+**8** DECCANHERALD Sunday, April 17, 2011+

SundayHerald travel

Paris's green movement

With throngs of eco-cafes, organic markets and green wine shops opened city wide, Paris is slowly earning the distinction of being an eco-friendly city. It also has hotels that are promoting low-carbon living.

RELAXED HOLIDAY



Soak up some sun

A once-sleepy island, Koh Samui in Thailand is now a bustling little place. Apart from the conventional tourist trappings, its quirky attractions like the 'monkey theatre' and the Buffalo Fighting Festival are a huge draw, writes KALPANA SUNDER

icture this. Bare feet and powdery beaches. Spending your day on loungers over Singha beer and *pad thai*. Indulging in jungle treks, jet skiing, Thai compress massages and starting all over again the next day. There are some places in the world that seem to be just made for happiness. Koh Samui, the third largest island in Thailand, is definitely one of them. The picturesque airport is an indication of serenity inhabited by only a handful of things to come — it looks like a tropical re- monks. sort with open air huts, palm tree pillars, rattan walls, landscaped gardens and dinky little vehicles. Built at the behest of the Bangkok Airways who own and run the airport, it has won awards for its ecofriendly and green approach.

Thai lifestyle

A once-sleepy island, Koh Samui was first settled by fishermen from mainland Malaysia and China some 1,500 years ago. It was, for many years, only known as an exporter of cotton and coconut; even today it's called the 'coconut island'. It's part of an archipelago of deserted islands that were the real-life inspiration for the iconic cult film, The Beach. Our stylish Amari Palm Reef Resort is

perched on the party-central hedonistic heart of Samui-Chaweng Beach. The white sandy beach is a sprawl of sun loungers and clusters of massage beds with curtains offering brief nirvana under skilled hands. Hawkers peddle snazzy sunglasses, offer to cornrow and braid your hair or take you for a kayak ride on the seas. The ubiquitous fruit-on-skewer and cold beer is always at hand. Chaweng Town is a sprawl of lively $bars, stalls \, selling \, faux \, designer \, jeans \, and \,$ sunglasses, umpteen 7 Elevens, ready-ina-day tailors, massage houses offering traditional to raunchy massages. Come evening, there are lady boys strutting their wares and vans with loudspeakers advertising Thai boxing events.

It wouldn't be Thailand without temples and a Buddha and the island's most popu-

lar one is the Wat Phra Yai or the colossal Big Buddha. It's perched 15 metres tall, above the north-eastern corner of the island like a protective guardian and ringed by souvenir stalls. There is also the quirky Wat Khunaram where a mummified monk in a meditative pose with orange robes and Ray Ban sunglasses is preserved in a glass case. Wat Sumret is slightly off the beaten path - it's a time capsule of

One of the weathered buildings houses an eerie congregation of old Buddhas clothed in orange robes. From the sublime to the ribald — the Grandfather and Grandmother rocks are perched at the southern end of the Lamai Beach. The story behind them is that an elderly couple went out to sea and their boat capsized in a storm. The couple died and turned into rocks to be remembered forever.

We walk to the bohemian Bophut Fishing Village, one of the most charismatic villages on the island, a stretch of two storey teak shop-houses (that hint at the island's past) converted into stylish bars, restaurants, day spas, even a Bikram's yoga and boutique-style hotels with a true Mediterranean feel.

There are a line of eclectic restaurants bursting with personal style, ranging from Thai and Mexican to Indian and French, each with a balcony skirting the white sandy beach and cerulean waters. There's Villa Bianca with its stark white decor, Bophut Diving School, a snazzy building offering diving equipment and classes and quaint guest houses like The Lodge with a small garden and their own strip of the

For something different and ethereal, there is the tranquil Tanim Magic Garden high up in the hills - a unique creation of a Samui native called Khun Nim Tongsung who used to farm durian and coffee here. A tree-lined stone stairway leads into a jungle gorge where there are a host of Ramayana characters, dancers and sculp-

tures frozen in stone. I spend a wondrous couple of hours meandering through the forest catching glimpses of stone figures, frogs and tortoise, scattered amongst the greenery and small streams.

