

London
**Evening
Standard**

Jackie Annesley combined a family tour of northern India's classic cities — Delhi, Agra and Jaipur — with a tiger safari at Ranthambore



SHER BAGH JUNGLE CAMP IN RANTHAMBORE

Jackie Annesley



17 October 2012

She could have been a commuter on a dusty Delhi junction. Three jeeps down, the Bengal tigress peered at us from the crest of the road, then padded down the small space between the tyres and a rugged incline.

Coming towards us, all 150kg of her, now six feet away, she moved through the dry grass with grace. Then she was gone, the tiger we'd come to see.

We returned through the forest of Ranthambore National Park, amazed at having spotted one of just 30 tigers in an area of 392 square kilometres. Lucky us — we went just before a temporary ban on tiger tourism in core sanctuary zones in India, lifted only this week by the country's Supreme Court.

Back at Sher Bagh, the Relais & Chateaux Raj-tastic tented camp, tea was served with freshly-baked biscuits and the children refused to believe anyone would kill these creatures and grind their bones for rheumatism cures.

We'd arrived five days earlier on an overnight flight via Muscat. With three children - George, 12, Alice, 10, and Joe, seven - and unable to go down the private education route, we'd made the decision to channel whatever we could into a fun fund and show them Asia, Africa and South America before what is there has gone.

The first stop was Delhi and possibly the world's most fragrant hotel. Vases of jasmine, lilies, gardenias and roses filled the Imperial's marble corridors, built in 1933 by Edward Lutyens as a monument to the final years of the Raj.

After a swim in the pool, we set off beyond its imposing walls, dodging hawkers and beggars, to feast on steaming dosas and fresh juices at the Hotel Saravana Bhavan, a southern Indian restaurant. The bill? About £12. After we collapsed into our crisply sheeted beds back at the Imperial and slept the dreamless sleep of the exhausted.

Few experiences are more exciting than waking up early for breakfast in a foreign clime. The children talked about that buffet spread for days — fluffy eggs, crispy bacon, the smell of fresh bread — but Rekha, our guide, awaited, with Anil at the wheel for a tour of the Muslim enclave of Old Delhi.

We wandered around the Red Fort, the children fascinated with Rekha's stories about Emperor Shah Jahan, before a rickshaw ride took us through Chandni Chowk, Delhi's main market.

There's a fine balance when it comes to children and sightseeing, and our travel advisers Scott Dunn know the necessary quid pro quo is afternoon pool action. By 3pm they were playing "Marco Polo" while I lounged nearby, thinking how heavenly some holidays are. Which doesn't negate the need for painful wake-up calls. At 5am the next day, we stood on platform two of Delhi station watching dawn break, waiting for the Shatabdi Express to Agra. This modern train sped through the wheatfields of Uttar Pradesh and deposited us for breakfast at the Oberoi Amarvilas.

Amid the grinding poverty of Agra, you enter a fantasy world of endless sandstone arches and perfectly groomed turbaned staff, with a gilded, cavernous lobby looking directly out onto the Taj Mahal as its centrepiece.

We negotiated a tour of the fort and the baby Taj with our guide as long as the children were back in the Doric-columned pool by late afternoon, where their high jinks attracted opprobrium from honeymooning Italians.

I love India but its food? While enjoying a curry as much as the next Indophile, I should never have eaten that lentil sausage on the train. By the next day, as the family toured the Taj Mahal, I felt as green as the cypress trees that line its central water channel.

A five-hour minibus drive to Ranthambore later that day delivered us to the restorative tented oasis of Sher Bagh, where Russell Brand and Katy Perry celebrated their fated wedding. Of all the places we visited, I loved our two nights at this extraordinary retreat with its stone showers, fireside dinners and organic kitchen garden the most.

Rajasthan beckoned for our final few days at Jaipur's Samode Haveli Hotel — less Relais & Chateaux and more relegated hotel, though the courtyard at night was charm itself. The pink city provided us with an astronomy lesson at Jantar Mantar (its 27-metre sundial was a hit with the kids), a history lesson at the Amber Palace and an elephant ride at

dusk. Following the most delicious meal of our trip, we watched, fascinated, as elephant polo was played under a new moon.

We left the subcontinent with our heads filled with moghuls and maharajas, our suitcases full of made-to-measure £20 silk pyjamas and a lost tally of one swimsuit, flip flops, sunhat, hoodie, sunglasses and a pair of Crocs.

It was a culture shock to end up a few hours later at Shangri-La's Barr Al Jissah Resort in Oman — helped by a new flight from Jaipur to Muscat — eating burgers and chips with executives from Weybridge. In truth, it provided a perfect decompression chamber from India's craziness, allowing us days on the beach reading while the children played in the bougainvillea-lined lazy river.

At the end of a mind-opening, laughter-filled 12 days, I asked the kids: "So what was your favourite moment?" "The lazy river!" they chorused. Grrr, as our tiger would say.

DETAILS: INDIA

Scott Dunn offers 12-night tailor-made family adventures to India and Oman from £3,995 per adult and £3,695 per child B&B including international flights from Heathrow with Oman Air, private transfers and experiences scottdunn.com/india, 020 8682 5075.

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