

As locals well know, one of the finest views of the Taj is away from the crowds, at dawn or dusk from across the Yamuna river

Indian dream

Follow our journey through northern India, taking in the Taj Mahal, a tiger-inhabited national park, serene lakes, glittering bazaars, and the beautiful Thar desert

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Classic destinations are seen in a new light on this tour around some of India's most iconic wonders. If you've always wanted to holiday in India, but have been bewildered by the practicalities, this trip makes it easy



Set off into the Thar desert and you'll discover tribal villages, itinerant musicians, rolling dunes, and what unusual noises camels make.

Best for bazaars



The Pink City feels like one great bazaar, overflowing with glittering mayhem and Rajasthan's rich crafts.

Best for Taj Mahal



The poet RN Tagore wrote of the Taj: 'Yet still one solitary tear/Would hang on the cheek of time'. See Emperor Shah Jahan's sorrow set in stone here.

Best for lake palaces



A silver light bathes Udaipur, a serene, romantic haven, where icing-sugar palaces sit on rippling lakes.

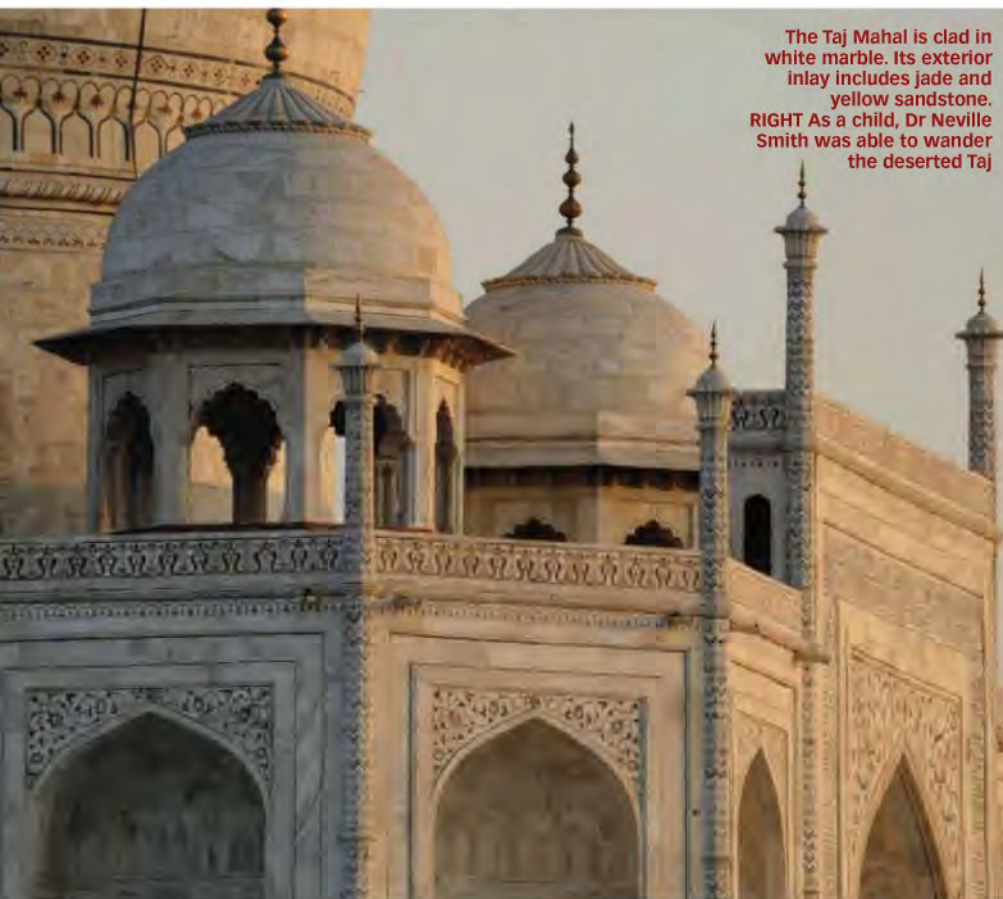
Best for wildlife



Spot tigers, bears, leopards, hyenas, jackals, mongoose and much more in this epic jungle park around the ruins of a 10th-century fort.



