

# Toy stories

Jazz up a Golden Triangle tour with a trip on India's Toy Train, says Jenni Doggett

**O**ur little train trundles along faithfully around endless bends, through scores of tunnels, across hundreds of dizzying bridges. Now I see why it's called the Toy Train – you don't have to be an anorak to be utterly charmed by its modest carriages and quaint, out-of-the-way stations.

We're on our way to Shimla, the city set in the foothills of the Himalayas and one-time summer retreat for British colonials escaping the intense heat of Calcutta and Delhi. But it feels more like being transported to a different era. The proximity of the seating sets a cordial tone, and everyone smiles as we pull away from the station. Before long we're swapping seats and sharing food with fellow passengers in a way that would be unimaginable to most Brits.

This Unesco-listed narrow-gauge train, officially called the Shivalik Express from Kalka to Shimla, is an extraordinarily ambitious exercise in engineering, climbing more than 7,000 feet up into the Sivalik Hills in far-north India.

With a gentle pace, there's plenty of time to absorb the spectacular scenery – a grand panorama of thickly forested

mountains and seemingly bottomless valleys. A local honeymooning couple lean out, selfie-ing the ride away. The rest of us settle for opening the windows wide and relishing the cool alpine breeze, feeling the shift in altitude as the temperature dips and the tree scents change.

Add to that the smell of spice, as a man bearing a metal bucket full of ingredients for chana masala rattles along the train, serving chickpeas, tomatoes, onions and lemon dressing in a small paper bowl with a leaf for a spoon. Simple but authentic, and considerably better value than British Rail.

#### ▶ TRAVEL TALES

The Toy Train is one of the undisputed highlights of Great Rail Journeys' tour of India's Golden Triangle, but we're lucky enough to have local academic and author Raaja Bhasin along for the ride too.

He is the rail specialist's captivating guest speaker for the Shimla portion of the tour – a great selling point for those wondering why it's worth taking a tour rather than going it alone – and narrates our journey with an insightful history of



The Toy Train, Shimla



**RIGHT:**  
Viceregal  
Lodge, Shimla

**FAR RIGHT:**  
The Oberoi  
Cecil, Shimla

**BELOW:**  
Shimla



PICTURE: SHUTTERSTOCK



**Great Rail Journeys'**  
India's Golden Triangle is a 13-day rail holiday with excursions to Delhi, Shimla and Agra, and journeys on the Shatabdi Express and Toy Train, staying in five-star hotels. Prices start at £2,170 for departures until December, including flights, transfers, all breakfasts and some other meals. Sister brand GRJ Independent can also tailor-make holidays to the region. [greatrail.com/travelagents](http://greatrail.com/travelagents)

→ the Toy Train and the region. We're spellbound by tales of sacred cedar forests and Himalayan snow being fetched to cool the wine of the Mughal kings.

The 60-mile trip takes around five hours and we arrive at Shimla station just as dusk falls. Shimla was once known as the summer capital of British India, and is now the capital and largest city of northern Indian state Himachal Pradesh.

A twinkling constellation of lights dot mountains that are melting away by the minute into evening shadow. Once we pull in, a neat row of taxis whisks our party away to the grand five-star Oberoi Cecil Hotel.

A pianist plays romantic standards as we enter the hotel's elegant lounge, conjuring decadent long-ago parties and intrigue. We're served plate after plate of exquisitely spiced local delights.

"If you leave India without gaining

40lbs, you're not doing it properly," the manager teases as I tuck into my third portion of chaat - heavenly sweet and sour chili yoghurt, tamarind, crisp pancakes and jewel-coloured pomegranate seeds.

That's nothing to the dawn view from my room, though. Awoken by an army bugle and the howling of a pack of dogs, I stumble to the window to get my bearings, only to be greeted by the heart-stopping sight of sunrise over the Sivalik mountains. It is as if Kipling and Hans Christian Andersen had conspired to invent a new fairytale landscape. Flamboyantly coloured houses balance on impossibly steep inclines, extravagant forests cascading down the hillsides below.

**▶ PAST LIVES**

The following days are spent exploring the town and its extraordinary history. Climbing seemingly vertical steps in the heat is a challenge, but a lazy

promenade along the historic Mall makes a worthwhile reward.

