To my father, for making me a free bird far from the manacles of restrains and constrains to savour the world in all her virtues and diversities.
The author likes to share...

As a race, we humans love mysteries, regardless of whether they are simple riddles, exciting novels or something much bigger. There are many unsolved spine-chilling mysteries in this wide world even though science, technology, and research have come a very long way. While some get solved and others do offer a kind of explanation, there are still some happenings that leave the best of researchers and scientists ‘scratching their heads’. Some ancient technological wonders can’t be duplicated even today and others are considered to be way ahead of their time. But that doesn’t stop us from trying. We may never understand the entire universe, but we can surely appreciate the fact that it’s so complex that it eludes us. Mysteries can make our brains think critically about what we know. We will never solve all of them. Many more will arise in the future. What follows is a selection of some of the interesting and mind blowing mysteries that have enthralled human imagination and give us a rush of adrenalin. This book is designed for people who would like to get a deeper understanding of these confounding and exhilarating mysteries.

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Let these ever-lurking mysteries trigger out the enigmatic enthusiasm and excitement within you!

Anish George
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The Loretto Chapel in Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA is a former Roman Catholic Church. Today, it is one of the most sought-after wedding venues and home to a fascinating museum and notorious spiral staircase, which is perhaps the Santa Fe Chapel’s most famous feature of all. It is a mystery for over 140 years and attracting around 250 thousand visitors every year.

In 1872 Jean-Baptiste Lamy, the Bishop of the Santa Fe Archdiocese, commissioned the building of a convent chapel to be named Our Lady of Light Chapel, which would be in the care of the Sisters of Loretto. The chapel was designed by French architect Antoine Mouly in the Gothic Revival style, complete with spires, buttresses, and stained glass windows imported from France. When the plan was ready, the nuns found that there was no staircase built to take them to the top level. Historians have noted that earlier churches of that period had ladders rather than stairs to the choir loft, but the sisters did not feel comfortable with that prospect because of the long habits that they wore. At that time, the choirs at most churches were all male, the men could use a ladder to reach the loft. Due to the chapel’s small size, a standard staircase would have been too large. “Carpenters and builders were called in,” according to one source, “only to shake their heads in despair.”

One day a shabby-looking stranger with a donkey and a tool chest knocked at the convent’s door and said that he was a carpenter who could help them build the staircase. He used a small number of primitive tools including a square, a saw and some warm water and constructed a spiral staircase all by himself, which was considered to be the pride of carpentry. Then the carpenter, who did not use a single nail or glue to construct this staircase, disappeared without even waiting for his payment.
The winding stairway that the old man left for the sisters is a masterpiece of beauty and wonder. It is thought to be unique, and some claim its very existence is inexplicable. There are three mysteries about this staircase, says the spokesman of the chapel. The first mystery is that, to this day, the identity of the builder is not known. The legend claims that the mystery had never been satisfactorily solved as to who the carpenter was or where he got his lumber, and that there were no reports of anyone seeing lumber delivered or even seeing the man come and go while the construction was being done. Since he left before the Mother Superior could pay him, the sisters of Loretto offered a reward for the identity of the man, but it was never claimed. Lumberyards were checked, but they had no bill for the Sisters of Loretto. They had not sold him the wood. No one seemed to know him, where he lived, nothing. Advertisements for the carpenter were run in the New Mexican and brought no response. There is no record of paying anyone a penny for the incredible piece of carpentry.

The second mystery is that the architects, engineers and scientists say that they cannot understand how this staircase can balance without any central support. The staircase makes two complete 360 degree turns. There is no supporting pole up the centre as most circular stairways have. This means it hangs there with no support. The entire weight is on the base. Some architects have said that by all laws of gravity, it should have crashed to the floor the minute anyone stepped on it and yet was used daily for nearly a hundred years. Indeed, there are photos of the staircase filled with members of the choir!

The third mystery is from where did the wood come? Knowledgeable men went in and inspected the stair and none knew what kind of wood had been used, certainly nothing indigenous to this area. Many experts have tried to identify the wood and surmise where it came from. No one has ever been able to give a satisfactory answer to this mystery. Where the mysterious carpenter got this wood is a secret known to him alone.

