

# Epic city

Immortalised in the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the port city of Visakhapatnam on India's east coast has stood the test of time to offer modern-day travellers a hefty sprinkling of history, culture and nature.

BY ISABEL PUTINJA

Unlike other Hindu temples in India, the iconic Simhachalam Temple in Visakhapatnam features a west-facing entrance which signifies victory.

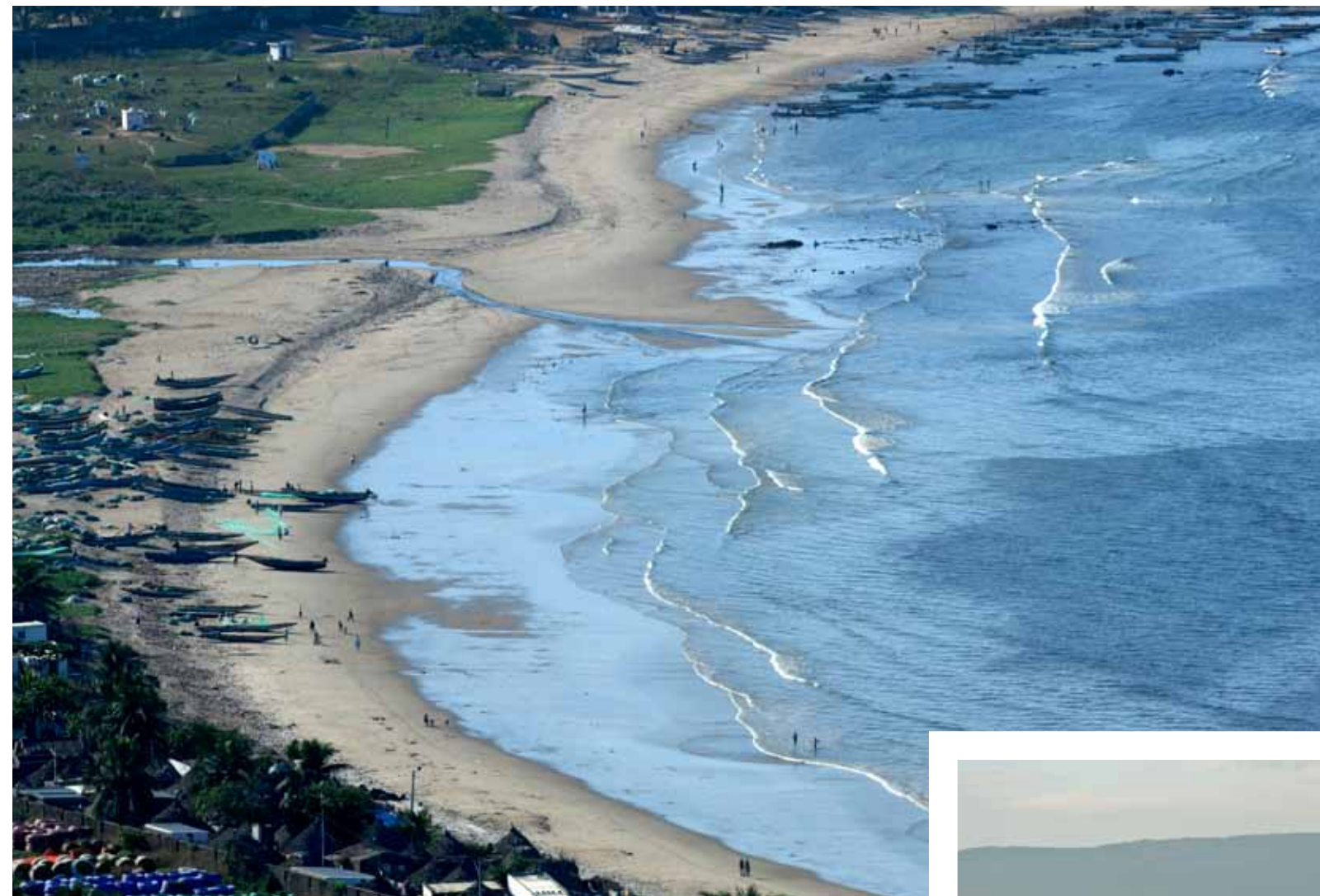
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**ARRIVING** in Visakhapatnam by air is a spectacular prelude to the natural splendour of this city located on India's east coast. A breathtaking bird's eye-view takes in its undulating coastline and natural harbour, the naval barges anchored in the blue waters of the Bay of Bengal, and the surrounding hills of the Eastern Ghats mountain range which complete this stunning tableau.

