



# FROM INDIA WITH LOVE

While travelling through the fabled Golden Triangle region in the country's north, Michelle Wranik-Hicks falls hopelessly in love with the startling yet unforgettable sights, sounds and infinite colours of India



Jama Masjid in Old Delhi is one of India's largest mosques; the sun rises on arguably India's most famous sight, the Taj Mahal (previous page)



Colourfully dressed women head home carrying their work's tools on their heads; in Jaipur, brightly painted elephants can be seen during festivals (below)

## “NOTHING QUITE PREPARES YOU FOR THE TAJ'S QUIET BEAUTY. EVEN AT A DISTANCE, THERE'S SOMETHING SOUL STIRRING ABOUT THE SILHOUETTE”

It's an hour before the Friday prayers and the faithful are already making their way to Jama Masjid, one of the holiest sites in India's north. Our guide is telling us grand tales about the history of the mosque, one of the most stunning pieces of Islamic architecture in India, but I can barely listen, for we have only just emerged from Chandni Chowk, the centuries-old market in Old Delhi. Set at the doorstep of the mosque, the bewildering patchwork of ramshackle alleys is crammed with what seems to be thousands of market stalls and a ceaseless tide of people. The riot of colour and sound is almost too much to take in: overripe bananas stacked high atop bullock-drawn carts, mangy dogs lapping at bowls of milk, shopkeepers squatting in doorways, chai wallahs, rickshaw drivers, salesmen plying brilliantly weaved textiles, cotton *kurtas* and scarves, and

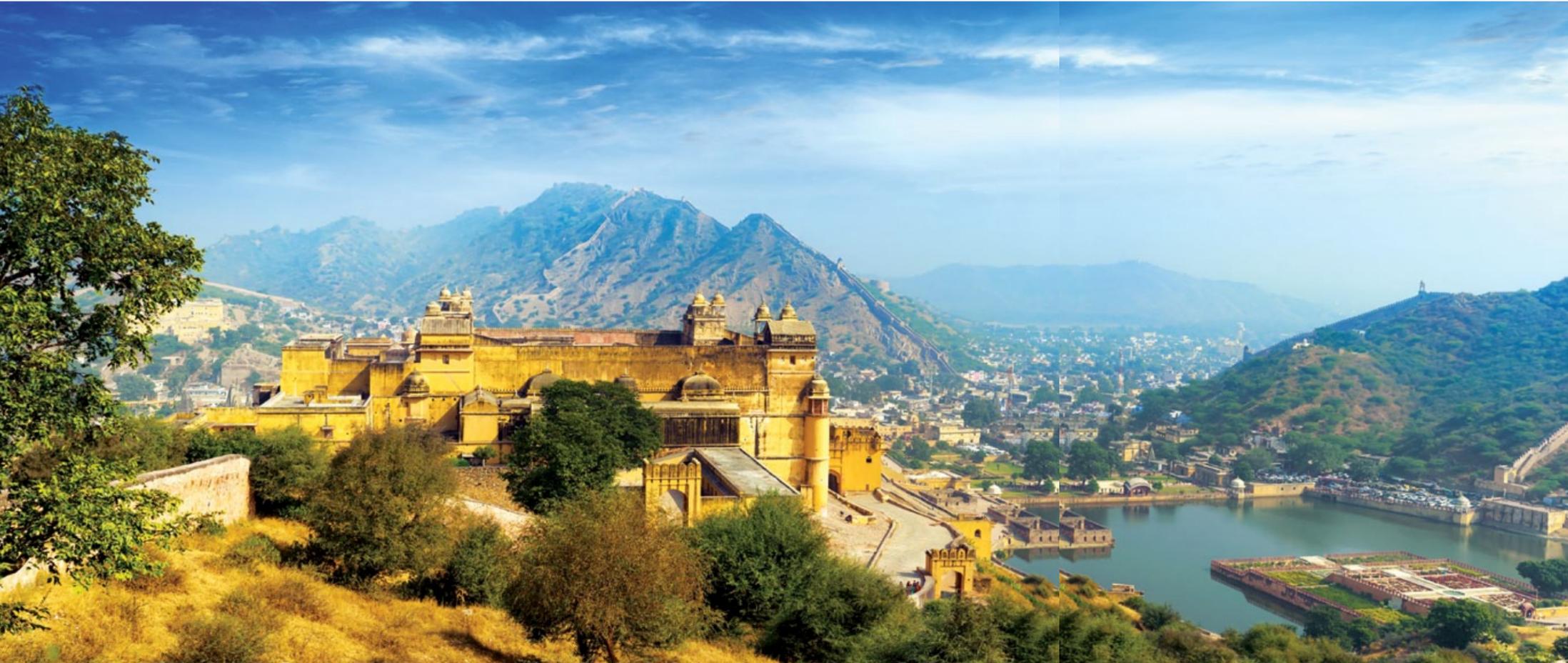
the scent of spices and marigold garlands filling the air. When we finally emerge from the other side, I need a moment to recover from the sensory assault, and judging by her twinkling eyes, the guide knows it. “Welcome to the organised chaos of Delhi,” she says, smiling mischievously. I don't reply. It certainly won't be the last time I stand mute, in awe of the marvel that is India.

