Tour Code
IA2

ADVENTURESABROAD

INDIA

Ancient Temples, Mughal Marble & the Sacred Ganges

20 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Delhi

Welcome to India! This vast subcontinent enthralls visitors with its extraordinary cultural diversity, ancient history, and natural beauty from the Himalaya to tropical coastlines. Delhi itself reflects this complexity, a sprawling metropolis where Mughal monuments rise beside modern infrastructure, where ancient bazaars pulse with life, and where millennia of history unfold at every turn.

This evening we gather with fellow travellers for our first meal together, beginning what promises to be an unforgettable journey through one of the world's most captivating countries.

Overnight in Delhi.

Included Meal(s): Dinner

Day 2 Delhi: City Tour

After breakfast at the hotel, we embark on our full-day exploration of Delhi, beginning with a drive north along Rajpath, the ceremonial boulevard leading to India Gate. This 42 m/138 ft archway commemorates Indian soldiers who fell fighting for the British Army during World War I and the Afghan War of 1919, its Arc de Triomphe-inspired design dominating the broad avenue.

Our journey continues to Old Delhi and the Jama Masjid, India's largest mosque. Built between 1644 and 1658, this imposing structure can accommodate 25,000 worshippers beneath its three gateways and twin minarets. We then experience the energy of Chandni Chowk by cycle-rickshaw, navigating the imperial avenue where Shah Jahan once rode at the head of lavish cavalcades. The street now throngs with vendors, shoppers, and the organized chaos that defines Old Delhi. We pass the Red Fort, Shah Jahan's massive 17th-century sandstone fortress that blends Persian, Timurid, and Indian architectural styles into a powerful symbol of Mughal authority.

After lunch, we visit Humayun's Tomb, a stunning predecessor to the Taj Mahal built nearly a century earlier. This Persian-style mausoleum combines red sandstone with black and white marble inlay, its garden setting and geometric precision establishing the template that Mughal architecture would refine over the following decades.

We conclude our day at Qutub Minar, the monument that heralded Muslim rule in India and introduced the Indo-Islamic architectural style that would transform the subcontinent. The towering minaret and surrounding complex mark the beginning of a new artistic era that merged Central Asian traditions with Indian craftsmanship.

Overnight in Delhi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Delhi - Mandawa

After an early breakfast, we depart Delhi and drive northeast to Mandawa in the heart of Shekhawati, arriving early afternoon.

Shekhawati's semi-arid landscape seems an unlikely setting for artistic treasures, yet this region harbours some of India's most remarkable painted architecture. From the 18th century onward, wealthy merchant families commissioned grand havelis adorned with vibrant frescoes depicting everything from Hindu mythology to the arrival of the first motor cars and aeroplanes. As we approach Mandawa, these ornate mansions emerge from the sandy plains like a mirage made real.

We explore the town's winding lanes, discovering the opulent havelis of prominent families including the Goenkas, Sarafs, Ladias, and Chokhanis. Impressive gateways lead to interior courtyards where every surface carries paintings in ochre, indigo, and rust red. The frescoes blend traditional subjects with whimsical observations of the changing modern world, creating an open-air gallery that chronicles both timeless mythology and the merchant class's fascination with European fashions and new technologies.

Overnight in Mandawa.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Mandawa - Shekhavati - Bikaner

After breakfast we depart Mandawa, pausing at additional Shekhavati settlements to explore more painted havelis before continuing to Bikaner, where we arrive around midday.

Founded in 1488, Bikaner stands on high ground surrounded by formidable battlemented walls. The city's defining monument is Junagarh Fort, constructed in the 16th century and unusual among Rajasthani forts for standing on level ground rather than atop a hill. The entrance, flanked by two life-size stone elephants, leads into a complex of palaces, temples, and a mosque built primarily of red and yellow sandstone.

Within these massive walls lie some of the finest examples of Rajput artistry. The Durbar Hall displays Mughal-influenced decoration with elaborate paintings, while the Zenana, the women's quarters, dazzles with gilt reliefs, glass mosaics, and intricate mirror work. Separated from the main palace by a broad courtyard with panelled niches, the Zenana represents the intimate, graceful counterpoint to the fort's martial exterior. The marble images throughout are considered exceptional specimens of Hindu sculptural art.

