

MY TRIP TO INDIA

In May of 2014, while stranded overnight at the Dallas Airport, we met Nipanjana, a young woman from India, who was visiting the U.S. for the first time. Like us, she needed to get to Albuquerque, NM and was told she couldn't get a flight out until the following evening.

We took her under our wing and made her part of our small entourage. We kept her safe, found her a rare cot to sleep on, got her an earlier flight the next day and saw to it she arrived safely. When we said goodbye, I told her that my family had just grown by one. We became friends via emails and Facebook. When she announced her engagement that fall, she asked that her "American parents" attend her wedding in Kolkata, India in March of 2015.

Which is how we came to visit India.

When I was around 12 years old, I learned that there was a country called India. The culture fascinated me. I knew I wanted to visit India one day. As life went on, India became my entire 'bucket list'. I contracted to do a 2-year, 12-credit multimedia program on Mahatma Gandhi when I was in undergraduate school. As part of my research for that project, I interviewed Morarji Desai, the Prime Minister of India, at the United Nations Plaza Hotel in 1978. <http://synthrick.tripod.com/id51.html>

Thanks to an Indian friend in Houston, TX, I make a mean cup of homemade masala chai (chai tea). I love Indian food. I love drumming for kirtans! I love 'Bollywood' movies! The 2006 American movie, "Outsourced", which takes place in India, may be one of my three favorite movies of all time.

My heritage is Acadian, but India has been a part of me for most of my life.

My wife, Judy, and I decided to attend Nipanjana's wedding in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) and then stay on and visit Jaipur and Delhi. We returned home only days ago.

WELCOME TO KOLKATA

Though we expected to be met at the Kolkata Airport by Nipanjana's relatives, she came to greet us herself. It was an emotional greeting with lots of heartfelt hugs.

My initial impression of India was its traffic. It was NUTS! We were horrified to see how congested the traffic was. I was prepared to see traffic driving on the left. WRONG. Driving on the left is only "suggested"! Drivers drive wherever there is an opening, including the middle and the right side of the road! There are no marked lanes in the cities. Vehicles come within an *inch* of other vehicles and pedestrians (!) and no one is even mildly surprised! After a few days of this, you come to realize that

these drivers are much better skilled than us Westerners at handling this sort of traffic. Vehicles blow their horns *constantly*, not because they are angry but to let others know that they are there! A blaring horn usually means, "I'm here.", "I'm about to pass you.", or "I'm approaching a corner."

What's more, Kolkata's traffic includes cars, trucks, buses, push carts, tuk-tuks (3-wheeled auto-rickshaws), bicycle rickshaws, motorcycles, motor scooters, bicycles, and pedestrians... with an occasional bovine or pig joining in the fun.

But here's the thing: Crazy as this traffic is, everyone is calm. Horns aren't blown in anger. Close-calls are seldom even reacted to! When a vehicle flies past a pedestrian close enough to brush their clothing, there is no negative reaction whatsoever. There is an innate trust shared by vehicles and pedestrians.

How to drive in major Indian cities: Blow your horn as you position yourself alongside any vehicle in front of you. Blow your horn again and cut them off so that you are now in front of them. While doing this, bear in mind that every vehicle behind *you* is attempting to do the same to *you*. You do this even when traffic is practically at a standstill.

After a few days of this, you learn to relax in Indian traffic. You learn to trust your driver and the drivers around you.

Nipanjana is an astrophysicist with a PhD. Also attending her wedding were her other "international parents", Miller Goss and his wife, Libby, of Socorro, NM and Ron Ekers and his wife, Jay, of Sidney, Australia. Miller and Ron were both former Directors of New Mexico's VLA (The 1997 film, "Contact" took place at the VLA... The place with the 27 enormous radio-telescopes). We shared an apartment with Miller and Libby while Ron and Jay had one a few floors up.

Before coming to India, I had done some extensive research. I learned that Westerners should avoid India's tap water. It contains bacteria we just don't have the antibodies to combat. Potential and likely dysentery. It is recommended that you use only bottled water ...even to brush your teeth!

Inoculations, malaria pills, mosquito repellent, sunscreen... all sorts of preventative measures are strongly suggested. It was during our stay in this apartment that we had to learn all these new habits.

The Kolkata apartment was managed by a guy named [Aditya Poddar](#). He was great. You told him what you wanted for breakfast the next morning and he made it happen. Ask for a pot of masala chai and it appeared within the half hour. But Indians don't drink as much coffee as we do so morning coffee was about half a pot for 4 people... enough for a tiny cup each. We eventually began asking for *two* pots each morning.

The showers were interesting. The showerhead was mounted on the bathroom wall. The entire bathroom was the shower! There was a drain on the tile floor near the toilet. When you shower, most things in the room get wet, including the toilet seat. The towels and the toilet paper get damp. For hours afterward, if you use the bathroom you step on a wet tile floor! This wasn't unusual in India. We saw this in a few other places.

We were fortunate our apartment had Western-style toilets and toilet paper. That's not how it's done in India. Indians squat over an opening in the floor, clean up with their left hand and have a water source handy to clean up.



This may be TMI for some readers but it's an important cultural difference. It's why you learn to not eat with your left hand (which, as you might imagine would seem disgusting to an Indian) and not hand food to others with your left hand.

Also worth noting is the fact that, since Indians don't use toilet paper, when you do find toilet paper in India it is made only slightly more absorbent than wax paper.

Indians eat food with their right hand (no utensils) but our apartment came equipped with spoons. We had to make a habit of boiling tap water to kill any bacteria and using that to wash our plates, cups and spoons.

Speaking of cultural differences, a few of the more humorous differences that became apparent in my first few days were:

1. Lots of people pick their noses here. Not privately, when no one's looking, but publicly! Even a beautiful woman might look you right in the face while her finger disappears up her nose digging for treasure! They don't eat it or do anything weird with it... but picking one's nose in public isn't the social faux pas that it is in our culture.
2. Men pee in public. Not every guy... probably not even most... but, in the two and a half weeks we were there, I'd estimate I saw this seven or eight times. Now and then you'll see a guy stand on the sidewalk furthest from the street, faced away from traffic, having himself a whizz!

