

TRAVEL LUST

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Finland - Happiest Country in the World

Finland is the happiest country in the world for the sixth year in a row

Written By Abbas Tyabji based on inputs by Raoul Gomes, Raija Ellonen and Sheela Ranta -Aho, all from Finland



Helsinki from Toolo Bay

Finland has taken the top podium spot in the Good Country Index, which measures countries' overall impact on the planet and humanity. The index examined 153 countries and evaluated how they each contribute to or burden the global common good, providing a country-specific balance sheet. It is based on 35 criteria and divided into seven categories, such as contributions to science and technology, planet and climate, as well as peace and security. Finland is a good, down-to-earth country and a reliable partner in international forums and its performance is the result of consistent work. The recognition shows that the government and the people care about the rest of the world and have the imagination and the courage to think outwards instead of only thinking selfishly.

Helsinki - The Capital



Aerial View of Helsinki with Senate Square in foreground (above) and a street scene in the capital (below)



What Finnish people think about their country's achievement

I had asked three people who live in Finland, Raoul Gomes, my schoolmate of 1961 batch, his daughter Sheela Ranta-aho and friend Raija Ellonen about why they think Finland is the happiest country in the world. All of them echoed what my friend Raoul had to say

Excellent and almost free medical care for serious and complex illnesses. Free schooling from Std 1 upto graduation from college. Free press and independent judiciary, and democratic government. Freedom of speech. Low pollution levels and Finnish Nature in our neighbourhood. Satisfactory social services network for the unemployed and working families e.g day care centers for the preschool children. Excellent regular follow up services for pregnant women from pregnancy upto when the baby is 1 year old. Maternity paid leave for mothers and fathers.

Summer season at a countryside home

Many people live near the lake shores and have houses and gardens and also a little saunahouse next to the lake. That's how it used to be years ago with almost everybody, before they started building apartment houses

This summer home belongs to Raoul Gomes, who has sent all these pictures



Land Of The Midnight Sun



Want a husky and reindeer safari experience?
Want to visit the only Snow hotel in the world?
Want to see the Northern Lights or Aurora Borealis?

Then head to Lapland, a region of over 100,000 Sq km at the northern fringe of Finland bordering Russia, Sweden, Norway and the Baltic Sea.



Pic by Raija Ellonen

It has 179,000 humans and over 200,000 Reindeer so the chance of seeing these antlered creatures is enormous. Instead of heli tours you can experience husky and reindeer safaris

Rovaniemi, capital of the Lapland Region, is situated about 800 km from Finland's capital city, Helsinki.





A frozen waterfall in Kourouma Nature Reserve in Lapland

A city with a population of just over 60 000 people, Rovaniemi is the gateway to Lapland's attractions. The Santa Claus village, Home to the original fabled Santa Claus, is on its outskirts and when you visit you can claim that you have crossed the Arctic Circle. This is about the closest you can get to the North Pole. In Rovaniemi itself is the, Arkticum Museum and Science Centre which are worth visiting. You can organise Husky safaris and visits to Reindeer farms through any travel agency in the town. These are iconic experiences not found in any other part of the globe.

Another unique attraction is the Snowhotel, completely built of ice, similar to an igloo but with complete rooms with all facilities. Any agency there can organise a trip to view this hotel and perhaps have a meal there. There are also glass igloos available as hotels.

A Reindeer sled (left) and a colourfully dressed person in a Reindeer Farm





A motorized sled (above) and the Aurora Borealis or Northern Lights



*The Santa Claus village where you can meet the original Santa Claus ,
have a picture taken with him and maybe,see him riding a husky cart*





The Midnight sun hovers over the Lapland horizon

If you are lucky, you may be just in time to see a local celebration, where people in their age old finery, come out and enjoy themselves whether it is snowing or sunny.

Unmatched in the world, one of the most sought after attractions is the view of the Northern Lights or Aurora Borealis, most visible in winter months. Some of the hotels in Rovaniemi have built their rooms in such a way that you can view these fantastic dancing lights in the night sky, right from the comfort of your bed! One of the best is the Treehouse Arctic Hotel in Rovaniemi.

All in all, a visit to Lapland is a unique experience

There are many lakes scattered over Lapland





Glorious fall colours

In the Santa Claus village you can meet an authentic Santa Claus along with the elves and get your picture taken. There is also a post office in the village from where you can post cards to reach your friends on Christmas day!!! The Arctic Circle, for those interested in Geography, is the point from where the sun is seen throughout the summer months from about 25th March till around September 25th. The rest of the time it just hovers over the horizon.

When asked if the darkness of winter months is very depressing, a person in Rovaniemi said it is in fact the most exciting time of year because of preparations for Christmas and other celebrations as also the numerous fun activities which are organized during this period.



A rapidly flowing river with fall colours lining its banks

Pic by Raija Ellonen

In fact many tourists come to Rovaniemi and Lapland because they can enjoy the snow as well as the husky and reindeer safaris which are more exciting over snow. Skiing, snowmobiling and other such activities are available at this time of year



A typical Lapland landscape

Skiing in Lapland (left) and swimming are two winter sports that people indulge in



Pic by Raija Ellonen



Rooms can be booked for overnight stays in the Snow Hotel.

The heated igloos with glass roofs are for enjoying views of the Northern lights.

