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INDIAN

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PHOTO ARTS

December 2017

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DISCOVERING THE BEAUTY OF THE CANADIAN ROCKIES, through the lenses of SALEEM MOOPEN
THE GOLDEN TEMPLE an Abode of Humanity by SHIVANG SHEKHAR SINGH

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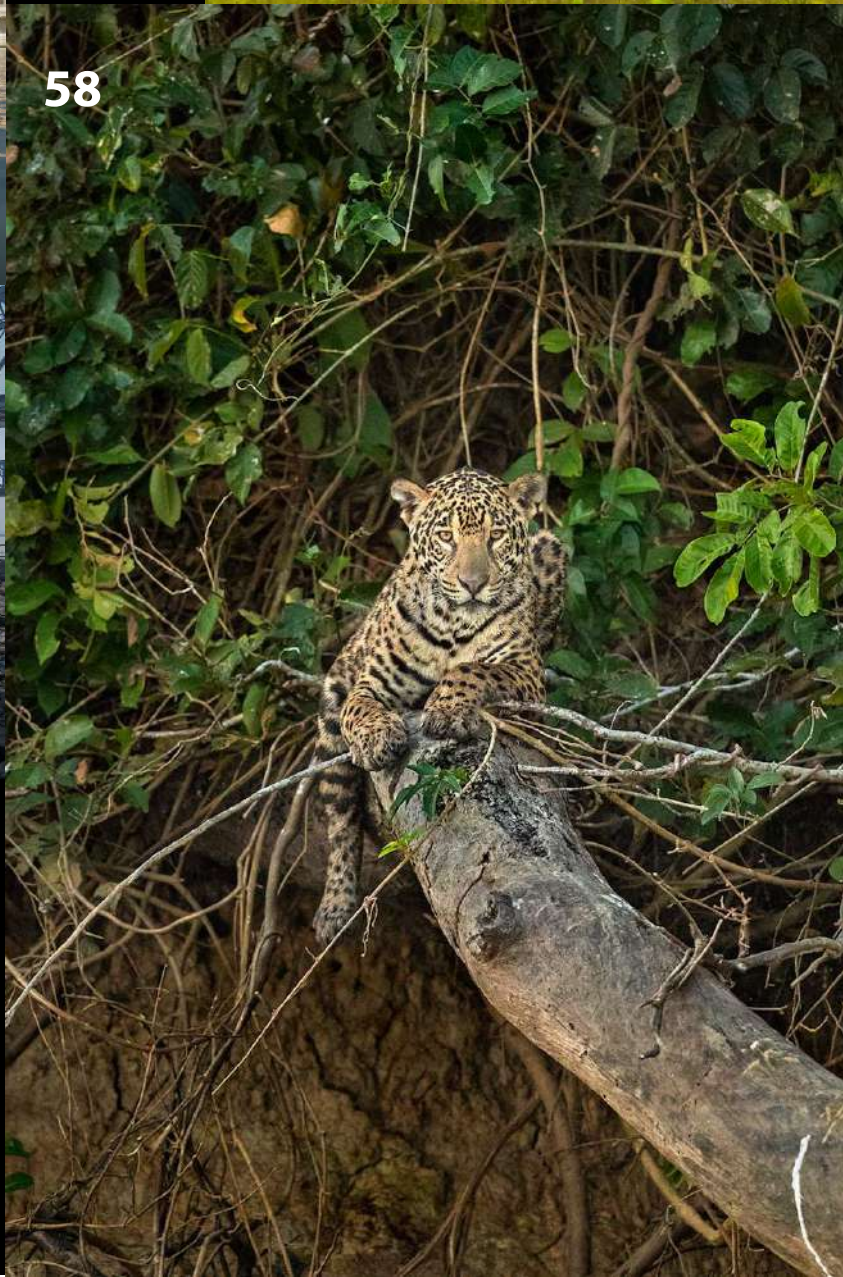


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The Wise Elders of Jim Corbett National Park and Others

by Varun Thakkar

Corbett National Park located along the foothills of the Himalayas in the northern Indian state of Uttarakhand has always found a special mention in the cause of conservation of endangered species in India. This is primarily due to this being the oldest national park in India set up in 1936 as Hailey National Park to protect the dwindling Bengal tiger population in the region. It also holds the distinction of being the first national park in India where the iconic Project Tiger initiative was launched in 1973. Corbett National Park is spread across an area of approximately 520 square kilometres across the districts of Nainital, Almora and Pauri Garhwal. The park is divided into two major wildlife zones- to the southeast lies the relatively smaller zone known as the Bijrani range. The other zone which is much larger both in terms of area and its stature is the Dhikala range. Corbett National Park has always been the favoured wildlife destination for wildlife enthusiasts and this is mainly due to the rich history of conservation associated with this wilderness and the contributions it has made over the years in safeguarding the future of numerous species which inhabit this wild wonderland.

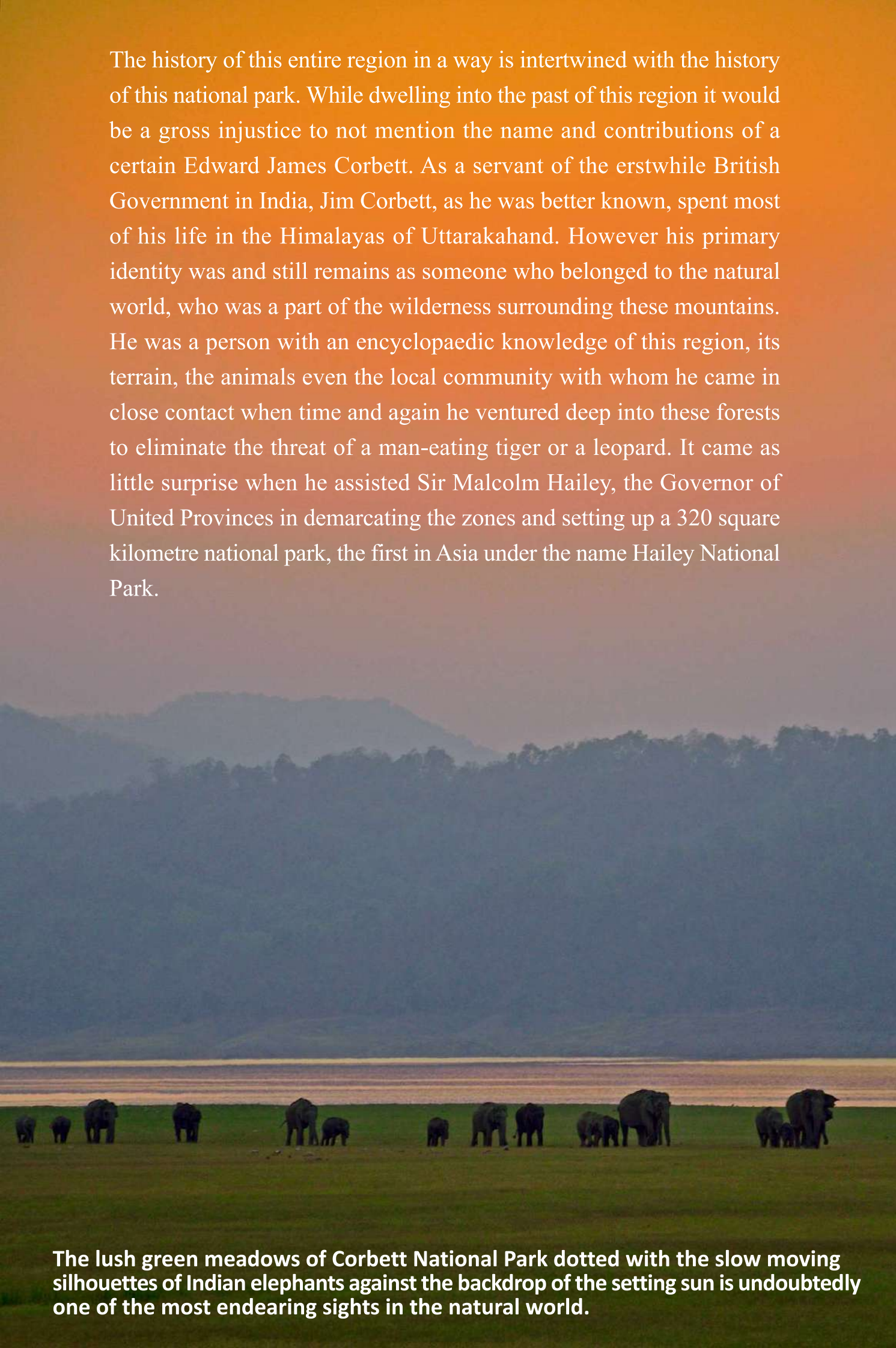


The history of this entire region in a way is intertwined with the history of this national park. While dwelling into the past of this region it would be a gross injustice to not mention the name and contributions of a certain Edward James Corbett. As a servant of the erstwhile British Government in India, Jim Corbett, as he was better known, spent most of his life in the Himalayas of Uttarakhand. However his primary identity was and still remains as someone who belonged to the natural world, who was a part of the wilderness surrounding these mountains. He was a person with an encyclopaedic knowledge of this region, its terrain, the animals even the local community with whom he came in close contact when time and again he ventured deep into these forests to eliminate the threat of a man-eating tiger or a leopard. It came as little surprise when he assisted Sir Malcolm Hailey, the Governor of United Provinces in demarcating the zones and setting up a 320 square kilometre national park, the first in Asia under the name Hailey National Park.

This still remains an iconic moment in the history of conservation; the baby step for the monumental struggle which lied ahead to protect the natural world was taken. Soon after the establishment of the reserve, rules prohibiting killing and capturing of mammals, reptiles and birds within its boundaries were passed thereby laying down the basic template for the would be national parks all over the country. After India's independence in 1954-55 it was renamed as Ramganga National Park after the major river which cuts through the park. However authorities soon realised the name never really resonated with the soul of the forest. Thus keeping in mind the significant contributions of the man who championed the cause of setting up a national reserve and who was one of the pioneers to truly understand and set up the foundation to resolve man-animal conflict, the park was renamed in 1955-56 as Jim Corbett National Park. In many ways Corbett National Park was the brainchild of Jim Corbett. A famed hunter during his hay days Jim Corbett shot around 19 tigers and 14 leopards in this region between 1907 to 1938. Government records listed each of these big cats as man-eaters and together they were responsible for causing over 1200 deaths. However Jim Corbett delved deeper into each of these incidents and he soon realized after every time he analysed the carcasses of these dead cats, most of these

man-eaters were either old animals who had lost their skills for hunting down their natural preys or were animals in their prime which have been injured in some fight, or by other animals or worse still by stray bullets, sometimes locally made rendering them useless when it came to bringing down their natural prey. Eventually all these animals developed a taste for human flesh not by choice, but simply because human beings being slower with lesser efficient senses were easier targets. These facts were an eye opener for Jim Corbett who soon realized the only way to put a permanent end to this problem was to address the issue of human beings and animals coming in close contact with each other. This single thought planted the seed of demarcating protected reserves for wild animals in his mind which in subsequent years would translate into first Hailey National Park and eventually doing true justice to the tireless efforts of one great man and visionary renamed as Jim Corbett national Park.

Today's Corbett National Park staying true to Jim Corbett's vision is a safe haven for hundreds of species of flora and fauna. It remains the most preferred wildlife destination in India by a huge margin with an estimated 70,000 visitors per year. Home to some of the iconic animals found in wild India Corbett National Park is a world in itself.

A herd of Indian elephants is silhouetted against a bright, hazy sunset sky. The elephants are scattered across a lush green meadow, some standing and some grazing. In the background, a range of misty mountains is visible under the soft light of the setting sun.

The lush green meadows of Corbett National Park dotted with the slow moving silhouettes of Indian elephants against the backdrop of the setting sun is undoubtedly one of the most endearing sights in the natural world.



Elephant calves share an extremely strong bond of love and affection with their mothers and stay close to their mothers. This beautiful young calf basks in the early morning rays of the sun cuddled between the mother.



Male elephants usually lead a solitary life except when they come in contact with the females during mating. When a male calf reaches the sub adult stage of its life the mother or the other females of the herd usually try to push him out of the herd so that it can learn to survive on its own.



Such mock fights among juvenile males are not just mere play, during the course of such fun and games they learn valuable life lessons which in this case happens to be honing their fighting skills which might prove to be useful when they are faced with a challenge from another male over mating rights or territory later in their lives.

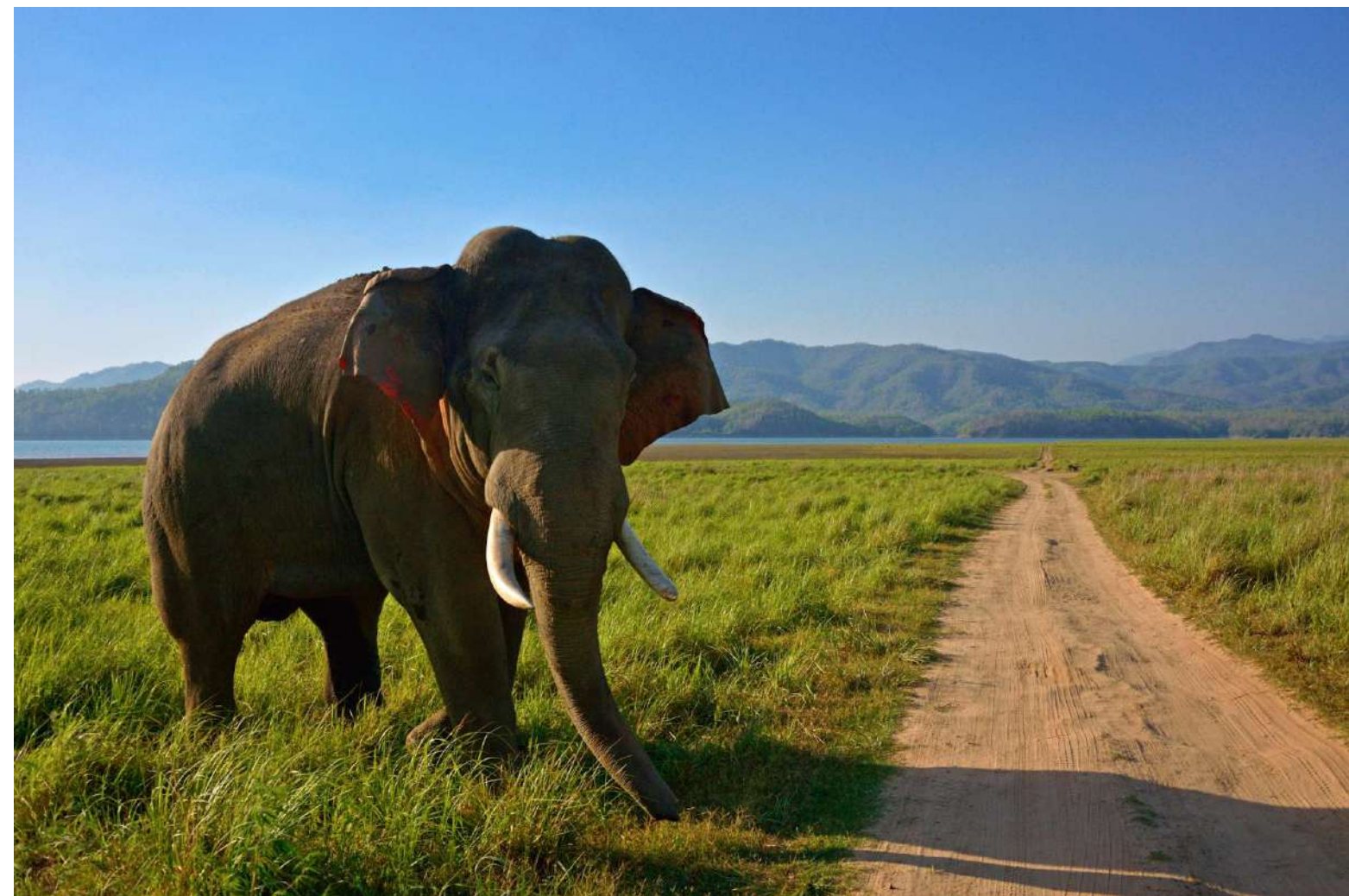


Elephants' love for water is well documented. These huge animals need a lot of water to sustain them and have a strong affinity towards water and waterholes such as this provide them with much needed relaxations and bonding opportunities.

