

EXPLORE

Extreme India

Before you make a mad dash to New Zealand or the USA for your next adrenaline fix, know there's some serious adventure on offer right here at home if you just look in the right places.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS ANURAG MALLICK AND PRIYA GANAPATHY

IF YOU THOUGHT ADVENTURE tourism in India was just limited to trekking, white-water rafting, diving and a few other major sports, buckle up for some offbeat outdoor activities across the country.

CANYONING OR WATERFALL RAPPPELLING IN MAHARASHTRA

While gazing at a gorgeous cascading waterfall may do it for some, others can get their thrills by rappelling down them. The Western Ghats in Maharashtra, which are dotted with several waterfalls, are fast emerging as a premier canyoning site. There's no better spot than Vihgaon, 13 km from Kasara Ghat near Igatpuri (a hill station in Nashik district). The dizzying 120-ft drop has a 30-ft wide rockface, large enough for four ropes to rappel down. The check dam, smaller cascades nearby and a scenic plateau have also boosted Vihgaon's popularity. Other good sites to visit include Bekare

at Bhivpuri near Karjat, Dudhani near Panvel and Dudhiware near Lonavala.

Pro-tip: Carry a waterproof backpack with a change of clothes and knee-guards or protective caps to avoid scraping your knees against the cliff-face.

When to go: July–October

Who to do it with: Offbeat Sahyadri (Ph: +91 9987990300, 9664782503; Email: offbeatsahyadri@gmail.com) and Nature Knights (www.natureknights.net) offer several adventure activities, scheduled trips and customisable treks.

Getting there: Jet Airways flies regularly to Mumbai from several major Indian cities. From Mumbai, Vihgaon is a two-hour drive (115 km) via NH-3.

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SPELUNKING OR CAVING IN MEGHALAYA

Limestone deposits in Meghalaya's southern slopes, coupled with high rainfall, humidity and elevations of over 1,000m, make for ideal conditions for cave formations. With 1,350 caves stretching over nearly 400 km, Meghalaya has some of the deepest, longest and largest labyrinths of caves in the Indian subcontinent. Also known as spelunking, caving gives people a chance to see a rarely explored realm of stalagmites, stalactites, candles, cave curtains and cave pearls, which have formed over thousands of years. For tourists, Masmai Cave near Cherapunjee in the Khasi Hills, is a good introduction. For more serious explorations, head to Shongrim Ridge in the Jaintia Hills, riddled with cave passages like Krem Tyngben, Krem Umthloo, Krem Chynpe and Krem Liet Prah, the longest natural cave in India.

Pro-tip: Caving is not advisable for those who suffer from claustrophobia or those afraid of heights, darkness, bugs and bats.

When to go: November–March

Who to do it with: Kipepeo (www.kipepeo.in) offers environmentally friendly and community-centric tours across Northeast India.

Getting there: It's best to set up base at the state capital, Shillong. Jet Airways flies regularly to Guwahati from Delhi, Bengaluru, Kolkata and Ahmedabad. Shillong is a 2.5-hour drive (100 km) from Guwahati.



Above: A 120-ft high waterfall at Vihgaon, one of the premier rappelling destinations in Maharashtra. Left: Masmai Cave, near Cherapunjee, is one of Meghalaya's many natural limestone caves that are open for exploration.



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BOULDERING IN HAMPI

Bouldering refers to the art of scaling boulders without any ropes or harness. Pioneering rock climber John Sherman quipped, "The only gear really needed to go bouldering is boulders." Thanks to the country's landscape, the adventure sport is gaining ground here—places around Bengaluru such as Ramanagaram, Antargange near Kolar, Turahalli Forest and Badami have firmly placed Karnataka on the global bouldering map. But few sites can compete with Hampi—the profusion of boulders, monuments, monkeys and oddballs make for a dramatic climb! For inspiration, check out Chris Sharma's movie *Pilgrimage*, shot by renowned climbing documentary maker Josh Lowell, and *Golden Boulders*, a Geoquest Bouldering Guidebook on Hampi based on the knowledge of two old-time Hampi climbers Pil Lockey and Harald "Hari" Vierroth. Carry your own chalkbag (chalk helps keep sweaty hands dry) and climbing shoes, though guesthouses such as Baba Café and Begum's Place rent out crash pads (foam

mats that are used to protect climbers should they slip and fall).

