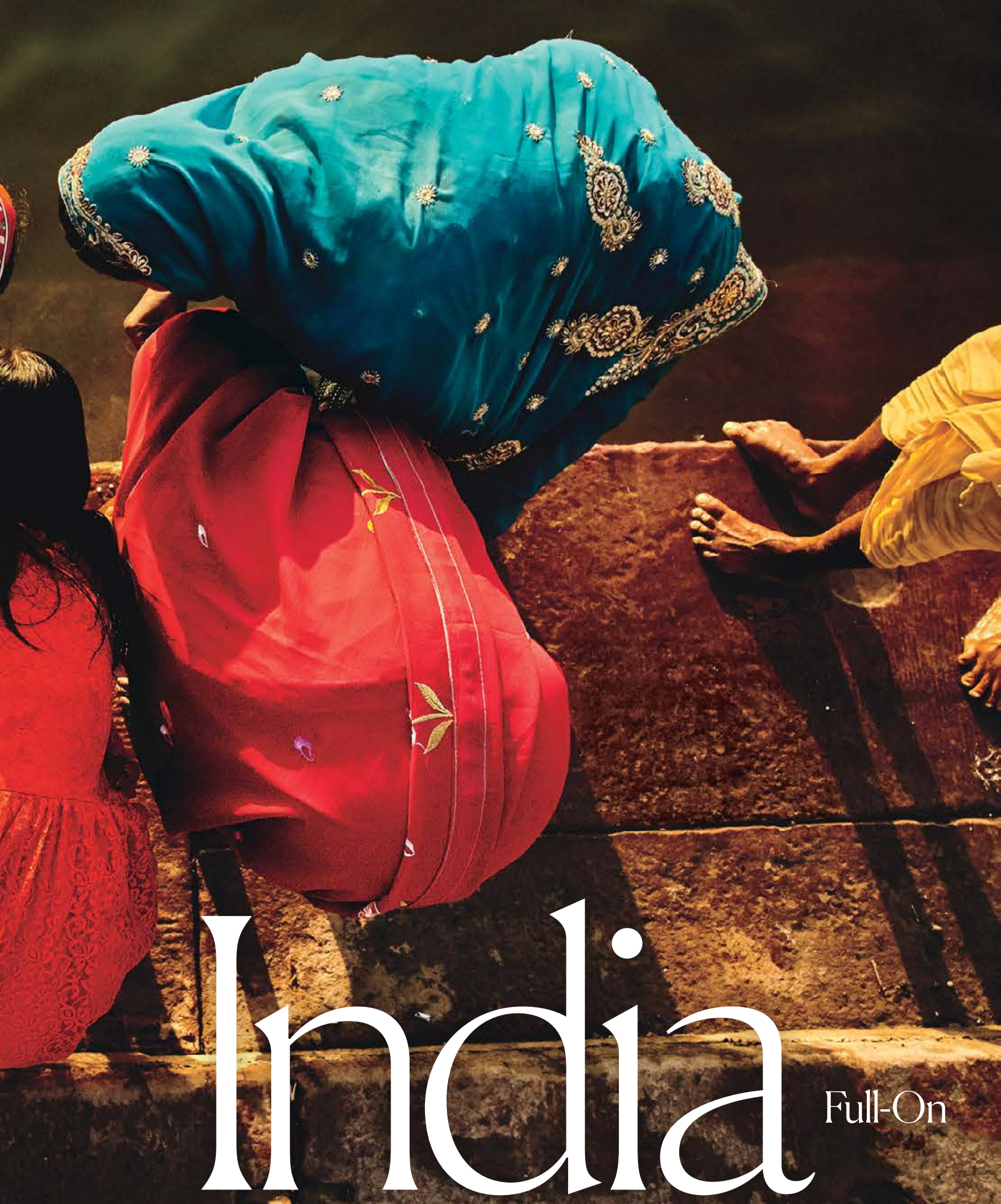




TEN INTREPID FOODIES EXPLORED THIS MEGAWATT COUNTRY
AND FOUND CHOREOGRAPHY IN ITS CHAOTIC CITIES,
SERENITY IN ITS RURAL TOWNS, AND BRILLIANTLY SPICED
BIRYANIS IN THE UNLIKELIEST PLACES



