

# KING-SIZE moments

*Luxury is a state of mind they say. Not when you are aboard one of the most luxurious trains in the world, waited upon and pampered. Here are some of the most exotic experiences from one of the week-long journeys the Maharajas' Express offers. Money indeed can buy you dreams, royal ones too, says [DEVI SINGH](#)*



“LUXURY must be comfortable, otherwise it is

not luxury.” No, that certainly is not me. That is Coco Chanel who always had a high sense of things around her, way ahead of her times, and holds absolute validity even today. In the times we are in, luxury has been reduced to Chanel’s summation — comfort and quality. This is something most of us can relate to in this fast-paced life.

It’s all about experiences now, fulfilling the bucket list, seizing the day, living your dreams before it’s too late... And with the pace comes instant gratification. Fortunately, there are travel experiences that let you, mind the cliché, luxuriate over each moment well-spent, savour the slowness of warmth and touch the inner core of felt experiences. Where timelessness creeps up on you like the curl of a winter duvet. And your environs attend to your every need. So I take my ease aboard the Maharajas’ Express and experience the artful royalty of not only India’s past but of making each moment memorable.

My journey starts from Delhi’s Safdarjung Railway Station where a red carpet is laid out. A bunch of local performers is dancing as I zoom in just in time while sari-clad women mark me with a vermillion, and I start feeling touristy all of a sudden. I don’t know if it’s a good feeling to be courted so but the warmth of a send-off does lend a sense of purpose to a rediscovery of India. As I sip my drink, I see a bunch of young Russian girls beaming like little girls, getting clicked and filmed with the staff of the Maharajas’ Express, documenting what marks a journey of a lifetime for them.

I’m going to be aboard the train for a week where we will disembark each day for fresh experiences beginning with Agra, Ranthambore, Jaipur, Bikaner, Jodhpur, Udaipur and ending with Balasinor as the leg of an Indian Splendour comes to an end.

My first dinner on board is at Rang Mahal, one of the two fine-dining restaurants. The carpet is hand-woven from Kashmir, the glass is from Paris and the walls are adorned with Burmese teak, the best wood money can buy. The rug which goes long way above is painted by a 68-year-old man from Moradabad, hand-painted with stable hair. The finesse on the tapestry calls for some appreciation. The colour scheme of the two restaurants is well thought out, breaking the monotony. The menu changes every day I’m told, with the likes of strudels, to marquis, to waterzoois with a mandatory Indian *thali* representing a different region of the country each day. Finesse here is about artistry of every kind and while there is a sensory over-indulgence, there’s also an attempt to connect with and save the best of where we come from.



PHOTOS: IRCIC

(Above) A guest enjoying the vistas. (Below) The mahogany-finished safari bar and the ceremonial send-off



Guests enjoying drinks at the Rajah Club where the bartender is an eager listener

## HEAD HELD HIGH

A brainchild of the Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation (IRCTC), the train runs on five circuits covering the erstwhile princely states which explains the name and the coaches thereof. Having bagged “The World’s Leading Luxury Train” four times in a row at The World Travel Awards since 2012, it’s claimed to be the most expensive luxury train running in the world. “The credit naturally goes to IRCTC’s deployment of the right kind of people and professionals who have made the Maharajas’ Express what it is today,” says General Manager Sunil Tarneja.

With the current number of luxe trains in the country, some of them aggressively selling themselves while others losing out on their vibe, Maharajas’ Express sure has an advantage. It is in a league of its own. “We are extremely confident of our product and we take pride in it. We rely on word of mouth as that’s the most genuine way of flattery and appreciation. We have successfully tapped into a segment so niche where penetration was very difficult,” Sunil informs.

So who are these sophisticates who would have the luxury of time to travel at leisure? The average guest age is 65 and more as he has lived his life and now wants to enjoy twilight years hassle-free, packing and unpacking only once. From Hollywood to royalty, the Maharajas’ Express has had almost everybody on board. “We want to tap into the market of royal families...we have had royalty from Brunei, Saudi Arabia and Queen of Monaco recently expressed her willingness to travel with us,” he adds.

