



Essential India

Delhi, Varanasi, Jodhpur, Jaipur & Agra

18 November–1 December 2026

(MM 232)

14 days

Lecturer: Dr Giles Tillotson

Visits many of India's most celebrated sites and cities as well as lesser-known but quintessential places.

Spends more time at each location than most mainstream tours, with free time for rest and independent exploration.

Varanasi, one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities and the most sacred in India; magnificent Rajput and Mughal forts, palaces and tombs.

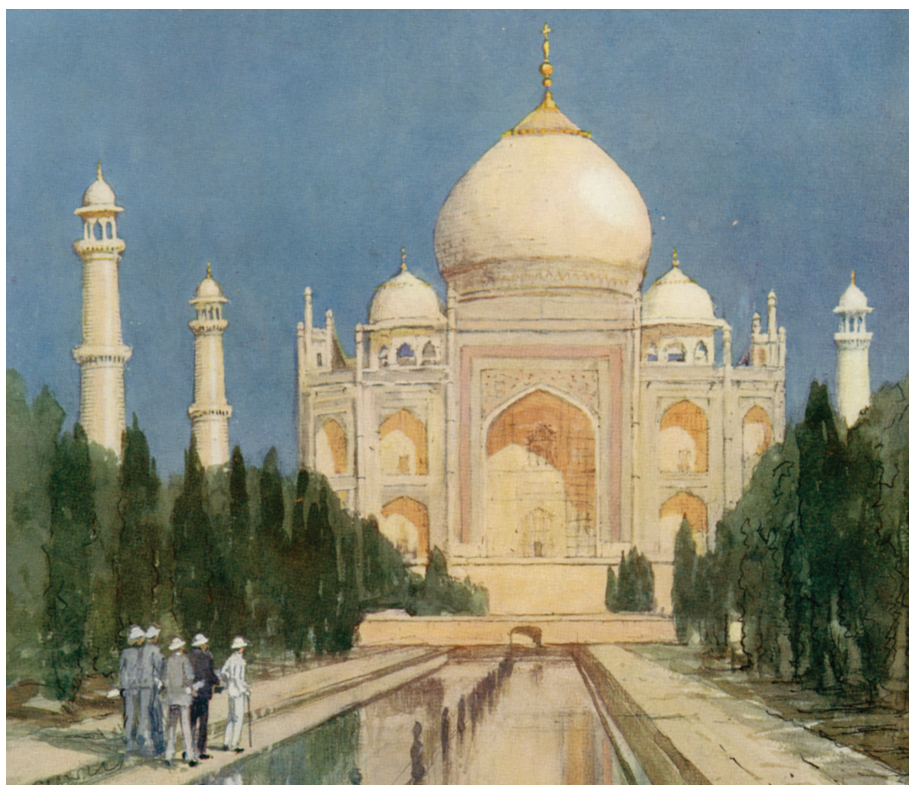
Includes no fewer than nine UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

The rich and fertile riverine plains of northern India have long formed a corridor allowing migrations and invasions to spread across the Subcontinent. The result is a region of fascinating cultural diversity.

Like the Ganges and the Yamuna, the sacred rivers of Hindu lore, this tour runs through the modern state of Uttar Pradesh and neighbouring Rajasthan. Yet its scope is not limited by these geo-political boundaries. Participants are treated to a comprehensive overview of the Subcontinent's history – from the emergence of Hinduism and Buddhism to the decline of the Mughal Empire, the last Islamic power before the British Raj of the nineteenth century.

Varanasi, perched on the banks of the Ganges, is India's most sacred place and claims to be the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. Founded by Lord Shiva, the city is mentioned in scriptures dating from the early Vedic period, in the second millennium BC. It was known as Kashi, the Luminous, during the life of the Buddha, who visited on several occasions on his way to Sarnath nearby where he preached his first sermon. Pilgrims still flock here to wash away their sins in the holy Ganges. The modern Varanasi is also a place of learning and culture – with the first Hindu university in India.

