

# The Magical Mystery Tour - India -



**July - August 2004**

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## **Part 1 - Indian Insanity - July 19 2004**

### **Lies, Damned Lies, and the Lonely Planet**

Writing in Agra is like writing in a sauna or steam room, except it does not smell like cedar or eucalyptus; but the unfortunate combination of curry, fecal matter, diesel, bovine and every other scent under the fragrant rainbow - at least the Taj Mahal is breathtaking.



How did I get here? I wish I had some answers. What I do know is everything the Lonely Planet has warned me about has happened - the scams, the grifts, the chaos and shifts. Not to mention that everything LP has adventurized as 'amazing' or 'not to be missed' is open for debate. Oh well, you learn quickly in India to just roll with it and don't forget to pay cash. After an incident in Delhi I have relearned the universal truth; If there is a problem, money will solve it and if there is no problem; one will be created and money will solve it. Not to get into the details, but to date I have been almost physically ripped off \$400, however the freedom and education the compromise has awarded me is invaluable. I now know how India's complex social, religious, economic, caste, hindustani fabric is so interwoven that I may just have to become a guru or politician.

### **Juxtaposition**

India is an amazing visceral country - an experience for your 6 senses. Within moments of arrival in Delhi you see some of the greatest wealth and poverty in puzzling coexistence. Almost hour after arriving I was forced to hire a driver to get me out, but

not before I was confronted by stray dogs and a dead baby. I still do not know what is more frightening - but I am sure I will pay a psychologist one day to help me figure out.

Things vastly improved upon arrival in Rajasthan. The mix of hills, desert, and third world settlements is further collaged with a highway of camels, monkeys, elephants, bears, cobras, cars, carts, motorcycles, bicycles, and pedestrians. Somewhere between riding an elephant, eating curry (its breakfast, lunch and dinner in these parts), touring some palaces and meeting a great Spanish couple; I met some locals who tried to recruit me for a 'gem' smuggling operation.

I was invited to a party celebrating the arrival of the monsoon and caught a ride to a warehouse on the back of a motorcycle (it passed under an elephant in traffic). The party was short lived for me and I was quickly recruited into a 2 hour discussion (about 110 minutes of it was trying to get away safely) on a warehouse roof top with some enterprising individuals. I think they figured I was better not to employ and now they want to go into business.

### **It's Raining Cows and Skinheads**

A month late, the Monsoon has finally hit and everyone is taking individual credit for their shaved heads and prayers to elephant headed god Ganesh as the one that has made it pour. We context the world in what we know and if your or my's livelihood and fed children depended on flooding the rice fields, we would be shaving our heads too.

Religion is an interesting concept in India. It seems they just absorb deities to the point that no one can keep track of them. Everyone and their dog - I mean cow has their own cult and the phrase 'Heaven's to Betsy' makes sense in these parts. I may just have to create my own cult as the combo mole/ stretch mark on my shoulder resembles an Allah faced Buddha... I will be a guru in no time.

### **The Things We Do For Love**

No one would really come to Agra if it was not for the Taj Mahal, but then again no one would really go to Anaheim if it was not for Disneyland. The Taj Mahal lives up to it's postcard and is the most striking building I have scene. The white marble work would make a Venetian drool and the purpose of such a building is a testament to any romantic. Normally I just make an ass out of myself - this guy must of done something right (even if technically the Taj Mahal is a mausoleum).

## **Part 2 - Greetings From Goa - July 26, 2004**

### **'E' is for Enlightenment**

Goa is the ultimate party zone. It's too bad I am visiting during the off season. Modern folklore tells us that Goa is the birthplace of the rave, and we went to a good one the other night. Walking home at 4 am, a cobra crossed my path - Thankfully the moon was not blocked by the monsoon cloud on this 'near-dawn' experience.

