



Atop a hill, there are lush pastures for miles all around

JOURNEY TO THE AFTERWORLD

This megalithic passage tomb is older than the Pyramids

Kalpana Sunder

An alien flying saucer? My first glimpse of Newgrange from outside the shuttle bus is magical and otherworldly. Five thousand years ago, settlers raised livestock and grew crops in this fertile valley. They were artful architects and engineers who built mounds, hill-top forts and shrines.

Newgrange is part of a heritage trail in Ireland, called Bru na Boinne which includes the burial mounds of Knowth, Douth, and the Hill of Tara.

Green pastures

The Newgrange site sits perched on a hill in the Boyne Valley with lush green fields and hills all around. Granite and sparkling white quartz from as far as the Wicklow and Dundalk Bay were used to create this tomb. This tomb is called a passage tomb because of the long corridor leading to a central burial room. There's a lot of debate about the actual function of these tombs. Were they sacred temples or astronomical observatories? Or a pagan homage to the seasons?

The outer facade is marvelous with white quartz stones punctuated by egg-shaped granite stones and a grass top. This is surrounded by mammoth kerb stones.

We creep into the narrow passage, squeezing ourselves



The entrance into the passage tomb at Newgrange

between closely placed rocks. The path goes on a slight incline and then widens into an inner chamber built like a crucifix. The air is chilly and the interiors are mysterious.

Karlos Brady, our articulate guide shows us three recesses with shallow basins, which must have contained the bodies along with funeral offerings. Many of the stones are decorated with ancient art-symbols like triangles, waves, spirals, lozenges and circles. Apparently, this place has two-thirds of all the known Neolithic carvings and they are similar to aboriginal representations found in other parts of the world. The symbols remain unsolved. Maybe they represent nature or were maps of the afterworld.

The overlapping stones packed with burnt clay and sand form an intricate conical roof. For millennia, the roof has been intact and has kept the inner chamber dry. Archaeologists believe that

this construction may have taken more than forty years. As the average life span then was around thirty years, work must have carried over from one generation to the other!

Newgrange is famous for its winter solstice when the rays of the sun enter the roof box at the entrance crawl into the passage and fall on the inner chamber, illuminating it. The event lasts just seventeen minutes. This is such a great tourist attraction that tickets are sold by a lucky draw! It is now believed that the ancient people viewed the winter solstice as a rebirth, or a passage from darkness into light. Our guide says, "In a moment, I will turn off the lights, if any of you are uncomfortable, let me know." After some minutes of darkness, we see the torch light that he shines creep up into the chamber and light up the inner chamber faintly. It's an unforgettable moment: a flash of insight into an ancient world.

Glimpse of Kangchenjunga



Q&A inbox

Q Please let me know about the weather conditions of Yumthang and 0 point, Sikkim, in last week of December as I'm planning to go there. Are the roads being closed due to snow fall?

Chayan

A You may be happy to know that even we will be travelling to the same place at the same time. Yumthang will have temperatures ranging from a maximum of 6 degrees to a minimum of -10 degrees. Recent news has it that it's already dipping down to -2 degrees overnight with snow flurries — intermittent snow drizzles that do not cover the ground like snowfall — but one can really enjoy the flakes and the chill. The roads will not be closed contrary to what some websites say.

Expect some breathtaking glimpses of the mighty Kangchenjunga!

Q I am planning to visit Bhubaneswar-Konark-Puri from 12th to 15th of Jan, 2011. Please give me a clear idea how to cover these places. Do suggest the best hotels near the train station at Bhubaneswar with tariffs below ₹ 1,000. Also recommend a hotel in Puri with a similar budget.