So what sets apart the Maharajas’ Express from its contemporaries and what exactly explains the craze for it? Sunil explains, “Our cabin space is the biggest than any other train in the world and the only one to have an en-suite bath. And of course our time-flexible multi-cuisine restaurants. Then we also have bath tubs which again are a rarity besides Wifi on board, personal valets, live TVs with DVDs... You name the pamper and we have it. Coming up are a spa and salon.” Too much indeed.

## THE MARBLE LOVE

IT’S day two and you can’t go wrong with Taj Mahal when it comes to living the ultimate Indian dream. The tripper appeal of Taj Mahal has only increased over the years as I see women of foreign origin queuing up for an exotic photo op having wrapped their saris over their skirts and jeans in an oddball manner. Their sneakers scream for more attention than their tasteless saris. So much for a dream click in a dream set-up?

Maybe local guides are selling a clichéd India to the foreigners too much, making Taj Mahal too commercial for an uppity. But Taj comes with different connotations to different people and it does sell to many in many ways. As one of my fellow guests asks our incisive local guide, Ali, as to “Why he can’t paint the Taj for it’s just a white marble?” To this he retorts, “The day we start getting travellers instead of tourists we might just allow them to paint the Taj.” Ali just about manages to hit the nail right on its head ceasing the vagaries of the ever curious American guest.



Many would even think that this city majorly runs on tourism which actually comes only after agriculture. That again comes as an eye opener. We then proceed to Taj Khema to satiate our hunger building for long and of course with the promise of the white beauty standing in front of us, formidable with notes of a past love from an era untouched, unknown, stirring up a thousand emotions within. There are other charmers here too, rather distracters. The ones who bring me back from my rather sedated thoughts of an arcane India of the past to the India of blandishments. I come back to the present, touch the reality, in this case, a glass of chilled bubbly. I see the champagne lose its fizz, as my racing

(Above) Lunch under the shadow of the Taj; (below) the Rajah Club reminds you of colonial luxury





Guests enjoying lunch at Mayur Mahal

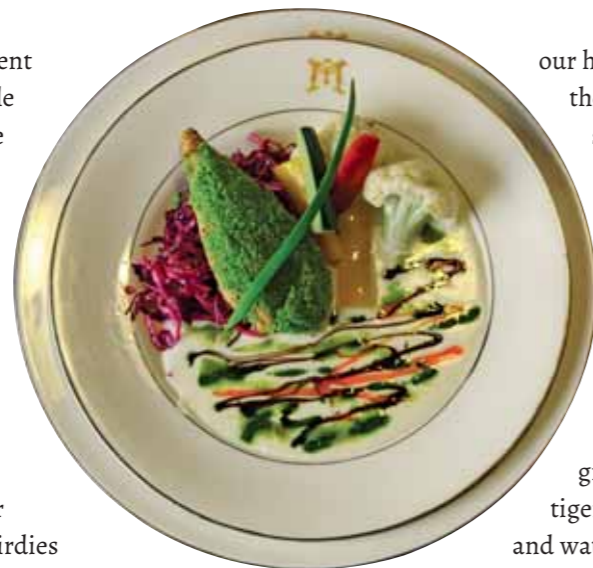


One of the crew members preparing meals in a smart kitchen; the Indian thali with bespoke crockery