We arrived in India on the day they celebrate a festival called Holi. Holi is the spring festival of colors, sometimes known as the festival of love. It's a very joyous festival when people toss colorful powders at one another as well as colored liquids. It is often portrayed in Bollywood movies for it's beautifully striking visual appeal as well as its gaiety.



Nipanjana warned us that we might not wish to go outdoors that day because of Holi. Judy and I had different thoughts. If we were going to be in *India* on *Holi*, we were going to join in the fun! I brought my best white shirt just for the occasion!

As tired as we were from the flight (We had left New Mexico, USA on Wednesday and landed in India on Friday.) we donned our white shirts and left the apartment. A woman outside the front door wished us “Happy Holi!” and we wished her the same. She said, “Are you going to join in?” We said that was why we were wearing white. She said, “Then let me be the first to put colors on you!” She proceeded to smear each of our faces with bright yellow powder.

Next, we joined a group of celebrators nearby. Adults smeared our faces, hair and clothing with greens, blues, and reds while children sprayed us with colored waters from super-soakers, pails and buckets! The adults often offered us their colors so that we could do the same to them!

Next, we decided to take a walk down the crowded street. Initially, we would get apprehensive looks from people... probably wondering if we had been doused in colors against our will. As soon as we smiled and wished people “Happy Holi!” their faces and smiles lit right up! More adults smeared us with colors. One man looked at us and said, “You don't have any PINK! You need some pink!” and proceeded to rectify this situation. Many of these adults spoke Bengali (the native language of West Bengal) but no English. It didn't matter. We communicated just fine.

We came upon groups of kids and teens whose hands were black, caked with colors. They would line up to shake our hands... all of us laughing the whole time. Two different men we came across had heavy coats of colored powders in the front of their shirts and trousers. Each approached me and gave me a huge, tight hug! ...More laughter!

What a first day in India! What an introduction to the people of India. We met them at their best and they met us at our best. I was reminded of my drum circles... where people with nothing apparent in common gather together and **PLAY**. Whatever differences between us... culture, politics, religion, race, income, profession, sexual preference, nationality, language... are irrelevant when we *play* together. That's what Holi was for me. I was a person from another culture celebrating joy itself with the people of India.



We went out to lunch some days. In the evening, Nipanjana's family always cooked us food and had a family member deliver it (a 45 minute drive). The food was always wonderful. Bengalis don't use the heavy, spicy sauces you normally associate with Indian cuisine. Bengalis believe in letting the flavor of the food come through so they spice their food with primarily turmeric, as opposed to the more complex curry mixtures. They also cook with more fish than much of India.

One afternoon, Nipanjana's brother, Goutam, brought us to a museum and then to Millennium Park in Kolkata, where I saw the best sunset of our whole 2 ½ week visit and got to cruise down the Ganges River.



In the mornings after breakfast during that week in Kolkata, everyone would sit around reading or checking emails or doing work on their laptop computers. I would check my email quickly and read Facebook messages, but then I was itching to get outdoors. I was in India!

I began taking morning walks by myself. I stumbled on a fairly poverty-stricken area of the city. I always felt safe. Smiles were usually returned. I had learned to say two things in Bengali: Hello and Thank You... Namoshkar and Dhanyobad. I struck up conversations with some individuals who spoke English. We talked about politics, religion, culture and life in general. I also made friends with some people who didn't speak English.



One such soul was a guy who sat on a wall watching his two young daughters play. They were around 6 or 7 years old and played with a small scooter and a broken bicycle. I was pretty tired after having walked for hours and sitting on that wall looked appealing. I put my hands together and said “Namoshkar ” and he returned the gesture. We both watched his daughters play. The little girls smiled shyly at me from time to time. Every now and then, when his daughters did something cute, silly or troublesome, the man and I would look at one another and only communicate through non verbal looks or gestures. When I left to head back to our apartment, we gestured goodbye.

After that day, each morning when I walked I would pass that father and his daughters at the same place. Each time we waved each other hello.

That may not sound like a deep friendship but it was an important one to me.

Another similar meeting happened a day or two later. During my walk, a boy of 10 or 11 began walking by my side. He didn't ask for money, as some do in the larger cities, we just traded occasional smiles as we walked. Sometimes I would take a picture and then show him the picture I took. This always made him smile. At one point, I asked him his name. He looked at me and said nothing. I thought that he probably didn't understand the question.



After we walked for several more blocks, he pointed to me and asked, “Name?” I replied, “Rick”. He then pointed to himself and said “Amit”. Amit and I walked a few more blocks until another boy approached him, said something in Bengali. Amit waved goodbye and ran off.

Talking about religion and politics comes straight from the head. It involves passing life through an intellectual and rational filter. But non-verbal communication comes straight from the heart. It requires being present and just putting yourself out there. Even now, that father and Amit are stronger memories for me than any of the people I spoke with during those walks.

Judy wasn't very comfortable when we walked the streets. There were no sidewalks so that you were always walking on the edge of the traffic. It made her understandably nervous to constantly have vehicles rush inches beside us blaring their horns. I was comfortable with it from the start.

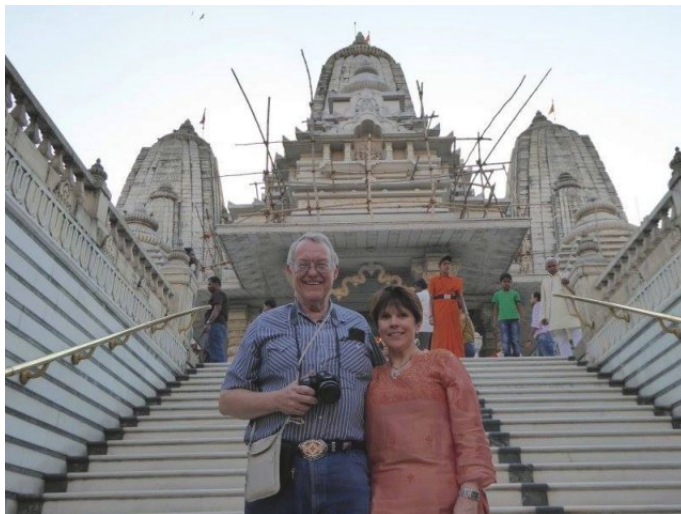
I was reminded of the Huichol shaman whose culture taught that dead souls all went like liquids into a big pot while waiting to be reborn. He said that, sometimes, the soul of one culture gets mixed into the soul of another. When that person is reborn he/she will always be drawn to that foreign culture. I told Judy that my Acadian soul must have gotten mixed up with one from India.

