



# *A Land of* TEMPLES

BY ISABEL PUTINJA

ODISHA'S TEMPLES  
ATTRACT MILLIONS OF  
PILGRIMS, BUT IT WAS ITS  
CLASSICAL DANCE THAT  
DREW ME HERE.

My first contact with Odisha was through Odissi, the classical dance that originated in this coastal state of eastern India. When I witnessed a performance for the first time during my student days in Toronto, I had no idea I would eventually spend years in India as a student of the dance. It was through Odissi that I was first exposed to Odisha's rich artistic heritage, religious traditions and even its landscape—before I even set foot there.

## ART IMITATING LIFE

I had read that Odissi (one of India's eight classical dance styles) is associated with the element of water, and that its fluid torso movements and graceful arm and wrist

movements resemble the waves of the Bay of Bengal and the rustling of palm trees. These soft lyrical movements are juxtaposed by strong, rhythmical footwork and striking poses inspired by the sculptures found in Odisha's many majestic temples. During my first lesson, I learned the basic *chauka* position, bending my knees out to the sides while lifting and bending my arms at right angles, just like the statue of Jagannath, the Hindu god worshipped here.

## THE CITY OF TEMPLES

I arrived by train in Bhubaneswar, the state capital and one of three stops in the "golden triangle" pilgrimage circuit featuring the

**TOP:** The 10<sup>th</sup>-century Mukteswar Temple in Bhubaneswar features stunning architectural details. Odisha Tourism

**OPPOSITE:** The 13<sup>th</sup>-century Sun Temple in Konark serves as a scenic setting to a dance festival held every December. Isabel Putinja



great temples of Bhubaneswar, Puri and Konark. It's impossible to visit all of Bhubaneswar's 700 temples (of the 2,000 built here between the eighth and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries), but the few I did see struck me by how different they were from the ones I'd seen in other parts of India. Temples in Odisha are dominated by colossal cylindrical or sometimes pyramid-shaped towers rising skyward in multiple tiers, covered with elaborate stone carvings and guarded by huge sculptures of seated lions at their entrances.

The 11<sup>th</sup>-century Lingaraj Temple, the city's oldest and largest, is dominated by a 55-metre-high spire. Located in the city's atmospheric old town and set inside an enormous 2.2-hectare compound full of dozens of smaller temples and shrines, it is dedicated to Harihara, a form of the Hindu gods Shiva and Vishnu. On my visit, the area in front of the temple complex bustled with flower and coconut sellers as a steady stream of worshippers passed through its gates. Thousands visit the temple every day, however I could only admire this famous temple from outside its walls because non-Hindus are not allowed inside.

But not all of Bhubaneswar's temples are off limits to foreigners. The much smaller but delightful 10<sup>th</sup>-century Mukteswar Temple is one of them. With no crowds milling about here I could enjoy the quiet atmosphere and take in all the stunning architectural details. Entirely built in red sandstone, this Shiva temple has an arched gateway and is completely covered with intricately sculpted figures of holy men, smiling celestial maidens, mischievous monkeys and peacocks. Every January, a three-day dance festival takes place here, with the temple's ancient red stones providing a dramatic backdrop.

### SUN WORSHIP

"Jai Jagannath!" With these words uttered by the driver, we were off. The taxi made its way to Konark, 70 kilometres away, with me squeezed in between two fellow dance students from France and the U.S. on the back seat. While Bhubaneswar is known for its hundreds of temples, Konark's sole and unique temple is one of India's best known. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Sun Temple was built to resemble Surya the sun god's celestial chariot, outfitted with 24 giant wheels pulled by seven horses (although only one remains today).

Though visibly corroded by time and the sea air, the sculpted friezes of human figures, mythical creatures and floral motifs covering the temple are still breathtakingly beautiful. We spotted rampaging elephants, military processions and hunting scenes, as well as a few erotic encounters between amorous couples here and there—not uncommon in Hindu temples.

A stone staircase, flanked by the ever-present seated lions, took us to the *natya mandir*, the dance hall where temple dancers once performed. Here we observed sculpted musicians playing the *mardala* drum and cymbals, and dancers with one hip jutted out in *tribhanghi* pose, the other Odissi position we knew well from dance





**TOP:** Visitors admire a giant wheel at the Sun Temple in Konark. *Isabel Putinja*  
**CENTRE:** The Lingaraj Temple in Bhubaneswar is the city's oldest and largest. *Odisha Tourism*  
**ABOVE:** Only Hindus can enter the Jagannath Temple in Puri. *Odisha Tourism*

class. While dance is no longer performed here as a ritual offering, this spectacular temple now serves as the scenic setting for a dance festival held every December.

### PURI PILGRIMAGE

After a bumpy 35-kilometre ride along the coastal road, we arrived in Puri, one of the four most important Hindu pilgrimage sites in India, and the last stop on the "golden triangle" circuit. This holy city is home to the great Jagannath Temple, built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The temple is famous for its strict entrance policy: like the Lingaraj Temple in Bhubaneswar, only Hindus are allowed to enter it. Even former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was barred from a visit because she was married to a non-Hindu.

We arrived in Puri during a particularly auspicious time. It was the annual *rath yatra*, when the idols of Jagannath, his brother Balabhadra and sister Subhadra are taken outside the temple and paraded on massive chariots. This is the only occasion when people of all castes and creeds can catch a glimpse of the gods, with close to a million devotees congregating here from all over India and the world.

Adorned in brightly coloured fabrics and mounted on giant two-metre-high wheels

painted in festive colours, three giant chariots stood ready in front of the temple. The next day they would be pulled by hand to another temple three kilometres away. It's believed that touching one of the thick, 50-metre-long ropes during the *rath yatra* washes away sins and brings good fortune.

A priest overseeing the decoration of the chariots told us about the elaborate preparations involved for this festive day. Each year, 150 carpenters build the two-storey-high wooden chariots entirely by hand, and a team of 20 sculptors creates the woodcarvings decorating them. Before they set off on their journey, Jagannath and his siblings are fed 20 different dishes specially prepared for them by elaborately costumed temple cooks covered in flower garlands.

We asked the priest about the *maharis*, the temple dancers who used to dance for Jagannath as part of the daily rituals performed at the temple. He told us this tradition no longer exists, and that the last remaining dancer who was once dedicated to the temple lived nearby.

However, the tradition of the *rath yatra* persists. And while millions of pilgrims flock to Odisha's temples each year, for me, only one of many foreigners drawn to Odisha by its dance, this visit was a dance pilgrimage of sorts. I learned how much the dance that evolved and developed here is intrinsically linked to its cultural and religious traditions, and even its temple architecture. Today, the *natya mandir* of many temples still stands, but the sound of dancers' ankle bells is absent. The dance sculptures gracing the walls are the only remaining testaments of the erstwhile temple dancers. **DS**

### TRAVEL PLANNER

For more information on Odisha and India, visit:  
 India Tourism Office: [incredibleindia.org](http://incredibleindia.org)  
 Odisha Tourism: [odishatourism.gov.in](http://odishatourism.gov.in)