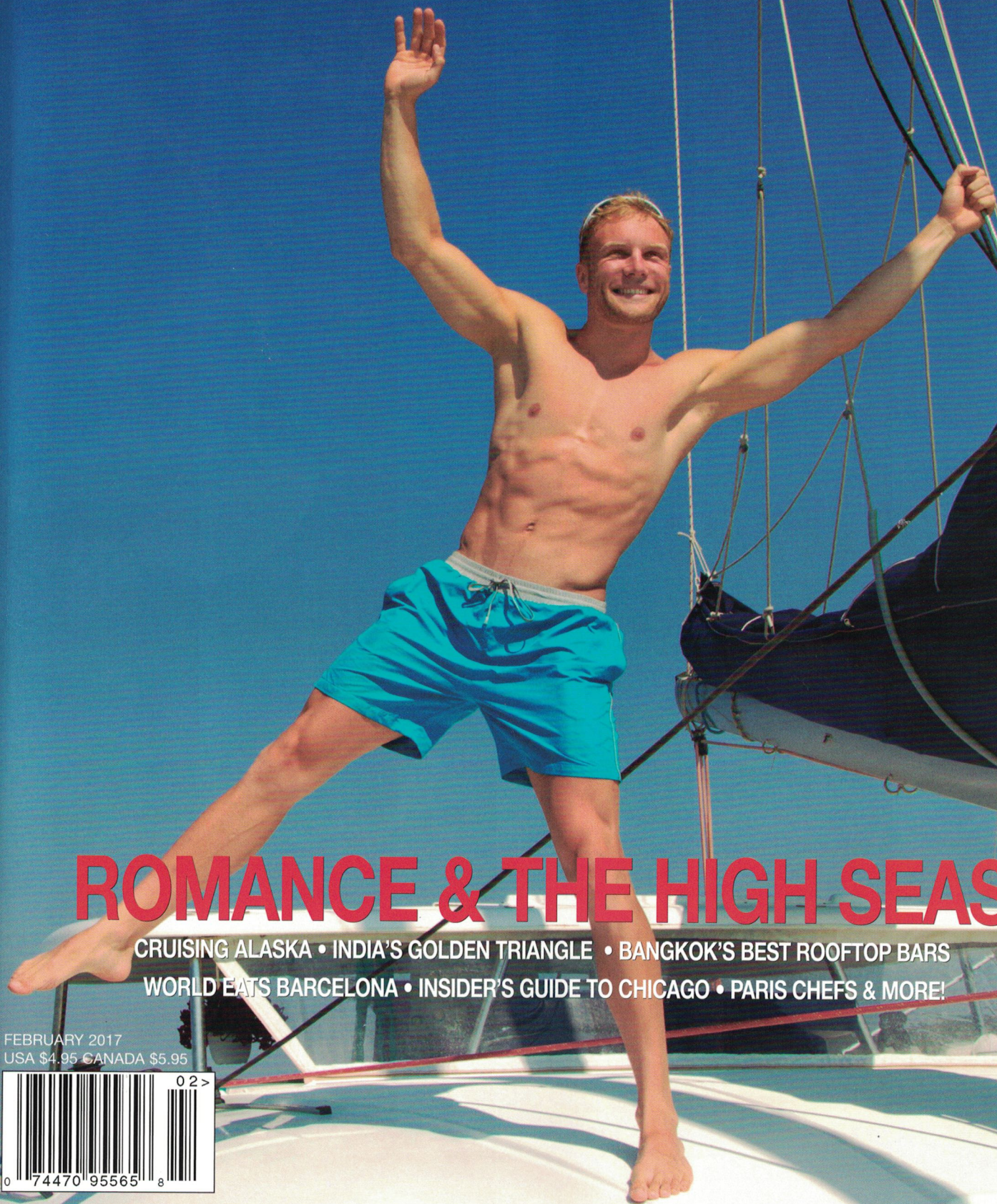


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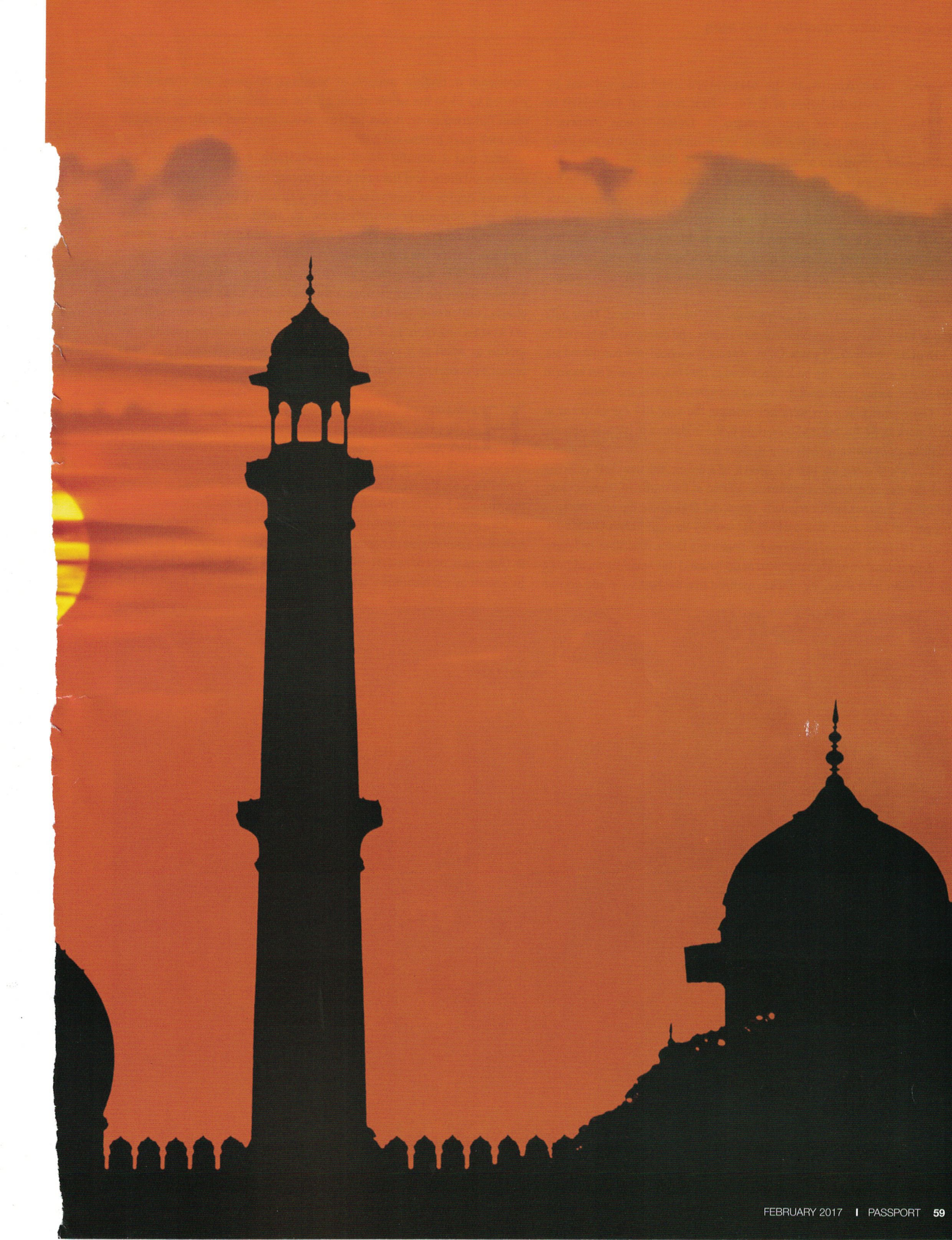
*Exploring Delhi, Rajasthan, and Agra*

# INDIA'S GOLDEN TRIANGLE

by Jim Gladstone

Photo: Danshutter

Jama Masjid Mosque in Delhi



Last August, in the bleary-eyed numbness induced by over 24 hours of flying—first from San Francisco to Singapore, then onward to Delhi—I was surprised when the driver taking me from the airport to my hotel slowed to a crawl.

I'd often heard that it was fairly common to see cows wandering on the roads in India, but I'd always envisioned this taking place on a rural country lane, not a densely trafficked four-lane highway.

But there I was, in a half-sleeping haze as dozens of cars, trucks, taxi cabs, and motorized rickshaws honked, drivers negotiated with hand signals, and everyone slowly steered their way around a cluster of five saggy-bellied old bessies.

In Hinduism, India's most common religion, cows are revered. Their milk and its byproducts are cherished culinary staples, and eating beef is banned in most of the country's 29 states. Often, when a household cow has passed her milking years, owners can no longer afford to feed her, and she is set loose in the streets, eating offerings from devout strangers wherever she roams.

These particular cows were not crossing the road like the chickens in an American riddle, but reclining right in the middle of it, blithely sunning themselves as urban society bent to their will.

The whole scene felt like a fragment of a dream, the mundane colliding with the fantastic; timeless spirituality snarled in the traffic of contemporary priorities. Such sensations regularly struck me throughout the next week, as my partner John and I took a whirlwind journey through India's Golden Triangle, the classic first-timer's itinerary, connecting Delhi, Rajasthan, and Agra.

As much as we might have liked to understand this small swath of India in our short time there, we quickly realized that the best we could do was

experience it. Endless snippets of historical, religious, and cultural fact whirled by us in the words of our guides, sometimes sticking, but more often fluttering away. It was feelings, evocations, and poetic perceptions that took more permanent hold.

John and I usually travel independently, cobbling together our accommodations and transport, and leaving room in our schedules for no small degree of improvisation. For a first visit to a country as complex and potentially overwhelming as India, especially since we planned to cover a lot of ground in a small amount of time, an organized tour proved the right choice.

We would be tagging along with a handful of gay travel agents from the US on a showcase itinerary impeccably curated by **Luxe India** ([www.luxeindia.com](http://www.luxeindia.com)), a renowned Delhi-based company that has recently committed to attracting more LGBT travelers. Creating customized packages for groups as small as a couple and as large as several dozen, Luxe India organizes complete tours at a range of price points.