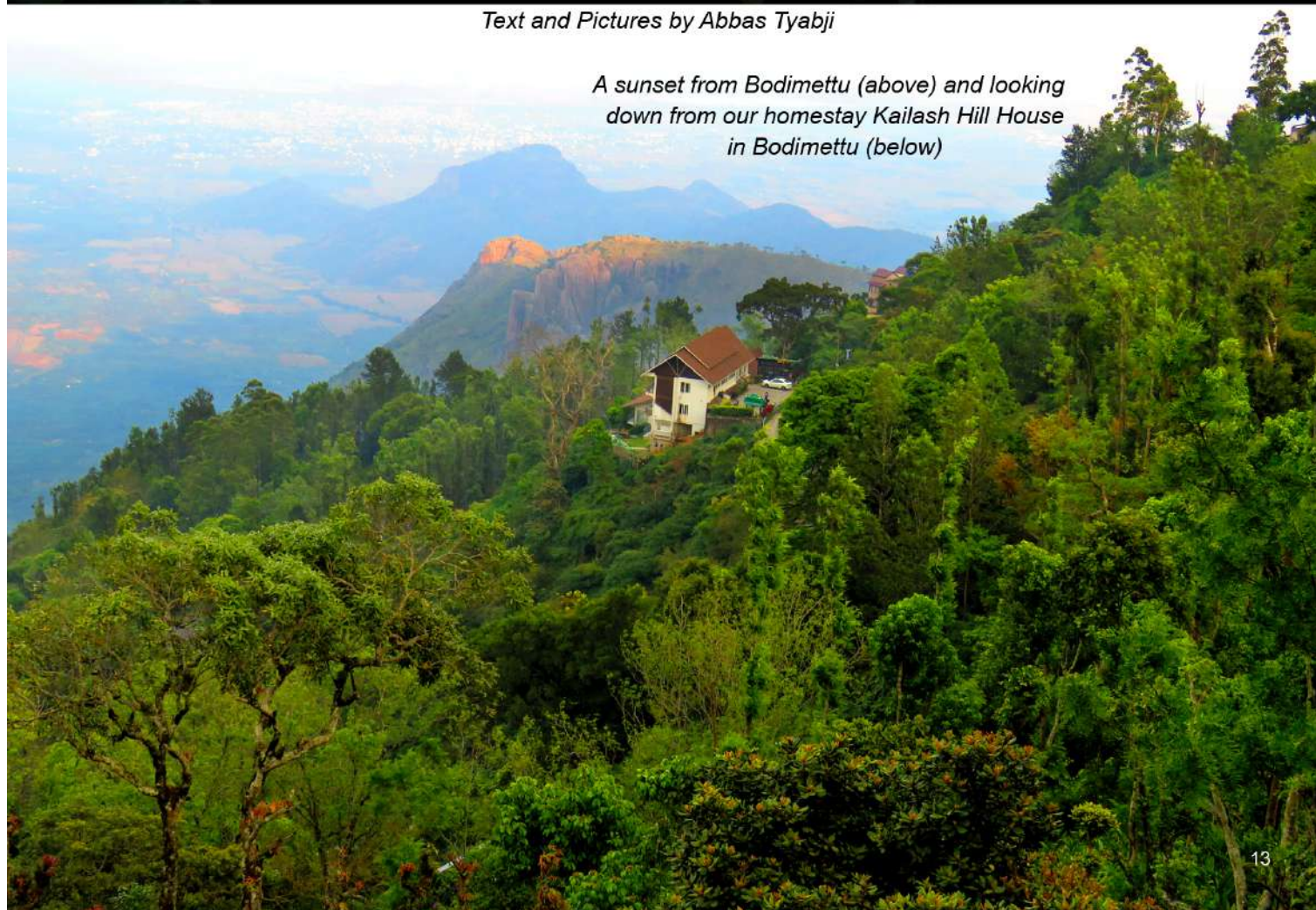




HIDDEN GEMS OF KERALA

Text and Pictures by Abbas Tyabji

*A sunset from Bodimettu (above) and looking
down from our homestay Kailash Hill House
in Bodimettu (below)*





Cardamom plantation visible from our homestay Kailash Hill House in Bodimettu

Ten years ago I had left a group of tourists from Turkey in Kottayam, Kerala, southern most state of India and was driving alone towards Munnar, a hill station of that state. On the way I stopped to get directions to a homestay called View Valley. I had wanted to stay the night and proceed further. However, the location of the stay and the affection of the owners dragged me to another day, during which the owner Shiju accompanied me to various interesting spots around. I was bowled over by its beauty.

Since then my wife and I have been travelling to this idyllic location, surrounded by plantations of coconut, cinnamon, nutmeg, clove and cardamom. The hospitality of the owners towards my wife and me cannot be exaggerated.



So this year too, when my grandson, who stays in Ahmedabad, said he wanted to go to Kerala during his March break, we heartily agreed... the only difference was, we decided to show him some of the other Hidden Gems of Kerala at the same time.

After a night halt at Vellore, about 650 kms from our home base in Hyderabad, we drove to our first real stop on the Tamil Nadu - Kerala border.

A bird pecking at its image for more than 30 minutes visible from our homestay in Bodimettu



Beautiful flowers greeted us along our hill roads

Bodimettu or Bodi peak is around 5000 ft above sea level and overlooks the plains of Tamil Nadu. The hotel we had picked, Kailash Hill House, though not POSH was very comfortable but the view was astounding. It was perched on a cliff overlooking cardamom plants scattered below, and the plains in the background.

Having arranged the luggage and had a cup of coffee, my grandson and I walked about 100 meters to a vantage point to get a shot of the sunset....and we were not disappointed. The sun hung over the hills of Kerala and sent a golden glow all around, unforgettable.

We also visited the high end Shola Crown Hotel with a wonderful location. We decided next time we would stay here.

The wind hitting our hotel at night was incredible, it whistled and groaned almost till midnight before dying down.

My grandson woke me up at 5.45 am asking me to come and view the sunrise over the plains, another beautiful sight.

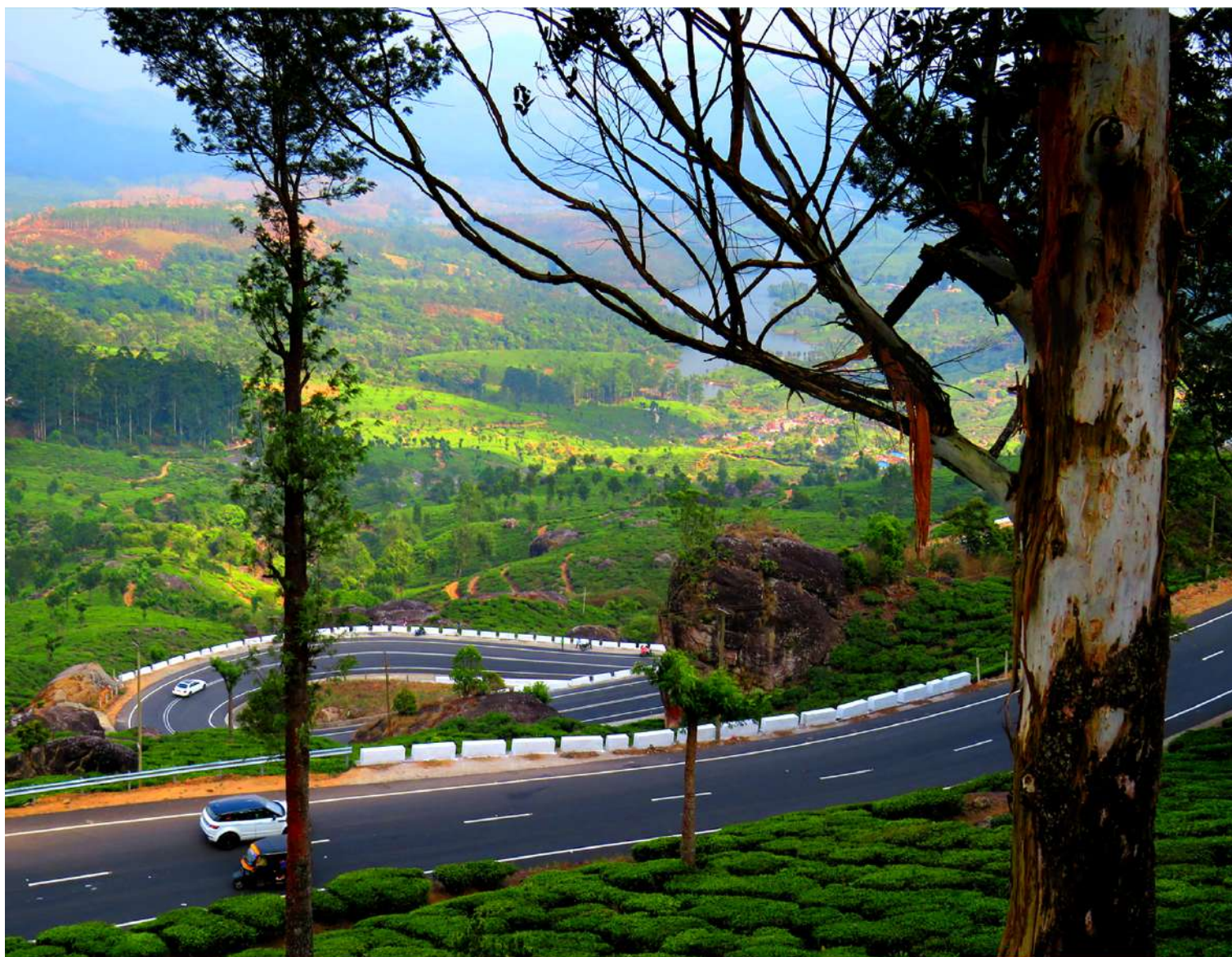
Sunrise from Bodimettu with the plains of Tamil Nadu visible below





A Pineapple plantation (above) and its all green in God's Own Country, Kerala





Winding roads with numerous hair pin bends (u turns) are common in Kerala's hill country

We had a breakfast of idli, vada and dosa before departing for our next destination, Thenmala, again on the Tamil Nadu - Kerala border.

