

# Experience India, maharajah style

Luxury meets history on unique train journey

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FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

“Shahib, would you like omelette for breakfast?” the steward on the Palace on Wheels asked me. “Are yaar (my friend), I eat omelettes in Canada all the time. I would like puri and shaak (Indian pancake with potato curry).”

“No problem, sir! I can make it in no time,” he said and vanished in the kitchen. In about 10 minutes, I was served a typical Indian breakfast of puri and shaak and treated royally.

Palace on Wheels, a unique and exclusive train originally used by the then ruling maharajahs, Indian princes, has been revived today for the sophisticated travellers who don't mind spending money to be treated like royalty. Started as a joint venture between the government of India and one of the state government's agencies, the Rajasthan Tourism Corporation, Palace on Wheels offers a first class, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and experience, to pass through one of the most picturesque, historic and scenic areas of India.

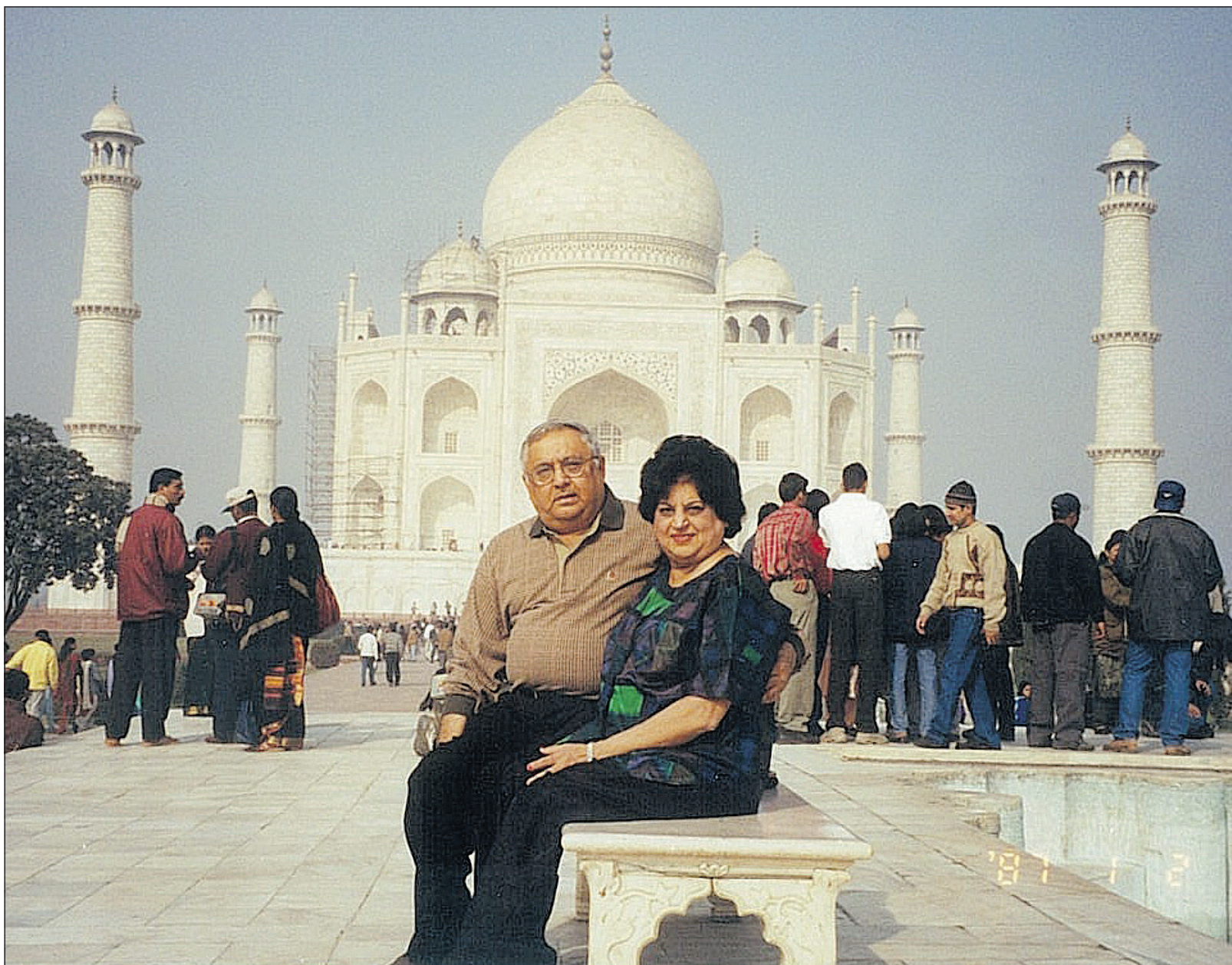
Palace on Wheels comprises 14 deluxe air-conditioned saloons, completely self-sufficient and tastefully equipped to impress modern travellers. Each compartment is equipped with hot and cold water, attached toilet, shower, intercom, wall-to-wall carpeting and soothing channel music while the passengers enjoy their sleep. It was first started from a vintage train used by the maharajahs, then the governor-general of India and later by the officials of the British Raj. Today, it services tourists around the world willing to pay top dollar to enjoy breathtaking scenery and experience the comfortable lifestyle of India's royalty.

