



Bespoke INDIA

By Hilary Nangle

Cast aside any singular vision of India. This jeweled pendant, dangling between the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal is hot and steamy, dry and dusty, even cool and refreshing. It's also staggeringly crowded and yet blissfully spiritual, steeped in history but technologically advanced. The land of Rudyard Kipling, Mohandas Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Salman Rushdie and Deepak Chopra is a singsong lullaby that soothes the soul, awakens the senses and fires the imagination.

"India is the cradle of human race, the birthplace of human speech, the mother of history, the grandmother of legend, and the great grandmother of tradition," Mark Twain wrote. "Nothing has been left undone, either by man or nature, to make India the most extraordinary country that the Sun visits on his round."

With a population exceeding 1.25 billion on a landmass that sprawls from the Indian Ocean to the Himalayan peaks, simply navigating this extraordinary landscape requires prioritizing. Trust specialist luxury outfitter Micato India to craft a bespoke itinerary that leaves nothing undone, one that savors cultural virtues and delves into millennia-old traditions, elevates experiences with personalized extras, pampers with five-star hotels offering full-service spas and 24-hour butlers, and seals it with abracadabra guides who make every wish come true, from teeing off at an exclusive private club to dining in a private palace.



Delhi, Old and New

Awaken amidst the colonial grandeur of Delhi's The Imperial Hotel to the cacophony that is India: the staggeringly dissonant stimuli that confuse and confound, excite and exhilarate. Exotic yet enticing aromas and flavors, tumultuous sounds and arresting eye candy abound. More than 450 years of Hindu, Muslim, Mughal, and British rule have peppered India's capital with a dizzyingly eclectic mix of temples, mosques, forts and tombs juxtaposed with British pomp and circumstance, the stiff-upper-lip government buildings and monuments designed by classical architects Lutyens and Baker in the early 1900s.

Dating from 1656, Jama Masjid, India's largest mosque, is capable of holding 25,000 worshippers in its grand courtyard. Don a wrap and remove shoes to whisper among worshippers in this intricately patterned red sandstone and white marble edifice, with its soaring minarets, onion domes and sculpted arches.

Outside, board a bicycle rickshaw through Chandni Chowk, the boisterous, three-centuries-old, densely populated, market heart of Old Delhi. Men push and beasts-of-burden haul laden carts, scooters and motorcycles shoot gaps between tuk-tuks and vehicles, pedestrians cross streets at will, and yet, there's calm and order in the chaos. Join the sea of people shopping the bazaars, where cheek-by-jowl vendors hawk conus and trinkets, fragrant flowers and spices, fresh fruits and dried nuts, gems and fabrics, tinsel and electronics.

Retreat from the madness to Humayun's Tomb, a blend of Persian and Mughal artistry and architecture built by the Mughal Emperor's widow in 1570. UNESCO awarded this geometric, wonder World Heritage status as the Indian sub-continent's first garden tomb, a style that culminated with the Taj Mahal.

Agra and the Taj

Just a half-day's journey from Delhi is Agra, which along with Jaipur make up India's famed Golden Triangle. Agra's masterpiece is the Taj Mahal, Shah Jahan's memorial to his favorite wife, Mumtaz Mahal, who died giving birth to their 14th child. Between 1631 and 1648, more than 20,000 laborers — stone-cutters, masons, carvers, inlayers, painters, dome builders, calligraphers, and others—gathered from throughout the empire to craft this stunning, white marble memorial, inlaying it with rubies, emeralds and other precious and semi-precious stones, and surrounding it with gardens, courtyards and waterways.

Instead of simply lazing on the balcony of your Oberoi Amanvilas suite, mesmerized by the play of sunlight and moonlight on this UNESCO World Heritage Site, don traditional yoga wear for a private session with a master in a garden overlooking the iconic mausoleum, during the glow of sunset. It's a memorable introduction to the architectural masterpiece, and sets the tone for an early morning visit.



In the Pink in Jaipur

Painted the color of hospitality for the 1876 visit by Queen Victoria and Edward, Prince of Wales, the Pink City of Jaipur is internationally renowned as a center for gem cutting and jewelry. It's equally famed as the capital of the Land of Kings, the northern state of Rajasthan. Although no longer officially recognized, the maharaja title is still honored, and Jaipur's City Palace remains the royal family's home.

There's no better person to reveal the 30-acre complex's secrets or explain its precious artifacts than Micato guide and Jaipur native Hem Singh. With his handbarb mustache, ivory jodhpurs, silk ascot, and red handkerchief rising from the pocket of his Nehru-collared vest, he cuts a distinguished profile. His intimate insider's tour concludes with the current maharaja's private residence in Chandra Mahal, the Palace of the Moon. A shopping expedition to Jaipur's Gem Palace for museum-quality jewelry and a session with a bespoke tailor provide the appropriate attire for a magical evening here.