Madhu

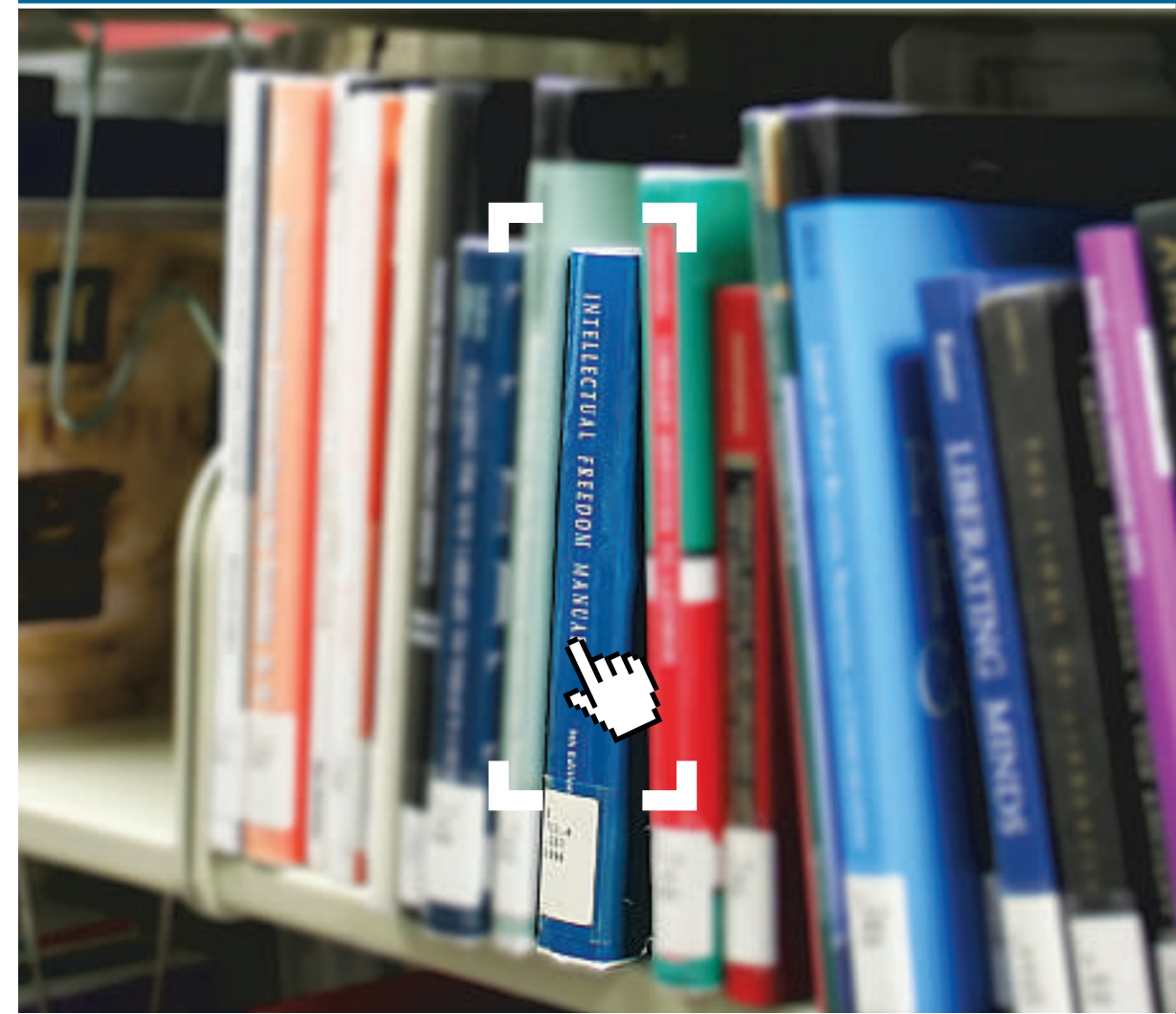
A Trip plan assuming you are reaching Puri first. There are two places to stay, either Swargdwar

