**Agra**

Agra is the city where the Taj Mahal is located. It is in the state of Uttar Pradesh, but is not the capital of the state. The Red Fort is also found in Agra. Although the city is well known for these exceptional world heritage sites, it does not have the appeal of other Indian cities and is not, in itself, a travel destination. It is only visited so frequently because of these two monuments. Its population is 1 700 000, a large proportion of whom are young people.



*A street of Agra, nowadays*

**Getting to Agra**

Agra is not an easy city to reach, but it is not the worst city to get to in India either. It is a reasonable distance from the capital New Delhi.

If you wish to travel to Agra by plane, note that there is an airport in Agra, but it is not served by international airline companies, and you will probably arrive in India via other cities. If your goal is to visit only North India or even only Agra, you will probably arrive in New Delhi from where you will take an internal flight operated by an Indian domestic airline: Kingfisher Airlines and Air India Regional, for example. These air operators also have flights to Jaipur. Of course it is the most expensive means of travel, and in addition, is not always on time.

If you wish to travel to by train, it will cost you only 6 Euros, plus one or two euros for fees. There are advantages and disadvantages, of course. One of the advantages is that it will save you a lot of trouble as the hotels or local travel agencies are responsible for buying tickets for you and for telling you where to go. In addition, for this price you will be entitled to a rather luxurious air-conditioned cabin. And you'll be in Agra quite quickly, in about 3 hours. Finally, trains run relatively on time, compared to other means of transport. The disadvantages are that you have to plan your trip well in advance, as the trains fill up quickly and you will not get a ticket if you book too late. The trains going to Agra are the Bhopal Shatabdi Express and the Taj Express, which are the two classic trains for tourists. The others are more for the inhabitants. This does not imply that we should not mix with the locals, but rather that the state of Uttar Pradesh prefers to organize trains for tourists so that they have a level of comfort that locals do not have. So if you wish, travel by other trains, they will be more authentic. Note that the journey from the station to the hotels usually costs between 50 and 200 rupees. There is another station in Agra, Agra Fort Station, which serves trains arriving from the east.



*A street in Agra, nowadays*

If travel by taxi, it will take you about 5 hours to get from New Delhi to Agra. It is quite economical, especially if you are not travelling alone, and you will see both the scenery and the art of driving in India without the inconvenience of trying it yourself. Yes, driving in India is so much an art that it seems complicated to drive normally while avoiding pedestrians, permanent sources of danger. Not to mention the animals. The disadvantage of the taxi is common to the bus and the private car: The travel time is random, ranging from 5 hours if everything goes well at ... a certain time, if everything goes wrong -accident, traffic jams, checks, etc.

If you decide to drive yourself, good luck! In between avoiding pedestrians, other vehicles, finding your way while keeping your focus all the way, you would arrive exhausted, and much later than planned, as you're not used to driving in India, unlike the taxis. This is a solution that I cannot advise.

If you travel by bus, you will need to buy your ticket well in advance because they too are quickly crowded. A bus normally takes 5 hours to reach Agra from New Delhi, but it is common that it takes longer depending on the conditions and the traffic. There are two bus stations in Agra, the Idgah Bus Stand and the ISBT (Interstate bus terminal). Note that if you travel by bus or car/taxi you can stop at Mathura, which allows you to split the trip in two parts and see an additional nice place.

**Climate of Agra**

Curiously Agra is of tropical type of climate, with a rainy season from June to September, during all the summer months in India. And when it rains in Agra, it's rains! We record up to 660 millimetres annually during the summer, and for the rest of the year it hardly rains.

Temperatures vary greatly, ranging from 45°C in summer to 4°C in winter, but generally winters are warmer than that.

The best months to visit Agra are October, from November to February, and possibly March. The city remains as interesting in the other months, but it is inclined to be very hot, or rainy. Although it is possible to visit during the hot or wet months the stay is less pleasant, especially during the hot weather since the city is heavily polluted.

**What to do in Agra**

Agra is not especially famous in itself. The city is not very touristy and there are few architectural elements or events organized around tourism. In fact, everything revolves around the 4 heritage buildings, two of which have a global reach. So the visit of the city can be done in one day, the time to see the centre, the streets, some old houses and one can pass to these 4 elements which are:

* **The Taj Mahal** The tomb of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal, a World Heritage Site.
* **The red fort** - Very nice stronghold of Agra, also of global reach. It was built by Akbar and has been extensively redesigned. Shah Jahan was locked there for the last 8 years. The style of this fort is a mixture of Hindu art and Muslim tradition, it is the first major example of what will later be the Mughal architectural style.
* **Le Sikandra** - This is the tomb of Akbar, it is a mausoleum in red sandstone of Hindu style with a Muslim influence. It is 4 km north of Agra, on the road to Delhi.
* **Fatehpur Sikri** - This ancient imperial city is 37 km west of Agra. It is remarkable for the good conservation of the architecture of the sixteenth century, in red sandstone.

Fatehpur Sikri's visits are usually made through an excursion dedicated to him or by a stop along the Jaipur road. The Sikandra, it can be visited from Agra with a taxi, it's still the simplest.



*The Taj Mahal*



*The red fort*



*The Sikandra*



*Fatehpur Sikri*

**Agra at the time of the construction of the Taj Mahal: The sixteenth and seventeenth century**

The city of Agra before the sixteenth century is poorly documented, but we know that it was a small city that developed along the Yamuna River. When Bâbur conquered the northern region of India and founded a new dynasty, Agra was chosen to host the first Mughal Garden. It was created in 1526.

The creation of this garden was not anecdotal. It was for Babur to show his power by taming what is probably the wildest of the existing elements: Nature itself. For a people from the desert regions, the presence of a garden in a place was a symbol of power. The Mughals accentuated this power by ordering their gardens perfectly, to impose the forms they desired. This artistic expression also had a religious and funerary purpose, religious because the Muslims see a garden as a symbol of Paradise and funerary because this symbol is necessarily closer to the deceased.

But to build this garden, Babur caused a large part of the population to be expelled, and the inhabitants lived near the river, which seems normal. However, it is precisely along the river that was to be built gardens. And those gardens were big, very big. The first of these gardens, Ram Bagh, was followed by a vast urbanistic complex of rectilinear architecture, integrated in other gardens, all stretching that more than one kilometre along the river. On this occasion a sort of stone quay was built, high enough along the shore, to mark the delimitation between the bed of the river and the arrangement of the gardens. It is this quay that was at the origin of the future development of the city of Agra.

In the following century, a riverside town in the Mughal gardens was in full swing and had even developed on both banks of the Yamuna River. It included the reconstruction of Agra Fort by Akbar, which was completed in 1573. By the time Shah Jahan ascended the throne the Agra population had reached about 700,000 people. The city was considered, according to the chronicler Abdul Aziz "a wonder that is worth as much by its centre as by its arteries, its trade by land or sea, like a place of meeting of the saints, sages and scientists of all Asia."

In the 17th century Agra had become a city centred on its seafront and had developed partly to the east, but mainly to the west, towards the rich lands that bordered the banks of the Yamuna.