

A PASSAGE TO INDIA



India is a tantalising honeymoon destination. It can prove challenging to visit, but not if you let someone do the hard work for you, as Jillian Bolger discovers

Just as India is large and vast so too is the list of adjectives required to paint a fair portrait. It would be lazy to call it a land of contrasts but there's so many intriguing incongruities on the expansive sub-continent that life here seems overwhelmingly contradictory.

At every turn the country hypnotises you with its beauty then confuses you with its extremes. Streetscapes flit between the mesmerising and the maddening; the pristine and the dirty; the serene and the hectic; the opulent and the impoverished. The culture is richer than you can ever imagine – from religious rituals to flamboyant dress, from the street life to street food, from the wildlife to the warm and friendly people. All life is here amongst the colour and noise and grime and history.

India's not for everyone, though I challenge anyone remotely curious about the world to come and experience it for themselves. It will not disappoint – all this life and rich heritage and glorious scenery is the stuff of dreams and can't fail to thrill even the most nervous of travellers. A country undoubtedly suited to independent travel plenty of visitors come on escorted tours, with carefully chosen itineraries that avoid all the uncertainty and stresses of travelling alone while granting access to some of the nation's most significant sites.

My first trip here was in 2004 backpacking for ten weeks, figuring it out as we went on a modest budget. This time around I join a luxury escorted tour and soon discover the benefits of experiencing India as a VIP.



Iconic landmarks

Our 'Gold' itinerary takes in India's gold triangle of Delhi, Agra and the Taj Mahal and Rajasthan's Pink City of Jaipur. We're also stopping off in Mumbai, a uniquely cosmopolitan city where Western sensibilities mix with local tradition to deliver a fascinating metropolis.

We sleep in five-star hotels fit for Maharajahs and travel by luxury coach with our own tour guide, who proves a font of knowledge on his native country. Cutting through the countryside we spot barefoot children working the fields, cows meandering through business yards, holy men meditating by the side of the road and women wrapped in colourful saris carrying baskets on their heads. In Old Delhi we board a cycle rickshaw and whizz through the narrow laneways of Chandni Chowk market where vendors are getting ready for Diwali.

We stop at the garden where Gandhi drew his last breath and negotiate traffic around India Gate an imposing war memorial that commemorates 82,000 Indian soldiers who lost their lives in various battles, including the First World War.

Drink in the serenity and exquisite craftsmanship of the world's most impressive monument to love



Amazing Agra

Next it's on to Agra where we first glimpse the iconic Taj Mahal through smog and a heat haze. Next morning we visit with throngs of tourists and drink in the serenity and exquisite craftsmanship that makes this marble mausoleum the world's most impressive monument to love. Despite having visited it before it still delights with its intricacy and beauty.

Leaving this modern wonder of the world again we head for the train station to experience what is, arguably, a rite of passage in India, a journey on the legendary Indian railway. Cutting through the countryside we climb to Ranthambhore, a region I've never visited. We've come to see Rajasthan's Ranthambhore National Park, once the private hunting grounds of the Maharajahs of Jaipur and now protected home of the endangered Bengal tiger. Fewer than half of the visitors here will spot the elusive tiger but it seems the elephant-headed deity, Ganesha, is smiling down on us today as we come across a magnificent beast lounging in the grass. Just as we were about to leave she stands up, and walks towards our convoy, all flaming fur, bold black stripes and startling amber eyes. Appearing by the roadside metres from our vehicle, she strolls past swishing her tail and leaving our group speechless in delight.

Not to be outdone by this queen of the jungle Ranthambhore's many wildlife put on quite the show for us. From elegant sambar deer with huge antlers, cheeky langur monkeys, wild boar, armour-plated crocodiles and a coterie of vibrantly plumed birds a safari here is a thrill. In a year where Jungle Book has been reinvented of a new generation it's humbling to imagine Kipling took inspiration for Shere Khan from India's exotic jungles.



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India always puts on a wonderful show for all who dare to come and visit

Honeymoon Heaven

Irish Brides stayed at the following luxury properties in the most romantic rooms and suites imaginable.

- ♥ Delhi – Hyatt Regency, delhi.regency.hyatt.com
- ♥ Agra – ITC Mughal, Agrat-hotels.in
- ♥ Ranthambore – Nahargarh, nahargarh.com
- ♥ Jaipur – Fairmont, fairmont.com/jaipur/
- ♥ Mumbai – The Oberoi, oberoihotels.com.

Pretty in pink

Next stop is Jaipur where we visit the 16th century Amber Fort, an imposing citadel high on a hill overlooking the fabled Pink City. After viewing the royal halls with their exquisite handiwork we're served lunch of traditional thali in 1135AD, an opulent bejewelled restaurant within the fortress walls. Royalty no longer live here unlike our next stop, the City Palace, a seven-storeyed citadel where we're granted surprise access to the private living quarters of the present-day Maharajah of Jaipur.

Our whistle-stop tour finishes with a flight to Mumbai, where a local guide takes us through the old city to witness Victorian Bombay in all its architectural splendour. The British Raj truly made their mark here and it's interesting to see how their landmark buildings have been assimilated into modern,

independent India. Fortunately – or maybe because Ganesha is looking out for us again – it's Diwali today, the Hindu festival that's India's most significant celebration. Here amongst the prestigious hotels, designer boutiques, roadside hawkers and bustling Crawford Market there's a palpable buzz in India's most populous city. We dine in a chic restaurant filled with well-heeled families before joining Mumabikars on the street to witness the fireworks filling the skies above Marine Drive.

The beautiful boulevard curves around the Arabian Sea and my seafront suite at the swanky Oberoi looks towards the famous Chowpatty Beach. With the fireworks filling the inky sky with kaleidoscopic brilliance I'm reminded that this country always puts on a wonderful show for all who dare to come and visit.

Your honeymoon planner

✦ Irish Brides travelled with **Insight Vacations** on a preview of the new Essence of India with Ranthambhore itinerary with Fascinating Mumbai extension. The 10-night trip costs from €3,350 per person based on two people sharing and includes, luxury 5-star accommodation, all breakfasts, 8 meals, sightseeing and safaris in Ranthambhore, travel in business class coaches, internal flight from Jaipur to Mumbai and the services of a Travelling Concierge throughout. A 7 Day Essence of India Trip, with the Ranthambhore extension is €2,325 per person. www.inightvacations.com, 1800 98 98 98 or visit your local travel agent.

✦ Jillian flew to India via Dubai with **Emirates airlines** www.emirates.com/ie ■

