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How To Experience The Taj Mahal With No Tourists: A VIP Guide To Agra, India

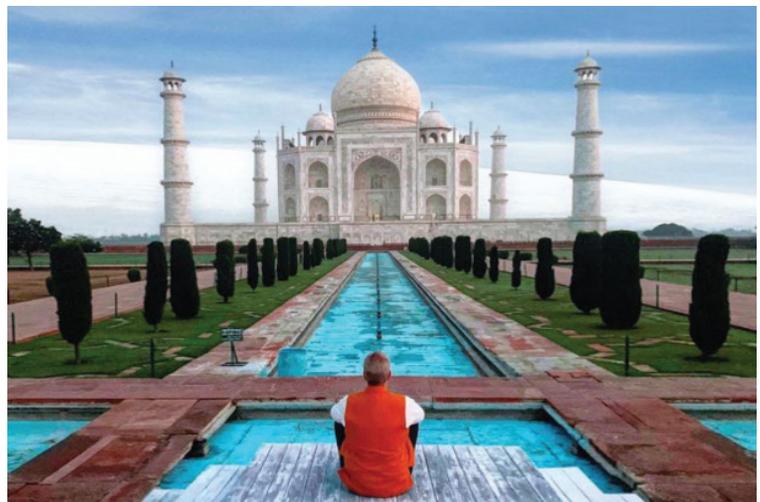
The cows blocking the winding dirt road ahead would have been a sure sign to turn back for the average visitor, but in India, locals are more resilient than that and they simply find a way around the crowded situation. We were in a private luxury car arranged by the amazing Micato Safaris taking us from Delhi to Agra on a four-hour drive. Our guide, the sophisticated, charming and well known Hem Singh was confident that the approaching wide open and empty toll freeway would make the drive a breeze. Before we knew it we had arrived in the humid, sweaty, dusty and overcrowded city of Agra.

I was here along with 50,000 other daily tourists to see the iconic Taj Mahal, one of the world's seven wonders. The famed mausoleum and memorial were erected by the grief-stricken Mughal emperor Shah Jahan in the 17th century to honor his wife, Mumtaz Mahal. I had always been reticent about visiting the famous site purely because I hate crowds and in my cranky old age cannot think of anything worse than standing in long lines for hours. But my visit was going to be different and so special that I was excited about the opportunity.

Most tour operators will have you visit the Mehtab Bagh – a site across the river for a sunset view of the Taj Mahal but I suggest you wait until you can get the ultimate wow factor at the main entrance. You don't want to see such a majestic monument from a dirty, crowded vantage point as this filled with selfie-stick day trippers.

There is only one way to really arrive into Agra and feel like a member of royalty and that is when you check into the spectacular Oberoi Amarvilas. The dramatic resort is located just under 2,000 feet from the Taj Mahal and is surely deserving of winning the Best Resort Hotel in India in this year's *Travel + Leisure* World's Best Awards. It is one of those rare hotels that offers stunning views from every one of their 102 rooms and suites. Spread out over nine acres of terraced gardens, pools, and pavilions, the property has hosted many celebrities and countless royals.

But for true decadence and the ultimate VIP experience, there is nothing quite like the magnificent Kohinoor Presidential Suite



Alone at the Taj Mahal

at Amarvilas, elegantly furnished like a private home with enormous windows overlooking your huge private terrace. Located on the highest floor of the resort, there are views of the Taj Mahal from every room including a spectacular vista from the large bathtub or glass-walled rain shower that opens to the terrace. Having your personal butler formerly adorned with a turban and long tail available to you to unpack your clothes or pour your tea adds to the royal welcome of this suite named after the famed 105-carat Indian diamond. Encompassing a living room, formal dining room, office, emperor style master bedroom with walk-in closet and large white marble and granite bathroom, the suite is the perfect escape from the crowds of the city.

The resort itself is a remarkably tranquil retreat designed throughout with Mughal style frescoes painted in gold leaf and resembling a palace from centuries ago. The courtyards are filled with fountains and pools while chandeliers and lush furnishing add to the opulence and celebrating Indian craftsmanship. A day visit to the Amarvilas Spa is the perfect way to unwind when you arrive with their mosaic lined whirlpool tubs and Ayurvedic treatments.

I only had time for a brief visit to Agra so I wanted to make sure every moment was magical. My dinner that night was

poolside under the stars along with the resorts charming young GM Vishal Pathak. We were entertained by a special classical dance performance overlooking the carved sandstone regal pavilions, while the Moorish architecture reflected in the pools.

Our plan was to wake up very early to truly experience the Taj Mahal as a VVIP. As is custom with Micato you receive rare access and exclusive experiences that normal tourists do not and are usually reserved for world leaders. The Taj Mahal is normally open to visitors from 6 AM to 7 PM every day, make sure you do not visit on a Friday as it is closed for prayers.

