



Photo: Sandeep TK

Aneasha (Photo Submitted to InsideOut Delhi's Annual Art Competition)



Exploring the Splendors of

INDIA

by Matthew Wexler

The murky brown water churns underneath the *Ganges Voyager II* as it weaves its way up the Hooghly River. It's early morning, the air still dewy as a sweet, grassy haze envelopes the riverboat. A cluster of teens, boys in T-shirts and jeans, girls in brightly colored saris, sit on its bank, their hands joyously waving in the air. I wave back time and again over the next week across that stretch of river, wanting to make sense of the sweeping disparity I've witnessed on the streets of Delhi and Kolkata. Then I remember that Western culture does not hold a patent on happiness and dreams. India, I will discover, is a cacophony of contradiction, and a foreboding presence of pollution and overpopulation is very much a part of daily life for its more than 1.3 billion residents. I begin my journey in New Delhi, the country's capital since 1931, and it's here that I start to understand the historical context that shapes the India of today.

DISCOVERING DELHI

I reached out to **Serene Journeys'** co-founder Robindro Saikhom for arrival arrangements and a city tour. The LGBTQ-friendly tour operator specializes in private, customized tours and small group travel, focusing on immersive and bespoke experiences. A private escort meets me at Indira Gandhi International Airport, whisks me through passport control and baggage claim, and I'm in a private car en route to my hotel before I've fully woken up from the 14-hour flight from New York City.

"I saw a growing opportunity," says Saikhom, who had previously worked for a gay-owned travel company. "I could see that gay travel was shifting toward more experiential values and less solely marketed toward sex appeal. LGBTQ people often want to see the same things, travel in the same manner and be treated in the same way. That's my mission."

"The biggest misconception (and this applies not only to LGBTQ travelers) is that they will be scrutinized and not made to feel welcome," says Saikhom of the common concerns he hears when customers first inquire. "But anyone who has been to India will tell you that we are among the most friendly and welcoming people on earth. India is known for tolerance, acceptance, and respect for all... just look at the example of Mahatma Gandhi and the tradition of 'namaste.'"

I settle into a restful night's sleep at **ITC Maurya**, an environmentally friendly luxury hotel located within New Delhi's diplomatic enclave. Named after the Mauryan dynasty, the gorgeous property is the world's first Platinum-rated LEED hotel. Best practices include harvesting rainwater, dynamic air quality readers situated throughout the hotel, and a bio-gas initiative that converts food scraps into energy.

Beyond its vision for a sustainable future, ITC Maurya also houses a breathtaking contemporary art collection. Be sure to request a private tour to fully appreciate the breadth of works, ranging from Krishen Khanna's "The Great Procession" (a spectacular mural that encompasses the lobby's dome ceiling) to Meera Mukherjee's 12-foot bronze garden sculpture of Indian emperor Ashoka.

I meet my guide the following morning. As we depart toward Amar Jawan Jyotim, the National War Memorial, we quickly dive into a conversation about sexuality, religion, and the caste system. We could drive all the way to Kanyakumari, India's southernmost city, and barely scratch the surface. In short: it's complicated. It wasn't until 2018 that India overturned section 377 of Indian law, which criminalized certain acts as "unnatural offenses." Yet the Kama Sutra, an ancient Hindu text that celebrates diverse eroticism and sexuality, dates back to the second century AD. My guide suggests that the introduction of Islam (now India's second-largest religion at approximately 14 percent) contributed to an increasingly conservative stance on sexuality. Add the caste system, a social stratification that separates Hindus into four major levels (along with hundreds of subcategories), and the challenges facing the LGBTQ community become glaringly apparent. Yet within these constructs, creativity and self-expression blossom.

A stroll around Lodhi Colony reveals an evolving India, one that celebrates ideas and challenges the status quo. Built by the British for government employees in the 1940s, the quiet, residential neighborhood has been transformed by public art murals. The **St+art India Foundation**, founded in 2014, helps reimagine these public spaces through art and public awareness. Beyond the Lodhi murals, St+art India has curated exhibitions on the walls of Tihar Jail (the largest maximum-security prison in South Asia), Rain Basera shelters for the homeless, and a landmark project at Azadpur Mandi (Asia's largest produce market).

The **National Gallery of Modern Art** also offers reflections of India's past through the lens of art. The collection includes works dating back to the 1850s that benchmark the country's shifting economic and political tides. Visitors will see prime examples from the Company School under the patronage of the British East India Company to the pan-Asian aesthetic of the Bengal School as well as more than 100 works by Amrita Sher-Gil, described as a "pioneer of modern Indian art."

