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North India Comprehensive Tour

The Art of Pilgrimage

September 30-October 20, 2016

coincides with Dusshera, Festival of Good over Evil

One of the most comprehensive itineraries of North India, “The Art of Pilgrimage” travels through a diverse cross-section of India, both geographically and spiritually, from the Himalayas through Rajasthan, visiting the holy pilgrimage sites of the various religions of India.

On this tour we traverse through seven Indian States, board one train and three flights, stay at some of the most authentic atmospheric hotels and participate in special ceremonies.

As spiritual traditions are the fabric of the culture of India, there is no better way to “get into the culture” than to visit its sacred sites. One has to embark upon such a journey to understand the complexity that is India and to unravel Indian Spirituality.



Detailed Itinerary

Sep 30 Arrival in Delhi. Met at airport & transfer to hotel.

Arrival needs to be in the PM of September 30 or the early AM of October 1 to avoid additional hotel charges.

Oct 1 Delhi Orientation, Tour New Delhi, Bazaars, Optional Yoga (B,L,D)

Breakfast and orientation with our guide.

We have a relaxed pace today to adjust and assimilate with Indian culture in the big city.

Departing the hotel at about 10 am, we'll start with visiting sites in New Delhi including Raj Ghat, (Gandhi Darshan), a memorial to the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi. It is a simple black marble platform that marks the spot of his cremation on 31 January 1948. An eternal flame is lit.

Opposite Raj Ghat is the Gandhi Memorial Museum that showcases the life and principles of Mahatma Gandhi and the Nationalist Movement.

Located in the home where she used to live, the Indira Memorial Museum preserves some of the personal belongings of Indira Gandhi, including the sari she was wearing when she was assassinated.. The collection of photographs and artifacts of Nehru-Gandhi family are amazing and stirring.. The most exclusive collection is the childhood photographs of Indira. The museum also displays some of Rajeev Gandhi's belongings and his own photography. The museum is surrounded by a pleasant garden.

Afterwards we drive past India Gate, memorial built in the year 1931 to commemorate the Indian soldiers who died in the World War I & the Afghan Wars. President's House built in the year 1931. Until 1950 it was known as Viceroy's House & served as the residence of the Governor-General of British India.

We'll enjoy lunch at a local restaurant.

Afterwards, we check out what's on most people's minds—the bazaars.

Since a lot of people enjoy buying traditional Indian clothing to wear during the tour (salwar kameeze for women and kurta for men), we stop at the Fab India retail store, which has a wide range of garments made from hand-woven and hand block-printed fabrics, upholstery fabrics, durries and home linens. Fab India sources its products from over 7500 craftsmen and artisans across India, thus supporting the craft traditions of India by providing an urban market, helping to sustain rural employment and slow the pace of urban migration. Extending a partnership to the farmers in rural areas, Fab India now offers organic food products and ayurvedic body care as well.

From here we go to the Shivananda Yoga Center, about a 10 minute drive from Fab India. A special hatha yoga class, 1.5 hours, has been arranged for us and starts at 3:30 pm. It is a great way to shake off the jet lag and wonderful inspiration for the start of our journey. You can enjoy it even if you have never practiced yoga before. Just follow along and do what you can.

Those who do not wish to participate in the yoga class will be taken back to the hotel at this time.

At 5:00 pm , we return to our hotel to shower and change; then out to dinner at an authentic Indian restaurant in Delhi.

Oct 2 Tour of Old Delhi Hindu Cultural Sites + Indo-Islamic Architecture (B,L,D)

We depart the hotel at approx 9 am. This morning's tour starts with entering the walled city of Old Delhi. In the midst of the Old City lies the great Jama Masjid- the principal mosque of Old Delhi. Built in the year 1656 AD by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, it is the largest & best known mosque in India. The courtyard of the mosque can hold up to twenty-five thousand worshippers. The mosque also houses several relics in a closet in the north gate, including an antique copy of the Qur'an written on deer skin. It lies at the origin of a very

busy central street of Old Delhi, Chandni Chowk.

From here we take an exciting rickshaw ride through Chandi Chowk, the old marketplace of Shah Jahanabad now a colorful bazaar. At one end of the bazaar stands the Red Fort.

The Red Fort, built in the year 1648, is the largest surviving fort of Shah Jahanabad and is now called Old Delhi. It has the same Mughal architecture and structure as Agra Fort (which we will visit later in the tour). Agra Fort is better preserved and accessible whereas large parts of Red Fort are held by the Indian Army and one has to walk quite a distance to see the permitted areas. This is the reason we will not visit Red Fort.

Next, we drive to Safdarjung's Tomb, situated at the head of Lodi Road, the tomb emits the glow of the Mughal era. Safdarjung's Tomb was built in memorial of Safdarjung, the governor of the province of Awadh and Nawab Shuja-ud-daulah's father. Safdarjung's Tomb is one of the few buildings built during the last span of the Mughal era. The plan of the tomb structure is similar to that of the Humayun's tomb over an area of 300 sq. mtrs. Two graves are inside the tomb, Safdarjung's and the his wife. The chambers in the tomb are essentially rectangular in shape except the corner chambers are structured octagonal. The tomb overlooks the beautiful pavilions of 'Badsha Pasand' or the king's favorite, Moti Mahal or the pearl palace and Jangli Mahal or the sylvan palace.

