

A BIRD PARADISE

The Central Asian Flyway is like a flightpath for birds and the Keoladeo National Park in Rajasthan is where many migratory birds come to enjoy the hot winter sun. Its glistening shallow lake fills with beautiful birds, like pink-beaked pelicans, painted storks with their rose-tipped feathers, and the black-headed ibis with its curled sharp beak, which it dips into the blue water hoping to catch a fish for breakfast!

WILDLIFE

Did you know that India is bursting with wildlife? Deep in the teakwoods, hidden in the grasslands, high in the mountains and under the surface of the holy rivers, India is a wildlife paradise, with magnificent animals everywhere ... from the sacred doe-eyed cows that meander through traffic-filled cities to elephants, tigers, monkeys, leopards and even lions.

There are more than a hundred national parks in India, where wardens and conservationists work hard to protect these animals – many of which are endangered. Corbett National Park was the very first to open, and this is one of the places Bengal tigers are thriving; their orange and black stripes are like human fingerprints ... no two tigers have the same markings!

Not many people realize that, as well as tigers, India is home to the last Asiatic lions. Although they once used to roam all over Asia, as far away as Syria in the west and Bihar in India to the east, the Gir Forest in Gujarat is now the lions' last sanctuary.

LOOKING FOR LEOPARDS

In the emerald-green forests of the Satpura National Park live leopards, sloth bears, blackbucks and the delicate chital deer, their brown backs spotted white as if with snowflakes.

TIGER SPOTTING

Riding in a boat through the mangrove swamps of the Sundarbans National Park, keep your eyes peeled for the Bengal tiger, India's national animal, as it cools itself in the fresh waters of the Ganges delta.

ENDANGERED BUT PROTECTED

Smooth grey river dolphins glide through the waters of Kaziranga National Park. On land, among the tall waving elephant grass, the one-horned rhinos – brought back from near extinction – are thriving.

Tamil Nadu

KALAKSHETRA DANCE ACADEMY

Jingle! Jangle!

Nanijee is shaking a pair of ankle bracelets: they're made of yellow cotton, with three rows of bells sewn onto the fabric.

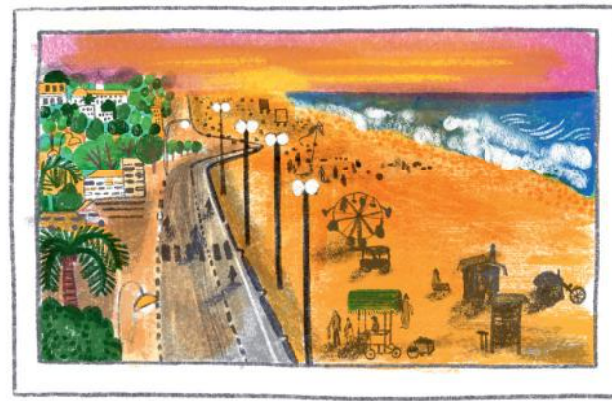
"I hope they fit," she says, tying them around my ankles. "These are called 'ghunghroos', Thara – I got them from the dance school in Chennai."

I pull the cotton ties tight and stamp my feet on the wooden floor of my room.

"What a racket!" says Nanijee.

I jump up and down, as if I'm in the practice hall.

"I love them!" I laugh, and the ghunghroos fill my bedroom with the tinkling sounds of bells.



SEASIDE CITY

The beautiful golden sands of Chennai's beach stretch all the way along the edge of the city.

CLASSICAL DANCE IS AN ANCIENT AND IMPORTANT ART FORM IN INDIA, WHICH HAS CLASSICAL MUSIC AT ITS HEART. THE DANCE ACADEMY IS IN CHENNAI, CAPITAL OF THE SOUTHERN STATE OF TAMIL NADU.

ELITE DANCERS

If you love dancing then you'll want a place at the Kalakshetra Foundation – it's one of the best academies in India, but you have to practise really hard to get in.