Named after Visakha, the Hindu god of valour and war, Visakhapatnam (or Vizag) is mentioned in the great Indian epics of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. This city is where Lord Rama formed an army of monkeys with the help of Hanuman, the monkey god, which would defeat the evil Ravana and rescue his wife Sita. And it was in a nearby village that Bheema had killed the demon Bakasura, as described in the *Mahabharata*.

The second-biggest city in the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, Visakhapatnam has an interesting and varied history. It was part of the Kalinga Empire in the 5th century BC which included much of the neighbouring state of Orissa before it was taken over by the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka. The many ancient Buddhist sites in this region are relics of its subsequent Buddhist period. The Andhra kings of Vengi then ruled over these lands, followed by other South Indian dynasties, including the Gajapatis and Cholas. The British arrived in



The city has numerous sandy beaches (left), such as the Ramakrishna Mission Beach (facing page, bottom left), and Bheemli Beach (below), and cultural attractions such as the Kailasagiri Park (bottom left).

the 17th century and developed the town as a major port, which today stands as the second most important port city after Mumbai and one of the headquarters of the Indian Navy.

The city's natural beauty and long sandy beaches make it a popular tourist destination and an ideal base to explore the east coast region. The Beach Road that runs parallel to Ramakrishna Mission Beach is closed to traffic in the early mornings so that locals can come for a brisk walk and watch the sunrise. This is when the beach is at its liveliest, before the heat of the day sets in: children play ball, fishermen prepare their nets before going to sea, and the devout perform *pujas* to the rising sun, or meditate in its healing rays of first light.

Moving northwards along the Beach Road and away from the big hotels are several

attractions: a children's playground, a temple dedicated to the goddess Kali, a small aquarium, a sculpture park, and a 90-metre-long submarine that has been transformed into an intriguing museum. Vuda Park is a large, quiet and leafy oasis next to the seafront.

Although the city boasts many beautiful beaches, with the locals preferring those



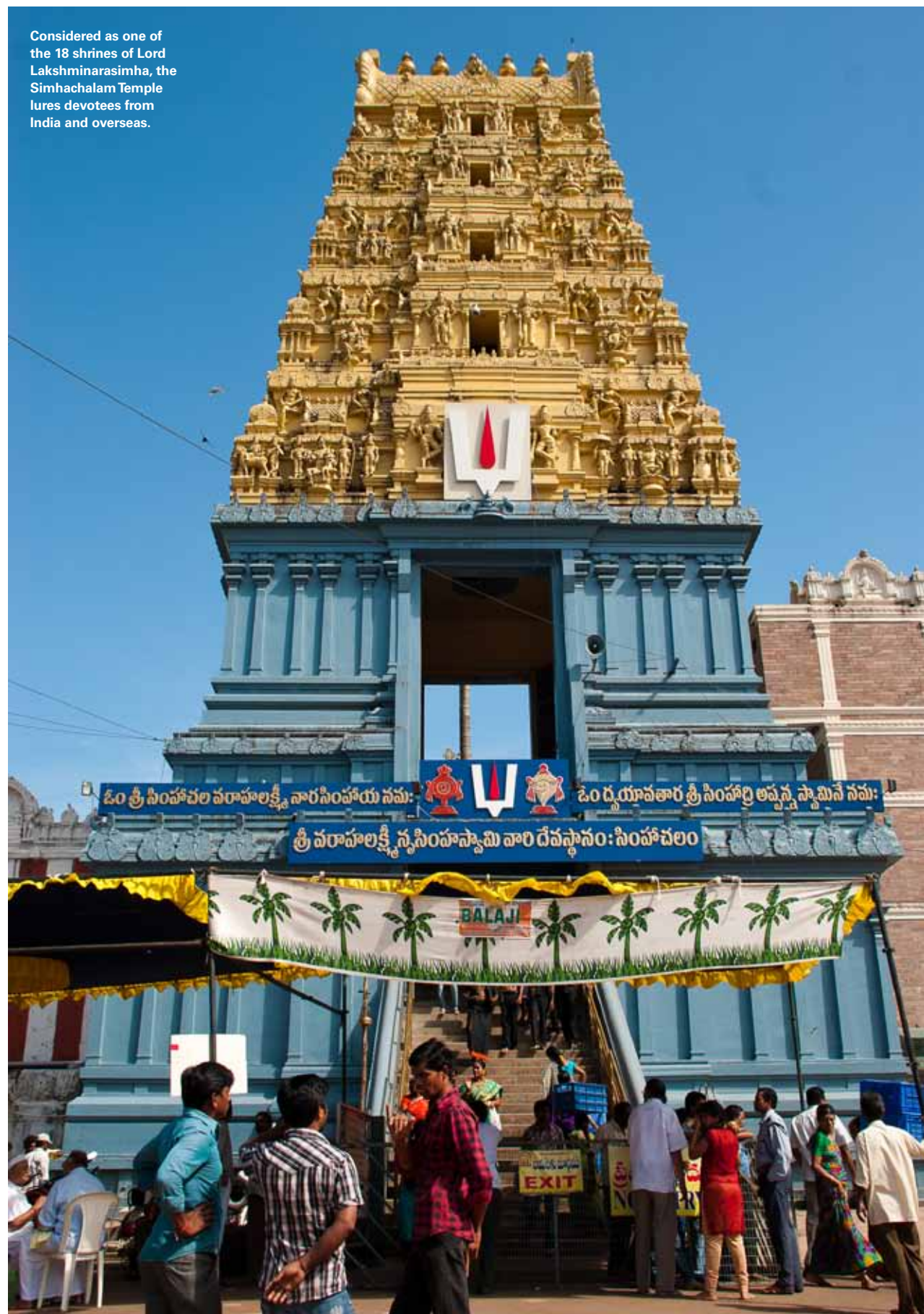
at Bheemili, Rishikonda and Yarada, there are no deck chairs or umbrellas to be found. The ocean here is particularly rough, waters are deep, and swimming is prohibited at several beaches.