One afternoon, Judy and I visited Kolkata's Birla Temple. A beautiful building inside and out but you're not allowed to take pictures while inside the gate. (Fortunately, there are plenty of pictures of it online.) Judy and I took turns seeing the temple. One of us staying with our shoes and cameras while the other checked out the temple.



The temple consists of 5 or 6 individual shrines, each with its own statue of a Hindu god and each manned by a priest. I watched as devotees prayed at each shrine before approaching the priest who blessed them and handed them something I couldn't see. At one point, a priest spotted me standing at a distance and gestured for me to approach. He gave me a blessing and handed me 6 tiny sugar confections.

After Judy had returned from her temple visit, we prepared to leave. One of the temple guards approached us and gestured that we should stand on the temple steps while he took our picture with my camera. "What a nice guy!" we thought. He took three photos. When I thanked him in Bengali he insisted I owed him 100 rupees!



Child beggars whose feet have never known shoes coax more rupees from my pocket than temple guards in uniform who behave as though you had agreed to pay for a service. I told him that I didn't have 100 rupees and we left.

Nipanjana had come to our apartment with one of her mother's saris for Judy to try on to see if she would like to wear a sari at the wedding. When Judy decided she would like to wear a sari, we all went shopping at FabIndia, Nipanjana's favorite clothing store.

Judy chose a beautiful deep blue and gold sari. I bought three kurtas (tunics). The store didn't carry the underskirt needed for the sari and they didn't make the blouse part so the next day we went to New Market to shop for those.

New Market is not for people who dislike crowds. It is jam-packed with people shopping. You just insert yourself into a crowd which is moving in the general direction you want and let them inch you to your destination. We got everything we came for but moving through the crowds was a challenge best taken with a healthy sense of humor.



NIPANJANA'S WEDDING

Indian weddings are famous. They last an average of five days and are very lavish. Bengali weddings are even moreso. For a detailed description of the various elements of a Bengali wedding see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bengali_wedding

The day before the actual wedding was a pre-wedding party I called the “bachelorette party.” It took place at Nipanjana's parent's home, where we got to meet many of her family and friends. Nipanjana had asked for Judy to bring a flute to play. She knew it wasn't practical for me to bring a drum so they gave me a plastic bucket to drum on. After accompanying Judy, I played my first ever 'bucket solo'.

Two of Nipanjana's relatives came to our apartment to help Judy with her sari (There is a real art to wearing one of these!) I had ordered a hand-stitched Bengali sherwani in advance. A sherwani is a long, fancy, formal tunic. Mine was light blue trimmed with pearl white and decorated with hand stitched silver embroidery. A bit fancier than my usual jeans and button-down shirts.

Before I ordered my sherwani, I sent a picture to Nipanjana and asked whether it was appropriate or too fancy. She assured me that it was perfect for a Bengali wedding. When we arrived at the venue, I noticed that all of the men were wearing slacks and button-down shirts! I said to Judy, “These guys are all dressed like *Americans!* Am I the only guy dressed Bengali??”

Later, it became clear that the fathers and brothers of the bride and groom wore sherwanis. ...Whew!



Judy and I with Nipanjana



Nipanjana: The beautiful bride



Nipanjana and Raunaq

The wedding was amazing... quite lavish and detailed. We met the groom, Raunaq, for the first time as well as his family.

At both the pre-wedding party and at the wedding itself we ate traditionally with only our right hand. This was a first for us and we got through it just fine. I tasted curried jackfruit for the first time. I thought it was some sort of meat! Delicious! (I had seconds!) All the food was amazing!

The day after the wedding ceremony, a reception is hosted by the groom's family. In this case, the groom's family lived in another state in India. We parted ways and flew to Jaipur for part two of our trip to India.

JAIPUR

As I mentioned earlier, visiting India has always been my dream. I had long ago decided that if I could visit only one city in India my first choice would be Jaipur. Located in the state of Rajasthan (meaning the 'land of great kings'), Jaipur (AKA the 'Pink City') was founded in 1727 by Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II. Jaipur is known for its palaces and forts as well as its rugs, clothing and jewelry.

A two-hour flight brought us from Kolkata to Jaipur. Though Jaipur traffic is not quite as chaotic and congested as Kolkata's (but still formidable by Western standards), Jaipur adds elephants, camels, and oxen to the traffic mix. Large animals in traffic became such a common sight I reached the point where I wouldn't have been surprised to see a giraffe walk down the street carrying three Jehovah Witnesses and a parrot speaking Hindi with a Swedish accent.

An online Quora friend in India wrote, "Now as you have enjoyed the Bengali traditions, be ready to get the Royal treatment in the Land of Kings in Jaipur." Well, the "Land of kings" indeed! Our hotel room even had a marble fountain built into the bedroom floor! We had breakfast by the pool each morning to the sound of birds and sitar music. And how about this party-sized bathroom! ;-)



The first morning we took a walk around our new neighborhood. We didn't pass many people on the street but we did see some incredible architecture in the local homes. We purchased drinks and snacks from local shops and Judy found a shop where she purchased a beautiful long kurta (tunic) for 1100 rupees (about \$17.00) which included custom alterations by the shop owner (!). It was done and ready to be picked up about an hour later.