India

Full-On

On

a bustling Mumbai street corner, knee-deep in tiffin boxes, I stand with Alice Waters, owner of Berkeley's Chez Panisse, and photographer Andrea Gentl, mesmerized by a flurry of men in white cotton caps who are stacking the tin boxes onto bikes with military precision. We sidestep awkwardly, trying not to get in their way as they work in busy silence to ensure that each box is delivered to its rightful owner. These are the *dabbawalas*, the couriers who each day ferry some 200,000 hot lunches to workers across the city from kitchens in the countryside where wives and mothers make food each morning for their loved ones. The scene is arguably not as Instagrammable as many other moments on our trip, with little of the color of the intricately painted murals at the Jaipur City Palace, or the yellow marigolds spilling from hot-pink silk sacks at the flower market. Yet each humble tiffin box (a typical one might include spicy vegetables, dal, rice, yogurt, bread, chutney, and dessert) is, in its way, a deeply moving celebration of culture and tradition—a defiant triumph of the freshly cooked over the fast or convenient.

Like the hectic fish market we've just come from, hidden away in Mumbai's naval base, a visit to the dabbawalas is not a standard stop on the itinerary of the naive tourist in India. But we're traversing the country with David Prior, an anything-but-naive explorer (and contributor to this magazine), who's test-launching a series of custom-designed trips drawing on his

unrivaled little black book of contacts and an uncanny instinct for sussing out unique experiences in any locale. He has led us off the well-worn tourist path and brought us to places from Mumbai to Maheshwar in search of something different—a taste of modern-day Indian food culture in all its rich, complex, and enigmatic glory. David gathered an eclectic group of friends for this trip, many of them alums of Chez Panisse (where he worked with Alice for a few years), including winemaker Cristina Salas-Porras Hudson and food writer Fritz Streiff, along with chefs Seen Lippert and Gilbert Pilgram, now of San Francisco's Zuni Café. Australian environmentalist Judy Stewart and New York photography duo Andrea Gentl and Martin Hyers also joined. For all of us, food is a lifelong passion—and for many of us, it is our first experience of India.

It is perhaps no surprise, then, that our days played out as a sequence of meals. Or rather, it is the meals that monopolize my recollection of our trip. From the dabbawalas we proceed to Kyani & Co., one of a handful of cafés opened in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by Parsi settlers—Zoroastrian immigrants from Iran. Improbably little has changed since the restaurant first opened its doors in 1904. The intimate interior is all dusty, faded grandeur, the walls lined with shelves of glass biscuit jars, each labeled in neat cursive with flavors that read like something out of an Enid Blyton children's book: milk biscuits, banana cheese wafers, *badam* or coconut jam biscuits. The smell of freshly baked bread that permeates the café is not only sweet relief from the polluted bustle of the city's streets but intoxicatingly wistful. Huddled around a few wooden tables, we indulge in mugs of milky sweet



Previous spread: Women offering prayers on the ghats of the River Ganges in Varanasi. Opposite: A room in the City Palace of Udaipur.







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*Boats on the Narmada
River in Maheshwar.*

