

India | From bustling cities to meeting big cats, a tour by train proves an eye-opening holiday for Kate Maxwell and her young family

It was five o'clock in the morning, a week before Diwali, and a crescent moon hung horizontally above Jaipur railway station. It looked, my son said, "like a smile." People in suits and bright saris rolled wheeled bags along the platform, stray dogs slept through the plinky departure announcements and the growl of locomotive engines. The air smelled of dust and chai.

My husband, our children, aged nine and eight, and I were here to board the fourth and final train of our tour of Rajasthan, the five-hour Jaipur to Jodhpur Express. Two weeks on the beach in Greece is our usual holiday speed, so travelling around India was a major step up. I'd approached the trip with some trepidation, worried we'd get ill – an Indian friend even suggested we take Imodium prophylactically – and that the multiple destinations and sensory overload would be too much for our kids; and to start with, it was. Negotiating Kolkata's steamy, margigold-scented interiors for a rickshaw ride 10 days earlier, my daughter clutched my hand so hard I developed a bruise. But now, she and her younger brother strolled confidently about with their red and yellow backpacks.

We'd come to India to visit Shikara, a Kolkata-based charity my husband is involved with, and had decided to explore Rajasthan while we were here. When I heard that Original Travel was launching a new tour of the region by rail, using the sorts of local trains millions of Indians take every day, it was seen to try to help us to well introduce to Rajasthan life in a way that crisscrossing the state in a hermetically sealed minibs might not.

The trip would take in the temples, palaces and forts of Rajasthan's Rajput and Mughal past, as well as exposing us to its rapidly changing present, with bespoke, family-friendly activities – including, we hoped, encounters with a couple of apex predators. As well as booking our train seats (having read *Monisha Rajesh's Around India in 80 Trains*, I knew this was no mean feat) to a small-scale building contractor, providing drivers and guides, and even helping us find our seats, the company's Delhi concierge would always be on the end of a WhatsApp. If we were going to leave our suitcase-building comfort zone, this was the way to do it.

The rail journeys, it turned out, were high points of the holiday, not just for the hubbub of the stations and the views, but also because of the people we met. As the train left Jaipur and the sky turned a hazy pink, the city gave way to farmland dotted with haystacks that looked, we thought, like the straw houses from *The Three Little Pigs*.

A samosa seller began his rounds and a couple across the aisle giggled through YouTube videos as the vast, milky Sambar lentil chutney was poured over it. I struck up conversation with a man on his way home to Delhi. "My brother likes crackers," he told me, when I asked if he'd be lighting fireworks. "I prefer beer."

Our train trip began in Delhi, where we stayed at the Imperial Hotel, its marble and teal hallways decorated with



Across Rajasthan by rail

Clockwise from above: a snack stall on the platform at Jaipur station; the author's children looking out for the chusive tiger a hot tub at Six Senses Fort Barwara

photos of elephants leading processions, military regiments, and busts of King George V and Queen Mary. The next day, we swapped the hotel's jasmine-scented interiors for a rickshaw ride around the hectic streets of Old Jaipur on our polynath guide, Robinson.

So much for food poisoning – the greatest health hazard of the holiday came in the form of a rampaging bull that spun around in front of us before collapsing from dizziness. Somehow, my husband and I managed not to convey our terror to the children, for whom the experience was a holiday highlight.

The following morning, we boarded the 8.10am Gatiman Express for Agra, en route to the Taj Mahal. I found the sight of the white marble mausoleum at dawn, when it glowed like a pink pearl, spellbinding. But again, animals were the biggest draw for the junior members of the party, my son grabbing my phone to snap two Egyptian pyramids perching on a minaret.

Our next hotel also had royal connections. On the edge of the Aravalli hills, Six Senses Fort Barwara is an exquisite conversion of a 14th-century fort built by the Chauhan Rajput clan. Ancient frescoes line the walls of the women's temple, now part of the spa, and though most of the building is new, including the swimming pool, with a raised platform on which my children lounged like mini maharajas, it melds elegantly with the original crenellations and domes.

Most of our fellow guests here and at other hotels were Indian tourists: the Covid pandemic, we were told repeatedly, persuaded prosperous Indians to discover their own backyards, just as it had for British holidaymakers in the UK. Fort Barwara was our jumping-off point for Ranthambore National Park, an hour's drive west, where we went in search of tigers. The closest my children had been to a safari was Whipsnade Zoo, and they were agog at the zombos, sambar and spotted deer, and peacocks we saw on our afternoon drive.

An hour in, our 4x4 stopped, and our guide Jyotirm Chaturvedi pointed out tiger tracks. A series of loud barks followed: warning calls from a sambar deer. We clung on as the vehicle shot off at high speed, pulses soaring. The tiger eluded us, but no one minded: being on a mission, binoculars clapped to our eyes, the rolling green-and-ochre landscape darkening as the light faded, was enough of a thrill.