Udaipur.



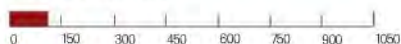
The Taj Mahal is clad in white marble. Its exterior inlay includes jade and yellow sandstone.
RIGHT As a child, Dr Neville Smith was able to wander the deserted Taj



1 AGRA

Best for Taj Mahal

MILES INTO YOUR TRIP



From New Delhi, Agra is 3½ hours by car, 2–4 hours by train

The Taj Mahal's moon-brightness and fluid lines make it seem almost to float. It's in a dialogue with its waterways: two long channels centre on the Al-Kawthar (abundant pool – a reference to the Qu'ran), reflecting the sky and perfect mirror images of the mausoleum. The ruler-straight angles of the Mughal gardens are set against the building's sky-searching lines.

An ode to love and death, the Taj was built by the grieving Emperor Shah Jahan in the 17th-century to commemorate his second wife Mumtaz Mahal, who had died giving birth to her 14th child.

It stands alone, cornered by minarets,

flanked by a russet-red mosque to the west, and a jawab (answer), a building providing balance, to the east. Stepping inside, the pale interior feels serene, and the acoustics lend sounds a clear quality. Semi-precious stones form twisting, formalised floral patterns and elaborately carved screens create patterns from the sunlight.

Dr Neville Smith, a local journalist, has grown up in the Taj's shadow – his family has lived in Agra for seven generations. He speaks with clipped, charming formality that evokes his British ancestry. 'The Taj lived in splendid isolation, even neglect, in the two centuries that followed the death of the last great Mughal, Aurangzeb, in 1707. The British were not particularly fond of the Taj and even put it up for auction at one point.' He recalls, 'Some 50 years ago, I could park my cycle against an old Peepal tree in the outer courtyard and walk to the main doorway with no-one to check me.'

Today such a deserted scene is unimaginable, but it's still possible to

experience the Taj as once Dr Smith saw it. Viewed from the Yamuna river's north bank, it feels as though you have the place to yourself, give or take a few buffalo. The building is also open for night visits around the full moon, with only 50 tickets available each night.

FURTHER INFORMATION

● For more on the Taj see asi.nic.in.

WHERE TO STAY

BUDGET

● **Hotel Sheela** Expect light and airy rooms at this simple choice, set in lovely tranquil gardens and in a central location, a short walk from the Taj (from £7; hotelsheelaagra.com).

BLOWOUT

● **Oberoi Amarvilas** Live the life of a Mughal prince at the Oberoi – think colonnades, pools, and landscaped gardens – one of India's finest hotels, where all rooms have Taj views (from £260; oberoihotels.com).

WHERE TO EAT

● **Bellevue** Have a meal with a view at the Oberoi – Bellevue has a fine choice of Indian and Western dishes plus the chance to gaze at the Taj as you dine (meals around £30; oberoihotels.com). ►

Ranthambore's jungle landscape tangles around temples, hunting pavilions and this summer refuge, the Raj Bagh Palace. FAR RIGHT About 30 tigers live in Ranthambore; get close to wildlife in one of Khem Villas' luxury tents

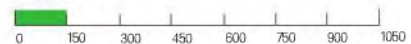




2 RANTHAMBORE NATIONAL PARK

Best for wildlife

MILES INTO YOUR TRIP



About 4 hours from Agra by car; no direct trains

'Ranthambore is not just about tigers,' says Goverdhan Singh Rathore, who grew up inside the park and is the son of tiger expert Fateh Singh Rathore. 'But it is the most fantastic tiger habitat in the world.'

The park is a mountainous jungle, entwining the 10th-century Ranthambore fort and wrapped around deep blue-green lakes. The overgrown fortress has huge doors bearing elephant-repelling spikes, beyond which is a 'decoy door' opening onto a vertiginous drop. You half-expect to see Tarzan appear, being pursued by Indiana Jones.

Goverdhan recalls the time before the local villages were evacuated, a move instigated by his father: 'My early memories are of people everywhere. Even the lakes had crops in them. One never saw any tigers, except at night. The best way used to be to tie a bait, usually a small buffalo. Dad would have a spotlight hooked up to the car battery with a long wire and we would sit for many nights before we would see a tiger come and kill the bait. Even then it would ►



be extremely skittish and I'd be constantly reminded to stay quiet.'