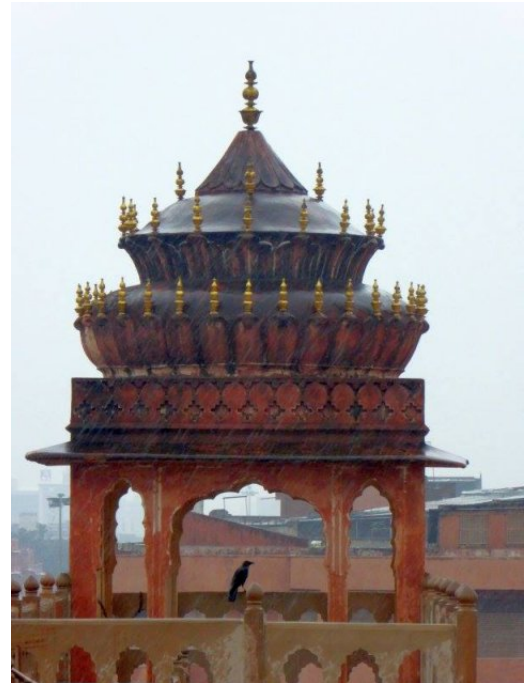
In Jaipur, we mostly traveled around by private car. You can rent a car and driver for about 800 rupees (\$13.00) for 4 hours or 1400 rupees for 8 hours. We had a few favorite drivers who made it a point to show us photographic opportunities and turned us on to the best places to shop and to eat.

It was also in Jaipur that we first tried riding in a tuk-tuk (auto-rickshaw). This is a three-wheeled vehicle which really puts you right in the traffic. It's a much louder ride... you have to practically yell to the driver... but, because it's an open vehicle, you can take pictures unencumbered by glass windows. Tuk-tuks are also much cheaper. We had one really awesome tuk-tuk driver for 10 hours (!) at a cost of 500 rupees (\$8.00).

We were warned that "public displays of affection" are not acceptable in India, but I saw lots of young couples holding hands or walking with an arm around one another. Judy and I are big hand-holders. We do it without even a thought. We went ahead and held hands in India. No disrespect meant. This is who we are. We did refrain from making out in the back of a tuk-tuk in the middle of traffic. ;-)



Hawa Mahal: Royal ladies would watch festivals and processions behind windows in this palace facade designed in the shape of Lord Krishna's crown.



The **Hawa Mahal** is breathtaking. Centuries ago, royal ladies would watch festivals and processions unseen behind its windows. The Hawa Mahal looks like a palace but it is actually a facade. Behind it are ramps to access the upper levels. Visitors are allowed passage behind Hawa Mahal.





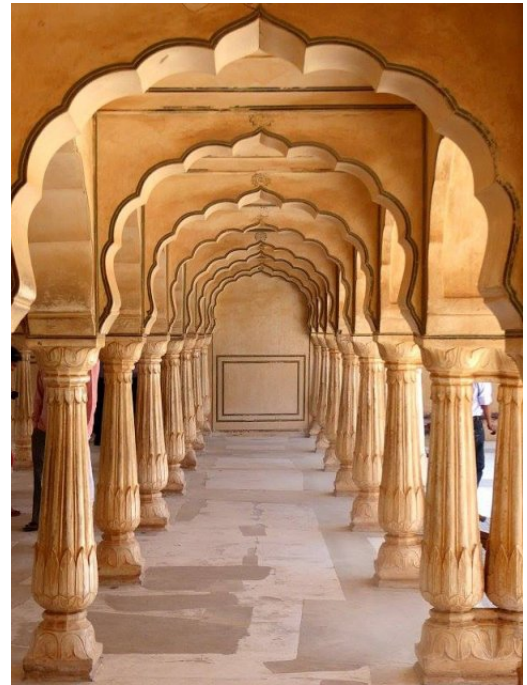
Amber Fort



Amber Palace

Amber Fort was one of our favorite visits. It was the maharaja's summer palace. It looks quite rustic from the outside but is most beautiful on the inside...

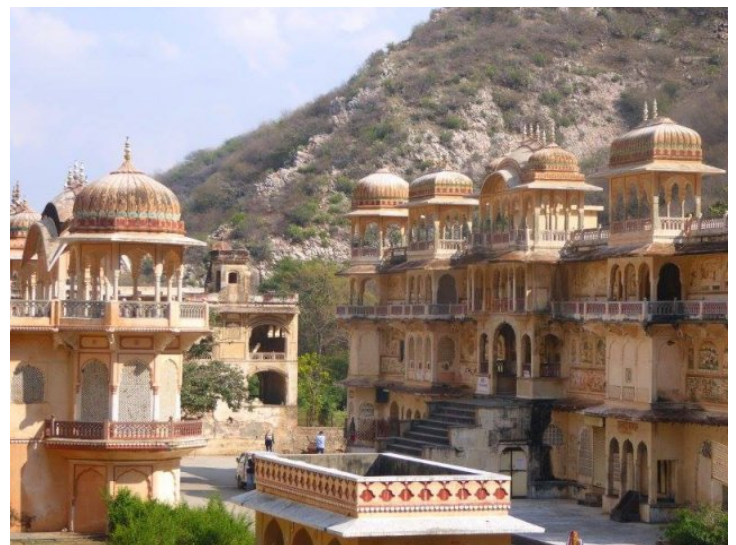
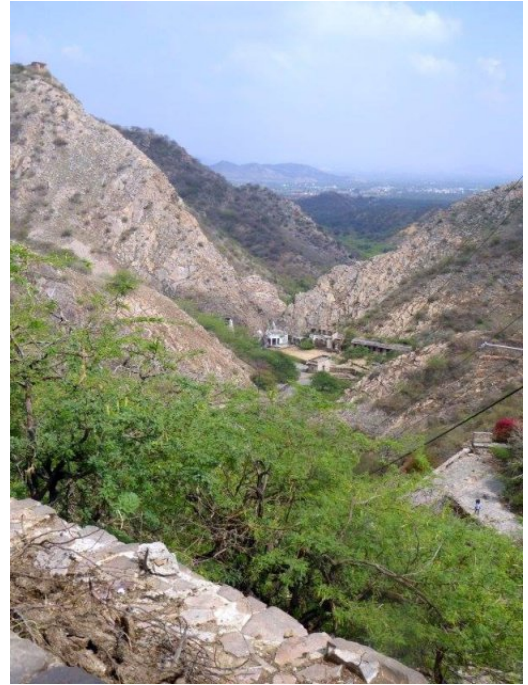


