

29 OCT – 10 NOV 2026

Delhi and the Rajasthan Loop

*Thirteen days: three in Delhi, six on the road from Udaipur
to Agra, and Diwali night in Agra.*

Offline edition of the trip plan, v0.1, generated 26 Aug 2026.

Open at the time of printing: Delhi day plans · Agra hotel & Taj tickets · Agra → Delhi transfer +
airport night (in booking).

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Every line here is a link, as is every cross-reference in the text: day chapters point at the places they visit, and each place points back at its day.

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PART ONE

The shape of the trip

*What the thirteen days add up to, where the road goes,
and which nights are spent where.*

Overview

Thirteen days, from an evening departure on Thursday 29 October to a late-morning landing back in Warsaw on Tuesday 10 November. Two LOT flights bracket the trip; almost everything between them happens by car.

DATES

29 Oct – 10 Nov 2026 — 13 days, 12 nights

LONG FLIGHTS

Warsaw → Delhi overnight; Delhi → Warsaw by day. LOT 787-8, non-stop both ways

NIGHTS IN DELHI

4 — three at the start, one by the airport at the end

THE TOUR

6 days, Udaipur → Agra, private car and driver, 872 km

LONGEST DRIVE

Jaipur → Agra, 238 km, 3 h

DEEP DIVES

7 places with a chapter of their own in Part Three

CONTEXT

6 essays on the country behind the sights, in their own part

FIELD GUIDE

7 reference pages at the back, in the last part

Three blocks

The first block is Delhi: an overnight flight lands at 05:10 on 30 October, and the hotel room is paid from the night before so it is ready on arrival. Three days follow in the city, taken roughly in historical order — Mughal Delhi and the imperial avenues first, then Old Delhi at full tilt, then the twelfth-century ruins in

the south. None of that is booked; it is a proposed shape, and the detail lives in Day 2 to Day 4.

The second block is the tour. On 2 November a morning IndiGo flight drops us in Udaipur, where a car and driver take over for six days: 872 kilometres of road, about 11 hours of driving spread over the week, ending in Agra on the evening of 7 November. This part is booked, though the times on the day pages are the operator's plan rather than a timetable. The route is a loop through Rajasthan's hill country and desert edge — Kumbhalgarh, Narlai, Jodhpur, Pushkar, Jaipur, Amber — and it is the reason the deep dives in Part Three exist.

The third block is the open one. Tour services stop on arrival in Agra, so the Taj Mahal, Agra Fort and Diwali night are ours to arrange, as are the way back to Delhi on 9 November and the bed near the airport before the 07:20 departure home. Those bookings were still in progress when this edition was generated; Bookings lists exactly what is settled and what is not.

Diwali

The festival runs through the second half of the trip. Its week opens on 6 November, the day we reach Jaipur, and the main night — Lakshmi Puja — falls on Sunday 8 November, which is spent in Agra. Expect illuminated bazaars from Jaipur onwards, fireworks late into the night of the 8th, and a smoke haze over the following mornings.

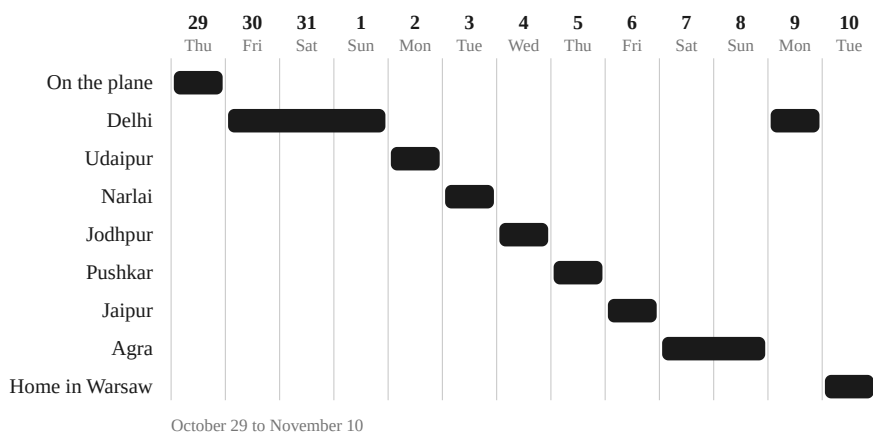


Figure 1. Where each night is spent. Delhi appears twice: three nights at the start and one at the end, next to the airport.

The route

Delhi sits at the top right of the map; everything else hangs below and to the west of it. The trip is a long triangle — flown down one side, driven back up the other.

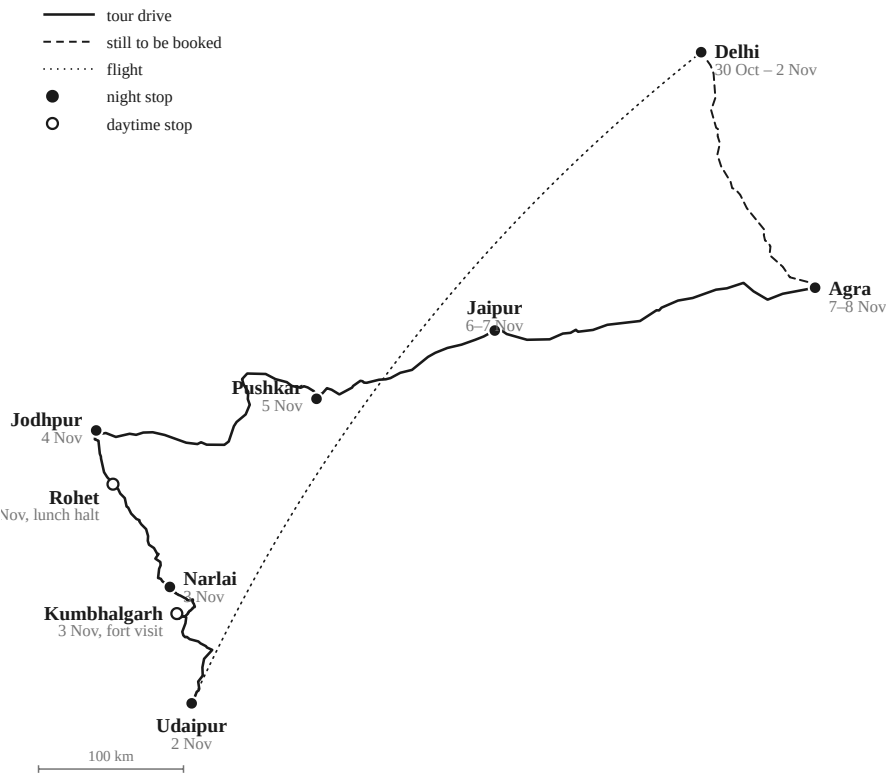


Figure 2. The trip on the ground. The flight to Udaipur opens the loop; the road closes it through Jodhpur, Pushkar and Jaipur to Agra.

The car tour never doubles back. From Udaipur it climbs north into the Aravalli hills for Kumbhalgarh, drops to the village of Narlai, crosses to the desert edge at Jodhpur, then turns east through Pushkar and Jaipur and finally runs the long

straight road to Agra. Two of the days are mostly driving — Jodhpur to Pushkar and Jaipur to Agra — and both are worth reading a deep dive on.

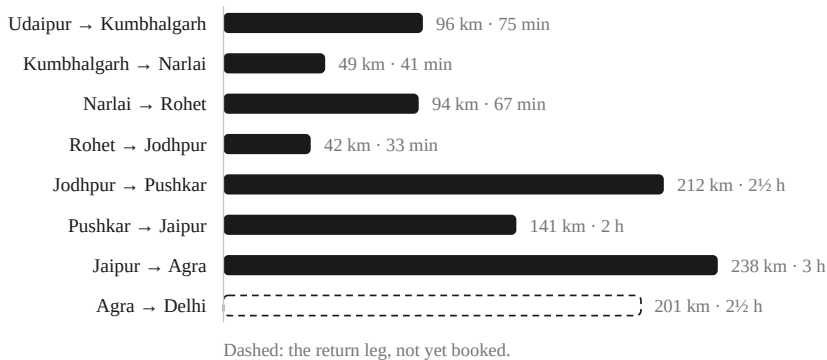


Figure 3. Road legs in travel order. Times are the routing estimate, before traffic, chai stops and photo stops.

Legs and distances

Distances and times are routing estimates. The last row is the return leg on 9 November, still to be booked — by car on the Yamuna Expressway or by train on the Gatimaan Express — and it is not part of the tour total.

LEG	DISTANCE	DRIVING
Udaipur → Kumbhalgarh	96 km	75 min
Kumbhalgarh → Narlai	49 km	41 min
Narlai → Rohet	94 km	67 min
Rohet → Jodhpur	42 km	33 min
Jodhpur → Pushkar	212 km	2½ h
Pushkar → Jaipur	141 km	2 h
Jaipur → Agra	238 km	3 h
Tour total	872 km	about 11 h

Agra → Delhi

201 km

2½ h

The thirteen days

The whole itinerary on one page. Every title is a link to that day's chapter in Part Two.

GETTING THERE AND BACK

29 Oct Thu	Day 1 · Warsaw → overnight flight	on the plane
DELHI		
30 Oct Fri	Day 2 · Arrive Delhi — Mughal afternoon	Delhi
31 Oct Sat	Day 3 · Old Delhi, full tilt	Delhi
1 Nov Sun	Day 4 · Qutb Minar & the south	Delhi
THE RAJASTHAN TOUR		
2 Nov Mon	Day 5 · Fly to Udaipur	Udaipur
3 Nov Tue	Day 6 · Udaipur → Kumbhalgarh → Narlai	Narlai
4 Nov Wed	Day 7 · Narlai → Rohet → Jodhpur	Jodhpur
5 Nov Thu	Day 8 · Jodhpur → Pushkar	Pushkar
6 Nov Fri	Day 9 · Pushkar → Jaipur Diwali week begins (Dhanteras)	Jaipur
7 Nov Sat	Day 10 · Amber Fort, then → Agra	Agra
AGRA AND THE RETURN		
8 Nov Sun	Day 11 · Agra — Taj Mahal & Diwali Diwali — the main night	Agra
9 Nov Mon	Day 12 · Agra → Delhi	Delhi
GETTING THERE AND BACK		
10 Nov Tue	Day 13 · Delhi → Warsaw	home

PART TWO

Day by day

*Thirteen chapters, one per day, each with its hours, its
road and the stories worth reading first.*

Warsaw → overnight flight

Wakes at home in Warsaw, sleeps on the plane



Evening departure from Chopin, land in Delhi at dawn.

The hours

~14:30 **Head to Chopin Airport** IDEA
Long-haul — aim to be there ~2.5 h before departure. No checked bag on the ticket; check what you’re taking.

17:20 **LO 071 departs Warsaw** BOOKED
LOT, Boeing 787-8, non-stop, 7 h 20 in the air. Seat 8A. Dinner and breakfast on board.

night **Overnight eastbound** BOOKED
Delhi runs 4½ hours ahead of Warsaw. Try to sleep after dinner — landing is 00:40 Warsaw time.

On this day

Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner — LOT’s long-haul flagship. Composite fuselage, electronically dimmable windows, and cabin pressure kept at a lower equivalent altitude than older jets — one reason people arrive less wrecked from it.

The southern routing — with Russian and Ukrainian airspace closed, the Warsaw–Delhi track typically arcs over the Black Sea, the Caucasus and Central Asia before

dropping across Pakistan into the Indus plain. Worth a look at the seat-back map: the detour is the geopolitics of the 2020s drawn as a line.

The half-hour time zone — India runs on UTC+5:30, one of the few countries offset by 30 minutes, so Delhi is 4½ hours ahead of Warsaw. One time zone covers the whole country, decreed from Delhi; in the far east the sun rises before 5 a.m.

Descent over the Gangetic plain — landing at 05:10, still dark. The approach crosses the Ganges plain, home to some four hundred million people — an unbroken carpet of sodium-orange towns roughly the size of Poland and Germany combined, and in early November usually a layer of haze already visible from the air.

Next: Day 2, Arrive Delhi — Mughal afternoon.

Arrive Delhi — Mughal afternoon

Wakes on the plane, sleeps in Delhi

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Land at dawn, sleep until about 12:30, then Mughal Delhi in the afternoon and India Gate after dark.

The hours

05:10	Land Delhi T3 BOOKED LO 071 arrives, Indira Gandhi Intl, Terminal 3.
~06:30	Immigration, cash, taxi IDEA e-Visa queue, rupees from the ATM, prepaid taxi or Uber to Janpath (~35 min at this hour).
~07:30	Check in — Le Méridien New Delhi BOOKED Room is ready — the night of the 29th is paid so early check-in works. Sleep until ~12:30.
13:00	Quick lunch IDEA At the hotel, or 10 minutes on foot in Connaught Place.

14:00	Humayun's Tomb IDEA The first great Mughal garden tomb (1570) — the building the Taj Mahal learned from, at its best in low afternoon light. ~20 min drive. The story behind it: The Seven Cities of Delhi.
16:00	Sunder Nursery IDEA The restored Mughal heritage park next door — tombs among the flowerbeds, and a good chai stop.
17:45	India Gate & Kartavya Path at dusk IDEA The imperial axis lit up: India Gate, the lawns, Rashtrapati Bhavan up the hill. Busy with local families after dark.
19:30	Dinner in Connaught Place IDEA Early night — tomorrow starts at 07:30.

On this day

The mudra hands of Terminal 3 — above the immigration hall, nine giant copper hands each making a classical mudra (gesture) from Indian dance. The standard first photograph of India; T3 was among the world's largest terminal buildings when it opened in 2010.

Connaught Place — the hotel is on its edge: two concentric circles of white colonnades built in the 1930s as the commercial centre of British New Delhi, modelled loosely on Bath's Royal Crescent. Still called "CP" and still the pivot of the city's geography — the metro's Rajiv Chowk station underneath is its busiest interchange.

Humayun's Tomb — the first great Mughal garden tomb (1570) and the building the Taj Mahal learned from: red sandstone with white marble trim, set in a charbagh

(four-square paradise garden). The compound also holds the older octagonal tomb of Isa Khan, a complete little precinct of its own. The story: *The Seven Cities of Delhi*.

Sunder Nursery — the 90-acre Mughal-era garden next door, derelict for decades and reopened in 2018 after a model restoration: fifteen monuments, formal water channels, an arboretum, and the best chai stop in this part of town.

India Gate & Kartavya Path — Lutyens' 42-metre war memorial arch, carrying the names of some 13,000 soldiers of the Indian Army who died in the First World War. The two-mile ceremonial axis runs from here up Raisina Hill to Rashtrapati Bhavan, the presidential palace. After dark it turns into an enormous public picnic.

Black kites — the wheeling raptors overhead all day, in their thousands. Delhi is reckoned to have the densest urban raptor population in the world; they thrive on the city's open kitchens and butcher districts.

Pre-Diwali Delhi — the festival is nine days out, and the build-up is already visible: string lights going up on facades, gift hampers stacked in shop windows, markets running late. The season runs on the Diwali bonus — the annual payout most Indian employers time to the festival — which is why the shopping peaks all at once.

Read the night before: *The Seven Cities of Delhi* — eight centuries on one plain.

Previous: Day 1, Warsaw → overnight flight. Next: Day 3, Old Delhi, full tilt.

Old Delhi, full tilt

Wakes in Delhi, sleeps in Delhi



The Mughal capital in one day: Jama Masjid at opening, breakfast in the paratha lane, the spice market, the Red Fort, and Gurudwara Bangla Sahib in the evening.

The hours

07:30	Metro to Old Delhi IDEA Yellow line from Rajiv Chowk two stops to Chawri Bazar — faster than any car up there. (Or a 25-min taxi.)
08:00	Jama Masjid IDEA India’s greatest mosque (1656), before the tour buses. Climb the southern minaret for the rooftop view of everything you’ll walk next.
09:15	Breakfast: Paranthé Wali Gali IDEA The paratha lane — stuffed flatbreads fried to order, some shops here since the 1870s.
10:00	Chandni Chowk & Khari Baoli IDEA Cycle-rickshaw through the lanes — silver street, wedding street — ending at Khari Baoli, Asia’s biggest spice market.

11:30	Red Fort IDEA Shah Jahan's palace-fort (1639) — the halls of public and private audience, where the Peacock Throne stood. ~2 h. The story behind it: The Seven Cities of Delhi.
13:45	Lunch at Karim's IDEA Mughlai institution in the lane by the mosque, run by the same family since 1913.
15:15	Raj Ghat IDEA Gandhi's memorial by the river — a calm 20-minute stop after the bazaar, on the way back.
17:00	Gurudwara Bangla Sahib IDEA The great Sikh temple near the hotel: golden dome, evening hymns over the tank, and a volunteer kitchen that serves ~10,000 meals a day — visitors can walk through it.
19:30	Dinner at Khan Market IDEA Or somewhere near the hotel.

On this day

The metro ride in — Delhi's metro is vast, cheap and rigorously ordered (the first carriage is women-only). Chawri Bazar station is one of the deepest on the network, about 25 m down; the contrast between the platform and the street you surface into is the whole point.

Jama Masjid — Shah Jahan's congregational mosque (1656), India's grandest: a courtyard for 25,000, three marble domes, two 40-metre minarets. The climb up the southern minaret gives a rooftop map of everything the day covers.

Paranthe Wali Gali — the paratha lane: a dozen shops frying stuffed flatbreads to order, several run by the same families since the 1870s. The menu boards list fillings from potato to banana; everything is fried in ghee, served with the same set of chutneys.

Dariba Kalan and Kinari Bazaar — the specialised lanes of Chandni Chowk, best seen from a cycle rickshaw: one street selling silver and jewels since the 17th century, the next selling nothing but wedding trim — tinsel, turbans, garlands of fake banknotes.

Khari Baoli — Asia's largest wholesale spice market, running west from Fatehpuri Masjid. Porters with sacks of dried chillies push through the crowd, and the chilli dust in the air has everyone — traders included — sneezing. It has operated on this spot since the 17th century.

Red Fort — Shah Jahan's palace-fort (1639): the halls of public and private audience, where the Peacock Throne stood until Nadir Shah carried it off to Persia in 1739. The prime minister addresses the nation from its ramparts every Independence Day. The story: The Seven Cities of Delhi.

Karim's — the Mughlai institution in the lane facing Jama Masjid, run by one family since 1913; the founders claimed descent from cooks of the Mughal court. Burra kebab and mutton korma are the orders.

Raj Ghat — the black marble platform marking where Gandhi was cremated in January 1948, with an eternal flame, set in quiet lawns by the Yamuna. Visiting heads of state are brought here as a matter of protocol.

Gurudwara Bangla Sahib — the great Sikh temple near the hotel: golden dome, a holy tank that reflects it, hymns broadcast over the water in the evening. Its volunteer kitchen (langar) feeds around 10,000 people a day, free, whoever they are — and visitors can walk through the kitchen and watch the chapati line at work.

Read the night before: The Seven Cities of Delhi — eight centuries on one plain.

Previous: Day 2, Arrive Delhi — Mughal afternoon. Next: Day 4, Qutb Minar & the south.

Qutb Minar & the south

Wakes in Delhi, sleeps in Delhi



Where Delhi began: the Qutb complex and the first city, then south Delhi.
Finish early — the tour starts at 05:30 tomorrow.

The hours

08:00	Qutb Minar IDEA 73 m of carved sandstone from the 1190s, over the ruins of the first city of Delhi. Quietest at opening time. The story behind it: The Seven Cities of Delhi.
10:00	Mehrauli Archaeological Park IDEA Next door: a thousand years of tombs, stepwells and mosques scattered through parkland. About an hour, few visitors.
11:45	Lotus Temple — the trip to Sydney IDEA The Bahá'í house of worship (1986): 27 free-standing marble petals which, from the right angle on the lawn, are an afternoon in Sydney without the flight. Makrana marble — the Taj's own quarry. Open Sundays; 30–40 min including the queue — skip if the queue is long.
13:15	Lunch in Hauz Khas Village IDEA Cafés overlooking the medieval reservoir and madrasa ruins.

15:00 **Lodhi Gardens** IDEA
15th-century tombs in Delhi's loveliest park — the pre-Mughal chapter you haven't seen yet, at strolling pace.

16:30 **Agrasen ki Baoli** IDEA
A 14th-century stepwell between office blocks, 10 minutes from the hotel — a 15-minute stop on the way back.

18:00 **Pack, early dinner, early night** IDEA
Six days on the road start tomorrow at 05:30.

On this day

Qutb Minar — 73 m of fluted red sandstone begun in the 1190s to announce the arrival of the Delhi sultanate, its bands carved with Quranic script. Still the tallest brick minaret in the world. The story: The Seven Cities of Delhi.

The Iron Pillar — in the same courtyard: a 7-metre iron column cast in the Gupta period, ~1,600 years ago, and famously almost rust-free — a phosphorus-rich passive layer protects it. It stood somewhere else first; nobody is entirely sure where.

Quwwat-ul-Islam mosque & the Alai Minar — the sultanate's first mosque, built from the carved columns of 27 demolished temples — Hindu and Jain figures still visible under the arches. Behind it, the stump of the Alai Minar: a second tower meant to be twice the Qutb's height, abandoned at one storey when its patron died.

Mehrauli Archaeological Park — next door and nearly empty of visitors: a thousand years of ruins in parkland, including Balban's tomb (arguably India's first true arch), the Jamali Kamali mosque, and the Rajon ki Baoli stepwell.

Lotus Temple — the Bahá'í house of worship (1986): 27 free-standing marble petals forming a lotus, one of the most visited buildings in the world. Silence inside, no idols, no sermons — all faiths admitted. Fariborz Sahba spent ten years on the geometry of the shells, and the family resemblance to Sydney is not imagined — both

solve the same problem, how to stand a set of thin curved shells up without a frame, and both are clad in white (here Makrana marble, the Taj's quarry).

Hauz Khas — a 13th-century royal reservoir with Firoz Shah's madrasa and tomb arranged along its edge, deer park behind, and the village lanes now full of cafés and boutiques. Medieval Delhi and hipster Delhi in a single frame.

Lodhi Gardens — tombs of the Sayyid and Lodi dynasties — the 15th-century chapter between the sultans and the Mughals — landscaped into the city's favourite park in 1936. Joggers, politicians on their morning walk, parakeets in the dome vaults.

Agrasen ki Baoli — a 60-metre stepwell of uncertain (pre-Mughal) date wedged between office towers off Connaught Place: 103 steps descending in three tiers of arcades. Ten minutes from the hotel and a strange, sudden silence.

Read the night before: The Seven Cities of Delhi — eight centuries on one plain.

Previous: Day 3, Old Delhi, full tilt. Next: Day 5, Fly to Udaipur.

Fly to Udaipur

Wakes in Delhi, sleeps in Udaipur



Tour begins: morning hop to Udaipur, afternoon in the city of lakes.

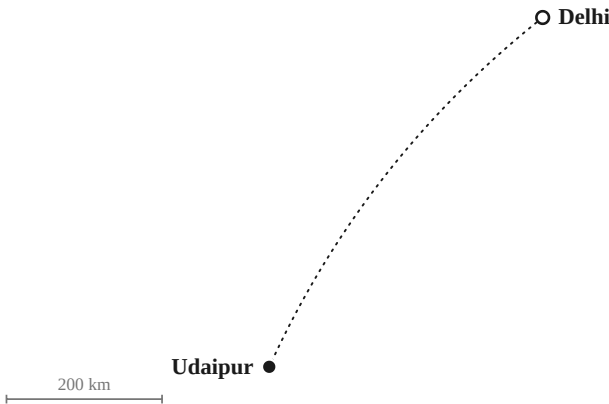


Figure 4. The day's road: Fly to Udaipur.

The hours

~05:30

Check out, taxi to the airport IDEA

Domestic departure, IGI. Allow for the queue at the terminal entrance (ticket + ID checked at the door).

08:00–09:20

IndiGo 6E 6765 → Udaipur BOOKED

Delhi → Udaipur, 1 h 20.

~10:00

Meet the driver TOUR PLAN

Tour car & driver pick up at Udaipur airport; ~30 min into town.

afternoon

Udaipur sightseeing TOUR PLAN

City Palace — the Mewar dynasty's 450-year home over Lake Pichola — then a boat on the lake past the Lake Palace.

The story behind it: City Palace & Lake Pichola.

sunset

Sunset from Ambrai Ghat IDEA

Good sunset view of the palace across the lake. Dinner options at the rooftop haveli restaurants nearby.

On this day

The Aravalli from the air — the hour-long hop crosses one of the oldest fold-mountain ranges on Earth, worn down to ridges over hundreds of millions of years. The line of the range decides everything in Rajasthan: rain falls (a little) east of it, the Thar desert lies west.

City Palace — the Mewar dynasty's home for 450 years, a ridge-top accretion of eleven linked palaces over Lake Pichola; peacock mosaics of Mor Chowk, mirror and glass inlay, and the dynasty that alone in Rajasthan never gave a daughter in marriage to the Mughals. The story: City Palace & Lake Pichola.

Lake Pichola by boat — the lake is artificial, dammed in the 14th century, and surprisingly slight for something that carries a whole city's identity: about four metres deep on average, eight at most. The boat passes the ghats and the two island palaces below the city walls.

The Lake Palace (Jag Niwas) — the 1746 pleasure palace that appears to float in the middle of the lake, now the famous hotel; it played the villain's lair in *Octopussy*, which half the rooftop cafés in town still screen nightly.

Jag Mandir — the other island palace, older (1620s); Prince Khurram — the future Shah Jahan — sheltered here while rebelling against his father, decades before he built the Taj Mahal.

Jagdish Temple — the big working Vishnu temple (1651) up the steep steps near the palace gate: friezes of elephants and dancers band the spire, and there is usually bhajan singing inside. Active worship, shoes off.

Ambrai Ghat at sunset — across the water from the City Palace, the classic view — and it works for a reason: the palace stands on the east bank, so its lake facade faces the setting sun and goes gold while this side is already in shadow. Rooftop haveli restaurants cluster on this bank.

The Monsoon Palace (Sajjangarh) — the white 19th-century palace on the mountain ridge above town, planned as a nine-storey observatory for watching the monsoon clouds arrive; its builder died at twenty-six with the work barely begun, and the finished palace was abandoned because its rainwater cistern could not keep it supplied — a monsoon palace defeated by lack of rain. Floodlit at night, it hangs above the city like a lantern.

Read the night before: City Palace & Lake Pichola — mewar's 450-year balcony.

Previous: Day 4, Qutb Minar & the south. Next: Day 6, Udaipur → Kumbhalgarh → Narlai.

Udaipur → Kumbhalgarh → Narlai

Wakes in Udaipur, sleeps in Narlai · 145 km by road, about 2 h of driving



Into the Aravalli hills: the great wall of Kumbhalgarh, then a night in a village hunting lodge.

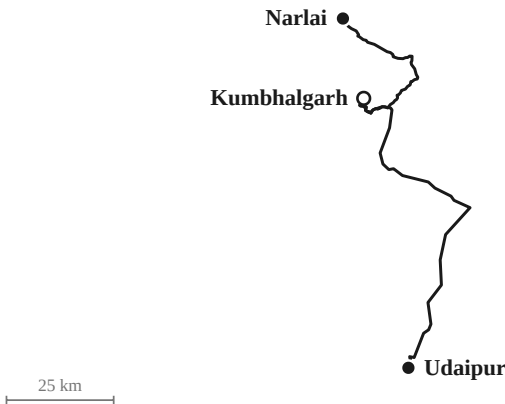


Figure 5. The day's road: Udaipur → Kumbhalgarh → Narlai.

The hours

morning

Drive Udaipur → Kumbhalgarh TOUR PLAN

≈95 km, about 2 h, climbing into the hills.

midday

Kumbhalgarh Fort TOUR PLAN

A 36 km wall — the second-longest in the world — around the fortress where Maharana Pratap was born. Taken once in 700 years, and only by poisoning the water.

The story behind it: Kumbhalgarh.

early afternoon

Ranakpur? IDEA

The great Jain temple of Rana Kumbha's own reign: 1,444 marble pillars, no two carved alike, under a forest of domes. It stands ≈33 km from the fort on a road that runs on to Narlai, so the detour costs the afternoon rather than the day — the thing to ask the driver about. Non-Jains are admitted from noon to 17:00; shoes and anything leather off at the door.

The story behind it: Kumbhalgarh.

afternoon

Drive Kumbhalgarh → Narlai TOUR PLAN

≈50 km, about 1 h down through the hills — ≈80 km and closer to 2 h if it goes round by Ranakpur and Sadri.

evening

Rawla Narlai TOUR PLAN

A 17th-century royal hunting lodge in a farming village under a granite hill dotted with temples.

sunset

Climb Elephant Hill IDEA

Steps behind the village lead up to a white marble elephant and a view over the whole plain. Ask the lodge about the lantern-lit stepwell dinner.

On this day

Climbing the Aravalli — two hours of winding road up from Udaipur: terraced plots of wheat and mustard behind dry-stone walls, goatherds, and villages where the women's odhnis (shawls) are the brightest objects in the landscape.

Kelwara — the small bazaar town in the valley below the fort, its lanes barely wider than the car — and notice what you cannot see from it: the fort. Thirty-six kilometres of wall sit just above the town, hidden by the folds of the hills until nearly the last bend of the climb.

Kumbhalgarh Fort — Rana Kumbha's 15th-century fortress with its 36 km wall, the longest in the world after the Great Wall; birthplace of Maharana Pratap; taken once in 700 years, and only by poisoning the water supply. The story: Kumbhalgarh.

The wall from Badal Mahal — the "cloud palace" at the summit is the payoff climb: from its roof the wall can be followed with the eye as it rides the ridgelines, and on a clear day the view runs to the Thar side of the range. The rampart top is broad enough, the saying goes, to ride eight horses abreast.

The 360 temples inside — the wall encloses a whole sacred landscape: hundreds of Hindu and Jain shrines, many older than the fort itself, scattered through scrub inside the ramparts.

Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary — the fort sits inside a sanctuary that holds leopard, wolf, sloth bear and grey langur; the descent road skirts it, and langurs on the parapets are near-certain.

Ranakpur — thirty-three kilometres from the fort, in a wooded valley on the far side of the ridge: the Chaumukha temple, the greatest Jain building in India. It is a hall of 1,444 marble pillars, carved so that no two are alike, holding up twenty-nine domed halls around a four-faced image of Adinath — and because the marble is translucent and the courts are open, the light inside changes hour by hour. Built under the same Rana Kumbha who was raising the fort down the road, on land he granted the merchant Dharna Shah. Only if the driver agrees to the detour. Non-Jains are admitted from noon to 17:00; shoes and all leather (belts, bags, camera straps) are left at the door. The story: Kumbhalgarh.

