

Clockwise from top left: A fuchsia-clad camel driver embodies Jaipur's regional flare, deluxe digs at The Oberoi Vanyavilas in Ranthambore, the Hindu god Vishnu contemplates the cosmos, and flower power.

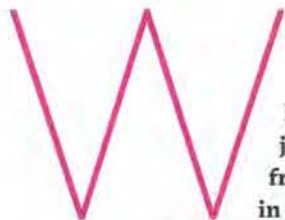
Opposite: Agra's iconic Taj Mahal, or "Crown Palace."



India in Style

From personalized yoga lessons overlooking the Taj Mahal to a private dinner in a royal palace, **a bespoke journey through the Land of Maharajas** enlivens the senses.

Story by **Becca Hensley**
Photos by **Kevin Garrett**



hen my camera breaks just an hour before my friend and I reach Agra in central India, I slip into

despair. It's bad enough that I've missed the chance to photograph my first snake charmer and his undulating cobra, lost the opportunity to record a painted elephant walking down the road amid cars overstuffing with people and camel carts, and been robbed of the shot of a group of women, colorfully clad in saris, balancing towers of cow pies on their heads. But now, just minutes away from my first glimpse of the Taj Mahal, I must face the fact that I'll be documenting that "wow factor" moment only with my eyes.

It's then that I decide to share my gloom with our private guide, Mr. Hem Singh. "Give it to me," he says. "I know someone who can fix this." In a jiffy, Singh makes a call in lilting Hindi. As we bump through the glutted city traffic, I spy unattended little children in school uniforms boldly crossing the busy streets, and marvel over a man riding a bike loaded precariously with a tilting mountain of *poppadums*, or Indian flatbreads. Suddenly, as we idle at a red light, a motorcycle with two riders pulls up beside our van. Without saying a word, Singh hands my camera to one of them — just as my jaw drops and the motorcycle whizzes off in a whirl of traffic.

Five minutes later, checked into the fanciful, Mughal-inspired Oberoi Amarvilas, my camera has become a distant memory. The vision of the Taj Mahal from the hotel's balcony, lit violet by a golden ray of sun, obliterates all other thought. Nearly close enough to touch, the Taj floats in the air like a mirage. As my friend frantically clicks his camera beside me, Singh approaches and asks: "Do you want to use mine?" Without taking my eye from the view, I reach for what he presents and, upon focusing, realize it's my camera — *not his, but mine* — that he puts in my hands. "What?" I mutter, ecstatic, but utterly confused as Singh laughs heartily at my amazement, then shrugs as if he's used to waving his wand and conjuring such magic.

And so begins our journey of contrasts and enchantment, custom-designed by **Micato Safaris** and led by the miracle worker, Hem Singh — a guide so famous he's reputed to be the most photographed man in India. Fortunately, for the next 12 days, Singh is ours alone as we travel from Agra to Udaipur to Mumbai, all the while admiring his singular ability to follow one magic trick with the next.

