

LICENCE TO THRILL

Whether you are a novice wanting to dabble in an adventure activity or a hardcore practitioner of an adventure sport, the vast and varied topography of India proffers a veritable playground. Here's our Great Indian Adventure List.

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Photography PHOTOCONCIERGE/CHIRAG SADHANI

Various surf schools now operate in the country and have opened new avenues for water-sports lovers and enthusiasts

One country: over 7,500 kilometres of coastline, mountains covering more than 96 million hectares, an extensive network of Himalayan and peninsular rivers. India's landscape is vast, varied, and wondrous. A country so diverse in geography and culture begs for deeper exploration, to connect with the elements – wind, water, land – that shape our way of life.

There's just one problem.

The problem of plenty.

Do you go skiing in Auli or diving in the clear blue waters of the Andamans this winter? Do you take a stunning hot air balloon ride over the Pushkar Camel Fair or head to an action-packed surfing festival in Odisha this November?

India truly is the playground of the intrepid. So dive deeper, fly higher, walk farther, to uncover the country's secrets.

WATER

SURFING

Where Puducherry, Mangalore, Kerala, Goa

In recent times, surfing has gained momentum in India, with more than a dozen surf schools along both coasts, and even a handful of surfing festivals. The annual India Surf Festival will host its fifth edition at Odisha's Ramchandi Beach over November 12-14, 2016. Participants from around the world come down for the championship, workshops, music and events. Earlier this year, Karnataka hosted the first edition of the All Cargo Indian Open of Surfing in May, and the Covelong Point Surf, Music & Yoga Festival was held in Chennai in August.

For most of the year, the absence of big waves in India means it isn't the first choice of pro surfers. On the plus side, smaller waves are easier to learn on. Some seasons like the pre-monsoon and monsoon offer swells large enough to draw both intermediate and seasoned surfers. The Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea both offer ideal conditions for beginners – November to March is a good time to head to the west coast (Goa, Kerala, Karnataka), while May to August is good for the east coast.

Abilities vary, but it takes around seven to 10 sessions to get the basics and catch a wave on your own. That being said, it's still common to stand up on your first time on the board!

Difficulty Challenging

Tips Know how to swim. Be comfortable in water. Wear a rash guard and swimming shorts to avoid sunburn.

Contact Soul & Surf (Varkala), Kallialay (Puducherry), Ashram Surf Retreat and Shaka (around Mangalore), Banana Surf School (Goa)

Photography: PHOTOCONCIERGE/RAMMOHAN PARANJPE



(This page) Taste the thrill of diving before you commit to a certificate course in the waters of the Andamans and Lakshadweep; (facing page) September to mid-May is the ideal season to go whitewater rafting in Devprayag and Shivpuri



Photography: PHOTOCONCIERGE/CHIRAG SAHNIANI

SCUBA DIVING

Where Andamans, Lakshadweep

Though India has a vast coastline, the best dive sites are found in its two archipelago groups – the Andamans in the east and Lakshadweep in the west. Tropical conditions ensure warm temperatures and the clear waters of the islands mean much better visibility underwater than off the mainland. The diving season lasts from November to March. The coral reefs surrounding these island groups are fragile and wondrous ecosystems: fantastical coral patterns, rich marine life and the myriad hues of the underwater world. Havelock Island in the Andamans is a diving hub with many dive shops and facilities. In Lakshadweep, dive sites can be found off the Agatti and Bangaram Islands.

There are two ways to do this: introductory dives or certification courses. A scuba diving certification from a diving certification organisation, such as Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI), gives you technical know-how, teaches you about the equipment used, and equips you to dive deeper. There's a theory component as well as confined and open water dives spread over a four- to seven-day period before you gain Open Water Diver certification.

If you want to simply test the waters and experience the thrill of diving before committing to a course, PADI's Discover Scuba is an introductory experience where you dive under the watchful eye of a qualified instructor, and can go up to 12 metres deep.

Difficulty Moderate to Challenging

Tip Though some outfits take non-swimmers on beginner dives, it's advisable to possess basic swimming skills.

Contact Dive India (diveindia.com), Andaman Bubbles (andamanbubbles.com), Lacadives (lacadives.com)

WHITEWATER RAFTING

Where Ganga, Alaknanda, Tons, Zaskar, Subansiri and Kali rivers

India's mightiest rivers wind through dramatic landscapes, interspersed with rushing rapids and placid stretches of water. Navigate your way through them on an inflatable raft, led by a team of experts. Whitewater is classified as Grade I to VI, based on the level of difficulty of navigation.

