

## Taj to Varanasi

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**Country(ies):** India

**Tour type:** Small Group

**Transport:** A/C minivan/minibus and trains

**Group size:** Min: 2 | Max: 12

**Days:** 11 days

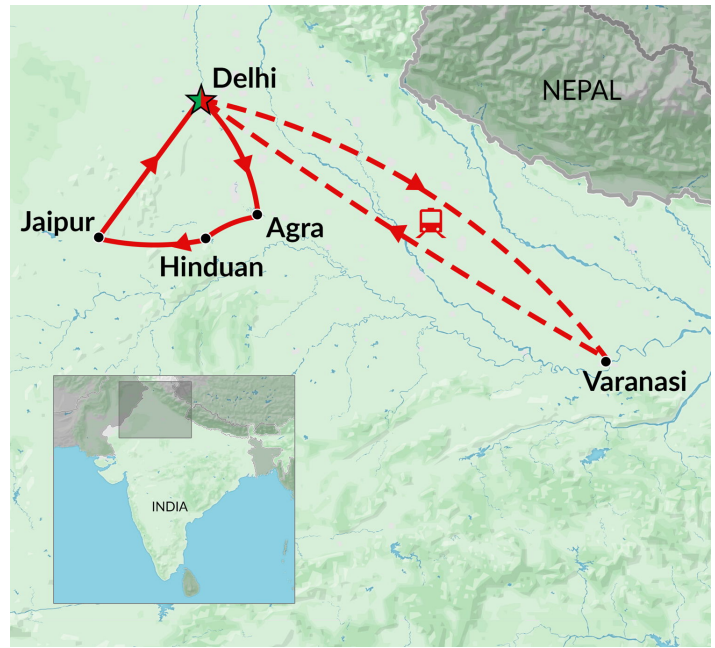
**Start Location:** Delhi, India

**End Location:** Delhi, India

**Meals:** Breakfasts - 10, Lunches - 1, Dinners - 1

**Highlights:**

Old and New Delhi, Taj Mahal, Agra, local village in Suroth Mahal, Pink city of Jaipur, hill top fort, Abhaneri step well, River Ganges at Varanasi, Buddhist site at Sarnath



# Itinerary

## Day 1: Welcome to Delhi, transfer to hotel included

Once you arrive in Delhi, you'll be met by one of our local staff, who will transfer you to your hotel. Once you're settled in, we'll run through the tour itinerary for the next few days, brief you on the local area and arrange a time to collect you tomorrow.

**OVERNIGHT:** Delhi hotel

**MEALS:** None

**EXTRAS:** Single room supplement (INSGTV) Extra day in Delhi - pre-tour

## Day 2: Exploring Delhi, Rickshaw Ride & Street Food Tasting

Your day starts with a morning tour of India's capital, New Delhi. Built on the banks of the Yamuna river, New Delhi is a beautiful blend of a historical past and a vibrant present.

We start at India Gate in the centre of New Delhi, a 42-metre high "Arc-de-Triomphe" like archway, a war memorial built to commemorate the 82,000 soldiers who partook in the undivided Indian Army. We'll drive past various government buildings such as the President's Palace and the Parliament of India, before passing Humayun's Tomb - a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and the Bangla Sahab Gurudwara Sikh Temple.

We'll stop at Connaught Place Station and join the locals on the metro to Old Delhi where we'll walk through one of the oldest and busiest markets in Old Delhi, Chandni Chowk, before exploring the narrow streets of Chawri Bazar which specialises in selling brass, copper and paper products. Throughout the afternoon our guide will also introduce you to the wide range of street food snacks and delicacies so you can get your first authentic taste of the delicious and varied Indian cuisine. Our walking tour will also take in a rickshaw ride and the Jama Masjid mosque, one of the largest in India.

