

## ***Stories of Our Journey to the East*** ***# 2 - Exploring Agra, India***

With a week of exploration in and around Mumbai completed, we are feeling quite comfortable being in India. We have eaten in small cafes, bought small necessities in shops and sidewalk stalls, negotiated with taxi drivers and shop keepers, evaded postcard sellers and beggars, explored neighborhoods and met friendly, helpful people. We have ridden local buses and made phone calls from the PCOs (Public Communications Offices), which are small shops or stalls with several phones hooked up to meters where one makes a call and pays the proprietor for the service. We feel ready to continue on our journey.

So, we return to the airport and fly to Delhi, then take a taxi from the Delhi airport to the Hazrat Nizamuddin Rail Station, where we buy tickets to Agra. We proceed down to the platform to find the train waiting, ready for boarding. Now the challenge is to find the right car, which is not that easy as Indian trains have many classes of service. After attempting to ask, we just board a car, a 2nd class sleeper, and find seats. The train pulls out and we are on the way. After passing through the edges of Delhi, the train runs through the countryside, past wheat fields and grass huts, with stops in several small villages. We watch fascinated! This is the real India!

After 3 ½ hours the train pulls into Agra Cantonment Station. We flow with the other passengers along the platform, through the station and out to find the prepaid taxi stand. By now we are surrounded by a group of 6 or 7 men offering rides, hotels and anything else we might need! Kindly refusing their offers, we continue our quest to the prepaid taxi stand and pay for a ride to the Tourist Rest House. We are guided to the next taxi in the queue and are soon on our way.

Tourist Rest House turns out to be a wonderful place to stay. We had made reservations via Internet before we left the US after a series of email messages back and forth. Now we have arrived and we discover that the place is just as Ramesh, our host, had promised. We have a room with comfy beds, a ceiling fan for cooling, even a bathroom with a western flush toilet! The restaurant is in the open air courtyard. After a good dinner and a solid night's sleep, we are ready to explore Agra.

Agra and Delhi traded positions as India's capitol from the 1500s until 1658 under the rule of the Mughal kings who were descended from Timurlane and Ghengis Khan. In 1526, Babar, the first of the dynasty, conquered the Afgan Kings and established his kingdom with its capital in Delhi. Babar's grandson, Akbar, moved the capitol to Agra in 1556 but soon began construction of a new city, Fatehpur Sikri. He directed the construction of this new city with amazing red sand-



stone buildings decorated with intricate carvings and panels of inlaid marble. A great mosque and graceful gardens completed the complex. But the water supply proved to be limited here so he abandoned his new capitol and returned to Agra.

His grandson, Shah Jahan, took over the construction of the Red Fort in Agra (left), following the plans and concepts that he learned from his grandfather. Still driven to create even more beautiful places, he moved his court back to Delhi and built the Red Fort there and the Jami Mosque, the largest one in India.

But sadly, Shah Jahan lost his favorite wife, Mumtaz, and he returned to Agra to build the most beautiful building his lively imagination could conger. It took 20,000 builders and craftsmen working 22 years to complete the Taj Mahal, Mumtaz's resting place.

We begin our exploration of Agra at the Red Fort, a grand fortress of red sandstone. Crossing the wide bridge over the moat, we pass through an arched entryway and into the first courtyard, where we visit the first large building of red sandstone. Continuing on, we explore the buildings where the emperor lived, and another where his wives lived (right). We are amazed by the marble inlaid with precious stones of bright blue, green and gold, the water pool in the floor of the harem house, and the arched and latticed windows. The buildings are set around formal gardens with wide walkways under roofs.



The audience hall (below, left) where the emperor sat in state to greet petitioners had its own gardens for people to wait and we tried to imagine the crowds gathered to wait their turn to make their request. From the walls of the fort, we catch glimpses of the Taj Mahal, shimmering in the distance (below right).



Back outside, we find the bicycle rickshaw guy who had brought us here, still waiting for us. We agree to let him take us to the Taj Mahal. After the ride, we get out and are immediately surrounded by people selling postcards, small glass Taj models, food of all sorts, horse cart rides, and young men offering to be our guide. We refuse all, buy tickets and get in the long entry lines, one for men and another for women. We go through se-

curity, but learn that we must check our backpacks, as no food or water bottles are allowed inside. At this point, Blair hires a young man to be our guide and he facilitates our way inside.

Our guide leads us through the forecourt to the great gateway with its arched entry. We walk through and there it is! It's difficult to believe that after a lifetime of seeing pictures, we are really seeing this lovely structure! The building with its white dome gleams, the four minarets rise gracefully at the corners of the large plaza, the image is reflected in the mirror of the water in the reflecting pools. We stop and just stare, mesmerized. As we walk nearer, the intricate inlay designs in the walls take form with their brilliant colors contrasting with the gleaming white of the marble.





Our guide helps us to buy shoe covers so we can go inside to marvel at the high dome and to look at Mumtaz's resting place. We now thank our guide and continue our visit on our own. We circle the stunning building, then wander through the gardens, and stop to just sit and gaze. As we walk around, we realize that each change in light or different viewpoint creates a new vision as enchanting as the first. All the pictures we've seen through the years just did not begin to prepare us for the real thing.

We also marvel that the place is filled with people, but does not seem crowded. The colorful saris of the women contrast pleasantly with the white of the marble. We realize that this is a place that is loved by all of the Indian people - whatever their religion. After all, the Taj Mahal is a monument to the love of Shah Jahan for his Mumtaz.

The persistent rickshaw guy is still waiting for us when we finally come out and he takes us back to the Tourist Rest House. We haggle over his price and come to a compromise agreement. It has been a long day and the heat and air pollution have made us sweaty and our throats sore. But a nice meal of tomato curry and hot lemon drink help a lot. We relax and sleep well.

Our experience with our rickshaw guy introduced us to one of the realities of life in India - people are living day to day and work is hard to get. We first encountered him in the morning when we left the hotel to walk to the ATM, the post office and the Tourist Office (a total of about a mile). He offered us a ride as we left the hotel, but we refused as we preferred to walk to begin our sightseeing. He followed us to each of our stops, presumably hoping that we would relent as the day became hotter.

After our errands, he was still there to offer us a ride. This time we agreed and he peddled us to the Red Fort. He waited for us, knowing we were next going to the Taj Mahal and would proba-

bly go with him, which we did. After spending a number of hours visiting the Taj Mahal, he was again waiting for us, so we agreed to have him peddle us back to our hotel. Once there, we bargained with him and agreed on a price for the rides, which we initially felt was too much, but later justified as being proper wages for the day.

Why did he stick with us, waiting for long periods of time while we visited the sites, rather than take a fare for our ride, and then look for other jobs? We guess that he figured there was less chance he would find other riders so he should stick with us - a fairly sure thing. Peddling us around became his work for the day. We pondered the degree to which we, as tourists, have an obligation to hire someone to provide our transportation rather than walk regardless of our preferences. People need work and the fare we paid would feed his family that day; but what about tomorrow?



Over the next few days we continue to deepen our relationship with India. We return to enjoy additional views of the Taj Mahal from the banks of the Yamuna River. We also explore Taj Ganj, the neighborhood just outside the walls, finding a thriving community, but surprisingly poor considering the proximity to a such a beautiful place. We also hire a car and driver for a day trip to Fatehpur Sikri, Akbar's abandoned capitol city and again we marvel at the size and complexity of the building of that time.

We find we are becoming quite comfortable traveling in India and are looking forward to our next stop - Delhi. We'll tell you about our adventures there in our next letter.

Susan & Blair