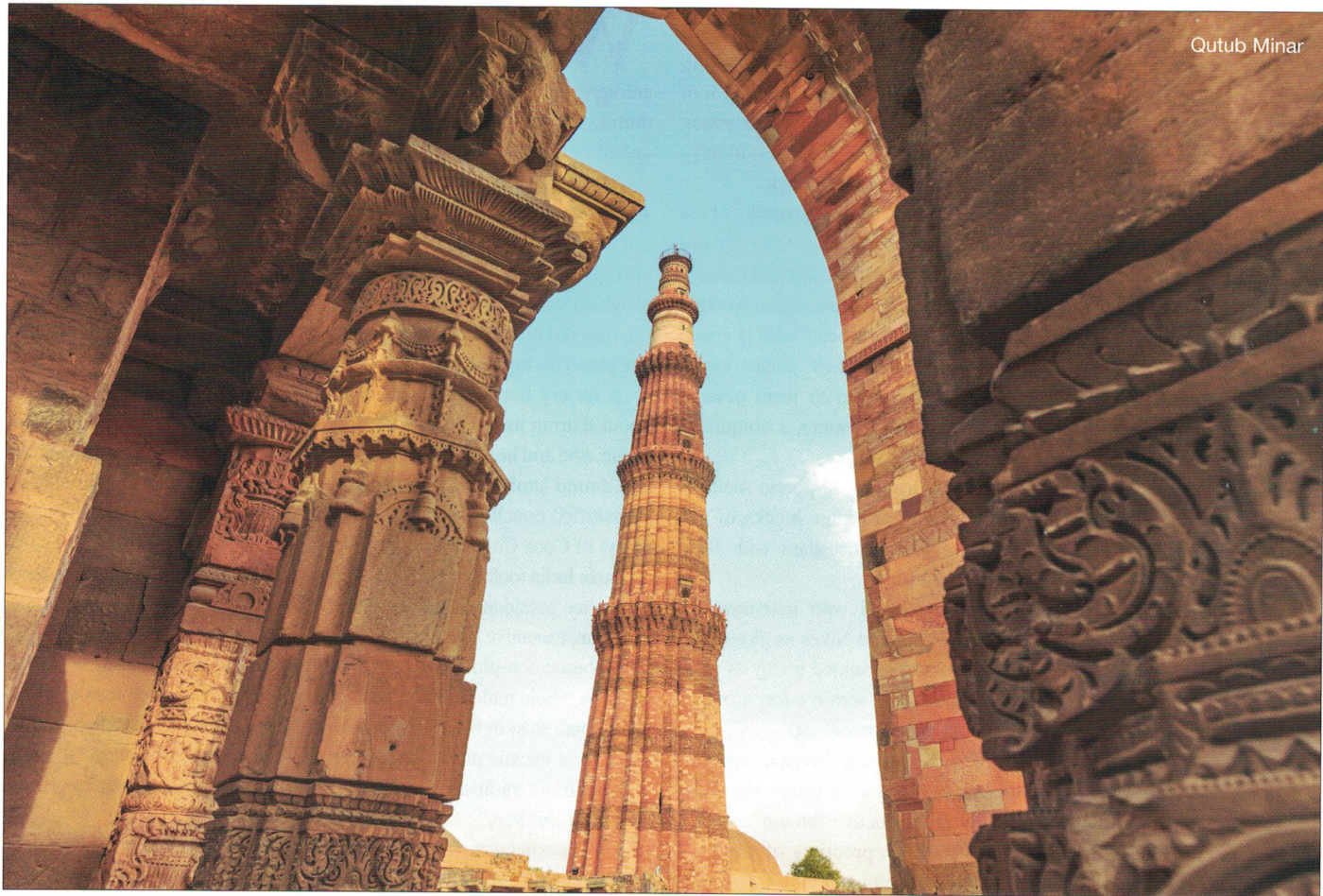
Having successfully avoided steak tartare à la car, my driver arrived at the gates of the **Oberoi Gurgaon** ([www.oberoihotels.com](http://www.oberoihotels.com)), a sleek arrangement of glassy rectangular blocks surrounding a turquoise reflecting pool with a Gucci boutique shimmering on its far shore. To a visitor who's soaked up images of ancient India for months, this five-star hotel delivers an unexpected jolt of future shock.

It's a reminder that beyond the historical sites that will dominate our visit, India is a major engine of the modern global economy. Gurgaon, also known as Gurugram, one of several satellite cities in the Delhi-centered megalopolis known as the National Capitol Region, is a business and financial hub



Photo: Sacred Cows in Delhi

Sacred Cows in Delhi



Qutub Minar

**For a first visit to a country as complex and potentially overwhelming as India, especially since we planned to cover a lot of ground in a small amount of time, an organized tour proved the right choice.**

and home to offices of over half of the Fortune 500 companies. High-rise residences and office buildings buzz surround shopping malls and public plazas, all connected by a whisper-quiet monorail that loops around Gurgaon's core and connects out to the wide-sprawling Delhi metro system.

Business schedules had led John and I to fly in separately, but after a happy reunion in our room's deliciously deep soaking tub and a few hours' nap, we were ready to venture out together, taking advantage of a half day before our group itinerary began.

Uber service is readily available and remarkably affordable in Delhi (If you're traveling solo, you can even choose to share a motorcycle seat). We opted for a car, and for less than five dollars took a ten-mile thrill ride (road construction is ubiquitous and lanes are interpreted as suggestions more than rules) to the most visited monument in all of India.

**The Qutub Minar**, is a graceful five-story sandstone and marble minaret constructed beginning in 1192 to honor the first Muslim kingdom of India. An elegant blend of Indian and Afghan styles, the tower is elaborately carved with calligraphic verses from the Qur'an.

Surrounded by stunning brick archways, tombs, small mosques, and columned arcades, the tower is the focal point of a lush green park, where families and couples gather to picnic and pass the time on sunny afternoons, and it's the site's popularity with locals that boosts the numbers of

visitors to nearly four million a year. It is Delhi's equivalent to the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris and a refreshing first dip into Indian antiquity.

Afterward, we decided to make like locals and take the metro back toward our hotel and were surprised to discover that, in order to limit unwanted groping in rush hour crowds, Delhi trains include "women only" cars. Similarly, many taxis throughout the city are emblazoned with stickers reading "This cab respects women." In India's traditionally male-dominated culture, educated working women are becoming more commonplace, and the government is making an effort to make them feel safe in their independence.

Our metro ride also exposed us to the fact that Delhi's transportation infrastructure doesn't always take you exactly where you need to go; the closest stop to our hotel required a perilous, *Frogger*-like crossing of eight lanes of highway with not a single traffic signal in sight.

We were ready for the ease of an escorted group.