Pro-tip: Must-visit sites in Hampi include Dali Boulder, Rishyamuk Rock, Ek-Number Boulderfield and Jungli Plateau.

When to go: November–December. Avoid the monsoon and peak summer.

Who to do it with: GETHNAA, i.e. General Thimmaiah National Academy of Adventure (www.gethnaa.org), is an autonomous body formed by the Government of Karnataka to promote rock climbing, forest treks and adventure activities in the state.

Getting there: Jet Airways flies regularly to Bengaluru from several Indian cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, Ahmedabad, Kolkata and Chennai. Hampi is a six-hour drive (343 km) from Bengaluru.

The profusion of boulders, monuments and oddballs at Hampi make for a dramatic climb.



Photo: Shutterstock

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KITEBOARDING NEAR RAMESHWARAM

Kiteboarding is an extreme surface water sport that combines aspects of wakeboarding, windsurfing, surfing, parasailing and gymnastics. The power of the wind is harnessed with a large controllable power kite that propels the surfer, perched on a kiteboard, across the water. The perfect conditions—steady wind speed, scanty rainfall and a large stretch of deep blue sea—can be found just off India's east coast, in southern Tamil Nadu. Learn the ropes with Charmaine, India's only female kitesurfer, and Govinda, who trained under the legendary Ines Correa at a Redbull Kitesurfing event in 2013, courtesy adventure sports company Quest. You can also complete a certification course with an IKO (International Kiteboarding Organisation) instructor and learn wave-style riding, freestyle or jumps at Swami's Bay, Lands End lagoon and Fisherman's Cove. Snorkelling, kayaking and stand up paddleboarding are also offered.

Pro-tip: Popping in and out of water intermittently due to light or gusty wind, poor flying skills or twisted lines is called tea-bagging.

When to go: Catch the southern winds in the summer (April–September) and northern winds in winter (October–March).

Who to do it with: Quest Expeditions (thekitesurfingholiday.com) offers several extreme water sports across India including diving, kayaking and kitesurfing.

Getting there: Jet Airways flies regularly from Chennai to Madurai, from where Rameshwaram is a three-hour drive (169 km).

SKIING IN GULMARG

CNN ranks Gulmarg as the seventh-best ski destination in Asia. And for good reason. At 13,780 ft, Kongdoori, on the shoulder of Mt Affarwat, is the highest skiing point in the Himalayas. The world's highest ski lift whisks adventure-seekers to the upper reaches, from where they can ski or snowboard down freshly powdered slopes. The Indian Institute of Skiing and Mountaineering (IISM), a snowball's throw away from The Khyber Resort, offers certified instructors, quality skiing equipment and snow gear for those interested in learning as well as shared accommodation.

Pro-tip: For a more luxurious spin to your adventure holiday, base yourself at the plush Khyber Himalayan Resort and Spa, a few minutes away from the Gulmarg Gondola cable car.

