

When the five go down to the farm, all alone



(clockwise, from left) Farm-stays allow children to be one with nature, at Vaksana Farms, children help prepare the food; and the Tree House Resort in Jaipur

Teenagers are now travelling with friends, unchaperoned, to farm-stays that score high on safety and sustainability

Abhisha Ojha

This might be straight out of an Enid Blyton book, with a group of teenagers heading to a farm for days filled with adventures and picnics. For though there might not be any mystery in the making here, the rest of it is typical *Famous Five*-style youngsters, 13 years and above, heading with friends to farm-stays for barnyard adventures complete with squawking chickens, friendly dogs and curious cows in tow.

from major cities, have emerged as the destination of choice. There is even a farm-stay aggregator.

Parents prefer farm-stays as they allow children to be one with nature, give them much needed time away from the screen, and help them enjoy the freedom such a trip brings, offering a deeper awareness of mindful living. Travelling at an early age enables children to be emotionally and physically strong, making them responsible and enhancing decision-making abilities. Most importantly, perhaps, they offer safety and security. Some options

TIME WITH A GRANDMA
Vaksana Farms, two hours from Chennai, is spread over 13 acres of lush green. Set up 12 years ago, it is run by three generations of a family—90-year-old Lakshmi Paati, her daughter, Kasturi Ammal, and grandson, Kiruba Shankar. It's common to see teens squealing with joy at the sight of farm animals while helping out on the farm that grows exotic fruits, vegetables, rice and millets. All the food is prepared by Paati with help from the children, who harvest the produce.

While schools from in and around Chennai send children on day trips to the farm, Vaksana organises overnight stays



for children too. Security is taken care of. No alcohol or drugs are allowed on the premises. The farm has old, trusted employees who go through a strict verification process periodically. It is not unusual for Shankar to chaperone children from nearby destinations, ensuring pick-up and drop.

Recently, Ravi Kumar, CEO, INQ Technologies, Chennai, sent his

Traveling at an early age enables children to be emotionally and physically strong, making them responsible and enhancing decision-making abilities

17-year-old daughter, Sriprya, with friends to Vaksana to unwind after exams. During the three-day trip, they helped graze cattle, planted trees, went on sightseeing trips, swam in a pond with life jackets, played mud kabaddi, and sat by the bonfire, regaling one another with ghost stories.

18,500, plus taxes, per night

CROSS-COUNTRY TRIPS

One-year-old Farmwalk is a farm-stay aggregator that has tie-ups with over 50 big and small farms in the National Capital Region (NCR), Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Goa, Kerala and Karnataka, among other places. The company hopes to get more youngsters to experience the richness and simplicity of rural life.

The aggregator has a strict screening process for the farmhouses that want to come on board. They have extensive conversations with parents to understand just what they are looking for in a kids-only vacation. Some findings include an emphasis on security, with cameras in place, routine background checks of staff, layout of the farm, a doctor on call, availability of first-aid kits, SOS numbers.

Three months ago, Farmwalk arranged for 12 children in the 15-plus age group to visit a farm in Shilaurou, near Shimla, for a four-day trip. The activities included pottery, nature walks, bird-watching, hiking, plucking apples and cherries in orchards, eating local meals, engaging in fire-less food preparation, visiting local cheese factories.

125,000 onwards for a two-day trip

BY THE HILLS

Located in Naurangpur, Punjab, Walden Living is nestled in the foothills of the Himalaya. Just an hour's drive from Chan-

digarh, the property, with its minimalist and sustainable interiors, attracts youngsters who study in the architecture colleges nearby. Founder Siddhartha Jindal says he is getting a lot of queries from parents of 14- to 16-year-olds too.

Children can enjoy walks in the fields, tractor rides, harvesting sessions, understand the concept of farm-to-table dining, hiking, visits to the local *garduara*. There are sand pits to romp in, and Jindal organises outdoor picnics as well. The star attraction is the handsome Baloo, the resident dog.

115,000, plus taxes, per night on a twin-sharing basis

SCIENCE AND NATURE

Hoping to encourage "early naturalists", Tree House Resort, Jaipur, has upped the number of activities for children in the 12-plus age group. While many come on school trips or with their parents, the inquiries are now veering towards children-only vacations. Some of the queries have come directly from parents. "We have created numerous activities and experiential zones for children and we want them to appreciate nature in all its glory," says Puneet Dutta, general manager, Tree House Resort.

While they offer painting, pottery, bird-watching, and gardening, many children are attracted to the unique science lab created for them. As of now, DIY *Chandrayaan* kits are popular, apart from star-gazing, microscopic viewing of plants, and other science-led activities. There's a doctor on call and a hospital near by.