### **The Jungle Book**

Goa was originally colonized by the Portuguese and thus the people, religion, cuisine and atmosphere make Goa feel more like a Latin American country and not typical India. First of all it is more affluent and educated (No one tried to give me their dying baby like in Delhi or sell me a child prostitute like Agra) It is full of cool locals, overcharging Yoga gurus, Israeli travelers, more Israeli travelers, and hippies who went AWOL during Vietnam (some still think they cannot return to the US, and others who will not let the 60's go. Tie Dye Forever.



I have been traveling the last week with 2 Dutch travelers (Roel & Maurice) and meeting a handful of characters along the way. We have rented some motorbikes (OK high powered Honda scooters) and have been traveling from town to town. We tried to go

surfing, however due to a bad rip tide the beaches are closed. Today I may go get a (henna) tattoo to go with my new biker image. After a fall, I already have some fresh scars. We are also trying to round up the other moped ready travelers for the 'Monsoon Challenge', a bike race through a big water and mud pit in the jungle.

### **Going Native**

I've also had to adapt my wardrobe. During my trip to India so far I am trying to achieve self improvement and be like Gandhi. However, I still have hair and I am at least too much at war with myself to be a man of peace. So to improvise: I now wear a sarong. It is similar to a kilt without the coarseness. I know many of you may find this hard to believe, but I have never worn drag before, thus there is a lot to get used to. For instance it is difficult to ride a bike, use a washroom and I find when sitting I prefer to keep my legs together and place a foot behind my ankle as opposed to crossing.

### **Bombay Sapphire**



Anyway... Prior to Goa we were in Bombay/ Mumbai. Bombay is an awesome city - a third-world Sydney or Vancouver (except the Kings Cross or Hasting Area is amplified across the city). The buildings have a mixture of decaying British colonial, Spanish, and art deco architecture, the museums amaze, and the people are either savvy, sneaky or sleazy... like anywhere or everywhere else.

We had some fun times here. On the train to Bombay, we all got food poisoned and developed a case of Delhi Belly - if you wanted a quick weight loss solution; try this. So in Bombay we had to eat a concentration of McCurry and Tandoori McChicken. You know the world has become overly globalized when you visit a country and the cleanest, safest, and arguably most nutritious food comes from McDonald's.

While Roel was sick in bed, Maurice and I were approached to become Bollywood stars, but our screen test was rescheduled and we did not wait around. So with other travelers we partied hard at some cool nightclubs, raided the five star Taj Hotel, went into a Muslim opium den to purchase off sales, and played poker using malaria pills as chips. I lost so I now have to stick with gin & tonic. Don't tell them that I was the real winner.

## Monsoon Wedding

The best part about the travels is the people you meet. On the train I have met a handful of cool Indians. A quiz champ, a president with a large oil company, a self described 'Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy' and numerous others. The funniest was an Australian couple who were on their honeymoon. You can tell that the husband was the one who planned the trip as (aside from a few nights in Bombay) the bride was not impressed - literally 'Love In The Time of Cholera'.



## **Part 3 - On The Trail of the Abominable Snowman - August 6, 2004**

### **Shitting Myself To Death**

Hello from the footstep of the Himalayas; Darjeeling, home of the world famous Orange Pekoe and Darjeeling Tea. I have not seen too much of this town yet as I have been sick in my hotel room for the past day due to another insurgence of Delhi Belly. Currently I am having dizzy spells and I am guessing that I have lost nearly 4 KG in the past couple days. I am beginning to feel much better, however if the illness continues another day I will go and see a physician.

### **Colonial Exile**

Darjeeling is a beautiful town made up of Buddhist monasteries, tea plantations, old British colonial homes, yaks, and possibly Yetis, but these still seem to remain mythically abominable. I awoke at 4am this morning to the music of Tibetan horns and chanting monks echoing through the mountains – Shangri-La. The people here are more Asian than Indian in ethnic makeup and speak Nepalese. I was planning on going on a trek for a few days and further north into Sikkim, however I do not think I am currently in health to do so, especially if the elevation climbs near 20 000 feet. Instead as my hair is getting a little long I may go for a haircut, however this may change due to the number of Buddhist monks here as I think the only style offered is stubble.



