

December 2014

Sterling



A Sterling Holidays Magazine

WORLD

It's a wonderful world!



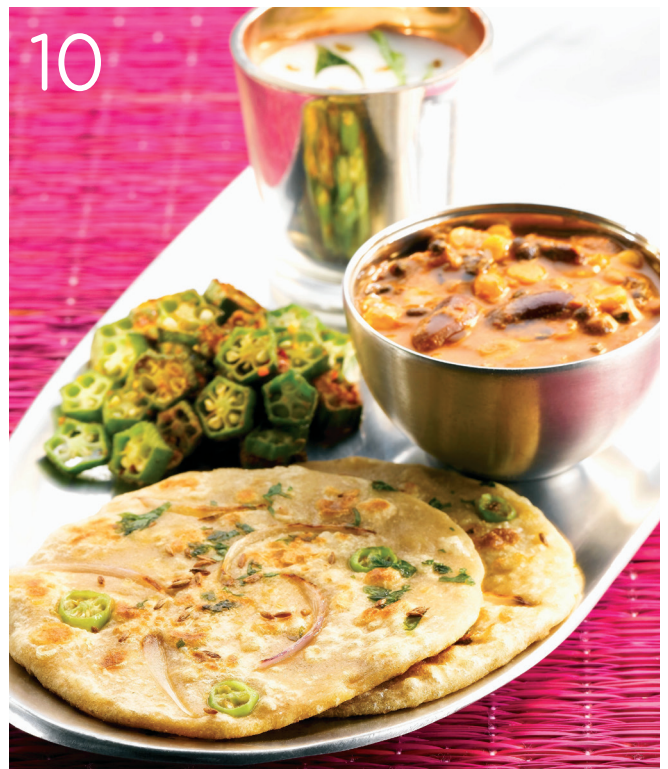
Investing in *India* and *Sterling*

Prem Watsa - Founder, Chairman
and Chief Executive Officer
of Fairfax Financial Holdings
visits Sterling Holidays

Sterling opens two new resorts:
Nainital - Bhawanipur Greens and Sariska - Tiger Heaven

Contents

- 02 COVER STORY
Investing in India and Sterling
- 03 SOCIAL INITIATIVE
Sterling Holidays joins Swachh Bharat Abhiyan
- 04 LEAD FEATURE
Sterling opens two new resorts!
- 06 PHOTO ESSAY
A serene sojourn
- 08 ROAD TRIPS
Into the Arms of Nature



- 10 CUISINE
A slice of the mountains
- 12 CULTURE
Rhythms and Ragas
Glazed blue decor from Jaipur
- 16 MEMBERS SECTION
Sterling strikes Gold!



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MD's Note



Namaste!

Let me start by taking the opportunity to wish you and your loved ones a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

2015 promises to be an exciting year, full of holiday cheer for our members, guests and Sterling itself. As we usher in a brand new year, I am happy to share with you that we have exciting plans to take a giant leap forward and change the holiday landscape in India. Our confidence that we will be able to achieve this has been bolstered by the backing of our parent companies—Fairfax Financial Holdings, Toronto, and Thomas Cook India.

On November 20, we were privileged to have Mr. Prem Watsa, founder of Fairfax, at the Sterling headquarters in Chennai. Mr. Watsa spent considerable time with the management and employees of Sterling, sharing his views on why he has so much confidence in the Indian economy and Sterling's potential for growth as India works to build its tourism industry.

I am also happy to share with you that six of our resorts are now the proud bearers of the coveted Resort Condominium International (RCI) Crown: Dharamshala - The Sanctuary, Kodai - By The Lake, Manali - White Mist, Munnar - Terrace Greens, Ooty - Fern Hill and Yercaud - Rock Perch.

The coming months will also see two new resorts in Daman and Dindi. Sterling members and guests will soon enjoy the heritage and beauty of Daman, while Dindi will give them the experience of a riverside holiday.

We look forward to celebrating Christmas and New Year with you and your loved ones at our resorts.

Happy Holidays!

Ramesh Ramanathan

“We must go beyond textbooks, go out into the bypaths and untrodden depths of the wilderness and travel and explore and tell the world the glories of our journey.”

– John Hope Franklin

Investing in *India* and *Sterling*

Prem Watsa, Founder, Chairman and CEO of Fairfax Financial Holdings Limited, visits Sterling Holidays.

