

The travel issue

The resurrection of Fogo Island

China without a safety net

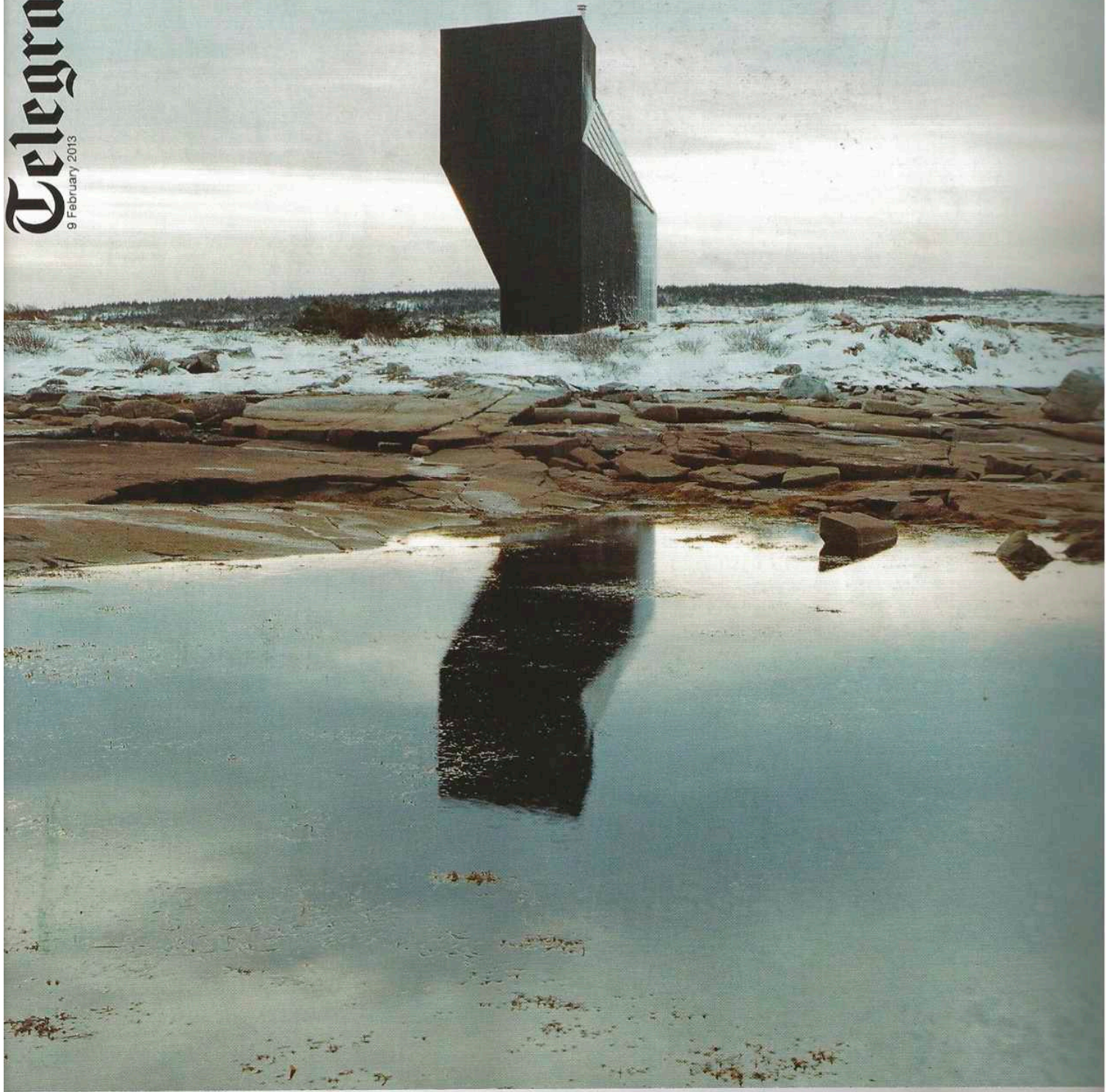
Herding with Berber nomads

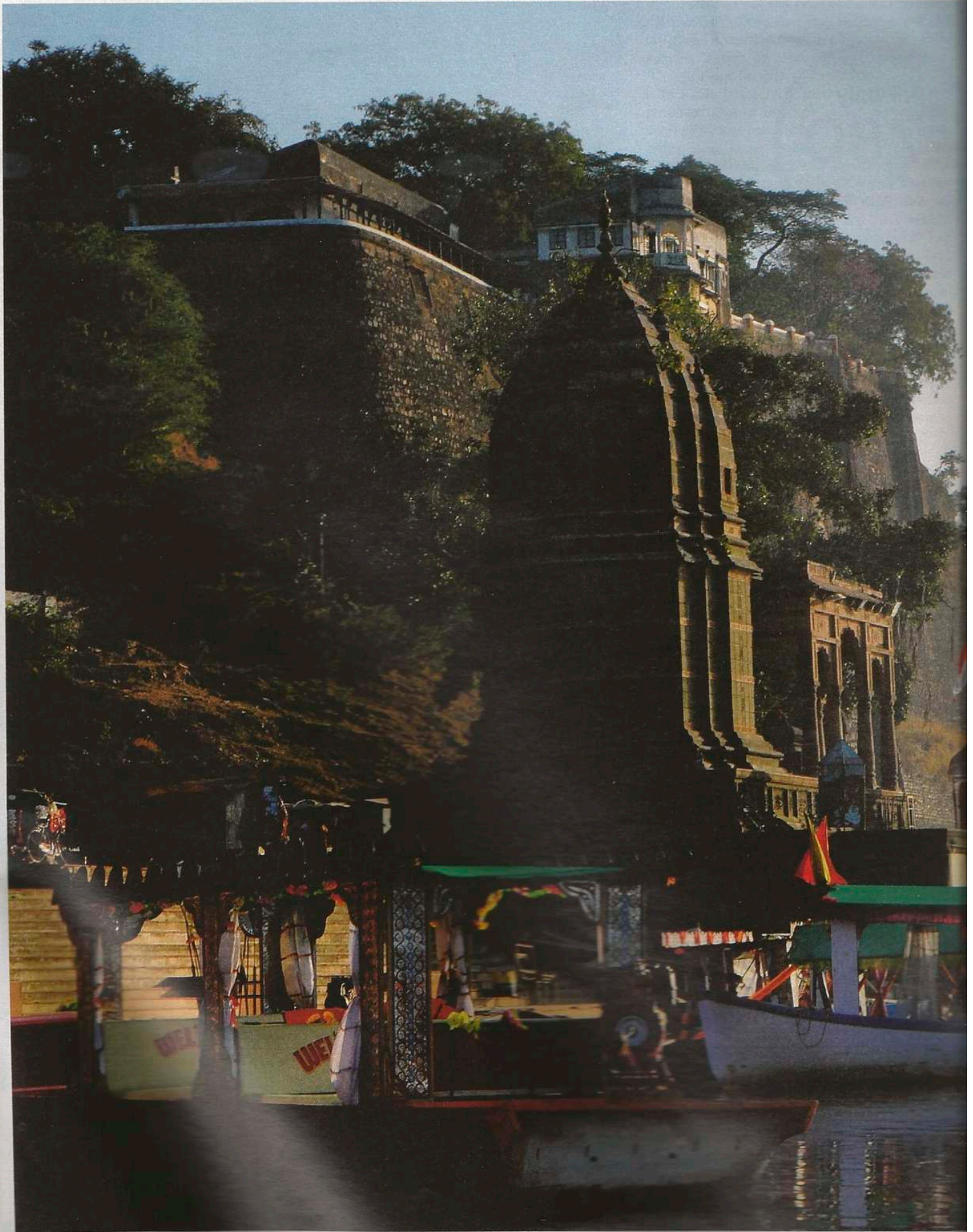
Norway's wild west

Gator bites in New Orleans

A hike in Italy's Gran Paradiso

India distilled





On a road in Maharashtra, hurtling along in front of me, is a flatbed truck with a motorbike balanced on the back, a man sitting precariously astride it. Despite a cacophony of revving engines, hooting traffic and a dust cloud, he is talking casually on his mobile. I thought of what a friend had said: 'You'll like India. Funny things happen there.'

I'd never been to India. And because I'd never been the idea of going had become overwhelming. I know that everyone who travels there loves it, but they all go to different places and they all have their favourites. 'Start with the golden triangle – Delhi, Agra and Jaipur.' 'You must go to Goa.' 'Surely you've heard of the Hermitage in Kerala?' 'We're going to the New Year's Eve party at Umaid Bhawan Palace...' – and on it went. Mumbai, Gujarat, Punjab, Pondicherry. The India bores. It was apparently impossible to go to one place; if you were going all that way, it seemed, then you had to go to at least three. (Why? People go to just New York, or just Florida.) It sounded exhausting. So I went on going to Africa, which I already loved, and where I had spent part of my childhood. It seemed easier, and there was still so much of it to see. Of course going to Africa doesn't preclude you from going to India, but somewhere in my head they were in competition.

Yet I couldn't help feeling I was missing out. And then I met James Jayasundera, who runs a travel company that concentrates on India and Sri Lanka. His company, Ampersand Travel, specialises in listening to what people want and coming up with the right ingredients. He said, 'Don't be

intimidated, just have the courage to go to one place. Go to Ahilya Fort in Maheshwar. It distils everything that everyone loves about India. Go there, watch the sun set over the Narmada river, and soak it up.'

A month later I board the plane to Delhi. Indira Gandhi International Airport is not what I expected – I thought it might be like Nairobi, a seething chaos, not organised and spotless with overzealous security: no one is allowed into the airport without a ticket or boarding pass. And it's cold in Delhi: 5C. (In fact 129 people were killed by what the *Times of India* called the 'cold wave grip'.) I could have flown directly from there to Indore, two hours from Ahilya, but that would be dull, Jayasundera said – there were things off the beaten track that he wanted me to see.

