

India – Feb 2012

“An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind” Mahatma Gandhi.

Landed in Delhi then took an internal flight to Amritsar - North West India.

Most visitors to the Golden Temple, whether Sikh or not, are unequivocally humbled by what is quite simply the most tangibly spiritual place in all of India. I arrived just before dawn with a few good hours set aside and managed to get lost in its magical beauty. Visitors must leave their shoes at the facility near the entrance, cover their head (a luminous orange souvenir bandana can easily be procured), and wash their feet by wading through the shallow pool before entering.



The most famous and sacred part of the Golden Temple complex is the Hari Mandir (Divine Temple) or Darbar Sahib (Court of the Lord), which is the beautiful golden structure at the centre of a large body of water. The gold-plated building (750 kg of the stuff) features copper cupolas and white marble walls encrusted with precious stones arranged in decorative Islamic-style floral patterns.

The water that surrounds the Hari Mandir is a sacred pool known as the Amrit Sarovar (Pool of Nectar). The temple is reached by following the Parikrama (a marble walk way), which circumscribes the sacred pool in a clockwise direction. Connecting the pathway with the Hari Mandir is a causeway called the Guru's Bridge, which symbolizes the journey of the soul after death. The gateway to the bridge, the Darshani Deorhi, has magnificent silver doors.

The fascinating scene inside the Hari Mandir is televised throughout India for Sikh viewers. Amidst a crowd of fervent and solemn devotees, scriptures from the Holy Book are sung beneath a canopy studded with jewels. A *chauri* (whisk) is continually waved above the Book as lines of Sikhs pay their respects by touching their foreheads to the temple floor and walls whilst continuing in a clockwise direction. It truly is an amazing experience.

Another major highlight of the Golden Temple complex is the Guru-ka-Langar dining hall where around 35,000 people a day are fed (for free) by a plethora of temple volunteers. Everyone is invited to join this communal breaking of bread. All participants sit on the floor, regardless of caste, status, wealth or creed, powerfully symbolizing the central Sikh doctrine of the equality of all people. I have never seen so many dinner plates in all my life.

“A small body of determined spirits, fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission, can alter the course of history” Mahatma Gandhi.

A short distance from the Golden Temple is Jallian Wala Bagh, a place noted for the most notorious massacre under British rule. The British General Dyer was the Lieutenant Governor of the province in 1919. On 13 April 1919, pilgrims poured into Amritsar to celebrate the Baisakhi festival, a holiday in the Sikh calendar. In the afternoon thousands of people gathered at Jallian Wala Bagh to celebrate the Baisakhi. Surrounded by high walls on all sides and with only a narrow alley for access, there is no easy way to get in or out. General Dyer personally led the troops to the sight and ordered his men to open fire without any warning. It resulted in the death of 379 people and injury of more than 1,200. India was outraged by Dyer's massacre. Gandhi called for a nationwide strike

and started the Non-Cooperation Movement, which became an important mile stone in the struggle for India's Independence. Today this ground has been transformed into a park with a pleasant little garden. On the northern side there is a well in which many people who tried to escape from the bullets were drowned. Remnants of walls have been preserved to show the bullet holes. As an Englishman surrounded by native Indians, I felt very uncomfortable here.

Overnight train to Varanasi: I was met at the station by the guest house rep and his car. However, because the centre of Varanasi is vehicle free (supposedly), the drive was only a short one. I was then accompanied to my lodgings, through a maze of narrow streets, on foot.

Ganpati Guest House overlooks the Ganges, which meanders gracefully below. The roof top restaurant is an excellent place to watch the dazzling world below, and a great place to meet fellow travellers.

My most memorable experience in Varanasi was a visit to one of the burning ghats. Manikarnika ghat hosts up to 200 cremations a day. The process, as a cremation ground worker explained to me, is simple and unadorned. Above the ghats are stacks of firewood. The family of the deceased, according to their means, chooses one of the funeral packages on offer - each with a certain grade and quantity of firewood, sandalwood or its sawdust, straw, ghee (clarified butter), and other ritualistic paraphernalia - along with a priest's services.

Once the pyre is set up, four men close to the deceased carry the corpse in on a bamboo stretcher supported on their shoulders. They transfer the corpse, wrapped in plain cloth, onto the pyre and pay their final respects (women do so at home and traditionally do not attend funerals). If the deceased lived to be over eighty, there may even be muted celebration and gaiety. The priest begins the rituals and the chanting - part of the *antim sanskaar*, or last rites, which vary by region, caste, and other social factors.



