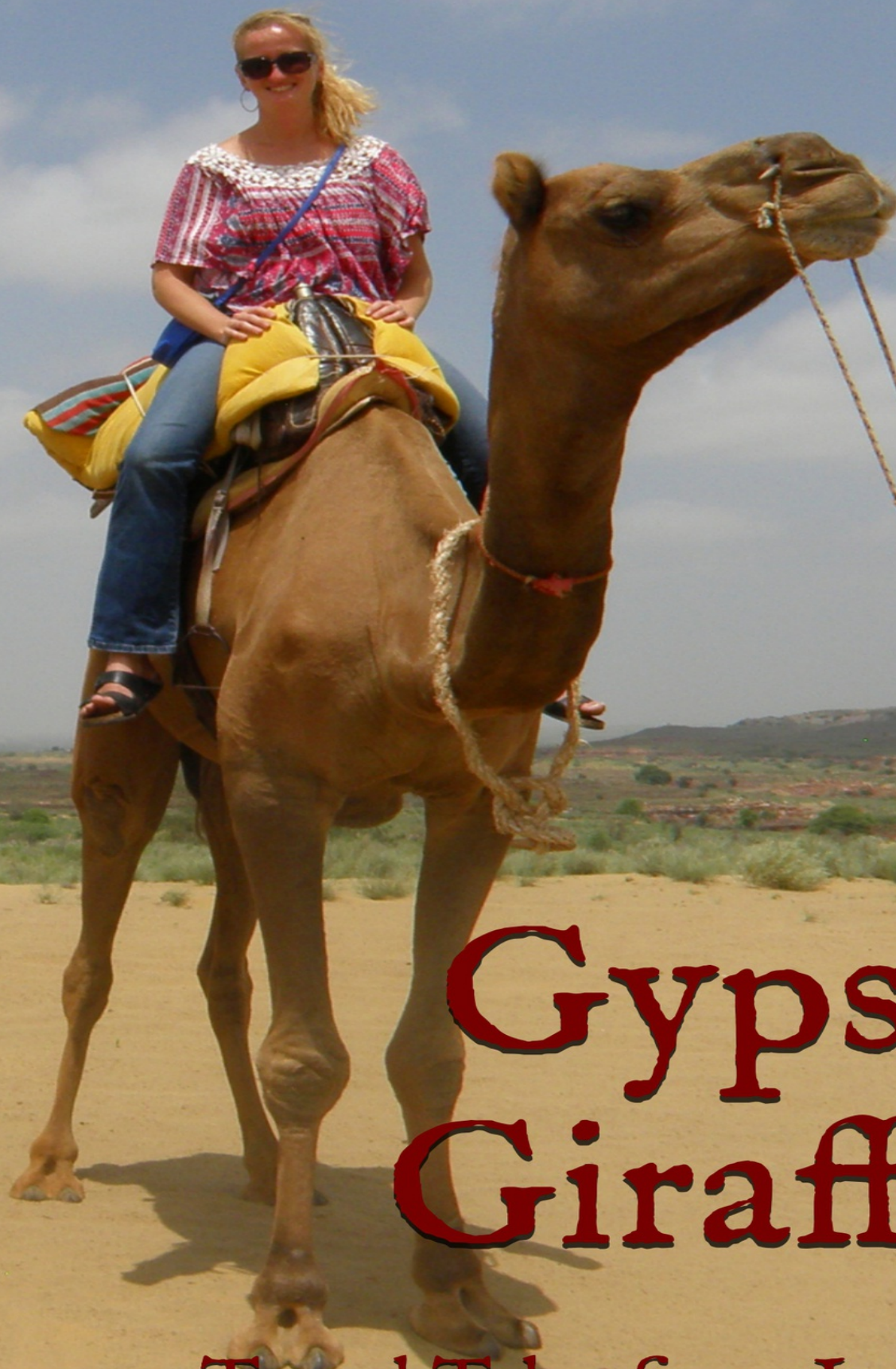


AMY E. ROGERS



# Gypsy Giraffe

Travel Tales from India

# **Gypsy Giraffe: Travel Tales from India**

**A Travelogue by  
Amy Rogers**

# Gypsy Giraffe: Travel Tales from India

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Gypsy Giraffe Travel Series:  
India

## Introduction

*“Twenty years from now, you will be more disappointed by the things you **didn’t** do than the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.”* – Mark Twain

I’ve always loved the above quote. Even before I was old enough to personally understand it, I could see the mentality with some of my older friends and family members. Sometimes it seemed I was surrounded by people who started every sentence with, “If only I’d done this...if only I’d done that...”

A life of regrets. A life of “if only’s.”

It didn’t take me long to decide that I never wanted to be one of those persons. When I’m old and gray, I want my reminiscing to sound something like, “Yeah, I *did* that! No, it didn’t work out perfectly. Sure, I took some risks and made some mistakes. It certainly wasn’t all smooth sailing...but at least I gave it a try.”

That mindset – along with the loving support of family, friends, and employers – has enabled to me to travel to over 30 different countries and live for extended time periods in New Zealand, Malaysia, and Thailand. Suffice to say, I am a travelholic. And I think it’s one of the best afflictions on earth!

How have I managed to finance this life of travel? Believe it or not, I’ve WORKED for it. In between travel stints, I spend long hours working hard (in restaurants, resorts, and spas) and saving money. It’s been my goal for a long time now to be a real, live travel writer, and, well...here I am.

Writing about travel.

And that is what you now hold in your hands, my friends – a story about travel. *Real* travel. Not sitting on the deck of a cruise ship or relaxing at some pretentious five-star resort, but real, honest, old-fashioned travel, where everything isn’t handed to you in a pretty little all-inclusive package.

These are stories about things I never thought I’d personally experience, sights and sounds and tastes that blew my mind, and plenty of “blond moments,” too. It’s all here—the funny moments, the scary moments, the unexpected moments, even the dumb mistakes I made along the way.

In my opinion, there’s not enough of that in most travel stories. Everyone

assumes that seasoned travelers never make mistakes and nothing ever goes wrong. Many travel writers choose to omit those mistakes and just focus on the positive, but I think it's important to present a balanced view of all that travel truly entails.

So whatever your motivation for reading his book – whether you're looking for inspiration for your own upcoming journey, or you simply want to sit back and enjoy a little armchair traveling – I'm glad you found me.

Are you ready to explore this big beautiful world?

Let's go!

# Of Marwari Horses and Moonlit Beaches

## Chennai, India

My goal when boarding my flight to India was to arrive with an open mind. Because, if you're anything like me, you've heard an array of conflicting information about this country:

It's dirty. It's beautiful. It's crowded. It's peaceful. It's noisy. It's serene. It's overwhelming. It's magical. It's chaotic. It's unpredictable.

After my first 48 hours here, I can honestly say that India is ALL of the above.

It was an easy 3.5-hour flight from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, across the Bay of Bengal to Chennai, on the southeastern coast of India. We're here at the invitation of a childhood friend of mine, Elizabeth, who's been living and working here for about a year. She offered to put us up for a few days and "show us the ropes," so we readily accepted the offer.

Actually GETTING out of the airport, though, was a bit of a challenge. We exited the plane and joined the masses in the customs/immigration line, where we filled out our arrival forms with all the pertinent information. When we reach the counter, the customs officer asked where we staying in Chennai.

(Now, in all fairness, this was largely my fault. There's always at least a few details you forget in planning a big trip, and the detail I forgot this time around was to write down Elizabeth's home address. But, on the other hand, I've never been in an airport that didn't have at least *some* WiFi access so I could go into my email and look it up).

Anyway.

Mr. Indian Customs Officer is staring at me, waiting for me to magically produce the unknown address. "We're visiting friends," I say. "They work for the American Consulate." (Hoping this detail might pull a little weight.)

No such luck. "I need address," is the response.

"I need internet," I repeat.

"I need address."

"I need internet..."

This useless exchange goes on for a good 5 minutes until I finally manage to convince him that I DO NOT in fact know the address (or phone number), nor can I access it because there's no WiFi in the arrivals area. Finally we are asked to step aside and towards a dubious-looking customs office, where we

take a seat and try to figure out some sort of solution. At last, on a whim, I turn on the data on my phone and – miracle of miracles – I’m able to get a roaming signal (apparently the cell phone companies in Malaysia and India are somewhat related, like distant electronic cousins).

So, after all of that, I’m able to get into my email and pull up the requested address. Mr. Indian Customs Officer then decides that we are good, honest, trustworthy American citizens and we should be allowed to enter his country.

It’s hovering somewhere around midnight (2:30am to us) when we emerge into the insanely crowded arrivals street. The touts and taxi drivers are instantly upon us like white on rice, but fortunately we see Liz (the only other fleck of white skin) waving to us from beyond the chaos. Big hugs ensue (we haven’t seen each other since high school) before we climb into her car and head for home.

Liz and her husband Brian live in a beautiful neighborhood in central Chennai, near all of the foreign consulates. It was dark and the streets were quiet when we arrived, but we were in for a delightful treat when we awoke the next day.

