

## India – Fall 2007

A new country (for me) this year! And a new way of traveling—with a group. For some reason India baffled me in a way that Indonesia and China did not. From all the information I gathered, I just couldn't get enough that seemed reliable for traveling alone. All the internet sites that purported to give information didn't but just wanted you to sign up for tours with them with the basic method of operation being “tell us how much you want to spend and we'll plan a tour for you.” Nor did *Lonely Planet* seem to offer as detailed information as it did for China.

I found a Dutch tour operator, Djoser, which operates in a way that gives you maximum freedom. The itinerary is fixed, as are the hotels. But that's it with the exception of a couple of tours. So you are free to eat where you want and visit what you want. I could book it without the air travel, which I wanted to do myself in order to use some of my frequent flyer miles.

This trip concentrated on North-West India, mostly Rajasthan. This was the area where the (Muslim) Mughal empire was centered, 1526 to 1857 when the British gained control. During the whole time there was resistance from the (Hindu) Rajputs, but they always had too many internal disagreements to kick out the Mughals, and mostly their territories became vassal states to the Mughals. However, the Mughals were quite weak after 1707 and were plagued with invasions from Persia and Afghanistan.

**Friday, 19 Oct.** Up and walked to the train station. Just before Utrecht the conductor announced that we should change trains in Amsterdam rather than in Utrecht. For some (unspecified) reason trains were not running between Utrecht and Schiphol. So I got to Schiphol a bit later than planned. It didn't matter though since there was almost no wait to check in my suitcase and almost no wait at passport control. The KLM plane, an old MD-11, was 20 minutes late leaving but the winds were favorable and we landed a bit before 10:20, nearly nearly a half hour ahead of schedule, in Delhi at the Indira Gandhi International Airport. The plane was full—the couple sitting next to me said they were booked on the flight the day before, but it was annulled. So that may explain why my flight was full.

It seemed a long wait at passport control, but that didn't matter since I still had to wait for my suitcase. In all it took more than an hour. As advised by *Lonely Planet*, I booked, for Rps 300 (about €6), a prepaid taxi at a desk in the arrival hall, the voucher only to be given to the driver upon arrival at the hotel. The driver's name and the voucher number were written down by a controller at the exit of the taxi area. So if there are complaints later, they know who the driver was. My name, presumably along with the voucher number, is in the computer that issued the voucher. So even with just my name they could look up the driver. Seems like a good system.

It was a fairly wild ride into the city. My hotel was in the Karol Bagh region of Delhi where there are a great many small hotels. The driver had some difficulty locating my hotel. He had to ask a few times. It was 12:30 AM by the time I was in my hotel. That wasn't too bad since the time difference is only 3½ hours. I had asked Djoser to extend

my stay at the hotel they had booked for the first night of the trip since I was arriving a day early. The price they charged was rather exorbitant, but worth, I guess, not having the hassle of finding a hotel myself for one night and then changing hotels the next day. (I searched the web but couldn't find the hotel they had booked.) But at the hotel they were not expecting me, although they were expecting a group the next day, hopefully mine. They let me have a room, and I hoped it would all straighten itself out when the tour group arrived. I was rather disappointed in the English fluency of the guy at the hotel desk.

**Saturday, Oct. 20.** It was nearly 9 by the time I woke up. I had breakfast in the hotel: some juice (out of a package, so it should be safe), 2 hard-boiled eggs, toast and tea. Since the group I would be traveling with would not arrive until evening, I had the day all to myself. Being a bit tired from the travel, I decided to see Old Delhi and leave the National Museum for Sunday. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/MJeWYbqPYvQs9tGz9>.

I wandered around the neighborhood a bit noting all the small shops and the dirty streets—no cows though—before finding the metro (elevated at this point, which made it a bit easier to spot) to go, with one change of trains, to the oldest part of town. Fares are according to distance. My distance fell into the second price category: Rps 11.

The system was like in São Paulo and Guangzhou: you buy a token, which contains a chip; pass it over a reader at the entrance and the gate opens. At the exit you drop it in a slot, after which (if you have paid the correct fare) the gate opens to let you out. Like in São Paulo, you buy the token from a person at a window. Guangzhou was more automated with touchscreen terminals dispensing tokens. There are also 'smart' cards that you buy for a fixed amount from which the appropriate fare is subtracted at the exit.

Security is fairly tight. After swiping your token and passing through the gate, you must walk through a metal detector, like at an airport. But either they don't trust them or they are all fake or never turned on, for then you immediately must step up onto a box and be patted down. Then you have to open anything you are carrying for inspection. I was told that it was forbidden to take pictures on the metro or in the stations. I just missed a train, but it didn't matter—during the day trains are every 3 or 4 minutes.

The metro is fairly new, and they are expanding it. Only the first phase is completed. Eventually it will go to the airport among other places, although I wonder what security will be like if you try to take a suitcase or a big backpack onto the metro.

From the metro I walked to the Red Fort, spying along the way a few monkeys on some rooftops. This was the first of a number of forts I would see during the trip. A word about forts: The word may refer to the fortified town, or it may refer to the (sometimes additionally fortified) palace of the local ruler within the town. Sometimes it is just a fortified palace, although then it is a relatively small palace of a relatively unimportant local ruler.

The Red Fort (Lal Qila) was built between 1638 and 1648 by Shah Jahan as the new capital at the same time he was building the Taj Mahal in Agra, his old capital. The (you guessed it—red) sandstone walls are 18 m high on the river side and 33 m

high elsewhere. It is quite impressive. Entry is through the Lahore Gate (since it faces Lahore (now in Pakistan). For foreigners it costs Rps 100. As in China the first time I went, foreigners must pay a much higher (as much as 10 times) entrance fee.

Security was in place. Two lines, one long, the other not, to go through the metal detector and be patted down. The shorter line was for women and (small) children, where the body search took place behind a screen. There were also soldiers with guns walking around or positioned behind sand bags ready to repel attackers.

The palace area of the fort contained the usual buildings: a public audience hall (Diwan-i-Am), private audience hall (Diwan-i-Khas), emperor's palace (Khas Mahal), palace of the emperor's chief wife (Rang Mahal). These are all open buildings with intricately carved stone, but you are not allowed inside. Much of the interior has been looted or destroyed. For example the solid-gold, jewel-studded Peacock Throne was taken to Persia by Nadir Shah in 1739. Also there were the baths and the emperor's private mosque, both of which were closed, which made it impossible to verify that the interior of the mosque is skewed with respect to the exterior. The interior is aligned to point to Mecca, while the exterior is aligned with the other buildings of the palace.

Perhaps because it was Saturday, there were many (Indian) visitors. While some were interested in the buildings, most sat about relaxing or picnicking on the grass.

I left the fort and walked south along the wall to the Delhi Gate, which is only open to the military, which occupies much of the fort. The Delhi Gate is less impressive than the Lahore Gate.

I then headed towards the Jama Masjid (Jama Mosque), the largest mosque in India, passing on my way a small, rather pretty mosque, Sunehri Masjid, from the roof of which the Persian invader stood in 1739 to watch his troops slaughter Delhi's inhabitants. The Jama Masjid was built between 1644 and 1658 by Shah Jahan, and it is indeed large—25000 people are said to fit into its courtyard (sardine pack, no doubt). After passing through the metal detector I climbed the stairs to the Eastern entrance, from which there is a nice view back towards the fort. But I did not go inside, balking at the Rps 200 camera fee (admission is free) irrespective of whether you want to take pictures—putting the camera in my pack would not help.

Upon leaving the mosque, a man offered to show me around Old Delhi. I said I wasn't interested, but he said he was going in my direction anyway. Obviously he wanted to guide me around, perhaps into some shops where he would get a kickback and of course he would want some money at the end. But it is hard to get rid of these guys. He claimed he was a retired history teacher, and he seemed to know something about the area and its history. We wandered around through lots of little streets, seeing much of the Muslim quarter and then moving into the Hindu area. I must admit that he pointed out some things I would have missed and took me into some buildings I would not have thought of entering by myself (out of politeness, not out of fear). This included some workshops where people were busy making various things, and a large building containing a wholesale spice market. At the end he, of course, asked for some money. I asked him how much he usually got, a question which he didn't really answer but instead suggested 4 hours (it was closer to 3) times 650 Rps per hour coming out at Rps 2600.

I said he must be kidding, and gave him 500. He was not happy and kept asking for more, which he didn't get. I had asked him to show me to the metro, and after the disagreement on money had been half expecting him just to leave me, but he brought me to within a few blocks of the metro and pointed the way, although by that time I had recognized where we were, its being the street I had walked along earlier to go to the Red Fort.

