

INDIA REDISCOVERED

A look at six extraordinary but lesser-known wonders of India!

TEXT PRACHI JOSHI

There's more to India than the Taj Mahal and the caves of Ajanta and Ellora. In the vast landscape of our uniquely diverse country, there are many natural wonders and man-made attractions that are lesser known. So for your next trip, why not explore your own backyard and seek out these hidden gems?

✦ BORRA CAVES, ANDHRA PRADESH

Borra Caves, also known as Borra Guhalu, are located in the Ananthagiri hills of the verdant Araku Valley in Andhra Pradesh. Araku Valley is a popular hill station in eastern India, less than 100 km from Visakhapatnam city. However, the Borra Caves are not much on the tourist radar (as yet) despite being one of the largest caves in India, and boasting spectacular stalactite and stalagmite formations. The caves extend to a depth of 80m. Records say they were discovered in 1807 by William King George of the Geological Survey of India, though the tribals living in the nearby villages have several legends about the caves, most with religious connotations. There is, in fact, a stalagmite shaped like a Shiva lingam in the cave, and predictably enough, people flock to the 'temple' to worship it. There's also a stone idol of the holy cow, Kamdhenu, which sits above the lingam, and its udder is popularly believed to be the source of the Gosthani River that originates from the Borra Caves. The inside of the caves is lit by electric lamps, giving you a stunning view of the limestone formations, which have some interesting shapes – everything from Shiva-Parvati and a rishi's beard to a human brain, a crocodile, and even a temple and church.



Jet Airways operates daily direct flights to Visakhapatnam from Mumbai. Borra Caves is 90 km from Visakhapatnam, a 2.5-hour drive.

➡ CHAMPANER-PAVAGADH ARCHAEOLOGICAL PARK, GUJARAT

The UNESCO World Heritage Site of Champaner-Pavagadh Archaeological Park stretches all the way from the hills of Pavagadh to the historical city of Champaner and is strewn with archaeological treasures – hill fortress, palaces, arches, mosques, temples, tombs, stepwells, and tanks. While archaeological evidence points to many Chalcolithic structures in the area, the bulk of the site is made up of 15th- and 16th-century monuments, more than 100 of which can be seen in the park. There's no doubt about the past grandeur of the dilapidated monuments, which display the confluence of Hindu and Islamic architectural styles. The almost intact Jama Masjid (also known as Jami Masjid) – a double-storeyed mosque with towering minarets and a large dome – is the jewel in the crown. The imposing Sahar ki Masjid near the royal palace is worth a visit as is the Ek-minar ki Masjid, where a lone minaret stands tall and proud while the rest of the mosques have disappeared. The Kalika Mata Temple and the Hindu fort of Pavagadh both date back to the 10th and 11th centuries and are a must-visit.



Jet Airways operates regular flights to Vadodara from Mumbai. The Champaner-Pavagadh Archaeological Park is about 50 km from here, an hour's drive.



LOKTAK LAKE, MANIPUR

The largest freshwater lake in North East India, Loktak Lake is famous for its circular floating swamps or *phumdis* – a mass of vegetation, soil and other organic matter in various stages of decomposition, which looks like a miniature island. Many rural fishermen live on the *phumdis* and the Loktak Lake (often called as the 'lifeline of Manipur') is a source of livelihood for them. The lake is a source for drinking water supply, irrigation, and hydropower projects. It is also a breeding site for many migratory birds. The Sendra Tourist Home is located on a large *phumdi* island and is an ideal spot to see life on the lake at close quarters. Another attraction of the lake is the world's only floating national park, Keibul Lamjao National Park, which is located at the south-western part of the lake, and is home to the endangered sangai, a brow antlered deer, the state animal of Manipur. Earlier this year, the lake became home to a first-of-its-kind floating elementary school, which aims to provide education to school dropouts who became homeless due to the recent evacuation of the *phumdis*.



Jet Airways operates daily direct flights to Silchar from Kolkata and Guwahati. Loktak Lake is 250 km from Silchar.

GANDIKOTA GORGE, ANDHRA PRADESH

Did you know that there's a Grand Canyon equivalent in India? Gandikota may be a small village in Andhra Pradesh, but there's nothing small about the spectacular 300-feet-deep gorge formed by Pennar River as it cuts through the Erramala Hills. Centuries of the river flowing through the gorge have left peculiar cuts and layers in the rocks; at some points it almost looks as if it's cut by hand with stones seemingly stacked. And as if that wasn't impressive enough, the 12th-century Gandikota Fort stands majestically atop the gorge. The fort derived its name from the gorge (in Telugu gorge is *gandi*) and was one of the most prominent forts of its time, not to mention impregnable from the riverside due to its location. Parts of the fort's red granite stone walls still stand today as do several architectural structures such as temples, pillars, a stone granary, the fort jail, and more. Apart from admiring the view from atop the gorge, you can also go trekking across the fort ruins and along the gorge.



Jet Airways operates regular flights to Bengaluru and Hyderabad from multiple Indian cities. Gandikota Gorge is 282 km from Bengaluru and 362 km from Hyderabad.





↑ **NIGHOJ POTHOLES, MAHARASHTRA**

Nighoj is a small village 90 km from Pune on the banks of the Kukadi River. As the river flowed for hundreds of years, it created fascinating depressions in the basalt rock riverbed. Geologists speculate that heavy rainfall in the region led to the river flowing with such force that it scoured the bedrock and created these potholes. There's a suspension bridge across the river, which gives you a bird's eye view of the potholes. The alien-like landscape is a worthy day trip from Pune and makes a good picnic spot, especially in winter or spring.



Jet Airways operates regular flights to Pune from Bengaluru, Mumbai, New Delhi, Hyderabad, Indore and Chennai.

↑ **ST. MARY'S ISLANDS, KARNATAKA**

Coconut Island sounds like a beach paradise somewhere in Thailand, but it's right here in India, just off the coast of Karnataka, 65 km from Mangaluru. It is a part of St. Mary's Islands, a group of four tiny islands in the Arabian Sea – the others being North Island, South Island, and Daryabhadurgarh Island. A short ferry ride from Malpe in Udupi, Coconut Island's beach has several hexagonal columns of black rock reminiscent of the Giant's Causeway in Ireland. These basalt columns were evidently formed by volcanic activity and give a clue to the formation of the islands – geological studies have shown that the islands were formed when India's land mass separated from Africa and Madagascar, 88 million years ago.



Jet Airways operates daily direct flights to Mangaluru from Bengaluru, Mumbai, and New Delhi.