

Puri, India

TEXT AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY Stephen Harby



Crowds Gathered Before the Three Temples
graphite and watercolor on paper, 10x8

While the temple cars are awaiting their journey, crowds clamor for a look. Brightly clad women stay behind the men, sitting down in response to the heat and covering themselves for protection from the sun.

India has fascinated me for half a lifetime, and one recent summer, I journeyed across the globe to attend the legendary festival of Rathayatra, one of the most important festivals in the Hindu calendar. The largest Rathayatra celebration occurs in the city of Puri, located on India's eastern coast in the state of Odisha, about 250 miles southwest of Kolkata. The trip posed significant challenges in the form of stifling heat and crushing crowds, but it was well worth any discomfort to see this unique celebration.

Hindus account for roughly 80 percent of India's population of more than 1.3 billion, and on the occasion of my visit, they all seemed to have thronged this normally sleepy town on the Bay of Bengal. The gist of the centuries-old ceremony is that the god Jagannatha and his brother and sister take a summer vacation to travel a few miles from their home temple in the center of town to their



Kandarya Mahadeva Temple at Khajuraho
graphite and monochrome wash on paper, 13½x8

This temple, one of the most famous in India, is a source for the prototypical temple form across the Hindu world. The stepped forms resemble the mountain caves that served as the original Buddhist places of worship.

FESTIVAL PROCESSION: SINODIA PHOTO/GETTY IMAGES; BEACH, TEMPLE: GETTY IMAGES

VISITING RATHAYATRA



This year's **Rathayatra Festival** will start July 14. (In 2019 it begins July 4.) Flights to the state capital of Bhubaneswar—which is one to two hours from Puri by car—are possible from the gateways of Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata.

The **Hans Coco Palms Hotel**, on the beach not far from the center of town, is a good place to stay and take advantage of cool breezes and refreshing swims in the sea or in the hotel pool. The hotel can arrange a local guide who will explain the intricacies of the festival and secure ringside seats, which are in shaded stands built on the rooftops flanking the processional route.

