

# A Trail Through Three Towns

Take a road trip through Lepakshi, Gandikota, and Belum to witness stunning landscapes and explore heritage structures.

**WORDS** Edwina D'souza

The diverse landscapes on the way to Andhra Pradesh from Bengaluru make for ample photo ops. An aerial view of a winding road near Makalidurga, Karnataka.





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A few months ago, I stumbled upon a stunning picture on the internet captioned 'The Grand Canyon of India'. Making it to Arizona in the USA to see the original marvel seemed like a far-fetched dream, so I snapped up the opportunity to witness the 'Indian equivalent'. My co-workers from Bengaluru and Mumbai, who shared this common travel goal, signed up to join me, and off we went on a road trip.

We mapped out an itinerary and armed ourselves with sunscreen, snacks, and songs. Since I was the only one who could drive, I got behind the wheels; the Bengaluru co-worker handled communication (and translation); and the Mumbai co-worker was the designated photographer. We hit NH44 from Bengaluru at 5.00 a.m. The stunning landscape comprising boulders and vast expanses of greenery made the drive enthralling. The rains played hide-and-seek leaving us with balmy weather and ample opportunities to pull over and capture the stunning beauty of nature.

Our first stop was Lepakshi village in the Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh; about 125 km from Bengaluru. Lepakshi is not only a pilgrim town but also an archaeologically important site with

references in Indian mythology.

If legends are to be believed, Jatayu (the divine bird) from the sacred scripture of *Ramayana* was injured here after a battle with Ravana, who was carrying Sita to Lanka. When Lord Rama reached the spot, he saw Jatayu and uttered the words, *le pakshi* which translates to 'arise, bird', thus giving the town its name.

A towering monolithic sculpture of Nandi Bull greeted us at the entrance of the Lepakshi temple complex and raised the bar for what was in store ahead. This structure is said to be carved out of a single stone and is reputed to be the largest Nandi sculpture in India. The many temples in Lepakshi date back to 16th century AD. Amongst them, the Veerabhadra Temple, built during the Vijayanagara Empire, is visually captivating. There's an

1. The Lepakshi temple complex is home to three shrines dedicated to Lord Shiva, Lord Vishnu, and Lord Veerabhadra. 2. The Nandi Bull structure at the entrance of the temple complex is replete with intricately carved ornaments which add to its grandeur. 3. Enjoy unending views of the 'Grand Canyon of India'.

18-ft-tall monolith of Nagalinga, a multi-headed snake and many frescos depicting scenes from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* including motifs of Lord Shiva and Parvati.

The star attraction however, is the 'hanging pillar' inside the temple complex that draws thousands of curious visitors each year. Call it a legend or an engineering marvel, but it is believed that this pillar hangs from the ceiling, barely touching the ground. We saw many tourists test this claim (including ourselves) by passing a thin paper and even a dupatta underneath it.

