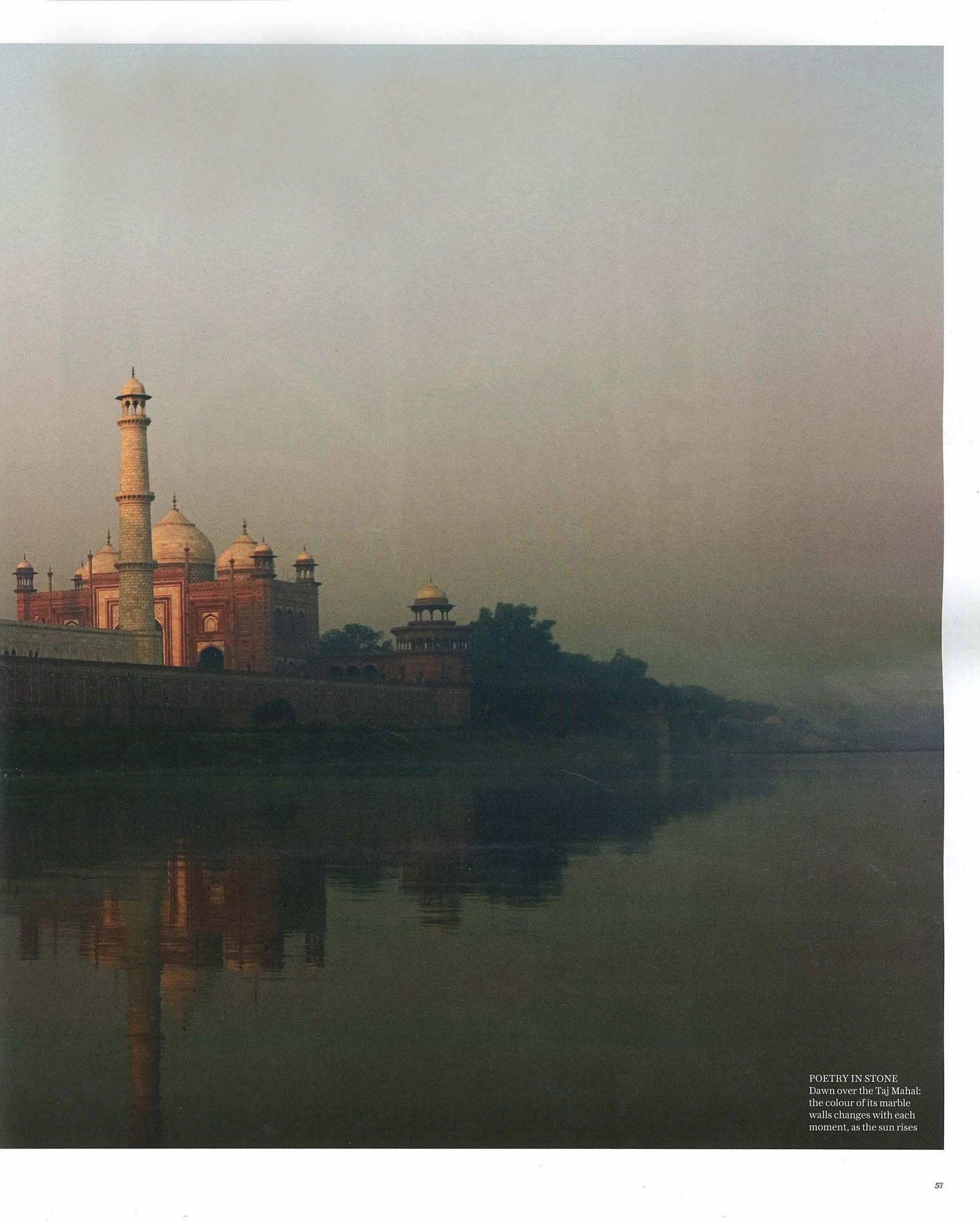


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