

# The Pioneer EXOTICA

TRAVEL & LIFESTYLE

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OCTOBER 2025 | ₹50

## *the ramayana trail*

Explore Sri Lanka's epic sites  
in a journey tied to India's faith

*Plus*

**AUTUMN SONATA**  
**MAGIC CALLED MALDIVES**  
**AN AUSTRIAN**  
**ALPINE ADVENTURE**

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## TWO DECADES OF CURIOSITY, CULTURE AND ADVENTURE



"THROUGH THE YEARS, WE HAVE  
CONTINUED TO CHRONICLE  
JOURNEYS THAT AWAKEN THE  
SENSES, UNCOVER HIDDEN GEMS  
AND CONNECT CULTURES.  
THIS ISSUE IS A TRIBUTE TO  
THAT LEGACY"

Nineteen years ago, *Exotica* set out to capture the world in its colours, flavours and stories. And today, as we celebrate our 19th anniversary, that spirit of discovery continues stronger than ever. Back then, there were very few travel magazines in India, and especially those that wove lifestyle into the way we travel the world, making every issue of *Exotica* a window to the world for curious readers.

We wove in experiences and made ourselves seen at the top-end hotels – *Exotica* came to be the exclusive in-room magazine for luxury hospitality groups such as Taj Hotels, The Lalit Hotels, ITC Hotels and Hyatt Hotels. It was later made available to all at the airport lounges, popular bookstores and by subscription. Our reach extended across India. It was sheer luxury woven into travel and with style. Through the years, we have continued to chronicle journeys that awaken the senses, uncover hidden gems and connect cultures. This issue is a tribute to that legacy.

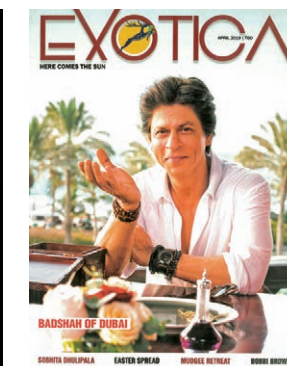
Inside, we trace the legendary Ramayana trail across Sri Lanka, where faith and folklore intertwine, indulge in festive feasting that celebrates local traditions that come with this season, soak in the beauty of the Maldives and take Mercedes Benz on a drive through Austria's breathtaking landscapes. Each story, each frame, is a reminder of why we fell in love with travel in the first place.

Over nearly two decades, *Exotica* has been more than a magazine — it has been a companion for the curious, the wanderers and the storytellers among us. From printed pages that were flipped by eager fingers to the digital spaces where readers explored with us, our journey mirrors the way we have evolved in the way we travel itself. We have witnessed seasons change, destinations transform and cultures blossom, all the while remaining committed to bringing authentic experiences to our readers.

As we look back in nostalgia, we are grateful to our readers, contributors and partners who have travelled this path with us and made us proud of our publication. This anniversary is not just a celebration of our years of being, but that of shared memories. Here's to many more journeys together — because the world is still waiting to be explored and *Exotica* will be there to guide you.

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 delectable\_reveries



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COVER PICTURE : @ESA

## VOLUME 18 • ISSUE 23

Well preserved and scattered across the island nation, Sri Lanka's sacred sites are a living link to India's legendary epic, Ramayana





# KEEP YOUR SKIN TRAVEL READY

Travelling can be exciting, but your skin often takes a hit. Flights, sun, dry air and shifting weather can leave it feeling tight, dry or looking a bit dull. Conscious skin care before your trip, maintenance while you travel and giving it some attention when you return can help keep it healthy and glowing. Dermatologist **Dr Simal Soin** suggests how to



## PRE-TRAVEL PREP

You can get that travel ready glow with proper hydration, moisturisation and minimal grooming. Make sure you drink enough water in the days leading up to travel. For topical hydration, look for humectants like hyaluronic acid and glycerin, which attract water into the skin before flights. Avoid trying any new products right before your trip to prevent irritation and keep a small face mist or spray handy to refresh your skin during the day.



## HEALTHY SKIN ON THE GO

Apart from staying hydrated, make sure to apply and re-apply sunscreen throughout your trip. Airplanes, sun and shifts in humidity can leave it dry, irritated, or breakout-prone. Airplane cabins have humidity levels as low as 20% (vs. 60% in normal conditions). This explains why skin feels tight, dry or itchy mid-flight. Carrying a barrier-repairing cream with ceramides and fatty acids helps reduce transepidermal water loss (TEWL). Remember, UV rays penetrate airplane windows — so sunscreen during a day flight is not optional. Include lip balm in your carry-on for easy access.



## SKIN RESET POST TRAVEL

Coming back from travel, your skin often needs extra care. Sun exposure, flights and shifting climates can make it dry or irritated. The skin's microbiome may get disrupted by different climates, water and hygiene products. Using calming agents like niacinamide, centella asiatica or probiotics helps rebalance it. Redness and flare-ups after travel often relate to subclinical inflammation. A short course of soothing masks or even dermatologist-guided anti-inflammatory creams can help reset the skin.



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# FALL CELEBRATIONS AROUND THE WORLD THAT YOU MUST ATTEND

Global travel and festivals go hand in hand. They hold the power to turn every journey into an experience that stays in your memories long after it ends. Fall season opens doors to cultures, breathtaking sights and celebrations around the world. Whether music, lights or traditions, we shortlist some events that hold the promise of making stories worth collecting and memories worth cherishing.



## FESTIVAL KREOL, SEYCHELLES

**Venue:** Anse Aux Pins, Mahe

**Dates:** October 3, 2025 - October 31, 2025

Thinking of a trip to East Africa anytime soon? Consider Sechelles. Here's a glimpse into the country's most vibrant cultural celebration. Every year during the last week of October, as the south-east monsoon winds bid farewell, colour and joy fill the air as the Festival Kreol unfolds. It is a week-long celebration honouring the nation's rich African, Asian and European heritage. Visitors are treated to a full spectrum of Creole culture, including *Lafoli lanmod*, a fashion show featuring *batik parreos* and tropical styles. Food fairs serve Creole delicacies. Festival Kreol offers an unforgettable immersion into the spirit of Seychelles.



## BERLIN FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS, GERMANY

**Venue:** Berlin

**Dates:** October 8, 2025 - October 15, 2025

Held in the heart of the German in capital, the Berlin Festival of Lights transforms the city into a mesmerising open-air gallery. Berlin's iconic landmarks — from the Brandenburg Gate and TV Tower to Bebelplatz and the Berlin Cathedral — are bathed in dazzling light art, video



projections and 3D mapping. Whether you choose to wander amid the glow of Potsdamer Platz, capture reflections on Museum Island or simply enjoy the shared wonder of illumination, the Festival of Lights is a magical blend of art, travel and urban charm.



