

Outlook

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HOLIDAY IDEAS

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Uber-luxe boutique resorts, hidden retreats in the wild, quaint homestays with quirky owners and more

IN THE FOREST
TREADING TIGER
TERRITORY IN
TIPESHWAR

COLD COMFORT
MEMORABLE
HOMESTAYS
IN SPITI

ENSHRINED
EXPLORING
BALI'S TIMELESS
TEMPLES

GREEN LIVING
ECO-FRIENDLY
TRAVEL & MORE IN
OUR NEW SECTION



IT'S NOT WHERE — IT'S HOW

IMMERSIVE

UNSEEN

INDIA

INDIA OFFERS A RANGE OF INCREDIBLE

experiences, which also happen to be gentle on the planet, thus proving that travel can be more than just an escape; it can be a means to connect, learn, and contribute to preserving cultural and natural heritage. The true essence of travel lies not just in the destinations but in the connections—with the locals, the environment, and the stories that become a part of your narrative. We hope this list of curated, immersive experiences and the inspiring stories behind them propels you to rediscover India.

HAVE YOU EVER GONE FORAGING IN THE DESERT? OR LEARNT POTTERY WITHOUT A POTTER'S WHEEL? ON YOUR NEXT TRIP, TRY SOMETHING YOU'VE NEVER TRIED BEFORE

Words → **NABIHA TASNIM**

COURTESY: ENCHANTING MAJULI; HABITAT INSTITUTE ACTIVITY CENTRE; QUEST ACADEMY; THE LODGE AT WAH (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT)



Clockwise from top: Local weavers using traditional weaving methods in Majuli; The water pool at the end of the hike with the Habitat Institute Activity Center; A windsurfer at the Quest Academy; Travellers during a tea-tasting tour at Wah Tea Estate

HIKING TO AN ANCIENT LAVA STREAM

Habitat Institute Activity Centre, Andaman & Nicobar Islands

What comes to your mind when you think of the Andamans? Pristine blue waters, powdery golden sand and days spent lazing in the sun, right? And just like every other tourist, I had already done all these. So, when I returned to the islands this time, I was on a mission to explore beyond the usual.

And an apt opportunity arose at the dinner table during my first night there. We were suggested a trek through Havelock Island's secluded, untamed rainforests. The next morning, we headed out to see a side of the islands that we didn't even know existed. During the first half of the hike, we explored the island's unique flora and fauna and how they adapted to the local ecosystem to ensure their survival. And the tiniest detail didn't escape us, thanks to the expertise of award-winning naturalist Anurag Karekar and his team from the Habitat Institute Activity Centre—Hussain, Chahat and Aditya,

who led the hike. Together, they had years of experience studying the ecology of the region.

The trail was scenic, and as we hiked up further, we were greeted by the soothing sound of water flowing through the forest. What awaited us was a lesson in evolution on how the islands were formed, natural pools of fresh water and a "private jacuzzi" formed by centuries-old volcanic rock formations. The humidity of the island made us all dive into the water immediately. On our way back, due to fresh rainfall, we encountered several tricky bits where the trek had become slippery. But Anurag and his team were thoroughly prepared. They had already set up rappelling ropes on the trail, which enabled us to climb down smoothly. They made us feel comfortable, constantly supporting us where needed and were thorough with their safety measures.

TRAVEL LOGISTICS

Guests can book the Ancient Lava Stream Hike amongst a range of activities offered by the Habitat Institute Activity Centre and can choose to stay at the Seashells Resort

(seashellhotels.net/activities). Havelock or Swaraj Dweep Island can be reached by private or government ferry from Port Blair. The best time to visit is between October and March.

WINDSURFING IN THE SEA

Quest Academy, Ramanathapuram

The southern Indian coastal town of Ramanathapuram, which is close to Rameshwaram, has access to the pristine blue waters of Palk Bay and the Gulf of Mannar. Here, Quest Academy offers the perfect spot to get started on some thrilling, low-impact water sports.

From kayaking to windsurfing, snorkelling and sailing to scuba diving and stand-up paddling, guests at Quest Academy are spoiled for choice. All the activities offered at the Academy use non-motorised power-paddle, pedal or wind. Led by Jehan Driver, the focus here is on helping everyone—the brave, the bold, and even the reluctant punters—discover the joys of adventure while raising awareness about the triple bottom line of sustainability—people, planet and profit.

Through its Ocean Ambassadors Foundation, Quest Academy organises regular outreach and training programmes for the coastal community to provide them with an alternate source of income. Quest also does regular beach cleanups and have popularised "trash for cash," where local children can pay them in the trash in exchange for activities.

