My Trip to India and Nepal

My desire to see the Taj Mahal was perhaps the biggest reason why I chose to visit India. Ask a group of seasoned world travelers to describe their most interesting destinations and inevitably the Taj Mahal will be mentioned among the top ten. The story behind this amazing monument is just as compelling; a king so distraught over the loss of his true love that he spends a sizeable portion of his kingdom's wealth to build what is arguably the world's most beautiful mausoleum. Forget about the sheer architectural wonder, the enormous trademark dome, the white marble design, the intricate carvings and inlay gemstones…*this site is a must-see for the hopelessly romantic.* But I must confess, beyond the Taj Mahal I knew precious little about Indian history or culture. Perhaps it was just as well, for India is not a country to be seen in the traditional sense, it must be 'experienced'. I'm not sure anything could have prepared me for what I encountered over there.

I booked my trip to India in June of 2012 – ten months in advance – right after GATE 1 Travel advertised this tour through their weekly promotional email listing. I was very excited and discussed the trip with a fellow traveler named Noelani Musicaro who I met during a recent Turkey excursion. The India trip included a three-day extension into Nepal, a country I was very interested in seeing. Noelani was also game, so we booked the tour at the same time. The entire cost of the package came to just over $3,300, which included the airfare costs, the hotels, most of the meals, all of the additional excursions, and the annoying 'single supplement' fee. All things considered, I thought this was a very reasonable price for a 15 day, two-country tour of South Asia.

Other than a visit to my doctor for any required inoculations (none were needed since I was pretty much up-to-date on all my shots) I planned almost nothing for this trip except buying a new Nikon Coolpix camera. For someone who likes to write detailed journals, I do very little research prior to my departures. I prefer being surprised and enthralled…and this, for me, usually comes at the expense of naivety. The least I know about a place, the more interesting everything seems once I get there. A friend gave me a Frommer's guidebook on India for Christmas and I did read up on the areas we would be visiting on the flight over, but for the most part I was as ignorant of Indian culture as most of my well-meaning family, friends and co-workers who offered some of the direst warnings you can imagine. I was cautioned about *everything*, from the food to the poverty to the sanitary conditions. To be honest, I had no idea what to expect. *And, boy, was I excited*!

As usual, I registered with the State Department's S.T.E.P. program, which allows U.S. citizens to inform the government of their travels abroad in case an emergency arises that might necessitate an in-country evacuation. I also purchased a separate travel phone for international calls. The previous year I got stuck overnight in Frankfurt due to an airline strike, and not having a phone to contact anyone was maddeningly inconvenient. I

kept tabs with the weather and news reports coming out of India, and as my departure date approached I checked repeatedly with the State Department to see if there were any travel advisories for the country. I found nothing to be alarmed about, considering the perennially sad state of affairs in that region of the world. And so, on the morning of April 4th, 2013, I took a taxi to Miami International Airport to begin my South Asian adventure…

Days One and Two

I had scheduled a taxi pick-up for 7:30 am. Since I live only five minutes from Miami International Airport I decided years ago that I would not bother family or friends with the dreaded 'airport run'. My United Airlines flight to Newark didn't leave until later that morning, but I like to check in early and then have a leisurely breakfast in one of the airport's restaurants while I read the day's newspaper. When I arrived at Newark's Liberty International Airport at 1:00 pm I was surprised to see how much the airport had changed since my last visit in the late 1980's. There was now an auto train connecting the terminals, and everything was larger than I remembered it.

My flight to India did not depart until 6:00 pm, so I killed almost an hour browsing in shops before queuing up at the Jet Airways counter in Terminal B. Actually, I was the only one there. The counter representative told me they would be opening in half an hour. I decided to wait since I was the first in line. Five minutes later, though, the counter rep took pity on me (or was annoyed to see me still standing there) and checked me in early. With boarding pass in hand, and relieved of my big luggage, I had a delicious steak burrito for lunch at a place called Currito (a Mexican cuisine fast food joint) situated in the Terminal B food court. Afterwards, I went through the security protocol. I thought I had emptied my pockets of everything but the swirling x-ray machine picked up a piece of aluminum foil gum wrapper wedged deep into the back pocket of my jeans. Immediately, two TSA officers approached me wanting to know what I had in my pockets. "Juicy Fruit" I told them, wondering why the wind-up clock and the bundled package of batteries in my carry-on didn't register a second glance, yet a sliver of aluminum foil did?

I walked the entire length of the Terminal B gate area and parked myself in front of a TV monitor broadcasting a continuous loop of CNN news. From time to time I looked around for signs of Noelani who was also booked on the same flight. Actually, I was a tad apprehensive. I hadn't spoken to her in over nine months, and had only recently begun communicating via email again. We had a falling out due to a personal matter I'd rather not mention in this journal, and I wasn't sure how she would react to me. I needn't have worried, though, because I ran into her while looking for a Time magazine in the terminal bookstore and we had a great reunion. As always, she looked lovely, and we sat down for the next couple of hours and recounted what we'd been up to since our Turkey

tour. She told me about her kids and her new online business (Figlie di Fortuna) and a video project called the Kindness Conversations which she has posted on YouTube (a wonderful series of video interviews in which random individuals are asked to discuss what kindness means to them). I told her about my daughter and how my job as a letter carrier was going. We made each other laugh and laugh as we had in Turkey, and it felt nice to be reunited with my traveling buddy.

By 5:30pm Jet Airways began their boarding process. This was the first leg of a two-flight schedule. We would be traveling to Brussels and then catching a connecting flight to Delhi. I had changed my original seat assignment to an aisles seat (due to my claustrophobia); Noelani sat in another section. But as it turned out, the window seat was empty so Noelani was able to join me. Unfortunately, the man sitting in front of her was very inconsiderate, reclining all the way back and making it very uncomfortable for her. By the time dinner was served Noelani felt like a caged animal. Frustrated, she returned to her original seat in the back of the plane. I had no complaints, though. This was an Airbus jet, which has more legroom in coach than a Boeing, and because I was now sitting by myself I could really stretch out. After watching the movie *The Silver Linings Playbook* on my personal screen I popped an Ambien and slept on and off until we arrived in Brussels. The flight lasted about seven hours.

We had a three-hour layover in Brussels, the capital of the European Union. Noelani and I spent that time walking the beautiful terminal building and browsing the duty-free shops. We both agreed to buy Belgian chocolates on our return trip. The flight to Delhi took another eight hours. For me, the time went by fast. I saw two movies: *Argo* (for the second time), and an intriguing action cop film entitled *End of Watch*. I also managed to sleep for a few more hours.

We arrived at Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport at 9:00 pm on April 5th, twenty-six hours after I had left my home in Miami. We already filled out the necessary entry forms on the flight over and breezed through immigration. It took a while before our luggage was available on the carousel, but once we cleared customs our tour guide, Jayanta Kar (who preferred that we call him Jay) was waiting for us holding up a GATE 1 sign. Eleven other members of our tour group were arriving, as well, and when everybody cleared customs we made our way outside the airport building and boarded our white tour bus. The international airport is situated approximately 16 kilometers south-west of New Delhi's city center, and the bus ride to our hotel was a slow, cumbersome affair in the insane late evening traffic. I thought the streets would be empty at this hour…but like so many things about India, I was wrong.

Everybody was thoroughly exhausted by the time we reached the Eros Hilton in New Delhi. Gratefully, Jay quickly secured our room key cards from the front desk and we all said goodnight. I thought about taking a hot shower before going to bed, but once in my room I started flicking through the TV channels and became totally engrossed by the Bollywood dance numbers on the local MTV station, viewing one after another until sleep overcame me.

Day Three

Jay had scheduled a 7:30am wake-up call for everyone, but I was up by 4:15am. Jet lag – *the bane of all travelers*! – was particularly annoying on this trip. India is on a fifteen hour time difference from Eastern Standard Time, and my internal clock was woefully thrown off track. I found myself going to bed relatively early, then waking up several times throughout the night and finding it nearly impossible to go back to sleep. I watched the BBC news broadcast and made several cups of coffee in my room before shaving and showering. By 6:30am I headed downstairs to the hotel's restaurant for a delicious buffet breakfast. The restaurant had just opened and I was the first one there. Not yet familiar with Indian cuisine I opted to stick with the more traditional fare of scrambled eggs, bacon, fruit and toast. I also added a cup of plain yogurt to the meal, a little trick I learned while traveling; a couple I met in Mexico advised me to consume yogurt each morning as a regimen to prevent stomach ailments, and I've been doing it religiously ever since. Almost 40% of the tour members on this trip took ill at one point or another, some from the moment we arrived, with daily bouts of diarrhea, nausea and vomiting. I firmly believe my yogurt routine prevented me from getting sick (um, this was before I realized I could just take probiotic pills, which work even better).

I went back upstairs to my room to use the bathroom and brush my teeth, and then watched some more BBC news before going down to the lobby at 9:00am to meet the entire tour group for the first time. Jay led us to an outdoor lounge area where he introduced himself and welcomed us to India. It was difficult to hear him above the routine traffic noise emanating from the nearby street (horns are blaring non-stop here from the moment you step outside). The sun was also very hot, even at this early hour. We took turns introducing ourselves. The other group members were:

Joy Newborg, from Minnesota, a corporate lawyer traveling with Dede, a friend she met on a previous GATE 1 tour; Serge Poiriero (retired military man) from Canada; Pleshette Olivero, a nurse from New York City; Nina and Lenny Kalen, a lovely retired couple from upstate New York; Ralph and Marilee Meuter, educators from California; Frank and Betty Arzt from Pennsylvania; Riad and Amira Taha, originally from Syria and Lebanon respectively (although both are now U.S. citizens); Neal and Katie Houde and their daughter Krystal from California; Winona and Betsy, two friends traveling together (I can't remember where they're from, sorry ladies); the effervescent Elsie from Texas. I believe this was everyone, and let me apologize to the group if I've omitted any details.

Jay briefly went over the trip's itinerary and gave us a cultural overview of what we could expect as our tour unfolded. He cautioned us about the aggressive street vendors who would be waiting for us at almost every stop, telling us to be firm and not engage them if we weren't interested in buying anything. He also spoke candidly about the abject

poverty we would be encountering throughout the tour. His advice was not to give money to any of the beggars on the streets because many either choose to do this for a living or are forced by family or street gangs to beg; the government's position is that if no one gave them money they would be compelled to stay in school or prepare themselves for a better vocation. He instructed us to just ignore them. This was easier said than done. We came in contact with beggars almost everywhere we went: rag-tag children, desperate looking women holding up babies, incredibly disabled individuals, some who had to drag themselves along the ground. Deliberately avoiding them was a heart-wrenching experience for many of us. In fact, one develops an almost unnatural response mechanism to all of this; on one hand the beggars break your heart, but on the other hand you're constantly agitated and angered by the unrelenting street vendors. It became an emotionally exhausting exercise which grated my soul by the end of the trip.

After our orientation meeting we boarded our bus for a day-long tour of Delhi, heading first to the Old Delhi section known as Shahjahanabad. It was Saturday, April 6th, and everywhere we went there were idols of Lord Hanuman, the monkey god believed to be one of the avatars of Lord Shiva in the Hindu religion and one of the most popular figures in the Hindu pantheon, worshipped as a symbol of strength, perseverance and devotion. Devout Hindus fast and make offerings to Hanuman on Saturdays. April marks his birth, and there were numerous festivals in his honor throughout the country. On our way to Old Delhi, Jay lectured us on the capital's history. There are at present approximately 16 million people living in Delhi, the majority of these are Hindus (81%), followed by Muslims (12%) and Sikhs (5%), with Baha'i, Jains and Christians rounding out the list. The capital is divided into two historic parts: the old section (Old Delhi, or Shahjahanabad) built by the Mughals, and the new section (New Delhi) established by the British in 1912 when they moved the capital of their colony from Calcutta to Delhi. But modern-day metropolitan Delhi also incorporates many districts and outer-lying smaller cities, extending the overall population to almost 22 million and growing.

On our way to the Shahjahanabad area we passed the beautiful flower-like design of the Lotus Temple which serves as the mother temple of the Baha'i House of Worship, a religion that emphasizes a monotheistic concept and allows for all denominations to worship within its doors since they believe *all* religions worship the same God. As we approached Old Delhi we came upon the majestic Red Fort, known as *Lal Qila*, built by Shah Jahan, the fifth Mughal emperor, who shifted his capital from Agra to Delhi in the middle of the 17th century (Shahjahanabad is named after him). This palace fortress was constructed from red sandstone, hence the name, and served as the seat of the Mughal Empire until the last emperor was exiled by the British in 1857. Although we did not visit the Red Fort, we did tour the fort in Agra that is almost identical in design and much better preserved.

Our first stop that day was the Jama Masjid, India's principle mosque, a beautiful structure constructed in the 1650's by the same emperor, Shah Jahan (probably the most prolific architect and builder of the Mughal Empire). It is the largest mosque in India, with three massive gates, four towers and two minarets all constructed from red sandstone and marble. The enormous rectangular courtyard can accommodate up to

25,000 worshippers. We had to drive through the crowded market streets of the Chandi Chowk district to reach the Jama Masjid. The sights were unbelievable. On each corner, utility poles were crammed with electrical wires in no apparent fashion, a jumble of cables suspended dangerously above the teeming crowds. Jay said he had no idea how the electric company determines *which* wire is connected to *which* house. With such an archaic system, I'm surprised the whole city hasn't burned to the ground! The back alleys and side streets were narrow and filled with shops, vendors, pedestrians and stray animals. The main streets were choked with an odd assortment of cars and vehicles, buses, tricycle cabs (known as tuk-tuks), the occasional bull, bicycle rickshaws, motorcycles, scooters and pushcarts…*all converging from different directions*. There didn't appear to be a right-of-way when it came to traffic; at the intersections everyone just kept going, albeit more slowly. The only semblance of order between these drivers seemed to be their insane system of horn blowing.

Our bus pulled up to the crowded Gate 3 entrance area of the Jama Masjid without (miraculously) hitting anyone in the process. The group ascended the stairs to the mosque – it sits atop a hillock – and we were afforded a nice view of the Chawri Bazar section nearby. We entered the huge paved courtyard (after removing our shoes on the stairway) and took in the sight of the Jama Masjid rising majestically above its crowded city surroundings. Although there were many visitors at the site already, the expanse of the courtyard made the place seem empty. In the middle of the courtyard is a large ablution pool. Several of the women in our group were made to wear robes to cover up their bare arms, legs and shoulders before entering the courtyard.

Jay gave us a brief lecture on the mosque before we went inside where we discovered a series of beautiful domed prayer halls built mostly of smooth red sandstone with intermittent panels of white marble; the white and black marble floors were covered in strips of long colorful rugs. Several Indian Muslims were prostrated before the walls in prayer. We took some great photos inside (which cost an additional fee of $6) and Joy and Noelani even posed with a group of friendly Muslim men. In areas near the side entrances we saw several pilgrims sleeping on the marble floor. This particular area of Shahjahanabad is predominately Muslim. And not without its dangers, apparently. In 2006, terrorists set off two bombs inside the courtyard during Friday prayers, and two Taiwanese tourists were wounded in 2010 when gunmen on a motorcycle opened fire on their tour bus. For the most part, though, the chaotic street life made for such a distraction you couldn't help but forget any concerns about safety and be amazed by it all.

We rendezvoused at the top of the stairs by the Gate 3 entrance thirty minutes later and gratefully gathered our shoes (I was worried someone may have absconded with my New Balance sneakers, the only footwear I brought with me to India). We then followed Jay back down to the street where he organized a bicycle rickshaw caravan for us. I rode with Noelani and what a wild and bumpy ride it turned out to be! We spent the next thirty minutes or so riding through the unbelievably crowded backstreets and alleyways of the Chawri Bazar market in the Chandi Chowk district adjacent to the Jama Masjid. Our poor skinny rickshaw driver surely earned his tip as he huffed and puffed to get my fat ass from one end of the marketplace to the other, along the way we passed wholesale shops

selling brass, copper and paper products (for which this particular market is famous), small local restaurants and street joints selling spicy *chaat* (tangy snacks), hole-in-the-wall hardware and auto parts stores, pushcart vendors offering everything from fruits and produce to yarns and textiles, we even passed several brick buildings built by the British during colonial rule. Everything competed for space here: vendors, shops, pedestrians…*even animals*! Not just cats and dogs, either. I saw bulls and goats strolling alongside the human population. What an amazing cultural experience this turned out to be.

When we reached the bus we had our first encounter with the aggressive street vendors, but Jay quickly took it upon himself to be the intermediary, stopping the sellers at the bus door and showing us their wares once we were all safely onboard. He sometimes negotiated the prices for us or 'closed the sale' if anyone was interested in buying something (most of the prices were fixed). I actually picked up quite a few souvenirs this way. The idea of trying to ascertain a fair price in the middle of that mob – let alone pulling money out of my wallet in such a chaotic public setting – was not something I particularly relished, so I was glad Jay did this at almost every location we visited. As we left the Jama Masjid area Jay asked if we wanted to stop for lunch or continue with the city tour. We decided as a group to continue touring since we were leaving the following morning for Jaipur and wanted to get as much sight-seeing in as possible in Delhi.

Before leaving the old city of Shahjahanabad we stopped at Rajghat to see the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial. The memorial is located in a beautiful park along the banks of the Yamuna River, near the cremation sites of other prominent Indians, notably Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, and Indira Gandhi and her son, Rajiv. Once again, we had to remove our shoes before entering the courtyard that contained Gandhi's memorial, a rather simple black granite plinth on the spot where he was cremated. An eternal flame burns in the background and his last words are inscribed in the front of the memorial (which translates into "Hail God!"). There was not much else to see or do here, but this site was a particularly emotional one for me. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (*Mahatma* was a bestowed title meaning "Great Soul") is one of my political heroes. He took the concept of passive resistance and guided his people to freedom without war, arguing that if a population *refuses* to be governed by tyrants then tyranny must fall. I witnessed this philosophy of civil disobedience first hand while serving as a Peace Corps volunteer in the Philippines back in 1986, when the relatively non-violent People's Power revolution toppled the brutal dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. The only downside to visiting the memorial was the public toilets, which smelled like over-flowing outhouses.

From Rajghat we traveled west towards the center of Delhi, passing Connaught Place, the retail heart of New Delhi, built in the 1920's by English architect Robert Tor Russell. This busy (and more modern) shopping area was designed in concentric circles around a central park. Just west of Connaught Place was our next stop, the magnificently ornate *Lakshmi Narayan Mandir*, also known as Birla Temple (because it was commissioned by the wealthy industrialist B.D. Birla in 1938). This is a contemporary Hindu temple, the

name Lakshmi Narayan refers to Lord Vishnu – one of the top Hindu gods – and his consort, Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. There are also idols within this unique complex honoring a multitude of Hindu deities: Lord Shiva, Lord Ganesha, Lord Rama, Lord Hanuman and the Goddess Durga. The exhibition hall/shrine known as Geeta Bhawan is dedicated to Lord Krishna, with paintings depicting Indian mythology, and there is another temple housing an idol of Lord Buddha.

The Birla Temple was inaugurated by Mahatma Gandhi under the condition that people of all castes (especially the Untouchables) would be permitted to enter. We were not allowed to take our cameras inside; a pity, really, since this site is a landmark of modern Indian temple architecture and not to be missed if visiting Delhi. The design borrows from the Orissa style of temple building, with tall curved towers (the highest reaching 165 feet) made of marble and red sandstone, while the entrances have two-storey verandahs on three sides with gardens and fountains in the rear. But what makes this temple truly special are the amount of sculptures, idols, tall spires and *jali* work (perforated stone or latticed screens) adorning it. Absolutely beautiful!

From here we headed south and parked along the famous boulevard known as Raj Path (King's Way) where we were able to take in the sights of central Delhi's imperial architecture, chief among them the *Rashtrapati Bhavan*, the ornately gated and domed former home of the British viceroy which now serves as the residence of the president of India. The house is off-limits to the public, but the adjacent 13-acre Mughal Gardens can be toured for one month out of the year between February and March (and worth it from what I've read). There are two Secretariat buildings flanking the *Rashtrapati Bhavan*, which contain several important ministries. And to the northeast we could see the *Sansad Bhavan*, the round Parliament House from where the country is supposedly governed. I say 'supposedly' because according to Jay, widespread corruption and the often fiercely independent Indian States seem to have conspired to make this country almost ungovernable. Throughout our trip he shared his pessimism about the country's future, despite the current economic boom, suggesting that if things didn't change for the better soon, it's very possible a civil war may break out in the ensuing years as the gap between the haves and have-nots widens and the government becomes less and less relevant.

At the other end of the Raj Path road is the India Gate national monument, built along the concept of Paris' *Arc de Triomphe*, and dedicated to the Indian soldiers who died during World War I and the Third Anglo-Afghan War. Following India's Independence, the India Gate also became the site of the army's Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The monument is constructed out of red and pale sandstone and granite, and was designed by Sir Edwin Luytens, the famous British architect who designed most of what is now central New Delhi. Luytens was tasked with creating the new colonial capital in Delhi. Between 1912 and 1930, the newly constructed central part of the city was known as *Luytens' Delhi*. His architectural style was called "Delhi Order", a blend of traditional Indian architecture mixed with Western classicism. This style is most evident in the *Rashtrapati Bhavan* with his use of the drum-mounted Buddhist dome. The nearby government buildings were designed by Sir Herbert Baker, who helped Luytens create New Delhi, including the bungalows of the members of parliament. Anyone interested in

this style of imperial architecture would be well advised to spend a day walking along the streets near the Raj Path.

We now headed back to the eastern side of Delhi to tour the fabulous Humayun's Tomb complex situated just south of the *Purana Qila* (the Old Fort). Built in the latter part of the 16th century, this tomb was the final resting place of the second Mughal emperor, Humayun. The mausoleum was actually constructed 14 years after his death, commissioned by his loving 'senior' wife, Biga Begum, at a cost of 1.5 million rupees (a staggering amount for the time, I'm sure). Eventually, it was used as a burial site for other members of the ruling family and has since been referred to as the necropolis of the Mughal dynasty, containing around 150 royal graves. This wonderfully preserved site is an important part of Indian architectural history. Humayun had traveled widely in the Islamic world (mostly Persia and Central Asia) and brought back with him ideas that were later applied to his mausoleum by the Persian architect Mirak Mirza Ghiyas. His mausoleum was the first garden-tomb in the entire Indian subcontinent, and influenced all future Mughal architecture, including the Taj Mahal.

We entered this enormous walled complex through a series of massive gates connected by beautifully maintained gardens that encompass the main tomb on all sides. There are pavilions and baths adorning the center of the eastern and northern walls. The mausoleum rests on a high, wide, terraced platform with small arched cells along its sides. In front of the mausoleum entrance are pools joined by channels. The elegant serenity of it all took my breath away. We spent about 40 minutes here, walking through the tall marbled chambers (in some there were birds flying about), admiring the intricately carved trellis windows, viewing the various marble burial monuments. Even though this is considered a 'simpler' precursor to the Taj Mahal, it is, in its own right, another architectural masterpiece. And with a similar royal love story (only it was the *husband* being immortalized and not the wife).

Wearily, we rode the bus back to our hotel. It was just after 5:00pm and most of us were thoroughly exhausted from almost eight straight hours of sightseeing. Well, not *everyone*. Joy was actually sick to her stomach, or so it appeared as we entered the main lobby of the Eros Hilton. The bellboy greeters had no sooner said "welcome" when all of a sudden Joy upchucked all over the lobby floor. It was not a pretty sight… (um, I'm referring to the vomit and not Joy, who is actually quite attractive). Turns out she wasn't the only one throwing up. Several other group members were suddenly ill, as well; a rather disconcerting turn of events since this was our first full day in India and no one was certain what was causing the outbreak. I kept my fingers crossed and my yogurt close at hand!

I went up to my room and managed to take a nap until 6:30pm. I hopped in the shower again and when I came out I was surprised to see the male housekeeper in my room. Actually, 'surprised' doesn't quite describe the moment. I had stepped out of the bathroom with (thankfully) a towel wrapped around my mid-section and nearly had a heart attack when I saw the young man standing by the door. The only reason I didn't scream was because it got muffled in my throat. Meanwhile, the young housekeeper

smiled nonchalantly and inquired if everything was okay with the room service, totally oblivious to the fact that he had just scared the bejesus out of me. My reply to him was something along the lines of *"GET THE F—K OUT!"*

By 7:30pm I went downstairs to the hotel restaurant where we were having a 'welcome' dinner buffet. I sat with Noelani, Lenny and his wife Nina. Dinner was a good, leisurely affair; Lenny and I had a very interesting conversation about our travels and, of all things, the Holocaust (why, I don't recall). Two hours later I was back upstairs in my room, falling asleep while watching the BBC news broadcast.

Day Four

I was awake by 3:00am. *Drats!* I tossed and turned in bed but was unable to go back to sleep, so I turned on the TV and found a station that offered back-to-back episodes of *Home Improvement* followed by an episode of *Madmen*. This unusual combination kept me entertained until it was time to shower and shave. I went downstairs for breakfast at 6:30am and was later met by Noelani, who was in tears. She had just received a text message that a good friend had lost her battle with cancer. I tried to console her, but men suck at this. I was surprised anyone would even send such a message under the circumstances. I mean, I usually inform my family and friends back home not to call me with any bad news unless there was something I could do *personally* to rectify the situation. And forgive me for sounding callous here, but death is not a situation you can rectify. I tried to get Noelani to talk about her friend, to conjure up the good memories and keep the tears from flowing. Obviously, I know very little about women. Noelani grieved in silence most of the day, lost in thoughts about her friend and shedding tears on and off. Poor soul. Thankfully, other members of the group took turns consoling her.

By 8:00am we were on the bus for our long drive to Jaipur. Prior to leaving the city we stopped for a quick photo op at the Qutab Minar, the tallest minaret in India. It was built in the year 1193 by Qutab-ud-din, a Turkic king from Northwest India who defeated Delhi's last Hindu Kingdom. This ancient Muslim monument is over 200 feet tall, with both Arabic and Brahmi inscriptions carved into it. And like just about everything else in historic north-central India, it was constructed of red sandstone and marble. After this brief stop we got on National Highway 8 heading south.