In the morning I had been surprised how few people were in the metro. Now I was surprised at how many. Huge numbers of people were seemingly heading home after a day's fun or shopping. The queue for security reached up out of the metro onto the street. I had been thinking of eating some place closer to my hotel, but decided to find a restaurant near by in the hope that the metro would be less crowded later. *Lonely Planet* suggested a couple, and I decided on a Muslim restaurant, which seemed pretty clearly marked on the map close to the Jama Masjid. The chicken in some kind of sauce was tasty together with the Indian bread (*roti*), and not at all expensive, perhaps because it was a very simple place, an adjunct to a busy take-away.

Unfortunately, the metro was only slightly less crowded than before. Since most people seemed to have 'smart cards' the line to buy a ticket was short. But then it was up the stairs out of the station to join the queue to go back down the stairs into the station. Police tried to prevent people from jumping the queue, but so many tried it that they were not always successful. It looked to me like about half of those who tried it were caught and sent back to the end of the line. It took about half an hour to get to the security port—there were only two. But since security moved so slowly and the trains run so frequently, the trains themselves were not crowded.

From the metro to my hotel was a bit troublesome. Everything looks a bit different in the dark. I had to ask directions a couple of times before finding it. In the meantime the tour group had arrived, and I met the tour leader, a young man who apparently likes to travel, although most of his experience is in Thailand. I told him it was my first trip with a group and that I usually traveled independently. He asked if I wanted to take the city tour with the group tomorrow, which I declined.

**Sunday, Oct. 21.** First I wandered around the neighborhood of the hotel a while noting all the small shops and the poverty, including people apparently living on the narrow divider of a street. Their children as well as a few of the women were very persistent beggars, but I resisted. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/DaA8YnMMxaHUCJSq5>.

I had planned on going to the National Museum. I took the metro to the Secretariat (the government center) and walked along the park-like Rajpath towards India Gate. The National Museum is about mid-way. But when I got to the museum it was closed—today is a National Holiday—last day of a Hindu Festival week. So, I continued to India Gate, a sort of Arc de Triomphe. It is a British war memorial to the 90000 Indians who died fighting for the King in World War I (plus those who died in the Northwest Frontier operations and in the 1919 fighting in Afghanistan). People were relaxing or playing cricket.

From there I walked (a rather long walk) to Humayun's Tomb, a sort of precursor

to the Taj Mahal. But before visiting that, I walked through a nearby Muslim neighborhood. It was a very mixed neighborhood. Some people looked very poor, but others appeared rather well off, often with name and title on the gate, *e.g.*, professor, or one I particularly liked: asst. engineer (sewers), central Delhi sub-district, if I remember correctly. Many of the women were wearing burkas. There were some very narrow streets, just wide enough for two persons pushing bikes to get past each other. They were too narrow to actually ride bikes. They were sort of covered over or shaded by the houses so that it was reasonably cool, except when passing a shop where they were cooking. One young man sitting in front of a shop asked me where I was from, where I was staying, how long in India—almost certainly leading me up to something that would cost me money. I was ‘saved’ by five young girls, 6 or 7 years old, who hearing English came trooping out to say hello and shake my hand, coming in the process between the young man and me. After hello, hello and shaking five little hands I switched to good-bye, good-bye and retreated.

Humayun’s Tomb is actually just one (but the best) of several tombs in a group. The complex is a UNESCO Cultural Heritage site. Before the entrance was our tour leader and a couple of the members of the tour. The others were apparently still inside. Humayun’s Tomb was built in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century by Haji Begum, Persian born senior wife of the second Mughal emperor, Humayun.

The site is nice. First you encounter a somewhat older tomb, that of Isa Khan, within a separate walled area also containing a mosque (no longer used). Both the tomb and the mosque are completely open and you can visit all the rooms. Then there are a couple of gates, both nice, before you get to Humayun’s tomb. It is in a large walled area of grass, large trees, water channels and ponds. The gate through which visitors enter is the public gate. There is another gate, the Royal gate, which is closed. There are also a few lesser tombs, which have not yet been restored. It is quiet despite the many tourists. The tomb itself is large, but, disappointingly, has little decoration inside, no doubt forbidden in Muslim tradition.

I walked back towards India Gate, passing through a well-to-do neighborhood on the way: large houses with walled enclosures with gates and security guards. The names on the gates showed that many of them were of judges or other important officials. At India Gate all of the open space was filled with picnicking and playing Indian families. Whether the crowd was because of the holiday or just a normal weekend, I don’t know. I found a restaurant a few blocks away improbably named the Chicken Inn, which was mentioned in *Lonely Planet*. It cost more than twice what last night’s meal cost, but it was also much better and in a restaurant with some decor and a huge, wall-size, flat-screen TV. I had chicken in a spicy spinach sauce—figured I should eat some vegetables—and Indian bread. Very tasty. The big fireworks up at the Red Fort, about which my “guide” of yesterday had told me, were on TV. Several large effigies of some legendary Hindu figures went up in explosions and fire.

I returned to India Gate. It was dark now, and the crowds were thinning out. Only the area around the flood-lid gate itself was still packed. Many vendors sold cheap toys. There were some bird-like things that supposedly flew back to you if you threw them

into the air. They seemed to work well when the vendors did it. The kids had less luck. Also popular were some things which lit up (two chemicals which when mixed give off light for a while, I think, which means they won't last long). I walked to the metro at the Central Secretariat and went back to my hotel—no problem finding it tonight.

**Monday, Oct. 22.** Today was the first day with the group: 11 people plus group leader (not a guide. He only takes care of practical things.) I am the oldest. There is a woman alone, widow, late fifties; a Belgian couple and a Dutch couple all early fifties; a young couple, around 30, he's Dutch, she Chinese; and three other men alone, ages 35 to 50. They all seem to have taken tours with Djoser before. I contributed Rps 1600 to the group tip pool—it is supposed to last the whole trip.

We left the hotel about 8:30 in a small bus—just enough seats for all of us. There was a driver and another man who apparently took care of the money and perhaps finding directions. It seemed to take a very long time to get out of Delhi. We stopped at a filling station in the outskirts of Delhi. Gasoline is just under Rps 50 per liter. While waiting to fill up, a couple of elephants with their drivers came along. Apparently they were begging—the drivers looked poor, and I saw someone giving money to one elephant, which he took in his trunk and handed up to his driver; nothing was given back in return. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/w95Qy1nsshkLQsjk9>.

It was a long trip—bad roads, and the bus is not the fastest, nor are its springs the best. We stopped at a place along the way for lunch, which seems to be mostly for tourists, at least only Westerners were there. The tables were outside on the lawn, and in the shade. It was pleasant, and prices seemed not out of the ordinary. We finally arrived at Mukundgarh around 5.

We have rooms in the fort, *i.e.*, former palace of some local (very local) prince, now run as a hotel—what else is a poor prince to do to keep up a palace? The rooms have their charm, and are equipped with modern conveniences.

The countryside is flat farmland, but now mostly between crops—at least nothing seems to be growing in the fields. Camels and bulls are used to pull carts and plows.

Mukundgarh is a small town, but with the remains of some rich merchant houses, called *havelis*, the walls of which are highly decorated. However, nicer *havelis* were to be seen the next day. Walking around the town in the 40 minutes or so before it would be dark, almost every kid of age 5 to 12 said hello and wanted something, preferably a pen.

Dinner at a long table on the lawn was pleasant, but the food was nothing special. I had the feeling, which persisted for the entire trip, that the food at the restaurants we went to as a group was toned down for western tastes. We were entertained during dinner by song, dance and a puppet show, all the performers of course wanting tips, which our trip leader gave out of the communal tip pool.

**Tuesday, Oct. 23.** Breakfast was in some ways better than dinner. Perhaps because they had western food as well as Indian, the Indian dishes seemed more authentic.

It was a fairly short drive to Nawalgarh, where a guide showed us around town. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/cByGEUS9Dw8QX7ZG7>. There are a large number of *havelis*. The layout of the *havelis* was more or less the same. You enter a courtyard through a large archway. On the side of the courtyard facing the entrance is a large, open room where business was conducted. If the *haveli* is large with a drive-in courtyard, the stable and coach house may be on another side of the courtyard. A smaller archway leads to the private areas of the house, usually along a dog-leg passage, which ensures that visitors cannot see in. The women, of course, did not appear to visitors, but could listen from windows on the gallery upstairs, which surrounds the courtyard, and later give their advice on pending business deals. The visitors cannot see the listening women since the windows are screened by elaborately carved stone work. The outside walls, as well as the walls of the courtyard, meeting room, and many interior rooms are covered with paintings. Originally these were frescoes, but around 1900 they switched to painting on dry plaster. The paintings depict not only gods and myths, but also scenes of everyday life. Particularly popular were modern things such as trains, telephones and airplanes, though the artists had probably never seen them.