FAIRFAX
FINANCIAL HOLDINGS LIMITED



IKYA
THE POWER OF BEING ONE



Mr. Prem Watsa, Founder, Chairman and CEO of Fairfax Financial Holdings, Toronto, was in India in the third week of November 2014. Popularly known as 'the Warren Buffet of Canada' for his exceptional investing skills and business acumen, Mr. Watsa is a chemical engineer from Indian Institute of Technology, Chennai. He moved to Canada in 1972 and enrolled for the MBA course offered by the University of Western Ontario. Post obtaining his management degree, and a decade of experience in insurance, he acquired Markel Financial in 1985, and rechristened it Fairfax Financial Holdings Limited.

Today, Fairfax is a \$36.2 billion global investment and insurance conglomerate. Its portfolio includes several well-known companies in the insurance, re-insurance and restaurant chains sectors worldwide.

Fairfax, which stands for fair and friendly acquisitions, first invested in India 20 years ago. Its initial investments included significant stakes in ICICI Lombard General Insurance and

India Infoline. In 2012, Fairfax acquired Thomas Cook India Limited through Fairbridge Capital, its 100% subsidiary in India. Following this acquisition, Fairfax has stepped up its investments adding Ikya Human Capital Solutions and Sterling Holiday Resorts (India) Limited to its India investment portfolio.

Sterling's Head Office in Chennai had the privilege of hosting Mr. Prem Watsa on the 20th of November. Mr. Watsa and the accompanying delegates spent a considerable amount of time with the management team and employees of Sterling Holidays. In his address and discussions, which was webcast across all of Sterling's 21 resorts and 12 sales offices, Mr. Watsa spoke about how buoyant he is about the immense potential in the Indian economy, with particular reference to the insurance and tourism sectors. With travel and tourism placed as priority on the Indian Government's agenda, Mr. Watsa expressed immense excitement about the growth opportunities that lie ahead for India and Sterling Holidays.

02



Sterling Holidays joins *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan*

A nationwide initiative has been launched by Sterling Holiday Resorts (India) Limited to contribute to the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* campaign.

The cleanliness drive is spread across the Sterling Holidays network comprising the Head Office, 21 resorts and 12 sales offices. Until now, more than 750 guests and employees have participated in the drive by cleaning up spaces in and around the resorts and offices. Many tourist spots such as Bear Shola Falls in Kodaikanal and the area around Loknath Temple in Puri

have been cleared of litter. In cities where Sterling Holidays has offices, Sterlings along with their families have been involved in cleaning public spaces. For example, Sterlings in the company's Corporate Office in Chennai woke up bright and early on Friday, November 28 to sweep away the litter and dust on the streets of Nehru Nagar, Chennai.

Commenting on the initiative, Ramesh Ramanathan, Sterling's Managing Director, said, "Swachh Bharat Abhiyan is a crucial nation-building effort. A clean India will make every citizen proud,

especially since each Indian would have played a role. Needless to say, a clean India will go a long way towards enhancing India's image as an attractive tourism destination. Sterling is proud to be part of this effort and is committed to participating in the country's *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* campaign on an ongoing basis. To ensure this, we have a year-long calendar in place. Further, by encouraging participation by our guests, employees and their families, we believe we will help spread awareness and build the momentum towards a Clean India."

Sterlingers cleaning the area near Bear Shola Falls, Kodaikanal.



03

Sterlingers from the Corporate Office in Chennai come together to sweep away the litter and dust.



Members of the Sterling Holidays sales office in Lucknow do their bit to keep their surroundings clean.



Sterling opens two new resorts!

Sterling Holidays perks up your holiday plans this festive season with two fabulous new resorts at Nainital and Sariska. Enjoy the cool winds of the misty Kumaon hills surrounding Nainital; follow the trail of tigers, leopards or respond to the call of a magnificent peacock in Sariska.

SARISKA TIGER HEAVEN a sterling holidays resort



Sariska – Tiger Heaven

04

Wildlife, Nature, and History blend into an eclectic mix at Tiger Heaven, the latest addition to the Sterling Holidays network. Its green setting and placid calm are in perfect tune with the scintillating wilderness that cloaks the adjoining expanse of the Sariska National Park and the Sariska Bird Sanctuary.

As its name suggests, Tiger Heaven celebrates the spirit of conservation of the Bengal Tiger, an endangered species. The theme of conservation is woven into the ambience of the resort too; tiger prints adorn the furniture and décor, and the pool is built in the shape of a tiger's paw.

A 45-minute drive away from the Sterling resort is the Sariska National Park, set amidst the scenic Aravalli ranges in the Alwar district of Rajasthan. Ask the resort to book a jeep for a tiger safari to get acquainted with the wildlife at close quarters while enjoying the soothing greenery cloaking Sariska.