Now that Ranthambore is better protected, the tigers have become so used to visitors that they will stroll out in daylight. Official estimates put the numbers here at 47, though tiger experts believe it to be around 30 – poaching and habitat encroachment are still issues.

Searching for a tiger is an adrenalin trip. As the park jeeps roll through the sun-striped undergrowth, the guides motion for quiet. Jungle signals indicate a tiger's position: first, the monkeys' warning calls, then the deers' sounds of fear.

On the journey, a leopard pads past in the sunlight, and a tree sways under the weight of parakeets. As Goverdhan explains, there are many other creatures to look out for here, in this park reclaimed by the wild: 'Bears, leopards, hyenas, jackals, desert fox, mongoose, deer, blue bulls, chinkara and hundreds of different types of birds.'

ABOVE AND LEFT
Ranthambore park is
home to plentiful langurs,
while leopards are also
regularly spotted

FURTHER INFORMATION

● Tiger Watch: tigerwatch.net.

WHERE TO STAY

BUDGET

● **Resort Tiger Safari** A well-kept resort with helpful staff and tiger-themed rooms of various sizes, facing a small garden and pool (from £12; tigersafariresort.com).

BLOWOUT

● **Khem Villas** A gorgeous eco-lodge, co-owned by Goverdhan Singh and his wife Usha, with colonial-style bungalows and sumptuous tents. The evening campfire is a great place to sit around and talk tigers (from £131; khemvillas.com).

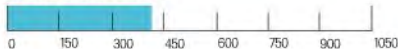
WHERE TO EAT

● **Resort Tiger Safari** Visitors to Ranthambore tend to eat where they are staying, but Hotel Tiger Safari Resort has a serene garden restaurant that's open to all (meals £4.30; tigersafariresort.com).

3 UDAIPUR

Best for lake palaces

MILES INTO YOUR TRIP



Udaipur is around 6 hours from Ranthambore, 7½ by train

The colour of roses and faded old paper, Udaipur, a doily of a city, overlooks the calm open space of its lake. Along Lake Pichola's banks stretches the City Palace, while at its centre lies the Lake Palace, like a great chunk of icing that has broken away from the main cake.

Bats, egrets, herons and cormorants swirl above the water's milk-glass surface. At dawn and at dusk, there is a sudden stillness. All that is audible is the birds' chattering, in the silence before the local temples begin their chants. These are the moments when Udaipur really catches at your soul.

Sunny Singh is a Rajput (the ruling caste in Rajasthan) whose family administered 12 villages outside Udaipur until independence. He holds himself with a hereditary dignity, and has a magnificent two-part beard. 'The beard is a signifier, to show you belong to a particular community. Like the turban.' He adds,



'It used to be unthinkable for you to visit someone without wearing your turban, 40 years ago.'

