

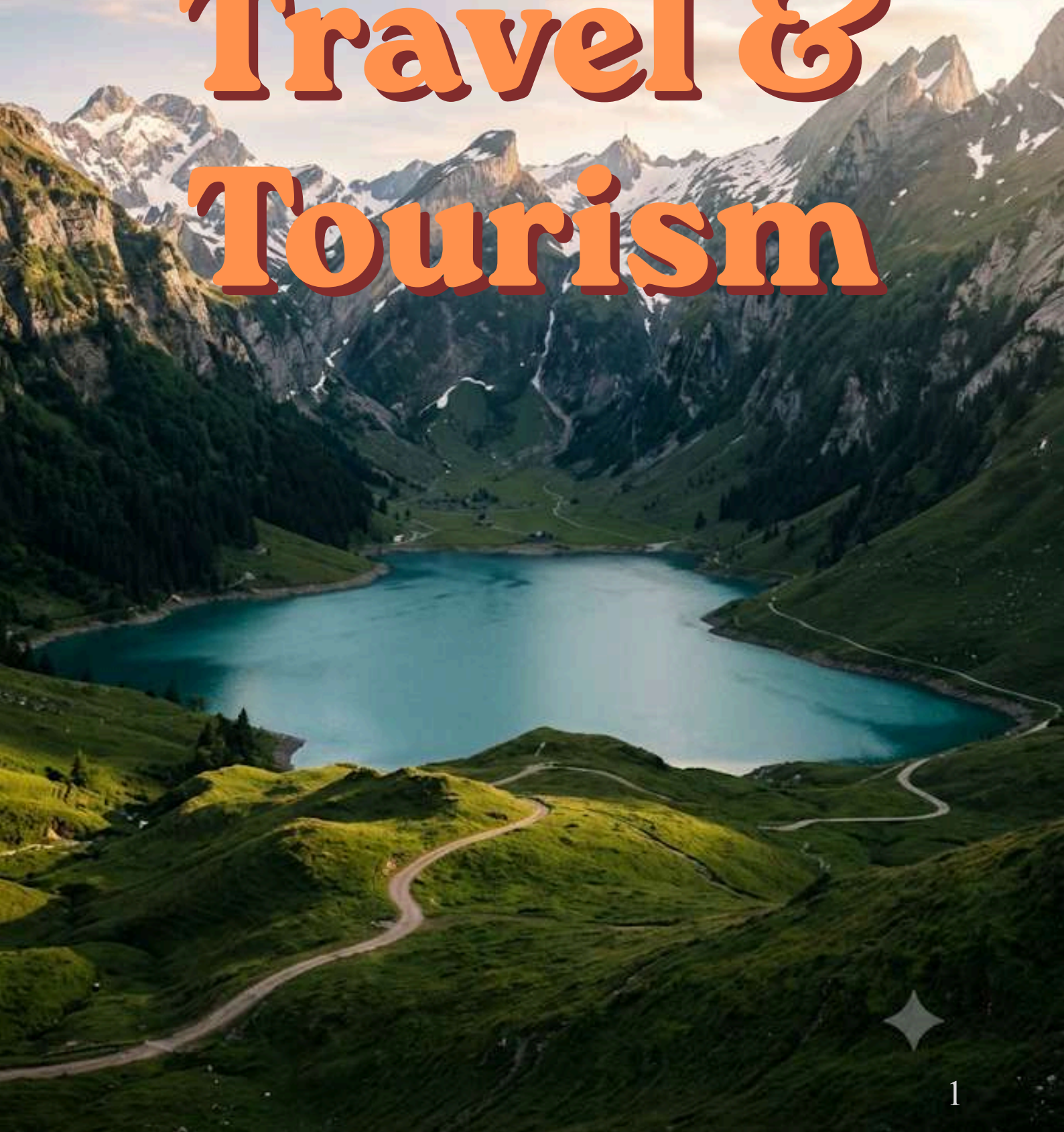
FORCENET



E-ZINE

Magazine of military veterans in the corporate
October 2026, Volume VIII, Issue 10

Travel & Tourism



Message from the Editor

Iqbal Singh



The Officer's Passport

Every soldier learns to travel light — but travel far.

Whether it was a convoy through Ladakh, a UN posting abroad, or the first family holiday after decades of postings, the uniform gave us something most civilians never get: an instinct for movement, logistics, and adapting to unfamiliar terrain. That instinct doesn't retire when we do.

This October, ForceNet E-Zine turns to Travel & Tourism — a theme that, on the surface, feels like a break from our usual ground of resettlement and career strategy. It isn't. Travel is where the officer's discipline meets the civilian's curiosity, and for many of you, it's already becoming a second innings.

I've watched veterans in our community turn a passion for the Northeast or the Himalayas into homestays and guided treks. I've seen officers who once ran logistics for a battalion now running tour operations for tourists who couldn't tell a milestone from a checkpoint. The transferable skills are obvious once you look: risk assessment, contingency planning, people management under pressure. Tourism doesn't just need your itinerary — it needs your judgment.

So this issue we asked our members to contribute not travel-blog fluff but first hand experiences and their learnings. Also the ground truth we're known for: the veteran-friendly stay that actually delivers, the sightseeing spot that's genuinely worth the queue versus the one that isn't, the visa paperwork nobody warns you about, the tourist trap you walked into so someone else doesn't have to.

We've articles on both Domestic and International travel — from Experiences & Itineraries to Entrepreneurship Opportunities in Tourism.

This is also, frankly, a chance to widen the aperture of what "second career" means in this community. Not every transition runs through corporate HR. Some of the best ones run through a mountain pass, a heritage property, or a well-timed WhatsApp group for fellow travellers.

Read the stories of fellow veterans. They tell us where to go — and where not to bother.
See you on the road.

Regards
Iqbal Singh
Editor, ForceNet E-Zine

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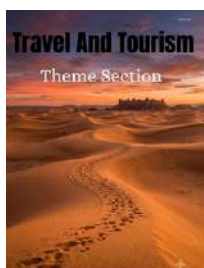
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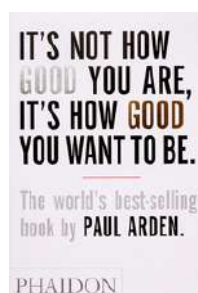
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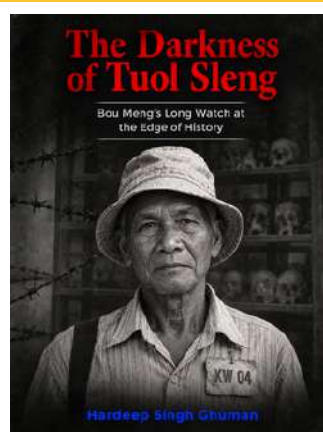
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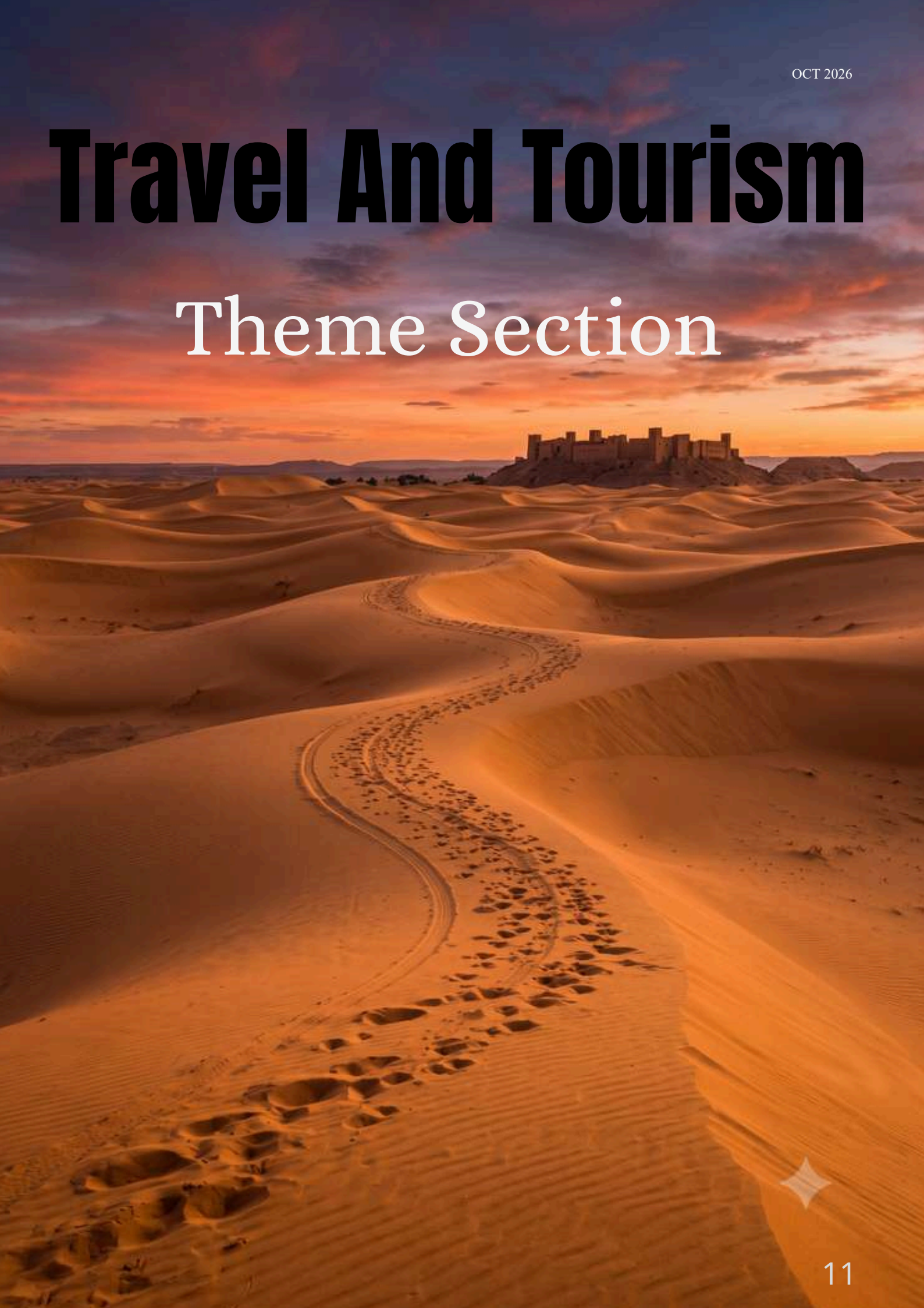
ForceNet E-Zine

Humour



Travel And Tourism

Theme Section



A Veteran's Guide to the Magic of Vietnam

Col CP Ramchandani

Magic of Vietnam is the chronicle of a self-planned holiday from 27 February to 14 March 2024, covering almost the entire country: Hanoi, Ha Long, Ninh Binh, Da Nang, Hoi An, Hue, Nha Trang, Da Lat, Ho Chi Minh City and the Mekong Delta. Seventeen days wasn't enough — but planning the route ourselves, instead of buying a fixed package, meant we could linger where the country grabbed us and move quickly through the rest. The date wise plan is given [HERE](#) The and a detailed itinerary is given [HERE](#).

Visas & Documentation

The e-visa is a straightforward process on the [official government portal](#) and is a fairly simple process, typically taking four days to a week. Don't forget to note your application number on

submission — you'll need it to check status and re-download the visa at different checkpoints.

Communications (SIM card)

On landing, look for the Viettel kiosk near the exit gate, before you leave the airport; a data or voice-and-data SIM costs around 10–12 Euro for 15 days, no paperwork involved. Activate it the moment you land — you'll need it immediately for cabs and hotels on a self-planned trip.

Experiences & Itineraries: The Route Through Vietnam

The Charm of Hanoi and Ha Long

Our journey began in Hanoi, a city that blends tradition with modernity, its history visible in well-





architecture and numerous pagodas. We stayed at Hanoi Paradise Hotel & Leisure which was quite close to the famous Hoan Kiem Lake and night market.



Do not miss the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, the Defence Museum, the Saturday night markets, and above all Train Street — visit only after 7 PM for the best, most festive atmosphere. Trains pass around 8 and 9 PM, though timings vary, so check with locals. You can only enter via one of the restaurants along the tracks, but that's part of the experience.



From Hanoi we moved to Ha Long Bay, a UNESCO World Heritage site of emerald water and towering limestone islands. Instead of overnight stay in the cruise, which most visitors are taken to by tour operators, we chose to start early from Hanoi and rent a room from Airbnb at Ha long. The superhost also arranged the day cruise on the day of arrival.



On the next day we went out on the lesser-known Sun World Queen Cable Car — the world's largest-capacity cable car, roughly the size of a bus.



Since amusement-park rides aren't a thing for our age group, we took the taxi across to Linh Thong Temple instead and used this cable car with a one-way ticket back from that side; enjoying the Ferris wheel with a panoramic view over the bay before the crossing.

Ninh Binh and Da Nang

Next came Ninh Binh, often called “**Ha Long Bay on land.**” Skip the Mua Caves if steep climbing is a concern; if you do go, the views are worth it. Don't miss Trang An's ancient temples and a bamboo boat ride at Tam Coc — go early and avoid weekends or lose hours in queue.



From there we based ourselves in Da Nang for day trips to historic Hue and Hoi An, and the archaeological site of My Son.

Da Nang is home to the Lady Buddha statue and the



Kuan Yin pagoda. My Khe beach is lined with excellent seafood restaurants, and the walk across the Dragon and Tiger Bridges over the Han River, with a stop at Han Market, is worth the evening.

The Vibrancy of Nha Trang and Ho Chi Minh City

A quick trip up to Da Lat from coastal Nha Trang made for a refreshing change of pace. Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon, was our final stop, where we met Vietnam's recent history at the Cu Chi Tunnels and on a day trip into the Mekong Delta.



Visit the War Remnants Museum before the tunnels, not after — it sets up the history in the right order.



Places to Stay

Do your hotel and flight bookings in advance on a platform like Booking.com or Airbnb — the “pay at venue” option is worth choosing wherever offered, since it keeps your plans flexible. We chose places which would be centrally located and from where most places to visit were generally within walking distance or easily accessible by public transport. In Hanoi, base yourself in the Old Quarter (the “First Quarter”); nearly every major sight is within walking distance. Remember that hotels, unlike restaurants or shops, typically add a 3% surcharge for card payments, so carry enough Vietnamese Dong to cover your stays on arrival. Also, they keep USD 50-100 as security, so keep that much cash with you. It will be returned when you check out.

Sightseeing: Must-Sees and What to Skip

- **Must-see:** Hoan Kiem Lake, the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, and Train Street in Hanoi — timed after 7 PM.
- **Must-see:** the Queen Cable Car at Ha Long and Vinpearl's cable car at Nha Trang, both with long ocean views.
- **Must-see:** the War Remnants Museum before the Cu Chi Tunnels, for context.
- **Worth doing:** The hop-on-hop-off buses from Hoan Kiem Lake — 100K VND for one hour, 150K VND for 4 hours, on and off.
- **Skip or Modify:** the Mua Caves in Ninh Binh if steep climbing is difficult.

- **Skip:** Weekend boat rides at Tam Coc unless you go early on a weekday to avoid multi-hour queues.



Travel Do's & Don'ts

- Do fly VietJet or Bamboo Airways for domestic legs. If you undertake train journeys, book four-berth cabins with lower berths on overnight trains.
- Do download Grab before you land — far more reliable than metered taxis. A local driver hired for a full day is also a good option and often doubles as a guide.
- Do carry Vietnamese Dong for your first few days, then exchange more as needed at moneychangers, usually found alongside tour operators.
- Don't rely only on restaurants for vegan food — it's available, but the choice narrows outside cities, so plan ahead and lean on fruit markets and supermarkets. There are plenty 9-11 stores everywhere.
- Don't skip a voice-translator app — it does more work than a phrasebook, especially with vendors and drivers.

Tourist Traps

- Metered taxis outside stations and tourist hubs are the most common overcharge risk — stick to Grab or a pre-arranged driver.
- Ho Chi Minh City is the priciest city on the route for market shopping; the same goods are cheaper in Nha Trang, Da Nang, Hoi An, and

even Hanoi.

- Booking everyday tour online before you land costs more than booking with a local operator on arrival — their rates are consistently lower.

Entrepreneurship Opportunities in Tourism & Travel

Putting together a self-planned, ten-stop itinerary — flights, trains, guides, timing around queues — is close to running a small logistics operation, and that experience translates into real second-career options: a boutique travel consultancy building vetted itineraries for travellers who don't want a generic package, homestay or small-property management, or wellness and retreat-style tourism built around Vietnam's dense network of pagodas and quiet coastal towns, a niche still growing well ahead of mainstream demand.

Lessons Learnt

A self-planned trip rewards flexibility more than a fixed schedule ever could — the best afternoons were rarely the ones marked on the plan.

A voice-translator app turned out to be the single most useful tool in the kit, and vegans will find the food choice more limited than seafood lovers will, so lean on the abundant fruit markets and 9-11 stores.

Experience the unique blends of coffee and street food, especially the variety of Banh mi, but be careful about where you buy from. You do get vegetarian options too, so do look out for those outlets. There are also many Indian Restaurants in every city.

In the overall analysis, what stayed with us was its people — everyone in Vietnam was so helpful. This is certainly a country where warmth seems to be the default.

Useful Websites

E-Visa -

<https://evisa.xuatnhapcanh.gov.vn/trang-chu-ttdt>

Trains – The official website for train booking is <https://dsvn.vn/>

Airlines – <https://www.vietjetair.com/> and <https://www.bambooairways.com/>

In Conclusion

Our journey through Vietnam was a blend of cultural immersion, historical depth, and natural beauty — ancient temples in Hue, vibrant markets in Hoi An, the emerald waters of Ha Long Bay, and the quiet courtesy of its people running through all of it. This wasn't a trip built around ticking off destinations; it was seventeen days of connecting with a rich culture, one self-planned stop at a time.



Hoan Kiem Lake and the Old Quarter, Hanoi — where the journey began.

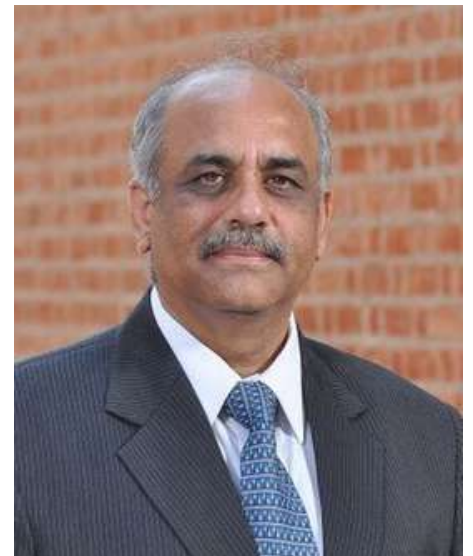
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

COL C. P. RAMCHANDANI

Col C. P. Ramchandani is a veteran of the Indian Army's Corps of Engineers and a graduate of the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington. After retiring from the Army, he served as Director at three private universities and continues to contribute to the national security discourse through his writings, lectures, and advisory engagements.

He has authored several books on military history and management, in addition to a number of works of fiction, including a popular mystery series for children. His interests extend well beyond these fields, and he regularly contributes articles on tourism, travel, and holistic living to various publications and websites.

The present work is one of his contributions to the field of tourism and travel.



THE TOURIST TRAP

When a Holiday Becomes a Fraud Investigation

A practical field guide to spotting scams, reducing exposure and travelling with confidence, in India and abroad

Lt Col Omkar Kulkarni (Retd)

Fraud Investigation Vertical



“A tourist is not necessarily careless. A tourist is simply operating with less local knowledge than the person trying to exploit him.”

The scam rarely begins with a ‘masked stranger’. It begins with ‘convenience’: a driver who “knows a better hotel,” a search result that looks official, a QR code for a refund, a friendly stranger offering help at an ATM, or a seller who can somehow get the “last two tickets” to a sold-out attraction. Travel is a joyful disruption of routine and precisely that disruption creates opportunity for ‘FRAUD’

For those of us who work in fraud investigation, the pattern is familiar. The location changes; the playbook does not. The fraudster tries to create urgency, authority, confusion or social pressure

before the traveller has time to verify. The answer is not to become suspicious of everyone. It is to ‘travel with a simple risk discipline’: identify exposure, verify before paying, limit what can be lost, and preserve evidence if something goes wrong.

THE TRAP SEQUENCE

1. **HOOK:** Bargain • Helpful stranger • Alert • “Official” message

↓

2. **PRESSURE:** Urgency • Authority • Scarcity • Embarrassment

↓

3. **PAYMENT:** Transfer • QR • Card • Cash • Personal data

↓

4. **EXIT:** Disappearance • Denial • Duplicate ticket • Another demand

The Fraudster's Advantage: Four Things Travel Changes

Travel temporarily removes four protections we normally take for granted: **familiarity with prices, confidence in local rules, control over time, and easy access to our usual support network.** Add tiredness, luggage, children, language barriers, patchy connectivity and the excitement of a new place, and even an experienced professional can be nudged into a poor decision.

- **Urgency:** “Pay now, the room, cab or ticket will be gone in five minutes.”
- **Authority:** uniforms, official-looking badges, government-style websites, fake police or “tourism desk” claims.
- **Convenience:** off-platform payment, a link sent on WhatsApp, an ATM helper, or a shortcut that bypasses normal verification.
- **Embarrassment pressure:** the traveller hesitates to challenge a driver, guide, shopkeeper or counter staff for fear of appearing rude or

uninformed.

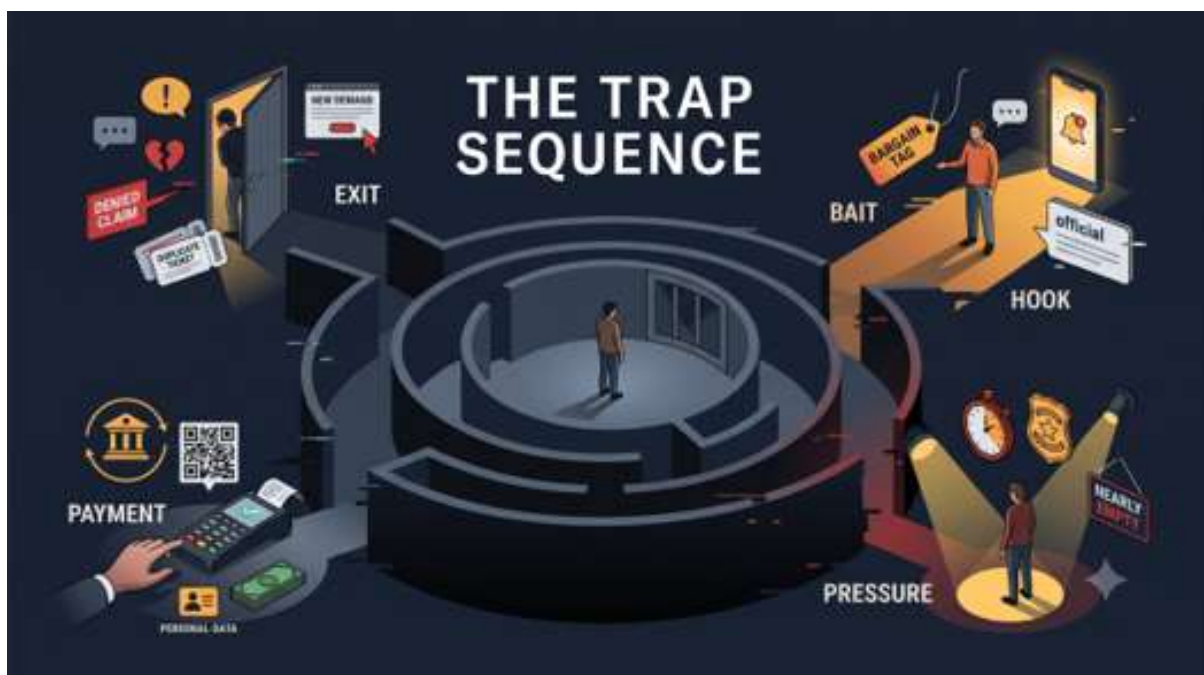
In fraud terms, these are engineered reductions in decision quality. The first defence is therefore not a gadget. It is a pause long enough to verify.

Domestic Travel: The Indian Tourist Trap Playbook

1. Fake Homestays, Villas and “Owner Direct” Deals

The photographs are excellent, the price is unusually attractive, and the “owner” wants a quick deposit outside the booking platform. Sometimes a real property listing has simply been copied and the contact details replaced. A traveller discovers the fraud only when reaching the address or when the real owner says there is no booking.

Control: Verify the address independently, check recent reviews across more than one source, speak to the property through the platform, and resist a request to move payment to a personal account merely to “save commission.”



2. The UPI “Refund” or QR-Code Trap

A common social-engineering trick is to make the victim believe a QR code or UPI PIN is required to receive money. NPCI warns that scanning a QR code and entering a UPI PIN is for making a payment, not receiving one. Never enter a UPI PIN because someone says it is needed for a refund, cashback or “verification.”

3. The Guide–Shop–Commission Circuit

A sightseeing stop becomes an “exclusive government emporium,” a gemstone investment, a carpet warehouse, a handicraft demonstration or a mandatory detour. The issue is not that every shop is dishonest; the risk is that the traveller has no way to know whether the recommendation is independent or commission-driven. Treat “fixed government price,” “tax-free today only” or “investment-grade gem” as prompts for verification, not buying signals.

4. VIP Darshan, Skip-the-Line and Permit Shortcuts

Pilgrimage centres, monuments, wildlife areas and high-demand attractions create a perfect scarcity narrative. Fraudsters exploit it with unofficial “VIP” passes, forged permits, duplicate QR tickets and promises of entry through a side gate. If the attraction has an official booking portal or counter, start there and verify whether authorised resellers exist.

5. The Tourist-as-a-Target Payment Moment

At restaurants, fuel stations, souvenir shops and transport counters, ‘distraction’ can lead to card swapping, duplicate charging, altered amounts or a QR code belonging to a different payee. Before authorising, read the merchant/payee name and amount on your own screen. Keep the card in sight and turn on instant transaction alerts.

International Travel: Same Psychology, Different Costume

1. Visa and Immigration Look-Alike Websites

Official portals are frequently imitated by sites that look governmental but are actually intermediaries

charging high service fees or worse, harvesting passport and card data. For India’s e-Visa, the Government states that indianvisaonline.gov.in/evisa/ is the official portal and warns against agents promising “speedy” or “express” grant of e-Visa. Use the same habit for every destination: reach the visa page from the embassy, immigration department or official government site rather than from an advertisement.

