



LAND OF THE KINGS

RISE early, so early that technically it may still be night, to fly from Mumbai – home to colonial relics, Bollywood and abject poverty – to Jaipur, gateway to the desert state of Rajasthan in the arid North West.

India's largest state is studded with a series of imposing forts, home to the Rajput princes that ruled in the area from the eighth to the 18th centuries, and just awarded Unesco World Heritage status, a first given that they are scattered across six cities.

Separating them, the Thar Desert and Aravalli hills (where white marble was mined for fellow wonder the Taj Mahal)

As the hill forts of Rajasthan are awarded Unesco World Heritage status, **Jo Fernández** discovers the regal delights of its capital, Jaipur, from its Amber fort to a

Hawkers run alongside throwing up items for sale – embroidered cloths, wooden instruments (I doubt "health and safety" here would allow such a thing). Later I buy as many souvenirs as money allows but for now I concentrate on holding on. We lumber through the entrance and another animal catches my eye – a twitchy-tailed monkey saze on top of a dome.

The red sandstone and marble Amber (pronounced with a soft "b" as Amir) Fort is the legacy from a long gone era, with temples, chambers and gardens forming an intricate fusion of Islamic (Mogul) and Indian (Hindu) architec-

ture by Raja Jai Singh in the 18th century, the crowning glory is the Sheesh Mahal – the Room of Mirrors – featuring mirrored inlay work set in wet plaster. Its ceiling reflects a thousand stars, my guide explains.

On the road leading back to town, he stops so I can photograph the Mahal, an 18th-century pleasure palace also built by Jai Singh that appears to float serenely in the middle of Man Sagar Lake. Abandoned for 300 years it reopened to the public last year following sensitive restoration including its scented roof garden with white marble floor lit from within.

18th-century open-air observatory Jantar Mantar, rewarded with Unesco status in 2010. I could have spent hours here were it not for the sun's rays intensifying as it rose up through the clear blue sky. Pan-giant sculpture park, part scientific wonder, instruments such as the striking sundial idea have been copied across India.

It's popular with locals, the women in strikingly neon saris.

To welcome the Prince of Wales in 1876, the city was painted pink, hence its moniker "the Pink City". Only it isn't pink. Perhaps time and the sun's intense glare have turned it terracotta.

Maintaining a UK voice for Jet Airways

Jet Airways wants to maintain its position as India's premier airline offering the best service in the skies through strong relations with the media. Keene acts as the main point of contact for the press in the UK, constantly liaising with journalists and other media contacts. Since 2007 we have handled numerous situations faced by the aviation industry – including the ash cloud. We have efficiently and effectively handled interview requests, sourced and provided photography and drafted comments and quotes, maintaining Jet's position as the premier Indian airline.

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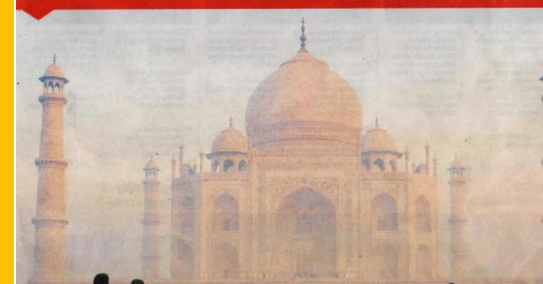
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INDEPENDENT Traveller TRAVEL SECTION OF THE YEAR



A first visit to Agra could easily trigger an attack of Agra-phobia. With its notorious sprawl and congestion, this north Indian city has, on the face of it, little to lure visitors... apart from what is arguably the world's most famous building.

The Taj Mahal may also be the world's busiest tomb: up to 60,000 people a day pack into it. With all the bustle and the chatter, all the jostling for photographs and the tour guides blowing whistles to keep their groups together, it can feel more like a market than a mausoleum. There's good reason for the sign urging simply: "Please keep quiet."

newcomers a taste of exoticism: a pagant of palaces, forts, heat, dust, elephant rides and snake charmers. Because it's so firmly on the regular tourist trail, however, the Golden Triangle can also be a baptism of fire for first-timers, with a swarm of touts and hawkers rarely found elsewhere in modern India. Most visitors seem to reckon it's worth it, though, even if they may have to queue at the Taj to be photographed sitting where Diana, Princess of Wales, posed in such beguiling solitude back in 1992.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

Between late October, after the monsoons, and mid-March, before the scorching heat is the most

the honeycomb-like Palace of the Winds and the Jantar Mantar Observatory, an astronomical sculpture park. Outside the city, the highlight is Amber Fort, with its Grand Trunk Road processions of elephant rides.

Delhi's regularly visited sites include the Vast Red Fort, the Jama Masjid mosque opposite, the towering Qutb Minar minaret, Humayun's Tomb (for some, more engaging than the Taj Mahal) and the inspirational dignity and order of Lutyens's New Delhi.

Some tours also include a visit to the grand Mughal "ghost city" of Fatehpur Sikri or to Bharatpur, India's best-known bird sanctuary.

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