

Dear Friends and Family,

During the month I spent in northwestern India I discovered their cold coffee drink, often with the addition of a scoop of ice cream. Of course I was familiar with the wonderful fruit lassis, but this was a whole new dimension to the afternoon pick-me-up !

Delhi (Master's Guest House) was my base and I traveled, mostly by India Rail Pass, in spokes to Agra, Varanasi, Rishikesh, Jaipur, Amritsar and McLeod Ganj. Each city has a unique personality and the biggest surprise of all was that I came to love Delhi with its forest preserves, shady streets and parks in addition, of course, to the expected intense bustling bazaars. I especially loved the early morning flower market where the flower sellers were all men.

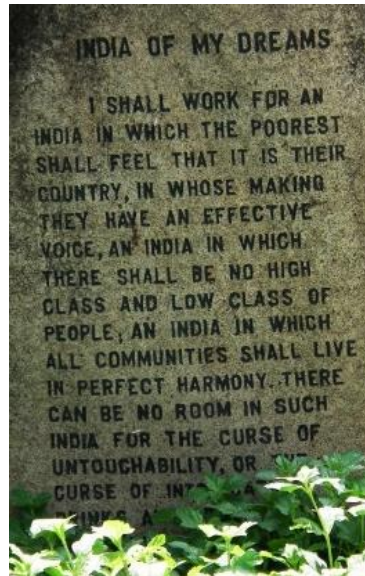
India is one of the most diverse nations in the world and its 28 states and 7 union territories have individual governing powers far beyond those of our (United) states. The amazing thing is that the country functions at all, but it does. I came away with the feeling that across all the religions, cultures, castes and languages Indians share a characteristic of being big-hearted. Even the poorest people seemed always to be sharing what little they had and they worked constantly to keep their often meager surroundings and clothes as clean as possible.



And despite what political tensions there might be among ethnic and religious groups, I found that at the individual level people got along. I don't think that I was ever in a situation where there weren't at least three different religions represented among the Indians I was with, and all was harmonious.

Highlights for me in Delhi were Humayun's tomb, Lodi Gardens, Karol Bagh market, the Bah'ai house of worship and Gandhi Smirti where Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated, including his words « India of My

Dreams".



While the Taj Mahal was even more beautiful than I could have imagined, the tombs, mosque, palaces and fort built by Moghul (Muslim) Emperor Akbar in 1571 in Fatehpur Sikri, near Agra, far exceeded in beauty and complexity any of the others on my itinerary.



And as an added bonus, en route there were thousands of pilgrims walking the 200 kms to a festival for the God Kanali Mata, complete with trucks sporting loudspeakers of music to keep people upbeat, and colorful canopied rest stops all along the roadside.

In Varanasi I stayed at a guest house right on the Ganges river and spent hours on the roof terrace watching the constant hubbub of activity on the river contrasting with people quietly meditating, bathing or

doing laundry on the ghats.





Walking in the first light of early morning was inspirational, as was watching the nightly ganga aarta ceremony of dance, chanting, bell ringing and fire by Hindu priests.

During this ceremony people float a leaf with flower petals and a tiny candle on the Ganges to bring their wishes – much like the annual Loi Kratang ceremony in Thailand. Every night the river of tiny candle lights looks like a starry sky.

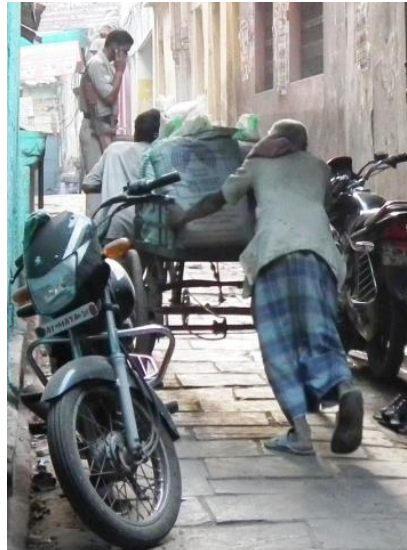


Waking up before dawn the silence was « deafening » with no activity on the river, only a faint sound of a cow lowing and a train some distance away, allowing me to clearly hear the singing and chanting of a

family during cremation of a loved one at the nearby cremation ghat. It was not at all mournful, much more like an uplifting hymn than a dirge including multi-part harmony with some lovely high women's voices and lower men's. By the way it is believed that crying at a cremation will prevent the soul from leaving the body.