Herds of elephants are known to travel great distances regularly in search of food and water. For the herds in Corbett food and water is plentiful and lush green grasses such as these feature prominently in their diet.



Adult male elephants are significantly larger and heavier than females and usually lead a solitary existence or on the odd occasion they tend to pair up with other bulls and form a coalition. The bulls come in close proximity with a herd of females during the mating season.



This wild marvel is an area interspersed with hills, riverine belts, marshes, open grasslands as well as a large lake. While the park is home to some of the most endangered and elusive species of animals, it goes without saying two of its most dominant residents share all the limelight between themselves. The Bengal tiger and the Indian elephant rule the roost in this wild land. In a recent report published by the Wildlife Institute of India Corbett National Park is home to the largest tiger population in the national parks of India with an estimated number of 215 tigers. Despite their huge numbers the lives of these big cats of Corbett still remain shrouded in mystery and the occasional much anticipated appearance they make evokes a sense nothing short of reverence among the eager human audience. Dense moist deciduous forest cover which dominates Corbett's landscape plays the role of the perfect accomplice in preserving the enigma of these majestic big cats. The elusive tigers share this vast kaleidoscopic wild landscape with their heavyweight neighbours who unlike the tigers are a lot less subtle, in fact leave an indelible mark on wherever they have been to. Corbett is home to a staggering thousand odd wild Indian elephants. Like the tigers elephant population in Corbett National Park has been on a steady rise since 2007, recording more than 60% increase in the elephant population. These giants of the natural world measuring an astounding 8-11 feet at the shoulders and weighing anything between 2,500 to in excess of 5,000 kg are constantly preoccupied with the ever present task of satisfying their gigantic appetites. Sometimes depending on the source of the food these giants have been known to feed for about 20 hours daily during which they have been known to consume nearly 150 kg of food. Although partial to grasses all kind of plant items such as barks of tree trunks, roots, leaves feature prominently in their diet.



A typical elephant herd is comprised of the elderly matriarch and other adult females who are usually related to each other by birth who all work together in looking after the juveniles and raising the calves.

Elephants in the Corbett national Park like elephants elsewhere in India have to be constantly on the move in search of greener pastures and the huge amount of food they need on a daily basis. They undertake long-distance migrations and follow the same seasonal migratory routes generation after generation. Migrating herds of elephants, or herds travelling across the open grasslands of Corbett is a common sight, one which has elevated these animals to the poster boys of Corbett National Park. Keeping pace with the huge appetite, the elephants need to consume substantially huge amount of water on a regular basis in order to stay hydrated. In fact these animals have developed a quiet liking for water and enjoy spending time in herds along the waterholes which serve the multiple purposes of drinking, cleaning themselves and in due process strengthening family ties. Such exercises may seem trivial to an outsider, however in the elephant society family plays an extremely crucial role. An elephant herd is made up of mature females all of whom happen to be related by birth to each other, the calves comprise of both males and females although once the males show signs of sexual maturity they are usually driven away from the herd and thus their usually solitary existence as lone tuskers begin.



Forest fires due to unnatural causes remain a big threat for this wilderness with the ever growing human settlements around the park. This image shows a pair of mating elephants while smoke billows from the forest in the background when a huge patch of Uttarakhand was engulfed by forest fire in 2016.

The females of the elephant herds come in contact with males only when they are ready to mate. The bond the members of a herd share among themselves is extremely strong and sensitive. A young calf or a newly born calf is extremely well cared and is looked after by all the members of the herd. The young calves growing up in such an environment seeped in love and affection pick up essential skills which would sustain them from their mothers or aunts, grandmothers and other elder members of the herd. It is extremely common to find elephants among the herds expressing their affection for one another, in doing so the trunk plays a crucial role, the gestures made by the trunk of an elephant is indeed the language which the elephant world speaks.

The aptly named Royal Bengal tiger truly is the royalty of any national park across India. This majestic animal exudes supreme confidence and grace with its every movement.



Amidst the scenic beauty of Corbett's kaleidoscopic landscape the eternal struggle between the predator and the prey pans out every minute. In this quest to outwit each other both parties play a high stake game and losing is always synonymous with death.



These massive animals, in spite of their intimidating presence maintain an incredibly calm demeanour and rarely lose their cool. It is not without reason they are known as the gentle giants of the forest. In fact this gentle and calm attitude of these animals has led to their long standing association with humans not only across India but all over Asia for centuries. In fact no other wild animal finds such prominent mention in the human society along with their wild existence. In this regard the elephant truly remains a unique animal. Although there can be no denying with changing times there remains no doubt that the elephant truly belongs to the wild and nowhere else. Such parallel existence of this magnificent animal can be attributed to the higher levels of intelligence possessed and exhibited by these giants. Most scientists are of the belief elephants are in fact the most intelligent animals on this planet. An elephant's brain has more mass than any other land animal and proportion wise the largest brain size in the animal world. While the facts and figures back this claim, further evidences were provided by certain aspects of elephant behaviour which have been noticed only in human beings. It has been observed time and again; elephants exhibit a wide range of emotions such as mourning the death of a family member for days, or showing empathy towards another distressed herd member and indulging in elaborate display of affection or joy. All these don't seem odd at all when we focus on the similarities between the structures of a human brain and that of an elephant's. Like humans and dolphins that are considered highly intelligent creatures as well an elephant's neocortex is highly convoluted, which usually is an indication of complex intelligence. In fact the familiarity doesn't end there; elephants like humans are one of the very few creatures which are born with no survival instincts. In fact elephant calves pick up these skills by observing their mothers and elders which again is a proof of their higher cognitive skills. The brain is specially designed to accomplish this sort of life learning. Elephants and humans have a similar lifespan of 60-70 years or excess, and elephant calves spend about 10 years in the company of their elders learning and honing the essential survival techniques before they can venture out on their own or considered as independent adults.

The khaleej pheasant is one of the crown jewels of Corbett National Park. This extremely beautiful bird is found along the foothills of the Himalayas and as is the case with many other species finds a safe home in Corbett National Park.



The elephants of Corbett are true gems of this amazing wilderness. In Corbett these exceptional creatures have found a safe home, where they have thrived and prospered. However the rising elephant numbers while heartening brings with itself a fresh set of challenges for the park authorities. An increase in the number of elephants means increased chances of human-animal conflict which are reported from all over the country on a regular basis. This is one conflict where no one side will ever emerge victorious; the losses will be huge on both sides. Along with this a gradual loss of habitat and the ever present threat of poaching for their much coveted tusks which fetch huge amount of money have always loomed large in the horizon for these animals. In Corbett though they need not worry about such perils. For the time being their future looks secure in this vast wilderness where they are well protected. As a result of the relentless efforts put in by the forest officials and concerned authorities these animals are enjoying a safe passage of life in their history in the Corbett National Park. One can only hope this trend will continue forever and these wise elderly giants will keep on upholding the indomitable character and integrity of Corbett National Park.

A pair of red headed vultures or Asian king vultures engage in a scuffle over scraps of a rotting carcass. Once widely distributed across the subcontinent these ancient scavengers are now mainly restricted to the northern part of India.





About the Photographer

I am an entrepreneur by profession, a photographer by passion. Being born and brought up in Nagpur, Maharashtra has been a boon for me, a city surrounded by national parks, sanctuaries and tiger reserves and abundant with urban wildlife too. I try and make the most of it whenever the opportunity arises. It is a matter of great joy for me to have photographed more than 250 different individual tigers over a decade of wildlife photography.

Having had a keen interest in wildlife, I have had abundant opportunities in my growing up years to spend time in multiple parks in the area, and spend most of my holidays over the last 11 to 12 years at some national park or the other. It was only in 2007 that I picked up a Digital SLR on the insistence and mentoring of my dear friend and a famous wedding photographer Navin Varma. It started off as a hobby but it didn't take too long for it to turn into an addiction. The sight of a tiger and being able to capture the majestic animal in a frame is a high on its own, and there has been no turning back for me ever since.

My travels have been mostly in and around national parks of central India, like Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve, Pench Tiger Reserve (Maharashtra & MP) , Nagzira Tiger reserve, Kanha , Bandhavgarh, Corbett, Sattal, Pangot to name a few. I have been fortunate enough to have my work recognized and have been awarded for my work at various national and international levels and regularly published in many leading publications.

Wildlife photography is never easy; one has to shoot in the given situation, the natural light and of course the natural background. In such cases it is the photographer who has to make the photograph look appealing without any help from any unnatural element, which in itself is the greatest joy and challenge of wildlife photography.

A person in white traditional Indian attire stands on a concrete ghat by a river at sunset, surrounded by a large flock of birds and a fire in a bowl.

The Story of Yamuna Ghats

by Navin Vatsa

Human civilisation and the countless aspects of it have a natural tendency of following the course of any major river. Every major civilisation in the history of this planet unfolded and thrived along the banks of rivers. In more ways than one the story of every human civilisation will remain firmly etched in the beds of the rivers that flow through the hearts of them. The thousands of year old civilisation of Delhi, one of the most populated and busiest cities in the world, is no exception to this norm. Yamuna River, the second largest tributary of the Ganges played the most crucial role in shaping the life of Delhi with a motherly embrace. One of the most prominent rivers to flow through India the Yamuna originates in the Yamunotri glacier at a dizzying height of approximately 6,400 meters in the lower reaches of the Himalayas in the state of Uttarakhand. Before it merges with the Ganges the Yamuna travels a massive length of 1,376 kilometres. The Yamuna in fact remains the longest river in India which does not pour its water directly into a sea or an ocean. The Yamuna along with the Ganges have shaped the ever so fertile Ganges Basin, of which the city of Delhi and the ancient civilisation of Delhi have been a part too. Even before the Yamuna meets with the Ganges at Prayag near Allahabad in the state of Uttar Pradesh it leaves its own lasting contribution on the highly fertile alluvial Yamuna-Ganges Doab region. From its origin till it meets with the

Ganges at Prayag the Yamuna flows through a number of states including Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Delhi too.

Of all the factors, all the elements both human as well as natural which have shaped, carved, defined and re-defined the history and the façade of this beautiful city, Delhi probably owes the most to its biggest and oldest patron, the Yamuna. Within the boundaries of Delhi, Yamuna flows for a stretch of 22 kilometres with its width varying from 1.5 kilometres to 3 kilometres. The river flows from the Wazirabad region of Delhi till Okhla barrage and covers almost 7% of the total landmass of Delhi. Apart from the obvious life sustaining elements which the Yamuna offers to the human settlements along it, the river itself is of great religious significance to the Hindu community. Hindu mythology describes this great water body as the daughter of Surya, the Sun God and sister of Yama who is regarded as the God of death. The river finds mention in various religious texts and is closely associated with a number of religious mythologies and episodes from the ancient past. Hindu devotees believe the waters of Yamuna are a manifestation of the powers in heaven which renders these waters to be pure and blessed with the power of absolving anyone of their sins once they take a dip in these holy waters.



Thousands of people and families living along these ghats depend on the Yamuna for their everyday chores from laundry to washing.



Families have lived along these ghats for generations; in more ways than one these ghats have shaped their beings and their everyday lives.



The ghats come to life with the first light of dawn over the horizon.

In the city of Delhi, there are 32 ghats in the Yamuna Bazaar area of old Delhi spread across 500 meters along the bank of the Yamuna River. These ghats are together known as Yamuna Ghat and for their identification are numbered serially from 1 to 32. Among these 32 embankments currently 16 are operational which see a flurry of day to day activities unfolding on their steps. Apart from these ghats some of the other notable ghats along the bank of Yamuna in the city of Delhi are the Nigambodh Ghat, the Kudsia Ghat and the Ram Ghat near Wazirabad. The ghats along the bank of Yamuna have a life and soul of their own. Some of these ghats more than a few centuries or even older have witnessed all the ups and downs this great city has been through, these ghats silently rejoiced with the rest of the city as spells of prosperity showered its streets and alleys, the same ghats quietly endured the horrors of plundering troops as the regimes changed and now maintaining the same dignified silence stares into the rather interesting future full of promises and potential that lies ahead in the journey of this great city. Every stone in the steps of these ghats carries in its heart stories from eras long forgotten, the waters they lead up to hold in their abyss secrets from the cities forgotten past, a lot has changed around these waters which even today carefully preserves the soul of this city and still nurtures it with the love and care of a mother with the promise of doing so for many more centuries to come.

What is it with the rivers across the world which attracted human settlements to swarm along their banks? The answer is simple-water, one of the principle ingredients of nature which is the key to sustaining any kind of life form. The waters of these rivers along with the never ending resources they carry with them shape the future of humans and animals alike across the globe. However these waters and these rivers are some of the indomitable forces of nature. Taming them and harnessing them was a crucial piece of this puzzle. In order to achieve those objectives human beings came up with this ingenious method of building certain structures along the banks of the rivers to gain easy access to the treasure trove which lied in their waters. A series of steps usually made of concrete or stones leading up to the waters of large rivers, or lakes or even ponds are a common sight across India as well as other parts of the world. In India these steps or the man-made embankments are commonly known as “ghats”. The ghats provide easy access to the much coveted water and other resources of a river or other water bodies and are usually used for various purposes ranging from fishing, cleaning; performing religious ceremonies even the last rites of the deceased.



Among the many purposes the ghats serve transforming themselves into early morning trading centres for small time fruit and vegetable vendors is one of them.



For four months from late October till early February the ghats welcome a different kind of visitors when the Siberian seagulls make these ghats their winter homes to escape the bitterly cold and harsh northern winters.



Against the backdrop of such beautiful setting even mundane daily activities carry with them an element of aesthetics.



Devotees gather along the ghats and wade into the sacred water of the Yamuna to offer their prayers to the Sun God on the auspicious occasion of Chhath puja.

The bodybuilders locally known as the “pahelwans” gather in these akharas at the stroke of dawn and devote themselves for the next hour or so at achieving a strong and healthy body. Devoid of any fancy equipment or plush setting these muddy open air gymnasiums are possibly as old as the ghats themselves, their ways are ancient and rather simple yet no one can doubt their effectiveness which is evident from the muscular hugely built men wrestling with each other on the muddy floors of these akharas. Small business commitments are also taken care of along these ghats. For the small time vegetable or fruit vendors these concrete embankments along this mighty river turn into their workplaces during the early hours of the morning. These supplies tend to the needs of the families living along these ghats where by early morning the kitchens spring to life. The sanctity of Yamuna is much revered among the Hindus, as a result of which the ghats of Yamuna witness various rites of different religious ceremonies being performed on their steps. The most notable one being the celebrations related to the “Chhath Puja”. Among a certain section of people over the past few decade Chhath puja, a religious festival dedicated to the Sun God and his wife has metamorphosed into one of the biggest festivals of the year. On the occasion of Chhath puja the Yamuna Ghats see huge congregations of people early in the

An average day in the heart of Delhi along the banks of Yamuna especially along these ghats witnesses a flurry of activities from dawn till dusk. Life along these ghats or embankments begins early, even before the first rays of the sun sweep across the steps leading up to these waters. Devotees from different parts of the city visit these ghats on a regular basis to offer their prayers to the Sun God even before he peeks out of the eastern horizon. The river which itself is considered sacred by the Hindus too receive a fair share of devotees, some of whom braving the elements of nature even during the cold winter months take a dip in these holy waters to begin their lives on a new day on a fresh note free of their sin riddled past. The human settlements which have sprung up along these ghats or embankments are still heavily dependent on the waters of the Yamuna too carry out some of their daily chores such as cleaning or washing or even cooking. For those with a slightly healthier bent of mind, the “akharas” or the traditional mud wrestling rings are a common sight along these banks.



