

Best of India May 4-14, 2023

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Our Glorious AFS Itinerary

MAY 4 - Fly USA to Delhi Plenty of airline choices. Air and trip details coming soon and AFS Trip Tips.

May 5 – Arrive in Delhi & Chill

Arrive at New Delhi's Indira Gandhi International airport and be greeted by your English-speaking tour guide outside the customs gate. (Note ** There will be one common pickup will be arranged for group depending upon arrival flight timing.) You will be escorted to your air-conditioned bus and transported to the 5 Star Le-Meridian, located in the heart of the city. A traditional Indian welcome of aarti-tikka, garland and beverages will welcome you. (You are in the heart of everything and easy to explore your surroundings if you have the energy. We love Lotus Temple, Salaam Balak guided slum tour and the fab Delhi Haat Bazaar.)

You will have the afternoon and evening to relax and prepare for tomorrow when we will explore one of the world's fastest growing cities with over 5000 years of history. As India's capital, there's a fascinating blend of old and new and we'll see some of each, Delhi has been the seat of power for numerous dynasties like the Turks, Rajputs, Afghans and Mughals who led until the British entered. The history here is fascinating.

Overnight : Le Meridien New Delhi WINDSOR PLACE, NEW DELHI, NEW DELHI, INDIA, 110001

May 6 – Imperial Delhi Tour

We have a relaxing morning with breakfast included at our hotel before heading out on a full day tour to discover Delhi. There is no other city in India that boasts as varied a history as Old Delhi. There were eight prior cities of Delhi before the city of today was built. In the last 3,000 years, Delhi has seen the rise and fall of great empires and has been ruled in turn by the Hindus, the Mughals, the British and others.

We begin at the impressive Jama Masjid is one of India's oldest and largest mosques, offering an exquisite expression of Mughal architecture that has withstood the test of time. Built in the mid-17th century by Mughal Emperor Shah Johan, the sprawling premise unites hundreds of devout Muslims each day. In addition, the mosque is home to intriguing artifacts like a strand of hair from the prophet Mohamed. Enjoy an eye-popping Tricycle rickshaw ride through the narrow lanes of Chandni Chowk, considered the spine of Old Delhi. Have your camera ready as we make our way through the spice market and along jeweler's lane.

We'll later see the stunning Lal Qila or Red Fort, which was the seat of Mughal power from 1639 to 1857. The sprawling red sandstone fort was built by Shah Jahan, the most prolific architect and builder of the Mughal Empire and covers an area of almost 2km. Visitors enter via three-story Lahore Gate, one of six impressive gateways.

On to the golden-domed Gurdwara Bangla Sahib where we experience the amazing hospitality and tranquility of the Sikh faith. Inside, devotees kneel facing a small pavilion in the center that holds the Granth Sahib (Sikh scriptures). Hymns from the holy book are sung continuously from well before sunrise into the evening, and you are welcome to sit and listen.

Enjoy the Sikh Kitchen! In a cool cultural immersion, we'll visit the huge "Langar" or kitchen and dining hall where thousands of people are fed each day. What you eat in India depends on which religion you follow, but here's a place where people of all religions and castes come to share a common meal and it's free! Sikhism, the 5th largest world religion, is an egalitarian society and followers volunteer their time in Langars to fulfill a tenant of their faith. (Ladies will need to cover your head with a scarf.) Sikh and you shall find total serenity here.

This evening we enjoy an AFS Welcome Dinner at a local restaurant and get to know your fellow travel lovers.

Overnight: Le-Meridien (B, D)

May 7 – Optional - Agra and Taj Mahal

No visit to India is complete without the chance to witness the timeless Taj! This day can be a day of leisure on your own if you've been here, but we are offering an optional "must do" on any first visit to India – the Taj Mahal. (\$140 full day tour)

For those who want to visit this legendary monument to love, we will leave early and take the fast train to Agra, enjoying breakfast aboard during the 2 hours scenic ride. 8 to 9:50AM on Gatiman Express.

Two Great Mughal monarchs, Akbar and Shah Jahan, transformed the little village of Agra into a befitting second capital of the Mughal Empire - giving it the name Dar-ul-Khilafat (Seat of the Emperor). Today, a visitor to Agra is caught up in a world of contrasting edifices of red sandstone and white marble, narrow lanes and quaint buggies, and that irresistible charm that this favorite city of the Mughals still retains.