A cable car makes the steep climb up to Kailasagiri Park, which can also be accessed by road. From the peak of the hill there are stunning 360-degree views of the ocean towards the east and the hills to the west. A train takes visitors around the top and there are several viewpoints from which the stunning views





Considered as one of the 18 shrines of Lord Lakshminarasimha, the Simhachalam Temple lures devotees from India and overseas.



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of the city, sea and mountainscapes can be taken in. The playgrounds for children, vendors peddling souvenirs and snack bars offering cold drinks add an amusement park-like atmosphere. The western end is more peaceful, and this is where families come for picnics and couples sit to watch the sun makes its descent behind the mountains.

Perched atop Simhagiri Hill just 16 kilometres north of the city, is Simhachalam Temple, dedicated to the half-man, half-lion god Varaha Lakshminarasimha. Built in the 11th century, this majestic temple is architecturally unique. The gateway is in typical South Indian Chola style while the main tower is similar to those found in the temples of Orissa. The 96 pillars of the impressive *natya mandap* (dance hall) is decorated with intricate sculptures of lions and elephants. This temple is a popular pilgrimage destination and queues seem endless, especially on weekends, but those who can afford the 100 rupee fee can take the special 'fast lane'. Childless couples come here to wrap their arms around a large pillar called the *kappam stambham*, which is believed to grant wishes. In an act of complete surrender, many pilgrims get their heads shaved here as an offering to the god. Just outside the temple, ladies sell the fragrant, bright orange *sampangi* flowers which grow on this hilltop.

On another hill overlooking the Bay of Bengal, 15 kilometres north of the city, are the remains of the Thotlakonda Buddhist complex. More than 2,000 years ago, a great Buddhist monastery was built here. Devotees would come here from faraway lands, arriving by ship and climbing a footpath up the steep hill. A good dose of imagination is required to picture the magnificence of this monastery, which included 72 rooms in the sleeping quarters, a large 64-pillared meeting hall and several domed meditation halls. This and other nearby sites such as Bavikonda and Pavuralakonda are lasting testaments to the ancient Buddhist civilisations in India.

A day trip to Borra Caves and the Araku Valley is a must-do. Located 90 kilometres



Left and below: Intricate details of Simhachalam Temple. Bottom: Ruins of the 2,000-year-old Thotlakonda Buddhist monastery.





