

A trip to India is everything it promises to be... and more!!! People who have been there all offer –oddly enough– the same sage advice: “Look beyond the underlying poverty and let yourself be ‘seduced’ by this extraordinary country and its people. It will mark a ‘Before and After’ in your life and most assuredly you will be anxious to return”. This turned out to be my case... and that of all those who accompanied me on this extraordinary trip to India’s Golden Triangle: Delhi, Jaipur and Agra.

India is color in the streets, in the saris, in the outdoor marketplaces... It is also spicy smells, fairy tale palaces, noise, crowds, street vendors selling everything imaginable, and overwhelmingly warm and friendly people.

To begin with, I would say that it would be hard to find a more hospitable, open and gracious people than the Indians. With a broad and ready smile, they seem to be more than willing to help you, accompany you to where you are going or even pose for a photo. The country itself makes one feel at home and in these difficulties times, the traveler feels safe and comfortable. Even the begging children and the persistent street peddlers will respect your “personal” space and eventually take NO for an answer, after some insistence.

Service in the hotels and restaurants is impeccable and what they may lack in modern conveniences and state-of-the-art technology, they more than make up for with their desire to assist and please.

India is a land of contrasts indeed, beginning with the ostentatious wealth left by the ruling classes as compared to the poor living conditions of the vast majority of the population. The lavish extravagance and splendor found in the old Maharajahs’ palaces are worthy of admiration, although most of them have fortunately been turned into hotels for the pleasure and enjoyment of visitors and tourists, and as the only solution for maintaining their upkeep.

The contrast in the streets is proverbial, consisting of every means of transportation imaginable: elephants, camels, donkey carts, bicycles, scooters, and rickshaws.... Old, broken down buses with passengers hanging out of the windows and seated on the roofs are common means of transportation, too. They all share the poor roads with modern—though not too common—vans, which merge to make up the most chaotic and dangerous traffic situations anyone could possibly imagine. This is not an exaggeration.. To make matters worse—if that is possible—, India inherited the English custom of driving on the left side of the road, and it is literally “every man for himself”... Vehicles do not



## India—A Land of Contrasts

*TEXT & PHOTOS BY MURIEL FEINER*

limit themselves to passing just on the right, but they are rambling all over the road. Cars approach head-on, but there seem to be few major accidents—thankfully—because it is impossible to go over 50 kms per hour on the “open highway”.

There are great contrasts too regarding the clothing: no two women dress alike... Each sari is different, elegantly worn, but with an infinite array of colors and designs. The men wear different attire, too, not just depending on their “castes”, their status and their wealth, but also on their religious affiliations, reflected particularly in their headgear, with a variety of turbans.

The **Golden Triangle** is an excellent option for a first visit to India. The country is indeed huge, practically a continent in and of itself, and the north is a good place to begin to discover this incredible land.

**Delhi.** First of all, the capital of India is called Delhi and not NEW Delhi, a foreign reference that is surprising, since there is nothing new about this ancient, bustling city. In fact, the more modern part of Delhi is only just developing on the outskirts of the city, in an area known as Gurgaon.

In Delhi, with its 14 million inhabitants, there is so much to see. The 42 meter high India Gate was built in 1931 to honor the 90,000 soldiers of the Indian Army who died in World War 1 and all of their names are inscribed on the arch. Nearby is Rashtrapati Bhawan, the

former Viceroy’s Palace and today the President’s Residence, with no less than 350 rooms, and also the circular, colonnaded Parliament House. The “Lal Quila” or Red Fortress is an impressive structure, which includes the “Moti Masjid” or Pearl Mosque and the “Hamman” or bathing area. The “Jama Masjid”, with its immense patio and marble domes, is near the Chandi Chowk quarter, a maze of the most picturesque streets and alleyways.

Shanti Vaj is a beautiful park where one can visit the Raj Ghat Memorial to the great Mohandas Gandhi, later called Mahatma, which means “Great Soul”, responsible for achieving India’s independence from Great Britain. The eternal flame marks the site where Gandhi was cremated after his assassination by a Hindu radical on January 30, 1948.

To the south is the Tomb of Humayun, a fine example of Mogol architecture, constructed between 1564 and 1573. The Qutb Minar complex, which dates back to the early Moslem reign in India, boasts a 73 meter high minaret. Work was begun in 1199 and was meant to be a symbol of the power and greatness of the Islamic faith.

**On the Way to Jaipur:** One should stop to admire the Palace in Samode, just 20 kms outside of Jaipur. It is well worth the time to wander through its picturesque streets, its very old buildings, its mango trees and the

wild boar and other local fauna meandering around peacefully in search of food. Lunch in the Palace, below the old portraits of its past owners, the Maharajas, is a special treat.