The distance between Delhi and Jaipur is approximately 265 kilometers (or roughly 164 miles). In the U.S. – traveling on a national highway – I could cover that distance easily in less than three hours (with time to spare). But in India, this trip took us seven hours. The reason was due to traffic. I'm not referring to the bumper-to-bumper variety we experience in America, although at times traffic *was* slow in certain stretches, especially in the areas undergoing construction. The 'traffic' I'm referring to is the

incredibly odd mix of transportation vehicles (and their varying speeds) one encounters along the roadways here. Whatever can move a population and its commerce from point A to point B will be visible on the national highways of India. And I do mean *whatever*. You will see things on India's roadways that will leave you flabbergasted. A family of six on *one* motorcycle. Horses, bulls and camels pulling wagons. People on elephants. A shepherd casually leading hundreds of sheep down the highway. Tractors hauling a ton of wheat with nothing more to their design than an exposed engine and a steering wheel. Tuk-tuk motorized tricycles or jeepneys loaded to overflowing. Passengers standing on back bumpers, or clinging to the roof or sides of buses. Cows? *Fuggedaboutit*! These bovines simply lay on the roadways whenever they want. *And may Shiva help you if you hit one of them*.

Back in the late 1990's, when India's economy really began to expand, it became necessary to undergo a massive road-building program not unlike the one America experienced in the mid-20th century. The National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) came up with a plan to link the country's four largest cities – Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata (Calcutta) and Chennai – in a series of inter-connected highways known as the Golden Quadrilateral. This highway system also linked many of the country's major industrial, agricultural and cultural centers. While the main part of the Golden Quadrilateral was 'officially' completed in 2012, these are basically limited-access highways, and so there are still many ongoing road construction projects to improve or expand the size of the roads and to develop interconnecting access roads to the more rural areas. According to Jay, private companies were contracted to build this highway system, and they are given exclusive toll-collecting privileges for several decades (to recover the cost of construction and maintenance). While this seems like a great way to build a national highway system quickly and cheaply, it doesn't allow for much monitoring. Hence the sometimes chaotic traffic scenes we witnessed driving up to Jaipur. At one point, there was even *on-coming traffic* on the very lane we were traveling on! My hat went off to our bus driver, probably the most stressed-out individual in all of India.

On this road trip I finally discovered the reason behind all the horn-honking in the country. Jay told us there was a pattern to this madness. Whenever one vehicle wants to pass another, the driver toots the horn to let the other driver know of his intention. At this point, the driver of the front vehicle honks his horn to notify the vehicle in back that it's okay to pass. Once the vehicle passes, he honks again to say 'thank you' while the other driver honks twice to say 'don't mention it'. This goes on all day and night in India. At times, we saw trucks lined up on the shoulder of the opposite highway heading towards Delhi. There is a city ordinance which prohibits large trucks from entering the capital during certain daylight hours, so the drivers simply camp off the side of the road until they are allowed access. *And what colorful trucks they have*! Many drivers deck out their cabs with beads, curtains, brightly painted symbols and designs. The drivers themselves looked just as exotic…that is, when they weren't glaring at us menacingly. Most of these trucks are built by the Tata Group, India's largest multinational conglomerate, with their large TATA logo clearly visible on the back of the vehicles.

As we travelled south on National Highway 8 – the leg of the Golden Quadrilateral that extends all the way to Mumbai – we came upon the city of Gurgaon just outside of Delhi. This was the only modern city we saw while in India. Granted, our tour was limited to the central northern parts of the country – with a stop in the central eastern city of Varanasi – but I was shocked to see very little in terms of modern-looking urban centers. We traveled through dozens of cities and townships in India, yet nothing came close to the newly minted modern cities I observed in China during my visit in 2011. Since both countries began their meteoric economic rise during the 1990's, I just assumed India was progressing at the same rate. Perhaps the strong central government in Beijing is the difference, the necessary catalyst needed to propel change forward at a rapid pace. India's government – from what our guide was telling us – appears to be an impediment to growth, with a corrupt, archaic legal system that often stymies innovation, despite the country's technological know-how.

As I mentioned, the city of Gurgaon was the exception to the places we saw or visited. Situated 30 kilometers south of the national capital, Gurgaon is part of the Indian state of Haryana, which borders Delhi on three sides. It has the third largest per capita income in India behind only Chandigarh and Mumbai. Gurgaon is actually two cities in one; the old section (where the less fortunate live) and the new section, a gleaming modern metropolis of skyscrapers, huge multinational call centers and business offices, high-rise condos, malls and elegant retail shops. This *new* Gurgaon is the type of city I envisioned was sweeping across the Indian subcontinent. *Boy, was I wrong*.

Much of this modern city was built in the past twenty years. There is a well-educated, financially affluent, young middle class living here who are hugely employed by the telecom or manufacturing industries of Gurgaon, or the multinational corporations that maintain call centers or IT operations in the city. If you've ever dialed customer service or tech support in the U.S. and spoke to a representative with an Indian accent, chances are they're working in Gurgaon (or another similar 'call center' city). According to Jay, this newly created middle class is propelling India's economic miracle, as they have large disposable incomes and ferocious consumer demands. Jay hopes *these* are the people who, with their ambition, education and technical savvy, will transform India and save it from itself. I hope so, too… *for their sake*. Not far from the glittering skyscrapers and condos is an army of squatters who live in tents and makeshift shanties. I'd hate to imagine what may ensue when these people start to demand *their* slice of the economic pie!

We made a brief pit stop at a McDonald's in Gurgaon before continuing on to Jaipur. I make it a point to eat in at least *one* McDonald's restaurant whenever I travel abroad, I like comparing the quality of the Big Mac's and fries from country to country. But in India, the hamburger chain does not sell beef burgers. At least not in the north-central part of the country where many of the locals are practicing vegetarians and eating red meat (cows) is a religious affront. The menu had such strange and interesting items: McPizza, McEgg and McAloo Tikki!

We spent the next several hours traveling south on National Highway 8. The further away from Delhi we drove, the more open the countryside became. The cities gave way to rural farming communities and we passed many workers toiling in the wheat fields (most of them women, curiously enough). In addition to the stray animals that would occasionally cross the highway – bulls, boars, goats, etc – we saw shepherds tending to huge flocks of sheep, and packs of work camels resting in the fields. As the day wore on, the small rural towns along the highway all started to look the same, with names like Bawal, Bahror, Kotputli, Paota and Shahpura. Some travelers do not enjoy long bus rides; I actually relish them, especially in foreign countries, where you can get a real glimpse into the lifestyles of the rural folk.

Another thing I enjoy about these long bus rides is that they afford the tour guides ample opportunity to impart their knowledge about the area's history and culture. Jay launched into a fascinating lecture on India's caste system on this particular drive:

Traditionally, South Asian society (the Indian Subcontinent) is organized into a hierarchy of hereditary groups known as *castes* or *jati* (which denotes thousands of various sub groups). These castes are fixed by birth, and are associated with specific occupations. Historically, the caste system stems from the Hindu religious concept of the four *varnas*, which rank all people by innate spiritual purity. The highest varna (in this case caste) is the *Brahmins*, or priests, which is not surprising since they invented the rules! They are followed by the *Kshatriyas*, or the warrior class. Next comes the *Vaishyas*, the merchant class, followed by the *Shudras*, the laborers, artisans and servants who perform work that is deemed unclean. And there is a fifth caste, the *Untouchables*, who have historically been viewed with particular disdain by the other castes because their labor is viewed as *extremely*, centering around garbage, excrement or corpses. This caste system has produced a discriminatory and unjust system of social stratification in India, because under varna, contact between the higher castes and the lower castes must be limited (especially the sharing of food and water) to avoid the contamination of higher, purer individuals by lower, unclean ones. This is not to say that members of the lower castes cannot achieve a higher status in society (many move up the ladder economically and politically), and being a member of a higher caste does not shield one from poverty or disgrace. Each caste consists of thousands of jatis, which in turn can consist of many different types of occupations. A member of a lower caste jati can gain higher societal status through wealth and the avoidance of 'unclean' labor and adopting a more spiritually pure lifestyle. But generally speaking, the higher castes have a much better time of it.

Under the current Indian constitution, discrimination on the basis of caste is banned, along with the use of the term "Untouchables". There are also affirmative action programs helping the members of the lower castes. But even still, once prejudicial attitudes settle into a society (especially deep-seated ones fostered over thousands of years) it is difficult to remove them entirely, and since Hindu religious principles underline this caste system it has become a morally accepted social norm. Today, almost all forms of 'undesirable labor' are still performed by the lower castes. In fact, even most marriages in India still occur within castes. Jay told us that due to the Internet and global

modernization, attitudes concerning the caste system are slowly changing, and younger people are putting less importance on it. He, himself, married a woman outside his own caste (although he admits neither of their families was thrilled).

At some point in the afternoon we crossed into the Indian State of Rajasthan, with the Aravalli Mountain range off to our right. We stopped for lunch at a resort hotel just across the border. I ordered a chicken-filled *naan*, a delicious oven-baked leavened bread popular throughout India, and Dede was kind enough to share her fried rice with me. From here, we drove about another hour or so before we reached the outskirts of Jaipur. It was very hot outside, and shade was a precious commodity on our tour bus. Several months earlier, a young Indian woman was gang-raped on a public bus in Delhi. When she died a few days later the public outcry was tremendous, with daily street demonstrations throughout the country. Since then, buses within (or originating from) the capital are required to remove anything obscuring their windows. Throughout most of the trip I had to wear my nylon brim hat to ward off the sun's glare.

Jaipur constitutes one of the three major tourist destinations more commonly referred to as the Golden Triangle of central India (the other two are Delhi and Agra). It was founded in 1727 by Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II, the ruler of Amber, and is named after him. The city has uncharacteristically wide streets set up in a grid-like pattern over several quarters, including the historic Palace Quarter. This is the capital and largest city of the state of Rajasthan, with a population of approximately 3.5 million and growing at the astonishing rate of 3.4 % annually. Although it has a large and varied manufacturing base, Jaipur is famous for its textiles, handicrafts and jewelry (specifically gemstones). The historic quarter of Jaipur, which is enclosed by the old city walls, is called the Pink City due to the distinctly colored buildings that were originally painted this way to imitate the red sandstone architecture of the larger Mughal cities. In anticipation of a visit by the Prince of Wales in 1876, the city's old quarter was repainted to its current pinkish hue. Jaipur is quite famous, and has appeared in recent years not only on the list of the top 50 emerging commercial (out-sourcing) centers in the world, but also as one of the top ten most interesting cities to visit in Asia. The recent comedy-drama *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* was set and filmed here. *All* of the travel brochures tout this place as a must-see area, and, quite frankly, everyone on the bus was excited to see the Pink City.

Imagine our dismay, then, when we entered Jaipur and were greeted by the worst slums the city has to offer; an entire community of poor people living in tents or dilapidated shanties or homes along the side of the road. The streets here were covered with litter and rubble. It was both appalling and heart-wrenching. As we continued to drive through the city the sights only improved nominally, and we wondered aloud *where in the heck were the famed pink buildings*? We arrived at the Ramada Jaipur at 3:15 pm, surprised that while the hotel was very nice, the nearby neighborhood was not.

Jay gave us 45 minutes to freshen up in our hotel rooms before we piled back onto the bus and drove to a more industrialized section of Jaipur – finally getting our first glimpse of the historic pink quarter! – to visit a jewelry manufacturer. These stops are compulsory on most guided tours. They are billed as above-board government sponsored or approved

shops, which guarantee their quality and workmanship, but in reality these are nothing more than 'tourist traps' designed to separate you from your money. Don't get me wrong, the shops are always beautiful (and the bathroom facilities are awesome), they usually provide some kind of refreshments and always include a *very* interesting (and often entertaining) demonstration and tour inside their factories, followed by 'browsing time' in their exquisite showrooms. *But hold on to your wallets, folks, because nothing here is ever cheap.* I cannot recall the name of the establishment we visited, but it fit the typical bill of an 'official store'. The owner (or some higher up) greeted us and gave us a quick demonstration/lesson on gemstones and how they're polished and cast, and then we were set free inside their showroom where salespeople were waiting to pounce. Everything on display made your mouth drop and go "ooooooh" or "aaaaaaah". I enjoy hanging around Noelani during these jewelry shop visits since she makes her own jewelry back home and is a wiz on gemstones; the salespeople can't pull the proverbial wool over her eyes! An interesting fact I learned on this particular stop: only one gemstone is indigenous to the subcontinent – the Star of India – all others are imported.

From the jewelry shop we headed to one of the main markets within the Old City. The entire area of the historic quarter of Jaipur is still surrounded by the original defensive walls, and yes, it is painted pink. We drove through a massive gate entrance onto the Chandpol Bazar Road and went down a fairly wide main street flanked on both sides by continuous rows of light red or pinkish colored squat buildings, almost all of them had storefronts (although many were closing at this hour). The grid-like design of the streets makes the Old City easy to navigate. We stopped on this main road – not far from the historic Hawa Mahal (palace) – and walked one block to a backstreet marketplace. Jay gave us about an hour and a half to wander around the market area. It was getting dark already, but the marketplace was lively and teeming with people.

I ventured with Noelani from shop to shop looking for souvenirs. In one store featuring textiles we found some really nice silk and cotton blend scarves and were able to talk the proprietor into letting us buy them for $3 apiece. Jay told us to negotiate for *everything.* His advice was to knock whatever price was quoted down to 60% and bargain from there. The shop owner was very taken by Noelani (a beautiful woman who can be quite the flirt when shopping) and invited us to have *chai masala* (a delicious spicy black tea mixed with boiled milk). We purchased a few more items and Noelani asked if she could try on this gorgeous purple sari. The elderly shop owner was *more* than delighted, wrapping her up in the sari like she was a piece of fine china. It took a while, but when Noelani finally posed for the camera she looked stunning. From here we strolled further down the marketplace for a couple of blocks before returning on the opposite side of the street to our rendezvous point. In one small shop I was able to buy a wood-carved image of Lord Ganesh – the elephant-like god of good fortune – for my souvenir shelf.

We got back to the hotel by 7:10pm. Dede and Joy were in a bit of a hurry since they had booked a dinner show excursion with an independent online travel service and needed to be back at the hotel by seven o'clock for their pick-up ride. I went to my room for twenty minutes to put my purchases away and freshen up. I then joined the rest of the group in the hotel's restaurant where we had an excellent buffet dinner. But prior to

eating, we sang ‘Happy Birthday’ and cut two small cakes for Frank and Lenny who were both celebrating their birthdays. Lenny turned 82; I’m not sure how old Frank was (I’d guess in his mid to late seventies). They both looked great, though!

The buffet was magnificent. There was a large selection of Indian and Chinese dishes. This was my first real experience with Indian cuisine, which is as varied by region as the country is. What makes Indian food particularly different from western cuisine are the spices, an exotic blend (curry) of pungent ingredients like turmeric, cumin, chili peppers, black mustard seed, cardamom, asafetida, coriander, ginger and garlic. The word *masala* means a combination of dried spices (in the north-central part of India that usually includes black or white peppercorn, cinnamon, cloves, cardamom pods and cumin seeds) and this seasoning mix is used in everyday cooking. Another thing that gives Indian cuisine its special flavor is the cooking oils. In the south, according to Jay, they use coconut oil, but in the north-central part of India they prefer mustard seed oil.

At the buffet that night I sampled mutton cooked in some kind of spicy masala tomato sauce, chicken masala, *palak paneer* (cubes of farmer’s cheese cooked in a thick pureed spinach curry sauce), the Indian staple known as *dal* (a side dish made from any of the many varieties of lentils in the country, seasoned with curry, tomatoes, onions and other ingredients, resembling a thick split pea soup which is generally eaten with white rice or flatbread). There were several delicious curry vegetarian dishes. And all the *naan* (oven-baked flatbread) you could slop your plate with (lathered with ghee, an indulgent clarified butter with a fat content that can probably clog an artery in seconds, but tastes like you’ve just ascended to Heaven). *What a meal*!

By 10:00pm I called it a night and waddled up to my room where I fell asleep instantly.

Day Five

I awoke several times throughout the night (damn this jet lag!) and by 4:00 am was unable to go back to sleep, so I made several cups of coffee in my room, repacked my suitcase, showered, watched the BBC news and wrote in my journal until it was time for breakfast. I sat with Noelani, who seemed to be in better spirits than yesterday, and she turned me on to *lassi*, a traditional yogurt drink (flavored in any number of ways), which was served at all the breakfast buffets. By 8:00 am we met the gang in the lobby for a full day of sightseeing.

Once again, we drove through some rather disturbing slum areas before the city scenery became more pleasant. We stopped briefly at the Ram Niwas Gardens not far from the Old City walls to take photographs of the Albert Hall Museum, the official state museum of Rajasthan (now known as the Central Museum). This beautiful building, built by Maharaja Ram Singh, was originally designed to be a town hall, but was later opened in 1887 as a museum housing the art and history of Jaipur. It is named after King Edward VII (Albert Edward). The construction of the museum is a great example of Indo-Saracenic architecture, also known as Indo-Gothic, which mixed Indo-Islamic architecture with Gothic and Neo-classical styles favored in Victorian-era Britain.

From here we drove to the heart of the Pink City (the old quarter) to see the *Hawa Mahal* (the Palace of Winds). This five-storey palace was built in 1799 by Maharaja Sawai Pratap Singh, constructed out of red and pink sandstone in a design that supposedly resembles the crown of Lord Krishna, a Hindu god. The Hawa Mahal is nestled between other pink buildings near the Badi Chaupad intersection, a busy commercial thoroughfare in the center of the Old City. The palace is one of the historical highlights of Jaipur because it is the embodiment of Rajputana architecture. We couldn't actually go inside due to an ongoing restoration project at the site; instead, we walked along the sidewalk on the opposite side of the street and took photographs of the pyramid-shaped façade. The most striking feature of this structure is the windows. *All 953 of them*! The windows are called *jharokhas*, they jut slightly out from the wall and are intricately carved with latticework so that the palace ladies could gaze upon the street below without being seen (adhering to the strict code of *purdah*, or face covering). This unusual number of windows helps facilitate the flow of wind through the palace, cooling it in the summer. Our view was hindered somewhat by the towering series of scaffolds covering the front of the building. Even still, we could make out the uniquely carved windows from where we stood.

As we headed back to the bus we stopped to observe three Indian snake charmers sitting on the sidewalk playing flute-like instruments called *pungi*, while several thin black cobra snakes stood upright from two baskets placed in front of them. This is a very old tradition, dating back thousands of years. It was fascinating to watch. Snake charmers claim they can hypnotize snakes with their music, but in reality snakes lack an outer ear and cannot actually *hear* music, and simply stand at attention because they view the instrument (and the snake charmers, for that matter) as a threat. To avoid potential harm, the charmers employ a number of techniques, none of them beneficial to the reptile: a snake can be defanged, have its poison glands removed or even have its mouth sewn shut. There used to be millions of snake charmers in India, wandering from place to place trying to eke out a living by performing in public areas. But nowadays, snake charming is considered a dying entertainment art form thanks, in large part, to technology. In our group, the only person brave enough to sit next to these men for a photograph was Krystal, who squirmed heroically as the two cobras in one basket eyed her intently.

We drove through the Pink City and headed north along Amer Road. About eleven kilometers outside Jaipur, in a hillside valley within the Aravalli Mountain range, we came upon the majestic Amber Fort, perched strategically at the mouth of a rocky

mountain gorge overlooking Lake Maota. The crystal mirror image of the fortress on the still waters of the lake makes quite an impression on the first time visitor. From below, it resembled something out of a medieval fairytale.

The Amber (actually spelled Amer) Fort was built in 1592 by Raja Man Singh I, the local Kachwaha clan ruler. The Kachwahas used the city of Amer (known as Dhundar back then) as their capital between 1037 and 1727, and then shifted to Jaipur under the reign of Sawai Jai Singh II. The fortress is actually part of a bigger complex connected to the Jaigarh Fort that is located on a hill just above it. Underground tunnels link the two forts. During fierce battles, the occupants of the Amber Fort would take refuge in the apparently impregnable Jaigarh Fort above. Although constructed in the late 16th century, Amber Fort has undergone many changes and restorations throughout its history. Much of what we see today – especially the palace structures within the complex – were built under Sawai Jai Singh I and his successors from the 1700's onward.

There are two ways you can enter Amber Fort: either walk up a stone pathway or ride an elephant to the top. We rode the elephants! Many tour companies stopped using the elephant caravan several years ago when a terrible incident involving these huge animals claimed the lives of several tourists. The elephants had been mistreated, forced to climb the hill all day with little rest or food, and finally snapped under the incredibly hot noon-day sun, stampeding and killing half a dozen people. Since then, strictly enforced local laws require that the elephants be fed properly and given so many hours of rest each afternoon. This is why you will see these massive creatures on the streets of Jaipur as they head back to their handler's home at midday.

We queued up in the garden courtyard at the bottom of the fortress and waited about fifteen minutes or so until it was our turn to ride. Noelani and I went together; we were required to sit side-saddle in this pink-colored riding carriage that was strapped to the elephant from all angles. A flimsy guard rail was the only thing holding us back, and we were cautioned not to lean against it by our elephant guide. We handed our cameras to Jay and Serge so they could take our picture but the elephant began moving the moment we sat down. Frantically, we reached out to grab our cameras. Too late. The elephant was already heading up the road. There are two things I cherish most when I travel: my passport…*and my camera*. It was difficult for me to relax knowing I didn't have my precious Nikon with me. Luckily, Jay gave our cameras to the elephant guide behind us (who was transporting Ralph and Marilee) and he was able to reach us fairly quickly (taking our picture in the process as we clung to the elephant carriage and tried to smile).

Now that we had our cameras, the next order of business was trying to stay seated. The Indian fellow who was 'steering' our elephant (whose name, by the way, was Katarina) kept telling us to lean back, but it was physically impossible to do so. Every time Katarina took a step, her haunches would shift abruptly and we would go either forward or backward. Since we were advised not to hang on to the guard rail we had no choice but to hold tightly to the sides of the carriage (or each other) to prevent from slipping forward. And let me tell you, it was quite a drop. As our elephant caravan slowly made its way up the walled hillside road, our feet were actually suspended *over* this wall,

affording us not only a beautiful panoramic view of Lake Maota below and the surrounding mountains, but also giving us a terrifying idea of how far we would fall if we slid off! The ride to the top was rather cumbersome, as the caravan would, at times, become bottlenecked. Occasionally, we'd experience a refreshing sprinkle of water…only to discover it was actually the saliva (or snot) of the elephants coming down the road next to us.

We dismounted inside the main courtyard of Amber Fort, saying our grateful (*believe me*) goodbyes to Katarina, surprised when the animal lifted her trunk towards us and waved at the mention of her name. We waited patiently in whatever shade we could find until the last of the group had arrived and then followed Jay to one of the upper level courtyards to hear his lecture on the fortress before we entered the palace complex.

Amber Fort consists of four main parts or levels, each with its separate courtyard. We entered through the Sun Gate or *Suraj Pol* (so called because it faces the rising sun on the eastern side of the fortress) into the main courtyard (the *Jaleb Chowk*), a wide open space used to assemble the soldiers or conduct military parades. The cavalry had a stable here, as well. Since this was the main entrance it would have been heavily guarded. From here we climbed a large stone stairway to the second courtyard passing the Sila Diva Temple on the right where the Rajput Maharajas would worship (and, until not too long ago, perform animal sacrifice rituals). The second level courtyard contains the Public Audience Hall (*Diwan-i-Am*) where the maharaja would hear and receive petitions from the public. To the right one passes through the Ganesh Gate, the ornately decorated entrance into the maharajas' palaces. Ganesh is the elephant-like Hindu god who vanquishes all obstacles in a person's life and is seen as a symbol of good luck, his image is inlaid in marble above the palace complex entranceway.

The third level, or courtyard, contains the private quarters of the royal family and their servants. Long, polished hallways connect the second level, which contains beautiful mosaics and sculptures, and two royal buildings opposite each other separated by a Mughal-inspired garden. The building on the left side is called *Jai Mandir*, but is more popularly referred to as *Sheesh Mahal* (mirror palace) because it is covered in exquisite glass inlaid panels and has mirrored ceilings, all in a convex shape decorated with bright painting and silver foil designed to glitter underneath the glow of candlelight. I'm sure the lighting effect at night must be spectacular. The base of one of the pillars in front of the Sheesh Mahal has a large 'magic flower' fresco carved in marble depicting two butterflies hovering over a flower, but if you hold up your hand and partially obscure parts of the panel, you'll be able to see seven unique designs: an elephant trunk, a hooded cobra, a fish tail, a lotus, a cob of corn, a lion's tale and a scorpion. Pretty cool! The other building on the second level is known as *Sukh Mahal* (pleasure palace) and is entered through a very ornate sandalwood door. A piped in water source kept this building cool in the summer which drained into the garden. Just south of this courtyard is the Palace of Man Singh I, the oldest section of the fort, completed in 1599. This was the main palace, and has a pillared pavilion in its courtyard used as a meeting venue by the maharanis (the royal queens). Surrounding this courtyard are rooms with open balconies. Frescoes and colored tiles decorate the palace. The fourth courtyard contained the royal females'

chambers (known as the Zenana). This is where the queens, mistresses and concubines of the maharajas lived. There is a common corridor leading to all the rooms so the king could discreetly slip into any chamber without being seen. I was reminded of a Mel Brooks line: "It's good to be the king"……*or the maharaja*!

We spent about an hour and a half exploring the Amber Fort. I particularly enjoyed the latticework windows facing the courtyards. And the higher up the palace levels we climbed, the better the view of the surrounding Aravalli hillside. We could see the mighty defensive walls of the Amber-Jaigarh fort complex stretching out for miles in either direction throughout the valley. It was a formidable sight indeed, reminding me of China's Great Wall. No wonder the Kachwahas ruled for so long! When it was time to leave we exited the fort via the Moon Gate (*Chand Pol*) in the main courtyard – opposite the Sun Gate entrance. The Moon Gate served as the official entry point for the local people. It has a long, winding stone pathway that leads to the ancient town of Amer, a UNESCO Heritage city which depends heavily on the tourism trade surrounding the fort.