**OVERNIGHT:** Delhi hotel

**MEALS:** Breakfast

**EXTRAS:**

## Day 3: Head to Agra. Sheroes Hangout, Mughal Heritage Walk. First glimpse of the Taj Mahal

We head to Agra this morning, home of the famous Taj Mahal. After arriving in Agra we'll make a stop for lunch at the Sheroes Hangout Cafe. The cafe was set up by the Chhanv Foundation and is run by victims of acid attacks. The cafe works to raise awareness of acid attacks in India and to empower those who have sadly been the victims of these heinous crimes. Prior to gaining employment in the cafe, many of the 'Sheroes' led solitary lives, rarely going outside due to shame associated with their scars. At Encounters Travel we're proud to support such an organisation, which has the sole aim of helping these women find acceptance, a supportive community and a means of income. Lunch will be included whilst at the cafe.

Once you've checked in into your hotel, we'll spend the afternoon on a Mughal Heritage Walk through the ancient village of Kachhpura and surrounding farmland on the banks of the Yamuna River across from the Taj Mahal and Red Fort. This walk has been designed by a local NGO and helps support the local community through employment and new infrastructure. During the walk one of the villagers will give a guide to their village life, the layout of their homes, with living, cooking & religious areas, the farming done, and the local cottage industry for leather shoe making which helps Agra export shoes all over the world. You'll also see some lesser known but important Mughal era monuments. Finally today we'll stroll around the park at Mehtab Bagh - originally built by Emperor Babur as the last in a series of 11 parks on the Yamuna River's east bank, before taking in the magnificent sight of the Taj Mahal at sunset.

A special evening option is available today, where you can join a Hindu family for a Vegetarian Thali cooking lesson and meal.

**OVERNIGHT:** Agra hotel

**MEALS:** Breakfast,Lunch

**EXTRAS:** Cook with a Hindu family in Agra

## **Day 4: Taj Mahal sunrise. Drive to Suroth Mahal, enjoy a Village Walking tour**

We start today early for our tour of the Taj Mahal. Truly one of the wonders of the world this elaborate monument to love was built by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan and took over twenty-two years to complete. Sunrise is a great time to visit as the light changes gradually with the colours of the Taj changing too.

After breakfast we leave the region's popular tourist areas and head into the heart of rural Rajasthan to the small town of Suroth. The property was a former palace, now welcoming guests as a hotel, but retaining its heritage charm, with rooms painted with murals.

The afternoon sees us exploring the village, interacting with the local villagers, getting invaluable insight into seeing their way of life. Our walking tour will pass by local shops, down narrow streets, we'll visit a small temple and perhaps even visit a local barber shop where you can have a shave or head massage. In the evening we'll have a cooking demonstration before enjoying dinner at the hotels restaurant.

**OVERNIGHT:** Suroth Mahal heritage hotel

**MEALS:** Breakfast,Dinner

**EXTRAS:**

## **Day 5: To Jaipur via the Abhaneri step well. Optional Bollywood Movie or Cooking Demo**

Today we head to Jaipur, the capital and the largest city of the Indian state of Rajasthan in Western India. Enroute, we'll visit the Abhaneri step well, the largest and deepest step well in the world, which boasts 3500 steps and is 13 stories deep. You may recognise this as the place that Sonny tried to express his feelings for Sunaina in the recent movie The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel.

The remainder of the day in Jaipur will be free to explore at leisure or join one of our optional extras:

- A fun option this evening is to head out and watch a Bollywood movie at the Raj Mandir cinema.

- Another good choice for this evening is to visit a local family in their home for a cooking demonstration and dinner together.

**OVERNIGHT:** Jaipur heritage hotel

**MEALS:** Breakfast

**EXTRAS:** Jaipur Bollywood Movie - Raj Mandir Cinema Hot air balloon in Jaipur Jaipur Cooking demo and dinner with local family

## Day 6: Amber Fort & Jaipur City. Block printing workshop

You have an option of going on an early morning hot air balloon ride over Jaipur, flying over its palaces, forts and lakes - a truly mesmerising experience.

If you chose to sleep a little later, your morning starts with a visit to the Amber Fort, the jewel in Jaipur's crown - an ancient fortress built on a hilltop in the 16th century dedicated to the ruling Kachhawa clan of Amber. Be mesmerised by this majestic architectural wonder, with its pink sandstone and marble palace shining in the sun. It's massive fortress walls sprawls across the hills, with many seeing a resemblance of the Great Wall of China.

