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India just the way you like it

A bike ride, a maharajah with connections, and lots of curry (not too spicy, thanks)... Our Golden Triangle tour takes shape

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The maharajah looks out over his kingdom and nods his approval. The sun is sinking behind the hill, casting a warm light on the fields and faded blue buildings of the village below the royal fort. Earlier, elderly villagers had bowed respectfully as he had passed by, nudging grandchildren to follow suit. At his feet sits Tiger, whose head he strokes absentmindedly as rose-ringed parakeets perch on the parapets, squawking irreverently.

If all this sounds like a scene from an 18th-century Indian fairy tale, it almost is, except the timing's a bit off. This tableau is real, and it's being played out right now at Bhainsrorgarh Fort, a slightly crumbling but utterly charming 270-year-old palace in Rajasthan. The "maharajah", Hemendra Singh, turned his family home into a five-room boutique hotel a few years ago and it is, in simple terms, one of the most lovely places you'll lay your head. Yes, you'll find more spectacular accommodation on honeymoon islets in the Maldives, and bigger beds in five-star suites on the Upper East Side, but for sheer delicious antique class, this is it.

And Tiger? He sits there obediently before stretching and padding over so that I can scratch his head. The beast was found at Delhi airport, abandoned — it's a long story, involving lots of phone calls and a lorry ride, but eventually Hemendra gave him a home here. It didn't like any name it was given, until someone shouted "Tiger" and it perked right up. It's an unlikely title for a labrador, but, like many things in this part of the world, somehow the unlikely seems perfectly normal.

The Indian Golden Triangle is a well-worn trail around the country's headline cities, Delhi, Agra and Jaipur. It is the default setting for the first-time visitor, the Route 66 of the subcontinent, the grand tour of the former colony. The clash of the two Delhis, old and new, the majesty of the Taj Mahal and the chaos and hustle of Jaipur make for an engrossing, often intoxicating, almost inevitably head-spinning immersion into Indian life. You can do the three comfortably — relatively speaking — in a week, and it's some week. And that used to be enough. But we're getting greedy. First-time tourists to India now demand more from their itineraries, and tour operators are facing increasing calls for a glimpse into rural life. Which is how I ended up on the rooftop patio of Bhainsrorgarh Fort with a gin and tonic, the sun setting, the parakeets perched and Hemendra asking

me how hot I wanted my curry.

Rajasthan is the perfect place for a rural detour. The name itself translates as “land of kings”. Numerous Rajputs (“sons of kings”) set up home here in the 6th century AD, building walled forts and cities to protect their land from invading hordes. Many of these remain, as do the ruling families, but since India became independent, in 1947, their power has waned, and in 1971 a law was passed divesting them of all privileges.

Only their homes and their sense of paternalism towards their former charges linger, as does the villagers’ respect for the noble family on the hill. These families, no longer rich, need help to maintain their royal residences. Which is why many are opening them up to you, in all their faded regal splendour, with all the extraordinary hospitality of princes and princesses.

The point of tagging on these rural additions to a three-city itinerary, other than experiencing a living history lesson while gaining an understanding of life outside the city, is to relax. Delhi, Agra and Jaipur are many wonderful things — some fairly grim things, too — but relaxing they are not. When I stepped under the archway into Bhainsrorgarh, my shoulders dropped at least an inch. Yet really to relish these magnificent old palaces, with their back yards of fields, lakes and hilltops, you need to have experienced the other side.

Have you been to Delhi? Lively, isn’t it? If you haven’t, take Cairo’s traffic, but treble the nihilistic abandon that is part of getting into a car there; add four times the dirt, debris and poverty of the outskirts of Nairobi or Dakar; and crank up the volume of downtown Manhattan during rush hour to the power of 15. Throw in more cattle than a Devon dairy, all of them in the middle of the road, and you’re halfway there. Old Delhi is squalid, cramped and chaotic, and the only way to explore it is to allow yourself to be engulfed. So let’s not go in for half measures: a dawn cycle tour sounded terrifying, but would end up as one of the highlights of this, or any, adventure.

We picked up the bikes while it was still dark and set off, a timorous snake of two-wheeled wanderers with guides at the head and the tail. Old Delhi was built for 20,000 people and now houses 2m, according to some estimates. Actually, “houses” is the wrong word — every pavement, gutter, or doorway reveals somebody curled up, asleep where they dropped, and as dawn breaks and we cycle into the dense heart of the city, it comes alive around us. People brush themselves down, squat, wash and set to work where they woke. The local paper carries adverts showing dead bodies, asking for help identifying them. “Tourists are scared of Old Delhi,” our guide, Denzin, says. “They’re scared of treading in the muck.”

