**Juggernaut Journey**

The Jagannath Temple defines the spirit of the holy town of Puri | **By LAKSHMI SHARATH**

**EXPLORE**

**TEMPLE TOWN** The 12th-century Jagannath Temple, built by King Anantaavarman Chodaganga Deva of the Eastern Ganga dynasty, is believed to have been designed by Vishvakarma, the divine architect. More than 120 smaller shrines dot the temple complex, girded in by a 20-foot-high wall.

The main shrine has an imposing tower, crowned by Vishnu's sacred instrument (the arichakra). The temple is divided into four sections. Besides the main sanctum where the deities are placed on a throne of pearls (rakhabedi), there is a dancing hall (nabarangopanid) and the offerings hall (bhagamandapa), and the front porch (mukhavatika). But it is the kitchen where the bulk of the activity is concentrated. One of the largest in the world, more than 50 types of offerings are prepared for the deities in earthen pots, with water drawn from the two wells in the complex. Goddess Lalaki is supposed to supervise every morsel prepared here.

Legends about the temple abound. The most fascinating one is about the discovery of the deities. A priest tells me that King Indradyumna, who ruled over the Malwa region in central India, commissioned a carpenter to carve the idols from a radiant log of wood. The carpenter turned out to be Vishnu, who abandoned the idols unfinished. As a result, none of the idols have hands. Jagannath and his siblings make their silent devotion before the three-headed trident, worshipped in a shrine of pearls.

In the early decades of the 19th century, local rulers took away stone panels from the majestic Konark Sun Temple to use in their own temples, Jagannath figures are available outside the temple and across Puri. The original deities in the temple were carved from a single log of wood, unlike most Hindu idols that are made from stone. But it is still dark, because dawn usually seems to have missed its date with the city. I wake up gingerly, surprised that it is early in the morning and the sun is already up. We weave through the crowd and manage to find a little corner to silently commune with the troika of deities. Mesmerised by the sight of these larger-than-life, brightly clad wooden idols of Jagannath (Vishnu, his avatar Krishna), Balabhadra (Vishnu's elder brother), and Subhadra (Krishna's sister), I nearly forget the jostling and elbowing. When we step out of the temple and find that it is bustling. An entire part of the city is crowded with tourists, handloom saris woven here. Several of Puri's festivals, including the Rath Yatra, are focussed on the temple. During the Snana Yatra, the deities are brought out in a ritual procession for their annual bath. After the ceremony, they are taken for a fortnight to a secret place, as they are believed to be recovering from a fever (daily 5 a.m. to noon, 4-8 p.m., except during the Snana Yatra).

**UNIQUE EXPERIENCE**

Dolphin spotting

Nothing beats a sunset cruise. I leave Puri late in the afternoon and head towards Satpada, a small town along the banks of Chilika Lake, one of the largest brackish-water lagoons in the world. The 50-km journey to the jetty at Satpada (which means ‘cluster of seven islets’) takes about two hours. We have a boat to ourselves and we go cruising along the vast expanse of the lake, looking for the elusive Irrawaddy dolphins. We stop by to see some locals, who show us cultured pearls from oyster shells, trying to con us into believing they were obtained through deep-sea diving. We nearly fall for it. Our boatman takes us to Rajhans Island, where we can see the lagoon on one side and the Bay of Bengal on the other. We stop for a while, continuing to hope for a glimpse of the dolphins. An hour later, we are greeted by the sight of a couple diving into the water. Their friends swim close by, fins peeping above the water's surface. Although this stretch of Chilika is not the haunt of migratory birds, we also see flocks of ducks in the distance.
The lively traditions are on display during Puri’s annual spring festival, Basant Utsav. All village life is also a training hub for young Odissi— and its precursor, Gotipua—dancers (bottom). Scroll paintings, palm-leaf engravings, shadow puppets, and other traditional crafts (top). At the crafts village of Raghurajpur, a few minutes outside Puri, artist families produce pattachitra (cloth) paintings featuring tribal motifs. There is an eclectic mix of various art forms. Aside from the narrative pata, there are palm-leaf engravings with divine portraits, and tusser paintings featuring tribal motifs. Trees, flowers, and birds border the paintings, while the portraits are characterised by fine brushstrokes. I see various masks and wooden toys, even those made of cow dung. I could spend the whole day in Raghurajpur watching the artisans work, but it is time to leave.

UNDER THE SUN The 13th-century Konark Sun Temple, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, known for its erotic carvings, is about 35 km east of Puri. The magnificent granite temple, now almost in ruins, is designed like a chariot drawn by seven horses with 24 massive wheels with intricate carvings on them. Built by King Narasimhadeva I of the Eastern Gangaraj Dynasty, it was called the Black Pagoda by the British. The sun’s rays strike the erotic sculptures as my guide nonchalantly points out every sign of passion on the walls. The temple faces east, so it is best to visit it at sunrise to capture photographs of the first rays falling on the sculptures. The Konark Dance Festival is held against this dramatic backdrop every February. Tourists visiting Konark also head to the mouth of the Chandrabhaga River (2 km east of the temple), which once ran by the shrine but has now changed course.

SINGADEHUNA, or lion gate (10) is the main entrance to the Jagannath Temple. If you are on a small budget, stay at the trusted Bhujohori Mann: for seafood, head to Peace Restaurant. A Chinese couple from Kolkata has started Wild Grass or Honey Bee Bakery and Pizzeria for fast food.

From Kolkata to Puri, it is a mere 20-minute drive from Puri takes me to a world of beauty, paint and colour. I’m at the crafts village of Raghurajpur, a hamlet outside Puri (15 km north). Raghurajpur is home to nearly 100 artist families who create pattachitra (cloth) paintings. The village is also a training hub for young Odissi—and its precursor, Gotipua—dancers (below). All three lively traditions are on display during the annual spring festival, Basant Utsav.

Toshali Sands is a luxury beach resort, located on the Konark Marine Road just outside Puri. Its private villas and cottages allow you to steer clear of the noise and clutter of the city (Ethnic Village Resort, Konark Marine Drive; 99370 03232; www.toshalisands.com). If you are on a small budget, stay at Hotel Gandhara, which offers clean rooms, Wi-Fi, and a swimming pool (Chakratirtha Road; 06752-254037; hotelgandhara.com; doubles from INR 1,565).

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