Down to the Godwar plain — the afternoon hour drops out of the hills through a pass onto flat farming country — the abrupt edge where the Aravalli ends is the day's geography lesson in one view.

Narlai and Elephant Hill — a farming village beneath a single granite dome, the 17th-century hunting lodge of the Jodhpur royals at its centre. Steps cut into the rock lead up ~350 steps to a white marble elephant and a view over the whole plain; the lodge also does a lantern-lit dinner in an old stepwell — worth asking about.

Read the night before: Kumbhalgarh — the wall that was never breached.

Previous: Day 5, Fly to Udaipur. Next: Day 7, Narlai → Rohet → Jodhpur.

Narlai → Rohet → Jodhpur

Wakes in Narlai, sleeps in Jodhpur · 136 km by road, about 1½ h of driving

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Out of the hills to the edge of the Thar desert — afternoon under Mehrangarh’s walls.

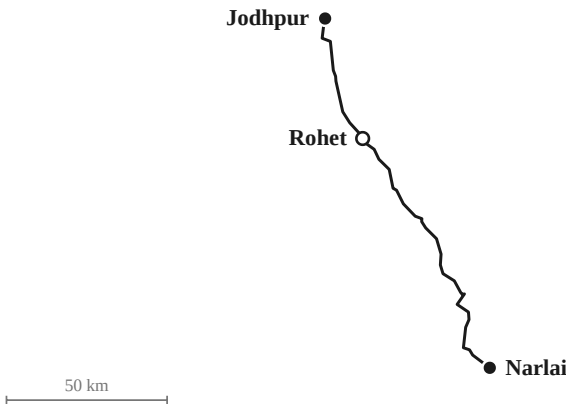


Figure 6. The day’s road: Narlai → Rohet → Jodhpur.

The hours

morning

Drive Narlai → Rohet TOUR PLAN

≈95 km, about 1½ h. Rohet is a heritage garh (manor) village — likely the lunch halt.

midday

Rohet → Jodhpur TOUR PLAN

≈40 km, 45 min into the blue city.

afternoon

Mehrangarh Fort TOUR PLAN

120 metres of sheer rock and rampart over the old city — Kipling called it “the work of angels and giants”. The best museum of any fort in Rajasthan.

The story behind it: Mehrangarh.

late

Blue city & Jaswant Thada TOUR PLAN

The indigo-washed brahmin quarter below the fort, and the white marble cenotaph next door.

evening

Clock tower market IDEA

Sardar Market for spices and street food — makhaniya lassi at Mishrilal is the famous one.

On this day

Godwar herders — this belt of Pali district is Rabari country: semi-nomadic herders of camels, sheep and goats, the men in white with red or pink turbans and heavy silver earrings. Flocks on the road are part of the schedule.

Nadol — the road passes the edge of this small town, once a capital of the Chauhan dynasty (10th–12th c.) and still known for its Jain temples — a big history in a place that now barely registers on the map.

Pali and the henna belt — Pali is an industrial textile-dyeing town (its river has been famously abused by the dye works); the district around Sojat, just east of the road, grows most of the world’s mehndi (henna).

Om Banna, the motorcycle temple — right on this highway near Chotila: a shrine whose deity is a Royal Enfield Bullet 350. Its owner died in a crash here in 1988; the bike allegedly kept returning from police custody to the spot. Drivers stop to offer flowers and liquor for safe passage — one of the road’s genuine wonders.

Rohet Garh — the 17th-century fortified manor, likely the lunch halt; Bruce Chatwin wrote *The Songlines* in room 15, and William Dalrymple began *City of Djinn*s at the same desk. The surrounding villages are Bishnoi — the community whose 29 rules protect trees and wildlife, which is why blackbuck antelope graze unafraid here.

First sight of Mehrangarh — the fort announces Jodhpur from far out on the plain: 120 m of rock and rampart with the blue city pooled beneath it.

Mehrangarh Fort — Rao Jodha's citadel (1459), Kipling's "work of angels and giants", with the best palace museum in Rajasthan inside. By the first gate, look for the round scars in the wall: cannonball hits from Jaipur's failed siege of 1808, still unrepaired two centuries on. The story: Mehrangarh.

Jaswant Thada — the white marble cenotaph of Maharaja Jaswant Singh II (1899) on the ridge next to the fort, built of stone milled so thin it glows translucent in afternoon sun.

The blue city — the indigo-washed lanes of the old brahmin quarter below the fort; the wash (lime plus indigo) is variously explained as caste marker, insect repellent and heat treatment — probably all three by now.

Sardar Market & the clock tower — the evening bazaar around Ghanta Ghar: spice stalls, bangles, vegetables by lamplight, and the famous makhaniya (saffron-butter) lassi at Mishrilal by the gate.

Read the night before: Mehrangarh — the citadel of the sun.

Previous: Day 6, Udaipur → Kumbhalgarh → Narlai. Next: Day 8, Jodhpur → Pushkar.

Jodhpur → Pushkar

Wakes in Jodhpur, sleeps in Pushkar · 212 km by road, about 2½ h of driving

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Longest drive of the tour, into Rajasthan’s holiest little town.

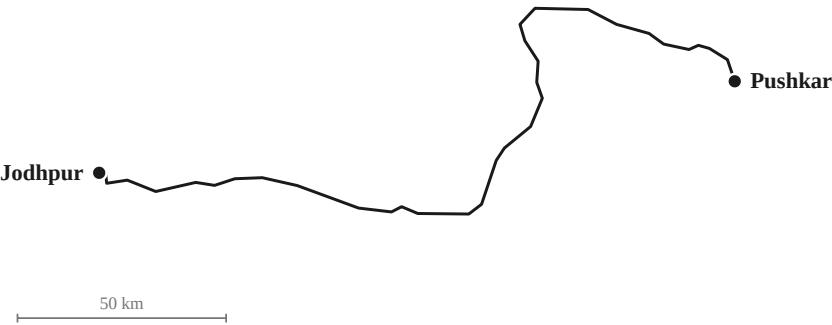


Figure 7. The day's road: Jodhpur → Pushkar.

The hours

morning

Drive Jodhpur → Pushkar TOUR PLAN

≈210 km, about 4 h with a chai stop.



afternoon

Pushkar TOUR PLAN

The sacred lake ringed by 52 bathing ghats, and one of the only temples to Brahma anywhere in the world. Shoes off, cameras away at the ghats.

The story behind it: Pushkar.

sunset

Sunset over the lake IDEA

From the eastern ghats or a rooftop café — drums usually start at dusk for evening aarti.

On this day

The Marwar plain — the longest drive of the tour crosses the semi-desert east of Jodhpur just after harvest: stubble of bajra (pearl millet), the crop this dryness allows, and lopped khejri trees — Rajasthan's state tree, pruned for fodder, sacred to the Bishnoi.

Dhaba stop — the chai halt will be a highway dhaba: charpoy string beds to sit on, a tandoor, sweet milky chai, truck drivers on rotation. Dhabas are the road's institution and this leg has the best of them.

Painted trucks — four hours of Tata trucks decorated like shrines — pom-poms, painted eyes, "HORN OK PLEASE" and "USE DIPPER AT NIGHT" on the tailgates. The horn language (one honk: passing; leaned-on horn: get out of the way) starts to make sense around here.

Bilara — the bypass town roughly halfway; around it the plain begins to green slightly as the road bends east toward the Aravalli gap. The wide sandy beds crossed along here drain to the Luni — Rajasthan's only large river, brackish for most of its length, flowing a few weeks a year, and ending not in any sea but in the salt marsh of the Rann of Kutch.

Merta — the road clips the edge of Mirabai's hometown: the 16th-century Rajput princess who abandoned court life to write ecstatic devotional poetry to Krishna —

still sung all over India, and she is still Merta's whole identity.

Nag Pahar — “Snake Mountain,” the ridge that separates Pushkar's valley from Ajmer; the road curls in beneath it. Legend says the mountain shrinks each year and the world ends when it is gone.

Pushkar Lake and the ghats — the sacred lake ringed by 52 bathing ghats and one of the world's only major Brahma temples; a dip is said to cleanse all sin. Shoes off near the water, no photographs of bathers. The story: Pushkar.

Sadar Bazaar — the single main street between the lake and the temple: pilgrim kit, rose products from the fields outside town, and the residue of the 1970s hippie trail. Pushkar is vegetarian and alcohol-free by law. The great Camel Fair follows about a fortnight after this visit — early traders sometimes drift in ahead of it.

Evening aarti — at dusk drums and bells start on the ghats for the lamp ceremony; watched from a rooftop café on the east side, with the sun going down over the lake.

Read the night before: Pushkar — brahma's lake.

Previous: Day 7, Narlai → Rohet → Jodhpur. Next: Day 9, Pushkar → Jaipur.

Pushkar → Jaipur

Wakes in Pushkar, sleeps in Jaipur · 141 km by road, about 2 h of driving · Diwali week begins (Dhanteras)



To the Pink City just as the five days of Diwali begin — Jaipur is famously the best-lit city in India for it.



Figure 8. The day's road: Pushkar → Jaipur.

The hours

morning

Drive Pushkar → Jaipur TOUR PLAN

≈140 km, about 3 h. The road runs Ajmer → Kishangarh → Jaipur.

~10:30

Kishangarh marble yard? IDEA

Asia's largest marble-slurry dump — 200 acres of blinding white waste that India has taken to calling its mini Switzerland, and which fills up with thousands of people taking photographs. It sits 2.3 km off this exact road, so the cost is the stop, not the drive. Free, but you need a pass from the gate 1 km before — the driver's job. Open 10:00–17:00.

afternoon

Jaipur city sightseeing TOUR PLAN

City Palace, the astronomical instruments of Jantar Mantar, and the honeycomb facade of Hawa Mahal.

The story behind it: Amber Fort & the Pink City.

evening

Diwali lights in the bazaars IDEA

Dhanteras night — Johari and Bapu bazaars ablaze with lamps and shoppers. Jaipur's markets are decorated city-wide for the week.

On this day

Over Nag Pahar to Ajmer — the road climbs out of Pushkar's valley and drops toward Ajmer with views over Ana Sagar, the city's 12th-century artificial lake.

Ajmer Sharif — the bypass skirts Ajmer, home of the dargah of Moinuddin Chishti, the subcontinent's most important Sufi shrine — pilgrims of every religion, Mughal emperors included, have walked to it for 800 years. Not on the itinerary, but knowing what the city is changes what the crowds and flags mean.

Kishangarh marble yards — the highway runs straight through Asia's biggest marble market: kilometres of stockyards with slabs racked like library books, cranes swinging blocks, everything dusted white. Kishangarh also gave its name to a famous school of miniature painting (the Bani Thani portrait).

The marble slurry dump — the waste from all that cutting — a milk of powdered stone and water — has been pumped onto two hundred acres here since 2005, roughly seven hundred tanker-loads a day, and dried into flats and dunes of blinding white. India calls it a mini Switzerland; on winter weekends ten thousand people come to be photographed on it. The same whiteness the Taj is made of, at the far end of the process. Only if the driver takes the turning — it is 2.3 km off the road. Free, but a pass is issued at a gate 1 km before the yard. Open 10:00–17:00. It is an industrial waste site: the dust is respirable silica, so this is a short stop, not an afternoon.

NH48 — the Ajmer–Jaipur stretch is Golden Quadrilateral: six lanes, toll plazas, camel carts in the slow lane next to container trucks — the two speeds of the economy sharing one road.

Dhanteras — arrival day is the first day of Diwali week, the day for buying gold and new utensils; jewellery and kitchenware shops will be mobbed and the markets at full brightness. Jaipur is reputedly the best-lit city in India for the festival.

City Palace, Jaipur — the Kachwaha court's palace in the middle of the planned city; the four seasonal doorways of Pritam Niwas Chowk (the peacock gate above all) are the photograph everyone takes. Inside stand two silver urns of about 345 kilos each — the largest silver objects in the world — made in 1902 so a maharaja could carry Ganges water to London rather than touch English drinking water. The story: Amber Fort & the Pink City.

Jantar Mantar — Jai Singh II's 1720s observatory of walk-in masonry instruments; the Samrat Yantra is the world's largest sundial, 27 m tall and accurate to about two seconds. UNESCO-listed and genuinely strange to walk through.

Hawa Mahal — the 1799 “palace of winds”: a five-storey pink honeycomb of 953 screened windows, just one room deep, built so the women of the court could watch street processions unseen. Best from the café terraces across the street.

Read the night before: Amber Fort & the Pink City — mirrors on the hill, pink by decree.

Previous: Day 8, Jodhpur → Pushkar. Next: Day 10, Amber Fort, then → Agra.

Amber Fort, then → Agra

Wakes in Jaipur, sleeps in Agra · 238 km by road, about 3 h of driving



The tour’s grand finale at Amber, then the long road east. Tour services end on arrival in Agra.

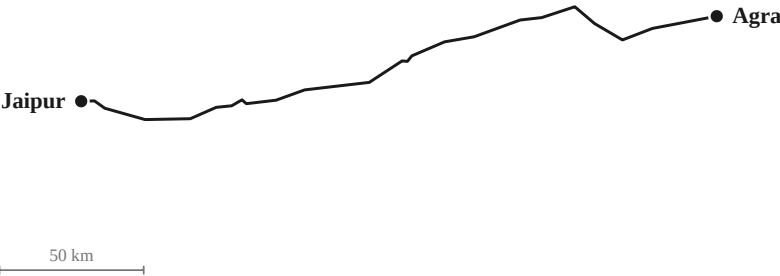


Figure 9. The day’s road: Amber Fort, then → Agra.

The hours

morning

Amber Fort TOUR PLAN

The Kachwaha rajas’ hill palace: Ganesh Pol, the mirror-mosaic Sheesh Mahal, views over Maota Lake. Go early — it fills up by 10.

The story behind it: Amber Fort & the Pink City.

~11:00

Panna Meena ka Kund IDEA

The 16th-century stepwell 600 m from the fort gate: a square tank with criss-cross flights of steps climbing all four walls in mirror image, and octagonal pavilions at the corners. Ten minutes and free — the shortest detour of the whole trip. You are not meant to walk down the steps any more; the view from the rim is the point.

midday

Drive Jaipur → Agra TOUR PLAN

≈240 km, 4–5 h.

en route

Fatehpur Sikri? IDEA

Akbar's abandoned red-sandstone capital sits right on this road, ~1 h before Agra. Worth asking the driver if daylight allows.

evening

Arrive Agra — end of tour services TOUR PLAN

Hotel for tonight: part of the open booking.

On this day

Jal Mahal — on the Amber road out of town, the water palace sitting in the middle of Man Sagar lake — four of its five storeys are below the waterline when the lake is full. A two-minute photo stop.

Amber Fort — the Kachwaha rajas' hill palace: Ganesh Pol's painted gateway, the Sheesh Mahal mirror hall (one candle lights the ceiling), and views down over Maota Lake with its saffron-garden parterre. The story: Amber Fort & the Pink City.

Panna Meena ka Kund — six hundred metres from the fort gate, a 16th-century stepwell: a square tank with criss-cross flights of steps climbing all four walls in mirror image, octagonal pavilions at the corners, water still standing at the bottom. Ten minutes, free, and the geometry is the reason it is on every photographer's list.

Walking down the steps is no longer allowed — you look from the rim. The story: Amber Fort & the Pink City.

Jaigarh above — the ramparts on the ridge over Amber belong to Jaigarh, the garrison fort that protected it, connected by tunnels; it holds Jaivana, once the world's largest wheeled cannon — fired exactly once.

Dausa — the road east passes the old Kachwaha seat that Amber itself replaced; now an ordinary district town, which is its own lesson in how capitals move.

Chand Baori, Abhaneri — about 10 km off the highway near Sikandra (Dausa): a 9th-century stepwell of ~3,500 steps in 13 storeys of perfect geometric descent, one of the deepest and most photographed in India. A possible one-hour detour if the day runs early — worth asking the driver.

Bharatpur — the bypass passes the town whose maharajas' duck-shooting reserve became Keoladeo National Park, a UNESCO wetland where wintering waterbirds (once including Siberian cranes) arrive in exactly this season.

Into Uttar Pradesh — the state line crossing: different licence plates, different police, noticeably different roadside economy — the border is a real line on the ground, not just the map. Uttar Pradesh holds some 240 million people — more than Brazil; this one state would rank among the half-dozen most populous countries on Earth.

Fatehpur Sikri — Akbar's red-sandstone capital (1571–85), abandoned within decades — likely for want of water — and preserved almost intact. The Buland Darwaza victory gate is 54 m, the highest gateway in India; the white marble tomb of the Sufi saint Salim Chishti sits in the mosque courtyard. Right on this road, ~1 h before Agra — daylight permitting, and not booked.

Arriving on Choti Diwali — 7 Nov is the festival's eve; Agra will already be strung with lights and the first fireworks will be going off as the car comes in.

Read the night before: Amber Fort & the Pink City — mirrors on the hill, pink by decree.

Agra — Taj Mahal & Diwali

Wakes in Agra, sleeps in Agra · Diwali — the main night

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

The big open day: Taj Mahal, and by night the biggest festival in India.
Being booked now — this is the working shape.

The hours

sunrise

Taj Mahal at first light IDEA

Gates open ~30 min before sunrise; the marble goes from grey to rose to white. Book the time-slot ticket ahead. (It's a Sunday — open; Fridays it's closed.)

The story behind it: Taj Mahal.

midday

Agra Fort IDEA

Where Shah Jahan was imprisoned by his son — with a view of the Taj from his marble balcony.

sunset

Mehtab Bagh IDEA

The moonlight garden directly across the river — the Taj at dusk without the crowds.

night

Diwali night IDEA

Lakshmi Puja night: oil lamps and fireworks across the city, late into the night. Expect smoke haze by evening.

On this day

The great gate (Darwaza-i-Rauza) — the Taj is designed to be first seen through the arch of its red sandstone gate: a frame that hides and then reveals the whole facade. The inscription over the arch invites the pure of heart to enter the gardens of paradise.

The Taj Mahal at first light — grey, then rose, then blazing white; Makrana marble inlaid with 28 kinds of stone, minarets tilted slightly outward, the calligraphy sized larger higher up so it reads evenly from the ground. The story: Taj Mahal.

The Yamuna riverfront — the Taj is not isolated: it was one of more than forty Mughal gardens and tombs lining both banks of the river at Agra, a whole waterfront of which it is the surviving climax.

Agra Fort — Akbar's red sandstone walls wrapping Shah Jahan's white marble courts; the Musamman Burj is the octagonal tower where Shah Jahan spent his last eight years imprisoned by his son, with the Taj in view across the river bend.

Pietra dura workshops — Agra's inlay craftsmen, some claiming descent from the Taj's builders, still cut cornelian and lapis into marble by hand; a workshop demonstration shows exactly what covers the monument seen at dawn.

Petha — Agra's own sweet: translucent candied ash-gourd, plain or scented with kewra and saffron, sold in every third shop and moving in volume today of all days.

Mehtab Bagh — the “moonlight garden” directly across the river, laid out on the Taj's exact axis — sunset view without the crowds, and the origin point of the (baseless but persistent) Black Taj legend.

Diwali night — Lakshmi Puja at dusk: rangoli patterns on thresholds, oil lamps on every ledge, then hours of fireworks over the whole city. The biggest festival in India at full volume — and by late evening, a smoke haze that will still be there at breakfast.

Read the night before: Taj Mahal — grief in marble.

Previous: Day 10, Amber Fort, then → Agra. Next: Day 12, Agra → Delhi.

Agra → Delhi

Wakes in Agra, sleeps in Delhi · 201 km by road, about 2½ h of driving — not yet booked



Return leg — in booking. The flight leaves at 07:20 tomorrow, so tonight should end near the airport.

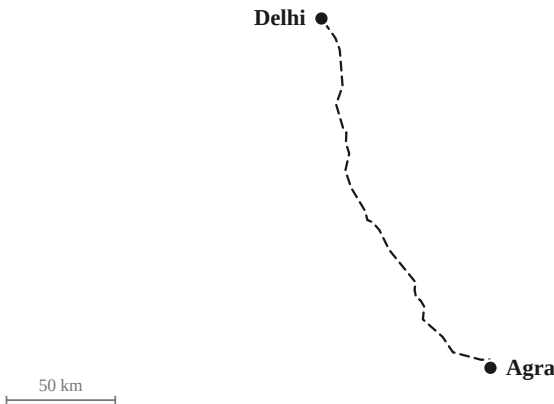


Figure 10. The day's road: Agra → Delhi.

The hours

morning	Yamuna Expressway to Delhi IDEA ≈200 km, 3–4 h door to door. Booked transfer or train (Gatimaan Express) — being decided.
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afternoon

Aerocity hotel IDEA

Sleep next to IGI T3 — the sensible move before a 07:20 departure. Day 13 starts around 04:30.

evening

Pack, early night IDEA

Last rupees, sim card off, boarding passes downloaded.

On this day

Sikandra — Akbar's tomb — on the old Grand Trunk Road out of Agra: the emperor's red sandstone tomb, its gardens grazed by blackbuck and patrolled by langurs. The four white marble minarets on its gateway are often read as the rehearsal for the Taj's, a generation early. Passed, or worth a stop, if the transfer leaves by the NH19 side — the route is still being decided.

The Yamuna Expressway — 165 km of concrete built as India's showcase expressway, dead straight across the doab farmland. Notorious for November morning fog — a late-morning start is the sensible version. If the transfer goes by road, which is still being decided.

Mathura and Vrindavan — the expressway passes the turnoffs for Krishna's birthplace and the temple town of his childhood, together one of Hinduism's great pilgrimage clusters; the day after Diwali is Govardhan Puja, a major day in exactly this region, so pilgrim traffic is likely. Expressway route only.

Buddh International Circuit — near Greater Noida the expressway runs past the grandstands of India's Formula 1 track, which hosted the Indian Grand Prix 2011–13 and has been looking for a purpose since. Expressway route only.

Jewar — Noida International Airport — Delhi's second hub, opened in spring 2026 beside the expressway and run by the operator of Zurich's airport on a forty-year concession. Planned to grow to seventy million passengers a year — close to what Heathrow handles today. Expressway route only.

The Gatimaan Express alternative — India's first 160 km/h train, Agra Cantt to Delhi in about 100 minutes, which would turn the transfer day mostly into a Delhi afternoon. The other half of the open booking — if rail wins, the road items above do not happen.

Aerocity — the night ends in the hotel district built beside the airport: an enclave of glass hotels ten minutes from Terminal 3, existing purely for mornings like tomorrow's.

Previous: Day 11, Agra — Taj Mahal & Diwali. Next: Day 13, Delhi → Warsaw.

Delhi → Warsaw

Wakes in Delhi, sleeps at home in Warsaw



Dawn departure, landing in Warsaw before noon.

The hours

~04:30	At Terminal 3 IDEA International check-in; T3 checks tickets at the entrance, then security and immigration.
07:20	LO 072 departs Delhi BOOKED LOT, Boeing 787-8, non-stop, 8 h 30. Seat 8B.
11:20	Land Warsaw BOOKED Chopin Airport, late morning of the same day.

On this day

- Terminal 3 at 4:30 a.m.** — the departure runs the arrival in reverse: ticket check at the door (a T3 ritual), then the mudra hands one more time from the other side.
- The Himalaya, maybe** — after takeoff the plane heads northwest with the mountains off the right side; on a clear morning the snow line of the high Himalaya floats above the haze. In November the haze usually wins, but it costs nothing to look.
- Flying against the clock** — 8½ hours in the air, landing in Warsaw at 11:20 the same morning: the 4½ hours surrendered on the way out are handed back.

Chopin before noon — home with most of a day left — the standard advice for the jet lag is to stay awake until a normal Polish bedtime.

Previous: Day 12, Agra → Delhi. The last day. [Back to the contents.](#)

PART THREE

Places

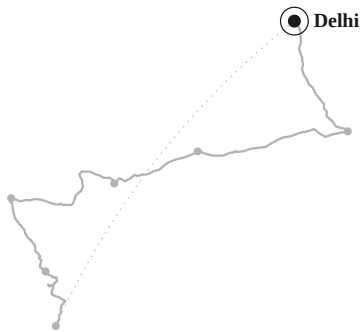
*Short histories of the things worth understanding
before standing in front of them, in the order they
appear on the trip.*

PLACE 1 OF 7 · SEEN ON DAY 3

The Seven Cities of Delhi

Eight centuries on one plain

On Day 3, Saturday 31 October — Old Delhi, full tilt.



QUTB MINAR

1190s — victory tower of the first sultanate, 73 m of carved sandstone

HUMAYUN'S TOMB

1570 — the first great Mughal garden tomb, the Taj's direct ancestor

OLD DELHI

Shahjahanabad, 1639 — the Mughals' last capital: Red Fort, Jama Masjid, Chandni Chowk

NEW DELHI

Lutyens' British capital, 1911–31 — India Gate, Rajpath, and your hotel on its edge

Delhi makes more sense once you stop thinking of it as one city. Tradition counts seven cities of Delhi — really more like a dozen — built over eight centuries on the same stretch of plain between the Aravalli ridge and the Yamuna river, each new dynasty raising its capital beside, or on top of, the last. Nothing was ever fully demolished, so the layers are all still there: a 12th-

century victory tower in the south, a Mughal fortress-city in the north, a British imperial capital in between, and the modern megacity of over thirty million poured around all of it. Your three days here happen to work through the stack almost in order.

The sultans: where Delhi began (day 4)

The story starts at the Qutb complex, which you visit on your last Delhi morning but which is chronologically first. In 1192 Muhammad of Ghor defeated the Rajput ruler Prithviraj Chauhan, and his general Qutb-ud-din Aibak — a former slave — stayed on to rule, founding the Delhi Sultanate, the first of the Muslim dynasties that would govern northern India for the next six and a half centuries. His victory monuments set the tone: the Quwwat-ul-Islam mosque, built fast from the carved columns of demolished Hindu and Jain temples (look closely at the pillars — the figures are defaced but the garlands and bells remain), and beside it the Qutb Minar, a 73-metre tower of fluted red sandstone banded with Quranic calligraphy, still the tallest brick minaret in the world. In the mosque courtyard stands something far older: a 7-tonne iron pillar cast around 400 CE, which after sixteen centuries in the open has barely rusted — a metallurgical puzzle only properly explained in recent decades.

Five sultanate dynasties followed — Mamluks, Khiljis, Tughlaqs, Sayyids, Lodis — and most built a city of their own: Siri, Tughlaqabad, Jahanpanah, Firozabad. You will brush past their leftovers all over the south of the modern city, most pleasantly in Mehrauli Archaeological Park next to the Qutb (a thousand years of tombs and stepwells in parkland) and in Lodi Gardens, where the domed tombs of the last two dynasties now stand among joggers and picnics. The stepwell of Agrasen ki Baoli, wedged between office towers near your hotel, is another fragment of this Delhi surfacing through the modern one.

The Mughals: from Humayun's Tomb to the Red Fort (days 2–3)

Babur ended the sultanate in 1526 and founded the Mughal empire; his son Humayun — a talented, unlucky ruler who lost the empire, won it back, and then died falling down his library stairs — got the dynasty's first great monument. Humayun's Tomb (1570), which you see on your first afternoon, was commissioned by his widow and built by a Persian architect: the first monumental garden tomb in India, red sandstone and white marble, a dome on a plinth in a walled charbagh garden quartered by water channels. Stand in front of it and you are looking at the Taj Mahal's direct ancestor, eighty years early — the same composition you will see finished in white marble on day 11. The tomb has a coda: in 1857, after the failed uprising, the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, was captured here where he had taken refuge among his ancestor's graves.

The dynasty's Delhi masterpiece came from Shah Jahan, who moved the capital back from Agra and in 1639 began a whole new city, Shahjahanabad — today's Old Delhi. Its anchors are your day-3 morning: the Red Fort, the palace-city whose marble private apartments and audience halls held the Peacock Throne until a Persian invader carried it off in 1739; the Jama Masjid, India's largest and grandest congregational mosque, whose courtyard holds 25,000; and Chandni Chowk, the processional avenue laid out — canal down the middle, moonlight reflecting in it, hence the name — by Shah Jahan's daughter Jahanara. The canal is long gone and the avenue is now the densest bazaar in India, which is the point of walking it: the lanes off it still sort by trade (silver, wedding gear, parathas, and at the western end Khari Baoli, Asia's largest wholesale spice market), much as the 17th-century plan assigned them.

New Delhi, and how to read the whole thing

The eighth city is the one you sleep in. In 1911 the British announced the transfer of their capital from Calcutta, and Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker spent twenty years building New Delhi: a garden city of white bungalows and vast axial avenues, its centrepiece the two-kilometre line from the Viceroy's House

(now Rashtrapati Bhavan, the president's residence) down to India Gate, a war memorial arch carrying the names of some 13,000 dead of the Indian Army. The scale was meant to declare permanence; sixteen years after its inauguration the British were gone, and independent India simply moved in. The axis — renamed Kartavya Path — is now Delhi's evening promenade, at its best after dark, which is when your day-2 plan has you there. Connaught Place, the colonnaded circle near your hotel, was the new capital's commercial hub and still behaves like it.

Practical notes for the stack. Distances are the trap — Delhi is enormous, and the Qutb, Old Delhi and India Gate are each 30–45 minutes apart by car, so the day plans keep each day in one layer. For Old Delhi take the metro (Yellow Line, Rajiv Chowk to Chawri Bazar): it is faster than any car there, clean, cheap and air-conditioned, with a security check and a women-only first carriage. Mornings are the working hours for sightseeing — big sites open around sunrise, and both crowds and traffic build steeply from mid-morning. Early November is the start of Delhi's smog season, so expect milky light and check the air-quality index; it is also why the dawn and dusk slots in the plans matter more here than anywhere else on the trip. Mosques and the Sikh gurudwara need covered shoulders and legs, shoes off, and a head covering at the gurudwara (scarves are lent at the door).

Next: City Palace & Lake Pichola, day 5.

PLACE 2 OF 7 · SEEN ON DAY 5

City Palace & Lake Pichola

Mewar's 450-year balcony

On Day 5, Monday 2 November — Fly to Udaipur.



BEGUN

1553, by Udai Singh II, who moved the capital here after Chittorgarh fell

THE LAKE

Pichola, artificial, 14th century — the Lake Palace floats in the middle

DYNASTY

The Sisodias of Mewar, who fought the Mughals for generations

TIME NEEDED

2 h palace + 1 h boat

The City Palace runs along a ridge above Lake Pichola for nearly half a kilometre — not one building but eleven, added by twenty-two rulers over four and a half centuries, all in the same honey-coloured granite and marble so that the joins barely show. It is the largest palace complex in Rajasthan, and it is still, in part, a family home: the Mewar dynasty that built it lives in the southern wing today, and claims — with some scholarly support — the longest unbroken ruling line in the world.