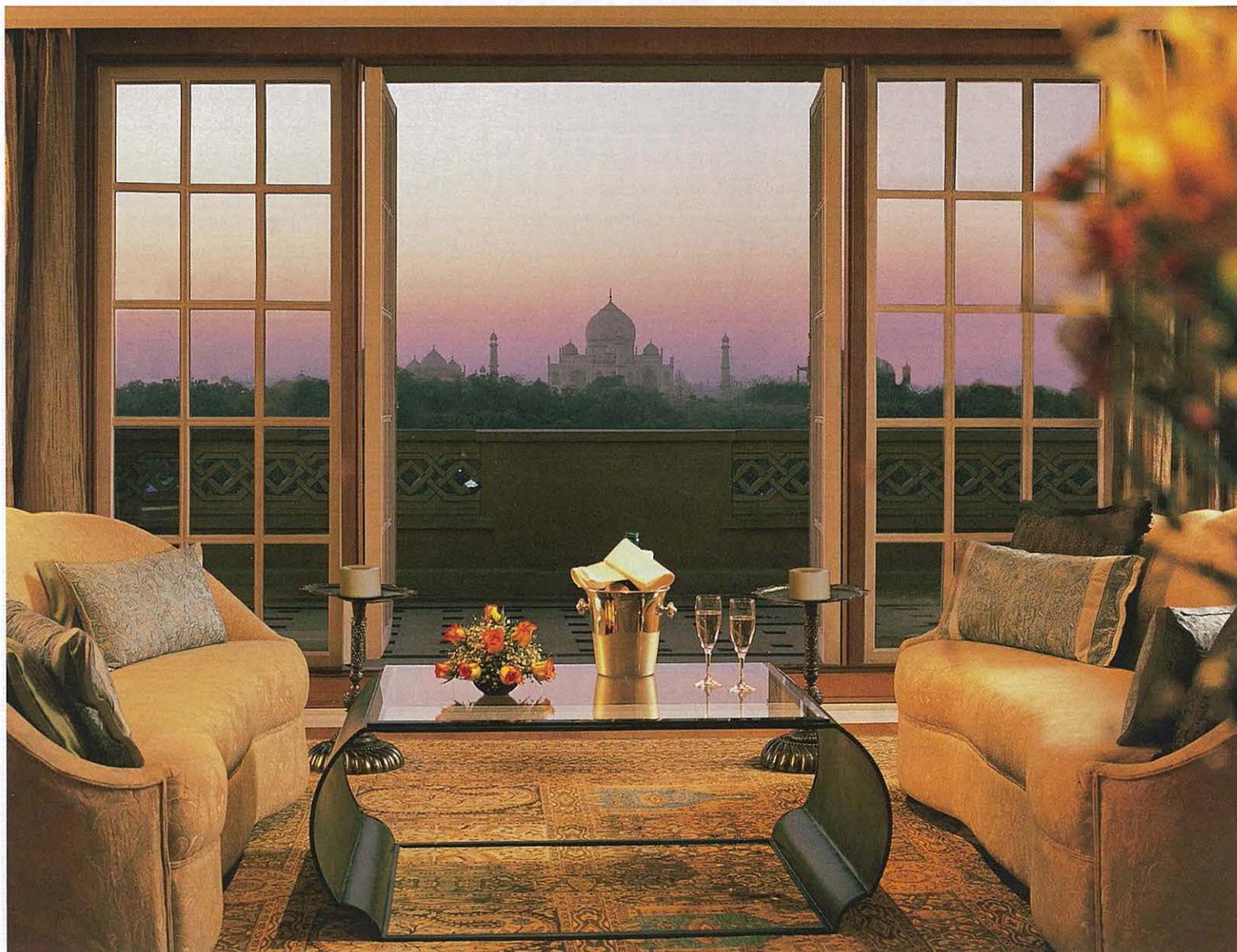
A TOUR DE FORCE

