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Edited by VICKY LISSAMAN



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RISE AND SHRINE: The wonderful Taj Mahal. Inset left, with tuk-tuk driver Saddam. Below, on tiger watch

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BY LOUISE BERWICK

"DON'T worry, his last name isn't Hussein," we are told as we're introduced to our tuk-tuk driver, Saddam.

We smile, jump in the back, and suddenly we are hurtling down a steep hill in a stomach-churning ride-of-a-lifetime.

"This is better than a roller coaster!" my pal yells as we swerve past cows, dodge motorbikes and overtake our fellow travellers.

By the time we reach the market at the bottom, my nerves are shot. Thanks to Saddam, our ride down from the Mehraugh Fort in Jodhpur, India, is one I'll never forget.

I had arrived in the "blue city" over breakfast - rolling into the desert metropolis while polishing off a freshly made dosa curry, a morning speciality.

It was my fourth day aboard the famous Maharajas' Express train and I was already feeling at home lapping up the five-star luxury I had landed in Mumbai the Saturday before at 5am, when the city was already fizzing.

The first curries of the day were ready on street stalls as women stopped traffic scurrying across roads, balancing buckets of fish on their heads for the market.

The cows laying at the roadside were stirring and the first daylight slithered through the shums.

My first taste of India and I was already in love.

My time in Mumbai was brief, long enough to walk around the city, haggle for a bag and watch the fisherman return to the shore for lunch.

But my real journey began on the country's railway tracks. As I boarded the Maharajas' Express, I learnt the opulence India has to offer.

We pulled out of Mumbai's train station as the sun began to set and rolled past the trackside shacks. We trundled past cows, children chasing goats and villagers surrounding a makeshift cricket ground.

We snaked past packed trains where limbs dangled through grates and passengers hung off the side. Then travelled long into the night as the staff on board the train offered tipples of choice, followed by a lavish feast for dinner. My

INDIA'S RAIL-LY SPECIAL

onboard butler, Jeet, woke me up the following morning, bringing fresh tea.

Our first day off the train started at the Ajanta Caves, where legend has it that British tiger hunter John Smith rediscovered them in 1819, about 1,000 years after their construction.

In true British fashion, he accidentally stumbled upon the carved-out temples and monasteries, which are now considered one of the world's greatest historical monuments by UNESCO.

Back on the train I chat to the chef, John Stone. His kitchen spans an entire carriage from which he serves up everything from spicy prawn masala to lobster and roast lamb.

The train, which at 750m long is all too easy to get lost in, has two restaurants, as well as two bars.

But those wanting a taste of the reality of India aren't left disappointed either.

On day five, in the blazing heat of Bikaner, we find ourselves in the middle of a traditional Indian festival at Junagarh Fort.

We battle through hundreds of ice-cream trucks jostling for position in the fort's courtyard before we are surrounded by hoards of beautifully dressed women carrying traditional puppets on their heads.

The colourful Gangaaur festival, which offers women the chance to celebrate the



well-being and long-life of their husband, is just the start of our party night.

A couple of hours later we are whisked away from the fort and taken to the desert, where we swap the train for camel carts and ride into the sunset.

This excursion is real movie-star stuff - we're handed champagne as we arrive to a candlelit dinner on carpets and cushions in the sand.

Incredible

It's an evening I never want to end, but this is a trip that never stops giving.

The next two days are just as incredible as we roll across the Indian countryside to our next destinations.

The following morning we search for tigers on safari in Ranthambore National Park before spending our final day visiting the incredible Taj Mahal.

As we board the train for last stop Delhi, I can't help thinking I'll miss the people and the buzz of India as much as all its famous monuments.

A SEVEN-night journey on the Maharajas' Express

Express Indian Heritage Itinerary from Mumbai to Delhi starts from £4,899 pp, based on two sharing.

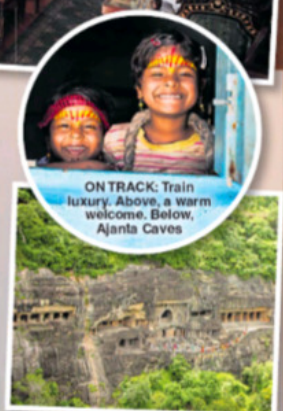
It includes all meals, tea, coffee, mineral water, soft beverages, house brands of Indian wines, beer and spirits on board, butler

FACT FILE

service, guided off-train excursions, monument entrance fees, still camera fee, transport and services of a guide and taxes. Book at uk.themaharajas.com. Getting there: Fly to Mumbai or Delhi on Air

India from London or Birmingham

from £449pp return. Book at uk.themaharajas.com. What to take: Ensure you have a visa before arriving in India, check with your doctor about vaccinations and carry some American dollars. Indian rupees cannot be bought in the UK.



ON TRACK: Train luxury. Above, a warm welcome. Below, Ajanta Caves