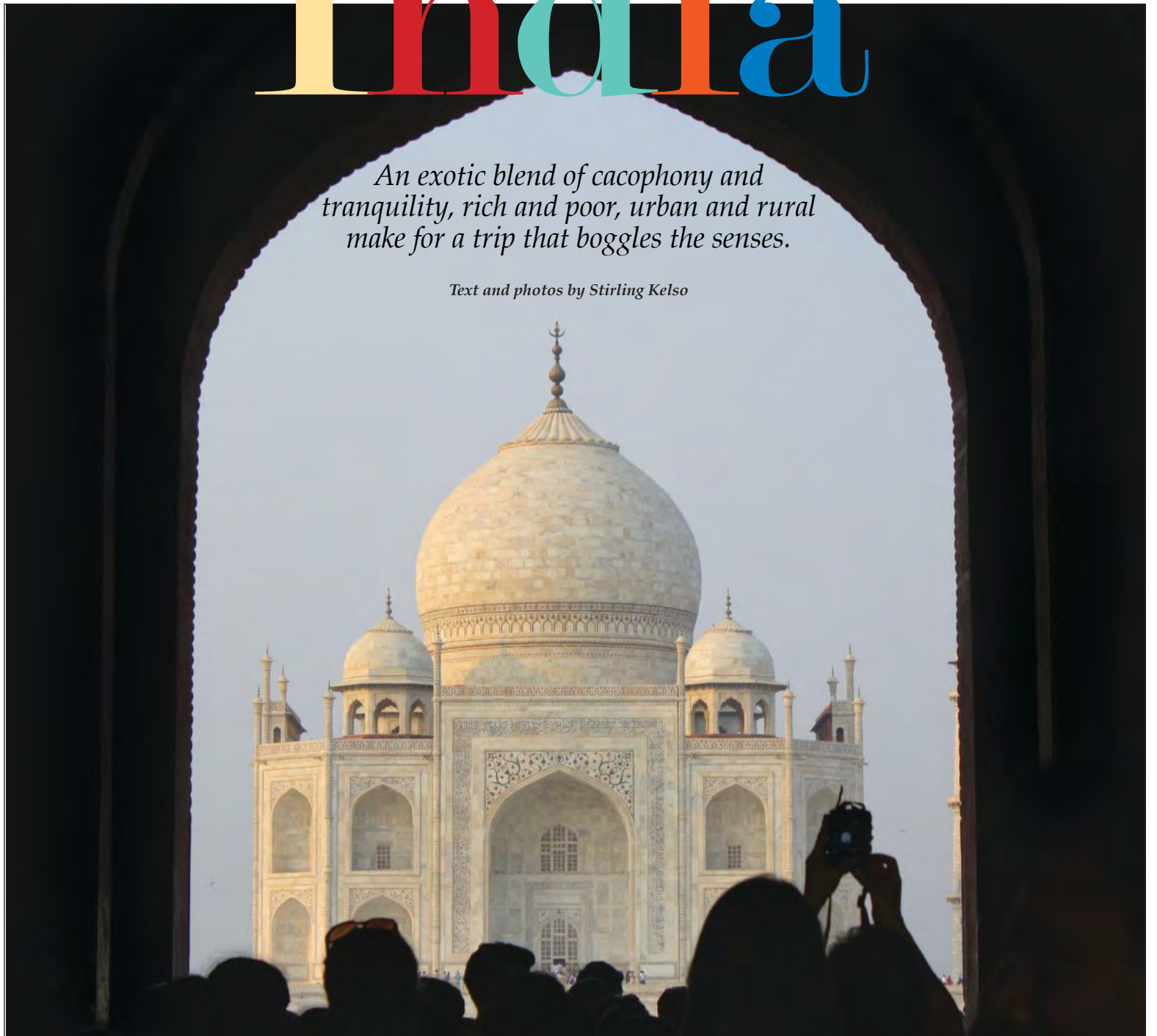


India

An exotic blend of cacophony and tranquility, rich and poor, urban and rural make for a trip that boggles the senses.

