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I'm happy to report that I have just survived a 12-day trip through northern India. It all started as a pilgrimage to the Taj Mahal, which sat atop my father's bucket list for the last 50 years.

By Lisa Miller

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I'm happy to report that I have just survived a 12-day trip through northern India. It all started as a pilgrimage to the Taj Mahal, which sat atop my father's bucket list for the last 50 years. My mom had her own reasons for going: she'd journeyed to the "crown of palaces" in 1967 with her mom and wanted a re-creation of that moment. So they researched all the options and signed the three of us up for a tour run by Tauck.

It is said, it's the people that make the place, and in this case that meant being with my amazing and adventurous parents, and it also meant being with 32 other hardy souls, who chose to make this trek across India. But it quickly became clear that the bright lights of India were not those of our group, but the faces we met along the way: the kind smiles, small waves, lilting voices and Namaste bows. The genuine warmth, patience and grace of this welcoming and inviting culture enveloped us in one big om shanti (an invocation of peace).

We managed to cover 5 major cities of historical significance in 11 days. We began in the capital city of New Delhi with the highlights there being Humayun's tomb and the Gandhi Smriti Museum. Gandhi's quote of "Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony" struck a chord as we placed our feet in his final footsteps. And we all began to understand how an overarching belief in karma is a guiding force to happiness in this subcontinent that comprises one-fifth of humanity and holds 5,000 years of historical significance.

Day 2 was spent exploring Old Delhi and the Red Fort, rich in both history and architectural delights. Upon leaving it, we were caught up in the throngs of hawkers and peddlers amid the wildly overpowering stink of the sidewalk area: a bizarre mix of urine comingled with burning incense, cow dung, and hints of the flowering frangipani trees overhead.

A loitering cow to our left, wild dog to the right, I found myself stuck in the middle beneath the relentless sun while sweat poured down my spine and pooled inside my sneakers. It took everything I had not to rip off all my "India-appropriate" clothing and jump into the bacteria-filled fountain in front of me. But instead, our little group happily doled out 100 rupees apiece to the sweet tempered peddlers for handcrafted fabric fans to combat the oppressive heat.

My head began to spin with questions. Why are tank tops and shorts such a no-no in this country of unbearable heat? Why is there so much garbage everywhere? Why is it so dusty? Why can't (won't) they contain all these cows and dogs? Why are the buildings in such bad shape? Why, in this heat, do these women wear such heavy cloth wrapped in layers upon layers around their bodies? And why for the love of God, can't the men stop urinating everywhere? But most importantly, with all of this being the case, why is there an overall sense of peace and contentment? That is our ultimate conundrum. In the end, with no real answers, but fabric fans in hand, we forged ahead, back onto our air-conditioned tour bus.

Once back on the bus, our guide talked of India under British rule, and the country's universal love of cricket. She spoke of the ongoing issue of the "Untouchables," who are considered low-caste people and are forced to remove accumulated human waste from latrines. (Every human rights hair on the back of my neck stood up at that.) Then she spoke of the young workforce and growing middle class and widespread government corruption. She spoke of the Hindu belief system, dharma, and the efforts to build up and attain the transcendent state of moksha. Our American spirits were shifting uncomfortably in our bus seats as we tried to wrap our heads around actually believing "you get what you get and you don't get upset."

The street scenes in India were, for me, truly head-spinning. Those sarees on the women stood out as bright and welcome beams of color amid the squalor of the squatting sidewalk commerce sandwiched between garbage piles. Cows and dogs were having a free-for-all amidst the women selling fresh flower leis as temple offerings. Vegetable markets were noticeable color pockets against the dirty beiges and grays of every street corner full of heat, dust, flies, and feces. Our local guide said that an effort is being made to improve both the quality and quantity of ladies' toilets.

On Day 3 we flew to Varanasi, India's oldest and most holy city, and the gateway to the Ganges. We were there to witness the evening Aarti Ceremony, where they put the river to sleep. This display of devotion occurs every night all year long. I must admit that it was tough to stomach. We watched as they carried the corpses of loved ones sheathed in golden cellophane down to the river to dip them in the holy water, then they threw the bodies into huge fires that were burning all night long along the river's edge. The ashes of these bodies were then put into the river.

The next morning, at sunrise, after tossing and turning all night trying to digest those images, we went back to watch the Waking Up of the Ganges. Practically sleepwalking, we step-by-step maneuvered our way down to the river by willing our way through the holy cows, street hawkers relentlessly peddling their wares, and beggars whose universal gestures for food and money were impossible to ignore. I had a scare with a snake charmer's cobra that sent me flying through the street (no one runs in India, by the way.) It was an intensely impoverished street scene — young children sleeping in the street wrapped in thin sheets, covered in flies. There were not enough rupees in my purse to make it better for them.

