

16 NEW THINGS TO DO THIS YEAR

Travel is all about new experiences. Neeharika Satyavada
tells you what to attempt – and enjoy – in 2018







Kayaking is an excellent way to slow down and explore the famed backwaters



Alappuzha is about 85 km from Kochi airport. GoAir operates direct flights to Kochi from Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Bangalore and Chennai with convenient connections from Delhi, Jaipur, Chandigarh and Lucknow. For more information, log on to www.GoAir.in

KAYAKING IN ALAPPUZHA

Think beyond the houseboat when you plan your next holiday in Kerala. Add a sense of adventure to your explorations. Go kayaking in the narrow inland canals of the famed backwaters of Kerala, where a houseboat wouldn't reach. Watch the villages come to life as dawn breaks, revel in the bird call, all while paddling low in the water. Make the most of the mild winter here, head to Alappuzha between November and February.



ABOVE AND RIGHT: Just get into an orb and roll down



Manali is about 500 km from Delhi. GoAir operates direct flights to Delhi from Mumbai, Bengaluru, Pune, Patna, Ranchi, Jammu among others. For more information, log on to www.GoAir.in

ZORBING IN MANALI

From a honeymooners' paradise to becoming the gateway to a road trip to not just Ladakh but also the Spiti Valley, Manali has come a long way. And, the latest activity to catch the fancy of adventure seekers here in Manali is zorbing. So, what does one do while zorbing? Simple really, just get into an orb and roll down the mountain through the green open spaces and take in the view. Much like the hamster ball chase scene in *Jurassic World*, only minus the dinosaurs. The best time to go zorbing is in summer, when one can roll unencumbered by snow or slush.



NEEHARIKA SATYAVADA

ABOVE AND RIGHT: The Valley of Flowers is a bio-diversity hotspot located between Zaskar and Greater Himalayas



TREK TO THE VALLEY OF FLOWERS

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, The Valley of Flowers is a breathtakingly beautiful high altitude meadow of alpine flowers in the Himalayas. Located in a transition zone that lies between the Zaskar Region of the Himalayas to the north and the Greater Himalayas to the south, this stunning biodiversity hot spot is accessible only through a trek route through the mountains. The trek route to The Valley of Flowers goes through the same base camp, Gangharia, as the one to Hemkund Sahib (the world's highest gurdwara and an important pilgrimage centre for the Sikhs) and diverges along the way. Owing to which this trek route is not just very popular but also logistically one of the best equipped. From helicopters that fly in to the base camp every twenty minutes to mules and porters that take on from there, there are enough arrangements to ease your trek if needed. A full five-day monsoon trek, the best time to do this is in July or August when the valley is in full bloom.

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The nearest major town to The Valley of Flowers is Joshimath. Joshimath is about 500 km from Delhi. GoAir operates direct flights to Delhi from Mumbai, Bengaluru, Pune, Patna, Ranchi, Jammu among others. For more information, log on to www.GoAir.in



ABOVE AND RIGHT: Early mornings are best for bouldering; Hampi's surreal landscape



BOULDERING IN HAMPI

Hampi is a landscape dotted with boulders and massive granite monoliths. So much so that this temple town that doubles up as a hippie haven is touted to be the largest bouldering area in the world. Bouldering is pure rock climbing at its very basic. Leaving behind ropes and harnesses one climbs short but tricky boulders using only one's strength, balance and technique. The only equipment if any is the bouldering pad that one can keep at the base of the boulder to manage the risk of falling. Most of the guest houses rent out bouldering pads, chalk, tape and even shoes. Early mornings are the perfect time to go climbing, but one can also go early evenings once it starts to cool to catch a glimpse of the now famous Hampi sunset. As Hampi is very hot, November through February is peak tourist season and the best time to go bouldering here is in the cooler months of December and January.

