

think!

FOOTLOOSE

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TEMPLE DIVINE

NEGLECTED HERITAGE

If properly promoted, the town of Ambika Kalna can rival Bishnupur and become a hot tourist spot

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There is no easy answer to the question which is the ultimate temple town of Bengal - Bishnupur or Ambika Kalna. Although Bishnupur is more popular for its terracotta work, the variety of temple structures at Ambika Kalna is far more attractive.

Ambika Kalna was known as Ambowa Muluk between 15th and 16th centuries as evident from Mangal Kavyas of 1495. A map of Bengal made by Von den Brook in 1660 mentions the town as Ambowa.

Historians opine that Ambowa was an important military base of Muslim rulers after Jafar Khan conquered Saptagram in 1298. Several mosques were built here between 1490 and 1559 during the rule of Hussein Shahi dynasty. During early 16th century, arrival of Shree Chaitanya Dev at Ambowa resulted in spread of Vaishnavism there. The famous temples of Ambika Kalna

templeguide

HOW TO GET THERE

Katwa-bound local trains from Howrah take two hours to reach Ambika Kalna.

CELEBRATIONS AT AMBIKA KALNA

Durga Puja in October and Charak or Gajan during April is celebrated in a big way. Krishnadebpur near Ambika Kalna holds a grand fair during Gajan.

We were told the best way to see the temples there was by hiring a cycle rickshaw. Hiring one, we started with the Nava Kailash Temple. Comprising 108 Shiva temples in two circles - 74 in the outer circle, 34 in the inner one - this temple was built in 1809 by King Tejeshchandra. There are actually 109 Aatchala-styled temple structures, of

Krishnachandra Temple



This 25-pinnacled structure was built in 1751.

Pratapeshwar Temple



Ramhari Mistri built this temple in 1849.

We next walked to see the first of several 25-pinnacled structures, Laljiu temple. Built in 1739 by Raja Kirtichand of Burdwan for his mother Brajakishori Devi, Laljiu temple has a huge multi entrance naatmandir or assembly hall of Chaarchala style, standing on several pillars. The enormous structure of the temple impressed us though the terracotta works could not.

From Laljiu we took a path on our left, towards a small Chaarchala styled small mandap with three entrances. This temple has fascinating terracotta works all over it. Scenes from social life depicted in Hindu epics, including Krishna and Balaram leaving for Dwaraka, pirate ships, soldiers on horseback, queen being carried on a palanquin and Vaishnavas dancing with musical instruments made us marvel at the sense of detailing.

We next entered Siddeshwari Kali temple. Built by King Chitrasen Roy, this 1739-built Jor Banglo-styled structure is the oldest temple of Ambika Kalna along with Laljiu. Not far away was Anantabasudev, whose deity is carved out of a black stone. We stopped here too. History has it that Raja Trilokchand made this temple for his grandmother Brajakishori Devi in 1754.

Our next stop, the 25-pinnacled structure Gopaljiu's temple of Gopalbari, had quite a few erotic terracotta plaques on its wall involving European men and local women. Moving on, at Mahaprabhu Bari we saw a manuscript of Bhagavad Gita, which according to legend was written by Lord Chaitanya.

After seeing so many temple, we reached the 16th century Datan Kathi Tala Masjid. It is the oldest surviving mosque of the town. But to our disappointment, we found it to be distastefully painted in blue, a result of conservation work undertaken at the site.

Our final destination was the twin temple of Jagganath Bari. Built in 1753 by queens of King Chitra Sen, these are in a dilapidated condition. Terracotta works with scenes like sailing Portuguese warships, battle between horsemen and elephant riders, zamindar smoking hookah on palanquin, that should have been preserved for posterity, are falling apart.

As we started on our way back home, we were wondering why is this fabulous temple town not promoted by the state. With a few more accommodation facilities, it could have given a fitting competition to Bishnupur.



Krishnachandra Temple as seen from Rasmancha.

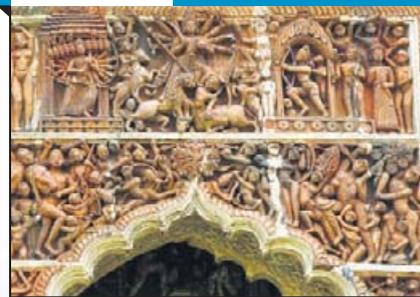
were not built till the arrival of the kings of Burdwan in the area during 18th century. The town was called Ambikanagar then, after one of the many names of Goddess Durga.

