

THE TAJ MAHAL

An enduring symbol of love, the Taj Mahal is the town of Agra's main attraction – a two-hour train ride from Delhi. Declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1983, the monument is one of the globe's most recognisable buildings, yet no matter how often you've seen it in print, nothing can compare to seeing the Taj Mahal in the flesh. Rising 35 metres above a massive square plinth, the Taj was built by Mughal emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his beloved



third wife, Mumtaz Mahal, who died in 1631. Twenty-two years later – with the help of 20,000 workers and 1,000 elephants – his masterpiece was finally complete.

The Taj is still as beautiful today. With nothing behind it but the Yamuna River, the entire edifice appears to float on the horizon. Up close, its sheer size is overwhelming – its detail, astounding. Famous for changing colour with the time of day, the monument glows lily white at dawn, burnished gold at midday and rose pink at dusk.

ROYAL BENGAL TIGERS

One of the most beautiful animals in the world, the Royal Bengal Tiger is also one of the most endangered. Its striped coat marked it

out as a huntsman's prize in days gone by, but thankfully today the only shots being taken at India's national animal are photographs – at least in game reserves where it is protected.

Rajasthan's Ranthambore National Park is where one can witness tigers in their natural environment – living



wild as nature intended. The former hunting ground of the Maharajahs of Jaipur, this 392km² park is located 130km from Jaipur. Apart from tigers, a safari into Ranthambore also offers the opportunity to spot leopards, sloth bears, chital deer and up to 350 species of birds.

INDIAN WEDDINGS

Filled with tradition, Indian weddings are festive affairs that last several days. To witness or participate in such an event would be to experience one of the world's most joyful nuptial celebrations.

An Indian wedding involves the entire community, with up to 10,000 guests! Marriages are usually arranged, but love matches do occur. There are a number of common wedding traditions, despite India's melting pot of cultures. In the lead up to the wedding day, events include the 'mehendi' party when the bride's hands are painted with henna patterns, and 'sangeet' when the bride's family throws an evening of musical entertainment. On the morning of the wedding, an important ritual is 'haldi'

– the cleansing ceremony for both bride and groom which involves being pasted with turmeric powder. The actually marriage ceremony generally takes place in a 'mandap' or tent, beautifully decorated with marigolds. An unforgettable sight is the groom arriving on a white horse bedecked in red, white and gold – just like the hero of a fairytale. Weddings are usually held from November through April, and during these months, it is common to see grooms on their steeds stopping traffic as they make



their grand way to meet their bride, surrounded by attendants. (Aman-i-Khâs' manager and groom of 2007 Gerhard pictured above.)

HOLI

One of the most eye-catching, photogenic and enjoyable of all India's holidays, Holi is a literal riot of colour, fun and games. The challenge is to keep your camera dry, as those celebrating in the city streets throw coloured powder and water at each other – and everyone is fair game!

A festival celebrating spring, Holi is held on the last full moon day of the lunar month 'Phalguna', which usually falls in the latter part of February or March each year (20th March 2011). Bonfires are usually lit the day before in memory of a legendary

escape: Prahlad, a staunch devotee of the god Vishnu, went unscathed in a burning pyre while his demoness sister, Holika, was burnt to death. Prahlad represents good, while his sister is a symbol of evil – a key theme throughout the festival.



SPICE OF LIFE

Indian cuisine is known for its complexity of flavours and, of course, its heat. One can enjoy it the world over, but there is nothing like indulging in an authentic Indian meal – whether a *masala dosa* (breakfast crepe stuffed with spiced potatoes), roadside samosa, or Rajasthan *thali* (a selection of different dishes served in small bowls on a round tray). While every region has its own distinct fare based on cultural and religious practices, certain ingredients such as rice and lentils are staples. But it is the sub-continent's spices that make Indian food unique.

The most frequently used spices are chilli pepper, black mustard seeds, cumin, turmeric, fenugreek, ginger, coriander and garlic. Popular spice mixes are known as *garam masala* – a powder that typically includes five or more dried spices. Each region, and sometimes each individual chef, has a distinctive blend of *garam masala*. Desserts are usually seasoned with cardamom, nutmeg, saffron and rose petal essences. •

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"So far as I am able to judge, nothing has been left undone, either by man or nature, to make India the most extraordinary country that the sun visits on his rounds. Nothing seems to have been forgotten, nothing overlooked."

