

A literary journey through INDIA

From the narrow lanes of Old Delhi to the country's most famous Moghul monuments and beyond, author **Claire Scobie** takes a group of avid readers on a literary journey through northern India dropping in to the Jaipur Literature Festival en route.

INDIA

“Did you full enjoy?” asks our bus driver after the first morning exploring the narrow lanes of Old Delhi. We did it the local way with bicycle rickshaws, stopping for a sweet creamy lassi served in a clay cup, our noses wrinkling at the drifts of turmeric, chili and coriander from the spice bazaar. Above are thousands of electric wires and monkeys jumping from roof to roof. You see all sorts on the streets of Delhi: ear cleaners, street dentists (ouch), fortune tellers, shoe shiners, massage wallahs and even your pavement-dwelling barber. Horns are blaring and the Sunday shoppers are pouring in so it's time for our Abercrombie & Kent Literary Tour group to beat a retreat to the elegant Imperial Hotel. It's only day one, after all, of our 12-day tour. Ahead lie Agra, Jaipur - and Asia's pre-eminent literary festival - Udaipur and Mumbai.

I'm too excited to settle, though. This is my first time hosting a special interest tour and our guide Suryaaveer Singh Shaktawat (Sunny for short) asks if I'm hungry. The capital is famous for its sweets and snacks, which often feature in stories written by local authors. A favourite is Manju Kapur who writes about middle-class Delhi. In her novel, *Home*, all the men in the family work in a jointly-run clothing shop and their lives revolve around “the mid-morning snack, evening snack, feeling stressed snack, visitor snack.” Of course they have “to balance the hot and spicy with the sweet: laddos, barfis, jalebis and kulfis.” Even those Hindi words drip with syrup, just like the sweets themselves.

**the domed cupolas rise out of the
winter fog in an unearthly way**

The first 'special author day' I've arranged begins in Moghul Delhi, visiting an old haunt - Humayun's Tomb - where I used to retreat to when I was working in the capital as a journalist. In the weak sunlight the domed cupolas rise out of the winter fog in an unearthly way. Above, brown kites wheel in the thermals and just as I finish telling the group that it was here, in 1857, that the last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar was taken



Indian Spices



Taj Mahal



Street food in Jaipur



Local transport



Traditional dancers at Jaipur Literature Festival

prisoner by the British, an Indian school group arrives filling the serene gardens with youthful chatter. It's a perfect reminder of the parallel currents in India - the modern alongside the mystical. From there it's a walk through Lodi Gardens, where Khushwant Singh, one of the city's most well-known authors, enjoyed early evening walks before a peg of whisky, and then to meet Rana Dasgupta, whose biography of the city, *Capital*, has the group of Australians riveted. In an art deco apartment, Dasgupta describes the complexities of this ancient and cultured city. "This is not a naive society," he says. "It has enormous political and philosophical debates around issues. India is changing at a fast, furious pace."

We're in Delhi long enough to get our 'India legs' on before our next stop - via Rudyard Kipling's Grand Trunk Road - to Agra and the world's most famous monument, the Taj Mahal. With Sunny steering our group between the crowds, it's as if they melt away. Abercrombie & Kent is known for its personable expert guides and Sunny, originally from Udaipur, where his family is minor royalty, is no exception. He recounts the poignant story of how Shah Jahan built the seventeenth-century monument as a tomb for his beloved wife, the emperor's grief so acute, his coal-black hair turned white overnight.

