

# Journey To Mayapur

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Ronnie and I arrived in Delhi around 1:00am local time, groggy from 14 hours of travel. With luggage in tow, we made our way to the line of taxis parked just outside the front doors. Keen competitors, several “fixers” were plying freshly arrived travelers like ourselves to match them up with drivers of their individual fleets.

“Very quick, very safe, best deal!” they assured each and all. Ronnie gave one the name and address of a hotel where he had arranged for our brief overnight stay. Our flight to Kolkata (Calcutta) would take off at 8:00am, and we needed to be at the airport a full hour before that. Before our next boarding, I eagerly looked forward to a hot shower and stretching out horizontally on a real bed, even if only for a few hours’ brief nap.



*Ronnie enters the Delhi Immigration que*

As we pulled away from the airport district into the urban bustle of Delhi, I couldn’t help but wonder why we were passing by one beautiful, Western-style hotel after another, only to keep driving into the dark. “No worries, I get you to hotel pretty quick,” our driver confirmed while rattling off an ongoing commentary about the amazing sights around us. Street lights illuminated palm trees in the medians of four lane highways. When he pulled off into a neighborhood, the scenery quickly changed to one of few lights, narrow streets, and even an occasional oxcart. What kind of hotel were we getting ourselves into, I wondered! Ronnie again told the driver our intended

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*I go through the immigration gauntlet in Delhi*

address. With a little more hesitancy, he again assured us we would be there soon.

An hour passed by as we drove on through the night. It was now nearly 2:30am and we seemed no closer to our hotel than when we began. It was clear that our increasingly flustered driver had no idea where our hotel was. Doing the math, it became obvious that even if we got to our hotel in the next few minutes, we would have precious little time to rest before we would need to board another taxi to get back to the airport on time. A quick conference with Ronnie brought us to the same conclusion. "Turn around, please," Ronnie announced to the driver. "Take us back to the airport. We've changed our mind."

We re-entered the nearly abandoned airport at 3:30 in the morning. Now even more exhausted than we had been on arriving from New York, we set up a camp of sorts in a vacant area of hard, industrial grade seats with our baggage stacked around us and I lay on the floor to try to get some sleep. Like a guardian angel, Ronnie watched over me, granting me an incredible sense of peace and security.



*Sande Hart and other URI delegates greet us in the Delhi airport.*

At 7:00am, we made our way to the boarding gate for our Air India flight to Kolkata. After passing through the gauntlet of checkpoints and armed guards, to my total surprise, I heard someone call my name! Sande Hart, a URI member from Southern California along with several other delegates, hailed Ronnie and me. What a breath of fresh air! We chatted about our adventures so far, and in due time began enjoying the luxurious in-flight services

provided by Air India. Although we were traveling coach, we were treated to real silverware and a delicious Indian luncheon, nothing like the plastic wrapped, minimal fare of our prior flight. If being treated as honored guests like this was to be our fate for the next two weeks, bring it on!

In Kolkata, we were delivered by private car to a local hotel where we met several members of the URI delegation from a variety of countries. Now I was too excited to sleep. We

were really here! A bus collected the dozen or more of us to take us the 70 kilometers north to our destination of Mayapur. Back home, I couldn't understand why two hours were reserved for this 44 mile leg of our trip, but once out in the country it became clear as I had my first introduction to Indian traffic. Our full-sized bus was vying for road space with various other modes of traffic. The two-lane road was host to six lanes of traffic. On each edge of the road were pedestrians toting a child on a hip or a basket of goods on their head. Also on the verges were plodding donkey or ox-drawn carts with produce or people on board. Busy lanes of autos and motorcycles whizzed by in each direction, punctuated by an occasional bus like our own or huge Tata (brand) trucks hauling industrial and commercial goods. The larger vehicles hugged the center of the road, dodging out of the way of oncoming traffic at the last possible minute accompanied by a continuous chatter of horns.

Amazed at the white knuckle chaos, I looked in the mirror at our driver to see no sense of tension or anger in his placid brown eyes. This was obviously normal traffic for him! My tension eased somewhat when I examined the cars and trucks whizzing by and noticed only rarely any evidence of a prior mishap. But then, perhaps those unlucky vehicles were no longer able to be on the road at all. It dawned on me that, unlike the implicit insults conveyed by the honking of horns in the US, in India it was almost an ongoing means of communication among drivers.

True to our schedule, we arrived in the small hamlet of Mayapur two hours after leaving Kolkata. As our bus pulled under a red clay archway onto the campus of Mayapur, a Hare Krishna ashram, a large photo of its founder, His Divine Grace A.C.

Bhaktivedanta Swami, known in the West as Srila Prabhupada, greeted us. Before his death in 1977, he had founded ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) and seen it grow into a worldwide confederation of temples, ashrams and conference center. He had declared Mayapur to be the "Spiritual Center of the World", and predicted that it would someday host



guests from all the continents and many faiths. With this assembly of the United Religions Initiative Global Assembly, his vision had come to fruition.

The beautiful campus had green, lush lawns throughout, with a fountain centerpiece. Yellow and orange chrysanthemums were growing everywhere. Two story red clay buildings spread across the grounds housed offices and classrooms. We were dropped off at the entrance to a three story dormitory which had an incredibly beautiful floral mandala spanning a circle four feet in width. In small, colorful chrysanthemum leaves the display spelled out "URI" within a circle decorated with symbols of the world's many religions. We felt welcomed, indeed.



Our lodgings were utilitarian two-person dormitory rooms with an adjoining bathroom. My new roommate was a young woman from Finland by the name of Lon. Independent, single and very pregnant, she started each day with a yoga routine that could put any Westerner to shame. Having not slept soundly since waking in North Carolina more two days ago, I was incredibly grateful to learn we had nothing more demanding on our schedule before tomorrow than supper later in the day. Not even pausing to unpack, I collapsed onto my welcoming solid twin bed. A shower would have to wait.

But that's another story. (See "Daily Life". )

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