Chennai has got to be one of the greenest cities anywhere on earth. Every single road is lined with magnificent trees – banyans, royal poincianas, tamarind, mango, coconut, fan palms – all creating a beautiful blanket of green that stretches out over every road. Add to that flowers of every shape, size, and color, and some brightly colored buildings, and you might think you’re walking down the streets of Coconut Grove, Miami, instead of a city in southern India!

We met up with some of their friends (also from the American Consulate) and walked a few blocks to a local brunch spot. “Brunch” in India is not quite like brunch back home. In this region of India, where the Hindus are especially devout, the vast majority of the population is vegetarian. This means that the vast majority of restaurants are also completely vegetarian. This in itself (for us meat-loving westerners) is not particularly a reason to get excited about eating.

I’m going to let you in on a secret, too. If you’ve read my blog, you know that food is one of my great passions in life. But – as much as I tried and tried and tried – I could never get a taste for Indian food.

I know, I KNOW. What the heck was wrong with me? EVERYBODY loves Indian food! Isn’t it supposedly one of the most amazing cuisines in the world? And don’t I LOVE amazing cuisines? So what was the problem?



Apparently, the problem was that I'd never tried the real thing.

We sit down in this crowded little brunch spot, where our friends proceed to order a dozen different dishes (since we're totally unfamiliar with southern Indian cuisine). Out comes plate after plate of entirely vegetarian dishes (not even eggs) that are so mind-blowingly delicious that my taste buds can barely process the flavors. All sorts of amazing baked, boiled, and fried doughs – some wheat flour, some rice flour – magically appear with all sorts of colorful chutneys to dip them in. Coconut chutney, tomato chutney, cilantro chutney, all with a PERFECT blend of spices and just the right amount of heat.

I'm already impressed with the spread of breads (roti), crepes (dosa), and dumplings (idli), when an ENORMOUS tube of dosa lands on the table. This dosa is almost as long as the table itself! This one's been finished with ghee (clarified butter), giving it an amazing salty flavor and crunchy texture akin to baked parmesan cheese crisps. I tore into that ghee dosa like a ravenous wolf and put down about two bowlfuls of the cilantro chutney before I could blink.

Seriously, I will be dreaming of that meal for years to come.

After brunch we had a fairly lazy rest of the day...hung out with the local expats, tried some homemade mango wine, and wound up at a prestigious international school in the late afternoon playing ultimate frisbee (with yet more expats). Overall a nice relaxing introduction to the country!

Today we actually behaved like tourists and did some sightseeing around the city. At 5 million people, Chennai is the 4th largest city in India (although you'd never know it), and it's the capital of the state of Tamil Nadu. It was the first established hub for the British East India Trading Company, way back in the 1600's, as the main port to ship silks and spices back to Europe. Back then it was called Madras, like the cocktail (vodka, cranberry juice, and orange juice; ironically, NONE of those things are found here). Fort Saint George was the British stronghold during the entire colonial period (almost 300 years), and today it's still the political center of Tamil Nadu.

(As an interesting side note, one of the fort's first governors, Elihu Yale, went on to become the founder of Yale University!)

We braved our first tuk-tuk ride (here they call them "auto rickshaws") to the nearby Hindu temple called Kapaleshvara. I'm not going to pretend to be an expert on Hinduism, their customs, or their temples, because I'm not. What I WILL say is that – like everything else in India – the temple was



bursting with rich, vibrant colors. Enormous towers covered in three-dimensional, fully painted carvings of gods and animals (from the Bhagavad Gita, I'm told) soar high over your head, and you can't help but gawk at how intricate and detailed the artwork is.

Next we journeyed along the waterfront road past Marina Beach, supposedly the world's second largest urban beach at just over 8 miles. It's an incredibly wide beach, too, averaging 1,000 feet (300m) in width!

(Before you entertain visions of sprawling out and sunbathing, let me assure you – this is NOT a beach you want to lay on or water you want to swim in. Raw sewage drains from the river right into the ocean, and the sand is littered with trash and debris. It's fine for a walk, but it's far from a “paradisiac” tropical beach! On another side note, this beach area was the hardest hit region in India back in the Boxing Day Tsunami of 2004, where a total of 10,000 people lost their lives.)

We toured the old fort area – now basically a small museum – “fired” our rickshaw driver who, since there were three of us, tried to triple-charge us for the ride home, and hired another driver who took us back to the same lovely brunch spot. This time we swapped out the dosas for a tasty array of fried paneer (cheese), tandoori cauliflower (slathered in yogurt and spices and baked to a crisp in a tandoori oven), and sensational biryani rice with cashew nuts.

Again, all vegetarian, and again, all insanely delicious.

After a much-needed shower and afternoon rest, Jeremy and I journeyed solo back to Marina Beach, which comes alive every night with a million little “night markets.” Hawker stalls and tourist booths form perfect, brightly lit lines from the street all the way across that 1,000-foot stretch of sand to the water.

It's like walking through a carnival, only on sand.

On the beach.

At night.

In India.

Nothing especially caught our eye – just lots of cheap jewelry and trinkets and deep-fried food – until we reached the water's edge and saw four white Marwari horses standing there, saddled and ready to ride.

Was I hallucinating? Had the scorching Indian sun melted my brain?

Nope. As I stand there gawking, my little heart going pitter-patter inside my chest like a 6-year old girl, I see one of the handlers giving a “pony ride”

to a little kid on one of the horses. Before I know it, I'm handing over my purse and camera to Jeremy, meeting a beautiful gelding named Raju, and climbing into the saddle.

The handler grabs the reins and jogs off up the coast, giving me my own adult version of a pony ride. At some point he looks back, sees me posting perfectly in the saddle, and finally realizes that I know how to ride.

"You want to run back?" he asks.

Uhhhhhhhhh....YEAH!!!!

So he releases the reins, I spin Raju around, and a few seconds later, I'm galloping a Marwari horse down a moonlit beach along the bay of Bengal, with the waves crashing against the shore and a sliver of an orange crescent moon coming up over the horizon.

Seriously, pinch me, because I know I'm dreaming. This is the kind of stuff you fantasize about as a horse-crazed little girl, reading *The Black Stallion* and dreaming of galloping down some faraway exotic beach.

I got to do that. TONIGHT. In India. I could fly home right now and the entire trip would be worth it! (In case you're wondering, after the obligatory haggling process, my bucket-list gallop down the beach worked out to be about \$6. I am SO okay with that!)

So that, my dear readers, was our first 48 hours in India. As others have said – and I have to agree – this country is a major, relentless assault on your senses. The colors are so bright and the sun is so intense it almost hurts your eyes. There is never a second of quiet – even during the night, there is a never-ending parade of traffic, honking horns, blaring music, and even firecrackers (some Hindu festival last night went on 'til 4am).

The smells are so intense it's like you've never even smelled anything before. You pass a spice shop or a flower stall, and the aroma is so strong and heavenly you can almost SEE it. Then you pass a garbage heap or drive across the river, and the scent of raw sewage or rotting food nearly makes you lose your breakfast.

And the food...talk about sensory overload! Yes, it's all hot and pungent and spicy, but even when you're used to those flavors, your stomach STILL wonders what the heck is going on.

Like I said, I had NO idea what to expect when I got here. I realize that our stay with western friends and our jaunts around the nicer neighborhoods have given us a cushy, rose-colored intro to India. And I also know that the other areas we're visiting (in the north) are going to be much grittier, much

dirtier, and much more crowded than Chennai. Chances are, we'll still have at least a few of those crazy Indian travel moments you always hear about.

But, as of right now, my Indian moments are some darn good food and galloping a horse down a beach. I'd say we're off to a GREAT start!!

## The Seaside Temples of Mahabalipuram

If you've ever had aspirations of being a major movie star or celebrity, or if you've ever wondered what it feels like to have people run up to you, screaming at the tops of their lungs and begging you to take a picture with them...I can tell you *exactly* where to go!

Today Liz hired a private driver to whisk us south about 40 miles (65km) to the gorgeous seaside town of Mahabalipuram. This ancient port town dates all the way back to the 1st century A.D., and artifacts have been found that indicate it was a bustling center for international trade during the late Classical Age.

The city's real heyday, though, began around the 7th century, when the Pallava King Narasimhavarman came up with a fantastic use for the region's abundant supply of massive stone monoliths. He ordered the construction of many different Buddhist temples and shrines, all depicting events from the ancient Sanskrit text of the Mahabharata.

The temples were largely completed between 600-700 A.D., and despite centuries of wind and water erosion and the harsh salt environment, they're still in remarkably great condition! The history in this area is so rich and diverse that it's recently been named a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Our first stop was the appropriately named Shore Temple, also called Seven Pagodas (because of how it appears from the water). Interestingly, the tsunami in 2004 uncovered even more ruins around the temple and also led to the discovery of six additional temples all submerged just offshore!

Why, oh, *why* don't I have my scuba license?

