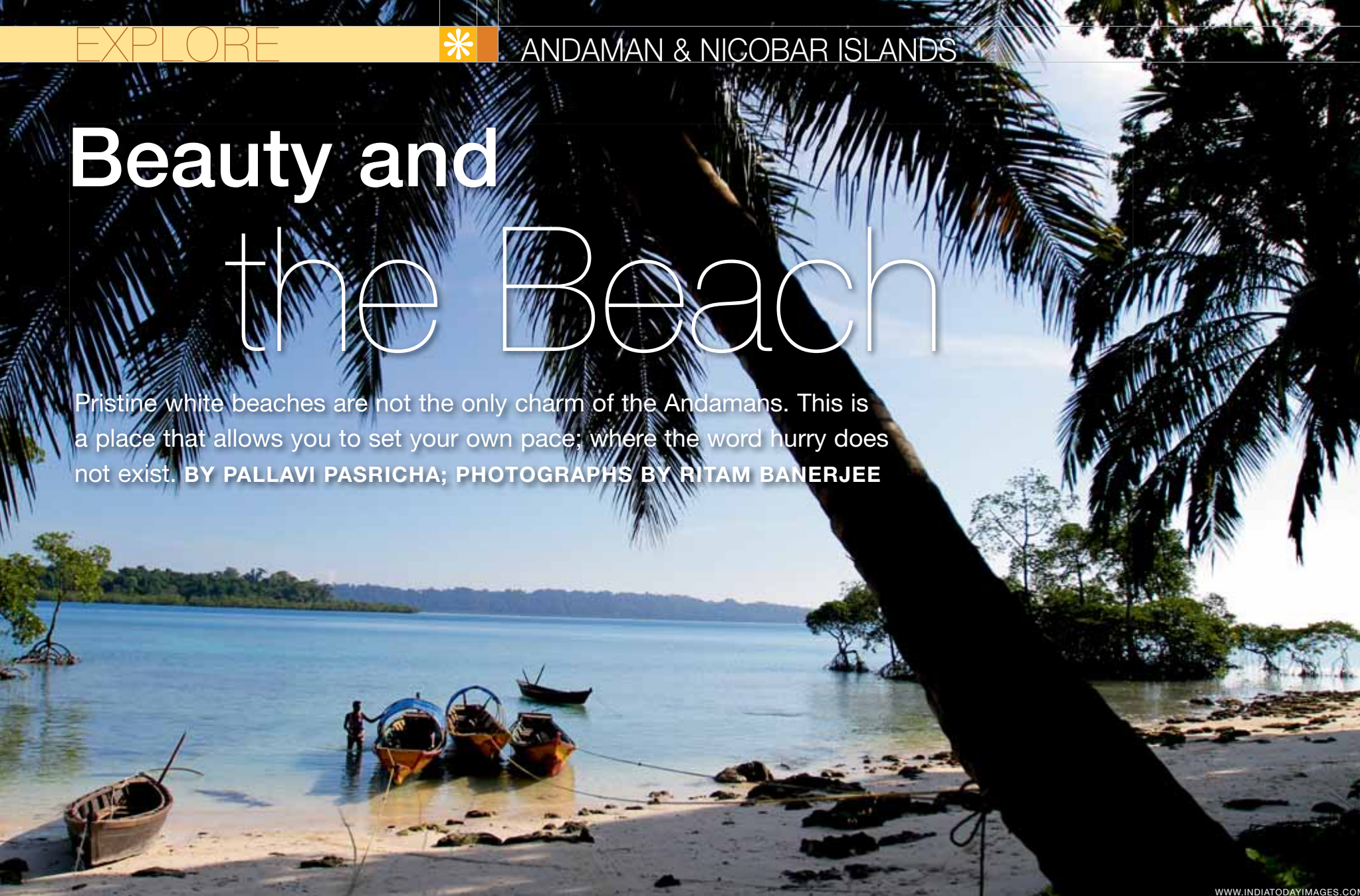




Beauty and the Beach

Pristine white beaches are not the only charm of the Andamans. This is a place that allows you to set your own pace; where the word hurry does not exist. **BY PALLAVI PASRICHA; PHOTOGRAPHS BY RITAM BANERJEE**



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CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW *Sunset at Radhanagar, one of the prettiest beaches in the country; Swapan shows off the catch of the day; Mangroves at Havelock; wooden boats at Govindnagar beach; going for snorkelling close to Elephant Beach*





PLEASE BE A LITTLE careful madam, there is a tsunami red alert," Amit, our tour guide, tells us. The Rum and Coke I'm drinking, sitting next to the sea, spurt out of my mouth.

"Tsunami? And what do you mean by saying be a bit careful?" He says, "Please don't lock your rooms at night, in case you have to run out." Does he actually expect me to run helter-skelter in my night clothes dodging the tsunami waves? To make matters worse I realise that my room is closest to the sea. Panic. Nervousness. Surprise. Excitement. I experience it all in five minutes. This is certainly not what I had expected during my trip to the Andamans. It's only our second evening here, and Havelock Island already has me captivated.

I quickly force my thoughts away from the tsunami alert and refocus on the magical beaches around me. There is such a sense of calm that it is difficult to worry for long. Radhanagar is the first beach we go to after we arrive in Havelock. I have heard a lot about it, but nothing could have prepared me for what I see. Pure white sand, fringed with mangroves, crystal clear green and blue water merging with the horizon—it is stunning. I have no doubt about why *Time* magazine rated it among the most gorgeous beaches in Asia. There is not a shack in sight or a vendor pestering you to buy something. People here just let you be. I enjoy watching the sun go home. The graying sky and darkening clouds give a surreal effect. The fine sands are full of intricate designs created by the crabs, it almost seems like artwork done on the sand. Every five steps I also pick up colourful shells of different patterns that lie scattered around and make a collection of my own.

By 5.30 p.m it is pitch dark and we have an entire evening in front of us. We go to the local market—Village Number 3—and browse around till we find a shack called Swapan's Restaurant. Interestingly, all the beaches and villages here are numbered because the British found it too tough to pronounce the traditional names. It's a tiny place with just a couple of benches and tables. Swapan tempts us, a hungry lot, by showing the catch of the day—a huge crab and lobster, and promises to cook it just the way the locals have it. We are back after an hour to have the yummiest crab with rice. While we gorge, he chats with us and tells us that he runs it as a restaurant during the peak tourist season from October to February and sells samosas and tea for the rest of the year. A wall is covered with comments by people who had come and eaten his food. It's nice to meet the locals and eat the way they eat. Who needs a fancy restaurant when there is food like this?

Havelock is a lot like south Goa, with narrow roads and fields on either side, small shacks and villages sprinkled around the island. Though, I find the absence of street lights and signages rather strange. Most of the settlers are from West Bengal, and as a result Bengali is the locally spoken language. Walking through the market I notice there are carom boards outside many shops. It is the most popular pastime and there are regular carom competitions among the people. Life here moves in slow motion, allowing you to set your own easy pace.

Elephant Beach is next in line. It's a 40-minute ride and we take the glass bottom boat and see a variety of coral



CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW *Tree stumps in the water provide a dramatic setting against the blue sea; spotting corals is easy in the sparkling blue waters; Havelock is lined with stunning white beaches; crabs hidden in the white sand come out occasionally*





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Typical Andamanese huts are dotted on the way to the limestone caves in Baratang Island; swimming and floating in the ocean; the jetty at Havelock

reefs and fish on the way. The water is sparkling, enabling us to see them absolutely clearly. This is one of the best places in India to see corals and even though many of them were destroyed by the tsunami, they still look stunning. The shoreline was badly affected by the tsunami but the tree stumps in the water provide a dramatic backdrop against the blue sea. We walk into the water and sit on one of the branches, staring at the pebbles and sand below, watching schools of fish go by and testing our photography skills. The hours pass by in minutes and finally it is time to go snorkelling. I have never done this. To tell you the truth, I don't even know how to swim, but I am determined to give it a shot. Amit has convinced me that it is absolutely safe, even for non-swimmers. I put on the mask and he holds my hand and takes me to another world. A world I am unfamiliar with. He says, "Please look down, the corals have started." I dip my head under the sea and watch the corals, some huge in size and some smaller, but all breathtaking. Colourful fish pass by me and Amit keeps telling me names, but I am too fascinated to register or remember them. After 15 minutes when I surface out, I make a new resolve—to learn swimming and explore more of this fascinating undersea world. I suddenly feel jealous of all the swimmers and scuba divers as they are aware of the mysteries of a world I know little about.

