

Rail Royalty – The

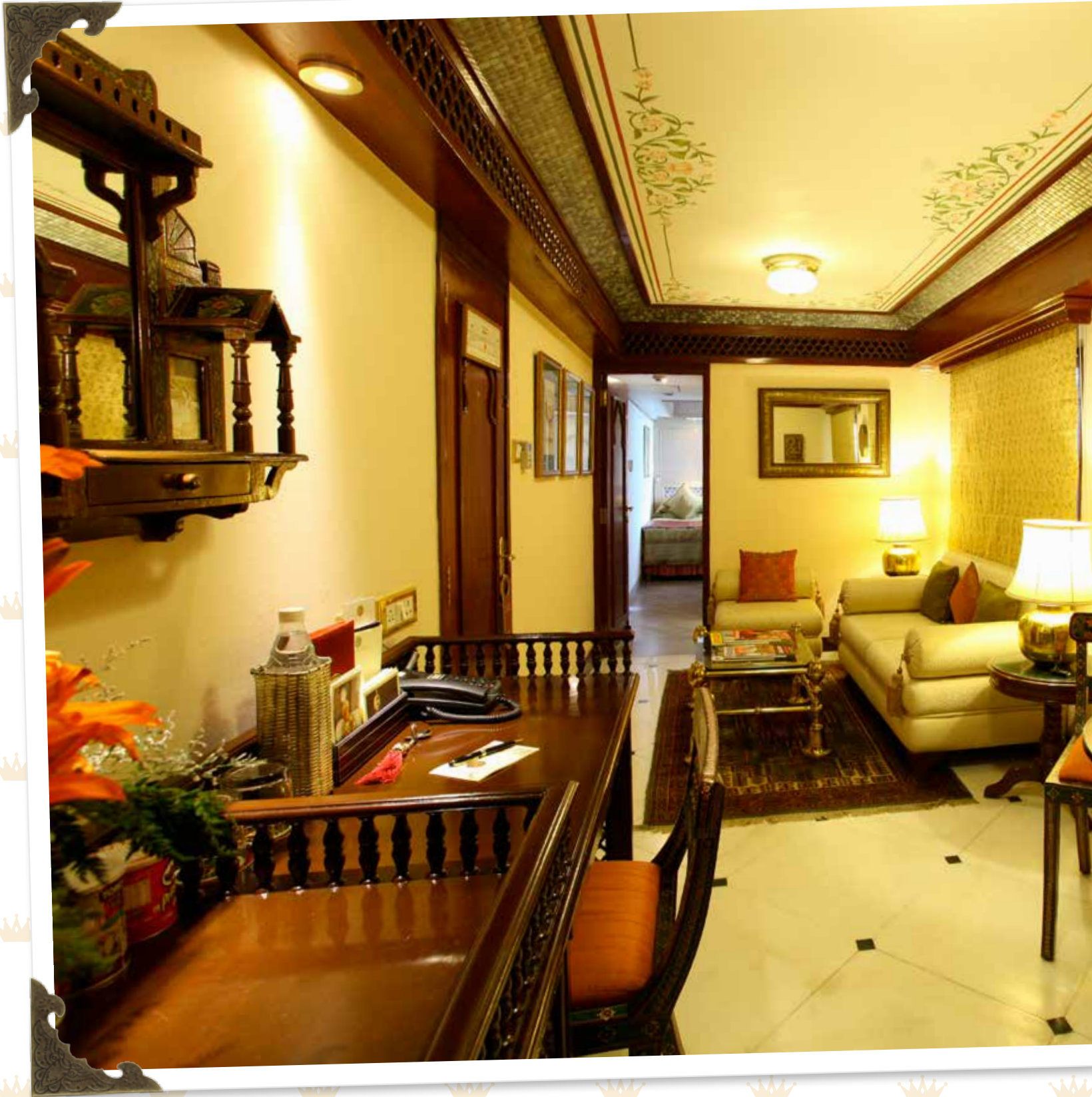


Maharajas' Express



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Photographs: MAHARAJAS' EXPRESS

When the journey itself becomes the destination, luxury travel is redefined. The uber lux offering of the Indian Railways – the Maharajas' Express, an ode to the royal heritage of India – has firmly established itself amongst the fabled most luxurious trains that have run the tracks around the world as the “World's Leading Luxury Train”.

