

OMKARESHWAR, Madhya Pradesh

Culture

Instead of Varanasi



HERITAGE

HOW TO GO

The nearest airport in Indore is 84 km/2 hr. Omkareshwar has its own railway station about 12 km from the city centre. The train route is well-connected with Khandwa, which links to major metros and some big cities.

Omkareshwar, some say, could pass off as “Little Varanasi”, at least in vibe, if not scale: Think temple town, spiritual bliss, sacred river, lively ghats. An Om-shaped settlement by the Narmada, Omkareshwar is also a site for one of the 12 *jjyotirlinga* shrines in India, its streets crammed with colourful shops selling religious curios, kitschy idols and devotional CDs. To cross the river island, pilgrims usually tread the 270-foot-high suspension bridge (Omkareshwar Setu) on foot or hire a boat for a leisurely ride. Evening *aartis*, basic but popular, complete the Varanasi charm, although Mahashivratri is when festivities peak.

Historically the region has been ruled by the Malwas, Chauhans and later on by the

Marathas, who built many temples. A *parikrama* of the island will expose you to the ruins of some of these 11th-century temples, medieval fortifications, hidden villages and ashrams. Start early to beat the mid-afternoon heat and by early evening, set out for the hilltop Mandhata Palace, or Omkareshwar Palace. Built by the Holkars, its Durbar hall is Instagram-worthy, so is the aerial view of the main town from the palace's balcony. Best way to cool off? Definitely by the ghat; a quiet moment or two on the rocks, taking in the shimmering waters. Pro tip: Madhya Pradesh Tourism Board's Narmada Retreat offers intimate views of the river and the main temple. As for the hypnotic tintinnabulation of temple bells, that's your sweet upgrade.

—Edwina D'souza

Diglipur,

ANDAMAN AND NICOBAR ISLANDS

Adventure

Instead of Havelock Island



BEACH

Diglipur in northern Andaman is blissfully underexposed—so far. Plans for an airport are underway. So go before the world does, and if you do, expect top-notch natural wonders. The twin islands of Ross and Smith, separated by a svelte sandbar, are Diglipur's biggest draw. Cover the sandbar on foot, pausing for a swim or some sea-watching. Plan your hours well, authorities only permit three.

A hike inside the Saddle Peak National Park takes you to the highest point in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands at 2,400 feet. Kalpong, Andaman's only river, flows through this forest. On the park's foothill, Lamiya Bay Beach is perfect for idling. The nearby Kalipur Beach is a turtle nesting ground, claimed by hundreds of olive ridley, leatherback and hawksbill through December to January. The Alfred Caves echo with fruit-eating bats and inside the jungles of Shyam Nagar thrive mud volcanoes. Craegy Island, a short swim from Kalipur, is superb for snorkelling... schools of parrot fish, stingray, angel fish and moray inject the blue waters with colours you'd find in a bag of confetti. —**Edwina D'souza**

HOW TO GO

Port Blair, a ship or a short flight from Chennai, is the closest hub. The 298 km/12 hr ride from Port Blair to Diglipur winds through the disputed Andaman Trunk Road, where buses ply, albeit under security. A more responsible option, is to take a boat. The Aerial Bay Jetty near Diglipur connects to Port Blair by sea thrice a week. Some islands need permits, so do check in advance.