

DESTINATIONS

EXPLORING INDIA



Bespoke itineraries and a familial approach combine to show travelers a more intimate side of India.

BY LINDSAY LAMBERT DAY

Home to a staggering 1.36 billion people, India is constantly in motion, a place where sound never stops. Exploring the vast and populous country can feel overwhelming, but, with its bespoke itineraries, VIP access to iconic historical sites, and its familial approach to travel, **Micato** makes traveling through India an intimate and highly personalized experience. We found that out on our own custom journey to some of North India's most iconic and sacred sites.

UDAIPUR, India's "City of Lakes," is a major tourist attraction, known for its history, culture, lakes and palaces. Shown here is the City Palace, which is set on the banks of the iconic Lake Pichola.

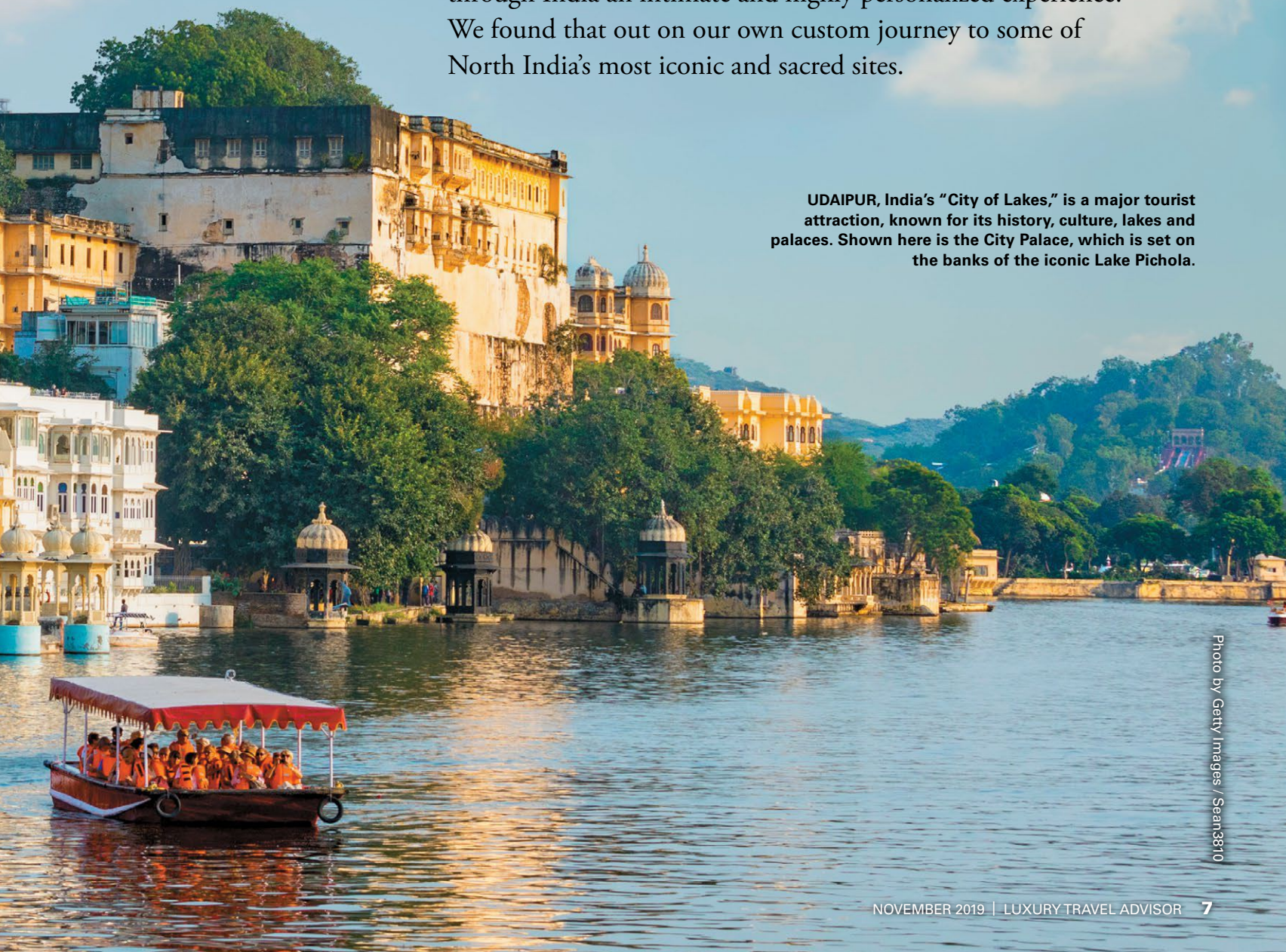


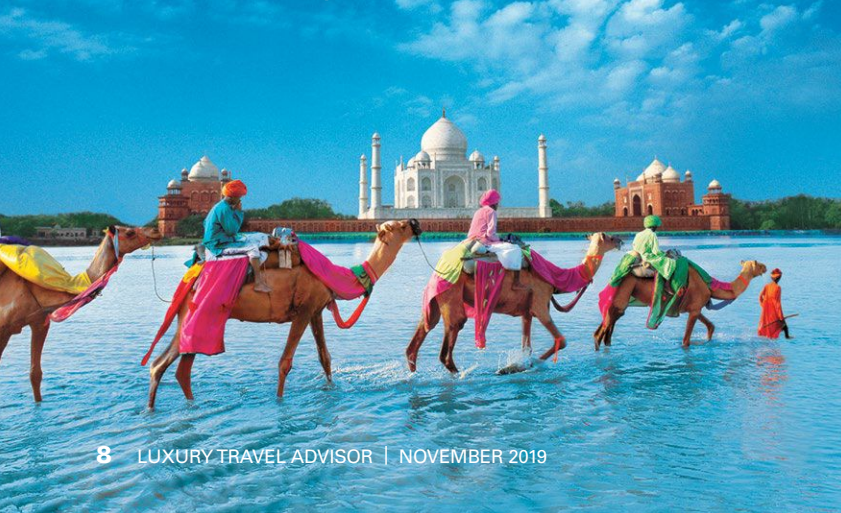
Photo by Getty Images / Sean3810

THE OBEROI NEW DELHI's Kohinoor Suite (here) has 3,500 square feet of space and its bathroom comes with a full length enamel bathtub.

HUMAYUN'S TOMB (below), a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is the tomb of Mughal emperor Humayun, built in 1560s in New Delhi.



THE TAJ MAHAL on the banks of River Yamuna in Agra is a significant Indian landmark, which was built by the order of Mughal emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his wife, Mumtaz Mahal.



Pre-departure

Our India journey began several weeks prior to our March departure from the U.S. After narrowing our focus to North India, we consulted with Marion Miller, director, Micato Safaris Bespoke Collection India, to create an itinerary that hit all the region's can't-miss highlights. In the weeks that followed, we received several care packages from Micato, containing everything from helpful trip-planning materials to a Bollywood DVD.

