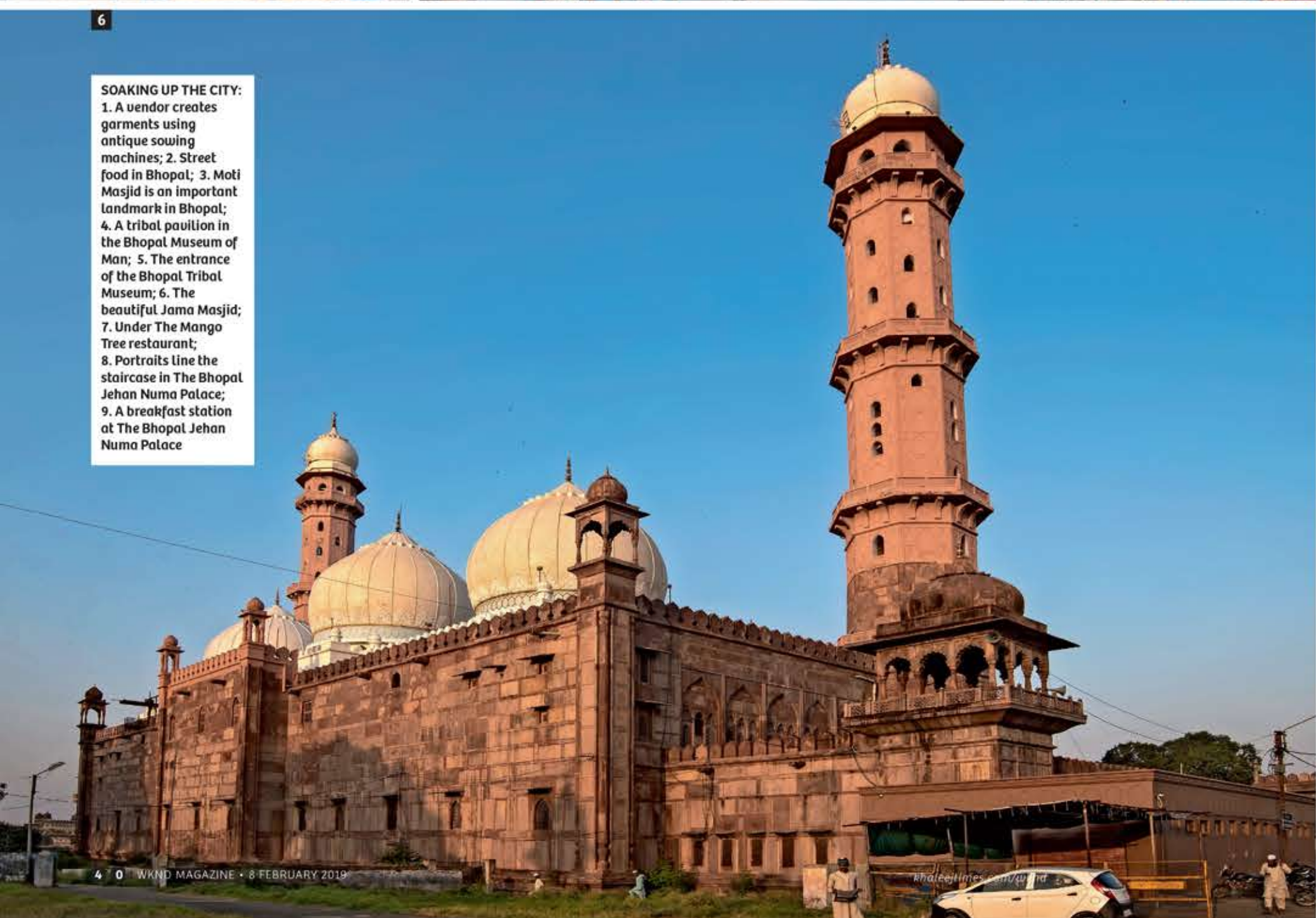
