

Thursday 13th October: Delhi

My brain is in a whirl. We arrived at Heathrow too early – my fault. That didn't help my anxiety about the flight – and a bigger plane than I've ever taken – how does it get up into the air – answer: with a fair few drops of Rescue Remedy. Flying with Jet Airways was great – with turbaned attendants and the girls in saffron tunics and a quite acceptable curry supper. The eight hours was pretty dire – dreadful restless legs!! George met us and whisked us through the diplomatic channel – wondrous! Shame we had to wait an age for our hold luggage. George amazed at our ONE piece of cabin baggage, well within baggage limit for one.

The drive from station became a tad alarming as we travelled into Delhi, George's driver Rishi not imitating the other drivers with excessive horn blowing. G explained horn in UK = "You bastard you cut me up". In Delhi = "I'm coming, get out of my way or I'll take off your wing mirrors if you have any left". The other weird thing was motor bikes and scooters with women in saris riding side-saddle on the pillion, man in crash helmet (that's now the law) and woman without! Finally, plenty of taxis – 1930's looking Indian-manufactured Ambassadors, and motorised tuk-tuks (half the taxi price) George told us the meter would regularly be covered as if out of order but would invariably recover when requested politely and firmly!

So we have walked in the heat across the road and through the Todi Gardens just opposite George's place – beautiful 12 C 14C tombs and a Mosque in wonderful green parkland. Then on to Kahn Market where we had a bite to eat and then were picked up by Rishi to do a tour of the impressive city centre: the wide open spaces with grand buildings, once the showcase of the British Empire, now occupied by the president, ministers and civil servants. Also, the processional avenue leading to India Gate. But most surprising was the greenness of much of the city.

Monday

Today we've had a lazy-ish day, much needed after a hectic few days which words could never justify. My head is awash with powerful images and my emotions see-saw dramatically. We've seen so much and the business of Delhi has been superseded by the greater craziness of a weekend in Jodhpur. We took the overnight sleeper. Although we were in the luxury first class accommodation it was all a bit Spartan but that first evening was just splendid. Our companion, found sitting cross-legged in the 4 person compartment, Dinesh,



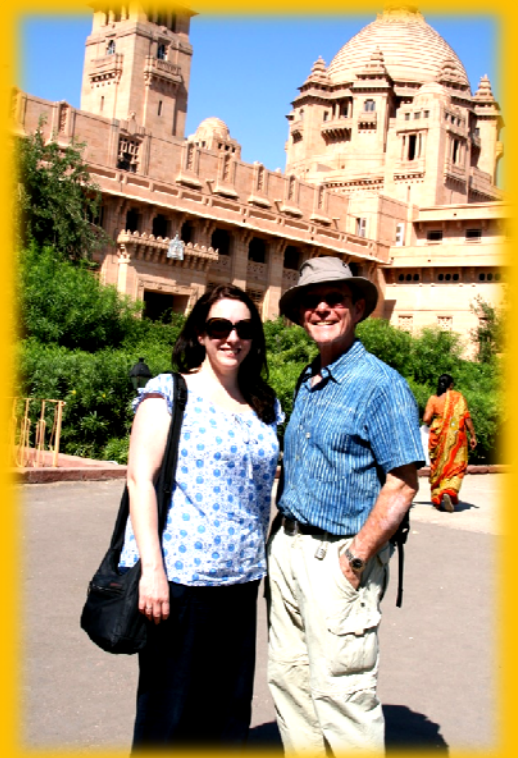
was a business man who dealt in pumps and consequently talked the same language as Nick. We shared his pic-nic and his whisky (strictly forbidden on trains) **and** served with ice! We finally said our farewells after a noisy, rocky night and had our first experience of a busy, chaotic Indian station with porters and drivers desperate for business. Hundreds of people, sitting, lying, around looking as if they were there for the long haul. A veritable cacophony of mind-blowing images! Our tuk-tuk driver was there to whisk us to our hotel up in the old city a real colourful ethnic mix of colour. I'd always thought French bathroom facilities a tad basic but this was different again! Our room was so colourful – turquoise walls and most of the furniture painted. In fact the entire hotel was awash with colourful ethnic paintings and our room, high up, reached by dozens of steep steps (and I thought Canal Walk was challenging!) Driving through the city which had hardly woken up was a real eye-opener - lots of wandering beasts, mostly cows and dogs (we saw herds of goats, many horse-drawn vehicles, a couple of camels, a pig, and an elephant in the streets over the weekend) And lots of dust and dirt and rubble between the houses.



