

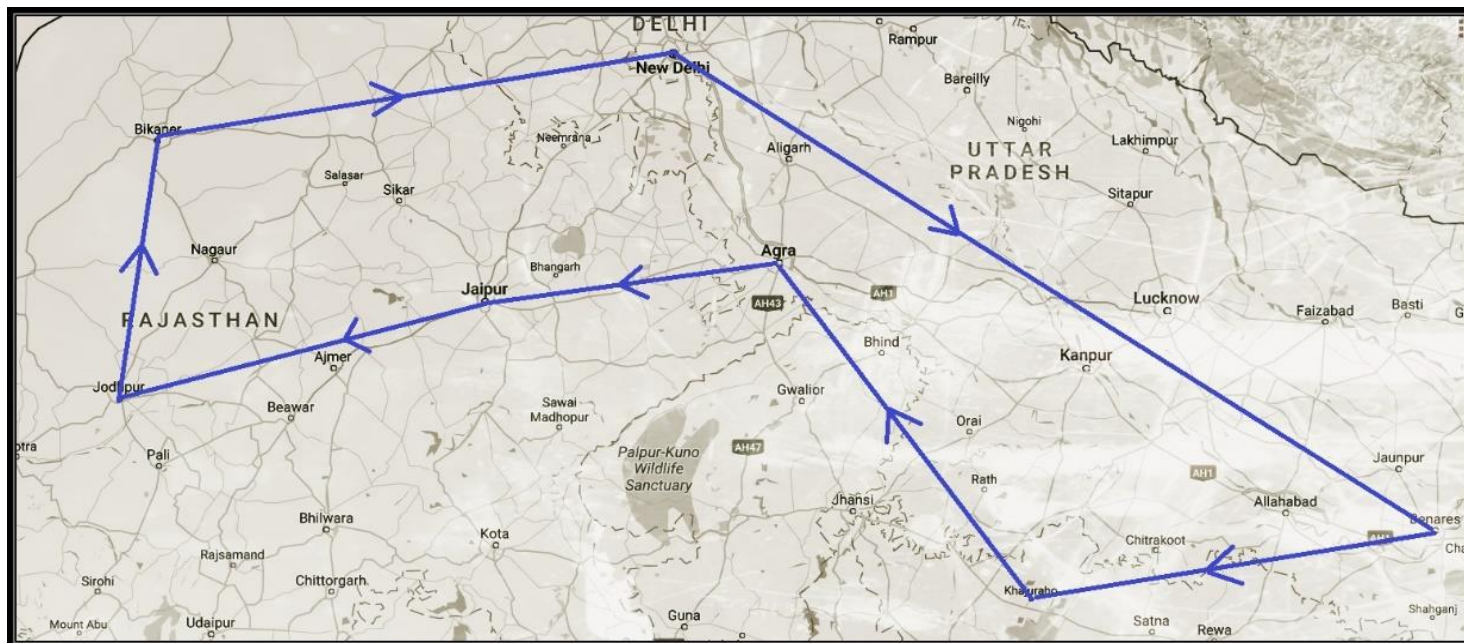
Incredible India

“If you can travel in India, you can travel anywhere”

There is no denying that travelling to India can be a major adventure. It is a place with many different religions and cultures, cities that never sleep and bustle with activity. However, this shouldn't hold you back to visit this incredible country. As they say: “if you can travel in India, then you can travel anywhere”. That statement is nothing but the truth.

As for my thesis I explored the south of India by visiting different universities to investigate the opportunities for the company Information Mapping. After this adventure I was eager to see more of India and hoped to return one day. With the incredible support of BICC&I and Jet Airways, one year later I was able to experience the North-Indian culture.

My friend Caroline and I decided quickly that we wanted to focus on the state Rajasthan which is the largest state of India. We planned our visit carefully since we wanted to maximize our experience during our stay in India. We came up with a plan which lead us from Delhi to the religious Varanasi, the town Khajuraho, Agra and the Taj Mahal, Jaipur, the blue city Jodhpur and finally we went through the desert back to Delhi. In total we covered a distance around 2900 km, just by backpacking. We decided to travel by train, bus and one national flight.



Overwhelmed by culture

Arriving at Delhi I felt like coming home. The shouting people, traffic noises, oriental smells threw me back to the time I spent in India during my research work needed to draft my thesis. As we arrived in the middle of the night we arranged a pick up that brought us directly to the front door of our accommodation. We visited several things in Delhi but the most memorable visit was the Indian gate. Not because of the monument itself, but due to the many people surrounding us. Our guide-book advised to visit the Indian gate at sundown. Which was true, but they forgot to mention that it is also the time when a lot of Indians go there to have fun after work. So when arriving there, we could not stand still for more than two minutes, we were that much surrounded by people. They all wanted to speak to us and take photos, with or without our permission!

We learned quickly that in India you can't be precious about your personal space. We were followed everywhere and constantly yelled at: "Where are you from?", "Can I have a selfie?" or "Need a tuk tuk?". But this is what India is about and after a couple of days you enjoy its vibrant cities more and more.

