



The colour and movement of India: (top) A street procession in Rajasthan; (above left) the Qutb Minar tower in Delhi dates back to the 13th century; (above right) a woman pays homage at the tomb of Mahatma Gandhi; (right) a colourful gentleman from Rajasthan; (far right) the majesty of the Taj Mahal.

Photos: Lee Mylne

Go with Indian flow

There's little else to do in this land of surprises other than sit back, relax and enjoy the ride wherever it might take you

By LEE MYLNE

WE plunge into India – it's the only way. Crowded and chaotic, it is an assault on the senses; a cacophony of shouting, laughter, music and life, painted in brilliant jewel hues and with a sense of "anything can happen".

My travelling companion and I make a pact: we will go with the flow, refuse to get frazzled and take whatever comes our way.

It proves a good rule in India, where things can veer from the planned path at times.

In Delhi, we meet our driver.

Mr Brij is a good-humoured 30-something who is at our disposal, giving us flexibility to go where we want at any time.

We have booked an "independent" but off-the-shelf tour with Intrepid Travel taking in Delhi, Agra and Rajasthan, with local guides in each new city.

It's ideal for any traveller to India who is nervous about dealing with it all "on-the-spot".

Old and New Delhi have their own personalities and there is much to see if you can tear yourself away

from the bustle and bargains of the bazaars.

The highlights here are the architectural marvels of the Red Fort, which was built by the Emperor Shah Jehan (who also built the Taj Mahal).

There's also the Jama Masjid mosque, the Laxmi Narayn Temple, Qutb Minar, a 72m-tall tower dating back to the 13th century, and the Mughal-built Humayun's Tomb.

New Delhi, with its wide boulevards and formal parks, has many reminders of colonial rule including the magnificent Parliament Building, the Rashtrapati Bhawan, once the residence of the British viceroys and now the presidential palace, and the majestic India Gate, a memorial to Indian soldiers killed in World War I.

We also join sombre pilgrims paying homage at the grave of Mahatma Gandhi.

As we hit the open road on a five-hour drive to Jaipur, Mr Brij explains that driving in India is a matter of "good brakes, good horn and good luck" – happily demonstrating the first two as he talks.

"There are road rules, but we are all free," he says, as if in explanation

GETTING THERE

■ Intrepid Travel's eight-day Golden Triangle and Varanasi independent tour costs from \$1330 per person twin share, including accommodation, breakfasts, transfers and overnight train trip. Price does not include airfares.

■ For more, go to www.intrepidtravel.com.au

■ Jet Airways offers daily code share on QF services from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth to/from Singapore.

From Singapore, Jet Airways operates its own services to/from Madras/Delhi and Mumbai. Australians need a visa to visit India.

■ For more on the country, go to www.incredibleindia.org or www.indiatourism.com.au

of anything that is to come.

Several times, we close our eyes and hope for the best.

The capital of Rajasthan, Jaipur is the "pink city".

The highlight, in the centre of town, is the elegant Palace of the Winds with its honeycombed sandstone windows, from which the women of the royal family once watched life go by below them.

We rise early to take an elephant ride up the hill to the stunning Amber Fort.

Numbers are restricted to 400

daily, and we're keen not to miss out. The fort, a wonderful example of Rajput architecture, perches above the Maota Lake, its sheer walls and rock face ensuring good defences.

Alighting from our painted elephant, we wander the halls and chambers of the fort.

One of the most spectacular areas is the sparkling Sheesh Mahal, its walls a mosaic of tiny mirrors.

Reluctantly, we leave Jaipur, comforted by the knowledge that even greater joys are in store.

Next morning, we stand transfixed before one of the greatest wonders of the world: the Taj Mahal.

Light plays on the dazzling white marble, a monument to love built by the Emperor Shah Jehan for his beloved queen Mumtaz Mahal.

The overnight train from Agra (see story, right) takes us to the ancient holy city of Varanasi.

We wander the maze of twisting alleyways in the old city and take a row-boat on the Ganges.

Cremation fires burn along the shore, pilgrims seeking eternal absolution dip their bodies in the holy river water at bathing ghats, and we are silenced by a body floating by.

This is the place that many Hindus come to die, for they believe that anyone who dies in Varanasi, on the banks of the river of life, attains instant enlightenment.

Like all of India, it is a place unlike any other I have visited.

Train trip a pleasant surprise

WITH some trepidation, we abandon our car and driver to travel overnight by regular train from Agra to Varanasi and then on to Delhi.

To test the difference, we're travelling second class for our first leg of the journey and first class on the next leg.

Our tickets have been booked and paid for in advance, taking the hard work out of standing in line and figuring out which ticket to buy.

We're grateful for the company of our local guide, Dinesh, who ensures we find the right platform.

The train is late. We settle in on the platform for several hours, watching packed trains come and go.

We peer into sleeping cars with bed platforms seemingly inches apart, louvred and barred windows open for the breeze.

Is that second class? Surely it can't be first?

Our faces must reflect our thoughts.

Dinesh explains this is sleeper class, the way most Indians travel long-distance, in crowded open plan berths, no bedding provided.

When our train arrives, our second class sleeping berths are in air-conditioned carriages with sheets, pillows and curtained privacy.

The carriage is open-plan with berths in bays of four.

Ours are in a bay of two, aligned with the corridor, which gives even greater privacy.

It is clean and more comfortable than we've expected (as are the toilets).

First class offers a cabin for four, with leatherette bunks.

In the morning, we watch green fields go by as rural Uttar Pradesh awakes.

Chai-wallahs patrol the corridors, chanting "chai-ee" and dispensing hot sweet tea.

There are no restaurant cars on Indian Railways, but you can buy a cheap and basic meal – dahl, naan bread, rice and a mild chicken curry (or a vegetarian option).

■ For more, go to www.indianrail.gov.in

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