



The magnificent Taj Mahal

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seasoned travellers. “It’s funny,” he says. “One is so familiar with India through photographic imagery, films, literature and television but the sheer vastness and variety of the place and the mass of people does come as something of a shock.”

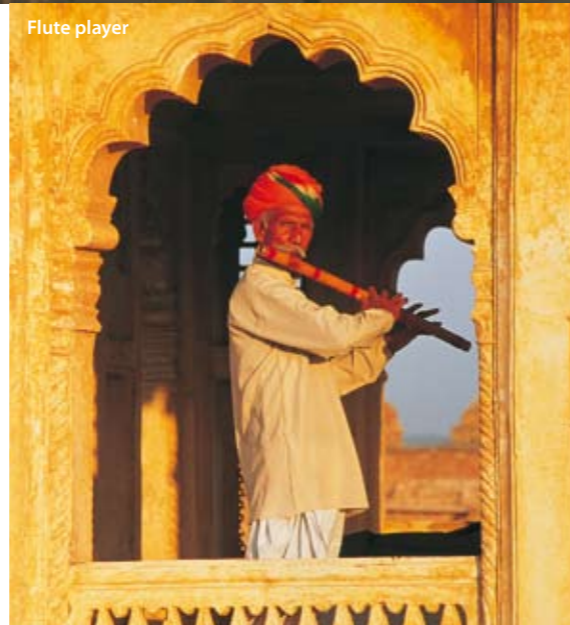
And yet it is those people that Leo flags as a highlight of any visit to the subcontinent. He has found that the kindness and warmth of the Indian people surpasses that of most countries he has ever travelled to and one of the things that contributes to making India such a delightful place to visit. “They are absolutely adorable,” he says. “Sweet and gentle and desperate to be helpful. I can think of few other destinations where one’s experience is so uniformly benign.”

Leo Schofield has been a significant figure in Australia’s cultural life for three decades, with highlights that include directing the Olympic Arts Festival in 2001. With a knowledge and interest in the finer things in life, it follows that a trip overseas meets certain standards. And the enviable job of being editor-at-large of Australia’s premier food and travel magazine has certainly given Leo a unique approach

to travelling. “I’ve travelled a lot,” he says. “Being editor-at-large of *Gourmet Traveller* has made me choosier.”

Leo describes the accommodation and food on his 14-day trip as “a knockout”. “Mind you,” he adds, “we did it with A&K so we were hardly backpacking. We stayed in the most luxurious hotels and ate like princes.” As a connoisseur of good food, it would be difficult not to enjoy the variety of offerings that Rajasthan is famous for, notably her rich red curries such as the *jungle maas*, a chilli and ghee infused dish that dates back to the Maharaja of Salwar.

Leo says his responsibility to the magazine has made him far more selective. “It’s made me really look out for the unusual. When you’re writing about somewhere you want it to be about something special,” he says. “However, getting a real insight into Rajasthan was certainly no challenge on this trip,” he reflects about the experiences A&K facilitated. One unique experience, which really hit the high notes, was having drinks with Maharajah of Jaipur. “It was great, a real window into the world of the Maharajahs,” Leo enthuses. “The



Flute player

Maharajah showed us around his private apartments within the palace. It was a fantastic insight into their lifestyle,” he continues. “Most people just go to Rajasthan and only get to see the usual sights. That experience really differentiated this trip for us.”

One would think this was an experience that was difficult to top, but Leo says the most magical moment of the trip was upon his arrival in Agra. “I travelled with my eldest daughter. We arrived late in the evening in Agra,



Jodhpur Fort



Chhatra Sagar tent interior



Leo Schofield at Chhatra Sagar

checked in at the spectacular new Oberoi Amarvilas, walking to our adjacent rooms, opened the windows, walked on to the terrace and there was the Taj Mahal above the trees, gleaming in the moonlight. I’d seen it before but never under such magical conditions.”

Another highlight was a chance to experience the wonderful desert camp of Chhatra Sagar. “It was wonderful, we really didn’t know what to expect,” Leo says. “The desert camp has been done so stylishly.” Chhatra Sagar’s 1920’s-style tents are located on a dam that overlooks a lake. East facing, guests awaken each morning, walk out onto their private porches to be faced with beautiful sunrises. And at night the vista is rich with rose hues, as the sun descends over the Thar’s dusky dunes.

It is A&K’s attention to detail that Leo believes was the main point of difference on this holiday. “No detail was overlooked. I am a bit of a control freak and it was great to leave the details to others.” Without the stress of planning and preparation, especially in a challenging destination such as India, all Leo found he had to worry about was enjoying the trip. “I think that independent travel in India could be

a testing experience,” he says. “But we had a totally stress-free time, with the most erudite guides and a magnificent driver who was with us for 12 of the 14 days we were there. And we were met everywhere by A&K representatives who could not have been more charming or helpful. Every single little detail was taken care of so we were never stressed out, ergo able to enjoy every moment of the experience.”

And what about his next trip with A&K? Leo would love to go to Prague and Vienna because of the architecture, history and culture. “I’ve been before and feel it’s time for an upgrade,” he says. “But I’ve never been to Africa so that trip with A&K may come first. They’re specialist in that part of the world, as indeed they proved to be in India.”

A&K’s 14-day/13-night Splendours of Rajasthan visits all the highlights of north India. For more information phone 1300 851 800.