In Rajasthan, the legacy of the Rajputs endures in their spectacular forts and palaces. Initially resisting Muslim expansion in North India, these Hindu maharajas later became co-architects of the Mughal Empire. Their fine cities have been magnets for tourists and



Agra, the Taj Mahal, watercolour by Donald Maxwell, 1877–1936.

travellers since the days of Pierre Loti and Rudyard Kipling. Some have ancient origins, but in the more settled times of the heyday of the Mughals and of the period of British rule they built increasingly elaborate and delicately ornamented palace apartments within the embattled forts of their forebears.

These buildings of the Mughals in the 16th and 17th centuries are often regarded as the apex of India's artistic achievements, a prestige due no doubt in no small part to its best-known representative, the Taj Mahal, a creation which hovers somewhere between architecture, jewellery and myth. White marble is typical of the late period, while earlier buildings are of red sandstone – the deserted capital of Akbar at Fatehpur Sikri, and the Red Fort of Agra.

Few cities in the world rival Delhi in imperial succession. With most new ruling powers establishing their own capital alongside those of its predecessors, Delhi's architectural legacy is a palimpsest of power – from a monumental 13th-century minaret to the majestic expansiveness of Lutyens' New Delhi. Empire succeeds empire; just eighteen years after the Viceroy took up residence in

Government House it was handed over to a newly independent India.

Itinerary

Day 1: Delhi. Rooms are available from 2.00pm on 17th November, allowing for early check-in today. Nothing is planned before a pre-lunch talk. Humayun's striking tomb, with its high-arched façades set in a walled garden, is an important example of early Mughal architecture. First of two nights in Delhi.

Day 2: Delhi. The Jama Masjid, India's largest mosque, dominates Old Delhi with its minarets and domes. Rickshaw through the labyrinthine streets near Chandni Chowk. After lunch, visit the severely beautiful 15th-century tombs of the Sayyid and Lodi dynasties which are located in the serene Lodi Gardens.

Day 3: Delhi to Varanasi. Fly mid-morning from Delhi to Varanasi (IndiGo). After lunch in the hotel, walk in the old town, visiting hidden shrines and experiencing the busy life along the river. The Dasaswamedh Ghat is named after the ancient ten horse sacrifice which took

Essential India continued

place here in mythical time; a boat ride along the Ganges ends here with the evening river blessing ceremony (Arti), a ritual going back to the Vedic Age. First of two nights in Varanasi.

Day 4: Sarnath, Varanasi. Begin the day with a boat ride at sunrise, followed by breakfast and a morning walk through the alleys of the old city. Buddha preached his first sermon at Sarnath and the site remains an active Buddhist centre. The Dhamek stupa in the Deer Park marks the spot where the Buddha sat to preach. The museum houses the 3rd-century BC lion capital which has become the symbol of modern India since independence.

Day 5: Varanasi to Delhi. After an independent morning in Varanasi, fly back to Delhi (IndiGo) in the afternoon. Overnight in Delhi.

Day 6: Delhi to Jodhpur. Fly to Jodhpur (IndiGo) in the morning. Presiding over the capital of one of the largest Rajput states in western Rajasthan is the magnificent Mehrangarh Fort. Described by Kipling as the 'work of angels, fairies and giants', it was built in 1459 and has some of the most imposing fortifications in the world. Private dinner in the fort's garden. First of two nights in Jodhpur.

Day 7: Jodhpur. Created in resplendent white marble, Jaswant Thada is the large 19th-cent. memorial of Jaswant Singh II and cremation ground of the Marwar rulers. A second visit to Mehrangarh Fort examines the painting tradition of the Marwari Rajputs, with special admission to the gallery led by the curator. The buildings of the lively Old City are painted in a variety of blues, originally the colour denoting the homes of Brahmins.

Day 8: Jodhpur to Jaipur. Today is spent travelling by coach through the scenic Aravalli mountain range from Jodhpur to Jaipur, stopping for lunch en route. First of three nights in Jaipur.

Day 9: Jaipur. The City Palace contains an unsurpassed collection of paintings and artefacts. The Jantar Mantar, the 1730s observatory is equipped with massive astronomical instruments that are astonishingly accurate. Some free time to visit the painting and gem markets for which Jaipur is famous.