Overnight in Bikaner.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Bikaner - Manvar Resort

After breakfast we drive to Manvar, our base for experiencing the Thar Desert's unique landscape, culture, and wildlife. We arrive in time for lunch at our comfortable desert resort.

This afternoon we venture into the desert by jeep, exploring the vast sand dunes and scrubland. The shy chinkara, a graceful gazelle adapted to this arid environment, makes its way across the silent sands alongside other desert wildlife. Our visit provides insight into the fascinating culture of desert communities who have thrived in this seemingly inhospitable landscape for centuries, their traditions shaped by scarcity, isolation, and the rhythms of desert life.

As evening approaches, we gather around a campfire beneath a dazzling canopy of stars. Traditional mashaals and local musicians and dancers enliven the gathering, their songs and movements echoing across the tranquil wilderness. In this peaceful corner of Rajasthan, life reveals itself in elemental form: spectacular sunrises, mesmerizing sunsets, star-filled night skies, and a silence so profound it becomes almost tangible.

Overnight near Manvar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 6 Manvar - Jodhpur - Luni

After breakfast we depart for Luni, stopping en route at Jodhpur.

Jodhpur rises from the Thar Desert in dramatic fashion. A bleak rocky ridge rears 120 m/394 ft above the desert valley, and straddling this natural fortress is Mehrangarh Fort, its sheer walls a testament to the strength and ambition of the Rathore warrior kings who built it. Seven formidable gates control access up the winding approach, each representing a layer of defence against would-be attackers.

The museum within the fort ranks among Rajasthan's finest, displaying royal apparel, ancient paintings and manuscripts, the royal household's treasured possessions, and an impressive armoury. One section features folk musical instruments from across Rajasthan, illustrating the region's diverse cultural traditions. Despite the fort's rugged military exterior, delicately latticed windows and pierced sandstone screens create an elegant aesthetic throughout the palace chambers. The contrast between martial necessity and artistic refinement defines Rajput architecture at its best.

We continue to Luni, a village known for its vivid blue-painted houses that give parts of the settlement an almost surreal appearance against the tawny desert landscape.

Overnight in Luni.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Bishnoi Village Jeep Excursion

After breakfast, we visit a Bishnoi village by jeep. The Bishnoi community follows 29 tenets laid down by 15th-century Guru Jambeshwar, with environmental conservation at the core of their faith. They fervently protect animal and plant life, creating villages where blackbuck antelope, chinkara gazelle, and other wildlife roam without fear. This deep reverence for nature extends even to their burial practices: Bishnois are sometimes interred in sitting positions at house thresholds or near cattle sheds, believing they will be reincarnated as deer, hence the herds of blackbuck commonly seen near their settlements.

We continue to Ranakpur, where remarkable Jain temples lie hidden in a shady glen. The central Chaumukha (four-faced) temple represents the most complex and extensive Jain temple in India, covering over 3600 sq m/38,750 sq ft. Its 29 halls are supported by 1,444 pillars, no two identical. Subsidiary shrines cluster in all directions, including a temple dedicated to the Sun God featuring intricate erotic carvings that demonstrate the artistic freedom permitted in Jain sacred architecture.

Overnight in Ranakpur.

NOTE: Our January departure includes an extra night in Ranakpur with a leopard jeep safari, replacing the Pushkar Camel Fair which occurs only on our autumn departure.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Ranakpur - Udaipur

This morning we take time to appreciate the serene forest setting, nestled within the Aravalli mountain range. These ancient hills, worn smooth by millions of years of erosion, provide a green sanctuary in otherwise arid Rajasthan.

We then drive to Udaipur, arriving with time to settle into our hotel. The afternoon offers leisure to explore at your own pace. The city's vibrant bazaars wind through narrow lanes filled with artisan workshops, textile merchants, and jewellers. You might wander through these atmospheric streets, discovering miniature paintings, hand-blocked fabrics, and the skilled craftspeople who maintain centuries-old traditions.

Overnight in Udaipur.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Udaipur: City Tour

Our morning exploration of Udaipur begins at the City Palace, perched on a ridge overlooking Lake Pichola. Rajasthan's largest palace complex grew over several generations yet maintains remarkable architectural harmony, its massive octagonal towers crowned with cupolas rising above the lake. Now a museum, the palace unfolds as a labyrinth of courtyards decorated with inlaid mirror work, galleries covered with frescoes, intimate temples, and roof gardens offering panoramic views across the city and lake.