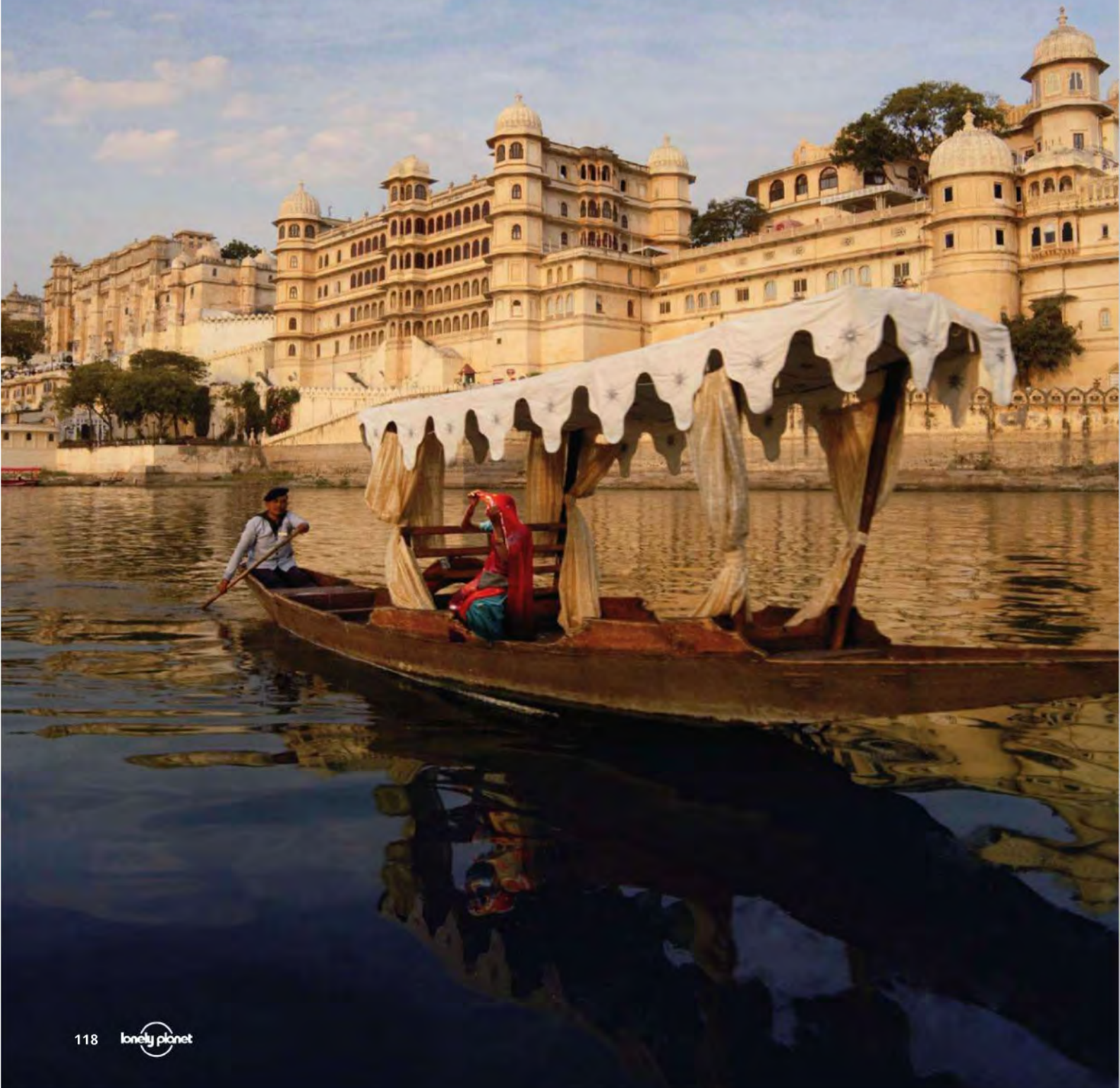
Rajasthan's history is one of war, yet Udaipur feels too pretty to fight, as boats glide across the lake, outboard motors phut-phuttering. 'It feels unfortified because the hills formed a natural barrier,' explains Sunny. 'Nature has been generous in making the location of Udaipur so beautiful. Add to that the creative contribution of every ruler for the past 400-odd years and you have a pleasant brew.'

The metropolis's palaces are pure whimsy. Exploring the huge City Palace, the riches of the building are revealed ►



ABOVE Udaipur resident Satyendra 'Sunny' Singh, whose beard signifies the community he belongs to. BELOW The Lake Palace was built as a royal summer abode in 1754 and completely covers an island







slowly. At the entrance are tiles resembling faded vintage postcards. Arriving at the fourth floor, it's a surprise to find a courtyard filled with trees – showing that the palace clings to a steep hill. Beyond are mirror-lined rooms, where light filters through coloured glass. Amid the views, artful screens and gentle breezes, it's easy to sense the maharanas (princes) here, gazing over Udaipur, a city as idealised as their miniature paintings.

FURTHER INFORMATION

● Rajasthan Tourism: rtdc.in.

WHERE TO STAY

BUDGET

● **Mountain Ridge** Just over four miles west of town, this is a unique, fantastically set guesthouse, run by English expat Piers, who's written books on Udaipur. The dramatic contemporary building has sweeping rural views from all four suites (from £28; mountainridge.in).