**T**he next morning, we met our fellow travelers in an Oberoi lobby abuzz with activity. The hotel was hosting a conference of African diplomats, whose polyglot conversation mixed with English, Hindi, and, no doubt, some of India's 22 other official languages, filling the room with a well-heeled, worldly air, and a reminder that white West-

erners are not the only holders of privilege in today's global society.

An hour-long crosstown ride by private motorcoach took us to the well-preserved pre-colonial enclave of Old Delhi for a visit to **Jama Masjid**, one of India's largest Muslim mosques, followed by an early highlight of the entire week. Our guide, Jasvir Saurana, aka Jassi, an elegant young man with a degree in English literature—hailed bicycle rickshaws to ferry us in pairs through the old town marketplace, **Chandni Chowk**.

While we begrudgingly heeded Jassi's warnings to not to partake of the tempting street food on offer, the marketplace provided a feast for our eyes, its narrow lanes an endlessly unfurling labyrinth of color and motion.

Sari-draped women, arms bangled from wrist to elbow, sat on wooden crates and gestured toward sheets of burlap, thickly carpeted with jasmine, plumeria, marigolds and roses. Once purchased, their petals would become the fragile, fragrant tiles delicately arranged to form circular mosaics (known as rangoli) that float atop bowls of water, a ubiquitous element of Indian decor.

Stick-slim mustachioed men nonchalantly carried 50-pound sacks of rice on their heads. Smiling teenage boys chipped huge blocks of ice, squeezed pyramids of lemons, and filled glass after glass with fresh lemonade, served with pastel pink plastic straws.

Other young men lorded over blankets spread with kaleidoscopic arrays of athletic shoes, their knock-off Reeboks and Nikes as glossy and tempting as the bright green papayas and glitter-sprinkled mangoes piled a few feet away (There are dozens of fruit vendors within a few crowded blocks, so this one bets a little bling will help him stand out).

At the nut-wallah's shop, its heaps of pistachios and almonds, coconuts and dried dates reflected the complexions of India—a dozen shades of warmth, impossible to summarize in a single, reductive “brown”.

We continued with a tour of the stark British propriety of **Luyten's Delhi** ([www.lutyensbunglo.co.in](http://www.lutyensbunglo.co.in)), a marked contrast to the happy chaos of Chandni Chowk. Driving through this central administrative area of the city, nicknamed for its master planner, architect Edwin Luytens, the manicured lawns, reflecting pools, and Christian cathedrals evoke a cool, colonial indifference to native Indian culture. Yet today, India's government ministries, parliament, and the president and prime minister's homes are located in these severely tasteful relics of a time gone by.



Photo: saiko3p

Shop in Delhi

We spent that evening in the modest private home of **Rashmi Marwah**, a middle-aged, middle-class homemaker who, since her grown daughter married and moved out, has tapped an entrepreneurial spirit and began hosting small gatherings of foreign tourists for casual dinners, at which the guests are invited to help prepare one of the dishes.

John and I toasted cumin seeds in a pan of oil, releasing the earthy, slightly anise-tinged aroma so typical of northern Indian cuisine. Mixing it with a dash of chili pepper, mouth-puckering mango powder, and floral, citrusy coriander powder, we'd created a distinctive masala, or spice mix, to which we added cubed, boiled potatoes, sautéing and coating them in the flavored oil. With a bright sprinkle of cilantro (the leaves of the coriander plant) on top, we had a warming, vibrant jeera aloo.

A far cry from the *Cordon Bleu*, cooking with Rashmi was as more about sharing the ambiance of a Delhi family home than a lesson in technique. She and her husband Anil fussed over us, serving just-fried samosas and a mild lamb curry as we sat around their living room coffee table on overstuffed couches, asking questions about daily life and turning down offers of Coca Cola, the assumed American choice of beverage.

Luxe India took an already remarkable evening a step further when company vice president, Amit Aggarwal, arrived with a special guest, Anjali Gopalan, executive director of the **Naz Foundation** ([www.nazindia.org](http://www.nazindia.org)), a Delhi-based non-profit focused on HIV/AIDS and sexual rights.

“The whole matter of counseling men who have sex with men is so different here than in the US,” said Gopali, who studied and worked in New York for a decade prior to returning to India and starting Naz. “Because Indian family tradition is so strong, many men still want to marry women and have children.”

Homosexual sex and gay identity are still very different to most Indians, she explained. “The whole idea that men can form meaningful relationships with each other is difficult to help people understand.”

Nonetheless, between 2001 and 2009, Gopali and Naz successfully spearheaded efforts to decriminalize homosexuality in India. While the Indian Supreme Court overturned that ruling in 2013, public dialogue on the subject has remained active and there is growing support for another court reversal.

While India is not yet as safe a place for its LGBT natives as many



Hands of a Woman in Delhi



Lake Pichola in Udaipur

Western countries, its larger cities have hosted gay pride parades and lower courts have made some surprisingly liberal rulings protecting same-sex couples from harassment. Discussions of transgender rights actually seem quite prominent, due in part explained Gopali, to the ancient Hindu tradition of *hijira*, or third-sex people. Filling out our customs forms on arrival in the country, we could check a box for male, female, or other.

Luxe India's openness and resourcefulness in introducing LGBT travelers to local community leaders like Gopali should serve as a model for other tour operators. Far more than "gay-friendly" lip service, this was an exemplary effort in engagement.

After Delhi's gritty juxtaposition of India past and present, the lake city of **Udaipur** offered a mind-clearing change of pace. A fairytale iteration of India, the city, founded in the 16th century, offers an abundance of elegant vistas, its chain of man-made lakes reflecting the magnificent palaces that rise on its banks and islands.