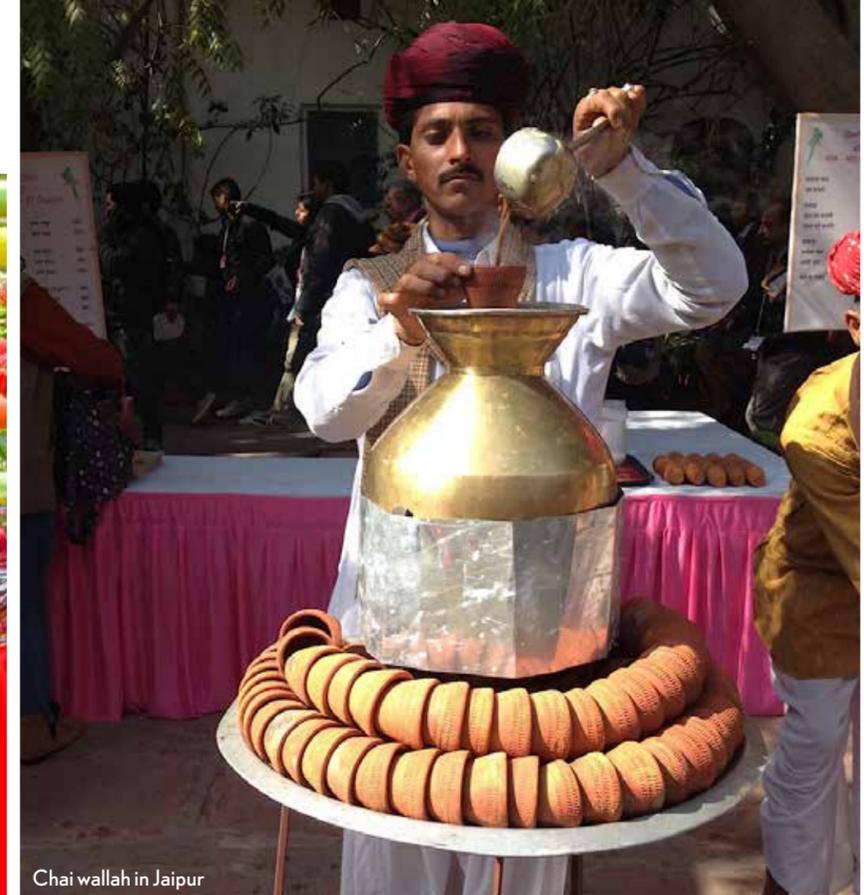
Reluctantly we leave the opulent Oberoi Amarvilas, with its view over the pearly central dome and four minarets, but the next stop is Fatehpur Sikri, beautifully captured in Kunal Basu's novel *The Miniaturist*. In the sixteenth-century Emperor Akbar moved his court from Agra to Fatehpur Sikri, only to abandon it 14 years later, and the rust sandstone buildings are like a preserved snapshot of Moghul India with lime-green parakeets flitting among silent arches.

As we drive west into Rajasthan, the weather warms up and the land becomes drier. Men with red turbans and coiffured handle-bar moustaches stream past on motorbikes; families hang off the back of buses. The turban, with its regal air and brilliant colour, is still *de rigueur* in Rajasthan, and if you're unfamiliar with one of the 36 ways to wind it, you can hire a chap to do it for you - as we see during one wedding procession in Jaipur. The majority of Indian weddings are still arranged with astrologers picking the most auspicious dates. It's wedding season when we arrive in the 'Pink City', Rajasthan's regional capital, and the groom glitters on his white horse while sari-clad women bedecked in gold whoop and cheer around him.

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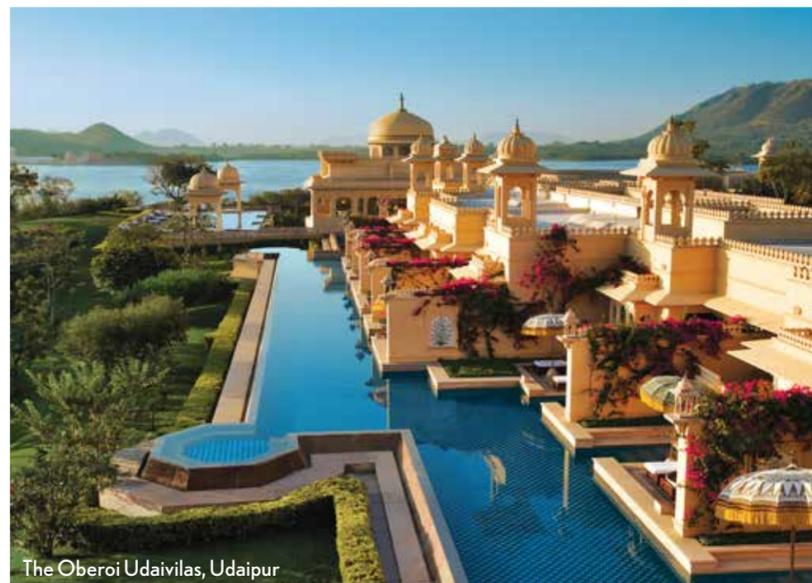
Rajasthani puppet dolls



Chai wallah in Jaipur



Rana Dasgupta



The Oberoi Udaivilas, Udaipur

The power of storytelling never ceases to amaze me.

