

Surrounded by Surrealism

A TWO-DAY SOJOURN TO HA LONG BAY UNCOVERS ANCIENT LEGENDS, MYSTERIES AND BEAUTY, ALL AT ONCE, DISCOVERS ANANYA BAHL

The gushing and murmurs of fellow travellers on our minibus interrupted my sleep. Late night revelry and a rather early morning start from Vietnam's capital, Hanoi, had got the better of me: I had slept my way through the three-hour drive to Ha Long City, located in the country's northeastern Gulf of Tonkin. Feeling slightly left out, I peeped out the window to partake of the excitement. As we descended the slope to the jetty, a different world seemed to unravel.

Thousands of rock formations clad in dense carpet of green shot up into the sky from mesmerising emerald waters: Ha Long Bay had extended to us an impressive welcome, indeed.

Ha Long ~ meaning "descending dragon" ~ is a name inspired by the Vietnamese legend of The Jade Emperor, who sent Mother Dragon and her children to protect the country from invaders. These dragons spewed fire and emerald to form a barricade during ancient wars. Over a period spanning thousands of years, this wall transformed itself into the bay's current topography, comprising 1,600 limestone karsts. Being amid the karsts ~ as I was to find out during my visit ~ is just as surreal as the story of their origin.

MAGICAL LAND

I'd signed up for a two-day trip aboard one of the many cruises ~ that have replaced almost all the traditional wooden junk boats ~ operating in the bay. There's a cruise for every kind of budget along with options for one-, two- and three-day excursions. Our affable guide, Tom, welcomed us and listed the itinerary that focuses on providing guests with a peek into the bay's culture and way of life. After a delectable lunch comprising freshly-caught clams, fish and squid, I settled on a reclining chair on the upper deck and soaked in the view.

As we navigated the waters, I repeatedly asked myself, "Am I really here? Does this place really exist?" It's a question repeatedly asked by visitors, and rightly so. The air was nippy and adding to the mysticism of the place was fog from the previous day's rain, which had enveloped the karsts' peaks, giving them a celestial aura.

My mind had wandered off into the land of fantastical dragons and warriors battling atop peaks smothered in fluffy clouds when Tom came to say that we were heading



to our first stop: the amazing cave. Now, to say that this is a large cave would be undermining its actual size. Further, to say that this visit was amusing would be an understatement. Here's why: Tom spent an hour in the cave pointing out formations of Lady Gaga, Mother Mary and baby Jesus, Mufasa and Tom Cruise in its various limestone stalactites and stalagmites! My eyes only saw Mufasa, though. Perhaps I'm too much of a Lion King fan!

MUNDANE LIFE

On our way back to the cruise, I spotted what seemed to be a conical Vietnamese hat bobbing in the distance. In a few minutes, I realised that it was actually a fisherwoman who was rowing in our direction. My mind meandered toward her ~ what must her life be like? Do her daily chores seem special in this extraordinary setting? Has she ever encountered a dragon deftly swimming through the jade waters of the bay? How does she deal with so much natural beauty, all at once? Where was she going on her little boat, all by herself? How mundane must our existence be compared to hers in this glorious backdrop!

Back on board, we learnt the nuances of Vietnamese cooking from the cruise's head chef. The menu included prawn spring rolls, which we washed down with the local brew, Bia Ha Noi. This was followed by a delightful dinner with fellow travellers from Australia and Germany. Among the wonders of travel are the amazing people you meet, and this trip was no different! We had docked in the Cong Do area for the night, where we indulged in night squid fishing. How easy it is to eat a squid but so tough to catch one! After 45 minutes of trying every rule in the fishing book, I called it a night.

HERITAGE SITE

The next morning, after a spectacular sunrise and refreshing Tai Chi class, we grabbed our oars and headed out to kayak through lagoons and caves. Up close and personal with these looming structures, it becomes obvious why the bay is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. There is an unfathomable feeling of oneness with its natural ecosystem, an unspeakable feeling when under the shade of its lagoons. For a couple of minutes, we lost our group and the idea of being stranded on a kayak amid gigantic karsts did seem a little eerie! Fortunately, the ever-faithful Tom came back to find us!