### **Hell Hath No Fury/ Heaven Hath No Blessing**

Prior to Darjeeling, After a 28 hour train ride from Chennai, I was in Calcutta (Kolcuta) – my favorite Indian city so far. Mother Theresa's program must have worked (or she chose to work in a more pleasant Indian city) as this city is beautiful. As compared to other India cities there are noticeably fewer beggars, less aggressive hawkers, and I did not see one leper. With my final point stated, there are a large number of vultures circling the city. The air is surprisingly clean as well, so clean that you have to purchase Diesel brand clothing if you want to wear Diesel.

I wish I had more time in Calcutta, but I made the most of it by visiting the flower market, the Hindu temple of Kali, and Mother Theresa's motherhouse. Apparently the Kali temple was built on the site that the dismembered goddess Kali's (Kal-cuta) body parts fell to earth. Up until the mid 1800's, Hindus sacrificed humans to Kali, now they kill goats. Currently they slaughter about 50/day. As this is a temple, I had to walk around barefoot amongst the monsoonal wet streets emulsifying goat blood, religious pilgrims, and sacramental flowers. I also was pickpocket here (I lost ~ \$10 cdn), and the only conceivable person who got close enough to do so was the temple priest! All this after he gave me a tour and I made a donation to his 'food bank'. I have always felt that organized religion was a cash grab – now the feeling is literal. I suppose with the past practice of human sacrifice, this was a small price to pay.

My trip to Calcutta was partially an attempt to answer my long standing question: 'Did Mother Theresa only help people out of greed for her own salvation?' However any conclusion is inconclusive. Mother Theresa's motherhouse is a big grey building, also down the street from the only Lexus dealership I have seen in India. Her program must have worked. To close my Calcutta entry I had a couple of great meals. The food in Calcutta is southeast asianesque, a welcome change after eating an abundance of curry for 3 weeks straight. I also took a rickshaw ride to the train station traveling through LaPierre's 'City of Joy' – which looked better than some of the best neighborhoods in other Indian cities.

### **So Much For Yoga School**

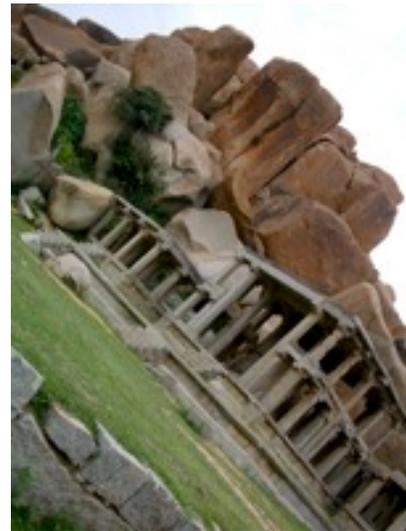
Other highlights of this leg of my trip included Mysore. Most foreigners come here to practice yoga, I did too until I tasted the pollution. Instead I hung around with a multitude of great travelers; a trio of UK doctors doing a brief residency placement, a cool Basque couple, and a group of French travelers. I have found that my French has improved enormously as I have met a number of travelers – who barely speak a word of English. In Mysore, I went to some great markets, went up to a temple on Chumundi Hill and ate well. I had some guy on the street asking to me to pay him so he could pick the wax out of my ear with his finger.



Surprisingly I found a supermarket that sold imported fruits and vegetables. In the Indian markets the only food products that are safe for a foreigner to purchase and eat uncooked are lemons, limes, and dried peppers. So the Washington Apples and Florida Oranges were heaven sent. Of course I had to pay an arm and a leg for these (but it was an Indian arm and leg). For some reason I do not think lepers shop hear.

### **The Party**

Prior to Mysore, I was in Hampi. Hampi is a cool city situated in ruins that date as far back as 200BC, however most are about 500 years old. Here I rented a motorbike and had my own Indiana Jones adventure riding the cycle through the ruins. There is an upside to charging foreigners excessive entry fees (\$25 cdn for the Taj) – for instance allowing you do whatever you damn well please. I spent all day riding everywhere through, on, and in between temples, monuments and shrines galore. I also met an interesting fellow from Santa Barbara who is doing an undergraduate degree in Sanskrit and Indian Snake Gods (I will leave the following space blank so you can insert your own California joke -----). My travels in the last few days have been alone and I have not ran into any westerners. I am doing my best to fit in by acting like Peter Sellers, but this still has not fooled anyone as I awoke on the bus one night and I had people touching my hair and skin. You would think passengers on a bus would have seen black hair before?