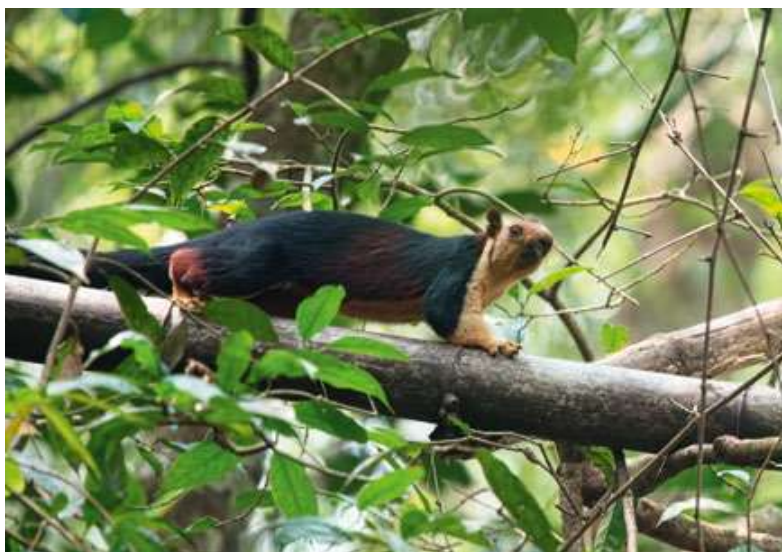
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Hampi is about 340 km from Bengaluru. GoAir operates direct flights to Bengaluru from Mumbai, New Delhi, Hyderabad, Goa, Port Blair, Ahmedabad, Pune and Ranchi, with convenient connections from Patna and Jaipur.

For more information, log on to www.GoAir.in



ABOVE AND RIGHT: Kabini is famed for its open jeep safaris; the Malabar Giant Squirrel



Kabini wildlife safari is about 230 km from Bengaluru. GoAir operates direct flights to Bengaluru from Mumbai, New Delhi, Hyderabad, Goa, Port Blair, Pune and Ranchi, with convenient connections from Patna and Jaipur. For more information, log on to www.GoAir.in

WILDLIFE SAFARI IN KABINI

Named after the river Kabini, this former hunting ground of the Maharaja of Mysore in the Nagarhole National Park is famed for its open jeep safaris and sightings of leopards and elephant herds. A safari in this lesser known South Indian national park should be on your list of things to do this year, not just for the fact that it is home to the rare black panther but also because one does get to catch a glimpse – and quite frequently – of the Sloth Bear, the Malabar Giant Squirrel, packs of wild dogs or even that elusive tiger in its natural habitat. March through May is the season to go on a wildlife safari in Kabini, for the dry summer draws out the animals to the edge of the river and sightings are more likely.



ABOVE AND RIGHT: Ascend and descend boulders, with waves lapping your feet on a beach trek



Gokarna is about 160 km from Goa airport. GoAir operates direct flights to Goa from Bengaluru, Delhi and Mumbai, with easy connections from Ahmedabad, Jaipur and Patna, among others. For more information, log on to www.GoAir.in

BEACH TREKKING IN GOKARNA

If the walk along the iconic Om beach – that gets its name from its shape – was a trail in itself and the Shiva Climb here on the beach, a trek in itself, Gokarna has much more to offer both in terms of trails and beaches. Beach trekking is unique to this part of the coast as the beaches along this stretch are sandwiched between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea. One can follow the oft-used trek route that goes through the three most popular beaches of Gokarna: the Gokarna Beach, Om Beach and the Kudle Beach or even include a fourth, the Half Moon Beach, to ascend and descend hills and climb over boulders with the waves lapping at your feet. October through March is pleasant and a good season to go beach trekking here.



ABOVE AND RIGHT: Chandratal is a sweet water glacial lake in Spiti; visitors camp at a site away from the lake



CAMPING AT THE CHANDRATAL LAKE

To pitch a tent amidst the magnificent Himalayas on a freezing summer night and to sleep under the moonlit sky is amazing enough in itself. But if the campsite was to be at the Chandratal Lake, the remote and not-so-easily accessible crescent-shaped Moon Lake, then you'd have the trip of a lifetime guaranteed. The Chandratal is a sweet water glacial lake in the Spiti Valley that reflects the colour of the sky. At sunrise the lake appears a brilliant blue and as the sun sets, it turns a deep green. As the lake is an important wetland protected by the Ramsar Convention, camping on the banks of the lake is prohibited but there is a campsite a little away from the lake. And the short hike from the campsite to the lake is a beautiful experience in itself. July is when the road to Chandratal opens and the lake remains accessible for the four months thereafter.

