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Seeing India by Luxury Train

The Maharajas' Express has spacious cabins, fine food and private performances

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ON TRACK | The Maharajas' Express stopped at a station. Maharajas Express India

WHEN WE STEPPED off the train at the small station of Pachora, 250 miles northeast of Mumbai, Lord Ganesha was waiting.

A man costumed as the Hindu god was carried by turbaned attendants and accompanied by folk dancers who whirled to ancient stringed instruments, reedy horns and hand drums. Ganesha sported a pinkish elephant head, complete with trunk and oversize ears, but he blessed us with a very human hand. Locals must have felt like the circus had arrived in town, for despite the early hour, they had come to watch the welcome arranged specially for us.



One of the train's dining cars; Maharajas Express India

It was appropriate to be greeted by the god of good fortune: We were a lucky group—passengers taking a 2,000-mile journey from Mumbai to New Delhi on the Maharajas' Express, one of the most luxurious trains in the world.

The train's name conjures images of hilltop forts, bejeweled scimitars and armies on camels and elephants— for good reason. The maharajas ("great kings") ruled India's hundreds of princely states from as early as the 1600s to the mid-20th century. In Rajasthan, in particular, the warrior-kings built impressive cities they named for themselves: Udaipur, Jodhpur, Jaipur. Their heirs, allying themselves with the British Raj, continued a sumptuous style of living until Indian independence in 1947. (While the princely families lost their power post-Raj, they kept most of their palaces and forts.)

What to Wear There

For a balmy day in Bikaner or Jodhpur

The Maharajas' Express pays tribute to that regal lifestyle. Nearly half a mile long, the train is a glossy burgundy on the outside. Inside, guests sleep in cabins that feel like upscale hotel rooms, with silk window treatments, carved wood paneling and marble-tiled floors. Travelers feast off fine china and crisp linens in the two dining cars. The staff seems almost to outnumber the guests, which total 88 at full capacity. In the morning, valets brought tea to our rooms. When we trundled through the long line of cars to dinner, staffers folded down our beds, delivered clean laundry and left behind chocolates or a flower. Upon our return from outings, they greeted us with fresh juice or cocktails and cool, damp cloths for wiping the dust from our faces.

The extravagance wasn't limited to the onboard experience. We visited private gardens and met local notables. As we chugged through Rajasthan and three adjoining states, we were welcomed at every stop with red carpets, music and dancers, even camels and horses in colorful regalia. Such treatment in the face

of India's poor piqued my conscience, though we didn't encounter much of the poverty that is so prevalent in India.



Guests playing elephant polo in the private garden of the Maharaja of Jaipur. Roger Toll



Dancers welcoming Maharajas' Express passengers. Roger Toll

The Maharajas' Express experience doesn't come cheap. I chose the smallest and least costly cabin, priced at \$6,840 a person for seven nights. The train's top two classes, the suite and presidential suite, run \$13,800 and \$23,700 per person, respectively. I imagined they would be filled with Russian oligarchs, Chinese millionaires or at least successful Indian expats. But in fact, on our

journey those quarters remained empty, and my fellow passengers were hardly exotic: fellow Americans, older British couples, a smattering of Japanese and Russian families.

Each day, the Maharajas' Express stopped at a destination and we disembarked to see the sites. In the evening, we set off for the next city. After a night or two of adjusting to the rocking of the train and the scream of its whistle when we passed through villages, I slept soundly and was often the first in the dining car for breakfast. Alone at a table set with white damask and heavy silver, I watched the world slide by through the broad windows: women in bright saris hauling pots of water on their heads, a bullock cart heading out to a field, young boys tending cattle. At a rural train station, a gray-haired man did yoga on a wooden bench while a woman, the end of her sari pulled over her head in traditional style, swept the platform with a handful of sticks.

Such everyday scenes of India delighted me as I worked through a pitcher of coffee, a bowl of muesli, a masala dosa. One morning, as our chef passed by, I complimented him on his pastries and croissants. "Try doing that on a moving train every day," he said, laughing.

After our exuberant arrival at each destination, we would head to a fort or palace (and a tiger refuge on the penultimate day) in a luxury coach that followed us the entire trip. From Pachora, our first stop, we drove about two hours to Ajanta, a group of caves that sheltered wandering monks during the Buddhist wave that swept India from 200 B.C. to 600 A.D. Several of the caves at the Unesco World Heritage site are decorated with exquisite 2,000-year-old paintings of gods and religious life.

“ The monument to undying love glowed rose under the still-rising sun. ”

A few days later, outside Jodhpur, we visited a farming family of Bishnois, a six-centuries-old sect that prizes hospitality, protects wild animals and prepares opium tea for guests. I lapped several mouthfuls out of the palm of one of our hosts; this was how Rajasthani traders used to present the tea to guests on the spice route, we were told. (It was too mild to have any sort of narcotic effect.) An even odder experience was our visit to the Karni Mata Temple near Bikaner. Devotees travel great distances to revere the more than 20,000 black rats who make it their home, feeding from bowls of milk and grain and scurrying around visitors' feet.

The Lowdown: Maharajas' Express, India



Getting There: Dozens of airlines fly from the U.S. to Mumbai and/or Delhi, the departing or arrival points for Maharajas' Express trips. Most itineraries from major U.S. hubs involve one stop.

Staying There: At one end of the trip, in Mumbai, the iconic Taj Mahal Palace has hosted maharajas real and figurative for more than a century (*from about \$400 a night, tajhotels.com*). On the other end, in New Delhi, the Imperial is a jewel of Victorian and colonial architecture with a very pleasant spa (*from about \$280 a night, theimperialindia.com*).

Riding the Train: Maharajas' Express runs trips from October through April. They last for three or seven nights, and begin or end in New Delhi or Mumbai (*from \$3,850 per person, maharajas-express-india.com*). Consider booking through a travel agency, which can help you choose an itinerary and arrange add-on trips. Railbookers is the largest booking agency for Maharajas' Express (railbookers.com).

What to Pack: Go light and informal. This is not the Orient Express of 1890, and no one dresses up for dinner. The days are warm, but a light jacket or sweater is useful, especially in New Delhi in winter or at a barbecue dinner on the sand dunes in Bikaner.

Nothing beat the game of elephant polo we played in the private garden of the titular Maharaja of Jaipur. Six female elephants, their trunks painted with colorful swirls, faced off like football linemen. I perched on the broad back of a 12-foot-tall animal, my feet planted in stirrups, clutching a rope strung tightly across its back and struggling to maneuver the absurdly long polo mallet. A mahout sat a foot in front of me, urging our mount toward the soccer ball that

had been rolled between the two teams. Off we ambled in the ball's general direction. I scored a point with an ungainly back shot from right in front of the goal. In the end, an elephant on the opposing team broke our two-point tie by snagging the ball in its trunk and lobbing it through the goal. We retired to drinks with a relative of the maharaja, followed by a vast Indian lunch on a terrace overlooking the polo field.

The Taj Mahal was our final stop. When I visited two decades ago, it felt flat, a picture-pretty cliché; perhaps it was the hordes of midday tourists. This time, at 8 in the morning, the grounds were largely empty and the monument to undying love glowed rose under the still-rising sun. I roamed alone, letting its exquisite craftsmanship and sheer audacity sink in. Later, we walked to a nearby private garden for a breakfast buffet on a lawn overlooking the Taj.

That evening, the lurch of the train pulling out of Agra signaled that we had only three hours left in our journey. I sat in the dining car, watching as fields of crops, green from monsoon rains, give way to the busy outskirts of Delhi. When we pulled into a quiet suburban station, no band met us. There were no dancers, no camels this time.