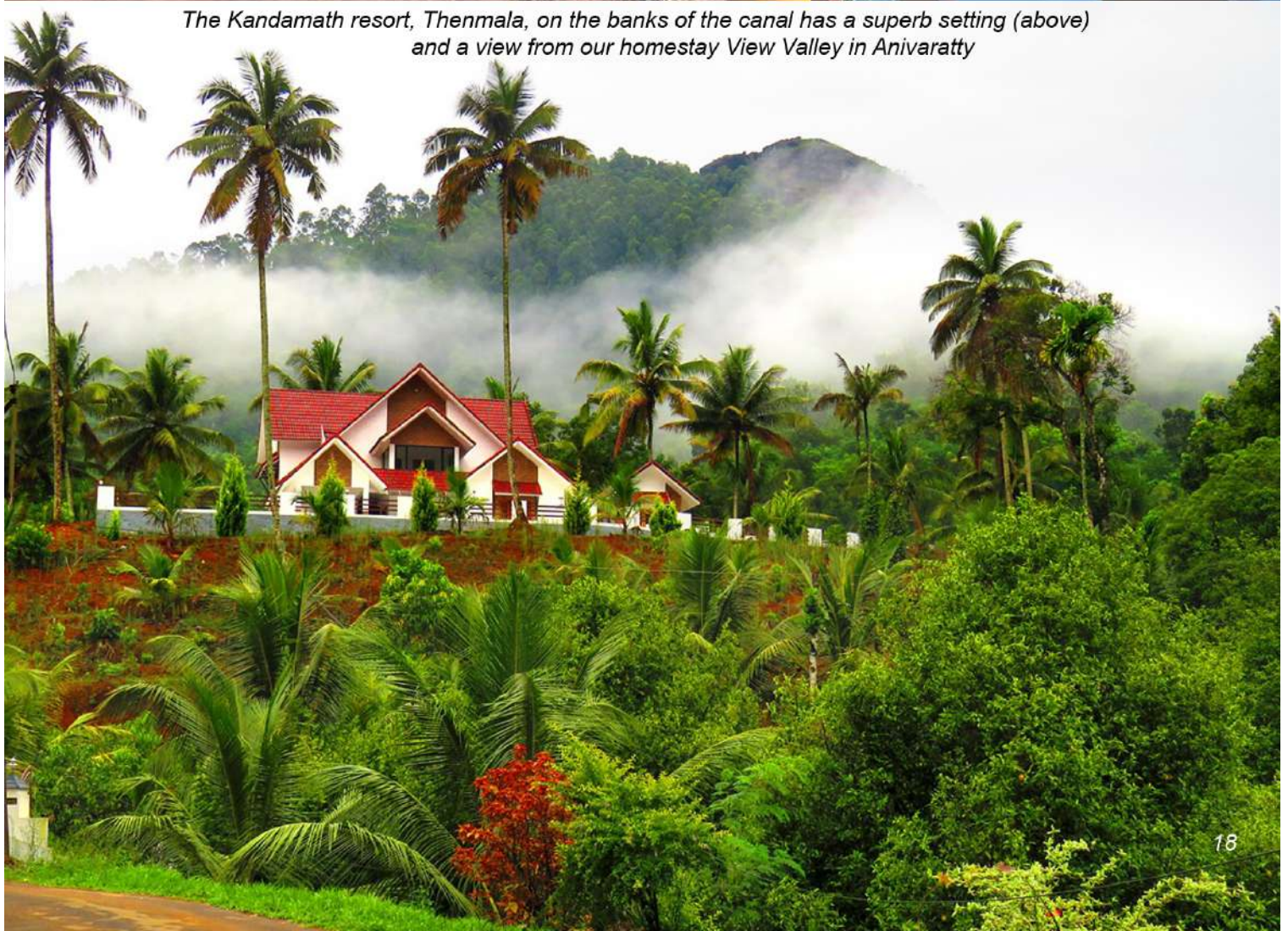
Winding our way over numerous hairpin bends (u turns) descending and ascending the fully forested hills, we made the distance of 200 kms in over 7 hours, which we could cover in less than 3 hours in the plains. Anyway the scenery enroute was just too beautiful to describe. After about 6 hours, we came to a somewhat plain road though it was still winding and reached our destination Kandamath Resort, by tea time. The location was again beyond belief, situated right on the bank of a backwater of the Thenmala reservoir, with a thickly wooded hillside right opposite. We decided there was no need to go anywhere, just watch the view right from our cottage.

Anyway the next day we went to the Ecotourism resort which was supposed to have various activities in which our grandson might be interested, but for some reason they were not operating at that time. So, disappointed, we drove back to our resort, had lunch and relaxed, seeing the sun dipping over the hillside and scattering its rays on the water. We got excellent service from the young man, who seemed to be running a One Man Show, except the cooking which was handled by ladies.

Next day, after an early breakfast, we decided to see Idukki dam, one of the highest rated attractions of the area, and then proceed to our often visited homestay in Anivaratty, View Valley.



The Kandamath resort, Thenmala, on the banks of the canal has a superb setting (above) and a view from our homestay View Valley in Anivaratty





View Valley homestay

Various plantations surround View Valley





The Kalarutty backwaters at sunset.

However it was not to be. Google showed a road leading to the dam but it turned out to be wrong and by that time we were all quite tired with the continuous turning and twisting road. In the end we all voted to proceed directly to Anivaratty.

We received a great welcome at View Valley with Simi, the owner, stretching out both hands to grab my wife and hug her. Coffee was served immediately and we were introduced to their garden which had a number of exotic fruit trees including Rambotan, Dragon Fruit etc. They also served us grapes freshly broken from the grapevine which dangled almost above our heads!!!

The next morning we visited the main market town of Adimali, about 15 kms away to see what spices we could buy for our friends, but the shop we used to visit every time was closed and prices seemed sky high at others. On our return we told Simi about this and she immediately told us she would get the stuff for us at very moderate prices... so problem solved. We relaxed at our home stay while our grandson walked around the area clicking pictures.

After having our breakfast the next morning, consisting of Appam made of rice, and coffee, we drove up to Kalimali view point, about 40 kms away. From here we got a panoramic bird's eye view of the Ponmudi dam reservoir stretching amongst the hills, a spectacular sight.



The Kalarutty reservoir has delectable surroundings

Saying our farewells to our hosts, we drove through Munnar, passing tea gardens climbing the hillsides, and reached Chinnakanal where we had planned to stay, but had not booked any hotel. We scouted around and opted for Joy's Resort up on the hillside with a fantastic view of the hills all around and the lake down in the valley. Here too, the wind was tremendous and we were lucky to get views of the sunrise over the mountains and beautiful changing colours in the lake..

Joy's was a good choice, being well priced with huge, comfortable rooms and superb views.. With this ended our week long sojourn to the Hidden Gems of Kerala and we drove back tired but greatly satisfied with our discoveries.

