

Jaipur, 13th October

First of all we are a long way from Orissa and its cyclone! And also a fair distance from Datia, where there was a tragedy at the temple (I was fairly close last year).

We had a very smooth journey from England. The plane took off on time and arrived in Mumbai early, after a comfortable time with good catering, but not a lot of sleep. Immigration was easy but of course our bags were the last off the plane.

The tail end of the monsoon is still in evidence with some beefy showers, but also plenty of warm, sunny weather. We had a sea trip across the water to one of the islands off Mumbai where there are old cave temples and carvings, impressive but not so extensive as those at Ajanta and Ellora. We also had some good meals. One was at Trishna (the place that has a franchise in London) with some excellent fish and another was a very quirky place called the Britannia. Rick Stein filmed there in his recent series and it's run by a Parsee family who are very Anglophilic, with pictures of the Royal Family, and food imported from Iran. The elderly owner asked us to give his best wishes to the Queen.

It was a long overnight train journey from Mumbai to Jaipur (18 hours for 1150km) in the usual rather old fashioned but comfortable train which ran largely to time. We had a decent meal in the evening, but breakfast was rather dire. Jaipur is warm and bright, but some showers are forecast. It has been the longest monsoon for over 70 years.

The hotel in Mumbai was an efficient business hotel in a very central area and with friendly staff. Here in Jaipur it's more tourist oriented; a new build but attractively decorated in traditional style, and a pleasant roof top restaurant.

To be continued

Udaipur

Jaipur turned out to be very interesting. It has changed a lot over the years with new road building. It is very busy but the central old town is just the same as ever, with lots of little shops selling everything from sewing machines to building materials through food and clothes. The big sites are there still there although many of them have had quite a bit of the tourist money spent on them they look in rather better condition than they did

Our hotel was in a pleasant residential area and we use rickshaws quite often to get backwards and forwards. On one day we took a rickshaw out to Amber where there is a big fort and Palace which we spend time investigating. Also there was a very active Hindu temple where we caught the end of the ceremonies complete with lots of drums and bells. Afterwards we had a pleasant walk through the scrubland on top of the ridge overlooking the lake and city. En route where two forts with the largest cannon in the world or so they said though it had never been fired. The final part of the walk was a busy zig zag paved track down to the city of Jaipur. All along we met several people who were very friendly and helped us to find the way. Back in the city we did the tourist things of visiting the Palace of the winds where the ladies could not be seen but were able to see out and the 18th century Observatory.

The day was finished with an excellent meal in a long standing hotel, restaurant and sweet shop where we had Rajasthan thalis with 12 dishes around the edge and plenty of banter with the waiters. We returned to the hotel with a box of sweets made on the premises.

On the next day the weather turned out hot and sunny with the clear blue sky that you expect at this time of year. We spent the morning exploring the city palace which is in very good condition, and has

the two huge silver vessels that the maharaja used to transport his Ganges water on his visit to England.

We got the afternoon train to Chittorgarh, where the hotel was rather down at heels but friendly, and we could eat in the garde, but we didn't see the turtles that are supposed to live there.

The fort is a huge site with many interesting buildings and we walked around it yesterday in the blazing sun. We were pleased to get into an air conditioned car in the afternoon to save time on the journey here rather than waiting for the night train which would have got us here at 10pm. Instead we had dinner on the lawn overlooking the lake.

More later!

Shimla

You will be pleased to know that the Romans had been here before us; one of the lavatories was labelled 'Gentes'. It's good to be here in Shimla well things are a little less manic and the climate is really good. During the day it's just like the best English summer with temperatures in the high 20s and sunny with a few clouds. At night is quite cool and one needs a jacket. Unfortunately the visibility is not too good and so we cannot see the highest mountains.

The hotel in Udaipur turned out to be comfortable with the garden restaurant on the Lakeside and a breakfast room in the courtyard open to the sunshine. We did all the usual tourist things including visiting the city palace and took a drive out to the monsoon Palace. The latter is on top of a hill with wonderful views of the lakes and the hills surrounding Udaipur. It was also a very good place to watch the sunset.

We had a very memorable meal whilst we were in Udaipur at the Royal Cafe. Initially we thought it was close but the man across the road told us to ring the bell. The elderly owner let us in and showed us to the single table. She provided us with pumpkin curry banana Curry and home-made apple fritters with delicious rice pudding with nuts and cardamom. Whilst we were there the grandchildren came home from school and the daughter came to talk to us about her cookery school and heritage walks.

I'm having difficulty with losing emails so I'll send this and then another portion.

I hope you got the previous part!

From Udaipur we had another overnight rail trip to Delhi where we arrived at 6:30 in the morning to the tremendous melee of taxis and rickshaws. After some negotiation we hired one of the latter to get to our hotel which was across town, and it was a pleasant drive in the cool morning air along the streets of new Delhi which were designed out by the Lutyens. Our rooms were not ready, but we could leave luggage and go searching for breakfast which we found at a branch of Saravana Bhavan which I know well from here and London, and we feasted on Dhosas and other delights from Southern India.

