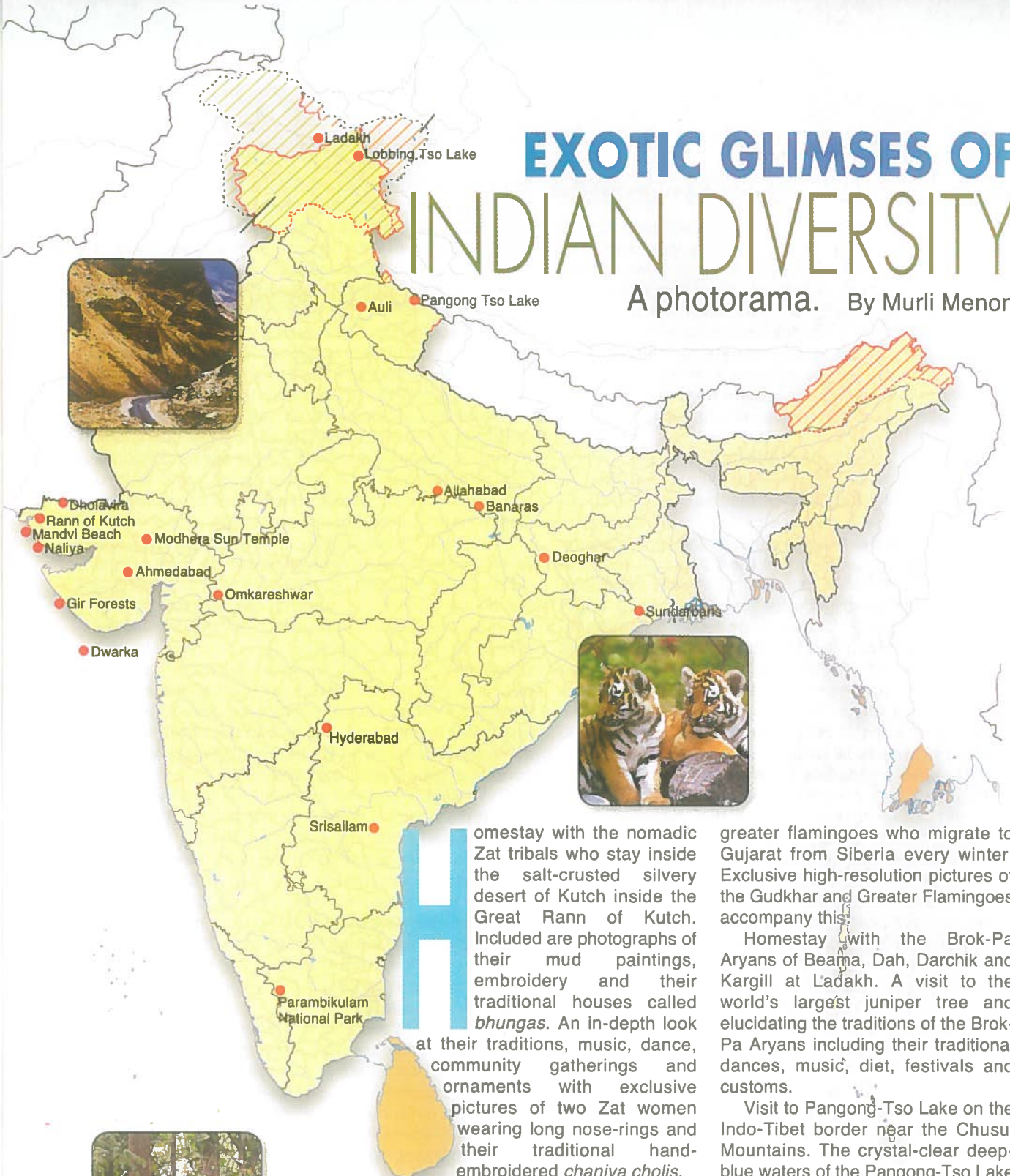


EXOTIC GLIMSES OF INDIAN DIVERSITY

A photorama. By Murli Menon



Homestay with the nomadic Zai tribals who stay inside the salt-crusted silvery desert of Kutch inside the Great Rann of Kutch. Included are photographs of their mud paintings, embroidery and their traditional houses called *bhungas*. An in-depth look