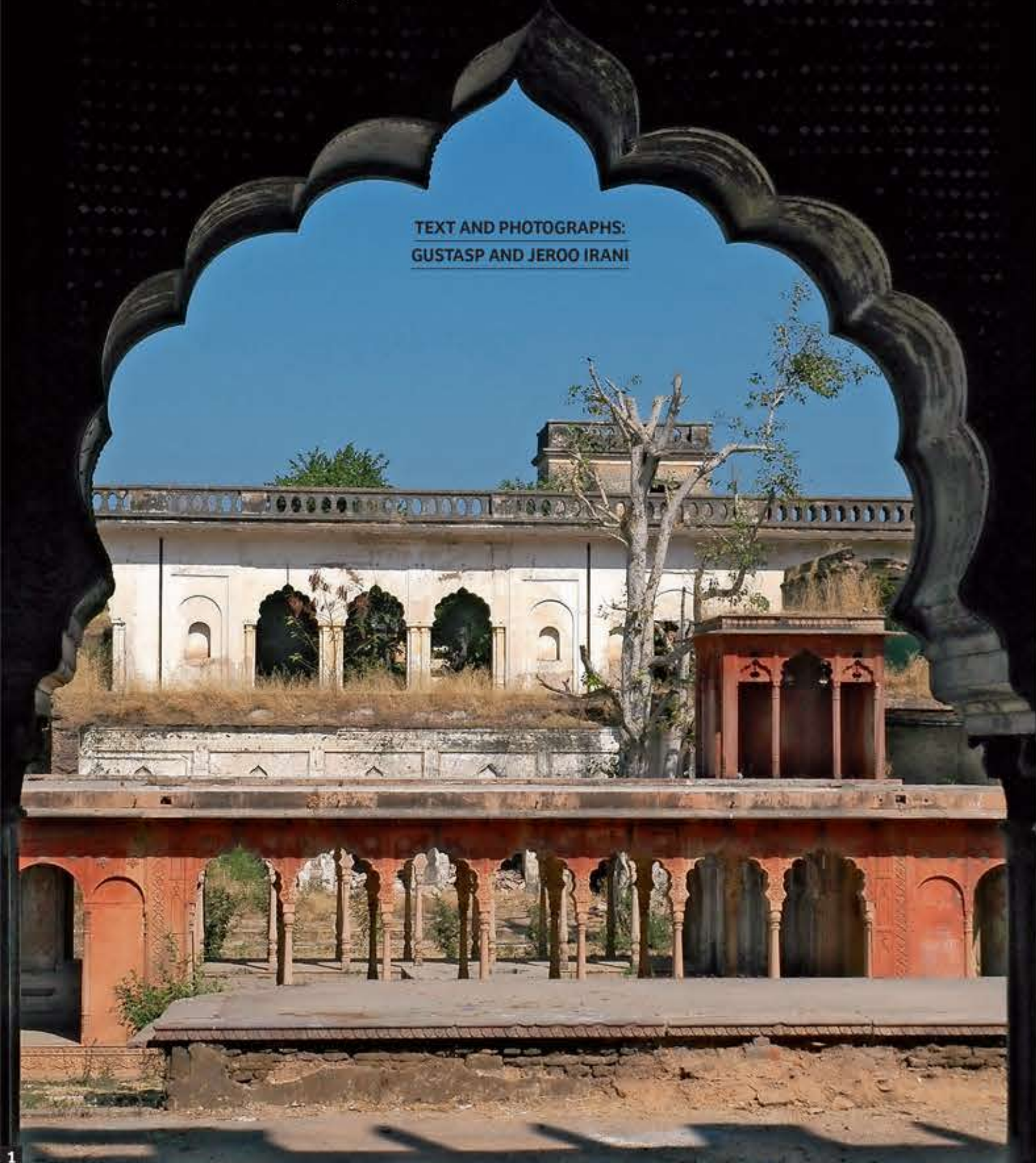


