

# **The Incredible Faces of India**

## **Kumbh Mela Festival, Varanasi, and Nomadic Tribes of Gujarat**

**VAN OS PHOTOSAFARIS**

It is India's Kumbh Mela Festival—one of the largest gatherings of humanity on the planet. “The greatest show on Earth.” Every few years, tens of millions of Hindu men, women and children congregate during this 45-day religious festival to bathe at the sacred confluence of the Ganges and Yamuna Rivers. At Prayagraj the rivers join the “lost” Saraswati River—which mythically evaporated and disappeared some 4,000 years ago. Here these “three” sacred rivers unite to form an auspicious convergence where an immersion in their waters is said to wash away all sins and free the bather from the cycle of reincarnation.

The spectacle of a lifetime. A photography journey like no other. Van Os Photo Safaris offers the most intrepid photo traveler a unique front row seat for this spiritual celebration with photography opportunities few Westerners ever experience.

**From our elegant, exclusive, luxurious tent encampment erected in the heart of the festival's photographic action, we are the personal guests of Lakshmi Singh, princess of the royal family of Tikari in Bihar and daughter of the last Maharaja.**

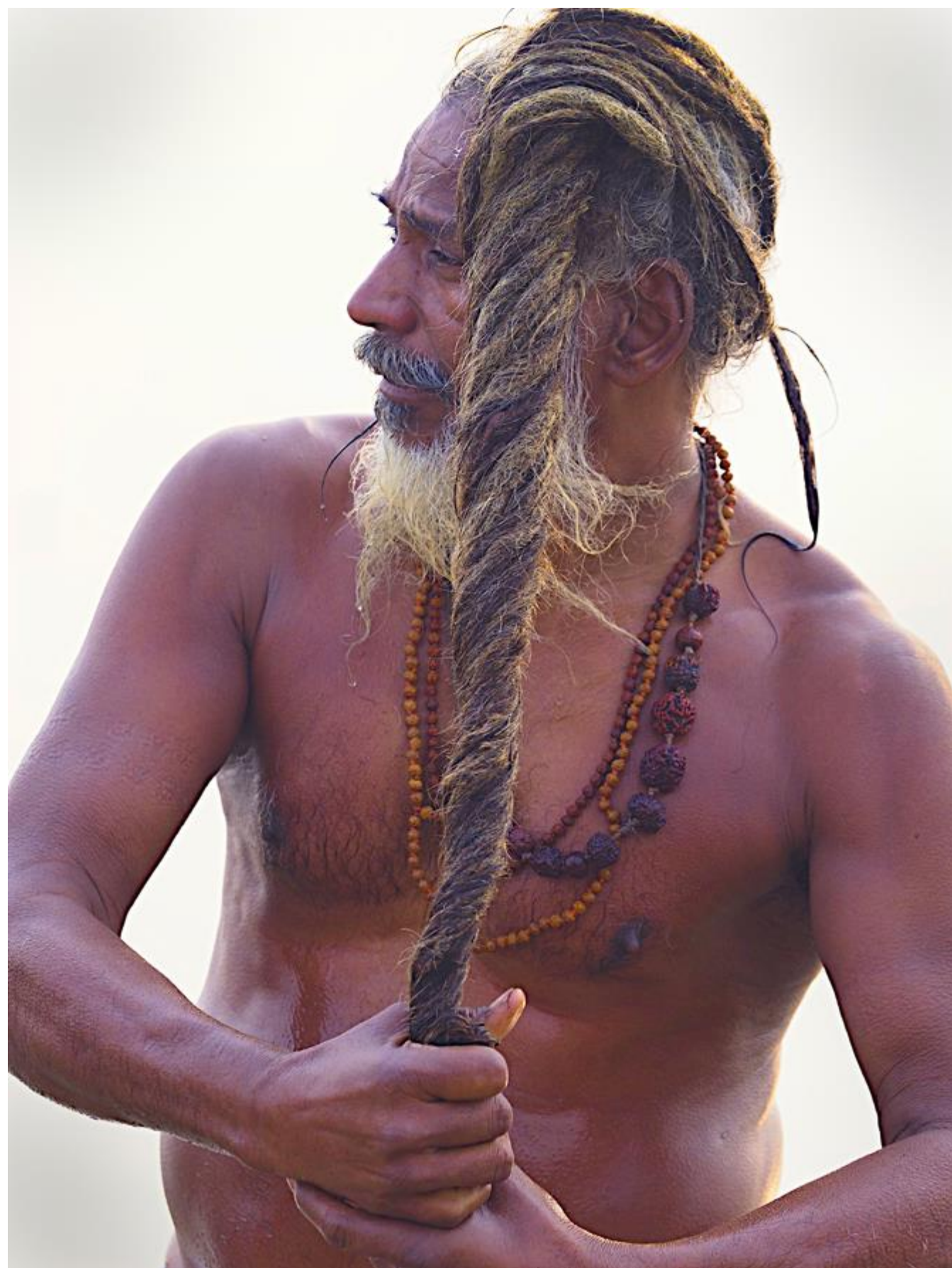
The princess will navigate our participants through the event. Her incomparable connections provide us with exclusive one-on-one photographic access to dreadlocked, ash-covered holy men (sadhus) as they prepare for the massive bathing rituals and help us capture the festival's many colors and milestones as large groups of Naga sadhus sprint into the chilly water for a holy bath, some brandishing Shiva's trident, others chanting, praying, and dancing.











