

'Duvets are better than blankets'.

*Prolonged shivering is the first stage of hypothermia, so one of my traveling companions told me, despite the many blankets this is what I had been doing for most of last night!*

Landed in Delhi on Saturday morning with that all too familiar 'culture shock' - right smack between the eyes. I have never seen anything quite like this place in all my travels so far. I have experienced the traffic, the smells, and the filth before, however, it was the constant hassle from every conceivable angle that blew my mind. Spent my first night in Delhi and couldn't wait to get out.

The following day I took a 3-hour train journey to Agra and the Taj Mahal. The train was punctual, clean, and we had a wonderful meal on board.

My guest house, in Agra, was a delightful spot, with a lovely open garden for one to relax in - a positive sun trap, should the sun ever appear! The Indians are struggling with the cold weather at the moment and so all day long they wander round in bobble hats and thick rugs draped around their shoulders. The weather to me felt positively balmy compared with the snow and ice that I had left back in the UK.

Having checked into my room I took a wander round town and then retired early, in order to make an early start at the Taj. Around 1am I awoke to find myself severely shivering. Despite dragging 3 blankets over me I still could not get warm. I would have turned the central heating on if I had been at home. In India this is not possible.

I have seen the Taj in many pictures and many times on the TV but nothing compares to the real thing. As you walk through the main gateway your breath is taken away by its sheer size and beauty. I spent 4 hours wandering around, taking in every angle of this amazing place.

From Agra I had planned to take the 5.30pm train to Jaipur, but had not realised how busy the trains were going to be. I soon found out that you have to try and book things well in advance to guarantee a seat. I thought I had purchased a ticket for this leg of the journey, what I had actually purchased was the option to go on a waiting list. I hadn't quite appreciated this finer detail until I was asked what my seat number was by a fellow traveller. I was advised to go to the ticket office and see if I had now been allocated a seat. Fortunately I was told that a sleeper carriage was available.

Fog has proved to be a major problem here in Rajasthan, which has delayed many of the trains over the past few weeks. Tonight was no exception. The railway tannoy announced delay after delay, with a few cancellations thrown in for good measure. There was no mention of our train, however, it was obvious things were not right when the train had still not arrived at 7pm. Trying to find any information on the situation proved to be impossible. It was eventually 8.30pm when the train pulled in. By this time I was yet again frozen to the bone - I must invest in a decent blanket.

Boarding the train I found my carriage and settled in. What I didn't appreciate was that my class did not come with bedding. This was going to be a cold night. Foreseeing the problem I pulled on two more pairs of trousers and a few more T-shirts. It was cold but as the carriage was so full I managed to absorb body heat from my Indian companions.

The train arrived in Jaipur at around 1.30 in the morning - never a good time to arrive in a strange place. Thankfully most train stations have a 'fixed price' auto rickshaw rank. I gave the guy at the booth my accommodation details and a taxi was allocated. We set off and found the place with little problem.

The hotel was perfect with delightful rooms filled with antique furniture. I could not help notice the thick winter duvet on the huge bed - this was going to be a great place to stay.

Jaipur is famous for, amongst many things, the Amber Fort. Took the local bus and enjoyed a great afternoon wandering around this amazing site.

On Wednesday morning I went on an exploration for a blanket come shawl and invested in a delightful piece that set me back RS 1400 (£20).

At 1pm I jumped onto the bus that would take me to Pushkar, my next destination, in Rajasthan. It was during this journey that I experienced those tell tale stomach pains that indicate severe digestive problems! 2 hours into the journey, and after much cheek clenching I had to admit defeat and ask the driver to pull over. The sight of me answering the call of nature with my white little bum sticking in the air will no doubt prove interesting dinner talk for my fellow passengers for some considerable time to come.

Most of last night was spent on the loo, in agony. It is some time since I have felt quite so bad. Thankfully things have cleared up today, and I am nearly back to 100%. Such are the joys of travelling.

The day time temps are hovering around 12 deg C. The food is varied with little meat apart from chicken. Vegetarian food is more easily available. Most of the time one is made to feel very welcome but you can tell that tourism has taken its toll. I can honestly say that I have never experienced so much hassle.

*Vijay: Is he still there?*

*Q: You must be joking! 007 on an island populated exclusively by women? We won't see him till dawn!*

As I sit enjoying my muesli (piled high with all manner of exotic fruit) and tuck into my soft French toast, I savour the oasis that I now find myself in. To my left is the snow white marble of the seemingly ship wrecked 'Lake Palace'. To my right a group of women rhythmically beat piles of multi coloured cloth. They squat at the bottom of the concrete steps that lead down to the edge of the water. I can hear the slapping of wooden paddles as they beat the soapy cloth to free the grime that has become imbedded into the fibres of the material. An old man in boxer shorts stands next to them. Bent double he wrenches up the overnight flem that has built up in his wheezing lungs. His coughs and hacks strike a familiar sound, you hear it all the time here in India. The early morning sun rises across the shimmering lake. There's not a cloud in the sky. I take another sip from my cup of steaming coffee and, for a moment, remind myself of how different my life is to theirs. I hear a sharp shriek and then a splashing sound. The old man has waded into the ice cold water and is now carrying out his morning ablutions. All these activities are taking place in the same lake, not more than a few feet apart. The water has a murky green colour to it. In places, along the bank, algae spreads out in large patches. A balloon silently drifts overhead, early morning tourists taking in the serene beauty of Lake Pichola.

The Lake Palace of Udaipur was famous even before Bond came here, the filming of Octopussy, in the early 80's, made Udaipur an even more popular tourist destination.

The weather is fantastic, my batteries are fully charged, and my body warm to the core.

I have just spent 2 wonderful days here in Udaipur, and I do mean wonderful. Either I have found my feet or this place is pretty special. The hotel is gorgeous and so is the food. I have dined on the most amazing Tandoori chicken that I have ever tasted. Last night I sat in a delightful garden restaurant, overlooking the city palace, I ate sweet and sour fish with vegetable rice - my mouth is still watering at the thought.

My previous destination, Pushkar, would have no doubt been enjoyable had it not been for all the hippy travelers, young and old, who were 'getting into' the Indian scene. Most if not all had adorned

local clothing and were eagerly chatting to the locals whose only interest was extracting as much money as they could from these gullible pilgrims. Call me cynical!

Today I will take the 8 hour journey north, to Jodhpur, where I stay 1 night, before taking the overnight 12 hour train to Jaisalmer (in the far west of Rajasthan), where I hope to stay for a couple of days.

I'll leave you with one final picture. Imagine that you are in London, it's rush hour, the streets and the pavements are bulging with cars, busses and people, respectively. Now imagine, if you will, the same picture but now double the traffic and the people. Remove the black cabs and London Buses. Add in loads of Rickshaws, motorbikes, bicycles, horses, and camels. Increase the volume by 100%. Increase the vehicle fumes by 400%. Now double the number of people again. Inter disperse the people with the flowing traffic. Remove a few manhole covers. Oh, and for good measure throw in a few sacred cows. Now you have a street scene in an Indian city.