



Gentle elegance: A sophisticated artist gives a performance of Odissi dance, the cultural pride of the Indian state of Orissa

Sanctity in the City of Temples

Sandip Hor visits a little-known gem — an ancient city with a culturally rich history and a proud heritage of magnificent religious architecture

BHUBANESWAR in eastern India is a city full of ancient temples, the architectural marvels of which provide a feast for anyone who has a passion for art and history.

Dating back more than 2000 years, the land then called Ekamra Kshetra had more than 7000 temples honouring the religious faith of the rulers of the day, the Kalinga emperors.

Over time the number has reduced significantly, but there are still more than enough to justify the title of "City of Temples".

The city has two quarters — the old, where all the imposing temples stand in a divine atmosphere of sanctity, and the newer additions, blueprinted by German architect Otto Koenigsberg when it became the capital of the state of Orissa, on the Bay of Bengal, during India's post-colonial independence period.

"The grandest and the largest of all is the thousand-year-old Lingaraja Temple; we shoot out there first," says Sukanta, the auto-rickshaw driver we have hired for the day.

He tells us most of city's holy spots are dedicated to Lord Shiva, the ash-smearing god of the Hindu pantheon, making Bhubaneswar an important pilgrimage destination.

As he rolls his three-wheeler through the tree-lined boulevards of the new city into the congested old, we are awestruck in a little world where modern aspirations meld neatly with an enduring past.

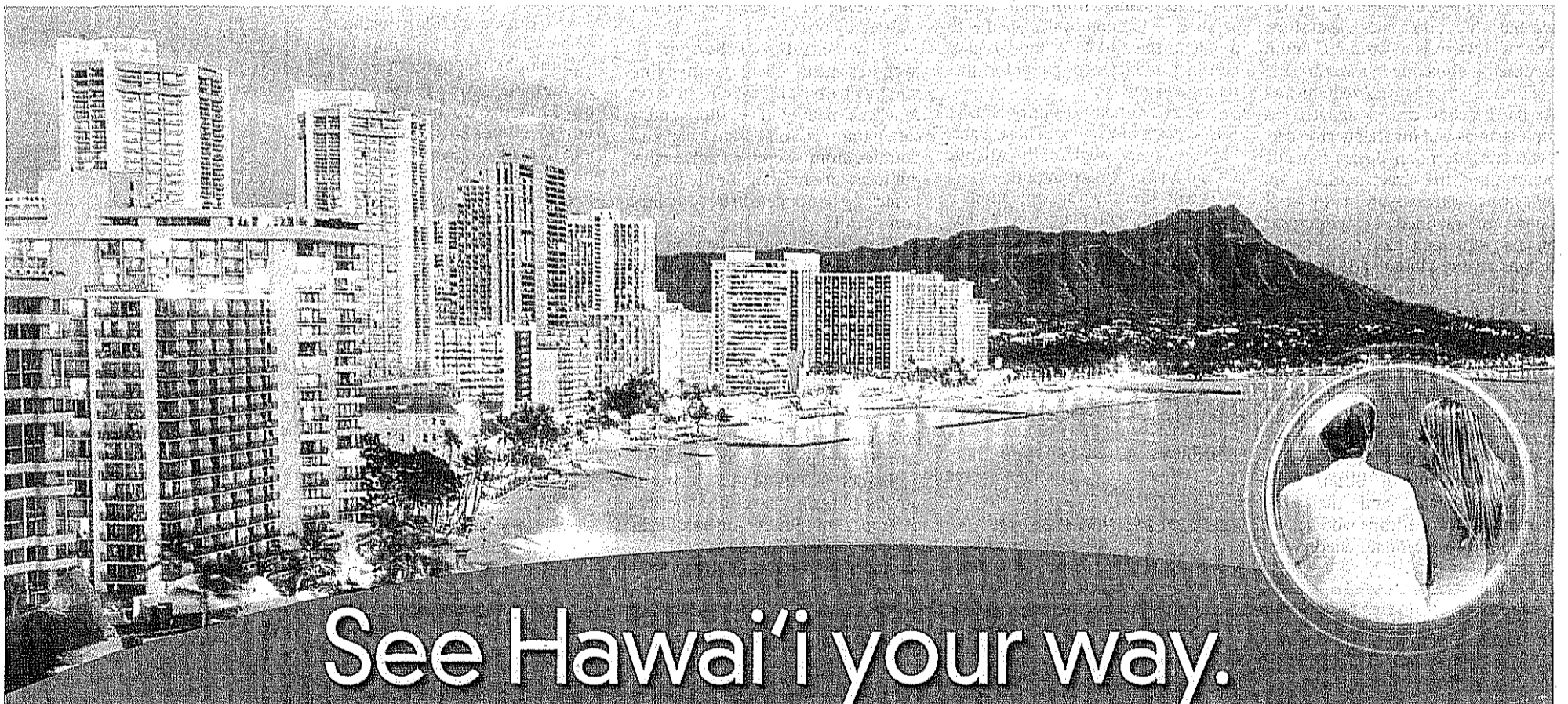
Trendy shopping malls, a magnet for India's fast-growing middle class, share a backdrop of soaring sandstone spires of ancient temples. Saffron-clad temple priests with their mobile phones speed off on Honda two-wheelers as a flashy Mercedes

passes a sculptured bull which, being Lord Shiva's traditional carrier, is accorded saintly status.

The sight of a colossal tower in the distance, basking in the golden morning sun, signals that we are nearing the Lingaraja Temple, on the banks of the Bindu Sagar Lake. A dip here is believed to purify the soul, so thousands of devotees visit this 11th-century-built shrine every day.

A deep sense of holiness surrounds you the moment you step inside. As waves of pilgrims enter or leave the temple we hear bells ringing, drums beating and holy people chanting mantras. The fragrance of burning incense sticks blends with the aroma from food stalls frying sweets and snacks as we weave through crowds bigger than we've ever seen before.

A typical Orissa temple usually consists of a deul (the spire which can be viewed from a distance), garbhagriha (the sanctum where the deity resides) and a jagmohana (a front porch where devotees gather). Some bigger temples have a natmandir (dancing hall) and bhog mandir (offering hall).



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