We will stop for lunch at a wonderful traditional Rajasthani restaurant.

Afterwards, visit Qutab Minar, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, built in the year 1206 by Qutub-ud-din Aibek. It is the world's tallest (72m) brick minaret and an important example of Indo-Islamic Architecture. Surrounding the building are many fine examples of Indian artwork from the time it was built in 1193.

The day culminates at Lakshmi Narayan Temple, (also called Birla Mandir) whose soaring spire dominates the urbane skyline of Central Delhi. About 2km west of Connaught Place, this garish, modern, Orissan styled temple was erected by industrialist B.D.Birla in 1938 and was inaugurated by Mahatma Gandhi on the condition that people of all castes especially untouchables would be allowed in. The temple enshrines almost all the deities of the Hindu Pantheon, the presiding deity being Narayan (Vishnu, the preserver in Hindu trinity) and his consort Lakshmi, the Goddess of prosperity and good fortune. The revered shrine, nestling in the heart of the city, is as famous for its sanctity as for its architecture. Portraying an alluring blend of cream and red, the sacred shrine also affords a curious medley of Hindu mythology and ancient Indian architecture. The exterior is of white marble and red sandstone with tall curved towers.

We shall visit Geeta Bhawan (Hall) where paintings depicting scenes from Indian mythology are displayed. We will attend the aarti (puja ceremony) performed every evening, 6:30-7 PM.

Dinner at a local restaurant.

Oct 3 Delhi – Haridwar/ Haveli Hariganga (B,L,D)

Transfer to the domestic airport for the flight to Dehradun 9W824 dep. 1110 / arr 1155. On arrival we will transfer to Haridwar (30 km).

We shall spend the day in Haridwar visiting various sites including the Neel Parvat Temple, dedicated to the Goddess Chandi Devi (Durga), which is on top of a hill overlooking the Ganges and about 6 km (3.7 miles) from Haridwar. We get up to the temple via a ropeway. Local Indian women will be there performing devotionals to the goddess.

This evening we shall join hundreds of locals along the banks of the Ganges to attend an ancient prayer ritual. We arrive early to enjoy pre-ceremony festivities on the promenade. There is much excitement in the air as people are bustling about in preparation. The ceremony, called aarti (full name Har ki Pauri) is a mesmerizing experience involving a good amount of chanting and a fire ceremony performed by a Hindu priest.

Afterwards, a short walk through the bazaar from the sacred Har ki Pauri to our accommodation, the Hari Ganga, a beautiful heritage haveli, on the banks of the Holy Ganges. It stands at the gateway to the Devbhumi, the abode of the Gods and the "Char Dham Yatra". The Haveli is an architectural marvel, where the ancient structure has been restored to recreate an old-world charm with modern day hospitality. The interior of The Haveli is interestingly reminiscent of old Indian Mythological times where there are balanced tones of tranquility & comfort.

Oct 4 Haridwar - Rishikesh (Homa Ceremony) / The Great Ganga Hotel (B,L,D)

This morning, we drive to Rishikesh (40 min).

Rishikesh is a pleasant town, much more peaceful than Haridwar. We enjoy a full day walking tour visiting Sivananda Ashram and Omkarananda next to it; then cross the Ram Jhula (now called the Sivananda Bridge) on the Ganga visiting several ashrams and temples including: Gita Bhawan, Gita Ashram, Swargashram and Parmarth Ashram.

There are many shops stocked with spiritual books, music, clothes and articles of a spiritual nature along the path.

We will reach Parmarth Ashram in time for the Homa Ceremony in which various forms of the Divine are invoked in a sacred fire while Sanskrit mantras are chanted. The energetic vibrations that are invoked during a traditional Vedic fire ceremony represent the most powerful presence of the Divine on earth.

The combination of the powerful energy of the fire and the Sanskrit mantras creates extremely auspicious and purifying vibrations that are beneficial to all who attend the homa. It is believed that the smoke that rises from a homa contains a powerful healing energy, and as it rises to the heavens it purifies the atmosphere, both physically and subtly, encouraging a peaceful environment and gentle weather. Even the damaging effects of natural catastrophes can be reduced through the performance of homas. The element of fire is associated with the upward motion of the divine kundalini energy and is considered to be the most powerfully purifying element. Every kind of negative karma can be purified by the sacred homa fire due to divine grace.

The ceremony takes place in the open courtyard of the temple. We participate in decorating it with flowers, drawing Rangolis- religious diagrams on the floor with rice and colored powder similar to the mandalas done by the Buddhists. Each person will be given a personal receptacle to perform the ceremony and Indian dress; kurta, pyjama for both men and women with a turban or cap for men and a chunni (head scarf) for the women to wear during this ceremony. Each one will be individually blessed by the head priest and offered prasad (an offering). The timing of the HOMA has to be at a special holy time decided by the priest. Usually Hindus perform such an important ceremony after a bath, with fresh clothes, partake of Prasad and have their first meal after the ceremony.

The rest of the afternoon is independent for you to enjoy quiet time at the hotel, take a walk in the woods nearby, or indulge with an ayurvedic massage.

In the evening we will view the aarti ceremony from the rooftop of our hotel.

