

# Sights and sounds

Ex-Lowvelder Philippa Francis has been drawn to India for as long as she could remember and when the opportunity to visit presented itself, she jumped at the chance. She shares her trip to this chaotic, squalid, splendid, daunting, intoxicating and crazy beautiful country.

The Taj Mahal, a must-see for visitors to India, looks majestic in the early morning light

Home to more than 1,3 billion people, India is as diverse in terrain as it is in cultures, religions and languages. I only had a few short weeks to take in as much as I could, and decided to concentrate on a few destinations in the northern part of the country. I had a vague plan, but was willing to let the wind blow me in the right direction.

## A whirlwind tour of the Indian capital

I arrived in Delhi in the middle of the night and took a taxi to the only hotel accommodation of my backpacking trip. Even late at night, the roads were swarming with cars and rickshaws, bicycles and pedestrians, and incessant beeping hooters. It was a sound I thought I would never get used to, until I left India and could not get to sleep at night for the lack of traffic noise on the street outside.

Delhi was as overwhelming as promised, but I did not plan to stay too long. I found a friendly driver to take me on a day tour packed to the brim with as many of the capital city's points of interest as possible.

What struck me immediately was the incredible architecture dotted around this great city. I stood in awe of the Qutb Minar, the tallest brick minaret in the world at a height of nearly 73 metres; admired the grandeur of the sandstone Red Fort, a reminder of the magnificent power of the Mughal emperors; and explored the beautiful gardens and courtyards of Humayun's Tomb, built in 1565 AD, according to the entrance ticket.

I spent time reflecting at the Raj Ghat, a monument to one of India and South Africa's most known and inspirational figures, Mahatma Gandhi. A black marble rostrum marks the spot where he was cremated and an eternal flame burns at one end, an eerily quiet place of remembrance amid the hustle and bustle beyond its walls.

## Food, glorious food

I hopped off the train in Amritsar amid a monsoon downpour. The rain came down in steady sheets, causing water and debris to gush through the streets, even finding its way into the station building. I stood and stared in disbelief at what seemed like nothing out of the ordinary for the local people, who went about their business as usual.

I lifted my 15-kilogram pack a little higher up my back, covered the small bag carrying my camera with a waterproof jacket and waded through the water to the auto-rickshaw pick-up point. I eventually found a driver willing to drive me to my hostel, and after attempting several different routes and sprouting a few grey hairs, we managed to get there. I was so relieved, I could have cried. I gave my driver more tip than the whole trip had cost me.

The next day, there was hardly a sign of the flash floods, and the intense heat of the morning sun weighed on my shoulders like an unwelcome jacket. The good weather meant that a group from the hostel could head out on foot to taste the best Punjabi treats Amritsar had to offer. Sanjay, our guide dressed in his baby pink cotton kurta, showed us where to find the city's best paratha - flatbread stuffed with mashed, spice potatoes served with delicious dal (lentils). We sampled some sickly sweet jalebi, made by deep-frying flour into pretzel or circular shapes and soaking them in syrup, and poori, a light, hollow-puffed bread which you fill with a side dish of curry.

The next day, the sweltering city gave way to lush, green rice paddies and buffalo carts on the way to visit one of the hostel workers' homes in a small village. After a morning of freshly prepared pakora, vegetables dipped in flour and deep-fried in oil, chai (sweet-and-spiced milk tea), a spirited Bhangra dancing lesson, milking the family's resident cow and mud wrestling out in the fields, we were



Now a tourist spot, Ugrasen ki Baoli was an underground structure built to cope with seasonal fluctuations in water availability in Delhi



The chilly evening weather in McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala called for bowls of steaming vegetable noodle soup



My very brave guide, Shabbu, allowed me to take control of the auto-rickshaw. He made sure to get out first.

taught by our Sikh hosts to wrap a turban on our heads. I use the term “taught” lightly, because even though I concentrated, I would not have a clue how to replicate the intricate pattern.

### Heading to the hills

“Mister, please slow down,” my British travel companion desperately pleaded with the taxi driver as we narrowly overtook the car ahead of us into oncoming traffic in the opposite direction. We were both rather relieved to survive the two-and-a-bit hour trip. Our near-death experience proved worthwhile when we got out of the car in cool McLeod Ganj, home to the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Government in exile.

It was a welcome escape from the stifling heat and dusty streets of Amritsar, and no Internet searches or travel photography could have prepared me for the beauty of the views offered by the Himalayan hills. I spent my stay visiting the Buddhist temple complex, leisurely sipping on piping hot ginger-lemon tea in the mornings and walking in the forests in the early evenings. Vegetable noodle soups and Nepalese chicken momos - Chinese-inspired dumplings - were the order of the day.

I easily decided to extend my stay for the international T20 cricket match between my host country and South Africa. I managed to get three last-minute tickets and dragged two travel friends along to the game. I think I was the only Proteas fan in the stadium.

It was an evening of sixes and fours, thousands of “selfies” with excited spectators and deafening Hindi music. I have not been so moved during a sport match before or since. South Africa won, but still the spectators around our little group were eager to shake my hand and offer their congratulations. It is one of my fondest memories of India’s beautiful people.



The snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas above the town of Dharamsala



The Qutb Minar was built to celebrate the defeat of the Delhi’s last Hindu kingdom



A melange of Hindu and Islamic architectural styles, the Golden Temple seems to float atop the tank of water which is said to have healing powers. Sikh pilgrims come from far and wide to bathe in its sacred waters.



The talented Anil was our guide on a fascinating tour of Varanasi’s temples - it was complete with clever anecdotes and snack-stealing monkeys

### Mausoleums and Mughal mystery

It took a hair-raising overnight bus ride and sweaty train ride to get to Agra, approximately two hours from Delhi in the state of Uttar Pradesh. The highly recommended Shabbu, arrived with his auto-rickshaw at my guest house just after 05:30, and I was waiting in line at Taj Mahal’s western gate, on the bank of the Yumana River, less than half an hour later.

Despite the tourist hype, touts, the expensive entrance fee by Indian standards and lengthy security process, it is every bit as good as you have heard, and more. The magnificent marble mausoleum was built by the Mughal emperor, Shah Jahan, in commemoration of his favourite wife, Mumtaz Mahal. When the empress passed away, no effort was spared in the building of her tomb, considered to be one of the most beautiful creations on earth. Only 2,5 kilometres away, stands the historical Agra Fort, also a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

### The Hindu holy lands

Varanasi provided the India of my imagination, except the reality was much louder, brighter and more spectacular. In this city, immense beauty and raw poverty stand side by side, the smells sometimes overpower you and the heat has a taste. The air in places is thick with smoke above the cremation ghats which line the Ganges River.

While eating a meal at one of the little restaurants nestled in the web of narrow lanes, it is not uncommon to see bodies wrapped in muslin or gold cloth being carried through the throngs of people to be placed on a funeral

pyre and cremated in public. This city is the place many Hindus come to die, since it is believed that it offers moksha, a release from the cycle of rebirth.

Varanasi is a magical world, but it is not for the faint-hearted. Coming from a culture where death is almost hidden and not spoken about, it was incredible to have unlimited access to the intricacies of the Hindu faith.

The majesty of the Ganges can best be appreciated at sunrise or sunset. An early morning boat tour of the holy river illuminated some of the most remarkable sights of the City of Light; bathers washing themselves in the sacred water along the banks, and women in full saris furiously

scrubbing away at their laundry, the soap suds reaching our boat.

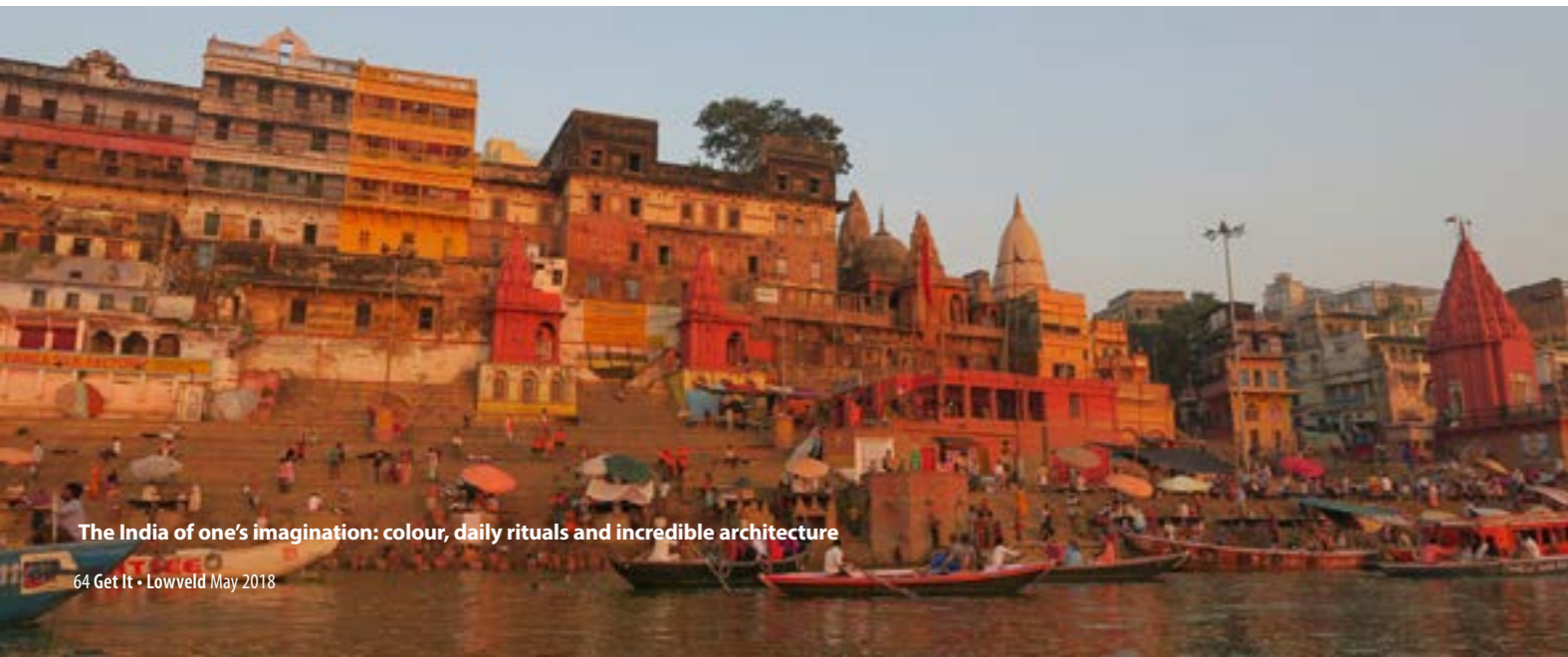
Sadly, Varanasi was my last stop in northern India, although there are dozens of destinations on my travel bucket list - from the pink city of Jaipur to the yoga and adventure of Rishikesh, one would need years to see them all.

As I wandered south, along the west coast, to Goa and Kochi, the food and landscape diversified, but the vivid colour, chaos and charismatic nature of the Indian people prevailed. The extremes of India, good and bad, make it a fascinating country to take in and explore. I am yet to meet a person who has visited this exotic land of food, fragrances and sounds, and remained indifferent.

**Travel tips**

- Do thorough research. Make sure India is a country you want to visit and whether you are comfortable travelling solo or as part of a group.
- Whether you stay in a five-star hotel or a backpacker’s hostel - there is no escaping real life here. You could say there are two Indias perhaps; poverty and incredible wealth coexist side by side.
- Pack hand sanitiser and wet wipes in your daypack. Many people get sick not because of the food, but because their hands are not clean.
- Don’t drink the tap water, and avoid putting ice in your beverages unless you know it has been made with boiled water.
- South Africans need a tourist visa for India. It is valid from the date it is issued and not from the date when you enter India, so find the fine line between applying too far in advance and giving enough time for your application to be processed.
- A pay-as-you-go SIM card is very helpful. Data and airtime are cheap, and even though Wi-Fi is accessible at most accommodation options, it enables you to phone your hotel in advance if your transport is delayed or look up travel information while on the road or railway.

One of the best ways to see how life is lived on the Ganges is by sunrise boat tour



The India of one’s imagination: colour, daily rituals and incredible architecture