Anyway, on our way into the temple, we passed an entire group of schoolkids on a field trip, and we experienced our first of many, many "paparazzi" moments for the day, where they asked us to take photos of them or if they could take photos of us (or both).

Sure, kids, why not?

Thus began my celebrity status for the day.

Five Rathas, or Pancha Rathas, was the next group of monuments we visited. Incredibly, each individual structure was carved from ONE monolith!! Even today, this town is renowned for its stonework, and it's easy to see why – they've been doing it for centuries! Pancha Rathas are often mistakenly referred to as "temples," but they were never fully completed and therefore never consecrated. Each of the five carved monuments is supposed

to resemble a chariot, or “ratha.”

Down the street is a long, fascinating journey through thick tropical jungle and overgrowth. The trees and the rocks are practically prehistoric – you wouldn’t be the least bit surprised to see a dinosaur come lumbering down the path. The landscape is littered with ENORMOUS monoliths, some towering over the treetops. At the top of one such monolith is the Mahabalipuram Lighthouse, built by the British in the 19th century. There’s also a spectacular view of the coastline and the blue-green waters of the Bay of Bengal.

We stopped and posed for many, many photos near the lighthouse before we descended into the trees, only to be mobbed – again – by the cutest group of little girls I’ve ever seen. They were all decked out in their fanciest sequined sarees and dresses (apparently this is quite common for a “day in the park”), but somehow they were interested in taking pictures of me, the Jolly Blond Giant, in my blue jeans and Birkenstocks.

It was pretty awesome.

After that we were approached by all sorts of people for photos – a group of middle-aged guys, several large families, more schoolkids – each of whom wanted nothing more than to take a simple picture with me, Jeremy, Liz, or all three of us. It’s almost overwhelming how warm and friendly their greetings are, how shy some of the kids are, and how they squeal with delight if we so much as say “Hi” to them.

This is what traveling is all about!

When our cheeks hurt from smiling too much, we made our way back to our faithful driver, who proceeded to drive us into the touristy-but-laid-back town of Mahabalipuram. Think Key West atmosphere and style, but with the occasional cow wandering down the street! We dined at the locally famous Moonraker Cafe, chowing down some well-earned masala fish and spicy beef (our first meat since we’ve been here). Afterwards we walked down to the beach to admire a different view of the Shore Temple, as well as the brightly painted fishing boats that lined the sand.

All in all, a fantastic day, if not a little exhausting – and we’ve all got decent sunburns from all the amazing tropical sunshine!

So our three days in Chennai went pretty quick, but they were the perfect intro to India. Tomorrow morning we catch an early flight up north, to the old desert outpost town of Jodhpur. I am BEYOND STOKED at the prospect of spending the next three days there, seeing the sights, and hopefully squeezing

in some horseback riding...or a camel safari!

## The Jaw-Dropping Desert Outpost of Jodhpur

Do me - and yourselves - a big favor.

Forget EVERYTHING you've heard about India.

Go ahead. Right now, just expunge all of those rumors, media stories, and images (good and bad) from your mind. And listen up, because I'm going to tell you what this place is *really* like.

Like all good travel tales, this one began with something going wrong – an unexpected “bump” in our itinerary from Chennai to Jodhpur. When we went online late last night to check in for our morning flight to Mumbai, we discovered that it was delayed several hours (which meant we would miss our connecting flight to Jodhpur).

A few phone calls and customer service agents later, we were rebooked on a different flight to New Delhi and on to Jodhpur. I figured nothing in India could possibly be that easy, but lo and behold, as soon as we step up to the check-in counter at the airport, we're handed four shiny boarding passes for our new flight schedule.

Airport security in India is quite different than anywhere else I've seen. Men and women are segregated through separate security lines, and the ladies are “frisked” in a private little curtained booth. Even when we landed in Delhi for our connecting flight, we had to go through segregated security – again – and be frisked – again – and have our bags checked – again.

They're thorough, I'll give them that much!

So we're on our 45-minute flight from Delhi to Jodhpur and are surprised to hear an announcement during the approach that absolutely NO photos or video recordings are allowed in or near the airport. Seemed kind of strange... until we start our descent and realize that Jodhpur airport is, in fact, a fully active military base for the Indian Air Force. They only receive a few domestic flights per day (ours being one of them), and 99% of the rest of the airport is loaded with military helicopters, tanks, fighter jets, even an incoming AWAC (reconnaissance craft)!

We deplane on the runway and are greeted by dozens of fully armed soldiers, who escort everyone into a nondescript little blue building (at this point we're starting to wonder if our flight got diverted and we actually landed somewhere in Afghanistan...?). In all reality, though, we're probably about as close to the Middle East as we're ever going to get. Jodhpur is one of the westernmost outposts in India, and only a few more desert towns stand



between us and the Pakistani border.

Anyway, once inside the “airport” we were greeted with smiles and waved right through arrivals to the waiting queue of taxis and tuk-tuks. One look at the tiny, ramshackle, sputtering little tuk-tuk – which looked like it had been through a few wars itself – and we knew this was it.

The *real* India.

Let me reiterate...Chennai was amazing. We loved it. But it definitely had a more chill, laid-back vibe than its fellow cities in the north.

Well, we’re in the north now, and I can say with confidence that it is truly NOTHING like I thought it would be.

Thanks to the overly dramatic American media, I was expecting mountains of filth in the streets and beggars on every corner. And don’t get me wrong – yes, by western standards, it *is* dirty, and yes, there *are* beggars here.

But that image so many of us have of India – of extreme poverty and despair and the looks of hopelessness on everyone’s faces – is NOT the India we saw today.

The India we saw today is bright, vibrant, noisy, colorful, and BEAUTIFUL. Almost everyone has a smile on their face, whether they’re passing by on a motorbike or manning a fruit stand or just walking down the street. Children run up and say hello, just for the sheer thrill of hearing you say hello back. Strangers stop you in the street to ask where you’re from and if they can take a photo with you and give you advice on where to have dinner tonight or which sight to visit tomorrow.

To put it mildly, so far India is *nothing* like I expected it be. It has completely and totally blown me away...and then some.

So our trusty little tuk-tuk carries us into the tiny, winding, insanely congested roads of medieval Jodhpur. Oh, and when I say medieval, I mean it. This city was founded in 1459 by the King of Marwar (as in, the Marwari horse I rode on the beach). Thanks to its strategic location on the east-west trade route, it became a flourishing hub in the middle of the Thar Desert. 500 years ago, it was famous for its textiles and its spices, and nothing has changed...except now the streets are teeming with tuk-tuks and motorbikes instead of horses and camels.

I fell instantly head-over-heels for this city.

If you can picture such a thing, it’s like some strange mixture of the Old Testament and 1001 Arabian Nights. You’re whizzing past mosques and Jain

temples faster than you can blink, and you know the narrow streets and intricate facades look exactly the same as they did centuries ago. Throw in a handful of cows in the road, an ancient bazaar, and 300,000 incessantly honking horns, and you're starting to get the picture.

It's complete chaos, but there's something totally enchanting about it. It's like the more ruckus is going on around you, the more you're able to slow down and take it all in.

So we arrive at our accommodations for the next 3 nights – the oldest guesthouse in the entire city, The Blue House. Our host, a lovely elderly Jain man, invites us right in, serves us the most delicious chai tea I've ever tasted, and gets us all set up in an air-con room (YES PLEASE). The "guesthouse" is over 300 years old, and I get the feeling it (like the rest of this city) hasn't changed much over the centuries.

We braved Jodhpur on foot, enduring the relentless horn-honking as we gawked at all the incredible architecture around us. Eventually we wound up inside a world-famous, eight-story textile shop that is the major supplier for brands like Hermes and Anthropologie. We sipped more fabulous chai while we enjoyed probably an hour-long display of some truly amazing silks and cashmeres – the quality in this place is so high that celebrities like Richard Gere and Sting come here to buy textiles!

To put it into perspective, one of their silk rugs sells for \$5,000 at Hermes in Paris...and we can buy it here at the source for just over \$100.

Eventually we wound up at a rooftop restaurant with a jaw-dropping view of the hilltop fort. It was more vegetarian fare, but I swear you never knew vegetables could taste this good!! I was not at all looking forward to the food here, but like everything else, I have been consistently blown away by the tastes and the quality of the cuisine. Every meal is perfectly seasoned, spiced, and balanced – not too hot, not too sweet, not too salty – just PERFECTION in every bite.

I am officially a believer.

Tomorrow we'll scratch another activity from our bucket list – we're heading about 50 miles out into the Thar Desert to go on a real live CAMEL safari across the sand dunes!!

# Camel Safaris and Mistaken Identities!

## Osiyan, India

Today's highlights:

1. Camel trekking in Osiyan
2. Our awesome host family in Osiyan
3. Being mistaken for mother and son by said family in Osiyan

Yes, it happened again. In fact, it's happened SO MANY times that I've actually started to lose count.

Here in India, where there's no such thing as a "personal" question, it's totally normal to be asked your age, how much money you make, or how you can possibly be married for almost eight years and NOT have children (one man that we'd known for all of two minutes told Jeremy – in all seriousness – that he should impregnate me while we're here so we can have an "Indian" baby as a holiday souvenir).