The bird sanctuary is not too far from the resort either. One could cycle or stroll down to catch avian wonders at their natural best. A somber Indian Great Horned Owl, a ferocious Crested Serpent Eagle, or a coy peacock might catch your eye and fancy.



Peacocks and peahens often strut into the environs of the resort in search of water, demonstrating the manner in which Tiger Heaven blends seamlessly with the natural world that surrounds it. Then there are the pond herons and parakeets, which add to the colour and to the avian splendour at the resort.

Wait. There's more. You can add to your holiday memories by walking into the portals of the Kankwadi fort built by Jai Singh II; the Sariska Palace, the royal hunting lodge; or Pandupol in the hills, which is believed to be one of the retreats of the Pandavas. For the religiously inclined, the Neelkantheshwar temple situated on a plateau surrounded by hills is a big draw.

With so much on offer at Sariska, we hope you are already planning your next holiday there!



**NAINITAL
BHAWANIPUR
GREENS**
a sterling holidays resort



Nainital – Bhawanipur Greens

Silhouetted against the Kumaon Hills and situated close to Nainital town, Sterling's Bhawanipur Greens resort makes an ideal base for any traveller—be it an adventure enthusiast or someone wishing to just relax in the soothing arms of Nature.

The Sterling resort in Nainital, Bhawanipur Greens, overlooks a stunning valley. The name of the resort draws its inspiration from a fascinating legend that recounts the story of the land on which it is constructed. It was the 1920s when India was still ruled by the British Empire. A dacoit by the name Sultana Daku was terrorising large areas of Nainital and beyond in the UP belt. Sultana Daku's reign of terror was finally brought to an end by a brave Inspector in the Police—Bhawani Das Sah who played an instrumental role in capturing the dacoit along with the British Army. In recognition of Bhawani Das Sah's bravery, the British bequeathed a tract of land to the Inspector along with a village. To honour him, the village was also named Bhawanipur. Today, the latest addition to the Sterling network of resorts in Nainital proudly bears the name Bhawanipur Greens, drawing from this legend of bravery.

Bhawanipur Greens is a charming, full-service resort equipped with modern comforts and indoor recreation facilities. Well-appointed rooms offer great views of the surroundings. As does the outdoor restaurant where guests can relax while relishing the multi-cuisine fare on offer. The location and the ambience of the resort also provide a great setting for meetings and conferences, not to mention memorable get-togethers to celebrate that special anniversary or a birthday!

From the comfortable base of Bhawanipur Greens, you can set forth and explore the myriad attractions around Nainital. The Fun Rangers at the resort's Holiday Activity Center will be more than happy to guide you here.



There is an interesting legend on how Nainital got its name. A bereaved Lord Shiva carrying the mortal remains of his consort Sati did the *rudra tandava* that threatened to destroy creation. Lord Vishnu intervened and cut Sati's corpse into several pieces to bring the dance to an end. The various organs fell at different places, which came to be known as *shakti peeths*. It is believed that Goddess Sati's eye (*naina*) fell here and hence the name Nainital. The colourfully built Naina Devi temple on the north shore of the Naini Lake is one of the 64 *shakti peeths* in India. In addition to the religious import, the temple also offers stunning views of the lake and the valley.

The pear-shaped Naini Lake is a must-do on every tourist's itinerary. Its placid waters and sublime views offer the perfect backdrop for a leisurely afternoon of boating and paddling. If you are game, you could even go yachting in the emerald green waters.

The resort could also arrange for trekking expeditions to the Guano Hills, Tiffin Top, or the Naina Peak. A cable car could take one to Snow View—this vantage point at an altitude of 2,270 m offers a stunning view of the Nanda Devi, Trisul, and Nanda Kot peaks of the Himalayas.

After these exhilarating but strenuous activities, you can also indulge in a bit of souvenir shopping. Bhotia Bazaar is famous for the quality woollens and knits woven by women from Almora. You can also get a custom-made cap or a muffler knit! And if you want to carry home local flavours, stop by the Barra Bazaar and buy some home-made strawberry jam, pickles, and preserves.

If you'd like some peace, solitude and relaxation, Nainital is the ideal getaway. Have you booked your holiday yet?

05

A *serene* sojourn

Sterling Holidays has always strived to not intrude into the tranquillity that embraces Mother Nature. We have struck a cordial note at Sariska - Tiger Heaven too, where the green core attracts many a winged visitor. Here's a snapshot of the harmonious coexistence.



06

A muster of peafowl gathers at the resort's swimming pool. Judging by their familiarity with the surroundings, this seems to be one of their regular haunts.



