

India 3 WAYS

Meera Dattani
takes a look at
what's new in India

Whether it's the big-screen charm of *The Jungle Book* and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, the new e-visa, or the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge's royal visit, India is very much in the limelight, sparking a phenomenal number of new products for next year.

Rob Goodwin, head of product for Cosmos Tours & Cruises, says: "With public awareness of India now at an all-time high, we have launched an authentic and exciting product range early for 2017."

ADVENTURE



BEACH



CULTURE



► ADVENTURE

The highlights: Walking and climbing in the Himalayas, tiger-spotting in Rajasthan's Ranthambore National Park, yoga breaks in Kerala, railway journeys and more – India has always appealed to adventurers.

This year has seen a particular focus on Madhya Pradesh. There is nothing like the arrival of a Disney film to put a region on the map and *The Jungle Book* remake has spawned numerous itineraries to see the landscape and wildlife that inspired author Rudyard Kipling. ➔

Somak has also revived its Simply India Holidays brand. "After a number of years of not having really promoted this amazing destination, I'm delighted to say we're back in India," says CEO Ash Sofat. Its 2017-18 brochure combines traditional itineraries with tailor-made options, and specialist trips such as wellness breaks and England cricket team tours.

We round up what's new in this exciting country, home to more than 20 official languages and a kaleidoscopic variety of food, sights, cultures and wildlife.

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➔ Taj Safaris, a Taj and &Beyond partnership, launched Mowgli Trails, staying at Taj Baghvan and Banjaar Tola Tented Camp with add-ons such as jungle showers and stargazing; while Cox & Kings' Kipling's India is a 13-night private tour visiting his birthplace at Mumbai, and Shimla where he reported on the British Raj (from £2,925).

Inntravel's Jungles of the Forsyth Trail, a nine-night walking and wildlife holiday in conjunction with Village Ways puts the emphasis on village life and home-grown food alongside wildlife-spotting in Satpura National Park (from £2,195).

What's new? Adventure covers a spectrum of holiday types. Health and Fitness Travel's Discover Recover programme is a guided cultural itinerary with retreats in the Himalayas, Goa or Bangalore, combined with walking, yoga, detoxing treatments and a spa.

Adventurous families should consider the new 12-day adventure from Families Worldwide, with tiger spotting in Ranthambore and birdwatching in Keoladeo national parks (from £1,879).

For climbers, suggest KE Adventure's new Stok Kangri Climb trip in Ladakh, a 6,000-metre non-technical climb with visits to Leh and the Indus Valley (from £1,495 land-only). Adventurous add-ons for foodies include ITC Hotels' Food Sherpa Trails (from £35): at ITC Maurya in Delhi, tours visit a kebab stand that's been going since the early 1900s, and Old



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Famous Jalebi Wala for traditional Indian sweets.

What's next? They say you need a lifetime to see India, but innovative itineraries softening the challenges posed by cross-country travel are increasing. Experience Travel Group's east-to-west trip includes Kolkata, Varanasi, Lucknow, Bandhavgarh in Madhya Pradesh and Delhi. Wendy Wu Tours' new Trans Himalayan Journey (from £3,790) is an active 23-day itinerary incorporating the classic Taj Mahal at sunrise and hilltop town Shimla, but also the spectacular 4,800-metre-high Baralacha pass and Hemis Monastery Festival.

► BEACH

The highlights: A long-standing favourite with Brits, Goa has the monopoly on India's beach tourism. This former Portuguese colony is full of options, from The Leela's luxurious surroundings in south Goa to the inland attractions of spice plantations and heritage mansions. Kerala is cropping up more regularly though, with beach stays often combined with its tranquil backwaters, houseboat stays and cultural attractions in

Cochin. There's also a significant rise in trips featuring neighbouring state Tamil Nadu with its temples and tea plantations.

What's new? One of the biggest hotel openings is W Goa, W Hotels' first property in India set to open on November 1. The 160-room resort by Vagator Beach in north Goa has a Rock Pool carved out of the mountain and Clarins spa, with launch prices from £231 per room.

The Goa Experience has added several new products: its North & South itinerary stays at Taj Exotica and Vivanta by Taj - Holiday Village to experience Benaulim, Varca and Palolem beaches in the south, and Candolim in the north, from £2,099. New accommodation includes heritage homes such as Panjim Inn in Goa's Latin area, five-star Alila Diwa by Majorda beach and family-run beachfront Santana Beach Resort in Candolim.

Encouraging 18-35s to India, Contiki's new 12-day Eternal India itinerary ends in Goa. The 11-night trip (from £1,465 including domestic flights) includes Mumbai, Udaipur and four Unesco sites, ending with yoga on the beach.

What's next? The opening of the W marks a shift towards upscale boutiques, transforming Goa's former hippy scene, while the trend to combine southern states for more immersive culture-and-beach holidays is one to watch. Experience Travel Group's Tamil Nadu and Kerala beach trip (from £2,450) pairs rural Tamil Nadu with Kerala's quiet Mararikulam beach, and with no domestic flights, offers a richer scenic experience.



ABOVE:
Kaziranga
National Park

► CULTURE

The highlights: The Golden Triangle has long been a top choice, thanks to Agra's Taj Mahal, Delhi's Red Fort and Jaipur's palaces. But regions such as Gujarat, pastoral Tamil Nadu and northern India are making tracks. Saga's new 12-night escorted tour A Passage Through Assam (from £2,399) visits Kolkata and

Kaziranga National Park where Prince William and Kate went rhino-spotting, while Great Rail Journeys' new 17-day Ganges & The Himalaya Tour (from £2,995) combines rail, hotel and cruise with trips aboard the new Gatimaan Express and Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, and six nights on luxury riverboat ABN Rajmahal.

What's new? For fans of Rajasthan, Transindus has week-long itineraries in the form of Wonderful Workshops in Rajasthan, led by local master-craftsmen: think Rajasthani cooking, textile printing and jewellery-making (from £1,660). Trafalgar's new 13-day Leisurely Rajasthan with Mumbai (from £2,377) has a similar ethos, with kite-flying and hand block-printing in Jaipur.

Neighbouring Gujarat is also increasingly popular: Explore's new 14-day Tribes and Wildlife of Gujarat (from £1,799) goes looking for Asiatic lions in Gir National Park, visits Gandhi's ashram in Ahmedabad, and the salt pans and villages of the Great Rann of Kutch.

The backwaters of Kerala are another favourite, but there's a marked focus on southern India. Cosmos's 14-day Discover Southern India & Kerala (from £1,585) includes experiences in Tamil Nadu such as silk-weaving at Kanchipuram and prayer ceremonies at Madurai, while HF Holidays' 11-night Spice Trails of Kerala (from £2,859) explores lesser-visited areas.

What's next? With India marking 70 years of independence in 2017, expect special-interest itineraries, such as Wild Frontiers' 44-day Great Indian Adventure that visits 15 Unesco World Heritage sites. "We're seeing increasing demand, particularly from young baby boomers, who have more time on their hands," says Wild Frontiers founder Jonny Bealby.

And this only scratches the surface. The emphasis on lesser-known regions is welcome news to those who have long championed India beyond the Golden Triangle and Goa, while ever-creative itineraries offer new ways to enjoy this vast nation. **TW**

ABOVE:
Taj Safaris'
Mowgli Trails

BELOW:
W Goa



PICTURES: KEADVENTURE.COM; WENDY WU TOURS; THE GOA EXPERIENCE



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