Now is the time for the Taj. Following a major restoration, a private visit to this wonder of the modern world reveals both the sparkle and surprising solitude of what the poet Rabindranath Tagore described as 'a teardrop on the cheek of time'

By Leslie WOIT



POETRY IN STONE
Dawn over the Taj Mahal:
the colour of its marble
walls changes with each
moment, as the sun rises



A ROOM WITH A VIEW
Every guest at the Oberoi Amarvilas hotel can look out uninterrupted at the iconic Taj Mahal

My butler's turban cuts a stylish swath, its long scarlet tail swaying as he holds open the door of the Lord Curzon Suite. I follow him through the rose-scented sitting room, padding swiftly across an emerald-green silk carpet, pausing to glimpse a four-poster king bed, a hint of a marble tub just beyond. It's glorious furnishing foreplay, a tempting tease before the big reveal. Then, framed in a French door, her milky white splendour shimmers bare in the heat of the mid-day sun. The Taj Mahal: just 2,000ft from my bed.

The closest, most lavish vantage over Agra's key attraction is to be had from rooms of the Oberoi Amarvilas, all of which offer uninterrupted views. Erecting a hotel on such hallowed ground in 2001 was one in a line of corporate coups for the group: in 1957, when Mohan Singh Oberoi successfully negotiated with the Maharaja of Jaipur to convert Rambagh Palace into a hotel, the Maharani was, by her own admission, "speechless and wretched". A Maharani's loss, our gain.

No small homage to Mughal majesty here. Instead, in the foreground verdant terraced gardens, pools and curves mimic its famous neighbour. Of the six top-floor suites, the Cambridges recently forwent the largest, Kohinoor, in favour of the splendid Robert Burns, with

its two-person Taj-viewing tub tucked at a corridor's end. Mine, the Lord Curzon, is a nod to his sweeping restoration of what he called "the gem of man's handiwork", undertaken while he was Viceroy.

Over the tinkle of an icy gin and tonic in the bar, Puneet Dan, the Micato India tour director who accompanies me on a bespoke tour of India's Golden Triangle, introduces me to Dr PBS Sengar, former director of the Archeological Survey of India, the government body responsible for maintaining the country's historical sites. Graciously, Dr Sengar has agreed to give me a private behind-the-scenes tour of his life's work at the Taj, an entity he found "out of the world" on his first visit at the age of 17. **This sort of exclusive is - I am to discover - the standard *modus operandi* for Micato, whose India and Africa tours have been providing rarified access and exclusive travel experiences for more than 50 years.**

The doctor bears great tidings. To our surprise and considerable relief, the current mammoth cleaning project - fuller's earth mudpacks, distilled water and elbow grease to counter the effects of wind and industrial pollution - is ahead of schedule. Nary a stick of scaffolding would obscure the building (and the small remaining portion should be complete by December).

"Every monument has its own story," he says. "The Taj took 22 years to build, 22,000 labourers and many hundreds of elephants. We have the most perfect building, with not one speck of asymmetry - except one." A pause. "Come, we'll look for ourselves."

It's a rather surreal four-minute journey to the entrance gate, riding a stretch golf cart, dodging the odd dozing cow, to alight at our destination.

"Begin here and walk precisely down this line," Dr Sengar tells me. I do as he says, to proceed, eyes-forward, beneath the domed chamber of the gate. "See, how it is expanding and it is coming towards you." Indeed it is. In full four-colour spectrum the tomb slowly emerges, an imposing marble meringue. First as a slice, then as a whole, then as we walk, step by step, two by two, its minarets reveal themselves, sentries to symmetry.

We amble up the eastern edge of the garden, toward the red sandstone guest house that flanks the tomb. Away from the crowds, Dr Sengar pulls aside a "closed" rope and as we step into the shaded portico, he draws attention to engraved scratches in the floor - calculations and measurements left by unknown mathematicians. Beneath a scalloped arch, he shares a secret spot through which to photograph the iconic

A TOUR DE FORCE



FINE DINING

Above With its high ceilings, gilded mirrors and Renaissance-style frescoes, the Suvarna Mahal Room in Jaipur's Rambagh Palace offers opulence as sumptuous as its five-star cuisine.