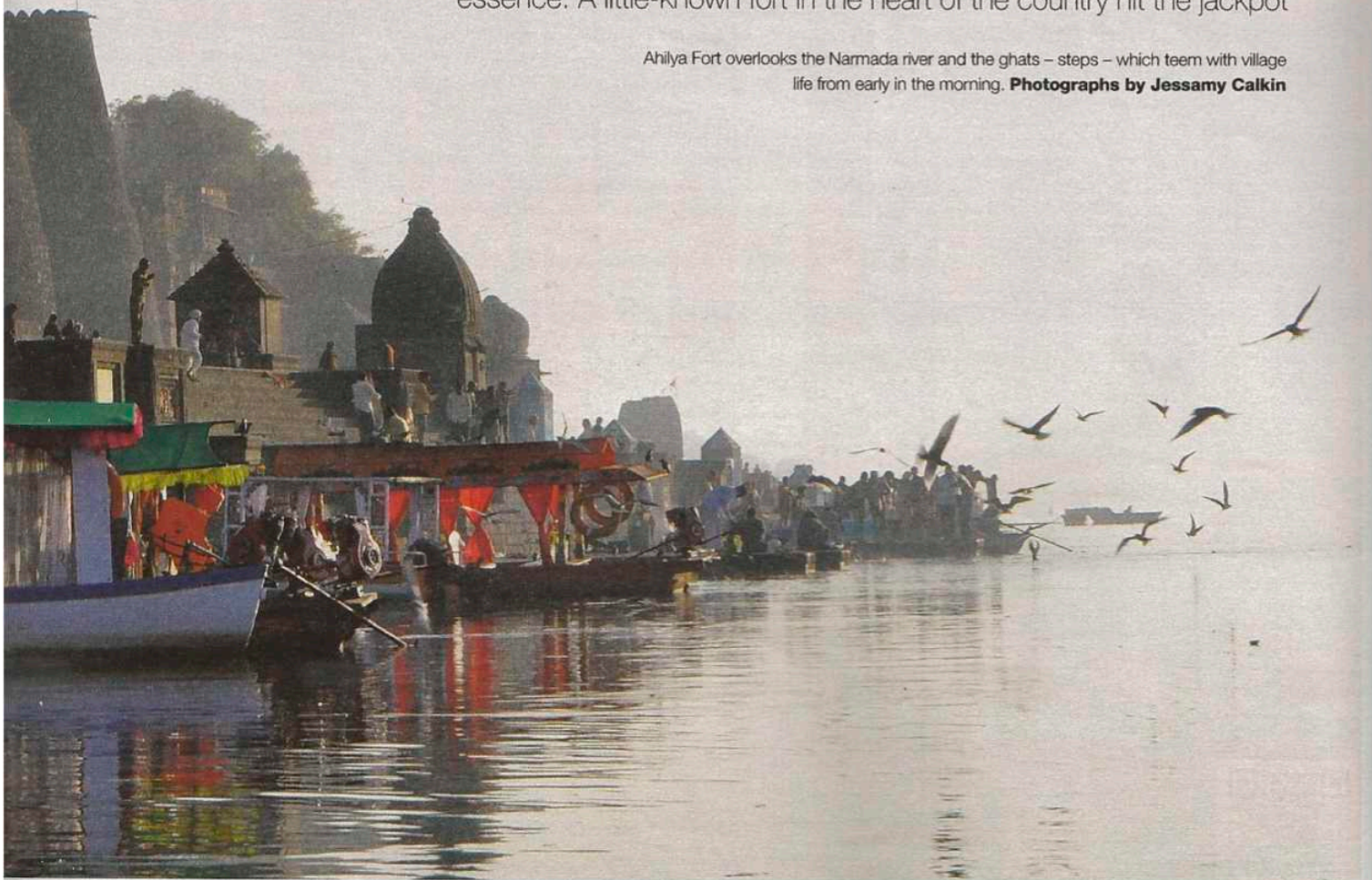
So I fly to Aurangabad in Maharashtra, in the heart of India. Sajid Khan, my driver, is waiting for me with a lovely smile and a blast of deafening Indian disco when he turns the ignition on. He speaks a little English with great confidence; we have lots of incomprehensible but entertaining chats.

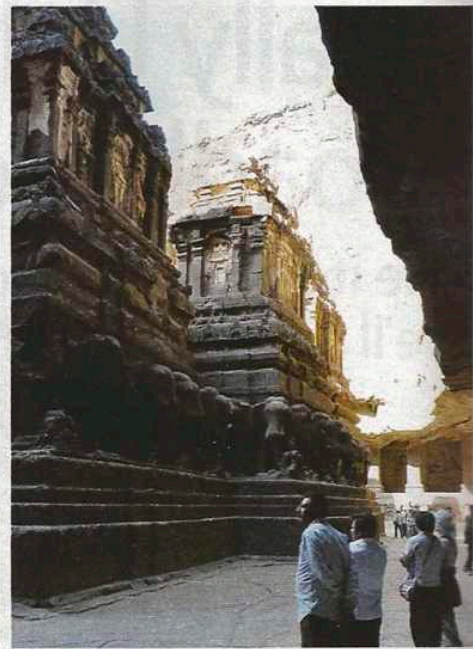
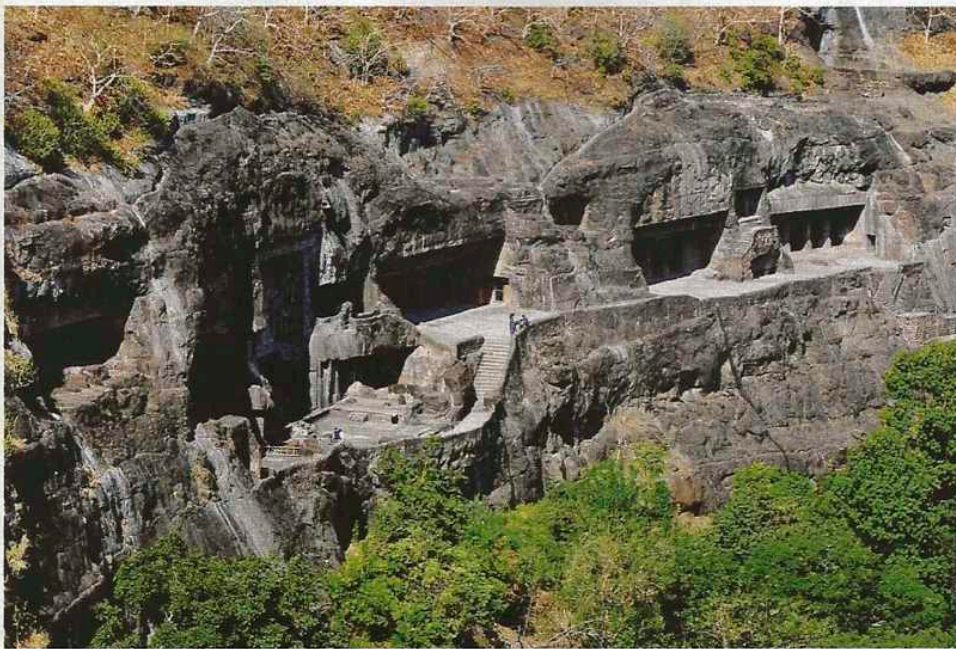
Aurangabad has a population of more than a million, and is one of the fastest growing cities in Asia. It's my first glimpse of India and it's gorgeous: everywhere so colourful, a reckless mass of unfinished buildings, barely-started buildings, hooting, scooting – a motorbike pulls up beside us with a female passenger sitting side-saddle casually holding her toddler like a clutch bag. It is all noisy, gaudy chaos with moments of exquisite tranquility – a woman standing on the top-floor balcony of a purple house combing