Yep. Welcome to India!

Anyway, where was I? Oh, yeah. How Jeremy and I have been mistaken for everything EXCEPT husband and wife.

We've been asked many times this week if we're friends or we're siblings. Those, I suppose, are feasible enough. But less than 30 seconds after our driver picks us up for our camel ride – right after learning our names – he glances at Jeremy in the rearview mirror and goes, "So, this is your mom?"

Go ahead. Laugh at my expense. Laugh until you have a good ol' bellyache, then laugh some more. Okay. Done yet?

Good.

I get it. Really, I do. We all know that Jeremy looks young and I look... well, old enough to be his mom, I guess (slitting of wrists commencing in 3, 2, 1...).

But this conversation repeated itself another FOUR times today, with our host family, a restaurant owner, and a guesthouse worker all being astonished to discover that I am, in fact, Jeremy's *wife*.

What's especially great is the way it's been asked. On occasion #4 tonight, we'd been talking to the worker for about 20 minutes and finally he asks Jeremy, "So, are you married?" And I'm standing *right there* thinking, "Hmmmm...if the answer is no, then he must think I'm a friend or relative. But if the answer is yes, since there's no possible way that *I* could be his

wife...then who does that make ME in this scenario??"

"Yes, I'm married," Jeremy could say. "My wife is back in the states right now with our five young children while I'm off gallivanting around India with this random blond woman...?"

So.

Weird.

But, at the same time, I kind of love the fact that no one here cares about offending someone or being "politically correct." It's refreshing and quite entertaining to be in a culture where anyone feels entitled to ask you anything they want (and believe me, they do)!

At the very least, it makes for good travel writing.

Anyway, the driver who assumed I was Jeremy's mom was mortified and quickly apologized. (I assured him this kind of thing happens all the time, because apparently...it does.) But after getting several more shocked reactions from several other people – who weren't nearly as apologetic – I'm starting to think I looked *really* old today.

Or something.

So anyway, now that my humiliating self-deprecation is over, let's talk about camels.

Yesterday when we arrived, our lovely guesthouse owner arranged for my "son" and I to go on a camel safari in Osiyan, a rural town about an hour outside of Jodhpur. We rode in the back of an open-air Jeep and enjoyed the scent of fresh diesel exhaust, dust, and cow dung on our way into the countryside. When our driver stopped for fuel – I wish I could've captured this on film – Jeremy and I were literally MOBBED by a group of construction workers.

Translation: They saw us coming, crossed the highway, leaned their elbows against the car, poked their heads *through* the bars/windows, smiling from ear to ear...and just STARED at us.

For about 5 minutes straight.

So we smile back (a little anxiously) and say hello, which apparently was the most incredible thing they'd ever heard. I'm guessing their English was limited, because no conversation ensued...just more smiles and more staring. Not in a creepy or threatening way, mind you. More of a suspended disbelief that they were within arm's length of us. I kind of expect it from kids, but a group of grubby middle-aged construction workers?

It was pretty hilarious.

Our next mobbing occurred when we got stopped at a railroad crossing because (ready for this?) there was a film crew set up doing a shoot for a new Bollywood movie.

Nope, not kidding. Apparently there's some high-speed train scene going on, and this particular scene was being filmed at the junction we needed to cross to get to our camels (I promise there *are* camels in this chapter... eventually).

So there's already an eager mob of onlookers crowded around the train tracks, watching the camera crew fiddle with their equipment and trying to get a glimpse of whichever star happened to be there. But then – lo and behold – a Jeep pulls up and parks on the side of the road...

With Jeremy and I in the backseat.

Who cares about Bollywood? Two WHITE people just arrived on set! And one of them is BLOND! She's even wearing SUNGLASSES! That must mean SHE'S a movie star, too!

The kids were about eight layers deep around the car, no lie. Laughing, screaming, pushing, shoving, shouting, shaking our hands, and freaking out even more when they found out that we're from *America*.

OMG.

I wish I was exaggerating, but that's the way it happened. There was so much commotion, in fact, that our driver ended up moving the Jeep and parking about half a mile down the road (where our only company was a lone Brahma bull who seemed totally unimpressed by us).

So the train rolls by and the film shoot ends, which allows us to *finally* head out into the rurals and meet our camels, Babu and Sanu. I can't recall a single person's name I've met this entire trip, but I remember the camels' names. Go figure.

Our guide for the journey was Arjun, a 14-year old boy who spoke excellent English and was eager to tell us everything about camels, his village, and Rajasthan in general. The biggest surprise for us was that this arid "desert" was actually very green and lush. That's because it's the end of monsoon season, and the desert is in full bloom!

All the guidebooks tell you to avoid this area during the summer, because of the monsoons (we've seen zero rainfall, by the way), but I say they're wrong. DEAD wrong. Photos of this area in the dry season look like your typical brown, lifeless, arid desert. If that's what everyone wants to see when they go camel trekking, be my guest.

Me, I'll take the "monsoon" season with lush grass and shrubs and flowers and vegetable farms any day!

It was STUNNING how green the desert was. It was like riding through an oasis, except it never ended. We did go up one dune that was bare at the top, but all the roads and farms and fields we passed were incredibly vibrant and colorful. We rode for 2 hours – nothing crazy, just a casual lumbering stroll through a few tiny villages – until we arrived at Arjun's home, where his parents, siblings, and nieces and nephews all live.

It was a gorgeous little rural utopia, with goats and camels and gardens and not a honking horn for miles around. Since it's slow season and we were their only guests for the day, we were treated like royalty. A delicious (vegetarian) lunch, camel-hair cots for us to rest on, chai tea with fresh goat's milk (translation: we watched the goat get milked and then it went into our tea), a free lesson in how to wrap a turban, and finally having a beautiful henna design drawn on my arm by one of the host's granddaughters.

At that point, I didn't really care if they all thought I was Jeremy's *grandmother*. They were all so nice and hospitable, I didn't want to leave!

I simply cannot get over how warm, welcoming, and accommodating everyone in this country is. It took us half an hour to leave the restaurant tonight because the owner kept talking and talking and talking, telling us every single thing there is to see and do in Jodhpur. Three Punjab girls were seated at the next table and they joined in the conversation, too, telling us which towns we must visit and sights we must see and foods we must try. We've barely stepped out of the restaurant when we run into one of the workers at our guesthouse, who stops us for another half an hour and asks about our camel ride, what we have planned for tomorrow, what we like most about India so far...

Couple all of that friendliness with the paparazzi levels of attention from kids (and construction workers), and we're feeling more and more like rock stars every day. So if you're having some self-esteem issues, come spend a week in India. You'll be flying high before you know it.

At least, you will until you get mistaken for someone's mom. And even then, you'll just laugh it off, because you're in India.

And you're having the time of your life.

# Castle in the Clouds - Mehrangarh Fort

## Jodhpur, India

Rising 400 feet (122m) above the blue city of Jodhpur is the majestic Mehrangarh Fort. The first time he laid eyes on it, author Rudyard Kipling described the fort as “the creation of angels, fairies, and giants.”

I couldn't come up with anything quite that poetic, so I stole his line.

Seriously, though, this fort is a sight to behold. The original structure was founded in 1459 by Rao Jodha, and over the centuries other Rajasthani rulers gradually added to it. After extensive renovation work, it's now a museum that wows you from the second you pass through the first (of 7) fortified gates. The bastioned walls of the ramparts are carved right out of the rock and average 80 feet (24m) thick and 130 feet (40m) high.

I'd love to know if any army ever breached this fort's defenses!

From the royal palace and the ramparts, you see the beautiful “blue city” spread out in all directions. On the backside of the fort (opposite the side we see from our hotel), the collection of blue-painted rooves and houses is so spectacular it's almost otherworldly. Seriously, you'd swear you're on some faraway desert planet or, at the very least, in a time warp back to the Middle Ages. Since you can't see or hear any of the traffic from way up there – just the bells of the Jain temple and the call to prayer from the mosque – you're basically experiencing the city as it was centuries ago.

I wouldn't have been the least bit surprised to see an armed cavalry of Marwari horses and war elephants coming up the hill to storm the gate.

(Actually...that would have been pretty awesome.)

My partner in crime was even more awestruck than me, I think. Jeremy said it's absolutely the most impressive man-made sight he's ever seen. I might have to agree with him.

What's really great about the historical sights we've visited is the number of Indian families that come to visit, too. There are two separate admission prices – one for nationals, one for foreigners – and the foreigners are charged anywhere from 10 to 20 times more for admission (for the Taj Mahal, it's almost 50 times more).

But you know what? I'm fine with that. The foreign admission fees would probably be too steep for a lot of local families, and they of all people should be able to enjoy and experience the sights within their own country, right?



Speaking of local tourists, the fort wasn't the only attraction of the day. Jeremy and I were up on the ramparts, taking photos of the cannons and the city, when we were *mobbed* by a family of about 100.