Later, we return to the city for a tour of Jaipur, as we visit the strange Jantar Mantar monument, a collection of nineteen architectural astronomical instruments, built by the Rajput king Sawai Jai Singh II between 1724 and 1730. Jaipur was the first planned city of medieval India and we'll also explore its City Palace. Built by Raja Man Singh during 1729-1732 AD, the City Palace was once the seat of kings as it was from here that they ruled the region. This tangle of courtyards, manicured gardens and exceptionally crafted mahals is one of the most revered attractions in India.

We spend the remainder of the day walking in the walled city to discover some of Jaipur's famous crafts markets and craftsmen in action such as jewellers, silversmiths, textile workshops and bangle makers. Our tour will include a blockprinting workshop, where we learn the ways in which fabric is decorated using this ancient method and we'll also have a gemstone demonstration.

**OVERNIGHT:** Jaipur heritage hotel

**MEALS:** Breakfast

**EXTRAS:** Hot air balloon in Jaipur

## Day 7: Return to Delhi (optional multimedia show at the Akshardam Temple)

We leave Jaipur today to head back to Delhi, from where we'll take the train to Varanasi tomorrow. You can use your remaining time in Delhi for last minute shopping, exploration of join our optional visit to the Swaminarayan Akshardham a Hindu mandir and a spiritual-cultural campus, home to millennia of traditional Hindu and Indian culture and architecture to witness the mesmerizing Sahaj Anand water show - which makes use of multicoloured lasers, under-water flames, video projection, water jets combine to provide a captivating experience which tells the story of Kena Upanishad - a Vedic Sanskrit text.

**OVERNIGHT:** Delhi hotel

**MEALS:** Breakfast

**EXTRAS:**

## Day 8: Morning train to Varanasi, evening Aarti ceremony by the Ganges

Today we'll board the Vande Bharat train, bound for Varanasi. The journey will take approximately 8 hours. From the window you'll be able to see the outskirts of Delhi and rural Indian life as we make our way to Varanasi.

After arriving you'll have some free time to settle or begin exploring. As night falls, we head to the holy Ganges River for the evening Aarti ceremony, a devotional Hindu ritual which involves numerous small candles being lit inside cups made from leaves and flowers and floated down the river. Varanasi is one of India's holiest cities and we get our first taste here of how important the city and the Ganges River is to the country's Hindu population.

**OVERNIGHT:** Varanasi hotel

**MEALS:** Breakfast

**EXTRAS:**

## **Day 9: Sunrise on the Ganges, Varanasi Exploration and visit to Sarnath**

Our second day in Varanasi starts with an early morning boat ride along the Ganges River, as we explore the city. The Ganges is a constant hive of activity throughout the day, as hordes of people come to pray and immerse themselves in its spiritually cleansing waters. The city is also considered an extremely auspicious place to die, and many people come to Varanasi to spend their final days. We'll see many funeral pyres on the ghats at the edge of the river as we pass by on the water. Whilst on the river, you'll have the opportunity to offer Pind Daan in memory of any deceased loved ones.

We'll then go on a walking tour of the city, exploring its medieval streets, intricate temples and busy markets, abuzz with the general cacophony of Indian life. We'll also spend some time exploring the Ghats which straddle the banks of the Ganges.

In the afternoon we take the short trip to the ancient Buddhist site at Sarnath where Lord Buddha delivered his first sermon after becoming enlightened.

**OVERNIGHT:** Varanasi hotel

**MEALS:** Breakfast

**EXTRAS:**

## **Day 10: Train to Delhi. Free afternoon**

This morning we'll re-join the Vande Bharat for the journey back to Delhi. We'll arrive in the afternoon and the remainder of the day will be free for any last minute shopping or exploration.

**OVERNIGHT:** Delhi hotel

**MEALS:** Breakfast

**EXTRAS:**

## **Day 11: Bon Voyage! Airport transfer included**

You have some free time in Delhi this morning until we transfer you to the airport in plenty of time for your flight home. You could also consider adding to go on safari looking for tigers in Ranthambore National Park, or head to the beach at Goa for some sun, sea and relaxation, Indian style.

