TBI Photo Essay: The Hornbill Festival - A Visual Treat

The Hornbill Festival, held in the first week of December every year, is a marvelous riot of colour that shows off the rich fare of diverse cultures and traditional arts that is Nagaland. Here you can witness the attires, folk music and dance forms, headgears, cuisines, paintings, handicrafts, and other intricacies of the varied tribes and sub-tribes of the state, as Meena Vaidyanathan did. Here we invite you to take a look at the festival just gone by through her words and lens, while hoping you can make it there yourself this year!

Some of the interesting headgear and attire of the local tribes

The beauty about diversity in the world we live in is that at the heart of our social fabric, culture shapes our identities, aspirations and relations to others. And the myriad of cultures make the experience of living that much more colourful and vibrant.

Dance forms an integral part of the festival

The differences in cultures, both subtle and otherwise, shapes places and landscapes that we live in, and give our unique lifestyles their form. Heritage, visual and performing arts, cinema, music, publishing, fashion or design all have a place that bring to life this cultural panacea.

There are many forms of performing and martial arts that are unique to the region

The Hornbill festival that has been showcasing the cultural canvas of Nagaland and North-east India for the last 12 years just reinforces just how brilliantly cultural and creative sector can impact social and economic development while introducing this beautiful part of the world and its people to those who come seeking to know better.

Even though it is so colourful, the subtle differences between the art forms, costumes, ornaments, weapons, etc stand out and catch our attention

Celebrated in the first week of December, the festival features traditional arts, dances, folk songs, and games conducted amidst near perfect replicas of tribal hutments to the loud applause of an ever-growing enthusiastic audience. Every year, a new theme, game or contest is added to give the festival a new flavour urging even those who have experienced the festival before to be hungry for more.

Uniqueness in Diversity

This was my first participation at the Hornbill, but I definitely have to go back for more. After all, I learnt there are nearly 1400 villages in Nagaland, each having a unique tradition, dance form and attire, and given that only a few get invited to perform every year, the opportunity to see the dances and other cultural events that one witnessed this year might come after a 100 years.

Some examples of local furniture on display

Besides, the beautiful lovely people, near-perfect management of the teeming crowds, clean utilities, exotic food and cold rice beer or Zutho to wash it down is a heady enough combination that will draw me back to Kisama village where the hub of activities during the Hornbill festival is.

The Rock Shows at Kohima kept the night alive

If the mornings were rife with splashes of colour, exciting head gear and energetic dances, sundown brought the city of Kohima alive with the night bazaar, carnival and the fabulous rock shows.

The city of Kohima, as is true with many other parts of India, has severe power shortage and we got to experience the gravity of the situation first-hand. But the obvious lack of infrastructural support did not dampen either the spirit of the people or enthusiasm among the visitors. During the day, the drive down the Naga slopes in winter is a treat to the eyes. Wild poinsettias in full bloom make the entire area dressy and festive as if nature is celebrating the Christmas spirit as well.

The food is primarily meat-based, but there are some exciting vegetarian options as well. Meena learnt to cook Lutho food with a family. Lutho is a tribe in Nagaland.

The Naga food has not been influenced much by other cuisines in the region. Hunting being the favorite occupation of the people, meat is an indispensable part of the Naga cuisine, but I was pleasantly surprised at the festival that the vegetarian in me was as excited as my non-vegetarian son. Apart from the expected pork and beef specialities, bamboo shoot, lettuce wrapped sticky rice balls and yam leaves made for some fabulous vegetarian options.

A signboard that says it all

The Naga king chilli, for which the Government of Nagaland has obtained GI rights, is widely used to add flavor and spiciness to the dishes, and consequently, most of the dishes were rather hot! It wasn't difficult however to balance the spicy food with farm fresh fruits, especially pineapples and kiwis, and yummy rice cake. I also relished the sweetness of the sticky rice tea which reminded me much of the Kerala red rice Kanji in its flavour and delicate smell.

Naga tribesman in traditional attire competing in the archery contest

The food and the local games (piglet catching, greased bamboo pole climbing, Naga chili eating and archery, to name a few) kept my otherwise restless little boy so totally engaged that when it was time to leave, he literally had to be coaxed with the promise that we will be back soon!

A painting of the hornbill taken at the art gallery

The makeshift art gallery, where in addition to some outstanding works of art by local artists, we also got to hear interesting voices, was a delight. The highlight was Javed Akhtar's talk, brief but interesting, where he talked about how art can be the harbinger of progress. The Second World War museum that Kisama houses is by far the best chronicled war museum I have seen in India.

Meena learning to use some Naga weaponry here. Staying with a family takes the experience to a different level.

I would urge Hornbill festival enthusiasts to find local friends to host them around the villages between Kisama and Kohima rather than stay in the Kohima hotels. The experience just increases multi-fold when one lives and stays with the beauty and warmth of a hospitable group of people!

Interesting headgear everywhere we looked!

To me, the Hornbill festival was a lot more than just an annual affair of mass get together. To me, it was a window to get to know and experience a beautiful part of the world, rich in tradition with its unique identity and cultural legacy. It's a beautiful way to bring awareness about preserving the biodiversity in the region along with its heritage while providing opportunities to the local economy to flourish.

The riot of colour that was the Hornbill Festival!

The few days spent at the Hornbill made me yearn to know more. It reminded me of how much there is to learn and experience. As I drove along the Dhansiri River on my way to Dimapur to return home, I held on to the samples of locally woven cloth, the pictures of local birds, the masks, and the bamboo utensils we bought. They will keep the memories of a beautiful land that has so much to offer alive until I find the opportunity to be back.