This side of Delhi is one enormous wholesale market. When New Delhi was built, the rich no longer had any need to come here, so those who remain are the businessman and the labourer, Delhi’s working (or hoping to work) class. Each street sells something different: fruit, cloth, wedding dresses, spice. As we snaked through them all, then stopped off at the sights — the Red Fort, or the biggest mosque in India, Jama Masjid — then detoured for a glass of sweet, steaming chai from a roadside vendor, I felt closer to the city and its people than I had to almost any other metropolis. And nobody got knocked down. Well, not seriously.

From Delhi, old and new, to Agra, and the Taj, and the thousands who come to stare at it. Initially, I had no intention of being one of them. When I’m told that something is a must-see, a wonder of the world, I’m first in the queue for somewhere — anywhere — else. But I went because I was travelling with my father. His mother was born in India, and lived between Delhi and Shimla, in the Himalayas, for her first 12 years, while her father served in the army and the Indian civil service during the Raj. Dad had talked of seeing where she grew up for so long, I knew he wouldn’t ever go unless I went with him. So we went. And we went to the Taj, because, having come this far together, we had to.

Good job, too. It was, of course, extraordinary — a temple to symmetry, order, mathematics. You know the story: the emperor Shah Jahan was so consumed with grief in 1631 when his third wife, Mumtaz Mahal, died giving birth to their 14th child at the age of 38, that he ordered the greatest building in the world to be erected to house her body. It took 20,000 people 22 years to build, but finally she was laid to rest in the very

centre of the tomb, at the heart of this monument to love. After being placed under house arrest by a devious son, Shah Jahan died 13 years later, still in mourning, aged 74. He was buried to the side of her. In this palace of perfection and precision, he lies for ever off centre.

After Delhi, and Agra, and the constant crush of people on the streets, the trains and the roads, you can perhaps see the attraction of Hemendra and the rooftop of Bhainsrorgarh Fort. Having spent a silent night within its walls, we walked into the village, where my father was kidnapped. One minute he was there, walking down a narrow street, smiling at everyone; the next minute, same street, no him. I found him at a wedding — he'd been snatched as the guest of honour. Garlanded with flowers, blessed with a handful of sweets, he was deep in discussion with the village elders. It took half an hour of photos and negotiation to persuade him to come back.

Our second fort, Ramathra, was on the way to Jaipur, at the end of a road so pockmarked that Nasa could have used it to practise the Mars landings. The fort has been a family residence for more than 300 years, but was recently turned into a boutique hotel by the current “maharajah”, Ravi Raj Pal. It had a few luxury tents on the lawn, and a few luxury suites in the fort, and the gins and tonic were this time served with mint. (Try it, it's good.) Ravi and Hemendra went to the same school and know each other well. In both places, the boss took us out for wildlife tours and walks, as they try to with every guest. Personal touches — hot-water bottles in your bed, for instance — abound. But one stood out above any act of hospitality I have ever witnessed.

Dad loves curry, but curry doesn't love him, so, on our first night in Bhainsrorgarh, as we did everywhere we stayed, we asked Hemendra if he wouldn't mind giving us a mild option for dinner. Only once, on our first night at Ramathra, did we forget. As we were served a steaming lentil dhal, Dad looked at me apprehensively. Ravi appeared at our table. “I hope you don't mind,” he said, “but Hemendra called earlier and mentioned that you might prefer a less spicy option. I've taken the liberty and changed your menu.”

Eight months later, we still talk about that moment. It encapsulated the hospitality we received as soon as we stepped off the well-worn triangular trail. That's not to say that the hotels on our regular route weren't outstanding. They were. But we were richly rewarded for our deviations, as Ravi and Hemendra were something else — kingly but humble. It's the sort of thing your spectacular accommodation on honeymoon islets, or five-star suites on the Upper East Side, will never quite match. I doubt we'll ever forget the maharajah with his Tiger by his side, and his hotline to the kitchens of kings.