## OOC OM BOC FESTIVAL, VIETNAM

**Venue:** Phu Loi Ward, Soc Trang Ward, Bach Dang Square, April 30 Park

**Date:** November 3, 2025 - November 5, 2025

Adventure sports mixed with the fun of festivities, and that too with travel, Ooc Om Boc Festival is one of Vietnam's most happening cultural celebrations. It is a thanksgiving festival held annually by the Khmer community in the Mekong Delta, marking the full moon of the 10th lunar month when the harvest is gathered. Central to the festivity is the thrilling *Ngo* boat race decorated in traditional Khmer patterns that compete on rivers by teams of rowers. Alongside, is the moon worship ceremony, where culture and community come together to create memories for travellers.



## AUSTIN CITY LIMITS MUSIC FESTIVAL, USA

**Venue:** Zilker Park, Austin, Texas

**Dates:** October 3-5, 2025 and October 10-12, 2025

With the lineup including Sabrina Carpenter, Hozier and Killers, the sky becomes a stage of anticipation. The Austin City Limits Music Festival returns to Zilker Park across two October weekends, offering more than 100 performances across multiple stages. The diverse bill also includes Luke Combs, The Strokes, John Summit, Doechii and many more. Over two weekends, the festival blends pop, indie, rock, country and electronic acts into a lively celebration. An absolute must for the music lovers, they can plan their travel keeping the festival in mind and catch the amazing vibes.



## AYODHYA DEEPOTSAV, INDIA

**Venue:** Ram Ki Paidi, Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh

**Date:** October 19, 2025

Creating a Guinness World Record year after year, The *Ayodhya Deepotsav* is an annual festival of lights celebrating the return of Lord Ram to his kingdom of Ayodhya after a 14-year exile. Held in the holy city of Ayodhya in India, it culminates in a grand illumination with lakhs of oil *diyas*, creating a spectacular display. Lakhs of people come together to celebrate return of Lord Ram. This year, the record is set to be broken by lighting more than 25 lakh diyas. Such festivals connect you to the culture of a place and excite your itineraries.







Travel is not only about ticking off a destination off your list, but about creating a strong connection with a place and immersing yourself in its cultural beauty. Every corner of the world is rooted in traditions, stories and expressions that shape its character and give you the feeling of closeness to a place. To truly experience

the essence of a country, every traveller must dive into that cultural pool and emerge with a deeper understanding of its spirit. We turn our gaze to the soul of South America — Argentina. From music and dance to cuisine and history, Argentina offers a kaleidoscope of cultural experiences to travellers.

ARGENTINA IS WHERE RHYTHM, FLAVOUR AND TRADITION MEET, INVITING TRAVELLERS TO LIVE ITS CULTURE AS MUCH AS SEE IT



#### RHYTHMS OF TANGO

No cultural journey through Argentina is complete without experiencing the sensual magic of the tango. Born in Buenos Aires in the late nineteenth century, this iconic dance was a living expression of Argentine identity. Travellers can witness its drama and elegance across the city. You can opt for the intimate ambience of El Beso in San Nicolás, the bohemian halls of La Catedral Club, or the atmosphere of Salon Canning in Palermo, which boasts a contemporary energy. To watch tango is to glimpse Argentina's heartbeat and to dance it, even as a beginner, is to step into the country's soul.







**SPIRIT OF THE GAUCHO**

The gaucho remains a national symbol of Argentina, embodying freedom and an unbreakable bond with the land. Beyond their role as skilled horsemen and cattle herders, gauchos represent a lifestyle that values simplicity, pride and tradition. Travellers can experience this living heritage by visiting *estancias* — working ranches where horsemanship, folk music and hearty *asado* feasts unfold in authentic surroundings. In towns such as San Antonio de Areco, gaucho heritage is celebrated with colourful parades, rodeo displays and storytelling that transports visitors back to an earlier time, when life on the Pampas shaped the spirit of Argentina.



**SIP AND RAISE A GLASS**

Do you love wines? Argentina has you covered in the most unforgettable way. Beyond being one of the world's leading producers, the country turns wine into an experience to be lived apart from simply being tasted. In the sunlit vineyards of Mendoza or the lofty slopes of Salta, wine flows hand in hand with culture, hospitality and celebration. Sharing a glass here means embracing a tradition that binds families and friends often during long meals that stretch joyfully into the night. Visiting a *bodega* is about sampling vintages and stories of heritage and passion.



**THE RITUAL OF MATE**

Local culture makes its way into everyday life in Argentina with sharing a *mate gourd*. Made from dried *yerba maté* leaves, this earthy infusion is far more than a drink — it is a symbol of hospitality, friendship and belonging. Passed around counterclockwise, sip by sip, the tradition invites travellers to step into the heart of Argentina's social life. To be welcomed into this circle is to feel the warmth of the country itself, and visitors can even join local families or cultural tours to learn the art of preparing *mate* alongside *empanadas*.



PASSED AROUND COUNTER-CLOCKWISE, SIP BY SIP, THE TRADITION INVITES TRAVELLERS TO STEP INTO THE HEART OF ARGENTINA'S SOCIAL LIFE



# ARCHITECTURAL MARVELS

Travel often takes us to places where history, culture and design intertwine, creating destinations that are far more than a place to rest. Around the world, there are extraordinary hotels that stand as living works of art. From daring modern creations to heritage landmarks steeped in

romance and tradition, these stays are designed to fascinate and comfort. Each of these architectural gems invites travellers to experience luxury and immerse themselves in stories told through design and cultural heritage. We bring you a curated collection of hotels that have made their mark architecturally.



## BAMBU INDAH, UBUD, BALI

Featured in the TIME Magazine's World's Greatest Places 2024, tucked away in the lush heart of Ubud's jungle, Bambu Indah is harmony between architecture and nature. Designed with an ethos of sustainability, the property is crafted almost entirely from bamboo and other local materials, creating a setting that feels at once organic and otherworldly. Imagine waking in a cocoon shaped bamboo walls framed with uninterrupted views of the jungle and every detail has been shaped by hand.

The architecture celebrates Balinese craftsmanship, combining traditional techniques with bold, contemporary forms that flow seamlessly into their surroundings.

For travellers drawn to eco-conscious escapes, Bambu Indah offers an architectural journey into the heart of Bali's wild beauty.



