



2002 Edition

Revision 3

# The Hazle Journal

*The Crucible: 12 Days In India*



## Why India?

Welcome readers to the Hazle Journal 2002! As you opened the envelope, your first thought might have been “*Come on Wayne, the Declaration of Independence wasn't this big!*” Well The Hazle Journal doesn't need to be rushed through in one sitting. It 's like a delicate cup of tea to be savored over time. *And also there are lots of pictures and easy words!*

So why, why, why, in the name of God would I go to India? When I even mentioned the thought to people it was like “Eeeeeew, poor, dirty, lepers, crowds...” But one thing always trumped all the terrible things people would say: *The Taj Mahal*. The glorious white marble mausoleum is the de facto symbol of India, and has always been one of those “must see in my lifetime” places. But the more I read, the more I discovered there was so much more to India. And my appetite was whetted.

I won't go into an extensive history here, those who wish to can pursue that further. But suffice it to say, India has one of Earth's oldest and most diverse civilizations. It's first civilization began around 2500 B.C. along the Indus River Valley. As centuries and centuries went on there were conquests and invasions by multiple countries and empires, each leaving their own mark.

India may be the most religiously diverse nation on earth. Among the faithful are Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains and Christians. It is estimated that over 330 million deities are worshipped by India's well over 1 billion people.

The 1900s were turbulent times for India as they sought independence from British rule and lost a Muslim section of their country which was renamed Pakistan. They were heartbroken when their spiritual leader, Mohandas Gandhi, was assassinated. Two prime ministers in a row, Indira Gandhi and son Rajeev Gandhi (no relation to Mohandas) were

also cut down. Religious internal strife continues to cause difficulties as India struggles to cope with an overwhelming population, ever increasing poverty, threats of war with it's nuclear powered neighbor Pakistan and a caste system that though officially banned, remains strong.

Yet despite the challenges, I also read



***“There is no word that can describe the look on a young-bride-to-be's face when her guy says that six weeks before their wedding he is going to go sashay around India for a while.”***

that India simply has some of the most amazing architectural sites in the world, incredible food, wonderful natural beauty and some of the warmest people you will ever meet.

I began 2002 making plans for my wedding, a day many thought they would never see. As Mary Ellen and I marched on with our plans, the wanderlust that brewed in my heart grew to a boil. The Iditarod, Angkor Wat... I needed one last trip to complete my trilogy, and India called out to me. There is no word that can describe the look on a young-bride-to-be's face when her guy says that six weeks before their wedding he is going to go sashay around India for a while. To make things a little less insane, rather than just jumping on a plane and figuring things out on my own when I got there, I contacted a local company called Col-

league Tours in Agra, India. They would set up an itinerary for me. Also they would take care of hotels, all transfers between cities. I would have a guide and driver everywhere I went.

While Mary Ellen wasn't doing cartwheels, she at least thought there was a chance of seeing me alive again this way. With many prayers, I booked my tickets at the beginning of March to spend twelve days in India. I would go to Delhi, the capital, Varanasi, the Holy City of the Ganges, Agra, the city of the Taj Mahal, Ranthambhore, the great tiger reserve and Jaipur, the fabled “Pink City”.

But why do I call this trip The Crucible? Well aside from being the good but annoying play you had to read in high school, a “crucible” is “an instrument in which impure gold is smelted in order to have the impurities removed, to be refined”. A crucible is also defined by Webster as “a fiery test”.

Let me begin at the ending. I *loved* India and wouldn't trade the time for anything in the world. My time in India was a fiery test that refined me and removed impurities (and maybe a few heartbeats too).

Please join me in the Hazle Journal 2002 as you read about lots of interesting history, breathtaking sightseeing and tons and *tons* of magnificent nonsense!

## The Journey Begins

So on Saturday March 30<sup>th</sup>, my future father-in-law, Gary Pugh, drove me to the airport. We briefly talked of the wedding plans and then had one of those chats about male-female relationships. Assuming I ever got back from this crazy trip, he felt that things would go well for Mary Ellen and I.

When I told him I would be flying on Aeroflot, he said “Oh good that is the Russian national airline. They’re good!” {*At least I thought he said that.*}

He dropped me off at LAX and I entered the international terminal. It felt so incredibly inviting to me, even better than it felt last year when I made my trek to Cambodia. Yet the world now is quite different from the one of last year’s trip. Back then “9-1-1” was only that number you called in case of emergency.

