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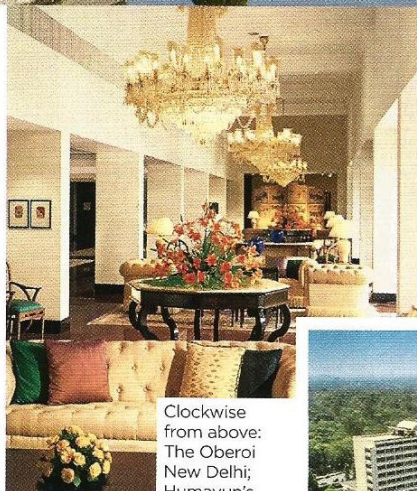
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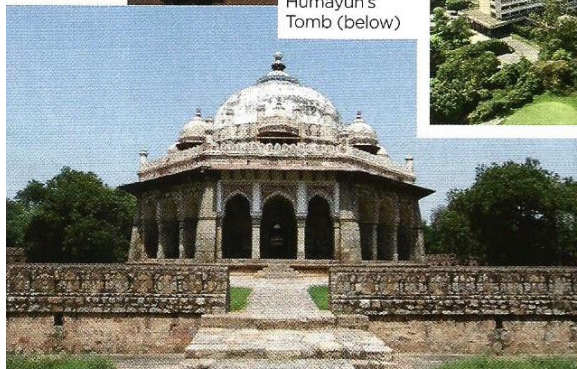
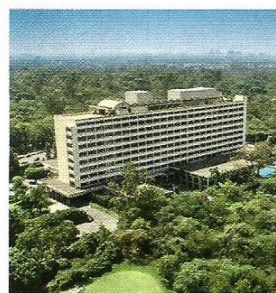


# WONDERS OF THE WORLD

Sophie Lam, *The Independent's* travel editor, and her husband Rich take a passage to India



Clockwise from above: The Oberoi New Delhi; Humayun's Tomb (below)



**B**y the time Rich and I got married, we'd been together for 14 years, so you could say that taking our time is a bit of a theme. True to form, we decided on a month-long honeymoon, and not immediately after the wedding – we'd dashed off on a road trip of south-west England – but to coincide with our first anniversary.

Previous travels had taken us all over the world, from Portugal to Panama, so our honeymoon had to be somewhere really special that would offer us the chance for exploration and inspiration as well as time to relax and unwind – we decided on India. We'd been there before, to the south of the subcontinent, so this time we had our eyes fixed

on the north, with its sublime saturation of history, natural good looks, spirituality, culture and cuisine.

## Romantic encounters

We land in India on the morning of our anniversary and are whisked off to The Oberoi, a five-star hotel in New Delhi. I'd anticipated we'd be enveloped in noisy crowds of people and chaotic street traffic the moment we left the airport, but – in the capital city at least – the picture is surprisingly tranquil, particularly as we pass the British architect Edward Lutyens' gracious 1930s governmental bungalows planted behind a verdant curtain of trees and shrubs.

Although newer than many of its neighbouring buildings, The Oberoi is nonetheless impressive. As we arrive, bindis are pressed onto our 'third eye' and marigold garlands placed around our necks as we're ushered into the Club Bar where chilled champagne awaits under sparkling chandeliers.

From our sixth-floor bedroom, the city spreads out in all its startling greenery below us, but more immediately, the pool beckons and we spend a lazy afternoon recovering from our jet lag; relaxing shirodhara spa treatments restore us further – a blissful hour of warm herbal oil trickled on the third eye.

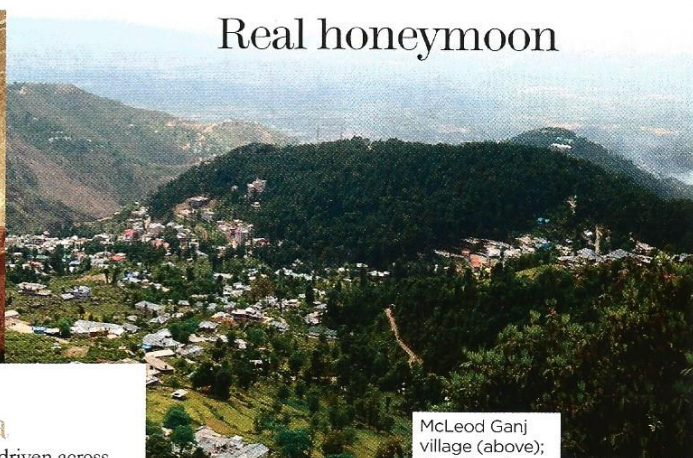
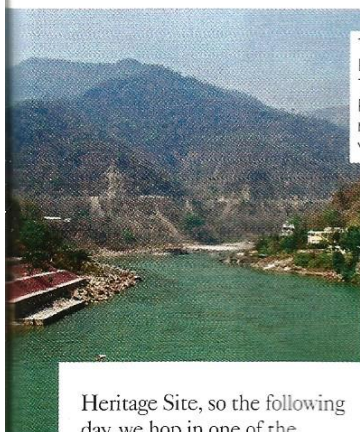
From the upper floors of the hotel we can see Humayun's Tomb, a Unesco World



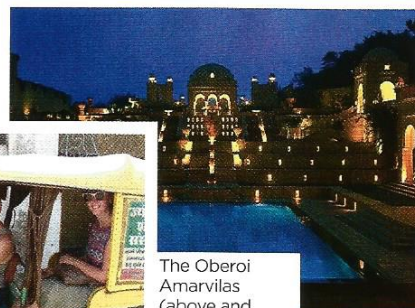
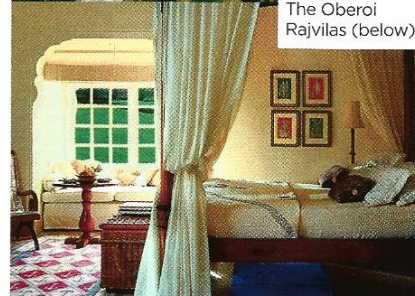


