

Singing In The Rain

Brooks, waterfalls and carpets of green greet the tourist in Chiplun, the place Lord Parshuram created with his arrow says **Renuka Rane**

As a single woman tourist in Konkan, I scarcely expect to have a constant companion. But the moment I alight from the rain-drenched compartment of the Goa-bound Mandovi Express at Chiplun railway station, the mist follows me with tenacity and the downpour shows no sign of letting up.

Notwithstanding the stormy weather, the monsoon is an ideal time to visit this beautiful place, when the landscape transforms into a lush velvet blanket of leafage. Situated on the banks of the Vashisti river, Chiplun seems bewitched – the hilly terrain and serene valley under the spell of strong gusts of wind interspersed with brief lulls.

A developing city in the Ratnagiri district of Maharashtra, Chiplun is located on the Mumbai-Goa highway.

A sprightly native and my driver-cum-guide of sorts takes me to Quality Resort, The Riverview, situated on a hilltop overlooking the river. We chat merrily in Marathi and he provides me with local titbits and details of exotic locales accessible from Chiplun. The uphill drive affords breathtaking views of the Western Ghats. Stretches of green greet my eyes – miles of rice fields, wild shrubbery, soft tufts of grass and densely forested mountains. I see temples and mosques dotting the town in equal number.

Monsoon magic turns Chiplun into a vast expanse of green

Centuries-old thatched-roof houses co-exist in harmony with the latest brick-and-mortar constructions.

Chiplun is demarcated into 'kshetras' – small pockets of land named after the background of the residents. The resort is in Shri Kshetra Parshuram which is populated largely by Brahmins and named after the 700-year old Parshuram Mandir in the vicinity. In fact, the name Chiplun stands for the 'abode of Lord Parshuram', the ascetic considered an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Hindu mythology credits him with the genesis of Konkan – apparently the sage did so by driving back the sea with his arrow!

The luxury resort is set over 10 acres of land and is a preferred stopover for tourists en route to Goa. Airy and colonial-styled with 30-odd feet high ceilings and tiled roofs, the resort exudes an unmistakable old-world charm. Curios, chandeliers and stained-glass artworks line the charming interiors. The cordial and attentive staff mostly includes, the hotel manager Vijay Gaonkar informs me, handpicked and trained locals.

With a Warli fresco on the wall, a rich wood-panelled floor and all the material comforts I could ask for, I also get a room with a view: the balcony overlooks the manicured terraced gardens of the hotel and beyond it the Vashisti river, as it meanders softly through the valleys with the hills standing sentinel. I sip the cooling *kokum sarbat* and watch the vista turn hazy again with mist.