FLOATING VILLAGE

Also on our agenda was the Vung Vieng fishing village replete with floating homes, a school and community centre! Tourist influx and other commercial influences have depleted fish species considerably, forcing fishermen to harvest pearl and work in the tourism industry instead.

En route to the harbour, I decided that I wasn't going to waste another second. I returned to my favourite spot on the cruise, the upper deck, and simply stared at the magnificence around me. The weather was colder and the mist had thickened, further adding to a romantic environ-



ment. That's when I thought again about the lone fisherwoman ~ what pressing call of duty would make her brave the choppy waters and fierce winds on a chilly morning such as this? Whatever it is ~ I could only hope she found her destination ~ armed with her conical hat for company.

FAST FACTS:

An overload of tourist companies in the bay lead to confusion, here are a few recommendations to avoid the clutter:

Cruises: Oriental Sails (budget), Calypso Cruiser (mid), Starlight cruiser (luxury), Pelican Cruiser (luxury)

Places to see: Cat Ba National Park, located on Cat Ba island in the bay is good for treks, Thien Cung Cave, Bai Dai Beach and Ngoc Vung island for great seafood and biking trails. *If you do decide to explore Halong City, visit its casinos and karaoke bars.*

Hotel options: The Novotel Ha Long Bay and Royal Lotus Hotel Ha Long for great service.

HAPPENING IN DELHI

TRUNK SHOW ~ STYLE FOR CAUSE

When: 5-6 April (10.30 am to 7.00 pm)
Where: Alliance Francaise de Delhi, Lodhi Estate, New Delhi
Damage: None

Around 14 upcoming designers, who are set to make a mark in the world of high fashion, are participating at a show held in the aid of Concern India Foundation. The non-profit organisation supports over 270 grassroot programmes across India, working in the areas of education, health and community development.

MADE IN BENGAL

When: 30-31 March (11 am to 8 pm)
Where: Nimai, 416 Shahpurjat Village, New Delhi.

Chikky Goenka from Style O' Graph has curated works of 16 celebrated designers such as Kallol Datta, Sneha Arora, Eshaani Jayswal, Vasavi Shah, Nupur Kanoi, Deshabashi Samanta, Aditya Dugar, Blank Slate, Door of Maai, LovetoBag, Paromita Banerjee, Rimi Nayak, Vasundhara Mantri, Suede and Rohan Arora. She will showcase these brands for two days at Nimai, in association with Little Black Book, the official digital partner.

RAAG BASANT ~ A GROUP VISUAL EXHIBITION

When: 25-31 March
Where: Gallery No-1/2, Lalit kala Akademi, Rabindra Bhawan (11 am to 7 pm)

AGUNTUK will be presenting "Raag Basant" a group visual exhibition of paintings, photography and sculpture. The show is conceptualized by Susanta das and Tanushree Chatterjee.

LUXURY FESTIVAL

When: 1-3 April
Where: Indira Gandhi Stadium

Jointly organised by Quintessentially Lifestyle Services India and GroupM (a WPP Company) with Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) as the Trade Partner, the three-day Luxury Festival will showcase luxury brands and services from an impressive range of luxury categories, catering to a highly affluent guest list. The exhibition will feature a broad selection of carefully selected categories including automobiles, luxury living, gadgets, lifestyle and be-spoke travel.

HUNGARIAN OPERETTA

When: 25 March (7 pm)
Where: Stein Auditorium, India Habitat Centre

An extravagant event, "The Csardas Princess", a Hungarian Operetta, will be organised on behalf of the Balassi Institute as part of a World Tour. The Balassi Institute is celebrating the 100th anniversary of the first presentation of *Princess Csardas*.

An operatta is a musical genre written with the particularities of an opera but mixed with smooth and haunting melodies. The Hungarian Operatta is something that is unique to Hungary and, therefore, represents great value to the Hungarian people.

WORLD GOLF

The latest stage of the 2016 Turkish Airlines World Golf Cup, golf's largest and most exciting amateur tournaments, took place at Classic Golf and Country Club in the Capital. The seventh of 100 qualifiers for the global event, which has gone from strength to strength since the inaugural tournament in 2013, featured 100 players, all personally-invited guests of Turkish Airlines.