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Agra

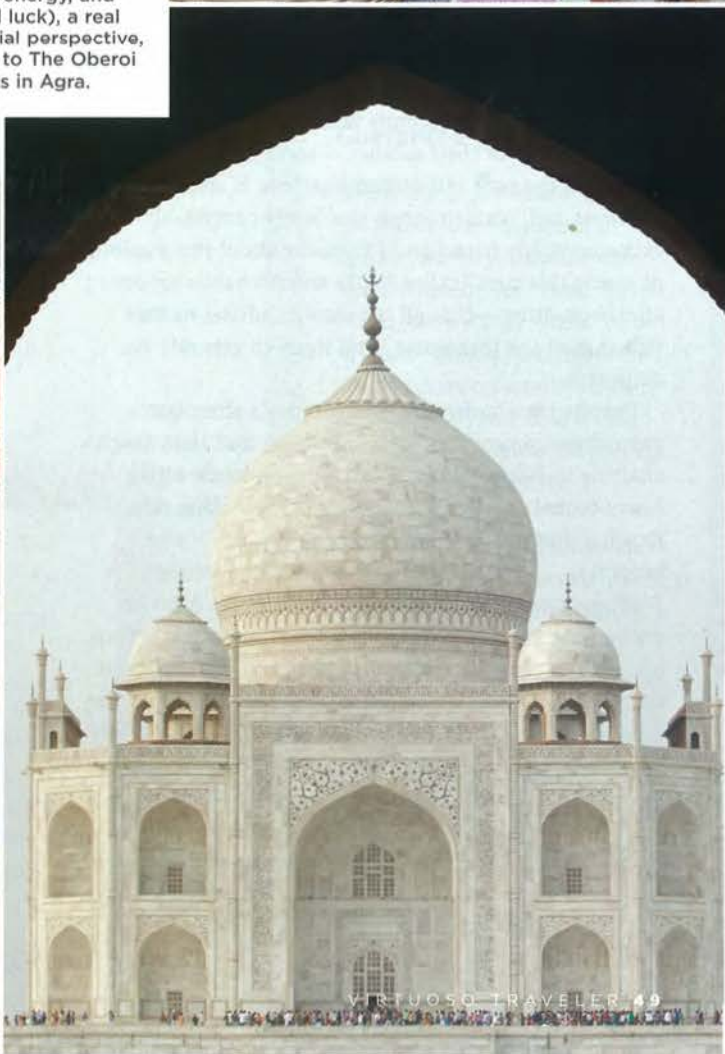
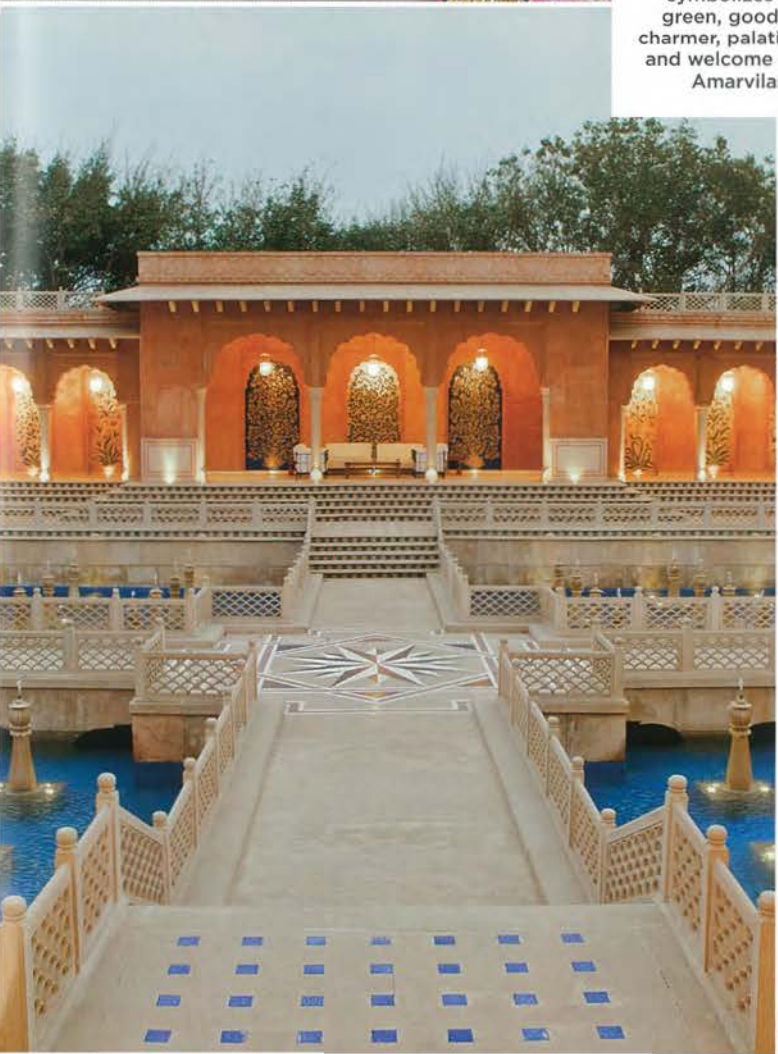
The following morning, **Micato** has arranged a private yoga session with Shri Atul Vyas, a renowned yoga guru who has taught celebrities as diverse as Bill Clinton and Kate Winslet. Atop a hill overlooking the Taj Mahal, yoga mats await, while staff from The Oberoi Amarvilas stand by with freshly squeezed fruit juices.

