



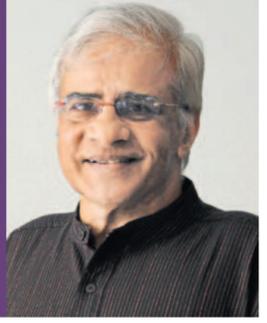
# lounge

SATURDAY, APRIL 12 2023

## THE ARTIST-ACTIVIST

One of the most important voices in Indian contemporary art, Vivan Sundaram, who died earlier this week in Delhi at the age of 79, always responded to political and historical events in his multi-disciplinary practice

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NEW FTP EYES \$2 TN IN EXPORTS BY 2030 | PAGE 16



# BESPOKE TRAVELS

LOUNGE PICKS EIGHT DESTINATIONS WITH ITINERARIES DESIGNED BY EXPERIENCE CURATORS TO HELP YOU MAKE LASTING MEMORIES THIS SUMMER



THINK  
Chennai's Kalakshetra is out of step and out of tune

TASTE  
*India gets its own tea ceremony*

STYLE  
The double-breasted blazer makes a chic comeback

CULTURE  
*Hong Kong's M+ Museum makes a bold statement*



## Up close and personal with Kashmir's craft heritage

With Gulzar Hussain

There is something meditative about watching a *sozani* shawl maker at work. After needles thread their way through the fabric over hours, exquisite patterns of *shikaras*, the lotus on the Dal lake and beautiful flora spill on to the shawls. "Every single day for two years, an artisan spends seven hours on a single shawl," says Gulzar Hussain, co-founder of Frozen Himalayas, which focuses on unique and sustainable ways of travel through the western Himalayas.

The organisation runs a customised craft trail through Srinagar, focusing on the heritage keepers of the city. You can watch embroiderers work with silk skeins on *jamawar* shawls and hear stories about mystics who practised this art for its meditative qualities, or watch papier-mâché artists create exquisite pieces with gold, mineral dyes and cats' hair brushes. The trail focuses on some of the major crafts in the region, including walnut woodwork. Hussain doesn't just take you for a rendezvous with the artists, he also offers historical and modern context to these crafts.

Walk in the old city, starting from Zaina Kadal, and get a glimpse of the Mughal and local architecture that has inspired craftspersons. The trail takes you to culinary landmarks such as Ahdooos for a traditional Kashmiri *wazwan* meal as well.

This unique initiative started as a collaboration between Hussain and Jammu and Kashmir Tourism 12 years ago. "The government asked us to run the trail and today an intensive craft tour takes around five nights-six days," says Hussain. Those pressed for time can do a truncated version spanning three-four hours.

The trail design aims to battle fake Kashmiri crafts in the market. "We connect the craftsperson straight with the customer. Also, buying craft need not be the superficial process that it has become. Why not know more about the story behind each craft and craftsperson? When you see the process, each piece acquires newer meaning," he adds.

The trail, which costs around ₹80,000 per person on twin-sharing basis, includes pick-ups from the airport and accommodation.



## Learn bullock cart riding at this farm in Maharashtra

With Rahul and Sampada Kulkarni

In the tiny village of Phungus, in the verdant Ratnagiri region, lies a farm where birds are forever chirping, the cattle are always happy and the trees abound with fruit. The Farm of Happiness is run by Rahul and Sampada Kulkarni, a former creative director at an advertising firm and an actor, respectively, who left their jobs in Mumbai in 2007 to follow their passion for agro-tourism.

The Farm of Happiness, which they opened to guests in 2014, has not just emerged as an example of sustainable farming but as a cosy, comforting space for children. "We warn families that there is no television or mobile network. Initially, parents are worried if their children will take to this kind of life but within hours, when they see kids running after the chickens or taking the cattle grazing, they are pleasantly surprised," says Rahul.

The food comes from the farm, where crops and vegetables are grown only for sustenance, not for commercial purposes. "Whatever you need and what the land allows" is their farming motto. So, you will find a lot of *ragi* (finger millet), paddy, turmeric, gourds, beans and lentils on the menu. "A farm is a most exciting place for a child, who thinks everything comes from a supermarket. They have never seen a cashew fruit drop or played with a calf; 95% of the kids don't want to go back. We get very mushy, wet-eyed goodbye hugs with requests like 'can I take the bull home?', 'can I play with the dog one more time?'" says Rahul. Children even get a bullock cart riding licence.

You can work on the farm, pick out vegetables for meals and go on nature trails. Nightwalks, pre-monsoon, are a huge attraction, with the fireflies eliciting gasps of wonder. The Kulkarnis encourage stargazing sessions for children and also take them birdwatching, introducing them to a vibrant world inhabited by the green bee-eater, purple sunbird, red wattled lapwing and Malabar whistling thrush. Do keep seasonality in mind, though, and don't expect all the crops, birds and other fauna to be present at all times.

A two-day package costs ₹12,000 per room for two adults, with additional costs for children depending on the age group.



## Soak in the Santiniketan vibe at Amoli, West Bengal

With Bidisha Tagore and Alope Ghosh

The sense of aesthetic at Amoli is very strong—warm, open spaces tastefully done up with contemporary wooden accents, local crafts and textiles. Plants flourish. This home-stay, with four guest rooms, a café and a store, has been conceptualised by Bidisha Tagore and Alope Ghosh, a couple in their 60s, who used to live in Mumbai. The added attraction is that it is walking distance from the Visva-Bharati University, making Amoli the preferred destination for poets, artists, photographers and writers.

