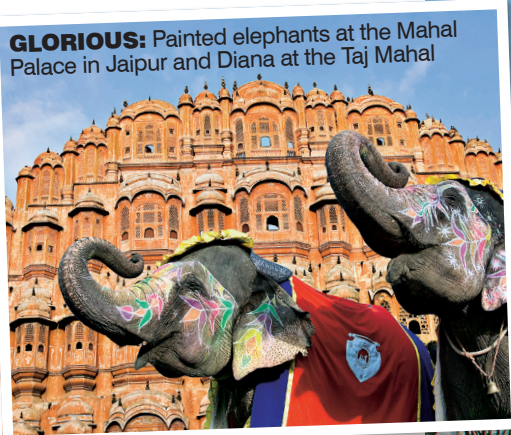


GLORIOUS: Painted elephants at the Mahal Palace in Jaipur and Diana at the Taj Mahal



Diana Preston embarks on an enthralling tour of India's past and present

In the pale misty dawn Agra was stirring. Tonga drivers were harnessing their horses, white-robed priests rang temple bells and peacocks fluttered from their roosts in the tamarind trees.

I'd spent the past two days doing what every visitor to Agra does – exploring the splendour of buildings created in the 16th and 17th Centuries by India's Moghul emperors. They include, of course, the world's most iconic monument to love and loss, the Taj Mahal.

Now, as I left Agra, I was seeking a natural rather than a man-made wonder, the ghariyals – fish-eating crocodiles – of the Chambal River.

Once my chances of sighting this large but gentle reptile would have been slim. A landowner whose family formerly ruled this area and today runs river safaris explained that 30 years ago barely 20 ghariyals remained in the Chambal. Today, a reintroduction programme means there are 2,000.

Ghariyals are shy and inconspicuous. But gradually I got my own eye in and realised there were not only ghariyals galore but also marsh crocodiles – chunkier than the slender ghariyal.

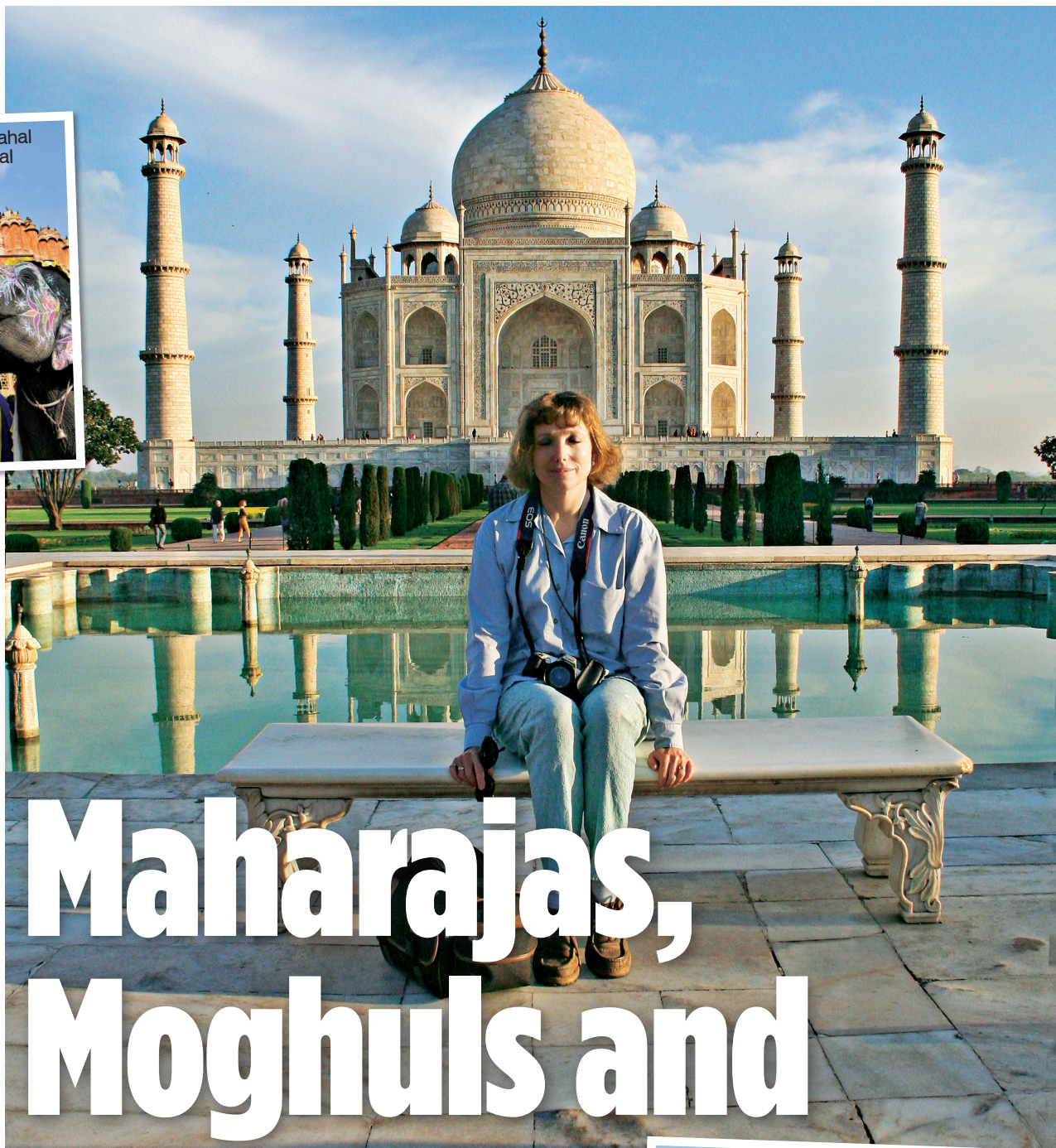
Next morning I crossed into neighbouring Rajasthan, 'land of the Rajas'. A five-hour drive from Agra brought me to Jaipur, Rajasthan's capital.