Even for the most seasoned traveller, India can be a daunting experience. The sights, sounds and (often pungent) smells commandeer the senses, and when you consider the constant urge to grab your camera to try to capture it all – the flower garlands, the extraordinary temples, the wondrous faces and foreheads smeared with *kumkuma* – along with the inevitable street urchins, beggars and pashmina-waving vendors competing for your attention, it can be hugely distracting. Which is why an organised tour – in the organised chaos

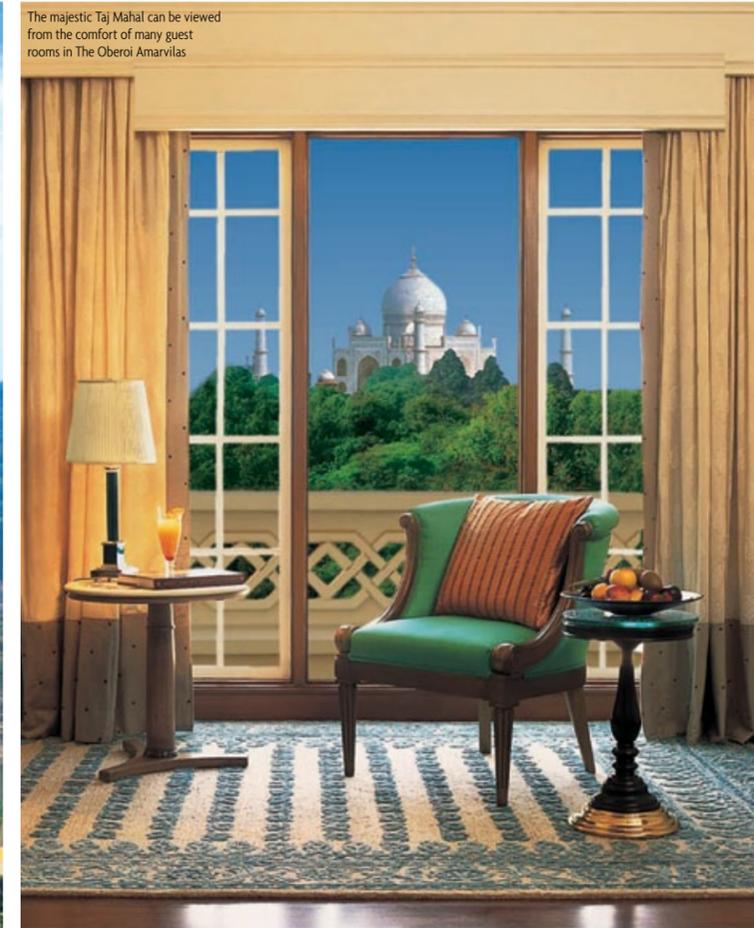
of Delhi, no less – is a relatively painless way to experience India, allowing you to emerge, even from the madness of Chandni Chowk, as unruffled as one can be.

I've joined a small group of travellers on Scott Dunn's (+44 20 8682 5000; [www.scottdunn.com](http://www.scottdunn.com)) tour of the country's epic Golden Triangle region, which spans a triangle-shaped circuit in the country's north. We begin in Delhi, a city built and destroyed seven times, and the magnificent Jama Masjid – crafted by the finest artisans Shah Jahan, the fifth Mughal emperor of India, could summon – is just one of the highlights. The mosque can hold up to 25,000 Muslims, and as we stand in the ferocious August humidity, watching the crowds amass, our guide points out the other regulars stationed at the foot of the stairs: vendors selling freshly pressed lime juice and soda; the barber armed with a retractable stool, a blade





The majestic Taj Mahal can be viewed from the comfort of many guest rooms in The Oberoi Amarvilas



Threesixty® restaurant in The Oberoi, Gurgaon, serves local and international cuisine with pretty hotel views; Jaipur's Amber Fort overlooks Maota Lake (above)

and a rusty pair of scissors; and the ear cleaner – distinguished by a piece of white paper sticking out from beneath his cap.

