

GONE NATIVE

VENKY VEMBU embraces wholesale cultural assimilation in the tribal heartland of Bastar. Photographs by SELVAPRAKASH L.

Rock stars: a troupe of cultural dancers framed against the majestic Chitrakote falls



Fowl play: in mid-flight, a combatant cock prepares for a ninja attack; and (facing page) the weapon of war strapped to the killer claw



A few hundred metres away from where I stood at a Bastar village haat (weekly market), a raucous roar announced the thrill of excitement that coursed through the distant crowd. It was an intense auditory outburst, which came in waves, such as you might experience from outside a cricket stadium where a T20 match—that carnival of sixes passing for sport—is under way. And it had a curious bestirring effect on me.

Almost reflexively, I tore myself away from the giddy whirl of the sights at the Tokapal haat and broke into a slow trot in the direction from whence the high-decibel cheer emanated. I was about to witness another kind of sporting event, one that was admittedly far less genteel than the game of flannelled fellowmen. I was here to watch cockfights, where roosters, with sharpened knives tied to their feet, wage valorous battles to the death, while adrenaline-pumped, mahua-high men, standing six layers deep on the sidelines, noisily wager money on the outcome.

The surge of emotional energy as each fight started up had a raw, visceral quality to it. The owners of the two roosters made a show of displaying their wards, rocking them in their hands. Last-minute combat tips—or perhaps martial incantations—were whispered into fowl ears, after which they were set down on the ground. The two roosters then circled around for a bit,

sizing each other up like prize fighters do. And then in a flash, they were air-borne, flying a foot or two in height, in a flutter of wings and a series of squawks that were drowned out by the human roar. Their knife-strapped claws traced flashy arcs in the air; if either made contact with the other, the fight ended in a 'sudden death'. The winning owner then walked off with the prize—the vanquished rooster and the wager. As the onlookers' bets were settled on the sidelines, the next set of cocky gladiators stepped up.

Cockfights are considered a marker of Bastar tribal cultural identity; much money rides on the outcomes

For sure, for those attuned to a heightened sensitivity to animal and avian well-being, a bloodsport such as this makes for queasy spectatorship. And yet, cockfights are considered a distinctive marker of Bastar tribal cultural identity—in the way that bullfighting is to Spaniards; one such cockfight, in fact, shaped the historical fortunes of the neighbouring erstwhile princely state of Vijayanagaram. Therefore, to visit this

bewitchingly beautiful part of southern Chhattisgarh and savour joyous interactions with the shy but sweet-natured folks without experiencing their cultural tradition seems oddly incomplete.

I myself was not so severely conflicted about this, and in fact, on this ‘eco- and ethno-tourism’ experience, artfully curated as a unique ‘Walk With Tribe’ concept by Sachin Bansal, chief explorer of India City Walks, I was determined to immerse myself in every aspect of the tribal way of life.

Over the next week, accordingly, I ate what the tribal communities ate, including their staple mandia pej (gruel made of millet); imbibed the same mahua and salfi (toddy) that they did; danced with tribal women in front of the stunning Chitrakote falls; participated in their

festivities, including a goat sacrifice to propitiate a tribal goddess; and even gate-crashed a tribal wedding, in-

voking the same community spirit that they abide by.

So much so that by week’s end, when I emerged one afternoon from a soul-elevating bath beneath a forceful strand of the beautifully splayed Tirathgarh falls, a Chhattisgarh tourism official observed that as a result of my efforts at tribal cultural assimilation, I had totally “gone native”.