Riverside and forest camps operate near Rishikesh, at Devprayag and Shivpuri, offering a chance to run Grade III and IV rapids such as 'The Rollercoaster' and 'The Wall' on the Ganga. September to mid-May is the ideal season here. Tented camps are popular with families and groups looking for an introduction to whitewater rafting. The Tons river in Garhwal is a tributary of the Yamuna. Camping at Mori gives you a chance to navigate the wild water and also explore the diverse flora of the region – deodar, pine, and rhododendron. For beginners, the lower Tons is best between May and July.

At the more extreme end are multi-day expeditions through largely uncharted landscapes. A 13-day rafting trip on the Subansiri, a tributary of the Brahmaputra, in Arunachal Pradesh takes you through narrow gorges. The Zaskar expedition in Ladakh winds beneath the towering cliff faces of the Zaskar gorge before reaching the river's confluence with the Indus, with views of 6,000-metre peaks. In comparison, rafting on the Kali at Ganeshgudi in Karnataka is a more leisurely experience with much calmer stretches.

Difficulty Moderate to Challenging

Gear Life jackets and helmets are mandatory and provided by the rafting outfit.

Contact Aquaterra (www.aquaterra.in); Hornbill River Resort (hornbillriverresort.com)

AIR

HOT AIR BALLOONING

Where Rajasthan

To experience the thrill of floating miles above the ground, without any of the gulp-inducing action of paragliding or bungee jumping, a gentle hot air balloon ride is the perfect alternative. It requires no special skills, and classifies as soft adventure, but there's a magical quality in being in a wicker basket, gently buffeted by the wind, reaching heights of upto 1,200 feet. Some of the best views are to be had in Rajasthan, as you float above a patchwork of arid landscapes, scrubby grasslands, towering forts and palaces, desert dunes and placid lakes. In Jaipur, get a glimpse of Amer fort's ramparts from up above; experience complete silence as you glide over Udaipur's Lake Pichola, or catch the manic action of the Pushkar Camel Fair from an aerial perspective. Balloon flights also operate in Ranthambore, starting from the edge of the national park, offering a truly unique chance to glimpse some wildlife. Flights do not operate from June to August.

Difficulty Easy

Tips Follow the pilot's instructions carefully when he advises you to put cameras away and tuck elbows in.

Contact Sky Waltz (www.skywaltz.com)

PARAGLIDING

Where Bir-Billing, Kamshet, Bhimtal

Indulge in some thrills on your next mountain getaway. Many of India's hill stations in Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Maharashtra are now geared to provide paragliding experiences and training courses. Seated in a harness and attached to an inflated nylon or polyester wing, you glide through the sky at a gentle pace, with a bird's-eye view of the mountains and treetops. Unless you are a certified paragliding pilot, you'll be doing a tandem flight with a qualified instructor. In this scenario, you can sit back and enjoy the ride, as all the controls, such as those for direction and speed, are in the capable hands of a trained professional. To be able to paraglide on your own requires around 10 to 12 days of training, including supervised solo flights, before you're qualified to fly unassisted. Schools structure their modules in different ways, so you can take the course at a stretch, or in a more staggered fashion if you're pressed for time. Whether you're flying solo or assisted, you'll have stunning vistas, such as the Dhauladhars in Bir, and the Sahyadris in Kamshet.

Difficulty Challenging

Tips Wear snug shoes and a jacket.

Contact PG-Gurukul (www.paragliding.guru), Indus Paragliding (www.indusparagliding.in)

BUNGEE JUMPING

Where Rishikesh

For an unbridled adrenalin rush, nothing quite beats the free fall thrill of a bungee jump. There are relatively few sites where you can bungee in India. Of these, many are within the commercial surrounds of a city, where you jump off a high building or a platform on a crane, or could also be within the confines of a mall.

Near Rishikesh, though, you can jump in a completely natural environment as you free fall above a rushing river. A platform is situated high on a cliff above a gorge through which flows the Hyul, a tributary of the Ganga. Attached by your ankles to a safety cord, you hurtle head first into a river gorge. There's an 83-metre drop, and you dangle by mere feet above the water. This is India's highest bungee site, set up at Mohan Chatti near Laxman Jhula, designed by trained specialists from New Zealand.

