

Transcendent **train travel**

You might find more famous trains elsewhere, but for the last four years consecutively the *Maharajas' Express* has been voted as the planet's best train journey at the World Travel Awards. But what makes it so special? And how can it function so smoothly in a country as colourful and chaotic as India?

BY JAMIE LAFFERTY



I HAVE always loved Indian-English and the way it clings to formality, dredging up archaic verbs and half-forgotten idioms. Indians don't argue, they quarrel; they don't think someone is nuts, but that they 'have nuts in their belfry'. It is a dialect that bathes in hyperbole, whether that's a best exotic hotel or "the most auspicious cabins and modern facilities" of a train.

That was how the rooms were described over the tannoy the night we boarded in New Delhi, before the same voice added: "Welcome aboard to have a delightful experience on the famous *Maharajas' Express*."

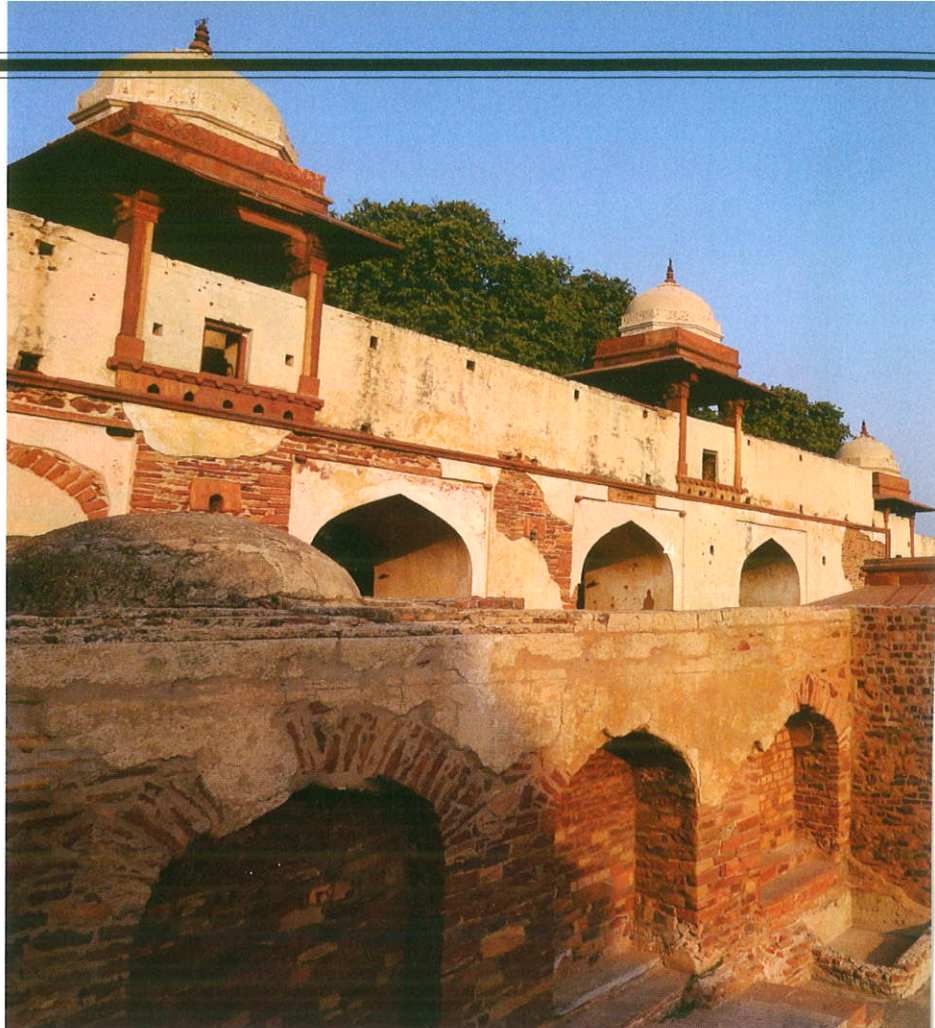
I was on-board for the Indian Panorama programme, an itinerary that takes eight days and seven nights to travel around 1500km of northern India, but which is really a journey through time.