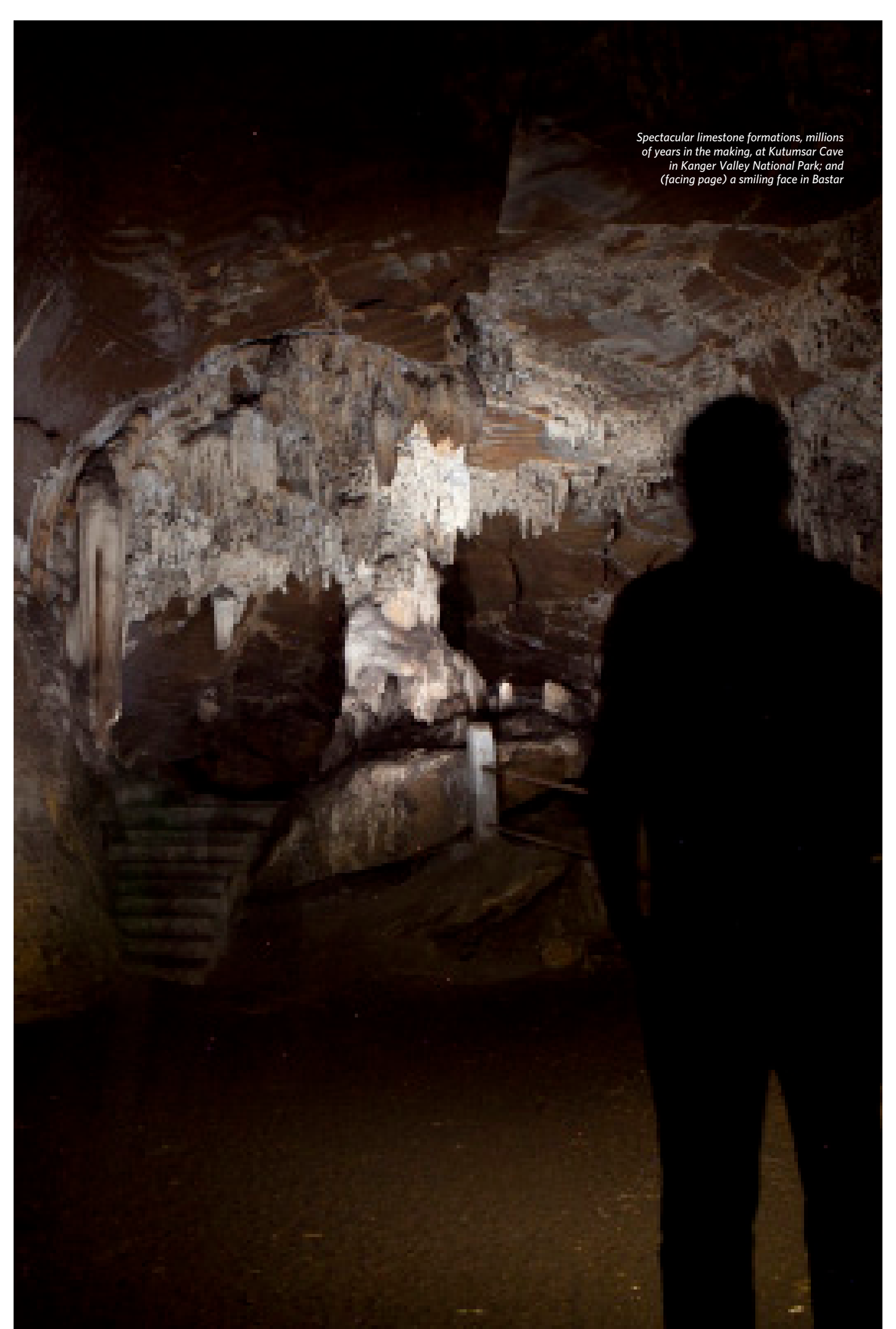
That certification, however, wasn’t easily earned: returning from an outing to the Kanger Valley National Park, we’d stopped at a roadside haat. Wandering through the market, gazing in wonderment at the range of merchandise on sale—everything from vegetables to mahua flowers to crabs to agricultural implements to fashion accessories—I stumbled upon a stall that was dispensing a local delicacy called chapra. I’d heard of it as a chutney made of red ants, which the tribal communities consumed for its medicinal properties. But what the woman was proffering me in a dona (leaf cup) wasn’t the paste that I had come to expect, but a preparation that teemed with live ants, along with ginger and garlic slices. I had, of course, sworn to do in Bastar as the Bastar folks do: so