As the sun rises, Vyas pilots us through a series of therapeutic poses. Emerald green parakeets flutter and soar in profusion above us. Nearby monkey chatter is our serenade and the dome of the Taj gleams a sherbet pink on the horizon. When Vyas leads us through *shavasana* (a practice of deep breathing meant to promote homeostasis) at the end of the session, we feel so relaxed we can barely stand.





Clockwise from top left: A Hindu bride displays her wedding bangles (red symbolizes energy, and green, good luck), a real charmer, palatial perspective, and welcome to The Oberoi Amarvilas in Agra.



Ranthambore National Park

Part of the adventure of Ranthambore National Park is getting there. The long drive through semi-arid terrain passes over some of the bumpiest roads in India. But colorful scenery prevails: decorated trucks with blaring music, tired camels bedecked with fresh flowers, and children in uniforms riding bicycles to school. Women in gemstone-hued saris pump water from wells as idle men draped in white recline on mats or confabulate in groups over shared hookah pipes. At times, overburdened teetering trucks, abundant with grain and topped with roof riders, compete for the road. Huts made from cow pies look like gingerbread houses — some are being repaired by women so concentrated in their tasks they resemble painters fretting over a canvas.

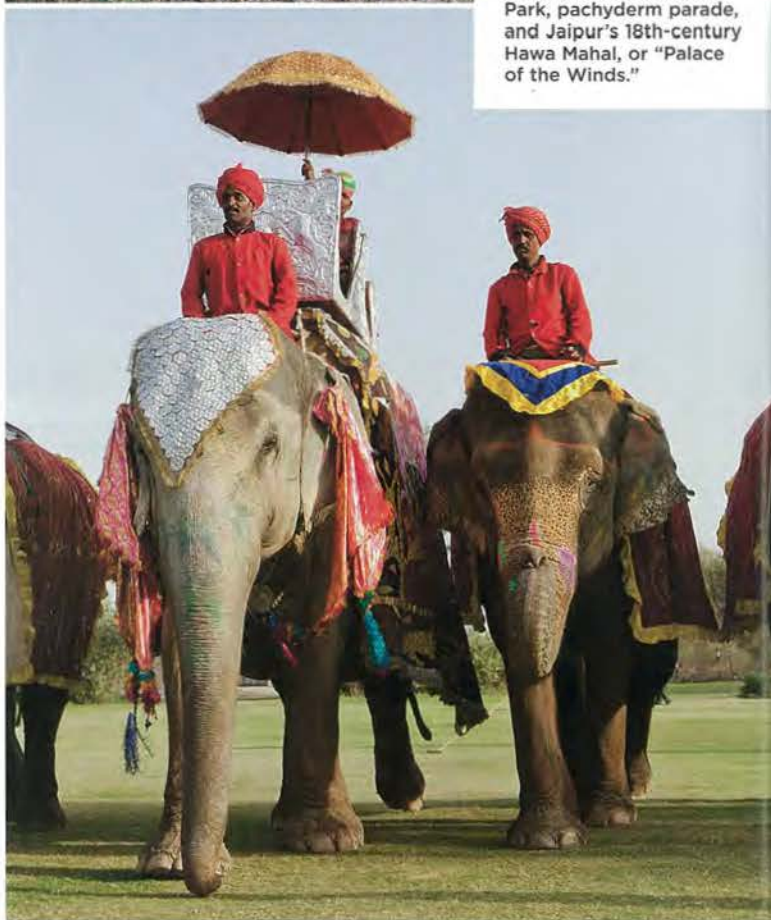
But the real reason travelers visit Ranthambore is the chance to see some of the 40 tigers that inhabit this protected expanse, which is also studded with ancient temples and the ruins of a mystical fort — not to mention a myriad of monkeys, deer, birds, and sloth bear. Based on the edge of the park at The Oberoi Vanyavilas with its luxury tents, deftly prepared local cuisine, and on-site naturalist, it's easy to join the twice-a-day tiger drives organized by the park. Before our first safari, though, we're treated to a privileged meeting with Ranthambore's honorary warden — who also happens to be our guide's brother-in-law.