## CORINTHIA BUCHAREST, ROMANIA

The Corinthia Grand Hotel du Boulevard brings a touch of Parisian grace to the cultural heart of Romania. First opened in 1873, this landmark hotel has long been a symbol of refinement, once hosting prestigious art exhibitions featuring masters such as Lucas Cranach. Its striking façade showcases the architectural brilliance of Alexandru Orăscu, one of Romania's most celebrated architects. As one of the country's oldest hotels, it carries with it the grandeur of history with sophistication of modern luxury. While you roam around the hotel you are met with romance at every turn including gleaming chandeliers, opulent interiors of a bygone era. For travellers with a love of history it is an experience.



## INTEL AMSTERDAM ZAANDAM, HOLLAND, NETHERLANDS

Rising eleven storeys high, the Inntel Amsterdam Zaandam is an architectural wonder unlike any other in Europe. Designed by Dutch architect Wilfried van Winden, the hotel is a striking composition of nearly seventy traditional Dutch houses, stacked playfully together in four shades of the iconic Zaan region green. Imagine standing before this façade – where centuries of Dutch tradition have been reimagined into a bold statement. Each detail feels both fancy and purposeful.

Inside, the design continues to surprise, reflecting a spirit that is uniquely Zaandam yet welcoming to travellers from every corner of the world. For those

seeking a stay that is as memorable as the destination itself, the Inntel Zaandam offers a catchy thrill of modern design.



## HOTEL MARQUÉS DE RISCAL, ELCIEGO, SPAIN

Defined by architect Frank O Gehry as a marvellous creature, with its hair flying in all directions, the daring, chic and unforgettable – the Hotel Marqués de Riscal is the kind of place that stops you in your tracks. This avant-garde masterpiece is where 21st-century design meets the timeless tradition of Spanish winemaking.

Travellers would arrive in Elciego, the heart of Rioja's wine country and catch the first glimpse of the hotel's sweeping steel and titanium ribbons glinting in the sunlight. Its asymmetric walls and undulating forms appear almost alive, reflecting the bold signature Gehry leaves on every creation. Step inside and the wonder continues.

The interiors echo the same daring spirit as the façade, making the hotel not just a place to stay, but a living work of art. For travellers who crave both culture and indulgence, the Hotel Marqués de Riscal offers a rare experience.





# THE RAMAYANA TRAIL

The mythic trail of Sri Lanka is more than a pilgrimage. It is an odyssey that connects faith, folklore and geography, letting you walk in the footsteps of gods and kings.

Ruchira Hoon travels through the island's sacred routes



Sigiriya or the Lion Rock in Sri Lanka where Ravana is believed to have kept Sita captive

Like most Indian children of my generation, I grew up on the tales of Ramayana. My grandmother would take time out to narrate stories of Ram, read out from texts, segue into mini tales about Hanuman and tell us about Dronagiri mountain and *Sanjeevani booti*. To her credit, she was the daughter of an Ayurvedic doctor, so was very interested in the medicinal properties of all herbs.

Growing up in Delhi, also meant that we would see the Ram Leela year on year, whether it was the version at Sangeet Natak Akademi or at the Ram Leela Grounds. For us, Dussehra always meant watching the stories of Ram, Sita and Ravana come alive on stage with beautiful sets and then in the second half taken over by forest and monkeys or the *vaanar sena*. And then of course were the exhaustive episodes of Ramanand Sagar's Ramayana on Doordarshan that had us glued to the television every Sunday.

So you can just about imagine how ingrained this part of our history became a part of my life. To be able to go and visit and learn about the places, the caves, the temples — bringing to life the colourful pictures of my childhood imagination — became part nostalgia and part learning.

Which is perhaps why, I have always been fascinated with Sri Lanka — a land that's so near and yet so far. A land where Ravana had a beautiful kingdom, lush and well-ruled. A land where Lord Shiva was worshipped. A land that was ever so prosperous.

Having been to the country a few times over the last decade, I can safely say that Sri Lanka is all that and more. The food is incredible, the people, kind and the history — so rich. And if you're lucky to have a window seat, while flying to Sri Lanka — you can even spot the Ram Setu — the bridge that Ram built with Hanuman and army or the *vaanar sena*. The stones (possibly corals) are said to have 'Ram' still written on them and stayed afloat making it easy to crossover to the island.

Peppered with history in all four directions, there are over 20 historical sites that have the indelible mark of the Ramayana intertwined with local legends. Whether it's the Sigiriya Rock Fortress — in Sigiriya one of the places where Ravana is believed to have kept Sita captive (which is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site) or the Dolukanda Sanjeevani Mountain in Kurunegala district, where Hanuman dropped a part of the Dronagiri



TO BE ABLE TO GO AND VISIT AND LEARN ABOUT THE PLACES, THE CAVES, THE TEMPLES — BRINGING BACK CHILDHOOD — BECAME PART NOSTALGIA AND PART LEARNING





SEETHA AMMAN TEMPLE WHICH IS ON THE SITE OF THE ASHOK VATIKA, THE GARDEN IN WHICH RAVANA HELD SITA CAPTIVE. IT IS ALSO THE SITE WHERE HANUMAN MET SITA FOR THE FIRST TIME WHILE SEARCHING FOR HER



mountain still thrives with some unusual herbs which are mostly only found in the Himalayas.

This 7,000 year old intertwined history between Bharat and Sri Lanka is stunning to say the least. As a part of the Ramayana trail, here are my top places that are an absolute must visit.

NUWARA ELIYA

Located in the central mountains, Nuwara Eliya (and its surroundings) have three of the most historical nuanced places, including Seetha Amman Temple — which is on the site of the Ashok Vatika, the garden in which Ravana held Sita captive. It is also the site where Hanuman met Sita for the first time while searching for her. The gardens are now called the Hakgala Botanical Gardens and is also connected to the Sita Jharna or Sita Eliya — the stream where she is believed to have bathed. The temple also sees a giant footprint, believed to be Hanuman’s. A few kilometers away is Divurumpola, where Sita performed the *Agni Pariksha* to prove her chastity after she was rescued and reunited with Ram.

But one of the most important sites is the Sri Lankadheeshwar Temple, believed to be the place where Lord Shiva, Lord Brahma and Lord Vishnu appeared when Meghnad (Ravana’s son) performed the *Shiva Tapa* and *Nikumbala Yagya*. It was here that he was granted super natural powers by Lord Shiva.



