

Hidden Gems of India

Ilika Ranjan explores not just some stunning hidden destinations but also their cultural heritage.



Explore our land not only for pleasure,
Travel to sustain its culture.

Travel to generate self employment

Travel because our Country is more than worth it.

India is a land of diversity, a land of numerous folk dances and art forms, a land of magnificence and exquisite destinations - conspicuous and inconspicuous, a land of rich cultural heritage, a sacred land of Gods, a land of innumerable languages. In this land of kaleidoscopic beauty, lie some gems hidden from the visitors. I have been exploring some of them and have always come back mesmerised.

During my visits it also struck me that the custodians of our cultural heritage - local folk dancers, singers, artisans, sculptors and painters - are struggling for a square meal. How long then will we be able to sustain our cultural heritage? These artists are entrepreneurs and tourism can be a great way to encourage them and support them. Their art forms and folk dances can add spice to our travel itinerary. What a win-win situation it can be - enrich yourself while enriching others!

In this article, I want to share my experiences of discovering some of these lesser known havens, hidden in the periphery of popular travel destinations of India and their wonderful dance forms.

Satpada in Orissa – Discover the Dolphins here.

How many of us know that we can see Dolphins in India, in their natural, untrained and untainted form. Visit Satpada in Orissa, just 36 km away from Jagannath Puri. This is the sea mouth island where Chilka lake meets the bay of Bengal. It is also the home of

Irrawaddy Dolphins.

Orissa is the land of architectural distinction and sculptural magnificence; it is where dream and reality fuse. Situated on the eastern border of peninsular India, it is gently washed by the gurgling waves of the Bay of Bengal. In ancient times, it was renowned for its sea ports facing the Bay, looking out at the distant islands of Bali, Java, and Indonesia.

Chilka Lake is Asia's largest brackish water lagoon and is recognised as one of the most important wetlands in the world because it is home to a phenomenal variety of birds. It lies at a distance of 60 km from Puri and 127 km approximately from Bhubaneswar. The remarkable islands surrounding the Chilka Lake require a dedicated one-day trip, but for this it is important to start early and reach the port by 7 am. Motorboats can be hired here to visit many islands: The Nalabama Island and bird sanctuary at the centre of the lake; Bird Island; the abode of goddess Kali, Kalijai Island and; Satapada, where the endangered dolphins can be seen.

The capital city Bhubaneswar boasts of the famous Lingaraja temple

of Lord Shiva, the Mukteshwar temple, the twin cave groups of Khandagiri and Udaygiri, and Dhaulagiri.

It takes approximately one-and-a-half hours to drive from Bhubaneswar to Puri, a pilgrim town, where the celebrated temple of Lord Jagannath (Lord of the Universe) is situated. The temple is one of the four dhams (abodes of god in the four directions). The Jagannath Temple was built in the 12th century – started by King Anant Varman Choranganga Dev, and completed by his grandson Ananga Bhima Dev of the Ganga Dynasty.

Some prominent dances of Orissa.

Odissi – One of the eight classical dance forms of India, characterised by the independent movement of head, chest and pelvis also called Tribhangi; and the stamping of foot to the traditional music and performing the dance in varied postures.

Chhow Dance – An ancient dance form originated in the mock fights of the Oriya warriors. The Chhow dance begins with ranga vadya--an ensemble of indigenous musical instruments which inspires the dancers, followed by the orchestra taking up the initial tune of the dance in slow steps. In the next stage, 'nata', the thematic contents of the performance and the drama, is built up. The concluding stage is 'nataki' when the vigorous movements of the dancers develop a high tempo.



Courtallam or Kutralam, Spa of South India



Located at a distance of 165 km from Madurai, in Tamil Nadu, lies this pristine destination, known to cast a natural spa effect on its patrons. The memory of visit to Courtallam brings a smile to my face always.

