

TAKE A BREAK!

From forgotten forts to ancient ruins, Vedic cities lost in time to brand new towns that are the proud symbols of our state of Telangana; here is a list of seven road trips that you must make from Hyderabad this winter. All the destinations are less than four hours away!

TEXT AND PHOTOS: NEEHARIKA SATYAVADA



THROUGH THE FORT GROUNDS

FORT ON THE VERGE

Place: Elgandal

Distance from Hyderabad: 156 kms

Trip Duration: Half day

Sitting atop a hill overlooking the Manair tributary of the Godavari River is **ELGANDAL FORT**, the crown jewel on the tourist map of **KARIMNAGAR**. Once the capital of Telangana, this ancient fort has been the stronghold of five major dynasties over time – Kakatiyas, Bahamanis, Qutb Shahis, Mughals and Asaf Jahis.

Though it is not clear when exactly the fort was built, according to some of the inscriptions available, it is believed that the village of Elgandal or Veligandula has been around since 1202 AD. Assumed to have been built by the Kakatiyas, this hill fort of Elgandal was the district capital till 1905 and the headquarters of Karimnagar under the Nizams.

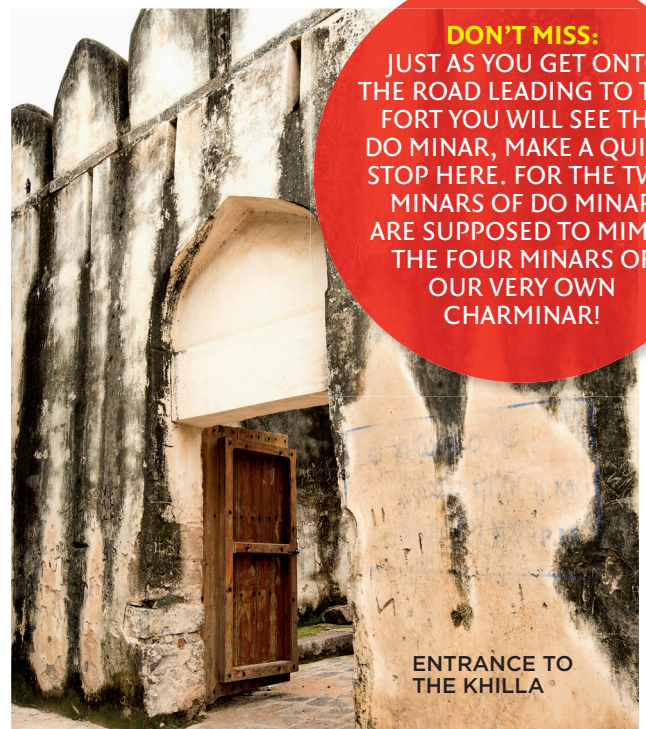
The most prominent and also the most strikingly beautiful feature of the Elgandal Fort is the Alamgir Mosque and its three minarets. Popularly known as the Teen Minar, these minarets on the mosque built by Zafar Ud Dowla in 1754 AD oscillate when shaken. Most tourists seemed to prefer sitting down in the shady avenues of the two mile wide fort grounds for a picnic, rather than go up the winding, worn down steps leading to it. Though steep, this short hike up is not to be missed for the Teen Minar remain the highlight of this fort. These spires stand out from afar, even on a cloudy day when most of the relics of this fort are lost in foliage.

Other notable features include the 12 feet deep contour trenches around the fort walls where crocodiles once resided

as protection against enemy intrusion and a 10 km underground tunnel connecting to the neighboring village. Work is underway by the Telangana Government to restore this once important fort and turn it into a popular tourist spot. Despite the crumbling walls, this ravaged relic stands testimony to time and history.