The ghats and the akharas along them have been the traditional training grounds for the wrestlers locally known as the “pahelwans” who hone their skills in these mud rings along the ghats.

morning along the edge of the holy river. These devotees line up the steps of these ghats in huge numbers to offer their prayers to the Sun God and take a holy dip in the sacred waters of the Yamuna. Keeping in mind the scale of this festival and the sentiments of those involved with it, the authorities took measures to provide the ghats with some long overdue facelift recently. Necessary security arrangements were also made to ensure the thousands of devotees who had gathered along these ghats had a safe and comfortable experience. Amidst these regular and some annual occurrences the ghats remain mute spectators to a rather morbid aspect of human life, death. The Nigambodh Ghat is the oldest burning ghat along the bank of Yamuna in the city of Delhi, where the funeral rites of Hindus are performed. The burning pyres lined against one another are the most dominant site at the Nigambodh Ghat. Amidst such flurry of activities from dawn to dusk, the river Yamuna flows quietly as it has been doing for thousands of years. The river which saw this mighty city develop around it, the river which has often been described as the lifeline of Delhi, quite ironically is gasping for life now. Dumping of human waste has robbed the 22 kilometre odd stretch of the river across Delhi of any aquatic life. Devoid of any aquatic eco-system the river has sometimes been described as a dead river within the confines of Delhi.

Experts are of the opinion that the present number of sewage treatment plants across Delhi is not sufficient the amount of human waste the city produces every day. There is a serious need for an increase in the number of such plants in order to curb the amount of pollutants and toxins contaminating the waters of the Yamuna. Apart from the human waste the industrial waste and toxins from the industries and factories in the region are major factors polluting these waters. The combined effect of this pollution goes far beyond than just affecting the river’s eco-system. While the river have been robbed off its precious resources, its ecology, the humans dependent on the river have been affected as well, and are getting affected on a daily basis. The amounts of toxins contaminating these waters are affecting the health of those thousands of people who make use of these waters for their daily needs. Often blind faith stands in the way of dissuading them from using these waters. Even though the appearance of the water and the debris and sewage floating all over it give away the quality rather the lack of it, people are often driven by the strong belief that the sanctity of these waters should not be questioned by the mere sight of a few debris floating around. It goes without saying drinking this water or using it for other purposes eventually lead to chronic and complicated ailments. With the ever growing levels of pollution in the waters of the Yamuna, the government of India with a view of tackling this problem launched the much ambitious Yamuna Action Plan (YAP) in 1993 in collaboration with Japan. Having completed the first two phases, YAP-III was introduced at an estimated cost of 1,600 crore rupees with emphasis on Delhi in 2013 which was completed by 2015. In addition to this some other measures have also been taken to clean up the waters of the Yamuna. For instance, the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) has proposed a Sewerage Master Plan 2031, according to which,

As life flows along the ghats, these ghats witness the same life coming to an end too. The last rites of the departed according to Hindu ritual and tradition are performed along the ghats.



areas in Delhi without proper sewerage system will be intricately connected by laying down of a network of sewage pipelines which in turn will transfer the wastes to the nearby sewage treatment plants instead of dumping them in the Yamuna. To further facilitate this model newer sewage treatment plants are being set up in various locations across the city. Along with the government several NGO's are working in tandem to raise general awareness among the people, several precautionary measures such as ban on construction of new barrages, roads, metro and railway bridges, embankments near Yamuna and identifying landfill sites to dump garbage have also been proposed. With more and more people and agencies coming forward and joining hands in the quest to save this great waterbody there is every hope that in the near future we will be able to turn the tide and elevate the waters of this river to their former glory. If all these steps are implemented with proper vision and efficiency the daunting task of cleaning up this massive stretch of water can be achieved with rather ease. The ghats of Yamuna have been silent witnesses to a lot that has transpired around them, if these steps of stones could speak they would narrate nothing pains them more than the slow death their beloved river has been subjected to over time. It is about time, those voices, even though imaginary be heard, for the river and its ghats will always be a part of our being, and we cannot afford to lose either one of them.



About the Photographer

A self-taught passionate photographer, especially in capturing candid street moments, architectural life and of travel stories domain, Mr. Navin Vatsa is a combination of versatile personalities. He has his Master's Degree in Computer Applications and taught computers to graduate and post graduate students for over 9 years. He also served in Jagannath University, Jaipur as Joint Registrar for 7 years, and now from last 3 years he has devoted his full time to his in-born Art, Photography. So with the experience of teaching, administration and art, he has the ability to visualize and implement the creative ideas in photography to complete his compositions which tell some unique stories. Photography is like meditation for him. He loves to compose in colors and monochrome both. The monochrome versions of his photographs have the power to spread colors in the mind of his viewers.

He has been awarded and recognized by various International and National organizations of repute such as National Geographic, UNESCO, Sony World, Sony India, Inspiro India, Asian Photography & imaging magazine (Nov 2016, Dec 2016 with complete portfolio, February 2017 issues), Creative Image Magazine, Heritage youth Foundation Delhi, Camarena Academy (Best photographer of the year 2016 and awarded by Sir Raghu Rai for the same). One of his photographs was published by Sony India in its "Annual Calendar 2016".

Recently in April-May 2017 in "SONY World Photography Award" one of his photographs in "Travel" category got commended by the juries and was placed within the top 50 entries out of 105,692 submissions from 182 countries and exhibited at the prestigious Somerset House in London from 21st April to 7th May, 2017.

He is one of the mentors and admins of one of the largest Facebook Photography groups, Camarena Academy. His Art work can also be accessed through:

National Geographic account:

<http://yourshot.nationalgeographic.com/profile/1294847/>

Facebook account: www.facebook.com/navin.vatsa/

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/navinvatsa/>



The Last of the Sonpur Elephants

by Manabendra Gupta

Considered by many to be the world's largest cattle fair, the Sonpur cattle fair organised annually in the eastern Indian state of Bihar has been hogging the limelight for many years now primarily due to the largest item it stacks up in its inventory, the mighty elephants. For centuries the trading grounds of Sonpur's cattle fair have attracted animal traders from some of the remotest corners of Asia. The relatively small town of Sonpur lies barely 30 kilometres from Patna, the capital city of Bihar at the confluence of two rivers, Ganges and Gandak. The animal fair which has given this otherwise quaint little town a distinct identity of its own is held annually on the occasion of Karthik Purnima- the most auspicious full moon of the year in the month of November according to the Hindu calendar. The event usually lasts for a month or so and unfolds over a sprawling 500 acres of land. In order to trace the origin of such a unique event it is absolutely imperative to shed a light on the history of this region for in those anecdotes lies embedded the root of this unique spectacle. Today's Patna, the bustling capital city of Bihar was once the bastion of the Mauryan Empire under emperor Chandragupta Maurya who ruled his vast kingdom occupying almost the entire subcontinent from Patna, better known as Pataliputra under the rule of the Mauryan Empire. It is believed Chandragupta Maurya's vast conquests



For people from the neighbouring villages these boats act as one of the primary modes of transport across the river.

Like the fair grounds the ghats of the rivers too witness a flurry of all kind of human activities during this period.



swathing the length and breadth of the Indian sub-continent could be attributed to his mighty garrison of approximately 10,000 well trained war elephants in face of whom the enemy's forces were of no match. In order to oversee the functioning of one his finest and most potent weapons the emperor set up a market where the finest elephants from all over Asia were handpicked by the Mauryan Empire and trained and turned into lethal war machines. Thus Chandragupta's quest to build an army of these beasts laid the foundation stone for this event which has been going on for centuries in these grounds of Sonpur. However with time the fair evolved in its own manner and was no longer restricted to the exchanges of elephants alone. The fair grounds through centuries have been hot beds for the buying and selling of various farm animals such as horses, donkeys, mules, buffaloes, cattle as well as pets in the form of different dog breeds in more recent times. In spite of such a vast conglomeration of animals up for sale, the elephants have always remained, both literally as well as figuratively the biggest attraction of Sonpur cattle fair. In fact there is a separate section in one of the grounds known as the "Haathi Bazaar" dedicated exclusively for the trading of elephants. These elephants, whose predecessors were the might and pride of the Mauryan Empire, who were much coveted by some of the iconic rulers of India, the likes of Mughal



In 2004 the trading of elephants was banned across India, since then elephants have been displayed in Sonpur for the tourists not with the purpose of buying or selling them. One of the handlers decorates his elephant before presenting her in front of the eagerly waiting crowd.



Tending to these giants is no task for the faint hearted and these hard working mahouts have their hands full at all times.



Elephants are social animals and often spend hours socializing with each other. These two seem to be doing exactly the same as their handlers prepare to feed them.

emperor Akbar and Lord Clive of the East Indian Company, still enjoy a significantly higher degree of status than the other animals. Apart from the obvious business aspects, there is one other reason which attracts thousands of people to the Sonpur cattle fair. The famous Hariharnath temple of Sonpur witnesses thousands of devotees every year who throng in huge numbers to offer their prayers and cleanse their souls by taking a dip in the holy waters of the Ganges. Needless to say these devotees having responded to their inner spiritual calling head off for the fair grounds to catch a glimpse of the magnificent animals at display over there. In some sense the spiritual history and the animal trade background of Sonpur are intertwined, which only adds to this occasion every year. The winds of change over the years have swept across the grounds of Sonpur too, and possibly resulted in the biggest upheaval in 2004 when with a view of stricter enforcement of the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 elephant trading across India was made illegal. This was a landmark moment in the history of the fair, with many fearing the event will sooner rather than later meet with an untimely demise if robbed of its major attraction the elephants. However those fears were soon brushed aside when despite trading being made illegal the authorities and traders were allowed to display captive elephants to the tourists and visitors. In fact the 2004 edition of the fair saw a greater number of elephants than the 2001 edition even though elephant trading was made illegal in 2004. The presence of these magnificent giants ensured the charm of this event lived on among the thousands of tourists and visitors who would throng these fair grounds in huge numbers to catch a glimpse of these gentle giants from close quarters. Cashing in on the star status of the elephants the Bihar Government was quick to identify the potential of this spectacle and has been for quite some time proactively promoting the event as part of the state's many tourism attractions. While the animals, particularly the elephants remain the biggest draw in the Sonpur cattle fair, there are quite a few other attractions to keep the visitors engaged. Every year hundreds of shops line up against each other in these grounds. These shops deal a wide range of items ranging from garments, furniture, toys, agricultural equipment to even jewellery.

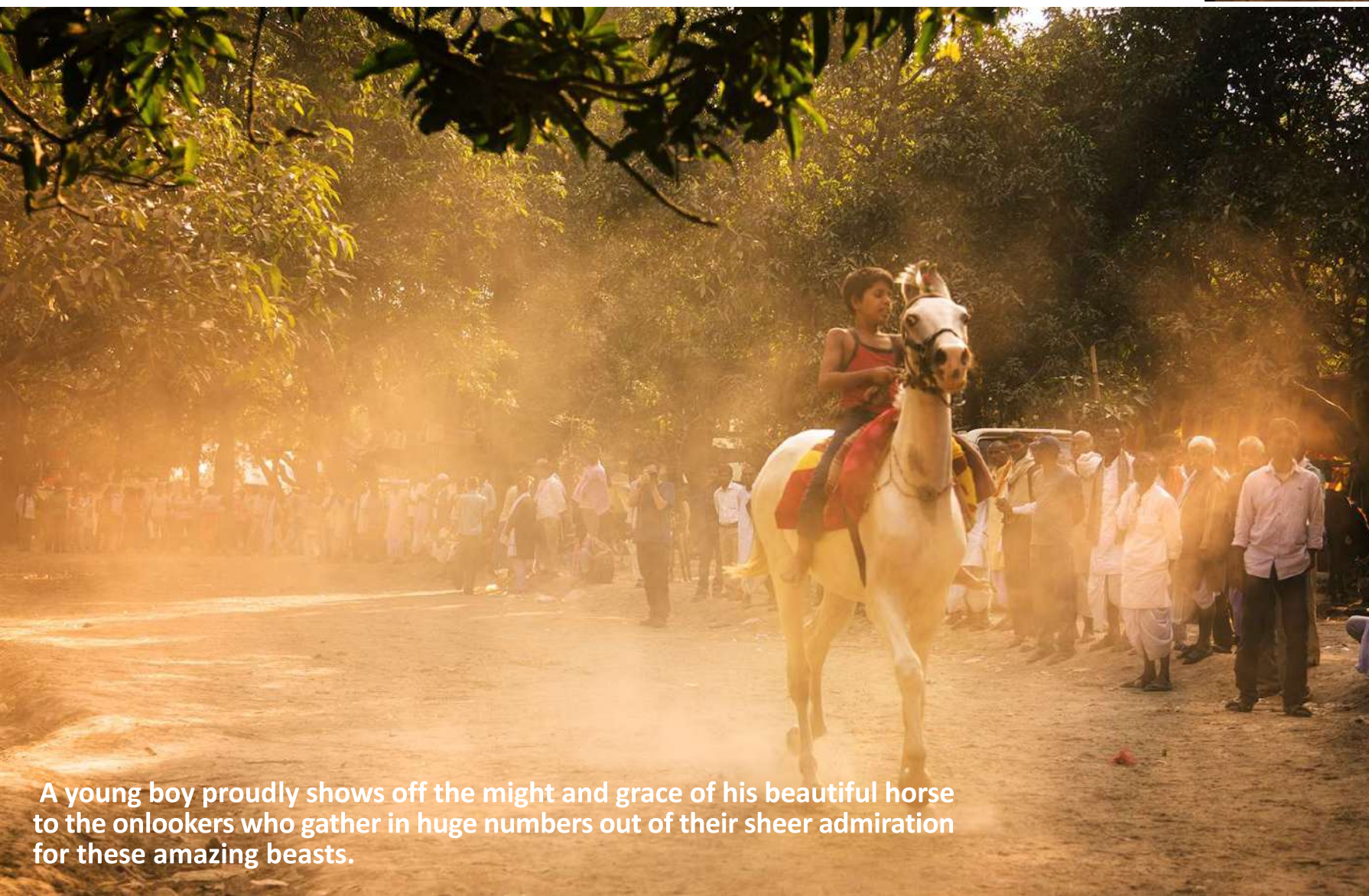


A mahout stands proudly with his elephant in the background during one of the previous editions of Sonpur cattle fair.

These shops and their products in fact provide a glimpse into the local culture too with every piece of garment or traditional weapons and furniture carrying with itself little pieces of this region's ancient past. However all is not well with this ancient event. There are several worrying signs looming large in the horizon and one cannot be entirely sure about the future of these grounds with the dark clouds hovering over them. It all began with the dwindling elephant numbers in the iconic Haathi Bazaar. There has been a steady decline in the number of elephants in the cattle fair over the past decade which plunged into the abyss with not a single one to be found in the 2017 edition of this event. The numbers were no less alarming last year which witnessed a mere 13 elephants to be exhibited. Traders who have been involved with this fair for decades now attribute this decline to the ban imposed on the trading of elephants. It becomes extremely difficult for the owners to display their animals without the purpose of selling or trading them since these giants by no means are low maintenance possessions.