INSTRUMENTS

As well as the jingle of the ghunghroos, the Kalakshetra dance hall is filled with the sound of stringed instruments like the sitar and tanpura, bansuri flutes, hand drums like the tabla and dholak, manjira hand cymbals, and keyboard instruments like the harmonium. The air is zinging with music.

BHARATNATYAM

Watching a performance of Bharatnatyam is like a stirring of your spirit; the jangle of bells, the music of the singers and the extravaganza of make-up mean you won't forget it in a hurry!



EXTREME PRECISION

Can you put your fingers and thumbs together to make an eye shape? In Bharatnatyam dance – the oldest form of classical Indian dance – dancers use their hands to make incredibly precise shapes.

Kerala

A HOUSEBOAT IN KERALA

Near the bottom of the trunk, there's a photo of a boat floating on a palm-fringed blue river.



"Can you see me waving at you?" Nanijee asks, as we peer at the photo together. "There were so many other boats sharing the water. Some sold fruit and vegetables, so our hosts bought everything they needed to cook up some delicious food."

"What was it like sleeping on the boat, Nanijee?"

"I loved it. The boat rocked gently, and a cool breeze floated into my cabin... And each night, the sounds of frogs and night birds sent me right off to sleep."

I lay my head in Nanijee's lap and she sings my favourite lullaby – I close my eyes, and imagine the waters lapping in the dark.

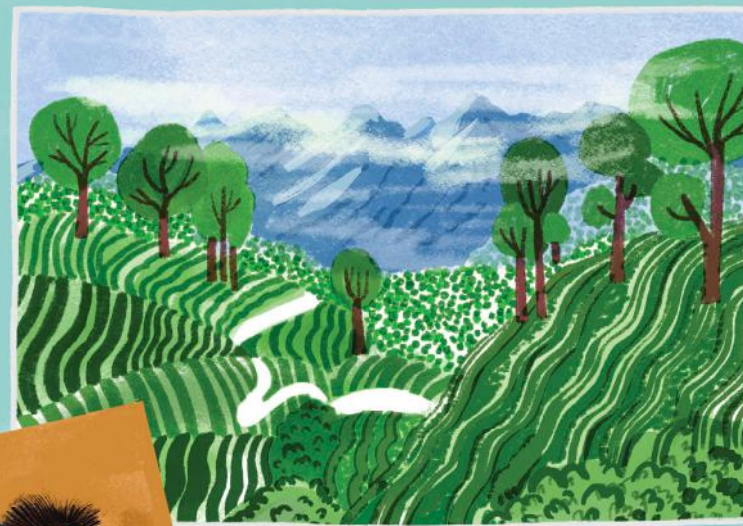
EARLY MORNING ELEPHANTS

Kerala is full of wildlife and if you wake up at dawn, as the mists rise, you can get a ringside seat to watch wild elephants having their morning bath: showering water everywhere and trumpeting! Watch out for splashing...

THE WATERS OF THE ARABIAN SEA THREAD INLAND TO FORM A SPIDERWEB OF CHANNELS ALL ALONG THE COAST OF KERALA, WHICH HOUSEBOATS NAVIGATE AT A SLOW PACE.

THE BACKWATERS

Like watery roads, the channels of Kerala can take you anywhere; you can hop on and off boats too – if you want to visit a museum to see statues of Buddha, or nip into a restaurant to eat appam (a delicious crispy pancake served with chicken stew).



THE WESTERN GHATS

Slightly further inland, Kerala has the famous Western Ghats – mountains that rise out of the tropical heat and are home to langur monkeys, tigers, elephants and tea plantations.



AYURVEDIC MEDICINE

Kalari Kovilakom in Kollengode is a centre for Ayurvedic medicine – an ancient way of treating health problems using fresh herbs, massage and exercise.



SHOPPING AFLOAT

Floating shops sway along the rivers: boats piled high with bobbly green jackfruit, luscious orange papaya and slender okra – vendors enticing the other boats with their cries of "Ripe, ripe mango: buy one and I'll give you two free!"