

The Sabbatical Journey - Part 4: India

Jo Loveridge

We travelled on to India, where compassion had been at the heart of Mahatma Ghandi's (1869-1948) message. Ghandi is revered by many for his life and teaching as well as for being the founder of modern day India.

The Royal wedding coverage continued here in India and was dominated by flashbacks to Princess Diana, who was admired for her humanity and her compassion, and sometimes even compared with Mother Teresa of Calcutta.
India

The Indian pilots were on strike as they had all been sacked and told to reapply for their jobs so our flight to India was delayed by half a day. We arrived in Delhi, and were greeted by our local guide with a garland of marigolds. We were very late and so we had a very quick tour of the city, the Mosque and the bazaars, the memorial to Gandhi and the very British Lutyens buildings from the last century for the MPs and Indian Parliament set in the mist of verdant grass and lush trees and well swept streets. After the wonderful chaos of Nepal, Delhi seemed rather orderly apart from the roads where it was every car, truck, bike and Tuc Tuc doing whatever suited them.

We said goodbye to three members of the party who were returning to England and the next morning we left with our Taxi driver to go to Agra. A man with a monkey touted for business, the monkey was encouraged to climb through car or coach windows at a stopping place and shake hands and pose for photographs. It was a strange feeling to be looked in the eye and have my hand taken by a monkey!

We stopped at the Red Fort, an enormous palace, fortified buildings and a mosque, it was impressive and awe- inspiring and yet it had a sense of tranquillity and calmness, despite the hustle of people trying to sell us souvenirs. It was impressive to see how faith was at the heart of the life, in Europe a

church or chapel would be found in the grounds of a castle or large house and here it would be a mosque or a shrine.



The hotel had stunning views of the Taj Mahal. I had a swim in the evening which cooled me down after the immense heat of the day (more than 40C) while Doug had an Indian beer.



We woke early, 5.15am, to enjoy a peaceful, tranquil visit to the Taj Mahal. As the sun rose, the beautiful fairytale-like building stood serene in the early morning mist. There were lush well-tended gardens, with fragrant- blossomed trees, and water surrounding the white marble building. There were peacocks and white cranes in the gardens. It seemed to have an air of sadness and yet beauty at the same time: The memorial to a beloved wife, the iconic photo of Princess Diana sitting sadly all on her own. Was it the world's biggest and

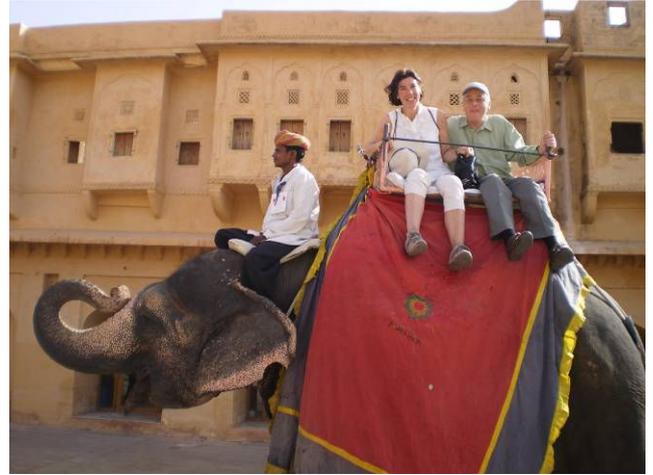
most beautiful memorial or tomb dedicated to only one person? The king had had plans to build a black tomb and memorial to himself just opposite the Taj Mahal on the other side of the river but he had spent so much of the people's money and taxes they lost the appetite for such extravagance and he was overthrown before the building could be completed. The white marble was inlaid with beautiful precious stones, once again the reality was better than the pictures and it just seemed stunning to have the opportunity to be there.

We later stopped off at a red sandstone fort with a mosque. The temperature had reached 42 degrees, draining us of much energy, but cool for that time of year apparently! We were given an unofficial tour by a very persistent little eight year old boy and his friends who spoke many languages and needed the money (he was ostensibly selling postcard packs) for his schooling. I was a bit concerned that he should have been at school but it seems that there were so many at his school they could not be educated on all five days of the week.