Partnering with Oberoi hotels, which are dotted around the circuit, the Scott Dunn tour affords a luxurious way to see the country, particularly in Delhi, where there are two Oberoi properties offering vastly different perspectives of the city. I swim laps in the outdoor pool at The Oberoi, New Delhi, surrounded by the verdant cloud-cloaked forests lining the Delhi Golf Club before dinner at the hotel's Threesixty® restaurant, where businessmen, diplomats and glamorous society women clad in saris mingle in the lounges. The hotel is located nearby to the tranquil Lodi Gardens where (some inside trivia) the security team of former French President Nicholas Sarkozy spent hours combing the bushes, preparing for the president's morning run – only for Sarkozy to announce he would use the treadmill in his suite.

On the other side of the city, The Oberoi, Gurgaon is a contemporary structure of glass, steel and a 920-sqm-tall "living wall" planted with almost 3,000 wedelia plants. Modern and urban, it's a haven from the hoi polloi and showcases India's passion for art, cuisine and fashion, with the country's largest Gucci boutique along with Jimmy Choo and Burberry. We dine on exquisite seafood at Amaranta restaurant, plucked from the country's 7,500-km coastline at 4.30am and

## “ONE OF OUR FINAL MEALS IN INDIA PROVES TO BE ONE OF THE MOST MEMORABLE - AND IT BEGINS ON AN ELEPHANT”

appearing on our dining table by lunch; peruse the hotel's collection of modern art – including a sculpture of a *dabbawalla* (tiffin delivery man) by Mumbai-based artist Valay Shende, made entirely of bronze discs and pocket watches; and sniff scented-silk saris at Neel Sutra, the boutique of acclaimed Indian designer Deepika Govind, who infuses some of her exquisite materials with aromatherapy scents, from tea-tree oil to rose.

From Delhi, it's a lengthy drive to Agra, but the sight of dozens of beaming, moustachioed, turban-wearing staff at The Oberoi Amarvilas, standing with their palms touching in greeting, is heart-warming. It's a memorable welcome to the city's most legendary hotel, a fabulous nearly-four-hectare complex of elegant gardens and Mughal and Moorish sandstone architecture, terraced pavilions, domes, archways and symmetrical reflection pools. Situated just 600 metres from the Taj Mahal, my first glimpse of the World Heritage-

listed love monument is from my suite. There are probably millions of images of the memorial – indeed, I even go home with a book titled *501 Photographs Of The Taj Mahal And Glimpses Of Mughal Agra* – but nothing quite prepares you for the Taj's quiet beauty. Even at a distance, there's something soul stirring about the silhouette. I gaze at it from my balcony with a cup of Darjeeling tea, the air scented by wafts of incense and exotic flowers mingled with fires from nearby villages, and the occasional clatter of a bullock-cart in the distance; it's a moment I'll recount to my grandchildren.

It's difficult to wake the following morning before dawn, but as is the case when a UNESCO World Heritage site is on the agenda, the air is electric in the lobby. Cameras in hand, we clamber on to the hotel's golf buggies for a two-minute drive down the road, where we queue in line to witness arguably the world's most lavish



Opulence reigns at the swimming pool and terraced gardens in The Oberoi Amarvilas; flower garlands in a riot of colour are sold to decorate doors, be used in wedding ceremonies and adorn temples (below)

“JAIPUR WAS PROBABLY THE PLACE WHERE THE SAYING ‘SHOP ‘TIL YOU DROP’ WAS COINED”

statement of love. Beautifully described by Bengali poet and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore as “a teardrop on the cheek of eternity”, at dawn, the Taj Mahal is bathed in an ethereal milk-white hue. According to our guide, the colours change depending on the hour of the day; a phenomenon that locals say depicts the moods of woman.

As for Agra itself, overshadowed by the omnipresent Taj Mahal, the town is often overlooked, yet our guides introduce us to the region’s famed artisans, leading us to watch craftsmen hand carve pieces of marble into elaborate pieces of art, or to boutiques where we buy super-soft pashminas at a snip of the price paid elsewhere. What I enjoy most about the tour, however, is that there is no attempt to shield us from India’s harsher realities. In-between viewing the Itimad-ud-Daulah (aka Baby Taj) – crafted by such delicate marble inlay, mosaic and latticework, it gives the Taj a run for its money – we cross the river to the small rural village of Katchpura, where we are met by a young man named Radha Mohan, who as part of the community-based tourism initiative known as the Mughal Heritage Walk, leads visitors on guided tours. Compared



to our lavish hotels, it’s a sobering insight into how Agra villagers live, farming wheat, millet and watermelon. Despite the abject poverty, Mohan is on a mission to help the village derive an income from tourists flocking to see the Taj. As one of the star pupils who attended the village’s tiny, state-funded school, he went on to learn English and graduate from high school. “I am also applying for my MBA,” he tells us, smiling with pride.

