

A woman in a red sari is seen from the back, holding a camera up to her eye, framing the Taj Mahal in the distance. The Taj Mahal is reflected in a pool of water in the foreground. The scene is set in Agra, India, during the day.

INDIAN SUMMER

A&K REGULARS JAN ROGERS AND GINA MCPHERSON MADE A MEMORABLE JOURNEY TO THE HEART OF INDIA, WHERE THEY STAYED IN PALACES, RODE RICKSHAWS AND FELL IN LOVE WITH THE LOCAL PEOPLE.

WORDS: CHRIS CANTY

For many people, travelling through India might sound too exotic, too dangerous or perhaps too much effort, but for Melbourne residents Jan Rogers and Gina McPherson, it was simply their latest adventure.

"My husband said he didn't want to come and my friends kept asking me why I wanted to go," says Jan, who has been travelling with A&K for years. "I just told them it was a part of the world I wanted to see."


For Gina, almost 90, who has the energy of a teenager and is another A&K regular, travelling to India was, in a way, returning home.

"I was born in India, growing up in the time of the British Raj," she says. "I wanted to know if I could still feel the soul of India, despite all the recent developments."

Describing the trip as the "best of her life", which is high praise from a person who has travelled through much of the world, Gina says that while the country had changed, finding its soul was easier than expected.

"As soon as I landed, I could feel the religion in the people," she says. "I loved how temples were part of their daily life. The trip was everything I hoped it would be and I saw everything I wanted to."

Indeed, such was her affection for India that she cheekily tried to bring part of it back to Melbourne, although that didn't turn out as planned. While hoping to sneak through customs with a bottle of water derived from the >



River Ganges (which is said to have recuperative properties), she discovered that it had leaked all through her bag and belongings.

"I now have the holiest suitcase in Australia!" she proclaims.

Their 16-night journey, 'India: Festival of Lights', included destinations such as the bustling town of Delhi, the sculptured temples of Khajuraho, the beauty of Ranthambore National Park and the striking Samode Palace. It provided a balanced insight into the architecture, natural attractions and people of India and with a group of just 10 others, both ladies thought the number was ideal.

"I think 12 people in a group is the perfect size," Gina says. "I got to meet people like Jan, who is lovely, but never felt crowded or the service was impersonal."

The highlight for both travellers was largely due to their guide, Vikram, who has been with A&K for the past 10 years and is a member of the nobility in the town of Udaipur. When they went to his hometown, a place famous for hosting the Festival of Lights where thousands of small, shimmering oil lamps paved the streets, they were surprised to be welcomed into his home.

"He took us into his home and introduced us to his family," Gina says. "He treated us like friends rather than just clients. We fell in love with Vikram."

"He was always so pleasant and organised," Jan adds. "We just felt taken care of." >

Another highlight, especially for Jan, was seeing the Taj Mahal, even if Bollywood actors proved to be a bit of a nuisance.

"It was one of the few icons I had left on my list to see," she says. "It was so photogenic and I took some great photos, but because there were Bollywood stars filming on that particular morning, the crowds hoping to see them were enormous!"

And while the two were pampered with the usual high quality standards A&K is known for – sometimes staying in converted palaces, which, says Jan, were "hard to leave behind" – they did experience real Indian life.

"Riding rickshaws through the crowded streets was absolutely fabulous," Gina says.

Ignoring the friends who questioned why they wanted to travel to India was, according to the ladies, one of the best decisions they had ever made. They both regret nothing and recommend it for everyone.

"I never felt afraid at all," Gina says.

"Even when I walked among crowds in busy market streets and people were coming



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up to me, I didn't once feel nervous."

"The people were terrific and you feel so comfortable," Jan says, agreeing enthusiastically. "There was nothing on the trip I wouldn't eat, either."

When the obvious question is asked regarding their age and if it was a barrier while travelling through India, both ladies look somewhat bemused, as if this has been asked a hundred times before.

"The only thing you need to travel through India is good knees," Gina says with a laugh.

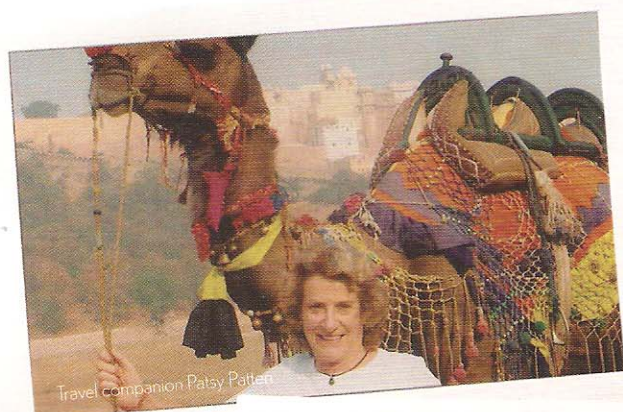
"Everything seems to be at the top of 500 steps!"

"The Indian people show a great deal of respect for the elderly. At one point a man bowed to me and referred to me as 'Grandmother' and I was just so moved."

Both ladies are set to continue their adventures with A&K shortly. While Jan enjoyed her first trip to India so much she is considering going back to India next year on a newly programmed tour, Gina will be travelling through Scotland on the *Royal Scotsman* train and then on to Ireland.

"There is just so much to see and do," Gina says with a smile.

Oh, to be young at heart. •



Travel companion Patsy Potters



Also on the journey Barbara and Ted Smith