In fact, our favourite part of the day came when we left the serene park in our open-top 4x4 and entered a maelstrom of daily life on the outskirts of Sawai Madhopur. Motorbikes hooted and swerved around marauding warhogs, goats and families of monkeys; children waved from balconies strung with neon Diwali lights as the smells of evening meals were cooked drifted by.

From Sawai Madhopur, the closest station to Ranthambore, it was a two-hour train ride to Jaipur. That evening on our hotel's terrace: we were stunned to see more than 100 kites swinging high above the Old City's rooftops, practice for Jaipur's centuries-old kite festival.

Built at the start of the 19th century, Samode Haveli became a hotel in the 1980s, and members of the aristocratic Samode family still live there: staff walk their dachshunds under a 200-year-old banyan tree. Jaipur's royal family still occupies its City Palace, too, as we saw first-hand: one minute we were admiring a photograph of 25-year-old Princes Gauravi Kumari, the next she was zooming past in a golf buggy.

The following day, we were driven to the village of Bagru, where the 400-year-old craft of block printing is going strong. We were shown bubbling vats of natural dyes and the pomegranate flowers used to fix the colours, before being invited to have a go. My daughter loved it, stamping her fabric so vigorously with the leaf blocks she'd chosen that I was surprised we weren't printed head to toe by the time we left. Back at home, she



'Sorry I'm late, I was rescuing a 12-foot rock python,' was Sid's introduction

used her new skill in a school art project, carving potatoes instead of wood.

My son is less interested in crafting but obsessed with cricket – no gender stereotypes here – and Original Travel had arranged for him to have a game with boys from Blue Heaven School, outside Jaipur. While he picked up bowling tips from Nandeep Rajawat, school director and former cricket pro, I chatted to his teenage teammates about their career plans. Most were would-be entrepreneurs; true Modi citizens, they told me, to capitalise on India's raw materials and infrastructure. India's GDP grew by about 7 per cent in 2024, a trajectory it was easy to imagine continuing as we chatted.

But as the economy has grown, wealth and income inequalities have widened, and we saw plenty of evidence of that during our trip, too. Before coming to India, my husband and I debated whether we should be exposing our children to the country's appalling poverty.

"India's got riches," my daughter observed, "but they're not shared out." If nothing else, I hope our trip made them realise how lucky they are with their cosy London lives, food in the fridge and drinkable water in the taps.

After exploring Jodhpur's Mehran garh fort, a feat of Mughal engineering that hovers 120 metres above the Thar desert and had the best arsenal of any fort we'd visited – "Arms & Weapons" signs, I'd discovered, are catnip to eight- and nine-year-olds – we drove to three hours to our last stop, Suján Jaisal. A spectacularly beautiful camp with just 10 tents, each with a terrace, bathroom and marble shower, in a wilderness area known for its leopards.

Leopards are notoriously hard to spot, and after the tiger no-show we were prepared to be disappointed. Our



intrepid zoologist-son, Siddharth Waradkar ("Sorry I'm late, I was rescuing a 12-foot rock python," was his introduction), refused to be drawn on our chances either.

But within five minutes of leaving the camp, we found Ballraja, a dominant male leopard, beneath a tree. It was an emotional moment: we were so close we could see his chest rise and fall. "He winked at me," said my daughter. That same afternoon, we watched a hefty eight-month-old cub stretch and lay on a rock. Suján's rewilding efforts, which began a decade ago and included uprooting an invasive species of acacia, have helped increase the leopards' prey, and their population has risen by about 50 per cent.

The animals are now comfortable with humans – as long as they stay in their vehicles – hence our up-close sightings. The property has a community-focused approach to conservation: 90 per cent of the camp's staff, including its red-turbaned Rabari guards, come from local villages, and it sponsors 10 nearby schools.

The following morning, Sid received a call from one of the camp's spotters, and we sped towards Jaisal. "This is literally like Mario Kart," said my son appreciatively as we rollovercasted over the granite rocks, "but we found another cub, rolling on its back as if asking to be tickled. On our last dusk drive, cicadas chirping like alarm clocks, we were escorted back to Suján by a leopard straddling itself in front of our vehicle. "He's saying goodbye," said Sid.

In the end, it was the constant gearshifts I'd worried about that made our tour of Rajasthan so magical. "Everything's so different," said my children again and again: different from yesterday and different from home. Hopping between capricious, kaleidoscopic cities and pristine wildernesses where big cats roamed wild? Just as electrifying, it had stretched our holiday horizons. As the kids stuck their train tickets in their journals and I put four unopened packets of Indomie in the bathroom cupboard, I wondered if we'd ever been with two weeks on the beach again.

Kate Maxwell is the author of *'Flashy'* (Virago)