



THE ROYAL RAIL

CHANNELLING THE GRAND DAYS OF THE RAJ, Annika S. Hipple RIDES THE RAILS ON A LUXURY JOURNEY THROUGH RAJASTHAN.

YOU KNOW YOU'RE ON NO ordinary rail journey when your arrival at a remote station is greeted by a brass band clad in pristine white, with colourful waistbands and trailing turbans. But aboard India's Palace on Wheels, such royal treatment is a standard part of the experience.

A luxury train designed to evoke the days

of old, when maharajahs travelled in private carriages, the Palace on Wheels is one of the best ways to visit the far-flung attractions of Rajasthan, where distances are great and roads often mediocre. Each of the train's 14 saloons is named after a Rajput state, with decor to match, and each has its own saloon captain and assistant who provide princely service to their guests (four cabins with twin beds per saloon).

The musical greeting on arrival at remote rail stations in India onboard the Palace on Wheels.





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What lingers most is the charm and courtesy of the staff, and the experience of waking up each morning in a new location steeped in history, colour, and splendour.

The week-long journey officially begins in Delhi, though my group boards on day two in Jaipur, capital of Rajasthan, known as the Pink City because of its salmon-coloured stone buildings. Upon arrival at the station, we were escorted to our luxurious cabins, with twin beds and a private bathroom. Space was extremely limited, but the beds were comfortable, and I slept much better than expected as we travelled between destinations at night.

Nevertheless, it soon became clear that the highlight of the Palace on Wheels is not the facilities, but the service. Our saloon captain,

Devendra Pal and his assistant, Gopal are gracious and attentive, anticipating our needs and responding quickly to any issues. Each morning, they serve us breakfast in the lounge area at one end of the saloon, bringing eggs, sausages, fruit, juice and coffee to fuel us for the day's sightseeing.

Our first stop after Jaipur is Ranthambore National Park, where we set off early in jeeps in search of the park's famous tigers. Although the big cats remain elusive, we spot two types of deer, as well as a variety of birds and a colony of langur monkeys.

Above left to right: Musical accompaniments on the journey; langur monkeys at Ranthambore National Park; colourful scenes at Jaipur. Opposite page: the bar onboard Palace on Wheels.





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ALL ABOARD!



RAIL NEWS

CENTENARY

100 YEARS OF TRAVERSING THE TRANS-SIBERIAN

Then it's back to the train for lunch. Unlike breakfast, lunch and dinner are served in the elegant dining cars, Maharajah and Maharani. Turbaned waiters circle bearing trays of Indian and international dishes served family style. Before dinner, guests gather for drinks in the bar saloon, where there is a television with international news. The train also has a spa car, though with a full program of sightseeing, I have no time to check it out.

From Ranthambhore, we wind our way southwest, stopping at Chittorgarh, home to a historic hill fort besieged and abandoned in the 16th century, and Udaipur, a lakefront city with palaces that seem to float on the water. Then it is on to the far west, to Jaisalmer, where the golden colour of the fort and its intricately carved havelis (mansions) matches the sands of the surrounding Thar Desert. At Jodhpur, where the brass band serenades our arrival, the sweeping view from the fort encompasses the many azure houses that give the city its nickname, the Blue City.

Back in the east, we disembark at Bharatpur to visit the Keoladeo National Park bird sanctuary. We see parakeets, storks, cranes, spoonbills, snakebird and, herons as we tour around by bicycle rickshaw. Afterwards, our fellow travellers continue on to Agra Fort and the Taj Mahal before a final night en route back to Delhi. For my group, however, it is time to say goodbye to the Palace on Wheels and make our own way to Agra. Among the kaleidoscope of impressions from the journey, what lingers most is the charm and courtesy of the staff, the festive welcome at the stations, and the experience of waking up each morning in a new location steeped in the history, colour, and splendour that make Rajasthan such a fascinating region of India.

In 2016, the Trans-Siberian Railway line will be commemorating 100 years since its official opening. The longest single service railway in the world (9,288km), it was opened in stages between 1891 and 1916. In addition to its existing classic journey, Golden Eagle Luxury Trains is offering two Trans-Siberian routes to mark this milestone, both of which will include a complimentary upgrade to the Ritz-Carlton Moscow and special celebrations during the journey. The 15-day Trans-Siberian Discovery will retrace the first continuous railroad through Russia's interior between Moscow and Vladivostok, with two days at the 'Pearl of Siberia', Lake Baikal, and a private folk performance in a local village. The trip will run 26 July-9 August 2016, and is priced from US\$16,995 (about A\$23,000) per person, twin-share. goldeneagleluxurytrains.com



NEW JOURNEY ROCKY RAIL

National Geographic Expeditions has released a new journey through the Canadian Rocky Mountains in 2016. The seven-day Canadian Rockies by Rail and Trail will journey along the border between Alberta and British Columbia aboard the Rocky Mountaineer. Guests will take excursions into the Jasper and Banff National Parks with a National Geographic expert, trek across Athabasca Glacier and cruise Maligne Lake in Jasper National Park, staying at historic lakeside hotels along the way. The first departure date will be 27 June-3 July 2016 and is priced from US\$8,295 (about A\$11,265) per person, twin-share. nationalgeographicexpeditions.com

INDIA

● GETTING THERE

Air India flies direct to Delhi from Sydney and Melbourne. Return economy fares start from A\$1,224 and from \$7,670 on executive class. Total flying time from Sydney is 12 hours and 35 minutes. airindia.in

● THE JOURNEY

Palace on Wheels (and its Royal Rajasthan on Wheels itinerary) is a seven-night, eight-day trip that runs year-round. Rates for a double cabin start from US\$4,482 (about A\$6,118) per person excluding taxes and surcharge. Rate includes accommodation, all meals, guided sightseeing, entrance fees for palaces and cultural entertainment. palacetours.com