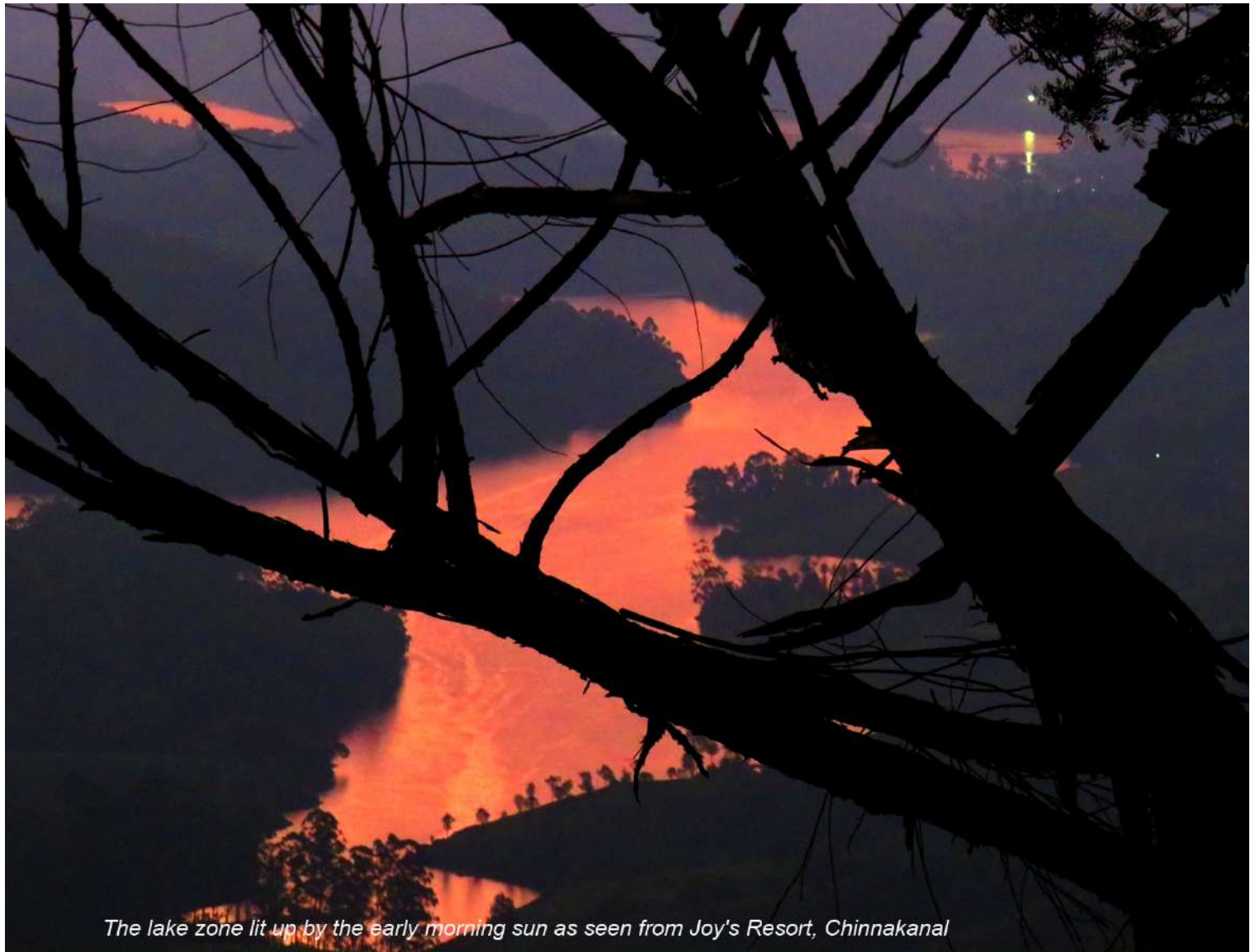


Aerial view of Ponmudi backwaters from Kalimali viewpoint



*The Lake zone at Chinnakanal (above)
and tea gardens climbing the hillsides near Munnar*





The lake zone lit up by the early morning sun as seen from Joy's Resort, Chinnakanal

Our faithful Tata Safari parked in front of a huge rock at Joy's Resort



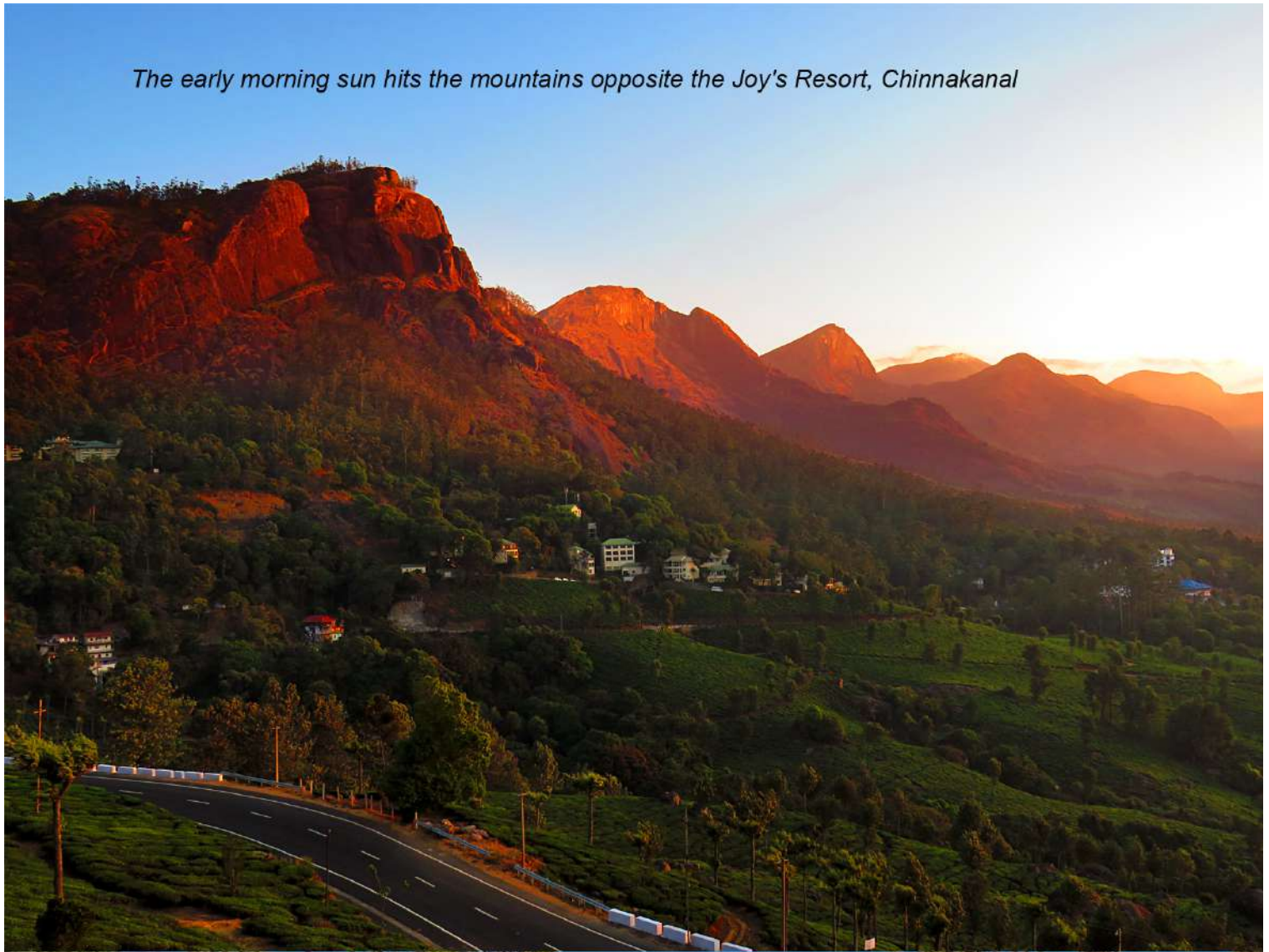
My wife Parveen and grandson Raihan with the Lake zone at back