Regaling us with information, Balendu Singh speaks of a male tiger that has recently been spotted raising his cubs after the death of their mother — something heretofore unseen in the park. All of Ranthambore is abuzz with the news and Warden Singh can barely contain his excitement. My friend and I fantasize about the possibility of seeing this tiger (called T-25) and his babies on our afternoon drive — though the warden advises us that sightings of the threesome (and tigers in general) are quite rare.

Despite the warden's warning, today's afternoon game drive commences with our ranger and Hem Singh chatting in frantic Hindi. Our driver responds with a heavy-footed surge and we're off on a rollicking ride. Down a dusty path, Warden Singh's car sits — and beyond it . . . ensconced in tall grass, lazily lounges T-25 and one of his chubby, playful progeny. After an enthralling hour of just watching the tigers stretch, turn, and wrestle, our day feels complete. Then, just as we set out to leave the park, our ranger sees something and the vehicle spins around and takes off like Mr. Toad's Wild Ride. Tigers seem ubiquitous all at once. There's one on the road, another up on a hill, and farther ahead, barely visible in the forest, yet another. At day's end, we've counted a total of eight tigers — including the soon-to-be-famous T-25 and one of his cubs.



From top: A father and cub repose in Ranthambore National Park, pachyderm parade, and Jaipur's 18th-century Hawa Mahal, or "Palace of the Winds."



Jaipur

The drab desert environs that surround Jaipur inspired a creativity of self-expression in its residents, says Hem Singh. Visitors witness it in the architecture — exotic Rajput bits of artistry manifested by salmon-hued terra cotta buildings, embellished window frames, lavish mosaic-laden walls, and grand mansions such as the City Palace. This artistry is also tasted in the food: a spicy cuisine that takes full advantage of a hot weather's yield of sun dried chilies, tomatoes, and regional herbs such as coriander and cumin. Jaipur's regional flare can be seen in the flamboyant dress of its locals, as well.

Singh — a resident himself — embodies the look. Distinctively mustached, he dons a brightly colored turban, jodhpurs, and shoes with curling toes like a genie might wear. With such *de rigueur* garb, it's not surprising that Singh personally knows the maharajah, or honorary king, of the region — which gets us an invitation to sup at his private residence in the City Palace. But first, Singh advises, we need to dress like Indian royalty. That means a tunic and turban for my male friend, and an opulent sari for me. To achieve this, a duo of tailors meets us at our hotel, the Hindu shrine-inspired Oberoi Rajvilas. They roll out bolts of sumptuous cloth and tape measures, designing our official costumes on the spot.

Sari wrapping isn't easy for first timers, so later that evening the hotel sends over an expert to swathe me in seven yards of emerald green fabric. She even puts a bindi on my forehead, the Hindu ornamental dot that accentuates the third eye. Thus transformed, my friend and I set off for the City Palace to a fete of fabled proportions. Decorated elephants ridden by mahouts, flower-bedecked camels, ornate puppets, horn players, drummers, and dancers all greet us. Seated in 19th-century horse-drawn carriages, we enter the palace courtyard to a fragrant, relentless shower of rose petals. First, on a terrace overlooking the city, we watch a performance by one of India's most famous dancers and her troupe. Then, inside the palace, joined by a posse of locals (a maharajah from another region, a city official, and more), we sit at the same Lalique crystal table where the likes of Prince Charles have dined. Quixotic, the evening resembles a storybook tale or hazy dream.

