



Reeling from India's assault on the senses

Whether on the trail of tigers in the wild, battling the melee of city life or marvelling at the Taj Mahal, Robin McKelvie finds himself almost lost for words

Touching down in New Delhi, the snappy tourist slogan echoes around my head – “Incredible India”. After only a few hours in the chaotic, engaging capital it is clear that India is indeed incredible, not to mention iridescent, intoxicating and often downright infuriating.

Ahead lie three weeks of travels that will sweep me from the maelstrom of India's cities, through to the elegance of her temples and on to bucolic national parks where tigers and leopards roam wild, as I attempt to make any sense of this vast nation of more than a billion souls.

It is no surprise that India can be hard to comprehend, as it feels to me more like a continent than a country. At Indira Gandhi Airport I survey an arrivals board awash with instantly exotic destinations – Goa, Mumbai and Kolkata. India is massive. It is also that instant assault on the senses of travel writing cliché. On the drive in from the airport I have already adopted the brace position twice as we career at high speed through a jungle of not only cars and heavy trucks, but myriad motorbikes and chugging tuk tuks. Then there are the sacred cows, the gutter scavenging pigs and the meandering monkeys, all somehow sharing the scraggy road.

My base in New Delhi is a sanctuary that speaks of India's economic emergence since independence from Britain in 1947. The marble bathed ITC Maurya (www.itchotels.in) sports a sweep of fine restaurants – including Bukhara, arguably the city's best – as well as a spa where a traditional ayurvedic massage promises to soothe both mind and body. Indian five star hotels are like the country, though – gloriously surreal. To welcome me, there is a pillow with my name embroidered on it on the bed and a picture frame awash with images of me that the staff have culled from the internet.

India is a 24/7 sort of country. There really is no respite. My visit coincides with wedding season and on most nights wherever I stay my bed rocks with the booming maelstrom of a lavish Hindu wedding. One moment India is noisy and in your face and the next it is noisy and in your face.

I do find some sense of serenity as I move on to Agra and the Taj Mahal. I am, of course, not alone at the country's biggest tourist attraction, but the Taj is a global icon that does not disappoint. It is no exaggeration to say that it's worth coming to India for alone. I venture out at sunset to watch the light play an ever-changing dance across the vastness of

Clockwise from top left: sacred cows in Jaipur's marketplace; the Taj Mahal; the remains of a sloth bear after its tussle with a tiger; a spice market in Jaipur.

Photographs: Meinzahn/Getty/Stockphoto/Robin McKelvie



‘Crocodiles keep a watchful eye on us as we glide along in total silence in our canoe’



marble and precious stone that stand testament to one man (Mughal emperor Shah Jahan) and his love for his wife, whose tomb lies inside. I cannot resist coming back the next day at sunrise too.

Indian cities can be hard to fall in love with, though. I find the lack of pavements and the sheer threat to life involved in walking around cramps my usual exploration style in New Delhi and Agra. There is respite in Jaipur, Rajasthan's largest city. I have an oasis here in the form of the lavish Fairmont Jaipur (www.fairmont.com/jaipur), where another massage eases travel-worn muscles and the chef cooks up a flurry of delicious Rajasthani dishes. At the opposite end of the scale I savour street food on a sunrise cycle tour of old Jaipur with Le Tour de India.

The next day I embark on a walking tour of Jaipur. I am lucky enough to join a group of locals who all work in design. Together we discover parts and arts of their city they didn't even know existed. Like many Indians I meet, they are unfailingly friendly and at the same time treat me with a slightly bemused curiosity. And I spend quite a bit of time apologising for the stops we have to make so that random strangers can be photographed with me.

Escaping the cities, I venture out to the



Ranthambore National Park. They have leopards and crocodiles here, but like most visitors I am in this wild vastness hunting for tigers. We find one on our first drive. He is trapped down a well in the buffer zone where man is allowed to coexist with these predators. We are the first safari jeep to arrive. A crowd has gathered to watch the madcap attempts to get down the well and tranquillise the tiger.

I don't see any tigers on any of my game drives and I am disappointed again in Satpura National Park. The consolation is that Satpura enjoys the sort of spectacular mountain and jungle



scenery with which India overflows, not to mention the serene calm of the Tawa Reservoir. It also offers the unusual chance to get out of the security of a safari jeep and on to two feet on a walking safari. We chance upon the spot where a large sloth bear has just battled a tiger to the death. The winner is clear from the mound of dark fur and the sloth bear skull. A more leisurely experience comes the next day with a sunrise trip in a canoe around a reservoir that is alive with crocodiles, who keep a watchful eye on us as we glide along in total silence.

My last few days are spent in the welcoming embrace of Ahilya Fort. This

is another India again. There are few tourists around in the riverside town of Maheshwar, where this historic fort has been reinvented as a charming all inclusive heritage hotel. Rather than just cream off the profits the owners work with the local community and I visit a weaving workshop and a school that they have set up nearby.