We left New Delhi in the 21st century, then arrived in Jaipur in the 18th. We would go to Nepal with the Mughals, then to India with the British. We breakfasted before visiting a Buddhist monument, then got back for dinner after watching a Hindu ceremony.

In between times, as the train travelled its long and occasionally bumpy route, it was hard to tell exactly when we were,

alone where. For many people in rural India – those in the fields with ox-drawn ploughs; the peasants arranging dried sticks of cow dung for fuel – life has surely not altered much in several centuries.

Watching those strangely familiar pastoral scenes from my train window, I felt oddly disconnected, as though none of it is actually out there, just a few metres away, but instead part of some big budget documentary aimed at showing foreign passengers how life used to be. On high ridges on the horizon I would see crumbling forts, the names of which I would never know, and below them yawning, untouched meadows. Again and again I struggled to believe that this vast, seemingly empty land was the same country whose population is now thought to exceed 1.2 billion.

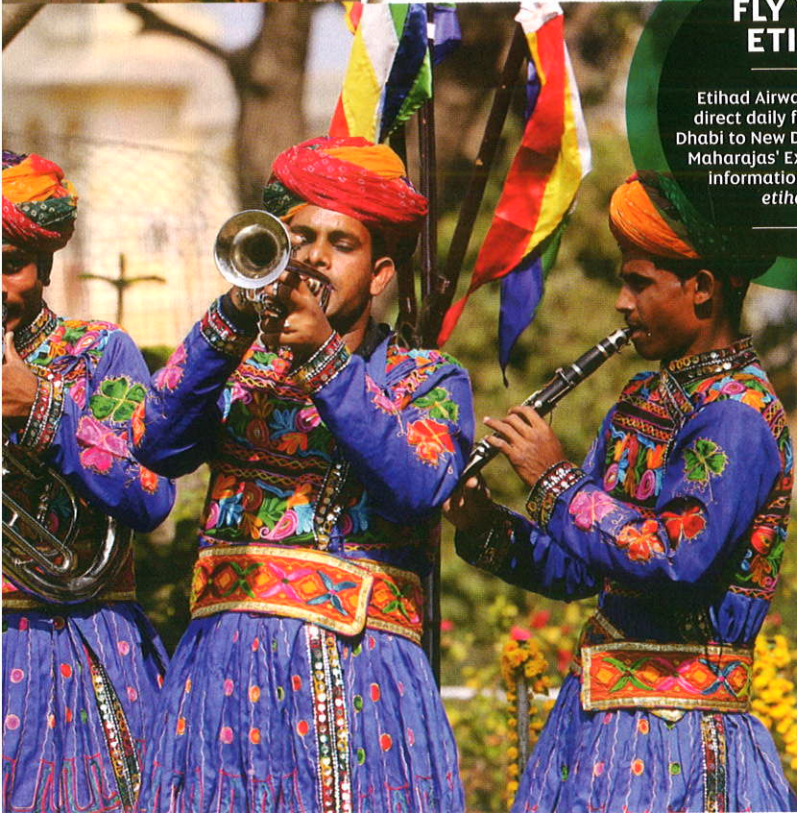


It felt like we were quite literally being treated like royalty, invited to witness these exoticisms and applaud politely while waiters solemnly delivered more canapés.



OPENING PAGE: The spectacular Taj Mahal reflects in the waters of the Yamuna River; Om Prakash welcomes guests back to the *Maharajas' Express*.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The red ruins of Fatehpur Sikri; a design detail in Jaipur's Royal Palace; a colourful band play for train guests; a typically sumptuous meal served onboard by the culinary team.



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Etihad Airways offers three direct daily flights from Abu Dhabi to New Delhi, home of the *Maharajas' Express*. For more information, please visit etihad.com

Few of that gargantuan number have travelled India in the same manner as the 40 or so passengers of the *Maharajas' Express*. Despite stiff competition from more famous trains, The *Maharajas'* has, for the last four years consecutively, been voted Leading Luxury Train at the World Travel Awards, leaving the likes of the *Orient Express* and the *Blue Train* in its wake, along with several would-be rival luxury trains in India.