The house that would not bow

Udaipur exists because Chittorgarh fell. The Sisodias of Mewar had ruled from that great fort for centuries, and lost it three times — each fall ending in *jauhar*, the mass self-immolation of the women while the men rode out to die. After the second sack, in 1535, the dynasty survived only because the infant heir Uday Singh was smuggled out by his nursemaid and raised in secret at Kumbhalgarh — a story you will hear again at that fort tomorrow. When Akbar destroyed Chittorgarh for good in 1568, Uday Singh had already begun building a new capital here in the Aravalli hills, on a site a hermit had recommended to him, beside a lake that offered what Chittorgarh never had: water that could not be cut off. The palace's first structure went up in 1553; the city took his name.

What sets Mewar apart from every other house you will meet on this trip is what it refused to do. The Rathores of Jodhpur and the Kachwahas of Jaipur made their peace with the Mughal empire, married daughters into it, and commanded its armies. The Sisodias never did — no daughter of Mewar was ever given to a Mughal emperor. Uday Singh's son Maharana Pratap fought Akbar from the hills for over twenty years, losing the famous battle of Haldighati in 1576 but never submitting; his descendants held out until a negotiated peace in 1614 that pointedly excused them from attending the imperial court in person. The other royal houses acknowledged this stubbornness with a curious deference: Mewar's ruler was the *Maharana*, not Maharaja, and ranked above them all.

Inside: a fortress wearing a palace

The complex is entered through the *Badi Pol* and the triple-arched *Tripolia* gate, past a wall where elephants were once lined up for weighing and for fights. Inside, the museum wing is a genuine maze — deliberately so. The corridors are narrow, low and crooked, and the stairs turn blind corners, all designed to slow an attacking force to single file; the effect now is that tour groups meet head-on in passages a metre wide. The rooms they connect are a run of small, dense chambers rather than grand halls: *Krishna Vilas* with its miniature paintings, the

Sheesh Mahal lined with mirrorwork, *Badi Mahal* — the garden palace at the top, built around full-grown trees that grow from the hill's natural summit, ninety steps above the entrance — and *Mor Chowk*, the peacock courtyard, where three glass-mosaic peacocks in high relief were set into the walls in the 19th century using some five thousand pieces of coloured glass each.

Give the museum about two hours. The audio guide is decent; a licensed guide is better value if you want the dynasty's story kept straight, because the labelling assumes you already know it. The windows and balconies frame Lake Pichola all the way up, and the higher you climb the better the framing gets — the best views are from Badi Mahal and the small balconies of the upper zenana, the women's quarters.

The lake and its islands

Lake Pichola is older than the city — first dammed in the 14th century by a grain merchant, then enlarged by Udai Singh — and entirely artificial, which is easy to forget once you are on it. The boat from the palace jetty circles two islands. *Jag Niwas*, the white marble summer palace begun in 1743, appears to float on the water and has been the Lake Palace hotel since the 1960s; only hotel guests land there. *Jag Mandir*, the older island palace, has a stranger history: in 1623 it sheltered the rebellious Mughal prince Khurram — later Shah Jahan — during his revolt against his father, and the hospitality was remembered; during the 1857 uprising the then Maharana used the same island to shelter European families fleeing Nimach. The boat stops there long enough to walk the garden and see the row of carved stone elephants at the landing.

Take the boat in the late afternoon if the schedule allows — the palace facade faces west and takes the low sun full-on, which is also why the classic view of it is from across the water at Ambrai Ghat around sunset. Boats leave from Rameshwar Ghat inside the palace complex and are ticketed separately from the museum; the last departures are timed to be back before dark.

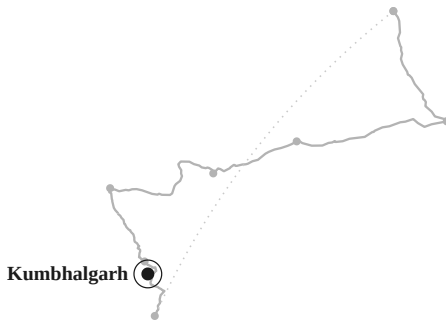
Before this one: The Seven Cities of Delhi, day 3. Next: Kumbhalgarh, day 6.

PLACE 3 OF 7 · SEEN ON DAY 6

Kumbhalgarh

The wall that was never breached

On Day 6, Tuesday 3 November — Udaipur → Kumbhalgarh → Narlai.



BUILT

1443–1458, by Rana Kumbha of Mewar

THE WALL

~36 km long, up to 15 m thick — the longest in the world after the Great Wall of China

FAMOUS AS

Birthplace of Maharana Pratap (1540); refuge of Mewar's heirs

STATUS

UNESCO World Heritage (Hill Forts of Rajasthan, 2013)

NEXT DOOR

Ranakpur — the great Jain temple of 1,444 marble pillars, 33 km on toward Narlai

TIME NEEDED

~2 hours: main gates, Badal Mahal at the top, wall views

From the road out of Udaipur you climb for an hour into the Aravallis — some of the oldest mountains on Earth, worn down to hard brown ridges — and then the wall appears: fifteen metres thick in places, riding the ridgelines like something geological. It runs for thirty-six kilometres. Only the Great Wall of China is longer, and the Chinese needed dynasties to do it. This took one man, fifteen years.

The builder-king

Rana Kumbha of Mewar, who began this fort in 1443, is one of those figures history struggles to keep in one piece. He fought off the sultans of Malwa and Gujarat — sometimes both at once — wrote treatises on music theory, and built or restored, by tradition, thirty-two of Mewar's eighty-four fortresses. Kumbhalgarh was his masterpiece, raised on the ruins of a far older hill fort under the direction of his architect Mandan, who literally wrote the book on Rajput fortification.

The legend of its founding is grim in the way Rajasthan's best legends are: the walls kept collapsing until a holy man advised that the work needed a voluntary sacrifice. A pilgrim offered himself; where his head fell, the main gate was built, and where his body fell, the wall finally held. There is a shrine on the spot. When the fort was complete, Kumbha is said to have burned enormous lamps at the summit each night — using tonnes of ghee, clarified butter — so that the farmers on the plain below could work after dark.

Kumbha did not die in battle. He was assassinated in 1468, inside these walls, by his own son — struck down while at prayer. Rajput chronicles never forgave the son, and the dynasty's story rolled on without him.

The fort that wouldn't fall

What you are walking through is the safe-deposit box of the Mewar dynasty — the same house you met at the City Palace in Udaipur. When everything else was lost, this is where they put what mattered. In the 1530s, when a usurper murdered

his way toward the throne at Chittorgarh, the infant heir Udai Singh was smuggled out by his nursemaid Panna Dhai — who, the story goes, sacrificed her own son in the prince's cradle to cover the escape — and raised here in secret. That child grew up to found Udaipur. His son, born inside this fort in 1540, was Maharana Pratap, the great guerrilla-king who fought Akbar's empire to a standstill and remains northern India's favourite symbol of defiance.

In seven centuries of warfare the fort was taken exactly once. In 1577–78 Akbar's general Shahbaz Khan besieged it with the combined weight of the Mughal war machine, and even then the walls did not fail — the water did. The defenders' wells gave out (poisoned, the local telling insists), the garrison slipped away, and the Mughals held the fort only briefly before Pratap took it back. As military records go, one loss on a technicality in seven hundred years is hard to argue with.

What to look for

Inside the wall, the ridges hold a small world: more than three hundred temples, most of them Jain and much older than the fort, which Kumbha walled in rather than cleared. The path climbs through seven gates to the *Badal Mahal* — the “palace of clouds” — a comparatively recent (19th-century) addition, painted in pastels at the very top. The palace itself is skippable; the reason to climb is the view from its roof: the wall unspooling over the hills in both directions until it disappears, and on a clear day the Thar desert beginning in the west. This is the one place where the whole absurd scale of the thing becomes visible.

Give the walk up 45 minutes and take water; the gates are steep by design — angled so that war elephants couldn't build up momentum. Since 2013 the fort has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site, one of the six great Hill Forts of Rajasthan — you'll see two more of the six, Amber and (from the outside at least) Jaipur's hills, later in the trip.

Thirty-three kilometres on: Ranakpur

Down the western side of the ridge, in a wooded valley on the road toward Narlai, stands the building that is Kumbhalgarh's twin and its opposite. The Chaumukha temple at Ranakpur went up in the same reign as the fort, on land Rana Kumbha granted to a merchant, Dharna Shah, who had dreamed of a celestial flying chariot and wanted it built in stone. It is Jain, four-faced, and open on all sides to Adinath, the first of the twenty-four teachers — and where the fort is fifteen metres of solid wall, this is a hall so thin-walled it is mostly light: 1,444 marble pillars, carved so that no two are the same, carrying twenty-nine domed chambers. The marble is translucent enough that the interior changes colour through the day, and the pillars are set so that from wherever you stand, the central image stays in view.

It is a small detour — half an hour's drive, an hour inside — and the two buildings explain each other. Kumbha walled three hundred Jain temples *inside* his fortress rather than clear them; the same king endowed this one outside it. The Rajput bargain with the Jain merchant class was practical: they financed the state and were left free to build. Non-Jains are let in from noon to five, shoes and leather at the door, and there is a temple canteen (*bhojanshala*) beside it doing an unlimited thali for a few rupees.

Before this one: City Palace & Lake Pichola, day 5. Next: Mehrangarh, day 7.

PLACE 4 OF 7 · SEEN ON DAY 7

Mehrangarh

The citadel of the sun

On Day 7, Wednesday 4 November — Narlai → Rohet → Jodhpur.



FOUNDED

1459, by Rao Jodha of the Rathore clan

THE NAME

Mihir-garh — “fort of the sun”, the Rathores’ mythical ancestor

FAMOUS FOR

Palaces of mirror and gold, the best fort museum in Rajasthan, the blue city below

STILL OWNED BY

The Jodhpur royal family’s trust — not the state

TIME NEEDED

2–3 hours; audio guide is genuinely excellent

Mehrangarh rises straight out of its hill — a hundred and twenty metres of cliff and rampart in one continuous face, so that you genuinely cannot tell where the rock stops and the masonry begins. Rudyard Kipling, passing through in the 1890s, decided people couldn’t have built it at all and credited “angels, fairies

and giants”. From its walls the old city below spreads out in a wash of indigo — the blue city — and beyond it the beginning of the Thar desert.

A curse at the foundation

In 1459 Rao Jodha of the Rathore clan — who claimed descent from the sun itself — moved his capital from Mandore, a few kilometres north, to this defensible outcrop called Bhaurcheeria, the mountain of birds. The hill had one inhabitant: a hermit, Cheeria Nathji, lord of the birds, who was evicted to make room and did not go quietly. His curse — *may your citadel forever thirst for water* — worried the king enough that he built the hermit a house and a temple inside the walls. Jodhpur still sits on the edge of drought every few years, and locals will tell you why.

The foundation story gets darker: to guarantee the fort’s fortune, a man named Raja Ram Meghwal volunteered to be buried alive in the foundations. He is commemorated inside, and his descendants were looked after by the rulers for centuries. Between the curse and the sacrifice, Mehrangarh begins as it means to go on.

Sun, iron and gunpowder

The name is usually read as *Mihir-garh* — fort of the sun, for the dynasty’s solar ancestor. The Rathores needed the sun’s luck: Jodhpur sat on the caravan routes between Delhi and the ports of Gujarat, which made it rich, and being rich next to the Mughal empire was a dangerous condition. The clan fought the Mughals, married them, served as their generals in Afghanistan and the Deccan, rebelled, and were besieged — sometimes all within one generation. The fort wears the history honestly: the second gate, Jai Pol, still carries round scars from cannonballs fired by the armies of Jaipur in 1808, a war between two states you will have visited within four days of each other.

The most sobering detail is at Loha Pol, the iron gate: a row of small carved handprints at shoulder height. They were left in 1843 by the widows of Maharaja

Man Singh as they walked out to die on his funeral pyre — the last royal *sati* in Jodhpur. Visitors touch them; the red powder on the stone is renewed to this day.

Inside: the best museum in Rajasthan

Past the gates the fortress turns unexpectedly delicate: courtyards of red sandstone carved into screens so fine they look like lace, and palace rooms that out-glitter anything else on this route. *Phool Mahal*, the flower palace, is a ballroom of gold filigree built for dancing girls and opium evenings; *Takhat Vilas* has a ceiling hung with Christmas baubles a nineteenth-century maharaja took a liking to; *Moti Mahal*, the pearl hall, held the throne room. The collections — palanquins, elephant howdahs (the riding seats), miniature paintings, a tent taken from the Mughal emperor, cradles, daggers — are superb because, unusually, the fort never left the family: it is run by a trust set up in 1972 by the present maharaja's family rather than by the state, and it shows in the curation. The audio guide (included with the foreign ticket) is widely considered the best in India — take it.

End on the ramparts by the cannon line, looking down. The blue of the houses below is usually explained as the mark of Brahmin households, or as copper-sulphate wash against termites and heat; nobody fully agrees, which is somehow fitting. If the light is right, walk down into those lanes afterwards — and finish at the white marble cenotaph, or memorial, of Jaswant Thada just along the ridge, where the Rathores are still memorialised today.

Before this one: Kumbhalgarh, day 6. Next: Pushkar, day 8.

Pushkar

Brahma's lake

On Day 8, Thursday 5 November — Jodhpur → Pushkar.



SACRED TO

Brahma — whose worship is vanishingly rare; this is its one great centre

THE LAKE

Ringed by 52 bathing ghats; a dip here is said to cleanse all sin

RULES

Shoes off near the ghats, no photos of bathers; the town is vegetarian and alcohol-free

TIME NEEDED

Half a day of slow wandering

Pushkar is a small town — about twenty thousand people — wrapped around a small lake, and it is one of the oldest continuously used pilgrimage sites in India. The lake is ringed by 52 bathing ghats and several hundred temples, and among them stands something genuinely rare: a working temple to Brahma, the creator god, who for all his rank in the Hindu trinity is worshipped at almost no other major shrine anywhere. Understanding why is the key to the whole town.

The lotus and the curse

The name comes from *pushpa* (flower) and *kar* (hand): Brahma, the story goes, dropped a lotus from his hand while flying over the desert, and where its petals struck the earth, water sprang up — the lake. Brahma then chose the spot for a great fire sacrifice, a *yajna*, which had to be performed together with his wife at an exact auspicious moment. His wife Savitri was late. Rather than miss the moment, Brahma had the gods produce a local girl, Gayatri, and married her on the spot so the ritual could proceed. Savitri arrived to find the ceremony under way with a new consort in her place, and cursed Brahma: he would be forgotten by worshippers everywhere on earth — except at Pushkar.

Whatever its origins, the curse describes reality: temples to Vishnu and Shiva are everywhere in India, and Brahma temples are vanishingly rare — Pushkar's *Jagatpita Brahma Mandir*, with its red spire and silver-coined floor, is the famous one, the centre of the god's worship in the world. The present structure is largely 14th-century on much older foundations. Savitri got a temple too, on the hilltop southwest of the lake, positioned — the townspeople like to point out — where she can keep an eye on her husband; Gayatri's sits on a hill on the opposite side. A ropeway now runs up Savitri's hill, and the sunrise or sunset view from the top takes in the whole lake, the town, and the dunes beginning to the west.

The lake and the ghats

A dip in Pushkar's lake is held to cleanse all sin, and pilgrims have been coming for that purpose since at least the centuries before the first written records of the town. The 52 ghats — stone steps descending into the water — were mostly built and maintained by the royal houses of Rajasthan and beyond, each keeping its own: there is a Jaipur Ghat, a Gwalior Ghat, a Varah Ghat where Vishnu is said to have appeared as a boar. Gandhi Ghat, renamed after a portion of Gandhi's ashes was scattered here in 1948, is among the most visited. At dusk the ghats fill for evening *aarti* — lamps, bells and drums over the water — which is worth

arranging your evening around; the eastern ghats and the rooftop cafés behind them face the sunset.

The town lives by the lake's rules. Shoes come off within a wide margin of the water — locals will tell you where the line is — and photographing bathers is genuinely offensive, not just discouraged. Pushkar is strictly vegetarian and alcohol-free by municipal order, eggs included; the cafés have long since turned this into a cuisine of its own. One thing to be ready for: men will approach on the ghats offering flowers for a blessing, then conduct a quick puja and press hard for a large “donation” for the so-called Pushkar passport (a thread around the wrist). It is not a scam exactly — some are genuine priests — but agree a small amount first, or decline the flowers politely and keep walking.

Camels, traders and the season

Pushkar's other identity is as a market town on the edge of the Thar, and once a year the two identities merge: at the full moon of the month of Kartik, when bathing in the lake is at its most auspicious, the town hosts the Pushkar Camel Fair — historically one of the largest livestock markets on earth, with tens of thousands of camels and horses traded on the dunes west of town, alongside a week of pilgrimage. In 2026 the full moon falls in late November, a couple of weeks after your visit, so you will see the town in its ordinary rhythm — quieter, and most locals would say better for it, though tents and fairground infrastructure may already be going up on the fairground side.

Half a day of unhurried wandering covers it: the main bazaar street running parallel to the lake — good for textiles, silver and leather at prices gentler than Jaipur's — the Brahma temple, a circuit of the ghats, and a rooftop for sunset. The town is compact and entirely walkable; the one climb worth the effort is Savitri's hill if the ropeway is running.

Before this one: Mehrangarh, day 7. Next: Amber Fort & the Pink City, day 10.

PLACE 6 OF 7 · SEEN ON DAY 10

Amber Fort & the Pink City

Mirrors on the hill, pink by decree

On Day 10, Saturday 7 November — Amber Fort, then → Agra.



AMBER BEGUN

1592, by Raja Man Singh I, Akbar's greatest general

SHEESH MAHAL

The mirror hall — one candle lights the whole ceiling

JAIPUR FOUNDED

1727 by Jai Singh II, on a grid from Hindu architectural manuals

WHY PINK

Painted terracotta-pink for the Prince of Wales' 1876 visit; mandatory in the old city ever since

TIME NEEDED

Amber 2–3 h (early!), city sights 3–4 h

Amber is what happened to the Rajputs who said yes. Where Mewar fought the Mughal empire and paid for it in blood, the Kachwaha rajas of Amber allied with it — marriage, military command, imperial favour — and the profits are stacked up on this hillside: a palace of audience halls, mirror mosaics and

painted gates that is less a fortress than a statement of account. Below it, their descendant built Jaipur, one of the first planned cities of modern India. You see the city on day 9 and the fort on the morning of day 10; this page covers both.

The price and the payoff

The Kachwahas had held Amber since the 12th century, but the turning point came in 1562, when Raja Bharmal gave his daughter in marriage to the young emperor Akbar — the first major Rajput house to do it. His grandson Man Singh I became the greatest of Akbar's generals, commanding imperial armies from Kabul to Bengal and fighting fellow Rajputs at Haldighati — on the Mughal side, against Maharana Pratap of Mewar, whose story you heard in Udaipur. The arrangement scandalised the prouder houses and made Amber immensely rich. Man Singh began the present palace in 1592; Jai Singh I added its most refined parts in the 17th century. The result deliberately mixes the two worlds it straddled — Rajput plan and Mughal ornament, Hindu iconography under Persian-style mirrorwork.

By the 1720s the kingdom had outgrown its hill. Jai Singh II — general at thirteen, and a serious astronomer his whole life — laid out a new capital on the plain in 1727, on a nine-square grid drawn from Hindu architectural manuals, with streets wide enough for processions and separate quarters assigned to each trade. Jaipur was arguably the first planned city of early modern India, and it worked: it drained the old capital within a generation. The pink came later — the old city was painted terracotta-pink for the visit of the Prince of Wales in 1876, and the colour has been mandatory inside the walls ever since.

Amber: what you walk through

The palace rises in four courtyards. You enter at *Jaleb Chowk*, the soldiers' court, and climb to the *Diwan-i-Aam*, the many-pillared public audience hall. The centrepiece is the gate beyond it: *Ganesh Pol*, painted floor to parapet in florals and gods, the private apartments' front door. Behind it lies the *Sheesh Mahal*, the

mirror hall — walls and ceiling set with thousands of convex mirror pieces, built so that a single candle, reflected, would light the room like a night sky; guides will demonstrate with a phone torch. Facing it across the garden court is *Sukh Niwas*, the pleasure hall, with an ingenious piece of engineering: water channelled down a carved marble chute and through the room, cooling it by evaporation — desert air conditioning, 17th century. The fourth courtyard is the oldest, the *zenana*, where Man Singh's twelve wives had twelve identical apartments joined by concealed corridors, arranged so the raja could visit any of them unobserved by the others.

From the ramparts you look down on Maota Lake and the *Kesar Kyari* — a formal garden laid out in the lake itself, once planted with saffron — and up to Jaigarh, the plainer military fort on the ridge above, connected to Amber by fortified passages and holding the Jaivana, one of the largest wheeled cannon ever cast. Go at opening time (8:00): the fort fills with tour buses by mid-morning, and the light on the lake side is best early. The climb from the road takes ten to fifteen minutes on foot; jeeps run the same route. Elephant rides up the ramp are still offered — animal-welfare groups have documented persistent problems with them, and they are easy to skip. Two to three hours covers the palace properly.

Six hundred metres away: Panna Meena ka Kund

Downhill from the fort's gate, in the lanes of Amer village, is a square stone tank with staircases running up all four of its walls in criss-crossing zigzags, each flight mirroring the one beside it. It is a sixteenth-century *kund* — a stepwell, built so that the village could reach the water whatever the level, and could climb back out on a different stair from the one it came down. The geometry is the whole point: from the rim it reads as an Escher drawing that happens to be four hundred years old, with small octagonal pavilions at the corners for shade.

It is free, it takes ten minutes, and it is the shortest detour of the trip — but you now have to look rather than climb, since walking on the steps was stopped to

protect them and the people on them. If you saw Agrasen ki Baoli in Delhi on day 4, this is the same idea in its village form: the same problem of a dry country, solved as architecture rather than plumbing.

The Pink City: three buildings

Day 9's city circuit centres on three sites within walking distance of each other. The *City Palace*, still partly occupied by the former royal family, is a sequence of courtyards and museums — textiles, armoury, two silver urns of Ganges water (the largest silver objects in the world, made so Madho Singh II could take holy water to London in 1902) — pleasant rather than unmissable. *Jantar Mantar* next door is the one to take slowly: Jai Singh II's observatory of 1734, a garden of enormous masonry instruments including the *Samrat Yantra*, a 27-metre sundial accurate to about two seconds. The instruments still work, and a guide who can demonstrate them earns the fee — without explanation it reads as abstract sculpture. It is a UNESCO site, the best preserved of the five observatories Jai Singh built.

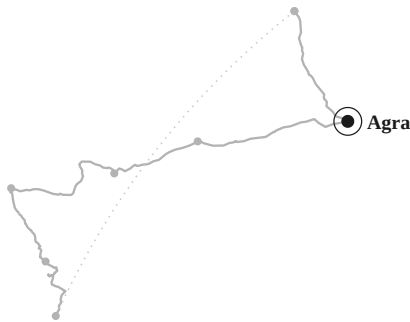
The *Hawa Mahal*, the honeycomb facade on the bazaar street, is a five-storey screen of 953 small windows built in 1799 so that the women of the court could watch street processions unseen. It is essentially one room deep; see it from the street (the café terraces opposite have the classic view), and only go inside if time is loose. Your evening in Jaipur is Dhanteras, the first night of Diwali week — the bazaars around Johari and Bapu Bazar are decorated and lit city-wide, and Jaipur's Diwali illuminations are reckoned the best in India. That, as much as any monument, is worth being on the street for after dark.

Before this one: Pushkar, day 8. Next: Taj Mahal, day 11.

Taj Mahal

Grief in marble

On Day 11, Sunday 8 November — Agra — Taj Mahal & Diwali.



BUILT

1632–1653, by Shah Jahan for Mumtaz Mahal

THE MARBLE

Makrana white, inlaid with 28 kinds of precious stone (pietra dura)

CLOSED

Fridays. Sunrise entry ~30 min before dawn — the slot to book

THE ENDING

Shah Jahan was deposed by his son and spent 8 years gazing at it from Agra Fort

TIME NEEDED

2–3 h at sunrise

The Taj Mahal is the one monument on this trip you already know, which is its own problem: the building has to compete with every photograph ever taken of it. It wins. Partly this is scale — the dome stands 73 metres, taller than it reads in pictures — and partly it is the marble, which is slightly translucent and takes the colour of the light: grey before dawn, briefly pink, then white, then gold by

late day. The sunrise slot exists because of this, and because the crowds triple by mid-morning.

Mumtaz and the emperor

Arjumand Banu Begum married prince Khurram in 1612; when he took the throne in 1628 as Shah Jahan, “king of the world”, she became Mumtaz Mahal, “chosen one of the palace”. By every account — including hostile ones — theirs was an unusually close political marriage: she travelled with him on campaign, held the imperial seal, and bore fourteen children in nineteen years. The fourteenth killed her. She died in 1631 in a war camp at Burhanpur, in the Deccan; the court chronicles say the emperor’s beard went grey within months, and that he emerged from a week of seclusion having resolved to build her the finest tomb ever raised. Construction began at Agra in 1632. The mausoleum itself was substantially complete by 1643 and the full complex by around 1653 — some twenty thousand workers, a thousand elephants hauling marble from Makrana, three hundred kilometres away in Rajasthan, and semi-precious stone from as far as Tibet, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka.

The ending is the part the building doesn’t show. In 1657 Shah Jahan fell ill, his four sons fought a war of succession, and the winner — Aurangzeb — had two brothers killed and his father confined to Agra Fort. Shah Jahan spent his last eight years a prisoner in his own palace, with a view down the river to the tomb, and when he died in 1666 he was carried the two kilometres by boat and buried beside her. The story that he planned a matching black-marble tomb for himself across the river is almost certainly a later legend — no serious evidence supports it — but his actual grave produced the complex’s one asymmetry: Mumtaz lies at the exact centre of the chamber, and his cenotaph sits beside hers, off-axis, the only unbalanced element in a building otherwise obsessed with symmetry.

What the design is doing

The building rewards knowing a few of its tricks. The four minarets lean outward by a few degrees — deliberately, so that in an earthquake they would fall away from the tomb, and so that from the ground they read as perfectly vertical. The Quranic calligraphy framing the great arches grows larger the higher it climbs, so it appears uniform from below; the calligrapher, Amanat Khan, is the only artist whose signature appears anywhere on the building. The flowers on the lower walls are *pietra dura* — pictorial inlay of carved semi-precious stones set into the marble, some blossoms made of dozens of individually shaped pieces of carnelian, jasper, jade and lapis. This is where standing in front of it beats every photograph: the detail is invisible at any distance, and the craft tradition behind it still operates in Agra's workshops today.

The layout is a Mughal garden tomb, the form you saw at Humayun's Tomb in Delhi, brought to its final version: a walled charbagh garden quartered by water channels, with one crucial change — the tomb sits not at the centre but at the far end, on the riverbank, so nothing stands behind it but sky and the Yamuna. It is flanked by two matching red sandstone buildings: a working mosque to the west, and to the east its mirror image, the *jawab* ("answer"), which faces the wrong way for prayer and exists mostly to balance the composition. The marble cenotaphs in the main chamber, behind an openwork marble screen carved from single slabs, are markers only — the real graves are in a plain crypt directly below, closed to visitors.

The visit, practically

Your Taj day is Sunday 8 November — Diwali itself. The Taj is closed on Fridays, so the day works, but book the time-slot ticket online ahead (the official ASI site), including the mausoleum entry supplement, and take the sunrise slot: gates open about 30 minutes before sunrise, roughly 6:00 at that time of year. Enter by the East Gate, which generally has the shortest queues at dawn. Security is airport-style and the prohibited list is long — no tripods, no drones, no food,

no large bags; carry essentially a phone, camera, wallet and water. Shoe covers for the marble platform are included with the foreign ticket, and visits are capped at three hours, which is enough.

The classic sequence: through the great red sandstone gate, the *Darwaza-i-Rauza*, which frames the first full view down the gardens — the photograph everyone takes, and the view the architects composed; then the long approach, the platform, the chamber, and time on the riverside terrace. The Diwali wrinkle is air quality: fireworks over the preceding nights can leave a haze that softens the dawn light, and the following morning is usually worse — one more argument for sunrise on the day. In the evening, Mehtab Bagh, the garden directly across the river, gives you the Taj at dusk from 300 metres with a fraction of the crowd; it closes at sunset, and the view improves as the light drops.

Before this one: Amber Fort & the Pink City, day 10. The last of the seven. Back to the contents.

PART FOUR

Context

*Six essays on the country behind the sights — each
one an angle that cuts across everything the trip
passes, from the water in the stepwells to the family
that still holds the fort.*

Water in Rajasthan

From geology to ritual in a dry land

Rajasthan's organising fact is water — where it is, and where it is not. The Aravalli hills catch just enough of the monsoon to fill lakes and tanks on their eastern side; on their western side the Thar desert begins. Nearly everything on this route follows from that line: why Udaipur is a city of artificial lakes, why forts stand where they stand and fell when their wells failed, why wells grew into architecture, and why a small lake at Pushkar became one of Hinduism's holiest places. This essay follows the water — from geology through engineering and war to ritual, and out of the car window along the way.

The line across Rajasthan

Start with the hills. The Aravallis are among the oldest mountains on Earth — raised more than a billion years ago, long before the Himalaya existed, and worn down ever since. What was once a range on an alpine scale is now a chain of hard brown ridges, rarely a thousand metres high, running diagonally across Rajasthan from Gujarat towards Delhi. You will meet the range at both ends. The low rocky ridge that runs through Delhi's parks and past the Qutb Minar is its northern tail. On day six, the two-hour climb from Udaipur to Kumbhalgarh crosses its spine.

Worn down or not, the range still does one enormous job: it divides the rain. The monsoon arrives from the Arabian Sea, from the south-west, and the hills catch it. East of the range the land gets enough water for fields, tanks and lakes. West of it, in the rain shadow, the Thar desert begins and runs on into Pakistan. The old kingdoms are named for the two sides. Mewar, around Udaipur, is the green side. Marwar, around Jodhpur — the name comes from *maru*, desert — is the dry one. The drive on days six and seven, from Udaipur over the hills and down to Jodhpur, is a transect of this divide: watch the fields thin out and the ground turn paler as you descend.

Hold that line in mind, because the rest of the essay hangs on it. Geology decides where the rain falls; the rain decides where people can live; and everything people built here — lakes, wells, forts, temples — is a response to that decision.

A three-month year

The second fact is timing. Rajasthan does not get a little rain all year; it gets nearly all its rain in one burst, from late June to September, when the south-west monsoon stands over India. The rest of the year is dry by default. When you visit in early November, the last rain will be six weeks gone and the next is seven months away.

