



the land of tigers

From staying in a centuries-old palace on a lake to looking for tigers on a game drive India is a land of extremes, says Alex Wright

It's one of the rarest animals on earth but there it is, sitting right in front of me in all its splendour. The only sounds that can be heard for miles around are its gentle panting. The royal Bengal tiger, with its magnificent orange-and black striped coat, arrived in India around 12,000 years ago.

But it has been driven out of its natural habitat or hunted to the point of extinction with just over 2,500 estimated to be living in the wild today. I'm in the 170-square mile Bandhavgarh National Park in central India, which is one of the best places for viewing these majestic creatures up close in their natural environment.

Stood on the back of an open-topped jeep in the middle of a vast plain, I have an experienced driver and guide by my side.

Having picked up a trail of fresh paw prints, we pull up in a clearing by some trees, cut the engine and listen intently for the monkey calls to confirm a tiger is near. And sure enough it, here's one emerging slowly from behind the nearest tree to survey its kingdom before it takes up a position in the long grass directly behind the jeep. I daren't move a muscle in case I disturb this terrifying yet magnificent creature. Suddenly something catches its attention, its ears prick up, and it's off into the undergrowth. It was a fleeting glimpse but one that will stay with me a lifetime.

A cultural feast

Rich in culture, food and history, a visit to India is likely to be one of the most eye-opening experiences of your life. Interest in this awe-inspiring subcontinent is at an all-time high, with the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge visiting on a royal tour and the release of Disney's *The Jungle Book* film earlier this year. Almost 900,000 e-visas have been issued since the scheme making it easier to visit India was launched last year, according to the India Tourism Office London, key sponsors of World Travel Market 2016.

And with preparations starting in earnest to mark the country's 70th year of independence in 2017, this is the time to suggest a visit.

From the splendour of the Taj Mahal in the north to the golden sands of Goa in the south, there is something here for every traveller. Other must-sees include the tranquil backwaters of Kerala, bustling Delhi, the bright lights of Bollywood and the holy temples of Varanasi.

For the perfect trip, start in the capital with a visit to the ancient Mogul Red Fort in Old Delhi before hitting the maze of bazaars for a bit of retail therapy.

In the evening, sit back and watch the sun setting on Humayun's Tomb, the inspiration for the Taj Mahal. The next day catch the Rajdhani Express to Agra. Get there early and head straight to the Mehtab Bagh gardens ▶

► to watch the magical sight of the Taj Mahal emerging from the morning mist. And wait until the crowds have dispersed at 17.00 before enjoying the full splendour of the palace itself.

Then it's off to Rajasthan, staying overnight in Jaipur to see the tigers at the Ranthambore reserve before heading to Jodhpur for a tour of the medieval Mehrangarh Fort. The next port of call is the Golden City of Jaisalmer, rising from the Thar Desert like a huge sandcastle. Here you can explore the magnificent fort and the Jain temples at your own leisure.

Consider camping overnight in a luxury tent at the Khuri Oasis Desert Resort before rising early to visit the lake city of Udaipur. Then it's time to hit the coconut palm fronted beach of Mararikulam in Kerala for some RnR.

No trip would be complete without a houseboat cruise around the state's backwaters, sitting back and drifting past the riverside villages and fishing boats along the way.

Perfect five

- 1 Live like a Raj:** Stay at the 250-year-old Lake Palace in Udaipur, an 83-room floating hotel with white marble walls, accessible only by boat or speedboat. It was once used as a summer palace for kings.
- 2 Holy ground:** Make the pilgrimage to Varanasi to watch priests perform their colourful rituals and floating cremation ceremonies on the banks of the River Ganges.
- 3 Beatlemania:** Pay a visit to Rishikesh, home of yoga and where the Beatles found enlightenment. Get your palm read or have a tarot reading.
- 4 Mine's a cuppa:** Sample the delights of the world-renowned Darjeeling tea in the peaceful Himalayan town of the same name.
- 5 Curry favour:** Taste the flavours of Kolkata, India's foodie capital, where you can get everything from traditional stuffed paratha flatbread to spicy fish curry.



What's new

Attractions: Dubbed the new Taj Mahal, the Qutb Shahi Heritage Park (akdn.org) is being restored as part of a 10-year conversation project in Hyderabad. There are 106 acres to explore, more than double the size of the Taj Mahal, with 40 mausoleums and 23 mosques. One of the most significant historic medieval necropolises in the world and nominated for UNESCO's World Heritage List, the park also includes a hammam. The first phase of work is expected to be completed by early 2018.

Events: To find your path to enlightenment, head to the Siddhartha Festival in Bodhi Tree. Marking the life and teachings of the Buddha, the festival will be held under the Bodhi Tree – the place where he attained enlightenment. Among the activities on offer are prayers, talks, meditation, chants, shadow puppetry, storytelling and dance, as well as offerings to the Buddha himself at the Mahabodhi Temple. Amersand Travel (ampersandtravel.com) runs tours to the festival as part of a seven-night itinerary, staying in Delhi, Varanasi and Gaya, from £2,890pp, including B&B accommodation and internal flights.

Tourism talk



"Tourism in India is growing and evolving at a rapid pace. It's easier than ever to obtain a visa and once you're there the range of experiences on offer is extraordinary.

"India's incredible and vast range of ever-increasing tourism products, from adventure tourism in the Himalayas, wildlife tourism and

"India is a real feast for the senses, with so much to take in. If your clients have the time, three weeks is better than two and it represents much better value to take a longer tour"

STUART DOUGLASS-LEE, HEAD OF PRODUCT, SAGA



Clockwise from top left: The grand City Palace in Udaipur; houseboat in Kerala; sunset offerings to the gods in Varanasi; an auto-rickshaw



► yoga to its 32 UNESCO world heritage sites attracted 870,000 UK visitors in the last year.

"British holidaymakers continue to be drawn to India's strong cultural offering and beautiful natural surroundings. India is now also at the forefront of responsible tourism with eco-tourism in the north-east currently receiving a dedicated focus from the Indian government, with heavy investment in tourism infrastructure developments. Due to its myriad unspoilt national parks, waterfalls and temples, the region is described as 'paradise unexplored'. "India's continuous tourism growth from the UK has been testament to the great job travel agents and tour operators have done in promoting India. In 2017, as we look to share new areas of India to new audiences, we will look to further support our travel trade relationships by inviting partners on fam trips."

Raj Sunani, Assistant Director, India Tourism Office UK

Where to book it

WILDFOOT – 0800 195 3385

On the 11-night 'Tigers and Leopards in India' tour you will see leopards in the foothills of Rajasthan's Aravali mountains and walking past your window at the Bera Safari Lodge in the Jawai Leopard Conservation Reserve. Starting from £2,420pp, the tour, which runs from October to June, includes most meals, accommodation, internal flights and trains. wildfoottravel.com

INTREPID TRAVEL – 0808 274 5111

The seven-night Golden Triangle tour begins and ends in New Delhi, taking in Jaipur, a rural heritage stay in Karauli, and Agra. Running year round, and including some meals and accommodation, prices start from £500pp. intrepidtravel.com

THE GOA EXPERIENCE – 01489 866986

The 'Glimpses of Goa' day tour begins at the Shri Mangeshi temple in Ponda, starting from £35pp. The tour continues with a short drive south to the Shri Shantadurga Temple and a guided tour of Goa's oldest spice plantations. After an authentic Goan buffet lunch, it's off to Old Goa to see the Basilica of Bom Jesus and Se Cathedral before finishing at the capital Panjim. goaexperience.co.uk

Yoga in Hampi
Temple, Karnataka



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