The excellence of the food and the diversity of the itineraries are undoubtedly factors in this success, but ultimately it can be attributed to the wonderful staff, whose dedication to their guests fits in that uneasy intersection of a Venn diagram between hospitality, servility and efficiency. Each carriage is assigned a butler in a flamboyant turban and neat yellow blazer, men who seem to possess an ability to appear out of nowhere to instantly eradicate any minor inconvenience.

But they are just the most conspicuous cogs in a marvellous machine, one which – once you factor in all the butlers, bosses, waiters, chefs, barmen, supervisors, planners and engineers – sees the staff comfortably outnumbering the passengers.

The level of coordination required to make the journey a success seemed miraculous to me, especially in a country as colourful and chaotic as India. When we arrived in the stations, actual red carpets were rolled out for us, the platforms were decked out in fiery flowers, and bands noisily heralded our arrival with horns the size of 10-year-old boys. Almost every time we stopped we were presented with a necklace or scarf, a bright *tilaka* daubed on our foreheads. We got a lot of attention.

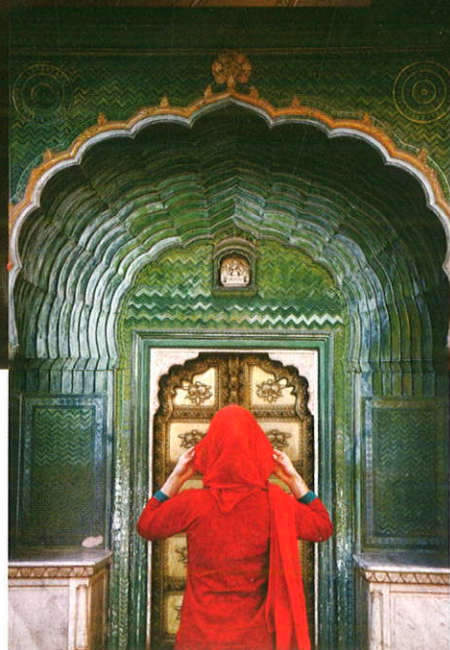
Yet station life didn't stop as we disembarked: the goats kept butting each other, the tannoy kept babbling away, the hawkers kept on hawking. The ceaseless bustle seemed largely uninterrupted by the train, save for those locals with camera phones, snapping away in case we happened to be famous.

The first stop was pink city of Jaipur and it set the tone for the week on-board. We were whisked through the bedlam of the station and onto an air-conditioned coach to navigate roads filled with bikes and rickshaws and cars and buses and horses and camels and people – so many people.

We battled our way out to the mighty 16th-century Amber Fort, which dominates a hillside just outside Jaipur, and from there we were taken to the Royal Palace, where another band played us in and women in garish saris pelted us with flower petals. When we walked out into the immaculate garden in the heart of the palace we were met with painted elephants, ▶



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Flowers flutter down at Jaipur's Royal Palace; an ornate door at Jaipur's City Palace; Jal Mahal, the Water Palace; pilgrims gather on the banks of the holy Ganges River in Varanasi; a flower girl plies her trade by the sacred Ganges.