There are signs of development all over the island. Huge hoardings offer plush condominiums and expat villas. High-end resorts like the Six Senses and the Anantara have made their presence here. Samui prides itself on offering a variety of cuisines we experience one of our best Italian

meals at Prego at the Amari Palm Reef Resort. There are basic roadside eateries, fine dining restaurants perched on hillsides and restaurants on the beach. If being a beach bum is not your thing, there are other pursuits as well. You can take a day trip to the 42 islands of the Ang Thong National Park with the clearest of waters to snorkel, scuba or sea-kayak.

Maybe you want to head towards the dense forests for a trek or a zip line ride through the canopies. We hear about the rave parties and full moon revelries at the nearby island of Ko Pha Ngan. There are advertisements for 'monkey theatre' everywhere. My guide tells me that the monkeys are trained to pluck coconuts and offer them to tourists

Our 'view from the top' moment is from Khao Hua Jook, a golden pagoda perched on a hill with the most marvellous views of the hinterland — white beaches, palm fringed bays, forested hills, smudges of coral reefs and the aquamarine ocean. Samui is not a place you can ever tire of. If you like energy and excitement, you can find it here.

Our friend Martin Kunzmann, an Aussie living in Samui, describes the frenzied Songkran festival celebrating the Thai New Year, when jets of ice cold liquid are squirted over unsuspecting souls. I hear about the body painting competition at Lamai Beach and the Buffalo Fighting Festival. Otherwise, there is always the beauteous beach and the seamless sky to keep





ERISING (From left) The Khao Hua Jook Pagoda on a hill; The tranquil Tanim Magic Garden.

HILL STATION

Town with a colonial past

igh up in the Satpura mountain ranges that rise to altitudes of more than 1,300 meters above sea level, like a verdant bowl, sits Pachmarhi. At the height of 1,067 meters, it is central India's only claim to a hill station. Captain James Forsyth is credited with the discovery of this lush plateau.

Pachmarhi has a history of long bat-tles between the British and the inhabitants of the Satpuras who had lived there for centuries. And it was only when their ruler, Raja Bhabhut Singh, was defeated in 1857 that the British took over. They declared the Satpura forest area as reserve forests, India's first, and Pachmarhi with its invigorating climate was developed as a sanatorium for the British army in 1862. It became an army cantonment and the Army Education Corps Training College & Centre was established in 1921.

It is still, predominantly, a cantonment town and it is not uncommon to see platoons marching on the broad, treecanopied, endless roads, or catch the musical notes wafting out of the military music wing on a wondrously silent evening. The lush landscape of Pachmarhi is dotted with old British bungalows, churches and cemeteries. Literally, a one-horse town, Pachmarhi used to have only one *tonga* as public transport till the early '80s.

Evening walks along never-ending, wide, no-vehicle roads were interrupted only by clouds descending and enveloping you in a mist for a few moments. By day, one could wade through clear streams and walk miles in the sun-dappled pine forests around town. More tourists have since discovered Pachmarhi, but the beauty is still unmarred. It is not crowded like the typical hill stations of Shimla-Manali and is an ideal place for a relaxed

Largely untouched even today, people throng to see the stunning natural sights of Pachmarhi – gigantic falls, clear pools, gaping ravines and breathtaking sunsets. Famed for its magnificent waterfalls and bathing pools, a dip in the crystal clear waters of a natural spring pool is a mustdo in Pachmarhi. The most famous waterfall, the Big Fall

or the Rajat Prapat, which literally means



GREEN COVER The Pachmarhi landscape.

silver falls, is so called because the water turns to a shimmering silver colour in the sunlight. It is a 350-foot, horsetail fall. Bee Fall is another spectacular sight that this hill station offers. The waterfall scatters wide as it cascades and the sound it makes is likened to the buzz of bees. A dip in the pool here is irresistible. Another stunning attraction is the Duchess Fall, which flows down in three cascades. To reach the base of the first, one must trek down a steep and rough track. All the pools at the falls are safe for swimming.

