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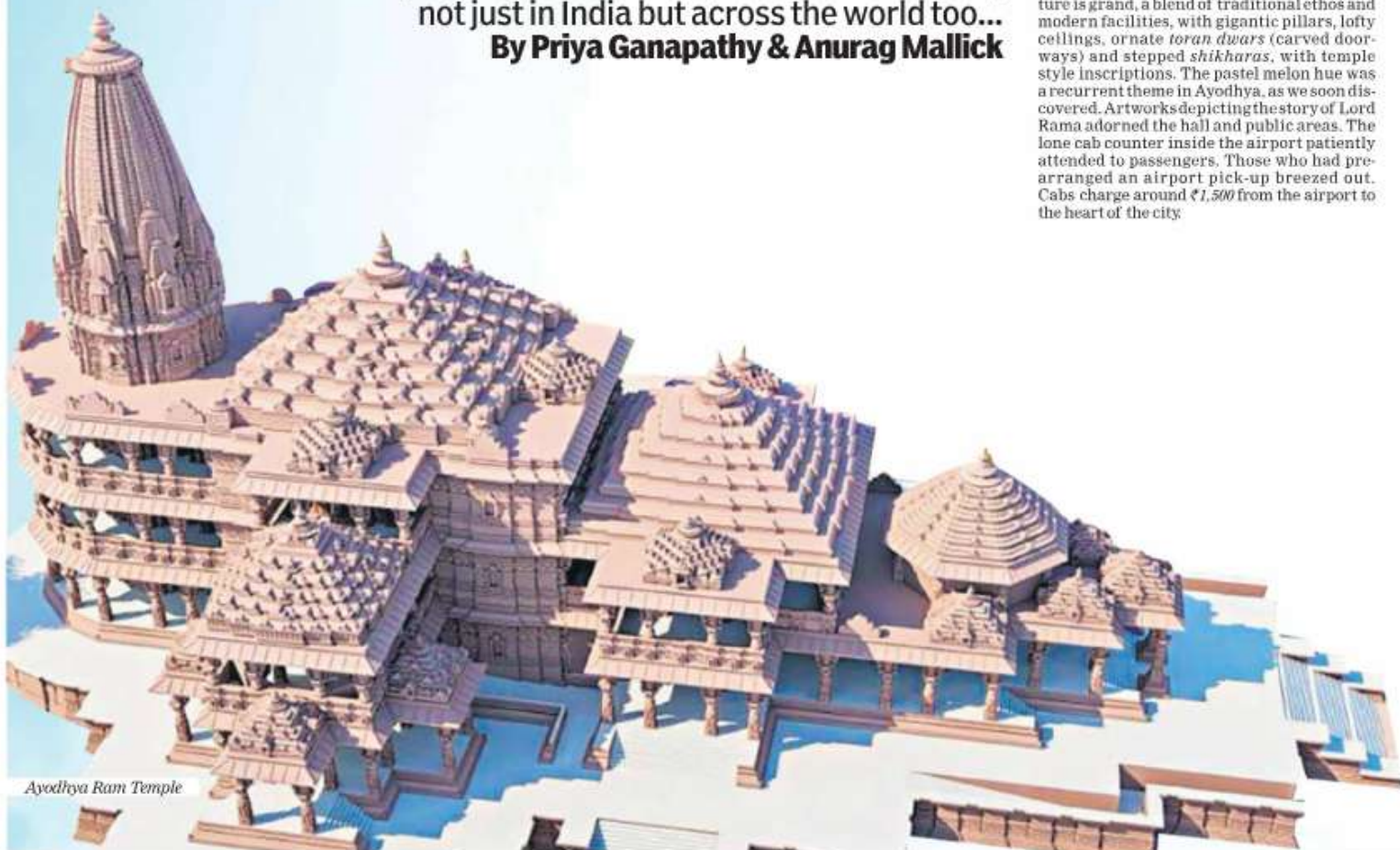
ALLEYES ON AYODHYA

A brand new airport, several new trains, river cruise services and so much more — Ayodhya has received a mega tourism face-lift to become one of the most popular and revered spiritual destinations, not just in India but across the world too...

