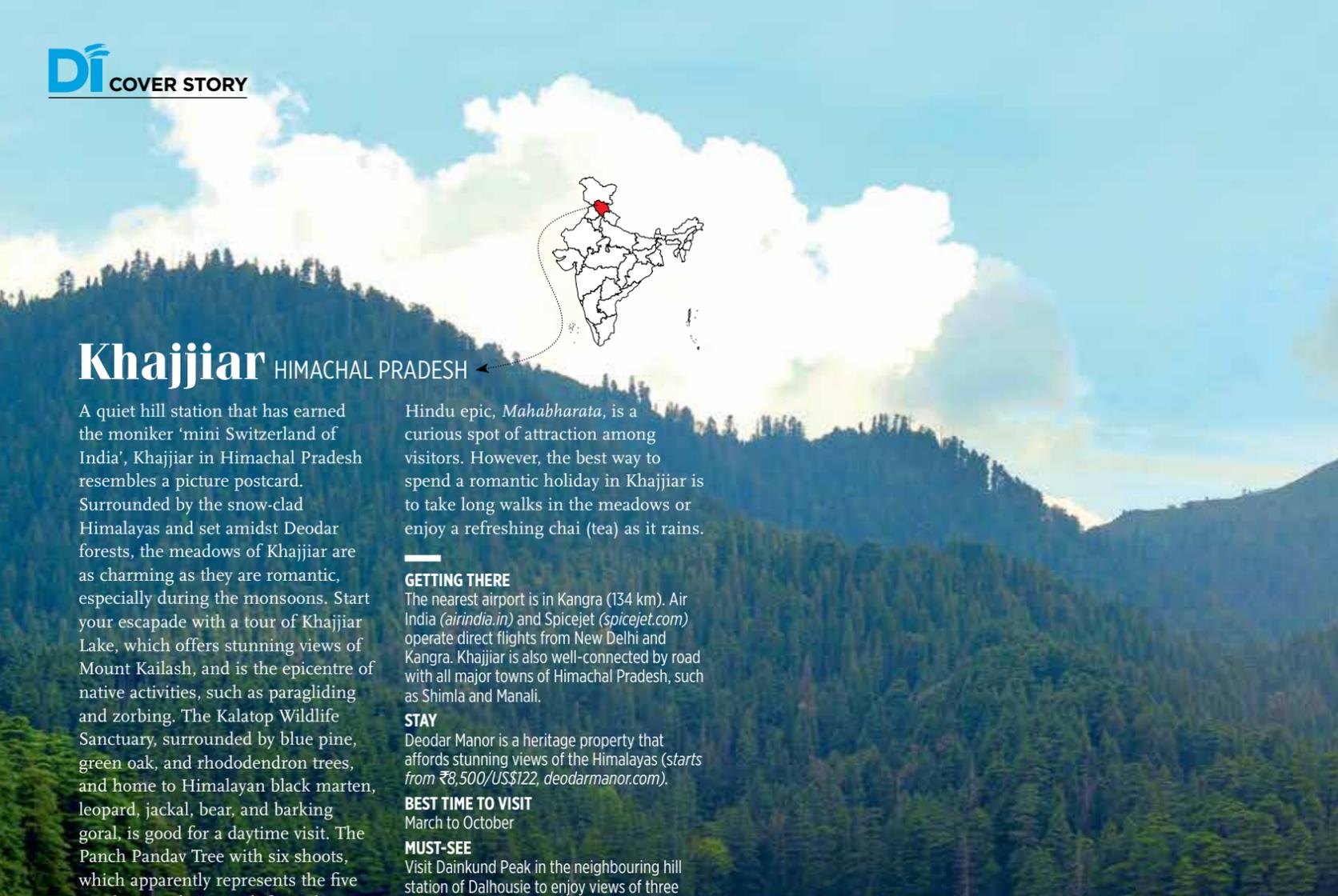


Romancing *the* RAINS

As the sun makes way for thunderous clouds, India too lugs out of lazy summers to surprise its visitors with ethereal landscapes. Follow our top 10 offbeat destinations to experience the charm of travelling in the monsoons. By BINDU GOPAL RAO

IMAGERY INDIA/ALAMY

Kerala is among India's top monsoon destinations. Seen here is the Athirappilly Falls in Thrissur.



