

India's Maharajas' Express: All aboard for a train vacation that takes the stress out of sightseeing

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There's a brand-new train running on India's commuter railway, but it's a little more lavish than the LIRR or New Jersey Transit.

The Maharajas' Express has two restaurants - decked out in vibrant, gorgeous colors, like the swankiest Indian restaurant - as well as two bar cars and staffers with five-star service skills. There are also deluxe cabins, complete with private bathrooms and showers, since this train runs overnight. In fact, travelers step on board for seven days for a journey through the Indian countryside that's much like a cruise with wheels.

The Maharajas' Express offers a week-long trip through Rajasthan's greatest hits (plus some nearby unmissables like the Taj Mahal), with stops in Delhi and Mumbai.

At every station stop, red carpets roll out along the platforms and local musicians serenade the lush train's arrival.

One day it's Jaipur, the gem hub of India, with its booming jewelry industry and stores selling bargain-priced, topnotch gems; another day is spent exploring Udaipur, the so-called Venice of the East - dotted with watery oases (a little parched at the end of the dry season) and with a live-in royal family.

Yet another day is dedicated to Jodhpur, called the blue city, its houses covered in indigo paint to repel mosquitoes, making the skyline shimmer like a rough-cut sapphire. A century ago, the horse-mad maharajah here invented the billowy pants named after his hometown. No wonder Madonna passed through and spent time driving around the countryside (apparently, she asked her hotel staff why no one could clear away all the cows that blocked her path - maybe Madge missed the kabbalah class on their holy history here).

Such a jam-packed itinerary underscores the lure of train-cations: Indian sightseeing involves stressful travel between distant places on clogged, often pothole-riddled roads.

But a luxury train trip is like a cruise on land, scooting effortlessly between must-see sites while its guests sleep; by breakfast each day, a new city slides into view.

No wonder train trips to hard-to-reach places are an emerging trend in the travel world. Don't mistake them for Carnival or Royal Caribbean on wheels, though. With their small capacity (the Maharajas' Express holds only 84 travelers), many trains are like chartered yachts privately piloted to exclusive destinations (the Maharajas' Express, like Europe's Orient Express and Royal Scotsman, is priced for that once-in-a-lifetime honeymoon trip, from \$800 a night; maharajasespress.com).

But this new train trend has brought more and more options for every budget. A trip on the Trans-Siberian Express, an almost 6,000-mile route from Moscow to Vladivostok via the brutal yet beautiful wilderness of Siberia, starts at just \$650 per person for a week (check seat61.com for a booking guide).

Though the setup may be basic, it didn't deter 37-year-old Rachel Brown, whose first solo trip on the train was so inspiring, she's planning a return. "On the one hand, you're traveling across this vast piece of inhospitable land and on the other it's a very cozy community in the train, almost a domestic situation," she says. "And being able to do that epic journey in a comfortable way was amazing. You get to meet people - you sit and have conversations you wouldn't have on a plane journey for three hours."

Canada is another country, like Russia and India, where sightseeing can involve vast distances, so rail trips to see hard-to-reach sights are booming there, too. Via Rail, the national carrier, runs a train from Toronto to Vancouver with a 360-degree viewing car (www.viarail.ca), while the Rocky Mountaineer offers itineraries covering the rugged western reaches (www.rockymountaineer.com).

The latter just launched a promotion offering a credit of just under \$500 on any seven-night booking (made by May 28), which starts at around \$1,852. Try the Western Explorer, which offers trips to Banff and Lake Louise, plus a daytime journey to gape at the spectacular scenery on a trip to Jasper.

"People want to see the land and get a sense of the country from looking at the landscape and the people who live there," says Janet Libert, editor in chief of Executive Travel magazine. "It's totally authentic, yet there's a retro exoticness to it as well. And it offers the opportunity to spend time with the people you're traveling with."

Railway fervor is so high that a quarter of U.S. travelers headed overseas book rail-based trips, says Menlo Consulting's travel expert Heather Hardwick. Trains are also on track for a larger role in vacations, Hardwick says, thanks to European environmental standards that require operators to substitute rail journeys for long bus rides on planned itineraries. It's feel-good do-gooding.

When you're looking to book a train trip, approach it like you would a cruise. Check not only the amenities on board, from food to sleeping quarters, but also the excursions, says Libert. "After all," she says, "you're not spending all your time on the train and the tour opportunities, in the cities you stop in, are important to look at."

Certainly, when it comes to the Maharajas' Express, she's right. Lavish as the onboard setup might have been, it was the excursions that underscored the trip's uniqueness. As at the crack of dawn, driving through Ranthambore National Park, when a 4-year-old tigress - one of only 30 on the reservation - sauntered into view, stalking a pack of deer and pouncing for a kill.

Tracking (and shooting) such animals was once reserved for royals. Though guns may now be outlawed, it was that moment that put the maharaja in the Maharajas' Express.