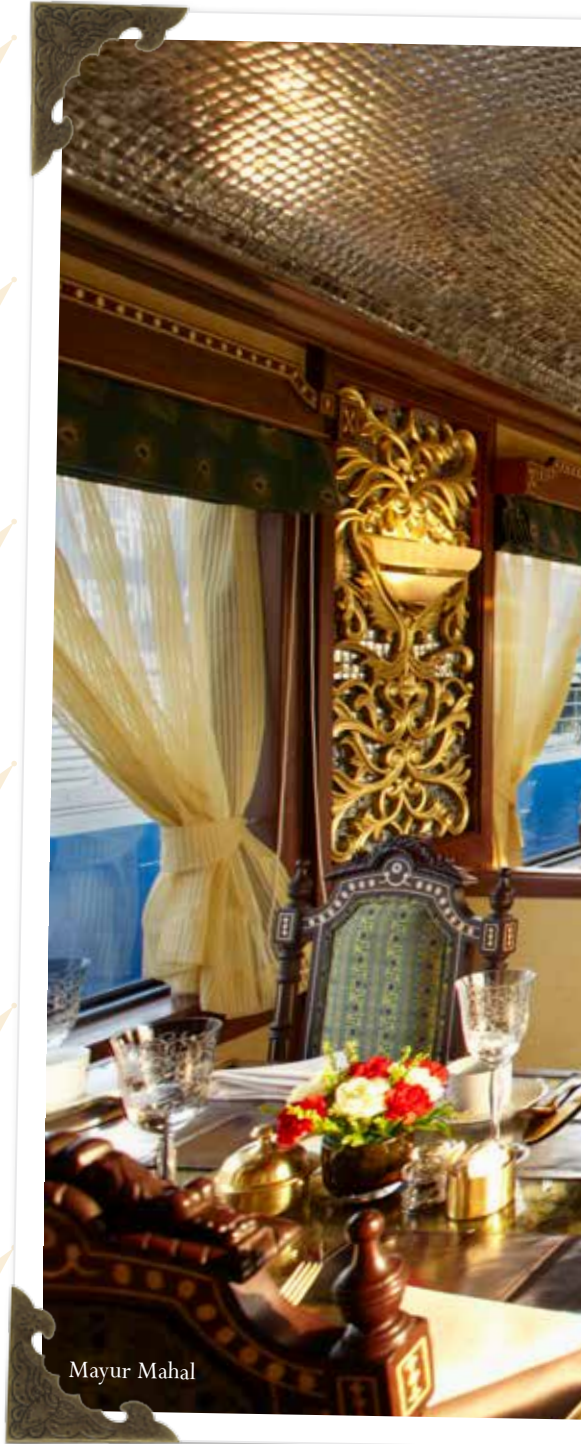




The indulgence of Indian Royals in the FINEst that was on offer (from all around the world) is legendary. Whimsical as they were, anything that caught their fancy was acquired for them – by hook or by crook – no one was willing to invite the wrath of *hukum*. Fascinated by the first passenger train in India that was flagged off with a 21 gun salute on a 34 kilometer route between Bombay's *Bori Bunder* and Thane in 1853, the royals of various princely states began to vie with each other to stay “one-up” and present ostentatious custom designed personal luxury coaches that showcased novelties and rarities like strips of ivory, solid gold hardware, sycamore wood, telephones, air coolers over ice or anything else that the makers in England could do to amuse their patrons.

