

# Sunday Herald travel

## Carnival calling

The season that leads up to Mardi Gras, which was on February 21 this year, fuses into one long weekend in New Orleans, as the streets around the city fill up with floats and homes become littered with feathers and costumes.

## BREATHTAKING



# Still waters

**MITA GHOSE** visits the turquoise waterscape of Pangong Tso, high in the mountains of Ladakh, and paints a picture just as surreal as the real thing.

The urge to live dangerously tends to strike couch potatoes in their midlife. It's known as a 'crisis'. Mine began with the *3 Idiots*, or rather a visual from the film: a turquoise lake high in the mountains of Ladakh. And it has been making me behave in ways timorous women my age don't. They don't aim too high, for instance, and certainly not for altitudes that exceed 14,000 ft above sea level.

But then, fools, whatever their age, rush in. So here I am, terrified at my own recklessness, but heading nonetheless, for the sacred Pangong Tso, the world's highest salt water lake in a remote region in the northern Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. My rendezvous with risk has begun badly, with a weather-foiled attempt to land at the airport in Leh, the region's largest town. With the second — successful — try, I resolve to be intimidated by nothing; not snowfall, landslides or altitude-related acute mountain sickness (AMS) — the hidden punches Ladakh often packs — and quake at the first hint of doubt: a veteran's warning about Pangong Tso's mercurial nature. Waxing and waning with the whims of weather, now you see its beauty, now you apparently don't.

Moving southeast of Leh, my hopes rise as I watch the landscape unfold like a series of dream sequences in a movie. Then anxiety plays spoilsport again. What if the mountain pass en route is snowed under? What if my tryst with the lake, approximately 160 km away, is a total loss? What if, what if, what if? But the weather holds and Chang-La is accessible, even if it seems puny at 17,586 ft after Khardung-La, the highest motorable pass in the world that I'd crossed days earlier on my way to Nubra Valley.

Geographical measurements — a controversial issue in this region — apart, Ladakh defies comparisons. For, tucked away in its hidden corners are several worlds — all unique. If the journey to Nubra Valley leads you through rock and

snow and pale, pale sand, around nearly every bend in the mountain highway leading to the Changthang Wildlife Sanctuary, where Pangong Tso is located, lies an arresting vista that bowls over even those sold on the region's stark lunar beauty: rushing streams, purple and yellow heather or valleys of verdant pastureland dotted with velvet-black dzo ("a hybrid of yak and cow," my Ladakhi driver corrects loftily, when I exclaim, "Oh, look! Yaks!") and — during one wild, wonderful moment — long-maned horses, among them, an exquisite pale blond mare playing truant, surely, from a fairy tale.

### Prayers for a safe journey

This is paradise, without the polluting presence of Adam and Eve who are obviously in hiding. Not a soul in sight along miles of deserted highway. But small chortens, crudely fashioned from wayside stones, mark the passage of travellers who have sought divine blessings for a safe journey. Faith is the sole constant in a life fraught with natural hazards and uncertainties and Ladakh's many monasteries bear witness to its power. The most important of these on the road to Pangong Tso are Thiksey, which, like many fortress-monasteries of the past, reigns over spectacular surroundings from its lofty perch; and, encircled by high ridges and Hemis, a surprisingly unassuming structure, given its importance as a centre of religious learning and a repository of the priceless treasures on display in its museum.

If my monastery visits are rushed affairs, regret is swiftly elbowed out by the intensity of luminous blue edging the horizon as the sun tilts westwards and my hired Scorpio bumps its way over axle-breaking pebbled tracks towards the lake area. The car crests a rise and there it is — Pangong Tso, stunning like a sock in the jaw. I recognise the spot where the Bollywood blockbuster's last scene was shot and where day-trippers are offloaded. But the camp in Spangmik, where I'm staying overnight,

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is further ahead, at a point beyond which foreign tourists are not permitted.

At Camp Watermark, I spurn tea and hospitality to get the last few shots of the waters before the sun dips behind the ring of mountains; who knows what tomorrow will bring?

It seems impossible that of the lake's dark blue vastness — approximately 130 km long and five km at its widest point — the visible area represents only one-third of its actual size; the rest vanishes into the unknown Tibet Autonomous Region. The breeze whips bright prayer flags, strung from poles, into a frenzy, carrying the dreams of many heavenwards. All is well.

