

INDIA**Classic North with Khajuraho & Varanasi****20 days**

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Day 1 Arrival in Delhi

Arrive in Delhi and transfer to our hotel.

Welcome to India! Anyone visiting the country will be enthralled by its natural beauty, cultural diversity, ancient history and its incredible people. Visitors come to India for its wealth of sights, cultural exuberance, diversity of terrain, and in search of that special something, an extra punch that only India promises and delivers.

Overnight in Delhi.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Delhi: City Tour

Today we have a full-day tour of Delhi. We start with a drive north into Old Delhi, passing along the Rajpath (King's Way) and stopping for photos at the India Gate. The 42m high India Gate, an "Arc de Triomphe"-like archway in the middle of a crossroad, commemorates the Indian soldiers who lost their lives fighting for the British Army during WWI. This landmark also bears the names of British and Indian soldiers killed in the Northwestern frontier in the Afghan War of 1919.

Next we will make a visit to the Jamma Mosque. Located in the heart of Old Delhi, the largest mosque in India can accommodate as many as twenty-thousand worshippers. This imposing architectural monument, with its three gateways and two minarets, took fourteen years to complete (1644-58). We will also enjoy a cycle-rickshaw ride down Chandni Chowk once the imperial avenue down which Shah Jehan rode at the head of lavish cavalcades.

We will re-board our bus, going past the Red Fort (photo stop), and we disembark at the Raj Ghat, set within a beautiful park. This national monument is where the father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi, was cremated.

After a stop for lunch we continue our sightseeing with a visit to Humayan's Tomb, an excellent example of Mughal architecture, pre-dating the Taj Mahal by almost 100 years. Persian in style, this is a beautiful red sandstone building inlaid with black and white marble.

We will finish our day with a visit to the Qutub Minar. Few other monuments are as closely identified with Delhi as the Qutub Minar, this first monument of Muslim rule in India. It heralded the beginning of a new style of art and architecture which came to be known as the Indo-Islamic.

Overnight in Delhi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Delhi - Mandawa

After an early breakfast, we'll set off for Mandawa, a hidden gem nestled in the heart of Shekhavati. We should arrive in the early afternoon, just in time to explore this enchanting town.

Shekhavati, a semi-arid region in northeastern Rajasthan, is renowned for its stunning havelis—grand mansions adorned with vibrant frescoes. As we approach Mandawa, it's like stumbling upon a mirage rising from the sandy plains.

Once we're there, we'll wander through the town's winding streets, admiring the opulent mansions of the Goenkas, Sarafs, Ladias, and Chokhanis. These architectural marvels boast impressive gateways and intricate frescoes that will leave you in awe.

Tonight, we'll spend the night in Mandawa, giving us plenty of time to soak up the local atmosphere and perhaps even catch a glimpse of the stars in the clear night sky.

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Overnight in Mandawa.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Mandawa - Shekhavati - Bikaner

After breakfast we drive to Bikaner, arriving around midday. En route, we stop at some of the ancient settlements of Shekhavati.

Founded at the close of the 15th century, Bikaner stands on high ground, surrounded by fine embattled walls. The 16th century Junagarh Fort contains palaces, temples and a mosque, mostly made of red and yellow sandstone. The marble images are considered to be the finest specimens of Hindu art.

Within the massive edifice of the fort, the entrance of which is flanked by two life-size effigies of elephants, are housed some of the rarest gems of Rajput civilization. The Durbar Hall is in Mughal style, lavishly decorated with paintings. Gilt reliefs, glass mosaics and lace-like mirrors adorn the intimate and graceful Zenana -- the women's wing, separated from the main palace by a broad courtyard with paneled niches.

Overnight in Bikaner.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Bikaner - Manvar Resort

After breakfast we drive to Manvar, an ideal base to explore the Indian desert life, culture, wildlife and natural beauty. On arrival, we check-in at our comfortable desert resort in time for lunch.

This afternoon we enjoy the unique desert atmosphere by jeep for which this region is famous. Keep an eye out for the chinkara -- a shy gazelle -- as they make way across the silent sands. Our visit allows us to share the fascinating culture of these people and experience the beauty and tranquility of this vast desert.

The evening is enlivened by a campfire, mashaals (traditional songs), and local musicians and dancers. With stunning sunrises, mesmerizing sunsets and dazzling night skies, life in this peaceful wilderness is spectacularly elemental -- and extraordinarily silent.

Overnight near Manvar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Manvar - Jodhpur - Luni

After breakfast drive to Luni.

