

Our Glorious AFS Itinerary

May 3 or 4 – Depart USA

With flights overnight, we encourage you to fly in a day early to rest and explore! You can arrange own air for flexibility, even add a stopover en route such as on KLM in AMS. Many airlines fly USA to Delhi with great rates. We're also working on Group Air and we'll present details on air and hotel to come in our Trip Tips.

May 5 – Welcome to Incredible India! (Land Tour Begins)

Check in to our **5 Star Le-Meridian**, located in the heart of the city with a traditional Indian welcome of aarti-tikka garland and beverages along with a full trip briefing from your dedicated guide.

Discover one of the world's fastest-growing cities with over 5000 years of history. As India's capital, there's fascinating blend of old and new and we'll see some of each, Delhi has been the seat of power for numerous dynasties like the Turks, Rajputs, Afghans and Mughals who led until the British entered. There's never a dull moment in this city of 14 million with endless enticements to enjoy.

Imperial Delhi City Tour -

We begin in impressive **old Delhi** to retrace the architectural history. Visit **Jama Masjid** and palatial buildings with Mughal-style gardens. Drive Past **Red Fort** - Built by Shah Jahan, the most prolific architect, and builder of the Mughal Empire, Lal Qila or Red Fort was the seat of Mughal power from 1639 to 1857. Named after the red sandstone used in its construction, Red Fort covers an area of almost 2km. Visitors enter via three-story Lahore Gate, one of six impressive gateways.

Enjoy a 2-wheeled rickshaw ride among the monuments. Pass vibrant bazaars, vendors cooking up street delicacies and children (as well as cows!) darting in and out of traffic - a giant photo opp! If time allows, we visit Raj Ghat – crematorium site of Mahatma Gandhi as well as stunning sites in New Delhi and Delhi's oldest and busiest market, Chandi Chowk.

Our past groups loved visiting the enormous **Sikh temple - Gurdwara Bangla Sahib**. What you eat in India depends on which religion you follow, but here's a place where people of all religions and castes come to share a common meal and it's free! See the huge "Langar" or kitchen and dining hall where thousands of people are fed each day. Sikhism, the 5th largest world religion, is an egalitarian society. Sikhs volunteer their time in Langars to fulfill a tenant of their faith (It's a cool cultural immersion. Ladies cover yourselves with a headscarf.)

Overnight: Le Meridian (D)

May 6 – Day of Leisure or Tour the Taj Mahal and Elephants in Agra

(Most AFSers have toured the Taj and Agra, so we offer an optional visit for our newbies.)

A whole day free to explore Delhi on your own OR knock off a bucket list item with a full day tour in Agra with the Taj and Elephant SOS.

Optional Private AFS Tour: Taj Mahal and Agra Fort

After breakfast, early morning transfer to train station for our fast train to Agra 8:10-9:50am. The little village of **Agra** was transformed in the 17th century into second capital of the Mughal Empire under two Great Mughal monarchs, Akbar and Shah Jahan. Today, a visitor to Agra is caught up in a world of contrasting edifices of red sandstone and white marble, narrow lanes and quaint buggies, and an irresistible charm.

On arrival enjoy a guided tour of Agra. No visit to India is complete without visiting the mesmerizing **Taj Mahal**. We ride to the Taj on decorate carriages Nothing can truly prepare you for the beauty you are about to experience. Witnessing it for the first time after walking through the gates will leave you breathless.

The 17th century Taj Mahal is often called a ‘poem in stone’. If so, the mausoleum is a love poem - created by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan for his favorite wife Mumtaz Mahal. It took 22 years to complete. Apart from its stunning design balance and perfect symmetry, the Taj is also noted for its elegant domes, intricately carved screens and some of the best inlay work ever seen. We explore both the manicured grounds and the spectacular monument. Witness the magical effects caused by the reflections of the changing colors of the sun on this brilliant white marble building!

After lunch buffet at a local restaurant. Later in the afternoon we head to Mathura to visit **Wildlife SOS - The Elephant Conservation and Care Center**. This elephant haven provides you with the fun opportunity to bathe and feed the rescued elephants and learn more about these gentle creatures. This is an elephant sanctuary created in 2009 to rehabilitate severely abused and neglected captive elephants in distress. Several months of vet care, good nutrition and rest totally rehabilitates their welfare. They get the best medicine, veggies and even pedicures here! Learn about their incredible rescue efforts by elephant ambulances and meet the vets who treat all their injuries. They are so credibly worthy, AFS donates regularly to SOS. Return to Delhi by coach, about approx 4 ½ hours drive.

Full Tour Cost (Lunch included): \$115

Overnight: Le-Meridien (B)

May 7 – Jaipur & Elephants

After a hearty buffet breakfast, transfer to airport for flight to Jaipur on Indigo Airlines 9:25pm-10:15am. Fabulous Jaipur founded in 1727 is called the “Pink City” for its buildings painted pink over a century ago. This ancient royal city was home to the Rajputs, a fairy-tale land of legends, chivalry and beautiful women. It has timeless appeal with colorful bazaars, ornate gardens and palaces surrounded by mountains.

Late afternoon enjoy an orientation tour of the city.

Start with a photo stop at **Hawa Mahal or the Palace of Winds**. This beautiful façade is probably the most-photographed in Jaipur, with its ornately carved windows designed so the ladies of the palace could look out onto the streets unobserved.

Continue to **City Palace Museum**, which has a priceless collection of antiques, costumes and armory of the Mughals and Rajputs including swords of different shapes and sizes with chiseled handles. It also has an art gallery which displays a collection of miniature paintings, carpets, royal paraphernalia and rare astronomical works in Arabic, Persian, Latin and Sanskrit. Next visit **Jantar Mantar Observatory**, a UNESCO World

heritage site - a stone astrological and astronomical Observatory built by Maharaja Jai Singh in the 18th century.