"Sisters, going in to the chapel to pray, saw the tubs with wood soaking in them, but the man always withdrew while they said their prayers, returning to his work when the chapel was free" says another account. The ingenious carpenter not only solved the problem of floor space, but in
doing so designed a structure whose beauty actually enhanced the aesthetic appeal of the entire chapel. It’s mind-boggling to think about constructing such a marvel with crude hand tools, no electricity and minimal resources. And to make such a staircase using only wooden dowels is an astonishing work of craftsmanship. It was originally built without a railing, presenting a steep descent that reportedly so frightened some of the nuns that they came down the stairway on their hands and knees. Ten years later the railing was added to the staircase by Phillip August Heasch for safety reasons.

Visitors have come from all over the world to see the wonderful stairway. Among them have been architects who, without exception, declare that they cannot understand how the stairway was constructed or how it remains as sturdy as it is after a century of use. According to experts, spiral and other winding staircases are not only problematic in design but are also fundamentally unsafe. They are somewhat tricky to build because the form is not well-suited for bearing weight and generally requires additional support. Explains one authority, “For safety, any departure from a straight staircase requires careful attention to detail in design and construction. The construction is dangerous and may easily lead to bad accidents. As a consequence, winders are frequently prohibited by building codes”.

Mr. Urban Weidner, a Santa Fe based architect and wood expert, says that he has never seen a circular wooden stairway with 360 degree turns that did not have a supporting pole down the centre. One of the most baffling things about the stairway, however, is the perfection of the curves of the stringers. According to Mr. Weidner, the wood is spliced along the sides of the stringers with nine splices on the outside and seven on the inside, each fitted with the greatest precision. Each piece is perfectly curved. How this was done in the 1870’s by a single man in an out-of-the-way place with only the most primitive tools is inexplicable to modern architects.

Wood technologist Forrest N. Easley noted that “the staircase does have a central support,” an inner wood stringer of such small radius that it “functions as an almost solid pole.” Far from weakening a structure, the use of wooden pegs can actually strengthen critical joints because, unlike iron nails or screws, the pegs expand and contract...
under varying weather conditions at the same rate as the surrounding wood. Nails were often an unavailable or precious commodity to builders of earlier eras, who developed a number of techniques for fastening wood without them.

There is another twist to this mystery. Later on, the manager of the privately owned chapel (1991-2006), Richard Lindsley, took a piece of wood from the staircase and sent it for analysis to find out what kind of wood it was. When the results came back, they showed that it was spruce, but of an unknown subspecies. This specific wood was very strong with molecules dense and square which is something that you usually find in trees that grow very slowly in very cold places. However there was no such wood in the area and no local trees grow in the Alpine tundra (approximately 2,000 to 3,000 metres) in the surrounding area. The closest place that he would find this density in trees was in Alaska (North America), but of course back then, transport was not the same as it is now and wood was not transported over such long distances. Richard Lindsley claimed to have discovered a new subspecies.

There was a rumour in the city of Santa Fé that the carpenter was St. Joseph (Father of Jesus Christ) himself, sent by Jesus Christ to attend to the nuns' problem. There was a reason for this belief. The sisters had tried to bring a carpenter for building a staircase. But all efforts were in vain. Needing a way to go up to the choir loft, the nuns prayed for Saint Joseph's intercession for nine days. It is believed that this stranger showed up on the ninth day. There is another detail that has just increased the belief in the supposed miracle: The staircase has 33 steps, the age of Jesus Christ. No doubt the legend has improved over the intervening century, like good wine. Since then, the staircase was called “miraculous” and the site for pilgrimage.

Over the years many have flocked to the Loretto Chapel to see the Miraculous Staircase. The staircase has been the subject of many articles, TV specials, and a television movie titled “The Staircase.” The staircase stands but the myth fumes...
or over seven centuries, the village of Kuldhara, as well as its adjoining 85 villages, was home to over 1,500 people. For an unknown reason, one night they all decided to leave and their existence completely disappeared. They didn’t die or get abducted or anything - they just left. Why did the villagers decide to leave their settlement after having lived there for more than seven centuries? No one has an apt answer to their departure, but many have speculated. The reason for their sudden evacuation is lost in time. Whatever the reason may be, one aspect of the tale stands firm. When they left, they cursed the village so no one else could ever live there. It is said that people have tried to make the area a home for themselves but have fallen upon ill fates such as death or sickness. It is rumoured to be haunted by individuals who have died within its borders. So to this day, few dare to tread here, and even fewer dare to stay the night. Kuldhara lies about 15 km west of Jaisalmer in western Rajasthan (India). The village now lies in ruins.