2. Sponsored-Search Impersonation

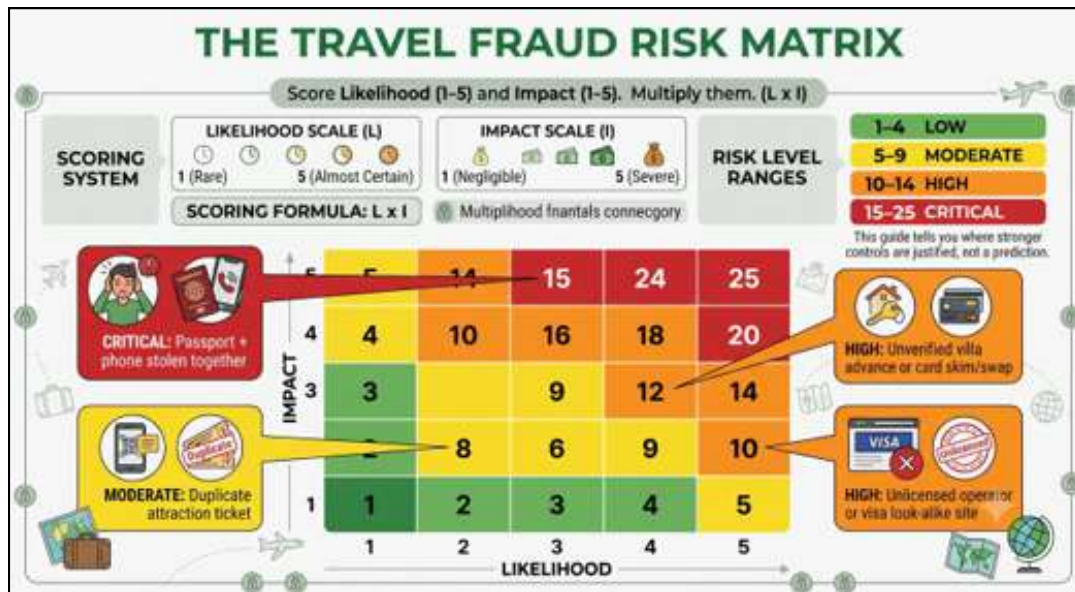
A traveller searches for an airline, hotel or booking company, clicks the first sponsored result and calls a number shown beside a familiar brand name. In 2026, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission again warned that scammers use paid search ads and look-alike sites to impersonate travel companies. A safer habit is to type the known company address directly or use its official app.

3. Dynamic Currency Conversion - The Expensive Convenience

At an overseas card terminal or ATM, you may be offered a choice: pay in the local currency or convert immediately into your home currency. This is Dynamic Currency Conversion (DCC). Visa notes that DCC can include an exchange-rate markup and additional fees, and that the customer must be given a choice. Compare the offered rate and costs; paying in local currency usually avoids the merchant/ATM’s DCC conversion, although your own card issuer may still charge foreign transaction fees.

4. The “Helpful” ATM Stranger

A stranger offers help because the machine is “different here.” That help can become shoulder-surfing, card swapping or distraction while cash is taken. Prefer bank-owned ATMs in well-lit locations, cover the keypad, refuse unsolicited assistance and leave if the slot or keypad looks tampered with.



The Travel Fraud Risk Matrix

5. Attraction Tickets That Work - Until They Don't

A genuine-looking QR code can be copied and sold to several buyers. The first person through the gate gets in; the rest discover that the code has already been used. For high-value or timed-entry attractions, buy from the attraction or an authorised reseller, keep the original confirmation email, and avoid screenshots sold by anonymous social-media accounts.

The Travel Fraud Risk Matrix

Score Likelihood from 1 (Rare) to 5 (Almost Certain), and Impact from 1 (Negligible) to 5 (Severe). Multiply the two. A practical guide: 1-4 Low, 5-9 Moderate, 10-14 High, 15-25 Critical. The score is not a prediction; it tells you where stronger controls are justified.

Illustrative scoring:

- ~ **15 Critical:** Passport + phone stolen together (L3 x I5);
- ~ **12 High:** Unverified villa advance or card skim/swap (L3 x I4);
- ~ **10 High:** Unlicensed operator or visa look-alike site (L2 x I5);
- ~ **9 Moderate:** UPI/QR social-engineering fraud (L3 x I3);
- ~ **8 Moderate:** Duplicate attraction ticket (L4 x I2).

Controls follow the score so, design, test & deploy

The 60-Second Personal Risk Assessment: P-TRAP

Before leaving the hotel, boarding a vehicle or beginning a high-value activity, run a quick **P-TRAP** check.

- **P — Profile:** Who is travelling? Solo, family, elderly parents, children, medical needs, language barriers, first-time international traveller?
- **T — Terrain:** How familiar is the destination? What are the transport, connectivity, crowd, weather and local-law issues?
- **R — Resources:** How are money, cards, passport, phone, medicines and backups distributed? Can one loss disable the whole trip?
- **A — Activity:** Routine sightseeing, nightlife, trekking, water sports, a remote drive or a cash-heavy purchase all change the risk.
- **P — Plan B:** If the primary phone, card, transport or accommodation fails tonight, what is the recovery route?

The key principle is 'separation'. Do not let a single wallet, bag or phone hold every critical asset. A passport, primary card, backup card, all cash and the only copy of insurance details should not travel together.

Forex: Treat the Exchange Counter Like a Financial Transaction, Not a Souvenir Stop

For Indian residents, the Reserve Bank of India states that forex transactions should be undertaken only with **authorised persons and for permitted purposes**. RBI's money-changing directions also require licensed money changers to **display their licence and exchange-rate chart**. Use an authorised bank / dealer / Full Fledged Money Changer, compare the net rate after fees, and take a receipt or cash memo.

- Avoid **street exchangers** and “better rate” offers from strangers or unverified shops.
- **Count cash at the counter**, check denominations, and do not allow the notes to **disappear from view** after you have counted them.
- **Carry more than one payment method**: modest cash, a primary card/forex card, and a separately stored backup card.
- Use **transaction alerts** and **set sensible daily limits** before departure.
- At overseas ATMs and card terminals, **read the currency choice carefully**. Decline DCC if the offered conversion is unattractive; choose local currency when you want your issuer/network to perform the conversion.

Booking Attractions: Five Questions Before You Pay

- Is this the attraction's official website or an authorised reseller listed by the attraction?
- Does the URL/domain exactly match the organisation not merely its logo and colours?
- Are the date, time slot, entry gate, ID requirements and cancellation rules shown before payment?
- Does the payment page remain on a trusted domain, and does the merchant/payee name make sense?
- Will I receive a booking ID or ticket that can be independently verified not just a forwarded screenshot?

Now If You Are ‘Hit’: The First 15 Minutes Matter

1. Stop the Loss

Block or freeze the affected card, contact the bank, disable compromised UPI/payment access, change critical passwords from a trusted device, and remotely lock a stolen phone where possible. Do not wait if credentials may be compromised.

2. Preserve the Evidence

Save screenshots, URLs, phone numbers, WhatsApp chats, UPI IDs, QR images, booking confirmations, receipts, vehicle numbers, location data, names/descriptions and transaction IDs. Write a short chronology while the sequence is fresh.

3. Report Quickly

In India, the **National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal** directs victims of cyber financial fraud to call **1930** for immediate reporting. The national emergency number is **112**. The Ministry of Tourism's 24x7 multilingual Tourist Helpline is **1363 / 1800-11-1363** for travel information and assistance in distress.

Abroad, contact the card issuer and booking platform through verified channels; report theft or deception to local police when appropriate; inform the travel insurer; and contact the nearest Indian embassy/consulate if identity documents, safety or legal issues are involved.

4. Do Not Chase the Scammer

A financial loss can become a **physical-safety incident** if a traveller confronts an organised group, follows a suspect into an unfamiliar area or accepts a “refund meeting.” Preserve evidence and let the appropriate authority, platform or bank handle recovery.

The Seven Red Flags I Would Never Ignore

- A demand to leave the official platform and pay a personal account.

- A price dramatically below the market with a deadline measured in minutes.
- A “refund” that requires a PIN, OTP, screen-sharing app or remote access.
- A service provider who refuses to provide a written rate, receipt, licence or booking ID.
- A website reached from an ad that asks for passport or card details before you have verified the domain.

Travel Risk Management: Build Resilience, Not Paranoia

Good risk management does not mean **eliminating** every uncertainty. That would eliminate ‘travel’ itself. **It means ensuring that one bad event does not cascade into five.** A stolen phone should not also mean losing all cards, all booking records and access to your email. A fraudulent ticket should not consume the entire holiday budget. A taxi dispute should not become a confrontation in an isolated place.

Think in layers: Prevent — Verify — Limit — Recover.

- Prevent what you reasonably can.
- Verify high-value or irreversible decisions.
- Limit the amount exposed to any single transaction.
- Build a recovery plan before you need it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lt Col Omkar Kulkarni (Retd)

Lt Col Omkar Kulkarni was commissioned into the Regiment of Artillery in 2005 and had over two decades of distinguished service. He served with elite formations including Parachute and Missile units. His experience a strong blend of tactical and technical expertise. After 20 years of service, he opted for PMR & at present he is associated with the Fin-Crime & Fraud Investigation Vertical.



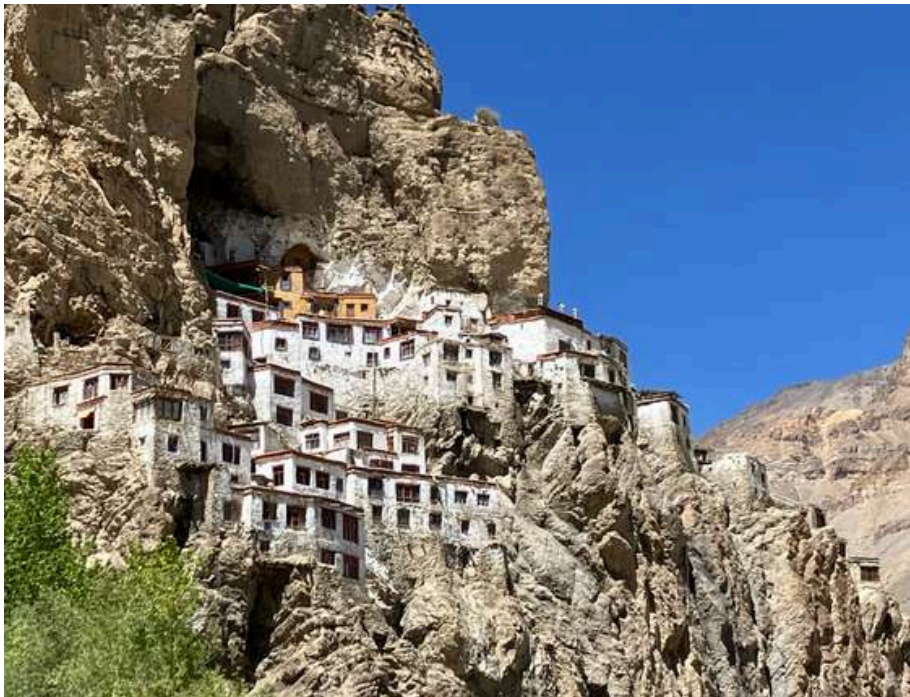
The Hymm and Humm of Phuktal Monastery and Its Centrality to The Spread of Buddhism

Col Diganta Choudhury

Perched atop a limestone cliff side at 3950 metres (12960 feet) in the very remote Lungnak valley of Zaskar, Ladakh, the Phuktal (also Phugtal) Monastery stands pristine and majestic in the rugged Himalayan landscape, since the 12th century. As I feasted my tired eyes for the very first time at this magnificent structure, having reached there after a hard day's trek from Cha village, I was mesmerised by its beauty and

simplicity. The aura and mysticism of the hallowed structure enveloped me and my fellow companions. Phuk (meaning a cave) –Tal (at leisure or liberation) truly signifies the monastery's role as a place for spiritual retreat and liberation.

Located 52 kms Southeast of Padum (visited by His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama on July 20, 2025), the Phuktal Monastery was constructed in the 12th century and is a marvel of design and structural



The first glimpse of the monastery (photo by the author)

tenacity. It resembles a honeycomb structure and has been constructed in a manner to provide an optimal balance between strength, weight and material usage.

The cliff where it has been constructed, is part of a lateral gorge of a major tributary of the Lungnak river and despite being one of the oldest monasteries in the world, it has withstood the vagaries of time.

The History and Lineage

The Phuktal Monastery itself was established in the 12th century by Jangsen Sherap Zangpo (1395-1457), a disciple of Tsong Khapa Losang Drakpa, the founder of the Geluk school of Buddhism in Tibet. Over centuries, it earned its reputation as a seat of learning and spirituality due largely to some remarkable men who came from afar and made it their home. It is believed that one of the earliest residents of the cave were the sixteen legendary followers of Buddha, also called the 16 Arhats (those who had extinguished all defilements); remarkably, I found the images of the 16 Arhats on the cave walls of the monastery. Padmasambhava (also called Guru Rinpoche), the Tantrist and revered for his role in introducing Buddhism in Tibet lived in the monastery. Phakspa Nestan Dusdan, a spiritual scholar, also lived in the cave of the Phuktal. Three brothers and scholars, Dangsong, Pun and Sum, who had supernatural powers of flight, gave teachings on Dharma at Phuktal. It is believed that when Jangsen Sherap Zangpo arrived at the Phuktal, the three brothers bequeathed the holy site to him and departed. It is

further believed that Losang Drakpa caused a spring to appear and run from the cave. The spring exists, as I bore witness to it during my visit. All of these learned men and hallowed travellers were instrumental in spreading Buddhist teachings and monasticism as a way of life. Sandor Korosi Csoma (1784-1842), the Hungarian philologist and orientalist stayed in Phuktal monastery from 1826-27 and authored the first Tibetan-English dictionary; he is considered the founder of Tibetology. It is truly remarkable that such learned men and intrepid travellers made it their life's quest to travel to the remote Phuktal monastery and spread Buddhist culture, teachings and tradition.

The Phuktal Monastery today houses a main temple, prayer rooms, a library with rare sacred texts, apartments and living quarters, teaching facilities and the kitchen. The original spring is protected. As we walked through the labyrinth, awestruck, we were informed that there were about 70 monks of various age groups. There is also a medicine man, a healer adept in Tibetan ways of healing. He provides community engagement and healthcare to people from neighbouring areas. We were also given access to the main prayer hall and witnessed the monks' chanting prayers from the holy scriptures with the hymn and hum reverberating through the ancient stone walls. There were child-monks amongst them, but they participated in the prayers chanting and meditation with serenity and a sense of divinity. These child-monks undergo rigorous training in Buddhist teachings, in the process learning discipline, self-sufficiency and take on the monastic life with a sense of pride.



The intricate layout of the monastery.



A monk through the labyrinth.

The Geluk Tradition

Interestingly, while Buddhism was introduced in Tibet by Shakyamuni Buddha (the founder of Buddhism) and Padmasambhava, the Geluk school of Buddhism came to India from Tibet when Jangsen Sherpa Zangpo founded the Phuktal Monastery (as well as the Thiksey monastery in Leh). Considered the most modern amongst all Buddhist philosophies, the Geluk tradition stresses the importance of observation of the Vinaya (Vinaya refers to the guidelines for monks, focusing on ethical behaviour and conduct in the community), as primary base for practices of Sutra and Tantra. Hence, the Geluk school put a lot of emphasis on monasticism where monks observe Vinaya ethical codes, to gain full understanding of the Sutra and Tantra teachings of the Buddha.

The Mystic of The Monastery

The Phuktal monastery stands as a cultural beacon, straddling centuries of austerity, healing and faith. It has steadfastly served as a centre for spiritual learning. The Gelukpa school of Tibetan Buddhism has contributed to its enduring influence as a retreat for Buddhist philosophy and practice in the entire region and far beyond. It has had metamorphic effect on scholars like Sandor Korosi Csoma, who made it his life's mission to record and spread its teachings till his death in Darjeeling.

The monastery stands tall amidst the stark mountainous landscape, with its hoary past, guiding the visitors to reflect on the Buddhist philosophies of tolerance, gratitude and ethics. In today's world full of growing intolerance, greed and hate, the Phuktal monastery stands as a beacon of faith and hope.

Postscript:

Best Route: Leh to Padum via Kargil or along the Nimmu-Padum axis (my recommendation as I have not come across a grander and scenic route). Will take approximately 8-9 hours. Spend the night at Padum.

Padum to Purne or Cha village (approximately 52 kms, good road). Thereafter, walk to the monastery (took me 6 hours). Pure bliss thereafter!





Enroute to the monastery

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Col Diganta Choudhury

Commissioned in June 1986 in 15 PUNJAB (PATIALA), Col Diganta Choudhury has had a distinguished career spanning over three decades. He has had multiple stints in High Altitude and Counter Insurgency operations and has commanded an Assam Rifles battalion. In fact, the Officer has had eight stints in the state of Jammu and Kashmir spanning nineteen years. Post retirement, the Officer has been part of a security and strategic consultancy think-tank and writes extensively on military technology and strategic security environment.



Smart Global Travel: The Ultimate Guide

Planning Foreign Travel Smartly: A Practical Guide For Serving And Veterans Travellers

Brig Krishna Raj Nambiar

*The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step...
Lao Tse from chapter 64 of the 'Tao Te Ching'*

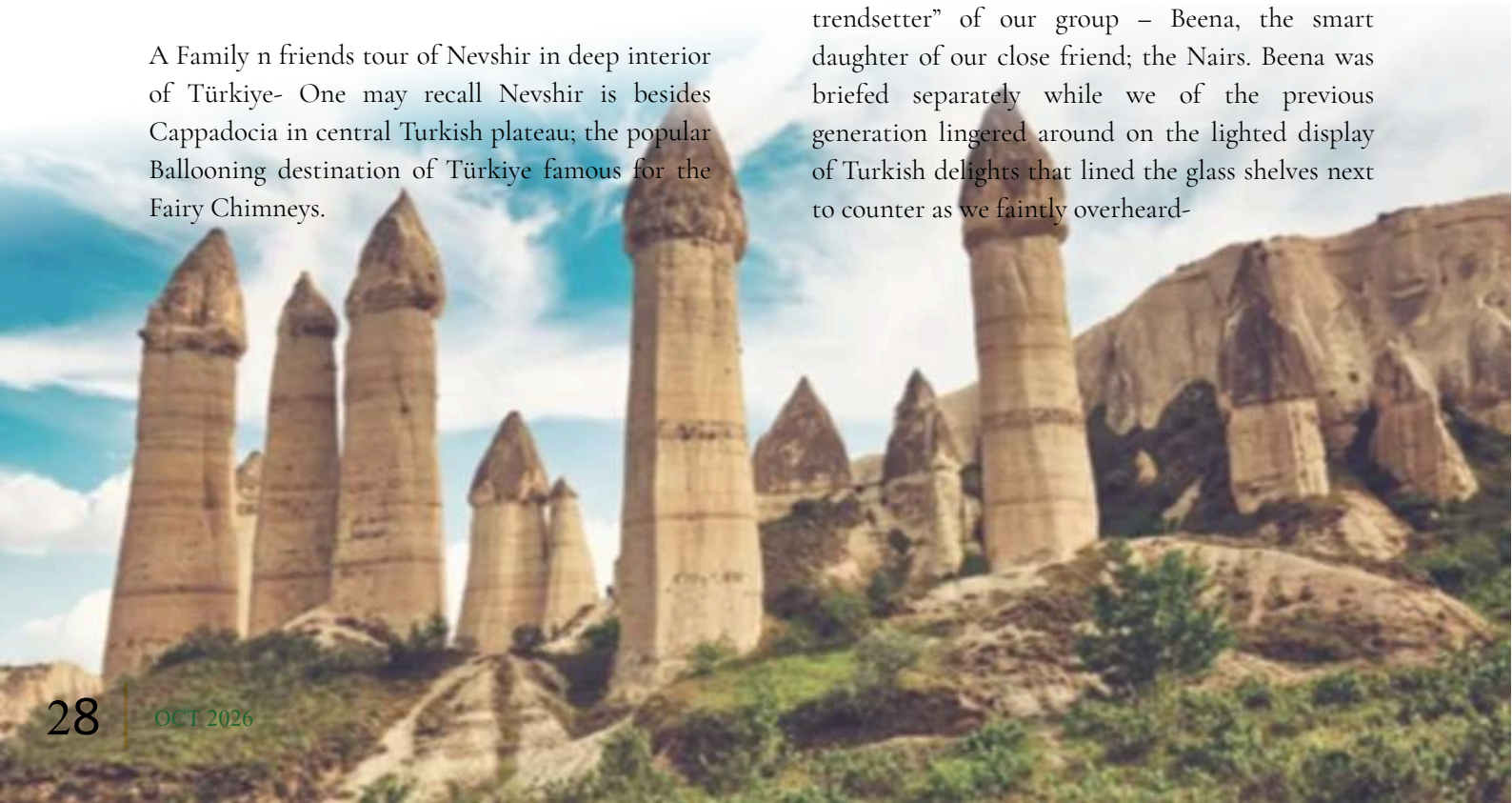
Having been to eleven nations across the world as a tourist and that too as a self-organised planned traveller on one's own terms, one has learnt the hard way and have a few anecdotes to share and bits of advice to render. This work attempts to set a systematic approach to planning a global getaway that is safe, relatively budget-friendly, and packed with unforgettable experiences, along with essential foreign-clearance insights tailored specifically for the military community. YOLO !

Entrée

A Family n friends tour of Nevshir in deep interior of Türkiye- One may recall Nevshir is besides Cappadocia in central Turkish plateau; the popular Ballooning destination of Türkiye famous for the Fairy Chimneys.

The Tuzda Tavuk story – of the “Baked Turkish Salt Chicken”. Some time back in the later part of 2022 our small group of five stumbled into a small elegantly low arched entrance and well laid out ‘Tavaci Restaurant’ in the tourist buzzing town of Nevshir, the town famous for two great destinations the Fairy Chimneys and Sheltered Caves. After a tiring day, we were looking for moderately priced but authentic local cuisine.

Hoş gel Diniz! Welcome... The burly and cheerful head host was visibly relieved at our arrival. He then instinctively homed on to the “travel trendsetter” of our group – Beena, the smart daughter of our close friend; the Nairs. Beena was briefed separately while we of the previous generation lingered around on the lighted display of Turkish delights that lined the glass shelves next to counter as we faintly overheard-





the 'Tuzdaa Tavuk' a legendary baked Chicken dish, the star item of our restaurant and it's been baking for past three hours in crusted salt and egg yolk dough, and wonder of wonders, it is finished baking just now BUT Only available on prior day order. The Good News for you - this American family who placed this order thru their guide Ms Pinar, their flight got cancelled /delayed and will now arrive only tomorrow. Since it's moderate tourist season the item is a bit on the expensive side as far as common fare goes, that owing to Salt & Eggs yolkcrust baking separately in a reserved oven. You'll not regret this madam...and will forever recall" . (Aptly prophesised - We still Do so...)

Beena came over and relayed the same – we go into a huddle like the Chak De team in blue- and Risky Shift Phenomenon took over – we decided to go for it! It was after all falling into our lap- Luckily!!

The Tuzda Tavuc

The huge plate was carried by two chefs, the small hill like baked chicken was bought in like a trophy. It was good from the word GO; the crust split ever so lightly like the legendary Vesuvius wanting to erupt. A cute mallet was handed over to Beena to break open the crust of the chicken Hill. And slowly as the salt and egg dough crust broke away the gourmet delight a glistening Red Ochre chicken emerged, Steaming... The honeydew shine on the chicken surface doubled our appetite. We devoured it with gusto and blessed the manager in broken Turkish- **Hoş bulduk!** Thanks Türkiye.

And soon we came off with much lighter pockets – it was expensive, no doubt but then you don't get so lucky every-time, with the Americans skipping the order. What a classic Dish! What chicken and what fragrant rice!

The silent Wake-up call- Next day while walking through the same area we saw through the window glass a Sri Lankan family being taken for a similar RIDE and the Hill chicken – Tuzda Tavuc, there was no American family order after all. The restaurateurs are past masters of tourist psychology! So the reader would have seen the Perspective that I'm driving at. You are the Chosen One !!



Flashback- 1985 NDA - Sudan Block. Major AP Singh's voice rang out in some distant memory...'Remember the first Principle of Military campaign – **Selection and maintenance of Aim!** Select an Aim and stick to it throughout!" If the aim is Budget meals then so be it.

Cheer Up friends -No Gourmet delight is budget friendly – Nor is the Tuzda Tavuk'. It is advisable thus to keep a good bit aside for the 'Cuisine' in planning Stage itself. YOLO ...

Now for the Serious Stuff...

Nuances of Foreign Travel - Foreign travel from India has become far more accessible over the last decade, but mind you, accessibility is not the same as ease. Between visa regimes, currency fluctuations, and the sheer number of moving parts in an international itinerary, a trip can either be a well-executed operation or a series of avoidable, expensive mistakes. Having been to eleven Nations across the world that too as a self-organised planned traveller on one's own steam, one has a few anecdotes. Through twenty odd years of travel; A few lingering thoughts one reminisces and wishes to share here for the benefit of my friends and brothers in Arms.

For serving officers and veterans, planning is second nature. You are trained to execute missions

with discipline, account for contingencies, and master every operational detail. Apply that same strategic mindset to an international vacation, and the payoff is extraordinary. Remember the contingency plan, if you carry an Umbrella it generally doesn't rain !

Whether you are active-duty or enjoying retirement, a seamless foreign trip requires more than just booking a flight—it takes smart recon and tactical execution. And yes, international travel to a destination has to be smart guys; with Transit Visa ... getting there is Half the fun !

There are six Mantras to a good trip that is sprinkled like dew covered all through in this article.

- Plan everything Six months Prior- prices are downright reasonable!
- Plan with a tour guide mindset – internal travels abroad best planned from regional portal.
- Choose a good airline – the Aura of travel is an experience by itself !
- Plan a good stop-over if globe-trotting, it helps stave off the Jet lag.
- Stay in the thick of the city; be it Venice or



Ballooning at Cappadocia

Florence; soak in the pizzazz of the town.

- Keep your papers close to your heart; passport loss can be painful ruin of the whole trip.

I. Advance Planning: The Foundation- This first step needs to be taken well six months prior to your trip.

Passport validity. Most countries require a passport valid for at least six months beyond the date of return, and some insist on two blank pages. Check this the day you decide to travel, not the week before departure. Renewal through Passport Seva can take anywhere from a week to over a month depending on police verification status, so build in margin.

The Visage of the Visa

While India's visa-free or visa-on-arrival access has expanded (Thailand, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and several others allow easier entry for Indian passport holders, though rules change periodically and must be reconfirmed on the relevant embassy website before booking), the visa regimes are vastly different when you travel to the Western developed countries zone. For visa-required countries such as the Schengen zone, the UK, or Australia, apply at least 6–8 weeks ahead, since appointment slots at VFS or embassy centres often run weeks in advance, especially during peak season (April–June and October–December). The US visa regime is a different zone and it would be advisable to apply for US Visa right now, once one receives US visa in the appropriate time frame the grant is usually valid for a 10 year period. Keep digital and printed copies of the visa approval, invitation letters, hotel bookings, and return tickets, since immigration officers abroad frequently ask for these even with a valid visa.