at their traditions, music, dance, community gatherings and ornaments with exclusive pictures of two Zai women wearing long nose-rings and their traditional hand-embroidered *chaniya cholis*. Desert safari through the Little Rann of Kutch at Zainabad, 120 km from Ahmedabad to spot groups of *gudkhars* (Indian wild ass). This safari also gives one an opportunity to spot thousands of pink-necked

greater flamingoes who migrate to Gujarat from Siberia every winter. Exclusive high-resolution pictures of the Gudkhar and Greater Flamingoes accompany this.

Homestay with the Brok-Pa Aryans of Beama, Dah, Darchik and Kargill at Ladakh. A visit to the world's largest juniper tree and elucidating the traditions of the Brok-Pa Aryans including their traditional dances, music, diet, festivals and customs.

Visit to Pangong-Tso Lake on the Indo-Tibet border near the Chusul Mountains. The crystal-clear deep-blue waters of the Pangong-Tso Lake which lies between India and Tibet in Ladakh is a must visit destination for all visitor who fly into Leh.

Visit to Lobbing-Tso Lake near Hunder in Ladakh. There is a belief among the Tibetans that the clouds

NITISH VS MODI

In terms of crowds the JD(U) rally at Delhi's Ramlila Ground can be termed quite successful. The avowed object of this rally was to convince the Centre to grant special status to Bihar. But indirectly by showing their strength in Delhi, Nitish Kumar and JD (U) president Sharad Yadav have achieved a dual goal. They did not think it appropriate to invite BJP to participate in the rally despite the latter having a strong presence in Delhi. By this gesture Nitish has created a greater distance from Modi, without taking his name anywhere.

In reality Nitish upheld Bihar's development model as ideal for the holistic development of India. Thus he countered Modi's Gujarat model thereby rejecting his (Modi's) claim as a would-be prime minister. Earlier too, Nitish has opposed Modi's name for the PM's post and it is due to his opposition that the BJP is hesitant about nominating Modi as its prime-ministerial candidate. What is more intriguing is that, by praising Union finance minister P. Chidambaram for his suggestion to redefine the benchmark for backwardness, Nitish wants to indicate that new political equations may emerge before the next general elections. His rally fuels speculations about new political alliances though he may be accused of being overambitious and poised to play a larger political game.

Nevertheless, despite being a regional political outfit, the JD(U) has imparted a much brighter aura to its leader Nitish Kumar through this massive rally. Implications of this rally are clear – either grant Bihar a special status now or face hung Parliament later. The party seems assured of winning a substantial number of parliamentary seats in 2014. In other words, Nitish and his party are positioning for the next general elections. By raising Bihar's development model he has taken away steam from Modi's aggressive campaigning. Does merely this puts him closer to the Congress?

By nature Nitish is against the Congress. But he would not go with a BJP under Modi either. And it would be a blunder to assume that he would forge a Third Front especially when some big fish like Mulayam and Maya are also in the fray. On its part the Congress has shown a friendly gesture towards Nitish. But again, nothing is certain in politics.

By highlighting the demand of special status not only for Bihar but for other backward states also, Nitish projects himself as an undisputed leader. In many aspects he is better than Modi. He is a master at making new political friends. Mamta Banerjee and Navin Patnaik are his close allies. These new friends may chart a new path for him outside NDA and even UPA. It is undoubtedly a well-planned strategy for

2014, when he may emerge as a leader with a new brand ideology and agenda. In this regard he appears to be more sensitive than Narendra Modi. His rally is a clear indication that no one can form a government at the Centre without his support.