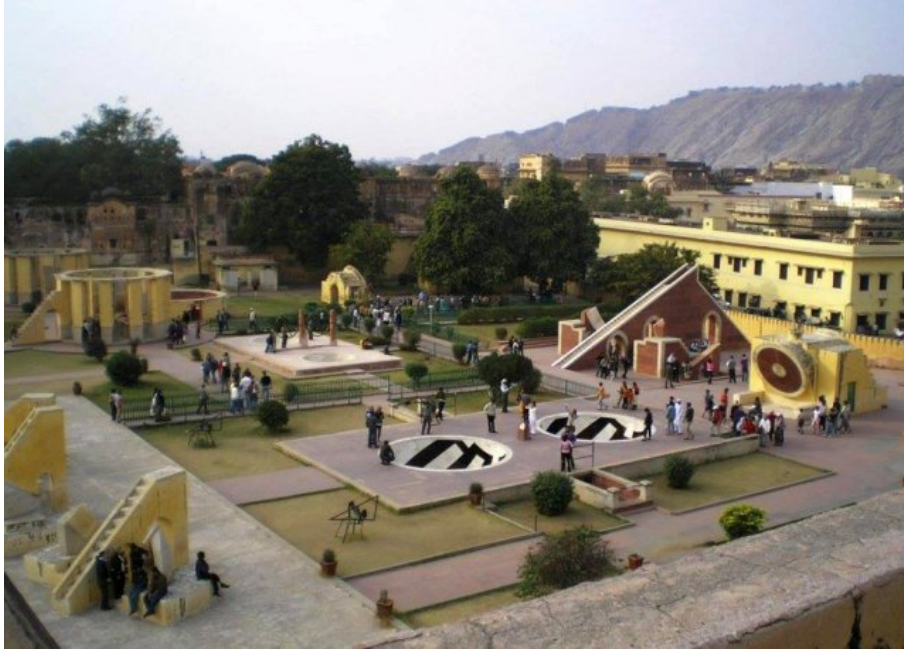


One of the most impressive features of the Amber Fort is the **Hall of Mirrors**, which served as the maharaja's audience chamber...



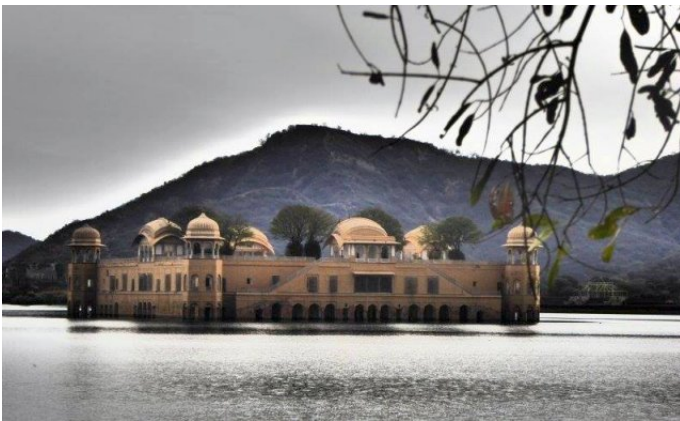
Climb a steep mountain foot road on the outskirts of Jaipur and then down the other side to get to the **Monkey Temple**. Built to honor the Hindu monkey god, you'll pass hundreds of wild monkeys along the way...



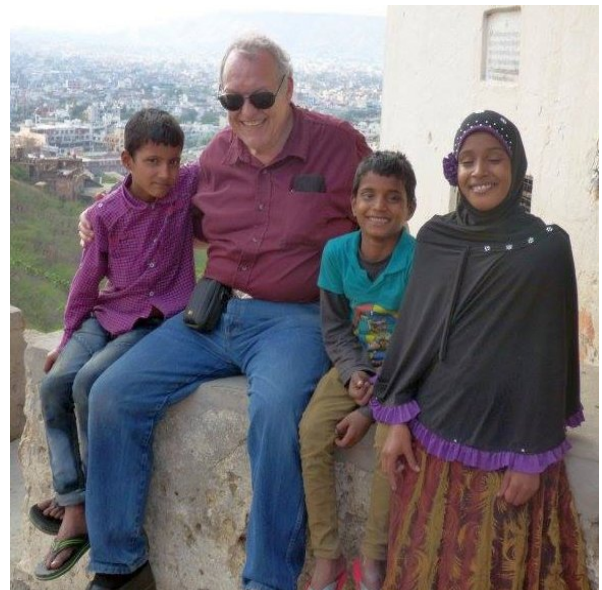
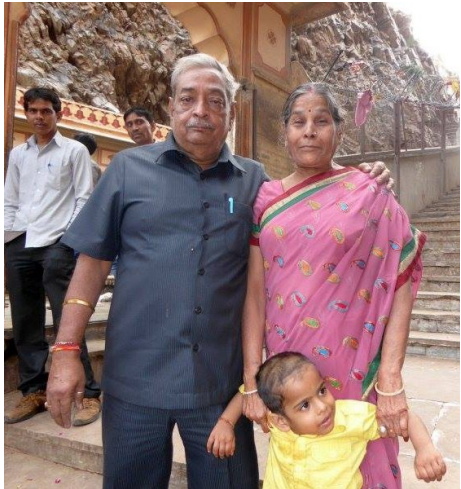


Jantar Mantar (above) was one of five built by Jai Singh II, who had a passion for astronomy. This one in Jaipur is the largest and best preserved. It consists of 20 structures which are actually fixed instruments for observing and calculating astronomical phenomena.

Jal Mahal ('Water Palace') pictured below, was built in the middle of Man Sagar Lake. It was a palace with no chambers but a pavilion with a terrace garden. Its original purpose is unclear and undocumented. At the bottom is a rare shot I found of *inside* the Jal Mahal.