BLOWOUT

● **Udai Kothi** Boutique Udai Kothi has cupolas and mirrored mosaic aplenty. Rooms are filled with colonial-style wood-carved furniture, and the rooftop pool and restaurant are the icing on this particular wedding cake (from £73; udaikothi.com).

WHERE TO EAT

● **Queen's Café & Meenu's** Meenu (pictured right) and her mother cook fragrant Jain dishes in their simple family house, and at Meenu's new restaurant around the corner. Try pumpkin curry, delicately fragrant with coconut and mint (meals around £2.20). Queen's Café, 14 Bajrang Marg. Meenu's, 9 Bhrampole Marg.

LEFT Udaipur's City Palace stretches 244m along the waterfront.

RIGHT Meenu serves delicious vegetarian dishes in her cafés.

BELOW Temples and bathing ghats frame the lakeside



TRY A TASTE OF INDIA AT HOME

Meenu's key-la subji (banana curry)

'I am Jain – Jains are a Hindu sect who are very careful about animals. We are vegetarian and traditionally don't eat any vegetables taken from under ground, like garlic or potatoes, as it might harm insects when they are being pulled out. I invented this dish myself: banana is a good substitute for potatoes.'

SERVES 1

2 tbsp peanut oil
 ½ tsp cumin seeds
 ½ tsp mustard seeds
 2 bananas, chopped
 2 tbsp curd (plain yoghurt)
 2 pinches red chilli
 3 pinches dry coriander
 2 pinches salt
 1 pinch turmeric
 1 pinch garam masala
 ½ tsp dried mint
 ½ tsp dried coconut
 ½ cup water

Heat the oil, add the cumin and mustard seeds. Add the banana and yoghurt. Then add the rest of the ingredients and boil for 1-2 minutes until it softens. Serve. ►





4 JAIPUR

Best for bazaars

MILES INTO YOUR TRIP



Around 6 hours drive from Udaipur, 7½ by train

A frenzy of bazaars, palaces, cows, pigs, near misses, crashes, temples, dressed-up camels and made-up elephants, Jaipur was northern India's first planned city, built in the 18th century. Its kernel is a neat grid of streets, centred around the City Palace, though development has long escaped any such neat confines. The entire city was painted salmon pink to welcome the Prince of Wales in 1876, and the colour stayed: at its most regal on the sumptuous city gates, at its least on the dirt-streaked outskirts.

There's the odd pocket of curious calm: an old man outside a hole-in-the-wall temple, a child flying a kite on a rooftop, a harlequin-painted elephant plonking through the traffic. But elsewhere, it's mayhem. And bazaars. Everywhere you

look, people are buying and selling. There's the jewellery bazaar, busy with parents stocking up for their children's weddings, sipping tea as they haggle. In the narrow bangle market, women crouch in the tiny shops, having bangles melted to fit while they wait. To the east, Muslim workers hammer silver foil, used to adorn the most opulent sweets, and an entire street resounds to a pounding 'pang-pang-pang-pang'. The central bazaars are ablaze with cloth: sarees, bed sheets, and quilts.

The creativity of Jaipur, where everything is decorated, from elephants to pavements, is what sets it apart, even in India, where trucks are works of art. See this creativity in action at the Anokhi Museum of Hand Printing in Amber, just outside the city. Here, Radhesharan, a chhippa (block printer) works deftly, layering print upon print using carved wooden blocks. 'My father was also a chhippa. I started work when I was 17, now I am 65. If it's an easy pattern, I could produce 100 metres per day.' He adds, finishing the stretch of cloth, 'Not many young people are learning the craft.' The room echoes to the rhythmic 'thap-a-te-thap' of the block print. The whole city feels like a huge bazaar. ►

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE Elephants carry visitors up to Amber Fort, the former seat of power, seven miles northeast of Jaipur. The elephants are decorated for weddings and festivals. Traditional Jaipur motifs are inspired by local plants. It takes 6-10 days to carve a teak block, depending on the intricacy





FURTHER INFORMATION

● **Anokhi Museum of Hand Printing:** anokhi.com.

