

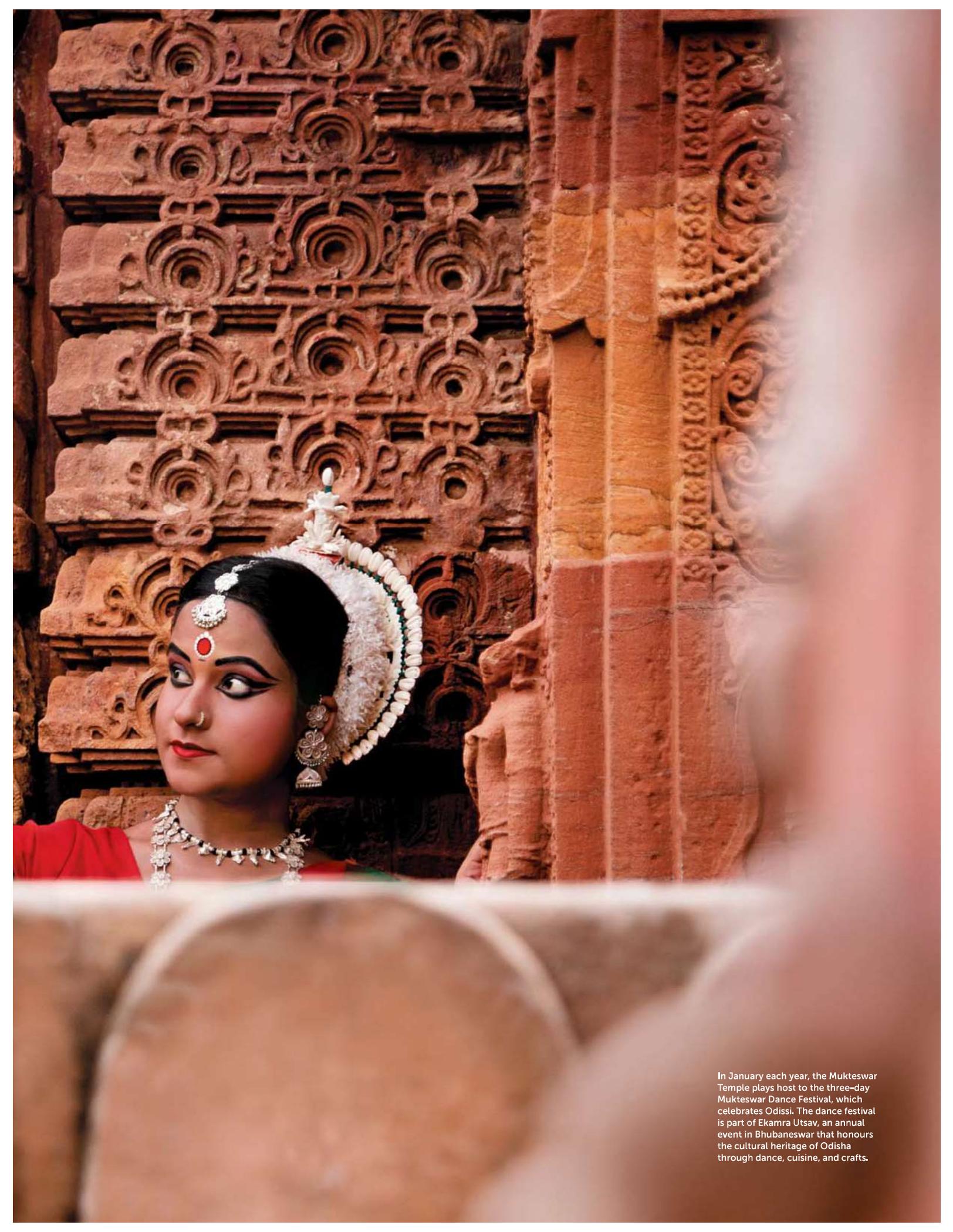
WANDERLUST / India

Temple Run

Photojournalist Nicky Almsy embarks on a whirlwind three-day tour of ancient shrines in Bhubaneswar, India's Temple City, and uncovers an architectural heritage that dates back 2,000 years.

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY Nicky Almsy





In January each year, the Mukteswar Temple plays host to the three-day Mukteswar Dance Festival, which celebrates Odissi. The dance festival is part of Ekamra Utsav, an annual event in Bhubaneswar that honours the cultural heritage of Odisha through dance, cuisine, and crafts.