The Jagdish Temple in the old town, built in the mid-17th century, features a striking bronze Garuda, the mythical bird who serves as Lord Vishnu's mount. Nearby, Sahelion-ki-Bari (Garden of the Handmaidens) exemplifies princely landscape design with ornamental pools, finely sculptured black stone cenotaphs, and numerous fountains creating a cool retreat from Rajasthan's heat.

This afternoon we cruise Lake Pichola, its steel-blue waters reflecting two extraordinary palace islands. Jag Niwas, now the Lake Palace hotel,

was built in 1746 as the summer residence of Udaipur's rulers. Jag Mandir, constructed by Maharana Karan Singh for Prince Khurram (the future Emperor Shah Jahan), showcases translucent stone slabs of remarkable thinness and rooms embellished with onyx, jade, carnelian, jasper, and agate inlay. The lake was artificially created in the 14th century, transforming what was once a valley into the scenic jewel that defines Udaipur today.

Overnight in Udaipur.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Udaipur - Pushkar

After breakfast we depart on the drive to Pushkar. On arrival we check in at our resort, set amidst orchards of Indian gooseberry and fields of roses. As Pushkar is a holy town, the resort serves no alcohol or non-vegetarian food, though an extensive selection of vegetarian cuisine from around the world is available.

During our time in Pushkar we visit the Brahma Temple, the only temple in the world dedicated to Lord Brahma, the Creator in Hinduism's holy trinity. We walk through Pushkar's winding lanes before reaching the sacred lake, which according to legend was created by fallen petals from Lord Brahma's lotus. The lake becomes particularly magical at sunset, when pilgrims gather along the ghats.

We attend an aarti ceremony at the lake's edge, a Hindu prayer ritual involving fire, incense, and chanted mantras. The rhythmic devotions and flickering lamps reflected in the water create an atmosphere of profound spirituality that has drawn pilgrims to Pushkar for centuries.

Overnight in Pushkar.

NOTE: Our autumn departure coincides with the Pushkar Camel Fair, held on the full moon of the Hindu month of Karttika. Over 200,000 buyers, sellers, and spectators descend on this peaceful holy village, creating extraordinary mayhem. The fair combines livestock trading with cultural celebration, vibrant colour, and unfiltered energy, topped with the town's inherent spirituality. It provides non-stop photography opportunities and, should you wish, bargain-priced camels.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Pushkar - Jaipur

This morning we spend additional time at the Pushkar Camel Fair (fall date) before departing for Jaipur.

We arrive in Jaipur with time to explore one of India's best-planned cities. Founded by the astronomer-king Jai Singh II in 1727 and built of rose-pink sandstone, Jaipur earned its nickname "The Pink City" from this distinctive building material. The City Palace stands at the city's heart, part royal residence, part museum. The museum sections display rare manuscripts, fine Rajput and Mughal paintings, royal apparel, and an extensive armoury that chronicles centuries of martial tradition.

Jantar Mantar observatory, built by Jaipur's founder, features massive stone instruments designed to study celestial movements with remarkable precision. The huge geometric structures, some standing several storeys high, track the sun, moon, and planets with accuracy that still impresses modern astronomers.

Hawa Mahal (Palace of Winds) serves as Jaipur's most recognizable landmark. This five-storey pink sandstone facade features a delicate honeycomb design of semi-octagonal overhanging windows, each with perforated screens. The elaborate structure allowed court ladies to observe street processions and daily life while remaining unseen from outside, a striking architectural solution to social restrictions of the era.

Overnight in Jaipur.

NOTE: Our January departure proceeds directly to Jaipur without the Camel Fair visit, spending only one night in Pushkar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Jaipur & Amer Fort

After breakfast we drive 11 km/7 mi north to Amber Fort, capital of the region for six centuries before Jaipur was established. The fort and palace complex climbs the slopes of a rugged hill, blending Hindu and Muslim architectural styles across several building phases. The austere earlier Hindu constructions in the inner apartments contrast sharply with later additions featuring the ornate flourishes characteristic of Muslim influence.

We access the fort by vehicle rather than by elephant, an option we've discontinued out of concern for animal welfare. Within the fort's massive walls, we explore palaces decorated with mirror work, marble, and semi-precious stone inlay. The Sheesh Mahal (Mirror Palace) glitters with thousands of tiny mirrors embedded in the walls and ceiling, designed so that a single candle flame would illuminate the entire chamber.