As we descended the pathway we were mobbed by aggressive street vendors who hawked their wares almost in our faces. Particularly annoying were the photographers who took pictures of the group as we rode the elephants up to the fort. Jay warned us about them on the bus, and told us to ignore them if we did not want to buy their pictures. The fellow who took *our* photo was so persistent that eventually Noelani broke down and bought some. They were not very flattering, either; he photographed us while the elephant was tossing us back and forth in the carriage! Noelani also purchased two Ganesh sculptures from one particularly pesky vendor who actually walked from the top of the fort all the way down to the town with us – the whole while pleading with her to buy his products. As irritating as he was, I was impressed with his tenacity. Just before we re-boarded our tour bus he made Noelani a great final offer that she simply could not refuse.

I had mixed emotions concerning the street vendors. While they pissed me off entirely at times, *I also felt pity for them*. As I type these words I'm sitting comfortably in front of a computer, with a cup of coffee and a snack nearby, in my air-conditioned apartment. God only knows what kind of living conditions these poor vendors endure on a daily basis, or the pressure and desperation they must feel each day trying to sell their wares so they can feed their families. Throughout the trip, on an almost near-constant basis, I had to *force* myself to keep things in perspective. An unusual feeling, indeed.

Our next stop was another 'official store' visit, a Rajasthan carpet and handicraft shop. On our drive there we stopped to photograph the *Jal Mahal* (Water Palace) built in the middle of the Man Sagar Lake in Jaipur. This interesting five story palace, made of red sandstone and designed in typical Rajput and Mughal architecture, was constructed by Jai Singh II in the 18th century. Actually, he did the *final* restorations on this summer palace; the original foundation was laid two centuries earlier after a dam was erected to ease drought conditions in the area. Over time, deforestation of the surrounding Aravalli hillsides (and natural changes in wind and rain patterns) conspired to dump tons of silt into the lake, raising the lakebed, causing the bottom four floors of the palace to be

constantly submerged under water during the monsoon season when the lake rapidly rises. This unexpected 'design flaw' led the royal family to eventually abandon the palace. Restoration projects initiated by the Rajasthan government in recent years have saved the building from further deterioration. From the distance, it makes for an odd view, this beautiful palace in the middle of the water. I had one of my fellow travelers take a picture of me while I posed with an adorable street girl on the pier overlooking the Man Sagar Lake.

When we arrived at the carpet and handicraft store the owner gave us a demonstration on how textiles are made (there were workers operating old fashioned looms), and how ink patterns are stamped onto the finished textile materials, explaining that the inks used are derived from local vegetation. He even asked for some volunteers to offer their shirts for a free ink printing. I raised my hand and he imprinted the upper left portion of my grey T-Shirt with a black ink design of a tiger with the words 'Jaipur' over it. The shop owner proudly announced this was now a permanent emblem and would not wash off. I can report he was full of malarkey. When I returned home and washed the shirt, the ink faded like a long-ago memory. After the demonstrations we were served refreshments and taken to the showroom. Again, everything was gorgeous…*and pricey*. I saw wool carpets, beautiful scarves, sheets, jackets, shirts and blouses, all of it designed and manufactured right there in the shop. Noelani and Nina bought some scarves after getting the salesman to knock down the price. The two were like a wrestling tag-team, taking turns 'attacking' the salesman until he agreed to their price. From the store we headed to a local hotel called the Holiday Inn for lunch (no affiliation with the international chain with the same name). I ordered the *laal maas,* a Rajasthani lamb dish prepared in a spicy curry and served with rice. Delicious!

Our whirlwind tour of Jaipur continued with a visit to the Jantar Mantar observatory in the heart of the old district. People who are scientifically-minded will really enjoy this stop. Built in the early 18th century by Jai Singh II, the local ruler and Mughal commander (he also constructed the observatory in Delhi), this fascinating site is a collection of fixed astronomical instruments constructed out of stone and marble, designed for observing outer space with the naked eye. As a UNESCO Heritage site, the Jantar Mantar serves as an important historical record of the astronomical skills and cosmological concepts of the late Mughal period, and constitutes the best set (and some of the largest) of the fixed monument instruments in all of India. Prince Jai Singh II was himself an avid astronomer, and Jantar Mantar was a culmination of the Ptolemaic tradition of positional astronomy handed down through the centuries and practiced by many civilizations of the day.

We were met by a local guide who specialized in the Jantar Mantar observatory. I'm not sure if he was employed there, or an astronomer by trade, but he sure knew his business. Unfortunately, his accent was thick enough to carve steel and I barely understood what he was saying, which, from the little I did understand, was very technical in nature. By now, the sun was beating down on us unmercifully. Due to the positioning of the fixed instruments there was practically no shade anywhere on the observatory grounds. I can't say this was one of my favorite stops (science and math were

never my strong suit) but it was *definitely* interesting. Our guide took us around the whole complex, showing us the more important instruments. Most of them were fairly large, and each an engineering marvel in its own right. Many of these devices can still be used today to accurately measure time, predict eclipses or track stars and planets. There are giant sundials that can tell the exact time of day to within two seconds. And while the Jantar Mantar is a popular tourist attraction, the observatory is still used by local astronomers and students. For an amateur historian such as myself – I have a degree in history from Rutgers University – the significance of such a site is the various religious, scientific and political needs that it served. In addition to furthering the scientific study of astronomy, the Jantar Mantar gave rise to social practices linked to cosmology, and became a symbol of royal authority, as the rulers could predict eclipses and tell their farmers when to plant their crops for better harvests. Such knowledge not only benefited the rest of society, but also inspired awe, which I am sure the rulers used to their advantage.

From the observatory we walked to the Maharaja City Palace nearby. This palace was once the seat of the Kachwaha Rajput clan. Jai Singh II built the original structure between 1729 and 1732 when he moved his capital from Amber to Jaipur, designing the initial layout and the outer defensive walls. Succeeding maharajas constructed much of the complex we see today, which consists of gardens, courtyards and palace buildings. Indian Independence put an end to the maharaja's rule, but the descendents of the royal family still retain their titles (and properties, apparently) and live in the Chandra Mahal (one of several palaces within the complex). While much of the Maharaja City Palace is closed to the public, a good portion of it serves as a public museum.

We entered through the *Virendra Pol*, one of three gates leading into the complex, passing two beautifully sculptured marble elephants by the entrance archway. Jay gave us a very brief lecture on the City Palace before turning us loose to explore on our own. I started my tour in the *Diwan-I-Khas*, a marble-floored chamber in the middle of the first courtyard, resembling a wide, stone pavilion. This was used as a private audience hall and contains the two largest sterling silver vessels ever made (each over five feet tall and weighing 750 pounds). They were crafted for Maharaja Sawai Madho Singh II just before his visit to England in 1901 to attend the coronation of King Edward VII. A devout Hindu, the maharaja had each vessel filled with 4000 liters of water from the sacred Ganges River for his personal consumption during the trip. (Apparently, the Ganges River was much cleaner back then). In the center of the Diwan-I-Khas were several Indian women who would do henna paintings on your hand for a fee. Noelani got one done, but I don't think she was pleased with the results.

I explored the museum inside the Mubarak Mahal (one of the two major palaces) known as the *Diwan-I-Aam* (the Hall of Public Audience); a regal, high-ceiling chamber painted in rich red and gold colors. Along the walls were paintings and photographic portraits of the maharajas who have ruled Jaipur. This museum also served as an art gallery, with exquisite miniature paintings, embroidered rugs, ancient Hindu texts, and Kashmir shawls and carpets. In the center of the chamber was the golden throne of the maharaja. Photography was not permitted. Serge, who entered the museum after me, did not know this and started snapping away. One of the guards immediately approached him

with a surly attitude demanding he either delete the picture he'd just taken or pay a 500 rupee fine. Serge deleted the picture.

From here I headed over to the weapons museum on the second floor of the Maharani Palace (the former residence of the royal queens). The ceiling in this chamber-turned-museum is covered with unique frescoes. But what really catches the eye are the royal weapons on display, ranging from swords and daggers to muskets and flint stock firearms. I saw a jewel-encrusted sword given by Queen Victoria to Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh, a walking stick gun, an usual dagger which is meant to disembowel the victim once it is withdrawn, a sword with a pistol attached to it and other weapons dating as far back as the 1500's. Next, I tried to tour the Chandra Mahal, the main palace, but the descendents of the royal family still live here and much of this seven-storey building is off limits to the public. There *is* a museum on the first floor, which includes personal items belonging to the royal family; disappointingly, I was not able to locate it as the sections I came across were all closed off. One interesting note: whenever the current maharaja is in the palace, the flag of the royal family is unfurled from the roof of the Chandra Mahal.

With about twenty minutes to go before our group rendezvoused, I headed over to the Palace City bookstore/gift shop to see what kind of souvenirs they had. The shop had four resident artists (who happen to be brothers and are equally talented) plying their artwork from here. I met one of them who specializes in finely detailed drawings and purchased a very unique colored artwork of the famous Seven Sacred Cities of India, each with its corresponding animal design. It now hangs on my apartment wall.

By 5:00pm we wearily boarded the bus and headed back to the hotel. I had pre-purchased the optional dinner-show excursion for later that evening. Jay instructed us to meet in the lobby by no later than 7:15. Exhausted from the combination of jet lag and a long day of sightseeing, I decided to take a short nap before the dinner-show. When Jay called my hotel room inquiring if I was still going, I groggily checked my watch and saw that I had overslept! Unable to shower again, I threw on a nylon safari shirt and rushed downstairs where everyone was already waiting on the bus. *How embarrassing*! I apologized for being late and slinked into my seat.

I do not recall the name of the restaurant only that it was inside of a famous hotel in Jaipur. When we arrived it was already dark. The welcoming reception was amazing: trees near the entrance courtyard were decorated and lit up like it was Christmas, men and women in colorful costumes greeted us with refreshments, uniformed guys on horses and elephants welcomed us gallantly. I thought to myself: this is going to be a good night! Well, I *thought* too soon. We were led to a long table on the restaurant lawn, not far from a puppet stage and an impromptu dance floor. It was hot and a bit muggy. A group of four Indian musicians began playing native instruments while several young women took turns doing cultural dances dressed in colorful saris and costumes……none of it seemed spectacular in the least, not even the bowl balancing or fire dance numbers. They invited some of the tour members to go up and try their hand at Indian folk dancing. Pleshette, who took up belly dancing back home, surprised us with her sensual hip-swaying moves.

I thought she was better than the actual performers! When the show was over, the musicians and dancers stood waiting in front of a tip basket and wouldn't leave until we coughed up some money (even though tipping was already included in the price). The amateurish puppet show that followed was a joke. It was funny simply because it was awful, with the puppeteer exposing his arms repeatedly during the performance and tangling the puppet wires. I wasn't even impressed with the food, a buffet that featured nondescript Indian cuisine. At the end, most of us just wanted to leave, so we stood up and started heading for the exit to let Jay know we had had enough. This was definitely not worth the price we paid.

From my experience, these cultural dinner show excursions can be a hit or miss affair, usually designed for tourists (rarely do you see any locals at these places). Sometimes the food is great and the show sucks; sometimes it's the other way around. This particular one – for me anyway – was simply awful. At the end of each tour I tell myself that I'll never book another one of these hokey dinner shows again…but I always do. *Why?* Because I'm an idiot.

We were back at the hotel by 10:00pm. That night I dreamt I was being chased down the streets of Jaipur by a knife-wielding puppet named Man Singh.

Day Six

I awoke around two in the morning, watched an episode of *Mad Men* and dozed off again for another two hours. I had breakfast with Noelani, Joy and Dede. Joy was still not feeling well, hardly able to eat. Krystal and her mom, Katie, were also quite ill and did not make it downstairs for breakfast. In fact, each morning someone was noticeably absent during the buffet, having been afflicted by some nasty intestinal bug the night before. At the rate we were falling sick (one by one) I became a little paranoid, feeling like a character in an Agatha Christie novel (*Murder on the Indian Subcontinent Express*) wondering who was going to be next?

By 8:30 am we were on our tour bus heading for the city of Agra. It was Tuesday, April 9th. In India, each day of the week is named after some god or goddess in the Hindu pantheon. Today was Parvati Day, the wife of Lord Shiva. We drove east along National Highway 11 for most of the day. The distance between Jaipur and Agra is approximately 235 kilometers, supposedly a four hour trip, but it took us much longer. As we left Jaipur we passed an enormous statue of Hanuman – the monkey god – by the side of the road whose face reminded me of Cornelius from the *Planet of the Apes*. About an hour into our ride we stopped to take photos of a beautiful temple along a lonely stretch of highway. I do not recall the name of the temple (or the god to which it was dedicated) but

it was stunning to look at, with multi-colored towers and sculptures adorning the ledges. There were public toilets along one side of the walkway leading to the temple and I decided to take this opportunity to, um, *relieve* myself before we continued down the highway. As I entered the toilet stall (which had no roof) I glanced up momentarily and saw three local women from the adjacent building staying down at me. Needless to say I couldn't concentrate on the task at hand. Luckily, on the other side of the walkway were enclosed pay toilets. *Ten rupees never felt so good!*

During this long road trip Jay spoke about India's burgeoning population, which he claimed was just over 1.1 billion. Although, I would not put too much credence on 'official statistics' here since many of the poor rural or urban areas do not use computerized systems, and I am certain many deaths or live births go unregistered, or are not compiled properly in national data banks. Trying to figure out the *actual* number of citizens in this country in any given year would be tantamount to hitting the lotto. But the *general* consensus seems to indicate the population is growing rapidly, and each year adds as many people to its ranks as there are in the entire country of Australia, or roughly 24 million. Yikes!

Jay expounded on why India's population is so high. He said there were numerous factors. First, most of the country's poor remain largely uneducated, a fact one could expect in any country, but here, the poor number over 500 million. To put that into perspective, you would need to take the entire population of the United States – and throw in Canada, Mexico and most of Central America – to equal the amount of people living below the poverty line in India. *A staggering reality*. There is no social security system or unemployment benefits in India, and one of the safeguards against dying destitute in old age is to have many children who can look after you. Another factor is the cultural desire to have a son; families will keep having children until one (or more) is born. Why? When girls marry, they go to live with their husband's family while the sons stay home and support their parents. There are other, less obvious factors. For instance, electrical services in the rural or poor urban areas are very limited, or non-existent, so families tend to go to bed earlier, which leads to more…*well, you figure it out*. The lack of government support or social services, due to corruption and mismanagement, is creating what Jay calls unbearable living situations for the underprivileged, conditions we witnessed first-hand along the roadways. He firmly believes things will come to a head soon, possibly within a decade, if these issues are not addressed. If he's right, I'd hate to be a tourist in India on *that* day.

Our guide balanced the gloomy population perspective with a list of fun facts about his country. The national flower of India is the lotus, the national bird is the peacock, and the national animal is the tiger. The national drink is *chai* (tea). And here's one that threw us, the national sport of India is *field hockey* (I assumed it was cricket based on the extensive television coverage of the games). India has 28 states (the smallest being the former Portuguese colony of Goa along the southwestern coastline) and 17 union territories. Around this time my mind started to wander and I stopped taking notes and just enjoyed the view. The road from Jaipur to Agra cuts mostly through rural areas. We passed one wheat field after another and small farming communities that became more

'rustic' the further into the countryside we went. The centers of these towns were nothing more than a small collection of one and two storey businesses (some made of wood with thatched roofs) by the side of the road. We drove by towns like Basi, Dubbi, Sakrai, Patoli, Mahwa and Helena. Occasionally, we'd see a shepherd walking hundreds of sheep down the highway. And, of course, the odd combination of vehicles and animals along the road. Piles of cow dung (cow pies) – used as cooking fuel – were stacked in neat pyramid-like mounds by the side of the homes. From time to time we'd catch glimpses of local women sitting on the ground shaping cow pies, their elbows deep in bovine excrement – *a thankless job if ever there was one*! Beyond the wheat fields were large kilns baking red bricks used in construction, the tall smokestacks emitting thick plumes of black smoke.

We stopped for lunch at the beautiful Hotel Surya Vilas Palace in Bharatpur. It took a while for the confused wait staff to bring us our lunch, but the food was good. I ordered the *tandoor* (oven-cooked) chicken and a side of fried rice. From here, we drove about thirty minutes to the amazing deserted city of Fatehpur Sikri, a UNESCO World Heritage site approximately 37 kilometers west of Agra.

This ancient capital was founded by the third Mughal emperor, Akbar, in 1569, to honor the Sufi saint Sheikh Salim Chishti who lived in a cavern nearby. Akbar believed that the mystic Salim Chishti had blessed him with a son (whom he named Salim) and wanted to show his appreciation by building this splendid city for his use. He later transferred the capital of his empire from Agra to Fatehpur Sikri for fifteen years (1571 – 1585) before eventually returning to Agra. His decision to abandon the city was due to the scarcity of water in the region and the proximity of the constantly warring Rajputana areas to the northwest. The location of Sikri is an ancient one – continuously inhabited since the Stone Age – lying on the banks of a large natural lake (which gradually dried up) along an extension of the Vindhya Mountain Range that geographically separates India into North and South.

Fatehpur Sikri is unique in that it was the first planned city of the Mughals. The efficient drainage and water supply system adopted here (in such an arid place) suggests a high level of civil engineering. The naturally sloping landscape was connected by terraces upon which the Mughals built various large complexes, including the Jama Masjid (mosque) capable of holding 10,000 worshippers, its enormous courtyard containing the white marble tomb of Saint Salim. Constructed of mostly red sandstone, Fatehpur Sikri is a classic example of Indo-Muslim architecture, a fusion of indigenous and foreign cultures. But what I found most striking about this place was its lovely majestic solitude. The city has been abandoned (but preserved) for over four hundred years, and walking through the quiet, empty courtyards and buildings was both fascinating and eerie, made even more so by the fact there were not many visitors when we arrived.

We entered through a side courtyard with a well-maintained lawn area that was used for public gatherings. Unfortunately, we did not go through the *Buland Darwasa*, the massive triumphal gateway built in 1575 to celebrate Akbar's successful military

campaign in Gujarat. Instead, we marched directly to the enormous central courtyard containing clusters of royal buildings. Jay would lecture in different areas of the compound before letting us wander about and take pictures. The first major building we saw here was the *Diwan-i-Khas*, the Hall of Private Audience, a rather plain square building with four *chhatris* (elevated, dome-shaped pavilions used in Rajput architecture denoting honor and pride) on each corner of the roof. The interesting thing about this building is the central pillar inside, which extends upward like a huge decorative fan, its octagonal shaft carved in floral and geometric patterns. This was where Emperor Akbar would meet with representatives of the different regions.

Near the Diwan-i-Khas is the *Anup Talao*, a beautiful, ornamental pool which has a square platform at its center with stone bridges leading to it from all sides. The platform was used by singers to entertain the royal family and visitors. Surrounding this pool are numerous important buildings in the royal enclave, including Akbar's residence, the *Panch Mahal*, a palace with four elevated recess levels reminiscent of Buddhist temples, and the *Khwabgah* (Chamber of Dreams) where the emperor held private court with close friends, took afternoon naps and otherwise 'relaxed' with members of his harem. Next to the Panch Mahal is the simple palace structure of Empress Miriam-uz-Zamani, Akbar's wife. Behind the Panch Mahal are the city's hospital and a three room structure known as the *Ankh Michauli* where royal treasure was kept (there are monster carvings on the ceiling to scare off thieves). In the northern-most corner of this royal courtyard is the large *Diwan-i-Am*, the Hall of Public Audience, where Akbar would sit in his royal box surrounded by his ministers to hear petitions from the public or mete out justice to law-breakers. Throughout Fatehpur Sikri there are many religious and votive monuments, owing to Akbar's piety.

I really enjoyed touring this site, and highly recommend it. You will see many palace fortresses in India, but none as mysterious as Fatehpur Sikri. From here we boarded our bus and drove for about an hour more before we reached the Trident Hotel in Agra. As we entered the outskirts of the city we again experienced some rather depressing slum areas. The closer we got to our hotel, the more congested the streets became. Because of the Taj Mahal, Agra attracts millions of tourists annually so I was under the impression this city would be better maintained than most. But as was the case with Jaipur (and, for that matter, most of India's cities), Agra was not designed to hold its current ever-expanding population of approximately 3 million, and the place looked dirty and run down. On the way into the city we had to stop momentarily at a railroad crossing; a commuter train whizzed by on the tracks. The train's compartments seemed crammed to capacity with passengers, reminding me that we were leaving for our next destination *via train* in two days. The thought already made me nervous.

The street scenes in Agra were amazing, *from a cultural point of view*. We drove through very crowded market areas, with vendors selling everything imaginable – from sacks of colorful grains and fruits to shoes and garments – in front of shops, or in push carts, or on the sidewalk. Stray bulls competed with tuk-tuks and motorbikes for a piece of the street. Children played cricket in the parks. We passed men urinating out in the open by the side of the road, and I even photographed one guy squatting in a field moving

his bowels in plain sight of everyone, his pants pushed down around his knees. There was trash everywhere, and open sewage drains.

The Trident Hotel in Agra, by contrast, was absolutely beautiful, a spacious, modern hotel with plenty of amenities. The large pool area was situated in the center of a nicely landscaped courtyard with fountains and gardens. My room was big and comfortably furnished. There were only two drawbacks. The first occurred around dusk when the hotel staff sprayed the entire pool area with some kind of smoky pesticide (the mosquitos here can be brutal). They claimed, from behind surgical masks, that the smoke was harmless, but everyone ran for cover nonetheless, especially when the 'cloud' threatened to engulf everything in its wake. The second drawback was their expensive restaurant, which offered both a buffet and a sit-down menu. The price of the buffet was $30 per person *plus* a 20% service tax. Yikes! For that kind of money (in South Asia, anyway) I expect to be spoon-fed by naked women. The menu prices were just as outrageous. I mention this because dinner was on our own that night.

I met Noelani down by the pool area at 6:30 pm and proceeded to the restaurant where we spent a good thirty minutes perusing the menu and waiting for Riad and Amira to join us. After several minutes the waiter realized we were hesitant to order anything due to their prices – Joy and Dede had gone to look for a McDonald's somewhere in the vicinity, and I was thinking *aloud* that perhaps we should do the same – and he offered us a special 'deal'. For 1400 rupees (for the two of us) he would bring us an order of *dal* and a vegetable curry dish, plus plenty of white rice, chips and garlic *naan* (flat bread). We jumped at the offer, thanking him profusely. When Riad and Amira showed up they opted for the buffet and brought back enough food to the table so everyone could share, including dessert. (Thank you, Riad and Amira). It turned into one heck of a feast. Elsie also joined us, but she drank two Long Island ice teas from the bar and was *six* sheets to the wind by the time the meal was over.

By 9:30 pm, after a wonderful dinner and great conversation, we called it a night and returned to our rooms. I slept like a baby.

Day Seven

I awoke early again (by 4:00 am) but felt well-rested and didn't even try to go back to sleep. I shaved, showered, made coffee, wrote in my journal and watched the BBC until it was time for breakfast. I sat with Noelani, Riad and Amira. We were all excited by the idea of seeing the Taj Mahal. By 8:00 am we assembled on the bus for another long day of fabulous sight-seeing.

Agra is an ancient city that lies on the banks of the Yamuna River in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Although the current city's founding has been generally

attributed to Sultan Sikandar Lodi (ruler of the Delhi Sultanate) in 1504, there are historical records indicating settlements have been here since around 1000 BC. Eventually, Zahir-ud-din Muhammad Babur, a conqueror from Central Asia, was able to bring a large portion of the Indian Subcontinent under his control and establish the Mughal Dynasty in 1526. Akbar, the third and greatest of the Mughal emperors, consolidated his control over India and made Agra the capital of his empire in the 1550's. In 1649, his grandson, the fifth Mughal emperor, Shah Jahan, shifted the capital to Delhi (or, as it became known, Shahjahanabad).

During the time of Akbar, the city of Agra began its Golden Age. He built marvelous structures, including the towering ramparts of the Red Fort (*Lal Qil'a*) of Agra – more commonly referred to as Agra Fort – not to mention the amazing city of Fatehpur Sikri nearby. His grandson, Shah Jahan, would later build the Taj Mahal here. These three historical places – the Taj Mahal, the Agra Fort and Fatehpur Sikri, all UNESCO World Heritage sites – make this city one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world. But there are many other wonderful structures here, as well. The *I'timid-ud-Daulah's Tomb*, known as the 'Baby Taj', built by Empress Nur Jahan for her father, who served as Chief Minister for Emperor Jahangir. *Akbar's Tomb*, located 13 kilometers from the fort. The *Mankameshwar Temple*, one of four ancient temples dedicated to Lord Shiva, situated in the old market area. The *Ram Bagh*, the oldest Mughal garden in India, built by the first emperor, Babur, along the banks of the Yamuna River. And these are just a few of the long list of Mughal wonders to be seen here.

Today, the 'modern' city of Agra – which constitutes the third axis of India's famous Golden Triangle tourism zone – is a bustling economic hub of thousands of small-scale industrial units (from factories to iron foundries) cranking out leather goods, brassware, carpets, handicrafts, *Zardozi* embroidery (done with metallic thread) and fine marble carvings and table tops (with inlay work). The city is also famous for its varieties of *petha*, a soft translucent candy made from white pumpkin. Roughly 40% of the population is still dependent upon farming. Agra also has one of the highest percentages of self-employed males in the country, who either sell goods to the public (or the millions of tourists who visit annually) or provide some kind of service.

Like most thriving cities in India, congestion is a real problem in Agra, as more and more folks settle here looking for work. Behind the exciting veneer of this industrial and historical city lie the poverty and squalor of numerous slums, home to the burgeoning urban poor population. The infrastructure in these areas is very bad, or non-existent, and open sewage drains can be seen everywhere. Sanitation is the most pressing problem for the poor since they have little access to adequate toilet facilities and often defecate outdoors or into the open drains. Access to good quality drinking water in the slums is very limited. The over-crowding has created traffic congestion on the streets of Agra that was even more insane than what we had encountered thus far throughout the trip. With no civic sense, the population here floods onto the roadways in a seemingly hysterical mass of bodies, vehicles and blaring horns. But, incredibly enough, there is a method to all this madness, and traffic does flow (even with all the stray animals).

