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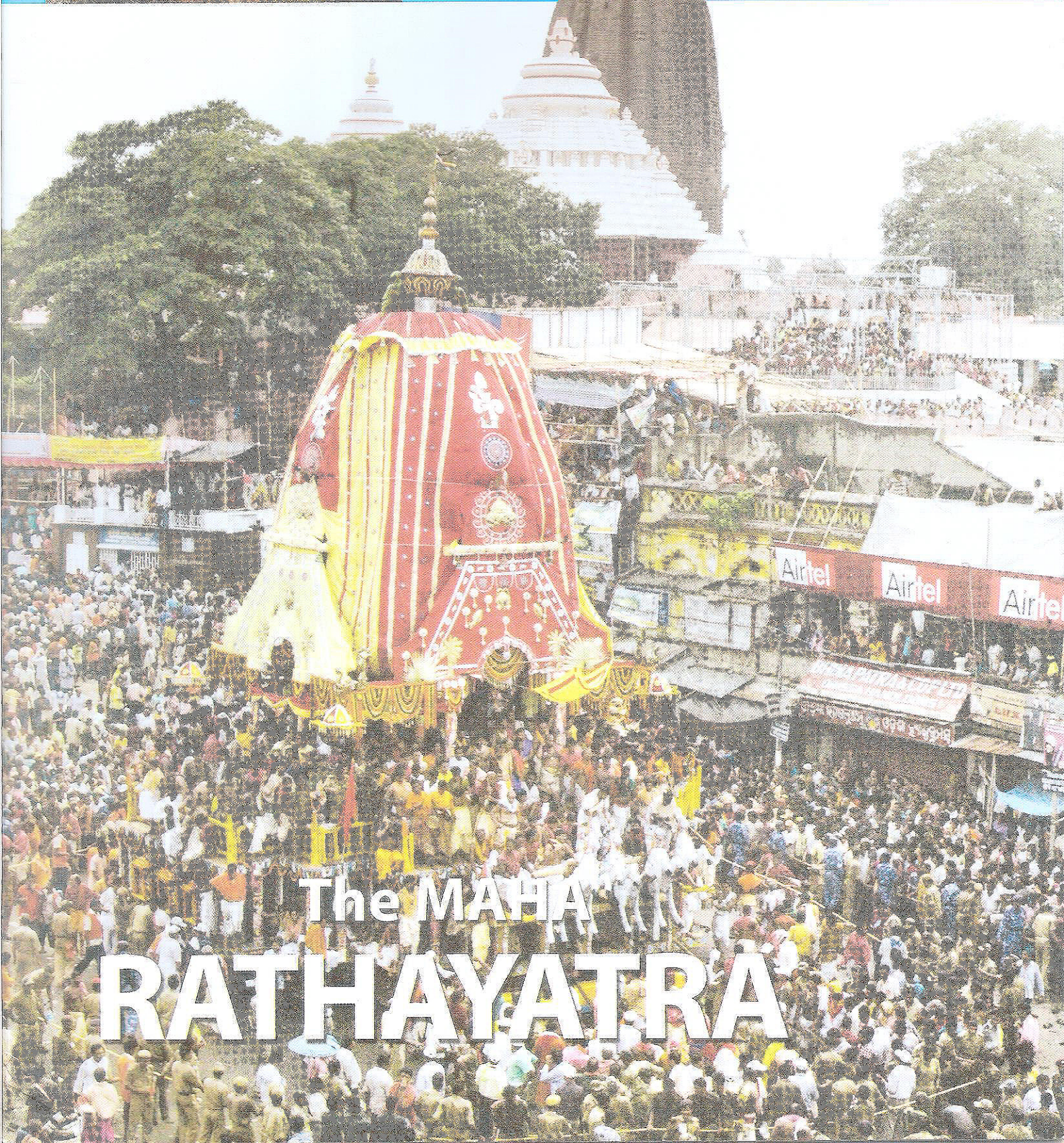


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## The MAHA RATHAYATRA



# Flying through KOLKATA

by ALLISON RULON-MILLER



After 20 years working in the financial services industry in the U.S., I now make my livelihood bringing American tourists to India. I am very fortunate, as I now have professional license to look for beauty in India not only for myself, but for curious individuals from my home country. I have spent the last seven years traveling throughout India, and though I have yet to visit every destination, thus far I find Kolkata to be the most compelling city in the country. Fact: Kolkata is a very hard sell to clients who are visiting India

for the first time. Nonetheless, it is a destination that leaves every person who makes the effort to visit gasping "I had no idea...I love it here." Despite being the center of British power in India for over two hundred years and having a rich intellectual heritage - Rabindranath Tagore, Subhas Chandra Bose, Sri Aurobindo Ghosh, Satyajit Ray and Amartya Sen are just a few of the notables with ties to Kolkata - for most people, the city is far down on the list of must-see destinations in India...far behind Rajasthan, Mumbai,

Delhi, Varanasi and Kerala. As a result, Kolkata is not a touristy city overrun with souvenir shops and tour buses. You rarely run into large groups of foreigners at the major monuments, and the city's best eating spots are still the purview of in-the-know locals. If you are open to experiencing India *as it is*, Kolkata is the perfect destination.

