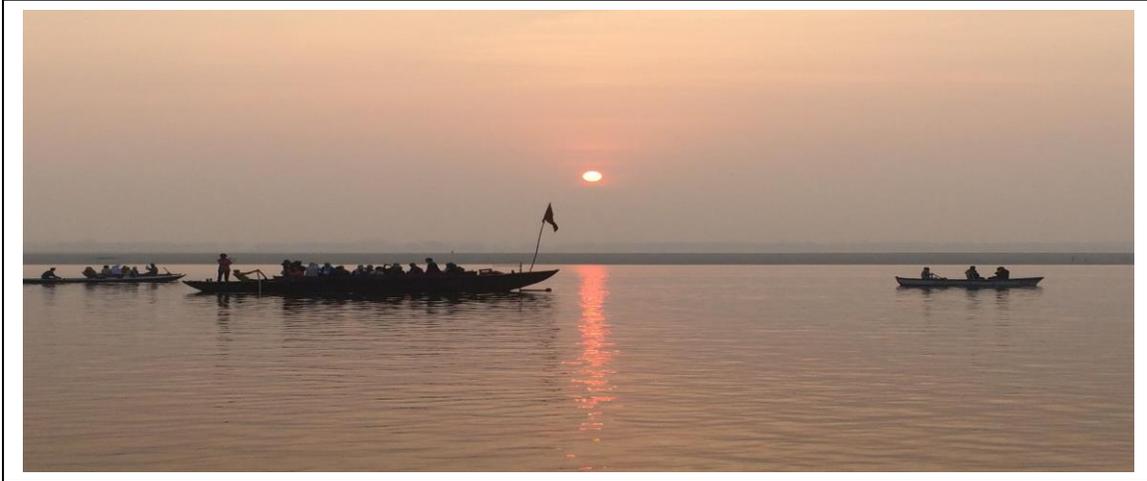


## WHY I LOVE INDIA

By Milan Vertone



India is the land of beauty, colour, tranquility amidst chaos, and home to some of the most iconic sites in the world. Amongst its 38 UNESCO World Heritage Sites, is the stunningly beautiful palace of love, the Taj Mahal. I always imagined what it would feel like to be able to peer up at this architectural marvel of glimmering white stone and let my eyes soak in her majesty. I had a question though; would my dream be more fantastic than the reality of being there?

Like thousands of Canadians who have flocked to India for many years now, I too had an unwavering longing to visit this country I had been dreaming about since I was a teenager. So many things come to mind when one envisions India and for me, my visions were alluring, colourfully beautiful, and magical. While I fully understand that for many people the first word they think of when it comes to India is not magical, however, in my case, you'll soon learn why I find India to be one of the most magical places in the world.

By 2016 I had travelled to over 35 countries including the Middle-East and Africa, and a lot of my journeys were by myself. I preferred it this way because it gave me the freedom to do whatever I liked, moving from here to there at a whim and discovering amazing places on my own terms. India, however, was a slightly different story because, without having access to a car (navigating through crowded streets of people and animals is one thing but the even bigger problem is

finding anywhere to park as most spots are owned) I couldn't wrap my head around the fact that a lot of my trip would be trying to get from point A to point B. For that reason, I sought out a travel specialist with the idea of creating a custom private tour of India.

Needless to say, there were quite a few travel agents to choose from. The problem I was having was that they all wanted to lump me in on their standard tours of India with people who had India on their 'bucket list' who would check off each site and stop without understanding or researching the country, people, and culture at all – for someone who usually travels alone, I knew this was not for me. I had targeted the larger travel companies because they offered a standard of luxury that was appealing but none of them spoke to me like they were as passionate about India as I was. These companies didn't take me seriously either when I said I wanted to go on a private tour and that I was alone. Was India not as safe as I thought it was? Was this indeed the case? Absolutely not!

Enter Nazir Karnai of Explore India Journeys Inc. who I stumbled upon when I googled 'best Canadian tour company for India'. When I spoke with Nazir he not only told me each and every place I needed to experience while in India, something I was still a bit unclear on, he also spoke with such enthusiasm for his homeland country that it was hard to imagine travelling there with any other company and, to top it off, his office was right in downtown Vancouver and I live in North Vancouver! Bingo...I not only had a plan now but an entire itinerary with a jam-packed 3-week list of the most captivating experiences one could imagine.

Bags packed, ready to go and I was off to India in 2016 to celebrate my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, alone but on Explore India's award-winning Journey of the Senses small group tour and then an exciting extension to Kerala for my actual birthday. I'll never forget the day I left for India as I said good-bye to my ex-husband and 15-year-old daughter at the airport because I was filled with a combination of sadness to leave my daughter and absolute joy and exuberance at the thought that I would be in incredible India in 32 hours ...a long 32-hours. (*Don't worry, now Air Canada fly's direct so you won't have such a long wait to arrive*)

After a few tears, a lot of snacks, and many hours later, I arrived in the capital of India, the fabulous city of **Delhi**. The experience as I walked into the Delhi airport and out onto the street will be etched in my minds-eye forever and for all the

right reasons. Although weary from travel, my senses were immediately awakened with scents of rose petal flowers and sandalwood essence that subtly lingered in the air... a far cry from the stereotypical smells people assume of India. A lover of classical Indian music since an early age, my heart was touched by the gentle strumming of sitar that came from the steps of the open-air airport lobby as I walked, in a trance-like fashion, toward the alluring music. As I floated



through toward the exit, I glanced up at the most memorable and gigantic painting of a white-haired Indian man that seemed to be watching every step I took as his gentle eyes followed me all the way to where I could walk out onto the street. There, I saw everything from people to goats to ladies dressed in

gorgeous colourful dresses handing out flowers to all the travellers. Aware that I had only been in India's loving arms for a mere 5 minutes and was already completely seduced by her charms, I wondered how it could get any better than this and.....I was only at the airport.

It was mid-morning when I reached my hotel and although they had turned down my blinds in anticipation of needing to rest, I changed my clothes and dashed down to the lobby to find out how I could go for a walk around and do a little exploring. I was staying at the world-renowned Taj Hotel chain, that Explore India arranged for my early arrival, and the service was absolutely incredible. I explained to the very concerned looking doorman that I wanted to go and explore, and he urged me to stay at the hotel and enjoy a nice cup of chai and a walk in the garden. Having travelled through some pretty sketchy places in the past, I knew that I would be totally fine walking around in Delhi and assured the handsome fellow that I would be back in a little while. Furrowed brows of concern bid me farewell and I left for what turned out to be the most memorable first day of any trip I've had.

I walked down onto the street by the hotel and, within a matter of minutes, a bicycle rickshaw pulled up and asked me, in perfect English, if I would like to have



a small tour of Delhi. The elderly looking man explained that he would take me wherever I wanted to go and the cost would be a very good deal (ended up being less than \$10 CAD). Well, I had a pre-tour tour and an absolutely amazing first day in Delhi as I went with my new friend

Ahmer for an 8-hour adventure in Delhi. I had my first meal in India, had two outfits custom made, and also bought a bronze Buddha that was one of my best purchases in India. When I arrived back at the hotel, just before the dinner hour, my fabulous tour host, Nazir Karnai, who was preparing to greet arriving tour guests, advised me to be sure to leave word with the hotel or with him in the future because no one knew where I was...lesson learned, point taken but I went to bed that night, exhausted yet fantastically happy at my trip so far.

My tour began the following morning and I have to warn you, you are about to enter an enchanting world unlike any you have even imagined - hang onto your hat and enjoy the ride on **Explore India's Journey of the Senses award-winning tour.**

**Delhi** – well, I did cheat and go all over Delhi the day before the tour started but that certainly didn't make my first tour day any less interesting. After a delectable breakfast of, well, everything you can think of, we went to the **House of Mahatma Gandhi**, aka 'Father of India' as lovingly referred to by the Indian people. I had



anticipated the moment that I would walk the path that Gandhi walked the day he was murdered by an advocate for Hindu nationalism, and the moment was as I had suspected it would be, surreal. As we pulled up to the home where Gandhi spent the last 144

days of his life, there was a calm in the air as the sun beamed down on us and birds were singing in the beautiful Ashoka trees which were nestled around the grounds. As we walked the path in the footprints of Gandhi, you could hear his voice of prayers gently filling the air through a loudspeaker which added to the intensity of the experience. When we approached the Dais, or raised steps from the lawn, we stood in the exact spot where Gandhi was shot when he was approaching the alter to offer his evening prayer. This moment, as well as being

able to go into Gandhi's house to view his personal spaces along with several of his items that still sit in his room, is a moment that I carry with me as an absolute highlight of my trip to India.

Next, we arrived at **Gurudwara Bangla Sahib** which is known as the most beautiful and prominent Sikh gurudwaras or houses of worship in India. One of



the most amazing things about Sikh gurudwaras is that they all feature a 'langar' or place to prepare and serve food. Regardless of your race, religion, gender, and place in the world, the Sikh people open their doors to anyone who would like to come in and enjoy a meal of freshly prepared food at no cost to the person at all. It is truly an enormous undertaking as volunteers spend hours each day preparing gigantic pots of vegetarian cuisine that is endless as they lovingly make enough food to serve over 10,000 meals a day. As with every remarkable experience in India, despite hundreds of people partaking in the feast and hundreds more waiting for the next sitting, the enchanting sounds of Indian music surrounds the dining hall as people sit on the floor, in a very orderly fashion, and enjoy the sumptuous offerings of this incredible Sikh tradition.



Pants bursting at the seams but super happy nevertheless, we are now at the **UNESCO World Heritage Site of Humayun's Tomb** which was built by his widow 14 years after his death. Humayun was the second Mughal emperor of India and his tomb is thought to have inspired the design of the Taj Mahal.

**Next, from a tomb to a bicycle rickshaw ride through Chandi Chowk and the streets of Old Delhi, yes please!!!** I've done some pretty fun things in my life,



however, gunning it through the crowded and animal ridden lanes of Old Delhi was some of the most fun I've had. I still remember my exact feeling when my nervous bicycle rickshaw driver reached out his hand to help me aboard and timidly looked away as he probably assumed that I wouldn't take his helping hand. I would have none of that

nonsense in this amazing country with these gentle people and as I took his hand, he turned toward me, all teeth and gleaming ear to ear, and said 'you are welcome here' then he threw me onto the back carriage of his rickety bike and off we went. We blazed a trail from where the bikes were parked all the way through Chandi Chowk which is one of the oldest and busiest areas of Old Delhi and where the winding, narrow roads seem endless. Whizzing past people, goats, vehicles, and shops galore, we seemed to be passing everyone at warp speed. As we were held up in a bit of a bottle neck at one point, a little scruffy piglet running beside our bike looked up at me with hope in its eyes that I might like to pick it up, sadly, a pet piglet was not on my list of things I wanted to take home from India and I gave him a little wink that with any luck he wouldn't end up on someone's dinner plate that night.

When we did stop for a break, I wandered through the many spice shops that lined the streets. Hues of greens, sandy browns and golden shades of turmeric and many other spices were front and centre in the spice lane area of Chandi Chowk. The experience of walking through the streets of Old Delhi was like stepping back in time as animals worked to pull carts, people were selling every imaginable item out on the street, and there was a happy tone amidst the bustle of the chaotic day. *\*Not mentioned in this article but included on the Journey of the Senses tour are stops at Jama Mosque and Akshardhan Temple.*



The next day we went from the busy capital of Delhi to the religious capital of Hinduism and oldest living city in the world, **Varanasi**. There are a lot of movies filmed along the river Ganges, where tourists and locals, aboard tiny boats, make flower offerings to the river. Similarly, many famous photos of India are taken along the Ghats, a word used to mean steps (as well as mountain ranges), of the river

as it is tradition for the people to bathe and worship in the river each morning and evening. All of these images are in the city of Varanasi, the most mystical place I have ever been to and where the presence of a bewildering yet sweet and magical energy walked alongside me every single place I went.

Regardless the time of day or night, Varanasi is one of the most atmospheric cities in India, for good reason, there is a lot going on here. I could write about Varanasi for days but, for our purposes here I will tell you the top two things I did in Varanasi starting with the Aarti Ceremony the day I arrived. The Aarti ceremony in Varanasi is held on the banks of the Ganges River and is a fire ceremony whereby the worshipper is offering prayer to the Ganges. It is said the funeral pyre has been burning for over 300 years along the Ganges and over 200 cremations take place each day.

As we sat silently in our little boat on the river, the Explore India team gave each of us flowers that we could gently place in the river as our offering. Unlike so



many stories you hear, the Ganges river water was like any other body of water one would see except this one had beautiful lotus flowers, some lit with candles, floating atop the water. We could see the Aarti ceremony flames burning high along the Ghats of the river and as drums beat and music played, we could see

bodies being cremated too. In Varanasi, the cycle of life, death, and rebirth is a normal and sacred aspect to living and there isn't anything morbid or sad here, quite the opposite. However, for Westerners to see bodies burning out in the open can be quite unnerving but, overall, it is a uniquely happy affair. Also, to be

cremated in Varanasi and have your ashes released in the Ganges is said to bring the deceased person moksha or liberation and it breaks the cycle of rebirth.

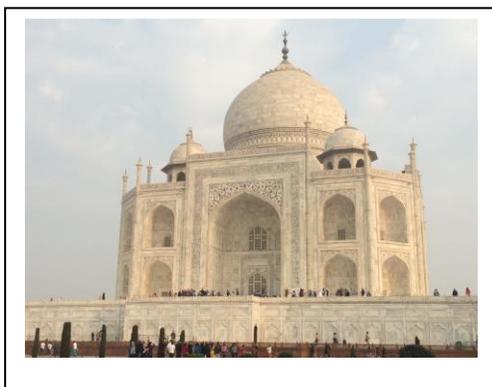


The next morning, bright and early, we went back to the Ganges to witness the locals come to the water to perform their morning prayers as well as bathe. This again was quite a scene as men and ladies, in separate large groups, enjoyed their morning rituals in the river. Next, another fabulous adventure as we drove to

**Sarnath**, the site where Buddha preached his first sermon after gaining enlightenment. I thoroughly enjoyed this stop because it was in such a peaceful, natural spot away from the city and it really gave everyone a sense of tranquility being in that sacred area. We also got a chance to walk the path that Buddha walked and I felt a particular energy at moving in this circular pattern in such a relevant and historic place, a great way to say goodbye to one of the most wonderful areas of my India trip. Needless to say, I believe that Varanasi is one of the most important and life-changing places to visit in India and I highly recommend this stop on any trip to India you take.

One of the most iconic buildings in the world, the **Taj Mahal, is located in the city of Agra**, also home to the Agra Fort which was our first stop there. This incredible red sandstone fort was home to the emperors of the Mughal Dynasty until 1638 and was built between 1565-1573. The fort, used for both military and royal residences, was named a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1983.

The next morning, we got up bright and early to be first in line to see the sunrise



over the grand Taj Mahal. It was still dark as we stood first in line before entering the grounds of the Taj Mahal, and when the large doors of the gate opened and I walked through, I literally lost my breath. We have all seen countless photos of the Taj Mahal, however, when I saw it looking down on me in all its glimmering splendour, I was completely speechless. I didn't think I would react that

way after seeing it so many times in photos, however, this is one case where the reality is 100 times more impressive than the best photos could ever be. I have to give credit to Explore India as well because they made sure that our group was the first in line to get through the gate. In fact, I was the first one through the gate and had a completely unobstructed view with not one person in sight which made it all the more incredible. Indeed, we only had a minute or two before the others inline started to catch up to us, however, that was a minute or two that I will never forget and most certainly, it cannot ever be matched at that place again. I got lots of my own photos as I meandered through the grounds and I was in awe the entire time, seemingly floating on a cloud as I embraced this fabulous experience and time in my life that I was so lucky to be having.