OPTIMUM AGE

Our politicians often become objects of ridicule by making bizarre suggestions. Recent in line is the decision to reduce the age for sexual consent from 18 to 16. Instantly the decision invited public ire and a nationwide debate started on various media platforms. Public expressed its anger openly and a demand was raised to retire all the ageing politicians and replace them with young blood. Amid all this commotion it is but natural to ask what compelled the governments make this weird suggestion.

Proponents argue that by the age of 16, boys and girls become mature enough to decide their sexual behaviour; that they know what is good or bad sex and can take precautions to prevent unwanted outcomes of sex – ie. pregnancy and acquiring sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Above all, according to the proponents, this move will ease the burden on our courts which have to dispose of ever-increasing litigations most of which are nothing but false charges of rape made by minor girls. Thus, with one stroke most of these rape cases could be dismissed as sex with the consent of girls, argue the proponents.

But a deeper pondering over this sensitive issue reveals the fallacy of these arguments. Sixteen is a very sensitive age in terms of emotions. Growing teenagers are in the middle of maturity. They are neither children nor adults at this age. What is more, they have a curiosity to explore the body of the opposite sex – a weakness which is exploited by the adult males to coax teenaged girls into sexual relationships. Some boys too become toyboys for adult females; but that is another aspect. Here main concern is the protection of teenaged girls from forced sex.

Thankfully, at the eleventh hour, the government showed prudence and withdrew this suggestion from the proposed law of sexual protection which has been passed by Lok Sabha. If this proposal had been retained, a large number of families with girls would have found themselves in an embarrassing situation. Their daughters could have become the targets of sexual assaults.

And then it would be the onus of their parents to prove the innocence of their girls. And the government and the judiciary also would have found an escape route not to book or even punish the rapists. Would it be the ideal situation then for our society?

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reflected on the turquoise waters of this lake reflect events about the future. The Lobbing-Tso Lake lies in the middle of two elephant shaped hills and is a day-long trek from Panamik.

Homestay with the Sidi tribals who stay inside the core area of the Gir forests in Gujarat.

The Siddis have lived inhere since 1600 AD, when they were brought to India as slaves by the Nawab of Junagadh, to convert the thick forests at that time into tillable land.

River Rafting down the Ganges from Kaudiyala to Rishikesh. White water rafting at its best with a no holds based – a thrill-a-minute adventure from start to finish.

Visit to the hot springs of Panamik in Ladakh. The sulphur springs at Panamik, which offered miraculous cures for arthritis, digestive ailments and skin diseases. The drive to Panamik though Hunder takes you through the highest motorable road in the world at Khardung-La

Visit to the Sun Temple at Modhera. The beautiful temple dedicated to the Sun-God is a few hours drive from Ahmedabad. The delicate carvings on the walls of this temple, the giant step-well and pool were a delight to view. Watching the first rays of the sun strike the forehead of the main idol of the temple is no less than a miracle to behold at Modhera

Visit to the idyllic beach at Dwarka in coastal Gujarat.

Boat cruise on the Narmada at



Omkareshwar in Madhya Pradesh. It is almost like river rafting down the Narmada but on a boat. Passing through a multitude of hills, the boat cruise is a relaxing experience.

Trek to the peak of Trikut Hill in Jharkhand. Located near Devghar, the Trikut Hills offer a birds' eye view of the forests that carpet the hills of Jharkhand. The trek has to be

BOAT CRUISE ON THE NARMADA AT OMKARESHWAR IN MADHYA PRADESH. IT IS ALMOST LIKE RIVER RAFTING DOWN THE NARMADA BUT ON A BOAT. PASSING THROUGH A MULTITUDE OF HILLS, THE BOAT CRUISE IS A RELAXING EXPERIENCE

completed on foot and takes all of four hours but the view from the peak is worth the strenuous climb.