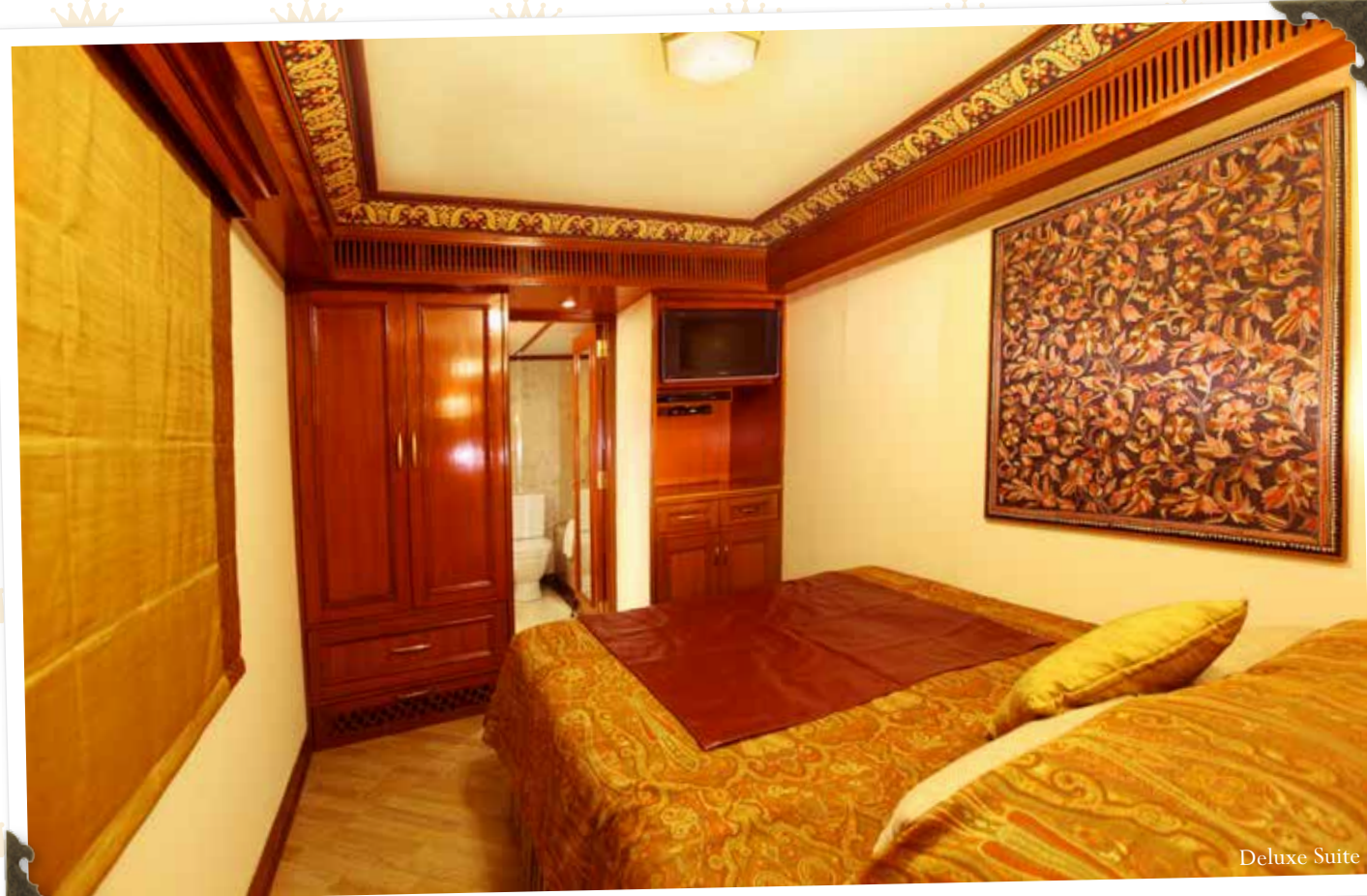


Mayur Mahal



Mayur Mahal





Deluxe Suite



Junior Suite

In a highly praise-worthy initiative, the Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation Limited (IRCTC) brought the Maharajas' Express back to life in 2010 to protect the rich royal legacy for future generations, redefine luxury travel on tracks and allow guests to experience the luxury lifestyle just like the erstwhile royals did in the bygone era.

Delhi Safdarjung Railway Station, tucked away into a relatively unknown quarter of the capital's Diplomatic Enclave, is home for the Maharajas' Express. The sleepy station kicks into a flurry of activity as the station master is alerted by flashing panels in his control room of the yesteryears that royalty is approaching. 23 ornate and glossy burgundy coloured coaches of this nearly half a mile-long train are pulled by modern locomotives (that have sadly replaced the steam engine) to the platform. Turbaned and royally liveried stewards roll out the red carpet around the aesthetic flower and *diya* arrangements, *rangolis* and local folk artists in elaborately coloured dresses that deck the platform.

Guests are led to Rajah Club lounge coach – which, as per an elaborate security protocol, is the only entry and exit point – where they are welcomed on to the train with a grand traditional Indian ceremony replete with marigold garlands, *tilak* and *aarti*. The guests' anticipation and excitement of the fascinating mystical excursion ahead is palpable. No ordinary train journey this one – the Maharajas' Express is a modern palace that defines luxurious comfort – on wheels.

The rich ethnic designs, motifs and arts in the coaches stun the visual senses. The tasteful interiors including, but not limited to, wooden carvings and mirrorwork take inspiration from the elegance and grandeur from the age of *Raj* – the whole experience is a grand tribute to the regal lifestyle of that era.