Day 10: Jaipur. Athwart a natural ridge, the magnificent yellow walls of the 18th-cent. Amber Fort conceal fine craftsmanship – mirrored chambers, latticed windows, carved

alabaster. Located in a traditional townhouse, the Anokhi museum showcases the art and heritage of wood-block printing.

Day 11: Jaipur, Fatehpur Sikri, Agra. En route to Agra, visit Fatehpur Sikri, a new capital built by Akbar (1570) but abandoned after a mere 15 years. The palace complex consists of a series of courtyards and beautifully wrought red sandstone pavilions. First of two nights in Agra.

Day 12: Agra. Rise early to visit the Taj Mahal in the first light of day. It was commissioned by Shah Jahan in memory of his third wife, Mumtaz Mahal, and completed in 1648. Return to the hotel for breakfast before visiting the magnificent Red Fort, built by Akbar and the best-preserved of the palaces built during his reign, and the Tomb of I'timād-ud-Daulah (c. 1628), an exquisite garden tomb and the first Mughal building clad in white marble inlaid with *pietra dura*. Independent afternoon.

Day 13: Agra to Delhi. Drive to Delhi via Akbar's mausoleum at Sikandra, built on his death in 1605. Set in a traditional char-bagh, it has no central dome unlike other Mughal mausolea. After lunch, visit the Qutb Minar, site of the first Islamic city of Delhi, established in 1193 on the grounds of a defeated Rajput fort. The towering minaret and its mosque survive as testament to the might of the invaders. Overnight in Delhi.

Day 14: Delhi. Car transfers to Delhi airport can be arranged for your onward journey.

Lecturer

Dr Giles Tillotson. Fellow (and former Director) of the Royal Asiatic Society, Giles is currently Senior Vice President at DAG (a Delhi-based art gallery). He was earlier Consultant Director at the City Palace in Jaipur, and before that Reader in History of Art and Chair of Art & Archaeology at SOAS. His specialisms include the history and architecture of the Rajput courts of Rajasthan and of the Mughal cities of Delhi and Agra; Indian architecture in the period of British rule and after Independence and landscape painting in India. His books include *Taj Mahal, Jaipur Nama, Delhi Darshan*, and the historical novel, *Return to Bhanupur*.

Practicalities

Included: flights with IndiGo; Delhi to Varanasi, Varanasi to Delhi and Delhi to Jodhpur; travel by private air-conditioned coach; accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 11 lunches and 10 dinners with wine or beer, water and coffee; all admissions; all tips; the services of the lecturer, tour manager and local guides.

Flights: from London to Delhi are not included in the price of the tour. We will send the recommended flight options when they come into range (by January 2026) and ask that you make your own flight reservation.

Visas: required for most foreign nationals, and not included in the tour price. We will advise all participants of the process.

Accommodation. The Imperial Hotel, New Delhi; 18–20 November (theimperialindia.com): 5-star hotel designed by F.B. Blomfield, a member of Lutyens' team. **Taj Ganges Hotel, Varanasi** (tajhotels.com): a comfortable 4-star hotel outside the city centre. **Daspan House, Jodhpur** (daspanhouse.com): a small 4-star boutique hotel set in a former family home. **Samode Haveli, Jaipur** (samode.com/samode-haveli): a 5-star hotel centrally located in Old Jaipur. **Trident Hotel, Agra** (tridenthotels.com): comfortable, well-run, modern 4-star close to the main sites with a spacious garden. **Roseate House Hotel, New Delhi; 22–23 November and 30 November–1 December** (roseatehotels.com): a 5-star hotel conveniently close to the airport.

How strenuous? This is a long and demanding tour so a good level of fitness is essential. Unless you enjoy entirely unimpaired mobility, cope with everyday walking and stair-climbing without difficulty and are reliably sure-footed, this tour is not for you.

You will be on your feet a lot, walking and standing around – sometimes on exposed sites in warm temperatures. Uneven ground and irregular paving are standard.

There are three days with long coach journeys of at least 150 miles where facilities are limited. There are some fairly steep ascents to forts and palaces. Steps to temples and palaces can also be steep and slippery. The unruly traffic and busy streets of Indian cities also require vigilance. Average distance by coach per day: 49 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.

Essential India
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