Visit to the Sunderbans Tiger Reserve in West Bengal. The world's largest delta at the confluence of the Ganga and Brahmaputra on the Indo-Bangladesh border is full of thick mangrove forests which shelter innumerable large water-birds and tigers. A boat cruise inside through the mangroves to spot the elusive tiger and a visit to Jharkhali are highlighted here.

Visit to the world's largest teak tree inside the Parambikulam National Park in Kerala. Located on the border between Kerala and Tamilnadu, the Parambikulam Elephant Sanctuary it is home to innumerable elephants and spotted deer. The thick bamboo and teak forest is also the home of the Malabar Hornbill.

Visit to the mangrove forests of Jhakhau in Kutch. Boat cruise through the thick mangrove forests



that surround Jhakhau, a port town in Gujarat's Kutch district to spot hundreds of birds who migrate to Kutch every winter.

Visit to Mandvi Beach in Kutch, which is the nesting ground of the green turtle. Mandvi is an ancient port town which boasts of one of India's finest beaches. Watching the sunset over the tranquil sea at Mandvi is a mesmerising experience.

Exploring the uninhabited river islands around Benares. Crossing the Ganges on a hand-paddled boat to visit the uninhabited islands that lie on the opposite bank of Varanasi Town.

Boat cruise on the Ganges at the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati at Prayag. A small paddle boat, guided by an expert oarsman on a moonlit night across the swirling waters of the Ganga and Yamuna at Prayag.

Boat ride on the Krishna river at Srisaillam in Andhra Pradesh. Boat cruise on the Krishna river. A small canoe, guided by an expert oarsman on a moonlit night across the swirling waters of the Krishna river at Srisaillam.

Trek to Auli Bugyal in Garhwal. Visit to the grasslands of Auli located on the foothills of the Nanda Devi sanctuary in Garhwal. The grasslands of Auli receive snowfall in May and offer the best views of Nanda Devi on clear, cloudless mornings.

Visit to the Great Indian Bustard Sanctuary at Naliya in Kutch. Tracking the great Indian bustards through the grass through the sanctuary is described in detail along with several high-resolution photographs.

Drive through the Great Rann of Kutch A drive through Kutch in India's

second largest district after Leh. Driving 1000 km across the length of Kutch from Ahmedabad to Dhola Vira to Koteshwar. Passing through the length of the Little and Great Rann of Kutch. Passing through Zainabad, Viramgam and Dhrangadhra and Bhuj.

Visit to the ancient Harappan settlement of Dhola Vira in Kutch. Watching the excavations of the Indus Valley Civilisation at Dhola Vira and seeing the underground city with its water tanks, step wells and drainage system. Discovering an ancient city hidden beneath the earth.

