

ACROSS THE

UNIVERSE

India's teeming cities may induce sensory overload, but its fine

accommodations and eateries ensure nirvana. *By Kevin Raub*

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BLAME THE BEATLES. Blame Lonely Planet. Blame a century of romanticized and breathless prose. All have contributed to India's long-standing status as the sojourn of choice for enlightenment or simply self-discovery.

Unfortunately, the clarity one finds there does not extend to the country's navigability. India remains a helluva place to traverse, a fascinating, filthy, beautiful mess that can infuriate the most hardened nomad. And while you could follow in the footsteps of those who choose the country as the place to trade their popped-collar polos and smartphones for pajamas and vows of silence, the finest way to do India does not involve a backpack or a renouncement of material possessions.

India is a country of dichotomies, a dizzying spin of color and calamity, grit and glamour, funk and phemaldehyde. After an exhausting day of battling the sweltering, exhaust-smothered, cow dung-dotted streets of the Indian subcontinent, the best way to recharge is to enjoy the entirely contrasting experience of a sparkling clean hotel room with beat-down water pressure, chilly air conditioning, and a cozy feather-full duvet—not to mention the ministrations of a gaggle of personal butlers.

In Mumbai, India's cosmopolitan capital of

cool, that can only mean one address: the Taj Mahal Palace, Mumbai hotel. Reportedly commissioned by Parsi industrialist J.N. Tata in 1903 after he was refused entry to the city's white-only Watson's Hotel, the establishment stands as one of India's most endearing symbols of architectural excess. A fairy-tale blend of Islamic and Renaissance styles jostling for prime position among Mumbai's most famous

landmarks, the hotel faces the harbor next door to the Gateway of India in Apollo Bunder, a tag team that cannot be outdone in screaming "Welcome to India!" Inside, it couldn't whisper more quietly all that's unique and extravagant about Indian hospitality.

Mark Twain once said, "So far as I am able to judge, nothing has been left undone, either by man or nature, to make India the most

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extraordinary country that the sun visits on his rounds. Nothing seems to have been forgotten, nothing overlooked." That's what it feels like to stay at the Taj Mahal Palace. The hotel was the site of a terrorist bombing in 2008, but some 285 rooms have been lavishly restored in gorgeous fuchsia, saffron, and celadon color schemes. Security is now as over-the-top as the service (TSA-

level checks upon entry, key-access elevators by individual floor only), and the attentiveness of the staff can approach uncomfortable levels for the uninitiated (a rather nice First World problem to have). You could eat at the hotel—the Taj chain's staunch focus on the culinary arts belies the traveler truism that eating at the hotel is the table of last resort—but why would you when a restaurant like

Khyber calls Mumbai home?

I was a backpacker on my first trip to India, in 1999. I did not go to find myself or to meditate, but I did go to eat. Khyber was a predetermined extravagance at something hovering around a few dollars per main course (my friend and I ordered three between us). Having now visited 78 countries as a travel journalist and eaten (and forgotten about) enough tasting menus



[clockwise from left] The Taj Mahal Palace Hotel; the hotel's newly renovated interior; Pakistani vegetable and fruit vendors wait for clients at a market in Karachi





to kill a small army with gout, I have never forgotten that first meal at Khyber.

Today, most main courses at Khyber are still under \$10, yet the restaurant is one of Mumbai's most distinguished dining destinations. That is not a reflection of anything lacking in the foodie scene in Mumbai (if you're a fan of complex flavors there is no better city in the world to eat) but rather just how low the price of luxury remains in India. The cavernous space

is a burnt-orange maze of moody Mughal royalty art embedded in exposed brick, surrounded by tasteful antique oil lanterns dangling from railway trestles. Around the tables, a who's who of Mumbai elite—from high-powered stockbrokers to Bollywood beauties to foreigners—sit entranced by the parade of Punjabi/North Indian kebabs, biryanis, and curries. The dishes leave a trail of spiced vapor that jump-starts the taste buds,

making you green with envy of the patrons who have ordered before you.

Megalopolises like Mumbai (nearly 19 million) and Delhi (hovering around 16 million) can be a slap in the face for first-time visitors, so much so that almost no amount of extravagance (or Kingfisher's) can ease the pain. That's why travelers often flock to Rajasthan, a postcard-perfect oasis of color and culture in the Great Indian Desert, nearly

HEMIS/ALAMY (2); JON ARNOLD IMAGES LTD/ALAMY; ASHISH TIBREWAL/FLKRR/GETTY IMAGES

(clockwise from top left) Udaipur's City Palace on Lake Pichola; a camel handler in the Khuri desert; Lake Pichola; colorful marionettes in Rajasthan; a decorated elephant walking in Jaipur

WESLEY ROBERTS/ALAMY

sandwiched between India's two largest cities, which lie catty-corner on a southwest/northeast plane from the desert. It is here that you will find several of India's most romantic hotels set in some of the country's most storybook settings, many of them in the former lavish palaces and resplendent forts of the country's great *maharajas*.

