

If it's Friday, this must be Rajasthan



The Taj Mahal is still magic.

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My initial impressions of India on this trip were tempered with my living in Lahore, Pakistan 47 years ago. Delhi was rather different and somewhat the same. Rather than tongas (horse-drawn passenger carts), there are flocks of tuk-tuks, small 3-wheeled cars with motorcycle engines, almost all with green bodies and yellow tops.

Not changed is the dust and the litter, and the feeling that there are enough people to fill all the available space. But there are more advertisements, indicating more disposable money. In that time, a middle class has formed, and there is a little less poverty.



Varanasi street

Traffic: In Delhi, most of the larger streets are one-way and about 4 or 5 lanes wide, but with no lane markings. Dogs, pedestrians, bicycles, bicycle rickshaws, bicycle trucks, motorcycles, cows, tuk-tuks, cars, trucks and buses drive where they like and move back and forth through the traffic. Cows have right of way, but otherwise, size, speed and driver stubbornness seem to determine it. Drivers seem to expect horns when being passed, so it's all very noisy.

On trips outside the cities, you're best to let someone else drive and keep your eyes shut. Roads are rough and narrow. (You can't read on a bus; the ride is too bumpy.) People pass when there is not enough room, trusting the oncoming driver to cooperate.

Temples: There must be almost as many temples as people in India. They range from a storefront too small to carry on business but containing an idol, to vast temples with many places to worship. We saw a Buddhist temple carved into a mountain in 200 BCE (Ajanta), and the new temple in Chennai (Madras) built only a couple of years ago. There are temples for Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Jains, Parsees, Sikhs, Christians, Jews (a synagogue in Cuchin was founded shortly after the Dias-



Ajanta caves (200BCE)

pora) and many others. The apostle Thomas is buried under a cathedral in Chennai.

Hinduism has four main gods, but there are relatives and attributes and incarnations and other variations too many to keep track of. Temples are covered with hundreds of statues. Some tell stories from the Mahabharata or Ramayana, but some just keep track of the hierarchy of the gods.

In the temple in Madurai, Shiva visits Parvati each night; priests ceremonially carry him on a palanquin, to carry out marital bliss. (The palanquin is covered—was it an idol or only his lingam?) Thousands of years old, he still gets laid every night.



Temple in Chennai (2002)

The temples at Ajanta and Ellora are carved into lava. The earlier Buddhists made caves but the Kailasa Temple is an amazing monolithic building, the outside stone fully removed. Ajanta is farther from the roads, beautiful in its setting. Its cave temples include a huge recumbent Buddha. Temples carved from rock were done in several other places, notably at Mamallapuram in Tamil Nadu.



Kailasa Temple in Ellora (750CE)

The guides expressed varying degrees of piety. It was refreshing in Madurai to have a Marxist guide, with cynical comments about the opiate of the people.

Varanasi was a bit of a disappointment, because we did not have enough time there. One airline was late getting us there, and the other airline couldn't get us out at the time we wanted, so we had to leave a day earlier. We spent less than 24 hours there, saw 96 temples and did the obligatory boat ride on the Ganges. We did not have a chance to see my sister's friends, which I thought might be a chance to meet Real People in India. But...

Khajuraho. We thought we'd go for a walk the first day. We were agreeably hustled by a 20-year old who took us to the old village, gave us a tour of the four caste areas of the village, ending up at his house, where we met his family. We were invited to dinner the next day.

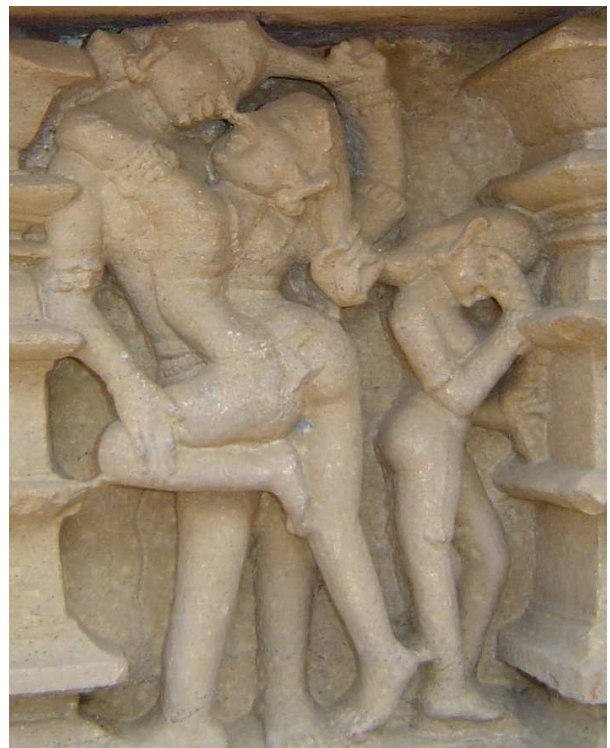
At the Sound and Light show, we sat down in the near-dark. As the show started, we were a little overwhelmed to realize we were surrounded by the temples. The program went into the history of the temples (tenth to thirteenth centuries); well-done.