At many of these tourist sites, we were the only non-Indian tourists visiting. One of the interesting things we observed about Indians was that so many loved to have their pictures taken. We were often approached by Indians who asked us to take their picture. (Bear in mind that the picture would be taken with *our* camera) Sometimes they wanted us to pose with them and sometimes they didn't. Sometimes one of them had a cell phone camera to take their own pictures but not very often. It was a strange thing but it led to us meeting and talking with some very nice adults, teens and children.





At **Handicraft Haveli**, Judy and I jammed on a huge drum and drew an appreciative audience. Then Judy got to play a transverse flute. This salesman asked me if I played guitar and handed me his. I played a few instrumentals for him while he recorded it on his smartphone. Before we left the store, he gave us a gift of a small statue of the favorite Hindu god, Ganesh, who symbolizes good fortune and prosperity.

While in Jaipur, we contracted a driver to take us to the town of Abhaneri (60 miles away) to see the **Chand Baori** and its nearby **Harshat Mata Temple**. The Chand Baori ('deep well') was constructed in 800 AD. It is made up of 3500 steps descending 13 stories below ground.

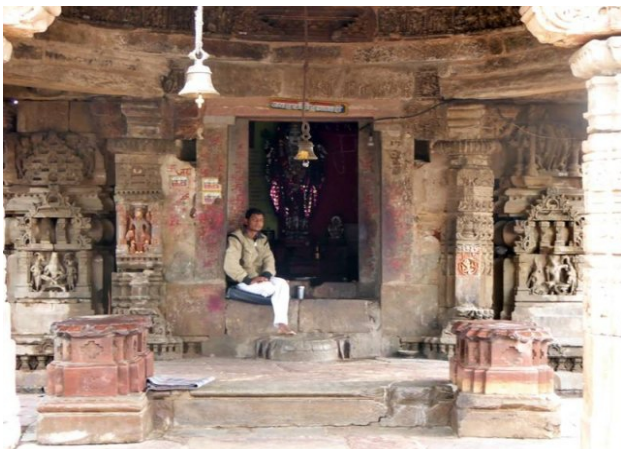


The Chand Baori was used to collect precious rainwater and also as a community gathering place since the temperatures at the bottom of the well were 5 to 6 degrees cooler than at the top.



I've added this second photo because it is impossible to grasp the sheer size of this well. Bear in mind that these are stairs large enough for people to have walked on!

Next door to Chand Baori is the Marshat Mata Temple. The priest of that modest temple was among our favorites. Goats walked free all over this temple as well as the town of Abhaneri!



A few more interesting observations about India...

1. I found one brand of beer: "Kingfisher".

We found only one brand of wine: "Sula" ...but it comes in two flavors: Red and white!
An internet search says that they have more brands but we never saw anything but Sula served.

Feel like a soda/pop/tonic for the taste of home? They have both kinds: Coke and Diet Coke. :-/

Alcoholic beverages are expensive in India. At one restaurant, the charge for glass of wine was the same as the charge for both of our full dinners (\$4.50 U.S.)! When we settled the bill for our 6 day stay in Jaipur, the charge for ALL of our meals, bottles of water, afternoon masala chai, AND washing our laundry was the same as the charge for five 350ml (half-sized) bottles of wine and two beers (\$90. U.S.).

2. At restaurants, the **man** is handed a menu first. His order is taken first. His meal is put down in front of him first. The **man** is asked how the food is. Make no mistake, the woman is treated like a queen... but it's clear who they consider king. It's a subtle, but awkward, cultural shift.

It was in Jaipur that we first shopped at an outdoor bazaar. What a blast! Both tourists and locals shop at these bazaars. Prices are pretty much set for tourists but, if you haggle, it pretty much becomes a game...

Shopowner: "Sir, let me show you a nice wool scarf. Feel how incredibly soft this is. Only 4500 rupees (\$72.00)"

Rick: "No thank you. I don't need a scarf."

S: "For you, Sir, 4200. rupees!"

R: "I don't need a scarf."

S: "Sir, how much would you be willing to pay for a scarf like this?"

R: "1000. rupees."

S: (laughing) "Sir, I couldn't sell a scarf like this for so little!"

R: (laughing) "That's okay. I don't need a scarf. I don't even wear scarves!"

S: "I tell you what, Sir, I will sell you this scarf for 4000 rupees."

R: "No, thank you."

S: "Sir, let's compromise. How much is this scarf worth to you?"

R: "1000 rupees."

After 10 more minutes of this, Rick leaves with an awesome woolen scarf (which I really did want) for 1000 rupees (\$15.00)

I got a 2500 rupee calf-length cotton kurta for 1000 rupees, a pair of 3800 rupee camel skin slippers for 1400 rupees (\$22.00) and, of course, a 1900 rupee drum for 650 rupees (\$9.75). Indians expect to haggle. They make a game of it and have fun playing it. As long as you're willing to walk away, you can get some real bargains. I bought a good supply of Assam tea and some fresh cardamom for my homemade masala chai for a fraction of what I pay in the U.S..

The funny side if this is that every shop owner tries to get you to look at his goods. Some are quite aggressive about it but most approach it with humor. If you sit and look at what he has to sell he'll often offer you some masala chai. (In the U.S., we say "chai tea", which literally means "tea tea". Spiced tea is "masala chai".) A few shop owners even offered me a beer!

On one occasion, I accepted a beer. They brought me a tall can of cold beer with a paper towel wrapped

around the can to disguise its contents. When I finished the beer I removed the label. It was a Kingfisher beer, of course!

Judy got similar good deals by being willing to walk away from any purchase.

In two hours time we didn't even get more than one city block away (!) but shopping at these bazaars was a lot of fun.



Each column you see in the photo above marks a different shop. Now imagine *miles* of outdoor shops like this! The photo below is of just one of these shops.



Most (but not all) Indians are vegetarian. In the cities, you'll find "non-veg" selections, mostly chicken, but sometimes mutton or lamb. Even McDonalds in India limits choices to chicken or paneer (a cheese curd). At Domino's Pizza all pizzas are "personal pan pizza" size and chicken is the only non-veg. topping. Beef and pork are not food choices here.

