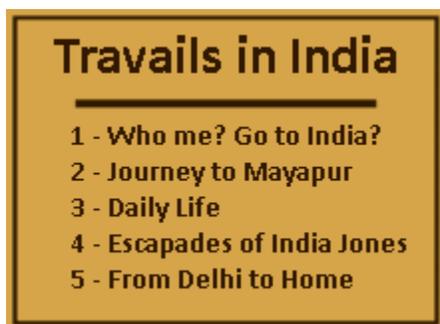


Who me? Go to India?

Sandy McCune Westin



As I put down the phone, a mix of shock and excitement had me a bit shaken. I had just learned that in six months' time I would be in Mayapur, East India. It took some online research to even place it on the map. I found it on the eastern edge of the country, close by the border of Bangladesh near where the Ganges opens onto the Bay of Bengal.

In that call, Mary Page Sims, my friend and interfaith activism mentor, had just encouraged me to accept appointment as one of two delegates to the coming Global Assembly of United Religions Initiative, or URI as it is better known. It was Mary Page who in 2005 had first acquainted me with the worldwide interfaith peacebuilding and collaboration organization. In the three short years since then, I had embraced its mission as my own personal passion and become active in our local Cooperation Circle (CC), or chapter, of URI. Never in my wildest imagination, though, had I ever imagined I would be chosen to represent our local CC at the organization's global gathering.

The very idea sent my mind reeling. Where's my passport? Will I need shots? How do I go about getting a visa? Can I get time off from work for the ten-day trip? And most importantly, how will my husband and I ever be able to afford the estimated \$5,000 cost of the trip?

My fellow traveler on this adventure-of-a-lifetime would be Ronnie Pepper, a good friend and colleague in URI. Ronnie is known not only for his community leadership in URI and as director of the Head Start program, but also as an increasingly accomplished storyteller and actor in our town's little theatre. I was delighted we would be traveling together on this, my

first trip to the far side of the planet. Eleven time zones and a world of cultural differences separate North Carolina from Mayapur, East India, near the borders of Nepal and West Bengal.

In the next few months I devoured every book on the history, geography and many cultures of India I could lay my hands on in our local library. Being a woman not fond of all things that slither, my teeth were set on edge by learning there are no fewer than 270 varieties of snakes in India. "Of these, only 58 are venomous", the book assured me. Yeah, right!

I was amazed to learn that Paleolithic evidence proves the Indian subcontinent has been continuously inhabited for at least 9,000 years. Today more than 1.2 billion (that's with a B!) call India home, speaking 122 major languages and dialects. Over the millennia, India has been invaded and occupied by too many cultures and occupying forces to count from Central Asia, East Asia, and most recently Europe. Through it all, Indian culture has managed to survive by continuously adapting and absorbing whatever was thrown at them. As a result, modern day India seems somewhat familiar, yet truly Indian. The bureaucracy of Great Britain has emerged as multiple layers of regulatory bodies in India's own independent government. Western movie making has been reborn as Bollywood. This was going to be an adventure and a half!

Thanks to the generous support of friends in our local Cooperation Circle, and especially that of our benefactors who were friends of Mary Page Simms, Ronnie and I were able to get our visas and plane tickets in time for the late-November trip. Our flight took us from our local Asheville airport to LaGuardia, then by bus through the streets of New York to JFK International. Flying east as we worked our way across nearly 8,000 miles from North Carolina to Delhi provided an experience of time compression. As our Delta flight took off in the late afternoon and flew into the coming night across the frigid northern Atlantic, we settled in for the nearly 14 hour flight. Seated near the back in the four seat center section of the mammoth Boeing 777-300er plane, Ronnie and I spent the time chatting excitedly about our anticipations, reading, and when possible, napping. Ronnie was much more skilled than I at sleeping peacefully, so I discovered the delights of onboard movies and games displayed on the interactive screen directly in front of my seat. I especially appreciated the interactive "Here's

where you are now” map that visually charted the course of our plane as we moved across the face of the earth, centimeter by centimeter.

Somewhere over the British Isles I got up to stretch my legs, making my way to the aft of the darkened plane amid the snoring bodies of my fellow travelers. In the flight attendants’ area I found what I was looking for – a window I could press my nose against to get a sense of where I was in the wonder of this trip. The last quarter of the moon was bright enough at 33,000 feet to silver the small clouds below us. A myriad of stars blanketed the heavens above. Far below sparkled lights in small splotches separated by inky darkness. These could only be the Shetland and Orkney Islands off the northern tip of Scotland – my ancestral home! The thought somehow thrilled me. On the distant horizon to the east, a streak of pastel pink edged the world. We were flying into the dawn!

The dark mass of Norway sprawled across our path. I blew a kiss to my ex-pat sister, Kathleen, living there with her husband, Hans, among the fjords and rocky landscape on its western edge. As I watched, the colors painted a bright, broadening band of crimson, then pink fading into yellow across the horizon. In a little while I could make out the snowy mountains and dark seas far below us as we made our way into Europe.

The new day had come. Being a detailed planner, I thought I knew what it would bring, but as a seasoned traveler once told me wisely, “When you travel overseas, you make your plans and reservations, but then you wait to see what really unfolds. If problems and changes come, you will have that many more stories to tell when you get back home!” That wisdom was to stand me in good stead in the hours, days and weeks to come. But that’s another story.

(Continued in “Journey To Mayapur”.)

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