

Dream trips made real

Close your eyes and picture yourself... where? Lazing on a paradise beach? Awestruck by the Grand Canyon? Spotting elephants in the wild? Now open your eyes and read on — because we know how to make those fantasy travels happen

Illustration: **Eiko Ojala**

SPICING IT UP IN INDIA

Look no further for colour, chaos and life bursting at the seams. And prepare to make friends: there are 1.3 billion people in India — most will want to chat

Dream-trip highlights: Sunset over the Taj Mahal; a rice-boat cruise on Kerala's inland backwaters past villages, paddy fields and coconut groves; the old Latin Quarter in Goa's capital, Panaji — a rustic, ramshackle slice of 18th-century Portugal.

Ignore the hype... about Mumbai's Gateway of India; the memorial is a hub for hustlers.

Hidden treasure: Most people tick off the Taj, but miss nearby Fatehpur Sikri (fatehpur-sikri.gov.in; £6.50). Their loss, your gain: the 16th-century capital of the Mughal Empire is an elegant oasis of mosques, harems and palaces — with no crowds. Pay 20p for a thread to tie on the marble lattice in the Sufi saint Salim Chisti's tomb, and make a wish...

The nitty-gritty: India is 13 times bigger than the UK — bite off too much and you'll hate it. *Shanti, shanti*, as the rickshaw wallahs will tell you: chill! But not about immunisations (consult your GP before you go) or hygiene (wash your hands before eating, avoid tap water, salads and potentially re-used straws, and you should bypass Delhi belly).

So which bit to choose? Most people go to Rajasthan — and with good reason: it's close

to Delhi and the Taj Mahal, and has beautiful towns, such as Udaipur, Jaipur and Jodhpur, as well as tiger reserves, camel-trekking, and elegant hotels in old maharajahs' palaces (mahoutuk.com showcases the best of them). Audley Travel (01993 838330, audleytravel.com) has a 13-night 'Classic Rajasthan' trip from £2,770pp, B&B, including Heathrow-Delhi flights and private driver-guide.

For our money, though, the tropical-lush south is a better first-time bet: less touristy, less hectic, it's a more authentic glimpse of an India still packed with temples and fascinating towns. It's also appealingly warm when everyone else is chipping ice off the car windscreen back home (just don't come in crowded December, or April to September, when it's unbearably hot). You don't have to travel via Delhi in the north, either: you can book a cheaper charter flight direct to Goa (from £439 return; thomascookairlines.com).

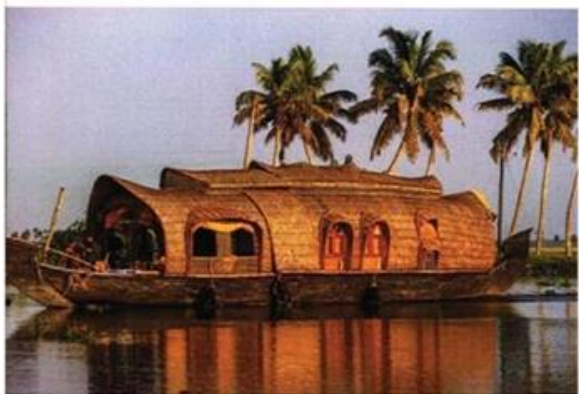
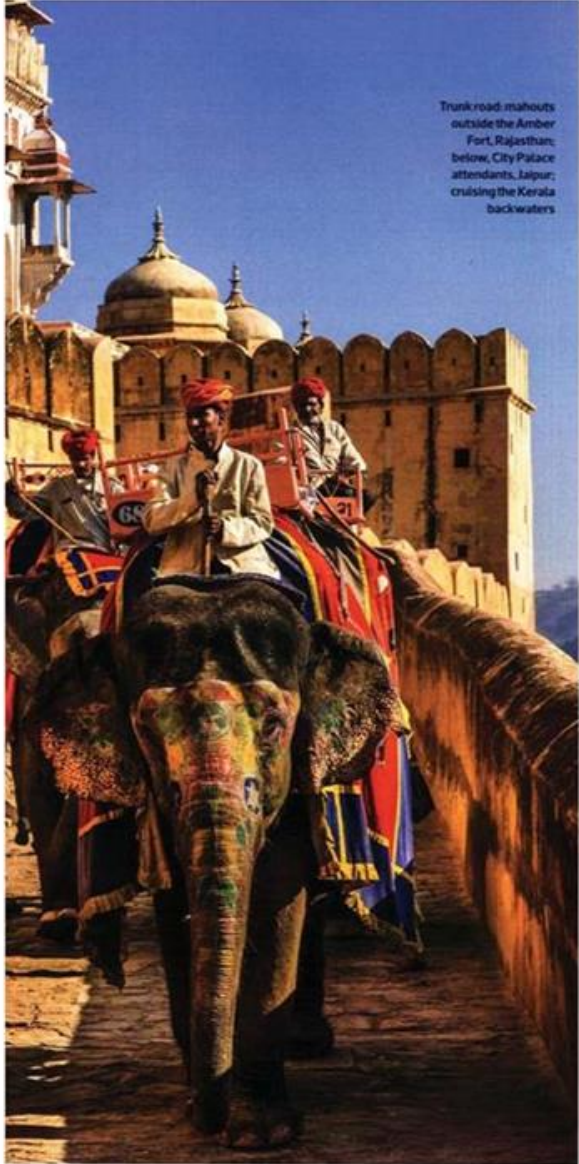
Southern India is well covered by specialists. Greaves India (020 7487 9111, greavesindia.com) has 11 nights there from £2,395pp, B&B, with a backwater cruise and flights from the UK, but unlike the frenetic north, which is best tackled via a tour operator (no queuing for train tickets or