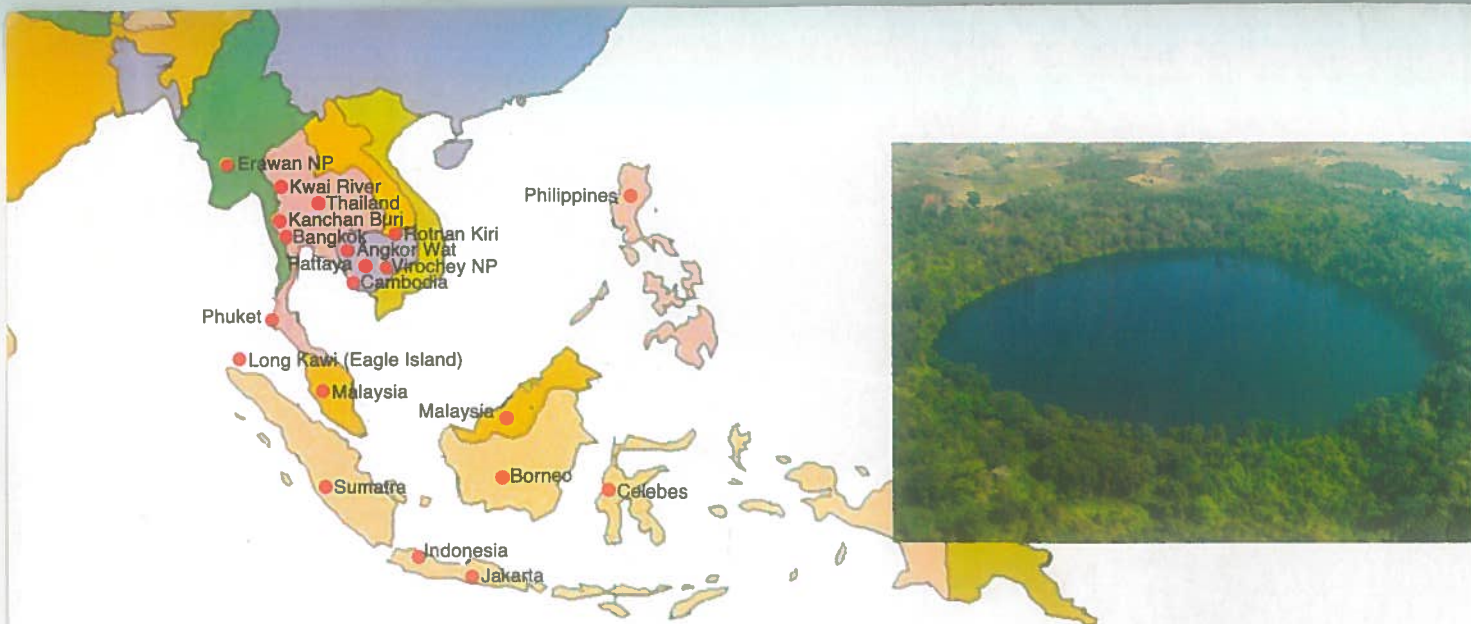
Visit to the forest reserve at Kala Dungar near Bhuj to spot jackals. Kala Dungar is home to a large population of wild jackals who can be spotted quite easily during a trip to Kala Dungar peak. Ideal budget week-end getaway from Ahmedabad or Bhuj.

Visit to Nal Sarovar Bird Sanctuary, 70 km from Ahmedabad in winter. Boating into the depths of this shallow lake is the best way to watch the flocks of lesser flamingoes that migrate every winter from Siberia and Russia.

AN IDEAL DAY-TRIP

Exotic travel through south-east Asia and Tibet Boat cruise on the Kwai river at Kanchanaburi, is an ideal day-trip from Bangkok. The most exciting part of my trip was trekking inside the Erawan National Park near Kanchanaburi. Easily reached by bus, the park sits in the middle of thick jungle and contains a series of small waterfalls descending a hill and flowing into a series of pools. It's a delight to swim in the cold clear pools as an antidote to the thick tropical heat.

Visit to the long-necked Kayans at Huai Suea Thao village near Mae Hong Son. The thick rainforests that straddle the Thai-Burma border are home to the long neck tribe. The most unique aspect about the tribe living in this village is the elongated necks of the females! The women wear brass rings at birth and continue to wear a ring every year.



Unbelievable high-resolutions pictures with these long-neck tribal women accompany this article which reads straight out of *Ripley's Believe it or not*.

Visit to Koh Taen island off the coast of Koh Samui in Thailand. Koh Taen is an uninhabited island full of bamboo groves, fruit trees, coconut trees, bamboo groves and thick rainforests. Koh Taen island is a two-hour speed-boat ride away from Koh Samui and is surrounded by crystal-clear waters and is surrounded by verdant hills with underwater caves. Koh Taen is also home to coral colonies which surround the island.

Trekking inside the Khao Sok National Park in Phuket. The Khao Sok National Park is home to monitor

lizards, gibbons and hornbills. This park offers several treks with different degrees of difficulty but the trek to Tam Nam (crystal-clear pool) is the best of the lot. Every step of this trek is an adventure and one is lucky enough to spot gibbons and several monitor lizards during this trek.