India won the semi-final world cricket match against Pakistan when I was in Varanasi and then the championship two days later. Needless to say, the fireworks and ecstasy of the Indian population further heightened the excitement of the visit! There is no question but that cricket is the national sport and everywhere toddlers to adults were « batting » rather than « footing » a (soccer) football.

Cars can't get very close to the river in Varanasi, so to stay on it you have to transfer to a rickshaw and then eventually carry (or have carried) your bags uphill through a maze of tiny alleys competing for space with pilgrims, rickshaws delivering goods, sadhus and, of course, the ubiquitous cows. But it was worth it.



A short side trip from Varanasi to Sarnath allowed me to spend a day where Gautama Buddha preached his first sermon after achieving enlightenment. In addition to the historic ruins, there are Buddhist

temples of China, Japan, Sri Lanka, Burma, Tibet and Thailand which reminded me of these countries' contrasting built environments' homage to the Lord Buddha.

Rishikesh, also on the Ganges, has a very different feel. This area is noted for its ashrams, there is a major campaign to clean up the Ganges, and the banks for a considerable stretch have been paved with stairs like amphitheaters. There is even a bathing ghat reserved for women. The annual yoga festival held here was just the previous week, it was still white water rafting season, and many treks start from here so the visitor mix was quite eclectic. Two famous landmarks are the Chotiwalis restaurant run by eunuch brothers and the former ashram where the Beatles studied under their guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

The walk along the river between the two suspension bridges gives a taste of it all. I loved the mother



monkey offering snacks to her baby on the bridge. While one Sadhu was cooking his meal and leaving his cauliflower leaves for a wandering cow, another was unfortunately throwing a rock at it, while nearby, Europeans were practicing yoga, all to a constant background of chanting and drumming coming from the major ashrams.

I will say that the Hindu temples I saw in this part of India didn't

compare in beauty and drama to those I saw in the south two years ago. My hotel here was run by Nepalese !

I next dipped into Rajasthan with a few days based in the pink city of Jaipur. This was during the 9 day fasting puja from April 4-13 so the Hindu temples were very full, but the bazaars also seemed to be as busy as possible.

Chilis are a specialty here.

Staying at the Arya Niwas Hotel was worth the Jaipur visit, with its veranda, large lawn, lovely library and excellent vegetarian restaurant (more cold coffee!), a peaceful respite from the touring hubbub.

At the restored haveli (noble's house) housing the Anokhi Museum of Hand Printing I saw fabrics being created with hand carved wooden blocks (and bought a few products thereof).



The UNESCO restoration of the Madhavendra Bhavan palace at the Tiger Fort, which for some reason I had all to myself when I visited early in the day, was also a highlight. In the City Palace are 2 Silver Urns listed in the Guinness Book of World Records as the largest silver pieces in the world.



The walls in the hills above town were reminiscent of the Great Wall in China and because this is the edge of the desert, camels are often used to pull delivery carts. En route one saw cow dung drying for



fuel.



Next stop was Amritsar, site of the Golden Temple, Sikhism's holiest place with more visitors per year than the Taj Mahal ! The walls and floors are covered with poignant memorials to Sikhs who served in India's many wars and the free community dining room (a

feature of all Sikh temples for people of all religions and nationalities) serves 60 – 80,000 free meals per day. The temple itself is like a gold ingot set in the midst of its holy water tank.



Nearby I also visited the Nam Hirath Hindu temple.



