



A TRIP TO MOUNTAIN COUNTRY

The Tatra mountains loom large over Zakopane in Southern Poland, a region known best for its distinctive culture and snowy ski slopes

Kalpna Sunder

I am staring at a local Polish lad with mesmeric light eyes standing beside his horse and carriage. He is confident, thriving on all the attention that he gets. He is a Gorale (from the Polish word, goral for mountain), wearing Highlander clothes embellished with embroidery. His outfit includes a black felt hat with a feather and white woolen trousers with a pom-pom at the ankles!

Shepherd settlement
Krupowki Street is the epicentre of all life in Zakopane, in Southern Poland. There are pretty chalets and a pedestrian-only main street crammed with restaurants, bars and souvenir stalls. Oszczypek or smoked goat's cheese is the local delicacy and old women in headscarves sell it round-the-clock. The distinctive taste of the cheese comes from being smoked and soaked in a

brine-filled barrel. We see the Tatras in the distance, their peaks enshrouded in mist. Silver patches glistened in the sunshine. The Tatras are the highest ranges in the Carpathians — jagged peaks punctuated by lakes and valleys. Zakopane was the favourite haunt of the athletic Pope John Paul II, who skied and hiked here, as well as paid a nostalgic visit when he was pontiff. We dine in traditional Polish restaurants and feast on smoked cheese, jurec (a soup made of rice, potatoes, eggs and herbs) and potato pancakes. Meat is traditionally smoked, grilled or roasted over a wood flame. The local portions are large enough to feed an army! Zakopane was originally an obscure shepherd settlement. The pure mountain air was ideal for sanatoriums, the

forerunners of health spas. Soon, Polish artists, composers, literary figures, architects, poets and painters flocked to Zakopane. Hotel Litwor, where we were staying, is built in the traditional Zakopane style of architecture, with sloping tiered wooden roofs and small windows and eaves.

We drive to the Tatra National Park just south of Zakopane. Our guide Krzysztof surprises me by saying that the Bollywood movie Fanaa was shot nearby!

We chose to be driven by a raffish Highlander, Michel in a horse carriage. He tells me that these mountains are dangerous and witness a lot of accidents in the long winter. Always take experienced guides and stay on the marked trails.

Skier's dream
Zakopane is a cross-country



Smoked goat's cheese is the local delicacy in Zakopane

skier's dream — we see the enormous ski jumps and imagine how exotic this town would be in the winter. Local Gorale music with cellos, fiddles and lively tunes filled the air. We enjoy it at crowded local bars over some warm beer with cinnamon, honey and herbs.

If you want to feel the spirit of a hundred years here, then the place to visit is the cemetery behind the St Clements church on Koscielska Street. This is the place where local celebrities are laid to rest: it is atmospheric, with wooden carved

crosses and sculptures, coloured lanterns and candles and kaleidoscopic glass paintings. We take a funicular to Gubalowka for a panoramic view of the Tatras. We spend hours here drinking highland electric tea spiked with vodka, looking out at green meadows and watch sheep grazing. In the distance is the Babia Gora (the Old Lady's mountain). It looks like a sleeping figure with snow-capped peaks and the mesmerising colours of fall. I think to myself — the mountains are the real stars of Zakopane!

Visit celestial waters

Aditya Gokhale

Lonar in Buldhana district of Maharashtra has a special place on the geological map of India. Its claim to fame is a salt water lake in basaltic rock — the world's only such lake — believed to have been caused by the impact of a meteorite that struck the earth thousands of years ago. Initially, some scientists felt that it was a volcanic crater. The crater has a depth of 170 meters, with a circular rim surrounding it. The lake water is ten times saltier than seawater, preventing the survival of fish. The legend goes



The tank that has a sweet water stream



PHOTOS: ADITYA GOKHALE

that the soap made from this salt was used by Emperor Akbar. We first reached the north eastern side of the crater where the circular ridge has a breach. It indicates the direction from which the meteorite struck the earth. There are small but ancient temples in this region. In the middle, there is a tank-like structure with steps leading down, where a sweet water stream flows from a stone snout. The water is supposed to have

healing powers as well. The Daityasudan temple in Lonar is dedicated to Lord Vishnu, who is believed to have killed a demon called Lavanasur at the bottom of the crater. Lavanasur's blood is said to have salinated the water. The crater and the lake have the potential to draw hordes of tourists. But the authorities need to spread awareness of its existence and develop basic facilities to encourage tourists to visit.