By Priya Ganapathy & Anurag Mallick

THE AIR INDIA Express flight circled interminably in the air above Ayodhya like an amnesiac Jatayu or a *Pushpaka Vimana* that had lost its bearings. The flight was already late by 50 minutes and we wondered if we'd run out of fuel, when the air hostess announced, "due to some technical difficulty, the flight might be redirected to Jaipur." The passengers let out a collective groan and clicked their tongues in disapproval. As the murmurs died down, someone from the back yelled, 'Jai Sri Ram.' There was stunned silence before it was met with an enthusiastic roar from others, 'Jai Jai Sri Ram.' This went on for a bit. Then out of the blue, the air hostess' voice crackled on the radio. "We have good news. We're landing in Ayodhya in five minutes!" The passengers let out a loud cheer that could have drowned out the ruckus students made on the last day of school before vacation. Call it divine intervention or pure luck, but the chants were still resounding as the wheels hit the tarmac. Welcome to Ayodhya!

After the pran pratishtha of Lord Ram's idol and the formal opening of the grand *Ram Janmabhoomi Temple* on January 22, all roads and flight paths seem headed to Ayodhya. The holy city has received a mega tourism face-lift with a brand new *Ayodhya Dham Railway Station* and *Maharishi Valmiki International Airport*. The new state-of-the-art airport is named after the sage Valmiki, the author of the great epic, *Ramayana*. Designed by architects Vipul B Varshneya and Harsh Varshneya of Sthapati, the airport's architecture is grand, a blend of traditional ethos and modern facilities, with gigantic pillars, lofty ceilings, ornate *toran dwars* (carved doorways) and stepped *shikharas*, with temple style inscriptions. The pastel melon hue was a recurrent theme in Ayodhya, as we soon discovered. Artworks depicting the story of Lord Rama adorned the hall and public areas. The lone cab counter inside the airport patiently attended to passengers. Those who had pre-arranged an airport pick-up breezed out. Cabs charge around ₹1,500 from the airport to the heart of the city.



Ayodhya Ram Temple



TEMPLE Trail

travel/heritage

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Sarayu Aarti



Guptar Ghat



Hanuman Gathi



Ayodhya City



Bati-Chokha



The arterial pathways from *Lata Mangeshkar Chowk* to *Ayodhya Dham*, *Dharam Path* and *Ram Path* have been widened and shop fronts given a uniform façade similar to the heritage redevelopment in Amritsar, Jaipur and Old Delhi. From rooftops to roadside stalls, everywhere Lord Ram pennants and the familiar flash of saffron waved in the air. A trip to the holy city must customarily begin with a visit to *Hanuman Garhi*, a fortified temple complex dedicated to Lord Hanuman, believed to be the protector of Ayodhya. Shops are stacked with sweets like *laddus*, *pedas* and the Ayodhya special, *khurchan malai peda*, besides religious paraphernalia. Little kids offer to print *Jai Sri Ram* tilaks on the forehead of visitors for a small fee. Our tilaks in place, we walked up the flight of 76 steps to the Hanuman Temple bedecked with flowers. Negotiating the streets was like wading through a sea of humanity. Months after the opening, Ayodhya still sees around two lakh visitors a day and the wave does not seem to abate anytime soon.

On the short walk to *Sri Ram Janmabhoomi Temple*, we met a bunch of boys who had cycled all the way from Assam. Another group had

shrines dedicated to Ram's *kuldevi* (family deity) *Devkali* and Sita's *kuldevi Chhoti Devkali*. Another temple commemorates *Bharat Milap* or Ram's reunion with his brother Bharat. *Nageshwar Nath* is an ancient Shiva temple believed to have been built by Kush, Lord Ram's son. Legend has it that Kush once lost his armet while taking a bath in the River Sarayu and it was retrieved by a *Nag-Kanya* (serpent maiden) who fell in love with him. Since she was a devotee of Shiva, Kush built this shrine for her. It was the only temple to survive when Ayodhya was abandoned until the time of King Vikramaditya. While the rest of the city was in ruin and covered in dense forest, King Vikramaditya recognised the sacred city by this temple.