"After Alope retired, I asked my mother, who lives in Santiniketan, to move in with us in Mumbai. She refused as she had lived there for so long and had a strong community," reminisces Bidisha. Ghosh had always wanted to return to Santiniketan, the couple's alma mater. "I had always dreamt of starting a café with a little place to stay and a curio shop," she adds. Luckily, the couple had some land right next to where Bidisha's mother lived. The architectural and décor plans for Amoli began to fall in place from 2017. Today, the two houses stand connected, with Bidisha's mother

closely associated with running the home-stay.

Bidisha put dishes she could cook well, both Bengali and Western, on the menu and today people can't stop gushing about the food.

"We employed people from the village and trained them in every aspect of running the place. It was our way of giving back to the community. We also have equal opportunities for people with learning disabilities. It has been a year and a half since we opened and the response has been great. We have built a little Amoli community (of repeat visitors)," says Bidisha.

A stone's throw from the university, Amoli has a close association with the Tagore family of Jorasanko. Bidisha's father was the grandson of artist Gaganendranath Tagore and the décor and architectural elements have been informed by stories of his childhood. "In the Tagore home, during any auspicious occasion, a light fish was bought. And after a small ceremony, it would be thrown into this one well. It was where all the kids learnt to fish. I simply had to have those little elements in the architecture," says Bidisha.

Double rooms are priced ₹6,000 onwards (inclusive of breakfast).

## Embark on a cacao trail at Varanashi Farms, Karnataka

With Partha Varanashi

It's time to don your Willy Wonka hats and immerse yourself in the world of chocolate at Varanashi Organic Farms. Located in Adyanadka in Dakshin Kannada district, this natural haven sprawls over about 100 acres, with seven irrigation ponds, a river and a rivulet crisscrossing its pristine landscape. It feels like a veritable Eden, with 60% of the farm still untouched forest, while the rest of the land has multilayered crop trees such as areca nut, coconut, nutmeg, banana, black pepper, and, of course, cacao, all grown on regenerative farming principles.

The land has been with the Varanashi family for at least 200 years, passed down through six generations. Today, the youngest member, Partha—a coach for team India in the 2019 World Aquatics Championships and a mentor for movement sports and aquatic education—manages it. It's an ideal destination for families who wish to be one with nature or corporate teams keen to experience a minimalist lifestyle.

The cacao trail, spanning three/five days, is a highlight and you can often hear children squealing in excitement at the small chocolate-making facility. "We prefer to do this in groups. You see the entire process of grafting, harvesting cacao pods, seed removal, fermentation and more on the farm. We have an expert chocolatier, Ketaki Churi, who takes the groups through tree-to-bar chocolate-making. So you go back with a bar you have created," explains Partha.

You can learn about regenerative farming practices, take walks, or go kayaking and open-water swimming. "We take people to water caves in the vicinity. In fact, one of the farmers, Amai Mahalinga Naik, has won a Padma Shri for having built a water cave himself and we take guests to his farm," adds Partha. Varanashi is not a resort but a farm-stay, so make sure not to add to the carbon footprint by taking plastic bottles.

The cacao trail costs ₹1,500-6,000 per day, depending on whether you pick a dorm, room, mud cottage or treehouse.



## A river safari on the Chambal, Rajasthan/Uttar Pradesh

With Kunal Jain

For the longest time, the Chambal river and its ravines were associated with dacoits. Kunal Jain's Agra, Uttar Pradesh-based travel agency Travel With hopes to change that perception through a Chambal river safari that aims to create awareness of the area's rich biodiversity.

For little do people who visit Agra realise that one of the country's "most alive river ecosystems" is barely an hour away. The Chambal is home, among others, to the critically endangered *gharial*, marsh crocodiles, eight species of turtles, including the red-crowned roofed turtle, Gangetic river dolphins and Indian skimmer. During the two- to three-hour safari, you could also spot the striped hyena, jackal, jungle cat and desert fox on land.

Jain's fascination with the river is linked to his journey in conservation and tourism. He was working as an auditor in Singapore when he took a sabbatical and volunteered with the Wildlife Conservation Society and the Centre for Wildlife Studies. He started Travel With in 2018.

Jain serves not just as a naturalist but as a *sutradhar*, or narrator, of legends. He talks about the contribution of the ravines' residents to the first war of independence in 1857, particularly in Bhareh—where the Chambal merges with the Yamuna, and which is the site of a medieval fortress. In 1857, the British only managed to recapture the fort after getting on to French frigates brought to the Chambal and firing cannons at the fort walls.

Local legend suggests the Chambal area is where Draupadi was disrobed. She cursed the land and its people. "...these (stories) have been passed down through time and kept the river largely undisturbed," says Jain. Fear of dacoits ensured no factories or buildings came up either, other than in Kota.

Jain organises the safaris from October-March—this year, he has extended it to April, since the weather has remained cool. Jain reminds groups to take back the garbage, be quiet and respectful of wildlife, and observe safety norms. "Stow your mobile phones away, drink in the sights and sounds of the river as what you are going to see, you won't see anywhere else in the world (in the wild). I am here to take images with my camera, which I share with all my guests. Nothing should come between the Chambal and you," says Jain.

Prices, starting from ₹12,000, depend on the size of the group and the duration of the safari.



The red-crowned roofed turtle.

KUNAL JAIN

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