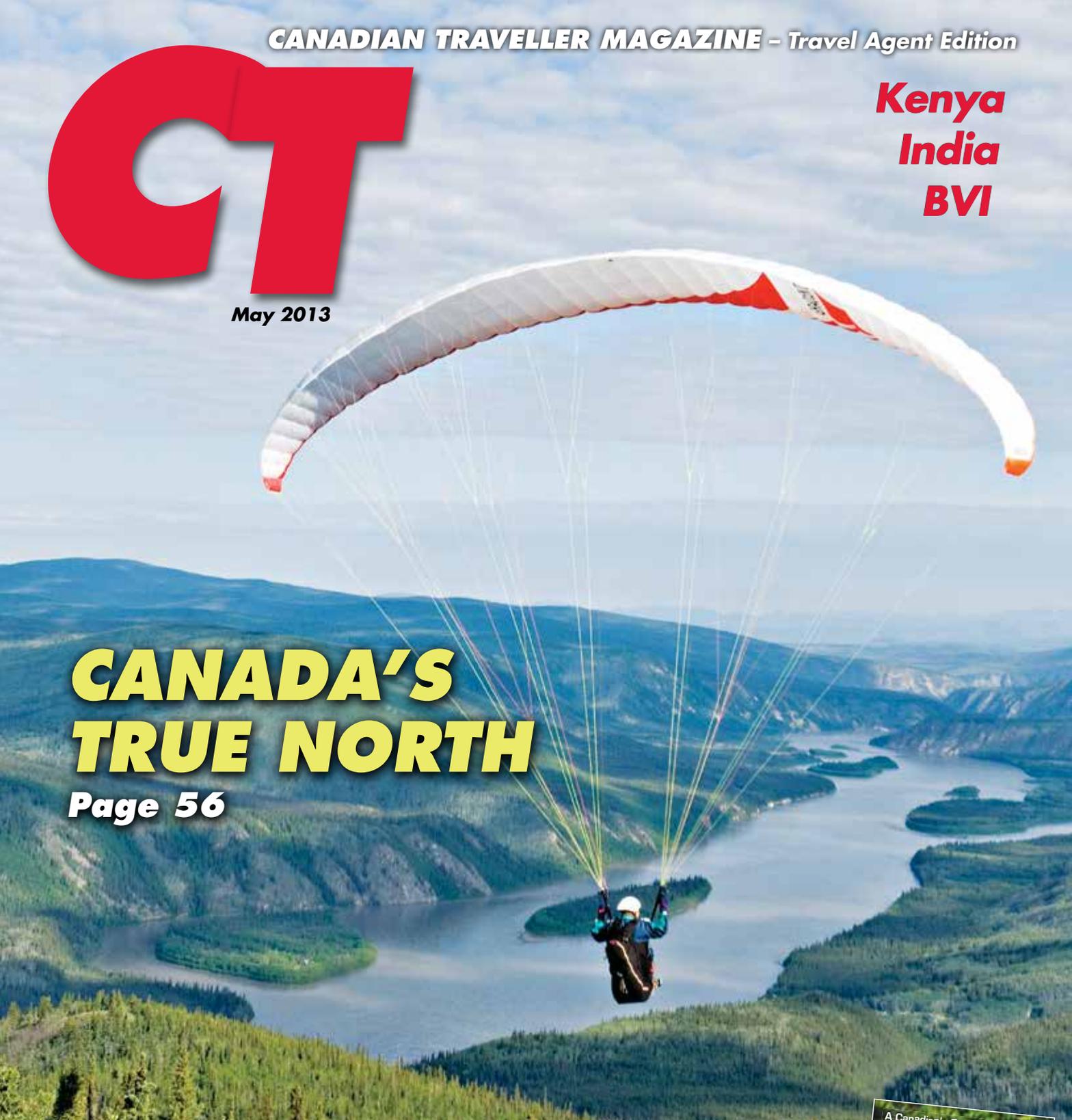


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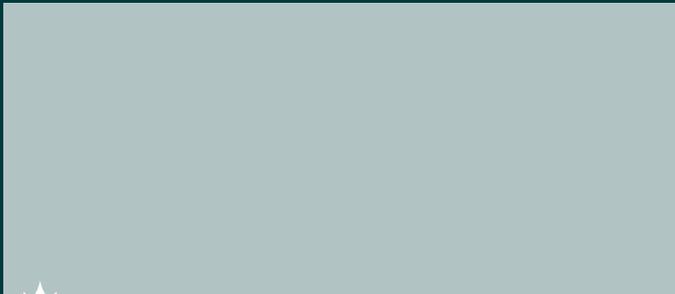
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Amazing, Awesome, Inspiring

