

## North India Cultural Highlights

To enhance your experience, we have put together brief descriptions of the areas we will be visiting. In all of India, history, politics, religion and art are intertwined. To understand one is to appreciate the other.

### Delhi

The capital of India, is the country's third-largest city and the home of some of the finest monuments of the Moghul Empire and the British Raj.

Ancient and modern times are in juxtaposition here, not only in the remains of a succession of empires, but equally in present social structure and lifestyles. The name Delhi, Dehali, or Dilli is derived from Dhillika, the name of the first medieval township of Delhi, located on the south-western border of the present Delhi, in Mehrauli. This was the first in the series of seven medieval cities. It is also known as Yoginipura, that is, the fortress of the yoginis (female divinities). There was, however, an ancient urban settlement in Delhi known as Indraprastha on the banks of the Yamuna that is traditionally believed to have been founded by the Pandava brothers, the mythical heroes of Mahabharata, the national epic of India. Excavations at the site of the township inside Purana Kila or the Old Fort show that the date of the oldest habitation in Delhi is around the 3rd or 4th century **B.C.** Delhi is divided into two parts. The old Delhi was one of the capitals of Muslim India between the 12th and 19th centuries. Old forts, mosques and monuments related to India's Muslim history are located here. New Delhi is the imperial city that was created as the capital by the British. It is spread over a wide area and is lined with imposing boulevards.

### Varanasi

A contemporary of Nineveh and Thebes, Varanasi today is one of the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world and the oldest in India. Ancient names are Benares and Kashi. The derivation of its ancient name *Varanasi* is not known, nor is that of its alternative name *Kasi*, which is still in common use among Hindus, and is popularly explained to mean "bright." The original site of the city is supposed to have been at Sarnath, 31 **m.** north of the present city, where ruins of brick and stone buildings, with three lofty *stupas* still standing, cover an area about half a mile long.

The Hindu kingdom of Benares is said to have been founded by one Kas Raja about 1200 **B.C.** Subsequently it became part of the kingdom of Kanauj which in A.D. 1193 was conquered by Mahommed of Ghor. On the downfall of the Pathan dynasty of Delhi, about A.D. 1599, it was incorporated with the Mogul empire. On the dismemberment of the Delhi empire, it was seized by Safdar Jang, the nawab wazir of Oudh, by whose grandson it was ceded to the East India Company by the treaty of 1775. The subsequent history of Benares contains two important events, the rebellion of Chait Singh in 1781, occasioned by the demands of Warren Hastings for money and troops to carry on the Mahratta War, and the Mutiny of 1857, when the energy and coolness of the European officials, chiefly of General Neill, carried the district successfully through the storm.

Sakya Muni, the Buddha, came here from Gaya in the 6th century B.C. (from which time some of the remains may date), in order to establish his religion, which shows that the place was even then a great centre. Hsiian Tsang, the celebrated Chinese pilgrim visited Benares in the 7th century A.D. and described it as containing 30 Buddhist monasteries, with about 3000 monks, and about 100 temples of Hindu gods. Hinduism has now supplanted Buddhism and the Brahman fills the place of the monk. The modern temples number upwards of 1500. Even after the lapse of so great a time the city is still in its glory, and as seen from the river it presents a scene of great grandeur.

Varanasi is a crumbling maze of a city that rises from the ghats (steps) on the western banks of the Ganges, which is worshipped as a living goddess. The 90 ghats along the river define the life and identity of Varanasi. They cover more than 4 miles and are lined with temples and shrines that reverberate with the endless cycle of Hindu religious practice. It serves as the holiest of Indian pilgrimages, home of Shiva, where the devout come to wash away their sins. Many return to die here in the hope that they may achieve "moksha" or the liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

Unfortunately many of its temples were plundered and destroyed by Mohammad Ghauri in the 12th century. The temples and religious institutions in the city now are of 18th century vintage.

The bank of the river is entirely lined with stone, and there are many very fine ghats or landing-places built by pious devotees, and highly ornamented. These are generally crowded with bathers and worshippers, who come to wash away their sins in the sacred river Ganges. Near the Manikarnika ghat is the well held to have been dug by Vishnu and filled with his sweat; great numbers of pilgrims bathe in its venerated water. Shrines and temples line the bank of the river.

