

## MYTHICALLY MAPPED



SCULPTED The Kalyana Mantapa; (below) Nagalinga. PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

# Symphony in stone

While soaking in the beauty of Lepakshi, **RAJI SUNDERKRISHNAN** finds herself surrounded by legendary stories of Shiva, Parvati, Rama and Sita.

Lepakshi's name is derived from an epic tale — *Ramayana*. When Sita was abducted by Ravana, the mythical bird Jatayu fought with Ravana in the place we now know as Lepakshi in Andhra Pradesh, which is at a distance of about 125 km from Bangalore. Ravana cut off Jatayu's wing and the bird lay here, injured. When Rama found Jatayu, he said "*le, pakshi*" (rise, bird) and the bird rose. Hence the name Lepakshi. Upon hearing this anecdote, I nodded happily — the day certainly held the promise of many such interesting tales. I found myself here one mundane weekend, itching to escape city life for a day, to enjoy some things that I admire: architecture, paintings, tales and folklore, sculptures and people. A friend had suggested Lepakshi. I don't think I could have chosen better.

This gem of a temple is so beautiful that you have to try really hard to not be in awe. To understand the history of the temple, I hired a guide who explained everything; beginning with how the temple actually has seven layers in its design. The outer layers of the temple complex are apparently now occupied by people who have set up shops and houses within the colonnaded pavilions. So, houses of the poor may have up to 10 columns within them, while larger houses supposedly have up to 200 columns! The temple complex currently occupies about five acres of land.

The tortoise-shaped rocky hill is where it all began. It is presumed that a small shrine installed by sage Agastya already existed here when Achyutaraya (Achyuta Devaraya), the ruler of the Vijayanagara Empire, came upon it in the 16th Century. This temple was planned and begun by Virupanna, Achyutaraya's trusted treasurer, in 1530 AD. He was assisted by his brother Veeranna. It was built in the Vijayanagara style of architecture, using brown and grey granite. The temple construction continued till 1542 AD, when a few enemies of Virupanna complained to the king that the treasury funds were being embezzled by him.

The temple is today known as the Veerabhadraswamy temple, Veerabhadra being the wrathful form of Shiva. This is said to be the spot on which Shiva threw a clump of his hair, when he found that his beloved Dakshayani had died, insulted by her father. She was reborn as Parvati and married Shiva once again. Besides Veerabhadra, there are shrines dedicated to Lord Shiva and Vishnu too. There is a pavilion connecting all three shrines as well as a hall for ritual dances (*Natya Mantapa*) as you enter the temple.

Wandering inside the *Natya Mantapa*, I tore my eyes away from the life-size sculptures to look up, only to have lovely paintings vie for my attention. These paintings have been coloured using vegetable and natural dyes. For the next hour, all I did was to walk with my head turned upwards, bumping into columns and people. But, people were strangely indulgent of me. This is also when I met and almost trampled my guide, seated as he was near a column for some rest. Had he not said, "That's Rambha" in time, I would have stepped over him. Instead, I hired him to guide me around the temple.

I turned my aching neck downwards to focus on the statue that he was pointing to — the *Apsara*, the celestial nymph; dancing as the gods watched. Rambha mimicked her three-legged dance teacher, whose statue was also present there. The gods had arrived to watch the spectacle and play an instrument or two.

I turned my attention back upwards to admire more paintings; Parvati grooming herself and peering into a mirror; Baby Krishna, with his eye following you all around; Ravana with his *Shivalinga* and many more such mythological depictions. Looking down once more, I was stunned to see the 'hanging column', a column that does not touch the floor.

Apparently, the British were equally stunned by the column and had tried to find out how the column stood. In doing so, they moved it slightly, resulting in the re-alignment of columns and beams around. Scared that the temple would collapse, they let it be and carried out no further investigations. It was obvious to them that this was a very crucial column, probably one that lent the main support.

Venturing into main sanctum and circumambulate, the ceilings of the smaller chambers reveal other breath-taking paintings, slightly worn out with time. The main sanctum itself has a large, splendidly painted ceiling which is unfortunately faded and sooty. But, I am happy that it has been left as it is and not been subjected to shoddy re-painting under the guise of restoration. At least I can spot glimpses of the original craftsmanship, which has no parity.

### Tall tales

The afternoon sun did not dampen my enthusiasm to walk around the complex. Luckily, the monsoons had made it a warm but bearably hot day. Visitors seeking shade rested in the dance hall, escaping the heat outside. I walked on to find a large footprint in my path, filled with slightly green water, an effect of algae. I was told that this was Sita's footprint, one that was

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a perennial source of water, of the holy variety. As if on cue, devotees appeared and cupped some water in their hands, drinking or sprinkling a little over their heads. A couple of steps ahead, there were curious circles scooped into the rock. A colour palette? No...my guide informed me that it was a *thali* (a plate with multiple bowls), where workmen sat for lunch and food was served in these various 'bowls'.

As we approached the *Nagalinga* — a *Shivalinga* shielded by a coiled seven-headed snake — my guide told me stories of how it was built. During lunch break, a group of brothers waited outside the kitchen at this spot, as their mother hurried to cook their meal. Not wanting to waste their time waiting, they built this in the 30 minutes that it took their mother to prepare the food. When she came out to call them, she was surprised to see this and the power of the surprise she exuded through her sight was so strong that the sculpture cracked in two places.

Lepakshi, it seems, was quite the cradle of art and craft in the region. I noticed various repetitive motifs that are reproduced on fabrics even today (in bed covers, mostly) — Lepakshi prints. In the *Lata Mantapa* or the 'hall of creepers', each of the 42 columns are embellished with a unique creeper design on every face. These are popular as 'border' designs, apparently a favourite with Kancheepuram *sari* makers even today.

