

Escape

By Suzanne Wright

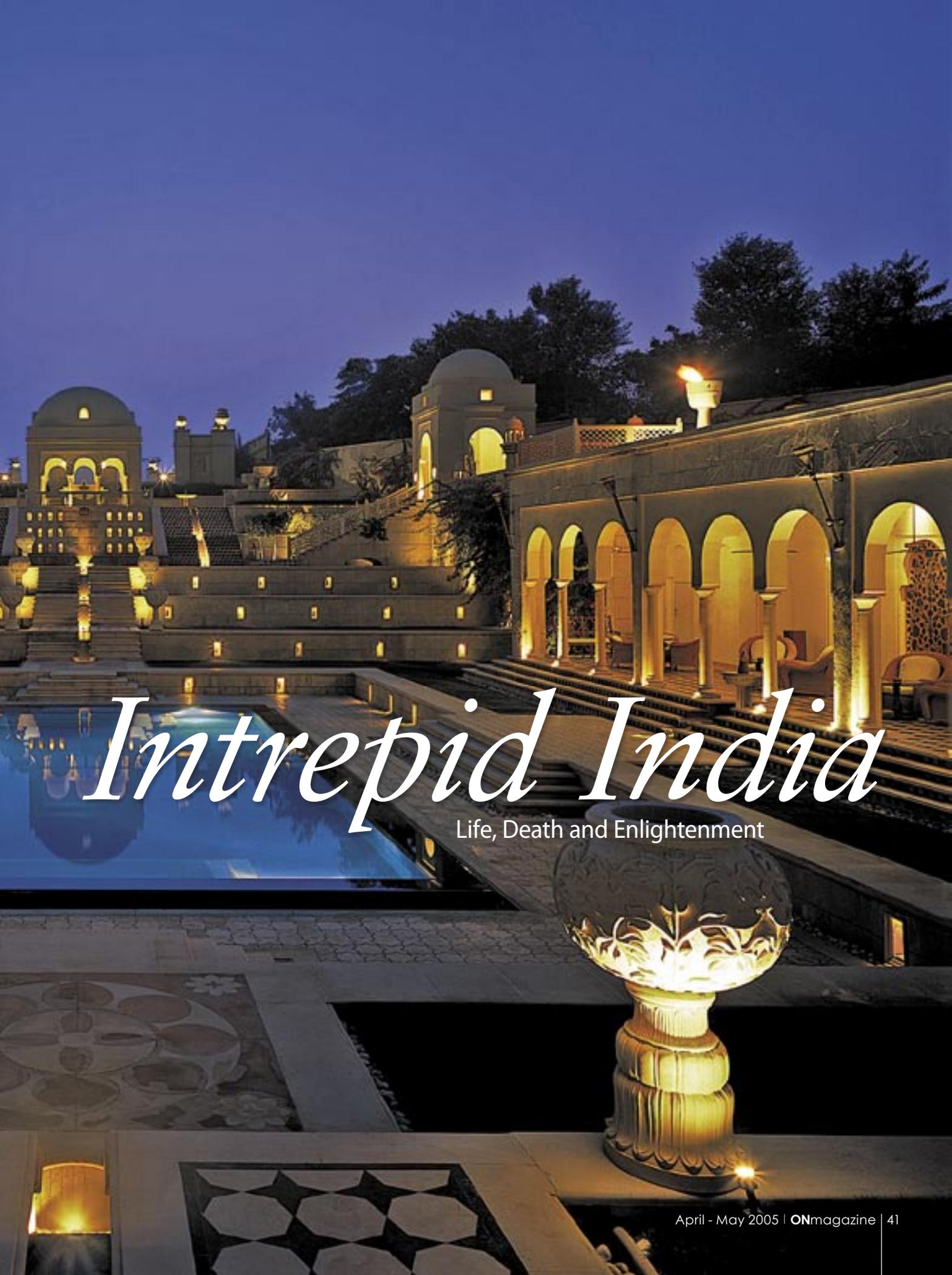
India was a matchless experience for this globetrotter.

English-speaking India is the world's most populous country and the largest democracy on the planet. India assaults your senses—all of them. India is loud, pushy, dirty and chaotic. It is both more and less than I'd expected, ricocheting me from elation to despair and back again.