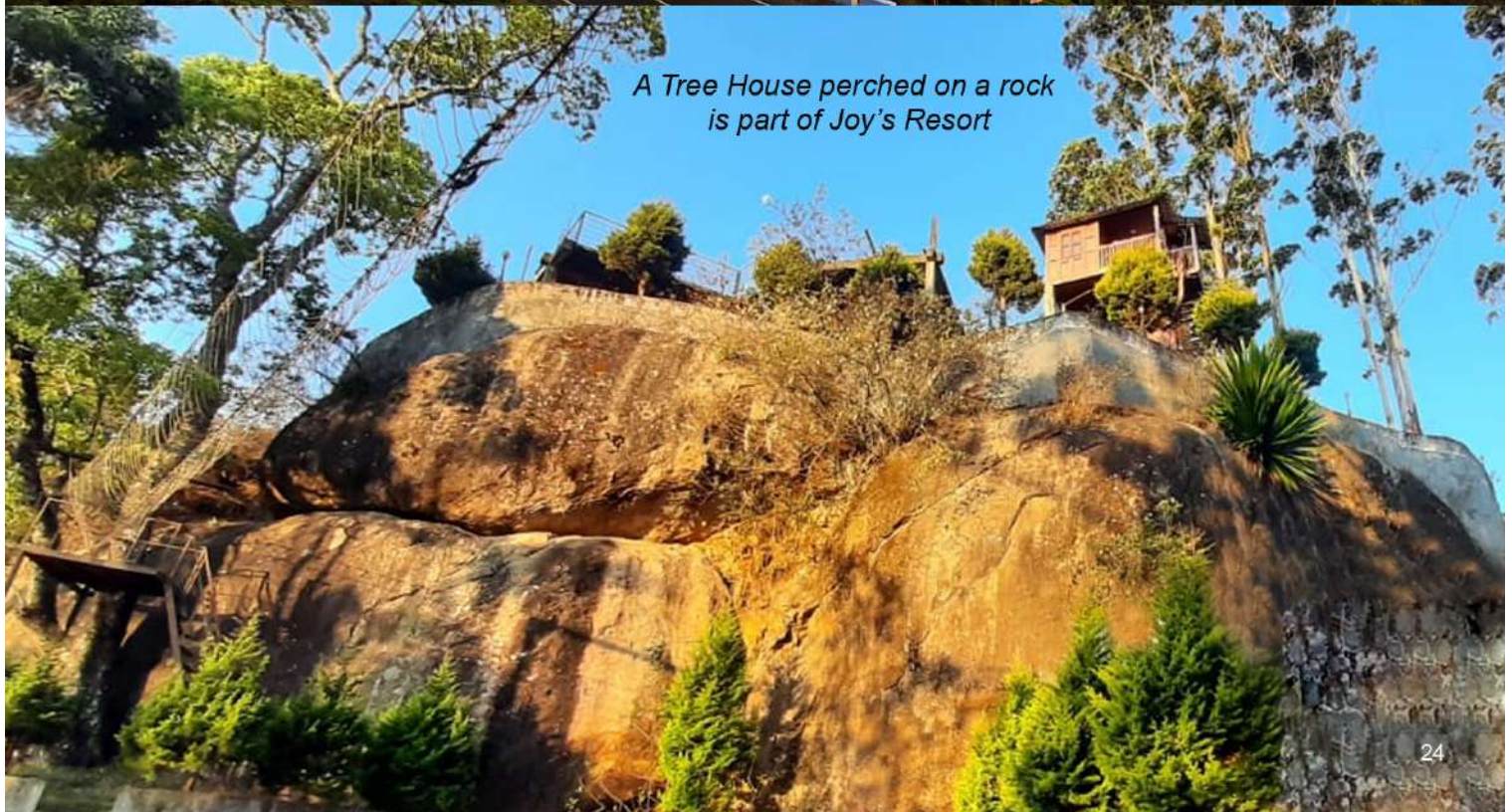
My grandson clicked this picture of me at Chinnakanal



The early morning sun hits the mountains opposite the Joy's Resort, Chinnakanal

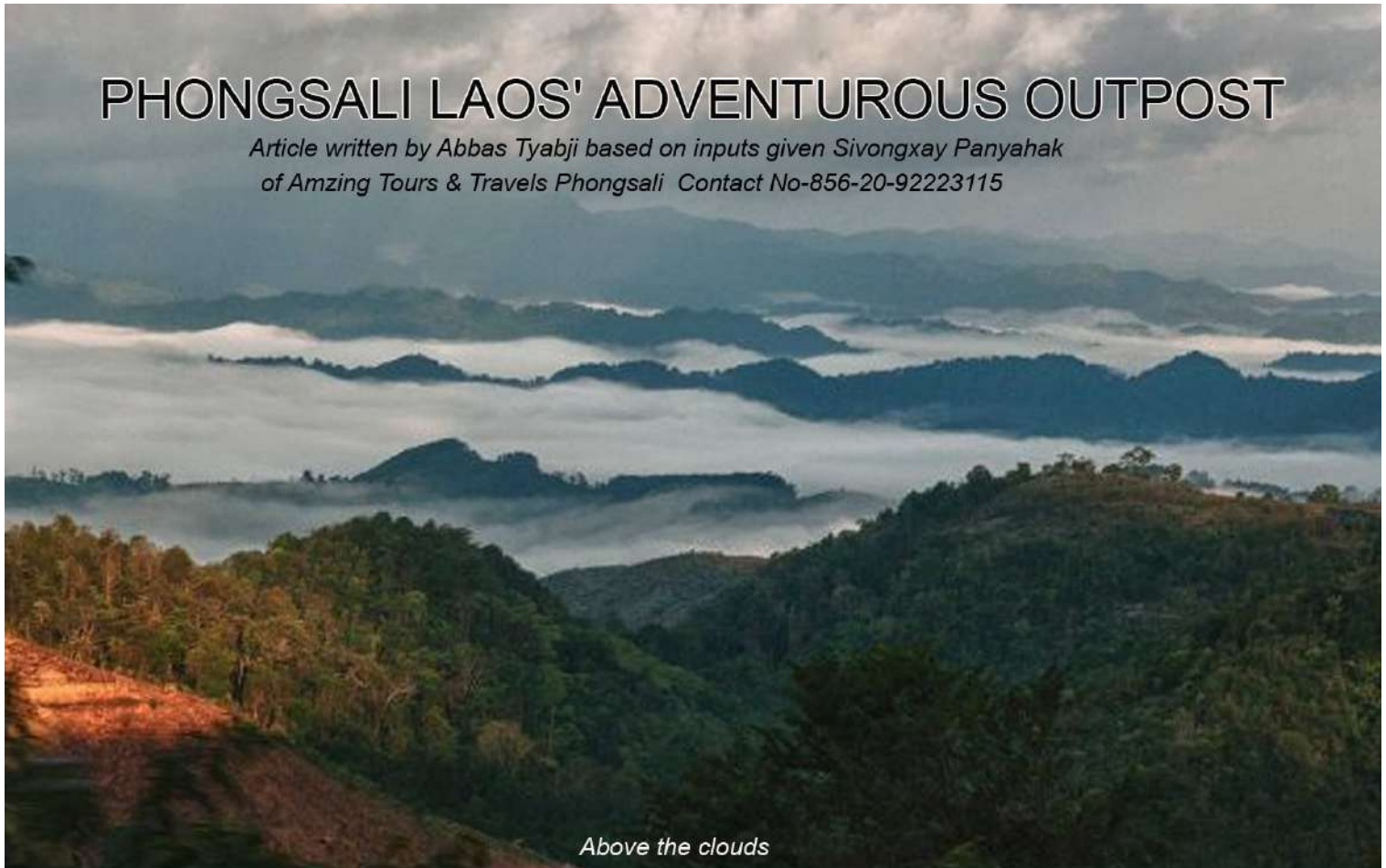


A Tree House perched on a rock is part of Joy's Resort



PHONGSALI LAOS' ADVENTUROUS OUTPOST

*Article written by Abbas Tyabji based on inputs given Sivongxay Panyahak
of Amzing Tours & Travels Phongsali Contact No-856-20-92223115*



Above the clouds

I live in Phongsali, a province in the north eastern corner of Laos, bordering China and Vietnam. The town of Phongsali, capital of the province, lies at an elevation of 4500 ft and is surrounded by rugged mountains and has the scenic Nam Ou river flowing by. The Phou Fa peak towers above the town .