Throughout the festival, the city of **Prayagraj** vibrates with energy and anticipation as the streets become a tapestry of ash-covered bodies decorated with garlands of bright orange marigolds. The colorful sights, music and aromas of incense invigorate the senses. **The Akharas**—club-like sects also referred to as Shiva’s army—are among the most fascinating groups to photograph at the festival. Each akhara maintains its own tented camp. We have the chance to observe and photograph as these groups meditate and perform religious rituals. Here we meet the **Naga Babas**, a radical faction of Hindus who renounce all their possessions, including their clothes, and live in remote mountain forests and caves. Followers of the Lord Shiva, **the Kumbh** is a significant event for the Naga Babas as it is the only time they come down to these spiritual flood plains from the Himalayas.





Prior to Kumbh Mela, we spend time acclimating to India's spiritual energy in the country's holiest city, **Varanasi**. Set along the banks of the Ganges in Uttar Pradesh, Varanasi is one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities and another important pilgrimage site. Here is the chance to photograph the city's iconic **ghats** (broad steps on the riverbanks) and an evening **aarti ceremony**, where priests set huge butter lamps ablaze as the crowd sings hymns of praise.





### **Sunrise Boat Ride**

We observe the spiritual ceremonies of Varanasi from a boat ride at dawn, but we also have the unique chance to be immersed in fascinating rituals celebrating the goddess of danger at the Sankata Devi Temple.





## A Tranquil Oasis

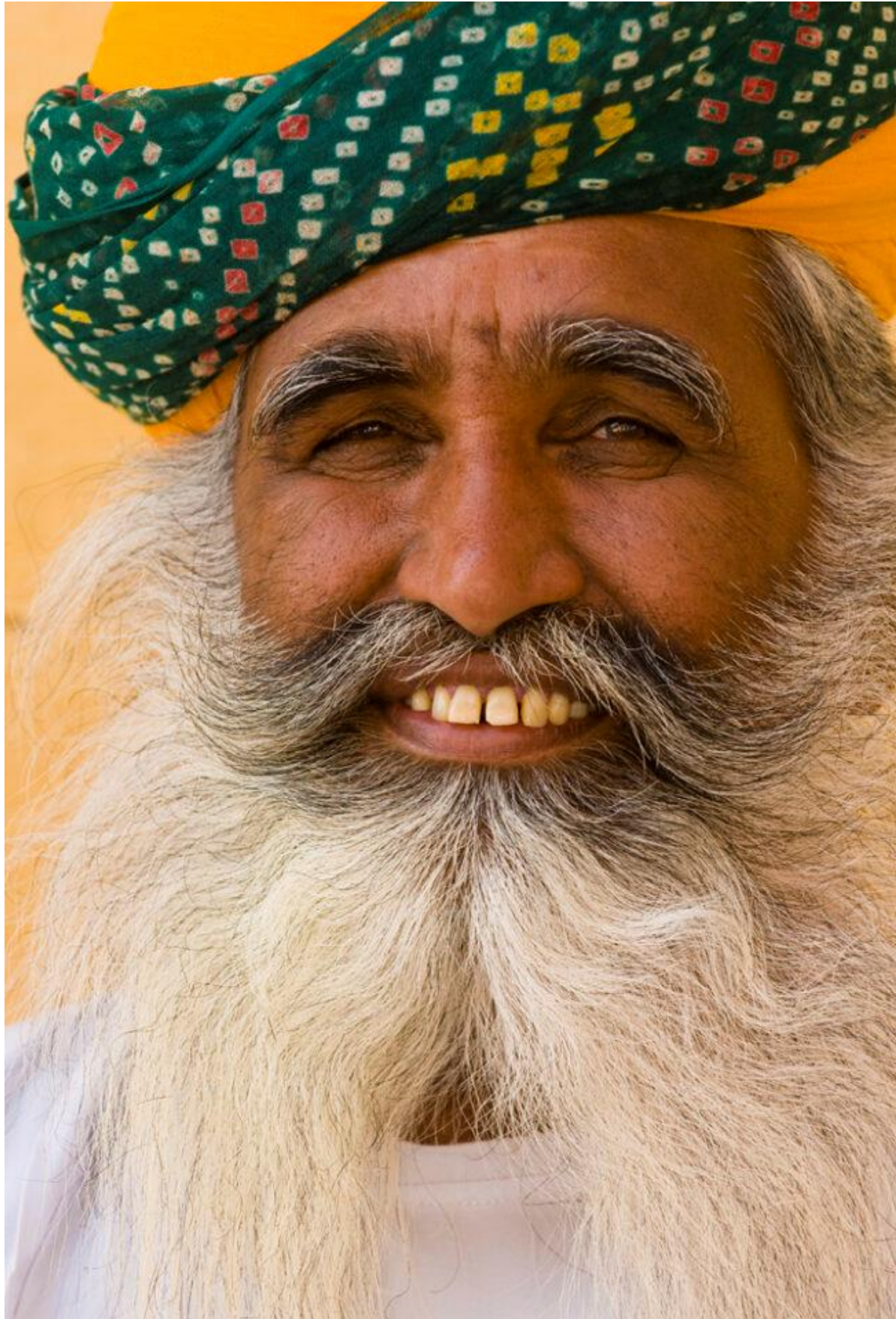
After being surrounded by millions of celebrants and worshipers, we escape to solitude as we journey to the **Great Rann of Kutch in the Thar Desert in Gujarat**. This vast expanse of salt desert unfolds out to the horizon like a sparkling white carpet. We reside in a camp in a region home to fantastically photogenic nomadic tribes, including the Rabari, Ahir and Jat. **Few Westerners have had the opportunity to come face-to-face with these nomadic peoples**, whose lives are determined by the moods of the desert.