INDIA

Taj Mahal,
Agra.

Two First-Timers Share Their Favourite Sights, Sounds & Places

By Laurie Carter

Veteran travellers Mike and Rosemary Carter know how to seize an opportunity.

When offered the chance to join what eventually became a group of 54 Vancouver area people on a 15-day land/river journey through Cambodia and Vietnam, they jumped on board. But Mike also harboured a long-standing desire to visit India, so the couple figured that, as long as they were in the neighbourhood, this was the time.

Travel Concepts in West Vancouver made the arrangements. Agent Cindy Horton set the couple up on the Uniworld tour of Cambodia and Vietnam. Then working through Bestway Tours and Safaris, a Vancouver-based company that specializes in cultural tours of India and the surrounding region, she organized private drivers and guides for their journey through northwest India.

While scheduling for the river cruise dictated the timing of their trip, Mike says it also worked out well for India. "The weather was still warm, but pleasant," and they were able to dodge the monsoon that starts in May.

The Carters began their Indian adventure with four nights in the capital city of New Delhi, where they immediately realized how lucky they

were to have a local driver. Throughout their stay in India, Mike and Rosemary remained fascinated by the "crazy driving". The record number of people they counted on a single bike was six. Rosemary made every effort to document these phenomenal acrobatics, but she only managed to capture a photo of five riders.

Rosemary particularly remembers one dad and two kids on a motorbike, with the son feeding the baby a bottle while they negotiated a roundabout. "Don't have the photo for that one either," Mike complains. Both he and Rosemary are still wondering just how many people can cram into a single tuk-tuk and Mike cites driving as "the thing I found so impressive in India. It feels very chaotic and the horns are being sounded all the time, but you see few accidents or road rage. If our

drivers could drive like they do, life would be a lot better."

With their driver handling the chaos, the Carters were free to enjoy standard sights. They toured the parliament buildings, Connaught Place, **JAMA MASJID, INDIA'S LARGEST MOSQUE**, Humayun's Tomb, the Qutb Minar and the massive Akshardham Temple complex. They visited the Red Fort, built by Shah Jahan, and Birla House, once the residence of Mahatma Gandhi and the site of his assassination by Nathuram Godse.

Things got a touch more exciting when they ventured onto a cycle rickshaw for a ride through the narrow lanes and bazaars of Chandni Chowk. Down a side street, both Mike and the guide were horrified when a snake charmer draped his hefty charge around Rosemary's neck.

Not a bad time to hit the road. On the way to Agra, they stopped in Sikandra to tour the tomb of one of India's grandest Moghul rulers, Akbar the Great, then settled in the Oberoi Amarvilas Hotel **OVERLOOKING THE TAJ MAHAL.**

MADHAV PAUL/FLICKR



Victoria Terminus, Mumbai.

TIM MOFFATT/FLICKR



Jama Masjid, New Delhi.



Lake Palace Hotel, Udaipur.

DYLAN WALTERS/FICKR

For two days this luxury establishment was home base while they visited the iconic monument to love, as well as the Imad-Ud-Daulah (often called the Baby Taj).

Opulence seemed to be the theme for their tour of Agra. Mike was particularly struck by the showroom where skilled workers were crafting items in marble with inlaid semi-precious stones. “They had on display one very large table approximately six feet wide by 16 feet long, which had been purchased by somebody in Los Angeles for \$75,000. It was quite stunning.”