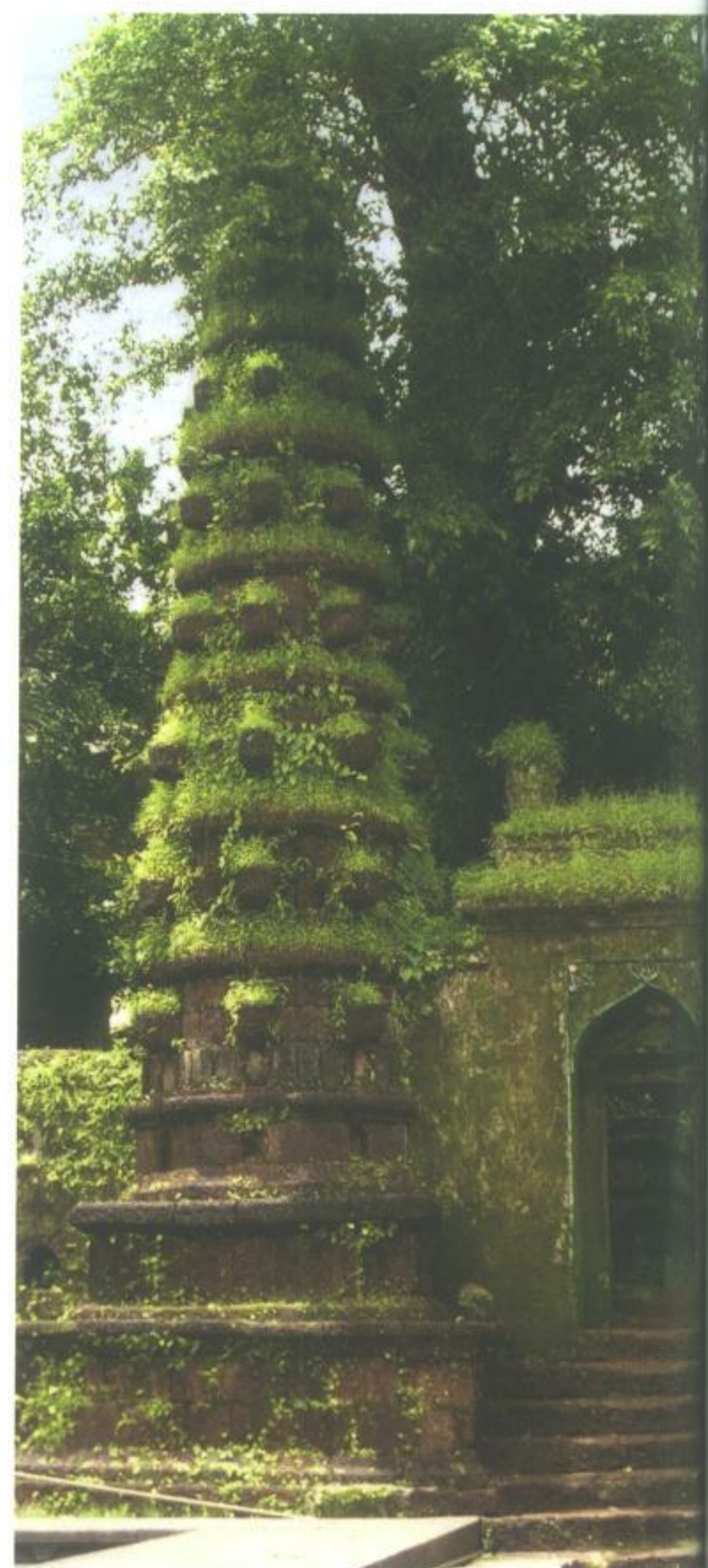
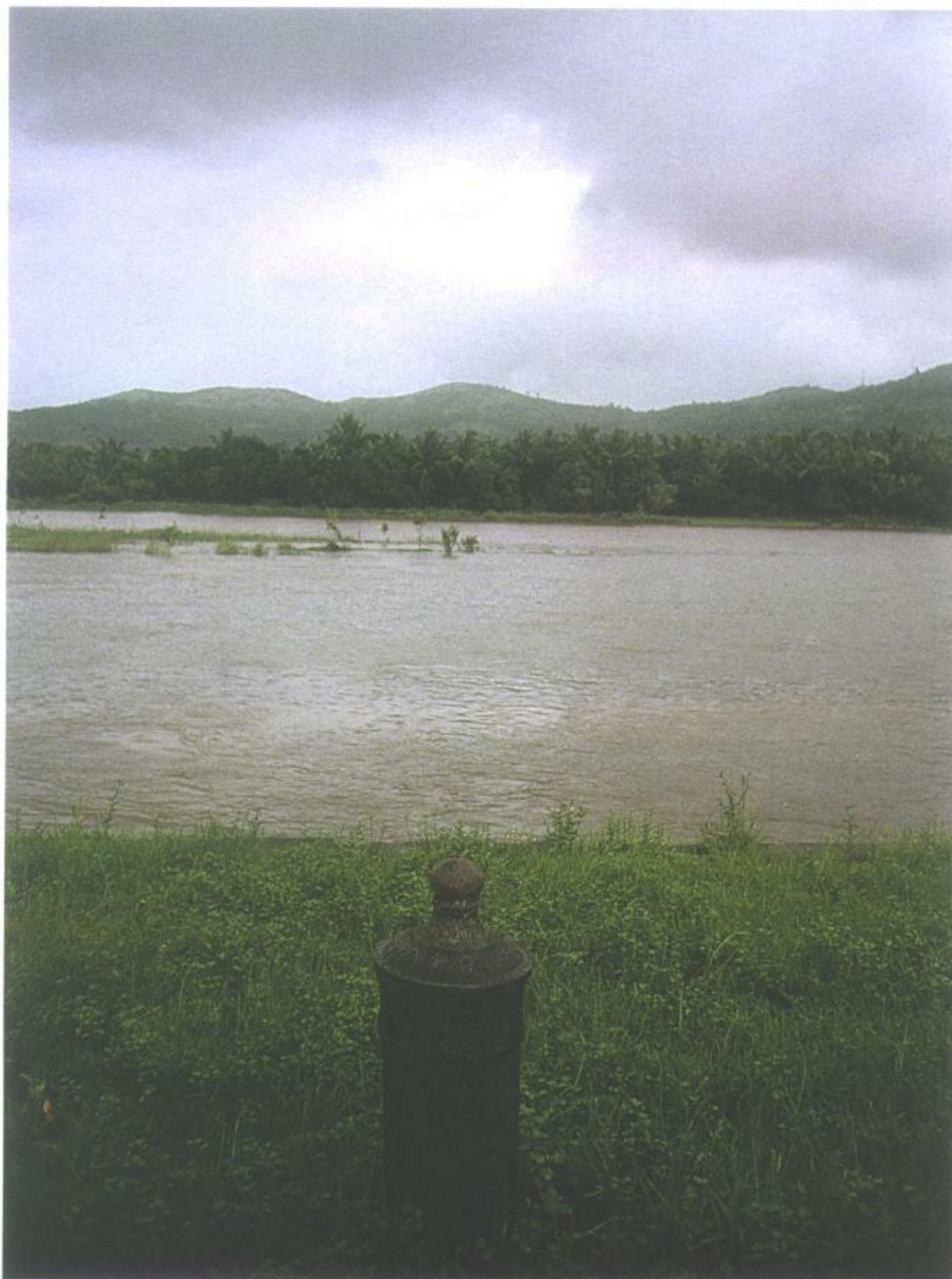
In the evening, I set out for a walk down the dirt roads lined with trees. The rustling leaves turn into a live piano-forte and the pitter-patter of raindrops creates a symphony. A fairly devout place, I spot the potted holy basil at regular intervals on the road. I visit the recent Dattatray Mandir housing life-sized images of deities before descending a hundred steps leading to the ancient Parshuram temple. The damp stone walls at the entrance are covered with ivy. The architecture reflects a mix of Hindu and Muslim motifs. Friendly locals