I walked through the waiting areas, people were eating, relaxing, talking, acting like everything was OK. (I know, I know, this is what we are supposed to do, or else “the terrorists will have already won”.)

So rather than walking around like some paranoid loon looking for suspicious people, which was just about everyone in my book, I ate a meal in the restaurant and downed a whiskey sour.

Everyone was searched thoroughly before getting anywhere near the plane. We all took off our shoes. Multiple law enforcement groups were there triple checking identification and asking questions. One guy who looked like Ivan the Terrible was pulled out of line by a cheerful military guy with a gun who asked to see his passport again. The guy looked like he was guilty of *something*, so I was hoping he wouldn’t make the plane.

As the plane lifted off the runway,

and sailed into the clouds, I pondered my next great adventure. After weeks of planning and a lifetime of dreaming I was on my way to India!

### From Saturday to Sunday

When it actually switched days depends on your frame of reference. I was flying to India via Moscow, which to me sounded like flying to Venice via the Moon, but what do I know, I’m not a pilot. The flight was smooth; lots of Russians mingled about the cabin relaxed. More than 12 hours later we descended into the Moscow airport. I saw the other planes on the ground as we came towards the runway... “*Hey aren’t we going a bit f---?*” BAM! We SLAMMED onto the runway and swerved and skidded. People strained against their seat belts. Eventually we came to a stop. NOTE TO RUSSIAN PILOTS: Feel free to start slowing down the plane BEFORE you land it!

Anyhow, I had a few hours to kill in the Moscow airport while waiting for my transfer. The time was pretty uneventful. The airport was quite dreary.

A few hours later again the plane lifted off. This time there were mostly Indian people on the plane. I saw lots of women in their beautiful saris and felt like I was in India already. Two burly Russian guys wedged me in. I hate to contribute towards racial stereotyping, but they swigged down a couple of vodkas way too quickly.

Somewhere along the flight I began wondering about that one thing you think you left at home. In this case it was the cord to plug in my camcorder so that I could recharge the battery. If I forgot this back home then once my two batteries ran out (which wouldn’t be that long), there would be no more camcorder. The suitcase I thought I packed it in was checked all the way through and so I wouldn’t find out until I hit the hotel.

My spirits lifted when I looked out the window and saw the most awesome sight. We were above the clouds, it was nighttime, the moon was bright and you could see the rays of the sun peeking around its edges! I got some sleep.

The flight attendant woke us to hand out the embarkation forms to give to Customs people once we “de-planed”. In a half an hour we would to land. A big smile of satisfaction grew on my face. I did it! Then, *the scariest twenty minutes of my life!*

As we began to lower into the clouds the plane began shaking: *violently*. I mean several good hard shakes. You know it’s bad when the flight attendants hurriedly buckle themselves in and look around nervously. The plane dropped 3 or 4 feet. The overhead baggage bins flew open, the plane dropped again. Bags flew out. The flight attendants screamed “*Sit down!*” as people tried to close the bins. The violent shaking grew worse and then another drop, there were collective gasps from everyone, including the flight attendants. We achieved weightlessness for a split second and then the seat belts pulled us back to our chairs. There was a point where I just **knew** the plane wasn’t going to hold together much longer. I *knew* we weren’t going to make it. It was too late to pray to God “If you just get me out of this...” we were past that now.

“I can’t believe it’s going to end here.” I thought. I prayed:

***Forgive me Father Jehovah. I know I have not been perfect, but please keep me in your memory for your New World. If it be your will I would like to be there.***

Another SHAKE, another DROP.

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## The Journey Begins (Cont'd)

(Continued from page 3)

*Please bless Mary Ellen, my bride-to-be. She will grieve, she will mourn. Help her to find happiness again. Don't let her be too angry with me.*

I thought of my poor parents, waiting forever for their son to get married and less than a month away...

*Please give them strength Dear Father in their hour of need.*

I thought of my sisters Elaine and Sara. Sara just about to graduate from high school and I would never see it.

*Help them to continue being the wonderful women they already are. May your spirit be with them throughout all their lives. Help them to make good choices.*

I thought of friends of mine at the memorial service, mourning the loss. Also screaming "What an idiot, he couldn't just stay put till he got married! He had to see the Taj Mahal!" My poor parents. My poor parents.

