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## Why I chose India for my last ever long-haul holiday

With far-flung holidays feeling less and less worth the effort, I decided to stick to Europe – after one final trip to my favourite country

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Ahead of her plans to 'ditch air travel hassle and jet lag', Fiona travelled to India with her husband and son CREDIT: Fiona Duncan

I'm not saying I'm never going to get on a long-haul flight again – but it's not likely. My husband Andrew and I are drawing in our horns: to ditch air travel hassle and jet lag and also do our bit for the planet; and to pursue a passion for Europe that will keep us happily occupied until our travelling days are done.

But before we called a halt, there was one country we had to revisit.

It's the country where, for every upsetting or infuriating thing that happens, a captivating, uplifting one swiftly follows, where spirituality, modernity and poverty co-exist and where the people understand that suffering, as well as joy, is part of life. In 1983, before parenthood, Andrew and I spent three enriching, never-forgotten months travelling in India. We were determined to return, this time with our older son, Alexander.

I actually began the trip not with them but with my long-time travelling companion Widge, on an almost circular dive into Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh in the north of the country. Our route took us from Lucknow to Varanasi, Khajuraho, Panna National Park, Orchha and the Chambal Valley. Here, we met Andrew and Alexander, who then embarked with me on a quieter week, pausing at Agra and Delhi en route north to Shimla in the Himalayas.

When I last travelled around India, it was on a tight budget and at times a pretty testing experience. The poverty we witnessed – still in place but certainly lessened – was hard to bear, train stations were pandemonium, bureaucracy baffling. We were young and it was fine, but now we're not young and hassle and confusion are not fine. This time, guided by experts and cosseted by a travel company who fetched, delivered and made all the arrangements, our path was made serenely smooth as we plunged into today's India, economically stronger, rapidly modernising yet still a whirl of intoxicating sights, both urban and rural, colours, sounds and tastes. Our aim in returning was to harvest those sensations and store them for good.

## Sights to behold

History, often dramatic, sometimes brutal, somehow seems to roll over India like a wave, leaving poignant, half-forgotten reminders of once-mighty dynasties and rulers, not least the British. The wide boulevards, historic buildings and faded grandeur of often-overlooked Lucknow can be traced back both to the Nawabs of Avadh – patrons of music, dance and the culinary arts – and to the British Raj. Amid the remains of the Residency, our guide Samir vividly brought to life the 1857 Siege of Lucknow.



That evening, Widge and I embarked on a buoyant street-café tour in the hectic, hooting lanes of Chowk where we tucked into some of the city's famously fragrant, slow-cooked specialities: buffalo pasanda, nihari curry and flat, marinated kebabs. On my last trip, food safety had been a problem; not so this time: we ate very well, without a qualm.

It's quite possible to tire of temples in India, but the cluster of astonishing Hindu and Jain temples at Khajuraho is electrifying. Released from the forest vegetation that had all but overtaken them after a visit by British Army captain T S Burt in 1838, they and their many rare and detailed erotic, blush-inducing carvings now stand in a manicured park, immaculately restored and a Unesco World Heritage Site.

By contrast, Orchha has a more forlorn air, an entrancing island oasis of long-abandoned Mughal-influenced structures surrounded by the Betwa River and wooded countryside beyond. They capture the imagination, while the village around them, with a revered Hindu temple, is notably easy-going.

And who could forget the Taj Mahal? Forty years ago, Andrew and I had stood before it, so young, the future unknown, and here we were again, this time with our grown-up son who had wanted to see it for himself. Its extraordinary beauty, floating, ethereal and lace-white, never disappoints.

Delhi, on the other hand, did disappoint. We found a city now seriously polluted and traffic clogged, though an early-morning walk in the dilapidated lanes of Chandni Chowk proved, thanks to another great guide, Girish, as much an instruction in Hindu philosophy as it was factual. Haveli Dharampura, a restored Mughal mansion, made a characterful, historic haven, where we flew kites from the rooftop at sunset and watched the sport of kaboortar-bazi – pigeon flying – in the morning, as we had done with the host of our backpackers' guesthouse all those years ago. Compared with the budget-imposed discomfort of 1983, every hotel on this wonderful trip, comfortable without being bubbles of unrealistic luxury, felt right for its location.

