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1. Devotees
taking a dip in
the waters of
River Kshipra
in Ujjain

2. Evening aarti
being held by
the river bank
in Ujjain

THE DIVINE TRILOGY

Spirituality and architectural splendour blend seamlessly in Ujjain, Maheshwar and Omkareshwar in Madhya Pradesh. Punita Malhotra takes us on a tour

graceful *ghats*. Since antiquity, several religions have thrived here, but one incarnation of the divine has been specially venerated, Lord Shiva. Let's take a temple trail, especially dedicated to the lord, in a land nurtured by the holiest of India's rivers, Narmada.

Ujjain: City of temples

The schooling ground for Lord Krishna, Balarama and Sudama, capital of the vast Gupta empire and one of the host cities for the Kumbh Mela – Ujjain was destined for adulation, even before poet Kalidasa started waxing eloquent verses about its glory in the 5th century. An aura of faded splendour still hangs over one of India's seven most sacred cities located on the eastern bank of River Kshipra. And this is where we decided to embark on our spiritual journey from.

The city's most sacred temple, Mahakaleshwar, on banks of the Rudra Sagar Lake, is a *swayambhu* (self born) *gyotirlinga* (a devotional shrine of Lord Shiva) in Madhya Pradesh. It flaunts Maratha, Bhumiya and Chalukya styles of structural design and an imposing *shikhar* (spire) soaring into the skies. We lost track of time admiring its elaborate motifs, pillared porches, sculpture-adorned walls and a spacious courtyard dotted with remnants of time-worn shrines. As part of the *Bhasma aarti* ceremony, the *lingam* (an abstract representation of the deity) is smeared with hot ash from cremation grounds, suggesting the circle of life and death, an inseparable part of the Hindu mythology. Mahashivratri and Vijay Dashami are the best occasions to soak in the temple's magic.

Embedded in the blessed surrounds of wild forests, untouched mountains and divine rivers, Madhya Pradesh has a long, unbroken chronology of habitation. A fascinating timeline stretching from the fragmented movement of Gondwana continent 100 million years ago and the region's Gond tribe settlement to 14 great dynasties (from Mauryas and Mughals to Marathas) – leftovers of many legacies are strewn across its fabulous forts, remote ruins, temple towns, sacred shrines and

Among other prominent temples of Ujjain, the Kal Bhairav Temple, the Bade Ganeshji Temple with one of the biggest idols in the country, the Chintaman Ganesh Temple with a Swayambhu idol and the Harsidhi Mata Temple are the most revered.

Maheshwar: Abode of Lord Mahesh

Exalted as a mini-Varanasi, our next pilgrimage site, located along the banks of River Narmada, wooed us with irresistible charm. Mentioned as 'Mahishmati' in the



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1. A devotee offering prayers to the statue of Nandi, Lord Shiva's mount, in Maheshwar

2. The majestic Maheshwar Fort takes pride of place on the banks of River Narmada

3. The Akhileshwar temple



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In & Around

>> Ujjain is approximately 50 km away from Indore. It takes about an hour by road.

>> Maheshwar is around 100 km away from Indore and Omkareshwar is 77 km away. The roads are smooth and a trip in this season is a splendid experience.