Presidential Suite



Deluxe Suite





Safari Bar

On the train, 88 guests are accommodated in 43 suites which range in classification from Deluxe suites, Junior suites, Maharaja suites and the show-stopper Presidential suite, *Navratna* (nine gems). Precious stones name the guest coaches (whose number varies depending on trip occupancy) – *Moti, Heera, Panna, Neelam, Firoza, Moonga, Pukhraj* and so on. The walls and ceilings of the lodgings carry the theme around the stone from which its name is derived and depict different bright hues of the gems (each one more striking than the next) – the insides of *Moonga* are ocean deep coral, while *Heera* proudly glistens in fiery and sparkling white.



Every cabin has large panoramic windows – an engineering design marvel – just so that the guests can savour every bit of incredible India through their journey and see the landscape evolve from plains to desert to forest as they connect with nature in a way they haven't done before. While one might expect compactness in living on a train, quite the contrary. Guests retreat to their own private sanctuary which, like any luxury hotel, is fitted with all modern amenities and have well sized *en suite* bathrooms. Design and planning has ensured that there isn't an aspect where this special train lacks excellence. That the train is constantly on the move did not deter the Indian Railways' engineers from providing live satellite television, direct dial telephone and Wi-Fi to keep guest *au courant*.

A special effort has been put into curating the food and wine offer on the train, and a more than special effort goes into ensuring that the kitchen is stocked with all requirements – there is no corner shop from where the missing ingredient can be bought during the journey should they be missed! Two dining cars are dedicated to the two speciality restaurants – Mayur Mahal (the palace of the national bird of India, the colourful peacock) and Rang Mahal (the palace of colours) – both decorated with special hand painted fresco ceilings that exemplify





the characteristic decor. The Maharajas' Express crest adorns the bespoke gold-filled chinaware which is specially imported. Complemented by the intricately etched glassware, the table settings spell luxury, on which the chefs serve their very elaborate menus of diverse Indian and international specialities. And a carefully chosen list of champagne, wines and spirits gives guests an opportunity to enjoy pairings with food, or just to unwind with fellow guests over drinks at the Rajah Club or at the Safari Bar!

"King size beds that are studded with jewels, cabins that stand up to luxury hotel shame, hospitality that the royals of yore would envy. Maharajas' Express is not just a journey, but a lifestyle – godly bliss", the management proudly claims. The Maharajas' Express is quite special, to say the least.

Emphasis is on bringing an out-of-this-world experience to the guests and to maintain a very high standard throughout the journey. And with that, an additional self-imposed focus on guest expectation, satisfaction and accessibility that has been seen as a game changer in the travel world. A multi-lingual personal butler is assigned to each residential coach. "The domain of our ever-attentive butler, who appears, genie-like, a shy smile on his face, every time we enter the coach – no matter the hour. It would be rare to find this level of service in a conventional luxury hotel but in the close confines of an ever-moving train, it's truly impressive," reads a guest testimonial.

Personalised levels of service add to the pleasures of the high-maintenance traveller. And so that this may be offered effortlessly to each travelling guest, the accommodation capacity is capped at 88. IRCTC officials claim that they have never failed to provide complete satisfaction to their guests in all the runs till date, something that they are very proud of – and rightly so. Another feather in their cap – Maharajas' Express bagged the title of the "World's Leading Luxury Train" at the World Travel Awards each year from 2012 to 2016.





Safari Bar



Safari Bar

The star of the show is still the journey itself. A blend of rich cultural heritage, ancient testimonies and local artefacts that all blossom under the modern lifestyle, which gracefully adds a special dimension to the already extraordinary experience. The “streak of burgundy” as the train is named by passers-by who see it race along the perimeter of what were 12 former princely states – from the romantic splendour of the Taj Mahal in Agra first-thing-in-the-morning to the natural grandeur of the big cats of Ranthambore or the tranquillity of the historical ceremonies on the *ghats* of the Ganges in Varanasi. Off the train, cultural experiences are re-inforced – this is a well-planned immersion that deep dives into the world of diversity that India has to offer – an exhibition elephant polo match in the historic courtyards of a monumental fort, lunch or high tea with the royals in their palaces or a sundowner flute of champagne among the sand dunes of the Thar.

Maharajas' Express is listed to be among the most expensive luxury trains in the world. Yet, the supreme sophistication and the general sense of the traditions and grand history of India does not take away from the great carnival-like atmosphere on-board. It is a mesmerising Indian odyssey which the royals would surely approve – a unique experience that the world could surely know more about. The pure indulgence that Maharajas' Express offers is true to its style and name, and is, without a doubt, beyond gold standard that can make the guests feel like “Maharaja's and Maharani's for a week”. ❁