The afternoon is yours to explore Jaipur's renowned bazaars at leisure. These colourful markets showcase ancient craft traditions: meenakari enamel work, exquisite jewellery in silver and gold set with emeralds, rubies, and sapphires dangling with pearls. Small workshops reveal age-old tie-dye methods, miniature paintings on silk or cotton, hand-carved wood and bone statues, fine metalwork, and Jaipur's distinctive blue pottery.

Overnight in Jaipur.

NOTE: Our autumn tour, which spends an extra night in Pushkar, proceeds to Agra today as per tomorrow's programme.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Jaipur - Fatehpur Sikri - Agra

Today we journey to Agra, stopping en route at Fatehpur Sikri, the magnificent ghost city that served as the Mughal Empire's capital under Akbar the Great from 1571 to 1585. Perched atop a rugged ridge, this abandoned sandstone city stands as a haunting testament to imperial ambition cut short by water scarcity.

The deserted palaces, imposing fortifications, and serene mosques showcase a fascinating blend of architectural styles. Akbar employed craftsmen from across his vast empire, resulting in buildings that merge Hindu, Islamic, Persian, and indigenous Indian elements into a distinctive Mughal synthesis. The Buland Darwaza (Gate of Victory), rising 54 m/177 ft high, remains one of the world's tallest gateways, while the delicate carvings throughout the complex reveal the extraordinary skill of Akbar's artisans.

The city's brief occupation adds poignancy to its grandeur. After just 14 years, the court abandoned Fatehpur Sikri when the water supply proved inadequate for a capital city, leaving this architectural masterpiece to the desert wind and silence.

We continue to Agra, checking into our hotel with the evening at leisure.

Overnight in Agra.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Agra: The Taj Mahal & Agra Fort

This morning we visit the Taj Mahal, one of the world's most recognizable monuments and an enduring symbol of love. Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan commissioned this white marble mausoleum for his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal, who died in childbirth in 1631. Construction required 17 years and employed over 20,000 artisans from across the empire and beyond. As morning light illuminates the pristine marble facade, the monument displays subtle colour shifts, appearing to change from soft pink at dawn to brilliant white at midday to golden at sunset.

The perfection lies in details: semi-precious stone inlay creating floral patterns across the marble, perfectly proportioned minarets flanking the central dome, reflecting pools that mirror the monument's ethereal beauty. The structure rests on the banks of the Yamuna River, its placement and orientation carefully calculated for maximum visual and spiritual impact.

This afternoon we explore Agra's bazaars, where craftsmen continue the centuries-old tradition of marble inlay work using techniques passed down through generations. We then visit Agra Fort, a massive red sandstone fortress commanding the Yamuna's west bank. Shaped

by successive emperors Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan, the fort contains palaces, audience halls, and mosques that chronicle the evolution of Mughal architectural taste from Akbar's bold monumentalism to Shah Jahan's refined elegance.

Overnight in Agra.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Agra - Train to Gwalior & Gwalior Fort

After an early breakfast, we transfer to the railway station to board the Shatabdi Express to Gwalior. We're met on arrival and transfer to our hotel.

This afternoon we visit Gwalior Fort, where walls and buildings constructed by successive rulers create a layered historical record. The 8th-century Suraj Kund tank, two 11th-century temples known as Sas Bahu ka Mandir dedicated to Vishnu, the 16th-century Gujari Mahal Palace, and the Hindola Gate housing a small archaeological museum all contribute to the complex's architectural diversity.

We also visit Jai Vilas Palace and Museum in the city below. This enormous 19th-century palace features some of India's most extravagant royal possessions, including a pair of the world's heaviest chandeliers suspended in the Durbar Hall. Before installation, ten elephants were placed on the roof to test whether the ceiling could support their weight. The palace also features a crystal staircase and a dining table fitted with a silver electric train that carried brandy and cigars to guests after dinner, exemplifying the eccentric grandeur of princely India's twilight years.

Overnight in Gwalior.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Gwalior - Khajuraho

Today we travel by road to Khajuraho, where we explore the western group of temples upon arrival. Built between 950 and 1050 AD during the Chandela dynasty's peak, these temples rank among India's most creative architectural achievements. Only 22 of the original 85 temples survive, their sandstone surfaces covered with thousands of intricate carvings.

