

# INDIA'S GOLDEN TRIANGLE

## From Delhi to Jaipur

By Julie L. Kessler  
Special to S.F. Examiner

**T**raveling in India can often be a tumultuous dance of noise, color and humanity creating an intense sensory overload. It can also be a magical carpet ride of exquisite light, iridescent colors and friendly people.

### DELHI DELIGHTS: CENTRAL, OLD AND SOUTH

The Mughal capital with British Colonial architecture galore, interesting neighborhoods and wide boulevards is often overwhelmingly full of traffic and significant smog. Rewards will come with relaxed patience, a comfortable car and talented driver.

Central Delhi's Shangri-La Hotel Eros

was an oasis of panache and tranquility during my January three-night stay. Perfectly located near important sites in this section of Delhi, made it a great choice.

At Central Delhi's core is the 126-foot sandstone and granite arch India Gate. Thought to be inspired by Paris' Arc de Triomphe, it was designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens and completed in 1931 as a memorial to the 90,000 soldiers who died fighting in World War I and the Third Anglo-Afghan War. Families and vendors mill about and often there's a cricket game being played nearby.

The neighboring red and gray circular Sansad Bhavan — Parliament House — is nearly dwarfed by the massive Rashtrapati Bhavan, where the Indian President resides. Containing 340-rooms on a 330-acre

compound, it includes home affairs, defense, finance and prime minister's offices.

Standing on the site where Guru Hari Krishnan lived, the enormous white marble and gold-domed Bangla Sahib Gurdwara — Sikh Temple — is a hive of colorful, auditory and altruistic activity.

Worshippers believe the pools contain holy waters and ritually immerse their feet and chants are continuously sung. At the community kitchen, dozens of people sit cross-legged and chop mountains of vegetables that daily will feed more than 10,000 people.

A plethora of historical dioramas, photographs and documents fill the Mahatma Gandhi Museum Birla House. While industrialist G.D. Birla's houseguest in 1948, Gandhi walked to a prayer meeting

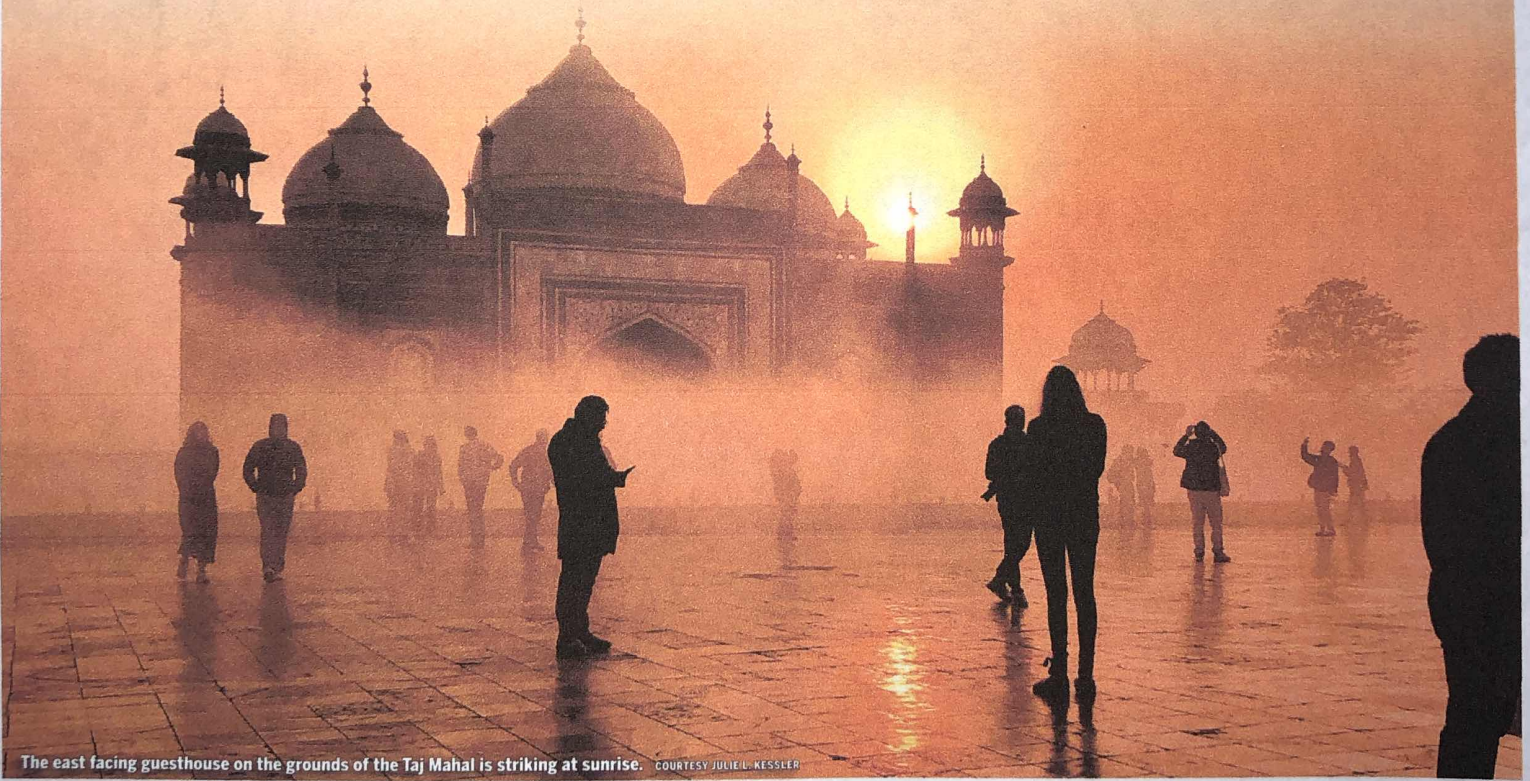
in the bungalow's rear garden and was assassinated by a Hindu extremist. Both melancholy and moving, the garden's eternal flame is a potent reminder of Mahatma's enduring spirit.