Difficulty Moderate

Tips: Must be above 12 years of age and weigh between 40 and 110 kg.

Contact: Jumpin Heights (www.jumpinheights.com)

ZIP-LINING

Where Jodhpur; Neemrana Fort

A fun and easy activity that requires no specialised prowess, zip-lining combines the thrill of whooshing between two points many metres above the ground with the safety and comfort of a body harness. A zip-lining experience typically consists of multiple 'zips,' or lines, of varying lengths and gradients.

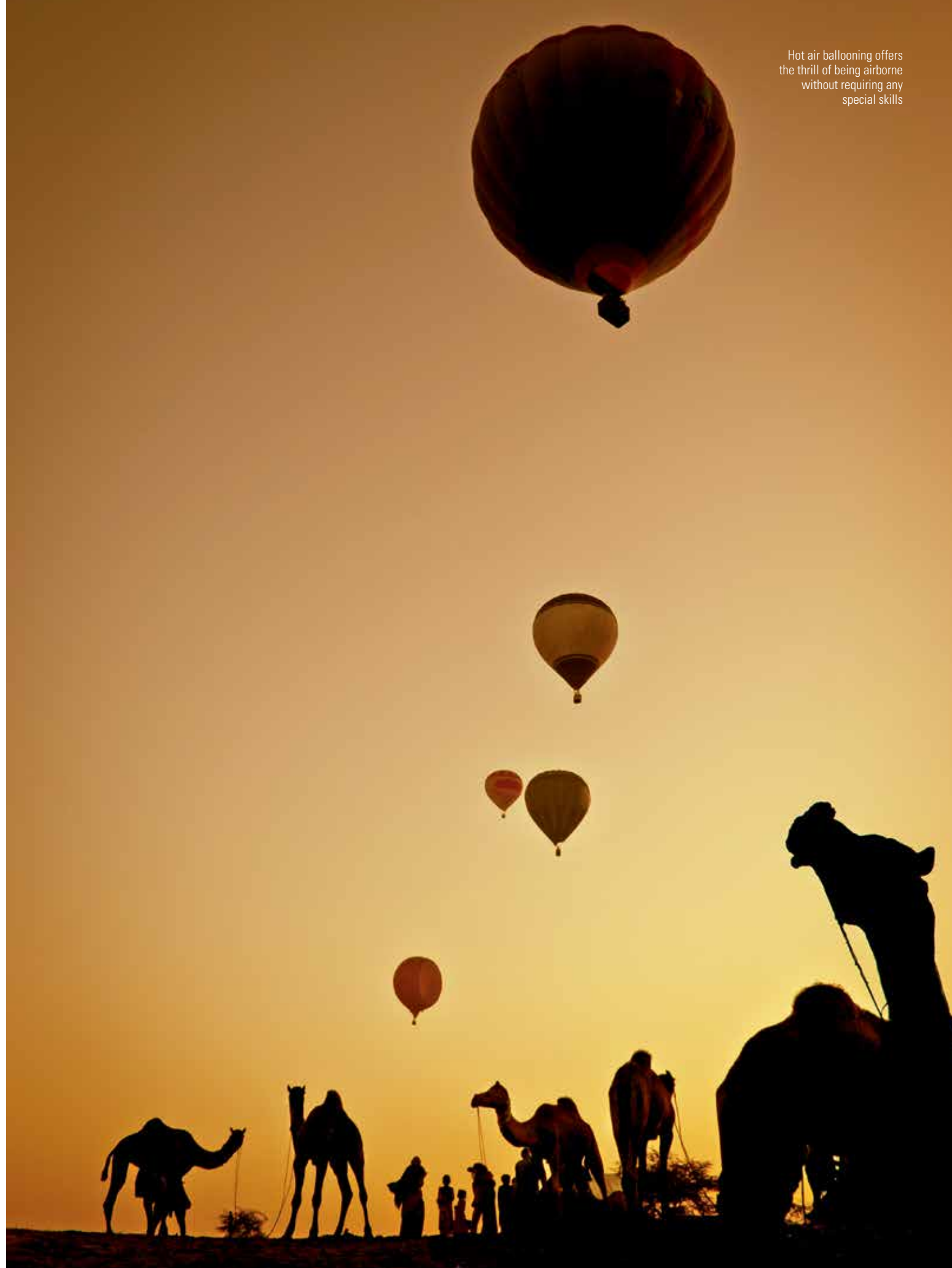
Suspended from a steel cable, legs dangling far above ground, you'll fly over treetops, forts and rivers. The best places to do this are Mehrangarh Fort in Jodhpur, Neemrana Fort near Delhi, and Shivpuri in Rishikesh. Get a stunning aerial perspective of the 117-metre-high ramparts at Mehrangarh Fort as you zip across seven lines that span 1,150 metres. At Neemrana, five zips across 1,250 metres take you over the lush Aravalis. The newest addition is in Rishikesh, where two zips take you over the foaming rapids of the Ganga 70 metres below. Zip-lining in Rajasthan does not operate from mid-May until end-June and in Rishikesh it is open from mid-Sept to end-June.

