

India's roads, railways offer nostalgia-filled travel

AFP, New Delhi

In transport as in many things in India, the old exists alongside the new, providing tourists with numerous entertaining ways to travel in bygone style.

The majority of visitors on a quick break to the country opt to get around on new budget airlines and air-conditioned SUVs, missing out on some of the iconic old technology that lives on in India decades after it died elsewhere.

On the roads, the elder statesmen of Royal Enfield motorbikes and Ambassador cars, both based on almost unchanged 1950s British technology, are still in production and continue to jostle for space with their modern competitors.

On the railways, a half dozen "heritage" trains criss-cross the country, transporting passengers in former colonial splendour with liveried staff, wood-pannelled carriages and luxury sleeper cabins.

Tracey Forbes and her husband decided to go "retro" during their recent trip to India, hiring an Ambassador with a driver to travel between the historic forts of Rajasthan, the Taj Mahal in Agra and the sacred city of Varanasi.

"For me the old-style glamour of the Ambassador outweighs a modern car every time," the 48-year-old semi-retired therapist told AFP. "I'd advise anyone to grab the chance while they can - modern cars are two-a-penny."

Hindustan Motors, India's oldest car maker, has been producing the curvy Ambassador since 1957 with a design based on the long-defunct Morris Oxford that has evolved only slightly in 60 years.

Each year brings new predictions of the car's ultimate demise, but the workhorse remains popular with taxi drivers, politicians and, fortunately for tourists, car hire outlets which can be easily found online.

"It reminds me of bygone days when men wore hats and ties and ladies wore gloves and dresses with big skirts," said Forbes, whose driver charges about 50 dollars a day.

"It's a thing of beauty -- so often these days beauty is sacrificed for functionality or simply because it's not economically viable."

Fellow Brit John Mallace decided to pilot his own vehicle, taking on the chaotic and anarchic Indian roads abreast a Royal Enfield motorcycle during a 12-day holiday in the southwestern beach state of Goa.

As a traffic policeman, he was horrified by the



Indian musicians welcome guests to The Golden Chariot train at Yesvanthpur Station in Bangalore. In transport as in most things in India, the old co-exists with the modern, providing tourists with numerous entertaining ways to travel in the bygone style of the last century.

wilful disregard for road safety, but had nothing but praise for the sturdy bike, famed for its chrome and deep "thumper" sound generated from its single-cylinder engine.

Royal Enfield in India -- motto "Made like a gun, goes like a bullet" -- still produces variations on what is essentially the same "Bullet" model based on a British design from the 1950s.

"It's pretty comfy and it handles really well," said the 46-year-old, who opted for an organised tour to see the "real India" in the villages and backwaters of Goa rather than the famed beaches.

The trip was organised by Blazing Trails, owned by British Enfield fanatic Susie I'Anson who takes groups of riders on a handful of circuits across the country from the high Himalayas to the tropical deep south.

She says her clients are often people with a past

link to India -- a parent or grandparent stationed in India during British colonial times -- or just fans of classic motorbikes.

"It's got Old World charm," I'Anson explained to AFP. "And you're not racing around. You're just pottering along in a comfortable position."

"Some people come and start whingeing about missing their BMW bike at home, but at the end of two weeks, they've got full respect for the Enfield. Their BMWs would have fallen apart."

Organised tours with Blazing Trails start at 2,000 pounds (3,200 dollars), but travellers can opt to buy or hire bikes for less locally.

For those unwilling to tackle India's hair-raising roads, the world's second-largest railway offers some old-fashioned journeys where the scenery glides past the window with the minimum of noise and fuss.

There are at least six services, including the

Deccan Odyssey in western Maharashtra, the Palace on Wheels in Rajasthan and the Golden Chariot in southern Karnataka.

The most recent service is the Maharajas' Express, the most luxurious and expensive train service to date, which was launched last March to accommodate just 84 passengers on trips all over the country.

"Rajasthan is the most popular route in India because people want to see it for the culture, history and heritage," Rakesh Agarwal from theluxurytrains.com travel agent told AFP, referring to the colourful desert state.

Most of the clients are foreign, he says, with the financial means to pay the high prices of 3,000-4,500 dollars for a seven-night tour.

Some trains such as Palace on Wheels in Rajasthan can be booked for shorter three-night stays at a cost of 500 dollars a night.