CITY OF BEGUMS

Bhopal, capital of the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, is often referred to as a "transit lounge", but now it's reinventing itself to showcase its rich past — most notably, the reigns of sword-wielding women who led armies into battle

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS:
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SOAKING UP THE CITY:
1. A vendor creates garments using antique sewing machines; 2. Street food in Bhopal; 3. Moti Masjid is an important landmark in Bhopal; 4. A tribal pavilion in the Bhopal Museum of Man; 5. The entrance of the Bhopal Tribal Museum; 6. The beautiful Jama Masjid; 7. Under The Mango Tree restaurant; 8. Portraits line the staircase in The Bhopal Jehan Numa Palace; 9. A breakfast station at The Bhopal Jehan Numa Palace

They were gutsy, many were gifted, many were comfortable in their own skins. The begums of Bhopal, who governed the former princely state in the heart of India from 1819 to 1926, were as swashbuckling as the founder of their dynasty, the formidable Dost Mohammad Khan, an Afghan soldier of fortune.

He founded his capital on the site of the 11th century city of Bhopal in 1707, little realising that over a century later, his dynasty would be taken over by sword-wielding women rulers who would lead their armies into battle, hunt, play polo... and were accomplished archers and lancers and also able administrators.

The shape of things to come was clearly visible when the first one, Qudsia Begum, cast aside her veil at her husband's post-death ceremony (some whispered he was assassinated) to announce that her 15-month-old daughter Sikandar would be the heir and she, the regent. Indeed, much later, the adult Sikandar survived a murderous attempt on her life, thanks to the fact that she was trained in the martial arts! Not surprisingly, she had been brought up to survive in a man's world.

Viewed against the backdrop of its warrior begums, Bhopal, one of the most attractive cities in India and the capital of Madhya Pradesh, took on a more fascinating hue. The begums left behind a formidable legacy of palaces (many are crumbling today), grand mosques, mansions, expanded an existing lake and gifted Bhopal a composite Hindu-Muslim culture which the locals call Ganga-Jamuna or *nawabi tehzeeb*. They introduced many administrative reforms too.

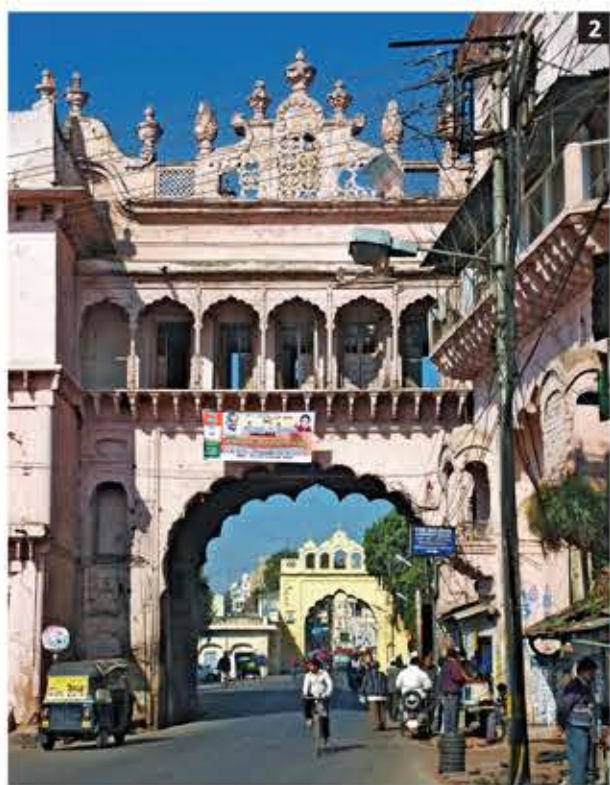
In the process, they created a city, cupped in the embrace of the Shamlia and Idgah Hills, that exudes feminine grace. Till recently, Bhopal was viewed through the prism of the gas tragedy of December 1984 and became a kind of transit lounge on the way to some place more interesting — the forested *Jungle Book* swaths of Madhya Pradesh. Today, this comely city, with its outstanding modern museums, is edging itself into the spotlight to take its place along with more fabled destinations like Agra, Jaipur and Udaipur.

