

Beyond Delhi: Making Your Way to the Taj

By Avatar Singh
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The image of the Taj Mahal has been so reproduced, so co-opted, that it seems it should be meaningless—a signifier with no significance. But it isn't. Its form remains powerful and its border-defying narrative couldn't be more universal in its appeal. The story is, by now, legendary. Moghul emperor Shah Jahan built the monument as a mausoleum for his third and favorite wife, Arjumand Banu Begum, who took the name Mumtaz Mahal (Chosen One of the Palace) upon marriage. She died giving birth, with her 14th child, in 1631, and over the course of the next 22 years, Shah Jahan emptied the royal coffers waging wars and building this final homage to Mumtaz in Agra, then the capital of the empire. To put a stop to his father's profligate ways,



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Shah Jahan's son and successor, Aurangzeb, imprisoned him in Agra Fort, where the former emperor lived out the rest of his days confined to a set of rooms overlooking the completed Taj Mahal.

Today more than three million people visit Agra each year. They come for the great monument but also for other sites: the red-sandstone and white-marble fort; the marble mausoleum of the Moghul finance minister Itimad-ud-Daulah, which likely inspired Shah Jahan's masterpiece and is known today, in fact, as the mini Taj; and the Moghul capital complex of Fatehpur Sikri, ostensibly built by Shah Jahan's grandfather, the emperor Akbar (though some say it was originally constructed by Hindus), and abandoned after only 14 years. Here, the best way to do the city in style.

Getting There

The easiest access is on the daily hour-long Kingfisher Airlines flight (flykingfisher.com) from Delhi, and the plushiest via Oberoi Hotels' air charter (from \$3,500; oberoi.aviation@oberoigroup.com). Or it's a four-plus-hour drive or two hours by train.

Staying Put

The Oberoi Amarvilas is the place to stay in Agra, sited less than 2,000 feet from the Taj Mahal. Every space in the 102-room property, built in 2001 in a traditional Moghul-meets-Moorish style, looks out onto the gardens, the pool, and the monument itself, and the two fifth-floor corner luxury suites have combined living-dining rooms, balconies, and tremendous bathrooms. (The marble floors and gold-leaf-domed ceiling of their octagonal glass showers mimic the Taj Mahal.) There's a Banyan Tree spa, nightly dance and music performances, and

two fine restaurants (Eshpahan for northwest frontier kebabs, dals, and rich vegetarian dishes; Bellevue for Continental cuisine). From \$835 to \$5,875; 91-56/2223-1515; oberoiamarvilas.com

Shopping

It's hard to resist the romance of the city's white inlaid marble, quarried from the same spot as the Taj Mahal's. Akbar International (289 Fatehabad Rd.; akbarinternational.com) and Kalakriti (41/142 A/1 VIP Rd.; oswalonline.com) are good spots for it despite their corny artisans' demonstrations. Browse street markets for steel trunks and spherical terracotta pots, but skip the jewelry, rugs, and leather; better examples are elsewhere.

Guides to Get

Amarvilas uses 25-year guiding veteran and professor Vir Tripathi (from \$16 per day; 91-98/3703-0507). Those traveling with India outfitter Our Personal Guest (212-319-1354; ourpersonalguest.com) could be guided by Nagendra Chauhan, a Rajput demiroyal and scholar. And cultural historian Dr. Navina Jafa (\$1,000 per day; navinajafa.com) is the top choice of Asia travel specialist Remote Lands (646-415-8092; remotelands.com)...and of Clintons and Kissingers.

Ideal Itinerary

Agra can be done as a day trip, but an overnight allows a sunrise visit to the Taj Mahal. Arrive at 5 p.m. on Kingfisher and meet your guide at the airport. Drop your bags at Amarvilas and head to the monument in one of the hotel's electric golf carts. (Since 1994 no gasoline-powered vehicles have been allowed within two and a half square miles of the building. Skip the horse- or camel-pulled ride; they're unnecessary and embarrassing.) The sunset light will be fantastic, but the crowds thick. Return to the hotel for dinner at Eshpahan and go to bed early. Awake before dawn for the relative peace of sunrise at the Taj Mahal. Then breakfast at Amarvilas's Bellevue and make the hour-long drive to the haunting Fatehpur Sikri, a trip highlight. Spend an hour or two there and return to Amarvilas for lunch, maybe stopping to shop along the way. Finally, pack your bags and head out, making a quick tour of the Agra Fort or Itimad-ud-Daulah's tomb or both, depending on time, before catching the 5:30 p.m. flight back to Delhi.