### An incomplete marriage

As I stood in the *Kalyana Mantapa*, I marvelled at what my guide called 'special effects': two monkeys that would appear as four. And, a three-headed cow that, depending on which head you focussed on, looked like it was standing, grazing or licking itself. My guide then pointed out to two reddish smear marks on a stone wall nearby. He went on to tell me that this was the blood from Virupanna's eyes, when he threw them here. "And why would he do such a thing?" I asked, aghast. Well, apparently, when the king received the embezzlement complaint, he ordered that Virupanna's eyes be gouged out, as was the customary punishment in those days. When the loyal Virupanna heard this, he decided to carry out the task himself. The *Kalyana Mantapa* remained unfinished. It was the last part to be built in the temple complex. I gazed at the ornate columns of this *Kalyana Mantapa*, built at the spot where Shiva and Parvati were supposedly married many *yugas* ago. The sculptures of all the guests, the bride and the groom are exquisite. Had it been completed, it might have even had a roof. Maybe, vibrant paintings as well. Or domes, perhaps? One can only speculate. Today, I had a brilliant blue sky with dramatic clouds providing the perfect cover.

I stopped at *Nandi* on my way out of Lepakshi. It is India's largest *Nandi*, carved out of monolithic granite. The second largest is at Tanjore's Brihadeeswara Temple, and the third is at Chamundi Hills in Mysore. The *Nandi* is in the middle of a garden — a favourite haunt of the locals. There's never a free moment and it is quite a challenge to photograph the bull without people or with the subjects you want. It's a beautiful piece of work, characterised by lovely doe eyes, a benevolent countenance and a hint of a smile. Admiration-worthy are the neck, ear ornaments and the saddle on its back. I left Lepakshi just as the sun hinted at setting, happy with my day.

## Warm winters

A lack of snow across much of the United States has ski resorts from Lake Tahoe to Vermont scrambling to make enough of their own. Unreasonably warm temperatures and unusual jet stream patterns are to blame.

## SNOW-CAPPED

# Alpine adventures

Most people relate a trip to Switzerland with the impeccably laid-out cities of Zurich and Geneva, with the natural beauty found at Interlaken and Rhine Falls and with the breathtaking train ride to Jungfraujoch, also known as the 'Top of Europe'. But not many tourists have discovered the charm of the snowy slopes at Mount Titlis, the highest point and only glacier in central Switzerland. This permanently ice-covered mountain at nearly 10,000 ft above sea level has been developed into a wonderland of day-long fun and activities.

Mount Titlis looks down on the beautiful Swiss town of Engelberg that lies at 3,300 feet and boasts of tourist activities all the year around. In summer, there is mountain biking, golf, bungee jumping and hiking, and in winter, it transforms into a base camp for the ski resort at Titlis. With several good hotels and the Swiss Rail running through it, Engelberg is well connected, being just an hour from Lucerne and about two-and-a-half hours south of Zurich.

The journey to Mount Titlis is in three phases and begins in the cable car station at Engelberg. The 'gondolas' that climb up from here are small cable cars that take six people at a time. The 20-minute ride to Trubsee traipses over alpine green slopes dotted with plump, contented jersey cows, their famous Swiss cow bells clanging peacefully in the mountain air. At Trubsee, there is a change-over to a much larger cable car that accommodates up to 80 people at a time. The short, five minute ride in this cable car ends at Stand for the final and most exciting part of the journey in the Rotair — the world's first revolving cable car and one of only two, the other being in South Africa.

The Rotair affords you a complete view of the mountains on all sides as it revolves at 360 degrees and simultaneously climbs steadily into a world that changes from verdant forests, musical with sylvan sounds to endless silent snowscapes. Here, surrounded by ice and snow, glaciers and deep ravines, you enter the wonderland that is Mount Titlis.

The Titlis Glacier Station sits atop the mountain, centrally heated and with all the comforts you could wish for. Five restaurants, a relaxation lounge, an open-to-sky 'Sun Terrace' that offers a breathtaking view of the mountains all around, and access to the Titlis Glacier cave 20 meters below it.

There are so many activities to try out that it would be wise not to waste any time once you have reached the top. The 'Ice Flyer Chair Lift' zooms you across the slopes as you sit in its open but secured comfort and look down at the sheer mountain sides, the dangerous crevices and snow banks, from an angle you could not have otherwise seen. It takes you straight to the 'Glacier Park' where the fun and games start. Here, special slopes are earmarked and maintained for safe indulgence in snow activities.

Sitting snug in the 'Snow Tube', it is a heady ride downhill ending in a gentle tumble as you hit a snow bank at the bend. Truly exhilarating, yet safe. Coming back uphill is made easier by an escalator that climbs steadily back to starting point. The 'Snow Scooter' and 'Balancer' are for the more daring. If you believe that safety is in numbers, you can try the 'Snake Gliss', two or more plastic sleds linked one behind the other. While the person at the back can control the direction, it takes guts to be the one in front as you both hurtle downhill, the icy air and growing speed quite taking your breath away. For mountaineers and adventurers, there are guided hikes and crevice abseiling.

Returning from the 'Glacier Park' via the 'Ice Flyer', you can relax with hot coffee or chocolate on the 'Sun Terrace' and drink in the sheer magnificence of the Alps all around. It is impossible to put into words the sight of the world's most spectacular mountain ranges, appearing as if it were a touching distance away.

Mount Titlis is a popular winter sports destination for ski enthusiasts coming from all over the world. But it is worth a visit in summer, just to enjoy its various fun activities.

**MALATHI RAMACHANDRAN**



BREATHTAKING The Alps, as seen from the 'Sun Terrace'. PHOTO BY AUTHOR

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