– Mark Twain

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IT'S DELHI!

THE FASTEST-GROWING DEMOCRACY IN THE WORLD TODAY, India is transforming at an astonishing pace from a developing country into a global powerhouse. As the capital of this burgeoning nation, Delhi is at the forefront of these changes. Its new prosperity and proximity to Rajasthan and one of the wonders of the modern world, the Taj Mahal, makes it a city primed for travellers seeking a luxurious yet stimulating getaway.

Aman Suite in the nine-storey Aman New Delhi. Unique in a multi-storey resort, all 31 Aman Rooms and eight Aman Suites feature private plunge pools.



PASHMINAS

Known for their softness and warmth, pashmina shawls find mention in Indian texts from 300 BC. However, the founder of the cashmere wool industry is traditionally held to be the 15th-century ruler of Kashmir, Zayn-ul-Abidin, who introduced weavers from Central Asia.

Pashmina refers to a type of fine cashmere wool which comes from the 'changthangi' or 'pashmina goat' – indigenous to the high altitudes of the Himalayas. To survive the region's harsh winters, these goats grow an extra inner layer of soft wool which is then shed every spring. One goat sheds approximately 80-170g of this fine wool which is spun to produce cashmere.

Pure pashmina products have a gauzy open weave,

finely honed by craftsmen who regard themselves more as artists. Every knot tied in the creation of a carpet masterpiece is part of a story told through colour and pattern.

In the early 20th century nature was the most important source of colour: madder roots providing a rainbow of pinks and reds, green coming from grass and brown from the kiker tree. A range of natural dyes are still used today.

Pattern is just as important. The usual procedure adopted by a weaver is to draw his designs and transfer them to graph paper on which each square represents a single knot. The other manner followed by weavers in Kashmir and Amritsar is the 'Talin' which demands time and experience. A coded colour chart, the



as the fibre cannot tolerate high tension. The most popular pashmina fabric is a 70% pashmina, 30% silk blend which results in tightly woven fabric with an elegant sheen.

CARPETS

Crafted from wool and silk, Indian hand-knotted carpets are renowned the world over for their exquisite designs, subtle elegance and fine workmanship. Brought to India by Mughal emperor Akbar the Great in the 16th century, carpet weaving is an ancient art that has been

Talin indicates the number of knots to be woven in their respective colours. The master-weaver reads the Talin out loud and the weavers chant their reply after carrying out the instruction.

Once a carpet is woven, it needs to have its underside burnt and rubbed with a wire brush to make it even. Then it is washed, dried and clipped. So how long does this take? A 9 by 12 foot rug that has 500 knots per square inch would take 4 to 5 artisans working 6 hours a day, 6 days a week, approximately 14 months!

RETAIL THERAPY

While luxury malls stocking the world's leading brands are a-coming (such as the super-glam *Emporio* in New Delhi's Vasant Kunj), the retail industry in Delhi is still dominated by local independent stores. A spot of retail therapy therefore means moving about to find exactly what you want.

But it's worth it: You get a tour of the city and truly experience the personality of the place. With the help of a savvy guide and patient driver, and if the traffic gods are smiling, you can zip from Khan Market to the Garden of Five Senses, stopping at Lodhi Market, Connaught Place, Sunder Nagar and a host of others on the way. A shopper's paradise, Delhi is famous for its miniature painting and antiques (Sunder Nagar), its contemporary art scene and fashion designers the likes of Manish Arora and Rohit Bal. It's also a mecca for jewellery, textiles and carpets, and boasts some incredible lifestyle stores. If at any point you feel yourself flagging, a hot sweet cup of masala chai is never far away and will revive you immediately – even if your credit card takes a little longer to recover.

invite good fortune and ward off evil, gems are an integral part of India's culture. So much so that a man or woman of outstanding qualities is known as Purusha or Sthree Ratna – a gem of a man or woman, and the highest award given by the Indian Government to its citizens is called Bharata Ratna – Gem of India.

