

All aboard the Maharajas' Express!

It was a cold and miserable day, when suddenly a cheery email arrived in my inbox...It was an invite to join a trip aboard the Maharajas' Express. The newest and most luxurious train travelling on India's busy railway system. Now, I have never felt the urge to travel to India, but this trip intrigued me...Fast forward a month later, at their I was, along with my fellow travellers, standing in the Lobby of the Historical Oberoi Hotel, Calcutta. Its marble floor shining like they had never been walked upon and the brass glistening in the sunshine. After dinner we came up with the idea of seeing the city by night and our trusty steed?...The good old Ambassador with its black body and shiny yellow roof. There are literally thousands pounding the streets of Calcutta, each one scrabbling for its next fare. After our introduction to 'Calcutta by night' and a brush down thanks to smoke and smog of the city, it was time to head to bed, before our big day.



Whilst we had been made aware that we were in fact going to be the train's third lot of guests, our journey was to be a special one. This was to be named the inaugural journey for the trip and the honourable Mamata Banerjee, the Minister of Railways was to wave us off from the station. As we arrived at Chitpur station, which is the newest of the four intercity stations, serving Howrah and Kolkata, the plethora of TV cameras and constant flashes of cameras told us this was going to be a big send off! With the red carpet laid out before us, we could have been heading to the Oscars! After some time at the station and the obligatory welcome drink on board the train, we headed off in to the night and our first stop Bodh Gaya.



After bidding my travel companions a good night, it was time to check out my cabin. Now, if you mention Indian trains to most people, it normally conjures up images of crowded carriages, with people hanging from every window or doorway...Not this train though. I was met by my Cabin Attendant Pankaj. He was on hand to welcome me to 'Pitoniya' as my carriage was called, and my home for the next 7 nights. Now, having never travelled more than about 3 hours on the good old UK railways, I had no idea what to expect. However I was amazed when I was shown cabin number 3, a large and luxurious double cabin. With Individual Air Conditioning, own bathroom with large shower and a flat screened TV! Everything one expects from a 5 star hotel in fact! With turn down service, luxurious amenities and a space in the wardrobe to hang enough clothes for a week, it really was like nowhere I had stayed before.



Now you would think that sleeping on a train would be a strange sensation, however the Maharajas Express is newly built, just for Cox & Kings and Indian Railways, the joint owners. This meant that the suspension has been specially designed for riding on the rail tracks of India! After a comfortable night's sleep, I was awoken with my morning call, then my freshly brewed cup of coffee from Pankaj. Today we were heading to Bodh Gaya, the place where the Buddha attained enlightenment, which makes it the most important Buddhist pilgrimage site in the world and Nalanda and important seat of learning in ancient India. It was also to be my first sight of the 'real India' and something I was longing to absorb. My senses were not disappointed! It truly was a mind blowing experience of the heady mix of 35 Degree heat, people, cars and cows! Plus a few hundred stray dogs...But in a strange way, it was serene and a controlled mess!

After my first full day of pounding the streets, it was time to head back to the train, onboard our coach, with our bottled water and wet wipes, which were handed out by our guide. Everything was thought about. After a quick freshen up, it was time for dinner, inside one of the 2 restaurant cars on the train. However the all important aperitif was called for first in the 'Safari Bar'! Dinner was what you would have expected on such a luxurious trip. With a good mix of Local and Western palettes catered for, the choice was amazing. Plus the other benefit of the journey, was that all your food and drink, be it alcoholic or non alcoholic, was already included in the price! Made it much easier for everyone.

As the train travelled through-out the night, or next stop was to be Varanasi, or Banaras as it was once called. Now, unless you have been to Varanasi before, it is so difficult to describe it in a couple of words...I guess imagine the busyness of say Oxford Street (without the designer shops!) times this by 100, add in dust and dirt and the odd cow or 10 and you could be somewhere close. It was amazing! Yet, sitting in a boat on the Ganges as the sun rose at 6am in the morning, was so far removed from the street scene it was slightly surreal. The same could be said about the Ganges in the evening, watching the Arti, or 'Ceremony of Lights' where thousands of people again descended on the Ganges, but we were spellbound by the flicker of candles as each person released their own special light and flowers on to the river...After such a wonderful and peaceful experience on the river, it was time to head back to the train, for our next destination...A date with some tigers, so we hoped!



