

Itinerary

DAY 1

En route to India

DAYS 2–4

In-depth Delhi, old and new

“Charming, capricious, imperial” (as John Foster Fraser wrote), Delhi is one of the world’s most intriguing mega-cities. Based from the modern, centrally located Taj Mahal Hotel, we’ll visit the imposing war memorial India Gate as well as Humayun’s Tomb (an inspiration for the Taj Mahal of 73 years later). With our Tour Director at helpful hand, we’ll wend Old Delhi’s twisting maze of streets and narrow, bustling, breathtakingly colourful byways, and visit India’s largest mosque, the imposing Jama Masjid and the nobly friendly Gurudwara Bangla Sahib, second most important shrine (after Amritsar’s Golden Temple) for India’s large and influential Sikh community.

DAYS 5 & 6

Agra and the Taj, humanity’s greatest artifact

There’s much more to Agra than the Taj Mahal. The Agra Fort is a masterpiece of Mughal architecture in its own right and the city itself is vivacious and engaging (which in India means extremely vivacious, exceptionally engaging). But “emeralds, rubies, and pearls...must pass away, yet still one solitary tear would hang on the cheek of time in the form of this white and gleaming Taj Mahal,” as India’s great laureate Rabindranath Tagore wrote.

Heartliftingly, almost hallucinatorily beautiful, the Taj Mahal is one of the first artefacts we would present to aliens as proof of humanity’s worth. Our hotel, the universally admired Amarvilas, is a delight for those of us bewitched by the Taj: every window in the hotel looks out at the very nearby monument.

DAYS 7 & 8

In peaceful search of nature’s greatest beast

We drive in the morning to Ranthambore and the exquisite and intimate Oberoi Vanyavilas, named India’s top luxury hotel in TripAdvisor’s 2015 Traveler’s Choice Awards. We come to subtly beautiful Ranthambore (thought by many to be the inspiration for Kipling’s unforgettable Jungle Book, of Mowgli and Bagheera fame) to see *Panthera tigris tigris*, an incandescent beast many consider the most impressive of Earth’s many trillions of sentient beings. Our chances of life-sparking sightings are very good. We cruise the park under the guidance of our Tour Director and astute local guides, who can identify the park’s super feline denizens by name and number, and sense their presence by the jungly warning cries that everywhere accompany Shere Khan. Micato, nine-time winner of Travel + Leisure’s Number One Best Safari Operator award, has a natural affection for *Panthera leo*, the African lion. But we must admit that seeing Leo’s Indian cousin amble imperially in Ranthambore is an almost shockingly exciting experience.

DAYS 9–11

Jaipur’s palaces, monuments, and colourful bustle

Residents of the entrancing Pink City are Parisian in their pride of place, and the city is the historic home of what is probably India’s most famous and flamboyantly rich ruling family. In fact, our three nights in Jaipur are spent in the fabulous former home of one of them, the great polo-playing, modernizing Maharajah Sawai Man Singh II.

Monuments to the wealth and monumental ambition of Jaipur's Maharajah abound: grand City Palace, where members of the family still live; the Star Warsy observatory of Jantar Mantar, and huge yet lyrical Amber Fort, designed for protection in case of war (which never came) and for royalty's never-ending quest for luxury. One morning we'll lift off on a heart-stirring hot air balloon ride, flying high, then low over Jaipur's awakening suburbs, waving to kids on the way to school, housewives putting up laundry, solemn old men on bicycles who break into big smiles as we waft overhead. We'll explore Jaipur's famous shopping bonanzas, and one evening we'll get up close and personal with a winsome *Elephas maximus indicus*, and hop aboard for a rolling elephant ride in the gentle Rajasthani hills, ending with a festive, open-air dinner.

DAYS 12 & 13

Holy Varanasi, heart of the Hindu universe

We fly to Varanasi in the morning, via Delhi. During our stay we'll venture out to the excellent museum and much-pilgrimage site at Sarnath, where the Buddha went public for the first time after his enlightenment at nearby Bodh Gaya. But our focal point is Varanasi, in many ways the beating heart of the Hindu universe, perhaps the earth's most supremely potent pilgrimage site. We'll observe ancient rites on a quiet early morning boat ride on the sacred river Ganges, watching in the pink and gold light as devotees perform ritual sunrise baths and religious ceremonies, chant mantras, sing hymns, and go about the business of enlightenment. We'll return at sunset, when tiny sacred lamps are ceremoniously lit during the ancient—and in the Indian way, very contemporary—aarti ceremony. Perhaps nowhere in India, or the world, is it possible to witness so clearly, colourfully, and intensely many thousands of years of unbroken dedication to spiritual exploration.

DAYS 14 & 15

The astounding mega-city of Mumbai

A world vanguard city, Mumbai is India's unquestioned financial and commercial hub, a gleaming magnet for India's millions of go-getting entrepreneurs: We'll encounter the famous dabbawallahs of Churchgate Station, who prepare and deliver upwards of 175,000 lunches a day. We may do some spirited bargaining at Chor Bazaar, or the Thieves Market, where everything and anything is available. We'll roam the former Prince of Wales Museum, one of India's premier art and history museums, and enjoy a leisurely walk through Colaba market near our lodgings, the exquisite Oberoi, Mumbai, before dinner and our late night flights homeward.

DAY 16

Arrive home