The amounts are not absurdly small — the distribution is. Udaipur gets roughly sixty centimetres of rain a year, about the same as Warsaw. But Warsaw spreads it across fifty-two weeks, and Udaipur takes almost all of it in twelve. And that is the wet side of the line. Jodhpur gets half as much; the far west of the state, barely ten centimetres, one-sixth of Udaipur's share, a real desert.

So the year here has never had four seasons. It has three: the wet, when water arrives; the stored, when you live on what you caught; and the dry, when you find out whether you caught enough. Every institution of pre-modern Rajasthan that still stands along this route is, one way or another, a storage institution — a way of stretching twelve weeks of rain across a whole year. The lakes of Udaipur, the stepwells, the fort cisterns, even the gods of Pushkar: all of them answer the same question. What do we do when it stops raining?

Lakes as statecraft

Udaipur looks like a city that happens to have lakes. It is the other way round: the lakes came first, and they are built things. Lake Pichola, the one the City Palace stands over, began in 1362, when — as the tradition has it — a grain carrier named Pichhu, of the wandering banjara caravan people, dammed a stream here to water his bullocks. Two centuries later Maharana Udai Singh the Second,

looking for a capital safer than Chittorgarh, enlarged the dam, flooded the village of Picholi, and in 1559 founded Udaipur on the shore. The city was sited on its water supply the way other cities are sited on harbours.

On day five you will do the standard tourist things: walk the City Palace, take a boat past the Lake Palace hotel in the middle of Pichola. It helps to know that the boat ride is a tour of infrastructure. The white palace in the lake sits on a natural island, but the lake around it is a reservoir; the far shore is a dam you can walk on; and north of the palace, joined by a canal, lies a second reservoir, Fateh Sagar, named for the maharana who rebuilt its dam after a flood. A chain of these lakes steps down through the city, each catching the overflow of the one above — a municipal waterworks disguised as scenery.

Notice the names: Udai Sagar, Raj Samand, Fateh Sagar, Jai Samand — lake after lake named for the ruler who paid for it. That is not vanity, or not only vanity. In a land of three-month years, building water storage was the core business of kingship, the way a good ruler earned merit in this life and credit in the next. Chronicles praise Mewar's rulers for dams the way other chronicles praise conquests. Several of the great lake works were famine-relief projects, built in drought years to put wages in empty hands. A maharana who built a lake fed his people twice — once with the wages, then with the water.

And the lakes can still fail. Through a run of weak monsoons that ended in 2005, Pichola shrank to puddles and then to mud. Boys played cricket on the lakebed, farmers planted corn in it, and tourists rode camels across it to reach the Lake Palace, stranded in a field of dirt. One good monsoon refilled it. Hold that picture during the boat ride: the lake under you is not a permanent feature of the landscape. It is a bank balance, and it has been overdrawn within living memory.

The well that became architecture

So much for the lakes; the wells are stranger. A lake stores the monsoon on the surface, where the sun taxes it heavily — an open tank in this climate can lose a couple of metres of depth to evaporation in a year. The deeper store is

underground, and to reach it you dig a well. But here the water table itself moves with the seasons: high after the monsoon, falling through the dry months. A rope and bucket cope with that. A whole community fetching water all day, every day, needs something better — steps, so that anyone can walk down to the water wherever it happens to stand. Build those steps in stone, at scale, and the well becomes a building. That is the *baoli*, the stepwell: an inverted temple, its grandest floors at the bottom.

You will meet one before Rajasthan. On day four, ten minutes from the Delhi hotel, Agrasen ki Baoli runs its sixty-metre flight of stone stairs into the ground between the office towers off Connaught Place — a hundred and eight steps in three arched tiers, narrowing down to a shaft that is now dry. Nobody recorded who built it; tradition credits the legendary king Agrasen, with a rebuilding in the fourteenth century by the Agrawal merchant community that claims him as ancestor. Read it as a gauge. Each tier of arches marks where the water stood in some season, in some century. The dry sand at the bottom tells you where it stands now, which is a later chapter of this essay.

Two days later, in the village of Narlai on day six, the stepwell is still part of a working landscape. The lodge there — a former hunting retreat of the Jodhpur royal house — serves a lantern-lit dinner at a stepwell outside the village, and it is worth asking for: dinner at the bottom of a piece of hydraulic engineering, lit the way it would always have been lit after dark.

Stepwells died of the pipe and the pump. British engineers distrusted them as standing water and built pressured supplies past them; the tube well and the electric pump finished the job. Thousands of stepwells silted up, filled with rubbish, or vanished under buildings. The ones you will see survive as monuments — cleaned, fenced, photographed — their form preserved long after their function ended. If the day-ten drive to Agra allows a stop at Abhaneri, just off the road, you can see the form at its limit: Chand Baori, a stepwell from around the ninth century, thirteen storeys of criss-crossing staircases dropping into the ground like an Escher drawing carved a thousand years early. Keep the

form in mind anyway. It is the shape of the problem: in Rajasthan, water is something you walk down to.

Water and war

Every fort on this route is a water system first and a wall second. Walls can be built as thick as money allows; water is the constraint that no mason can fix. A fortress under siege does not usually starve — grain stores keep for years. It goes thirsty.

Kumbhalgarh, the great fort you reach on day six, makes the point with one story. Its wall runs for thirty-six kilometres over the ridgetops, and in seven centuries of warfare the fort fell exactly once — in the late 1570s, to Akbar's general Shahbaz Khan, and not because the wall failed. The water failed. The wells gave out at the height of the siege — poisoned, the local telling insists — and the garrison slipped away. The one defeat in the fort's history is a hydrological defeat.

Once you know the rule, you see it everywhere. At Mehrangarh on day seven, look down from the ramparts at the two tanks pressed against the fort's foot, Ranisar and Padamsar, built with the fort itself in the fifteenth century to catch the runoff of its own rock. At Amber on day ten, the palace looks at itself in Maota Lake below, which is no ornament but the fort's reservoir, its water once raised by stages to gardens and cisterns inside. Guides will show you cannons; count the cisterns instead. Sieges in this country were contests between the attacker's supply line and the defender's water table, and the walls were just the board the game was played on.

Sacred water

Where water is this scarce, it does not stay a commodity; it becomes holy. The clearest case on your route is Pushkar, on day eight — and it starts with a geological oddity. After days of artificial lakes, Pushkar's small lake is natural, one of very few in Rajasthan. To the tradition, of course, it is not natural at all: a

lotus fell from the hand of Brahma, the creator god, and the lake sprang up where its petals touched. Around that story grew one of the very few working temples to Brahma anywhere in the Hindu world, and around the temple a whole small town, ringing the water with fifty-two bathing ghats — stone stairs to the lake, cousins of the stepwell stairs, but leading down to salvation rather than supply. A bath here is held to wash away sin, and Hindus try to come at least once in a lifetime, the way Muslims try for Mecca.

It is worth pausing on why the two things go together — why the driest state in India should hold some of its holiest water. In Hindu practice, water is the great purifier: it carries sin and pollution away, which is why rivers, and the Ganges above all, outrank any building as sacred places. But a purifier that is also scarce becomes precious twice over. On the wet side of India a river is a fact of life; here, a permanent lake with no river feeding it looks like a standing miracle, and the tradition treats it as one. Scarcity does not just raise the price of water in Rajasthan. It raises its rank.

The holiest bathing time is the full moon of the month of Kartik, in late autumn. Around it Pushkar holds its famous camel fair — tens of thousands of camels, horses and cattle traded on the dunes while pilgrims fill the ghats. To be plain about the calendar: this year the fair runs in the second half of November and the full moon falls on the twenty-fourth, so you will miss it by about two weeks. What you get instead is the town at its ordinary devotional pace — drums and sung prayers at the ghats around sunset, which is its own argument for the visit.

One practical paragraph, then back to the water. At the ghats, shoes come off and cameras should be put away — people are praying, not performing. Expect men with flowers who press petals into your hand, walk you through a quick blessing, and then name a price for it, sometimes styling the red thread they tie on your wrist a Pushkar passport. It is a hustle with a liturgy. If you want the blessing, agree the donation first and keep it small; if you do not, a firm no thank you before the flowers reach your hand settles it.

Water now

The old constraint — you live on what you store — was broken in living memory, and the bill for breaking it is now arriving. The tube well and the cheap electric pump let a farmer pull water straight from the aquifer, wherever and whenever he liked. No dam, no steps, no maharana required. The green that spread across Rajasthan's fields in the last two generations was pumped up from underground, and it is being pumped far faster than the monsoon puts it back. Rajasthan holds about a tenth of India's land and about one per cent of its fresh water.

The audit is blunt. The state now pumps out roughly half as much groundwater again as the monsoon puts back each year, and in about seven of every ten of its administrative blocks the official classification is over-exploited — the bureaucratic word for a water table going down and not coming back. Agrasen ki Baoli's dry floor is the same story told in stone.

The modern state's answer would have been familiar to any maharana: build something enormous. The Indira Gandhi Canal takes Himalayan river water from the Sutlej and Beas in Punjab and carries it some six hundred and fifty kilometres south-west into the Thar, greening desert districts that never had a surface river. It is tank-building statecraft at national scale, with the same logic and the same politics — whoever controls the canal gates upstream controls the neighbours downstream.

And this is what you will actually see from the car. The fields along the drives on days eight to ten — Jodhpur to Pushkar to Jaipur — will be freshly sown, and some will already be green. That green is the anomaly worth noticing. Nothing has rained on it and nothing will; it is the winter crop, wheat and mustard, sown in November precisely because the monsoon is over, and raised entirely on stored and pumped water. A green November field in Rajasthan is not nature. It is a machine running.

From the car window

Here, finally, is the essay as a checklist, for the long drives. A pond below a curved earthen bank at the edge of a village: that is a tank and its bund, the smallest cousin of Udaipur's lakes. A knot of people around a red or blue lever pump: the hand pump, the tube well's village form, which retired the stepwell. Black plastic tanks on every rooftop: household storage, because the piped supply comes for an hour or two a day and the old habit — catch it while it flows — never died. A wide bed of pale sand under a road bridge, with no river in it: a monsoon river, which flows a few days a year and spends the rest as a sand quarry and a cricket ground. A tanker truck with a water hose: the water table falling in real time, somewhere nearby. And women walking with steel pots stacked on their heads: the oldest water technology in Rajasthan, older than every fort you will visit, still in daily use.

Each of these is one chapter of this essay in miniature — storage, extraction, scarcity, and the labour of carrying water, which never made it into the chronicles. The forts and the lakes got the poets. The pots got none, and carried more water than all of them.

Next: Caste.

Caste

The system a visitor is surrounded by and cannot see

Caste is the social fact you will be most surrounded by and least equipped to see. It is painted onto Jodhpur's hillside, built into Jaipur's street grid, printed in the Sunday matrimonial pages, and counted in every Indian election. It is also, for a visitor, nearly silent: nobody will explain it, and its markers need reading. This essay is the reading lesson — what the system is, how it laid out the cities on this route, what the constitution abolished in 1950 and what survived the abolition, and how to watch it all honestly.

The blue on the hillside

On the afternoon of the fourth of November, day seven of the trip, you will stand on the ramparts of Mehrangarh and look straight down at the reason Jodhpur is called the blue city. Thousands of flat-roofed houses below the fort are washed in the same powdery indigo-blue, packed so tight that the old town reads as one blue surface with lanes cracked through it.

Ask why the houses are blue and you will get three answers, sometimes from the same guide. The traditional one: the blue marks the houses of Brahmins, the priestly caste, and the quarter under the fort is still called Brahmapuri — the Brahmin town. A second: the wash was lime mixed with copper sulphate to keep termites out of the walls, and the colour is a side effect. A third: indigo was cheap here and keeps houses cool. The explanations disagree, and nobody can settle the argument now. But notice what nobody disputes: the quarter is named for a caste, and everyone you ask takes it for granted that a city block can belong to one.

That is the claim of this essay. Caste is mostly invisible to visitors not because anyone hides it, but because it is written in markers a newcomer cannot read — a surname, a thread, a street name, a job. You cannot learn to read them all in thirteen days. You can learn what kind of writing you are looking at.

Four boxes, several thousand drawers

Start with two words that the word “caste” blurs together. The first is *varna* — the four-part scheme from the oldest Sanskrit scriptures, which describes society as the body of a primeval man: Brahmins the mouth, priests and scholars; Kshatriyas the arms, warriors and rulers; Vaishyas the thighs, farmers and traders; Shudras the feet, labourers and craftsmen who serve the other three. Below and outside this body stood a fifth group, left unnamed in the scheme — the people once called untouchable, whose story comes later in this essay.

The four boxes are the theory. The lived unit is the second word: *jati*, usually translated as community, and there are several thousand of them. A *jati* is the group you are born into and expected to marry within. It typically comes with a region, a set of surnames, a traditional occupation, rules about food, and its own gods and festivals. Ask an Indian about caste and the honest answer is a *jati* name — Jat, Mali, Agarwal, Meghwal — not one of the four boxes, though most *jatis* claim a place in one.

The Rajputs, whose forts fill this trip from Kumbhalgarh to Amber, are a cluster of *jatis* claiming Kshatriya rank — the warrior box. Whether the claim was always ancient is doubtful; making it stick was the point, and another essay in this series is about how they did. What matters here is the machinery that kept every *jati* in place for centuries. Four gears: you are born into the group; you marry inside it; you eat with your own — who may cook for whom was regulated in detail; and you inherit its trade. Since 1950 each gear has loosened at a different speed. The eating rules wore down first, ground away by railway carriages, factory floors and office canteens, where nobody can check who cooked. Occupation half-loosened, as we will see. Marriage has barely moved.

One more thing about the drawers: nobody knows exactly how many there are. The British counted and ranked *jatis* in every census up to 1931, and the ranking caused so much jostling — communities petitioning to be listed a notch higher — that the republic stopped asking. Independent India has never held a full caste

census, so every count is an estimate, and the jostling, as we will see, simply moved to a different ledger.

So much for the categories. Now look at what they built.

The street map

An old Indian city is a map of jatis. The unit is the *mohalla* — a named quarter, historically home to one community, with its own well, its own small temple, sometimes its own gate that closed at night. Jodhpur's blue Brahmapuri is one mohalla among dozens packed below the fort; the names of the others record weavers, dyers, silversmiths, and clans nobody outside Jodhpur has heard of.

Jaipur, which you reach on day nine, shows the same logic drawn with a ruler. The city was founded in 1727 by Jai Singh the Second — the astronomer king whose giant instruments you will walk among at Jantar Mantar — and laid out by his engineer Vidyadhar as a grid of nine great blocks. Two blocks went to the palace. The other seven were parcelled out street by street to trades and the communities that practised them: jewellers on Johari Bazar, which simply means jewellers' market, and so on through cloth, brass, marble and bangles. You will walk Johari Bazar on Dhanteras night, when the whole street is lit for Diwali and half of Jaipur is out buying silver. It has been the jewellers' street for three hundred years, and jati is a large part of why: sons followed fathers, and marriages knit the trade together.

You will already have seen the older, unplanned version in Delhi on day three. The lanes of the Mughal old city are named for what was made and sold in them — Dariba Kalan for silver and gold, Khari Baoli for spices, and the paratha lane where you will eat breakfast, whose shops have been run by Brahmin families for a century and a half. That is why the menu is strictly vegetarian: a Brahmin cook could serve every caste without anyone breaking a rule about who may cook for whom. Trade geography and caste geography are not identical, but in India they overlap so far that a street name is usually a caste clue.

The old quarters are mixing now. Money moves families in and out, and an old mansion in Brahmapuri may hold anyone who can pay for it. But the names stay, the little temples stay, and the marriage networks stay, so the old map fades slowly. Streets carry it. So, still, do jobs.

Who does which job

The tidy version of the system gave every jati a trade: priest, potter, washerman, barber, weaver, leather worker, sweeper. The names survive as some of India's commonest surnames, the way English kept Smith and Baker. The question is which of those chains still hold.

The new economy broke many of them. Driving a car, running a mobile-phone shop, writing software — jobs with no ancient rulebook have no hereditary owner, and the cities are full of people doing work their grandfathers could not have imagined. The dhobi who collects the hotel laundry and the barber with a chair under a tree may still carry the old trade as a surname, while their sons drive taxis and sell phone credit. That is the loosening you will see everywhere.

Two links have held, and they are the top and the bottom of the old scale. Temple priesthood remains almost entirely Brahmin, by heredity; courts have ruled on whether anyone else may be trained for it, which tells you how firm the custom is. And sanitation — sweeping, drain work, the handling of waste and the dead — remains overwhelmingly the work of Dalits, the communities once called untouchable. Nothing in law reserves it for them. It stays theirs through poverty, expectation and the reluctance of everyone else, which is the old machinery running without any law at all.

Watch it quietly at the heritage hotels. At Rawla Narlai on day six and at Rohet on day seven you will be guests of Rajput houses — the hunting lodge of one noble family, the manor of another — where hosting itself extends the old order: the family receives you, and a staff drawn from the village fills roles that are not distributed at random. Who greets, who cooks, who cleans, who is introduced by name. These are patterns, not verdicts on any person in front of you. But for most

of Indian history the bottom of that ladder was not merely custom. It was held in place by force, and that is the part the constitution set out to break.

Ambedkar and Article 17

Untouchability was a system of enforced distance. In practice it meant separate wells, and a beating for drawing from the wrong one. It meant being barred from the temple, served tea at the roadside stall in a separate glass kept for your kind, made to live downwind at the village edge, and in the strictest places expected to keep even your shadow off a Brahmin's path. About one Indian in six descends from communities held under those rules.

The man who did most to end it was born under them. Bhimrao Ambedkar, born in 1891 into the Mahar community of western India, sat apart from his classmates at school and was not allowed to touch the water tap; an office servant poured for him, and when the servant was absent he went thirsty. A reforming maharaja paid for his education, and he took it as far as education goes: doctorates from Columbia University and the University of London, a law practice, and three decades of campaigning — for the right to drink from public tanks, to enter temples, to be treated as human. When independence came, the new state asked him to chair the committee that drafted its constitution.

He wrote his enemy into it by name. Article 17 reads, in full: “Untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden.” The constitution took effect in 1950, and enforcing that one sentence has been the work of every decade since. The distance between law and village practice remains real — cases about wells, temple entry and wedding processions still reach the courts — but the law's side of the argument no longer needs making. Ambedkar himself, near the end of his life, gave up on reforming Hinduism from within. In 1956, weeks before he died, he converted to Buddhism at a public ceremony in Nagpur, and several hundred thousand followers converted with him — one of the largest religious conversions ever held. You will see him across India as a statue: a stout man in a blue Western suit and round glasses, one arm raised, the constitution

under the other. Keep count from the car window; he outnumbers Gandhi on the roadside by a wide margin.

Abolishing untouchability was the constitution's sword. It also carried a scale, and the scale is where the argument moved next.

The permanent argument

The same constitution created the world's largest programme of affirmative action, called reservation: quotas for the communities at the bottom, in parliament and the state assemblies, in government jobs, and in universities. The listed groups were the Scheduled Castes — the Dalit communities, named in a schedule to the constitution — and the Scheduled Tribes, the forest and hill peoples outside the caste system altogether.

Then the categories grew. A government commission under B. P. Mandal concluded that a vast middle band of low-ranked but not untouchable jatis — the Other Backward Classes, in the official phrase — deserved quotas too, and in 1990 the government acted on it. Upper-caste students burned buses in protest, and some burned themselves; the courts let the quota stand but capped the total at half of all seats. The cap has since been breached from an unexpected direction: in 2019 a further tenth was added for poor families from the unlisted castes. In Rajasthan the arithmetic now reserves sixty-four places out of every hundred, and the figure is similar across north India.

Notice the paradox, because it explains half of Indian politics. The constitution set out to dissolve caste, and the remedy fixed it in administration forever: to receive the benefit you must be counted, so the counting never ends. Where a British census clerk once ranked jatis, a reservation schedule now lists them, and the pressure runs toward getting in, not out. Rajasthan has seen it in the flesh — the Gujjar community, herders across the state you drive through, has repeatedly blockaded railways to demand a lower official classification and the better quota that comes with it. Fighting to be listed as backward makes perfect sense once

being listed is worth more than rank. Every Indian election is read through this arithmetic: which jatis vote as blocs, and who has promised whom a category.

That is caste argued in public, at the top of the country's voice. It runs just as strongly through the quietest institution there is.

The Sunday pages

Buy a Sunday newspaper in Delhi — the Hindustan Times or the Times of India — and turn to the matrimonial section. It is organised the way everything in this essay predicts: columns of small advertisements sorted by community. Brahmin. Rajput. Agarwal. Jain. Punjabi Khatri. Within each column, parents advertise a son's salary or a daughter's degree and fair complexion, and invite proposals from the same community. At the end sits a short column headed "Caste No Bar" — the declared exceptions, in practice often with preferences attached. The matchmaking websites that have replaced the papers for the young carry the same architecture: community is a search filter, usually the first. The advertisements themselves are a crash course in what families weigh: four dense lines of height, degree, salary, complexion and horoscope, with the jati stated up front like a postcode.

The pages tell you what the statistics confirm. In the largest household survey to ask the question, about one Indian marriage in twenty crossed caste lines. The other nineteen were made within the jati, most of them arranged by the families, the rest approved by them. Marriage is the gear of the old machine that has barely turned, and it is the one that keeps the whole mechanism alive, because a group people only marry inside stays a group.

This is also why Indians can place each other in seconds and you never will. A surname, a home town and a diet usually suffice: a Sharma is a Brahmin, a Singh from Rajasthan is likely Rajput, a Gupta is a trader by ancestry, a Meghwal is a Dalit. The sorting is so habitual that many Indians hardly notice performing it. You, reading no surnames and hearing no signals, will move through it like a

person at a concert with no sense of pitch — which is, finally, worth talking about directly.

How to watch

Some of the writing you can now read. At Pushkar on day eight, the priests who take you down to the sacred lake are hereditary — rights to the ghats pass from father to son, and the white cotton thread worn over the left shoulder and across the chest is the *janeu*, the mark of the twice-born castes, tied on Brahmin boys at initiation. A “pure vegetarian” sign on a restaurant is a purity signal as much as a menu note. The paratha lane’s Brahmin kitchens, Johari Bazar’s three centuries of jewellers, the blue wash under Mehrangarh, the caged or garlanded Ambedkar by the road: each is a sentence in the script.

Some of it will be read to you. Drivers and guides often narrate their own caste unprompted and with pride — a Rajput guide will tell you his ancestors defended the fort he is showing you, and it may be true. Take such commentary as testimony from inside one jati, which is what it is.

And some of it is better left alone. Do not ask anyone their caste directly; the question lands somewhere between “how much do you earn” and worse, because for many people the honest answer has been a means of humiliation. If you need a frame for the whole subject, the least false one is a naturalist’s: you are watching an old, intricate system that a modern republic is dismantling at some speeds and reinforcing at others, and the people in front of you did not choose their place in it. Verdicts on the system exist in plenty; India’s own constitution delivered one in a single sentence in 1950. You do not need to add yours over dinner.

One image to carry home. In some villages the Ambedkar statue stands inside a steel cage — welded around him because uncaged statues get smashed at night, which tells you the argument is alive. The man in the cage wrote the sentence that outlawed the world this essay describes. Both the blue suit and the blue city are

still standing, seventy-five years on, in plain sight of each other. Now you can see them both.

Before this one: Water in Rajasthan. Next: Red sandstone, white marble.

Red sandstone, white marble

Reading every monument by its material

Nearly every building you will stand in front of on this trip is made of one of two stones, or both: red sandstone and white marble. The pairing is not decoration. It is a code — red for the fortress and the public, white for the sacred and the private — set down in Delhi in the twelfth century, perfected by the Mughals, pushed to its endpoint in the all-white Taj Mahal, and then borrowed, deliberately, by the British. Learn to read the two stones and you can date almost any monument on this route at a glance, and tell what its builder was trying to say.

Two stones in one glance

Start where the trip starts. On your first afternoon in Delhi, jet-lagged and blinking, you will walk up to Humayun's Tomb: a great cube of red sandstone under a dome of white marble, sitting in a walled garden. Look at it for a moment before you look at anything else. The body of the building is red — the colour of walls, gates, and power. The dome, the part that points at heaven, is white. The trim around the arches is white too, thin lines of marble drawn onto the red like chalk on brick.

That one elevation is the whole essay. For the next ten days you will see the same two materials again and again, in different proportions: a red fort with white pavilions hidden inside it, a red mosque with white domes, a red tower with white bands, and at the end a tomb with no red in it at all. The proportions are never accidental. Builders here chose their stone the way a priest chooses robes — by rule, and for meaning.

By the morning of the eighth of November, standing in front of the Taj Mahal, you should be able to run the code backwards: to look at any building and say,

from the stone alone, roughly when it was built and what it was for. That is the promise. Here is the grammar.

Where the stone comes from

Both stones are local, and that is the first thing to understand. Empires did not ship their building material across oceans; they built big where good stone lay close to hand, and northern India is unusually lucky in this.

The white marble comes, above all, from Makrana, a dusty quarrying town in the dry country north of your own road. Its stone has been cut for at least six centuries. It is calcite marble of remarkable purity — white, hard, and slightly translucent, so that light gets a little way into the surface before it comes back out. The marble of the Taj Mahal came from Makrana, hauled the two hundred and fifty kilometres or so to Agra by ox cart — roughly Warsaw to Kraków, at walking pace. You will brush past this world on the sixth of November, on the drive from Pushkar to Jaipur: the highway runs through Kishangarh, which has grown into the largest marble market in Asia. Look out the window as you pass — kilometre after kilometre of yards stacked with sawn slabs, showrooms the size of aircraft hangars, and dust from a thousand cutting machines. The quarries themselves lie further north, but this is where the stone comes to be sold, and the scale of it tells you the trade never ended.

The red sandstone belongs to the other end of your route. A belt of it runs through the country south of Agra, around Fatehpur Sikri and Dholpur — fine-grained, iron-rich, and easy to carve when freshly cut, hardening as it weathers. It also splits cleanly into beams and slabs, and the masons treated it almost as timber: posts, brackets, and whole ceilings cut from stone, carved with the fluency of woodwork. At Fatehpur Sikri you can stand under sandstone brackets so delicate you would swear they were carpentry. The Mughal heartland of Delhi and Agra sat within reach of both stones at once, and that accident of geology is a quiet reason the empire could build the way it did. Where the quarries are is a hidden constraint on where the monuments can be.

The first pairing: the Qutb

The code begins at the Qutb complex, which you will visit on the morning of the first of November — the oldest thing on your itinerary, and the place where two building traditions collided.

In the 1190s, Delhi's new Turkic rulers threw up a mosque in a hurry, and they built it out of demolished temples. Walk the colonnade and you can see this plainly: the pillars are carved with bells, chains, and human figures — Hindu and Jain temple work, stacked up to hold a mosque roof, the faces chipped away by masons uneasy about images. Reused temple stone is the signature of this first period. Where you see it, you are looking at the twelfth or thirteenth century, when the conquerors had ambition but not yet a workforce trained in their own style.

Beside the mosque stands the Qutb Minar itself, a tapering tower of carved red sandstone, seventy-three metres of alternating round and angled flutes, banded with verses cut so deep they hold their own shadows. Near the top the material changes: the upper storeys carry white marble. Lightning wrecked the top of the tower in the fourteenth century, and the sultan who repaired it added marble to the new work. So the red-and-white pairing is already here, a full three centuries before the Mughals — but as circumstance, not yet as language.

One more thing to look for at the Qutb: the great stone screen of arches beside the mosque. Its arches are not true arches. The local masons had never built one, so they corbelled — stepping each course of stone a little further inward until the two sides met. The true arch, and the dome that follows from it, arrived from Central Asia a century later. Technique travelled; the stone stayed local. That is the pattern for everything that follows.

The Mughal grammar

The Mughals turned the accident into a rule. From the mid-1500s the two stones settle into fixed roles. Red sandstone is for the outward and the public: fortress

walls, gates, halls of audience, congregational mosques. White marble is for the inward and the sacred: tombs, prayer chambers, and the private apartments of the emperor. Red says power. White says holiness — and, increasingly, the person of the emperor himself.

There was precedent to lean on. Old Indian texts on building assign white stone to priests and red to rulers, and the Mughals, always canny about legitimacy, were happy to build in a colour scheme that read correctly to both their Persian nobles and their Hindu subjects. Whatever the exact mix of motives, the result is consistent enough to navigate by.

You will read the grammar all through Delhi. Humayun's Tomb, from 1570, you have already seen: red body, white dome, a tomb caught midway between the registers. On the thirty-first of October you will stand in the Red Fort — the name says it — whose ramparts are red sandstone for two and a half kilometres. But walk deeper in and the code repeats at a smaller scale: the hall of public audience, where anyone could bring a petition, is red; the hall of private audience, where the emperor sat among his ministers, is white marble, and carries the couplet: if there is paradise on earth, it is this, it is this, it is this. Then out to the Jama Masjid, red with white marble domes and stripes on the minarets. If the light holds on the drive to Agra a week later, you may also stop at Fatehpur Sikri, the capital Akbar built in the 1570s and abandoned within decades. It is a whole city of red sandstone — palace, mosque, courtyards, everything — with exactly one white marble building floating in the middle of it: the tomb of the Sufi saint Salim Chishti. One glance at that courtyard and you know the rule without being told. Red for the city of men; white for the one man who talked to God.

Then use Agra Fort, at midday on your Agra day, as the exercise. You enter through red: massive sandstone walls, a red gate, the red Jahangiri Mahal built under Akbar. Keep walking toward the river and the buildings turn white around you — the Khas Mahal, the private palaces, the little octagonal marble tower called the Musamman Burj, added by Shah Jahan a lifetime later. The fort is the social order in cross-section: public red at the gate, private white at the heart, and

the emperor at the whitest point of all. The Indian army still holds most of the fort, so the open part is precisely this palace corner — which happens to be the part the code is written in.

All white: the Taj

Follow the logic of the grammar one step further and you reach a strange conclusion. If white is the sacred register, then a building entirely of white marble is a statement no emperor had quite dared to make: a declaration that its occupant belongs wholly to heaven. Shah Jahan made it. The Taj Mahal, built from 1632 for his wife Mumtaz Mahal, who died giving birth to their fourteenth child, has no red in its body at all. The sandstone is still there — but pushed outward, into the flanking buildings and the great gate, a red frame around a white centre. The tomb itself stands on its platform like something from a different, cleaner world.

It was ruinously expensive, and it was meant to be. Marble of that quality, in that quantity, carted from Makrana and worked by the finest masons of the empire for about two decades, was the treasury made visible. Contemporaries understood the price as part of the meaning.