The excitement is contagious as our group dines together in Peshawri, known for its north-west frontier Mughlai cuisine. We all don aprons as you're encouraged to eat Indian style – with your right hand. Spoons are provided for the signature 'dal Bukhara' but a tandoori prawn, scooped in a morsel of flaky roti bread, tastes even better when licked from the fingers.

The next morning is the first day of the Jaipur Literature Festival and the air crackles with expectation in the grounds of the Diggi Palace. Rajasthani dancers twirl and chai-wallahs serving aromatic tea are doing a roaring trade. Indian students vie with international guests to bag seats for the opening address by the witty, sometimes acerbic, Canadian author and Booker prize-winner Margaret Atwood.

"Writing is the means whereby light is shed on darkness," she begins. "There are many darkness's, but also many voices." Over the next two days, in colourful marquees, we hear writers discuss how to navigate modernity and the fate of Afghanistan; Stephen Fry warns of the danger of selfies; British author Alexander McCall Smith, creator of *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* series, has the audience crying with laughter during his session with festival co-founder, and writer, William Dalrymple. It's unlike any literature festival I've been to – and I've been to a few. For authors and delegates like ourselves, curry and piping hot

chapattis are served for lunch, followed by rose petal ice cream. In between sessions, Indian school boys mob McCall Smith for his autograph. Patiently he scribbles on pieces of paper until one asks, "Excuse me, sir. What is your good name?"

A day's sightseeing in Jaipur, to the 'Palace of the Winds', ends with another special literary treat when writer and Professor of English at Delhi University, Mala Lal, speaks to us about Indian women writers and the rich tradition of Rajasthani storytelling. As we sit in a circle, with birds chattering and elephants wandering by, everyone is captivated. The power of storytelling never ceases to amaze me.

We leave Jaipur and drive to Udaipur, built around Lake Pichola. Ever since Roger Moore shot the film *Octopussy* there in 1983, this city has been a popular destination. There's never a dull moment en route, with Sunny inviting a young boy to practice some magic on the coach. The ten-year-old squats down and makes balls appear and disappear, before plucking out coins from one guest's ears, to the hilarity of everyone looking on.



Claire Scobie with Mala Lal



A serene moment on tour with A&K

It's another fairytale arrival at the Oberoi Udaivilas where rose petals rain down as we enter the marbled foyer. More recently, Udaipur has become famous as one of the locations where *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* was shot, and we brush with fame in one textile shop where, like us, Judi Dench bought pashmina scarves. But it's the miniature paintings inside the City Palace, the sunset cruise on the lake and an invitation to take tea with Sunny's family at home, that are most memorable.