I am literally a stone's throw from the 11th century Rajarani Temple, when, without warning, the heavens open. I scramble to find shelter under a tree but it's too late: I'm drenched, and my camera bags are soaked.

Of course, the sensible thing to do is to surrender to the elements and wait it out, but here, in the outskirts of Bhubaneswar – the Temple City of India – the scenery proves far too alluring. So, instead, I decide to brave the storm and continue my temple expedition. My aim is to see as many temples as I can among the hundreds in and around Bhubaneswar over the next three days – a temple marathon of sorts. Then, all of a sudden, the clouds part and rays of sunlight creep through. It's going to be a beautiful day after all.

Divine Architecture Bhubaneswar derives its name from Tribhuvaneshwar, which in Sanskrit means Lord of Three Worlds in reference to Lord Shiva (one of the main principles of the Hindu trinity). Unsurprisingly, many of Bhubaneswar's temples are dedicated to Shiva. According to Hindu mythology, when Shiva was seeking a quiet place to meditate, the sage Narada suggested a mango grove located in present-day Bhubaneswar. Shiva took the sage's advice, and found a contemplative spot under a mango tree. Today, the Ekamra Utsav (literally translated to mean mango festival), which derives its name from this legend, is an annual festival that celebrates the heritage of Odisha.

The design of Bhubaneswar's temples is rooted in Kalinga-style architecture. Kalinga, an ancient state in the eastern central region of India, flourished between the 11th and 13th centuries. The Konark Sun Temple, situated around 66km from Bhubaneswar, is known to be a masterpiece of Kalinga architecture. Kalinga is said to have once been home to an astonishing 7,000 temples! Today, only approximately 700 remain, scattered mainly across the state of Odisha.

Kalinga architecture is rich in iconography, and features a world of gods, goddesses, dancers and musicians, carved into sandstone. Untouched for centuries, and thus conserved, these intricate designs are said to have been inspired by Hindu myths, legends and ancient texts; even the Kama Sutra is represented!

The basic structure of Kalinga-style temples consists of a central shrine called the *vimana* (sanctum), which is crowned by a *mastaka* or curvilinear spire. The unique curvature of Odisha's temples sets their design apart from other styles of temple architecture, and it is this motif that you will encounter throughout your temple expedition here. Once you begin noticing the forms and characteristics of Kalinga architecture, Bhubaneswar becomes a treasure trove waiting to be discovered.

My reliable guide on this trip is Vishwajeet Dash, aka JustVish, a local vlogger (video blogger) who possesses an encyclopedic knowledge of the area's rich heritage. True to his vlog motto – Live Life with a Dash of Adventure – JustVish's YouTube vlogs capture his adventures as he zips across Bhubaneswar on his motorbike documenting iconic landmarks, indigenous festivals, and local cuisine. No wonder his channel is gaining a substantial following!

With a tight schedule, I hadn't wasted any time upon arriving in Bhubaneswar. JustVish had introduced me to his dad, Jayant Kumar Dash, who brought me up to speed on various aspects of Kalinga architecture. The senior Dash maintains an impressive database on Kalinga architecture in Odisha, and provided me invaluable insights into the history and heritage of this ancient building style. Armed with the basics, JustVish and I had set off on our temple adventure.

Day One – In Great Adoration Our first stop is the 11th century Rajarani Temple in the heart of the city. Locally known as the 'love temple', it owes its moniker to the erotic carvings of females and couples in seductive poses. Constructed from red and yellow sandstone, the temple rises to a height of about 18m, overlooking a well-maintained garden. An interesting feature of the Rajarani Temple is that there is no particular deity associated with it, though it is generally linked to Saivism (a tradition within Hinduism that reveres Lord Shiva).

As the sun begins to set, we decide to call it a day, and head to Ekamra Haat in the centre of Bhubaneswar where local artisans showcase their handicraft. Enjoying