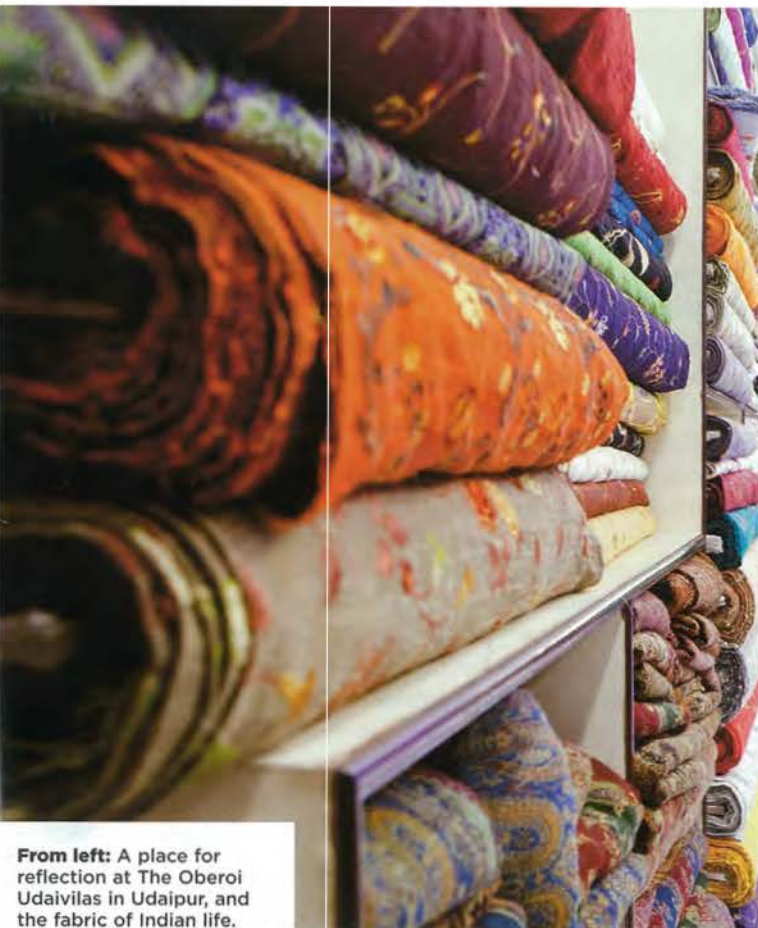
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Gem Palace

Follow in the footsteps of maharajas and maharanis — not to mention modern Bollywood, Hollywood, and Western royalty — at Jaipur's Gem Palace. Arguably the world's most famous jewelry store, the eighth-generation Gem Palace is still run by the founding Kasliwal family, one-time court jewelers for Moghul emperors. We visit one afternoon, surprised to find a low-key shop where the jewelry takes center stage. While hours can be passed browsing the trove of contemporary and antique necklaces, earrings, and bracelets, my highlight (thanks to [Micato Safaris](#)) was surely the moment the owners invited me into the back to sample vintage, dazzling, multi-jeweled pieces once belonging to Indian royals. *

Mumbai and Delhi

In bustling Mumbai and old world Delhi, **Micato Safaris** and our guide, Hem Singh, help us demystify the urbane culture. In Mumbai that means a ride with locals on the train, a visit to a Hare Krishna temple, a tour of the outdoor laundry run by *dhobiwallahs* (laundrymen who rent their own stone bowls amid a labyrinthine setting), and a gander at the *dabbawallahs* (food deliverers) who transport box lunches from homes to work (or school) via an intricate system. In Delhi, we ride bicycle rickshaws through Chandni Chowk, literally Silver Square, a market area where every lane specializes in a different product — from bangles to hardware to brilliant fabrics.



Udaipur

The pace slows naturally in Udaipur, a lakeside city known alternatively as the City of Dawn and the Venice of the East. Conceived as a maharajah's palace, The Oberoi Udaivilas is best approached for the first time by boat. To cross the water romantically and disembark as Indian royalty begins a pampering stay that includes lots of lingering by lap pools and yoga sessions in ancient structures overlooking Lake Pichola. Shopping (the city is renowned for its silver ornaments and leather goods) and sightseeing are woven into languid days.