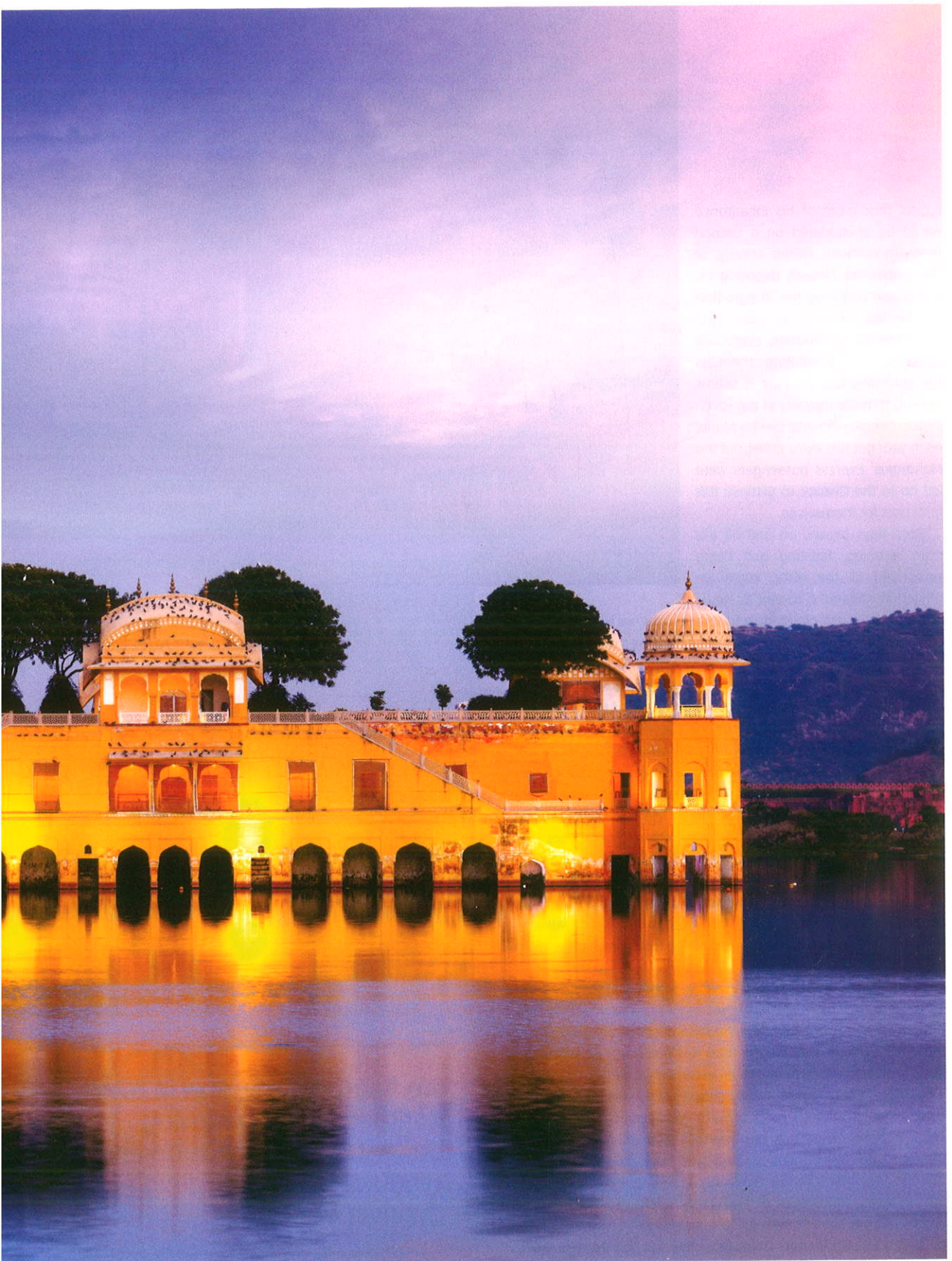


more camels, and men in ceremonial uniforms on horseback. It felt like we were quite literally being treated like royalty, invited to witness these exoticisms and applaud politely while waiters solemnly delivered more canapés.

As early as the fourth day we were in Agra, home of the Taj Mahal. A few years ago, it was officially confirmed as one of the New Seven Wonders of the World, a controversial list featuring several places that many people had never heard of, and omitting many others which are widely loved. Some complained bitterly that Cambodia's Angkor Wat wasn't included, but for all the bickering and noise around the selection process, few sought to deny the Taj's claim.

The now-legendary love story that motivated its construction (Mughal emperor Shah Jahan spent a fortune on building it as a grand tomb for his deceased wife, Mumtaz Mahal) masks the darker elements of the project.

