

Divine guidance

Christopher Middleton and his family wanted to do India their way. With a knowledgeable guide, it turned into a holiday beyond their expectations

A scorching hot afternoon in rural Rajasthan and across the vast expanse of sun-caked fields not a creature is stirring. The only sounds to be heard are the tiny splashes made by the diving swallows as they dip their wings into the cooling water of the swimming pool.

Our location is the extraordinary Mandawa Desert Resort, 175 miles west of Delhi and built entirely with local materials. In Chipping Campden that means Cotswold stone, but out here it means mud, straw and cow dung. Yes, improbable as it sounds, this is a luxury retreat made largely from bovine by-products. Not that you would know it from a distance; the resort's impressively buttressed frontage looks like the entrance to some Foreign Legion fortress, manned by orange-turbaned guards.

It's only when you get close up to the walls that you see they are not so much constructed as moulded. Yet despite the raw materials, the feel of the finished product is beautifully smooth and rounded; what's more, each guest bungalow has its own unique shape and its own rice-flour pattern around windows and doors.

Inside, meanwhile, it's all air-conditioning and marble floors, plus designer alcoves strewn with artfully bold-coloured cushions. For while the motif may be peasant, the overall effect is altogether more maharaja. And that fits in perfectly with the theme of our tour, which is entitled "The Rough With The Smooth".

The fact is, when you are visiting India, you need to have some degree of insulation

from the sheer chaos of the streets. As a student in the Seventies, I went for zero insulation (grubbiest hotels, cheapest food) and lost three stones in as many months. Returning now with my family, 30 years later, I wanted a trip that would enable us to immerse ourselves in the teeming tumult of the subcontinent, but at the same time not be swallowed up by it.

How to achieve this balance, though? Not by roaring around in a great, big battle bus with three dozen fellow British tourists for company. Nor, on the other hand, by fighting our own way through the crowds, heat and constant hello-come-see-my-textile-shop approaches that, after a few days of independent travel, somehow lose their charm.

In the end, we did go for a conducted tour, the difference being that we four Middletons (my wife, Sarah, our two teenage children and I) were the only people on it. What's more, we had the chance to choose for ourselves not just the places we visited, but the places we stayed.

This meant that, as well as the mud resort in Mandawa, our list of overnight venues included one glorious maharaja's palace (at Samode), another maharaja's personal bungalow (the Bhanwar Vilas Palace at Karauli), plus a two-bedroom city apartment in Jaipur, a little backstreet hotel in Delhi and a mainstream three-star hotel in Agra. Between them, we were ferried around in a characterful little white camper van, complete with pale blue curtains, wood-panelled interior and old-fashioned ceiling fans that didn't all work.



On paper, then, we and our tour company, The Imaginative Traveller, had fashioned a holiday to match our own specifications. However, the most important element was the one over which we had no control, namely the choice of tour guide.

Get the wrong kind of guide, and you will not only be bored to death with dates and dynasties (were the Mughals the same as the Moguls?); you will also be bullied into a predetermined timetable, in which no, you cannot just opt out of the obligatory midday demonstration of traditional gem-polishing or wooden souvenir whittling.

By contrast, our guide Loki (short for Lokendra) remained responsive to our requests from day one. On our very first afternoon, we said we would like to see something of the less modern parts of the capital, upon which he scrapped our scheduled visit to the India Gate (tall, rectangular, bit dull), sent the bus driver home and took us on an impromptu walking tour of Old Delhi, which comprised a visit to the beggar-beleaguered Jama Masjid mosque, followed by a crazy, cycle-rickshaw ride through impossibly busy back alleys, culminating in a trip back to the hotel on the city's lovely cool, clean Metro.

If we were curious about strange-looking spices, he would introduce us to the man selling them. If we so much as peeked over a school wall, he would sort us out a full Ofsted-type tour of the classrooms plus an interview with the head teacher.

What's more, the doors he opened were not just physical, but cultural. As the days went by, we found out more about him, his family and his forthcoming marriage; did he, we wondered, feel in any way awkward about the prospect of spending his life with someone he had met for only five minutes, whom his mother had chosen for him? "No," he replied. "Just excited."

All of which meant that, having started out with a rather ungracious, Raj-like attitude ("Oh God, the man's going to sit with us at every meal"), we gradually realised that not only could we not manage without Loki, but we genuinely didn't want to. What's more, we found that having a non-family member at the meal table did wonders in keeping down the parent-child argument count.

As so often is the case, then, the best parts of the holiday were not so much the high-profile official sights (such as the Taj Mahal and the ghost city of Fatehpur Sikri), but the more low-key informal moments.