It is inhabited by numerous hill tribes, who still continue to live in a lifestyle dating back hundreds of years. One can see the women in their very colourful costumes at the morning markets in and around Phongsali. Phongsali is in a very remote corner of the country, being about 730 kms from Vientiane, the capital of Laos. However, it has become accessible by air from the capital with three flights a week. Of course it is also possible to travel to Phongsali by luxury or ordinary buses. Some buses come directly while if you are adventurous, you can take hopping buses which will enable you to get a glimpse of other places in Laos.

However, the best option I would suggest for those looking at visiting the highlights of Laos, is to book a driver-guide and drive to Phongsali after stopping at other interesting places enroute.

The places I would suggest are Van Vieng, Luang Prabang, Nong Khiaw and any other place your guide suggests.

Somsay Sayasith, based in Luang Prabang, is a very knowledgeable guide - driver and a nice person, whom Abbas Tyabji, Editor, had contacted for a tour of Laos, which did not materialise. Contact No: 856-20-5299009



Idyllic villages scattered over the hillsides

Mt. Phou Fa towering over the surroundings



A tribal village (left) and two gorgeously dressed tribal women



Another very interesting way to reach Phongsali is to take a 5 hour boat ride from Nong Khiaw to the end point. Your car can pick you up from there to reach Phongsali.

Anyway, let me talk about Phongsali. As I said earlier, Phongsali borders China hence it has a strong Chinese presence with many businesses run by Chinese. However it is a patchwork of unending mountains cut by deep river valleys with very minimum infrastructure. It is therefore a haven for the back packer, the adventurer who will wonder into what world he/she has wandered into. For these lucky few, some unique experiences await.

It is one of the most unique and fascinating provinces in Laos, unlike any other in this "forgotten" country. A number of captivating hill tribes still live everyday lives in their distinctive traditional values, dressed in colourful costumes and farming the land as they have done for centuries. Visiting Phongsali provides an incredibly rare insight into Laos' rich heritage and a realm that has barely been discovered. Although unmistakably Asian, the province is a world away from the demands of modern-day life, and the curious traveler will encounter an extremely remote destination.

HILL TRIBE VISITS

Phongsali is home to a number of curious hill tribes that live in secluded rustic villages, tucked away amongst the hills. Just within this one province are numerous different tribes - the Hmong, Akha Epia, Black Thai, Lan Tan, Akha Ikor, Por Sang, Akha Loma to name a few within the region. They adopt unique traditions with the women wearing specific tribal-wear with colorful garments, flamboyant embroidery and applique, jewellery and silver ornaments and distinctive head-dresses. The tribes are not accustomed to seeing visitors and foreigners are often greeted with an intriguing stare. Visiting these hill tribes provides an extraordinary insight into Laos' simple way of life that is seen by very few outsiders.



MUSEUM OF TRIBES

The Museum of Tribes in Phongsali Town provides an interesting insight into the lives of the Phongsali ethnic tribes and there are a diversity of local costumes on display as well as a collection of traditional wooden utensils.



