

Micato Musings

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Micato's Man in Agra Knows the Way

By Becca Hensley

Puneet Dan knows how to wend his way through Agra.

This vibrant, colourful city, best known for the Taj Mahal, is, after all, his hometown. So, it's no surprise when Puneet uses his connections to show me some other eye-popping aspects of his residential turf.

With glee, I return to the Oberoi Amarvilas, a palace-style hotel just steps from India's most famous landmark. An opulent lodge, it presents views of the Taj Mahal from every room—a sight so stupendous that guests feel woozy with awe. After an adventurous ride from Delhi, in which my photographer, Kevin, insists we stop on the dusty road's verge to take photos of a snake charmer and his dancing cobra, I am happy to reach this fanciful hotel.

I rush through the marble-sheathed lobby to take in the iconic vista, which can be seen through the panoramic windows of a colourful parlour or through the doors on a commodious deck. There, a short distance away, the Taj Mahal seems to be floating amid the clouds. It emits rose-colored rays that glitter like something bejeweled. But, that view only gets better upstairs in my suite. My personal balcony, on an upper floor, overlooks the icon, amid the hotel's medley of swimming pools and old-style, manicured gardens. Ethereal, it exudes a discernible energy—and the sight of it awakens my long sleeping soul. That's the power of the Taj Mahal.

But Puneet is powerful too. He urges me outdoors, away from the view that I had wanted to linger over. He urges me off my balcony, and out into the street. I follow him because he has the best laugh in India. And, an enthusiasm that is contagious. Puneet has plans. And, when Puneet has plans, you know something miraculous is in store.

We head away from the Taj Mahal to Kohinoor Jewelers, set in an unassuming building. I have no idea what to expect. But, in fact, as it turns out, the Taj Mahal has some hearty competition in Agra.

Known for their magnificent Mughal-style workmanship, Kohinoor has supplied the regal classes with magnificent jewelry for more than a century. Today, the atelier, storehouse, and boutique is helmed by a descendent of the first Kohinoor family—Ghanshyam Mathur. An artist in his own right, Mathur meets us at the door and beckons us into this Aladdin's Cave of precious jeweled delights. While each



Micato's Man in Agra, Puneet Dan, enjoying the Festival of Holi

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stunning piece outshines the next, I pause to gaze at an ancient necklace so beautiful only a deity could pull it off. Composed of nine perfect emeralds, each one the size of fingerling potato, it also boasts twinkling rubies.

With trepidation, I try it on.

A magical bijoux, it transforms me—and for a minute I ponder its myriad stories. Mathur then leads us to the emporium’s back rooms to peruse other priceless artwork, including a century-old tapestry collection, dotted with precious crystals, made by his ancestors.

The next day Puneet has another surprise. Always grinning, bubbly, bemused Puneet has infinite tricks up his sleeve. On previous trips we’ve been to the Taj Mahal, walked its grounds, photographed it at sunrise and sunset—even done yoga in its shadows. Honestly, I am hankering to go back—just to repeat a bit of poetry made palpable. But, as usual, the ever crafty Puneet has alternative plans. And, he can barely contain his excitement.

He picks us up before dawn and we walk up the street toward the Taj Mahal. Inexplicably, I am wearing a long, silk dress. And, as usual, my photographer, Kevin, his camera cases akimbo and his eyes like a thousand hummingbirds, seeking nectar (that is, photo ops), lags behind to ponder simply everything. “I am just waiting for something to happen,” he says.

And, it does.

Just as Puneet tells him, “Don’t do that,” Kevin kneels down to take a portrait of a monkey. The problem is that this monkey is angry—at him. He rushes us, teeth bared, a screech emitting negativity into the universe. I jump onto Puneet, Kevin leaps into the air, avoiding the monkey’s bite. We all scream. It is a most undignified trek to that Taj—but laughing, we carry on. (I make a note to self: Tell readers to avoid photographing the monkeys. “Don’t look them in the eyes,” says Puneet.)

We go beyond the Taj Mahal to the River Yamuna. This river, which flows behind the palace, is linked to the sacred River Ganges. There, on the bank, a very shoddy raft awaits. An oarsman, his head wrapped in a white turban, and a cigarette dangling off his lip, sits at attention. Another man, his smile as big as India, takes my hand, and helps me on. He lays out a towel to protect my silk dress. (“Why did I wear a silk dress?” I think). And off we go, just as the sun begins to rise. This is doing the Taj Mahal rogue.

“Are we allowed out here?” I scream, over the lapping of the waves and the furious clicking of Kevin’s camera.

“Of course not,” says Puneet. He shrugs. “But, this is India.”





Rowing past the Taj Mahal at Dawn.



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