Arriving via an early morning flight from Delhi on SpiceJet, a stylish Indian airline that compares favorably to Virgin America, we began our day with a leisurely tour of the **City Palace**, on the eastern shore of Lake Pichola. Actually multiple palaces built by successive generations of ruling families, the adjoining buildings harmonize beautifully, forming a marble and granite labyrinth of intimate spaces: small galleries, sitting rooms, public ceremonial chambers, and charming garden terraces.

Extraordinarily detailed miniature paintings, marble inlay work, murals, silver vessels, and colored glass mosaics greeted us at every turn as we navigated the complex's narrow corridors and staircases. The density of ornate embellishment in relatively modest-sized rooms sometimes made us feel almost drenched in riches. But then, through an arched window, we'd take in a placid view of the lake, the visual equivalent of catching one's breath, and resubmerge ourselves in the palace's sea of treasures.

Perhaps the most extravagant display of dynastic wealth here (the

City Palace complex is still partly owned and occupied by the members of an extended family descended from the region's historic royalty) is the **Crystal Gallery**. In 1877, Maharana Sajjian Singh ordered the gallery's glittering contents from a British manufacturer. The collection comprises thousands of pieces of tableware, chandeliers, vases, and decanters, as well as full-sized furniture (couches, dining tables, and a bed) made of shimmering transparent glass.

Not only did the Maharana die before his trove was delivered, but the boxes in which it was delivered were warehoused, unopened, for over 100 years. Never used privately, they ultimately went straight to exhibition. Admission fees to the gallery help his progeny pay to keep up their portions of the palace.

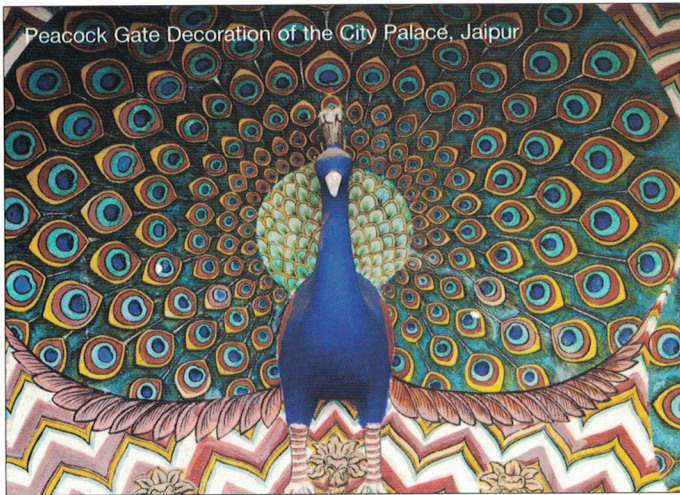
That afternoon, we took lunch on a lakeshore terrace just outside the palace grounds, savoring freshly-baked naan, tandoori chicken, and a spicy sauté of tomato, onion, and okra. Okra is surprisingly popular in India. Called *bhindi* in Hindi and known in local English as "lady fingers" it was offered at many meals throughout our trip.

Afterward, we plied the waters of Pichola in a traditional wooden boat, gliding past the **Lake Palace** ([www.tajhotels.in](http://www.tajhotels.in)), a glistening white edifice, with a foundation spreading over the equivalent of four acres. This castle seems to have adopted the entire lake as its moat. The building's outer walls rise at 90° from the water, and it was featured on film as the lair of James Bond villainess Octopussy. The one-time royal abode is now a Taj hotel.

Next, we docked at the tea garden of **Jag Mandir** ([www.hrhhotels.com](http://www.hrhhotels.com)), an island guarded by a herd of stately stone-carved elephants. So was this one, we wondered, a palace or a hotel?

A palace, as it turned out this time. The very question: "Hotel or palace?" points to one of the great sybaritic thrills of Indian tourism. Perhaps no other country in the world offers such graciously indulgent places to spend the night.

Our guide Jassi explained that the high caliber of the Indian hospital-



Peacock Gate Decoration of the City Palace, Jaipur

Photo: Kurkul

ity industry is not only the result of rigorous training by companies like Oberoi, but is also tied to a traditional Hindu ethos that “the guest is God,” be it in a home or elsewhere. The sense of welcome and the natural, unaffected friendliness extended by the staff members at each hotel we stayed at was extraordinary.

Our quarters that evening were at the **Oberoi Udaivilas** ([www.oberoi-hotels.com](http://www.oberoi-hotels.com)), consistently ranked among the world’s top hotels. Set in an oasis of 50 acres, 20 of which were formerly royal hunting grounds and now serve as a wildlife preserve, the Udaivilas’ 87 rooms are situated along open-air corridors. These sun-shaded paths traverse tiered gardens punctuated by gazebos, fountains, topiary, two elegantly tiled swimming pools, and a giant gilded sundial.

Common areas and dining rooms were situated in a series of domed

chambers, their ceilings elaborately painted with renderings of the sky at different times of day.

Walking over the manicured lawns in the waning afternoon sun, John and I found ourselves on an elevated platform overlooking an adjacent hillside where two deer clacked antlers in a bit of playful rivalry and a pair of enormous brown boars wandered by.