DAYS 1-3

Delhi

After clearing immigration in Delhi, we were greeted by a Micato staffer and shown to a waiting car for the late-night drive to **The Oberoi, New Delhi**. Memorable Moment: Our travel fatigue faded when we found a small welcome gift and note from Micato perched on our pillow.

Over lunch the next day at the hotel's 360° restaurant, we met Hem Singh, our guide and Micato's senior travel director. Singh, who has escorted high-profile Micato guests such as Hillary Clinton in India, not only took care of logistics throughout our trip (including tipping), but he also beautifully shared his encyclopedic knowledge of Indian history and culture at every turn. After lunch, we set out to explore the city, with stops including Jama Masjid (India's largest mosque) and a walk and rickshaw ride through the jam-packed, narrow *galis*, or lanes, of Old Delhi, where vendors sell everything from street food to smartphones to brilliantly colored bangles. Nice Touch: Back at the Oberoi that evening, to help us get better acquainted with India's cuisine, we were treated to a private cooking lesson in the kitchen at the elegant Omya restaurant before eating dinner.

The rest of our time in Delhi brought visits to stunning sites, such as Humayun's Tomb, India

Gate and Gandhi Smriti, the former private home turned museum where Mahatma Gandhi lived out the final 144 days of his life and was assassinated in 1948. A highlight of our time in Delhi was a visit to one of the city's *gurdwaras*, or Sikh temples. Meaningful Moment: Volunteers welcomed us into the temple's massive kitchen, where we joined others in flipping *chapati*, or Indian flat breads, on a giant grill. We were also invited into the gurdwara's large *langar* hall to serve free, homemade food to hundreds of congregants — a touching display of community.