I spend the next several nights at the exquisite **Leela Palace New Delhi**, a five-star property that embodies modern Indian luxury with an international flair. I've already indulged in multi-course meals at ITC's Bukhara (a once-in-a-lifetime Tandoori feast) as well as fashion designer Rohit Bal's VEDA Connaught Place. But Leela Palace, a member of Preferred Hotels & Resorts Legend Collection, offers dining options that I can't resist. Acclaimed restaurants Le Cirque and Megu both have on-site outposts worth experiencing. Le Cirque's menu merges exquisite classical technique



Photo: Hiyachenba Pangambam

Incarnation (Artwork Submitted to InsideOut Delhi's Annual Art Competition)



Ganges Voyager II

Photo: Matthew Wexler

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with Italian favorites such as ravioli stuffed with Barolo braised duck leg, while Megu's personalized omakase menu paired with a stellar sake collection makes for an exquisite evening of international cuisine.

The following evening I join Saikhom the for a monthly social gathering hosted by **InsideOut Delhi**, an all-volunteer LGBTQ+ organization of Indian and ex-pat professionals and diplomats based in New Delhi, supporting health, human rights, and the arts through cultural exchange. The collective raises funds for the Naz Foundation, which has led in the fights against HIV/AIDS and for LGBTQ rights in India since 1994. InsideOut also hosts an annual art competition. "As visibility for LGBTQ people is still very limited, this art competition gives LGBTQ individuals a voice, a safe place to be seen, and a forum to express themselves not only as artists but also as part of the LGBTQ community that is slowly coming out of the shadows and refusing any longer to be marginalized," states the organization.

I can't leave Delhi without experiencing the bustle of Old Delhi, and there's no better way to immerse oneself than by pedicab. I've met up with my **Brand g Vacations** tour group who I'll be traveling with for the next week, and it's an exhilarating way to kick off our journey. We weave in and out of Chandni Chowk's narrow streets as red-faced rhesus monkeys

(there are an estimated 40,000 throughout the city) leap from roofs and swing among the tangled web of electrical wires overhead. Shop owners present their wares, everything from electronics and food stalls to wedding invitations and other paper goods, proving that the district built by Mughal emperor Shah Jahan continues to thrive as it has for centuries.

RIVER OF DREAMS

Our Brand G group convenes the following morning for our flight to Kolkata, where we'll transfer to the Uniworld *Ganges Voyager II*. With a capacity of 56, the intimate vessel provides the ideal way to traverse the river channels. Staterooms feature hand-painted murals, French balconies, and floor-to-ceiling windows to take in the sites. Public areas include an open-air sun deck, enclosed Governor's Lounge, and spa/fitness center for those who want to put wellness front and center. I even manage to procure a few souvenirs from Jackfruit on the Ganga, the onboard boutique, which showcases a collection of various textile techniques from throughout the country.

Brand G has won the Cruzie Award for Best All-Gay Small Ship Full Charter for the past three years, and with good reason. The attentive team, led on this trip by Van Wey and U.K.-based Jonathan Gallagher, seems to anticipate the needs of every guest. The pair, along with the riverboat



Rituals Before Kalaripayattu (Martial Arts) Practice in Thalassery, India

Photo: Robindro Saikhom, Serene Journeys

staff, provide an assuring presence for travelers of all ages as we navigate various ports of call, which in some cases means disembarking on a wooden plank onto the muddy shoreline. These are working docks, used more often for transporting locals to opposite sides of the river than for camera-wielding foreigners.

Brand g, since its inception, has encouraged LGBTQ travelers to push the boundaries beyond Canada and Mexico (identified by research group Community Marketing & Insights as the top international destinations for LGBTQ travelers).

“Many people think India isn’t much more than the Taj Mahal,” says Van Wey. “But this country of 35 UNESCO World Heritage sites (the U.S., by comparison, has 23), is a continent of extraordinary sightseeing.

And thanks to an amazing exchange rate, you can see it all in five-star luxury, for prices comparable to a four-star trip elsewhere. At Brand g, our mission is to create incredible opportunities for you to experience and interact with the local culture.”

Brand g also makes philanthropy part of its mission. In India, the commitment has been several years in the making, beginning with a local guide, Sumit, who taught English to Kalyan, a young man in the small village of Barangar. Kalyan was inspired to open a small school in the town, but the modest building needed a major makeover. With contributions from Brand g, the school now has electricity, fans, windows, desks, a fresh coat of paint, and most importantly, books for its 300 students ranging from children to adults.