Gemstones

India is a land famed for its jewels and gemstones. In fact, it is here that diamonds are thought to

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READY, STEADY, DELHI

There's so much more to Delhi than merely being the gateway to India. Delhi is a cosmopolitan, international city with plenty to offer the discerning jetsetter, from gourmet restaurants to world-class shopping. Throw in over 1,000 years of history and you get a city where fast-paced modernisation and carefully preserved antiquity co-exist to create a fascinating destination. Welcome to the capital of the sub-continent.

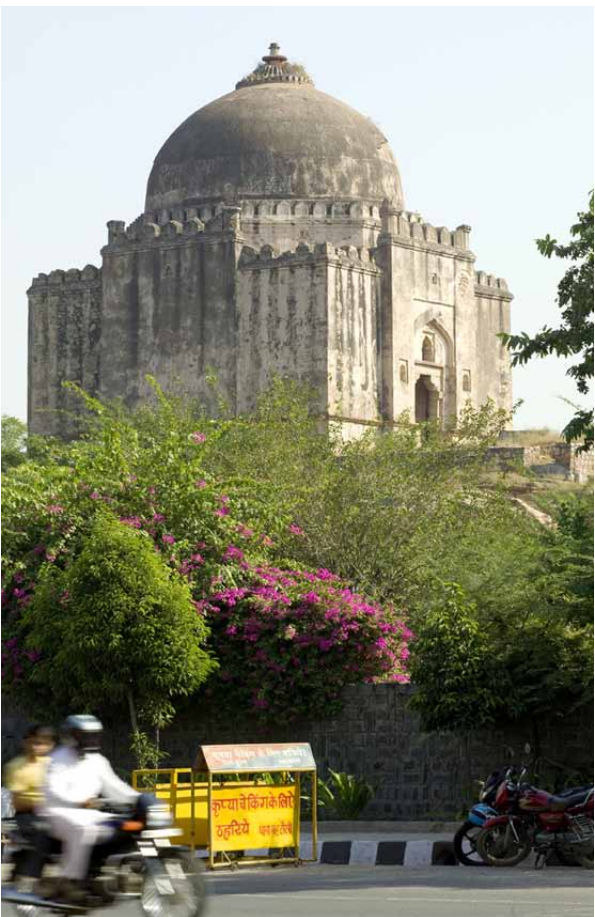
Delhi is a city with many faces, a veritable mirror to the diversity of India as a whole. In terms of population, Delhi is home to more than 15 million and is a true melting pot of cultures and religions. Even more striking than the diversity of the city's inhabitants, is the city itself. From the atmospheric spectacle of Old Delhi to the wide, tree-lined streets of New Delhi, this is a city full of contrasts, many arising from the fact that Delhi is a city of cities: The remains of 7 major cities have been discovered in Delhi, but the two which can still be explored are 17th-century 'Shahjahanabad', more commonly known as Old Delhi or Chandni Chowk, and the garden city built by the British Raj known as 'New Delhi'.

Standing on the corner of Dariba Street in Chandni Chowk, Old Delhi's atmospheric retail area, you'll feel like you've stepped into an Indian caricature. It's as marvelous as a movie set, yet as real as the samosas for sale behind you. The narrow street or *gali*, famed for its bespoke silver jewellery shops, is thronged with people, from paan and chai wallas to women threading marigolds in their jewel-bright saris. So are the rest of the warren-like lanes which weave like threads in a tapestry of markets before the magnificent Lal Quila. Known as the Red Fort,

