



He notices your look of dismay, and you can see his face become gentler as he sympathizes with you and starts digging through his memories. "OK, three places only I give you, and teen aur chai khreedo- you buy three more chai. But sir, you must promise to keep these places a secret. It would not do for every one of the foreigner ghoomnis to hear about them."

He huddles closer to share his secrets, and his thick accent seems to melt away as his English becomes more confident.

"Ek number. Tungnath temple, Chandrashila Mountain. Easy Himalaya peak. You will love the place. Big mountains is there, more than four thousand meters. Good path with nice forest, and very important temple in top. View of the big mountains of Uttarakhand Himalaya, especially Nanda Devi. Sleeping high in the mountains, is possible, by the temple, thousand years old, one of five Kedar temples. Chandra is moon, Shila is crescent, you can climb Crescent Moon Mountain. Go from Gopeshwar, on the Joshimath Road from Rishikesh. Buses are there."

He looks at you sharply. "Have you heard of this place?" When you shake your head for the negative, he gives you a quick head bobble and immediately continues.

"Number do. Jatashankar Cave, below Pachmarhi, old Britisher hill station. But this is not Himalaya, this is secret Satpura Range, in Madhya Pradesh state. Beautiful stones there, many colors, from old sandy beaches. Much jungle is there also. Deep cut in the rocks, and below. In this cave, there are rocks like Shiva's dreadlocks. Very narrow place, naturally cut in the mountains. You walk there from Pachmarhi. Train to Bhopal, overnight bus to Pachmarhi. Many hotels are there. Easy." A quick pause. "You have heard? No? Good."

"Teen number, last. In Karnataka, jungles of Western Ghats Mountains. Agumbe town, just above Udupi and Manipal. In Udupi, this is home of the original masala dosa. Manipal, this is university town with many students, many young people. But above, on the mountains, Agumbe has beautiful rainforest, and waterfalls, and walking tracks. The Snake people are there, cobra-scientists studying the forest. Some hotels, but maybe you contact snake scientists and stay with them at Agumbe Rainforest Research Station. They are friendly. You can get there along the coast, easy. Buses are there, from Udupi. You get also very fine spiced milk, it is strong medicine. Agumbe is one of the wettest places in India, and after rain and wind you will be glad for the hot drink."

"Agumbe, then, have you heard of it?" You are grinning back, and giving a head booble in reply. You tell him you haven't heard of any of these places, but are very excited to see the mountains, caves, and forests of this Secret India.

"Ha, well, you are a foreigner. These places all are famous to Indian people. Tungnath, Jatashankar, both are important pilgrim places for making yatra. And Agumbe, there was one famous television show, Malgudi Days. So this town is very famous. But you go, many less foreigners are there. And remember, they are secret."

You heft the thick and heavy guidebook in both hands, looking at its size and weight. Maybe there are other, more organic, ways to find travel suggestions. Maybe you can find your own Secret India, on your own, with the help of a billion people. Tumhahara dost, your chai-wallah friend, he takes the opportunity put three boiling hot clay cups on the book, using it as an impromptu tray. "Teen aur chai. You buy three more. 20 rupees give me"

By the end of your fourth cup, you are wired, oversugared, and ready to go exploring the India unheard-of. You've promised your new friend that you'll stay in touch, and you are looking forward to seeing him back at home overseas, as soon as he sorts out his visa and purchases his plane ticket. He tells you about his visit last year to Italy, and to America. Turns out, in Alaska, he went deep into the wilderness and camped out in the most remote corners of that vast place. He also tells you about his girlfriends- one in Calcutta, one in Mumbai, and one in Bangalore, and how he will soon be travelling extensively by rail to visit them both as soon as possible. Maybe you'll meet up in one of these cities. You may have to cancel your plans to go to Rishikesh, or Manali, or Dharamasala, but maybe that's the right thing to do. Go see "Real India." Because, now, you've got three places to go in India that nobody has ever heard of. Or, maybe the point is, that few other foreigners have heard of. The whole point of the lesson is that someone, somewhere, has heard of everything. There aren't any wilderness places, and there aren't any truly secret places. But you can invent them in your own mind. You'll just have to pretend you are the first to explore India.

It turns out that you don't have any change, only five-hundred rupee notes. But looks like you'll both walk away happy. You've got your three destinations, and he's got a slightly-worn copy of the latest Lonely Planet guidebook to exotic India.