I just don't have time to share the amazing images but we really had an awesome weekend and thank George so much – she gave up the entire weekend for us and demonstrated skills in dealing with errant drivers and the never-ending demands we go to this, that shop,

market stall, whatever. She bargained brilliantly for a tuk-tuk driver for the day – chosen for his dyed red hair – but we became increasingly concerned by the scent of his roll-up and the glazed look in his eyes! The evening ended with

Nick, unable to raise him after the concert at the fort. So after noisy deliberations with other drivers over



the situation we gave him what we thought was a reasonable amount in the circumstances and were whisked down into town by another. We visited the Maharaja's Palace – a beautiful building and paid our dues to do the tourist bit and were a tad disappointed not to see more of the building. George, ignoring our driver's frantic gestures, marched us up to the gates of the 'out of bounds' luxury 'hundreds of pounds a night' hotel and pulls the diplomatic card and, I think, surprises herself by being ushered through the gates and up to the grand hotel where we were escorted around and able to really appreciate the beauty and opulence of the place, as well as the splendid grounds beyond.

Then, in the evening after a meal a-top a hotel watching the sun go down and the city light up, we were driven up to the beautiful flood-lit fort where the cultured of the region were gathered under the stars to enjoy the music and dance of Rajasthan. All just magical! The dancer dressed in the costume of the area was exquisite – I could see a connection with flamenco with the rhythmic stamping though the bells around her ankles was quite unlike, as were the bare feet. Then there was an amazing amount of shimmying with more jingles on her bodice called into play. Add to that the amazing, expressive Indian hand movements... and the upright classical posture... and the interpretation of the music.



And more excitement next day which was incredibly hot – this is virtual desert - the most important, another visit to the fort in daylight this time with an atmospheric and informative audio guide as we moved up the fort. There was so much to impress – the great door at right angles to the slope (elephants can't charge and maintain momentum turning at 90 degrees) – the handprints of the M's wives in the wall before they silently and with courage joined his body on the funeral pyre! A memorable image as we enjoyed an ice coffee was of a beautiful young woman in a vibrant sari loading soil into a truck. A brief visit

was made to the lovely white marble mausoleum was foreshortened as the heat was so extreme and we spent the afternoon languishing with fresh lime soda and whatever before heading towards the station and supper before boarding the train back to Delhi.

No wonder we have welcomed a quieter day – I've worked out that I've barely consumed one twentieth of the water. All I've done is visit the market with Therese – chicken live at the

butcher and I was relieved not to see one being dispatched. The veg and fruit in the market is all wonderfully fresh with most of what we have at home and lots more exotic amazing things. What appeared like a lime here is an orange inside! I've watched Thersa prepare the curry for tonight: one chicken, one paneer and veg, one aubergine and hopefully I've learned how to make a decent chapatti!

Tomorrow we head for the tiger reserve and on to Agra and the Taj Mahal on Friday.

Sunday (back in Delhi)

Further myriad impressions of this amazing country – and this will be our final full day. We arrived back in Delhi shortly before two yesterday and basically chilled, caught up with computer things, like downloading pictures and booking accommodation for Sri Lanka, skyped Emm, ate simple in apartment.