The following morning the train pulled in to the rather smart looking Umaria station. Apparently it had



been built not long ago, for the 2 trains that stop there each day(!) After a brief walk around the small town/village it was time to head off to Bandhavgarh National Park. This was the bit I had been waiting for. After a fantastic lunch, it was time to head out for our 'game drive' only this time, there was just one animal that everyone wanted to see. The group the week before us had seen 8 of the elusive tiger, so surely our chances were high? Sadly they were not, and after a 3 hour journey in a jeep, with camera poised and eyes looking in every direction, the best we could see was a few hundred deer...Feeling slightly dejected at not getting to see my first tiger, it was time to brush of the dust and head back to the train.

All too soon, after a great sleep the alarm was going off and it was time to head out for our next day of excursions. Today we are in Khajuraho, famed for its temples built by the artisan of the Chandela dynasty. The sculptures which were rediscovered by an English soldier in 1839 portray the rite of creation. Of the 85 original temples, only 22 now survive. After our tour of the temples, we then had the afternoon 'off' and so we headed to the Lalit Temple View hotel, for lunch and time by the pool. After a relaxing afternoon, we boarded the coach, for our journey back to the station. Tomorrow was possibly going to be the highlight for many on the trip...A day in Agra and a visit to the famous Taj Mahal.

After another night 'on the rails' we arrived in the city of Agra. As had become common place by now, as we left the station, there was a small group of local people to meet us, present us with our garlands of flowers, or beads and have a bindi placed on our heads. Each station made us feel as if we were film stars, with the red carpet and crowds of locals wondering what was going on! Our first stop today was to be the very impressive Agra Fort and a tour of its amazing grounds. At one point the excitement was building, as although fairly 'smoggy' you could just make out the silhouette of the Taj in the distance. After more food (!) We boarded electric powered buggies and set off in a small convoy to see the Taj Mahal in all its glory. What an impressive sight to see. Built in 1632 as a monument to Shah Jahan's wife, Mumtaz, it glowed in all its glory in the afternoon sunshine, having recently been totally cleaned. After spending a few hours exploring the Taj, we watched as it changed colour in the slowly setting sun. It really was an impressive site to see.





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The next morning, and it was going to be our last full day on the train. A visit to Gwalior and its fort was today's highlight, along with afternoon tea in the gardens of Jai Vilas Palace. Gwalior was a strange city. With its fort perched high above the town. The local government are trying to attract more visitors to the Fort and in fact apart from our group there was no one else there! The ride to the fort can best be described as 'bumpy' but by now most of us had gotten used to Indian roads! After our tour we headed to the Palace and home to the Scindia Family. Its amazing architecture and contents looked as new as when it was built and with two of the world's largest chandeliers hanging in the Durbar Hall, it was very impressive. After spending time wondering the halls of the dramatic main house, it was time for tea! We sat in the grounds as the sound of the Sitar wafting on the air and we dined on our finger sandwiches and tea, all very formal, and at the same time we sat and wondered how many members of royalty had done just as we were doing...?

Our last morning on the train...After packing the bags, it was time for breakfast and a fairly leisurely day. After saying goodbye to Pankaj, my cabin attendant off we went to explore the city of Delhi.

With its wide tree lined streets, it felt more like being in Paris! You could see that a lot of work is taking place, to ready the city for the Commonwealth Games in September. Although it still held its Indian charm, which I had started to love. Following a quick city tour and a photo stop at India Gate, situated in the heart of New Delhi, it was time for lunch and then time to bid our goodbyes from the rest of the group. Some were continuing their journey, by travelling south and some were heading back home. We were to head to the Oberoi Hotel for the night, before heading to the airport the next morning and our flight back to the UK.

I felt a little sad at the thought of me leaving this amazing country. A country that I have never felt I wanted to visit, or had any great urge to see...How my opinions had changed. The biggest feeling was despite the hardship and the poverty, every single person I met, be them young or old, had a smile on their face. They just got on with it, no matter what life had dealt them there was no real complaining. Yes you get hassled in the big cities like you would do anywhere else in the world, but I left India feeling safe and secure and happy that the opportunity for me to visit such a diverse and exciting country had come my way. It was a trip I will never forget.

If you would like further information on the Maharajas' Express, then please call in to our office, on the Borough (above the Gifted Co.) Or call us on 01934 713 714. The journey can be booked separately or as part of a bigger trip and we can help put anything together for you.