Our Micato guide Hem Singh met us very early in the morning for coffee and we departed on one of the Oberoi's special buggies that transported us through a private back brick road directly to the main entrance of the Taj Mahal. By 5 am there were already almost 500 people in line, standing forlornly in the dark. Groups of tourists following their leaders to queue up for the crowded visit ahead.

I felt a twinge of guilt as we were escorted ahead of the line into a private entrance. Many of the visitors had been waiting so long and we whisked ahead of everyone as the security guards welcomed us with a smile. This is part of the magic of using Micato as your travel experts, they have the personal connections to make these moments happen. To be able to see the Taj Mahal before the masses is truly an experience I will cherish forever. If you want to try and experience an empty Taj Mahal, make sure you arrive very early and do your research in advance so that you are among the very first people to enter for that dramatic photograph that is on most travelers bucket lists. You will not have VIP access without a Micato guide but you will have a more peaceful experience.

Walking into the majestic monument was enough to take my breath away, and to be the only person strolling through the structure that took 22 years to build and utilized 22,000 laborers with 1,000 elephants, it was an experience that will leave you speechless. Of course, we had to take the required photo sitting in front of the Taj Mahal as the sun rose. We had only a limited time before the masses would appear behind us so we wanted to take full advantage of the moment.

Walking in complete silence, we arrived even before the legions of monkeys did as they made their pilgrimage to the Jamuna river. We were also fortunate that there were no renovations taking place on the famed dome or minarets and that the skies were remarkably clear for Agra. The only thing dramatically different was that the fountains had been drained for cleaning which revealed a spectacular turquoise color only adding to the stunning images.

We entered the iconic 240-foot dome where we were told normally you could not move due to the crowds but for us, it was completely empty and haunting. The heat inside was oppressive and I can only imagine what it would be like with crowds. An octagonal marble chamber adorned with carvings and semi-precious stones held the false tomb of Mumtaz Mahal. On the exterior of the dome, we took time admiring the white marble inlaid with semi-precious stones (including jade, amethyst, and turquoise) all forming intricate designs.

The entire Taj Mahal complex is made up of five elements surrounded by four smaller domes and four slender towers. The rest of the Taj Mahal complex includes the main gateway of red sandstone and a square garden divided into quarters by long pools of water, as well as a red sandstone mosque and an identical building called a jawab (mirror) directly across from the mosque. We were in the unique position to visit all sides of the complex with its expansive views before departing as the crowds arrived. Many celebrities including actor Will Smith who had visited the Taj Mahal a few days earlier than us are usually forced to endure the thousands of visitors and paparazzi. Of course, they are offered heavy security but they don't have the amazing peacefulness of having the entire place to yourselves. A luxury usually reserved for visiting world leaders.

The history of the Taj Mahal is equally as dramatic and emotional as the visit. The reign of Shah Jahan was a peaceful era of prosperity and stability and a time of outrageous opulence when the world's most precious gems were being mined from India. Jewels were the main basis of wealth and Shah Jahan inherited trunks of emeralds, sapphires, rubies, and diamonds.

In 1631 the queen died during giving birth to their fourteenth child. Before she died, the Shah promised to build her the most beautiful mausoleum in the world. But in a twist of fate just as Shah Jahan had once conspired against his brothers for the empire, his son Aurangzeb overtook the throne. In 1658, Aurangzeb declared himself emperor and imprisoned his father in a tower of the Red Fort in Agra. For the man who once held the wealth of an empire, he was forced to view the Taj Mahal from his prison tower. After the British discovered the site in the late 18th century the Taj Mahal became the ultimate place to visit for every traveler to India. Today the Taj Mahal attracts over 8 million tourists annually with most of them visiting during the cooler months of October, November, and February.

VIP EXPERIENCE TO AGRA AND TAJ MAHAL

There is only one way to really experience Taj Mahal like a world leader and that is through Micato Safaris. Micato has been creating private, bespoke journeys and taking travelers to India for more than 20 years. All of their excursions are accompanied by a highly-trained Indian Tour Director, someone deeply knowledgeable about the land and its customs and dialects, not to mention its lesser-visited wonders, including unique encounters with locals. Make sure to request the amazing Hem Singh and if you are lucky to get him as your guide on your journey through India, you will have an experience like never before. Fully escorted and all-inclusive India packages start at \$13,650 per person.

WHERE TO STAY

The Oberoi Amarvilas, Agra enjoys a spectacular position among all hotels in Agra, located just 2,000 feet from the iconic Taj Mahal. Each of their rooms offers dramatic views of this ancient monument while the stunning design and the layout of the resort pay homage to its Mughal splendor. Rooms start at \$650 to \$15,000 for the Kohinoor Suite.