TRAVEL LOGISTICS

Ramanathapuram is 2.5 hours away from the nearest airport in Madurai. While doing their short four-day courses, you can stay at the natural cottages built using local materials like coconut thatch, palm and silver teak. The best time to visit Ramanathapuram is between October to March. (quest-asia.com)

TEA TASTING IN THE HIMALAYAN FOOTHILLS

The Lodge at Wah, Palampur

Moving on to the serene hills of Himachal Pradesh, we arrive at The Lodge at Wah in Palampur. At the Lodge, which has more than 70 years of history, the hosts are

fourth-generation planters and high school sweethearts Surya Prakash and Upasana Todi Prakash. Take part in the tea tour if you want to know about the journey of tea from a shrub to a teacup, learn more about the people who pluck your tea, or acquaint yourself with the traits of a tea sommelier. After a walk through the tea gardens and a brush with history, you can witness the withering, rolling, fermenting, drying and sorting processes involved in the manufacturing of tea. Then, move on to sample a range of freshly brewed teas of different varieties and learn insider tips of making the perfect cuppa. You can also taste authentic Himachali food if you ask for a Kangri dhaam, which includes local dishes like kala chana khatta, teliyama, jimikand madra and meethe chawal.

TRAVEL LOGISTICS

Palampur is accessible from Kangra Airport or a 10-hour drive from Delhi. You can stay at an eco-friendly homestay on the 500-acre farm. The best time to visit Palampur is between September and November and March and April (www.thelodgeatwah.com).

LEARNING POTTERY WITHOUT A POTTER'S WHEEL

Enchanting Majuli, Majuli

Did you know that India has the world's largest river island? At 352 sq km, the Majuli island on the Brahmaputra River is the largest river island in the world, and not only that, it is also the only island in India that has become a district. Steeped in history and culture, Majuli is truly a world unto itself.

"Tourists come to the Northeast and see waterfalls, rhinos and sunsets. But no one visits the local villages or walks into the forests," says Julie Kagti, Founder of Curtain Call Adventures, who is changing this perspective, one trip at a time. Julie brings travellers to learn and experience one of the most well-preserved traditions of the island's vibrant community—its unique, ancient pottery-making practice without a potter's wheel. The passion of the potters for their craft clearly shines through as they continue to adopt the technique in accordance with their limited access to resources. Their story is a shining example of the proverb, "Necessity is the mother of invention," as they did not let their remote location deter their spirits or passion for their craft.

The indigenous Mishing community is also known for their beautiful handloom weaves. The intricate patterns require a lot of precision, and the locals are exceptionally skilled. You can engage with them and learn more about their craft. Also, grab this opportunity to learn how to weave a scarf or stole.

TRAVEL LOGISTICS

Majuli, being a river island, is only accessible through ferries and boats via Jorhat. The curated experience can be booked standalone or as part of a larger trip around Northeast India through Curtain Call Adventures (curtincalladventures.com). Guests can choose to stay at Enchanting Majuli or Jyoti's Homestay. The best time to visit Majuli is during the dry months of October to February.

LEARNING PERMACULTURE

TIEEDI Forest Garden, Darjeeling

En route to the historic Hill Cart Road that connects Siliguri with Darjeeling, you will find yourself at TIEEDI, a self-sufficient, regenerative, zero-waste experiential stay and earth school. TIEEDI Forest Garden offers

a unique co-living experience with nature, where you can enrol in a permaculture course focussing on natural farming at Dzomsa, the classroom at the TIEEDI Forest School. Pause and immerse in the surrounding nature as you take inspiration behind the name TIEEDI, which is an abbreviation for "Take it easy, easy does it" from an old Ladakhi folk song.

As founder Utsow Pradhan puts it, "At TIEEDI, our vision is to fight for pure air, fresh water and rich soil for all beings." Driven by this, the team is committed to sharing an experience where guests travel and live differently while learning the ropes of sustainable land and building solutions, decentralised waste management and regenerative tourism.

You can complete the permaculture course and get a certificate. Or experience TIEEDI as a short-term stay, where you can go on village walks, hike to surrounding waterfalls and birding trails and sample the local Newari cuisine.

TRAVEL LOGISTICS

TIEEDI is an hour's drive from Darjeeling and easily accessible by road. You can stay at an earth dwelling, a garden room or a shared dormitory here. The best time to visit TIEEDI is between March and June (*instagram/tieediforestgarden*).