So in the morning, Rishi took us to station and we managed to find our accommodation on train – simple but comfortable. For several hours till sunset we watched one part of the Indian subcontinent pass by, initially farmed, but slowly changing to desert and farm with occasional dramatic rocky outcrops. There were regular patrols up and down selling coffee/chai/chips. Along the route we were joined by other European travellers, including a large UK contingent lead by an Australian and were even offered a banana from their snack, much appreciated as we were getting hungry. We arrived in Sawai Madipore around six and were met by a driver from our amazing safari style jungle hotel, greeted by a warm damp towel to refresh ourselves and a bindi on our forehead – a Hindi custom. At our feet, a large bowl of vibrantly coloured flowers. We stayed in the hotel – for more rupees you could have a tent, for more, a small cottage, all with lovely views. Supper was Indian – rice, and a selection of Indian dishes, served buffet-style above burning coals with subdued and serious young men in colourful tunics serving delicious Indian breads. Then the camp fire under a totally unpolluted starry sky, chatting to other guests. Just magical! Nobody told us of the croc in the pond just feet away! We were told to stay on paths close to hotel at night unless we had an escort – a leopard had once been spotted on site! We could not stay long as our safari was booked for 6.30.am.

It was cool in the morning and the blankets offered for the first part of the rocky ride were much appreciated. Down the road. past camel trucks, stray dogs, goats and cattle and roads lined with lowly, dusty homes where water had to be carried from the nearest pump. From many directions trucks and jeeps arrived at the park gates to be allocated an area for the duration. Then we were off, stopping briefly for monkey viewing and croc spotting, then spotted deer (2 kinds here and plentiful –food for tigers, I guess) The terrain was quite varied, rocky forest, low lying lakes with wild fowl and water lotus (exquisite!) Then forest again and



whooh! – a huge female tigress, an old lady, well past breeding and particularly long-lived, and obviously replete lying in the shade, behind some undergrowth. We stopped and watched for up to an hour as other vehicles arrived and tourists clambered and contorted themselves to get a shot. (the poem, ‘We are Going to see the Rabbit’ came to mind!) There were gasps as she move a paw, lifted her head or changed position. The trucks were moved to allow her to cross the track when she moved, but no luck there – she finally heaved herself up and moved slowly away, further into the forest and our jeep lead the dusty, rocky way back as our allotted time in the park was approaching. I wondered if an Australian lady on the third and final Safari of her stay had been as lucky: she had not!

After a late and much appreciated breakfast, a lazy time and then a 3 course lunch (fruit and salads grown on site, colourful and delicious) we set off with a guide to the fort, part ruin and really impressive, set 750 feet up and over 1000 years old. From the banyan tree with several families of monkeys (babies swinging from mum’s tail, trapeze-like) we passed the gate into the outer wall and climbed upwards thro’ three more walled (at right angles again to forestall elephant charge) to the vast space atop with palaces, temples, tombs, lakes (one for him and one for her) and at the top a temple surrounded by hoards of monkeys where many Hindus come to pray, that day many groups of young men praying for beautiful wives (arranged) and wealth. The views over the park and lakes were really worth the climb. (150 steps, steep steps!) Back again to the hotel, soon dark and time for more starry skies and camp fires.

Thursday, extremely lazy, much appreciated, reading Pavan Varma’s ‘Being Indian’, a fascinating and illuminating read about India and its soon to be 1 in 7 of world’s population with many, many millionaires and many thousands more, poor. A point made is that India is far from its reputation as a place of ashrams and a spiritual place but a really pro-active wealth-seeking nation. Hindus seem to be able to withstand poverty and believe that with

alms, prayers **will** have results; they are also huge players of the National and Local lotteries and with added prayers they will win! I feel a bit of a cynic!!

After our lunch, the cuisine Italian (the previous day Middle Eastern) we were packed and ready for the off, back to the train. This time we had 2 berths in the sleeper section of the train with option of sitting or lying and were the only Europeans. Most of the journey to Agra was in the dark and most of our fellow travellers enjoyed a full meal from the catering carriage. I tried not to think of the over-packed carriages at the other end of the train, the hungry eyes looking out of bars, making it appear as if they were prisoners.

We arrived in Agra late and there was Richie but quelle disaster – the Taj not open on Friday – how did we not know! So our weekend arrangement blown and we negotiated with Rishie and the Imperial Hotel for another night.