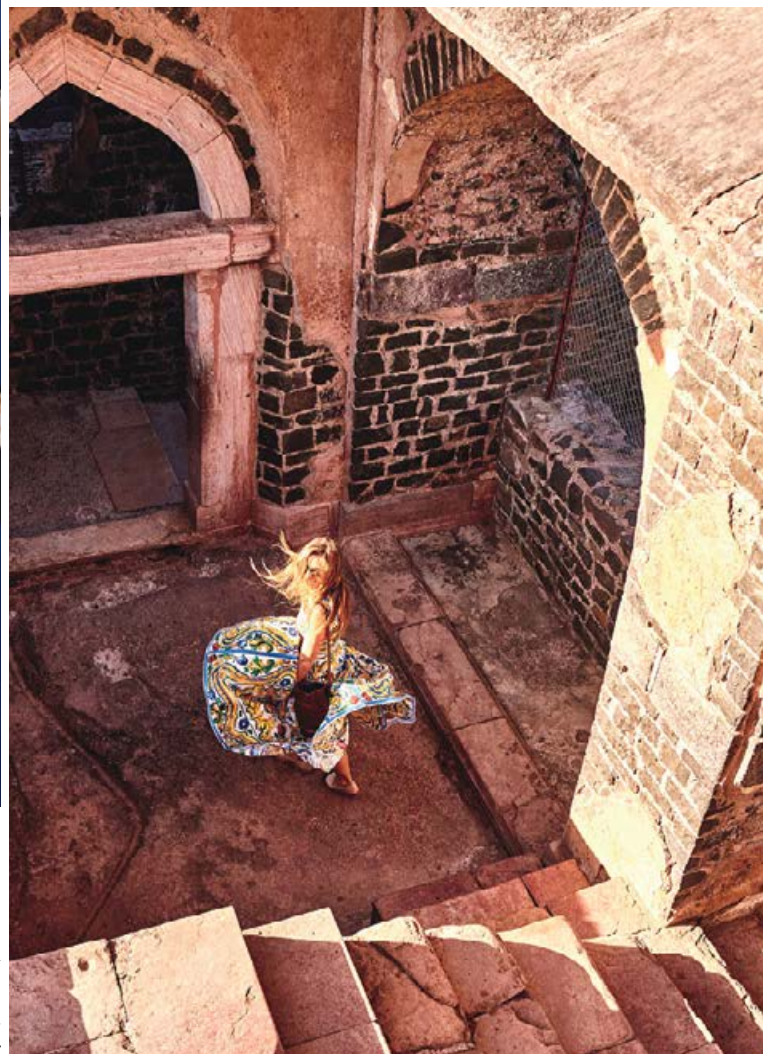


chai tea, biscuits, and soft buttered white bread, and delight in the eccentricity of the vintage signage that adorns the restaurant's walls: NO LAPTOPS and NO FLATULENCE ALLOWED.

It was, however, an unexpectedly good lunch at a working-class *thali* café that proved the highlight of our time in Mumbai. We would never have found the no-frills spot on the second floor of a cinder-block building—nor thought to eat there—had it not been for our guide that day, the celebrated Mumbai restaurateur and chef Rahul Akerkar. “McDonald’s clean” is how David describes the restaurant as we clamber apprehensively upstairs to a sterile room with Formica tables and strip lighting. At first glance, it certainly has the soullessness of a McDonald’s. But we eat so much and so well (Gujarati *thali* platters laden with creamy lentils, saffron-scented basmati rice, and *bhakri*—flatbreads made with sorghum flour and laced with ghee) that when we are done, Alice asks to see the kitchen. There, behind closed doors, we discover a culinary whirlwind: pans of steaming-hot dal and rice; baskets of fresh coriander and red chilies; the overwhelming, deliciously foreign scent of spice; and a gaggle of women clad in saris, sitting on the floor, chatting away and deftly making naan on the boards at their feet. It is unlike restaurant kitchens any of us have ever seen, and the beautiful informality and conviviality of the cooking here goes a long way toward explaining the excellence of our meal.



I had joined the group late, along with Suzanne Goin (chef-owner of the Los Angeles restaurant Lucques) and her husband, David Lentz (chef-owner of the Hungry Cat in Hollywood), at Ahilya Fort, an 18th-century palace set in the 4,000-year-old town of Maheshwar, in Madhya Pradesh. Formerly a private home, Ahilya has operated as a boutique hotel since 2000, a bohemian oasis in a part of India otherwise untouched by tourism. With no other guests staying there, it feels like a relaxed house party. On arrival, we are



whisked off onto the Narmada River in wooden boats by Prince Richard Holkar, the son of the last Maharaja of Indore, who now runs the hotel. As the sun sets, a thousand flickering candles float peacefully on the water. We each place a votive nestled in a leaf holder into the current, adding our wishes to the cluster of glimmering flames.

We spend our days at Maheshwar lounging by the secluded pool, strolling through the fort's shady organic gardens, and exploring the majestic ruins of the nearby abandoned 13th-century city of Mandu. If we travel to escape the mundanity of our own worlds, to experience that elusive magic of elsewhere, then in Maheshwar we find a fairy tale. On our last night at Ahilya, we dress for a banquet—the men in red turbans and women in rainbow-hued silk saris, each beautifully woven by women in a nearby cooperative we visited that morning. Standing in the palace's turret at sunset, Judy, Cristina, and I, in blushing pink, deepest black, and ice blue, are princesses in a tower, if only for a night.

