

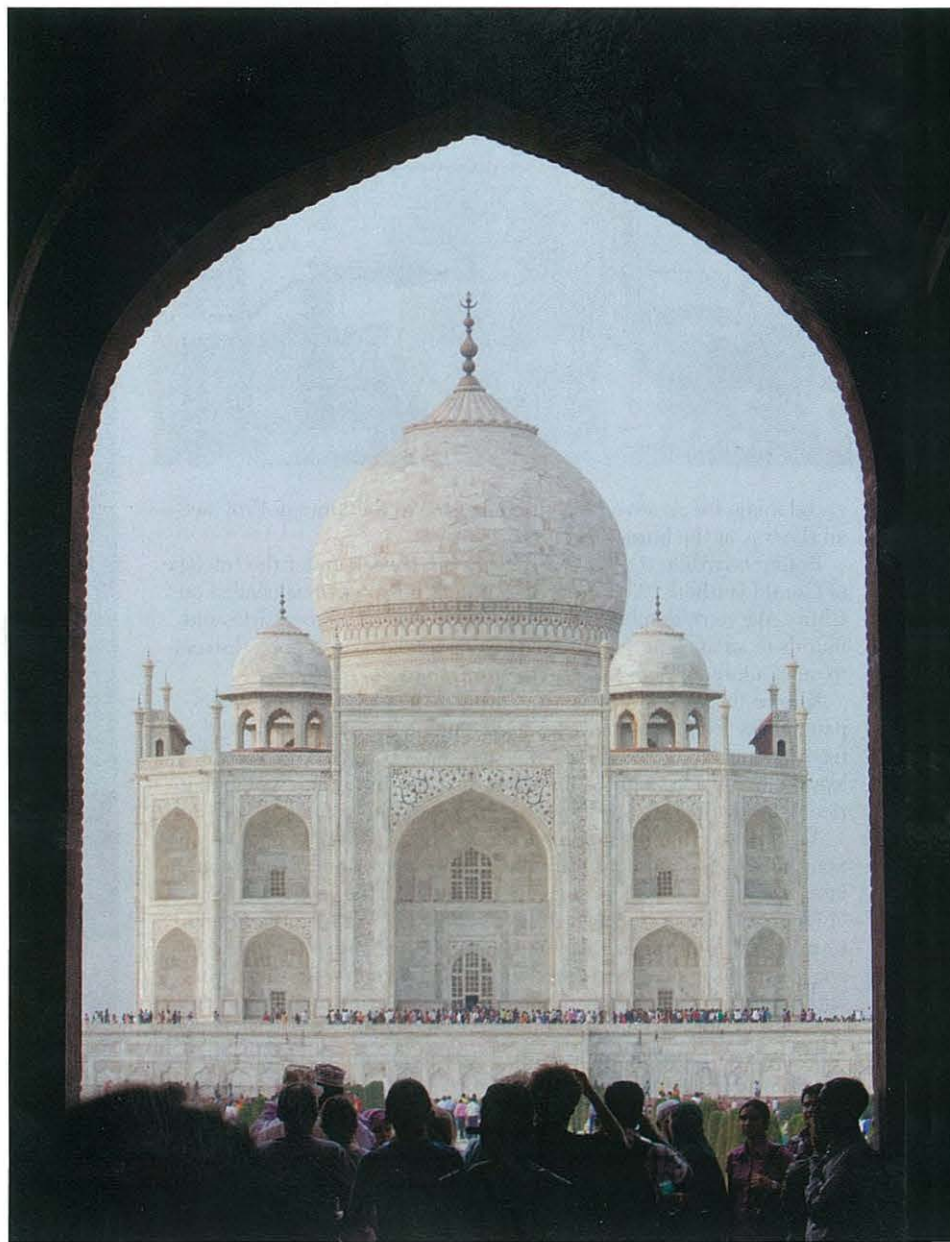
Yoga Overlooking the Taj Mahal

A trip across India brings unforgettable experiences, cultural immersion, wildlife sightings and a fondness for the one-time jewel in the crown.

BY BECCA HENSLEY

Playing elephant polo in India is like stepping into the pages of a Victorian storybook. So, it's no surprise that I feel a bit like Annie Oakley in a Wild West show as I lean off my lumbering painted elephant to stretch my 10-foot mallet toward the ball. Giggling, I urge my turbaned mahout (or elephant driver) to steer closer, while he mutters advice on my swing. When other elephants and their riders approach, I careen dangerously to one side and whap the ball with all my might. It rolls across the emerald green lawn and passes over the finish line. The crowd cheers. And, a royal band emits a euphonious serenade. I dismount the immense beast by ladder, snuggle my elephant's crusty, swishing trunk and accept a well-deserved flute of champagne from a nattily clad waiter. When at last I return to my hotel in Jaipur, I pass the regal Amber Fort atop a hill—just as the sun sets over it in smudges of tangerine sherbet. **It's just another perfect day on my Micato Safaris (micato.com/india) custom-created tour of central India.**