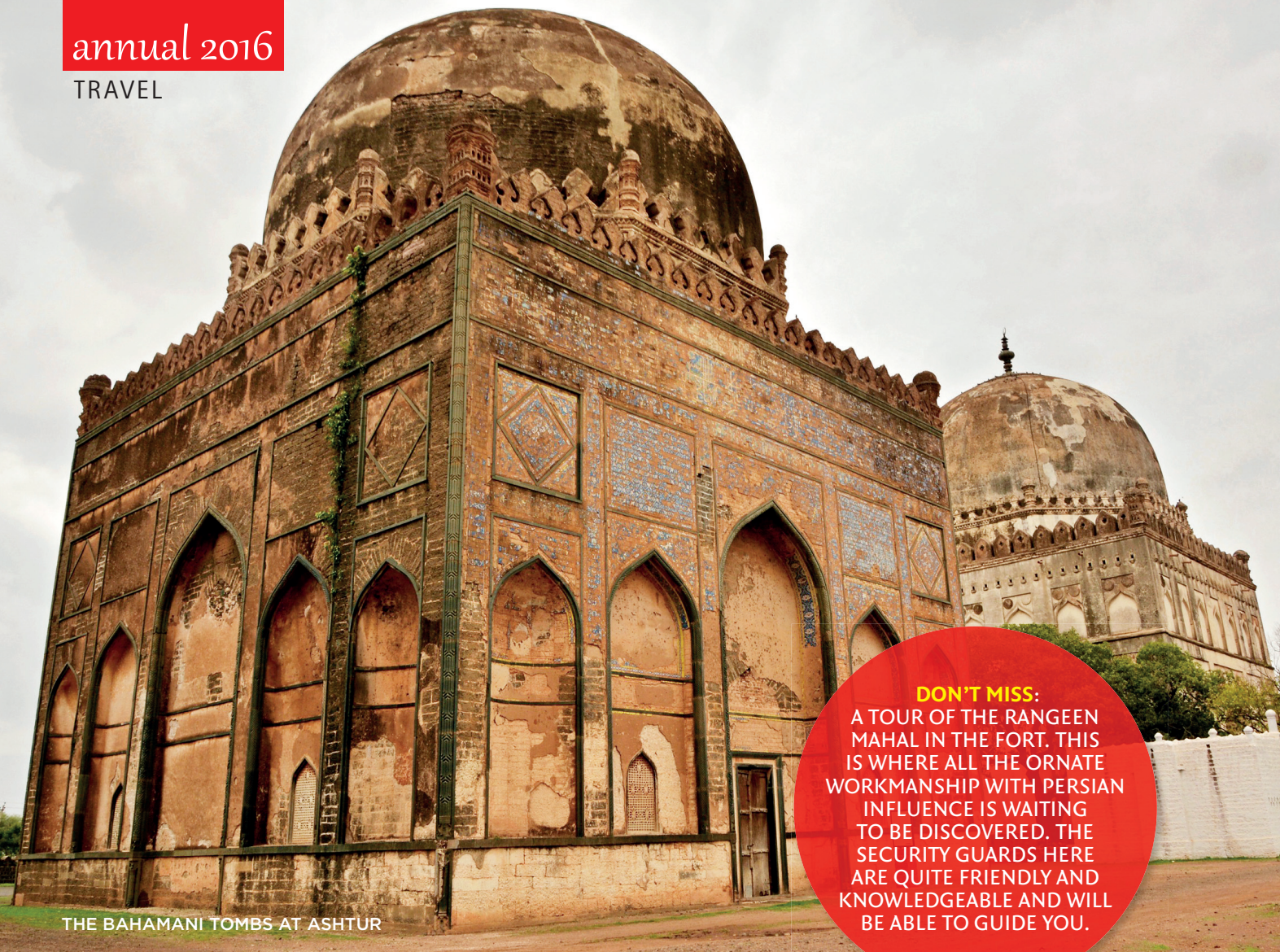
ROUTE: Take the NH44 or get onto the Outer Ring Road to reach Karimnagar. Referred to as Elgandal Khilla locally, this hill fort is 21 kms from the Karimnagar railway station and it will take you a little over two-and-a-half hours from Hyderabad.

TOURIST INFO: The Telangana Government has started work to make this fort accessible with a light and sound show on the anvil. Right now this fort is open from 10 am to 5 pm, all days of the week.



DON'T MISS:
JUST AS YOU GET ONTO THE ROAD LEADING TO THE FORT YOU WILL SEE THE DO MINAR, MAKE A QUICK STOP HERE. FOR THE TWO MINARS OF DO MINAR ARE SUPPOSED TO MIMIC THE FOUR MINARS OF OUR VERY OWN CHARMINAR!

ENTRANCE TO THE KHILLA



THE BAHAMANI TOMBS AT ASHTUR

DON'T MISS:
A TOUR OF THE RANGEEN MAHAL IN THE FORT. THIS IS WHERE ALL THE ORNATE WORKMANSHIP WITH PERSIAN INFLUENCE IS WAITING TO BE DISCOVERED. THE SECURITY GUARDS HERE ARE QUITE FRIENDLY AND KNOWLEDGEABLE AND WILL BE ABLE TO GUIDE YOU.

THE CITY OF WHISPERING TOMBS

Place: Bidar

Distance from Hyderabad: 135 kms

Trip Duration: Full day

Just over two hours from Hyderabad, across the state border, in Karnataka is Bidar. If you love visiting places of historic significance and can't get enough of architecture, this is one road trip that you must take from the city. Of the 61 listed monuments of Bidar, 30 are tombs. Little wonder then that Bidar is known as the City of Whispering Tombs.