Travel Insurance. This is non-negotiable, not optional. A policy covering medical emergencies, hospitalisation, trip cancellation, baggage loss, and evacuation typically costs ₹800–₹2,500 for a two-week trip depending on destination and traveller age — a minor treatment at a foreign hospital, the

bill can run into lakhs. Schengen countries mandate a minimum insurance cover (usually €30,000); confirm your policy meets this explicitly, not just in spirit.

ECHS and AFMS medical cover does not extend overseas, so this insurance is the only safety net abroad.

Foreign Exchange. Carry a mix: a forex card loaded with the destination currency (locks in the exchange rate and avoids repeated conversion charges), a small amount of physical currency (₹15,000–₹25,000 equivalent) for the first day's transport and food before you can access banking, and one international-enabled debit/credit card as backup. [Disable proximity pay on your card, always swipe.](#)

Compare rates across banks and licensed forex dealers rather than airport counters, which typically charge 3–6% above market rate. Under RBI's Liberalised Remittance Scheme, resident Indians can remit up to USD 250,000 per financial year for personal travel, which is more than adequate for the vast majority of holidays.

Flight Bookings and documentation. Book flights and the first few nights of accommodation before departure; keep the rest flexible if your itinerary allows exploration. Maintain a single folder (physical and cloud-based) containing passport copies, visa, insurance policy, hotel confirmations, flight tickets, ID proof, and emergency contacts.

Air Tickets. Book 4–5 months ahead for the best fares; last-minute bookings inside 3 weeks are almost always the most expensive. Use fare-alert tools, compare Tuesday/Wednesday departures (typically cheaper), and check whether a connecting flight through a hub (Dubai, Doha, Singapore) beats a direct fare significantly —



often it does, at the cost of a few extra hours. It would be surprising to note that the route to San Francisco from Doha goes over the Russian Siberia and the North pole all across Canadian wild to reach west coast of USA. Cheaper tickets available at 15 k lesser if you are ready to have a 10 hour long halt at Doha etc.

Email this folder to yourself and share access with one trusted family member who is not travelling with you.

Vaccinations. Yellow fever vaccination is mandatory for entry into several African and South American countries if arriving from India or transiting through a risk country — carry the International Certificate of Vaccination. For Southeast Asia and parts of Africa, consult a travel clinic 4–6 weeks before departure regarding Hepatitis A/B, typhoid, and Japanese encephalitis, depending on itinerary and duration.

Emergency contacts. Note the Indian Embassy or High Commission's address and 24-hour helpline for every country on the itinerary. Register your travel on the MEA's MADAD portal, which allows Indian missions abroad to track and assist citizens in distress.

2. Considerations Specific to Military Personnel

Permissions. Serving personnel must obtain the requisite No Objection Certificate or leave sanction through the chain of command before applying for a foreign visa, particularly for countries requiring security clearance or where postings involve access to classified material. This

process can take longer than a civilian's visa application, so factor it into the planning timeline well before booking non-refundable tickets.

Security awareness. Avoid discussing unit location, current posting, operational details, or service specifics with strangers, including friendly locals or fellow travellers met during the trip. This applies equally to conversations in hotels, tour groups, and online forums.

Uniforms and Identification. Do not carry or wear uniform items, rank insignia, or unit merchandise while travelling abroad on personal visits, and avoid producing your Defence ID card as identification in casual settings — a passport suffices for all civilian purposes overseas.

Photography Restrictions. Many countries prohibit photography near airports, ports, government buildings, military installations, and border areas — rules that are stricter and less forgiving toward foreign nationals with any perceived military connection. When in doubt, do not photograph; ask a local guide or check signage.

Beware ! Adverse impact of Social Media. Avoid real-time location tagging, especially near sensitive infrastructure, and be conservative about posting details that reveal service

affiliation, travel patterns, or family information publicly. Many personnel prefer to post trip photos only after returning home.

Local Laws. Research the destination's laws regarding dual citizenship declarations, currency limits, dress codes, and restricted zones. Ignorance of local law is not a valid defence anywhere, and the consequences for defence personnel — who may face administrative scrutiny back home — can extend beyond the immediate legal penalty.

3. Relatively Budget-Friendly Travel Without Compromising Experience

Season and timing. Shoulder season (just before or after a destination's peak season) offers 30–50% lower airfare and hotel rates with only marginally different weather. Europe in early April or late September, Southeast Asia just after monsoon, and the Gulf outside the summer heat are all examples where value peaks without much comfort trade-off. Accommodation. Book well in advance and book with reputed sites or go to the hotel site. Do read reviews— some budget hotels simply deny accommodation and show ignorance of the Booking .com references. While booking do call up on given number and check response; take down names of the desk holder.

Where to Stay - Believe me by experience ; book early 5- 6 months and live in the thick of the City – your local travel costs will be a song. See the city life – Paris - the neighbourhood wine and bread store with Roast chicken ready, the French neighbourhood laundry where students sit reading a book as the clothes turns lazily above the trundle. Live in Chiswick, London By the Thames, the two room set, the landlords - Patels, the small sunrise cafes nearby serving English breakfast. You sitting on wooden benches in the cobble sidewalks zone to feel the rays of rising Sun streaking through the buildings of suburban high rise and shining down on the plum like fried Tomato alongside the glistening buttered Chestnut brown swollen mouth-watering sausages. See the City life up close - not to mention the convenience of the local tube /transport zooming about all around you...

Air BNB is a bridge too far sometimes. Otherwise as a counterview a mix of budget hotels, well-reviewed guesthouses, and short-term rentals (Airbnb-type platforms) usually beats chain hotels on cost without compromising safety, provided reviews and host verification are checked carefully. For families or groups, an apartment with a kitchenette also cuts food costs substantially. But you will miss the essence of the destination City if you stay far out. Book Early

Tourist Passes. Each city has a conducive pass system for tourists. London for one has a London Pass which includes a One day “Hop On - Hop off” tour ride and 80 plus attractions. Similar facilities exist in many of the tourist locations. Underground rail or the tube could be a different package, one size may not fit all. So then one has an Oyster card in London that is a carte blanche for all transportation, but then no free tourist spots – entry . Read the fine line or watch some you-tube videos of the city tourist feedback- it is worth it.

Transport. Then one has Singapore's EZ-Link, or Japan Rail Pass for multi-city Japan trips are classic examples of essential rather than optional spending, since they directly reduce daily cost. If you plan an out of way trip like a chateau with vineyards tour, timings are given clearly at bus stops and some smaller chateau in Europe have scant taxis. Beware you may end up doing a lot of walking!

Food. Eating where locals eat — markets, small eateries, standing bars in Europe, hawker centres in Southeast Asia — costs a fraction of tourist-zone restaurants and is usually more authentic. Reserve one or two "special" restaurant meals as a deliberate treat rather than defaulting to restaurant dining for every meal. Its expensive but cuisine is a star point in most of the foreign travel. If you plan well in



A Winery in Istanbul and Seafood platter in Santorini

advance the savings of stay costs can be translated in to food- keep 20% for Food; you will enjoy.

Attraction Passes. City tourist cards bundling entry to multiple museums, monuments, and sometimes transport can be worthwhile if you are visiting 4 or more paid attractions, but calculate the actual per-attraction cost against the pass price before buying — they are not always cheaper for a light sightseeing pace.

Get a guide. When travelling to heritage sites like the Musee de Orsee or the Louvre in Paris or the Works of Michelangelo in Florence or the Vatican, visiting the Sistine chapel, The Creation of man painted by Michelangelo, get a qualified and organised guide to open up the silent spectacles. There are guides with good review- select with care; it is worth the effort.

4. Bucket-List Planning: Prioritise and Cluster

Identify the destination's 5-10 genuinely unmissable experiences before building the day-by-day itinerary — for instance, in Italy plan for a week with four spots Venice, Florence, Rome and San Gimignano in Tuscany. Though lesser heard; Gimignano, the walled town of Tuscany with its 14 standing towers and flat bread Pizzas is a must see. San Gimignano's pizza tradition evolved from a long history of local flatbreads.

Or in the US do the east or west coast. In the West Coast there's the SFO, Grand Canyon, the famous

US route 66 and Hoover Dam not to mention the town of Las Vegas to cover in one beat. Good plans cater for fatigue factor too. Don't forget that.

5. Practical Planning Tools

Timeline (for a 3-6 month lead trip):

- **5-6 months out:** Decide destination, check visa requirements and NOC process (if serving), start passport renewal if needed. Book early and moderate accommodation in the thick of the city.
- **3-4 months out:** Book flights, apply for visa, purchase travel insurance, start saving for forex.
- **2 months out:** Plan rough itinerary, check vaccination needs.
- **1 month out:** Buy forex/load forex card, finalise day-wise itinerary, confirm activity bookings.
- **1-2 weeks out:** Pack, photocopy documents, inform bank of travel dates, register on MADAD portal.

Daily budget framework Accommodation ₹10 k per day Food ₹ 5,000/- local transport ₹500-₹1,000, activities/entry fees ₹800-₹1,500, miscellaneous ₹500. This gives a working daily range of roughly ₹15-18,000 depending on destination, excluding international flights, which should be budgeted separately and often

represent 30–40% of total trip cost.

Packing checklist essentials: passport and visa copies, insurance documents, forex card and backup card, universal adapter, basic medicines, weather-appropriate clothing, comfortable walking footwear, a physical printout of key bookings, and a small daypack for daily excursions.

Contingency Fund: Keep 10–15% of the total trip budget aside, untouched, for unplanned expenses — a missed connection, an unexpected medical need, or simply an experience worth the splurge. This fund is what separates a stressful trip from a smoothly managed one when something inevitably does not go to plan.

Conclusion

The rationale behind international travel spans personal, cultural, economic, and psychological dimensions. At its core, leaving one's home country satisfies the fundamental human desire for growth, connection, and perspective. Take a flashback to Aristotle; the Logos ethos and Pathos of a foreign trip. Aristotle's three core modes of persuasion defined by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle to convince an audience. Here is a comprehensive breakdown of why individuals and societies engage in international travel. Every traveller who steps off Indian soil carries three silent companions:-

- Logos, the planner's mind that studies visas, budgets, and timelines with the precision of a mission briefing, refusing to let excitement outrun preparation.
- Ethos, the traveller's character abroad — the quiet discipline of respecting local laws, honouring another culture's customs, and representing not just oneself but one's country and, for those in uniform, one's service, with dignity even when no one is watching.
- And Pathos, the reason it all matters in the first place — the goosebumps of smelling sulphur at the edge of a Volcanic pit in Santorini, the hush inside a centuries-old temple, the unplanned conversation with a stranger that becomes the story retold for years.

Logos gets you there safely, Ethos ensures you're welcomed back, and Pathos is the only souvenir that never fits in a suitcase yet is the one every traveller truly comes home with.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brig (Dr.) Krishna Raj Nambiar (Retd), Ph D, LLB. PGDHR



The New Age of Travel

WHY HOLIDAYS ARE NO LONGER JUST ABOUT HOLIDAYS?

Major Satnaam Singh

The pandemic may have shut down airports, emptied hotels and brought international tourism to an unprecedented halt, but it also changed something far more fundamental: the way people think about travel.

When travellers returned to the roads, railways and skies, they did not return exactly as before.

The post-COVID traveller is more conscious of time, more selective about experiences and increasingly unwilling to undertake a journey merely to “cover” destinations. The familiar race to visit the maximum number of cities in the minimum number of days is gradually giving way to a different philosophy—**travel with purpose, travel at one's own pace and return with something more than photographs.**

The change is visible across the tourism spectrum. Students are seeking learning beyond the classroom. Corporates are combining meetings with team engagement and leisure. Families are travelling across generations to reconnect. Friends are organising reunions. Retired military personnel are travelling together to revive bonds formed during years of service.

The destination still matters.

But the traveller's question has changed.

It is no longer simply: “Where can I go?”

Increasingly, it is: “What do I want this journey to give me?”

The New Vocabulary Of Holidaying



From Staycations and Fitcations to Military Reunions and Experiential Journeys, post-COVID tourism is being reshaped by a traveller who wants more than a destination

The transformation in tourism has also created a new vocabulary.

A **Staycation**, once considered a modest substitute for a conventional holiday, has become an experience in itself. A weekend at a hotel or resort close to home now offers urban residents an opportunity to disconnect without negotiating airports, long flights or complicated logistics.

Then there is the **Fitcation**, where holidays are combined with physical activity and well-being. Trekking, cycling, yoga, hiking and outdoor pursuits are becoming central to the journey rather than optional additions.

At the other end of the spectrum is what may be described as **Relax Tourism**—a response to increasingly stressful professional and urban lives. Here, the traveller is not looking to complete an exhausting sightseeing programme. The objective is to slow down.

More leisure.

- Fewer hotel check-outs.
- Longer stays.
- Better accommodation.
- And, perhaps most importantly, time to do absolutely nothing.

The idea is increasingly simple: a holiday should not leave a traveller needing another holiday to recover from it.

When Business Goes On Holiday

The boundaries between professional and personal travel are also becoming less rigid.

Bleisure—the combination of business and leisure—has become a familiar concept among corporate travellers. A professional travelling for a conference or meeting may extend the journey by a few days to explore the destination with family or friends.

The **Workation** takes this further.

With remote working and flexible professional structures becoming more widely accepted in some sectors, people are choosing to work temporarily from a resort, hill destination or another city. The office travels with them, and leisure begins when the laptop closes.

Similarly, **Wellness Tourism** is expanding as travellers seek yoga, meditation, spa therapies, nature retreats and opportunities to disconnect from demanding routines.

Slow Tourism, meanwhile, is challenging the old belief that a successful holiday must cover the maximum number of destinations.

The new approach asks a different question:

Why spend six days rushing through five cities when those same six days can be spent understanding one destination better?



For Students, The Classroom Is Expanding

The changing tourism landscape is particularly significant for students.

Educational travel is moving beyond the traditional school excursion. A well-designed journey can combine history, geography, science, culture, adventure and exposure to new ways of life.

Students today can visit museums, universities, industries, historical sites and cultural centres, but the real value of educational travel often lies in what happens between these planned visits.

They learn to move in groups.

- They adapt to unfamiliar surroundings.
- They understand other cultures.
- They become more independent.

They learn that the world outside the classroom is often the most powerful teacher.

However, the growing demand for student travel has also placed greater responsibility on institutions and travel organisers. Safety, accommodation, reliable transportation, emergency support and professional group management are no longer secondary considerations.

The challenge is to ensure that an educational journey is both **inspiring and responsibly managed**.



Corporate Travel Is Becoming More Purposeful

Corporate travel, too, is undergoing a reassessment.

For businesses, travel is no longer merely about moving employees from one city to another. Companies are increasingly evaluating why people need to travel and what the journey is expected to achieve.

This has led to the growth of:

- Corporate offsites
- Incentive travel
- Leadership retreats
- Team-building programmes
- Conferences
- Business-and-leisure extensions

The emphasis is shifting from travel as an expense to travel as an experience with a purpose.

- An incentive journey can motivate.
- An offsite can build teams.
- A leadership retreat can create space for reflection.
- A well-planned corporate gathering can strengthen relationships that may not develop through video calls and emails.

In a world increasingly connected digitally, physical interaction has acquired a new value.





Families Are Travelling To Spend Time Together

For families, the pandemic created another realisation: time together should not always be postponed.

As a result, **multi-generational travel** is gaining importance.

Grandparents, parents and children are increasingly travelling together—not only for holidays but also for birthdays, anniversaries, milestone celebrations and family reunions.

These journeys require a different kind of planning.

- The interests of a teenager may be very different from those of a grandparent. A destination suitable for young children may require more accessible arrangements for senior citizens.
- The modern family holiday therefore demands balance.
- A good itinerary must offer activity without exhaustion, comfort without boredom and flexibility without losing direction.

The most successful family holidays are increasingly those in which every generation finds something meaningful.

The Journey Back To Adventure

Adventure tourism has also moved into the mainstream.

It is no longer limited to extreme sports or professional explorers.



The modern adventure traveller may choose a self-drive journey, a motorcycle expedition, a Himalayan road trip, a wildlife safari, trekking, off-road exploration or simply a road less travelled.

- The appeal lies in participation.
- The traveller does not merely want to look at a mountain.
- They want to drive towards it.
- Walk through it.
- Climb it.
- Or discover what lies beyond it.

This is also where the concept of **experiential tourism** becomes important. Travellers increasingly want to participate rather than simply observe. **They want stories, not just sightseeing.**

The Rise Of Celebration And Reunion Tourism

Another visible trend is the growing desire to travel for occasions.

Birthdays, anniversaries, retirements, destination



weddings, honeymoons and milestone celebrations are increasingly being built around travel.

At the same time, reunion tourism is creating a new emotional dimension.

Schoolmates are returning to destinations together decades after graduation.

College friends are reconnecting.

Former colleagues are travelling to remember the years they spent together.

For the military community, reunion travel carries an even deeper meaning.

A Military Reunion Tour is not simply a group holiday.

It is an opportunity for former comrades to reconnect with people who shared duty, discipline, hardship, humour and defining moments of life.

- The years may pass.
- The uniforms may have changed.
- But the bonds remain.

Travel provides the setting for those bonds to be celebrated again.



The Myth Of The Cheapest Holiday

As tourism becomes more complex, travellers are also becoming more price-conscious.

But the lowest quoted price is not necessarily the lowest-cost holiday.

A cheaper flight may involve inconvenient timings or long connections. A low-priced hotel may be located far from the city centre, increasing transportation costs and reducing available sightseeing time.

The same principle applies to transportation.

A vehicle should not be selected merely because it has a certain number of seats. Luggage capacity, journey duration, passenger comfort and road conditions are equally important.

The traveller planning a holiday should therefore consider the total value of the journey.

The real equation is not:



What is the cheapest option?

It is:

What offers the best value for the money, time and comfort involved?

Plan Early, But Plan Intelligently

Advance planning remains one of the most effective ways to improve travel choices.

Booking early generally provides access to a wider range of:

- Flights
- Hotel categories
- Room types
- Transportation options
- Itinerary choices

The greatest advantage of planning ahead is not always a guaranteed lower fare. It is often the ability to choose.

Flexibility also matters.

Changing travel dates by a few days can sometimes avoid periods of high demand, festivals, long weekends or major events.

A traveller who plans early and remains flexible has more options.

And in tourism, options often create better value.

Cancellations And Refunds: Read Before You Book

One of the most misunderstood areas of travel remains cancellation and refunds.

A traveller may assume that cancelling a journey automatically means receiving the full amount back. The reality is more complicated.

A holiday may involve several independent suppliers:

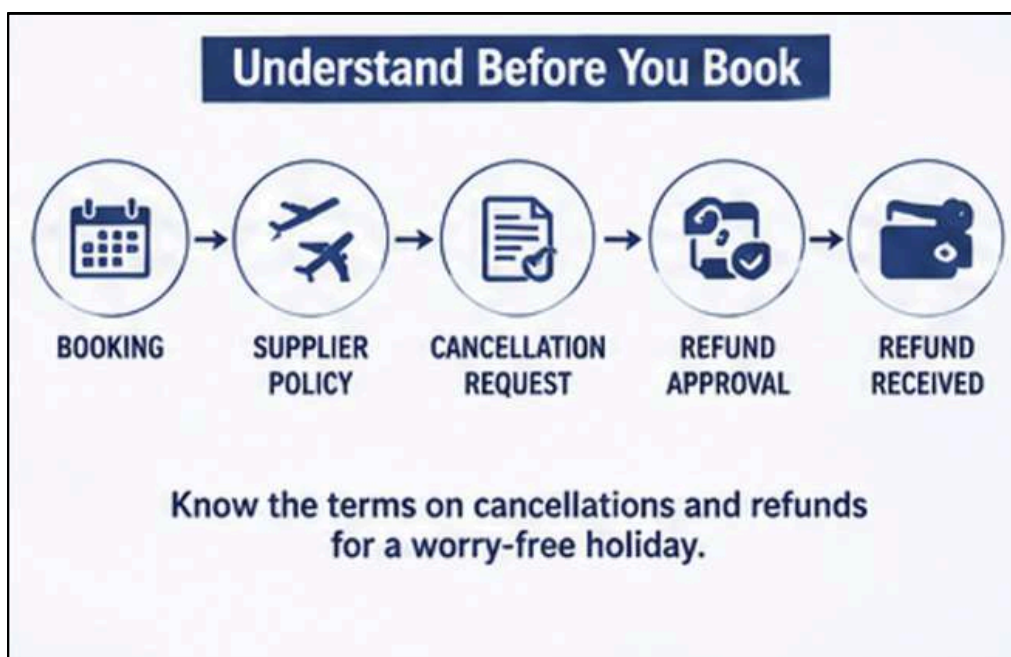
- Airlines
- Hotels
- Cruise operators
- Transport companies
- Attractions
- Overseas partners

Each may operate under different terms.

A booking can be fully refundable, partially refundable, non-refundable or changeable only with a penalty.

- Cancellation charges may depend on how close the cancellation is to the travel date and on the conditions agreed at the time of booking.
- Refunds can also take time because a travel company may first need to receive confirmation and funds from individual suppliers.

The most important advice for travellers is therefore straightforward:



Understand the booking before making the payment.

- Ask what can be changed.
- Ask what can be cancelled.
- Ask what is refundable.
- And ask what happens if circumstances change.
- A holiday planned with clear expectations is far less likely to end in disappointment.

The Future Of Tourism Will Be Personal

The future of tourism will not be defined only by new destinations.

- It will be defined by the reasons people choose to travel.
- A student wants to learn.
- A corporate group wants to connect.
- A family wants time together.
- A couple wants to celebrate.
- A friend wants to reconnect.
- A veteran wants to meet an old comrade.
- An adventurer wants to discover something new.
- And sometimes, a traveller simply wants peace.
- The destination may be the same.
- The purpose is not.
- That is why the future belongs to a more personalised and experience-led form of tourism.
- The best travel planners will not merely ask clients where they want to go.
- They will first ask why.

Travel takes us to places. Experiences help us grow. And the journey, long after it is over, remains a part of who we become.

“Travelling a thousand miles is better than reading ten thousand pages.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Major Satnaam Singh

Major Satnaam Singh, an Ex-Cavalier, War wounded, Mountaineer. He has spent nearly three decades in tourism, experiential travel, adventure, leisure and events. His professional journey has evolved around a belief that travel, when thoughtfully designed, can become far more than movement between destinations.

Over the years, his work has extended across several specialised areas of the tourism and experiences industry.





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The Wilderness I Found in Retirement

Col Vikram Uppal

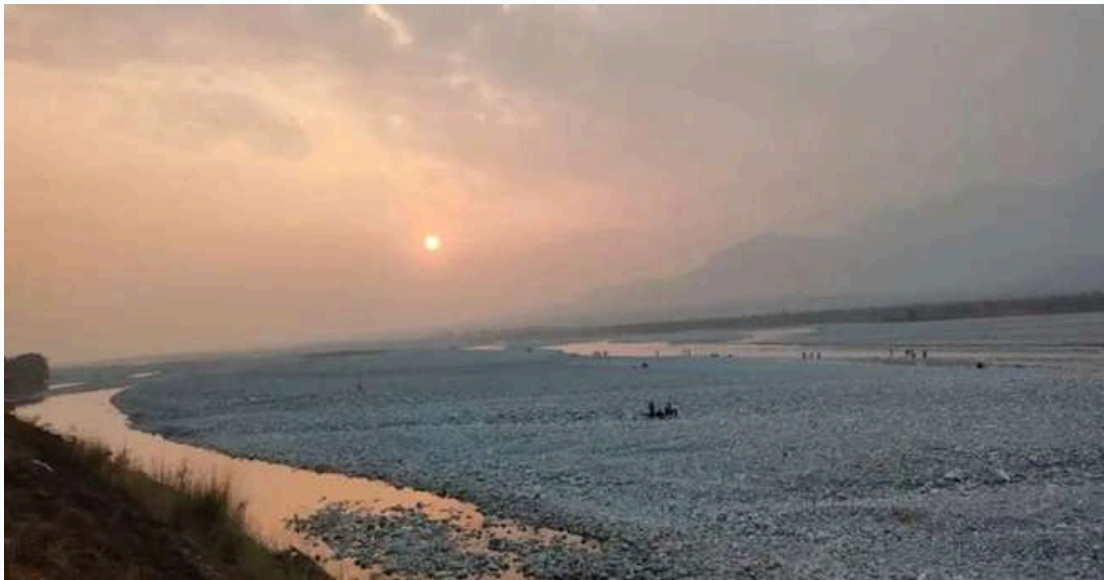
There was always a little corner of my mind that belonged to the outdoors. As a child, I remember the bushes under which we created an underworld of our own in the Nilgiris; the ‘invention’ of fire on the bed of the River Torsa in the Dooars; our failed experiments in inland water transportation on the turbulent Teesta; the numerous episodes of living off the land in the Kasauli Hills; and the umpteen unauthorised dockings on the far shore of Sukhna Lake, followed by little forest treks. These were the blissful moments of a young misadventurer!

Trekking, walking through forests, sleeping under the stars, reading the ground, finding one’s way without a road—these were things we’ve enjoyed simply because they seemed to us wonderful ways of living life: uncomplicated, purposeful and minimalist.

But life, as it often does, has as a rule other plans. For more than three decades, the Army took me from one assignment to another—from mountains to deserts, forests to plains. The outdoors were never far away, but it invariably came with a mission, a task, a timeline and a long list of things to be done. There was seldom time to stand ‘neath the bough and least of all stare at the cows.

Retirement changed the context, but perhaps not the purpose.

Well into my retirement years, I found Negi Wilderness Education (NWE), and suddenly something fell into place. I realised that the experiences I had accumulated over a lifetime did not necessarily have to retire with me. They could be passed on.



By the Torsa River



Wilderness Classroom

The wilderness became my classroom and children my buddies.

There is something deeply satisfying about taking a group of young children outdoors and watching their eyes change. Their faces light up. Somehow, they stop looking like children for a while. They become independent, purposeful and responsible.

A map that looked like a collection of strange lines in a classroom suddenly becomes a living landscape. Contours become tedious climbs and treacherous falls. Geography is no longer something to memorise; it is right there—the terraced field, the conifers, the exposed rock and the stream bed. Geology comes alive as metamorphic and sedimentary rocks reveal themselves under their feet. Biology is no longer confined to diagrams: pine cones, needles, nettles and the forest floor become part of the landscape they must understand.