CHILLAW

Situated in the Puttalam district, Chillaw houses two of the most important temples from the Ramayana trail — Munneswaram temple and the Manavari temple, both of which are believed to be in existence since 1000 CE. The Munneswaram temple is the oldest temple in Sri Lanka, it is believed to be the place where Ram prayed to Lord Shiva to help defeat Ravana and also atone for killing a Brahmin, since Ravana was one. He was advised by Lord Shiva to install five lingams or the *Pancha Ishwarams*, the first of which is here and subsequently the next one at spot where the Manavari temple is. The Ramalingam is one of two lingams in the world named after Ram, the other being Rameshwaram.







ELLA

A small town in Badulla District of Uva province, Ella is most famous for the Ravana Caves and Ravana Falls. Amidst lush tea plantations are manmade caves that open out to larger caves, a sort of secret maze that were built to go from one city

to the other without drawing attention. This is also believed to be a place where Ravana did a lot of *tapa* or deep prayers and meditation. Next to the caves, amidst misty clouds is a 1,080-foot-high waterfall called the Ravana Falls, a very major attraction for trekkers but steeped in rich history.

TRINCOMALEE

One of the most significant part of the trail, Trincomalee on the east coast of Sri Lanka is home to the Thirukoneeshwar Temple or the Temple of a Thousand Pillars which is believed to have been built by Agastya Rishi on the instructions of Lord Shiva who was impressed by Ravana's devotion. Also known as 'Dakshina Kailasa' — this temple is on the same longitude as Mount Kailasa. This is also home to the Kanniya Hot Springs, where Ravana is believed to have struck the ground with his sword to get fresh water to perform rituals pertaining to the last rites of his mother. Seven hot springs are said to have emerged at the spot. Legend also states that this is one of the *Pancha Ishwara lingams*, which Ram installed before his battle with Ravana and that he also stopped here with Sita on his way back to Ayodhya and rested his bow.



SPECIAL MENTIONS

- Dunuwila Lake, located in the Matale District of Sri Lanka, is the spot where Lord Ram is believed to have aimed his final arrow to kill Ravana.
- The Chariot Path in Pussellawa, located in Sri Lanka's central highlands is said to have marks left by Ravana's chariot that are still visible as deep impressions on the grassy land. These impressions appear as parallel tracks.
- Ussangoda National Park where Hanuman's fire led to the red, barren soil seen in Ussangoda today, which is devoid of much vegetation and has a scorched appearance. This unique landscape is attributed to the divine fire that Hanuman supposedly unleashed on Ravana's lands.



TIPS & TRICKS

- This trail can be done in 6-7 days
- Pack your hiking shoes/sneakers
- Make sure you carry clothes that cover your arms and knees for the temples



COLOMBO

Finally at Colombo, or rather the outskirts, sees the Kelaniya Temple or the Kelananiya Raja Maha Viharaya, where Ravana's brother Vibhishan was coronated. This temple is now a very major Buddhist temple which can trace back its history to 543 BC and houses some beautiful paintings and an 18-foot Bodhi-Sattva statue as well as rock art depicting the coronation of King Vibhishana.



# FEASTS OF FAITH, FESTIVALS OF INDIA

From Punjabi *kanjak* to Bengali *bhog*, from Chennai's *sundal* to Gujarat's *garba* nights, Vernika Awal takes you on a journey through cities where food becomes the heart of celebration

Festivals in India are never just dates on a calendar. They are seasons — of sound, of scent, of streets swelling with colour. They linger in the taste of food that is eaten together, in the rhythm of drums or temple bells that echo late into the night. For me, festivals have always been more than rituals. They have been milestones of memory, teaching me belonging in every city I've called home.

I was born into a Punjabi household, where *Navratri* meant the kitchen itself seemed to fast and feast with us. Mornings were scented with roasted *makhana* and cardamom. Afternoons held bowls of *samak* rice steaming gently, light and warm. And evenings — my favourite — brought the deep hiss of *kuttu ki puris* frying, their earthy aroma filling the house. On *kanjak*, the courtyard would come alive. Little girls, their braids tied with red ribbons, anklets chiming as they walked in, lined up shyly as we placed in front of them plates heaped with *halwa*, *puri*, and *kala chana*. Their laughter, the scrape of

steel plates, the collective prayer whispered through food — this was devotion I could touch, taste and carry with me.

Later, life stretched out like a railway map, pulling me into new cities. Each one carried its own soundscape, its own festival rhythm.

In Delhi, *Navratri* was everywhere — from temples that rang with *aarti* to the buzz of *ramleelas* unfolding in neighbourhood parks. The streets smelled of *chaat* — tangy tamarind and fried *papdi* mixing with the sweetness of *jalebis*, hot from the *kadh*i, syrup dripping down fingers. Here, I saw devotion spill from shrines into open-air stages, blending theatre, prayer and feast into one.

In Mumbai, Ganesh Chaturthi arrived with a roar. The thrum of drums carried across the sea breeze, idols as tall as houses wound through narrow lanes, and the entire city seemed to march to one beat. But what caught me most were the food stalls that sprang up like lanterns in the dark — steaming *modaks* with jaggery and coconut, *vada pavs* stacked high, and *malai kulfi* melting faster than one

IN DELHI, NAVRATRI IS EVERYWHERE — FROM TEMPLES THAT RING WITH AARTI TO THE BUZZ OF RAMLEELAS UNFOLDING IN NEIGHBOURHOOD PARKS. DEVOTION SPILLS FROM SHRINES INTO OPEN-AIR STAGES, BLENDING THEATRE, PRAYER AND FEAST INTO ONE



Kanjak prasad plates heaped with halwa, puri and kala chana make for a collective prayer that whispers through food.

could eat. It was chaos, but it was also communion.

Bangalore was gentler. I remember temple courtyards quiet in the morning, jasmine garlands swaying from wooden stalls, and the soft thud of bare feet on stone floors. Here, *prasadam* was the heart of festivity — tamarind rice that glistened with sesame oil, pongal slow-cooked until it was almost creamy, *laddus* pressed with ghee that melted as soon as they touched the tongue. It was humble, yet sacred.

And then there was Chennai, where *Navratri* took a form entirely its own. I still remember the first time I walked into a Tamil home and saw a *golu* — wooden steps lined with dolls, myth layered with artistry. Each evening, women carried out trays of *sundal* — chickpeas or green gram sautéed with





mustard seeds, curry leaves and grated coconut. At first, I wondered how something so simple could be festive. But sitting in a room filled with music, stories and neighbours exchanging plates, I understood. Here, food was not indulgence but offering, a gift of hospitality, a gentle, everyday devotion. And then, life brought me to Bengal through marriage — and Durga Puja rewrote everything I thought I knew about scale, spectacle and celebration.