### **I.T.'s Happening**

The last point of interest is Bangalore, India's IT and I.T. city. IT, as in it's booming, it's the place to be and I.T. as in information technology. Bangalore is the cradle of India high-tech industry. It is also the city that is America's nemesis as many jobs are being outsourced here and may just be the new addition to their axis of evil list.

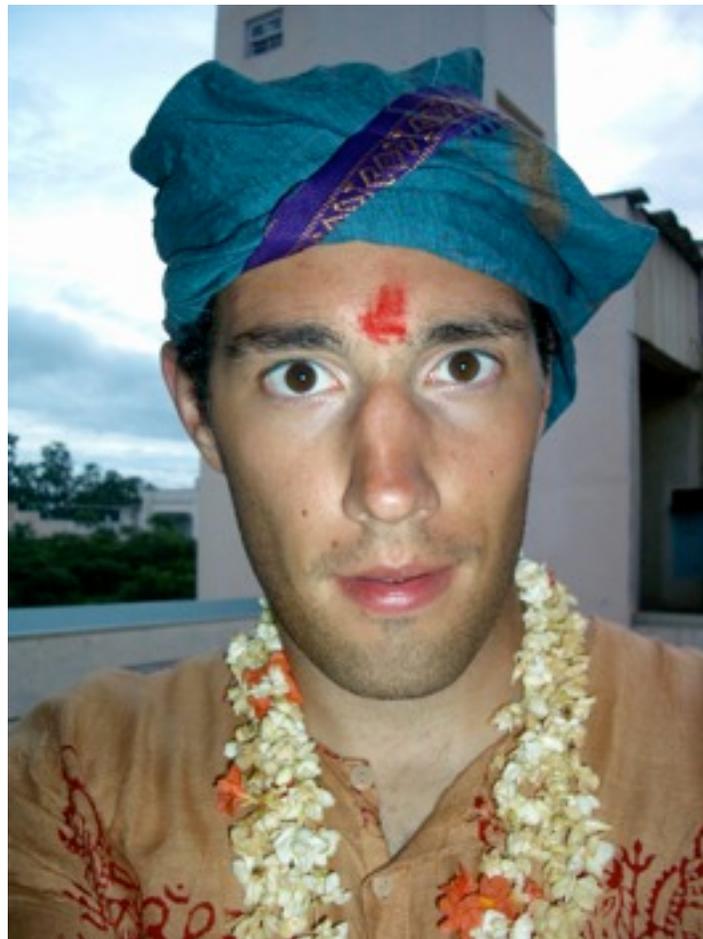
### **Ingoauity**

I believe the last time I sent an update was from Goa and my last few days were an adventure to say the least. I met a nice Dutch girl and we decided to hike up this

mountain. As we reached the top it began to get dark, then we saw a cobra with its eyes and hood glowing in the moonlight. As we did not have a flashlight I pulled out my digital camera and used the view screen as our guide light down the mountain, watching carefully were we stepped and avoiding all bushes. It was probably the longest 15 minutes of our lives. If that was not enough to end my Indian holiday, we had the brilliant idea to purchase motorcycles and ride them to Amsterdam. This was put to stop due to some logistical issues, namely getting immediate Visas for Pakistan and Iran.

### **Next Missteps**

So long for now, from here I am probably heading towards Varanasi, via Nepal if both my health and their political situation improve within the next few days.



## **Part 4 - The Burberry Sari - August 23, 2004**

This is a bit of a late update as both time and Internet cafe hours of operation delayed its delivery until I arrived on domestic soil.

