

How about owning an elephant for a day!

Chiang Mai, tucked amidst the hills, is an exotic and beautiful Thai destination packed with tons of excitement, finds Aruna Gracias

While most head for the beaches of Thailand, there are the mountain loyalists who find Chiang Mai in North Thailand a great destination. Chiang Mai, with its plush five stars ranging from Le Meridien to Shangri-La, also has boutique hotels and heritage properties like RarinJinda and spa resorts like The Verandah that make it a charming destination. While the spa can take over late afternoon, the morning are great for spending with a variety of activities like looking after elephants, making it an unusual rustic, plush and unique holiday. The flight from Bangkok takes just about an hour to Chiang Mai and most of the attractions are just about an hour away.

Things you can do in Chiang Mai Own an elephant a day About an hour away from the city, the rustic surroundings are just like the village in your home town but here you can watch elephants rambling along in the forest. Park your car a few metres away and walk to a thatched hut for an orientation on the elephant. At Patara Elephant Farm, Pat, the instructor gives a simple presentation minus a laptop et al on how the elephant is very important to the environment.

Then the practicals take over - he shows you how to check if the elephant is in a good mood, how to feed him, communicate with him, how to check if he is healthy, how to tell him to sit, stand, walk. And yes how to bathe an elephant too! Then climb up the elephant and take a ride on his bare back (head actually) to a nearby waterfall. Here it is a picnic, where one can have a sumptuous Thai meal on the flat rocks which includes sticky rice wrapped in banana leaves, paad thai noodles, coconut sweets

and exotic fruits like rambutan, sapodilla and mangosteen. After you have finished you can feed the vegetarian leftovers to the elephant who are rollicking in the stream of water.

Head for your hotel after this great experience and have a foot massage or spa treatment to refresh you and the Thai treatments are genuinely good.

Night safari

What a lovely concept! Sit on an open bus and tour around spacious



PICS: ARUNA GRACIAS

Silks and handicrafts are the best things you can buy here. Chiang Mai has, for many years, been the home for traditional Thai art and artefacts. Paradise for shoppers

you have to raise your neck to greet the giraffe family. Rhinos, hippos, black bucks and bison make for some of the most amazing sights.

Thai cuisine

A meal at the Empress Hotel is a must especially lunch. The Chao Nang Coffee Shop offers a mind-blowing buffet with traditional Thai, Chinese and western cuisine. The desserts are lip-smacking. For large groups of 10-15 persons there are private dining rooms.

Temple visit

Late afternoon you can visit the temple of Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep. This temple is a major pilgrimage destination. Situated at a height of 3,500 ft it is accessed by a

winding road. Once you get there you can choose to climb the 300 odd steps up or take the cable car to the top to visit the temple. After prayers, check out the view of Chiang Mai city from the top.

Shopping in Chiang Mai

Silks and handicrafts are the best things you can buy here. Chiang Mai has, for many years, been the centre for Thai arts and crafts - and for good reason. There is a long established tradition here of hand skills, and the locals are exceptionally gifted and patient at creating superb pieces. Choose from hand-woven silk, rattan furniture, woodcarvings, neiloware, pewter, silversmithery, embroidery and exquisitely detailed souvenirs, such as the famous 'sa' paper - you can buy it all.



Chiplun beckons adventure freaks

The serene town along the Konkan coast packs in loads of options and excitement for those seeking the thrills of an adventurous outing

Sushma Pawar

How many of you know a destination where you have trails paths going through forests or alongside rivers and through valleys? A destination which gives you a variety of adventure options like trekking, rock climbing, rappelling, boating, parasailing etc..... With beautiful views and a rustic outdoors' feeling in location of a place with historical significance..... all these are available at a destination called Chiplun.

Let's have some knowledge about location information and history about Chiplun:

Chiplun is located on the Mumbai-Goa highway and is one of the most popular cities in the Konkan belt, land of the Holi God Parshuram. The story goes that Konkan was reclaimed by Lord Parshuram from the mighty sea by shooting an arrow into it. The ancient Parashuram Temple at Chiplun is a well known temple dedicated to Lord Parshuram. It is an ancient temple and according to locals is over 800-years-old, however, the images currently worshipped were installed in the 18th Century. Chiplun was renowned as a port and a trading centre as far back as the third century BC, by the Portuguese, when Buddhism was spreading through out India.

Why visit?

A lot of people visit Chiplun for the mix of adventure, relaxation as well as to experience the rustic Konkan town. Adventure activities include morning treks down to the Vashisthi river through the Parshuram Ghat, rock climbing and rappelling, boating, parasailing, fort climbs and many more adventures. You can also enjoy various sightseeing places like the Vashisthi River Jetty, Veldoor, Guhagar Beach, Walwalkar museum, Mahad Caves, various famous temples besides the famous Parshuram Temple and for bird watchers and nature lovers it's heavenly as it has hundreds of varieties of birds and flora fauna as well as reptiles.

Trekking

Few of the trekking paths includes, trekking down to the Vashisthi river through Parshuram Ghat or to sunset point/Swasdata water fall or to the Govalkot fort. These are sufficient enough to enjoy for an hour to 2



hours; not too short or tiring. Early morning treks are always advisable as you can walk through the mist and fog throughout the monsoon up-to late winter. Enjoy the due drops on the grass and bushes, ear soothing calls of beautiful birds. Hiring a guide will make it more interesting for information seekers and for knowledge of the history of the area or birds and flora-fauna. Two to 20 people can have an enjoyable trekking experience.