The most prominent landmark of this city though is the Bidar Fort. It was built by the first sultan of the Bahamani Dynasty, Ala Ud Din Bahaman Shah when he set up his capital in this city that dates back to the third century BC. Built on the brink of

the Deccan Plateau, this fort has been damaged and renovated many a time, but it stands till date as one of the strongest and better-preserved medieval forts of the country. For a crowded town built within crumbling fort walls, the sheer size and the beautiful layout with its landscaped gardens are sure to take you by surprise. But what you will take away from here are the blue tile fragments found everywhere around Bidar, for the encaustic tiles of Persian inscriptions still preserve the bright blue of their age old color.

Four kms from here is the final resting place of the Bahamani Sultans, the little known Bahamani Tombs. No visit to Bidar is complete without a trip to these majestic structures located in Ashtur. Some of these are in a state of disrepair today, but even these crumbling mausoleums stand as a beautiful testimony to the art of an era gone by.

The most frequented tourist destination here, though, remains the Guru Nanak Jhira Sahib Gurudwara. People of all faiths come here, even straight from the airport to get the holy water from the spring in the Gurudwara, which is believed to possess healing powers. The structure itself is modern day religious splendor in full scale, probably the grandest I have visited till date, which for me completely overshadowed the moment of quiet and tranquility usually experienced in a Gurudwara.

PIT STOP

FAMOUS TEA POINT NEAR SANGAREDDY. THIS LITTLE DHABA CLAIMS TO SERVE THE BEST TASTING CHAI IN THE AREA. SO IF YOU ARE CRAVING SOME GOOD OLD IRANI CHAI, YOU COULD MAKE A ROAD TRIP JUST TO AND BACK FROM HERE!

Other places of interest in Bidar could be the two famous landmarks right in the center of town, the Chaubara and the Madrasa Mahmud Gawan. Once a watch tower, this cylindrical Chaubara of 22 meters is now a popular clock tower that serves as a landmark from where all the roads lead into different parts of town. The Madrasa was built by Mahmud Gawan, who in 1466 was the Prime Minister and a figure of cultural significance in the history of this kingdom. It housed everything from a library, lecture halls, housing for the professors and students to a mosque, all designed around an open courtyard. So, do not let the façade on the main road deceive you, for you can still see all this, though in ruins, from the side.

Route: Leave early morning and you should be there in less than two-and-a-half hours, in time for when the fort opens and is relatively less crowded. Make a quick stop for souvenirs on the way to Madrasa Mahmoud Gawan in town. Leave town and head to the tombs in Ashtur and on the way back out of Bidar to Hyderabad stop at the Gurudwara Nanak Jhira Sahib.

Tourist Info: The Bidar Fort is open from 9:30 am to 5 pm all days of the week and for information about the fort and other places of interest in Bidar, one can visit the museum in the fort.