En route we stop at Jodhpur. This is the land of the valiant Rathore kings, whose courage was a match for the tyranny of the Thar Desert. A bleak scarp rears up 120 meters from the desert valley. Straddling the rocky crevices is the massive Jodhpur Fort, its sheer walls reflecting the strength of its warrior builders. The fort is entered through seven gates, each a formidable barrier. The museum within the fort is one of the finest in Rajasthan and displays royal apparel, ancient paintings and manuscripts, fabled treasures of the royal household and an armoury. An interesting section displays folk musical instruments from different regions of Rajasthan. Delicately latticed windows and pierced screens worked in sandstone form the dominant motif within the rugged casket of the fort and the palaces are exquisitely decorated.

On arrival we check in at Luni, known as the "Blue City" due to the vivid blue-painted houses.

Overnight in Luni.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Bishnoi Village Jeep Excursion

After breakfast, we will visit the Bishnoi village by jeep. The Bishnois are a fascinating community which follows the 29 (bish-noi) tenets laid down by the 15th century Guru Jambheshwar. They fervently believe in the sanctity of animal and plant life so all animals live near their villages without fear. When a Bishnoi dies, he is sometimes buried in the sitting position and often placed at the threshold of the house or adjoining cattleshed. A Bishnoi believes he will later be reincarnated as a deer, hence the herds of blackbuck often seen near their villages.

Later we travel to Ranakpur where the famous Jain temples lie buried in a shady glen and cover a vast area. The central temple is called Chaumukha (four-faced) and is the most complex and extensive of Jain temples in India, covering an area of over 40,000 sq. feet (3600 sq metres). Its 29 halls are supported by 1,444 pillars, none of which are alike. Subsidiary shrines in the shape of side alters throng around in all directions, including a temple dedicated to the Sun God which displays erotic carvings.

Overnight in Ranakpur.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Ranakpur - Udaipur

This morning, we'll take some time to appreciate the serene beauty of the forest, nestled amidst the majestic Aravalli mountain range. After this peaceful interlude, we'll embark on our journey to Udaipur.

Upon arrival in Udaipur, we'll check into our hotel. The afternoon is yours to relax and unwind. If you're feeling adventurous, you could explore the vibrant bazaars, where you'll encounter a myriad of shops and artisans' workshops. The narrow, winding streets are a treasure trove of unique finds, perfect for leisurely strolls.

Overnight in Udaipur.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Udaipur: City Tour

Our morning sightseeing in Udaipur includes a visit to the City Palace, which stands on the crest of a ridge overlooking Lake Pichola. The largest palace in Rajasthan, it was built at various periods but still preserves the harmony of design, enhanced by massive octagonal towers surmounted by cupolas. Now a museum, it is a labyrinth of courtyards richly decorated with inlaid mirror-work, galleries covered with frescos, temples and roof gardens, which afford a wide panorama below. The Jagdish Temple in the old town was built in the mid-17th century and has a remarkable bronze statue of Garuda, the mythical bird, facing his revered master Lord Vishnu.

Sahelion-ki-Bari (Garden of the Handmaidens) is a good example of the Hindu art of landscape gardening on a princely scale. Ornamental pools with finely sculptured cenotaphs of soft black stone are surrounded by a profusion of fountains.

In the afternoon we take a boat ride on Lake Pichola. The steel blue waters of the lake, artificially created in the 14th century, reflect the white phantom Jag Nivas Palace, now the Lake Palace hotel which was built in 1746 as the summer residence of the rulers, and Jag Mandir said to be built by Maharana Karan Singh for his friend Prince Khurram, who was later to become emperor Shah Jehan. Huge seamless stone slabs of translucent thinness were used. The rooms were embellished with inlaid stones -- onyx, jade, carnelian, jasper and agate.

Overnight in Udaipur.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Udaipur - Pushkar

After breakfast we depart on the drive to Pushkar. On arrival check in at the resort, set amidst orchards of Indian gooseberry and fields of roses (as Pushkar is a holy town the resort serves no alcohol or non-vegetarian food, though a wide variety of vegetarian delicacies from

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around the world are on offer).

During our time in Pushkar we will visit the Brahma temple. This town boasts of the only temple dedicated to Lord Brahma in the world. Lord Brahma is the Creator in the Holy Trinity of Gods. You get a chance to walk through the winding lanes of Pushkar before reaching the lake, which is magical at sunset.

Our fall departures coincide with the Pushkar Camel Fair,* on the full moon of the Hindu month of Karttika, when over 200,000 buyers, sellers and gawkers invade this peaceful, holy village. It is a calibre of mayhem that can only happen in India, an assault of colour, laughter and energy topped with a healthy dose of spirituality. From morning 'til night, it's a non-stop photo op. If you are in the market for a camel, you will have no problem finding one at bargain prices!