Delhi was hectic but we managed to see many of the sites including the archealogical park in the South. This was much easier to get to with the new Metro.

Another overnight rail journey got to Kalka at 4:30 AM for the ride on the narrow gauge railway up to Shimla. This is a terrific ride winding up and through the mountains and we had tea served to us and a reasonable breakfast.

I attach a photograph of Ian in the grounds of our hotel here in Shimla, featured in Jewel in the Crown.

Pokhara, Sunday

I spent today on the bus from Kathmandu to here, seven hours including rest stops and lunch. The latter was included in the fare and the fair included rice, veg curry and dal, with a cup of coffee - not bad. The road out of K was very poor, with lots of bends and unsurfaced sections, but soon it settled down to the sort of roads that we expect in Bucks. One of the photos is of the river by the lunch stop. The roads have not so many couplets as in India but today's 'after whiskey, driving risky' I thought was good, as is 'better Mr late, than late Mr'.

We enjoyed Shimla which was very restful after the big cities. Our hotel was out of town, quiet, old fashioned, and had porridge for breakfast. Part of 'Jewel in the Crown' was filmed there. Unfortunately the views were rather hazy and we only just managed to see a hint of snowy mountains. The journey back down the hill on the narrow gauge railway was just as enjoyable, and we saw the parts that we went through in the dark on the way up. The comfortable 'Shatabdi Express' served a good meal and got us to Delhi by 10pm followed by a mad rickshaw ride to the hotel in the dark.

On Thursday I went with Iain to the airport on the metro, and returned to town for a meal, some shopping and a long night's sleep. This travelling is tiring. On Friday I got my flight to Nepal; about a couple of hours with of course beer and a meal served before the views of the Himalayas. I made sure that I had a window seat on the left as prescribed in the guide book. The hotel was welcoming but back in the centre of a town with the noise, dust and pollution.

Saturday was spent sightseeing, including the old city centre (see the other photo) and the burning ghats which are now in disrepair, although the former is in good form, no doubt having had lots of tourist money spent on it. There seem to be far more foreign tourists here than in India, and the country is more ready for them. The hotel provided another excellent breakfast (more porridge) and even Yak's cheese was on the buffet (it's rather like Gouda since you ask), and the meal was available from 5am, presumably catering for trekkers setting out early.

I plan to relax here in Pokhara and get in some walking.

Until the next episode,

Pokhara, Thursday

I know that you will be worried about my missing the Archers. Through the miracles of technology, I download the last episode each morning, Internet permitting, and listen to it as I get ready for breakfast. Today, the BBC has let me down; yesterday's episode 'will be available shortly'.

I'm currently sitting on the terrace of the Sacred Valley Inn where I'm staying with a pot of tea and a piece of cake (see the first photo), looking at the hills through the rain which has just started. The weather here has been something of a disappointment - most of the time it has been warm and humid and very hazy, with no views of Annapurna and the other big snowy mountains that one should see from here at this time of year. As everywhere, the locals say that you can no longer say what the weather will be like at any particular time of year. Another sadness is that many of the paths are said to be unsafe to walk without a group or a guide as a few folk are on the lookout for an easy way of getting tourists' gold.

However, I've managed to have some good days. One involved crossing the lake on a rather rickety rowing boat (complete with 'driver') and hiking up the steep stepped track to the Peace Stupa. It was donated by the Japanese buddhists, as was one that I saw a few years ago in Ladakh in Northern India. There should have been huge views of the mountains, but I saw haze through the sweat.

Another day was spent walking alongside the lake and further up the valley, through various villages and rice paddy (2nd photo). At least the lake is well in evidence, and one of the reasons for Pokhara's popularity. The lake side is very tourist oriented with lots of handicraft stalls and restaurants, and reminds me of Goa with lake and mountains instead of the ocean.

Yesterday, I took a local bus to another pair of lakes, where there are far fewer people around and was able to do a walk along a quiet country road up to a ridge between the two lakes and have lunch

at a peaceful lodge overlooking them. The bus (apart from being very full at times), ... Shall we just say that Arriva operates luxury coaches in comparison.

On Saturday I move on, so it will be an early start as the reporting time at the bus station is 7am, but I've booked a rather more upmarket hotel for a couple of nights, with views

As always I look forward to hearing your news.

Dhulikhel, November 5th

Three cheers, the mountains are just beginning to appear out of the haze. I've come to this small town at 1500m by bus from Kathmandu, which is at 1000m. The air is pleasantly cool, but the sun is shining, and there are potentially huge views. The bus was a local one which started out from the bus park with a remarkable amount of space, but it was soon grossly overcrowded with the young conductor touting for more custom. Soon my rucksack was on the roof, but no humans to my knowledge. I've been on buses where there have been; but not me.

