

Kanchenjunga, the third highest peak in the world, is the pride of Sikkim; *(facing page)* the rock-cut caves of Ajanta and Ellora are on every discerning traveller's bucket list



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BLUE MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK *Mizoram*
Located at over 2,100 metres, Phawngpui in the Lushai Hills of Mizoram is also known as the Blue Mountain, evocative of its high peak dissolving into the sky. As with many mountains in this part of the country, it is revered and the people of Mizoram believe it is the abode of their gods. No wonder that Phawngpui is where folk religions and tales have sprung from. The Blue Mountain National Park, established in the early 1990s, covers the entire mountain along with the surrounding reserve forest. The park is the natural habitat of various flora and fauna. The orchids and rhododendrons in full bloom are one of the very special attractions of the park. Here, wildlife-lovers get to spot the mountain goat, slow loris, tiger, leopard, leopard cat, *goral*, Asiatic black bear, stump-tailed macaque and capped *langur*. The rare clouded leopard has also been seen here.

LOKTAK LAKE *Manipur*
Imagine a vast expanse of water on which float masses of vegetation. This unique phenomenon is Manipur's Loktak lake. It's the largest freshwater lake in this part of the country and attracts attention with its *phumdis*—the masses of vegetation, soil, and organic matter in various stages of decomposition—which float on it. The Keibul Lamjao is one such massive *phumdi*, making it the only floating national park in the world. This unique biosphere is the last natural refuge of the endangered *sangai*, the state animal of Manipur, also known as the Manipur brow-antlered deer. Loktak lake is crucial to the day-to-day life of Manipur, serving as a source of fresh water and as a means of livelihood for the local fishermen. It has been designated a wetland of international importance.

KANCHENJUNGA *Sikkim*
Sikkim is remote, isolated and magical. And towering over this intriguing little corner of the country is Kanchenjunga, or Kanchendzonga. At 8,500 metres-plus, it's the third highest mountain in the world and revered by the people of Sikkim. Kanchenjunga is hard to sight and elusive, its snow-crowned peak is known to remain wrapped and hidden by clouds and mist for days at a time. On days it makes itself visible it looks like a mammoth white sheet dropping down from the sky. So, to see Kanchenjunga, leave alone scale it, is a very special experience. Adding to the air of mystery are local legends that say the area around this mighty peak is home to Dzonga, a mountain spirit of the region. Locals also believe there's a valley of immortality hidden on the slopes of Kanchenjunga.

LIVING ROOT BRIDGES *Meghalaya*
This is the wettest place on Earth. The rains that pound Cherrapunjee not only earn it this watery superlative, they've also driven the creation of one of its greatest wonders. Part man-made, part nature's gift, the living root bridges of Meghalaya came into being so that people could ford the streams that became fierce torrents during the rains. Some 200 years ago, the Khasis of the area who lived close to nature used their ingenuity to come up with a solution. They took the pliable roots of rubber trees and guided them into the hollow canes of areca nut palms to meet halfway across streams. They tended the roots carefully until they reached the opposite bank, thus forming a bridge. Today, the region is known for its many living root bridges and they are an amazing sight to behold.

TRIBAL CULTURE *Arunachal Pradesh*
Arunachal Pradesh lies in the farthest reaches of the country, a dramatic canvas of deep, wooded hills and snow-capped peaks, inhabited and coloured by its indigenous tribes. There are 26 major tribes in the state, each with its own set of traditions and customs. The major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh include the Adi, Galo, Aka, Apatani, Nyishi, Tagins, Bori, and Bokar. They are followers of Donyi-Polo and worshippers of the sun and moon and in West Kameng and Tawang districts there are the Monpa and Sherdukpen tribes who follow Tibetan traditions. To visit Arunachal Pradesh is to delve into fascinating tribal traditions, customs and vibrant festivals, most of which celebrate agriculture.

RANN OF KUTCH *Gujarat*
It seems like a bleak, unbroken landscape with salt-encrusted mudflats stretching to the horizon. But there's a great deal more to this corner of Gujarat, a wondrous, geographically unique landscape. The seemingly flat desert is punctuated by little hillocks known as *bets* which were once islands on ancient seabeds which have, over centuries, risen above ground and are covered with grass and scrub. It is these *bets* that form the habitat of the *khur*, the Indian wild ass. The Rann of Kutch is, in fact, the last remaining home of the *khur* and has been declared the Indian Wild Ass Sanctuary. Seeing a herd racing across this dramatic landscape is a sight that makes the whole trip worthwhile. This zone, rich in biodiversity, is also home to a wealth of fauna and attracts scores of migratory waterbirds like cranes, ducks, pelicans, flamingos and terrestrial birds like sand grouse, francolins and the Indian bustard.