

## Rich and Cheryll Odendahl's Trip Report from India and Nepal November 2010

We've talked to experienced travelers who were so shocked upon arrival in India, that they immediately turned around and went home. We wanted to be properly prepared for the experience, so we read several guidebooks during our 15 hour flight from Chicago to Delhi. To summarize our reading, India is the exact opposite of Switzerland. A collection of the choice adjectives used includes; cacophonous, stench, chaotic, corrupt, exasperating, bamboozling and bureaucratic. But wait; this is the place that gave the world the tranquility and inner peace of yoga. Surely we'll be able to find something here that is calm and relaxing? We were as ready as ready can be. And yes, we know, "stench" is not generally considered to be an adjective.

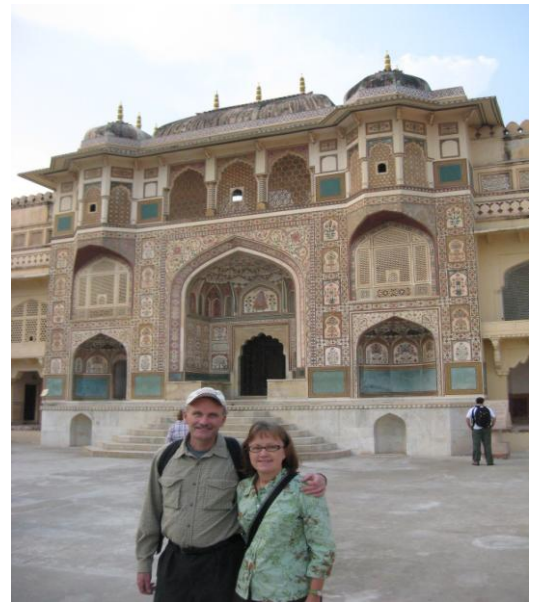
Two hours out from Delhi, we put down the books to gaze and reflect as we passed over Kabul and then flew south over the tribal areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan where Osama bin Laden is supposed to be hiding in a mountain cave five miles below. Whatever discomforts we were about to endure were trivial in comparison to the daily life of the hunters and the hunted on the ground there.



We booked this tour through Gate 1 Travel and can recommend their agency. <http://www.gate1travel.com/>. We joined 25 other seasoned travelers from all over America. We had excellent hotels and guides who led us on very busy days. This group tour was much cheaper than anything we could negotiate on our own.

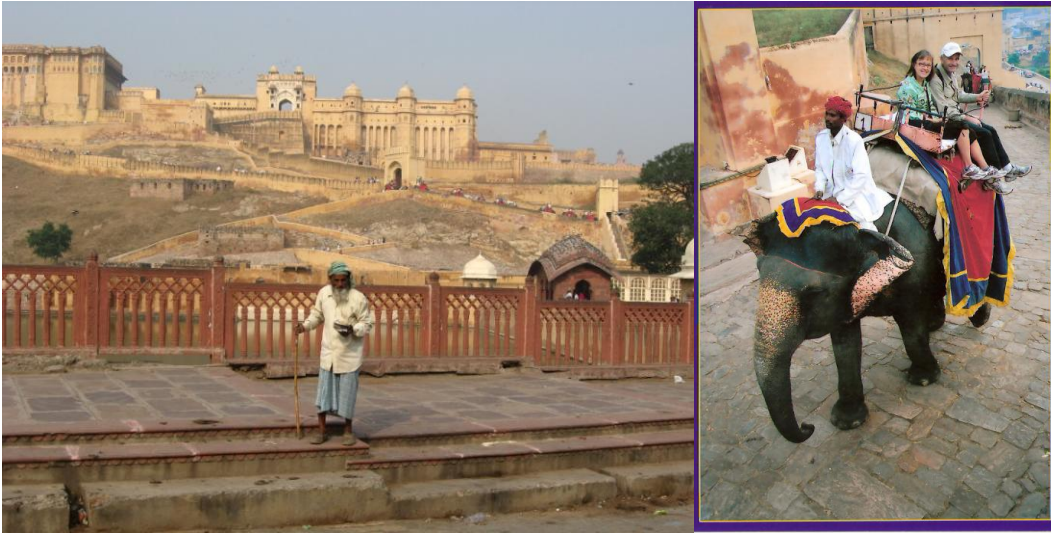
We arrived in heavy fog at the airport. At least that's what the guide called it. But fog doesn't taste like this at home. This was undoubtedly thick air pollution. The road to our hotel, like most roads in India, was lined with a mélange of litter, dust and feces. Most people have heard that cows are sacred and roam the city streets, but they are also accompanied by pigs, monkeys, camels, donkeys and the occasional elephant; both in the cities and the rural areas. We didn't see a single garbage truck during our stay, and, outside of the major tourist sites, most