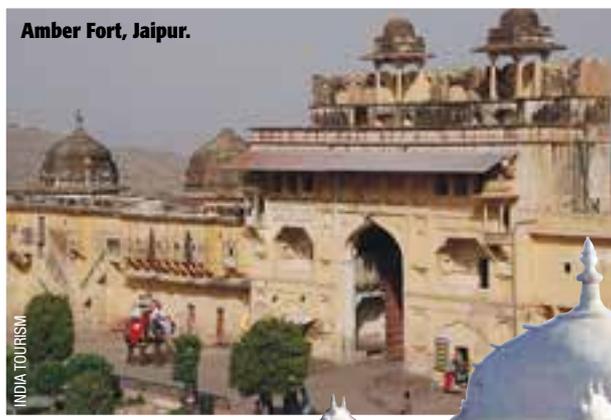
After the drive to Jaipur, where the Carters were slated to spend four nights, the couple once more switched conveyances. Mounted on elephants, Mike and Rosemary were transported back in time as they rode up the

hill to the **17TH CENTURY AMBER PALACE AND ADJOINING FORT** for a look at the world’s largest wheel-mounted canon.

But the hands-down highlight of Jaipur wasn’t listed in any of the travel brochures. The Carters were utterly delighted when their guide invited them to attend the marriage of his cousin. “We spent just a few hours there,” says Mike, “as the process goes on for many hours. But we met the bride and saw the groom arrive on an elephant led by a band.” Now that’s what independent travel is all about.

In Udaipur, the Carters experienced further echoes of the Raj, staying for two nights in **THE LAKE PALACE HOTEL, A FORMER SUMMER PALACE** on an island in the middle of Lake Pichola. They were impressed with other extravagant residences, the City Palace, and **JAG MANDIR, ALSO SITED IN LAKE PICHOLA**. And Jagdish Temple was a particular highlight for Rosemary who was “fascinated by the amazing temples in each country”.

Another treat awaited her in Jodhpur, where they visited the Ranakpur temples (constructed in 1439) and found more reminders of just how long-established Indian culture really is. From their favourite hotel on the trip, the Umaid Bhawan Palace, Mike and Rosemary could look out on the Mehrangarh Fort built



Amber Fort, Jaipur.

INDIA TOURISM

Jag Mandir, Udaipur.



JEFF HART/FICKR

in 1459 by Rao Jodha. They visited the fort and **THE JASWANT THADA, A MILKY WHITE MARBLE MEMORIAL** to Maharaja Jaswant Singh II.

Mike and Rosemary skipped the drive from Jodhpur to Mumbai, taking a quick flight that left them four days to explore before returning home. Again they checked out the must-sees: India Gate, Prince of Wales Museum and the ultimate horror for agoraphobes – **VICTORIA TERMINUS, WITH ITS FIVE MILLION TRAVELLERS** – per day. For Rosemary, who loved all the colour and characters they encountered, this was a real eye-popper, as was the vast outdoor laundry at Dhobi Ghats.