The Great Ganga Hotel is situated at one of the best areas in or around Rishikesh, at Muni-ki-Reti, the place where the holy Ganges meanders out of the hills and enters the plains. Surrounded by lush green hills, the hotel offers an atmosphere of serene tranquility. All rooms are equipped with air-conditioning, heater and balconies where one can enjoy the enchanting panoramic view of the River Ganges, the Chandrabhaga River and Rishikesh town. It is a five minute walk to reach the banks of the Ganges and the nearby forest makes for a nice walk in nature. Yoga classes and massage are available.

Oct 5 Rishikesh-Amritsar/ Hotel Ramada (B,L)

This morning we drive to the Lakshman Jhula Bridge along the river, visiting several ashrams and temples including Ved Niketan and Triveni Ghat.

This afternoon we enjoy a hearty lunch before transferring to Haridwar railway station for Jan Shatabdi

Express train departing 1430, arriving. 2205 to Amritsar. Suggest bring snacks for the train ride.
On arrival, transfer to hotel.

Oct 6 Amritsar (Sikh Traditions) / Hotel Ramada (B,L,D)

Today is another full and exhilarating day! Amritsar is in the state of Punjab, in the Himalayan foothills called the Shivaliks and one of the most ancient and fascinating cities in India. It is an important seat of Sikh history and culture. The Golden Temple was founded by the fourth Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Ramdas, and completed by his successor Guru Arjan Dev. It is famous for its full golden dome, one of the most sacred pilgrim sites for Sikhs. The Mandir is built on a 67-foot square of marble and is a two-storied structure. Maharaja Ranjit Singh had the upper half of the building adorned with approximately 400 kg of gold leaf. The Golden Temple is surrounded by a number of other temples.

This morning we will witness the religious traditions of the Sikhs at the Golden Temple during a guided tour by one of the Sikh priests as well as enjoy time to stroll independently and reflect/meditate.

Hypnotic meditative music plays as we walk the path with the pilgrims around the lake. We will enter various buildings, one where the Guru Granth Sahib or Adi Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the holy scripture is read aloud from 4 am-10 pm. It is a voluminous text of 1430 angas (parts), compiled and composed during the period of Sikh Gurus, from 1469 to 1708. A collection of hymns (shabads), the text describes what God is like and the right way to live. Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708), the tenth of the Sikh Gurus, affirmed the sacred text Adi Granth as his successor, terminating the line of human Gurus, and elevating the text to Guru Granth Sahib, the final Guru of the Sikhs.

Thousands of pilgrims arriving each day are offered shelter and food prepared and served by volunteers. The pilgrims travel for days from all over India, often on foot. The temple complex is a community run by volunteers and is truly amazing to witness the efficiency by which thousands are feed each day and also inspiring, as elsewhere in India, to see the devotion of the people to their faith. Voluntary service is one of the main paths of Sikhism. Everyone is contributing in some way at the shrine; chopping veggies, cleaning utensils, making chappatis, cooking daal, serving, cleaning, offering water, participating in ongoing maintenance and repair. Everyone is giving back to humanity by way of self less service.

For those who would like to participate, our group members will have an opportunity to volunteer in the kitchen. (You must let our guide know at least the day prior).

We will spend considerable time today just soaking up the ambiance here, which is an amazing feast for all the senses. We can gather in a spot by the pool surrounding the lake, for reflective time and journal writing.

We will have lunch at the popular local restaurant, Bhrawan Du Dhaba, walking distance from the Golden Temple and our hotel.

In the late afternoon drive 32km (20 miles) to Wagah, the border town between India and Pakistan, to arrive just before sunset to witness the flag ceremony between these two countries that were once one.

We will sit on the India side with the locals for an exciting high-kicking, toe-stepping, quick-marching ceremony wherein the Indian and Pakistani flags are lowered on either side of the only border that remains open between the two countries. A number of officers from each team put on a performance to the satisfaction of the cheering, chanting crowds, seated on concrete grandstands on either side. The exercise ends with the slamming of the border gates, at which time each side's flag is urgently carried to a room for overnight safekeeping. The Flag Ceremony is a touching, memorable experience.

We return to the hotel for dinner and then a return visit to see Golden Temple all lit up after dark.

Oct 7: Amritsar - Dharamsala (McLeod Ganj) / Pride Surya Mountain Resort (B,L,D)

After breakfast drive to the headquarters of Tibet in Exile, Dharamsala (180 km / 5hrs). A scenic drive through the mountains brings you to the upper Dharamsala or popularly known as McLeod Ganj. This is the

heartland of Buddhism within India.

This hill station with its magnificent view of the Dhauladhar range of the Himalayas, the seat of His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama (where the Dalai Lama lives when in India) and the headquarters of the Tibetan government-in-exile. The town has a large Tibetan refugee settlement. Numerous monks in their flowing maroon robes, many street shops selling momos and butter tea, and old Tibetan women in their traditional clothes tuning their prayer wheels, could well be in Tibet.

After checking into our hotel, we will have lunch and then a short walking tour of the town, stopping to spin the main prayer wheel and passing by the nunnery.

The Namgyal Monastery, which houses the Buddhist School of Dialectics, also known as the "Tsuglagkhang" (cathedral) is opposite the Dalai Lama's residence. It resembles the center of a similar one in Lhasa. Inside are large gilded bronze statues of the Buddha and it is a good place to chat with the monks.