One evening I travelled 30 km west to the India/Pakistan border for the nightly closing of the border ceremony. This reminded me of a big ten university 'battle of the bands' with cheerleaders on each side leading singing of pop songs and cheers, women dancing like rock star groupies, families parading huge national flags in front of thousands

of participating spectators on each side of the border. At last the guards did their fancy high stepping routines, the flags were lowered, the gates were closed for the night and my driver and I joined the massive traffic jam to return to town.

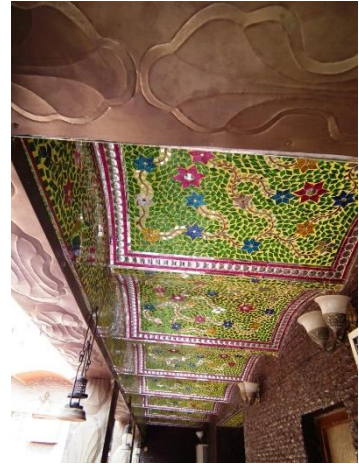


Another interesting opportunity was to spend time outside of Amritsar at 250 year old Virasat Haveli talking with Mr. Singh the Sikh owner who is painstakingly restoring and embellishing the house, originally obtained in 1947 at partition when his family migrated from Peshawar in what is now Pakistan.

Although the family has a very successful wholesale shoe business, he studied animal husbandry, oversees the wheat and bazmati rice crops, breeds white Marwari horses (originally a warrior breed from Rajasthan and

much prized for marriage ceremonies), and welcomes visitors with full board and cultural entertainments in the evening.

Installation of one inlaid glass ceiling (and there are many) required 6 months' work by 8 artisans from Rajasthan region where historically there were many palaces. By the way, Amritsar was notably cleaner than other cities without cows roaming the streets (they are not holy in Sikhism) and there is a fabulous 5* Ista hotel on the edge of town.



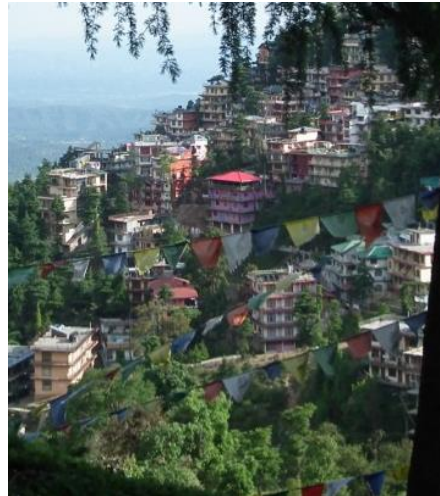
I loved this touch of humanity for the police to wish the students good luck on their exams !

From Amritsar I took the train to Pathankot and arranged with my McLeod Ganj hotel (owned by Muslims from Kashmir) to drive me the 2 hours from there to McLeod Ganj, home of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the exiled government of Tibet. My return to Delhi four days later was by overnight sleeper train (11 hours) from the same station.

Dramatic views of the Himalayas began to reveal themselves en route near Kangra (also known for its tea).



Upon my arrival in McLeod Ganj I felt transported back to a mini Namchi Bazaar in Nepal with snow-covered Himilayas towering overhead and traditional Tibetan dress on the, mostly older, Tibetan residents. The serene Tsuglagkhang Complex (Dalai Lama residence and temples), the museum and the handicrafts workshops to assist in providing livelihoods for the refugees, were highlights. We experienced an evening candlelight procession of monks.



A worthwhile day trip was to the Norbulingka Institute about 6 km outside Dharamsala. This campus, founded in 1988, is dedicated to preservation of Tibetan culture. The serene gardens of Japanese flavor, Buddhist temple, exquisite buildings, excellent restaurant and guesthouse, provide a peaceful respite from the outside world. Sacred Thangka painting and sculpture skills are being preserved here.



The drama of the McLeod Ganj natural setting and the serenity of the people were a perfect conclusion to a trip through many cultures, religions, landscapes and, most of all, people with big hearts.



Love,



Marilee