On second thought, italics aren't emphatic enough.

We were MOBBED.

Backs to the wall, unable to move or breathe, staring at 100 wide-eyed, toothy-grinned kids and parents. Before I know what's happening, I'm being handed babies and toddlers and I have 20 different cell phones and cameras pointed at me. There was actually a *queue* that formed along the wall of the rampart, with family after family waiting in line to hand me their kid and take pictures.

(Jeremy, incidentally, was standing helpless off to the side. I guess his brown hair wasn't *nearly* as exciting.)

The mobbing went on for probably 15 or 20 minutes before the family finally moved on and we were able to breathe again (and laugh hysterically at the absurdity of it all).

The scene repeated itself later that afternoon in front of the Umaid Bhavan Palace, while we were sitting outside waiting for our driver to pick us up. In this episode, a tour bus full of locals passed by us, then stopped and BACKED UP to where we were sitting. The entire bus then proceeded to empty out and mob us (again), hand us babies (again), shake our hands (again), and take at least 4,000 photos.

From then on, we decided to refer to ourselves as Brad and Angelina, because I'm convinced that not even *they* would not get so much attention here.

It's kind of flattering to think that we – just a couple of backpacking bums in blue jeans – are considered so “exotic” in a land that has more stunningly beautiful women (in stunningly beautiful attire) than I knew existed.

Anyway, the rest of the day was a prime example of all the things that can (and do) go wrong while traveling.

For starters, the driver we thought we'd hired “for the day” never came back to claim us from the palace, so we finally hired another to bring us back into town. Since it's slow season, the guesthouse is under renovation, so we endured the rest of the afternoon (and half the night) with no electricity or internet.

In my quest to write while the memories were fresh, we wandered the streets for hours in search of an internet café (no luck), coffee shop with WiFi

(no luck), or another guesthouse whose WiFi we could use (most said their internet was down, as well). We did finally locate a McDonald's, where the cashier was kind enough to let us use his Indian mobile number to access the WiFi there for the allotted 30 minutes.

It was better than nothing!

Upon our return to the room (still no power), we decided to do some laundry...except we had no way to plug the sink. After much thought and debate, we filled one of our space saver vacuum bags (that we normally pack our clothes in) with water and soap, tossed our dirty clothes in, swished them around for a while, and then rinsed them out and hung them up to dry.

All of this is being done *in the dark*, by the way, using only our dying cell phones for light.

See? You guys think it's all luxury and extravagance being a travel writer, but I can assure you... "travail" is not always easy. (Our English word "travel" comes from a French word that literally means "work." Because it is!)

But, as I said before, it's great fodder for writing.

On Saturday morning, we checked out of our guesthouse and wandered the city for a bit, as we had a few hours to kill before our 2pm train to Jaipur. We spent most of it in an exquisite little coffee house that had – ready for this? – a mango lassi with *saffron*. As if a mango lassi (cold yogurt drink) isn't already the most delicious beverage on earth, let's throw in some saffron for good measure. Ha!

Eventually we find ourselves at the train station, where we board our "first-class" train car for the 5-hour ride to Jaipur. I had exceptionally low expectations for the Indian railway system (even first-class), so we were pleasantly surprised to see that our compartment was clean and had comfortably padded leather seats. There was even a western toilet onboard (not the most luxurious, mind you, but in China all you get is a hole in the floor that drops right onto the tracks. This was an upgrade).

We shared the ride with a German couple about our age, Favian and Lea, where we swapped the obligatory travel stories and discussed their view of Americans (always a fun topic with foreigners, because *everyone* has an opinion of us – good, bad, or otherwise). First-class comes with air-conditioning, and their AC is no joke – the four of us spent most of the day huddled up under blankets and coats!

Yes, we were almost the first people to die of hypothermia in August in

the Indian desert!

Our train arrived in Jaipur around 7:30pm, where we caught a tuk-tuk to our hotel, enjoyed a fabulous meal on the rooftop (alcohol AND meat – we’d died and gone to heaven!), and called it a night. Today we’re off to explore the “Pink City” and see the Amber Fort, which some claim is more impressive than the one we just left in Jodhpur.

We shall see!

## Amber Fort and the Pink City of Jaipur

Let me tell you how our day began.

On the way out to the historic Amber Fort, our tuk-tuk driver stopped on the side of the road so I could hop out and snap a few photos. As I was climbing back in, an old man approached with a wicker basket in his hands, presumably to sell us something. I figured it was samosas or bracelets or some touristy trinkets, so we were in for quite a surprise when the man held the basket up to the tuk-tuk (about 6 inches away from my face) and opened the lid.

It was a live COBRA.

Welcome to Jaipur!

We were very pleased when we arrived last night in front of Hotel Umaid Bhawan, our accommodation in Jaipur. It's our "splurge" for the trip at \$30/night, but in-season it's over \$100/night, so I think we got a pretty sweet deal.

This place is gorgeous. It's built in traditional Rajasthani style, with open courtyards and terraces, intricately carved balconies and doorways, hand-painted ceilings, marble floors and antique furniture, and a rooftop restaurant that has live entertainment every night. It's so nice we were almost tempted to skip the city and chill here instead.

But...we didn't.

We couldn't, really, since we arrived last night and our train for Agra leaves early tomorrow morning (scheduling blunder on my part), which only gives us one day in Jaipur. We're making the most of it, despite our first case (Jeremy) of the dreaded "Delhi belly." Poor guy was sick all last night and this morning, but he's recovering nicely and was a trooper all day during our sightseeing.

(I, the Iron Stomach, have been just fine the entire trip. Of course, now that I said that, it'll be my turn to get sick...)

Anyway.

After a delicious rooftop buffet breakfast (they had an *omelette* station – I was SO happy), we climbed into our hired tuk-tuk and sputtered away for our first views of the "Pink City." The sandstone buildings in the area already have a pinkish tinge to them, but they're also *painted* pink, so the color is spectacular. The streets are wider and the city is larger than Jodhpur, but it's also more crowded and chaotic – cars, buses, and tuk-tuks have to compete

for space on the road with cows, bulls, *huge* pigs, camel-drawn carts, horse-drawn carts, even the occasional elephant!

If you ever come here, don't be a prissy western tourist and insist on riding in a taxi. You can't experience the sights and smells through shiny, rolled-up windows. Get in a tiny, sputtering old tuk-tuk, breathe in the dust and exhaust and animal dung, and swerve like mad around rogue Brahma bulls and camels.

NOW you're in India, my friend!

So we're on our way to our first sight, the Amber Fort, when we have the aforementioned encounter with Mr. Cobra. I'd love to think that the snake was de-fanged (not likely), but I'm going to keep telling myself that to prevent horrific snake-infested nightmares tonight.

(Don't get me wrong – I love snakes. Got all sorts of pictures of me with pythons around my neck and stuff like that. But a deadly cobra less than a foot away from my face is *slightly* different...)

Anyway, our driver speeds away (thank goodness), saving us from Mr. Cobra. Still hyperventilating from our up-close and personal encounter, we arrive at the base of Amber Fort, parts of which date back to the year 1135! Its heyday was from 1592-1727, when the Kachhawaha moved their capital away from the hilltop and into Jaipur. The fort has been beautifully maintained and restored – not quite as stunning as the one in Jodhpur, in my opinion – but still an architectural masterpiece.

We bypassed the tourist-trap elephant ride and hiked to the fortress on foot, where we toured the palace and enjoyed some beautiful views of the surrounding hills, Maota Lake, and the saffron gardens. Again, this place would be pretty barren during the busy winter season, but this time of year, it's green and lush and simply stunning!

The first of two obligatory stops on the way back through town was at the "Water Palace" of Jal Mahal. It was built in the mid-18th century and once hosted royal duck-hunting parties. This time of year, during the monsoon, the surrounding basin fills with water and becomes Man Sagar Lake, which, in turn, makes the palace appear to "float" in the middle. You can't physically go out to it, but it's a beautiful photo op.

Afterwards we stopped at the "Wind Palace," also known as Hawa Mahal. Its ornate pink façade, modeled after the crown on Lord Krishna's head, has become nothing less than the icon of the city. It was built in 1799 as a place where the women of the harem could observe the goings-on in the streets

below while remaining unseen. It's an incredibly narrow building, more than five stories high but only one room deep, and the walls are only 8 inches (20cm) thick!

After sightseeing we wandered around the bazaar area for a while, being pestered (of course) by all the eager shopkeepers and touts. I used to hate the whole bargaining process of shopping the third world countries, but this time around, I find I don't mind it as much. (Maybe I've become coldhearted these days, but I've finally learned to just state the price I'm willing to pay and walk away if they don't agree to it. 99% of the time, they will.)

At any rate, I scored a beautiful handmade tunic to wear when we visit the Taj Mahal – because one simply doesn't wear a ratty old T-shirt there – and a few pieces of silver jewelry, including a beautiful elephant pendant.

Before dinner, we headed over to a nearby day spa to experience our first-ever Indian Ayurvedic massages. Let me preface this experience by stating that it is NOT for the faint of heart...or the prudish!