South Delhi houses two magnificent UNESCO sites: Humayun's Tomb and Qutub Minar.

The red sandstone and marble Humayun's Tomb built by his widow combines Hindu, Persian and Roman architecture. Restored in 2013, its lovely 26-acre garden is divided into four peaceful quadrants with water channels representing the rivers of Quranic paradise.

The Qutub Minar with its 219-foot sandstone and marble tower was built in 1193

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The east facing guesthouse on the grounds of the Taj Mahal is striking at sunrise. COURTESY JULIE L. KESSLER

# India

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and is India's tallest stone tower. Alternate origin theories abound, from a victory tower reflecting commencement of Muslim rule in India to a minaret so muezzins could call worshippers to pray.

Old Delhi is crowded and chaotic so it's best to visit this area once you've acclimatized a bit. Fifth Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan built Red Fort, also called Lal Qila, in the 17th century as the royal family's main residence. This UNESCO World

Heritage Site reflects the apex of Indo-Persian architecture.

My rickshaw ride through Chandni Chowk market competed with bicycles, pedestrians, dogs, cows, hand-pulled trolleys and horse drawn carts ferrying people and cargo. Here textiles, wedding items, costume jewelry, food and every spice imaginable nearly overwhelm in a congested, yet colorful, commercial cornucopia.

Also in Old Delhi is India largest mosque, Jama Masjid, built by Shah Jahan and completed in 1656. It's an enormous red sandstone Mughal testament of pillars and minarets.

**BELESS BEAUTY OF AGRA'S TAJ MAHAL** For many, seeing Agra Fort and the Taj Mahal are bucket list items. Neither disappoints.

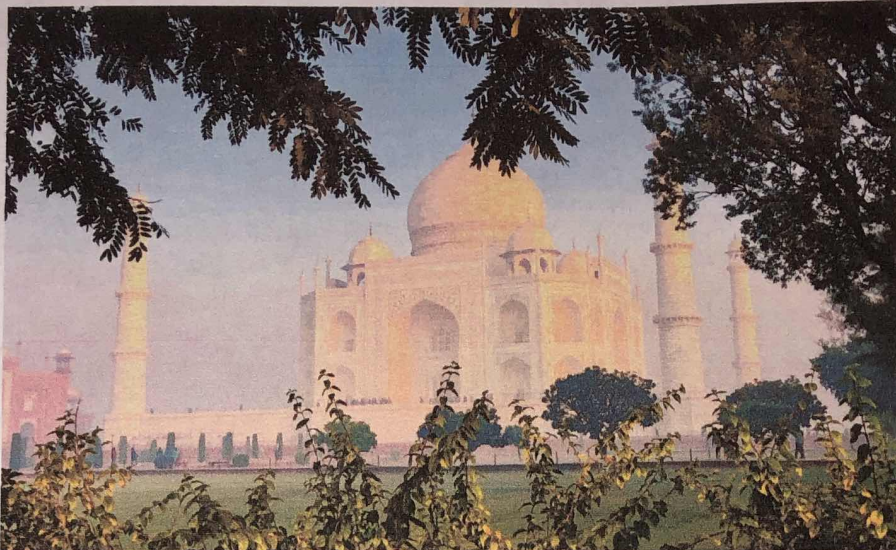
After a four-hour drive from Delhi, I arrived at Agra's Oberoi Amarvilas Hotel, just 1,800-feet from the Taj's East Gate entry.

Here breasting, head-on Taj views, a magnificent pool and lush gardens were coupled with delightful service.

That afternoon my genial local guide Shiraz accompanied me to the 16th century Agra Fort. A bit of a misnomer, this UNESCO site really is a fortified palace with the muna River and moat running along its perimeter. Construction is a collective endeavor of Third Mughal Emperor Akbar, son of Jahan and grandson Shah Jahan.

