

Fuggernaut Journey



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



Puri's coastline lends itself well to festivals, such as the annual Puri Beach Festival, which has been running for 20 years, and the India Surf Festival that concluded in February.



It is early in the morning and the sun seems to have missed its date with the world. I wake up gingerly, surprised that it is still dark, because dawn usually visits Puri, Odisha, very early. It is hazy as we drive past the empty boulevard along the beach. Every inch of the road is lined with sea-facing hotels, and they are all wrapped in a cloak of silence. The city slowly stirs to life as the sun strides up the sky, its rays glancing off the 200-foot tower of the Jagannath Temple, the centre of gravity.

The holy city of Puri is the last stop on the *char dharm* pilgrimage that Hindu devotees undertake—the other sites are Dwarka in Gujarat, Badrinath in Uttarakhand, and

Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu. I enter the temple and find that it is bustling. An entire city seems to be inside the complex: tourists, locals, priests or *pandas*, all vying to get the first darshan of the lord. 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, or his avatar Krishna), Balabhadra (Balarama, Krishna's elder brother), and Subhadra (Krishna's sister), I nearly forget the jostling and elbowing. When we step out of the shrine into the vast courtyard, I realise I have 4,00,000 square feet of the complex to explore.

CHIRODEEP CHAUDHURI (BEACH), DINODIA (IDOL)



In the early decades of the 19th century, local rulers took away stone panels from the majestic Konark Sun Temple (left) to use in their own temples; Jagannath figures (right) are available outside the temple and across Puri. The original deities in the temple were carved from a single log of neem wood, unlike most Hindu idols that are made from stone.

EXPLORE

TEMPLE TOWN The 11th-century **Jagannath Temple**, built by King Anantavarman Chodaganga Deva of the Eastern Ganga dynasty, is believed to have been designed by Vishwakarma, 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 *srichakra*). The temple is divided into four sections. Besides the main sanctum where the deities are placed on a throne of pearls (*ratnabedi*), there is a dancing hall (*natamandapa*), the offerings hall (*bhogamandapa*), and the front porch (*mukhashala*). 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 Lakshmi 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 *neem* wood floating in the sea. The carpenter's only condition was that he be left undisturbed inside a locked room until he finished the idols. When the artisan failed to come out for two

weeks, Indradyumna's queen presumed him to be dead and asked for the door to be opened. 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 presence felt in several aspects of Odisha's culture, especially as motifs in *pattachitra* scroll paintings and the many types of handloom saris woven here. Several of Puri's festivals, including the Rath Yatra, are focused 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*).

BEACH BUMS Puri's identity is defined by the Jagannath temple, but in recent years, it has begun to offer more secular pleasures. Fast emerging as the Goa of the east, Puri is a convenient **beach getaway** for tourists

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 fishing hamlets") 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.

CHIRODEEP CHAUDHURI (COUPLE & IDOLS), NILADRI ADHIKARI (BOAT)



At the crafts village of Raghurajpur, a few minutes outside Puri, artist families produce pattachitra scroll paintings, palm-leaf engravings, shadow puppets, and other traditional crafts (top); The village is also a training hub for young Odissi—and its precursor, Gotipua—dancers (bottom). All these lively traditions are on display during the annual spring festival, Basant Utsav.

from neighbouring states. I take a walk around the coast in the evening to find it bursting with colour and people. Kites and balloons vie for aerial space, while camels dominate the scene on the ground. A local sand festival has just concluded. In Puri and Konark, the shores are usually full of sand art sculptures: Most artists try to carve socially relevant messages into their designs. The best time to see sand art by artists from all over the world is during Puri's annual beach festival in November-December. Several local fairs coincide with the Rath Yatra and the run-up to New Year's Eve, but the beach festival remains the most popular.

CRAFTS VILLE 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 over 100 craftsmen who preserve the 900-year-old art form of pattachitra. Their homes, clustered together, have fascinating wall murals; the verandas serve as studios. I stop by to watch a *chitrakaar* at work, painting Krishna with his *gopikas*.

Before the artist can put his brush to the *pata* (cloth), an elaborate ritual is followed to prepare it. The cloth is soaked in water with tamarind seeds, and coated with a paste of

chalk and gum. Another layer of cotton is added to it, which is rubbed with stones to achieve a glossy finish. The artists usually prepare their own natural colours and use very fine brushes. Their subjects are stories from Indian mythology, but an artist tells me that it is Jagannath who inspires them. During the deities' annual fortnight off, devotees worship a pattachitra of the trinity.

I pause in front of a temple to pay my respects, when a group of artists invites me into their home. On the colourful walls there is an eclectic mix of various art forms. Aside from the narrative *patas*, there are palm-leaf engravings with divine portraits, and *tussar* 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 Ganga 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 (3 km east of the temple), which once ran by the shrine but has now changed course.

STAY

Puri is full of resorts, and almost all the hotels are located on the road leading up to the beach. I stayed at the **Sterling Golden Sands**, where the Bhargavi River joins the sea. The beach is very clean. The rooms are large and comfortable and guests can choose between single and double rooms, or studio apartments (255/2 and 255/3, *Sipasarubali Village*, Baliapanda; 06752-254093; www.sterlingholidays.com/our-resorts/sterling-destination-network/puri; doubles from ₹3,000).

DINODIA (ARTISTS), DEEPIKA SORABJEE (DANCERS)



Singhadwara, or lion gate (left) is the main entrance to the Jagannath Temple. It faces a monolithic pillar called the Aruna Stambha, which was originally located at Konark; The temple (right) also has a connection with Sikh history. Maharaja Ranjit Singh is believed to have given massive donations and willed it the *koh-i-noor* diamond. However, the gem never reached the temple, as Punjab was annexed by the British soon after his death.

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 03223; 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*; 06752-224117; hotelgandhara.com; doubles from ₹1,565).

EAT

Puri draws tourists around the year from across the country, so it isn't hard to find a

cuisine of your choice, whether Bengali, or continental or Chinese. For a taste of Bengali food, visit the trusted **Bhojohori Manna**; for seafood, head to **Peace Restaurant**. A Chinese couple from Kolkata has started **Chung Wah**. Several cafés serve continental breakfasts and snacks like pastas and pizzas. Try **Wild Grass** or **Honey Bee Bakery and Pizzeria** for fast food. ■

THE GUIDE

Orientation

Puri is a coastal city located in the Puri district of Odisha state, about 60 km south of its capital Bhubaneswar, and 500 km southwest of Kolkata.

Getting there

Air The closest airport is Bhubaneswar, which is connected to most major Indian metros. Taxis charge about ₹2,000 for a one-way journey to Puri.

Rail Puri is a major railhead, which is connected to Delhi, Kolkata, and Varanasi as well as other towns.

Road There are several luxury buses between Kolkata and Puri. The journey takes a minimum of 10.5 hours and fares begin at ₹600. A one-way journey by taxi will set you back ₹10,000.

Getting around

Cycle rickshaws ply around Puri, as do several private taxi operators. You can take a bus to Satpada or Konark. Most hotels can arrange transport within the city. Several operators also offer bus tours that take you to the various temples (approx. fare ₹500 inclusive of snacks).

Seasons

The best time to visit Puri is during the winter (Oct-Feb), when temperatures hover between 10-18°C. However, the sun sets by 5 p.m. and it becomes pitch dark within the hour. Summer (Mar-June) temperatures can soar to 45°C. The monsoon (July-Sept) is moderately heavy. Puri is prone to cyclones, so always check weather warnings in advance.



CHIRODEEP CHAUDHURI (LION), KAY MAERITZ/DINODIA (TEMPLE), SAMIA SINGH (MAP)