and this,” says the weaver, unfurling with a flourish a gossamer-fine pink-and-gold fabric, “is the Kareena Sari!” As we wander through pretty-as-a-picture Pranpur village, we’re walking in the footsteps of Aamir Khan and his co-star from *Three Idiots*. The duo arrived in this obscure corner of Bundelkhand completely unannounced, three years ago, as part of their whirlwind tour to promote the film, and Pranpur is still basking in the honour. “Is bargaad ke perh ke neeche baithi thhe Aamir.” “Ish qmar mein kaafi itme bitawaq un hone ne.” “Yeh solar lights Kareena ne dhejgaanvalon ke liye.” This running commentary on the doings of the celebrity duo plays like a constant counterpoint to the other sounds of Pranpur—the clack-clack of the looms of Chanderi weavers, the whirr of the potter’s wheel, the clunk of the stone carvers’ chisels and, more faintly, the metallic clang from the homes of Pranpur’s two remaining metal craftsmen.

The Amraee Rural Heritage Resort, run by the Pranpur Village Tourism Development Committee, is set in an orchard of mango, khirni, guava and sharifa trees, with the hills of the Vindyachal range as a backdrop. Its cluster of buildings proudly showcases the skills of Pranpur’s craftspersons—from its lovely carved stone jaalis to its rooms hung with Chanderi curtains and its sumptuous thalis of Bundelkhandi specialities made by village youngsters. Don’t expect the usual ‘resort facili-

ties’ here though—there’s no swimming pool, spa or bar dispensing cocktails. Apart from comfortable mattresses and modern plumbing, it’s all consciously no-frills, and strictly vegetarian and teetotal as well. What you get, instead, apart from the idyllic pastoral setting, is an opportunity to experience up close the daily rhythm of village life. Amraee even has a resident village elder, master potter Babu Ram Prayapat, a touthe knowledge on all kinds of local lore from medicinal herbs to Bundelkhandi musical instruments, who can be found holding court on a chabutra under a mango tree.

The day begins with a chorus of bird-song and ends under a star-filled sky. Avyaytran proceeds in a relaxed, unhurried way, so go with the flow, reset your watch to Pranpur standard time—about an hour behind IST—and don’t fret if the early morning tea you asked for at 6.30 arrives at 7.45: it’s served with such a shy, eager-to-please smile that you’re instantly disarmed. It all depends, apparently, on when the milkman turns up. Forget about trying to get a signal on your mobile phone; and if the electricity goes off, as it does frequently, abandon your book and stretch out on the platform under the leafy canopy of a mango tree. Large and delicious meals are served at breakfast, lunch and dinner. But there's
There's a lot more to Chandni than its fabled fabric. It is so full of history, so brimming with architectural gems that you wonder why it's fallen off the tourist map.
noisy, bustling town where the sari shops are easy to spot, with their huge billboards of Guess Who. She really should come back to Chanderi to see the power of the Kareena Effect. The weaving tradition here dates back to the eighteenth century, and today some 3,500 families—around sixty per cent of the town’s population—make their living from the looms. But there’s a lot more to Chanderi than its fabled fabric. It is, in fact, so full of history, so brimming with architectural gems, that you wonder why it’s fallen off the tourist map. It wasn’t always so; in medieval times, Chanderi was a must on every traveller’s itinerary—Al Biruni, Ibn Battuta, Ferishta and many others came here and chronicled its wealth, splendour and importance. And every conqueror of Hindustan wanted to capture its fort, strategically situated on the trade routes connecting North India to South, and to the ports on the west coast.

The fort looms over the town, stretching for two kilometres along the crest of a hill, its architecture bearing the imprint of the different dynasties who ruled it. Founded in 1100 AD by Gurjara Pratihara king Kirtipal, it was successively captured, among others, by the Khiljis, the Tughlaqs, the Malwa sultans, the Lodis, Rana Sangha of Udaipur, the Mughals, the Bundelas, the British and, finally, the Scindias of Gwalior. Our guide, the incomparable Muzaffar Ansari, better known as Kalley Bhai, runs a passionate one-man crusade to get Chanderi recognised as a World Heritage city. But before we begin our tour, Kalley Bhai, who has his priorities right, insists we try the very local and very seasonal delicacies on sale in the bazaar—the bright yellow fruit of the khirni tree, sweet as honey, and green, deliciously tender lotus seeds (kamal gatta).