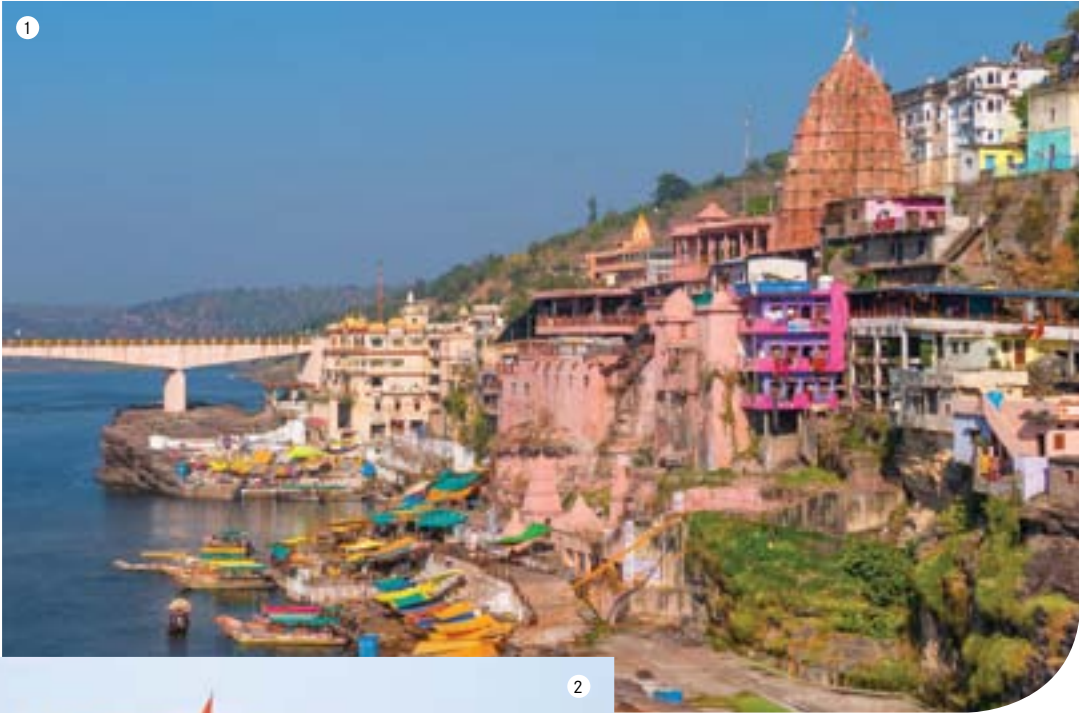
Hindu epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, Maheshwar used to be the capital of King Sahasrarjun, who is said to have stopped the river with a thousand arms to create a playground for his 500 wives. Panning the vistas from its glorious *ghat*-facing Ahilya Fort in golden sandstone, we flash-backed to its Mughal origins and reconstruction by Rani Ahilyabai Holkar during her 18th-century reign. It was surreal, observing locals partake in the daily rituals – morning dip, lighting of *ghee* (clarified butter) lamps at dusk and offering flowers and milk to the river. Some places spell timelessness and Maheshwar is one of those, we realised as we stared at the spectacular sunset against the liquid gold of the Narmada.

Of the hundred ancient temples of Lord Shiva here, the most well-known is the Baneshwar Mahadev, taking pride of place in the middle of the Narmada, and accessed by a boat. It is said that a heavenly line from North Star passes through this 5th-century shrine to the centre of Earth. A few other notable shrines in the area include the Kaleshwar Shiva temple, located at the confluence of the Maheshwari and Narmada river. Raj Rajeshwara temple, the Vithaleshwara temple and the Ahileshwar temple. The last two sport grand gateways and intricately-carved facades. Ahilyabai's replica of the Kashi Vishwanath temple along the *ghats* is also worth visiting. Her tradition of Sapta-Lingam ceremony (making 1,00,000 Shiva lingams as an offering to Narmada) continues till today, though the numbers stand at a mere 15,000 now.

Omkareshwar: Where Om resides
Omkareshwar, situated 77 km from Indore, owes its name and revered status to the natural 'Om' shaped island on which it is built, at the confluence of two holy rivers Narmada and Kaveri. The five-storey Om-

1. The towering spire of the Omkareshwar Temple

2. The Siddh-nath Baradwari Siddheshwar Temple



kareshwar Temple, one of the 12 *dyotirlingas*, can be accessed by walking across the Mammaleshwar Setu, but we chose to indulge in a boat ride till the temple *ghats*. Architectural details of the 19th-century Holkar structure, including its 11th-century spire and 60 artistically carved stone pillars, mesmerised us. We discovered that one half of the *dyotirlinga* is placed here, while the other half is in the Mammaleshwar Temple on the opposite shore. So a visit to both completes the *darshan* (devotional sighting). Both *dyotirlingas* are *swayambhu*. The inner sanctum was decorated with a bed and *palna* (swing) for the God and his consort, and the ritual of lay-

ing out *chaupad* (Indian board game) for Him to play at night, gave insight into His human aspect. Staying for the night *aarti* was a given. With the rhythmic beats of the *damru* (Lord Shiva's favourite two-headed drum) in the background, we watched the prayer lamps gently float away on the shimmering waters.

Other important temples in the town include the 10th-century Satmatrika group of temples, six km away, dedicated to seven goddesses. The Kedareshwar temple, located at the meeting point of Narmada and Kaveri rivers and dating back to the 11th century is known for its detailed architecture, while the highlight of the Gauri Somnath Temple is a gigantic six-feet tall Shivlinga.

There was much to see and soak in. The Shiva trilogy of Omkareshwar, Maheshwar and Ujjain had initiated our tryst with spirituality. But we knew that the spectacular heart of India would beckon again with its hidden holy treasures.

The author is an avid traveller and the views expressed in this article are her own