

Journeys through the paintbox

Housebound by the pandemic, a travel writer turns to art to revisit her favourite destinations.

TEXT AND ART BY **KALPANA SUNDER**

As a travel writer who has spent two decades exploring the globe, Covid-19 has brought my work to a standstill. I was supposed to be in California in March, but cancelled the trip in February, foreseeing the pandemic's course.

At home in balmy Chennai, on the South Indian coast, I went into lockdown with my husband and son, ordering groceries online, doing Zumba remotely with my trainer, keeping our outside jaunts to a bare minimum. I had been dabbling in art for a couple of months, as a creative outlet and indulging a childhood passion I had forgotten in the hustle and bustle of a career and motherhood.

Now, having time to look at hard drives full of travel photographs taken over the years, I started drawing on my digital memories, capturing my favourite moments on paper with ink and watercolours instead of words. After all, to quote author Vivian Greene, "Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass, it's about learning to dance in the rain."

These are some of the results from the past few weeks, each recalling a special memory from a different part of the world. And each infused with the hope that one day I will travel again and capture more memories in words and photographs.

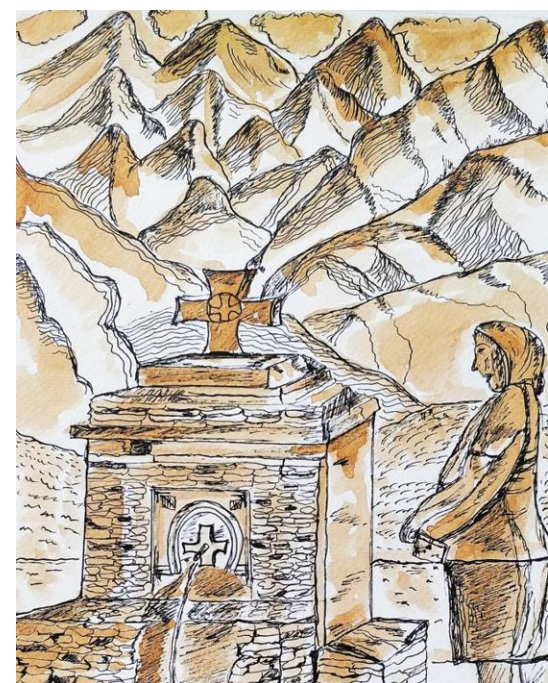


ON TOP OF THE WORLD

Ladakh, in India's far north, is an arid plateau more than 3,350 metres above sea level, surrounded by jagged mountains. I had avoided it for a long time because I have a fear of high altitudes. But when I was offered an opportunity to stay in The Ultimate Travelling Camp's luxury tents in Diskit and Thiksey, I decided to brave it. I had to take oxygen and medication for altitude sickness but it was worth it. With

its whitewashed Buddhist temples, low-hanging clouds, fluttering prayer flags, hardy people and rough terrain, Ladakh was spectacular. I travelled to the highest mountain pass, at more than 5,350 metres, had spicy instant noodles at wayside stalls, trekked to remote monasteries and drove to Turtuk, the last village in India before Pakistan, with its apricot-cheeked children and lush barley fields.

This is a view from Thiksey Monastery, in Leh, the capital, where prayers are held every morning. Having climbed a steep incline to the terrace, the panorama took away what breath I had left. The sound of prayer horns, the red-robed monks, the snowcapped mountains, the valley below and the crispness of the rarefied air ... that's a lot to capture in a simple sketch.





LEST WE FORGET

I have long had a horrified fascination with the Nazis and the evil of the Holocaust, so when I travelled to Poland with my husband, I made sure we visited the Auschwitz concentration camp. Many dismiss it as “dark tourism”, but I believe it’s important to visit such places. As philosopher George Santayana said, “Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

It was a gloomy autumn’s day when we entered the gates inscribed with the cruel words “*Arbeit Macht Frei*” (“work sets you free”). As our guided tour moved from the barracks to the furnaces and gas chambers, an ominous gloom settled over the group. I could almost hear the shouts of the soldiers and the barking of their dogs. I did the sketch in muted colours and under a dull sky to reflect my mood that day.

WHERE TIME STOOD STILL

Whenever I want to mentally escape to an idyllic, tranquil place, my thoughts return to La Digue, an island in the Seychelles, and its white-sand beaches, lapis lazuli waters dotted with gargantuan granite boulders and an absence of cars. The tropical island is home to the elusive black paradise flycatcher and red fody birds. The only way to reach La Digue is by ferry from the mainland and most visitors walk or cycle around the island. My group of friends swam in the shallow lagoons, cycled past pretty Creole homes with shuttered windows and came face to face with giant tortoises in the Union Estate Park, a former vanilla plantation. We watched the sunset from the boat-filled harbour and explored the hilly interior of the island, which is covered with tropical jungle and hiking trails. The island is laid-back and sleepy, and my sketch tries to capture the sense you get of having stepped back in time.



ON A WING AND A PRAYER

One of the most exciting parts of a trip to Georgia, at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, was the journey to the craggy Caucasus range and the small village of Stepantsminda, in the shadow of Mount Kazbek. I reached Stepantsminda on the rugged Georgian Military Highway, which runs to the border with Russia, winding past vertiginous cliffs, green pastures and panoramic views.

Staying at the minimalistic Rooms Hotel (a former Soviet hostel) in the village, we took a tortuous, bone-breaking ride up the steep mountain to the 14th century Gergeti Trinity Church. Holy relics were stored here in times of invasion. On the mountaintop, I saw a pilgrim standing near a cross, with the mountains in the background, and this is what I have portrayed in my sketch, with ink and a coffee decoction.



