

# All aboard...



**These are exciting times for train travel in India – quite simply one of the best ways to explore this vast and varied country**

**S**o huge is the sub-continent of India that getting around is no easy feat. Journeys by plane can't always get you where you want to go, and journeys by car can be long and arduous. The simple answer is to travel by train, primarily because India has one of the largest, most comprehensive and efficient rail networks in the world. While public trains are the cheapest, most popular option with standards of comfort and hygiene having improved considerably in recent years, by far the most glamorous and relaxing way to travel is aboard a luxury, tourist-only train. There are a handful of these operating throughout the country, but two in particular stand out for their quality and service, as well as for the unusual itineraries they offer.

First is the Golden Chariot, a beautiful train which was launched in 2008 and is named after the famous stone chariot in Hampi. This luxury hotel on wheels departs from Bangalore each Monday and follows a 7-night journey through the ravishingly verdant landscape of the Deccan Plateau before descending the Western Ghats to the Arabian Sea and Goa. The train travels by night delivering its passengers to

a new destination every morning, making some of the most exciting and off-the-beaten-track destinations in South India accessible for the first time without needing to suffer the discomfort of sub-standard accommodation or waste valuable time on long, hot drives.

In the 19 specially-designed carriages there are 44 en-suite cabins, with either double or twin beds, all of which are equipped with wi-fi, LCD television, DVD and satellite, and are beautifully furnished with intricately carved ceilings and plush furnishings. The two on-board kitchens (Indian and Continental) provide excellent meals out of fresh ingredients picked up en route. There is a spa offering massages and a steam room, a gym, an internet café and a very efficient laundry service. The real pleasure though is in the service – private butlers wake guests with tea and biscuits in bed in the morning and welcome them back on board in the evening with a cold towel and a refreshing drink.

Highlights of the journey include the Mysore Palace and Brindavan Gardens, the ancient Jain pilgrimage centre at Shravanabelagola, the ruins at Hampi and the cave temples of Badami. At the end of the journey guests have the option to stay on in Goa or return on the train to Bangalore.

Perhaps the most exciting news for Indian Tourism, however, is the imminent launch of the Maharajas' Express, which heralds a luxury train service like no other. This is to be the first train of its kind to cross state borders and its routes will open up spectacular parts of



India that are very difficult for a luxury traveller to experience by plane, car or current train service.

As its name suggests, the train has been designed to be fit for princes and kings, but with a modern-day twist to embrace the 21st century. There are 43 rooms altogether, ranging from the deluxe cabins to the one-carriage Grand Presidential Suite. Each cabin has a large panoramic window, air-cushioned suspension, environmentally friendly washrooms and the best in audiovisual technology. Added to this is a bar carriage, an Observation lounge, two fine-dining restaurants and a boutique.

The Maharajah's Express will be making its inaugural journey in January 2010 and thereafter will follow two routes – Mumbai to Delhi, and Delhi to Kolkata (both of which can be taken in reverse, too). The first of these, 'Princely India', is an 8-day journey taking in some of the most breathtaking sights of 'royal' India including Udaipur, Jodphur, Jaipur, Ranthambore National Park and the Taj Mahal. But it is the second itinerary, 'Classical India', which is the real ground breaker. No other luxury train follows the route between Delhi and Kolkata - a journey which incorporates some of the most fascinating sights in the country. First stop is Agra and the Taj Mahal followed by the palaces, temples and monuments of Gwalior. At Khajuraho in Madya Pradesh guests can explore the exquisite Indo-Aryan temples before moving on to the wilderness of Bandhavgarh National Park, which has the highest

known density of tigers in the world. Arrival at Varanasi takes place very early in the morning to allow guests the chance to enjoy a scenic cruise on the Ganges at sunrise. Guests also have the chance to explore the Old City of Varanasi and visit the silk weaving centre. The final day of the six-day itinerary, before disembarkation in Kolkata, takes in the Hindu pilgrimage site at Gaya, the Swarna Bhandar and Cyclopean Wall at Rajgir and the 4th century seat of learning at Nalanda.

There can be no doubt that 2010 will be an interesting and dynamic year for Indian tourism, and the launch of the Maharajah's Express will be an exciting way to begin.

*By Pamela Goodman*

**Greaves Travel (0207 487 9111; [www.greavesindia.com](http://www.greavesindia.com)) offers a ten day tour of South India including 7 nights on a full-board basis on the Golden Chariot, return international flights, and hotel accommodation in Bangalore.**

**The Maharajah's Express costs about \$800 per person per day based on two sharing a deluxe cabin. This price includes accommodation, all meals and soft drinks, house brands of wine, beer and spirits, all sightseeing with entrance fees, guides and all entertainment. For details visit [www.rirtl.com](http://www.rirtl.com).**