

Giles Milton adores the chaos and charm of India's fabled Pink City - even if he does get stuck in a...

Jumbo jam in Jaipur

WE WERE not going anywhere fast. A giant elephant - its trunk painted in swirls of green, pink and blue - had stopped right in front of our bus, along with a wedding party so huge that it stretched far into the distance. There were two brass bands, a troupe of brilliantly clad dancers, and a family entourage that could have dropped straight from Bollywood. Perhaps they had.

When driving in Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan in northern India, it pays to allow extra time for your journey. The streets are a chaotic mix of fume-belching cars, brightly painted lorries, and motorised rickshaws, all of them hooting and jostling for position.

Incredibly, the traffic almost never comes to a complete halt. It's as if some invisible hand is gently shunting the whole lot forwards, oblivious to red lights, ragged street urchins and the fact that half the rickshaws are driving on the wrong side of the road.

Our stand-off with the elephant didn't last long. After 20 minutes or so, the beast trumpeted, the band blew their brass, and the bride and groom exhorted everyone to get under way. They did - even the elephant - allowing us to once again get on the move.

Jaipur is one of India's most beguiling cities, one in which nothing is quite as it seems. Founded in the late 1700s by the local ruler, Jai Singh, it was deliberately designed to look different from every other place in India. The streets were laid out in a grid and adorned with flamboyant palaces and temples. Every door opens on to a new wonder.

THE entire city was painted pink in 1876 as a welcoming gesture to the visiting Prince of Wales (later crowned King Edward VII). History has not recorded who, at the time, owned the concession for pink paint, but I wouldn't be surprised if the maharaja had a vested interest. Ever since, Jaipur has been known as the Pink City.

The central sights of Jaipur are best reached by tuk-tuk or motorised rickshaw: 100 rupees (£1.25) will get you just about anywhere in the city centre. Hold on tight, look at your feet and not at the maelstrom of vehicles zooming towards you, and don't inhale the exhaust. It's like a fairground ride,

with a large dollop of added danger.

My first stop was Jaipur's most photographed facade, the stunning Hawa Mahal or Palace of Winds. I'd seen scores of pictures of the place, all breathtaking, yet nothing prepares you for the real thing: a giant pink beehive of a building that's decorated with 1,000 latticed windows.

When built in 1799, each window-niche would have been occupied by a lady of the court, every one of whom lived in purdah. Forbidden from wandering about town, or even being seen in public, these imprisoned princesses could catch a glimpse of the bustling street life below if they twisted their necks downwards and pressed their faces tight against the lattice-work.

From the Hawa Mahal, it's a five-minute walk to the fabled City Palace, principal residence of the city's once-mighty maharajas. That



GOING NOWHERE: A typically chaotic day on the streets of Jaipur, above. Left: The elephant procession that held up Giles during his trip

five-minute walk along the edge of the bazaar was one to remember. Suddenly, everyone was my friend. Carpet-sellers, gem-dealers, weavers and stone-carvers - with every step, yet another hawk or peddler joined the merry band trying to sell me their wares. One claimed

to have family in Bradford. Another said improbably that he'd spent a weekend in Manchester United.

Spurring their offers of antique caskets and Moghul miniatures, I pressed on towards the City Palace, still inhabited by descendants of the ruling dynasty who lavished

their fortune on embellishing the place. Much of it can be visited: sun-splashed courtyards, mosaic-covered gateways and ornamental audience chambers dripping with opulence and decadence.

Pause for a moment on the marble steps, close your eyes, and it's

BEGUILING: The Amer Fort in Jaipur. Far right: The latticed windows of the Palace of Winds



GETTING THERE

Cox & Kings (coxandkings.co.uk) offers a 13-day escorted tour of the Golden Triangle and Shimla from £1,995pp, including three nights in Jaipur, return flights to Delhi, transfers, excursions, B&B and some meals.

LATE DEALS OF THE WEEK

BARGAIN BEST ALL-INCLUSIVE HEAD TO CUBA
on July 11 for a week at the Grand Memories Santa Maria. The beachside resort has a spa, pools and tennis courts. All-inclusive prices start at £780pp, with return flights from Manchester and transfers. Visit thomson.co.uk.

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GREEK ODYSSEY: One of the stunning beaches on Zante

BARGAIN BEST SHORT BREAK FOUR NIGHTS' HALF-BOARD AT THE GLOBALES REINA CRISTINA HOTEL
in Algiers, set in gardens with views over the Strait of Gibraltar, costs from £159pp, with flights from London. Go to tinyurl.com/ycmley2 or call 0203 883 8245.

BARGAIN BEST SELF-CATERING THE NATIONAL TRUST
is discounting last-minute breaks by 15 per cent up to July 20. Accessible only by footpath, Pant Rhiv Cottage, near Pwllheli in North Wales, has stunning sea views. It sleeps four and costs from £379 for three nights up to the end of this month. Visit nationaltrustholidays.org.uk or call 0344 800 2070.

BARGAIN BEST LUXURY SIGNATURE
from Thomas Cook (thomascook.com, 0844 871 6650) has a week at the Beach Rotana, Abu Dhabi, from £579pp. It has a private beach and spa with 11 restaurants. The B&B deal includes flights from Heathrow for September departures.

not hard to imagine yourself back in the city's heyday, when the ruling Maharaja Sawai Madho Singh II, a veritable man-mountain, struggled to ease his vast frame into the voluminous clothes on display. (For the record, he was 4ft wide, weighed 40st and had 108 wives.)