**OVERNIGHT:** N/A

**MEALS:** Breakfast

**EXTRAS:** Ranthambore National Park Safari Extra day in Delhi - post-tour Spinmonkey cycling tour

**Included:**

- All accommodation in mid-range hotels and heritage properties
- All transport and transfers in AC vehicles
- 24-hour airport arrival and departure transfer service
- Morning trains Delhi-Varanasi-Delhi - AC Chair Car
- Sightseeing tours and activities as per the itinerary
- Delhi Tour, Rickshaw Ride & Street Food Sampling in Delhi
- Agra Sherone Cafe, Mughal Heritage Walk and Taj Mahal visit
- Suroth Mahal Village tour & cooking demonstration
- Jaipur Amber Fort, City Tour & craft workshop
- Varanasi Aarti Ceremony, Sunrise Boat Ride, Visits to Ghats, Temples and Sarnath
- Services of a local tour leader and specialist local guides
- Meals as indicated in the itinerary

**Excluded:**

- International flights (available on request)
- Visa fees
- Travel insurance (compulsory, available on request)
- Meals not indicated in the itinerary
- Drinks, snacks and other personal expenses (e.g. laundry)
- Tips for driver and/or tour guide
- Entrance fees (allow approx. US\$105)
- Any other items not mentioned above

## Notes

**Similar tours:**

The following tours also connect with this trip on a similar shortened or extended itinerary:

- [Incredible India](#) - follows the same itinerary but ends in Delhi, instead of continuing east to the holy city of Varanasi
- [Temples & Tigers](#) - adds some wildlife safaris in search of tigers at Ranthambore National Park after Jaipur and then misses Varanasi
- [Mumbai Express](#) - if you would also like to visit Mumbai, why not consider our Mumbai Express tour which can be booked to start on any date

# Options

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Our tours are designed to include all that you need to enjoy a really special time in the destination you're visiting. However, we do also offer some extra options to complement the tour and add some additional sightseeing or activities, or some extra time at either end of the tour.

All accommodation based options (e.g. Single supplements, extra nights, cruise upgrades) should be booked and paid for in advance so that we can make the appropriate arrangements. Other options may either be booked and paid for in advance or while you are on the tour, though we recommend booking in advance to ensure there are no issues with availability.

Many options are priced the same throughout the year, but some may incur single or high season supplements - full details are given on the tour reservation form or on request.

## Single room supplement (INSGTV)

Min numbers: 1

This tour is based on twin-share accommodation, with single bookers paired up with another traveller of the same sex in the group. If the final group make-up means that no room share is available, you do not need to pay this supplement. However, if you would like to guarantee yourself a single room throughout the tour, then please add this option to your booking.

**Note:** Single supplement prices may vary seasonally.

## Extra day in Delhi - pre-tour

Min numbers: 1

This option adds an extra day to the start of your tour, staying in the same hotel as the main tour itself (subject to availability). Your airport arrival transfer is still included. Prices shown are per person and based on two people sharing.

**Note:** Single room and peak season supplements apply.

## Extra day in Delhi - post-tour

Min numbers: 1

This option adds an extra day to the end of your tour, staying in the same hotel as the main tour itself (subject to availability). Your airport departure transfer is still included. Prices shown are per person and based on two people sharing.

**Note:** Single room and peak season supplements apply.

## Hot air balloon in Jaipur

Min numbers: 1

Capture the spectacular views of Rajasthan's forts with an early morning hot air balloon ride over Jaipur for a different perspective of this vibrant capital. Float high above the pink painted rooftops and enjoy a bird's eye view of Jaipur.

**This option runs from 1st of September to 10th of May each year, subject to weather conditions.**

## **Jaipur Bollywood Movie - Raj Mandir Cinema**

Min numbers: 1

Head to the famous Raj Mandir cinema in Jaipur to enjoy a night in front of the silver screen, Bollywood style!! This option includes transportation to and from the cinema, plus your movie ticket.