of the trash cans have apparently been re-appropriated for some higher purpose. Lacking any alternative, the people seem to have few qualms about discarding most anything most anywhere. If the litter gets too bad, the locals make a pile and burn it. All that we could do was to redouble our hygiene efforts. The hand sanitizer was on full alert as we made every effort to avoid a case of dysentery or “Delhi belly.” Most of the members of the group would experience at least minor intestinal discomforts for a day or two.



At a couple of hotels, we had difficulty connecting to the wireless internet. In both cases, a call to the front desk produced a capable IT professional at our door within a few minutes, and our problems were quickly solved. At work, Rich is connected to an Indian call center when he has computer problems. Here, the service is live.

The reward for enduring the poverty and filth is the privilege of immersing yourself into a fantastic, colorful culture and visiting the magnificent monuments scattered around the country. Of course, the Taj Mahal is the most famous. But there are also many well-maintained palaces, forts and memorials that honor the long history of a magnificent civilization.



India is a country of contrasts. People live in squalor outside opulent five-star hotels. At one hotel that is a former royal palace, we enjoyed ten-dollar cocktails as one large crew prepared the pageantry that accompanies a game of elephant polo on the manicured front lawn for the amusement of the wealthy guests. Meanwhile, a second large crew begged outside the gate. We were often surrounded by groups of beggars who turned on a sad face, asking for money for food or shampoo. Our guide warned us not to give them anything or even to buy them milk, as they'd return it to the store and split the money with the shopkeeper. Rich developed an effective strategy to deal with the onslaught. He'd take off his sunglasses and stare straight into their eyes without saying anything. The game of stare-down with a middle-aged white guy invariably turned their sad faces into smiles and they'd run away laughing. However, it should be noted that playing stare-down does not work with cows.





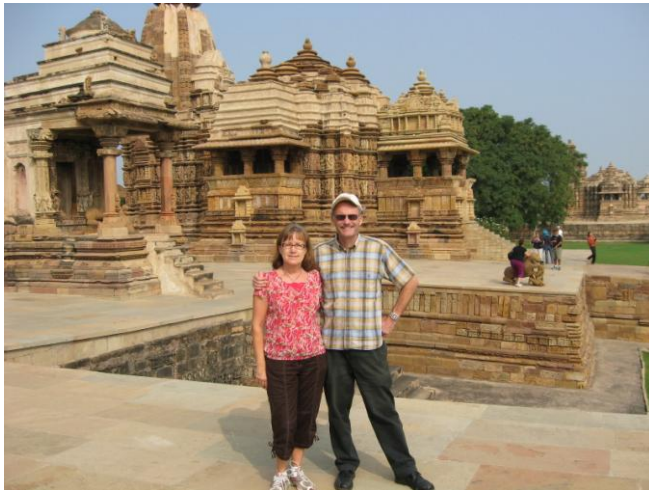
Traffic is just plain nuts. It's so thick that it's impossible to get anywhere in a hurry, even on the best of roads. Right-of-way seems to be a function of nerve more than anything the laws or signals have to say. One day, a bicyclist carrying a load of fabric bumped off our bus's front bumper as we were inching into traffic to make a right turn. Several people stopped to help him up off the ground, brushed him off and pointed him on his way. Not a single lawyer was summoned.



Indian food is OK, but not all that agreeable with our palates. We were told that they back off on the spices for tourists. McDonald's is very popular with the small, but growing Indian middle class. Cheryl had tired of Tandoori Chicken and likes an occasional taste of home when we travel, so we stopped in for lunch one day and made a few new friends. Everybody loves Ronald McDonald. But they don't all love hamburgers, and there was no sacred cow anywhere to be found on the menu. McChicken and Filet-o-Fish would have to suffice.