The same number stood at 354 in 2004 even after the ban was imposed which also happens to be the last recorded instance when their numbers made it to the three figure mark. This in turn has severely affected the tourism industry associated with this place and this event. Many foreign tourists would crowd these premises with the sole agenda of catching the glimpse of an elephant from close range and even witness an elephant feeding or taking a bath, which incidentally happen to be some of the major attractions of this fair as listed in the travel brochures of many tour agencies in this region. It goes without saying the gradual and rather unprecedented disappearing act pulled off by the elephants certainly left the tourists especially the foreign tourists with a sense of disappointment of giant proportions. Like the Haathi Bazaar, the Gai Bazaar or the cow market once famous for its huge collections of cows, oxen, buffalo too bore a forlorn look. According to some reports the numbers of cows, buffaloes and oxen have gone down too with a significant number among those taking part in the fair remaining unsold. The Ghoda Bazaar or the horse market is yet to go down the same way as the Haathi Bazaar or the Gai Bazaar although it comes as a little consolation to the old timers who unanimously believe the dwindling numbers are just the beginning

The Ghoda Bazaar or the horse market is a bustling neighbourhood covered in a perennial dusty haze kicked up by the hooves of thousands of these beautiful animals.



of the end. Of all the animals horses did brisk business in the recently concluded edition of this fair and seem to be strutting along steadily for the upcoming edition in a year's time. However the veterans involved with animal trade and this fair believe it is not possible for the horse alone to carry the legacy of this event forward, more so in a time when horses are kept as status symbols or for recreational purposes and cater to only a handful of the society who enjoy the necessary resources. The dog traders too are meeting the same fate as their elephant and cattle counterparts. In a desperate attempt to find takers among foreign tourists the government came up with the idea of setting up of luxurious Swiss cottages in a joint feature with a private organisation. The luxury of the Swiss cottages although failed to make up for the disappointingly low turnout of animals and eventually managed to find only a handful of takers. Priced at 4,000 rupees a day the future of these luxurious settlements seems to be in similar doldrums as the very grounds upon which they have been set up.

A young boy proudly shows off the might and grace of his beautiful horse to the onlookers who gather in huge numbers out of their sheer admiration for these amazing beasts.



For the thirty odd days of the fair these grounds and these makeshift enclosures become home to the traders and their animals alike.



While the animals take centre stage in Sonpur the banks of the rivers witness a huge gathering of devotees, some of whom are hard to miss.

Faced with such overwhelming odds the future of arguably Asia's largest cattle fair hangs precariously on the edge. Most of the traders who have been associated with this event for decades believe the animals will soon become a thing of past on these grounds. It is hard not to believe them. The changes can be felt and seen everywhere. What once used to teem with animals is gradually turning into another run off the mill fair event with amusement park styled rides, Bollywood inspired dance theatres which many would argue have a tendency of flirting with sleaze, even illegal local liquor bars where the footfall never dwindles. Many involved blame the lack of patronage they receive from the authorities as well as their indifference as opposed to that enjoyed by the other prominent Pushkar animal fair in the state of Rajasthan as the major reason for the gradual decline of Sonpur cattle fair. While some believe animals no longer play a major role in our lives particularly in the farming sector as compared to the situation 20-30 odd year ago. The reasons may be varied, they can be doubted, even debated upon, yet the sad truth remains the once famous animal fair of Sonpur, the animals have been reduced to nothing more than ageing superstars clinging on to the last remaining bits for their precious few remaining moments under the spotlight.

The holy waters at the confluence of the Ganges and Gandak offer the devotees the chance of cleansing their souls and getting rid of their sins.



About the Photographer



Manabendra Gupta, a self-taught photographer and a businessman from the city of Durgapur in West Bengal discovered his love for photography four years back. Since then he has been on a constant journey to discover and re-discover himself as a photographer while honing his photography skills and developing a thorough understanding of the nuances of this subject. A well-travelled person, he wishes to spend more time in the company of his camera and take it along with his on many more of his future journeys in days to come.

The Elusive Kings of Pantanal

by Neeraj Bantia

Jaguars, often mistaken for leopards will undoubtedly qualify as one of the natural world's classic case of mistaken identity. This is mainly due to the significant similarities this species share with their much more common and widely distributed and rather versatile cousins the leopards. The leopards far more widely distributed are excellent at adapting themselves to diverse eco-systems ranging from rainforests to arid plains. On the other hand the jaguar over time has carved a specific niche for itself in the natural world in the humid tropical rainforests along the amazon basin in South America. While Amazon hogs all the limelight in terms of being the jaguar's lair, the Pantanal remains the best place on earth to observe a jaguar in the wild. The dense foliage of the Amazon provides the perfect cover for these big cats, keeping its regal resident hidden away from the



prying eyes of the outside world. The Pantanal on the other hand takes pride in showing off its most celebrated occupant and the open marshes and the banks of its wetlands provide the much coveted glimpses into the rather secretive lives of these amazing big cats.

Located in the heart of South America, the world's largest wetland, the Pantanal is almost the size of Britain. Most of this amazing natural wonder lies in Brazil although neighbouring Paraguay and Bolivia lay claim to their fair share of these wetlands. The Pantanal was declared a World Heritage Site in 2000. The Pantanal is a seasonal floodplain which gets filled to the brim and spills over during the torrential downpour every year. As the rain subsides so does the level of water leaving behind in its wake giant pools of water scattered all over every single one of which turns into a hotbed of activities attracting countless species ranging from huge flocks of wader birds to the communities of cattle herders in this region who direct the movement of their herds based on the richness of the pastures and the availability of water. The Pantanal eco-system is one of the most diverse and thriving eco-systems in the world. The Pantanal is a safe haven to some of the most endangered and rarest species on the planet. The list includes the highly elusive giant river otter, the South American tapir, the capybara and



The sandy river banks of the Pantanal are the best places to spot these amazing creatures.

the caimans which have made a stunning comeback in the marshes of the Pantanal and presently boast of a healthy population in the waters of the Pantanal. The jaguar's present range extends from South-western United States and Mexico across much of Central America and south to Paraguay and northern Argentina.

The Pantanal has very few people and no towns within. Distances are so great and ground transport so poor that people get around in small airplanes and motorboats; car travel is restricted by the seasons. The principal access road that runs deep into the Pantanal is the Transpantaneira Road, This 147km dirt road which ends at Porto Jofre consists of 122 small wooden bridges and houses only 17 lodges during the dry season, since roughly 80% of the Pantanal floodplains are submerged during the rainy seasons. In the Paraguay River portion of the Pantanal, water levels rise between two meters to five meters seasonally. Annual rainfall over the flood basin is recorded between 1,000 and 1,500mm with most rainfall occurring between mid-October to March. The months from June to mid-October are great for wildlife viewing.

At the first glance a jaguar seems to closely resemble the leopard with both species exhibiting similar colours and rosettes on their fur, although the rosettes on a jaguar are of different pattern.

Overhanging branches or tree trunks provide the jaguars with the perfect vantage point to scan the surroundings for any prey.



Jaguars display a natural affinity towards water. They are equally at home in water and prey upon some of the formidable water residents like the caiman or the mighty anacondas.



These solitary creatures regularly patrol and mark their territories in order to ward off any intruder.

The capybara deserves a special mention among the rare species of animals found in the Pantanal. This herbivore which can weigh up to 60 kg or more happens to be the largest rodent in the world.



The waters of the Pantanal teem with caimans and the sight of them basking in the early morning sun along the banks is an extremely common occurrence in this wilderness.



The other major difference between the two species lies in their dimensions. The jaguar is usually larger and sturdier with a significantly large head. Quite interestingly the behavioural and habitat characteristics of the jaguar are closer to those of a tiger which also includes this cat's affinity towards water and the ability to swim across large stretches of water and even hunting in it. While dense rainforest is the Jaguar's preferred habitat, they range across a variety of forested and open terrains. They are the third-largest feline species after the tiger and the lion, but the largest in the Americas. The jaguar is largely an opportunistic, apex predator at the top of the food chain in the Pantanal. They have an exceptionally powerful bite, even relative to the other big cats; they bite directly through the skull of their prey between the ears to deliver a fatal bite to the brain. Masters at stalking, jaguars prefer to sneak close within the range of their prey before making the final dash. The jaguar attacks from cover and usually from a target's blind spot with a quick pounce, they are even known to use the elevated platforms the trees provide for setting up an ambush or as a perfect vantage point for scanning the surroundings for a potential meal. Like all big cats, the jaguar is an obligate carnivore, feeding only on meat. Being at the top of the food chain they enjoy the luxury of having a long listed menu on their tables which includes deer, capybaras, tapirs and sometimes even the mighty anacondas fall

prey to those powerful jaws. However the one thing which sets these big cats apart is their remarkable ability to bring down another apex predator of this region, the caiman on a regular basis. Over time, these big cats have mastered the craft of sneaking up to an unsuspecting caiman basking along the banks and crushing the life out of it with one fatal bite to the skull. Jaguars from the Pantanal region are the largest of their species; they weigh about 110kg to 150kgs, similar to a Javan or a Sumatran tiger in size. Like most cats, the jaguar is solitary outside mother-cub groups. Adults generally meet only to court and mate. A female's territory may range from 25-40 square km in size and may overlap other female Jaguar's occasionally, but these animals usually try to avoid one another. A male Jaguar's range covers roughly twice as much area of a female, varying in size with the availability of game and space, and almost never overlaps with another male's domain. There could be several females within the territory of a resident male, in fact during one such trip I experienced the rare privilege of spotting three different females within a radius of 0.5 square kilometres. Like other big cats jaguars use scrape marks and urine to mark their territories. These little pointers are crucial in communicating with other members of their species and more often

The Pantanal is home to some spectacular and rare bird species, the bare faced curassow being one of them.



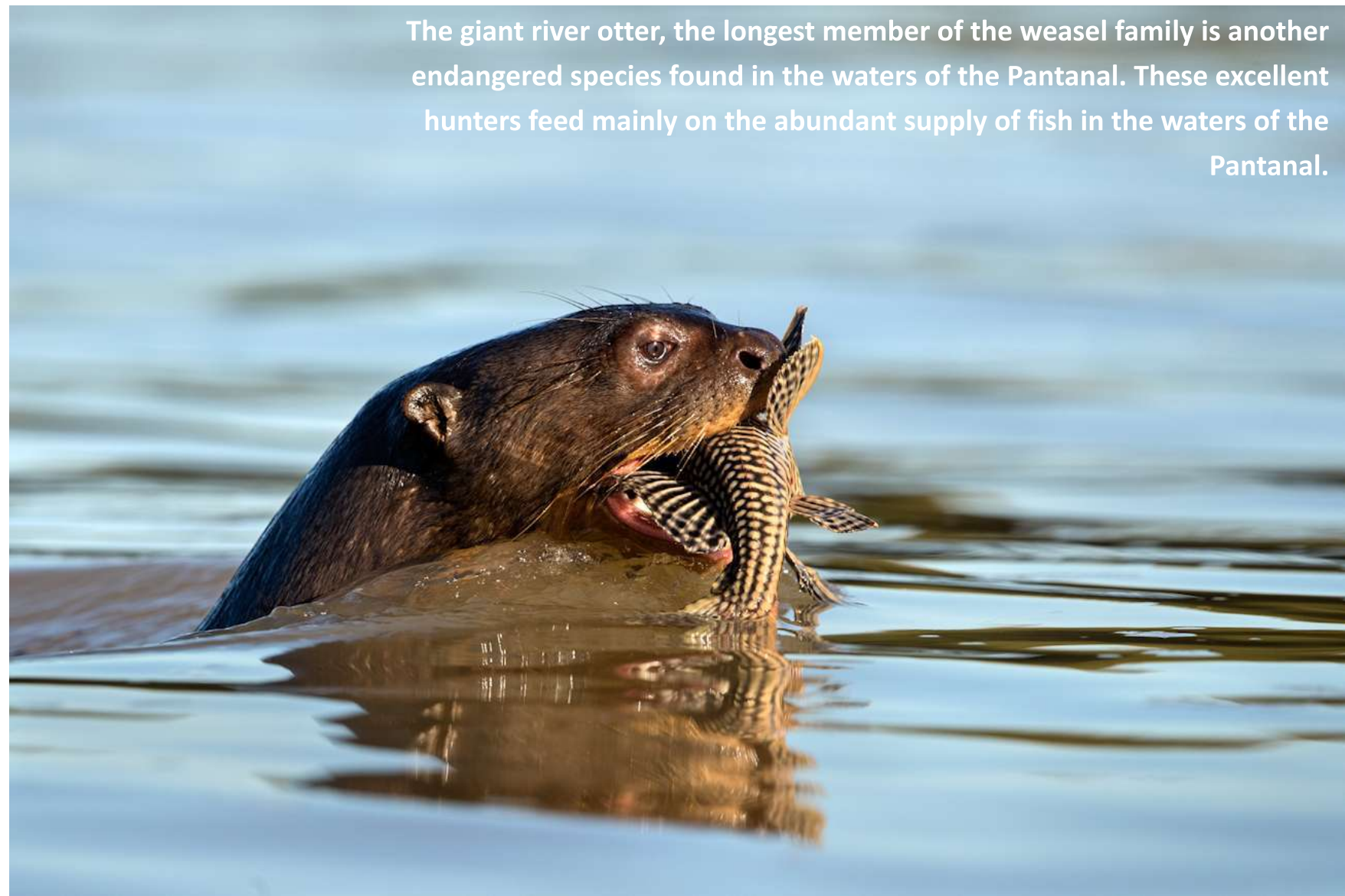
Everybody is a part of the eternal cycle of life and death in this vast wilderness, the dead body of a yellow anaconda floats in the waters of the Pantanal.



Capybaras feature prominently in the menu of caimans; this capybara is well aware of that fact and keeps a safe distance from the caiman basking along the banks of the river.