Having spent so much of his wealth on building the Taj Mahal, Jahan's ruthless, murderous son Aurangzeb, ►



t more of his inheritance squandered on a second monument, seized control of for himself, deposing his confining him in Agra Fort t of his days. Aurangzeb d his brothers, eventually and executing them in ng Gwalior Fort. It seems t the majority of the seven ple who visit the Taj Mahal get this extra detail, but the Express passengers were re Gwalior to glimpse this or themselves.

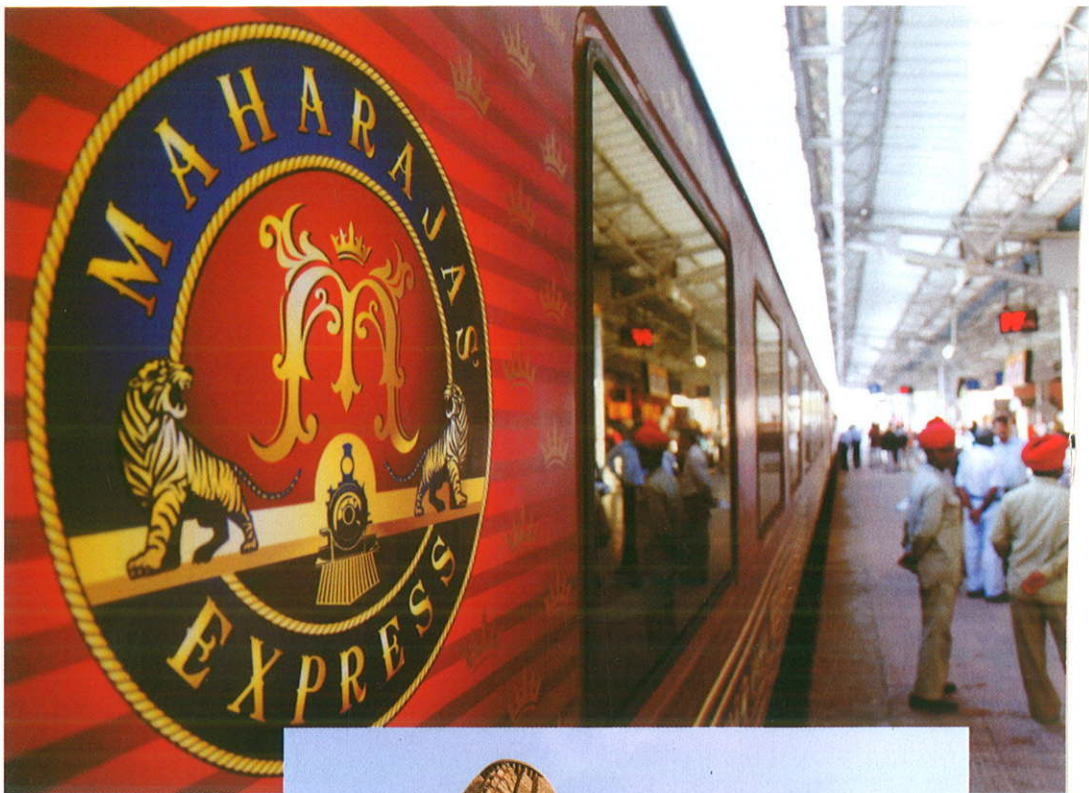
ys passed on and off the ing, feasting and being all the while. When we hahjuraho to visit its near-

00-year-old Hindu and Jain temples, we were met in the n by an acrobatic dancing troupe. As the men bounced outing and slapping sticks, a small child popped up by watch the spectacle. I ushered her to the front, only sively tinier children to tumble forward like unpacked ls. Behind them a teenage boy with a shirt too tight s too high nervously brushed back his hair, while just nah birds squabbled over a discarded piece of puri lly crow swooped in and stole it.

at writer of train travel Paul Theroux compared life tations to that of a village, with all the politics and may find rurally transplanted inside. "At night and in orning the station village is complete, a community pried that the thousands of passengers arriving and eave it undisturbed," he wrote in *The Great Railway* e newcomer cannot believe he has been plunged into cy so soon."