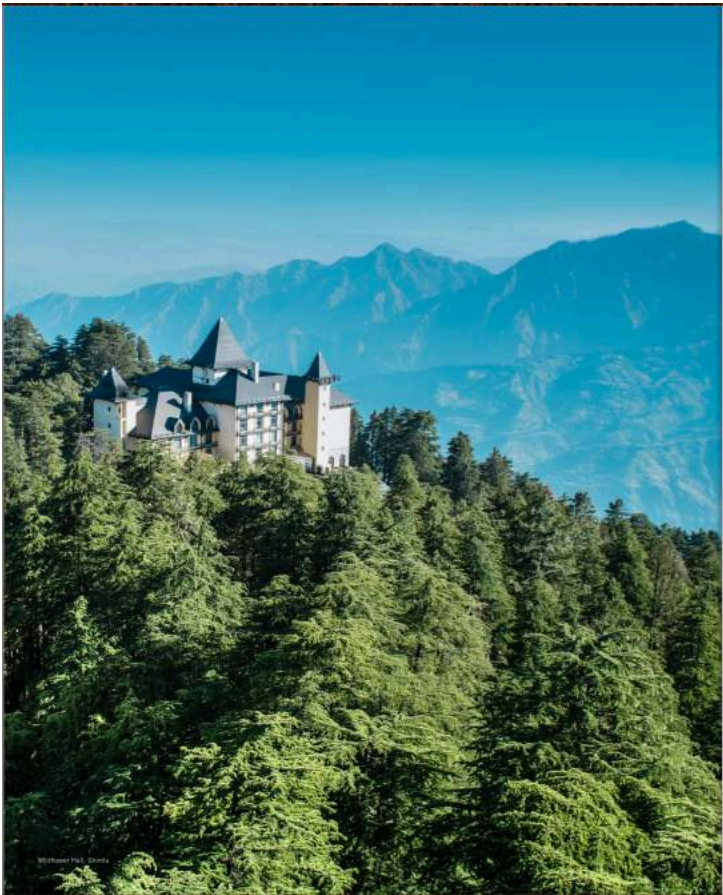
Seeking Health in Shimla

The daylong journey to Shimla, the capital of Himachal Pradesh, India's northernmost state, blends air travel with a geo-producing drive up, up, up a cliff-edged two-lane road

shared with trucks, pedestrians, monkeys, dogs, cows, and impatient drivers who beep and pass, threading the needle on hairpin corners. The calm at the end of this meekstron is Wildflower Hall, Shimla in the Himalayas, an Oberoi resort etched into the rugged Himalayan foothills. The resort houses the luxurious Spa Pavilion and Spa Suites that are tranquil havens to revitalize and experience a holistic wellness program.

Wildflower Hall originally served as the summer residence of Lord Kitchener of Khartoum, the Commander in Chief of the Indian Armed Forces, when Shimla was the official summer capital of the British Raj and the year-round army headquarters. The masterfully rebuilt hotel retains its colonial regality, fitting for a city studded with Tudor, Scottish Baronial, and Gothic architectural reminders of the era's grandeur.

The region remains a retreat from the cities, one prized for its pure mountain air and lush forests of pine, oak, cedar and mododendron. After a guided nature walk highlighting some of the wild and rare plants used in Ayurvedic medicine, the hotel's spa director, a Yogi Master, Reiki Master, and Ayurvedic practitioner, will recommend the ideal holistic treatment to usher in a state of mindfulness and health.



Sunset in Mumbai

After Shimla, Mumbai, the country's financial center, shocks the system. Depart The Oberoi Mumbai in predawn darkness for a guided immersion into the support system that makes this city tick. Pad through the fish auction on the Sassoon Decks; watch illiterate workers sort newspapers for bicycle delivery; inhale deeply at the flower market; browse the vendor stalls at Crawford Market; visit the Dhobi Ghat traditional outdoor laundry; savor afternoon tea at the Sea Lounge; in the historical Taj Mahal Palace and marvel the efficiency of the dabba-wallas, whose lunchbox delivery system is so precise that Harvard Business School has studied it.

In the evening, before dining on twice Michelin-starred Chef Vivek Bhatia's contemporary Indian menu at Zoya, mosey to the seawall. It's a Mumbai tradition to gather here watching the fiery sun finish its round and sink into the endless blue sea, as the heat of day cedes to the star-spangled promise of the morrow.