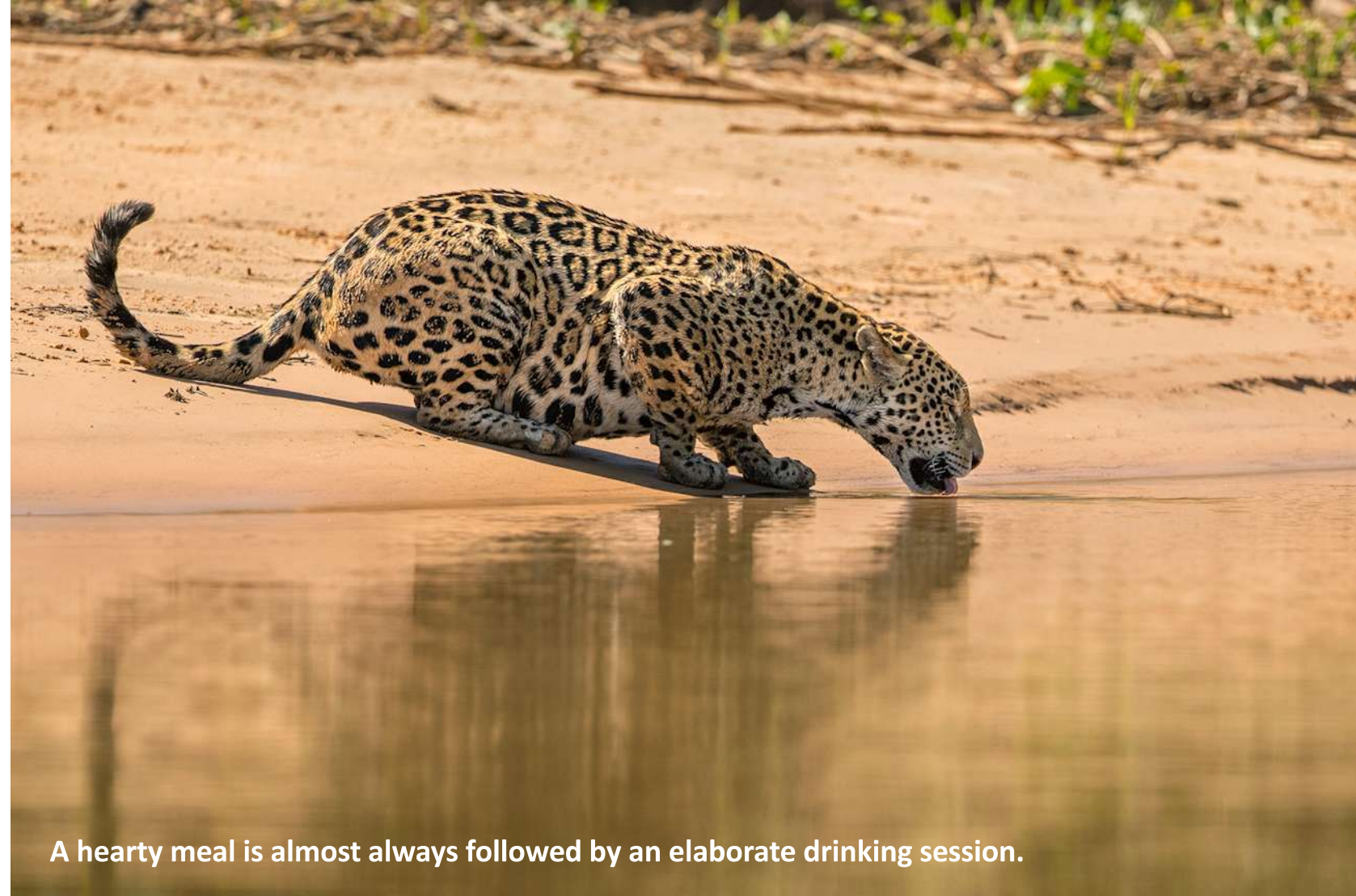


The giant river otter, the longest member of the weasel family is another endangered species found in the waters of the Pantanal. These excellent hunters feed mainly on the abundant supply of fish in the waters of the Pantanal.

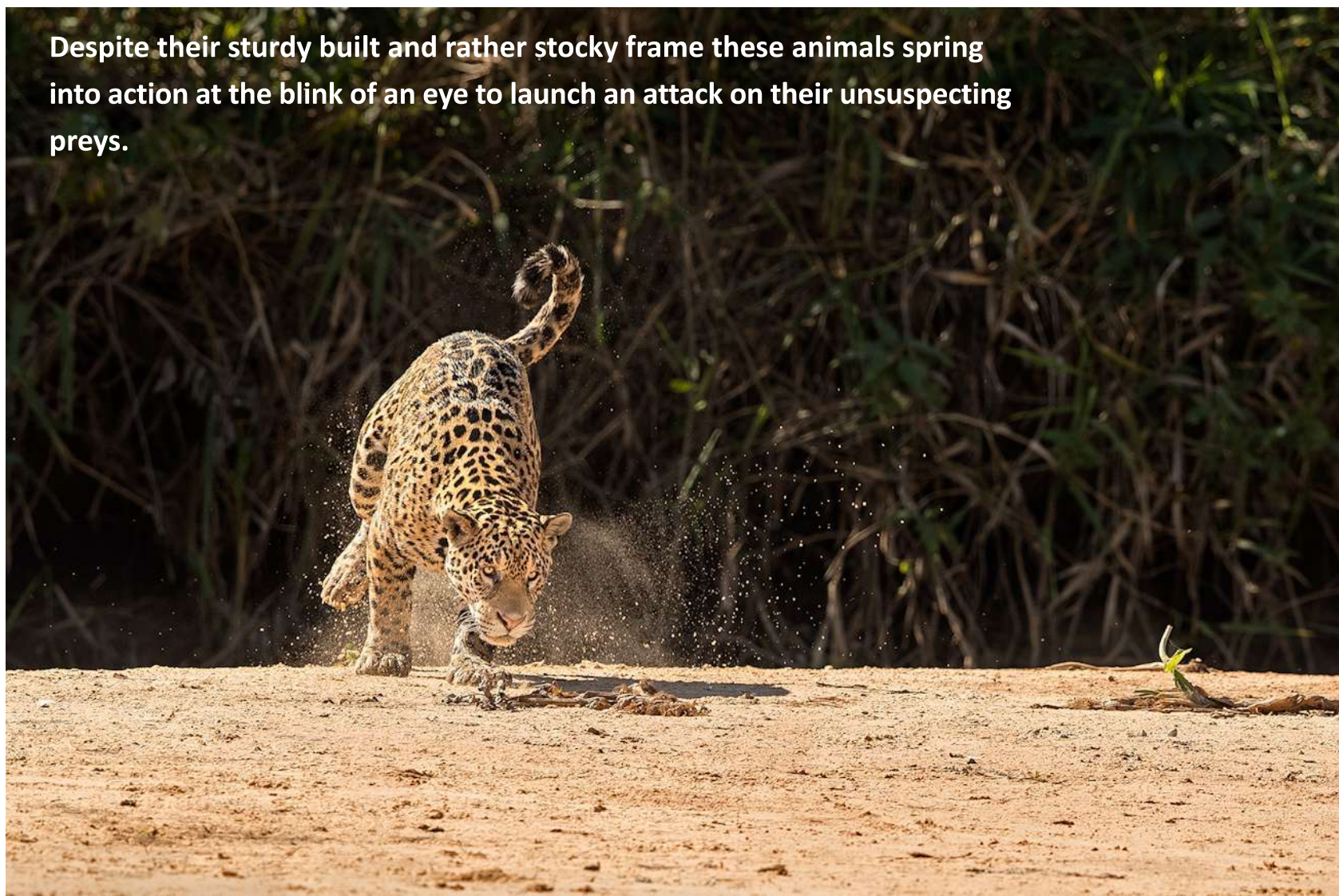


than not play a significant role in thwarting any impending conflicts peacefully. The Pantanal is an unparalleled universe. The diverse biodiversity prevalent in this seasonally wet world can't be compared with anything else. Having spent almost all its time playing second fiddle to the much more celebrated Amazon rainforests the Pantanal slowly but steadily is carving a niche in the hearts and souls of wildlife enthusiast and adventure seekers. All roads leading up to the Pantanal comes to a grinding halt at Porto Jofre from where the stretches of waterways become the primary channels of communication. Early mornings in the Pantanal bring a noticeable chill in the air with them, as the day matures the misty haze of the early morning is replaced by clear skies and hot and humid afternoons. It is the setting sun though which truly unveils the amazing beauty of the Pantanal landscape. With the descending darkness the Pantanal comes to life but not before it unveils itself to its admirers in its full glory bathed in the golden hue of the twilight sun. However there are signs and hints veiled in the majestic wilderness of the Pantanal which undoubtedly have the potential to cast a spell of doom upon the wetlands of the Pantanal and its rare and endangered residents. Lack of protected cover with even less than 4% of this entire wilderness under protection means the abundance of

illegal activities including poaching in the lesser protected parts of the Pantanal. Unchecked and unrestricted mining activities along the Pantanal have contributed significantly towards further compounding these threats. The major consequences of such un-monitored mining activities are water pollution where the waters of the Pantanal get contaminated by toxic mining by-products. Quite disturbingly in one the recent studies conducted by naturalists and scientists high levels of mercury was found in the fur of the resident jaguars of the Pantanal. The role the mining industries had to play was further established by comparing the findings in the jaguars towards the south of the Pantanal, which revealed low traces of mercury due the lack of mining activities. Traces of high levels of mercury have also been found in the fish dwelling in these waters and even birds like the kingfishers or other raptors who feed on them. Untreated domestic sewage from the neighbouring human settlements along these waters too contributes significantly towards polluting these waters. Another major concern which threatens the future of this region is the loss of biodiversity. The IUCN lists at least 50 species found in this region in the threatened or endangered categories.



A hearty meal is almost always followed by an elaborate drinking session.



Despite their sturdy built and rather stocky frame these animals spring into action at the blink of an eye to launch an attack on their unsuspecting preys.

The Pantanal is not as densely populated with vegetation as the Amazon, as a result of which the banks along the rivers provide the perfect unobstructed view of jaguars walking down them.



The list includes some of the rarest animals on the planet such as the giant river otter, giant armadillo, giant anteater, tapirs, maned wolves and the jaguars. A lot of factors have worked in unison towards this unfortunate development. The primary ones being habitat destruction, poaching, over-fishing and the illegal pet trade which thrives on the export of some of the exotic creatures found in this region. Although big-game hunting is illegal in the Pantanal yet poachers make use of those parts of the Pantanal which are less protected. Some of the exotic bird species found in this region fetch a huge amount of money in the illegal pet trade which lure those involved in this murky business to capture birds such as the hyacinthine macaw, the blue and yellow macaw, the toucans which unfortunately become a part of a \$5 billion dollar business nexus thereby threatening the delicate balance of this mosaic eco-system.



In a jaguar's world defending one's own territory is a full time job, a carefree secluded bank of the river can within moments turn into a bloody battlefield where disputes over territories get settled in no subtle manner.

Despite being the third largest cat species in the world and blessed with incredibly powerful jaws, these animals are no warmongers, in fact they would go the extra yard to avoid any conflict. Baring their canines while letting out a snarl is a typical display of threat.



Quite remarkably in the wake of such adversities which have plagued this wonder of the natural world like so many others the Pantanal has done remarkably well. Due credit should be given to the concerned authorities as well who have been working tirelessly over a long period of time to bring a lot of species notably the jaguar from the brink of extinction back into the folds of Pantanal's enigmatic realms. A lot of the threats mentioned above still exist and continue to threaten the future of these wetlands. However they face a strong resistance in the form of an ever so determined natural world and its subjects as well as the local authorities who are

whole heartedly committed towards safeguarding the future of this amazing eco-system. One major step in this direction which many believe would play a crucial role in safeguarding the future of the Pantanal was the Pantanal Headwaters Defence Pact. This pact aims at establishing a perfect synergy between the civil society, the private sector as well as the public sector with a view of promoting a model of sustainable development in this region and conserve the waters of the rivers Rivers Jaurú, Sepotuba, Cabaçal and Paraguay, which together account for 30% of the waters of the Pantanal. Another aspect of this pact deals with the

regeneration of 23,000 hectares of forest cover lost through deforestation by planting more than 11 million saplings which in turn will reap the additional benefit of generating over 1,000 jobs. The positive outcomes from such developments are already there to be seen. The forty odd eco-friendly septic tanks which have been set up as part of the curriculum have successfully brought down the amount of human waste polluting the waters of the Pantanal as well as produce bio-fertilizers which have improved the quality of the produces by the farmers.

With the successful implementation of measures like this and further planning, there is every reason to be hopeful about

the future of the Pantanal and its inhabitants. This magnificent wetland has stood in all its glory for centuries braving and overcoming all the adversities which have come its way. It is unfair to subject this amazing natural wonder to such tumultuous times, hence the onus lies with us to do our bits in order to protect and preserve this diverse eco-system from extinction. If we all contribute in whichever little form we can together our collective efforts will ensure the setting sun over these vast wetlands will keep on entralling us for centuries to come.

The Pantanal is a place where rivers rule the landscape and boats like this one are the only mode of transport available.



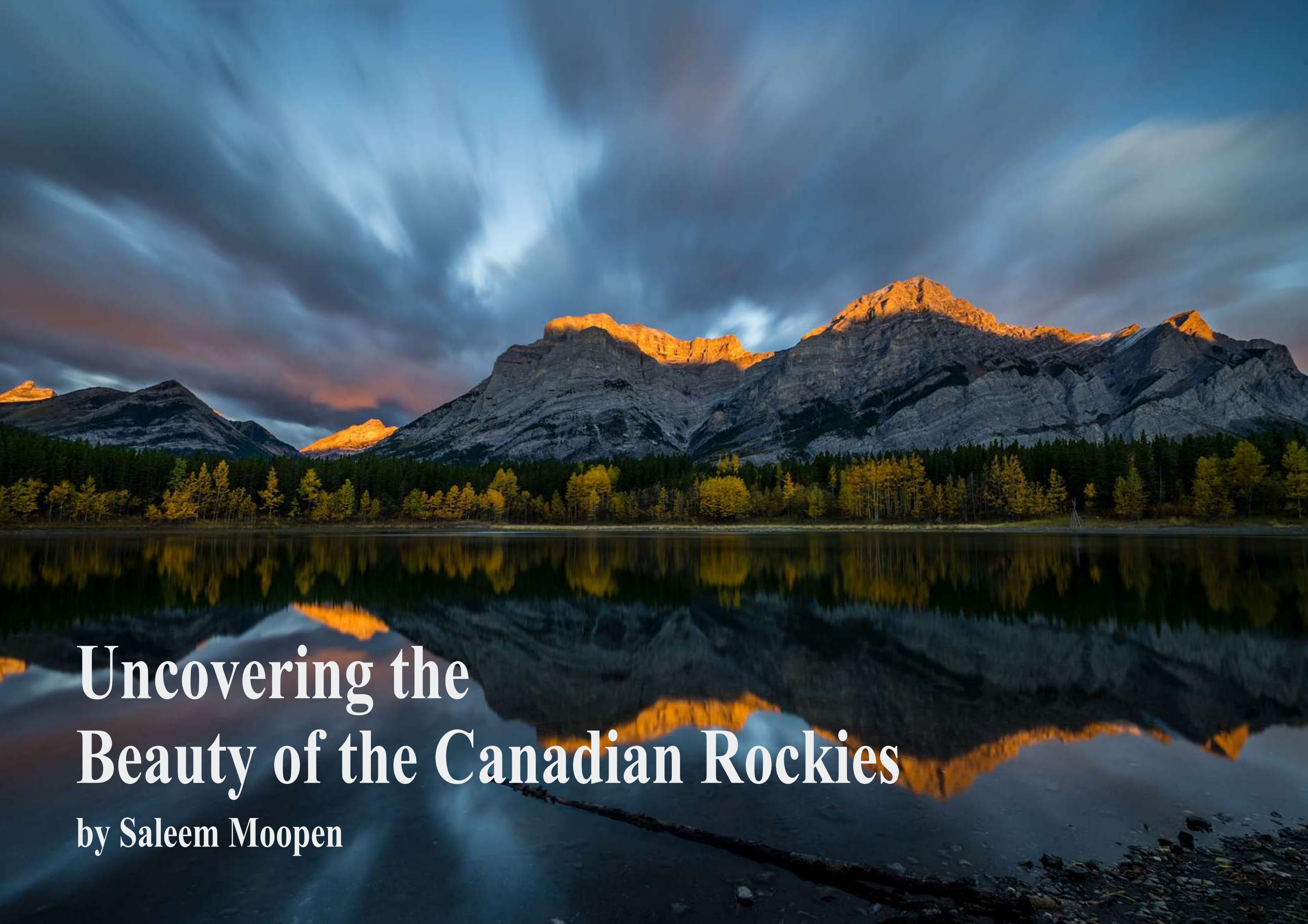


As night descends upon this vast wilderness, an array of species venture out of their dug outs, this tapir, a large herbivore is a typical resident of this ec-system.

About the Photographer



Neeraj Bantia is an entrepreneur by profession but at heart he remains a natural history and wildlife photographer. An avid traveler and a nature lover he has a special affection for big cats. His love and innate passion for wildlife have taken him to far away corners of the globe with the hope of witnessing the wild nature in its most unadulterated form. He has been documenting the wild world through his photographs for quite some time and his images and photo-stories have got published in some of the leading national newspapers and reputed wildlife magazines and journals all over the world.