The Sarayu riverfront wears a new look. The most decorated spot is *Ram ki Paldi*, where Lord Ram took his ritual bath in the Sarayu. A dip before sunrise here is equivalent to the merit of visiting all other *tirthas*. It holds the *Guinness World Record* for lighting the largest number of *diyas* (oil lamps) at the *Ayodhya Deepotsav* during Diwali. Every evening at 5.45 pm, visitors can witness the beautiful sarayu *aarti* ritual at *Naya Ghat*. An army of *safai mitras* or cleaning staff work round the clock to keep the *ghats* and the city clean. Evenings are also great for a bite of *bun maska* and tea at *Bhanu Tea Stall* and *Gabbar's Pakode*. At *Ayodhya Haat*, the River Sarayu has been diverted through newly made *ghats* with pre-fabricated luxury cottages on one side and an upcoming food court on the other. The *Jatayu Cruise* on the River Sarayu is a unique riverine exploration of Ayodhya. The 45 feet long two-storeyed, air-conditioned cruise ship can accommodate 70 passengers and does four two-hour round trips a day (4.30 am, 11 am, 4 pm and 6 pm — costing ₹300 per person), covering 18 km from *Naya Ghat* to *Guptar Ghat* and back. Another cruise service called *Garud*, will be launched soon.



Kanak Bhawan

biked in from Bengal. From Andhra to Karnataka and Haridwar to Himachal, we encountered people from every corner of India. Some pilgrims were doing *dandavat* (ritual prostration), as they crawled forward to the shrine. Others came dressed like characters from the *Ramayana*. Security was tight with lots of police personnel and barricades everywhere, though the queues were orderly. Lockers are available for visitors to deposit phones, shoes and personal belongings before they amble to the main shrine. The all too familiar chants of, 'Jai Sri Ram,' got louder. The idol of *Ram Lalla* was indeed stunning. The cops and temple staff had to keep the crowd moving to avoid a pile-up, as they stood mesmerised by the idol's beauty. The entire operation of *Ram Mandir darshan* took under two hours.

E-buses ply locally, though the best way to get around the crowded bylanes is e-rickshaws. Not far from the *Ram Temple*, *Dashrath Bhawan* is regarded as the original residence of Lord Ram's father King Dashrath while *Kanak Bhawan* was a wedding gift to Sita by Queen Kaikeyi after her marriage to Lord Ram. There are

Located at the banks of the Sarayu or Ghagra near Ayodhya Cantonment, *Guptar Ghat* is a corruption of *Gopratar Ghat*. According to sage Vyasa, at the end of his *leela* or time on earth, Lord Ram became *antardhyan* (immersed) in the River Sarayu, along with his subjects and all living creatures. Animals, birds, bugs, insects — the sacred site that provides salvation to all was called *Gopratar Ghat* — explained priest Pramod Tiwary. The temples here are 550 years old and boats offer a leisurely jaunt along the river. The *ghats* are lit up at night and there are numerous food stalls serving tea, *dal vada* and the local staple, *bati-chokha*.

While in Ayodhya, don't miss the *kulhad dahi jalebi* at *Maurya Mishthan Bhandar*, *Ramji's Samosa* near *Avadh University*, *Mahaveer ki Tikiya* near *Rikabganj*, *Moti Samosa* in *Faizabad* and *Madhur Sweets* at *Chowk*. There's also Lucknowi-style *biryani*, *galouti kebab* and *ultra tawe ka paratha* at *Have More Kitchen*. Yes, you heard it right. Interestingly, while Ayodhya Dham is pure vegetarian, its twin city Faizabad is non-vegetarian with most hotels like *Krinoscco*, *Shane Avadh*, *Krishna Palace* serving both veg and non-veg.

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