

independence **day**

*Rich in experiences
and an extreme
test of the senses
at any time,
India's 70th year
of independence
celebrations in
2017 provides
agents with another
reason to sell this
colourful continent,
says Alex Wright*



The snake is heading right for me. Its head is bobbing menacingly up and down as it slithers through the murky green-brown water towards my boat.

But there's no need for concern – this is not a real snake, rather a snake boat, a 30-metre long canoe-style boat used by teams of villagers competing in one of four annual races that take part during the Indian monsoon season between July and September.

I'm in deepest Kerala, known locally as God's Own Country, on the Runnamada Lake in Alappuzha for the Nehru Trophy boat race, in honour of the late prime minister of the same name.

It's also one of the many traditional events taking place up and down India as the country gears up for its 70th year of independence in 2017.

These magnificent war boats date back more than 400 years to the Kings of Alleppey who used to do battle with each other for control of the waterways.

Each boat is lined up under starters orders, manned by a 100-strong crew decked out in splendid white turbans and robes, and decorated with colourful garlands of marigold flowers across their bows.

The silence is palpable as they await the signal, the flag drops and then they're off.

The captain, standing under an ornate red umbrella in the middle of the vessel, lets out a yell and the cross-legged oarsmen, packed in back-to-back like sardines, are soon into their stride, rowing in synchrony to the rhythm of the Vanchipattu song of the boatmen.

The huge roar from the crew drowns out the commentary on the loud speaker hanging overhead as the two leading boats reach the halfway stage neck and neck.

Then it's an all-out sprint to the finish line, each team drawing on their final reserves in one last effort.

The wild celebrations that ensue are even louder and more animated as the winning crew holler and wave their oars aloft to the delight of the dancing and screaming masses on the far shore.

A cultural feast

Tourism to India is growing and evolving at a rapid pace. It's easier than ever to obtain a visa and once you're there the range of experiences on offer is extraordinary.

Rich in culture, food and history, a visit to India is likely to be one of the most eye-

“India’s so easy and it doesn’t break the bank. It allows your clients to embrace excitement and beauty within an unforgettable experience”

NICK PARKER, HEAD OF INDIA AND MIDDLE EAST, VIRGIN ATLANTIC

opening experiences of your life. Interest in this awe-inspiring sub-continent is at an all-time high, with the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge visiting on a royal tour and the release of Disney's *The Jungle Book* film earlier this year.

And with preparations starting in earnest to mark the country's 70th year of independence there's never been a better time to visit.

From the splendour of the Taj Mahal in the north to the golden sands of Goa in the south there really is something here for everyone.

Other must-sees include the tranquil backwaters of Kerala, the hustle and bustle of Delhi, the bright lights of Bollywood, and the holy temples of Varanasi.

For the perfect trip, recommend clients start in the

capital with a visit to the ancient Mogul Red Fort in Old Delhi before hitting the maze of bazaars for a bit of retail therapy.

They can watch the sun set on Humayun's Tomb, the inspiration for the Taj Mahal.

Next suggest they catch the *Rajdhani Express* to Agra. if they get there early tell them to head straight to the Mehtab Bagh gardens to watch the magical sight of the Taj Mahal emerging from the morning mist.

Once the crowds have dispersed (at 17.00) the full splendour of the palace itself remains.

Then schedule in Rajasthan, staying overnight in Jaipur to see the tigers at the Ranthambore reserve before heading to Jodhpur for a tour of the medieval Mehrangarh Fort.

The Golden City of Jaisalmer should feature next, rising from the Thar Desert like a huge sandcastle, where you can explore the magnificent fort and the Jain temples at leisure.

Camping overnight in a luxury tent at the Khuri Oasis Desert Resort allows clients to rise early to visit the lake city of Udaipur.

Add-in time on the coconut palm fronted beach of Mararikulam in Kerala or aboard a houseboat cruise around the state's backwaters for truly scenic R'n'R .

Perfect ten

1 Fly and drive: To avoid the overcrowded buses and trains suggest ►

From left: The Taj Mahal in Pradesh is not only a centre for tourists but also a site for stunning cultural displays



► hiring a car and driver. For long journeys connect by plane.

2 Live like a Raj: The 250-year-old Lake Palace in Udaipur is an 83-room floating hotel with white marble walls, accessible only by boat or speedboat and originally used as a summer palace for kings.

