



JEWEL IN THE CROWN: The Chandigarh Rock Garden is among the city's many curiosities. Left: A traditional dancer



'Cheap as chips' Chandigarh is beautiful and fascinating, leaving our writer asking...

Is this India's most underrated city?

By **Olivia Greenway**

I AM staying in the Presidential Suite at The Kaptain's Retreat, a little boutique hotel owned by Kapil Dev, former Indian cricket captain and one of the best players ever. As you would guess with such a pedigree, this is not bad at all.

There is a lounge with marble-topped furniture and snazzy green sofas, fresh cut flowers, elegant carved decorations, a writing bureau and a massive bed. All quite charming, if a touch old-fashioned.

Yet it's the room rate that really stands out: £51 B&B a night. About the same as a (low-priced) Travelodge back home.

Welcome to Chandigarh, capital of the northern Indian states of Punjab and Haryana and one of the cleanest, happiest, wealthiest, greenest and best value - cheap as chips - cities in India.

So why do so few tourists visit? It's a mere two-hour stint on a flight from Delhi. Hotels are a bargain - it's from £120 a night at the super-plush JW Marriott Hotel Chandigarh. Taxis cost £1.50 for most city-hop fares (it's 45p for a tuk-tuk ride). A blow-out dinner at a top restaurant for two with drinks is £35.

It's also a fascinating city and not too big, with a population of one million. And then you have low-rise buildings (high-rises are banned), set around a neat grid system with few traffic jams.

Everything is extremely orderly with each part of the city designated an official 'sector'.

What's going on? The answer is that Chandigarh is India's only purpose-designed city, conceived by Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier in the 1950s. To find out more, I

visit the Capitol Complex, where free walking tours are offered to see the stark, concrete High Court, Secretariat and state legislative assembly.

You need a passport to enter and enjoy the 1950s architecture, featuring a classic 'brutalist' school building.

One of the highlights is Le Corbusier's 'Open Hand' sculpture, the city's emblem, designed to convey openness as well as 'peace and prosperity, and the unity of mankind'.

Chandigarh is a forward-thinking place.

Feeling peckish and thirsty, I make my way to the newly opened 9.9.9 British-themed bar, next to the JW Marriott.

Here, I find myself near a red phone box tucking into fish and chips served with tartare sauce and malt vinegar - with a pint of Kingfisher. The bill? Less than £12.

The next day I visit Nek Chand's Rock Garden. A roads inspector and a self-taught artist, Chand collected unwanted building materials and old pottery pieces turning them into artistic treasures, peopling his world with small characters and fantasy animals.

For many years, his secret hobby in its hidden location was undetected - but when discovered, it became an instant tourist attraction. Today, it is spread over 18 acres and sees 4,000 daily visitors with tickets at 30p. I am soon stooping through caverns, entering his wonderful secret worlds of waterfalls and pottery people.



TRAVEL FACTS

HEATHROW to Chandigarh flights via Delhi or Mumbai from £430 return (goindigo.in); doubles at The Kaptain's Retreat from £41 (the-kaptains-retreat.hotels-chandigarh.com).



ROCK GARDEN: The garden's characters made out of reclaimed pottery, above and inset

Not far from here is the Rose Garden - with more than 50,000 bushes here in Asia's largest botanical garden spread across 30 acres. Food is not all fish and chips. I enjoy spiced prawns (accompanied with a decent drop of

Indian red wine) at the Taj Chandigarh hotel - then negroni cocktails at the Hyatt Regency. This is a city to savour, with great value, curiosity aplenty - and comforts, too. Is this India's most overlooked (underrated) city?

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