After three hours of exploration,

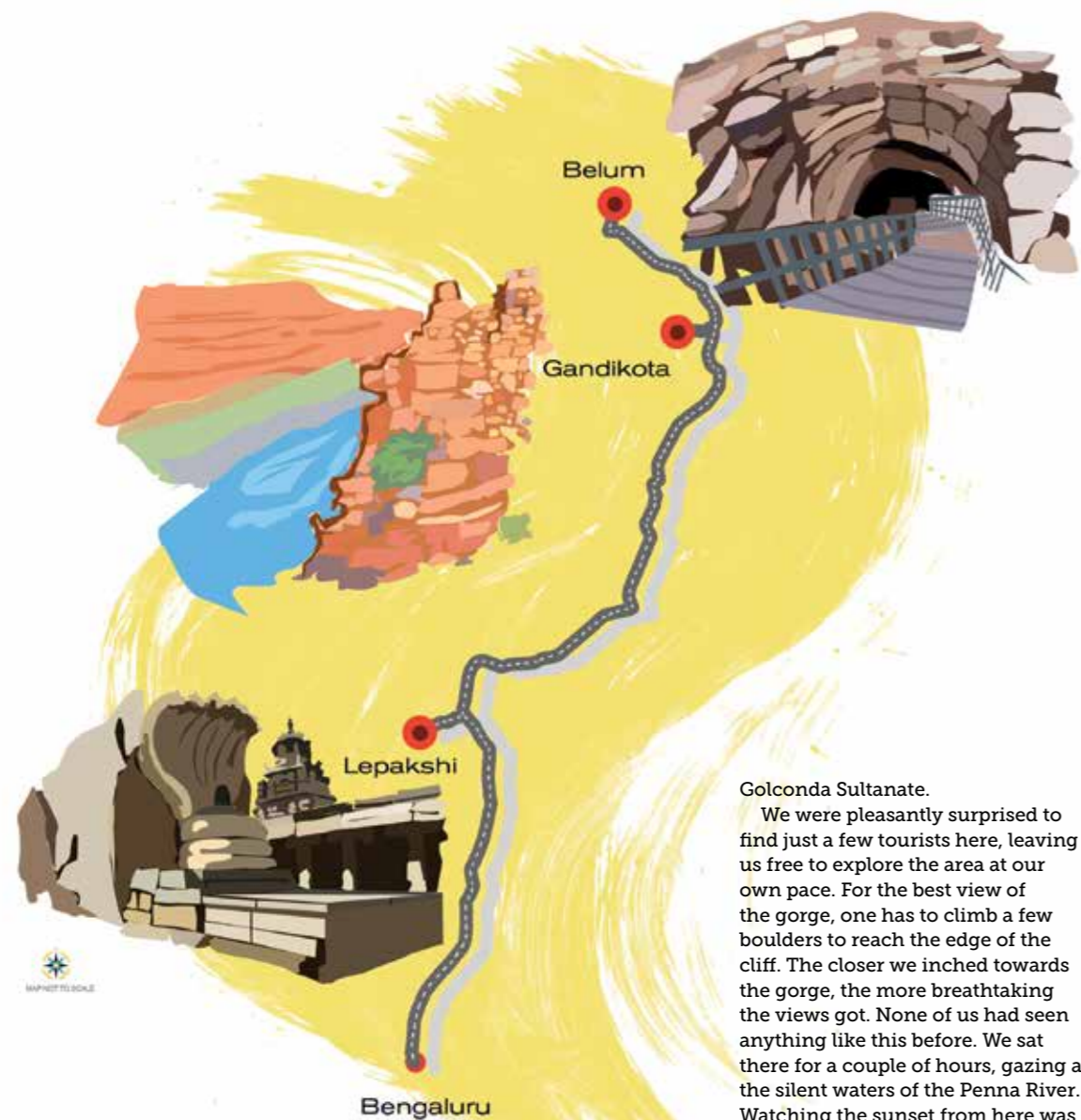
we hit the road again. It was now time to visit the famed 'Grand Canyon of India' in Gandikota, a small village in the Kadapa district of Andhra Pradesh.

The town gets its name from the 13th-century Gandikota fort. The structure sits on a spectacular gorge formed by the River Penna cutting through the Erramala hills. Gandikota translates to 'gorge' (*gandi*) and 'fort' (*kota*) in Telugu. The region was once under the rule of the Kaka Raja descendents from 1123 A.D to 1239 A.D, and has since been ruled by the Kalyani Chalukya, Tughlaq, Pemmasani Nayak dynasties, and even the

### Did you know?

The guides at Lepakshi animatedly narrate the story of a British engineer, Hamilton, from the pre-independence era, who once tried to decode the mystery of the hanging pillar, but failed after he realised that the distortion would result in the alignment of the adjoining pillars to get disrupted, leading the entire structure to collapse.





**Golconda Sultanate.**

We were pleasantly surprised to find just a few tourists here, leaving us free to explore the area at our own pace. For the best view of the gorge, one has to climb a few boulders to reach the edge of the cliff. The closer we inched towards the gorge, the more breathtaking the views got. None of us had seen anything like this before. We sat there for a couple of hours, gazing at the silent waters of the Penna River. Watching the sunset from here was the icing on the cake. Shutterbugs will have a field day capturing stunning images of this raw, natural landscape. A downhill trek to the riverbed allows visitors to indulge in adventure sports such as rappelling and rock climbing, or a leisurely coracle ride.

Back at the Gandikota fort complex, there are many structures – the Jama Masjid mosque, a granary, a stepwell, and a jail – now in ruins, that allow visitors a peep into the history of a bygone era. In the present day, the complex is home to a few villagers and has a small government school.

We decided to spend the night at the Haritha Resort run by the Andhra Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation in Gandikota. The resort's location, barely 100m from the Gandikota

**Travel log**

The best time to visit the Gandikota is at sunrise or sunset. Although the climb to the gorge is not particularly tough, wearing hiking shoes is recommended. The Andhra Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation-run Haritha Resort is the best stay option here. Booking in advance is advisable.