Our little group of privilege teetered in our wooden skiff, so out of place and trying so hard to get our bearings. Then, as the sunrise cast everything around us in light and dark pinks and golden oranges, and as the water around us got deeper, blacker and calmer, the whole scene suddenly felt holy. And we watched in silence as the pilgrims bathed in the healing waters of the river.

We made it back to the hotel drained, but headed to the airport immediately (sleep would have to wait) to fly to Khajuraho to explore a temple complex built between 950-1050AD by the Chandella Dynasty. The architecture was Hindu and stunning and I can understand why people have said it rivals Angkor Wat.

The next day, our 5th, was a long one for us as we travelled many hours by bus. Driving in India is a hair-raising experience of constant swerving, near misses, and close calls. I had my heart in my throat for most of it. The mayhem of the streets and highways is notorious, littered with the oddest assortment of cows, betel-chewing pedestrians, meandering water buffalo, careening buses, camel- or ox-drawn carts, goats, boars, tractors, tuk tuks, and trucks. Diesel fumes, dust, and dung clung together at every corner.

While traffic rules are minimal, conveniently and colorfully plastered on the back of all trucks is the message: "USE DIPPER AT NIGHT, and BLOW HORN." The horn blowing is as much a part of driving in India as using the brake, perhaps even more so, some joke. And as for dipping to stay awake at night. I guess that's the Indian version of our highway signs advising us to "Take a break, stay awake."

But the No. 1 driving rule in India is: do not dare hit a cow; no matter how hard it is to swerve around the animal as it sits on its haunches in the middle of the road or meanders along the median on a diesel high.

After our long bus ride, we were rewarded with a stop at a small, beautiful village, where the vibrancy of the sarees worn by the women screamed against the bare houses and broken buildings. They stood in the oppressive heat, lingering inside the doorways of their open-air stone wall homes, to gaze at us, it was a standoff of two cultures sizing up the many differences between us, and it was beautiful.

We journeyed to Orchha to embrace the splendor of the cenotaphs before driving in the dark of night to the Jhansi train station. We mingled with the locals on the train platform while cows grazing on garbage on the train tracks held up our train's departure. We finally reached Agra, home of the Taj Mahal, late at night. It was an aggressive itinerary and we were all dragging by the end of that very long day through India. But the Oberoi hotel was most certainly an oasis, and we all recharged soon after our arrival.

We slept like kings only to awaken and be among the first inside the grounds to witness this wonder of the world at sunrise (by far the best time to see it). It was bathed in a gorgeous pink hue that managed to heighten the majesty and romance of this 367-year-old testament to love. And so we stood, fulfilling my dad's bucket list and posing in the same exact spot as my mom and grandma did in 1967, with the splendor of the Taj Mahal as our backdrop.

On Day 7 we headed to Jaipur by bus, enjoying the Rajasthan countryside.

Outside our window, the roadways were littered with donkeys, horses, water buffalo, monkeys, camels, oxen, and elephants. The boars, goats, cows, and stray dogs tend to be the ones rooting around in the ubiquitous piles of garbage.

The highlights of the Pink City (as Jaipur is affectionately known) were the wild and crazy jeep ride up a steep hillside to reach the Amber Palace, the Maharaja's City Palace, the bicycle rickshaw ride between palaces, and the Rambagh Palace, the Maharaja's former country home. There, we were greeted with pink-painted elephants, adorned camels, a marching band, and soldiers on horseback.

We had an incredible feast under the stars while dancers twirled for us. And that night we slept soundly in terra cotta villas nestled in lush landscaped gardens amid peacocks and exotic birds chirping in the treetops. Jaipur and its palaces, gems, and festivals were a far cry from Varanasi, indeed.

India is certainly, and exquisitely, confounding in its contradictions and extremes. From festivals to fireworks to incessant horn honking, this country seems to be in constant celebration (and noise pollution) mode. It's a non-stop assault on all the senses, and Diwali was still weeks away.

From a health perspective, it takes a strong stomach to survive a visit to India. We had plenty of worldly travellers in our group, but many were dropping like flies from "Delhi belly," or else succumbing to a bout of "Indian pneumonia" from breathing in all the hot and dusty polluted air.

So be warned, India is not for the faint of heart, and I'd strongly think twice before bringing the kids. That being said, the Hindu attitudes of patience and acceptance and overall peace that permeated our trip are powerful lessons for Americans.

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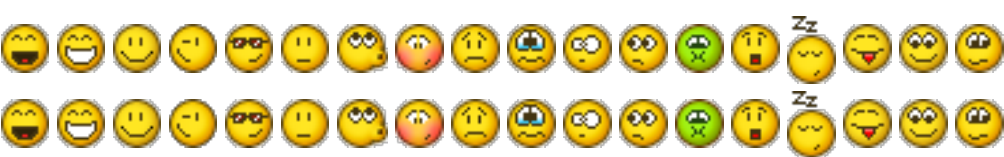
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