



# A Piece of Peace!

A visit to Shanti Niketan in West Bengal is truly peaceful experience – one that allows an exposure to talented artists and leaves one enriched, says **Aruna Rathod**.

The 10 rooms available at this beautiful resort are spread over a.



**M**y memory of Shanti Niketan was revived when a friend from Mumbai decided to relocate there. I recalled a history text book, where we had studied about Tagore's school with classrooms under trees, in West Bengal. That's all I knew about the place. Almost forty years later, curiosity led me to follow my friend there. From Howrah Junction station in the heart of Kolkata, there are a lot of trains that go to Bolpur (where Shanti Niketan is located). While most take more than three hours, I chose to take the Shatabdi Express, which got me there in two hours.



The 10 rooms available at this beautiful resort are spread over a.

**SERENITY ABOUNDS**

Shanti Niketan is situated just three kilometres away from Bolpur Station. While pulling out of the station in an electric rickshaw (called Totos), I see a modern one storey building called Gitanjali – a Rabindranath Tagore Museum. Going through narrow lanes, we reach the Vishwa Bharati Campus and the police station, behind which is my friend’s bungalow.

The area around the campus is very peaceful, with huge sports grounds (I later got to know that the famous Poush Mela is held here). Large plots of land – two acres and more were given to the professors of Vishwa Bharati who built their individual bungalows, and indulged in gardening in the sprawling garden around. Some bungalows are looked after by caretakers, while others are given on rent. A

great place for walking in the mornings and evenings, I observed that most women use a cycle to get around, very comfortably even in saris. On weekends, Shanti Niketan is teeming with tourists from all over West Bengal, mainly Kolkata, while during the week, the place is very quiet. Huge trees lend a lot of shade to the mud roads in most residential areas and local markets. One can spend three days exploring the place. One day, preferably a week day, is good to absorb the Uttarayan Complex that houses the Rabindra Bhavan Museum and a couple of buildings. Closed on Monday, it is best to avoid Sundays. Like most museums, no photography is allowed here. One can browse through artefacts that trace the life of Rabindranath Tagore. The first floor has plenty of photographs and even a reproduction of the Nobel Prize he won. Three smaller buildings, just a storey each, are well-preserved and the complex



The hotel itself is a beautiful structure, with colonial style architecture, painted in earthy shades of yellow and white, accented with brown.



has a lot of interesting sculptures and landscaped gardens all around. It takes about a couple of hours to soak in the information on the Nobel Laureate. Enriched by the life of Tagore, I walk out of the museum and cross the road. Opposite the museum, is the ashram complex which houses the original building

– Shanti Niketan – a ground plus one structure in yellow. Across this building is one of the most striking sights, the Glass House – an artistic structure with glass panels in various colours which is easily visible from the road, and usually well lit up during the nights. It is also called the prayer hall and is open on

Wednesdays, when prayers and meditation is conducted inside.

As I walked around the picturesque campus, the trees and yellow low rise buildings, that house classrooms, make the entire complex seem ideal for learning. A huge banyan tree that is really old, with a trunk that is almost five feet wide is a landmark, as Tagore used to teach under this tree. Another landmark is the Chatim tree, where Tagore held his spiritual discourses, preserved in an enclosure. The Vishwa Bharati campus that was set up in 1921 is located next to the heritage complex, with small modern buildings –Kala Bhavan: the art college, and Sangeet Bhavan: the music college are truly artistic. Other departments include Vidya Bhavan: The Institute Of Humanities, Shiksha Bhavana: The Institute Of Science, Vinaya Bhavana: Institute Of Education, Rabindra Bhavana: Institute Of Tagore Studies And Research, Palli-Samgathana Vibhaga: Institute Of Rural Reconstruction, And Palli Shiksha Bhavana: Institute Of Agricultural Sciences, among a few other departments.

At the end of the day, the experience leaves you totally relaxed and contemplative about the urban educational set up.



The 10 rooms available at this beautiful resort are spread over a.



#### AROUND SHANTI NIKETAN

Make sure you spend one Saturday in Shanti Niketan as every Saturday afternoon there is a weekly *haat* called the Sanibarer *Haat* (Saturday *haat*) that is located about a couple of kilometres away from the university campus. People from as far as Kolkata visit the weekly *haat* – a shopper's delight – that has three markets with at least 100 stalls, where artisans sit on the red mud with a mat or bedcover to display their wares. At this ethnic *haat*, one can buy a range of ceramics, wood carvings, woven artefacts and lots more. Earthy and exotic is the only expression for the amazing crafts, arts and handwork of the humble artisans. Choose

from reasonably priced jewellery, *kantha* embroidered *saris* and *dupattas*, fabric bags with appliqué work, paintings with fish motifs – the range is wonderful and the humility of the artisans is endearing. If you are up for it, a visit to the Vishwa Bangla *Haat* is a must, where local artisans sell their wares, but only in the evenings. *Kanthadupattas* and *saris* in intricate designs, paintings done by tribals on handmade paper, or terracotta, masks carved in wood, the artistic quotient of this state is mind boggling. Indulge in a variety of Bengali sweets, that are really affordable and don't forget to have the famous Kasha Mangsho – a mutton dish with lip-smacking gravy with steamed rice or fluffy *puris*! ■



**Aruna Rathod** is a features writer by profession and a traveller at heart, who believes that one doesn't need magic to disappear... just a destination! Fascinated by all things artistic, she can get lost in a real life landscape or even a painting.