For me, it was playing billiards at the Maharaja of Karauli's time-warp Art Deco bungalow, with half a dozen staff to hand us

our G&Ts and snooker cues. For my son, Charles, 14, it was being able to lie in his

hotel room at 10pm and watch live Test cricket from England (such is the Indian devotion to the game, they have three television channels dedicated to it). And for Sarah and our daughter, Julia, 18, it was being invited by a throng of elderly women worshippers to join a singing-and-dancing session in a Hindu temple filled with the smell of incense and the hypnotic ringing of heavy brass bells.

Therein, of course, lies the great appeal of a bespoke holiday. Instead of trundling around with a herd of fellow trippers, frightening off the locals and putting all your energies into keeping out of each other's photographs, you are free to move at your own pace and achieve a more personal relationship with the sights you visit.

Which means that as well as being able to spend more time in a place that takes your fancy, you can also opt to spend less time in somewhere that doesn't. When asked, for example, if we would like to spend another 60 minutes exploring the Taj Mahal on our own, we reckoned, after a brief family consultation, that actually 20 would do us fine (we had been up since dawn, a couple of tummies weren't quite right and it was so humidly hot we couldn't tell whether the haze in the air was early-morning mist or clouds of perspiration rising from our shirts).

Ah yes, the heat. Read any guidebook and it will tell you optimum tourist temperatures occur from around October to March. Turn up in July or August, then, and you can expect not just heat in the low hundreds Fahrenheit, but either torrential monsoon rains or (as is increasingly common) the kind of super-sultriness that sits on you like a suit of hot, wet foam rubber.

Not that this should put you off, for the advantage of going outside the conventional visiting season is that while not exactly having the place to yourself (India's population is 1.1 billion and rising), you don't get the same industrial quantities of fellow tourists filling your camcorder lens.

Several times on this trip, in fact, the absence of fellow Europeans enabled us not just to have our own choice of sunlounger, but also to indulge in those solo flights of fancy that elevate a holiday from a getaway break into an adventure.

Standing on the Mandawa ramparts, surveying the surrounding desert, or

sipping a solitary cold beer beneath whirring fans and photographs of royal tiger shoots, you got an almost supernatural sense of what it was like to have been a Brit

out East at any given time from 1800 to 1947.

And let's face it, that's the holy grail of holidaymaking. After all, these days everyone's been almost everywhere, but time travel is open only to the privileged few.

● Christopher Middleton travelled with his family to India on a tailor-made 10-night tour with Imaginative Traveller (0845 077 8802; www.imaginative-traveller.com). Price from £960 per person, tour only, (travelling in August), and return flight to Delhi from £390 per person with Air India.

● Imaginative Traveller offers more than 30 different small-group adventures to India, including a Mogul Highlights tour (11 days, tiger safari, camel ride, mud hut, older children only) from £715 per person, plus a local payment of 10,000 Indian rupees (£135); return flight from £386. A 21-day Among the Maharajas tour, including a stay in a luxury tented camp at Osian, costs from £1,199 per person, plus a local payment of 16,000 Indian rupees (£220) and flights from £386.

Our guide, Loki, took us on an impromptu walking tour of Old Delhi

10 best things about India

As voted by Christopher Middleton and family

1 Vegetarian food So much more choice than in Britain; we didn't miss meat at all.

2 Auto rickshaws Racetrack thrills in an urban setting.

3 Indian use of English Old-fashioned, elegant but inventive, for example, ratings-hungry TV bosses want "maximum eyeballs".

4 Live cricket on television Round the clock in hotels and bars, so much more accessible than at home.

5 Incense Masks bad smells and at the same time adds atmosphere.

6 Politeness on the roads It's complete chaos, yet no one gets cross; in Britain there would be punch-ups.

7 Staring People gather to have a good look at you, but in a nice way.

8 Children's television quizzes On every subject from spelling to advanced environmental geography.

9 Lots of gods We each voted for our favourite - a tie between Ganesh (elephant) and Hanuman (monkey).

10 Indian films Our favourite was *Love Aaj Kal* (*Love Today and Yesterday*), a will-they-won't-they romantic drama set in Delhi, New York and Hampton Court.





Sunset over the Jama Masjid in Old Delhi, India's oldest mosque. Opposite page (clockwise from bottom left): the Middletons on tour; India has a wide choice of excellent vegetarian food; the Mandawa Resort with its buildings made of mud and cow dung; and the ubiquitous auto-rickshaws

