

TRAVEL

SPARKLING LIKE AN EMERALD

Seattle shines bright for holidays **F11**



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VANCOUVER SUN SATURDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2017

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INDIA THE EASY WAY

Revel in the beauty when you have
the luxury of skipping lineups, buses



JANE MUNDY

As Mrs. Moore and Adela Quested discovered in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, it's not for the faint-hearted or the timid.

Most everyone who has been to India has a love-hate relationship; love the country, hate getting around in it.

I set off to discover what it would be like to skip the line, and for the most part the buses, with a group tour of the "Highlights of India" compliments of the Micato tour company.

This kind of trip is for people who only have a few weeks to see India's top destinations, want impeccable service in swanky digs — namely the Oberoi Hotels — and, of course, aren't on a budget.

Mrs. Moore would have undoubtedly signed on for this trip.

It starts at the Delhi airport. I meet my guide Raj, who whisks me past the long visa lineup to his "person" and before I get to the carousel, faster than my thoughts, a porter appears carrying my suitcase.

I am escorted to an air-conditioned minivan with sandalwood-scented cool towels. Fellow Air Canada passengers likely wonder if I'm a criminal or VIP — the latter is how I'm treated for the next two weeks.

You don't experience the real India this way — you bypass the noise, the dirt, the poverty, and skip the overladen buses and trains. What you do experience is the beauty.

This tour includes the cities Delhi, Agra and Jaipur because of their cultural splendour. We also tagged on Chandigarh. Looking at the map, it covers a lot of ground. But part of the Micato package includes flying from city to city, and we never spent more than a few hours on the road at once.

SEE INDIA ON **F9**



The grand Taj Mahal can be seen in the distance from the Oberoi Amarvilas Hotel in Agra. PHOTOS: JANE MUNDY

Gleaming glass, decaying splendour

INDIA FROM F8

And Micato has paid for us to jump the lines (getting into some temples and palaces can take ages).

I meet my travelling companions at the Oberoi Gurgaon in Delhi, and start out with visits to Humayun's Tomb and the marvellous Red Fort.

When we aren't cocooned in luxury, we thread down Old Delhi's grubby alleyways choked with shabby buildings and stalls selling everything in a rickshaw.

The midday heat is relentless, and we stop for excellent hot tea from the chai wallah. We then join dozens of local volunteers at a Sikh temple's community kitchen that feeds up to 30,000 every day.

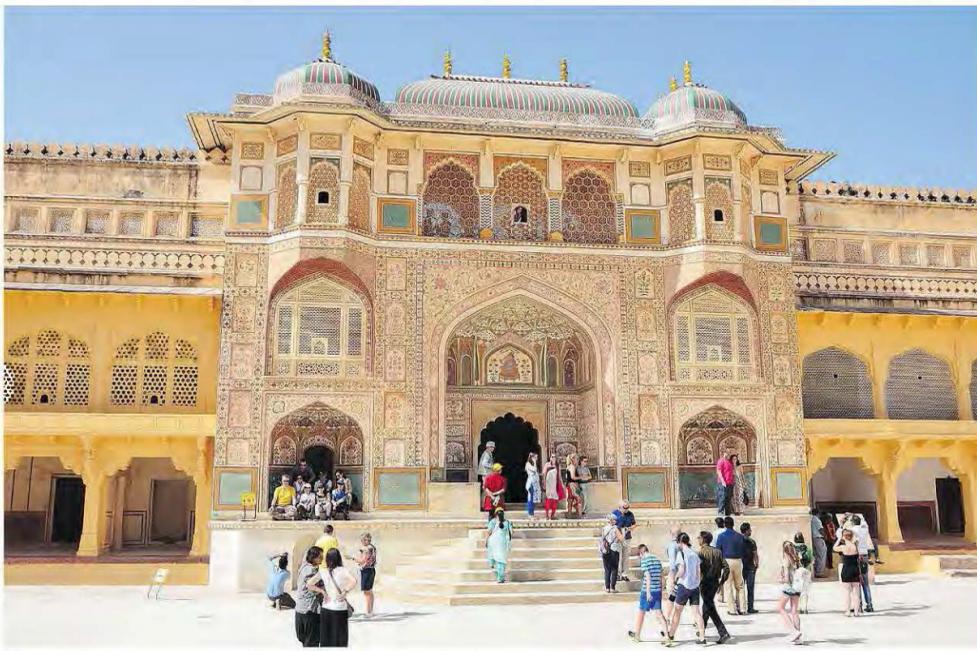
I'm amazed at this walled part of New Delhi: a dichotomy of rich and poor, gleaming glass and concrete next to decaying splendour and wide boulevards shaded with neem, tamarind and jacaranda trees.