Leaving Agra to go to Jaipur we saw children waiting to go to school in neat uniforms, a white-washed Methodist church, pristine and seemingly out of place, next to a Hindu Temple, cows, camels, brick-laden donkeys, women in beautiful saris piling up dung cakes, and piles and piles of rubbish. There were traders selling everything from old motorbike parts to bricks, to raw meat and beautiful sari material. Trees lined the roads with white bands painted around the trunks to prevent termite damage. There were beautiful wild jacaranda, bougainvillea, trees and cars and vehicles jostling for positions on the chaotic roads, driving any way they liked around a roundabout.

We reached Jaipur and thought that we had seen the best by now: The Great Wall, Tibet, Mt Everest, the Taj Mahal but Jaipur was a brilliant and beautiful place. We had been promised a jeep ride to the top of the

hill where the Amber Fort was but we had read that there were elephant rides too!



Doug and I were taken up the hill at break-neck speed on a huge elephant with its laughing driver who had decided to overtake all the other elephants in its path. It was a great experience to ride on this immense creature and it was surprisingly comfortable.

We laughed and held tight all the way up and were photographed on this white knuckle ride showing us to be holding on extremely tightly! The fort was superb, nestling at the top of the hill, a former palace where the King had lived with his harem and concubines, with great views of the surrounding countryside, and down onto the lake with a palace that had been built in the middle. The fort was a good vantage point to see any approaching enemies. The Amber Fort had flowers painted on the walls but this building, unusually, seemed to have no gardens.



We were driven into Jaipur where we had lunch and were serenaded by a man, dressed in red velvet, who played, danced and sang, and he had an amazing curled maharaja moustache and looking as though he had stepped straight out of the past!

We looked around the astronomical and horological instruments but because they were so large and technical and because it was so hot, 48 degrees C, somehow we failed to admire them. We were left to do a bit of shopping in Jaipur where it was an adventure just to cross the road. We discovered that no one stops at zebra crossings, but if you do cross they try to avoid you. We realised this only after waiting for ages to pluck up courage to cross!

We bartered for some camel skin Maharajah shoes with curled toes. Our guide had taken us to a gem stone factory where everything was terribly expensive and to a carpet weaving and fabric printing factory. They showed us how such things were made as though this was where it was produced but once we had passed through the room they seemed to stop!

We felt tempted by the beautiful carpets which the owner told us he supplied John Lewis for twice the price, but having popped into the carpet department at JL at Welwyn since, I am glad that we did not go for it! There is, of course, huge pressure put on us to buy, pressure that somehow seems to have the opposite effect!

Back at the hotel preparations were being made for a Hindu wedding. The bridegroom appeared riding a white horse with a band marching beside him, and a special stage had been built for him to sit on and be joined by his bride. Marigold petals were scattered all over the hotel lobby in different shades of orange and red. That evening we dared to eat meat, we had been encouraged that this was the city in which to sample the meat, and enjoyed a wonderful chicken tikka and afterwards cooling ice cream kofti.

To be concluded next month

"Will Aid": make a will, make a difference

"Will Aid", the UK's most enduring and successful charity will-making scheme, returns this November.

"Will Aid" provides the opportunity for any adult to have their basic will drawn up by a professional solicitor in return for a voluntary donation to Will Aid. The suggested donation is £85 for a single will, £125 for mirror wills or £40 for a codicil or change to a previous will. Will Aid has also teamed up with Certainty, the National Will Register, to offer Will Aid clients the opportunity to register the location of their will - for free (usual cost is £30). When a will is needed, the register enables loved ones to quickly and easily locate it.

Last November was Will Aid's most successful campaign ever, with around £1.5 million being raised in just a few short weeks by Will Aid solicitors all over the UK. They helped more than 19,000 people make or update their Wills.

The money raised from donations is shared between the participating charities and is put to use helping people to live, build their communities and improve their future in the UK and around the world. However, the Will Aid charities are not the only charities to benefit from Will Aid. Many people use Will Aid to make a lasting difference to their favourite cause, church, or charity by leaving a legacy.

It's so easy to take part in Will Aid. Simply find a convenient solicitor at www.willaid.org.uk or by phoning 0300 0300 013. Make an appointment for November as soon as possible, as participating solicitors can become booked up very quickly.

***Editor:** Will Aid is an annual fundraising campaign involving nine of the UK's leading charities: ActionAid, British Red Cross, Christian Aid, Age UK, NSPCC, Save the Children, Sightsavers, SCIAF (Scotland) and Trocaire (N. Ireland). Approximately 1,200 participating solicitors all over the UK will generously give their skills and time to write basic Wills in exchange for a donation to Will Aid. They will receive no payment for this work.*