Old Delhi

Photo: M. J. Mahesh

We head north from Kolkata on the Hooghly River, a tributary of the Ganges, stopping at Hooghly Imambara. Completed in 1861 in memory of philanthropist Haji Mohammad Mohsin, the serene courtyard, classrooms, and mosque offer a space for reflection about the intersection of religion in faith in modern India, which has the second-largest population of Muslims in the world. Though India’s constitution was amended in 1976 to make it a secular state, societal discrimination still exists, which can prove even more challenging for LGBTQ Muslims. The Queer Muslim Project (@thequeermuslimproject on Instagram), started by activist Rafiul Alom Rahman in 2017, aims “to create safe and enabling spaces for LGBTQI Muslim individuals to find support networks, resources, and opportunities for social participation and leadership.” With more than 14,000 followers, Rahman has leveraged a range of diverse voices for projects such as The Spirit of Ramadan campaign, which highlights stories of self-acceptance, love, and faith.

After sunrise yoga the following morning, we disembark to tour the 18th-century terracotta temples of Kalna. The Nabakailas Temples consist of 108 (considered a divine number) smaller structures in two concentric circles. The intricate carvings display both scenes from everyday life as well as Hindu deities such as the goddess Durga. Our time in India splendidly coincides with Durga Puja, the annual festival honoring the multi-armed warrior ready to battle evil from any direction. The festival also celebrates the harvest with processions and pop-up alters appearing throughout the various villages on our journey.

There is plenty of time to relax onboard the Ganges Voyager II, with additional programming that deepens my connection to the splendors of India, including an introduction to the country's rich culinary traditions. Executive Chef Ranjoy Das hosts an immersive presentation on India's use of spices and herbs with both the familiar and the unexpected making an appearance. Most Westerners are probably familiar with pre-blended curry powder, but "curry" has vastly different meanings throughout India and Southeast Asia. Chef Ranjoy suggests gently toasting whole spices in a dry pan, then using a coffee grinder to create a custom blend. We sniff our way through cardamom, clove, cinnamon, and coriander, along with lesser-known discoveries such as kalonji (onion seed), fenugreek and ajwain (bishop's weed).

The itinerary shifts from cuisine to culture that evening with a special performance presented by the Behrampur Srity Dance Academy. The troupe's vibrant performance showcases India's long dance history from classical to Bollywood in which mudras (hand gestures) convey emotion and storytelling. The dancers also reveal a window into India's hijra community.

Hijras, or "third gender," face a complicated life in India. The approximately half-million Indians that identify as hijra find community and solidarity not only through their sexual identity but also through religious and social structures. "Hindu mythology deifies them, and British colonists demonized them," writes Ina Goel, founder of the Hijra Project.

"So today, they are revered by many as demi goddesses and reviled by others as deviant victims of bad karma. For more than a century, they were ostracized almost to the point of being forgotten." In 2014, India's Supreme court officially recognized a third gender, and social media exposure has increased advocacy and awareness. Still, daily life, especially in small villages, is not without its challenges.

We continue upstream with a stop in Matiari to visit the Kansari artisans who utilize recycled metal to create kitchenware and home goods. The handcrafted pieces embody the craftsmen's century-old traditions and serve as a primary income source for many of the town's families. The following morning, we stroll along the weaving path through Baranagar, where I see firsthand the schoolhouse that Brand g helped bring to life, followed by an afternoon visit to the Hazarduari Palace in Murshidabad, each location a juxtaposition of grandeur and decay, a sign of the prosperity and poverty that has gripped India at various times throughout history.

Our final stop in the city of Chandannagar showcases colonial architecture, its entry gate marked with the French revolutionary phrase, "Liberte, Fraternite, Egalite." The region wouldn't be returned to India until 1952. The "City of Liberty" feels like an appropriate finale as I take note of our group. We span generations that have witnessed a shift in liberties on our own soil. Same-sex marriage in the USA and other countries around the world was but a dream for many of my fellow travelers.

The end of Durga Puja prompts processions throughout the small city as locals gather at the shore to release a tribute alter. A statue of the warrior goddess, decorated with flowers and symbolic charms, slowly floats downriver. For a moment, religion and the caste system, gender and sexual orientation melt away. I think back to those first days, the indelible impact of children at water's edge, and I feel hope for the future. ■



Bathing in the Ganges River

Photo: Zvonimir Atletic