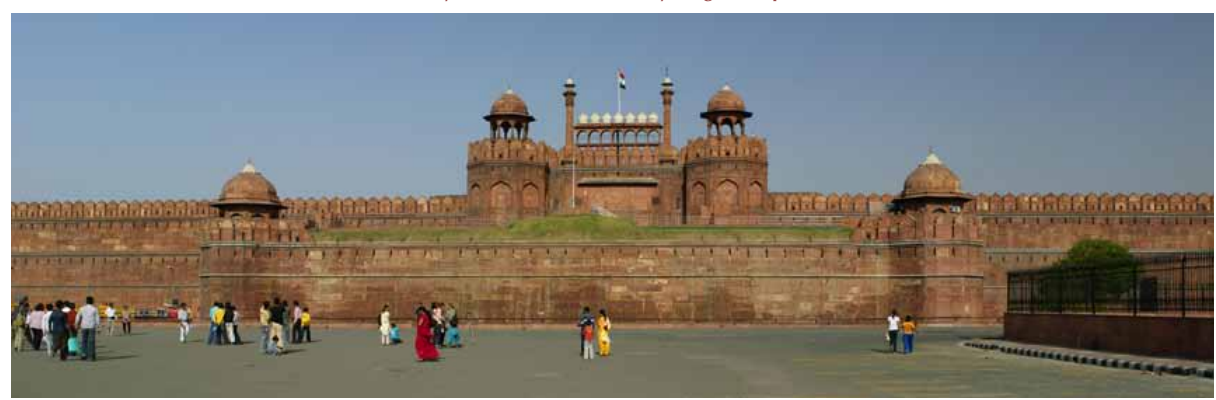
Lal Quila was built by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan (of Taj Mahal fame) when he moved his capital from Agra to Delhi in 1649, founding Shahjahanabad. It was his favourite daughter who designed the city outside the fort's walls, the galis purposefully narrow to hinder invading armies, and studded with such must-see sites as the Jama Masjid and Fatehpur Mosques.

This is what many expect Delhi to be: a labyrinth of alleyways bustling with activity and bursting with shops

The 14th-century Tomb of Azim Khan



The 17th-century Red Fort constructed by Mughal emperor Shah Jahan



selling saris, lassies, bangles and incense – the list goes on. But despite being the largest trading centre of North India, Chandni Chowk is just a tiny corner of the capital which is divided into nine huge districts. Guide books further divide Delhi into 36 areas and Old Delhi is just one of them. Nonetheless, Old Delhi's few square kilometres hold a fair number of Delhi's 1,200 heritage buildings and 175 monuments regarded as national heritage sites. Old Delhi is also home to two World Heritage Sites, including the Red Fort and Qutab Minar. The capital's third World Heritage Site, Humayun's Tomb, lies in New Delhi.

The eighth city built in the Delhi region (the count starts with the fabled city of Indraprastha), New Delhi or Lutyens' Delhi was built by the British after they moved their capital from Calcutta in 1911. Sir Edward Lutyens did a grand old job of laying out a spacious city of broad boulevards, elegant parks and regal buildings. When entering New Delhi you'll soon find yourself driving past pristine white bungalows in leafy grounds towards the iconic India Gate, its

Top: India Gate at sunset. Below: Vendor in Chandni Chowk



surrounding lawns and canals, and the presidential palace of Rashtrapati Bhavan. Lutyens' Delhi boasts more historic sites than any one place deserves, from the old fort of Purana Qila to the tranquil Lodhi Gardens. But leaving history behind, it's also where the city's finest restaurants and shops are situated.

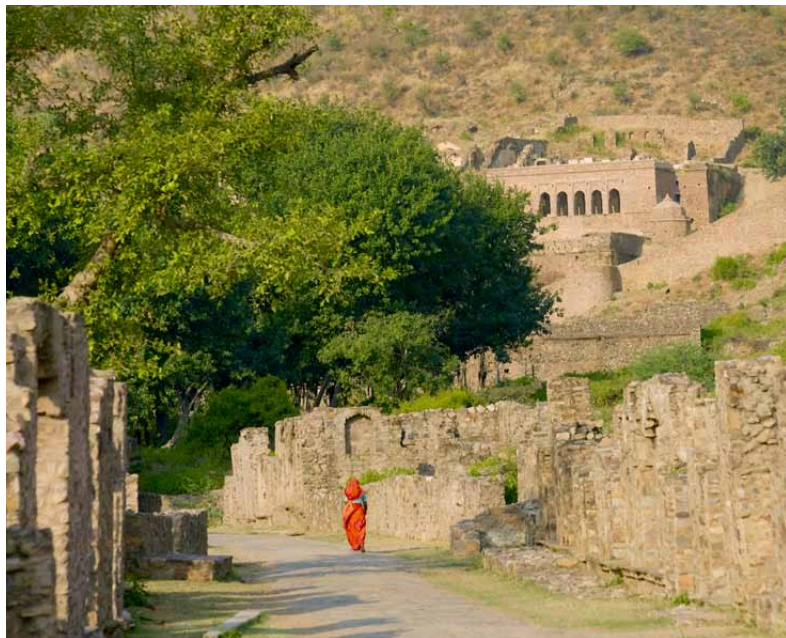
While Delhi has enough attractions to keep visitors occupied for weeks, its proximity to Agra means even the shortest of city stays should include a venture down south to see the world's most impressive testament to love – the Taj Mahal. And beyond this monument lies Rajasthan, India's ruggedly beautiful frontier region. As fierce as the tigers which inhabit its wilds and as cultured as a Maharajah, Rajasthan offers travellers adventure in sultan-esque style. ●