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Chandratal Lake is about 220 km from Chandigarh airport. GoAir operates direct flights to Chandigarh from Mumbai and Delhi, with convenient connections from Goa, Bengaluru, Chennai and Kochi. For more information, log on to www.GoAir.in



ABOVE AND RIGHT: It takes time to get a hang of snowboarding, and Gulmarg is a great place to do that



SNOWBOARDING IN GULMARG

Snowboarding came later, but it sure is more intense than skiing, for it is all about balance and you virtually have no other control, neither on your speed nor in the manoeuvring. It takes up to five days for one to get a hang of the sport and to begin enjoying the slide down the snow-clad mountain slopes at dizzying speeds. So prepare to set aside at least a week to embark on this adventure. Owing to the popularity of the destination, equipment is readily available and easy to rent. Snowboarding season in Gulmarg is December through February, when the ski capital of the country disappears under a thick blanket of powdery snow.



Gulmarg is about 60 km from Srinagar airport. GoAir operates direct flights to Srinagar from Delhi, Jammu with convenient connections from Mumbai, Bangalore, Patna, Lucknow, among other cities. For more information, log on to www.GoAir.in



ABOVE AND RIGHT: Take off at 8000 feet above MSL? Sounds like fun; Billing hosted the Paragliding World Cup in 2015



PARAGLIDING IN BIR BILLING

Bir Billing is synonymous with paragliding in India. This beautiful Himalayan valley in Himachal Pradesh even hosted the Paragliding World Cup in 2015, where pilots from over a hundred and forty countries participated. Soaring over the Kangra Valley with wondrous up close views of the Dhauladhar Ranges, a paragliding flight lasts anywhere from fifteen minutes to thirty and can be done either solo or in tandem. Taking off at an altitude of eight thousand feet above sea level in Billing, one lands four thousand feet below in Bir. If one wishes to fly solo, though, one must undergo a two-week training. Otherwise, anyone can always fly in tandem with the pilot. All through the year except monsoon is paragliding season. But here in Bir Billing paragliding season can be divided between the snow covered month of January and also June to October.



Bir is about 290 km from Chandigarh airport. GoAir operates direct flights to Chandigarh from Mumbai and Delhi, with convenient connections from Goa, Bengaluru, Chennai and Kochi. For more information, log on to www.GoAir.in



ABOVE AND RIGHT: If you can swim, you can snorkel; shallow waters off Lakshadweep are ideal for snorkelling



Kavaratti Island, in Lakshadweep, is about 218 nautical miles from Kochi airport. GoAir operates direct flights to Kochi from Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Chennai, and Bangalore with convenient connections from Delhi, Jaipur, Chandigarh and Lucknow. For more information, log on to www.GoAir.in

SNORKELLING IN LAKSHADWEEP

With its living coral reefs of varied and brilliant hues glistening through the crystal clear waters of the lagoons surrounding the various islands of Lakshadweep, there can be no better destination in India for snorkelling. All you need is a basic familiarity with swimming and with a mask, snorkel and a set of fins and you are raring to go. The shallow waters here only help, making it easier for anyone wanting to take a peek into the ocean, at the spectacular life underwater. December to April is the ideal season to go snorkelling in the Lakshadweep Islands, where the weather is generally humid, as befits a tropical island.



ABOVE AND RIGHT: The hills of Meghalaya have hundreds of cave systems; and January to March is the best time to explore them



CAVING IN MEGHALAYA

Disappear into the caves of the Khasi Hills. Feel like Batman. Go caving in Meghalaya. It is the thrill of discovery – venturing into the dark unknown and coming up on fossil passages, limestone stalactites and stalagmites, bats and other endemic creatures – that is today contributing to the growth of caving or spelunking in Meghalaya. There are more than a thousand cave systems in the hills of Khasi, Garo and Jaintia, waiting to be explored. Extending to a formidable 30,397 metres, India's longest cave, the Krem Liat Prah is also one of them. Ducking through jagged outcroppings in a cave, finding your way through rocks and water, chancing upon discoveries, caving is surely an offbeat adventure that one should try at least once. Caving in Meghalaya is best done in the winter months of January to March when the water levels in the caves are at their lowest.



