

Eating in Cochin, Shopping Mumbai

DEPARTURES

OCTOBER 2008

Delhi Jewels

Udaipur

The Taj Mahal and Beyond

Grandeur in Rajasthan

Into Calcutta

Bangalore Daranasi Jaipur

Kimono

fact that the quite luxurious camps had been built and managed by the latter and staffed with wonderful guides, waiters, cooks, wildlife experts. As rare as the tiger sightings are, monkeys and spotted deer are everywhere in a terrain that, alas, reminded me a lot more of growing up in Oklahoma than any dreams of far pavilions and jewels in the crown.

But that second trip showed me exactly what we had to do in this issue. It proved just how difficult—and different—travel to India can be without the requisite preparation. You've got to be honest about who you are and what you want and expect. Though some adventurous souls may want to see Kashmir on the Pakistani border, for example, we decided, based on safety issues, not to cover nor recommend it.

On the other hand, I adored an out-there destination called Ahilya Fort, but the English lady in the suite next to ours found it ghastly. Her husband, a swanky Notting Hill doctor who was the one to reassure me that Zachary did indeed not have malaria, simply rolled his eyes when madam began her diatribe. "The towels," she wailed, "are like something I'd throw away at home, and there is no telephone in the room." What can I say? One man's exotic beach is another's hell with salt water. Even sophisticated destinations like Delhi, Mumbai, and Rajasthan need a lot of sorting out. That said, nothing in India, or life, is guaranteed. In travel the unexpected is part of the DNA, and from serendipity comes the grand love affair with a person or a place. Hopefully.

We've culled more than 40 writers, reporters, and photographers who know India well, most of whom live in the places they write about. The issue begins with a special BLACKBOOK. Brilliantly

edited by Senior Editor Andrew Sessa and Associate Editor Nandita Khanna, the section is divided into Mumbai, Calcutta, Bangalore, and Delhi, the four great cities that act as a point of arrival and departure for most Americans. From there we strike out to Rajasthan, Goa, Varanasi, and even greater exotica north, south, east, and west. To-

gether Sessa and Khanna sorted and vetted everything from dispatches by experts, trusted word of mouth, and insider addresses (the very private little black book) of the rich, the famous, and the anonymous to the people, places, palaces, and plane flights that you won't find anywhere else. Turbans off to both!

In the section INDIA 2008, Deputy Editor Stephen Wallis has created his own "Talk of the Town, City, and Country" with an incredible collection of celebrated artists, novelists, journalists, and, yes, icons.

And what would we have done without the elegant Gita Mehta, the brilliant Indian by way of Park Avenue intellectual/journalist/wife/mother who sat me down in her apartment nearly a year ago and said, "Let me read something to you." It was the beginning of a work in progress. Having just come from India myself, I found it staggering. She actually captured, distilled, and illuminated the India I had only glimpsed. She understood the pain and the glory of a new world being born.

And then there's Sophy Roberts, our London-based editor at large, who is the stealth missile of DEPARTURES travel. You've most recently seen her up close and personal in Tanzania ("Total Surrender," July/August), but you've been reading her in these pages for nearly eight years now. She's schlepped to Prague, Barbados, and Buenos Aires for us, and she's written marvelous elegiac dispatches from such far corners. For this issue she trekked to the Himalayas. But that was just the beginning.

Welcome to India.

THE DEPARTURES GUIDE TO

THE NEW INDIA

10 Outfitters You Need to Know

The American Express Platinum and Centurion Concierge can arrange any trip to India along with these regional specialists.

1 A seasoned international player, **Abercrombie & Kent** leads set and tailor-made tours throughout India, next year debuting a 16-day adventure covering the north and south. One night is spent on a private two-bedroom boat. 800-554-7016; abercrombiekent.com

2 **Absolute Travel's** privately guided trips and once-in-a-lifetime experiences, like a one-on-one lesson with a famous sitar player, are the forte of this New York-based company. 800-736-8187; absolutetravel.com

3 From its main office in London, **Ampersand Travel** designs bespoke tours, combining off-the-beaten-path activities with luxury experiences and accommodations. They're especially good on India's south. 44-207/289-6100; ampersandtravel.com

4 Headquartered in Delhi, **Banyan Tours** creates custom itineraries using authoritative guides. Its sister company, **Shakti**, focuses on high-end Himalayan expeditions. 91-11/4173-4810, banyantours.com; 91-11/4173-4788, shaktihimalaya.com

5 Known for its upscale biking and walking tours, the Canada-based **Butterfield & Robinson**, which has been taking riders on a set Rajasthan trip for nearly a decade, launches in March a biking excursion through the southwestern state of Kerala. B&R also does private custom trips. 866-551-9090; butterfield.com

6 The UK-based **Greaves's** introductory guided tour of India will blow first-timers away, and its bespoke itineraries can include elephant polo matches and dinners with famous authors, all while you travel the country in the company's brand-new private plane. 800-318-7801; greavesindia.com

7 Although its main office is in New York, **Our Personal Guest** has an unparalleled array of Indian contacts. It uses them to put together highly personalized journeys, which can include a private puja ceremony in Varanasi. 212-319-1354; ourpersonalguest.com

8 Extensively researching clients' individual interests, the Indian firm **Peirce & Leslie** plans excursions ranging from comprehensive cultural tours to more thematic ones (culinary, architecture, wildlife). They can also introduce guests to an unusual Hindu oracle and the Old Delhi sport of pigeon racing. 91-12/4404-9361; peirceandleslie.com

9 The New York-based **Remote Lands** uses the unique relationships it has cultivated in India to provide bespoke experiences, such as a stay in the Darjeeling palace of the Maharaja of Burdwan, as his personal guest. 646-415-8092; remotelands.com

10 With a focus more on rural adventures than luxury accommodations, London's **Wild Frontiers** specializes in north India, even the difficult territory of Kashmir—though its friendships with Raj royalty have been known to land travelers in much safer places. 44-207/736-3968; wildfrontiers.co.uk