It's a thought that helps me settle in for the night. With the generator switched off at 10.30 pm, I'm expecting pitch darkness inside my tent. But a magical afterglow like stardust keeps me awake.

Dawn makes a stagey entrance with seismic tremors. I unzip the tent flap when they subside and watch clouds gathering overhead. The lake is a foul-tempered, soul-destroying grey. By breakfast time, a flirty sun is coaxing from the water, an array of aqua, turquoise, indigo — gleaming and peacock rich. The discerning eye can apparently pick out seven distinct shades. I'm content to be undiscerning.

Up close, the lake surface is crystal clear; pretty pebbles lie beneath. Greedily, I stoop to collect one as a memento and lose my balance, bruising my hand as I fall. An anecdote, recounted by a Tibetan friend, of a man who had visited Pangong Tso a few months earlier, flashes through my mind. Defying local religious sentiments, he had apparently relieved himself in its sacred waters. Within weeks, he suffered a stroke that left him brain-damaged.

The sceptic in me smirks at that story. But moments before my departure for Leh, I'm back at the lake, listening to the gentle slurp of water licking the shore. Reluctantly, I remove the little pebble from my trouser pocket and toss it back to where it belongs.

## DOWN UNDER

# Shipwrecked in Warrnambool

I am entranced by the sight of the glazed earthenware Minton peacock in iridescent hues standing proud on a grey mound, with flowering blackberry and ivy and clumps of foliage. Created by an imaginative French artist and made by skilled craftsmen of the famed British pottery company Minton & Co, it symbolises to me the triumph of man over nature. The peacock, intact in its packing case, drifted ashore two days after the Loch Ard shipwreck. It was modelled by an Italian artist and was to be exhibited at an international exhibition in Melbourne in 1880. Except for a chip on its beak, it survived the stormy seas and the dangerous reefs. Today, it is valued at over \$4 million!

Along the southern coast of Australia is a rugged stretch called the Shipwreck Coast, between Moonlight Head and Port Fairy. Many ships have come to grief on this stretch in the early 1800s and 1900s, because of the ferocious weather conditions, thick fog and treacherous reefs. On our drive along this winding road with swoops and loops, we read a series of plaques along this disaster zone, marking these tragedies.

I am in Warrnambool, Victoria's most active port in the 1880s, situated on one end of the Great Ocean Road. Today, this seaside town with a charming vibe is the place where visitors spend a night before they explore the charms of the winding Great Ocean Road, with its superb vistas of windswept cliffs, rocky promontories, rainforests and amazing wildlife. Between June and September, visitors flock to Logan Beach to witness female whales give birth and nurse their calves.

The town is also home to the iconic Fletcher Jones clothing manufacturer's factory, with a landscaped garden, waterfalls and a hawk's wagon created on an old quarry site when the company built its first factory in 1948.

The Sebel Deep Blue, our unique hotel, is set on top of an underground aquifer and uses this mineral-rich water in its deep water bath house as well as plumbing and room heating systems. Visitors flock to the Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village, which was created around an original 1859 lighthouse, to give visitors a back-in-time feel and an experience of life in a 19th century port as well as showcase the maritime heritage of this region. Built around the original lighthouse and keeper's cottage, this four hectare site has a chapel, shops, cottages, a cozy Victorian tea room, a Masonic Temple and a sail maker's workshop. We join the atmospheric Loch Ard Lantern walk... it's a pitch dark night with the wind howling, as a bunch of adults and children

tread cautiously on the winding cobblestone streets with lanterns in their hand, listening to the guide's narration. We first watch a film in the Gravesend Theatre on the journey of the immigrants and their lives. The voyage to Australia was a long and hazardous one for immigrants. They lived in crowded conditions and had to battle disease and lack of food. Faster but more hazardous routes were adopted by captains under a pressure to reach Australia quickly.

It was a wild and stormy night in 1878. The rough seas, the dense fog and the notorious rock outcrops in this treacherous coast were the death knell for the clipper ship Loch Ard with 54 passengers aboard, almost at the end of her three-month journey from Mutton. The ship struck a rocky reef off Mullion Bird Island at the entrance to what is now called, Loch Ard Gorge.

There were only two survivors: a handsome man called Tom Pearce who managed to cling to a lifeboat and was swept into a gorge and a young girl called Eva Carmichael who clung on to some wreckage for five hours, before she was spotted by Tom. They took refuge in a sheltered cave until Tom scaled a sheer cliff, ran into some farm workers from a nearby sheep station and got help!