Paul Croughton travelled as a guest of Cox & Kings

Cox & Kings (0845 154 8941, coxandkings.co.uk) can tailor-make a private 11-day Golden Triangle tour, with stays at Bhainsrorgarh Fort and Ramathra Fort, from £2,895pp, B&B, including flights, private transfers and excursions. Or try Transindus (0844 879 3960, transindus.co.uk) or Audley (01993 838300, audleytravel.com).

Passages to India: seven classic trips

The trick to getting the most out of any holiday in India is not to cover too much in one trip. Below, we reveal how to do the Golden Triangle, and we've parcelled the rest of the country into six holiday-sized areas.

All prices are per person, B&B, and include flights from London. Ask the operator about regional departure options

The Golden Triangle takes in Delhi, Agra and Jaipur, but there are many variations. It can be done cheaply on a group or private tour that sticks to four-star hotels. For greater style, you could tailor-make a trip to include the best heritage hotels. The Holiday Place (020 7644 8248, theholidayplace.co.uk) has a nine-

day group tour from £999. Trailfinders (020 7368 1500, trailfinders.com) has a nine-day private tour from £949, including car and driver, local guides and sightseeing. Transindus (020 8566 3739, transindus.com) has a nine-night private trip from £1,895, staying at the Imperial, in New Delhi, the Oberoi Amarvilas, in Agra, and the Samode Haveli, in Jaipur.

Kerala is a lush strip between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats, with a tropical climate, beaches, backwaters and laid-back locals. Audley (01993 838000, audleytravel.com) has Classic Kerala, an 11-day private tour, from £1,500. You'll visit Kochi and the tea plantations at Munnar, take a jungle walk at the Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary — where you might see elephants — enjoy a houseboat cruise from Alleppey and wind down at Marari Beach.

Rajasthan is a fiery mixture of desert and forts, palaces and flamboyant costumes. There's the Pink City of Jaipur and the nearby Amber Palace, the hilltop fort at Jodhpur, the Thar Desert city of Jaisalmer, the magnificent marble temple of the Jains at Ranakpur and the serene beauty of Lake Pichola, in Udaipur. Abercrombie & Kent (0845 485 1548, abercrombiekent.co.uk) has a 14-day Essence of Rajasthan tour, calling at Jaipur, Jaisalmer, Jodhpur, Ranakpur, Udaipur and Devi Garh, from £4,035.

The **foothills of the Himalayas** are a calm, clean-aired slice of mountain grandeur. Shimla, the Raj-era summer capital, is a must, as is Dharamsala, the home in exile of the Dalai Lama. Other options are the Sikhs' Golden Temple, in Amritsar; Rishikesh, the self-styled yoga capital of the world; and the new city of Chandigarh, designed by Le Corbusier. Pettitts (01892 515966, pettitts.co.uk) has a 12-night private tour, visiting Delhi, Amritsar, Dharamsala, Shimla and Chandigarh, from £2,890, including some dinners.

Tamil Nadu doesn't have the same cachet as Kerala — its beaches are more modest — but it has enthralling temple cities and a fascinating history. The temple town of Madurai is wonderful, as is the more tranquil Chola capital, Tanjore. You'll find grand old trading mansions in Chettinad, echoes of France in its former territory, Pondicherry, and beach temples and stone carvings in Mahabalipuram. Ampersand Travel (020 7289 6100, ampersandtravel.com) has a 15-day Mystical Tamil Nadu private tour, visiting Chennai, Madurai, Chettinad, Tanjore and Pondicherry, with four nights by the beach at Mahabalipuram, from £2,385.

Kolkata, or Calcutta, the capital of British India for more than 100 years, is a fascinating megacity and the gateway to the Himalayas and India's eight eastern states and territories. Darjeeling is a beautiful hill station, known for its "toy train", olde England architecture and views of distant Everest. On the Go Tours (020 7371 1113, onthegotours.com) has an 11-day private tour, visiting Kolkata, Kalimpong, Gangtok, Pelling and Darjeeling, from £1,599.

The **Deccan Plateau**, which straddles a swathe of central and southern India, is home to the extraordinary palaces of the Nizams, in Hyderabad, and the ruined remains of the Vijayanagar capital at Hampi. Then there's Mysore, with its charming boulevards and maharajah's palace — lit up nightly by 80,000 bulbs — the Hoysala temples at Belur and Halebidu, and cosmopolitan Bangalore. Greaves India (020 7487 9111, greavesindia.co.uk) has a 15-day private tour, taking in Mumbai, Hyderabad, Hampi, Mysore, Bangalore and more, from £3,185

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