Khajjiar HIMACHAL PRADESH

A quiet hill station that has earned the moniker 'mini Switzerland of India', Khajjiar in Himachal Pradesh resembles a picture postcard. Surrounded by the snow-clad Himalayas and set amidst Deodar forests, the meadows of Khajjiar are as charming as they are romantic, especially during the monsoons. Start your escapade with a tour of Khajjiar Lake, which offers stunning views of Mount Kailash, and is the epicentre of native activities, such as paragliding and zorbing. The Kalatop Wildlife Sanctuary, surrounded by blue pine, green oak, and rhododendron trees, and home to Himalayan black marten, leopard, jackal, bear, and barking goral, is good for a daytime visit. The Panch Pandav Tree with six shoots, which apparently represents the five Pandavas and Draupadi from the

Hindu epic, *Mahabharata*, is a curious spot of attraction among visitors. However, the best way to spend a romantic holiday in Khajjiar is to take long walks in the meadows or enjoy a refreshing chai (tea) as it rains.

GETTING THERE

The nearest airport is in Kangra (134 km). Air India (airindia.in) and Spicejet (spicejet.com) operate direct flights from New Delhi and Kangra. Khajjiar is also well-connected by road with all major towns of Himachal Pradesh, such as Shimla and Manali.

STAY

Deodar Manor is a heritage property that affords stunning views of the Himalayas (starts from ₹8,500/US\$122, deodarmenor.com).

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March to October

MUST-SEE

Visit Dainkund Peak in the neighbouring hill station of Dalhousie to enjoy views of three rivers—Chenab, Ravi, and Beas.



PHOTO: LEFT: ANAND PUROHIT/GETTY IMAGES; DETHAN PUNALUR/GETTY IMAGES



Kotagiri TAMIL NADU

The lesser known cousin of popular hill stations Ooty and Coonoor in Tamil Nadu, Kotagiri sits pretty in the Nilgiri biosphere at 6,000 feet above sea level. The place was a popular summer getaway among the British, and has retained its distinct colonial undertones amidst the verdant green tea estates. Among the top attractions here is the double cascade Catherine Falls, which can be reached after a short trek through tea plantations. The sacred Rangaswamy Pillar is where you'd like to head with your partner to witness ethereal views of the Nilgiris during sunset. Stop over at Kotagiri Women's Co-Operative Cottage Industrial Society to shop for gifts. The place sells unique creations by Tada (an indigenous group)

women, including saris and shawls, which make for interesting souvenirs to take back home.

GETTING THERE

The nearest airport is in Coimbatore (100 km). Direct flights operate from New Delhi, Mumbai, and Chennai. Book a prepaid taxi at the airport for onward journey to Kotagiri.

STAY

The Teanest Nightingale resort is tucked away amidst sprawling tea gardens and offers rooms with colonial touches (starts from ₹4,195/US\$60, natureresorts.in).

BEST TIME TO VISIT

June to September

MUST-SEE

The Longwood Shola Reserve Forest offers trekking experience through picturesque shola forests.