My last night is spent being rowed out to the Baneshwar Temple. As the sun melts over this sacred river I sip a glass of the ridiculously sweet Indian chai that I have become accustomed to. I am knackered and still slightly bewildered, but beguiled too by India. As we slip back over the sleepy waters the bashing booms of a traditional wedding greet me as I hop on a tuk tuk and dodge the cows and chaos of what is unmistakably Incredible India.

FACT FILE

Robin travelled solo around India on a trip organised by Experience Travel Group (www.experiencetravelgroup.com), which can organise a range of Indian packages, as well as bespoke adventures.

Robin flew with Oman Air (www.omanair.com) which offers flights to Delhi from Manchester Airport starting at £429 return with flat beds available in their award-winning business class.

Do Not Disturb

The No 17 Rutland Street Hotel Apartments, Edinburgh

Heaven seventeen

@THERUTLANDHOTEL

A familiar feature of Edinburgh's cityscape, the Rutland Hotel now has a fresh aspect to offer those seeking an ideal location in the heart of the capital. An extension to the existing luxury self-catering apartments two doors along, No 17 Rutland Street, has been created by award-winning designers Jeffrey Interiors. Each of the four new apartments, converted from a traditional Georgian townhouse property, have been individually designed with a variety of unusual and eye-popping features.

Unless you furnish your own house with hanging resin busts or Love Puppet Neon wall panels, just a couple of the wide and eclectic range of features included throughout the property, you certainly wouldn't describe this as a home from home.

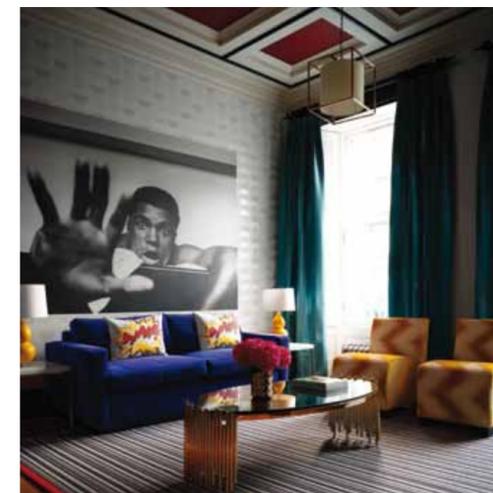
Unlike so many of the run-of-the-mill serviced apartments which have challenged the popularity of hotels in recent years, No 17 Rutland Street provides a singular experience which will linger in the memory beyond the moment you hand back the front door key after your visit.

Room service

We stayed in the ground floor apartment, which looks directly across to the old Princes Street railway station entrance and boasts a striking red and black grid effect ceiling which mirrors that view.

A spacious lounge area, with stunning portraits of Muhammad Ali and the Blues Brothers among the many exceptional decorative touches, incorporates a high range kitchen with a breakfast/dining bar. A canopy-free four poster bed takes centre stage in a large bedroom where Roy Lichtenstein pop art curtains on the tall window set off an otherwise black-and-white look.

There is a sense of space and serenity in every part of the apartment, a theme continued in the bathroom which has a sizeable walk-in



shower and freestanding roll top bath.

Wining and dining

If you want a break from the self-catering aspect of the apartments, look no further than Kyloe Restaurant & Grill on the first floor of the Rutland Hotel itself.

Edinburgh's first gourmet steak restaurant, it has earned a well-merited reputation as one of the city's most distinctive and popular eateries. Kyloe takes genuine pride in delivering what it calls the “steak experience”, with our waiter presenting the wide range of cuts available to us in cheeseboard fashion – or should that be steakboard? – before we made our choices.

From plain old rump to 60-day aged ribeye, the options are comprehensive. We plumped for sirloin and fillet, both receiving high approval ratings, as did the outstanding sides of grilled portobello mushrooms and homemade beer-battered onion rings. If you have room for dessert, well done. We had to raise the white flag and retire downstairs instead to the Rutland's Huxley bar for a nightcap.

Worth getting out of bed for The apartments could hardly be more ideally located, whether your stay is for business or pleasure. Our visit was during the festive season, making the

Christmas attractions in Princes Street Gardens readily accessible, but the property would make the perfect city base at any time of the year.

Budget or boutique?

Boutique in both style and cost, albeit certainly not extortionate. You are also getting something out of the ordinary for your money here, which adds a sense of value.

Little extras

Such is the unusual nature of these apartments, most things in them feel like an “extra”. The simple things in life often remain the best, however, and the complimentary water, milk, crisps, tea and coffee provide a welcome start to a unique self-catering experience.

Guestbook comments

Combining style and creativity with comfort and practicality, No 17 Rutland Street will certainly be added to the address book for a return visit.

Stephen Halliday

Double bedrooms available from £130, one bedroom apartments available from £200; two bedroom apartments available from £280. The Rutland Hotel & Luxury Apartments, 1-3 Rutland Street, Edinburgh EH1 2AE, 0131-229 3402, www.therutlandhotel.com