The birds scurry towards the hedge as we try getting up close.



Something amidst the green catches our eye from the balcony of our room. Convinced that he is camouflaged well amidst the foliage, this rose-ringed parakeet takes a well-deserved break.



A red-vented bulbul strikes a pose while soaking up some of the last rays of the day's sun.



A peahen catches a glimpse of the resort premises from a vantage point. The absence of tail feathers indicates that the bird is a female.

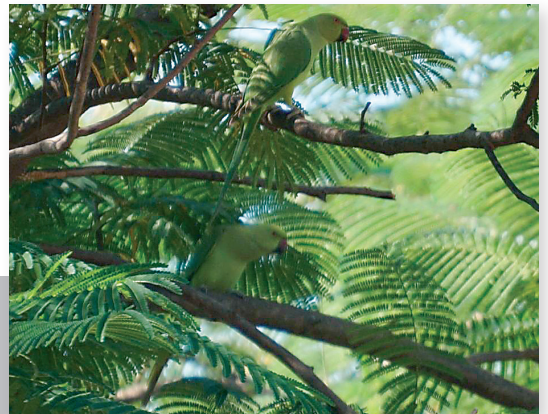


A rufous treepie musters the courage to sit on the resort's railing while it looks for its next landing spot.



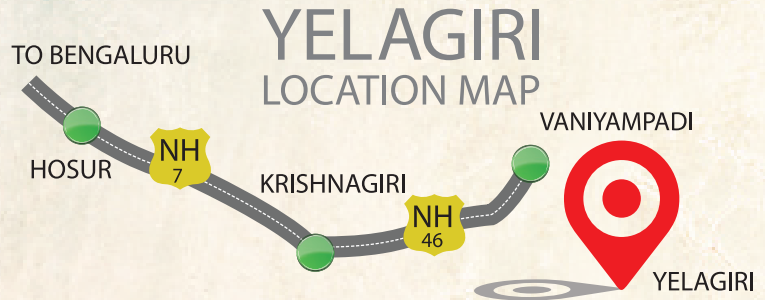
An Indian pond heron looks around for aquatic insects, fishes, and tadpoles. Little does it know that unlike ponds and marshy wetlands, the pool does not offer such delicacies!

Spot the rose-ringed parakeets. The lush green branches provide them a perfect hideout.



Into the Arms of Nature

ALTITUDE 1048.5 M
NUMBER OF HAIRPIN BENDS-14



Illustrations © swapnil redkar

Weekends are the time when we try to break the daily routine and engage in activities that rejuvenate and recharge us, preparing ourselves for another hectic week ahead. Blessed are those who live in cities from where you can whisk yourself away into the lap of Nature in a short span. Bengaluru and Chennai are two such metros that offer fabulous holidays that are just a few hours away.

BENGALURU-YELAGIRI

Three-and-a-half hours and 180 km—that is how quickly one can get from Bengaluru to Yelagiri, from the hi-tech electronic city to a quiet, quaint hill station nestled away in the foothills of the Eastern Ghats. As one heads out of the metropolis, Hosur is the first city that one passes by. Known for its beautiful roses, the city is one of the largest exporters of these flowers in India. So, if you have the time and the season is right, stop and stare at the blooming fields bordering the highway. And if you are a history buff, make a quick stop at Thorapalli, located about 6 kilometres south-east of Hosur close to the Hosur-Krishnagiri road, to visit the Rajaji Memorial.

As you drive out of Hosur and head for Krishnagiri, a truly resplendent landscape starts unfolding—an expanse of thick forests embellishing the black granite hillocks of the Eastern Ghats. A short detour off the main highway will take you to

the Syed Basha Hill—also known as the Krishnadevarayar Mountain—which holds a fort that was occupied by Tipu Sultan. One could also visit the Krishnagiri Reservoir built in 1958 and take in the scenic views.

Further up is Yelagiri, the charming hill station nestled in the foothills of the Eastern Ghats. The Punganur Lake, an artificial lake around 1.5kms from the resort, is a perfect spot to relax and reconnect with Nature. For those looking for some quiet, long strolls along the winding paths in the vicinity offer a treasure trove of tranquillity.

The rocky terrain here is a fabulous treat for adventure enthusiasts; trek up to the shimmering Jalagamparai Falls at a secluded alcove in the hills, or to Swamimalai, the highest point in Yelagiri hills situated at 4,338 feet above sea level. Paragliding is a popular sport in Yelagiri and offers one a bird's eye view of the scenic expanse.