A FAIRY-TALE LAND

Growing up on a diet of fairy tales, I thought they existed only in books – until I arrived in Cesky Krumlov, in the Czech Republic. A stately castle on a rocky promontory, towers with conical roofs, red-tiled houses, the waft of freshly baked bread in the air, a winding river down in the valley ... all the town needed were fair maidens in long trailing gowns and fierce lance-wielding knights strutting down the twisting lanes.

I stayed in a 16th century Jesuit monastery that had been converted into a hotel and enjoyed rafting on the Vltava River, sipping Czech beer in riverside cafes, feasting my eyes on ornate buildings with gables and murals, and walking up to the castle for a 360-degree view of the town. I sketched this from a photo taken from a viewpoint overlooking the red roofs, the zillion windows and chimneys, and the castle in the distance.



MY BEST SWIM

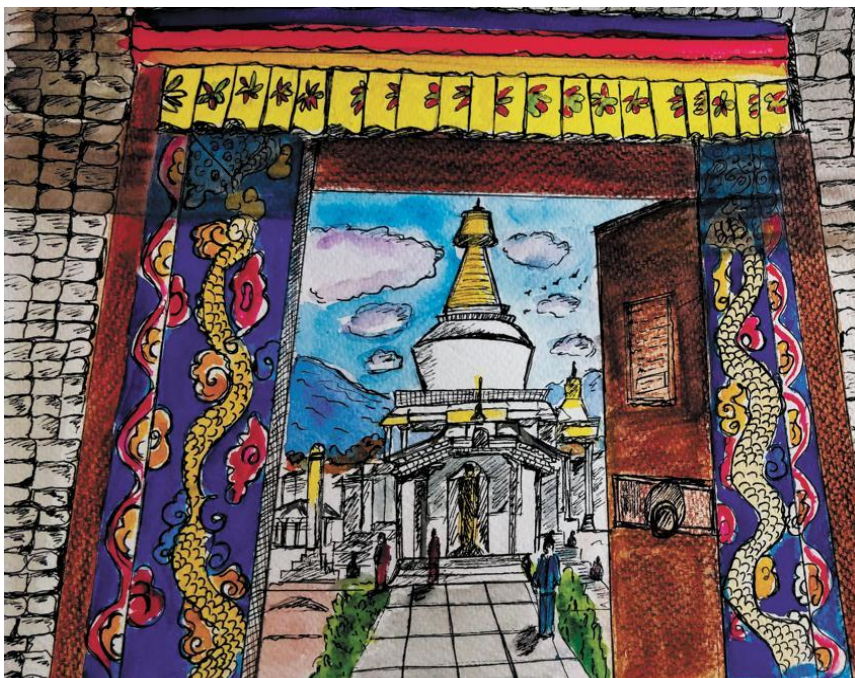
Australia is one of my favourite countries. A special memory is of a trip to Fraser Island, the world's largest sand island, off the coast of eastern Queensland. Fraser Island is covered with wetlands, freshwater lakes, kauri pine rainforests, translucent creeks and sandy beaches, which double as highways. I travelled across the Unesco World Heritage Site on a monster steel bus that could cross a range of terrains, from sand to knotted tree roots.

My "Aha!" moment on Fraser Island came after a swim in crystal-clear Lake McKenzie, which is replenished only by rain water and bordered by white sand. The water is so acidic it cannot support plant or fish life. The sand on the beach is pure silica; you can even clean your jewellery with it. My skin felt as soft as that of a baby after a dip in the lake. I lay back on the sand and watched families bask on the beach, children play in the shallows and the pristine waters gleam in the sunshine. A big gum tree with the lake behind made for a great picture.

SOJOURN IN SHANGRI-LA

The kingdom of Bhutan had always been on my wish list and my husband and I decided to celebrate our 25th wedding anniversary in the land of happiness. Flying into this mountainous country was a dream in itself. The flight took us over the great Himalayan peaks and Mount Everest. Landing in Thimphu, I immediately fell in love with the pristine country, its temples and *dzongs* (fortresses), colourful crafts, friendly people and fiery food. We walked through the clean, pretty capital, which doesn't

have a single traffic light and where everyone cycles, even the prince, to the National Memorial Chorten. Behind carved doors painted with dragon motifs, it was a hub of activity. Elderly Bhutanese women in traditional *kira* sarongs and blouses sat meditatively near the prayer wheels, others walked around the temple, and pigeons took off in a flurry as children chased them. The temple and its backdrop of lofty mountains are etched in my memory. That tranquil moment is what I wanted to capture.



CASTLES IN THE SKY

Every summer, my daughter and I would visit a different country on holiday; it was my way of giving her a taste of the world and a love for travel. One year, we took a trip to Greece – the mainland and the islands. It was filled with adventure, stormy weather and some cancellations. The place we loved the most was Meteora (meaning "suspended in the air") in the centre of the country, with its 14th century monasteries balanced on craggy rock pinnacles that once gave refuge to the persecuted. Before

the coronavirus pandemic, they were accessible to tourists by steep flights of stairs. The topography, ingenious architecture, ancient manuscripts, finely carved wooden crosses and icon paintings, and the mind-boggling fact that monks once clambered up ropes to reach these structures, all make this place seem like a fantasy land. The photo this sketch is based on reminds me of a delicious meal we had in the town below Meteora and the icon-making workshop we visited. ■