(Below) a fisherman on the Indravati River, in Chitrakote; and (left) chapra, or red ant chutney, believed to possess medicinal properties

The chapra I gulped down was teeming with live red ants. I washed them down with a mouthful of mahua





Spectacular limestone formations, millions of years in the making, at Kutumsar Cave in Kanger Valley National Park; and (facing page) a smiling face in Bastar

Dried and salted fish being sold at a roadside haat



A wide range of goods goes on sale at haats: from fish to farm implements to fashion accessories

I ingested a mouthful and gulped it down.

Barely seconds later, however, I sensed a strange stirring inside of me. Perhaps it was just my lively imagination, but it appeared as if an army of red ants, still alive, was crawling up my innards. A brief moment of panic ensued, but that soon yielded to a flash of lucid resourcefulness. I calmly walked up to the women selling mahua nearby, gathered up a dona-ful of the drink and downed it with a villainous laugh, flushing the ant army down the hatch.

As much as it is about these lively haat-side interactions with the local communities, to travel to the Bastar region is to enter an ethereally beautiful land, whose tourism allure remains under-appreciated, largely owing to an exaggerated association, in the popular perception, with Maoist activity. Selva and I travelled, along with Sachin, in early June, ahead of the monsoon, which meant that the Chitrakote falls were somewhat less majestic than the expansive horseshoe-shaped water mass they become after the rains (which earns it the sobriquet of the 'Niagara of India'). Even so, we found ourselves mesmerised by the 100-foot-tall falls, to which we returned virtually every morning and evening, often to hitch boat rides with fisherfolk to get up-close to the raging, roaring waters and feel the spray.

The Chitrakote falls are a thing of enchanting beauty, and draw daredevil kayakers from around the world, but given their sheer force, they don't permit anything so sedate as a bath under the waters. For that, I hoofed it to the Tirathgarh falls, near the Kanger Valley National Park, which are rather more gentle and easy-paced. And yet, when Selva and I returned there early one morning, for him to catch them in a pre-dawn light, we had the place to ourselves. While Selva sauntered off in search of a vantage spot to shoot from, I, ever the man of leisure, ventured yet again into nature's own alfresco shower stall. Only, this time, as a concession to the blissful solitude and in resonance with the elemental bareness of that magical

CHHATTISGARH

moment, which made swimwear vestments seem altogether superfluous, I stepped in *au naturel*.

Later that day, we encountered yet more instances of awe-inspiring beauty in nature, when we went underground into the Kutumsar Cave, which lays claim to being one of the deepest in India. With a guide and a solar lamp to assist navigation, we crawled and contorted our way through an incredibly narrow and low-slung passage. Bats fluttered around in the dark, evidently resentful of the human invasion of their damp, subterranean home. But what lay beyond these minor impediments was a treasure trove of natural art that dates back millions of years. In the dim yellow light of the solar lamp, we could make out spectacular stalactite and stalagmite formations of limestone, sculpted by nature at the glacial pace of an inch every 6,000 years. Some were enormous and mostly irregular in shape, but the human sensibility always looks for recognisable patterns: with just a bit of imagination, we could discern the 'Titanic' formation (resembling a ship's hull) and the self-explanatory 'elephant trunk' formation.

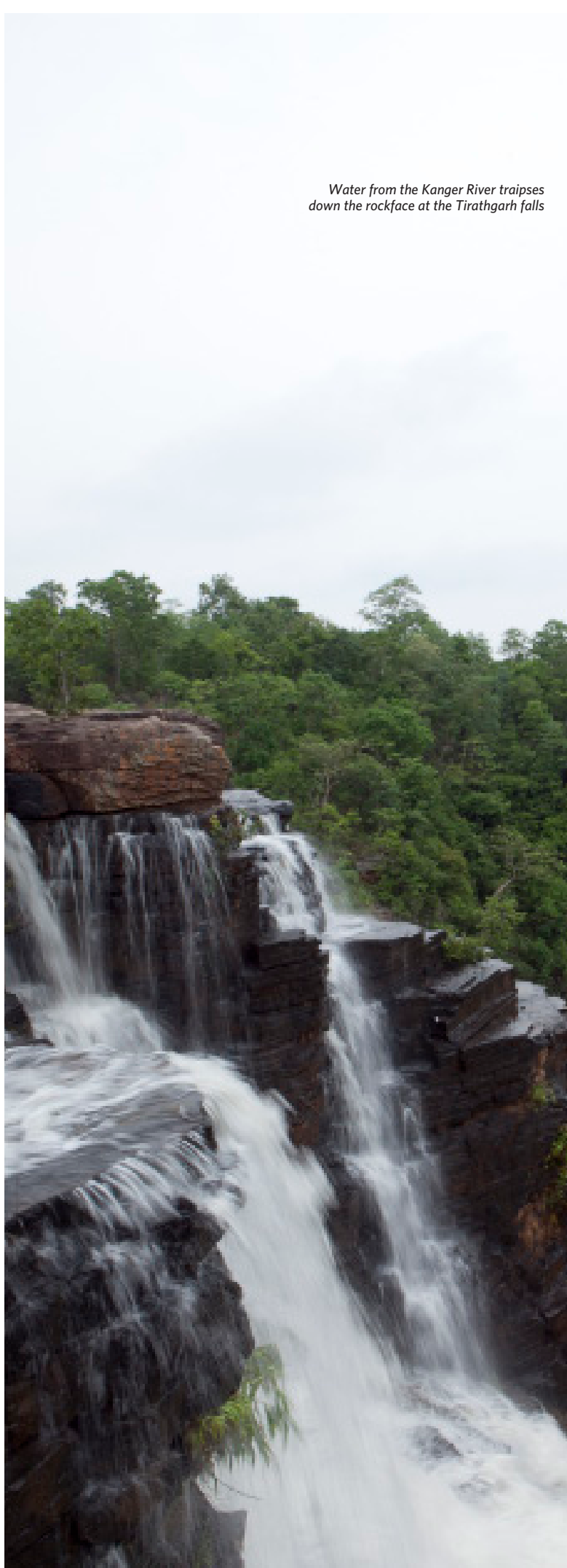
Coming up for air, we found ourselves serendipitously drawn to two festivities that seemed to encapsulate the cycle of life. Our cultural intermediary, Madhusudan Kashyap, who had kept us plied with engaging accounts of tribal life, had learnt through the bush telegraph system that a pre-nuptial ceremony was under way in Gotiya village near Chitrakote. Discreet enquiries with the groom's family had immediately yielded an informal invitation, so we proceeded thither, cheery about the prospect of being a part of something so happily life-affirming.

At the venue, remarkable for its spartan simplicity, the groom, his face enveloped in a date

The falls at Tirathgarh are much more gentle, and I returned one morning and bathed here—in the nude!

leaf mask, was being subjected to some pre-nup ritual beneath a bedecked jamun tree. Over in one corner, a trio of village musicians were exerting themselves strenuously. Relatives hovered around, and a group of children derived much amusement from the unexpected throng of jeans-clad visitors. So as not to overstay our welcome or serve

Water from the Kanger River traipses down the rockface at the Tirathgarh falls



At the Dandami Luxury Resort, I stayed in a cottage with a stunning view of the Chitrakote falls from my bed

as a distraction, we departed after a while, happy for the chance to have borne witness to a tribal wedding.

Later that afternoon, Madhusudan alerted us to a temple festival, held only

once a year or two, to propitiate a local goddess with sacrificial offerings of goats. Once again, we embraced the cultural crossover experience and headed out enthusiastically. To my untrained eye, the form of worship at this tribal gathering seemed to draw on Sanskrit influences, with a priest chanting incantations. Over to one side were tied four young billies, unaware that they were being readied for slaughter. When the time came for them to be offered, however, some primal instinct seemed to kick in, and they demurred from accepting the rice offerings, despite priestly commandments that it was "Parvatiji's *hukum*". At about the same time, four

village men went into a dance trance, which was perhaps just the attention diversion one needed to look discreetly away from the primary proceedings.