Most of the *havelis* are still owned by rich families, but no longer lived in, and are in varying states of preservation. The owners now live in larger cities where real business is done these days. They leave their *havelis* with a caretaker and only visit occasionally. Some are open for a fee, others if the caretaker feels like it, expecting a tip. In Nawalgarh there was a Haveli Museum. It was not clear to me whether it had been built as a museum or was a *haveli* which had been converted to a museum. In any case, it was almost completely restored.

The *havelis* were not the only interesting thing in town. Just behind the Haveli Museum some boys sitting well-spaced on the floor of the courtyard seemed to be taking a school exam. Outside, younger kids crowded around us, the youngest wanting pens, the somewhat older wanting to speak some English. They had their schoolbooks with them, and I took a look at a science book. It was in Hindi, but from the figures I could tell what it was about—reminded me of a book I had back around 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade, especially the diagrams of a blast furnace. I asked the boys with the science books what they wanted to be when they grew up. One wanted to be a doctor, the other an engineer.

It seems that the Indian government has shot itself in the foot regarding education. In an effort to improve it they decided some time ago to allow private schools. As a result private schools sprang up. But, by offering higher salaries, they took most of the qualified teachers away from the public schools. The quality of public schools thus dropped leaving parents with having to pay higher school fees for no improvement in education. Many cannot afford the higher fees.

And there were colorful small shops and markets.

We ate lunch at a small hotel-restaurant on the edge of town where they appear very eco-friendly—they claimed everything was made with ‘organic’ ingredients which had been washed using bottled water. It was quite tasty, one of the few meals with the group which was. But then we had chosen this place on the recommendation of the local guide, and the restaurant claimed to be in all the guide books like *Lonely Planet*. They

also have a web site, <http://www.ShekhawatiRestaurant.com>.

Then it was back in the bus for a five hour ride to Bikaner, well almost, since the hotel (very nice) is some distance (9 km) from the city. The land turned to desert—sand with scruffy trees scattered around. I don't think they can grow vegetables here, but there were lots of goats.

Since it was rather late when we got to the hotel, and with its being so far from town, there was little choice but to eat in the hotel—another non-memorable meal.

**Wednesday, Oct. 24.** Most of the group got up early to go to the Rat Temple (Karni Mata Temple) some 30 km away. There rats are considered holy and apparently have free run of the place. The floor is covered with rat shit, and you, of course, have to take off your shoes to enter the temple. I decided I would skip that, as did one other member of the group. We had agreed to meet at 9 to share an auto-rickshaw, also known as a tuk-tuk for the sound its little motor makes, into town.

We had been told the the auto-rickshaw cost Rps 50, but the driver wanted 50 per person. We could only bargain that down to 40 per person, because there wasn't any competition in sight. We arrived at the fort a bit before 10, which was when it opened. So we had to wait a bit, but we were not the only ones.

Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/gVUeWDZK77qF2ur99>. Just then our group showed up, back from the Rat Temple. So we gave up fighting our way to the ticket booth and let our group leader buy the tickets. A guide was included in the price of the ticket, and he was pretty good. In fact, you are not allowed to go through without a guide. The guides are employees of the foundation that now owns the palace (fort). Junagarh Fort was constructed between 1588 and 1593 by a general in the army of the Mughal emperor Akbar. The walls are nearly a kilometer long with bastions and a moat. The palace occupies a good part of the fort. It consists of many buildings and courtyards with nice balconies, towers, and windows.

After the tour, the group was going for lunch, but I headed north out of town towards Lalgarh Palace, which is now apparently run as a hotel and a small museum. It was built by Maharaja Ganga Singh (1881–1942). The museum was not much more than a collection of photographs of the maharaja and family and some of his possessions. There were many photos of him on hunting expeditions with tigers and lions he had shot. Apparently he (or maybe a son) was in the Olympic trap shooting event a couple of times. And there were the cameras (motion picture as well as still) he had used, as well as a collection of his childhood toys, *etc.* Apart from that, it looked like quite a nice palace, very grand with nice lawns and gardens. An interesting small pavilion contained what looked like a royal swing, a large chair suspended from a frame. Turns out it was the scale with which the Maharaja was weighed on his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. Following tradition he gave his weight in gold to charitable causes.

But on the way there, shortly before getting there, the guide from the fort, on a motor cycle with a friend, caught up with me. “What happened?” he wanted to know. “What do you mean?” I replied. He seemed convinced that I was somehow lost from my group. But when that was straightened out, they offered to take me to the palace.



But I said I could just walk, as it wasn't much further. Then he suggested visiting a local artist who was just around the corner. The artist and his brother, also an artist, make miniature paintings—some had been used on UNESCO cards. But after looking at some I said I thought they were very nice, but I didn't want any.

After seeing the palace I ate a couple of oranges I had bought at the market the day before and walked back to town. Approaching the old town, a young man offered to show me around. He said he didn't want any money, just wanted to practice his English, a statement I held him to. We saw some *havelis* from the outside and one, now a hotel, from inside. My 'guide' said I could go in and look around; so I did. And someone there was kind enough to open a few of the rooms—magnificent—no two rooms alike and all quite luxurious. I wonder what it costs to stay there. The *havelis* here have less paintings than those in Nawalgarh, but more intricate designs in the stone.

We also stopped at a couple of shops along the way. Ordinary rice costs Rps 50 (about €1) per kg, very good quality 100, low quality 25. Saffron was about Rps 100 per gram, but I think that price was inflated for my benefit—I didn't buy any, and later others in the group said they had managed to buy it for about 50.

We visited a small Jain temple, the foundation of which is supposedly made of cement and butter (*ghee*), one reason being that a butter merchant paid for it (according to my 'guide')—40000 kg of butter—and in the summer, he said, butter still seeps up through the floor.

Finally he brought me to a "Fair Trade" shop of an NGO that has organized a system whereby woven products are produced in a cottage industry in small towns of the region, and then sold at these shops. Proceeds keep the people employed at a "living wage", fighting poverty, *etc.* It was nice stuff, but not what I have much use for. I said good-bye and went to eat at a place on Station Road—*Lonely Planet* mentioned three places there.

On the way there I passed many shops selling all sorts of things. Interesting was a shop selling metal goods, pots and pans and such. Judging by the scales next to the proprietor's desk, they are sold by weight. While trying to decide which of the restaurants to go to my 'guide' pops up and has a suggestion. Since the *Lonely Planet* places didn't really look all that attractive I went to the one he pointed to, which, in fact, was the restaurant of a hotel which was in *Lonely Planet*. It was pretty good—cheese blocks in a spinach sauce, cauliflower fried in spices, and rice.

Then I needed a tuk-tuk to get me back to the hotel. On stepping out of the restaurant I was approached by a driver. I started to tell him where I wanted to go, but he knew already. My 'guide' had phoned him. But he wanted Rps 100. I offered 40. Several other drivers gathered round, but I couldn't get them below 80, and I wouldn't go above 50. I said that for 80 I could walk. They (rightly) didn't believe me, but I walked away. After about 20 meters a couple of guys caught up with me. A tuk-tuk was 80, but I could go on a motorcycle for 50. OK. A nice young man who spoke good English—is studying languages, hopes for a job in a call center, or so he said. I rode behind him on his motorcycle, and we had a rather interesting conversation about changing times, duties of children to their parents, and so forth. By this time it was

dark, and he jokingly said that I was very trusting, he could be taking me any where. I told him that I had noticed a road sign which said that the road we were on was indeed the one to my hotel. He offered to stop at a place where I could buy some beer if I wanted, which we did—about half the price of the hotel.

All in all it was a pretty good day. Although it is very hot—must have been above 40°C—it is also very dry so that it is not bad at all.

**Thursday, Oct. 25.** Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/nWa2UkZQj11BtdvS9>. Almost the entire day was spent in the bus going through the desert. We stopped for refreshments at a small village where they mine salt. This area used to be under the sea. We saw a group of people with a number of camels and a herd of goats. We had to stop for a train. I thought it might be interesting so got out to take a picture, but it was an ordinary diesel locomotive, and there were no people riding on the roofs of the cars or hanging onto the sides.

