

ALL ABOARD

WHEN THE BRITISH RAJ CAME TO INDIA, THEY BROUGHT THE RAILWAYS: A NOVEL MODE OF LUXURY TRAVEL THAT WON OVER THE MAHARAJAS' PAMPERED HEARTS. THE ROMANCE OF RAIL TRAVEL HAS RETURNED WITH THE MAHARAJAS' EXPRESS, A GRAND RAILWAY TOUR THAT REVIVES THE EXTRAVAGANCE OF INDIA'S LEGENDARY RULERS

WORDS | JESSICA GLIDDON



A red carpet is stretched upon the ground, sprinkled with flower petals. Turbaned attendants bow in greeting, bright in their gold and ruby uniforms. Girls in richly-coloured saris garnish their guests with garlands. A small brass band plays as dancers with jingling skirts sway softly, their nose-rings glinting. It's a scene that could be straight out of the 16th Century miniature paintings decorating Rajasthan's royal forts – but this is happening today, as a welcome for the passengers of the Maharajas' Express, India's most famous luxury train.

The Maharajas always had a passion for travelling in style. Their elephants carried thrones carved with peacocks and lions, but it was trains that brought a new level of colonial grandeur to the Maharajas' courts. They outfitted their carriages with gold and ivory, teak and mahogany. In Gwalior, the Maharaja set his dining table with a model train made of silver, which chugged around the table serving liqueurs and cigars to his guests.

With India's independence, the Maharajas lost their titles and much of their fortunes. Many of the great palatial trains were

decommissioned, but a few were retained and refitted, now forming part of India's fleet of luxury trains.

At almost a kilometre long (which makes things difficult when you're trying to get to the dining car in a hurry), the Maharajas' Express takes 84 passengers and has two dining cars, two lounges and a presidential suite. With the reds used in the Mayur Mahal dining car and the emerald and slate tiling in the Rang Mahal restaurant, the Maharajas' Express evokes the grand days of train travel, with wood panelled interiors, brass fixtures and plush seating. ➔



Onboard the train, it's as though the days of the Maharajas never ended. The cabins feature ensuite bathrooms and five star details such as fresh chocolates placed on the bed each night. The staff treats guests like royalty, whether it is rolling out a red carpet on a train platform filled with cows and children, or fetching champagne in the middle of the night.

Every time we walk down the passageway, Dash (short for Dashrath), our loyal valet, leaps out to check that we are happy, check whether we need some coffee or tea, and see if we are aware of the next item on the programme. We are perpetually late, to his great distress.

As the train departs Delhi in the evening, guests are greeted with a flurry of flowers before being invited to a glittering *thali* banquet, the chef personally visiting each table. Our travelling companions are an affluent bunch, mostly from the US and Europe, including a pair of Los Angeles lawyers, a Finnish couple working for Nokia and an Australian businessman and his wife.

From the regal spaces to the international passengers, it's reminiscent of a journey on the Orient Express. We only hope there'll be no Agatha Christie-style intrigue on our seven-night journey across northern India.

As we settle into our suite, we watch the lights of villages flit by outside, contemplating how the Maharajas must have felt, surveying their empires from their carriages.

As the train rolls into Agra, our first morning begins shrouded in mist. Village fires burn through the early morning haze as children and dogs run between the strings of lights still dangling from Diwali. The houses, though simple, are neat, square concrete structures, fringed with greenery. From our train car, we sit sipping coffee in the early morning as our valets stand by, carefully watching over their brood of foreign royalty.

The journey starts with an early morning venture to one of the most visited monuments in the world, the Taj Mahal. This opulent mausoleum built by Shah Jahan in tribute to his wife is a perfect introduction to the secret lives of the early Maharajahs, who in the 15th and 16th Centuries began the tradition of opulence that came to inform the later excess of those who ruled during the British Raj.

The Agra Fort displays many elements common throughout many of Rajasthan's forts. The early Maharajas were mostly ⇒



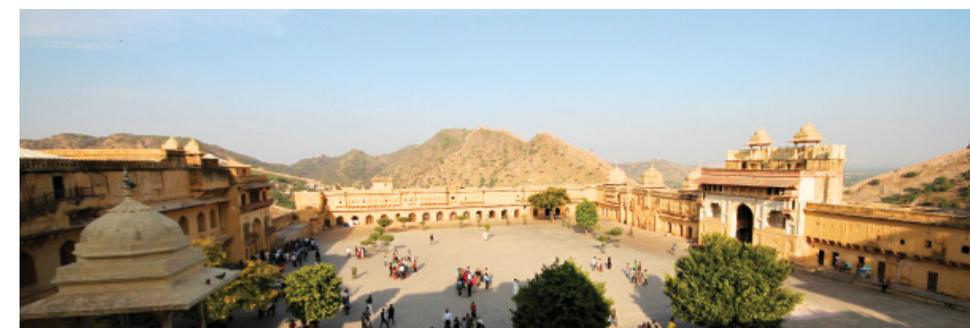
PREVIOUS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: The Taj Mahal became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1983; riding elephants up to Agra Fort; all aboard the Maharajas' Express; detail of royal Indian architecture; dancing girls welcome guests onboard the train.

FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Agra Fort; elephants wearing elaborate costumes; the Lake Palace in Udaipur; the dining car onboard the Maharajas' Express; colourful local architecture.

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Two women walking in the Amber Fort; Junagarh Fort in Bikaner; a traditional Rajasthani band welcomes train guests; Amber Fort in Jaipur; peacocks are a symbol of Indian royalty.



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Mogul, having conquered India through marriage. They left traces of Islam in the architecture and culture of the fabled northern lands, combining indigenous Hindu elements, such as lotuses and animal motifs, with the Islamic influences brought with them from Central Asia.

Off the train, we explore city streets in a bus, where our guide, fantastically named Prince, animatedly explains the history of each palace and fort we pass by.

"It is time for the driver to press the magic button!" Prince insists each time the giant vehicle squeezes through a muddy street littered with cart sellers and bored cows.

In Jaipur, a boy wearing eyeliner greets our train, madly prancing in a rainbow-coloured horse costume. At each station we are received with traditional dances and costumes of the region. The girls carrying our flower necklaces are heavily decorated with beads and wear sheer veils over silver-laden heads.

Centuries, was a handsome moustachioed fellow famous for his diplomacy during WWI. He was also a great enthusiast of railways. By the end of 1935 he had created a rail network over 1,000 miles long across Bikaner.

The Maharaja was also a hunting fan. The royals and the British wiped out a great deal of India's tiger population; today much of the former royal hunting grounds have been turned into reserves. One of these is Ranthambore National Park, where we take an early morning safari in search of one of the park's thirty-odd remaining tigers. But all we see are deer and peacocks.

Bikaner is home to the sumptuous Gajner Palace with rouge walls picturesquely located by a lake. Its vine-draped courtyard offers a soothing introduction to the wild beauty of Rajasthan's Thar Desert. Leaving the palace, we pass the tall smokestacks of brick-makers, rising eerily out of the desert into a slate blue sky with a vivid orange sun.

Onboard the train, it's as though the days of the Maharajas never ended

Jaipur's Amber Fort is immense, cast in the Indian sun's otherworldly glow. The fort features elaborate glass Islamic motifs and sandalwood doors inlaid with ivory. Jaipur is not only the home of ancient glamour. The city became famous through Maharani Gayatri Devi, the third wife of Maharaja Man Singh II, who became an object of global adoration for both her incredible skills as a polo player and her beauty, which earned her a place among *Vogue's* most beautiful women.

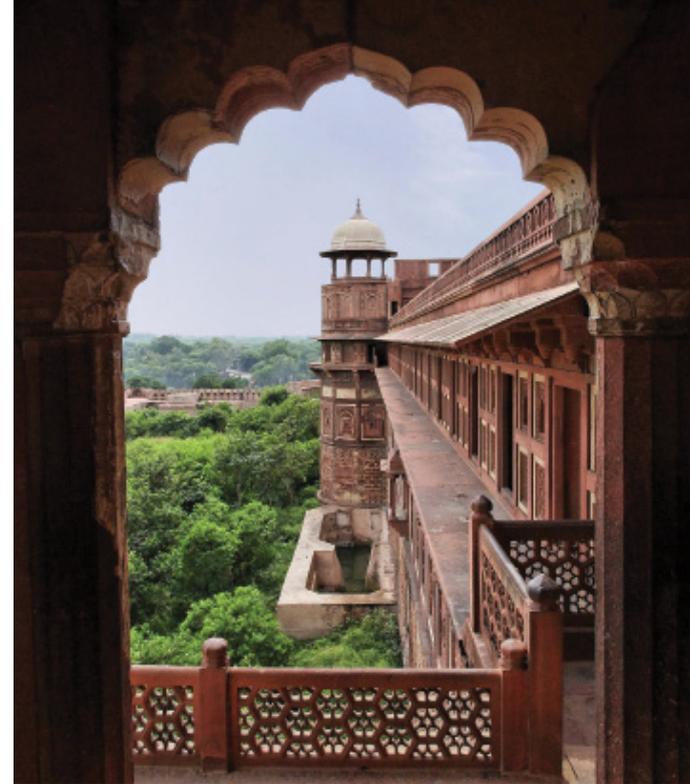
We arrive at the Jal Mahal Palace in the evening, after emerging from the pink city's streets, which are filled with scrambling monkeys and shops brimming with trinkets. Our red carpet is flanked with elephants painted in fluorescent patterns and draped in sparkling cloths. Here we get a taste of Maharani Devi's favourite pastime: polo. Most of our attempts to hit the ball are amusingly pathetic; at one point an elephant picks up the ball and carries it to the goal himself.