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World's big cities set to become even more crowded

AFP, Cannes, France

The world's big cities are already bursting at the seams but are set to grow even larger, with experts predicting that some 70 per cent of the world's population will be urban by 2050.

This will put great strains on infrastructure and the environment, and presents a major challenge to city planners, developers and mayors who gathered here this week at MIPIM, the world's leading annual real estate event, to look for the best way forward.

"The future of the world lies in cities," London's mayor Boris Johnson told a packed auditorium at the opening day of MIPIM Monday.

He was among leaders taking part in a "mayor's think-tank" here, who say they are increasingly starting to work together in looking for urban development initiatives to improve the quality of life for their citizens.

"We have to keep putting the village back into the city because that is fundamentally what human beings want and aspire to," Johnson told the crowd, adapting a famous statement made by India's Mahatma Gandhi that the future of India lay in its 70,000 villages.

"Cities are where people live longer, have better education outcomes, are more productive," Johnson noted, adding that cities are also where people emit less polluting carbon dioxide per capita.

In 1900, around 14 percent of the world's population lived in cities, by 1950 this had risen to 30 percent and today is 50 percent. Currently, there are more than 400 cities with a population over a million, 19 of which have over 10 million inhabitants, Robert Peto, president of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS), told a conference here.

Much of this surge in the next 40 years will occur in cities in emerging countries such as China, India, Asia,



In 1900, around 14 percent of the world's population lived in cities, by 1950 this had risen to 30 percent and today is 50 percent.

Latin America and Africa, all of which are growing very fast, Tony Lloyd-Jones, Reader in International Planning and Sustainable Development at the University of Westminster in London, told AFP.

Explosion of urbanism

A recent study by Citigroup published in Britain's Daily Telegraph newspaper forecast that mega-cities expected to have the fastest growing economies by the middle of the next decade include London, Chicago, Tokyo, New York, Los Angeles and Hong Kong, Sao Paulo, Mexico City, Shanghai, Buenos Aires, Mumbai and Moscow.

"There is a massive explosion of

urbanism and this will have a major impact on communities, businesses, economies, and, specifically, our environment," underlined RICS's Peto.

Increased urbanisation, however, also concentrates risks as many big cities are in earthquake and flood zones. And climate change is likely to intensify these risks, Fouad Bendimerad, president of the seismic and megacities initiative in the Philippines, told a MIPIM conference.

Eight to 10 major cities around the world are under continuous threat of earthquake, including Istanbul in Turkey, Bendimerad noted. And it could take considerable time before expertise in building and planning

resilient cities is developed, he noted.

Key issues for dense cities over the coming years will include sustainable development, transport and energy use, Lloyd-Jones told AFP.

"Obviously, with the price of oil going up, the pressure is on to conserve fuel and energy," Lloyd-Jones emphasised. This means that cities need to become more efficient in terms of transport infrastructure and investment in public transport is one of the keys to achieving that, he added.

Some cities are already taking steps in this direction, like London, host city for 2012 Olympic Games, which is building new river crossings ahead of that event.

Where they can feel secure

And the city of Melbourne in Australia plans to create denser residential areas along transport corridors, increasing the use of solar power and recycling more onsite.

In Brazil, the city of Curitiba's highly successful program 20 years ago to expand the metropolis along very fast bus routes could also inspire other countries, Lloyd-Jones suggested.

This urban explosion is already having a big impact in China, experts here noted.

Between 18 and 20 million people each year leave the Chinese countryside for its cities, putting great strains on existing accommodation and infrastructure, experts said.

But some of China's fastest-growing cities are now looking abroad for foreign investment to help fund their redevelopment.

Officials from Chongqing, the biggest city in the western China with 32 million population, are exhibiting at MIPIM for the first time to meet potential foreign partners to help fund a massive redevelopment program that aims to double the surface area of the city by 2020.

Canada's second largest city, Montreal, is busy implementing its "Montreal 2025" plan with its numerous huge projects that include the creation of a new science and technology quarter and a huge entertainment district.

The goal is to attract more new residents to the island city, which already boasts 3.9 million inhabitants and attracts 18.8 million visitors every year.

"People want to come back and live in the city centre, which is where it all happens, offers a safe real estate investment where they can feel secure," Richard Deschamps, head of Montreal's 2025 grand plan, told AFP.

Cities are where people live longer, have better education outcomes, are more productive, said London's mayor Boris Johnson, adding that cities are also where people emit less polluting carbon dioxide per capita