
P assage to India

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By Tam Putnam



Sunlight slanting into Durbar Hall at Samode Palace hotel illuminates an infinity of painted patterning. Built in the 19th century by the chief minister of Jaipur, India, the hall is a calm, quiet space. It's a long way from the full-on-jangle of Delhi streets, where vehicles, pedestrians, and cows honk, weave, moo.

Pallavi Shah sends people to both Samode Palace and Delhi. She runs Our Personal Guest, a travel agency in New York whose clients are demanding travelers – among them, Fortune 500 CEOs and the cast and crew of Merchant Ivory Productions. To offset the din of Indian streets, she puts people up at luxurious retreats such as the Imperial Hotel in New Delhi (in whose spacious rooms Nehru, Gandhi, and Mountbatten once met) and the Oberoi Udaivilas in Udaipur (where the architectural flourishes are matched with contemporary comforts). She books clients into Samode Palace's elegant old suites (rather than its pedestrian modern rooms).

Shah, who grew up in India, possesses a formidable Rolodex that once mainly held names and numbers in the subcontinent. Now, of course, the world is flat, and she talks to insiders in Milan, Cape Town, Chiang Mai. Each of her clients receives a notebook of excerpts from history and art books, clippings on geography and culture, and recommended reading list. "We give our clients homework," she says. They tend to prefer less-traveled territory but have a single requirement: luxe lodging. "People are looking for exotic, unchanged places," she says. "Cultural destinations – but with a fabulous hotel."

Shah says firmly, "What's important is to experience a destination, not just view it. Less voyeurism and more participation." She plunges clients ("if they want", she notes) into the stream of local life. "Each city in India has a different way to get around – cycle rickshaw, boat, three-wheel taxi. It's a fun way to see things." And she insists that travelers pause mid-trip for a few days, to simply sit beside the hotel pool, or gaze at the intricate ceiling at Durbar Hall.