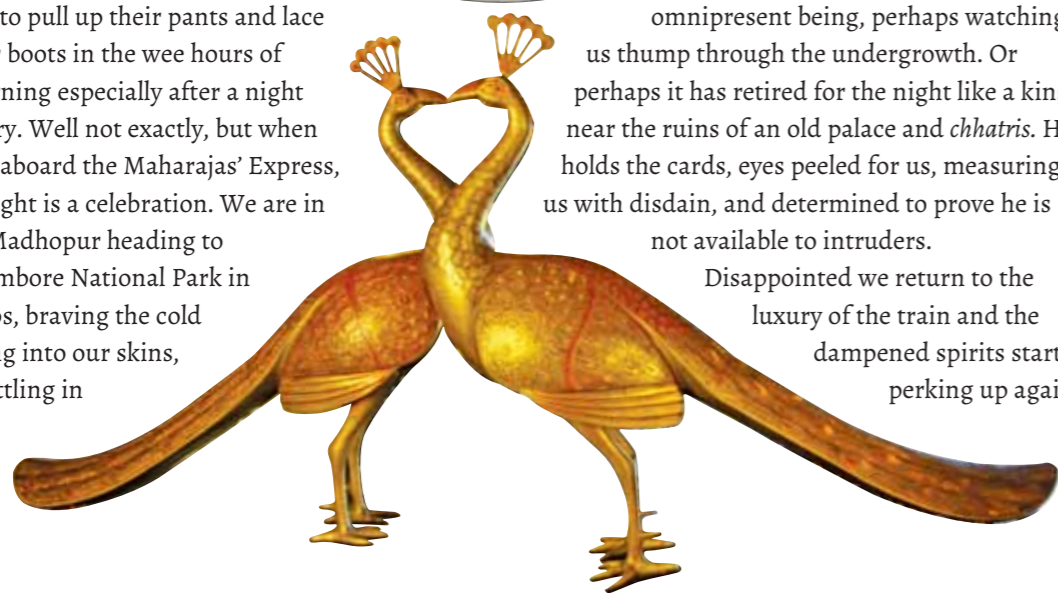
thoughts about past, present and future start to dwindle and I choose to stay in the present and enjoy the majestic views instead. Taj according to me is best understood by the spectator, its moods varying with the sun and the moon.

### TIGER IN HIDING

**IT'S** a torture for nocturnal birdies like me to pull up their pants and lace up their boots in the wee hours of the morning especially after a night of revelry. Well not exactly, but when you are aboard the Maharajas' Express, every night is a celebration. We are in Sawai Madhopur heading to Ranthambore National Park in our jeeps, braving the cold air biting into our skins, sand settling in



our hair. Almost all the eyes in the jeep I am in are searching for a tiger to come out of its homey habitat as the cameras wait to capture the capricious animal. But it's not our day after all. "A tiger reserve with no tiger in sight," is what I hear from one of the group mates. But then, the tiger rules in absentia, feeling and watching us like an omnipresent being, perhaps watching us thump through the undergrowth. Or perhaps it has retired for the night like a king, near the ruins of an old palace and *chhatris*. He holds the cards, eyes peeled for us, measuring us with disdain, and determined to prove he is not available to intruders. Disappointed we return to the luxury of the train and the dampened spirits start perking up again.



### THE PINK TINT

**AS** the train makes its way to Jaipur, I catch up with the delightful Chef John Stone who is responsible for maintaining the kitchen on board. As I enter his busy kitchen, I see a tray full of croissants being prepared by one of his crew. The kitchen is built in one complete coach segregated into two parts — the left is where they make continental and the right side is for confectionery and Indian cuisine. The best thing is they prepare everything on board and don't use open flames. The entire cooking takes place on

induction. The other good thing is the chef is always prepared for everything. Well most of the things if not everything. "If a guest asks for a Caribbean chicken, I can get it to him as I have the *masala* for it. And if a guest wants something smoked, I have a trick for that too up my sleeves and that is liquid smoke," he tells me.

While the chef explains things to me, I'm in my own stream of consciousness as to what these people do for entertainment..and call it telepathy, John starts narrating how he and his boys enjoyed a match of volley ball at one of the stations last night. Pursuit of happiness is what keeps us going.