Known for good food and bargain-hunting, Shimla is also home to the historic Gaiety Complex Theatre where Baden-Powell and Kipling performed, plus Scandal Point and Christ Church, the second-oldest church in northern India.

We weave our way past ladies in saffron-toned saris and boisterous schoolchildren. Cars are banned from this part of town, which is a welcome respite from the ever-audible horns; smoking is illegal here too.

We explore the Viceregal Lodge, Lord Dufferin's imposing hilltop mansion built in dour Scottish stone. During the summer months of the Raj, the entire Indian subcontinent was ruled from here, and row upon row of old photos are on display, illustrating India's complex colonial past.

We pay our respects to the monkey god Hanuman at the Jahku Temple. →







**'If you leave India without gaining 40lbs, you're not doing it properly,' the manager teases as I tuck into my third chaat**



PICTURES: INCREDIBLE INDIA; SHUTTERSTOCK



**EXPERT TIPS**



**Beverley Philpotts, business development manager, Central and Wales, Great Rail Journeys**

- ▶ Listen to local tour guides; they really are the experts and offer amazing advice.
- ▶ Just because a client hasn't specifically asked for rail doesn't mean it won't be the perfect option, so offer it on any India or touring enquiry.
- ▶ Advise customers to have an open mind – they'll see amazing sights, but also poverty alongside huge wealth. Be open-minded and enjoy the experience.
- ▶ Advertise on your social media pages or in windows that you offer India and Great Rail Journeys or Rail Discoveries. Customers might not know they can book these through you.

➔ Again, the uphill effort is worth the exercise, as is the small outlay on sticks to fend off the legion of ill-tempered macaques.

This tour is not for the faint of heart or the unfit as the heat can be a challenge. Great Rail Journeys tends to target the adventurous 50-plus market for this itinerary, as it's a good way to experience authentic Indian culture without compromising on luxury.

**▶ CITY SIGHTS**

The north is a far cry from frenetic New Delhi and the tourist hubs of Agra and Jaipur, which make up the other points on this Golden Triangle tour.

We'd arrived via the capital, where our coach driver dispensed some sage advice as we slalomed wildly between lanes on the way to New Delhi train station. "You need three things to drive

in India," he said. "A good horn, good brakes and good luck." I would add a good stomach.

A stoical herd of water buffalo filtered past us through the gridlock of the left-hand lane at a roundabout – both cattle and cars making enthusiastic use of their horns. There are many reasons to choose rail in India, but bypassing the eccentric road traffic is the most compelling.

We opted for the ease of the Shatabdi Express from Delhi to Kalka – where we would pick up the aforementioned Toy Train – for the first leg of our journey.

As one of India's faster, modern trains, it's an altogether different experience of the country's rail system. Scarlet-shirted porters jostled along the crammed platform for the chance to collect our bags, then before we

knew it, we were in the comfort of spacious, air-conditioned seats that would give any first-class carriage in Europe a run for its money.

A steady stream of snacks and creamy chai were dispensed throughout the journey, and a respectable curry was served in cardboard containers at lunchtime with as much free bottled water as a dehydrated traveller could desire.

We flew past yellow-topped rickshaws, signs in Hindi, English, Punjabi and Urdu, and baboons dangling from snarled telephone wires, nonchalant above the melee. Soon the clamour of the city gave way to lush green fields and the odd dusty goat. An infantry of willows lined the tracks; they're used locally to make cricket bats, our guide explains.

That invaluable inside information was truly worthwhile, helping us navigate through the hustle, filling in the cultural blanks as we went, and providing a reassuring back-up if things didn't go to plan. How else could we have known, for example, that you can post letters from the train?

In our remaining days, we cover the Golden Triangle's more famous sights – Delhi, Agra and Jaipur. The iconic craftsmanship and melancholy origins of the Taj Mahal are profoundly moving, and the Red Fort of Agra magnificent. Exploring the bazaars of Old and New Delhi is thrilling and the ancient candy-pink palace in Jaipur is something to behold.

But it is Shimla and the Toy Train I dream about while sipping tepid, over-priced tea on the Gatwick Express train home. **TW**



**ABOVE:** Amber Fort, Jaipur

**LEFT:** Taj Mahal, Agra