Lessons First Hand

Even physics and mathematics acquire a new meaning. The mechanics of a jumar, the logic of maintaining a broad base while rappelling, the mathematics of back bearings and magnetic variation—all become applied knowledge rather than textbook theory.

At NWE, we use the wilderness and all the props it provides to validate, visualise and experience what children learn in classrooms.

And somewhere between navigating a trail and identifying a feature on the ground, something else begins to happen.

They begin to learn to look.

And in learning to look, they begin to pick up life lessons.

They learn that the obvious path is not always the right one. That the smallest clues can matter. That sometimes you have to stop, think and orient yourself before moving. That when one member of the group struggles, everyone slows down. That confidence does not come from knowing everything, but from knowing how to find an answer.



Skilling Up

They learn teamwork—while navigating, crossing a gorge or setting up a la cuisine sauvage. They discover the significance of discipline and more importantly, the ‘why’ behind rules. They begin to value the little things around them. They connect their textbooks to reality.

And, good Lord, they are smart—and remarkably quick learners!

As I watch them engrossed in their activities, I sometimes smile at the thought that this may be the last time they experience something like this for a while. Once they return to the ‘Jungle Out There’, with its looming concrete structures, scurrying automobiles, fire, water and light available on demand and Google Maps ready to tell them where they are, life will once again return to semesters, examinations and cut-offs.



Wilderness Kitchen

But somewhere tucked away in their hippocampi and neocortexes will remain the fundamentals of **field craft, navigation, awareness, self-reliance and**

resilience. Perhaps these will make them a little more hands-on, a little more confident and better prepared to handle the VUCA—BANI environment. But perhaps that is not really the point.

The wilderness is not merely about survival. It is about discovering oneself.

It strips away, even if temporarily, the artificiality of classrooms, screens and comfortable routines and places a child face-to-face with the real world. The wilderness asks them to observe, decide, adapt, persevere and work with others. It makes them responsible for their own actions and often, for the person walking beside them.



Feeling At Home Outdoors

There is also growing scientific interest in the physiological and psychological benefits of spending time in natural environments. Japan has been at the forefront of this research through the practice of Shinrin-yoku, or ‘forest bathing’, a term introduced in the early 1980s. Researchers such as Dr Qing Li and Dr Yoshifumi Miyazaki have studied how exposure to forest environments can influence stress, mood and several physiological markers.

Research has associated time spent in forests with lower stress and cortisol levels, reduced pulse rate and blood pressure, and increased parasympathetic activity—the body’s ‘rest-and-digest’ response. Studies have also examined the role of phytoncides, volatile organic compounds released by trees, in some of these effects.

Perhaps equally important is what might be called sensory restoration. In a forest, the senses are

constantly engaged: the smell of pine, the sound of running water, the texture of bark, the sight of changing terrain and even the taste of something cooked outdoors. It is not necessarily about strenuous exercise. It is about reconnecting with the physical world.

For me, however, there is an even deeper satisfaction.

After spending a lifetime being responsible for the preparedness of soldiers, I now find myself contributing, in a small way, to the preparedness of a generation.

And the irony is that, while I teach them, I realise there is much I can learn from them as well. Their curiosity, their questions, their enthusiasm and their ability to adapt remind me that learning need not have an age limit. I may have discovered the wilderness rather late in life. But along with it, I have discovered something equally precious—the next generation.

Bringing the two together has become a source of immense personal satisfaction.

Perhaps retirement did not take me as far away from soldiering as I had imagined.

It simply gave me a different mission.



The Senses Alive

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Col Vikram Uppal

Colonel Vikram Uppal was commissioned in December 1987 into 151 Air Defence Regiment (SP) (Chhamb), which he went on to command in 2006. In his career spanning over three decades he served across a multitude of environments and capacities. Post retirement he has been associated with psychological mentoring, wilderness education and personality development in addition to farming. He is based at Chandigarh.





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From Soldier to Tourism Entrepreneur:

BUILDING A SECOND CAREER IN THE WESTERN GHATS

Capt. Sujay Hegde (Retd)

For many veterans, retirement from the Armed Forces is not the end of a career. It is an opportunity to apply what we have learnt in uniform to an entirely different battlefield.

My own second innings has taken me through corporate leadership, outdoor operations, hospitality and, eventually, entrepreneurship. The journey has taught me that the qualities that make a good soldier—discipline, planning, leadership, resilience and the ability to deal with uncertainty—are equally valuable when running a tourism business.

My entrepreneurial journey eventually led to Captain's Camp, a nature-based hospitality venture near Sirsi in Karnataka's Western Ghats.

Finding the Right Second Innings

I served in the Indian Army with 18 Jammu & Kashmir Rifles after being commissioned in 2008. Like many officers, I initially assumed that my post-Army career would follow a conventional corporate path.

It did. I moved into corporate security and administration, eventually taking up leadership responsibilities with large organisations. Along the way, I realised that I wanted to build something of my own.

The connection was also deeply personal. I had grown up around our family plantation near Sirsi. The Western Ghats, agriculture, forests and rural life were familiar to me. I had always wanted to



The Machan at Captain's Camp, nestled amid the greenery and paddy fields of the Western Ghats.

return to Sirsi and create something connected to the land.

The idea was not to build just another resort. I wanted guests to experience nature, outdoor activities, a working plantation and the values of the Armed Forces—without compromising on comfort and hospitality.

That became Captain's Camp.

What the Army Taught Me About Hospitality

At first glance, the Army and hospitality may appear to have little in common. In reality, there are many similarities.

In the Army, preparation is everything. You plan for the normal situation, but also for what can go wrong. In tourism, the same principle applies. A guest may arrive late, weather may suddenly change, an activity may have to be cancelled, or a room may develop a maintenance problem.

The customer sees only the final experience. The team must be prepared for everything happening behind the scenes.

Military training also teaches the importance of standard operating procedures. In hospitality, SOPs

are equally important—but they must coexist with warmth and flexibility. A guest does not want to feel that he or she is following an SOP. They want to feel cared for. That was one of my biggest lessons: discipline should remain invisible to the guest, while hospitality should remain visible.

From Outdoor Operations to Owning the Business

Before Captain's Camp, I worked in travel and outdoor tourism, gaining an understanding of how adventure tourism and campsites function. My subsequent exposure to premium hospitality taught me another lesson: customers may come for the destination, but they remember the experience.

These experiences helped shape Captain's Camp. We deliberately combined outdoor adventure with comfortable hospitality. Today, the property offers Executive Cottages, a Machan stay and tents, along with trekking, birdwatching, archery, air rifle, adventure activities and plantation experiences.

But the core philosophy remains simple: the farm comes first, the tourism experience comes second. The land should not become merely a backdrop for buildings. Guests should experience the landscape, plantations, forests, birds, wildlife and changing seasons.



The open restaurant at Captain's Camp, surrounded by the forest and designed for a close-to-nature dining experience.

The Reality of Starting a Tourism Business

Entrepreneurship is often romanticised. The reality is very different.

A tourism business involves land, permissions, construction, staffing, procurement, marketing, online reviews, digital platforms, guest complaints, accounting, taxation, maintenance and, above all, consistency. There is also seasonality. A property can be full one weekend and quiet the next. Unlike a corporate job, there is no real “off switch”.

For several years, I continued my corporate career while developing Captain’s Camp. This allowed me to build the venture gradually, understand the business and establish the operational foundations without taking an unnecessary financial leap.

My wife, Jaya, has also been an integral part of the journey and continues to play an important role in operations.

Then came an important turning point. In November 2025, I took the decision to step away from corporate life and look after Captain’s Camp full-time.

It was a significant decision, but by then the venture was no longer simply an idea or a side project. It had grown into a functioning hospitality business with its own identity, team, guests and responsibilities.

Looking back, I am glad I did not make that decision at the very beginning. Building gradually gave me the opportunity to understand the business before committing completely. You do not always have to choose between security and entrepreneurship on day one; sometimes you can build carefully until the right moment becomes clear.

Opportunities for Veterans

Tourism offers many opportunities for veterans. A veteran does not necessarily need to build a large resort. Possible models include homestays and farm stays, nature camps, eco-tourism, adventure tourism, trekking and outdoor activity companies, destination management, travel consultancy, corporate off-sites, heritage tourism, rural and plantation tourism, tour operations, and hospitality training or safety consultancy.

Veterans also have an advantage in areas where safety, discipline and logistics matter. Adventure



A natural stream flowing beneath an old stone bridge at Captain’s Camp—part of the landscape that shapes the guest experience.

tourism requires planning, risk assessment, equipment management, trained staff and emergency preparedness—areas where military experience can provide a strong foundation.

However, military experience alone is not sufficient. Hospitality is a business, not an extension of military life. The customer is not a subordinate. The guest must be treated with courtesy, patience and empathy. Veterans entering tourism must consciously make this transition.

Five Lessons I Have Learnt

First, start with the destination, not the building. Identify what makes your location special—forests, mountains, beaches, plantations, heritage, wildlife or culture.

Second, don't over-invest initially. Build progressively and prove demand before taking on large financial commitments.

Third, experience matters more than luxury. Guests remember the sunrise, the trek, the food, the campfire and how they were treated.

Fourth, embrace digital marketing. Today's tourism customer discovers destinations through Google, Instagram, travel platforms and reviews. A small property can compete with larger businesses if it delivers a good experience and communicates it effectively online.

Finally, build a team and trust them. An entrepreneur cannot do everything. Delegation, training and creating ownership within the team are critical.

The Second Innings

Perhaps the biggest lesson from my journey is that a second career does not have to look anything like the first.

The Army taught me how to lead people, plan operations and remain calm when circumstances change. Corporate life taught me systems, governance and professional management. Tourism taught me the importance of experience, customer expectations and adaptability. Entrepreneurship brought all three together.

For veterans contemplating their next chapter, I would say this: don't look only at what qualifications you possess. Look at what problems you know how to solve, what environments you understand and what you genuinely enjoy doing.

You do not necessarily have to wait until you leave your existing career to explore your second innings. You can begin small, learn continuously and build alongside your existing career. But when the time is right, don't be afraid to make the full transition.

For me, that transition came in November 2025.

Captain's Camp began as a dream of returning to my roots. It gradually became a functioning business and eventually my full-time second career—a way of connecting people with nature, creating experiences for travellers and applying lessons from the Army in a new environment.

The uniform may have been left behind, but the values remain. Perhaps that is what a second innings is really about—not starting from zero, but taking everything you have learnt and using it to build something new.

Author Bio

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Capt. Sujay Hegde

Capt. Sujay Hegde is a former Indian Army officer of 18 Jammu & Kashmir Rifles, commissioned in 2008. He holds a BSc in Horticulture, an MBA in Operations Management from Symbiosis Pune, and completed a General Administration programme at IIM Lucknow. After the Army, he built a career spanning outdoor tourism, premium hospitality and corporate security leadership. In November 2025, he moved into entrepreneurship full-time and now leads Captain's Camp, a nature-based hospitality and adventure venture near Sirsi in Karnataka's Western Ghats. His second innings combines military leadership, professional management and a lifelong connection with the outdoors.



Two Indonesian Island Paradises: Diving, Discovery and the Pristine Charm of Labuan Bajo and Gili Trawangan

Maj Gen Ranjan Mahajan (Retd)

India is a diverse and vibrant country that offers a rich tapestry of cultural, historical, and natural attractions, making it one of the world's top tourist destinations. From the majestic Himalayas in the north to the serene backwaters of Kerala in the south, India boasts a variety of landscapes and experiences. With its blend of ancient heritage and modern attractions, India continues to captivate travellers from around the globe. Having served in the Indian Army for over 35 years, one got the opportunity to serve across India and thus travelled the length & breadth of our beautiful country and visited almost every state and its interiors and of course I always prefer domestic tourism over international one.

We recently concluded our trips to **Labuan Bajo** & earlier trips to yet another small island called **Gili Trawangan** in Indonesia. Living on small islands offers a unique lifestyle, one that contrasts sharply with the hustle and bustle of urban life. These isolated locales, surrounded by vast oceans, provide a retreat from the noise and pollution of large cities. Let us explore what life on small islands entails.

Labuan Bajo: Where the Sea Meets the Soul of Flores

There are places one visits once and remembers fondly. Then there are places that quietly become part of one's life. For our family, Labuan Bajo in Indonesia is one such place. We have visited this



beautiful coastal town three times, and each visit has deepened our affection for its landscapes, people, culture and unhurried rhythm.

Today, Labuan Bajo has acquired an additional meaning for us. It is the place where our son has begun his entrepreneurial journey with **The Smoke House Komodo**, [The Smoke House Komodo](#) a restaurant and bar, together with **The Loft by Smoke House**, [The Loft by Smoke House](#) three beautiful sea-view rooms created for travellers who wish to experience the charm of this remarkable island town.



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The Gateway to Komodo

Labuan Bajo lies on the western tip of Flores in

East Nusa Tenggara. It is best known as the principal gateway to Komodo National Park, the extraordinary marine and terrestrial environment that includes Komodo Island and Rinca Island, the natural habitat of the legendary Komodo dragon. The town has also been designated one of Indonesia's priority tourism destinations.

The Komodo dragon is undoubtedly the symbol of the region. Its presence has given the island world international recognition and has placed Labuan Bajo on the global tourism map. But the deeper appeal of the destination lies in the larger ecosystem around it.

The Komodo region combines rugged islands, coral reefs, clear waters, secluded beaches and rich marine life. Travellers come for trekking and wildlife, but they also discover snorkelling, diving, sailing, island walks and spectacular viewpoints. Padar Island, with its distinctive bays and steep ridgelines, has become one of the most memorable landscapes in Indonesia.

Yet Labuan Bajo should not be regarded merely as a transit point before a boat trip to see the dragons. It has its own identity: a small port town of fishing boats, island excursions, dramatic hills, brilliant sunsets and a waterfront that seems to change character with every hour of the day.



At dawn, the sea is calm and silver. During the day, the harbour comes alive with boats carrying visitors towards Padar, Komodo, Rinca and the surrounding islands. In the evening, the sky turns into a wide canvas of gold, orange and crimson, while the town begins its quieter transformation

into a place of cafés, restaurants, music and conversation. Sunset watching is just another experience at Labuan Bajo. The attraction of Labuan Bajo lies in this combination of adventure and intimacy. It offers access to one of the world's most unusual natural environments, while retaining the warmth and scale of a small island community.



Historical Background

Labuan Bajo's history is closely connected with the maritime communities of the Indonesian archipelago. The name is generally understood to mean the "harbour of the Bajo people," referring to the seafaring Bajo communities who used its naturally sheltered bay as an anchorage and centre for fishing and trade. Local tradition also recalls Labuan Bajo as a meeting place between the Bajo people, who brought products from the sea, and the Manggarai people of the interior, who exchanged agricultural produce from the hills and mountains. Its transformation accelerated after it became the capital of the newly created West Manggarai Regency in 2003 and later emerged as the principal gateway to Komodo National Park. Today, the town represents a fascinating meeting point of maritime heritage, Manggarai culture, Catholic traditions and modern international tourism.

Labuan Bajo may be small in size, but it is generous in character. It offers wildlife, landscape, faith, culture and opportunity in one unforgettable setting. For our family, it has become a place where travel has evolved into belonging and where our son's venture is now part of the continuing story of this beautiful island town.

The Catholic Character of Flores and The

Hindu places of worship of Flores

One of the aspects that makes Flores especially distinctive is its strong Catholic cultural presence. Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim-majority country, but Flores has a deeply rooted Catholic identity, visible in its churches, roadside shrines, religious festivals, processions and community traditions. The island's Catholic heritage is associated with centuries of missionary activity and has become an important part of its social and cultural character. Churches such as Saint Angela Church & Saint Peter Church reflect not only religious devotion but also the continuing cultural importance of Christianity in western Flores.



Labuan Bajo also reflects Indonesia's religious diversity through the presence of Hindu places of worship. On Tondong Ras hill stands **Pura Agung Giri Segara**, regarded as the only Hindu temple in West Manggarai Regency; built in 2002, it serves the local Hindu community during festivals such as Galungan, Kuningan and Nyepi. From its elevated position, the temple overlooks the waters and islands around Labuan Bajo, giving it both spiritual and scenic significance. Flores, therefore, offers an important reminder that Indonesia is a vast and culturally diverse country.



The Smoke House Komodo

What began as a dream venture is also an expression of confidence in the town's future and affection for the place. The Smoke House Komodo is a restaurant and bar located in the heart of Labuan Bajo's waterfront environment. Its concept centres on live-fire cooking, charcoal-grilled steaks, slow-smoked brisket and cold craft beer served on tap. It offers visitors an opportunity to pause after a day of island exploration and enjoy food prepared with patience, care and a sense of occasion. [The Smoke House Komodo](#)

There is something particularly appropriate about The Smoke House, after a day spent on the sea, walking across rugged island terrain or watching the colours of sunset over the harbour, a well-prepared meal becomes more than food. It becomes part of the travel experience, the place where stories are exchanged, photographs are reviewed and the day's adventures are relived.



The Loft: Staying above the Harbour

Alongside The Smoke House Komodo is The Loft, comprising three attractive rooms with sea views. For visitors, this offers the convenience of staying close to the restaurant, the waterfront and the town's principal attractions. Unlike a large resort, a limited number of rooms can provide a more

intimate experience. Guests can wake to the changing colours of the sea, watch boats move across the harbour and enjoy the feeling of being close to the life of the town. [The Loft by Smoke House - Central Stay - Stairs Access](#)

How to reach Labuan Bajo

Labuan Bajo is an International Airport, relatively a very small one and reaching there is relatively straightforward. There are two options - First is to fly to Kuallalumpur (Malaysia) and there is a direct Air Asia flight to Labuan Bajo. Second is to fly into Jakarta or Bali International Airports. There are direct flights from various cities of India to both these destinations. And then take a domestic flight to Labuan Bajo.



Gili Trawangan: A Tropical Paradise with a Rich Tapestry of History and Culture

More than just a postcard-perfect destination, Gili Trawangan is a captivating blend of natural splendour, cultural heritage, and adventurous allure. With its stunning aquamarine waters, vibrant coral gardens, and laid-back island charm, it continues to enchant travellers from across the globe. But beyond the breathtaking scenery lies a fascinating history and a series of unique facts that make the island all the more remarkable.

Surrounded by crystal-clear turquoise seas, Gili Trawangan is a haven for snorkelling, diving, and all kinds of water sports. Its marine biodiversity is among the richest in the region, offering encounters with sea turtles, reef sharks, and a

kaleidoscope of tropical fish. The island's underwater world draws marine biologists, divers, and eco-tourists alike.

Today, Gili Trawangan welcomes a diverse mix of visitors, solo adventurers, diving enthusiasts, honeymooners, digital nomads, and families, all drawn by the island's magnetic appeal. Whether you're chasing marine thrills, searching for serenity, or diving into culture and history, Gili Trawangan offers an experience that is as rich as it is unforgettable.

Gili Trawangan, fondly called as "Gili T", one of the most sought-after destinations in Indonesia, is part of the Gili Islands, a small cluster of three beautiful islands along with its sister islands Gili Air and Gili Meno located off the coast of Lombok. Gili T is the largest of the Gili Islands and is located about 8 kilometres (5 miles) off the northwest coast of Lombok, Indonesia.



Gili Trawangan: A Serene Escape with Vibrant Life Above and Below the Waves

Gili Trawangan, often affectionately called "Gili T," offers a refreshing escape from the hustle and bustle of modern life. With its car-free status, the island maintains a unique charm and serenity. No motorized vehicles are allowed, transportation here is beautifully simple, relying on bicycles, leisurely walks, or the traditional horse-drawn carts known as Cidomos. This eco-friendly approach ensures clean air, quiet surroundings, and a deeply relaxing environment that invites visitors to truly unwind.



But tranquillity is only part of what makes Gili Trawangan special. The island is a world-renowned hotspot for marine life, attracting divers and snorkelers from around the globe. Lying near the heart of the Coral Triangle, Gili Trawangan boasts rich biodiversity, with thriving coral reefs, graceful sea turtles, and schools of vibrant tropical fish. Popular dive sites like Shark Point and Manta Point offer encounters with majestic marine creatures, including black-tip reef sharks and manta rays, making it a dream destination for underwater explorers of all levels.

For those seeking a livelier vibe, Gili T doesn't disappoint. The island is famed for its vibrant nightlife, especially the legendary Full Moon Parties that light up the beach under the stars. Beach bars and clubs serve up good vibes with live music, fire dancers, and creative cocktails, making it a magnet for backpackers and party-goers looking to dance the night away.

Beyond the fun and relaxation, Gili Trawangan also shows a strong commitment to marine conservation. The island hosts a dedicated Turtle Conservation Program focused on protecting endangered sea turtles. Visitors can learn about conservation efforts and even take part in releasing baby turtles into the ocean—an inspiring and heartwarming experience that connects guests to the island's deeper ecological mission.

Activities & Experiences on Gili Trawangan: Adventure & Relaxation

Gili Trawangan offers an exciting mix of adventure, exploration, and wellness -making it an ideal destination for travellers of all types. Whether you're seeking adrenaline-pumping thrills or serene, soul-soothing experiences, the island has something special for everyone.

Among the top activities are world-class **diving and snorkelling** experiences in the island's crystal-clear waters, home to vibrant coral reefs, sea turtles, and an astonishing variety of marine life. Visibility often ranges between 15 to 30 meters, with water temperatures averaging a comfortable 23°C to 29°C (73°F to 84°F), making conditions ideal year-round. Many dive centres are professionally run by experienced PADI and SSI-certified operators, offering everything from introductory dives to advanced courses, all with a strong emphasis on safety and environmental care.



For those who prefer to stay above the waves, glass-bottom boat excursions provide a stunning glimpse into the underwater world without getting

wet. You can also enjoy island-hopping adventures to explore the nearby Gili Meno and Gili Air, each with its own unique charm.

Back on land, activities like cycling around the island (a complete circuit takes about 90 minutes along a scenic path that hugs the shoreline), horseback riding along the beach at sunset, and exploring the rustic inland paths give you a feel for the island's tranquil, natural rhythm. While the inner trails can be a maze, they all eventually lead you back to the coast, making it a safe and fun way to get lost in paradise.

If you're looking to unwind, Gili Trawangan is equally known for its wellness offerings. Beachfront yoga classes let you stretch to the sound of the waves, while spa treatments and traditional massages help you melt into deep relaxation. Yoga retreats on the island offer multi-day programs for holistic rejuvenation of body and mind.

As the sun sets, indulge in beachside dining under the stars, enjoy a quiet drink with your toes in the sand, or retreat to a wellness resort for a quiet evening of reflection. Gili Trawangan offers a beautiful balance—vibrant and lively when you want it, yet peaceful and intimate when you need it.



Where to Stay, Dine, & Unwind: Gili Trawangan's Vibrant Hospitality

Gili Trawangan offers a wide variety of **accommodations, dining experiences, and entertainment options**, catering to all tastes and budgets. From rustic beach bungalows to luxurious villas, this island paradise ensures every traveller—whether backpacker, couple, family, or honeymooner—finds their perfect slice of tropical comfort.

The **east coast** of the island is the liveliest hub, brimming with energy and home to the highest concentration of **hotels, resorts, restaurants, dive centres, shops, and nightlife venues**. That said, Gili T's ever-growing popularity has led to a diverse spread of accommodations and eateries across the entire island, including quieter inland retreats and tranquil northern shores.

Accommodation options are as diverse as the visitors they welcome. Whether you're seeking **budget-friendly homestays, mid-range boutique hotels, or luxury resorts and private villas with ocean views**, there's something for every kind of traveller. Many inland villas and smaller guesthouses offer a more serene and affordable experience, often surrounded by swaying palms and local village life, just a short walk from the beach.



As the sun sets, Gili Trawangan transforms into a **lively island of music, lights, and celebration**. The nightlife scene is well-organized and respectful of the island's peaceful rhythm. Bars follow a **rotating**

party schedule, with each venue taking turns to host the island's main event on a different night of the week—helping to spread out the fun and avoid noise overload. For instance, **Monday nights at Blue Marlin Dive Centre** are legendary, often featuring live DJs and beachfront dancing that lasts until the early hours.

During peak season, **Full Moon and seasonal parties** light up the shoreline with fire shows, dancing, and international beats. But if a laid-back vibe is more your style, there's no shortage of **beach bars with live acoustic music**, perfect for sipping a cocktail, listening to talented local performers, and watching the waves roll in.



Even the **shopping scene** on Gili Trawangan is evolving. What was once a simple market of sarongs and souvenirs now includes **stylish boutiques, art galleries, and brand-name outlets**,

offering everything from handcrafted jewellery to sustainable beachwear and locally-made goods.

Whether you're here to party, relax, explore, or indulge, Gili Trawangan offers the perfect blend of **laid-back island living, modern comforts, and warm hospitality.**

In order to book your accommodation one must try [agoda.com/booking.com](https://www.agoda.com/) and various other travel sites for competitive rates. Booking well in advance always pays.

One of the most unique and family-friendly ways to explore is by **glass-bottom boat**. These special outriggers feature a transparent acrylic panel in the floor, offering a fascinating glimpse into the colourful underwater world below—without ever having to get in the water. It's a perfect option for **families with young children**, non-swimmers, or even adults who want to enjoy the magic of the sea while staying dry. The experience is both **educational and entertaining**, offering the thrill of discovery without the need for snorkelling gear.

Relax, Rejuvenate & Restore: Spa and Wellness Experiences in the Gilis

Holidays are meant for recharging your soul and what better way to relax than indulging in a soothing **spa treatment, meditation or yoga session**, especially after a day of **diving, snorkelling, paddleboarding, or horseback riding**? On the Gili Islands, wellness isn't just an option—it's a way of life.

From **beachfront resorts to independent wellness studios**, there's no shortage of places to pamper yourself. Many of the larger hotels feature **full-service spas**, while stand-alone **boutique spas** are dotted across the islands, offering a wide variety of treatments that embrace both traditional Indonesian healing techniques and modern relaxation methods.

Diving Courses



The Gili Islands are one of Indonesia's top diving destinations, situated in the famed Coral Triangle. Their location in the Lombok Strait, is at the exact point where the warm waters of the Pacific Ocean meet the colder waters of the Indian Ocean. This brings a large variety of marine life to enjoy. Each day nutrients ebb and flow through Gilis, carried by ocean currents. This phenomenon, referred to as the "Indonesian Throughflow", brings life and food to the sea, creating extreme biodiversity in fish, coral and creatures for you to observe while diving in the Gilis.



So, therefore Diving is indeed the most sought-after activity amongst all age group visitors immaterial of their gender ! Blue Marlin Dive Centre amongst other Dive centres is by far the best one! Courtesy Blue Marlin, Gili T, I am today a certified Open Water Diver. In fact, I was lucky to be a student to my own son Vasu in May 2024 and later in Mar 2025 I further earned a certificate for Advanced Open Water Adventure Dive.