My first visit to Maddox Square was overwhelming in the most intoxicating way. The *pandal* glowed like a jewel under the Kolkata night sky. Groups of people sat on the grass, their *adda* spilling into the early hours, plates of food balancing on their laps. I tasted my first *kobiraji* there — the crackle of its batter giving way to tender fish within — and it felt like a revelation. Syrupy *pithe* stuck to my fingertips, queues for *biryani* curled endlessly along streets and in every corner, the city hummed with hunger and joy. *Bagbazar Sarbojonin*, by contrast, felt like stepping into history. In that older, northern part of the city, the *bhog* had been the same for decades — *khichuri*, *labra*, *chutney* and *payesh* ladled onto leaf plates, served twice daily to anyone who came. Sitting shoulder to shoulder with strangers, I felt the weight of continuity, of traditions that refused to waver. At



IN MUMBAI, THE THRUM OF DRUMS DURING GANESH CHATURTHI CARRY ACROSS THE SEA BREEZE, IDOLS AS TALL AS HOUSES WOUND THROUGH NARROW LANES, AND THE ENTIRE CITY SEEMS TO MARCH TO ONE BEAT



*Sovabajar Rajbari*, the old aristocratic home still carried on its *puja* with a kind of stoic grace. Here, I realised festivals could be both public spectacle and intimate inheritance, both loud and quiet at once.

And then Gujarat — oh, Gujarat! If Bengal was a storm of food and art, Gujarat was a nine-night dance of faith. *Navratri* here meant *ghagras* swirling under moonlit skies, *dandiya* sticks clashing in rhythm, and music rising louder with every beat. But just as vivid were the foods that sustained the dancers — *sabudana khichdi* flecked with peanuts, *rajira puris* puffed golden, *farali* patties crisp and comforting, *singhare ka halwa* fragrant with ghee. At midnight, when hunger came calling, Ahmedabad's streets turned into feasting grounds: steaming *khichu* seasoned with green chilli, fiery *bhel* tossed in giant steel bowls, *jalebis* coiled straight into sugar syrup from the *kadhai*. Here, devotion and appetite were inseparable, the night a carnival of both.

Sometimes I think my life has been stitched together by these sights and sounds, these tastes that taught me belonging. Being Punjabi by birth, married into a Bengali family, and having lived across so many Indian cities, I've grown to see festivals as a mirror of India itself: diverse, complex, yet bound by one constant — the way food turns faith into something tangible.

For me, every *puri* fried in my mother's kitchen, every *sundal* passed across a Chennai threshold, every leaf-plate *bhog* in Kolkata, every *jalebi* twirled in Gujarat — they all carry the same truth. That festivals are not just markers of religion or season but acts of sharing. They are the times when kitchens open wider, when strangers become companions at meals, when food becomes the language of togetherness. That is why, no matter which city I have lived in, joy in India has always tasted the same: warm, generous and eaten together.

#### SERVING TOGETHERNESS

From *jalebis* on Delhi streets to *kuttu ki puris* in a Punjabi kitchen, Mumbai's *modaks* and *vada pavs*, Bangalore's *ghee-laden laddus*, Chennai's *sundal*, Kolkata's *khichuri* and first bite of *kobiraji*, to Gujarat's midnight *sabudana khichdi* — festivals across India prove that food is devotion, memory and togetherness.





# AUTUMN SONATA

As leaves turn gold and amber, Asia transforms into a canvas of colour. Every corner is a visual delight and tells a magical story of the season's fleeting beauty



A land of timeless beauty, Kashmir enchants visitors in every season, yet autumn lends it a charm. Known for its beauty throughout the year, a burst of fiery reds, brilliant golds, and vibrant oranges pop in the month of fall. From the golden chinars of the Kashmir University Campus to the picturesque view of a bridge over the Jhelum River, the colours play in the fall of Kashmir's view and wraps the valley in a warm and poetic glow.








Autumn in Japan is one of the country's most breathtaking seasons. From the steps leading to the great Buddha, where women in traditional kimono stroll beneath towering trees, to the hues around Nikko's Lake Chuzenji, every scene feels serene. Autumn invites travellers to embrace *momiji-gari* — tradition of 'hunting red leaves'.



Seoul in autumn treats the travellers to the gradient of gold and crimson. Ginkgo trees, like this 500-year-old one at the Myeongnyundang Lecture Hall of Sungkyunkwan University, burst into fiery hues, creating a breathtaking view with the canopy of leaves. The Hyangwonjeong Pavilion at Gyeongbokgung Palace too reflects its beauty.





# MAGIC CALLED MALDIVES

A popular destination among the honeymooners, this archipelago actually holds so much more. It is where nature, adventure, culture and quiet reflection weave seamlessly together. **Abhi Singhal** submits to the charm of this magical retreat

**A**zure seas that reflect in the colour of the skies and golden sands that you can sink into, Maldives is a destination straight out of dreams. Consisting of nearly 1,200 coral islands (grouped into 26 natural atolls scattered across the Indian Ocean), this archipelago is home to local communities that are spread over 200 atolls. The others remain untouched or

have been designed into dreamy island resorts.

Shades of blue draw me in as I look out of my airplane window. The waters shimmer like liquid glass, stretching endlessly, as if tempting me to dive straight in. So much that by the time I land in Malé, serenity has filled my heart already. At Velana International Airport, I head straight to the jetty where