Uncovering the Beauty of the Canadian Rockies

by Saleem Moopen

The numerous high peaks and ranges of the Canadian Rockies have for centuries been home to one of the most beautiful and picturesque drives on this planet. The drive through the Icefield Parkway in Canada linking Lake Louise with Jasper Lake can be without an iota of doubt rated as one of the most beautiful journeys on this planet. Rated as one of the top drives in the world by the National Geographic society, the Icefield Parkway is a 232 km stretch of double-lane highway winding along the Continental Divide through soaring rocky mountain peaks, icefields and vast sweeping valleys. The Icefields Parkways, known as Highway 93 North, offers spectacular sightseeing of pristine turquoise lakes, tumbling waterfalls, ancient glaciers and the Columbia Icefields. Each of these elements of nature is blessed with a surreal beauty of its own, each scene appears to be an assortment of nature's finest carefully curated by some master curator. The glacial lakes sport hues of blue and shades of turquoise almost impossible to find anywhere else and bound to challenge even the most imaginative of minds. Standing tall around these lakes as silent ancient sentinels are the snow-capped peaks, the slopes of which are gently wrapped in a blanket of emerald conifers. Amidst such surreal settings it is all but natural for the mind to drift away into a beautiful realm far beyond the confines of daily life into a place of joy and purity only to be brought back into the presence by the sound of the ever chirpy birds making the most of the summer season and the rhythmic ripple of water cascading down the hillsides. In other words this is nature at its very finest. It is hard to think of any other place on this planet where all the elements of nature join forces and work in tandem to produce scenes of such exquisite beauty. The Canadian Rockies would have to be the most visually spectacular regions in all of North America. In September 2016 I had the opportunity to drive through this incredibly beautiful landmass, and through the course of my travel through these mountains I explored some of nature's most beautiful sights and sounds. It was hard to believe these mountains were a part of the same planet. This journey in more ways than one encapsulated the grandeur of nature when it is at its finest.



By late September the Canadian Rockies turn into a palate of Autumn colours showcasing a remarkable assortment of colours with the spruces and aspens dawning their fall cloaks.





At the edge of Wedge Pond in Alberta, morning coaxes the first rays of the sun forward over the ridge line of the Canadian Rockies. The peaks of the mountains bathed in this glowing highlight appear to be dipped in gold. The spectacular beauty of this region is incentive enough to brave the biting cold outdoors.



Lake Louise is what makes Banff National Park the phenomenon it is. It is one of the most spectacular sights in the Rockies, and the turquoise hues of its waters surrounded by the snow-capped peaks have captured the imaginations of mountaineers, artists and visitors for more than a century.



A different view of Lake Louise.

The Moraine Lake situated in the Valley of the Ten Peaks in the Banff National Park is a glacially fed lake and spreads over an area of more than hundred acres. The iconic image of Moraine Lake and the Valley of the Ten Peaks was used on the back of Canadian twenty dollar bills issued between 1969 and 1979. The beautiful deep blue water with a backdrop of towering snow-capped mountains is one of the most photographed spots in the Canadian Rockies and possibly in all of Canada.



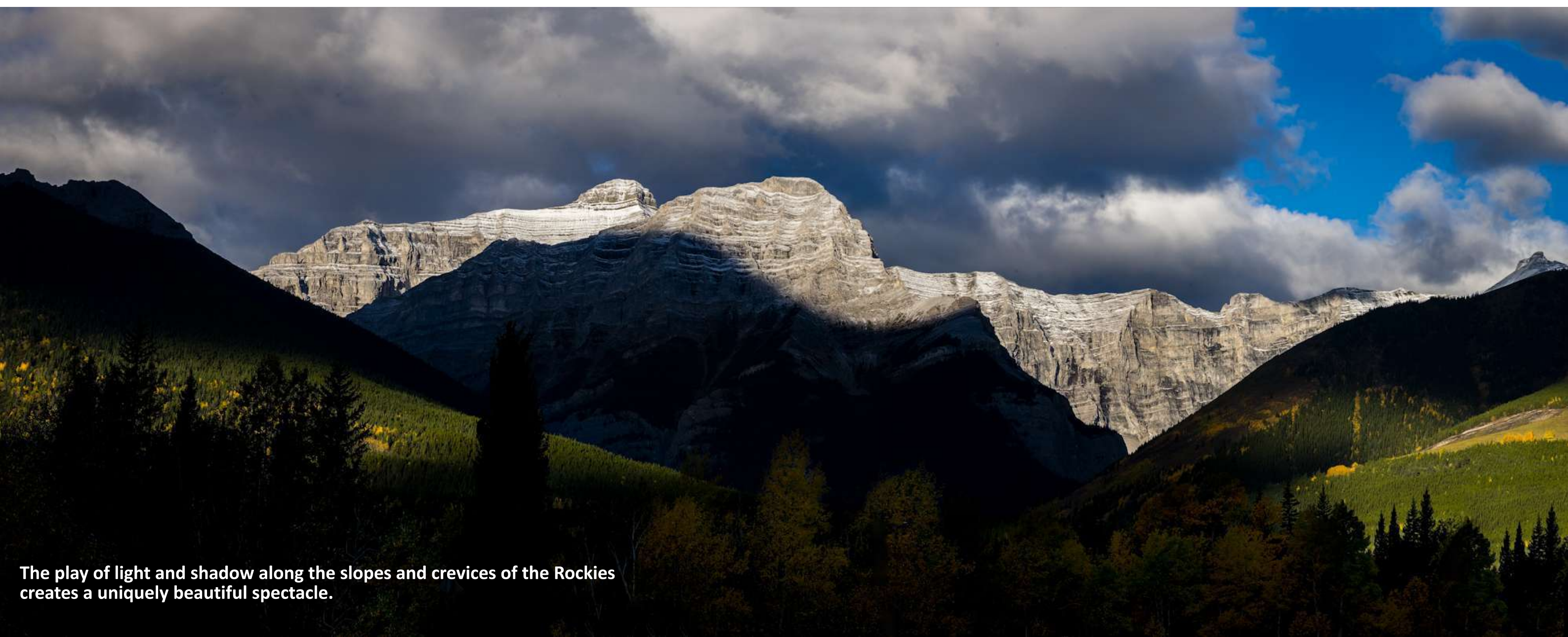


The ethereally beautiful turquoise waters of the Emerald Lake lie within the Yoho National Park in British Columbia. Apart from being one of the most beautiful the Emerald Lake also happens to be the largest and most popular water body in the Yoho National Park. Canoeing and Kayaking are some of the top tourist attractions during summers while the frozen surface of the lake during the winter months provide tourists with the ideal cross country skiing destination.

Alberta, also known as Canada's Cowboy Country is a place where humans and horses still cherish and maintain their long founded association.



Fall marks the elk rutting season in the Jasper national park. Bull elks can become aggressive and protective of their cows and tend to attack anything which they perceive as a threat which often includes cars passing by.



The play of light and shadow along the slopes and crevices of the Rockies creates a uniquely beautiful spectacle.



The beautiful Edith Lake in the Jasper National Park is a glacial fed lake barely 10 km from Jasper town. This beautiful emerald blue lake owes its origin to some massive lake which covered this entire region during the ice age.

About the Photographer



I am an ophthalmologist by profession, practicing my trade in the U.A.E for the past 20 years. My origins though are rooted in the south Indian state of Kerala. In spite of my busy work schedule I try to devote whatever time and energy I manage to squeeze out to my passion, photography. I intend to keep my passion alive despite whatever hurdles I am faced with in my life. It is this love for photography that takes me to different places across the world in search of unique and interesting stories and subjects to photograph whenever I get the opportunity.



The Golden Temple of Amritsar- an Abode of Humanity

by Shivang Shekhar Singh

A historical monument evokes a sense of belonging in us, it reminds us of our roots or origins, and it bears on its walls the anecdotes of how time changed around it. These are not mere architectural wonders, the stones, the marbles, the monuments, and the domes diligently preserve every episode in the history of the place, the people, the culture, the race in their every nook and crevices, in their every arch and beam. These silent guardians of history have successfully withstood the onslaughts of the tumultuous past; with the same resolve they have stayed relevant even in the face of dramatically changing modern times. In many ways these structures are the last remaining bridges between our present and the past. Among the iconic architectural monuments or structures across India, the one that remains one of the most widely recognisable and prominent is the Golden Temple of Amritsar also known as Sri Harmandir Sahib meaning the “abode of God”. There can be hardly any reference to the city of Amritsar without the mention of this iconic structure. However the most prominent identity of this ancient shrine is being the spiritual epicentre of Sikhism, the world’s fifth largest religion. Historical records reveal, the idea of today’s iconic Golden Temple was conceived by Guru Amar Das, the third Guru of Sikhism. In fact Guru Amar Das is recognised as the one who demarcated the land which now

houses the sprawling city of Amritsar and bought the land from the local Zamindars or the landlords of the native villages. Following his instructions, his disciple Ram Das went about facilitating his Guru’s instructions which also included the construction of a man made pool at the centre of the new town, which would eventually become the focal point of the Golden Temple. Ram Das succeeded Guru Amar Das and the then Guru Ram Das realised the dream of his predecessor and eventually founded the town which came to be known as Ramdaspur. The artificial pool too came to life and since its very inception carved a prominent niche in the history of this land as Guru Ram Das chose his residence next to it. The legacy of the town of Ramdaspur founded by Guru Ram Das was carried forward by his successor Guru Arjan Sahib who facilitated the developmental activities in and around the town. It was Guru Arjan Sahib who conceived the idea of creating a central place of worship for all Sikhs, one which would become the spiritual edifice of Sikhism. Under the continued supervision and patronage of Guru Arjan Sahib the foundation stone was laid by a muslim saint by the name of Hazrat Mian Mir ji of Lahore on 1st of Magh, 1645 Bikrmi Samvat (December, 1588) according to Sikh calendar. This was an incredibly significant moment in the history of Sikhism, not only because of

The sacred realms of the Golden Temple are still equally relevant across generations.



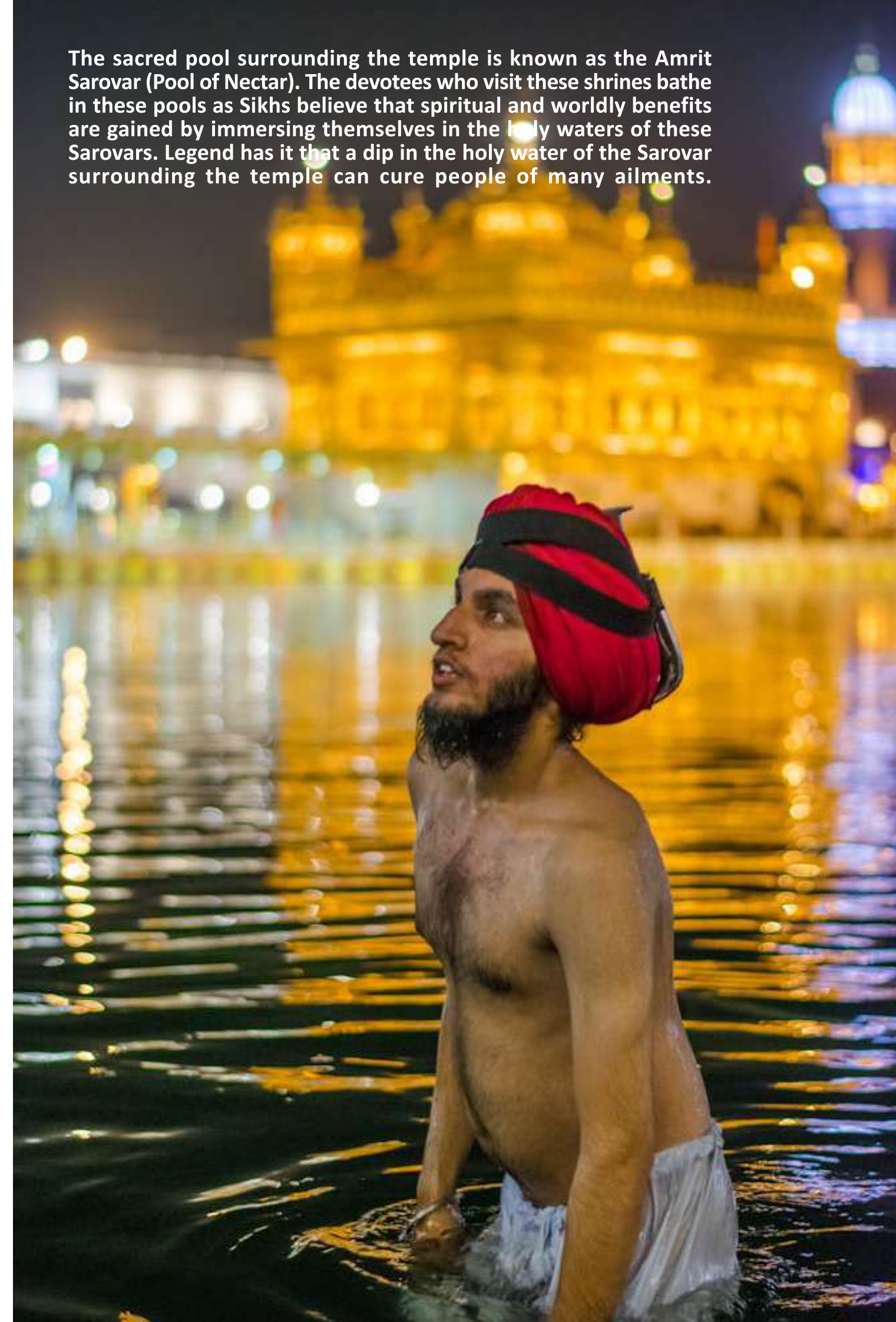
Entrance to one of the holiest shrines in the world.



the grandeur of the occasion but also because this incident further established the pluralism which Sikhism propagated among the followers. The construction work since its early inception in 1581 received continual impetus from Guru Arjan Sahib himself as well as from other prominent Sikh personalities and devotees such as Baba Budha ji, Bhai Gurdas ji, Bhai Sahlo ji among others. On completion of the construction work in 1601 A.D. Guru Arjan Sahib installed the newly created Guru Granth Sahib or the central religious scripture of Sikhism containing the words and lessons passed on by Sikh Gurus and other blessed saints. Baba Budha ji was entrusted with the prestigious responsibility of becoming the reader of this sacred text and thus became the first Granthi or reader of Guru Granth Sahib. With the sacred Guru Granth Sahib installed in the inner sanctum of the Golden Temple, this magnificent architectural wonder entered the sacred realms of a pilgrimage.



The sacred pool surrounding the temple is known as the Amrit Sarovar (Pool of Nectar). The devotees who visit these shrines bathe in these pools as Sikhs believe that spiritual and worldly benefits are gained by immersing themselves in the holy waters of these Sarovars. Legend has it that a dip in the holy water of the Sarovar surrounding the temple can cure people of many ailments.



Young and old alike, everyone finds their peace of mind in this abode of humanity.