I was numb, but at some point the shaking of the plane subsided. And yes, we did touch down safely. Everyone on the plane burst into applause. A Hindu man screamed out something and everyone applauded and cheered. After the plane stopped completely and I realized I would be OK, I burst into tears. Not a few drops, but full scale crying. I let the salt water run down my face, not even bothering to wipe it. Drunken Russian Guy #2 grabbed his barf bag and threw up. Three other people in succession did the same.

Well Wayne, how do you like the vacation so far?

I staggered off the plane and shivered as I thought: in two weeks I would have to fly back with these people.



Checking into my room at 4:30 AM!

## Day 1—Delhi

I stumbled out into Indira Gandhi International Airport. It was as clean as most US airports. After a tiny second of panic I found my bags. I made my way through customs and my eyes began searching the crowds waiting out there. Then I saw the most welcome sight: on a large placard "**Wayne Hazle – Welcome!**"

My first guide Sanjay Dixit, or "Sonny", was there waiting. It was Monday around 4AM as we stepped out into the Delhi air. We hustled quickly to the car where the driver waited. When I got in he put a garland around my neck and said, "**Welcome to India!**" Sanjay had a deep booming voice and I could see him as one of the great Mughal emperors, commanding his armies from atop an elephant.

We drove through very dark deserted areas of Delhi, and for a split second that type of paranoia crept in. I had been communicating with this tour company for a month and things seemed totally on the up and up, but here I was in the middle of nowhere with people I didn't know. They could easily drag me off the road and say "**Now, Osama says you must die!**" But very soon that fear disappeared and for the rest of the trip I never doubted that I was in good hands.

I was checked quickly into the Hotel Vasant Continental with its pristine lobby. Sonny said to get some sleep and in the afternoon we would tour old Delhi. I went up to the room and opened my big suitcase. There, on top, was the power cord for my camcorder! Life is good. I passed out.

After a few hours, I got a good breakfast and met up with Sonny and the driver. I was ready to take on Delhi. The streets of Delhi are simply chaos; cars, auto-rickshaws, motorcycles, bicycles, cows, and pedestrians battle for the right of way like an Old West shootout. There should be an accident every five seconds but somehow it all seems to work.

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## Day 1—Delhi (Cont'd)

(Continued from page 4)



**Qutb Minar**

India has more UNESCO World Heritage sites (<http://www.unesco.org>) than any other country and in the next few days I would see several of them.

Our first stop was the Qutb Minar complex, one of the oldest sites in Delhi, which dates back to the early 1100s, and the Muslim conquest of India. It includes the oldest mosque in all of India. ([http://www.delhigate.com/qt\\_index.htm](http://www.delhigate.com/qt_index.htm)) The highlight is the actual tower. It is nearly 73 meters high and tapers from a 15-meter-diameter base to just 2.5 meters at the top. The tower has five distinct stories, and each story is marked by a projecting balcony. The first three stories are made of red sandstone, the fourth and fifth of marble. As I walked around my first tourist spot, I quickly flashed back to last year and Angkor Wat.

The next site was Humayun's Tomb. Built in 1570, it is the first "garden-tomb" in India. Humayun was the first of the great Mughal Emperors. The Mughals were a line of Muslims from Afghanistan, highly skilled with cavalry and firearms and in artillery. They were also magnificent architects. Humayun's son, Akbar, was considered the greatest of the Mughal emperors and he created

an alliance with the Hindus. His great-grandson, Shah Jahan, would build the Taj Mahal.

We then drove over to the Rajpath. This is the center of New Delhi as the capital of India. (For those studying for the SATs: Rajpath is to India as Pennsylvania Avenue is to \_\_\_\_\_.)

Finally we went to a Sikh temple. It wasn't on my original itinerary, but I told Sonny that I had strong interests in culture, history and religion of India and so he thought the site would be interesting, and it was. It was the beginning of many places where I would have to take off my shoes. I watched the devoted cleanse themselves in the pool, and perform various other rituals.