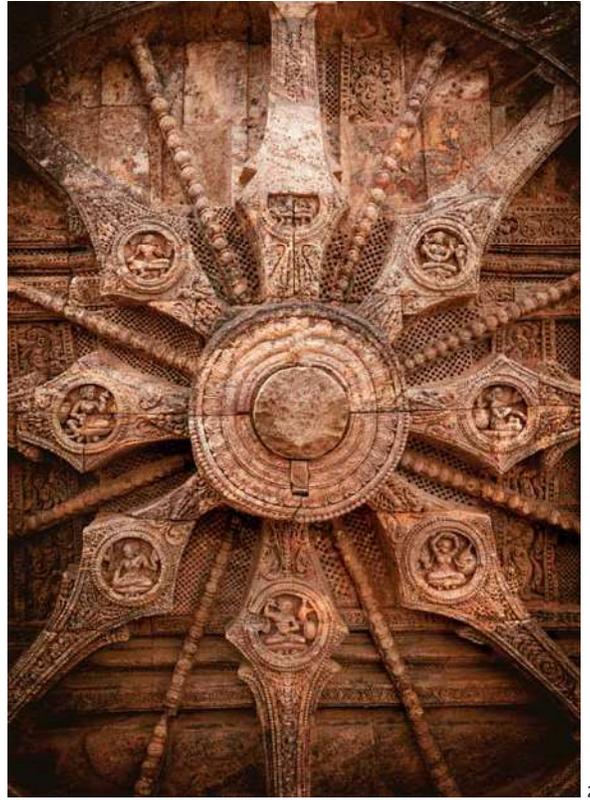
"Rani Gumpha was once a theatre, and it is here that King Kharavela attended cultural performances with his queen. The cavern has amazing natural acoustics, and once also functioned as an aqueduct – proof that ancient Kalinga was indeed ahead of its time."

1. Over 60 temples across Bhubaneswar provide meals to worshippers, serving more than 10,000 people every day, between 12:30pm and 3,00pm. These meals normally consist of freshly prepared *kanika* (sweet rice), ghee rice and curd rice.

2. The Konark Sun Temple represents the chariot of Surya, the Hindu sun god. The structure features 24 wheels and seven horses. The 12 wheels on either side of the chariot correspond to the 12 months of the year, and function as sundials as pictured here. The seven horses signify the seven days of the week. 3. The Shanti Stupa in Dhuli Giri Hills the place to head to for the spectacular Light & Sound Show, which depicts the story of the Kalinga War through light and sound projections. The daily evening show is narrated in three languages: Odia/Oriya, Hindi, and English.



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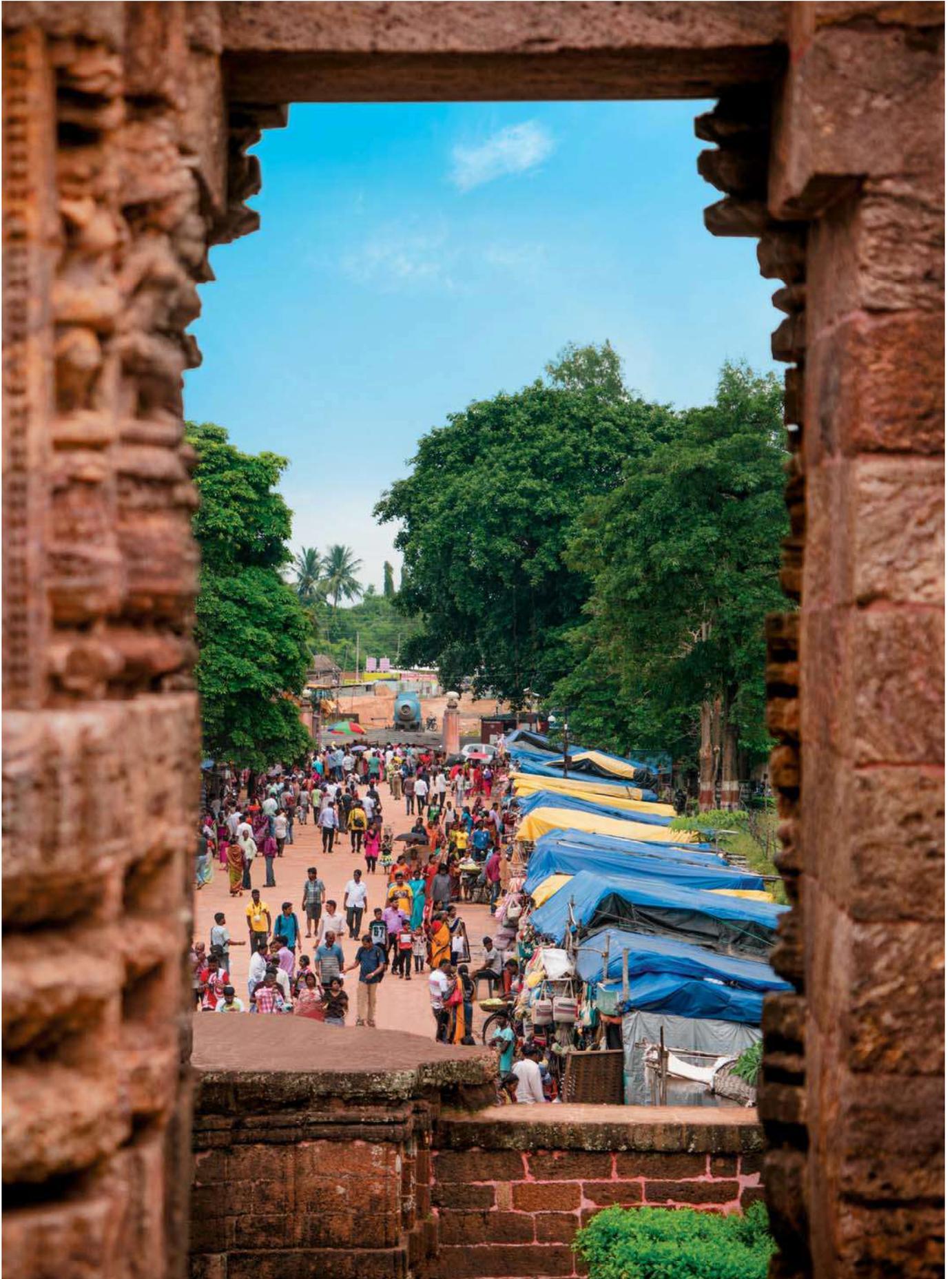