We will watch an aarti (Hindu prayer ceremony) at the banks of the lake Pushkar. This lake is a scared lake of Hindus and is believed to be created by the fallen petals of Lord Brahma's lotus.

* Please note that this event historically spans +/- one week, during which the nature of activities and events change over time. We time our visit to coincide with the days at the beginning of the arrival of the camels and camel sellers, as this is the most traditional spectacle associated with this event. Over the years, the fair has expanded to include a religious and "cultural" component, which usually occurs toward the end of the week.

Overnight in Pushkar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 11 Pushkar - Jaipur

This morning we depart for Jaipur.

This afternoon we explore Jaipur, one of the best-planned cities in India, built of rose-pink sandstone by the great astronomer-king Jai Singh II in 1727. The City Palace stands in the centre of the city. Part of it is still the Maharaja's residence, while most of the complex has been developed into a museum containing rare manuscripts, fine specimens of Rajput and Mughal paintings, royal apparel and an armoury. Jantar Mantar observatory was built by the founder of Jaipur, Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh. The huge stone instruments were devised to study the movements of the sun, moon and planets and are incredibly accurate. Hawa Mahal (Palace of Winds) is the landmark of Jaipur. Built of pink sandstone with a delicate honeycomb design and rising five storeys high, it is composed of semi-octagonal overhanging windows, each with its perforated screen, which allowed the ladies of the court to look onto the main street without being seen.

Overnight in Jaipur.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Jaipur & Amer Fort

After breakfast, we visit Amer Fort (also sometimes written "Amber"), the capital for 6 centuries before Jaipur was built, 11 km north of Jaipur. Rising majestically on the slopes of a hill, this 11th century fort and palace complex is a blend of Hindu and Muslim styles -- the earlier constructions in the inner apartments designed by the Hindu founder are austere, while later constructions abound in the rich flourishes characteristic of Muslim influence. Though the option still exists, we choose to access the site by vehicle, rather than by riding elephants to the top.

The afternoon is at leisure. You have time to wander through the colourful bazaars, a veritable collector's paradise where you can watch ancient craft forms: Meenakari or enameling work, exquisite jewellery in silver or gold sparkling with emeralds, rubies, white sapphires and dangling pearls. In tiny ateliers you can see the age-old tie-dye methods of cloth printing, miniature paintings on cotton or silk, statues hand-carved in wood or bone, fine metalwork and the renowned blue pottery of Jaipur.

Overnight in Jaipur.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Jaipur - Fatehpur Sikri - Agra

Today we embark on a journey to the historic city of Agra. En route, we make a stop at Fatehpur Sikri, a magnificent ghost town that once served as the opulent capital of the Mughal Empire under the reign of Akbar the Great. Perched atop a rugged ridge, this deserted sandstone city is a haunting reminder of a bygone era, its empty palaces, imposing forts, and serene mosques standing as testaments to its former glory. A fascinating blend of architectural styles can be observed here, a result of the diverse pool of skilled craftsmen employed by Akbar.

Upon our arrival in Agra, we check into our hotel, ready to delve deeper into the rich history and architectural marvels of this iconic city.

Overnight in Agra.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Agra: The Taj Mahal & Agra Fort

The pinnacle of our journey is a visit to the iconic Taj Mahal, an enduring symbol of love and one of the world's most breathtaking architectural wonders. Commissioned by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan as a mausoleum for his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal, this magnificent structure took 17 years to complete, employing skilled artisans from across the globe. As the first rays of dawn illuminate its pristine white marble facade, casting a mesmerizing play of colours, we'll be captivated by its ethereal beauty.

Beyond the Taj Mahal, we'll explore the vibrant bazaars of Agra, where we can witness the intricate art of marble inlay work. Later, we'll delve into the grandeur of the Agra Fort, a formidable red sandstone fortress that stands sentinel on the banks of the Yamuna River. This architectural marvel, shaped by the reigns of Akbar, Jehangir, and Shah Jahan, offers a glimpse into the opulent lifestyle and military might of the Mughal Empire.

Overnight in Agra.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Agra - Train to Gwalior & Gwalior Fort

After an early breakfast at the hotel, transfer to the Railway Station to board the Shatabdi Express train to Gwalior. We are met on arrival and transfer to the hotel.

This afternoon we visit the Gwalior Fort. The fort's walls and buildings were constructed by different generations of rulers. The most notable are the Suraj Kund, a tank built in the 8th century AD, two 11th century temples known as Sas Bahu ka Mandir, dedicated to Vishnu; the 16th century Gujri Mahal Palace and the Hindola Gate, which houses a small archeological museum. Later visit Jai Vilas Palace and Museum, located in the city. The enormous Jai Vilas Palace, built in the 19th century, has a pair of the world's heaviest chandeliers in the Durbar Hall and a crystal staircase. The dining table is fitted with an electric train made of silver, which carried brandy and cigars around the table after dinner.