VISITING A MUSEUM OF MEMORIES

Hundurman Museum, Kargil

Amidst the rugged terrains of Kargil, the Museum of Memories in the village of Hundurman opens up a window into the lives of people who have survived four wars and lived under the rule of two countries. The village's unique architectural style and connection with the 1971 war prompted this museum's opening. A joint initiative of Roots Ladakh, a local travel company, CEPT University and the villagers of Hundurman, the museum houses several rare artefacts, including French coffee tins, identity cards, coins and traditional jewellery. When asked what could potentially be the oldest preserved part of the museum, co-curator Muzammil Hussain shares, "It might be the building which houses the museum itself. It is believed to be more than 300 years old."

What makes the Hundurman Museum truly unique is the opportunity to interact



Utsow Pradhan, Owner, TIEEDI Forest Garden, Darjeeling with produce from the farm

with the local Purigpa tribe. With a current population of about 39,000, the Purigpas are the original inhabitants of Hundurman. You can have a traditional meal of local Purigpa and Balti dishes with the museum host, Iliyas.

TRAVEL LOGISTICS

To have an immersive experience, guests can witness all that the museum has to offer through a curated tour hosted by Roots Ladakh (*rootsladakh.com*). Visitors can further choose to stay at either the local homestay at Hundurmaan or travel 30 minutes away to book a stay at the Black Sheep B&B in Kargil.

To reach Hundurman, the nearest airport is in Leh. From Leh guests can take a long and scenic drive of about five to six hours to get there. The best time to visit is between May and October.

STARGAZING AT A VILLAGE AND MONASTERY

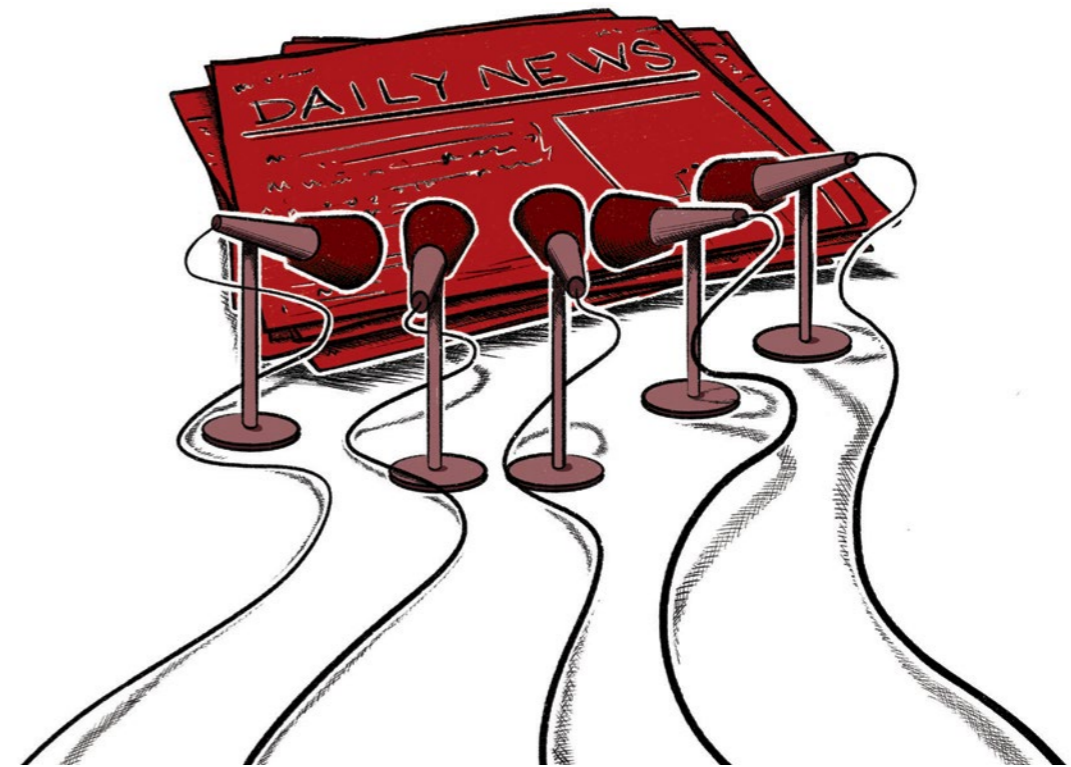
Cosmohub, Phyang

A sky full of stars awaits you in the beautiful, quaint village of Phyang, barely 20km from Leh. A dark, star-studded night sky is a true rarity for city dwellers like us. But not when

