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## The India You Don't Know

by Sheila Sivanand

I had gone to Sikkim to find absolute peace. But wherever we went, it looked like most of India had got there first. Gangtok, the capital, in summer was crowded with tourists. Heading up to Tsomgo Lake at 3660 metres, we actually encountered a traffic jam of jeeps and cars back to back, spewing exhaust fumes.



"In Ladakh, if you go deep into the interiors with a jeep, pitch a tent and go trekking, you will see scenes like this that take your breath away."

People had gone up to "play" in whatever was left of some very slushy snow. There were stalls taking advantage of the cold to peddle woollens, rent out heavily padded snow suits, sell hot noodles and offer yak rides. People were picnicking on every rock.



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Music blared. So much for the peace of the eastern Himalayas.

It was in 2001 that I'd signed up for Sikkim with The Explorers, a Mumbai adventure tour company. When they drove our trekking group to

Yuksom, 125 kilometres from Gangtok, it was breathtaking. The stars were dazzling, the snows of Kanchendzonga showed through the clouds every morning and though we didn't have running water on our campsite, there were many crystal clear streams to play in. We went on hikes out of Yuksom through bamboo forests festooned with wild orchids. Yuksom had just the one village street and a single hotel.

There were no phone connections, newspapers or television. It was perfect.

I'd got to Yuksom unplanned. But falling off the map is possible with a strategy that my friend Yogi Khullar, a Delhi designer uses. "Every well-known tourist destination has places around it that are off the beaten track," declares Yogi. "Just go off the highway, take a promising bylane and you could be pleasantly surprised." She means that India is full of places of enchantment. You just have to find them. Here are some more suggestions along with the experiences of seasoned travellers who've been there.

### Hanley, Ladakh

Madhu Reddy, a seasoned traveller and amateur photographer from Hyderabad, is in love with Ladakh. "The space, the silence, the winds... there is nothing like it anywhere," she says. Leh, the capital, is squarely on the tourist trail, where you will find your luxury resorts and trendy cafés. "But if you go deep into the interiors with a jeep, pitch a tent and go trekking, you will see vistas that take your breath away," says Madhu. "The colours are so pure and brilliant. An artist could come here. Or a poet. It is truly magnificent."

Madhu recently rode all the way up to Hanley, which is high on a ridge with a 360-degree view of the valleys. There is a monastery there, built in 1624 by Taktsang Repa of the Drukpa lineage, who also founded the better known Hemis monastery in Ladakh. There is also a school for Tibetan children, possibly the most secluded school in the world.



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- The ties that bind
- A love for bubbles
- Something inside me

Nomadic tribes, their ponies and yak herds are among the only other things you may see.

Since Hanley is so close to borders with China and Pakistan, it is closed to foreigners and even Indians need a permit to enter. The world's highest observatory, run by the Indian Institute of Astrophysics, is situated there. To visit Hanley, an eight-hour drive from Leh, you need to be fit, prepared for high (4517 metres) altitude, thin air and very basic accommodation—to stay, you will have to either set up camp or ask to be accommodated in a village house.

If Hanley is difficult to accomplish, just sign up on any organized trek that goes through Ladakh and you will find landscapes which are just as heartstopping. Alchi, the Markha Valley, Yangtang, Tso Moriri... you can combine driving and walking there.

### **Raghurajpur, Orissa**

Puri, with its celebrated Jagannath temple and beautiful coastline, has its fair share of visitors. But around Puri you may find less populated attractions. There is Balighai beach, eight kilometres away, where a casuarina-fringed river flows into the sea.



The mural painters of Raghurajpur still use natural pigments.

Balighai is also a nesting site and research centre for Olive Ridley Turtles. But Piya Bose, a young lawyer and travel writer, highly recommends Raghurajpura, a village that's a 20-minute drive from Puri. It stands serenely on the banks of the Bhargavi, amidst rice fields and groves of palm, betel vines and mango. Art and nature, too, marry well in this artisan village where every family is involved in some form of traditional art or craft. "Pattachitra, the art of palm leaf painting and etching, has been passed down for generations," says Piya, "Artists also paint on paper and cloth with plant and mineral pigments that are entirely natural. The walls of their houses and temples glow with colourful murals."