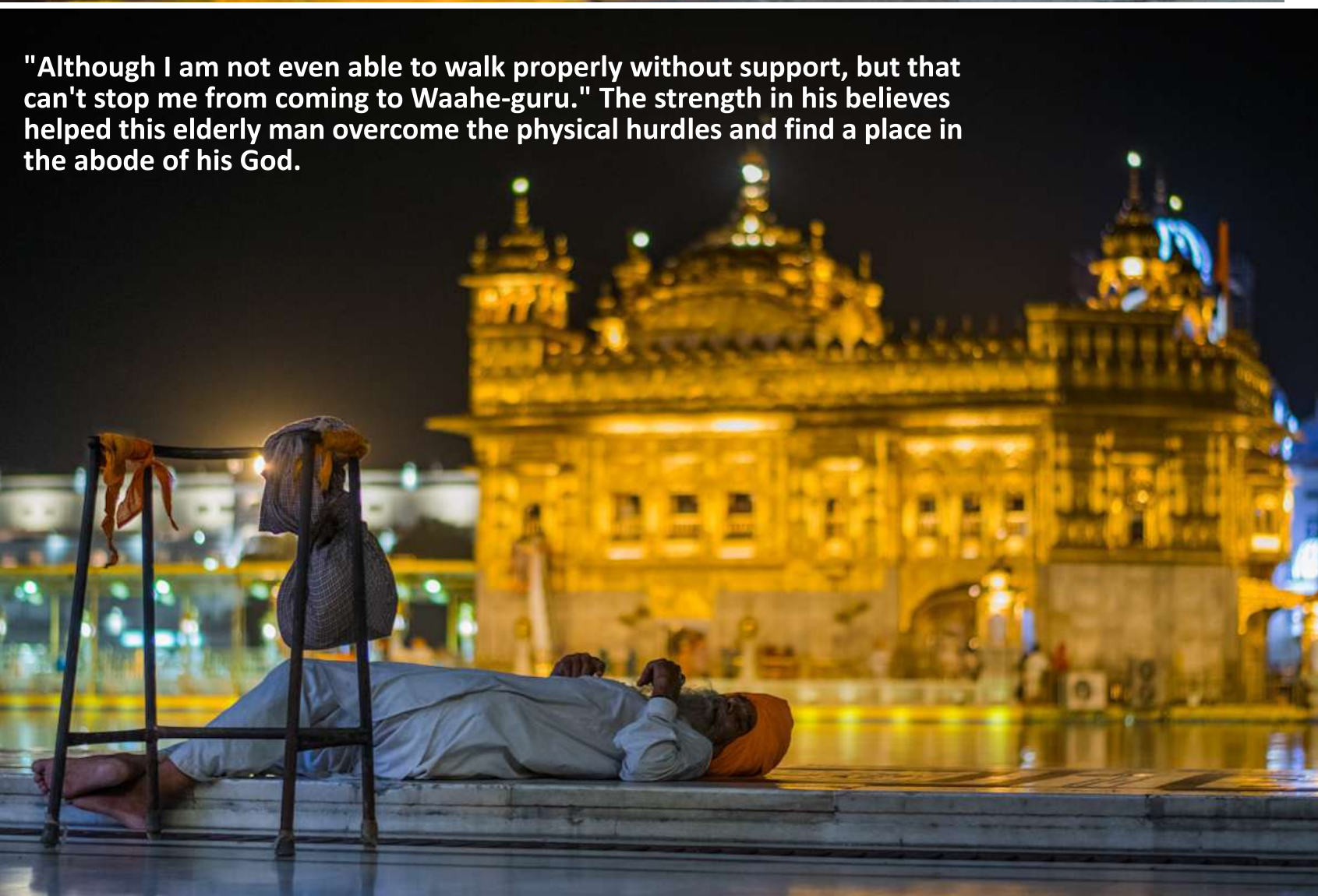


The temple keeps its doors open to anyone looking for shelter, food or any kind of refuge. Such practices of fellowship and brotherhood has always been an integral part of Sikhism and the golden walls of the temple uphold these believes and traditions.



The architecture of the Golden Temple is an amalgamation of the prevalent architectures in the Indian sub-continent during that era. Many architects and historians have described the architecture of the Golden Temple as a reflective of both Indo-Islamic Mughal and the Hindu Rajput architecture. Unlike most other religious monuments the Golden Temple is not built upon any elevated platform, in fact it rests on a depression and a series of steps lead down to the entrance. This was done to emphasize the importance of humility and leaving aside ones ego before entering the inner sanctum of the temple. The main structure is situated at the centre of the sacred pool known as the Amrit Sarovar or the Pool of Nectar. The main structure is built over a platform of 67 square feet and the sacred pool surrounding it is 150 square meters. The main temple has entrances on all its four sides, which is symbolic to the all-inclusive practices of Sikhism. The main structure is a three-storied one. At the top of the first floor, 4 feet high parapet rises on all the sides, while the third story rests on the central hall. Three entrances lead to a square shaped room on the third floor where regular recitation of Guru Granth Sahib is held. The main dome or the “Gumbaz” rests on top of this square shaped room. The dome is adorned by lotus petal motif at the base and an inverted lotus at the top. The second story houses the Sheesh Mahal or the Mirror Room, the walls of which are gilded with mirrors and other intricate designs. The entire temple is characterized by intricate floral patterned designs interspersed with animal motifs. The most remarkable thing about this temple is it is gilded with 750 kg of pure gold. Maharaja Ranjit Singh took this initiative and covered the temple in gold in 1830 almost two centuries after it was constructed. Initially it had taken almost 160 kg of gold to achieve this feat, although while it was being renovated from 1995-99 a further 500 kg of gold was used. Skilled artisans from all over were entrusted with this job and the entire feat was achieved with hands without the use of any machines. The gold too is of superior 24 karat quality compared to the usual 22 karat. There are three Holy Trees or Bers inside the temple, each associated with a historical event or Sikh saint. The rich history and culture of the land and its people, the glorious tales from their past are firmly and eloquently etched on memorial plaques inside the temple, which in more ways than one, through its practices, through its architecture and through its history commemorate the history of this ancient land and religion.

"Although I am not even able to walk properly without support, but that can't stop me from coming to Waahe-guru." The strength in his believes helped this elderly man overcome the physical hurdles and find a place in the abode of his God.



The calm, peaceful and extremely clean and hygienic environment maintained by the selfless hard work put in by the volunteers characterise this holy shrine.



reaches of 1, 00,000. The custom of serving free meals is not something new to Sikhism. This practice was introduced by Guru Nanak Dev Ji, with a view of betterment of the entire Sikh community, particularly the downtrodden section of the community and also with the added noble purpose of initiating a sense of camaraderie and brotherhood among the members of the community. The massive scale at which operations are carried out in the community kitchen of the Golden Temple defies logic. Families, well-wishers, devotees out of this sense of brotherhood volunteer to work at this community kitchen in hundreds. The daily requirements for the vegetable meals served at the langar are mindboggling. A regular supply of 100 quintal of wheat flour, 25 quintal of cereals and lentils, 10 quintal rice, and approximately 5000 litre of fresh milk, 10 Quintal sugar and 5 quintal of pure ghee or clarified butter make their way into the community kitchen. Hundreds of volunteers render their services to the sacred task of feeding their fellow beings. The volunteers work in tandem with the 300 odd permanent workers or “sewadars” employed to look after the functioning of the kitchen.

Since the time the doors of this sacred place were opened to the devotees, the Golden Temple has stayed true to the early visions of the founders as well as the true teachings of Sikhism. Guru Arjan Sahib had a vision, he had dreamt of a place of worship which would keep its doors open to people from all caste creed and religion without making any distinction among them. This practice, this belief is still firmly etched in every stone of the Golden Temple even after more than four hundred years. This core belief of including everyone in their wake and serving them is probably best reflected in the Guru ka Langar or the community kitchen of the Golden Temple. The langar comes to life at as early as 5 in the morning and is a relentless hot bed of activities throughout the day. However it is the numbers which depict the true picture of the massive scale at which these activities pan out relentlessly on a daily basis. On an average estimate the langar serves more than 50,000 devotees or visitors on a daily basis. On the occasion of any religious gathering or festival the number easily exceeds the upper



The Khalsa tradition was initiated in 1699 by the last living Guru of Sikhism, Guru Gobind Singh. Its formation was a key event in the history of Sikhism. The founding of Khalsa is celebrated by Sikhs during the festival of Vaisakhi, the Sikh New Year which sees participation from some of the youngest followers.



A fish eye view of the Golden Temple and the sacred pool surrounding it.

Devotees are served vegetarian meals in batches of roughly 5,000 people seated in the two huge dining halls of the langar. The volunteers form the backbone of this massive operation which is carried out with surgical precision and with the efficiency of well-oiled machinery on a daily basis. Even children are encouraged to be a part of this event which goes without saying instils a sense of fellowship among them at a very tender and early age. These selfless efforts that these wonderful people put in everyday to perform an incredible deed such as feeding their fellow men is one among the many aspects which makes this religious monument a true abode of humanity.

From its humble beginning the Golden Temple of Amritsar today has metamorphosed into one of the most beautiful and sacred monument on the planet. This abode of God is a shining beacon of Sikhism across the globe, but more importantly it uplifts every single practice, every single belief that makes us humans. This is a place of calm, of peace, of hope and reassures the faith in humanity in everyone who enters its folds. This truly remains a place which still connects us to the most cherished and treasured aspects of our souls without asking for anything in return.

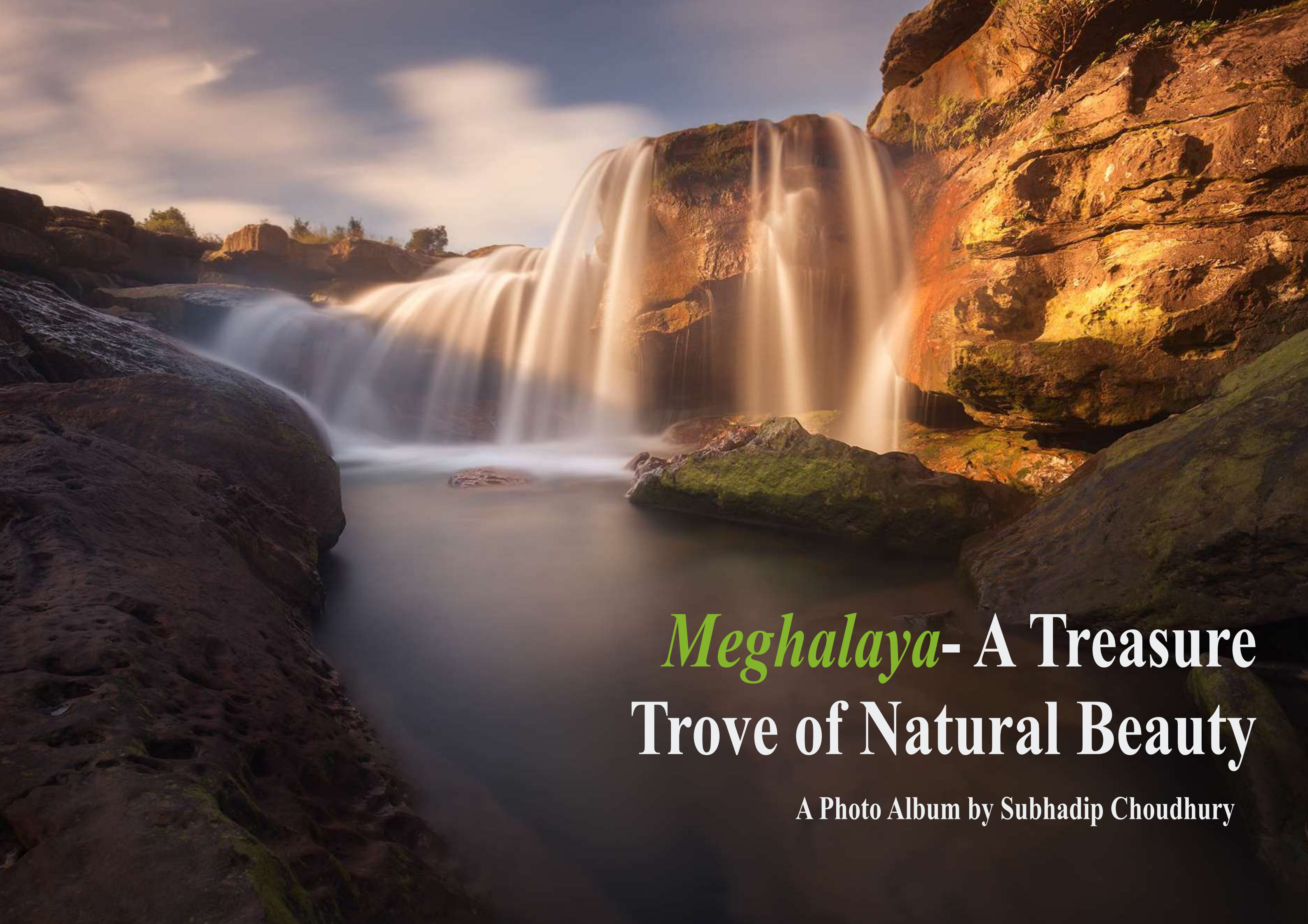


Large carp fishes are an integral part of Amrit Sarovar, surrounding the Golden Temple. Earlier they were kept for the purpose of cleanliness as these fish consumed the algae thereby cleaning the water of the sacred pool. Although the purpose of cleaning the water has been entrusted to modern methods and treatment plants the fish have managed to retain their old world charm and have become a major attraction among the devotees and tourists.

About the Photographer



I consider myself to be an amateur photographer who is constantly learning the nuances of photography every day. Presently I am based in Varanasi pursuing my studies in Tourism & Travel Management from Banaras Hindu University. While walking through the exhaustive career pathways, I identified the creative fire burning within. My heart n' soul lies in the pristine milieu of Banaras. I love to explore new places, something which my life is all about. Since I started taking photographs, I have become more observant and have started paying a lot more attention to the world around me. In my photographs, I try to capture the unadulterated quintessence of daily life. If asked, I will describe my photography as honest, sincere & intimate. As of now, this is all I can put to words but I may add more along the way. So for now, I would like my photographs to do the rest of the talking.



