

Our Visit to the Golden Triangle



The Taj Mahal

Introduction

We were a party of four old-age pensioners (two married couples); one of us had bad knees and could not climb stairs or get up hills very easily, and another had asthma, carried an inhaler, and also had difficulty with stairs and hills. The poor air quality (caused by unimaginable amounts of road traffic) in major populated areas consequently led to issues with shortness of breath. If that was not bad enough, the travel agent had arranged an itinerary that would challenge even the fittest. Still, having no prior experience of India, we all agreed that the itinerary looked reasonable before we left.

The Itinerary and Internal Travel

The travel agency arranged the Golden Triangle trip via Indus, which included visits to Udaipur, Delhi, Agra, and Jaipur. However, we later were not sure why we were going to Jodhpur, Amritsar, and Shimla as part of the itinerary. The flights to and from London were booked, with arrival and departure from New Delhi, plus three internal flights and a train journey. The travel agent promised us 5-star accommodation, and of the five hotels we stayed at, only two would qualify as 5-star. One hotel was so bad that it would have issues reaching a 3-star standard. Two Jeep trips were also arranged, and one of us had to be lifted into the Jeep by one of our party and the driver.

An 8-seater minibus with a driver was included in the itinerary, along with two internal flights. The minibus was adequate, though spending many hours jostled about made travelling a burden, and two of our party felt sick. Indian roads are a challenge as all the villages seem to have very narrow streets and congestion is common; vehicles drive the wrong way down dual carriage ways (very common); and it is a free-for-all at roundabouts; vehicles illegally turn left at red traffic lights (including our driver who got stopped by police); cows, bulls, buffalo, sheep, goats, donkeys and dogs roam around the roads (also saw giraffes and elephants transporting people and goods by road plus pigs rooting through rubbish and monkeys making mischief by banging boxes to frighten the pigeons. Vast numbers of motorbikes and tut-tuts clutter the roads; the road surfaces are awful (primarily single-carriageway roads between Jodhpur and Udaipur); and massive road construction projects are underway with diversions across fields, although nobody seems to be working (a bit like road works in the UK!). The effect is that even short journeys can take many hours.

The travel agent should have advised us of the disastrous state of the roads, the pavements (where there were any), the congested roads, and the vast array of animals wandering about and holding up traffic. With this information, we would have missed out the unbelievably bad trip to Udaipur (and possibly Jodhpur) and changed our itinerary to something more restful.

The majority of the palaces, forts, tombs, monuments, and places of worship in the itinerary were from the Islamic era, and we could not relate to them. Besides which, most could not be visited as they were up hills or had many steps, or we were so tired and shaken from road travel that we just wanted to get back to the hotel to rest.

Other Issues

Toilet stops during travel were an issue, as Indians do not use toilet paper (they use a water jet to clean themselves). Public Indian toilets are dreadful, and there is always someone outside holding a roll of toilet paper, collecting money for sheets. We should have been advised of this by the travel agent so we could bring our own toilet paper and wipes to avoid the indignity of asking for four or five sheets.

Lunch stops occurred on long journeys and after visiting attractions. Whilst relatively cheap and even with a “so-called” international menu, the choices were minimal, as none of us could eat very spicy food. Only one of our many outside lunches was really lovely. The other issue that occurs whilst travelling is that, in many places, different types of beggars and street vendors bang on the sides and windows of the minibus, asking for money or selling everything from chewing tobacco to plaques and guidebooks. We were hassled when not on the minibus, and two of our party were easy targets as they could not walk away quickly.

Hotels

We were told that all the hotels were 5-star and luxurious, although this was not the case. Of the five hotels we stayed at, two were 5-star (Imperial Delhi and Umaid Bhawan Palace), one was 4-star (Taj Lake Palace), and one was barely 4-star (ITC Mughal). The Samode Haveli in Jaipur might have just scraped in at three stars. All Hotels had “International Cuisine” on their menus, and at times it was challenging to find non-spicy food. The cost of meals and beverages was approximately 4.5 times higher than the same items outside the hotel (e.g., Hotel tea was INR275, while outside restaurants charged INR60, excluding taxes). This was made even worse by 18% CGST/SGST added to food, 20% VAT added to wine, etc., plus an additional 4% in our last three hotels for “Cow Tax”. Outside restaurants added a 5% tax to meal costs. Most outdoor restaurants were not licensed, so wine with a meal was not an option yet they did serve beer illegally. Indian lemons are actually limes, so two of our party members who usually drink lemon tea had to resort to mint-leaf tea.