Khajuraho: sculptures everywhere



The next morning, we were guided through the temples, looking at the sculptures. (The Kind Men Like, if you remember your Mad Comics.) There are sculptures on every bit of space on the temples. They are amazing; the sculptors created real people with real emotions. I'm not sure why sex was such a common theme to the sculptures. Perhaps you have to work through bodily desire to clear your mind for spiritual concerns, and as long as you're doing that, you might as well do it right, so here were exemplars of just about everything. Or maybe the rulers who financed the temples were dirty old men.



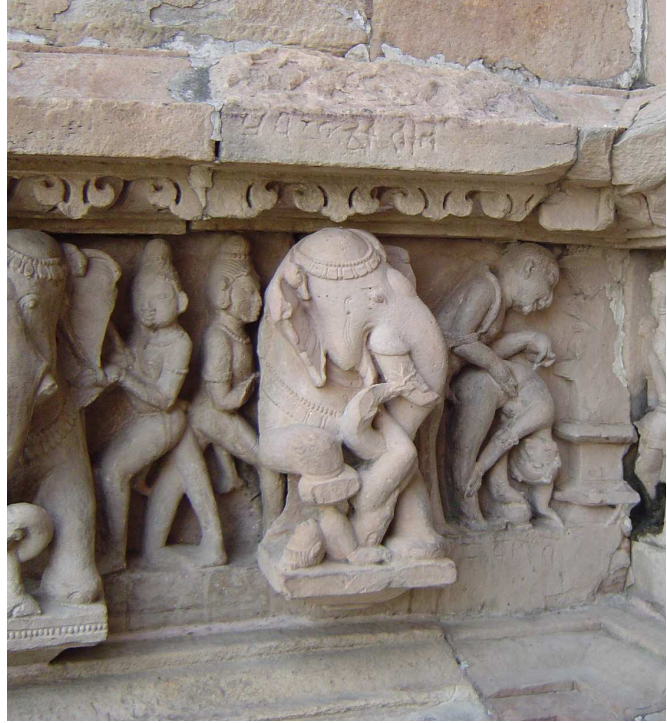


There is humour too. In a line of stolid elephants symbolically supporting the temple, one has an expression of interest, and is looking at ...

The moghuls were probably doubly outraged by the sculptures: at the idolatry and at the sexuality. Many of the sculptures were defaced. It's a rare elephant with tusks.

And some of the temples simply fell down, unmaintained. There are many houses in the old village with temple rocks, including sculptures, in the walls.

Colour. Driving through Tamil Nadu, I saw what seemed to be brightly coloured bundles in a rice field. Then I saw them moving; they were women bent over, working. Hindu women wear bright colours everywhere; one sees street sweepers wearing colourful saris. Muslim women mostly wear black or white.



Kerala was beautiful. We started in the mountains, at the spice plantations, then went down to spend a day on a houseboat in the backwaters. Kerala seems to have prospered under its communist government, though someone told me it is a “money order” economy. That is, a lot of people are away working in the oil states, and send money back. The high literacy rate may make those workers suitable for the jobs.

Maharajas and Moghuls: The obscenely rich have always lived well. Their palaces and forts, and some temples and mosques, represent money spent lavishly. This may have been defensive; public works projects keep people employed and less likely to revolt. The forts, of course, were definitely defensive; the other thing despots do to keep the people in line is to make



Herding ducks in Kerala backwaters

war on each other. Some of the palaces, now too costly to maintain, have become hotels.

We stayed in various places, including former palaces, small and large hotels, a houseboat and tents. (“Deluxe tents”, to quote the promotion.)

Buying stuff: Indians see foreigners as walking money trees. You will be surrounded by people selling things, at relatively low prices. Your guides and drivers will take you to shops or factories, and get an entry fee and a cut of the sales. (One merchant honestly said that shops would rather please the guides, whom they may see again, than the tourists.) Almost every price is negotiated. The first asking price is too high, though by North American standards it may be reasonable.

It would be better if you could resist buying things for a week, to get a feel for prices (watch what others buy); you’re then at least aware, when you go into a store. For things Indians use, such as clothing (including saris), go to ordinary shops rather than tourist shops; prices will be as close as you’ll get to fixed, and low.

Miscellaneous notes

Animals: Cows, dogs and people are all over the place. Monkeys are protected, and quite visible, sometimes in



cities. A mongoose ran across a highway in front of our car, we saw a black buck in the desert, a boar rooting next to the highway in Kerala, and a herd of deer in a forest. Oxen and buffalos pull wagons, and in the desert, camels are frequent.

Camels put each foot in front of the last, so they look extremely knock-kneed. Elephants sashay, looking like a flirting woman passing a group of guys.

Scenery: India is a diverse country, still with a lot of open space. There are wild rivers, tropical and glacial mountains, deserts, etc. It's refreshing to get out of the cities and the crowds.

Delhi: I was moved by Gandhi's commemorative, where we spent some time in silence.

Air: The air is almost unbreathable in cities, even cities in the Rajasthan desert.

Beer: In most places, the only beers available are Kingfisher and Foster's. Kingfisher is a mild lager. Not a good place for dark ale drinkers.

Food: It's easy to be a vegetarian in India, and after trying a chicken that seemed to have died of starvation, we ate vegetables. I lost 5 pounds; Janet gained 5.



In a park near Khajuraho

I enjoyed the food, but looked for salads and beef when I got back.

Ganges water: You can fake taking a sip of the water by letting it slide along your arm.

One of the maharajas of Jaipur went to visit London and thought he should take some Ganges water with him, so he had a couple of silver flasks made.

