

# Stories in stone at Konark

THE  
CULTURAL  
TOURIST

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I can feel stress melt away heading from the dusty town of Bhubaneswar, capital of the Indian state of Odisha, towards the seaside resort of Puri on the Bay of Bengal. Crowded streets give way to emerald fields and palm groves, and the salty scent of the ocean fills the air. Within an hour I arrive in Puri, considered by many to be the resort destination of India's lesser-travelled east coast. Past a stretch of white sand, the bay shimmers in the sun; I settle in for a fragrant crab curry at a shack perched on the sand and that night fall asleep to the sound of waves.

For many visitors, this is as good as it gets, but just half an hour away by road is the spectacular Konark Temple and this is the real reason I've come to Puri. "Here the language of stone surpasses the language of man," wrote 1913 Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore. The stonework celebrates the miracle of the sun, the sensuality of the people and the dedication of the pious. Built for the sun god Surya, this UNESCO World Heritage site originally stood on the shore. An idol of Surya was carefully positioned within its inner sanctum, designed to capture the sun's first rays. Nowadays, the shoreline has moved 3km away and the statue has disappeared, but the glory of Konark remains.

It's early morning when I enter. The cacophony of street vendors crowding the entrance dissipates and all I can focus on is the breathtaking sight before me. Steps lead up to the Natamandapa, or dance hall, where Odissi dancers would use their bodies to make graceful offerings to Surya. The main temple lies past intricately carved columns; built in the 13th century, it resembles a chariot



ISTOCK

Konark Temple, a World Heritage site, left; intricate stonework celebrating the miracle of the sun, above

driven by Surya and drawn by seven galloping horses. It is flanked by 12 pairs of wheels that have been exquisitely carved, appearing as if they will carry away the structure once it's woken by the sun.

Around the temple are hundreds of statues depicting activities from men hunting elephants to musicians playing joyously. Each statue is a tale, turning the base of the temple into an anthology of short stories of life almost 800 years ago. Like the famous tantra temples of Khajuraho in Madhya Pradesh, Konark has erotic sculptures. Some are private scenes of such adoration and unbridled passion that I feel I'm intruding on an intimate moment between lovers, while others are acrobatic feats that have been cast in stone as if to prove their capability. The emotion in each sculpture is palpable but they're not there to titillate — they exist to remind visitors to leave their lust

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behind. While each sculpture is wonderful, my eye is drawn to the huge wheels. Each pair has been perfectly crafted with a central hub from which darts 16 spokes decorated with foliage of minute flowers, creepers and beads. Within each of the large spokes and axles is a window that peers into a unique scene, all seemingly unrelated. Galloping horsemen, seated gods and amorous couples feature within, awaiting their journey into the next life.

Only the heat of the sun beating down against my forehead brings me out of my trance. I've spent several hours lost in the beauty of this magnificent structure. While thoughts of a refreshing drink by the beach in Puri beckon, I know I'll soon be drawn back to read more of these stories in stone at Konark.

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