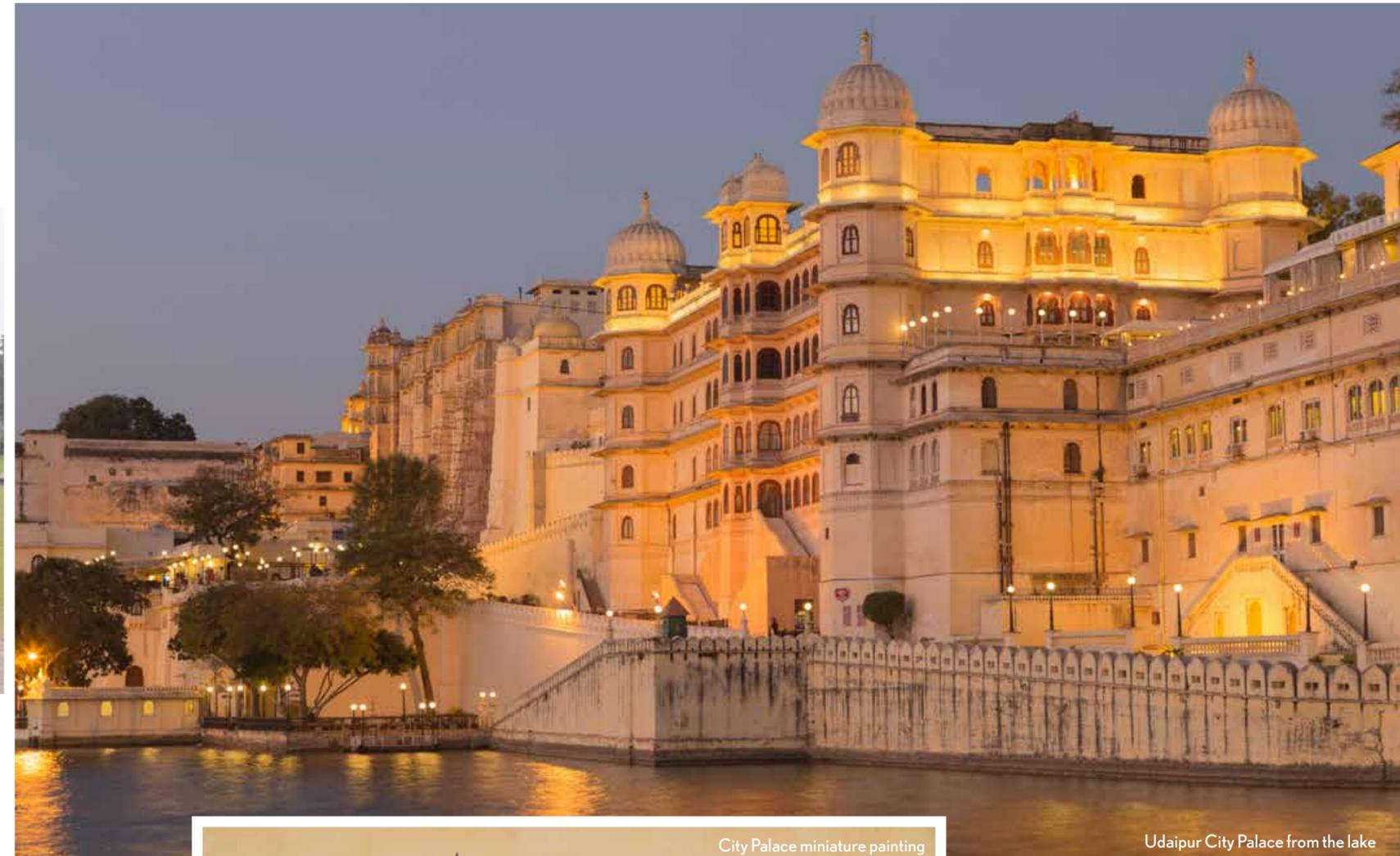
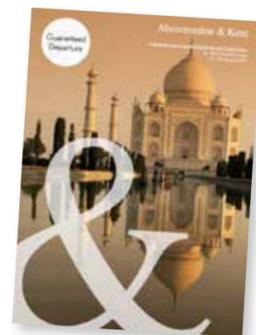
Udaipur is also the setting for *Cuckold*, a novel by award-winning Indian author Kiran Nagarkar, so it is fitting that this dapper erudite man, whose conversation ranges from Hindu politics to *The Odyssey* in one breath, is our last special author experience in Mumbai. By now, everyone's bags are bursting with books. *The Last Mughal* by William Dalrymple is a pet-choice, so is *Memoirs of a Princess* about the last queen of Rajasthan. And even though the 12 days have gone too fast, a few days after coming home, a guest emails me. Dr Noel Grieve is deep into *Cuckold*. 'The read is made even more enjoyable by having met the author. It is as if he is reading the words to me!'

As a writer, I know, there's nothing more special than the intimate relationship you have with your reader; it's a relationship that exists in the magical space between art and life, and in the mysterious power of the written word. ✎

OUR SUGGESTED JOURNEY

A&K's thirteen day
'India & the Jaipur Literature Festival with
Claire Scobie' 14-26 January 2017
with prices from \$12,695 per person twin share.

For more information call A&K on
1300 551 541 or your local travel agent.



City Palace miniature painting

Udaipur City Palace from the lake



Men with red turbans
and coiffured handle-bar
moustaches stream past
on motorbikes