The story of Kuldhara is one of the weirdest and rousing stories one may have ever heard. Historians believe that this town was established by Paliwal Brahmans in 1291 who migrated here from Pali, a small kingdom in Thar Desert and flourished in leaps and bounds with as much as 85 villages in its vicinity. The name Kuldhara is said to be derived from the word “Kuldhar”, which was the name of a sub-caste of Paliwal Brahmans who being the first settlers gave their caste name to the settlement itself. The first chief or ruler of Kuldhara was a Brahmin rishi Visahat whose subjects, including the warriors, were all Brahmans.
The Paliwal Brahmins were a rather prosperous community due to their ability to grow bumper crops like wheat in the rather arid desert. Involved in agricultural trade and practice, as well as other businesses, the Paliwals contribute a substantial amount to the Jaisalmer kingdom’s coffers. The town was beautifully built with lots of greenery around it which almost made it look like an oasis. People were honest and worked hard towards the well being of the society. A well planned settlement, the straight and wide streets ran in grids with houses opening into them. The placement of gate, water tank and presence of Lord Ganesha on the entrance was just accordingly. There was a temple in the mid of the village, ‘Sati Mata Mandir’, that was worshipped in those days. The architecture was immensely good. Everything was systematic. On reaching this village, you will be welcomed by a sand stone gate built just before the village was abandoned. Once in the village Kuldhara, you will feel as if you have stepped into an entirely different world. Wide dusty roads and sand stone houses on either side of roads depict the architectural marvel of the Paliwal Brahmins. Few houses have been restored and these restored houses display courtyards, kitchen, along with other rooms. All design elements kept both aesthetics and utility in mind. A kind of garage opened into the streets to park carts in. Temples, step wells and other structures are all signs of sound development over the centuries.

At the night of Rakshabandhan in 1825, all the people in Kuldhara and nearby 85 villages vanished in dark. Nobody knows where they went but it is believed that they settled near Jodhpur, another city in western Rajasthan. Some believe that they had migrated till Delhi and Agra. Though nobody knows exactly how they did it, everybody in all of the 85 villages completely disappeared that very night. Nobody saw them leave or figured out where they went – they simply vanished.

The first look of the village is very haunting with a forlorn look and brings sadness to the heart when one thinks of those unfortunate people who were forced to leave the land of their forefathers. The crumbling brick structures span out towards all directions and a ghostly silence is all that lives on there. There are still some double storeyed houses that are intact and the awestruck tourist can well visualise how life went on in Kuldhara, ages ago. The landscape is dry and dusty and even during happier times, it would have been a struggle to live there. What remains there is a fascinating glimpse of the past, with crumbling homes and underground structures remaining. Currently, it is home to only rats, snakes and foxes. Over the years, a few skeletons had been discovered in the village. The village temple has no idol (Idol was reportedly taken away by the fleeing community). The government maintains the ruins as a heritage site. The ruined structures and the ghostly silence makes this place aptly called the “Haunted Village”. Nothing ghostly has been established, but several visitors have recorded an eerie feeling here. A walk through the village is akin to wandering onto the sets of a ghost movie.
According to folklore, Salim Singh, the evil Prime Minister of the Maharaja of Jaisalmer, once while visiting this village fell for Nandini, the extremely beautiful daughter of the chieftain and wanted to marry her. The malevolent minister was well known for his lecherous eye and evil disposition. His love was one sided yet he was determined to marry the girl. His marriage proposal was rejected by the chief on basis of him belonging to another caste. This however did not dampen the spirits of Salim Singh and he forced the village chief for marrying his daughter and threatened the villagers that if they did not let him marry the girl, he would levy huge taxes. He also threatened the village with grave consequences if they did not adhere to his wish. One day, Salim Singh gave them a deadline for the marriage after which he would forcefully enter the village and take their daughter. Paliwals were prosperous Brahmins but they were in no way ready to go to war with Jaisalmer and hence were left with no choice but to give their consent for the marriage. Self respect and honour were above all materialistic belongings at that time. Instead of submitting to the order of the tyrant, the chief of the village with those of the other 85 adjoining villages met one night and for pride and honour decided to abandon and migrate elsewhere as against marrying the girl to Salim Singh. The chief of the village knew that if he refuses to give his daughter’s hand to the evil minister and flees away with only his family, the minister would kill every Paliwal Brahmin in Kuldhara as well as the nearby villages. Thus, they decided to abandon all the villages in one night. Apparently, this caused one of the most intriguing migrations of mankind and no one has any clue where all these people went to. They took away what they could carry, buried the treasures within the village and left behind a curse - that any person who attempted to settle down in the village would die. It is likely that this is the reason why so much of the ancient village still remains deserted. There’s no story that says how they did it. But one night was all it took. The evil Minister could never see the girl of his dreams again. Ever since then, no one has ever lived in this town except the curse that still haunts it.

