

Taj Mahal (and trip to Jaipur)

Delhi, India - January 22, 2008

Amy:

We were awakened by a shrill wake up call at 5:45 a.m. We popped out of bed and quickly got dressed. Brent wore all the clothes he brought (3 shirts and a sweater and 2 pairs of pants) b/c he was so cold the day before! We went outside and met Shabbu at 6:00 in front of the hotel, where he was sitting with some people next to a fire. We drove in the darkness through the streets of Agra to the west gate of the Taj Mahal. On the way, we saw many fires burning, vendors setting up shop, sleeping dogs and goats, people sleeping inside stores. The alleys and streets were quiet, which was a stark contrast to the previous day. Shabbu dropped us off at the west gate, and we decided to meet him 1:45 later at the same place.

We walked toward the gate, through a security checkpoint, and bought a ticket. The ticket cost 750 rupees per person (approx.\$19) and included a bottle of water and a cloth wrap to put over shoes for entering the Taj Mahal. We walked in near-darkness through a metal detector and were searched by security.

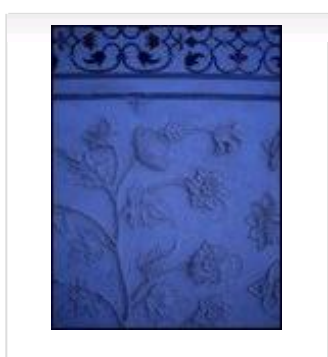


We walked through the west gate to a red building, which is a gateway to the Taj. There were a few tourists milling about. Through the red gate we saw our first glimpse of the Taj, which was silhouetted, but still visible. (Our first pre-light pictures came out as black on black, but of an exquisitely pure blackness representative of the love between a king and his favorite lady.) The Taj Mahal was much bigger than we had expected! (we had seen it the night before from the banks of the river, but there was nothing to compare the size to) As the sun rose, we walked toward the Taj, taking pictures along the way. It continued to become bigger than even our new bigger-than-expected expectations.



The building itself is flanked by 2 mosques on either side, which are large but still small compared to the Taj Mahal. There is a reflecting pool that runs the length of the enclosure, from the red gates to the Taj. As the sun rose, so did the number of tourists, and we saw our friends from the train again! (We had also seen them the previous day at the red fort and at the riverbank sunset). We approached the Taj, which continued to become immense as we got closer; the building itself is beautiful – white marble, with beautiful Arabic-writing (a quote from the Koran?). There are elaborate writings, paintings, and reliefs on the Taj (we who are very

familiar simply call it “The Taj”).



As we got close to the platform, we put our cloth footies over our shoes and walked up the platform to the building. We were able to walk around the entire building, which (again) is massive and much larger than we had realized. Despite the large number of tourists, the scene was quiet and peaceful, with only the sounds of birds. At the front of the building, we walked in and saw a chandelier like ours at home (old rulers had good taste!), reflecting light in beautiful patterns on the walls. The inside chamber was octagonal and about 20 x 20 feet wide, with elaborately carved wooden screens (that looked kind of like honeycomb) encompassing two tombs, one for Shah Jahan’s favorite wife, for whom he built the Taj, and one for Shah Jahan. We were told that both the tombs face west/Mecca, and that the wife’s tomb faces her husband first, then Mecca (!).

We walked away from the Taj Mahal, back to the west gate where we met Shabbu. As the sun had risen, it was much easier to see. Shabbu drove us back to our hotel. I wrote in his book of “tourists I’ve transported,” and he gave us his card. He made the trip very memorable and much easier for us, and we were very glad to have met him!



Back in the room, we showered and packed, and went downstairs for breakfast, which was a huge buffet! Luxury. We ate and practiced our extensive Hindi with the waiters (who, like in Africa, had a difficult time understanding Brent....) then went upstairs to finish packing. We got a call from someone saying they were from the Agra tourist agency; Brent and I both hung up on him. The 3rd time, I realized that the man was from our tour agency, Trailblazers! (Oops) We went downstairs and met the man, who gave us our itinerary for the next 10 days, including hotel vouchers, train, and airline tickets. (I apologized for being rude on the phone!). We checked out of our hotel, met our driver, and met a tour guide who would be with us for half the day. We got into our car, which was a 4-door white car (called a “Tata”) which we thought, at the time, was luxurious -we later realized that no car is safe on the highway roads, no matter how luxurious.

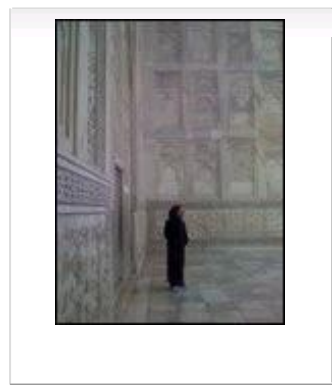


Next, we drove about an hour outside of Agra to Fatepur Sikri (some of the books call it the ghost city because it was abandoned, but that name doesn’t fit). During the drive, the guide told us the crops we were seeing: mustard oil/seed, wheat, and potatoes. There were cow patties formed into tidy round disks and neatly lined up in rows or piled high to be sold for cooking fuel – with some stored in thatched huts for

monsoon season (summer). The driver told us that food cooked in mustard oil using cow patty fuel is far better than food cooked by other methods (we'll take his word for that).

Fatepur Sikri is an old historic palace/fort built by Akbar, a mughal ruler who was tolerant and had many wives (more than 12) of different faiths, all apparent in the architecture of the buildings. The guide told us about the history of the buildings and the British rule, buildings, architecture, culture. He was very thorough and answered all of Brent's questions. Our driver dropped our guide and us off at the palace/fort, where we took a bus up the road and entered the monument. There were lots of tourists with guides in big groups, most likely from the large tourist buses we'd seen at our hotel and at the sites in Agra. I bought a (possibly) garnet necklace from one of the "hawkers" outside the fort. We spent the next few hours in the fort, with the guide explaining the history and architecture of the fort. He was pretty business-like, and not too chatty about other subjects (Brent and I like to joke around, which, I guess, not everyone loves). At one point, he went to the mosque to pray while Brent and I took pictures outside. It was really cold (cold for the natives, too) and I was glad when the tour ended.

We dropped the guide off a few minutes later, and proceeded to drive about 5 hours to Jaipur. During this drive, I blogged while Brent looked out the window (bad move). During this drive, we witnessed the aftermath of several accidents, so we decided that train or air travel was safer and better, and that we'd change our itinerary and avoid driving on the highway roads.



We stopped once for lunch at a tourist place/souvenir shop, and once to buy some oranges, bananas, and roasted peanuts. We had only 100 rupee bills, so the driver bought the food for us (nice!). The bananas were weighed on a balance scale (hand-held) and sold by the kilo. After the long, harrowing drive we arrived at our hotel, which was the same chain as our Agra hotel (luxury!). www.sarovar/hotels.com. We were so tired from our trip that we didn't stop to talk with anyone or eat dinner (!) and fell asleep at 7:30.



(Brent) P.S. I just remembered that we had seen Taj Mahal before, last year at the Fox Theater in Redwood City. He seemed a whole lot smaller then--smaller, bluesier, and not nearly so white.

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