COURTESY: TIEEDI FOREST GARDEN, DARJEELING

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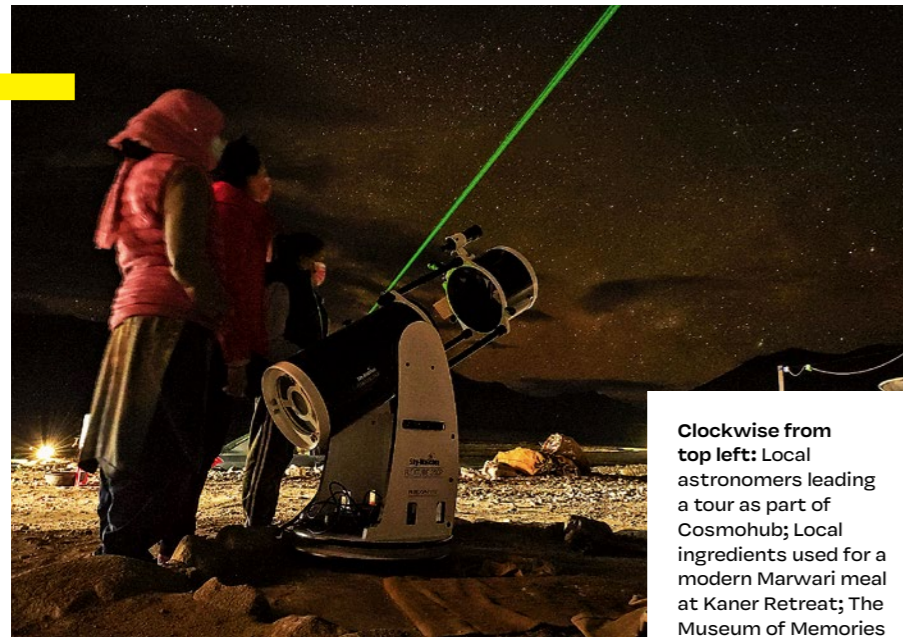
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Return to Reading



COURTESY: COSMOHUB; KANER RETREAT; HUNDURMAN MUSEUM (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT)



Clockwise from top left: Local astronomers leading a tour as part of Cosmohub; Local ingredients used for a modern Marwari meal at Kaner Retreat; The Museum of Memories



you are at the Cosmohub, an experience centre on the periphery of a 700-year-old monastery perched on a hill. Stargazing is a low-impact, nature-based activity that has brought the community together and motivated local women to lead the change. About 34 local women have been trained in astronomy and now lead the tours. With the advantage of the Himalayan dark sky and minimal light pollution, the stargazing experience at Phyang is unparalleled.

"There were many other women in the village, too, who weren't trained in astronomy, yet they wanted to be a part of the project, and we had to find a way," shares Sonal Asgotraa, Founder of Astrostays and CosmoHub. So, while CosmoHub was designed to celebrate the cosmos, as its name suggests, it now also celebrates local pashmina handicrafts and apricots and farm-fresh Ladakhi dishes made by local women. It's also paired with a guided tour of the Phyang monastery, which is not a particularly popular pitstop.

TRAVEL LOGISTICS

Book the experiences through Cosmohub from June to September. Stay at Astrostay, an astronomy-focused homestay in Phyang village or Leh, about 30 minutes away. (astrostays.com/cosmohub).

FORAGING IN THE DESERT

Kaner Retreat, Hapusar

India's first desert botanical-inspired resort,



Kaner Retreat, stands majestically amidst the golden sands of Hapusar. Named after the Oleander flower or desert rose, Kaner has been brought to life by long-time Thar resident Sapna Bhatia.

For instance, if you've ever wondered how locals sustain themselves in a desert, you can sign up for Kaner's tour of the "oran" or sacred grove. The tour is a wonderful excuse to go foraging in a "wasteland" while decoding the mysteries of famine foods and discovering the truly unique cuisine of the Thar. Local and seasonal ingredients like ker and sundried vegetables are prominent in-house dishes.

You can also experience a cheese-tasting session with cheeses made from camel milk, including cream cheese and feta, sourced locally from Camel Charisma, a social enterprise providing income opportunities for the traditional camel herding communities. You can sample a 5-course meal inspired by

modern Marwari flavours, too. Or opt for any of the other wild and wonderful experiences and exquisite meals on offer, including a lunch at an olive farm or dinner in the dunes after a spot of stargazing. At Kaner, the influence of the desert botanicals is omnipresent, from the food served to the decor in the rooms.