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Odissi is one of the oldest performance arts in India. The significant difference between Odissi and other classical Indian dances is the *tribhangi*, which means 'three parts break'. It refers to the three bends in the body – the neck, waist and knee curved to form an 's' – a typical pose of grace and sensuality inherent in Odissi.

OPPOSITE PAGE The road leading to the majestic Konark Sun Temple is lined with stalls selling a wide range of tourist bric-a-brac, including miniature replicas of the chariot temple.

1. The intricate carvings on the walls of the Konark Sun Temple are so spellbinding that visitors don't mind braving the rain to take them in. 2. The Odia/ Oriya people are also renowned for their artistic prowess, especially in handicraft making, and sculpting. 3. Temples in Odisha are built based on certain fundamental principles of stability, and are inspired by human anatomy. The typical temple structure is basically divided into three parts: *bada* (lower limb), *gandee* (body) and *mastaka* (head).

“Konark’s exceptional display of Kalinga architecture is especially notable as it was built with a twist; shaped like a chariot with 24 enormous wheels, 12 on either side of the building, the temple is dedicated to Surya (Hindu sun god).”

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a laid-back evening chatting with local craftsmen and checking out the local cuisine is the perfect way to cap an exhausting first day in Odisha.

Day Two – King of Kings The next morning, the sun is merciless as we arrive at Mukteswar temple. As it is customary in India to remove one's shoes before entering holy grounds, I promptly adhere to local tradition and dart across the scorching stone pathway; it's worth every burning step!

The Mukteswar temple is one of the most important monuments of Kalinga architecture, and a prominent temple in Bhubaneswar. Every inch of its stunning exterior is covered with intricate sculptures, depicting graceful figures in different poses. Mukteswar is one of the few temples in India where non-Hindus are allowed entry into the shrine. I stand in awe as I marvel at the ceiling of the Hall of Audience with its beautiful canopy featuring an eight-petalled lotus. And if that's not enough amazement for the day, I step outside to be greeted by a breathtaking sight: six Odissi (classical dance indigenous to Odisha) performers practising their dance moves against the backdrop of the magnificent Mukteswar temple. I feel like the luckiest person in town – insta-photo of the day: check!

No excursion to Bhubaneswar would be complete without visiting the 1,000-year-old Lingaraj Temple,

which is perhaps the top draw on the temple circuit. Carved from red stone, the structure was built at the end of the 11th century, although parts of it are believed to date back even further – to the 6th century! Although only Hindus are allowed on its premises, there is an observation deck where visitors of other faiths can take in the panoramic beauty of the entire complex, which aside from the main building, consists of 64 smaller shrines.

Lingaraj, another name of Lord Shiva, and translated to mean 'King of Lingas', is considered the epitome of Bhubaneswar temple architecture. The temple walls are beautifully carved with sculptures of kings and queens, musicians and dancers, and its imposing spire rises over 55m, dominating the city's skyline.