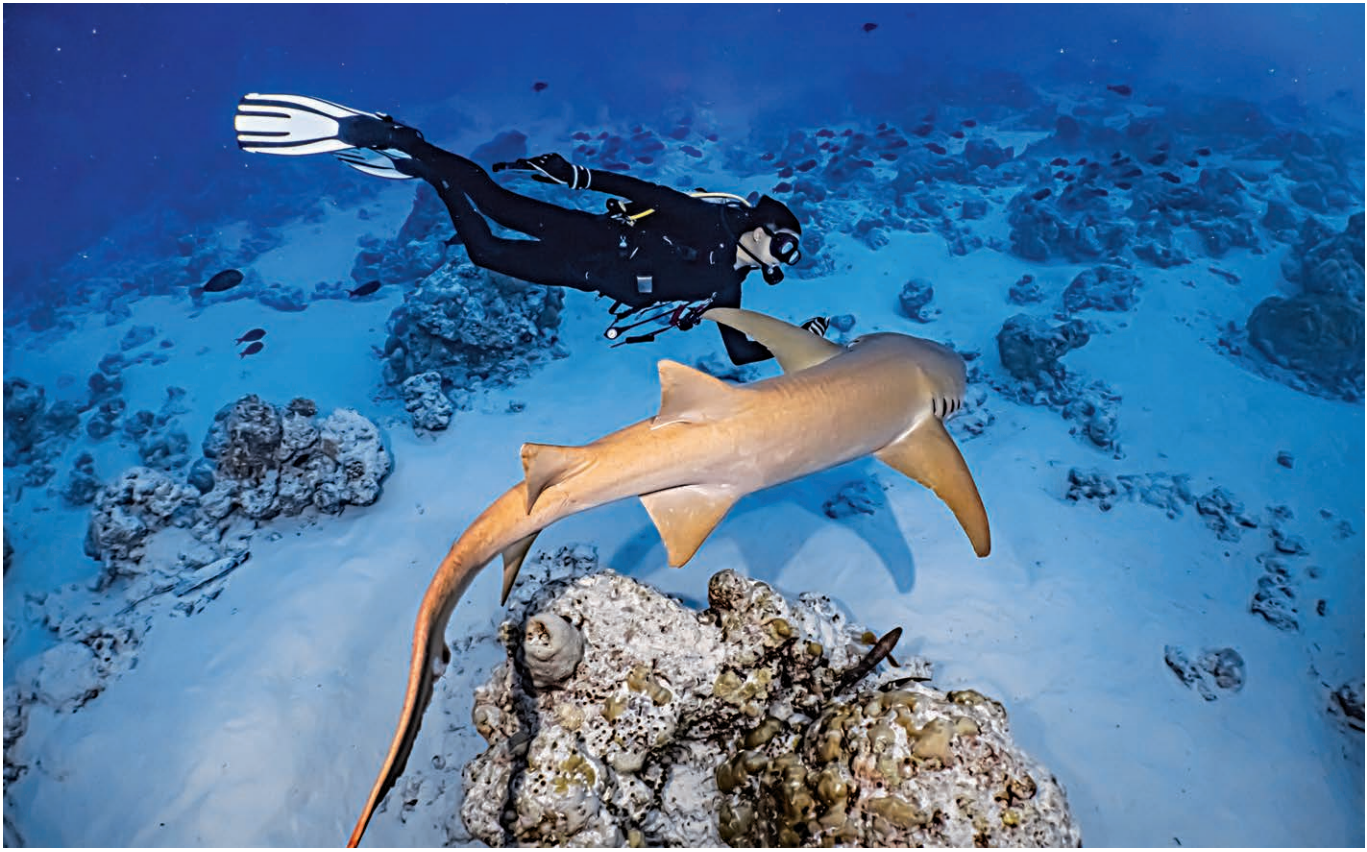
a speedboat awaits to take me to my final destination – an island resort.

Maldives spoils you pretty with the choice of resorts that it has to offer. The concept of one island, one resort gives it a distinct edge when it comes to defining the character

of your stay – each of this resort is private, designed to offer an exclusive experience to its guests. Each built on the base that promotes sustainable tourism, mindful of its flora and fauna and preserving nature in its true form is a given. The best part – there is something

Consisting of nearly 1,200 coral islands that are grouped into 26 natural atolls scattered across the Indian Ocean, this archipelago is a home to local communities that are spread over 200 atolls. The others are designed into island resorts.





**SNORKELLING IN THE MALDIVES**

The Maldives is one of the world's best snorkelling destinations in Asia, with rich coral reefs just steps from shore. Expect encounters with baby sharks, turtles, stingrays and schools of rainbow fish. Resorts in Maldives offer guided sessions and equipment rentals, making it easy for beginners to explore the underwater wonders safely.

that suits every pocket and fits every budget.

A warm welcome awaits me as I touch the shores of OBLU XPERIENCE Ailafushi, a fifteen minute speedboat ride from the airport. I look dreamily at the beautifully designed villas that line the ocean, every bit welcoming and out of this world. The resort staff is cheerful and friendly and I feel instantly at home. A quick island tour reveals Ailafushi's spirit: corners designed for quiet moments, open spaces alive with music and laughter and everywhere, the endless sea reminds me of where I am.

I check into my water villa that offers me a sweeping view of the ocean. It makes me realise how small is human in front of the vastness of nature. Inside, the décor is a balance of luxury and clean lines, creating a calming space. I pour myself a cup of hot coffee and submit to the calmness that surrounds me.

**UNDERWATER HAVEN**

The Maldives is, above all, an invitation to the ocean. Here, each day begins with anticipation of new adventures like snorkelling, diving, kayaking, jet skiing, parasailing and windsurfing. I get to take my first shot at snorkelling, guided by Ailafushi's trained team that ensures I stay safe as I open myself to an unknown world.

Underwater, it feels as if I have been transported to another universe. Baby sharks swim gracefully around me, unmindful of the humans figuring out a way into their world, stingrays glide like shadows and turtles float with effortless calm. Schools of rainbow-coloured fishes dart in and out of corals. Ailafushi's reef may be modest, but for me, the whole experience is nothing short of magical.



**GOLDEN EVENINGS**

Evenings bring in a different kind of wonder. When in Maldives, you can always hop on a *dhoni*. It is the traditional Maldivian boat with its elegant curved prow, and we set out in hope of a good dolphin sighting. In less than an hour, as if on cue, dolphins leap and twirl around us, as the setting sun paints the sky gold and rose.



When in Maldives, the dolphin cruise is a must. I boarded a *dhoni*, the traditional Maldivian boat with its elegant curved prow, and we set out in hope of a good dolphin sighting. In less than an hour, as if on cue, dolphins leap and twirl around us, as the setting sun paints the sky gold and rose. We clap and cheer as if part of a celebration orchestrated by nature itself. For a while, time seems suspended and I realise these were the moments holidays are truly made for.

**LIFE IS A CELEBRATION**

Food, in the Maldives, is both comfort and discovery. At Ailafushi, buffet meals offer cuisines from across the world, with vegetarian options alongside plentiful seafood and meat. Most resorts offer all-inclusive plans as did this one so you don't have to worry about meals. Maldivian specialities, particularly fresh tuna and coconut-based curries, are a highlight with their delicate

flavours and island freshness.

After sunset, the island transforms into yet another celebration. The poolside turns lively with music filling the air and guests gathering for an evening of drinks and dance. Live bands and DJs make the central bar come alive and the staff ensures the joy never fades. Laughter and clinking of glasses stands out against the silence of the ocean under the stars.