A tribal woman in all her finery

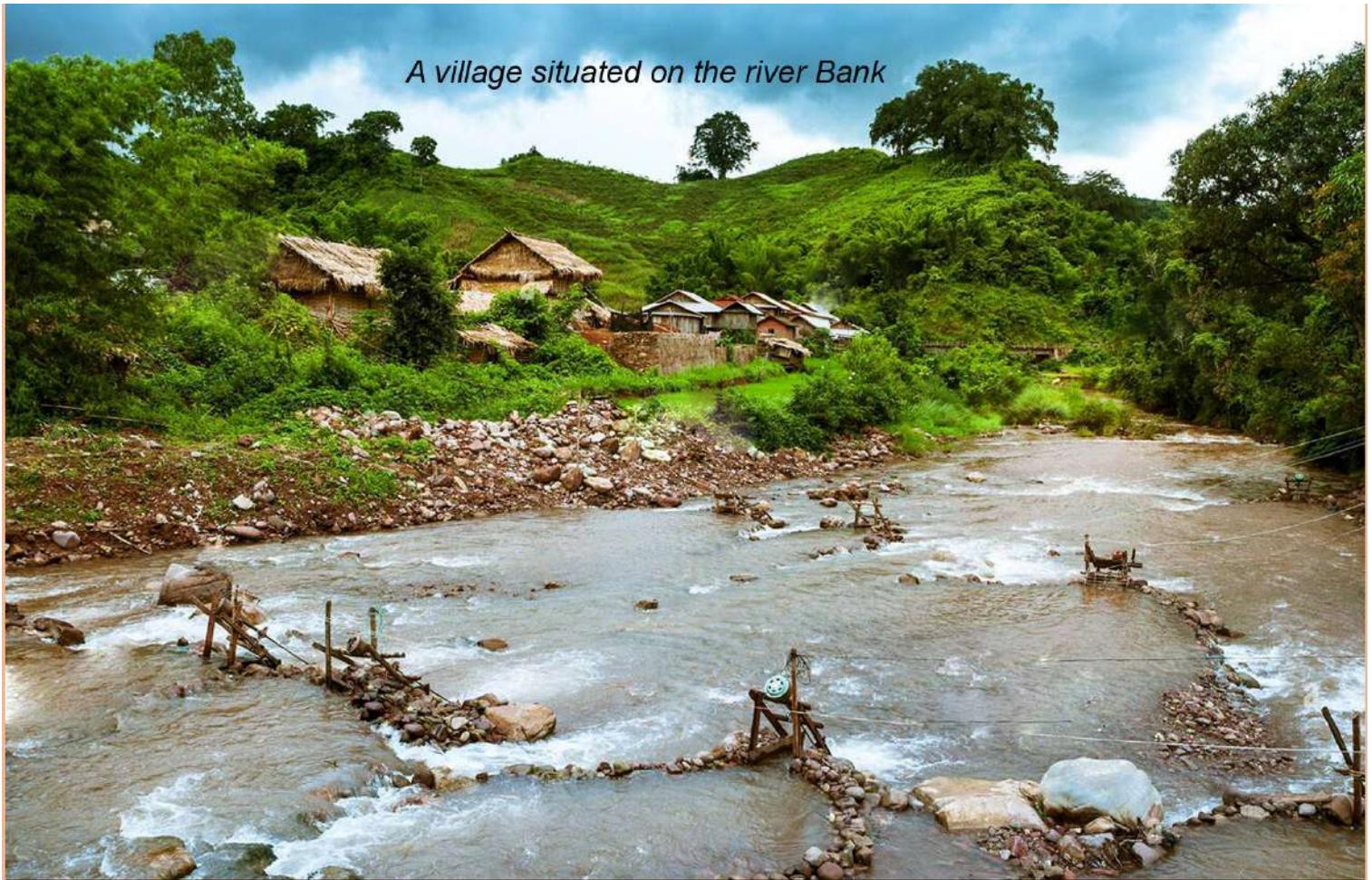


A ride down the Nam Ou river is a real treat with delectable scenery enroute



A typical village near Phongsali

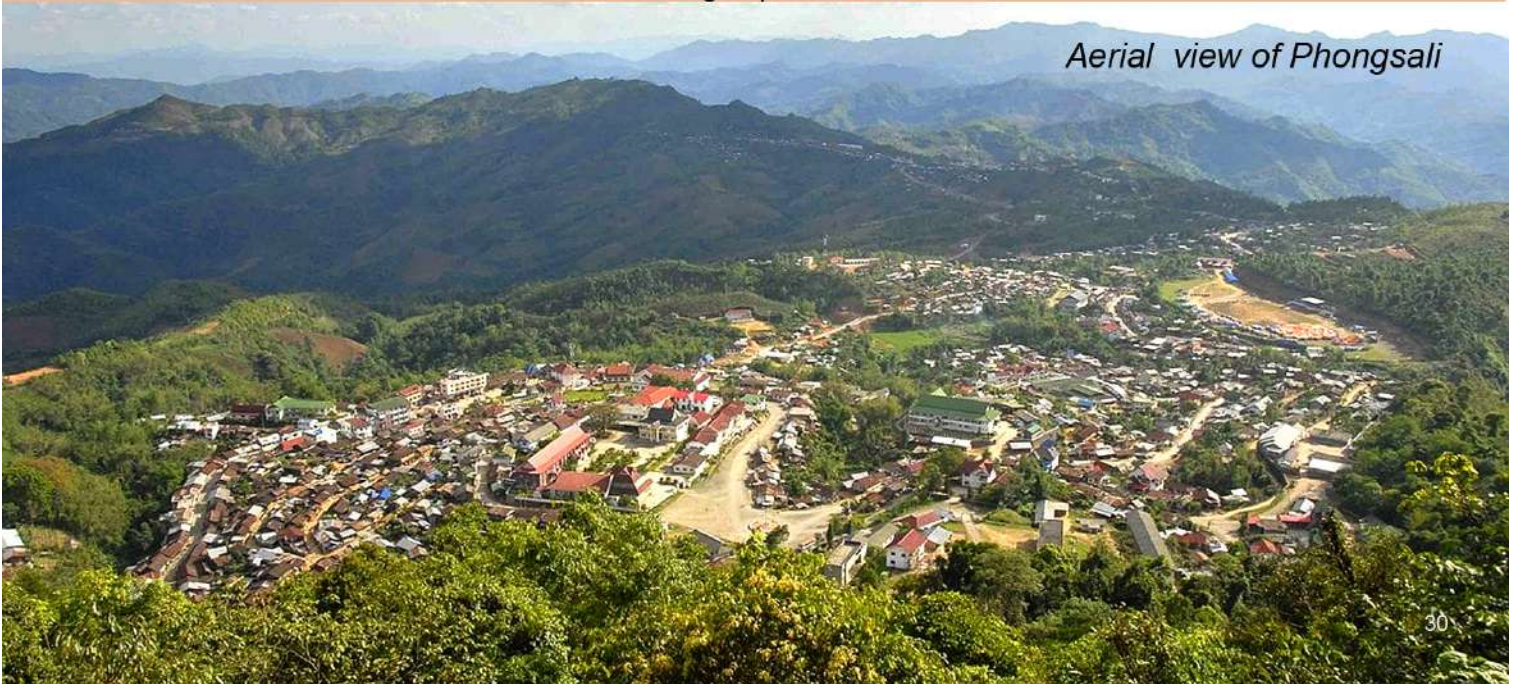
A village situated on the river Bank



TREKKING

Trekking within the Phongsali province provides remarkable and rare sights in a part of the country that has been barely visited. Walking up the steep, forested incline to the peak of Phou Fa offers breath taking views over both Phongsali town and magnificent Lao landscapes. Other mountainous hikes present a challenging-yet-rewarding climb to any trekker, with sensational, uninterrupted views from the top over landlocked terrain and rolling mountains. In addition to the chance to explore Laos' undiscovered and stunning countryside, trekkers may also find themselves encountering hidden hill-tribe villages, nestled high up in the hills.

Aerial view of Phongsali





Two tribal villages in the area



Cherry Blossoms with Mt.Fuji, Japan in background

More on this in future issues

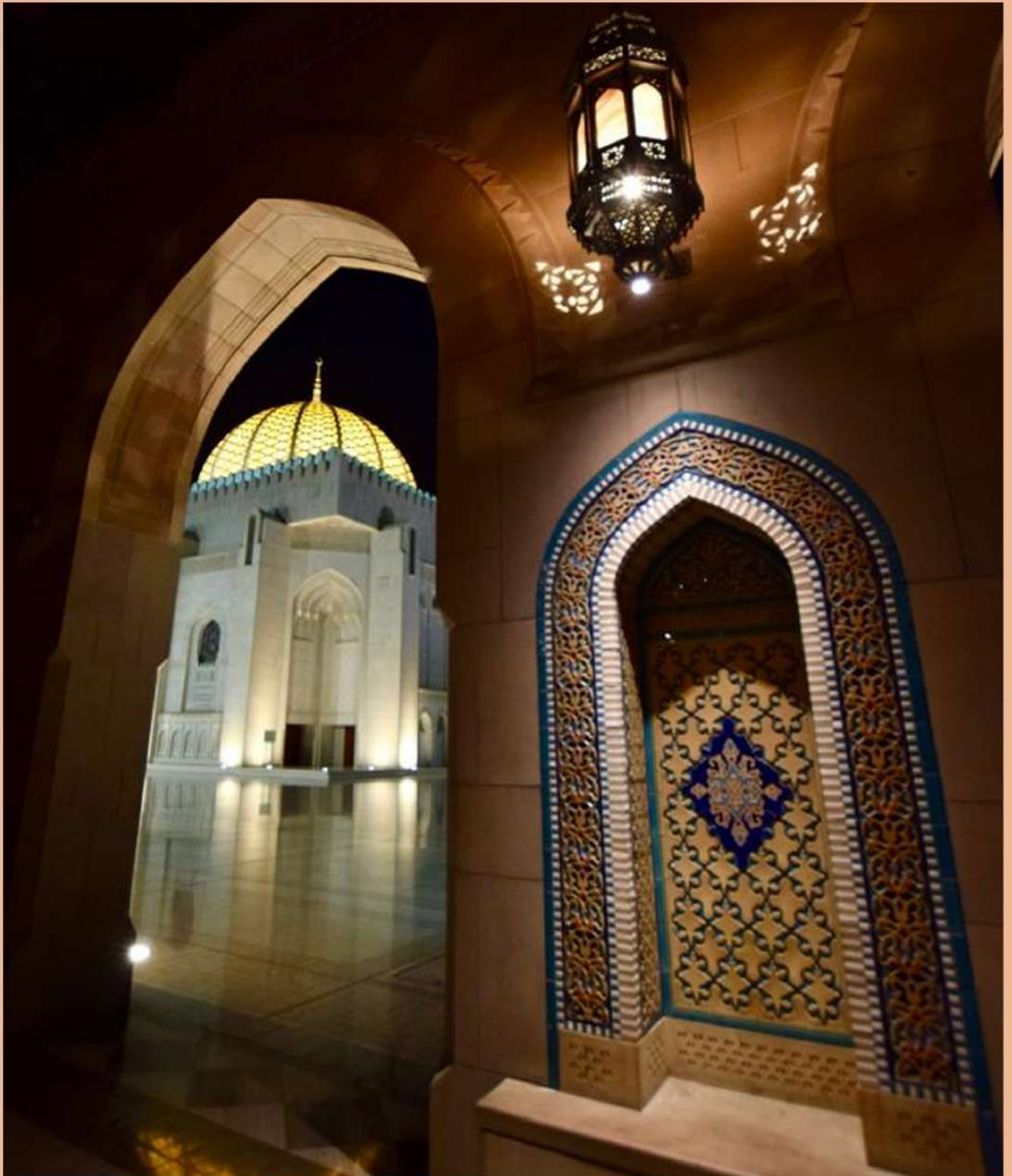


WE HOPE OUR READERS WILL CONTRIBUTE ARTICLES /PICTURES AND FORWARD THIS MAGAZINE TO THEIR CONTACTS SO THAT MORE PEOPLE CAN READ AND PERHAPS BENEFIT FROM IT