As the largest dive company in Indonesia, Blue Marlin Dive boasts six locations across the country including Gilli T & Labuan Bajo, delivering quality diving experiences. They have a plethora of diving activities to include Discover Scuba Diving, Fun Dives, Adventure Dive. They also have Refresher, Beginner, Bubble Maker, Open Water Diver, Scuba Diver, Scuba Diver to Open Water, Specialty, Divemaster training and instructor Development Courses.

How to reach Gili Trawangan: Indonesia's Island Paradise

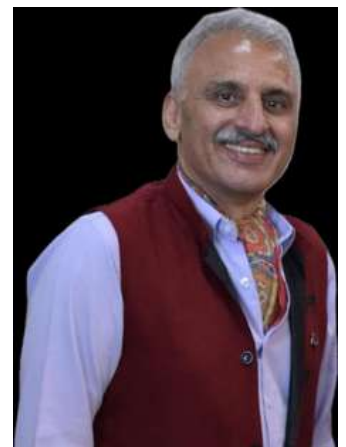
Reaching Gili T is relatively straightforward. There are two options - First is to fly into Lombok or Bali International Airport. There are direct flights from various cities of India to both these destinations. From Lombok it is a 30-minute drive to the harbour in Bangsal and from there another short 30-minute boat ride will bring you to Gili T. Alternatively, from Bali International Airport in a cab drive for 1 to 1.5 hour, you can reach Padang Bai Harbour from where it takes approximately 1.5 to 2 hours fast boat ride to the Gili T Island. These journeys are unique and must be enjoyed thoroughly. There are many fast ferry services to include Semaya, Gili Getaway and Eka Jaya Speed boats etc. Even private Speedboats (Chartered) are also available which carry up to six passengers.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maj Gen Ranjan Mahajan

Maj Gen Ranjan Mahajan, SM, VSM (Retd) from 4 Rajputana Rifles Battalion & with 35 years of unblemished & outstanding career in the Indian Army operated FOUR times in Kashmir Valley fighting the terrorists. He commanded a Rashtriya Rifles Battalion in an intense Counter-Insurgency area in the South Kashmir Valley where he was also a Company Commander. Also, he commanded an Infantry Brigade on the volatile Line of Control in North Kashmir and a Division on the Western Borders. He has also been ADG NCC & ADG Recruiting. Post retirement he has been actively contributing towards motivating and inspiring the youth having personally been through life & death situations. He has been an instructor in Army Training Institutes. He had the opportunity to officially visit China, Vietnam, Kazakhstan & Sri Lanka and interact with their Armed Forces & Government Officials. Apart from this he has also travelled across the globe to include Hongkong, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia.



His articles have been regularly published on different platforms such as Army War College & Infantry School Journals, Economic Times, Daily Excelsior's Jammu & Kashmir, Claws (Manekshaw Paper) & Defence Security Alert Magazine etc. He has authored a very engrossing book "Kashmir in the Line of Fire" which is indeed a gripping fusion of soldier's memoir and human-stories. Its Hindi edition is soon to be hitting the bookstores all across and both editions are available on Amazon & FauziDays. <https://www.amazon.in/dp/9349042444/> and <https://fauzidays.com/shop/books/heroic-auto-biographies/soldiers/india/kashmir-in-the-line-of-fire/>

The Lost Art of Getting Lost: How Travel Has Changed in 30 Years

Lt Col Iqbal Singh (an Old Hand on the Road)



Travel Has Now Become a Frictionless Ballet

If you walk through any international terminal today, you will witness a quiet, frictionless ballet. Thousands of travellers glide effortlessly on four multi-directional spinner wheels, eyes trained downward on illuminated smartphones. A quick scan of a glowing barcode gets you through the gate; an algorithm alerts you if your flight is ten minutes late; and by the time you land, an apartment in the heart of Rome will unlock with a numeric keypad tapped into a digital lock.

It is efficient. It is sleek. It is remarkably painless.

Yet, having spent more than four decades with a passport in my breast pocket, I often catch myself gazing out the airport window with a gentle pang of nostalgia. Thirty years ago, travel wasn't merely a transfer from point A to point B. It was a leap of faith into the unknown—a physical, sensory, and wonderfully imperfect endeavour.

The Weight of Red Carbon Paper and the Ticket Wallet

Thirty years ago, embarking on a foreign trip began not with an app, but with a pilgrimage to a high-street travel agency. You sat across from an agent who clattered away on an amber-monitored SABRE terminal. A week later, you held tangible treasure: a thick, glossy airline folder containing multi-layered paper tickets printed on red-and-white carbon-backed sheets.

Those tickets carried real weight. If you misplaced that booklet halfway across the world, you couldn't simply pull up a cloud backup; you had to visit a central airline office in person, explain yourself, and pray an agent could verify your handwritten microfiche record.

Airlines themselves belonged to a different era.



Passengers Were Immaculately Dressed On Flights

Boarding a wide-body jet felt like an occasion. Passengers dressed in blazers and polished leather shoes. Hot meals served on actual porcelain trays—with metal cutlery—were an expected courtesy in coach, accompanied by complimentary drinks and a tiny deck of cards handed out by attentive flight attendants. There were no seatback screens with hundreds of on-demand movies. Instead, an entire cabin craned their necks to watch a single fuzzy CRT monitor suspended over the aisle, sharing communal laughs at whatever Hollywood comedy was projected onto the bulkhead.

Luggage You Had to Muscle

Before the advent of modern four-wheel spinners, packing demanded brute strength and strategic discipline.

In the early and mid-1990s, luggage rarely came equipped with wheels. If it did, it had two rigid, in-line skate wheels that scraped along curb stones and toppled over sideways the moment you took a corner too sharply. More often than not, you hauled a heavy, hard-shelled Samsonite suitcase by a thick plastic handle.

You hoisted it into overhead racks, hauled it up five flights of spiralling stairs in Parisian pensions, and heaved it into luggage holds. By the end of a two-week European tour, your forearms were noticeably toned and your shoulders permanently bruised. Travel demanded honest physical effort, and your battered luggage carried every scratch like a medal of honour.

The Scarcity of Information: Living by the Map

Today, we travel in a bubble of hyper-certainty. We know the menu, the average user rating, the exact walking distance, and whether the morning espresso bar has oat milk before we even set foot in an unfamiliar district.

Thirty years ago, information was scarce, fragile, and deeply precious.

We navigated using giant fold-out paper maps that billowed in the coastal breeze like ship sails. Once unfolded across a cafe table, folding them back along their original creases was an engineering challenge that humbled even the sharpest minds. Your travel bible was a battered, dog-eared copy of Lonely Planet or Let's Go, where whole regions were boiled down to two dense pages of black-and-white text.

If you needed lodging, you didn't have Airbnb or instant booking aggregators. You walked out of the railway station in Florence or Kyoto, approached an elderly woman holding a cardboard sign that read Zimmer frei or Camere, and followed her through winding alleys to a spare bedroom in her family home. Alternatively, you ducked into the station's tourist information bureau and stood in line hoping a modest, family-run guesthouse still had an open cot. You chose restaurants not by checking four-star aggregate reviews on Google, but by peeking through the lace curtains of an osteria to see if local elders were dining inside.



Map-reading was Necessary Skill For Tourists

When you got lost—and you invariably did—you could not ask Siri for a reroute. You swallowed your pride, unfolded your paper map, tapped a stranger on the shoulder, and communicated with gestures, smiles, and broken phrasebook phonetic attempts. Those moments of navigational vulnerability were almost always where the true magic happened.

Thirty-Six Frames: The Art of Delayed Gratification

Perhaps the most profound shift lies in how we capture memories.

Today's journeys are relentlessly documented for social media. We compose photos for unseen audiences, snapping forty nearly identical high-resolution bursts on a smartphone, discarding thirty-nine, and applying digital filters before our lunch even gets cold.

Back then, you packed a compact 35mm rangefinder and a dozen yellow boxes of Kodak Gold or green boxes of Fujifilm.

Every press of the mechanical shutter cost actual money. With only 24 or 36 exposures per roll, you framed every scene with deliberate mindfulness. You didn't photograph your dessert; you photographed your travel companion laughing across the candlelit table. You couldn't check an LCD screen to confirm if everyone had their eyes

open—you simply trusted your instincts, advanced the film winder with an audible click-clack, and returned to living in the moment.

The joy of travel was prolonged by weeks because of that latency. You protected your exposed rolls from airport X-ray machines in lead-lined bags, brought them home, dropped them off at a local photo lab, and waited five agonizing days. The ritual of opening that double-sleeved paper envelope, smelling the freshly developed chemicals, and flipping through 4x6 glossy prints alongside friends and family brought your journey back to life with an intimacy that endless cloud galleries simply cannot replicate.

Silence, Solitude, and the Post Office Run

Staying in touch across oceans was once a major undertaking. Long-distance telephone calls required purchasing prepaid plastic calling cards and hunting down a public phone booth on a rainy street corner, listening to the hollow click of international satellite relays while watching precious units tick away by the second.

More often, staying in touch meant buying postcards, licking postage stamps, and trusting the local postal service. You wrote hurried dispatches over morning coffee and mailed them off knowing



The Pictorial Gratification Was Always Delayed

they would likely arrive on your family's doorstep a week after you returned home. If you needed urgent mail, you directed it to Poste Restante at the central post office in Athens or Bangkok, waiting in line with a passport to see if a loved one had sent an aerogramme your way.

Because communication was infrequent, when you left home, you were truly away. You were allowed the luxury of total disconnection. The office could not reach you via email, news alerts didn't buzz in your pocket during a cathedral tour, and you were not haunted by the fear of missing out while scrolling through someone else's vacation reel.

What We Gained, and What We Left Behind

It would be dishonest to romanticize every facet of the past. The democratic accessibility of modern travel is a genuine marvel. Today, airline tickets are far cheaper relative to average incomes than they were in the 1990s. Booking a ride across town doesn't require knowing the local language, translation tools break down daunting barriers in seconds, and finding safe lodging in remote corners of the globe has never been more straightforward.

Yet, as logistics have grown effortless, we have surrendered an intangible romance.

We traded anticipation for instant answers; serendipity for optimized five-star itineraries; and the quiet, solitary joy of being lost in a strange land for the perpetual company of our digital screens.

To those of us lucky enough to have travelled in the analog era, those old paper ticket stubs, faded passport stamps, and blurred 35mm photographs remain treasures. They remind us of a time when we ventured out into the world not to document our lives, but simply to experience them—one unmapped step at a time.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lt Col Iqbal Singh

Lt Col Iqbal Singh was the third generation in his family to proudly serve in the Indian Army. Iqbal joined the National Defence Academy in the 71st course and was commissioned into 4 GARH RIF in Dec 1987. He is a PSC officer having attended DSSC-57 course. In addition Iqbal also holds two technology degrees of BTech and MTech. In 2008 Iqbal took premature retirement to join the technology industry. His first employer was Satyam Computers at Hyderabad. He later joined Nokia and Noida where he worked for 12 years in a Global role. He is currently working with Google Cloud based at Gurgaon. Col Iqbal is the Founder of Forces Network and is considered an expert on Military to Corporate transition.



Then & After 14 Years in Andamans

Varun Dhand



Travel Has Now Become a Frictionless Ballet

It was a very nostalgic feeling revisiting Andamans after 14 years. I and my better half took the decision to visit Andaman again. One of my college course mates was posted in Shri Vijaya Puram.

The first thing which caught our attention was the newly developed shell shaped Veer Savarkar airport. There was a lot of hustle in the island capital now named Shri Vijayapuram. Traffic had increased 3-fold and Andaman capital was no longer a mere isolated island. Then in August 2010, I was a commissioned officer in the Indian Navy and I was posted in Port Blair. After getting married, Andaman was my honeymoon posting.

Presently in September 2026, I am working in State Bank of India in the Security Department and I was on vacation this time with my family.

Then Port Blair & Now Shri Vijaya Puram

There is a lot of difference between today's Shri Vijayapuram and then Port Blair. Port Blair was like an island where limited people and vehicles were in the city. The network was 2G and the connectivity was very restricted. But life was good in one aspect that it was laid back and there was a lot of peace while working in the Indian Navy. There was 5 days a week routine and work- life balance was maintained. I purchased my first car Alto (Second Hand) in Port Blair and we used this car to go up till Diglipur (North point of Andaman). We went for local sightseeing at Cellular Jail, Chidiya Tapu, Navy's Samudrika Museum Sagarika (Govt. Handicraft Emporium), Brijganj, Marina Park and various restaurants (Light House, Seashell). Nowadays amenities like communication connectivity, local household consumables are available like the main land city. But old secluded Port Blair was a better place to stay.

Then Ross Island & Now Netaji Subhas



Cellular jail

Chandra Bose (NSCB) Dweep

Ross Island was named after marine surveyor Captain Daniel Ross. Ross Island remained the administrative headquarters of the British for the islands till 1945-46. Ross Island houses ruins of bazaar, bakery, stores, water treatment plant, church, hospital, cemetery, swimming pool, troop barracks and Chief Commissioner's residence. In 2010, Ross Island was recovering from 2004 Tsunami brunt which it faced to save the whole island city of Port Blair. Our then trip to Ross in 2010 was a memorable one where we met Ms. Anuradha (local guide) who explained us about the island. She was well versed with birds calls and deer's habitability requirements. All the birds started perching on her head and the deer was fed by her. We were amazed to see bidirectional nature of love which Mr. Anuradha was showering and also getting the same love in return. We stayed in Ross for a night in the guest house maintained by INS Jarawa (Indian Navy). I remember it was full moon night and there was no one present at night on the island. Late at night, there were thunder showers and there were ghost-like noises heard near our guest house. It was a scary night!



Then with parents and wife in 2010



Royal Family Affair with kids

This time in Oct 2024, we went to NSCB Dweep via yacht. We enjoyed the packed food along with the lovely weather. In Nov 2024, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Dweep, an area was developed to end the stretch where golf carts are going till CINCAN (Commander- in- Chief Andaman & Nicobar Islands) jackstaff. They have also deputed a guide which explains the old day scenario to visitors. There is also a sound and light show developed by the Indian Navy. We came back seeing the whole view of Sri Vijay Puram, Haddo, Naval Component Commander area where naval assets were deployed along with Floating Dockyard.



Discover Scuba Dive in Shaheed Dweep

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Then Neil Island & Now Shaheed Dweep

Neil Island was the first island we both visited when we both landed during my first tenure in the Indian Navy (Andaman & Nicobar Islands) in Aug 2010. It was a mesmerizing experience as we enjoyed our honeymoon like Adam and Eve in then Neil Island. Yesterday's Neil Island is now named as today's Shaheed Dweep and this island remains very close to our heart. We revisited sunrise at the Sitapur beach, Natural bridge for stunning sunsets at Laxmanpur beach. We hired a guide who told us various striking facts of marine biodiversity. We got a professional photographer to do a photo session which included the same poses which we did in our first visit. For the first time we had done Scuba Diving together at Bharatpur Beach. It was like a dream come true but was very challenging as we had to maintain pressure in our ears and simultaneously breathing from the oxygen cylinder.

New Addition: Mahua Dera Island

Mahua Dera was a new discovery for us. By law, no one is allowed to visit the island. It's an isolated, adventurous, naive island and to us it offered great excitement. Our journey started from Port Blair by road, and we reached the mangroves area from where we had to board small fishing boats to start our journey to the island. We also got some amazing aerial photography experience from drone as well.

Before I sat in the boat, I walked barefoot on clayey

soil of mangroves and it was really thrilling. We all passed very clandestinely through small passages created by fishermen. It was really exhilarating for all of us as we were travelling over the waves and entering the monster sea. I was emotional as I love the sea journeys which were reminiscent of my time in the Indian Navy.

Shveta and I did 2 hours of snorkeling and it was an unforgettable experience. We both were literally walking along the different types of virgin live corals. All of us were partying on this island along with food, music and booz (liquor). We walked along the shore of the beach and collected various precious corals. Mahua Dera island is unique in many ways as it is a marine and wildlife protected area.



Turquoise Paradise



Our First Honeymoon Destination: Blissful (Then and now)

Diwali Celebrations: We had a remarkable Diwali celebration with our course mate along with his family.



Family Deepawali Celebrations

Shveta Birthday Celebrations: On 7th Nov Shveta's Birthday was celebrated marking a milestone of completion of 40 years.



Quadragenarian

Hut Bay: South Andaman Serendipity

This was the second new addition after Mahua Dera Island in the itinerary. We boarded a ship named 'Nancowry' used for a public ferry network for residents and tourists. I loved explaining the leaving harbour processes, various deck fittings onboard the ship to our group. I went to meet the



Captain of the ship and urged them to kindly explain to our families various things about the ship and also took pictures of the ship at sea. It was an enthralling experience for all as we were getting firsthand exposure of naval and marine life at sea. It took 5-6 hours to reach Hut Bay from Port Blair. Entering Hut Bay was a mind-boggling experience with emerald blue water welcoming us. When we reached Hut Bay, the market was closed and it was scheduled to open in the evening. We stayed in the Coast Guard Guest House in the VIP Guest House. We were lucky as we got to stay in the Coast guard mess as there was no other accommodation except 1 hotel. We started our journey to Little Andaman Lighthouse; it was a bumpy road but an exciting jungle safari experience. It was a great view from the top of the light house where we got the entire turquoise Netaji Nagar beach view and Hut Bay town. It was a true haven of serenity where we got some moments of peace away from city lights. We were also lucky to know the functioning of the lighthouse as the maintenance team was there for their regular visit. Then we proceeded to Harminder Bay Beach which was like a lagoon and we experienced a lot of water currents which created a situation of me and Shveta getting almost drowned. Luckily, a lifeguard spotted us who came running and threw the life buoy at the right time. It was a very close shave of death for both of us. We also met the Nicobari tribe people who were brought to the mainstream of society by the government. Then we proceeded to visit Butler Bay Beach, Kalapathar Limestone Cave and Red Palm Oil Plantations. White Surf Waterfalls was a bigger surprise for us, as we got a fresh water waterfall in the middle of the island. All day travel fatigue just vanished when we all bathed in the waterfall. By 1830hrs we were done with our dinner as we had to catch our ship to Port Blair. It was an indelible experience for us to visit as we got various reminiscences in one basket.

Then Havelock & Now Swaraj Dweep: Family Trip

Me and Shveta visited Havelock on a Cruise in 2010. Havelock is a commercial island where a lot of tourists pour in every year to enjoy the tranquility.



Heavenly and Pristine: South Andaman

This time there was no will inside me to visit today's Swaraj Dweep because of commercial aspects. But my friend convinced me that I should go along with my family and have a good time there. When we landed there in the jetty area, it was like heaven in a place where corals and colorful fishes were waiting to welcome us. We first proceeded to Radha Nagar beach where we stayed till fabulous sunset and clicked mind baffling photographs. My course mate suggested a great place to dine at 'Something Different', which we enjoyed as a family. The next day, we went to Kala Pathar beach and had a professional photography shoot. Spending a few bucks to get professional photography done was the right decision because photographs were so adorable that we want to see pics repeatedly.

Sagarika Shopping

It was a treat to shop in Sagarika just after landing from Swaraj Dweep Island (Havelock Island). In the past, we purchased cane furniture, local artifacts from the emporium. That was our first owned furniture. This time the experience was overwhelming and fruitful. A lot of addition was in various items like wood, cosmetics, shells, clothes,



Nature at its Best

handicrafts. We had a lot of purchases and brought gifts for my friends.

New Dweep Vihar, Haddo

Surprises waited for us! We wanted to visit our old house in Port Blair where we resided years ago during my first non-specialist appointment onboard INS Trinkat. To our surprise, we met a lady in the house with a pet cat, who mentioned that she was the wife of my known 'Long Gunnery Course Batchmate'. Later, we sat together for dinner along with my batchmate & his better half. We also sat for an unforgettable moon view at a location near our old house, which we used to view daily back in 2010.



Nostalgia

Ship & Floating Dockyard Visit

When in Andamans, it is not possible to skip the naval base. I had spoken to my Long 'G' batchmate for a ship and Floating Dockyard visit. This visit opened various aspects of naval life to my course mate's family during ship visit and how naval personnel live, what armaments we have, and what operations the ship can carry. I explained the entire procedure of how maintenance of ships is carried out in a floating dockyard, what facilities it had, and the photograph of family with propellers of ship was a diverse reflection. Our families enjoyed sunset at the walking pathway of the floating dockyard. We still cherish different types of sunrises & sunsets in Andaman's, and this attracts us to go back again and again.

Next Target

Our next target is to visit Campbell Bay and Indira Point in South Andaman's. We had visited up till north and now we wish to explore south.

Conclusion

Our stay at my course mate's House was like coming back to our own house and we were concentrating only on enjoying the trip. Stay at home, movement at various places, dine and wine were arranged smartly by him. Vardaan and Samarth got great company with their two pets - Oscar and Figo. We played with them and they also accepted us as members of the family with open arms. We will be visiting Andamans from time to time as we cherish our memories and we have developed a strong bond with the people and place. Shveta and I love to stay with our friends when we

go on any vacation. It gives feeling of being at home, relish old times and do our 'Dil Diyan Gallan' (दिल दियाँ गल्लान). This is a best practice which is now developing as a habit to stay with our friends, as our emotions and love quotient goes up which help us to be happy in life.

A Memorable Trip.... Eager to write a few more chapters of bonhomie.



Lovable: Figo & Oscar

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lt Cdr Varun Kumar Dhand

Lt Cdr Varun Kumar Dhand ret'd from Indian Navy with 11 years of service in Executive cadre. He had left Indian Navy in 2018. Presently, he is working as Deputy Manager (Security) in State Bank of India, Mumbai. He is passionate about reading books, running marathons, writing book reviews, write and debate on different topics of national importance. Readers can share their feedback at dhani984@gmail.com



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Sepia Memories: A Road Trip In The Sahyadris

Arun Hariharan 'Raayan'



Way back in 1997, I was a young Captain and posted in Pune (on the degree course in CME). I and Kalpana who had been married for about a year now decided to embark on a short 4-day trip astride our motorcycle into the rural hinterland of Maharashtra (a state in Western India). It was an impromptu trip taking advantage of an extended weekend. We were on a shoestring budget, with no fixed plan and no hotel booking, planning only to camp in the wilderness as we explored the various historical sites and natural wonders dotting the Sahyadri mountains. We loaded our camping gear onto our little 100 cc Kawasaki RTZ bike and

readied the machine for our road trip. I wore my trademark leather jacket, riding boots, and Ray-Bans and strapped on my helmet. Kalpana, with her hair cropped into a boy cut, a riding jacket, jeans, and long boots, to looked dapper as she sat on the pillion seat.

We rode out from Pune and headed towards Bhima Shankar, an ancient hilltop shrine located around 130 km away high up in the Sahyadris. The road was initially good, but it deteriorated as we started climbing. The bike chugged its way to the top through the winding road. It was cold, and the cold winds crisscrossed the hilltop. Kalpana felt cold and

and snuggled close. We were a carefree couple with a mutual passion for travel and adventure, and loved to explore new places, meet people, and travel in our leisure time.

After soaking in the lovely ambience of Bhima Shankar and visiting the ancient temple, which is also one of the jyotirlingas- the most important of Shiva temples (where the primary image is lingam, representing the beginning-less and endless stambha pillar, symbolizing the infinite nature of Shiva), we decided to move down from the hill and ride on. Our next stop was the historic hill fort of Shivneri, located on the outskirts of the town of Junnar. We parked our bike in front of a tea shop at the base and hiked up the steep rock-cut path leading to the fort, which holds a very important place in Maratha and Indian history. After a sweaty climb, we finally reached the barren top which houses some magnificent ruins. Built in the 16th Century, the formidable fort was mainly used to guard the old trading route from the hinterland to the port city of Kalyan. In 1595, a Maratha chief named Maloji Bhonsle, the grandfather of Shivaji (the founder of the Maratha Empire), was awarded Shivneri and Chakan by the Ahmednagar Sultan, whom he served. Shivaji was born at the fort in 1630 and spent his childhood there. Inside the fort is a small temple dedicated to goddess Shivai Devi, after whom Shivaji was named.

After taking some photographs and enjoying the raw beauty of the place we headed back to the base. Back in the 90s when not many people bike toured in rural India, we attracted the attention of the rustic locals, who were curious to know who we were and where we were going. They were also very curious to see Kalpana, a woman with her short cut hair, jeans and riding jacket doing the trip with me in the motorbike. A few wanted us to click their photos with us which I obliged with my little Hotshot camera. As it was getting dark, we picked up some food (nothing fancy was available, just some vada pao- bun with potato stuffing and boiled eggs) at Junnar, the next big town. It is then that I realised that my prized little Hotshot camera had fallen off somewhere enroute and it was lost.

We could not find it in spite of searching our stuff thoroughly. Disappointed at losing all our photos rather than the camera. We badly needed a new camera as we had just begun our trip. The only big photography studio in the little town did not offer much choice but had to settle for a low-end point and shoot Yaschica. We then rode out of town looking for a suitable place to camp for the night.

We settled for a small thicket about 12 km away from Junnar, which provided three essentials for a good campsite: privacy and safety, availability of a water source, and a firm place to pitch our little tent. We tucked in discreetly about ½ km away from the road on the banks of a small river. River Mandavi flowed down from the hills of Bhima Shankar and was full of fresh flowing water.

Dusk was rapidly fading into the night. I surveyed the area finally to assure myself of its privacy and safety and quickly unloaded the bike, opened the tent, and pitched it on a flat piece of ground. As the sun went down, it started getting cold too. Kalpana quickly collected some dry driftwood and started a fire, whilst I spread the sleeping bags inside the tent, and our camp for the night was ready. Both of us were tired and grimy from the day's ride. I fetched some fresh water from the river, and we washed our faces, arms, and legs, and sat next to the fire, cuddling each other to beat the cold.

Did I hear a sound? I abruptly rose from the fireside, senses heightened. "What was that?" Kalpana asked, concerned. "I heard a sound. Hurry and put out the fire, put on your boots, and stay alert," I told her in a whisper. My experience as a soldier on stakeouts in Kashmir had sharpened my senses, allowing me to detect danger more acutely than an average person. I quietly unsheathed my Khukri and concealed it behind my back.

I spotted the outlines of three figures approaching our camp along the dirt path, all wrapped in thick shawls. One of them carried a lantern, and they wielded large and heavy sticks. As they neared us, a gruff voice in Marathi demanded,

Stay where you are." I replied firmly, "Don't come any closer. Tell me what you want."

Suddenly, one of the figures yelled, "Let's catch him," and they advanced. I responded without hesitation, "I'm an army man, and I'm armed. If you come any closer, I will shoot you." My ploy appeared to work, as there was no response from the other side, only a hushed murmur as the three conversed. "Okay, we don't mean any harm. We're villagers. But we need to make sure who you are. We're approaching, so don't try anything," a voice said.