Text and photos by Stirling Kelso



Top, brilliantly hued scarves on display in a Jaipur marketplace. Above, visitors enter the Taj Mahal grounds.



The ladies' line at the Taj Mahal creates an impressive show of traditional fashion.

aren't you worried about getting sick?"

I couldn't believe it. I was off to India on a bespoke tour through the country's golden triangle (Delhi, Jaipur and Agra) as well as Mumbai and the southern state of Kerala. My itinerary read like poetry — overnights at five-star Oberoi Hotels, river boating on Kerala's backwaters, an afternoon of elephant polo — yet everyone peppered me with the same digestion-related questions. "Haven't you heard of Delhi belly?"

They had a point. Many tales that include the words "India" and "food" are legendarily, well, explosive. While I was prepared for the worst — Cipro and Purell have permanent spots in my carry-on — I was otherwise unconcerned.

Why the smug conviction? On the one hand, I heard my mother's voice: "So you get a little food poisoning. There's no better way to drop a few pounds."

More significantly, though, I was traveling with Micato Safaris. The luxury-tour operator, best known for top-notch African safaris, does pretty much everything to ensure a smooth experience. A few weeks before departure, I received a package with a detailed itinerary, a cookbook by Indian chef Floyd Cardoz and a guidebook. I sent off for my visa, studied a few maps, cooked a few of Cardoz's specialties and considered myself prepared.

I look back on that moment and laugh.

I've hiked jungles in Colombia, driven through mountains in Guatemala and flown over the Serengeti's wildebeest migration. Nothing prepared me for the spectacular sensory overload that is India, a country of contrasts that also can be incredibly challenging. While the middle class is growing, the very real problems of faulty infrastructure, extreme poverty and pollution remain omnipresent. Still, there's a vibrant undercurrent to this chaos, a street rhythm that every man, woman and child — not to mention cow, monkey and pig — taps into.



Artful plates at Oberoi Mumbai's Ziya restaurant

New Delhi and Gurgaon

My friends and I exit the Delhi airport, step over a slumbering dog in the parking lot and pile into our plush, air-conditioned vehicle. Our dapper guide is Hem Singh, and he's wearing Rajasthani jodhpurs, a tailored blue blazer and a burnt-orange silk ascot. Slight in stature, he has a commanding presence, so much so that people often come up and ask to take his picture.

Hem is a Sikh by birth, though not in practice, so while he has an impressively silky mustache, he shaves his beard and cuts his hair.

He tells us this while chatting about

his heritage and caste — Kshatriya, or the warrior and ruler caste. India no longer officially recognizes castes, of course, but still it's hard to escape the reference in daily conversation. Browse the local paper's classifieds and "Brahman female, 25, seeking Kshatriya or higher" is not an uncommon request.

With a bejeweled index finger, Hem points out places of interest on our trip to Gurgaon, a wealthy suburb of the capital city. It's hard to blink in this landscape of 17 million: Barbers give shaves under trees heavy with fruit; women in smart suits navigate cracked sidewalks in stilettos; five people cling to a motorcycle whizzing by. "Indians have magnetic fingers," Hem says with a deep laugh.

We're only in Gurgaon for one night, though the stay at the sleek glass and steel Oberoi Gurgaon is worth the trip alone. While Oberoi hotels may not be as familiar to U.S. travelers as Taj, an Indian brand with three properties in the U.S., it's equally luxe, with a solid focus on design, sense of place and, most of all, service.

To that end, we're greeted with hot towels, champagne and a bindi, a red dot placed between the eyebrows to strengthen



The Oberoi Amarvilas in Agra offers a spectacular view of the resort grounds with a glimpse of the Taj Mahal on the horizon. Below, an ornate door frames a canopied wood bed at Rajvilas in Jaipur.

THE DETAILS

Logistics Visas are required for travel to India.