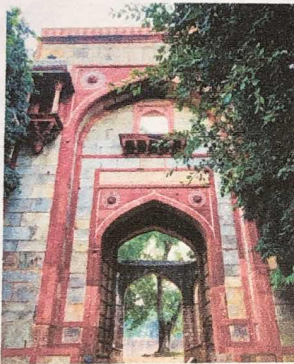
From within the fort's 1.8 square miles that included the mint and the treasury, the country was governed. Remnants of mosques, baths, assembly halls, apartments, harem and dungeons contain Hindu and central Asian architectural features juxtaposed with Bengal and Mughal styles.

Starting with the birds, Shiraz I hopped into Oberoi's golf cart at 8:30 a.m. At the Taj Mahal five minutes later, any qualms of waking for the sunrise experience quickly evaporated.



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Above: The famed Taj Mahal is a symbol of Shah Jahan's eternal love. Below left: Humayun's Tomb in South Delhi has a beautiful, large garden divided into quadrants. Below center: Jaipur's Albert Hall Museum is dramatic at night. Below right: On the road to Jaipur are women from Abhaneri, a village known for the ancient Chand Baori stepwell.



In perhaps the most immense display of love-inspired construction, Shah Jahan built the Taj in honor of his third, and favorite, wife Mumtaz, who died in 1631 while giving birth to her 14th child. Taking 20,000 laborers and 17 years to complete, it became a UNESCO site in 1983.

Entering the gardens at dawn with its four pools, the Taj breathtakingly comes into full view. Its two side structures were built to maintain symmetry. The western-facing Mecca structure serving as a mosque and the eastern-facing used as a guesthouse. The lighting of the rising, golden sun against misty, slowly evaporating fog was ethereally captivating.

Inside, crown-shaped, hand cut screens of white marble surround

Mumtaz and Shah Jahan's tombs. Inlaying jewels, peitra dura, in the 24 panels took nine years. A veritable drop in the bucket exemplifying an enduring testament to love.

### THE JEWEL THAT IS JAIPUR

Following a four-hour drive, I arrived to the former Jaipur royal family guesthouse, the Sujan Rajmahal Palace in Rajasthan's capital. Converted to a hotel in the 1970s, it was recently renovated into a 30-room treasure trove with five restaurants and bars, each dazzlingly decorated in bright hues. Divine rooms and exquisite service allowed me to channel inner royal delusions.

Perched hilltop is Amber Fort built by Raja Mansingh in 1592. An excellent example of Hindu-Ra-

jasthani architecture, it became a UNESCO site in 2011. Most interesting were the frescoed arches at the maharaja's residence entryway and the secluded women's quarters, designed so the maharaja could secretly visit his various wives and concubines while reducing palace intrigue stemming from nocturnal visits.

The Albert Hall Museum is a 19th century Indo-Saracenic architectural marvel showcasing 16 galleries that include folk art, ivory, Indian culture and even a 322BC Egyptian mummy. Also pass by at night for a spectacular neon-light display.

If shopping floats your boat, Jaipur is a veritable nirvana for all manner of tribal and fine jewelry, block-print textiles, pashminas and leather goods.

## IF YOU GO: India

**Air, the best way:** From SFO, award-winning Cathay Pacific Airways has connecting service (change of planes) to Delhi twice daily via Hong Kong. Round trip fares during winter months when weather is best begins at \$1,361. Tel 800/233-2742. [www.cathaypacific.com/us](http://www.cathaypacific.com/us)

### Visas are required for U.S. citizens.

The time consuming application is extremely onerous to complete and requires traveler's religious history and familial information even if deceased. The government's visa site is temperamental. Instead use a private service such as CIBT. 800-929-2428. [www.CIBT.com](http://www.CIBT.com)

**Travel arrangements:** Perfect Travels seamlessly provides air-conditioned cars, drivers and knowledgeable English speaking guides, including airport pick-up, transfers and monument entry fees for Golden Triangle tours. Six-day packages with five-star hotels including breakfast start at \$1,295 per person. Tel 9111/25732-4462. <https://www.perfecttravels.com>

## WHERE TO STAY

**Shangri-La Eros Hotel, New Delhi:** It has a central location with outstanding dining at Shang Palace, Sorrento and Tamra restaurants. Its signature CHI Spa has excellent massages. Tel 866/565-5050. [www.shangri-la.com](http://www.shangri-la.com)

**Oberoi Amarvilas, Agra:** It's the ultimate location for the Taj Mahal set in Mughal grandeur. Tel 800/562-3764. [www.oberoihotels.com](http://www.oberoihotels.com)

**Sujan Rajmahal Palace, Jaipur:** The site offers an unforgettable boutique hotel and dining experience. Tel 9111/4617-2700. [www.sujanluxury.com](http://www.sujanluxury.com) For general tourism information, visit [see.wwww.incredibleindia-tourism.org/](http://see.wwww.incredibleindia-tourism.org/)

Jaipur, like many Indian cities, is one of contrasts. Within moments, one can see elaborately decorated horses — often en route to vibrant Indian weddings — along with working camels next to late model cars and scurrying pedestrians. Traveling in India is not for the faint of heart, but it is also a uniquely marvelous, extraordinary experience.

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