Visit to the floating village inside the rainforests of Southern Phuket. Eco-friendly huts made of coir and bamboo with thatched huts float on the waters of a giant lake inside the Khao Sok National Park in Phuket. Getting to these floating houses, one passes through giant hills covered in green, several waterfalls and limestone rock formations with an extensive underwater cave system.

Visit to the Volcanic Crater Lake

on the Cambodian-Vietnam border at Ratnakiri in Northeast Cambodia. The crystal-clear waters of this turquoise lake is famous for its medicinal properties and is surrounded by pristine, virgin rainforests on all sides. The unique feature of this lake is that it is shaped like a full moon (a perfectly circular lake)

Visit to Chaong waterfalls at Ratnakiri in Northeast Cambodia. One of the most beautiful waterfalls in the world, is hidden among pristine rainforests on the Cambodian-Vietnam border. An eight hour drive through a dirt road gets you to this waterfall located inside the Virachay National Park in north-east Cambodia.

Visit to Anantara Elephant camp on the Thai-Burma-Laps border at the Golden Triangle, near Chiang Rai in northern Thailand. One can watch the elephants at close quarters and give it a bath. A gentle trek through the hills located on the banks of the Mekong river gets you to the elephant camp.

Visit to Sam Roi Yod National Park near Prachua Kiri Khan in Thailand. Located near Hua-Hin, this national park has a unique footboard system which takes you into the interiors of the park to view cranes, pelicans, jacanas, gulls and other large water-birds.

Visit to "Wat Arun" or the "Temple of Dawn" at Bangkok to watch the sunrise. Located on the opposite bank of the Chao Phraya river, Wat





Arun is tucked away in a quiet part of Bangkok and is a tranquil destination most tourists miss.

Visit to Coral island off the coast of Pattaya. Boat ride to the snow-white beach of Coral Island on hour away from Pattaya by boat. This beautiful island boasts of surf-rimmed waves, snow white beaches, colourful corals and verdant hills.

Visit to Samae Beach off the coast of Pattaya. Samae beach is a shallow beach on the far side of coral island. With gentle waves and soft sands, it is ideal for body surfers. Samae beach also offers several water sports including yachting, water-skiing and para sailing.

Visit to Morakkot Cave off the coast of Krabi off the island of Koh Lanta. The beautiful island resort of Pimalai at Koh Lanta is the resort of choice to stay during one's stay at Koh Lanta. This cave is a short ride away from the island. One has to swim through several tunnels to enter

this cave tucked away in the middle of open limestone formations.

Visit to Koh Kret island to buy Tribal pottery made by the Mon tribals. Tucked away in a quiet river island on the far end of the Chao Phraya river, one can watch the Mon potters making pottery using the same techniques as their ancestors did 5000 years ago. There is a pottery museum here which displays Mon pottery over the centuries. The Mons are the original tribal inhabitants of Thailand who migrated here from Mongolia nearly 5000 years ago.

Snorkeling in the transparent azure blue waters around the island of Koh Lanta in Krabi. With extremely colourful high-resolution pictures of the colourful underwater coral formations and aquatic life seen crystal clear waters of the Andaman Sea. The underwater is a riot of colour and shapes including table corals, fan shaped corals and corals

in every shade of red, green and purple. With several high-resolution pictures captured with a special underwater camera.

Travelling on the open air bamboo train at Battambang on the Thai Cambodian border. This is the only open-air bamboo train in the world which runs through rural Cambodia. The bamboo train is mounted on a pair of railway wheels and powered by a diesel generator. The open air ride through rural Cambodia offers an opportunity to sight butterflies and colourful birds including parrots, swallows and hornbills.

Visit to the giant temples of Angkor Wat in Cambodia. The giant silver oak trees grow inside the giant temple at Ta Phrom. The gigantic faces of Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma chiseled from a single giant slab of rock and stories of the Mahabharata and Ramayana chiseled on long stone panels, hundreds of metres in length are some of the miracles found in the temples at Angkor.