Another legend also revolved around the Brahmins leaving the village at night but the reason was different. It says that during the 13th century, the Paliwals migrated from the then state of Jaisalmer to Kuldhara, due to the tyrannical behaviour of the King of Pali. It is said that the Paliwals were welcomed into the village with a brick and a gold coin – the brick to build their homes and the coin to start a business or farm. Paliwals were very benevolent people with a strong sense of community. Over a period, with the help of each other and collective trading practices with external traders, Paliwals prospered much. Their prosperity became famous and that caused them to become targets of Mughal invasions. The Mughals wanted to plunder the wealth accumulated by the Paliwals. Paliwals bravely fought off most of these invasions until the last one sometime in 18th century. It is not clear who the invader was but the day was
Raksha-bandhan. A large number of paliwals were martyred. The war went on for days. On the last day, this Mughal invader ordered to put animal carcasses into all the wells which Paliwals used to get their water from. All the wells in and around the village finally became poisonous and this caused the staunch religious Brahmin community to migrate from these villages. Overnight, they left the villages of Kuldhara and moved to other places never to return.

However as per both these stories, before the Paliwals left Kuldhara, they laid a curse on the village in order to protect the treasures they had buried there, hoping that they would be able to come back some day and dig it out again. Some say that the power of the curse was so strong that it made the village uninhabitable for humans but attracted the supernatural elements to come and live here. Witches and ghosts are now believed to wander the village at night. After Paliwals were pushed out of their homes, they spent their lives longing to return which they did after their deaths, returning to Kuldhara as spirits and still reside here. Another legend states that no one can spend an entire night in Kuldhara without dying or at least losing his or her sanity.

Another version of the story says that instead of surrendering to minister’s blackmailing tactics, villagers decided to flee overnight. But in the process, they decided to kill the village head’s daughter, as the minister’s guards and soldiers may recognise her and arrest everyone in the convoy for fleeing. Instead of leaving her behind and let her fall into wrong hands, they decided to kill her before fleeing. She is believed to be buried there alive and since she died with lots of desires unfulfilled, she is
believed to be roaming around as a Chudail (lady ghost), haunting people who dare to venture into her village, particularly at night. Other versions claim that they were all hunted down and their souls could never escape due to the collective guilt of burying Nandini alive.

However another version says that the next day when the minister came for his marriage and saw the abandoned village, he tried hard to look for everyone, but in vain. It is said that he then cursed the land and thus no one can stay in the village after sunset.

Another, more plausible reason can be that Salim Singh raised the taxes to such an extent that it became unviable for the local community to survive in the village; and they thus decided to migrate to greener pastures. However, people love the former story; after all, who doesn’t want a tinge of romance and mystery in their tales!

According to another version, the chief of the village decided to leave the village along with 85 adjoining villages’ people but they were unable to go out of village because the minister attacked on that very night and many of the villagers died and the village was sealed. The villagers, who didn’t get injured badly, cursed the village and then suddenly vanished. It is believed that whoever enters in this village never returns back as the souls of the villagers out there kill them.