We drove from our hotel to a street several blocks away from the Taj Mahal and transferred to an 'electrical bus'. In order to prevent exhaust fumes from discoloring the white marble structure of the Taj, vehicular traffic is not permitted within a certain distance of the mausoleum. A few minutes later we reached the front of the site and marched through a vendor's area to a security checkpoint where we were patted down by armed guards looking for weapons or anything that could sully the national treasure of India (food, pens, magic markers, etc… and, for some unknown reason, extra camera batteries, which are not permitted). We continued through the massive main entrance gate (*darwaza-i-rauza*) and finally stood in awe of the most beautiful mausoleum ever built. *Wow*. I was speechless. No, that's not exactly true, I remember uttering, "Oh my gosh" over and over again. And just like Machu Picchu defines Peru, or the Great Pyramids define Egypt, I felt that witnessing the Taj Mahal was definitely a defining moment on this journey. *This* was definitely worth the trip, a sentiment echoed repeatedly by my fellow travelers as we clicked away with our cameras.

As you approach the site from the street, the mausoleum is actually blocked from view by the tall red sandstone walls that border the complex on three sides (the forth faces the Yamuna River and is left open). The wall is interspersed with domed *chattris* (kiosks) which may have served as guard towers or viewing stands. Once you enter through the Main Gate – which is a Mughal architectural wonder in its own right, made mostly of marble with great arches, vaulted ceilings and walls decorated with bas-relief, inlaid artwork and geometric designs – you enter an enormous garden area, beautifully landscaped, with reflecting pools that extend towards the mausoleum. This is the spot, just beyond the main gate, where all visitors gasp at the beauty of the Taj Mahal for the first time. A professional photographer hired by GATE 1 was waiting for us to take a group photo. We lined up in front of the garden for the picture, with the Taj in the background, but had to wait several minutes because poor Krystal was not feeling well and actually threw up when we entered the complex. I'm not sure if this was a testament to the allure of the Taj Mahal *or Krystal's resolve*, but no intestinal ailment was going to keep her from seeing this great structure. Kudos, Krystal!

Jay gave us a brief lecture and made some suggestions on what to see, and then gave us an hour and a half to explore. It was relatively early in the morning, and the grounds were not yet *packed* with visitors so we were able to take great shots of the mausoleum from the main gate entrance without huge crowds obscuring the view. I was with Noelani, and we walked down the middle of the Mughal garden towards a raised marble water tank (*al Hawd al-Kawthar*, or the Tank of Abundance) in the center of the complex that divides the reflecting pools stretching from the gateway to the tomb. There is a lone marble bench here supposedly built for Princess Diana when she visited the site in the early 1980's. From this raised level you can see not only the splendor of the mausoleum, but the breadth and scope of the garden. The garden is divided into four quarters with sixteen sunken flowerbeds, all divided by avenues lined with trees and fountains. The design of this garden reflects the symbolism of *Jannah* (Paradise), which is depicted as a garden with four rivers flowing through it. The Yamuna River at the back of the Taj Mahal was incorporated into this design. The uniqueness of this particular layout is that

the tomb (the Taj) lies at the end of the garden and not in its center, which is uncharacteristic for a Mughal garden-tomb structure.

The Taj Mahal complex took 22 years to built (1632 – 1653), and was done in stages. First the tomb was erected; than the rest of the site. It was built on a parcel of land just to the south of the walled city of Agra (the Agra Fort) donated by Maharajah Jai Singh (who was given a large palace in the center of the city in return for the property). Initially, three acres were excavated, filled with dirt to reduce seepage and leveled at about 165 feet above the banks of the Yamuna River. Construction of the mausoleum itself was a major and expensive undertaking, lasting 12 years. Wells had to be dug around the tomb area and filled with stone and rubble to form a solid foundation. An enormous brick scaffold was constructed to build the mausoleum, with a fifteen kilometer-long earthen ramp used to drag the heavy marble materials to the site in specially-made wagons via teams of twenty to thirty oxen. Tens of thousands of laborers were employed, and materials from all over Asia were used. Although a board of architects under Imperial supervision was tasked to build the Taj Mahal, it is generally accepted that the Afghan-born architect Ustad Ahmad Lahauri was the principal designer.

The story behind the Taj is legendary. In 1631, during the height of Mughal strength and prosperity, Mumtaz Mahal, the third wife of Emperor Shah Jahan passed away giving birth to their fourteenth child. Her real name was Arjumand Banu, and hailed from an Agra family of Persian nobility. The title Mumtaz Mahal meant “the chosen one from the palace” because she was the favorite of the emperor. In fact, once married, they were mostly an exclusive couple, and rarely separated. She was even by his side when he conducted military campaigns, becoming his most trusted advisor. Her death deeply saddened the emperor who supposedly went into seclusion for an entire year to grieve the loss of his true love. When he re-emerged, he commissioned the Taj Mahal. In essence, this great structure, and the complex surrounding it, is nothing more than one man’s final attempt to profess his devotion to the woman he so dearly loved. This enduring sentimental reason probably draws just as many visitors to the Taj each year as does the architectural wonder of the site itself.

The actual tomb of Mumtaz Mahal is the main attraction of the entire complex. The design of the mausoleum is Persian in origin. Resting on a square plinth, it is a symmetrical building with an enormous arch-shaped entrance doorway topped by a large dome and a finial (a decorative ornament at the top of the dome). Basically, the Taj is a large, multi-chambered cube resembling an unequal octagon with beveled edges rising roughly 180 feet on all sides. These sides have huge vaulted archways called *pishtaq* with two smaller archways (with balconies) on either side. The Taj is framed by four minarets, one on each corner of the plinth. The whole thing is made of stunning white marble and decorated with carvings inlaid with gemstones, calligraphy, abstract forms and vegetative symbols (under Islam, it is prohibited to show anthropomorphic forms). But the most spectacular feature of the tomb is the enormous (115 feet high) onion-shaped marble dome that surmounts it. There are four *chattris* placed on each of its corners to emphasis the size of this trademark dome. When Noelani and I reached the

tomb we had to slip plastic bags over our shoes before we could climb the stairs leading to the entranceway.

Inside the actual tomb, the octagonal chamber can be entered by all sides (although, for security purposes, only the main archway entrance is used, the rest are closed off). Throughout the inner chamber there is extensive inlay work of precious and semi-precious gemstones. The caretakers inside would delight visitors by holding up a small flashlight to these gemstones, making them translucent. Surrounding the center tomb area is a series of *pishtaqs* (vaulted archways) on top of more *pishtaqs* which contain viewing balconies. In the center of the chamber are the two cenotaphs of Emperor Shah Jahan and his wife Mumtaz (their *actua*l remains are entombed somewhere beneath the structure). Both monuments are decorated with gemstones and calligraphy praising the two. It is interesting to note that the cenotaph of Emperor Shah Jahan is the only visibly asymmetrical thing in the entire complex. The emperor was eventually imprisoned by the son who succeeded him, and upon his death one of his daughters had him interned in the Taj Mahal next to his wife, a decision the original architects hadn't planned on. Surrounding the two cenotaphs are eight marble panels carved with intricate pierce work (known as *jali*).

After touring the inside of the tomb, Noelani and I ventured around the entire structure, taking photographs of the Taj Mahal from different angles. The Yamuna River, in back of the mausoleum, was pretty low as this was not yet the monsoon season in India. There is a section on the other side of the river that is supposed to render a beautiful view of the tomb at dusk or dawn. In fact, the white marble of the Taj Mahal provides quite a colorful effect throughout the day; in the early morning, as the sun rises, it is pinkish, at night it is milky white, and during a full moon it appears golden in color. As I left the tomb, I had a rather unsettling moment with one of the armed soldiers guarding the entranceway. I had assumed the plastic shoe covers were only needed for entering the mausoleum, so I removed them once we exited, which prompted the soldier to address me in a very nasty tone. Apparently, everyone who steps on the plinth foundation of the Taj has to either take their shoes off or wear plastic shoe coverings. I quickly slipped them back on, apologizing to the angry military man who looked as if he wanted to bury me inside the tomb with Shah Jahan and Mumtaz.

Adjacent to the Taj Mahal are two buildings, one on each side of the western and eastern walls, and in keeping with the symmetry of the complex they are both identical. The one along the western wall is an active mosque; the other building was constructed merely to give balance, and was probably used as a guesthouse or storage facility. Noelani and I made our way to the mosque and found it completely empty, allowing us time to roam around undisturbed. The architectural design was similar to the Jama Masjid mosque in Delhi, a long hall with three domed chambers, made of red sandstone and marble. We took photos of ourselves standing before the *mihrab* (the niche which faces Mecca) and some excellent shots of the Taj from the open doorway of the mosque.

It was now almost 10:00 am, close to our rendezvous time, so we walked back to the main entrance gate to meet up with the group. Prior to leaving the site, I took one last appreciative glance at the Taj Mahal. What a thing of beauty. *Sigh*.

We then drove to a nearby marble arts and craft shop, another 'official store' visit. The owner greeted us and led us to a room where we sat in a circle around tabletops made of marble with inlay gemstones and listened to his spiel on marble-making. It was exquisite work, as were the marble pieces adorning every inch of the wall. They did not allow us to photograph anything inside the shop, though. This, coupled with the owner's hurried manner and incredibly thick, indiscernible accent, turned me off. They provided us with refreshments and then gave us thirty minutes or so to browse their showrooms. Joy purchased a lovely marble serving tray with intricate inlay work that she had shipped back to the States.

Our next stop was the Red Fort of Agra (or the Agra Fort) situated near the Shah Jahan gardens approximately 2.5 kilometers from the Taj Mahal. It is almost identical to the Red Fort of Delhi; only it is better preserved because the British, following the Mutiny of 1857-58, razed much of the Delhi fort. Emperor Akbar chose Agra as the capital of his empire due to its central location in India. He built the initial parts of the Agra Fort on the right banks of the Yamuna River between 1565 and 1571, raising the tall red sandstone ramparts around a large moat, encompassing 94 acres of land that would become the great Imperial City of the Mughals. Succeeding emperors (especially Shah Jahan) continued to build more palaces and structures within this walled city.

The fort itself was actually built on the foundation of the previous brick fort that existed during the time of the Hindu Sikarwar Rajputs and later used by the Sultanate of Delhi, Sikandar Lodi, as his base. There are four gates, one on each side, including one that opens to the river. The two main gates, though, are the *Delhi Gate* and the *Amar Singh Gate*. The Delhi Gate on the western side was the king's official entryway, a massive formal gate embellished with marble and inlay work. To reach this entrance you had to cross a large wooden drawbridge where you would find another *inner* gate known as the Elephant's Gate (with two life-size stone elephants and riders standing guard). Because of the ascending drawbridge and the 90 degree space between the inner and outer gates, the entranceway was virtually impregnable back then. Today, the Indian military still uses a portion of the fort for training purposes and the Delhi Gate is off-limits to the public, so visitors enter through the Amar Singh Gate.

The layout of this bastioned fortress is semicircular; its chord parallel to the river, with seventy feet high walls and double ramparts offering a formidable defensive shield against any attack. We spent a good two hours here walking through much of the walled city that is open to the public. And I must confess, it was tough going because of the heat of the afternoon sun…and the fact that we'd been on our feet touring for most of the morning. I cannot speak for the others in the group, but I was thoroughly exhausted by the time we returned to the bus.

We entered through the Amar Singh Gate and walked up a long wide stone ramp way (built to allow quick access for cannons and cavalry in times of sieges) into a large courtyard. From here we toured the many palaces within the fortress, the earlier ones built of red sandstone and the newer ones (constructed under the reign of Shah Jahan in the 1600's) made of white marble, creating an interesting contrast between the structures, which lay side by side. There is also a curious mix of Hindu and Islamic architecture found here, with images of animals (birds and elephants) and dragons (taboo subjects in Islamic art) instead of the calligraphy normally seen in Mughal surface decorations. Besides the various palaces and interconnecting courtyards, we saw the *Diwan-i-Am* (Hall of Public Audience), *Diwan-i-Khas* (the Hall of Private Audience), the *Anguri Bagh* (a geometrically designed garden) and a private marble mosque used by the royal family. On the side facing the Yamuna River is an open view to the Taj Mahal; a sight that must have comforted Emperor Shah Jahan…that is, before he was imprisoned in the fortress by his own son. What irony!

By 1:00 pm we finished our tour of the Agra Fort and drove to a local restaurant called the *Riao* for lunch. Most of us really enjoyed this restaurant, which had a friendly staff and offered good Mughali dishes at very reasonable prices. I was feeling somewhat adventuresome and wanted to try a very spicy (hot) Indian meal. This was our seventh day in the country and I – from an intestinal standpoint – was faring quite well. I saw that the chicken *masala* listed in the menu was described as spicy, so I asked the waiter if it was very hot ('masala' means a combination of several spices). The first hint this dish might be *too* hot was the look on our waiter's face when I mentioned the chicken masala. "Oh, yes, sir, it is very hot and spicy" he told me in a very pleasant Indian accent. My second hint came when I inquired if the dish could be made *extra* spicy. The waiter looked at me the way one gazes at something incredulous. "Sir" he repeated, "You want it *very* spicy?" Yes, I replied, feeling triumphant in the knowledge that I was going to be sampling some real local cuisine here and not just what they feed the tourists back at the hotels. The waiter stood there with his pad and pencil, temporarily frozen, before warning me, *"It will be very hot, sir."* Like former President George W. Bush, I smiled moronically and exclaimed: "Bring it on!"

We dug into some freshly warmed garlic and ghee-lathered *naan* while we waited for our food to arrive. When I finally took my first bite of the chicken masala I could not speak for several minutes. Something incredibly hot lodged itself to the back of my throat and burned as if someone had shoved a lit candle into my mouth. It was actually *painful*. The members at my table asked me how the chicken was, probably noticing the distressed look on my face. I must have drunk my entire bottle of water trying to douse the inferno now engulfing my throat. Somehow, through sheer misguided machismo, I managed to finish the dish…and I think I only ate it to avoid looking ridiculous. Don't get me wrong, it *was* tasty, just unbelievably burning hot. When we left the restaurant my throat was very sore, a condition that worsened throughout the next two days. So much for my 'adventuresome spirit', I stuck to bland foods from that forward.

We got back to the hotel shortly after 2:00 pm. The afternoon was free so Noelani and I decided to visit a nearby shopping mall to hunt for souvenirs. We were continuously

besieged by tuk-tuk drivers offering their services the moment we started walking up the street. I was glad when we finally reached the mall, which was only a few blocks away. Many of the stores on the upper level were empty, but there were several shops on the bottom level, including an arts and crafts store that sold some really nice marble pieces just like we had seen earlier in the 'official store'. The owner of the shop was a really nice guy who charmed us with his laidback honest demeanor. He told us how we could tell if an item we wanted to buy was genuine marble: just light a match to it and if it burns or blackens, it is a fake. We thanked him and continued browsing the few stores inside the mall. Noelani was looking for some marble candleholders and found a set in another store at a really good price. She asked the two young proprietors if it was real marble. They assured her it was, so she asked them if they could perform a little test. They agreed. Noelani had them strike a match and hold it up to one of the candleholder; *it quickly caught fire*! "A-ha!" she exclaimed. We walked out of there while the two men worked frantically to save the candleholder (probably cursing us under their breath in the process). We eventually went back to the first arts and crafts store and purchased several items. I picked up a really nice decorative marble wall piece with intricate inlay work for about $90 which now hangs on the wall above my computer monitor.

Back at the hotel I was able to take a nap before dinner. By 6:15 pm I went downstairs where I gathered with Noelani and Pleshette by the pool area. Noelani had her video camera with her and she taped me for her Kindness Conversations project that she posts on YouTube. I spoke for a few minutes about the incredible kindness I encounter from my customers each day on my mail route, and what a great feeling it is to be appreciated for what I do. At 7:15 a group of us gathered in the lobby for another dinner-show excursion. I do not recall the name of the establishment, but I enjoyed it better than the one in Jaipur. We had a small dining room all to ourselves. Before dinner was served a hokey (but amusing) street magician performed (and later sold us) some tricks. Afterwards, the staff placed quite a spread before us on the table: butter chicken, *paneer* (cheese) in cream spinach sauce, *dal*, chicken kebobs, mutton *halal*, and an assortment of different types of *naan*. Sadly, most of us were still full from the earlier lunch (or were a little queasy about eating too much Indian food), leaving much of it on the table. Noelani and several other members of the group sat outside with Joy, who was not feeling well, in a section that had live Indian music (I think Noelani learned how to play the sitar). Inside, a very attractive Indian woman entertained us with several dance numbers. We got back to the hotel by 10:00pm. My throat was still red raw from the earlier lunch and was causing me much discomfort. I had to take an Ambien in order to fall asleep.

Day Eight

I awoke shortly after 4:00 am. My throat was still painful. I made several cups of tea in my room hoping the hot liquid would sooth the inflammation in my mouth. I then

shaved, showered and repacked my suitcase, leaving it outside in the hallway for the bellhop to collect just before heading to the hotel restaurant for breakfast. By 7:15 am we were getting on the bus for what would be an exhaustingly long day of traveling. Our next stop was the small city of Khajuraho in the central plains state of Madhya Pradesh, to get there required a two and a half hour train ride followed by a seven hour bus trip along a rural country road. This was the last time we would be seeing our current bus driver and his assistant, a guy I nicknamed *'paani'* – which means *water* in Hindu – since his primary purpose seemed to be handing out bottles of water on the bus. Most of us really appreciated the skill of the bus driver and tipped him well, posing for photographs with him and the assistant. Afterwards, he drove us to the Agra train station.

The Agra Cantt Railway Station is located in the southwest section of the city, near the bustling Sadar Bazaar. We pulled into the crowded parking lot and walked inside the station toting our carry-on bags; the heavy luggage had been tagged and checked in separately (by those mysterious behind-the-scenes personnel who make all these guided trips a hassle-free pleasure!). The Agra Cantt Railway station has six platforms and is a main junction point, servicing not only the central lines from Delhi to Chennai and Mumbai, but also to numerous cities throughout the region, like Jaipur, Tundla, Jhansi and Fatehbad. When we arrived at our platform there were already many local commuters waiting for the Shatabodi Express, a rather, um, *interesting* lot, and I wondered what the conditions would be like onboard. We waited for less than thirty minutes before the blue train pulled into the station and hurriedly made our way to our compartment, which, to my surprise, was quite pleasant, with a wide aisle and comfortable seats. Very courteous train personnel served us free refreshments upon leaving Agra, and there was a complimentary large bottle of water attached to the back of the seat in front of each passenger. Although the train traveled quickly from stop to stop, the ride was very smooth and quiet. The windows offered a clear panoramic view of the surrounding countryside. It was a most enjoyable experience.

We traveled through the central plains of India for the next couple of hours, the flat, often barren terrain giving way in stretches to farmlands, rolling hills and small valleys, and an occasional river. We made two brief stops in the towns of Morena and Gwalior before continuining on to Jhansi, arriving shortly after 10:30 am. The scene at the Jhansi Train Station was chaotic, with commuters cramming the platform area (some sprawled out on the floor) as we made our way outside the station building and onto an incredibly congested street where a smaller tour bus was waiting for us on the other side. Crossing this street proved to be a challenge. We had to maneuver carefully around taxis, tuk-tuks and other vehicles since there weren't any stop signs or traffic lights to give pedestrians a right-of-way. It was more like a *run for your life* free-for-all once you committed to crossing the road! As soon as we were settled on the bus our new driver took off like he had urgent business at hand, zipping through the morning traffic with professional alacrity. At one town circle, we passed a monument dedicated to Mahatma Gandhi, which depicted his life size statue leading a group of Indians to freedom.

The historic city of Jhansi is situated along the banks of the Pahuj River in the state of Uttar Pradesh. It was once the stronghold of the Chandela kings who controlled the

central plains region of India between the 10th and 13th centuries. During the 1600's, it came under the control of the rulers of Orchha. The city is famous (or *infamous*, depending on which side of history you're on) for playing a major part in the Indian Rebellion of 1857-58, when *sepoys* (Indian soldiers serving European powers) mutinied against the officers of the British East India Company and slaughtered them, forcing the British to send troops to put down the rebellion, a very bloody campaign that paved the way for direct British control over its Indian territories.

We did not see much of Jhansi other than the busy downtown area, continuing straight onto National Highway 75 for what would be a 175 kilometer road trip to Khajuraho. The distance should have required only three hours at best, but it took us almost seven hours. NH75 is basically two lanes (one in each direction) and much of it, until recently, was not very well paved, making for a longer ride than usual. But we did see crews paving and/or expanding the road along the way, and for the most part the journey was pleasant, albeit a tiring one. The landscape was flat and very rural, with isolated farming communities and small towns dotting the highway. Piles of cow dung marked these little communities like welcome signs.

Forty five minutes into our ride we stopped at a resort in Orchha for a vegetarian buffet lunch. At first, most of us were a little skeptical, but the food turned out to be quite good. They started us off with a delicious mulligatawny soup and plenty of hot *naan* bread. The buffet offered *paneer* in spinach sauce, *dal*, eggplant and vegetable curries, different styles of rice, and for dessert there was fruit, pudding and cake. I over did it, not certain when we would be eating again. Afterwards, we continued on NH75 passing through the city of Orccha, which lies along the banks of the Betwa River in the state of Madhya Pradesh. This once royal city was the seat of the Bundela kings, a Rajput clan of the Chattari, who ruled over the *Bundelkhand* (the central region) during the 16th century. You will find some of the finest examples of Hindu and Mughal architecture in this city. We drove by the Jahangir Mahal palace, a formidable citadel built in 1598 to serve as a Mughal stronghold in the region, and other splendid royal buildings. Along the Betwa River there are numerous cenotaphs and *chhatris*. Orchha also contains some interesting temples, including the beautiful Ram Raja Temple, a sacred Hindu pilgrimage site, and the 9th century Chaturbhuj Temple, dedicated to Lord Vishnu. Unfortunately, the long drive ahead of us did not permit for an in-depth tour of the city. But I would definitely recommend spending some time here to see the historical buildings.

During this long drive, Jay gave us a brief lecture on Hinduism. As our tour unfolded, it dawned on me that we had been introduced to Indian culture via their religious history. In both Delhi and Agra we witnessed the mosques and tombs built by the Mughals, and now we were heading for an area of central India that contains some of the most amazing Hindu temples in the world, and we would end our tour of the country in the sacred city of Varanasi, the birthplace of Buddhism. I have to admit, I was completely confused by the Hindu religion, which claims millions of gods and goddesses according to Jay. The following is my attempt to provide a brief explanation of Hinduism based on what I learned on this trip (and through my own research). Here's the nutshell:

First, where did the term 'Hindu' come from? Historians think it is derived from a Persian word meaning river, which was used to describe the peoples living along the Indus River Valley. The actual term 'Hinduism' is more of a Western attempt to define Indian religious culture. In reality, Hinduism is more complicated than the word implies. Indians commonly refer to their religion as either *sanatama dharma* (eternal religion) or *varnasramadharma,* a word meaning the fulfillment of duties (*dharma*) appropriate to one's class (*varna*) and stage of life (*asrama*). Hinduism is not a religion like Judaism, Christianity or Islam. It was not created or founded by a prophet or steeped in codified rules. Modern day Hinduism is not a homogeneous, organized structure, either, but rather the product of religious development in India that has spanned more than four thousand years, a mixing of religious thought and philosophy through the millennia which has evolved into a way of life for the more than 900 million adherents around the world. Many Hindus, for example, are devoted followers of either Lord Shiva or Lord Vishnu (whom they regard as the one true God) while others look inward to the divine Self (*atman*). But most Hindus recognize the concept of a unifying principle, a Supreme Reality behind the universe, known as Brahman. Within the large scope of Hinduism lie many different religious beliefs and principles, so one must be careful when making generalizations about the 'Hindu religion'.

Hinduism is considered the world's oldest religion. Nobody knows who wrote the ancient sacred texts upon which Hindu is based, much of it having been passed down orally for thousands of years. The first of these sacred Hindu writings appeared around 1200 BC, and were concerned primarily with the ritual sacrifices of various gods who represented the forces of nature. Around 700 BC, a more philosophical group of writings emerged: a large collection of texts known as the Vedas (written in ancient Sanskrit) that included Upanishads (sections on wisdom and knowledge). Around 500 BC, several important new belief systems developed as a result of Hinduism, mainly Buddhism and Jainism. Today, while most Hindus respect the authority of the Vedas and the Brahmans (the priestly class), there are those who shun one or both. Being a Hindu is as complex and diversified as Indian society itself. Hindu religious life might take many forms, such as devotion to a God or gods, or an emphasis on the duties of family life, or concentrated meditation and living 'purely' in the strictest sense.

There are certain spiritual principles within Hinduism that *all* Hindus accept, specifically the pure science of consciousness. This consciousness is not just about the body, mind or intellect, but of a soul-state that exists beyond the physical being, known as the pure Self. In essence, religion to a Hindu is the spiritual search for the divine within the Self, or the One Unitary Truth which will lead to Nirvana, the union of Self with Brahman (Supreme Being), where the mind is finally freed from suffering and peaceful eternal stillness is achieved. The abstract concept of *Dharma,* the religious and moral Natural Law that governs *everything* in the Universe, is another common Hindu belief. It is based on duty or proprietary living within one's caste (*varna*) and stage in life, and is the basis for ethical and social behavior within Hindu society. In simpler language, everybody has been designated a role to play (upon birth) and should live so accordingly. *Dharma* provides for a natural order of things.

Most Hindus believe in a combination of actions in order to achieve this state of Nirvana, these include: 1) the belief in *dharma* 2) reincarnation (a process of being reborn while the soul undertakes its search for the Truth) 3) *ahimsa* (non-violence) 4) karma (how to generate the good kind and avoid the bad) 5) the importance of the Guru in guiding one through the spiritual process 6) meditation 7) the Divine Word of Aum (or OM, a sound signifying the Divineness of Creation) and the power of mantras and hymns 8) seeking Truth through the many manifestations of the gods and goddesses 9) understanding the spark of Brahman in all living things. Hindus approach their faith differently, and are tolerant of other's belief systems, one of the reasons the religion has grown in popularity in the West, if not in converts at least in influence and practice; yoga, the chakra system and New Age are just three Hindu concepts which have taken strong roots in the U.S. over the past few decades. One final note before I end this lecture, the reason many Hindus are vegetarians is based on various religious beliefs such as the notion that the gods and goddesses of the Hindu religion are symbolically reincarnated as living things, so one wouldn't want to eat something which represents a deity; and also because of *ahimsa*, the non-violent philosophy that dictates something should not be slaughtered unnecessarily.