I entered the city along streets lined with ancient houses, their carved sandstone balconies delicate as filigree. At the gates of the Rambagh Palace, once home to the Maharaja of Jaipur and now a hotel, a 1938 Daimler with soft seats waited to convey me through the manicured grounds to the entrance.

My suite overlooked gardens where the royal women once relaxed, sipping cooling sherbets secluded from men's prying eyes. Portraits of Maharajas adorn the hotel walls and I grew to feel regal at the Rambagh, swimming in the tiled indoor pool with its stained-glass windows where, towards dusk, attendants light scented candles, or eating the fiery local delicacy, *lal maas* – lamb cooked in a red chilli sauce – on a private terrace while my own sitar player serenaded me from the shadows.

In such a beguiling environment, sightseeing can seem an effort but Jaipur is worth it. The airy, handsome streets are a tribute to the city's 18th Century founder, Maharajah Jai Singh, who laid it out on a grid system.

However the colour of Jaipur's peachy-pink buildings – it's known as



Maharajas, Moghuls and mojitos...

The Pink City – owes nothing to Jai Singh. In 1876 the then ruler gave the city a pink face-lift for the visit of the future Edward VII. The colour suits the architecture such as the Hawa Mahal or Palace of the Winds, an 18th Century five-storey confection of domes, cupolas and crenulated arches.

Next stop was Jodhpur, capital of the old kingdom of Marwar, known as the Land of Death so hard was it to survive its parched terrain.

Long before I reached it, the turreted fortress of Mehrangarh, perched on 400ft sandstone cliffs above the city, appeared through the heat haze. Soon, so did the dome of the Umaid Bhawan, a vast Art Deco palace built in the 1920s by Jodhpur's ruler and now

a hotel. I stayed within the old town in a converted sandstone merchant's house. Its own blue tuk tuk rattled me through the maze of streets, avoiding wandering cows and itinerant hawkers.

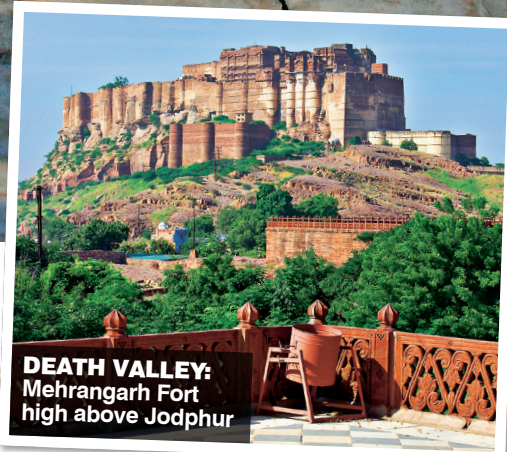
I wandered through its palaces and courtyards, and from Mihir Garh – a local aristocrat's recreation of a desert fortress but with an infinity pool and Jacuzzis – I rode a camel into the sands in the cool of the morning.

In a village I met Bishnoi people, sometimes called the 'original tree-huggers' for their passionate devotion to preserving nature – the only Hindus not to cremate their dead because they won't cut down live trees for fuel.

My last Rajput city was Udaipur, a few

hours' drive over the rolling, golden, Aravalli hills where black-faced monkeys lounged by the roadside. Udaipur is famous for its lakes fed by the monsoon rains from the hills and for the elegant white palaces and pavilions built on the islands in them.

At my hotel I played croquet, before sipping a green mango mojito as egrets picked about in the shallows and lights began to sparkle from the pale palaces out on the lake. India may be changing fast but in Rajasthan the beauty and pride of a mighty past remain.



DEATH VALLEY: Mehrangarh Fort high above Jodhpur



MAJESTIC: The Taj Rambagh Palace

GETTING THERE

Greaves Travel (greavesindia.com, 0207 487 9111) offers tailor-made tours to India. An eight-night trip costs from £2,799pp including return flights on **British Airways** and one internal flight, accommodation at the **Oberoji Amarvilas**, Agra where every room has a Taj view, the **Taj Rambagh Palace**, Jaipur, the **Raas** and **Mihir Garh**, Jodhpur, and the **Leela Palace Hotel**, Udaipur. It also includes a car and driver throughout as well as excursions, guides and entrance fees.