Difficulty Easy

Tips Wear closed shoes or sandals with an ankle strap; be prepared to walk a fair bit.

Contact: Flying Fox Asia (www.flyingfox.asia)

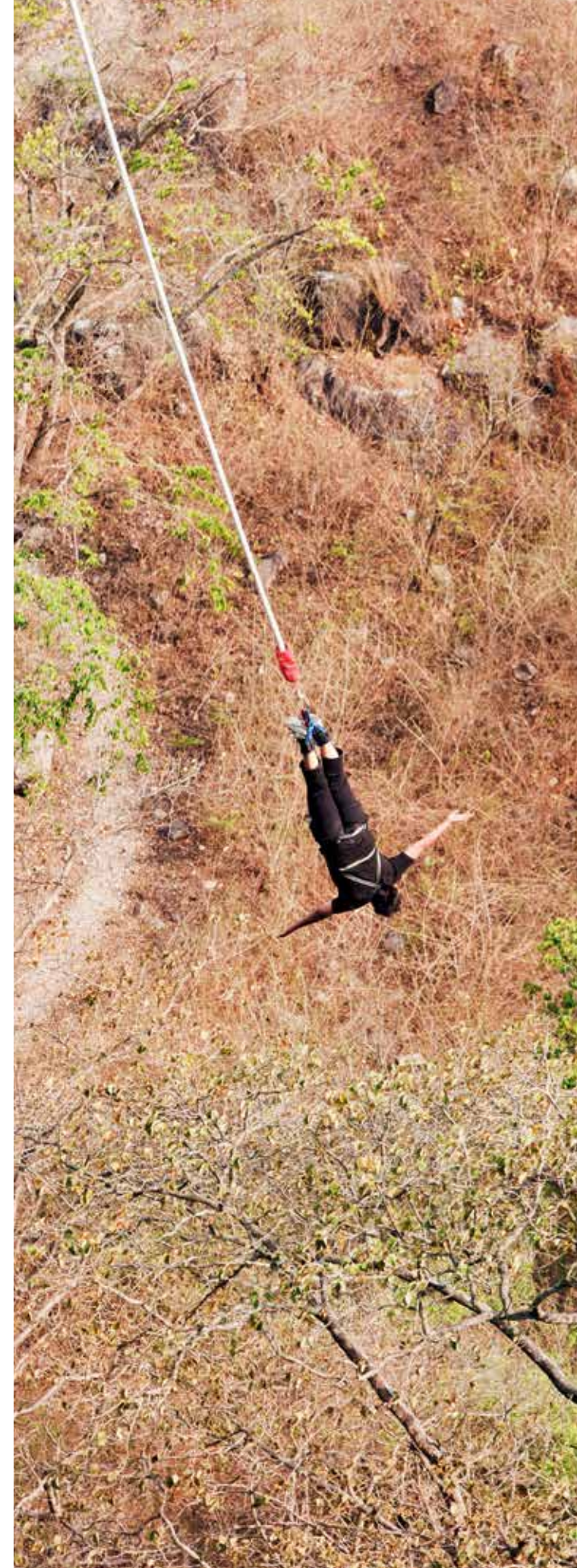
Hot air ballooning offers the thrill of being airborne without requiring any special skills



Paragliding allows you to enjoy a bird's eye-view; (facing page) India's highest bungee site is set up at Mohan Chatti near Rishikesh