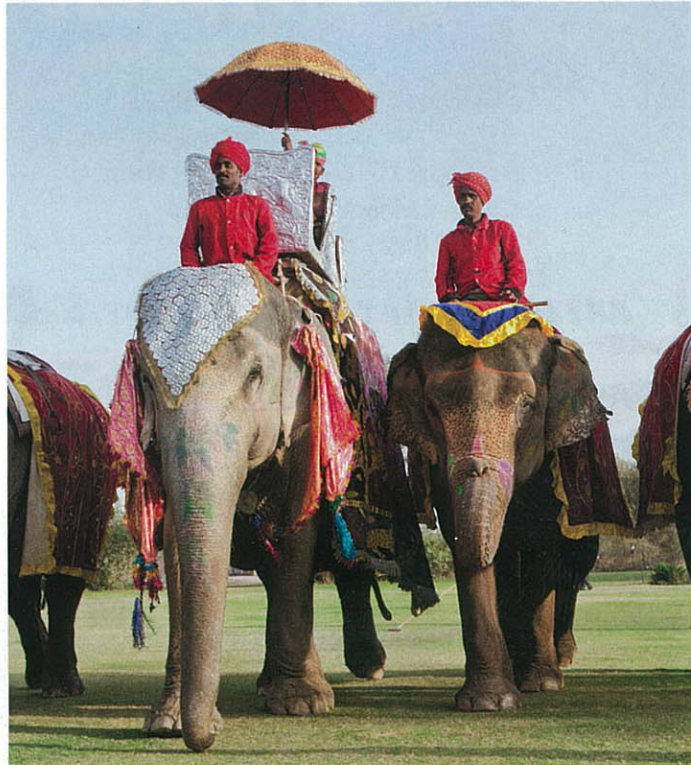
As part of the 12-day itinerary, I head to Rathambore National Park, once the royal hunting ground for the maharajahs of Rajasthan—and still the home to some of India's (now protected) tiger population. There, I check into the Oberoi Vanyavilas (oberoihotels.com), a luxury hotel with tent-style standalone rooms that sit on a verdant garden-like expanse near the edge of the park. A cosseting resort, this intimate hotel has only 25 suites for guests, a chef well-versed in local cuisine, two friendly elephants, and its own on-site naturalist. While part of the thrill of arriving to this remote area is the sights of the region seen along one of India's bumpiest roads—flower bedecked camels pulling carts, women dressed in colorful saris working in the fields, huts made from cow pies and gigantic statues of Hindu gods—the real reason to come is to experience the Rathambore Park's twice-daily jeep safaris. These three- or four-hour rides take visitors deep into the game sanctuary, a sprawling terrain thick with forest-like foliage and abundant with lakes. An ancient fort occupies the crest of a hill and centuries-old temples dot the landscape. Tigers, leopards, wild boar and sloth bears—as well as 30 other types of mammals, 300 species of birds and 12 reptiles—roam the park. Though there's no guarantee, most visitors return having seen a few creatures, not to mention jaw-dropping landscapes. I feel especially lucky, however. During our group's three outings into the thicket, we spy a total of eight tigers (including a male tiger currently



making history for raising his cubs after their mother's sudden death), a sounder or two of wild boar, myriad birds (including some that land on our heads), scores of monkeys and a sloth bear.

In Agra, home of the Taj Mahal and perhaps India's most iconic stop, I stay at Oberoi's Amarvilas. Walking distance from the Taj Mahal, it's the closest hotel to the monument and every room boasts a dreamy view. Like all the other tourists, I experience the stunning monument at sunrise, for the spectacle of rose colored light that wafts off the dome, and at sunset, for the profound tranquility it exudes as daylight turns to dusk. But my most unique experience is a yoga session atop a hill overlooking the Taj Mahal as the sun rises. Led by a world-famous yogi, I practice with the Taj in my sights, to the sound of playful monkeys babbling and to the flutter of lime green parakeets flapping across the cobalt sky.

My Micato tour of India takes me from Bollywood and Mumbai to Colonial Delhi to the fabled romantic city of Udaipur—and nearly everywhere in between. India is a land of contrasts that's full of surprises—and so pulsating with life it glimmers like a maharajah's magic gem. I simply can't wait to return. ★



A TASTE OF INDIA

Enjoy Indian delicacies without crossing the ocean at some of the United States' best homages

- ▶ **New Delhi, San Francisco** (newdelhirestaurant.com): Featured on the *Galloping Gourmet* TV show, award-winning New Delhi exudes the swank of a maharajah's private dining room. The restaurant serves cuisine made from recipes culled from the royal Indian menus dating back 300 to 400 years using the freshest local ingredients. Chef and owner, Ranjan Dey, star of PBS show *My India*, creates daily specials with his six gourmet spice blends, available nationwide in gourmet specialty stores under New World Spices. The bar, too, is a local favorite, best known for its Double Happiness Happy Hour, which includes complimentary appetizers.
- ▶ **Junoon, New York City** (junoonnyc.com): This modern Indian restaurant in the Flatiron neighborhood received its first Michelin star last fall. Opened in early 2011, the grand space combines modern elegance with Old World Indian artifacts. The menu focuses on the five elements of Indian cooking: *handi* (pot cooking), *sigri* (open fire pit), *pathar* (stone), *tawa* (griddle) and *tandoor* (clay oven). Highlights include lobster tandoori (lobster tails seasoned with a tandoori spice blend, cooked in the tandoor oven, and served with a sweet tomato and fenugreek chutney) and duck Tellicherry pepper (sliced crisp, farm-raised duck breast with a sauce of Tellicherry peppercorns, curry leaves, tamarind pulp and coconut milk). Junoon's vast wine list complements its cuisine.