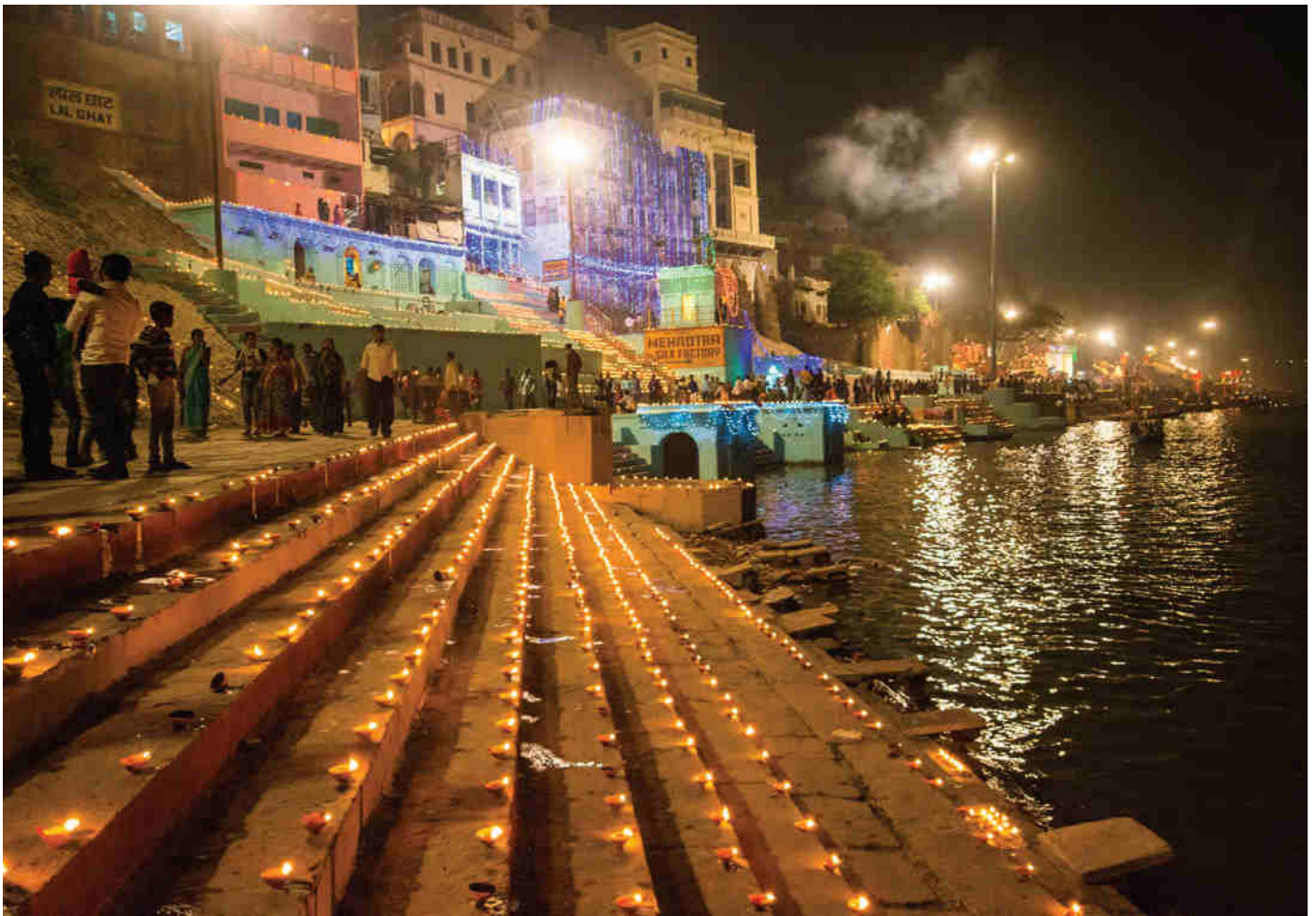


Call it Kashi, Banaras, or Varanasi. Add Mark Twain's famous adage about its history, tradition, and age. Whether one visits for salvation or, like us, for curiosity, it takes only a few steps into this revered city to reaffirm its legends. To not have visited Varanasi even once, is to have missed out on a slice of life itself. And what better time to experience its magic than the exuberant Dev Deepawali festival.

VARANASI

Where Time Stands Still

KUNAL BHATIA & SHUVAJIT PAYNE



The first rays of the sun have barely touched the horizon, but the air is already thick with a heady mix of incense and bells. We are standing at Assi Ghat, right at the crack of dawn, watching the priests blow conch shells, wave *agarbattis*, and rhythmically sway brass lamps, while chants echo all around. It's a ritual that has been performed countless times over centuries, in myriad forms, across the dozens of *ghats* that line the Ganga here. We are in Varanasi, India's spiritual heart, where devotion is not only a momentary practice but a constant pulse that flows through the city's soul.

City of the Gods

Considered to be the abode of Lord Shiva, Varanasi is home to numerous temples and sites of religious significance from across the Hindu pantheon. Chief amongst them is Kashi Vishwanath, a shrine believed to be the foremost of the twelve *Jyotirlingas*. Tens of thousands seek blessings here each day, yet it's possible to find moments unperturbed by the rush. We discover joy in the infectious energy that hums through the air, in the faith

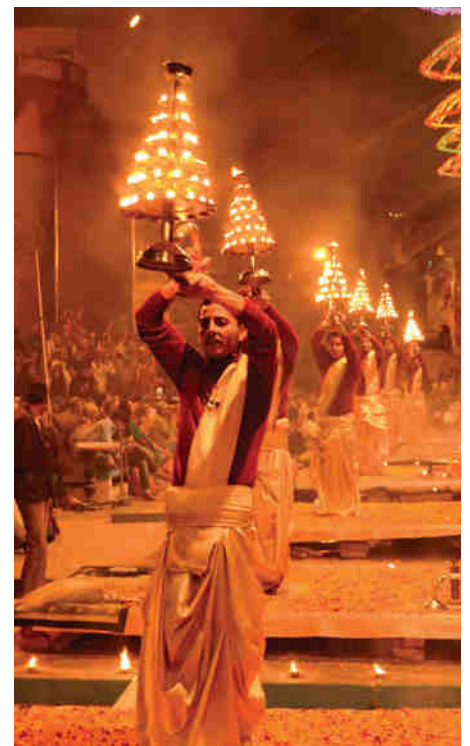
that binds devotees across languages, and in the act of surrendering to a greater power.

On auspicious occasions such as Dev Deepawali (on 5 November 2025), when crowds swell, this sacred energy only heightens. Marking the victory of Lord Shiva over the demon Tripurasura, the festival is celebrated annually fifteen days after Diwali. It's said that the gods themselves descend onto Earth during this full-moon night, and the residents of Kashi welcome them by transforming the riverfront into a cosmic spectacle. The winding alleys are adorned with *rangolis* and the *ghats*

Top and Bottom

The ghats come alive on Dev Deepawali

A scene from the spiritually charged evening aarti



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are lit with thousands of flickering *diyas*, their flames reflected in the Ganga's waters and in the eyes of the faithful.

While fireworks and laser shows have been added to the festivities, the highlight remains the spiritually-charged evening *arti* at the Dashashwamedh Ghat. The ardent chanting, unwavering devoutness, and sense of belonging leave a lasting impression for days to come.

Art as Devotion

But Varanasi is much more than just temples and rituals. With a recorded history dating back thousands of years, several crafts flourished alongside spirituality. Some of these, such as the weaving of the Banarasi saree, are relatively well known even if in dire need of continued patronage.



Wandering through the labyrinthine lanes of the Ghasi Tola neighbourhood, we encounter artisans skilfully creating delicate pieces of colourful jewellery and other collectables. This is the GI-tagged craft of *Gulabi Meenakari*, in which hand-painted designs on metallic



Clockwise from Top
Varanasi's streets are filled with stalls selling a wide variety of mouth-watering fare

The city is known for its rich culture, with Hindustani Classical music and dance performances regularly staged here

No visit to Varanasi would be complete without admiring its famous sarees

surfaces and powdered enamels are fired in a kiln, to fashion stunning pieces with a characteristic pink hue.

Like these precious handcrafted skills, Varanasi also has a long legacy of music and dance, linked specifically to the Banaras *gharana* and overall to the Hindustani Classical heritage. Staying at Kashi Parampara, a restored house in the old city, we awaken each morning to the melodious tunes of a flautist, before embarking on a peaceful boat ride on the Ganga accompanied by tabla and sitar players, and catching a spellbinding Kathak performance in the hotel's courtyard by night. We are pleased to discover that many of these musicians and performers are students in the departments of music and dance at the Banaras Hindu University (BHU), an encouraging sign of traditions being carried forward to the present day.



galleries of stone sculptures, miniature paintings, and *objets d'art*. Each piece is a testimony to the skills of its creator, be it an artisan or—as in the case of the sundials at Jantar Mantar, an observatory built by Maharaja Jai Singh II. These Ganga-facing astronomical instruments have been measuring the sun and celestial bodies ever since they were built in 1737 CE at Man Mandir Ghat. Their presence sums up the beautiful dichotomy of Varanasi. It's a place where each step reminds us that faith and science, ritual and reason, can coexist. Whether in the piety of shrines or the dedication of artisans, the city holds still all who set foot in it, long enough for time itself to dissolve into eternity ●

When to Go From late October to early March, when Varanasi boasts the best weather and hosts several prominent festivals

Where to Stay jüSTa Kashi Parampara is a boutique stay with a luxe-homely charm, within walking distance of Assi Ghat. There are other stay options across all segments.

What to Eat Street food is the go-to, be it for breakfast or dinner. Get *kachori* and *sabzi* at Prasadhh Chachi ki Dukaan, Pahalwan Lassi topped with *mawa* and dry fruit, and melt-in-your-mouth *paan* from Keshav Tambul Bhandar.

Harmony in Duality

This adherence to art and craft is also mirrored in the splendid collection of Bharat Kala Bhawan, a sprawling museum on the grounds of BHU. We were left mesmerised while visiting its