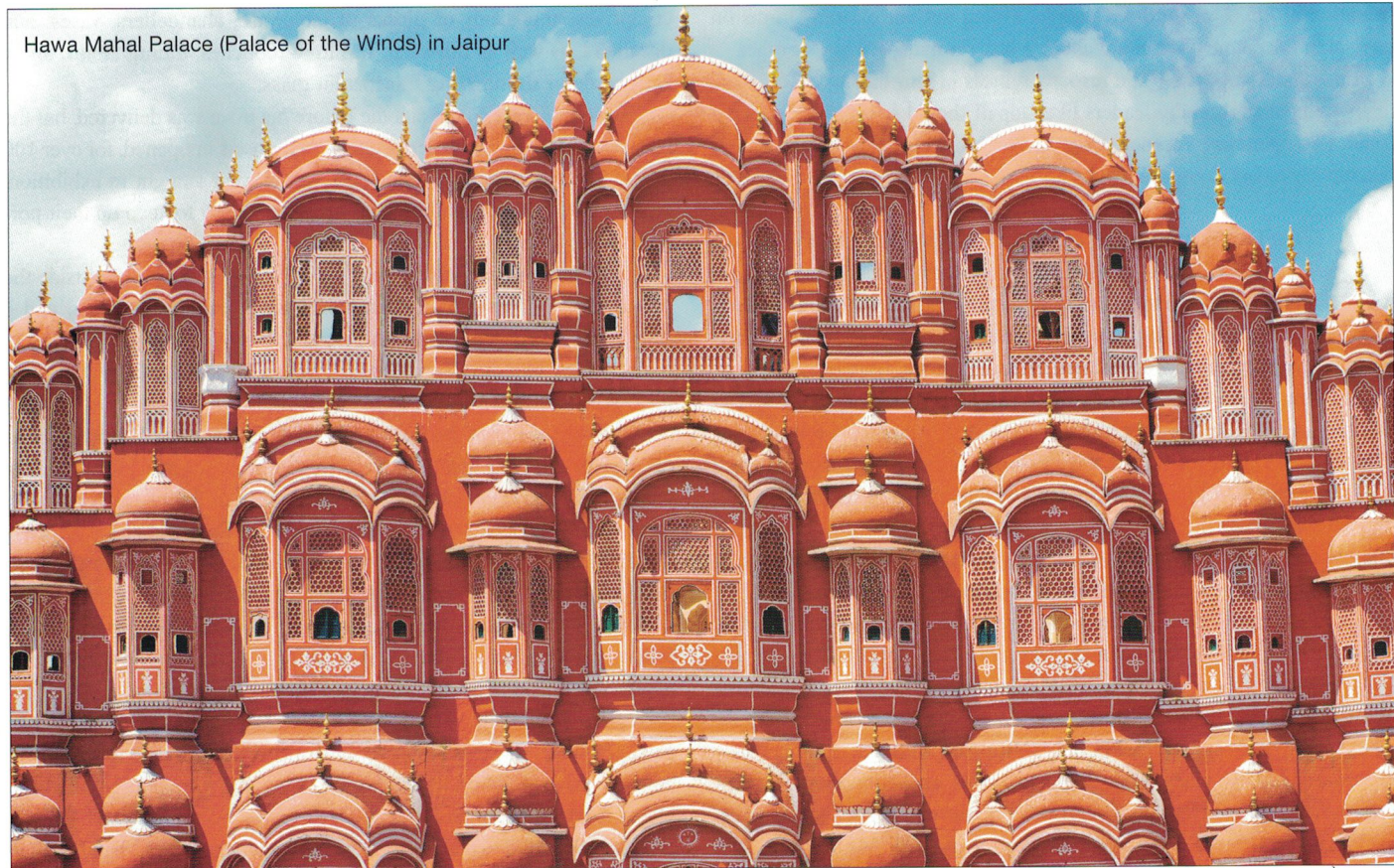
Headed back toward our room, where a private outdoor terrace awaited, a handful of resident peacocks strutted past. One stopped, cocked his crown, and fanned his kaleidoscopic tailfeathers, as if to insist that nature could still out-design even the most opulent hotelier.

Another morning, another hour’s flight. Next on our lightning itinerary was **Jaipur**, the **Pink City**. Founded in 1726, many of the Jaipur’s oldest palaces and temples were built with sandstone, which has been deemed pink *post facto*. But had Jaipur truly been nicknamed for the natural color of these buildings, it would perhaps be known as the Baby Aspirin or Salmon City. The true story owes a bit more to colonialism.

The city’s sobriquet actually emerged during the era of British rule. In 1876, prior to a visit to the city by the Prince of Wales, the regional Maharaja, in a dramatic gesture intended both to extend a warm welcome and curry favor in trade, ordered all of the city’s buildings to be painted pink, a color that traditionally symbolizes hospitality in India.

An authorized spectrum ranging from pale rose to deep brick remains Jaipur’s hallmark today, certainly a success in building the tourist trade. My own perception is that the relatively uniform architectural color scheme has calming effect. In this city of three million, abuzz with activity, the consistent palette creates a soothing illusion of orderliness, distinctly different from Delhi.

At **Jaipur Handicrafts** ([www.jaipurhandicraftsco.in](http://www.jaipurhandicraftsco.in)), an irresistible



Hawa Mahal Palace (Palace of the Winds) in Jaipur

Photo: Byelkova Oksana





Jaipur Artisan Demonstrates Traditional Wood Block Fabric Printing

45,000-square-foot complex of artisans' studios, galleries, and shopping opportunities, all of the city's main craft trades are on display under a single roof. Attentive, but not overaggressive salesmen, offered detailed explanations and demonstrations of rug weaving, gemstone cutting and polishing, and marble inlay work.