The stone also behaves. Makrana marble is slightly translucent, and its surface answers the sky: grey before dawn, briefly rose as the light comes up, then a hard brilliant white by mid-morning. This is why your itinerary puts you at the gates before sunrise on the eighth of November, and it is not a tourist superstition — the change is real, and watching it happen is the best fifteen minutes the trip has to offer.

The grammar ends here, and so does the money. Shah Jahan was deposed by his son Aurangzeb and spent his last years a prisoner in Agra Fort — in the white marble tower you will visit at midday, which looks straight down the river to the Taj. Aurangzeb built little and built plain; his own grave, far to the south, is a slab open to the sky. After him the empire could no longer afford its own language. When the building stops, the code stops with it.

Flowers in stone

Get close to the marble — at the Taj, and again in Agra Fort’s white palaces — and you will find it is not plain. Vines, lilies, and poppies curl across the surface, made of coloured stone set flush into the white: carnelian, jasper, jade, lapis, and a dozen others, cut to petal shapes a few millimetres across and fitted into carved sockets. The craft is called *parchin kari* — Europeans call it *pietra dura* — and the finest of all of it is the screen around the two cenotaphs — the empty marker tombs — at the centre of the Taj, where a single flower may hold dozens of separate pieces.

Where the technique came from is genuinely disputed. One school points to Florence, which perfected stone-inlay pictures in the same decades, and to Italian-made panels — including one of Orpheus playing to the beasts — that ended up set into the Red Fort’s throne canopy. The other school answers that Indian builders had been inlaying stone since long before the Mughals, that the imported panels are isolated curiosities, and that the flat, floral Mughal style looks nothing like Florentine picture-making. The honest summary is that ideas travelled in both directions and Agra’s workshops out-did everyone. Those workshops never closed, and their descendants both make beautiful tabletops and staff the relentless marble emporiums your driver will try to route you through — the road essay has more to say about that.

The Rajput variants

Rajasthan plays the same game with different pieces. The Rajput courts you will visit in the first week — Udaipur, Jodhpur, Amber — had less money than the empire and no Makrana-scale marble budget, so their palaces perfect the art of the effect: local stone underneath, and surfaces that do the talking.

Udaipur’s City Palace, your first stop in Rajasthan, is largely local stone finished in white-painted lime plaster — from across Lake Pichola it reads as a marble city, at a fraction of the cost. Jodhpur, two days later, is built of its own rock: Mehrangarh fort rises off a sandstone outcrop in walls quarried from the same

hill, so that it is hard to say where the cliff stops and the masonry starts. Below it, the old city is washed indigo-blue, house by house — paint again, by custom rather than law, in the quarter once reserved for Brahmins. Keep that in mind for Jaipur two days later: in Rajasthan, colour is often a coat, and the coat is a claim. And at Amber, on the seventh of November, you will see the third trick: the Sheesh Mahal, a room lined with thousands of small convex mirrors set in plaster, said to turn a single candle into a sky of stars. Mirror, paint, and polished plaster — the shine of marble, conjured from cheaper things.

But watch what happens when a Rajput ruler wants to say something sacred. Beside Mehrangarh stands Jaswant Thada, the royal cremation memorial, built in 1899 — and it is pure white Makrana marble, some of it sawn so thin that the walls glow faintly from the inside when the sun is on them. For fortresses, local stone; for the honoured dead, the white stone and the Mughal register. The grammar outlived the Mughals because everyone around them had learned to speak it.

Jaipur pink and the British echo

Jaipur will fool you, and it is worth being un-fooled in advance. On the evening of the sixth of November you will walk its bazaars — Dhanteras night, the start of Diwali week, the whole old city lit up — and every facade will be the same dusty rose-pink. It looks like stone. It is paint: a terracotta-coloured lime wash over rendered walls. Before 1876 the city was mostly white and yellow. That year the Prince of Wales toured India, and Maharaja Ram Singh the Second had the entire old city painted pink — a colour associated with welcome — to receive him. The next year he made it law, and the law still stands: within the walls, you may paint your building any colour you like, as long as it is this one. Jaipur is the only place on your route where the colour code is a statute rather than a stone.

The point of the story is who the paint was for. A Rajput king dressed his capital to impress the British crown — and the British, when their turn came to build, dressed their capital to inherit the Mughals. You will see this on your first

evening in Delhi, driving the great axis of New Delhi at dusk: India Gate, the long lawns, and on the hill the president's palace that was built as the Viceroy's House. Edwin Lutyens built it in the 1920s out of cream and red sandstone from Dholpur — the same red belt the Mughals quarried — layering the two colours through the whole composition. The classical columns are European; the stones are the Red Fort's. It was a deliberate quotation, legitimacy claimed through masonry: the new rulers building in the palette of the old ones, so that Delhi itself would seem to say the empire had merely changed hands. The British got about seventeen years' use out of it before independence.

The waste at the other end

There is a coda to all this, and you drive past it. Every slab of Makrana ever cut was cut wet, and the cutting turns a share of the stone into slurry — a milk of powdered marble and water. Kishangarh, the marble town on the Ajmer–Jaipur road, has been pumping that waste onto two hundred acres of open ground since 2005: some seven hundred tanker-loads a day, dried into dunes and flats of blinding white. The result photographs like a glacier, and India has taken to calling it a mini Switzerland; on a winter weekend ten thousand people come to be photographed on it.

It is worth seeing precisely because of what the rest of this essay has argued. The whiteness that meant purity, sanctity and unlimited money — the register reserved for tombs and saints — turns out to have an industrial byproduct, and the byproduct is the same colour. The dust is also the reason marble workers get silicosis; scientists studying the site have called it a toxic tourist destination. Half an hour on a bright morning is a photograph and an argument. It is not somewhere to linger in the wind.

A field guide

So here is the code, small enough to carry. Reused temple stone, carved figures in the wrong places: the Delhi Sultanate, twelfth or thirteenth century. Red

sandstone with white marble trim: high Mughal, the age of Akbar and his grandsons. Pure white marble: the sacred register — a tomb, a saint, or Shah Jahan spending like the end of the world. Plaster, mirror, and paint over local stone: a Rajput palace, keeping up appearances. Red and cream under classical columns: the British, quoting their predecessors. Pink: paint, Jaipur, and a royal welcome that became a bylaw.

Test it as you go — on gates, on cenotaphs, on the skyline from a car window. And save the final reading for dawn on the eighth of November, when the greatest of the white buildings comes up grey out of the river mist and slowly takes the light: first rose, then cream, then a white that seems lit from inside the stone. Four hundred years on, the code still transmits.

Before this one: Caste. Next: The Rajput bargain.

The Rajput bargain

Why the families who built the forts still hold them

At the City Palace in Udaipur, the ticket in your hand is sold not by the state of Rajasthan but by a foundation the builders' family still runs. At Mehrangarh in Jodhpur, the fort is managed by a trust chaired by the family that raised its walls five centuries ago. Two of the places you sleep on this trip are the private houses of Rajput noblemen, and the waiter pouring your tea may be introduced as the owner's son. India abolished its aristocracy in 1971. Yet the aristocrats are still here, still in their buildings, and prospering. The reason is not that they won their wars. Mostly they lost them. The reason is a talent, kept sharp for eight centuries, for striking terms.

The question at the gate

Europe's old regimes tended to end abruptly — a guillotine, a revolution, or, as with Poland's landed families in 1944, an expropriation decree. India's princes negotiated their way down, step by step, and each step left them holding something. That is why the question at the gate — why do these families still have the keys? — has no single answer. It has five, struck with five different counterparties: the Mughal emperors, the British, the new Indian republic, the taxman, and finally you, the paying visitor.

This essay walks through those five deals in order. Conveniently, so does the trip. The deal with the Mughals was sealed at Amber, which you visit on day ten. The great refusal of that deal belongs to Udaipur and Kumbhalgarh, days five and six. The British deal is visible from the ramparts of Mehrangarh on day seven, in the shape of a palace with three hundred and forty-seven rooms. And the newest deal — heritage for money — is the bed you sleep in at Narlai. So keep the question in your pocket as you go. Every fort on this route is also a contract.

What a Rajput is

Rajput means, roughly, son of kings. The name covers a set of warrior clans, spread across northern and western India, who claimed descent from the sun, the moon, or a sacrificial fire on a mountain — genealogies that put them beyond ordinary humanity and, usefully, beyond audit. What the clans actually were, most historians think, is successful fighting lineages who rose during the centuries after the eighth, and whose bards then supplied the cosmic paperwork.

Three of these houses dominate the trip. The Sisodias of Mewar, ruling from Chittor and later Udaipur, claimed the sun. The Rathores of Marwar ruled the desert country around Jodhpur. The Kachwahs held Amber, the hill fort above what became Jaipur. Between them they ran most of what is now Rajasthan, and they fought each other as readily as anyone else.

What bound them was less a kingdom than a code. A Rajput kept his word, protected whoever ate his salt, and died rather than surrender. The code's extreme expression was *jauhar* — the mass self-immolation of a fortress's women when defeat became certain, while the men rode out to die. Chittor, Mewar's first capital, performed it three times. Modern readers meet the code with a shudder, and fair enough. But notice what it also was: a reputation, carefully maintained and advertised. A clan known to fight to the death commands a better price for its friendship than one known to fold. Honour was the asset on the table in every bargain that follows.

The clans also kept the ledger among themselves, and the currency was marriage. Rajput houses married their daughters into lines of equal or higher standing, never lower, so every wedding was a public statement of rank, negotiated as carefully as a treaty and remembered for generations. The bards who sang each family's genealogy were its credit agency. Keep that in mind, because it explains why the next deal was so hard to swallow — and so valuable to the man who offered it.

The Mughal bargain

In the winter of 1562 the young emperor Akbar, on pilgrimage through Rajasthan, stopped at Sambhar, and there married the daughter of Raja Bharmal of Amber. Chroniclers recorded her titles rather than her name; the label most people know her by today, Jodha Bai, was pinned on her by a British colonel's history book two and a half centuries later and is almost certainly wrong. What matters is what the marriage meant. Bharmal, a middling raja squeezed by rivals and by Mughal governors, had converted his biggest liability — proximity to the empire — into kinship with it.

The terms were never written down, but both sides honoured them for a century and a half. Amber gave daughters and cavalry. The empire gave rank, revenue and protection — and rank, in the Mughal system, was a number. Every noble held a *mansab*, a graded commission that fixed how many horsemen he maintained and what the treasury paid him, so a raja could read his own worth, and everyone else's, off a list. Bharmal's grandson Man Singh climbed that list to its top: rated at seven thousand horse, the ceiling for anyone born outside the imperial family, he became the foremost of Akbar's generals, commanding armies from Kabul to Bengal — a Hindu raja leading the forces of a Muslim emperor, which tells you how far the arrangement reached. The bride's son ruled the empire as the emperor Jahangir. And the profits went into stone: the palace of audience halls and mirror mosaics you walk through at Amber on day ten was built almost entirely on Mughal service money.

Most of the great houses took a version of this deal, including, after initial resistance, the Rathores of Jodhpur. It was a real exchange, not a surrender. The rajas kept their lands, their gods and their internal rule; the emperor got the best cavalry in India and quiet on his western flank. Proud houses swallowed hard — giving daughters implied ranking below the receiver — and the bards were paid to sing around the awkward parts. But as bargains go, it worked. Which makes the exception more striking.

The refusal

One house said no. The Sisodias of Mewar, the senior-most Rajput line by common consent, never sent a daughter to the Mughal court and never attended it. When his fellow rajas were taking imperial commands, Maharana Pratap — born at Kumbhalgarh, the great walled fort you climb on day six — chose war instead. In 1576, at a mountain pass called Haldighati, he met a Mughal army led, pointedly, by Man Singh of Amber: Rajput against Rajput, the deal-taker sent to punish the refuser. Pratap lost the battle, escaped, and spent the rest of his life fighting from the hills while his farmland was occupied and his treasury emptied.

Count the cost honestly. Chittor had already been sacked, with a slaughter so complete that Akbar's own chroniclers gave numbers in the tens of thousands. Mewar spent a generation poor, feeding on what the hills could grow, while Amber built mirror halls. The refusal was, on any spreadsheet of the sixteenth century, a bad trade. Even Mewar eventually compromised: in 1614 Pratap's son accepted a negotiated peace — though its terms excused the Maharana from ever appearing at court in person. Mewar's pride was written into the contract.

But run the spreadsheet longer and the refusal starts to look like the shrewdest bargain of all. The house that would not bow became the standard by which every other house measured its shame. For five centuries Mewar has outranked everyone socially, whatever the political arithmetic said. When you tour the City Palace in Udaipur on day five, notice how hard the displays lean on Pratap — the portraits, the weapons, the loyal horse Chetak. The family is still drawing income from a battle it lost four hundred and fifty years ago. Honour, remember, is an asset. Mewar cornered the market.

The British bargain

The Mughal empire faded; the Maratha armies that replaced it bled Rajasthan for decades; and when the British East India Company broke the Marathas, the Rajput states lined up to sign. In 1817 and 1818, one after another, Udaipur, Jodhpur, Jaipur and their neighbours accepted what the British called subsidiary

alliance: the Company would handle defence and foreign affairs and station a Resident — a political officer, part ambassador, part minder — at each court. Inside his borders, each ruler remained absolute. Outside them, he ceased to exist.

So began the century and a half of the princely states. At the Raj's height, about five hundred and sixty-five of them covered some two-fifths of India's land, ruled by princes in treaty with the Crown rather than governed directly. The British sorted them with an instrument only an empire of clerks could love: the gun salute. The grandest five houses in India were greeted with twenty-one guns. Udaipur got nineteen — the highest in Rajasthan, its reward for seniority and stubbornness. Jaipur and Jodhpur got seventeen. Every prince knew his number, and much of court life became a campaign to raise it.

The empire also raised the princes' sons. In 1875 the viceroy founded a school at Ajmer, Mayo College, built expressly to turn young Rajput rulers into English gentlemen — cricket, Latin grammar, and a coat of arms drawn up for each boy by the college heralds. It worked. Within a generation the maharajas spoke to their British Residents in the Residents' own idiom, shot tigers with them in the winter and played polo against them in the spring, and the Resident's little office at each court settled into a comfortable routine of hints rather than orders.

Read the deal plainly. The British bought quiet across two-fifths of the map for the price of some cannon powder and flattery. The princes bought survival, and spent it on comfort. The result is visible from Mehrangarh's ramparts on day seven: across the city stands Umaid Bhawan, a sandstone palace of three hundred and forty-seven rooms, begun in 1929 as a famine-relief project and finished in 1943 — one of the largest private homes on earth, completed four years before the world that paid for it ended.

Joining the republic, and the deal revoked

In 1947 the British left, and their treaties lapsed. On paper, each prince was suddenly free to join India, join Pakistan, or dream of independence. In practice,

Vallabhbhai Patel, the new home minister, and his civil servant V. P. Menon dismantled princely India in about two years, state by state, with a repertoire that ran from charm to open threat. The instrument the princes signed handed over only defence, foreign affairs and communications — the same three things the British had taken, which made the pill familiar. The sweeteners were also familiar: keep your titles, keep your palaces, and receive a privy purse, an annual payment from the treasury, guaranteed in the constitution itself. By 1949 the states of Rajputana had been folded into a single Indian state, Rajasthan, and the maharajas had become wealthy pensioners with palaces for addresses.

Even the pensioning-off was done in the old style, with rank observed to the last decimal. The maharaja of Jaipur was made *rajpramukh* — ceremonial head of the new Rajasthan, a governor in all but name. That left the problem of Udaipur, which had refused the Mughals, outranked everyone for four centuries, and could hardly now rank below Jaipur. The solution was pure Rajputana: a new title, *maharajpramukh*, senior to the rajpramukh and attached to no duties whatever, was invented for the Maharana alone. The republic, in its first years, was still paying out in the oldest currency these families knew — precedence.

The last classic bargain held for one generation. To the new republic's politicians, the purses came to look like the state paying feudalism a salary; Indira Gandhi made abolishing them a central promise of her socialist program, and in December 1971, by constitutional amendment, the payments stopped and the state ceased to recognise any royal title. There was no compensation and no appeal.

Notice what abolition actually did. It did not take the palaces — those were private property, and stayed. It took the income that maintained them. A family might own a fort, a lake palace, a city block of stables, and suddenly nothing that earned a rupee. For the first time in eight hundred years, the Rajput houses faced a counterparty that wanted nothing they had. No emperor needed their cavalry; no viceroy needed their quiet. What saved them was finding, one more time, someone who did need what they had. It turned out to be you.

Fort into trust, palace into hotel

The shrewdest families had seen it coming. In Jaipur, the maharaja had moved his art, carpets and armoury into a public museum trust as early as 1959, a dozen years before abolition — which is why the City Palace there runs as a museum to this day. In Udaipur, Maharana Bhagwat Singh had already turned Jag Niwas — the white summer palace floating in Lake Pichola, which you circle by boat on day five — into the Lake Palace hotel, and he went into partnership with the Taj hotel group in the same year the purses died. In Jodhpur, the young maharaja Gaj Singh answered abolition within a year by moving the family's treasures into a trust: the Mehrangarh Museum Trust, founded in 1972, which is why that fort's museum is the best in Rajasthan and why the entry fee builds conservation labs instead of anyone's swimming pool. Umaid Bhawan split three ways — family home, museum, and a hotel where a room can cost more than a schoolteacher's annual salary.

The smaller nobility followed the same road with smaller houses, and on this trip you stay in two of them. Rawla Narlai, your bed on day six, is a seventeenth-century hunting lodge that the last maharaja of Jodhpur gave to his younger brother; the branch of the family that owns it also opened Ajit Bhawan in Jodhpur, generally counted India's first heritage hotel, and turned Narlai into a hotel in the 1990s. Rohet Garh, the likely lunch halt on day seven, has been held by one Rathore family since 1622, when a Jodhpur maharaja granted a warrior named Dalpat Singh the estate — with, the family says, one village for each of his eighty-four battle wounds.

Look at the structure of this newest deal and you will recognise it. The asset is what it always was: the name, the walls, and the performance of honour — the turbans, the ancestral portraits, the host who mentions his lineage over dinner. The counterparty pays for access to it. The Mughals paid in rank, the British in gun salutes, the republic in pensions; the visitor pays in hard currency, and asks for less loyalty than any of them. By the standards of the last eight centuries, tourism is the softest bargain the Rajputs have ever struck.

The bargain now

Abolition never made the families ordinary. Voters saw to that. In 1962 Gayatri Devi, the maharani of Jaipur, entered parliament with about four votes in every five cast — a margin that stood for years as a world record. In the same month the purses were abolished, her stepson Bhawani Singh was commanding a parachute battalion in the war with Pakistan; he came home with the Mahavir Chakra, India's second-highest decoration for gallantry — a prince serving the republic that had just struck his title off the books. The house is still at it: Diya Kumari, of the same Jaipur family, was sworn in as a deputy chief minister of Rajasthan in 2023. A title the constitution refuses to see is, on a ballot paper, worth a great deal.

And the old code still flares. In November 2024 the head of the Mewar family died, and the family split over the succession. The heir, anointed in the old rite, arrived at the Udaipur City Palace to pray at the family shrine — and was locked out by his uncle's side of the family, which controls the palace trusts. Supporters of the two branches threw stones at each other at the gate; the district administration seized part of the palace; the courts now hold what the bards once settled. When you queue at that same gate on day five, you will be standing on the front line of a live dynastic dispute, in a republic that officially has no dynasts.

That is the thing to carry through the trip. The Rajput bargain never ended; only the counterparty changes. And for these two weeks the counterparty is you — your ticket money funding the trust, your hotel bill keeping the garh roofed, your admiration doing what an emperor's grant of rank once did. It is, as these eight centuries go, a good deal for both sides. Just know, as you hand over the money, that you are dealing with the most patient negotiators in India.

Before this one: Red sandstone, white marble. Next: Diwali.

Diwali

Myth, market, household, sky — matched to your dates

Diwali is the obvious subject; the useful angle is narrower. Diwali is India's economic and civic year-end, and the trip meets it at the peak. Dhanteras, the metal-buying day that fills the bazaars, falls on the sixth of November — the evening you arrive in Jaipur. The main night, Lakshmi Puja, falls on the eighth — your full day in Agra. The goddess being honoured is wealth. The surrounding days are the year's biggest for gold, sweets, gifts and the opening of new account books, and the morning after brings the worst air of the year. This essay follows the festival as one sequence — myth, market, household, sky — matched day by day to where you will be standing.

Your dates and the festival's dates

Diwali is not one day but five, and in 2026 the five lie exactly over the end of the trip. Dhanteras, the opening day, is Friday the sixth of November — day nine, the drive from Pushkar to Jaipur. The second day, called Choti Diwali or “small Diwali”, is Saturday the seventh, the day you leave Jaipur for Agra. The main night, Lakshmi Puja, is Sunday the eighth — your Taj Mahal day. Govardhan Puja follows on Monday the ninth, the drive back to Delhi, and the last day, Bhai Dooj, is Tuesday the tenth, when the plane leaves. The festival ends as the trip does.

The date moves each year because the Hindu religious calendar follows the moon. Diwali's main night falls on the new moon of the lunar month of Kartik, which lands somewhere between late October and mid November. And the new moon is the point: the lamps are lit on the darkest night of the month, by design. A festival of light makes its argument best against a black sky.

What the lamps are for

Two stories explain the lamps, and both are worth knowing because you will see both acted out.

The first is the end of the Ramayana, one of the two great Sanskrit epics. Prince Rama of Ayodhya is exiled for fourteen years through a palace intrigue. His wife Sita is kidnapped by Ravana, the demon king of Lanka, and Rama wins her back in a war fought with an army of monkeys led by the god Hanuman. When the exiles finally walk home, the people of Ayodhya light rows of oil lamps to guide them in. That is the official story, the one told to children, and it gives the festival its name: *deepavali*, a row of lamps.

The second story is less told and explains more. On the same dark night, Lakshmi — goddess of wealth and good fortune, the figure you have seen all trip flanked by two elephants over shop doorways — walks the earth and visits houses. She enters only where she is welcomed: a house cleaned top to bottom, a threshold decorated, a lamp burning in every window. A dark or dirty house she passes by. So in the week before Diwali the whole country cleans, repaints, repairs and decorates, and on the night itself every window and parapet holds a flame, because nobody wants to be the house the goddess skipped.

Rama's lamps are the story; Lakshmi's visit is the practice. Once you know the second story, the next three days of shopping, account books and lit thresholds all follow from it.

Dhanteras in Jaipur

The festival opens with a day devoted, without embarrassment, to buying metal. *Dhan* means wealth; on Dhanteras it is auspicious — favoured, lucky — to bring new metal into the house — gold or silver for those who can, a steel pot or a kitchen utensil for everyone else. The myth behind it is brief: on this day Dhanvantari, physician of the gods, rose from the churned ocean of milk carrying a pot of the nectar of immortality, and the pot is why you buy a vessel. The

economics are less brief. Indians hold more private gold than any other nation, and jewellers count Dhanteras among the biggest gold-buying days of their year — the day a large share of the country walks into a shop and buys a coin, a bangle or a set of pots, all at once.

You will be in the right city for it. Jaipur has been a jewellery town since it was founded three hundred years ago, and its bazaars are laid out on a grid inside the old walls. Johari Bazaar — literally the jewellers' market — runs south from the City Palace, and Bapu Bazaar crosses nearby, selling cloth, sandals and everything else. On Dhanteras evening these streets are at their fullest of the whole year: shops open late and lit to the roofline, strings of lights across the facades, families out buying, sweet-shop counters stacked with boxes for giving. Jaipur decorates city-wide for the festival week — whole markets under canopies of light, and a good deal of civic pride in which bazaar has done it best.

The plan for day nine already ends with an evening walk through these bazaars, and this is what the walk will be: not a show put on for visitors, but a city doing its year's main shopping on its brightest night. Watch what people carry out of the shops. Silver coins stamped with Lakshmi, kitchen steel, boxes of sweets by the kilo — each one is the Lakshmi story translated into a purchase.

The sweets deserve a word of their own, because for the next four days they are the festival's main currency. *Mithai* — the dense, silver-leafed confections of milk, sugar, nut paste and ghee, clarified butter, stacked in pyramids behind sweet-shop glass — moves at Diwali the way carp moves in Poland in December. Families exchange boxes with neighbours and relatives; firms give them to employees and clients by the vanload; and the better shops take orders days ahead and sell out anyway. Boxes of dry fruit and, increasingly, imported chocolate play the same role one price bracket up. If someone hands you a box of sweets in the next few days — a hotel, a driver, a shopkeeper you have bought from twice — that is not a tourist gesture. It is the season, and the correct response is to accept with both hands and eat one on the spot.

The trader's new year

For India's traditional business families — and Rajasthan's merchant castes, the Marwaris above all, run a striking share of Indian commerce — Diwali is not just a festival. It is the end of the financial year. Account books are closed at Diwali and new ones opened, and the new books are blessed before they are written in. The ceremony is called *chopda pujan*, the worship of the ledgers: the fresh account books are laid before Lakshmi, marked with auspicious signs, and only then put to work. A shop that looks freshly painted in early November usually is; you repaint before the goddess visits, the way you would before an inspection.

The habit runs to the very top of the money system. The Bombay Stock Exchange suspends its calendar for the evening of Diwali and holds a special session called *muhurat* trading — an hour at an astrologically chosen time, in which brokers make token purchases so that the new year opens with a buy. The exchange has done this since the nineteen-fifties, and the session is usually up, since nobody wants to open the year selling.

It is worth taking this at face value rather than as a curiosity. In the Lakshmi story, prosperity is not a guilty pleasure; it is a blessing to be sought, honoured and accounted for. A festival in which the holiest act of the year is a family gathered around its balance sheet says something true about how this country regards commerce — and it explains why the season you are travelling through feels less like Christmas week than like Christmas, New Year and year-end bonus season rolled into one.

The main night in Agra

The eighth of November is the festival's centre, and the day has a shape you can read from the street. Through the morning, the last cleaning and the last shopping. From midday, women make *rangoli* — patterns in coloured powder, rice flour or flower petals — at thresholds and courtyard floors, marking the entrance the goddess is meant to use. At dusk, the lamps go out along parapets, window sills and doorsteps: rows of small clay oil lamps called *diyas*,

increasingly mixed with electric strings, but the clay ones still matter and still sell by the crate. After dark, each family holds its Lakshmi Puja at the household shrine — the goddess invited in, the new account books or the salary, whatever form the year's wealth takes, set before her. Then sweets, gifts, new clothes, visits to relatives. And then the fireworks, of which more below.

One detail of the puja is worth knowing, because it corrects a common guess. Lakshmi is not worshipped alone: beside her sits Ganesh, the elephant-headed remover of obstacles, and he is honoured first. The pairing is deliberate. Wealth without wisdom is considered dangerous — money that arrives before the sense to manage it — so the god of good beginnings and clear thinking is invited before the goddess of fortune. Every shop calendar, every silver coin from the Dhanteras stalls, every doorway image you pass this week will show the two of them together, and now you know why, and why he is always on the left.

The night has one more old custom: gambling. Playing cards for money on Diwali is not a lapse but a tradition — by one telling, the goddess Parvati played dice with Shiva this night and declared that whoever gambles on Diwali will prosper all year. In practice it means family card games, mostly a three-card cousin of poker called *teen patti*, played late over sweets for stakes that range from token to genuinely reckless. It fits the festival's logic perfectly: on the night the year's books close, you test your luck for the year ahead.

Your own day runs sunrise to midnight in the best possible order. The Taj Mahal first — it is a Sunday, so the gates are open; Friday is the closed day — and Agra Fort at midday. At dusk, the working plan puts you at Mehtab Bagh, the Mughal garden directly across the river from the Taj. One practical note learned the hard way by many: the garden closes at sunset and stops letting people in half an hour before, so arriving early is the whole trick. You watch the marble go grey and gold across the water, and as you leave, the first diyas will be appearing in the riverside lanes.

Then find a rooftop. Agra is not a polished city, but on this night it does not need to be: from any hotel roof terrace you get lit thresholds below, strings of lights on

every block, and from about seven o'clock a horizon that flashes in every direction. The fireworks are not a municipal display with a start time. They are tens of thousands of families, each with their own bag of crackers, from dusk until well past midnight. Sleep will be approximate. It is a fair trade.

The nights of noise

About those crackers. Fireworks joined Diwali honestly — gunpowder reached India centuries ago, and lamps had company soon after — but the modern scale is industrial. Most of India's crackers come from one town, Sivakasi in the far south, which makes the country's matches and fireworks the way other towns make cars. What a residential street does with them on Diwali night is not a display but a duel: strings of a thousand crackers unrolled down the lane, rockets from rooftops, and the ground-shaking single bangs that car alarms answer.

The courts have been trying to quiet this for years. India's Supreme Court has banned the louder chemistry outright and, in Delhi and its surrounding region, allows only so-called green crackers — reformulated to emit less — within set evening hours. Agra sits outside that region, in Uttar Pradesh, where the rules are looser and enforcement is looser still. The honest report is this: expect the law to shave the edges off the night, not to change its character. The noise will run late, dogs and birds will have a bad night of it, and the morning street will be carpeted in pink and grey paper casings, swept into heaps by mid-morning as if nothing had happened.

The morning after: the air

Monday the ninth, the return to Delhi — by road or by rail, still being booked — is the morning after — and you will see it before you smell it. Diwali produces a measurable overnight spike in fine particle pollution in every north Indian city; monitors routinely record several times the usual load by dawn. And the spike lands on air that was already the year's worst, for two reasons that have nothing to do with the festival. In early November, farmers across the plains northwest of

Delhi burn the stubble of the rice harvest to clear fields for wheat, and the smoke drifts southeast over the whole Gangetic plain. At the same time the first cool nights put a lid of still air over the land — an inversion — so that what goes up stays down. Festival smoke, field smoke and cold, still air arrive in the same fortnight, and your route to Delhi crosses the middle of it.

The scale is worth one comparison. On the morning after Diwali, cities across this plain routinely record fine-particle levels ten to twenty times the limit the World Health Organization calls safe — readings that would close schools and make headlines in any European capital, and that here mark an ordinary bad morning in a bad month. So expect the light on the last full day to be grey-white, the sun a flat disc you can look at, visibility a kilometre or two. It is worth saying plainly: the greyness is not mist, and not the “winter fog” of polite conversation. It is smoke, it is seasonal, and the second week of November is its opening act. If anyone in the group is sensitive-lunged, the last two days are the ones for the masks brought along; the simple surgical kind helps little, a proper filtering one helps a lot.

Closing days, and the same night in other faiths

The festival’s last two days are quieter and family-shaped, and you will see them mostly from a car. Govardhan Puja, on your travel day, commemorates Krishna lifting Mount Govardhan on one finger to shelter villagers from a rainstorm sent by an offended rain god — a story, incidentally, set in the Mathura country your road to Delhi passes straight through. Households mark it by cooking extravagantly: temples build an *annakut*, a “mountain of food” piled before the deity. In parts of the north it also opens the new year of the Vikram calendar, so the shop signs reading “Happy New Year” in early November are not early for January; they are on time for Samvat 2083.