My last day in Pokhara was spent on an excellent walk. I got a taxi up to a local viewpoint (which had only limited views on that day), and sat waiting for the clouds to clear but I only managed to see down into the valley. I then left behind all the stalls selling handicrafts and food, and walked long a largely horizontal track along the hillside. It traversed various villages with lots of local life, farming, schools, etc. It was a joy in the warm sun, and if only the views were there! I may have mislead you over the weather. Sure there has been unseasonable rain, but always in the late afternoon and so avoidable. And each day has seen the sun, even if the views were very hazy. A minibus took me back to town, for a local meal. I had such things as potato and bamboo shoot soup, toasted and spiced soya beans and a pickle made from dried spinach. I saw an advert for 'organic Bhang lassi'. It's good to know that the drugs are organic (Bhang = cannabis, lassi = yoghurt drink).

My next journey started with a seven o'clock report for the tourist bus for a couple of hours back along the road towards Kathmandu, and then a crowded local bus up to Bandipur. That was a relic of the days when it was an important staging post for traders but has lost its purpose on the construction of the main road in the valley. But it's a lovely village with a paved bazaar and lots of old mansions one of which has been restored to form the Old Inn where I stayed. It was like staying in a National Trust property with lots of carved wood and ornaments. I had a tiny cell to sleep in, with facilities up or down steps and were rather basic. But the food and hospitality were good. I met up with a couple from Weymouth that I ate with. Some of you think that I have long trips; they were on a six month round the world trip.

On Sunday, I was back on the road with a lift down to the main road and the tourist bus to Kathmandu for a one night stop in the sister hotel to the one I used in Pokhara.

The photographs, which I hope survive the journey, are of my room here in Dhulikhel (bottom left), the view from the terrace here (spot the mountains) and the Old Inn in Bandipur .

Best Wishes,

Martin

Kathmandu, November 10th

I'm coming to the end of my trip. Tomorrow I fly to Delhi, and the day after to Heathrow. When I've uploaded a selection of photos, I'll send you a link, to delete or use as you see fit.

Dhulikhel proved to be an oasis of calm after Kathmandu, and at 1500m was above the worst of the pollution. My room, attractive as it was from the outside was rather bleak inside, but large with a large bathroom. And best of all had views from both the bedroom and the shower room. The

mountain views got better, and I enjoyed eating my breakfast on the roof terrace in the sun looking at them. When I booked breakfast for seven, the manager suggested that it would be too cold and that 7.30 would be better, as the sun would be up and the air warmer. He was right; it got cold at night, but during the day it was pleasant in the sun in the low twenties.

I spent my time walking to various view points and temples and looking round the old town, which again had some fine old brick town houses although they were in a state of disrepair. I also went for coffee at the sole remaining guest house from the old days when a lot of independent travellers visited. The local coffee, grown in Nepal and sold as organic, is excellent and far superior to the Nescafé alternative. On the first night there were various other guests in the hotel, but I was alone on the second night.

On Thursday I got the bus for the short ride down the valley to Bhaktapur. This is an old town, where the centre is beautifully restored and has a large area of brick paved streets, old brick houses and many pagoda style Hindu temples. Indeed I stayed at the Pagoda Guest House for the two nights I was there, and the photo attached shows the view from my room. The family running the house were kind and friendly, but unfortunately the first night saw a Chinese group who arrived noisily, were smoking in the corridors and were up again noisily at 4.30am, presumably to get their bus to see the sunrise. The second night was much more peaceful and I was able to enjoy my breakfast, again on the roof with a similar view to that from my room, talking to a young man from Long Island who was travelling for up to two years.

The Friday was frustrating as it was yet another holiday and the museums were closed. Instead I got a bus to a nearby hill top village with a famous temple. The guide book described it as peaceful, but the bus was anything but, with many on the roof, and the village was over run with tour groups. I managed a good walk back to town.

Yesterday, I was able to do the museums, including an unusual one dedicated to the brass and bronze work of Nepal. I got the bus to here, back in the middle of the foul air, and have two days to relax. I've just booked my taxi to the airport for 6.30 tomorrow morning. Whilst I was viewing a bookshop yesterday afternoon, I looked up to see the couple from Weymouth that I had seen a week before. Also, a young German woman walked in whom they had also met up with and so we all repaired to the cafe.

I spent my last day in Kathmandu doing some shopping and sightseeing, including to a Buddhist Stupa on top of a hill in the suburbs. On the way there, who should I meet but the couple from Weymouth. It was an early night for I had to be up at five for the taxi I had booked for 6.30 to the airport. It was somewhat tense as the day was the first of a general strike called by the Maoists in the lead up to elections. But I was assured that tourists were immune and the ride through the empty streets was lacking in event but there were plenty of armed police around. The flight to Delhi had excellent views and landed on time and I was back to the same hotel as previously and spent the afternoon bookshopping and eating.

Tuesday was my flight back to the UK, but I had a leisurely start as it was an afternoon flight. I had done the online check in to get a window seat and had a pair of seats and so it was reasonably comfortable flight back, except that again there was a lack of gin. Malcolm and Elaine were at the airport to meet me and I was soon speeding back to Bucks, through the cold but blessedly clean air.

For those who are interested a selection of photos is at
<http://www.martinberry.co.uk/selectphotos/album2.asp?trip=1310IndiaNepal>