I was very tired by time I reached Courtallam. Seeing my state, the driver took me to the main falls in the region (Peraruvu). The site was enchanting and awe inspiring- a river falling from a huge cliff with a force that could generate electricity. The taxi driver instructed something to a lady in Tamil. She came towards me and introduced herself. To my relief she was the owner of the guest house which had been recommended by a South Indian friend. I immediately called on the number given by my friend to check the authenticity of this new companion. She indeed was the one. I humbly told her to take me to the guest house and that I would see Courtallam the next morning. She



smiled and instructed me to follow her towards the fall. She advised that I should wash my legs here to feel better. I removed my shoes and obediently followed her. As I bent down to dip my leg in the water, the lady pulled me beneath the fall. I screamed but the sound could not reach my ears as I was standing beneath that electricity generating cascade of water. It felt like needles were piercing me and in seconds all the body aches caused by the long journey vanished. After five

seconds, I voluntarily chose to stand beneath the mighty torrent. It was absolutely refreshing and relieving. While the world might call it the Spa effect I choose to name it the Acupressure or Aqua-pressure effect.

This was the Courtallam way of greeting a guest -ensuring a good night sleep to a tired traveler. The lady (named Sukanya) informed me that the waters of Courtallam are believed to have medicinal qualities as it flows through forests of herbs. The falls which attract large number of visitors are: Main Falls (Peraruvu); Small Falls (Chitraruvu); Shenbagadevi falls (not safe to take bath); Honey Falls (Thenaruvu); Five Falls (Aindharuvu); Tiger Falls(Puli Aruvi); Old Falls (Pazhaya Courtallaruvu); New Falls (Puthu Aruvi); and Fruit Garden Falls (Pazhathotta Aruvi).

Courtallam lies in vicinity of the ancient town of Madurai, known for the Meenakshi Temple. Situated on the banks of river Vaigai, Madurai has a rich cultural heritage passed on from the great Tamil era more than 2500 years old. Madurai was an important cultural and commercial centre even as early as 550 AD. It was the capital city of the great Pandya kings.

Celebrated dance form of Tamil Nadu

Bharatanatyam – This classical Indian dance form is popular and nurtured in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. This dance form denotes various 19th and 20th century reconstructions of Sadir, the art of temple dancers called Devadasis. Sadir in turn, is derived from ancient dance in the treatise Natya Shastra by Bharata of fourth or third century BC. A possible origin of the name is from Bharata Muni, who wrote the Natya Shastra to which Bharathanatyam owes many of its ideas.

Kamandi or Kaman Pandigai – This is celebrated to commemorate the pauranic event when Manmada the God of Love was burnt to ashes by Siva in anger. The villagers separate themselves into two parties as Erintha katchi and Eriyatha katchi and a heated debate ensues. Kaman and Rathi, his consort, are main characters.

Mawlynnong in Meghalaya Asia's Cleanest Village

Greenery here cajoles heart and mind

Clean is what makes it divine;

Blue is the sky ever so clear, The trees bend down and bring cheer

As the Cleanest Village of Asia lies here.

Meghalaya - the Abode of the Clouds - showcases nature's innumerable spectacular fiats. The capital city of Shillong inconspicuously preserves these gems of achievement, in its fold.

The land of the heaviest rainfall - Cherrapunji - lies at a short distance of only two hours by road from Shillong. Another jewel, hidden from tourists, lies only two-and-a-half hours away by road from this city. Mawlynnong (pronounced as Mou-lin-nong), also known as God's Own Garden, is the cleanest village in Asia located in the East Khasi Hills of Meghalaya.

Nature dances to the tune of purity and rawness here. In close proximity to the Bangladesh border, it still retains its own coolness with a distinct nip in the air, unlike the humidity in the

neighbouring country. The village is inundated with dark green bamboo trees and picturesque plateau ranges. The descending clouds add to the beauty.

Dances of Meghalaya Nongkrem dance form - Nongkrem

Dance is a religious festival in thanksgiving to God Almighty for good harvest, peace and prosperity of the community. It is held annually during October - November, at Smit, the capital of the Khyrim Syiemship near Shillong.

Behdienkhlam - Behdienkhlam dance festival is celebrated annually in the monsoon season in the

month of July after the sowing period. It is the most popular tribal dance festival of the Jaintias. The festival primarily invokes the blessings of the Creator for a good harvest and to drive away disease and plague.

Satpada, Courtallam and Mawlynnong are some of the few inconspicuous divine destinations lying in close proximity to the very well known travel routes of India. These could contribute in converting your trip from 'nice' to 'wow'. Don't forget to spare your evenings to cherish few precious moments with the custodians of our cultural heritage. ■

Two roads diverged in a wood and I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.

Robert Frost



Ilika Ranjan

The writer is an avid traveler and author of the several books
ilika@pundareek.com