Both of us remained vigilant as the men drew near. Eventually, I showed them my Army ID, and they were satisfied that I posed no threat. They also noticed that I was accompanied by my wife, which made them more respectful and accommodating. The trio, who barely knew any Hindi, cautioned us that the area was dangerous due to a gang of robbers seen prowling in that area, which explained their initial unease. They urged us to move our camp and come to their village nearby, where it would be safer. We heeded the advice and packed up the tent, riding down to the village across the road.

Upon arrival, we found that the only person who knew any Hindi was Pramod, the local paan-wallah.

He informed us that the village was called Shegaon and was a small agrarian village. We pitched our tent in the centre of the village, where many curious villagers came to see what was happening.

As Kalpana took off her helmet and jacket, the village women realized that she was a girl and not a boy, as they had previously assumed due to her closely cut hair. After whispering amongst themselves, they approached Pramod, who then informed me that the ladies felt that it was against their basic norms of hospitality to let a woman sleep outdoors in the middle of their village. They insisted on planning for our stay in someone's house.

Feeling awkward, I initially protested, stating that they were fine and didn't want to bother anyone. However, the ladies persisted, and eventually, one of them led us to a blacksmith's workshop, where an area had been cleaned, and fresh water and a simple meal of zunka bhakar (local Maharashtrian delicacy) been placed. I spread out our bedding, and there we changed into comfortable clothes and relaxed.

Shortly after, the village headman came to visit us, followed by a horde of other curious villagers, men, women, and children, who brought with them something to eat and drink. They showed great affection towards the us, with even the village



drunk offering his bottle of country brew to me. I politely turned him down saying that I was a teetotaler.

The night was cold and a small fire crackled inside the hut to keep us warm. Both of us shared a cigarette and raw Old Monk rum from my hip flask. Kalpana laughingly said “If only one of the village ladies sees me smoking and drinking like this, it will be the next big scandal in this little village and all the regard they have for us will go kaput.”

I got up to take a leak around mid-night and pushed the door and stepped out of the hut. I saw the blacksmith, his little son and dog sitting on vigil outside around a small fire to beat the cold. Surprised, I asked them what they were doing there. “Sahib, there have been some robberies here and since you are our guests, we did not want to put you at risk,” said the Blacksmith. “But, you people are losing your sleep. We will be just fine. Suggest you please go to sleep” I told him. “Sahib, you are my guest and it is my duty. This little fellow is just giving me company” replied the blacksmith gently declining my request. This along with all that had transpired in the evening, were all really touching gestures which proved that decency and unselfish hospitality was very much part of the rural Indian culture (as has been proved many times during our travels to different parts of India). The next day morning, it was time for us to move on. But the fondness with which the entire little village gathered to see us off, had both getting emotional. The simple village folks whose hospitality and affection was not only selfless and spontaneous but also a lesson for most city dwellers, who in spite of having access to modern amenities, continue to revel in pettiness.

A photo session followed with me clicking a lot of pictures with the villagers and of the village on my newly acquired camera. Pramod then gave a formal speech in Hindi bidding us goodbye. He said that the village was indeed fortunate that I, an army man and my wife had graced their village and given them an opportunity to extend their modest hospitality to us and in spite of the short stay it felt

as though we had always been part of the village. Post that, we loaded up the bike and finally bid farewell to our new friends. The villagers presented us with many a bagful of freshly harvested groundnuts, the main produce of the village.

Our next halt was Randha Falls, about an hour and a half away along a quiet, well-maintained country road. Fed by the Pravara River, the waterfall plunges nearly 170 feet into a beautiful gorge, creating a scene of remarkable grace and grandeur. As we stopped the bike and stood before it, the falls seemed to draw us into their cool, mist-laden stillness. Moved by the beauty of the place, I guided the bike off the road until we found a secluded spot from where we could explore the area in privacy. There, surrounded by the deep green embrace of nature, we changed into our swimwear and walked a little further until we came upon a sheltered pool below the falls, entirely removed from the bustle of the world. With no one in sight, we stepped into the clear, cold water, feeling its bracing chill awaken every sense.

The cascading water surrounded us as we allowed ourselves a few unguarded moments of simple joy, free from the weight of routine and care. Each splash carried with it a sense of release, as though the journey had washed away the fatigue of the road and restored in us a quiet, childlike wonder. When we finally emerged from the pool, we felt refreshed and renewed, our spirits lifted by the purity of the place and the timeless rhythm of the falling water.

Soon we dried ourselves and dressed and were on the bike again and rode towards the British Raj era Wilson Dam on the Pravara River. Built in 1910, Wilson Dam has a huge water reservoir known as Lake Arthur and is almost completely surrounded by the magnificent Sahyadris. Also known as Bhandardara Dam, it is the largest earthen dam in India and gets its water from Pravara River. A visit to the garden at the base of the dam, offered us stunning views of the architectural marvel.

Unlike the bustling scene of today, with its hordes of tourists and abundant resorts adorning the



lakeside, the 90s were a simpler time for this unassuming haven. The small town of Bhandardhara, located adjacent to the dam, boasted only a single, noteworthy eatery (though its name eludes me). After indulging in a quick bite, we sought refuge at a safe, yet proximate spot beside the lake. Our adventurous spirits did not carry us too far from the lake, as the nearby wildlife sanctuary teemed with the potential danger of encountering a leopard or bear in the nighttime.

It was to the North of the lake that we found a petite peninsula, which proved to be the perfect place for our encampment. As I erected our humble tent, we nestled in comfortably, igniting a small fire to warm our souls. As day broke over the tranquil, cerulean waters of the lake, we were blessed with a sunrise that can only be described as sublime. Kalpana had already risen and brewed us each a piping hot cup of coffee. With our feet immersed in the frigid, crystal-clear waters of the lake, we sipped our steaming beverages with great delight. Eventually, we determined that the ambience was too picturesque to forgo a refreshing swim. Thus, we plunged into the shimmering depths. The water was relatively shallow near the shore, allowing us to frolic and revel in the mystical atmosphere, all while capturing the moment in stunning photographs.

At a distance of 14 km from Bhandardara, is Baari Village which is the base for climbing up to the summit of the Kalsubai Peak, which is about 7 km of climb from there. Perched at an altitude of 5,400 feet (1646 m), it is the highest peak in Maharashtra and lies within the Kalsubai Harishchandragad Wildlife Sanctuary.

Today, Mount Kalsubai is a famous trekking destination and the trekking route attracts a large number of visitors, some just to climb up to the summit to enjoy the view and some to visit the ancient Kalsubai temple on top. But back then in the 90s it was hardly crowded barring a few rustic folk going up to the temple. After parking our bike in Baari, we tagged along with some of these pilgrims and started climbing. The trek is a mix of easy to moderate slopes as well as treacherous rocky outcrops overlooking the valley below. The rough-cut steps and the path was quite slippery and lichen covered with moderate to thick cloud cover all along the route. There are three iron ladders along the vertical hill slopes to make the trekking route safer. It eventually took us over 3 hours to reach the Kalsubai summit. It is a flat plateau which offered us breath-taking views of the area around including Lake Arthur and Wilson Dam, albeit briefly before the cloud cover and biting cold was back. The small Kalsubai temple houses an old well, where it is said



that the water level never drops below 3 feet. A religious fair is organized by the locals at this temple during Navratri (a Hindu festive period).

We trekked down the treacherous path and reached back the village and had a hot cup of tea and Maggi as we were ravenous with hunger and feeling quite cold.

As it was approaching dusk hour we rode out down the highway back towards Pune and set up camp adjacent to the Krushnavanti Dam, a small dam on the Waki River. The night went off eventfully and next day morning after witnessing yet another beautiful sunrise over the Sahyadris, we set back with a heavy heart on our 5 hour ride back to our home in Pune.

This unplanned trip on a frugal budget and infrastructure created memories of a lifetime for us with discovery of hitherto unknown facets of rural India and the simple people who make India what it is. The raw beauty of not so well known or touristy destinations which our country abounds is also something one could experience first-hand when you travel without too many frills or expectations.

PS: I got all the photos I took in Shegaon developed and mailed them with a letter to Pramod. To my pleasant surprise I got a wonderful reply from him, thanking me for the same and saying that they really were honoured that we stayed in their village and all of them looked forward to meeting us again. As much as we would like, in the 29 years since then we have never been able to visit the little village and its wonderful people again!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

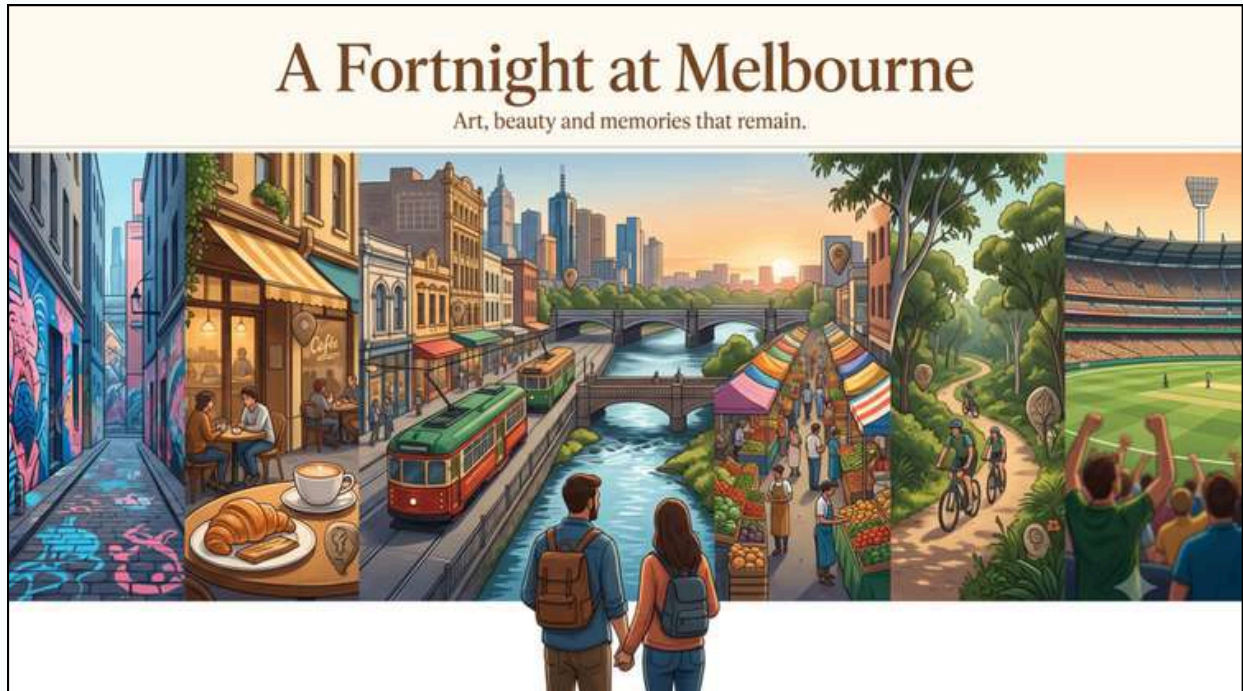
Colonel Arun Hariharan

Colonel Arun Hariharan is an alumnus of the National Defence Academy (Foxtrot Squadron, 78th Course) and was commissioned in the Bengal Sappers of Corps of Engineers in 1991. He is a graduate of the Defence Services Staff College and has tenanted various command and staff appointments including commanding in parent Regiment. He took premature retirement in 2013. He is presently a senior corporate professional with a large telecom company and lives in Gurgaon. Arun is a voracious reader with a lot of interest in history, archaeology and occult. He is a published writer with his stories and poetry have been published in print over 50 times so far as an author/co-author. He also has four solo publications to his credit including two books each of short stories and poetry. He is a regular book reviewer for the Hindu Businessline.



A Fortnight In Melbourne

Col Arun Hariharan



Melbourne's charm, just a fortnight to explore
Laneways, cafes, bridges, a city alive
Art and beauty, we couldn't ask for more

Shopping curios on Swanston street evermore
Trams rattle past as the city does thrive
Melbourne's charm, just a fortnight to explore

Street art adorns walls, a visual lore
Bustling markets myriad flavours jive,
Art and beauty, we couldn't ask for more

Creeks, Rivers flow, nature we adore
Hikes and rides, peace we derive,
Melbourne's charm, just a fortnight to explore

MCG tour, cricket fans galore
Coffee and croissants we dive
Art and beauty, we couldn't ask for more

As our journey ended, we yearned for more
Memories etched, forever alive!

Melbourne's charm, just a fortnight to explore
Art and beauty, we couldn't ask for more

10:30 AM

Class Teacher
online

Today

Hi ma'am, I wanted to discuss Aarav's behavior.
10:26 AM

He is very bright and has potential.
10:26 AM

But he gets distracted very easily in class.
10:26 AM

Homework is incomplete again.
10:27 AM

He struggles to follow instructions and reactions are impulsive.
10:27 AM

Please take this seriously 🙏
10:27 AM

Oh no 😞 Thank you for letting me know, ma'am.
10:28 AM ✓✓

What should I do to help him?
10:28 AM ✓✓

ADHD?

It's not bad behavior.
It's a condition.

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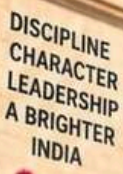
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Mock Tests


Revision


Previous Year Papers


Performance Analysis

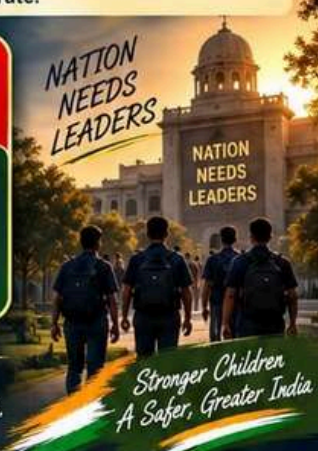

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WORK

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WISDOM

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GROWTH

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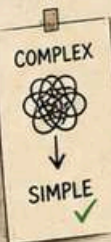
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CORRELATE.
SIMPLIFY.
CARTOONIFY.



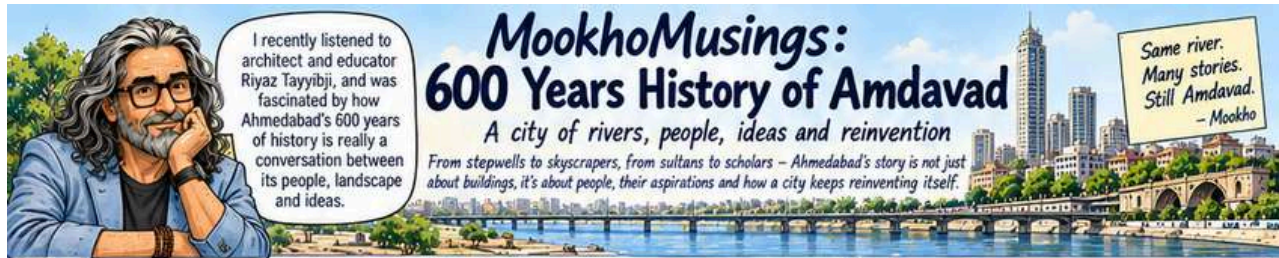
LET'S OVERCOMPLICATE THIS.

ALREADY ON IT!



Mookho Musings

IDEAS
→
OPINIONS
→
IMPACT



1 A TOUGH LAND, A CLEVER PEOPLE

Before Amdavad, this was a hot, arid, sandy land. Life here was never easy. Survival depended on one thing - water. The people of this region learned early that to live here, they had to respect the land and manage water wisely.

In this land of scarcity, ingenuity took root.

2 THE TRIANGLE OF LIFE

Tekro. Talav. Vav. A simple yet brilliant system.

Tekro (mounds to live on - stay dry)

Talav (lakes to collect rainwater and recharge the earth)

Vav (stepwells to draw purified, filtered water)

This ecological triangle made settlement possible and shaped the city's unique character.

3 BAI HARIR NI VAV - MORE THAN A STEPWELL

Stepwells like Bai Harir ni Vav were not just about water. They were masterpieces of geometry and ecological engineering, patronised often by women. Deeply symbolic of fertility and the earth, they were places for travellers to rest, for communities to meet, for festivals to be celebrated, and for ideas to flow - quite literally.

Water created community. And community created Amdavad.

4 1411 - A NEW CITY RISES

In 1411, Sultan Ahmed Shah founded Ahmedabad, displacing the older settlement of Ashawal. He built the Bhadra Fort, the Jama Masjid and laid out a new walled city. Interestingly, the early Sultans did not build a grand palace - just a functional fort. They were more like nomadic rulers, and power was distributed, not centralized.

A new city, but with a different idea of power.

5 A BEAUTIFUL BLEND

The city's early Islamic architecture borrowed heavily from local Hindu and Jain temple traditions. Local craftsmen, used to a trabeated system (pillars and lintels), created a unique style seen in the Jama Masjid - elevated domes, open spaces and intricate stone carvings that allowed light and air to flow freely.

Different traditions. A shared language.

6 MERCHANTS, POLS AND A THRIVING CITY

As the Mughals took over, political power shifted, but Amdavad thrived. Its merchant guilds - the Nagasheths - became immensely powerful. Their promissory notes were valid in Venice and Rome!

Wealth from trade created the iconic Pols - dense, close-knit neighbourhoods with beautiful wooden houses, courtyards and shared spaces. Built by artisan guilds, these homes reflected a syncretic mix of Hindu, Jain and Muslim needs.

Not just houses, but a way of living together.

7 A CITY OF SURFACES, SHADE AND HUMAN SCALE

Ahmedabad's traditional architecture works brilliantly with the climate - finite volume, infinite surface area. Instead of straight, harsh lines, you find crenellations, jalis, carved facades, projecting balconies and shaded courtyards. The city creates cool, cozy, human spaces in a hot climate.

Architecture here is an embrace, not a statement.

8 THE TEXTILE BOOM CHANGES EVERYTHING

In the 20th century, Amdavad became India's textile capital. Industrialists like the Sarabhai and Lalbhai families not only built mills, but also a modern vision for India. They founded institutions like NID, CEPT and IIM, and invited global architects such as Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn to the city.

From looms to learning. From industry to ideas.

9 TWO VISIONS - GANDHI AND LE CORBUSIER

Ahmedabad became a stage for two contrasting ideas of modern India. Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram embodied a simple, decentralized, village-based model of living and making. Le Corbusier's buildings, like the Mill Owners' Association Building, represented a centralized, industrial, modern future.

Two visions. Same city. Both part of Amdavad.

10 A MODERN CITY, NEW QUESTIONS

Today, Ahmedabad is seen as a model for Indian urban development. The Sabarmati Riverfront has given the city public spaces, but it comes at a cost - a seasonal river has been turned into a concrete-banked lake, fed by the Narmada canal. Is this really ecological? Does it reflect the arid reality of this land?

Development brings new spaces, but also new debates.

11 A HERITAGE IN DANGER

In 2017, the walled city of Ahmedabad became India's first UNESCO World Heritage City for its Pol houses. Yet, many of these historic wooden homes are being demolished or converted into warehouses. Without economic incentives and modern infrastructure, preservation remains a challenge.

A proud recognition. But a fragile future.

12 A CITY FOR EVERYONE?

Ahmedabad's architectural wealth is largely in just 25% of the city. The other 75% - where the working class and industrial labour live - has little of this celebrated architecture. As Amdavad grows, the big question is: can it remain inclusive, plural and liveable for all its people?

Amdavad's story is not over. It continues to ask us - what kind of city do we want to build, and for whom?

Ahmedabad - not just a city of the past, but a living conversation with the future.

- Mookho

Source: "600 Years of Architectural History of Ahmedabad" - Conversation with Ar. Riyaz Tayyibji, Q by QC (Head YouTube Podcast)
https://youtu.be/6RsNEpAltGs?si=tBeLFxc3RK7_vGt



MookhoMusings:

Chanakya's Rajamandala (Mandala Theory) as Corporate Career Guide?

Ancient wisdom. Modern careers. Same game. Different battlefield.

"Strategy is not a luxury in uncertain times. It is survival."
— Chanakya (Arthashastra)

1. ANCIENT IDEA, MODERN QUESTION



Can Chanakya's Rajamandala – a model for kingdoms and power politics – also guide our career choices today?

ARTHASHASTRA

STRATEGY

PEOPLE

POWER

RELEVANCE

2. WHAT IS RAJAMANDALA ?

Chanakya saw every kingdom as part of a circle of relationships – allies, enemies, neutrals and opportunists.



Power is never static. Alliances are fluid.

3. TODAY'S BATTLEFIELD – OUR CORPORATE CAREER

Different players. Same dynamics.

AI DISRUPTION
Automating work

FALLING MARGINS
Doing more with less

GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS
Fragmented world

PLATFORM GIANTS
New power centres

LAYOFFS
Real and continuing

SKILL OBSESCENCE
Yesterday's skills don't pay today

REGULATIONS & UNCERTAINTY
Changing the rules

SAME OLD QUESTION ... HOW DO I STAY RELEVANT ?

4. TRANSLATING MANDALA TO CAREERS

The kingdoms become career forces.

Chanakya Concept	Career Equivalent
Vijigishu (aspiring king)	Ambitious professional
Ari (enemy)	Skill obsolescence
Mitra (ally)	Network, mentors, peers
Madhyama (balancing power)	Platform companies / industry ecosystems
Udasina (neutral)	Adjacent industries
Parshnigraha (opportunist)	Short-term collaborators
Sama-Dana-Bheda-Danda	Negotiate, incentivise, differentiate, act decisively

Different names. Same realities.

5. KNOW YOUR ENEMIES

In today's world, the real enemies are not people, but structural forces.



Commoditization
Work that can be automated or outsourced



Skill Inertia
Staying in a declining skill area



Over-dependence
on one employer, technology or market

Be realistic. Denial is the biggest risk.

6. BUILD ALLIANCES (MITRA)

No kingdom survives alone. Neither do you.

Internal Alliances

- Cross-functional teams
- Business stakeholders
- AI and innovation units
- Product organisations
- Leadership mentors

External Alliances

- Professional networks
- Open-source communities
- Industry forums
- Startups and academia
- Global opportunities



Network centrality is a career force multiplier.

7. BECOME A MADHYAMA POWER

Be the bridge between domains. That's where the power lies!



Be hard to replace. Connect the dots.

8. PRACTICE DVAIDHIBHAVA (DUAL STRATEGY)

Run two career engines in parallel.

Engine 1 – Current Employability

- Deliver in your present role
- Maintain credibility
- Stay relevant
- Pay the bills

Engine 2 – Future Capability

- Build AI-native skills
- Explore adjacent domains
- Create optionality
- Stay ready for transition

Stability today. Optionality tomorrow.

9. MOVE UP THE VALUE CHAIN



From doer to designer to decision-maker.

10. BUILD ASYMMETRIC CAPABILITY

Combine domains. Create your unique edge.

Domain Expertise
(e.g. Telecom, Finance, Health)

AI + Data Capability

Product + Policy Understanding

Geopolitics + Regulation

The rarer the combination, the stronger your position.

11. REPUTATION IS STRATEGIC CAPITAL



- ✓ Thought leadership
- ✓ Write and share insights
- ✓ Speak at forums
- ✓ Contribute to communities
- ✓ Be known for what you stand for

In uncertain times, trust compounds.

12. FINAL THOUGHT

The career world today, like Chanakya's era, is fluid, competitive and uncertain.

Adopt the Mandala mindset – be aware, adapt, build alliances, keep learning and always reposition.

Because in any era ... relevance is power.

Stay curious. Stay strategic. Keep evolving.

MookhoMusings™

Ancient frameworks. Modern journeys. Timeless lessons.



MookhoMusings: Veterans for Creator Economy

Exploring India. Creating Stories. Building Opportunities.

From Service to Sustainable Livelihoods through India's Tourism Potential.

Incredible India
Infinite Possibilities

Same Spirit.
New Stories.
A Brighter Tomorrow.

EXPLORE
EXPERIENCE
PRESERVE
SHARE
CREATE
EMPOWER

1 THE NEXT FRONTIER AWAITS.
The uniform may come off, but the explorer, leader and storyteller within you remains.



NEW PLACES
NEW STORIES
NEW PEOPLE
NEW PURPOSE
SHARE

A new journey. A familiar spirit.
India is calling.

2 WHY VETERANS ARE A NATURAL FIT FOR TOURISM & CONTENT.

DISCIPLINE	ADAPTABILITY	TEAMWORK
TEAPERSHIP	LEADERSHIP	RESILIENCE
INTEGRITY	PROBLEM SOLVING	

These aren't just military skills.
They are tourism and creator economy superpowers.

3 INDIA'S TOURISM OPPORTUNITY IS HUGE.
Diverse destinations. Rich heritage. Unique culture. Growing demand.

Himalayas & Adventure	Heritage & Culture	Beaches & Wellness
Wildlife & Nature	Pilgrimage & Spirituality	Rural & Eco Tourism

India offers endless stories and experiences.
The world wants to discover them.

4 MANY WAYS VETERANS CAN CREATE.
Pick your niche. Share your passion.

TRAVEL VLOGGER & STORYTELLER	HISTORY & HERITAGE INTERPRETER	ADVENTURE & OUTDOOR GUIDE
WILDLIFE & NATURE EDUCATOR	DEVELOP HOME-STAYS OR COTTAGES FOR RENTALS ON AIRBNB	CURATOR & TOUR OPERATOR

One background. Many possibilities.

5 THE 5C FRAMEWORK IN TOURISM CREATOR ECONOMY.

CREATORS
You create authentic content, experiences and value.

CHANNELS
You publish on YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, blogs, podcasts and more.

VETERAN TOURISM CREATOR ECONOMY

COMMERCE
How you monetize - tours, courses, merchandise, affiliates, partnerships.

CONSUMERS
Travellers who watch, learn, book and trust you.

COLLABORATORS
Tourism boards, hotels, homestays, local communities, brands and fellow creators.

Create. Share. Collaborate. Monetize. Grow.

6 TURN STORIES INTO INCOME.
Your content and community can open multiple revenue streams.

- Guided Tours & Experiences
- Ad Revenue & Sponsored Content
- Merchandise (gear, maps, books)
- Online Courses (history, outdoor skills, photography)
- Paid Communities & Memberships
- Newsletters & Blogs
- Partnerships with Hotels, Homestays & Tourism Boards
- Consulting (safety, training, experience design)

Multiple income streams. More impact. More freedom.

7 AUTHENTICITY BUILDS TRUST.
Travellers seek real stories, not scripted content. Your military experience brings a unique and credible perspective.



"Real people.
Real places.
Real stories.
That's what travellers value."

Be authentic. Be consistent.
Build a community, not just an audience.