WHERE TO STAY

BUDGET

● **Madhuban** An oasis in a leafy suburb, this sumptuous heritage guesthouse is run by the helpful Dicky and Kavita Singh – whose family once ruled nearby Patan – and has immaculate antique-decorated rooms (doubles £26; madhubanhotel.com). **BLOWOUT**

● **Samode Haveli** A wonderful palace in the old city – standard rooms are elegant and antique-filled but if you've got the cash, splash out on the mirror-lined Sheesh Mahal suite. The pool is ideal for recuperation post-bazaar (from £177; samode.com).

WHERE TO EAT

● **Reds** A bar-restaurant overlooking Jaipur's meringue-shaped cinema, the Rajmandir. Food includes kebab rolls and other Indian dishes (meals from £15). 5th Floor, Mall 21, M.I. Road.

ABOVE AND LEFT Most bangles are made from lac, a resinous substance deposited by various types of insect and found on trees in south Asia. Women have their choice of bangles melted to fit while they wait

5 BIKANER

Best for desert safaris

MILES INTO YOUR TRIP



About 5 hours drive from Jaipur, 7-9 hours by train

Camel man Mamraj's face has been carved by the sun. 'I'm 68. I have...' He laughs, unsure, 'maybe 30 grandchildren.' He continues, 'I thank God that I was born in the desert. When I was young, I thought I'd prefer the city, but when I went there, I wasn't happy. I like nature and the silence.'

Safaris from the city of Bikaner combine camels and carts, and explore the Thar desert, stopping en route at local tribal villages. The local people call the region Marusthali – land of the dead – but this desert is very much alive.

The villages combine many trades. In the first stop on the way, there's a group of dholi, musicians, named after the drums they play. The dholi start to learn when they are about four years old, and sing searing songs about cranes,

peacocks and camel decorations.

In a nearby hamlet, two sisters, intrigued by visitors, smile shyly, surrounded by children, in the soft light of their father's mud house. They married young. Shanti, aged 20, is a mother of three. She was married at 12, had her first child at 14.

Riding on to the dunes, the sun sets quickly, and the vast sky becomes smeared by twinkling stars. The men cook dinner on an open fire, using dried camel dung as fuel. The food, desert vegetables such as the twiggy sangri, has a delicately spiced texture, with a certain sandy crunch. After dark, the musicians start to play and the camel men dance, arms in the air, shouting 'challo!' ('let's go!').

In the early morning, the desert is cold, and the men warm their hands on the fire, as they make masala chai (tea spiced with cardamom) for breakfast. Mamraj says, 'Sometimes I go into the city. But I wouldn't like to live anywhere but the desert.'

BELOW Mamraj, like many desert dwellers, belongs to the Bishnoi Hindu sect, who live according to 29 tenets, including 'do not cut green trees', 'keep your goats alive' and 'avoid opium, bhang, tobacco and blue clothing'

FURTHER INFORMATION

● Vino Desert Safari: vinodesertsafari.com.

WHERE TO STAY

BUDGET

● **Hotel Bhairon Vilas** With eclectic decor that mixes antiques and old family photographs, Bhairon Vilas was the home of the former Bikaner Prime Minister (from £21; hotelbhaironvilas.com).

BLOWOUT

● **Laxmi Niwas Palace** Set amid green lawns and around elaborate courtyards, this has palatial rooms with antiques (from £196; laxminiwaspalace.com).

WHERE TO EAT

● **Laxmi Niwas Palace Garden Restaurant**

Sample Chinese and Indian dishes while listening to accompanying music in the evenings (meals from £8.70; laxminiwaspalace.com).

Abigail Hole is the co-author of Lonely Planet's *India* guide, and wrote the first edition of *Rajasthan, Delhi & Agra*.



MAKE IT HAPPEN

INDIA



Tour the Golden Triangle and beyond – start off in Delhi, then take in the Taj Mahal, tigers in the jungle, a porcelain-pale lake city, Jaipur's glittering bazaars, and the fierce colours of the desert



Prepare for an assault on your senses of colour and sound

ESSENTIALS

Getting there

Jet Airways, Air India, BA, Virgin, Emirates and Gulf Air fly between London and Delhi (from £400; nine hours). There are daily flights between Delhi and Agra (£50 one-way), Jaipur (£50) and Udaipur (£40), with Jet Airways, Air India and Kingfisher.