Illustration: Swapnil Redkar

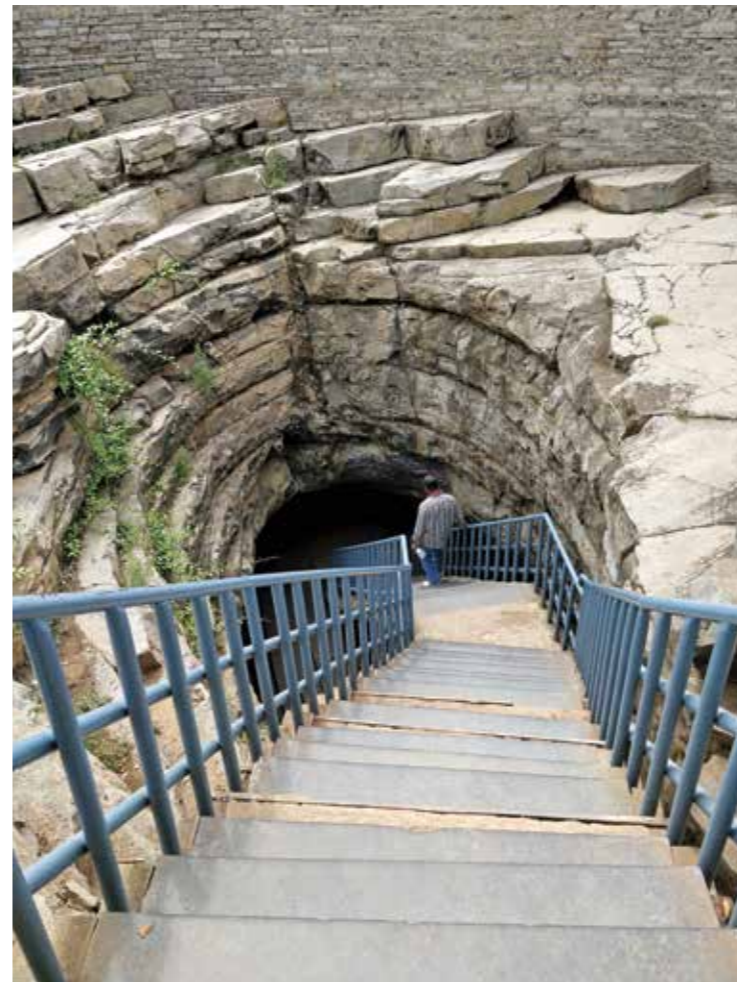


Image: Edwina D Souza



1. The country's largest and longest cave system, Belum Caves, is home to long passages, galleries, caverns with fresh water, and siphons. 2. The imposing Gandikota fort boast intricately carved pillars, making the structure an architectural marvel.

fort, is ideal to reach the structure in time to catch the sunrise.

The next morning we drove 60 km further north to Belum, near Kurnool district. The Belum caves are known for their unique stalactite and stalagmite formations. The first records of these caves were mentioned in an expedition report of Robert Bruce Foote in 1884, followed by another detailed expedition by Herbert Daniel Gebauer in 1982 and 1983. Jain and Buddhist monks are believed to have occupied these caves centuries ago, and a giant Buddha statue adorns the entrance of the caves.

The network of caves stretches up to 3,229m in length and are considered the second largest cave system in India after the Krem Liat Prah in Meghalaya. Inside, the site is complete with hidden passageways, chambers, and fresh water tanks. The deepest point of

the caves – Paatalganga – and the Musical Chamber are key attractions here. The stalactite and stalagmite formations in the Musical Chamber mimic notes when hit with fingers. The use of neon lights to illuminate the formations adds character to the place.

At sunset, we started our journey back to Bengaluru. On this weekend trip alone, we had managed to explore diverse places of interest – from a heritage temple complex and a picturesque gorge, to a unique cave system.

The drive back was a good seven hours but went by like a breeze, in good company. By the end of the trip, we had crossed over to conversations beyond work; about life and dreams. Perhaps, it is true that travel not only makes you see the world differently but also see other people differently. 🗺️



**GETTING THERE**

AirAsia India flies to Bengaluru from New Delhi, Hyderabad, Kolkata and other destinations. [airasia.com](http://airasia.com)