8 FROM FOLLOWERS TO TRAVELLERS.
Engage. Educate. Inspire. Enable.
Turn an online community into real-world impact.

- Followers
- Newsletter Readers
- Community Members
- Tour Participants
- Repeat Travellers
- Referrals & Advocates

Influence is rented.
Trust is owned.

Useful content brings followers.
Great experiences bring them to your doorstep.

9 BUILD MEANINGFUL VENTURES.
Go beyond content. Create sustainable businesses.

Adventure & Trekking Expeditions	Heritage & Battlefield Tours	Homestays & Rural Experiences
Eco & Responsible Tourism	Leadership & Team Building Programs	Specialised Tour Operations

Turn your passion for India into a purposeful enterprise.

10 EXPLORE. CREATE. CONTRIBUTE. A BRIGHTER TOMORROW.



"Tourism lets veterans continue to serve - by showcasing India, supporting local communities, preserving our heritage and inspiring others. New journeys. New stories. A stronger India."

Same Spirit.
Bigger Horizons.

Explore our incredible India
 Create opportunities for local communities
 Promote responsible and sustainable travel
 Preserve our heritage and culture
 Inspire travellers from India and around the world.

VETERANS EXPLORE. VETERANS CREATE. VETERANS BUILD A BRIGHTER TOMORROW. INDIA AWAITS. SO DO NEW POSSIBILITIES.

Moment In Time

We have started with a Photography section “**Moment in Time**” to provide an outlet for creative side of our esteemed members. The rules for submission are as under:-

1. Forces Network members, spouses and their wards can submit images for publication.
2. No Nudity or Porn.
3. No mention of Mil establishments or unit identity or tac numbers or tail numbers.
4. It's a photography section so no images of various get togethers and social functions will be published.
5. The longer side of image should be 2048 pixels.
6. Maximum 5 images will be published every month. The images must be submitted by 20th of every month.
7. Mention your Instagram ID.
8. **While submitting the following details be submitted along with the suitable Title:-**
 - a. Aperture
 - b. Shutter speed
 - c. ISO
 - d. Camera used
 - e. Lens
 - f. Focal length.
 - g. In case of a mobile click, the same may please be mentioned.

All Photos may please be sent to forcesnetworkz@gmail.com by 20th of every month.



A Trekking Camp at Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh. By Col J Sharma



An Ao Tribe Couple By Col Ranjit Singh



A Tikhir Tribesman By Col Ranjit Singh



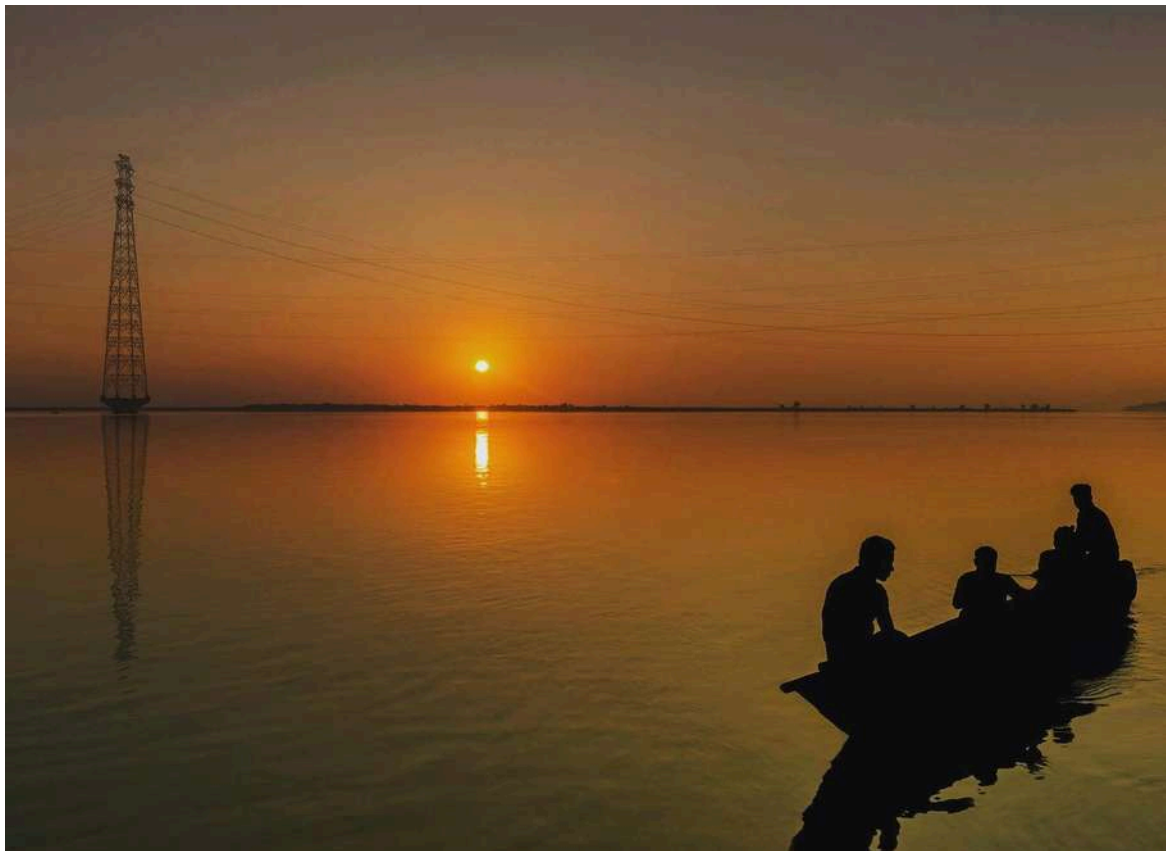
A Zeliang Tribe Girl By Col Ranjit Singh



An Angami Tribesman By Col Ranjit Singh



Ziro Music Festival By Col J Sharma



Sunset over Brahmaputra By Col J Sharma



On the Way to the Everest Base Camp by
Col J Sharma



On the Way to the Everest Base Camp by
Col J Sharma

NOEL LAND

***Dedicated Section for the Star
Author of Forces Network***

LT
COL



NOEL
ELLIS

We welcome Col Noel to the folds of
the Forces Network .
We have decided to devote a Section
to his writing every month in the
ForceNet E-Zine .

Remembering The Good Old Days

Lt Col Noel Ellis (retd)

I had just written about how we have become entrapped by the World Wide Web. The article was actually inspired by a spider's web. We have become a kind of slaves to our phones, checking every two seconds to see if we have received a message. If not, we start scrolling through reels. Swipe-swipe-swipe, until you suddenly realise that a few hours have gone by and there are still many important things to do.

For a veteran like me, my phone needs to be fully charged, just like the last parade in the MT garage. Fuel topped up, windscreen cleaned, car diary filled; in modern terms, all notifications seen and cleared, and there is nothing on the bar except the battery indication 100% and network signal.

I didn't realise that my phone-charging activity had changed from BD to TDS (Tarke-Dupahri-Shaam).

With Wi-Fi installed, there is no limit on data. It is all thanks to our daughter, who often works from home. Even the OTT platforms that my daughter keeps taking subscriptions to ensure a lovely evening without having to go out to a movie hall.

Be that as it may, my system had taken a temporary shutdown. Nothing serious, but it had sapped whatever energy I had. My eyes were getting watery if I held a screen in front of them. Perforce, the idiot box, tablet, mobile and laptop were given a well-deserved rest.

With my eyes closed and all the pillows behind my back, I sat back and contemplated: what if I go off the air completely?

The dilemma was whether to open any social media platform or not. I decided on the latter.



Caught in the real World Wide Web

What would happen?

Would my friends mind? Would someone call to check if all was well, or even send a message?

None of that happened.

But you know what happened?

Acche din returned.

The mind was free from all the clutter. There was no cheeni kam, Hindu-Muslim, war, flood, Pakistan, or any other distraction or 'attraction', going across your eyes, entering your mind and eating into your peace.

Believe you me, there was peace on earth.

These days, the only ones who remind you of birthdays and anniversaries are either Facebook or the group admins of the groups you belong to.

I have a habit of wishing my Facebook friends first thing in the morning, so I opened it. Then, it was time to see what WhatsApp had in store. I would have missed the obituaries of two people whom I knew.

Now that I had opened it, I replied to a few Good

Morning messages, lest they felt offended, and switched everything off again.

There was more peace.

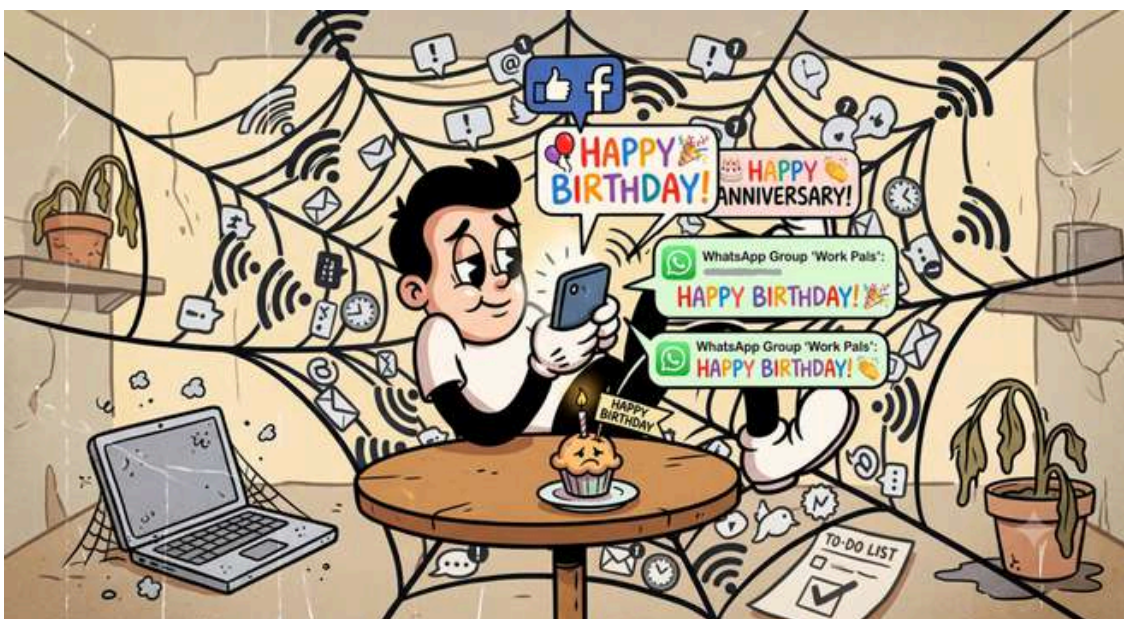
I remember that, as a child, we would meticulously note down each name and address in diaries, along with all the relevant information. Telephone numbers came later, but birthdays were carefully jotted down.

It was another thing that we could remember dates and rattle off telephone numbers without a hitch.

Alas, we are so enslaved to that handheld device that sometimes one forgets one's own phone number, leave alone passwords and PIN numbers.

Such ideas and thoughts only come when you are free in the mind.

Yes, I admit that I had to switch on the laptop to pen down these thoughts. But, friends, I think all those who are not working need to take a break from their devices once in a while.



The Only People Who Remember Your Birthdays These Days are Facebook

The internet can give you so much content that you simply cannot handle it all. How much of it is true and authentic is another matter altogether.

I agree, one has to stay in touch with family, at least. But remember how we communicated when there were no landline phones at home?

Many things were taken for granted.

No news was good news.

And once in a while, an inland letter would drop in, bringing you all that you needed to know.

The good old days were much better, I feel. I plan to revert to them, only to check messages once in a while.

Do you agree?

I wonder!!!!!!

JAI HIND

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lt Col Noel Ellis

Lt Col Noel Ellis (retd) is an ex-NDA officer from 66th NDA course. He was commissioned in June 1985 into the Mechanised Infantry. Col Noel is a very vibrant writer. His articles relate to his deep experiences which he had as an Army officer. During his service he has interacted with numerous types of people, be it his colleagues, his seniors or his subordinates and each of his articles portrays that how vivid human nature is and how different their reactions to situations are. He is heavily into reading and leaves no opportunities to pen down his opinion about what is going on in the country. You can read his Blog here: [Blog](#)



Book Review

It's Not How Good You Are, It's How Good You Want to Be

The ForceNet E-Zine Editorial Team

IT'S NOT HOW
GOOD YOU ARE,
IT'S HOW GOOD
YOU WANT TO BE.

The world's best-selling
book by **PAUL ARDEN.**

PHAIDON

For professionals stepping out of rigid, structured hierarchies after two decades in uniform and into the fluid waters of the civilian corporate workforce, the standard rules of engagement rarely apply. Paul Arden's *It's Not How Good You Are, It's How Good You Want to Be* is a manifesto for this exact kind of transitional disorientation. As we recently explored in our September survey on Directorate General Resettlement (DGR) management courses, formal executive education provides the structural bedrock for a mid-career pivot. Yet, what those rigorous academic syllabi often miss is the unapologetic, lateral audacity required to truly redefine oneself in a second career.

Arden, a former executive creative director at Saatchi & Saatchi, uses the creative processes of the advertising industry as a broad metaphor for business practice. The result is a pocket-sized volume that serves less as a traditional management textbook and more as a series of sharp, contrarian provocations designed to jolt the reader out of conventional complacency.

The core premise of the book is delightfully audacious: nearly all rich and powerful people are not notably talented, educated, or charming; they simply achieved their status by deeply wanting it. Arden illustrates this with the unexpected example of Victoria Beckham, whose teenage ambition was not just to be a famous singer, but to become a world brand as ubiquitous as Persil Automatic detergent. For the members of Forces Network who have spent their lives accumulating technical expertise, following established doctrine, and avoiding the spotlight, Arden's worldview is radically different. He argues that conventional cleverness and a strict reliance on past experience actually hinder originality, going so far as to state that experience is the opposite of being creative.

Wisdom for the Mid-Career Transition

Arden's insights translate remarkably well for those navigating a post-military career, directly addressing the impostor syndrome that often accompanies corporate shifts. His mandate to

completely disregard where your abilities end and to intentionally aim beyond what you are capable of is a powerful antidote to self-doubt.

Several of his principles align perfectly with a disciplined ethos, while applying them to boardrooms rather than battlefields. He demands absolute accountability, insisting on the mindset of "It's all my fault". Whenever you are involved in something that goes wrong, you must accept total responsibility without blaming the brief, the budget, or your partners. Furthermore, he advises professionals to embrace criticism over praise; while it is easy to get approval by asking people who will tell you what you want to hear, explicitly asking others to find fault with your work is the only way to genuinely improve an idea.

He also tackles the practical mechanics of client and stakeholder management. Rather than overpromising in a pitch, Arden suggests underselling by pointing out possible weaknesses and how to resolve them, thereby building a trusting relationship. When a new idea is deemed silly or impossible by leadership, his advice is characteristically blunt: do it anyway. If you do not physically make it exist yourself, it will never happen. He reminds readers that energy is 75% of the job, adding drily that if you haven't got it, you had better be nice.

The Power of Perception and Failure

Perhaps the most challenging sections for mid-career professionals involve Arden's views on perception and failure. He demonstrates how personal branding dictates reality, noting that an individual presenting themselves simply as an "Architect" is perceived far differently than one whose card reads "Architects" or "Director". How you perceive yourself is precisely how others will see you.

Equally disruptive is his assertion that being right is boring, arrogant, and rooted in the past. Being wrong, conversely, opens up a space where suddenly anything is possible because you are no longer

trying to be infallible. He reinforces this by normalizing failure, reminding readers of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Edison, and insisting that the person who does not make mistakes is unlikely to make anything at all.

A Balanced View

The book is not without its blind spots. Arden's perspective is intrinsically rooted in the high-stakes, ego-driven world of advertising. Consequently, some of his advice leans toward the glib. His assertion that getting fired can be a positive career move because it shows initiative to future employers may ring incredibly hollow for a transitioning professional with a family and a new residential construction project to finance. Similarly, his directive to give away everything you know so that more will come back to you is conceptually beautiful but potentially hazardous in highly competitive, proprietary corporate environments. Furthermore, his bold claim that one should not try to win awards because they merely reflect consensus and fashion might conflict with the realities of corporate benchmarking.

Despite these minor missteps, Arden's work is a vital read for anyone looking to reinvent their professional trajectory. It successfully dismantles the fear of failure and offers a blueprint for audacity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Arden

Paul Arden (1940–2008) cemented his legacy as a towering, if wildly unconventional, figure in the global advertising industry. After spending eighteen turbulent years navigating the ad world, he found his true professional home at Saatchi & Saatchi in 1977, where he remained for fifteen years. Serving as the agency's Executive Creative Director, Arden was the driving force behind some of Britain's most iconic and successful advertising campaigns. His portfolio included culturally ubiquitous work for British Airways, Silk Cut, Intercity, and Fuji, along with unforgettable slogans such as "The Car in front is a Toyota" and "The Independent - It is. Are you?"

Beyond his corporate achievements, Arden was frequently described as a brilliant, charming, and irascible creative genius who operated entirely off the wall. Following his legendary tenure at Saatchi & Saatchi, he pivoted to a new medium in 1993 by establishing the London-based film production company Arden Sutherland-Dodd. He possessed an extraordinary blend of drive, energy, and an uncommon brand of common sense that defied traditional corporate logic. This potent mix of wayward talent and relentless ambition allowed him to reshape the creative landscape and author works that continue to inspire professionals seeking to break free from mediocrity.

Paul Arden is primarily known for authoring three notable books:

- *It's Not How Good You Are, It's How Good You Want To Be* (2003)
- *Whatever You Think, Think The Opposite* (2006)
- *God Explained in a Taxi Ride* (2007)

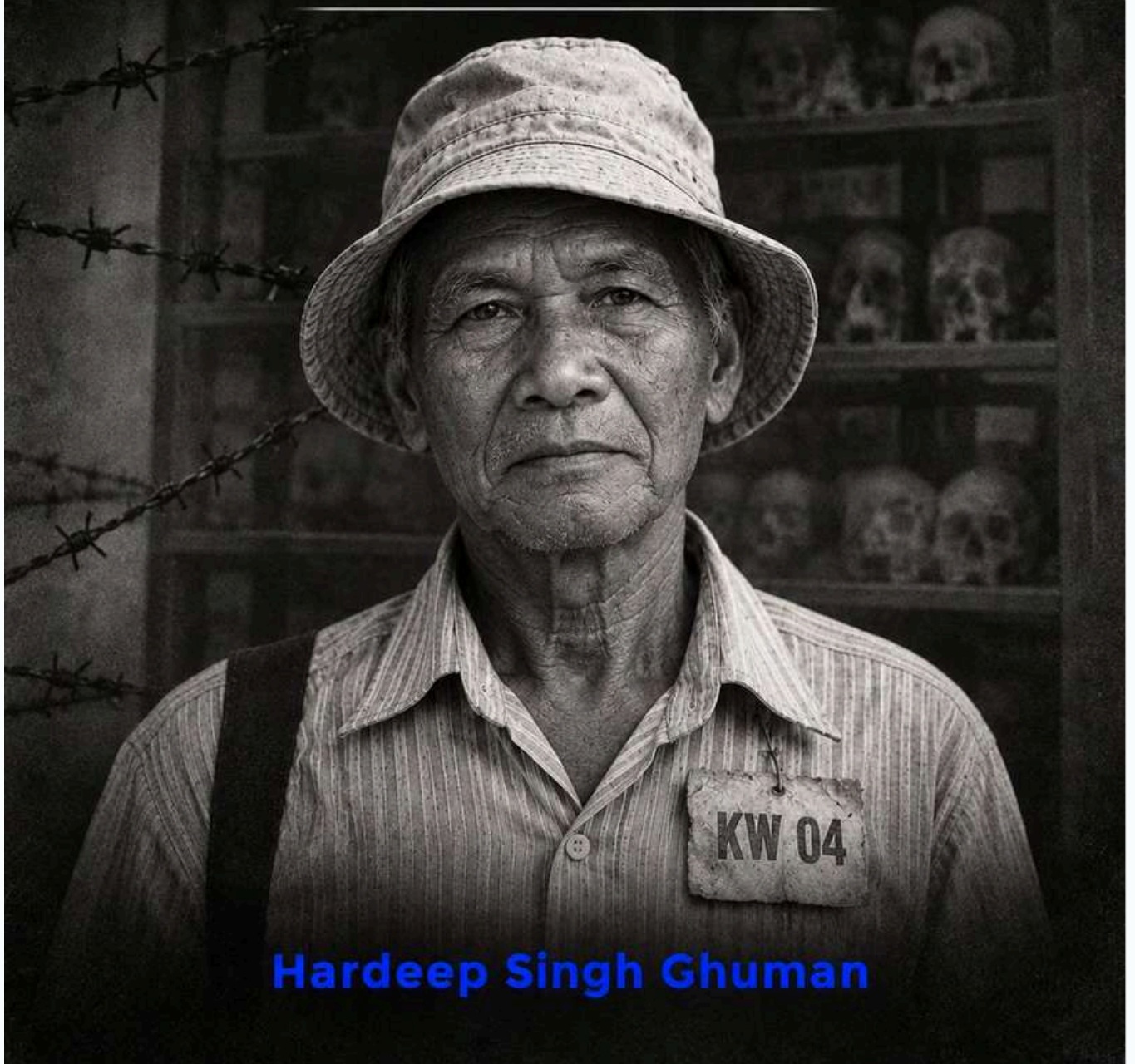


A SHORT STORY



The Darkness of Tuol Sleng

Bou Meng's Long Watch at
the Edge of History



Hardeep Singh Ghuman

BOU MENG

*Witness to the Darkness
of Tuol Sleng*

Tuol Sleng (S-21) was the former detention and interrogation centre of the Khmer Rouge regime and is today preserved as a memorial and museum.

Prologue

The corridor still has the shape of a school.

I notice this before I notice anything else. Three storeys of pale concrete, open walkways, a stairwell of black iron worn smooth in the middle of each step by feet that climbed it every morning for years. Someone once painted the balustrades white. Most of that paint is gone now, flaked away by heat and rain and the passage of decades, though a few stubborn patches remain near the corners, as if the building itself were reluctant to let go of what it used to be.

It is March, and Phnom Penh is already hot by nine in the morning. Inside, though, the air is still and cool in a way that has nothing to do with temperature. Nobody around me is talking above a murmur. A group of schoolchildren, no older than twelve or thirteen, walk past a classroom door in single file, and even they have gone quiet, the way children go quiet only when they sense, without being told, that a place demands it of them. It occurs to me, watching them, that this is precisely why the museum still opens its gates each morning. Not for people like me, who came already knowing roughly what happened here, but for them. For the ones who were not yet born when it ended, and who will need, one day, to be the ones who remember it.

I have read about this building for years before I ever stood inside it. I knew the numbers. I knew the outline of what happened here between 1975 and 1979, when a school became something else entirely and its classrooms were divided with brick and wire into cells barely wide enough to lie down in. I thought I understood, in the way one understands a fact one has read many times.

But my understanding was incomplete and wrong.

Understanding, it turns out, is not a fact you can be handed. It is something that happens to you slowly, in a hallway, in front of a wall of photographs of people who did not know, on the day the

photograph was taken, that it would be the only thing left of them. Rows and rows of faces. Some defiant. Some already gone somewhere inward, somewhere the camera could not follow. A number pinned to each shirt, as though a name might have taken up too much room.

Further along, in a wooden cabinet with glass doors, skulls are arranged shelf above shelf, rank upon rank, the way a person might once have arranged books or plates. Light comes down through a row of narrow vents in the wall above and falls across them in pale stripes, so that whichever shelf you look at, some of it is lit and some of it is in shadow. A few of the skulls are cracked in ways that are not accidents of age. Nobody has tried to arrange them for effect. They did not need to. A cabinet of ordinary carpentry, holding this, says more than any plaque could.

I stand there longer than I mean to.

I think, standing there, of how very ordinary the men who did this must have been before they did it. Not demons. Not a separate species built for cruelty. Young men, mostly, with mothers and childhoods and, in some cases, an education, who were told a story about purity and the future and an enemy hiding inside their own country, and who came, in time, to believe that story enough to do this with their hands. It is a far more frightening thought than any demon would be. Demons are, at least, safely not us. This was done by people, and people have gone on doing versions of this, in one country or another, in almost every decade since, which means the cabinet in front of me is not really a relic of the past. It is a warning that has not yet finished being necessary.

I walk on, past a room where the floor tiles are the same black and white checkerboard pattern you might expect in any old French colonial schoolhouse, and it is precisely that ordinariness, the tiles, the shutters, the proportions of a room built for teaching arithmetic or arts, that makes it unbearable. Horror does not need a special architecture. It only needs an ordinary one, and the will to use it.

power in Phnom Penh. Within months the country had split along a line that was not always visible on any map. The cities and the main roads belonged to Lon Nol's new republic. The countryside, more and more of it each season, belonged to the Khmer Rouge (of Pol Pot). Kampong Cham, where Bou Meng had his shop and his young family, sat close enough to that line to feel it move.

An old friend of his, a man named Nai, came to see him not long after, along with another man called Chhon. They asked him to join the revolution. Nai explained it plainly enough, or plainly as such things were ever explained: this was about liberating the country, and it was about Prince Sihanouk, who had been cast out by men in Phnom Penh and who deserved to be brought back. Bou Meng listened but did not agree at once. He was, by his own account in later years, not a man who had ever imagined himself joining a political movement of any kind. He had a shop. He had a wife. Politics was something that happened to other people, in other places.

What changed his mind was not an argument. It was a voice on the radio. Sihanouk himself, broadcasting from Beijing, calling on the people of Cambodia to take up the resistance and support the men fighting in his name. For Bou Meng, as for a great many Cambodians of that generation, loyalty to the prince ran deeper than any understanding of Marx or Lenin or the men who now claimed to be fighting for him. The king had asked. That was enough. In June 1971, Bou Meng and Ma Yoeun left their village together and went into the forest to join the revolutionaries, believing, as he believed for a long time afterward, that they were doing it for Sihanouk's sake and not for any ideology beyond that.

It is worth pausing on this, because it will matter later. He did not go into the jungle a communist. He went in a subject loyal to his king, in a country being torn apart by a civil war and, over those same years, by American bombs falling on the countryside in numbers that turned whole districts into something closer to wilderness (When comprehensive US Military flight databases were

declassified, it was revealed the lifetime extent of the air war (spanning 1965 to 1973) was much higher than earlier estimated - in total, the US flew 230,516 sorties, targeting 113,716 sites, and dropping a massive 2,756,941 tons of munitions). Whatever the men leading the revolution believed, the men and women who filled its ranks in these early years, Bou Meng among them, largely believed something much simpler and much older: that a wrong had been done, and that this was how a Cambodian person set it right.