My dinner at Only BLU, Ailafushi's underwater restaurant, makes for yet another memorable experience. Blacktip baby sharks swim past the glass walls, weaving playfully through the reef as the diners dig into the exclusively curated menu designed by the house chefs. Almost as if fine dining has been wrapped in theatre, where cuisine and marine life merge into one unforgettable memory.

**FROM CALM TO ZEN**

It is always a good idea to extend your stay and book two resorts for a wholesome

ONLY BLU, AILAFUSHI'S UNDERWATER RESTAURANT, MAKES FOR YET ANOTHER MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE. BLACKTIP BABY SHARKS SWIM PAST THE GLASS WALLS, WEAVING PLAYFULLY THROUGH THE REEF AS THE DINERS DIG INTO THE EXCLUSIVELY CURATED MENU DESIGNED BY THE HOUSE CHEFS





experience. That is the route I took. My second island haven – OBLU NATURE Helengeli by SENTIDO – is a 40-minute ride by speedboat. If Ailafushi sparkled with social energy, Helengeli exudes peace and the gentle rhythm of nature.

Coconut palms, dense tropical plants and shaded pathways give it a wild, natural charm. Hermit crabs scuttling across the sand and lizards basking in the sun, remind me that here, nature is the true host. My villa, designed with earthy tones and comfort, opens directly onto the beach, where the ocean is just a step away.

Helengeli is celebrated for its house reef and considered one of the best in the Maldives. Snorkelling here is an experience unlike any other. Coral gardens thrive with colour, larger reef fish swim with confidence and even reef sharks circle calmly in the depths. Each dive feels like entering a living gallery, full of wonder. The resort's diving centre makes these explorations seemingly easy, catering to both beginners and experienced divers.

Life here unfolds at an even slower pace. Keep your afternoons for spa. The treatments at this resort are heavenly. I submit to the calm as my therapist works oils of lavender, lemongrass and coconut into my body with the intent of releasing any stress that I may be carrying. A sunset cruise on a *dhoni* is a must

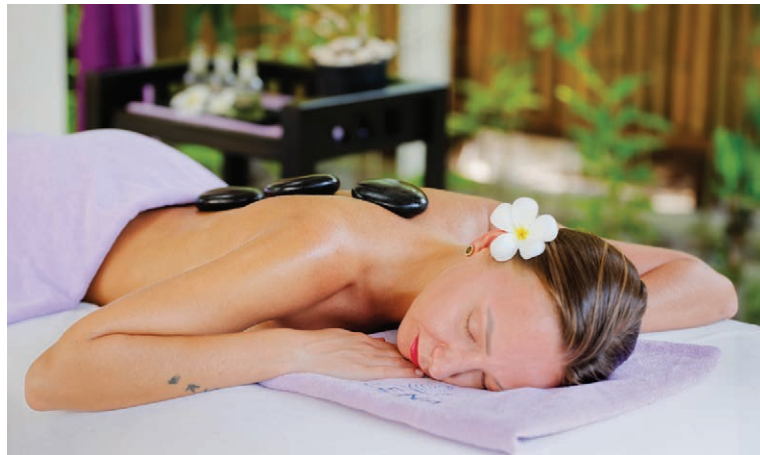
### UNDERWATER DINING

Few places in the world let you enjoy gourmet dining beneath the waves. Restaurants like Only BLU at OBLU XPERIENCE Ailafushi create a surreal experience, where sharks and colourful fish swim past glass walls as you savour exquisite cuisine. It is fine dining with nature's theatre as the backdrop.



### WELLNESS AND SPA

Maldivian resorts are havens for relaxation, with spa treatments inspired by island traditions. Therapies often use coconut, lavender or lemongrass oils to restore balance and calm. Many spas are tucked into tropical greenery or set above the water, offering a soothing escape that complements the rhythm of island life.



to conclude your perfect day. Against the stillness of space, you can watch the sky melt into the ocean. At a distance, soft rhythm of *Boduberu*, traditional Maldivian drumming can be heard, echoing the heartbeat of the islands.

Dinner is equally peaceful and resonates with the island's calm. There are different offerings like food trucks, Indian restaurant, sea food joint within the island where you get global fare with Maldivian twist.

While regulars may say otherwise, Maldives is a destination for a longer stay, especially if you are looking to reset your rhythm. I got to do that. As I head home, I wonder if it was all a dream. I know for sure, I am going to be back, hopefully sooner than later.



MALDIVES IN ITSELF IS LIKE A PACKAGED RETREAT. A RETREAT OF FUN WITH MOMENTS LIKE *BODUBERU*, HAPPINESS YOU FEEL WITH SERENITY, NEW EXPERIENCES WITH UNDERWATER LIFE AND SO MUCH MORE





# AN AUSTRIAN ALPINE ADVENTURE



Avoiding modern high-speed highways and driving through Alpine lakes, meadows and valleys in Austria, **Kushan Mitra** finds out that the hills really do come alive with the sound of music

**T**he Autobahn south of Munich heading towards Austria was covered by a low layer of clouds. Unfortunately, this meant a couple of things. This stretch of Germany's famed Autobahn was 'unrestricted', that is, no speed limit. But the low-lying cloud meant that the overhead gantry was showing a speed limit of 120 kilometres per hour (kph). Fast, but well, when in Germany, you should be able to cruise at 200 kph. It also meant that the clouds covered the spectacular views of the Eastern Alps.

Not to fret though, as I drove along between Munich and Graz, I was heading to the famous Mercedes-Benz G-Wagen Experience Centre in the eastern Austrian town. But instead of flying there, our hosts, Mercedes-Benz India, had decided to arrange a drive for us. And after the short stretch of highway in Germany, the rest of the drive was primarily through the Austrian mountains in the regions of Tyrol and Styria.



## ADAS IN ACTION

It was also a place to put some of Mercedes-Benz' latest automotive technology to the test. While Advanced Drive Assistance Systems (ADAS) are quite the norm these days, even for cars in India, the level of automation in Europe was amazing.





After a few hours of driving through the rain and filling our eyes with beautiful scenery, we needed to fill our stomachs. *Tyrolean Kiachl*, a fried yeasty dough with powdered sugar and strawberry jam along with a hot coffee was just the thing.

FEW ROADS EXEMPLIFY THAT BETTER THAN THE SÄLKPASS — FULL OF TWISTS AND TURNS, YET WIDE ENOUGH FOR HEAVY VEHICLES AND SMOOTH ENOUGH FOR SOMEONE LIKE ME TO HAVE SOME FUN

These reaches of the Alps, shorn of snow in late summer are ancient dating back to a time in Earth's history when the continents were joined together. While this makes road-building in these neck of the woods slightly easier than the tectonically active Himalayas, Austrian road engineers have done a wonderful job over the past couple of centuries carving paths through the mountains. Few roads exemplify that as well as the Sälkpass. Twists and turns, but wide enough for heavy vehicles and smooth enough for someone like me to have some fun.