Getting there Emirates, British Air, KLM, United and Lufthansa offer one-stop service from DFW to New Delhi.

Tours Miato Safaris Tastes and Treasures of India Tour, from \$16,769 per person, double occupancy; 212-545-7111 or micato.com

Stay

- Oberoi Hotels & Resorts, from \$495 to \$756 a night, depending on city; oberoihotels.com
 - Oberoi Motor Vessel Vrinda, Kerala, from \$1,616 for two nights; oberoihotels.com
- Note that Vrinda doesn't sail during monsoon season, May through September.



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concentration and maintain positive energy. After my 40-hour commute, both the bubbly and the bindi are much appreciated. An epic dinner at the hotel means I go to sleep still dreaming about prawns with cashews and coriander; lamb and potatoes; and a ginger-and-date ice cream.

Agra

The new Yamuna Expressway connects Delhi to Agra, home to the Taj Mahal. Though this strip of cement cuts the trip down by several hours, the road is largely empty, not worth the 150 rupees (about \$2.60) to most drivers making the journey.

Another round of champagne and hot towels awaits at our new destination, Oberoi Amarvilas, as does one of the world's most spectacular views. While the teak furnishings, silk pillows and hand-woven bedspreads vie for my attention, the real attraction is the Taj Mahal crowning the horizon just outside my window.

Over the next two days, we do the Taj Mahal three ways: At dawn, I race to the "High Value Ticket Holder Ladies" line to be one of the first to experience the marble mausoleum. In the evening,

I join thousands of globe-trotters taking requisite photos — for Westerners, holding the Taj by their fingertips; for Indian teens, taking pictures with Westerners. Best of all, we enjoy a sunrise yoga class in a private garden overlooking the architectural masterpiece — an experience offered only by Micato. As the monument changes from a light gray to a glowing cream, our yogi ends our workout with a hearty laugh. “Laughing yoga,” my friend explains in a whisper. The Taj, yoga and fits of giggles? I can’t think of a better way to start the day.

Jaipur

That is, until I get to Jaipur, nicknamed the Pink City. Located in the state of Rajasthan, its buildings were originally painted their rosy hue in honor of a visit from British royalty in the 1800s. I wake up in a villa at the Oberoi Rajvilas, coddled in silky sheets. I grab plump grapes from a silver bowl and practically skip to a 280-year-old temple in the middle of the resort’s peacock-dotted grounds. A pundit, or priest, leads a puja ceremony in honor of Lord Shiva, to whom the temple is dedicated, that begins with a melodic chant and ends with a blessing. Coming out of my meditative state, I glance at my travel companions. A few have tears in their eyes.

After a breakfast of uttapam, a rice pancake topped with vegetables, we’re whisked off to the Amber Fort, built from red and white sandstone and completed in the 16th century. The mirrored ceilings, hand-carved latticework and painted archways are mesmerizing, as is the people watching: More than 5,000 people visit the fort daily.

We once again make the leap between crowds and chaos to tranquility and opulence, this time to a grassy arena where decorated elephants stand at attention. We’re playing elephant polo and, it turns out, I have a knack for this game. Or, rather, my guide does. I awkwardly climb onto the elephant and use both arms to hold the story-high mallet. “Hit it! Hit it!” he says in broken English before helping me swing somewhat in the soccer ball’s direction. Still, I score two goals and promptly send a photo off to my high school field hockey coach.

I think of myself as a maharaja inductee after polo, though I soon find out there’s one more step to the initiation process: dinner at a palace. A deep purple and blue sari with gold embroidery awaits me back at the hotel, as does a woman to help me pin back the folds of the rich fabric and create an elegant gown.

I put on my new ring from Jaipur’s Gem Palace, where co-owner Sanjay Kasliwal has not only greeted the likes of Mick Jagger and Oscar de la Renta, he also handcrafts jewelry ranging from diamond- and pearl-studded headpieces to cascading emerald necklaces. “The best customers



A riverboat cruises the waters in Kerala, where the pace is much slower.

these days are Middle Eastern brides,” he says as he casually lays his museum-quality works across a table. My small ruby and sapphire ring set in 18-karat gold is comparatively simple, but it’s still a splurge I won’t tell my husband about for weeks.