This hill station also houses the Velavan temple dedicated to Lord Muruga. During May-June, the village comes alive with its annual Summer Festival. A treat for culture enthusiasts, it serves as a platform for local artists to showcase their talent, and for us a chance to shop for unique souvenirs and curios.

Other attractions around Yelagiri include the Vainu Bappu Solar Observatory—South Asia's second largest solar observatory—around 25 km away in Kavalur.



Punganur Lake covers an expanse of about 56.706 sq. mtrs.



Statues such as these can be seen while trekking to Velavan Temple.



Krishnagiri Fort was previously occupied by Tipu Sultan.



Kailasanathar Temple, Kanchipuram, is a fine example of Dravidian architecture.

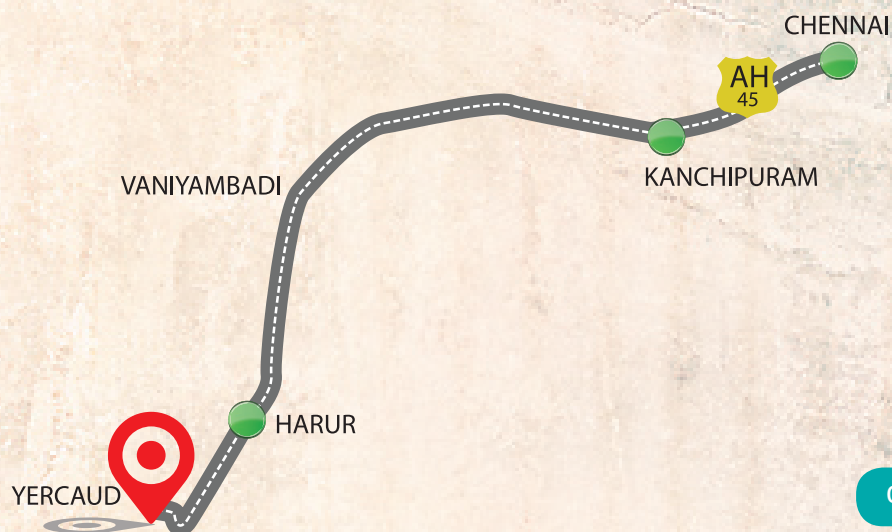


View of the ghat road from the Sterling Holidays resort in Yercaud.



Killiyur Falls is around 2.5km from Yercaud Lake.

ALTITUDE 1515 M
NUMBER OF HAIRPIN BENDS • 20



CHENNAI-YERCAUD

A six-hour drive from Chennai, past some of Tamil Nadu's most iconic landmarks takes you to Yercaud, a small hill station situated in Shevaroy Hills of the Eastern Ghats.

About two hours from Chennai is Kanchipuram, considered one of the *sapta puris* or seven holy cities of India; between the 1st and 5th centuries, it used to be a major centre of learning for followers of Jainism and Buddhism. A must-see here is the Kailasanathar Temple, an eighth-century monument built during the reign of the Pallava dynasty. This sandstone masterpiece stands testament to the glory of Dravidian architecture. The town is famous all over the world for its exquisite hand-woven silk saris. Shops selling these saris dot the main roads and most travellers loosen their purse strings and indulge in some retail therapy.

The next stop is Harur, best known for its granite and molybdenum mines. Ensnared between the Sitheri Hills and Theerthamalai, it offers sumptuous views of the exquisite landscape and has a number of ancient temples to explore. As you proceed from here towards Yercaud, it is better

to take the route along the Kalrayan Hill Forests; it offers a picturesque backdrop for the last stretch of the journey.

Yercaud gets its name from 'yeri' (lake) and 'kadu' (forest). At Yercaud Lake, you can take a boat out onto the water and soak in the green and tranquil air. It's near the lake that the 'Loop Road' starts, which cuts through coffee plantations—a biker's delight. The coffee blossom in Yercaud is a unique spectacle—when a huge expanse turns into a blanket of white soon after the summer showers in May.

The Lady's Seat and Pagoda Point are vantage points that offer breathtaking views of the Salem Valley. And not to be missed is The Grange. Constructed in the early 19th century, it was the summer resort of Robert Clive who was Governor of Bengal during the British rule. The story goes that the Grange bungalow, which was a camping ground of the British, was fortified with ramparts, gun placements and cannons and a well-stocked cellar to last a six-month siege, during the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857.

It's such interesting glimpses of the past that unfold when you make enchanting forays into the soul of a place. And that's what road trips are all about.

A slice of the mountains

For a dash of local flavour in your holiday, try dhaba-hopping along the roads and villages of Himachal Pradesh.