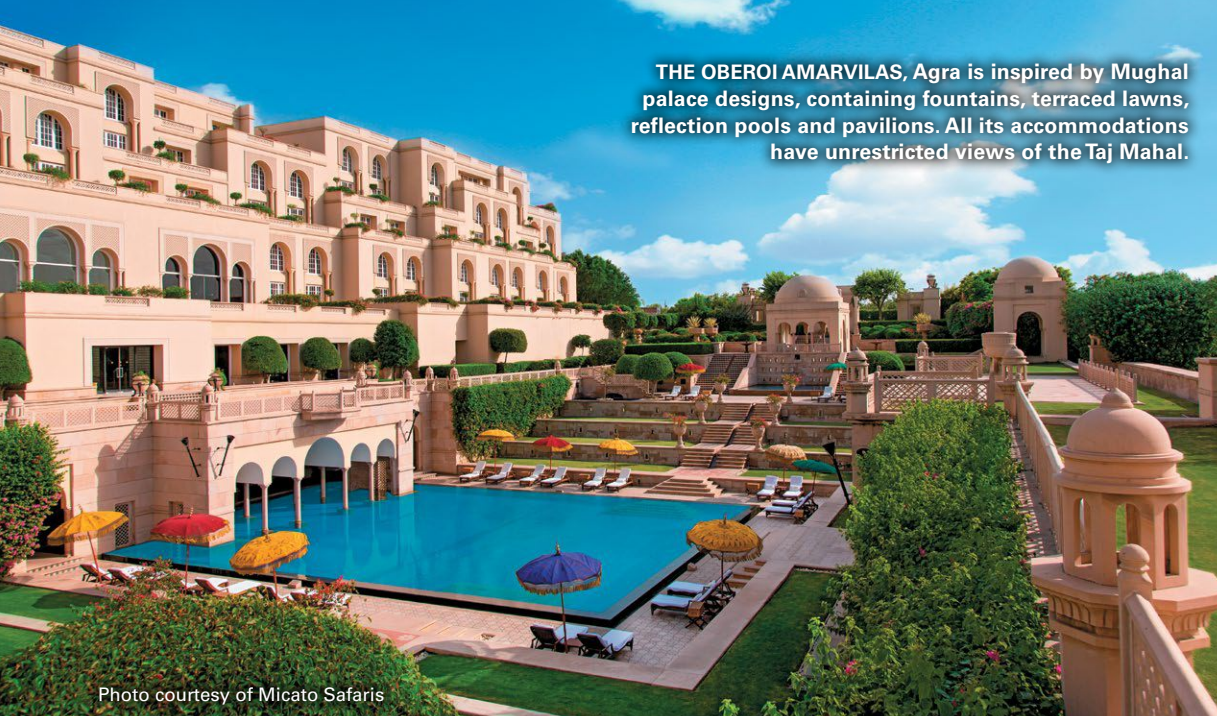
Days 4-5

Agra

From Delhi, we rode with Singh and our driver, Darmender, to Agra, where we checked in to a spacious suite at **The Oberoi Amarvilas, Agra**. Magic Moment: After showing us to the suite, a hotel staffer slowly pulled back its drapes to reveal a stunning first look at the Taj Mahal. A sunset visit to the legendary landmark followed. Note that, while a sunrise visit was scheduled for the next day, we asked to skip it and catch up on our sleep, feeling certain that the sunset experience couldn't possibly be topped.

Although the Taj Mahal is Agra's most famous landmark, there's plenty more to enjoy there. We enjoyed exploring Agra Fort's resplendent architecture, and visiting with artisans in town who carry on centuries' worth of tradition through their skillful work with marble, jewelry and more.

VIP Access: While visiting the storied Kohinoor Jewellers, Ruchira Mathur, the brand's chief jewelry designer, invited us inside its heavily secured workshop. There, highly skilled technicians use 3D-printed molds designed digitally on-site to bring Mathur's exquisite designs — featuring diamonds, sapphires and other precious gems — to life. Mathur's father and Kohinoor's current