From Agra, we drive to Jaipur, stopping to explore Fatehpur Sikri, a walled city of imposing gateways and Hindu- and Islamic-style architecture. It was the capital of the Mughal Empire for 14 years before being deserted. Today it is anything but, with thousands flocking to the shrine of Sheikh Salim Chishti. Covering our hair with scarves, we enter the shrine and join the masses paying their respects and tying a thread through the latticed marble windows of the Dargah, which is said to fulfil one’s wish.

It isn’t long before the pink-terracotta architecture of Jaipur beckons, as does another Oberoi. This time, it’s the The Oberoi Rajvilas, built to resemble a traditional fort. As I’m led to my villa, I pass the Ayurvedic spa, set in a restored Rajasthani *haveli* (mansion). Peacocks roam the 13-ha gardens; the tranquil surrounds made all the more magical by the hotel’s on-site, 280-year-old Shiva temple. The following day, we are offered the chance to glimpse inside the temple when we’re treated to a traditional Hindu Aarti blessing ceremony carried out by a local *pundit* (priest). Of all the Oberoi properties on the circuit, this

one seems the most spiritual; there’s even a local astrologer who performs readings on certain evenings by the pool.

Jaipur is larger than I imagined and there is a dizzying amount to see, from the intricate chambers and gardens of the ancient Rajput capital of the hilltop Amber Fort and the grandeur of the City Palace, where we glimpse the private rooms of the present-day Maharaja family, to the pink-hued Hawa Mahal (Palace of Winds), a sandstone structure with latticework windows

created for royal ladies to peer down to the streets without being seen. We manage to cover it all, our canny guides ensuring there’s plenty of time to indulge in one of Jaipur’s most famous draws: shopping.

“Jaipur is probably the place where the saying ‘shop ‘til you drop’ was coined,” says Vikram, one of our affable guides, and he’s not exaggerating. The city is well-known for its incredible array of artisan wares, jewels and antiques, and after only an hour, I’m genuinely concerned about my



The façade of Hawa Mahal Palace in Jaipur is intricately covered in latticework so royal ladies could view the activity outside in privacy (below); holy men, or *sadhu*, are dedicated to meditation and contemplation of Brahman (above)



The Oberoi Gurgaon is a modern urban sanctuary near bustling Delhi. The Oberoi Rajvillas in Jaipur uses traditional techniques to mimic the city's famed pinky hues (opposite page)



excess-baggage fees. We empty our pockets buying Jaipur's famed blue-and-white pottery, a cherished Rajasthani art form since the 14th century; watch with fascination as artisan textile workers block-print fabrics by hand at a warehouse on the outskirts of town ("Similar to those potato prints you used to make as a child," according to Vikram), and gaze wistfully at cabinets filled with precious gemstones.

When travelling in a group, particularly in a traffic-snarled city like Jaipur, shopping requires militant planning and precision, yet Scott Dunn's guides know exactly where to take us. Instead of haggling with the crowds in bazaars for silk saris and traditional Indian textiles, we are led directly to the fabric emporium of Saurashtra Impex (7-8 Jorawar Singh Gate, Amber Rd.; +91 141 263 0233) where owner Kishor Maheshwari, emerges with bright eyes and outstretched hands, rattling off a lengthy list of fashion designers who have visited and international boutiques he supplies. Somehow, we manage to squeeze in trips to at least half a dozen boutiques along with antique warehouses where we are led deep into store rooms filled with rare carpets, artworks and salesmen promising to ship items "anywhere in the world".

As is the case throughout the trip, the food is exceptional; between pausing for a street-

side *lassi*, served in earthen cups from Jaipur's legendary *lassiwallah*, we dine in an atmospheric traditional dining room at Samode Haveli, a 150-year-old heritage mansion. One of our final meals in India, however, proves to be one of the most memorable – and it begins on an elephant.

Dera Amer is a camp nestled in the foothills of the Aravalli Range behind the Amber Fort. We are met by the gregarious owner, Udaijot Singh, who has inherited the 76.8-ha family property and today, welcomes visitors to experience the tranquil forest reserve. Once, the forest used to be home to tigers, however now there are only a few hamlets housing the local villagers – and the occasional leopard. The experience begins with a ride on Singh's elephants, the gentle beasts ambling through the forests with an undulating gait. It ends with an organic Indian meal, most of the ingredients grown on the farm. As darkness falls, we sit by the flicker of candlelight, listening to the occasional murmurs of the nearby elephants, and reflect on the wonder of many stories we have accrued on the trip. Our Dera Amer experience is perhaps another that I will tell my grandchildren one day. I can just imagine it: "One day, your grandmother rode an elephant through the foothills of the Aravalli forest in Jaipur."

## Stay

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“PEACOCKS ROAM THE 13-HECTARE GARDENS; THE TRANQUIL SURROUNDS MADE ALL THE MORE MAGICAL BY THE HOTEL’S ON-SITE, 280-YEAR-OLD SHIVA TEMPLE”