## Natural wonders

How I love, then as now, contrasting city life with rural India. I never saw a tiger on my previous visit, but I did this time, on a game drive in Panna National Park. It was thrilling, of course, but watching the beautiful landscape, filled with gradually waking birds and animals and threaded by the River Ken, remains in my memory even more than the majestic tiger.

On the riverbank, we stayed in tucked-away Sarai at Toria, perfectly echoing its natural surroundings. Conceived with great care by wildlife photographer Joanna Van Gruisen and her conservationist husband Dr Raghu Chundawat, it's a place of real relaxation, where we took a magical morning boat ride, the air filled with birds, including many kingfishers.



▲ Burning bright: a tiger at Panna National Park, Madhya Pradesh

Mela Kothi – Chambal Safari Lodge – was another idyllic rural spot, declared by Alexander as the best place he'd ever stayed. It's hard to disagree, for kind local landowners Ram and Anu Pratap Singh have created a cultured and homely base for spotting crocodiles and freshwater dolphins on the Chambal River and for birdwatching, nature walks and village visits. Alexander felt particularly happy there, and his photograph of a gharial crocodile now decorates a wall.

## Intoxicating colours

The colours of India have stayed with me for 40 years, but I wondered if, in the world's fastest-growing major economy, I would still find them among the sober attire of the burgeoning middle classes. I need not have worried.

Even by Indian standards, Varanasi remains a kaleidoscopic colour bomb, bursting with sari-clad pilgrims, orange-clad sadhus and pink-clad priests. Widge and I had

both been to the holy city of Lord Shiva before and had both felt rather withered among the jostling sea of people and piles of litter, but this time, our stay in the historic, recently renovated Brijrama Palace, at the heart of the action, and our balcony seats at dusk for the ceremony of light transformed the experience into something intense and mesmerising. Who could forget those burning ghats seen from a dawn boat ride?

Back in 1983, we hitched a ride in one of India's famous gaily painted trucks after our bus broke down. The roads were bad and the driver alarming, but we survived. This time, our transport was in excellent trains and chauffeur-driven, air-conditioned cars on recently constructed highways. No change when it comes to cows: they littered the motorway in their sacred imperviousness and we weaved around them, just as before.

Near the end of our journey, Andrew, Alexander and I found ourselves in a dinky red carriage with silk curtains and painted ceiling, clickety-clacking its way to Shimla. The Toy Train, which opened in 1903, winds spectacularly into the Himalayan foothills.

Shimla, too, is full of colour with its brightly painted houses. What remains of the former summer capital of the Raj can be found at its car-free centre. As we strolled along The Ridge and The Mall from Christ Church to the Cecil Hotel, visiting the 1877 Gaiety Theatre, frozen in time but still going strong, I felt that Shimla's development, from the first bungalow constructed in 1822 to the sprawling mountain metropolis of today, encapsulates India's ever-rolling history.

Eight miles away, on the site of Lord Kitchener's residence, stands Wildflower Hall. Purple umbrellas, fringed in yellow, frame the view of snow-capped mountains from the stunning terrace of this exceptional hotel, a deeply relaxing and spoiling final stop. It was a far cry from our last days in India in 1983, when I lay in a clinic in Shimla, sick as a dog.

Little did I know then that, as well as a severe version of the usual complaint, I was also pregnant. Nine months later, our lives changed. Alexander was born with autism and developmental delay and he lives at home, where he loves to play the keyboard, make models, cycle and take photographs. Despite these joys, his has been a lonely and at times traumatic road, struggling to fit into the neurotypical world. By introducing him to India, we felt somehow that we were squaring a circle. It was one of the reasons we had to go back.

## Essentials

Fiona Duncan was a guest of Ultimate Travel ([theultimatetravelcompany.com](http://theultimatetravelcompany.com)), which offers a 15-night trip to northern India, including accommodation, private transfers, guides and international flights from £5,490pp. Her bespoke itinerary costs from £5,985pp, including B&B accommodation (full board at Sarai at Toria), two exclusive Jeep safaris in Panna National Park, private sightseeing with local guides, rail, domestic and international flights