As the sightseeing for the day ended, Sonny asked if I was interested in going to a store and seeing how the people of Kashmir make rugs. This would be the first of many, many, many, stores I would visit during the trip. From this



**A snake charmer on the Rajpath**

point on, each time I mention going to a store, please play the "Axel Foley" music from Beverly Hills Cop in your head.

Shopping in places like this is done via the "haggling" method. They propose some ridiculous price for an item, like \$800 for a rug. If you don't know better and you just buy it they just made an *incredible* profit. If you are savvy you offer \$300. Then they tell you that is impossible and you go back and forth for hours until you work out something agreeable. I hate doing this. I am used to the lazy American way of just looking

at the price tag and then buying.

I entered the store. They made this great Kashmir tea and I sat. They then proceeded to show me rugs, DOZENS of rugs. Within a few minutes the floor of the showroom was covered with all kinds of rugs. We haggled over multiple ones. There were some nice



**Humayun's Tomb**

larger ones, but I told them I didn't want to make a rug decision without talking to my fiancé first. I told them I would talk to her that night and let them know.

Sonny dropped me back at the hotel. I had a wonderful dinner that included this tomato chicken over basmati rice. Mary Ellen and I talked that night. I decided not to get any rugs yet.

Tomorrow would be more Delhi sightseeing and then catching the overnight train to Varanasi. After a hot shower, I curled into bed. I pinched myself really hard: I'M IN INDIA!

## Day 2—Delhi to Varanasi

The next morning I arose, and pigged out on another buffet breakfast. I had a few hours before they were coming to pick me up, so I figured I would plug in my camcorder and recharge the battery. India is on the 220-volt system as opposed to the 110 Volt system our American appliances are on. Being the smart cookie that I am, about six weeks earlier I went to a travel store and bought an adapter for the Indian sockets and a transformer to step down the voltage so I could plug in my camera to an Indian outlet and not have it blow up.

I remembered at the store the worker asked me what the wattage was on my camera because there was a small and a large transformer. I just bought the small one because "*Hey, my camcorder is small!*" Now of course I couldn't possibly be so silly as to buy something weeks in advance and then never check the instructions could I? (Come on do you think I'm a fool?)

I plugged my camcorder into the adapter and transformer and then plugged that into the wall. I waited for the light to come on to show that the camcorder was charging... NOTHING. I unfolded the here-to-fore unread instructions to my transformer where it clearly spelled out this size will not work for a camcorder! Aaaaarrggggghhhh! I can be *unbelievable* sometimes. Now what? I tried not to panic. I will ask Sonny if there is some travel type shop that might have them. Don't panic. Don't panic...

I packed my things and checked out of the hotel. Sonny and the driver came to get me and we were off. I asked him if he knew a good travel or electronic store anywhere that might have a transformer. He told me I would have a hard time finding that anywhere in India. "*Nice going Wayne!*" I would have smacked myself hard if it wouldn't have looked so weird. I will have to use the camcorder as little as possible until the Ganges and the Taj or just count on some miracle. Sigh...

### More Touring

The first stop was the Indira Gandhi Memorial. I had been looking forward to this one.

Indira, was prime minister of India from 1966 to 1984 minus a few years in the middle ala Grover Cleveland. Her Sikh security guards assassinated her while she walked in the backyard of her home.

(!) Her home has been turned into a memorial to the beloved leader. Pictures, newspaper clippings, etc., described her rise to power. The actual clothes she was shot to death in are on display. The path in the yard where she was shot is covered with glass to represent the eternal flow of a river. Her bloodstains are still on the pavement.

Then we went to the Lotus Temple. This magnificent building is a temple of the Bahai faith, completed in 1986, it is shaped like a lotus flower and looks amazing from afar. Inside it is interesting to see all the uses of the number "9" constantly in their work. It is the highest digit and this holds special value for them.

The Raj Ghat, where Mohandas Gandhi was cremated, was closed that day, as was the Red Fort.

### Moolchand

Towards the mid-evening, we were done with the tour for the day. I had already checked out of my hotel, but Sonny brought me to another hotel in downtown Delhi, he said, "Stay here for a while. Get something to eat and relax, we will pick you up in two hours. We need to arrange some things. Don't leave the hotel, you'll just get confused outside."

So I found a comfy chair in the lounge and started reading. But somewhere a voice cried out to me. "*We are right in the heart of*

*downtown, there MUST be somewhere to buy a transformer!*" I asked the concierge and he told me of an electronics store just 3 blocks down. I decided to take a stroll into Delhi.