3 Holy ground: Those who make the pilgrimage to Varanasi can watch highly-decorated priests perform their colourful rituals on the banks of the River Ganges.

4 High spirits: A trek across the Himalayas allows time to visit some of the 15th century Buddhist monasteries scattered between Kashmir and the Chinese border.

5 Beetle mania: Suggest a visit to Rishikesh, home of yoga and where the Beatles 'found enlightenment'.

6 Easy rider: A rickshaw ride around Mumbai or Delhi is always memorable as the driver weaves in and out of the traffic.

7 Mine's a cuppa: Tea tasting is a must in Darjeeling, a peaceful Himalayan town of that gave its name to the world-famous tea produced in the surrounding by tea plantations.

8 Curry favour: Kolkata is India's foodie capital. You can get everything from traditional stuffed paratha to a spicy fish curry.

9 Shopper's paradise: Visitors can load up on colourful embroidered shoes and textiles, antique jewellery and paintings, semi-precious gemstones, marble

"India is a real feast for the senses so allow three weeks if possible. Airfares are not cheap so the longer clients stay the better value the tour becomes"

STUART DOUGLASS-LEE,
HEAD OF PRODUCT, SAGA

ware, silk and saris.

10 Walk on the wild side: To get close up to tigers, rhinos and other wildlife suggest the Kaziranga National Park with viewing from stilted cottages at Diphlu River Lodge.

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What's new

Attractions: For an insight into the history of India's presidents and the country's struggle for independence, suggest the new Rashtrapati Bhavan museum (presidentofindia.gov.in), which opens on October 2.

Tour operators: Tapping into all the excitement surrounding the release of *The Jungle Book* film, Cosmos Tours (cosmostoursandcruises.co.uk) has launched its new 2017 programme, starting in March. Animal lovers and history buffs alike can enjoy the 10-day 'India's Golden Triangle and the Tigers of Ranthambore' tour from £1,299pp, including accommodation, guided tours and transfers. The tour takes in the iconic sights of Delhi, Agra, the Taj Mahal and the ancient city of Jaipur, as well as Ranthambore National Park, where Rudyard Kipling drew his inspiration for *The Jungle Book* character Shere Khan.

Tourism talk



"As well as the regular array of historic monuments, religious centres, wildlife parks and markets, there's been a proliferation of small boutique guest houses and hotels providing unique experiences, often in

remote and distinctive locations. Whereas in the past people would stay at this kind of place for just a night or two, now they'll pause for longer, taking the opportunity to visit local weavers and potters, go on horse or camel treks, and take excursions to remote temples and birding hot spots – activities crafted by the owners of the property.

"Many also offer candle-lit suppers in romantic ruins or walks guided by local villagers where visitors learn about farming, herding and the landscape.

"It's a great way of getting to know India at a deeper level and is much more the experience that helps clients choose India as their next destination."

Amrit Singh, Managing Director, Trans Indus

Where to book it

☎ CONTIKI – 0808 281 1120

Contiki's 11-night 'Eternal India' trip starts in Delhi, takes in Agra, Ranthambore, Jaipur, Udaipur, Mumbai before ending in Goa. Starting from £1,339pp, the tour, which runs from December, includes breakfast, accommodation and internal flights.

contiki.com

☎ COX & KINGS – 020 3811 0851

The solo traveller 10-night 'Mystical India' trip will take you to see the elusive Bengal tigers in Ranthambore and the majestic forts and grand palaces of Rajasthan. Starting from £2,995pp, the tour, which runs from October to March 2017, includes accommodation and breakfast.

coxandkings.co.uk

☎ SAGA – 0800 414 383

Saga has launched a 22-night 'Grand Tour of South India' to celebrate the Year of Culture 2017, starting from £2,399pp. The tour, which runs from October to June 2017, takes in ancient temples, royal palaces and bustling cities, as well as a cruise of the Kerala backwaters. It includes accommodation and most meals.

saga.co.uk/India 📱

"While India does have a reputation for being chaotic, staying in luxury accommodation and having an experienced tour leader will ensure visitors experience India at its best"

LIVESEY, INDIA PRODUCT MMANAGER
COX & KINGS'



From left: Camels are used for transport in regions such as Jaipur; Kerala's lush green landscape is in stark contrast to much of India; Rajasthan is home to the Thar Desert; Ladakh is in the far north of India; Gadi Sagar temple in Rajasthan.