tell me the temple was built by Adilshah and then renovated by the Siddhis. The façade is covered with scaffolding what with renovation work in progress. Also in the vicinity is the Devi Renuka Mandir, named after Parshuram's mother, whom he beheaded at his father's bidding and then won back her life! A water cistern in

TOP: A spectacular view of the Vashisti river and valley from Quality Resort, The Riverview during the evening

ABOVE: One of the tree-lined lagoons en route to Guhaghar beach



The rustling leaves turn into a live piano-forte and the pitter-patter of raindrops creates a symphony

ABOVE LEFT: The Vashishti river jetty; **RIGHT:** The moss and ivy-covered stupa at the 700-year-old Parshuram Mandir

the precincts is marked by gargoyle-like spouts. There's also a large uninhabited bird house. There are beautiful 50-foot high stupas in which lamps are lighted and placed after twilight.

Famished after the little expedition, I relish a hot meal of *soulkadhi* (curry) and *masalebhath* (a spicy preparation of rice and vegetables) at the hotel's multi-cuisine restaurant. Chef Eknath Dhuri who has been with the hotel since its inception in 1988 can whip up the choicest coastal fare.

My itinerary for the next day, includes

a drive to the yet unspoilt beach at Guhagar, a typical Konkani town. Nearly 55 km away from Chiplun, it's a small diversion to the west on the Goa road. In fact, the Enron (Dabhol) Company Power Plant is close by at Veldur.

En route, numerous brooks rush out to meet us. A little further, we halt briefly to gaze awestruck at the Sawatsada waterfall. A treacherous path leads to the seemingly inaccessible white cascade, which is a hit with avid trekkers. We pass the tiny hamlets of Rampur, Malghar and Hedvi on the way. At some villages, the



The Guhagar beach is renowned for its blue waters and azure skies

weekly bazaar is in progress. I notice buyers getting the week's ration of farm produce, not to mention sundry items ranging from flacid plastic *chappals* to incense. I buy some delectable *aam-poli* and *fanas-poli* (dried squares of mangoes and jackfruit), a homemade Konkani treat and the region's speciality. Also on sale are fish, crustaceans, shrimps and more.

The path to the beach is through inland lagoons sheltered by palm groves. The pristine beach is empty, except for an anchored steamer. We face a tempestuous sea. Each wave turns into a plunging breaker and surf spills far on to the shore. I venture waist-deep into the waters. A local fisherwoman, dressed in the customary nine-yard sari, tells me to back off lest the sea take me with it! But the turbulence is momentary, as the rain ceases the sea becomes a picture of calm and the water is crystal clear. I meet a jolly bunch of fisher folk returning with the day's catch. They don't need any coaxing to pose for pictures!

On my way back I visit the Vashisti river jetty. The still waters reflect clouds scudding across grey skies obliterating the sun completely; there's not even that odd cheery patch of sunlight. In better weather conditions, boating trips are common, and so is crocodile spotting!

Trekkers would love to visit the remnants of the Gowalkot Fort. Located on a hilltop opposite the jetty, the fort was built during the days of Shivaji Maharaj. One can go for day trips to the Ganapatiphule beach or visit the hill station of Mahabaleshwar. Both are well connected from Chiplun.

A strange calm descends during the evening... the rain ceases slightly, the workers in the fields head home and people gather for the daily *arti* in the temples to the sound of cymbals. I head for a relaxing aromatherapy massage at the Ayurveda spa at the hotel and emerge refreshed and ready for another saunter across the hills. A rainy weekend in Chiplun is just what city slickers need. ♦

FACTFILE

Around 250 km to the south of Mumbai, it takes four hours by rail and five hours by road to reach Chiplun from Mumbai (on the NH 17 to Goa). Best months to visit: June to February. Places of interest also include the Koyna dam and reservoir, the Shiva temple at Velneswar and Ganesh temple at Hedvi. Quality Resort, The Riverview – Chiplun has 37 deluxe and superior A/C rooms equipped with modern facilities, a swimming pool, gym, conference room, an Ayurvedic rejuvenation centre and a playhouse for kids. A former Taj property, the hotel is now part of Choice Hotels. Visit www.chiplunhotels.com