The moment I hit the sidewalk, I was descended on by all kinds of hawkers selling jewelry, incense, clothing, and books. Rickshaw drivers offered rides. A man offered to help direct me; I made the mistake of following him, which led me to the clothing store his friend owned. It was amazing how everyone wanted to be my "friend". I found the electronic store, but they only had the transformer I already had. Finally one teenage looking person adopted me and I couldn't shake him for the life of me. He tried to make conversation and direct me to various places. I showed him what I was looking for and he directed me back to the place I just left!

I walked faster to get away but he kept up. He told me he knew another place, an underground shopping place. "*Uh-huh.*" I thought. But feeling desperate I followed him... for blocks and blocks. Every once in a while he would turn back and say "*This way.*" Isn't this how stupid Americans end up chained up in a basement and saying "God how could this have happened?"

We eventually reached a doorway with guards and a metal detector and beyond it there were definitely stairs that led underground. I saw people going in and out with shopping bags. "I guess that's OK." So I followed. By the way I had **TONS** of metal all over me, yet I walked right through the "metal detector" and was never stopped.

Downstairs was a crowded underground mall. Lots of busy storekeepers pushed their wares. He brought me to the first store. I showed them the part. They shook their head. Another store, same thing. Then another. Finally we went to store that says yes we have that! They brought out the one I

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The Home of Indira Gandhi

## Day 2—Delhi to Varanasi (Cont'd)

(Continued from page 6)

already had. I told them *I didn't need to buy what I already had*. I needed the bigger one. They didn't have it. Several more stores either gave one answer or the other. It was getting late and I needed to get back. I told the guy "Thanks anyway" and made a beeline



Moolchand

to the stairs. He looked crestfallen. Out of the corner of my eye I saw one more store. We looked at each other and then ran to the store.

The shopkeeper smiled and pulled out something that said it was a transformer on the box. He told me it would work for camcorders. It was light as a feather, unlike the one I had. "How can this be so light? Are you sure anything is in there?" He opened it and showed me a fuse and what looked like a computer chip. He said, "Yes it will work, special circuitry!" It was 300 rupees (\$6) and it was my only shot, so I plunked down the money. The thought that even if it didn't work I would never see this guy again plagued me, but whatever.

My young guide beamed. Mission accomplished. We started walking back to the hotel. *Now* I asked his name. "Moolchand", he said. Moolchand was 24 and already had 3 kids (!) Of course that could have been the line he uses on all softhearted tourists. I squeezed some rupees into his hand and went back to the hotel lobby.

### OFF TO VARANASI (OR HOW I LEARNED TO LOVE THE INDIAN TRAIN SYSTEM AND STOP WORRYING.)

Sonny and the driver came to pick me up and in the evening we went to the train station. What pandemonium! It was a menagerie of all kinds of people. Whole families slept on the dusty concrete. Sonny led me by the masses of people as we looked for my

car. I would be riding the luxury sleeper class train. Funny thing is I mentioned this to someone on the Internet who had been to India and he asked me where I was getting the word "luxury" from. It would be a train that I could sleep on, but that was it. He tried to temper my delusions by telling me that luxury in India and America isn't the same thing.

Despite this warning I must say my expectations were a tad high. I thought of the legendary Orient Express. I expected pretty much my own car, with the walls and floors lined with silk. Veiled maidens bathing my feet in the juice from pomegranates. The smell of frankincense and myrrh would permeate the entire car. Tender bite sized morsels of curry chicken would be spoon-fed to me. Sonny and I went from car to car, he would look at a paper taped to the outside, realize this wasn't the right one, and then go to the next one. Finally we arrived at a car.

He looked and saw my name on a list with like *one hundred other names*. "Hmmm they're going to need a lot of pomegranates!", I thought as I stepped in.

And then I was inside. There was no silk, no frankincense, poor air conditioning, and teeming masses struggling to find their bunk. The "beds" folded out from the wall, eight in each tiny section. On each side there were three bunks up to the top and then against the

other wall there was an upper and lower bunk. I plopped myself down on a lower one as I struggled to lift my jaw. "*Can this be happening?*" You could have hit me in the head with a bat and I wouldn't have noticed. I just sat there staring off into space. A guy came up next to me with his ticket. He had the lower bunk and I had the upper one.