Of all the cities on the Rajasthan route, none more than Udaipur greets visitors with a

truly life-altering first sight: the majestic Lake Pichola. Flanked by sun-scorched mountains that reflect off the glass-calm surface onto both the whitewashed *havelis* (Mewar-style private mansions) that border its shores and the dazzling lake palace on Jagniwas Island, Lake Pichola provides the perfect respite from crazy and chaotic India. You could rest your weary head here at many atmospheric lakeside *havelis*, but we'd recommend the

GOURD VIBRATIONS

The dos and don'ts of sitar shopping in India.

It's common for visiting Western musicians to hit India's streets in search of the perfect sitar. The traditional Indian instrument provides the signature sound of the subcontinent's hypnotic soundtrack, but ever since George Harrison played one on the Beatles' 1965 classic "Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown)," it's been the go-to instrument for Western rock bands seeking an exotic flavor. "The sitar just has that ancient feel to it and can transport you to another place with its sympathetic resonance and sweetness," says Lars Jacobsen, owner of one of the only sitar specialty shops in the U.S., Rain City Music (raincitymusic.com).

The typical sitar features 20 to 25 strings, a long and hollow neck, and a gourd resonating chamber, but as Jacobsen points out, not all sitars are created equal. "There are thousands made every year, and most of them are junk," he says. Expect to pay up to \$2,500 for a quality instrument, and buy a fiberglass case to transport your new acquisition out of India. Jacobsen recommends the following artisan sitar makers.

RIKHI RAM'S MUSIC

"Near Gole Market, founded by Sanjay Sharma. He's the maker of Ravi Shankar's instruments and many others. You can usually get a good-quality instrument off the shelf!"

rikhiram.in; 144 Bhagat Singh Market, New Delhi; 91 112 334 0496

RADHEY SHYAM SHARMA AND COMPANY

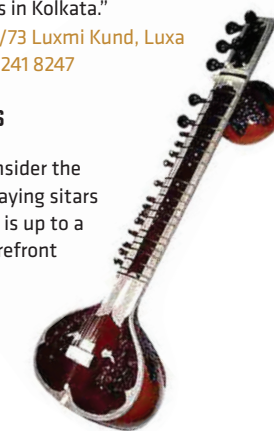
"Radhey is one of the only shops that makes their own sitar completely—their more expensive models—and some of the carvings are the best available, rivaling the legendary, and now closed, Kanai Lal & Bros in Kolkata."

radheymusic.com; D52/73 Luxmi Kund, Luxa Road, Varanasi; 91 542 241 8247

HIREN ROY & SONS

"They make what I consider the best-sounding and -playing sitars in the world, but there is up to a year's wait and no storefront any longer."

hirenroysitar.com





[clockwise from top left] Udaivilas Oberoi Hotel at sunset; entrance to the Udaivilas Oberoi; New Delhi's Imperial Hotel; Oberoi Udaivilas interior

Oberoi Udaivilas, one world's most celebrated luxury resorts, which sits regally on the north-west shore of the lake.

Conceived as a traditional Indian palace, the Oberoi Udaivilas is consistently ranked one of the world's top-10 places to sleep, and travel magazines and polls often place it at the top of their list of resorts in Asia. Guests are showered with rose petals upon arrival and smothered with a your-wish-is-my-command aesthetic around every picture-perfect turn. The hotel is also the home of Executive Chef Deep Arneja, who has worked with the likes of Jamie Oliver and Gordon Ramsey on his way to becoming one of India's most-celebrated chefs.

When it comes to dismissing preconceived notions about the country's cuisine, no one does it better than Arneja, whose knowledge of complex flavors, exotic spices, and regional

cooking techniques results in the creation of revelatory dishes. After welcoming me into his kitchen, he teaches me the wonders of cooking with the traditional clay oven, known as a *tandoor*. Under his tutelage, one learns why everything from Goan shrimp curry to spiced bread from Kerala to Rajasthani specialties like braised spring lamb cooked with Mathania chilli can make for a meal no less stunning than the famous dishes from three-star Michelin restaurants in France and Italy. Arneja releases an onslaught of dishes on my wife and I. We eat, we drink, we be merry, all in a stately al fresco setting that feels light years from the persistent roar of rickshaws that generally provides the soundtrack for dining in India.

Back in New Delhi, the volume is turned back up again, but not for long. Say what you will about the city—and many do—its

position as the nation's capital affords it a certain pole position among luxurious Indian destinations. There's so much opulence that the choices become dizzying.

But if cocktails on the lawn of the Imperial—Delhi's most historic hotel—aren't an escape from the fumes into a world of grand luxury, then nothing in India is. Entering through the hotel's palm-lined entrance under the commanding guise of its whitewashed Victorian and art deco architecture feels like walking into the dreamy hotel in Christopher Reeve's *Somewhere in Time*. With a dry martini in hand, you'll feel like you've been caught in a colonial time warp. You might start pinching yourself just to make sure that you're not dreaming. Rest assured, this is all part of India's reality...one that, at times, just happens to be uniquely transcendent. **CA**