Lofty ideals

For her first trip to India, **Jessamy Calkin** wanted to visit one place that would capture its essence. A little-known fort in the heart of the country hit the jackpot

Ahilya Fort overlooks the Narmada river and the ghats – steps – which teem with village life from early in the morning. **Photographs by Jessamy Calkin**





her hair in the evening sun; a man in an open-air barber's shop with his head tipped back having a shave; schools, goats, tents by the side of the road. Plucky little auto-rickshaws, which I knew as tuk-tuks. (What are those called here, I ask Sajid. Muslims, he replies.) It's 29C and the traffic is mad.

I am staying in the Taj Residency, a compound of calm efficiency where barbecue dinners and delicious puddings are served in the garden. Banyan and neem trees overlook a pool with smart yellow-and-white-striped towels and a games area – Monopoly and Scrabble, a dartboard and a chess table.

There are two Unesco World Heritage Sites on the way to Ahilya. Near Aurangabad are the Ellora caves, dating from the 6th and 8th centuries AD, and considered to be the greatest example of cave architecture in the world. They are not widely known, presumably because there's so much else to see in India, but are unique because the site houses temples of three different religions – 12 cave shrines are Buddhist, 17 Hindu and five dedicated to Jainism. (There are six million Jain in India.) The caves are dug out of the Charanandri Hills, hewn out of one mountain, and sport spectacular carvings. The most amazing temple is on the Hindu site, the Kailashnath temple dedicated to Lord Shiva. It is twice the size

water system – step wells fed by a spring. The fort itself is built on a 650ft-high conical hill surrounded by unassailable rock. It is a schoolboy's dream: the entrance to the compound is fronted by a vast door – a foot thick and studded with sharp spikes to deter elephants. In the courtyard a false entry passage leads to a dead end; then walls, ramparts, bastions and two moats; one was filled with crocodiles. The only way across the final moat is a narrow bridge with a tunnel at the end (where a swordsman would be posted to chop off protruding heads), followed by an underground passage (Andhari – which translates as 'dark confusion passage') carved out of rock, 165ft-long and smelling strongly of bat excrement. Further on is a small opening for light and air, but heading for that would lead you to fall into the moat. No wonder it was invincible.

Daulatabad is wondrous, and deserted apart from a few school trips enjoying its grisly charms. The only tourists are Indian, and they are very keen to take my picture. It is a memorable morning.

There is one more stop. In a Sylvan setting lies another Unesco site, the Ajanta caves, which are Buddhist, some dating from 200bc. They contain carvings and paintings that are considered masterpieces of Buddhist art, and the reason they

are so well preserved is that they were abandoned in AD 650, and became overgrown and forgotten. They were rediscovered by a British Army officer in 1819. Consequently the paintings were not damaged by cooking fires and the wear and tear that Ellora suffered from habitation (though some were spoilt by primitive attempts at restoration). Five of the caves are temples and 24 were monasteries – the monks slept on austere little rock bunks. In the last, beautiful cave a serene Buddha reclines along the side of one wall. The paintings have recently deteriorated, and a replica of the caves is being built nearby with a view to closing the original.

My guide, Bharat, takes me up to a platform with an overview of the caves, and we discuss the intricacies of Indian politics – which Gandhis were good. ('Congress thinks it can't function without a Gandhi,' he says.) Then he leaves for Aurangabad and Sajid and I head north to Burhanpur.

Almost all the vehicles apart from the cows are made by Tata. The single-carriageway road is jammed with trucks overloaded with sugarcane and cotton, clapped-out buses, cows pulling carts and families of five on one scooter. Manic, reckless overtaking, accompanied by frantic honking. The saying is that to drive in India you have to have good brakes,

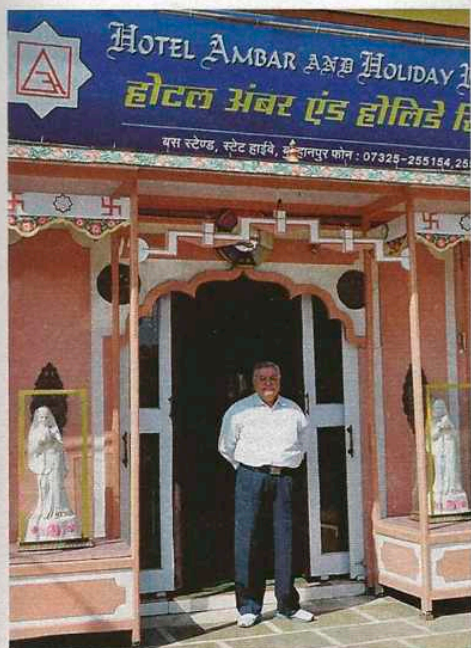
The Ajanta caves contain carvings and paintings that are considered masterpieces of Buddhist art

of the Parthenon, and took 2,000 artists 150 years to build (AD 753-900). It has the biggest cantilever ever made – an overhang 23ft wide. How did they work that out? No computers, no plans – it is a staggering feat of engineering.