I didn't move. No sense in going up to the top, any second now the door would open and they would say, "Just kidding Mr. Hazle, your private car awaits." Half an hour later the veiled maidens hadn't arrived.

"Well I wanted the real India, and so here it is." I sighed and threw all my suitcases onto the top bunk and climbed up. I took out all the bicycle cables and locks I was instructed to bring and chained and connected all my pieces of luggage together. Nothing was going to disappear in the night! A porter came by and brought fresh sheets for everyone. I put one sheet under me. Then I looped one leg through the mass of chains and cables threw the other sheet over the suitcases *and* myself and leaned back. A strange maniacal grin crept onto my face.

Delirium had set in.

The truth is, it probably wasn't quite that bad. It's just that the chasm between expectation and reality was soooooo vast. I watched all my new Indian friends prepare themselves to sleep. I was a stranger in a

strange land. I pulled my trusty black fedora over my head and closed my eyes.



Still waiting for the veiled maidens

## Day 3—Varanasi: The City of Shiva

I awoke in the middle of the night with a bladder about to burst. I undid my leg from the cables, slipped on my shoes and climbed down quietly. Everyone looked asleep and so I dashed into the bathroom, or should I say the room with a hole in the floor? For a guy it ain't so bad, but you ladies better have good strong leg muscles.

I climbed back to my bunk. As I took off my shoes and looked around at my 'mates, I felt a sense of accomplishment. Soon we would be there. I had done it! *That which does not kill me makes me stronger.* (Unless it maims me so badly that I'm on a Jello diet for the rest of my life!)

The train stopped at Mughal Sarai station. There would be a ½ hour drive to Varanasi. As I got off the train I immediately saw my name on a board and there was my next tour director. As we walked along talking, someone called out, "Is that an American voice?" I looked over and there was an Indian woman talking like an American. Her name was Seema and she was an Indian woman, raised in America, who was now returning to Varanasi with her Father's ashes. Since we were all going the same way in town, we gave her a ride.

Seema does a lot of social work for women in India. She said the work is difficult because there is so much to do. Currently she is trying to start an English language newspaper in Varanasi. She said that if between my tours, I wanted to see how a regular family of Varanasi lives, we could hang out. We traded phone numbers and she was off.

I should mention that in Delhi we

would see a few cows sauntering along on the road now and then, undisturbed since they were sacred to Hindus. In Varanasi, cows *own* the road and cars struggle to get through. I did get the displeasure of seeing one cow road kill, gee wasn't that lovely! Varanasi seemed even more hectic than Delhi. There were fewer cars, but it was a small town carrying way more than it was supposed to. Eventually we reached the Hotel Clark Varanasi and I checked in. Then I faced the ultimate test:



"In Varanasi, cows own the road."

I took out the so-called "transformer" that I bought in Delhi. Three things could happen when I plugged this in with my camera. 1) Nothing, no light, no recharge. 2) POW! As my thousand dollar camcorder explodes from an overcharge of voltage. 3) The little recharging light comes on and all is good. Gingerly I plugged it all in...

The recharge light began to glow! Eureka! I took the hottest, greatest, shower. I checked the camera and the battery had started charging. "Sigh... It's just the little things in life..." Sleptime.

Later that day my guide, Mr. Mukal Srivastava, came to get me and we went to tour the city of Varanasi. We went to Benares Hindu University, one of the largest Universities in Asia.

On the campus we walked towards a temple, which gave me quite a surprise. *One tends to be surprised when one approaches a building and there are swastikas all over it.* But I knew my history, and long before Adolph and his band of merry men traipsed through Europe, the swastika was a symbol in many cultures

that meant peace, good luck, laughter and joy. We then saw the Durga temple or Monkey Temple, a blood red temple overrun with lots of monkeys.

There was also the Mother India Temple, whose entire floor was a large map of India, and greater Asia. It was not a simple map but a *large* three-dimensional relief map where the mountain rose up several inches from the floor. One could clearly see Everest, K2, the Ganges and the Indus Valley. You could look at this map and see why Tibet is called "the roof of the world".