### **Darjeeling Revisited**

When I last mass corresponded I was held up ill in Darjeeling shitting myself to death. Historically, Darjeeling was the original kick-off point for Everest expeditions. To me it has provided many of my favorite impressions of India. I met a handful of fantastic people; local business owners, newspaper journalists, fellow travelers and many Tibetan refugees. The Buddhist and Tibetan community invited us into their monasteries, schools, and even funeral ceremonies – it was sort of like a wake without booze, but they did serve us a fantastic lunch. The refugee children are the most delightful little people demonstrating the very essence of life – Appreciation and happiness with their every breath.



Perhaps it was a combination of my deathly illness, newfound spirituality, and low libido (due to my illness, life as a monk seems like an easy pursuit) that it was in Darjeeling where I decided to self-ordain myself as the ALPACA LAMA. This is the religious equivalent of a mule variation, sort of like a horse and donkey producing an ass.



Despite my newfound enlightenment, I had to take care of this health problem before I literally became too enlightened... so I inquired about some doctors. I learned about a

Hindu homeopathic doctor who was not highly recommended as his advice usually involves drinking Ganges water and prayer to one of the 3.5 million gods in Hindu. I then learned about a Buddhist homeopathic doctor with a legitimate MD. I went to the good witch's office/ clinic/ pharmacy all rolled into a shack about the size of an outhouse (with much more pleasant of an odor) and she provide me some root oil that seemed to do the trick...

### **Spiritual Chaos**

From Darjeeling, we caught the night train to one of Hindu's most sacred cities, Varanasi. It is located on the banks of the world's largest natural sewer: the Ganges. The water is so polluted that the fresh? water dolphins who swim through it are blind. Varanasi is the Jerusalem of the east, attracting pilgrims, tourists, religious profiteers, and people who will worship anything. I am sure I could have even found followers for the Alpaca Lama – but I did not want to hand out flyers. Varanasi is a great place to die with hotels to cater to this wish as in here you exit this reincarnation cycle and go straight to the next world. The streets stretch off the water ghats into a narrow labyrinth enchanting the air with the masala aroma of cremation, ash, opiates, hash, cows, cows, cattle, human pollution, gangrene, incense, monkeys, perfume and water buffalo - which for all intensive purposes are cows. One morning at about 5:30 am I boarded a boat with a charming Australian couple who coined the event (and India) 'spiritual chaos'. We watched the waterways come alive with Shiva pilgrims bathing, shaving, brushing, and meditating in and along the river.



The closest I came was splashed by the water, two German tourist who were at the same hostel were able to see dead bodies floating to the surface – and they did not even have to pay extra for it! Varanasi is also very important for Buddhist as well, as right outside is where the Buddha began his teachings. They even have a tree created from a graft of the original Bodhi tree Buddha received enlightenment under. I went for a nap under such a tree, but I did not receive any enlightenment that day as my Darjeeling root oil medication was working.

## Divine Intervention

We then ventured to Khajjarho. In Khajjarho, I met sickness once again. There is nothing like losing simultaneous control of various organs to give you a biology lesson you really don't need.

Why did this sickness plague me once again? The easy answer is that I stopped taking my pills and got food poisoned off a bad banana lassi. However India is a land of living mythology and like my favorite mythological traveler Odysseus; I was a victim of the gods. But which one did I offend? At first I thought it was my Alpaca Lama stint, then I remembered it couldn't be lord Buddha, as he never wanted worship and felt no threat of competition.

So I nailed it down to three possibilities:

1. Back in my sarong days I may have offended some female earth goddess like Parvati and she decided to give me bloating and cramps to go along with my dress.
2. When I was in Hampi I possibly desecrated some temple during my motorcycle fun. Here it would have been most likely Ganesh who I angered.
3. When visiting the Kali temple (Kali, a goddess who demands sacrifice) I had a little altercation that ended peacefully, however offending Kali as no blood was spilled.

To solve my problems I placed a flower on a statue of Parvati, a coin on a figurine of Ganesh, and stepped on a cockroach for Kali. I also started taking my medicine again.