Next to the Tsuglagkhang is the Kalachakra Temple with modern murals of mandalas - protectors of the Dharma, as well as Buddhist masters, with the central image being of the Shakhyamuni. Sand Mandalas are constructed throughout the year. This temple is particularly important as it practices Kalachakra Tantra, which is instrumental in bringing about world peace and harmony. If the Dalai Lama is in Dharamshala he leads the prayers on special occasions.

We shall attend an early evening puja at Kalachakra Temple (pending occurrence). Those interested can have a short time to stroll town independently & shop.

Dinner and early to bed as we have a very full and exciting day tomorrow!

Oct 8: Dharamsala - Norbulinka Institute -Taragarh (60 km 1.5hrs) / Taragarh Palace (B,L,D)

Today's activities are exhilarating! Inspiring! Touching your hearts!

We arise extra early for a 6 am walk to the Namgyal Monastery (Dalai Lama's monastery) to witness the monks chanting/meditation. It is possible we will be invited inside to sit around the exterior of their circle and participate. Afterwards, we may be so lucky as to be blessed by the head lama with a kotta (white cloth placed around ones neck).

Afterwards, we join the locals for a walk circumambulating the monastery complex. It is a breath-taking and inspiring experience-- not to be missed! The walk will take 20-30 minutes, depending on how long you care to linger at the mid-point, where there are large prayer wheels and often monks chanting and playing music while locals pray at the chortens.

Return to the hotel for breakfast by 9 am.

After breakfast, a half hour's drive will take us to the Norbulinka Institute, a major center for Buddhist teaching and practical work. Named after the summer residence of the Seventh Dalai Lama, it was set up to ensure the survival of the Tibetan Buddhism cultural heritage. Over 100 students learn a variety of crafts in wood, metal, silk and thangka painting.

The visual focal point and spiritual center of Norbulingka Institute is the Deden Tsuglagkhang temple. The 15 foot gilded copper statue of Buddha Shakyamuni, made by Norbulingka Institute statue making master the late Pemba Dorjee, is the largest of its kind in exile. Above the temple there is a library housing Tibetan scriptures, and also both Tibetan and English reference books.

We will enjoy chai and snacks at the beautiful garden café (pay direct) and continue an hour's drive to the Taragarh Palace, our wonderful accommodation for the next two nights.

In this area we will visit both Buddhist and Hindu sacred places., however our accommodation was built by Muslim royalty.

Taragrah is a spectacular location with the Dhauladhars towering behind with its peaks between 9500Ft – 16000 Ft which are clearly visible from here.

Formerly known as Al Hilal (land of the crescent moon), Taragarh Palace was built in 1931 by the 27 year old Nawab of Bahawalpur as a large European-style summer residence up in the cool Himalayan jungle of the Kangra district. He laid out lush gardens, built a glass pavilion and a mosque. It was bought by the royal family of Jammu & Kashmir in 1951 for the Maharani who lived there for several years. It is now run as a hotel by the present royal family.

After check-in, you'll enjoy a home-style prepared lunch at the palace. Then some time to wander about the "palace," and personal relaxation.

In the evening, drive 5 km to Baijnath, a pleasant little town surrounded by tea plantations. Here you will visit Baijnath Temple, one of the oldest existing Shiva temples. The temple is dedicated to Shiva Vaidyanatha. It is supposed to be the temple where Ravana worshipped Shiva to gain immortality. The Baijnath is one of the twelve 'Jyotirlingas' and is thronged with pilgrims during the festival of Shivratri.

A Jyotirlinga' or Jyotirling or Jyotirlingam is a shrine where Lord Shiva an aspect of God in Hinduism is worshipped in the form of a Jyotirlingam or "lingam (pillar) of light." There are twelve traditional Jyotirlinga shrines in India. It is believed that Lord Shiva first manifested himself as a Jyotirlinga. It is believed that a person can see these lingas as columns of fire piercing through the earth after he reaches a higher level of spiritual attainment.

Return to the Taragarh Palace for dinner and overnight.

Oct 9 Taragarh / Taragarh Palace (B,L,D)

Enjoy a leisurely morning! We will have a late morning departure to visit the Tashijong Gumpa that is the focus of a small Tibetan community who hail from Kham province in Tibet. We'll have a pleasant walk around the village with possible opportunities for interaction with the residents.

We return to the hotel for lunch.

This afternoon we drive to Sherabilling Monastery, one of the world's largest Buddhist teaching centers. The monks received a Grammy for their Sacred Buddhist Chanting in 2003. (Best Traditional World Music Album). Sherab Ling Monastery nestles in the gentle pine-forested foothills of northern India's Kangra Valley, the seat of its founder His Eminence Ti Situpa XII, a leading Tibetan Buddhist teacher and peace campaigner.

Here the monks perform mesmerizing prayer ceremonies, as part of their daily lives, originating many centuries ago in the great Buddhist monasteries of Tibet. The monks begin their day with the Lineage Prayer, offering respect to a line of great meditation practitioners going back as far as the 7th century. The Mahakala Ceremony is part of each day's closing ritual in which the monks ask for purification and dedicate their blessings to all sentient creatures.