Cycling

Being a hilly region one will really enjoy cycling along the interior roads of Chiplun (not highway - NH17). There are few internal village areas like Parshuram village, Guhagar beach, Chiplun city Vashisthi River Jetty etc. which could be an enjoyable experience for cycling lovers..... enjoy the pleasant views of paddy fields, cattle farms, a variety of birds and the stunning view of the valley and river, typical huts made out of 'Chira' stone along with few spectacular designed bungalows etc. Early morning and late afternoon timings are suggested, be prepared to get a mix of good, muddy and pot holed roads.

Rock climbing and rappelling

Being a hilly region there are many sites for adventure activities like rock climbing, rappelling, valley crossing, river crossing, jungle walks etc. As per the choice and capacity/stamina of the individuals there are sites available for normal to tough climbs. This activity has to be done in group, min. 25 to max 75 pax, with known

professionals/experts. Keep in mind that there are certain moves/actions/precautions which have to be followed under the direction/guidance of professionals/experts only.

River boating

The Vashisthi River flows through the year, probably thanks to the Koyna Dam. An one hour long family/group boating experience in a motor boat gives you an all together different feeling from the routine boating trips available in metro and semi metro cities. A combination of coconut/mango/cashew/paddy fields, villages situated on the banks of the river, mirror images of hills in the river, jiggling schools herds of white water fish, migratory birds,

Kingfisher birds cherish a lavish meal and of course the sun bathing crocodiles are rare and memorable sites in their own ways. The river is full through out the year, ready to give you an all season experience at a very reasonable price.

Parasailing

Chiplun was not known as a Parasailing destination until recently when the management of Quality Resort The Riverview identified and started promoting this exciting sport at Guhagar beach with the help of parasailing experts. Guhagar is one of the most beautiful and virgin beaches of the Konkan region, located approx 45 kms from Chiplun, with an easy and enjoyable drive. Parasailing would be enjoyable only if it's performed during the first half of the

great outdoors

Ganpatipule by the rains is a perfect destination for a wet and wild weekend

Many of us believe that beaches are not the best of places to visit during the monsoon. The seas are rough at this time and one cannot really enjoy the beach to its fullest. I also thought the same till I decided to embark on a trip to Ganpatipule last weekend. Beaches are awesome in the rains!



Ela Goyal

We boarded the Jan Shatabdi from Panvel station at 6:30 in the morning. It was a somewhat sleepy journey to start with. On the way, a variety of delicacies such as samosas, cutlets, wada pavs etc were served in the train. We reached Ratnagiri at 11:30 am. The station, surrounded by the Western ghats, is a refreshing change from the concrete jungle that Mumbai is. We took a taxi and were soon on our way to Ganpatipule.

The half-hour drive is a beautiful and memorable one. We crossed the ghats through winding roads surrounded by lush, green Alphonso mango trees. There were no mangoes though, as the fruit is plucked before the onset of

readerwrites

monsoon. As far as the eye could see, we could only see a green carpet covering the hills. The new road that goes from Ratnagiri to Ganpatipule is right next to the Arabian Sea. All along, we could see the beautiful, rough, high sea on one side and green hills on the other. We stopped often to click pictures of the virgin beaches, untouched by modernisation and industrialization. It all seemed picture-perfect!

We reached our resort around 1 pm. The resort was a new one, spread over 30 acres of land. It had beautifully landscaped gardens and cozy villas. We refreshed ourselves and headed straight to the beach. The sea was high and rough. It was a different feeling to be next to the sea at this time. The waves were much higher and meaner than we had normally seen. Even though we stay in Mumbai, we would not plan to go to Juhu, Chowpatty or any other beach during the monsoon season. This is because the rains in Mumbai can cause quite a chaos on the roads and there's a good chance of getting stuck in traffic and not enjoying too much of the beach. Hence to experience the rough seas, we

need to go out of our island city! We spent the entire afternoon on the beach. Since it was windy and cloudy, the afternoon was very comfortable to sit on the beach. This is another advantage of going to the beach at this time of the year, at most other times of the year one can be on the beach only during early mornings and late evenings! We saw some fishermen trying to catch fish.

Even though they were spreading their nets near the shore, they had caught a good number of fish by the end of the day.

Next day, we went to Ganpatipule town. It is a very small town with small, scattered huts and brick houses. Nearly all the huts have a Tulsi plant in their courtyard. The main occupation of people here is farming. The local inhabitants work extensively only for a few months in the year. We visited the Ganpatipule Temple as well. The beach next to the temple is a nice and clean one. The seas were even rougher the next day. One of the tides touched the extreme end of the shore. It was quite a scary one and had the capability of sweeping away the tourists' belongings kept there.

There is another very interesting place in Ganpatipule called 'Pracheen Konkan' that is worth a visit. This is an ancient 500-year-old Konkan village setting created on a small hill. The village has small huts belonging to different village folk including the Mukhiya. The other huts belonged to a farmer, a carpenter, a goldsmith, an ironsmith, a cobbler, a bangle man, a fisherman, a grocer etc. It was quite an interesting experience to see how the Konkani people used to live in those days. My kids learnt a lot from this village visit. The remaining time of the day and the visit was again spent with the rough seas on the beach, listening to the roaring waves.

The entire Konkan route is covered with lush greenery at this time of the year. We enjoyed the journey through many tunnels, watching the several waterfalls that were meandering down the ghats. It definitely was a weekend well-spent!

