

# The streets of Khojwa

## Where wooden toys come alive

One of the oldest crafts to have survived changing times, the wooden toy world of Varanasi has many stories to tell.

words // Supriya Sehgal



UTTAR PRADESH

Varanasi ●

**V**aranasi is a lively city. Its magical sunrises foregrounded by the broad sinuous Ganga, devoted footprint of spiritual visitors and an abiding love for handicraft and heritage, cast an uplifting mood on the entire city. Each street is alive with a joyous riot of colours, most of it contributed by the reams of silk cloth, toys, clay crafts, brassware, zari work and other handicrafts.



**HOW TO GET THERE**

Vistara has daily non-stop flights to Varanasi from Delhi, along with convenient connections from other cities.

Most travellers toe the line of blogs and brochures, visiting every ghat, sampling kachauris and thandai, strolling past centuries-old havelis and transfixed by the shimmering

river. Few expand the horizon of their explorations to a degree further than the labyrinth of slim streets that criss-cross behind the stepped ghats along the River Ganga. But when they do, the awards are exemplary. The maze of narrow streets in one of the oldest living cities on Earth holds fascinating stories and traditions, many of them unsung and unrecorded by guidebooks.

**A SPLASH OF COLOURS**

The famous Khojwa market is where unparalleled treasures await. Shops bathed in bright colours flank the road. Eyes can trace the colourful trajectory from the

display outside to relatively dim interiors, where toy workshops are thrumming with action.

Hunched over blocks of wood, skillful craftsmen gently scoop out bits with their chisels. It is fascinating to see a distinguishable shape emerge magically after a few hours. While the head artisan shapes the toy, others keep themselves busy with embellishments, sticking pieces together, colouring and lacquering them.

Going through a toy workshop is a veritable history lesson that takes you back in time when the Mughals held sway in northern

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Image credit: Ahmed Kamal



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India. Centuries ago, the work entailed intricate designs of ivory. In fact, the skill was passed down through generations and ivory remained the main raw material even during the colonial rule in India. When ivory was banned, timely ingenuity made the craftsmen switch to soft wood that could be easily sourced from nearby places. Earlier they used keria from Chitrakoot, but now eucalyptus has become the new canvas. The soft wood is easy to break, chisel and shape into different designs. It takes on colour well and is durable in a child's hand.

### BEHIND THE SCENES OF MAGIC

The toys have always been a reflection of daily life and learning tools for children – a true depiction of the Banarasi culture. For toy makers, inspiration comes in the form of daily activities, nature and wildlife, mythological stalwarts, and the pantheon of Gods that exist in the city. Fish, musicians, elephants, women drawing water from a well, parrots, Hanuman, Saraswati and many others share a common platform in the workshop of a toy maker. New creative themes are slowly

making way into the designs to match the updated trends and tastes, but most artisans still prefer traditional topics.

Seven birds eating from a feeder is one such traditional toy, that showcases bird figurines circling around a plate as if pecking from the same bowl. Most artisans grew up watching scenes like these and nature has always been an inspiration to many of them. It is evident that the old designs have a nostalgic value and an everlasting appeal. In comparison to the toys of new generations, their bright colours, intricate handiwork and relatable themes outshine others.

The world of handicrafts is a tough one. “These colourful toys may not offer margins, but the smile on people's faces when they have a look at our work, is incomparable,” deliberates a senior artisan in Khojwa market. For centuries, the toy artisans have contributed to the creativity and intellect of the city of Varanasi. Even if the sales are down, their spirit is forever high. ✨

### Insider's view



**Niharika Singh,**  
Airport Manager,  
Varanasi



“In Varanasi, one must try the Banarasi Paan at Lanka Chowk's popular Keshav Paan. Mallaiyo (a dessert) is another must-have from Dina Chat Bhandar at Luxa. One can also find great, locally made wooden toys in Varanasi that are perfect souvenirs to take back home; these toys depict Hindu mythology in colourful forms.”

### — VISTARA QUIZ —

Answer the following question and win exciting prizes.

Question 2: In Harry Potter fiction series, which is the spell that levitates objects?

Email your answers at [inflightmag@airvistara.com](mailto:inflightmag@airvistara.com). First three lucky winners will win prizes.

## EXPLORE THE CITY

The bustling cultural hub has many facets for travellers to explore



Visit the Dashashwamedh Ghat at dusk to participate in the soulful *aarti* with panoramic views of the river against the setting sun as backdrop. A spiritual experience, the *aarti* is followed by classical music performances by different artists each day. There are also exclusive private cruises with musicians, trained at the Benaras music *gharana*, holding private concerts. So sail along with the soothing music, and soak in the magical Ganga *aarti* for a soul rejuvenating experience.

### VISIT

Bharat Kala Bhavan, an art museum in the Benaras Hindu University was established in 1920 with Rabindranath Tagore as honorary chairman. Today, its diverse art collection includes rare manuscripts and paintings that date back to the 1500s.

One of the oldest cities in the world, Varanasi has many stories to tell. Go for a Spiritual Walking Tour in Varanasi with an experienced guide and learn the history of Varanasi's *ghats*, musical *gharanas* and temples where *Ramayana* frescoes adorn marble tiles.

Head to Bread of Life, one of the oldest bakeries in Varanasi for some piping hot coffee, freshly made sandwiches and fluffy pancakes. To try some Korean delicacies, Bona Cafe comes highly recommended.

### EAT

The street food in Varanasi is a lip-smacking celebration of north India's tastiest crunchiest goodies. The iconic Benarasi *paan*, milk-heavy *thandai* and *lassi*, savouries like *samosas* and *kachauris* and a *kulhad* topped with rose-flavoured *rabri* are must-have items here.



The eponymous Benarasi silk is a renowned souvenir coveted by people across the world from spiritual leaders like Dalai Lama to Hollywood actresses like Goldie Hawn and Liz Hurley. Get for yourself a memento like a *saree*, *dupatta* or robe weaved lovingly out of this lavish silk from any of the factories in the city.

### SHOP

Gulabi Meenakari is a lesser-known craft of Varanasi where *meena* work (covering metal with transparent coloured enamel) is done using pink enamel, derived from a rose. You can buy intricately carved jewellery and small decorative boxes from any of the shops near the *ghats*.



Image credit: Weaver's Story