We shall attend the monks' evening prayer and chanting session.

Return to the palace for dinner and evening at leisure for relaxing and enjoying the ambiance.

Oct 10 Taragrah-Delhi-Varanasi (Hinduism) / Hotel The Gateway Ganges (B,D)

After breakfast we drive to the airport for the flight to Delhi t AI9814 dep. 1210 / arr. 1350 to Delhi, connecting flight 6E176 dep. 1620 / arr. 1730 to Varanasi.

A contemporary of Nineveh and Thebes, Varanasi today is the oldest living city in the world. One of India's most sacred cities, a devout Hindu believes to die and be cremated in Varanasi is to gain "moksha" or release from the eternal cycle of rebirth. The visit to the old city is a fascinating insight into the rituals of Hinduism.

Every temple is well attended and every street corner has roadside shrines and vendors selling garlands, incense sticks and other items used in worship.

On arrival attend the aarti ceremony performed by Hindu priests on the banks of the Ganges River. We shall board a country boat and ride out to the point right in front to witness the aarti away from the crowds.

Oct 11 Varanasi - Dusshera Festival (Buddhism & Hinduism) / The Gateway Ganges (B,D)

This morning we switch gears from Hinduism to experience a slice of important Buddhist history nearby.

A twenty minute drive brings us to Sarnath, the spiritual center of Buddhism. Sarnath is where Buddha gave his first sermon. The ancient ruins are fascinating, including the Dhamekh Stupa that is believed to mark the spot where Buddha preached his famous sermon; the archaeological museum is excellent. There is also a monument dedicated to Buddha and a modern Buddhist temple with murals by a Japanese painter depicting the story of the life of Buddha.

Return to the hotel for lunch (pay direct) and then we will go into the Old City to observe people preparing for the festivities.

The 2 week long Dussehra festival peaks today with the burning of effigies of Ravana and his two brothers Kumbhkaran and Meghnath. The essence of this festival is victory of truth over evil.

This evening is reserved for the festivities that start approx 6 or 6:30 pm.

Dinner at a local restaurant and return to the hotel for an early bedtime. Another early rising in the morning.

Oct 12 Varanasi-- Bharat Milap Festival / The Gateway Ganges (B,D)

Sunrise boat ride on the Sacred Ganges River.

A visit to Varanasi reveals the spiritual heart of India, and the best way to experience this is to tour the Ganges in a country boat at sunrise. Pilgrims, yogis and mystics flock to the ghats (steps) which lie along the banks of the Ganges to take a cleansing dip in India's holiest river, practice yoga, meditate, or to complete mundane earthly chores such as washing clothes and vessels. Early morning life in this city revolves around the ghats.

After our boat ride, we walk through the narrow alleys where we share space with cows, scooters, cycle rickshaws, shops and people to the banks of the Ganges, visiting the temples and being able to watch the rituals of Hindu worship.

Return to the hotel for breakfast and some independent time.

This afternoon we attend Bharat Milap Festival, always held the day following Dussehra at Nati Imli, Varanasi. It is an important festival of Kashi (ancient name of Varanasi), celebrated to commemorate Lord Ram's return to Ayodhya after 14 years of exile and his reunion with his brother, Bharat. The people of Varanasi celebrate Bharat Milap with great fanfare and devotion. Thousands gather in the streets to see the procession of Lord Ram and his reunion with younger brother, Bharat. People pay their respect by putting tilak on their forehead and garlanding Lord Ram and his brothers. The story of Lord Ram is the main theme of Valmiki's Ramayana and Tulsidas' Ramcharitmanas. Another interesting part of the Bharat Milap celebration is the presence of Kashi Naresh (former king of Varanasi) with all his royal entourage and regal finery. There will be a grand procession followed by ceremonies performed just before sunset.

Oct 13 Varanasi – Khajuraho / Hotel Taj Chandella (B)

Transfer to airport for flight to Khajuraho 9W 2423 dep. 1240 / arr. 1325. Transfer to hotel for check-in and lunch on your own at the hotel restaurant (pay direct).

This quiet, genial, dusty village is awash with temples. Temples for everything - sun gods, sacred bulls and, more memorably, sex. Stone figures of apsaras or 'celestial maidens' pout and pose like Playboy pin-ups while mithuna, erotic figures, run through a whole Kama Sutra of positions and possibilities. It's highly salacious stuff and one reason why the temples of Khajuraho are famous throughout the world. The other reason is that they are liberally embellished with some of the finest handiwork of the Chandela period, a dynasty which survived for five centuries before falling to the onslaught of Islam. Visitors are also drawn to a dance festival, celebrated in March, which attracts some of the best classical dancers in the country - the floodlit temples provide a spectacular backdrop during the event.

This afternoon we shall visit the Western Group of temples from the Chandella period, 9th- 11th century that are illustrated with remarkable sculptures of the classic erotic literature the Kama Sutra. These are the largest group and most important temples. Of the original 85, only 25 survive and each is a masterpiece dedicated to different deities. The temples were lost among the forest for centuries and were accidentally discovered by a British army engineer in 1858.