Waiting at the longest traffic light in the world, there's time to buy something for everyone. The kitab wallah sells books for 100 rupees (\$2). There's time to buy chai, cellphone chargers and a cool towel from the tollia wallah.

We lunch at Veda, its walls lined with mirrors from palaces, with huge brass platters hung from the ceiling with elephant and lotus motifs. I have to stop eating the fried spinach leaves with tamarind sauce because it's just the warm-up. To end, kulfi: Indian ice cream made with buffalo milk and pistachios.

They say India changes you forever. I don't know about forever but I've been a vegetarian since that day in India months ago now.

We get back to the hotel past



The grand entrance to Amber Fort will transport you back in time with its beauty.

nightfall, hot and sweaty, and the swimming pool is closed. Sensing our disappointment, someone appears and opens the gate. Under the moon, we take a long cool dip.

Pool and room service seems accomplished by thought control: just think about a cool towel or iced tea and it miraculously arrives.

Every Oberoi breakfast buffet features a mind-boggling array of choices. Sensing indecision, my server Pradeep suggests dosa — the paper-thin delicate wrap filled with fluffy potato, coconut and dipping sauces is tastier and healthier than eggs and bacon.

Micato makes flying effortless, like taking a taxi ride. We jump the check-in line (of course), breeze

through security and board the plane to Jaipur, home to the beautiful Amber Fort that has got to be my favourite site. Step back 500 years to 1001 Arabian Nights. From the terrace we watch elephants saunter up the hill — they are allowed only three trips per day carrying one or two passengers.

We drive its main street lined with pots of bougainvillea, past public parks filled with art installations and playgrounds and people doing yoga to the Oberoi Rajvilas, an oasis just 20 minutes from the heart of the "Pink City." More than 50 varieties of birds, including many peacocks (the national bird) share 32 acres with just 70 rooms and a staff-to-guest ratio of 3:1.

There's only one problem: It's hard to leave. But we have an appointment with an astrologer at Jantar Mantar. Here is the biggest sundial in the world that's been accurately telling time for 300 years. Next day we get a novella of our astrological profile delivered to our hotel. Apparently, I'll have a luxurious life until 2023 (didn't ask what happens then).

Jaipur is a world-class shopper's paradise for jewelry and textiles. I choose — from hundreds of bolts — paisley-patterned silk for my pyjamas and the tailor measures me like I'm getting a three-piece suit. During dinner at Rajvilas our server whispers that I have a delivery and asks if I want it here or sent to my room. A perfect fit, but maybe temporarily.

Heaven forbid we would have to slice our own wedge of cheese from the breakfast buffet, pour from our coffee pot or open a door. I'm beginning to think that, despite eating healthy food, the odd beer, gin and tonics aside, I might be putting

on a few pounds. So what.

Next up is Agra, home of the Taj Mahal, first spotted from our balcony window at Oberoi Amarvilas. Like all tourists, we experience the stunning monument at sunrise, and again at sunset. Agra's saffron sky is dotted with kites — is it that game where they try to cut their competitor's string?

Lastly, we drive through the city of Chandigarh designed by Le Corbusier. Architecture buffs and travellers on their way to Darumsala or Shimla come here.

The new Oberoi Sukhvilas Resort set on 20 acres and surrounded by a huge natural forest is banking on wellness tourism; superb spa treatments, yoga and archery lessons easily fill the day.

Besides the incredible Rock Garden of Chandigarh (nothing like this on the planet) there's not much to do here, but that's the point.

Thanks to Raj, I came home with a smidgen of understanding of India's history and culture, gifts from Khan Market and a vow to return.

IF YOU GO

The Indians are very service-oriented but hospitality is taken to the Nth degree at the Oberoi hotels, where we were treated like Maharanis. Granted, luxury hotels on their own rarely make a memorable vacation, but combined with Micato tour company (that just turned 50) it's a trip of a lifetime I'll never forget.

GETTING THERE

Air Canada flies its 787 Dreamliner non-stop from YVR to New Delhi October through April. I flew premium economy — which was like some airlines' business class with priority check-in and boarding, and spacious seats in a small, quiet cabin. To get in the mood I watched Bollywood movies and ate a decent Indian curry.



There's a wealth of choices when you go sari shopping in New Delhi.