A bedecked camel goes in for a kiss from his minder at the elephant polo grounds.

That evening, dressed in our saris, we make a surprise turn into the Jaipur Palace gates and, on cue, are showered with rose petals. Horses, camels, elephants and musicians lead our carriage to the entrance, where the maharaja’s father, Maharaj Narendra Singh greets us (young Panmanabh Singh, the current maharaja of Jaipur, was away at school). Rooms sparkle with mirrored mosaics, etched ivory tiles and museum-quality artwork.

After an hour-long music and dance performance in a private courtyard where, among other feats, a young man dances on knives while balancing water glasses and a gourd on his head, we amble to an opulent dining room for a dinner of mixed

lentils, chicken in tomato masala and no fewer than 12 additional dishes. As we toast with crystal glasses, I close my eyes, wishing for a *Ground Hog Day* miracle. This is one day I would not mind reliving.

Kerala

Until 1954, this southwestern state located on the Arabian Sea was a partly a Portuguese colony, and its culture diverges from the rest of the country. About 19 percent of the state is Christian, for example, whereas the national average hovers at 2.3 percent. Its major industries include fishing, clamming and rice farming, which produce three food groups I’ll be pairing with Kingfisher brews over the next several days.

Among travelers, Kerala is best known for its placid backwaters, a

There are many alternative modes of transportation wherever you go in India.



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series of rivers and tributaries bordered by royal palms. It's here that our hotel and transportation await, the Oberoi Vrinda, an eight-room houseboat. On board, local music and dance groups perform nightly, and we learn to cook karimeen pollichattu, a local fish dish served with rice on banana leaves. Even more impressive is the service. After breakfast, I find my bed made, my pajamas folded and a fresh gold sticker on my toilet paper roll.

Life here is slow and tranquil. Women wash clothes on the riverbank as duck farmers herd thousands of birds nearby. The area, though, is quickly changing as larger hotels fill vacant lots along the water. One can only hope the area grows responsibly.

Mumbai

My trip ends in Mumbai, whose city harbor looks like a crescent moon from my waterfront suite at the Oberoi Mumbai. The hotel sacrificed 50 units during a \$40-million renovation, completed in 2010, to enlarge the guestrooms, all of which encircle a soaring 240-foot lobby clad in white marble (it takes six full-time employees to keep the floors sparkling).

Though Mumbai feels like a shock after Kerala's leisurely pace, there's also an addictive quality to it: The city of 18 million accounts for 38 percent of India's overall GNP and, much as in New York, you can stroll

around and feel largely unnoticed.

While the arts and culture are world class — Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (the former Victoria Station), the Mari Bhavan Gandhi Museum and the Rajabai Clock Tower (modeled after Big Ben) should definitely make the itinerary — my limited time frame leads to an equally important endeavor: shopping.

My blond hair calls my bartering bluff, so I fold from the street-market game and head to some of Mumbai's cutting-edge stores. Among them, Bungalow is a three-story warehouse with fashion-forward finds such as reversible sequined jackets and architectural cocktail dresses; at Good Earth, I covet brightly painted ceramics and hand-sewn children's clothes. My most affordable finds are at Anokhi, where breezy, batik-printed shirts and scarves pad my wardrobe.

My days in India end with an enchanting tasting menu at the Oberoi's Ziya, helmed by chef Vineet Bhatia, whose previous restaurants have earned Michelin stars. He specializes in a modern interpretation and presentation of Indian classics and, relishing my now favorite cuisine on its home turf one last time, I eat every last bite.

For those who are wondering, I never fell ill. I gained seven pounds, in fact — and an extra suitcase. **360**

Stirling Kelso is an Austin-based travel writer.