After check-in, we were led back to a room with two massage tables (and a curtain divider), where you strip down to your birthday suit and hop on the table. No top sheet, no robes, no disposable underwear. Just your naked body on a table, where you're rubbed head to toe with warm, fragrant scented oils.

Oh, and when I say head to toe, I mean HEAD TO TOE. They start with a vigorous scalp massage (heaven), slather your face with some sweet-smelling cream, then massage your face and throat. Next comes your arms, chest, and stomach (yes, ladies, breasts are included). Legs and feet follow, then you flip over to be oiled up on the backside (again, nothing is skipped).

Basically, everything except your *actual* genitalia gets massaged.

Now, I already know what you're thinking, and the answer is no. There is nothing erotic or sexual about this massage. (In fact, cross-gender massages are not allowed. My therapist was a woman and Jeremy's was a man and there was no other option). Ayurvedic medicine has roots that go back 5,000 years (long before we had antibiotics, colonics, or fad diets). In their culture (and many others), massage with essential oils was and still is a basic component of health and wellness. The strokes are very similar to Swedish – always towards the heart – with the goal of pushing lactic acid and other wastes out of the muscles and into the lymph, where it can then be flushed out of the body. Essential oils like eucalyptus, clove, and lemon aid in the detox process.

After the massage, you're wiped down with warm, moist towels before

you get dressed and thank your hard-working therapist. If you can get past the western notions of modesty and propriety (I was a massage therapist for 10 years – believe me, I understand), it's actually a delightful experience.

I fell into a coma-like slumber last night and awoke at 5am (for our early train to Agra) bright eyed and bushy tailed. Of course, the bottle of local Rajasthani red wine we sampled (a nice fruity Shiraz-Cab blend) with dinner probably helped too!

Our hotel was located a little ways out of town, so we enjoyed dinner in their rooftop restaurant each evening. Jeremy got his fill of chicken and mutton curries while I tried grilled lamb and a creamy chicken kabobs (basically, chicken slathered in yogurt and herbs and cooked in a tandoori oven). Sensational Jeera rice, cooked with cumin and cashews, accompanied the meals each night. Last night we even discovered *saffron* ice cream, if you can imagine such a thing.

It was quite literally the nectar of the gods.

I now write to you from our first-class "chair car" on our 3-hour train ride from Jaipur to Agra. Agra is home of the Taj Mahal (no introduction needed) and an ancient Red Fort, both of which we'll be exploring over the next few days.



# Never, EVER Eat Food On An Indian Train (And Other Lessons Learned the Hard Way)

Well, if you've been a little surprised so far by all of my happy-go-lucky, fairy tale fortresses and magical unicorn tales of India, let me assure you...

Today the magic ENDED.

We are currently in the city of Agra, and I currently have a view of the Taj Mahal from right outside our bedroom window. In fact, our plan was to be touring the Taj Mahal right at this very moment.

However, I am currently lying in bed, where I've been curled up in a fetal position (mostly wishing for death) ever since we arrived around 11am this morning.

Allow me to explain what led up to this unfortunate event.

We arrived at the train station in Jaipur around 6:30am this morning for an easy 3-hour ride to Agra. This train didn't have sleeper cars like our last one, but we were pleasantly surprised by how comfortable and clean the first-class chair car was. Our car was mostly empty, save for an exceptionally polite (and well-armed) group of militia men.

We're served complimentary bottled water, then tea and biscuits, then a nice hot breakfast, and since everyone's chowing down around us, I don't think twice about digging in (since I am, after all, the self-proclaimed "Iron Stomach").

BIGGEST.

MISTAKE.

EVER.

Jeremy and I swapped a few items around, since breakfast came with wheat toast (which he can't eat) and some sort of potato-millet thing (which I didn't care for). I also ate half a bowl of corn flakes, which – if I had to guess – is the culprit.

(Mind you, we've been eating dairy here every day. Lots of yogurt, lassis, paneer cheese, milk tea, ice cream, etc, and we've been totally fine. So I really didn't think anything of adding a little boiled milk to my cereal).

BIGGEST.

MISTAKE.

EVER.

Within fifteen minutes, I'm starting to feel shaky and nauseous. After half

an hour, I know I'm going to be sick, but I really, *really* did not want to subject myself to puking in the not-very-clean train toilet. By the time we arrived at Agra's train station, I was shaking and sweating violently and was so weak I couldn't even lift my own backpack.

We step down onto the train platform and I immediately try to find a restroom...to no avail. I asked three different workers, who all kind of grunted and made nondescript gestures in some nondescript direction. I'm searching and searching and feeling sicker and sicker, until it finally happens:

I have a complete and total meltdown.

(By the way, I cry *maybe* once every five years.)

So you can imagine poor Jeremy's reaction when I come crawling back to him, sobbing hysterically, unable to breathe, in the throes of a major panic attack because I'm sick as a dog and I can't locate a bathroom.

It was not fun.

I sat with our backpacks while he dashed off to find the mysterious nonexistent bathroom, hiding behind my sunglasses and hoping no one would notice I was a crying mess. At last Jeremy returns and leads the way to a "waiting room" that had a tiny, filthy shower/squat toilet combo, complete with a horrendous stench and used sanitary pads all over the floor. (If I wasn't sick already, I *definitely* was after smelling and seeing that.)

Suffice to say, this was NOT one of my favorite travel moments.

I'm feeling only slightly better by the time I step out, but still incredibly weak and woozy. We catch a tuk-tuk straight to our hotel and, even though it's only 11am, we're miraculously able to check in right away. I fall into bed and alternately cry, moan, sweat, and crawl to the bathroom as wave after wave of nausea and stomach cramps takes hold.

This goes on for probably five or six hours until finally – FINALLY – I start feeling halfway human again. Jeremy decided to bypass his own opportunities for sightseeing and stay with me, just to make sure I survived.

(Incidentally, if our roles were reversed, I probably would've left him behind and gone off exploring on my own. Does that make me a terrible wife?)

Our room comes with a lovely view of the Taj Mahal, and down the hallway is a rooftop restaurant with an even better view. For today, however, that's all I'm going to see. Jeremy just devoured chicken curry while I managed to keep down some dry toast and a boiled egg.

The good news is that now it just feels like I have a *really* bad hangover,

which still sucks but is infinitely preferable to how I was feeling earlier today. So the plan – provided my recovery continues – is to see the Taj Mahal and Red Fort tomorrow.

And the moral of the story, boys and girls, is this:  
NEVER EAT FOOD ON AN INDIAN TRAIN.

# Taj Mahal - A Monument to Undying Love

## Agra, India

If you're not into mushy gushy love stories, don't worry...I'll keep this one short!

Emperor Shah Jahan, the fifth of the Great Mughals, was incredibly devoted to his beloved wife, Mumtaz Mahal (whose name means "Jewel of the Palace"). He couldn't bear to be parted from her for any length of time, so he always insisted that she travel with him, no matter where he was going. In 1631, while accompanying him on a military campaign, she gave birth to their fourteenth child and died in the process. On her deathbed, she made him vow that he would create a monument that would show the world how much they loved one another.

The Taj Mahal is that monument.

Two distinct things went through my mind when I heard this story. The first was, "Yeah, after giving birth to FOURTEEN babies, I'd probably die, too!"

But the second thought was, "Wow, that's actually a pretty amazing love story."

Shah Jahan went into mourning for over two years after the death of beloved; then he set out to fulfill his promise to her. Twelve years, 41 million rupees, and 1,100 pounds of gold later, he'd created a garden-tomb that one writer described as "a vision, a dream, a poem, a wonder."

The Taj Mahal is perfectly symmetrical, mind-blowingly beautiful, and without a doubt deserves its place on the list of the Seven Wonders of the World.

When you're standing beneath it, you just...gawk at it. It feels like you could stare at it for 1,000 years and never get tired of looking at it. There are so many unique facets to the architecture, which is decidedly Islamic and yet incorporates other unexpected details, too.

The colorful floral designs, for instance, are made in the Italian "pietra dura" style, where miniature precious stones are slivered and set into the marble. The pishtaq (recessed arches) have subtly inlaid panels that seem to change color throughout the day, changing from white to cream to gold to pinkish as the sun moves across the sky. The Arabic verses that stretch across the doorways actually *increase* in size as they move higher, giving the optical

illusion of perfectly flowing script (and no vanishing point).

It is an incredible work of art, in the truest sense of the words.

If you're journeying here yourself, I have one recommendation – visit the Taj EARLY. I've seen so many photos of wall-to-wall people, where literally tens of thousands are jostling their way through the gardens towards the tomb. We arrived at 8am and the place was virtually empty! (It wasn't brutally hot yet, either.) By the time we headed over to the Red Fort, around 9:30am, it was starting to fill up, so we're glad we got the chance to see the Taj without fighting the crowds.