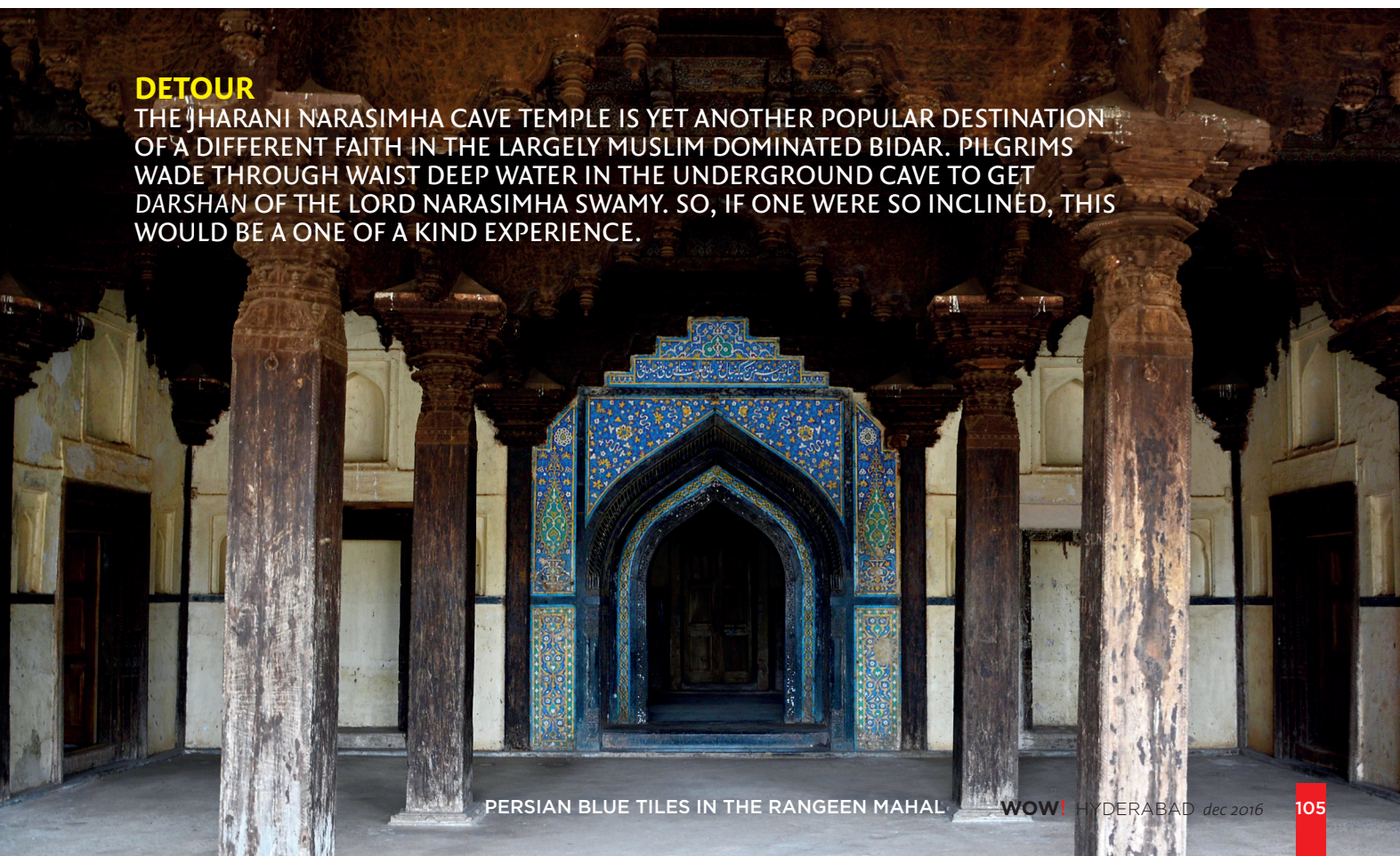
A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE BIDAR FORT WALLS

SHOP

STOP BY AT ANY OF THE ARTISAN STORES ON CHOUBARA ROAD TO PICK UP SOME BIDRI WARE. BIDAR HAS EVEN EARNED A GI TAG FOR THIS ART OF SILVER INLAY WORK IN BLACK METAL THAT TRACES ITS ORIGIN TO TURKISH, PERSIAN AND ARABIC CULTURES. BOTH, THE QUALITY AND THE PRICE ARE SUPERIOR TO WHAT IS AVAILABLE HERE IN THE CITY OR ONLINE.

DETOUR

THE JHARANI NARASIMHA CAVE TEMPLE IS YET ANOTHER POPULAR DESTINATION OF A DIFFERENT FAITH IN THE LARGELY MUSLIM DOMINATED BIDAR. PILGRIMS WADE THROUGH WAIST DEEP WATER IN THE UNDERGROUND CAVE TO GET DARSHAN OF THE LORD NARASIMHA SWAMY. SO, IF ONE WERE SO INCLINED, THIS WOULD BE A ONE OF A KIND EXPERIENCE.





SANGAMESWARA TEMPLE

SOUTH INDIA'S CITY OF MOKSH

Place: Alampur

Distance from Hyderabad: 215 kms

Trip Duration: Full day

The temple town of Alampur in the Mahbubnagar district of Telangana is renowned for its Ashtadasa Shakti Peetham, the Jogulamba temple. But there is more to this sleepy little town that is only a few hours from Hyderabad. It is believed to be the Western gateway to Srisailem, one of the important pilgrimage centers for Shaivites in the country.

The Jogulamba temple is one of the 18 major Shakti, and is but one of the temples in the Navabrahma temple complex. There is a moat around the temple here, where the goddess takes her Roudra Roopam or the form of fury, to cool the atmosphere and make it easier for us mere mortals to pray to this 'Mother of Yogis', they say. Also manifest here are nine forms of Lord Shiva or the Navabrahmas. All in all, both the principal deities of this temple come power packed with legends and beliefs! This temple complex has also clearly been a witness to a lot of mankind's history for, within the original walls, amidst all the temples, sits a *dargah*, speaking volumes of the time when this temple was invaded by the Bahamani sultans in the 14th century.



CARVINGS AT THE JOGULAMBA TEMPLE

Every temple in this town seems to somehow signify the importance of the holy confluence of the rivers Krishna and Tungabhadra here. To begin with the most prominent one, the Navabrahma temple complex built on the banks of Tungabhadra in the 7th century, together with the word *teertham* meaning holy water give this town the name Navabrahma Teertham. Yet another temple in Alampur hinting at the holy confluence or *sangam* is the Sangameswara Temple. This temple comes next only in terms of popularity, for it is just as beautiful as the first if not even more striking in its stoic solitude. This only leaves us to wonder just how important were these rivers once, spiritually!