TRAINS, PLANES, AUTOMOBILES AND TRISHAWS

Like many other Asian cities, Delhi has a reputation for chaotic traffic and drivers with a rather laissez faire attitude to the rules of the road. While this is true in part, the city has developed a highly efficient public transport system with the introduction of the Delhi Metro which has significantly improved congestion on the roads and as a result, air quality. Another improvement is the opening of the New Delhi airport. This means that domestic transfers from international flights are all within the same complex, avoiding a commute between airports.

Challenges aside, getting around Delhi is really all part of the adventure. Taking a trishaw gets you up close and personal with the city sights and sounds, while bouncing along in an Ambassador is like cruising back in time to the colonial era when these vehicles were known as 'The Kings of Indian roads' (possibly due to their excellent suspension!). The best way to explore beyond the city is by train – comfortable and quicker than travelling long distances by road.

When time is of the essence, flying is the way forward. In this respect Delhi is truly the gateway to India, offering direct flights to every city and most towns in the country – providing they offer an airport.



From top to bottom: Ruins of Bhangarh; Laxmi – the leopard hand-reared by Aman manager Gerhard Weihahn in Ranthambore National Park; a Rajasthani shepherd.

14th century, tolerated the dominance of the British Raj in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and survived – with pride intact.

Tourism has flourished in Rajasthan in recent years. Visitors flock to the cities and their surrounds to capture on their SLRs the exotic colours of elegant sari-clad women, the nonchalance of cows causing traffic jams, the concentration of roadside barbers, and the magnificent architectural relics of days gone by, from Jaipur's Hawa Mahal 'Palace of Winds' to Udaipur's hill-top Monsoon Palace.

However, it is in the countryside around the cities that the true Rajasthan experience of luxury and relaxation is to be found. Rural Maharajah's palaces now serve as exclusive hotels and offer access to traditional villages and more remote historical attractions such as Ajabharh Fort, the deserted city

RUGGED RAJASTHAN

With rose- and violet-hued cities, ancient forts and tiger-inhabited wilds, this desolate region is something of an oasis for the discerning traveller.

James Bond probably had his best time yet in this starkly beautiful Indian state, and it's anyone's guess why he hasn't returned since his Octopussy encounter in Udaipur's decadent Lake Palace. Just the word 'Rajasthan' is enough to conjure up romantic images of a silver screen India. The beauty of the place is that these images can't compete with the reality.

Rajasthan is the largest state in India – about the size of Germany – and is endowed with exceptional natural beauty and a fascinating history. The dry northwestern part

west to the northeast corner of the state, and provides opportunities galore for outdoorsmen and nature enthusiasts. It is also a range filled with the ruins of temples and palaces which speak eloquently of Rajasthan's glorious and bloody past, populated with more heroes and villains than a Marvel comic book.

Literally the 'Land of Kings', Rajasthan only became part of India in 1949. Before that, it was a collection of 23 warring prince-

doms ruled by Rajputs – fierce warrior families, rich in elephants, camels, jewels and land. The Rajputs had risen to prominence during the 6th century, been subjugated (with difficulty) by Babur and Akbar the Great's Mughal invaders in the



of Rajasthan, with an initial stay at Aman New Delhi on arrival, followed by stays at Aman-i-Khás, a luxury tented camp on the outskirts of Ranthambore National Park and at Amanbagh. Tucked into the Aravalli Hills on an historic garden estate – once the Maharajah of Alwar's hunting grounds, Amanbagh is a work of art crafted from pink *makrana* marble and sandstone in the graceful domed cupolas and arches of the Mughal era.

Even Bond himself would have to admit – Rajasthan is a world in itself that is more than enough. ●