At one point, I was getting tired of typical Indian dishes with the heavy sauces. I needed a change of pace. We ordered pizza at our hotel restaurant. Big mistake. They ordered it from Domino's. It arrived about an hour and a half later... and was about 10 inches wide... the only size they make... and it had this white stuff on it they called "liquid cheese"... except it tasted nothing like cheese... more like a thin white sauce... fortunately it was only a 10 inch pizza.

During our trip to Abhaneri, we stopped for lunch at a small town restaurant. In small towns and villages most of the restaurants are vegetarian. I'm a dedicated carnivore, but still I managed to find a dish with noodles and mushrooms and a sauce that was delicious.

It was hard to leave Jaipur and the Jas Vilas Hotel. I loved our room and breakfast by the pool and my afternoon pots of masala chai. I'll always remember the guard at the gate who saluted me every morning. He never understood a single word I said but we genuinely liked one another. Maybe it was because we both had the same huge grin, straight from the heart. Some things you just can't fake.

DELHI

I made the following entry on my Facebook page, *"It is 12:50 AM. Judy is fast asleep. A driver will pick us up at 2 AM to bring us to the train station. Our super-fast express train leaves at 2:50 AM for Delhi. (With 25 million people, Delhi is the world's 2nd most populous city! Tokyo is #1.) We expect to reach Delhi at around 8 AM."*

I woke Judy and we checked out of our hotel and headed to the train station by car. The train station was confusing as there wasn't much in the way of information and the information desk is closed at that hour. One of the railway workers got us to our train car and helped us with our luggage. We now had four major bags. We had bought so many clothes that our three checked bags wouldn't be enough so we bought an extra bag before leaving Jaipur.

I was lucky enough to get this shot of the sunrise from the window of our train car...



Once in Delhi, we hired a car to take us to our hotel. Delhi traffic made Kolkata look like a small, peaceful village. We thought we had gotten used to India's traffic. Delhi held some surprises for us.

In Delhi, when traffic gets backed up, motor scooters and motorcycles just drive right onto the sidewalks and blast right through the pedestrians! We have seen as many as six motorcycles in a row do this! Pedestrians just calmly move out of their way and then go about their business.

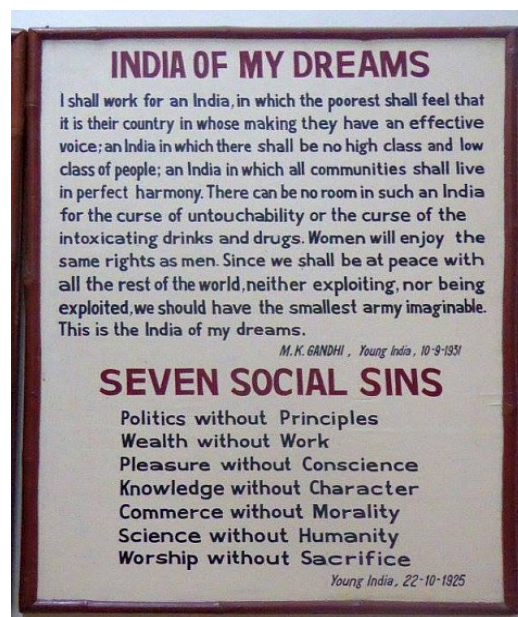
Our hotel in New Delhi was beautiful. Smaller than our hotel room in Jaipur, the Hotel City Star was very modern. All glass and stainless steel and marble. It is the first hotel I've ever seen that had art on the walls that I would actually buy... Not the cheesy art we've come to expect in U.S. hotels and motels.

Anxious to see New Delhi, we decided to go out for a morning walk. The street was pretty crowded. A gentleman approached us and told us that it was dangerous to walk on this street... too many dishonest people on alcohol or drugs who might rob you. We explained that we were just looking for an ATM nearby. He insisted that we would be smarter to hire a tuk-tuk to bring us to one.

We wondered if *he* was scamming us! By the time we reached the next corner, *another* guy approached us with the same warning! He waved down a tuk-tuk for us and off we went. When we got back to our hotel, I asked a hotel manager about the safety of walking on the street. We got the same warning from him. You don't take walks in Delhi. Tell the hotel staff where you need to go and we'll hire you a car or a tuk-tuk. We'll negotiate the price and take down the driver's information before you leave.

I was crushed. Exploring India had been such an awesome experience. I had met so many nice people during my walks. Delhi was India with crime? Delhi was unsafe India? One cab driver explained to us that lots of people come to Delhi from other states looking for work. He said that, because they are not from Delhi, they don't feel the same pride and ownership they feel toward their own home states and towns. As a result, some behave in Delhi in dishonest ways which they wouldn't at home. The people who warned us were *from* Delhi. We adjusted and used cars and tuk-tuks to get around.

We had a great time in spite of this. I've been an admirer of Mahatma Gandhi for most of my life. We visited the National Mahatma Gandhi Museum one afternoon.



For me, the museum visit triggered many memories from my 2 year Independent Study project in undergraduate school. I remembered many of his quotes and speeches and read many more for the first time. It also triggered many emotions, especially surrounding Gandhi's assassination.

Our tuk-tuk driver recommended a restaurant which served Indian and Chinese food. I ordered a Chinese dish involving crispy noodles, chicken, vegetables and a sauce. When I told Judy that it was my favorite meal yet, she laughed at the fact that I had come all the way to India and my favorite meal was Chinese!

Well, I liked it *so* much that I insisted we return there before heading home!

(I still love Indian food. I love New Mexican food, too, but you won't see me eating it every meal, every day for weeks!)

One thing I had found online in Delhi that I knew Judy would love was "Mystery Rooms". They lock you in a room for one hour. Your mission is: 1.) to find the bomb in the room and 2.) to diffuse it. Judy loves solving puzzles and mysteries. We made a reservation for the two of us.

They brought us into this room and closed the door. When the door closed, the lights went very dim in the room. "Hey! The light went out!" called Judy. The guy opened the door and said, "That's part of the mystery. You have to figure that out!" and closed the door again.