Dinner is served at a long, lantern-lit table in the fort's garden, the hum of cicadas trilling in the background. Our guide, Sameer, talks us through the plentiful and unfamiliar flavors on the thali plates in front of us, and he regales us with stories of his own family's kitchen. His mother, he insists, makes an even better curry—in fact, she makes the *best* curry. We observe that the kitchen at Ahilya, like the one at the lunch joint in Mumbai, is

utterly basic. And yet out of it comes dish upon dish of exquisite beauty: duck in pomegranate sauce, jackfruit biryani, banana in smoked yogurt, tomato curry, many varieties of naan and chapati, still warm to the touch. Our various meals in India have excited us with the possibilities of new spices and preparations. At the same time, the food tradition's emphasis on family and history, as well as its seeming contradictions—deriving complex flavors from elemental ingredients, eating with your hands in even the finest settings—is a useful reminder to us all of what we have long believed in: the value of simplicity and humility in cooking.

◉
From left: Overlooking the blue city of Jodhpur from the Amber Fort; a village girl in Mandu; a thali at Shree Thaker Bhojanalay, a Gujarati vegetarian restaurant in Mumbai; the author exploring the ruins of Mandu.



Precious stones at
the Gem Palace, Jaipur.
Opposite: Lakshmi,
a rescued elephant at
Dera Amer, outside Jaipur.





**"IN INDIA, DEATH, LIFE,
AND THE NEXT MEAL GO
HAND IN HAND."**





Varanasi, where we fly next, is another ancient river town, on the banks of the Ganges in the north of India. But whereas Maheshwar is dreamy, Varanasi electrifies. Open pyres burn along the waterside, their bright flames dancing in the air with all the drama of a scene from *Game of Thrones*. It is here, the holiest place in India, that the Hindus burn their dead; and, as tradition dictates, it is here that many come to die, believing that death on the Ganges will free their souls from the bonds of reincarnation. Yet life—vibrant and raw—is what most defines Varanasi: the children playing cricket along the ghats; the boisterous monkeys who unashamedly steal into your bedroom should you leave the window open; the cows and the stray dogs that amble through the streets; the heaving crowds; the busy shopkeepers; and the saffron-robed priests who congregate along the water's edge, washing, praying, and selling their blessings under the shade of faded umbrellas.



From left: Early morning bathing off the ghats in Varanasi; dyeing threads in Jodhpur; antique spice tins in the kitchen at the Ahilya Fort, Maheshwar.



On our last afternoon, a small group of us take a boat to the burning ghats. We moor a few feet away from the pyres—no cameras, no iPhones, just us and the fire. As we watch, a gaggle of men carry a body, laid out on a bamboo stretcher and bound in ceremonial yards of brightly colored silks, and set it onto the flames. I've never been so physically close to death. "At the end of the day," our guide tells us, "the locals take the embers from the pyre and use them to cook their chapatis." In India, death, life, and the next meal go hand in hand. ♦



HOW THEY DID IT

The group traveled with David Prior, who has just started rolling out a series of bespoke Indian travel experiences for the wider public under the banner of Prior (priorknowledgetravel.com). Next year, there will be trips to India, Spain, Ireland, and Japan, as well as a membership component that, besides giving members first dibs on trips, will get them entrée to hard-to-book hotels and restaurants. At a time when access and experience have become the new luxuries, David's instinct for finding what's truly special in a place (he's given us tips on everything from the best nightclub in Berlin to the most private cove in which to moor a boat in Sydney Harbor) and his vast network of contacts that includes princes and fishermen make him exactly who you want to be traveling with. Here are a few highlights from his inaugural tour. **THE EDITORS**

AGRA

Easing into India

Most visits to this tourist hub begin and end with the Taj Mahal, but before joining the crowds there, David took the group to see [Itmad-ud-Daulah](#), a 17th-century white-marble mausoleum known as the “Baby Taj.” That evening there was a visit to the 16th-century [Mehtab Bagh](#) (Farsi for “moonlight garden”), where the group's first glimpse of the Taj was at sunset from across the Yamuna River.

JODHPUR

The Cultural Deep Dive

After a private tour of the [Mehrangarh Fort](#), the travelers exited through the lesser-known back gate and went on a walking tour of the oldest part of the city, winding their way through its warren of markets. They stopped for chai and picked up hard-to-find spices like black cardamom. On another day, they saw the twirling Rajasthani sword dancers perform at the World Sacred Spirit Festival,

the leading Sufi cultural event, then a private concert from the Mirasi boy singers, the keepers of the region's oral-storytelling tradition.