The hotel in (or rather outside) Jaisalmer is again some distance from town. And again we arrived rather late. So, again a non-memorable hotel meal. But, there was the extra attraction that they were filming some Bollywood production in the garden in front of the hotel. This included several camels and horses as well as actors in costume—warriors, prince, beautiful maiden, *etc.*

**Friday, Oct. 26.** I took a tuk-tuk into Jaisalmer. It is a walled city on a hill, within which the fort occupies the highest part and is further defended by its own walls. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/WWsaZCJBihWH8eK5w9>.

Jaisalmer (present population around 58000) was founded in 1156 at a strategic position on the caravan routes between India and Central Asia, and it became quite wealthy until the rise of shipping diverted much of the trade to Bombay. The partitioning of India killed what remaining trade there was, but the India-Pakistan wars (1965 and 1971) revived its strategic importance. Nowadays it thrives on a military base and on tourism. It was, I think, the most touristy city of the trip.

The tuk-tuk let me off just inside the city walls, and I walked a fairly steep winding street through a series of massive gates up to the fort. Along the way there were many people selling souvenirs or begging, some in quite outlandish dress. Once through the gates, the streets are very narrow—only pedestrian traffic here, except for the occasional man trying to ride his motorcycle. Fortunately, it is small enough that you can't get lost for long. Sites of interest are the former maharaja's palace, many *havelis*, and temples. Sites not of interest are the many souvenir shops and travel agencies.

You have to be careful walking these narrow streets. There are many cows, and some of the streets are just wide enough for a cow and a human to pass each other, something that is a bit scary at first. You also have to watch where you step. Cows may be holy, but that doesn't mean they have an easy life—food, such as it is, often comes from the rubbish heap.

The most interesting site was the group of Jain temples. Several temples (at least five) were all next to each other. In fact, with one exception they seemed to be touching,

and the ‘street’ was so narrow you couldn’t see much of the outsides. The insides of the temples were quite different. Two of them were very dark, the only light being what came in through the door. Others were light and airy with open courtyards. There were signs saying not to tip anyone. Rather, you were supposed to put however much you wanted to give in a collection box. However, the priests or holy men (or whatever) were sometimes helpful at pointing out things and, whether helpful or not, very insistent that you give something, which I refused since you had to pay admission to get into the temples. They tended to stand in front of the main Buddha statues. Besides Buddha statues there were many statues of voluptuous dancing girls. Since the Jains respect life to an extreme degree (the most religious ones wear gauze masks before nose and mouth to prevent accidental ingestion of an insect), it was not surprising to see bats hanging from the ceiling of one of the temples (the darkest one).

I also walked through the old city outside of the fort. Here streets were somewhat wider and the danger was not only cows, but tuk-tuks and motorcycles. I noticed small generators outside many buildings, their wires running in through a window or door. Their need became apparent when I visited an art gallery, and the lights went out for 10 or 15 minutes while I was talking with the artist. He had made some pretty nice things. He showed me one old, original miniature, which would have cost a fortune (well to me a fortune—\$1500 or so), and some ‘fake’ miniatures which he made himself on old paper taken from old books and using home-made, natural paints. They were, to my non-expert’s eye, very good. I was tempted. He only wanted \$200, but I hesitated. The longer I hesitated, the lower the price became. But I finally decided not to buy, even at his final offer, as I was leaving, of \$100. My problem was more the size than the money—you can’t really hang one of these on the wall; you really have to get close and study them.

Outside the city’s walls is an artificial lake, called a tank. (I would call it a reservoir.) There are a lot of buildings around the lake, whose purpose is not very clear, apart from those that are lived in. There is a dock at which you can rent a boat to row around the lake in. To get to the dock you pass under a fancy arched gateway about which *Lonely Planet* says that it is supposed to have been built by a famous prostitute. When she asked the maharaja permission to build the gate, he refused feeling that it would be beneath his dignity to have to pass under it on his way to the lake. But when he was away she had it built anyway, incorporating a Krishna temple on top so that the maharaja could not tear it down. The lake seemed well stocked with fish, as evidenced by a guide who impressed his followers by throwing some bread in, at which the water suddenly burst into a frenzy. Apparently this was a popular trick, since several vendors were there to sell bread.

**Saturday, Oct. 27.** The bus trip to Jodhpur, again through desert—in fact, for the first part along the same road we took two days ago—did not take so long. We arrived there about lunch time. After getting checked into the hotel and not wanting any more lunch than the orange I had with me—it had been a rather big breakfast—I headed off for the fort. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/86QpZjRt8MLdMEb79>.

It was only about 3 km away, so I decided to walk. That was probably a mistake. Whereas Jaisalmer seemed to have tourism as its main business, Jodhpur was not at all touristy. At times that had its disadvantages—people were not jumping up to try to help you. I got semi-lost in the warren of streets before the fort. I knew more or less where I was but could not find the street going up to the fort. Finally I gave up and got an auto-rickshaw. It turned out that the only road went all the way around the fort and came up to it on the other side. On the town side there was only a foot path from the end of a very small street—no wonder I couldn't find it—as I discovered when I walked down.

An audio tour was included with the price of the ticket, and for once it was well done with semi-humorous stories about the fort's history as well as information about the buildings and their contents. They had figured out a good way to make sure they got the audio apparatus back—you had to leave your passport as deposit.

Once inside the outer walls, a series of ramps with 180° turns led up to the main gate. Immediately before the gate was a 90° turn, which prevented war elephants from getting up to speed before colliding with the gate. As an added precaution, huge iron spikes stuck out from the gate.

Another curiosity is the numerous hand prints of the widows of Maharaja Man Singh's widows, who threw themselves onto his funeral pyre in 1843.

The fort is still run by the maharaja of Jodhpur, although he now lives in a more modern palace some distance away. There are a number of courtyards which can be viewed from behind elaborately carved windows on upper stories. Some of the rooms serve as museum. I particularly liked the room full of elephant saddles, called howdahs. Other rooms were lavishly decorated with gold leaf and colored glass.

In the area around the fort many of the houses are painted blue. That color used to be reserved for the houses of Brahmins, but not any more. After visiting the fort, I took the trail down to town.

I managed to find the railroad station and the restaurant on the street leading to it which was mentioned in *Lonely Planet* where I had a very nice meal.

After leaving the restaurant I bought a bottle of water at a little store which sold little else. There seemed to be a lot of competition selling bottled water on that street—there were several stores and, most unusual, they had large signs advertising the price. The price was certainly a lot less than what our hotels charged, and less than what vendors around India Gate in Delhi had asked. However, I noticed that the seal was broken on the bottle they gave me. One is warned about that. In fact, the labels on bottled water ask you to crush the bottle after use. This prevents its being resold after filling it with ordinary water. I complained and received a new bottle with no problem.

By then it was dark, which complicated finding my way back to the hotel, but I managed, even locating a beer shop shortly before the hotel where I could get a bottle of beer at a reasonable price.

**Sunday, Oct. 28.** We left the desert today, moving south into some hills. Most of the rivers we crossed were dried up, but occasionally there was a stream with real water.

We stopped at a large Jain temple, Ranakpur, in a wooded valley—very nice, both the location and the temple. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/CjzSSvYNKiU7aL8o9>. There were many visitors, both foreigners and Indians, including several school groups. The main temple, built in 1439, contains 29 halls supported by a forest of 1444 pillars, each different. They were rather strict on clothing—some women who were too scantily dressed had to rent a more covering garment.

After a too short stay at Ranakpur we continued on. The wooded hills and valleys were rather pleasant. We saw a man with two oxen walking in a circle to power a water wheel which raised water for irrigation from a stream.

We arrived in Udaipur in the early evening. For once the hotel seems reasonably close to town.

**Monday, Oct. 29.** I slept late today. The breakfast was particularly bad: 4 slices of toast, butter, what they called preserves—more like artificial fruit flavor plus sugar—tea and a very small glass of mango juice. For that they had the nerve to charge Rps 90.

Udaipur is built on a lake in a valley surrounded by hills. It is a nice location. The lake was enlarged by Maharaja Udai Singh II after he founded the city in 1559 by building a dam. The lake is about 4 km long and 3 km wide, though it becomes considerably smaller if the rains have not been plentiful, as is the present case. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/kXsNaMRMLUv5pFiN7>.

As I walked into town in the morning, people were washing clothes and themselves at the *ghats*. Passing the back of a temple, I noticed a lot of people, I assumed poor people, sitting under trees eating food they had received from the temple.

The City Palace covers a large area along the east side of the lake. It is Rajasthan's largest palace, covering 4 acres (1.6 ha). The façade is 244 m long and 30.4 m high. It was begun when the city was founded, and each succeeding maharaja added to it, including the present one. So it is a mishmash of styles, but still looks impressive.