Save the best for the last and use Google Maps to take you to the Papanasi group of temples next. Tucked away, just around the corner from the main town, is this cluster of 24 temples, stunningly elegant in their simple design. A majority of these shrines are dedicated to Lord Shiva - yet again - housing *lingas* in numerous forms. Locals say that there are so many Shiva *lingas* everywhere, in and around Alampur only waiting to be found, that this little town is known as Dakshina Kashi, implying it is South India's very own Benaras/Varanasi/Kashi, the abode of Lord Shiva and the Hindus' city of moksh or nirvana.

ROUTE: Alampur is a three-hour drive along the Hyderabad-Bengaluru highway. One can either go via the Outer Ring Road or the airport. To save on time, plan your day trip so that you are not stuck in the city traffic during peak hours.

TOURIST INFO: The Jogulamba temple in Alampur is open from 7 am to 8:30 pm, and is closed for an hour during the day between 1pm to 2pm. It is advisable, though not mandatory, for women to dress in traditional Indian clothes like a *salwar kameez* or a sari.

PIT STOP: START EARLY AND BRIGHT WITH BREAKFAST AT THE AIRPORT NOVOTEL.

SHOP: MAKE A QUICK STOP AT GADWAL ON THE WAY BACK ALONG THE NH44 TO INDULGE IN SOME RETAIL THERAPY. WHO DOESN'T LOVE A BRILLIANT HUED HANDWOVEN SARI!



AN UNCONVENTIONAL ELEPHANT CARVING ON THE TEMPLE FACADE

DID YOU KNOW?
THE SANGAMESWARA TEMPLE WAS MOVED STONE BY STONE FROM THE BANKS OF THE RIVER TO WHERE IT IS NOW, DURING THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SRISAILAM DAM IN THE 1970'S.

REMEMBER: THE JOGULAMBA TEMPLE CLOSSES AT 5:30 PM, SO MAKE SURE YOU VISIT HERE FIRST. IT IS ALSO CUSTOMARY TO TAKE ALONG A SARI AND BANGLES AS AN OFFERING TO THE MOTHER GODDESS.



THE PAPANASI GROUP OF TEMPLES



A VIEW OF THE SUNSET FROM A TOP
THE ARMOR ROCK FORMATIONS

DID YOU KNOW?
IN THE TRETAYUGA, RIGHT
AFTER MEETING HANUMAN
FOR THE FIRST TIME, LORD
RAMA WAS ON HIS WAY TO
WAGE WAR ON RAVANA,
WHEN HE STOPPED HERE IN
DICHPALLY ON THIS HILL AND
STAYED FOR A FORTNIGHT;
AND IT IS TO MARK THIS
FACT THAT THE TEMPLE WAS
CONSTRUCTED HERE.



VANTAGE POINT



THE DICHPALLY RAMALAYAM

WHERE HISTORY AND ADVENTURE MEET

Place: Nizamabad

Distance from Hyderabad: 175 kms

Trip Duration: Full day

One of the oldest and most renowned temples in Nizamabad is the Ramalayam in Dichpally. This 14th century temple dedicated to Lord Vishnu's incarnation as Rama is also called the Indhoor Khajuraho and Khilla Ramalayam.

Considered to be a fine example of the Kakatiyas' architectural splendor, this stone structure of black and white basalt has sculptures on its pillars that are reminiscent of the ones on the famous Khajuraho temples, bestowing on it the moniker of Indhoor Khajuraho, indicative of a time when Nizamabad was Indhoor, named so after a Rashtrakuta King. These carvings based on Vatsayana's Kamasutra were so remarkable that even the name of this town originates from them. These stone sculptures were called Gicchu Bommalu by the villagers, meaning pictures of Gicchu, the Sanskrit word for romance and beauty. Over time the village of Gicchu, Gicchu Palle came to be called Dichpally.

Sitting on a hillock, the Dichpally Ramalayam offers one, sweeping views of the quaint little town of Dichpally and is undoubtedly a worthy vantage point to enjoy the early morning breeze.

Yet another temple in Nizamabad, though not quite as legendary as the Dichpally Ramalayam, but just as historic with an extra dash of adventure added to it is Siddulagutta in Armoor. As you drive along the highway to get here, you will go past a long stretch of hills that look like they were made by someone who has artistically and quite laboriously piled up boulders to form them! These are the Armoor rock formations. They are so striking that they are but a natural stopover for anyone driving that way and rightly so, for these naturally weathered rocks have been created by Mother Nature over millions of years.