Noisy but amazing festival

On our last day in Delhi we woke up by noises on the street: music, fireworks, yelling... Not knowing what was going on, we started googling the different holidays in India. We soon realised that it was Ganesh Chaturthi, which is a festival that honours the birth of the beloved Hindu elephant-headed god, Lord Ganesha. On this day, statues of Ganesh are installed in homes and public places. They have been decorated with flowers in different colours. At the end of the festivities, the beautifully garnished statues are paraded through the streets, together with singing and dancing. We were overwhelmed by these beautiful festival and got even lost in all this "craziness". A perfect way to end our visit in Delhi.

The atmosphere of the Ghats

One national flight later we arrived at Varanasi, which is located in the state Uttar Pradesh. We had no idea what to expect of this very old, religious city. When arriving near the Ganges, the streets were very busy and full of traffic. Varanasi was not at all a small, old city we expected it to be. When we walked into the small pedestrian streets, you could see the real poverty of this city. And believe us if we say that this had a huge impact on us. On the other side, the beauty of the Ganges and the many rituals that come with the river are definitely worth to see. These rituals take place at different 'ghats', which are steps leading to holy water. Varanasi's liveliest and most colourful ghat is



Dashashwamedh Ghat. We were told that the best time to take a boat trip on the Ganges to visit the ghats was in the evening or at sunrise. As we could not decide, we agreed to do both. After seeing the burning ritual in the evening and the washing ritual in the morning, we knew that doing both was one of our best decisions.

Lots of backpackers we met stayed in guesthouses near the river. We wanted a different experience so we stayed in the house of two granny's living together. It was an extraordinary experience. We had dinner with them and listened to their stories. We tasted the real Indian food, which was even spicier than we tasted before. We also met one of the grandmother's sons, he was disabled and the main reason why they moved to Varanasi. Many Indian people who are sick, come to Varanasi to spend their last days in a holy place.

Get out of the city

Being overwhelmed by the rituals of the Ganges, we were pleased to head off to the town Khajuraho, an eight hour train ride further from Varanasi. It was a relaxing visit because there was almost no traffic. Unfortunately Caroline did not enjoy the visit as much as I did since she had some troubles with the well-known 'Indian disease'. Luckily it took only one day to get back on her feet.

Meanwhile I could not resist to visit the Khajuraho temples or in other words: India's temples of sex, because they are famous for their erotic sculptures. During my visit to the temples I met some tourists who suggested to join them in a tuk tuk to the Raneh Falls. Because it was a one hour drive and my friend was still sick, I took the opportunity to go with them. The drive to the waterfalls was relaxing with spectacular views as it was at sundown. Once arrived at the waterfalls, we made a little walk in the forest and enjoyed the nature.

Amazed by beauty

We headed back to Rajasthan to visit the most well-known Mughal building of India, the Taj Mahal. This magnificent white marble mausoleum, situated in Agra, is one of the boldest romantic symbols of the world. There is no doubt that this extravagant architecture is worth to see: simply because it is utterly spectacular. As we had only one day in Agra, we visited the Taj Mahal before breakfast and before the crowds of tourists. Afterwards, we went back to have a relaxing breakfast and we had time to explore Agra a little bit more. After a good night sleep, we took the bus to Jaipur. It was our first bus drive so we didn't know what to expect. It was a ride we will remember as it was very bumpy and noisy (the broken windows were replaced by wooden boards...). When we arrived, we were glad to leave our uncomfortable situation and start our exploration of Jaipur, the capital city of Rajasthan.