Many stories floated around. Some say the “chudails” or ghosts walked around in the night, haunting the place. The silence was not comforting. Tales of mysterious deaths at the ruins have also spooked people. When people go there, they feel like someone is looking at them from behind the walls; they hear women screaming, kids running around and some people have claimed to see burning fire. People get pushed by unknown forces while walking or stones being thrown at them from nowhere. According to the stories, no one has ever spent a night at the ruins and those who have tried have not lived to tell the tale. It is also believed that those who pick even a stone or pebble from there will bring
him curse. It is believed to be the place of most aggressive spirits.

There have been stories of people trying to stay behind after sunset and getting in trouble. One of which is of two Germans who had stayed back in the village after dark. They had heard stories about gold lying beneath the walls of the Kuldhara homes. Around midnight they started digging and to their luck, they did find the good old gold. But unfortunately, something happened, and they could not carry the gold with them. One of them died while the other was arrested.

Paranormal society of Delhi acknowledge about the haunted Kuldhara village. They sent a team of thirty people to stay the night in the eerie abandoned village. They claim (somewhat unsurprisingly) that they detected mysterious moving shadows, haunting voices, hand imprints of children on cars and one even claims he felt someone touching his shoulder from behind, but nobody was there. They also claim they detected a sudden rise and drop in temperature. The team had a device K-2 metre by which they noticed sudden rise and drop of temperature from 31 degrees to 42 degrees within a distance of few metres. They are yet to find an explanation for this phenomenon. However, as time wore by, they began to get confident and decided to take these so-called spirits head on. The team said they used an equipment Ghost Box to communicate with the haunting spirits and were even successful as some responded with their names. While they did survive the night, the team was not able to confirm or deny the presence of any ghosts due to the strange occurrences throughout the night. The objective of paranormal society of Delhi is to dispel fear from people because strange activities in the village minify as their confidence increases.

The people who lived there, their history, beliefs, art, culture, life and their ultimate downfall never fails to interest us. Why did the villagers decide to leave their settlement after having lived there for more than seven centuries? It remains a mystery.

By the time dusk settles down, the ultimate horror environment starts to descend on the panorama. Check out the truth for yourself!
The North Sentinel Island
An island that really doesn’t want visitors!

North Sentinel Island is one of the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal. It lies about 40 kms west of the southern part of South Andaman Island. Most of the island is forested, surrounded by coral reefs, and lacks natural harbours. A group of indigenous people, the Sentinelese, live on North Sentinel Island. Their population is estimated to be between 50 and 400 individuals. The tribe lives a peaceful life in the dense forests of the island which is about 72 square kilometres in area. The Sentinelese reject any contact with other people, and are among the last people to remain virtually untouched by modern civilisation. The Sentinelese may be the most isolated tribe in the world, with the Indian government choosing not to meddle in their affairs. Indian authorities have gone as far as making it a crime to try to make contact with the Sentinelese. It is illegal to go within three miles of the island. Anyone caught trespassing can be sentenced to prison along with fines if they are not killed first by the Sentinelese themselves.

From the sky it appears to be an idyllic island with amazing beaches and a dense forest, but tourists or fishermen don’t dare to set foot on this outcrop in the Indian Ocean due to its inhabitants’ fearsome reputation. Visitors who venture too close to North Sentinel Island risk being attacked by members of a mysterious tribe who have rejected modern civilisation and prefer to have zero contact with the outside world. They are rarely photographed up close and almost never seen on video. Most of the photos and video clips that do exist are of poor quality.
North Sentinel Island sat in the direct path of the tsunami, the deadliest in recorded history, which devastated the region on Christmas 2004. The tsunami killed more than 230,000 people in surrounding countries. The Sentinelese apparently survived the earthquake and its after-effects, including the tsunami and the uplifting of the island. Where all other places affected by the tsunami had thousands of casualties, the Sentinelese did not suffer any damage. They were somehow prepared to face a calamity of that scale and took precautions beforehand. No one knows for sure however, what they did to save themselves. It appears that the Sentinelese were able to sense the coming of the tsunami and escape to higher ground before it arrived. When an Indian Navy helicopter arrived three days after to check on their well-being and drop food parcels on the beach, a Sentinelese warrior came out of the jungle and warned the helicopter off with a bow and arrow, a clear sign that the Sentinelese did not want help from outsiders.

