

# India trip

*September – October 2014*



## **Introduction**

I had been to India many years ago back in 2005 on a business trip when I was working at Oracle. I had been part of an “exchange program” involving engineers from our team at HQ and our team in Bangalore. I got selected to go on one of the trips, and looking back, I realized it was a cultural experience of a lifetime, connecting two very different cultures that worked together every day.

My wife Nisha and I had gotten married in February 2013, and we knew we both wanted to see each other’s hometowns where we grew up. Both of us were taking time off of work to travel and see each other’s roots. Back in June, we got to take a trip for nearly a month to the east coast, visiting MIT where we both went to college, Rockport, MA where Nisha lived during 4th grade, then Southport, ME where Nisha lived during 5th and 6th grade. Then we visited S. Burlington, VT where Nisha lived for about 10 years. We then stayed with my family in PA for two nights and visited Geoff and Lana and the kids in VA. We also got to visit several other old friends and family along our way. We connected through St. Louis on our flight back to CA, and we took the chance to visit two more of my cousins there.

Having most of a year off was wonderful in that it gave us both the chance to travel and see our roots. Deuteronomy 24:5 reads, “When a man is newly married, he shall not go out with the army or be liable for any other public duty. He shall be free at home one year to be happy with his wife whom he has taken” (ESV). Nisha and I had joked together when we first read this passage after getting married, that maybe we should take a year off. I wasn’t sure if and when I would ever make it back to India in my lifetime, (and she wasn’t sure if and when

she was going to return either), but the opportunity arose in October where we decided it would be now or never. I knew once I was working again, taking a month off would be nearly impossible!

This trip to India and our trip to Bryce / Zion a year ago would make the bookends for my year off. I was eager to start working again. I was thrilled to have gotten a job offer before leaving for India, and with the fact they were able to delay my starting date until I returned. It had a great response when I was meeting all the in-laws - I would be able to say to her family that I was taking time off to travel, but that I was going to be starting again as soon as I got back (in case her parents were asked why their son-in-law wasn't making money!) I knew I would be super jet-lagged when I returned, and in fact I would have just 3 days before my starting date (which would be packed with last-minute appointments to get wrapped up before I dedicated my full attention to ramping up at work).

The trip to India would be two-fold for me - I would be staying with Nisha's family for two weeks, and taking an additional week to visit northern India. Nisha would skip the northern part and just stay with her parents in Ernakulum for that week. It would give her more time to catch up with her family (this is the first time we would be seeing her dad since our wedding), and it would allow me the opportunity to see some of the architectural wonders of the world in Delhi, Jaipur and Agra. I felt Nisha affirmed my decision to visit the north as well - several months ago when I was away on a backpacking trip, she spent several hours looking at tours I could sign up for, and she came across Intrepid Tours, an Australian based company with a good reputation. The tour appeared to be fabulous, and it would make a meaningful complement to the visit to Kerala.

### **Leaving for India**

We arrived at the SFO airport for our midnight flight around the world. We had a flight with Singapore airlines, connecting through Hong Kong and Singapore, before reaching Kochi. Nisha's friend Kuldeep owns his own travel agency - it was a fitting gesture to get to use his services, and in return he was able to hook us up with a bit of a discount on our flights. I felt our flight was one of the few coming through Singapore - almost all of the flights were connecting through somewhere in the Middle East - Doha, Dubai or Abu Dhabi. A lot of Middle Eastern oil money was coming into Kochi.

Singapore is one of the best airlines for food - I got my preview of Indian food on the flight - curry chicken. I could have also gotten a Chinese dish (we were connecting through Hong Kong), or a pasta dish ("ordinary" food for those who weren't into the "exotic" dishes). Singapore was good at accommodating vegetarians - Nisha really liked her spicy vegetables.

We cruised over the vast ice-fields by Alaska as our great-circle route took us far

north. A few hours later, we made a big swing through Japan (even crossing right over Kochi, Japan) - it would be many hours before we got to Kochi, India. I imagined how astronauts in the space station circle the earth every 90 minutes, witnessing 45 minutes of daylight, 45 of night, sweeping auroras over the poles, flashing thunderstorms over the tropics and vast blue oceans. After many months of world traveling, we were getting used to it.

I had a prescription of malarone that was supposed to last 4 weeks in India. The CDC recommended malarone for malaria (I was glad to be off the hook for Lariam since that's the one that gave me weird dreams on a missions trip many years ago). Nisha opted out all together of shots for India. I was glad all my other shots I had gotten for Africa were still good from 2010 for my trip to Tanzania. Most of them were good for at least 5 years. I decided to start with my first malaria pill on the flight to India, so it would have enough time to start activation. A few hours later on the flight, I started getting a bit nauseous. I expected to get sick at least once during my trip - there would surely be some kind of food that wouldn't agree with my stomach, but I wondered if I had gotten some tainted food on the flight. When I learned later that nausea was a typical side-effect of malarone, I figured dealing with actual malaria in the very slight chance I would contract it was better than the side-effects of the medication. Plus I could start the medication if I actually got malaria. I didn't take any more pills the duration of the trip.



*Panoramic view in Singapore*

We had about an 8-hour layover in Singapore - typical for these westward flights to India. I was already dog-tired of the travel after at least 16 hours in the plane, but getting out and seeing some of the sights gave me a second wind of energy. The familiar butterfly gardens, koi ponds, cactus gardens and orchid gardens gave the airport some character, and the Hainanese chicken and rice was a savory treat. We had time to take one of the free bus tours of Singapore as well - we got a quick "day visa" at the counter letting us out for a few hours. The 2-hour tour took us through the signature sights of the bustling metropolitan city - the financial district, Chinatown, the nearby Hindu temple, a mosque and church, showing the diversity of the ethnicity and religion of the people, and along part of the route of the F-1 race that was just completed a couple days prior to our arrival (the tour had to be re-routed for a week or so since the race went right through

the main part of downtown - I couldn't imagine a similar race through Manhattan!) Finally the signature stop was at the Merlion - the lion-fish sculpture spouting water, overlooking the Singapore skyline - the "boat" of the Marina Bay Sands, the "durian" Esplanade building, the "lotus" Art Science Museum and the "London eye" Singapore Flyer (which just got surpassed a few months ago by the Las Vegas High Roller) as the highest Ferris wheel in the world.

Our luggage was already checked, so we just got back to our gate and to our next flight. My former co-worker from Reputation.com recognized me in the airport! She was from Kerala, and she and her family were looking forward to getting back home. I hadn't seen her in over a year, but yet she recognized me 10,000 miles from CA – small world!

I managed to sleep a bit on the flight - exhaustion finally overtaking my inability to sleep on planes. It was late at night by the time we reached Kochi. I was elated when Nisha's mom and dad were there at the gate with open arms to welcome us to India!

Our driver was already there so we got underway right away. I don't remember efficiency being a priority in India on my last trip - I hoped this trip would prove otherwise. Our driver was excellent, however, knowing how to bypass traffic jams and construction when he could. The nearby Kochi Metro project was underway - the elevated rail line would eventually connect from the airport to the city center. The construction appeared to be at various stages of chaos - rows of pillars were at different points of construction. Occasionally we could speed along at a full 70 - 80 km / h, but many times we hit the brake lights suddenly to get us over a deep pothole or dip in the road that would surely take out part of the suspension at full speed! Our driver seemed to have a keen sense of the locations of these hidden obstacles. And all the time he did this while not even wearing his seatbelt!

Our "home base" was Nisha's dad's apartment in Ernakulum, just south of Kochi. We would have a few days to get settled in India and to meet some people before I would head out on a tour of the Golden Triangle. I had anticipated this tour for almost a year already, hoping to be able to combine it with a visit of Nisha's family. Nisha herself didn't have interest to travel to the north, and her dad had already been to many of the places, so for a week, we would "divide and conquer", where I would split off, see the sights with an organized tour group, and Nisha would relax and catch up with her family.

India seemed to be one of the fashion capitals of the world - it is where many of our clothes were made in the US. Both Nisha and I would be able to get some clothes made - custom made and measured to fit, for less than 1/2 the price as in the US! And if we wanted to do some name-brand shopping, the Tommy Hilfiger

store was open, near the end of Mahatma Gandhi (MG) road - I knew they were one of the major customers of Centric software - I looked forward to starting at such an international company when I got back. I wondered if they would pick up any major Indian brands - maybe I would get sent on a business trip to India with Centric someday!

I got my first real taste of Indian culture when the family went to attend a Katakali dance show in Ernakulum, less than 10 minutes from the house! Katakali is a tradition south Indian dance form, native to Kerala. Watching how an ordinary man could be transformed into a “living god”, representing Pacha. His face was decorated starting with yellow lines on his forehead, then black by his eyes, green over his face, and an array of finishing details. His face make-up alone took over 1/2 hour. His dress was similarly extravagant, starting with layers of undergarments, many bands of burlap sacks that would create a 5-foot diameter “hoop” for his flowing robe. The costume when finished weighed over 100 pounds! His robe was covered with ribbons and long tassels, and finally his “beard” and headdress were fitted to complete the figure.



*Katakali dancer*

The Katakali dancer performed for about an hour, starting with simple dances, illustrating the different components of Katakali, from the 24 “letters of the alphabet” composed of various hand signs, to the twitching of the eyes and mouth, and the stomping of his feet to incite the audience when telling his centuries-old tale of epic religious stories from the Mahabharata. I wonder if Star Wars or Lord of the Rings will someday get so embedded in our culture and religion that hundreds of years later a dance would be invented to keep the story alive.

We also got a bit of cultural experience in a different way. Nearby the

oceanography lab where Nisha's dad used to work, we spotted an arts theatre where a performance was happening that night. One local group, "Rock Of Ages" and a visiting one from Chennai called "MMS" were going to be doing a bunch of Broadway show tunes! We got tickets, and were entertained with a wonderful display of music (in English) of familiar tunes such as from Oklahoma, the Mikado, and some Gilbert & Sullivan show tunes! All the performers were Indian, though they were wonderfully clad in American Midwestern, Japanese, and other various outfits for each show. Back in San Jose, we had recently attended a friend's Bharatanatyam performance (a Tamil traditional dance), and in return we went to India to see some Broadway performances!

Even after just a couple days, I was getting used to life in India. It was great to be able to just walk down the street and pick up some bananas and papayas from the "fruit guy" or go down to the "phone guy" to fit a new speaker for a broken cell phone. Everybody was so personable, and not interested in just making a quick buck off of tourists. We talked about my upcoming trip to Delhi. We visited a banker in his shop, far off the beaten track, and he arranged an exchange for a couple hundred dollars in rupees to get me through a week up north. We picked up a couple samosas from a street vendor for Rs 5 each.

After several days at home in Ernakulum, visiting some of Nisha's relatives along the way, I felt I was being "sent off" to explore the wild north of India. For my trip, I would be able to borrow Nisha's mom's phone - we had it charged with 200 minutes - plenty to be able to call her dad's phone each night and catch up each day! I was excited about being able to call for about 1 rupee / minute - orders of magnitude cheaper than from my phone - AT&T international roaming would set me back \$2.50 a minute! I ended up using it just once during the tour, when a voicemail chimed in. The 2-minute call to retrieve the message would be a wasted \$5.00 - it turned out to be a political ad (election day was coming up in just a couple weeks) from one of the candidates for the San Jose mayor (who we weren't going to vote for anyway)...

### **September 29 - Golden Triangle day 1**

It was time to depart for my Golden Triangle tour. I would miss Nisha and her family for 7 days, but I'm glad she wouldn't feel lonely during that period, and she would have a good opportunity to rest and get caught up with her remaining jet lag. It was an early departure on Indigo Airlines (the equivalent to Southwest in India). Our driver showed up around 4 am to take me and Nisha and her dad to the airport (her mom stayed behind to sleep!) The direct route was still choked with construction (and probably would continue to be that way for many months) so we headed along our bypass route by the coast once again. A huge convoy of trucks was still parked by the side of the road - there must have been several hundred of them! With trade booming in the busy port of Kochi, goods often have

to wait in long lines to get transported. A group of cycle-rickshaw drivers were sleeping in the cabs of their vehicles, waiting for clients needing rides.

We were at the airport early - not wanting to risk any misadventures on the roads or at the airport, we took the extra caution. Nisha and her dad said good-bye for now - it was bittersweet, but I was looking forward to the sights around Delhi. The gate wasn't open yet when I arrived (the counters opened 2 hours early), but everything was running on time, and the logistics actually appeared to run like clockwork. 40 rupees for a coffee and a pastry kept me going for a little while.



*En route to the north*

We were soon off - an on-time departure for my 7:00 am flight, taking off over the mists in the humid south, heading for the dry and dusty north. Low clouds filled in the valleys among the Western Ghats up to maybe 3,000 feet - the green hills appeared as islands in the sky above the valley mists. The clouds disappeared and the earth gradually changed from a deep green to a lighter green to a mostly tan-brown color as we headed north. Landing in Delhi we got a preview of some of the sights to be seen - numerous temples, domes and mosques stood by the Yamuna river as we made our approach to the airport.

The domestic terminal at Delhi was bustling with people - Delhi is one of the most crowded cities in India. Travelers from all around the world were passing through. This was the only part of my 3 weeks in India where I would be traveling alone - between the point where I was dropped off by Nisha's family and the point where I would meet the tour group in the hotel in Delhi. Fortunately, Nisha's dad offered some good advice (he's a seasoned traveler) and had me find the pre-paid cab counter, where I hopped on a cab headed to the Royal Metro hotel. The driver was a bit confused with the directions and actually had to borrow my cell phone (Nisha's mom's phone actually) to call the front desk!

After a few minutes on the phone, everything was set and we were on our way. The streets were the familiar chaos of roadways in India. Anything and everything with wheels or feet that moved occupied the roadways - cars, lorries, scooters, motorcycles, auto rickshaws, bicycles, pedestrians, ox carts, dogs and cows. An entire family was seated on a motorcycle – father, mother riding side-saddle in her sari, and their 3 small kids. Upon seeing one of the bovine intruders on the street my first thought was “Holy Cow!” - what’s that animal doing on the road? And then I realized it was actually a real “holy cow” - cows are sacred in Hindu religion.

My rudimentary knowledge of the Hindi language was proving helpful once again - I had learned snippets of it on my trip to Kathmandu earlier in the year, and once again it was all around. Although Kochi and Delhi are in the same country, they were about as different as you could imagine - different culture, different kind of food, different language, different script and completely different climate. It would get cool in Kerala after a good rain, but in Delhi, it would be a toasty 95 degrees about every day without a cloud in sight for the next week.

I had landed early, reaching the hotel around 11 in the morning. After a short nap and a good shower, I changed and read about some of the sights nearby. A street market was just a block away - reminiscent of the Thamel district in Kathmandu. I had a couple hours to kill before meeting the tour group that evening, so I decided to go out and have a look around. Dealers selling clothes, shoes, kitchen wares, cheap phones, temple goods and tourist junk were all around. I had actually been looking for a couple decent shirts - I had packed mostly long-sleeve shirts thinking it was going to be cooler than it was - I only had a couple short-sleeve ones.

Almost immediately I saw some dealers selling cheap but nice-looking short-sleeve polo shirts for just a couple hundred rupees. An insistent vendor came to me, selling some “Woodland” knock-off belts – I paid him Rs 200 (\$3) for 2 belts to get him off my back, but at least the belts were useful since my old one was starting to come apart. There weren’t enough holes in the belts (I was too skinny for the belt to fit), so he punched a couple extra holes with a hand-held puncher to finish the sale. I figure if either belt only lasted a month, it would be OK. I found many things to be “home-made” instead of made at factories where everything was uniform. Each shirt was a little different, each seeming to have a slight defect – you had to QA everything carefully! I would end up ordering several pairs of pants later in Kerala – they were custom measured and sewn, but one pair of pants had one of the back pockets missing (I don’t normally use back pockets, but it was a sign the pants weren’t “professional”). And I had a pair of glasses made, and they looked great at first, but they had forgotten to take one of the measurements (my pupil distance), so since they used a default value,



the glasses came out to have a strange “barrel distortion” in the lenses – they would have to be re-made. Nisha had some pants made but the button-holes were too small, but at least her glasses came out nice – each item was a “luck of the draw” in the way it turned out.

My first real culture shock of India hit when I was shopping - I had expected the streets to be busy and for dealers to come up to tourists trying to make sales, ripping off naive travelers from other countries. I’m sure many poor people in the crowd saw me as a “rich white guy from Europe or America” and saw a chance to make a quick buck. I soon had an entourage of folks following me, looking for an opportunity to sell me something I didn’t need, or to beg. 10 rupees to me was just pennies, but for many unfortunate people, that might be all they had to live on. I didn’t take my wallet or passport or anything important - they were locked in the safe in my room. I just had some cash and a business card of the hotel in case I got lost. I knew there to be pickpockets in the busy streets (I know of several people who had wallets stolen while traveling), so I just took some cash to buy some clothes and some lunch.

A young mom holding a desperate looking baby swaddled in her arm was following me. I bumped her by accident when she brushed by me - I didn’t realize how close she was to me at first. A little further down the road, when I found a shirt I was looking for, she had come back to me. I’m pretty sure it was the same lady - I was doing my best to ignore her. Her persistence was aggravating. When spotting the shirt across the street, I turned quickly to have a closer look, forgetting she was so close to me. I ended up giving her a hard bump, again not expecting her to be right on top of me. She didn’t have any sense of “personal space”. The bump actually nearly pushed her into an oncoming motorcycle. She was so small and gaunt, and again she was so close to me I felt she was just about to try to pick my pocket. If she had gotten hit by the motorcycle I would have felt a demonic satisfaction of “ha - served her right!” - Darwinism at its best. But I felt a deep remorse when I thought about it again when I was back at the hotel. Later in the trip, I would see many beggars with casts and on crutches, probably victims of accidents due to their desperate efforts at combing the streets to gather attention. Society in India has been heavily stratified for hundreds of years – people were trapped in whatever caste they were born in. I’m sure many of these poor beggars were Dalits (“untouchables”) completely forsaken by society and living at its margins, unable to rise above the systemic mistreatment.

The honking and the noise of the traffic didn’t bother me so much as seeing the level of poverty in the city. It was one thing for homeless people to be holding signs, but for them to aggressively go after people was an invasion. It felt easier to just “buy them off” - handing out money to just get them off your back, but like scratching an itch, it would only make it itch worse. People would start coming

out of the woodwork, begging for money, once they got word that someone was giving out handouts. I never once gave money to someone on the street - I have a group of charities I have donated through on a regular basis - charities where I believe in the principles of giving money in a Biblical and sustainable way as to not make begging a lifestyle for them. A book "When Helping Hurts" by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert illustrated how often people get "helped" in the wrong way. Giving handouts to the poor when their problem is really a systemic issue only perpetuates the cycle of poverty.

Back at the hotel, I was going to go up to my room to have my couple samosas and snacks I picked up at one of the shops on the street. I felt the fried food should be safe. In the lobby were 3 other people - a white couple chatting with a local. The couple seemed to be from Australia, judging by the accent - they were on a tour and they said they were going to start the next day. I listened for a couple minutes and when they mentioned "Intrepid" I was excited to find out they were on my tour after all! They were Kevin and Jenny, from Melbourne. I was eager to get started. The "local guy" was actually our guide Nilanger, who we would be spending the next 7 days with. We still had several hours before our first "official" part of the tour, and Nilanger (Nil) gave us the option to see some of the sights during the spare time. We all agreed we'd love to go together, and I was thrilled we'd get to see some "bonus" sites since we got in early.



*Qutb Minar complex*

Nil said to be back down in 15 minutes while he got a car and driver ready. I scarfed down the samosas and a drink and threw together my backpack to go back out. Our driver was right on time (I didn't run into "India time" very often - things ran surprisingly efficiently and smoothly). We were off to see the Qutb Minar - I leafed through my Lonely Planet guide again - I had heard of it, but didn't realize its significance until we got close. The sight was magnificent - over

800 years old, the 73-meter minaret is the 2nd tallest in all of India. Consisting of both Hindu and Islamic elements, it showed a blend of culture and religion. Several tombs stood nearby - the tomb of Iltutmish had a wonderful array of red sandstone carvings, domes and Islamic architecture. A giant iron column perhaps 1000 years old and over 20 feet high was standing one of the courtyards, filled with inscriptions including Sanskrit script honoring Vishnu - one of the Hindu gods. Ruins of ancient arches, columns, and pavilions adorned the UNESCO heritage sight reminiscent of some of the ancient cities I had seen in Israel on a tour about 10 years ago. Kevin and Jenny were enjoying it as much as I was, and they had seen many places around the world.

I had been working on a “doors of the world” and “ceilings of the world” project for several months, starting with my trip to Nepal about 6 months earlier - I felt like a kid in a candy store seeing the wonders of the ancient city. And we weren't even on our actual tour yet - this was a “bonus” sight! My anticipation for the rest of the tour was at a peak. There was so much to see - we could have spent hours in just one area, but we wanted to get over to Humayun's tomb as well. Traffic in Delhi was a nightmare - the gridlock putting Bay Area traffic to shame! Humayun's tomb was only a few kilometers from the Qutb Minar, but it would take nearly an hour to reach.

A couple small girls were in the street dancing among the gridlocked vehicles - they were perhaps 5 or 7 years old (or at least they looked that age - they could have been much older). As the honking cars inched forward, the girls started to perform somersaults right between the rows of vehicles - they had a captive audience! As soon as they saw someone with a camera taking pictures, they would stop, demanding money before continuing. When they danced again, I snuck in a video, capturing several flips before they moved down the street to entertain the next set of vehicles. It was a sad form of begging - the girls were probably actually not asking for money for themselves, but they were trying to raise money for their parents - it was a form of slavery since the parents were “using” the children to beg for money.

We came up to Humayun's tomb - another architectural wonder. The tomb was built in 1565 and commissioned by Humayun's first wife Bega Begum. Several “tour guides” stood by the entrance, wanting to make a few rupees by telling stories about the tomb. We just went in, saved the time and the money and started exploring - besides, so much information is available online (you could just go to Wikipedia to find out more than you'd ever want to know!). The tomb was a marvel of red sandstone and marble. Reflection pools dotted the complex, reflecting the domes as a mirror. The stonework was clean and well built - appearing as if a bunch of renovation had been recently completed.

We walked around the plinth of the octagonal structure, gazing in wonder at the architecture of the arches, ceilings, and domes. A few more photos for my “doors” and “ceilings” albums - I would have so many I wouldn't even know where to start when I got home! We walked right by the sign describing the tomb, just taking a quick photo - we were so eager to see everything! I had a field day photographing the Mughal architecture - appreciating all the work had been done by hand for so many years.

It was hot outside and I was pretty tired when we walked out - I went back and made sure I had photos of the signs so I'd know where we went. But checking the sign it said “Isa Khan tomb” - hmmm - I thought it was “Humayun”. Just across the path was another sign with an arrow pointing “Humayun's tomb -> that way”. Huh? It turned out the wonderful octagonal tomb wasn't even the main tomb. We had to get rolling - we spent so much time at the wrong tomb we had to speed through the “real one”. The real Humayun's tomb was even more magnificent - I couldn't imagine topping the last one. It was like a mini-Taj Mahal, complete with multiple domes, symmetric Mughal architecture, lined with gardens and pools. It was almost deserted, providing so many photo opportunities! It would give me good practice in shooting the real Taj Mahal at the end of the tour!



*Humayun's tomb*

It had been a sensory-overloaded several hours for this “bonus” part of Delhi - I eagerly anticipated the rest of the tour as we headed back to the hotel. On our way we passed the Arc de Triomphe-like India Gate, a war memorial erected after WWI. We had a little time to relax back in our rooms and wait for the others to show up. It was soon 6:00, the official “start” of the trip.

Our full contingent had mostly arrived now - there was  
Our guide Nilanger (who went by Nil)  
Lisa from Australia (but originally from the US, she would arrive the next day)  
Kevin and Jenny from Australia (Jenny is just to the left of me)  
Cleo from the UK  
Christian from Germany  
Kate from Australia (who works with Intrepid, but was doing this tour for fun)  
Julius and Marieke from Germany  
Meg and Annette and Michelle from the UK  
and me (behind Annette).



*Our group in Karauli on the tour*

I was initially surprised the entire group was white - there were no Asians or blacks or other Indians. I'm sure the price was a filter, and with the company being Australian-run it was no coincidence many Aussies were with us. This India tour group was about as night-and-day different from my previous India tour - when I had visited back in 2005 and made the tour of South India, just about everyone else on the bus were local south Indian tourists! I was often the only white person, and a couple times I was the only single (all the rest of the people were married couples)... but that was the difference in paying 100 rupees a day on a tour vs. paying 100 dollars a day. After having paid over \$1,300 to get to India in the first place, and another \$200 for the extra flight to Delhi, it was worth every penny of the \$700 for the tour. At the other extreme, I had heard of the fabled Palace on Wheels for several years - the luxury train taking tourists to some of the wonders of India. The "week in wonderland" ride covered a similar route as our Golden Triangle tour, but the tariff ran upward of \$4000 - \$5000 - maybe next time!

Lisa hadn't made it yet, although she was supposed to arrive that morning. She was actually still tied up at airports. She had spent the last few weeks in the Darjeeling area of India, doing charity work. After getting what appeared to be a life-threatening illness over there, she then ended up having traveling issues getting out - heavy rains had triggered landslides, taking out several roads, delaying her arrival to the airport. She ended up missing a flight and having to get rebooked. After a couple days of scrambling through airports and connections, she finally arrived in Delhi a day late for the tour - whew!

We walked down the street to Crossroads, a local restaurant, enjoying chicken lamanal and Kingfisher beer - quite a change from our cuisine in the south the last few days! With an ongoing alcohol prohibition going on in Kerala, you had to go to a high-end resort to get a similar beer down there, but in the north, there were no restrictions. I was really looking forward to the tour. A sense of déjà vu went through me - thinking of the first meeting on my previous trips to Nepal and Ecuador we had met in a similar way. But on those previous trips, the introduction was filled with anxiety of anticipation of scaling the mountainous heights instead of just touring the culture. I looked forward to a relaxing tour that didn't have to be quite so "high-octane". Nepal and Ecuador felt like a "mission" whereas Delhi could be more like a "vacation"!

I enjoyed a good 1/2-hr call with Nisha that night from the hotel - giving her the scoop of how things were going so far. I could even post a photo to Facebook to give people at home and back in Kerala a sort of play-by-play of my tour! I also got to call home in PA - Nisha's dad had put a rider on my phone calling plan to let me call to the US for less than 1 rupee / minute - I could talk for an hour for less than \$1 - amazing! Calling the US was even cheaper than calling India. And the call quality was excellent - I just wish they could offer the same quality and price of phone service in the US!

### **September 30 - Golden Triangle day 2**

Breakfast at the hotel was a simple buffet - a mix of Indian and western food - idlis like those we make at home, along with scrambled eggs and toast and coffee. In the morning we did a walking tour of Delhi - traveling like the locals. Our Hotel Metro View was just down the street from one of the local metro stations. We planned to take the metro into the center of Old Delhi - the fastest, cheapest, and most efficient way, considering the madness of the traffic in the city.

Walking up the stairs to the metro station, we entered a sea of humanity navigating the local rail system. Crossing a set of metal detectors (which beeped on almost every single person, but they just waved us through anyway), we reached our platform. Nil bought us the tickets for our station in Old Delhi. We were packed on the trains in a way resembling the crowded trains in Tokyo. I

was glad to not need too many items - just my wallet and camera and phone in my front pockets. I worried a bit about losing the group or getting separated - luckily since the whole group was white and generally quite a bit taller than the rest of the population, we found each other rather easily!

Getting off the train, we were soon bombarded all around - the city was a feast for the senses - overwhelming in so many ways. The crowds clad in an array of multicolored punjabis, saris and Western clothes. The fabric colors were stunning, adorned with chikan embroidery and zari patterns in paisley floral designs to geometric shapes and some solid colors. The vivid colors almost seemed to bring out musical tones - one looked like the color of Ab, one was E major, and another G major - it was an orchestra of color.

Our first stop was at the impressive Jama Masjid mosque. Built in 1650, it was a masterpiece of Mughal architecture. Constructed of marble and red sandstone, shaped with towering arches and enormous minarets, the mosque made us feel like ants crawling through a vast sacred space. We all took off our shoes, and a couple of us who were wearing shorts had to wear long pants - luckily at the gate they had some wrap-around garments that could be borrowed! I was already wearing long pants - just like most of the locals wear every day (it seemed only children and foreigners got away with shorts). With our shoes taken off and checked at the door, we walked barefoot across several wet cloth pathways strung across the blazing hot sandstone. I occasionally stepped off the path to look around and frame a photo, but I had to go right back to the path to cool my feet again! A pool in the center of the courtyard offered a cool respite from the heat - soaking my feet in the cool water was blissful!



*Jama Masjid*

A handful of worshipers were reading their Koran in the shade under some of the

main arches. A flock of pelicans was grazing where somebody threw a bunch of seed. A couple other “worshippers” appeared to be reading but would look up when they saw tourists to ask for money to get their photo. Paying money for a photo with a “pious” worshiper seemed only to defame the religion. This would actually end up being more common in India than I expected - so many people were poor and would do anything to try to make money.

Walking along the busy Kinari Bazaar, we stopped to visit a Gurdwara Sikh temple - the Gurdwara Sis Ganj Sahib temple constructed of brilliant white marble, it welcomed visitors from all walks of life. The tall Nishan Sahib flags were flying, indicating it was open. Taking off our shoes and putting on turbans they handed out for each of us (it was a dishonor to have your head uncovered in Sikhism), we walked across the smooth marble (being careful not to slip on the polished stone). Dipping our feet in a watery trough to rinse our dusty feet, we started climbing the steps to the main part of the temple. Worshipers were kneeling on mats facing an altar with a holy book - the Guru Granth Sahib, adorned with flowers and beautiful fabrics. A small band of harmonium players and a tabla player was singing a set of prayers from the holy scriptures - the words were projected in Punjabi, Hindi and English. The Punjabi was quite similar to Hindi - just a little bit “smoothed” style of font. The men sat on one side and the women sat across from us - the congregation was divided.

We visited the temple kitchen - several ladies were making chapattis. A pipeline was going. A machine was dividing out chunks of dough and rolling them into round shapes about 6 inches across. One lady would pass the raw chapattis to a large griddle where they would cook in just a few seconds - the griddle must have been over 700 degrees! The chapattis would puff up and bubble before our eyes as another lady would scoop the finished chapattis into baskets to be served. An enormous pot of lentil soup was boiling over a kerosene burner - a guy with a spoon the size of an oar was stirring the bubbling pot. A massive pot of ghee was being served just outside the entrance - a couple people in our group stopped by for a free piece on our way out. The Sikh religion believes in providing free food. The “langar” practice in Sikhism ensures that anybody is allowed to partake. The ghee was pungent and oily, but rich in flavor.

The Chandni Chowk was filled with so many shops - wedding shops full of marigold flowers, jewelry, tassels and religious icons. The Hindu religion seemed to be one of the most gaudy and colorful aspects embedded in the culture. Coming from a more post-modern background in the US, I’ve become more adapted toward minimalism and functionality - my iPhone is just a plain black box, my clothes are mostly plain solid colors, and my working spaces at previous companies were fairly plain and ordinary - uncluttered and simple. In Delhi, shops were filled to the brim with items for sale. Shopkeepers must know exactly where anything and everything was located - no signs like “cereal - aisle 9”



provided (or needed - you would just ask the shopkeeper).



*Spice market*

Many shops were adorned with lemons and chilies by the front door - a long-standing superstition they believed would ward out evil spirits from their shop and bring better business. Often swastikas would indicate welcome as well (the kind that have existed for thousands of years as a sign of friendship, not the kind that has been twisted 75 years ago)... Rows of shops lined the streets - each one a uniform depth and width. I'm sure they probably change all the time. Competition is fierce, if you don't find the sunglasses you like at one shop, you could find them a few shops down.

We all got a turn riding cycle-rickshaws, navigating the main stretch of the street down the Chandni Chowk - passing shops of all colors and styles. We were surrounded by dozens of other cycle rickshaws - our driver spoke almost no English but knew how to take us down to one of the famous spice markets - he just had to follow everybody else! Getting off at the spice market, we started navigating the narrow winding streets and staircases to various shops. Buckets full of saffron, cumin, coriander and chilies were all around. Even after just 5 minutes, my eyes were running and I started sneezing - I couldn't imagine being one of the shopkeepers in that section of the market! We'd have to come back for paan after dinner to cleanse the palate.

Stopping at a tea shop, we sampled various flavors of tea infused with an entire array of flavors - mango, lychee, blueberry and raspberry flavors to name a few. I'm sure the tour operator has us stop at different shops intentionally - kickbacks from the shops help the tour business (besides we were a rather captive audience). I was happy to pick up something to take back to Nisha's family when I got back to Kerala - tea was something nice that all could enjoy.

We walked down some of the narrow streets in the old city, where we came upon a paratha restaurant - it was just a small hole-in-the-wall place, frequented by locals. It was called "Gaya Prasad". Very little was in English, and what was in English was often badly misspelled. I had a potato paratha and mango lassi. The "kitchen" was just a couple propane burners near the entrance as a couple people worked several pots at once. The aroma was mouth-watering. The food was all hot so it seemed safe. It was pretty quick - lunch was finished in probably 20 minutes - there wasn't a minute to lose!

Every time we walked along the streets, I seemed to notice a few more things. As we were making our way to our next meeting point, I saw that occasionally, trucks would drive by with such a flash of color and sound, as if they were participants in an art-car competition for Burning Man. Even the horn sounds were elaborate - from high-pitched whinnying sounds to ooga-style beeps to various multi-toned chimes, they would be sure to get your attention. The vehicles were clad in hand-painted designs of flowers, geometric patterns, and religious motifs. Tassels, religious icons and artwork were often hanging inside the cab of many trucks. And the familiar words "HORN PLEASE" or "SOUND HORN" was painted (in English) on the back of each truck, as if to perpetuate the practice. When I got home I found out that somebody has even created a project called "Horn Please" engaging people by illustrating the works of art embodied in the Indian trucking industry!

Although there was clutter and trash around on the streets all over the place, it appeared people were careful to keep the interior of their dwellings clean. You could take your shoes off and walk bare-foot on the marble tiled floors. Sweepers would clear the rubbish from around the houses - even where the ground was just dirt. But just a few feet away, plastic bags, bottles, and other trash piled up. It was as if for hundreds of years people had developed a habit of throwing trash with impunity, knowing it would decompose in a couple weeks. They hadn't figured out yet that plastic doesn't simply "go away" by itself. In California there have been multiple campaigns to get rid of plastic bags - a wonderful thing - not only does it help the environment but it results in less litter and less clutter. Modi was starting a wonderful campaign to clean up India - I couldn't wait to see what it would look like in a few years, if the general population really got on board. Less litter also meant less risk of a bag floating over a road getting sucked into somebody's car exhaust where it could make a terrible mess and even catch fire...

We had the afternoon free to do any number of optional activities. We had a choice of visiting some heritage as a tribute to Mahatma Gandhi, visiting the Qutb Minar and Humayun's tomb (which we just did the previous day), doing a sampling of street food (none of us were that brave), or visiting the Lotus Temple.

The Lotus temple would be packed (requiring hours just to get in), and we ruled out the other options, so we went to check out the Mahatma Gandhi tribute.

The trip had been going quite well, and it seemed as if luck was on our side. But the luck rapidly shifted. We were supposed to meet our driver right after lunch at 1:00, but he failed to show where we expected. We got a call saying he was stuck in traffic and he was going to be late. At least where we were waiting was next to the impressive Red Fort in Delhi and the Sri Digambar Jain Lal Mandir Jain temple across the street. We got to peek a little bit since our ride was supposed to be coming any minute. But then our driver called again asking if we could meet him a few blocks down the road. Then he called again saying he couldn't get out of a parking lot. Then he called again saying there was a problem with the car. It was a string of one excuse after another - bummer. And then one of our ladies started not feeling well - the heat, unsettling food, and the stress of the situation had her face in her hands for probably 1/2 hour as we tried to decide how to continue.

We ended up hailing an auto rickshaw to take us to our first spot instead - the Gandhi museum. The museum was quiet and actually a cool respite from the heat and hustle and bustle of Delhi! Some of Gandhi's textile spinning wheels (charkas), some of his personal artifacts, books and journals told stories of his life. Photographs and articles of his 240 mile long Salt March in 1930 illustrated the desperation of the people dealing with the British salt monopoly in colonial India. The finale of the museum showed the blood-stained shawl that Gandhi was wearing when he took the fatal bullet on Jan 30, 1948. His ashes were buried in the Ganges river by Allahabad, where the Yamuna river meets the Ganges.

After the museum we headed to the nearby Rajghat park to see the memorial and ghat where Gandhi's body was cremated in 1948. We passed a memorial sculpture illustrating Gandhi's Salt March. The greenery in the park was a respite among the bustling streets outside. We arrived at the gate, however to find a locked chain. Hmmm - why would there be a lock on this public park? We could look inside - the rolling pastoral greenery lined with paths was inviting for a walk. A little further down was another gate - maybe we could enter there, but that one also had a chain. I looked inside again and only saw a couple people, both finely dressed. They had some kind of badges - they had special access. Apparently with Gandhi's birthday celebration coming up, his memorial park was closed except to VIP's - bummer.

We decided we had enough and wanted to just get back to the hotel - to relax a bit. After half a dozen tries, we managed to hail an auto rickshaw to take us back. Negotiating the fare ahead of time, we were on our way, bumping along the hot and dusty roads. The traffic was so bad, that even after an hour we only

made it as far back as Connaught Place near the Delhi Gate - Connaught Place was one of the major commercial centers of Delhi - filled with malls and businesses. We had to get off and then catch a second auto to get back to our hotel - another tiring 45 minutes. We knew we were finally close when we could see the head of the enormous Hanuman monkey temple a couple blocks from our hotel around 5:00 in the evening. Those couple hours were not exactly travel in India at its finest!



*Navratri festival*

We had dinner again at a nearby restaurant within walking distance of our hotel - we were in the Karol Bagh district of Delhi, offering plenty of choices. The Aroma Spice restaurant was our choice. Butter chicken and garlic naan went well with a Kalyani beer. As we were walking back to the hotel, I heard a bunch of commotion nearby. It sounded like singing and dancing - I had remembered from my trip to Kathmandu that it seemed like there was always a reason to celebrate something in the street. Delhi was no different. We were only 2 blocks from the hotel and the others continued to the hotel but I stayed back for a few minutes to see what was going on. An elaborate costumed figure was dancing as cymbals and drums were sounding. It was a sea of humanity all around - at first I thought it might be a street performer or magician or something. A small set of risers was nearby and I managed to sneak a spot on the end of one of the steps - people were packed all around, at times so tight you had to put one hand on the shoulder of the person in front of you to avoid getting trampled. I watched for a couple songs, trying to figure out the story of the masked dancer with his tongue sticking out - it looked like some sort of demon. I recorded a couple videos by holding the camera over my head, and when I got back to the hotel, Nil was still there and mentioned there was a 9-day Hindu festival going on. Called Navratri ("nine nights" in Sanskrit), the festival is celebrated all over India and involves worship of 9 forms of the Shakti and Devi gods. We were there on about the 4th

day - in fact for the rest of our tour in India we'd see more celebrations of the Divine Mother Durga and her grand battle over evil. We were there during the Sharad Navratri, the most important of the 4 Navratris.

Nisha was talking about the heavy rain and thunderstorms they had in Kerala that evening - a far cry from the hot and dusty weather in Delhi so far! I already missed the rain. After 3 years of drought in CA, I quickly developed an appreciation for the downpours that made Kerala so alive and green. I just hoped we could bring some of that rain back to CA when we get home!

### **October 1 - Golden Triangle day 3**

The next morning, we were to board an A/C chair car train headed to Jaipur. We were up at 5 am for our 6 am train. It had been a fitful night of sleep - emotions of my first few days in India mixed with my expectations of starting a new job once I got home. I had a dream about starting my 1st day at work, settling into my corner office, packing, training a new guy and connecting to our "Juniper" database. I awoke with a start with my alarm chimed - it took a few moments to realize where I was, that I had to shower, finish packing quickly and get downstairs to catch our rides to the train station.

Our vehicles were there early to pick us up from our hotel so we could get a pre-dawn start on our 4 hour train ride to Rajasthan. People were sleeping all around the platform in Delhi - we had to be careful as we wheeled our luggage to make sure we didn't run the wheels over somebody's arm laying on the floor... I'm sure many of the folks were beggars and were homeless, many of them probably Dalits - train stations were a good place for them to get attention. A number of cycle-rickshaw drivers and auto rickshaw drivers were asleep in their vehicles as well - I wondered if they actually just lived in their vehicles and didn't have a real home since they were always on the move.

Clattering down the tracks, we made good progress heading southwest through Haryana and into Rajasthan. The landscape turned increasingly dry as we headed further into the desert. Maize plantations passed by on both sides - the harvest was underway. Slums lined both sides of the tracks in places - people appeared to be foraging along the tracks in places, and in places, cows and pigs were roaming. I just hoped we didn't run over a cow at full speed - I wonder how much we'd even feel it. Our train had at least 20 full-size cars.

After a bit of a nap, we were soon rolling into the outskirts of Jaipur - a wave of excitement came over me. I thought of the images of India I had since I was a kid - camels, sand dunes and ancient temples. We didn't quite get to the sand dunes (they were further to the northwest), but we would get our fill of the rest. Rolling into the train station, we were soon aboard a couple auto rickshaws heading to our hotel in Jaipur - the Arya Niwas.

The hotel was a beautiful 3-storied structure overlooking a green lawn and gardens, complete with rooftop terraces, beautiful tilework, and exotic oriental style furniture. I felt we were getting to the “exotic” part of India - I had received a book on India for a house-warming gift back in 2007 with some wonderful photography, and I was eager to be able to see some of the places in person. (In fact, Nisha had the exact same book but a slightly older edition - one of the “coincidences” that eventually lead to our marriage!)

Lunch at the hotel was a treat - toasted cheese and spinach and tomato sandwiches - like my favorite grilled cheese sandwiches my mom used to make when I was a kid. Banana lassis and cake made a sweet complement to the savory sandwiches.

As we got on our bus to head to the Amber Fort, I noticed a case of mistranslation - these were common in India. A wheelchair ramp for the disabled was labeled for the “differently abled” - although I’m sure it was a mistake there, I know of many people who we would think as handicapped actually possess a keener understanding of other talents than “normal” people. Often musicians who are blind end up having a deeper passion for music when they can “see” the music in a richness that many sighted people would never perceive. A child with autism may be socially inept but be a virtuoso at the piano. I should withhold my judgment next time when I see one who is “differently abled”.



*Amber Fort*

We soon made our way down to one of the signature sights outside Jaipur - the Amber Fort (sometimes spelled Amer Fort without the “b”). Crossing the main triple-arched city gate, we were dazzled by the pink artistry of the architecture. Jaipur was called the “Pink City” and we’d soon find the color motif everywhere.

Shops lined both sides of the street - it looked like a shopper's paradise. One lady had bought a pair of sandals on her previous trip to Rajasthan and she wondered if that same shop was still there so she could pick up another pair!

Passing the Jal Mahal water palace, we came to the hills outside the city, dotted with numerous forts and palaces. Many were connected with fortifications resembling a Great Wall of China – I wished we would have all day to explore, but I knew we only had a couple hours.

We reached the Amber Fort in the early afternoon. Once again, we appeared to strike out - when we saw the lock on the door of one of the main gates. Apparently with the Navratri festival going on, the protocol had changed a bit. People were walking up the ramps to the fort and didn't appear to have some weird badges or anything - it turned out they were just using a different entrance gate than we expected.

I've heard of people waiting an hour or more to ride an elephant up the steep ramps to the fort - it sounded like a novel experience, and I had never ridden an elephant before, but hearing of the way the great animals were treated cruelly in the sweltering heat, we didn't want to patronize the practice. I didn't even see where the elephants went - we must have avoided that side of the fort altogether, or maybe they weren't taking the elephants out that day - just as well. We walked instead. A group of monks clad in matching saffron yellow garments and shaved heads followed us up the path. Worshipers were lined up to participate in Navratri festivities.

The fort was an architectural masterpiece - this is what we came to Jaipur for! It was magnificent complete with multiple arrays of columns, grand entrances, four courtyards and Mughal architecture at its finest. The richly arrayed Diwan-i-Aam with its double columns, overlooking the Maota lake and gardens was an overload of eye candy. And that was just the beginning! The Ganesh Pol gate was covered in marble tiles, accented with floral patterns, Islamic geometric shapes, and inlaid stones. The mirrored Sheesh Mahal was like a crystal cavern with reflecting jewels on the walls and all over the ceiling. The Sukh Mahal was a hall of pleasure again covered in jewel-like crystalline patterns - water running under the floor acted as a natural air conditioner. It was the pinnacle of hedonism.



*Sheesh Mahal*

Passing through the final courtyard of the Amber Fort, we came to the Baradhari pavilion at Man Singh I Palace Square. This contained the quarters where the concubines of the royal court slept. It was a maze of small apartments connected by narrow uneven stairways. Several domed porticos stood on the top floor, each with a different symmetrical pattern in the ceiling. Each individual dome was a surprise, in a similar way I would find a symmetrical surprise when zooming into a Mandelbrot fractal, discovering different symmetrical patterns at each stage of the zoom. A vertical shaft extended many stories down, connected by an innovative pulley system to allow women to haul water buckets to each floor.

This “catacombs” cavern of interconnected concubines quarters extended over 4 or 5 floors. Nisha and I had recently explored the Catacombs cavern in Lava Beds a month earlier - there was an eerie similarity of the natural “catacombs” with the apartments of the women used by the maharaja in Jaipur. It felt like a Winchester Mystery House - as if the sexual sins of a king could be hidden within a maze of corridors to not be discovered by a judgmental higher power. The women were not allowed to leave the palace grounds - for them it was a prison - their sole duty was to serve the maharaja. For me, one wife was enough - I couldn't imagine having dozens of women at my disposal. An eerie “vibe” hung over the place, as if some kind of spirits still dwelled there. I was relieved when we left.

We passed a couple giant cauldrons, probably 8 feet in diameter - a scene from Macbeth came to mind “Double double, toil and trouble; fire burn and cauldron bubble” - even bigger than the giant pots in the Sikh temple back in Delhi! A little further was an entrance to a tunnel - the Amber fort was known to have a bunch of tunnels, supposedly connecting all the way to the neighboring Jaigarh fort. I



peeked in the entrance of the tunnel, not knowing how far down it went, but knowing the rest of the group was still moving, I could only afford a quick peek to make sure I didn't get lost in the sea of humanity near the entrance of the fort. There was just way too much to see! The massive "great wall of China" connected the forts along the ridgetops on the mountains – some people were climbing the stairs outside.

On the way down, one of the boys reached up to my forehead when I wasn't paying attention, touching it with a dab of red powder to put a tilak as a blessing. Of course he would ask for money, and I didn't ask for the tilak. I ended up giving him a Rs 10 note (less than 20 cents), but it seemed a violation - it was an aggressive form of begging, in the name of Hindu religion to raise money, probably for his parents. I would have gladly paid Rs 10 (and probably even more) to receive a tilak if it was on my own terms, but here it seemed like an unexpected tax for visiting. A snake charmer was playing his pipe - taming a pair of cobras with their heads sticking above their basket. I sneaked a quick photo so he wouldn't notice and start asking for money.

Back near the center of Jaipur we strolled a few blocks not far from our hotel. The Lassilava lassi bar was selling its signature lassis - I've had mango many times and just had banana so I opted for the pineapple lassi. Fresh fruit and yoghurt and a few other ingredients blended made a soothing drink, served in an earthenware cup. Nothing was plastic or fake here. The cup would have made a wonderful terra-cotta flowerpot if I could get it home safely, but was too lazy and just threw it in the trash with the other hundreds of broken clay vessels.

Next door, ironically was a McDonalds with its signature golden arches. I could have gone for a McSpicy Paneer or a Chicken Maharaja-Mac (no beef allowed), but instead I watched a young man on his cell phone sitting next to a (white) Ronald McDonald on the bench just outside. The plastic Ronald McDonald appeared to have fallen off a time machine that was supposed to be flying to Roswell, NM back in the 1960's.

In the evening we had a chance to witness a Bollywood cinema at its finest. Nearby our hotel was the famous Raj Mandir theatre. The movie "Daawat-e-Ishq" was playing, complete with a cheesy love story, Bollywood singing and dancing, and a story about a lover who wants to get married but cannot afford the expensive dowry to pay for his wife. The plot was a bit silly, and the movie was in Hindi (and not sub-titled), but we could figure out most of it just by watching! Samosas in the lobby tied us over until dinner - Rs 10 each for 3 samosas ended up costing just 50 cents.



*Bollywood cinema*

Dinner was at the nearby Copper Chimney restaurant - Afghan kebabs and cumin seed rotis along with a red Kingfisher ale was a treat. It was Kevin's birthday - we got to surprise him with a chocolate birthday cake!

It was a short walk back to the hotel - I was whipped after a long day. I had a lot of details to fill in for Nisha - luckily she was still up - her body was still several hours behind so she was a bit wired. She was doing fine, happy to be with her parents for a relaxed several days. They were coming to grips with a major life decision - whether to settle back in the US or settle in India. They were happy to make the decision peacefully and at ease - they were leaning more toward settling in India long term - Nisha's mom was becoming more comfortable with life in Kerala, and Nisha savored her time there.

Just before settling into bed, I got an alert from a climber blog - one of the guides from RMI Alex Barber had summited Manaslu. I had been tracking his progress for several weeks, through his setbacks with bad weather on the way. He summited the 8,163 m peak solo and without bottled oxygen. I reminisced again about my trek just about 6 months ago to Everest base camp and Island peak - in an adventure that felt like a lifetime ago, even though I was in the same part of the world again.

#### **October 2 - Golden Triangle day 4**

We were up early to do an early morning yoga session. Meeting in the library, our instructor greeted us, set up our mats and started us on our 1-hour session. My last yoga session was on a beach on Southwest Caye in the Glover's atoll in Belize at sunrise - I had many good memories! Practicing the different poses and stretches was challenging but rewarding. I know my flexibility needs some work! The "tree" pose, "warrior" pose and "dolphin" poses stretched my concentration as well as my muscles. I feel the breathing and concentration exercises would be good warm-ups for my choir - at the end of our session, we all hummed a meditative "om" for probably 30 seconds - it tuned remarkably well in our relaxed state, echoing off the marble walls of the library, ringing clear up to at least the 5th and 6th harmonic.

Finishing the session, we showered and enjoyed breakfast out on the lawn - it

was almost a tropical setting with the green grass and beautiful plants and flowers all around! Masala omelets, fruit and coffee made a nice start for the day. Our bus was just pulling in to take us on our tour of the City Palace. On the way they stopped at a fabric factory and a stone-cutter workshop. I thought they were just going to be short stops on the way, but they ended up being several hours. Again, I'm sure they got a bit of a kickback from these places.

Both the shops actually turned out to be more interesting than I thought. The fabric factory was actually an entire textile emporium where workers stamped different patterns onto fabrics, making scarves, tablecloths, table runners and clothes. Some workers were in the back, painstakingly stamping a pattern of elephants on a large tablecloth. We have a few tablecloths like that at home - in fact I'm pretty sure some were from the old Spices Indian restaurant Nisha's family used to run back in VT years ago. I thought about the patterns. A slight unevenness attested to their handiwork - so many fabrics were machine-run, probably flying around conveyer belts that spun by at 60 miles an hour. But these fabrics were all pressed by hand.

A series of wood-blocks were carved to make a 4-colored elephant. Each block had to be dipped in the right ink, aligned just right, tapped by hand several times, and lifted carefully. Once the ink was set, the fabric would need to dry for 48 hours in the sun to cure. Or they could short-cut the curing by dipping the fabric in nitric acid and rinsed.

Lisa fell in love with some of the fabrics and splurged to order a beautiful green sari. I bought a purple scarf with a pattern of elephants - I looked forward to surprising Nisha when I got back with her favorite color and favorite animal! I felt I wanted to patronize the shop somehow after all the effort they went through to show us the process of making the beautiful fabrics.

After the textile emporium, we visited the stone-cutter shop. Cutting and polishing semi-precious stones, they had crafted an array of beautiful jewelry, elephants, peacocks and other housewares. Nisha would have loved one of the bright blue peacocks (her other favorite animal), but the price was just a wee bit out of our range (\$300-\$400) - again the shop was a "tourist site" primarily visited by white people and foreigners with money. I'm sure the tour company got some fat kickbacks when rich people bought some of the museum-quality pieces offered there. After multiple rounds of soft drinks and samosas and biscuits to keep us longer, we finally decided we had enough. We have so many pieces at home, that we've even had to box some things up to keep our shelves from getting too cluttered. At least the rounds of food kept us going for our anticipated part of the day - the Jaipur City Palace!

We were soon on our way to the palace - I was glad to be done with the shopping

and back to the “real stuff”. The City Palace was an architectural wonder - pink walls, elaborate courtyards, sandstone pillars, majestic gates, carved elephants and enormous silver urns. A group was worshipping in a make-shift Hindu temple in the pavilion by the silver urns - a couple harmoniums were playing while some men were performing pujas and women were applying henna on their hands. The harmonium reminded me of Rossini’s Petite Messe Solennelle that we were going to be performing back in CA in a few weeks - I had been studying the music on my iPad in India, and I was looking forward to performing it along with 2 pianos (the famous Jon Nakamatsu on one), and a harmonium. The sound of the harmonium in an Italian mass was like having the sitar in some of the later Beatles works.



*Jaipur City Palace*

The many-storied Chandra Mahal was magnificent, clad in many tiers of eye-candy architecture. Multiple gates with various themes surrounded the courtyard. A “peacock” gate and a “rose” gate were dressed in a feathery finery of color. Several workers were outside, meticulously restoring the flowery designs to their original splendor, using small paintbrushes and an array of different colors.

A museum illustrated the rich history of the maharajas that lived in the palace - dating back many hundreds of years. An adjacent garment museum illustrated the rich fabrics worn by the royalty - elaborate dresses lined with gold threads, flowing pajamas (where we get our word pajama), and royal robes. The armory contained an array of weapons, from daggers to gunpowder flasks to swords with blades 6 inches thick and 4 feet long to “camel guns” that had to be at least 15 feet long. They must have rested on someone’s shoulders or on a camel to point in the right direction - I wouldn’t want to be the one steadying the gun while somebody else was shooting!

A couple guards were standing by the entrance gate – clad in their traditional Rajasthani garments and bright red turbans. A pair of stone elephants guarded the entrance as well – warding off any invading armies or evil spirits. A snake charmer was playing his pipe, trying to carouse his pet cobra out of his basket.

We were not far from the architectural wonder of Jantar Mantar. I had heard of

the place years ago when one of my Indian coworkers visited. He showed pictures of a bunch of mysterious “stairways to heaven” pointing in all different directions. With proper reading, they could tell time with a precision of several seconds as well as predict solar and lunar eclipses for decades. The timing of the monsoon was important for centuries and telling time was a priority for farmers to know when to plant their crops. I was excited that Jantar Mantar was indeed on our tour. We didn’t have time to visit the smaller version of Jantar Mantar in Delhi, but we wouldn’t be disappointed in Jaipur.



*Samrat Yantra sundial in Jantar Mantar*

It turned out to exceed all my expectations after all - Jantar Mantar was magnificent! The name actually just means “calculation instrument” - but it was quite a grand instrument! Stairways ascending at a 27-degree angle (the latitude of Jaipur) measured the precise angle of the sun. The shadow would fall on a semicircular curved arc, carefully labeled with angles. The numbers were written in Hindi (I had to remember the “8” was really a 4 and the “6” was really a 7, and the “9” was really a 1). These angles could be read from tables to tell the time very precisely. The tallest staircase (the Samrat Yantra) was 27 meters high. Walking through the playground of solid geometry I felt like an ant wandering through models of geometric shapes I played with as a kid. Deep bowls labeled with alternating patterns, sundials that looked like cut slices of an orange, and cylinders cut with radial patterns of lines all marked time in a three-dimensional sense. A staircase pointed toward every constellation in the Zodiac (the Roman one) indicating the locations of all 12 sectors of the sky.



*Signs of the zodiac*

The Vedics were very superstitious and would plan weddings around “auspicious” times marked by astronomical events. I guess I was in a way superstitious, noticing how there was an uncanny relationship of lunar eclipses to important events in my life. A lunar eclipse happened in 2004 when the Red Sox broke their curse to win with World Series, a lunar eclipse happened in 2007 and it was announced the next day Bill Gates was going to make a visit to our company, and a solar eclipse was predicted on Oct 23 - perhaps it would correlate to the start of my new job (I was supposed to start on the 22nd), and maybe even the Giants might win the World Series (again!) if the superstition worked... (I did indeed start work around the eclipse - in fact I showed my new CEO how to view it through my eclipse glasses... and the Giants would indeed end up winning the World Series) - whew! I guess I am more superstitious than I thought...



*Hawa Mahal*

Across from Jantar Mantar was the magnificent Hawa Mahal, built in 1799. Its enormous pink face was on all the postcards of Jaipur. I was bummed it was already late in the day and it didn't seem there would be much time to see any of the huge palace. But as we got closer, I realized the Hawa Mahal was actually just an enormous facade - that's all there was to see! Climbing several sets of narrow stairs through some shops across the street, we entered a small jewelry shop that had a small balcony where we sipped drinks with a beautiful sunset view of the giant facade.

We visited the LMB hotel along the busy Johari Bazaar street where we enjoyed a pre-dinner snack and dessert (life is short - eat dessert first!). Sitafel ice cream and a masala chai tea hit the spot. The sitafel (sometimes spelled sitafal) was sweet - a tropical fruit like a cross between lychee and apple. Sitafel sometimes translates to "custard apple". The restaurant was busy - a popular spot for passing tourists and we were lucky to get seated when we did.

Back at the hotel, I got caught up with my daily call with Nisha and my updates on Facebook - I had a running blog going on, keeping people back at home caught up on what I was doing halfway around the world.

For dinner, we got a special treat - a visit to the Baradari Mahal and the Hotel Diggri palace and gardens where we enjoyed a wonderful dinner and puppet show! I got the laal maas - a Rajasthani special. The mutton was tender and flavorful, something I haven't gotten in the US very often. The butter naan complemented the spicy meat nicely. The soothing banana lassi helped cull the spice in my mouth - this was one of the few meals without alcohol since it was Gandhi's birthday. The national icon advocated abstinence from alcohol during his life, so we could honor his wish at least for one day. Alcohol is actually banned many days in India as India recognized many religious and national holidays.

After dinner, some guys were getting a small puppet theatre set up - a nice bit of live entertainment! A tabla player started some rhythms going and a singer gave a melody as a set of dolls took turns on the stage. Colorful marionette dolls about 18 inches high, clad in rich costumes captured our senses as they swayed to the beat. A "snake charmer" doll was playing his pipe as a cobra swayed along in time. A "Michael Jackson" doll was danced the moonwalk - again another blast from the past! Lisa was so captured by the beauty and handicraft of the dolls that she bought a couple of them on the spot - 200 rupees for 2 dolls. I would have happily paid the equivalent of \$3 for a couple of the dolls if I had a way of getting them home - my suitcases had already been full to the brim!



*Puppet show*

We hopped a ride on several autos for our way back to the hotel - it was just a short ride. Along the way, we bumped a scooter, nearly knocking him off balance... he just kept on going as if nothing happened. Judging by the scratches on many of the vehicles on the roads, I imagined these small accidents happened all the time, but with the low speeds on the crowded roadways, they would rarely be serious. I was actually far more distraught by the sight of a desperate woman almost literally “throwing” her baby at us sitting in the backseat of the auto we were riding. I felt if we weren’t careful to “catch” the baby, it would fall, get run-over and get killed. A different woman scratched my shoulder (I was sitting on the other side) to get my attention - I feared she was trying to steal my camera or wallet, but she was just another beggar. I had to steel myself to the level of poverty in the area we passed through the filth on our way from the palace to our villa-like hotel.

### **October 3 - Golden Triangle day 5**

It was a pretty early wake-up since we had a big day scheduled. Breakfast was served at 7:00 - masala omelets, fruit, yoghurt and coffee. I remembered the breakfast orders being rather slow, so most of us ordered breakfast, then showered and packed in our rooms, then about 40 minutes later the plates would be ready. It was a good tactic here - our plates didn’t come out until about 7:45, just in time to scarf down for our 8:00 bus departure for Karauli.

We ended up actually not leaving until 8:30. Kate actually was getting a bit nauseous during breakfast. I feared she had picked up some kind of food poisoning, and since we ate mostly the same thing, I expected my turn of food poisoning to come any minute, maybe somewhere along the long bus ride. It turned out she had just taken a malaria pill (the same ones I was using), and she



was getting the same side-effect I had gotten on the plane at the beginning of the trip. I was really glad to be skipping the pills (and it was so dry and there weren't any mosquitos anyway!) The nausea had cleared up in a couple hours for me, so I reassured her she would be fine too.

We bumped along the dusty streets outside Jaipur as we made our way eastward toward Karauli. Camel carts, oxen, cows on the roadway were common... again anything with wheels or legs was allowed. Ladies carrying piles of sticks on their heads, wheelbarrows carrying loads they were probably not designed for, and buses brimming with people inside as well as hanging outside and sitting on the roof passed by - the "economy" way of travel through the city. We moved slowly, but each stretch of road brought a new surprise about how people lived.

We finally got far enough out of the city when we came to an "express" section - a toll tunnel was ahead. Paying our tariff probably based on our size or number of axles (the categories were all in Hindi), we passed through and hit "freeway" speeds through the smooth tunnel - maybe 80 km / h! I felt we were on the autobahn as we made efficient progress. I hoped there wasn't a surprise speed-bump or pothole that would suddenly appear. I don't imagine any of those overloaded buses we saw earlier trying to get through the express tunnel...

Stopping to pick up gas on the way, I tried to figure out the grades of fuel at one of the stations - they had to accommodate cars, trucks, buses, motorcycles, autorickshaws, tractors and anything that had an engine that used the road. Petrol was 68 rupees / litre (equivalent to about 4 dollars a gallon, slightly more than in the US). Diesel was 58, high-speed diesel was 61, "speed" was 71, and "speed 97" performance fuel was 85.

On our way toward Karauli, we stopped at a rest area to use the facilities. But instead of it being just a quick bathroom stop and coffee, it also featured one of the largest shopping emporiums we had seen yet on our tour. I felt it was a strategic place to get us to shop. The sculptured elephants, wood carvings, marble statues, masks and swords were exquisite. The only people shopping there were foreigners - the only Indians were shopkeepers and people to "help" you spend more money than you planned. I knew we were planning on doing our "real" souvenir shopping back in Kerala after I got back - Nisha and I and her folks were planning on visiting a famous emporium in Trivandrum, known for its wonderful selection and no-hassle shopping. I still felt obligated to buy something at this shop however, so I picked up a small mosaic-tiled elephant for about \$10 (they would have the same one in Trivandrum for about \$3) - we were paying "white-people" tourist prices here.

After doing my business in the restroom, I saw someone there to "help me" turn on the water at the faucet. Apparently my quick gaze in his direction was enough

to “engage his services”. I expected to just turn on the water myself – I didn’t need help, but since he already helped me, I’m sure he would be expecting some form of payment. In Europe, “pay toilets” were common, and 50 euro cents was a typical fare, but here it was an unexpected tax. Even if he didn’t ask for money, it felt like a demeaning “favor”, a bit of a culture shock from America where DIY is fashionable – India is so much the opposite, a service-based culture. My smallest bill was a Rs 100 note (a bit much for just turning on the faucet for me), so I just left, but I guess I would have to owe it to the next guy.

Crossing the Chambal River, we soon came to our destination for the next night. The itinerary indicated it as a “rural heritage” stay - I imagined we would be staying in a village maybe with some locals, for a “truer sense of the culture”. Of course, for me, staying with Nisha’s parents back in Kerala and shopping the local streets and markets was a cultural experience in itself. I brought a few photographs of me and my wife to give to some of the people that might be hosting us. I was eager to meet and befriend some of the local people and see how they got around, since so far we had been more as “tourists” instead of “travelers”, merely visiting places and not really experiencing them.

We pulled off the dusty street through a side street and through a gate toward a palace. We were actually going to be staying there! We were at the Bhanwar Vilas Palace, a royal residence built in 1938 by Maharaja Ganesh Pal Deo Bhadur. The colonial-style palace was clad in saffron-yellow and white on its exterior, and its interior was decorated with numerous regal pieces of art, carpets, majestic dining rooms, and hunting trophies - including a full-grown tiger in the lobby! We were blessed with tilaks of red powder on our foreheads as we entered.

My room was like that of a castle - enormous vaulted ceilings, elegant chandeliers and majestic artwork. I’m sure to stay at a similar place back in the US or Europe would be at least hundreds of dollars a night, but in India, we could live like kings for a fraction of the price! Nisha and I could probably just move to India, not even bother finding jobs, and live like royalty off of our investments for a while. It did feel a bit lonely, however. The guy who would have been my roommate for the trip ended up paying the single supplement, guaranteeing him a private room. In turn, that ended up giving me a private room as well (without me having to pay..) The entire palace was almost empty - although there were dozens of buildings, there were only a couple other people staying the night we were there. The other rooms seemed long-abandoned, like a ghost town.

Lunch was at the royal dining room - on a kingly wooden table probably 25 feet long and 6 feet wide, dressed with elegant tablecloths and candles. The lunch itself was surprisingly simple and actually a bit bland - just carrot and celery sandwiches (with crusts removed), lentil soup, and some fried snacks. The decor

had me anticipating a giant roast suckling pig with an apple in its mouth or something similar on a kingly platter. It didn't bother me too much though - I was actually thinking more about how much time we would have to explore the vast grounds of the palace. Seeing that it was mostly empty, I wondered what we would be able to peek into.



*Courtyard of our palace*

After lunch, most people opted to relax and just enjoy a nap. I was tired but felt there was too much I would miss otherwise... The room next door had an enormous pool table — one of the biggest I had ever seen. It had to be at least 12 feet long and 6 feet wide, with dozens of red balls and various multicolored other balls. I don't know the rules of snooker (a British style of pool - I'm guessing that's what this table was), but it looked much more difficult than regular pool. The bridge had to have an extender to accommodate cases where you had to reach a long distance across the table.

Beautiful artwork covered many of the walls in various rooms, sculpted plants filled the gardens, and an array of old weaponry displayed in an armory made for an interesting museum. Holding one of the spears that had to be 12 feet long, I felt like a mighty warrior (although I could barely lift it!) I imagined being carried in one of the covered palanquins with 4 people taking me from one hall to another. Sculptures, sandstone pots, and statues dotted the grounds, some appearing to still be works in progress. Several other buildings appeared abandoned as well - their walls covered in festive arrays of artwork and colorful patterns. A set of narrow stairs led to a small door on the 4th floor of one of the old buildings. The door was ajar, the lock apparently broken years ago. Creaking open the door, I came to the bird-scat splattered roof, arrayed with old stone benches and tables with sections long broken off. Stepping gingerly along one of the weathered paths, I came to a view overlooking the gardens below.

The spires of a majestic palace lay probably just a mile away up a hill. Back in the gardens, a row of large carved tiles lay on one side of one of the paths. A deep well had been dug just ahead - perhaps 10 feet in diameter and quite deep. Looking (carefully) over the edge, I felt the blackness deep in the chasm sucking me into the void below. A ladder clung tenuously to one side, running for at least 50-60 feet straight down - I wasn't about to give it a try.

My feet were tired afterward and I could just enjoy a cup of hot tea for 1/2 hour. I think my mind was as tired as my body - all the sensory overload of the last several days was catching up with me. It would take months to go through all the pictures properly and digest everything I had experienced, and starting a new job I had no idea when I would have time!

We got back together as a group to make a tour of the nearby city palace. Walking the grounds, we came across an old swimming pool - maybe 2/3 full of rather scummy water. If it were clean, it would have been inviting for a swim - the colorful tile reminding me of the pools on the extensive grounds of Hearst castle. I guess we were there on a "shoulder season" before the real crowds started to arrive. We later came across a bunch of antique cars sat in garages leading up to a farm. Classic DeSoto and Bedford cars from the 30's and 40's were like that from a museum, though I wonder the last time they were serviced or used. Several horses were sitting in their stalls by the farm - they were docile and appeared to be handled and fed well. A herd of cows was feeding as well - some appeared to be in need of milking soon! The familiar smells of the farm reminded me of days as a kid visiting farms in PA on a school field trip. I wonder if after this we can legitimately say on our immigration cards that we haven't "been in close proximity to livestock" in fears that we would bring back some kind of weird "mad cow" disease to the US.

Walking the dusty streets outside the palace, we started to accumulate a posse of children interested in our whereabouts. After probably 10 minutes we had a contingent of a dozen kids - they were so cute! We took turns photographing each other - I was as interested in getting their photos as they were to see themselves on the magic screen on my camera. They didn't beg or ask for money - they were just curious - I imagine the small town of Karauli doesn't get a lot of foreign visitors. A bright orange statue of a god was sitting next to a temple - I clicked a photo, and when he heard the sound of the shutter clicking, his head turned slightly - the "statue" was actually a real person, probably wanting money.

The Karauli City Palace was a majestic 600 year-old masterpiece of Mughal architecture built for the royal family. I had never heard of it, but the description sounded fascinating. It turned out the spired roof I had seen earlier was the city palace after all - we could see it as we got closer. Coming to the main entrance, we crossed through a triple gate, arrayed in colorful tiled mosaic work of floral

patterns. It was as extravagant as the Rococo-styled churches in Germany we had seen over the summer, where every square inch of the walls and archways was covered with some detail.

Crossing into one of the main courtyards, we came to a geometrically arrayed sandstone patio, decked with some old gardens, in need of a bit of tending. The palace had an abandoned look all around - flocks of black crows swooshed back and forth like something of an Alfred Hitchcock movie. A couple monkeys ran along the eaves by one of the roofs. The sun was getting low, casting an eerie twilight over the setting. It would have been the perfect setting for a bunch of ghost stories, which made it all the more fascinating to explore. I imagine the ghosts of the ancient maharajas and their concubines still embodied in the cackles of the black birds circling overhead. A crematorium lay by the nearby river, a macabre setting.



*Inside the abandoned palace*

If something like this were in the US, I'm sure it would have been closed years ago, until the authorities made it into a museum, only available by docent-led tours. Here, we would explore at will, wandering the grounds. Of course I had no idea really where to go - following our guide was the best option after all. Opening of the doors across the courtyard, we came to a giant sitting-room, clad with bright red carpet, ornately decorated blue columns, and intricate mosaic patterned ceilings and walls. Nothing seemed "off-limits" - several of us took turns sitting on the royal shaped mattresses, with built-in head and foot-rests, staring at the patterns all around us. The palace would be a "gold mine" for my "ceilings around the world" project!

The sun was getting low, and our guide knew the palace was a spectacular sunset spot. Climbing several sets of narrow stairs, using flashlights to light our way through the darkened corridors, we emerged at an upper level just below the roof. Patterned arches festooned with splashes of various colors yet again filled our sights. There was too much to see - I started taking flash photos in various directions, each time seeing another gaudy design revealed by the flash. A dance floor and puppet theatre lay in one of the rooms - I imagined the puppets from the previous evening dancing to music of pipes and drums. Finally, we came to our last set of stairs, taking us right to the roof. A monkey had just scurried by a few minutes ago - it wasn't safe to set anything down since it might not be there when you looked back!

The sun was an immense orange ball hanging just above the horizon. A picture-perfect Rajasthani sunset, straight out of the postcards of India. I imagined the view on the cover of the India coffee-table books we had at home. The sun set over the Kalisil River lined with temples on both sides. I felt like an explorer who had traveled for months to come across an ancient wonder - my camera was clicking feverishly to capture every detail before it was forgotten to time.



*Sunset*

Making our way back through the palace, we descended more sets of winding and uneven stairs in the dark. Using my cell-phone flashlight, I poked in various directions to glimpse the wonders we were passing. I was reminded of one of the first caves I went to in CA - Crystal Sequoia cave in the heart of Sequoia national park. Arrayed in glittering stalactites, flowstone and brimstones, the cave had surprises around every bend. Being mostly dark now, I felt the palace was a cave waiting to be explored. I could have spent hours wandering its many corridors, colonnaded passageways, mirrored halls, and courtyards.

On our way back to our hotel palace, we passed by an old Hindu temple - a Sri Krishna temple. It was getting near the end of the 9-day Navratri festival. The temple was packed - hundreds of women dressed in elegant multi-colored saris were seated on the floor while the men stood around. The women were clapping and dancing to the chanting and rhythm of cymbals and tabla drums. Inside were 3 "stages" where different gods were set up. The worshipers inside took turns rushing back and forth as a different stage was opened and the lights illuminated the god inside. The temple was an overload of the senses - smells of incense filled the air as the gaudy sights and sounds filled the scene. No photos were allowed - it was a place of worship, and turning it into a "tourist stop" would be a demeaning intrusion to their practice.

Back at our hotel palace, it was nice to get cleaned up and caught up with my daily chat with Nisha back in Ernakulum back "home". I had much journaling to get caught up with as well - there was no way to try and remember everything! If someday my mind started failing me I didn't want these memories to be lost.

We were going to have a late dinner in our courtyard. I was hungry after the long day. Happy hour was being served - we enjoyed drinks in the courtyard gardens. I don't think I had a rum & coke since Las Vegas several months earlier, but they had it there. Several of us got drinks and enjoyed taking turns getting clad in saris and turbans. Lisa's sari she had bought earlier in the day finally arrived. It was a beautiful silk fabric, about 6 feet wide and over 20 feet long. It was a work of art, illustrating the extravagance of centuries of Indian tradition. It took probably 1/2 hour to get it wrapped and tied properly, but she looked like a queen once it was done! Two other women picked out saris (just trying them on) so all 3 came out like fashion models. Several women in our group got henna applied - elegant filigree curlicue patterns adorning their hands.

Several of the men (me included) wore Rajasthani-style turbans. My turban was a strip of bright red fabric at least 10 feet long when unrolled, but it would become a work of art when they started winding it and shaping it around my head. Once I was seated, somebody started wrapping it repeatedly around my head, seemingly tighter and tighter, like my brain was going to get crushed inside! But as the fabric started to take shape, it turned into a brilliant headdress of royalty. Instead of a Punjabi-style turban (which is what I've associated with India), it was flatter and had a bit of a "tail" sticking out.

Dinner was being served - we were like royalty, being served a local red wine and enjoying a feast of soup and rice and vegetables. The dinner itself was rather simple (which was fine after a long day), but dinner by candlelight under a full moon was blissful.

It was probably 11 by the time we got to bed - I did my best to sleep as much as I

could - we would be up early and would need our energy as an even bigger day was on tap for tomorrow.



*Turbans, saris and henna*

#### **October 4 - Golden Triangle day 6**

The alarm chimed at 5:30 in the morning - we had many miles to cover and places to see on our way toward Agra. Traffic in India was always an adventure, and we didn't want to take any chances of missing something we might regret later on. I knew we were stopping along the way at some place called "Fatehpur Sikri", but I had never heard of it and I didn't have many expectations of it. It would be a bonus if it turned out to be interesting.

Checking out at 6:00 am, we saw the sun just starting to rise as we departed from our palatial home for the previous evening. I wished we could have stayed a bit longer, but then we would have to have missed something else - conflicting intentions after all. Breakfast was served in to-go boxes - we didn't want to spend any more time than we needed since efficiency was of the essence.

It was a long and slow drive in our coach on our way to Agra. The sun rose brilliantly over one of the desert lakes outside Karauli, reflected in the serene water as in a mirror. The roadway was fraught with many dangers - deep potholes, rough speed bumps, various tolls, and even occasionally opposing traffic would share our lane to get around obstacles. In one section, the road appeared to be under construction, necessitating a circuitous detour.

Stonecutters lined both sides of the road - forging beautiful temple-like chhatra portico structures, statues, and sandstone columns and lintels for palace-like homes. Occasionally we caught glimpses of the workers in action. A circular blade perhaps 5 feet in diameter was running, cooled by sprays of water, cutting



chunks of the pink sandstone into various forms. Brick factories lay a short ways beyond - their tall smokestacks lining the landscape like giant pillars. There were dozens of these factories - many families probably worked long and hard hours to make ends meet in the blazing desert heat while running the red-hot brick furnaces. A funeral procession was passing through – a body was wrapped in garlands on a mat, carried by 4 people along the side of the road. Meanwhile many of us were dozing in our air-conditioned bus as we motored through.

We made a short coffee break a couple hours into our journey at the uninspired-named “Rajasthan Motel – Restaurent ACRooms” (with the misspelling) - the steaming caffeinated drink slowly waking me from my slumber. A tube of biscuits would keep me going until lunch. As we were getting ready to get back on the bus, I noticed one of our guys Julius hanging his head down. I thought he was just really tired (I was hanging my head down at times too), but he was actually starting to get sick - bummer. I’m sure the long bus ride along the dusty roads wasn’t helping either. I was actually a bit stuffed up as well - the dust must have been triggering my allergies. I never felt like I was coming down with a cold and I wasn’t feverish, but I did lose my sense of smell (and taste) for a day or so. I knew it would probably clear by the time I got back down to Kerala in the tropical moisture and out of the desert - I kept my fingers crossed.

We soon came to our first big sight of the day - Fatehpur Sikri! I was reading about the red sandstone wonder, but didn’t find much information. I’d have to witness it in person to really appreciate it. It was already getting pretty warm by the time we got off the bus to enter the site - drinking plenty of water would be the key. We wouldn’t be able to drive completely to Fatehpur Sikri - we would walk a short way and then take a short bus ride to the main part.

My memory card was nearly full, even though we still had 2 more days on the tour! I debated about trying to spend 1/2 hour or so, deleting photos off my camera that evening in the hotel - at least to finish the tour. I could have Nisha and her folks pick up a card in Ernakulum so I’d have an extra one when I got back. But upon entering Fatehpur Sikri, a passerby overheard me saying something about that I wished I had more memory in my camera. He came up to me and presented an 8 GB SanDisk memory card - 1400 rupees. He was actually a salesman, whipping out memory cards from his pockets to sell. He was persistent - but I planned to save my money and get one back in Ernakulum (it probably should have only been around 700-800 rupees). He followed me like my shadow, looking for opportunities to make a sale - he wasn’t as bad as the persistent woman in Delhi, and he left for a while. But when I was waiting to get on the bus, he showed up again, offering to sell it for 700 rupees after all. I had a look at it and it appeared legit - it said SanDisk Corporation, Milpitas, CA - in my backyard back home! I pulled out the bills to pay him, inserted the card into my camera and took a couple test photos - worked - whew! I just hoped it wouldn’t

develop some weird problem a couple days later...

We met our guide Peter who was going to show us around the 16th century architectural wonder. Fatehpur Sikri was the capital of the Mughal Empire from 1571 and 1585 and is now an UNESCO world heritage site. If it wasn't overshadowed by the more famous Taj Mahal in Agra, I could imagine it being one of the corners of the Golden Triangle instead. I was glad to have the new memory card - it was going to get filled pretty quick!



*Fatehpur Sikri*

Clad in elegant carved red Sikri sandstone, the red city was a masterpiece of a synthesis of several types of engineering, including Gujarati and Bengali design. Influences from Hinduism, Jainism, and Islam shape the architecture. The Diwan-i-Khas, the hall of private audience with its elegant 4-spoked central column greeted us as we entered. I felt like a kid in a vast playground once again. It was quite hot outside now, but it was so beautiful everywhere, and I was constantly finding new angles to compose photographs. After seeing postcards with the “typical” views of the buildings, I worked on composing unique shots that would personalize my experience in a different way. Otherwise, it seemed like if we just got the “postcard” views, would we even need to go in the first place, or just find pictures on the internet when we got home instead?

A large Turkish bath sat at one end - a couple people were goofing around, diving off the 20-ft walls into a murky pool below. I was surprised people were swimming in the scummy water - if the water was clean, however, it would be a wonderful spot! I got a photo of one of the guys just as he was about to jump, and as soon as I was ready to click, he seemed to “chicken out” - he wouldn't jump. I was sure he was the same guy who had just jumped earlier, so why did he suddenly get scared to jump again? Maybe he came to his senses, realizing

the water was so disgusting he didn't want to get some kind of weird infection. It turns out actually, he saw that I was wanting to take a photo, and he was asking for money - Rs 100 so I could get a picture of him jumping. I forgot it seemed like everything in India had something to do with money - the guys jumping were probably beggars, looking for an easy way to make money off tourists.