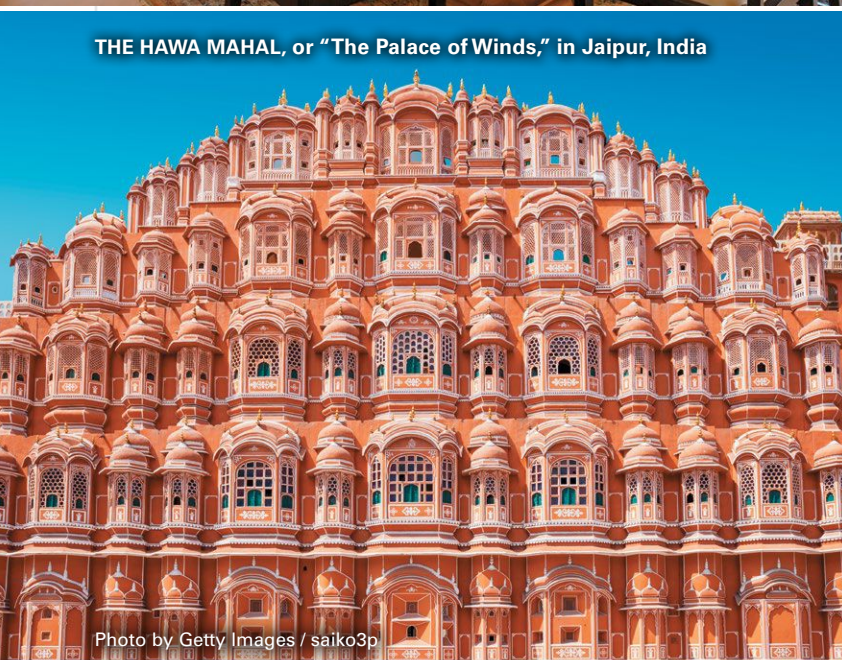
THE OBEROI AMARVILAS, Agra is inspired by Mughal palace designs, containing fountains, terraced lawns, reflection pools and pavilions. All its accommodations have unrestricted views of the Taj Mahal.

Photo courtesy of Micato Safaris



THE OBEROI, RAJVILAS in Jaipur is spread over 32 acres of landscaped gardens. Shown here is the dining room of the hotel's Kohinoor Villa.

Photo courtesy of Micato Safaris



THE HAWA MAHAL, or "The Palace of Winds," in Jaipur, India

Photo by Getty Images / saiko3p

Rajvilas, Jaipur, we set out to explore the city's historic sites, including the Amber Fort, Hawa Mahal, and City Palace. Nice Touch: At the City Palace, Singh whisked us through a restricted door for a peek inside one of the royal family's private drawing rooms. We then emerged onto a restricted rooftop terrace, where palace staff poured us refreshing glasses of cold Champagne as we savored city views.

Shopping is a must in Jaipur, which is known for its jewelry and textiles, among other products. So, save room in your suitcase for new leather slippers, glass bangles and other purchases you're bound to pick up in the city's bazaar. One of the best places in town to shop for block-print pajamas, wraps and more is Heritage Textiles. Personal Touch: During our own visit to Heritage Textiles, Singh surprised us by suggesting we pick something to take home — a special gift from our gracious hosts.

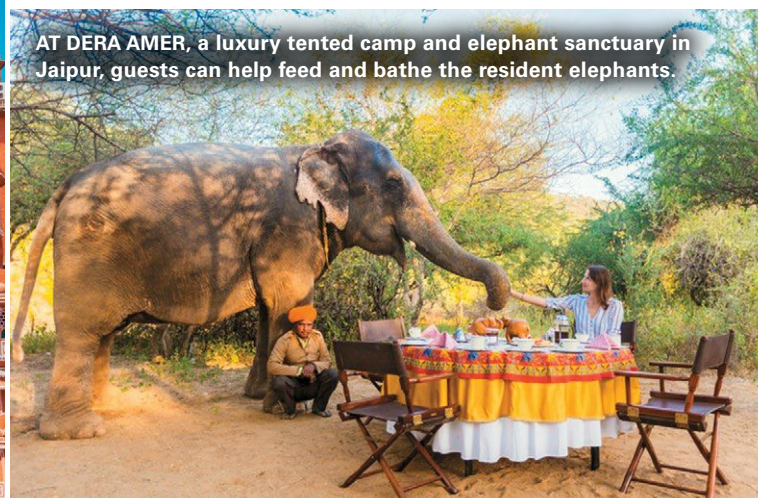
A can't-miss experience in Jaipur came later that evening with a visit to **Dera Amer**, a luxury tented camp and elephant sanctuary just outside town. There, owner and founder Udaijit Singh accompanied us on a walk around the property alongside one of its three resident rescue elephants, 49-year-old Laxmi. (Rides are strictly off-limits, but guests can help feed and bathe the gentle giants.) After feeding Laxmi more

owner Ghanshyam Gopal Mathur also gave us a private tour of his family's priceless collection of embroidered tapestries by artist Padmashri Shams.