The eight-day journey starts from New Delhi, India's capital city, and passes through some of the country's unique landscapes and tourist attractions in the beautiful state of Rajasthan. In many respects, a trip on Palace of Wheels can be described as “a cruise on land,” as each morning the train stops at a different city and passengers are taken in luxurious air-conditioned buses to tour the city's tourist attractions after a sumptuous breakfast.

Two personal attendants or “khidmatgars” are attached to every compartment to prepare breakfast and attend to every wish and whim of passengers. Wearing colourful attire consisting of black jackets and red turbans, these attendants or stewards are expected to be at the passengers' beck and call. Our steward smilingly prepared a typical Indian breakfast for me while other passengers were happy to start their day with cereal, fruits and toast. Other services include everything from cleaning the cabin to ensuring the passenger's laundry is done and ready on time.

At each stopover, passengers are taken to the tourist attractions of the city and served lunch in the city's best hotel, usually a former palace leased by a maharajah in a five-star restaurant chain. The bus returns to the rail station at around 5 p.m., allowing tired passengers to wash up and relax before dinner. Before dinner, there is time for cocktails in the train's luxurious lounge or passengers can order drinks in their cosy private sitting rooms, ideally located at the end of each compartment for smaller groups of friends.

Dinner is served in the train's two dining rooms, appropriately called the Maharajah (the King)



Photos: Mansoor Ladha

Palace on Wheels stops in Agra to allow passengers to visit the Taj Mahal, a must for all visitors to India.



After a day sightseeing, passengers enjoy delicious meals in the train's two dining rooms.



Lunch at the Lake Palace Hotel, in the middle of the lake in Udaipur, is a highlight.

and the Maharani (the Queen). The five to six course meals, with complimentary wine on occasions, is served by colourfully dressed waiters and consists of Indian, Rajasthani or North American cuisine. Special orders or prior requests are also taken to meet the passengers' culinary demands. The on-site chef prepares a variety of dishes during the eight-day journey, bearing in mind the foreign clientele and

their tastes, hence making it palatable and delicious to non-Indian passengers.

No trip to India is complete without a visit to world famous Taj Mahal in Agra. Palace on Wheels stops in Agra to allow passengers to view Taj Mahal, a monument of love and one of the wonders of the world, to their heart's content.

The train mainly passes through Rajasthan or the land of the Ra-

jputana, an arid desert whose inhabitants boast of a proud civilization and rich culture. The capital, Jaipur, is meticulously planned urban city with tree-lined avenues. Envisioned by the local maharajah Jai Singh II in 1772, Jaipur is famous as a city of artisans, craftsmen and merchants, whose wares are abundantly sold in the city's stores and markets.

Jaipur is commonly called the Pink City as a law enforced by

another maharajah established a tradition among its inhabitants to paint all dwellings in the city in pink colour. The nucleus of the Pink City is the sprawling City Palace, which covers one-seventh of Jaipur.

One section of the palace is still the royal residence of the former maharajah while the other side has been converted into a museum of rare collection of ancient portraits, manuscripts, chandeliers, a golden throne and priceless miniature paintings in the Rajput style. When we visited the palace, a dance sequence for an Indian film was being shot.

After a hectic and busy tour of Jaipur, we were taken to the historic Amber Fort, an 11-kilometre drive through meandering, narrow streets. At the foot of the fort, there is a battalion of elephants waiting with their attendants to take tourists on a delightful ride to the top of the fort.

Jaipur offers a lot for tourists in terms of its historic sites, palaces and museums while for the ardent shoppers, the Pink City offers a variety of handicrafts, jewelry, textiles and its famous blue pottery.

The Palace on Wheels next travels to Jaisalmer, located in the heart of the Thar Desert, which is fairly close to the Pakistani border. A common sight here was that of smiling and waving Indian soldiers going to the border in army trucks. The highlight of the visit is an exciting camel ride on the sand dunes, and watching the desert sunset while sipping tea and biscuits.

My favourite city on Palace on Wheels trip was Udaipur, or the Lake City, made famous by two of its most beautiful sites — the marble palaces of Jag Niwas and the Jag Mandir.

A brief stop for lunch in the Lake Palace Hotel, beautifully constructed right in the middle of the lake, is a must for every tourist, thus ending an enriching experience through India's most beautiful tourist attractions, on Palace on Wheels.

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