road and New Marine Drive or CT (Charak Tripatha Road). Both the places are not too far from the railway station. Swargdwar Road is on main Puri beach, which is crowded but you can enjoy till late in the night. Hotels on CT road are very quiet. The rate of hotels on Swargdwar Road, especially the sea-facing rooms are normally more than ₹ 1,500. Non-sea-facing rooms are available for less than ₹ 1,000. Tour plan: 12th — visit Lord Jagannath temple. After that, visit the Puri beach. 13th — book a day tour from OTDC (Orissa tourism) including Konark, Nandan Kanan Zoo, Bhubaneswar. 14th — go on a half-day tour to Chilka. Enjoy boat-riding where you can observe lots of migratory birds. You can book a cab but bargain beforehand. In the evening, ask the same cab to make a city trip, and see some places like Lokenath temple and other famous shrines. 15th — rest! Enjoy the beach and go shopping.

If you are fond of sweets then try Khaja from Kakatua Sweets. Let me know of your experience. (Inputs from HolidayIQ members)



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Saline Encounters



The Dead Sea is actually a land-locked lake in a rift valley

The Dead Sea lives up to its name: no fish can survive in its waters and staying afloat is a piece of cake!

Kalpana Sunder

This may be the lowest point on earth at 422m below sea-level, but it's certainly been the high point of my trip to Jordan! The stark Dead Sea landscape has an otherworldly beauty, almost like a moon-scape. It's enshrouded by a diaphanous haze in the air, created by the high evaporation of salts. I remember my geography lesson of long ago — the Dead Sea is actually a landlocked lake in a rift valley which was formed by a major earthquake. When the incoming rivers and streams reach the Dead Sea, they have nowhere to go and they evaporate, leaving behind a dense mixture of salts and minerals. The lethal hyper-salinity allows no life to exist here, except some resilient bacteria and algae. The Dead Sea is the place where the pages of the Bible are played out before your eyes. This area was the site of five Biblical cities. Abraham walked here; Lot's wife turned into a pillar of salt. In days of yore, the Dead Sea water and salt were imported by nobles in Italy. Asphalt, the bituminous substance rising to the surface was used for industrial



The Mövenpick Resort in Jordan overlooks the Dead Sea

and medicinal purposes, even embalming.

Accommodation

We stay at the Mövenpick Resort right on the Dead Sea, a luxurious hotel with stunning views and rooms built like a Moroccan village. The showpiece is the opulent Zara Spa as big as a theme park — 65,000 sq feet of saline pools, steam rooms, and an Arabic style relaxation room. The Dead Sea was the original spa of the world. The therapeutic nature of its waters and mud has attracted handsome notables like Queen Cleopatra and King Herod! Today, it is a gold mine for beauty and health products: there are some 35-odd healing minerals in the waters which reduce the toxins and inflammation, cure

arthritis, eczema and the like. I understand that the Dead Sea also has 4-6% more oxygen, so just breathing here makes you more energised and it's particularly good for chronic lung disease patients.

Staying afloat

Floating in the waters of the Dead Sea is not as easy as it's made out to be. I gingerly pick my way on the pebbled beach and enter the murky green saline waters. I get nervous in the water and instinctively flap my hand and legs till I remember, "To float, you have to relax first!" The natural buoyancy drags my hands and legs to the surface. The waters are choppy, so I miss out on the perfect photo-op with a newspaper in one hand, and a drink in the other. With our

guide's help, I stumble out of the oily waters and mimicking the beauty regime of the ancient royals (much better than Botox), slap on some of the Dead Sea mud (which smells most foul, like rotten eggs) supplied thoughtfully in large vats. I shower off the sulphurous goo and there's the new me — my skin feels rejuvenated and youthful. Experts say that fifty years from now, the Dead Sea may disappear completely largely because of evaporation and the diminishing inward flow from the stagnant river Jordan. My cup runneth over — I have the Dead Sea mud in pouches, sea salts and creams stuffed into my bags and a certificate that attests to the fact that I actually floated at the lowest point on the earth's surface!