I guess the most important thing Jay wanted us to take away from all of this is the fact that Hinduism cannot really be defined in the classical sense, each Hindu's faith and worship is different. I hope, dear reader, this has been enlightening…….*ommmmmmm*!

The further we drove along NH75, the more rural the landscape. The road was not as well paved along these isolated stretches, at times narrowing to become a one lane highway which proved a little scary whenever there was oncoming traffic. I'm not sure if it was the huge lunch I had or the gentle up and down sensation of the bus as we traversed those bumpy patches, or both, but after a while I felt groggy and dozed off. About forty five minutes before we reached our hotel we stopped at a local Tata car dealership in the town of Chhatarpur to see the world's cheapest car. At a mere $2500 – *brand-spanking new*! – the Nano, a tiny hatchback vehicle, is the least expensive automobile on the planet. I'm not sure if I could have actually fit in one, although I saw many on the roadways here crammed with Indians. The small, economical engine is in the trunk. Much of the body is made of lightweight plastic material. The tires were not much bigger than the standard issue emergency tire I have in my Toyota. Jay said the Nano averages about 30 kilometers to the liter, making it very popular in the countryside…um, I tried to figure out how many miles to the gallon that was but my stupid American brain almost imploded trying to do the metric system conversion (*how many kilometers in a mile*? *How many liters in a gallon*? KABOOM).

We reached the beautiful Radisson Hotel Khajuraho by 5:30 pm. Wearily, I made it to my room fifteen minutes later and simply fell on the bed, but I was unable to nap because of the pain in my throat. I watched the BBC news until 7:30 and then went downstairs to the hotel restaurant for a sit-down dinner. I was still feeling bloated from the earlier lunch (that vegetarian food can really fill you up), and with my aching throat I didn't really feel like eating. And I wasn't the only one. Neal, Katie, Krystal and Dede were not present during dinner, and Noelani said she was feeling a bit queasy and retired to her room

before dessert. The long day of traveling had taken its toll on everybody; the conversation at dinner, and the overall mood at the table, was more subdued than previous nights. Most of us just wanted to get some sleep. I had told Jay about the burning sensation in my throat and he was kind enough to give me a bottle of an Indian *Ayurveda* medicine called Himcocid, telling me to take two teaspoons before going to bed, and then two teaspoon in the morning. *Ayurveda* is the traditional medicine of the Indian Subcontinent based on ancient Sanskrit medical texts. Jay swore it would clear up the problem overnight. I thanked him, but was very doubtful this green liquid herbal concoction would 'cure' my sore throat in one evening. I stayed at the table until 9:00pm, nibbling at everything the wait staff brought out, and then went upstairs to my room. I took two *tablespoons* of the Himcocid (which had a pleasant and soothing minty flavor) before going to bed.

Day Nine

I had a terrible night, waking up repeatedly, tossing and turning in my bed. To make matters worse, my stomach felt unsettled, requiring a few trips to the toilet. I was beginning to think my good (intestinal) fortune had come to an end and that I would soon become the next 'victim' conspicuously absent at the breakfast buffet. Unable to sleep, I showered, shaved and wrote in my journal, periodically glancing up to watch the BBC news broadcast. Surprisingly, my throat was no longer painful, and with two more tablespoons of the *ayurveda* medicine Jay gave me, not only did the red swelling clear up completely, my stomach started to feel much better, too. I jotted down the name on the bottle (the heck with the yogurt) and made a mental note to buy some of this stuff over the Internet for my next trip. By 7:00am I felt good enough to go downstairs and brave a light breakfast.

The next 24 hour period proved to be the most exciting cultural experience of the entire tour. It began with a visit to the Chandela Dynasty Temples of Khajuraho. At 8:00 am we boarded the bus and drove for about ten minutes to the western complex of this fascinating collection of Hindu temples. The Chandela were a clan of Indian *Gurjar* Rajputs (an ethnic group from India, Pakistan and Afghanistan) who rose up to control large portions of the *Bundelkand* region (central India) between the 10^{th} and 13^{th} centuries. The most famous Chandela ruler was Maharaja Rao Vidyadhara (1017 – 1029) who expanded the dynasty's territories and established his clan's hold on the region. Although the official capital of the Chandela Dynasty was in Mahoba (approximately 60 kilometers away), they maintained a 'religious capital' in Khajuraho for the purpose of separating politics from religion. Between 900 and 1130, every Chandela ruler – in keeping with tradition – supposedly built at least one temple in Khajuraho. Archeologists believe there were more than 80 temples at one time in this incredible city which was originally protected by a defensive wall with eight gates, each gate flanked by two date

trees (the indigenous species of the area). The name Khajuraho derives from the Hindi word for date tree (*Khajura*).

Following the fall of the Chandela Dynasty, Khajuraho fell into disrepair and suffered destruction and disfigurement by Muslim invaders who did not tolerate the temples of other religions in their areas. Eventually, the local population abandoned the religious city and over the centuries it was consumed by the encroaching jungle, hidden from view until 1838, when a British army engineer by the name of T. S. Burt came upon information concerning the temples and re-discovered them in the remote jungle. Today, just over twenty temples remain, having been carefully preserved and restored, scattered over a 9 acre area divided into three sections which are more commonly referred to as the western, eastern and southern groups of temples. The entire complex is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and seeing it was worth every minute of the exhausting day-long journey it took to get there. Next to the Taj Mahal, these were the most impressive historical landmarks I saw while in India, and I whole-heartedly recommend that every visitor to the country put this stop on their itinerary.

The Khajuraho medieval temples represent two distinct Hindu religions: Brahmanism and Jainism. All of the temples were constructed using similar typology. Each has an elevated substructure over which rises a temple building covered with several registers of sculpted panels and open work galleries. The top of the temples are crowned with a series of bundled towers with curvilinear contours, resembling large beehives, known as the *Sikharas* (‘mountain peak’ in Sanskrit), these tall towers rise above the inner sanctum where the temple’s deity is enshrined. And while these structures were built along similar architectural lines, no two are quite alike; some were very tall in stature, resting on wide terraces with multiple annexes, capable of accommodating dozens of worshippers, others were very small, allowing entry by only one or two persons at a time. The site we visited first was the western group; these temples were separated from one another by a well-maintained garden area, lending an overall aesthetic wonder to the complex. The whole thing was simply amazing to look at, beautiful and spiritually serene.

Luckily, we got there early in the morning when the site was not crowded and the sun was not yet scorching hot. A local guide named Anurag joined us that day. He was an expert on the Khajuraho temples and he walked us through the more important structures while giving us a brief lecture on each building and entertaining us with interesting stories about the site. The most important group of temples is found in the western section, not far from the archaeological museum, which is why most tours begin here. We saw or visited many of the important temples on this side, including the largest and most ornate, the Kandariya Mahadevi Temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva, and considered to be one of the best preserved examples of medieval temples in all of India. We toured the inside of the famous Lakshmana Temple (built in the mid 10^{th} century) with its four-armed sculpture of Lord Vishnu in the inner sanctum. Along the outer walls of this and every other temple are sculpted panels of divine figures, people, animals and erotic scenes.

Anurag explained the meaning behind the erotic imagery on the walls of the Kandariya Mahadevi Temple, which showed statues in various sexual positions and what appeared to be orgy-like goings-on. These erotic panels are seen at the bottom of the temple wall, and as you ascend to the top, the panels become spiritually pure, with the sex images replaced by that of a loving man and his wife, and then of a figure in the highest realm of spiritual Enlightenment, depicting the journey a soul must take to be one with Brahman (first passion, then love, then enlightenment). These sculptures, which cover the outer walls of the temples, are what make this site so fascinating.

But none of the sculptures were as, um, *eye-opening* as the ones adorning the outside of the Lakshmana Temple. If you're prone to blushing easily you might want to skip this erotic display. There were panels of sculptures in just about every sexual position you can imagine; in fact, I saw a few that I *hadn't* imagined yet. Orgies, homosexuality, bestiality...it was like viewing a medieval Internet porn site! According to Anurag, these sculptures provided 'moral' lessons for the public. One particular panel showed a man having sex with a horse while another man masturbated nearby and a woman stood in the background peeking through covered hands. *The moral here?* Hypocrisy. The woman, according to Anurag, while feigning shock at the actions of the men was nonetheless watching with keen interest. We stood there quietly as Anurag gave us the explanation, but I'm sure I wasn't the only one thinking that perhaps there was a better way of conveying *hypocrisy* than by showing two men having sex with a horse!

The Chandela kings were greatly influenced by the Tantric school of thought (a style of meditation and ritual that arose during medieval India around 500 AD, which attempts to connect with the Greater Spirit of the Universe in creative and emancipatory ways). Tantric doctrine was promoted on the walls of temples and monuments, hence all the erotic imagery. Indian society at the time believed in dealing honestly and openly with *all* aspects of human life. In Tantric philosophy, sex is important because the cosmos is divided into the male and female principle: the male principle has form and potential, the female principle has the energy. The two, therefore, are essential and intertwined. But only a section of the temple walls were dedicated to erotic depictions, the rest dealt with other aspects of life.

We spent several hours on the western side of the complex, walking from temple to temple, listening to Anurag's entertaining discourse on the Chandelas. From here, we drove over to the eastern section that contained a group of three Jain temples, dedicated to Lords Adinath, Parshwanath, and Shantinath. When we arrived, two spotted owls were perched on the ledge of one of the temples watching us with their creepy glare. The carvings on these structures lacked the eroticism found in the western group, with more emphasis on stories from Jain mythology than anything else. We spent about thirty minutes here (compared to the western section this site was not as exciting, although the temple architecture and sculptures were just as magnificent). By now, the sun was really bearing down on us and we just wanted to get back on the bus. We made a quick stop at an arts and crafts shop (sponsored by the Hilary Clinton Foundation) where Anurag told us we could pick up text books on the Khajuraho temple complex. The place had the suspicious feel of an 'official store' visit.

We got back to the hotel shortly after 11:00 am and had about thirty minutes to use the bathroom and put our luggage out. By 11:45 we were heading to the Khajuraho Airport for our flight to Varanasi. When we pulled into the airport the parking lot was practically empty. Inside the terminal building Jay checked us in by groups in case anyone's luggage exceeded the 20 kilo weight limit. Domestic flights in India have very strict baggage guidelines, and one of the ways to avoid paying exorbitant fees is to check in the luggage by groups, this way, if one group's combined luggage weight exceeded the limit, some of their luggage could be transferred to another group. After being screened by security we waited nearly an hour before walking across the tarmac and boarding our plane. By 1:30pm we took off for what turned out to be a short, thirty-minute flight to Varanasi. The reason we didn't drive there, according to Jay, was because the road conditions were not good and would have required a 17 hour journey by bus. Believe me, after the long ride into Khajuraho we were all grateful to be flying…that is, until our actual take-off; it was so turbulent I began rattling off the names of every Hindu god I could remember (*Vishnu, Shiva, Buddha, Cornelius from the Planet-of-the-Apes*…**save us**!!!).

When we got off the plane in Varanasi the temperature was a smoldering *106 degrees Fahrenheit*, I quickly built up a sweat just walking from the tarmac to the terminal building. The bus ride to the hotel took about an hour. Varanasi was Jay's home town and he was excited to be showing us his city. The outskirts were mostly rural farming areas, but as we entered the city limits it began to take on the familiar congested sprawl of every Indian city we had seen thus far. Even still, I could sense that Varanasi was going to be much different somehow. Historically, this is India's oldest continuously inhabited city – dating back to approximately 1100-1200 BC (or older, depending on what archeological source you quote) – making it one of the world's truly ancient metropolises. It lies on the banks of the Ganges River, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, and is regarded as the holiest of India's Seven Sacred Cities (*Sapta Puri*). These Sacred Cities – Ayodha, Mathura, Haridwar, Varanasi, Kanchipuram, Ujjain and Dwarka – are pilgrimage centers, and are considered holy places because these were the areas where spiritual and religious masters and gods were born or descended as *avatars* (reincarnated forms). Varanasi, which is also known as Benaras, is said to be naturally endowed with spiritual powers (*nitya tirhas*); dying here is believed amongst Hindus to bring salvation.

Varanasi's religious history dates to the period of Buddha in the 6th century BC, when he gave his first sermon in nearby Sarnath. Since then, it has become a center of religious *Brahminical* learning, and popular amongst sages, philosophers, writers and musicians who have settled here throughout the centuries to write scholarly texts or pursue enlightenment. Sadly, most of Varanasi's ancient temples were destroyed when the Muslim conqueror Mohammad Ghauri invaded in the 12th Century. The 'older' temples you see today were actually constructed around the 18th century, and these include the most venerated like the Kashi Vishvanath Temple of Shiva, or the Mochan Hanuman Temple, or the Durga Temple (often referred to as the Monkey Temple due to the sizeable population of primates which reside in the trees nearby).

According to the 2011 provincial census, modern day Varanasi has a population of approximately 1.5 million, but Jay put that number at much higher (and it definitely *felt* much higher as we drove or walked around the city). The primary economic source is manufacturing, of which spinning and weaving (especially silk weaving) is the specialty. But this is not a well-developed industry, with much of it done by small-scale businesses or household production. The second most important source of revenue is derived from tourism. More than 3 million people visit the city each year, but only about a tenth of that are foreigners, the rest are mostly Hindus on religious pilgrimage. For devout Hindus, bathing in the holy waters of the Ganges River in Varanasi is at least a once-in-a-lifetime must-do, as is visiting all of the Seven Sacred Cities. And like most over-burdened Indian towns, the infrastructure is woefully lacking, especially the sewage, sanitation and drainage components. Complicating these sewage problems is the use of the Ganges for bathing purposes and the oftentimes chaotic river traffic that is very difficult to control. And, as usual, there is a large urban poor population living in slum conditions throughout sections of Varanasi.

By the time we entered the heart of the city the street traffic was incredible. We managed to reach the Radisson Hotel Varanasi by 3:45pm. This turned out to be another beautiful, modern hotel, an *oasis* situated amidst the chaos and congestion of the city. Although GATE 1 is considered more of a budget tour company, the hotels we stayed were definitely the four and five star varieties. On this trip, each hotel turned out to be even better than the last, and believe me, we were very grateful for this. I'm not sure how back-packers can traverse India and stay in budget lodgings or hostels. There was so much poverty, congestion and pollution to contend with in the cities that a nice hotel room was needed just to keep one's sanity in check.

After putting our luggage away we had about an hour and a half for lunch before we departed for the riverfront area to witness the sacred evening ceremony along the Ganges. Noelani and I had chicken Panini sandwiches (with fries) and tea *masala* inside the hotel's coffee shop. At 5:15pm we gathered in the lobby. Jay organized five taxi vans for us. I sat in the front, next to the driver, with Noelani, Jay, Riad and Amira sitting in the back seats. I wanted to film the drive from the hotel to the waterfront to show people back home how chaotic the traffic was, but, boy, was I in for a surprise. It's one thing to see the traffic sitting high up in a bus seat, and quite another to experience it at car level. I have no idea how anyone can drive in these conditions. Our twenty minute ride took us through the center of the city towards the waterfront district. Many of the lanes and streets we traveled on had traffic in *both* directions: bicycles, scooters, motorcycles, tuk-tuks, buses, cars, trucks, wagons pulled by animals, pedestrians, stray bulls. At the intersections everybody kept going, nobody stopping to allow for a sensible flow of traffic, with moving vehicles converging in a convoluted mess only a seasoned Indian driver could maneuver around. Why we didn't witness any accidents is beyond me.

We had to get out of the taxi a few blocks from the actual riverfront and walk through a very crowded rough-looking neighborhood. The one and two story buildings were mostly run down with litter everywhere. The local folk didn't fare much better. If it was possible for humans to resemble their environment, it was definitely here; the people I

saw looked just as downtrodden as their surroundings. Small shops and street vendors took up business along both sides of the narrow roadway. We walked by groups of stray bulls eating garbage from the sidewalk, and saw homeless people sleeping on makeshift cots right out in the open. When we finally arrived at the Ganges River we were in for an even bigger cultural shock: several families were cremating their loved ones by the water, the huge funeral pyres burning brightly against the encroaching nightfall. At first, I thought they were having barbecues, given the festival-like atmosphere along the river, but then Jay gave us the low-down:

Approximately 250 bodies are cremated each day near the Ganges River in Varanasi. In fact, as we arrived so did a family carrying a dead body wrapped in colorful sheets, which they took to the river's edge and started to wash in the waters of the holy Ganges. Following the ritual bathing of the corpse, it is covered with a special type of ghee (clarified butter) to prevent the body from emitting a bad smell during the cremation, and then members of the Untouchable caste (the only people supposedly allowed to perform cremations in India) carefully place the wrapped body on a pile of wooden logs before setting the whole thing on fire. These caste members ensure that the flame is constant and strong. It takes about four or five hours to fully cremate a body. Afterwards, the ashes are scooped up and scattered into the Ganges. Nothing remains of the dearly departed.

Completely blown away by what we were witnessing, our initial reaction as a group was to photograph the funeral pyres and the family washing their loved one's body in the river, but Jay admonished us not to do so, saying it was very disrespectful. I have to admit (and I am not proud of myself for doing this) but several of us took clandestine pictures when Jay wasn't looking.

Along the western bank of the Ganges River in Varanasi are embankments made of stone steps that are called *ghats*. These steps extend all the way down to the waters of the river, and much of the lower sections are submerged during the monsoon season. Varanasi has over eighty ghats, each section painted differently and maintained by different groups or associations. Many of these ghats were constructed by the maharajas who once controlled the central regions of India, and some even have large palaces built directly on the top steps (so the maharajas could stay in comfort whenever they visited the Sacred Ganges). The ghats are colorful stone tiers resting side by side along the water's edge, stretching in a seven kilometer arc between the confluence of the Ganges with the River Asi in the south and the Varuna River in the north. The name Varanasi is derived from these two tributaries (Varuna and Asi). For many city blocks, these ghats enhance the riverfront with shrines, temples and elaborate palaces. They are constructed along a spiritual concept and are viewed as locations along the "divine cosmic road". Hindu pilgrims arrive here daily to perform ritual ablutions and bath in the sacred waters of the Ganges. Evening prayer ceremonies are performed on numerous ghats at different hours of the night, and the collection of pilgrims, locals and tourists make this area seem like a brightly-lit festival. Two of these ghats (including the one we entered from) are reserved for Hindus to cremate their dead.

Jay rented a large row boat for us to tour the river. The 'captain', a thin young man who was later joined by an assistant from another boat, struggled mightily to navigate us up and down the Ganges so we could see the various ghats. Jay handed out juice cartons and bags of chips he had brought along for the boat ride. Oddly, we sat munching on snacks and sipping juice like school children while the fascinating scenes along the banks of the river unfolded before us: bodies were being cremated at both ends of the ghats, young men and children were swimming in the river (which seemed incredibly polluted), a small herd of cattle were cooling off in the water, people were lined up on various tiers watching the different evening prayer ceremonies, colorful strings of lights and other adornments decked out the larger ghats, adding to the carnival-like atmosphere. *What an amazing thing to witness*!

The Ganges River is the largest river in India, and the second largest in the world in terms of water discharge. It originates in the western Himalayas in the Indian state of Uttarakhand and flows south and east through the Indo-Gangetic Plains of North India into Bangladesh where it empties into the Bay of Bengal. The Ganges River basin supports more than 400 million people making it the most densely populated river basin in the world. Besides providing for so many lives, among Hindus the river is worshipped as the goddess Ganga, and is considered the embodiment of all sacred waters in Hindu mythology. In fact, all local rivers in India, for religious purposes, are seen as an extension of the Ganges (whether they are or not). Pilgrims will bathe in the Ganges and also cup the water in their hands and raise it up and then let it fall back down in homage to their gods and ancestors. Once a person is cremated, their ashes are scattered in the Ganges (which is suppose to aid in their spiritual journey). Pilgrims will also take back small quantities of the sacred water for ritual purposes.

Considering how important this river is to Hindus, I was shocked to discover during my research that it is regarded as one of the five most polluted waterways on the planet. Five years ago, the *fecal coliform* levels in the Ganges around Varanasi alone were one hundred times higher than the actual acceptable limits established by the government. We saw litter and at times even dead animals in the river (a dead boar, bound with rope, floated by our row boat when we visited the Ganges the following morning). Although the government has implemented plans to clean up the river, corruption – combined with the absence of good technical planning and the lack of support amongst religious authorities – has led to failure for the most part. I, personally, would not dip my hand in this waterway. When some of us mentioned this to Jay, he smiled and said we were already bathing in the Ganges River. *How so*? Well, the water used in the hotels is processed from the Ganges. Not a comforting thought. Even less so when one considers how many dead bodies are deposited in the river each year. In Hindu religion, holy men, pregnant women and children are not cremated, and are dumped directly into the middle of the Ganges, where supposedly the strong currents wash them out to sea. Since this is the oldest city in India, continuously inhabited for over 3000 years, one can only imagine the millions of cadavers that have ended up in this river. *Yikes*!

Around 7:00pm, the boat's crew maneuvered the vessel next to dozens of other rowboats near the *Dashashwamedh ghat*, the main stone tier and oldest ghat in the city,

so we could watch the sacred evening river ceremony. Groups of priests perform these rituals nightly on different ghats, but the one done at the Dashashwamedh ghat is considered the most important and draws the largest crowds. Situated not far from the Kashi Vishwanath Temple, devout Hindus believe that Lord Brahma built this ghat to welcome Lord Shiva to the world, and sacrificed ten horses here in what is an old Vedic ritual. It is considered a very sacred area, and there are numerous temples built just above the ghat or near to it. The tier itself was jammed with people, and in the center was a platform where seven priests performed the *Agni Pooja* (Worship to Fire) ritual. The priests sang and chanted dedications to various Hindu gods (Shiva, Agni, the god of fire, Surya, the god of the sun, and Ganga, the goddess of the river) and lit symbolic lanterns or cauldrons. It was quite a spectacle, especially seeing it from the river, which offered a panoramic view of the entire brightly lit ghat.

The ritual lasted approximately thirty minutes. As it was winding down Jay instructed the boat's crew to return us to the riverbank. With so many rowboats surrounding us I wondered how they would get us out of there, but the captain immediately cranked up an engine propeller hidden beneath the wooden floor boards and within minutes we were disembarking along the river's edge. As we climbed the steps of the ghat leading back to the waterfront area where our taxi vans were waiting, we passed the funeral pyre of the family we had seen arriving earlier. The burning body's blackened feet and skull were clearly visible as we walked by, a shocking image most of us will not soon forget.

We arrived back at the Radisson Hotel Varanasi by 9:00pm. Most of us were exhausted from a full day of touring and traveling and retired to our rooms hoping to get a good night's sleep; we had a very *early* wake-up call the following morning.

Day Ten

I was awake by 3:30am, and not because I was restless, either. We had to gather in the lobby at 5:00am (*sharp*, as Jay instructed!) to head back over to the waterfront area to witness the sun rising over the Ganges. We took the tour bus this time since traffic was not so heavy at that hour of the morning and got off near the Dashashwamedh Ghat area. The streets of the waterfront neighborhoods were mostly empty. The locals we saw were either on their way to the river for the morning Surya (Sun) ritual or vendors selling flowers to be used as offerings. There were many homeless people sleeping on blankets in the streets or along the sidewalks.

The scene on the Dashashwamedh Ghat in the early morning was quite different from what we'd experienced last night during the sacred evening ceremony. Gone were the throngs of spectators and bright lights, replaced by groups of pilgrims ritualistically bathing in the Ganges River; a lulling peacefulness seemed to fill the air. Once again, Jay rented us a row boat and we piled inside to view the sunrise from the water. Just as Surya

(the sun god) made her appearance over the horizon, priests and pilgrims alike began singing or chanting on the ghats. It was a beautiful sight, seeing the day come into full bloom along this sacred waterway. A female vendor pulled up to our boat in a smaller craft, selling flower petals arranged on cardboard plates with a lit candle in the middle. I photographed Katie placing one in the river as an offering. In fact, the Ganges was full of little floating flower-and-candle homages…and, um, an occasional dead boar (the smelly, decomposing carcass of one, bound with rope, floated by our row boat, and I wondered if it, too, was an offering to the gods).

Once it was daylight, we continued down the Ganges, disembarking along a ghat close to where we'd entered the night before. As we stepped off the boat, one elderly Indian man dropped his towel as he dried himself by the water, exposing his long flaccid penis to our group. I didn't know whether to be shocked or envious! In addition to the pilgrims bathing in the river, we saw white-bearded *Sadhus* (wandering holy men also known as Babas) sitting along the piers dressed in their saffron-colored robes; people washing and drying laundry; a school of young boys performing yoga exercises wrapped in pink garments, their heads shaved in monk fashion, while a master gave them instructions through a microphone.

As we walked along the ghats, back to the waterfront streets, we came upon packs of stray dogs sleeping peacefully; right above them along the top of the stone steps was a large pile of fire wood used in the cremation rituals. By now, the entire city was awake and beginning its new day. We strolled through the same run-down neighborhood we had seen the previous evening, only it took on a different semblance in the morning light. Homeless people were waking from their makeshift cots or blankets, others gathered around a communal water pump to collect water for drinking and breakfast, vendors were opening their shops or setting up their wares in pushcarts along the streets, sleepy-eyed uniformed children awaited transportation to school on the corners, stray bulls rummaged through garbage looking for something to eat, Muslim men sat around *chai masala* vendors sipping their spicy tea and milk, reading the complimentary newspapers the vendors provided. The crowded alleyways were alive with people going about the start of their day; colorful temples were already occupied with early morning worshippers. And perhaps the most amazing thing of all…*nobody seemed to care that a group of foreigners was walking through their neighborhood!* Perhaps tourists are such a common enough sight along this pathway the locals no longer pay any mind. For me, it was unusual to be walking through an Asian city and not have people staring, especially in a very poor urban area. As I mentioned earlier, Varanasi was *different*.