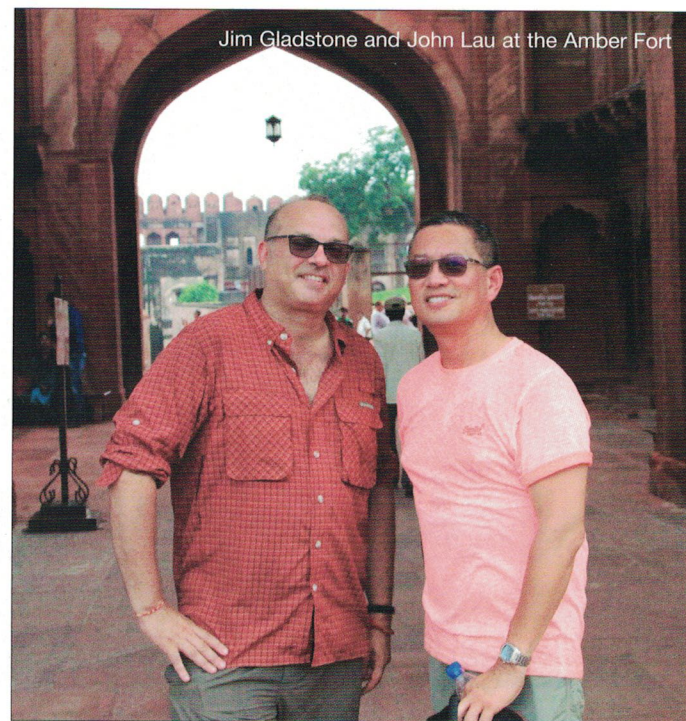
We were especially impressed with an octogenarian textile printer, who meticulously pressed dye-soaked blocks of carved wood, used like rubber stamps, against large sheets of cotton. Each color in a design requires its own printing block, demanding incredible precision of placement in the creation of complex floral and geometric patterns. Over and over, with near-perfect positioning, guided only by eye, the old man laid down his inks, transforming a plain white sheet into a thing of intricate beauty.

There was no wait at the complex's impressive bespoke clothing shop, where John and I browsed dozens of fabrics and sample garments before consulting with a patient tailor. He took what seemed like a dozen different measurements and asked numerous questions in preparing our orders for custom shirts and sport jackets. The gentleman was altogether empathetic when I told him to assume I'd likely be getting fatter, not thinner.

Having never had clothing made-to-measure before, I was concerned about the quality of the finished product, but the fabrics were excellent and the prices, about \$40 for a dress shirt, less than \$150 for a jacket, were worth a gamble.

As it turns out, the risk paid off, not only materially (the best fitting sport jacket I've ever worn, and a shirt I may mail order in additional colors) but experientially: having been told our garments would be delivered to our hotel the next evening, John and I were taken aback when, the next afternoon, a Luxe India staff member approached us in the midst of a walking tour of Jaipur's city palace and hustled us out to the parking lot. Assistants from the tailor shop were waiting outside our group's tour bus, which we boarded, slipped on our partially made new clothes, and had them marked up for finishing alterations. As in our hotels, the customer service was extraordinary.

Home base for two nights in Jaipur was the **Oberoi Rajvilas** ([www.oberoihotels.com](http://www.oberoihotels.com)), a compound of spacious villas and a handful of safari-style luxury tents set in a garden surrounding an ancient Hindu



Jim Gladstone and John Lau at the Amber Fort

temple. We attended an early morning ceremony in the temple, unsure of the exact content being presented by the resident priest, but finding meditative peacefulness in the rituals of repetitive chanting.

Yoga, cooking lessons, and history talks were also on offer at the Oberoi properties we stayed at. One night, impossibly handsome members of the Rajvilas staff, uniformed in multi-colored turbans and block-printed robes, made us traditional headgear of our own. Circling us as we sat on wooden chairs, they twirled and tightened nine-foot bands of richly dyed fabric around our heads.

During our time in Jaipur, our group dined, as we did throughout the majority of the trip, at the hotel. Given the compressed nature of our itinerary, the breakneck pace of our days, and the lurking potential of "Delhi belly" given much of India's relatively primitive water treatment and sewage facilities, we played it particularly safe (and successfully so).

That said, unlike in the US, hotel restaurants are among the best to be found in India. Luxe India often arranged for our meals to be served family style, allowing each of us to sample a wider range of local specialties. (Luxe's concierge service has access to tables at trustworthy fine restaurants throughout the country for travelers with the time and stamina to dine out).

Adventurous eaters should know that Indian eateries tend to dial down the heat when serving westerners. So if you like your food spicy, you'll want to request that the kitchen amp things up to local tastes.

Perhaps the most unexpected tourist attraction we visited while in Jaipur was **Jantar Mantar**, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. What first appear to be an array of abstract 20th century concrete and marble sculptures are a collection of mathematical precise astronomical instruments, dating as far back as 1728. Used to measure the movement of the sun through complex systems of shadowcasting, they generated functional calendars and timekeeping systems. The hybrid of aesthetic beauty and scientifically complex utility on view here is astonishing.

Our most dramatic Jaipur experience, though, was a visit to the **Amber Fort**, located just outside the city. Constructed beginning in 1592, the beauty of the fortress' terraced inner courtyards belies the rough-hewn outer walls that protect them.