In the middle of the lake is another palace completely covering Jagniwas Island (about 1.5 ha). It was built by Maharaja Jagat Singh II in 1754 as a summer palace. Today it is a luxury hotel—you may remember it from the James Bond film *Octopussy*.

Part of the City Palace is now a museum and open to the public. The rest is two luxury hotels. I particularly liked the roof-top garden, which was very peaceful compared to outside. Some older parts consisted of small rooms heavily decorated with inlaid walls, mirrors and paintings. Balconies looked down on courtyards, the walls of which were sometimes wonderfully decorated.

Apart from the palace there was not too much of interest—a so-so Hindu temple and lots of souvenir shops with touts out on the street trying to convince you to enter a shop.

**Tuesday, Oct. 30.** A long day in the bus—from 8 to 7 with a stop for lunch. The hotel in Jaipur is a different one from what we were originally told (again) and about 2

km further from the fort. Here it is a bit cooler, but also a bit more humid—all in all not an improvement since the humidity comes because there is water and hence mosquitoes, though not too many.

**Wednesday, Oct. 31.** In the morning I went with the group to Amber, about 11 km from Jaipur, where the main attraction is a pink fort/palace just outside of town on a hill above a narrow valley. Since it is something of a walk up to the fort, there are alternative ways to get there. Fortunately, they all have their own paths: foot, jeep, elephant. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/eq3LnTsk7nKHb5Fz6>.

The fort was begun in 1592 by Maharaja Man Singh, the Rajput commander of Akbar's army. It was later extended by the Jai Singhs before the move of the capital of Jaipur state to the city Jaipur. It is not the only fort. Above it and on the opposite side of the valley are other forts, apparently not open to the public. There are also walls from the forts down to the valley reminiscent of the Chinese Wall. Perhaps they are only forts, not palaces.

There was a very active restoration program in progress. Some of the facades and rooms were nicely restored, and more were to come. There must have been 50 people working. Some of the walls and ceilings of rooms were decorated with glass or porcelain.

Then we went back to Jaipur where the bus dropped us off at the City Palace in the old city. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/3qHhAGa2esBmMSis7>. Inside it was quiet and peaceful, a nice escape from the crowded, bustling streets outside. The palace was started by Jai Singh, but added to through the centuries, most recently in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and is a blend of Rajasthani and Mughal architecture. The current maharaja lives in a new seven-story palace next door. The old palace serves as a museum, and some of its pavilions contain collections of weapons, costumes, and paintings. One of the exhibits is Maharaja Sawai Madho Singh I's clothing. It looks overly large, but it turns out he was just big—2m tall, 1.2 m wide, 250 kg with 108 wives. Another item of interest was a pair of large silver jars, 1.6 m tall, claimed to be the largest silver objects in the world. They were used by Maharaja Madho Singh II, a devout Hindu, to take holy Ganges water with him when he visited England.

Some of the pavilions were really ornate. I particularly liked a courtyard with two portals on each side. They were all different. Above the doors were nice small statues.

There were also some people and animals in costume to give it some flavor of its past.

I decided to try to walk back to the hotel while it was still light and to eat in the hotel. It was out of town, beyond what was covered on the *Lonely Planet* map, but I had watched carefully from the bus as we drove into Jaipur on the way to Amber in the morning. The *Lonely Planet* map got me onto the right road. It was interesting to see the variation in small shops, mostly old but also a few very modern ones. Thinking I was getting fairly close to my hotel, and passing a beer shop, I stopped to buy a beer. However, I had not gotten as far as I thought, and the road was not as straight as I remembered from the bus. At a fork in the road I almost made a wrong turn. I guessed, giving myself a 60% chance of being right, and knew I was after 10 minutes when I saw a

sign, which I remembered from the morning, saying a new shopping mall was to be built there. Then I passed a pretty poor, shanty-town area. At one place the road narrowed from 6 lanes to 2, only to widen again a couple hundred meters further. A woman with a few small children had only a tarpaulin on some poles above her head making a sort of tent put up on a piece of land that remained before they widened that section of the road. But she had a TV. Then there was a market, and a bit further my hotel. In all, about a 50 minute walk from the western gate of the old city.

**Thursday, Nov. 1.** I walked into town, which took about 45 minutes. When I passed the beer shop the proprietor waved to me.

Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/cXmuwQAXBHg3uvbFA>. I went first to the Hawa Mahal or Tower of the Winds. Built in 1799, a time of strict *purdah*, it was a place where the royal wives could view the outside—the busy street and state processions. It is five stories high and just one room thick each story narrower than the one below. The rooms at the top are very small, comparable to a box at the opera, which in effect is what they were. Like much of Jaipur's old city it was being restored.

Next I went to the Observatory. It is the largest and best preserved of the five observatories built by Sawai Jai Singh II, Maharaja of Jaipur, at various places in India. (The others are in Delhi, Ujjain, Mathura, and Varanasi). He was a keen astronomer and felt that existing instruments were not accurate enough to calculate such things as eclipses and planetary positions necessary to scheduling sacred rituals. So his instruments were sufficiently large to provide accuracy and not be prone to vibrations. The largest, Samrat Yantra, is a right-triangle lying on its longer leg. The shorter (vertical) leg is 23 m. The hypotenuse is parallel to the earth's axis. The structure looks like a giant ramp leading to nowhere. It is in fact a giant sundial, its shadow being measured by gigantic calibrated arcs, one on each side.

A set of similar, but considerably smaller, instruments, one for each of the 12 signs of the zodiac point each in somewhat different directions, the direction being appropriate for its time of the year. It was interesting, and not so easy to figure out the purpose of many of the instruments. Fortunately there were some signs with explanations.

Hot and tired, and there not being too much more to see, I decided to head for the park. It was a disappointment: a poor excuse of a zoo and lots of seedy looking men lying around on the grass, who later seemed to be getting food handouts at a Hindu temple. I finally found a bench in the shade in a place without any sleeping derelicts and read a book for a while. Then I bought a few souvenirs at a government gift shop which had items from all over Rajasthan. I found a book store mentioned in *Lonely Planet*, and bought a book, since I was running low on reading material. Then I went to a nearby restaurant, also in *Lonely Planet*, and had a nice meal. It was dark when I came out of the restaurant, but I had no trouble finding my way back to the hotel, buying a beer at the same place as the previous night.

**Friday, Nov. 2.** We left Jaipur at 8 and got to the Keoladeo Ghana National Park, which is a bird sanctuary, around noon. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/>

ozGsoT3JZdrY83rE9. Originally this was arid scrub land, but the Bharatpur rulers in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century wanted a duck reserve. Accordingly water was diverted from a nearby irrigation canal. Royalty and viceroys killed astounding numbers of birds. Today it is a World Heritage site covering 29 sq km, the wetlands attracting a large variety of water birds from as far away as Siberia. Well, that last may not be true anymore. The Siberian cranes get shot at quite a lot on their 6400 km journey. Unfortunately, the monsoon has failed a number of times in recent years, and the place is drying up. Local farmers object to diverting any more water, since they need it for irrigation. Not surprisingly, fewer birds are coming.

Bicycle rickshaws took us around the park, well a small portion of it, and the drivers also acted as bird and wildlife spotters. My driver knew Dutch as well as English names for most of the birds and animals, and we did see some wildlife: turtles, a baby python, kingfishers, parrots, antelope, wild swine, and a pair of marabou. The marabou were the only pair in the park according to my driver, and are a very endangered species. The marabou stands 1.5 m tall and the only distinguishing feature to tell whether it is male or female is the color of the eyes.

It would have been nice to spend longer in the park, but as often with the tour, we needed to push on. Then there was a long lunch pause—lunches and stops to use facilities take up a lot of trip time.

Finally we got to Fatehpur Sikri, where we again had only an hour. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/ozGsoT3JZdrY83rE9>. Fatehpur Sikri was built by the Mughal emperor Akbar in 1571 and was his capital for only 14 years before he abandoned it, supposedly for lack of water. It thus is sort of a snapshot of what a Mughal walled city and palace were, unaltered by later modification. Well, not quite unaltered—much of its treasures were plundered. Fortunately, the British, and in particular Lord Curzon, Viceroy 1899–1905, did much to preserve Indian monuments.

Then it was on to Agra where we arrived around 7. Dark and not so sure where we were, we all ate in the hotel—so-so.