Soon, our rumbling tummies signal that it's time to take a break from our spellbinding day of temple-hopping. We make a quick stop at the Odia Thali restaurant in Sahid Nagar where we enjoy a traditional Odia meal. JustVish insists that I try the *dalma*, one of the highlights of Odia cuisine. The vegetable gravy, which consists of pumpkin, and various tubers such as potato, sweet potato and yam, is incredibly delicious and is a great energy booster – just what I need to get me through the rest of the day.

Next on the itinerary is the Hathigumpha Inscription that dates back to the 1st century BC in the Udayagiri Caves, a cluster of caverns that feature some of India's oldest cave temples. The Hathigumpha Inscription – 17 lines in Brahmi script carved into the overhanging brow of a natural cavern called Hathigumpha – remains the best-known source of information on one of Kalinga's greatest rulers, King Kharavela, who reigned during the 1st century BC.

The Udayagiri Caves showcase Kalinga architecture in a unique form; in the Rani Gumpha cavern within Udayagiri, visitors will notice a departure from the typical Kalinga temple architectural style. Rani Gumpha was once a theatre, and it is here that King Kharavela attended cultural performances with his queen. The cavern has amazing natural acoustics, and once also functioned as an aqueduct – proof that ancient Kalinga was indeed ahead of its time.

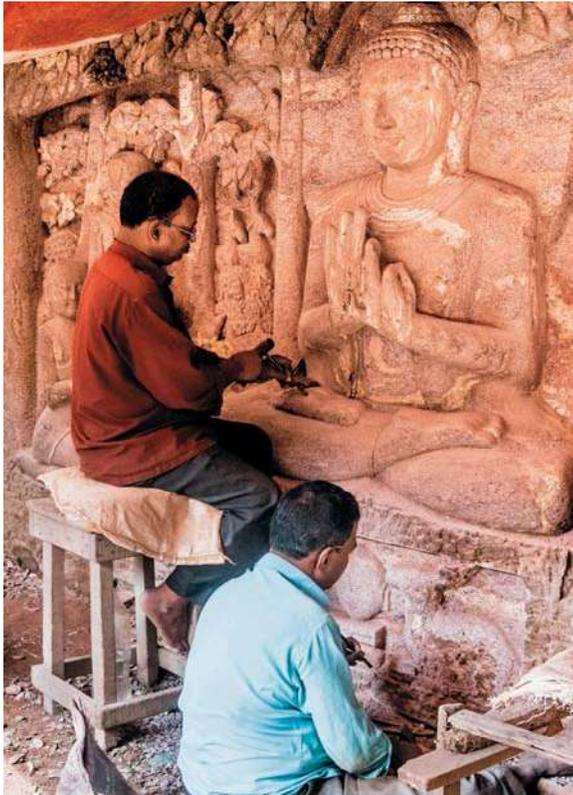
Day Three – Battles Lost & Won All too soon, it is almost time to say goodbye to Bhubaneswar and I plan to see as much as I can before heading home. We start off at Dhauli Giri Hills, situated 8km from Bhubaneswar, amidst lush paddy fields set along Daya River. The hills are infamous as the backdrop of the Kalinga War, which according to historians, precipitated the downfall, and rebirth, of Emperor Ashoka the Great, the Indian ruler of the Maurya dynasty who reigned between 268 and 232 BC.

Legend has it that the bloodshed on the battlefields at the foothills of Dhauli Giri turned the waters of Daya River red. It is here that Ashoka, after witnessing the carnage, was overcome with guilt, and in remorse, turned to Buddhism. Today, although the place is a hive of tourist activity, there remains an underlying