Taj Mahal

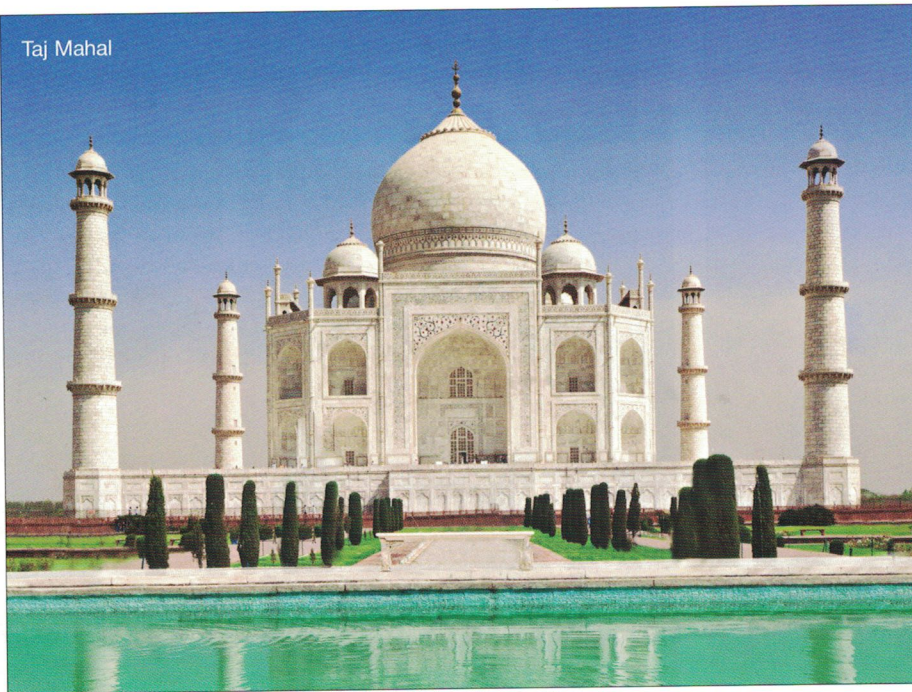


Photo: Passport Archives

We were ferried up to the fort on the backs of elephants whose ears and foreheads were decorated with colored chalk designs. As we climbed the zigzag path to the imposing façade, young boys waved and shouted up at us, snapping photographs while urging us to purchase them when we came back down (sure enough, thanks to the kids' speedy footwork and some hardworking entrepreneurs with digital printers hidden away nearby they had photos ready for us to buy 90 minutes later).

Passing through the fortress' massive stone gate, we looked over our shoulders at the sweeping green valley below. Looking forward, we saw a courtyard so enormous that dozens of pachyderms and hundreds of tourists didn't seem like much of a crowd at all. We were swept up in the fantasy grandeur of life in another world.

Fantasy, because needless to say, life in the 16th century was hardly grand for most people living in what is now Northern India. Neither is life today. Not for people (over 20% of the Indian population live on the equivalent of less than \$1.25 per day), nor for the Amber Fort elephants. After our return from abroad, we were upset and embarrassed to learn of reports that the over 100 elephants used for tourist transport at the fort have been widely reported to be mistreated and malnourished by their handlers.

There's no need to deny one's self a bucketlist trip, a long-dreamed-about skim of another culture's greatest hits, but due diligence is in order, like bringing an open LGBT presence to countries still evolving in regard to human rights. Also, make sure to let tour operators know that you refuse to participate, and insist that they stop participating, in activities that impinge upon animal rights. Your words and actions will send important signals to foreign governments and businesses.

As you have the opportunities to make your own dreams come true, it's worth keeping in mind that there are other realities. In many of them, the quality of life you already lead would surely seem the stuff of fantasy to others.

From Jaipur, we departed by bus toward our final fantasy, the Taj Mahal in the city of Agra. To be honest, after nearly a week chockablock with architectural astonishments, not to mention a lifetime of *National Geographic* stories, school room posters, and travel brochures, I felt fairly certain the Taj would be a letdown, an Indian equivalent of the

Washington Monument or some other over-photographed landmark.

After just about 90 minutes on the road, we took a pit stop that, in and of itself, would have made the day a fantastic success. Relatively untrafficked by foreign tourists, the village of Abhaneri is home to **Chand Baori**, an Escheresque masterpiece more than 1,000 years old.

From a giant rectangular aperture at ground level, four angled walls sink 13 stories into the ground, forming a sort of hollow, inverted pyramid that long ago served as a village well. Three of the walls are composed of dozens of narrow stone stairways (over 3,500 steps in total), which townspeople once descended to draw springwater from what is now a brackish green pool. Almost surreal in appearance, Chand Baori seems like the set of some unreleased Indiana Jones movie, an inside-out Mayan temple, a structure that should only exist in a dream.

A change in the weather when we resumed our drive to Agra felt more like a nightmare.

After a week of almost perfect blue-skied 80 degree weather, we caught a solid two hours of late-in-the-season monsoon rains. While our steadfast driver nonchalantly powered through waters that lapped against car doors and climbed the front stoops of small town houses, I gritted my teeth and averted my eyes.

The rain cleared almost as suddenly as it had started, and as we pulled into the drive of the Oberoi Amervilas, the only hotel with unobstructed views of the **Taj Mahal**, we were met by two electric golf carts that immediately ferried us to the monument grounds. Washed clean by the afternoon's downpour, the soaring marble dome beckoned us to walk toward it through an elegant garden of fountains, perfectly trimmed trees, and a long, narrow reflecting pool.

Commissioned by Muslim Emperor Shah Jahan, the Taj is a mausoleum for his beloved wife, Mumtaz Mahal, who died in labor with the couple's 14th child in 1631. Over 20,000 workers spent more than a decade in the monument's construction, largely from white marble inlaid with semi-precious stones.

The Taj Mahal did not disappoint. It transcended every photograph I'd ever seen. In part, this was because the near perfect symmetry of the building's design, from the octagonal chamber at its core to the four free-standing minarets at the corners of its plaza-scaled marble platform, created a remarkable three dimensional space to move through. The flat plane of a picture postcard doesn't begin to convey the elegant forms and echoing rhythms of a walk within and around the central dome.

Building exponentially on the impact of space and volume was the play of early-evening light on the Taj and its surroundings. As the sun descended, the monument's backdrop shifted from pale blue to orange, from deep rose to dusky purple; the textures of lattice carvings and calligraphic inlays faded as the buildings flattened into inky silhouettes of their primal geometry.

The Taj Mahal, while it may once have been a bucketlist destination for me, a box to be checked off, was now something different. Transformed by travel, it was no longer a place, but an experience, a set of sensations on their way to becoming memories. ■