Below Saris in the sun at Mehtab Bagh, the grand gardens across the Yamuna river from the Taj Mahal

I try to imagine a constellation of gems glimmering in the pink twilight'

dome. Remarkably, with up to 40,000 visitors on a busy weekend, we don't see another soul.

"With no cladding, it would last a thousand years," he explains. "With the magnificent marble and limestone cladding that was used, it will last forever."

Alas, its decoration did not. Over the centuries, precious stones of mother-of-pearl, lapis lazuli and emeralds have been chiselled off and stolen. I try to imagine a constellation of gems glimmering in the pink Indian twilight.

"It may be difficult to make up for this unfortunate shortcoming," says Puneet Dan, back at the Amarvilas. "But let us try." And try, he does.

"Emeralds, we have them," says GG Mathur, as I dip my head to slip into a necklace of nine marble-size emeralds and two rubies. The doyen of Agra's Kohinoor Jewellers, five-generation purveyor of jewels to the Maharajas, is bringing out magic crimson-silk boxes, one after another. This set from the Mughal period is part of his priceless personal collection, and not for sale – though the boutique is aglitter with a king's ransom that is. As a pre-screened invited guest, I am also guided by his son, Milind Mathur, through their renowned tapestry collection, one piece recently returned from loan at the New York's Metropolitan Museum. A final visit to the jewellery showroom has Mathur Senior conjuring the stuff of green dreams. The finale, a \$3 million emerald set, is destined, he hopes, for a kind woman in Hong Kong. "We want them to go to happy people," he adds gently.

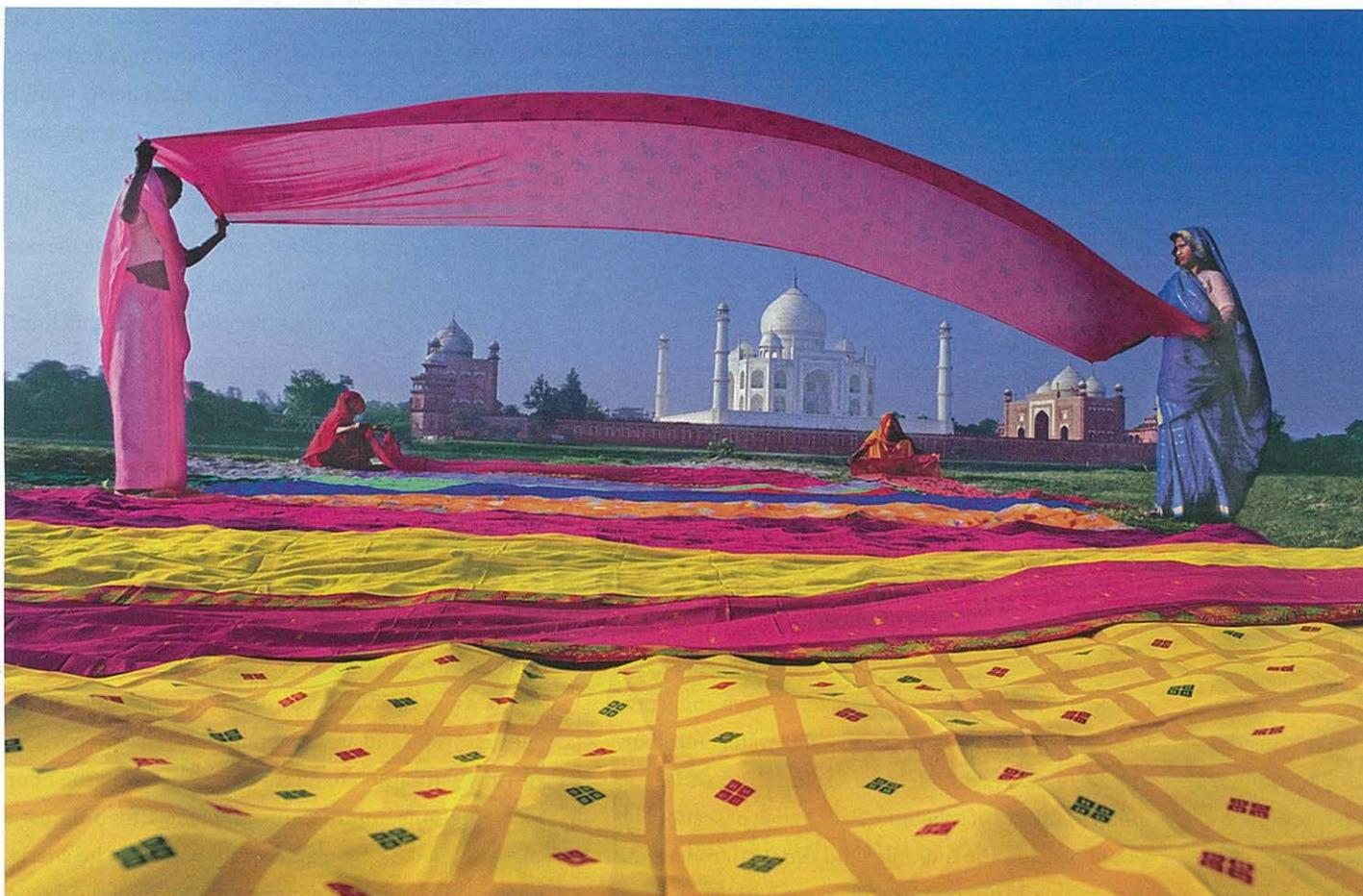
Ah, if happiness were all it took. Though on that score, Puneet Dan is enriching me from minute to