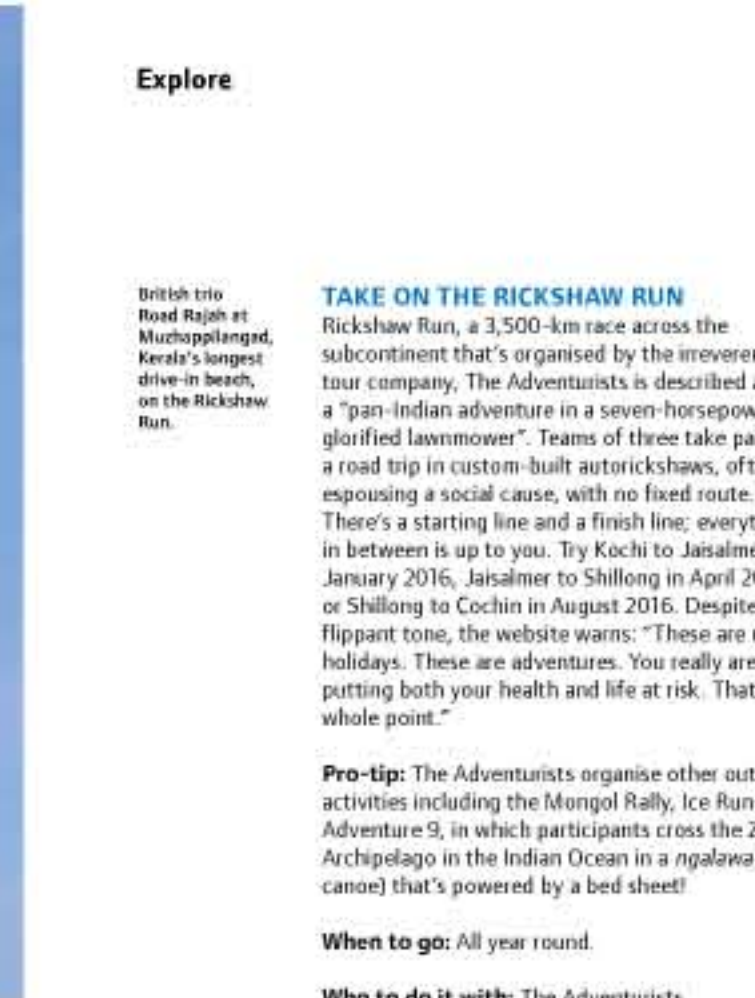
When to go: December–March



Who to do it with: Mercury Himalayan Explorations (www.mheadventures.com) provides an extensive list of adventure activities both in India and abroad.

Getting there: Jet Airways flies regularly to Srinagar from Delhi. From there, Gulmarg is about an hour's drive (51 km) away.

Above: Skiers walk up the slopes at Gulmarg. Top: Kitesurfing, relatively new to India, has caught on at Rameshwaram, Tamil Nadu.



British Eric Road Rajas at Muthapattangal, Kerala's longest drive-in beach, on the Rickshaw Run.

TAKE ON THE RICKSHAW RUN

Rickshaw Run, a 3,500-km race across the subcontinent that's organised by the irreverent tour company, The Adventurists is described as a "pan-Indian adventure in a seven-horsepower glorified lawnmower". Teams of three take part in a road trip in custom-built autorickshaws, often espousing a social cause, with no fixed route. There's a starting line and a finish line, everything in between is up to you. Try Kochi to Jaisalmer in January 2016, Jaisalmer to Shillong in April 2016 or Shillong to Cochin in August 2016. Despite the flippancy tone, the website warns: "These are not holidays. These are adventures. You really are putting both your health and life at risk. That's the whole point."

Pro-tip: The Adventurists organise other outrageous activities including the Mongol Rally, Ice Run and Adventure 9, in which participants cross the Zanzibar Archipelago in the Indian Ocean in a ngalawa (dugout canoe) that's powered by a bed sheet!

When to go: All year round.

Who to do it with: The Adventurists (www.theadventurists.com) is a maverick adventure company that lives to find ways to make the world a little less boring.

Getting there: Jet Airways flies regularly to Kochi, Jodhpur (four hours from Jaisalmer) and Guwahati (2.5 hours from Shillong) from several Indian cities.

SPORTFISHING IN THE ANDAMANS

For a taste of saltwater sportfishing (fishing for recreational purposes), hit the high seas in the Andamans. Fishing is as per catch and release and operators run day-trips for first timers or seven-day, all-inclusive adventures that include accommodation and transfers covering Ritchie's Archipelago and the South Andaman Islands. Day trips to Invisible Banks and Barren Island are also organised.

Pro-tip: The varieties of fish available include Giant Trevally, Barracuda, Barramundi, Yellowfin Tuna, King Mackerel, Wahoo and Sailfish.

When to go: November–April

Who to do it with: Gamefishing India (www.gamefishingindia.com) is one of India's most professional big game angling operator running sportfishing charters in the Andamans.

Getting there: Jet Airways flies daily to Port Blair from Chennai. Havelock Island and most of the reefs and fishing haunts are in Ritchie's Archipelago, a boat ride away. ■