We took the early morning Katowa local of 5.38 am from Howrah station and reached Ambika Kalna at 7.30 am.

which 108 have Shiva lingam in them.

Just opposite to Nava Kailash is the Rajbari complex. Here, we first came across the Odishi Deul structured Pratapeshwar temple. Built in 1849 by Ramhari Mistri under the supervision of Pearykumari Devi, the first wife of Raja Pratapchand, Pratapeshwar temple has unparallel terracotta works on its four walls. We marvelled at the terracotta designs of the likes of Ram and Ravana on two sides as Goddess Durga stood in the centre; Rama as king of Ayodhya with Sita seated beside him; and that of a large horizontal panel with different forms of Krishnalila.

Terracotta wonder



A plaque on Pratapeshwar temple depicting scenes from epics.

FULFILLING WISHES

More than a lakh visit Tirupati daily

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Tirumala Venkateswara Temple, popularly known as Tirupati Temple is one of the most popular tourist destinations in south India. It is located at a hill town called Tirumala in Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh.

Tirumala is a combination of two separate words - 'Tiru' meaning 'sacred' and 'Mala' meaning 'hills'. In ancient India, the Chola dynasty was powerful in the south and they were devoted to lord Venkateswara. Legend has it that the Cholas improved and renovated Tirupati temple during their reign.

The principal deity of this temple is Lord Vishnu, known as Venkateswara and Balaji here. It is the richest pilgrimage hub of India, with almost a lakh visitors a day. It is perhaps the most visited religious centres of the world. On any festive day, Tirupati receives more than five lakh visitors.

The distance between Chennai city and Tirupati is about 200 km. Several bus and private car services are available from the city for the visitors. Andhra Pradesh State Road Transport Corporation (APSRTC) offers free bus service to Tirupati from Tirupati Railway Station to Alipiri, every 30 minutes.

The road to Tirupati, carved out of Tirumala hill, is well maintained and the Natural Arch, one of the prominent geological wonders is just a kilometre away from Tirupati.

Surprisingly, to get a glimpse of this god,



The Tirupati temple. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

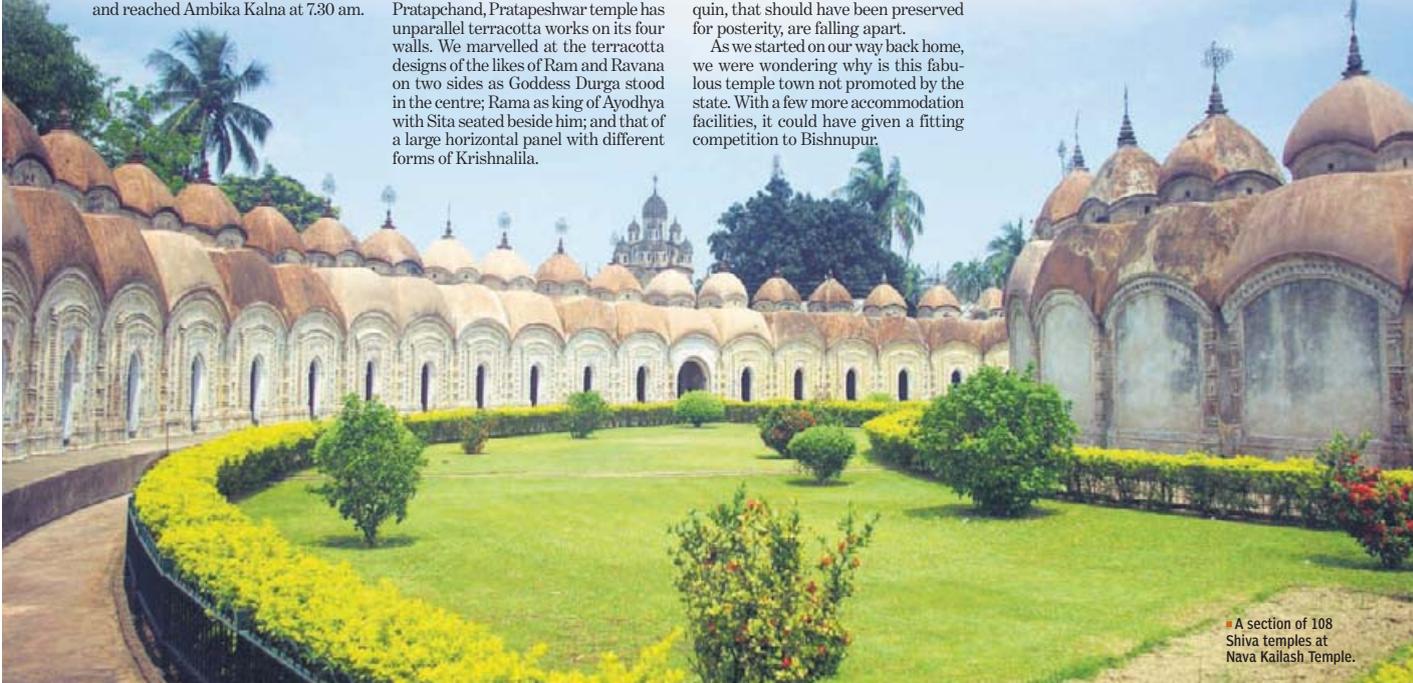
one must shelve out at least ₹50. While one can enter the temple compound free of cost, the desire to see the idol of the Lord can be fulfilled only by standing in one of the several price-based queues: ₹100, ₹300, ₹500 and ₹1000. The more expensive the puja package you avail, the shorter gets the queues. Devotees in the low-priced lines spend more than six hours to reach the shrine of Balaji.