**Saturday, Nov. 3.** In the morning I headed first to the (where else) Taj Mahal, a not too long walk from the hotel. After walking a ways through a park I arrived at the entrance. The price was exorbitant, Rps 750 while Indians pay only Rps 20. Double pricing had been the rule all along, but usually it was ‘only’ a factor 10 or so. The Rps 750 seemed to be a basic entry price of Rps 250 plus an extra “toll” of Rps 500. It seems that they are getting the foreigners to pay for all the restoration and maintenance. Foreigners did, however, get one small extra, a ‘free’  $\frac{1}{4}$  liter bottle of water.

There was a long line before the security check. Just as at the Red Fort in Delhi there was a special (shorter) line for ladies. A guide tried to sell me his services promising quick entry for Rps 500 claiming that I would have to stand more than an hour in line otherwise. I said no and headed for the end of the line. He lowered his price to Rps 400 and when I took my place in line to 300. I still said no. He walked away only to come back a bit later offering 200. I still refused. The Indian man in line ahead of me said disgustedly “Touts, cheats—they ruin India’s name.” The guide came back once more,



“What’ll you pay?” I said, “Nothing.” Actually the line moved pretty fast. It only took about 10 minutes—I’ve had longer waits at the supermarket. Everyone was patted down by an Army security man, but it was pretty perfunctory, at least for foreigners.

The Taj (photos at <https://goo.gl/photos/WFGKurDWW7DXJU5b8>) and the grounds around it are actually really quite nice. And it is quiet, apart from the tourists. But the air pollution in Agra is bad, although a sign giving pollution info at the Taj had all of the numbers well below the acceptable level. So, I guess it is often worse. Nevertheless, the air was quite hazy. Later, at the fort, about 2 km away, where I went next, you could hardly make out the Taj through the haze.

The usual guide-book facts: The Taj Mahal took about 20000 workers 22 years to build, finished in 1653. It cost 41 million rupees and 500 kg of gold.

To enter the Taj Mahal itself you had to tie plastic sacks around your feet. Whether this was as a sign of respect or to protect the floor, I am not sure. They were not enough to avoid taking off your shoes to visit the mosque to one side of the Taj Mahal. Inside it was very dark and very crowded. Photography was forbidden, but everyone’s flash was going off. At one point one of the guards stood before the door in the filigree screen surrounding the cenotaphs (the actual tombs are in a crypt below) to prevent people from taking pictures. As an Italian woman said when he told her not to photograph, “But *everyone’s* taking pictures.” Actually, you just had to have a bit of patience. After five minutes the guard went away. The screen is delicately carved from a single block of marble. Walls are decorated with calligraphic and floral designs.

After the Taj, I went to the fort. Agra was the imperial Mughal capital during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Agra Fort was built by Akbar between 1565 and 1573. But just as the fort was being completed he decided to make his capital in Fatehpur Sikri, only to give that up after 14 years. So the older part of Agra Fort is much like Fatehpur Sikri, built in similar style from the same red sandstone. The more recent, and much more elegant, palaces of the fort are white marble.

After the fort I thought I would go to another mausoleum—not as nice as the Taj of course, but still supposed to be interesting. But it was on the other side of the river, and both of the bridges I thought of crossing on turned out to be railway bridges. A third bridge was a good ways further. So, not having too much more time in the day, I decided to skip this mausoleum and wander around town a bit. That was rather interesting: dirt streets; traffic jams of cars, carts pulled by humans or animals, tuk-tuks—most of the time it was faster on foot; monkeys on the rooftops; stores with spices, sweets, commodities, clothes, utensils; all kinds of smells, occasionally pleasant.

I ate at a restaurant mentioned in *Lonely Planet*, which featured South Indian food. That was very hot, but tasty. I went to buy a beer to take back to the hotel, but I couldn’t get the price down low enough—maybe the taxes are higher here, but I don’t think so. There was a price on the bottle which was the same as other times. The guy claimed that it was the old price, and that the price had gone up. I said no, and thought I would maybe find another beer shop on the way back to the hotel, but I didn’t run across one. I did get back to the hotel though with no problems, even though it was dark.

**Sunday, Nov. 4.** Another long bus day—left Agra at 7 and arrived at Khajuraho at 7. Again a long stop at mid-morning—at least there was a fort to see on a hill in the distance and some nice flowers in the garden.

We stopped for lunch at Orcha, at a luxury resort just outside of town. There was a nice view of the Betwa river and some near-by cenotaphs, but no time to visit the walled town with its three palaces. It would have been better to skip lunch, which was a lousy, way over-priced buffet.

At Khajuraho the hotel is (again!) rather far from town. They seem to be picking the hotels the furthest from the towns. I admit that they are nice hotels, probably nicer than those in town, and probably cheaper than those closer to town.

**Monday, Nov. 5.** Khajuraho is famous for its temples, which were built in the period 950–1050 by the Chandela dynasty. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/pbpwEm6yf7s2Qbpe7>. Why they were built in this place is not clear. It seems a long way from anywhere; there are no forts or palaces or large cities nearby. The temples were abandoned when the Chandelas, under attack from invading Afghans, were forced to retreat to their forts and were eventually conquered, at which time all these temples seem to have been forgotten. They were “discovered” by a British officer, whose guides brought him to Khajuraho. He was rather shocked by the erotic statues on the temples describing them in British understatement as “a little warmer than was any absolute necessity for.”

I walked into town with an auto-rickshaw driver following me all the way, not believing I didn’t want a ride. I headed for the Eastern group of temples. I was soon joined by a young man who wanted to show me around. I made it clear that I wasn’t going to pay him, but he said that didn’t matter—he just wanted to practice his English. So I got commentary from him about the various temples, most of which was in the guidebook and the rest of which I have forgotten. He claimed to be in his first year of university studying art history. He was probably disappointed that I didn’t pay him anything at the end.

The Eastern ‘group’ of temples is scattered around the old village of Khajuraho. The newer village, with the hotels and restaurants, is near the Western group, which is on the UNESCO World Heritage list, and which is surrounded by a fence and charges admission. According to my ‘guide’ the original inhabitants live in the old village and are poor. And the poor rains of the last few years have made their farming income less than its already low level. The inhabitants of the new village are intruders who are taking advantage of the tourist boom. Perhaps needless to say, my ‘guide’ was from the old village and was having difficulty paying his university tuition so that he had to take time off from his studies to work (hint, hint).

In the old village many people were painting their houses. Apparently it is traditional to do that for the Diwali holiday, one of if not *the* most important Hindu festival, which will be on 9 Nov.

The Eastern group consists of several temples standing alone, three of which are rather large, and a group of Jain temples packed close together. The smaller ones are in

rather poor shape, but the larger ones have been at least partially restored.

The Western group costs Rps 250, or US\$5 according to the sign (also in Agra the Taj and fort had dollar prices)—I wished I had some \$5 bills with me; it would have been interesting to see if they would really take one, since \$5 is only about Rps 200 at present rates. (Later, after I got home, I read in the newspaper that India was stopping accepting dollars at that old fixed rate; they would still accept dollars, but at the daily exchange rate.) The good thing about having to pay is that the entrance price (even the low Indian price) keeps the ‘guides’ and touts out.

There are a half dozen or so large temples and a similar number of smaller ones. The larger ones are covered with scenes of dancing girls, gods, goddesses, musicians, *etc.*, including what nowadays goes, I guess, by the name of explicit sex.

The archaeological museum, close to the Western temples, contains only a few statues—nothing remarkable, but at Rps 5 (Indian *and* foreigner!) I didn’t expect much. An old man latched on to me when I went in and insisted on telling me what everything was and held out his hand for a tip at the end.

After the museum I sat on a bench in the shade outside the museum reading a book and watching a few cows searching the grounds for something to eat, waiting until it would be a reasonable time for me to eat. You don’t get left alone for long though. Soon an Indian boy, 13, came up to talk to me. His English was very good; he wants to be a doctor. After a while a young man joined us, and after a while talking on general things he started with the leading suggestions—the boy was from a poor family, goes to a private school to get a better education, works part-time in the man’s shop to help pay the school fees, *etc.* Finally, would I like to look in his shop. No, not really. We talked a little more, and then again would I like to look in his shop—don’t have to buy, just look. It was now almost dark and time to eat so I said OK. It was a small shop with the usual tourist stuff. He claimed some of the jewelry was silver and made by himself and his family—have been making silver things for generations. Ha! Anyway, I didn’t buy anything and left to find a restaurant.