The chief mourner, usually the eldest son or brother or the husband, sprinkles ghee on the pyre, and is then handed a torch to set it alight - an intensely emotional moment for most Hindus. The first fire, *mukhagni*, is ritually lit at the mouth. A funerary worker might add more ghee or straw to ensure the fire picks up and burns evenly. This worker is usually from the Dalit caste Dom the corpse is significantly burned, an important ritual called *kapal kriya* is initiated: the chief mourner is given a pole for a quick jab at the skull, breaking it and releasing the *atman* to continue its transmigration.

If a family can afford only the cheapest funeral package - or none, in which case they rely on help from the government - the corpse is burned in stages on a small pyre: the middle part burns first; the head and the legs stick out until they are nudged in deftly by a pole after the middle part collapses. It takes about 250 Kgs of firewood and three hours to incinerate a corpse. After the burning is complete, the chief mourner and others douse the smoldering pyre with water from the river. They gather the ashes and fragments of bones in an urn, and go down the ghats to empty it in the Ganga. Dom men wait there with wire nets to sift through the remains, hoping to find bits of gold from a tooth or a nose ring.

It's quite a shocking place for a westerner to visit and I left feeling somewhat traumatized by the whole experience.

Darjeeling – North East India.

Draped over a steep mountain ridge, surrounded by tea plantations and backed by a splendid Himalayan panorama, the archetypal hill station of Darjeeling it is quite rightly West Bengal's premier drawcard. When you're not gazing at Khangchendzonga (8598m), you can explore colonial mansions and churches, Buddhist and Hindu temples, botanical gardens and a zoo for Himalayan fauna. The steep narrow streets are crowded with colourful souvenir and handicraft shops, and a good steaming brew and excellent Indian and Tibetan fare are never far away.

During the day it was a balmy 20 degrees but by 5 pm you could see your breath as the temperature plummeted to a chilly 5 degrees centigrade. Thankfully I had my merino wool thermals and the hotel provided hot water bottles at night.

Darjeeling was one of the highlights of my trip, especially the journey to get there, by jeep. The road is steep, narrow and very winding. It took 2.5 hours to get from Siliguri on the planes.

Last night I soaked up the sumptuous atmosphere of the colonial Hotel Windemere. The distant sound of a piano was wafting gently onto the veranda where I sat resting my weary body, smoking my Habana cigar and sipping a well deserved G&T. The altitude, over 2,000 metres, had taken its toll and I felt quite giddy, no doubt magnified by the effects of the soothing alcohol. It had taken over 26 hours to get from Varanasi to Darjeeling, a long, expensive, and time consuming journey. I



had planned to travel by train but there were no decent carriages left so I decided to splash out on a flight instead.

Whilst in Darjeeling I grabbed the chance to travel on the 'toy train'. It was on here that I had the pleasure of meeting a number of the people who appeared in the BBC television series Indian Hill Railways. The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway (DHR) is one of the engineering feats of the world. It has a gauge of 2 ft. and a length of fifty-one miles, with steep gradients and amazing loops. It climbs from the warmth of the

planes to the coolness of the hills in just over 8 hours.

From Darjeeling I took the overnight train to Kolkata (Calcutta). Checked into Hotel Fairlawn and enjoyed a superb English breakfast with tea served from a bone china tea pot, complete with tea sieve and tea cosy – ahhhh so quintessentially English.

The colonial-style Fairlawn is a Calcutta institution and the kind of eccentric family-run hotel I absolutely adore. Its charming matriarch, Violet Smith, has managed the hotel since the Sixties and sometimes dons a dress to match the hotel's prevailing shades of green.

The garden and shady balconies offer nooks and crannies in which to hide away and one can happily spend hours tracing the hotel's history through the numerous framed photographs, reviews and articles that paper the interior stairwell; lounges are packed with Violet's bric-a-brac.

Saturday: Took a trip out to Victoria Memorial then onto The Indian Museum. Sunday: checked out the flower market and Howrah Bridge then onto South Park Cemetery and the Mother Teresa Museum.

How things have changed! Back in 2001 'internet cages' were all the rave, now it's Wi-Fi access that has an influence on your choice of hotel. In fact everyone I met appeared to have a laptop, ipad or iphone. Internet cafes could soon be a thing of the past for western travellers.

Arrived in Goa late morning and took the local bus to Colva - spent the night at Sam's Cottages, and enjoyed some fantastic local fish at the restaurant across the way.

The next day I took a couple of busses to get to Agonda and checked into Om Sai beach huts, where I spent four days in 'chill out' mode.

I met, and travelled with, some wonderful people who made the journey so very, very special.

This was my third and final trip to India (I have seen everything I set out to see three years ago) went like clockwork and devoid of the setbacks experienced during both of my previous visits. I was sad to leave but pleased to get home to creature comforts that are, more often than not, taken for granted!