From the window that Monday, the signs of it are small but readable once you know them. Many shops stay shuttered — the festival is a holiday in the way the days between Christmas and New Year are — and the ones open are the sweet

shops, still selling down their stock. In villages, look for fresh patterns of cow dung shaped on the ground or against walls near temples: on Govardhan day the hill itself is modelled in dung and worshipped, which sounds stranger than it looks. And outside any temple around midday there will be a queue, because the mountain of food is distributed after it is blessed, and blessed food is lunch.

Bhai Dooj closes the sequence on the tenth — a brother-and-sister day, on which sisters mark their brothers' foreheads and pray for their long lives, and brothers give presents and pledge protection. It is a domestic day with nothing for a visitor to see except full trains, since it is the day everyone travels to their siblings. You will be doing the same thing in spirit: the seven-twenty flight home leaves on the festival's last morning.

Finally, the same night belongs to more than one religion, which in India is entirely normal. For Jains, Diwali marks the night Mahavira — the founding teacher you have been meeting in temple carvings since Kumbhargarh — attained final liberation, and the Jain new year begins the next morning; in Rajasthan and in Jaipur's jewellery trade, where Jain merchant families are prominent, both matter. For Sikhs, the day is Bandi Chhor Divas, the “day of release”, marking the sixth Guru's walk out of a Mughal prison in Gwalior — Sikh gurdwaras are lit for it just as houses are, and Bangla Sahib in Delhi, which you saw on day three, will have been dressed in lights for a week. One dark night, three calendars' worth of reasons to light a lamp. By the time your plane lifts off on Tuesday morning, the lamps will be out, the ledgers will be new, and the year — by several countings — will have begun.

Before this one: The Rajput bargain. Next: Reading the road.

Reading the road

Twenty hours of India through a car window

Between Udaipur and Delhi you will spend about twenty hours watching India through a car window, and none of it need be dead time. The traffic that looks like chaos runs on consistent rules. The painted trucks, the roadside kitchens, the toll plazas, the cows in the carriageway and the families stacked on motorbikes all have explanations, and most of them open onto something larger: who works for whom, who is moving where, what the state builds and what it leaves alone. This essay is a field guide to the drive itself.

Twenty hours through a windscreen

Add the legs up. Udaipur over the Aravalli hills to Kumbhalgarh and down to Narlai on day six. Narlai to Jodhpur the next morning. Jodhpur across the Marwar plain to Pushkar — the longest single drive of the tour. Then Pushkar to Jaipur, Jaipur to Agra, and, if the final transfer goes by road rather than rail, Agra to Delhi. Call it a thousand kilometres spread over a week, at Indian highway speeds: about twenty hours in the car.

It is tempting to treat those hours as the price of the monuments. That gets it backwards. The forts and palaces are curated: ticketed, restored, explained on panels. The road is not. Nobody has arranged what you see from the window, which is what makes it reliable evidence. Far more Indians live along these highways than will ever stand in a mirror-walled palace hall, and twenty hours among them is the longest unbroken look at ordinary India this trip will give you.

So this essay is a guide to the drive. It takes the things you will see most often — the traffic itself, the trucks, the food stops, the tolls, the animals, the junctions, the villages, and the man at the wheel — one at a time, and says what each of them means.

The rules of the road

The first hour out of Udaipur will look like anarchy. It is not. Indian traffic runs on firm rules; they are simply not the rules painted on the road.

Start with the horn. In Europe a horn is an insult. Here it is sonar: a stream of short honks that mean nothing more than *I am here*. A truck cannot see a motorbike tucked behind its left rear wheel, so the motorbike announces itself, constantly. That is why the tailgates ask for it — Horn Please, Blow Horn, and Use Dipper At Night, the dipper being the headlight flash that does the same job after dark. Nobody is angry. A silent road would be a more dangerous one.

Next, the hierarchy. Right of way follows size: truck over bus, bus over car, car over motorbike, motorbike over pedestrian, with one exception above them all — the cow, which yields to nothing because it does not know it is in traffic. An oncoming headlight flash means *I am coming through*, not *after you*: the exact opposite of the flash you know from home. Lane markings are decoration. The working width of any road is however many vehicles will physically fit, plus one motorbike.

Why does this mostly work? Because nobody assumes anything. A European driver trusts the system — a green light means the crossing is clear, a lane is a lane — and is helpless on the day the system lies. An Indian driver trusts nothing and watches everything, and at town speeds, total mutual attention turns out to be a fair substitute for order.

Watch one overtake and the whole grammar shows itself. Your car pulls out to pass a truck; a bus appears, coming straight at you. Nobody brakes. The bus flashes, the truck edges left, your driver holds his line, and for a moment the two-lane road carries three vehicles abreast with a hand's width between mirrors. Then it is over, and nobody mentions it, because nothing happened: three drivers made room, which is what the flash and the horn had negotiated. The manoeuvre that would end friendships in Europe is simply how a two-lane road is used at Indian densities.

Speed is the catch, and the honest sentence has to be said: Indian roads killed about a hundred and seventy thousand people in 2023, roughly one death every three minutes, most of them where new highways let old habits run fast. The system works at walking pace and fails at highway speed. Your driver knows this better than anyone. The unhurried pace he keeps is skill, not timidity.

Trucks

The vehicle you will study most is the Indian truck, because there is always one in front of you. Most are Tatas, and no two are alike. The cab is painted with peacocks, film stars, gods and slogans; tinsel garlands hang across the windscreen; a fringe of pom-poms swings under the bumper. Look closer and the decoration turns out to be protection. The eyes painted on the front ward off the evil eye. So does the old shoe or black tassel slung from the axle. On the dashboard, behind marigolds and incense, rides the driver's own deity. A truck is a shrine that carries cement.

The best-known words on any tailgate are HORN OK PLEASE, and nobody can tell you what the OK means. One theory says wartime trucks ran on kerosene and carried the warning *On Kerosene*, which shrank to OK. Another says a Tata firm once used tailgates to advertise a soap called OK. The theories are older than anyone able to check them; the phrase has simply outlived whatever it once meant.

The tailgate carries poetry too. The commonest couplet is *buri nazar wale, tera muh kala* — you with the evil eye, may your face turn black — a curse on envious onlookers, painted in letters half a metre high. Others declare *Mera Bharat mahan* — my India is great — or give instructions, Keep Distance, Use Dipper At Night, or just sign off: OK TATA, the road's goodbye. Truck lettering is a working trade with its own hands and house styles, and once you start reading the tailgates the traffic jam becomes a library.

You can read a truck in about ten seconds. The two letters on the number plate name its home state, so you can tell the Punjabi long-hauler from the local sand

carrier. The cargo names the economy of the stretch you are on: marble slabs out of Kishangarh, steel rod, fodder, drums of dye. And the tilt names the business model. Freight rates are thin, so the margin is in overloading, and a load leaning like a haystack in a gale is a man paying off his truck.

The man in the cab is either an owner paying off that one truck or a hired driver paid by the trip. Either way the arithmetic keeps him out for weeks at a stretch, sleeping in the cab bunk, home reduced to a voice on the phone clipped beside the wheel. Remember that when one of them blocks both lanes: he has been driving far longer today than you have been riding.

The dhaba

Where trucks cluster, there is food. The *dhaba*, the highway kitchen, is the road's oldest institution: a clay tandoor oven, a row of pots over burners, lentils and fresh flatbread, sweet milky chai, and *charpays* — wooden frames strung with rope — to sit on while you eat. The form comes from Punjab, from eateries that fed truck drivers along the Grand Trunk Road, which is why dhaba cooking everywhere leans Punjabi and butter-heavy.

The economics are as plain as the menu. A driver's meal — dal, a stack of rotis straight off the tandoor wall, raw onion and a green chili on the side — costs about what a single espresso costs back in Warsaw, and the rotis keep coming until you stop. The charpoy is part of the deal: eat, stretch out for an hour while the engine cools, drive on. Food, bed and parking in one transaction, settled in cash.

Drivers pick a stop for parking they can watch from the table, food that turns over fast, and a proprietor who will wake them at the agreed hour. The rule of thumb travels well: eat where the trucks are, because sixty drivers a day empty the pots before anything can sit and spoil.

Your own chai stop on the long Jodhpur-to-Pushkar drive will more likely be the dhaba's scrubbed cousin, the midway restaurant: same tea, cleaner toilets, a

souvenir counter, and a quiet arrangement with the drivers who deliver the customers. Ask your driver to stop at a real dhaba once. The chai is identical; everything around it is not.

Tolls and the new roads

Between the food stops, the state collects. Every hour or so the traffic funnels into a toll plaza, and the plaza rewards reading too.

India built few highways in its first fifty years, then began building fast. The turn came around 2000 with the Golden Quadrilateral, nearly six thousand kilometres of four-lane road tying Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata together — the country's first modern highways at scale. The pace has risen ever since; India now lays new national highway at roughly thirty kilometres a day, and the network has grown by more than half in a decade. The road you are on may not be the road your guidebook drove. You will ride a piece of the Quadrilateral on the Pushkar-to-Jaipur leg: six smooth lanes on which a camel cart in the slow lane shares the carriageway with container trucks running to the ports.

The tolls themselves have gone electronic. Every windscreen carries a FASTag, a radio sticker read at the barrier; it has been compulsory since 2021, a car without one pays double, and it now settles nearly all tolls in the country. The queues survived the technology, and so did the plaza economy — boys working the line of waiting trucks with water, peanuts and coconut slices. Wherever traffic must slow, somebody sells something.

The newest road may come last. If the Agra-to-Delhi transfer goes by car rather than by train — still being decided — you will take the Yamuna Expressway: a hundred and sixty-five kilometres of fenced, tolled concrete, dead straight across flat farmland, opened in 2012 as an advertisement for what India intends its roads to become. It has one November vice, morning fog, thick enough on bad days to cause pile-ups. A late start is the sensible version of that drive.

Animals in the carriageway

No fence, though, has fully solved the oldest problem on Indian roads: the animals.

The cows come first, and they are an economic fact wearing a religious explanation. A milking cow is an asset and stays home. A dry cow, or a male calf in the age of the tractor, produces nothing and cannot decently be sold for slaughter — so surplus cattle are turned loose, and the grazing they find is the strip of grass along the road. Some end up in *gaushalas*, charitable cow shelters; most simply live on the road, and every driver obeys the one rule that matters: the animal has right of way, because the animal does not negotiate.

Rajasthan adds its own cast. Camels still earn their keep here, hauling flatbed carts in the slow lane. Street dogs run the night shift. Monkeys mass wherever temples and food coincide — bold red-faced macaques in the towns, grey langurs draped along the fort walls. And at dusk on the fast open stretches there is the *nilgai*, a blue-grey antelope the size of a horse, which grazes the field edges and crosses without looking. Its name means blue cow, and the cow half of the name is no small thing: it buys the animal the same tolerance cattle get, which is why farmers curse it, nobody hunts it, and there are more of them every year. Dusk is the hour drivers like least: tired truckers, unlit tractors, animals on the move. Your long drives are scheduled for daylight, and that is not an accident.

The junction economy

Where a side road meets the highway, India assembles a high street in fifty metres. Read one crossroads closely and you have read hundreds. There is a puncture-wallah, the tyre man, with a tub of water for finding leaks and a wall of shredded truck tyres as his signboard. A chai stand with a bench. A fruit barrow. A shack that tops up phones and sells shampoo in single-use sachets — sold that way because its customers earn daily, spend daily, and hold no stock of anything, so the shop holds the stock one rupee at a time. Sometimes a barber's chair, facing a mirror nailed to a tree.

None of it is registered anywhere, and that is the point. About nine in ten Indian workers work like this — no contract, no payslip, cash in hand, family for staff — and between them they produce roughly half of what the country makes. Economists call it the informal sector, which makes it sound like a fringe. It is the norm; the office job with a payslip is the exception.

Each stall is a firm, and each is fitted precisely to the road's failures. The puncture man exists because overloaded trucks shred tyres. The chai stand exists because drivers must not fall asleep. Once you have read one junction this way, the roadside stops looking like clutter and starts looking like what it is: the Indian economy at its usual scale, one family at a time.

Villages at highway speed

Between the junctions come the villages, ten seconds at a time — and ten seconds is enough once you know the checklist. A concrete water tower means a government piped-water scheme; the hand pumps below it tell you how far the pipes reach in practice. A saffron flag on a pole marks the temple. The school announces itself with a painted wall: enrolment slogans, the alphabet, a map of India. Round dung cakes drying in neat stacks are cooking fuel for houses that still cook the old way, and fodder piled on a rooftop means livestock wintering at home. The fields themselves keep the calendar: early November is sowing time for the winter crop, so you will see stubble burning off, bullocks and small tractors turning the ground, and the first green lines of mustard and wheat. A village at highway speed is a census form that fills itself in.

November puts particular traffic between those villages. Your longest drives fall in Diwali week, when much of India is travelling home, and the wedding season gathers just behind it, opening in the weeks after the festival when the gods are held to wake from their four-month sleep — you may meet the first convoys: a decorated car, a bus of relatives, sometimes a brass band on a truck. Pilgrim buses fly flags and paint their whole circuit on the windscreen. And everywhere there is the motorbike family — father driving, a child on the tank, mother side-

saddle behind with an infant — the standard family vehicle of India. It is also why motorcyclists account for nearly half the country's road deaths, a number worth remembering whenever the weaving around you starts to look like a game.

One date matters for the last leg. If you drive to Delhi on the ninth of November, the day after Diwali is Govardhan Puja, a great day in the Krishna country around Mathura, which that road passes. Expect pilgrims, and give the day some slack.

Your driver

Which brings the essay to the man who handles all of the above so that you can watch it. For six days your driver is the most constant Indian in the trip. His working life is the trucker's, softened a notch: weeks on the road, nights in the drivers' quarters that every tourist hotel keeps behind the kitchen, dispatch and family both arriving by WhatsApp. He will have washed the car before you wake every morning of the tour; the state of the car is his CV, and the agency hears about it if it slips.

One custom is worth understanding before it happens. At some point the car will drift toward a marble emporium, a textile workshop, a viewpoint café. If you buy, the shop pays the driver a cut. The commission is part of how his wage works, not a trick aimed at you personally, and the way through it is a clear, friendly no, said once and early. He will not take it badly, and it is kinder than sitting through a demonstration you resent.

Then take the front seat for a leg and ask questions: where he is from, how many days he has been out, what that truck was carrying, why the traffic stopped. Twenty hours is a long time to look out of a window, and longer still to spend looking at a phone. The forts come with guides and ticket booths. For the road, the man changing gears beside you is the only guide there is — and the twenty hours are the tour.

Before this one: Diwali. The last of the six. The practical part follows.

PART FIVE

Practical

*Numbers, references and the handful of things worth
knowing before landing.*

Emergency card

India '26 · 29 Oct – 10 Nov 2026. Public numbers checked August 2026. A ruled blank is a number nobody has written down yet — fill it in by hand.

INDIA — FREE FROM ANY PHONE, NO AREA CODE

Emergency — everything	112	Police, fire, ambulance. Works with no balance.
Police	100	Direct line, where 112 has not taken over.
Ambulance	108	Free state ambulance (not 102).
Fire	101	Fire, gas leak, explosion.
Tourist helpline	1800-11-1363	Ministry of Tourism, 24 h, English. Short code 1363.
Cyber / card fraud	1930	Call within the hour if money moves.

POLISH EMBASSY, NEW DELHI — 50-M SHANTIPATH, CHANAKYAPURI, NEW DELHI 110 021

Consular duty phone	+91 99109 99477	After hours, real emergencies only.
Consular section	+91 11 4149 6904	Weekdays 14:00–15:30.
Switchboard	+91 11 4149 6900	Mon–Fri 09:00–16:00.
Note		Delhi’s consular district covers Delhi, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh — the whole trip. Lost passport: police report (FIR) first, then the consulate.

THIS TRIP

Tour operator	<i>to fill in</i>	Car, driver and hotels, 2–7 Nov.
Driver	<i>to fill in</i>	Mobile, taken in Udaipur on 2 Nov.
Le Méridien New Delhi	+91 11 2371 0101	Delhi · 29 Oct – 2 Nov
Jagat Niwas Palace	+91 294 242 2860	Udaipur · 2–3 Nov
Ranbanka Palace	+91 291 251 2801	Jodhpur · 4–5 Nov
Umaid Mahal Palace	+91 98280 60601	Pushkar · 5–6 Nov
Tour hotels	<i>to fill in</i>	Udaipur, Narlai, Jodhpur, Pushkar, Jaipur.
Agra & airport hotels	<i>to fill in</i>	Nights of 7–9 and 9 Nov, not booked.
LOT call centre, Poland	+48 22 577 77 55	Booking ref W17F82.

EACH OF YOU	1	2	3	4
Name				
Mobile in India				
Insurer				
Policy no.				
Insurer 24 h line				
EHIC / ECUZ				
Blood type & allergies				
Card-blocking hotline				

Passport and e-Visa (ETA): a photo on every phone and a printed copy, carried apart from the passport itself. · Card or phone gone: your own bank first (above), then 1930 if money has already moved. · Private hospital: call the insurer's 24 h line before you are admitted, or the bill may not be covered. · This card is worth nothing on a dead phone. Print the page and put it in a wallet.

CHAPTER TWO

Bookings

Everything with a reference number, plus the parts that do not have one yet. Anything reading “to be confirmed” is exactly that — the operator or the booking has not supplied it.

Flights

LO 071 · Warsaw Chopin → Delhi

Out · Thu 29 Oct — day 1.

DEPARTS

Warsaw Chopin (WAW) at 17:20

ARRIVES

Delhi — Indira Gandhi Intl (DEL), Terminal 3 at 05:10 (+1)

AIRCRAFT

LOT Polish Airlines · Boeing 787-8 · non-stop 7 h 20 · Economy (L)

SEAT

8A

BAGGAGE

no checked bag on the ticket (0 PC)

REFERENCE

WI7F82

E-TICKET

080-2424735594

AIRLINE

lot.com — check-in & status

BOOKING LINE

LOT +48 22 577 77 55

AIRPORTS

WAW: Warsaw Chopin Airport

DEL: Indira Gandhi International Airport Delhi

LO 072 · Delhi → Warsaw Chopin

Home · Tue 10 Nov — day 13.

DEPARTS

Delhi — Indira Gandhi Intl (DEL), Terminal 3 at 07:20

ARRIVES

Warsaw Chopin (WAW) at 11:20

AIRCRAFT

LOT Polish Airlines · Boeing 787-8 · non-stop 8 h 30 · Economy (L)

SEAT

8B

BAGGAGE

no checked bag on the ticket (0 PC)

REFERENCE

WI7F82

E-TICKET

080-2424735594

AIRLINE

lot.com — check-in & status

BOOKING LINE

LOT +48 22 577 77 55

AIRPORTS

DEL: Indira Gandhi International Airport Delhi

WAW: Warsaw Chopin Airport

6E 6765 · Delhi → Udaipur

Domestic · Mon 2 Nov — day 5.

DEPARTS

Delhi — Indira Gandhi Intl (DEL) at 08:00

ARRIVES

Udaipur — Maharana Pratap (UDR) at 09:20

AIRCRAFT

IndiGo · non-stop 1 h 20

BOOKED

via tour

AIRLINE

goindigo.in — check-in & status

AIRPORTS

DEL: Indira Gandhi International Airport Delhi

UDR: Maharana Pratap Airport Udaipur

NOTE

Part of the tour package. Ask the operator for the PNR before you fly — the domestic terminal is on the ticket, not the same as the T3 you land in.

Where you sleep

Le Méridien New Delhi

Delhi · 29 Oct – 2 Nov · paid ✓ — day 2.

ADDRESS

Windsor Palace, Janpath, New Delhi 110 001

PHONE

+91 11 2371 0101

ON THE MAP

Le Meridien New Delhi, Janpath, New Delhi 110001

NOTE

4 nights, paid. The night of 29 Oct is included deliberately — the room is ready at the 05:10 arrival.

Jagat Niwas Palace

Udaipur · 2–3 Nov · via tour — day 5.

ADDRESS

23–25 Lal Ghat, behind Jagdish Temple, Udaipur 313001

PHONE

+91 294 242 2860

ON THE MAP

Jagat Niwas Palace, Lal Ghat, Udaipur

NOTE

One night. A 17th-century haveli on Lal Ghat, on the lake shore just north of the City Palace — the rooftop restaurant looks straight across Pichola.

Rawla Narlai

Narlai · 3–4 Nov · via tour — day 6.

ON THE MAP

Rawla Narlai hotel, Narlai, Rajasthan

NOTE

One night. A 17th-century royal hunting lodge in the village, under Elephant Hill.

Ranbanka Palace

Jodhpur · 4–5 Nov · via tour — day 7.

ADDRESS

Circuit House Road, Jodhpur 342006

PHONE

+91 291 251 2801

ON THE MAP

Ranbanka Palace, Circuit House Road, Jodhpur

NOTE

One night. Built in 1927 for Maharaj Ajit Singh — younger brother of the Umaid Singh who built Umaid Bhawan Palace, by the same English architect, on the

same Circuit House Road. Two different hotels, 4 km apart: this is the smaller one, ~2 km east of the clock tower, part of the Ajit Bhawan estate. Phone found online, not from the booking.

Umaid Mahal Palace

Pushkar · 5–6 Nov · via tour — day 8.

ADDRESS

Motisar Road, Ganahera, Pushkar 305022

PHONE

+91 98280 60601

ON THE MAP

Umaid Mahal Palace, Motisar Road, Pushkar

NOTE

One night. A modern palace-style hotel out on the Motisar Road side, 2.5 km from the Brahma temple and the ghats — the car, not your feet, gets you to the sunset. Not to be confused with Hotel Umaid Mahal in Jaipur, which owns the obvious web address. Phone and address found online, not from the booking.

Ramada by Wyndham Jaipur

Jaipur · 6–7 Nov · via tour — day 9.

ON THE MAP

Ramada by Wyndham Jaipur

NOTE

One night, the night of Dhanteras. Confirmed: the Raja Park property — Govind Marg, 3.4 km from the City Palace.

In booking

Agra · 7–9 Nov · open — day 11.

ON THE MAP

Agra

NOTE

Two nights, over Diwali. Not booked yet.

In booking — Aerocity

Delhi airport · 9 Nov · open — day 12.

ON THE MAP

Aerocity, New Delhi

NOTE

A bed next to IGI before the 07:20 departure. Not booked yet.

The tour

Six days, private car & driver, Udaipur → Agra, 2–7 Nov. Includes the Delhi → Udaipur flight; sightseeing per the day pages. Services end on arrival in Agra on 7 Nov. The programme is reproduced hour by hour in Part Two, where the times are the operator's plan rather than a timetable.

Operator contact: to be added when the operator confirms it. Whole route in Google Maps: Udaipur → Kumbhalgarh → Narlai → Rohet → Jodhpur → Pushkar → Jaipur → Agra.

TOUR DAY	LEG	DISTANCE	DRIVING
2	Udaipur → Rawla Narlai via Kumbhalgarh Day 6	≈140 km	3 h
3	Rawla Narlai → Jodhpur via Rohet Day 7	≈125 km	2–3 h
4	Jodhpur → Pushkar Day 8	≈190 km	4 h
5	Pushkar → Jaipur Day 9	≈140 km	3 h
6	Jaipur → Agra Day 10	≈250 km	4–5 h

Distances and times as quoted by the operator; the routing estimates in The route differ slightly.

Still open

AGRA HOTEL, 7–9 NOV

Two nights over Diwali week — the busiest nights of the year in Agra. See day 11.

Hotels near the Taj

TAJ MAHAL TIME-SLOT TICKETS

Sunrise slot for Sun 8 Nov. Closed Fridays; entry ~30 min before dawn. See day 11.

tajmahal.gov.in — official site · Taj Mahal, Agra

AGRA → DELHI, 9 NOV

Car on the Yamuna Expressway ($\approx$ 200 km, 3–4 h) or the Gatimaan Express from Agra Cantt. See day 12.

IRCTC — train tickets · Agra Cantt railway station

AIRPORT NIGHT, 9 NOV

Aerocity is the hotel cluster beside IGI, ~10 min from T3. See day 12.

Aerocity

DELHI DAY PLANS, 30 OCT – 1 NOV

Nothing booked — the day pages hold the proposed shape. See day 3.

Numbers worth having on paper

LOT CALL CENTRE, POLAND

+48 22 577 77 55

ALL-INDIA EMERGENCY NUMBER

112 — police, fire and ambulance.

Where to eat

Restaurant, café and bar picks for the whole trip, city by city in trip order. Breakfasts are at the hotels. Every entry names its source; the rupee marks give the price of a meal a head — ₹ street (₹100–400), ₹₹ local sit-down (₹400–800), ₹₹₹ comfortable (₹1200–2500), ₹₹₹₹ fine dining (₹3000+).

Delhi

day 2 · day 3 · day 4 · day 12.

- Saravana Bhavan (₹) · Janpath — Delhi outpost of the Chennai vegetarian chain, five minutes on foot from the hotel — masala dosa, mini-tiffin thali, filter coffee. *Afar city-guide pick; the standard first-night answer on traveller forums.* No alcohol; queues move fast. Right for a jetlagged early dinner.
- Kake Da Hotel (₹₹) · Connaught Place, Outer Circle — No-frills Punjabi dhaba on the Outer Circle — butter chicken, dal makhani, tandoori roti. *CP institution since 1931; food-writer consensus for butter chicken.* Basic room, shared tables at peak times; open late.
- United Coffee House (₹₹₹) · Connaught Place, Inner Circle — High-ceilinged 1942 dining hall — kebab platters and butter chicken under the chandeliers. *Same family since 1942; fixture of heritage-CP lists (TimeOut, LBB).* Unhurried — suits the last easy dinner before the 05:30 start.
- Pt. Gaya Prasad Shiv Charan Paranthé Wale (₹) · Paranthé Wali Gali, Chandni Chowk — Oldest shop in the paratha lane, frying stuffed parathas in ghee since 1872 — with banana-tamarind chutney, about ₹150 for two. *Sixth generation of the same family; Nehru and Indira Gandhi ate here.* This is the planned day-3 breakfast stop. Backup next door: Kanhaiyalal Durga Prasad Dixit, est. 1875.

- Karim's (करिम) · Gali Kababian, Jama Masjid — Mughlai canteen in the lane facing gate 1 of the mosque — mutton korma, seekh kebab, khameeri roti. *Same family since 1913, founded by a cook from the last Mughal court's kitchens.* Shared tables, crowds, cash. The original Gali Kababian branch, not a franchise.
- Al Jawahar (जवाहर) · Jama Masjid — Karim's next-door rival since the 1940s, named after Nehru — mutton korma, nihari. *Several Delhi food writers prefer its korma to Karim's.* Calmer seating, no table-sharing — the fallback if Karim's queue is long.
- Khan Chacha (खान) · Khan Market — Kebab-roll counter that started as a 1972 market stall — chicken tikka or mutton seekh rolls in roomali roti. *Khan Market institution since 1972.* Counter service — a light dinner or the snack before a proper one.
- SodaBottleOpenerWala (सोडाबottleopenerwala) · Khan Market — Bombay-Irani-café-styled Parsi restaurant with a full bar — berry pulao, kheema pav, eggs kejrwal. *Regular on Condé Nast Traveller India and Esquire Khan Market lists.* Book a table for four in the evening.
- Naivedyam (नायिदियम) · Hauz Khas Village — Temple-decor South Indian vegetarian room at the village entrance, running since 1994 — thali or rava masala dosa with rasam. *Thirty-year fixture of Delhi editorial lists for South Indian food.* No lake view — pair it with the walk to the reservoir and monuments next door.
- Hauz Khas Social (हौज खस सोशल) · Hauz Khas Village — Multi-level café-bar whose terrace overlooks the reservoir and deer park — comfort food and cocktails. *The village's anchor venue since 2014; tops the lake-view lists.* Ask for lake-facing seating; loud after dark — better at lunch.
- Indian Accent (इंडियन असेंट) · The Lodhi, Lodhi Road — Contemporary Indian tasting menus — blue-cheese naan, dal moradabadi, meetha achar ribs. *The fancy night out, at a Warsaw price. Asia's 50 Best Restaurants, 13 consecutive years; India's most-awarded restaurant.* Book several weeks ahead. Ten minutes by car from Khan Market.

- Bukhara (बुखारा) · ITC Maurya, Chanakyapuri — Frontier tandoor room unchanged since 1977 — dal Bukhara simmered 18 hours, sikandari raan, eaten by hand. *Has fed Clinton and Putin; ranked among Asia's best since the 1980s.* Reservations limited — book via the hotel or expect a queue.
- Sidecar (साइकार) · Greater Kailash II — Neighbourhood cocktail bar by veteran bartender Yangdup Lama — classics-driven list. *Asia's 50 Best Bars 2025; long India's most-decorated bar.* About 25 minutes by car from Khan Market; reserve on weekends.
- Lair (लेयर) · Vasant Vihar — Dim speakeasy-style cocktail bar with a tiered menu and Asian small plates. *No. 8 on Asia's 50 Best Bars 2025 — ranked best bar in India.* Small room, in demand — book ahead. ~25 minutes by car from the hotel.
- Daryaganj (दर्यागंज) · Worldmark 1, Aerocity — Run by the grandson of Moti Mahal's co-founder — the original-recipe 1947 butter chicken and dal makhani. *The Jaggi family, credited with inventing butter chicken; widely covered in the Indian food press.* Walkable from the Aerocity hotel strip — the sensible last-night dinner before the 04:30 start.

Udaipur

day 5.

- Jagat Niwas Palace Rooftop (जगत निवास पैलेस रूफटॉप) · Lal Ghat — Rooftop of a 17th-century haveli on the east bank of Lake Pichola, 400 m from City Palace — laal maas or a curry thali with a straight lake view. *Long-standing Lonely Planet and Outlook Traveller pick.* Ask for a jharokha (window alcove) table.
- Millets of Mewar (मिलेट्स ऑफ मेवार) · Hanuman Ghat — Udaipur's first health-food restaurant, built around local millets — millet roti pizzas, thalis, vegan options. *Lonely Planet listing; backpacker-circuit veteran since 2011.* The cheap casual alternative; no lake view.