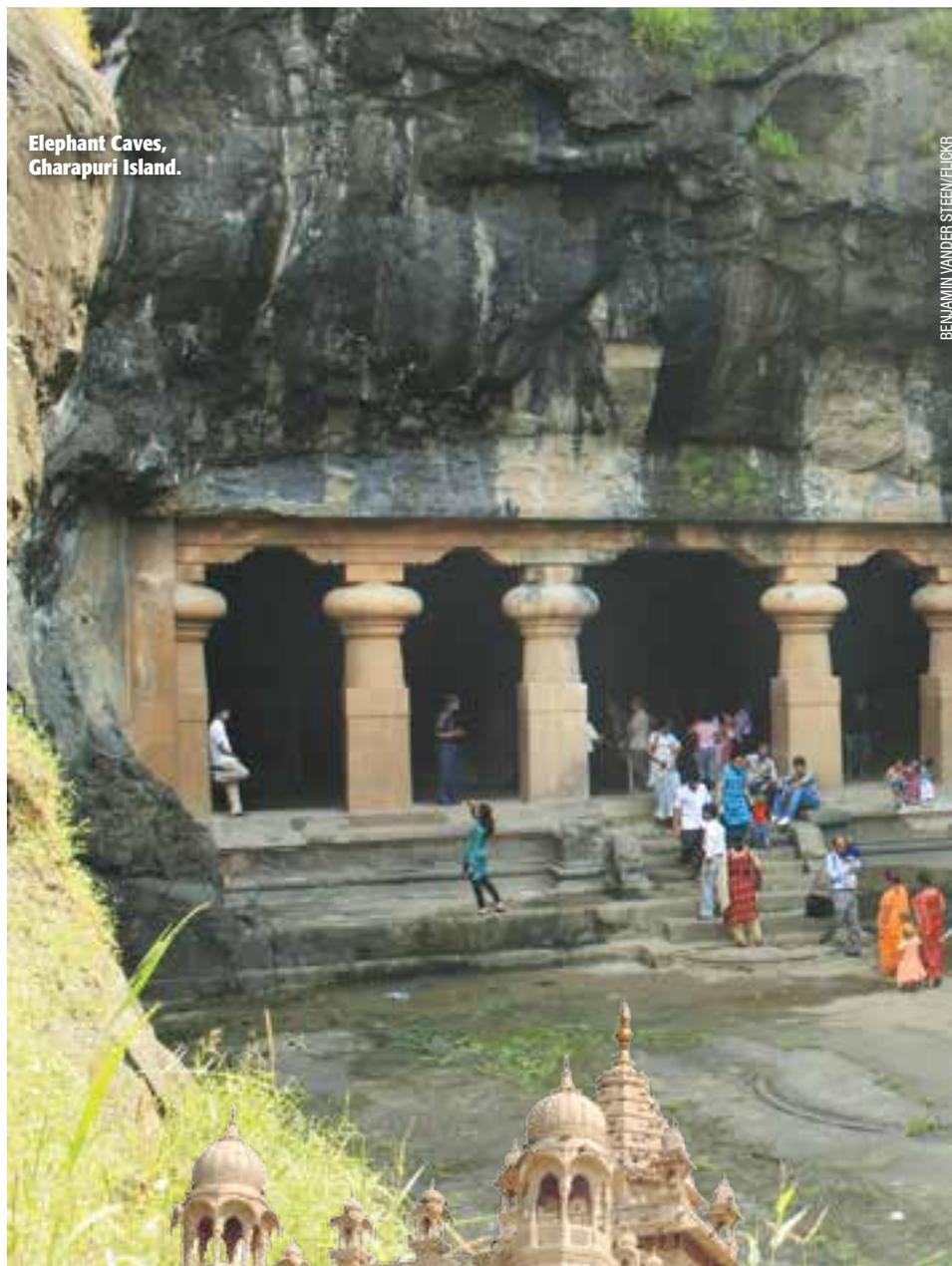
The Carters rounded out their time in Mumbai with a visit to Mani Bhavan, where Mahatma Gandhi spent many years, and a **HALF-DAY TRIP TO GHARAPURI ISLAND TO SEE THE ELEPHANT CAVES**, which were likely built between 450 and 750 to worship the Hindu god Shiva.

Months after returning home, Mike and Rosemary are very glad they made their India/Cambodia/Vietnam trip, but admit that the places they visited are now ticked off their bucket list. “Once you have seen the Taj Mahal,” says Mike, “you do not have to rush back to see it again. As far as India is concerned we may visit south of Mumbai, Goa for instance.”

Group travel on the cruise suited them well, especially since tour groups were kept to 18 people. “There were enough people to interact and not too many to make it difficult for the guide to handle.” Mike adds that having a guide to themselves for India was expensive, but ideal. While sites in Cambodia/Vietnam were not that busy and therefore, suitable for larger groups, “India was best done in a small group (themselves and a guide) because of all the people visiting all the sites.”

While they would definitely recommend the overall trip to others, they suggest that given a choice between a Nile or Mekong cruise, people should opt for the Nile cruise first – although security concerns might tip the scales in favour of the Mekong.

Mike says, “We thought the traders were much better behaved (less aggressive) in these countries compared to Egypt.... We felt completely safe both on the Mekong and in India.” ✈



BENJAMIN VANDER STEEN/FLICKR

HONZA SOUKUP/FLICKR