Text: Simar Preet Kaur



Parathas, rajma, bhindi ki sabzi and chhas—an inviting fare for the weary traveller.

It used to be a simple affair. There were walls painted pale blue, one corner decked with a black-and-white poster of Madhubala, on another a Photoshopped image of an ideal home with out-of-proportion doves perched atop miniature log huts. Among these walls were cots with wooden planks placed in the centre, on which the wary traveller could bite into a simple *aloo paratha* with fresh *amla* pickle and feel the pure joy of homemade food found in an unassuming hole in the wall. Luckily, this is still the case. The cots have been replaced by plastic chairs, the plank has metamorphosed into a table, and Madhubala is now a colourful Katrina, but simplicity and delectability are still the defining features of a dhaba.

Dhabas—as roadside eateries are called—are a quintessential element in the Himalayan landscape. They are a 24x7 culinary pit stop for nocturnal travellers, an affordable change

for the locals; and until two years ago, they even provided steaming hot Maggi and chai to ill-equipped, frozen explorers at 11,000 ft. near Rohtang Pass. Their indispensability is increased in winter, when tourists have departed, cafes and restaurants have shut shop for the season, and the only good place for a bite remains this humble eatery.

With the rising popularity of Himachal as a getaway, there has been a surge of fast food restaurants along the roads, in the last decade. But any regular would tell you that a burger stands no chance next to a hearty *mooli paratha* and mint chutney, or the piquant apple chutney prepared during the apple harvest season through October and November.

Haven't come across the chutney yet? That's because you must ask for it. A lot of dhabas, especially those removed from the main towns, prepare local Himachali fare alongside familiar dishes of *dal makhani* and *sarson ka saag* (the latter a winter speciality). It is usually not mentioned on the menu, but you'd do well by asking if there is an option of Himachali *thali*. *Rajma* and *kadhi* are the same as anywhere in northern India, but you can take a spoonful of healthy local red rice,

or bite into *bhatura*, a kind of fermented local bread cooked on a *tandoor* on special family occasions, festivals, and the onset of new seasons. *Siddu* is another fermented dish made of wheat flour, home-ground spices and opium seeds. *Lingdi ki sabzi* is highly recommended too; *lingdi* is a local fern that grows amongst common grasses and shrubs, and could be rather tricky for an outsider to spot.

Travellers who take the road from Delhi to Manali via Mandi would be familiar with Annapurna Dhaba, whereas those heading to Dharamsala or Shimla would have their own favourite stopovers. However, there are several dhabas that don't make a blip on the tourist map, but locals throng there to get a taste of their improvisations of local recipes.

Winter is already here. The air is crisp and while the coveted snowfall is still a month away, if you are heading into the Himalayas you can get your fill of Himachali cuisine without much effort. We suggest that you be adventurous on the slopes as well as the dhabas this time!

Around Manali in 5 eateries

To begin your culinary journey around the Kullu-Manali mountains, we recommend visits to the following eateries—a combination of local fare and tourist cafes that draw up a bigger picture of the region's flavours:

Sapna Sweets, Kullu

This one is an institution in itself. Locals from all over Himachal stop by here for traditional *kulwi dhaam* (as a lavish Himachali meal is known in the local language). Don't forget to try *channa madra* (chickpea and yoghurt gravy).

Shanti Dhaba, Old Manali

This dhaba may seem little more than a simple neighbourhood eatery to a first-time visitor. This is where Manali locals come for delicious Himachali fare, and if interior aesthetics are not a concern, you wouldn't want to skip their food.

Chopsticks, New Manali

There are many reasons why Chopsticks has survived for years on the Mall Road—the excellent Tibetan, Chinese, and Japanese food (including momos, yes), the Oriental decor, the fact that it's open all year round, and the *tandoor* installed here through winter for warm, comfortable dining. They serve trout fish and beer as well.

Blue Elephant Cafe, Old Manali

For a long time, Blue Elephant was the only respite for winter travellers parked in Old Manali. It has expanded since and grown to become a popular backpacker address due to its riverside location. They serve an assortment of Continental cuisines, but the *thali* is as good as ever.

Jana Waterfall

Those of you who don't mind an adventurous drive up a narrow road, there is Jana Waterfall between Kullu and Manali (40 km away). It's a lesser known wonder that happens to have a dhaba run by Mani Ram, a local who serves unforgettable traditional Himachali *thali* comprising 11 dishes, no less.

This dhaba in Chattru, on the road to Spiti Valley, is a popular stopover for tourists crossing over from Rohtang La.