Photography: PHOTOCONCIERGE/SAURABH CHATTERJEE





JOE SMITH



(Previous page) You can go mountain biking on leisurely trails, multi-day excursions or opt for gruelling competitions; (this page) Gulmarg in Jammu and Kashmir and Auli in Uttarakhand offer the best ski slopes in the country

LAND

MOUNTAIN BIKING:

Where Nilgiri Hills, Himalaya, Western Ghats
With undulating trails across the Himalaya, the Western Ghats, the Aravalis, and the Nilgiris, India is prime mountain biking country. Gorgeous cycling routes crisscross the length and breadth of the mainland, through varied landscapes such as steep inclines and lush forests. From the barren landscapes of Leh to the plantation-wrapped hillsides of the Nilgiris, chances are you'll find a trail to suit your ability level whichever part of the country you're in. Leisurely trails such as those in Munnar in the Western Ghats are good for beginners. High-altitude trails in the Himalaya, such as the challenging Manali-Leh route, and various trails in Sikkim, are best explored through guided, multi-day excursions.

Seasoned cyclists push their boundaries in gruelling mountain biking competitions, such as the 650-kilometre MTB Himalaya. The route goes off-road, over loose rock and mud, gains 15,000 metres in altitude, and touches 3,250 metres at its highest point. Similarly, in the south, the eight-day Tour of Nilgiris begins in Bengaluru and spans more than 800 kilometres. The 2016 edition is scheduled for December 16-23. More than a race, these competitions are a real test of endurance.

Difficulty Moderate to Challenging

Tips Train hard before signing up for a competition and acclimatise in high-altitude areas.

Operators Unventured (unventured.com); Art of Bicycle Trips (artofbicycletrips.com)

SKIING & HELI SKIING

Where Auli, Gulmarg
India isn't particularly known as a ski destination because, unlike other parts of the world such as Europe, access to slopes covered in fresh powder isn't easy. There are, however, parts of the Himalaya, in Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, where the slopes are suited for snow runs. Auli, in the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand, sits at a height of nearly 3,000 metres, with views of mighty peaks including Nanda Devi, Kamet and Trishul. Gulmarg in Jammu and Kashmir is prime ski country, with one of the world's highest gondolas. Both these destinations offer facilities and training geared to newbie as well as experienced skiers.

