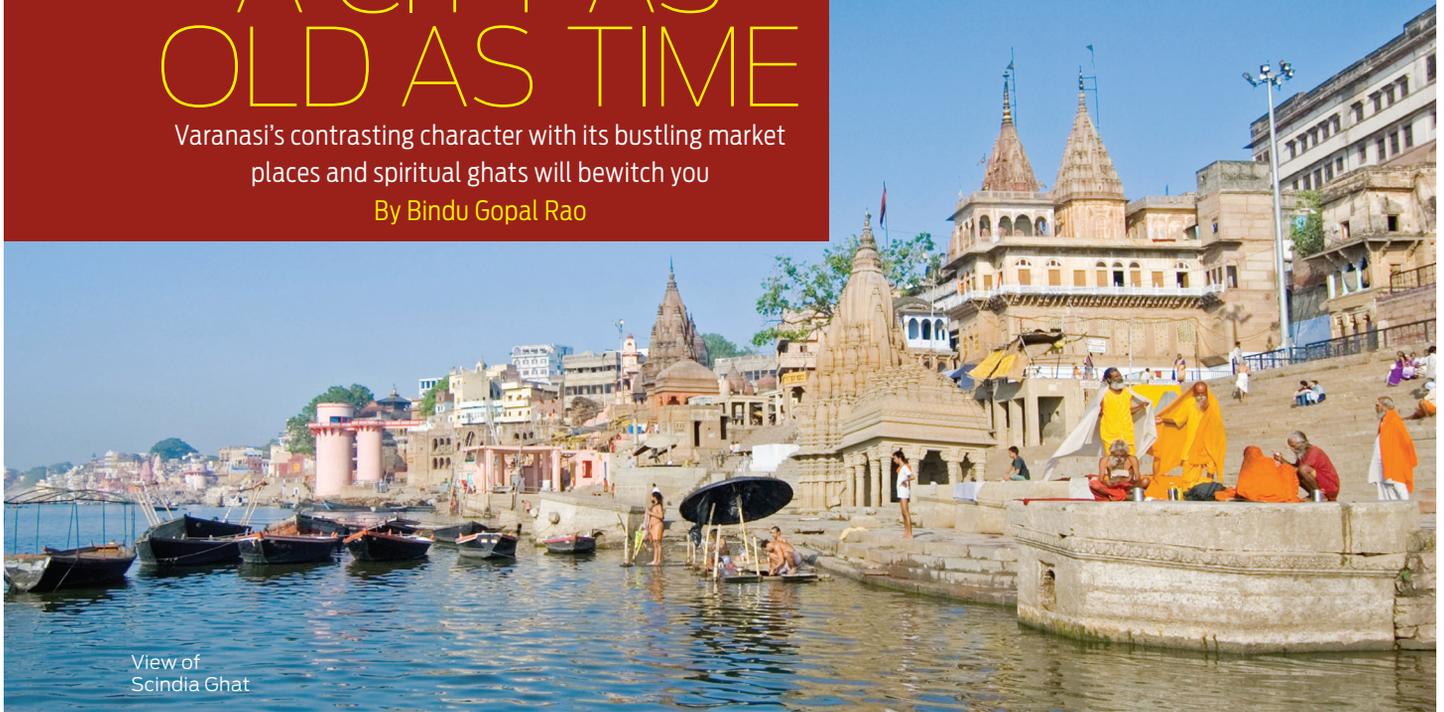


A CITY AS OLD AS TIME

Varanasi's contrasting character with its bustling market places and spiritual ghats will bewitch you

By Bindu Gopal Rao



View of
Scindia Ghat



Golden tower of Kashi
Vishwanath temple

THE SPIRITUAL CAPITAL OF INDIA

where water is an integral part, Varanasi is named after the Varuna and Assi rivers. Also known as Banaras and Kashi, this city in Uttar Pradesh is said to be the oldest city not just in India but also the world. It is also one of the Shakti Peethas and the twelve Jyotir Linga sites in India, making it one of the world's holiest cities. Also it's believed (mostly by Hindus) that those who are cremated here get an instant liberation from the cycle of births and re-births. It is also a city of contrasts: the bustling market places where honking never ceases, the aarti on the waterfront, spirituality calling on the ghats and the serenity at Sarnath.

I started my day early before dawn to attend the morning aarti programme called Subah-e-Banaras, a musical tribute (with prayers) to the Ganga, started last year. The ghats or the riverfront of the Ganga are the lifeline of Kashi, which everyone comes to see and experience. There is a complex network on narrow

alleys and labyrinths dotted with homes, shops, animals and even two wheelers that is like a maze that will eventually lead you to the ghats.

There are 84 ghats in all and the best way to explore these extremely photogenic spaces is to take a boat ride offering you a ringside view of the same. Each ghat has its own name and a long stretch of steps leading to the Ganga and a purpose. While most are bathing ghats, the Manikarnika ghat happens to be the most important one as it's used for public cremation. This is believed to be the most auspicious place for a Hindu to be cremated. Not recommended for the faint hearted.

Moving over, there's the Assi ghat. Located at the confluence of the river Assi and the Ganga, pilgrims come here to worship Shiva beneath a peepul tree. I was taken aback by the sight at the Scindia ghat, courtesy a beautiful sunken temple on the fringes of the river. The Harishchandra ghat is another