MUMBAI

A Crash Course in City Life

Day one started at dawn at the historic [Crawford Market](#) as wriggling fishnets from the Indian Ocean were hauled onto the stone dock, followed by traditional Iranian sweets at [Kyani & Co.](#), a 1904 café and a rare window onto old Bombay. Next, they headed to Churchgate Station to see *dabbawalas* deliver thousands of tiffin boxes of homemade lunches—a frenetic scene that epitomizes the organized chaos of India. Lunch was at [Shree Thaker Bhojanalay](#), a working man's canteen deep in Mumbai's labyrinthine backstreets where barefoot waiters served brilliantly nuanced curries (lunch—at \$2 per person—was unanimously voted the meal of the trip, and, for some, their best in years). The day concluded on the balcony of the Peacock Suite at the [Taj Jai Mahal Palace](#) hotel, as they watched boats bobbing in the harbor, margaritas in hand (no small feat to drum up tequila during a religious festival-mandated dry period).

MAHESHWAR

Low-Key and Local

David rented out the entire [Ahilya Fort](#), a centuries-old citadel turned hotel overlooking the holy Narmada River. The stay in this temple town in the rural state of Madhya Pradesh (it's not uncommon to see caravans of camels and shepherds in bright-red turbans herding sheep) took on the feel of a four-day retreat. Meals were prepared using organic produce from the fort's garden. One evening, guests took a boat to the [Baneshwar temple](#); they left at sunset to discover that David had arranged for 1,000 candles to be floated down the river. Another day, the women in the group visited [Rehwa Society](#), a non-profit that helps locals earn an income weaving and selling exquisite Maheshwari gossamer saris—each guest had a bespoke one made. The next day, they checked out [Mandu](#), an immense Mughal city abandoned 400 years ago, a sort of Indian Angkor Wat.

JAIPUR

Artisanal and Over-the-Top

The entire group toured the [Royal Family's quarters](#) in the city palace, then some went on targeted shopping expeditions (vintage copper utensils, Rajasthani miniature art), while others had appointments with tailors or Siddharth Kasliwal, scion of [Gem Palace](#). There was a candlelit dinner in a pale-pink tent at the [Suján Rajmahal Palace](#) as peacocks strutted along the lawn; a private lunch hosted by Barbara Miolini of the beloved [Bar Palladio Jaipur](#); a sunrise visit to the flower market with its endless bundles of marigolds, roses, and tuberoses; and a stop at the milk market, where dairy farmers sell their yield in giant pails. Another dinner was arranged in the wilderness outside of the city, at [Dera Amer](#), where rescued elephants roamed and guests like Gilbert Pilgram and Alice Waters (who pioneered wood-fire oven cooking in the States) worked the tandoor.

VARANASI

Spiritual Immersion

David timed the February visit to India's holiest city—where Hindu pilgrims come to wash away their sins in the Ganges and cremate their dead—to coincide with Maha Shivratri, the festival of Shiva. The guests arrived and walked through the city as wrapped bodies were being carried through the streets. They then boarded a boat and were transported to the [Brijrama Palace](#), a maharaja's home recently converted into a hotel. Over the next few days, faculty members from the local university led the travelers around the city, explaining Varanasi's deep relationship with life and death by taking them to observe different pilgrim rituals and to view the burning pyres. One night, a special Sattvic dinner was arranged, each dish meticulously prepared according to Ayurvedic principles.

UDAIPUR

A Calm Retreat

The travelers based themselves at the [Taj Lake Palace](#) on the tiny island of Jag Niwas, in Lake Pichola. (Built from white marble, it looks like a floating castle.) They visited less-touristed Hindu temples [Sas-Bahu](#) in Nagda and [Eklingji](#), and, the next morning, toured the wildly ornate [City Palace](#) before stopping to see a performance of Jai Sanjhvi, a religious ritual in which artists paint on water, layering colored powder to create fleeting images. There was an afternoon cooking class taught by a local woman, who went deep into the principles and flavors of Indian cuisine before this illustrious culinary team cooked a meal together.

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Opposite: The Amber Fort, Jaipur.