Near to Ellora is Daulatabad, the most invincible fort in all India. I read the history of it in the shade of a flame tree with a troop of monkeys playing beneath it. 'Its possession was craved by most powerful dynasties ruling between 12th and 17th century AD – ownership became a matter of prestige.' You can see why. The compound is 2.1 square miles, entirely self-sustaining for 10,000 people and their elephants via a huge water tank and sophisticated

Top left the Ajanta caves contain Buddhist carvings and art. **Top right** the Kailashnath temple at the Ellora caves. **Right** the old town of Burhanpur





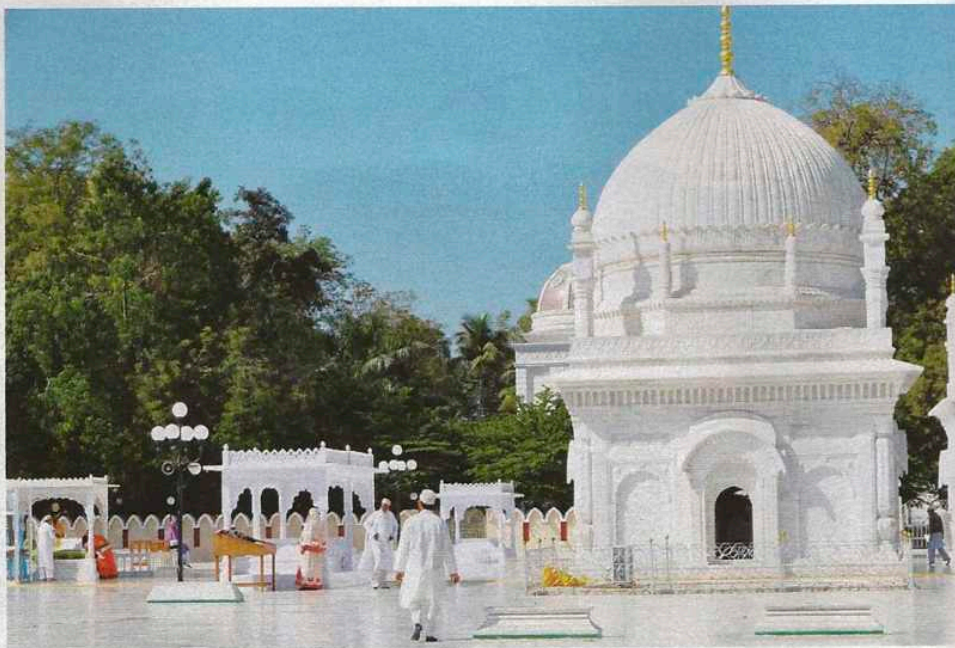
a good horn and good luck. (At night it's worse. Most people have no lights.) But once I get used to bracing myself for impact I discover that I like nothing better than driving through the Indian countryside. We pass fields of crops – cotton, sugarcane, corn, wheat, red chillies. 'What's in that field?' I ask Sajid. 'Vegetarians,' he says. There are oxen pulling ploughs and children leading goats on strings. Gnarly trees line the side of the road, their trunks painted with red and white stripes to denote that they are government property and to deter people from driving into them – very different to driving through much of Africa, where there are few trees left, the rest having been cut down for charcoal. (There are stiff penalties here for cutting down trees.)

We reach Hotel Ambar in the one-horse town of Burhanpur on the northern banks of the Tapti at 8pm (its address is 'Opp Bus Stand, State Highway, Burhanpur'). The owner, Hoshang Sorabji Havaldar, portly in a knitted cap, comes rushing out to meet me with a necklace of yarn, a rose that has seen better days and a glass of warm Coke. He indicates a poster on the wall and, aided by a pointer of the type used by teachers, gives me a potted history of Burhanpur.

Baneshwar, an island temple, is said to be aligned with the North Star and the centre of the earth

My room is a little cottage; its interior is 1970s in style: an ancient telly, a blue-and-white-tiled shower, a loo with a jug beside it for flushing. Simple and very clean. The restaurant is in the garden; no alcohol is served. My supper – noodle soup, a very garlicky nan and paneer angara, which contains local cheese – is extremely tasty and costs £3.35.

When Havaldar discovers I am from *The Daily Telegraph*, he dismisses my guide and shows me around town himself. And what a town. It's like taking a trip back into the past, to old India. Burhanpur is enclosed by a six-mile wall. It was the second Mughal capital, and the old town is filled with narrow streets and wooden houses with shutters; there



are few cars here and we have to weave our way through the market on Quila Road. There is one street for each product: fruit, spices, textiles, rope, fish, utensils.