While winding up the Alpine Pass,

conquered by few armies but tamed by Austrian road engineers, we stopped at a local mountain cabin. After a few hours of driving through the rain and filling our eyes with beautiful scenery, we needed to fill our stomachs. *Tyrolean Kiachl*, a fried yeasty dough with powdered sugar and strawberry jam along with a hot coffee was just the thing. Some freshly brewed coffee was what I needed to give me the energy for the rest of the drive. Not that I needed much inspiration to drive on these roads, but food never does hurt.

The rest of the way to Graz was just as scenic, but what was impressive was driving



WAY TO GRAZ

The rest of the way to Graz was just as scenic, but what was impressive was driving through small Austrian towns with their small town chapels and historic centres. These were also surrounded by fields laid out with solar panels, which felt rather incongruous.



through small Austrian towns with their small town chapels and historic centres. These were also surrounded by fields laid out with solar panels, which felt rather incongruous. A strange mix of the 18th, 19th centuries and the 21st century.

It was also a place to put some of Mercedes-Benz' latest automotive technology to the test. While Advanced Drive Assistance Systems (ADAS) are quite the norm these days, even for cars in India, the level of automation in Europe is amazing. Take for example, Adaptive Cruise Control. Once you switch it on, you can let the car adjust automatically to the speed limit. Between small Alpine villages, the speed limit on those hill roads was 100 kph, but as you approach a built-up area, the limit drops,







THE NATION STATE OF AUSTRIA IS MUCH SMALLER TODAY, BUT THE ROADS ARE TOP-NOTCH. WHILE THERE WERE SEVERAL PATCHES OF ROAD CONSTRUCTION, EVEN LEADING TO SOME DIVERSIONS THAT MANAGED TO CONFUSE THE NAVIGATION SYSTEM, EVERYTHING WAS WELL-MARKED

first to 70 and then down to 50 or even as low as 30 kph. And the vehicle's inbuilt navigation system knows the limits so, it starts braking and slowing down before the new lower speed limit comes into force.

The camera also plays a role. It reads the reduced speed signboards whenever the road repair activities are taking place and feeds into the vehicle's navigation system. This results in instant speed adjustment in the vehicle. In fact, if you're using adaptive cruise control in addition to Lane Keeping Assist, you could let the car do its own thing almost all the way. The vehicle, however, still cannot deal with turns or roundabouts. Actually, I'm sure it can but I guess legal reasons prevent this level of automation — or full self-driving (FSD) as it is called. Also, it does make you rather complacent as a driver as I found out — luckily with no injury to myself or the vehicle.

Back to the roads and the route, it is hard to imagine this region was once the heartland of one of the largest empires in medieval and even early modern history — the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The nation

state of Austria is much smaller today, but the roads are top-notch. While there were several patches of road construction, even leading to some diversions that managed to confuse the navigation system, everything was well-marked. In fact, over 1,000 kilometres driving between Munich to Graz and back, not once did I need to use the horn or even flash anyone. All road-users were incredibly well behaved, despite occasional patches of traffic, it kept moving and you did not need to worry about someone darting across the road. It is true that not all of Europe is like this, but complete trust in other road users and the technology onboard the vehicle means that one can really enjoy the scenery and not expend brain power on creating a 360-degree bubble around you.

The journey back was equally impressive, this time we went on a few more highways as our arrival in Munich by early evening

was essential. But that did not mean that the mountain passes were completely off the agenda, driving through towns that could trace their history back a 1000 years, we stopped on the side of an ancient Alpine lake, the Hallstättersee and ate at a 500-year old restaurant, trying out traditional *Tyrolean fried chicken* and a wonderful *Nougat mousse*.

But as we crossed the border between the two German-speaking nations, the clouds had lifted and this time on the unrestricted Autobahn, it was time to put the pedal to the portal. I was in the GLE 400, and this car sure can go fast if it wants to. But sadly, when you go fast the road tends to end quickly as well.

This was an excellent trip and in the next issue of *Exotica*, I will be talking about the brilliant G-Class Experience in Graz, so do be sure to pick up your copy of the magazine that comes with *The Pioneer* next month.

DRIVING THROUGH TOWNS THAT COULD TRACE THEIR HISTORY BACK A 1000 YEARS, WE STOPPED ON THE SIDE OF AN ANCIENT ALPINE LAKE, THE HALLSTÄTTERSEE AND ATE AT A 500-YEAR OLD RESTAURANT, TRYING OUT TRADITIONAL TYROLEAN FRIED CHICKEN AND A WONDERFUL NOUGAT MOUSSE



# TRAVEL SMART

There is no life without a battery, especially when you are travelling. Yet finding a working socket at the airport can be an exhausting hustle. Lugging your belongings from one corner to another just to find a place to charge your phone is hardly the travel experience you deserve. This is where innovation comes to the rescue. All you have to do is invest in a tech-equipped bag with inbuilt chargers that will keep your devices powered and your journeys seamless. We bring you some options.

**FROM BRIGGS & RILEY – TORQ CARRY-ON SPINNER**  
Equipped with an integrated USB port and patented quick-access front pocket, this refined spinner keeps your electronics safe and devices charged, all while gliding smoothly on 360° wheels.

**FROM EUME – CABIN PRO**  
Engineered with German Bayer polycarbonate and TSA-approved charging slots, this bag goes beyond convenience, with cushioned gadget storage, bottle holder and impeccable organisation for modern travellers.

**FROM JULY – CARRY-ON**  
With an ejectable USB-C battery, aerospace-grade shell, and SilentMove wheels, July offers a seamless blend of elegance and usage, keeping you charged and ready from gate to gate.

**FROM MOKOBARA – THE TRANSIT CABIN PRO**  
Unbreakable yet lightweight, this sleek case features a TSA lock, whisper-quiet Japanese wheels, and a front compartment for your laptop and power bank – making device charging effortless mid-journey.

**PRECAUTIONS TO TAKE**  
You must be careful at all times when you use bags with built-in chargers. Make sure to disconnect the power bank and pack it in your carry-on bag, not checked luggage, as they pose a fire risk. Keep the power bank accessible for security checks.

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## The Pioneer Unveils The Sinister Face Of Simon Commission

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**A SUCCESSFUL EXPERIMENT**

NEW DELHI, May 18

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## A SUCCESSFUL EXPERIMENT

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