India, the country, is immeasurably rich in sensations,



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history, cuisine and spirituality. It doesn't come easy, but for the intrepid traveler the hassles are worth the rewards; there is splendor amidst the squalor.

There was a frantic lethargy to much of my touring, maddening and isolating at the same time. India has a fraying beauty, former opulence gone to seed. Nearly everyday I experienced sensory overload. Although my



body was rarely tired, I was often mentally exhausted. To wit: there was the absurdity and futility of looking for a trash can. Not wanting to litter, I searched in vain for a receptacle until my guide snatched the trash from my hand and flung it to the ground. Mounds of rubbish were everywhere I looked.

It was depressing to see skeletal cows eating garbage as they lumbered down the street, safe from slaughter, but living out a wretched, homeless existence. It was devastating to have small, filthy children in tatters tear at me for a rupee. Often the inside of my mouth felt gritty, yet I marveled at how gorgeous the women's complexions were in spite of the pollution. Every day, people sifted through heaps of used clothing on one side of a city street, while teenaged girls queued for colorful glass bangles sold from carts on the opposite side.

To be sure, India has its charms. Most Indians are exceedingly polite—you'll be "Madamed" or "Sahibed" to death and everyone will inquire about your "good name." At hotels, you'll be earnestly handed a comment card to fill out (and you won't get your credit card back until you do). I attracted plenty of stares although modestly attired; the eyes I encountered ranged in color from amber to hazelnut to dark chocolate to coal, even startlingly green. "Too many" is the amusing description for anything from shops to people to woes. Call this ingenious: women wearing "toe socks," rather like mittens for feet, that allow them to wear flip-flops in chilly weather.

My favorite memories were the unexpected. In stylish Bombay (an unlikely blend of Miami,

Los Angeles and New York), I was lucky enough to happen upon a wedding, a festive and garish production that rivaled a Bollywood film in its celebratory excesses. I was wholeheartedly welcomed with food and drink.

The grand central train station of the city, Victoria Terminus, is an amalgam of architectural styles built by the British in 1887. Just after 11 a.m. on weekdays, dabawallahs deliver freshly cooked food from hundreds of thousands of suburban kitchens to office workers in tiffin boxes, aluminum cylinders fitted together. Coded, then carried in handcarts, they rarely, if ever, go astray. In fact, the system was studied by Forbes Magazine, and accorded a 6 Sigma quality rating.

In front of the high court buildings, on the "oval maiden," dark-skinned, white-clad men and boys played cricket.

Old Meets New.

I loved the briny scent that clung to the air as I watched men unload from the Arabian Sea baskets of eel-like silver fish, improbably called Bombay duck, and then women hung them to dry. This fishing village smack in the middle of the teeming city reminded me that Bombay was once seven islands connected by causeways. Dhobi Ghat is an amazing sub-city of washermen, with sheets and clothing pinned above concrete wells. I quickly learned that the swastika I saw painted on so many shops and houses is an ancient Sanskrit symbol for prosperity.



The former Portuguese colony of Goa is unlike the rest of the country. Old Goa is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, chock-a-block with Catholic cathedrals, convents, churches and the tomb of St. Francis Xavier. I was greeted with a garland of marigolds and a coconut drink at The Leela, a posh, sprawling resort complete with a lagoon and golf course. Located on the quiet, southern tip of the beach, with talcum soft beige sand and palm trees, it could be in the Caribbean.

Although I was the only single in this romantic setting, I still felt romanced. I ate my fill of prawns masala in a rich paste of coconut milk and curry, washing it down with palm feni, a potent liquor. I tried a sirodhara ayurvedic treatment to "balance my energies." A sharp-smelling herbal oil was poured in a fine stream on my forehead, but it had the opposite effect: it made me twitchy and uncomfortably greasy.

The timeless beauty of the monument to love, the Taj Mahal, was most soul engaging at sunset, even as I was beset by begging street urchins and vendors selling trinkets and postcards.