F.Y.I

SCUBA DIVING IN ANDAMAS

The Andaman islands are among the top diving spots in the country. Clinique Island and Havelock in south Andaman are the most popular places to experience life under water. The Mahatma Gandhi Marine National Park at Wandoor also has many spots where you can go scuba diving. There are more than 50 types of coral reefs that can be spotted here.

We are starving so when we get back we have lunch at one of the shacks in Village Number 2 just opposite the jetty. Here we meet yet another interesting person. The owner of the shop came here from Kolkata after he read a novel on Andamans, and decided to stay back. Since then he has been running a tea stall/shack. A simple meal of Bhetki fish, rice and two vegetables costs me just ₹75. As they say some things in life are still reasonable.

We are all packed to go to Port Blair when we spot a local repairing his wooden boat at the lagoon at our resort—Sea Shell Resort. With more than two hours to kill before we make our journey, we ask him if he'll take us for a short round—it seems we just cannot have enough of the sea. He agrees instantly and two of us jump into his rickety boat. Passing the mangroves, we move ahead and reach a clear, sparkling stretch of water, which is again abounding with fish and corals.

The next three to four days are spent in visiting various islands around Port Blair—Ross Island, Viper Island, Coral Island and Mount Harriet. Each of them is unique in its own way, but I am looking forward to going to Baratang—an island in middle Andaman, about



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the promise of returning later with biscuits. Regretfully, it is time to go home. As I get ready to board the charter flight to Bangalore, that was part of the package by MakeMyTrip, I remember what Amit told me when we arrived by the same flight, "If you stay here for a month, you won't feel like going back." I was there for just a week, but still did not want to leave. I want to stay back; to learn swimming, to go diving, but most importantly because this is a place where people just let you be and where the word hurry does not exist. ●



100 km away from Port Blair. A part of the drive is through the forest reserve area of the Jarawa tribe, one of the few tribes remaining on this island. The Jarawas belong to the Negrito race, and are believed to be descendents from Africa. Only 250 to 300 of them remain now. They had virtually no contact with those from outside for a long time, but the Great Andaman Trunk Road which connects the south and north cuts through this reserve area and is considered one of the greatest threats to their way of life because it is exposing them to civilization. Many of them come out on the road and try to stop cars, asking for food and other things. I'm stumped to see one standing on the road. The man, wearing just bare, essential clothing, is carrying a long stick and has a headband with red flowers. As we go along, we pass many others. Not all are minimally dressed. Vehicles are not allowed to stop there or speak to them, but cars do slow down and that is when the Jarawas come forward to ask for things. Seeing them in photographs is one thing, but when you encounter them in person, it's an entirely different experience. It is goosebumpy, and takes your mind back to what life must have been centuries ago. We visit the limestone caves and pass through lush mangroves on the way. On our way back one of the tribesmen latches on to the car and asks for biscuits. He looks at the camera kept on the side and asks for it. The driver refuses and urges him to get off with

FACTFILE

GETTING THERE

MakeMyTrip runs packages that include charter flights from Bangalore to Port Blair from October to February. The tour is priced at ₹27,999 per person.

WHEN TO GO

October to February.

PLUS SAYS

STAY

►TSG Emerald View: 25 Maulana Azad Road, Phoenix Bay, Port Blair; tel: (03192) 246 499; www.andamantsghotels.com

►SeaShell Beach Resort: Village No 2, Govindnagar Beach, Havelock; tel: (0) 99332 39625; www.seashellhavelock.com

EAT

Seafood at Swapan's restaurant in Havelock.

SHOP

Pick up coir products from Sagarika Emporium in Port Blair.

SEE

Jolly Buoy Island and Red Skin Island at Wandoor.