But in spite of its fine appearance from the river, the architecture of Benares is not distinguished, nor are its buildings of high antiquity. Among the most conspicuous of these are the mosque of Aurangzeb, built as an intentional insult in the middle of the Hindu quarter; the Bisheshwar or Golden Temple, important less through architectural beauty than through its rank as the holiest spot in the holy city; and the Durga temple, which, like most of the other principal temples, is a Mahratta building of the 17th century. The temples are mostly small and are placed in the angles of the streets, under the shadow of the lofty houses. Their forms are not ungraceful, and many of them are covered over with beautiful and elaborate carvings of flowers, animals and palm branches. The observatory of Raja Jai Singh is a notable building of the year 1693. The internal streets of the town are so winding and narrow that there is not room for a carriage to pass, and it is difficult to penetrate them even on horseback. The level of the roadway is considerably lower than the ground-floors of the houses, which have generally arched rooms in front, with little shops behind them; and above these they are richly embellished with verandahs, galleries, projecting oriel windows, and very broad overhanging eaves supported by carved brackets. The houses are built of *chanar* stone, and are lofty, none being less than two stories high, most of them three, and several of five or six stories. The Hindus are fond of painting the outside of their houses a deep red color, and of covering the most conspicuous parts with pictures of flowers, men, women, bulls, elephants and gods and goddesses in all the many forms known in Hindu mythology.

The Kashi Naresh (Maharaja of Kashi) is the chief cultural patron of Varanasi, and an essential part of all religious celebrations. The culture of Varanasi is closely associated with the Ganges. The city has been a cultural center of North India for several thousand years, and has a history that is older than most of the major world religions.

The Benares Gharana form of Hindustani classical music developed in Varanasi, and many prominent Indian philosophers, poets, writers, and musicians live or have lived in Varanasi. Gautama Buddha gave his first sermon at Sarnath located near Varanasi.

Scholarly books have been written in the city, including the Ramcharitmanas of Tulsidas. Today there is a temple of his namesake in the city, the Tulsi Manas Mandir. The largest residential University of Asia, Benares Hindu University is located here.

The visit to the old city is a fascinating insight into the rituals of Hinduism. Every temple is well attended and every street corner has roadside shrines and vendors selling garlands, incense sticks and other items used in worship.

## **Khajuraho**

Once capital of the Chandela dynasty, Khajuraho is today known for its magnificent temples. The temples were built under later Chandela kings between 950 and 1050 AD. Of the 85 temples, the 20 surviving are among the finest in India. The sculptures are remarkable, and reflect society in an age free from inhibitions. They display one aspect of the nature of Hinduism itself, a genuine love of life. The temples, built mostly of fine sandstone, can be divided into three groups: the Western, Eastern and Southern.

## **Orchha**

The fort palace complex is set on a rock promontory above the surrounding countryside. It is approached by a remarkable early 17th century granite bridge. Orchha (meaning hidden) was the Bundela capital under the rule of Raja Rudra Pratap (1501-1531), responsible for building the palace and bridge. It is a wonderful example of a medieval fort palace. Within the turreted walls are gardens, gateways, pavilions and temples, surrounded by the Eetwa and Jamni rivers.

## **Agra**

The home of the exquisite Taj Mahal and impressive Agra Fort. The traditional marble inlay work is incredible, the techniques of which continue to be passed down thru the generations to ancestors of the workers who created the inlay for the Taj. The city alternated with Delhi as the capital of the Mogul Empire.

## **Fatehpur Sikri**

Fatehpur (town of victory) Sikri was built by Akbar, the third and greatest of the Great Moguls. The town was erected after a holy man, Sheikh Salim Chisti, living in Sikri, decreed the births of three sons to Akbar after all his children had died in infancy. It is over 400 years old and yet perfectly preserved. There are three sections to the City: The Royal Palace (notable for the Emperor's throne), outside the Royal Palace and the the Jami Masjid (the location of the Tomb of Sheikh Salim Chishti, a masterpiece in brilliant white marble).

## **Jaipur**

The "Pink City," Jaipur was founded by Sawai Jai Singh II (1700-1743). It has 7 gates into the city--one for each of the 7 planets (which were the number of planets known at the time of the city's founding).

At the heart of Jaipur is its City Palace which houses an extensive collection of rare manuscripts, Mughal and Rajasthani miniatures, Mughal carpets, costumes and textiles, arms and weapons, royal buggies, chariots and palanquins and a remarkable carriage -the indraviman - that was drawn by four elephants.

At the center is Chandra Mahal, the seven tiered moon palace where the present Maharaja still resides. The City Palace complex also contains the Govind Devji Temple, dedicated to Lord Krishna.

Just outside the gateway of the City Palace is Jantar Mantar, the Yantralaya of Sawai Jai Singh II, the last great classical astronomer in India. The modernistic structures known as Yantras are the unique creations of this astronomer-king designed by him and built by experts to observe the movements of sun, moon, planets and the stars. This is the largest of five observatories founded by him in various parts of the country.

Hawa Mahal (Palace of Winds) is Jaipur's most-photographed building, a honeycomb palace with 953 latticed windows overlooking the bazaar and busy streets of Jaipur. Built in 1799 by the poet-king Pratap Singh, this extraordinary building was used by purdah-bound women to watch the grand processions that were a regular feature of the city.

Akbar's magnificently illustrated Ramayana and Razmnama are sometimes on display at the Jaipur Library.

