

In Dharamshala for a brief holiday recently, I had a conversation at a local tea stall.

It went something like this:

Me: *Bhaiya*, coffee hai?

Him: *Jee kafi hai*.

Me: *Kaun si? Kaali wali ya doodh wali?*

Him: *Ji espresso hai*. (He meant Nescafe doodh wali, which was made with a special espresso machine.)

I smiled and said: *De do bhaiya*.

This was a small-town term for cappuccino, which I didn't know still existed. It was so nostalgic. We grew up drinking espresso milk *kafi* made with these machines. Till my teens, I thought that espresso coffee meant cappuccino.

Needless to say, the coffee was out of the world with a biscuit dipped in it and I loved every sip. It brought back memories of my childhood in Tinsukia, Assam.

While I was thinking about what to write for my next column, soaking in the beautiful atmosphere and the pristine *vatavaran*, my creative juices started flowing. I thought about how short getaways, long vacations and staycations are so essential to our mental health. That got me thinking about how travelling has impacted me, especially travelling in India. Today, in my column, what you'll find is a peek into my desi travel diaries, why I think seeing our own country is also important and, of course, how travel leads to better mental health.

MY TRAVEL DIARIES

Post-Covid, as a family, we've mostly been travelling in India — Dharamshala, pockets of Rajasthan, Hyderabad and Cochin were such wonderful places to be!

Rajasthan: When I was in Udaipur, one evening I realised how beautiful it all was. Sitting outdoors, watching traditional



WANDERER

FABULOUSLY INDIAN

India has numerous destinations waiting to be visited to rejuvenate jaded minds and weary bodies, says **Minu Budhia**



A view of Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh, at sunset

dance, eating local food and immersing ourselves in the culture of the place felt like coming home. All over it was the same 'namaste' culture. No one greeted with 'good morning' or 'good evening'. Udaipur has been declared the next 'Smart City'. There is a lot of development, but the whole atmosphere is soaked in regional culture.

I met two or three very upcoming designers who are working with organic materials and are so trendy and affordable too. I feel proud of these talented young desi designers.

In Ranthambore, it was great going on the safari. People used to crave the sight of a tiger. This holiday also made me feel for the privacy of the animals and the importance of letting them live in their own habitat. Rather than seeing them as captive beasts in zoos, we should visit them respectfully in nature. It is a privilege to see them in their natural surroundings, where they are not just entertainment for humans. Also, our natural wonders are so many and there is so much untouched, virgin nature to explore.

In Dharamshala, I felt like it was a home away from home. The place had such an accepting atmosphere. For half the day we stayed in the hotel and relaxed. We explored local eateries for lunch and dinner at the hotel that was infused with local flavours.

JONDO

I also made a new discovery here: The joy of not dressing up! I wore a tracksuit in the morning and evenings and during our explorations I repeated my outfits. I didn't bother much with make-up either. Less is more is so true.

Also, the chef would serve with a lot of love Himachali *thalis* for dinner that highlighted so many unique flavours but ultimately so very familiar because, after all, the roots are Indian. And we would go in our pyjamas for that homely dinner. And, of course, the

collection of authentic momos available everywhere was lip-smacking. One more popular local dish was the Buddha Bowl. Two cute cafes we explored were Morgan, which serves Italian food, and Khanabadosh, which has Indian and South Indian food.

Another great thing was making friends with fellow travellers at the hotel. A lot of the hill stations create several experiences/attractions such as lovely high-teas, happy hours, and brunches in the hotel itself and there are activity rooms and indoor sports such as table tennis too so that everyone can come to one place, gather around, talk, get to know each other and bond.

We even met another couple with a special needs child who were able to holiday peacefully in this tranquil place. The atmosphere was so cheerful with people introducing each other and mingling. During the high-tea held between 4pm and 5pm, masala tea and filter coffee were made right in front of us. A stall had local cookies and sandwiches and even our favourite *chiwda* and *bhujia*. You can be yourself if you don't want to chat with others and this was the time the idea of this article came to me.

Especially when I travel to smaller, unknown pockets of my *desh*, I feel that our colonial hangover is finally disappearing. In Himachal, people take pride in their desi clothing, everyone says namaste, and people are happy to speak mostly in their own regional language and dialect. From the tea to the people — everything is so beautifully and traditionally Indian. While in Himachal, I also fell in love with the local handicraft — woollens, shawls, bags — so so pretty, so Indian!

ATITHI DEVA BHAVA

The warmth and welcoming nature of the people in India is unparalleled. Wherever we go we are welcomed with open arms. After all 'Atithi Deva Bhava' is a big pillar of our culture. If you go to a different state in India, you are treated like a guest of the state — the people involved in your hospitality work tirelessly to make you comfortable. Our culture is so rich, so attractive, and so varied that it deserves to be seen, felt. While our tourism infrastructure is



Psychotherapist Minu Budhia (right) with younger daughter Prachi

not as developed as that of the West, we are making headway. The good thing boosting tourism is that several domestic airlines now have direct flights to many places from Calcutta, where options were limited earlier. Today, Udaipur, Jodhpur, Chandigarh, Goa, Shillong, Coimbatore, Surat, Amritsar and so on are either one flight away or can be reached via another city. From Delhi, too, the airlines are opening up many places with direct flights that make travelling easier.