Overnight in Gwalior.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Gwalior - Khajuraho

Today we travel by road to Khajuraho where we will tour its western group of temples. Built between 950 and 1050 AD, they are among the most creative examples of Indian architecture. Only 22 of the original 85 temples survive today. The most popular theme is woman: reflective, playful, and amorous. The carvings also depict gods in cosmic evolution, griffins, nymphs, beasts, demons in revolt and the several emotions of man -- fear, doubt, jealousy, ardent love and consummate passion.

The western group, contained within a fenced enclosure, is well-maintained as a park. The large Lakshmana Temple is dedicated to Vishnu

and is one of the earliest of the western enclosure temples, dating from 930-950 AD. It is also one of the best preserved, with a full five-part floor plan and four subsidiary shrines. The Vahara Temple, dedicated to Vishnu's boar incarnation (Vahara avatar) faces the Matangesvara Temple and has a huge solid and intricately carved figure of the boar incarnation, dating from around 900 AD. The Kandariya Mahadev Temple is not only the largest but also artistically and architecturally the most perfect. Build between 1025 and 1050 AD; it represents Chandela at its finest. The Mahadeva Temple is small and mainly ruined. However, it houses one of Khajuraho's best sculptures -- a fine sardula figure caressing a lion. The Devi Jagadamba Temple was probably originally dedicated to Vishnu, but later changed to Parvati and then Kali. The Chitragupta Temple is unique in being dedicated to the Sun God, Surya. The Matangesvara Temple, standing next to the Lakshmana Temple, is not within the fenced enclosure, because it is still in everyday use, unlike all the old temples.

We continue by road to Khajuraho.

Overnight in Khajuraho.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 17 Khajuraho Touring - Fly to Varanasi

This morning we will visit the eastern group of temples before flying to Varanasi (if time permits).

Varanasi is the religious capital of the Hindu faith since the dawn of history. Known as Kashi in the 7th century BC it constitutes a microcosm of Indian life. No one knows how old it really is -- when Buddha came here in 550B, it was already a flourishing ancient settlement. Varanasi is the oldest living city in the world and the epicentre of Hinduism and Indian culture.

On arrival we will check into our hotel and later in the evening, watch the spectacular aarti (religious ceremony) when thousands of butter lamps are lit and set afloat on the sacred Ganges. It commences with the blowing of a conch shell and continues with the waving of incense sticks in elaborate patterns and circling of large flaming lamps. The movement of the lamps, held in the pandits hands, is tightly synchronizing to the rhythmic chants of hymns and clang of cymbals. The heady scent of sandalwood thickly permeates the air.

Overnight in Varanasi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 18 Varanasi Touring

Before sunrise we take a boat ride on the sacred Ganges River, where devout Hindus can be seen performing their daily ablutions. The bathing ghats, over 5 km in length, lead down from a steep bank to the river, are the soul of the city. Return to the hotel for breakfast.

Later we walk through an inextricable maze of small streets and alleyways, hiding in disorderly array no less than 2,000 temples and shrines. Domes, pinnacles, towers and derelict 18th-century palaces dominate the left bank of the Ganges River. The streets are noisy, colour is rife. Visit some of the more important temples such as the Bharat Mata Mandir and the Durga Temple. Go past the beautiful Tulsi Manas temple. Take a walk down Vishwanathji Ki Gali -- the ancient alley which is home to some beautiful temples. Here you will find shops that sell every conceivable item required in a temple.

This afternoon we visit Sarnath. Located 9 km from Varanasi, it the centre of the Buddhist world, just as Varanasi is that for the Hindu. It was here that Buddha preached his first sermon, partially recorded on one of its stones. Dhamek Stupa dating back to 500 AD, is the largest with geometrical ornaments on its wall. Dharmarajika Stupa was set up by emperor Ashoka to contain the bodily relics of the Buddha.

Overnight in Varanasi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 19 Varanasi Touring - Fly to Delhi

This morning we visit Sarnath. Located 9 km from Varanasi, it the centre of the Buddhist world, just as Varanasi is that for the Hindu. It was

here that Buddha preached his first sermon, partially recorded on one of its stones. Dhamek Stupa dating back to 500 AD, is the largest with geometrical ornaments on its wall. Dharmarajika Stupa was set up by emperor Ashoka to contain the bodily relics of the Buddha.

Afternoon transfer to the airport for our flight to Delhi.

Overnight in Delhi (airport area hotel).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 20 Departure

Departure from Delhi.

BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast