

INDIA



and



NEPAL

November 2013

Bob and Molly Hillery

India is a country that has been on our wish list for quite some time and this was our year to make that trip. We knew that we wanted to take an escorted tour (rather than our usual “do it yourself”) as we had been advised that getting around the country can be quite difficult and very time-consuming for visitors. Fortunately, some friends had been several years ago and recommended Gate 1 Travel as a tour organizer and further suggested that we take the 15 day trip that included a few days in Nepal. So, that is exactly what we did and are very grateful for the recommendation because this turned out to be a fantastic vacation. It was a little tiring at times (very long days) but the guide was excellent, the hotels were very good and, of course, the sights were amazing.

India is everything that the stereotype says it should be: crowded, lots of poverty in evidence, cows in the street, etc, etc. But it is so much more. Obviously seeing something like the Taj Mahal for the first time is a thrilling experience but every day was filled with equally memorable sights. The culture is so much different from that we experience in the West (we would say anywhere else in the world based on our experience); the religions are numerous and fascinating and the people are amongst the most friendly. As the Indian tourism brochures and publicity say, it really is “Incredible India”.

Nepal is naturally very similar to India in many respects (they are neighbors) but has its own uniqueness and, of course, it has virtually the entire Himalayan mountain range as a backdrop, with Mount Everest its most well-known feature. Unlike India, Nepal was never under British rule (although there had been some close calls in the 1800s) but Nepalese Gurkha regiments fought alongside the British (almost as a part of the British Army) during World War II and the country has had strong ties with Britain throughout the past 100 years. In the few days that we were there, however, we saw nothing that shouted any true British influence (except one—read on) and certainly as a republic it looks and feels much more like its neighbor, India.

So we saw Incredible India and Amazing Nepal (or small fractions of each) on one fantastic vacation. We certainly would put this trip at or near the top of our travels around the world and—as with everywhere that we have been—would not hesitate to make a return visit.. Truly amazing and incredible. We can only hope that this journal does the trip some justice and reflects the feelings we had throughout our stay.

India and Nepal, November 2013

Wednesday November 6

We left home soon after 11:30 and met Elizabeth at Starbucks for coffee and a catch-up after her anniversary weekend away in Upstate New York. About 1pm we drove down to Cincinnati airport and checked in for our flights – the first one to Boston at 4pm. Just before we left West Chester it started to rain and rained heavily for most of the drive down and while we were waiting in the Crown Room. However, the flight to Boston was on time and we were on our way.

It was a smooth 1 ½ hour hop to Boston where we landed to clear skies about 30 minutes after it went dark (5:45 pm). It was a full half mile walk between Terminal A where we had landed and the International Terminal E so we had only about half an hour in the Air France lounge before boarding our 7:50 pm Air France operated flight for Paris. Dinner was served shortly after take-off and the food and service were clearly superior to that we normally experience on Delta flights.

Thursday November 7

It was just a 6 ½ hour flight from Boston to Paris so we only got a few hours of sleep before landing in Paris. There had clearly been some rain and the skies were overcast but the temperature on landing was almost 60F, almost exactly what we had left in Cincinnati. Transfer between gates in Charles de Gaulle airport was surprisingly straightforward and we were soon in the Air France lounge having a little breakfast. The layover was only two hours so it didn't seem long before we were boarding our next Air France flight to Delhi. It was now 10:30 in Paris, 4:30 in Cincinnati and 3pm in India. Presumably our bodies would adjust eventually but we were pleased that we had left a day early to provide some recovery time before the tour starts on Saturday.

The flight left Paris on time and we were soon through the clouds which obscured any view of the ground as we crossed France. However, by the time we were over Austria we had some magnificent clear views of the Alps with lots of fresh-looking snow covering many of the peaks. Mostly clear skies continued as we crossed over Hungary (we saw the River Danube very clearly) and a little further east before the clouds once again took over. Hence we didn't get a look at the Black Sea nor the Caspian Sea and, indeed, it was already going dark by this time.

Based on the flight information screens in the cabin, we crossed north of Iraq and Iran – on the southern borders of several of the former Soviet States – and then crossed Afghanistan and Pakistan before reaching India and our destination of Delhi. The flight arrived somewhat earlier than expected at 10:30pm local time, noon in Cincinnati. So, twenty four hours after our coffee with Elizabeth we were in a country that was new – and very different!

We went through Immigration and Customs (both bags arrived!) with no problems and soon met our Gate 1 greeter. Unfortunately we had to wait for another four people arriving on a different flight but time seemed to go by quite quickly just because everything was new and different. The first impression is that people are very friendly, driving (on the left) is a hair-raising experience – and Delhi has a serious smog problem. This is in large part a result of 6 million cars on the road but is exacerbated right now by the fireworks and other smoky celebrations as part of the Indian Festival of Diwali, held every November. Someone also said that there is smoke (which we could smell as well as see) from the burning of what's left from the field harvests, but that seems less likely in the middle of a big city. We experienced something similar in Cairo and that was in part due to burning dead plants, etc. In fact, again as a first general impression, there seems to be a lot of similarity between Cairo and Delhi.

We were taken to the Eros Hilton Hotel, checked in and settled in our room by about 1am. The time change (10 ½ hours from Cincinnati) made us feel not so tired but we eventually settled in to bed around 2am.

Friday November 8

We were awake soon after 8am and headed down for our first meal in India by nine. The sun was shining but had difficulty penetrating the smog which was still very dense and reduced visibility from our sixth floor room to about two blocks. Breakfast in the hotel was a very extensive buffet so we took advantage of that before venturing outside.



Street market just across from the hotel; our first venture into Delhi

We walked just a short distance from the hotel (fighting our way across one street of traffic) and spent a while strolling through an open market area whose main products appeared to be shoes, socks, shirts and all forms of electronics. It wasn't a market like those in England, for example, with organized stalls, but was what appeared to be random piles of goods – some piled for viewing and buying, others still in huge bags – all attended by several young men. There was virtually no hassling and the whole process seemed very low key – but then we didn't really show that much interest so perhaps we weren't considered likely customers. In fact, it really did seem geared for the locals rather than for tourists.

The area was poorly maintained (breaks in the sidewalks, etc) and generally untidy, with piles of rubbish in many places so the overall impression was not particularly pleasant by our standards. However, it seemed to work, no-one bothered us in any way (and we were quite literally the only non-natives) so it made for an interesting way to spend an hour. We did find a Starbucks for our morning coffee and, apart from the clientele, this could have been anywhere in the world.



*The hotel lobby; a stark contrast
to the world outside*

In the afternoon we spent some time catching up on e-mail correspondence while we had free time as we suspect that once the tour starts tomorrow, we will have far less time for this activity – and, of course, we didn't come to India to spend all our time on the computer. We spent a little time in the room until they came to clean it, at which point we went to the hotel lobby for afternoon tea.

At 5:30 we met with our tour guide Vicas who gave us a brief synopsis of the tour, specifically on the happenings over the next day and two nights in Delhi. As we said earlier, there will be 28 in the whole group but only 16 have arrived so far. Six are from Canada, several are originally from the Philippines and the rest scattered across the US. Even in this brief first meeting, everyone seemed to have an inane question – most of which had been addressed by the guide in his introduction. We shall see!

At 8pm Molly and I went to the hotel's Indian restaurant where we had a very good meal in plush surroundings. It was a pity that there were only a handful of others dining especially as there was a four piece musician group for part of the time. However, we enjoyed the experience of our first authentic Indian meal; similar in many respects to those in the US but rather more moderate in amount and spiciness. We retired about 10pm, having been told we would receive a 6:30 wake-up call to start our first day of the tour.



Saturday November 9

We did indeed get our 6:30 wake-up call and had breakfast before starting our day, leaving the hotel at 8am. And what an action-packed day it turned out to be! We saw many different monuments and learned a lot about the various religions and faiths which make up this country of almost 2 billion people. However, it is that statistic alone (the number of people) that underlies every impression that we got of life and culture in this country. It manifests itself in the traffic on the roads (which are totally inadequate and populated with every form of vehicular traffic), the crowds that one has to negotiate simply to get from one place to another and – perhaps most of all – in the sub-standard living conditions that so many must endure. Obviously there are some very exclusive and expensive homes, particularly in the Colonial and Government area of New Delhi, but there are many more tenement houses, shacks and shanty towns within the city. This creates garbage and maintenance (roads, buildings, sidewalks, etc) issues that are difficult to describe and even more difficult to imagine tackling as the country further develops. Despite this, and the attendant need for so many to perform menial tasks and to beg to scrape a living, people are generally very friendly, helpful and appear to be happy. It truly is amazing and humbling to see such poverty and squalor on this immense scale.



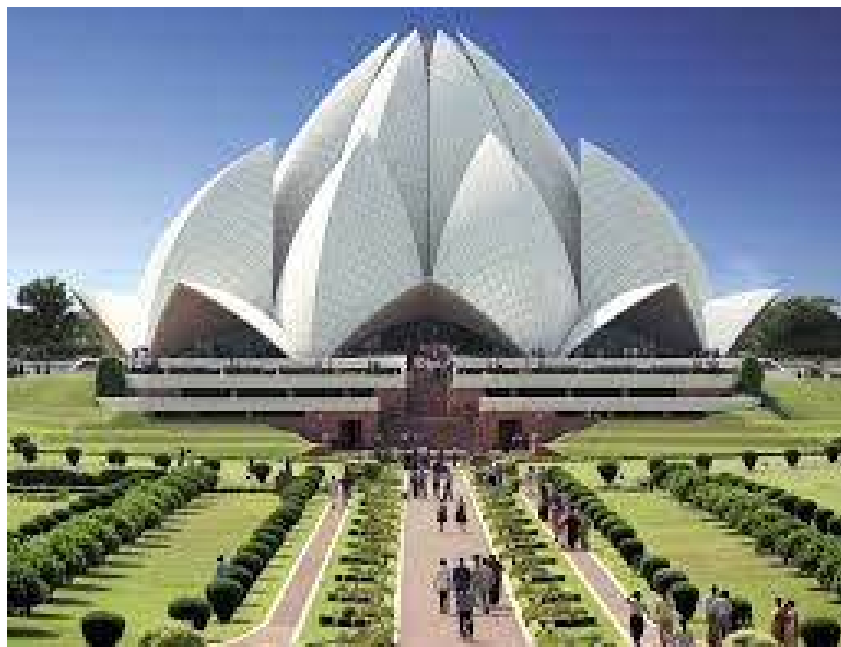
Having said that and with the recognition that things are quite different from those in Western developed countries, Delhi has a lot to offer as a result of its 500 year history, its mix of religions and its architecture. It certainly retains a good deal of British colonial influence (particularly New Delhi which was created by the British and laid out with wide European-style boulevards and is still home to all government and armed services offices as well as many embassies) but the dynasties that ruled for several centuries provided most of the sites that we visited today.

The Lotus Temple, New Delhi

I should say at the outset that a good number of the places of interest were seen as a fleeting glance through the window of a moving bus (this turned out to be the case on other segments of the tour) and, as such, the full beauty or scale may not be fully appreciated from the photographs we were able to take. Consequently, I have supplemented our own observations and

the excellent commentary of our guide with more detail and, in some cases, more professional photographs, taken from sources found on the Internet. This first, the Lotus Temple, is one such example.

The **Lotus Temple**, located in New Delhi, India, is a Bahá'í House of Worship completed in 1986. Notable for its flowerlike shape, it serves as the Mother Temple of the Indian subcontinent and has become a prominent attraction in the city.



The Lotus Temple has won numerous architectural awards and been featured in hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles. Inspired by the lotus flower, the design for the House of Worship in New Delhi is composed of 27 free-standing marble clad "petals" arranged in clusters of three to form nine sides. The nine doors of the Lotus Temple open onto a central hall slightly more than 40 meters tall that is capable of holding up to 2,500 people. The surface of the House of Worship is made of white marble from Penteli mountain in Greece, the very same from which many ancient monuments and other Bahá'í Houses

of Worship are built. Along with its nine surrounding ponds and the gardens, the Lotus Temple property comprises 26 acres.

Since its inauguration to public worship in December 1986, the Bahá'í House of Worship in Delhi has, as of late 2002, attracted more than 50 million visitors, making it one of the most visited buildings in the world.^[10] Its numbers of visitors during those years surpassed those of the Eiffel Tower and the Taj Mahal. On Hindu celebrative days and holy days, it has drawn as many as 150,000 people.

The first stop on our tour was a huge Moslem Temple (the Jama Masjid, biggest in India and in the top ten in the world). The three large onion-shaped domes, the two tall towers and the ornate frontage to the prayer rooms stood in front of a huge courtyard in which as many as 25,000 worshippers can be present. Despite the 1948 Partition that resulted in Pakistan splitting from India, this country still has the second largest Moslem population in the world, only exceeded by that of Indonesia.

The **Masjid-i Jahān-Numā** (the 'World-reflecting Mosque'), commonly known as the **Jama Masjid** is the principal mosque of Old Delhi in India. Construction began in 1650. The later name, Jama Masjid, refers to the weekly Friday noon congregation prayers of Muslims, Jummah, which are usually done in a mosque, the "congregational mosque" or "jāma masjid". The Jama Masjid was commissioned by the Emperor Shahjahan, who was the fifth Mughal emperor of India, and who also built the Taj Mahal in Agra and the Red Fort in New Delhi. It was completed in 1656 AD, with three great gates, four towers and two 40 m-high minarets constructed of strips of red sandstone and white marble. About 25,000 people can pray here at a time. The mosque has a vast paved rectangular courtyard, which is nearly 75 m by 66 m. The whole of the western chamber is a big hall standing on 260 pillars all carved from Hindu and Jain traditions.

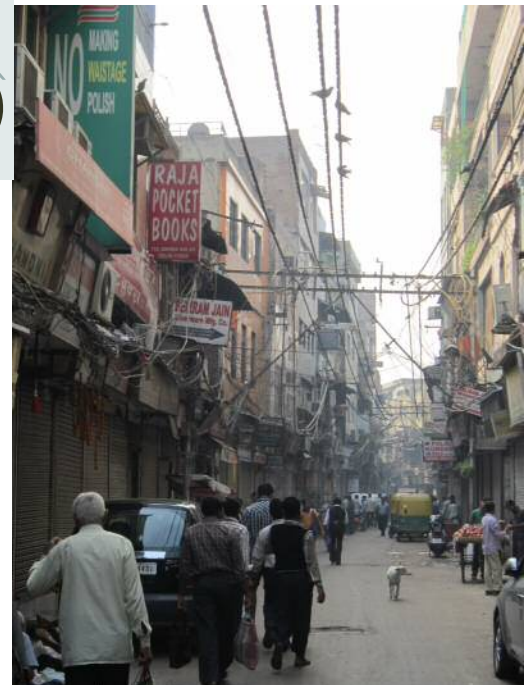


The Jama Masjid Mosque

As a stark contrast to the beauty of the mosque we were next taken on a 25 minute pedal rickshaw ride along the very narrow and very crowded streets that run alongside the mosque. We had a slow but somewhat bouncy ride past shops of all kinds, markets selling fruits, vegetables and flowers – and underneath some very dangerous-looking overhead electricity wiring that must be a nightmare to fix when things go wrong, or, perhaps, when some other resident simply taps into this haphazard grid. As the tour included this little adventure, we had no idea what the cyclist was paid to pull 400 pounds of tourists



along these poorly paved roads on a fixed speed bike – but he earned every penny and it wasn't surprising that he was pushing for an additional tip despite that having been covered by the tour guide.



Next we drove to a very large park (a mile long we were told) in which is the cremation site of Mahatma Gandhi, the father of modern, post-British India. Gandhi was murdered by Hindu fanatics (he was Hindu) who felt that, because he was anti-violence and preached tolerance of all faiths, he was patronizing to the Moslem population left in India after Partitioning and independence. He was actually slain in another part of town but his cremation took place at this spot (which was near the river at that time) and it has since become the cremation site for many dignitaries in India since the 1950s. It is a very simple stone with a well-kept flower bed and an eternal flame but I found the visit to be quite moving.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was the preeminent leader of Indian nationalism in British-ruled India. Employing nonviolent civil disobedience, Gandhi led India to independence and inspired movements for civil rights and freedom across the world.



Next on the agenda was a driving tour of the “Colonial” New Delhi with its wide, un-crowded streets, bungalow mansions for prominent politicians and the enormous Presidential Residence. The president is elected by the parliament but seems to have powers similar to a head of state (more ceremonial than persuasive) but certainly has a magnificent residence for his maximum of two five year terms. I forget how many acres the grounds covered but the facility boasts tennis courts, swimming pools, a golf course and every other amenity that a president (and his several hundred staff and families) might want.



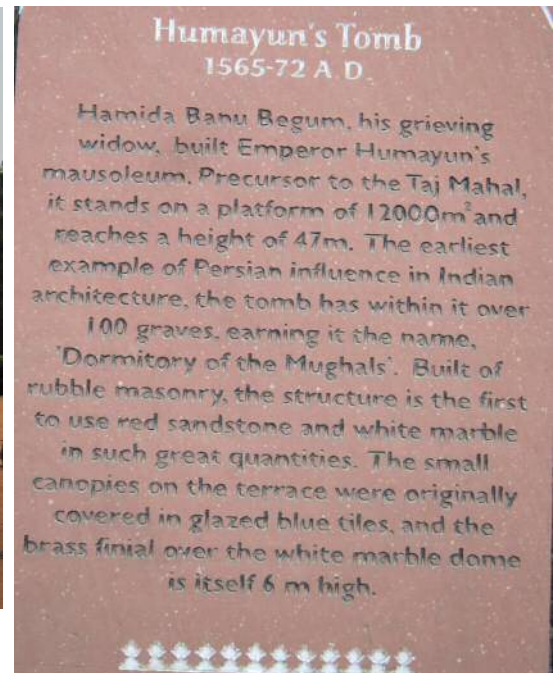
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Lunch at a restaurant in the Ethiopian Embassy was next. The food was good but the service and prices were not in line and it took about 1 ½ hours to complete a simple meal before our final stop of the day. This was at a mausoleum built by a bereaved wife for her husband and is very similar in design to the Taj Mahal – but was built about 85 years earlier and thus is considered a model for the more famous building.



It is built primarily of red (almost pink) sandstone and is set out in the middle of a very large symmetrical garden with water channels as dividers which complete the symmetry. Although the water aspect is much smaller than that of the Taj Mahal and the building may not be quite as splendid in its interior decorations, it is nevertheless a very grand and beautiful structure. The original was built for the remains of the last ruler of the Mughal dynasty but over a hundred of his family and descendants are now also inside the building (and I believe the grounds).

It is a truly magnificent setting and is about 400 years old. It has recently undergone significant renovation and is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. We were told that this was the first structure with this particular Persian design and that the Taj Mahal represents the pinnacle of this form – so we really can't wait to see the true icon of India.

Our day ended with our "Welcome Meeting" with the entire group (most of the information was a little repetitive since we had been with the guide all day) and then the Welcome Dinner in the hotel restaurant. After which I think most people simply collapsed into bed after a very long – but very interesting – day in Delhi. It was a wonderful introduction to our visit to India and created a base covering all the senses on which we will build a more complete picture as the tour progresses. As I said earlier, the contrast between here and the US (or virtually anywhere else in the world we have visited) is so dramatic that the tour guide's instructions not to compare but to view with an open mind were tested and made so true.

Sunday November 10



This was just a stop on the road on our way to Jaipur.

Qutb Minar is the tallest brick minaret in the world, it was built to celebrate the victory of Mohammed Ghori over Rajput king, Prithviraj Chauhan, in 1192 AD. The UNESCO heritage site is located at Mehrauli in Delhi.

Built in the early 13th century a few kilometers south of Delhi, the red sandstone tower of Qutb Minar is 72.5 m high, tapering from 2.75 m in diameter at its peak to 14.32 m at its base, and alternating angular and rounded flutings.

Today we left Delhi and drove by bus to Jaipur. The journey of less than 200 miles took about seven hours (with just two restroom and one McDonalds' stop!) partly due to some road construction, partly because buses are limited to less than 50 mph but mostly because of heavy traffic in the many towns and villages along the way – as well as traffic congestion for no apparent reason!

Nevertheless, the time passed rather quickly because the views along the way were generally very interesting and unusual. Not that there were significant sites of interest (although we did pass an 85 meter tall brick minaret (the highest made of brick

in the world) but rather the “life” that was all around us as we drove. Between the towns there were areas of farmland and some work was in progress in the fields, but it was the townships that provided the most interest.

The route is a major artery (“expressway” in many areas) between Delhi and Bombay (via Jaipur) but there were many areas alongside the road where dozens of trucks would be parked (many undergoing minor repairs) and “restaurants” (similar to a layby meal stop in Britain but nowhere near as sophisticated) at which the truckers ate and drank. The interesting aspect was that a café could be sandwiched between a tire replacement shop and a service bay where more extensive repairs might be ongoing in filthy conditions. So, once again, with the added contribution of major litter in the streets, the poverty and, indeed squalor, of India was front and center. At the same time, we were entering the state of Rajasthan which is one of the richest in the country and in which a significant percentage (8%, I believe I heard) of the wealth of India is located.

More visually interesting, however, was the mix of human beings (immense volumes in many places and now largely Moslem) and animals. At the sides of the road, and indeed in the middle of the road, we saw cows, camels, pigs, goats and monkeys. The cow, of course, is revered and is allowed to wander across a motorway and stop dozens of vehicles if she wants and is probably less vulnerable to being run down than we would be. Likewise, other animals (with the possible exception of the monkey which can be quite dangerous) are not only tolerated but accepted wherever they wish to walk, much as you or I might be.



Life along the road: Female laborers; taxi stand; camel cart; cows; and PEOPLE



Another somewhat humbling experience along the route was to be greeted with waves and genuine smiles by many locals who obviously were living in very poor conditions. People walking along the road, eking out a living at a roadside stand or packed inside a non-air-conditioned bus, tuk tuk, or jeep always seemed to be happy to see us dash by in



our comfortable air-conditioned bus and were eager to show friendship. One must travel the world to experience the feelings created – it cannot be understood simply by reading someone’s attempts to write about it.

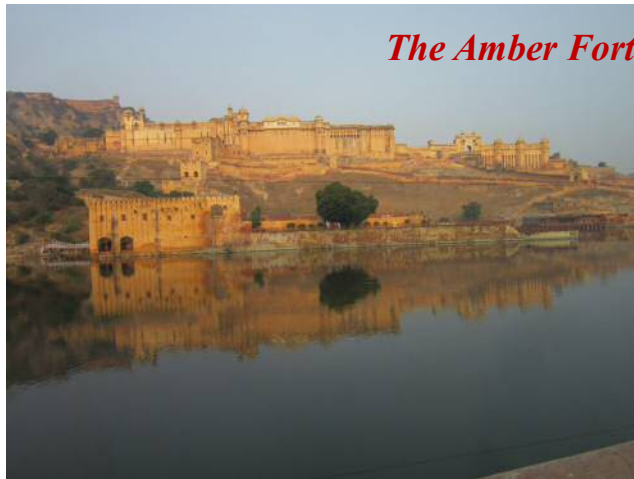
After seven hours we arrived in Jaipur, which is the gemstone cutting, polishing and mounting capital of the world. Almost all precious stones (except diamond) are processed here although very few are actually mined in the area, with emerald being the exception. After checking into the hotel, we were taken to one of the many jewelry cutting “factories”, given a quick introduction and then whisked to the showroom for the inevitable attempts at sales. A couple of people in our group made the investment but we chose to spend our money on the “cheap and nasty” stuff available in the local market which we visited next.

Market for locals and tourists alike



Actually, Molly was very restrained and purchased only two Pashmina (for \$20) – a far cry from the prices we can expect to see when we visit the true fabric stores tomorrow. Our day ended with a very good buffet dinner in the hotel restaurant and we retired early again in anticipation of another 6am wake-up call tomorrow.

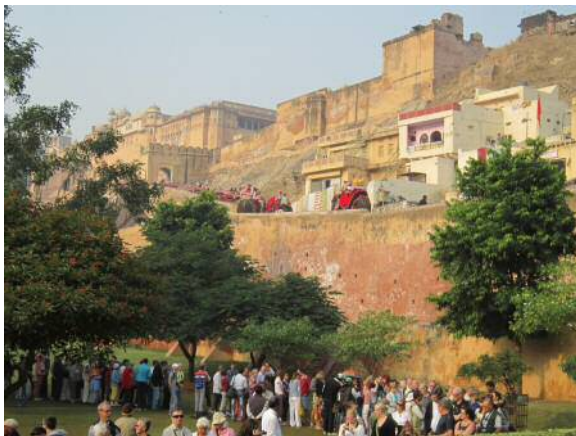
Monday November 11



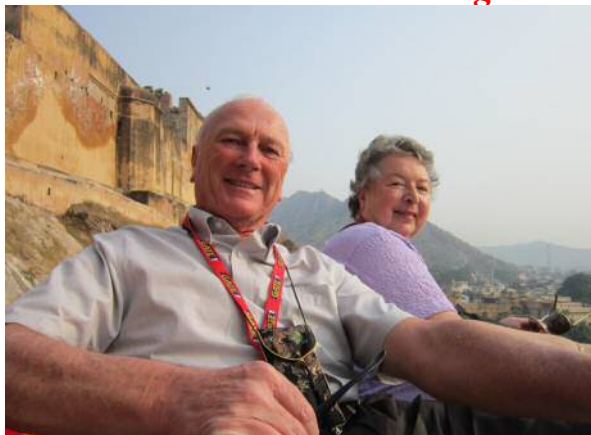
The Amber Fort and Palace



We left the hotel at 7:30 and drove about 20 minutes to the Amber Palace. Amber refers to the name of the township which was the predecessor to Jaipur and it was from this palace that the maharajas ruled for several centuries before they outgrew it and moved into what is now Jaipur. The fort and the palace within it is situated on a beautiful hilltop overlooking the valley and are reached today (as most likely three hundred years ago) by a 20 minute ride on an elephant up a very steep incline.



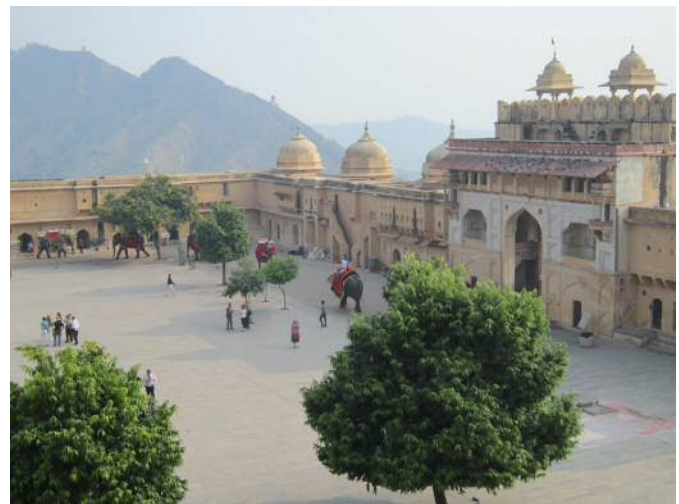
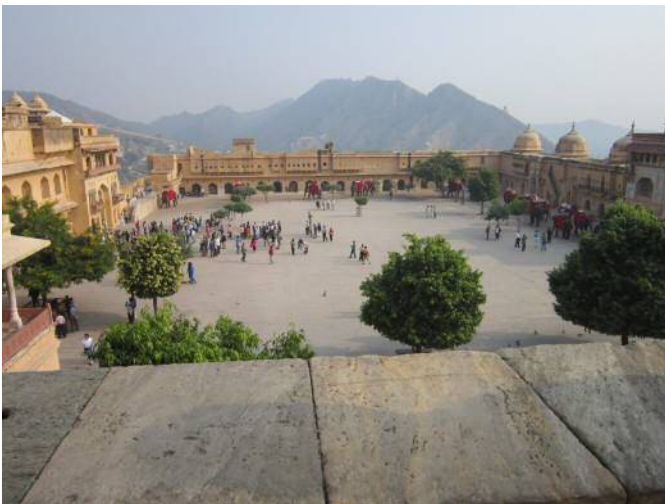
The line grows as our transportation arrives



So, after about a 30 minute wait in the ever-growing line, we started our day proper sitting side by side on an elephant's back, just behind its driver. We had experienced a camel ride in Jordan several years ago and thought that was probably the most uncomfortable form of transport – but we soon felt that the elephant was a true competitor to that title!



It was hard work holding on to the rails and the seats were less than comfortable but the most difficult part of the ride was attempting to stay upright and balanced as the elephant swayed from side to side on its walk up the hill. Nevertheless, the views of a lake and gardens below the palace were beautiful and, once we reached our destination – a huge courtyard of the palace – we were rewarded with some magnificent 360 degree views across the valley and the nearby hills. Then there was the palace itself!



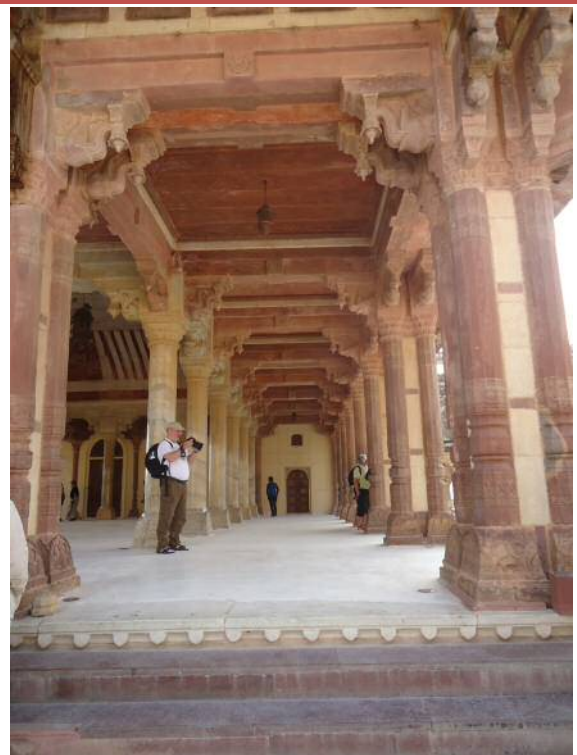
Two of the four courtyards of the Palace within the Fort and the “elephant” road from the valley



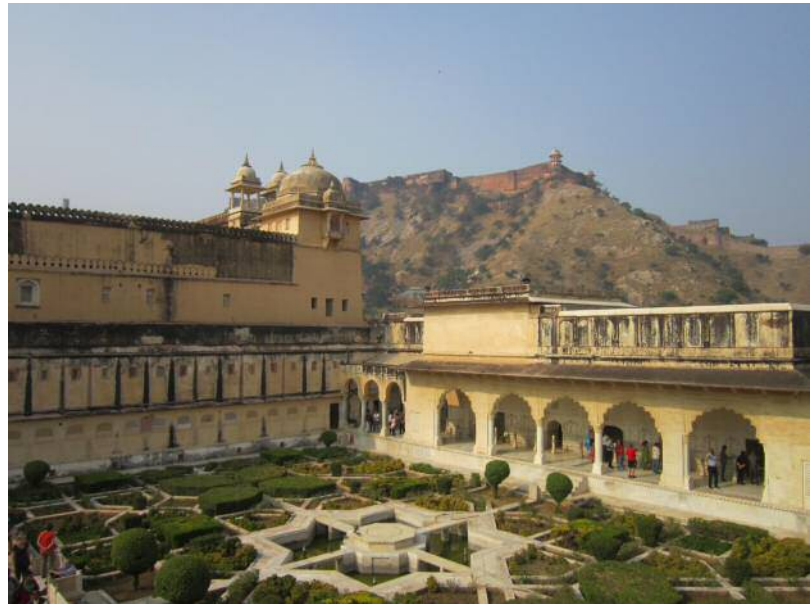
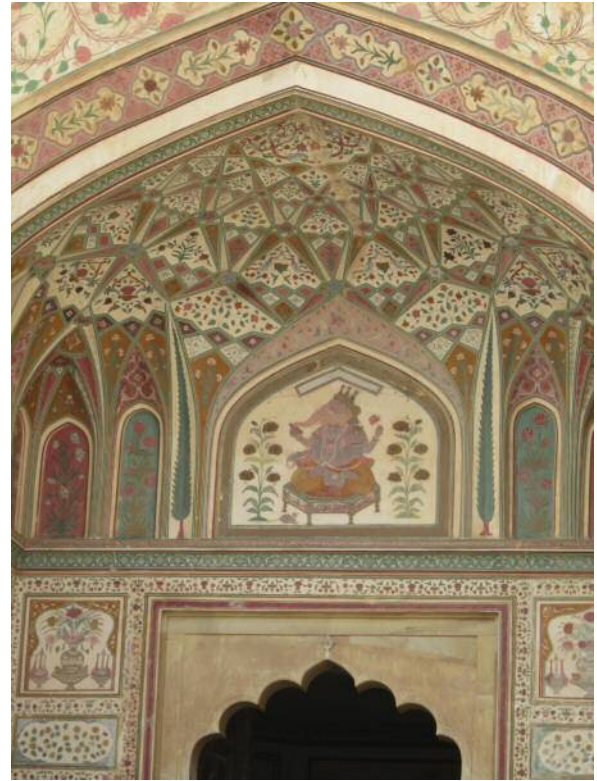
Amer Fort (Amber Fort) is located in Amer (a town with an area of 4 square kilometres, 11 kilometres from Jaipur, Rajasthan state, India. It is one of the principal tourist attractions in the Jaipur area, located high on a hill. Amer Fort was built by Raja Man Singh I and is known for its artistic style of Hindu elements. With its large ramparts, series of gates and cobbled paths, the fort overlooks the Maota Lake, at its forefront.

The aesthetic ambiance of this formidable fort is seen within its walls on a four level layout plan (each with a courtyard) in an opulent palace complex built with red sandstone and marble consisting of the Diwan-e-Aam or the Hall of Public Audience," the Diwan-e-Khas or the Hall of Private Audience," the Sheesh Mahal (mirror palace) or Jai Mandir, and the Sukh Niwas where a cool climate is artificially created by winds that blow over the water cascade within the palace. Hence, the Amer Fort is also popularly known as the Amer Palace. The palace was lived in by the Rajput Maharajas and their families. At the entrance to the palace near the fort's Ganesh Gate, there is also a temple dedicated to Sila Devi, a goddess of the Chaitanya cult which was given to Raja Man Singh when he had defeated the Raja of Jessore, Bengal (now in Bangladesh) in 1604.

This fort, along with Jaigarh Fort, located immediately above on the Cheel ka Teela (Hill of Eagles) of the same Aravalli range of hills, is considered as one complex, as the two are well connected by a subterranean passage. This passage was meant as an escape route in times of war for the royal family members and others in the Amer Fort to shift to the more redoubtable Jaigarh Fort.



Mughal (Persian) and Hindu architecture



The maharaja at the time was subservient to the



More of the Amber Palace, including a wall inlaid with stones and mirrors (above left) and the second courtyard with a view to the Jaigarh Fort on the next hilltop.

Moslem leadership in Delhi and tensions and outbreaks of war had been an issue for generations. He chose to solve this problem by marrying one of his daughters to a prominent Moslem man and thus brought a period of relative peace. This also meant that the palace buildings themselves had a unique mix of Hindu and Islamic influence in the architecture. The Islamic was basically Persian in style as the Mughals in charge had originated in Persia so

there are columns, for example, that have floral bases and elephant heads at the top. Similarly there are many walls and rooms that have no human or animal figures (Moslem buildings contain no such icons) but are ornately decorated in precious stones and mirrors that create unique lighting effects. Other areas are clearly Hindu in style and the various gods are prominent over doorways and on walls in beautiful frescos.

The whole complex is very large with several courtyards designated for various private and public functions, each being surrounded by living areas for the maharaja and his dozen wives, as well as their entourage of servants, courtiers, entertainers and other support staff. Although women were not officially involved in state decisions or policy, they apparently were consulted and quite influential. Consequently they watched and listened to the male deliberations from screened balconies which allowed them to get the information they needed without showing their faces in public.

Most of the buildings that comprise the palace date from the 16th century and the architecture, decorations and paintings are certainly of a caliber that would match that of similar buildings in Europe from the same era. For no logical reason I had not realized that the Indian society, form of government, architecture and culture were comparable to that in existence in the powerful European nations of the time. Again, there is no reason why this should not be so, but it reflects an ignorance of knowledge of the sub-continent that I had no picture of an India of that period having such stunning buildings.

We descended from the palace by Jeep, which was slightly more comfortable than the elephant with four passengers crammed in the back on makeshift seats. However, we had seen many similar vehicles carrying as many as a dozen, maybe more, locals so we considered ourselves fortunate.

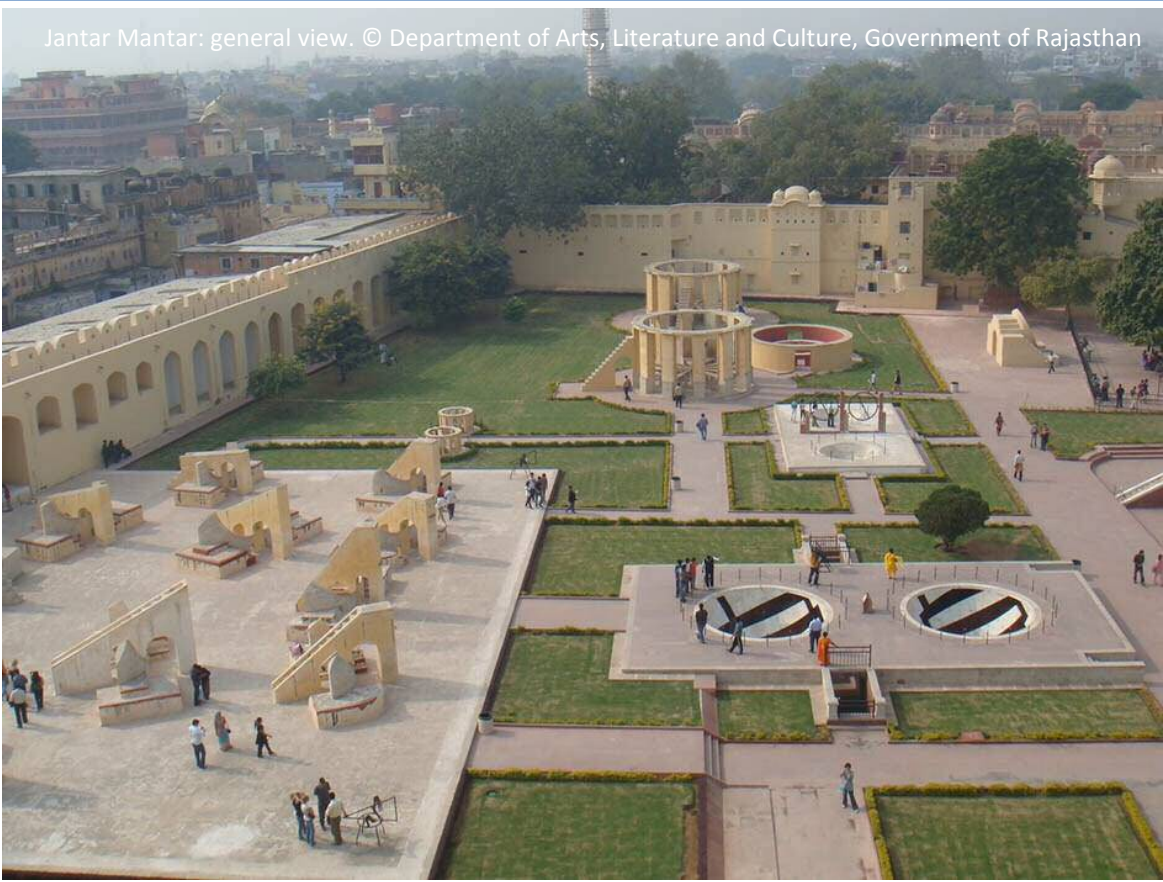


From the palace it was just a short ride for the inevitable visit to a jewelry and then a textile and handicrafts “factory” and SHOP. This seems to be a feature of any tour and obviously the Tour Company (and the guide) get a percentage but after you have seen one, you have seen them all. Nevertheless, one or two in the group always buy something of significant value (carpets, gems, etc) so it is clear to see why they are an integral part of the package. From those shops it was on to lunch which was served in, of all places, a Holiday Inn. Food and drink – at least in the places we have been directed to – are not cheap in India and, as today, it’s not unusual to spend \$40 on a light lunch for two. On the way back into Jaipur, however, we did get a view of another beautiful palace, this one—the Jal Mahal—built in the middle of a lake.

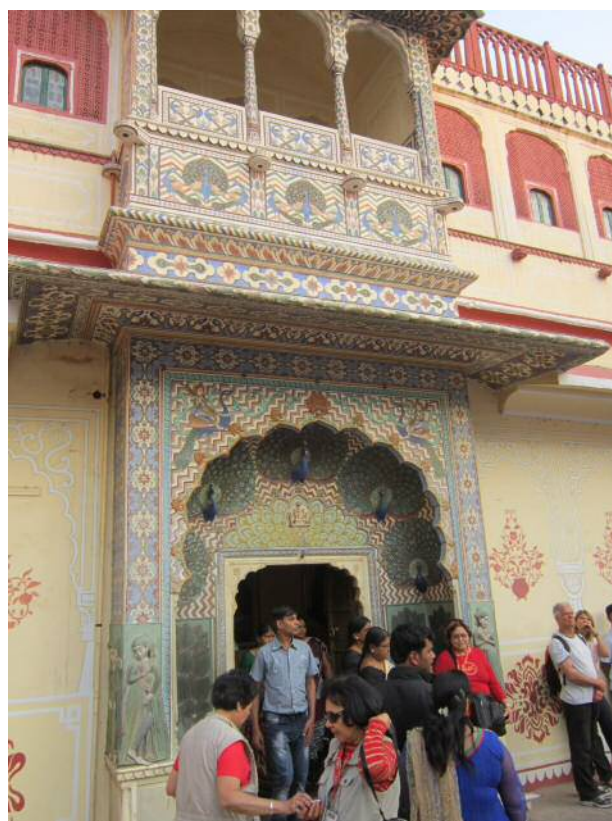
By now it was after 2:30 and the effects of the elephant ride were beginning to take hold on most people, but we still had two more places to visit in Jaipur. First was an open-air observatory built by the maharaja almost 300 years ago to provide an accurate (to within 20 seconds it is claimed) time for the city (not for today’s one time zone India) and to a series of astrological features that would allow the priest to accurately predict a new-born’s life based on zodiac signs. The whole area (a -sized park) is filled with stone features that mimic sundials of various kinds but on a grand scale. The largest piece looks more like an Olympic ski jump!

The Jantar Mantar of Jaipur is an observatory built in the first half of the 18th century. Today it has 19 main astronomical instruments or groups of instruments. They were generally constructed of brick rubble and plaster, but a few were made of bronze. They were built for naked-eye observations of the celestial bodies and precision was achieved through their monumental dimensions. The Jantar Mantar Observatory was built by Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II, as a focal point of his new capital, Jaipur, the first and earliest geometrically planned city in India. Jai Singh II was one of several powerful princes rising to power as the influence of the Mughal Empire decreased. In his attempt to become an almost independent ruler of Rajasthan, he started to build a new capital underlining the link between scientific capacities, urban planning and social control. The construction of the observatory site started in the 1720s and was completed in 1738.

Jantar Mantar: general view. © Department of Arts, Literature and Culture, Government of Rajasthan

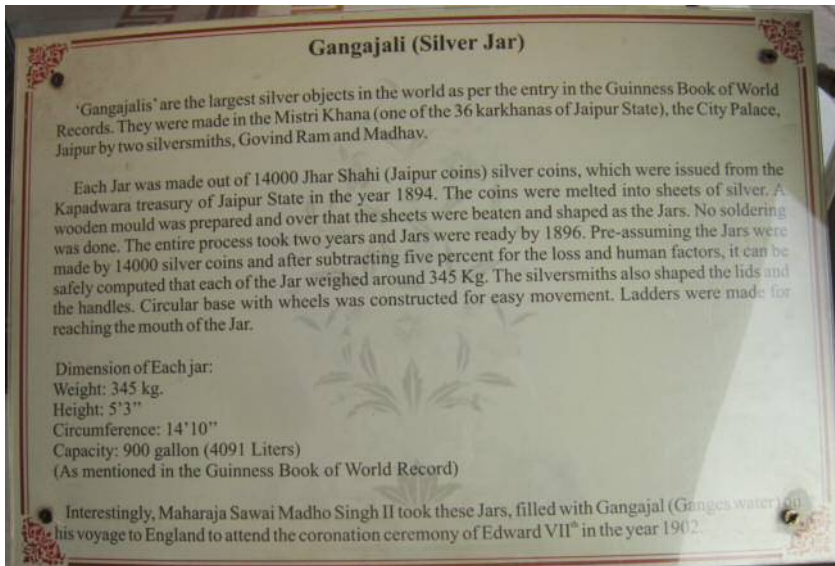


Finally, we visited the City Palace of the Maharaja of Jaipur. After gaining Independence the power of the maharaja diminished but it was Indira Gandhi in the early seventies who said that they would no longer have any direct power over their regions. The descendants are still given the title and a certain amount of the respect but no longer have any ruling authority. Consequently, although many remain among the rich, a lot of their former palaces and homes have been converted to museums and a range of rather exclusive hotels. In Jaipur it is a museum complex displaying much of the finery and dress of the former rulers, although one section (a still very large seven storey “home” - arrowed below) is occupied as living quarters by the current maharaja, aged fifteen!



The City Palace
Jaipur

Jaipur was originally built as a walled city and still retains most of the walls. In 1886 when the Prince of Wales paid a visit, the maharaja decided to honor him by having all the walls and homes painted pink. The facades facing the main streets (very wide boulevards set in a grid system) are still maintained in pink – hence Jaipur has the name of “The Pink City”. The museum has many beautifully decorated courtyards and a number of rooms in which are displayed the clothing and household effects of the maharajas from the height of their glory. In one room are the trophies won by the maharaja of the 1950s for his polo prowess when India (where the game was invented) was world leader. In fact, Jaipur itself had a world-class polo team and the maharaja was a key player.



No expense spared.....

Finally, no visit to Jaipur is complete without taking in the Wind Palace, a striking building in the middle of town containing over 900 windows that allowed the royal ladies to observe life in the street below without themselves being seen but it also provided an early form of air-conditioning for the building. It really is one of the more spectacular buildings we have ever seen,



At 5:50 (ten hours after leaving the hotel) a weary group of tourists boarded the bus for the 30 minute drive through rush hour traffic to the hotel. The term “Rush Hour” is at its most ludicrous here because the streets are not only packed with buses, trucks, jeeps, motorbikes and tuk-tuks but also with thousands of pedestrians, animals (goats, donkeys, camels, cows and monkeys) – all, it seems, wanting the same piece of roadway. So despite the extra wide boulevards (now half-filled by parking spaces), there just is not enough room for everyone and traffic inches along in very short bursts of “speed”. Once again, however, the locals display an amazing degree of patience (although horns are constantly being sounded as warnings rather than in an aggressive manner) and virtually everyone in an adjoining vehicle will smile and wave.

After an hour to clean up and change we left for a dinner and show at one of the Heritage properties not far from our hotel. On the way there each woman was given a scarf and each man a turban to be worn at the dinner. On entering the building a



red dot was placed on our foreheads and we were given a refreshing welcome drink. The dinner in this opulent building was on the third floor terrace (outdoors) and was served buffet style. The meal was reasonably good for a buffet, the show of local dancing and a puppet show were decidedly amateur, but it was a different experience – and that was why we were here.



And, I did get a birthday cake and a singing of “Happy Birthday”

in Hindi and English!!

Tuesday November 12

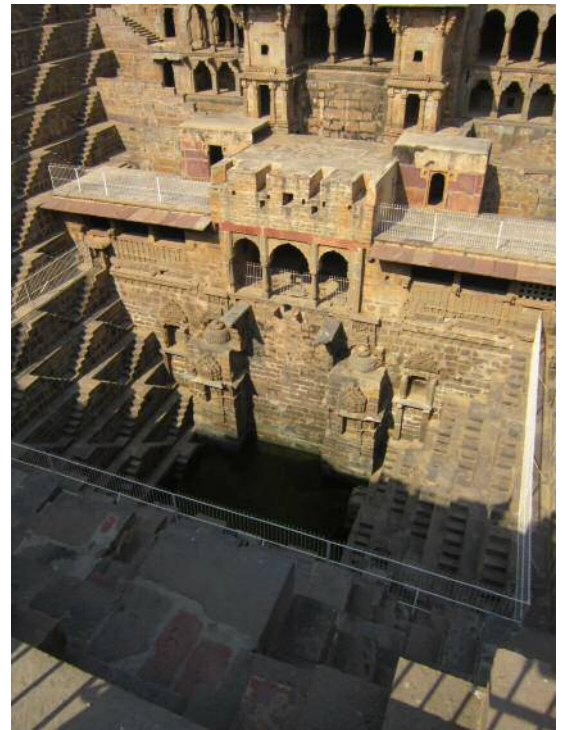
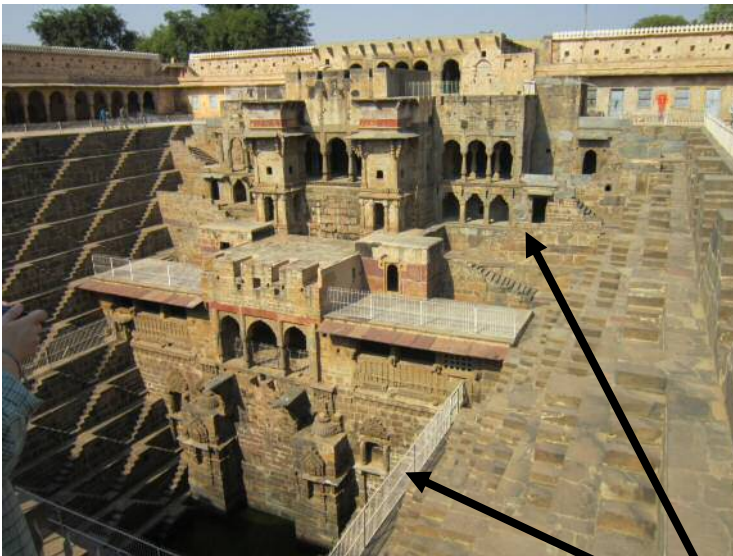


Today we were given a lie in until 7:45 and didn't leave the hotel until 9:30 for another long drive to Agra. We made two stops before lunch, the first being at a small private school where Gate 1 has just started a limited form of sponsorship. This was much like the schools we had visited on Viking Tours in China and Vietnam – several classrooms packed with children who sang a greeting, showed a little of their work and treated us to big smiles. The classrooms were tiny with only a half wall on one side; in one case the senior class sat outside under a tree for their lessons. As with those in China and Vietnam, the most favorable impression was how well-behaved the children were, even when unsupervised – and, of course, they all wore a school uniform.

The school and some sights along the way



Only a mile away was our next stop; an 1100 year old step well. This 60 feet deep well had been built to provide a year round water supply and was fed by underground piping from two parallel rivers which filled the well during the monsoon season. The walls were built in a stepped fashion so that water could be taken from the cistern at any level, so the climb was to a lower level as the supply dried up.



Upper and Lower suites



Perhaps the more surprising aspect of this particular step well was that it contained rooms for the maharaja and his family as a retreat from the summer weather. There was a full suite towards the top of the well and another low-



er down that was used towards the end of the dry season. Included in these suites was a mechanized system for obtaining the water that was driven by buffalo. For all it was over 1000 years ago, the ruler seemed to have thought of everything and provided the means to use it. In addition, a large number of granite and sandstone carvings have been excavated from this site and many are still in almost new condition with the deep relief still clear and sharp.

Our final stop on the way to Agra was for lunch at a roadside hotel where we had a good lunch before continuing to our hotel. The final hour of the drive was after sunset and it was amazing (and quite alarming) to see how our driver negotiated his big bus along a two lane highway (with many deep potholes) and avoided every obstacle thrown at him. Vehicles coming in the opposite direction with no lights or lights on full beam; cyclists and pedestrians with no lights at all and dark clothing; other vehicles of all kinds (included camel driven) – again with no lights. It was a never-ending sequence of flashing lights, loud horns and near misses, but he managed to get us to the hotel unscathed.

We checked in and had about an hour before we went our separate ways for dinner at one of the several restaurants in the hotel. Molly and I chose the Indian cuisine which was very good and presented with excellent service. We retired soon after 10pm.

Wednesday November 13

Today was our visit to the Taj Mahal and most of the discussion will be about that site. However, later in the morning we visited another showroom where products made from “the same marble and using the same gemstones” as those used in the building of the Taj Mahal were on sale. We did not partake! After lunch at the hotel we had two afternoon visits; one to the “Baby Taj” and another to Fort Agra.

The Taj Mahal was built between 1622 and 1655 as the mausoleum for the third and favorite wife, Mumtaz, of Shahjahan, the fifth Mughal emperor. The Mughals (Persians) had essentially conquered India the previous century and Jahan was the last emperor before the dynasty lost its power. *[See Box on opposite page]*. This accounts for the very strong Iranian influence in Indian culture and architecture and, of course, for the very large Moslem population both then and now.

Before Mumtaz died the Shah had asked her what she wanted him to do after her death and she had asked that he not marry again (he didn't) and that he build the finest palace “in the entire world” to house her remains (he did). The complex covers a huge area and the palace sits in the center, surrounded by gardens divided into quadrants by long pools, including the quintessential channel that defines the Taj Mahal in most pictures. The building itself is entirely symmetrical with minarets at each corner and a huge dome in the center above the sarcophagus of the Mumtaz. Actually the dome seen from the outside is twice as high as a similar dome beneath it (with nothing in between) that once again is centered over the remains.



**One of four entrance gates
and our first glimpse of the
Taj Mahal**



The entire palace is built of Indian marble, quarried about 150 miles from Agra, which is claimed to be even better than that from Italy in that it is non-porous (and very hard) and translucent and thus “changes” color with the light changes, at times appearing pink or orange. Today the sun was out and the smog (notorious in this area and very bad last night) was minimal so we saw the Taj in its typical brilliant white. The first impression immediately corresponds with all the pictures one has ever seen of this iconic place but, in addition, it seems so much more and cannot fail to impress. For most in our group, this was the reason they had made the trip and no-one expressed any disappointment; in fact several said that they could happily return home now having seen “India”. Neither Molly nor I had this as our only (or even major) reason for our visit but obviously it is a highlight and is one of those places that we have heard about forever but never thought we would see, so it certainly gave us the tingling factor.

The Mughal was an empire extending over large parts of the Indian subcontinent and ruled by a dynasty of Chagatai-Turkic origin.

In the early 16th century, northern India, being then under mainly Muslim rulers, fell to the superior mobility and firepower of the Mughals. The resulting Mughal Empire did not stamp out the local societies it came to rule, but rather balanced and pacified them through new administrative practices and diverse and inclusive ruling elites, leading to more systematic, centralized, and uniform rule. Eschewing tribal bonds and Islamic identity, especially under Akbar, the Mughals united their far-flung realms through loyalty, expressed through a Persian culture, to an emperor who had near-divine status. The relative peace maintained by the empire during much of the 17th century was a factor in India's economic expansion, resulting in greater patronage of painting, literary forms, textiles, and architecture. Newly coherent social groups in northern and western India, such as the Marathas, the Rajputs, and the Sikhs, gained military and governing ambitions during Mughal rule, which, through collaboration or adversity, gave them both recognition and military experience. Expanding commerce during Mughal rule gave rise to new Indian commercial and political elites along the coasts of southern and eastern India. As the empire disintegrated, many among these elites were able to seek and control their own affairs.

The beginning of the empire is conventionally dated to the founder Babur's victory over Ibrahim Lodi in the first Battle of Panipat (1526). It reached its peak extent under Aurangzeb, and declined rapidly after his death (in 1707) under a series of ineffective rulers.

The Mughal emperors were Central Asian Turko-Mongols from modern-day Uzbekistan, who claimed direct descent from both Genghis Khan (through his son Chagatai Khan) and Timur. At the height of their power in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, they controlled much of the Indian, extending from Bengal in the east to Kabul & Sindh in the west, Kashmir in the north to the Kaveri basin in the south. Its population at that time has been estimated at between 110 and 150 million (quarter of the world's population), over a territory of more than 1.2 million square miles).

The "classic period" of the empire started in 1556 with the ascension of Akbar the Great to the throne. Under the rule of Akbar and his son Jahangir, India enjoyed economic progress as well as religious harmony, and the monarchs were interested in local religious and cultural traditions. Akbar was a successful warrior; his reign also brought Persian cultural influence to its zenith in India, and the resulting Indo-Persian synthesis outlived the Mughals. He also forged alliances with several Hindu Rajput kingdoms. Some Rajput kingdoms continued to pose a significant threat to Mughal dominance of northwestern India, but they were subdued by Akbar. Most Mughal emperors were Muslims.

The reign of Shah Jahan, the fifth emperor, was the golden age of Mughal architecture. He erected several large monuments, the most famous of which is the Taj Mahal at Agra, as well as the Moti Masjid, Agra, the Red Fort, the Jama Masjid, Delhi, and the Lahore Fort. The Mughal Empire reached the zenith of its territorial expanse during the reign of Aurangzeb and also started its terminal decline in his reign due to Maratha military resurgence under Shivaji Bhosale. During his lifetime, victories in the south expanded the Mughal Empire to more than 1.25 million square miles, ruling over more than 150 million subjects, nearly 1/4th of the world's population.

By the mid-18th century, the Marathas had routed Moghul armies, and won over several Mughal provinces and internal dissatisfaction arose due to the weakness of the Mughal Empire's administrative and economic systems, leading to the declaration of independence by many factions. In 1739, the Mughals were defeated and Mughal power was severely limited. The last emperor, Bahadur Shah II supported the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and was therefore tried by the British for treason, imprisoned, exiled to Rangoon and the last remnants of the empire were taken over by the British Raj.

Once we got closer to the building itself, we could see the sheer opulence of both the exterior and interior. Most surfaces are covered with inlaid gemstones; nothing is painted, every decoration is made up of tiny gems shaped and mounted into colorful floral and Persian designs. Being Moslem there are no animal or human figures depicted. Religious quotations are scripted with inlaid black Onyx.

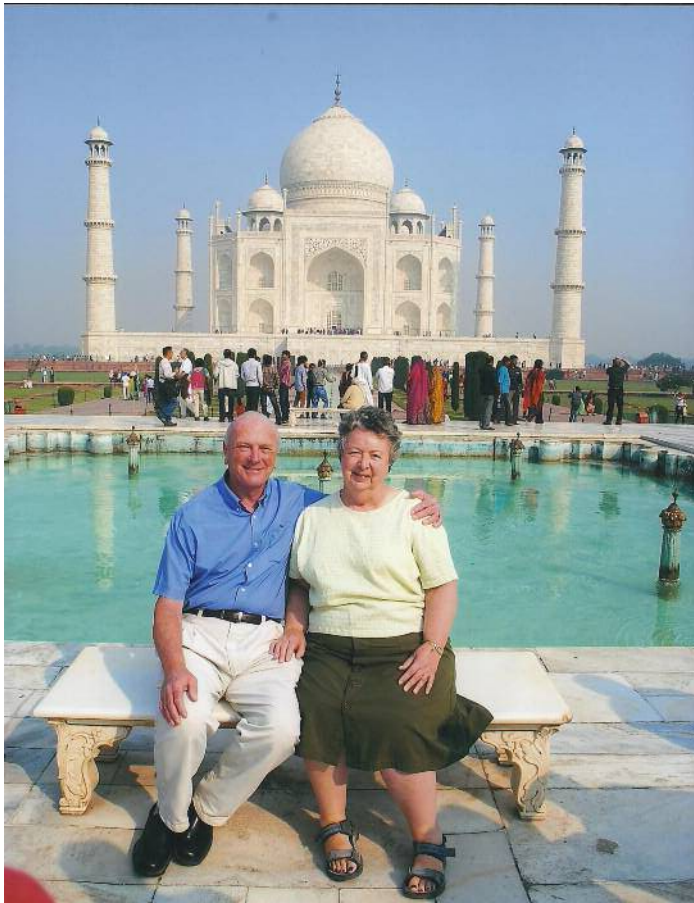
The floor that the public can visit contains a replica of the tomb of the emperor's wife and this is enclosed within an intricately carved marble screen. The tomb lies in a north-south direction with the head of the body turned to the left (west) to face Mecca. The only entrance is from the south so that one approaches the feet as a sign of respect. The actual tomb is one floor below but is no longer open to the public. The Palace was completed in 1655, some years after Muntaj' death and her body was moved here at that time. Some 30 years later when her husband died, he too was entombed in the same area, his tomb to the west of hers so that his heart was closest to her. The circumstances of his death are an interesting story..... But more on that later.



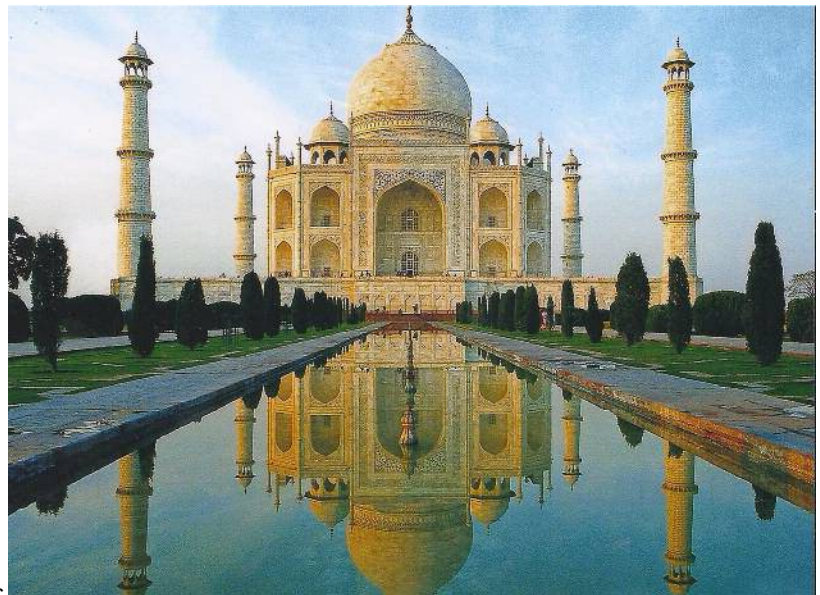


Taj Mahal





The Official Photos of our visit to the Taj Mahal



So we spent about two hours in the Taj Mahal and its gardens and, as have millions of others, marveled at the beauty of its architecture, its perfect white marble and the magnificent artisan work of the inlaid gems. As with so many world class sites, it is extremely difficult to describe and capture the feelings of respect and humbleness that accompanies such a visit. On the one hand it could be argued that to spend so much time and money on a burial place is decadent but it is impossible not to be moved and certainly impressed by the structure as you stand there 350 years later.

As I said, our next stop was at a marble store where we saw a brief demonstration of the art of shaping the tiny pieces of stone for the inlays and, of course, given an opportunity to buy. It was claimed that the workers there are descendants of those who built the Taj and that the materials, tools and techniques remain the same, having been passed down from generation to generation. Presumably these same craftsmen will be called upon as restoration work is required on the Taj Mahal itself.

We returned to the hotel for a quick lunch before we were off again for our afternoon sightseeing. First, we crossed the river to visit what is commonly referred to as the Baby Taj but obviously bears the name of an emperor entombed there. It was completed over fifty years before the Taj Mahal for the grandfather (and later family members) of the empress buried in the Taj Mahal. If one had not seen the Taj, this would be – and is – a very impressive building in its own right. Indeed it is very similar in construction (though about one quarter the size) and is made from the same white marble and contains impressive inlaid gem decoration. It is built on the same symmetrical lines as the Taj and is set in the same design of garden. The major difference is that, while the Taj has its iconic dome, the Baby Taj has a Hindu roof because this was built by the same woman who had been married into the ruling Iranian (Moslem) family to establish a treaty between the two warring faiths.

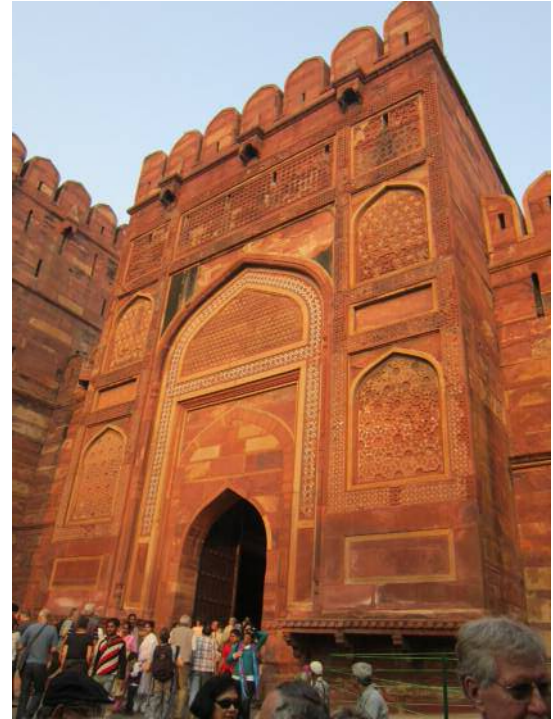


Tomb of I'timād-ud-Daulah is a Mughal mausoleum often described as a jewel box,"sometimes called the Baby Taj," and is often regarded as a draft of the Taj Mahal.

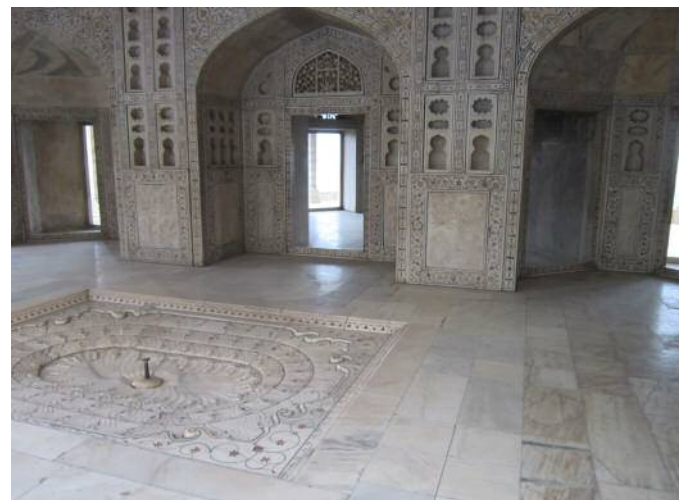
Along with the main building, the structure consists of numerous outbuildings and gardens. The tomb, built between 1622 and 1628 represents a transition between the first phase of monumental Mughal architecture – primarily built from red sandstone with marble decorations, as in Humayun's Tomb in Delhi and Akbar's tomb in Sikandra – to its second phase, based on white marble and pietra dura inlay, most elegantly realized in the Taj Mahal.

The mausoleum was commissioned by Nūr Jahān, the wife of Jahangir, for her father Mirzā Ghiyās Beg, originally a Persian Amir in exile who had been given the title of I'timād-ud-Daulah (pillar of the state). Mirzā Ghiyās Beg was also the grandfather of Mumtāz Mahāl, the wife of the emperor Shāh Jahān, responsible for the construction of the Taj Mahal.

Our final stop was at the huge sandstone Agra Fort. This had been built in the sixteenth century as one of several major fortifications in India. This has walls that are 75 feet high and a perimeter of 1 ½ miles. Under British rule about 2/3 of the complex was taken over as military barracks and is still used by the Indian army.



Agra Fort and Palace



The description of this as a fort is true but incomplete in that it was also the ruler's palace and has several palace buildings and administrative areas where governmental decisions and policy were made. Once again the palaces are very ornate and built mostly of marble. One in particular is of special interest with respect to the Taj Mahal. When Shahjahan's wife died and while the Taj was being built, he, for reasons unknown moved to Delhi. He had several sons but the eldest was supposed to take over once the Shah died. However, the third son was ambitious and smart and a good warrior so he killed off his competitor brothers in battle and then put his own father under house arrest for the final eight years of his life. It was in Fort Agra, just upstream from the Taj Mahal, that he was housed in one of the palaces with a perfect view of the shrine to his ex-wife. On his death, his tomb was placed next to hers.



The Taj Mahal (through the smog) as seen from the Shah's final home

The story of the building of the Taj Mahal is depicted as an act of love and devotion to a wife and the granting of her final wishes in the most impressive manner possible. It is a little difficult to understand, therefore, why the bereaved husband moved several hundred miles away from what would be her final resting place (obviously there were interim places where the tomb was kept during construction of the Taj). Could he not bear to watch the building? Did he just need to get away and start over? Whatever the reason, it is perhaps fitting that he spent the last years of his life with a perfect view of his wife's mausoleum – although he could never visit it. It is equally ironic that this closeness was the result of his third son's ambition; ambition that required him to keep his father in this place "so near and yet so far".

Our evening meal tonight was at a restaurant that served a very good Indian meal and at which we were also treated to a magician's show and some more "local dancers". The magician's main aim was to sell some of his magic (200 Rupees or three for 500) and the dancers were no more talented than those we had seen in Jaipur.

Thursday November 14

We were up at 5:30 today to catch our 8:10 train. The Indian railroad has the second largest amount of track in the world (second to the US) and travel on it is "a must".

Rail transport is a commonly used mode of long-distance transportation in **India**. Almost all rail operations in India are handled by a state-owned organization, Indian Railways,. The rail network traverses the length and breadth of the country, covering a total length of 40,050 miles. It is the 4th largest railway network in the world, transporting 7651 million passengers and over 921 million tonnes of freight annually. Its operations cover twenty eight states and three union territories and also provide limited service to Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Both passenger and freight traffic has seen steady growth, and the Indian Railways carried over 7 billion passengers in 2009.



We were given exact details as to where our seats and carriage were and where and how to board. Apparently it is not unusual – even when one has assigned seats as we did) to be jostled in the line and even to find your seat taken by someone else. Our boarding process seemed to go rather smoothly, however, and we left on time for the 2 ½ hour ride – in relatively comfortable conditions – to Jhansi.

OUR TRAIN DIDN'T LOOK LIKE THIS.....



It looked more like this



But there was a cow on the platform!



At Jhansi we took a bus for a very long ride to our final destination for the day in Khajuraho. We stopped after about an hour for lunch in the town of **Orrcha** which had several temples and a very attractive river which we could see from the restaurant grounds. Unfortunately there was no time to stop and see anything in any more detail. We then had only one restroom break for the rest of the journey.



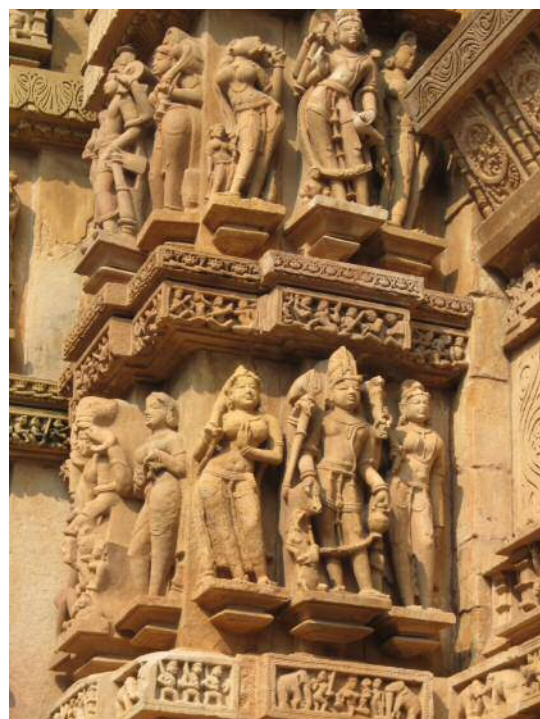
The roads here were in terrible shape with huge potholes and regions where the paved surface seemed to disappear altogether which added to the normal hectic conditions of any drive in India. In addition, the road was just two lanes all the way so progress was slow and scary during the daylight hours but became even more of a challenge for the driver during the final hour when it was dark. In spite of these terrible driving conditions the driver did a fantastic job and, although it seemed we had many near misses, he got us safely to the hotel around 6:30pm. I must say that we haven't witnessed any accidents in the week we have been here, so clearly people adapt to their surroundings very well.

The terrain in this part of Central India is generally more hilly (not mountainous) than that we have seen to date and the usual fruit and vegetable crops are supplemented by sugar cane. The land is still primarily farmland with little industry on the route we took but, as throughout the journey, there seems to be a town, village or some form of settlement every few miles and each is packed with people and animals which encroach on the road.

Tonight we were on our own for dinner in the hotel and we had a fairly luxurious wake-up call scheduled for 7:15 tomorrow on what promises to be another very full day.

Friday November 15

We had breakfast and left the hotel about 9:00 for a short drive to the Temples of Khajuraho. This is a huge complex that once contained 85 temples – one built by each of the Chandela monarchs in the state – and all are built in the Aryan-Hindu style. The period during which they were built was from the 9th to the 11th century which is about two hundred years before the majority of the temples at Angkor Wat (Cambodia) were built. And the similarity in style to Angkor is amazing. The temple itself, pointed like the Himalayas on which the design is based, is covered in intricate carvings depicting scenes from everyday life, the various gods, and – at the first temple we visited – many of the Karma Sutra positions.

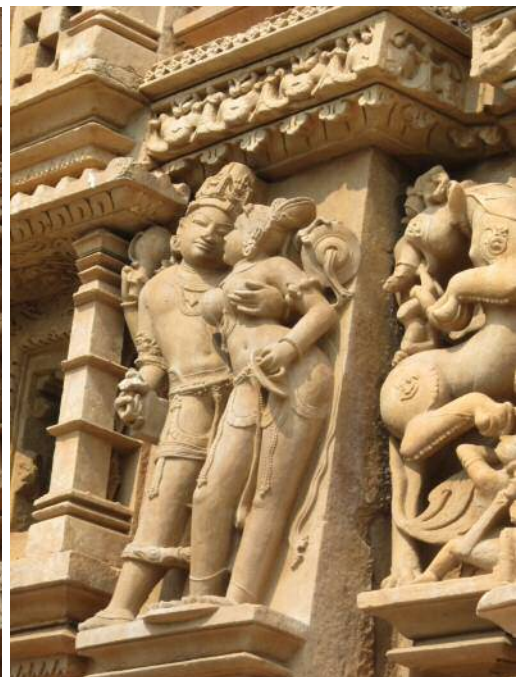




There are currently 25 temples on the site in various states of ruin and renovation and, unlike Angkor, they are all in a beautiful park-like setting. Like Angkor, they were abandoned in the 13th century or so and were taken over by the forest until being re-discovered by a British hunter in the mid-1800s. The envelopment helped preserve many of the buildings but also caused the destruction of others but those that are left are in marvelous condition for the most part and the intricate carvings are essentially like new.



We had a very good local guide who brought the place alive with his knowledge and humor and “translated” the tales of everyday life (around 100AD) that were depicted in the carvings. He went into tremendous detail (most of which we have already forgotten but it was fascinating at the time) except when he came to a Kama Sutra carving for which he said no translation was necessary – and indeed it wasn’t! Inside the temple is relatively plain although there are two recessed portions of the roof ceiling that are intricately carved. There is also a statue of the God Shiva (which has a piece – the hand – missing and therefore the temple cannot be used) on which the rising sun shines each morning.



Difficult to believe that these carvings are over 1000 years old.

We also visited the eastern part of the temple complex (so huge that we went by bus) where there are a number of Jain Temples. Jainism is an offshoot of Hinduism (as is Buddhism) and the Jains are very strict vegetarians; so strict that they will not eat root vegetables as insects might be killed during harvesting.



It is difficult to say whether these or the much more famous temples at Angkor are more interesting. The architecture and carvings are very similar but Angkor is much bigger, Khajuraho is a more pleasant setting and, after recent cleaning, look so much more pleasing than the darkened stone in Cambodia. Both are World Heritage sites and certainly both are worth a visit and are examples of the faith, creativity and building capabilities that have survived for a thousand years.

After lunch at the hotel we were driven to the airport for our flight to Varanasi, our final stop in India on this tour. The check-in process was a little frenetic and the flight was almost an hour late but other than that it was a smooth ride and by 6pm we were settled in our new rooms in Varanasi. Tonight was the official farewell dinner of the Indian portion of the tour, although we have a full day of sightseeing tomorrow.



Saturday November 16

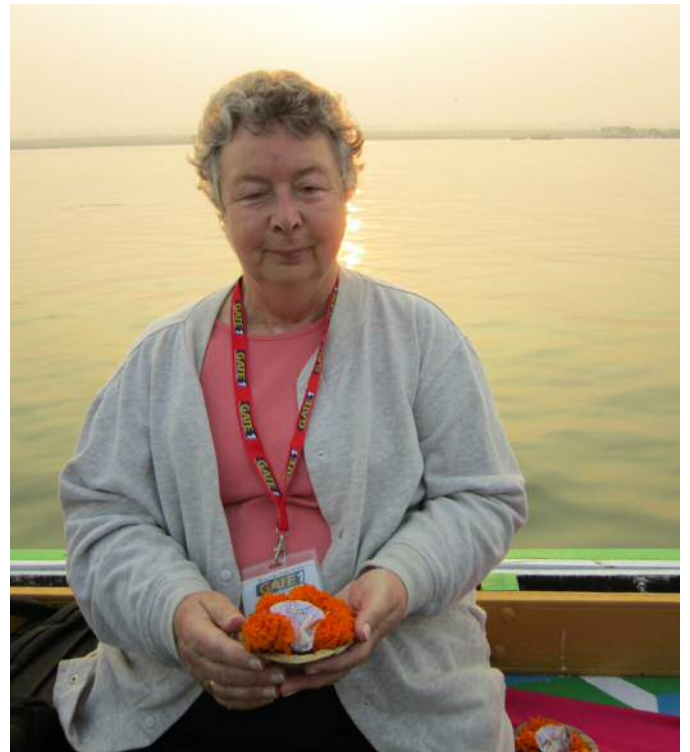
This morning our wake-up call was at 4:45 and we were on the bus (sans breakfast) by 5:30. Within thirty minutes we were within sight of the Ganges and walking towards its western bank. We were not alone!



The early morning is not only a good time to see the sun rise over the river (through a slightly hazy sky in our case) but also the time when Hindus perform their ablutions in the river or offer prayers to the rising sun. We were herded through the crowds to a boat on which we took a 40 minute ride past the many steps (ghats) used by the devotees to enter the water, often fully clothed but in some cases in underwear only. There were dozens (hundreds?) of tourist boats like ours, all with thirty or more passengers snapping pictures of these rituals. I must admit it felt somewhat of an imposition on our part to watch and photograph people as they performed their religious activities but we were assured that it was acceptable.

Varanasi (one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world and the oldest in India) is called the Holy City of India because it is here that pilgrims come to bathe in the Ganges and where many wish their cremated remains to be deposited. All Hindus are cremated as they believe that the five elements of their bodies (earth, water, air, fire and wind [ether]) should be returned to the gods. Cremation takes care of the earth, air, fire and wind and depositing the ashes in a river symbolizes the water, which of course is vaporized during cremation. There were a few cremation pyres burning as we sailed by although we were told we would see much more of that in our evening visit. The cremation pyre is built using 200-300 Kg of wood on which the body is burned and then the remains are pushed into the river.

There are several temples alongside the river and a number of private homes and small hotels, a number of which are very impressive and colorful. On the eastern bank there were no buildings but we could see some fairly large groups that we were told were Buddhists, presumably performing similar rituals of their faith. The whole hour in the area and on the River was an experience that will never be forgotten and was yet another unique aspect of this amazing country.



Dawn on the River Ganges

We returned to the hotel for breakfast and about an hour of relaxation before our afternoon visit to the city of Sarnath which was the site at which Buddha gave his first sermon after finding Enlightenment. There is a huge stupa over the assumed exact spot and there are a number of much smaller stupas built by the newly “converted” Buddhists for their worship and meditation. On the way to this spot we past another stupa where it is said that Buddha met his first five disciples as well as recent 80 feet tall statue of the Standing Buddha, an Indian-Thai collaboration completed in 2011.



Although our guide did an excellent job of explaining how Buddhism originated (as an offshoot of Hinduism) and how the Hindus “adopted” Buddha as one of the ten re-incarnations of Vishnu (one of their three main gods), it is impossible for me to remember much of the detail. However, one of the most striking aspects from any explanation of Hinduism or Buddhism is the similarity in principle to the beliefs in Christianity. As one listens to the story of Buddha’s mother having a dream that an elephant trunk had entered her womb (which she later explained to the priest who predicted great things for her son), how could you not make an immediate comparison with the Virgin birth? And there are so many other similarities between the faiths that, for me at least, the stories must either re-enforce your particular Faith – or, perhaps, make you think that all religions are nothing more than very nice stories told in a number of different “languages” and with slightly different twists. Then, I think, one must ask the question why these “stories” appeared in many different places on earth over a period of many centuries and yet are basically the same. Then you are into the philosophy of religions – which is further than I am capable of thinking. I did, however, find a short description of the relationship between Buddhism and Hinduism on “About.com” and I have included it on the opposite page for additional reading and information.

The Buddha's relation with Hinduism is so close that it's easy to confuse Buddhism with Hinduism. The two religions have close connections, and yet they are distinct. This was because of Buddha's reform movements and his refining of Hindu beliefs. It would not be wrong to state, then, that Buddha founded a noble religion by distilling Hinduism, and offering a commonsense approach to self-betterment to which the people can relate easily.

Swami Kriyananda (J Donald Walters) in his book *The Hindu Way of Awakening*, perspicaciously notes how Westerners confuse between these two closely connected religions, and why people mistakenly consider Buddhism and not Hinduism as the religion of India:

"Hinduism is often omitted from rosters of the world's great religions. Everyone knows, of course, that Hinduism exists. Even so, it is confused in many people's minds with what they think of as Buddhism. For Buddhism fits into their concepts of what a religion ought to be...

"Even if the Westerner holds good intention towards India... he may see Hinduism as containing some of the worst examples of Paganism. Small wonder, then, that many people look upon Buddhism as the noblest representative of India's religion, and turn to it when wanting an Indian religion to place among the great religions of the world.

"While Buddhism is relatively simple, Hinduism is complex...Buddhism seems, to Westerners especially, to offer a benign and palatable form of the Indian religious experience. Most students of religion know that Buddha tried to reform some of the ancient practices; they think of him as having brought order and sophistication to primitive chaos. When they prepare lists of the great world religions they think of themselves as demonstrating respect for the religion of India by calling it Buddhism. Most of them are not conscious of their mistake."

Buddha, as we know, began his meditation as a Hindu. He was awakened with a new enlightenment only to denounce Hinduism and emerge as the founder of a new religion. Therefore, to understand Buddhism fully, one should not separate it from Hinduism; while at the same time view it separately from Hinduism. Buddha's way of life was "the golden mean" and a relief from the pagan stigmas and caste system prevalent in Hinduism.

The Hindu caste system defined a person's position in society as determined by their birth. Buddha condemned the Hindu caste system and said that it is karma or the good and bad actions of a person and not birth that should determine a person's caste. He introduced the idea of placing morality and equality on a higher place than genealogy of a person.

Jesus had the same relationship to Judaism as Buddha to Hinduism. Both Hinduism and Judaism are ethnic and non-missionary traditions, and are characterized by an element of segregation between the castes and races, unlike Buddhism and Christianity.

Swami Kriyananda compares Buddha's position relative to Hinduism with Martin Luther's to the Roman Catholic Church: "Both men were reformers, and the structure reformed by each was not supplanted by his teachings. The Catholic Church survives to this day, and has in many ways been strengthened by Luther's reforms. Hinduism similarly was purified and strengthened by the teachings of Buddha, and was in no way replaced by them. Most Hindus today look upon Buddha as one of their own Avatars or Divine Incarnations."

Hindus believe that the purpose of the avatar of Buddha, like all divine avatars, was to re-establish dharma where "adharma" (irreligiousness) had become prevalent. Buddha is regarded by some sects of Hindus as an incarnation of Vishnu, or even as a Hindu. This is because Buddha's theistic beliefs are not contrary to Hinduism, but only a step ahead. This is also because the nature of Hinduism itself is such that all beliefs are recognized as being facets of the Ultimate Truth. It is interesting to note that the word "Nirvana" — used by Lord Buddha to describe the state of permanent bliss — is indeed a Vedic term.

The great unification of Buddhism and Hinduism is still prevalent in Nepal, the birthplace of Buddha. Ironically, Nepal is the world's only Hindu nation, where people don't consider the two religions distinct from each other..

Associated with this early Buddhist site is a museum in which are housed many artifacts found in the area as well as a section devoted to ancient Hindu sculpture. The centerpiece of the museum is a sandstone sculpture found on this site on the top of a column. It has the principal aspects of Buddha's birth and life and is topped with a four-headed lion, each facing a different part of the compass and passing on the message of Buddha. The sculpture is 2300 years old and it looks brand new. The polished sandstone is very smooth (it looks lacquered!) but has not been renovated in any way after over two millennia. Unfortunately, no photography was allowed inside the museum.

This evening we went once again to the Ganges for the evening prayer service. This time we had to take cars to a parking place about ¼ mile from the river as the streets were too crowded to allow buses. We had been warned that the walk would be a test of our skill and faith in other human beings (particularly those with any form of vehicle) and indeed it was a hair-raising experience. Our guide had said that we hadn't seen crowds in India until we reached Varanasi (which was difficult to believe) but he was in fact absolutely correct. He said that perhaps as many as a million people (maybe up to two million) would be in the area through which we walked and, although I certainly was too busy watching traffic to attempt a count, it would be difficult to question his judgment. It was absolutely wall to wall people, animals and allowed vehicles (mostly motorcycles and bicycles).



The evening prayer service is performed every evening of the year and tonight was said to be a fairly typical crowd with thousands on the river bank and perhaps an equal number in boats like the one we took. The boats tied up together (probably twenty deep) in front of the main stand from which the prayer service was conducted. It started with a sound of the conch horn and then followed an increasingly alarming fire ritual in which a small spire of candles (I presume that's what they were) arranged in a Christmas tree fashion was waved around by seven priests. By means which weren't at all obvious, they flames from these candles increased as the music and dancing became more pronounced until there were seven rather large "bonfires" being waved in the air. This, plus the other colored lights and the incense, as well as the music, made for a very spectacular event that lasted about 40 minutes – but which we Westerners would have difficulty identifying as a worship service.



Candles lined up on the river bank

And our view from the boat.





River Ganges Sacred Evening Prayer

Our candles lighted and set afloat on the river



Our boat then took us downstream to see a place where at least a dozen cremations were taking place simultaneously. The body is brought to this place on a wooden platform carried by the chief mourner (husband or first son) and several other family members. It is wrapped in a white cloth for the procession and the further wrapped in perhaps several layers in multi-colors. These outer layers are removed at the banks of the river and then the body is carried in the white shroud to the funeral pyre where it is cremated in the middle of a large bonfire. The cooled ashes are then thrown into the Ganges after about two days. The faith allows a thirteen day period between cremation (the day after death) and the washing in the Ganges so clearly it is impossible for many poor in India to receive the ultimate final treatment, that of being washed of all sin in the Holy River Ganges. However, so many faithful do in fact make this final journey that Varanasi performs cremations twenty four hours every day of the year whereas the norm throughout India is that cremations are only a dawn to dusk event. And, as we saw, there are many cremations taking place simultaneously (even in this relatively confined area) that there must be thousands every year in this city.



Funeral Pyres along the river bank

Religions such as Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism and Buddhism, mandate cremation. In these religions, the body is seen as an instrument to carry the soul. According to Hindu traditions, the reasons for preferring to destroy the corpse by fire, over burying it into ground, is to induce a feeling of detachment into the freshly disembodied spirit, which will be helpful to encourage it into passing to its next destination, lest it remain near its former body. Hindus have 16 rites of passage (Samskāra, the last being cremation. Cremation is referred to as antīm-sanskāra and it is believed that Lord Agni (God of Fire) will purify the dead body.

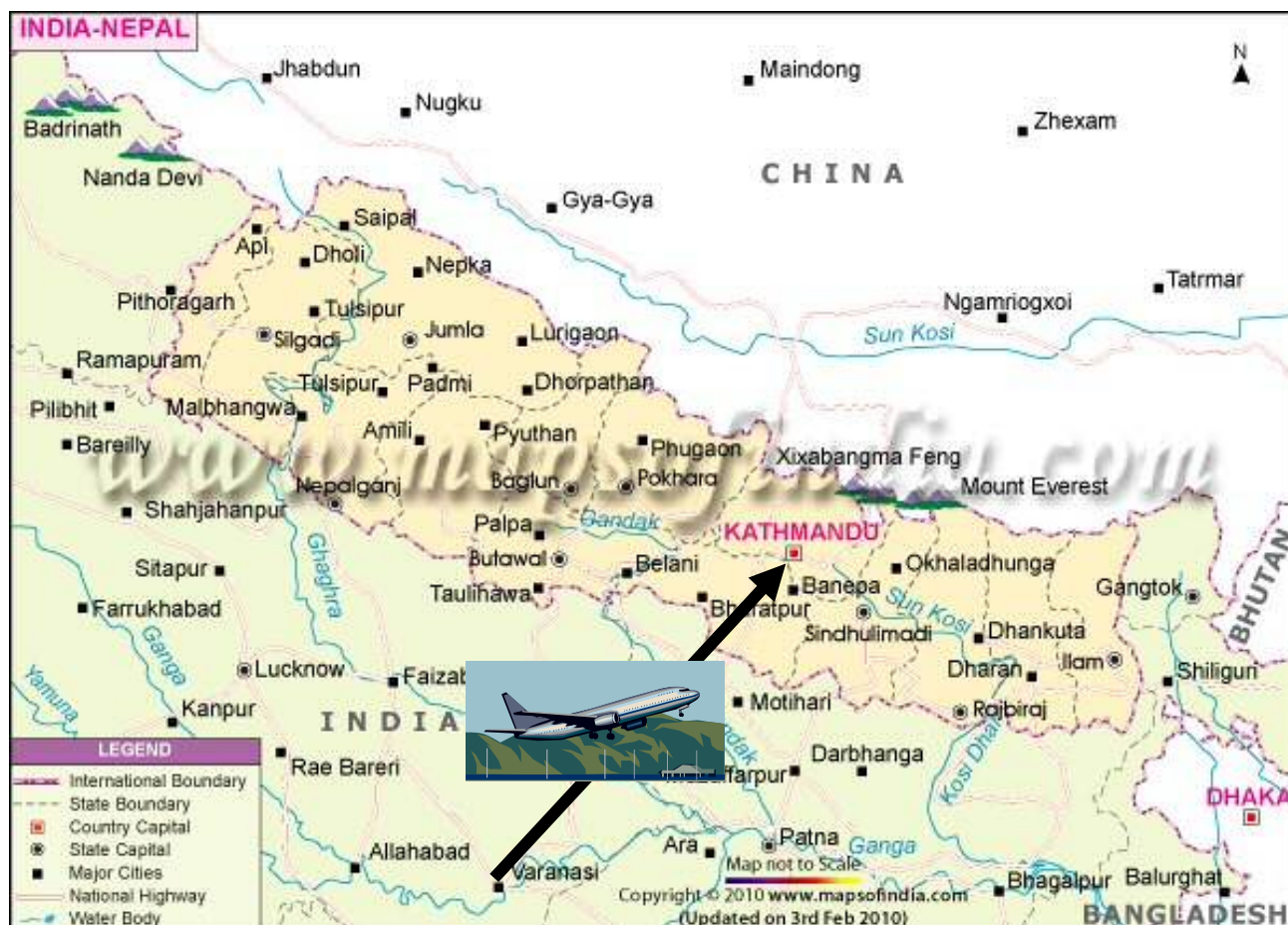
In Hinduism, during cremation the eldest son, the adopted son, or the younger brother put first fire on the dead person's body. This ritual is considered mandatory.

Bodies of holy men are however sometimes buried or sunk in rivers and children are buried not cremated. Certain castes and tribes who get classified as Hindus also perform burials, not cremations.

Varanasi is a city with a population of about two million (depending on how you count and your source) but it is said that there is an equal number of tourists, pilgrims and bereaved here at any time. No wonder the streets are so crowded!

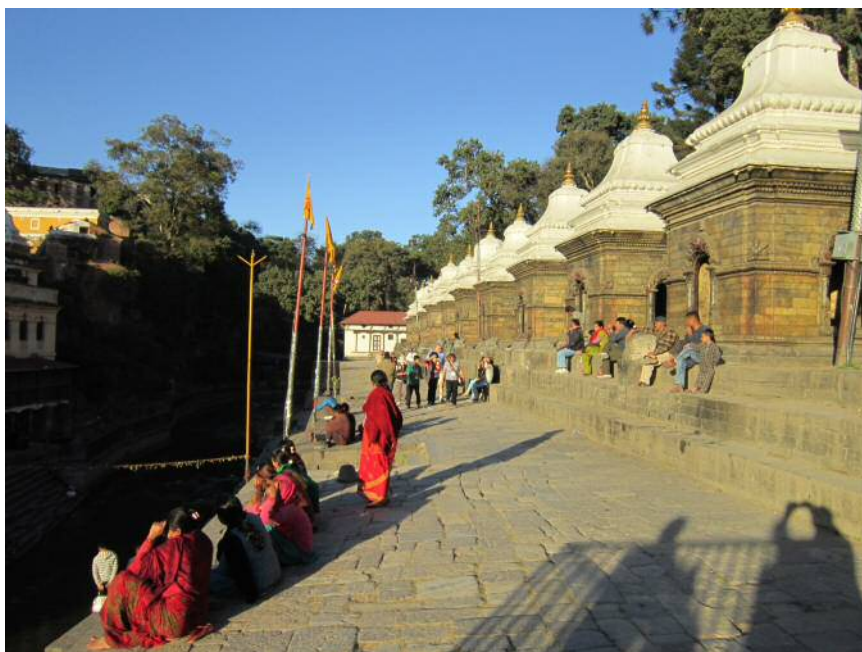
After getting off our boat we made our way back to the parked cars, dodging traffic, other pedestrians and animals and the very persistent hawkers and beggars. Varanasi has a very large percentage of beggars, many of whom we were told are old and come to the city to die so that their sins can be finally purged with a cremation on the banks of the River Ganges.

Thus ended our tour of India and we returned to the hotel for a final dinner with some of our new-found friends and prepared for tomorrow's trip to Nepal.



Sunday November 17

Today we got another late wake-up call (7:30) and left the hotel to drive to the airport for our 1pm flight to Kathmandu, Nepal. The check-in and security process were slow but the flight was smooth and short (less than an hour, with a very light lunch) and we had some good views of the snow covered Himalayas as we approached our destination.



In Kathmandu we picked up another tour guide (Archara) and left immediately for a 5th century Hindu Temple which is the equivalent of Varanasi in that it sits on the Bagmati River which flows into the Ganges and where cremations are ongoing twenty four hours a day. We actually witnessed one pyre in flames and saw another shrouded body being carried into the area for subsequent crema-



tion, which must take place within 24 hours of death. There were a number of platforms above the water where the cremations take place and one had been reserved for the king until recently, presumably when Nepal got rid of the monarchy.



The temple is built in a pagoda style but only Hindus are allowed in so we could simply admire its beauty from the outside as well as taking a walk to see several smaller temples, on many of which

were sitting the priests – charging for photographs! (I cheated on the one I took—above)



We then went to the Buddha Stupa, which was also built in the fifth century and is enormous. It is made of white limestone with orange texturing and must be close to a hundred feet high. It is said to be the holiest place for Buddhists in Nepal, which is the birth country of Buddha.





The stupa is set in the middle of a large circular plaza which is surrounded by three or four storey buildings which are basically shop houses, with living quarters above the ground floor shops. We were told that the buildings – which are very European in style – are owned by Nepalese but the shops are rented primarily to Tibetan refugees who sell their local work but actually live elsewhere in the city. Apparently there is a large and growing Tibetan population in Nepal, although most are illegal immigrants and so the exact number is difficult to calculate. The government turns a blind eye to them most of the time except when China “complains”, at which time some number will be forced to leave.



The area around the Stupa was very attractive and clean and, so far, Kathmandu appears to have cleaner streets and fewer cows (we saw only one today) than anywhere we have been in India. The population of the country is about 30 million, of which about 4 million live in the Khatmandu valley which houses three cities, all of which we are to visit in our full day of sightseeing tomorrow.

We finished the day at a local restaurant where we were served a very good meal and watched a small Nawar dance troupe. As with the previous two, the performances were quite amateurish but they did add a little local color to the event. The Namari are local to this area and if I understood our guide correctly were a ruling class for several centuries, perhaps even one of those that survived

until 1768 when all the Nepal kingdoms were unified under one ruler. This constitutional monarchy continued in various forms until 2008 when the monarchy was abolished in favor of a democratic republic.

Monday November 18

Kathmandu is the capital and largest urban agglomerate of Nepal. The agglomerate consists of Kathmandu Metropolitan City at its core, and its sister cities Patan, Kirtipur, Thimi, and Bhaktapur. According to a census conducted in 2011, Kathmandu metropolis alone has 975,453 inhabitants; and the agglomerate has a population of more than 2.5 million inhabitants. The metropolitan city area is 19.56 square miles.

The city stands at an elevation of approximately 1,400 metres (4,600 ft) in the bowl-shaped Kathmandu Valley of central Nepal. It is surrounded by four major mountains: Shivapuri, Phulchoki, Nagarjun, and Chandragiri. The Kathmandu Valley is part of three districts (Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Bhaktapur), has the highest population density in the country, and is home to about a twelfth of Nepal's population.

Until the 15th century, Bhaktapur was its capital when two other capitals, Kathmandu and Lalitpur, were established. Today, Kathmandu is not only the capital of the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal, but also the headquarters of the Central Development Region of Nepal. Interestingly, Nepal is 10 3/4 hours (yes 3/4) ahead of Eastern US Time. Kathmandu is the gateway to tourism in Nepal. It is also the nerve center of the country's economy. It has the most advanced infrastructure of any urban area in Nepal, and its economy is focused on tourism, which accounted for 3.8% of Nepal's GDP in 1995–96. Tourism in Kathmandu declined thereafter during a period of political unrest, but since then has improved. In 2013, Kathmandu was ranked third among the top 10 travel destinations on the rise in the world and ranked first in Asia.

The city has a rich history, spanning nearly 2000 years, as inferred from inscriptions found in the valley. Religious and cultural festivities form a major part of the lives of people residing in Kathmandu. Most of Kathmandu's people follow Hinduism and many others follow Buddhism. There are people of other religious beliefs as well, giving Kathmandu a cosmopolitan culture. Nepali is the most commonly spoken language in the city. English is understood by Kathmandu's educated residents.

Kathmandu's sister cities (Lalitpur Patan and Bhaktapur) are integral to Kathmandu's cultural heritage, tourism industry, and economy; therefore UNESCO's World Heritage Site lists all three cities' monuments and attractions together under one heading, "Kathmandu Valley-UNESCO World Heritage Site".

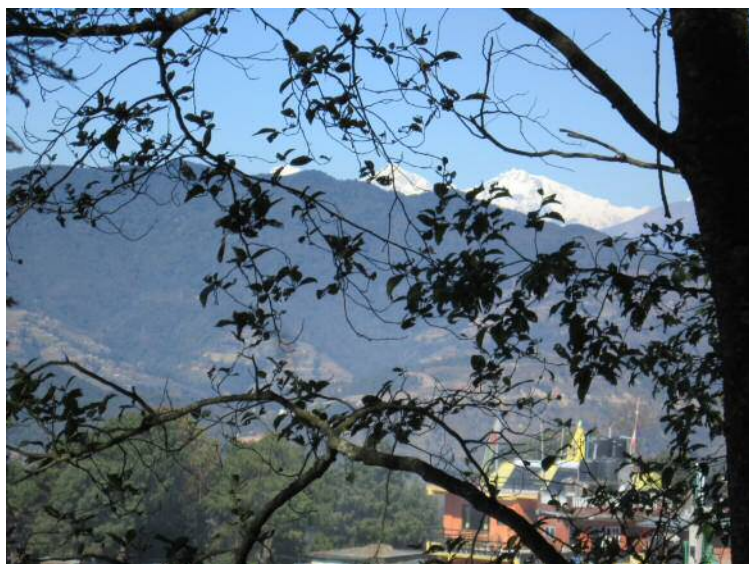


Today was a very full day of sightseeing in the three cities of the Kathmandu Valley. We started by driving perhaps 25 miles, the last ten of which were on a very steep, twisty road that was barely wide enough for the bus in most places. The paved portion was about a bus width so any passing (up or down) required one or both vehicles to get onto the dusty or grassy unpaved edge – and come precariously close to the almost vertical drops into the valley.

As we climbed we saw many rice paddies which were laid out on terraces which it was claimed were natural and not man-made. The rice crop had just been harvested and plantings of wheat or vegetables were just in the initial stages. Apparently the climate here allows for at least two, often three crops per year. We kept getting glimpses of the snow covered Himalayas but when we reached our destination of



the Ngarkot Resort, at an elevation of 7200 feet, we had some absolutely magnificent views of many peaks. The weather was very clear but we were told that one had to be at this spot very early on a very clear morning – and be a little lucky – to actually see Mt Everest.



Our first panoramic views of the Himalayas

The Himalayas are a very young range and have much more jagged peaks than the majority of the Rockies and appeared to us to be similar in topography to the Alps, but obviously a lot higher as there are dozens of peaks here that are over 20,000 feet. The road we had traveled to get here leads to Tibet which is only 120Km away but we were told that the drive would take a minimum of five hours due to road conditions and the hairpin nature of the route.

From this magnificent viewpoint we re-traced our steps down the winding road to visit Durbar Square, which has some of the finest architecture in Central Asia with more than fifty palaces, pagodas and temples. This has been in existence for many centuries and is now another UNESCO World Heritage Site. There are a number of beautiful temples set in two major squares which are joined by narrow streets filled with shops and street vendors. If we thought it was difficult to remember the hierarchy of the Hindu gods in India, in Nepal it is impossible. Nepal is 80% Hindu and so shares a lot of commonality with India in that respect but the Nepalese have put their own twist on the subject. For example they have vegetarian gods (only two arms) and non-vegetarian (multiple arms). Apparently about 80% of the Indian and Nepalese versions are similar but there are differences that make up the rest. Again, although the guides were very good and I felt that I could understand the nuances as they spoke, there was just too much information, most of which had a half-life of about five minutes.



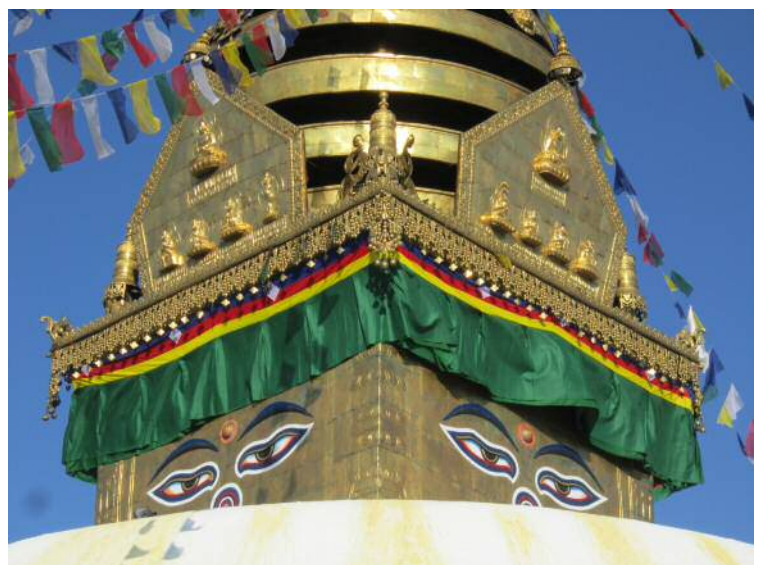
Durbar Square



One major difference here in Nepal is the practice of making animal sacrifices to the gods. We certainly didn't hear that much about it in India (although there may be areas where the practices continue) but in Nepal it seems to be a frequent occurrence. In fact we witnessed from a distance the sacrifice of a small water buffalo outside one of the temples, as we were having lunch! A small crowd gathered near the temple entrance and music played for several minutes during which the buffalo (which we had seen tethered nearby as we walked the square) had its head cut off and taken into the temple. The rest of the carcass was left on a mat outside the door in a pool of blood and the crowd dispersed. How long the carcass stays there we don't know but it was still there perhaps half an hour later as we left the square. Two women brought baskets filled with colorful items which it seems were part of the ritual and perhaps ended up in the temple as further tributes to the god. The whole thing seemed very odd and "out-of-this-world" to us but was apparently accepted as perfectly normal (necessary, in fact) to the locals. I had no idea that such sacrifices were still ongoing in any part of the world.

The sacrificial beast can just be seen in the bottom right photograph on the opposite page.

After lunch we drove to the so-called Monkey Temple. It is actually the oldest Buddhist temple in Nepal dating from the first century and is reached by climbing 130 steps. Lots of monkeys live around the temple, hence its nick-name. It is also set in a round plaza which has great views of the city and, as with all Buddhist temples, one must always walk around in a clockwise direction. This too is a UNESCO World Heritage site (it is claimed that Nepal has more than any other country) and has undergone some recent renovations, including the addition of about 200 pounds of gold to the upper portion.



*The Monkey Temple and
a view of the City*



Our final stop was in the Old City of Kathmadu (Bhagdgaoon) which was similar to the Durbar Square area but much bigger. I have no idea how many temples and other structures are in this complex founded in the ninth century. It is certainly not the oldest area we have seen but it houses the residences of the former royalty as well as two huge temples, one of which is devoted to the god Shiva and was the one where the Hippies of the sixties came to smoke marijuana. Apparently there is still one day of the year when this still happens despite the fact that marijuana is illegal in Nepal today.



“Hippie” Temple



Royal Palace—rebuilt by the British!



Amazing wood carving



This old town area contains hundreds of buildings of note as it was the home of the ruling Newars for many centuries. Unfortunately time was getting on (and the group a little weary after eight hours on the go) so we didn't see as much as we might have liked but we did get yet another taste of the culture and architecture of this part of the world.



Ancient and Modern “Gods”!

The Living Goddess appeared for about 30 seconds at the middle window upstairs. You may just be able to see one of her “minders” at the left hand window.

We also got further indoctrination on the Hindu way of life and worshipping practices and saw (very briefly) the “Living Goddess”. She is actually a girl selected for various intellectual and physical attributes at the age of three and remains as the goddess until puberty, after which another, suitably trained, goddess replaces her. She appears at a window in a courtyard of the palace for about a minute to be seen by tourist groups (and presumably locals also, but there was little evidence of these when we were there). No photographs are allowed and the whole thing is orchestrated and it makes you wonder just how it fits into the Faith. Since she returns to a normal life after her approximately 8-10 years of service and has no special privileges after her “reign” (she does get a stipend) it all seems a little staged. But, since everyone is expected to make a donation, it does help the local economy!



Tonight we had dinner at the restaurant (Italian!) in the hotel.

Tuesday November 19

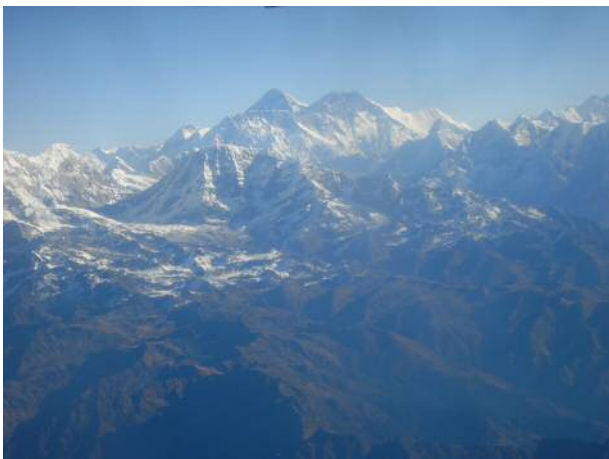
Today is Election Day in Nepal when just about everything shuts down so we had no daytime itinerary. I think for most it came as a nice break but we were confined to the hotel and the very short street of shops leading to it. This was mainly because there was no transportation available and presumably all the sites were closed, but there was also a real concern about potential violence. There was a strong military presence everywhere we went yesterday and there are armed personnel on the rooftops around this hotel – but that might be due to the fact that President Jimmy Carter is staying here as he is one of the contingent of foreign observers of the election. We did venture out to do a little last minute shopping in the afternoon but spent the rest of the day relaxing. We had our final meal with the group at a Tibetan restaurant in the hotel next to ours and had a very enjoyable meal.

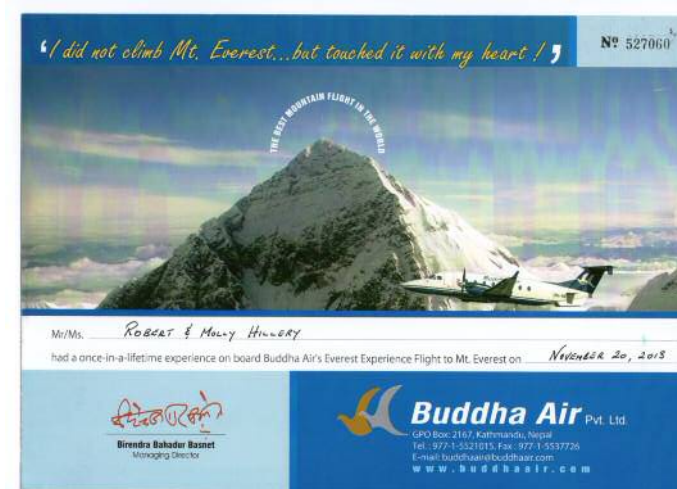
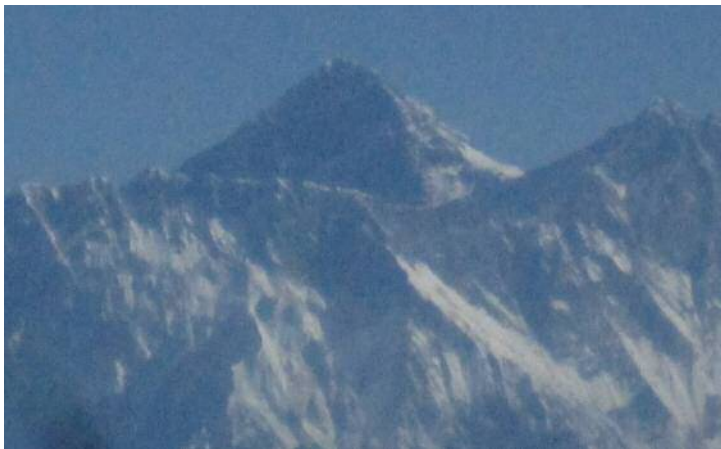
Wednesday November 20

We had a wake-up call at 5:15 and were on a bus to the airport by six for a scheduled 6:30 flight to view the Himalayan Range, and specifically Mt Everest. The flight was almost 1 ½ hours late but it was well worth the wait. The flight took us along the southern edge of the range, seeing several peaks over 20,000 feet high, until we were directly facing Mt Everest. Everyone was given a short visit to the cockpit to take a picture as we flew towards this very distinctive peak but as everyone had a window seat there were many opportunities for some magnificent shots. The weather was perfect (clear blue skies) and the flight was amazingly smooth so there were no complaints about the \$200 price tag! One peak is called the Holy Mountain and no-one is allowed to climb it – unlike Everest which apparently is always busy with those attempting to scale it.

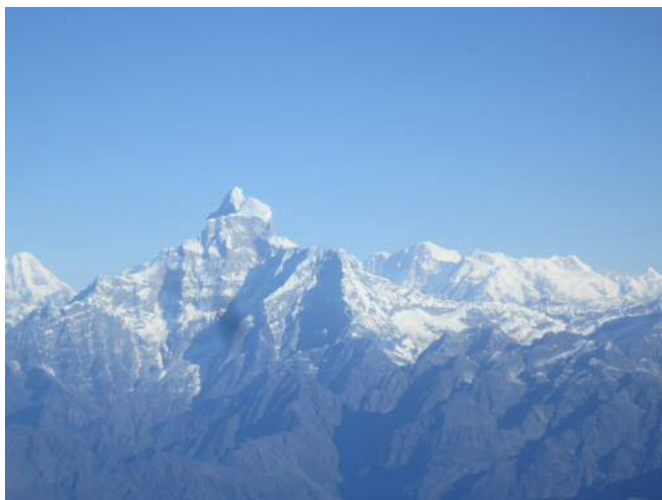
Our airline to Everest.....

Buddha Air!





Mt Everest



*An Amazing
Flight*

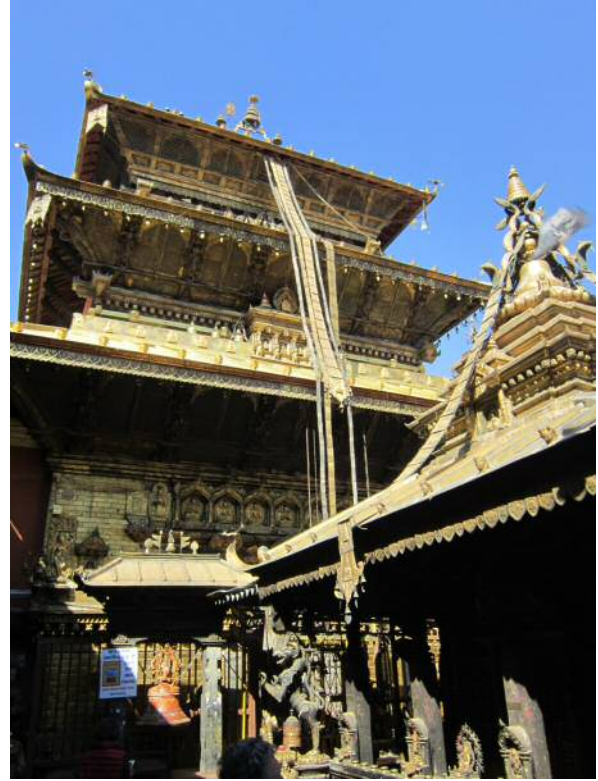
On returning to the hotel we had time for a quick breakfast before our 10am departure for the town of Patan. This town (right next to the city of Kathmandu) dates from the fifth century and boasts dozens of Hindu and Buddhist temples. The town is populated about equally between the two faiths.

There are simply too many temples, shrines and palaces to describe in this old part of Nepal but suffice it to say that they all are magnificent structures with very intricate wooden carvings, gold leaf finished walls and roofs, and almost every other form of beautiful decoration and symbols of the faith that you could imagine. Patan is famous for its metal working also, although we didn't see much of this in evidence as we quickly walked through the historic area. We did, however, enjoy a cup of coffee sitting in the shade (it was now about 80F and sunny) in a courtyard of one of the palace buildings.



Patan is one of the major cities of Nepal located in the south-central part of Kathmandu Valley. Patan is best known for its rich cultural heritage, particularly its tradition of arts and crafts.





After two hours in Patan it was time for us to drive to the airport and say farewell to Kathmandu and Nepal. In the three days that we were there we got a glimpse of the natural beauty of the country (with the Himalayas as a permanent backdrop, how could it not be?), the culture and the religions. In many respects it is similar in “development” to India but while it is still a much smaller and poorer country, Nepal does appear a little cleaner and perhaps even a little less hectic than the part of India that we saw. The elections that took place during our visit (with a 70% turnout despite some violence and accusations of “irregularities”) are hopefully going to result in a coalition that will write a new constitution for the relatively new democracy, but hopes for that were not very high based on our guide’s interpretation.

The flight was a little late leaving so we arrived in Delhi at the height of the evening rush hour. It took about an hour to get to the Doubletree Hotel where we were given rooms for a shower and change before being taken back to the airport for our flights home.

Thursday November 21

We had about an hour in the lounge in Delhi airport before our 1:45am flight departure for Paris. We chose to forego the meals and get some sleep on this leg, which both of us accomplished to a fair degree. We arrived in Paris to light snow and a temperature just above freezing but fortunately all we had to do was transfer inside using the train shuttle between gates. We had an almost five hour layover here but passed the time in the Air France lounge with a light breakfast, some computer and reading time – and a nap!

We left Paris on time and had a quicker than expected trip across the Atlantic, arriving in Cincinnati shortly before 2pm. We picked up our luggage and the car and arrived home to a chilly 45F around 3pm after an amazing trip to two amazing countries.

As we have said throughout this journal, both India and Nepal are countries that are totally different from those we have visited in the past and there were so many things that were new to us.

We have tried to identify the things that we saw and heard and specifically we have quoted our excellent guide on a number of occasions . He really did explain things very well and, at the time, we thought we were understanding every word! However, that and retention—and an ability to explain to a third party—are not the same and we probably have not done justice to the huge diversity of experiences to which we were exposed.

There were so many areas that fascinated us as visitors but two in particular caused Bob to do a little post-trip research in an attempt to capture the essence of what we had heard during our journey.

The appendices are the result of that effort.

Appendices:

The Caste System in India

*The Hierarchy of Hindu
Gods*

The Caste System in India

The caste system in India is very complex and easily misunderstood by visitors and I will be the first to admit ignorance in this area. Our guide helped us with his interpretation and I have done some additional reading since returning from India. I don't claim to have a complete picture but here is what I believe I have heard and read so far.

Caste is a term, which is used to specify a group of people having a specific social rank and dates back to at least 1200 BC. The Indian term for caste is jati, and generally designates a group that can vary in size from a handful to many thousands, each with its own rules and customs. The various jatis are traditionally arranged in hierarchical order and fit into one of the four basic varnas the (Sanskrit word for "colors").

- The Brahmins, commonly identified with priests and the learned class
- The Kshatriyas, associated with rulers and warriors including property owners.
- The Vaishyas, associated with commercial livelihoods (i.e. traders)
- The Shudras, the servile laborers

The Untouchables occupy a place that is not clearly defined by boundaries and is outside the varna scheme. Their jobs (generally of the lowest level and most menial) cause them to be considered impure and thus "untouchable." Historically the untouchables were not allowed in temples and many other public places but 1950 legislation prevents any form of discrimination. Although this has affected the status of the people, they are still very much a visible part of Indian society. In fact, we were told that it is only Untouchables who prepare the funeral pyres and that job is essential to all Hindus and one that has been passed down through generations.

Although it would appear that the caste system has been a part of Indian society for centuries, many have argued that it was underscored (some say initiated) during British rule. Certainly the system was formalized during this period and indeed many laws required Indians to declare their caste in official documents to be granted lease or license.

Although now outlawed as discriminatory, the caste system is maintained in more subtle forms, particularly when it comes to marriage, and our guide shared with us a number of "Bride and Groom Want Ads" from the Delhi Sunday newspaper in which it was clear that social standing was a very important consideration. This immediately invokes a feeling of discrimination or a throwback to a now illegal system – but it was argued that in a society where the newlyweds often live with parents (of one or the other), to ignore the background (caste) of either might set up a very difficult situation for the groom or, more likely, the bride. In effect, many societies (including our own) probably perform a de facto "screening" similar to this – and perhaps it's not entirely a bad thing.

It certainly provides food for thought..... and that is precisely why we find it so interesting to travel and get a taste of the diverse cultures that the world still offers.

The Hierarchy of Hindu Gods

If the Indian Caste System is difficult to explain and understand, to an outsider the Hindu Faith and its hierarchy of gods is an impossibility. I admit to having little knowledge of Hinduism before visiting India (80% Hindu) but the first effort at an explanation of it by our guide (who was excellent in all respects) did nothing to help. "Hinduism is not a religion" he said, "but is a way of life". He then went on to say that there are thousands; many say hundreds of thousands, of gods available to the Hindus – which didn't seem to clarify the situation!

I then read that in Hinduism, the concept of God varies from one sect to another and from one book to another with a diverse system of thought and beliefs covering a wide variety of forms of faith. From this

I deduced that one could make of it what one wants - and I think that is true to some extent, and certainly not all bad. But there is a degree of formality to it that I shall try to convey here (admittedly relying heavily on Wikipedia and the like!)

In Hinduism, **Brahman** is the one supreme, universal Spirit that is the origin and support of the phenomenal universe. Brahman is sometimes referred to as the Absolute or Godhead which is the Divine Ground of all matter, energy, time, space, being, and everything in and beyond this universe. Brahman is conceived as personal ("with qualities"), impersonal ("without qualities") and/or supreme, depending on the philosophical school.

It is taught that Brahman is the ultimate essence of material phenomena (including the original identity of the human self) that cannot be seen or heard but whose nature can be known through the development of self-knowledge. A liberated human being has realized Brahman as his or her own true self.

Those concepts seem to support a belief in a supreme power but one that is *within* us, rather than *over* us and, as such, has similarities with many Western faiths. And then we read that there are *three* main gods. Brahma (not to be confused with the Brahman state described above that we all can achieve) is the Creator; Vishnu is the Preserver; and Shiva, the Destroyer or Transformer. Our guide drew an obvious similarity here to Father, Son and Holy Spirit and even suggested that the Creator (Generator), the Preserver (Operator) and the Destroyer could be synonymous with a Three-in-One (Trinity), GOD. Incidentally, Vishnu is believed by many to have descended from heaven to earth in several incarnations! So, if we stop there, perhaps Western and Eastern religions look a lot alike.

But while Hinduism accepts one Supreme Being – in the form of three gods of equal standing – it also prescribes that there is no limit on the number that we can revere. Some have suggested that the numbers have grown as a result of the growth of Hinduism in many different languages and cultures. That might suggest, however, a true hierarchy and differences in capability between “your god” and “mine”. But Hindus were never polytheistic, in the sense that there are many equal Gods. Henotheism (“One God”) better defines the Hindu view. It means the worship of one God without denying the existence of other gods. (This, in turn, explains why Hindus are very tolerant of all other faiths).

Perhaps the easiest explanation to grasp is that Hindus believe in many Gods who perform various functions, like executives in a large corporation. These should not be confused with the Supreme God. These Divinities are highly advanced beings that have specific duties and powers—not unlike the heavenly spirits, overlords or archangels revered in other faiths. Each denomination worships the Supreme God and its own pantheon of divine beings. What is sometimes confusing to non-Hindus is that Hindus of various sects may call the one God by many different names, according to their denomination or regional tradition. Truth for the Hindu has many names, but that does not make for many truths. Hinduism gives the freedom to approach God in one’s own way, encouraging a multiplicity of paths, not asking for conformity to just one. Perhaps there is a similarity between an acceptance of many gods and the Christian view of saints; Saints who may have been martyred and worshipped or simply those who have passed before us and who are remembered in many worship services.

As a result there are many gods (and goddesses) and it’s your choice as to which you want to call your own. Our guide stopped in front of every shrine devoted to his own choice but simply accepted the fact that there were many others (some say millions – which would be close to one for each believer) and was quite happy to refer to all as Hindus.

Since Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhs and other faiths are offshoots of Hinduism – each perhaps with its own subtleties and “gods” – the possibilities seem endless. This, I submit, is a basic ingredient in all religions. And, as with the attempt to understand the Caste System, this on the Hindu gods was prompted only as a result of being lucky enough to visit Incredible India.