During the wet season, the plains turn into an impassable shallow marshland. During the dry season, these lands are home to the nomadic tribes. Some days we travel over 50 miles to visit remote nomadic villages, while another day we welcome numerous and varied tribal people that we transport to our camp for more formal photo sessions in makeshift studio situations. The beautiful faces of these nomadic tribes, from Jat women wearing huge, heavy gold nose rings, to the Rabari, shrouded in the region's famed colorful embroidered fabrics, will remain in your memory—and images—long after your journey home.

### **Tour Itinerary**







**1**

Depart home.

**Day 2 (February 1, 2025)**

Participants arrive in Delhi, India. Upon your arrival at the international airport, and after clearing Customs, our representative meets you for the transfer to our hotel.



**Day 3**

Delhi, the capital of India, is a city that offers a photogenic glimpse of both ancient and modern Indian societies. Following breakfast, we venture into the walled city of Old Delhi where we photograph from private rickshaws in the Old City, which was designed by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan in 1648. We shoot vibrant street scenes of the colorful shops of bustling Chandani Chowk, one of the largest wholesale markets in Asia. The afternoon



finds us in New Delhi, founded by the imperial British government in 1911. The city offers additional camera-friendly historical sites to complement our morning shoot, including a visit to Humayun's Tomb and a drive along the ceremonial avenue—Rajpath—which includes the imposing India Gate, Parliament House, and the President's Residence. (BLD)



#### **Day 4**

Following breakfast, we transfer to the airport for our flight to Varanasi. We check into our hotel in the afternoon. Varanasi, known to the devout as Kashi, is said to have been founded by Shiva, Lord of the Universe. Situated on the banks of the sacred Ganges, the city has been a center of learning and civilization for over 2,000 years. This evening, we visit Dashaswamedh Ghat for the aarti ceremony along the holy river. We are driven to the neighborhood of Benia Bagh and, from there, walk to Dashaswamedh Ghat amidst the

crowded local market with bustling shops and street vendors selling spices, cloth, fruits and vegetables on hand-pulled carts. We arrive at the ghat in time for the glittering aarti ceremony. Large butter lamps are set ablaze—an offering of fire—and held aloft by priests while the assembled multitude chants hymns. Numerous small floating candles and flowers are set afloat on the holy waters of the Ganges. (BLD)





## **Day 5**

We are up before dawn. Boarding our boat, we head out onto the Ganges, where we position ourselves at a respectful distance from the pilgrims who have come to the 100 or more ghats lining the river to pray and immerse themselves in the river at sunrise. There is an unmistakable peal of temple bells as the sun crests the horizon. Almost on cue, a conch sounds from somewhere along the banks, reflecting what Hindus believe to be the primordial sound that heralded the birth of the universe. Smoke and mist drifts across the river in the morning light. Fires from funeral pyres blaze on the shore. There is never a time when there is a lull in our photography at Varanasi. Here, we have taken a step back in time into the vibrant chaos of humanity. Following breakfast, we drive to Prayagraj. Later this evening, we settle into our exclusive luxury camp in the heart of the Kumbh Mela festival and meet our host, Lakshmi Singh. (BLD)





### **Days 6 - 8**

Welcome to the Kumbh Mela! From our luxurious oasis of calm amidst the crowds and hectic religious fervor, we venture forth with cameras in hand to capture the color, excitement and pageantry of the Kumbh Mela as it has been practiced here for centuries. Photography at the Kumbh is all about people. People, people—and more people—in one of the most photogenic and varied assemblages of humanity on the planet. Our photographic success is all about being at the right location at the right time to shoot the incredible spectacle as it continually transforms minute-by-minute.