Raghurajpura has one other claim to fame. This village is the cradle of the sensuous Odissi dance form. In fact, one of its greatest exponents, Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra was born and initiated into their ancient dance tradition here.

### **Jamnagar coast, Gujarat**

Sixty kilometres off the busy city of Jamnagar, you'll discover a marine sanctuary in the virtually untouched beaches of the Gulf of Kutch. Jamnagar hotelier and eco warrior Mustak Mepani and his friends are passionate about preserving this area. "There are 42 islands off this coast.

Just a few are inhabited by local farmers, and fisherfolk," explains Mustak, "Most of these islands are fringed with coral reefs which show above water during the ebb tide. You won't need to dive to observe marine life and corals here because you would be wading in just a couple of feet of water when the tides are low."

Since this is a marine sanctuary and national park, you would need permission from the Forest Department to get here. But it is a miraculous underwater world that you get to explore with sea turtles, octopus, many varieties of seaweed, colourful fish and if you are truly fortunate, marine mammals dolphins and dugong.

In winter, the coast, mangrove forests and creeks around Jamnagar are taken over by thousands of migratory birds, making it a birdwatcher's dream as well. Khijadia Bird Sanctuary here is a wetland where one may see flocks of flamingos, cranes and pelicans arrive for winter.

Jamnagar's islands are not the easiest of destinations



The unspoilt Jamnagar coast is great for observing marine life, like these stingrays basking at low tide.

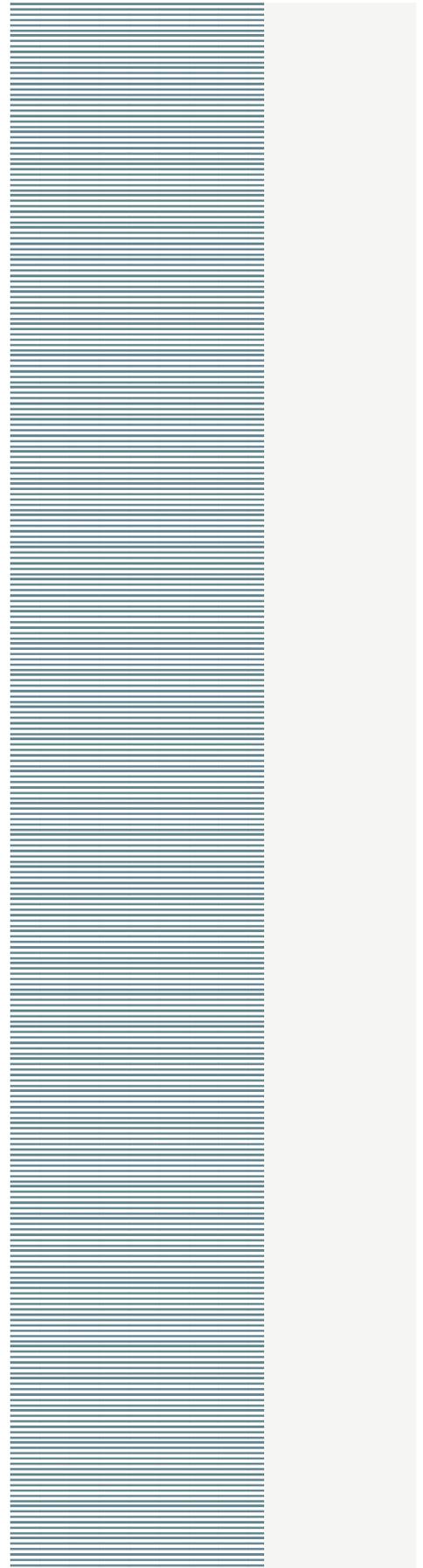
and you have to carry everything with you including drinking water. Since it is a fragile ecosystem, you should strictly follow the trekkers adage: “Take only memories and leave only footprints.” For more information go to the website [jamnagar.org](http://jamnagar.org) maintained by Mustak.

### **Raia—and other interior villages, Goa**

Goa is a cliché for a reason. Tourists flock here because they are guaranteed a good time. Excellent food, free flowing drink, and you could spend days barefoot on a beach, soaking up the easy life that is best described by the Portuguese word *susegade*.