The fridge is stacked and well stocked. I see the bacon has been imported from Germany and the vegetables are in organic packaging. Obviously they don't like compromising on quality. "We get supplies and refills only from three places on every journey of ours — Delhi, Jaipur and Udaipur. I don't even think about taking supplies from anywhere else," says John. He also informs me about the chemicals used to sanitise the work hubs.

Feasting should not be about the richness of food but about the presentation as well. So the



(Clockwise) The en-suite bath in the presidential suite; bedroom with a glow-in-the-dark star ceiling and a lounge room for coffee and conversations



crocery they serve their food in is from Paris. The Indian *thalis* are pure silver and designed in Jaipur. The normal dishes are 18 carat gold-plated costing anywhere around ₹40,000. They have left no stone unturned matching the royal house of Jaipur. A boisterous reception awaits us at the city station. The folk dancers entertain each guest stepping out of the train. Now pretty familiar and accustomed to the good old garlands and vermilion, my co-passenger asks me, "Isn't there too much of auspice going on in India?" erupting a laughter out of me.

We hop on to our deluxe coach and soak up the sights of the pink city as it's called. Though I would prefer pink panther for it sounds better. We enter the gates of City Palace, where a royal procession welcomes us at the exclusive entrance meant for Maharajas' Express.



They are definitely good at making commoners feel like royals as I see the guests rejoicing each and every moment of it.

As people get busy painting, feeding and riding elephants, I decide to get a feel of a freshly-made warm lacquer bangle in my hand and the breeze cooling it off. It's sanative in a way to watch how it's made and to be able to touch and feel the warmth of it. In front of the palace, there is an evening service going on at the Krishna temple. The bells ring in ears, adding more character to the evening. Inside the main hall, there are portraits and frames of members of the royal family gracing the place even in their absence. A distinct Diya Kumari looks resplendent as always. Sure the evening ends on a royal token and with the ultimate Indian exotica.



Guests take a break before their sight-seeing tours and (below) sundowners at the dunes

## THE DESERT SAFARI

**OUR** next haunt is Bikaner, the land of camels and more camels and famous for its annual camel festival. And that's exactly what we are here for. Camel carts on sand dunes — I won't like to call it a desert but good enough to enjoy sundowners by the bonfire and barbeque. We are not here to bash the dunes anyway. It's peaceful, sequestered and works for most of us. After a long day of sightseeing at the grand palace and ornate merchant mansions, this simplicity is what you need. The *Kalbeliya* dancers gyrate to the high pitch notes of Langa men, a shout-out enough for the guests to join them. The sight is compelling enough for many to forget everything and just jive to the moment.

## STARRY NIGHTS

**IN** between stations, disembarking and half held conversations, I decide to spend some time in the lounge flipping through a number of magazines and coffee tables. I also check the on-board boutique called Sandouk comprising a wide range of souvenirs to carry back home like jewellery, artefacts and handlooms. We are in Jodhpur now, where we get to spend a moon-lit night atop Hanwant Mahal overlooking a lit up Umaid Bhawan under a sky lit up with fireworks for Maharajas' guests. Next day it's the panoramic views of the city of lakes, Udaipur with a boat ride on Lake Pichola. Desperately hoping to explore something on my own rather than being waited upon.



A fossilised egg of a dinosaur and its limb; (below) the fossil park

## WILD THINGS

**THE** sun has gone strong and is beating on my skin as I along with my group carefully edge way through remnants of limbs and jaws of dinosaurs strewn across. We make sure not to step on the fossils which more or less look like everyday rock. This is India's very own Jurassic Park, one of the largest dinosaur sites in the world. Princess Alia from the royal family of Balasinor and a dinosaur enthusiast gives a guided tour to us delving deep into how the paleontologists come to know about the dinosaurs and their behavioural patterns. "It's all because of coprolites — the fossilised droppings of the dinosaur. When you find a jaw it tells you whether a dinosaur was a herbivore or carnivore. Similarly coprolites form a

major part of the history of these giant lizards," she enlightens us.