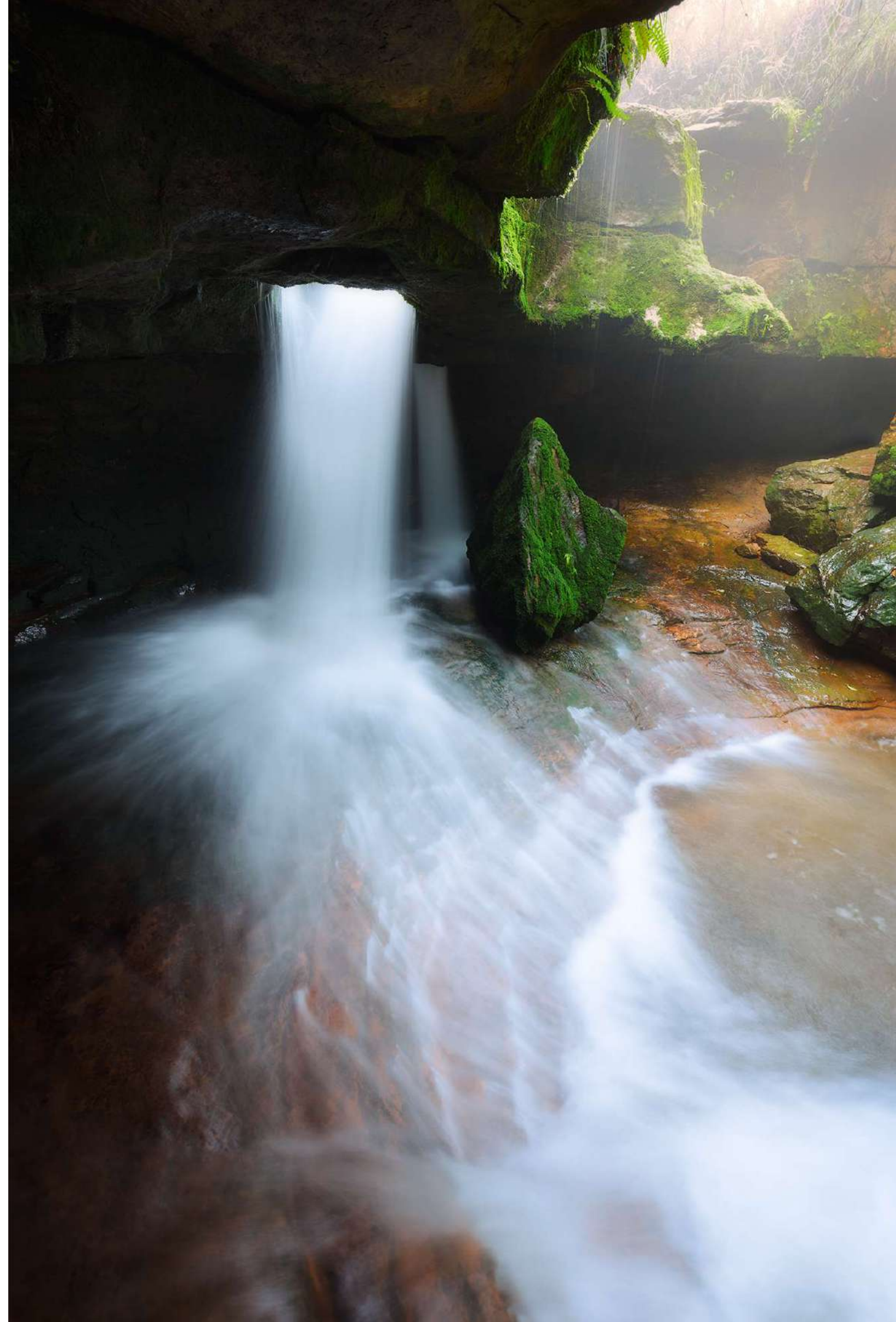
Meghalaya- A Treasure
Trove of Natural Beauty

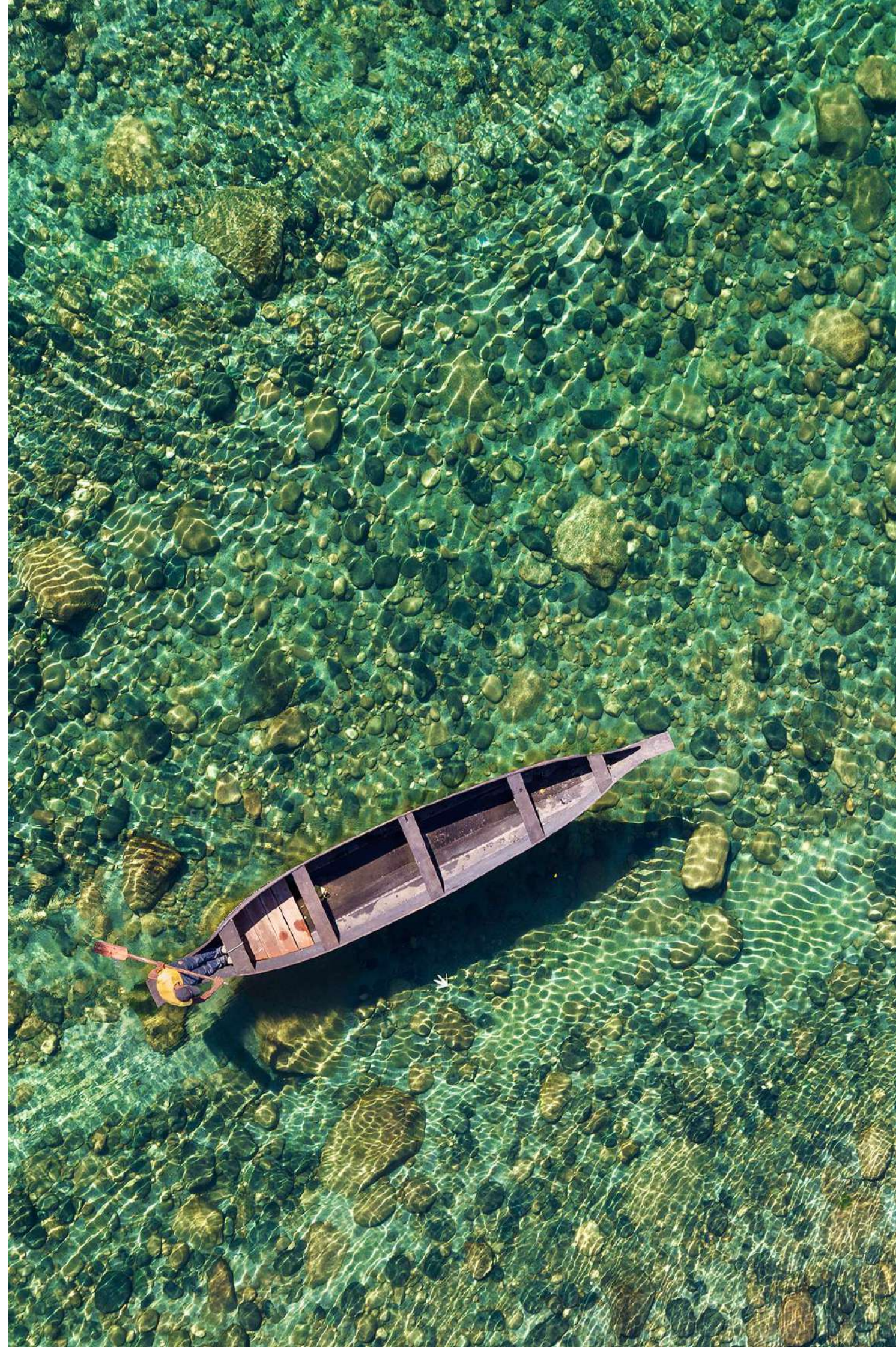
A Photo Album by Subhadip Choudhury



An Ode to Nature's Grandeur

Nature and its unadulterated beauty can have profound effect upon our senses, it has the remarkable ability to transcend the multiple barriers we set up within ourselves and touch the innermost corner of our souls in more ways than we seldom imagine. The widespread beauty of nature which nature envelopes in the trees, the hills, the meadows, the cascading waterfalls, the lush green slope or ice capped peaks of the mountains have the unique ability to soothe the most troubled of minds, to break free the mundane repetitive pattern of our daily lives and unleash before our eyes an aspect of this world which has a tremendous power to evoke the best in all of us. The north-east Indian state of Meghalaya is one such stronghold of the natural world, where the scenic beauties of nature are visibly abundant around every bend of the road, where almost every horizon paints a picture of utmost beauty. A land of countless waterfalls, each beautiful beyond words and imagination, a land where the early sun over the horizon paints its landscapes in surreal colours, a place where the crystal clear waters of its lakes reveal the most beautiful patterns carved on their beds, where underground caves hide in their dark moist realms beauty of an entirely different kind, Meghalaya truly is a paradise for those who seek to explore the beauty of nature. Every scene every moment that unfolds in this land against the backdrop of such ethereal setting brings to the observer a bounty of new experiences and evokes a plethora of emotions. Being based in Shillong gave Mr Subhadip Choudhury the perfect opportunities to explore the beautiful natural settings of Meghalaya and pursue his cherished hobby which happens to be landscape photography. His beautiful photographs do justice to the extraordinarily beautiful Meghalyan landscape. In this photo album we have highlighted some of his prominent photographs which captured the amazing natural beauty that lies hidden in every corner of this beautiful state only to be explored and brought to life by the likes of Mr Subhadip Choudhury whose amazing photographs re-emphasizes the enthralling beauty of nature which mesmerizes us all. This is a humble ode to the majesty of nature the essence of which has been beautifully captured in this wonderful photo album.



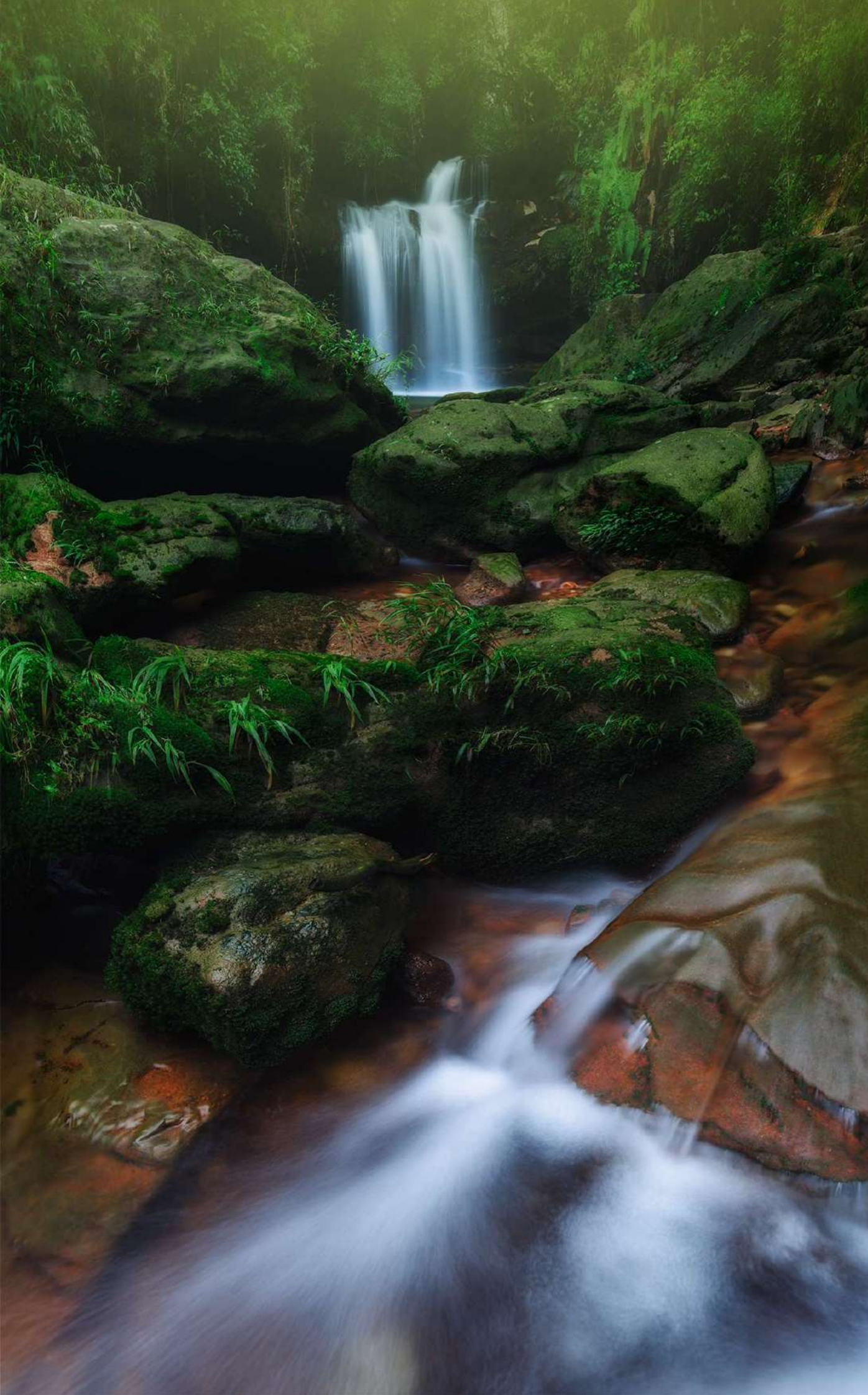












About the Photographer



I am a Shillong, Meghalaya based self-taught hobby photographer who just enjoys the process of photography. I love the landscapes around me; mountains, seas, deserts, rivers, waterfalls and I enjoy clicking the landscapes I see around me. Essentially I love landscape photography and to some degree travel photography.

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featuring the best entries from our facebook group Indian Photo ARTS



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Subhadip Choudhury



Reader's Section



Rajendra Dumane



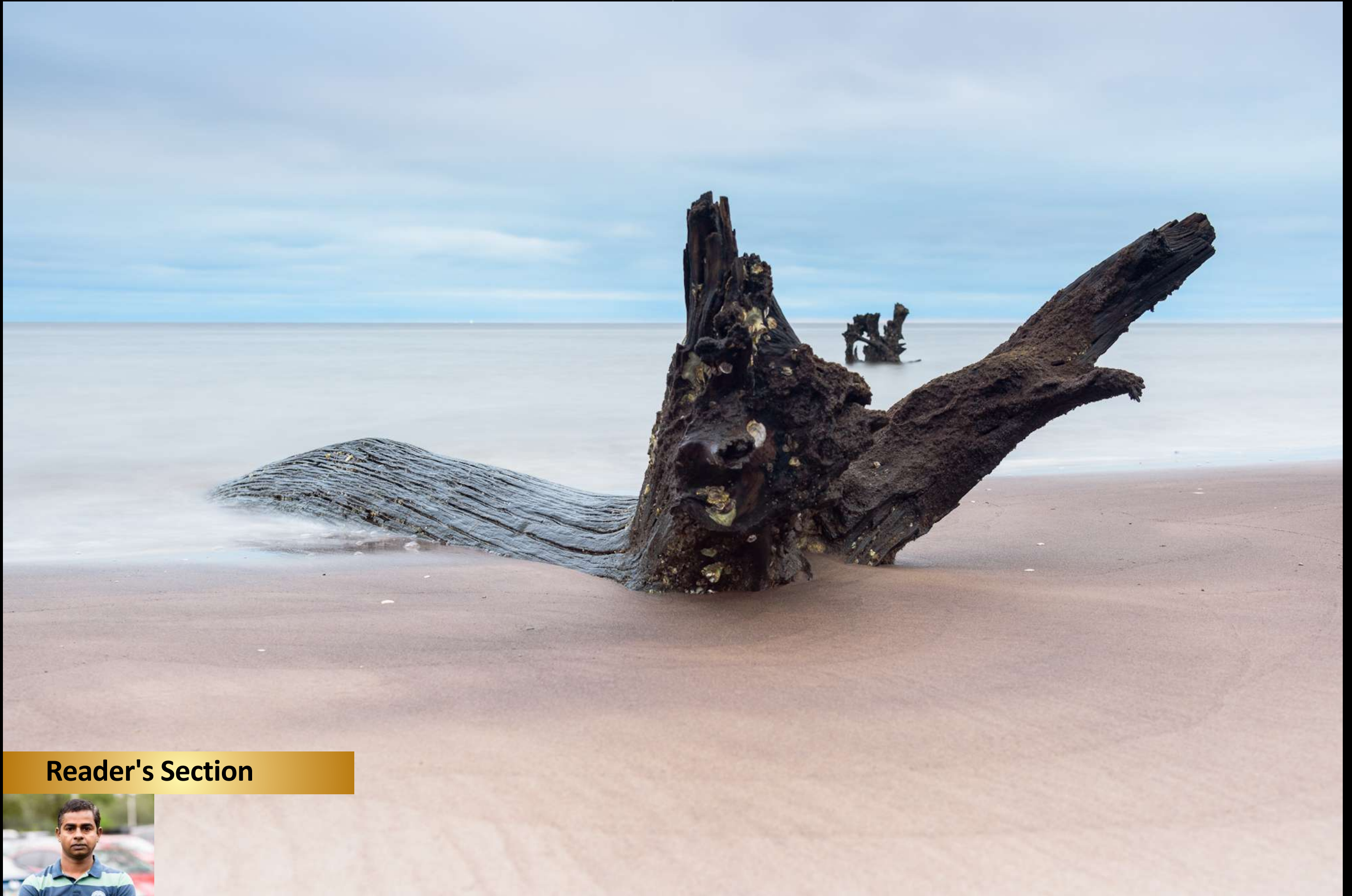
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