For our final night, though, Singh arranges a surprise. My friend and I embark on a boat to a pontoon in the center of the lake where an elaborately laid table and dinner beckons. A local musician plays the flute and sings for us. The water laps like clapping hands against our floating island and the stars flicker like candle flames. Just as we begin dessert, the sky pops and sizzles in an array of color above the town — and then a second time over the hotel. Though everyone in Udaipur can see the fireworks, it feels like our very own production.

From left: A place for reflection at The Oberoi Udaivilas in Udaipur, and the fabric of Indian life.

See the Subcontinent

GO

The only problem with **Virgin Atlantic's** new Upper Class Clubhouse at New York's JFK is that passengers have trouble leaving. A 10,000-square-foot social club, the vibe is hip, boutique hotel lobby meets stylish, uptown bar. Order from a decadent menu, enjoy a complimentary spa treatment — even get a haircut with iconic New York stylist Bumble & bumble. En route to Delhi, travelers stop over at London's Heathrow — which works out because they can while away the hours at that supersonic wow of a Clubhouse, as well. Upper class amenities include complimentary chauffeur service to the airport and private security lines. *Your Virtuoso travel advisor has additional details on Virgin Atlantic seating classes and flights.*

TOUR

Micato Safaris has long been the world's go-to outfitter for insider tours in Africa. So, when loyal clients requested that the family-owned company add customized journeys to India two decades ago, **Micato** was happy to comply. They can arrange tailor-made tours of any length that surpass simple sightseeing. Whether it's dinner in a maharajah's palace in Jaipur, dawn yoga with a guru in Agra, a game of elephant polo, or a cocktail party with Bollywood movie stars — your wish is their command. As insiders, their vast network of dedicated, local hosts makes all things possible. Traveling with **Micato** feels much like being led through India with old family friends. *All-inclusive, 12-day tours through central India from \$15,000.*



STAY

Boasting hotels throughout India, the Oberoi Group believes that a wonderful property should at once possess the power to make memories and evoke a sense of place — a philosophy that's personified at **The Oberoi Amarvilas** in Agra. With views of the Taj Mahal from every one of its 105 rooms and seven suites, this Mughal-inspired estate spins dreams. Set on nine acres of landscaped gardens, the hotel's immense swimming pool invites lingering between dawn and dusk visits to the monument. Spacious rooms with terraces, nightly entertainment, a spa with Taj vistas, and authentic Indian fare add to the appeal. Virtuoso guests receive a room upgrade upon arrival, if available; daily breakfast for two; and lunch for two, once during stay. *From \$340 per room, per night.*

Suggesting a bygone era when Ranthambore National Park existed as the personal hunting grounds of maharajahs, **The Oberoi Vanyavilas** plays up the posh camping theme. Set at park's edge, the 20-acre, groomed jungle estate is home to 25 luxury tents with four-poster beds, embroidered coverlets, local art, and lounging decks. The main building has a hunting-lodge feel and a naturalist on hand to teach guests all about the tigers that enticed them to visit. Flowers are used abundantly throughout the property as decor. Drawing from a vast organic garden, Executive Chef Vidhu Sethi enjoys introducing guests to the local Rajasthan cuisine — though she does wonders with Thai, as well. Virtuoso guests receive daily breakfast for two, and a candlelit dinner with a minimum three-night stay. *From \$390 per room, per night.*

Mirroring the architecture of the nearby Amber Fort and the pinkish color of Jaipur's old city itself, **The Oberoi Rajvilas** spreads across 32 acres, encircling an ancient Hindu temple at its heart. Awash with Oberoi warmth, the hotel offers 54 deluxe rooms and 14 luxury tents, all surrounded by gardens, a large swimming pool, and spa. Rooms are commodious and have sunken marble bathtubs (ask for a rose petal bath prepared by your butler). Executive Chef Ashish Bhasin lords over two restaurants, including Rajmahal, which specializes in Indian cuisine. Be sure to sign up for Tandoori cooking classes. Virtuoso guests receive a room upgrade upon arrival, if available; daily breakfast for two; and lunch for two, once during stay. *From \$330 per room, per night. VT*

