

incredible india: glimpses

It would take a lifetime to really fathom the depth, the diversity, the distinctive 'Indianness' inherent in every little experience this country offers...

Writer **AMITABH KANT**

"The one land that all men desire to see, and having seen once, by even a glimpse, would not give that glimpse for the shows of all the rest of the globe combined." Mark Twain

WHAT DOES THIS glimpse reveal? What magic does this glimpse work on you? Why do you yearn for more? Like most Indians, I too had, from childhood, unconsciously taken for granted all the glory associated with this land. But when I set out to see India, I realised that it would take a lifetime to really fathom the depth, the diversity, the distinctive 'Indianness' inherent in every little experience this country offers—simply because each experience is so startlingly different, so encompassing, that it challenges your senses and carves for itself a niche in your mindscape.

Though I've seen most of India, there are three regions that have touched my life irreversibly. Uttar Pradesh, where I was born and brought up—surrounded by the mystique of the Himalayas, the Ganga and the Taj Mahal; Kerala, where I've lived and worked for long stints amidst breathtaking greenery, along with the backwaters of God's Own Country; and New Delhi, where every bureaucrat ends up at some point in his career to walk the corridors of power and more importantly perhaps, to lose himself in this sprawling city of tombs and flyovers, ghazals and heavy metal, the past and the future.

In many ways, the Himalayas have been a powerful influence for me. The peace and the danger, the unpredictable nature and the predictable people, the magnificent isolation and the palpable presence of a God, the exhilaration and the exhaustion, have all taught me lessons that have stood me in good stead on the plains.

If you are on a spiritual trip, don't miss the Char Dham region, which, since year 2000, moved from Uttar Pradesh to the newly formed State of Uttarakhand. Here, you'll find the four most revered pilgrimage centres of India—Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath. They have, for many centuries, brought in saints and pilgrims in search of the divine. Like the rest of India, the Himalayas also offer you a range of choices—exhilarating adventure, exotic wildlife and breathtaking treks. Or, if you'd like to combine these experiences with holistic rejuvenation thrown in, there is no better place than the Ananda Spa, also in Uttarakhand.

My proximity to the Taj Mahal did not in any way take away the magic of one of the wonders of the world. With each visit, the Taj grows on you. The most extravagant symbol of undying love, the Taj has become for India what the Eiffel Tower is for France and the Big Ben for England. Built by Emperor Shah Jahan as a mausoleum for his second wife Mumtaz Mahal, who died in 1631, it took 22 years, over 20,000 people and an estimated three million Indian Rupees to complete this wonder.

The more you know of the Emperor's love for his wife, the architecture of the period and his obsession with perfection—which went to the extent of amputating the hands and thumbs of many workers to ensure that they would never replicate this beauty—the more you will enjoy your Taj.

The Ganga is an experience in itself—especially in Varanasi, also called Benares and Kashi. There is something about this place that gets into your system, makes you think about the ephemeral nature of life about birth, about death and about life after death. And a dip in the Ganges, more than cleansing the body, calms the mind with the belief that one has been purged of all sins hitherto committed. With its famous bathing-ghats, the placid Ganga, the umpteen temples dotting its banks and the rustic charm so palpable in the quaint shops of paan-Benaras, the ancient streets from where you hear the strains of the shehnai, Varanasi is the oldest living city in the world.

However, my eternal fascination will always be Kerala. It could be because life is simple in this state. It could be because Kerala envelops you in a soothing green. It could be because life is laidback. (An attempt to speed things up will give you the tag of an "overzealous Northy"). Kerala is nature undiluted—and the magic of this land lies in the fact that almost the entire state is a tourist destination, with the life of the people very much a part of the experience. For me, Kerala is at her best during the monsoons. There is an endearing rawness about this state that comes alive during the monsoons. The entire state is wrapped in rich green and the people surrender to the rejuvenative powers of Ayurveda... My fascination for Kerala also has a very personal reason—as the Secretary for Tourism, Government of Kerala, I had the opportunity to build the brand called 'God's Own Country' in select national and international markets.

My relationship with New Delhi is a love-hate one. With all its heat and politics, there is something about this city that draws you back to it again and again. New Delhi, for me is India's Forts, walls, havelis, imperial buildings... the city has history written all over it. Walking along the majestic Raj Path, or along the crowded streets of Connaught Place, it is easy to go back in time, to a time when an Oxford-educated young man named Nehru and a scantily dressed lawyer called Gandhi stole an entire nation's heart and inspired them to strive for independence. New Delhi has, however, moved with the times and like the beautiful Lotus Temple, showcases the best of heritage and modernity.

Like John Muir said, "Everybody needs beauty places to play in where nature may heal and cheer and give strength to the body and the soul alike." India is my beauty place, my hermitage, my fountain of inspiration and my soul food.

—The writer is Joint Secretary (Tourism) & CMD, ITD