Later heading out to take a peek into the Gem palace and Handloom Emporium. There's so much to do in this bustling city.

Overnight: Marriott Jaipur (B)

May 8 – Jaipur, Ballooning and City Tour

Optional Hot Air Balloon Ride: After breakfast, enjoy an excursion to the magnificent **Amber Fort**. Ascend the fort on Jeeps and tour the chambers and hallways of the intricately designed and decorated palace. The colorfully painted elephant-headed god Ganesh greets you as you enter the imposing Ganesh Pol gateway to explore the elaborate harem apartments and manicured Charbagh Garden. Pierced screen window offers views from different vantage points and shimmering mirrors encrust the walls of Sheesh Mahal.

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After lunch we include a chance for you to play with ellies on an "Elephant Immersion," which past groups just loved! It's an incredible 2-3 hour experience to get up close to these majestic animals. You can feed, bathe and even paint these extremely well cared for gentle giants – Then ride bare-back (much better for ellies' back than the bucket seats) to feel the power as well as the quiet grace of these elephants.

Overnight: Marriott Jaipur (B)

May 9 – Ranthambore Tiger Territory!

After breakfast, we head to tiger territory as we travel around 3.5 hours to **Ranthambore**, dominated by 11-century ruins, lovely lakes and home to **Bengal Tigers**. The scenery on our 4-hour drive evolves into rocky forests and grasslands as we approach the 248-square mile park. This area is the perfect habitat for tigers! Just five years ago, the tiger population in this region had been decimated by poachers but thankfully, and we once again have a good chance of encountering the largest and most powerful of the world's cats. The park is also home to sloth bears, hyenas, gibbons, jackals, macaques, giant crocs and 275 bird species!

Our home here is the uber-fabulous **Oberoi Vanyavilas**. 25 luxury tents are spread across 20 acres. This stunning resort and spa is designed to pamper you with most hospitable service. You can choose a host of Ayurvedic treatments at the over the top Signature Spa. There are even two resident elephants that call the property home. Sip champagne while atop an observation tower overlooking a nearby watering hole where you can watch animals come to drink. Each night after dinner there is live traditional entertainment.

After check-in, we climb to the majestic 11th-century hilltop fortress **Ranthambore Fort** where eagles soar at eye level as you gaze out over the entire park. The fort includes temples and a palace and a lot of curious playful monkeys. Continue with a visit to **Dastkar** – a handicraft market filled with unique offerings made women of local villages. The proceeds help empower the 300 women who create these works of art which include block prints, pottery, leather, bangles and much, much more. Let's get some retail therapy on.

This NGO supports the women because their homes were destroyed for the Tiger reserve here. They were illiterate but now get an education, learn a craft and even have their own bank accounts for the first time in their lives. Dastkar grew from a one-room cottage industry to a mechanized factory.)

Overnight: Oberoi Vanyavilas (B, D)

May 10 –Bengal Tiger Safari

Morning starts with an early tiger safari and game viewing in our exclusive safari large vehicles. Our expert naturalists' guides are trained to help us spot the magnificent tigers. There is a host of other animals we may see along the way including Sambar, Spotted Deer, Nilgai, Dorcas Gazelle (Chinkara), Hanuman Langur, small Indian and Ruddy Mongooses, wild boar and Indian Flying-fox. We could also spot a Leopard!

Royal Ranthambore was once the hunting grounds of the Maharajas and is most famous for wildlife photography today in India. The interesting feature of the park is that it is dotted with ancient ruins where tigers often roam for exceptional photos. When you see a photo of a tiger in India, its most likely taken here.

Take a break midday before going out again in the afternoon for another safari.

Overnight: Oberoi Vanyavilas (B, L, D)

May 11 – Oberoi Vanyavilas and Tiger Safari

We have the option for an added morning game drive with our intrepid guides or the rest of the day is yours to call your own. (Understand tigers are now critically endangered species in the wild. Successful sightings depend on being in the right place at the right time. Today around 60 tigers roam so it's a matter of luck, but there's plenty of other creatures to see. Leading solitary lives, tigers can be difficult to spot as their coats camouflage in the jungle. In dry May, there are fewer water resources which draws them out so our chances are greatly increased.)

The Oberoi Vanyavilas resort is one you can't get enough of and today is one of leisure to take time to drink it in. Get to know the Oberoi elephants, book Ayurvedic treatments (India is the origin of these wonderful natural medicines and herb-based therapies), hang out by the pool or sit in the tower and watch the world go by. Other options may be presented later.

Overnight: Oberoi Vanyavilas (B, L, D)

May 12 – Ranthambore to Delhi

In the morning, we will drive back to Jaipur for an afternoon flight back to Delhi. Fly Indigo Airlines 7:35 PM to arrive Delhi 8:45 PM. Check into the fabulous Novotel hotel - which is deluxe in my eyes. So stylish with a pool and excellent restaurant, great mall next door for last minute sari shopping and dining.

Evening farewell dinner.

Overnight: Novotel Airport (B)

May 13 – Return to the U.S.

Hotel check out at noon with afternoon free and many options to consider. We can easily arrange a visit for a great shopping excursion for some final retail therapy. AFSers love Diili Haat – an open-air food and shopping emporium of 6 acres under a tented roof with a village feel. It's the best bazaar in India for affordable crafts and endless goodies and last minute gifts. Food is totally hygienic. It's even better at night with its glittering lights.

Transfer to the airport to check in for evening flights to U.S.

Fitness Level Two - I have no trouble walking and if necessary, can walk for 3+ miles. Uneven surfaces are not a problem. I do not need a cane or walking device.