Disclaimer: The map used here is for illustrative purpose only and is not claimed to be either true or correct. The official boundary of India is as notified by the Survey of India (Map not to scale)



Lansdowne UTTARAKHAND

A quaint hill station in the northern state of Uttarakhand, Lansdowne is emerging as a preferred destination for weekend getaways among travellers from around the world. A birdwatcher's paradise, the town is home to over 600 species of birds. Go on nature walks to hear birdsongs or take a boat ride at the lake Bhulla Tal. For a bird's eye view of the hill station, head to the Tip-In-Top or Tiffin Top point that is both, a picnic spot and a vantage view point for stunning sunrises. Park yourself here for a couple of hours, and enjoy panoramic views of the Shivalik Hills and Chaukhamba and Trishul peaks of the Garhwal Himalaya. If you love history and architecture, the St. Mary's

Church is a must-visit to admire the Victorian architecture, replete with stained-glass windows and doors.

GETTING THERE

The Jolly Grant Airport in Dehradun (117 km) is the nearest air terminal. All major airlines offer direct flights from New Delhi. Hire a prepaid taxi for the onward journey.

STAY

Tip N Top Resort Lansdowne offers lovely cottages and huts with unparalleled views of the mountains (starts from ₹5,000/US\$70, tipntop.resortsinlansdowne.com).

BEST TIME TO VISIT

June to September

MUST-SEE

Kalagarh Tiger Reserve, situated 13 km from Lansdowne, is popular for tiger safaris. kalagarhtigerreserve.in



Gokarna KARNATAKA

If whiling away time at a balmy beach destination is your idea of spending quality time while you're travelling across India, head to Gokarna in southern Karnataka state. A relatively offbeat destination, Gokarna is blessed with a string of beaches—Om Beach, Kudle Beach, Gokarna Beach, Paradise Beach, and Belean Beach. Beach trekking is among the popular activities here. Don't be surprised if you've the beach to yourself since holidaying crowd seldom visit the coast during monsoons. Walk around the markets and shop for silver jewellery, brass lamps, prayer beads, wall decor made of seashell as gifts for friends back home. The place also has several restaurants serving world cuisine—from Mexican, to Israeli, and Iranian.

Chez Christophe ([facebook.com/CHEZCHRISTOFF](https://www.facebook.com/CHEZCHRISTOFF)) offers authentic French dishes and desserts, along with live music on some nights.

GETTING THERE

The nearest airport is in Goa (160 km). Goa is connected with major international cities, besides New Delhi and Mumbai through various flights. Hire prepaid taxi at the airport for onward journey.

STAY

The Arthigamya Spa & Resort offers spacious rooms and facilities, such as spa and pool (starts from ₹4,460/US\$64, arthigamya.co.in).

BEST TIME TO VISIT

June to August

MUST-SEE

Half Moon Bay is located 5 km from the main town. There are no roads, and the place is only accessible via a 20-minute hike from the Om Beach, or occasional boat rides from Gokarna.



SHUTTERSTOCK (TOP); SHOWLITS/ALAMY

Mahabaleshwar MAHARASHTRA

The misty little town of Mahabaleshwar in Maharashtra boasts pleasant weather through the year and is a great detour from Mumbai if you're looking for some quiet time after the chaos of the metropolis. However, arrive here right before the end of monsoon to enjoy the best views. The ancient Pratapgarrh Fort perched atop a spur, drenched in rain and glory alike; a pregnant Venna Lake, which gives way to the Lingmala Waterfalls; strawberry fields carpeting the landscape in bright candy red; and the mighty Sahyadri mountain range awash with different shades of green—there's no better place to experience monsoons in the Western Ghats. While the Venna Lake calls for a romantic boat ride in its vibrant *shikaras*, lush strawberry farms invite guests for an immersive berry-picking experience.

Spend some time breathing in the tranquillity at Lingmala Falls, or choose from Arthur's Seat and Elephant's Head Point to catch a rainbow peeping from behind the Sahyadri hills.

GETTING THERE

The nearest airport is in Pune (120 km). You can also opt for a five-hour drive from Mumbai (264 km) via the Mumbai-Pune Expressway.