**WHAT TO SEE AND DO** - If I have one recommendation for foreigners contemplating a visit, it is to come during



the annual Durga Puja festival. In Hinduism, Mother Durga represents the embodiment of shakti, the divine feminine force that governs all cosmic creation, existence and change. It is held that Durga emerged from the collective energies of all of the gods, including Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma, to vanquish the demon Mahishasura, who could not be defeated by any god or man. Durga Puja typically occurs in September or October and is the largest festival of the year for Bengali Hindus. In the months leading up to the festival, highly-decorated, life-sized idols of Durga that depict her slaying Mahishasura are created by potters out of clay. In thousands of open spaces around the city, elaborate pandals, or temporary temples made of bamboo and cloth, are created to house the idols. Practically every neighborhood creates its own pandal with funds from local residents. The idols are worshipped intensely for five days and then carried in magnificent procession to the Hoogly river for ritual immersion. Most foreigners are unprepared for how extensive and important this festival is for Bengalis. If Rio's Carnival and New Year's Eve in Times Square had a child, it might vaguely resemble one night of pandal hopping during Durga Puja. The main difference is that tourists from around the world flock to those events, while Durga Puja is still primarily a community celebration, although with an increasing number of corporate sponsors.

You should arrive at least one week before Vijayadashami, which is the day on which the ritual icon immersions take place. This way you will have enough time to enjoy the festival, as well as to visit Kolkata's other sights and monuments. One morning, board a local ferry at Princep Ghat, cruise north to Howrah, and then take a second boat to Shobhabazar. From there it is a short walk to Kumartuli, Area of the Potters, where the elaborate icons of Durga are sculpted and painted for the upcoming festival. Try to go on or before Panchami, which is five days prior to Vijayadashami and the day by which the icons must be installed in their pandals. It is quite a scene, with hundreds of 30-foot Durgas, demons and other gods being carried high above the crowd on bamboo poles and strapped into pick-up trucks for delivery to local neighborhoods.

Next, drop by the Sealdah railway station to watch each neighborhood association search for the drum-corps-of-their-dreams for their pandal. Swarms of brightly-uniformed drummers arrive by train from the villages of West Bengal, giant drums in tow, and bang away in the world's craziest group audition until they are selected for work.

Durga Puja is really a celebration of families and neighbors, evidenced by the fact that many of the elite family homes in Kolkata open to the public so that all can observe and share their private pujas. Many of these families have been celebrating Durga Puja in Kolkata for more than 250 years, and some still decorate their icons with solid gold jewelry. Last year I brought clients to the ancestral home of Raja Nabakrishna Deb on Vijayadashami. Despite periods of intense rain, we all ran behind the family idol as it was being hand-carried to the river, dodging cars and motorcycles, trying to keep up with a brass band and a mass of revelers sprinting to the river to mark what would be the first immersion of the festival. Late-night pandal hopping was also hugely popular with my guests. They embraced the challenge of jostling for a glimpse of Durga alongside thousands of others in places such as Dum Dum Park, Maddox Square, Telenga Bagan and Kalighat. I will say it again – Durga Puja is a festival by Bengalis for Bengalis, which is what makes it so appealing to foreigners. Unlike a lot of the Indian festivals that are promoted to tourists, nothing is staged for their benefit.

My plan for next year's Durga Puja is to hire an auto-rickshaw for an entire night and just drive from neighborhood to neighborhood, down narrow lanes, through forests of Chhota Bheem balloons and rainbow-lit archways and vintage movie soundtracks (punctuated by drums of course), past makeshift amusement parks and promotional displays for Vodaphone and Maruti Suzuki, deeply inhaling the smell of incense and freshly-cooked street food... I can't imagine a more enjoyable ride.

The next day I might continue the chaos with a visit to Kalighat, the iconic, crowded Kali Temple that is Kolkata's oldest pilgrimage site. Or for a more subdued experience, I would join the

evening prayer at Belur Math, headquarters of the Ramakrishna Mission, founded in the late 1800's by Swami Vivekananda, the chief disciple of Ramakrishna Paramahansa. I also enjoy the Pareshmath Jain Temple, a charming mosaic garden built in 1867 that features extensive stone and mirror inlay work, stained glass, and European-style sculptures and fountains. Kolkata is further home to two beautiful synagogues, Magen David and Beth El. Kolkata's Jews were mostly Baghdadi Jews who had come to the city as merchants. At one point there were almost 6,000 Jews in Kolkata; however, today there are only about 30 remaining.