The Gulmarg gondola deposits you just below the summit

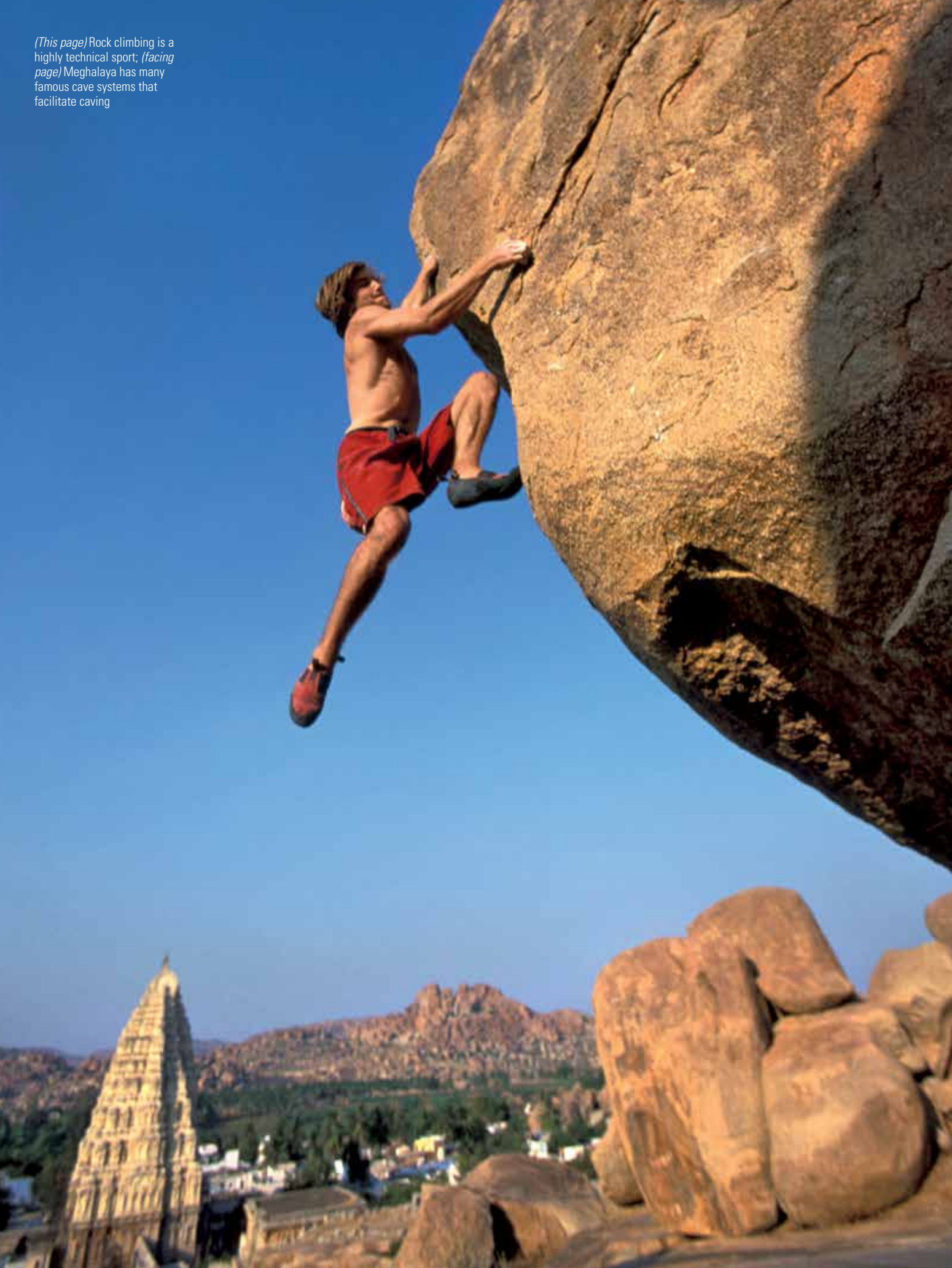
of the 4,200-metre Mt Agharwat, gaining an elevation of a stunning 1,300 metres. There are routes for every kind of ability, and grand views. Experienced skiers on the lookout for advanced slopes have the option of heli skiing – being taken by helicopter to otherwise inaccessible slopes, being air dropped and then hitting the slopes. The best time to go is between January and March, when a thick blanket of white covers the mountains.

Difficulty Challenging

Tips Choose a slope depending on your ability level and always stick to the trails.

Contact Gio Adventures (www.gio.in), Mercury Himalayan Explorations (www.mheadventures.com), Kashmir HeliSki (www.kashmirheliski.in)

(This page) Rock climbing is a highly technical sport; (facing page) Meghalaya has many famous cave systems that facilitate caving



ROCK CLIMBING AND BOULDERING

Where: Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, around Delhi

With India's diverse topography, rock climbing is possible in any part of the country with hills, mountains or rocks. The big walls of the Himalaya in the north offer climbing opportunities aplenty at both popular and little-known spots, such as Miyar Valley, Kinnaur, and Chatru. The granite rocks of Hampi in the south are set amidst the magnificent structures of the Vijayanagar Empire. Nearby, Badami's red sandstone cliffs and mighty boulders offer a chance to test your bare-hand bouldering prowess. Dhauj, near Delhi, with varying trails on quartzite rocks, is easy for a spot of weekend climbing.

Climbing is a technical sport and requires specialised knowledge of holds, knots, belaying techniques and safety measures. To really learn the ropes, sign up for a course at one of India's premier mountaineering schools, associated with the IMF (Indian Mountaineering Foundation). These include the Nehru Institute of Mountaineering at Uttarkashi, the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling, and the Jawahar Institute of Mountaineering in Pahalgam. As a beginner with no prior experience, try your hand on a climbing wall first to see if you have aptitude for rock climbing.

Difficulty Challenging

Tips: Proper climbing shoes, quality climbing ropes, harnesses and carabiners are required.

Contact: Girivihar (girivihar.org), Delhi Rock (delhirock.com)

CAVING (SPELUNKING)

Where: Meghalaya

A high level of rainfall has carved out an extensive system of caves in the soft limestone rock of Meghalaya. More than

1,200 caves form a network of over 300 kilometres, largely unexplored, across the Garo, Khasi, and Jaintia Hills of the state. Over thousands of years, the elements have carved out stalactites, stalagmites, and fantastical formations into the weathered rock. Caving involves crawling in cramped, dark spaces, walking through muddy and uneven underground passages, and occasionally wading, rappelling and climbing.