I went to the Paradise Restaurant, mentioned in *Lonely Planet* as well as other guides, which had an intriguing sign, including, as its only non-English words, “betrouwbaar eten” (reliable food in Dutch). The sign also claimed that they had Indian, Italian, French, Continental and Chinese cuisine—but no mention of Dutch cuisine! I asked the waiter why the Dutch, and he said that he lived in Rotterdam, worked for Albert Heijn (largest Dutch super market chain) as ‘inkoop manager’ (purchasing). He was home on vacation; it was his parents’ restaurant. I ordered Indian food. It was quite good.

**Tuesday, Nov. 6.** Up at 5; in the bus at 6. We had box lunches to avoid a long stop for lunch and arrived in Varanasi at 5. No idea where the hotel is—asked for a map at reception, but it is at such a scale that I can only be sure that the hotel is in Varanasi. Ate in the hotel—on a par with the other hotels. Went to bed early.

**Wednesday, Nov. 7.** Up at 5 to get an auto-rickshaw to the Ganges for a sunrise boat trip with the group along the ghats. Varanasi, which used to be called Benares, is

on the Ganges, and is *the* holy city of the Hindus. Taking a dip in the Ganges, despite its being heavily polluted, is thought to purify, and our boat guide claimed that it is true. He says that no one ever gets sick from bathing in the Ganges. There were certainly plenty of people walking into the water, washing, swimming, brushing their teeth with it, maybe even drinking it. It sure looked dirty though. At one point what could have been a dead body floated by. The guide said it wasn't, but I'm not sure I believe him. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/9XeZhkNAA2g3XpaQ8>.

Mark Twain wrote that "Benares is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together." It still does, except perhaps for the electric crematorium next to the smaller of the two "burning ghats", *i.e.*, cremation sites. Although it would help to clean up the Ganges, the electric crematorium has not proved popular. Tradition rules; plus it costs more, or so we were told. A normal cremation costs from Rps 5000 to 10000, depending on the type of wood used. Of course, if you want you can pay a lot more for extra special wood. The electric crematorium costs Rps 8000.

After being rowed up and down the Ganges, giving a good view of the various ghats and some explanation of it all by the boat owner, we went to have breakfast at a rooftop restaurant looking out over the river. Then I went my way alone, walking through the narrow 'streets' just wide enough for a cow and a person to pass each other. I walked through the area of the main burning ghat—piles of wood everywhere, and vendors selling plastic sacks of wood chips of various kinds, with which you can make your cremation much more expensive and show off your status. That also goes for exactly where you are cremated. There are various spots, with various prices. Apparently the higher and the more in the open, the higher the status (and price). There were a few cremations in progress, and a couple of bodies, wrapped in golden cloth lying on stretchers waiting their turn. A man hurried up to me to tell me that I was not allowed to take pictures of cremations. That would be disrespectful. But then he explained that he was a volunteer working there, and that if I donated to a fund to pay for cremations of the poor, I could take some photos after all. I politely declined.

I then started a long walk along the river, seeing what we had seen from the boat, but now from the land side. The bathing activity was lessening, the favored times being sunrise and sunset. All along the river there are stone steps going down to the water and a fairly broad walk. A few narrow alleyways come from between buildings, and occasionally what might be called a street. Some of the buildings are large, owned by rich people, *e.g.*, maharajas. Holy men sit on platforms looking holy, and ordinary people sit on chairs or tables talking or listening to wise words from those more holy than they.

I ventured into some of the small alleyways and streets to see the shops and temples. I did not visit the famous Vishwanath Temple (a.k.a. the Golden Temple), but did wander around the small streets near it. The police protection around it (apparently fear of Muslim reprisals for the destruction of a mosque by Hindus a few years ago) reminded me of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

I continued upstream along the Ganges, coming to the washing ghats where sheets and clothes are washed in the river and laid out along the banks to dry—very colorful.

The sheets are swung high over the head down on to stone slabs.

Just beyond was the smaller burning ghat, where non-Hindus are also cremated. Here too, photos were forbidden, as I was informed by a ‘volunteer’ who helped out helping mourners, but for a small contribution to him, which was not for him but for a fund to help pay the cremation costs of poor people, I would be allowed to take pictures.

I said I didn’t want to take pictures, but moving off a respectful distance, I did use my long tele-lens. A body wrapped in yellow and orange cloth was carried on a stretcher to the river and dipped the required three times in the water before being carried back and put on the ground to wait for its cremation. Further on, water buffalo were bathing.

After a while, I left the Ganges and, with a few wrong turns, finally found my way to the campus of Benares Hindu University. The campus is large, 5 sq km, with wide tree-lined streets and lots of vegetation. A nuclear physics professor had visited Nijmegen some months before, but I did not see any physics buildings—not that I looked very hard. My purpose was to visit a university museum, which was supposed to have (and did have) a nice collection of Indian miniatures. I looked at the rest of their collection too: statues, coins, some other paintings. A part of my visit was spent in the dark when the electricity failed for 10 minutes or so, and I found myself in an inner room without windows. I managed to feel my way to a bench where I sat in the dark until the lights came back on.

Then it was a long, but sometimes interesting, walk back to my hotel. I stopped in a couple of little stores, hoping to find something recognizable that would serve as a snack on tomorrow’s long train ride. As I walked along the street I was overtaken by six young men carrying a stretcher on their shoulders with a body wrapped in yellow and orange. They were moving fast, almost trotting, and chanting. A bit further I passed them. They had put the stretcher on the ground and were taking a rest. Soon they trotted past me again chanting the same thing. We passed each other several times until they got to where they turned off to go to the burning ghat.

As I got close to my hotel, I met most of the rest of the group in tuk-tuks on their way to another boat trip on the Ganges—at sunset. I had decided not to do that. But then I ran into difficulty, missing the street to go to the hotel, walking too far, doubling back, not getting lost, just not knowing where I was exactly. Finally back on a main street, I asked a policeman what street it was. It was one on my map so I again had an orientation. Then it was fairly straightforward. I only had to ask policemen two more times. I had a card from the hotel with its address. The first time the police didn’t know the street but could point me in the direction of the district. The second time they also didn’t know the street. Their suggestion was to take a tuk-tuk. But they agreed on the direction I should take to get closer. Finally I got close enough that the policemen actually knew the street.

After a shower, I took a tuk-tuk to the restaurant the group had agreed to assemble at for a meal on the last night we would all be together (except for the following night, but that will be on the train). It is a restaurant listed in *Lonely Planet*, with the suspicious name El Parador, run by a Nepali couple, and serving ‘carefully prepared Mexican and Continental dishes including homemade pasta, steaks and waffles.’ After

seeing that, I had told our group leader that I wasn't interested and suggested another *Lonely Planet* restaurant. But he had heard from another tour guide that this one was good and checking with her learned that it also served Nepali dishes. So I agreed. The tuk-tuk driver had some difficulty finding the place, but after asking some people, he found it. The Nepali food was good, some of it hot, some not. However, most of the group had pasta or Mexican dishes.

**Thursday, Nov. 8.** With the young Dutch man and his Chinese wife I took a tuk-tuk to Sarnath, where Buddha preached his first sermon. Getting a tuk-tuk was amusing. We stood outside the hotel and waved at a tuk-tuk. It immediately swerved over to us. The driver asked where we wanted to go and we then haggled a bit over the price. This was all rather incomprehensible to the two passengers sitting in the tuk-tuk, who were unceremoniously told by the driver to get out and find another tuk-tuk.

Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/71RkUwq4GYuK9A4P8>. In Sarnath, the deer park where the Buddha preached has recently been 'recreated'. There are also a number of temples from various types of Buddhism: Burmese, Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan, Thai. The others wanted to visit these temples. But I skipped them in favor of the deer park (peaceful) and the ruins. The ruins are not much more than foundations really of a series of Buddhist monasteries, the earliest from the third century B.C. Buddhism went into decline after the Muslim invasions with the attendant destruction of the city. Sarnath disappeared, but was discovered by the British in 1835.

At the ruins there were several groups of pilgrims, from various countries, who with their guides went to various ruins, conducting short ceremonies at each. The various ruins were fairly well marked with explanations of what (and when) the building had been.

The small archaeological museum was nice, mostly statues. Unfortunately about ten pieces, presumably the best ones, were loaned out, about half to Paris and about half to China.

Unfortunately also, the museum did not open until 10, which was the time I had agreed to meet the others at the tuk-tuk to go back to Varanasi. They had wanted to get back early to the hotel in order to take a shower before vacating the room at noon. I went back to the tuk-tuk to tell them that I wanted to stay longer, but they weren't there yet. So I visited the museum at an unhurried rate. They still weren't at the tuk-tuk. The driver said they were at a Chinese restaurant, which is where I found them. Back at the hotel the tuk-tuk driver wanted more than the price we had agreed on, claiming that we had taken much longer than normal in Sarnath. He is perhaps not used to thrifty Dutch tourists.

