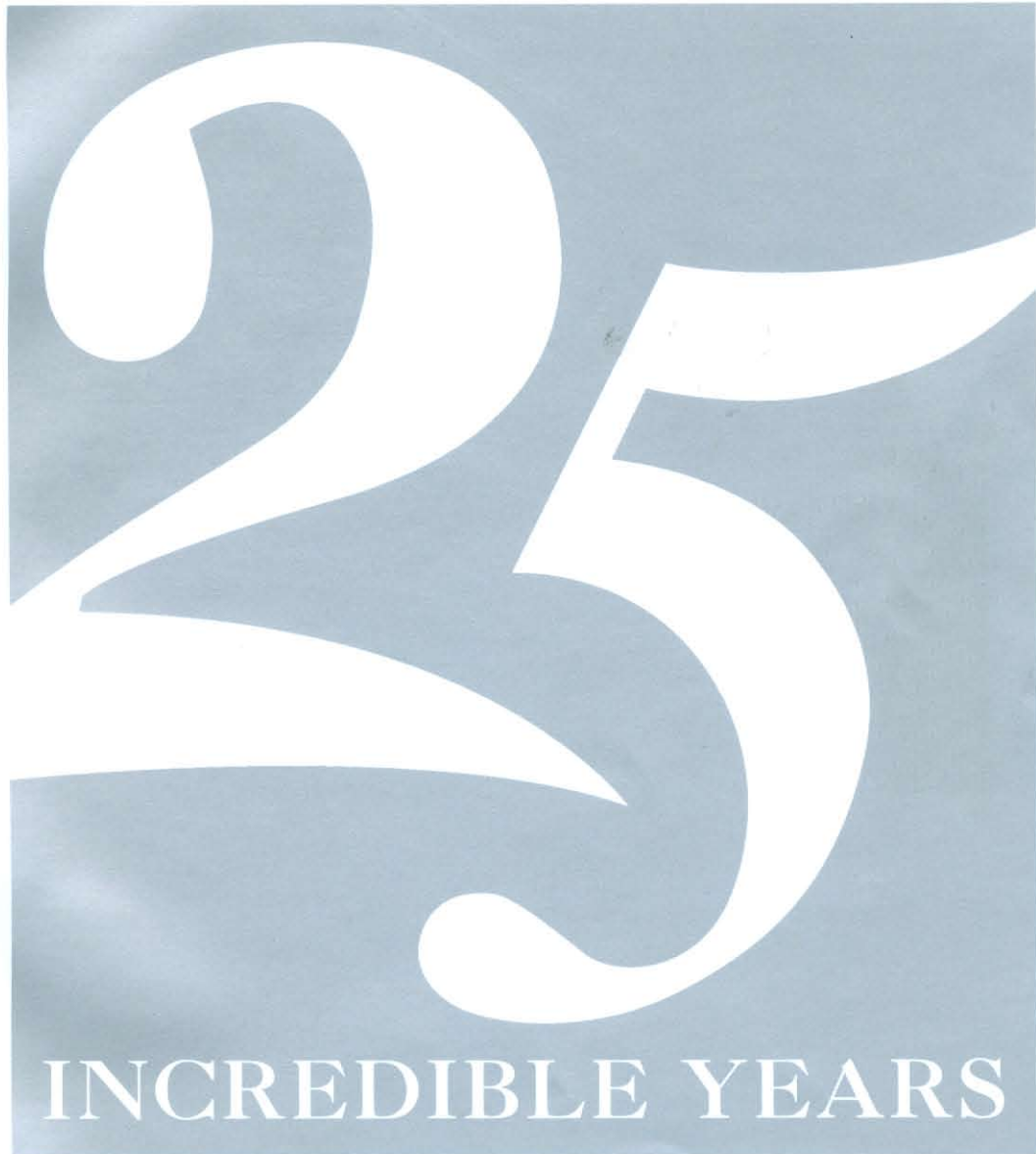


INDIA'S FIRST TRAVEL MAGAZINE

Discover India

JANUARY 2013 ₹100



Destinations, Journeys, Experiences & Ideas
Essential Time And Life Savers
Backpacking To Luxe: A Brief History Of Travel



VOLUME 26 ISSUE 1



INR 100-DI- JAN 2013

Floating gently, face down and immersed just under the surface of crystal-clear water, can be a surreal experience. It is an entirely different world—the one that lies underwater. A virtual cornucopia of marine life presents itself underwater at Jolly Buoy Island, in the Mahatma Gandhi Marine National Park located in the Andamans.