Ravi Burman, Director, Urgent Care Hospital, won the individual competition with 45 points and progresses to the Grand Final in Antalya, Turkey this October and November. Ranjeet Mehta, Director, PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry, was runner-up.



Sufi saints and sensation at births

BESIDES MAKHDUM SAHIB, WHOSE TOMB IS STILL IN A FAIRLY GOOD CONDITION ON KHEL GAON MARG, THERE HAVE BEEN OTHER SAINTS WHO'VE BEEN CREDITED WITH SENSATIONAL HAPPENINGS TOO

There's a mini-park in Mayfair Gardens' bungalow locality, touching the walls of Siri Fort, where is situated the 15th century tomb of Makhdum Sahib, visited by devotees throughout the year. Sheikh Makhdum Sabswari (according to author Sadia Dehlvi) came to Delhi from Sabswar, in Central Asia, in the last years of the reign of Bahlul Lodi or the beginning of his son, Nizam Khan Sikandar Lodi's reign in 1488. He had been directed in a dream to go to India and preach his mission there. Makhdum Sahib's sufi discourses were ardently heard by those who visited his jungle abode, where wild animals roamed about but did not harm anyone because of the (sic) influence of the saint, says a legend. Eventually, the Lodi Sultan (father or son) heard of him and invited the dervish to the royal court. He went there reluctantly and came back dissatisfied with the sultan's conduct.

Perhaps realising that he had offended the Sheikh, the sultan, while out hunting one day, decided to visit his *khanqah* or hospice. What he saw there amazed him, for Makhdum Sahib was feeding a wild leopard with a bunch of grass as though it was a goat. The sultan immediately dismounted from his horse and after offering his salaams decided to sit in a corner. The leopard was ordered to leave by the saint, who then turned his attention to the sultan. The latter apologised for having been rude at the court and requested him not to leave his kingdom but continue to reside in it and bless its subjects.

Makhdum Sahib nodded and gave the

sultan (Bahlul or Sikandar) a *tabiz*, or amulet, which he had brought from Mecca. He told him that so long as it was tied to his arm or that of his successors, the sultanate would continue to flourish, otherwise it would be conquered by an invader, who and his descendants would rule long undisturbed. The sultan took the *tabiz*, salaamed the saint again, mounted his horse and rode away. As history shows, the third ruler of the dynasty, Ibrahim Lodi, lost the kingdom in 1526 to Babar, with whom the Mughal dynasty started and continued to rule India until 1858, when Queen Victoria proclaimed herself empress and Bahadur Shah Zafar was exiled to Rangoon.

One tends to believe the story about the saint's prediction but at the same time wonders what happened to the amulet. Did Ibrahim Lodi forget to tie it around his biceps at the First Battle of Panipat, or did the *tabiz* somehow get lost? Maybe yes or no; also the prediction may not have been wholly true after all. But standing in front of the mazaar of Makhdum Sahib one tries to banish these thoughts lest they be regarded as sacrilegious. The reason for visiting the mosque and mazaar of Makhdum Sahib was a strange story related by Hafiz Manzoor Ahmed of Basti Nizamuddin during a winter evening in 1981. The Hafiz died not long after but what he said continued to feed one's curiosity for the past 33 years until the temptation to visit Makhdum Sahib's shrine could no longer be resisted. Now this is the story Manzoor Ahmed related:

There was a widow named Nadira,

whose husband Siddique had died without leaving an heir. Nadira was 55 years old, lonely and sad, when she came to the shrine one afternoon in the first decade of the 20th century. She had either been told by somebody, or had the urge herself, to pray there. And the prayer was strange for a woman of her age. She sought the saint's blessing for a son, who could continue his father's lineage. She prayed with tears in her eyes and all at once experienced a sensation, which passed through her face, bosom and lower abdomen and then ceased to excite her. Nadira then had a great urge to go to the toilet but as there was none near the shrine she squatted under a tree. When she got up she felt as though she had just conceived. The widow went home dazed and had a dream the same night in which she saw a bent, old man blessing her and confirming that her wish had been fulfilled.