We boarded our awaiting bus and drove to the Benaras Hindu University (BHU) main campus in the southern section of the city. BHU is not only one of India's best schools, it is also one of Asia's largest residential universities, with more than 20,000 students (from over sixty countries) housed in sixty hostels on campus. The large complex is administered like an independent community within the city, spreading out over 1300 acres. For some unknown reason, the security guards at the front gates were not permitting tour groups to enter the school grounds that day, so we continued through the now congested streets of Varanasi to another school campus, the Mahatma Gandhi Kashi

Vidyapeeth (a part of the national school system established by Gandhi) to visit the Bharat Mata Temple, located near a bustling produce street market. In order to reach the campus temple we had to walk several blocks down a main avenue, flanked on both sides by produce vendors selling their fruits and vegetables from either push carts or blankets set up on the ground. The market scene was hectic, with vendors hawking their products to passing locals, elderly women going about with large canvas sacks balanced on their heads, aggressive stray bulls eating discarded produce along the streets, and an ever-growing mass of early morning shoppers clogging the streets looking for bargains. I took several photographs of the vegetable displays, which featured large, colorful varieties including some I had never seen before, like the one resembling a spiky zucchini.

The Bharat Mata Temple was built in 1936 by Shiv Prasad Gupt (a wealthy industrialist who founded the Kashi Vidyapeeth campus) and inaugurated by Mahatma Gandhi. The temple is dedicated to Bharat Mata (Mother India) who is often depicted as a woman dressed in a saffron-colored sari holding a flag of India and sometimes accompanied by a lion. The image of Mother India took shape during the Indian Independence Movement of the late 19th Century, and represents the 'motherhood' of Hinduism in Hindu Nationalism, a symbolic image of a unified India. The Bharat Mata Temple in Varanasi houses a marble idol of Mother India and also a very large and unique marble relief map of the country prior to its partition when Pakistan and Bangladesh were still within its borders. This detailed map of a unified India sits in the middle of the building and is the main attraction. There are no gods or goddesses depicted in this temple, its primary purpose was to bolster nationalism. The building needed some serious up-keeping, though; it appeared worn and neglected, ironically enough like present-day India.

As we left the school campus and walked back to our bus a stray bull took a liking to Frank, coming up to him and gently nudging his arm with the top of his nubby-horned head. You will not see stray cows on the streets of India, only bulls. This is because cows produce milk, and are a valuable commodity. I found it incredible how the stray animals here react to the population. Since nobody harms them they do not seem to fear humans; at times we witnessed an entire family of boars roaming the streets of a city – or a colony of monkeys staking claim to a historical site – without anyone blinking an eye. I was curious to know what the rabies situation was like in India.

From the Bharat Mata temple we returned to the hotel for breakfast, and then continued our tour in the late morning by visiting the small village of Sarnath approximately thirteen kilometers north-east of Varanasi. Sarnath is famous for its deer park, where Gautama Buddha supposedly camped out while giving his first sermon (*dharma*), making this region the birthplace of Buddhism. Our first stop here was at the *Mulagandha Kuti Vihar* temple built by the Mahabodhi Society (a Sri Lankan Buddhist group) during the 1930's, near the area where Buddha is believed to have spent his first rainy season in Sarnath. The inside of the temple is covered with beautiful frescoes from famed Japanese painter Kosetsu Nosu depicting the life of Buddha. To the left of the temple's shrine is a small vault containing a relic of the Buddha (a piece of bone or some of his ashes) that the monks display on special occasions throughout the year. Adjacent

to the building is a sprawling bodhi tree, its sapling taken from a tree in Sri Lanka which originated from the *actual* tree under which Buddha sat in Bodh Gaya and became enlightened more than 2,500 years ago. Some of us collected the falling leaves as a souvenir. Surrounding this tree, on a raised platform, are numerous small statues of Buddha.

We drove a short distance to the sacred *Dhamekh Stupa*, built on the spot where Buddha is believed to have given his very first sermon or dharma. Stupas (which means 'heap' in Sanskrit) are semicircular or mound-like structures or monuments (made of stone or hard bricks) used to contain the relics of Buddhist monks – usually their ashes – or items belonging to the Buddha himself. They take on a religious significance as worshippers often gather to pray at these stupas, walking deferentially around the sacred mounds in a clockwise fashion. There are various types of stupas, but each one is constructed along similar lines. First, a Buddhist teacher must be consulted and certain ceremonies are administered. The type of stupa erected will usually have something to do with religious events that have occurred within the area. A treasury is created in the center of the stupa that is filled with small offerings and mantras written in thin rolled papers and inserted into small clay pots. A pole known as the *Tree of Life*, covered with gems and thousands of mantras, is also placed in the center of the stupa. All of these things are said to 'charge' the stupas with positive energy, which I'm assuming can be channeled. Building a stupa is considered very good karma; consequently, destroying one would have the opposite effect.

The actual shape of each stupa is said to resemble "the Buddha sitting in a meditative posture on a lion's throne… His crown is the top of the spire; his head is the square of the spire's base; his body is the vase shape; his legs are the four steps of the lower terrace; and the base is his throne." It is also believed that each stupa represents the five purified elements: the square base represents *earth*, the large dome or vase represents *water*, the conical spire represents *fire*, the upper lotus and crescent moon designs represent *air*, and the sun and dissolving point at the top represent *space*. Stupas come in many sizes. In Nepal, we would witness some very large (and beautiful) stupas in and around the Kathmandu area, as well as smaller stupas in the courtyards of the historic palace cities.

The Dhamekh Stupa is considered the oldest, and possibly the most sacred, stupa on the planet. The original structure was built by the great Mauryan King, Ashoka, around 249 BC in order to bolster and spread Buddha's message of Love and Compassion throughout his vast empire. Starting around 500 AD, the stupa that exists here today was built to replace the older one, and on several occasions since then it has been enlarged, although the top remains unfinished. The site where the Dhamekh Stupa stands is regarded as the very spot where Buddha gave his first sermon to five former companions, setting in motion the principles of what is regarded as the "Wheel of the Dharma" (or the Wheel of Law, with the wheel symbolizing the world and the eternal circle of life). To a Buddhist, this is very hallowed ground. It was here where Buddha, who had been mocked by his five companions for his girth and apparent lack of austerity, preached the Middle Way, a path to Enlightenment which avoids extremes in luxury or asceticism, converting the five men into his first disciples.

One of the things that Buddha spoke about here were the *Four Noble Truths*: **one**, that life is full of suffering; **two**, this suffering is due to the attachment of transient things; **three**, the cessation of suffering is attainable; **four**, how to bring about the actual cessation of suffering, which he described as an *Eightfold Path* (Right speech, Right action, Right livelihood, Right effort, Right mindfulness, Right concentration, Right attitude and Right view). I cannot speak for the others in my group, but this was perhaps the most spiritually stirring place I visited while in India, despite the fact that the Dhamekh Stupa itself is not very spectacular – unlike the larger ones we would see in Nepal – resembling a massive heap of solid brick. The base has stone facing (some of which has survived from the time of Ashoka), chiseled with floral designs of a Gupta nature; the facade is carved with images of humans and birds, and contains a band of Swastikas (an eternal life symbol). There are also inscriptions written in *Brahmi*, one of the oldest written languages on the Indian Subcontinent. The entire thing is over 130 feet tall with a diameter of approximately 87 feet, and is purportedly the tallest structure in all of Sarnath. As I mentioned, this stupa is not particularly aesthetic, but once you gaze upon it for the first time it is impossible to ignore, as if some force was compelling you towards it. Surrounding the Dhamekh Stupa are the ruins of ancient monasteries and temples, forming a labyrinth of raised brick platforms, walls and courtyards where these structures once stood.

Our next stop was the Sarnath Archeological Museum across the street from the Dhamekh Stupa site. In 1904, the government of India ordered this museum to be built adjacent to the Sarnath ruins to house and study the antiquities found here. At present, there are more than 6,800 sculptures and artifacts stored inside. This is the oldest site museum in India, and contains one of the most fascinating collections of Indian's cultural past. As far as museums go, it is not very large, with two display halls stretching out on either side of the main lobby entrance, but the remarkable antiquities more than make up for its size.

Entering the lobby you're confronted by one of the most endearing archaeological discoveries in all of India, the Lion Capital of Ashoka. During the reign of King Ashoka (304 – 232 BC), whose military controlled most of the Indian Subcontinent, a series of large columns (averaging forty to fifty feet tall and weighing up to fifty tons) were erected over northern India with edicts from the king. These were known as the *Pillars of Ashoka*. Archaeologists believe there were numerous such columns built, marking the famous king's territory, but only about nineteen survive today with inscriptions, the rest are nothing more than fragments. One of the best-preserved pieces is the Lion Capital of Ashoka on display in the center of the Sarnath Archaeological Museum. This pillar has four components. The circular shaft of the column (which is displayed separately) is plain and smooth, slightly tapering upwards and chiseled out of a single piece of hard sandstone quarried from the ancient town of Chunar. The capital is shaped like a slightly arched bell formed from lotus petals. The abacus (the uppermost platform of the column) is round and decorated with wheels (known as Ashoka's *chakras*) and animal shapes. Crowning the abacus are the statues of four lions seated back to back, representing power, courage, pride and confidence. The national emblem of India is taken from this

image (although one of the lions is hidden from view), and the national flag of India has the design of the wheel of Ashoka's chakra at its center.

We spent about an hour inside the museum, which has five small galleries containing artifacts found in Sarnath dating from the 3rd Century BC to the 12th Century AD. I saw an incredible collection of Buddha and Bodhisattva (Enlightened) images, including a beautiful sculpture of the Buddha from the 5th Century AD, and a life-size Bodhisattva statue. One entire gallery hall was dedicated to sculptures and artifacts from the Mauryan, the Kushana and the Gupta periods. I am a *huge* museum fan and thoroughly enjoyed this stop, regretting we didn't have more time to explore it. Although, many of my fellow tour members were tired by this point, having been up so early – not to mention the heat of the day (it was 105 degrees Fahrenheit) – and wanted to leave. The museum did not have air-conditioning (a serious oversight!). By 12:30 pm we headed back to the Radisson Hotel.

Before we broke for lunch we made one final 'official store' visit, a silk and brocade factory shop conveniently located right next to the hotel. As usual, we were provided refreshments while the proprietor, a very entertaining middle-aged man who at times seemed almost aloof about the products he was pushing, gave us a demonstration on how the garments and textiles are made (the adjacent factory floor contained old-fashioned looms where a group of workers toiled away). This was our last night in India and I could not resist buying some brocade slipcovers as souvenirs for friends back home, especially since the owner gave us a really nice discount. We had the rest of the afternoon off; most of us went shopping along the narrow streets near the hotel. I was able to buy a tea *masala* mix at a tiny grocery store, while Noelani purchased some *ayurveda*-based hair and beauty supplies. We found a wonderful souvenir shop that sold a little bit of everything at good prices; I picked up some embroidered T-shirts and Noelani bought a gorgeous white, embroidered blouse along with a silver pendant. Later, Noelani and I had lunch with Pleshette, Dede and Joy in the hotel's coffee shop. Pleshette and Joy shared their enormous brownies with me (thanks, gals). By 3:45 pm I was back in my room to relax before our farewell dinner. Not all the members of the tour were leaving for Nepal, so this would be the entire gang's last night together. I repacked by suitcase, wrote in my journal and then took a short nap.

At 7:15pm, refreshed after a second shower, I went downstairs to the hotel's Kebob House restaurant for our scheduled dinner. Our group sat at a series of long tables while the wait staff kept bringing different types of kebobs – vegetable, chicken and meat – cooked on nearby grills. On the tables were plenty of *dal*, white rice, fruit and *naan* bread. I sat with Noelani, Neil, Katie, Krystal and Elsie. We had a great conversation. Neil is a retired pilot and told us some interesting stories. As the dinner progressed, we began exchanging an email list and saying our "goodbyes" to those who were returning to the States the following day (Pleshette, Elsie, Winona, Betsy, Nina and Lenny), taking photographs with them inside the restaurant.

Throughout the dinner I asked many of the tour members what they thought of India, and if they would ever come back. Surprisingly (or maybe not so) the mood wasn't very positive, even among those who had really looked forward to this trip. Marilee, for

example, told me she had wanted to visit India for years, but was disappointed with the social conditions and probably wouldn't return. This sentiment was echoed by everyone, including me. Don't get me wrong, I enjoyed this trip enormously, and saw some incredible sites, but the underdeveloped infrastructure of the cities and the burgeoning squalor conditions of the poor leave quite a negative impression on the first time visitor. Later, when I returned home, I found it impossible to describe the beauty of the sites I had seen without tempering those descriptions with tales of the poor urban blight I witnessed throughout the trip. In fact, I had to *force* myself to stop doing this so as not to turn into one of those individuals I loathe who perpetuate negative stereotypes. It hasn't been easy, either. Today, when someone asks me 'how was India?' I have to take a contemplative pause before replying. In all fairness, though, I have since spoken to many travelers who have praised the southern parts of the Indian Subcontinent, telling me it is completely different than the central area that I visited. Perhaps in the future I will go back to India to tour the south regions.

Our farewell dinner ended just before 9:00 pm, with most of us retiring for the evening. I went up to Noelani's room and spent about an hour talking about the trip in general – our highlights and disappointments – before returning to my room where I promptly fell asleep.

Day Eleven

I was awake by 5:30 am. I made coffee, showered and filled out the Nepalese immigration forms Jay had given us the previous evening during dinner. I had breakfast that morning with Noelani, Frank and Betsy. By 9:30am, the fourteen of us who were going to Nepal gathered in the lobby (the six who were returning to the States were there as well to say their final goodbyes and wish us good luck). It took about forty-five minutes to get to the Lal Bahadur Shastri Airport situated 18 kilometers from Varanasi. I'm not sure if Jay 'tipped' the counter people at the airport but we whisked through the check-in process without any delays (and there was a considerable line when we arrived). Our flight didn't board for another hour so we browsed the shops in the terminal building, including one named – oddly enough – the Kocaine Store, which led to endless wisecracks among the group.

By 12:30 pm we took off on a Jet India flight to Kathmandu that lasted only 32 minutes. It was an aging Boeing aircraft and although I was seated in an exit row with plenty of legroom, the seat was so narrow I could barely move in it. The couple sitting next to me turned out to be from Venezuela, we had a lively conversation in Spanish about their country's presidential elections which were being held on that very day. Apparently, they were not supporters of Hugo Chavez, who had died months earlier, or

his party, and were hoping the challenger won. (Note: Chavez' successor in the United Socialist Party won the election amidst claims of ballot fraud).

When we arrived in Kathmandu we rode a shuttle bus from the tarmac to the terminal building, and then queued up in front of Immigration counters for processing (a visa fee of $25 was required to enter Nepal). We waited nearly forty minutes for everyone to clear Immigration before following Jay downstairs to where the luggage carousel was located. After retrieving our luggage and clearing customs, we were met in the airport lobby by our Nepalese tour guide, Sanjay Nepal, and a female assistant (whose name or actual duties I never ascertained, she spoke only once throughout our entire stay in Nepal and would simply sit next to Sanjay and smiled whenever he said something funny). Our awaiting tour bus was much smaller than the one we had in India; my knees sometimes pressed against the seat in front of me. As we drove to the Radisson Hotel Kathmandu, Sanjay, a very pleasant, entertaining fellow who possessed great English skills, welcomed us to Nepal and began giving us the lowdown on his country. From this moment onward Sanjay was officially our new tour guide, with Jay taking on a lesser role until it was time for us to return home.

The first thing most of us realized about Nepal (or at least Kathmandu) was that is was not as hot as India. We actually arrived on the Nepalese New Year, which that year fell on April 14th. Nepal celebrates the 1st day of *Bioshakh* – from the Bangla Calendar used in Bangladesh and other parts of India – as its new year. Although, in my research, there seems to be some confusion about *which* calendar the Nepalese government wants to implement year round (recently, they shifted from the ancient *Bikram Sambat* calendar to the *Nepal Sambat*, the national lunar calendar). I'm not certain what 'unofficial' year they were celebrating in Nepal since under Nepal Sambat the year would be 1133, and under the Bikram Sambat, it would be 2026. Take your pick. Many sections of the city were decked out with colorful streamers and banners. You could tell that a big celebration had taken place, too; the entire city had the subdued look of a hangover. As if to rub it in, Sanjay remarked that we had *just missed* an incredible party in Kathmandu (*ahhhhh, the story of my life*!).

The main avenues here seemed very wide compared to what we saw in India. In fact, we passed certain sections that were being enlarged as part of a massive construction project started by the government in anticipation of a South Asian economic summit scheduled to take place in Kathmandu later in the year. Dust from the road construction was everywhere. Kathmandu is an ancient city, with many old buildings and neighborhoods, but even with the dust and construction, it was evident to us that this place was much *cleaner* than anything we'd observed in India. I didn't see the sort of accumulated trash I often witnessed along the streets of India, and the infrastructure in Kathmandu seemed better equipped to deal with its burgeoning population. Even the traffic flowed more smoothly here; at major intersections, groups of traffic cops – most of them women – did an excellent job directing vehicles and keeping the roadways moving in an orderly fashion. Sanjay told us these police/traffic women were commonly referred to as the 'dragon ladies of Kathmandu' due to their strictness (they have been known to slap male drivers who disobey their commands). Another noticeable difference was the

absence of stray animals, especially bulls. According to Sanjay, a city ordinance prohibits having large animals roaming the streets of the capital, so they are removed to pastures out in the countryside: a simple, logical and seemingly more humane solution to the 'bovine situation' which somehow eludes the local governments of India.

The Democratic Republic of Nepal is a small landlocked sovereign country located in the Himalayas of South Asia, bordered on the north by the People's Republic of China, and everywhere else by India. Its current population hovers close to thirty million, of which 81% are practicing Hindus. Kathmandu is the country's capital and largest city. The spectacular northern mountain chain of Nepal – which, on a cloudless day, can be seen from most areas of Kathmandu – contains eight of the world's ten largest mountains, including the tallest of them all, Mt. Everest, with its famous peak of just over 29,000 feet above sea level. As we flew into the city I could see the snow-capped summits of these mountains in the distance. Unfortunately, a thick blanket of monsoon-like cloud cover obscured much of this view during our three day visit.

Sanjay also gave us a brief but colorful lesson on Nepal's more recent history:

Most of present-day Nepal was carved out by the great Gorkha king, Prithvi Narayan Shah, who conquered the Kathmandu Valley in 1769, bringing much of the warring local kingdoms and territories under his control, and establishing the Shah Dynasty which ruled until its abolition in 2008. The Gorkhas (or Gurkhas) are an indigenous people mainly from mid-western and eastern Nepal who are legendary for their military prowess (today, there are still Gurkha fighting units incorporated into the British and Indian armies).

Following China's invasion of Tibet during the 1950's, India took preemptive measures in Nepal in order to assert more influence in the country and check China's growing threat from the north. The Indian government sponsored the more liberal kingdom of Tribhuhvan Bir Bikram Shah (knocking out the Rana royal dynasty established by the British) and backed a new elected government comprised of the Nepali Congress Party (a pro-democracy group which wanted to ultimately abolish the monarchy and establish a parliamentary democracy in Nepal).

In 1959, the new king, Mahendra (1955 – 1972), tired of the 'democratic process' and did away with political parties, establishing a system known as *Panchayat*, which allowed for politicians to be elected on a local level and administer the government, but all real power rested with the monarchy. This political system ruled the country until 1990, when a people's movement forced King Birenda (1972 – 2001) to accept constitutional reform and re-establish a multi-party democratically elected parliament. In 1996, the Communist Party of Nepal (known as the Maoists) launched a violent revolution in the countryside hoping to dislodge the royal parliament and create a socialist republic. More than 12,000 people were killed during a ten year struggle (which in certain areas is still going on). The Kathmandu valley's population has surged over the years due to the influx of refugees fleeing this civil war.

Nepal's recent history took a bizarre turn on June 1st, 2001. At a royal dinner party the heir to the throne, Prince Diprenda, became drunk and disorderly. Supposedly angered by his parents' disapproval of the women he wanted to wed, the prince retired to his room and reappeared moments later armed to the teeth and began shooting his family one by one throughout the Narayanhity Royal Palace. The massacre left nine members of the royal family dead, including the king and the prince (who took his own life). The country, as you can imagine, was plunged into a constitutional crisis. The extremely unpopular Prince Gyanendra (the brother of the now-deceased king) assumed the throne following the massacre. Conspiracy theories abounded. The Nepalese public did not accept that Prince Diprenda – who, together with his father, King Birenda, was very popular – had committed the murders. The rumor mill blamed everyone: Gyanendra's political ambitions, the Indian intelligence services, even the CIA.

On February 1st, 2005, King Gyanendra dismissed the entire government and assumed full executive powers under the guise of combating the Maoist insurrection. But his attempts to squash the revolution failed. The Maoists controlled large expanses of the countryside while the military held the major cities and towns. This stalemate led to a ceasefire which in turn led to a pro-democracy movement that forced King Gyanendra to relinquish sovereign power to the people. In May of 2008, the assembly abolished the Hindu Kingdom of Nepal and established a democratic secular state. Ironically, the Maoists won the majority of the seats in the new parliamentary elections held a month later. For the most part, it was a peaceful election, and all the parties got together to form a coalition government. This lasted all of one year. The Maoist-led government was toppled and a new coalition government was created amongst all the other parties, with the Maoists excluded from sharing power. This arrangement didn't last, either. Back-to-back communist prime ministers held power briefly up until 2012 (including another Maoist). The current assembly, elected just last year, is working on a new constitution, but political in-fighting has made this an excruciatingly slow process (the previous assembly also failed to write a new constitution). In the interim, the head of the Supreme Court is actually running the government. This is the current political state of affairs in Nepal.

When you think about it, the odds against this fledgling democracy are quite daunting. Besides the fractious political landscape (much of it based on ethnic divisions) and the lack of a new constitution, there are threats from a still smoldering and possibly resurgent Maoist insurrection in the countryside and the ever increasing meddling or influence-peddling from the two super powers surrounding its borders. Historically, Nepal has maintained good relations with *both* China and India, but whenever tensions between those two super powers becomes heated, Nepal's government must feel like a nervous gymnast trying to hang on to a wobbling balancing beam. And yet, with so many obstacles in its path, instead of embracing strong-arm tactics and suspending civil liberties (the typical norm for a third world country under these circumstances), Nepal seems to embrace a more libertarian overview. For example, this is one of the few countries in Asia to abolish the death penalty, and the first to rule in favor of same-sex marriage. You can obtain marijuana and hashish just about anywhere in the country; it has been grown and used here for thousands of years. According to Sanjay, the influx of

international hippies, who flocked to Kathmandu back in the sixties and seventies, helped to create a more accepting and open society in the nation's capital. Even the dress code was more relaxed. Young people seemed to prefer western style jeans and shirts than traditional South Asian garb. I'm not sure what the rest of the country was like, since we were confined to the valley, but I was definitely impressed with what I saw in Kathmandu.

On our way to the Radisson Hotel Kathmandu we passed the enormous Narayanhity Palace complex in the central part of the city. The 74-acre palace grounds are entirely enclosed by tall brick walls and protected by guard gates. The current pagoda-shaped palace structure was built in 1970 to replace the original one partially destroyed by an earthquake in 1934. Following the dissolution of the monarchy in 2008, the ex-royals were ordered to vacate the palace and the entire complex has been turned into a public museum. The crown jewels displayed inside are considered to be one of Nepal's most valuable objects (the throne and crown are kept from public view for safe-keeping). The neighborhood surrounding the palace complex contains most of Nepal's foreign embassies, and is considered the upscale section of the city. We briefly traveled north on Lazimpat road – along the way passing the French Embassy and the official Nepalese residence of the Dalai Lama – before making a left onto a narrow side street that took us directly to the large Radisson Hotel Kathmandu. The rest of the day was free to explore on our own.

Around 4:30pm, after checking into our hotel and putting my things away, I joined Noelani, Joy, Dede and Jay for a walk along Lazimpat road. Due to the ongoing construction, the sidewalks had been uprooted and we found ourselves walking precariously along the very congested street. There were many restaurants and small shops on Lazimpat (or on the adjacent side streets), and if you continued further north along this road you will come across the Israeli, Danish, Canadian, Japanese and American embassies.

Joy wanted to buy a Nepalese dress (I believe she mentioned something about collecting traditional clothing from all the countries she visits) so we stopped in one corner store where she tried on a very lovely black and emerald-colored item called, I believe, a *gunyo chola* dress. Putting it on was a monumental chore and required the assistance of the female shop owner. To me, it resembled a more elaborate sari-style dress. We all took photos of Joy in her gunyo chola; she looked gorgeous in it. The price tag was a little steep (almost three hundred dollars). In the end, Joy wasn't sure if this was what she wanted and told the disappointed shop owner she would think about it. From here we continued up the road to an ATM machine where everyone withdrew Nepalese rupees. We stopped to take photographs of ourselves standing before the front gates of the Dalai Lama's residence and then continued browsing in a few more shops before returning to the hotel by 6:00pm. Joy and Noelani had scheduled a one and a half hour massage with an establishment in front of the Radisson. The five of us agreed to meet afterwards for dinner.

I watched an interesting documentary on the Al Jazeera network about Iraqi immigrants in Sweden, and watched a few entertaining Bollywood dance numbers on the local MTV station while waiting in my room. I met Dede in the lobby at 7:45pm but there was no sign of Noelani and Joy. I called Jay in his room to inform him we were going to have dinner and by the time he came downstairs Noelani and Joy appeared in front of the hotel 'loose as a goose' from what they described as an awesome massage experience which included a full body rub down and a facial. We proceeded back to Lazimpat road, to an Irish pub (owned by a German national) we had seen earlier on our drive in from the airport, but decided not to eat there because the people at the bar were smoking and the place smelled like a well-used ashtray. We trekked back to the hotel and opted to eat at the Olive Garden restaurant in the lobby. But this was not a typical Olive Garden establishment; it had a limited menu combining items from Outback Steakhouse. There was a ravioli dish made with yak milk! Noelani, whose stomach was still feeling queasy, perused the menu and decided she didn't want to eat and retired to her room. The rest of us stayed and had a wonderful (albeit pricey) dinner, talking about everything from our current trip to our past excursions, politics, and even the postal service (turns out Joy's husband works for the USPS in Minnesota!) By 10:00pm we paid the bill and called it a night.

