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Inside India

It's not easy to sum up India – the crowds and the sweltering, bustling cities; the pesky touts and the magnificent and tranquil temples; the pestering hawkers and beggars and the warm Indian hospitality. Love it or loathe it, India is a country that must be experienced, at least once in a lifetime. I wanted to visit India for a long time, but costly air travel always got in the way. AirAsia X's inaugural flight from Kuala Lumpur to New Delhi on Aug 4, however, provided the opportunity at long last.

We touched down at Indira Gandhi International Airport's spanking new Terminal 3 to an elaborate welcome – we were the first Malaysian carrier to land there. And so, for the first time ever, I received a congratulatory certificate for landing in an airport! India's summer is quite similar to Malaysia's climate, but when we left the airport the reality of the country hit us. The frenzied mess of Delhi's traffic, the constant blaring of horns, the workers who danced to loud upbeat music in trucks and – amidst the chaos of it all – the bizarre scene of cows calmly munching away. It was exciting and fascinating all at once.

Old Delhi was the capital of Islamic India before the British built New Delhi as their imperial capital. Although modern developments are mushrooming all over Delhi in light of the preparations for the upcoming 2010 Commonwealth Games, the allure of Delhi's rich past is still very much alive, if you care enough to look.

The tranquil ruins of Humayun's Tomb is one place where you can go to get away from Delhi's madness. Built by the widow of the second Mughal emperor in the 16th century, the structure is a fusion of Persian and local architecture. The style it introduced would eventually culminate in the magnificent Taj Mahal.

Another quiet refuge is the Raj Ghat, whose vast and immaculate grounds house a simple, black marble platform that marks the spot where Mahatma Gandhi was cremated following his assassination in 1948. You can't visit the country without paying respects to this Indian legend. Other notable leaders were also cremated here.

I was told that the Red Fort was the best place to go if you wanted an idea of a Mughal city's splendour. Unfortunately, we were in town on a Monday, which is the one day of the week when the attraction closes. Oh well, there were other things to do.

Malaysians love to shop, and Delhi will not disappoint in this regard. There are plenty of street bazaars and government emporiums (with fixed prices) that offer an astounding array of goods for shopaholics – colourful sari, textiles, accessories, jewellery, handicrafts, knick knacks and more.

My market of choice would be Janpath as the traders there don't hassle you much, but if you're looking for wholesale prices, then busy Chandni Chowk opposite the Red Fort is where the bargains are at. My tour group certainly left with heavy bags and wide grins!

Rajasthan

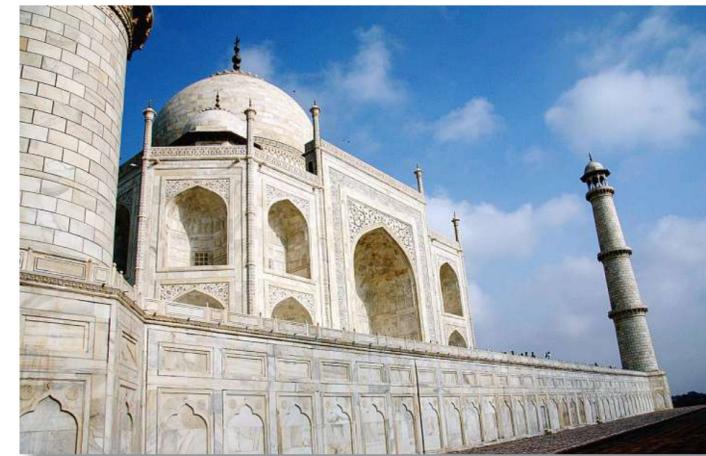
Most people who visit northern India do the classic Golden Triangle circuit of Delhi–Jaipur–Agra. We were no different, since this is the route that highlights the best of the region for those with limited time.

The desert state of Rajasthan is where you can catch a glimpse of the rich and romantic past of the maharajas and their lavish lifestyle. The Pink City of Jaipur, painted such to welcome the Prince of Wales in 1876, is a must-visit. It's a bright and cheerful city where camels and painted elephants have as much right to the road as the motorised vehicles.

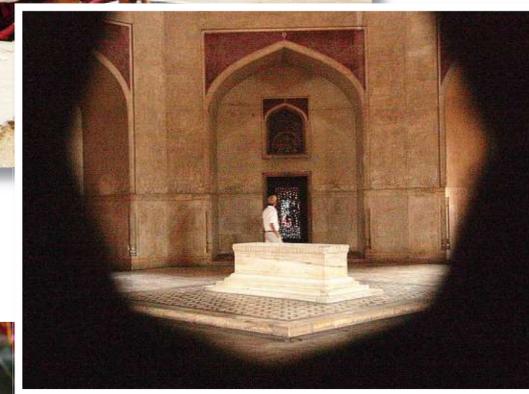
There is beauty to be found in its arts, so abundantly evident in its blue pottery, semi-precious stone jewellery and block printing, and wonder to be found in its culture, from snake charmers to Rajasthani puppet shows.

Shopping is a major sport for all who visit Jaipur, what with the rows upon rows of enticing shops beckoning the eager shoppers and their less enthusiastic partners. Bargaining is the name of the game here but it can get exhausting, not to mention infuriating, to have to fend off the never-ending advances of

To the visitor, India is many things, but it's often the people and the vibrant colours that leave the deepest impression.



Clockwise from left: Colourfully clad women smiling for the camera; schoolgirls in their blue and white uniforms; a close-up of the Taj Mahal; like a scene straight out of a P. Ramlee movie; the tranquil Humayun's Tomb; puppets from Rajasthan; transporting a heavy load in his trishaw. — JOLEEN LUNJEW



persistent traders. Just be careful not to wander too far in, or you may not come out in one piece!

Although the tourist attractions such as Amber Fort, Hawa Palace, City Palace and Jantar Mantar have their individual charms, the memory I cherish the most is of our unplanned visit to a small village enroute to Agra since it opened our eyes to the way the locals live.

As we disembarked from our bus, word got around that "foreigners" had arrived in their midst so a horde of schoolchildren in blue uniforms came rushing out to gather around us. They were as fascinated by us as we were by them. The children followed us into the village, eager and curious.

We saw the humble homes they lived in and the animals that shared the same compound. Women in colourful saris went about their business, tending to their kids and carrying out household chores. It was apparent that their lives were hard but they stopped to share a smile.

Further on, we came to a private school where young children in red uniforms sat cross-legged on the enclosed roofless compound. It was a scene straight out of a 1950s P. Ramlee movie. My heart went out to these kids who, despite their very basic learning conditions, seemed determined to better themselves. Well-behaved, the kids continued to pay attention to their teacher and the green chalkboard in front of them even though it was evident that they were puzzled by our presence.

Their discipline was in stark contrast to the public school children in blue uniforms.

Uttar Pradesh

The state of Uttar Pradesh is better known for hosting one of the Seven Wonders of the World. And what a wonder it is, for who hasn't heard of the Taj Mahal?

This iconic building in Agra is every bit as mesmerising as people make it out to be. Words can't do this magnificent white marble structure justice – its beauty is simply breathtaking. Looking at this monument to love gleaming in the morning sun is an experience I will cherish forever.

I looked on in quiet amazement, as did the other visitors, as though an unspoken rule required us to appreciate its beauty in silence. The Taj, up-close, is even more amazing as it reveals intricate carvings inlaid with 43 different types of semi-precious stones. You can't help but marvel at the elaborate complexity and artistry.

Later on, I took the liberty to do some yoga at the Taj's grounds. It would be a pity to visit Agra and not travel a further 40km west to the fascinating abandoned Mughal city of Fatehpur Sikri. This magnificent red sandstone city was the capital of Emperor Akbar between 1571 and 1585. Its grounds are airy and peaceful, and there are fascinating structures to explore, such as the palaces the emperor built for his three wives who were of Islamic, Christian and Hindu faiths.

There was something different about this place. What was it, I wondered, until it hit me: the freedom to soak in the sights without being hassled by traders!

Alas, my peace was short-lived as the darn touts returned in droves at the nearby Jama Masjid. It is hard to appreciate the beautiful mosque and the spectacular 54m-high Victory Gate when there are kids following you closely everywhere you go, imploring you to buy something. If only they understood the concept of personal space.

Despite the annoying peddlers and the summer heat, India is a fascinating country whose rich history and vibrant people will surely have you coming back for more.

□ The writer's tour was organised by India Tourism, Delhi. AirAsia X flies direct to New Delhi daily. Visit www.airasia.com for flight schedule.