We manage to fit in three of the 12 magnificent sites of Burhanpur. Jama Masjid is a mosque built in 1537 with an artful ceiling and a unique characteristic: it houses Sanskrit, Arabic and Urdu script. The ruins of the Shahi Quila palace, belonging to Mumtaz Mahal, the wife of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan (who built the Taj Mahal in her memory), are on the western bank of the Tapti; the palace has designs that influenced the Taj. We look at her beautifully decorated hammam, colours glowing on the ceiling (it was closed to the public because of an enormous beehive outside the window, but Havaldar had a word with someone). Mumtaz, much revered in these parts, died here while giving birth to her 14th child. She is buried at the Taj Mahal. This is a serene spot: roses have been planted, the gardens are opulent and green. We stand on the banks of the river, admiring the staircase she used to climb to mount her elephant. There are no tourists – just a few locals. It costs five rupees (6p) to come here if you are Indian; 100 rupees (£1.20) if you're not. Dargah-E-Hakimi is a mausoleum in the Shia community area,

a sacred pilgrimage for Dawoodi Bohra Muslims. It is immaculate and dazzling; its constantly mopped white marble floor shimmers in the sun. We take off our shoes and watch as the supplicants enter various mausoleums and pray in a circular ritual. Havaldar tells me there are about '500 houses' of the Shia community in Burhanpur; he himself is the only Parsee in town.

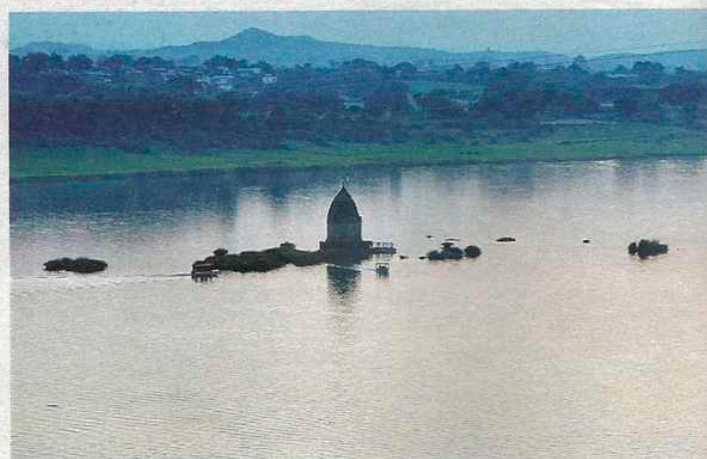
There are attempts to make Burhanpur a World Heritage Site, so rich is it with treasures. In the meantime, nobody's heard of it. Havaldar is a charming and knowledgeable host, and he wants more visitors to come to Burhanpur. I don't. I like it as it is.

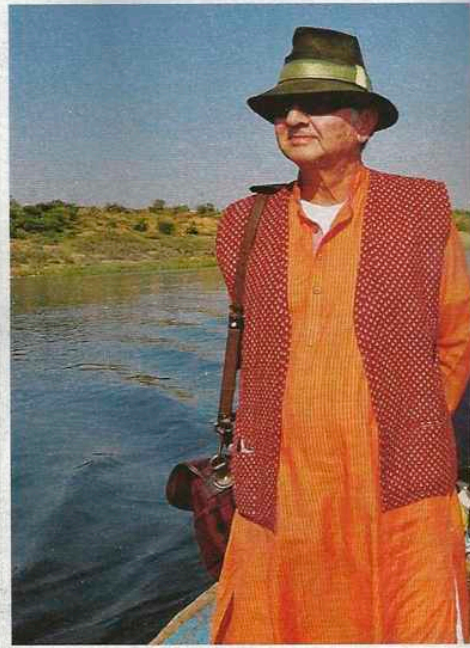
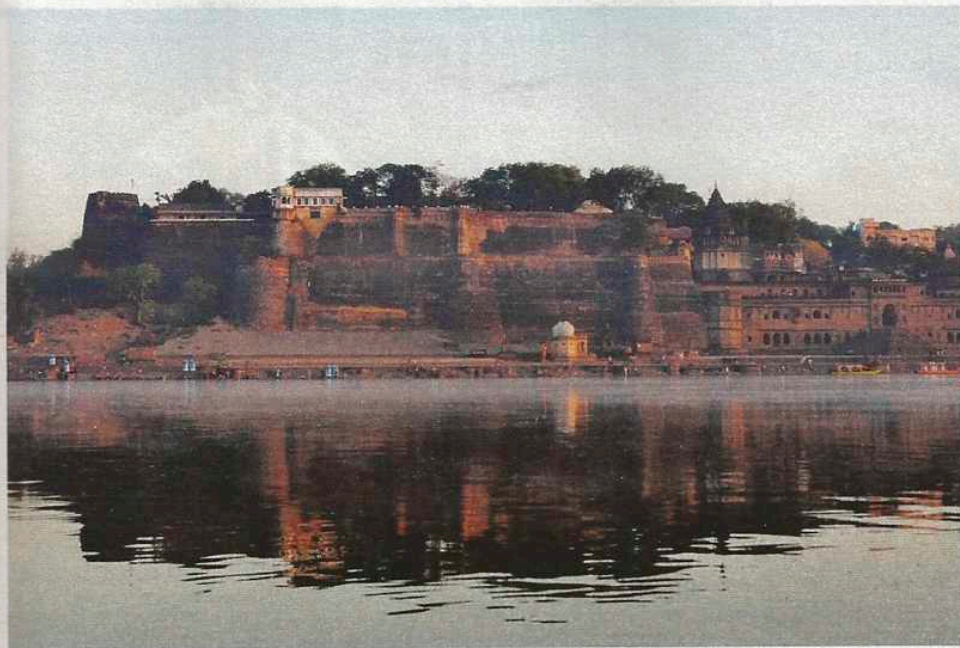
Loaded up with mango juice, Sajid and I hit the road at lunchtime, hoping to make it to Ahilya by the evening. 'On left, cotton. On right, corruption,' says Sajid, as we pass a family untangling long strands of cotton, and on the opposite side of the road a gang of policemen surrounding an overloaded lorry.