TRAVEL LOGISTICS

Hapusar is accessible by road from Jodhpur, which has the nearest airport and railway station. The best time to visit is from October to March when the desert is pleasantly cool. To truly make the most of the trip, consider Kaner's Thar Unplugged itinerary, where apart from the culinary experiences, you can also take guided nature walks, indulge in plant-based wellness sessions, and enjoy stargazing, birdwatching and safaris in the desert wilderness (kanerretreat.com). ▶OT

GEAR UP FOR A SNOW LEOPARD EXPEDITION WITH COLUMBIA'S ESSENTIALS

Get ready for a snow leopard adventure with Columbia's essential outdoor gear, ensuring comfort and safety on expeditions across rugged terrains

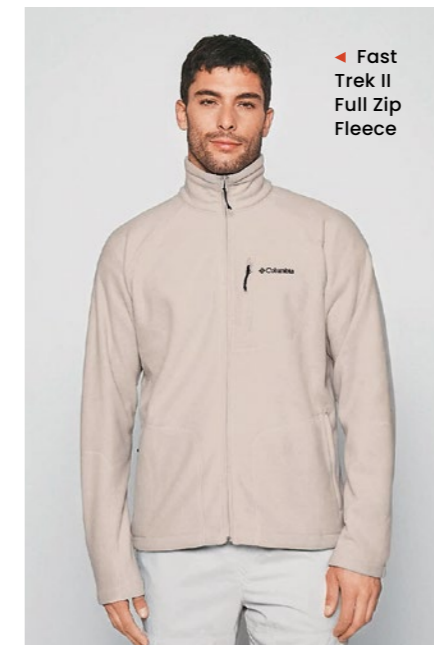
In February of this year, a pioneering four-year estimation effort unveiled that India is home to an estimated 718 snow leopards in their natural habitat. These elusive felines, known for inhabiting rugged mountainous regions that are challenging to reach, now have a foundational population count in India for the first time.

Ladakh leads with the highest estimated number of snow leopards (477), followed by Uttarakhand (124), Himachal Pradesh (51), Arunachal Pradesh (36), Sikkim (21), and Jammu and Kashmir (9). This latest estimation suggests that the Indian snow leopard population comprises approximately 10-15 per cent of the global total.

For wildlife enthusiasts, this revelation has ignited a desire to embark on an adventure to witness these elusive creatures. As interest in snow leopards continues to surge, prospective adventurers seek guidance on preparing for such an expedition. For those eager to venture into the realm of these enigmatic creatures, Columbia—an American company specialising in outdoor gear—offers indispensable essentials to ensure a safe and fulfilling journey. Here's a look at some of them.

FAST TREK II FULL ZIP FLEECE

This fleece is designed to elevate your travel experience. Whether you're exploring city streets or rugged terrains, it effortlessly adapts to varying climates. Thoughtful details such as thumbholes and binding at cuffs ensure a snug fit for uninterrupted comfort during your adventures. It is an indispensable companion with convenient hand pockets to keep fingers warm, offering warmth and



◀ Fast Trek II Full Zip Fleece



◀ Newton Ridge 36L Backpack



◀ Peakfreak II Outdry Shoes

functionality for every journey.

LABYRINTH LOOP HOODED JACKET

This puffer jacket is designed to redefine warmth and style on your outdoor adventures. Crafted with recycled synthetic down insulation and enhanced with a gold thermal-reflective lining, it ensures optimal cosiness during cold hikes. Its perfectly packable nature allows easy storage without compromising on the loft while maintaining warmth even in wet conditions.

PEAKFREAK II OUTDRY SHOES

Engineered with waterproof-breathable OutDry construction, this trekking shoe ensures a high-traction ride in any weather. Experience unparalleled comfort as you hike, thanks to its responsive, cushioned midsole providing stable support. Achieve the perfect fit with a lacing system that ensures a natural midfoot lockdown while seamless mesh delivers exceptional support.

PASSO ALTO III HEAT PANT

Discover the perfect blend of warmth and functionality with these innovative pants, engineered to keep you cosy

and dry in any weather condition. Featuring thermal-reflective lining and advanced repellency technology, they ensure optimal comfort and protection against the elements. Stay active and make your moves easily, thanks to the flexible comfort stretch fabric that allows unrestricted movement throughout the day.

NEWTON RIDGE 36L BACKPACK

Gear up for your next hiking expedition with this backpack designed to withstand the elements. Crafted from rain-and-stain-resistant fabric, they ensure durability and protection on the trail. Stay organised and prepared with multiple pockets in front and back, allowing you to conveniently carry all your essentials as you embark on your outdoor adventures.

OTHER COOL ITEMS TO PICK

- Midweight Stretch Long Sleeve Top
- Midweight Stretch Tight Bottom
- Stainless Steel Insulated Vacuum Hydration Bottles
- Trail Shaker Beanie
- Aluminium Trekking Pole Grill
- Men's Ascender II Softshell Glove