Agra Fort, or the "Red Fort," is one of the most important historical monuments in India. Its roots go back almost a thousand years, but the current fortress was built in the mid-1500's. The sandstone is almost blindingly red – like everything else in India, the colors are so bright and vivid! All of the Great Mughals made their home here, which means much of medieval Indian history occurred right here within these walls. A lot of the same architectural elements that were in the Taj Mahal are here also, from the intricate Islamic patterns to the pietra dura carvings in marble.

It was a beautiful sight and a beautiful morning, but by 10:30am I was starting to feel the effects of my food poisoning from the day before. We hitched a tuk-tuk back to the hotel and I crashed for a few more hours.

Honestly, it was kind of nice just to have a little break from the hustle and bustle of the tourist sights, too. After visiting Agra, I understand why India has the reputation that it does amongst foreign travelers. Agra is *appallingly* dirty. And as a westerner, you are basically viewed as a walking piggy bank.

Every single driver, tout, and tour guide is all over you the second you set foot in the street, trying to sell you something or pull you into their shop or bring you to their brother's/uncle's/cousin's restaurant/hotel/store. A polite "No, thanks" does little to deter their efforts. We've been chased halfway down streets by desperate touts, who repeat the same few words or questions over and over and over again, trying to pull you into a conversation in hopes of making a few bucks off you.

Frankly, it's irritating. And the especially insistent ones can be downright infuriating. We've literally had to shout "NO!" and wave our arms to get some of them to back off. I understand to a point – a few dollars, euros, or pounds is a lot of money here, and everyone needs to make a living. I get that. But respect should go both ways, and it would be *really* nice to just be able to walk down a street and enjoy the scenery without constant

harassment.

I am so glad that our introduction to India was in Chennai, Jodhpur, and Jaipur, because those cities were absolutely lovely.

Agra, sorry to say, is not.

But we were expecting as much. The general advice you receive about Agra is, “Go see the Taj Mahal and the Red Fort, and then get out.” Because you can’t come to India and NOT see the Taj Mahal – it would be a crime. But where we received genuinely warm hospitality and friendly smiles in our earlier cities, here they’ve made ripping off tourists into an art form.

And we’re *really* not feeling it.

But, with all of that said, it was totally worth coming here (and even the near-death bout of food poisoning) to see the Taj Mahal. There is certainly nothing else on earth like it, and photos don’t begin to do it justice. You simply must see it with your own eyes.

Tomorrow we’re off on another 3-hour morning train ride to India’s capital, New Delhi. Suffice to say...I will NOT be eating breakfast on the train!

# A (Slightly Terrifying) Rickshaw Ride Through Old Delhi

Please be advised – DO NOT visit Delhi if you have any of the following medical conditions:

Anxiety, nervousness, sensitivity to loud noises, sensitivity to dust or smog, claustrophobia, fear of crowds, fear of honking horns, fear of rogue cows, fear of stray dogs, fear of spiders, fear of traffic accidents, fear of crazy drivers, fear of having a toe or an arm amputated by a passing motorbike, fear of imminent death...

Basically, if you are afraid of *anything* at all, Delhi will be your worst nightmare. Chances are very good that you will NOT survive.

If, on the other hand, you thrive on chaos, if you've been known to waste away in front of exotic travel shows, and if you're not afraid to put your life into the hands of some totally random, mentally unstable rickshaw driver...then you might just have an AWESOME time exploring this city!

In fact, look up the word “insanity” in your closest dictionary. You won't find a photo of a mental hospital or Grigori Rasputin. I guarantee that you will find a picture of Delhi.

Because this city is – in one word – INSANE.

But not necessarily in a bad way. Oh, we had a few scary moments today for sure, but our reactions were more along the lines of “Wow, this is so crazy and cool!” instead of “Wow, we just almost died!”

Our day technically began in Agra with checking out of our hotel and catching a 2.5-hour train ride up to Delhi. This train car was different yet again – our first ride had four sleeping berths in a private compartment, our last one was reclining chairs, and this one was two sleeping berths in an individual compartment (so we had complete privacy for once). No food was offered on this ride, which is fantastic, because I'm pretty sure I would've declined.

Even at gunpoint.

Our arrival into the city's southern Hazrat Nizamuddin train station was pretty much what we expected: PANDEMONIUM. There is nothing quite like stepping off a quiet, peaceful train and into a bustling third-world metropolis of 25 million people. We're talking three times the total population of New York City!



There is simply nothing (not even ten days in other parts of India) to prepare you for the madness, the noise, the smells, and the chaos of New Delhi. It's like going from a tiny, peaceful cabin in the woods to Times Square on New Year's Eve.

Except it's not New Year's Eve. It's like this EVERY SINGLE DAY.

After playing the human pinball machine with 10,000 other people exiting the train station, we made our way to the rickshaw stand and proceeded to hire a certifiably insane driver to take us to our hotel. He *looked* like a normal human being, but the resemblance ended there. We exited the train station by driving the *wrong* way through the bus entrance, squeezing between gigantic tour buses with only millimeters to spare (into blind traffic, of course).

En route, our driver forms nothing less than a personal murderous vendetta against one of his fellow rickshaw drivers. The two are competing for space in the same lane, trying to pass the same cars/buses at the same time, even swerving into oncoming traffic to "beat" one another. We endure – not one, not two – but *three* collisions with this other (equally manic) rickshaw driver before the two finally pull over, step out of their vehicles, and start screaming at each other. Things heat up, fist bangs on each other's rickshaws ensue, gestures grow more wild, and we're pretty certain a full-on fistfight (or worse) is about to break out at any second.

It was like a Bollywood version of *West Side Story*...without the singing and dancing.

So we did what any sane passengers would do in that scenario. We grabbed our bags, got out, and ran for it!

(Seriously, guys, I couldn't make this stuff up if I tried.)

Luckily it wasn't much farther to our hotel, Bloomrooms, which is a beautiful, serene oasis in the middle of the city. We are located almost directly across from the busiest train/metro station in the entire city, but you'd never know it with these thick walls and courtyard-facing rooms. It's amazingly quiet for how *not* quiet it is once you step outside!

This is the first "backpacker" type place we've stayed at the entire trip, and I gotta say...it's great to be back. Downstairs is an awesome cafe with great food, board games on every table, and an endless array of your favorite 80's music. If it was less than 100 degrees outside, we'd be hanging out on the plush wicker furniture in the very Zen-like inner courtyard, but due to the threat of imminent heat stroke, we're opting for AC.

Anyway, where was I?

Oh, yes.

We arrive at our hotel with the last of our rupees and set out in search of an ATM. About two blocks away, Jeremy has the terrible misfortune of being pooped on by a passing pigeon. All over his head. Yeah...pretty gross. So we backtracked to the hotel so he could take shower #3 of the day (you take a LOT of showers in India) before we set out again.

At this point it's about 4pm – too late to see any of the touristy sights. The security guard suggests a “scenic” bicycle rickshaw ride up into Old Delhi (the Muslim Quarter).

“Good for photos,” he says.

“Great for me,” I respond. Plus, we had yet to actually experience a bicycle rickshaw ride – we’ve only done the motorized kind – so it would be something new.

So he flags down a passing bicycle rickshaw, we hand over 100 rupees (about \$1.60), and we set off for what will forever be etched in my memory as one of the most insane hours of my life. Traffic conditions like this simply don't exist anywhere else on earth.

We're talking cars, buses, motorbikes, rickshaws, bicycles, pedestrians, cows, bulls, goats, stray dogs, children, men pulling vegetable carts, women balancing enormous bags of who-knows-what on their heads...all competing for the same space on what's barely a two-lane road. Add in some mountains of trash on the roadsides and some dangerously sagging electrical wires that barely miss your head, and you're starting to get the picture.

Collision number FIVE of the day occurred while we were going through an “intersection.” We proceeded to crash into the bicycle rickshaw ahead of us, while another one creamed us from the side. Now, this all sounds very scary, but keep in mind that you're traveling *maybe* three miles an hour, so these are not high-speed, injury-causing crashes. Even the highways have maximum speed limits of 40km/hour (about 25MPH), so while the traffic is crazy, there's so much of it that no one is actually going that fast.

You can usually walk faster than traffic is traveling. In fact, this is probably the only place in the world where you can get into five accidents in one day and come away completely unscathed!

So our rickshaw drops us on Chandni Chowk, the main thoroughfare through the old quarter. This road has been the center of religious and commercial activity in the city for the past 400 years, and not much has changed over time. It's still insanely busy and it's still lined with temples,

mosques, and bazaars selling everything from silks to jewelry to electronics to wedding attire.

It is a shopper's heaven and a claustrophobe's hell.

I don't particularly love shopping or tight spaces, but somehow the maniacal atmosphere of the old city didn't bother me one bit. After our harrowing rickshaw ride, we spent another hour or two just wandering through the bazaar, getting completely and utterly lost, gawking at the powerlines that by all logical reasoning *shouldn't* work, and trying not to lose any fingers or toes to passing motorbikes. The shopkeepers in the bazaar are surprisingly not pushy – you can actually walk along and "window shop" without being hounded to death like we were in Agra.