minute. In the coming days, we would dine at Jaipur's Rambagh Palace in solitary splendour, glittering tables of the grand Suvarna Mahal Room heaving with 22ct-gold place settings and a princely feast. And at the City Palace, we would veer deftly through a door marked "Private" into the personal sitting room of the Maharaja of Jaipur. Over a glass of bubbly, we ruminated over the richest princely state in the land: the long Lalique dining table, the solid silver throne, the impressive collection of polo cups won by the last reigning Maharaja. Invitations to take tea with the current prince, just 19 and a keen polo player himself, are also arranged, though scheduling anything during The Season is understandably tricky.

First-time visitors to India may wonder how anything at all is managed here, this tumult of rickshaws and river laundry, the moveable rainbows of saris and spices. In short, all credit to Dan, who in a self-deprecating way declares himself "in charge of loose ends and miracles".

Alas, there is one thing he can't fix, that imperfection of the perfect invoked so casually over gin and tonic and curried nuts. "Ironically, the only asymmetry in the Taj," he admits with a hint of tragedy, "is the grave itself." Alongside Mumtaz Mahal, the Persian princess who died giving birth to her 14th child, Shah Jahan now lies askew – a husband forever a few feet off the mark.

Micato India's classic itineraries start at 11 nights from £11,000pp; bespoke itineraries start at 14 days for £17,000 pp (micato.com/india). Oberoi offers stays at Amarvilas from £575 pp (oberoihotels.com).



NEW GROWTH FOR A MUGHAL GARDEN

Since retiring from the Archeological Survey of India, PBS Sengar's work as Project Director of World Monuments Fund has spearheaded excavations at Mehtab Bagh, the grand Moghul gardens just over Yamuna river, opposite the Taj Mahal. Part of the original scheme of the Taj, its ornate pathways, pools and fountains are found in equal width, length and in perfect symmetry with the Taj. "These newly resurrected gardens and those still in existence place the Taj Mahal dead centre in a great symmetrical plan," says Sengar. The gardens are currently on the tentative list for Unesco World Heritage status