We worked up an appetite in Agra, and we enjoyed two of our favorite meals here: A traditional Indian-style *thali* at The Oberoi Amarvilas' Esphahan, and a casual feast at Peshawri, located inside the **ITC Mughal, a Luxury Collection Hotel, Agra**.

Days 6-8 Jaipur

A nearly five-hour drive from Agra took us on to Jaipur (nicknamed "the Pink City"), the busiest stop on our schedule. After freshening up in our luxury tent at **The Oberoi**



AT DERA AMER, a luxury tented camp and elephant sanctuary in Jaipur, guests can help feed and bathe the resident elephants.

Photo courtesy of Dera Amer

than a dozen bananas, we sipped cocktails by a campfire and sat down for our own Indian feast under the stars before heading back to our hotel.

While Jaipur's frenetic atmosphere is thrilling, getting out of town brings a welcome change of pace. We began our final day in Jaipur with a pre-dawn drive to the countryside for a sunrise hot-air balloon ride, floating silently over farms and tiny villages. The adventure continued after landing near Samode, where we took a jeep safari through the village's dusty streets, stopping along the way to greet friendly, local farmers. Local Connection: We paid an afternoon visit to Samode's main school, which Micato supports with guests' donations. The school's young students showed us around their classrooms and asked us to take their picture. (We did, and Singh had framed copies delivered to the school after we departed.) Waving goodbye, we headed to Samode Palace, a lavish former fort and private manor turned luxury hotel, for a relaxing lunch.

Welcome R&R: Simply put, traveling around India can be exhausting. An Oberoi Signature Massage at the Rajvilas' tranquil spa was just what we needed to get our second wind halfway through our trip.

Days 9-10 Udaipur

Bidding farewell to Jaipur, we drove to our next destination, Udaipur, nicknamed the Venice



Photo by Lindsay Lambert Day

IN DADAR, Mumbai's biggest flower market sells a variety of colorful, fresh flowers.

Days 11-12 Mumbai

A short flight from Udaipur took us to Mumbai, the final stop on our India itinerary. After checking in to **The Oberoi, Mumbai**, we joined a local guide for an introductory tour of the city, with stops including the famous Gateway of India and the 19th-century Victoria Terminus, whose design was inspired by London's St. Pancras Station. That evening, we reminisced over a meal of modern Indian cuisine, prepared by Michelin-star chef Vineet Bhatia, at Ziya, the see-and-be-seen restaurant inside The Oberoi, Mumbai.

Eager to make every minute of our last day in India count, we kicked it off with a pre-dawn walking tour that highlights the city's important morning rituals, from the delivery of newspapers to the opening of its major flower and produce markets. Our tour concluded at Church Gate Station, where we watched in awe as Mumbai's famous *dabbawallahs* — members of the Mumbai Tiffin Box Supplier's Association — prepared to deliver thousands of lunch boxes to workers in nearby office towers using a nearly failsafe, 127-year-old system comprising bicycles, carts, and symbol-based labels. Like India itself, the *dabbawallahs'* system is a marvelous marriage of old and new — something that has to be seen to be believed. ■

of the East for its breathtaking system of lakes. Upon arriving at **The Oberoi Udaivilas, Udaipur**, the hotel's staff welcomed us with dancers, music and a shower of fragrant flower petals. Within minutes, we were resting next to our suite's semi-private pool, enjoying beautiful views of Lake Pichola just beyond it. Nice Touch: As the sun began to set on our first evening in Udaipur, we climbed on board our own private boat for a cruise around Lake Pichola, complete with a full tea service.

After a packed few days in Jaipur, we welcomed Udaipur's slower pace — in particular, wandering between the count-

less rooms of its City Palace, and visiting its 10th-century temples. While each meal of our India journey was memorable, an al fresco lunch overlooking the pool at **Raas Devigarh** — an 18th-century palace-turned-chic boutique hotel in the Aravalli Hills — ranked among our favorites. Wow-worthy Moment: When it comes to the ultimate India VIP experience, nothing topped being surprised with a visit to the Oberoi family's private, hilltop home overlooking Udaipur. We arrived by private car at the estate, where chefs and staff from The Oberoi Udaivilas treated us to a beautiful meal, served with Champagne on the estate's breezy, emerald lawn.

Photos below courtesy of Micato Safaris

THE OBEROI UDAIVILAS's Premier Rooms with Semi Private Pool have sweeping lake views.



THE OBEROI MUMBAI's Executive Suite (here) has 800 square feet of space and affords panoramic views of the city.

