

BOOK

INTO THE DEEP

Archaeologist Victoria Lautman travelled to the remotest parts of the country to document the forgotten stepwells of India in her new book

Victoria Lautman, a print and broadcast journalist, has been documenting hidden and decrepit stepwells in India for over five years. The results of her research now comprise her new coffee-table book, *The Vanishing Stepwells of India*, complete with stunning images and information on 75 such subterranean structures. Lautman's degrees in archaeology and art history help illustrate their unique architecture and design. Here, she talks to *Bazaar* on her interest in the subject and the challenges of putting together the book.

What was your first experience with stepwells?

I saw my first stepwell 30 years ago, on my first trip to India. I was on a month-long tour with a group of architects and we were taken to the well-known Rudabai Vav in Adalaj, Gujarat. I had no idea what we were going to see and wondered why we were in a scrubby desert, with a low, unobtrusive wall in the distance.

Of course, when I looked over, the ground fell away and I was confronting the most mysterious, complex, subterranean structure I'd ever seen. It was subversive and transgressive—our experience of architecture is always of something to look up at, not down into: I couldn't have been more shocked.

Descending into this marvel was a profound experience—the deeper I went, the more everything transformed. I was surrounded by ornate, carved columns and the view through them kept shifting, telescoping into space. It was all so disorienting. And I absolutely loved it.

How did this encounter turn into a deep interest?

I spent several months travelling around the country in 2013, and stepwells were one of three stories I was pursuing. Then, while visiting the incomparable, jaw-dropping stepwell in Neemrana, which is two hours outside of Delhi, I was gobsmacked. It was like being hit with a rock, and maybe that's what love at first sight feels like. I was standing at one indelible spot when my interest became a full-on obsession. I still get shivers when I stand there. So, I put the other stories on hold, changed the course of my itinerary to see as many as possible, and in so doing also changed the course of my life.

What are the challenges you faced in the process?

How about a list of some purely physical challenges? Bats, bugs, snakes, heights, depths, darkness, filth, an occasional mongoose... exploring any stepwell that's decrepit and disintegrating (which is to say, most of them) can be dangerous or, to put it simply, gross.

Also, locating rural wells—actually, even stepwells in larger towns—can be incredibly frustrating, though 'the hunt' is an important part of the experience, and the payoff can be magical. Not everyone is even aware that there is a stepwell nearby, or can give an accurate description of where to find one. It's useful to ask everyone from shopkeepers to *chaiwalas* to shepherds and taxi drivers, but there's a lot of driving around in circles. For these reasons, I included GPS coordinates for each stepwell in the book. They weren't available when I was on the hunt, and can be a huge help.

Any favourite among stepwells?

In terms of sheer beauty, the Mahila Baag Jhalra in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, which appears on the cover of my book, is hands down the most colourful stepwell I've seen, the green algae such a beautiful contrast to that rich red sandstone of Rajasthan. Most stepwells are uniform in colour, making Mahila seem positively flamboyant.

By Charukesi Ramadurai



COURTESY VICTORIA LAUTMAN

(This page, from top) Masque; chef Prateek Sadhu with chef Matt Orlando of the renowned Amass restaurant in Copenhagen; a seabuckthorn and black pepper popsicle at Masque. (Opposite page) Chand Baori in Abhaneri, Rajasthan, known for the geometric pattern of its 3,500 steps; Ran Ki Vav in Patan, Gujarat, circa 1063, which became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2014.

COURTESY ABRAMS, RIVERHEAD BOOKS, ALGONQUIN BOOKS, AND CHICAGO REVIEW PRESS; MASQUE

FOOD

THE UNMASKING

A new fine-dining restaurant in Mumbai is changing diners' approach to food

The farm-to-table phenomenon, which focuses on locally-sourced ingredients, may have a few takers in India, but none as ambitious as the recently-opened Masque in Mumbai. At this fine-dining restaurant, owners Aditi and Aditya Duggar, and chef Prateek Sadhu have foregone the à la carte menu to offer only set meals of 10 courses, or shorter ones of three or six.

Aditi, who runs Sage & Saffron, a catering business in Mumbai, met Sadhu in 2013. Sadhu had worked in Michelin-starred restaurants like The French Laundry and Le Bernardin, although it was his time at Noma in Copenhagen where he learnt "how to cook from the region and harness the soil". The two bonded over the difficulty of sourcing good quality produce in India and decided to team up. They scoured the country and uncovered everything from fiddlehead ferns from Himachal Pradesh to seabuckthorn from Ladakh, and even grew vegetables at their own farm near Pune. "Most of the time, it's the chefs who go foraging themselves," says Sadhu. "A lot of research goes into finding the right sources, and the biggest struggle is planning around the shelf life of the products."

They describe their food philosophy as 'botanical bistronomy'—using regional produce to create refined, seasonal cuisine. That means the menu changes daily, based on what is available. While our first meal featured a flaky heirloom tomato and basil pesto tart, our next included another variety of tomato, compressed in its own juices and covered with basil seeds and feta. The flavours bounce around the world, from an Indian-inspired duck doughnut with chutney to an Asian tofu with kaffir lime and kale, and a European lamb shank with a turnip mash.

The interiors of Masque pay homage to its gritty, abandoned cotton mill compound setting. Designed by architect and interior designer Ashiesh Shah, it features a slate and marble flooring, a modernist, curved archway, a textured wood bar that's perfect for pre-dinner drinks, and the centerpiece, an expansive metal sculpture by artist Rathin Barman.

The restaurant recently launched G&T Sundays, a twist on the weekend brunch, which pairs food with gin cocktails. It's this innovative attitude that makes Masque more than just an ethical dining option. Over here, you don't have to know where your food came from to enjoy it. That's just an added bonus.

By Butool Jamal



BOOKS

READING LIST



Celebrated *Bazaar* photographer Richard Avedon's passion for Paris is on display through his images, letters, and more in *Avedon's France*. The Pakistani-British novelist Mohsin Hamid—whose 2007 book, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, was short-listed for the Man Booker Prize—weaves a tale of modern migration in *Exit West*. Lauren Grodstein pens a poignant missive from a dying mother to her young son in *Our Short History*. And in the posthumous memoir *Judy and I*, Judy Garland's third husband, the Hollywood producer Sid Luft, tells the story of their love and devotion. ■