Somewhat stodgy New Delhi (think Washington, D.C.) is a series of eight cities ruled and ruined by sultans, slave dynasties, horse traders, moghul kings and British Raj as Sarah



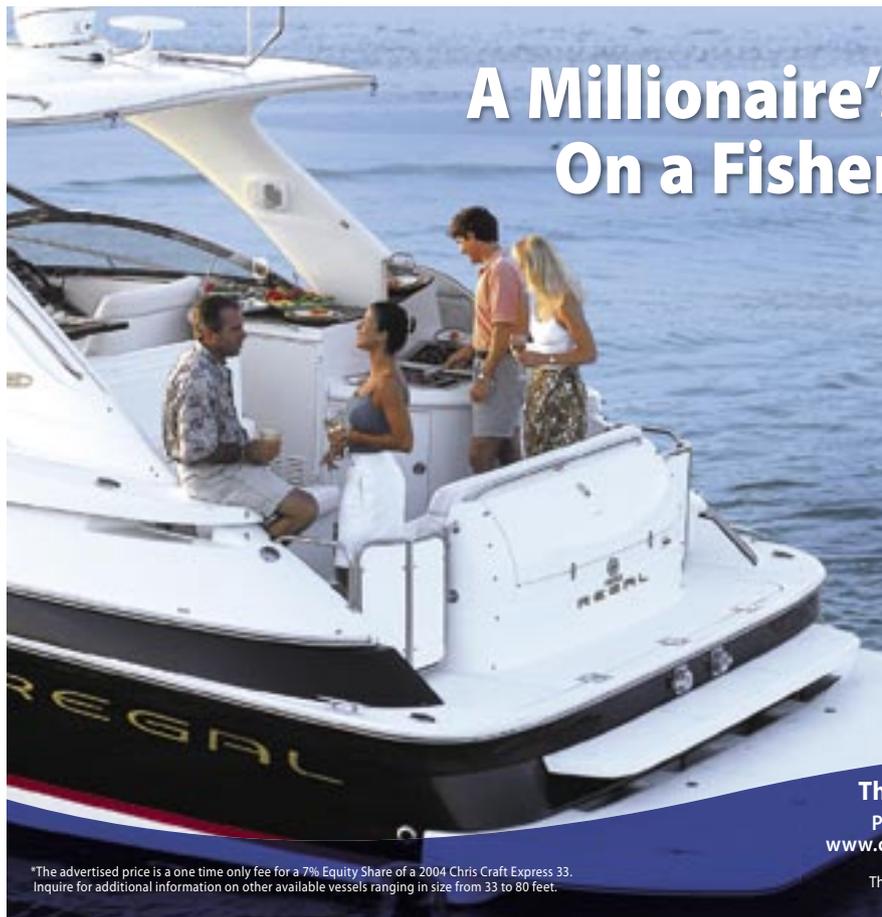
McDonald writes in her witty and poignant book Holy Cow.

There are days' worth of sights in the capital: the ram-rod straight, elegant bearing of bearded and turbaned Sikhs; the old mosque, Jami Masjid, India's largest; Raj Ghat, Gandhi's tomb with its eternal flame; the sandstone walls of Red Fort; the Persian-style Humayuns tomb in the center of Nizamuddin, a Moghul mausoleum constructed in the mid 16th century by a grieving widow; Lodi Gardens, where walkers, joggers and picnickers congregate; Chandi Chowk Bazaar with stalls

of flowers, fruits, vegetables and clothing; Connaught Place, surrounded by colonnaded white buildings, a reminder of colonization; the solid, pudgy Ambassador cars manufactured by Hindustan Motors that look like they belong in a 1950s film.

The Land of The Maharajas.

After touring the awesome deserted palace complex of Fatehpur Sikri, I reached Rajasthan, the most popular destination in the country and home to impressive forts, palaces, art and culture. Here the landscape becomes arid and



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beige and the women's clothing morphs from saris to brilliant, jewel-toned cotton skirts and scarves that enliven the desert setting. Hard-working women build roads and transport huge piles of wood or brass water pots on their head with regal bearing, their silver jewelry— toe rings, anklets and bracelets—glinting in the sun. The Raj men wear gold earrings and their turbans are colored differently from village to village.

The road is flanked on either side by chest-high fields of mustard; piles of perfectly round cow patties lie drying in the sun.



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The dusty asphalt is shared by a dizzyingly competitive brew of private cars, taxis, buses, bicycles, motorcycles, camel carts, rickshaws, pedestrians, cows, chickens and trucks with brightly painted tailgates that advise "Horn Please. Keep Distance. Use Dipper at Night (lights)." That explained the constant blaring symphony of horn bleats.