- Ambrai (रैरैरै) · Amet Haveli, Hanuman Ghat — Garden restaurant at water level in the 1730s Amet Haveli, directly opposite the lit City Palace — laal maas is the standard order. Steps from the Ambrai Ghat sunset stop. *The city's best-known table — Condé Nast Traveller India, Lonely Planet, Indagare*. Book a waterside table a day or two ahead.
- Upre by 1559 AD (रैरैरै) · Hanuman Ghat — Rooftop restaurant-bar above Hotel Lake Pichola — City Palace and Jag Mandir views, kebab platter, cocktails. *Outlook Traveller; the consensus Ambrai alternative*. Sunset slots fill fast in season — reserve a lake-facing table.
- Jheel's Ginger Coffee Bar (रै) · Gangaur Ghat — Small bakery-café with an upstairs room right on the water — coffee and cakes at the lake's edge. *Lonely Planet listing*. Good pre-boat coffee stop.
- Sunset Terrace (रैरैरै) · Fateh Prakash Palace, City Palace complex — Open-air terrace of the Taj-run palace hotel inside the City Palace complex, facing the Lake Palace — drinks and high tea, open to non-guests. *Lonely Planet's classic sunset-drink recommendation*. Minimum spend around ₹2,000 a head; convenient straight after the palace visit, but on the opposite bank from Ambrai Ghat.
- Sheesh Mahal (रैरैरैरै) · The Leela Palace, west bank — Open-air pavilion at the water's edge of the Leela Palace, looking across at the City Palace — Indian tasting menus. The fancy option. *The Leela's flagship; Indagare's Udaipur list; bookable by outside guests*. Dinner only; reserve ahead and confirm gate access for non-residents.

Narlai & Rohet

day 6 · day 7.

No lunch is scheduled — the day runs fort to lodge. If the driver takes the Ranakpur detour, the temple canteen below is the lunch; if not, it is a dhaba on the Kelwara road.

Lunch is the tour's planned halt at Rohet Garh, en route to Jodhpur.

- Ranakpur Tirth Bhojanshala (₹) · Beside the Jain temple, Ranakpur — The temple's own pilgrim canteen: one unlimited vegetarian thali — dal, two vegetables, rice, rotis, papad, curd — served at fixed sittings for a nominal charge. *Run by the temple trust; the standard lunch for everyone who visits.* Only if the Ranakpur detour happens. Sittings are fixed and early — ask at the temple gate. Strictly vegetarian, no onion or garlic, cash only.
- Rawla Narlai (₹₹₹) · Narlai village — Dinner is at the lodge — the village has no restaurants. The set piece is the lantern-lit dinner in the thousand-year-old stepwell, booked through the lodge. *The night's hotel; the stepwell dinner is its famous set piece.* Ask about the stepwell dinner at check-in — it seats few and goes first.
- Rohet Garh (₹₹₹) · Rohet, en route — Heritage manor where the tour breaks for lunch on the road to Jodhpur — garden tables in the courtyard. *The tour's planned halt.*

Jodhpur

day 7.

Lunch is the tour's planned halt at Rohet Garh, en route to Jodhpur.

- Shri Mishrilal Hotel (₹) · Sardar Market gate — Stand-up lassi shop at the market gate — the makhaniya lassi, thick with saffron and topped with butter-cream. *Institution since 1927; in practically every Jodhpur guide.* Cash; short queue; drinks and a few kachoris only.
- Omelette Shop (₹) · Sardar Market north gate — Roadside stall behind the clock tower cracking about a thousand eggs a day — masala butter cheese omelette on toast. *Lonely Planet pick since 1999.* A copycat trades at the opposite gate — the original displays its Lonely Planet clippings.
- Janta Sweet Home (₹) · Nai Sarak — Sit-down sweet-and-snack shop from 1980 — mirchi vada, mawa kachori, rabri laddu. *Local institution; consensus across Jodhpur food guides.* Ten minutes' walk south of the clock tower.

- Stepwell Café (रेरे) · Toorji ka Jhalra — Café-bar directly above the restored 1740s stepwell — coffee, juices and cocktails on the terrace overlooking the well. *Opened by RAAS as part of the stepwell restoration.* Best as the late-afternoon stop between the blue-city walk and dinner.
- Indique (रेरेरे) · Pal Haveli, by the clock tower — Rooftop of the Pal Haveli heritage hotel with a 360° view of the floodlit fort and clock tower — laal maas. *Lonely Planet's long-standing Jodhpur dinner pick.* Book a fort-side table for sunset; the courtyard bar one level down for drinks.
- Gypsy (रेरे) · Sardarpura — Vegetarian dining hall serving an unlimited Rajasthani thali of twenty-odd Marwari dishes — dal-baati-churma, gatte ki sabzi. *Jodhpur institution for ~35 years; the consensus thali.* In the new town, ~15 minutes' drive; go by 19:00 to beat the queue. No fort view.
- Darikhana (रेरेरेरे) · RAAS, below the fort — Alfresco dining at the RAAS design hotel with a straight-on view of the floodlit fort — garden vegetables, North Indian menu. The fancy option. *Indagare and the luxury-travel press.* Open to non-residents — reserve well ahead.
- Chokelao Mahal Terrace (रेरेरे) · Inside Mehrangarh Fort — Candle-lit, dinner-only terrace on the 18th-century garden palace inside the fort — Rajasthani thali, folk musicians, the city below. *Run by the Mehrangarh Museum Trust; open to outside guests by reservation.* Book a day ahead (+91 95715 71000) — the reservation is what gets you evening fort entry, jeep pick-up at the gate.

Pushkar

day 8.

Pushkar is a holy town: vegetarian and alcohol-free by law, eggs included. Everything below is veg; the sunset drink is a chai or a lassi.

- The Sixth Sense (रेरे) · Inn Seventh Heaven, Chotti Basti — Rooftop of the haveli hotel Inn Seventh Heaven, open to non-guests — veg curries, thalis and salads, food raised from the kitchen by pulley. *Where Goes*

Rose and Hiistories food guides. Kitchen pauses mid-afternoon — come straight after arrival. Cash only.

- Sunset Café (₹₹) · East lakeshore, by Pushkar Palace — Decades-old lakeside café at Sunset Point where travellers and drummers gather nightly — chai or a lassi as the sun goes down. *Long-standing institution; in most Pushkar guides.* Go for the view and the chai, not a full meal. A lake-facing seat means arriving ~30 minutes before sunset.
- The Laughing Buddha (₹) · Main bazaar, near Gau Ghat — Small first-floor vegan café above the bazaar — veggie burgers, smoothie bowls, balcony seats over the market street. *Where Goes Rose's Pushkar food guide.*
- Om Shiva Garden (₹₹) · Near Sunset Point — Garden restaurant a few steps from Sunset Point — wood-fired pizza, falafel platters and Indian dishes. *Lonely Planet listing.* Walkable straight after sunset at the ghats.
- La Pizzeria (₹₹) · Off the main bazaar, near Varah Ghat — Wood-fired pizza in the candlelit courtyard of a remodelled haveli — the pesto pizza is the named order. *Hiistories 2026 food guide; Where Goes Rose.* The entrance hides down a side lane off the bazaar — easy to miss.
- Original Ganga Laffa & Falafel (₹) · Main Market Rd — Street-side counter from Pushkar's Israeli-backpacker food row — falafel and paneer laffa wraps; one large wrap feeds two. *Strong consensus across food guides and forums.* Plastic chairs on the market street; queue at peak hours.
- Sarwadiya Mishthan Bhandar (₹) · Halwai lane, main bazaar — Old sweet shop in the halwai lane — Pushkar's signature rabri malpua, syrup-soaked pancakes fried fresh through the day. *Delhi Food Walks' Pushkar food tour.* Ask for “Sarvadia malpua” — several old malpua shops cluster in the same lane.

Jaipur

day 9 · day 10.

Dhanteras night — the lit bazaars are the evening plan. Book the sit-down dinners ahead; Diwali week fills them.

- Laxmi Mishthan Bhandar (लम्बी) · Johari Bazaar — Vegetarian restaurant and sweet shop trading in Johari Bazaar since 1727 — the 12-dish Rajasthani thali, paneer ghewar from the counter. *Three-century old-city institution; Condé Nast Traveller India and Lonely Planet staple*. Ten minutes' walk from Hawa Mahal. On Dhanteras evening the sweets counter is mobbed — come at lunch.
- Rawat Mishthan Bhandar (रॉय) · Station Road — Sweet shop credited as the birthplace of pyaaz kachori, selling over ten thousand a day. *Eight-decade institution; in every editorial Jaipur food guide*. West side of town — easiest as a stop on the drive in from Pushkar, before the hotel.
- Lassiwalla (लॉसी) · MI Road — Standing-room stall serving thick sweet lassi in clay kulhads since 1944. *Lonely Planet staple; the copycat saga made Forbes*. A row of imitators trades under the same name — the original is marked “Shop 312 · Since 1944”. Sells out by mid-afternoon.
- Masala Chowk (मसाला चौक) · Ram Niwas Garden — Open-air court of 21 vetted street-food vendors near Albert Hall — chaat, pav bhaji, lassi. *City-authority-curated; the consensus safe way into Jaipur street food*. ₹10 entry. Packed after 19:30, and Dhanteras will make it worse — treat as early-evening.
- The Johri (जोरी) · Johari Bazaar — Seasonal vegetarian Rajasthani menu and a small cocktail bar in a restored jewellers' haveli, steps from the Dhanteras lights. *Condé Nast Traveller India Top Restaurant Awards winner, three years running*. Small — book well ahead for Diwali week. Vegetarian only.
- Handi (हॉन्डी) · MI Road — Meat-focused Rajasthani place running since 1984 — laal maas and clay-pot handi chicken. *Outlook Traveller's best-laal-maas-in-Jaipur list*. The laal maas is genuinely hot; the plainer grills suit anyone spice-shy.

- Bar Palladio (₹₹₹) · Narain Niwas Palace — Blue-tented Italian cocktail bar in the palace gardens — the design-press darling of Jaipur. *Condé Nast Traveller favourite since it opened*. Open from 16:00; reserve — Diwali week counts as high season. ~15 minutes by taxi from the old city.
- Suvarna Mahal (₹₹₹₹) · Rambagh Palace — The maharaja's former banquet hall, serving royal-kitchen dishes of Rajasthan, Awadh and Hyderabad on gold-plated service. The fancy option — go for the room. *Fodor's and Condé Nast Traveller lists; the standard grand-palace dinner in Jaipur*. Book well ahead for Diwali week; dress up a little.
- 1135 AD (₹₹₹) · Amber Palace, Jaleb Chowk — Heritage dining room inside Amber Palace off the Jaleb Chowk courtyard — Rajasthani and Mughlai royal recipes in sheesh-mahal surroundings. *Long-standing guidebook staple*. Opens 11:00 — works as an early lunch straight after the morning fort visit, before the drive to Agra. Reserve.

Agra

day 10 · day 11.

Diwali main night. Family-run places may shut by evening; the hotel dining rooms stay open — book Esphahan or Peshawri well ahead for the night itself.

- Pinch of Spice (₹₹) · Fatehabad Road — Polished multi-cuisine room on the hotel strip — Mughlai standards, murgli boti masala. The comfortable arrival-night dinner. *Long-running traveller consensus; Petit Futé guide*. A short ride from the Taj East Gate hotel zone.
- Joney's Place (₹) · Taj Ganj, near the south gate — Tiny diner running since 1978 by the Taj south gate — malai kofta and banana lassi out of a closet-sized kitchen. *Lonely Planet; a backpacker institution for decades*. Cash, cramped seating.
- Deepsee (formerly Dasaprakash) (₹₹) · Gwalior Road, near Agra Fort — The original Dasaprakash South Indian vegetarian restaurant, renamed — thalis, dosas and ice-cream sundaes in booth seating. *Lonely Planet, as*

Dasaprakash: “*fabulously tasty and religiously clean*”. Maps lists it as Deepee; the Tajganj outlets still using the Dasaprakash name are different owners.

- Mama Chicken Mama Franky House (₹) · Sadar Bazaar — Loud grill counter regarded as Agra’s best street food — tandoori chicken and kebab rolls, separate veg counter. *Strong traveller-forum and Indian food-blog consensus*. Counter service, plastic chairs; pairs with the Panchhi Petha stop nearby.
- Panchhi Petha Store (₹) · Sadar Bazaar — Agra’s most famous maker of petha — the candied ash-gourd sweet — since 1926; plain, kesar and angoori, boxed to take away. *Century-old institution; the GOYA food journal wrote its history*. The Sadar Bazaar shop is the original — copycat “Panchhi” shops abound. Good gift boxes; Diwali is peak sweet season.
- Deviram Sweets (₹) · Pratappura crossing — 75-year-old shop behind Agra’s bedai-and-jalebi morning ritual — fried urad-dal puri with potato curry, curd and hot jalebi. *Named by Indian food media as the city’s bedai institution*. Bedai runs mornings until ~13:00 — fits between Taj sunrise and Agra Fort.
- Sheroes Hangout (₹) · Taj East Gate Road — Café run by acid-attack survivors since 2014 — simple veg food and chai, pay what you want; profits fund surgeries and legal aid. *Widely covered editorially, Intrepid Travel among others*. Walking distance from the Taj East Gate hotel zone; daytime is the easy visit on Diwali.
- Esphahan (₹₹₹₹) · The Oberoi Amarvilas, Taj East Gate Road — The Oberoi’s Mughlai dining room with live santoor — tandoor and royal-kitchen recipes, two seatings (19:00 and 21:30). The fancy option, and the Diwali-night pick. *Frommer’s and Fodor’s — consistently cited as Agra’s top table; non-residents welcome*. Book well ahead for 8 Nov — Lakshmi Puja night. Smart dress.
- Peshawri (₹₹₹₹) · ITC Mughal, Fatehabad Road — Sibling of Delhi’s Bukhara — dal Bukhara, tandoori kebabs and breads eaten without cutlery at low wooden tables. *The Bukhara lineage; Agra’s other top-tier hotel*

table, bookable by outside guests. The backup Diwali-night dinner — hotel restaurant, open on the 8th; reserve ahead.

- The Bar at the Amarvilas (₹₹₹₹) · The Oberoi Amarvilas — Hotel bar with an uninterrupted framed view of the Taj — the only genuinely notable bar in Agra. *The standard answer to “a drink with a Taj view”; non-resident walk-ins seated.* No reservations — hotel guests get priority; go at dusk or before an Esphahan dinner. Festival dry-day rules can apply — confirm on arrival.

Notes for the road

Four things that shape the trip more than any single sight.

Diwali

The festival runs 6–10 November. Dhanteras opens it on the 6th, the day we arrive in Jaipur — a city that decorates itself more thoroughly than any other in India. Lakshmi Puja, the main night, is Sunday 8 November, spent in Agra: oil lamps along every parapet, fireworks going off across the city until very late, and a smoke haze that settles over the following mornings. Sunrise at the Taj on the 8th comes before all of it; the light on the 9th may not be as clean.

Time and daylight

India runs on UTC+5:30 with no daylight saving, which in the European winter is four and a half hours ahead of Warsaw. In early November the sun is up around 06:30 and down by 17:45, so afternoons end early — which is why several days in this book start at or before dawn and finish with dinner rather than more sightseeing.

Visa and documents

E-VISA

Required for Polish citizens. Apply online at indianvisaonline.gov.in well before departure and print the ETA — immigration asks for it on paper.

PASSPORT

Six months' validity beyond arrival, two blank pages.

COPIES

Hotel bookings and the flight references (WI7F82) are worth having offline; this book counts.

Money and connectivity

CURRENCY

Indian rupees. ATMs at the airport and everywhere in cities; cards work in hotels and better restaurants.

SMALL NOTES

Keep them. Entries, tips, rickshaws and shoe-minders at temples all want cash.

SIM

A tourist SIM is easiest at the airport on arrival; hotel wifi covers most of the rest.

SHOES

Off at every temple, mosque and gurdwara, and at the Pushkar ghats — slip-ons save time.

The field guide follows: the pages meant to be opened in the car.

PART SIX

Field guide

*Six pages to look things up on: a god by the object in
its hand, a bird by its tail, a numeral, a date, a price, a
name worth knowing.*

Reading the gods

Which deity you are looking at, and what the people around you are doing

Between Udaipur and Agra you will pass more shrines than petrol pumps: a rock painted orange at a bend in the road, a tiled niche in a shop wall, a whole temple town at Pushkar. Almost all of them hold one of about ten figures, and each figure carries the same props every time. Learn the elephant head, the trident, the four faces — and a line of who each one is — and most of what you drive past can be read at speed.

How it fits together

One god or many? Both answers are old, and most people hold them at once: many distinct gods, or one divine reality wearing many faces. At the top sit three roles. Brahma makes the world, Vishnu keeps it running, Shiva ends it so the next one can begin. When order breaks down, Vishnu is born into the world to mend it; Rama and Krishna are two of those births — which is why a blue figure is always Vishnu or one of his lives. The goddess works the same way in reverse: one power with many faces, gentle as Parvati, armed as Durga, unleashed as Kali. The rest is family. Lakshmi is Vishnu's wife, Saraswati is Brahma's, Parvati is Shiva's; Ganesha is Shiva and Parvati's son, and Hanuman is Rama's devotee rather than kin. And a temple is one god's house, not a hall of the pantheon: you visit the resident.

The ten you will keep meeting

Ganesha, remover of obstacles

Spot him by. Elephant head, one tusk snapped off, a round belly, a rat sitting at his feet. photos **Who he is.** Shiva and Parvati's son. In the best-known telling Shiva beheaded the boy without knowing who he was, and made it good with the head of the first creature to hand — an elephant's. He clears the way, so he is

worshipped first, before any other god, at the start of anything: a journey, a wedding, a new ledger. **You'll meet him** over doorways and shop tills; the Ganesh Pol at Amber (day 10) is named for the painted Ganesha above its arch.

Hanuman, strength in service

Spot him by. Monkey face, a mace, sometimes a whole mountain carried in one hand. The image itself is usually orange, thick with vermilion paste. photos **Who he is.** The monkey general of the Ramayana: he leapt the sea to find Rama's stolen wife, and when a wounded man needed one herb from a Himalayan hillside, he brought the hillside. Devotion with muscles on it; people ask him for what he has — courage, protection on the road, freedom from bad spirits. **You'll meet him** at most roadside shrines, which are his. Tuesday and Saturday are his days — that is why a village temple is busy on a Tuesday evening.

Shiva, who ends the world

Spot him by. Trident, crescent moon in the piled-up hair, a third eye, a cobra round the neck. The bull Nandi sits outside, facing in. photos **Who he is.** The third of the great trinity, who ends each age of the world so the next can begin — and, between times, the great ascetic, meditating on a Himalayan peak with the Ganges falling through his hair. Husband of Parvati, father of Ganesha. His worshippers call him Mahadev, the great god.

Most Shiva shrines hold no figure at all: an upright stone in a spouted base, wet with the morning's milk and water — presence rather than portrait. the lingam **You'll meet him** in village temples all along the Aravalli stretch (day 6).

Vishnu, who keeps it running

Spot him by. Four arms holding a conch shell, a disc, a mace and a lotus. The eagle-man Garuda kneels opposite the door, facing him. photos **Who he is.** The preserver: he keeps the world in order between Brahma's making of it and Shiva's unmaking, and when order fails badly enough he is born into the world to mend it. Nine such births so far, by the usual count — Rama and Krishna are the two

that matter on this trip. **You'll meet him** at the Jagdish temple in Udaipur (day 5), 150 metres up the street from the City Palace gate: a black stone Vishnu of 1651, up 32 steps, with the brass Garuda in the pavilion outside.

Krishna, Vishnu as cowherd

Spot him by. Blue skin, a flute held sideways, a peacock feather in the hair, cows nearby. photos **Who he is.** Vishnu born among cowherds: the baby who stole butter, the flute-player the milkmaids loved, and — grown up — the charioteer of the Bhagavad Gita, talking a despairing warrior through why he must act. He is the most companionable of the gods, and loving him counts as worship in itself. **You'll meet him** around Agra, whose countryside is his home ground. Govardhan Puja, the day after Diwali (day 12), marks a hill he lifted there to shelter his village from a storm.

Rama, Vishnu as king

Spot him by. A bow, and three companions: his wife Sita, his brother Lakshmana, and Hanuman kneeling at his feet. photos **Who he is.** Vishnu born as a prince, and the hero of the Ramayana: fourteen years of exile, his wife stolen by the demon king of Lanka and won back with Hanuman's army. He is the model of how a king — or anyone — should behave; villagers greet each other with his name. **You'll meet him** on Diwali itself (day 11): the festival is his homecoming from exile, and the lamps were first lit to show him the way.

Lakshmi, wealth and wellbeing

Spot her by. Seated on a lotus, gold coins falling from one open palm, often two elephants pouring water over her. photos **Who she is.** Vishnu's wife, risen from the ocean when the gods churned it at the beginning of things. She is wealth in the wide sense — money, harvest, health, luck — and she is a guest who visits and leaves: fortune is courted, not owned. **You'll meet her** wherever trade happens — painted on shop shutters, printed on account-book covers. Diwali night belongs to her: the house is cleaned and lit because she visits the lit house.

Durga and Kali, the goddess armed

Spot her by. Durga: many arms, a different weapon in each, riding a lion or tiger, usually spearing a buffalo-headed demon. photos **Who she is.** The goddess as war leader. When a buffalo demon could be killed by no god, the gods pooled their weapons and their anger, and Durga rode out of it — one weapon per hand. Rajput houses keep her as the family goddess — that is why she sits inside forts.

Kali is the same power with the brakes off: black, tongue out, a garland of severed heads, and — in the best-known telling — stopped mid-rampage only when she finds she is standing on Shiva himself. Kali **You'll meet them** as Chamunda Mata inside Mehrangarh (day 7), installed by Rao Jodha in 1460 and still the Rathore family's goddess, and as Shila Devi at Amber (day 10), brought from Bengal in 1604.

Saraswati, learning and music

Spot her by. White sari, a long lute (the veena) across the lap, a book, a white goose. photos **Who she is.** Speech, learning and music; Brahma's consort. Where Lakshmi is gold, Saraswati is white — the point being that knowledge wants nothing. Students seek her before exams, musicians before playing. **You'll meet her** in schools and instrument shops. For her sake nobody steps over a book; you pick it up and touch it to your forehead instead.

Brahma, the creator retired

Spot him by. Four heads facing four directions, four arms with a water pot, a ladle, a string of beads and a book; red skin; a goose for a mount. photos **Who he is.** The maker of the world — but the world only needs making once, and worship long ago moved to the gods who keep it running. **You'll meet him** at Pushkar (day 8), which holds his one great temple in India. The local story blames a curse from his wife Savitri, who found him performing a rite beside another goddess.

Two shortcuts. If the figure is blue, it is Vishnu or one of his lives. If the figure sits bolt upright and expressionless, with no weapons, no extra arms and no

animal at its feet, the temple is Jain rather than Hindu — the Kumbhalgarh walls (day 6) enclose hundreds of them. photos

What people are doing

ACT	WHAT IT IS
Darshan	Seeing the god and being seen back — the point of the whole visit. Not a service you sit through but a look you queue for, often over in seconds.
The bell	Rung by hand on the way in, to announce yourself. Anyone may ring it.
Aarti	A lamp circled in front of the god while bells and drums go, at fixed hours — usually dawn and dusk. Dusk at Pushkar (day 8) is worth timing the afternoon around. The flame is then carried out to the crowd; people pass their hands over it and touch their forehead.
Prasad	Food — sugar lumps, a sweet, a few crumbs — offered to the god and handed back blessed. Take it with the right hand and eat it; refusing is the one real discourtesy.
Parikrama	Walking a circuit round the shrine, keeping it on your right. Clockwise, always. Inside a temple, follow whoever is ahead of you.
Tilak	The mark a priest presses on your forehead, red or orange or ash-grey. It comes with a blessing, not an obligation — though a donation is expected after.
Shoes off	At the threshold of every temple, mosque and gurdwara, often several metres before it. Socks are allowed, and midday stone is hot. A stand takes them; sometimes a man wants ten rupees for minding them.

Courtesies

- **Dress.** Shoulders and knees covered, men and women both. Nothing else is asked.
- **Photography.** Fine in the courtyard as a rule, forbidden in the inner sanctum; look for a sign or catch the priest's eye first. At Pushkar's ghats (day 8) the

rule is firm — no photographs of people bathing.

- **Leather.** Jain temples ban belts, wallets and camera straps made of it at the door. Kumbhalgarh's temples (day 6) are mostly Jain.
- **Heads covered.** The reverse rule at a gurdwara: everyone covers their head, and scarves are lent at the entrance. Bangla Sahib in Delhi (day 3) hands them out at the shoe counter.
- **Money.** No ticket, no fixed fee: a box takes notes. A priest who has given you a thread will name a figure, and it is fine to give less.
- **Feet.** Never pointed at the shrine or at anyone sitting — hence the tucked-up legs.

Gods outside temples

Most of the religion on this trip happens away from any building.

- Trucks carry Hanuman on the tailgate (photos).
- Cars keep a garlanded Ganesha on the dashboard (photos)
- and a lemon with green chillies strung under the bumper, against the evil eye (photos).
- Shops open with incense at the till and the day's first note touched to Lakshmi's picture.
- A smear of vermilion on a roadside rock is enough to make a shrine (photos), and once made it is never removed — which is why one sometimes sits in the middle of a widened road, with the tarmac going round it.

Next: Animals and birds.

Animals and birds

A spotter’s guide to what turns up, and how to tell the lookalikes apart

Almost nothing you see moving will be in a park. India’s animals live in the traffic, on the rooftops and in the fields along the road, and early November — dry, mild, just after the harvest — has them out in daylight. The short list for this route: the mark that names each one in two seconds, and one thing worth knowing.

In the cities, forts and temple courtyards

The two monkeys

Worth ten seconds of study: one ignores you, the other goes through your bag.

ANIMAL	KNOW IT BY	WORTH KNOWING
Grey langur photos	Silver-grey coat, coal-black face and hands, tail longer than the body. Sits in a group eating leaves; does not approach.	Named for Hanuman and left alone by everyone. Near-certain on the parapets at Kumbhalgarh.
Rhesus macaque photos	Sandy-brown, pink face, stubby tail. Walks <i>towards</i> you along a wall.	This is the one that steals — food, bottles, sunglasses, phones. Macaques are terrified of langurs, so Delhi hires men trained to imitate langur calls to clear them out of government buildings.

The rest of the street

ANIMAL	KNOW IT BY	WORTH KNOWING
Street dog photos	Mid-sized, sandy or brindle, curled tail, upright ears — the same landrace from Delhi to Kerala.	A V-shaped notch cut in one ear means the dog has been caught, sterilised, vaccinated against rabies and put back where it was found — national policy, upheld by the Supreme Court in 2025.
Cattle photos	Humped shoulder, loose fold of skin swinging under the throat, horns often painted. Lying in the carriageway as if it were a field.	Slaughter is banned in Rajasthan, so cows that stop giving milk are turned loose to forage and drift back into the market lanes. Traffic gives way to them, always.
Water buffalo photos	Slate-black, almost hairless, horns sweeping back in a ridged curve. Usually wet, usually being led.	Buffaloes give a bit over two-fifths of India’s milk, and it is far fatter than cow’s. The chai, the paneer and the curd are mostly buffalo.
Palm squirrel photos	Small, grey-brown, five pale stripes down the back, never still.	The story goes that Rama stroked a squirrel’s back in thanks, leaving three white finger-marks. That is the southern species; the northern one has five stripes, which the story does not explain.

From the car

ANIMAL	KNOW IT BY	WORTH KNOWING
Camel photos	One hump, long legs, usually in harness pulling a flat two-wheeled cart — including in the slow lane of a six-lane highway.	Rajasthan’s state animal. Since 2015 it has been illegal to slaughter one or take it out of the state; numbers have fallen anyway, camels having lost their work to trucks.

ANIMAL	KNOW IT BY	WORTH KNOWING
Nilgai photos	The size of a horse. Bulls slate-grey with a white throat patch and short straight horns, cows tawny. Stands in the stubble and stares.	Asia's largest antelope. Its name means "blue cow", and the cow half has done more to protect it from farmers than any law.
Blackbuck photos	Males: long spiral horns, near-black above, white belly and eye-rings. Females fawn and hornless.	The Bishnoi villages around Rohet protect wildlife as a religious duty, so blackbuck there graze in the open instead of bolting.
Chinkara photos	Small sandy gazelle, thin straight horns, alone or in twos and threes on stony ground.	Rajasthan's other state animal, at home in the Kumbhalgarh sanctuary and the dry country west of it.
Mongoose photos	Grizzled grey, low and long, bushy tail; crosses the road at a flat sprint.	It fights cobras and usually wins — partly speed, partly a mutation in its nerve receptors that blunts the venom.
Peacock photos	Blue neck, fan-shaped crest, long legs — and no train. Males shed the tail after the monsoon and regrow it by February, so in November they look plain.	India's national bird since 1963, wild here rather than kept, and very loud. At dusk they fly heavily up into trees to roost.

Overhead and on the wires

BIRD	KNOW IT BY	WORTH KNOWING
Black kite photos	Brown raptor with a forked tail, circling low over the city all day.	Delhi's kites are probably the densest concentration of birds of prey ever measured — about fifteen nests to the square kilometre — fed in part by meat thrown to them as an offering in Old Delhi.

BIRD	KNOW IT BY	WORTH KNOWING
House crow photos	Grey collar and breast against a black head and wings. An all-black one is a different, bigger crow.	It has followed ships out of India and settled in ports as far off as East Africa and the Netherlands.
Common myna photos	Brown body, black head, yellow bill and a bare yellow patch behind the eye. Walks, never hops.	One of only three birds on the international list of the hundred worst invasive species.
Rose-ringed parakeet photos	Bright green, long thin tail, screaming in flocks at dusk; males wear a black and pink neck ring.	The same species now lives wild in London and Cologne. In Delhi it nests in the vaults of medieval tombs.
Cattle egret photos	Small white heron standing beside a cow, or riding on its back.	It follows the animal for the insects the hooves flush out of the grass. Plain white now; buff-headed in the breeding season.
Green bee-eater photos	Small, brilliant green, thin curved bill, two wire-thin feathers off the tail. Darts from a wire and returns to the same spot.	It catches bees in the air, carries them back to the perch and beats the sting out before swallowing.
Fruit bats photos	At dusk: big bats crossing the sky on slow, heavy wingbeats, wingspan over a metre.	Indian flying foxes — fruit eaters with no interest in insects or in you. By day they hang in loud colonies in one particular big tree.

Monkeys, dogs and sense

A macaque that can see food will come for it, and it reads a direct stare as a challenge. Keep food and phones out of sight at forts and temples, feed nothing, and if one takes a bag, let go rather than pull. Dogs sleep through the day and

hold territory at night: walk around a group rather than through it, and don't run. Rabies is the reason for all of this. India has around 5,700 rabies deaths a year, roughly a third of the world's total, and once symptoms appear the disease cannot be treated. It is also entirely preventable: wash the wound with soap under running water for a full fifteen minutes, then get to a hospital the same day for the vaccine course. That goes for any bite, deep scratch or licked-open cut from a dog, a monkey or a bat, however small. Delhi and Jaipur have good private hospitals; none of this waits until you are home.