Our exclusive access to a group of sadhus (holy men) is attained with the help of Lakshmi Singh, whose deep connection with these holy men and spiritual gurus allows us the opportunity of portrait photography in our chosen settings.

Historic architecture, massive crowds of bathers, holy men, sacred rituals, elephants, camels, horses, gilded chariots, street vendors, musicians, playful children, and a spectacular variety of eye-catching photography subjects present themselves as this photographic event of a lifetime unfolds. (BLD)



### **Day 9**

We enjoy a morning of photography at the Kumbh Mela festival followed by a return drive to Varanasi. This evening, we fly to Mumbai where we spend the night in a hotel near the airport. Flight schedules for this date have not been announced and it may be a better schedule if we fly to Ahmedabad instead of Mumbai and drive to Bhuj the next day. (BLD)





#### **Day 10**

We travel to Bhuj, the ancient capital city in the heart of the Kutch District in Gujarat. We head to our camp near the Great Rann of Kutch in the Thar Desert. Our camp, near this glistening world of white sand, allows us wonderful in-situ encounters with several nomadic pastoralist tribes who dwell in this harsh desert environment during the dry season. The word kutch means “island” in traditional Sanskrit. The Great Rann (“desert” in Hindi) of Kutch was once submerged as a vast shallow inlet of the Arabian Sea. As earthquakes and geological uplift closed off its connection to the sea, this immense shallow briny lake dried up, becoming a vast desert of saline flats and salt marsh.

The Great Rann of Kutch is one of the saltiest deserts in the world and the salt harvest is an important industry here. The Indus River was once a major source of water to the Rann but its course was altered westwardly after a devastating earthquake in 1819. These days, major sections of the Rann are seasonally flooded during India's monsoon season. Then the inundated landscape becomes a magnet for many species of migratory birds that rely on this critical wetland. (BLD)



**Days 11 - 12**

The 4,000-year-long habitation of Kutch developed many trading and migratory relationships between ancient civilizations as far-flung as Zanzibar, the Middle East, and Greece, fostering today's unique ethnic mix of people and tradition in the region. This exotic



mélange of intriguing and spectacularly photogenic pastoralists occupies three days of intense photography. We venture out to isolated villages of several tribes—and welcome invited guests to our group camp—working closely with them to create dramatic images of them in their traditional finery.

The Rabari, Ahir and Jat are renowned for their exuberantly detailed embroidered costumes and conspicuous jewelry. During ceremonies, married women are frequently adorned with large gold nose rings, earrings, and neckpieces—often decorated with rubies, sapphires and emeralds—given to them as a bride for a dowry by her soon-to-be husband's mother.

To live in this environment requires its inhabitants to be highly adaptive. Along with traditional cattle herding, camel breeding, seasonal agriculture and salt harvesting, handicrafts (especially intricate textiles) and tourism have changed the financial landscape of the 25-odd villages in these barren salt pans. Here we work on environmental portraiture to convey the life of a person by combining portraiture with a sense of place—the kind of house they live in and how they decorate it; about what kind of work they do and where they do it; family life and their relationship with their livestock. Typical villages have no streets. The alley spaces between houses are used as pathways. The houses of some villages have a characteristic circular architecture called “bhunga” with a mud and lightweight thatch roof construction capable of withstanding earthquakes. The thick outside walls are decorated with vibrant motifs and are designed to keep the house cool even when the temperature reaches close to 50°C/120°F in the summer.



Though the tribe's people will be compensated as photo subjects during this part of our trip, it will be our job to interact with them to create a comfortable atmosphere where we will be able to capture unguarded moments and genuine emotion that enlivens the photo when a person's character shines through. A number of rarely photographed tribespeople will be brought to our camp from distant locations around Kutch for portraiture in our makeshift studio. Our trip fees provide their meals, transportation, and accommodation to create this unprecedented photo opportunity. (BLD)



**Day 13 (February 12)**

After breakfast, we drive to the airport in time for our flight to Mumbai. Depending on your chosen airline, some participants will be able to fly homeward late this afternoon or early evening on February 12. Other participants will fly home in the early hours (typically between 1 and 4 AM) of February 13. In any event, we will supply a hotel room that you can use until your international flight on Feb 12 or early on Feb 13. (BLD)

**Day 14 (February 13)**

Carefully consult with your travel agent regarding your departure time and date from Mumbai and the arrival time to your home airport.