Dhoopgarh, the highest peak of the Satpuras, is a sunset point and commands a magnificent view of the Satpura ranges. The red sandstone hills and rock faces all round assume a crimson hue in the light of the setting sun. As opposed to this desolate landscape, Handi Khoh is a 300-foot-steep gorge amidst a dense for-

The Pandavas are believed to have spent a part of their exile here in what is known as the Pandava Caves. Now a protected monument, these caves have lent Pachmarhi its name. There are several other places of religious significance, many of these dedicated to Lord Shiva. Around 1,200 steps lead up to Chauragarh where the devotees of Shiva congregate on Mahashivratri. Jatashankar is a formation of rocks in an underground cave that looks like the locks of Shiva.

The place has over a hundred shivlings and a stream runs through the cave. The

source of the stream has remained a mys tery, and therefore it is called the Gupt Ganga. There is also the Bada Mahadev and the Gupt Mahadev, other sites worth

SHEFALI TRIPATHI MEHTA

Travel tips

■ Pure honey and locally grown *chironji* nuts are good local products to buy.

■ Pachmarhi can be visited year-round. ■ After the rains, Pachmarhi struts its

beauty in lush greenery ■ The Jain, Gujarati, Maharashtrian thali meals are wholesome, light and quite

suitably 'unlimited'. They are a real treat ■ Places to stay range from the economy lodges and guest houses to exclusive cottages and heritage hotels run by Madhya Pradesh tourism. Jeeps

can be hired for sightseeing. How to get there Rail: The nearest and most convenient

railhead is Pipariya, 47 km away, on the Itarsi-Jabalpur rail line. Air: The nearest airport is Bhopal (200

■ Road: Madhya Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation runs regular luxury bus service from Bhopal to Pachmarhi. Private and roadway buses as well as taxis are also available from Pipariya, Bhopal and other cities located nearby.

The World is in Your Pocket

I f anybody tells you that your wallet can accommodate the Eiffel Tower of Paris, Petronas Twin Towers of Malaysia, Great Wall of China, Colosseum of Rome, Leaning Tower of Pisa, the Tea Gardens of Munnar in Kerala, Hidimba Temple of Manali, Naini Lake of Nainital, or even the famous Shalimar Garden of Srinagar then do not ignore or ridicule him for a joke since this is really possible now because of the cheap and yet the best K&S Tours introduced by Kesari now.

Every enthusiastic tourist, aspires to travel, always craves to visit variety of countries in the world and relish the charm of the scenic tourist destinations there but every foreign tour first raises the hurdle of the budget and then many simply curb that dream thinking it unaffordable. But all that is a history now, thanks to the K&S Tours, because with the delightful combination of Kesari's quality and hospitable service coupled with the reasonable prices, your dream of a foreign tour can be a reality now.

K&S offers a 19 days and 18 nights exciting 'European Explorer' tour of Europe that

boasts the legacy of glorious history full of grandeur, incomparably beautiful and scenic landscapes, and awesome historical structures. 32 important cities are included in this tour passing through eleven wonderful European countries like England, France, Belgium, Vatican, Monaco, Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Austria and Italy. Similarly, you can make a 9 days and 8 nights beautiful tour of Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and Hong Kong in South East Asia that includes 6 cities of these countries at an unbelievably affordable price only with Kesari's K&S Tours. Again, you can relish the joy of variety of entertainment shows, entertaining theme parks, colourful water sports and also dazzling shopping without taxing your budget much.

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yourself with the internationally famous destinations like the Forbidden City, Tiananmen Square, Great Wall of China, Terracotta Worriers Museum and Shanghai Circus while visiting prominent Chinese cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Xian. Another newly popular tour in K&S segment is Mauritius. Through 7 days and 6 nights tour of Mauritius you visit Ile Aux Cerfs Island, Royal Botanical Garden, Port Louis Theatre, Floreal Square, Model Ship Factory, Casela Bird Park and beautiful island and beaches for relaxation.

The K&S option is also available for the domestic tours going to Shimla Manali, Rajasthan, Kerala, Nainital and Missouri besides the exciting alternative of a Star Cruise with the destinations in South-East Asia too.

Although the K&S Tours are cheap their quality is never compromised with and you can easily fulfill your dream tourism with luxurious hotels, no cut-short sight-seeing, and hospitable tour managers amid the royal treatment of Kesari to finally say, 'The World is Indeed in My Pocket'.



M2-Mauritius 5 Days-7 May, 4 June 7 Days-13,20,27 May

D3-Dubai

Q4-S'pore Thai Malay

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