One of the world's largest Parcheesi boards was embedded in the tiled courtyard. I had played the game as a kid with my brother and parents, never realizing it was actually a game of strategy invented in India centuries ago! Parcheesi, also called Pachisi or Ludo is the "national game of India" (they must mean "board game" since I would say cricket was really the national game). For me it was a children's game, but it was played by nobility with actual human figures at Fatehpur Sikri. The courtyard was lined with fountains and pools, with pathways connecting the various buildings. Stone-pierced patterned screens adorned many of the walls. The multi-tiered Panch Mahal, house and palace containing several levels, including an enormous bed you needed a ladder to climb onto, all surrounded the giant courtyard.

The entire site was quite empty - only handfuls of tourists were strolling the grounds. The Jama Masjid mosque was enormous - like the one in Delhi, it was an impressive piece of architecture built in 1571-5. Entering the complex, we took our shoes off and walked the cloth pathways protecting our feet from the blazing stone underneath. The marble tomb of Salim Chishti gleamed brilliantly in the bright sun. The white tile was a relief for the feet - the marble was much cooler than the rough burning-hot sandstone! Finally, the 54-meter Buland Darwaza gate is one of the largest in the world. If my feet weren't on fire, I would have loved to go out a bit more and explore the intricacies of the architecture, but I'd have to come back on a cooler day...



*Tomb inside the mosque*

Walking back to the bus, we passed a number of ruins outside the Fatehpur Sikri complex - perhaps more architectural wonders were still waiting to be discovered. Supposedly they had found a tomb in the Champagne region of France very recently, though there weren't many details yet. I wonder if it would turn out to be a vast discovery - there was much excavation work to be done. I've always been fascinated with the potential of what wonders may still lie hidden.

We stopped for a quick buffet lunch en route to Agra. I was quite hungry again, but was eager to make it to Agra. Agra was the most anticipated part of our tour. When we got close, however, the traffic seemed to come to a complete standstill. Again we speculated that there was some kind of VIP thing going on - it was still close to Gandhi's birthday, and the Navratri festival was still going on. It seems like there was never a "quiet" time to visit - there was always something going on. The Muslim holiday Eid was about to start as well. Being stuck in traffic, parked in a gridlock of vehicles, gave us a chance to observe some of the locals from the anonymity of the bus. A guy was receiving a shave at a barbershop with a bare metal straight razor, a couple ladies were weaving with a hand-loom in a shop, and somebody was sleeping in a car of a small make-shift amusement park ride. A building was under construction with a floor recently added, supported by a seemingly random arrangement of bent sticks that would appear to topple like dominos if one was bumped. A small boy was peeking through an opening in a wall from a missing brick. We never did find out the cause of the traffic - but after about 45 minutes it started to trickle forward once again.

We had reached the climax of the Golden Triangle - the "crown jewel" of India - the magnificent Taj Mahal! My friend had made a weekend side-trip during a 2-week business trip to Bangalore to work at HP to see the architectural wonder. I made a 2-week trip to Bangalore back in 2005 and I could have tried to visit the Taj Mahal back then if I was ambitious enough, but instead I visited some of the sights in south India including Mysore, Ooty and Kodaikanal, hill stations in the mountains famous for churches, temples and palaces.

We had a couple chances to make it to the Taj Mahal - once in the late afternoon, around sunset, and one around sunrise the next day. Supposedly sunrise was the best to avoid the crowds and blazing heat, but it involved a 5:00 wake-up. Hmmm - we'd have to see how much that would be worth it.

We arrived at the Pushp Villa hotel in the early afternoon - our home for the next 2 nights. We actually made it in better time than we expected after all, so it was nice to get to lie down for an hour or so, get cleaned up and relax before heading out again. I turned on the TV for the first time during the trip - nothing was in English, but I came across a rather entertaining show, which was a cross between a cheesy Bollywood dance cinema and a gaudy Japanese game show.

People had to run, perform calisthenics and choreographed moves, but of course there was one 300 lb fat guy who was the “woobie” who became the star of the show, like how William Hung became (in)famous on American Idol!

Unfortunately, Julius wasn't getting much better - he had developed a rather painful stomach illness and wouldn't be able to join us for the Taj Mahal. A doctor came to the hotel to check on him and give him some medication. I was keeping my fingers crossed - it had been over a week and so far I was still fine. As long as we drank bottled water (with the original cap on it) and ate at “clean” restaurants and ate hot food we should be fine. I kept my fingers crossed for his illness to clear up so he wouldn't miss the climax of our trip!

We drove as close as we could to the entrance of the Taj Mahal - we were probably 1 km away before we realized it would be faster to get off and walk than to continue forward stuck in traffic. Nil went out ahead of us, securing tickets for us. He managed to get us high-end tickets giving us “fast-track” access to the monuments. The “good” tickets were Rs 750 and the “normal” ones were Rs 50. Anticipating the heavier than usual crowds due to the Navratri holiday, the extra Rs 700 (less than \$12) would probably save us 2 hours of waiting - a no brainer! Hearing they get 3 million visitors a year made me realize it was probably one of the most visited monuments in the world.

We walked along the main street. Some people were going in “style”, riding chariots pulled by horses festooned with multicolored accouterments. Although it looked like a stylish means of travel, none of us really felt good about it. One of the tenets of belief that the Intrepid travel company advocates is respect for the local culture in a sustaining manner. We didn't have any interest in the elephant rides at the Amber fort in Jaipur, and after seeing the malnourished horses going back and forth taking people to the Taj Mahal (many horses were not just walking, but many were trotting and even cantering in the blazing heat). I hoped the horses were being fed properly, but many looked quite tired and dehydrated.

Just getting to the entrance gate of the Taj Mahal was a magnificent experience. The gate itself was probably 80-100 feet high, solid packed with people all around. Inching our way forward through the crowd, we were able to finally glimpse the marble edifice that was the signature of India - the fabled Taj Mahal. The entrance of the gate made a perfect frame. A flurry of phones and cameras held over people's heads paralleled the sense of wonder in people's faces as they gazed upon the sight for the first time. It appeared out of a fairy tale - so grand that it actually appeared like a giant postcard. We would have to walk a ways before it started to appear three-dimensional. The edifice took a full 22 years to build, and has gone through many periods of restoration - on par with many of the grand European cathedrals.



*Entrance gate to the Taj Mahal*

I was looking forward to seeing the different angles of the Taj Mahal - it seemed like the only view people ever saw was the front-on shot with the symmetry of the reflecting pool and rows of trees on both sides. We got our obligatory photos in front before pressing on forward. The main difference in the photo in real life was the enormous crowds of people all around on the paths on both sides and on the main plinth of the main structure. I wonder if on all the postcards they just photoshopped out all the people, or they scheduled a 1-hour closure of the entire Taj Mahal to the public, only allowing access to photographers with special VIP permits to line up and take photos... Even though our pictures were cluttered with people, and some of the trees were slightly uneven on both sides, it added an authenticity to the experience that wasn't there in the postcards.

One row of pools was followed by another, and then a raised pedestal a little further down probably provided the best view. A column of fountains bisected the view of the Taj as it was reflected in the blue pools below. Most of the people were hidden behind the rows of trees - the architects were smart where they planted them! We took turns doing the obligatory shot as well, holding our finger in mid-air while a buddy got our photo, lining up the finger to "touch" the top of the white dome. My finger "missed" by an inch - oh well - I'd have to "fix" it in Photoshop when I got home.

We finally made it up the steps to the main plinth, raised maybe 20 feet above the ground level, putting on sets of booties to protect the brilliant marble. Two enormous red sandstone mosques stood on either side of the main Taj Mahal.

When I was a kid I thought the Taj itself was a mosque, but actually it's a mausoleum to the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan's wife Mumtaz Mahal. The emperor's remains were placed next to his wife's after he died. The mosques are adjacent to the Taj Mahal. Racks of lockers stood near each entrance as worshipers would take off their shoes for worship.

A deep red-orange sun was setting over one of the small pavilion domes next to one of the enormous minarets. Visible through the columns of the pavilion, it made the dome appear as if it housed a magical glowing red orb. The main gate was just ahead, clad with a verse from the Koran written in elegant large pishtaq-styled Arabic writing - translated to English it means "O Soul, thou art at rest. Return to the Lord at peace with Him, and He at peace with you". The writing itself was a work of art. In Islam, they don't believe in idols or icons for worship - no statues, gold-plated elephants or bull statues, so the experience of worship seemed very "clean" and uncluttered, especially compared to the over-the-top experience at the Hindu temple earlier.



*It matches my ticket!*

An enormous line mostly of local Indians was so long it wrapped almost completely around the main structure. The wait had to be at least an hour or more. Thanks to our "VIP" tickets, we got right up to the main door after just a minute or two. However, at the confluence of these "rivers" of humanity, people were packed shoulder-to-shoulder inside. I felt the only way to move safely forward was to hold the shoulder of the person in front of me with one hand while holding my camera with the other hand. It was stuffy, crowded and hot, like a sauna. When I hear about stampedes during religious festivals in India, I could imagine a situation like this, where a panic would cause a maelstrom of chaos. Fortunately here, though it was unpleasant and crowded, people moved steadily forward like a viscous fluid.

A guard near the entrance made sure people didn't stop to try to get pictures of the tombs inside - that was "off-limits" (though I've seen pictures online - obviously somebody has done it). Fortunately in the back of the main chamber, behind the tombs, the crowd let up. I couldn't use my flash, but I managed to prop the camera on various railings to get a few photos in the dimly lit chamber. The two tombs were visible through gaps in the latticed barrier surrounding them. Bas-relief patterns of flowers and leaves adorned the walls and panels of designs surrounded the main chamber.

The main structure actually contained several different chambers. I was relieved to be finished with the main one where I could move aside and catch my breath (almost in a literal sense as well!) I knew our group had dispersed a bit so I wandered quickly around the other chambers, capturing unusual angles of the soaring marble vaults of the ceiling and floral patterns. I had worked with tilings and patterns on a research project back at MIT, and I was fascinated in the geometric shapes, illustrating hexagonal tilings or enhanced forms of a truncated square lattice or a cantellated triangular lattice. I should start a new album of "patterns around the world".

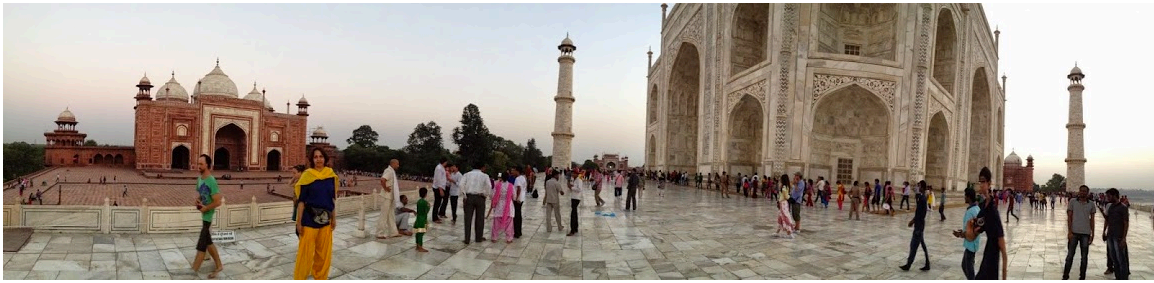


*Tombs inside*

Coming out on the side of the Taj Mahal, I saw others from our group coalescing once again. A dusky view over the Yamuna River gave a unique perspective to the grand monument. I didn't realize the river was right there – you never see it in the postcards! Several other monuments were visible on the shores of the river further downstream, and the Agra fort was visible in the other direction. The moon was shining brightly, and to cap off a wonderful evening at the monument, as we were walking back toward the entrance gate, we were greeted with fireworks! Navratri was wrapping up, and revelers were celebrating victory over



evil in the Hindu mythology.



*Outside the Taj Mahal*

I picked up a couple postcards down the street - 5 for about Rs 50 (\$1), but the postage fee was confusing. I needed 3 stamps, and the figure on the stamp showed "15 00" - like it was just Rs 15. But that didn't seem to be enough - international for only 25 cents? That's less than 1st class domestic in the US! They couldn't be 1500 (that's \$25) - he ended up selling the postcards with 3 stamps for Rs 500 total (so the stamps added to Rs 450, 150 each). The figure should have then read "150" not "15 00". I'm sure I got ripped off somehow, but the post offices weren't open now, and we wouldn't have time to shop around, so I just took it. Apparently someone else in the group went to a different shop and managed to get a bunch of stamps for Rs 90 - a bit cheaper, but nothing close to 15. The postcards made it in a couple weeks - not too bad.

As we walked out of the souvenir shop, a "party bus" passed by, followed by hordes of revelers for Navratri. An array of horns playing loud Hindi music were blaring - there were at least 8 horns on the front, maybe 8 more on the back and who knows how many more on each side - I lost count somewhere around 22 horns... A statue of a Hindu god was sitting on the roof of the bus - I think it was Durga. People in India really knew how to celebrate! A group of people was balancing jars on their heads. Fireworks, bright colors, faces covered in powder (reminiscent of the Holi festival I attended in Kathmandu back in March), and festive music and dance. Rangoli sand patterns had been painted on the street, partially obscured by puffs of multicolored powder that overflowed as people greeted each other, touching each other with the color. I would have to read about it when I got home - it was a sensory overload (I felt Indians were quite good at overloading the senses), full of symbolism and tradition that I didn't understand, but that made it all the more fascinating.