Early Arab and Persian documents report that Andaman Islands were inhabited by cannibals - an exaggeration probably originating from the ferocity of attacks with which these travellers were greeted. Later Indian and European explorers steered clear off these islands to avoid the hostile inhabitants.

In 1867 an Indian merchant ship, the Nineveh was wrecked on a reef connected to North Sentinel Island. The 106 passengers and crewmen of the Nineveh made their way to what they thought would be safety on the beach, but soon found themselves under attack by wave after wave of Sentinelese without provocation. Those that survived the ordeal were eventually found by a Royal Navy rescue party and quickly removed from the island.

Many explorers have tried to unfold the secret life of this isolated island and bring it to the modern world however, the ferocious men of the island do not spare anyone who tries to get close and attack them with bows, arrows and other primitive weapons. In 1880 a large, heavily-armed party led by 20-year-old Maurice Vidal Portman, the British colonial administrator, landed on North Sentinel and made what is believed to be the first exploration of the island by outsiders. Several days passed before they made contact with any Sentinelese, because tribe members disappeared into the jungle whenever strangers approached. Finally, after several days on the island, the party stumbled across an elderly couple...
who were too old to run away, and several small children. Portman brought
the two adults and four of the children back to Port Blair. But the man and
the woman soon started to get sick and then died, probably from
exposure to western diseases like smallpox, measles, and influenza, to
which they would have had little or no resistance. So Portman returned
the four children to North Sentinel Island and released them with gifts for
the rest of the tribe. The children disappeared into the jungle and were
never seen again. No other contact has been made. We don’t know what
happened to the four children that were returned by the British. Two
pervading theories that persist is that they were killed off by the natives or
that they could have possibly been welcomed back and might have led to
an outbreak that caused the tribe to go from shy to hostile. After this
experience, the British left the Sentinelese more or less alone, and
focused their pacification efforts on the other tribes.

When an Indian convict escaped in 1896, he drifted 30 miles on a
makeshift raft and washed up on North Sentinel. A search party found his
body a few days later on a beach, punctured by arrows and his throat cut.

When India won its independence from Great Britain in 1947, the
Andaman Islands were handed over to India, but the Indians too ignored
the Sentinelese, for about 20 years. Since 1967 Indian authorities have
attempted to make peaceful contact with the Sentinelese under the
auspices of anthropological research. Some government-sponsored groups
made brief trips to the island in the late 1980s and early 1990s, largely
under the direction of the Indian anthropologist T.N. Pandit. The visit was
less aggressive than the British had been 87 years earlier (no
kidnapping), and it was more scientific. But they never made contact with
a single Sentinelese soul. Once again, the tribe members vanished deeper
into the jungle whenever the outsiders approached. In an attempt to coax
the Sentinelese out of their customary hostility to outsiders, people in
padded suits left gifts of coconuts, knives, cloth, ribbons, arrowheads,
candy, aluminium cookware, mirrors, rubber balls, beaded necklaces,
plastic buckets etc. Once the visitors approached as closely as they felt
was safe, they would toss the items overboard to wash upon the beach.
Almost all of these attempts were greeted with showers of arrows and
stones.

When a National Geographic film crew lingered too long during a visit
in 1975, a Sentinelese warrior with a bow and arrow shot the director in
the thigh, and then stood there on the beach laughing at his
accomplishment.

The Andaman Islands, North Sentinel included, sit at the
crossroads of ancient trade routes between Europe, the Middle East,
and Southeast Asia. Ironically, this may have further encouraged the
isolationist tendencies of the Sentinelese, because their dark skin and
African appearance would have made them the targets of any slave
traders who might have tried to land on the island over the centuries.
Periodic contact with such outsiders would have only intensified the tribe’s hostility toward the outside world and their desire to be left alone. In the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, several tribes’ people were killed in battles with armed salvagers who visited the island to recover iron and other goods from a shipwreck.