Then we went to Sarnoth, where Buddha gave his first lecture. Like Angkor Wat and the Temple Emerald Buddha last year, Sarnoth is a revered site for Buddhists. The area is commemorated by a large stupa and a museum of ancient relics.

By early evening I was back at the hotel for dinner and early to bed. Tomorrow morning I would be up at 5AM for a sunrise boat ride on the Ganges. Also, Mukal mentioned I might like to shop for rugs and other items. {Ready that Axel Foley music!}

## Day 4—The Ganges

The wakeup call was at 5AM and by 5:30AM we were in the car on the way to the Ganges River. The roads were empty. It was one of the many times I would hold my breath on this trip waiting for something amazing. We reached the end of a cramped road and parked the car. We started walking. Buildings on both sides packed us in and then there was a break. Before my eyes I could see the water. A few boats were by the banks and the sun was just rising. The crowd started to pick up. There were vendors selling flowers, candles, incense and other offerings to the gods. You could buy bottles of various sizes to collect water from the Sacred River. I saw bathers, priests, peasants, men women and children performing their rituals. We made our way to the spot where our boat awaited. We pushed off.

There was a strange silence to the whole area. The only sound that stood out was the lapping of the water as our guy rowed the boat. I turned my body to face the Western side of the river and see the ghats (steps) and the bathers. Mukal regaled me on the history of Varanasi, the Ganges and aspects of Hindu beliefs.

Varanasi, the city of Shiva, is considered to be one of the holiest cities in India and one of the oldest cities in the world. Hindu pilgrims come here from all over the world to bathe in the waters of the Ganges River, which is believed to wash away their sins. Many also come to Varanasi to die since it is believed that dying here will liberate one from the cycle of birth and death. Literally its name means “the city between two rivers” – the Varuna and the Assi.

There are over 100 ghats in Varanasi. Dozens of major ones line the Western side of the Ganges. The buildings by each ghat look ancient, though most are no more than three hundred years old. Among the many is the Manikarnika Ghat, the oldest and most sacred ghat

that is used for cremations. There is the Shivala Ghat, owned by the maharaja of Varanasi. The Dasawamedh Ghat was the one we used to get to the boat. It is the most central ghat and also perhaps the busiest.



A young girl selling offerings

There was no way I was going to memorize all these names. That wasn't needed. I just watched people perform their timeless rituals in amazement. There is something so inspiring about a pilgrimage, even if it is something completely opposite of what you believe. It doesn't even have to be religious; it can be any great journey. There are always common factors. The desire to go, the saving and planning, the journey itself with its difficulties and pitfalls, that frustrating point where you nearly turn back, but you know you must keep going, the bonding that the pilgrims feel as they make their trek, the arrival. Then there is the bliss you are in during your whole time there: you can't believe you made it. There is joy and a sense of “purification”. There is a renewed sense of purpose in life. Finally you take the journey back home.

I wasn't about to turn Hindu. My mission here was to watch and to understand. For about two hours we rode up and down the Great River and I took it all in: people bathing, others washing clothes and beating them against rocks, people placing candles and other offerings in the water, swimmers, cows and dogs meandering in and out of the water.

The big controversy of course is, “Isn't

that water polluted?”. I must admit I came there expecting a wretched smell to come from putrid, foul colored water. Yet as we rode along, I had to admit the water looked extremely clear and everything around it smelled fine. My guide, Mukal, actually found it quite insulting that so many people think the Ganges is polluted. He challenged me to look at the water under a microscope and see if I could find any bacteria. I didn't have a microscope in my hotel and I really didn't feel like trucking water back home. He absolutely believes in the healing power of the water, even for those who drink it. The Lonely Planet guide to India had an amazing factoid about pollution in the Ganges. I won't even share it with you, lest I offend any of my Indian friends and readers.

He did tell me that babies aren't cremated and if a baby dies, it will most likely have some rocks tied to it and be dropped **whole** into the Ganges. I'm sure the water is fine though...

Suffice it to say I didn't bathe or drink.

I was a guest in their land and behaved respectfully.

Eventually we reached the cremation ghat. HUGE mounds of firewood were stacked neatly, ready for the next body to be cremated. We were going to come back in the evening to watch the sun go down and we would

probably see cremations.