Taking stock of my finances, I figured I needed a bit more cash and set off to find an ATM. Walking in one direction from the hotel I quickly found two. But one did not take foreign cards, and the other was out of order—a couple of technicians had its insides spread around them. Walking in the other direction, the first bank seemed to take foreign cards but was unable to make the network connection. Unluckily, in the crowded street I got clipped by an auto-rickshaw—nothing serious, just a dirty pant-leg

and a bruise on the leg. I shouted at the driver, and he looked around, but kept going. Luckily a bit further on I came to a cluster of banks, one of which was a Dutch bank (ING), which I figured must accept my card (also ING). And it did.

Then it was lunch at the hotel and sitting around the pool waiting for the mini-buses to take us to the train station. The time of departure kept being postponed as the travel agent who supplied the mini-buses kept getting messages that our train was delayed. Finally we were taken to the station. There were lots of porters wanting to carry our bags. Those who wanted a porter bargained hard over the price and then again later at the platform when the porter wanted more. The train was supposed to be at 3:15, but it was 4:45 before it finally left. And that was after having to change platforms, not, I think, because of the cow on our track, as we were told that the cows walk stately away when a train comes. Changing platforms brought another round of bargaining with porters. I was glad I was traveling light enough to take care of my own baggage.

Our train cars had a row of berths, only 2 high, along one side, then a corridor, then compartments each containing two 2-high berths, but there were no doors on the compartments. That would not be so nice traveling alone. But with a large group we felt reasonably safe.

The conductor came along to check tickets. Our leader had the ticket given to him by the local travel agent. The conductor had a print-out of the passenger names covered by the ticket. The conductor counted noses. There were only 11 names on the list instead of 12. So he wanted to check all the passports against his list of names. About half were not on the list. Apparently the travel agent had not given the names correctly. Probably some of the names corresponded to a different group. So the conductor wanted payment for the extra passenger, actually double the fare as penalty. Otherwise those not on the list would be put off the train at the next stop. Our tour leader said he did not have that much money on him, and the conductor agreed to forego the penalty, but he refused to give a receipt for the money. Dutch is close enough to English that he understood what we were saying when we spoke of ‘corruptie’, and he didn’t like that. Here mobile phones proved their worth. Our leader called the travel agent who spoke with the conductor and again with our leader. Finally, our leader paid the conductor the few thousand rupees which the travel agent promised to reimburse when we got to Delhi. So, who was cheating whom?

After that bit of excitement, I managed to get some sleep. The train lost more time through the night, and we finally arrived in Delhi at 8:15.

**Friday, Nov. 9.** We were taken to a hotel where we had rooms for the day. It was supposed to be the same hotel we were in at the start of the trip but wasn’t. It was, however in the same section of town, just a street away from the other one, and actually quite a bit nicer. I rested for a bit, washed up and had breakfast. My plan was to go to the National Museum which had been closed when I tried to visit it three weeks ago because of a Hindu holiday. But today was an even more important Hindu holiday, Diwali, and it was closed again.

So I just wandered around for a while, bought a book—books are cheap and there

is a large choice in English. Then I managed to find a bench in a park near India Gate and read. It was a nice park with lots of play areas for kids. Actually, according to the sign at the entrance, adults were not allowed in without a child. However, I noticed a few lone adults inside and decided to go in anyway. I sat on a bench in the shade and started my new book—very relaxing.

To my surprise the restaurant where I was planning to eat (next to the Chicken Inn where I had eaten on my first Sunday in Delhi) closed early because of Diwali, as did the other three restaurants close by. So I headed back to my hotel. Everything around there seemed closed too. Just after getting into my room, there was a knock on the door, a Diwali gift from the hotel consisting of some fruit and candy. After that I decided I could skip supper; after all, there would be food on the plane.

My flight turned out to be earlier than that of the rest of the group. So they all went out to eat, apparently having heard of a restaurant that was open. I was to wait in the hotel for a taxi which our group leader had arranged with the hotel. But because of the holiday it turned out they couldn't find one. Finally they managed to get a tuk-tuk. Would that be OK? I had little choice, but I balked when they wanted the same price as for a taxi—I was to pay the hotel clerk rather than the driver. After a bit of haggling I paid Rps 400, which was still Rps 100 more than the taxi when I arrived in Delhi. I probably should have bargained harder. There was almost no traffic. Everyone was busy setting off fireworks—it sounded like a war zone. We made it to the airport in only 45 minutes arriving shortly before 11. Not only was there little traffic getting to the airport, but there were not many people there. Indians were not flying, but celebrating with friends and family.

**Saturday, Nov. 10.** We boarded on time. The plane, a 747, was only about half full, and we were all ready to take off at 1:20 when the pilot announced a 'small technical problem' which would take about 20 minutes to fix. Then another 20 minutes, another 20 minutes, and so on. Finally around 3 they decided they couldn't fix it. Then they needed to get us all back through immigration and on buses to The Grand Hotel. That took a couple of hours. At the hotel, which really is rather grand, it was chaos. They insisted that people share rooms. I flatly refused. They said Air France would only pay for a shared room. I said, "Call Air France." They did. I heard something like "same problem, doesn't want to share." Then they talked about some other problem, after which the clerk handed me the phone, but AF had hung up. They would try again. But AF was not answering. The number of people who refused a shared room increased. In the end I think there were six—I was surprised it was so few—and we stood waiting as they supposedly tried to contact AF.

Then a pair of French girls, who had agreed to share, came back to complain that the room they had been given was occupied. They had awoken a German couple who were terrified that they were being burgled or worse. The French girls got a key for a different room. But they were soon back—it too was occupied. The third try was apparently successful.

In the meantime one of the people refusing to share became rather belligerent and



demanded a single room NOW. “Then you have to pay,” said the clerk. “Why should I pay. I paid for my ticket. I’m tired. Give me a room now.” “I can not.” “So you do not have the authority. Then get the manager over here.” The manager came, and then he and the clerks retreated to another room to decide what to do, leaving one poor clerk to take the rest of the verbal abuse. After a while they came back. They seem to have solved the problem of the occupied rooms, but still had not gotten permission from AF to issue single rooms. They were trying to contact AF, they kept saying, but they had been saying that for an hour.

Apparently they did finally get AF, since at a certain point they gave us all single rooms. So I crept into bed about 7. Some hotel guests were already up and eating breakfast in the restaurant.

I awoke around noon and not finding any number for the hotel reception I went down to inquire about the flight and to ask for a toothbrush, comb, and razor. Apparently we would fly out at 3 AM, 25 hours behind schedule. Lunch in the hotel restaurant was a big buffet with a large choice of European and Indian dishes, fresh fruit, desserts including several kinds of ice cream and sauces, including hot fudge. Reasonably good Indian dishes, some fruit and a hot fudge sundae for dessert—almost the best meal of the trip.

I should have taken advantage of the extra day to go to the National Museum, but I was so tired I just went back to bed and slept until after 7. The dinner buffet was very similar to the lunch buffet—only some of the main dishes were different—and not as good, I thought, maybe because I wasn’t so hungry.

**Sunday, Nov. 11.** Buses picked us up at the hotel at 1 AM. The airport was a madhouse. By 3:30 I got through security. The plane still wasn’t ready. It seems the part they needed was flown in on the AF flight which had arrived this evening (and which had just taken off to go back). They were still busy installing it. We finally took off about 7:15. The pilot explained that the additional delay was due to difficulties with the Indian Customs about importing the spare part. They wanted to collect duty. We arrived at Paris at 11:25 and I got a 14:25 flight to Amsterdam. But my suitcase didn’t make it. The computer in Amsterdam already knew that. It would be on the next flight and would be delivered to me. I finally had a bit of luck. The train left 1 minute after I arrived on the platform. The connection at Utrecht was also on time, and I was home in my cold house by 7.

On the whole it was a good trip, although travelling with a group had its disadvantages. The worst was the long stops and less time than I would have liked at a few places.

Indian infrastructure seemed somewhat comparable to China on my first visit there in 1995; also the policy of gouging tourists with the double pricing of attractions. A major difference between the two countries is the attitude of servility in India—the begging, something you seldom see in China. In India everyone has his hand out and is always haggling for more. In China, at markets or for a taxi, you may bargain over the price, but then that’s it. I think I prefer China, although India does have the advantage

that many people speak English, but then again more and more Chinese, are learning English.