On 2nd August 1981, the ship Primrose (Hong Kong freighter) grounded on the North Sentinel Island reef. The crew observed several dark-skinned naked people building boats on the shore and armed with spears, bows and arrows. It appeared as if the Sentinelese were preparing to board the boat and kill those on board. The captain of the Primrose radioed for an urgent drop of firearms so the crew could defend themselves, but did not receive them. Luckily for the crew, heavy seas kept the islanders away from the ship. After a week, the crews were rescued by a helicopter working under contract to the Indian Oil and Natural Gas Commission (ONGC).

It wasn’t until the early 1990’s, after more than 20 years of such visits, that the Sentinelese finally relaxed their guard - just a bit - and allowed the boats to come closer. Sometimes unarmed tribesmen stood on the beach while the people on the boats tossed the coconuts overboard. A few times, they even waded out in the water to collect the coconuts in person. Coconuts delivered to the beaches as a gift were eaten, rather than planted. Live pigs were shot with arrows, and then buried without being eaten. The coconuts and cookware were a big hit. The well-received items were red buckets, which were promptly taken away. Even so, they did not allow the visitors to stay long. After just a few minutes, the Sentinelese would signal with menacing gestures or “warning shots” - arrows fired with no arrowheads attached - that the visit was over.

On 26th January 2006, two poachers who’d spent the day fishing illegally for mud crabs inside the exclusion zone dropped anchor near the island and went to sleep, apparently after a night of heavy drinking. Sometime during the night, the anchor came loose and the boat drifted onto the coral reefs. The Sentinelese killed both men and buried their bodies on the beach. A helicopter arrived some days later, to search for the bodies of the fishermen to take back to their countries, so their families could lay them to rest. When the helicopter tried to recover them from the beach, the Sentinelese fought it off with bows and arrows. In reality, the Sentinelese are a tender but helpless people, for even against a single helicopter, they would have never stood a chance. Regarding the incident, Samir Acharya, the head of an environmental organisation, released the following statement. “As day broke, fellow fishermen say they tried to shout at the men and warn them they were in danger. However they did not respond - they were probably drunk - and the boat drifted into the shallows where they were attacked and killed.”

The tribe has rejected the modern world and is violent to outsiders. They drive off fishermen, journalists, anthropologists and government officials with their spears and arrows. The tribe keeps its
existence and numbers a closely guarded secret and many attempts at getting to know them have failed miserably. Like other Andaman island natives, they have managed to live for thousands of years near one of the most ancient sea routes while avoiding any influence from outside civilisations. Officially, the island has been administered by India as part of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Union Territory since 1947. But India has no treaty or contact with the North Sentinelese. In 1970, India left a stone tablet on an unpopulated part of the island that claimed North Sentinel Island as part of the Republic of India. The Andaman and Nicobar Administration has stated in 2005 that they have no intention to interfere with the lifestyle or habitat of the Sentinelese and are not interested in pursuing any further contact with them. India’s official policy is now to make no further attempt to contact or “assimilate” the islanders, so although they remain notionally “Indian”, they are still essentially untouched by the outside world. There are currently no planned attempts to contact the Sentinelese and access to North Sentinel Island is strictly forbidden.

Very little is known about the Sentinelese. They’re named after the island they live on, because nobody actually knows what they call themselves. Virtually nothing is known or understood about their culture. All knowledge about the Sentinelese is derived either by observation from a distance or from comparison with other Andamanese tribes. We know they are an ancient people who have probably inhabited the island for tens of thousands of years. Some anthropologists actually believe that they have lived on the island for 65,000 years. That’s 35,000 years before the last ice age, 55,000 years before the great woolly mammoths disappeared from North America, and 62,000 years before the ancient Egyptians built the pyramids at Giza. We know that they are most likely hunter-gatherers who use the dense forest and surrounding sea life to sustain themselves.