Some caves, such as Krem Mawsmai, are short in length, easy to manoeuvre and open to tourists of all abilities. Others, such as those in the Shnong Rim section of the Jaintia Hills, require the use of ropes, headlamps, and advanced techniques to navigate the vertical and horizontal passages. Many caves have waterways flowing through them, making them out of bounds in the monsoon, when they turn into rushing underground rivers. Even in the drier months from November to March, many caves require wading or swimming through water. Krem Umthloo and Chympe in the Jaintia Hills are advanced caves suited to the more adventurous, while Krem Mawmluh near Cherrapunjee is a relatively easier passage ideal for beginners.

Difficulty: Easy, moderate or challenging depending on the cave you choose

Tips: Always go with a reputed team, never alone. Avoid the activity if you are claustrophobic. Some caves require nylon ropes, harnesses, hard hats, etc.

Contact: Meghalaya Adventurers' Association, Kipepeo (kipepeo.in)

HIGH-ALTITUDE TREKS

Kashmir Great Lakes Alpine meadows interspersed with glassy high-altitude lakes. Glaciers mirrored in still waters. The 72-km Great Lakes trek in Kashmir takes eight days, is best between July and September, and delivers on all these

The frozen Zaskar river in Ladakh is the only way for locals to get to their villages in winter. The same route also makes for one of the most exciting treks in India



claims. The route begins at Sonamarg and goes through high-altitude passes, including the Nichnai Pass at 13,500 feet, and the Gadsar Pass at 13,750 feet. It winds through forests of maple and, as the name suggests, multiple gorgeous lakes, such as the Vishansar, Gadsar, and Gangabal.

Chadar The Zaskar river freezes over in winter, resulting in the formation of a thin sheet of ice, or a *chadar*, on its surface. For years, locals from the Zaskar Valley have traversed this fragile path, literally walking on thin ice, as it is the only connection to Ladakh. The nine-day Chadar trek, where temperatures are sometimes as low as -30°C , tests the strength of the mind more than that of the body. The best time to go is mid-January to the end of February.

Stok Kangri The 6,153-metre Stok Kangri peak is the highest in the Stok mountain range, Ladakh. July to September is the best time for this trail. There are varying routes to the Stok Kangri base camp, which is at an altitude of over 4,900 metres. The trek takes 10 or more days, crossing villages, high altitude passes, before beginning the ascent of the peak.

Dzongri and Goeche La The Kangchendzonga National Park in Sikkim is India's newest UNESCO World Heritage Site. Winding through this remote region is the Dzongri trail, and an extension goes onwards to Goeche La. Glacial lakes and vast tracts of forest make this a stunning, if challenging, route through the eastern Himalaya. There are views of mighty peaks, including Pandim and Kabru, and trees heavy with rhododendron blooms in the month of May.

Roopkund At 14,600 feet in the upper Himalaya of Uttarakhand sits the mysterious Roopkund lake. The six-day trek to reach this source of astounding stories goes through thick oak forests, past streams and lush *bugyals*, before crossing into alpine landscape. Many legends swirl around the lake, owing to the presence of skeletons in its depths.

Pin Parvati The 5,319-metre-high Pin Parvati Pass in Himachal Pradesh connects Parvati Valley to the Pin Valley in Spiti. The terrain is arduous and ever-changing: dense forests and expansive meadows, hot springs and glaciers, tracts of snow and icy peaks. The route goes from Khirganga to the high altitude Mantalai lake, and onwards to the Pin Parvati base camp at 4,450 metres before ascending the pass and crossing into Kaza in Spiti. Best between July and September.

Deo Tibba-Hampta Pass The 6,001-metre Deo Tibba peak sits in the Pir Panjal range within Himachal Pradesh. Starting near Manali, the nine-day trek goes through forests of oak and walnut, past alpine meadows to the Deo Tibba base camp. It then crosses Hampta Pass into the remote region of Lahaul. With views of vast snowfields and icy mountains, this is a route best done from June to October.

Difficulty Challenging

Tips Acclimatise gradually when in high altitude regions; stay hydrated; carry medication for AMS such as Diamox.

Contact Gio Adventures (www.gio.in), Red Panda, Trek the Himalayas (www.trekthehimalayas.com) ♦

Photography: SHUTTERSTOCK, GETTY IMAGES and ALAMY