It was a nice, refreshing breath of (heavily polluted) air.

Our day concluded back at the hotel with shower #4 (believe me...you NEED it!) and chilling in the downstairs cafe with some board games and our first western food of the trip – nachos for Jeremy and mac and cheese for me.

The trip is winding down, but don't worry...we're not finished just yet!!

# Minarets, Autographs, and Marriage Proposals

## New Delhi, India

Well, it's a good thing I'm not the jealous type, because today Jeremy almost got himself an Indian bride.

Allow me to explain.

Our day began with the breakfast buffet at our lovely hotel. We fueled up on eggs, toast, beans, yogurt, fruit, and plenty of caffeine, because we knew we'd have a long day of sightseeing ahead of us. The plan was to journey back through the old quarter to visit the mosque and the fort, maybe do a little shopping in the bazaar, and see where we ended up.

A rickshaw ride (much less eventful than the previous day) brought us to the red sandstone steps of Jama Masjid, India's largest mosque and one of the biggest in the world. The courtyard can hold as many as 20,000 worshipers! This magnificent building was created by Shah Jahan, the same emperor who constructed the Taj Mahal, and his style is evident in the architecture – the incredible marble domes, the perfectly symmetrical minarets, the soaring arches, and the same engraved pietra dura work that we saw in the Taj.

Having visited other Islamic holy places in the past, I knew the drill. As a woman, I needed to be dressed *very* modestly – long pants, covered shoulders, and an appropriate head covering (in this instance, a silk scarf I bought in Jodhpur).

I was quite surprised, then, to reach the top of the steps and see plenty of western women walking into the mosque with bare heads. Huh, that's interesting.

But wait...what are they WEARING?

I was about to find out.

A young Indian man approaches me with what will hereafter be referred to as “the frock.” Yes, all non-Muslim women entering the temple – no matter how modest their attire – were required to put on a floor-length, long sleeved, horrifically hideous polka-dotted frock. The goal, of course, is to disguise any trace of femininity (lest you be distracting to any male worshipers), and believe me...IT WORKS.

You could be the last woman on earth, and no man would give you a second glance in this thing.

So Jeremy, myself, and the frock enter the courtyard and, after gawking at

the domes for a while, we make our way over to the ticket counter. Our main goal for visiting – in addition to admiring more of Shah Jahan’s impressive architecture – was to climb one of the massive minarets for a bird’s eye view of Old Delhi. A dizzying, narrow, claustrophobic nightmare of 120 steps – once it’s over – rewards you with a truly magnificent vista of the city below.

It was in this setting that a pretty young Indian girl (conveniently traveling with her father) set her sights on Jeremy.

There’s not much room at the top of the minaret – maybe enough for six people to stand really close together. We have the place to ourselves for a few moments before we’re joined by two more visitors – a girl of maybe 18 or so, and a man who I presume was her father. I’m doing my thing – admiring the view, snapping photos, sweating to death inside my frock – when out of the corner of my eye, I notice this Indian girl start sidling up beside my husband.

Next thing I know, Dad’s whipping out the camera and photos start flying. The girl literally *latches* onto Jeremy’s arm with a glowing smile on her face, leaning her head against his shoulder, while Dad mutters something like, “Yes...good...very good match...very good match indeed.”

And even when the photo shoot is over, she’s still standing there, gazing up at Jeremy all googly-eyed, giggling like a nervous schoolgirl, until her father (quite seriously) points at his daughter and says, “You need bride?”

Now, I know what you’re thinking: Where was *I* while all of this was going on? Yes, I was there too, standing only inches away (we *are* on top of a minaret, after all). But don’t forget that I am buried beneath my oh-so-sexy frock, which probably makes me look more like Jeremy’s *grandmother* than his wife.

When Jeremy politely points out that he’s already married (indicating Grandma in the corner), the girl then fixated on me, the woman who’d already claimed the object of her affection. Rather than jealousy pushing me off the top of the minaret to my certain death, she posed for pictures with me, too...then asked for my AUTOGRAPH.

Yep. Not joking. Pulled out a sheet of paper and a pen, and asked me to sign it.

So I did.

Now yes, you’re all chuckling at this, and yes, it is a rather humorous travel story. But it’s also important to understand a little bit about the culture here, how women are viewed, and how marriages work.

India always has been – and still is – a country of deeply entrenched

traditions, and one of those traditions is arranged marriages. While there is some movement towards women's rights and "freedom of choice," the majority of marriages in this country are still arranged by parents or matchmakers. Often, marriages are negotiated and agreed upon right from the child's birth! Although technically illegal, the payment of dowries to the groom's family (by the bride's family) still factors in, too, which causes all sorts of social problems that could be an entire book of its own.

In a nutshell, compared to the social status of women in western countries, women in India have very few rights. As a female traveler, I've even experienced this (to a small degree) myself.

For instance, when we've dined in more upscale establishments, the waiter will pull out the chair for Jeremy – not for me. If I've been the one to pay for a meal or a taxi ride, I've sometimes been called "sir" – not that they don't know the words "ma'am" or "miss" (they do), but I'm simply viewed as an extension of my husband, not really a "person" of my own. When I've tried to get directions (when I was sick at the train station, for instance), I got nothing more than a grunt and a dismissive wave. When Jeremy went to ask for directions, he was immediately and clearly told where the restrooms were.

The most surprising instance wasn't my experience, but rather that of the German couple we shared a train ride with last week. When they checked into their hotel in Jodhpur, the porter grabbed the HUSBAND'S suitcase and backpack and carried it up four flights of steps, leaving the wife to haul her own luggage.

None of these things are a huge deal in themselves, and I'm certainly in no position to pass judgment on a culture that is radically different than my own. It's the way things are done here, and it works for them, and as a visitor you simply have to accept and respect the differences. I'm sure there are plenty of things about western society that they find strange, just like there are things about such a male-centric culture that seem strange to us.

For instance, it is perfectly normal here to see men walking down the street holding hands, or even with their arms around each other. This has nothing to do with being gay or bisexual; it's simply the way they express friendship. On the other hand, you almost NEVER see any sort of display of affection between members of the opposite sex – even simple hand-holding.

So, with all of that background, you can understand why the incident on the minaret – while "funny" to us – was a major commentary on the society here.

One young waiter we met in Agra, when he found out that we were married, asked, “You marry for love?” And in our minds, we’re like, “Well, *of course* we married for love!” But, despite all the syrupy Bollywood films, that’s still a pretty radical concept for most families in India. If I had to guess, I’d say that the waiter’s parents already have a bride picked out for him.

One of the beautiful things about travel is that – while you learn to accept and respect things about other cultures – you also gain a deeper appreciation for the good things from your own culture, as well. In this instance, the freedom that Jeremy and I had to make our own choice of a marriage mate. Talk about something we in the west take for granted!

Anyway, that’s my social commentary for the day. Back to Delhi.

I deposited my frock (quite happily) at the entrance of the mosque and we continued towards the Red Fort (yep, just like the one in Agra...guess there wasn’t another color available). During our walk we encountered a particularly desperate bicycle rickshaw driver, who followed us for probably half a mile and would not take “NO” for an answer.

At first it was kind of annoying, but towards the end of it we were laughing at his antics. He’d pedal forward for a while, then circle back and drop his price another 5 or 10 rupees. “Now?” he’d ask.

“The answer’s still no,” we’d say.

A few minutes later he’d be back. “How about now?”

Us: “Nope.”

A few minutes later: “Now?”

Us: “Nope.”

When they’re trying to reel you in, the touts here have 2 (and only 2) tactics. One is to ask your name. If that doesn’t work, they’ll ask what country you’re from. It’s kind of hilarious when we say USA, not only because it gives you instant rockstar status, but because they have exactly the same response:

“Ah, Obama!”

Yes, Obama. Yes, he’s our president. Yes, it seems to be the only thing that they know about the USA, because we’ve had the same conversation so many times with so many drivers/touts that we can now predict (and amaze) them with our foreknowledge.

On our way out of the Red Fort, a different rickshaw driver followed us for a while and asked where we were from. “USA,” we say.

“Ah, Obama,” he says. (Surprise, surprise.)

“Yes, Obama,” Jeremy interjects. “Next you’re going to ask if we like or don’t like him.”

(Driver’s eyes widen in astonishment.) “Yes! How you know?”

How do we know? Oh, maybe because 3,000 other drivers have asked us *exactly* the same question in the past 2 weeks?

Either the sun is starting to melt our brains, or we’re just getting used to it here, because we spent most of yesterday just laughing our heads off. We toured the fort, then did a little shopping at the bazaar (saw the best rip-off designer label yet: “Jookey” underwear!), braved a sweaty, male-dominated metro ride to a big outdoor shopping complex called Connaught Place, and spent our last 30 rupees on a bicycle rickshaw ride back to our hotel.

I continue to be surprised, amazed, and wildly entertained by this country. It is truly its own unique culture, unlike anywhere else I’ve ever been.

Tomorrow night, when we board our flight for home, I can honestly say that I’m going to miss it here.



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