The first time we went to Goa, I didn't do much research and it was touristy, crowded and not as great as I expected it to be. I didn't enjoy it at all. Before we went the next time, my elder daughter guided me on which places to go and avoid. I also did extensive research on places to visit, routes, hotels, beaches, food, ambiance, shopping, etc. The result was we had a wonderful time.

What I learned from this experience was that whether a place is big or small, research is a must to have a great experience that is tailored to your specific needs. Especially if you're going to a smaller, less-visited destination, speak to local guides, your hotel concierge, and even your fellow

guests to have the best holiday possible. In every city or town there are two types of areas. One should discover the right area, the right food, the right shopping.

CHILDHOOD HOLIDAYS

I spent my childhood travelling mostly to Darjeeling (numerous times), Dimapur, Shillong, Kaziranga (numerous times), Duliagan and Silchar. Those days we used to think that our parents have no other places to take us to for our holidays. *Bas school ki chutti ho gayi toh* Kaziranga *chalo*. Kaziranga and Darjeeling were our homes away from home. Everyone would recognise us there. But those are the memories I treasure. Those are the days that will never come back. There was a kind of joy in those holidays.

DOMESTIC VS INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL

There is a difference between a tourist and a traveller. Typically, the former runs around with an itinerary, visits popular spots,

THERE ARE ALSO SEVERAL WELLNESS RETREATS AND RESORTS WHICH CAN ADD LIFE TO YOUR YEARS AND YEARS TO YOUR LIFE. I THOROUGHLY ENJOYED MY DETOX HOLIDAYS AT ATMANTAN, PEMA AND ANANDA SPA!

multiple cities/ countries, and tries to get the maximum ROI (return on investment) out of the huge amount spent on any international trip. And this leads to more fatigue than rest and relaxation. But when you're in India, you can easily focus on only a single city, not even a state, and soak in the local flavours without hopping around with a to-do list.

I personally love a mix and match of holiday types — long and short, close by and far away, relaxing and adventurous, wellness or indulgent. Holidays don't always have to mean well-known places and locales filled with tourist attractions. We can also visit metros, so-called tier-2 cities, small towns and villages. One is not always in the mood for a long trip so a short visit to a place like Hyderabad, Bangalore, Pune, Vizag, Surat, Amritsar, Nainital, Chandigarh, etc. will lift your spirits.

There are also several wellness retreats and resorts which can add life to your years and years to your life. I thoroughly enjoyed my detox holidays at Atmantan, Pema and Ananda Spa! Indian wellness retreats offer both Indian and continental healthy food options. Another advantage is that the yoga and Ayurveda practised here are authentic. They originated in our country and the real experience can only happen where it all started. And it is a misconception that these packages are only for luxury travellers.

In Indian hotels, the breakfast spread is usually quite lavish and comprises American, European, Continental, South Indian, North Indian, regional and healthy options that cater to all types of preferences from all parts of the world. I'm a big fan of handmade South Indian filter coffee — machine-made cappuccinos are not to my liking — and I'm proud to say this filter coffee is available in every part of India. Also, our desi masala chai, which is handmade too, is available everywhere! This makes

for an inclusive, accommodating and comfortable travelling experience in terms of food.

Another way I plan my holidays is based on the people and number — whether it's a couple's holiday, one with immediate family, one with extended family, or an interesting one with friends. Not only is staying in India for the holiday much easier to arrange and way more economical, it also helps to cater to a variety of food needs across all generations.

For family holidays, if we go abroad, we're so busy seeing the sights that the whole point of family time is defeated. Instead, going to a smaller, quieter place in India allows us to be together and spend quality time with each other and do activities together and everything can be pre-planned and enjoyed on any type of budget.

This brings me to destination weddings. The number of foreigners coming to India, especially Rajasthan, for their weddings (and milestone birthdays) also reminds us of our vibrant culture. The most humorous part of our *videshi* destination weddings is that the only thing that remains foreign is the place, since every other aspect is ferried from India — the cook, the *halwai* crew, the clothes, the make-up artist, the stylist, the gifts, the singers, the choreographer, the musician, the *chaivala*, the *paanwala*, the *mehendiwala*, and *dholi* to name a few. The destination is *videshi* to our satisfaction, but everything else is desi. After all, *dil toh hai Hindustani!*

I am just too in love with travelling in India.

The namaste culture!

The 'espresso kafi' culture!

The desi culture, our own very culture!

Love you India!

ATHITHI DEVA BHAVA!

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