**Jaipur**, the capital of the Rajasthan region, is known as the Pink City, due to the fact that the residents were ordered to paint their homes pink, the color which signifies “Welcome”, on the occasion of the Prince of Wales’ visit in 1853. Jaipur is also noted for its bustling streets, its ubiquitous markets and bazaars, and the Albert Hall, built by the Maharaja of Jaipur to commemorate King George’s official visit to India.

The Royal Palace of Jaipur is made up of a series of patios, gardens and dwellings, of which the Ancient Moon Palace and the Jantar Mantar, an old astrological observatory built in 1728, stand out. Also not to be missed is the immense House of Hawa Mahal or Palace of the Winds, which was the home of the Maharaja’s harem. Painted pink, too, the palace boasts of 953 lattice-work windows from which the many wives of the Maharaja could observe the endless activity in the streets below, without being seen.

The Amber Fortress, of typical Rajput architecture, with the palace of the Maharaja Man Singh, is located 12 kms outside of Jaipur. Construction on this palace-fortress was initiated in 1592 and is a highlight of the trip. Be forewarned that the ascent to the Fortress high on the hill towering over the city is made via elephants. It is not as scary as it may sound and the views are breathtaking. The experience will be immortalized by a number of strategically located photographers along the way... [Try not to spend more than 100 rupees for each photo].

It is almost impossible to refer to this lovely city without mentioning the famous love story between the Maharaja of Jaipur, Jagatjit Singh Bahadur, of Kapurthala, and the beautiful Spanish flamenco dancer Anita Delgado, whose biography makes for a fascinating read. It tells the tale of how an Indian prince

falls in love with a very young and beautiful girl from Málaga. The prince happened to be in Spain to attend the wedding of King Alfonso XIII and Victoria Eugenia in May of 1906, when he visited a tablao flamenco where he became smitten by one of the performers, Anita Delgado. Anita’s illustrious friends at the time – painter Julio Romero de Torres and writer Ramón de Valle Inclán—encouraged her to accept the prince’s proposal and the couple was married on January 28, 1908. She became known as Majarani Prem Kumari and soon bore him a son, Maharajkumar Ajit Singh. The couple eventually grew apart and she tired of her lonely existence in India. After the divorce, Anita Delgado left the country with her son to settle in Paris. She died in Madrid on July 7, 1962.



### Agra

Agra is home to one of the Seven Wonders Of The World, the extraordinary Taj Mahal, an incomparable piece of architecture, known the world over as a symbol of eternal love. Made of translucent white marble incrustated with semi-precious stones forming beautiful motifs and designs, its construction was begun in 1631 and continued for approximately 22 years. Over 20,000 people worked on the building of this beautiful monument which Emperor Shah Jahan wanted to dedicate to his favorite wife Mumtaz Mahal, who died in childbirth in that same year. He was so distraught over the death of his beloved, young wife, that it is said that his hair turned gray over night. Both Mumtaz Mahal and Shah Yahan, who died in 1666, are buried here beneath the main hall in a sealed chamber. It would be ideal to view the Taj Mahal at different times of day, when its lavish marble façade changes color from white to gold, to pink, to a cool blue, at dusk. It is also a treat to admire it from the back, that is, from the other side of the river, which is a peaceful vantage point without the overwhelming presence of so many tourists. The main entrance can also be approached via a rudimentary donkey cart that makes for an entertaining ride.

Nearby is the Red Fortress of Akbar, actually a series of adjoining sandstone palaces that were built by the Emperor Akbar in 1565. Its walls stand 20 meters high enclosing a perimeter of 2.5 km and a maze of buildings creating a small city. The largest residence inside is the Palace of Yahangir, of classic Hindu and Asian Style.

And as if the scenery, palaces, monuments and picturesque towns were not enough, India is also a shopper’s paradise: Silk, marble, fine gold and silver jewelry, fun costume jewelry, small bronze statues, wood carvings, rugs, all kinds of handicrafts, shawls, saris, leather articles—as the cow is a sacred animal, these articles are made from buffalo, camel or goat skin—, etc.

Infinite are the reasons, then, for visiting the extraordinary and highly hospitable and traditional country of India.

### On the Way to Agra

Forty kms outside of Agra is the old Mogol ghost town of Fatehpur Sikri. It was founded by the Emperor Akbar al Santo Salim Chisti, who ordered its construction in 1569, to celebrate the birth of his son. The city with its ambitious lay-out eventually had to be abandoned due to lack of a sufficient water supply.

