

The erotic carvings at the Buddha Vihara in Sirpur are not its only draw. Travellers are equally lured by the six-foot statue of Buddha touching the ground with his right hand while meditating. The iconic posture signifies the moment he attained enlightenment. Facing page: At Barnawapara Wildlife Sanctuary, the sight of dead sal and sagun trees standing in a lake is surreal and deeply evocative.



HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

LONG IGNORED BY TRAVEL GUIDEBOOKS, A WALKING-DRIVING HOLIDAY IN CHHATTISGARH REVEALS MANY SURPRISES IN A STATE WHERE TOURISM IS SLOWLY COMING OF AGE

BY KARANJEET KAUR
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SANJAY AUSTA



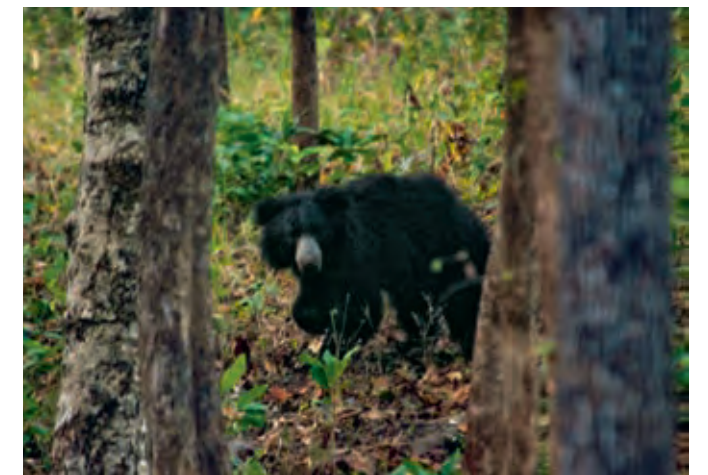
Sirpur's cynosure, the 7th-century Laxman Mandir, is an exquisite brick structure built on a high platform, accessible by stairs. It was excavated in 1872 by Lord Alexander Cunningham, the founder of the Archaeological Survey of India.

I've seen enough horror films to make me feel like we've wandered on to the set of one. Rows and rows of ghostly white sal, *karra*, and *sagun* trees frozen in time are reflected in a large lake. A small stream that was dammed a few years ago pooled around these trees, causing them to perish. Their branches remain outstretched in a state of unrequited prayer. On the right, in stark contrast, is the lush vitality of a forest. This is a place of intense, melancholic beauty, so complete in its isolation, it leaves me speechless.

I'm in the forests of the Barnawapara Wildlife Sanctuary, 115 kilometres from Raipur, the capital of Chhattisgarh. My photographer colleague, Sanjay Austa and I are on a six-day driving-walking journey organised by India City Walks (headed by Sachin Bansal), and the Chhattisgarh Tourism Board. Though I'd spent hours on the Internet, I had found precious little on the places we would visit. My excitement increased when I realised I'd be travelling where few tourists go.

Sirpur, our first stop, was the only place on our itinerary that's better documented, also acquiring prominence in recent years as the venue for a dance and music festival. It turned out to be so chock-a-block with historical sites, I was afraid I'd trip on a stone of archaeological value. On that first day in Sirpur, I recall standing in front of Laxman Mandir, India's finest ancient brick temple. I hung on to every word Dr. A.K. Sharma, the silver-haired archaeologist before me, uttered as he explained the scientific principles governing the structure. Chhattisgarh's connection to the Ramayana is one of the reasons I am visiting this little-explored central Indian state. Three years earlier, while collaborating on a graphic novel inspired by Valmiki's Ramayana, I'd been surprised to hear that the Aranya Kand, the jungle episode in the story, is believed to have unfolded amid the state's fragrant forests. Dr. Sharma confirmed this. He told me that the flora and fauna of Dandakaranya, the forest where Rama was exiled, as described in the epic, are found in Chhattisgarh!

But unlike the forests, Laxman Mandir has been misnamed. The temple is actually dedicated to Vishnu, he pointed out, showing us a doorway carved with the Dashavatara, the Hindu god's ten manifestations. When this seventh-century temple was discovered in 1872, residents of the town mistook the reclining deity to be Laxman, thanks to the existence of a Ram Temple nearby. Shorn of its association with the Ramayana, Laxman Mandir appeared no less grand. Earthquake- and lightning-resistant, it is in remarkably well-preserved condition even after 1,600 years.



Apart from Indian bison or gaur (top) and sloth bear (right), the enchanting forest of Barnawapara is a haven for tigers, endangered lesser kestrels, white-rumped vultures, and flying squirrels; As the moon rises, the forest skies assume mystical shades of indigo.

The dynamic Dr. Sharma, who wears his 82 years lightly, then rushed us along to see the remains of “the biggest market excavated anywhere in the world so far,” a 15-minute walk from the temple. It was large for sure—the ruins of a 6th-century network of underground drainage systems, medicinal *kunds*, and granaries. Even the compound’s banyan tree, under which Buddha is believed to have meditated, seemed oversized. I was partially distracted by a vivid blue water body, visible on the horizon. An ancient holy town, Sirpur is located in a crook where the Mahanadi River curls northeast towards Odisha after bisecting Chhattisgarh. Arriving in the state capital Raipur on an early-morning flight the previous day, I’d been captivated by the sight of the sun skating over the broad liquid ribbon of the mighty river.

Next, Dr. Sharma took us to the Buddha Vihara, a 15-minute walk away. It is a reminder of Sirpur’s importance as a Buddhist centre between the 6th and 10th centuries and once housed 10,000 scholars. Chinese pilgrim-scholar Huiyen Tsang visited it in the 7th century and in March 2013, the Dalai Lama came by. Dr. Sharma asked if I remembered the Panchatantra tale of the crocodile who wants to eat his monkey friend’s heart, and showed us a small sculpture in the door’s frame of a gleeful primate resting atop a reptile. The next question was about the figure of a couple in congress. “How do we know this couple is celebrating their *madhuratri* (honeymoon)?” he asked. The clue apparently is a tiny honey bee in the background that none of us had noticed. As Dr. Sharma delivered this impromptu lecture, I sneaked a glance behind me—a small crowd had gathered, listening in rapt attention.

Leaving Sirpur, we headed to the Barnawapara Wildlife Sanctuary. During the two-hour drive, we passed brown fields of dried paddy and mustard, and a series of small hamlets. These were soon replaced by towering thickets of sal trees, revered all across the region and never too far from view. Our driver, the gruff, observant Punjab Rao Shendge, told us that both Buddha and Mahavira have a connection with the timber-yielding tree: The former was born under one, and the latter attained enlightenment under another.

Around twilight, we stopped to take pictures of the moon rising through a sal grove. I drank in the view of the luminous white globe sharpening into focus against a darkening background. When I absently turned around, I was startled by the electrifying scene on the other side of the sky. The setting sun had left competing hues of orange, crimson, and purple across the horizon.

By the time we had reached our destination Hareli Eco Resort in the sanctuary’s buffer zone, it was pitch black. Reluctant to disturb the jungle’s almost primordial silence, I found myself whispering to my colleagues.

It was just as dark when we left for a safari this morning. At 5 a.m., the forest’s earliest risers were egrets, dogs, and bulls reared by the Baiga tribal community residing at its fringes. Our Maruti Gypsy trundled along the dirt track and went deeper into the forest through thicker and thicker growth, dominated by sal, mahua, and *arjuna* trees. Faint rays of February sunshine seeped through the leaves and there was a slightly intoxicating fresh fragrance of foliage. It was easy to imagine the exiled royals or their bard Valmiki in that jungle. How quickly their fortunes had changed in this enchanted forest.

Suddenly, the car halted. Our young Baiga guide hushed us. We followed his line of vision and saw a dark mama bear studying



us intently. She looked like we’d walked in on her with her hand down the honey pot. A few tense seconds followed before she disappeared in a flash, leaving me wondering how something so fleet-footed could be called a sloth bear. Over three hours, the serene depths of the jungle have revealed a supercilious gaur family, a dandy peacock in flight, hares, a fox that almost glided in front of our vehicle, and several curious deer parties.

Though it has been a long morning, Sachin insisted upon one last stop further inside the jungle. “It looks like Ireland,” he promised, and as an afterthought added, “There’s mobile network there.” Partially lured by the latter—I hadn’t seen a WhatsApp message in three days—we’d made our way to the graveyard of trees at Pakshi Vihar.

I’ve never visited Ireland, but the eerie scene of ghostly white trees silhouetted against the sky with matching reflections in the still water isn’t at all what I’d expected to find. It is the contorted branches that make me think of a scene from a horror movie. The spot is named Pakshi Vihar for the migratory birds that come here between April-June, but there are none today.

Sachin urges us along to an abandoned, crumbling watchtower. My phone begins to buzz furiously with queued-up texts. Curiously, I can’t be bothered with them—not when I can see an emerald expanse of forest extending endlessly below me.

Next day, we drive to Amadob, northwest of Barnawapara, taking all day to complete what’s usually a four-hour journey through the heart of Chhattisgarh’s sugarcane country. The



Mainpat (left) has a large Tibetan population and several Buddhist temples; Carvings at the entrance of the double-storeyed Teevardev Vihara (top right) represent episodes from the Panchatantra, Buddha’s life, and activities like bullfighting and elephant breeding; Local women worship one of the many artefacts excavated around Sirpur and kept in a small museum next to Laxman Mandir (bottom right).

delay is partly because we encounter so much bovine traffic, I feel like I’m witnessing Africa’s wildebeest migration. After a late dinner, we’re ready to crawl into bed. The spiffy Sonbhadra Tourist Resort where we’re staying abuts the Achanakmarh Wildlife Sanctuary. I look out the window before getting into bed. The forest looks spooky in the moonlit night and I imagine all kinds of shapes amid the trees.

