

INDIA WELCOMES YOU

India is a vast and diverse country that has something to offer to everyone. The beauty of the Taj Mahal by moonlight, the finest monument to love ever created; the beat and rhythm of folk dances which have come down the ages almost unchanged crowded colourful bazars contrasting with the peace and grandeur of snow-capped mountains, the quiet backwaters of Kerala fringed with coconut palms - these are a few of the countless facets of India which are timeless in their appeal. Those seeking the footprints of history will find that India has been a vast arena where races and cultures have battled and blended, creating sublime achievements in art, religion and philosophy.

Almost a fifth of India's land area is covered with forests, harbouring a wide variety of wildlife. Rare species like the Asian lion, the white tiger the one - horned rhinoceros, the blackbuck and the Kashmir stag are protected animals. Over a hundred National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries all over the country constitute a year long tourist attraction.

India is a land of tourist treasures - temples, palaces, forts and magnificent scenery. There are others which can take away - fabulous hand-made brocades and silks, exquisitely worked metal pieces, toys and jewellery - old and new - and a hundred others that cost a fortune to no more than a few cents.

India is a little over one-third the size of the United States and stretches over 3200 km from the snow-covered Himalayas in the north to Kanya Kumari, the tip of the tropical south, and 2735 km from the deserts of Rajasthan in the west to the evergreen forests of Assam in the east.

Though India became an independent state in 1947, its history is as old as 2000 B.C., when the Aryans moved from the north to the Indus Valley. Gradually, the civilization grew around the planned cities of Mohenjodaro and Harappa in Sind (now in Pakistan). The 6th century B.C. marked an epochal period in the history of India and it was then that the Buddha and Mahavira were born. They preached love and compassion and put righteous conduct above formal religion.

The invasion by Alexander in 326 B.C. brought India into brief contact with Hellenistic civilisation and although the political impact was not considerable, Indian

mythology and art in north-western India was influenced for a long time by Hellenic traditions.

The Emperor Ashoka (268-231 B.C.), whose grandfather Chandra Gupta defeated the Greeks, revolted by the violence of war was converted to Buddhism. Under his humane rule there was a splendid flowering of art and architecture in India. He also despatched Buddhist to Sri Lanka, central and south-east Asia spreading Indian influence practically all over the east.

The Gupta dynasty established power in the north early in the 4th century. Art flourished under their patronage to make these 200 years the Golden Age of India.

In the southern peninsula the Pallavas ruled from the 5th to 9th centuries. Great temple builders, their empire was overthrown by the Chola Kings. The Cholas ruled for some 300 years, to fall in the 13th century. The sculpture known as Chola bronzes possess both grace and dignity.

In the 8th century, Muslim traders and invaders came to India but it was not till early in the 13th century that a Muslim dynasty started ruling from Delhi. The Mughals made India their home in the 16th century and ruled for about 250 years.

The new rulers brought their own traditions, crafts and skills and the happy results of the blending of Saracenic, Persian and Hindu arts can be found over large parts of the country, not only in architecture, in the exquisitely laid out pleasure gardens and miniature paintings but also in the jewellery, literature, music and dances of India.

As Mughal rule declined, the British, who had originally come as traders eventually succeeded in subjugating the entire sub-continent. Under British rule, India was unified under a common system of law and western education was introduced. Western ideas of political and economic life came to acquire a dominating influence over the minds of the Indian people.

In August 1947, India shook off her colonial status and emerged as a sovereign nation. In 1950, the Indian people gave themselves a Republican constitution based on adult suffrage, secret ballot and equal economic and social rights. Since then five general elections have been held, and four five years plans in national development have been completed.

India's artistic traditions are ancient, esoteric and deeply rooted in religion. While at various times in her long history foreign races and cultures exercised some influence on Indian art forms, the main aesthetic current has remained predominantly Indian and has preserved classical traditions of music, dance, literature, architecture, sculpture and the theatre.

Hundreds of temples with intricate carvings, the unique murals of Ajanta and the bronzes of south India were all largely inspired by the instinct of worship. The handicrafts of India today still retain much of the spirit of age-old tradition.

With the coming of the Muslims in the 12th century, traditional Hindu art felt the overpowering impact of a new religion and culture. As the new rulers settled and built palaces and mosques, tombs and gardens, employing local artisans and craftsmen, the Saracenic style blended with the Hindu.

Modern art in India bears the impact of the classical and the folk idioms indigenous to the country as well as of recent trends in world art.

Indian dancing is a highly developed art of pantomime in which the dancer is essentially a story teller. Eyes and brows, the hands and fingers, the neck and the foot-in fact the whole body-are charged with meaning. Colourful and fascinating, it is largely religious in inspiration. Among the well-known schools of classical Indian dances is Bharat Natyam which was born and nurtured in the temples of the south. It is a highly stylised dance which relates a story through a language of gestures and expressions accompanied by songs.

Indian music is esoteric and, perhaps the oldest of India's arts. It unfolds in intricate rhythmic patterns with variations on theme. The base or frame for the improvisation is a 'raga'. Given this scale and mood the artist moves with an ease and ingenuity that caused Yehudi Menuhin to say of Indian music "A mathematical exercise becomes an ecstatic kind of astronomy".

India is a paradise for souvenir hunter. Handicrafts are produced in all parts of India. Every state has its special crafts to offer. The variety is enormous, ranging from intricate and delicate work to rough but colourful 'folk art' made in village homes.

Indian jewellers are famous for their intricate filigree silver and heavy gold and jewel work. Equally well known is the intricate enamel work from Jaipur which once delighted Mughal emperors. Glowing jewels, brilliant or muted, set in gold and silver or silver gilt, they are enchanting in either classical or modern designs.

Nowhere else in the world is there such a variety of animal and bird life as in India. The jungles, lakes and rivers of India are the homes of many rare species - the tiger, one horned rhinoceros, snow leopard and wild ass. And of course, India is the only home of the Asiatic lion.

In order to preserve and protect this fauna, wild life sanctuaries have been established all over India. They offer the nature lover an opportunity to see birds

and animals in their natural habit. A few important well known sanctuaries include:- Sasan Gir (Gujarat), the home of Indian lion ; Corbett National Park (Uttar Pradesh) the haunt of tiger, leopard, deer and wild elephant ; Mudumalai and Bandipur (Tamil Nadu and Karnataka), known for the Indian bison and spotted deer; Kaziranga (Assam), the home of the one horned Asian rhinoceros ; Periyar (Kerala)-a scenic sanctuary and Keolandeo Ghana (Rajasthan) - an ornithologist's delight.

Sport in India can be exciting, aristocratic and hedonistic ; polo is played by some of the world's greatest players at clubs in the principal cities and skiing in the Himalyas means some of the most spectacular ski-runs found anywhere. A long and lustrous coastline is studded with fine - sanded beaches washed by sun-warmed seas for sun bathing and water sports. For sybarites there are the beaches of Goa and Asia's newest beach resort at Kovalam in the south western state of Kerala.