Pointing out to a site where the bones of both the titanosaurs and rajasoraus, the Indian T-Rex, were found together, she tells us that this indicates that they must have died in a combat. She also tells us how she discovered an egg of a long-necked herbivore. "I was on a nearby village tour once when I saw a woman grinding *masala* with what looked like a dinosaur's egg to me. That's how I very lovingly named it my *masala* egg."

The Balasinor royals are the hosts for the day, so we head to their residence, the Garden Palace, where a unique set of performers awaits us. A bunch of dark-skinned men, almost a dozen of them, line up in front of us contorting their facial





muscles in a rather bizarre way. One of them jumps in front of us with those gnomish expressions. We are not able to grasp what he's doing while the other does something in an instance. He throws a coconut in the air and breaks it open with his head.

These incredible performers are the Dhamal dancers, also called the black sufis, from the Siddi community prominently found in Gujarat. Some are also dispersed to corners far and beyond such as Karnataka, Goa and Hyderabad. These descendants of African slaves were brought to India by the Portuguese and sold to Indian

(Above) The Garden Palace heritage hotel at Balasinor; (below) a performance by Dhamal dancers from the Siddi community



Mughals. "We speak in Hindi and Gujarati but are basically Muslims. We have adapted to India's customs but our ethnic African traditions are still intact. The Siddis in Karnataka are Hindus, Muslims and even Christians but in Gujarat we are all Muslims," one of the community members tells me. They sing in a mix of Hindi and Swahili and dance in obeisance to a sufi saint, Baba Gor, whose shrine is in Ratanpur.

"As you can see, their animal instincts come out while dancing, which is basically their passion for the saint," says Prince Salauddin. It's now a meet-and-greet with the Balasinor nawab who was only 11 months old when crowned and is now 72-years-old. One of the picture postcards on the train has him as a child. The royal family has been here for the past 650 years. "We made to Gujarat from Delhi as part of the Mughal entourage and were made the governors of this particular region. We used to be the bodyguards of the Mughal emperors. I'm the tenth generation here. It's a beautiful blend of cultures as we follow both Muslim and Rajput customs," says the prince.

## INDIAN AVATAR

**THE** last night is a heady carousel with the guests dressed in ethnic Indian wear dancing up a storm to Bollywood numbers. No inhibitions allowed. The women just about manage their heavy traditional saris and the men, well they have no sense of time or place left in them. For me it's just another jamboree with a different flavour. As a Scottish guest bids adieu to me, he says his bucket list is now almost complete. Almost! I see faces with a myriad of emotions and expressions. I see nostalgia, happiness, moist eyes but not exactly sadness. Most of them are already planning to come back and how.

## ESCAPIST BY NATURE

**WITH** the major chunk of passengers coming in from overseas and the main clientele being people from the foreign lands, will Indians living in India ever get attracted to come aboard? Answers Sunil, "We have had queries from Indians who wanted to charter the entire train for a wedding but the only glitch was that they wanted to pay in cash and we couldn't allow that. Also the Indians have a psyche where they want the maximum return out of their money which doesn't happen on such a train."

He adds, "But we do get a lot of NRIs though. Maybe they want to see India through a foreigner's eyes, in a cocooned, protected way. They don't



(Above) Guests playing board games; (below) evening glow at City Palace, Jaipur

really want to go through the dust and grime of India. It's like being an escapist, passing by the stations where the poverty is evident but they just ignore. That way there's a lot of irony going on, it's hot outside but you are comfortable in the air conditioned environs of the train sipping on your favourite wine."

Luxury might work in an escapist form, like someone rightly put it; luxury comes with a bastard mirth and goes with a stinging tail. Well that someone, again, is not me for sure. Whether you have waited all your life, made money and decided to splurge on yourself or whether you were born a blue blood with silver everything at your disposal, you definitely can't miss the quaint charms of being aboard a luxury train and experience how it feels like to travel like a maharaja or a maharani for that matter.