***This magazine is Edited and Designed by Abbas Tyabji with the assistance of Talla Goutham of Charm Photo Inn
Send information / pics and request to be added to FREE MAILING LIST on Whatsapp No: 0091-9391010015***

Gorgeous Mosques of Muscat

Pics by Rafat Nayyar

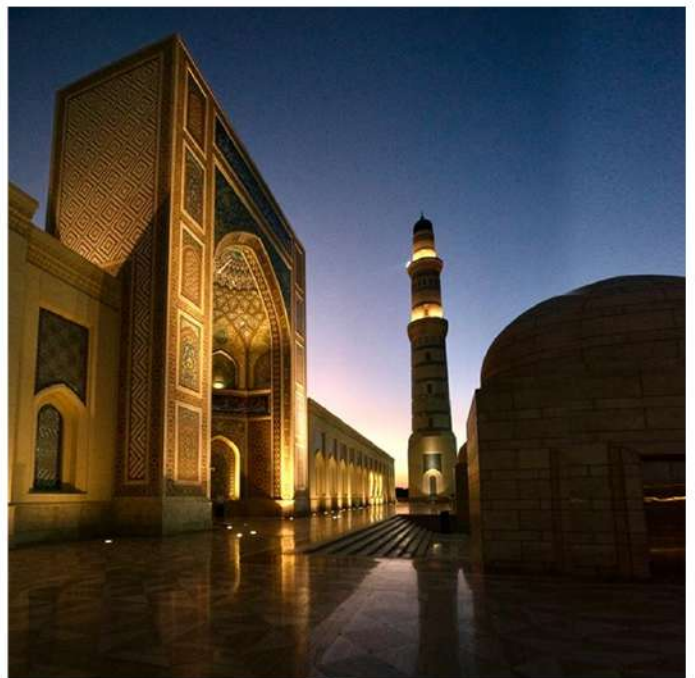
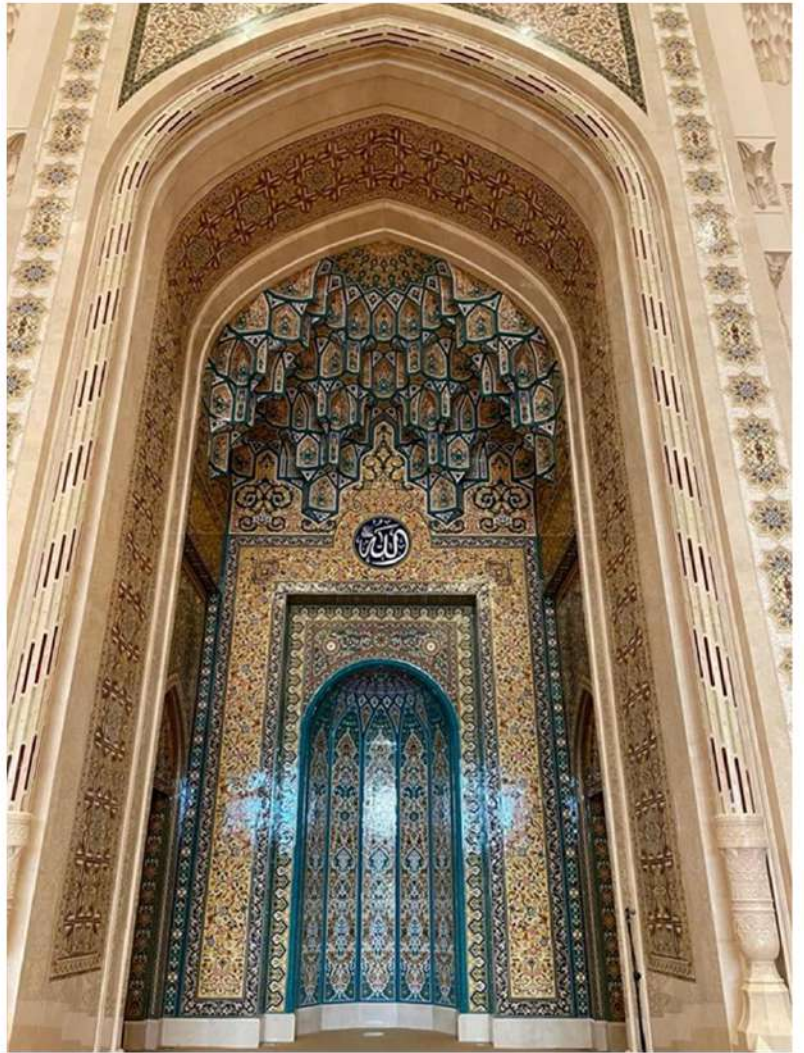


The mosques of Muscat are absolutely stunning. Many of the them have beautifully carved wooden interiors. A few pictures are shown here. More in future issues

Aesthetic mosques of Oman

More in future issues

Pics by Rafat Nayyar



Features in future issues



BIPENGGOU NATURE RESERVE, SICHUAN, CHINA

Pic by Abbas Tyabji

LIMESTONE TERRACES IN PAMUKKALE, TURKEY



Pic by Divakar Murthy



Pic by Syed Maqsood

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Abbas A. Tyabji is a Hyderabad, India, based photo journalist, who left Tata Motors, one of the largest auto makers in India after heading the Publications Division of the Company over a career spanning nearly 3 decades.

During his tenure he travelled all over India and to neighbouring countries like Nepal, Bhutan, Mauritius and the Middle East on photo journalistic assignments. His articles, pictures and photo features appeared not only in the Company publications but in national and international magazines.

He was invited by the then People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (S Yemen) to photograph the natural and man made wonders of that ancient land and prepare publicity material for their govt. The effort was appreciated by Govt officials and even India's Ambassador to S Yemen wrote an appreciation letter to Tatas on his efforts.

He is the recipient of over 50 national and international awards including:

The President of India's Award for Excellence in Designing and Printing on TWO OCCASIONS

Best Feature Writer Award from the Association of Business Communicators of India 4 times

Best Photo Feature Award from the Association of Business Communicators of India 5 times

The internationally circulated magazine "Bus Ride" from the US found his pictures so exceptional that they selected 2 for the First Place Award in their 1989 Worldwide photo competition, the only time in their history that two pictures were given this honour.

Almost half a dozen of his pictures appeared in Japanese calendars and dozens have graced Indian calendars.

He has also published a book on Hyderabad, for which the text, photography and design was done by him.

For his photo journalistic achievements he has found mention in "Who's Who of India", and "Reference Asia".

He also operates guided, customised tours from Hyderabad and is listed in LONELY PLANET as a Tour Guide.

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Abbas Tyabji receiving the President of India Award for Excellence in Designing and Printing from then President of India Dr. N. Sanjeeva Reddy