The 'pink' city

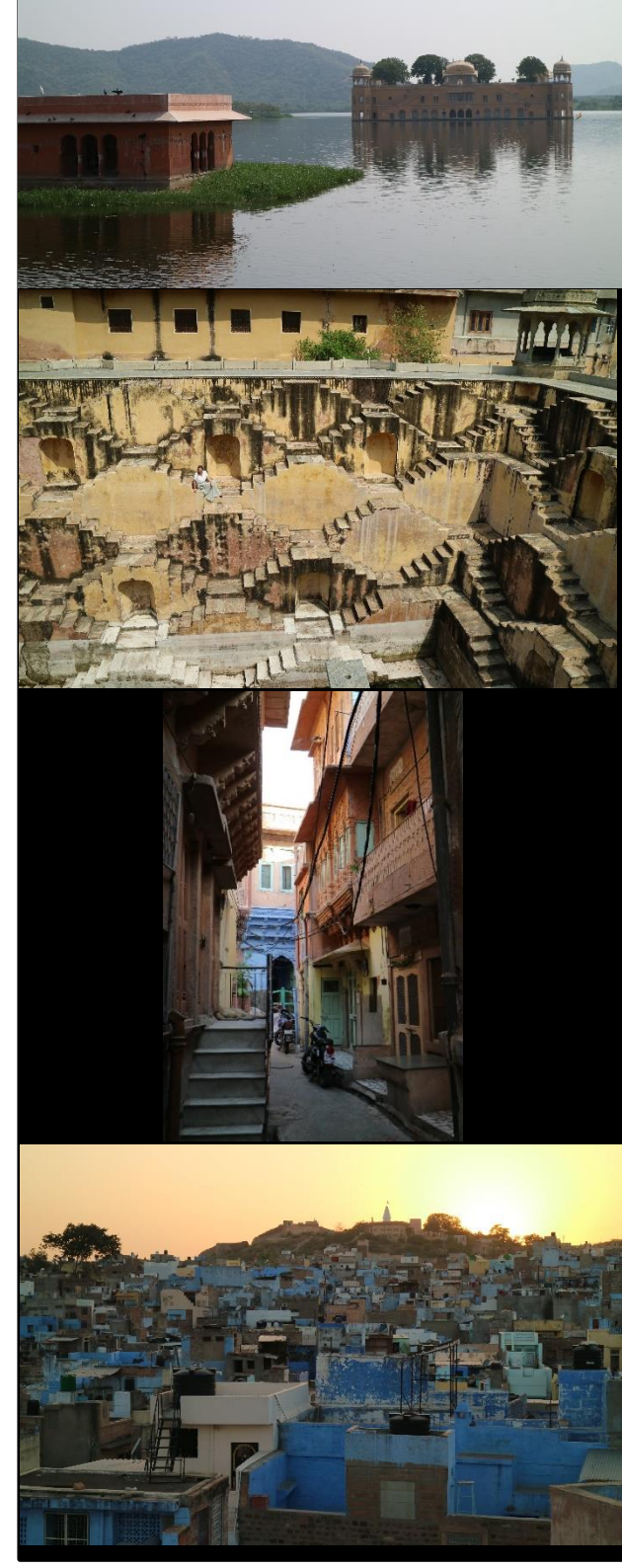
The city Jaipur is surrounded by mountains which also means: beautiful views. Therefore we decided to go to the amber fort which is situated on one of the mountains. This fort is built from pale yellow and pink sandstone and white marble, and divided into four main sections, each with its own courtyard. In other words, a real labyrinth with amazing views.

Afterwards, we explored by foot the old city Jaipur which was said to be really pink. We were a little disappointed since the pink, which was supposed to be the original colour of the stone, seemed for many houses to be paint. The name 'the pink city' is more used as a trademark, to attract tourists! Despite our disappointment about the 'pink' city not being pink, we still saw something amazing in Jaipur: 'Panna Meena ka Kund'. It's a 1000 years old stepwell and made to store water in the desert area. We're now two months later and we still talk about this beautiful stepwell. It was the little and amazing piece of quietness that we needed, in again a very busy city. No tourists, no crowds of people, just the two of us and the tuk tuk driver. After that visit, we decided we've seen everything we wanted to see in the 'pink' city and it was time to leave for the blue city: Jodhpur.

The blue city is really blue!

Our third train ride brought us to Jodhpur where we stayed at a beautiful guest house which was called the 'Juna Mahal Boutique Home Stay'. It was a lovely family house with a rooftop, where you could relax and enjoy the view of the blue city. Inside this blue city there are many medieval streets, which never seemed to lead where you expect them to. Shops and bazaars selling everything, from little sculptures and temple decorations to jewellery and saris. We loved the little streets, the colours of the buildings, the noises and even the smells but also the peace we could find on the rooftops, just to enjoy the beautiful view.

The Mehrangarh Fort is illuminated in the evening, as well as the clock tower which makes the view even more spectacular. That clock tower is located in the middle of the market area: it doesn't matter which direction you choose, you will always end up in a tiny market street. You can walk there for a very long time and still find new streets. After a little walk, we wanted to go back, but of course that took us a little bit longer than expected. You cannot count the amount of time we were lost during our trip in India, but it was all worth it.



Bikaner, our final destination

As last stop we wanted to do something completely different. In the first place, we stayed in a nice hotel where we could relax at the pool and reflect on the lovely, adventurous weeks we already spent in India. Secondly, we read - before and during the trip - a lot about the camel safaris you should do when you're in that part of India. We were in doubt at first, for reasons such as the heat (40°C) and the lack of real desert. After discussing the pro's and cons, we made our decision: camel safari it was! Bikaner is known for its safaris, our safari-trip was an exceptional but exhausting day. We ended the day with a beautiful sunset, had a good night sleep, and the next day it was time for us to take the last train to Delhi and the last plane all the way back to Belgium.

India, you were great

As we said in the beginning: if you can travel in India, you can travel anywhere. That defines completely how we look back on this big Indian trip. Yes, we saw a lot of ugliness, a lot of dirtiness, a lot of poverty, a lot of sadness. But, it is very important to say that we also saw a lot of beauty, a lot of richness and a lot of happiness. It was a culture shock, especially for Caroline because it was her first time in India. It was a tiring, sometimes exhausting trip (9 hours on a bumpy bus isn't always easy). It's a country definitely worth going to, just be prepared that anything can happen. We were lucky, we had very few or even none major problems. Everything went well, from the beginning till the end.

This trip will always be in our memories:

We laughed a lot and learned a lot, we were thrilled by the differences and amazed by Indian culture.

These are the things that matter, right?

Bea & Caroline

