

Gateway to India

Explore India's 'Golden Triangle' and discover a land immersed in rich cultural history and modern luxuries.

words Shannon Ponting



When Cove Travel's Jacki Whitlock set off on her journey to India with luxury travel experts Peirce & Leslie, she wasn't sure what to expect from this culturally rich country. What she witnessed was an insight into the nation's ancient history, combined with the charm of modern India, all wrapped into one amazing adventure.

First stop on the itinerary was Mumbai, the commercial and entertainment hub of India, where Jacki was quite overwhelmed by the sheer size of the vibrant city. With over 20.5 million citizens, Mumbai truly is the city that never sleeps with people on the go 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The bustling city is abundant with exotic fragrances, spices, fruit and vegetables, authentic trinkets and beautiful silks, not to mention the sacred cattle that wander the streets.

Home for this part of the tour was The Taj Mahal Palace. The history of Mumbai and the beautifully appointed 'Palace' are dramatically intertwined. A treasure-trove of invaluable memorabilia, the hotel is Mumbai's first harbour landmark (built 21 years before the Gateway of India) and the site of the first licensed bar in the city. For more than a century, the Taj has played an intrinsic part in the life of the city, hosting Maharajas, dignitaries and eminent personalities from across the globe. Today it is a Leading Hotel of the World and, with a delightful view overlooking the Gateway of India and the panoramic bay, Jacki's room was the perfect blend of rich history and modern convenience.

From Mumbai, the group flew to ancient Varanasi – the first point of call for India's 'golden triangle' at the north of the country. The city is known for the legendary Ganges River where Hindus take the ashes of their loved ones to be scattered, guaranteeing release from an endless cycle of rebirth and allowing devotees to achieve Moshka, the holiest of Hindu states. Over 200 cremations take place every day on the sacred Ganges – a sight Jacki said left a lasting impression and was definitely a highlight from the tour.

The group explored the ancient city by

rickshaw – manoeuvring around people, animals, potholes, and cyclists, weaving their way through mazes of laneways and streets, discovering many bazaars selling lotions, sweets, jewellery, fabrics and souvenirs.

Another memorable experience was the journey from Varanasi to Agra on the Shatabdi Express. With the train station full to the brim with locals trying to board numerous trains, the group – protected by guides at the front and back – made it on board easily and enjoyed a comfortable ride to the city of Agra.

In Agra sits the 'breathtaking' Taj Mahal, a marble mausoleum decorated with mosaic of semi-precious stones and Persian calligraphy citing phrases from the Koran. The palace is an 'Urs', an important place of pilgrimage where prayers and passages from the Koran are recited inside the 'artistic masterpiece'. It was built in the 1600s by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan for his third wife, Mumtaz Mahal, and is widely recognised as 'the jewel of Muslim art in India'. Although the Taj Mahal is one of the most easily recognised tourist attractions world-wide, Jacki admits she was still not prepared for the absolute beauty and grandeur of the building.

While in Agra the group stayed at the unforgettable Oberoi Amarvilas. Built in a style inspired by Moorish and Mughal architecture, the resort is a splendid display of terraced lawns, fountains, reflection pools and pavilions with rich interiors that take you back to an era of Emperors and Princes. Jacki was fortunate enough to have her own private room with a perfect view of the Taj Mahal – allowing her to wake up to the glorious sight of the great monument bathed by the first rays of dawn.

Leaving Agra behind, the group drove onto the city of Jaipur to arrive at one of the Taj Hotels & Palaces of the World – Rambagh Palace, their home for the following two evenings. As the coach entered the gates, the group were escorted to the main reception area where they were welcomed by a colourful display of dance and traditional music.

The pristine reception area featured white marble, and was adorned with garlands of flowers. Life-sized portraits of Jaipur Royals gazed down and palace butlers stood to attention nearby to ensure the group were treated like personal guests of the Maharaja.

The last stop before returning to Mumbai was Udaipur, known as the City of Lakes. Some hotels here are accessed by boat, an unusual and interesting approach to a hotel of such grandeur.

In Udaipur lies the City Palace. Home to the Maharanas of Udaipur, the sprawling palace was built over three centuries and is a series of four interconnecting palaces, made up of various architectural styles all with unique features.

The planning of the group's wonderful itinerary allowed sufficient time to do some personal exploring in each place en route – to enjoy and absorb Indian life at their own pace. Jacki recalls wandering down the small cobblestone laneways and stumbling across a fabulous material, oil painting, souvenir and sari shop that allowed her to dress in the traditional sari for a photo opportunity.

The entire trip was overseen by Peirce & Leslie, whose well-spoken Indian tour guides have extensive knowledge on every aspect of Indian culture, heritage, geography and folklore.

Due to Peirce & Leslie's extensive operations in the area, the group was given access to points of interest few tours are able to provide, allowing them to be educated on the fascinating secrets of the past and the modernisation of India by their guides and giving a great insight into this magical destination. ●

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