Before this one: Reading the gods. Next: Reading the signs.

Reading the signs

Devanagari numerals and twenty words that make a street legible

You will not learn Hindi in a fortnight, and you don’t need to — most road signs and many shopfronts carry English underneath. But two small things pay for themselves within a day. The ten numerals take about five minutes and unlock prices, house numbers and market boards. Twenty words, chosen because you will walk past each of them a dozen times, turn a wall of unreadable script into a street with labels on it.

The ten numerals

SIGN	VALUE	NOTE
	0	A circle. Ours came from this one.
	1	Reads like a 9 with a bar across the top.
	2	Recognisably a 2.
	3	Recognisably a 3.
	4	The trap: it looks like an 8.
	5	Like a 4 with a loop underneath.
	6	A curl that reads more or less as a 6. Fair enough.
	7	An open hook. The one to confuse with ८.
	8	A plain “c”. The one to confuse with ७.
	9	Closed loop, tail to the right — near enough to a 9.

Note where these do and don’t appear. Number plates and highway signs are required by law to use Latin letters and the numerals we use, so a milestone, a kilometre stone or a truck’s registration needs no decoding at all. Devanagari digits survive on the hand-painted things: shop boards, price tags, room and

house numbers, temple donation lists, the page numbers of a Hindi newspaper. Prices are often written both ways on the same board, which is the easiest way to check you have read a new numeral correctly.

How the script works

Devanagari is not an alphabet but something in between an alphabet and a syllabary: each consonant letter already carries a short “a” inside it, so is not *k* but *ka*. Vowels other than that one are written as marks hung on the consonant — above, below, before or after it — which is why , , and are all one letter wearing different hats. The horizontal line along the top of every word is not decoration: the letters hang from it, and a break in the line is a word break. There are no capitals, spelling matches pronunciation far better than English does, and the same script serves Hindi, Marathi, Nepali, Sanskrit and the Rajasthani spoken around you — so the writing stays constant even where the speech does not.

Twenty words you will actually see

SIGN	SOUNDS LIKE	MEANS	WHERE
	chai	tea	Every stall, every station platform, every second painted board.
	dhaba	roadside kitchen	Highway boards, usually next to the word Punjabi. This is where the driver stops.
	hotal	hotel	On a small-town shopfront it usually means a place to eat, not to sleep.
	restorent	restaurant	The English word in Hindi letters — a useful first thing to sound out.

SIGN	SOUNDS LIKE	MEANS	WHERE
	shuddh shakahari	pure vegetarian	Restaurant boards everywhere, and the whole of Pushkar.
	mithai	sweets	Sweet shops, which in Diwali week are the busiest premises in any town.
	paani	water	Bottles, tanks, water booths, RO filter shops.
	doodh	milk	Dairy booths, milk sweets, the sign on a buffalo shed.
	mandir	temple	Signposts everywhere; usually preceded by the god's name.
	baink	bank	Another English word in Hindi letters. ATM is written .
	pulis	police	Station boards, jeeps, checkposts.
	aspataal	hospital	Blue signs with a distance on them. Worth knowing on sight.
	shauchalay	public toilet	The formal word, so it is the one on the sign.
/	mahila / purush	women / men	Toilet doors, queues, the first metro carriage in Delhi.
/	pravesh / nikaas	entry / exit	Monument gates, car parks, station subways.
/	khula / band	open / closed	Shop shutters, and roads during a festival.
	swagat	welcome	Arches over the road at every town boundary.

SIGN	SOUNDS LIKE	MEANS	WHERE
	dheere	slowly	Painted on the road before a village or a school.
	aage	ahead	“Work ahead”, “diversion ahead” — always bad news.
	petrol pump	petrol station	What everyone calls it in English too.

The place names

SIGN	PLACE
	Delhi
	Udaipur
	Kumbhalgarh
	Jodhpur
	Ajmer
	Pushkar
	Jaipur
	Agra

Two endings do a lot of work here. *-pur* () means town, and the front half is usually the founder: Jaipur is Jai Singh’s town, Jodhpur is Rao Jodha’s, Udaipur is Udai Singh’s. *-garh* () means fort, which is why Kumbhalgarh is Kumbha’s fort. Once you can pick those two out of the script, half the road signs in Rajasthan tell you what kind of place they point at.

Number plates, for the car

Every plate reads left to right in four parts: two letters for the state, two digits for the district office that issued it, one to three letters for the series, then up to four digits. RJ 19 CA 4321 is a Jodhpur vehicle (photos). The state codes on this trip are RJ for Rajasthan, DL for Delhi, UP for Uttar Pradesh (which you cross into before Agra) and HR for Haryana, whose trucks are everywhere. The district numbers reward a little collecting: RJ 14 is Jaipur, RJ 19 Jodhpur, RJ 27 Udaipur, UP 80 Agra, UP 85 Mathura. Delhi slips an extra letter in after the district number for the class of vehicle — C for a car, so DL 1C is a private car from north Delhi.

The background colour says what the vehicle is for. White with black letters is private. Yellow with black letters is commercial — every truck, every taxi, and quite possibly the car you are sitting in. Green with white letters is electric, and there are more of them each year. Black with yellow letters is a self-drive rental, blue is a diplomatic mission in Delhi, and red is a brand-new vehicle running on a temporary registration. A plate beginning with a year and the letters BH belongs to someone whose job moves them between states — a new series that lets them skip re-registering.

Before this one: Animals and birds. Next: A pocket chronology.

A pocket chronology

Sultanate to Mughal to British to Republic, on one page

Guides work in dynasties. They will say “Sultanate period”, “Akbar’s time”, “after the Mutiny” and move on, assuming you have somewhere to put it. This is that somewhere: one strip of dates, each with the thing on this trip that hangs off it. Two numbers do most of the work — 1206, when Delhi got its first sultan, and 1526, when the Mughals arrived and stayed for three hundred and thirty-one years, the distance from Sigismund the Old almost to the January Uprising.

The strip

WHEN	WHAT	YOU’LL SEE
c. 2600–1900 BC	The Indus cities — brick streets, drains, a script nobody can read — flourish and are abandoned.	Nothing on this route. The nearest of their cities is Kalibangan, in the north of Rajasthan.
c. 400 BC–AD 400	The Mahabharata and the Ramayana take written shape. They are texts, not events: the stories are older than the writing and have never stopped being retold.	Everything. Diwali (day 11) is the Ramayana’s last chapter; Krishna, who advises the hero of the Mahabharata, is on the dashboard.
AD 320–550	The Gupta empire in the north — the period guides mean by “classical”: Sanskrit poetry, the number system that reached Europe as “Arabic” numerals, the first temples built in cut stone.	Only second-hand, in the temple form that later builders inherited.

WHEN	WHAT	YOU'LL SEE
8th–10th c.	Rajput clans emerge across this country as the north fragments. The Guhilas of Mewar date themselves to 728.	The three houses whose forts you enter — Mewar at Udaipur, the Rathores at Jodhpur, the Kachwahs at Amber — all trace their line to about here, some with more pride than evidence.
1192–1206	Muhammad of Ghor's armies take Delhi; his general Qutb-ud-din Aibak makes himself sultan in 1206. The Delhi Sultanate — five dynasties, 320 years.	Qutb Minar, day 4: begun 1199, finished by Aibak's son-in-law in the 1220s, standing on a mosque built from the stone of demolished temples.
1206–1526	Sultans rule from Delhi, at their strongest as far as the south, at their weakest over a few districts.	Also day 4: the Hauz Khas reservoir and college (14th c.), the tombs in Lodhi Gardens (15th c.), Agrasen ki Baoli.
1440s–1460s	The Rajput high tide. Kings west of the sultans build in stone on hills, out of reach.	Kumbhargarh, begun 1443 by Rana Kumbha (day 6). Mehrangarh, begun 1459 by Rao Jodha (day 7).
1526	Babur wins at Panipat and founds the Mughal empire. He rules four years and spends most of them complaining about the heat.	Nothing of his survives here.
1556–1605	Akbar . He never learned to read, and he is the one who made the empire work — by taxing farmland properly and by marrying and hiring Rajputs instead of only fighting them.	Agra Fort's red walls, from 1565 (day 11). Fatehpur Sikri, his built-and-abandoned capital, 1571–85 (day 10, if daylight allows). Amber palace, begun 1592 by his general Man Singh (day 10). Humayun's Tomb, built by his father's widow and finished about 1570 (day 2).

WHEN	WHAT	YOU'LL SEE
1605–1627	Jahangir. A connoisseur more than a builder; his wife Nur Jahan issued orders in her own name and had coins struck with it.	Her tomb for her father in Agra, 1622–28 — the first Mughal building faced entirely in marble and inlaid with coloured stone. (photos) It is a rehearsal for the Taj, and an easy add to day 11.
1628–1658	Shah Jahan. The builder. Marble, symmetry, and a new capital.	The Taj Mahal, 1632–53 (day 11). Shahjahanabad — the Red Fort, 1639–48, and the Jama Masjid, finished 1656 (day 3). The same years, a different empire: Udaipur's Jagdish temple is 1651 (day 5).
1658–1707	Aurangzeb deposes his father, kills his brothers, and reigns 49 years — the empire at its largest and its most broke, fighting wars in the south it could not win.	Agra Fort (day 11), where his father spent eight years imprisoned with a view of the Taj.
1707–1757	Mughal collapse. Persians sack Delhi in 1739 and take the Peacock Throne; the provinces stop sending money.	Jaipur, founded in the gap by Jai Singh II in 1727, on a grid, with his stone observatory of 1728–34 (day 9).
1757	The East India Company — a trading firm with an army — wins at Plassey and starts collecting taxes in Bengal.	—
1818	The Rajput states sign with the Company: they keep their thrones, forts and titles, and give up foreign policy.	Why the families in the forts are still the families in the forts.

WHEN	WHAT	YOU'LL SEE
1857–58	The rebellion. The last Mughal, an elderly poet, is put on trial and exiled; the Company is wound up and the Crown takes over.	The Red Fort (day 3), which the army occupied and half demolished afterwards.
1911–1931	The capital moves from Calcutta to Delhi, and Lutyens builds a new imperial city beside the old ones. It is finished sixteen years before the British leave.	India Gate and the axis up to the president's house, day 2 — your Delhi hotel sits on the edge of it.
1947	Independence on 15 August, and Partition with it: Punjab and Bengal cut in two, ten million people or more on the move, several hundred thousand killed at the least. Delhi's population changed in a year.	Bangla Sahib and Old Delhi (day 3), both of which absorbed refugees by the trainload.
1948, 1950	Gandhi is shot in Delhi in January 1948. The constitution takes effect on 26 January 1950 and India becomes a republic.	Raj Ghat, day 3 — the platform where he was cremated.
1971	Parliament abolishes the privy purses, the state salaries paid to former princes since 1947, along with their remaining titles.	The reason the old ruling families went into the hotel trade — Rawla Narlai, where you sleep on day 6, and the manor at Rohet, the day-7 lunch stop.

If the guide says a century, think

12th–14th c.	Delhi Sultanate. Sandstone, pointed arches, no human figures, and older temple stone reused in the walls.
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15th c.	Rajput hill forts in the west, Lodhi tombs in Delhi. Nobody is building an empire.
16th c.	Akbar. Red sandstone, huge, square, carved like woodwork.
17th c.	Shah Jahan. White marble, inlaid flowers, perfect symmetry — then Aurangzeb, and the money stops.
18th– 19th c.	The empire gone: Rajput and Jaipur palaces borrowing Mughal detail, then British domes and columns. Jaipur is painted pink in 1876.

Before this one: Reading the signs. Next: What things cost.

What things cost

Prices of ordinary things, and what they mean to the people charging them

A glass of chai at a stall on the Jodhpur road costs ten rupees. Your ticket into the Taj Mahal costs a hundred and thirty times that. Both numbers are right, and the distance between them explains most of what you will see through a car window. Prices here are what to expect in Rajasthan in November 2026, checked in August. Anything with a ticket counter attached is worth a second look on the day.

The anchor

Learn one conversion and you can stop doing arithmetic. Rates as of August 2026.

RUPEES	ZŁOTY	EURO
₹100	about 3.90 zł	about €0.90
₹1,000	about 39 zł	about €9
₹10,000	about 390 zł	about €90

In the head: divide rupees by 25 for złoty, by 110 for euro. A four-figure rupee price is rarely a large sum, and a two-figure one is almost nothing to you — which is exactly the trap. The gap between "almost nothing to me" and "a morning's pay to him" is where haggling stops being a game.

What things cost

ITEM	TYPICAL PRICE	WHAT IT TELLS YOU
Chai, small glass at a stall	₹10–20	The unit of Indian sociability. Ten rupees on the highway, twenty in a city.

ITEM	TYPICAL PRICE	WHAT IT TELLS YOU
Litre of bottled water	₹20	The price is printed on the bottle. Being asked for more means the shop is testing you.
Samosa	₹15–30	Cheapest in villages, dearest in Mumbai and Bengaluru. Rajasthan sits low.
Jalebi and other sweets	₹200–300 a kilo	Sold by weight, not by piece. Fifty rupees is plenty for four people.
Roti at a dhaba	₹10–15	They keep coming until you say stop.
Vegetarian thali at a dhaba	₹120–200	A working man's lunch, and the best value on the road.
Main course, hotel restaurant	₹400–700	Three to five times the dhaba, for the tablecloth and the toilets.
Bottle of beer with dinner	₹350–500	Rajasthan taxes drink hard. Some towns near temples sell none at all.
Auto-rickshaw, a 3 km hop	₹50–150	Delhi's meter says ₹30 for the first 1.5 km, then ₹11 a km. The meter will not be used on you.
Uber or Ola in a city	₹15–20 a km, about ₹80 minimum	Fixed in the app, so no argument. Usually cheaper than the auto you just haggled for.
Litre of petrol	₹112 in Jaipur, ₹102 in Delhi	Same fuel, different state tax. Rajasthan is one of the dearest states to drive in.

What people earn

WORK	PAY
Rural work-guarantee scheme, Rajasthan rate	₹300 a day
Building-site or farm labourer	₹450–700 a day, when there is work

WORK	PAY
Shop assistant, hotel cleaner	₹12,000–20,000 a month
Government primary school teacher	₹35,400 basic, roughly ₹45,000–60,000 in hand

The first row is the floor: the state guarantees rural households unskilled work at that rate, so private employers must beat it or find nobody. The last row is why a government job with a pension is the most sought-after thing in a small Rajasthani town, and why the teacher's family owns a scooter and the labourer's does not. Your ticket into the Taj Mahal costs what four days of guaranteed rural work pays.

Tickets

MONUMENT	FOREIGNER	INDIAN
Taj Mahal	₹1,100, plus ₹200 for the mausoleum itself	₹50, plus the same ₹200
Agra Fort	₹650	₹50
Fatehpur Sikri	₹550–610 (sources differ)	₹50
Amber Fort	₹1,000	₹200
Jaipur composite, 8 sites over 2 days	₹1,000–1,100	₹400–450
Mehrangarh, Jodhpur	₹600, audio guide included	₹100
Kumbhalgarh	₹600	₹40

Two practical notes. The Archaeological Survey, which runs the Agra sites and Kumbhalgarh, has pushed its ticketing online and its counters increasingly refuse cash — book on the official portal the night before and carry the QR code on a phone. Palaces run by family trusts rather than the state, such as the City Palace

in Udaipur, set their own prices and change them without warning; check those at the gate.

Why foreigners pay more

The ratio runs from five to one at Amber to twenty-two to one at the Taj, and it is deliberate policy, not a scam. Set one price high enough to maintain the buildings and you shut out the Indian families the monuments belong to; set it low enough for them and the upkeep is unfunded. Two prices solve it. Measured against income the Indian rate is the harder one: ₹50 is a sixth of a day's guaranteed wage, while ₹1,100 is a decent lunch in Warsaw. The tourist ticket is the cheapest part of your day, and it is subsidising the queue in front of you.

Cash, QR codes and cards

Every stall in India has a printed QR code taped to the counter because instant bank-to-bank payment is free here and works for a ten-rupee tea. Riding it needs an Indian bank account and an Indian phone number, which you will not have. There is one workaround: a prepaid tourist wallet, set up with a passport and visa through an app, topped up from a foreign card and refunded when you leave, with a cap around ₹25,000 a load and ₹50,000 a month. It is sold at Delhi airport. Set it up only if the idea of carrying cash bothers you; otherwise skip it.

Cash is simpler. ATMs are everywhere and take foreign cards. State-owned banks — State Bank of India, Punjab National Bank, Bank of Baroda — usually add nothing at their end, while the private ones charge ₹200–300 a withdrawal, so take the machine's maximum each time, often ₹10,000. Tell your bank you are travelling first.

Then there is the note problem. Since the ₹2,000 note was withdrawn in 2023 the largest note is ₹500, and that is what every ATM hands out. Nobody selling chai can break one, and being asked to wait while a shopkeeper runs down the street to find change is a daily event. Break your ₹500s where it is painless — hotels,

restaurants, petrol pumps, ticket counters — and hoard the small notes. Cards work at hotels and chain restaurants and almost nowhere else you will want to buy something.

Tipping

WHO	HOW MUCH
Your driver, for the six-day tour	₹400–600 a day from the group; hand it over on the last morning, about ₹3,000 in one envelope
Guide at a single site	₹300–500
Hotel porter	₹50–100 a bag
Housekeeping	₹100 a night, left in the room
Restaurant	5–10%, unless a service charge is already on the bill
Chai stall, auto driver, shopkeeper	Nothing

Tip in rupee notes, not coins and not foreign currency, which nobody can change. And keep it in proportion: the driver's tip is real money to him, and it arrives on top of a wage the agency already pays.

Before this one: A pocket chronology. Next: What to eat.

What to eat

What to try, what to leave, and the rules that keep you eating for twelve days

Most people worry about the wrong thing. The risk is not the chilli or the street stall; it is water, ice, and anything raw that was rinsed in tap water. Get those three right and twelve days are a run of good lunches.

The six rules

- **Bottled or filtered water only.** Check the seal is unbroken. Every hotel has filtered water; fill up before you get in the car.
- **Ice only where the water is filtered.** Hotel bars and proper restaurants use that supply. A roadside juice press does not.
- **Peel it or cook it.** Anything hot from a pan is fine, and fruit you peel. Leave salad, fresh chutney, cut fruit on a stall and raw coriander.
- **A queue beats an empty room.** Turnover is most of food safety. Sixty lunches empty the pots before anything spoils; the clean-looking room with two customers has had that curry since yesterday.
- **Go easy for two days.** Dal, rice, bread, cooked vegetables. Save the fried breakfast for day three.
- **Sanitiser before you eat.** You will use your hands more than you expect, and the hand does more harm than the food.

If it happens anyway

A quarter to a third of travellers to South Asia get a bout of diarrhoea in the first fortnight. It is rarely serious and passes in one to three days. Drink more than you want to: rehydration salts from any pharmacy, in bottled water, replace what you lose far better than water alone. Then eat plainly and rest.

Loperamide holds the symptoms off for a few hours, useful before a long drive, but it treats the traffic, not the cause. See a doctor for fever or blood, if it runs past three days, or if you cannot keep fluids down; any hotel will call one to the room.

Rajasthan: cooking without water

Little rain and long distances to market shaped this food: fresh vegetables were a luxury, so the desert kitchen leans on lentils, gram flour, milk solids, ghee and things that dry well.

DISH	WHAT IT IS	WHERE
Dal baati churma photos	Hard baked wheat balls cracked open and drowned in ghee, with lentils and a sweet crumble of the same dough. Heavy.	Everywhere. Best at Narlai.
Laal maas photos	Goat in a gravy of Mathania chillies and yoghurt. A Rajput hunting dish, and the one genuinely hot thing on the menu.	Jodhpur, Narlai, Jaipur. Not Pushkar.
Gatte ki sabzi photos	Gram-flour dumplings in yoghurt gravy — invented for a place with no fresh vegetables.	Any thali.
Ker sangri photos	Dried desert berries and khejri-tree beans, soaked and fried. Both grow where nothing else will — famine food, now the dearest line on the menu.	Jodhpur and west.
Pyaaaz kachori photos	Fried pastry ball stuffed with spiced onion.	Jodhpur, at breakfast.
Mirchi vada photos	A whole green chilli stuffed with potato and fried in batter. Milder than it looks.	Jodhpur, clock tower market.
Makhaniya lassi photos	Saffron and cardamom curd, thick enough to stand a spoon in. A meal, not a drink.	Mishrilal, Sardar Market gate.

Delhi and Agra

DISH	WHAT IT IS	WHERE
Chaat photos	Fried potato patties; crisp shells filled with spiced water, yoghurt, tamarind. Cold, wet, hand-assembled — buy it in a sweet shop, not off a cart.	Old Delhi.
Butter chicken photos	A Delhi dish, not a British one: refugees from Peshawar opened Moti Mahal in Daryaganj in 1947 and put leftover tandoori chicken into tomato, butter and cream. Two families are still in court over who did it.	Delhi.
Paratha photos	Flatbread stuffed with potato, cauliflower or paneer, fried.	Paranthe Wali Gali, Chandni Chowk.
Bedai and jalebi photos	Fried lentil-stuffed bread with spiced potato gravy, and a hot syrup coil to cut it.	Agra breakfast; the pairing barely exists elsewhere.
Petha photos	Translucent candied ash gourd, by tradition from Shah Jahan's kitchens. Buy plain or saffron; the flavoured ones are for tourists.	Agra, by the kilo.

What you meet every day

DISH	WHAT IT IS
Dal photos	Lentils. <i>Tadka</i> is the everyday yellow one, <i>makhani</i> the black lentils cooked overnight with butter. The safest thing on any menu, often the best.
Paneer photos	Fresh cheese that does not melt: in spinach, in tomato and cream, or grilled as <i>tikka</i> . The protein of half the country.

DISH	WHAT IT IS
Roti and naan photos	<i>Roti</i> is unleavened wholewheat slapped on the tandoor wall; <i>naan</i> is leavened white flour, softer and richer. Roti is daily bread, naan restaurant food, and either keeps coming until you stop it.
Biryani photos	Rice layered and steamed with meat or vegetables. A Hyderabadi dish; in Rajasthan a menu filler, so order local.
Thali photos	A steel tray of small bowls: vegetables, dal, curd, pickle, bread, rice, a sweet. One price, refilled until you refuse, and the best value in India.

Vegetarian is the default, not the compromise

Rajasthan is among the most vegetarian states in India, and the meat-free menu here is the long, well-practised one. Pushkar goes furthest: the town around the Brahma temple allows no meat, no eggs and no alcohol, and the rule is enforced rather than suggested. The food there is still among the best of the trip.

A board reading *Pure Veg* means what it says: no meat has ever been in that kitchen, and for many diners that is religion, not preference. On packaged food check the corner mark — a green dot in a green square is vegetarian, a brown triangle in a brown square is not. Eggs count as non-vegetarian, which catches Europeans out. photos

Sweets, and it is Diwali week

You reach Jaipur as the festival opens, and sweets are how Diwali is transacted. Boxes will be offered — by the hotel, a shopkeeper, your driver — and taking one and eating a piece is the right answer. Mithai is sold by weight and costs little.

SWEET	WHAT IT IS	NOTE
Jalebi photos	Batter piped in coils into hot oil, then soaked in syrup.	Only worth eating minutes from the pan. Buy where someone is frying.

SWEET	WHAT IT IS	NOTE
Gulab jamun photos	Dried milk solids, fried and steeped in rose syrup.	Warm. The one everybody knows.
Barfi photos	Set milk fudge cut into diamonds. The silver leaf is edible.	What is in the gift box.
Ghewar photos	A honeycomb disc of fried batter soaked in syrup, often under thickened milk. The Rajasthani speciality.	A monsoon-festival sweet. Jaipur's big shops carry it later; in November, ask rather than expect.

Drinking

Chai is the default and it is safe: milk, water, leaves and sugar boiled hard together, strained into a small glass. Take it whenever it is offered. photos Coffee in the north means instant or chain espresso; the good coffee is a thousand kilometres south.

Lassi is only as good as the curd, so drink it where they sell nothing else. **Fresh juice** needs care: the fruit is fine, the water it was thinned with and the glass may not be. Same for a sugarcane press. A green coconut opened in front of you has no such problem. photos

Alcohol is available but never casual. Rajasthan taxes it hard, the hotel bar is usually the only source, and Pushkar has none. Kingfisher is the beer everyone drinks. photos Dry days are the catch: each state fixes its own list, and licensed bars, hotels included, sell nothing on them. Diwali falls in our week and is a dry day in some states but not others; the 2026 lists disagree. Ask at check-in, not at dinner.

At the table

Eat with the right hand; the left is for other work, and the rule holds even where nobody would say anything. Bread is the cutlery: tear a piece and pick the food up with it.

Dishes are shared. Order three or four between the four of you with rice and bread rather than a main each — cheaper, and how the food is meant to be eaten. Thali refills are free and keep coming until you say stop.

Indian mild is not European mild. Say *kam mirchi* — less chilli — and anywhere used to foreigners it is respected without comment. Curd, rice or bread put out a burning mouth; water spreads it. Hotel breakfast runs both ways, omelettes and toast beside paratha and curry.

Before this one: What things cost. Next: Small talk.

Small talk

Cricket, Bollywood and the references a conversation assumes

Somewhere on the second morning your driver will turn the music down and ask which country you are from. The conversation that follows runs on a small set of shared references, and three of them will carry you through almost anyone in India. This page is that set: cricket, films, the questions you will be asked, and the Hindi words that do real work.

Cricket

India won the men's Twenty20 World Cup at home on 8 March 2026, beating New Zealand by 96 runs in Ahmedabad — the first side to win it three times, the first to defend it, and the first host country to take it. Jasprit Bumrah took four wickets for fifteen runs in the final. Eight months on, this is still the easiest opening line you have.

Your trip lands in the middle of India's tour of New Zealand, with one-day matches scheduled for 4, 7 and 10 November. New Zealand runs seven and a half hours ahead, so these are breakfast matches — expect a hotel lobby television on at eight in the morning and nobody watching reception.

The other half of the subject is the Indian Premier League, played by ten city franchises every April and May — the richest cricket league in the world and, outside a World Cup, the biggest thing on Indian television. Royal Challengers Bengaluru won in 2026, their second in a row, with Virat Kohli making 75 not out in the final. Everyone has a team, and asking which is safe anywhere.

Kohli is the name to know: retired from Test cricket in 2025 and from short international matches in 2024, still playing one-day cricket for India and still playing for Bangalore. Whether he should carry on is argued in every chai stall in the country. Shubman Gill captains India in Tests and one-day matches; behind

them stand two retired gods, Sachin Tendulkar and MS Dhoni, and mentioning either buys you ten minutes.

India against Pakistan is a different matter. The two countries do not tour each other, so they meet only at tournaments — last in Colombo in February — and the audience is put at around half a billion, several times the Super Bowl. That scarcity is why the fixture carries what it carries. Watch it if it is on; do not open with it.

Films

Bollywood means Hindi-language cinema, made in Mumbai, and three men born in the mid-1960s still sit at the top of it: Shah Rukh Khan — SRK, or King Khan — with Salman Khan and Aamir Khan. All three have films out in 2026, the first time in eight years; Shah Rukh's, called *King*, opens on 24 December. Say "Shah Rukh" and you will get an opinion.

Two things beyond the names. Nearly every Hindi song your driver plays comes from a film, sung by a playback singer rather than the actor on screen, so asking what a song is from is a better question than it sounds. And the biggest Indian films of recent years have not been Hindi at all but Telugu and Tamil — *RRR*, *Baahubali*, *Pushpa*. Calling one of those Bollywood is a small error with a large meaning attached.

The questions you will be asked

Strangers here place each other by asking directly. Nothing on this list is an intrusion, and none of it needs a full answer.

- **Which country?** Poland lands neutrally to warmly — no colonial history, no headlines. Younger men who follow European football may send Lewandowski's name back at you; most people file it under Europe and move on.

- **First time in India? How do you find it?** Say yes and say you like it. Praise the food and you will be believed.
- **Married? Children? How old are you?** Asked within five minutes, and meant kindly. A vague answer offends nobody.
- **What work do you do? What do you earn?** The salary question is normal here and needs no number. "Enough" works.
- **A photograph with you?** Mostly from families and school groups. Yes and no are both fine; say yes to one and expect a queue.

Chai

Being offered tea opens most hospitality here, and the honest answer depends on where you are. At a stall or a small shop the chai costs ten rupees, means goodwill, and obliges you to nothing — accept it, drink it, say the tea is good, buy nothing. Refusing outright reads as cold; "later" is the softer no.

In a marble emporium or carpet showroom that your driver has suggested, the same cup opens a sales session, and the shop pays him a cut if you buy. You may still drink it and leave with nothing, but you will be worked on for half an hour first. Decide before the tea arrives whether you intend to buy, and if not, say so once at the door, clearly and pleasantly.

The head wobble

A quick side-to-side tilt of the head, neck loose. It is not "no". A slow, deliberate wobble means yes; a fast loose one means "I hear you, go on", closer to a nod than to a word. It also softens a refusal, which is why "is the fort open today?" can produce a wobble and no clear answer. When you need a fact, ask again with a closed question. Don't imitate it: it is not a greeting, and copied it reads as mimicry.

What to enjoy, what to leave

Cricket, food, family, films, where someone is from, what the fields are growing, what things cost, how a fort was built: all easy ground, and Indians are generous talkers on all of it. Ask your driver where he eats, not where he thinks you should. Leave Kashmir, Pakistan, relations between Hindus and Muslims, party politics, caste, and cows and beef. Plenty of people will raise these themselves, sometimes forcefully, and hearing out a strong opinion is not the same as supplying one back. Asked what you think, "I don't know enough about it" is true and ends nothing.

Eight words

WORD	SAY IT	USE
Namaste	nuh-MUH-stay	Hello and goodbye, any hour. Hands together optional.
Dhanyavad	DHUN-yuh-vaad	Thank you, rather formal. Indians thank each other less than Poles do.
Shukriya	shook-REE-yah	Thank you, warmer and everyday. The one to use.
Kitna hua?	KIT-na hoo-AA	How much was that? Asking for the bill.
Bas	buss	Enough. Stops more food landing on your plate.
Accha	UCH-chha	Good, I see, right. The most useful sound in the language.
Thik hai	TEEK hay	That's fine, that's settled. Ends a negotiation.
Pani	PAA-nee	Water. <i>Bottle-wala pani</i> is the sealed kind.

Almost everyone you deal with speaks working English, so none of this is needed — which is the point of using it.

Before this one: [What to eat](#). The last of the six. [Back to the contents](#).