The sculptures celebrate life in all its dimensions: gods in cosmic evolution, mythical beasts, celestial nymphs, and humans experiencing the full spectrum of emotion from devotion to desire. The erotic carvings that made Khajuraho famous represent only a fraction of the total artwork, yet they demonstrate a frank celebration of physical love as one aspect of spiritual completeness.

The Kandariya Mahadev Temple represents the pinnacle of Chandela artistry. Built between 1025 and 1050 AD, its soaring shikhara tower rises 31 m/102 ft and carries over 900 sculptures arranged in ascending tiers. The Lakshmana Temple, one of the earliest and best preserved, dates from 930-950 AD and retains its full five-part floor plan with four subsidiary shrines. The massive Varaha Temple houses a huge intricately carved boar incarnation of Vishnu, while the Chitragupta Temple uniquely honours Surya, the Sun God. The Matangesvara Temple remains in active worship, unlike its museum-piece neighbours within the fenced enclosure.

Overnight in Khajuraho.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 17 Khajuraho Touring - Fly to Varanasi

This morning we visit Khajuraho's eastern temple group before flying to Varanasi, arriving late afternoon.

Varanasi has served as Hinduism's spiritual heart since before recorded history. When Buddha visited in 550 BC, it was already an ancient, flourishing settlement. Known as Kashi in the 7th century BC, the city represents the oldest continuously inhabited city on earth and the epicentre of Hindu religious life. For devout Hindus, to die in Varanasi and have one's ashes scattered in the Ganges ensures liberation from the cycle of rebirth.

This evening we attend the spectacular Ganga Aarti ceremony on the riverbank, where thousands of butter lamps are lit and set afloat on the sacred river. The ceremony begins with the blowing of a conch shell and continues with priests waving incense in elaborate patterns and circling large flaming lamps. The movement of the lamps, held in the priests' hands, synchronizes tightly to rhythmic chants and clanging cymbals. The heady scent of sandalwood permeates the air as crowds of pilgrims and visitors press close to witness this ancient ritual that unfolds every evening without fail.

Overnight in Varanasi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 18 Varanasi Touring

Before sunrise we take a boat ride on the sacred Ganges, where devout Hindus perform their daily ablutions along the ghats. These bathing steps extend over 5 km/3 mi along a steep bank, forming the soul of the city. Pilgrims immerse themselves in the holy waters, perform puja ceremonies, practice yoga, and meditate as the sun rises over the river. The spectacle of thousands engaged in spiritual practice creates an unforgettable scene of devotion and renewal.

After returning to the hotel for breakfast, we walk through an intricate maze of narrow alleyways hiding no fewer than 2,000 temples and shrines in seemingly disorderly array. Domes, pinnacles, and towers rise alongside derelict 18th-century palaces dominating the Ganges' left bank. The streets pulse with noise and vibrant colour, vendors selling everything from silk saris to religious paraphernalia to street food. We visit important temples including Bharat Mata Mandir and Durga Temple, and walk down Vishwanathji Ki Gali, an ancient alley lined with beautiful temples and shops selling every item required for temple worship.

This afternoon we visit Sarnath, 9 km/6 mi from Varanasi. This site holds profound significance for Buddhism as the location where Buddha preached his first sermon after attaining enlightenment. The Dhamek Stupa, dating to 500 AD and adorned with geometric ornaments, marks the spot. Emperor Ashoka built the Dharmarajika Stupa in the 3rd century BC to contain bodily relics of the Buddha, making Sarnath the Buddhist equivalent of Varanasi's importance to Hinduism.

Overnight in Varanasi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 19 Varanasi Touring - Fly to Delhi

This morning we visit Sarnath. Located 9 km from Varanasi, it the centre of the Buddhist world, just as Varanasi is that for the Hindu. It was here that Buddha preached his first sermon, partially recorded on one of its stones. Dhamek Stupa dating back to 500 AD, is the largest with geometrical ornaments on its wall. Dharmarajika Stupa was set up by emperor Ashoka to contain the bodily relics of the Buddha.

Afternoon transfer to the airport for our flight to Delhi.

Overnight in Delhi (airport area hotel).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 20 Departure

Departure from Delhi.

BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast