

North India Special

(15 Days)

Highlights: *the Golden Triangle (Delhi, Agra and Jaipur), Bharatpur, Panna and Bandhavgarh (national parks), Khajuraho and the holy city of Varanasi, visits to local NGOs, families and “economically” underprivileged people.*

Day 1: Arrival in New Delhi

Arrival in India. Afternoon visit the Qutab Minar, a world heritage site, which is a complex with beautiful religious buildings.

Qutab Minar buildings date from the onset of Islamic rule in India and were once at the heart of the Muslim city (now on the outskirts). The Qutab Minar is a 72.5m high victory tower (was also used as a minaret), the construction of which began end of 12th. Century by Qutub ud Din Aibak and was later completed by his successor. A 7m-high iron pillar stands in the courtyard of the mosque.

Day 2: City tour of New Delhi

Full day city tour of new and old Delhi (visiting India Gate, Parliament House, Jama Masjid, Red Fort, Humayun's Tomb, Raj Ghat (Gandhi Memorial), Lotus / Birla Temple). This tour is done using the new underground transport system in Delhi, and partially conducted by teenagers from a slum.

New Delhi, the capital and the third largest city of India is a fusion of the ancient and the modern. Standing along the western end of the Gangetic Plain, Delhi unwinds a picture rich with culture, architecture and human diversity, deep in history, monuments, museums, galleries, gardens and exotic shows. Comprising of two contrasting yet harmonious parts, Old and New Delhi, the city is a travel hub of Northern India. Almost 10 million people live here in an area of 1,500 sq. kms.

Red Fort (Lal Qila): Using his administrative skills, wealth, knowledge of architecture and aesthetic sense, Shah Jahan, the builder of Taj Mahal in Agra, laid out a new fort to suit his needs. Its Lahore Gate opened into the main street of a carefully planned adjoining city that thrives almost unchanged four centuries later, and which contains the Jama Masjid. Its construction lasted from 1639 to 1648.

Jama Masjid is the largest Mosque in India and stands across the road from the Red Fort. It was built in 1656 by Shah Jahan. About 20,000 people can pray here at a time.

Raj Ghat is the place where the father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi was cremated.

Humayun's Tomb was built by Humayun's widow, Queen Bega Begum, in 1565 and is supposed to be the prototype of the Taj Mahal at Agra. She employed a Persian architect to



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design the first great Mogul garden tomb; he created something new using local sandstone, marble and stonemasons. It is the most magnificent of Delhi's tombs.

Day 3: Delhi

Visit ABHAS (<http://www.abhasindia.org>), an NGO, located in a slum which has grown inside the walls of an old fort. ABHAS works towards eliminating gender diversity and helps give children (who go rag-picking early in the morning) a better future. Spend the day at their facilities interacting women and children, who use this infrastructure, and learn about India's socio-cultural diversity through their eyes and come in contact with the "real" India. Lunch will be with local families.

Day 4: Delhi - Jaipur

Take a train to Jaipur. Afternoon city tour (Hawa Mahal, City Palace and Jantar Mantar) and evening at Choki Dhani Resort for an evening of entertainment and dance, with dinner.

***Jaipur** is the first planned city of India, located in the desert lands of Rajasthan. The city that once had been the capital of royalty, now serves as the capital city of Rajasthan. Jai Singh, the Rajput ruler, was a lover of art and science and in 1727 lay out a model palace-city, Jaipur. The very structure of Jaipur resembles the taste of the Rajputs and the Royal family; it is painted in pink.*

***Hawa Mahal** is a major landmark and a famous tourist attraction of Jaipur. Its splendid Rajputana architecture still speaks the glory of the royal family.*

***City Palace** forms one of the most famous tourist attractions and is a major landmark in Jaipur. The beautiful palace was built by Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh during his reign. Among the various forts and palaces of Jaipur, City Palace stands apart, with its outstanding art and architecture. City Palace complex covers a huge area, which is divided into a series of gardens, courtyards and buildings. Initially, Jai Singh built the outer wall occupying a huge area. The additional grand buildings were constructed later by the succeeding rulers.*

***Jantar Mantar** (the Observatory) is the largest stone observatory in the World and this feature makes it a special destination for a traveller. It is one of the five astronomical observatories built by Maharaja Jai Singh.*

Day 5: Jaipur

Visit the famous Amber Fort (either climb it by foot or ride on an elephant), which lies a few kilometres from Jaipur. Lunch with a local family. Afternoon visit to a local NGO working with the poor.

***Amber Fort** in the Amber area of Jaipur used to be the capital of the Kachhwaha clan until Jaipur was made the official capital in 1727. The Amber Fort looks stunning, all-built in white marble and red sandstone and with intricate carvings on the walls and ceilings. The minute mirror work adds to the grand appearance and royalty of the halls. The mighty walls guaranteed the protection of the Fort against the invasion of enemies.*

Day 6: Jaipur – Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary

Travel to Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary. Walk around the bird park in the afternoon or take a bicycle rickshaw to enjoy this beautiful bird sanctuary.

*The Keoladeo Ghana National Park formerly known as the **Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary** in Rajasthan is a famous avifauna sanctuary that sees thousands of rare and highly endangered birds such as the Siberian Crane come here during the winter season. Over 230 species of birds are known to have made the National Park their home in this World Heritage Site.*

Day 7: Bharatpur – Fatehpur Sikri - Agra

Those who are keen on sunrises or birds can wake up early and go to the park before breakfast. Otherwise, proceed to Fatehpur Sikri, an abandoned city, first and then on to Agra. Afternoon visit the Agra Fort before proceeding to see the Taj Mahal at sunset.

***Fatehpur Sikri** is a city completely made of red sandstone. Built by Akbar and dedicated to a saint, Fatehpur Sikri was conceived in 1571 and was the first planned capital city of the Mughals. It was an instant success but 14 years later it was virtually abandoned, partly because Akbar was called to defend the northwest frontier and partly because of inadequate water supply. The architecture of Fatehpur Sikri has a definite all-India character. It is prolific and versatile Indo-Muslim composite style, which is a fusion of the composite cultures of indigenous and foreign origins.*

***Agra Fort:** Built in red sandstone, it is the one of the famous sights of Agra other than Taj Mahal. The semi circular fort was started by Akbar in 1565, and completed in 1574. The Fort was left to plunderers when Akbar's grandson left for Delhi in 1648.*

***Taj Mahal:** The most photographed monument in the world, the Taj stands in its splendour of white marble, an imposing citadel on the banks of river Yamuna. Built in 17th century by Shah Jahan, the fifth Mughal emperor, in the memory of his wife Mumtaz Mahal, the Taj Mahal is an ode to the emperor's eternal love for his wife. It took over 20,000 skilled workers from across the country, working day and night for 22 years for this architectural wonder to be created.*

Day 8: Agra – Bandhavgarh National Park

Wake up early to see the Taj Mahal at sunrise, as the colours are breathtaking. Take the train to Umria in the afternoon and from there on drive to the Bandhavgarh National Park.

Day 9: Bandhavgarh National Park

Early morning safari to spot a tiger and other animals, and then again one late in the afternoon.

*The **Bandhavgarh National Park** was established in 1968 and now occupies 400 sq. kms. The park is supposed to harbour the highest density of tiger population of any Indian park. It is also*



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home to elephants, langurs, sloth bears, wild boars, porcupine, deer, antelopes and various birds. The park takes its name from an ancient fort perched on top of a 800m high cliff. Its ramparts provide a home for many birds.

Day 10: Panna National Park

Early morning safari before a drive to Panna National Park (a wonderful, peaceful place to see crocodiles). Afternoon options: a walk in the park, a boat ride on the Ken River, a jeep safari, relaxation or visit to some local villages.

Day 11: Panna - Khajuraho

Visit to nearby villages and interaction with local communities. Drive to Khajuraho late afternoon.

Day 12: Khajuraho

Visit to the famous erotic temple complex of Khajuraho, a World Heritage Site, and its finest temple art in the world.

***Khajuraho:** It is really one of the most fortuitous accidents of history that Khajuraho lies where it does – well away from the path taken by the fanatical hordes that periodically unleashed their destructive wrath on the towns and villages of medieval India. The amazing temples built here by the Chandela Rajput rulers during the 10th to 12th centuries, were thus spared the destruction and mutilation suffered by countless other temples throughout north and central India.*

Day 13: Khajuraho – Varanasi - Sarnath

Fly to the Hindu holy city of Varanasi. Afternoon free to discover Varanasi on your own.

***Varanasi:** The land of Varanasi (Kashi) has been the ultimate pilgrimage spot for Hindus for ages. Often referred to as Benares, Varanasi is the oldest living city in the world. These few lines by Mark Twain say it all: "Benaras is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend and looks twice as old as all of them put together". Hindus believe that one who is graced to die on the land of Varanasi would attain salvation and freedom from the cycle of birth and re-birth. River Ganges in Varanasi is believed to have the power to wash away the sins of mortals. It is said to have its origins in the tresses of Lord Shiva and in Varanasi it expands to the mighty river that we know of. The city is a centre of learning and civilization for over 3000 years. With Sarnath, the place where Buddha preached his first sermon after enlightenment, just 10 km away, Varanasi has been a symbol of Hindu renaissance. Knowledge, philosophy, culture, devotion to Gods, Indian arts and crafts has all flourished here for centuries.*



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Day 14: Varanasi - Sarnath

Travel to Sarnath, the Buddhist holy town, and visit the monastery ruins, the Ashoka pillar, the Stupa where Buddha met his disciples, a modern Buddhist temple and the archaeological museum.

Sarnath is the leading Buddhist pilgrimage centre and is the place where Buddha (Siddhartha) preached his first sermon called Dharmachakra ("setting in motion the wheel of righteousness"); this was the basis of all future development of the religion. Buddha also founded his sangha (monastic order) here. Emperor Ashoka had the magnificent stupas, monasteries and an engraved pillar erected here in 3rd. century BC. Soon after the Muslim invaders ransacked the city in 12th century, Buddhism went into decline. Sarnath was rediscovered by British archaeologists in 1835.

Day 15: Varanasi - Delhi

Early morning boat ride on the holy river Ganges. Later visit some famous temples in town before transferring to the airport for a flight to Delhi International Airport, for flights home.