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A Daughter's Poignant Reflections
on India

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A DAUGHTER'S POIGNANT REFLECTIONS ON INDIA

Posted by Mary-Frances Walsh on 4/21/2016

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Lisa Miller joined her parents on Tauk's journey through Northern India in late 2015. Her father's bucket list had long been topped by the Taj Mahal, the monument that also held a special place in her mother's memory. In 1967, Lisa's mother had visited the Taj Mahal with her own mother. It was now her turn to re-create that kind of touchstone moment with Lisa. Below is a recap of the striking images, reflections and questions shared by Lisa after their trip.

Covering five historic cities in 11 days, the journey began in New Delhi where highlights included Humayun's Tomb (burial site of a Mughal emperor) and the Gandhi Smriti Museum (on the site where Gandhi was assassinated in 1948). Rich in history and architecture, and dense with hawkers, they found themselves at times "wildly overpowered by the comingled scents of frangipani, incense and urine." At the same time, they were "struck by the warmth, patience and grace of the people" they met.

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Beneath a relentless sun, Lisa described wanting to "rip off her 'India-appropriate' clothing" to jump into the fountain in front of her. She thought first about the cleanliness of the fountain's water, and like the rest of the Tauk group, opted instead to "purchase handmade fans from a sweet-tempered peddler."



As they traveled, they discussed cultural differences and economic realities with their local guides: India's "untouchables," the lowest-caste Indians who handle tasks that other castes won't... the country's growing middle class... government corruption... *dharma*, the belief in an individual's obligation to caste, social customs and sacred law... the commonness of arranged marriages... the sacredness of cows left to wander along highway medians... "Our American spirits were shifting uncomfortably in our bus seats."

In Varanasi, considered India's most holy city, they witnessed the evening ritual of "putting the Ganges River to sleep." Taking place on a daily basis, this involves carrying the corpse of a loved one down to the river to be bathed in the holy waters before cremation in huge fires along the river's edge. Lisa found the images led to a difficult night's sleep, despite acknowledging the sense of underlying devotion.



"Waking up" the Ganges followed the next day at sunrise, when the group found themselves nearly sleepwalking amongst holy cows, hawkers trying to make a sale, and impossible-to-ignore beggars. For Lisa, the images of "hunger, need and want," on a Ganges boat ride were emotional ones. Still, as sunrise coated "everything around us in light pinks, dark pinks and golden oranges and the water around us got deeper, blacker and more still, the whole scene suddenly felt more than okay. It felt holy."

Driving in India was a hair-raising experience. Streets and highways were littered with the oddest assortment of cows, betel-chewing pedestrians, meandering water buffalo, careening buses, camel-drawn carts, donkeys, goats, boars, tractors, tuk-tuks and trucks. Diesel fumes, dung and dust clung together at every corner and road rules were at a minimum. While Lisa found her "heart in her throat" for most of the rural driving, a stop at a small village managed to "soften the hearts of the whole group."



The women wore saris in deep colors that "screamed against the bare houses and broken buildings." "They stood shyly, lingering inside doorways to gaze at us. The men wore long-sleeved button-down shirts, long pants – and sometimes turbans, which are 'simply colorful sweatboxes.' It was a standoff of two cultures sizing up our differences, and it was beautiful."

In Khajuraho, the group found a Hindu temple complex built by the Chandela Dynasty to be stunning. And in the town of Orchha, they were wowed by the Jhansi railway station built by the British in the 1880s and today, one of India's busiest. On the day they finally reached Agra (home to the Taj Mahal) they found themselves dragging, after a day filled with activities and interactions. They were "welcomed at the Oberoi hotel – an oasis where, 'we slept like kings.'"

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Dawne Andrews
Guest Blogger
Jessica Reaves - freelance writer for Tauk
Joanne Gardner
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Mary-Frances Walsh
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At sunrise the next morning, the nearly 370-year-old Taj Mahal was "bathed in a gorgeous pink, heightening its majesty and romance." And "there we stood, fulfilling my Dad's wish list and posing in the exact spot as my Mom and Grandma did in 1967, with the splendid Taj Mahal as a backdrop."

In the "Pink City" of Jaipur, the group was greeted at their hotel, once a Maharaja's residence, by "intricately painted elephants, adorned camels, a marching band and soldiers on horseback. A feast under the stars followed, featuring twirling dancers. Surrounded by lush gardens and exotic birds, the night seemed a far cry from Varanasi."

The final two days of the trip were spent in tranquil Udaipur, "where lakeside palaces, yoga, and shopping prevailed." The latter was an adventure, with "good finds in silk and cotton scarves, pashminas, every type of jewelry, items made of marble and jade, turbans, blankets" and elephant figures of every kind.

Lisa found India "confounding in its contradictions and extremes." In seemingly "constant-celebration mode," its "festivals, fireworks and incessant horn honking" contributed to the notorious mayhem. Yet there was also fascination with the "overall sense of peace and contentment."

"India is a magical place... however, not for the faint of heart and I'd think twice before bringing little ones. But the accepting attitudes and pervasive sense of peace that permeated our trip would be powerful lessons for all Americans, including my own children," Lisa said.



At the end, "my fellow *Tauk-tarians*" were asking each other if they'd come back. My answer was "yes, but I'd probably choose the cooler winter months and I'd head to Mumbai, the Himalayas, or the beaches of Goa."

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