Shillong is 125 km from Guwahati airport. GoAir operates direct flights to Guwahati from Delhi, Kolkata and Bagdogra, with easy connections from Ahmedabad and Mumbai. For more information, log on to www.GoAir.in



Drive or ride across the high passes between Manali and Leh this year



PHOTOGRAPHS BY HARSH MAN RAI

ROAD TRIPPING FROM MANALI TO LEH

It is the quintessential Himalayan road trip, needing no introduction. A road trip along India's most celebrated route, the four-hundred-and-eighty-seven-kilometre stretch between Manali and Leh, is the stuff of dreams for any youngster and top of the bucket list for the avid biker or any travel enthusiast. Be humbled by the mighty Himalayas as you drive through the land of high passes, stop by for Maggi and parathas, dip your feet in the streams of glacial melt. From the twenty-one hairpin bends of the Gata Loops to the five high altitude Himalayan passes you cross, this road trip from Manali to Leh cannot but be the trip of a lifetime. The Leh-Manali Highway, as it is called, is open for a little more than the four months of Summer. May to September is also the peak tourist season in Ladakh so this is when you should plan your Manali to Leh road trip.



Manali is about 475 km from Leh airport. GoAir operates direct flights to Leh from Mumbai and Delhi, with convenient connections from Ahmedabad, Patna, Goa, Bengaluru and Chennai. For more information, log on to www.GoAir.in



Mulki is about 340 km from Goa airport. GoAir operates direct flights to Goa from Bengaluru, Delhi and Mumbai, with easy connections from Ahmedabad, Jaipur and Patna, among others.

For more information, log on to www.GoAir.in

SURFING IN MULKI

Located on the west coast of India, Mulki is a little ashram town and now a surf town, just north of Mangalore. Pretty late in catching on the wave of surfing, India's first surf retreat stands here in Mulki. Here is the Ashram Surf Retreat where you can get surf lessons on your holiday and even try out their surf yoga and wakeboarding. The season for surfing in India is during the monsoon and for a few weeks before the start of monsoon. It is when the big waves come in ranging anywhere between eight feet and fifteen feet. So if you are thinking of a surfing holiday, head to Mulki anytime between May and September this year.



ABOVE AND RIGHT: Coorg is not just about coffee, it's also a rafting hotspot



RIVER RAFTING IN COORG

Think Coorg and you think of leisurely strolls through the mist-laden coffee plantations in the quiet country side of Karnataka. But Coorg isn't just a hill station, for come monsoon, the Scotland of India turns into a hot spot for river rafting or white-water rafting as it is called. As the river Barapole drops from the Bramhagiri range of the Western Ghats into the rocky landscape, it turns turbulent, gushing through the forest, over the rapids and into the Bramhagiri Wildlife Sanctuary, making it ideal for rafting. The season for river rafting is from July to September and the entire experience from prepping to the actual run that goes for about three kilometres will take one approximately three hours.



Coorg is about 285 km from Bengaluru airport. GoAir operates direct flights to Bengaluru from Mumbai, New Delhi, Hyderabad, Goa, Port Blair, Ahmedabad, Pune and Ranchi, with convenient connections from Patna and Jaipur. For more information, log on to www.GoAir.in



ABOVE AND RIGHT: Havelock is home to some of India's best diving sites



Havelock Islands is about four hours from Port Blair. GoAir operates direct flights to Port Blair from Bengaluru, Chennai, Kolkata, and Mumbai, with convenient connections from Delhi, Ahmedabad, Hyderabad and Goa. For more information, log on to www.GoAir.in

SCUBA-DIVING IN HAVELOCK ISLANDS

Going underwater in the open ocean, exploring the stunning world of beautiful coral reefs and watching life go by in that suspended moment. Scuba-diving opens up realms that one has otherwise only imagined. The tropical island of Havelock in the Bay of Bengal is home to some of the most popular dive sites of India. Starting with under twenty metres, one can choose from any of these dive sites that can be reached by boat, based on one's experience and PADI certification level. November through April is scuba-diving season in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, but the best time to dive is anytime in February or March.



ABOVE AND RIGHT: February is ideal for skiing in Auli



Auli is about 430 km from New Delhi airport. GoAir operates direct flights to Delhi from Mumbai, Bengaluru, Pune, Patna, Ranchi, Jammu among others. For more information, log on to www.GoAir.in

SKIING IN AULI

Nestled cosily amidst the snow-kissed peaks of the Himalayas, Auli has only lately risen to popularity as India's top destination for skiing. Offering beautiful views of the Nanda Devi Peak, Auli is along the route to the Valley of Flowers, Badrinath and the trek route to Kauri Pass. A cable car operates from Joshimath to Auli during the day and one can take this four-kilometre ride up to get to Auli, stay at any of the resorts that have now mushroomed here and ski along the gentle slopes of the Garhwal Mountains. From January through March, the slopes are carpeted in thick snow but February is your ideal month, if you want to try skiing in India this year.