© Parikshit Rao

Rhythms and Ragas

From December to March, India comes alive with a fabulous display of culture—an array of finely curated dance and music festivals. There is no better way to capture the essence of the country's cultural ethos than to be part of this transcendental experience. A must-do for music, dance, and heritage aficionados.

Text: Poornima Subramanian



Traditionally, most Indian classical music and dance performances—though performed by *devadasis*—were largely confined to temples, or to concerts supported by the rich and the genteel class. This left the man on the street feeling distanced, lacking the knowledge to understand and appreciate the fine arts. However, the narrative changed course somewhere along the way—from the upper class engaging in public performances to the common man becoming the *raison d'être* and chief patron of these arts. And one of the levers that supported this movement was the many 'festivals of dance and music' that came to be organised across the country. Some of these are steeped in history, some are recent; some are purists, some are contemporary. Irrespective of their nature and the art form they patronise, these festivals have created a cultural renaissance of sorts—talent is aplenty, art is at its glorious best, and most importantly, has become innovative and inclusive. Here we take a look at four festivals that present some of India's finest performing art forms.

Chennai Music and Dance Festival

600 artists, 1200 *kutcheries* (music concerts), 50+ *sabhas* (organizing clubs), bigger than Edinburgh's Woodstock Festival, one of the largest cultural events in the world—these are some of the epithets used to describe the grandeur of the Chennai Music and Dance Festival that begins mid-December. Spread over six weeks, this annual extravaganza that began in the late 1920s primarily featured only Carnatic music concerts (vocal and instrumental), lectures, and discussions. Over the years, it has ceased to be solely a platform for legendary

and upcoming artistes to showcase their musical prowess. Now it has expanded its agenda to include classical dance forms, *harikathas*, and on some occasions, even drama.

Almost every neighborhood *sabha* comes alive during the 'season' and has its own brand of *rasikas* (fans). But if you are a newcomer, it is mandatory to visit The Music Academy—the must-perform place for most



artistes; the Narada Gana Sabha—favourite of the *rasikas*; and Thyaga Brahma Gana Sabha—one of the oldest and a strong supporter of the *harikatha* form. The festival's popularity—despite critics crying hoarse about quantity replacing quality—is evident from the fact that NRIs and music lovers from other cities now schedule a visit to Chennai during the season. As important as the concert is the food served at these venues—each one has a specialty and intermissions are devoted to grabbing a plate of the best *bondas*, *kozhakattais* and *Mysore pak*—music and food for the soul.



Konark Dance Festival

The sound of *ghungroo* (anklets with bells), flute and *pakhauj* (a percussion instrument) fill the air with mellifluous notes during the Konark Dance Festival. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, a tribute to the all-pervading Sun, ancient ruins of a magnificently carved

Goa Carnival

A mythical carnival king, a sea of colourfully costumed dancers, masked performers, floats, non-stop music (the guitars strum ceaselessly!), dance and fabulous food, and a party that goes on for three long days—this in a nutshell describes the annual Goa Carnival. Carnivals across the world generally happen just before the Lent period (February–March) when the faithful abstain from rich food, meat, and sweets. The carnival in Goa was introduced by the Portuguese and the modern-day version incorporates the flavour of the country in its cuisine, parade, and floats.

King Momo starts the celebrations on Fat Saturday by ordering his subjects to make merry. As he drives past them in a colourful float, people greet him with shouts of ‘Viva Carnival’. In earlier days, people used to indulge in a raucous celebration by throwing flour, eggs, fruits, and water at each other—today these are replaced by more prosaic colours!

The parade starts from Panjim and moves to places such as Margao, Ponda, Vasco, Curchorem, Shiroda, and Mapusa. Floats depict characters from popular nursery rhymes, street plays, dances, folk songs, and impromptu acts mocking the establishment. Though celebrated before Lent, the carnival has no religious connotations and attracts travellers from India and abroad. The flamboyant red-and-black dance and a play-cum-dance song of Mussol are must-see features of the carnival. And last love their

are must-see features of but not the least, Goans food and this carnival offers them the perfect excuse to dish out some of the most delectable dishes. Eat, sing, dance and be merry.