## **Jaipur Cooking demo and dinner with local family**

Min numbers: 1

Want to learn how to prepare a proper Indian dish? This cooking class with an Indian family in Jaipur will teach you the basics in a simple, easy-to-understand way, giving you the skills to create your own authentic Indian dishes once you go back home.

The evening will start with a demonstration on how to prepare a meal, before enjoying the fruits of your labour by settling down with the family for dinner.



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## 1. Accommodation

We use good quality hotels rated at the Indian 3-star level on this tour as well as some carefully selected heritage properties. These heritage hotels are often converted from former palaces or merchant houses and are full of historical character, though they may feel a little dated. They are often a highlight of your stay.

The specific hotels listed on our website are our preferred hotels for our small-group tours. However, these may be changed from time to time based on current availability and other logistics. In this event alternative hotels of a similar standard will be used. If you would like to guarantee any particular hotels for your trip, please contact us to request a tailor-made tour.

Accommodation is based on twin or double en-suite rooms with air conditioning. All couples will receive a private double room.

Please check the Single Room Supplement option for details on room sharing options and charges for solo travellers on this tour.

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## 2. Transport

Our trips feature a mix of different transport options. We want you to feel like you're really experiencing the country you're travelling through, but at the same time finish journeys refreshed enough to enjoy the next stage of the tour. Due to the somewhat chaotic nature of Indian roads, we only use private vehicles for all road journeys on this tour.

The tour also features a journey on India's famous railway network. The journeys from Delhi to Varanasi (and return) takes around 8 hours and we book AC chair seats. You will be shown to your seat in the departure station and met on the platform on arrival. Delays of up to an hour are quite common, especially during the winter season if the weather is foggy. Tickets are issued 120 days before departure. If you book within that time we cannot guarantee that you will be seated with other travellers, though the train stewards are normally very helpful and will arrange seat swaps with other people on the train, who are normally very accommodating.

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## 3. Transfers

The tour price includes a 24-hour airport meet & assist service in New Delhi airport, your arrival and departure airport-hotel transfers and all other transfers.

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## 4. Group Size/Tour Leaders/Guides

We are committed to being a small group operator, as we feel this gives everyone in the group the best chance to get to know their fellow travellers and to hear and make the most of their guide. There's no point in us providing great guides if you've got to peer over 30-40 shoulders to see them! So, we won't ever put you in a 50-seater coach with 49 other people and just one guide. Instead, we set our India small-group departures to have a maximum of 12 travellers. The minimum group size is 2.

In India we provide a fully trained, local English-speaking tour leader/driver to accompany our groups. On this tour they will accompany you throughout the whole loop from Delhi/Agra/Jaipur/Delhi with a separate escort in Varanasi. On groups of 4 or more, a guide will accompany you for the duration of the tour, for groups of 2 to 3, you will have a driver and local guides in each city.

At Encounters Travel we have a policy of aiming to use only local Indian guides and reps. We feel this gives you the best experience of the country and the sites you are seeing.

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## 5. Entrance Fees

The tour price does not include entrance fees to the tourist sites mentioned in the itinerary. This allows for fluctuations in the prices set by the local authorities, which do change from time to time.

You should currently allow approx. US\$105 per person to cover these entrance fees (this includes one visit to the Taj Mahal). You will also need to cover the cost of entrance to any other extra sites that you may wish to visit that are not listed in the main tour itinerary. Your guide will offer to collect the entrance fee cost from everyone at the start of the tour and pay on your behalf, or you can arrange them yourself as you go along.

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## 6. Dates & Prices

We run small-group departures on our Indian tours throughout the year, with less frequent start dates during the hot and wet monsoon months of May to September. All departures are guaranteed to run with a minimum of 2 travellers. Departure dates and prices are listed on our website (please check the website for up-to-date prices and special offers).

Private and tailor-made tours are available on any dates and may be adjusted to fit your personal requirements, available time and budget.

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**Note:** Please [download an up-to-date copy](#) of these tour notes shortly before you travel as itineraries and information does change from time to time.

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