The multi-million dollar hi-tech sound and laser show called 'Shipwrecked' is projected on a wharf theatre, where we become part of the Loch Ard's final voyage. The maritime village is the background and the story is projected on to a water fountain and uses images, lasers, illusions, mist effects and giant water screens to make the experience real. The walls slide away as we watch the scene entranced — chimneys spout ribbons of smoke, the Steam Packet Inn is filled with exuberant drinkers and colourful boats are moored on the silent waters. Suddenly a storm brews, rain and lightning lash the skies and the pounding ocean and a sheer cliff where Tom is swept away is all before our eyes. Technical wizardry makes our experience almost surreal.

The seats rock from side to side, simulating the ship on the pounding surf. We get drawn into the story of Tom and Eva and their survival against all odds. There was a lot of romantic expectation from the public that Eva and Tom would fall in love and marry. But Eva was a daughter of a British aristocrat and Tom Pearce was a mere seaman. Eva returned to Ireland and Tom went on to become a captain of a ship. Their miraculous story lives on... re-enacted every night in this seaside town.

**KALPANA SUNDER**



STORY TIME 'Shipwrecked' records Loch Ard's final journey. PHOTO BY AUTHOR

## MULTIPLE CHOICE

# A little something for everyone

We watched with a lot more than little trepidation as Neelam and Dinesh, our group members, placed their feet gingerly on the steep rock face, preparing to get down. Their feet struggled to find a foothold at first, slipped for one heart-stopping moment, and then steadied once again. All of us, including those who had averted their eyes, heaved an audible sigh of relief at their safe touchdown.

Rock climbing in Nakhon Nayok province of Thailand is a popular sport. There are entire holidays woven around this theme with many takers among the Thais. Especially among Bangkok residents, considering the fact that it's a short drive from the capital.

The more adventurous among our group were getting their share of thrills from this activity. The rest of us preferred to be spectators of this sport. But



INDIAN TOUCH The Ganeshas at Ganesha Park in Nakhon Nayok. PHOTO BY AUTHOR

then, we had roughed it out in our ATVs (all terrain vehicle) and had our fill of adventure for the day. Besides the forested hillsides, golf courses, rocky areas and waterfalls, Nakhon Nayok also has rough local terrain.

There are several well-delineated dirt track circuits on which you can take your ATV along and have a thrilling ride. You can either hire an ATV for as little as 100 baht or if you are less confident, you can go on a guided tour with a trained driver alongside or behind you on another ATV.

We were looking forward to river rafting on the Nakhon Nayok River, which has the Klong Tha Dan Dam over it. However, our rafting turned out to be sedate sailing down the river due to the fact that the waters were rather placid at that time of day and on that chosen stretch of the stream. So, we neither felt the rush of water nor adrenaline.

If you are game to driving out into the wild at night, take the night safari in the Khao Yai National Park, Thailand's second largest, that runs through the Nayok province among others in the country.

We also drove out to Ganesha Park, which is a short drive from Bangkok. There are two enormous statues of the elephant-headed god so dear to Indians. One of them is seated in the traditional posture while the other can be seen to be reclining. In the first temple, you encounter a gigantic Ganesha with four hands holding the three-pronged weapon or *trishul* in one hand and *modaks* (his favourite food) in another. A large mouse faces Ganesha. It is believed that you merely have to whisper your wishlist into the mouse's ear. He will tell Ganesha all about it, who in turn will fulfill it for you. There were more Thais whispering into his ear than Indians! Brahma might not enjoy much patron-

age in his native land — most are acquainted with the Puranic story wherein he was cursed that he would not have idols of his installed and worshipped on earth. However, in this Hindu temple, he sits pretty — a large, well-chiselled statue alongside Mahavishnu, complete with Garuda and Shiva, all fronted by another Ganesha — in a smaller temple within this complex.

Tourists crowd the rows of shops selling small Ganesha icons, photographs, and other paraphernalia while Buddhist monks sit in small alcoves and bigger halls, spinning the rosary or pronouncing benediction on devotees who come and touch their feet, seeking their blessings. This is a multi-faith complex — there are many statues of Sakyamuni too. As we made our way through the many open halls of this complex, Buddhist chants mingled with strains of *Shree Ganesha Namaha*.

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