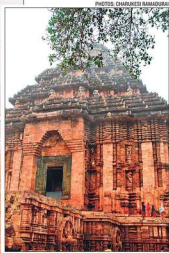
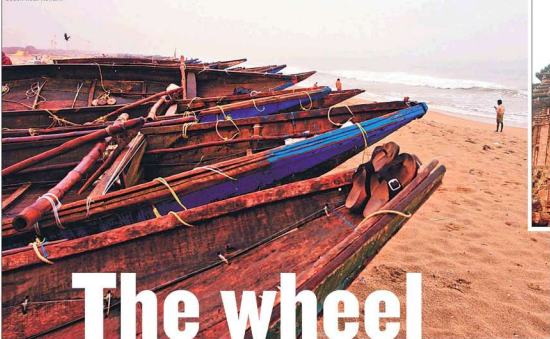


Catch the famous East Coast sunrise on the Chandrabhaga beach near Konark



The wheel of time

The stones of Konark's Sun temple tell a tale of ruin, grandeur, procreation and the never-ending cycle of life



CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

and the boats standing desolate on the shore suddenly seem to get a life of their own. I turn back and see a few of the fishermen already heading out into the sea. Good luck to them.

The beach at Chandrabhaga near Konark is a dull grey blanket when I reach there early in the morning, eyes half shut, mind still on "where-is-my-filter-coffee" mode. What ever happened to the famous 'East Coast' sunrise that I woke up at 5 am for? The rain. That is what happened. And so Chandrabhaga wears a deserted look, a few early morning types wetting their feet tentatively in the angry waters, creating enough noise to make up for their lack of numbers. As I walk away from the group towards the fishing hamlet between the narrow road and the sea, I find small groups of fishermen sitting on their haunches, staring at the sea with desperate eyes. 'Are you not going in to the sea,' I ask one of them in Hindi. I don't know if he understood my words, but he follows my hand pointing to the sea, and points towards the sky in return. Both hands up, a sign of despair.

I stand staring at the waves for a few minutes, peacefully blank, unmindful of the cold wind playing havoc with my already sore throat and aching ears. The sea, in all its dreary tones, is still magnetic. As I head back to the car park, the sun is just peeping out

hundred workmen toiled at it for 12 years, using up 12 year's worth of state revenue to build this magnificent temple. And as a fitting climax, a 12-year-old master craftsman fixed the *kalasha* at the top of the temple, a feast none of the other older, more skilled workers could achieve—and jumped to his death into the sea, protecting the honour of the clan. To this day, the child's sacrifice haunts the temple; no *pujas* has ever been done out there. It stands proudly much of it in ruin as a reminder of the grandeur that was. In all that ruin however, there is a profusion of carving all around the temple, intricate and astonishing in detail. Seeing them, one understands what made Rabindranath Tagore say here the language of stone surpasses the language of man.

It is believed that the temple was originally constructed right on the shore, till the sea receded a couple of kilometres. European sailors were said to use this black pagoda as a navigational point in the sea. The temple, as is well



Even though the sun temple is mostly in ruins, its architecture and carvings signify a grandeur that time cannot dim

known is dedicated to the sun god, Surya, who resides there (says my guide) with his two wives Chhaya and Sandhya. The scorching, all-powerful sun with his soft, gentle consort—a shade and evening.

The East-West axis of the temple is shaped like a chariot on 12 pairs of immense wheels, the rays of the sun follow the circumference of the temple as the day progresses. The lower part of the temple walls are carved with images of elephants and horses. Right on top, where the gods anyway reside, are carvings of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. The middle part, at eye level is full of erotic carvings—man and woman in poses of intimacy and togetherness, procreation, recreation. My guide spares no pains to point out the spicier carvings to me—lesbian, woman with animal, group sex—"see," he tells me, "all this has existed in India centuries ago. Foreigners take these ideas from us and they make films out of these. Chalk up one more for Global India."

Another recurring motif throughout is that of victory and defeat. Just as you are about to climb the steps to the *natyamandapa* (dance hall), you are greeted by two statues on either side of the steps—a lion (signifying power), riding an elephant (connoting wealth), which is in turn trampling a man (standing for justice). Whether this means justice will be trampled upon by might and wealth or is simply a metaphor for the eternal food chain—a my guide is unable to explain.

Right towards the end of our tour, my guide points out this carving of a woman standing by the gate—all dressed up and waiting for her husband. He adds for good measure, "In those days, women used to wait for their men."

I want to go back for another round on my own to take in the magnificence of it. Standing in the shadow of the temple, I watch the huge wheel intently. It is almost possible to feel it move, taking you back in time with it through the centuries.

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VISITOR INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

Konark is roughly 65 km or an hour and half away from Bhubaneswar, the nearest airport and large railway station (though Puri 35 km away is closer). It is best to hire a car from Bhubaneswar as bus service is irregular.

OTHER ATTRACTIONS

Puri with its beautiful beach and the Jagannath temple is just an hour's drive from Konark along the coast. You can stop at your own private beach on the way.

The Rameswari temple is a popular picnic spot, only 8 km from Konark. Konark hosts a classical dance festival every winter against the backdrop of the sun temple.

WHERE TO STAY

The government-run Panthivas is right opposite the Sun temple, though the exterior does not inspire much confidence. Stay in Bhubaneswar or Puri and make a day trip to Konark. Try to be there around sunrise or sunset for the experience.