The inner sanctum, known as Garbhagriha where the idol of Lord Balaji is placed is dark. This idol wears a gold crown which is replaced with a diamond crown on special days. Balaji holds a gem embedded Sudarshan Chakra in his right hand. His forehead has a tilak while a pair of kundalas made of gold dangle from his ears. No doubt, the effect is beautiful.

The ritual of *kesh daan* or tonsure brings many to Tirupati. It is believed that if one donates their hair here, all their wishes will get fulfilled. Thousands, including men and women, take part in this ceremony everyday.

Tirupati receives a huge amount of donation from its devotees across the globe in form of diamonds, gold, money and other items. The total monetary collection alone crosses ₹23 million everyday while its annual gold collection is to the tune of 3000 kg.

If you are here, do not forget to eat the laddu - the most famous of its *prasadam*, known as *prasadam*. Other items on the *prasadam* list are dosai, appam and sweet-pongal, which is distributed among the devotees.



A section of 108 Shiva temples at Nava Kailash Temple.

MILKDELIGHT

'Burnt' chicken as dessert in the Land of Turks

MUST EAT IN ANKARA
Kazandibi

Ever thought of eating non-vegetarian desserts? If yes, kazandibi in the land of Turks can fulfil it most appetizingly. "I could never have thought of chicken as a dessert, more so because in India or even elsewhere, I had never heard of or tasted a non-vegetarian dessert. But the traditional Turkish delicacy, kazandibi - translated in English as 'burnt chicken breast pudding' - got me going," says Pranay

Singh, executive chef, Swissotel. On Singh's visit to Ankara and Izmir last year, this kheer-like dessert stood out for its unique use of chicken.

OVER THE TRAY

To prepare this dessert, the chicken breast is first cut into small cubes and washed thoroughly in warm water. "Milk, sugar and a little bit of salt are boiled and simmered for sometime before rice flour and potato starch are added to it. Finally, hand-rubbed and torn chicken pieces are added. The entire mixture is poured in an aluminium or steel tray in a thin layer. The tray is

taken over a flame and heated for few seconds, so that the base of the mixture gets a brownish colour," explains Singh.

The chef explains that though the name has the word 'burnt' in it, it is only the colour which is so, not the taste. The hot mixture is cut in inch-long lines and each line rolled out into a khandvi-like shape. Cinnamon powder is sprinkled over it before serving.

HEALTH QUOTIENT

"Kazandibi is commonly cooked at homes in the region and is not very high on calories. It has its roots in the Ottoman Empire," says Singh, who

noticed that this dessert was the exception in the otherwise vegetarian-dessert fare.

TURKISH VS. BENGALI FARE

The chef noted some similarities and some differences between the cuisines of the two places, Turkey and Bengal. "There, I saw salted paneer being sold in local eateries, unlike the salt-free ones we have in Bengal. What we call

'halwa' goes as 'helwa' there. But of course, a lot of ingredients are the same in the two countries, including dals," says Singh.

WHEN IN TURKEY...

While you will have kazandibi, Singh suggests you can try the other popular desserts too. These include the rose jam, had as a dessert and not as a spread over bread, Turkish delight (tastes like marshmallow) and the region's famous - baklava.

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Suruchi Gupta