STAY

Le Meridien Mahabaleshwar Resort & Spa (starts from ₹12,000/US\$172, marriott.com) and Citrus Chambers Mahabaleshwar (starts from ₹10,700/US\$153, citrushotels.com) are good options.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

June to September

MUST SEE

Visit Mapro Garden (mapro.com) in Gureghar to feast on fresh strawberries. The fourth-century Mahabaleshwar Temple is also worth visiting for its architecture.



SHUTTERSTOCK: (TOP) PADDY PHOTOGRAPHY/GETTYIMAGES



Araku Valley ANDHRA PRADESH

If your idea of an ideal vacation is digital detox, Araku Valley in southern state of Andhra Pradesh should be on top of the list for its remote location and virgin landscapes. Start your day with a visit to the beautiful Chaparai or Dumbriguda Falls. Surrounded by thick forest cover, the place is a popular camping and swimming site. Spend the night here and watch a zillion stars take over the clear skies. In the morning, visit one of the coffee plantations in the Ananthagiri Hills and get insights into the entire process of brewing the famed Araku Coffee, which is grown by tribals

and known for its bittersweet scent. If tribal culture entices you, visit the Araku Tribal Museum to know more about the lifestyle of the 19 tribes that call the valley home. Or, stop by at the Padmapuram Botanical Garden (aptourism.gov.in) to take a toy train ride around the garden and learn about its origin that dates back to the World War II. For couples who are adventurous foodies, *bongulo* chicken is one of the prime highlights of the trip. Prepared using almost no oil and spices and merely with bamboo and coal, the local delicacy can be savoured at

small stalls set up by tribal women at popular tourist attractions.

GETTING THERE

Direct flights operate from New Delhi, Mumbai, and Chennai to Visakhapatnam (115 km away). Either take a scenic train journey (tickets available on irctc.co.in) to Araku, or hire a taxi from the airport.

STAY

The Haritha Valley Resort offers a pleasant stay (starts from ₹1,700/US\$25, aptdc.gov.in).

WHEN

June to October

MUST SEE

Visit the Borra Caves and admire the stalagmite formations in different shapes that date back to thousands of years.



Kumarakom KERALA



Imagine gliding through the picturesque backwaters in a houseboat as the pitter-patter of rains lend the perfect melody to your monsoon dream. At Kumarakom in Kerala, the most romantic dreams come true against the backdrop of the languid Lake Vembanad. Among the largest lakes in India, Lake Vembanad gently caresses the coastline of Kumarakom, creating a serene landscape featuring virgin backwaters, swaying palm trees, and iconic houseboats. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Prince Charles chose to celebrate his 65th birthday here with wife, Camilla.

While a houseboat ride is the most recommended activity for couples, the more outdoorsy guests can explore the Kumarakom Bird Sanctuary (keralatourism.org) either through a walking trail or a boat ride. During monsoon, the place welcomes special species, such as egrets, darters, bulbuls, herons, and teals. It is recommended to go on birdwatching tours just after sun rise when the sightings are the best. The best way to make the most of a destination like Kumarakom is to check into a luxury houseboat and spend the night watching the stars.

GETTING THERE

The nearest airport is in Kochi (60 km). Ask the hotel concierge to arrange a pick-up from the airport.

STAY

Kumarakom Lake Resort ([starts from ₹15,000/US\\$215, kumarakomlakeresort.in](http://kumarakomlakeresort.in)) is a popular choice for a luxurious stay. Niraamaya Retreats Backwaters & Beyond, Kumarakom ([starts from ₹14,320/US\\$205, niraamaya.in](http://niraamaya.in)) also offers comfortable stay.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

June to September

MUST-SEE

Visit Aruvikkuzhi (35 km from Kumarakom), a picnic spot set amidst rubber plantations.