We stopped in Khajuraho to see some temples that are more magnificent than anything that the Mayans left in Central America. It was probably the horniest place on Earth as they've carved some of the Kama Sutra into stone. Studying the sculptures left us wondering if ancient man was much more flexible.



The Taj Mahal is actually an Islamic mosque. India is very accepting of a variety of religions. Nobody except the tourists notices when a nude Jain holy man walks the streets. But tolerance only goes so far. Most of our hotels had metal detectors, and we were thoroughly frisked before entering the major monuments and even shopping malls.

Our last stop in India was the holy city of Varanasi. We took a sunrise cruise on the Ganges where people were bathing in water measured to have 3000 times the fecal coliform bacteria required to close a beach in the USA. We'll add sewage treatment plants to the list of things that we under-appreciate.



Our visit to Varanasi coincided with the Dev Diwali celebration when the Hindu gods descend to Earth guided by an elaborate puja ceremony. Varanasi is a popular place to die, and we witnessed a cremation with a burning pile of wood with feet and head sticking out of each end.



As the trip continued, the air pollution produced nasal mucous that reminded Rich of his assignment as a young engineering student working in a foundry. Foundry air is some of the dirtiest on the planet. He remembers that he blew his nose clean a week after the assignment ended and was happy to never return. After ten days in India, several group members were discussing the colors of their used Kleenex. We never did find peace or tranquility in India. It was time to head to Nepal.

*That's why I'm goin' to Kathmandu  
Up to the mountains where I'm going to  
If I ever get out of here  
That's what I'm gonna do*

When we first heard Bob Seger sing about Kathmandu during the halcyon days of our youth, we had no idea where Kathmandu is, or what it's like. It was just a really catchy tune. Several flight delays and endless bureaucracy at the Varanasi, India airport did leave us to wonder if we ever would get out of there. Anyone who came within a hundred feet of us was expecting a tip to help expedite things. This even included the guy who operates the luggage screening machine. It's illegal to remove Indian currency from India, and it seems that the people in the baggage room at the airport used the delay time to help themselves to the money that was packed in two of our group members' unlocked suitcases.

*K-k-k-k-k-Kathmandu.  
Really, really, really goin', too  
If I ever get out of here  
I'm goin' to Kathmandu*

We found Kathmandu to be a sort of “India Light.” Compared to India, Nepal also has a fascinating culture, only half as much garbage on the roadsides, one-tenth as many cows defecating on the streets, one-fifth as many car horns blowing, better scenery, and much more politeness. But alas, there is just as much air pollution.



We crashed two Nepalese weddings. At the first, we were standing outside watching as the bride was paraded around in her elaborate red wedding sari. Her uncle invited us to join the celebration and explained that this was an arranged marriage and she was an American educated dentist. This was the third day of a week-long celebration. Her brother insisted that we accept ornate gift bags with sweets and nuts before we departed. Nepalese hospitality is unbeatable.





We also witnessed several more cremations. They're done in public, on a platform by the river. We watched solemnly as the body was loaded onto the wood pile and set aflame; starting with the mouth that had been filled with melted butter. After a short while, only the feet are left sticking out. After three or four hours, the remaining ashes are pushed into the river.

This capital city has a few interesting temples and shrines, but it was apparent that the real Nepal is in the countryside. Our three-day stay would be just a tease. We could see the snow-capped Himalayas in the distance, but didn't have enough time to visit. Rich bought a map for the two-week trek to Everest Base Camp and started collecting information from various guide and porter services. Cheryll's no longer up for a climb to 18,000 feet, so Rich is looking for a partner for that future adventure. We might be able to combine it with a trip to Tibet. Maybe next year.



We're glad that we had the opportunity to visit India, but we probably won't return. We're more comfortable with the Swiss approach to cleanliness, discipline and order. India is more of an "experience" than a "destination", and this experience left us very appreciative of what we have at home; emission regulations, quiet places, weekly Garbage Day, less corruption, and little poverty (absolute poverty as opposed to relative poverty). Cheryll's brother Paul treated us to a Business Class upgrade for the long flight home. In the front of the airplane we found some tranquility and inner peace for the first time in two weeks. Thank you Paul. We blew our noses clean shortly after we arrived home. Cheryll washed all of the clothes twice, and Rich built a funeral pyre to ceremoniously cremate our shoes.

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