*Clockwise from below: The vast Borra Caves complex is believed to be the deepest and largest in India; gold jewellery plays an important part in Indian culture; the Araku Valley is home to many indigenous tribal communities.*



away from the city, the Borra Caves are vast underground limestone caves which are believed to be the deepest and largest in India. Visitors can hike through a small section of the caves to the sound of bats chattering above, and observe the ancient stalactites and stalagmites. Some of these are worshipped by locals as manifestations of the god Shiva and have set up small shrines. The Araku Valley, located just 22 kilometres further away, is the home to many indigenous tribal communities. At 911 metres above sea level, it enjoys a cool climate and is a popular weekend getaway for locals and the perfect destination for nature lovers and trekkers. The trip by train from Visakhapatnam is one of the most scenic in India, passing cascading

waterfalls, lush valleys, thick forests and verdant hills. Tribal women wearing colourful *saris* and their characteristic nose rings balance large baskets of bananas at station platforms on the way. The Tribal Museum features a permanent exhibition on the every day life of the tribes who live in this region and samples of their instruments, farming tools, water pots, and enacted scenes of daily life. ↘

*SilkAir flies three times weekly between Singapore and Visakhapatnam.*



LAKSHMI PRABHALA: ANDHRA PRADESH TOURISM

## IN THE KNOW

### BEST TIME TO VISIT

November to February

### STAY

#### The Gateway Hotel

This hotel is conveniently located just off the Beach Road on Ramakrishna Mission Beach. The comfy rooms have been recently renovated, many of which have sea views. [thegatewayhotels.com](http://thegatewayhotels.com)

#### Four Points by Sheraton

Located in a busy shopping district, this new business hotel offers 124 contemporary-style rooms and suites. [starwoodhotels.com](http://starwoodhotels.com)

### EAT

#### Any Time

Serving authentic and spicy Andhra-style cuisine, this restaurant at Daspalla Executive Court is a firm favourite with locals. Try the traditional South Indian *thali* meal or one of their most popular dishes like the tiger prawn *masala* or fish *tikka masala*. [daspallahotels.com](http://daspallahotels.com)

### Bamboo Bay

Dine al fresco by candlelight with the sound of ocean waves as a soundtrack at the city's most romantic restaurant. The menu features Andhra as well as Chettinad and Tandoori cuisine. The separate rustic beach shack serves roasts and grills. [theparkhotels.com](http://theparkhotels.com)

### Rajugari Dhaba

Locals swear that the food at this casual eatery near Gitam College on Beach Road is among the best in town. The house favourite is the mutton and prawn *biryani*.

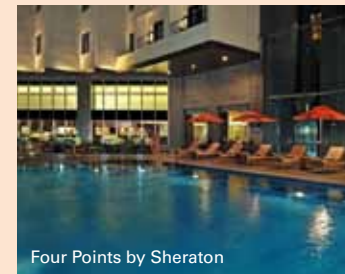
### SHOP

#### Lepakshi

This state-run emporium in Jagadamba has a large selection of local handicrafts such as brassware, stone carvings, leather puppets from Nimmalakunta, wooden painted toys from Kondapalli and Etikoppaka, Banjara embroidery, Kalamkari textile art and exquisite cotton *saris* from Narayanpet and Mangalgiri. [lepakshihandicrafts.gov.in](http://lepakshihandicrafts.gov.in)

### Jagadamba Centre

Avoid the shopping malls and make a detour to this lively shopping bazaar. This is a great place to pick up good deals on fashion, footwear, jewellery and more.



Four Points by Sheraton



The Park Visakhapatnam

## David Loh Surgery

aesthetic clinics in singapore

David Loh Surgery is the destination for discerning individuals looking to improve their appearance. Founded by Dr David Loh and assisted by Dr Wong Kai Jie, the clinics use FDA approved technologies that produce consistent treatment results. Dr David Loh is of course better known as the trainer for Botox and Fillers since 2006.

The 2 clinics in Singapore's Orchard Road provide a seamless experience for patients visiting Singapore to get a bit of discreet zapping before shopping at exclusive boutiques.

Besides popular treatments like Ulthera non-surgical facelift, Botox and Fillers, the Wheelock Place clinic is MOH accredited to provide office-based Liposuction. The Liat Towers clinic is a Body and Hair Center, which provides body contouring treatments like Coolsculpting, as well as Hair Transplants.

ulthera | voluma | coolsculpting | hair transplant | laser | botox & fillers

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