Externally, the temples consist of curvilinear towers with clusters of lesser turrets clinging to them, suggestive of rising mountain peaks converging round a great central peak. Round the exterior walls are two, sometimes three, superimposed rows of gods, goddesses, kings and heroes, courtesans, couples in carnal embrace and, in some cases, friezes depicting various forms of bestiality. The interiors are just as ornate, with an open portico leading into a main hall, then a vestibule beyond which is an inner sanctum containing the free-standing cult image. In fact, the sculpture and architecture blend so perfectly that each building appears to have been conceived by a single mastermind.

Oct 14 Khajuraho - Orchha - Gwailor / Hotel Usha Kiran Palace (B,L,D)

This morning we visit the Eastern Temples and the Old village of Khajuraho (where the local residents live).

Most of the temples here belong to the Jain faith but there are three Hindu temples of the group, namely, the Brahma temple enshrining a four-faced linga; the Vamana temple with divine carvings of sensuous celestial maidens in various poses adorning its outer walls and the Javari temple with an opulently carved doorway and ostentatious sculptures on its exteriors.

From here we drive to Orchha (170km/ 105 miles/4 hours drive), the capital of the kingdom of the Bundella Rajputs from 1531 to 1783. We visit Jahangir Mahal Palace, an Indo-Persian style palace of the Mughul period and the Ram Raja Temple, built in the 17th century. **NOTE:** road conditions are very poor in this section. Mostly due to monsoon damage that has been slow to be repaired. This means the drive can be slow and bumpy.

Lunch at the Amar Mahal in Orchha. Afterwards, drive 2.5 hours to Gwailor and transfer to hotel. Enjoy some leisure time to relax and dinner at the hotel.

Transfer to hotel Usha Kiran Palace. Rich in history, this 120-year-old Usha Kiran Palace played host to the King of England and is now a heritage hotel. Set amidst 9 acres of beautifully landscaped lawns, this regal palace is outfitted with artistic stone carvings and delicate filigree work.

Oct 15 Drive to Agra (2 hrs) / Hotel The Gateway (B,D)

After check in, visit Itmad-Ud-Daulah, the first white marble inlaid grave in pure Indo-Persian style, built between 1622 and 1628.

Afterwards visit Agra Fort, built principally as a military establishment by Akbar in 1565. The red sandstone Agra Fort was partially converted into a palace during Shah Jahan's time. This massive Fort is 2.5 km long & is considered as predecessor of Delhi Red Fort.

Return to the hotel for lunch on your own and personal time.

In the late afternoon we'll go across the river to the grand and fabulous Taj Mahal. We shall tour the inside and then sit together as we watch the sunset.

Oct 16 Agra-Mathura / Hotel Radha Ashok (B,L,D)

Sunrise visit to Taj Mahal. We shall drive to a point where the cars are parked and continue to the entrance by horse drawn carriage.

Return to the hotel for breakfast.

Afterwards, we visit a centre for the exquisite art of setting semiprecious stones in marble known as "parchin kari." It was first introduced in India in the 17th century by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan. For centuries this traditional art has been handed down from one generation to another within the families of the great master craftsmen, who gave the world the magnificent Taj Mahal.

Then, drive 60 km to Mathura, birthplace of Krishna. We visit Krishna temple and the birth place of Lord Krishna. We will have lunch in Mathura and then drive 12 km to Vrindavan, where Krishna spent much of his childhood (raised in the cow-herding village of Gokul in the Vrindavan forest).

Vrindavan has an ancient past, associated with Hindu history, and is an important Hindu pilgrimage site. One of its oldest surviving temples is the Govinda Dev temple, built in 1590, with the town founded earlier in the same century.

The Bhagavata Purana describes Krishna's childhood pastimes in the Vrindavan forest where he, his brother and his cowherd friends stole butter, engaged in childhood pranks and fought with demons. Along with these activities, Krishna is also described as dancing with the local girls of Vrindavan village, especially Radharani, who were known as **gopis**. These pastimes were the source of inspiration for the famous Sanskrit poem, Gita Govinda by the Sanskrit poet, Jayadeva (c. 1200 AD).

Today the major tradition followed in the area is Vaisnavism (one of the main branches of Hinduism). It is focused on the veneration of Vishnu. The followers of Vishnu, called Vaishnavites, lead a way of life promoting monotheism, which gives importance to Vishnu and his ten incarnations (one of them being Krishna).

Vrindavan is a center of learning with many Vrindavan Ashrams operating, as well as a center of Krishna worship. We shall visit the main centers including Radha Raman, Madan Mohan, Govinda Mandir, Raga Ji Ashram; and witness religious ceremonies--music & chanting--at ISCON Temple, the temple devoted to Krishna.

Return to Mathura for overnight.

Oct 17 Mathura-Fatehpur Sikri-Jaipur (270 km/approx 6 hours)/ Alsissar Haveli (B,L)

Depart after breakfast for a full day of sights and activities.

Our first stop is Fatehpur Sikri, built in 1571. It is one of the world's most perfect ghost cities and a marvel of design and construction. Today its' pristine red sandstone buildings are as perfect as when they were first chiseled.

The town was erected after a holy man, Sheikh Salim Chisti, decreed the births of three sons to Akbar after all his children had died in infancy.