When we hike through the same jungle the following morning, however, there is no trace of the previous night’s ominousness. It’s a stunning day and we stop to examine wild boar scratchings and chat with Baiga farmers. Scraping resin from a mighty sal on to a dried leaf, Mr. Kevat, the manager of the resort, sets it alight to demonstrate how *dhoop* is sourced. The scent is ambrosial. I imagine this is what Panchavati, Rama and Sita’s forest home in the Aranya Kand, must have been like.

A seven-hour drive west of Amadob takes us to Mainpat, known by several epithets including “Mini Tibet” and “Shimla

of Surguja.” Mainpat is way prettier than Shimla, especially since it’s free of hordes of tourists. The high plateau’s listed attractions, which include a collection of monkey-infested waterfalls and viewpoints, are inferior to the sights I see on my way to them. Bauxite-rich red sand roads, which are only now being tarred over, are lined with acacia and eucalyptus trees. The plateau goes on forever and, wherever you are, you can see the entire bowl-shaped highland glazed in browns. As there are seven Tibetan settlements in the area, in some places the chestnut hues are broken by series of colourful vertical flags inscribed with Buddhist mantras; in other areas we see green flags bearing the crescent and star.

The place in Mainpat I’m most fascinated by is Zalzala, seemingly nothing more than a vast, dry field. It looks solid, but the ground beneath my feet is actually moving. I jump, and the entire carpet of land bounces trampoline-like. Appropriately, the word Zalzala means “earthquake.” Our only companions



Steep, sweeping stairs lead visitors to the top of the pyramid-shaped temple complex of Surang Tila, with its shrines dedicated to Lord Shiva.

here are a bunch of water buffaloes grazing in the distance, and a baba clad in saffron robes nearby. We talk to him, anticipating fantastical explanations for the unusual phenomena. “He’ll tell us Rama shot an arrow into the earth here and that’s why it wobbles,” says Sanjay. Instead, the baba provides a surprisingly rational answer: There’s a swamp beneath the ground.

Back at Raipur airport the following day, I beam at the graceful life-size *dokra* figurines in the waiting area, acknowledging my luck at having a range of remarkable experiences in the past week. Until now, Chhattisgarh was an unfamiliar state of which I knew nothing beyond a little mythological and political history. Having walked parts of its cities, forests, and hills, I can see it

holds a historical, cultural, and natural heritage that has so far remained off the tourist circuit. I recall the Buddha Vihara whose carvings are visible even to the untrained eye but not entirely intelligible to the lay person. It’s a metaphor for the rest of Chhattisgarh, a treasure chest full of surprises out in the open, waiting to be interpreted and appreciated. ●

KARANJEET KAUR was until recently the Chief Senior Editor at *National Geographic Traveller India*. She is as fascinated by Mughal miniatures as she is mesmerised by the mighty Himalayas. **SANJAY AUSTA** is a photographer, writer, and a part-time apple-orchardist. When he is not backpacking around the world, he divides his time between New Delhi and Himachal Pradesh.

THE VITALS

ORIENTATION

Raipur is the capital of the state of Chhattisgarh and situated at its centre in a district of the same name. Sirpur lies about 80 km east of Raipur, and Barnawapara Wildlife Sanctuary a further 30 km east of Sirpur. Amadob is about 195 km north of Raipur in Bilaspur district and approximately 260 km east of it is the hill station of Mainpat.

GETTING THERE

Direct flights to Raipur are available from Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Hyderabad, and

Bhubaneswar and connecting flights from cities throughout the country. Raipur is well connected by rail and road.

TOUR INFORMATION

This six-day walking-driving tour was organised through India City Walks. The route followed was Raipur—Sirpur—Durg—Amadob—Mainpat—Raipur. It also covered Raipur’s markets, Sirpur’s Surang Tila temple, and the Jain temple of Bhand Deul en route to Durg. At Durg, the team spent time at the Sheonath River and the Jain temple

of Shri Uwassaggaharam Parshwa Tirth. Kabir Chabutra and the source of the Narmada River (at Amarkantak) were stopovers while travelling from Amadob to Mainpat. The pilgrimage centre of Rajim Kumbh at the holy confluence of the Mahanadi, Pairi, and Sondur rivers, about 40 km from Raipur, was also a halt on this itinerary. Customised itineraries can be created based on individual interests. An all-inclusive five-day itinerary for 2 people starts from ₹45,000 (chhattisgarhwalks.in; 0124-4112138/97111 90192).



1



2

- 1 Though Chhattisgarh’s capital, Raipur is a rapidly growing industrial centre, at Gol Bazar, roadside stalls still sell hand-painted pottery.
- 2 Small shrines can be found in every nook and corner of Raipur’s by-lanes.
- 3 The Narmadeshwar temple in Amarkantak, just across the border in Madhya Pradesh, at the source of the Narmada River, is an important pilgrimage spot.
- 4 Saurashtra Mishthan Bhandar has been serving Gujarati specialities in Raipur’s Sadar Bazar for 65 years.
- 5 Chhattisgarh has its own film industry, known as Chhollywood. Films are made in Chhattisgarhi, a dialect of Hindi that is the state’s official language.



3



4



5