## Architecting Sex

So now I was able to have the biology lesson people visit Khajjarho for, the erotic 'Kama Sutra' temples. These temples are roughly 1000 years old and are the best-preserved monuments in India. Now most of these images are supposed to showcase fairly monogamous relations whether they are between human and human (including the use of assistants) or human and elephant, tiger, lion or horse. Relations with a horse is apparently is a holistic way to cure syphilis. No anti-biotic needed. Giddy Up.



On a walk near the Khajjarho, we met a Sadhu (holy man – however most are criminals on the run) who wore nothing but a rope on his penis so he may attach a 15 kg rock. I

did not find out if this is for enhancement or piety purposes, but after seeing this I realize there are some questions I have no problem remaining unanswered. To each his own.



### Heaven's Alternate Gate

After a brief stop at a palace in Orcha, I returned to the Himalayan steppes at the Darmsala/ McLeod Gang area. McLeod Gang is where the Dali Lama and his exile government is HQed. His Holiness was out of town and was thus unable to meet with the Alpaca Lama. Nevertheless this was the perfect place to close my misadventures in India. I visited the monastery a few times, hiked, met another eclectic group of travelers, attended yoga classes, shopped and ate some of the best oriental cuisine in well... the southern Orient.



### Full Circle

Now I had to face Delhi again. My second time in Delhi was livable. I was either acclimatized to the pollution or cancer has already destroyed my lungs. I have now downgraded the city from the asshole to the armpit of the world. I was able to settle the score and regain part of the money I lost in the beginning. My return visit to Delhi also

allowed me to see the India this country may become, if the very real threat of AIDS does not devastate this land it may become Westernized/ Globalized without becoming completely modern. My basis for this comments was purely observational; I went to a more affluent middle class shopping district were I saw a woman wearing a woolen Burberry sari. It was about 30 degrees Celsius outside with humidity. No one said Haute Couture is easy to wear.



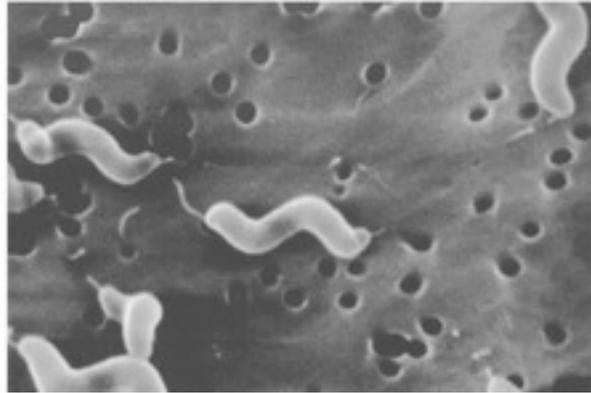
### **Minds Wide Open**

India has been quite the experience – literally for the 6 senses. Filled with contrasts and chaos I do not think anyone can completely figure this place out. I have had my absolute best travel experience here – as with my worst. I cannot tell you how many times I thought about getting on a plane to go home, yet with this said I cannot count the amount of times I thought about never returning home. I would never recommend India; but if you chose to go (as you may guess from the length of this email) I have lots of advice to give. Will I return? I hope so. I like to think I left part of myself behind... whether that is a bit of a shed skin, ego or literally over 8 kg of shat body mass, time will tell. As for spirituality in India – Does it exist? Enlightenment is not guaranteed - but awareness may be.



## Post Script

Shortly after arriving home I underwent a physical with blood-work and stool samples. A previously unknown strain of the bacteria *Campylobacter* (I named it 'Crampy') was discovered in my system and a special antibiotic had to be crafted and administered. The antibiotic ended up knocking me off my feet jto the same extent of the initial sickness. It also aided in continuing the concentration camp chic look I had developed.



Nevertheless as 'Crampy' is probably the only thing that will ever cultivate in my belly, I placed an ultrasound image in my wallet to show my friends and family. I went through the motions of my body, my choice but the gestation was short lived as the Canadian Health Agency flowed up to ensure I was taking my antibiotics - watch out for socialized medicine ;).