Natyanjali— Chidambaram

Mythology tells us that Lord Shiva performed *Ananda Thandavam* (dance of eternal bliss) at Chidambaram and so he is worshipped as *Nataraja* (the Lord who dances) at the temple there. Every year, around February–March, dancers from across the world congregate here to perform *natya anjali* (an offering of dance) to the Cosmic Dancer, expressing their devotion and faith. The five-day festival begins on *Maha Sivaratri* and close to 1,000 artistes practising various dance forms such as Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, Koodiyattam, and Mohiniyattam, perform in the *prakara* (outer part around the temple sanctum) of this 1000-year-old, gold-roofed shrine. A performance here is considered an honour and a blessing, and many young dancers clamour to have their *arangetram* (first performance) during this festival. A fine example of Chola, Vijayanagara and Pallava architecture, the eastern *gopuram* (tower) of the temple has all the 108 *karnams* (postures) of Bharatanatyam sculpted on it. Organised by the Natyanjali Trust and the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, this festival aims to spread the spirit of ‘unity in diversity’ through dance.

stone chariot—the Sun Temple forms the backdrop of this scintillating dance festival. It is a soul-stirring moment for artistes to present their talent in such surroundings. Odissi, Bharatanatyam, Manipuri, Kathakali, and Sattriya dancers display their skill and mastery under the stars, drenched in silvery moonlight. The festival celebrates dance in all its forms and styles. In recent years, performances of Gotipua and Mahari dance forms, from which Odissi is said to have originated, have been featured. The sight of elegantly dressed dancers moving rhythmically with grace against a life-like monument is sure to leave an indelible mark in your mind.



Glazed *blue decor* from Jaipur

Behind the pink façades of Rajasthan's capital lie the cerulean treasures of Jaipur Blue Pottery—an art form unique to the city.

Text: R Nalini



14

When one hears the name 'Jaipur', the first association that comes to mind is 'pink' city. But it is another colour that dominates the embellished interiors of the city's beautiful pink structures—a vivid cobalt blue.

As you stroll through the magnificent Rambagh Palace or the city's narrow markets, exquisite pieces of Jaipur Blue Pottery will hold your attention. Today, this art has earned the much-deserved Geographical Indication tag, bringing distinction to Jaipur, its people, and its rich art-and-craft scene. Blue pottery's journey so far spans many centuries and has been complex, yet interesting.



Trails of cobalt



The cobalt oxide found in Persia (now Iran) caught the fancy of China, which had by then discovered porcelain. Persian emperor Shah Abbas I—having observed the rising popularity of porcelain and wanting to exploit their interest in cobalt—invited 300 Chinese potters to teach their craft to local artists. When the artisans found that porcelain could not be made from Persian soil, they (along with native artists) came up with an innovative alternative. And blue pottery, the only kind that uses no clay, was born!

The secrets of blue pottery travelled to India with the Mughals, via Kashmir to Delhi, and adorned mosques, palaces, tombs, etc. Jaipur had its first brush with

Royal renaissance

In the 1960s, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (the first Chairperson of the All India Handicrafts Board) and Maharani Gayatri Devi worked towards reviving blue pottery. They founded an institute for Indian art forms, and enrolled eminent artist Kripal Singh Shekhawat to head the department of blue pottery.

Shekhawat, known for his illustrations in the Constitution of India (original document), introduced new designs and included green, pink, yellow, and brown, to the only-blue palette. These innovations brought in an essential turning point in the life of blue pottery. Shekhawat, who is called the 'Father of Blue Pottery', received the Padma Shri (1974) for reviving this lost art.

Crafting tradition

The blue pottery process is intense:

The dough—a mixture of ground quartz, green glass, fuller's earth, borax, gum, and water—is pressed into moulds. Usually, two to four separate moulds are made, joined together, and smoothed to form a single urn/vase. Once the piece dries, talented artists paint traditional motifs (lotus, animals, birds, and scenes from the life of the Hindu god Krishna) with firm strokes, and finally dip the painted piece in clear glaze. It may surprise you to know that the cobalt oxide looks dark brown when being painted. But when it is heated in an earthen kiln for about six hours and cooled for 3-4 days thereafter, the cobalt glistens in its final vibrant 'Persian' blue avatar.

Making it to the art-shopper's and tourist's list are blue pottery treasures such as urns, vases, tea sets, wall plates, animal/bird figurines, candle holders, trinket boxes, door knobs/handles, beaded jewellery, tiles, and much more.



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blue pottery in the 17th century, but it was only during the reign of Sawai Ram Singh II, a patron of the arts, that blue pottery made Jaipur its home.

Incidentally, at a kite-flying event, Sawai Ram Singh II was impressed by two participants—Churaman and Kaluram—who brought down other kites with much ease. When they told him they had coated the kite strings with the same glass powder they used for pottery, the king invited them to the art school he had set up. However, while the two artists practised blue pottery there and their families continued their legacy for nearly a century, they never parted with trade secrets. Eventually, the art form declined in Jaipur.

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