LOL

We wasted at least 10 or 15 minutes just getting the light back on. At one point I flipped a switch I wasn't supposed to and the room went completely dark... even the TV monitor went dead! The guy had to come back into the room and straighten it out.

It was uphill from there. We found clues and figured them out. We found keys and opened locks. We solved puzzles. Just before we found the bomb, a voice recording came on announcing that we had 10 seconds before the bomb exploded... 9... 8... 7...

Judy said, "If we're going to go, we'll go in each other's arms." We held one another, laughing.

BOOM! Went the recording. Out came a puff of stinky smoke.

We were toast.

The guy came back in and showed us the answers to the puzzles we hadn't yet solved. I suggested he stock T-shirts that said, "I DIED IN DELHI"

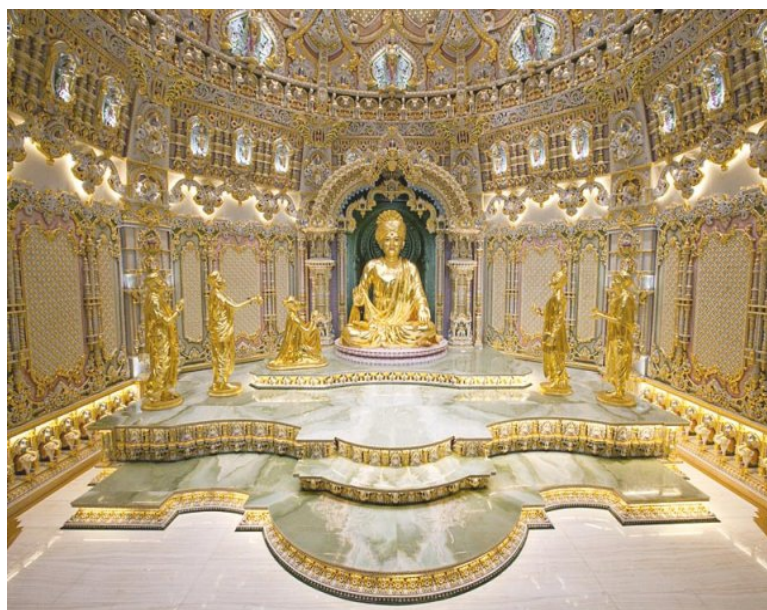
It was fun.

I got a Facebook message from our friend Ashok Nalamalapu in Maine. He strongly suggested we visit the Akshardham Temple while we were in Delhi. I looked it up online. It looked pretty impressive so we planned to go. We called Satish, our favorite driver in Delhi, and arranged for tuk-tuk transportation for the day.

When we got to a spot on the road where you could see the Akshardham Temple, Satish stopped the

which resulted in the deaths of 33 people and injury to 80 others. These security measures in Delhi were clearly implemented as a result.

Once inside the grounds, the temple was worth the wait. I have borrowed photos from the internet to illustrate. For the best look at this amazing temple without the plane fare, watch the YouTube video at <https://youtu.be/69PIMDGv4Bg>



When we first flew to India, we left on a Wednesday and arrived in Kolkata on Friday. Thanks to the mystery of time zone crossing, when we returned home we left Delhi on Saturday morning and got home on Saturday night... despite the fact that it took us 33 or 34 hours to get there!

I wouldn't have traded one bit of this trip. My walks in Kolkata, the wedding, the Gandhi Museum, Akshardham Temple and everything about Jaipur was all so memorable. We each bought lots of Indian clothing because it's so beautiful and comfortable. (Fortunately, any ethnic clothing will fit right in in Santa Fe!)

On March 22, I posted the following thoughts to my Facebook page...

"A more serious observation about India:

(If I over-simplify this, I apologize. It is important to communicate it to friends who are non-history buffs)

Mahatma Gandhi respected all religions as equals. When India was at the threshold of gaining independence, Muslim political leader Muhammad Ali Jinnah insisted that Indian Muslims should have their own state. Jinnah threatened to withdraw Muslim support for independence unless the Muslims could carve out their own exclusive country, which we know today as Pakistan.

Gandhi hated this idea because he hated the idea of separating people by religions. He had fought against India's caste system for similar reasons. But he was not willing to sacrifice India's hard-fought chance at independence from British rule. He agreed to Jinnah's demand.

When independence came, all hell broke loose. Hindus leaving their homes in what was now Pakistan were attacked by Muslims. Muslims leaving their homes in independent India were attacked by Hindus. Gandhi was horrified. Muslims were convinced that Gandhi was pro-Hindu while many Hindus saw Gandhi as pro-Muslim! It was why he was assassinated by a fellow Hindu. Many British smugly laughed at India... to have won independence and then squander it fighting among themselves. Instead of being proud that India had finally achieved independence, Gandhi went to his death ashamed that his countrymen responded to independence with hatred and intolerance.

Now here's the observation: Throughout India, every sect of Hindu, Muslim and Christian seems to get along beautifully. Some inter-marry. All work side by side. Christians in India do not teach that the Christian way is the ONLY way. That idea strikes them as arrogant and hateful toward one's fellow man. Their Christ never excluded anyone.

Though India is 80% Hindu, there are more Muslim mosques in India than any country in the world. In today's India, ALL religions are honored and respected.

THIS is the India that Gandhi envisioned."

Make no mistake... There is garbage. There is poverty. There is pollution. There is corruption. There is chaos. 1/6th of the world's population is crammed into an area about 1/3 the size of the continental United States. But there is also deep spirituality and humanity which directs daily life. There is economic and technological progress. There is one of the oldest civilizations on this earth. There are some of the warmest and most heartfelt people I have had the pleasure to meet. There is a culture that finds every excuse to celebrate with joy. Stepping into India, one is bombarded with sounds and colors. Every form of art is everywhere. There is a beauty that will stay in my heart as long as I live.

While in India, I enjoyed taking candid pictures of people, especially those who were traditionally dressed. My Facebook friends saw many dozens of these. I've greatly reduced the size and resolution, but I'll end this by posting some of my favorites...