Minicoy LAKSHADWEEP

Ditch the more popular islands of India and plan a vacation to the Minicoy Island in Lakshadweep for an idyllic beach getaway. Take long walks on languid white-sand beaches, sunbathe under swaying palm trees, or go sailing with your partner—plenty of opportunities await at this 'last Indian island'. Located in the southernmost tip of the archipelago, Minicoy is a crescent-shaped island, which lies closer to the Maldives than the Indian sub-continent. One of the popular attractions here includes, a British lighthouse (built in 1885) that offers astounding views of the Arabian Sea and its palm-fringed coastline. Stay put to watch an ethereal sunset or explore water sports activities, such as pedal boating and kayaking. The local tourism board (lakshadweep.gov.in) offers village

tours to give an insight into the locals' lives, which mainly revolves around boating and fishing. The more adventurous couples can go diving to explore the three ship wrecks within eight metres depth.

GETTING THERE

The nearest airport is in Agatti. Take a direct flight from Kochi in Kerala, or book a seat on one of the passenger ships—MV Minicoy, MV Bharat Seema, MV Tippu Sultan. lakshadweep.gov.in

STAY

The Minicoy Beach Resort offers modern beachside rooms and cottages ([starts from ₹6,000/US\\$85, lakshadweeptourism.com](http://lakshadweeptourism.com)).

BEST TIME TO VISIT

June to August

MUST SEE

Visit a tuna canning factory to buy products like tuna curry and canned tuna. ldcl.nic.in



SHUTTERSTOCK (2)



Hampi KARNATAKA

The ruins of Hampi are as poignant as they are romantic, and witness a heavy footfall of historians and international travellers who seek to trace the last remains of the erstwhile Vijayanagara kingdom. Post the arid summer, the rains are a welcome relief in this UNESCO World Heritage Site. Start exploring the place at the Vittala Temple Complex that houses the famed stone chariot—a testament to the Vijayanagara style of art and architecture. This sprawling complex with its many temples, pavilions, halls, and pillars (some of which produce musical notes) is best explored with a guide. Stop by at the Archaeological Museum of Hampi to get an insight into the might of the Vijayanagara dynasty through an

impressive collection of sculptures and antiques. Monsoons are the best time to explore Hampi since this is when the villages come to life, and the breezy weather makes it easy for travellers to explore an otherwise arid landscape.

GETTING THERE

Bellary is the nearest airport (60 km). It can be reached from Bengaluru, which offers good international connectivity.

STAY

Evolve Back, Hampi offers plush suites inspired by Vijayanagara architecture (starts from ₹21,000/US\$300, evolveback.com).

BEST TIME TO VISIT

July to September

MUST SEE

Visit Anjanadri Hills and climb up the 500-plus steps to be rewarded with a magical sunset.



TRAVELLOGRAPHER / GETTY IMAGES; (TOP) SHUTTERSTOCK



Pelling SIKKIM

At 6,250 feet above sea level, the small town of Pelling in Sikkim is where travel enthusiasts go to enjoy unparalleled views of the Kanchenjunga mountains. Plan a trip during the monsoon when rains breathe life into the breathtaking landscape. This is also a good time to avoid the mainstream crowd of tourists. Start your trip with a visit to the Pemayangtse Monastery, an old Buddhist monastery from the 17th century and a popular spiritual attraction. Spend a day in Darap Village, 8 km away, to experience bucolic life. Or, explore the Kanchenjunga Waterfalls, which originates high up in the Kanchenjunga mountains. If it's history and culture that interests you,

royalty at the Rabdentse Ruins, an erstwhile palace that offers panoramic views of the valley as well as the majestic Kanchenjunga range. While you're in this part of the country, indulge in local delicacies like *thukpa*, *thenthuk*, *momos*, and *gundruk*.

GETTING THERE

The nearest airport is at Bagdogra (140 km). Prepaid taxis are available at airport for onward journey.

STAY

The Elgin Mount Pandim offers comfortable accommodation in Pelling (starts from ₹12,000/US\$170, elginhotels.com).

BEST TIME TO VISIT

June to September

MUST SEE

The Kanchenjunga National Park is worth a visit for wildlife enthusiasts.