Believe it or not, nine months later Nadira gave birth to a son who was strange in his behaviour at first and did not either speak or walk properly. But after three years he began to improve and by the time he was five was able to attend school. He turned out to be a brilliant student and, following graduation, secured a good government job. His name was Javed and after he got married and became the father of twin boys, Nadira died. Javed migrated to Dhacca (now Dhaka) and what happened to him and his family was not known to Manzoor Ahmed. But one supposes it flourished with the saint's blessing.

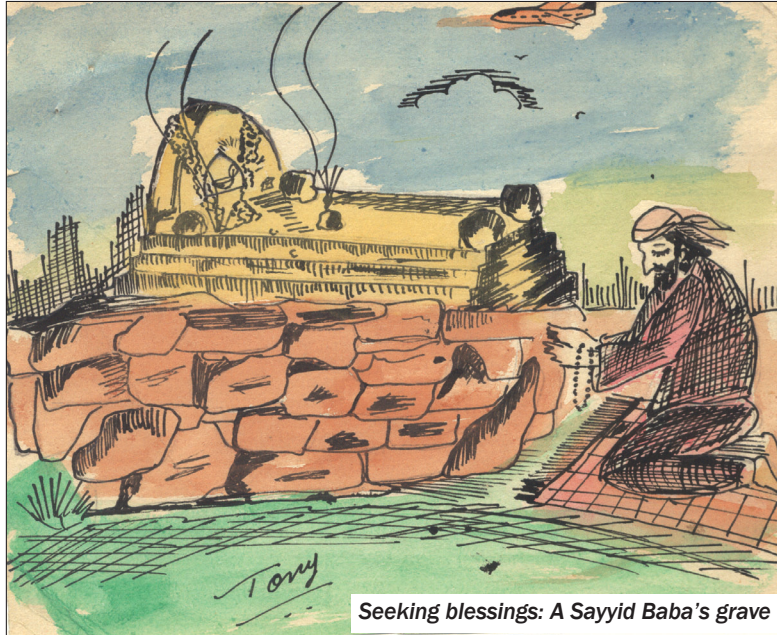
Incidentally, Makhdum Sahib's tomb is still in a fairly good condition on Khel Gaon Marg, its stone-domed roof (with four decorative minars) supported on 12 pillars. Both the tomb and the mosque on the north are protected monuments. The masjid has several prayer chambers and a fluted roof. However, the huge gate near it, which was erected in Tughlak times, is not in a good state of preservation though it too is pro-

tected by the ASI.

Besides Makhdum Sahib, there have been other saints who've been credited with sensational happenings too. One remembers a childhood friend, Dilshad, whose mother was having difficulty during delivery. It was midnight and midwife, tired after her futile attempts to make the woman, Intazari, deliver, fell asleep, along with the other inmates of the house. Only Intazari lay awake, praying to the Sayyid Baba, whose grave was right in the midst of her Ghattia locality. Suddenly, a man dressed in medieval clothes, with a long white beard, appeared by her side. He nudged Intazari and said, "Beti, loosen your pyjama string." She did so and the child, long in coming, was born almost effortlessly.

The Baba immediately disappeared and hearing the baby's cry, the midwife and all others in the house awoke to find out that a miraculous birth had taken place without anybody's efforts. They asked Intazari and she told to them what had happened.

"It must have been Sayyid Sahib of our mohalla, who had visited you and facilitated the delivery," said her husband, Sultan. He immediately rushed out and was met on the



Seeking blessings: A Sayyid Baba's grave

way by an acquaintance Kale, who told him that he was returning after seeing a late night show at Taj Talkies when he saw a strange sight. A white horse was tied to the steel pole that divided the street. Soon an old, bearded man appeared, sat on the horse and rode away.

After that both of them went to Sayyid Baba's grave and found the green cloth covering it lying on one side, as though somebody removed it, and all the extinguished earthen lamps upturned. Both men were convinced that the Baba had come out of the grave, but where did the white horse come from? The answer they got from a learned Pir was that the Baba's horse too had been resurrected, along with him. Strange indeed, but Dilshad's family had no doubts till they left for Pakistan in 1947 with the new born Aslam ~ The Baba's gift. ■ R V SMITH