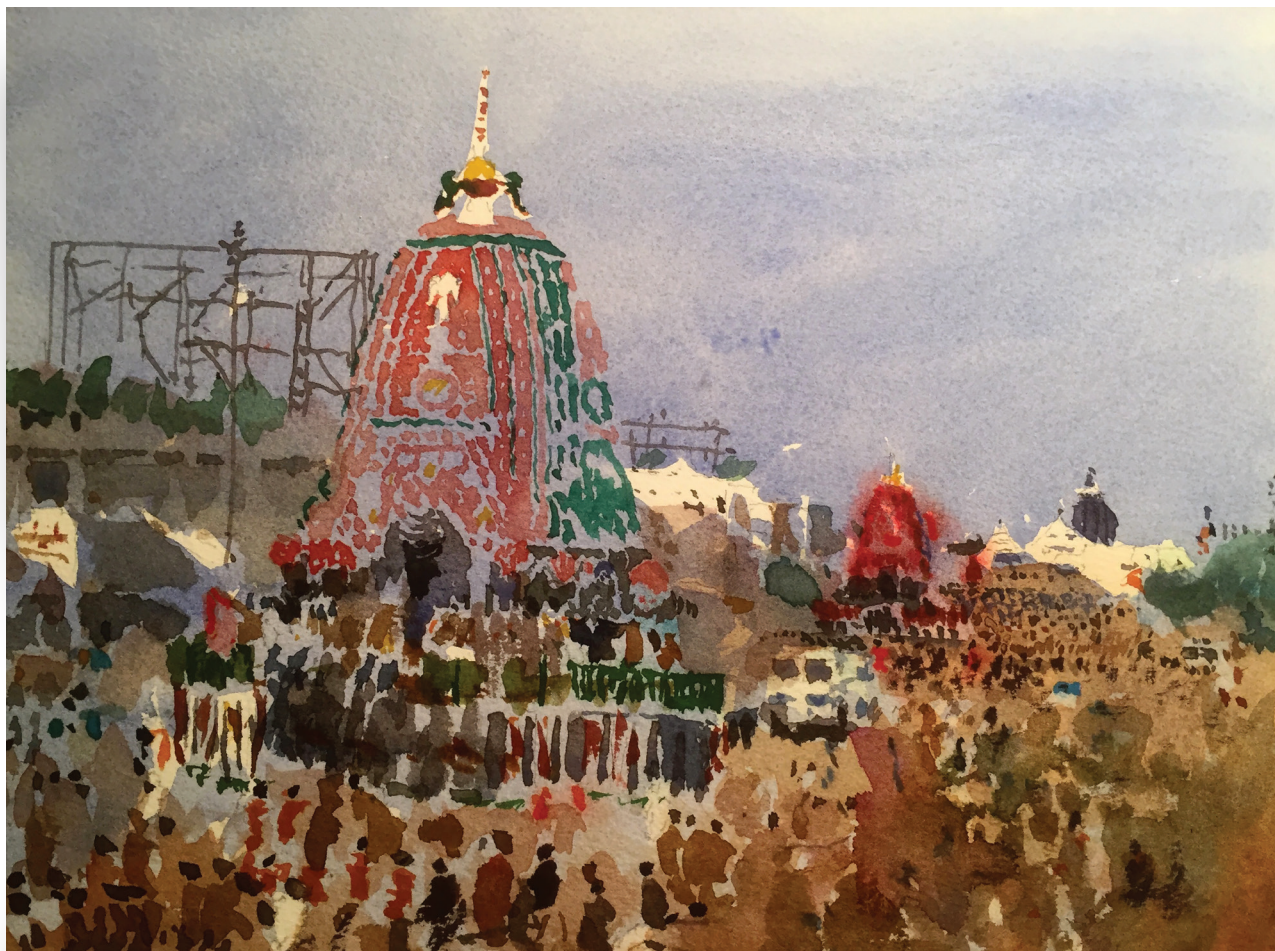
An excursion to the great **Sun Temple**, in nearby Konark, is a must. It's a massive stone temple fashioned as a chariot, with 24 nine-foot wheels. Dating from the 13th century, it is evidence that the tradition of mobile temples extends at least that far back.



ABOVE
The mobile temples in mid-procession

BELOW
The beach at Puri and the Sun Temple at Konark

The festival of Rathayatra is the source of the English word *juggernaut*, which derives from the name of the god Jagannatha and means something careening inexorably forward—although the massive temples themselves can hardly be said to careen.



aunt's temple on its edge—an age-old strategy to seek refreshment and renewal in the torpid summer days. Naturally, the deities—or the images embodying them, three statues without arms or legs—must travel in style. To transport them, three colossal rolling temples are built from scratch each year.

The 45-foot-tall temple “cars” are fashioned out of wood and brightly colored fabric; festooned with bells, garlands and gold decoration; and mounted on carriages with 12 to 16 huge wooden wheels. They are pulled through the streets by hundreds of villagers clinging to four massive ropes. From time to time someone is trampled or suffocated by the crowds or even crushed under the great wheels; many more pass out from the heat.

The Hindu temple form comes to us from Buddhist origins. Early Buddhists

worshipped in mountain caves, and the towering temple form is, in fact, an abstraction of a mountain. The very idea of a rolling mountain defies the imagination and, for me, was the great appeal of this festival.

The journey of about two miles takes a day or two. The temples inch along as a “driver” flays four wooden horses and the actual, human horsepower tugs at the ropes. Through it all, a crew of priests chants, blows horns and bangs cymbals. The sight is cacophonous, colorful and worth traveling halfway around the world to witness. 🍷

Stephen Harby is an architect, watercolorist, faculty member of the Yale School of Architecture and founder of Stephen Harby Invitational, which organizes travel opportunities for small groups.

Three Temple Cars Rolling

graphite and watercolor on paper, 8x10½

The three temple cars have begun their procession, traveling one by one down the wide main street, which is thronged with more than a million spectators. The “home” temple of the deities can be seen in the background.