Ancient artefacts can be found along the lake

Q&A inbox



Head to Coorg

Q I'm from Mumbai and I'm planning to travel to Coorg in a few days. At what height is Coorg located and how many hours does it take to reach? I have terrible travel sickness. Please tell me how many hours I will have to travel in the hills. Does the road have a lot of twists and turns or is it a comfortable ride? Since my niece is asthmatic, I would like to know how cold the weather will be at present. Are there any other precautions we should take?

Amit
1. Madikeri's altitude: Madikeri is around 5,000 feet above mean sea level. It is the capital of Coorg. The best way to reach Coorg is through the Mysore-Nagarhole route. This is a forest road and there are no hair pen bends. So don't worry about motion sickness. The forest road is open from 6 am to 6 pm and if you start early, you could catch glimpses of elephants and deer. Coorg is a district, not a single town. So you need to know exactly where you'll be going to understand how the drive would be. Beyond forest limits the roads are often bumpy, though they are not ridden with bends.
2. About travel time: It would take approximately 2 hours to reach Madikeri from Mysore. A cab would cost around

Rs 1,000 -1,500.
3. Climate: Coorg is always pleasant, even in the winter. So you don't need not worry. Don't spend too much time in Madikeri. Explore places like the Irpu Falls; go on a trek and check out white water rafting.

Q I am staying for a week in Mussoorie and then want to proceed to Nainital. Are there buses from Mussoorie or Dehradun to Nainital? How much time does it take to reach Nainital? The distance I guess. is around 330 km. Kindly suggest.

Kanithi
A You can catch the bus from Dehradun. The distance by road is approximately 370 km. There are buses at 5 pm (semi-deluxe), 7 pm (deluxe), 8 pm (AC deluxe) and 9 pm (deluxe-hitech). The bus takes around 10 hours to reach Nainital. The Kathgodam Express is a daily train from Dehradun to Kathgodam (335 km). It starts at 10.30 pm from Dehradun and reaches Kathgodam at 7.15 the next morning. From Kathgodam, you'll find plenty of taxis to Nainital (35 km away).



travel deals

Nature treks

Jungle Lore is organising a series of wildlife treks in December. They include visits to Ranthambore in Rajasthan, the Tadoba Tiger Reserve in Maharashtra and Pench in Madhya Pradesh. Write to junglelore@gmail.com for details.

Bombay Natural History Society is organising nature treks to Matheran, the Western Ghats of Goa and Bhutan from November 2010 to April 2011. To register, call Hornbill House at 22871202 or send an email to bnhs-programmes@gmail.com

Lisa Ray to host India travel show

Lifestyle channel TLC has now roped in model-actor Lisa Ray to anchor their new travel-based show that hits the small screen, early next year. The show will be produced by the channel and will be set against the contemporary cultural backdrop of India. Ray will be the host and the travel guide. She will also personalise the tour of each city, based on its cultural background.

Rahul Johri, senior vice president and general manager, India for Discovery Networks Asia-Pacific, insists that Ray was the best choice to play host. "Lisa will add great value to the tour, which we plan to make different from other India-based tour shows. The kind of places we plan to visit have never been seen on a television show." He's sure the show will meet the benchmarks set by other celebrity-driven shows on the channel in the past. "Our lifestyle shows highlight India's uniqueness in an exemplary way. Living With A Superstar - Shah Rukh Khan, Adventures Of A Ladies Tailor, Vir Sanghvi's Asian Diary and Indian Rendezvous are just some of our fine shows that have done well with the viewers. So, we'll capture India in the most unconventional

style ever," he says. Lisa Ray, who makes a debut of sorts on the small screen, is understandably ecstatic. "I've watched several shows on TLC, even before it became TLC," she says. "I can't wait to explore India. I've travelled in the country but that was many years ago. I'm sure a lot has changed and lots that hasn't. I'm sure I'll enjoy every bit of the exploration."

-HTC

Lisa Ray



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