The next day, the train rolls into Bikaner, where we tour the Junagarh Fort, one of the best preserved in India as it's still owned by the royal family. Knitted with twisting vines, the sumptuous gold ceiling looks as if it has not been touched by time. Maharaja Ganga Singh, who ruled during the late 19th and early 20th

The scene could be straight out of a tourist brochure: colourfully dressed villagers wave at us as we pass, and our arrival to our desert dinner is by wooden cart, pulled by camels draped in tribal blankets. Traditional dances are performed by candlelight: the eerie music complemented by the swish and sway of the dancing Kalbeliyas and Langaas tribal girls. All the comforts of the Maharajahs' Express, which has been sneakily following our bus, await on the other side of the dunes.

In the morning we peer curiously over our breakfast, complete with golden cutlery and plates embossed with the letter "M", at the hulking blue bodies of India's passenger trains. Girls in orange and green saris peer out between the window bars, watching us inquisitively. This is how the Maharajas must have felt gazing at their subjects passing by, slightly bemused in their rolling palaces.

In Jodhpur, the Maharajah still lives in the Umaid Bhawan Palace, the world's second largest private residence. The romance of the city is palpable, from the wedding cake gables, latticed windows and rotund turrets of the Mehrangarh Fort, to the sky blue colour of the city spread out below, painted to indicate that the high Indian caste, Brahmin, reside here.



Contemporary royalty, at least in the form of celebrities, are no strangers to the fort. Elizabeth Hurley and Arun Nayar were married here, despite Indian astrologers predicting a bad match: indeed the pair are now divorced.

Our guide, Thitu, looks a bit like Anil Kapoor of *Slumdog Millionaire* with his lush moustache and diamond studs. He once took Paul McCartney on a tour. Below the fort, it's wedding season. Strains of a sitar are mixed with blasting Bollywood tunes. "It's like theatre!" one of the German guests exclaims.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: View of one of the towers of Agra Fort from an archway; Rajasthani dancers of the desert barbeque in Bikaner; sumptuous banquet laid out on the edge of the Thar Desert; elephant polo is the pastime of Indian kings; Jai Mahal Palace, a Taj hotel.



Our next destination is Udaipur, the Venice of the East. The Fateh Prakash Palace is grand, with the large emblem of the golden sun king shining off the front of the building. But the greatest distraction here is not the soaring cupolas or the vivid miniature painting collection, but rather the Lake Palace, floating like a mirage. After another sumptuous buffet brimming with *paneer tikka*, *adraki gobi* and piles of *naan*, we lounge lazily on a palace window seat, gazing over the blue waters.

On our last day, we are treated to a private reception from the Balasinor royal family in Gujarat. Our hosts, prince and princess Nawabzada Sultan Salauddinkhan Babi and Aaliya Sultana Babi (the prince recently became the star of a reality TV show), afford us a royal audience while we watch dancing and feast on the Sultana's home recipes.

The Balasinor royal line is unique in that it is one of a very few Muslim ruling families left in India. Their palace burned in the 1950s, and the family converted a neighbouring palace into a hotel.

One of the world's most significant fossil finds was on the family's former property, and Princess Aaliya has made it her personal mission to protect the fossils. While the family's priority is hospitality, the princess explains the villagers still respect them as royalty.

When we return to our train carriages we find saris and *sherwanis* laid out on our beds for our "Indian Night". Perhaps the most extraordinary thing about this journey is the atmosphere created when you spend a week with the same group of people. We spend our last night dancing, wondering if the Maharajas enjoyed such merriment. With the orange sun softly setting behind the green tapestry of the Indian countryside, drinks in hand, we truly feel like the new Indian royalty. ☺

EXPERIENCE INDIA

FOR FEASTING: THE OUDH

There's no better start to your trip than with a royal meal at The Oudh at the Ashok Hotel in Delhi. The heavy dishes are rich with pungent spices and mouth-scintillating flavours: the *mutter masala* is thick and gorgeous, the chutney-stuffed paneer melts in your mouth in a tingly tangy sauce, all meals served in a palatial atmosphere with a band of Ghazal musicians playing haunting tunes in the background.

WWW.THEASHOK.COM

FOR CRAFTS: AKBAR INTERNATIONAL

Pietra dura or marble inlay, which decorates the Taj Mahal, is considered to be one of the finest Indian crafts. The same Agra family has been working with inlay for generations; they even use the same secret glue that was used on the Taj Mahal. The most detailed pieces can take months to make and include precious stones such as malachite, jasper and sapphire.

WWW.AKBARINTERNATIONAL.COM

FOR THE JOURNEY: THE MAHARAJAHS' EXPRESS

The Maharajas' Express runs five different journeys through India, generally focused on the Rajasthan region. Other parts of India are covered through the other trains offered by the Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation (IRCTC): the Palace on Wheels, the Golden Chariot, the Deccan Odyssey and the Royal Rajasthan on Wheels.

WWW.IRCTC.COM

WITH ETIHAD AIRWAYS

Etihad Airways flies between Abu Dhabi and New Delhi five times per week.

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