

SEVEN WEST TRAVEL CLUB

Passage to India a great launch

STEPHEN SCOURFIELD reflects on an epic first trip

It was a journey of 100 highlights through epic India.

On our inaugural Travel Club Tour, with 21 readers-guests-new friends, I have just travelled from Delhi to Agra, Jaipur and Udaipur. And we experienced not just obvious India but India glimpsed down alleyways.

There were the obvious highlights . . .

In the boulevard city of Delhi, there was the National Museum, tracing the city's history through 5000 years, and human civilisation back 7000 years to the first settlement in the Indus Valley. There was a visit to Raj Ghat, to see a memorial on the spot where Mahatma Gandhi was cremated in 1948, the day after his assassination. There were also wonderful dosas for breakfast at the five-star Crowne Plaza hotel.

In Agra, there was the Taj Mahal — a tribute in white marble and inlay built by Shah Jahan (or, more precisely, his 20,000 craftsmen and labourers) in memory of his favourite wife, Mumtaz Mahal. The building might have been estimated to weigh 2,500,000,000 tonnes, but it seems to hover, light, against the pale blue sky.

There was a little introduction to Indian classic music at our gala dinner at a rooftop restaurant with sitar player Intzar Khan and a few performed words from me.

And there was further insight into the Indian mind at Jantar Mantar, with its 13 architectural astronomy instruments. Jantar Mantar is one of five astronomical observatories built by maharajah Jai Singh II of Jaipur between 1724 and 1730, and the best. It blends the astronomy, astrology and mathematics that are intrinsic to Indian life, and is a further insight into the Indian complexity. Imagine this — time keeping accurate to two seconds, 300 years ago.

In Jaipur, there was the beautiful Amer Fort and its Ganesh Gate, coloured by semi-precious stones. There was the Palace of the Wind — Hawa Mahal, with its inlay filigree work and screens, through



The group at the Taj Mahal. Main group, from left: Rosemary Whitelaw, David Pass, Wendy Hobley, Jill Horwood, Maureen Bellett, June Simpson, George Firth, Valerie Dewar, Jutta Payne, Hedley and Jill Bond, Alan and Jill True, Bev Ireland, Lee Crisp, Ann Wilkins, Jack Dewar, Eleonor Winslade, Richard Ireland. Lower group: Virginia Ward, Stephen Scourfield, Iain Whitelaw, Richard Winslade.



Travel Club members are welcomed at a wedding. Picture: Stephen Scourfield

which royal ladies could watch life in the street. There was the historic City Palace and the modern comforts of the Lemon Tree Hotel.

There was the ride in Mahindra four-wheel-drives back up to the Amer Fort in the evening, when it was closed, for a private dinner inside, in the AD1135 restaurant.

There were fabrics hand printed using wooden blocks and semi-precious stones still cut and polished by men sitting cross-legged on the floor, using a buffing wheel.

Then on to Udaipur, the most beautiful of Indian cities, with white palaces set against a still, blue lake, like icing on steel. We explored its City Palace, built on the banks of Lake Pichola over a period of 400 years, walked in the cool morning in Saheliyon ki Bari — “The Garden of the Maidens”, built by Maharana Bhopal Singh for her maids, with its dancing fountains. (Clap and they spout higher.)

We stayed outside the city, high on a hill, at Fateh Garh hotel, a contemporary palace. We had dresses, tops, jackets

and shirts made at Rama Krishna Textiles, where Judi Dench, Bill Nighy and Penelope Wilton shopped and had clothes made during the filming of the Best Exotic Marigold Hotel movies.

But, epic as they were, those were just moments on the itinerary.

And there were the impromptu and unscripted moments . . .

So often, when we travel, it is the unscripted moments and impromptu experiences that embed in us and linger longest.

We had warm, sunny but not hot days in India. Perfect weather.

This is wedding season, after the big harvesting work and then the Deepavali festival of light have finished.

The weekend we arrived, it was estimated there were 30,000 weddings in Delhi alone.

In Jaipur, our wonderful guide Vishal Shivastava got us all invited to the wedding of a friend. We walked in the wedding procession right in front of the elephant bringing the groom, saw the bride

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The group heads to Udaipur.
 Picture: Stephen Scourfield

arriving, carried in her palanquin, and then stood on the enormous, pink-lit stage, to be photographed with the happy couple.

In Agra, we hastily arranged a visit to Mother Teresa's Missionaries for Charity home, and outside met a young couple bringing food they had cooked themselves — a gift to the home's residents to celebrate the first birthday of their own child.

It was not necessarily the interesting temple of Jagdish in Udaipur that resonates loudest but the auto-rickshaw ride to get there — through narrow streets full of people, motorbikes, cattle and nose-to-tail donkeys shifting dirt.

A mash of mobile humanity all lubricated by the honking of horns. “Horns are for lubrication,” I am told.

There are couples on motorcycles, with women in saris sitting sideways, “nine yards of wonder” kept from the rear wheel's spokes by a sari guard.

It was a journey of 100 highlights through inspiring India, run in partnership with Wendy Wu Tours. But, importantly, it was also a journey shared — with 21 readers-guests-new friends, with Vishal, who felt just like a brother, and with my wife Virginia.

And that, my friends, is an extraordinary journey.