ROUTE: Take the NH44 to drive down from Hyderabad to Nizamabad. Around 15 kms before you reach the town of Nizamabad get off the NH7 to reach Dichpally. The Ramalayam is the biggest and most popular temple in town and the wider roads in town leading here are an evidence to that. Follow the sign posts and you will soon spot the 'temple on the hillock'. Break for lunch in the town of Nizamabad and drive on to Armoor which is around 37 kms from there along the NH7 and NH16.

TOURIST INFO: A *ghat* road on the Armoor rocks from behind the caves leads straight to Siddulagutta. There is also a walkway from the Gol Bungalow for pilgrims wishing to do the climb up to the temple by foot.

PIT STOP:

COMPLETE YOUR TRIP WITH LUNCH AT
ANGEETHI IN NIZAMABAD.



BUILT IN THE GOTHIC REVIVAL
STYLE, THE MEDAK CHURCH

A TRINITY OF FAITHS AND MORE

Place: Medak

Distance from Hyderabad: 95 kms

Trip Duration: Weekend

What started off as a project of true Christian compassion in 1914 to provide employment and mitigate the suffering of people during the three-year famine that hit Medak, has brought its most famous landmark to this district. The Medak church is till today the largest diocese in all of Asia and is believed to be second only to the Vatican even across the globe. This Gothic church is renowned for its beautiful stained glass windows that leave one spellbound as the sunlight filters through them into the inner sanctum of the cathedral. As far as the structure of this church goes, its most striking feature is the 175 feet bell tower made of Italian tiles.

Everyone in Hyderabad has heard of the Medak church and if you grew up in this city, it is highly likely that you would have even gone there on a school trip! But don't just strike it off your list when you are planning your next road trip, for there is a lot more that one could do here.

The summit of the Medak fort offers gorgeous views of the surrounding city. The fort is known to have exploited the natural topography of the area in creating an invincible defense around itself. Though not much remains, except for its three entrances, Prathama Dwaram, Simha Dwaram and Gaja Dwaram, these



THROUGH THE PRATHAMA DWARAM

are striking in their architecture and their names say it all. Prathama being the first entrance, the other two entrances are adorned with snarling lion heads and majestic elephants. What stands out even today at this fort though is the Ganda Bherundam, the great Vijayanagar Empire's insignia, on the main entrance untouched by time. With the Tourism Department's resort at the fort, one can enjoy the art of slow travel right here so close to home.

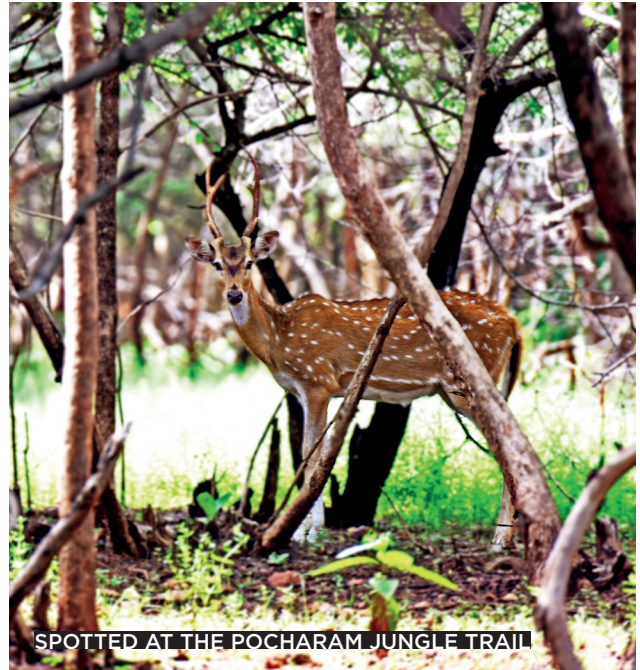
Just ten minutes from the Medak church is the former hunting ground of the Nizam and an ecotourism center. Spread over 30,000 acres, the Pocharam Wildlife Sanctuary hugs the banks of the Pocharam Lake, which was formed from the construction of a bund on the Allair River in 1916. The Pocharam Lake is so serene and peaceful that it is a true oasis for the denizens of traffic-choked Hyderabad. Calm blue waters, lush green trees, bird song minus the pollution and the crowds, this is one place that guarantees a pleasant morning. So, if the whole Medak circuit is not your kind of a break, a short morning trip to and back from the Pocharam Lake is a definite hit with every kind of traveler.

ROUTE: Take the NH44 via Kompally to get to Medak. The drive there takes 90 minutes. Continue on from Medak for another ten minutes to reach the Pocharam Lake and the Wildlife Sanctuary abutting it.