All hotels had a pigeon problem because pool water was available for them in the outdoor swimming pools. There were hundreds of pigeons at each hotel perched on the hotel building and above the swimming pools, and flocks would descend for drinks at the poolside as the water in the pools was almost level with the ground, so the pigeons could stand on the pool drain covers and drink the pool water. There was a pigeon chaser at each hotel trying to get rid of the birds. It was whilst one of these people was getting pigeons out of a tree by the side of the pool that one of our party slipped over as the pool water flowed across the drains at the side of the pool and onto the walkways. To add to the problems, two of our party were both anointed with pigeon droppings.

The Umaid Bhawan Palace had tried to frighten the pigeons away by bringing in a Peregrine Falcon. The hotel was surprised to find that the Peregrine Falcon started killing pigeons for food (as you would expect), and as killing birds was against the Hindu religion, the Peregrine Falcon was removed. One of the many sites we visited was totally ruined by pigeon droppings, which covered everything we were meant to see.

Hotel Imperial, Delhi, was a great hotel, but ITC Mughal, Agra, was very disappointing because it is suffering from rising damp. The first set of rooms we were offered was on the lower ground floor, and the walls inside the room were wet. The second set of rooms was in another part of the building, but, again, were on the lower floor, where workmen were plastering the walls. Following many complaints, we were eventually put into mini-suites on the first floor. Service at the hotel was not excellent, and the duty manager kept questioning us about our hotel voucher and how the hotel would be paid. No lift was available, and two of our party struggled to get up the steps. We visited the Taj Mahal whilst staying at the hotel, which was interesting. We were surprised to find that the building contained only two coffins, one large and one small, even though the Taj Mahal from the outside appears massive.

The Samode Haveli in Jaipur was an absolutely terrible hotel in the middle of the city, surrounded by many mosques, with one very near the hotel. Five times a day, from early morning to late at night, all the mosques in the city compete to make themselves heard over the loudspeakers. The noise was so deafening that all hotel guests were given earplugs, which only partially blocked it. The Samode Haveli was built 175 years ago, and the rooms were relatively small. There were tables, chairs, and couches outside each room in a small enclosure, but we could not use them because they were stained with pigeon droppings. Only one restaurant was available.

The Umaid Bwawan Palace in Jodhpur was a great hotel with the only fault being the yellow water out of the sink and bath taps. Another issue was the “English fish and chips” on the menu, which the Taj Hotel in London supposedly recommended. Two of us tried this dish, and because the chips were cold and the fish was small and crispy, the hotel removed the charges from the bill.

The Taj Lake Palace in Udaipur was a small hotel with a small pool, small rooms, and terrible service, so much so that the hotel scrapped all extras bills, although this did not include any meals or teas; cash was paid and not charged to the rooms. The swimming pool area was minimal, with a few chairs. There were three main problems at this hotel: the Sky TV box was not working in one room, and reception said they would send somebody to look at it, but they never did. When one of our party hung the red tassel outside her room to indicate that the room needed attention, this was ignored. Also, there was no lift, and two of our party struggled to get up the steps.

Internal Flights and Home

The flight from Udaipur to New Delhi was the last straw, as security required that men and women queue separately to have their hand luggage scanned, etc., and it seems that Indians in general know nothing about queuing, as the two women in our party were jostled out of the way by Indian women. This happened to the men as well, with people at the back coming forward to put their hand luggage through the scanner, pushing the two men in our party out of the way. Whilst one of our party had previously booked seats and a special meal for everyone, we ended up with different seats and a spicy wrap, which was not what we had ordered.

On our itinerary, we were supposed to fly from New Delhi to Amritsar. Still, when we got off the flight in New Delhi, we all decided we had had enough and wanted to go home, even though we had pre-paid hundreds of pounds for excess baggage on the two Jet Airways flights, which only allowed 15kg of free luggage per person. We all agreed to fly home to London and booked a Gulf Air flight via Bahrain for £400 per person. At great expense, one of our party then made nine calls to the local Indus travel representative listed in the

itinerary (including three calls to the emergency number) to notify them we were leaving, but no one answered. Luckily, as we were walking to board the plane, the emergency contact phoned back, and we explained we were going home.

As we did not complete the entire itinerary, the payments for unused hotels, trains, planes, transportation, drivers, guides, and representatives were refunded. In reality, we should have received compensation for staying at the Samode Haveli in Jaipur and for being sent on a "Golden Triangle" tour, which was totally unsuitable for our ages and state of health.