The years in the resistance are not ones he spoke of often or at length. What is known is that by April of 1975, when the Khmer Rouge finally took Phnom Penh, and the civil war, between Lon Nol's US-backed government (the Khmer Republic) and the Khmer Rouge guerrillas led by Pol Pot that had consumed the country for five years, came to its end, Bou Meng's usefulness to the movement was no longer as a soldier but as what he had always been, a painter. He was put to work producing the portraits the new order required of itself: Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, the faces of a revolution that needed to see itself reflected on its own walls. Ma Yoeun was given a different kind of training, in the rudiments of health care, and sent to work as a nurse in the countryside. He was assigned, for a time, to a technical school at Russey Keo, on the edge of Phnom Penh, painting and teaching what little he could of his trade to others.

For a while, this arrangement held. It was not the life either of them had planned in Chamkar Leu, but it was, in its way, a life, and it kept them together, or near enough to together, in a country where a great many families were already being pulled apart by the new order's endless reorganizations of who worked where and who lived with whom.

Then, about a year in, his superior at the school was arrested. No reason was given that Bou Meng was ever told, and in the world the revolution had built, none was expected. Arrests did not require reasons anymore. They required only suspicion, and suspicion, once it had touched a place, tended to spread outward from it the way damp spreads

survives a thing like this and still sits, decades later, in the same courtyard, in the same light, waiting for whoever comes next.

But the name does not yet tell me who he is.

For now, he is simply Bou Meng, an old man under a tree, and I am simply someone who has sat down across from him, and neither of us has said a word.

Chapter 1 The Special Painting House

He was born on the 4th of April 1941, in Kampong Cham province, in a house that stood close enough to the Mekong that in the wet season the sound of the river was never far from the house. His father was named Bou Hak. His mother was named Lay Kat. Cambodia was under French rule then, and the taxes the French levied fell heavily on families like his, who had little land to begin with and less each year the taxes were raised. There was no shortage of families in that condition, up and down the river. There was, however, a shortage of almost everything else: of schools, of teachers, of a hospital near enough to reach quickly if a child fell ill. It was, by the standards of the time and the place, an ordinary childhood. Poor, but not unusually poor. Hard, but not unusually hard.

There were very few schools in the district, so what education there was, came from the monks at the local wat, where boys were taught to read and to reckon figures in exchange for the help they gave around the temple grounds. It was there, among the monks, that Bou Meng first learned Khmer literature and arithmetic, and it was there, too, almost as a kind of afterthought to his lessons, that he became interested in painting.

He was fifteen when he entered the monkhood himself, in 1956, which was not unusual either. In those years it was rare for a Cambodian family not to have at least one son ordained for a time; a family without a monk among them was thought to be missing something. But it was not the robes or the discipline of temple life that stayed with him longest. It was a painting shop in town, one he took

to visiting whenever he could get away, a place with the unassuming name of the Special Painting House. He would stand at the edge of the room and watch. A Chinese painter working there showed him how to render a picture in black and white using a fine powder made from petroleum, building a face or a landscape up out of nothing but shading and restraint. Another painter, one who had studied at the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, taught him more broadly, how to paint, as Bou Meng would later put it, all manner of pictures. Between the two of them, an education began that no classroom in Kampong Cham could have given him.

By 1963 he had left the monkhood and returned to his hometown, where he found work painting for the cinema halls. It was steady work. Every new picture that came to town needed a hand-painted board to announce it, and his hand turned out to be a good one. The pay was decent enough that within two years he was able to marry. Her name was Ma Yoeun. By 1968 the two of them were running a small painting business together in Chamkar Leu district, taking whatever work came to them, portraits, signs, decorations for weddings and festivals, the ordinary commerce of a small provincial town. It was, whatever else it was, a life. A trade learned young and practiced well. A wife. A future that, as far as either of them could have known in 1968, looked very much like the years that had come before it.

Nothing in that life, the wat, the painting shop, the cinema boards, the small shop in Chamkar Leu, had prepared him, or could have prepared him, for what the country was about to become. In 1970, the world he and Ma Yoeun had built for themselves, modest as it was, began to come apart around them, though neither of them yet understood how completely, or how little say they would have in what replaced it.

Chapter 2 The Voice from Beijing

On the 18th of March 1970, Prince Sihanouk was dethroned in a coup, and General Lon Nol took

It is in the courtyard, under the shade of a tree, that I first see him.

He is sitting at a small table with a stack of books in front of him, a slight, elderly man in a pale shirt, his back straight in the particular way of someone for whom sitting up straight has always mattered. His hands rest on his lap, still, folded one over the other. He does not call out to passersby the way a vendor might. He simply sits, watching the courtyard the way a person watches a room they have watched for a very long time.

I do not yet know his name.

Then my eyes see something related to his identity.

Propped against the stack of books is a small, printed placard, the kind visitors might easily walk past without reading. It carries a photograph of him, younger, and beneath it, in both Khmer and English, his name. Bou Meng.

I know the name is not the man. Not yet. I know only that his face holds something I have not seen on any of the other faces this morning, not on the

tourists wiping their tears, not on the guide reciting dates in a careful, rehearsed voice. His face holds no performance of grief. It holds something quieter and, somehow, harder to look at directly. It is the face of a man who has made his peace with being looked at, and who has decided, all the same, to keep sitting there.

I sit down across from him.

He nods, once, the way you might greet someone you expect to see again, though we have never met. Up close his eyes are pale with age at the edges but entirely clear at the centre, and for a moment neither of us says anything at all. The courtyard goes on around us, footsteps, the shutter of a camera somewhere, a bird in the tamarind tree overhead. None of it seems to reach him.

I have his name now. I do not yet have the rest of it. I will learn, later, what this quiet man survived inside these walls, and what he did, in turn, with the little that was left to him afterward. I will learn what he lost inside this building and what he carried out of it, and I will spend a long time afterward trying to understand how a person



through a wall, unseen until the plaster itself begins to come away. Shortly afterward, Bou Meng was reassigned, away from Phnom Penh to a reeducation site in Kandal province. He went, as he had gone into the jungle four years earlier, because that was what was asked of him, and because in 1976 there was no longer any question of asking why.

He did not know, packing up what little he had to bring with him, that he was being moved one step closer to a gate that would open, the following year, onto something the revolution had not troubled to give a name at all.

Chapter 3 The Gate at Chao Ponhea Yat

The summons came in the middle of 1977, and it came, as so much did in those years, dressed as an ordinary instruction. Word reached Bou Meng and Ma Yoeun that they were wanted in Phnom Penh, where the Party had need of their skills. There was a school of fine arts in the capital, and the school required teachers who could paint, and who better than a man who had spent his whole working life doing exactly that. Ma Yoeun was to come as well. It was, on its face, the kind of news that might once have pleased them both.

A jeep was sent. They were told to get ready, and they did, gathering the little they had into whatever they could carry, and climbed in together.

It was on the road that Bou Meng began to feel the first thread of doubt. He knew this stretch of country, or thought he did, and the road the jeep had taken did not run the way a road to an art school in Phnom Penh ought to run. He said nothing. There was no one to say it to, and by then he had learned, as everyone under the new order had learned, that a wrong feeling was not something you spoke aloud, even to your own wife, even in a jeep with the countryside going by on either side of you. He kept the doubt where he had learned to keep everything else that year: folded down small, and silent.

The jeep did not take them to school.

It took them through a gate in the middle of Phnom Penh, into what had once been a high school called Chao Ponhea Yat, its low concrete buildings still faintly recognizable as classrooms beneath the wire that had since been strung across their balconies and the brick that had been used to carve their rooms into something smaller. This was the place the Party called S 21, though almost no one outside its walls knew to call it anything at all.

He and Ma Yoeun were separated almost as soon as the gate closed behind them.

There was no ceremony to it, no announcement that this was the last time they would be permitted to stand near each other. A guard's hand, a direction given, and the distance between them widened in the space of a few steps, the way distance widens between two people caught in a current that only one of them, for a moment, still has the strength to resist. Bou Meng would say, long afterward, that the last thing he had of her was not a face but a sound: her voice, somewhere behind him, raised in a register he had never heard from her before, pleading with whoever was near enough to hear. He did not see who she was pleading with. He was already being walked in the other direction, and by the time he might have turned to look, there was a wall, or a guard, or simply too much distance between them.

He never saw her again.

What he did not know yet, standing in that courtyard with whatever they had let him keep still gathered against his chest, was that he had just spoken to his wife, without either of them knowing it was the last time, and that the rest of his life would be measured, in part, by the space between that unremarkable morning and the moment he finally understood what it had cost him.

A guard took him by the arm and led him toward one of the low buildings, where a doorway that had once opened onto a classroom now opened onto something else entirely.

Chapter 4 Building C

They photographed him first. A number was written down against his name, and a camera was pointed at his face, and somewhere in the building that had once been a school, that image joined thousands of others already fixed to boards and walls, faces that would one day hang in silence for visitors to walk past without knowing any of their names. He did not know, having his picture taken, that he was becoming exactly the kind of face he would, one day, describe a stranger standing in front of.

He was shackled afterward in a common room on the third floor of what the prisoners called Building C, one of perhaps thirty or forty men and women fastened by the ankle to a long iron bar that ran the length of the floor. There was no space to do much more than sit or lie down head-to-head with the man or woman next to him, in a line of bodies that did not so much sleep as wait out the hours until morning. The rice, when it came, came as a thin grey gruel, barely enough to keep a man upright, and within weeks Bou Meng had grown so thin that he no longer recognized the strength his own arms and legs had once had. One night the man lying head-to-head with him did not wake. A guard had stepped on his chest sometime in the dark, and by

morning the body was simply gone, carried out the way everything unwanted in that building was carried out, without a word said over it. At night, from somewhere else in the building, there was screaming. It did not always stop before morning.



View of Building C, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (TSGM)

Author: Hang Nisay

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A close-up view of Building C
Source: Author's Personal Archive



A wall of photos, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (TSGM)

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Partitioning inside Building C
Source: Author's Personal Archive



A solitary cell inside Building C
Source: Author's Personal Archive

Twice a day they came for him. His wrists were bound and his eyes were covered, and he was walked, stumbling, to a room he never saw the inside of except with his face pressed to the floor. There, the questions began, always the same question dressed in different words: who had sent him, which network he belonged to, what he had done for the Americans and their Soviet enemies both at once, as though a single poor painter from Kampong Cham might somehow have served two opposing intelligence services on the same afternoon. He had no answer they wanted, because there was no truth that matched the shape of the question. So, they beat him instead, with whatever was to hand, and on one occasion drew the nails from his toes with a pair of pliers, unhurried, as though it were a task rather than cruelty. On other days they fastened wires to him, close against his body in places a man does not easily speak of afterward and sent a current through until the room went dark around him. He remembered, of some of these sessions, watching his own blood reach the floor before he did, a thin line moving faster than thought toward a crack in the concrete, and then nothing, until he woke again not knowing how much time had passed.

He came, in time, to understand something about the place that no one had needed to explain to him in words. To have been brought there at all was already, in the logic the guards worked by, a kind of guilt. There was no version of events in which a man walked out of that room innocent. The only question that remained open was how long it would take him to say what they wanted said, and what would be done with him once he had said it.

So, eventually, he said it. Not because it was true, but because the pain had reached a point past

which nothing else in the world, not honesty, not his wife, not his own name, mattered more than making it stop. He confessed to whatever they asked him to confess to, CIA, KGB, both at once if that was what they wanted written down, and the confession was taken away to be filed alongside all the others, each one a fiction produced by the same simple machinery of pain applied until a man agreed to sign his own death sentence in exchange for a single hour without it.

He had seen, by then, what came after the confession. From the common room he had watched other prisoners bound and carried out like sacks of grain to a waiting truck idling somewhere beyond the wall, and he had never once seen any of them return. Those trucks went, as it later became known to the world though not yet to the men lying shackled in that room, to a stretch of orchard land at Choeung Ek, on the southern edge of Phnom Penh, where the condemned were killed by whatever method cost the regime the least, a bullet being considered a wasteful extravagance for people already judged worthless. For the smallest children among the condemned, even a blade was thought too much expense. They were held by their legs and swung against the trunk of a tree, in full view of their mothers, so that no bullet or blade need be spent on a body that small. He understood, lying shackled in the dark with the sound of the truck's engine still in his ears, that he had every reason to expect the same, and no reason at all to expect anything else.

It did not come.

Instead, some months into his detention, a guard he did not recognize came to unfasten his shackles, and led him, silent and uncomprehending, not

toward the truck but toward a different building entirely, one he had not been inside before. He did not yet know why. He had confessed to everything

they had asked of him and been believed for none of it, and there was, as far as he could tell, no reason on earth why this morning should be any different from the ones that had ended with a truck engine and a silence that never broke. But it was different, and the reason for it had nothing to do with anything he had said in that room, and everything to do with something he had never thought to mention at all.

Chapter 5 Painting Brother Number One

Somewhere in the paperwork that followed a man through S 21, in the record taken down at his arrival or repeated under interrogation, someone had written down what he did for a living. A painter. It was a small fact, offered without calculation, one line among many in an interrogation that was never interested in truth to begin with. But it reached the wrong ears, or perhaps the right ones, because the men who ran the prison had a use for painters that had nothing to do with confessions.

The room he was brought to in Building E had been fitted out as a kind of studio, easels and paint and photographs pinned to the wall for reference, and working at one of them, when Bou Meng was brought in, was another prisoner he did not yet know by name, a fellow artist called Vann Nath, kept alive by precisely the same accident of usefulness. The two of them would go on painting in that room for as long as the men who had brought them there found reason to keep them breathing.

What they were required to paint was Pol Pot. Not once, but again and again, in oil and in charcoal, in busts and in full-length portraits, the same face rendered over and over until it hung in offices and meeting halls across the regime, an image of the Brother Number One that ordinary Cambodians were never permitted to see in the flesh but were required, all the same, to revere. Bou Meng, who

had once painted movie posters to make a living and portraits of Marx and Lenin to survive a jungle war, now found the last and strangest use of his talent was to be the man who kept the face of the revolution looking exactly as the revolution wished to be seen.

Comrade Duch, the Director of S 21, came to inspect the work himself. He was a former mathematics teacher, precise in the way such men often are, and he looked at Bou Meng's portraits with the same exacting eye he brought to everything else at S 21. When a likeness displeased him, an eyebrow set wrong, a jaw too soft, he said so plainly, and made plain, too, what would happen if the correction was not made to his satisfaction. He was fond of putting it that a painter who could not paint would be turned into fertilizer, a line delivered without apparent anger, as though he were discussing crop yields rather than a man's life. Bou Meng understood him to mean it exactly as he said it.

Survival, in that room, did not mean safety. It meant only that today's death had been postponed in favour of tomorrow's usefulness, and the men who ran the prison never let an artist forget how easily that arrangement could be reversed. On one occasion Duch ordered Bou Meng and another prisoner to beat each other, for no purpose either of them could name beyond the demonstration of the order itself, that even a spared man remained entirely at the mercy of whoever had spared him. Bou Meng did as he was told. There was no other choice available to him, and by then he had learned that the question of whether an order made any sense was not one a prisoner of S 21 was permitted to ask.

He was given better food than the men still shackled in the common rooms, enough to keep his hands steady at the easel, and this too was its own particular cruelty, to be fed adequately in a building where he could still hear, some nights, the screaming that had never stopped since the night he arrived. He painted the face of the man in whose name his wife had been taken from him, in a room built for exactly that purpose, and he did it well,

because doing it well was the only thing

keeping him alive, and he did not yet know, painting brushstroke after brushstroke into the smiling likeness of Brother Number One, whether that wife was still alive somewhere in the same complex of buildings, or whether the trucks that left in the night had already carried her to Choeung Ek without him.

He asked no one. There was no one in that building it was safe to ask.

Chapter 6 The Sixteenth of August

He was still painting when it ended.

In January 1979, the Vietnamese Army reached Phnom Penh, and the men who ran S 21 fled the city in the space of a few frantic days, abandoning the prison so quickly that documents, shackles and, in a handful of cells, prisoners still chained to the floor were simply left behind. Bou Meng was among the very last inmates found alive inside the compound, Vann Nath beside him, the two painters who had kept each other company at the easels now among the small handful of adults who walked out of S 21 under their own power. Of the 14,000 to 20,000 people who had passed through that prison since it opened, seven adults, by the fullest count anyone has since been able to make, lived to see the gate from the outside again. Bou Meng was one of them.

He went looking for Ma Yoeun. There was, in the ruined and half-emptied city, no office he could walk into and ask, no register anyone could show him. For years afterward he did not know, in any way he could call certain, what had become of her, only that she had never come out of the same gate he had. It would be decades before an answer of any precision reached him, and when it came, it came from paper rather than memory: the meticulous records the prison's own administrators had kept of the people they killed showed that Ma Yoeun had been tortured and put to death on the 16th of August 1977, a little over two months after the jeep had taken them both through the gate

together. His two children, sent in those same months to a Khmer Rouge children's centre in the countryside, had starved to death there, though no date was ever recorded for either of them, only the fact of it, arrived at slowly, from other survivors, over years.

In the meantime, there was simply the rest of his life to live, and Bou Meng lived it in the only place that had ever made sense to him afterward, which was near the prison itself. He went back to Tuol Sleng once it had been made into a museum, and in time he became something the place had not planned for: a man visitors could sit across from. For a period around the turn of the millennium, word went around that he had died, one Phnom Penh newspaper reporting it as fact, a Cambodian magazine describing him as having simply disappeared. When it reached him that he was rumoured dead, he did the only thing that seemed to answer it. He went back to the museum and sat there, in view of anyone who cared to look, so that being alive would not have to be taken on anyone's word but his own.

In 2009, 30 years after the gate had opened, he stood as a civil party before the tribunal convened to try Kaing Guek Eav, the man everyone had known inside those walls as Duch. On the witness stand, Bou Meng asked him directly what had become of his wife. Duch answered that she had most likely been sent to a killing field. It was not an apology. It was barely even an admission. But it was the first time in 30 years that anyone who might actually have known had said anything to him at all.

He went home afterward and painted her. Not as he remembered her from Chamkar Leu or the shop they had run together, but as he imagined her last, on her knees at the edge of a pit, a hand at her throat that was not her own. He hung the painting at the small table where he sat each day at Tuol Sleng, beside the books he had written about what had happened to him, so that anyone who stopped to speak with him would see it before they saw anything else. It was, in its way, the same trade he had practiced his whole life, a man rendering a face



A painting by Bou Meng
Credit: BBC

onto a surface so that something true would not disappear. Only now the face was hers, and the truth it carried was the one thing the regime that killed her had never wanted recorded anywhere at all.

He did marry again, in time, and had another daughter, and by every account those who met him in his later years describe a man who was gentle with strangers and unhurried with children, which is its own kind of answer to the question of what 30 years of this atmosphere and treatment can do to a person. But he never stopped returning to the museum. He sat there for decades, telling whoever asked what he was willing to tell them, selling his book to those who wanted to read the rest, present at the gate through which he had once walked out as one of only seven, so that the place would not have to rely on records and photographs alone to say what had happened inside it.

It was there, on an ordinary morning in March 2025, that I found him.

Epilogue

We do not talk for long, that first morning. There is a book he wants to show me, the one with his story printed inside it and a photograph of the painting he made of Ma Yoeun on the cover, and I buy a copy, and he writes something in Khmer on the inside page that I will later have translated and will keep. He asks, through the young volunteer helping him that day, where I am from. I tell him. He nods, the way he nodded when I first sat down,



Bou Meng with the photo of his wife

as though the answer confirms something he already suspected about the world, that it is larger than this courtyard and that people still come from all corners of it to sit with him for a few minutes before they go on with their lives. I do not know, shaking his hand before I leave, that I am shaking the hand of a dying man. Nobody ever does. I only know that his hand is smaller and lighter than I expect, an old man's hand, an artist's hand, and that he holds mine a moment longer than politeness requires.

17 months later, he is gone.

I read the news the way most of the world will read it, as a headline, a handful of paragraphs, a photograph taken decades ago because there was no recent one to hand. Eighty-five years old. One of the last seven. I sit with that sentence for longer than the sentence itself seems to want. Somewhere in it is the fact that a door has closed which will not open again, not for me, not for anyone, because the number of people left alive who can say I was there and mean the inside of that building is smaller now by one, and will only ever go on getting smaller.

It is here that I find I cannot write only about him.

Because the man who did this to him, and to Ma Yoeun, and to two children who never had the chance to grow old enough to be afraid of anything more complicated than the dark, was toppled from power on the 07th of January 1979, when the Vietnamese Army finally reached Phnom Penh

and the gates of S 21 were left standing open. Pol Pot was not hanged for all the atrocities, for all the wounds he inflicted on the conscience of his land. He did not stand, as Duch eventually stood, in front of a tribunal with the weight of the evidence laid out against him in exhibits and testimony. He went into the jungle instead, along the Thai border, and he stayed there, protected by the very men who had once served him, for 19 years and more. He died on 15 April 1998, in a hut near Anlong Veng, reportedly of a failing heart, in his sleep, an old man's death, the kind of death that comes for the fortunate at the end of a long and undisturbed life. His own comrades cremated him on a pile of old tyres and rubbish, because that was all the ceremony they had left to give him, and even that was more ceremony than he had ever shown the people whose lives he ended.

I find I have to ask the question plainly, because I do not know how to write around it. 19 years and more passed between the day his government fell and the day his heart finally stopped, and in all that time, no tribunal reached him, no soldier was sent to bring him out of that jungle to answer for what the country's own killing fields had recorded in bone. Where, in a case like this, is accountability? Where, in a world that watched a quarter of a small country's people die and did not stop it while it was happening, is justice supposed to be found afterward, when the man responsible is permitted over 19 years of sunrises that he never once permitted the people he condemned.

I do not have an answer to that question, and I am not sure one exists, at least not the kind that would feel like an answer rather than a further wound. What I have instead is a harder thought, one I cannot fully set down. It is this: a man who orders the death of a quarter of his own country does not do it in ignorance of how history will judge him. He knows, or comes to know, exactly what he will be called once the killing stops and the accounting begins. Pol Pot said, once, near the end, that his conscience was clear, and whether he believed it or was simply still performing for whoever might be listening, the claim itself tells you something worse than a confession would have. Men like this do not

sin against their fellow men because they believe they will be forgiven or forgotten. Some of them commit the sin knowing precisely how it will be remembered, and go on regardless, as though the judgement of history were a price worth paying for the power to make it, for a while, look otherwise. That is not new to Cambodia, and it was not new when Cambodia lived through it, and it has not stopped being possible anywhere since.

This is, I think, the second thing Bou Meng's life was trying to tell anyone willing to sit at his table long enough to hear it. Not only that a particular regime, in a particular country, did a particular unforgivable thing between 1975 and 1979. But that the machinery for doing it, the ordinary men willing to operate it, the ordinary silence of the wider world while it runs, and the ordinary length of time a man responsible for it can go on living afterward in the shade of a jungle with his conscience, by his own account, entirely clear, none of that is unique to him, or to his country, or to his century. It has happened before. It will happen again, somewhere, to someone, unless enough people carry forward exactly the kind of memory an old man sat at a small table trying, every single day for decades, to hand to strangers.

I have his book still. I have the page he wrote in, which I still cannot read without help. And I have this, which is the only thing I can offer back to him now that he is no longer at the table to receive it in person: that I sat across from him once, in March, under a tamarind tree, and that I did not look away.

So, I will close, instead of with an answer, with a request. I have no God of my own to bring these questions before, no power I fear enough to petition, no altar at which 19 stolen years and a quiet death in sleep could ever be made to balance against everything that came before them. If you keep a God, whatever name you give it, I am asking you to take this question to them on my behalf, since I have nowhere left of my own to take it. Ask why the world worked the way it worked for Bou Meng, and for Ma Yoeun, and for two children whose names history did not even trouble to

record, and to billions across continents throughout Homo Sapiens' history? Ask where accountability has been keeping itself for centuries, and whether it was ever anywhere at all. I cannot put the question to anyone but you.

So, I am asking. Help me understand how exactly this world is meant to work.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hardeep Singh Ghuman

Military Veteran | Author

Hardeep Singh Ghuman is a retired Indian Army Infantry Officer and a third-generation veteran who spent over two decades in service, including 14 years in intense operational and conflict zones like the Siachen Glacier. His military career deeply shaped his belief in discipline, duty, and peace, driving him to preserve the memories of those serving in extraordinary circumstances through his writing. As the proud father of a fourth-generation officer, his lived experiences, combined with a deep interest in history, geopolitics, and human nature, heavily inspire his literary work.



Hardeep writes across diverse genres, including international thrillers, military memoirs, and literary fiction. His complex narratives masterfully weave espionage, political intrigue, and covert operations with profound themes of sacrifice, corruption, and moral dilemma. He is the author of several digital works published since 2016, as well as two notable paperbacks: his debut thriller, *Kairos - The Time to Strike is Now!*, and his June 2026 short story collection, *The Dark Edge of Dawn*. Today, his expanding portfolio reflects a rich repository of novels, short stories, and documentary narratives enjoyed by global audiences.

Hardeep has recently completed his memoir, "The Land of Roses - A Soldier's Memoir from the Siachen Glacier." The book carries Forewords by Lt Gen Syed Ata Hasnain, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SM, VSM & Bar, Hon'ble Governor of Bihar, Former Member National Disaster Management Authority, Former Military Secretary, Former General Officer Commanding 15 Corps and Former General Officer Commanding 21 Corps, and Lt Gen Sukhdeep Singh Sangwan, PVSM, AVSM, SM & Bar, Former Director General of the Assam Rifles. The book is currently being vetted by the Army HQ for security clearance and is expected to be published by the year end.

Vanguard Reed Website: <https://www.vanguardreed.com>

Amazon Author's Page: <https://www.amazon.com/author/hardeep>

Kairos – The Time to Strike is Now!: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/1718183054>

The Dark Edge of Dawn:

(a) <https://www.sabreandquill.com/products/the-dark-edge-of-dawn-ten-stories-from-the-fault-lines-of-humanity/5197527000004626092>

(b) <https://www.amazon.in/dp/BoH5523MBR>

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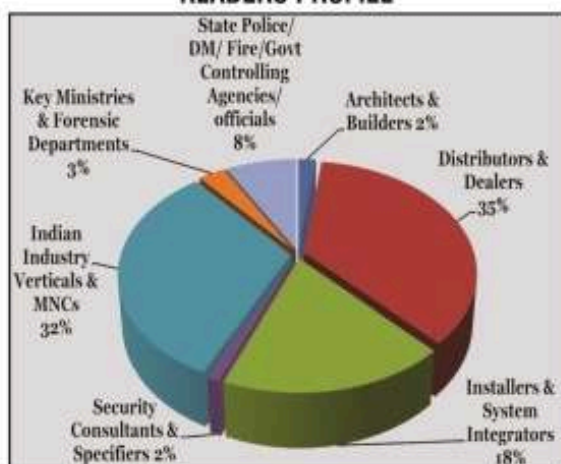
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