at India's poverty can hit like a punch on the nose, and d out the windows of the train, it simultaneously felt too very far away. While we fretted about the strength of gnal or whether the food was too spicy, we witnessed eperately poor people wretchedly toiling to survive.

it was the emotions stirred up by this struggle, but seemed to build towards Varanasi, the *Maharajas'* nultimate and easternmost stop. Said to be one of longest continually inhabited cities, this settlement on anges is renowned as a place of worship for Hindus, as thousands of Buddhists each year too. Those me to visit Sarnath, the location where the founder n, Siddhartha Gautama, gave his first sermon 2,500



We floated away, now in total darkness, silently moving downstream towards an enormous Hindu ceremony held high above the river banks.

ago. It was a hot afternoon when we visited, but we joined by thousands of devotees in robes of white orange and vermilion, all huddled around the colossal Ka Pillar to worship.

As the sun went down, we were gathered at the coach and transferred down to the boats, then quickly through battalions of girls busily selling candles and flowers, and private boats to cruise down the river. In the squadrons of swallows took to the sky, and the river we could hear the gentle crashing of oars. Every now and then, the breeze would carry the smell of incense.

Varanasi is the only place in India where public cremations can take place through the dark of night. For Hindus there is no better way to enter the afterlife than on the banks of the Ganges, and so the cremating industry has grown to cope with huge numbers of bodies arriving from around India.

As our boat slowly approached, we saw that one pyre roared, another smouldered. The dead were piled high, and spectators were crowded around. Holy cattle ambled around, the light illuminating their big eyes. I turned to look at my fellow passengers and saw two of these guests noiselessly weeping.

It may seem like a macabre way to have spent the evening, but as I watched the reverence and

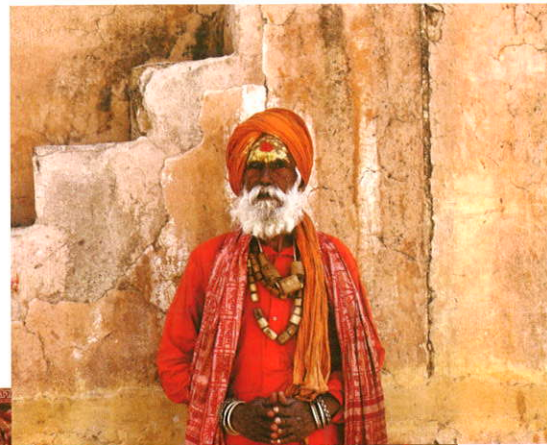
love with which the departed were treated, I found myself hoping that they had at least a little of this affection in life, and that they knew someone cared enough to tap a drum, to place a flower, to light a flame.

We floated away, now in total darkness, silently moving downstream towards an enormous Hindu ceremony held high above the river banks. These elaborate practises happen every night and draw sizeable crowds; of the thousands of people there, in boats and on land, it was impossible to tell who were tourists and who were congregation. As the priests began chanting and raising up candles, I tried to recall something our guide had said on the train. His name escaped me, but I remembered his words: "Varanasi is not somewhere you go, but somewhere you feel." ■

MAHARAJAS' EXPRESS

The most luxurious train in India has several routes and trips of various lengths throughout the year, all united by a dedication to quality and an immersion in India quite unlike any other tour. The train is currently taking its annual break over the crushing heat of summer, but will start again in October this year and is taking bookings now.

The Indian Panorama tour, featured here, travels from New Delhi to the pink city of Jaipur, Ranthambore National Park, Fatehpur Sikri, Agra, Gwalior, Khajuraho, the holy city of Varanasi and finally Lucknow before returning to New Delhi. Optional side tours are available along the way, otherwise guests can enjoy more time onboard the magnificent train. the-maharajas.com



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The train waits patiently on a platform; a yogi watches the world go by in the holy city of Varanasi; the nightly ceremony on the banks of the Ganges draws large crowds; the 1,000-year-old ornate temples of Khajuraho are in near-perfect condition.