Alysha Aggarwal, a media professional, is assailed by *saudades* (nostalgia) like all Goans when they remember childhood haunts. The village of Raia, close to Margao, where she spent many holidays with her aunt holds special memories. “It is just a typical Goan village, set among rice fields, with quaint little *gaddos* or corner shops that sell everything, and the church of Our Lady of the Snows,” she remembers. “But then to every Goan, his own village is best.” Raia is still unspoilt and strangely beautiful, set as it is between scenic Loutolim and serene Rachol with its famous seminary, on the banks of the Zuari.

Experienced Goa hands like Alysha know that there is plenty of Goa to discover off the beaten track. When in Goa, lose yourself. Take the day off to wander through fields and leafy bylanes in Utorda, sit in the village tavernas of Assagao and chat with the locals, sip *feni* at dusk and wander through the heritage quarters of Margao and Fontainhas where you can almost hear serenades in jasmine scented gardens. Play football with the lads in the school grounds in Aldona. Walk into churches and Saturday markets that you pass around Saligao. Eat *poi* and *sanas* flavoured with



toddy for breakfast. And you will stumble onto a unique slice of Goa.

### **The Andamans**

These islands are a paradox. They are always held up as examples of places that are off the beaten track. But several islands are now squarely on the tourist circuit. Package tours can take you comfortably from point to point and there is even a water sports complex.



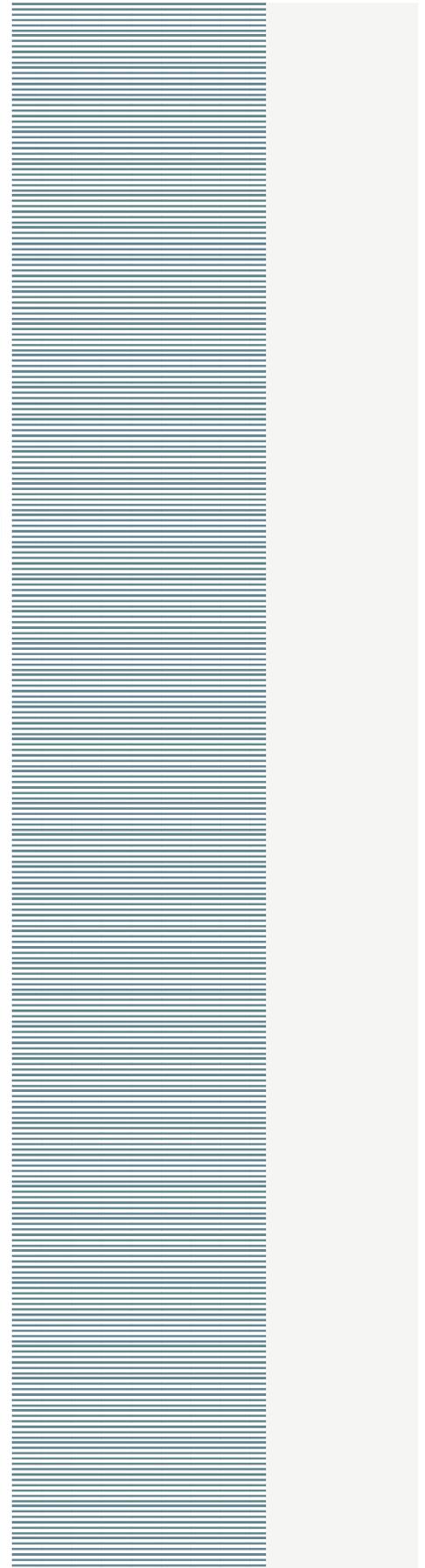
Spearfishing in the Andamans. The beaches are peaceful and still not overrun with people.

The beaches and islands are still not overrun with people, so even if you don't get much further than Corbyn's Cove in Port Blair or the resorts on Havelock Island, you will still have a spellbinding experience. Blogger and social media enthusiast Navin Kurian leads a double life, scuba diving and working on his dive master certificate when he gets half a chance. He spent a few months here, going where few have gone before.

“There are evergreen forests at Saddle Peak, and beaches where wild elephants splash in the surf,” he says, adding a warning: “If you want to literally have an island or beach to yourself, you need to be prepared to sacrifice some conveniences. Neil Islands are the closest to Port Blair and there is some excellent snorkelling possible off the coral reefs there.”