Ahilya Fort is right in the centre of the action in Maheshwar, a 4,000-year-old town in Madhya Pradesh. Its ramparts reach into the Narmada, one of India's holiest rivers, said to have been formed from a drop of sweat from Shiva's forehead. (The usual greeting in these parts is *Narmadey*

Top left Hoshang Havaldar, who runs Hotel Ambar. **Top right** the Muslim mausoleum Dargah-E-Hakimi.

Right Baneshwar temple in the middle of the Narmada





har, which means 'hail Narmada'.) Ahilya is an 18th-century fort, built by Queen Ahilya Holkar, known as Ahilya Bai. The fort remained in the family until my host, Prince Richard Holkar, Ahilya Bai's descendant, took it over in 1971. It was derelict, but he restored it and opened it as a hotel in 2000 with four rooms. It now has 13, all different, including the Maharaja Tent with a little garden overlooking Ahilyeshwar Temple and the river, where I am staying.

One of the best features of Ahilya Fort, and there are many, is the juxtaposition of the hotel with the ghats, or river steps. On the Ahilya ghats, directly beneath the hotel, all of Indian life is conducted: washing, praying, chanting, yoga, gossiping, singing, swimming. 'The Narmada is the last river in India where you can swim without any problems because there is no major urban area on the river,' Holkar says. We are on a boat heading for Baneshwar, a tiny island with a temple on it which, it is said, sits on the axis that connects the centre of the earth to the North Star. The shrine was built by Anand Raj Parmar in the 15th century. I climb up on to the steps of the temple and take off my shoes. Nandi is there, Shiva's doorkeeper, a stone bull guarding the temple. People come here often to pray and pay their

respects. It is a sacred spot, away from life on the ghats, with fine bird life – egrets and grey herons, river terns, black and white ibis, snipes and cormorants. We have tea and biscuits on the boat.

Holkar's father, Yaheshwant Rao, was the last Maharaja of Indore. Pictures show him to be a striking, flamboyant man, whose American second wife, Euphemia Stevenson, was Holkar's mother. Holkar says he was 'distantly close' to his father, who died when he was 17. Holkar went to the Woodstock School in the foothills of the Himalayas but moved to America aged eight and was educated at Stanford. He has two grown-up children who were raised by their nanny, Kuntā Bai, who has worked for the Holkars for 30 years, and is now housekeeper – and pinnacle – of the hotel. She arranges every detail, down to the placements at dinner.

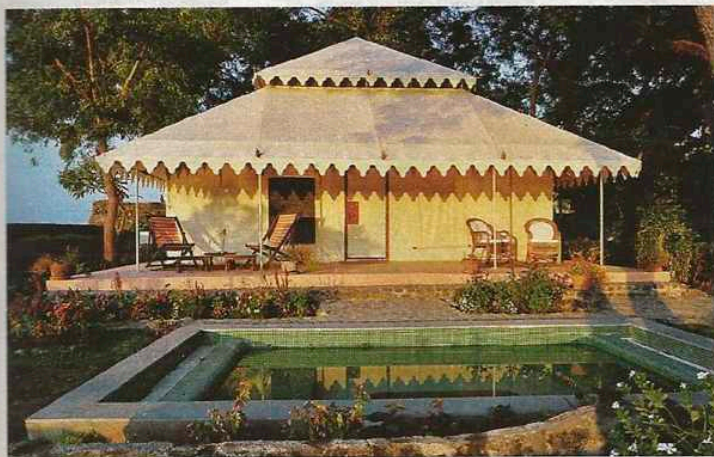
The reign of Ahilya Bai of Indore lasted from 1767 to 1795, a legendary period of reformation and good governance. Ahilya is highly respected in Madhya Pradesh. Holkar chose to settle here because he loves the fort and feels happy in Maheshwar, which is, he says, a microcosm of what India wants to be, with a very well integrated population, 18 per cent Muslim. There is no artisanal industry in Maheshwar but Holkar and his then-wife Sally

established the Rehwa Society in 1978 to inject life into the weaving industry. About 150 women and men work here; there is a creche for their children, and some subsidised housing for the weavers, with specially adapted high ceilings for the looms. Ahilya School is funded by profits from the weaving initiative; it has 240 children aged three to 13, and has been running for 15 years. It was closed while I was there because the government had decided it was too cold (it was, after all, about 24C).

Later, we have drinks on the terrace on the battlements overlooking the river and watch the sunset over Baneshwar. Holkar is avidly interested in cooking, and is present at every meal, lively *al fresco* occasions taken all together (though you can request a separate table). Dinner one night was 'Eight-hour spiced leg of lamb, lentils as prepared by the Hyderabad gypsies, okra kadhi, with baked apple for dessert'. A very good local wine, Sula, is served. Holkar is a patient but exacting host.

'Don't you get tired of all this guesting?' I ask him. 'No,' he says. 'Mostly people are so nice. And I like to show off my place.'

His 'place' is magnificent. It has great character and elegance, and like all the best hotels, is not without eccentricity. No televisions, no phones and no



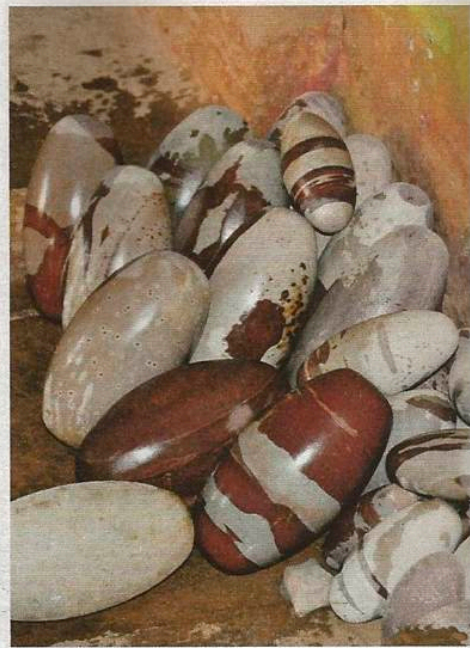
Top left Ahilya Fort seen from the Narmada river.