TOURIST INFO: The Medak church is open from 9 am to 5 pm all days of the week. Visit the Deer Breeding Center's office on the main road to get tickets for the Jungle Trail.

MUST DO

DRIVE THROUGH THE 4-KM JUNGLE TRAIL IN THE DEER BREEDING CENTER OF THE POCHARAM SANCTUARY AND SPOT THE CHINKARA, NILGAI AND THE SAMBHAR DEER!



SPOTTED AT THE POCHARAM JUNGLE TRAIL

DON'T MISS:
THE VIEW FROM THE
MEDAK FORT. NOTICE
HOW A MOSQUE, TEMPLE
AND THE CHURCH ARE
ALL ALIGNED IN A PERFECT
DIAGONAL, WHILE
THE CITY GREW AND
FLOURISHED ALL
AROUND IT.

STAY: TOURISM DEPARTMENT'S HERITAGE HOTEL, MUBARAK MAHAL HARITHA AT THE FORT. CALL 90002 82897 FOR BOOKINGS AND INFORMATION.

STOP BY: THE ROAD TO MEDAK GOES THROUGH THE NARSAPUR FOREST RANGE AND YOU WILL FIND A HORDE OF MONKEYS LINED UP ALL ALONG THE ROAD. SO DON'T FORGET TO CARRY SOME BANANAS TO FEED THESE GUYS.



THE ANCIENT TRIKUTA TEMPLE AT NAGUNUR

LOST IN TIME

Place: Manthani and Nagunur

Distance from Hyderabad: 200 kms

Trip Duration: Full day

Named after a Khiledar under the reign of Sikandar Jha during 1803 to 1823, Syed Karimuddin, Karimnagar is one district in Telangana, which has ancient places of historic importance to both Hindus and Buddhists alike.

Manthani has recently become popular with quite a few of the religious channels covering this ancient center of Vedic learning on their travel shows. Home to the ruins of the Gautameswara temple, it is a timeless village that flourished on the banks of Godavari in an era gone by. It derives its name from the Sanskrit word Mantra Kutam, meaning House of Mantras and is today also referred to as Mantrapuri or the Town of Hymns.

Another place in Karimnagar, similar to Manthani is Nagunur, with its cluster of Kalyana and Kakatiya temple ruins right in the heart of the village. This tiny village was once the center of the Kakatiya Empire. The most significant of these temples is the Trikota temple built by the Chalukyas of Kalyani. Though built in the same style as the Manthani temple, this is in much better shape with the three shrines dedicated to Lord Shiva showing evidence of continuing worship.

ROUTE: Take the NH44 via Medchal to reach Karimnagar in less than two hours. About 64 kms from here is Manthani, an hour's drive will get you there. A further 100 kms from Manthani is Nagunur, so the homeward journey from Nagunur to Hyderabad is slightly longer than the onward journey, but the 260 kms will only take around three-and-a-half hours.

DID YOU KNOW?

IT IS POPULARLY BELIEVED THAT MANTHANI IS HOME TO A THOUSAND BRAHMIN FAMILIES, WHICH IS WHY IT IS ALSO CALLED THE SAHASRA BRAHAMANA GADAPA, I.E A THOUSAND BRAHMIN'S THRESHOLD.



TEMPLE BELLS

TOURIST INFO: Work is underway to restore the beautiful stone temple of Manthani to its former glory. Meanwhile, there is also a new, fully functional temple on the premises.



NANDI MANDAPAM AT THE RAMAPPA TEMPLE

HERITAGE CITY OF TELANGANA

Place: Warangal

Distance from Hyderabad: 145 kms

Trip Duration: Weekend

Who doesn't know the Kakatiya Kala Toranam? It is the omnipresent symbol of Telangana heritage. Incorporated in the emblem of this newly formed state, it is but a rendition of one of the four massive stone gateways that are a legacy of the Kakatiya art and architecture. Warangal is not just the second biggest city in the state but it is also touted as and promoted as the Heritage city of Telangana.

This 12th century city's name has been derived from the Telugu word Orugallu meaning one stone, which is why it is also known as the Ekasila Nagaram. The city which was once capital of the Kakatiyas today comprises of the three towns of Warangal, Hanamkonda and Kazipet.

The most popular amongst the heritage spots in Warangal is the Thousand Pillar Temple which is in Hanamkonda. Constructed in 1163 AD by Rudra Deva in the Chalukya style,

it has three presiding deities, Vishnu, Shiva and Surya. The most recognizable feature of this temple besides its richly carved pillars is the huge monolithic Nandi in black stone.