A day trip to the Ross and Smith islands, connected by a sandbar, brings you to a protected and uninhabited retreat, says Madhu Reddy, the itinerant photographer. “The water is as clear as a mirror and you could soak here for hours,” she sighs, “Have you ever seen live shells “walking” on the sand? You can, here.”

### **Shekhawati, Rajasthan**



They rise in the desert like a mirage. Vast echoing mansions where the merchant princes of Marwar used to live. Just a few hours away from the tourist bustle of Jaipur are a cluster of townships, each of which is a treasure trove of havelis, private ancestral homes. There are a few thousand, some in a state of disrepair, quietly crumbling away. Some of them, however, are being carefully restored by their descendents, who now belong to some of India's great industrial empires.

Their walls are covered with intricate frescoes, depicting scenes from mythology, festivals, everyday life. Some even feature western motifs—you'll find Hindu deities in cars or aeroplanes, and cherubs rub shoulders with apsaras. With the highest concentration of frescoes in the world, these painted mansions are unique, but not widely known. The houses themselves are grand, standing over three storeys high with arched doorways and splendid pillared corridors.

Chandraprakash Mittal, himself a Marwari, often returns there from his home in Mumbai. "Some havelis are open to the public, like the Morarka Haveli Museum in Nawalgarh and the Haveli Nadine le Prince in Fatehpur," he says, "And a few, like the Piralal Haveli in Bagar, are heritage hotels. You can always ask the caretaker to show you around if you wish to see one of the others."

Mittal feels that hiring a car to explore the towns, which are clustered together along the route to Bikaner, is the most practical option. "Mandawa has the most celebrated havelis, but it is like a treasure hunt. Go to Jhunjunu, Ramgarh or Churu, and who knows what you may find. You'll even get wholesome Marwari meals at dhabas along the way,"

he advises.

### **Nagaland**

The seven North Eastern states retain an aura of mystery even for travellers from the rest of India. Phejin Konyak, intrepid traveller, teacher, and businesswoman, always tells me to come to her village in the Mon region when I ask about an unusual destination in Nagaland. “Here, anywhere you go will be off the beaten track,” she promises.



Phejin Konyak (right) with her grandfather, a tribal elder, at the Aoling festival.

The Konyak tribals were headhunters, and I’m not talking of the term in the ‘job search’ sense. But those days of inter-tribal warfare are long past. They are Baptist Christians, but on feast days like the spring celebration of Aoling, the elders still wear full tribal regalia, which show off their full body tattoos and boar tusk headdresses.

The big tourist scene is during the annual early-December Hornbill Festival near Kohima which showcases tribal costume, performances and crafts from all over Nagaland. But as Phejin says, the real Nagaland is in the villages, among tea and patchouli plantations, orange groves where you can pick fruit and find clear streams to bathe in. “It is a fact that in this place once ruled by ferocious tribesmen, even women may travel safely and alone,” smiles Phejin, “There is a strong code of honour.”

Besides the tribal route, you could also go to the Dzukou valley, which

bursts into vibrant bloom between June and September—truly a botanist’s dream.

**Niti and Mana,  
Uttarakhand**

Among writer Madhavi Bhatia’s Himalayan escapes are the spectacularly beautiful Niti and Mana Valleys. “These are the last villages you will see before you enter the passes into Tibet. The views are magnificent, with Panchchuli, Nanda Devi and other great peaks towering over you. On a clear day you may even catch a glimpse of Mount Kailash,” she says. Yet these valleys are a stone’s throw away from Joshimath, Badrinath, and the Valley of Flowers.



The views are magnificent, with towering peaks of many great mountains, like Panchchuli (above).

Once you step off the busy pilgrim trail, it’s all densely wooded slopes, green meadows and pastures where semi-nomadic tribes like the Bhotiyas camp in season. For five months, starting in May they graze their flocks, cultivate buckwheat, barley and gather medicinal herbs. In winter they move to lower altitudes. You will find village accommodation, especially at Lata, which has long been a base camp for expeditions to Nanda Devi.

“This has long been a very rich trade route, so you will find Malari and other villages have prospered,” says Madhavi. “It is quite a surprise to find houses here with elaborate carvings and decorations right in the middle of this distant outpost.”