It had been a wonderful climax to our trip - I felt I had seen some of the best wonders of the world! I realized it was to the day exactly 6 months since one of my previous trips, experiencing a wonder of the world. On Apr 4, we summited Island Peak (over 20,300 ft high) and on October 4 of the previous year, I summited Mt Goode in the eastern Sierra - one of the most majestic areas of the mountains I had seen. Looking back, the year off I had taken has truly been a

tour of superlatives in my life. I was ready to get back to start working and get back to a “normal” life for a while. I don’t have any regrets about the time I had taken off.

We had our final “celebration dinner” as a full group. Half of the group would be leaving the next day since they were making an extension to several other cities with a different guide. Just down the street was the Maya restaurant, a popular hang-out. A sitar player and tabla drummer provided some soothing entertainment as we enjoyed plates of Mughal chicken and Kingfisher beers.

### **October 5 - Golden Triangle day 7**

The next morning, we enjoyed breakfast at the hotel - watching the parrots roaming around by the roof-deck. We could glimpse the domes of the distant Taj Mahal poking through the trees. It was a little bittersweet - half our group was going to be leaving a day early to catch up with a couple others, on an extension to Varanasi, Chitwan national park in Nepal and Kathmandu. Of course for me the “extension” had already happened 6 months ago. A couple others were going to extend even further and visit the Annapurna sanctuary from Kathmandu, doing a few days of trekking. I was happy to share photos still on my phone from my Everest Base Camp trek 6 months ago. I wished them good luck - enjoy Varanasi, chase the tigers and rhinos while riding the elephants in Chitwan, and enjoy the mountains in Nepal.

Luckily, Julius was feeling better and would be able to see the Taj Mahal after all - whew! The rest of us checked out and headed down to visit the magnificent Agra Fort. It was a bit anticlimactic in a way, having already seen the Taj Mahal. I was glad it was so beautiful the previous evening - no need to bust my butt to wake up at 5 am to try to catch sunrise there! I didn’t have a lot of expectations about the rest of the trip - it was all “bonus” from this point on.

The Agra Fort was actually quite a masterpiece - constructed in the 1500’s on the banks of the Yamuna river, consisting of double ramparts with massive circular bastions and walls over 70 feet high. Entering through the impressive Amar Singh gate, we were immediately filled in awe and wonder. We had skipped seeing the Red Fort in Delhi (they said to not waste your time since this one is better...) - we were not at all disappointed.

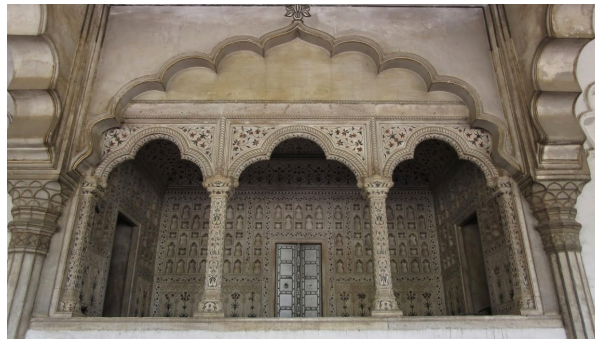
The Jahangiri Mahal (palace) with its marble columns, domes and pavilions were reminiscent of parts of Fatehpur Sikri and the Taj Mahal. The glass mosaic walls and ceiling of the ornate Sheesh Mahal looked like a crystal cavern. Supposedly if you went in at night with a candle, the reflections of the candlelight in the mosaic of tiny mirrors would appear as stars all around. Small niches in the walls of one room looked like dragon mouths with teeth, again casting a strange “vibe” over the room. It was interesting to visit, stirring the imagination in many ways,

but I couldn't imagine living in such a kind of place! Some sections were under renovation - India had been going through many renovations recently, restoring many of its monuments to their former glory, after years of pollution and acid rain had started to damage their beauty.



*Agra Fort*

A wonderful surprise of the Agra Fort was the view through some of the upper-story windows overlooking the Taj Mahal and the Yamuna river, offering a unique perspective. The holes in the hexagonal lattice-work made for an unusual geometric frame. As at Fatehpur Sikri, the Agra Fort also illustrated a syncretism of Hindu, Jain, and Islamic architecture. Instead of patterns of calligraphy decorating the structures, dragons, elephants and bird images were found. In a way I enjoyed the fort even more than the Taj Mahal itself – it wasn't crowded, it gave a unique view, and inspired my mind in unexpected ways.



*Architecture in the fort*

One of the last stops we made on our grand tour of Agra was at the Kanu carpet factory. The designs were magnificent, featuring floral patterns, religious icons, elephants and other animals and an array of geometric designs. All of the rugs were designed by hand without the aid of computers or any mechanical devices. The yarns were all natural, dyed with no artificial colors. The main building was full of blueprints rolled and stacked along the walls - hundreds of them. Each was meticulously drawn by hand, only using rulers and compasses to make precise geometric shapes.



*Rug being made*

These designs would be outsourced to women in the surrounding villages where they could work at home, weaving the rugs stitch by stitch according to the design. A typical rug 6 feet wide by 8 feet long could take a half a year to weave. Outside the shop, they had a sample loom set up where they were about 1/3 of the way through a rug. The yarn would be passed through a set of 3 threads, and then cut to make a stitch. A whole row of stitches would be set before the weaver would push the stitches down to compress the row with the previous row. Then the threads would be reversed with a switch on the top of the loom, sort of like an enormous pedal harp. They would continue until the entire rug was set, all 700,000 stitches of it.

Then the rug would be trimmed with hand shears, trimmed again, and smoothed to make all the stitches even and smooth. A couple workers were trimming a rug that was just finished a couple days ago, repeatedly evening out the pile across its surface to make a smooth finish with a nap that sheens in one direction and has a texture in the other direction. Once the rug is trimmed, it is washed. A couple other workers were rinsing and sweeping and mopping a recently trimmed

rug. The finished product was a beautiful hand-crafted masterpiece.

I expected the rugs to be a bit out of my price range as we stepped downstairs into a showroom. It seemed more of a rug museum - exotic patterns and designs all crafted by hand. I braced for a hard-core sales pitch as rug after rug was unfurled. Samosas and tea were served and then another round came by. The first rugs were in the thousands of dollars, then another set of slightly smaller rugs were shown, and then several more sets were unfurled from largest to smallest. Of course all of the rugs were "on sale" with today's "special discount". I wasn't intent on buying anything - again I knew we would be paying "white man's" tourist prices since this rug shop appeared to have a partnership with several tour companies. The secret handshake worked well - tourists got to see how these exotic rugs were meticulously made but then they were expected to buy something - you couldn't feel you could leave until there was a sale.

The stalemate finally ended about 45 minutes later when somebody bought a small rug of an elephant for about \$80. I had bought a similar rug on my last trip to Bangalore - a 3 ft by 4 ft pattern that they were selling for about \$400. I had bought the same one in Bangalore while accompanied with a coworker who grew up in Bangalore, so I paid a price more akin to what a local would have paid - around \$150. I'm glad I didn't have to feel obliged to buy anything once they bought the elephant rug - whew!

We had the option to try to visit one or two "bonus" places such as Akbar's tomb, but I was happy to go to the pool, swim in the waterfalls surrounding the refreshing water, and sip a mango lassi. Our guide Nil didn't really know how to swim, but he was having a grand time in the pool anyway!

We had our final farewell at a nearby hotel and restaurant also often used by tour groups. The guides all seemed to know each other since they frequented the same places. It was a bit of an anticlimactic finish of the trip - with a smaller group this time. But at this point, I was just happy to be able to get back to Delhi and make my flight the next day to get back to the family back in Kerala.

Our 9:10 train to Delhi had been delayed - it was already quite late and I would have minded leaving several hours earlier. But this was the "high-speed" express train, which would get to Delhi in half the time. The wait was worth it in the end - we did indeed make it back in just under 2 hours, reaching our platform at 11:30. People were sleeping in their vehicles and even along the median of the road as we neared our hotel - I forgot how many homeless people there were in Delhi. Our van got us back to the Hotel Metro View by midnight where I promptly hit the sack and called it a night.



*Our train arriving*

### **October 6 - back to Kerala**

I had forgotten the hotel didn't have any windows, so it was still pitch-dark when my alarm buzzed at 7:30. In fact, Jaipur was the only hotel on the entire Golden Triangle tour to have windows - often the rooms would have faux "window-shades" that just hid a utility panel or something. We talked about trying to revisit one or two of the sights in Delhi we missed in the beginning, but I was happy just getting to the airport. Kate had already left (she was headed to Kerala as well, though her schedule was packed and we wouldn't be able to meet up). The rest of us enjoyed our last breakfast buffet before checking out and heading to the airport. It was just Michelle, Christian, Cleo and me now (Lisa was staying another day to pick up what she missed on her first day since she got in late - and she had to spend a couple hours on the phone dealing with travel insurance headaches).

Our group kept getting smaller - it was bittersweet as the grand tour was ending. I was the only one going to the domestic terminal at the airport for my flight back to Kochi. I was ready to leave the dry and dusty north to get back to the lush and green south once again. Although India was far from my actual hometown, I felt Kerala as being a lot more like "home" than Delhi - I couldn't ever imagine living in such a busy and polluted city. The tag of "Back in my Hometown" went through my head as I checked through security at the airport. People were of such a diversity in Delhi - it was an intersection of so many cultures. To say most people were "Indian" was overlooking the actual diversity. I started noticing the differences of people's dress, from punjabis to saris to western jeans and t-shirts. Ladies with round or tear-drop shaped bindis came from different parts. On my flight I could tell who seemed to be returning home to Kerala - the darker-skinned, easy mannered people, versus the lighter skinned northerners who were leaving for Kochi for a few days.

A tropical storm with a strange name (“Hudhud”) was blowing through to our east - we probably crossed through some of the outer bands of the system as we could see enormous cumulonimbus clouds outside forming thunderstorms. The northeast monsoon was getting started in south India as the southwest monsoon had mostly passed. I was eager for the refreshing rain and coolness of the breeze to return as we continued southward - I could see how and why people would spend weeks anticipating the arrival of the monsoon, wearing colorful flowing saris with cloudburst patterns and flowers, waiting for the rains. It in fact rained the night I got back from Delhi - I felt I had been away for a lifetime!

It was wonderful to see a familiar face again - Nisha and her parents were waiting just outside by the baggage claim area. I felt I had a bonus celebration dinner - on our way back to Kochi, we visited one of our relatives - Josanto. He and his wife had prepared a wonderful array of local Kerala-style fish, Kerala rice (with the fat grains), and aviyal vegetables with papad and chapatti.

A fine trip indeed! I would be able to relax and enjoy traveling with the family and seeing the beaches and sights of southern India for the next two weeks.

### **Back in Kerala**

For the next two weeks, I felt we were more on a vacation, visiting “easier” places that were far less crowded and famous than the sights back north. We got to visit a number of friends and family in different parts of Kerala – in Kochi, Trivandrum (Thiruvananthapuram) and Calicut (Kozhikode). The beaches, tropical palms, houseboat tour on a backwater lake, and a sunset camel ride on a beach made for a bit of paradise!

In addition, we got to visit another aspect of culture in the south – since we were below the reach of the Islamic Mughal influence, we got to witness a religious tolerance not evident in other parts of India. We ended up getting a tour of the world’s religions in India, especially around Calicut. After I saw a number of religions in the north (Sikh, Hindu, Islam), we visited the Jewish synagogue in Kochi, churches around Kochi and Trivandrum, and a Jain temple in Calicut. I enjoyed seeing how people got along peacefully - I could see why the Jews settled in Kerala hundreds of years ago to escape persecution.



*Nisha and I enjoying the beach*

We witnessed the Portuguese-influenced southern coast, where Vasco de Gama visited and the Portuguese settled hundreds of years ago. We got to witness a final aspect of the culture in India when looking for the Vasco de Gama beach and monument. Nisha's dad didn't have directions - only a general sense of where to find it. Cars in India never seemed to use GPS - but maybe people never felt they needed it. GPS is inherently a tool people can use themselves DIY-style (a virtue in America), but in India where anybody and everybody is willing to lend a hand, people just ask when they need to find a place. If you knew how to get close, you would just find the next guy walking the street and ask, and a finger would point you in the right direction. It took several people's points (a "distributed" form of GPS), but we soon came to the monument - a relatively obscure obelisk several blocks back from the beach, seemingly forgotten to time. Of course, over 500 years ago, the beach probably looked much different and the location may have been right on the shore, not several blocks inland in a bunch of neighborhoods. The monument, barely 8 feet tall of weathered concrete was a far cry from the towering obelisk at the Cape of Good Hope in Africa, but it was equally important.

### **Journey Home**

The trip was finally coming to an end – suitcases filled to the brim with new clothes, gifts and souvenirs, and memories of a wonderful experience. It was a long flight on Singapore airlines – this time connecting through Singapore and Seoul. Our layover in Singapore was short, and so was - We made a brief visit at the Charlie Brown café (same as the one I visited coming back from Nepal 6 months earlier!) – it was still there.

The next 3 days would be a whirlwind of errands, appointments and shopping before my new job was to start on October 22. In the end, we made it somehow



and have many wonderful stories to tell. Nisha's parents did indeed decide to stay in Kerala for the long-term. Her mom would come back to Tucson and San Jose a couple more times before joining her dad to live out their remaining years in their roots of Ernakulum. Nisha and I hope to make it back someday.



*Our route in purple - there was so much to see...*