Our sightseeing sorties were leisurely as befits a city whose pace is languid and measured like the clip-clopping of thor-



HISTORY COMES ALIVE:
A portrait of a begum in the lobby of the Jehan Numa Palace Hotel

oughbreds that trot down the riding track around the pretty Jehan Numa Palace Hotel in the morning. The pedigreed horses hark back to an era when the royal family was into horse breeding. The antiques-strewn palace boast gilded portraits and photographs of begums that stare down at you in the lobby and in the marbled corridors. Flowering creepers, blood-red bougainvillea and rose bushes, mango and jamun trees, and soaring palms embellish the lawns where white wrought-



CITY SIGHTS: 1. The Taj Mahal Palace ruins in Bhopal; 2. One of the many former palaces located along the city's streets; 3. A glimpse of the architectural marvels seen in the beautiful city

iron benches and tables make for cosy nooks to recline with a cup of tea and a book.

Built in 1890 by General Obaidullah Khan, commander-in-chief of the erstwhile Bhopal State Force and the second son of the Nawab Sultan Jehan Begum, the Jehan Numa Palace, after many twists and turns of fate, was imaginatively restored by grandsons Nadir and the late Yawar Rashid. The dapper former royal, Nadir, and his elegant wife Sonia recalled how the Jehan Numa was dilapidated when it was handed back to them by the Geological Survey of India; the main building was leaking, there were rocks in the rooms and buffaloes strolled across the once handsome lawns. Today, the younger generation and Gaurav Rege, the general manager, have steered the palace-hotel into the 21st century without impairing its spirit.

The Noor-Ul-Sabah is another palace that has been converted into a hotel; the 19th-century Gohar Mahal was recently restored and glows with leafy courtyards that are often the venue of lively exhibitions. The once-stunning Taj Mahal built by Nawab Shah Jehan Begum will soon be converted into a heritage property.

But the other palaces have not been as fortunate in terms of preservation. At the entrance to the lively Chowk, stand grand palaces that are now run-down: Shaukat Mahal was designed by a French architect and commissioned by the redoubtable Nawab Qudsia Begum as a wedding gift for her daughter Sikandar Begum. The once graceful Sadar Manzil, in whose spectacular Durbar Hall the Begums interacted with dignitaries of state, is a broken shell of its former self.

We saw Bhopal through a sepia-tinted haze as gossamer thin as the veils behind which the begums sometimes shielded themselves. The pink façade, majestic Taj-ul-Masjid, was inspired by the Jama Masjid in Delhi and the Badshahi Mosque of Lahore. With its three marble domes topped with golden spires and flanked by two 18-storey high octagonal minarets, the edifice is awesome. We loved the way the domes and minarets of the Taj-ul-Masjid and the marble-faced Moti Masjid traced delicate arabesques against the sky.

And romance is tangible in the clamorous Chowk Bazaar in the old city where everything is available from clothes, jewellery, trinkets, flowers and spices to exquisite *zardozi* (embroidery) work and beaded *batus* (purses). There, the smell of commerce mingles with the aroma of mutton kebabs and mutton korma sizzling in open-air kitchens in the evenings. Other not-to-be-missed experiences in the neighbourhood are the Sulemani *chai* (a salty-sweet tea with cream — different from Sulemani *chai* elsewhere) poured from a vintage *samovar* (urn), and tea from Raju Tea Stall brewed with dollops of condensed milk with a side of *khoya*-stuffed *jalebi*.

After our hectic forays, we revelled in the tranquillity of the Jehan Numa Retreat, on the edge of Van Vihar, a leafy zoological park flanked by Bhopal's limpid Upper Lake. The faux rustic getaway, which snuggles in a forested glade, on the outskirts of Bhopal, is fringed by lush foliage and pink fountain grass. As we savoured romantic dinners by the light of paraffin lamps in the open-sided Under The Jamun Tree restaurant, we thought we saw a jungle cat pad past us in the dark and woke up next morning to the sight of a strutting peacock. That was an amazing overture to the next leg of our journey into Mowgli's domain! **W**

Fact File
Bhopal is well connected by air, road and rail. In terms of accommodation, the Jehan Numa Palace hotel is at the top of the heap, while moderate and budget options are also available.
For more information, visit: www.mptourism.com and www.jehannuma.com