ROCK CLIMBING AND TREKKING

Visit to Borneo for a homestay with the Murut tribals of Indonesia on the Malaysian-Indonesian border. 600 Murut tribals live jointly in a wooden house known as a long house. It is a once in a lifetime experience to watch the excellent coordination, team-work, comradeship and cohesion with which 600 Muruts live jointly as a single family

Rock climbing at the Kraen Krachan National Park in Thailand near Hua-Hin. The Kraen Krachan National Park offers several gentle treks ranging from two km. to four kms. It is ideal for beginners and the 4 km. ascent right up to the peak takes all of four hours and takes you to a large waterfall and pool where one can enjoy a ice-cold bath in winter and watch colonies of colourful fishes swim along with you,

Visit to Bangpae Waterfalls in Phuket. A one hour trek through verdant rainforests takes you to a gorgeous waterfall which resembles a parallel wall of water crashing into

the forest floor. The trek to this waterfall is slightly tough and takes all of an hour to reach. One can sight several wild gibbons along the way.

Trek to Mount Kailash in Tibet on foot from Darchula in India. Detailed description of a 100-km trek along the banks of the Kali Ganga river from Darchula in Kumaon to Mount Kailash in Tibet, crossing the "Om Parvat" at Nabhidang. High resolution



pictures from India, Nepal and Tibet accompany this feature.

Drive to Mansarovar in Tibet from Kodari in Nepal. Description of the circumambulation around Mount Kailash after a 2000 km. drive from Kathmandu, passing through Zhangmu, Saga and Paryang with some unbelievable high resolution photographs of the reflection of the crimson sunrise on the snow capped Mount Kailash.

Visit to the island of Langkavi in Malaysia. Langkavi or "Eagle's Island" in Malay is four hours away

from Penang by a Speed Boat. Limestone formations and mangrove forests surround the beaches of Langkavi. The island is home to several species of macaques who live in the mangroves. Description of a canoe trip through the mangroves to photograph macaques is described in this feature along with high-resolution pictures.

Visit to Tioman Island in Malaysia. The transparent, light blue waters of Tioman Island can rival any swimming pool in the world. Exploring the coral colonies of Tioman on a glass bottomed boat is described.

One can also sight several colonies of fishes, clams, crabs, sea anemones and aquatic creatures during this boat ride. With several high resolution pictures captured with a special underwater camera.

Visit to Pangkor Island in Malaysia. Located off the coast of Malaysia, Pangkor boasts of several acres of virgin rainforests and clean beaches.

There are several hundred hornbills on this island and it is not difficult to capture these long-beaked colourful birds perched on the top of coconut trees.

Visit to Bukit Tinggi Highlands in Malaysia. Firs, birches and pine covered forests carpet the hills around Bukit Tinggi which is a short drive away from Kuala Lumpur. Bukit Tinggi boasts of a small rainforest, where one can relax under the canopy of trees, while listening to the sound of the mountain streams that trickle down in sweet elegance.

A SPLASH OF GREEN

Visit to Air Itam Hills in Malaysia. Air Itam is located in a quiet corner of Penang Hill and it takes a few hours to trek up the hill. The trek takes you through a splash of all shades of green. There is also a train which goes up Penang Hill which stops near Air Itam. The trek from the station takes all of 30 minutes.

Visit to Monkey Beach in Penang. Monkey beach is an uninhabited beach in Penang which is home to several species of macaques. One has to trek through thick rainforests for about four hours to get to monkey beach. Monkey beach is a beach full of crabs, macaques, coconut trees, areca trees and tropical rainforests.

Trek through the rainforests of Taman Negara. Taman Negara in Malaysia is the home of the original aboriginal inhabitants of Malaysia called "Orang Asli" by the locals. The Orang Asli rarely venture out of the rainforests and continue to live of the land located deep inside the thick rainforests. We