To top off our Taj Mahal visit today, Explore India planned a very special lunch for our group only minutes away at the rarely occupied site of **Taj Khema**. This extraordinary private lunch event featured live music, drinks, and the most wonderful Indian cuisine imaginable. The incredible setting is situated high atop a hillock overlooking the Taj Mahal itself. Imagine being in a totally secluded and natural outdoor setting enjoying the enchanting sounds of the sitar with birds chirping in the background as you are gazing over at the most famous monument of love in the world. It was an outstanding experience and a rare opportunity to visit this site which was where a lot of the land was dug up to use to build the area around the Taj Mahal and over time it formed into this hillock mound which created a perfect spot to gaze at the building.....fantastic!! *\*Not mentioned in this article but included on the Journey of the Senses tour are stops at the famous Agra Marble Factory, and seeing the Taj Mahal in the evening by moonlight as well as two days in Ranthambhore National Wildlife Park.*

Next on the fabulous Journey of the Senses tour with Explore India was the city of **Jaipur**, home to **Amber Fort and City Palace Museum** and where we would have an amazing cooking class. I haven't mentioned all the delectable Indian cuisine I've had so far on my trip, but trust me when I tell you I have eaten my way through India and loved every bite along the way. Later in the afternoon, we went to a local chef's house to learn the art of Indian cooking. It was an intimate and

thoughtful approach to learning about Indian spices and how to use them in the incredibly delicious cuisine that India is famous for. We made a variety of vegetarian dishes and then enjoyed the luxury of being served our creations in our hosts backyard that had been made into a beautiful dining area. One thing I have learned about the people in India is that they will make sure you have the opportunity to try lots of different varieties of Indian cuisine and you will absolutely never be longing for more as there is always more than enough for everyone. What a great ending to my time in Jaipur...now onto our next stop, Jodhpur! *\*For more detailed information about Amber Fort and Hawa Mahal please go to <https://www.exploreindia.ca/tours/journey-of-the-senses/#itinerary>.*



At this point in my trip I experienced many magical moments that I will never forget – however, riding a camel through the desert near **Jodhpur** to an intimate campfire dinner was an absolute highlight of my tour. I rode a camel through Petra in the Middle-East in 2011 but that experience, although memorable, did not encompass the wildly amazing feeling to ride a camel through the desert for about 45

minutes, in absolute silence (well, quiet except for the 20 other tour members behind me but a long way behind me) to a campfire setting in the middle of nowhere. Other than my camel having a bit of drool flapping in the breeze that I had to dodge a few times, I can still feel how wonderful it was to be out front, leading the way through the desert in a country of millions of people, and it was just me and the camel – if I've ever believed in past lives before, I for sure did that day as I felt like I was travelling home from a long time away.

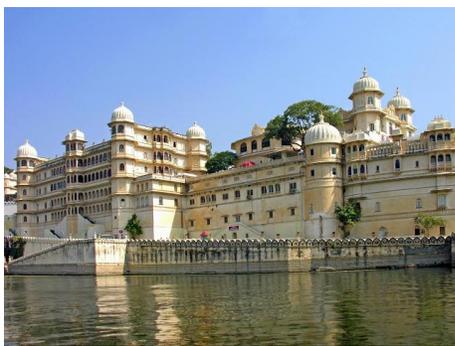


As I approached the camp that had been set up for us, I could see beautiful chairs decorated with red silk fabric all in a circle around a massive campfire and I could smell amazing aromas of sizzling meats and curries all being prepared for us. After some help getting off my camel, I was escorted to one of the finely decorated

chairs and given a little warm towel to rinse my hands before accepting a cool drink of sweet melon and sparkling water. As was the case with every magical

moment in India, there was music strumming in the background by a small band that was playing the most hauntingly beautiful Indian music. As I sat there, with such gratitude in my heart for this experience, I could see the sun about to set on one side and the moon rising in the other. As if they were being presented in 3D like I could reach out and touch them, I just sat there and soaked in every moment of this incredibly special gift I had just been granted.

