

Women Share the Essence of India

Before I joined the “Women Only” 23–day tour of Northwest India offered by Incredible Indian Tours (incredibleindiantours.com), plenty of people asked me what made this itinerary different from a mixed tour with men and women participating. “Endless shopping ... spa treatments? ... luxurious cuisine?” they only half–joked. Despite being well–travelled, I had never been on a women–only tour before so I had no response.



The group would be small, a maximum of 10 on all this company’s tours, and I felt sure there would be plenty of grassroots, behind–the–scenes experiences reflecting our Australian tour operator’s personal passion for India. Debbie Kindness had acquired this passion over three decades of travel in India and 19 years of planning trips and guiding in India and Nepal.

And how is it possible to discover the essence of a country if you are in air conditioned mini–vans each day and five–star international hotels each night? The knowledge that this would not be our lot and the very reasonable price of AUD\$3490 for 23 days (including two overnight train trips and two domestic flights) prepared me for the intimate experiences, small–scale accommodations and local eateries that characterized this tour, as well as time spent with Indian people in their homes and a rustic camel safari in Rajasthan’s western desert.



We gathered in Mumbai – four Australians, two Americans, and two Canadians – to begin our adventures through much of the colorful state of Rajasthan, on to Agra and the fabulous Taj Mahal, eastward to the spiritual heartland of Varanasi, then finishing in India’s capital, New Delhi. Only two women knew each other beforehand; everyone else was travelling solo which is not unusual in a ladies’ tour, I’m told. There were a lot of independent thinkers and management leaders, six of them grandmothers and five married to men who had other ideas than exploring the essence of India. All being of the same gender, we agreed to rotate roommates for each of the ten cities and towns where we stayed, an excellent way to get to know each other as roomies for two or three nights at a time.

Only a few times in our extensive travels did we use a driver and mini-van between ancient cities that boasted monumental palaces and forts. Our normal mode of transport mirrored the locals ... taxis in various states of repair, auto or bicycle rickshaws, camel-pulled carts, second class train coaches with curtained berths for two noisy overnight journeys, the subway in New Delhi with its women-only carriages, and plenty of walking each day.



We searched out the endless variations of Indian cuisine, identifying different cultural styles and tastes along our route. Some dishes were more challenging than others. Cooking lessons in a tiny roof-top kitchen classroom were a source of great merriment thanks to a very witty chef, while chai (tea) stops and the search for the finest lassi (sweet yogurt drink) became a daily source of conversational comparison.

I am a confirmed non-shopper, but finding myself outnumbered by a majority of close-to-professional shoppers, I happily tagged along on shopping sprees to see what I could learn. In India shopping is an art form to be savored over several hours with tea served (and possibly even lunch) as the shopkeeper and his assistants display their specialties. The best shops are small and obscure with an open entrance facing onto a narrow street. Expect the occasional sacred cow to stop and observe the proceedings and endless traffic and horn-honking just beyond these unhurried, time-honored proceedings.

Sitting on the floor in a sari shop in Udaipur, more than a hundred dazzling saris were expertly flung across our laps one on top of the other until we lost track of which sari we liked best. Demonstrations in neatly securing four meters of sari to the body were included, and a number of sari transactions were bargained to mutual satisfaction. Also in Udaipur, highly-skilled miniature artists executed colorful paintings on our fingernails using a single squirrel hair as paint brush – no charge – and gave us a lecture on this respected Rajasthani tradition. That day at least ten large paintings were shipped home or packed in ever-expanding suitcases.



Precious and semi-precious gems were another popular quest of our intrepid shoppers – rings, earrings and necklaces purchased from crowded showcases or selected for one-day custom design jewelry from hundreds of fine-cut Indian rubies, sapphires and garnets. Purchasers and observers among us sat nodding sagely, cross-legged and sipping tea while the jeweler poured hundreds of gems, sorted by size, from envelopes onto a velvet display cloth spread on the floor between us.

How could we not bond over such momentous proceedings? Thanks to these ladies, I learned that shopping is no mere walk through a sterile mall. I was truly breathless at the way our small group seemed to be fueling the Indian economy, and we all celebrated each well-considered purchase as though it were our own.

Of course, the core elements of our “Essence of India” trip appear in Incredible Indian Tours’ mixed group itineraries of the same route. However, our women-only journey distinctly feminized the experience in ways that added new dimensions and richness to our incredible adventure.

By Alison Gardner

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