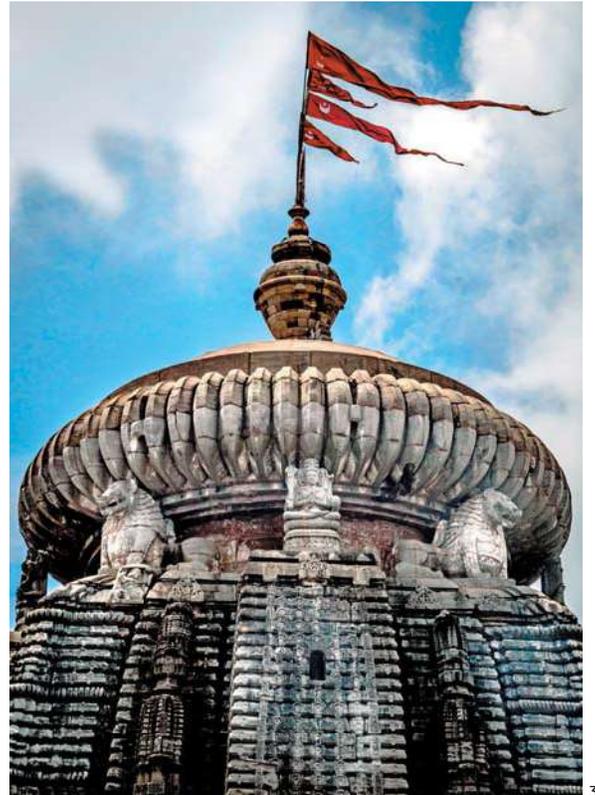


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1. At the Sudarshan Art & Crafts Village in the heart of Bhubaneswar, the art of sculpting is passed down from master sculptors to apprentices to preserve Odisha's precious artistic heritage.

OPPOSITE PAGE According to folklore, the pond at Mukteswar Temple is a sacred site for childless couples. It is believed that if an infertile woman bathes in the pond on the eve of the Hindu festival of Ashokastami, she will be blessed with a child.

Sundials of Konark

The result of an astounding collaboration between astronomers, engineers and sculptors, the millennium-old sundials of Konark can still be used to tell time. Each sundial has eight major spokes that divide 24 hours into eight equal parts of 180-minute blocks. There are also eight minor spokes, situated between every two major spokes, which further divide the blocks into 90-minute sections. There are 30 'beads' along the perimeter of the dial between the major and minor spokes. Each 'bead' indicates three minutes. This attention to accuracy and detail proves that the architects of the Konark Sun Temple were well ahead of their time.

Modern Kalinga Arena

Bhubaneswar's Kalinga Stadium, which can accommodate up to 50,000 spectators, played host to the 2017 Asian Athletics Championships in July this year. Bhubaneswar was the third Indian city to host the event after New Delhi in 1989, and Pune in 2013. More than 500 artists participated in the impressive opening ceremony on July 5, 2017, which featured an Odissi performance that depicted King Kharavela's founding of Kalinga.

calm about it; here, amidst a landscape of rolling hills overlooking the river, I can almost picture Ashoka's change of heart as he contemplated the casualties of war.

From here, we make our way to another amazing ancient monument – the world-famous Konark Sun Temple, regarded as one of India's 'Seven Wonders'. Constructed in the 13th century by King Narsimhandev-I of the Eastern Ganga dynasty, the temple is now a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Konark's exceptional display of Kalinga architecture is especially notable as it was built with a twist; shaped like a chariot with 24 enormous wheels, 12 on either side of the building, the temple is dedicated to Surya (Hindu sun god). The 12 wheels represent the months of the year, and each function as individual sundials.

It is during our visit to Konark that dark clouds appear, attempting to rain us in. Despite the daunting storm that prompts us to take cover under a nearby mango tree, the Konark Sun Temple emanates a charismatic vibe that is simply irresistible.

As the rain gradually subsides, locals and visitors emerge from their shelters and the bustle resumes; vendors of snacks and souvenirs continue their brisk business as tourists resume their exploration of the temple.

Now, in the final stretch of our temple run, we have time for one last stop before sundown, and we decide to visit the Chausathi Yogini Temple in Hirapur, about 20km outside Bhubaneswar. Inside the circular-shaped temple, 64 stone sculptures of *yogini* (demi-goddesses)

are displayed in wall niches. The temple's origins are tied to legend. It is believed that Goddess Mahamaya (Hindu deity symbolising divine illusion), took the form of 64 demi-goddesses to destroy a demon, and when this demon was vanquished, the *yogini* asked to be enshrined. Today, this temple commemorates the *yogini*, and features Goddess Mahamaya as the presiding deity.

Mission Accomplished As I cross the finish line of my temple marathon, I reflect on my whirlwind journey. Although my expedition barely skimmed the surface of Bhubaneswar's 700 odd temples, the Temple City of India, with its stunning sandstone structures steeped in reverence, myth and legend, will forever be entrenched in my memory, together with the warmth and hospitality of its people. 

A BIG THANK YOU *travel 3sixty* wishes to thank YouTube vlogger/Indie-filmmaker JustVish [youtube.com/justvish](https://www.youtube.com/justvish) and Jayant Kumar Dash [heritageodisha.com](https://www.heritageodisha.com) for their invaluable support in producing this story.



GETTING THERE

AirAsia flies to Bhubaneswar from Bengaluru, Kolkata and Kuala Lumpur. [airasia.com](https://www.airasia.com)