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Indian train travel: Journeys fit for a Maharaja

What better way to get round a country's iconic sights than by train – especially if that train has butler service, a gym and a library? Clover Stroud offers the inside track on India's finest railways .

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Image 1 of 3
Passengers on the Maharajas' Express have their own butler standing by

Maharajas' Express

Offering what is arguably the most thrilling of all of India's rail trips, the Maharajas' Express was launched in 2010 as a joint venture between the Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation and travel experts, Cox & Kings. The fine attention to detail is reflected in the excellent food and charming service – passengers even have their own butler standing by in case they fancy a masala chai in the middle of the night. There are two restaurants, a lounge and bar plus a presidential suite with a bath.

The “Classical India” trip is particularly tempting as it's a roll call of India's greatest hits, starting at the Taj Mahal, before heading to Gwalior. This town, with its spectacular fort, palaces and sandstone citadel, is packed with gems and the tour includes the glittering walls of Man Mandir Palace, Saas-Bahu temples full of sculptures of dancing girls, and the Jai Vilas Palace, with a crystal staircase and two of the world's largest chandeliers.

Gwalior is followed by a brief stop at the lapis lazuli palace of Jahangiri Mahal at Orchha, before heading to the extraordinary erotic temples of Khajuraho, dating from 950. Sitting incongruously among bougainvillea-lined dusty tracks, the temple carvings display the full spectrum of human emotions, not simply the erotic.

The tour then takes in Bandhavgarh, for potential tiger spotting, before heading onto the sensual onslaught that is Varanasi, a place of ancient pilgrimage. Nothing here disappoints, and returning to the train after an evening cruise surrounded by the chanting of Sanskrit mantras and the drifting scent of sandalwood is a wrench. But the following morning's journey through the green agricultural fields of Uttar Pradesh more than makes up for it, especially if you happen to be tucking into the train's delicious green curry and sliced mango at the time.

The cultural odyssey continues to Lucknow and Nawabi and finally to New Delhi, with little treats along the way such as a sound and light show at Khajuraho and an evening of feasting and dance at Nawabi.

The only downside is the price: a shade under £5,000 per person for seven nights. Then again, a trip on the Maharajas' Express is the train ride of a lifetime.