116,500, plus taxes, per night on twin-sharing basis

Abhisha Ojha is a Delhi-based art and culture writer

Ghosts, gods, demons, and kindness in abundance

Every tourist feels the inherent Bhutanese trait of compassion. It is easy to blend the natural with the supernatural here

Shoba Narayan

Does thinking about death five times a day increase your happiness? The Bhutanese seem to think so. Throughout the mountain kingdom, death blends with life in ways that are subtle, yet beautiful. Consider *tsa tsa*: Families fashion these tiny stupa-like pyramids from clay mixed with the ashes of dead relatives and leave them as roadside offerings. The ubiquitous prayer flags memorialise the dead, as do some *thangka* paintings and *cham* dances. Funerals are communal affairs—since Buddhists believe in reincarnation, death is seen as a beginning.

My death-defying experience began on the Druk Air flight from Delhi to Paro. Only 24 pilots in the world can land in Paro because it is done manually. As the plane turned sharply in the gap between two mountains, I muttered incoherent prayers, but the landing was smooth.

People visit this fabled Land of the Thunder Dragon (Druk Yul in the Dzongkha language) in search of wonder, beauty, enlightenment, and, yes, happiness, but the Buddhist take on happiness is nuanced, as I discovered while travelling to Paro, Thimphu and Punakha.

Bhutan ranks high on the world happiness scale, winning an honourable mention in the 2023 report. "When we say happiness in Bhutan, we mean collective



(above) Tiger's Nest, 3,000m above sea level, and a Buddhist monk

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NARAYAN RAMACHANDRAN

happiness, not individual happiness," explained my guide Namgyal Tshering, listing good governance, sustainable development, environmental conservation and preservation of culture as measures of happiness. I thought about this as I hiked up to Paro's Taktsang Monastery or Tiger's Nest, easily Bhutan's most photographed spot. Stunningly picturesque, it clings to a rocky cliff face, 3,000m above sea level.

Cultures, particularly complex ones like Bhutan and India, demand more from tourists. James Low, general manager of the Uma Paro hotel, alluded to this when

he explained "the two Bhutans"—one on the surface and the other that is "felt if you have an open heart". In Buddhism, though, an open heart brings to mind the now popular "loving-kindness" meditation, which I saw in action in every monastery I visited. A common prayer uttered by the monks, and indeed all Bhutanese, is a blessing for peace: *Tashi delok*, good luck and good health.

Bhutanese believe in divination—much like the Dala Lama, whom I once interviewed for this magazine. When you live as close to the land as they do, when 60% of the country is under forest cover, it is

easy to blend the natural with the supernatural. Bhutanese take ghosts, gods and demons seriously. After a day of sightseeing, I walked alone at sunset around the Amankora Thimphu, where the extended royal family lives. Trees rustled. Streams gurgled. Even I could imagine hungry ghosts and snake gods that required propitiation. In my room, the staff had left protective "dum" rosary beads, which I wore before going down for dinner.

My next stop was Punakha, about four hours from Thimphu by road, and quite literally heaven for a birdwatcher like me. We traversed Dochula Pass (3,100m) with



a great view of the Eastern Himalaya, and descended to Lamperi Gardens where minias, barbets, laughing thrushes, niltvas and warblers thronged the bushes. With 775 bird species, and a staggering abundance of flora and fauna, Bhutan is among the most biodiverse countries in the world, especially given its tiny size.

We visited the famous Punakha Dzong, where coronations take place, raffed, hiked up to see spectacular monasteries with colourful murals, and enjoyed a surprise breakfast beside a temple. All too soon, it was time to drive back to Paro airport. On the drive, I called former model and actor Kelly Dorjee, who now runs a high-end travel company, to ask him what was distinctive about his country. "Bhutan has chosen the path less travelled—to protect its forests, its culture, and cultivate a kinder and more mindful society," he explained, as he said, was abundant. At

Your Café, run mostly by women and popularised by actor Deepika Padukone's visit, posted on Instagram, I chatted with 20 young performers, dressed in *cham* masks and costumes, who were preparing to perform for a large group of tourists. They were in college and worked part-time as performers to make extra money. I asked them about the themes the dances portrayed and what they considered important in their culture. To a person, they said, kindness. "We used different words, of course—loving kindness, compassion, tolerance, generosity, but their underlying meaning was all about giving.

This inherent Bhutanese trait of compassion—*nyinjein* in Dzongkha and *karuna* in Sanskrit—is felt by every tourist visiting Bhutan. It is perhaps why so many return.

Shoba Narayan is an independent writer based in Bengaluru and has been a long-time contributor and columnist for Mint.