# India Done Right

legant, educated and deeply knowledgeable, Mehra Dalton, along with brother Shahrookh Cambata, operates Greaves Tours, which specializes in all travel Indian. Born in Mumbai and now London-based, Mehra talks to Richard David Story about why, when, where and how to do India—the right way.

#### What can Greaves do that no one else can?

We provide a bespoke service of tailormade holidays to the Indian Subcontinent. To ensure a trip of a lifetime, the Greaves portfolio includes a private plane and VIP assistance at most major international airports in India. We have our own ground operations, which gives us direct control for seamless arrangements from start to finish and allows us to uphold our high standards. We are also able to organize insider access to many of the private state and royal residences throughout the country.

#### Tell me about your private plane. Why did you feel the need to own one?

The plane is a Super King Air, a Beechcraft B200 turbo-prop that's more spacious than many jets of similar size. We chose it for its stability and reliability, and the fact that it permits us to offer a travel experience within India that is unmatched. Clients are driven to private corporate check-in and security facilities and then taken directly to the plane, avoiding the long airport lines. India's domestic airlines route most of their tourist destinations through main hubs. The Greaves plane allows clients to design their own itineraries, enabling them to fly directly from one destination to another at a date and time suitable to them. For example, one cannot fly directly from Varanasi to Agra without a private plane. Another distinct advantage is accessibility to



many destinations that don't have a civilian airport; the only way to reach them is by long road journeys that can take up to eight hours. Access to our plane allows those with time constraints to see much more.

#### What is the most interesting trip you have arranged recently?

By virtue of being tailor-made, all our vacations are unique and no two trips are alike. Whilst Rajasthan and Kerala offer a highly rewarding cultural experience, we have done some very interesting itineraries to the beaches and temples of Orissa, to the Hemis festival in Leh, to Gujarat to see this country's fabulous textiles, to the prehistoric landscapes of Karnataka [Hampi] and to the Robinson Crusoe-style beaches in the Andamans for intrepid scuba diving.

#### Do you travel with clients? If not, who does?

All our clients are accompanied by a Greaves representative at each point of contact. We are also able to provide full-time travel escorts, some of whom are museum curators, authors and specialist guides.

#### I have friends who are afraid to go to India after the bombing, because of the Pakistani situation. What should I tell them?

We would not want to persuade anyone to travel to India or any other destination in the world if they are afraid to do so. However, we do have a unique service that allows us to track the whereabouts of each client on any day. Our family standing and personal contacts give us the added advantage of being able to take care of our clients immediately, whether it is necessary to move them out of a destination or fly them out of the country. Those who have traveled to India recently will have noticed stringent security at all airports and major hotels.

## A friend of mine likes jewelry; another, fabrics; many love antiques. Can you do specialized trips along these lines?

Not only do we have the knowledge to advise on the best places to go, but we have many friends, colleagues and professionals in the art world who can personally help our clients with the purchase of jewelry, fabrics, antiques, contemporary paintings, sculptures, carpets, furniture and much more.

What some people don't seem to realize is that side by side with the world's most luxurious travel opportunities is horrific poverty.

#### Can you explain that contradiction?

This is a huge question and would require many hours to properly answer, but in as few words as possible, India is a country of great contrasts, not just economically but

in language, religion, culture and topography. It is also the land of a billion people, and while its culture dates back more than 5,000 years, the country is politically very young. Its independence was gained only 65 years ago! In spite of its myriad of problems, India has held fast to democracy and is not only the largest democracy in the world, but the only true parliamentary democracy in the entire region. Poverty is the most challenging of all the issues facing the Indian government, and there are no quick solutions for such a huge population, but the future is bright. Voter turnout in India is extremely high, and the people are involved with their political future; the majority are under 35 years old. There is a great determination to eradicate corruption, and the new economic surge has pushed millions above the poverty line. The new middle class, who are also India's new consumers, now number 340 million. These consumers drive the manufacturing base of India, increasing jobs and opportunities. This same economic boom has also created enormous wealth, resulting in spectacular hotels.

#### What city or cause is dearest to your heart?

Mumbai, where I was born and brought up, is a city of every language, every religion, with both beggar and billionaire living in close and noisy proximity. It has an energy like no other Indian city, but it has compassion as well.

The cause that is closest to me is the conservation of the desert town of Jaisalmer, with its historic monuments and structures. Sadly, architectural conservation is very low on India's agenda. Sixteen years

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ago we started a small charity called Jais-

almer in Jeopardy, and we were successful in bringing it to the attention of the World Monuments Fund, which has listed Jaisalmer as one of the world's most endangered cities. We have raised funds and completed resto-

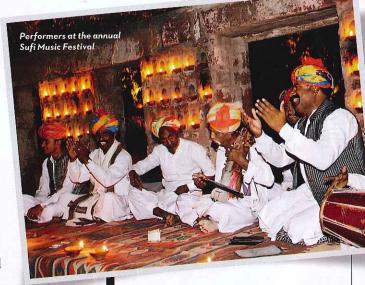
ration of some of the palaces within the city's fort, which is unique in that it's still inhabited. But the work is ongoing.

## I want the adventure of a lifetime; price is no object but bragging rights are. Where would you take me?

I'd fly you to Lukla by private plane for a four-day trek to Mount Everest, with porters to carry every luxury, including your favorite wine, food, sheets and portable toilet and shower. Instead of walking back, we'd fly off the mountain in a helicopter for incredible views.

#### I've been to India several times and want to return tomorrow for ten days. My only requirement? Amaze me!

Easy one! To Calcutta and the Hugli River, then to Darjeeling to stay at a private tea plantation (drinking tea will never be the same again). Next to Varanasi by private plane, ending with a few days at the amazing Ananda Spa, one of the best spas I have ever experienced.



DISPATCH

## **MY PASSAGE** TO INDIA

or five days, I had done the big cities of India-Mumbai and Delhiand now I found myself in the lobby of the Udaivilas in Rajasthan. I was to meet a woman named Mehra Dalton, who, trusted sources reassured me, would guide me through the second half of my trip. Five years and three trips later, I can't imagine India without her.

A woman of impeccable taste and equally impeccable instincts, Mehra is

the epitome of the modern-day travel bespokist. She knows India backward and forward, she understands her clients and she knows the difference between a good trip and a great trip. The one time I ventured off her perfectly calibrated itinerary, it was, to say the least, a mistake I don't care to make again.

Then, about a year ago, I was determined to go to Varanasi and Calcutta. Mehra advised otherwise: "Later-you're not ready for that quite yet. Of course, they are marvelous but...." Instead, she suggested the Sufi Music Festival. Located off the beaten track in the town

of Nagaur, the festival is three days of nonstop music, based in the ancient Sufism and orchestrated in and around the great 12th-century Rajput fortress where chefs from the royal kitchen serve traditional Rajasthani cuisine. In attendance is a cast of international characters and pedigreed intellectuals, like Scottish scholar William Dalrymple, who specializes in Indian literature and history. It's a journey I'll never forget, a very special passage to India, done right with Mehra. -R.D.S.

DETAILS

**Greaves Tours** offers introductory guided trips through India that are perfect for first-timers, and its bespoke itineraries are unparalleled. Prices are based on itinerary and customization: 800-318-7801; greavesindia.com.