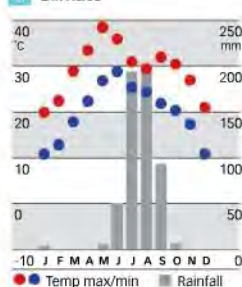
Visa

You must get a visa before arriving in India (£30; in.vfsglobal.co.uk).

Further reading

See Lonely Planet's *India* (£19.99) and *Rajasthan, Delhi & Agra* (£14.99) guides.

Climate



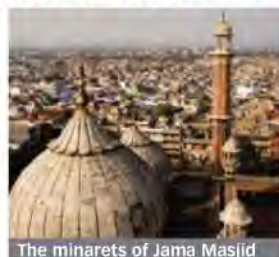
THE FINAL WORD

'Nothing in India is identifiable, the mere asking of a question causes it to disappear or to merge in something else.'

EM Forster
A Passage to India



3 THREE WAYS TO DO DELHI



The minarets of Jama Masjid

Budget

SEE

Old Delhi, full of glittering bazaars and medieval-seeming shops, is a joy to wander round. Head to the lanes off the Chandhi Chowk and **JAMA MASJID**, India's largest mosque, built by Shah Jahan in the 17th century (free).

BARGAIN!

SLEEP

There are only three rooms at the **DELHI BED & BREAKFAST**, in a leafy suburb, so book ahead. It has decorative crafts all over the place, and a plant-filled roof terrace (£42; delhibedandbreakfast.com).

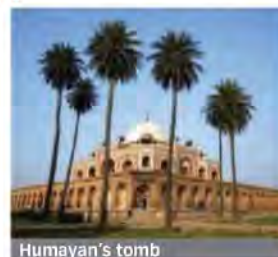
EAT

The kebab rolls at **NIZAM'S KATHI KABAB** are legendary. Snack on mutton in parantha and spiced paneer (from 70p; nizams.com).



DRINK

The unusual Connaught Place bar, **@LIVE** has a human jukebox: you choose what they play from the song menu (Kingfisher beer £1.15; K 12, Outer Circle, Connaught Place).



Humayan's tomb

Mid-range

The early-Mughal resting place **HUMAYAN'S TOMB**, set amid immaculate Mughal gardens, is a magnificent precursor to the Taj Mahal (£3.50; whc.unesco.org).

For top-end service without the top-end price tag, **HOTEL PALACE HEIGHTS**, and a cool hotel in the thick of the Connaught Place action, fits the bill (£99; hotelpalaceheights.com).



The luxurious Imperial hotel

Luxury

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM (below) has a feast of Indian fine arts that span millennia, including carvings, murals, manuscripts, tapestries, weaponry and tribal masks (£4.30; nationalmuseumindia.gov.in).

THE IMPERIAL has old-style splendour – marble hallways with chandeliers and curly-moustached men ensure you don't strain yourself opening a door (£219; theimperialindia.com).

Northwest frontier-style Mughlai cuisine is on the menu at **BUKHARA**, Delhi's most famous and starry restaurant. It's renowned for its tandoor and dhal, and reservations are essential (meals from £45; itcwelcomgroup.in).

It has to be a cocktail at the **1911 BAR** at the Imperial – a taste of Raj-style opulence if you can't afford to stay. Named after the year Delhi was proclaimed British India's capital (drinks from £8.50; janpath.theimperialindia.com).



HOW EASY IS IT TO GET AROUND?

TRAIN

Train is a glorious way to travel in India, and the national rail company, Indian Railways (indianrail.gov.in), transports around 200 million passengers per week (not counting those on the roof). Sometimes journeys are longer than by road, but you can save time travelling by scheduling them overnight.

You book train travel by filling in a form and taking it to the ticket office at the station – there's usually a dedicated tourist window, but if not, join the general queue (women are entitled to go straight to the front). It's possible to check train times and services online: go to trainenquiry.com and select 'Find your Train'. You can then look up prices on indianrail.gov.in. The swiftest and fastest trains are the Shatabdi and Rajdhani express trains.

