyton picnics, and the forested ranges of the Satpura National Park, Pachmarhi offers the usual hill-station staples like sunset and picnic points. Head to Handi Khoh, Priyadarshini and Rajendragiri for stunning views of the hills, and the Pandav Caves—believed to have been one of the Pandavs' hideouts—for a dose of ancient local mythology. Back in the present, the WelcomHeritage Golf View, a pretty, colonial-style hotel, is the perfect place for me to recover from my cave escapades. As I soak up the bright sunshine in perfectly manicured lawns and contemplate a pot of tea, the haunting feeling from the temple finally starts to fade into a distant, if not forgettable, dream.

GETTING THERE Fly to Bhopal with Jet Airways (www.jetairways.com) from Mumbai or New Delhi. Pachmarhi is a four-hour drive away.

WHERE TO STAY WelcomHeritage Golf View (www.welcomheritagehotels.in; doubles from ₹7,000)





EXPLORING THE ROCK SHELTERS AT BHIMBETKA

As I walk towards the caves in Bhimbetka, I realise that I have no network on my phone. Fitting, I think, considering I'm going to see some of the world's oldest prehistoric paintings.

Remarkably well preserved because of their natural pigments, the art in Bhimbetka's rock shelters dates back to the Lower Paleolithic period (about 200,000 years ago), but was discovered only in 1957 by Dr Vishnu Wakankar, an archaeologist. The site also provides insights into the early evolution of humans, as a number of rudimentary tools and blades that point to a hunter-gatherer community were unearthed here.

The shelters are easy to navigate—15 are well-preserved and numbered, linked by a concrete path with arrows. The caves vary in size, from narrow and low to double-storeyed, with views of the valley. Walking around, I feel a certain oneness with the environment and respect for the place it holds in history. That, combined with the knowledge that humans took shelter here for thousands of years, makes exploring the caves a deeply humbling experience.

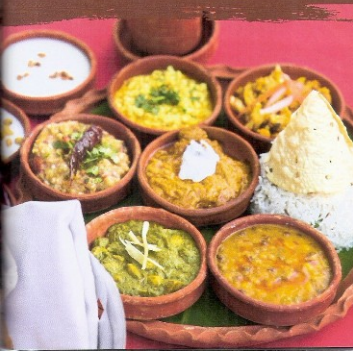


As gaurs, bears, elephants and scenes of community life walk across the rocks before me, I try to imagine the people behind these works of art. Were they celebrated and respected in the community, or just unknown members of the clan? Where did they come from? What was their daily routine like? What happened to their families?

What would they think if they saw us today?

Questions swim around my head as I run my hand along the tiny alcoves and rock beds inside the ancient caves. I want to capture this scene, so I construct a frame (to later filter and post on Instagram), but feel silly taking pictures of a picture from so long ago. To reduce all of this to a single image on social media would be to trivialise the entire experience, I think. Conflicted, I take one photograph anyway, and save it, postponing my internal argument. Standing at the spot that marked the evolution of man, there are bigger mysteries of life to ponder.

GETTING THERE Fly to Bhopal with Jet Airways (www.jetairways.com) from Mumbai or New Delhi. Bhimbetka is about 45km away →



A peacock in Panna National Park. Top row from left: an aerial view of the Ranch Fells near Khajuraho; a horse in Pachmarhi; signage at Panna National Park; the Denwa River in Satpura. Bottom row from left: the view from Handi Khoh in Pachmarhi; inside the Gupt Mahadeo temple; the signature thali at The Lallit Temple View Khajuraho



WILDLIFE SAFARI AND EARLY MORNING CANOE RIDE AT SATPURA NATIONAL PARK

We've been driving for about two hours and save for some birds of prey, elegant blackbucks and crocs in the distance, our wildlife sightings have been fairly underwhelming. Having spotted a tiger seven years ago in Bandhavgarh, I am eager to get up close and personal with India's favourite jungle cat. Unfortunately, the cat in question isn't in the mood. "I can hear some alarm calls, but they're very distant," says Aly Rashid, naturalist and co-proprietor of the Reni Pani Jungle Lodge, my home for the night. "The tiger's probably walking somewhere deep inside the jungle," he adds.

Spanning an area of 524sq km, Satpura National Park is located in the heart of Madhya Pradesh. It is a relatively lesser-known park as compared to Kanha, Pench and Bandhavgarh, and the tiger reserve here is not known for its sightings of the cat. However, most wildlife junkies swear that it embodies the essential safari experience: the breeze, the play of shadow and light, the

kaleidoscope of greens and browns, the sounds of a life that is entirely unlike mine. Aly, too, urges me to just listen. I strain my ears, but apart from the hum of the jeep's engine, I'm completely deaf. "My ears aren't tuned to jungle frequency," I joke, but no one is impressed. "Tough crowd." I mutter under my breath as I make my peace with the thought of not spotting anything that will earn me bragging rights back home.

And then, as if almost on cue, I hear the soft rustle of leaves underfoot. I whip around and a pair of sambar deer walk daintily across the grass. A few metres away, a civet scrambles to take shelter beneath a tree. Shutting my eyes tight to take in the sounds, I pick up on the beat of the wild. I recognise the deep bass of the gaur, the high-octave chirruping of the crickets and the tenor of the lawny-bellied babbler. It's a perfect, seamless jungle symphony. →



Exploring Bhimbetka's caves.
Opposite page: carvings on the
outside of the Lakshmana
Temple, Khajuraho



A reading nook at Reni Pani Jungle Lodge. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: the WelcomHeritage Golf View hotel in Pachmarhi; Aly Rashid of Reni Pani; the lawns at The Lalit Temple View Khajuraho; cave paintings at Bhimbetka



Later that evening, we're on our way back to the lodge when Aly gets word that a leopard had killed a cow. Excited by the prospect of seeing some kill, we head back to the depths of the jungle. We drive around the area for what feels like hours, but finally, we're forced to admit that our bloodlust is not going to be sated. Still, I think, as I stare up at the darkening inky sky punctured by tiny pinpricks of starlight, it's all quite beautiful.

By the time we get back to the lodge, it's cold and I'm exhausted after a long day in the car. Named after locally abundant wild reni berries, a favourite with local sloth bears, Reni Pani is an eco-lodge dedicated to conservation and preservation of its surroundings, visible in the eucalyptus beams and bamboo used to build the lodge. Still shivering, I enter my cottage and am relieved to see that despite the emphasis on environmentally friendly practices, creature comforts don't take a back seat here: there's a hot water bottle tucked in my bed. Gratefully, I sink into my mattress and pillows, looking forward to a deep, well-deserved sleep.

It's 5.30am and we're just setting out on the Denwa River in our canoe. The cold air whips through my hair and stings my face. I curse myself for not wearing a fifth layer. I yawn, raising my hand to cover my mouth, and my fingers turn numb. Aly senses my discomfort, smiles and tells me, again, to just listen.

Dawn is breaking. Pale patterns of pink, purple and blue dance across the water. The morning is silent, save for the dull rhythm of oars hitting water. Above us, a noisy flock of bar-headed geese soars past in a near-perfect V formation. To my right, lapwings, herons and egrets call out to each other, scanning the water for food. I automatically reach for my camera, but something stops me. I realise no photographs or words will match up to what I see.

GETTING THERE Fly to Bhopal with Jet Airways (www.jetairways.com) from Mumbai or New Delhi. Satpura is a four-hour drive away.

WHERE TO STAY Reni Pani Jungle Lodge (www.renipanijunglelodge.com; doubles from ₹18,000). The lodge and Satpura National Park are closed from June to October. 📶