So Friday we travelled to Fatephur Sikri (16 C) and the open Mosque, flanked by arched cloisters and within the marble tomb of a Sufi mystic, Salim Christi, where people make wishes and pray for a miracle after tying a cotton thread on a screen around the tomb, overtopped with a mother-of pearl canopy. We were escorted around by an insistent guide, a bit 'in your face' and did our first effort at bargaining for a small, carved, hollow, marble elephant with inner baby elephant: asking price 1000 rupees, final price 450 and could have had two for 700! Did we do well? Who knows!



Following this, Rishi took us onwards to the Keoladeo Ghana National Park where we hired a naturalist and cycle rickshaw into a quiet world where we saw owls, a crested serpent eagle (rare and stately), an impressive snake bird (named for its snake-like neck) its wings outstretched, drying (it submerges completely when it fishes). Then the impressive colonies of painted storks in wetlands, particularly impressive

- i) the parents, wings outstretched, protecting babes from sun
- ii) three fluffy youngsters in treetops and

iii) the adult flying, with dramatic black tipped wings.

A final nice touch, the driver put some dry seeds in my hands and indicated I should put some precious water in my palm. They exploded like bombs, leaping from my hand! We spent £25 for the two hours, really worthwhile. The naturalist explained that both he and cyclist participate in a lottery every morning for clients and work and if they have high no. , will in all probability not work on that day. We tipped both, equally, a 30% above cost but afterwards felt bad about how little our lean and hungry looking 'biker' earned when we considered this might be his only earnings for a few days; the naturalist cost five times as much as biker. And would the naturalist have been insulted if we



had doubled or quadrupled the bikers tip? Thinking about all this blows your mind and loses you sleep. By this time it was extremely hot and we asked Rishie to return us to The Imperial where we had been upgraded to a Raj style suite (clearly business is slow!) – all very grand with 4 poster and sitting area. In the evening as we walked down stairs there was an 11 year old boy, dancing with his father (both dressed in handsome ethnic garb) playing a primitive type sitar, the boy's flirtatious movements and facial expressions amazing! We gathered this was a form of up-market begging - you get nothing without paying here! Did that delightful child have an option? With dinner, an excellent father and son team played music but, when we showed appreciation they assumed we would shell out for a video and when we said no we

felt we had insulted them – well, at least I did!



A 5.00am call on Saturday, followed by a tea tray with no tea bag in tea pot (that's India) and we were at the Taj by 6.15am. The gates opened at 6.30 but it was gone 7.00 by the time we had tickets and were frisked and through the outer courtyards and faced with the Taj Mahal in its splendour. The emerald

green geometric gardens and jasmine bushes enhance the effect. The Taj "a prayer, a vision, a dream, a poem, a wonder" – all correct! The suggestion of pearl whiteness changes as you

walk towards it; you first notice the pietra dura, intricate, stylised floral designs in precious stones, the red carnelian, particularly clear, the lapis lazuli, turquoise and malachite less so. As you get closer you see the calligraphy of verses from the Koran and the carved relief work, all symbolizing the paradise theme. There were upward of 20,000 workers who laboured for 22 years; it cost 41 million rupees and 500 kilos of gold and was completed in 1653. Truly, truly a 7th Wonder!

By 10.30. we had walked the kilometre back to the car and started the 5-hour drive back to Delhi, the first half hour getting out of Agra, the final two getting into Delhi! And the rest of Saturday and all today, blissful nothing much but catching up. We Skype'd Emm yesterday – they were just off to Swanage. We walked in the Lodhi Gardens early this morning in the cool where many Indians were doing some serious arm swinging, walking. There were a few isolated yoga practitioners and a group of energetic yoga bodies, serious arm swinging going on there. As we didn't want to awaken George we went for coffee and a light bite, again in beautiful, restful surroundings. We chatted to the Canadian 'consultant chef' – an engaging chap who had just taken up appointment, his parents living in Thailand. George well up and active on our return and seemingly happy to 'chill' with us at home. Skyped with Inge-Marie and Hans – amazing. It seems they leave as we arrive and that we have fellow guests at their's – some artists from Bali. Hopefully they will advise us about accommodation and particular places to stop when we go there. Lucky us! Starting to sort our things for tomorrow's departure, and taking George out this evening.