North Sentinel Island is amazingly well suited to both support and isolate a tribe like the Sentinelese. It’s too small to interest settlers or colonial powers, especially when there are bigger, better islands within a few hours’ sailing time. And unlike many of those islands, North Sentinel has no natural harbours, so there’s no good place for a ship to take shelter from a storm. Furthermore, the island is surrounded by a ring of submerged coral reefs that prevent large ships from approaching. This was especially true during the age of sail, when ships had no way of quickly maneuvering out of harm’s way once they realised that the reefs were there. Narrow openings in these reefs allow small boats to slip through and land on the beach, but these are passable only in good weather and calm seas, which occur as infrequently as two months out of the year. For the remaining ten months, the island cannot be safely approached from the sea. The lack of a harbour and impossibility of ships to approach have led to this tribe being cut off from civilisation because their island was not of interest to governments looking for land to colonise. The isolation has also served to protect the population from being devastated by disease. It is likely the Sentinelese have never developed defenses against viruses
One more thing that has protected the Sentinelese from outsiders: the age-old belief that all Andaman Island tribes were cannibals. There is no evidence that any of them were, except that some tribes wore the bones of their ancestors as jewelry (including the skulls), which they wore strapped to their backs. It would have been easy to mistake such people for cannibals. Marco Polo described the Andamanese as “a brutish and savage race... [who] kill and eat every foreigner whom they can lay their hands upon.” Claims like these certainly did help to keep strangers away.

The Sentinelese themselves appear however to be markedly taller on average than other Andamanese people. Sentinelese wear no clothes, but leaves, fiber strings or similar material as decorations. Headbands made from vines appear to be fashionable items among men. The Sentinelese maintain an essentially hunter-gathering society, obtaining their subsistence through hunting, fishing, and collecting wild plants. The coral reefs create several shallow lagoons that are teeming with sea life. The food provided by these lagoons is so plentiful that the Sentinelese have never needed to fish in the deep sea waters beyond the coral reefs. They propel their dugout canoes through the shallow lagoons by poling along the bottom, but they cannot navigate in water deeper than the length of the poles. They’ve never invented oars, without which they cannot leave the island.

There are no signs of agriculture on the island. Although most of their tools and weapons are made from stone and animal bones, the tribe seems to make use of metal fragments that end up washed on their shore. It is also difficult to estimate the number of people in the tribe because of the impossibility to travel to the island to conduct a census. No single word of their language has been recorded. The fact that their language is so different even from other Andaman islanders suggests that they have had little or no contact with the other people for thousands of years.

Today anyone with a laptop and internet access can use Google Earth to spy on places that are not meant to be seen by outsiders. But when you look down on North Sentinel Island in the Bay of Bengal, all you can
make out is the wreck of the Primrose, still stuck on the reef. You can’t see the Sentinelese, their dwellings, or anything else that might shed light on how many people there are on the island, or how they live there. The dense jungle that covers every inch of the island except the beaches conceals everything: Even when viewed from outer space, the Sentinelese remains free from prying eyes.

The Sentinelese have remained unchanged, from their height to their hair, and their ebony coloured skin. They have made no advancements, living the exact same way, hunting and gathering, content with a devout purity, unaware and uncaring of the evolution of the world around them, on a tiny island in the great wide ocean. These people have never seen electricity, running water, a car, packaged food, or countless other modern inventions that we see several times every day; however, the North Sentinelese still experience happiness, sadness, greed, companionship, loss, stress and pride on their small “uncivilised” island.

No matter what picture the civilised world decides to paint, the people of North Sentinel Island have proven they are no cowards and their way of living is a choice, not a random, natural mistake. For thousands of years they have refused contact with the outside world including Arabs, Persians, Indians, Europeans and helicopters. They are fiercely defending their island. Loin cloths covering their groin, long spears grasped in their hands, using all the weapons in their arsenal, the Sentinelese men, primitive some say, may be soldiers, protecting their women, children and their nation. We have to admire them for keeping strangers away from what is precious to them.

North Sentinel Island remains one of the most mysterious unexplored islands in the world. Perhaps technology will allow us to learn from afar. One day, a satellite might look down on the island and observe, peering through the dense foliage with heat sensor cameras. Hopefully, we can gain some insight without disturbing the way of life of one of the most mysterious tribes on Earth. Until then, we can only wonder.

Undiscovered, vast and naturally beautiful, scarcely matched anywhere else on Mother Earth, the North Sentinel Island is a disturbing anomaly and no, you’ll probably never be able to visit there.