Our first stop is Agra Fort. A UNESCO World Heritage Site this imposing structure with walls of red sandstone is almost two miles long and contains palaces, audience halls and mosques. The fort presents a good sampling of Islamic and Hindu architectural styles and was built by the third Mughal Emperor, Akbar. Then visit the mesmerizing Taj Mahal. Also, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the sun on the fabled Taj Mahal has a magical effects, constantly changing shading and on this brilliant white marble building! Enjoy a romantic ride to the monument of the love on decorated Tongas 'horse driven carriages.' Perhaps the most photographed monument in the world. Nothing can truly prepare you for the beauty you are about to experience. Witnessing it for the first time after walking through the gates is like having the air sucked from the room. It will leave you breathless.

The 17th century Taj Mahal is often called a poem in stone. If so, the mausoleum is a love poem - created by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan for his favorite wife Mumtaz Mahal. It took 22 years to be completed and was designed and planned by a Persian architect Ustad Isa. Apart from its stunning design balance and perfect symmetry, the Taj is also noted for its elegant domes, intricately carved screens and some of the best inlay work ever seen. We explore both the manicured grounds and the spectacular monument.

Later we will stop for a special "Suzy experience" at Sheros restaurant for coffee and snacks. Sheros is a cheery little café and art gallery run by acid attack survivors. An initiative by Chaanv Foundation, this café not only serves coffee, but inspiration. Those operating it bear the injuries of being attacked by acid and Sheros aims to remove stigma as well as offering them an opportunity for financial independence so that they can be brought into mainstream. Your visit supports and empowers these women of abuse with sustainable income.

Train returns 5:30 to 7:30 PM. Return to Delhi by train in the evening where you will have the evening free.

Overnight: Le-Meridien (B)

May 8 – Jaipur Palaces & Elephants

After a hearty buffet breakfast, we head to the airport to fly to the legendary city of Jaipur. (Indigo airlines 6E 212 at 1300 – 50 minutes) Welcome to the Royal Kingdom of Rajasthan, India's most colorful state and so alive with culture. Jaipur "The City of Victory," founded in 1727 by Maharaja Jal Singh II - a warrior, astronomer and politician. Jaipur is the first planned city of India and although originally the color of red sandstone, Jaipur's universal color came in 1853 when the Prince of Wales visited and the whole city was painted pink to welcome him.

The neat and broadly laid-out avenues, painted in their rosy color provide a magical charm. Rich in its cultural and architectural beauty, Jaipur is known as an ancient royal city that is home to the Rajputs, a land of legends, chivalry and beautiful women. It has timeless appeal with colorful bazaars, ornate gardens and palaces surrounded by mountains. Jaipur is the craft capital of India, particularly gems and fine cotton wear. The dollar goes so far here now! In your free time, you may want to take a peek into the Gem Palace and Handloom Emporium!

This afternoon enjoy our AFS Elephant Immersion. This ethical experience with the most pampered ellies and loved by their handlers lends a special chance to get up close and personal. Spend time with our elephants bathing, painting and

feeding these magnificent creatures. We love elephants and do not support any activity that may be harmful to them. All are female ellies which makes them extra gentle and they love to play with guests.

We are welcomed in Rajasthani style (Tilak or garland of flowers) with soft drinks. More about elephants - First contact is always important! When meeting an elephant for the first time you have to let them catch your smell. Make them feel comfortable by stroking and talking to them while looking into their eyes. Let the elephant feel your energy and spirit.

Elephant Language You might be surprised to know that there is a certain language to communicate with them. To be able to understand them you have to learn the basics of this language.

Elephant Feeding -You might have heard of the saying “love goes through the stomach”? Well, they are no exception.

Painting using Organic colors - Learn about the completely natural paint that is used to paint the thick elephant skin as is tradition for festivals.

Washing the Elephant - Then it's time to wash and scrub the elephants. You can get a shower with your elephant and Wash & Scrub them poolside in the garden.

Dinner included at hotel. (In the evening if time permits, we can also present an option at Hasroli Palace with traditional sari clothing, turban tying, and an interactive cooking session with dinner.)

Overnight: Hotel Crown Plaza Jaipur (2 nights). B, D

May 9 – Ballooning, Temples & Forts - Jaipur

Hot air balloon option - Early to rise before sunrise and experience the excitement of flying over the beautiful landscapes dotted with palaces, temples, lakes and villages. (\$320)

After breakfast, enjoy an excursion to the magnificent Amber Fort with its rainbow of colors in the stunning endless mosaic halls. We'll ascend the fort in Jeeps and tour the captivating chambers and hallways of the intricately designed and decorated palace. The colorfully painted elephant-headed god Ganesh greets you as you enter the imposing Ganesh Pol gateway to explore the elaborate apartments and manicured Charbagh Garden. Pierced screen windows offer views from different vantage points and shimmering mirrors encrust the walls of Sheesh Mahal.

Any trip to Jaipur has to include a photo stop at Hawa Mahal or the Palace of Winds. This beautiful façade is probably the most photographed building in Jaipur, with its ornately carved windows designed so the ladies of the palace could look at the streets unobserved.

We'll continue to the City Palace Museum which has a priceless collection of antiques, costumes and amory of the Mughals and Rajputs including swords of different shapes and sizes with chiseled handles. It also has an art gallery which displays a collection of miniature paintings, carpets, royal paraphernalia and rare astronomical works in Arabic, Persian, Latin and Sanskrit.

You'll marvel at the utterly unique Jantar Mantar Observatory, a UNESCO World Heritage site. The 18th-century stone astronomical and astrological observatory track dates, times and even years through a variety of sundials and structures that look more like works of art than a scientific mechanism. Dinner included at hotel.

Overnight: Crowne Plaza Jaipur (2 nights). B, D

May 10 – Into Ranthambore Tiger Territory

After breakfast, we try our hand at dancing – Bollywood style – with a 2-hour Bollywood dance class. Feel the rhythms of India and move like a Bollywood Star with this unique dance form from our professional choreographer who will teach you all those moves!

Then it's time to head to Ranthambore, home of the Bengal Tiger. The scenery on our 4-hour drive evolves into rocky forests and grasslands as we approach the 248-square-mile park. This area is the perfect habitat for tigers! Just five years ago, the tiger population in this region had been decimated by poachers, but thankfully we once again have a good chance of encountering the largest and most powerful of the world's cats.

Our home here is the uber-fabulous Oberoi Vanyavilas where you will be treated like a Maharaja! Spread across 20 acres, this stunning resort and spa is designed to pamper. We even have our own butlers in our tented villas. (Each night my butler brought me chai tea and cookies in bed.) You can choose a host of Ayurvedic treatments at the over-the-top Signature Spa. There are even two resident ellies that call the property home. Sip champagne while atop an observation tower overlooking a nearby watering hole where you can watch animals come to drink. Each night, there is live traditional entertainment in the main dining. Your evening is on your own to enjoy one of the most coveted destinations in India.

Overnight: Oberoi Vanyavilas (3 nights) (B)

May 11 – Bengal Tiger Safari

Morning starts with an early tiger safari and game viewing in our safari vehicles. Our expert naturalists are trained to help us spot the magnificent Bengal Tiger. There are a host of other animals we may see along the way including Sambar, Spotted Deer, Nilgai, Dorcas Gazelle, Langur, Ruddy Mongooses, wild boar and flying fox. We could also spot a leopard, rhino, hyena or sloth bears, although these are much rarer.

Take a break midday before boarding our jeeps in the afternoon for another safari in search of tigers and nocturnal wildlife on the move.

Overnight: Oberoi Vanyavilas (B)

May 12– Oberoi Vanyavilas

You'll have another optional chance for a morning game drive with our intrepid guides, but the rest of the day is yours to call your own. The resort is one you can't get enough of and today is one of leisure to take time to drink it in. Book Ayurvedic treatments (India is the origin of these wonderful natural medicines and herb-based therapies), hang out by the pool or visit the nearby Dustkar, a women's co-op and amazing market for quality crafts.

This afternoon enjoy our Yoga class at the resort. Yoga being a gem of Indian culture, is not only a way to keep oneself healthy and fit, but it's more of a way of Life. We offer a one-hour Yoga class covering Asana, Dhyana and Pranayam. This session is best suited for all, be it a beginner or pro.

Overnight: Oberoi Vanyavilas (B)

May 13– Ranthambore to Delhi

In the morning, we will drive a few hours back to Jaipur for a short afternoon flight back to Delhi. (Indigo airlines 6E 6917 14:20/15:20 Hrs) From the airport, we'll check into our hotel near the airport and in the evening have our dinner to say farewell to magical India.

Overnight: Novotel Aerocity (1 night) (B, D)

May 14 – Return to the U.S.

Depart home to USA or continue on an extension to AFS Bhutan for another week of adventure in the Himalayas. Depart to U.S.