My experience of the tribal way of life seemed near-complete, but later that evening, the humbling realisation dawned on me that there were limits to the extent to which I could go native in Bastar. That epiphanic understanding was brought about on the bank of the Indravati River, with the Chitrakote falls for an arresting backdrop. A bevy of tribal women dancers in red saris had been lined up to provide cultural entertainment for the evening, and at their invitation, I unwisely allowed myself to be persuaded to join them. Now, I am not unused to shaking a nifty leg, but the intricate step-shuffle-sway routine that the dancers showcased to perfection was way beyond my amateur capability. I fell hopelessly out of step, and my artless effort at getting back in sync only had the effect of inducing in the women a gaggle of giggles.

Than which, I dare say, there is no sweeter sound in the universe.



Framed against a dusk sky, a luxury tent at Chhattisgarh Tourism Board's Dandami Luxury Resort in Chitrakote



A portfolio of pots for sale at a weekly market

THE INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

IndiGo, Air India and Jet Airways offer direct or one-stop services to **Raipur** from most Indian metros. I flew Delhi-Raipur on IndiGo; return-fares start at ₹9,800. From Raipur, we took a cab to **Chitrakote** (in Bastar district), some 350km away. Cabs charge ₹3,500 one-way.

WHERE TO STAY

We stayed at Chhattisgarh Tourism Board's **Dandami Luxury Resort** in Chitrakote, set in a scenic estate that's barely a 5-minute walk from the Chitrakote falls, on the edge of a ridge through which flows the **Indravati River**. The resort offers luxury tent accommodation (₹2,500 doubles) and more traditional cottages (₹1,500 doubles); taxes extra. I stayed in a cottage with a breathtaking view of the falls. The resort has an excellent kitchen, where upon request the chefs can rustle up Bastar delicacies. 0771-4224600; Toll-free: 1-800-102-6415; tourism.cg.gov.in

HOW TO DO IT

We travelled to Bastar at the invitation of **India City Walks** (indiacitywalks.com), which offers 'slow and local experiences' of slices of India, and the Chhattisgarh Tourism Board. India City Walks' founder and chief explorer, Sachin Bansal, accompanied us on the maiden '**Walk With Tribe**' experience, a six-day package that facilitates up-close and

personal interactions with tribal communities. Sachin customises these experiences for travellers, and costs hinge on accommodation and food preferences, but a 4N/5D walk starts at ₹30,000 per person (excluding air/train travel to/from Raipur, from where he takes charge). The walk is easy-paced, but demands a reasonable level of fitness. 0124-4372138; +91-9711190192; sb@indiacitywalks.com; walkwithtribe.in

WHAT TO SEE & DO

The 'Walk With Tribe' experience is centred around gaining an insight into the tribal way of life. But the Bastar region is also a place of extraordinary beauty, and the sight of the Chitrakote falls in full post-monsoon flow can be truly majestic. From the bank of the Indravati River, you can hire fishermen's boats (₹100 for 30 minutes) to get close to the falls.

Visit the **Kanger Valley National Park** (entry fee: ₹25; open 8am-4 pm; closed from July 1 to Oct 31), some 65 km

from Chitrakote, home of the endangered **Bastar hill mynah**. Go underground into the **Kutumsar Cave** within the park and gaze upon limestone stalactite and stalagmite formations shaped naturally over millions of years. (Not recommended for those who feel claustrophobic in dark, narrow passages.)

Visit the **Danteshwari temple**, one of India's 52 shakti peeths, in Dantewada. Go on a tour of the **Anthropological Museum** in Jagdalpur (07782-229356; open Mon-Fri, 10am-5.30pm), which showcases interesting elements of tribal life.

■ VENKY VEMBU



PRASHANT CHAUDHARY