There are various tiers of classes: for overnight trips choose from 1st-class one-tier, 2nd-class two-tier, 3rd-class three-tier AC (air-conditioned; bedding is provided for these), or regular non-AC 'sleeper' (bring your own bedding). The 'tier' part refers to the number of levels of bunks in the cabin. During the day you can either join the stampede for unreserved seating in 2nd class, or reserve a seat from a variety of more expensive and comfortable compartments, such as 1st AC

or Chair Car. For a journey such as Udaipur to Jaipur, or Jaipur to Bikaner, in 1st-class AC, the fare is £18, while 1st-class AC from Delhi to Agra on a Shatabdi train costs £10. You should book well ahead for any longer journeys. Buy tickets online at irctc.co.in. Check the invaluable website [Man in Seat-Sixty-One](http://ManinSeatSixtyOne) for more about travel by train in India and booking from outside India (seat61.com/India.htm).

CAR

You can hire a car through tourist offices, via the Rajasthan Tourism Development Corporation in Rajasthan. Costs vary from state to state, but charges are usually per km, and a little higher for an AC car, with a minimum of 250km (155 miles) per day. Added to the charge is around 85p per night for your driver's accommodation – this they will arrange themselves. So reckon on costs being around £22-£29 per day, depending on how far you travel. At the end of the trip you should tip the driver – around 65p per day would be an acceptable amount.

Alternatively, most towns have a taxi stand and car-hire companies where you can hire cars for long-distance journeys, and you can also hire cars through your hotel or guesthouse. Costs are similar, though you will probably also have to pay some commission. If you're going only one way, bear in mind you'll have to pay for the driver's return trip. It's best to

ensure that you hire a driver who speaks and understands some

English, and establish what is expected before you set off so that you don't run into misunderstandings along the way.

BUS

Bus is usually the cheapest way to get around India, but it's more comfortable to take the train for longer journeys. Avoid night buses, as there are more accidents at night. You have a choice between state or a variety of private bus companies, and they offer either bone-rattling 'ordinary' buses, or costlier 'deluxe' services – AC buses that offer a smoother ride. You can usually book up to a month in advance at bus stations or through local travel agencies for the deluxe services.

IS IT EASY TO ORGANISE AN INDEPENDENT TRIP?

It's straightforward to travel independently in Rajasthan, you just have to work out which sections you want to travel by which method of transport, and book your own hotels. Creating your own itinerary allows you a great deal more flexibility. A sample itinerary is to take the train or bus to Agra, then hire a car to take you to Ranthambore and on to Udaipur, before taking an overnight train to Jaipur. After Jaipur, take an overnight train to Bikaner then hire a car and driver or take the train back to Delhi. An easier option is to hire a car and driver for the entire trip, but book your own hotels and decide for yourself how long you want to stay in each place. Ideally allow two weeks for our trip.

THREE OF THE BEST TOUR OPERATORS

INTREPID TRAVEL

provides a 15-day Classic Rajasthan tour that combines train and other travel over two weeks, visiting Bundi, Agra and Ranthambore, Jaipur and Udaipur, and costing from £740. Its 22-day Rajasthan Adventure visits Shekhawati, the desert city of Jaisalmer, Jodhpur and Udaipur and costs £945 (intrepidtravel.com).

EXODUS offers a range of Rajasthan tours, such as a 16-day cycling tour that encompasses the desert, Jodhpur, Jaipur, Udaipur and the Taj Mahal (from £1,839 including flights). Other trips include a 16-day Classic Rajasthan trip (£2,129 including flights), via car and train, which visits the Taj, Jaipur, Udaipur, Jodhpur and Agra. Groups are no bigger than 16 (exodus.co.uk).

COX & KINGS provides luxury escorted tours around the desert state, some of which use the region's grandiose heritage trains, such as the Palace on Wheels (£3,095 for nine days). Its 13-day Forts & Palaces of Rajasthan trip costs £1,995 and stops at Delhi, Agra, Jaipur, Udaipur, Bikaner and other destinations. Its Heritage Tour: Princely India visits Delhi, Agra and the highlights of Rajasthan, and costs £1,995/£3,295, depending on the level of luxury you choose (coxandkings.co.uk).