PEERING INTO A CHANDERI WEAVER’S HOME IS LIKE LOOKING THROUGH A COLOURED PRISM

Our walk through Chanderi’s streets takes us past the magnificent thirteenth-century Jama Masjid and the exquisitely carved lattices of the fifteenth-century Bada Mahal Gateway, the town’s signature landmark. Along the way, Kalley Bhai pauses to show us its other wonders—camel caravanserais, stepwells, hammams, temples, the very house in which Ibn Battuta stayed in 1342, grand havelis and palaces. In the sprawling fifteenth-century Raja-Rani Mahal, painstakingly restored by Intach, the NGO Chanderiyaan has set up looms for training the town’s youngsters in weaving, as well as block printing and tailoring. The Empowerment Foundation trains them in computerising design motifs, many of them copied from Chanderi’s historic monuments, which can then easily be reproduced by the weavers on saris and dupattas.

And now Kalley Bhai, his shock of orange-hennaed hair standing out among the crowds in the bazaar, leads us to Chanderi’s most dramatic site—the Kati Ghati, where an opening was cut overnight through a gigantic wall of solid rock, a truly superhuman effort, to allow an invading army to enter the lush green Chanderi valley. The road from Kati Ghati leads to a seventeenth-century pleasure palace, Ramnagar Mahal, overlooking a vast waterbody, the Mehatiya Lake. Babur camped at this lakeside the night before he stormed and took Chanderi Fort in 1528. As we sit on a balcony overlooking the lake, a sudden storm whips up, and sheets of rain lash the lake’s surface where a tiny boat bobs about helplessly. When the boat finally makes it to shore, we discover that the boatman has two fat carp in his net—and they are ours for seventy rupees. The resourceful Kalley Bhai forages for some fallen twigs, haldi, salt, lemon and oil, takes over the palace chowkidar’s kitchen, whips out his Swiss knife and in ten minutes produces the freshest, most
Clockwise from jar left: a room at the Amraee Resort; Kalley Bhai makes a fresh fish fry; and a kachori vendor in Chanderi’s Sadar Bazaar.

delicious fried fish that we will ever eat. By now, the sunset hour approaches, and Kalley Bhai insists we visit one more site before heading back to Pranpur. A forty-five-minute drive out of town brings us to the prehistoric rock shelters at Nanaun, at the edge of a vast, boulder-strewn plateau covered with scrub and thorny. There, beside the Urvashi river where giant crocodiles snooze on the banks, are caves with Stone Age paintings of animals and stick-like figures. And beside them, the names and mohra numbers of recent visitors. Kalley Bhai, with an impish giggle, leaves us with a thought to ponder as we come to the end of our trip: how will future archaeologists interpret this bizarre juxtaposition of Stone Age and Phone Age graffiti at Nanaun?

THE INFORMATION

GETTING THERE
Pranpur is in Ashoknagar district, in the Bundelkhand region of Madhya Pradesh. Chanderi is 3 km from Pranpur. By Rail: The nearest railway station, Lalitpur, is 35 km from Pranpur, and several trains from Delhi, including the Dakshin Express and the Gondwana Express, stop there. Or else, one could take a train to Jhansi, a major railway junction, from where Pranpur is 110 km by road.

By Air: The nearest airport is at Gwalior (168 km).

WHERE TO STAY
The Amraee Rural Heritage Resort, run by the Pranpur Village Tourism Development Committee, works in partnership with two organisations that create and promote ecologically responsible tourism destinations, India Untravelled and Travel Another India. TARiff ₹1,500 (doubles), including all meals and transfers. Contact Kalley Bhai (resort manager) at 08103118534 (resort manager Rajpal) or see indiuntravelled.com and travelanotherindia.com.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

> IN AND AROUND PRANPUR: Explore Pranpur’s wheat, jowar and maize fields by bullock cart. Watch a performance of the lively local dance and music forms, Raee and Sehra, at the Amraee Resort. See the spectacular sunrise at Rajghat Dam, 10 km from Pranpur. Amraee can also arrange 5- to 10-day workshops in weaving, pottery and metalwork in the village.

> IN AND AROUND CHANDERI: The ASI’s Chhatarpur Museum has superb sculpture from the eighth to the twelfth centuries, and also the only clean public toilet in the town. In the Fort, see the khilji mosque with its exquisitely carved mihraabs, the Nokhanda Palace and the samadhi of the great singer Baiju Bawra. On the outskirts of Chanderi is the impressive fifteenth-century Koshak Mahal, like a vast roofless cathedral. Nearby, seven temples, about 60 km from Chanderi, have a cluster of temples from the eighth to twelfth centuries, similar in style to Khajuraho. Excavations are still going on.

WHAT TO BUY
Chanderi saris and fabric, of course. At the Pranpur Weavers’ Cooperative you can buy for ₹1,000 less than ₹4,000 in Delhi or Mumbai. Village potters sell utilitarian pots and tawas as well as clay toys. Chunky beads and pretty brass diya at the homes of Prismas' craftsmen.

TOP TIP
Before you make your trip, try the services of my friend Zafar Ansari (aadamehary@gmail.com). He can arrange a tour of forty-five days in Pranpur and Chanderi. Get in touch with him today.}

NANDINI MEHTA