At Ranakpur, the magnificent 15th century Jain temple, no two of the 1,444 carved marble pillars are the same. Yellow-robed priests use large skeleton keys to open wooden doors that reveal splendid statues. Situated in lush rolling Rajasthan countryside, the 48,000-square-foot temple is enclosed by a wall and is one of the five most important pilgrimage sites for Jains. Best of all, no hawkers mar the experience.

Equally enchanting was Sri Eklingji, a secluded 10th century complex of 108 temples dedicated to the God Shiva. Located about 30 minutes outside Udaipur, it, too, is enclosed by high walls. I arrived at an auspicious time: bells were ringing and Hindu pilgrims were offering garlands and incense. I was the only tourist there.

Mountainous Jaipur is known as the "pink city," thanks to the coat of pastel paint the city got during the visit of Prince Albert, when

England ruled India. Indians love a festival and today hundreds of diamond-shaped kites are aloft. The Palace of the Winds was postcard-perfect, but it was the fascinating observatory of former King Jai Singh, featuring massive astrological tools and gadgets including a



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sundial, that captured my imagination. At Meherangarh Fort in Jodhpur, smog gave way to clear skies and a panoramic view of the buildings of "blue city." A recently married couple—of the warrior class, as evidenced by his sword—paraded through the fort, yoked together with a bright scarf, their family trailing behind.

The Rituals, The People.

The elderly, rail-thin coolies in the train station hoisted heavy luggage onto their heads like balsa wood. Their teeth, like those of many Indians, were either impossibly straight and white or rotted brown or gray stumps. A small crowd of boys gathered while I waited for the train, which was predictably late. I answered the same questions I'd answered for weeks: Where are you from? What do you do? Are you married? How many brothers and sisters do you have? They giggled as they practiced their English.

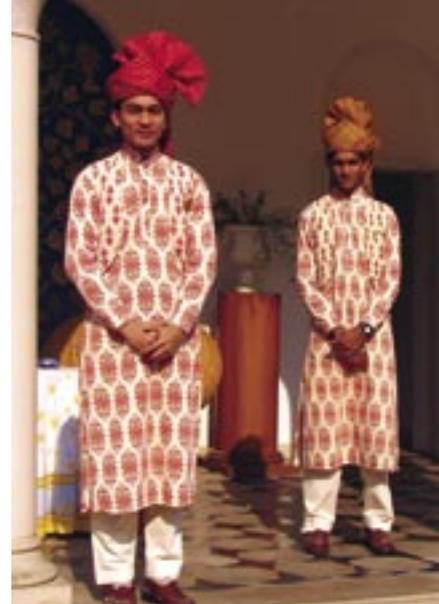
Although I didn't see an elusive tiger while on a game drive at Ranthambore Park, I spotted crocodiles, jungle cats, sambars (Indian deer) and kingfishers in the hilly, heavily forested former hunting ground of the kings. I bought ravishing and inexpensive (no bartering required!) mirrored scarves from the women's cooperative Dashkar, which preserves artisan traditions and financially liberates rural women.

The erotic temples of Khajuraho, nicknamed the "Kama Sutra temples" and built between the 10th and 12th centuries, are exquisitely and provocatively—not profanely—carved with ecstatic couples and cavorting dancers. But it was the Thursday market that really had me snapping pictures. I watched a scrawny vendor squatting in the dirt, scaling fish for customers using a curved bone while flies buzzed

around; cauliflowers and radishes and carrots piled high, their riotous colors competing with the women's garb; dal (beans) in hues ranging from yellow to red to green to black in triangular piles, waiting to be poured into scales. "Number 7," the skinny rickshaw driver who lolled outside my hotel, became my de facto guide and transportation since I'd used

him the day before. He has a lopsided smile, gray pants hitched up beneath a dirty cream shirt and seven kids, hence his nickname. He pumped along carefully, avoiding roadside bumps.

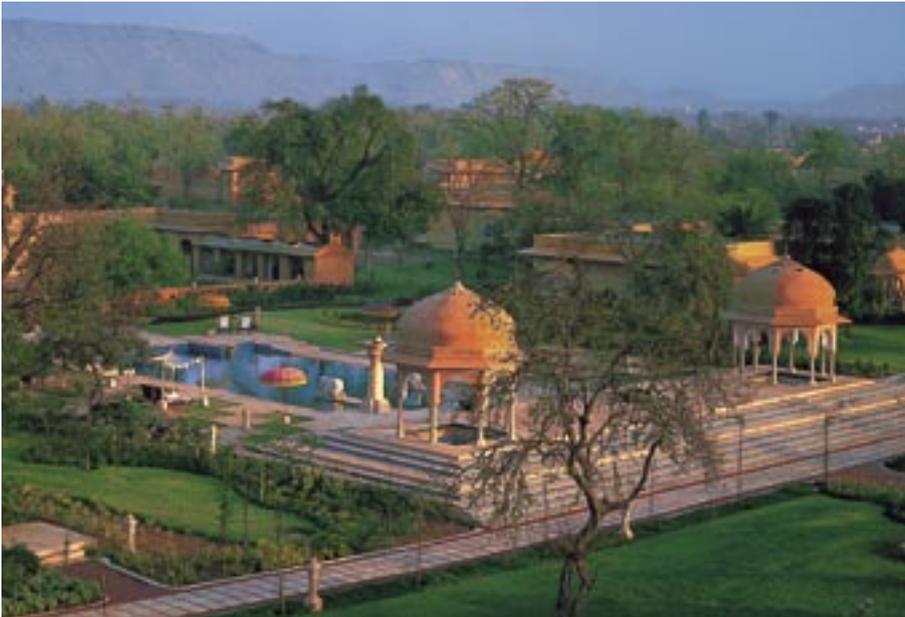
Nothing equaled the nightly spectacle at the Ganges in the holy city of Varanasi, for the evening pujas, religious rites featuring bells,



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fire and flowers that take place along the ghats, steps that lead into the river. In this ancient town, a dip in the mother river purifies; if you die here, it's said that your soul goes straight to Shiva's side instead of reincarnating again. During a surreal sunrise boat ride, I saw (and smelled) through the fog and smoke, a body carried aloft on a wooden stretcher, swaddled in saffron-colored cotton; bodies being burned on the crematories; bathers; dhobis or washmen; vendors in small boats selling tiny urns to fill with holy water; even a dead cow floating by.

In a land so randomly cruel, kindnesses emerged: the driver who greeted me with



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a rose; the guide who carefully used a handkerchief to wipe dust off my camera lenses; the waiter who gave me a second glass of watermelon juice and a makeshift birthday card; the chef who invited me into the kitchen for hoeberry chutney, which softened the fire of my chicken tikka; the army officer who shared a



train compartment with me, declared me "his guest," and offered me a blanket and tea.

In the end, India breaks your heart, tests your will, exhausts your spirit, stretches your soul, awakens your humanity and, finally, repays you for its challenges and exasperations with its indelible imprint. ■

The Oberoi Experience

My motto: In third world countries, it pays to travel first class.

My visit to India was far more enjoyable thanks to the lavish accommodations offered by India's top hotelier, The Oberoi. I consider Oberoi the antidote to the rigors of India. From city hotels (the Delhi property even has its own charcuterie!) to seven-star resorts, the company lives up to its slogan, "luxury redefined." Uniformed staffers will meet you at the airport with a sign bearing your name and whisk you to sanctuary.

Although each locale is distinctive, there is a comforting continuity: great restaurants, gracious service, spectacular settings, sumptuous rooms and Banyan Tree Spas, one of Asia's best. Stay in multiple properties; your preferences (like mine for cheese Danish) will be noted and seamlessly met as you travel.

The serene lobby of the Bombay high-rise features a knockout view of the city's skyline and matchless views of the Arabian Sea, a haven in the busy city. At intimate Vanyavilas, India meets Africa at Ranthambore Park, a tiger preserve. In Agra, Agravilas has a dignified opulence that matches that of the famed Taj Mahal. Rajvillas, on the outskirts of Jaipur, famously hosted President Bill Clinton. My favorite resort was Udaivilas, in Udaipur. My cozy window seat overlooked a shimmering pool and the freestanding claw foot bathtub came complete with a pillow. As breathtaking as India was, I sometimes didn't want to leave my room.

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