How did we get back at night on camel through the desert you ask? Like a scene out of a James Bond movie, after all of the evening's festivities of a feast and music, about 10 shiny white jeeps pulled up to drive us back to our hotel in Jodhpur. Very different than riding a camel but equally as exciting, we bounced at high speed through the dessert for about 15 minutes of sheer fun and laughter before getting back to city life. Explore India definitely knows how to read their guests and offer some tranquil amazing moments only to be followed by a thrilling adventure too. *\*Not mentioned in this article but included on the Journey of the Senses tour are stops in Jodhpur at The Old Haveli for dinner, Umaid Bhawan Palace and Mehrangarh Fort.*



With the end of my tour closing in on me, I was happy to be on my way to **Udaipur** which was a place I had always wanted to see. Udaipur is another fabulous city that one must visit when in India but the excitement for me was **Udaipur's City Palace**. This floating palace was the summer home to the royal dynasty of Mewar and was built in 1743-1746 and also featured in the James Bond movie, *Octopussy*, in 1983. Now, one of the grandest hotels in India, and part of the Taj Hotels, this immaculate white palace is an extraordinary vision from any vantage point that you get to see it. Explore India wanted us to see it from every angle and transported us to another world as we took a private boat out onto Lake Pichola, the manmade lake where the royal mansion was built, to see the palace up close

and personal, amazing!! While you can book your trip to stay in the palace, I preferred the Oberoi hotel just across from it because I could look out at the iconic Lake City Palace rather than being in it and looking out at the land views.

After Udaipur, we went to the bustling city of **Mumbai**, a favourite for many travellers to India. Formerly known as Bombay and India's largest city, Mumbai is the financial capital of India and is also known for the famous India Gate which stands prominently in the Mumbai harbour. A very different city than the others I



had travelled to in India, Mumbai was easy to maneuver around and I even walked for over an hour on the Mumbai seawall. On an Explore India tour, visiting Mumbai includes exploring the city on foot as we visited the fish market and Dharavi,

which is one of the fascinating 'slum' areas of Mumbai. We also saw the Dabbawalla's or lunch box delivery system which was something to see as fellows load their bikes with 100's of homemade lunches they will deliver to Mumbai office workers. Needless to say, it was an exciting city to experience and enjoy as the last stop of my Journey of the Senses tour with Explore India.



While the tour ended here for the rest of the group, I continued on to Kerala where I spent several glorious days basking in the Southern India sun. To celebrate my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, I boarded a private houseboat and cruised along the tropical backwaters which was a relaxing and peaceful way to soak up the atmosphere. The reality of my trip to India was definitely even better than what I had envisioned it to be

as India was far more beautiful than what I had expected and the people were absolutely amazing. Also, having travelled with a reputable and thoughtful travel company like Explore India made all the difference too. The extra events like the lunch overlooking the Taj Mahal, the camel ride to the desert campfire dinner, and so many more special events, meals, and experiences that aren't mentioned here made my trip to India even more outstanding and memorable.

Explore India's award-winning Journey of the Senses tour has even more to offer now such as a stop at Ranthambhore National Park and other additions and highlights not included in this article. Checkout the full and updated itinerary for Explore India's award-winning Journey of the Senses tour

<https://www.exploreindia.ca/tours/journey-of-the-senses/>

If you would like to speak to an Explore India Travel Specialist call their Vancouver, Canada office at 1-800-515-3808 today.

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