FINDING NEMO: As yet a fairly un-crowded snorkelling destination, the Andamans present a rich and diverse marine life. There are thick coral reefs, pale white and yellow, which hide an astounding number of marine creatures but the favourite has to be clownfish or, for those familiar with the Hollywood film *Finding Nemo*, the popular nemo fish with their semicircular bands of bright orange. There are other equally interesting and fascinating creatures from Nemo's world: a sluggish octopus which eyes the human intruders warily, starfish in bright red and purple, sooty black sea cucumbers, brilliantly-hued parrot fish, tiger fish...the list could go on.

It is easy to float around, losing track of time, and trying to let the vivid scenes etch themselves in the mind. So when it is time to stop and step on to the sands, there's usually a great deal of reluctance. Such is the experience that it can even leave you bereft and deflated, a bit like what the characters feel after the dive scene in *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*.

UNTOUCHED AND CHARMING: Once out of the water, and lying on the beach, the true beauty of the island and the sea also comes home rather stunningly. The national park is spread over 280 sq km and is among the most beautiful as well as ecologically fragile systems around India's coastline. It has five islands and innumerable creeks and bays, dark and mysterious mangroves, and is just the place for an adventure sport freak.



THE BLUE WORLD

(Clockwise from right) Soldier fish on a reef; a Nicobar pigeon; a scuba diver swims past Gorgonian coral and a Napoleon fish; a turtle swims past small species of fish; a group of divers in the Andamans

NAVIGATOR

The Andaman & Nicobar Islands are located in the Bay of Bengal, away from mainland India, about 1,400 km west of Chennai. Many carriers operate flights from Chennai and Kolkata, from where it is possible to connect to almost all other metros in the country. It is also possible to travel on passenger ships from Chennai, Visakhapatnam and Kolkata, but it takes almost four days.

(Non-Indians require a restricted area permit, issued on arrival at Port Blair airport; if arriving by sea, it needs to be arranged in advance.)

WHEN TO GO

Throughout the year, though December to mid-May is the peak season.



MYRIAD CHARMS

(Clockwise from top left) Sumer Banner fish swim in the blue waters; the Andaman & Nicobar islands seen from above; Port Blair Jail; a vista from Neil Island; a boat on the Andaman seas

INTO THE HEART OF DARKNESS: For a bit of change from sea, sand and adventure, visitors can head to Baratang Island. Travelling through the South Andaman & Baratang is bound to bring to mind the descriptions by Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*. Winding narrow roads, rugged and potholed in places, flanked by thick, dark forests and scattered rustic habitations only make the sudden and sporadic appearance of the Jarawas, the indigenous tribals with their distinctive but beautifully dusky Negroid features, at once surreal and slightly unsettling. To add to Baratang's mystique, there's a long boat ride past dense mangroves which brings one to a narrow path leading to ancient limestone caves. Towering rugged walls rise on either side, while a slender path leads deeper and deeper into the caves. In the pitch darkness, the guide sheds light, literally and figuratively, on the breathtaking stalagmites and stalactites, formed over hundreds of years.

But that's not all there is. On another part of the island, yet more natural phenomena—mud volcanoes—beckon. Considered the only known mud volcanoes in India, they are a set of strange gurgling formations. Their unreal quality is gripping and memorable.

NAVIGATOR

Peerless Sarovar Portico (Corbyn's Cove, Ph: 03192 229311; Web: www.sarovarhotels.com)

Sinclair's Bay View (South Point, Ph: 03192 227824; Web: www.sinclairshotels.com)

Fortune Resort Bay Island (Marine Hills, Ph: 03192 234101; Web: www.fortunehotels.in)

Barefoot Resort (Beach No.7, Radhanagar Village, Havelock Island, Ph: 3192-236008; Web: www.barefootindia.com)

The Wild Orchid (Vijaynagar, Havelock, Ph: 3192 282472; Web: www.wildorchidandaman.com)

ISLAND-HOPPING: Just off the coast of Port Blair is a set of three islands that can be visited during the course of a single day and offer interesting activities and insights. Ross Island was once the seat of British power. Settled in the mid-18th century and subsequently abandoned, it was turned into a penal colony soon after the first war of independence in 1857. Today, it is like a ghost town, without any inhabitants. Some distance away is North Bay, where snorkelling and glass-bottomed boat rides are on offer. Its beach has less sand and more pieces of coral and shell. The last of the three is Viper Island, where the gallows for prisoners were built and many Indian freedom-fighters were hung.

Heading home after such an intense few days of diverse activities—from snorkelling to peeking into a slice of India's history—can be deflating. But long after one has come away, the images are compelling and indelible enough to savour over and over again. Blame it on the siren call of the sea or the spell cast by the islands. 