There are three sections to the City: The Royal Palace (notable for the Emperor's throne), the outside of the Royal Palace and the Jami Masjid (the location of the Tomb of Sheikh Salim Chishti, a masterpiece in brilliant white marble). The centerpiece of this remarkable monument is the Jewel House of the Diwan I Khas. Architecturally extraordinary, the four doorways lead into a single-story room where a huge central pillar supports a seat reached by mid-air walkways.

During his stay in Fatehpur Sikri, Akbar spent much time studying religions other than Islam. From discussions with Hindus, Jains, Parsis and recently arrived Portuguese Jesuits from Goa, he developed a new religion called Deen Ilahi, which attempted to combine elements from all major religions. Fatehpur Sikri itself

can be seen as a similar synthesis: a place where Islamic architecture fuses with Hindu and Jain decorative art. Akbar, as was common of the Muslims of the time, had several wives--one Hindu, one Christian and one Jewish. You can see the reflection of each religion in decorative style of each wife's palace.

Lunch at Laxmi Vilas in Bharatpur and continue to Jaipur.

This evening we attend puja at Govind Devji Temple (7-8 pm).

Afterwards, our car is available for those who would like to shop: you can visit gem and jewelry shops, silk and cotton fabric houses to order custom clothing, block print and carpet demonstrations/shops. Or return to our hotel for dinner at their excellent restaurant (pay direct).

Oct 18 Jaipur-Pushkar (145 km/approx 3 hours) / Pushkar Palace (B, L)

This morning, a city tour including the City Palace, Hawa Mahal (Palace of Winds) and the Jantar Mantar Astronomical Observatory.

At the heart of Jaipur is its City Palace which houses an extensive collection of rare manuscripts, Mughal and Rajasthani miniatures, Mughal carpets, costumes and textiles, arms and weapons, royal buggies, chariots and palanquins and a remarkable carriage -the indiraviman - that was drawn by four elephants. At the center is Chandra Mahal, the seven-tiered moon palace where the present Maharaja still resides. The City Palace complex also contains the Govind Devji Temple, dedicated to Lord Krishna.

Just outside the gateway of the City Palace is Jantar Mantar, the Yantralaya of Sawai Jai Singh II, the last great classical astronomer in India. The modernistic structures known as Yantras are the unique creations of this astronomer-king, designed by him and built by experts to observe the movements of the sun, moon, planets and stars. This is the largest of five observatories founded by him in various parts of the country.

Hawa Mahal (Palace of Winds) is Jaipur's most-photographed building, a honeycomb palace with 953 latticed windows overlooking the bazaar and busy streets of Jaipur. Built in 1799 by the poet-king Pratap Singh, this extraordinary building was used by purdah-bound women to watch the grand processions that were a regular feature of the city.

Lunch in Jaipur and then we drive to Pushkar (approx 3 hours).

Pushkar is a holy town that surrounds the holy Pushkar Lake. The whole town follows strict Hindu dietary traditions, therefore no meat or alcohol is served or allowed in the town.

On arrival we'll check in to our hotel located on the lake and start out immediately on a walk through the town to the famous Brahma Temple, said to be one of the few temples in the world dedicated to this deity. It is marked by a red spire, and over the entrance gateway is the hans, or goose, symbol of Brahma, who is said to have personally chosen Pushkar as its site.

The rest of the afternoon/evening is free for you to explore the town independently, lots of shops, restaurants and observations of local life. Optionally you can take a yoga class at local yoga studio—based on schedule (pay direct). We will confirm the schedule closer to the trip departure if anyone requests. It is an easy short walk from the hotel. Or return to the hotel to relax on the patio facing the lake.

At sunset we'll gather at the main ghat (steps leading into the lake) with the locals. There will be drumming from every ghat (52) around the lake as the sun sets. A wonderful gesture and tradition.

Oct 19: Pushkar-Ajmer-Patan (Hindu & Muslim sites) / Patan Mahal (B,L,D)

We'll depart at 8:30 am to Ajmer (15 km), to visit the huge fascinating Dargah Sharif Mosque. It is a venerated holy place for both Hindus and Muslims. The mosque is actually a huge complex or rather like a community containing different areas: food vendors, shops selling beads and other spiritual items, separate areas for women and men to study the holy book and separate areas for call to prayer.

The mosque houses the mausoleum of the Sufi saint, Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, whose blessings are eagerly sought by pilgrims to his dargah. Known as the 'Dargah Sharif', the last resting place of the saint who died in 1235, it lies at the foot of a barren hill. The saint's marble domed mausoleum is India's most important shrine for Muslims and receives an endless flow of visitors of all religions as the sick, the troubled and the childless come here seeking a boon, a blessing or just peace of mind. Legend has it that the Mughal emperor, Akbar came here to the saint in the 16th century in quest of a boon for an heir and the saint obliged.

We'll have lunch at a local restaurant. Afterwards, we depart to Patan, 4.5 hours, for overnight.

Patan is a small town in the state of Rajasthan. In the 12th century, it became the centre of a minor state called Tanwarawati or Torawati (after Tanwar/Tomar the clan name) ruled by the Tomara clan. The chief of the clan is the Rao of Patan, and he is considered to be direct in descent from the last Hindu Emperor Anang Pal Tomar II the ruler of Delhi before Prithviraj Chauhan. The family came and built the impregnable fort at Patan and also the Badalgarh Mahal, halfway up the mountain in the 13th century. The Patan Mahal was built a few years later.