While most guests to Kolkata visit only the Indian Museum, I encourage those interested in folk art to see the extensive kantha collection at the Gurusaday Museum in Joka. Kantha is a type of embroidery that blends floral, animal and geometric thread designs with images depicting the day-to-day life and culture of the rural women of Bengal. The museum also contains a rare collection of Kalighat paintings from the 19th century. These fine-art mementos were highly coveted by both tourists and pilgrims visiting the city's Kali temple. Visitors looking for green space should stroll through the 109-hectare Calcutta Botanical Garden in Shibpur. Established in 1786, it was here that the tea plant was first introduced from China for commercial development in India. The garden also boasts the largest banyan tree canopy (*Ficus bengalensis*) in the world.

Those interested in Kolkata's colonial past should tour the Victoria Memorial and peruse its rare collection of lithographs by Thomas and William Daniell. These highly-detailed works document the architecture and landscape of India in the late 1700s. BBD Bagh, the heart of old Kolkata, contains a number of British colonial buildings dating from the 18th and 19th centuries, including St. John's Church, the General Post Office, the High Court, the Government House and the Writers' Building. Romantics will appreciate the elegant decay of the Park Street Cemetery, which dates to 1767 and contains the remains of many famous residents of Kolkata, including Sir William Jones, founder of the Asiatic Society; Major-General Charles "Hindoo" Stuart, and





Lucia Palk, the heroine of Kipling's *City of Dreadful Night*.

**WHERE TO STAY** – Hotels I have enjoyed include: the **Taj Bengal**, a luxurious haven located near the zoo; **The Peerless Inn**, adjacent to the bustling New Market area; the **Park Plaza**, a business-class hotel in the upscale Ballygunge neighborhood; and the **Park Hyatt** in Salt Lake. On my next visit I am eager to try **The LaLit Great Eastern**, a recently renovated property near Dalhousie Square, and the new **Swissotel** near the airport, which is perfect for transit passengers. My clients have raved about **The Oberoi Grand**, also next to New Market, and **Casa Fortuna Hotel**, a moderately-priced hotel on AJC Bose Road not far from Park Circus.

**WHERE TO EAT AND SHOP** – Kolkata has some of the best bazaars in India. The interior decor of the city's old shops, particularly the wood and metalwork, is fascinating in its own right. **New Market** contains endless tiny shops selling everything from vegetables and meat to china, DVDs, perfume, jewelry and flowers. During the winter I come here to stock up on fresh jaggery and pink Himalayan sea salt. I then enjoy a Bengali thali lunch at **Aaheli** in the Peerless Inn, or order take-out biryani from **Nizam's** behind New Market. While waiting for my biryani, I spend time admiring the area's zardozi artists who embroider intricate patterns with gold and silver thread on garments and other textiles.

The **Malik Ghat** flower market along the banks of the Hoogly is open 24/7 and supplies the city's small flower vendors with millions of exquisite roses, marigolds, lotus, gladioli, sunflowers and dahlias. Keep your wits about you at the **Sealdah wholesale vegetable market**; groups of men, bodies entwined and walking in perfect unison, literally run through the market with 100 kg parcels of tomatoes, potatoes, onions, and ginger balanced on their collective heads. For the bookworm, walk down **College Street**, home to hundreds of vendors selling new and used books on all matter of subjects. If you get tired, grab a pick-me-up at the nearby

**Indian Coffee House**, a popular spot for local students. My expanding collection of Lucknowi chikan kurtas is fueled by regular visits to the **Dakshinapan** shopping complex, where I escape the heat with an iced green ginger tea at **Dolly's The Tea Shop**. I just recently discovered the area around **Nakhoda Masjid**, where I picked up a few bottles of fresh rose water from a local attar shop and enjoyed incredibly tender and flavorful kebab at **Aminia**.

While traditional Bengali cuisine is heavy on fish and vegetable curries, the multicultural nature of Kolkata makes it home to dining establishments representing all regions of India. For example, when Nawab Wajid Ali Shah was exiled from Lucknow to Kolkata in 1856 he brought with him Rakabdari and Bawarchi dishes, culminating in the creation of Bengali mutton rezala, the best of which can be had at **Sabir's**. Similarly, the local Christian community developed its own specialty dishes, and many aspects of European dining are still to be found in the city. For a taste, try high tea in the famous English tea room of **Flurys**, operating in Kolkata since 1927. Other restaurants that I enjoy include **O'Calcutta** (Bengali specialty), **Peter Cat** (kebab) and the **Royal Indian Hotel** (biryani). I am also a big fan of sandesh from **Bhim Nag** or **Girish Ch. Dey & Nakur Ch. Nandy**, which is a

Bengali sweet made from milk and sugar and flavored with saffron, cardamom and nuts.

Now if only my sandesh would survive the 15-hour plane ride home.

Allison Ruion-Miller is the Founder of From Lost to Found Travel, LLC in Philadelphia ([www.fromlosttofoundtravel.com](http://www.fromlosttofoundtravel.com)). In conjunction with her Kolkata-based partners, Indian Tourism Pvt. Ltd. ([www.theindiantourism.com](http://www.theindiantourism.com)), she specializes in designing and executing custom trips to India for travelers from the U.S.