Day Twelve

I was awake by 4:30am. *Dang*. The trip was almost over and I *still* had jet lag. Strangely, there is a fifteen minute time difference between Nepal and India, even though the countries are adjacent to one another. When we asked Sanjay, he shrugged and told us there was no real motive for this; it's just the government's way of asserting its independence. Great, another internal adjustment my poor body needed to make…*and for no apparent reason!* At 7:30am I went downstairs for breakfast and sat with Sergio, who told me interesting tales about his traveling adventures and his life with the Canadian military. By 9:00am we had assembled on the bus for a full day tour of Kathmandu.

Our first stop was a mountain village called Nagarkot in the Kathmandu valley. We exited the city via the Friendship Highway, a wide, nicely paved roadway that extends 800 kilometers to the capital of Tibet. This highway was built by the Chinese as a gesture of goodwill between neighbors (hence the 'friendship' name); although there is a running joke among the Nepalese that this highway will also serve as the entry point for Chinese tanks once the invasion gets under way! Nepal officially endorses the One China policy (in regards to Taiwan) and, as a result, maintains good relations with Beijing, which can be quite generous towards its 'friends'. We eventually left this highway and proceeded east on a two-lane country road through the valley, passing terraced farmlands along the way.

On the drive to Nagarkot, Sanjay lectured us briefly on Kathmandu:

Nepal's capital is situated in the bowl-shaped Kathmandu valley located in the center of the country, at an elevation of approximately 6500 feet. It is surrounded by four major mountains: Shivapuri, Phulchoki, Nagarjun, and Chandragiri. Kathmandu is actually a large urban agglomerate which includes Kathmandu Metropolitan City and four sister cities: Patan, Kirtipur, Thimi and Bhaktapur. In addition, there are about half a dozen smaller urban satellite areas just outside the Kathmandu valley. Combined, the overall population comes to over 2.5 million people (or roughly 12% of the entire country). Of the 75 current districts in Nepal, three of these (Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Bhaktapur) divide the Kathmandu valley.

There have been people living in this valley for thousands of years, producing a rich cultural history one can easily experience during the numerous religious and cultural festivals held here annually. Kathmandu is also the economic nerve center of the country, containing the most advanced infrastructure in the nation. Tourism is the largest industry. Because of its religious diversity (Hindus make up the largest portion of the valley's population, but religious tolerance is the norm) the cities in the valley have developed a more cosmopolitan culture, giving way to that libertine attitude I mentioned earlier. There seems to be a 'live and let live' philosophy – probably influenced by the constant stream of foreign visitors – permeating the valley. The literacy rate is an impressive 98%. Several major languages are spoken here: Nepali (the national language), Nepal Bhasa (the language of the Newar people, the indigenous folks of the valley), Hindi (which closely resembles Nepali) and English.

We drove through the countryside in the Bhaktapur District of the valley for more than thirty kilometers before reaching Nagarkot, which is located on a hillside more than 6,000 feet above sea level. To get there, we traversed a very narrow, winding road (every time we maneuvered a corner I held my breath hoping there was no oncoming traffic). The higher up we went, the better the view, and while the Himalayas (in the distance) were still shrouded in cloud cover, we had a wonderful panorama of the rolling hills, the deep canyon walls, the lush pine forests and the beautifully terraced farmlands of the Kathmandu valley. Occasionally, we'd pass a small farming village or an isolated home or general store along the side of the road.

From what we could make of it, Nagarkot was a little village nestled on top of a hill, containing perhaps several hundred dwellings. Historically, it served as an ancient fort, perched on its strategic hillside location with a commanding view of the entire valley (and other kingdoms). Eventually, it became a summer retreat for the royals with its cooler temperatures and scenic nature trails. Today, this unassuming little town has become a famous international hill station, offering one of the broadest views of the snow-capped Himalayas in the Kathmandu valley. Eight of Nepal's thirteen mountain ranges can be seen from here (including the Mahalangur Range which contains Mt. Everest). Nagarkot is also the best place to witness the magnificent sunrises or sunsets over the Himalayas. We stopped at an arts and crafts store situated on a rise above the road to use the bathroom and take photos of the Himalayas. Sadly, thick cloud cover

obscured most of the mountain ranges. April is the last month of the year permitting a clear view of the Himalayas before the monsoon season starts; unfortunately for us, monsoon clouds began forming earlier than usual. Hanging on the wall outside of the arts and crafts shop was a framed panoramic photograph of the mountain ranges as seen from this hill. I guess it served as a reminder of what we were missing! Many of us took pictures *of the picture* as a 'remembrance' of the view that never was.

On our way back down we stopped to tour a small farming village called Telkot. We walked along a dirt path which led from one end of the village to the other (where our tour bus was waiting for us). The locals were very friendly, in that laid-back country manner, sitting in front of their homes watching life (and us) slowly passing by. The dwellings seemed very solid, mostly of brick construction with corrugated tin roofing, and fairly large in size to accommodate extended families. There were strips of tree branches stockpiled beside the homes, I assumed for cooking and/or heating purposes, and many farm animals (mostly goats and bovines) grazing or lying beneath makeshift awnings trying to stay cool. Many of the adorable local children came up to us and we took their photos. At one farmhouse, Sanjay introduced us to the oldest marijuana grower in the Kathmandu valley. This ninety plus year old was sitting on his porch with some family members when we walked by. Sanjay spoke to the man in his native tongue and before long the family produced a huge clump of marijuana they grew right on their farm. *Whoa*. I think almost immediately some of us started rummaging through our pockets for souvenir money. It wasn't for sell, though; Sanjay told us the marijuana was used to treat farm animals…to which many of us thought: *yeah, right*. No wonder everybody looked so laid back!

From Telkot, we drove back down into the eastern corner of the valley to visit the ancient Newar city of Bhaktapur (also known as Bhadgaon). The Newa people (or Newars) are the original inhabitants of the Kathmandu valley (and its surrounding areas). This entire region was once called Nepal Mandala, and the term Newa refers to the 'citizens of Nepal Mandala'. At one point during Nepal's early medieval history there were three separate kingdoms ruling the country: Khas in the west, Karnatak in the south, and Nepal Mandala in the center. Nepal Mandala (the Kathmandu valley) was ruled by the Malla Dynasty from the 12th century to the middle of the 18th century (when the Gorkha king, Prithvi Narayan Shah, invaded and unified the whole country). The Malla kingdom was seen as the Golden Age of the Newars, a period that lasted 550 years. Interestingly, a succession squabble erupted after 1482 that led to three separate Malla kingdoms within the valley: one in the city of Patan, another in Kathmandu, and a third in Bhaktapur (Bhadgaon). The relationships between these ruling families was like something out of a soap opera; the royal families were all interrelated and inter-married, attending one another's weddings and funerals, yet they fought and plotted against each other constantly. The most astonishing thing of all: the bickering and fighting between these three Malla kingdoms created an intense competition which in turn inspired the beautiful structures one sees at each royal city's main plazas (which are known as the Durbar Squares). In other words, the Newar Golden Age came about as a result of these competing rival kingdoms within the valley. Each kingdom tried to outdo the other with

spectacular palaces, temples and courtyards. The first Durbar Square we visited was the one in Bhaktapur.

Bhaktapur is the third largest city in the valley, 'officially' founded by King Ananda Malla during the 12th century when he made this city his capital. Bhaktapur was built along the ancient trade route connecting Tibet and India, becoming a very prosperous trading center. The city served as the seat of the unified Malla Kingdom until the late 1400's when the kingdom split into three factions. As we drove to the historic Durbar Square (which means "place of palaces" and denotes the location of the ancient royal kingdom) we traversed the center of the city, which resembled an old western town (only, instead of horses hitched to posts, there were motorcycles or scooters parked vertically in front of the wide, raised sidewalks). We got off the bus about a block from the square and spent the next several hours walking around this incredible ancient city. All three Durbar Squares in the Kathmandu valley are UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and have been carefully preserved and restored over the years. It almost feels as if you've been transported back in time as you stroll through the various courtyards, temples and palace buildings.

There are actually four plaza squares at Bhaktapur (Durbar, Taumadhi, Dattatreya and Pottery) but the entire royal city area is referred to as Durbar Square (as are the other two royal cities in the valley) because this is the main plaza in front of the royal palace and was considered the official showcase of the city. Bhaktapur's Durbar Square is essentially a collection of pagoda and shikhara-style temples grouped around the main palace, a large brick and wood structure called the *Palace of the 55 Windows.* As you tour the various squares and courtyards you will be confronted by some of the best medieval artistry in all of Nepal: intricate wood carvings on struts, uprights, lintels, gateways and windows; golden effigies of kings on top of stone monoliths; guardian deities in various forms watching from their temple sanctuaries; wide open plazas designed in a well-orchestrated pattern which adds to the overall aesthetic wonder of the royal city.

We began our tour at the *Palace of the 55 Windows*, built in 1427 by King Yaksha Malla but later remodeled by King Bhupatindra Malla in the 17th century. Along the brick walls of this palace, which contain sculptural settings, runs a balcony with fifty-five windows carved in a very intricate and elaborate pattern, one of the best examples of medieval wood carving in all of South Asia. At the entrance to the palace is the astonishing *Lu Dhowka* (the Golden Gate), considered to be one of the most beautiful and richly molded gateways in the world; its door is surmounted by the image of the goddess Kali and the mythical man-bird Garuda, attended by two heavenly nymphs. The gate is further embellished with mythical creatures and monsters in intricate detail. We saw the *Lion Gate,* built in 1696, with two large lion statues guarding the entrance, and the menacing stone images of Shiva (as Bhairab, his angry alter ego) and his consort Ugrachandi (in her fearful manifestation) nearby, perhaps serving as a warning to law breakers.

The temples in the various squares were amazing. We observed the *Pashupati Temple,* a replica of the sacred Pashupatinath Temple near the Bagmati River we visited

later that afternoon. Dedicated to Lord Shiva and off-limits to non-Hindus (we observed the structure from the outside), the Pashupati Temple is famous for the erotic wood carvings on its struts depicting the Kama Sutra. Many of the male carvings had abnormally long, um, schlongs… I wondered if that was something Hindus prayed for. We also saw the *Batsala Temple* made almost entirely of stone and covered with intricate carvings. It has a huge bronze bell that when rung emits a unique pitch that causes neighborhood dogs to bark insanely.

My favorite temple was the *Nyatapola Temple*, a five-storey pagoda structure built in 1702, and one of the tallest in the whole valley. It rests on five different terraces, each one guarded by two statues. The pair of statues on the bottom terrace is of two wrestlers (kings I believe), the next terrace has two elephants, followed by two lions, then two griffins, and the top terrace has statues of *Baghini* and *Singhini*, the tiger and lion goddesses. The concept of the statues is that each is ten times stronger then the one preceding it. Climbing the long stone steps of this temple afforded one a nice panoramic view of that particular square. Nearby is the three-story pagoda-style *Bhairab Nath Temple*, dedicated to the dreadful aspect of Lord Shiva (what I like to call the *pissed-off* Shiva). There are intricate carvings along the front of this temple with two frightening statues of Shiva in his Bhairab manifestation standing guard (according to Hindu legend, Lord Brahma boasted to Lord Vishu that he had created the Universe, this angered Lord Shiva (the top deity) who appeared in the form of Bhairab, the Annihilator, and lobbed off one of Lord Brahma's heads, leaving him with only four). There are certain Hindu sects that worship Bhairab exclusively, as a caretaker and punisher. The oldest temple we saw was the *Dattatraya Temple*, built around the time of the Palace of the Fifty Five Windows in the early 1400's.

Sanjay gave us about an hour and a half so we could have lunch and wander about and take photos of the royal city and to shop for souvenirs among the many vendors in the area. Most of us ate at a restaurant called the Café Nyatapola, shaped like a mini pagoda, inside the Taumadhi Square. This café was made famous by the hippies who flocked to the Kathmandu valley back in the late sixties. I ordered a plate of delicious thick-cut French fries cooked in mustard seed oil.

From Bhaktapur's Durbar Square we drove to the banks of the Bagmati River, next to a small village called Deopatan, to see the *Pashupatinath Temple*. This turned out to be another incredible cultural experience for us. The Bagmati River runs through the Kathmandu valley, separating the districts of Kathmandu and Lalitpur. It is considered a holy river by Hindus and Buddhists and contains many temples along its banks. But none as famous as the Pashupatinath Temple, regarded as the most sacred place in all of Nepal. Although Nepal is now a secular state, the majority of its inhabitants are Hindus who worship Shiva as the Supreme Being and consider him their national deity. *Pashupati* is an animal manifestation (or *avatar*) of Lord Shiva. In Hindu mythology, Lord Shiva first started living in Nepal in the form of a deer when he saw how beautiful the Kathmandu valley was. This particular temple is listed as one of the 275 *Paadal Petra Sthalams* (Holy Abodes of Shiva) in the ancient verses written by the Shiva devotional poets of Tamil Nadu (a southern state in India). Many Hindus worldwide consider the

Pashupatinath Temple as the most sacred of all the Shiva temples and make it a point to visit it once in their lifetime. For centuries, only born Hindus were allowed to enter the temple, but recently they have relaxed the rules to allow *any* Hindu to enter. Non-Hindus (like us) can only gaze at the temple from the other side of the river.

The Pashupatinath Temple is the oldest Hindu temple in the Kathmandu valley, the original structure is said to have been built around 400 AD, but was eventually consumed by termites. This 'new' two-story structure, with its richly-ornamented pagoda containing the *linga* (or holy symbol) of Lord Shiva, was constructed during the 17th century by King Bhupendra Malla. There are several legends surrounding the creation of the Pashupatinath Temple, much of it grounded in Hindu mythology and folklore, which only adds to its mystic. Numerous other religious structures have been erected all around it over the centuries. In fact, from our vantage point across the river, the town of Deopatan appeared to be nothing more than a collection of temples.

Before getting off the bus at Deopatan, Sanjay instructed us to leave our water bottles behind. The nearby trees were populated with rhesus macaque monkeys who view anything humans put to their mouths as food and will try to take it away. Sanjay strongly advised against interacting with them since the monkeys often become aggressive if they feel threatened or provoked. I cannot speak for the others, but the 'dangerous monkey' scenario added a whole new dimension to this visit. We walked the equivalent of about two city blocks along a busy vendors' road before reaching the Bagmati River. Since it was not yet the monsoon season, the river itself was nothing more than a trickling stream in an otherwise dried out riverbed, separated by two long stone walkways (with ghats) on either side of the embankments. On the platforms opposite us (on the other side of the river) two bodies were undergoing cremation, emitting thick white smoke that thankfully blew away in a different direction. According to Sanjay, the Nepalese do not use clarified ghee when burning their dead and the smell of searing human flesh can be quite revolting.

We asked our guide if it was okay to take photographs of the cremations, and he said we could. Apparently, the Nepalese were less affronted by gawking tourists then the Indians. Although, when we started photographing the Pashupatinath Temple, which lies on the other side of the river, past a small walking bridge, one Nepali man began shouting something in his native language and pointing at us. I do not know what he said, but I clearly picked up the reference that we were *'Americans'*. I decided to put my camera down for a few minutes and discreetly walked away *just in case*.

There were many people on the opposite side of the river, mourners burning their dead or worshippers visiting the Pashupatinath Temple. On our side, along the hill, there was what appeared to be a cemetery, with many shrines, tombs and monuments. Kirants, a small indigenous ethnic group, are buried here. Many of us took photos posing with a small group of *sadhus* (or *babas*) near one of the shrines. Considered holy men on a spiritual quest for Enlightenment, sadhus are often revered as gods themselves (or as manifestations of gods). They discard earthly possessions and live a very austere life, wandering about in white or saffron-colored robes (some are completely naked), with

long hair and beards, their faces (and sometimes their bodies) painted a ghostly pale. They live on donations the public gives them (for Hindus, giving money to a sadhu is like making an offering to a god). Even the legendary Beatles, when they visited this very site back in the sixties, posed with local sadhus. When we were done taking our pictures with them, we made a joint contribution which seemed to make them *very* happy.

The most compelling scene along the Bagmati River was definitely the funeral rituals. Under Nepalese Hindu tradition, the family of the deceased dips the body three times in the river prior to cremation. The chief mourner – usually the first-born son – lights the funeral pyre and must take a bath in the river immediately after the cremation and undergo a ritual shaving. I photographed a young mourner being shaved near where his loved one had just been cremated. On the ghats along the bottom of the Pashupatinath Temple several families were performing these rituals, lowering their dead (wrapped in colorful robes) into the river on stone ramps. Afterwards, they would carry the body to one of the platforms for burning, forming a procession. It was an incredible sight. The purpose of the cremation is to return the body back to its original cosmic source. Hindus believe they borrow five essential elements from the universe when they're born: earth, water, air, fire and void (or the open space of the Cosmos). These elements must be returned when they die. Upon death, breathing stops, returning the air; the body is then burned, returning the fire; which turns to ashes, returning the earth; scattered in a river, returning the water. Finally, the soul is released, returning to the void or cosmos.

We spent about forty-five minutes here. As we began our trek back to the bus a government official popped out of a building along our side of the river and began making weird calling sounds. Suddenly, dozens of monkeys began descending on the ghats all around us. It was feeding time. The man started to throw bread at the monkeys from a large bag. Most of us were startled and just stopped dead in our tracks; we were surrounded by an entire colony of hungry primates scurrying (or fighting) for food. We ever-so-cautiously side-stepped the monkeys and gratefully returned to our bus.

Our last stop that day was at the Boudhanath Stupa in Kathmandu, considered one of the holiest Buddhist sites in Nepal. Located on the northeastern outskirts of the city, this stupa's massive *mandala* (the actual symbolic traditional square design of the stupa, with four gates containing a huge circle or sphere and a central point) is one of the largest in South Asia. In this section of the city, the Boudhanath Stupa dominates the skyline. It stands along what used to be the actual ancient trade route with Tibet, and many Tibetan merchants stopped here throughout the centuries, making this a very popular Buddhist destination. When China invaded Tibet in the 1950's, many refugees streamed into Nepal, settling down around the Boudhanath Stupa, creating what is now referred to as Little Tibet, a thriving community in the Kathmandu valley.

The Boudhanath Stupa is steeped in legend and mythology; historians cannot pinpoint who actually built it, attributing its construction to various rulers, from the Licchavi kings (an ancient kingdom from the valley) to the Tibetan Emperor, Trisong Detsen. What is agreed upon is that the stupa, in one shape or another, was built between the 6th and 8th centuries, and is regarded as a Mecca of sorts by Tibetan Buddhists. There are relics of

the Buddha himself believed to be buried inside its enormous sphere. At 100 meters wide and 40 meters tall, it is one of the biggest such structures in the world. It sits in its own square, surrounded by shops, restaurants, temples and monasteries. There is a round path at the bottom (worshippers walk clock-wise in a ritual pattern, spinning the many prayer wheels situated at the base of the stupa), while another path is made of a three tier plinth. Colorful prayer flags adorn the stupa from its center point downward. Perhaps the most striking feature are the 'eyes' of the Buddha, which are painted in bright red, white and blue colors and exist on all four sides of the crown. No matter where you walk, those eyes seem to be watching you.

Sanjay gave us an hour here to explore. I did the ritual clockwise walk around the stupa, spinning the prayer wheels as I went and saying a prayer for my daughter Rachel. There was a temple nearby containing the largest prayer wheel in the world; many of us took turns having our picture taken while spinning it. Afterwards, a group of us visited the Buddhist Thangka Center, a school for *thangka* art students. Thangka art is an ancient – essentially Himalayan – art form of a spiritual nature, which requires six to ten years of schooling to learn, and decades to master. An instructor from the school gave us a brief lecture and a demonstration on how thangka paintings are made, and then we were free to browse their shop area. Several students were painting as we walked around the school. Noey, Dede and I each purchased *mandala* paintings (intricate circular artwork which represents the cosmos).

We walked back to our bus through the very crowded shop-lined streets of Little Tibet. I was back in my hotel room by 5:15pm, exhausted from an entire day of sightseeing. I took a quick shower to freshen up. At 6:30pm, Noelani and I went to a Thai restaurant for dinner about two blocks from the hotel, just off Lazimpat Road. Ralph and Marilee recommended the place, having eaten there the night before. Noelani was still not feeling well – her stomach a bit unsettled – but she was able to enjoy this meal because the food was quite delicious; a coconut milk-based vegetable soup for starters, and then a stir-fried spicy pork and a curry prawn dish with rice. Afterwards, we stopped at a local grocery store for some ice cream. By 9:30pm we were both totally wiped out and retired to our rooms.

Day Thirteen

I was awake by 4:00am. Unable to go back to sleep, I turned on the TV and discovered that terrorists had set off two bombs near the finish line of the Boston Marathon, killing several by-standers and injuring many others. I remembered that Riad and Amira's daughter was running in the marathon and stayed glued to the television set for the next several hours to see if any of the runners were among the victims. At 7:30am

I went downstairs for breakfast and met Noelani, Riad and Amira in the lobby. I asked the couple if they had been in touch with their daughter, and teary-eyed they told me she was okay. Relieved, we all ended up hugging one another. At breakfast, we discussed what happened in Boston and the topic of terrorism around the world, disagreeing on the implications of current U.S. policies in the Middle East. It was a 'touchy' conversation, with emotions running high as a result of the marathon bombings.

By 9:30am the group gathered in the lobby for what turned out to be another full day of touring. Initially, the Patan Durbar Square visit was an optional excursion scheduled for the following morning, but seeing as how we were leaving tomorrow the group unanimously voted to do the excursion today, in the afternoon, so that we would have the morning free to relax prior to our long journey home.

Our first stop was the Kathmandu Durbar Square, the preserved royal plaza complex inside the old city, representing the second of the three Malla Kingdom Durbar Squares within the valley. The construction of palaces at this site dates back to the early ancient Licchavi period of the third century. According to my research, though, during the Malla kingdom period there seems to be some uncertainty as to who built *what* in this complex of fifty temples and palace buildings. The original royal palace was constructed during the reign of King Sankharadev (1069 – 1083), but following the division of the Malla Kingdom into three independent smaller kingdoms in the late 1400's there were no written archives concerning the construction of the Kathmandu royal city. In addition, many of the structures have either been restored or rebuilt by subsequent rulers, so credit gets spread around. Either way, this royal city was impressive, home not only to the royal Malla family of Kathmandu, but also to the Shah Dynasty that replaced them (who added their own special touch to the area). The entire Durbar Square of Kathmandu is basically arranged into two large quadrangles, the inner one contains the *Hanuman Dhoka* palace complex, and the outer one has a series of temples. Throughout the site are numerous smaller courtyards and plazas. And like all the other Durbar Squares in the valley, you will find some incredible medieval Nepalese artistry, from intricate woodcarvings to amazing stone sculptures.

The first thing we visited was the *Kumari Ghar*, a small palace on the southern side of Durbar Square which contains perhaps the most curious attraction in all of Nepal: the *Raj Kumari*, an actual living goddess. A Kumari is a pre-pubescent girl considered to be the incarnation of the goddess Taleju (the Nepalese name for the Hindu goddess Durga, a fierce deity who is often depicted with multiple weapon-holding arms). Every seven to eight years, a certain Newar clan within the valley selects a young girl to serve as their living goddess. The selection process is quite vigorous and thorough, performed by a group of senior Buddhist priests. They begin their search within the Newar *Shakya* caste (the caste to which the Buddha himself belonged) to find a young girl (around the age of 4 or 5) who they believe is a direct descendent of Lord Buddha. But this child must be perfect in every way: she must never have shed blood or been afflicted by disease, and her body is inspected for the slightest imperfections (bruises, moles, missing teeth, scars, etc) which would disqualify her immediately. If the candidate passes these 'basic' requirements, then she is further evaluated on a list of 'thirty-two perfections' of a

goddess (a poetic listing of what an incarnated deity should look like such as 'thighs like a deer' or 'eyelashes like a cow'). Her hair and eyes should be very black; her hands and feet should be dainty. In the past, her horoscope had to align with the king's (since she had to confirm the king's legitimacy each year of her divinity), and her family is scrutinized for their devotion and piousness. The final tests are to ensure the girl's sense of serenity and, above all else, fearlessness (after all, she is supposed to be the incarnate of the fearsome Durga). This poor child is required to spend the night – *by herself* – in a darkened Taleju temple with the severed heads of various animals for company. If she shows no signs of fear then she is put through one final test: she must pick out the personal belongings of the outgoing Kumari from a selection of items placed before her, indicating she is the next true Kumari. *Let me tell you, we should select our own leaders this way*! Once the next Kumari has been chosen and carefully scrutinized, she undergoes a series of Tantric cleansing rituals and is officially installed inside the Kumari Ghar palace where she will reside, protected by armed guards and taken care of by a family of palace caretakers. Her reign will be brief, up until puberty, but in the meantime she is regarded as a living goddess (Hindus and Buddhists come here in droves to pray to her) and is paraded around on a throne during religious festivals. She lives on the second and third floors of the palace since her feet cannot touch the ground (she is carried from place to place by her guards or on a throne). When she is no longer the Kumari, she will return to her parent's home and continue to live a normal life. *Absolutely fascinating*.

When we visited the palace, the current Kumari, a young girl named Matina Shakya (installed in 2008) was there, and Sanjay requested from the guards (or caretakers) if she could make an appearance by the balcony windows inside the palace courtyard. We had to wait twenty minutes or so (nobody rushes a living goddess), but this adorable Kumari appeared for a few minutes at the window (in ritual make-up) and gazed silently at each one of us. You are not permitted to photograph the Kumari, and this is strictly enforced by armed guards who will arrest you on the spot and/or confiscate your camera. When she vanished from view we exited the palace grounds, many of us placing money in a donation box set up for the Kumari's future education. I was able to purchase a postcard with the Kumari's picture on it from vendors in the plaza.

