



Take a walk down colourful Jinli street

PHOTOS: KALPANA SUNDER

PANDA ADVENTURE

A trip to a city not too far away from Beijing throws up striking revelations



CHENGDU, CHINA

KALPANA SUNDER

The first sight of the cuddly creatures elicits a series of 'Awws' from us. Shi-shi waits for his mother on a tree, both looking like Sumo wrestlers on a sabbatical. We are at the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda breeding in China, an oasis of greenery with golf carts for transportation. Chengdu is best known for these iconic black and white pandas, and we're taught how they are reclusive and one of the oldest surviving species on Earth. Twelve million years ago they were meat eaters, but, for reasons not understood, became vegetarian. They feast on bamboo shoots, but here at the Panda Centre, they are also given milk and eggs. The male Pandas may look healthy, but they suffer from a low insemination rate — the reason this centre under-

takes artificial insemination. The rare red panda, which looks more like a fox, is also here and we get to cuddle one at a fee of 100 RMB (Rs 688). **City of spice** Chengdu has seen the rise and fall of several dynasties. The southern Silk Route started here and during the Song dynasty it began to issue the world's first paper currency. Today, Chengdu is a laidback place whose hedonistic people love spicy food, tea, mahjong and the opera! Traditional Chinese architecture, glitzy malls, tree-lined streets and vast green spaces all come together here. It is also the birthplace of Sichuan food — fiery, spicy dishes made with peppercorns. The signature Sichuan dish, Kung Pao chicken, comes with a liberal sprinkling of peanuts and Sichuan peppers. The ancient Jinli Street extends from a gate house with red lanterns and paved streets, and is a recreation of the traditional timbered tea-houses. In ancient times, it was one of the busiest commercial boulevards. Adjacent to the street is the Wohou temple. Today, there are tea-



Sichuan masks in multiple hues up for sale in Jinli Street

houses and antique shops selling Sichuan masks, traditional combs, porcelain and folk handicrafts. We watch craftsmen make clay figurines and paper cuts. The street food here is a medley of colours and smells — agar agar jelly with red hot pepper, beef in bamboo leaves,

smoked tofu, crawling crustaceans and porridge. **A change of face** In the evening, we watch the Sichuan opera, which dates back to more than 250 years. It is a variety of acts where the grand finale is the face-changing opera. The waiters



GETTING THERE

By air: You can fly to Chengdu from Beijing; it takes about two hours. Or take a train **What to see:** Panda park, Jinli Street, Wohou Temple, Leshan Buddha



pour jasmine tea in our cups with long-spouted brass teapots as we watch the show. There is a session of slapstick comedy and a stick puppet show, and the face changing opera is the dazzling finale. The performers peel off one mask after the other — but how do they change their costumes? We drive to Leshan to see the Giant Buddha, carved out of a mountain in 300 AD, at the confluence of three rivers — at 71 metres, it's as tall as a 20-storeyed building. It's reminiscent of the Bamiyan Buddha which was destroyed in Afghanistan. It was the inspiration of a Buddhist monk who thought that the Buddha would calm the turbulent waters that plagued the ships. The locals say, "The mountain is a Buddha and the Buddha is a mountain!" The Buddha is mossy, but striking. We watch people climb the stairs on either side — even his toenail accommodates one person. Chengdu and Leshan have been a welcome break from the hustle, bustle and history of Beijing! *Kalpna is a Japanese language specialist and travel writer based in Chennai*

Go wild at Corbett

Q&A inbox

Q My family and I are planning to go to Madurai for 2 days. We're going to sightsee in Madurai on the first day and go to Rameshwaram the next day. Any tips on what needs to be seen? Please tell us about what to avoid. *Raviunni*

A Meenakshi temple in Madurai is a must see. Madurai is the centre for both Rameshwaram and Kanyakumari. Don't take the tour buses as there will be a rush for everything and you won't be able to see the places peacefully. Buses of the Tamil Nadu Road-

ways leave every 10 minutes from Madurai bus stand. You can stay in Gujarat Bhawan, which is just a stone's throw away from Rameshwaram temple. **Q** I would like to know during which months the Corbett National Park is open for tourists. I am planning to visit in August or September; will it be open then? Also, how will the weather be during that time? Will we be able to enjoy the safari rides or would it be too rainy and muddy? *Sumit*

A Since you enquired about the opening season of the Jim Corbett park, I would like to tell you that, right now, the Jhirna zone of the forest is open and will

be throughout the year. The Bijrani zone will be open from October 15 and the main Dhikala zone will be open for tourists from November 15. Currently, the roads to Jhirna zone are not in good condition and there are several streams on the way, filled with water. It will be better for you to visit Corbett between November and February as it is winter time then and the animals usually come out to the open grasslands to keep themselves warm. If you want to visit the Dhikala zone, then you have to file an application with the Corbett reception at least two months prior, for a stay inside the park.



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travel buzz



River rafting at the Kundalika

Bird watching

Former BNHS researcher Nayan Khanolkar is exhibiting his photos on the wildlife and birds of Kenya at the NCPA Gallery between August 27 and September 5. The exhibition, titled Wildlife and Nature, will showcase wildlife and birding hotspots in India and will include a special focus on Kenya's rich

wildlife. Five other photographers will also exhibit their works on wildlife in Ladakh, Chambal and Bharatput.

Wildlife tour

Travel company UX Travels has announced an eight-day wildlife photography tour of Kenya for amateurs as well as an eight-day nature tour. The photography tour com-

mences on Oct 16, while the nature tour will start on Oct 9. Contact Rekha on 9987318191 or send her an email at rekha@universityof-experience.in.

Ride the rapids

Freespirt is organising a white water rafting trip on the Kundalika River this weekend. The trip will commence from Kolad, along the Mumbai-Goa highway. Rafting will take place in a 12 km stretch of river with rapids. This will be a moderately difficult trip. The trip will take place on August 15. The reporting time is 4.30 am, and participants will have to converge at Hotel Aswad, opposite Shiv Sena Bhavan, Dadar (W). The trip will cost Rs 2,310, inclusive of meals and transportation. Students with an ID card will get a discounted rate of Rs 1,710. Contact 9869201443 / 24442944 to register.

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