## Real honeymoon

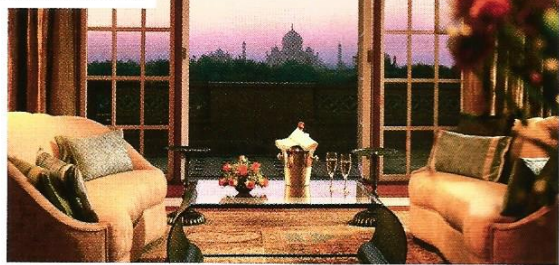
The Ganges at Rishikesh (left); The Oberoi Rajvillas (right); renewing vows (below)



McLeod Ganj village (above); The Oberoi Rajvillas (below)



The Oberoi Amarvilas (above and below); Sophie and Rich (left)



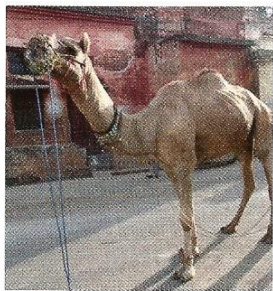
Heritage Site, so the following day, we hop in one of the hotel's cars to explore. This complex of 16th-century memorials is to be the first of our romantically historic encounters. The red sandstone centrepiece – a precursor to the Taj Mahal – was built for the Mughal emperor Humayun on the orders of his grieving senior widow Biga Begum. The walled enclosure's grand gateways, intricately carved lattice screens and elegant courtyards go some way to explaining the ruler's power and his wife's devotion.

Over the next fortnight, making use of trains and planes, we travel north to the lower Himalayas to explore the Tibetan culture of McLeod Ganj village – once a retreat for colonial Brits and today the home of the Dalai Lama – and the holy heritage that surges along the Ganges through Rishikesh and Varanasi, before heading west to Agra, one of the three cities, including New Delhi and Jaipur, that makes up the Golden Triangle tourist circuit.

### Grand design

Here, The Oberoi Amarvilas hotel announces Agra's headline attraction in spectacular style – through its arched windows, the mirage-like mausoleum of the Taj Mahal appears to float above the treeline. We set off to see it at dawn, just as the sun is giving the stark white marble a rosy glow – which seems fitting for this epitome of love. Like Humayun's Tomb, the Taj, which was built by Emperor Shah Jahan as a memorial to his beloved third wife Mumtaz Mahal, is also a Unesco World Heritage Site. Even though we'd seen its image hundreds of times, nothing prepares us for its grace and majesty, particularly when you are able to appreciate its magnificent symmetry and immense size in person.

After our early start, the hotel's impossibly grand grounds – which drift in terraces of gurgling water gardens leading down to a sapphire-blue pool amidst dancing dragonflies, saffron-yellow temple parasols and swirls of incense – provide the perfect setting for some together time and a number of seriously good fruit cocktails.



### Fit for a maharaja

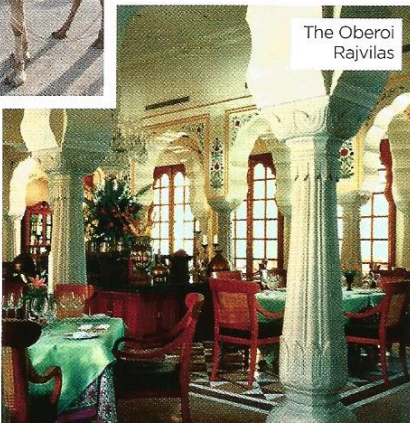
From Agra, we're driven across the state border to Jaipur and the final point of our Golden Triangle tour. As we make our way to the outskirts of the Pink City – so called because of the colour of the stone used

for its construction – we turn off the road for The Oberoi Rajvillas hotel and are surprised by an elephant ambling calmly along in front of us.

The hotel's structure resembles a Rajasthani hilltop fort with sun-blushed contours that recall the surrounding desert terrain, and in the midst of its landscaped, peacock-flecked gardens, sits a 280-year-old Shiva temple. After settling into our Luxury Tent, resplendent with block-printed fabrics, slipper bath tub and private terrace, we head into Jaipur to choose our outfits – a red sari for me; a sherwani (long coat-like garment with Nehru collar) and turban for Rich – for a Hindu vow renewal ceremony.

A horse-drawn carriage takes us from our tent to the hotel's temple as the early evening sky swarms with birds. We sit on the floor while rice and marigold petals are offered to the gods and planets, and a priest recites Sanskrit prayers. Red thread bracelets are tied around our wrists as we make our vows, and I lead Rich on seven circuits around a burning coconut husk. As dusk turns to dark, its flickering flames illuminate the room. It's an intimate and unforgettable experience, the perfect conclusion to our Indian extravaganza.

The Oberoi Rajvillas



### GETTING THERE

Virgin Atlantic ([virgin-atlantic.com](http://virgin-atlantic.com)) flies from Heathrow to Delhi. Greaves India ([greavesindia.co.uk](http://greavesindia.co.uk)) offers tailor-made trips to the Indian subcontinent. A six-night tour costs from £2495pp, incl flights, transfers, sightseeing, a rickshaw ride in Old Delhi, visits to the Taj Mahal and the Amber Fort in Jaipur, plus B&B accommodation at The Oberoi New Delhi, The Oberoi Amarvilas Agra and The Oberoi Rajvillas Jaipur ([oberoihotels.com](http://oberoihotels.com)).