We spent a couple of hours touring the Kathmandu Durbar Square. We visited the *Hanuman Dhoka* complex, which is spread out over five acres, containing the actual palaces where the royal families lived until 1886 when they officially moved into the Narayanhiti Palace in the center of the city. Locals refer to the Kathmandu Durbar Square as the *Hanuman Dhoka* Durbar Square, a name derived from the large monkey statue of Hanuman, an avatar of Lord Rama, situated at the entrance of the royal palace grounds. As you pass the main gate into the complex, a bizarre statue greets you on the left hand side of Lord Narasimha (the half-man, half-lion incarnation of Lord Vishnu) devouring the demon Hiranyakashipu. The east wing of the Hanuman Dhoka complex is the oldest section, with ten different courtyards dating back to the mid 1500's. Many of the 'newer' buildings – some made of white marble – were constructed under the British-supported Rana Dynasty (a Hindu Rajput clan that ruled Nepal between 1846 and 1951) with intricately carved struts, doorways and windows. The wooden struts of the older palace buildings have amazing carvings of Lord Shiva brandishing weapons in his many arms.

In the southern corner of the Nasal Chowk ('dancing Shiva') courtyard, is the nine-storey Basantapur Tower. We also saw the actual royal throne on display in one of the palace buildings. Inside the Hanuman Dhoka complex are several temples, the most famous is the Taleju Temple which takes up the entire Mul Chowk courtyard. This temple is dedicated to the goddess Durga, the tutelary deity of the Malla family, and is considered very sacred, open only to Hindus, and then again for only one day out of the year during the annual *Dashain* Festival honoring Durga.

There are many interesting temples and religious monuments throughout the Durbar Square. The *Kasthamandap Temple* is a three-storied, pagoda style structure built in the 16th century supposedly from the timber of one single tree, enshrining an image of Gorakhnath (a famous medieval guru). The name Kathmandu is derived from the word Kasthamandap. The *Jagannath Temple* has erotic carvings along its struts. I posed in front of the *Kal Bhairab*, the largest stone idol in Kathmandu, representing the terrifying angry image of Lord Shiva. Many locals lit candles and worshipped in front of this menacing-looking idol. Nearby was a small temple square that was covered with hundreds – if not thousands! – of pigeons. Riad was brave enough to pose in the middle of all those birds, standing perfectly still (in his *white* polo shirt) while Amira fidgeted with her camera, trying to take the perfect shot. At any moment, I half-expected Riad to be covered in a mountain of bird shit. But luckily, he emerged unscathed (or, um, *unpooped*). Further along I climbed to the top of the *Maju Deval Temple* and took some nice photos looking down into the square. I joined Dede and Joy in front of the *Shiva Parvati Temple*; we took turns photographing one another clowning around the giant lion statues at the base of the temple.

From the Durbar Square our group followed Sanjay through the streets of Kathmandu for several blocks, crossing a bridge over the incredibly polluted Bagmati River. Plastic trash was strewn up and down the entire dried out river bed. *No wonder the cities looked so clean*, I thought, *they dump everything into the water*! During my research, I discovered a dark side to all the natural beauty one sees in the valley. The nation's capital has a deepening water crisis on its hands. Unchecked urban sprawl has led to the use of rivers as garbage dumps, with large sewerage pipes acting as tributaries to the waterways here, literally killing off all the fish in the valley's rivers. Hundreds of thousands of refugees have fled the civil war in the countryside and many live in shanties and makeshift tents that stretch for miles along the Bagmati River, throwing all their trash into the sacred waterway. It is both saddening and appalling to witness.

We re-boarded our bus on the opposite side of the bridge and drove west to a valley hilltop to visit the religious complex known as *Swayambhunath*, although more commonly referred to by the locals as the Monkey Temple because of the 'sacred monkeys' who reside in the hillside trees. Swayambhunath is one of the top Buddhist pilgrimage sites in the world. Situated on top of a hill overlooking the Kathmandu valley, Swayambhunath consists of an enormous 1500 year old stupa (completely renovated in 2010) surrounded by a variety of shrines, monasteries and temples, some dating as far back as the Licchavi period (400 – 750 AD). More recently, a Tibetan monastery, museum and library have been added to the site. There are also many souvenir shops,

hostels and restaurants at Swayambhunath, making this place a popular tourist attraction, as well. We climbed to the top of the hill via a series of stairways that had standing platforms every so many steps, allowing us to catch our breath and take panoramic photographs of Kathmandu. There is another, *deeply* inclined stairway (with 365 steps) on the eastern side of the hill which leads directly to the main platform of the stupa. Tour guides tend to avoid this stairway because occasionally tourists will stand at the top of the steps to photograph the stupa, lose their equilibrium and topple backward to their deaths. And let me tell you, it is a scary fall; I got dizzy just looking down the stairway. For those who wish to avoid the long climb up, there is a car road leading to the southwest entrance of the site.

The creation mythology surrounding Swayambhunath is that the entire Kathmandu valley was once a giant lake out of which grew a lotus (a divine symbol pertaining to Lord Vishnu and his consort Lakshmi). The valley came to be known as *Swayambhu* ('self created'), a name that originates from the term *svyambhu*, an eternal self-existing flame. Later, a stupa was built over this sacred place and over the centuries it has become a revered site for both Hindus and Buddhists the world over. The first thing you notice when you arrive at the top of the hill is the white dome of the stupa and its large golden cubicle top with the painted sleepy-looking 'eyes' of the Buddha on each side. This particular stupa has a 'unity' symbol (resembling a large question mark) situated between the Buddha's eyes that looked almost like a nose, giving the stupa a real face-like quality. I did the ritual clockwise walk-around, taking photos of the Tibetan and Buddhist monasteries and the various temples, one of which was *very* old, surrounding the dome. Much of the iconic imagery adorning this site comes from the *Vajrayana* (Tantric Buddhism) tradition of Newar Buddhism. At the base of the eastern side of the stupa is a large *vajra*, a symbolic thunderbolt and diamond scepter representing the structure's irresistible force and indestructibility.

We spent about an hour at Swayambhunath; I was able to buy some Buddhist souvenirs from the vendors. Afterwards, we headed back down the stairway to our awaiting tour bus. Along the way, we asked Sanjay about the numerous monkeys at the site. He told us the monkeys here are considered holy because in Hindu mythology when Manjushree – a *bodhisattva* (Enlightened Being) of wisdom and learning – was raising the hill upon which the stupa would later be built, he grew his hair so long that head lice formed which later *transformed* into monkeys. I kid you not, folks.

The regular portion of our itinerary ended right there and we returned briefly to our hotel to drop off those who had not signed up for the optional Patan Durbar Square tour (I believe Riad, Amira and the Houde family chose not to go). We took a few minutes to use the bathroom and put our souvenirs away and then the remaining nine members, together with Sanjay and Jay, boarded our bus and drove to the city of Lalitpur in the south-central region of the valley to visit the Patan Durbar Square, the third Malla royal square in the Kathmandu Valley. Patan (now officially Lalitpur) is one of the four largest cities in Nepal. It lies on an elevated tract of land in the valley just south of the Bagmati River, which forms a natural boundary separating it from Kathmandu city on its northern and western side. Patan is a city *steeped* in Buddhism. The original city is said to have

been designed in the shape of a *Dharma-Chakra* (the Wheel of Righteousness), and contains over 1200 Buddhist monuments. The majority of the population is engaged in trade, particularly handicraft goods and small scale cottage industries. Historically, the best artists and craftsmen in the country have hailed from this city. Although not as urbanized as Kathmandu, it is changing rapidly. There is a fascinating network of alleyways in the center of the city that Sanjay took us to see where few tourists venture.

During our tour of the Durbar Square, we stopped to eat lunch at an outdoor restaurant located within the royal city. Waiting for our food to arrive, we witnessed several stray cats atop one of the vacated tables helping themselves to whatever scraps they could find. Normally, one would be shocked to see such a thing inside of an eating establishment, but most of us were in awe…*we hadn't seen a single cat since arriving on the Indian Subcontinent*! Towards the end of our meal Sergio began feeding them his leftovers; the furry felines encircled our table like a pack of lions surrounding a wounded zebra on the Serengeti.

The history of *how* Patan's Durbar Square took shape is as mysterious as that of Kathmandu's. Once again, a lack of written archives has left historians with the task of sorting out how this royal city came about. The Malla kings are credited with establishing the royal square, but the city of Patan sits on an ancient crossroads, with merchants and traders passing through here continuously for centuries, making it a prosperous economic hub that attracted many clans. For example, the *Pradhanas* were a Newar group that settled in the region before the Malla kingdom was established, and they built several of the *original* foundations in the old city. The Thakuri Dynasty (an Indian Rajput clan) built a palace here and instituted some reforms which are evident, as well. But most of the royal buildings and temples that exist in Durbar Square today were built by the Malla rulers from the 1600's onward.

We began our tour by walking towards the main square which is tiled in red brick. Along the way we passed an ancient communal water fountain area that has existed for over a thousand years. Locals, with buckets and empty bottles in hand, were lined up inside a recessed courtyard where three wall-mounted statue fountains continuously poured water into a small stone canal.

Patan's Durbar Square has two basic sections: the Palace grounds, and the adjacent main temples along the western side of the palace. We explored the palace complex first, entering the central courtyard known as the *Mul Chowk*. Surrounding the courtyard are various royal buildings and temples, most seemed to be dedicated to Taleju (Durga), the favorite deity of the Malla kings. In the southern section of the courtyard is a golden doorway leading to the Shrine of Taleju, flanked on either side by the golden statues of two river goddesses: *Ganga*, standing atop a tortoise, and *Jumana*, standing atop a carved makura, a mythical crocodile. In the center of the Mul Chowk is a small golden temple known as the Bidya Temple. The wooden struts along the buildings have beautifully carved images of what I believe is Taleju with her many weapon-brandishing arms flaying about. There are two other courtyards inside the palace complex, the *Sundari Chowk* and the *Keshav Narayan Chowk*, the former was closed to the public when we

visited the site. The Keshav Narayan Chowk, in the northern section of the complex, contains the Degutale Temple, and is the oldest part of the palace grounds. From what I could tell, the Patan royal palace complex did not appear to be as large as the ones we had seen in the other two Durbar Squares.

From here we walked through the temple areas of the Durbar Square just outside the palace walls. We saw the *Krishna Temple*, the most important temple in the square, built in 1637 by King Siddhinarasimh Malla on the spot in front of the palace where he claimed he saw the gods Krishna and Radha. The temple has a tall Shikhara-style tower (popular in Northern India) with 21 golden pinnacles; below the pinnacles are three stories, the first floor contains the shrine of Krishna (with the two goddesses Radha and Rukamani by his side), the second floor is dedicated to Shiva, and the third to Buddha. There is a stone plaza just in front of this temple that serves as the main gathering area of the Durbar Square and fills to capacity during the annual *Krishnastami* Festival. Another interesting temple overlooking the square is the *Bhimsen Temple*, with its three interconnecting golden windows, built in the early 18th century and dedicated to Lord Bhimsen, a Hindu god known for his super strength and bravery. He was a popular deity amongst merchants and traders, and is worshipped today as a god of trade and commerce. Just south of this temple is the 17th century *Vishwanath Temple* dedicated to Lord Shiva, this elaborately decorated two-roofed structure has a pair of large stone elephants guarding its entrance and the pillars have very ornate carvings.

But the most fascinating temple of all (at least for me) was the *Hiranayavarna Makavikar* Temple, more commonly referred to as The Golden Temple. It is located to the north of the Durbar Square, and is the only temple you have to pay to enter (but well worth the admission). Its construction goes all the way back to the early 1400's, but some of the elaborate gold- and silver-covered decorations and statues are even older. We entered through a series of narrow stone archways that conceal the incredible courtyard within. The entry into this inner courtyard is flanked by two stone elephants. A railed walkway extends around three sides of the courtyard, with the actual Buddhist temple (a rectangular three-story structure with a copper-gilded façade) on the fourth side. In the center is a smaller, richly decorated temple with a golden roof and a very ornate bell-shaped top. Throughout the courtyard are beautiful Hindu or Buddhist icon statues covered in silver, gold or copper and intricately carved pottery. Inside the main temple is a shrine of Sakyamuni (the Buddha) that cannot be photographed. There is a stairway that leads to a second-floor chapel lined with Tibetan-style frescoes. The temple caretaker is a boy under the age of twelve who hands over this duty to another boy every 30 days. This is probably just a symbolic ritual, as there is an older man, I believe a monk, who does the *actual* care-taking. When we were there, the boy 'monk' was playing with one of his friends. Dede and I took turns photographing each other in front of the temple shrine entrance; we had to wait until a Nepalese woman in a red sari finished praying at the shrine before we could take our pictures.

With our tour of the Patan Durbar Square officially over, Sanjay allowed us about an hour to wander around looking for souvenirs or take more photos. I wanted to purchase a Tibetan healing bowl earlier in the day but Sanjay advised me to wait until we got to

Patan to buy one. He now took me, Noelani, Dede and Joy to a small store inside the square called the *Om Shop* that sold healing bowls, exclusively. The young proprietor led us to a back room where we sat in front of shelves covered with various types of metal bowls. He gave us the customary lecture and demonstration:

Actually, they are referred to as Tibetan *singing* bowls, and to be even more precise, they are really bowl-shaped *bells*. In the Himalayas, it is believed the tradition of singing bowls dates back to the Buddha himself. The concept was brought to Tibet from India by the great tantric master Padmasambhava during the 8th century AD. The bowls can be used in two ways. By gently spinning a padded wooden handle around the edge of the bowl an unusual sound is produced that invokes a deep sense of relaxation which can naturally assist a person who is trying to reach a meditative state (with the ultimate goal of being enlightened); in this regard, the singing bowls are a quintessential aid to meditation, and can be found in temples, monasteries, meditation halls and on Buddhist altars all over the world. The second way the bowls can be used is as a healing device. By hitting the sides of the metal bowl with a cushioned wooden mallet, a very deep, resonating vibration is emitted which can produce deep relaxation and stress reduction when held close to the body, and can be used for holistic healing, Reiki, chakra balancing, or even New Age music. In one of the souvenir shops in Varanasi, I tried this 'healing' aspect of the bowl, and found the deep soothing vibrations so relaxing and emotional calming that I knew I had to buy one.

The proprietor of the Om Shop told us that a real singing bowl is made of several different alloys. Certain antique bowls have been analyzed to contain up to 12 different metals: silver, nickel, copper, zinc, antimony, tin, lead, cobalt, bismuth, arsenic, cadmium and iron. Most of the ones in his shop were hand-crafted using seven alloys. The Om Shop, in addition to making singing bowls (in the same time-honored Himalayan tradition) also sells antique bowls purchased from Tibetans who've immigrated to Nepal (and, apparently, are down on their luck). These singing bowls are very old, some hundreds of years, and are highly prized and traded between serious collectors worldwide. The proprietor showed us one section of bowls made in his own shop, then another section of antique bowls that he got from Tibetans. And then he showed us a series of special bowls claiming to be constructed during a full moon and containing alloys from meteorites that are supposed to be very 'magical', indeed. The singing bowls ranged in price. The cheapest were the store-made bowls; the more expensive were the antiques and the full moon/meteorite ones. He gave us a demonstration of the energy produced by the bowls by making water literally leap out of one simply by rubbing a wooden mallet around its edges. He made several bowls 'sing' so we could hear the different pitches, and we took turns sitting on a low stool while he gave us soothing vibration massages by simply banging a bowl with a mallet and then holding it next to our bodies. *I was totally sold*!

When the demonstration was over, I decided I wanted to purchase an antique singing bowl because the sound and vibrations supposedly gets better with age. I tried different bowls and found one with just the right tone for me and asked how much it cost. $380. Sanjay saw the hesitation on my face and told me I should not consider the price, that this

was not a souvenir but rather an investment in my overall physical and spiritual well-being. And, he emphasized, *antiques* are sometimes expensive. My first thought was perhaps Sanjay was getting a kickback…come to think of it, that was my second thought, too. In the end I chose to ignore my suspicious nature and give in to my spiritual side. Um, the proprietor also knocked off thirty bucks.

When I returned home I researched the costs of these antique singing bowls and discovered many of the bowls sold as 'antiques' today are really newer, hand-made bowls made in the Kathmandu valley. So either I paid for the genuine article and got a real bargain (they *are* very pricey) or I got taken for a ride. To be honest, I'd rather not know and just *assume* it's the real McCoy. Besides, I banged the bowl and held it up to my butt just in case I got reamed. *I'm joking*, of course. My Tibetan singing bowl sits atop a tiny red cushion in the center of my coffee table. I have used it many times since coming home and after each use I always feel calm and relaxed. It is now one of my most cherished possessions. Getting it to sing, on the other hand, takes a bit of practice; it's all in the angle of the mallet. *Ommmmmmmm*…

We rendezvoused at the agreed upon time and then followed Sanjay through the back alleyways adjacent to the royal square for a walking tour. I was surprised to see so much activity on those hidden narrow streets. Vendors sold fried snacks and steamed dumplings from pushcarts, tiny bakeries opened onto the streets, the smell of their goodies wafting through the air. We passed small grocery stores and shops. Motorcycles and scooters were lined up along one side of the alleys while people sat in small groups on the opposite side. We came upon a crowded outdoor food market area (operated by Chinese or Tibetan merchants) where the local residents do their shopping, surrounded by clusters of apartment buildings which formed a maze of pathways in all directions. In one section, groups of men were playing card games. And we saw some of the oldest residential brick dwellings in the city, with faded wooden door and window frames, and balconies that appeared as if they were ready to collapse. This little walking tour was not part of the itinerary, but Sanjay wanted us to see how the locals really lived. I, for one, was grateful for the experience.

We got back to the hotel by 5:00pm and I managed to nap for an hour. By 7:00pm we gathered in the lobby to head over to a popular local restaurant called *Utsav* (which means 'festival') for our farewell dinner. Ralph and Marilee did not attend because they fell in love with that Thai restaurant and wanted to have their final meal there. I don't blame them, the food was really good.

Utsav resembled a medieval banquet hall with a large sunken dining area lined with long tables. Throughout dinner, groups of Nepalese dancers performed traditional dance numbers wearing colorful native costumes. The place was packed, including the balcony areas. I thought this was going to be a typical 'dinner-show' touristy thing, but actually, it was quite enjoyable. A wait staff continuously came to our table, serving us course after course of traditional Nepalese dishes: potato squares, lentil soup, a maize dish, rice, vegetable curry, spinach, boar meat, chicken curry and fruit topped with sweetened yogurt. It was all very tasty, but a bit spicy. Prior to dinner they served a shot of local

liquor and everyone toasted the end of the trip (I abstained, having sworn off booze many years ago). Noelani, Dede and Joy played a prank on Jay, who cautioned them about the strength of the liquor beforehand. Noelani took one sip and pretended to keel over on the table, her performance was Oscar-worthy and Jay thought she had really passed out. Dede caught the whole thing on video, including Jay's frantic response. *Boy, did they laugh themselves silly over that*! By the end of the night, a female host invited the patrons to come on stage and join the dancers for one final number. Noelani volunteered from our group. Our farewell dinner at Utsav was a great way to end the trip. By 9:15pm we headed back to the hotel. I watched some more news on the BBC concerning the Boston bombing and then went to bed.

Days Fourteen and Fifteen

Ironically, on the last day of the trip I had my best night's sleep, waking up at 7:30 am. After shaving and showering, I repacked my suitcase (which, aside from my souvenirs, was now nothing more than a receptacle for my dirty laundry) and watched more coverage of the Boston bombing. A manhunt was underway for two Chechen brothers suspected in the terrorist act. At 9:00 am I met Noelani and we went downstairs for a leisurely breakfast. I ran into the Houde family who had just returned from an early morning plane ride over the Himalayas and were very excited by the experience. I believe they booked this excursion separately the previous day. They showed me some awesome photos they took of the snow-capped mountain ranges. *I was sooooooooo jealous*! At 10:00 am, Noelani and I decided to stroll down the narrow street in front of our hotel to shop for some last-minute souvenirs. Noelani was able to buy several nice jewelry pieces from two separate jewelers in the area, hoping to resell them later online. She seemed very impressed with the quality of their work and exchanged contact information with them for possible future business dealings.

By 12:30 pm we drove to the Kathmandu International Airport. Our flight to New Delhi was scheduled for 4:25 pm but Jay said there were always delays, especially with the security protocol, so it was best to arrive very early. We said our 'goodbyes' to Sanjay and his bus crew; I think most of us tipped Sanjay well, he definitely deserved it. The airport terminal was crowded with international travelers and we had to wait more than two and a half hours before boarding our plane. We arrived in New Delhi by 6:00 pm, retrieved our luggage and then proceeded outside the airport building and waited about fifteen minutes for our tour bus to show up. A gosh-awful stench permeated the air, but that paled in comparison to the gosh-awful *traffic* we encountered on our drive to the Hilton's DoubleTree Hotel in the city of Gurgaon (the modern city I mentioned on Day Four). What normally should have been a thirty minute drive took us almost an hour longer. Much of the delay was at the toll plaza separating New Delhi from the Indian State of Haryana where Gurgaon is located. At one point, our driver had to actually get

off the bus and go to a small office by the side of the highway to pay the Haryana state road taxes before we could continue.

When we finally reached the 5-star DoubleTree Hotel, security was so tight we spent another twenty minutes just having our luggage checked and going through a metal screening device. I didn't get to my room until 8:15pm. *And I was livid*. Most of us were not spending the night here; this was just a 'rest stop' before we were taken back to the airport (at 10:30pm) for our long flight home. It didn't make sense to put us up in a hotel – even one as elegant as the DoubleTree – so far from the airport! I barely had enough time to shower and slip into my 'airplane clothes' (jeans and a comfortable shirt-sleeved shirt) before meeting Noelani downstairs for dinner in one of the hotel's fancy bar and restaurants. We each ordered a refreshing ginger and mint juice drink and shared a large garden salad. For our entrée we chose the beef tenderloin (hey, it was our last night in India and we were tired of the vegetarian fare!) with broiled potatoes and grilled veggies. For people who don't eat cows, they sure know how to cook them. The beef was so tender I could slice it with my fork. The bill wasn't cheap, but it turned out to be one of the best meals I had on the entire trip. *Go figure*.

At 10:30 pm, Noelani, Frank, Betty, Riad, Amira, Ralph, Marilee and I gathered in the hotel lobby for the drive back to the airport. Sergio was leaving the following day, and Dede and Joy had scheduled some extra days in New Delhi, I think. Jay accompanied us to the airport. Most of us tipped him on the ride over and thanked him for his service. As tour guides went, I thought he was pretty good, and I wished him and his family well. By the time we checked in and cleared security, we had less than two hours before boarding. Noelani and I wandered around the airport, browsing in a 'spiritual' shop that sold mostly Hindu and Buddhist items. We also purchased some *kulfi* ice cream from a kiosk vendor. Our flight left at 2:45 am (on April 18th, the fifteenth day of the tour). It took about eight hours to reach Brussels; I took an Ambien and managed to sleep through most of it.

While waiting for our connecting flight to Newark, Noelani and I bought an assortment of Belgian chocolates and then sat down in a café and ate most of them while sipping strong coffee and sampling a croissant and a Belgian waffle. I'm not sure if it was the sugar rush or the caffeine overload, but I was more hopped up than a crystal meth addict. We took so long at the café we actually had to rush back to our boarding gate to make our plane. The flight to Newark lasted seven and a half hours. On the plane I saw a classic, but controversial, Bollywood movie entitled *The Bandit Queen*, based on the true-life story of a lower caste Indian woman who led a group of bandits in the 1980's and later became a popular politician. I also got to see the thriller *The Bourne Legacy.* In between movies I took a nap. The time went by fast.

We touched down at Newark's Liberty International Airport at 12:30 pm. Exhausted, the remaining members of my group (Noelani, Riad, Amira, Frank, Betty and myself) trudged through immigration and collected our luggage. Prior to clearing customs we hugged/shook hands and promised to call or write. I walked Noelani to her awaiting car service outside the terminal building, saying one final goodbye. After she left, I hopped on the Air Train and proceeded to Terminal C. My three-hour flight to Miami was

scheduled to leave at 5:25 pm, but due to severe storms in the central part of the country my departure kept getting delayed. To make a long story short, I didn't touch down in Miami until one o'clock in the morning…*31 hours after leaving Nepal*. Talk about jet lag!

My trip is not officially over until I finish the journal. I'm anal that way. I discovered years ago not to trust my memories and to write everything down so as not to forget the finer details. I have enjoyed re-living my India-Nepal trip through these pages, and I always send a copy to my fellow travelers as a way of saying 'thank you' for their companionship. After all, it's the people we meet along life's journey that make for a truly memorable experience. I hope I did not omit (or include) too much. I normally close my journals with a final summary of the trip and my lasting impressions. But I will not do that here. I think the opinions I expressed throughout the journal speak for themselves. Besides, as I mentioned in my opening paragraph, India is a country that needs to be 'experienced'.

I have a friend at work that, in a rather ingenious way of getting to the point, always asks me the same question: *"Would you go back?"* In regards to Nepal, yes. We crammed a lot of sightseeing into three days, but I would love to explore the Kathmandu valley further and experience more of the rest of the country's natural beauty. As for India…well, *that depends*. When I was in China, I woman in my tour group confided in me that she'd been to the Mainland twenty years earlier and was shocked to discover how backward the country was. When I asked her why she decided to revisit, she replied that many people kept telling her, "You should see China *now*." Maybe I'll wait until someone tells me the same thing about India, or perhaps I might consider a future tour of the southern regions, which are remarkably different than the areas I visited. But regardless of my own personal observations, I would definitely recommend India as a travel destination. It is a unique and fascinating place, with a history as old as Mankind. The people, the food, the wonderful historical sites, the spiritual nature of the Indian Subcontinent… all of it makes for a truly amazing experience. An unforgettable one, at that.

Till next time, my fellow travelers. *Ommmmmmmmm.…*

Richard C. Rodriguez

(My trip to India-Nepal occurred between April 4th and April 18th 2013)