Top right Richard Holkar, the owner of the fort. **Left** the Royal Tent at Ahilya Fort, where Jessamy Calkin stayed

Maheshwar is a microcosm of what India wants to be, with a very well integrated population

room service. There is a swimming-pool next to a vegetable garden, a well-stocked library and lots of places to read, shady courtyards, a table-tennis table, an internet room, and flowers everywhere.

Best of all is the constant presence of life on the ghats. The relentless beating of the laundry begins at 4am, and the chanting and singing sometimes goes on late into the night, but it's strangely soothing. Early one morning I go out on the river with Aimee Junker, who has a gentle manner and is in charge of 'guest relations'. Junker arrived in India from Vermont. 'I came to Delhi with one suitcase; 16 years later I left for Nepal with 50 assorted pieces of luggage, two horses and 30 polo sticks,' she tells



me. There she managed a small safari lodge, until in 2011 Holkar asked her to be his 'alter ego'; she is now in charge while he is away (he spends time in Paris, where his girlfriend lives). We drift up the river, past the place where the holy men live in small chambers near the Kashi Vishwanath temple (built by Ahilya Bai in 1790, to give shelter to sadhus, itinerant holy men). We visit one later – he is on his mobile phone. When Junker first came here there were no phones. 'Rajiv Gandhi was in power at the time and I remember it took him two days to get through to the White House,' she says.

A man is chanting on the ghats, another feeding the fish, an old lady performing a ritual with a candle and another man suspended in the river, doing yoga. At the small temple within the fort 11 Brahmin pandits (scholars) are performing their daily morning ritual to bless the town. It's a form of meditation and lasts for a couple of hours. (The youngest pandit turns up for work in sunglasses and headphones.)

When we return Holkar is sitting under a tree on the terrace eating duck and a fried egg. A convivial breakfast is in full swing; it is cooked in front of us. The guests tuck into the jams Holkar makes in Paris – fig, lemon mango, apricot, guava jelly; and fresh papaya and tiny bananas from a tree that he brought

from Goa. Afterwards he summons the cook, Kalyan Singh, who started at the fort as a gardener, to discuss the day's menus.

There is lots to do. We have a picnic on the riverbank, voyaging part of the way by ox cart. The road here is barely a road at all, and the cart has chic padding, which the Indians certainly don't have; even so it is wildly uncomfortable. We pass a deserted funfair and eat under a tamarind tree watched by hordes of children, then cross the river to the village of Bakawa, which can be reached only by boat, an ancient village with an ancient industry – retrieving and polishing shivlings, oval-shaped stones found only in the Narmada, which represent the power of Shiva and are used in Hindu worship.

Another day I visit Mandu, a deserted Islamic city which gained prominence in the 10th and 11th centuries. There are baobab trees here, which I had thought were found only in Africa; later Holkar says that Mahmud Khilji's Abyssinian cohorts brought them over as seedlings. Mandu is entrancing, peaceful and lushly green. On the way back, at the gate of Tarapur Darwaza, a little table overlooking the valley has been set up for lunch. As I am alone, it is the quietest picnic in the world.

On my last evening we assemble on the terrace

and descend to the ghats, where boats are waiting for us; we take off in the dark. Our boat then joins up with the other boat and they're roped together so we're facing each other; there are about 10 of us. Another boat full of musicians tails us, then a bar boat, with drinks and freshly grilled cheese cooked on board, draws alongside. Kunta Bai, in a surreal combination of sari and miner's headlamp (to keep her hands free for herding guests), is handing out aperitifs. Holkar takes out his iPad and starts up his astrology app. We are eating peanuts soaked in coconut water and roasted, and arguing about the stars when I notice that the river is alive with hundreds of little lights. As we have just toasted Narmada I wonder if this might be her response, but it is actually a thousand candles in half-coconut shells floating busily down the river, launched earlier by an advance boat. We land on Rupmati's Island – a strip of land close to the opposite bank of the river, where fires have been lit and a magnificent spread has been laid out. We eat lamb stew on plates fashioned from tendu leaves. It is a wonderful atmosphere; the last supper.

Even the India bores agree that Ahilya is one of the best; as James Jayasundera said, it's a 'happy accident – no hotel chain could create something

On the ghats all of Indian life is conducted: washing, praying, yoga, gossiping, singing

like this regardless of how much money it spent.'

My first visit to India was full of surprises: no one begged me for money, and I felt totally safe. I was prepared for its poverty but not for the accompanying grace and curiosity and radiant smiles; mostly I loved the colours, and the exhilarating feeling of momentum – that India seems to function entirely on willpower and force of spirit.

A nine-day journey, including international and domestic Air India flights, with two nights at the Taj Residency, a night at Hotel Ambar, and four nights at Ahilya Fort, plus private guides for sightseeing and car transfers, costs from £2,380 per person based on two sharing (ampersandtravel.com)



Top left morning bathing rituals on the ghats.

Top right shivlings, sacred to Hindus, found only in the Narmada.

Left lunch at Tarapur Darwaza, the gate to Mandu