Patan Mahal, home to Rao Digvijay Singh, is situated on the foot hills. He has now opened his home to the discerning traveler. The Patan Mahal is a heritage hotel with 18 rooms with all modern amenities, maintaining its original character.

Late afternoon/evening visit Patan village. You will find Rajasthani men and women busy making bangles or beautiful pots in the village. The temple also adds to the serenity of the existing ambience where one can spend a few spiritual moments on their own.

Oct 20 Drive to Delhi (170 km/approx 4 hours) - Sufi Rituals (B)

Departure (9 am) for the drive to Delhi.

On arrival, we'll stop at Dilli Haat, a contemporary recreation of a traditional outdoor market with a delightful mix of crafts from all over India, food and cultural activities. You can enjoy a last Indian meal, (pay direct) and browse the crafts.

Next we drive to Humayun's tomb, one of the remarkable structures of the Mughal Empire in India. The monument is surrounded by many new buildings but still the structure has importance. Humayun's tomb was built in 1565 A.D by Hamida Banu Begum (Humayun's widow). Close to the monument, is the shrine of Nizamuddin which is very sacred among Muslims. This evening we witness sufi rituals including Quawali music at the tomb of Hazarat Nizamuddin. (Thursdays 5-7 pm).

Return to the hotel for dinner on your own. Rooms for wash and change near the airport. Late night transfer to international airport for flight home.

śivās te panthānaḥ santu
May there be blessings on your journey.

PRICE \$4450 based on minimum 6 people **Single Room Supplement** \$1224
Extra hotel night Delhi: \$98 per person twin share; \$176 single room. **Private Transfer:** \$45 per car

SPECIAL OFFERS: two single room supplements are offered at 50% discount on first come/first serve basis based on min group size of 6 people.

Plus Airfares (estimates/exact TBD when booked)

Delhi - Dehradun \$110, Dharamsala - Delhi \$125, Delhi - Varanasi \$125, Varanasi - Agra min \$125

Includes:

Accommodation (subject to availability)
Delhi – The Lalit Hotel
Haridwar: Haveli Hari Ganga.
Rishikesh – The Great Ganga.
Amritsar: Hotel Ramada
Dharamsala – Surya Mountain Resort
Taragarh – Taragarh Palace.
Varanasi – Taj Gateway Ganges
Agra – The Gateway
Pushkar: Pushkar Palace Hotel
Patan- Patan Mahal
Delhi – Holiday Inn or similar, hotel near airport
Daily breakfast, other meals as indicated in the itinerary (14 lunches and 15 dinners).
Arrival, departure transfers and land transport by ac vehicle
Train tickets in A/C Chair Car Haridwar – Amritsar
Accompanying Indian escort
Professional local guide during sightseeing in Khajuraho & Orcha as per itinerary (required)
Monument entrance fees, Yoga class in Delhi, Boat ride on River Ganges, Homa Ceremony in Rishikesh, two visits to Taj Mahal
Camera fees
Tips to local guide in Khajuraho and Orcha
Mineral water during drives
Porter tips at train stations and domestic airports.
Indian Gov Service Tax

Our Escort:

Kunal Singh was raised in a deeply religious family. His grandfather and grandmother were dedicated followers of Ramsnehi. The tradition of Ramsnehi Sampradaya is one of the great ancient Nirguna traditions of Rajasthan.

Due to his early religious influence, Kunal studied Sanskrit and Indian philosophy to properly understand Hindu values, religious and social traditions. He holds a post-graduate degree in Sanskrit and Hindu Philosophy; his bachelor's degree is in Sanskrit, Geography and Sociology; he also earned a diploma in Travel and Tourism Management.

Kunal has been sharing and discussing philosophical traditions and rituals with western tourist groups for several years. He personally knows Hindu priests at various temples in Rajasthan. And he will also take you to his family priest at Haridwar who has been performing the last rites for his family members for many generations.

Kunal has escorted 7 tours for Spirit of India in the recent past. He is smart, compassionate, communicative, knowledgeable. I am sure you will enjoy him immensely.

Does Not Include: International flight, visa fee, trip cancellation/travel insurance, personal expenses such as laundry, telephone calls, tips to drivers and guide

Notes: Most days are quite full and exciting! Organizing an itinerary of India is tricky if you want to incorporate unique experiences and places not so visited by travelers. Some flights only happen on certain days of the week; some monuments are closed on certain days and special events are on specific days. I just want you to know that it is not our intention to give you long drives, one-night stands or hurried days. The longest drive is 6 hours, considered not so long by Indian standards. We are transported in a very comfortable new model Toyota mini-bus; always more seats than people. Due to the aforementioned issue with flight, sites and event schedules, there are nine places where we only spend one night. These places do not require more time for touring, though I do understand the need for down time and a bit of free independent exploration. The itinerary is organized so we can visit important sites and not miss any significant experiences. We have built in a few places that are relaxing and do have some freedom. India is an amazing, exciting, stimulating and often intense travel experience. You may elect to arrive a day early or stay

on afterwards for rest and/or additional activities. There really are also some beautiful areas where one can enjoy beaches, hiking, fishing and other relaxing activities. We are more than happy to assist you.