haggling with hoteliers when your room's double-booked), the chilled-out south lends itself perfectly to independent travel.

In Goa, dip into bustling Panaji, explore back lanes by moped (rentabike.in; £5 per day; insist on a good helmet) and unwind on the beach (south Goa is sleepier than the north, with Turtle Hill, near Canacona, a boutique favourite; turtle-hill.eu; doubles from £60, B&B). Take an overnight train to Kochi, an ancient spice port still whispering with the ghosts of Chinese and European traders past. Don't be tempted by the cheap first-class train tickets; second-class A/C is comfy enough and much more sociable (cleartrip.com; £20). Nearby Alappuzha (also known as Alleppey) is the jumping-off point for houseboat trips (trykeralagreeneries.org; two nights from £110pp, full board) – allow two nights to sink into the dreamy rhythms, and bring bug spray. Spend a couple of nights in a lofty treehouse in the Wyanad Forest (doubles £164, full board; vythiriresort.com), a cheaper, more relaxed safari destination than Rajasthan, with elephants, sloth bears and billions of birds. And squeeze in a cultural blast with a two-day tour to Hampi, the most spectacular temple complex in India; sunrise views from its central hill are worth the journey alone (from £224 for two, B&B; hampitrip.com).

Jeremy Lazell

Trunk road: mahouts outside the Amber Fort, Rajasthan; below, City Palace attendants, Jaipur; cruising the Kerala backwaters



Dream trips

iconic insight THE GREAT WALL OF CHINA



Aim for October: the recently restored Jinshanling section outside Beijing is hauntingly quiet then — and warm. Leave the city before 7am to beat the traffic. **Next step:** Book a private driver through your hotel or contact 'Patrick' (00 86 135 0126 7887, 13501267887@139.com; from £70pp), recommended by embassy staff.

iconic insight NORTHERN LIGHTS



Head to Europe's aurora belt, just above the Arctic Circle — Iceland, northern Norway, Sweden and Finland. **Go Oct-Mar,** ideally on moonless nights. **Next step:** Aurora Zone (theaurorazone.com) has three nights in Finland from £965, full board, including flights, cold-weather clothing and snowmobile tour.



LIVING IT UP ON A TRANSATLANTIC LUXURY VOYAGE

Do it the classic way: Queen Mary 2, Cunard's svelte ocean liner, serves Southampton and New York, sailing the North Atlantic. After a recent refurb, it's like a five-star resort — food, shows and a flight included (drinks/tips extra).

But don't go too cheap: Entry-level Britannia Inside Staterooms (sample one-week package: from £1,499pp on 2017 cruise M728) are comfy, but tiny: basically for Zzzz, with a double bed, TV, desk and shower/loo. Windowless, too.

Or too steep: The huge top-end Queens Grill Suites (from £4,559pp a week, as above) would be fine for Joan Collins going incognito — but are excessive given the impressive, less-pricey Princess Grill Suites (see below), and all the plush main areas (theatres, cocktail bars, restaurants, decks) to lounge in.

Give food some thought: Cabin grade dictates dining. In Princess Grill Suites (from £3,779pp, as above) you enjoy Barbary duck and lobster in panelled intimacy. Too pricey? The mid-range Britannia Balcony Staterooms start at £2,299pp, with meals in the vast Britannia Restaurant and King's Court buffet. Palate jaded? Pay a supplement (lunch \$20/£16, dinner \$50/£40) for the Verandah Restaurant.

Or try a cruise line: As boats are moved to Europe from America for summer, you could sail Miami-Southampton this April on Celebrity Cruises' Eclipse, from £1,959pp, with a night in Miami, all meals, drinks, entertainment and a flight out (book via Mundy Cruising). Or consider New York-Reykjavik in May: 13 nights, visiting Rhode Island, Boston, Bar Harbor, Halifax and Isafjörður: from £3,006pp on Crystal's luxury Crystal Symphony (pictured), with flights.

Get me there: Take a look at cunard.co.uk; mundycruising.co.uk; crystalcruises.co.uk; or CLIA (cruiseexperts.org) for agent listings. Nick Redman >



112 SUNDAYTIMES TRAVEL FEBRUARY 2017