If you prefer temples that have captured time and are ageless in their magnificence, then the Ramappa temple is for you. This medieval temple is beautiful beyond words and almost intact. The only temple in the country to be known by the name of its sculptor, its sculptures are truly exquisite and will probably be the ones that you will actually remember after all your road trips! Five minutes from the temple is the Ramappa Lake, peaceful and serene, it is neither crowded nor noisy, even on a weekend. A resort on its bank serving up piping hot, spicy Telugu food makes it an ideal location for an overnigher.

End your weekend with a stop at the Laknavaram Lake. The lake is beautiful and its waters soothing no doubt, but its popularity is its curse. From its yellow suspension bridge to the mini island in the lake, it is hugely popular as a picnic spot with families and youngsters alike, and it gets nearly impossible to really stay a while and wind down here. In spite of all that, here is a lake which was formed in the 13th century by closing down three narrow valleys and is actually so well hidden by the surrounding hills that you wouldn't even be able to see it till you actually get to the bridge.

ROUTE: Take NH163 via the Outer Ring Road to reach Warangal in two-and-a-half hours. About 70 kms from the city of Warangal is the Ramappa temple and lake. From here on it is another 29 kms to the Laknavaram Lake. The



STUNNING SCULPTURES ON THE CEILING OF RAMAPPA TEMPLE



SUNSET AT THE WARANGAL FORT PARK



THE RAMAPPA LAKE AS SEEN FROM THE HARITHA HOTEL

drive from here to Warangal is again 70 kms so plan your itinerary in a way that it is spread out over the weekend.

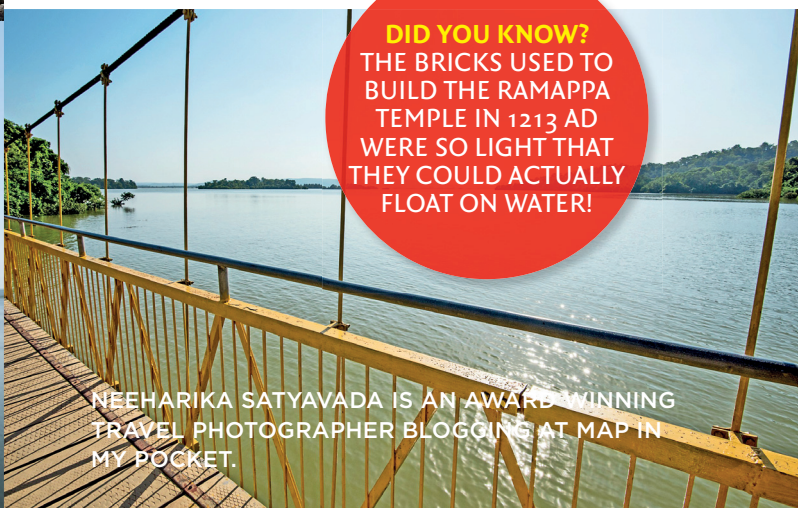
TOURIST INFO: The Warangal Fort is a ticketed monument and is open from 10 am to 7 pm, all days of the week. There is also a sound and light show here every evening after sunset. A portion of the Thousand Pillar Temple is currently under renovation and access to it is restricted. ■

STAY: TOURISM DEPARTMENT'S HARITHA KAKATIYA HOTEL AT WARANGAL OR LAKE VIEW HARITHA RESORT AT RAMAPPA LAKE. CALL ON 90002 82897 FOR BOOKINGS AND INFORMATION.

DETOUR: DO VISIT THE BHADRAKALI TEMPLE IN THE CITY IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR A RELIGIOUS DETOUR. SET AGAINST A BACKDROP OF WATER AND HILLS, THIS TEMPLE IS SCENIC AND ALSO POWERFUL IN ITS SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE, DELIVERING ON ALL LEVELS.

TRIVIA: A LOT OF SONGS AND SCENES FROM THE TELUGU MOVIE VARSHAM WERE SHOT HERE IN WARANGAL AND IS PROBABLY THE MOST STUNNING TAKE ON THE THOUSAND PILLAR TEMPLE.

POINT TO REMEMBER: IF YOU ARE USING GOOGLE MAPS TO NAVIGATE WITHIN THE CITY, LOOK FOR WARANGAL FORT PARK AND NOT WARANGAL FORT, FOR THAT WILL TAKE YOU TO WHERE THE ORIGINAL FORT ONCE STOOD AND WHICH IS NOW JUST A CRUMBLING STRUCTURE OF STONE OVERRUN IN GRASS.



DID YOU KNOW? THE BRICKS USED TO BUILD THE RAMAPPA TEMPLE IN 1213 AD WERE SO LIGHT THAT THEY COULD ACTUALLY FLOAT ON WATER!

NEEHARIKA SATYAVADA IS AN AWARD WINNING TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHER BLOGGING AT MAP IN MY POCKET.