EXCESS is everywhere on display in the City Palace. Don't miss the Hall of Public Audience, which houses two of the largest silver vessels in the world, each one made from 14,000 molten silver coins.

They were made for Sawai Madho Singh so that he could transport enough holy drinking water from the Ganges to last him the duration of his visit to England in 1901. Each held 8,500 pints - enough to ensure he wouldn't have to consume unholy water from the London mains. The

oddest monument in Jaipur is the curiously named Jantar Mantar, a collection of gigantic sun-measuring instruments invented by the same maharaja who founded Jaipur. The scale and accuracy of the Jantar Mantar's sundials and observatories are staggering, especially as they were built almost three centuries ago.

The largest sundial is the height of a three-storey house, yet its intricately calibrated scale, used to compute the sun's shadow, is correct to half a second.

You could easily fill a week seeing the sights of Jaipur. The Amer Fort is another highlight that's not to be missed. And then there's the Jai Mahal (or Water Palace), which is even more impressive.

Jaipur has more to offer than mere monuments. The local cuisine (largely vegetarian, since seven out of ten Rajasthanis

MOUNTAIN OF A MAN:
An image of Maharaja Sawai Madho Singh



don't eat meat) is infinitely superior to anything you'll get in your local Indian restaurant. Kadhi is one of the more unusual dishes - a thick and spicy yogurt sauce dotted with succulent, deep-fried pastries.

I'd come here for the Jaipur Literature Festival. This is the Glastonbury of the book world, gathering writers from across the planet, and up to half a million visitors. Jaipur hosts other festivals too, including the ever-popular elephant festival each March.

The highlight of the event is the beauty contest, with stunningly bedecked elephants (along with decorated camels and horses) competing for the title of Miss Indian Elephant.

Jaipur is one of those fabled cities that promise much and offer even more. Just don't expect to go anywhere in a hurry - especially if you get stuck behind an elephant.

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Working up a thirst for a tippale along the Thames

By Tom Chesshyre

conservatory at the back of the main red-brick building.

The beer garden slopes to the river (only a few feet wide here) and makes a perfect pitstop. You might also play a game in the pool room, which is decorated with pictures of military planes gifted by guests (the pub has rooms) attending the Royal International Air Tattoo at nearby RAF Fairford.

From here I continued eastwards, enjoying the New Inn Hotel in Lechlade, Gloucestershire (once frequented by Percy Bysshe Shelley and his wife Mary, and right next door to St Lawrence Church, inspiration for Shelley's A Summer English Churchyard), The Trout at Tadpole Bridge in Oxfordshire (lovely beer garden),



A NEW WORLD BECKONS: The Mayflower at Rotherhithe, used by the Pilgrim Fathers before they began their voyage across the Atlantic in 1620

and The Bull in Streatley in Berkshire. This was where Jerome K. Jerome stopped for lunch during his comic masterpiece Three Men In A

Boat, describing the Thames thereabouts as having a 'sweet smiling face'. Jerome also waxed lyrical about The Bull Inn in Sonning,

GETTING THERE

The Red Lion, Castle Eaton (red-lion.co.uk); **New Inn Hotel**, Lechlade (thenewinnhotel.co.uk); **The Trout**, Tadpole Bridge (troutinn.co.uk); **The Bull**, Streatley (bullinpub.co.uk); **Bull Inn**, Sonning (bullinsonning.co.uk); **Hand & Flowers**, Marlow (thehandandflowers.co.uk); **The Swan**, Staines (swanstaines.co.uk); **The Grapes**, Limehouse (thegrapes.co.uk); **The Mayflower**, Rotherhithe (mayflowerpub.co.uk); **Three Daws**, Gravesend (threedaws.co.uk).

Berkshire, which he considered 'a veritable picture of an old country inn'. This it still is, making a great place for a break during the long walk between Pangbourne and

Henley. I can highly recommend its bangers and mash, best eaten in the atmospheric low-beamed room behind the bar. The Bull is George Clooney's local and he occasionally pops in. Theresa May also lives close by, although she is not, you will be unsurprised to learn, much of a barfly.

Further on, I stopped for a drink at Tom Kerridge's two Michelin-starred Hand & Flowers in Marlow in Buckinghamshire, was impressed by the lovely Swan in Staines, and then reached London, where there are too many great riverside pubs to mention.

However, The Grapes in Limehouse, where one of the leaseholders is the actor Sir Ian McKellen, stood out for its Dickensian feel (indeed Dickens used to drink there), as did The Mayflower in Rotherhithe, from

where the Pilgrim Fathers are said to have set forth to the New World in 1620.

And then it was on, beyond the Thames Barrier to the sea, taking the southern bank, with a pint along the way at the historic Three Daws pub in Gravesend in Kent, before finishing by raising a glass at the British Pilot, overlooking the sea at Allhallows on the Hoo Peninsula. I was accompanied by my father, who had joined me for the final stretch.

What an adventure. What a lot of pubs. But with all the walking, you've more than earned that tippale or two along the way.

● Tom Chesshyre's *From Source To Sea: Notes From A 215-Mile Walk Along The River Thames* is published by Summersdale, priced £16.99.