## **Udaipur**

Built around Lake Pichola, Udaipur is perhaps most famous for its palace in the middle of the lake (Lake Palace Hotel). The city of sunrise is a quaint town with cobble stone streets, plentiful local bazaars, marble palaces, lakeside gardens, temples and havelis. It is a traditionally planned fortified city surrounded by walls and massive gates. The rulers, beginning with Maharana Singh in the mid 16th century, prided themselves on being independent from other more powerful regional neighbors, particularly the Moghuls.

## South India Cultural Highlights

### **Cochin (Kochi)**

Cochin (Kochi) spreads across islands and promontories in a stunning location between the Arabian Sea and backwaters. Fort Cochin and Mattancherry are the focus of interest, where the city's extraordinary history of foreign influence and settlement is reflected in an assortment of architectural styles. During a wander you'll stumble upon spice markets, chinese fishing nets, a synagogue, a Portuguese palace, India's first European church, Dutch homes and a village green straight out of England.

Kochi sprang into being in 1341, when a flood created a natural safe port that swiftly replaced Muziris as the chief harbor on the Malabar coast. The royal family transferred here from Muziris in 1405, after which the city grew rapidly, attracting Christian, arab and Jewish settlers from the Middle East.

### **Kerala Backwaters**

The Kerala backwaters are a chain of brackish lagoons and lakes lying parallel to the Arabian Sea coast (known as the Malabar Coast) of Kerala state in southern India. The network includes five large lakes linked by canals, both manmade and natural, fed by 38 rivers, and extending virtually half the length of Kerala state. The backwaters were formed by the action of waves and shore currents creating low barrier islands across the mouths of the many rivers flowing down from the Western Ghats range.

The Kerala Backwaters are a network of interconnected canals, rivers, lakes and inlets, a labyrinthine system formed by more than 900 km of waterways, and sometimes compared to the American Bayou. In the midst of this landscape there are a number of towns and cities which serve as the starting and end points of backwater cruises.

The backwaters have a unique ecosystem - freshwater from the rivers meets the seawater from the Arabian Sea. In certain areas, such as the Vembanad Kayal, where a barrage has been built near Kumarakom, salt water from the sea is prevented from entering the deep inside, keeping the fresh water intact.

Vembanad Kayal is the largest of the lakes, covering an area of 200 km<sup>2</sup>, and bordered by Alappuzha (Alleppey), Kottayam and Ernakulam districts. The port of Kochi (Cochin) is located at the lake's outlet to the Arabian Sea. Alleppey, "Venice of the East", has a large network of canals that meander through the town.

### **Madurai**

This is one of the oldest cities in south Asia and has been an important center of worship and commerce for as long as there has been civilization in south India. Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador who came here in **302BC**, wrote of its splendor while the Roman geographer, Strabo, complained at how the city's silk, pearls and spices were draining the imperial coffers of Rome. It was this lucrative trade that enabled the Pandyan dynasty to erect the mighty Meenakshi-Sundareshwarar Temple, today remaining the greatest man-made spectacle of the south.

The traceable history and fame of Madurai stretches back well over 2000 years. Numerous natural caves in local hills and boulders, often modified by the addition of simple rock-cut beds, were used both in prehistoric times and by Ascetics, such as the Ajivikas and Jains, who practiced withdrawal and penance.

## **Mahabalipuram (Mamallapuram)**

The Pallava Ruler, Narasimhavarman I made this port famous in the 7th century; responsible for the magnificent rock temples and carvings. There are 14 cave temples, 9 monolithic rathas (shrines in the shape of rathas or chariots), 3 stone temples and 4 relief sculptured rock panels. Carving stone is still a living art by stone masons, while students attend the Govt School of Sculpture. A characteristic feature of the temples was the system of water channels and tanks, drawn from the Palar River, which made it suitable as a site of religious worship. In particular, the Stone Temple, a World Heritage Site, was built by the sea at the end of the 7th century by King Rafasimha. It is unusual for its shrines to both Siva and Vishnu. Its position, with an east facing altar designed to catch the rising sun, and a stone pillar to hold the beacon for sailors. Two additional shrines were built to the west adding to the shrines unusual structure.

## **Chennai (Madras)**

There has been dramatic growth and commercial development from Chennai's old core between Fort St. George and the Harbor; with industrialized northern suburbs and affluent residential suburbs of the south and west. In 1639, the British obtained land by a trader, Francis Day and the East India Company. Madras became the center of British administration in India until 1793 when Calcutta became the chief center. Noted sights Fort St. George and St Mary's Church, completed in 1654, are fortifications on the beach. Fort George is a fine example of British military architecture, with fine woodwork and white stone paving. St. Mary's is the first English church in India and the oldest British building to survive. The most remarkable monument in the church was erected by the East India Company to the famous missionary, Schwartz, the intermediary between the British and Haidar Ali.