We left the boat eventually and walked through the back alleys of the old city of Varanasi. It was a crowded jumble of alleyways, temples, shrines, people, stores, cows, dogs, flies and worshippers. In and out we wandered. We went to a very tense area where the most sacred temple in all of Varanasi is located. The Vishwanath Temple, or Golden Temple, is dedicated to Vishveswara. The current temple was built in 1776 and is plated with 800 kg of gold on the outside towers. For the past

*(Continued on page 10)*



Bathers cleanse themselves in the water.

## Day 4—The Ganges (Cont'd)

(Continued from page 9)

1500 years there were a succession of Hindu temples built in this area. Each time Muslim invaders came in, they would knock down the Hindu temple. The last time they did this they erected a Great Mosque on the site. Hindu fanatics are threatening to tear down the Mosque. Police guard the entire area to make sure neither building gets destroyed. Eventually we landed at some stores. (You know what to do here.) I bought some incense, two shirts for myself and stuff for Mary Ellen.

I went back to the hotel for breakfast and a nap. It was still not even 9 AM. When I woke up, I gave Seema a ring. Since I was going to look at rugs later, I asked her if she wanted to come with me. She thought it would be fun, but told me she has never bought a rug so she wouldn't be helpful in pricing.

By early afternoon Seema, Mukal and I made our way over to the rug shop for round 2. It was funny because everyone was surprised to see 'this woman' with me. Varanasi is even more conservative than the rest of India. Any woman just randomly seen with a guy would be assumed to be a prostitute. *Why else would she be with him right?* And if you ask me I just might tell you a funny story off the record. Suffice it to say, I did see a rug that I liked, but the price still wasn't right. So still no sale.

Seema offered me the opportunity to get out of the tourist areas and eat in a local restaurant, that was more of a 2 or 3 star instead of 5. I was ready for the risk. We rode in an auto-rickshaw away from the hotel area of Varanasi across town and found a little restaurant

that she liked. The meal that I ordered was very, very good. They *told* me it was chicken, though the place was so dark I could just barely see anything. Seema and I talked about social work she is doing for the women of India and in particular her home-



A woman captures the sacred water.

town of Varanasi. It is a very uphill struggle in an area where good health-care is not readily available. Lack of pre-natal healthcare leads to a far too high rate of maternal deaths during pregnancies. And of course the lack of good family planning means that way **far** too many women are getting pregnant and having kids to begin with.

Seema told me about an Indian doctor she knew in another area who had worked for a while in America, but decided he wanted to give something back to his own country. So he moved back to India and set up a women's clinic. In it he would perform tubal ligations for the local women so that they could stop having children. Without population control like China, India has no chance of improving itself. A lot of families were uneasy about the thought of not being able to have more kids, but the doctor used a good example on them. A pig, considered a filthy animal, has a big litter and they all live in the mud because she can't possibly take good care of so many. The cow, a holy animal has one calf and takes good care of it. So the lesson: having less kids, gives you the opportunity to take better care of what you have.

So this doctor was performing DOZENS of tubals a day, and we aren't talking first class facilities either. The oper-

ating room had a rickety table, which was steadied by putting things under the foot of the table. The doctor's assistant/Anesthesiologist was not trained in medicine at all. The doctor simply showed him how to make the incision and apply the **local** anesthesia. Once the operation was done, the woman would be made to lie on a mat **on the floor** overnight and the next woman in line would come up. The husbands would pick them up in the morning. A tubal ligation is a dangerous surgery to perform in this way. But it was the only way. Seema reminded me that a vasectomy is a much simpler surgery, but the men just won't get them. I made that cringing gesture every man on the planet makes when you use the "V" word. "*Come on, that would hurt!*" She just shook her head. Good to know male selfishness knows no international boundaries.

Now assuming my female readers haven't torn this up by now, I went back home, rested, and then headed for sundown on the Ganges.

The river had a totally different feel at night. The orange sun blazed as it reflected off the ghats. The cremation fires roared, six at once. A group of mourners gathered around the body of their loved one, covered with flowers. They poured water from the Ganges in the mouth of the deceased to begin the ceremony.

As the sky turned to black, a nighttime celebration and offering took place on one of the main ghats. I sat and watched, no clue what was happening, but I was fascinated. I pulled out the bottle of insect repellent I was constantly spraying myself with. I decided to re-read the label, because **it sure wasn't repelling anything**. Maybe I mistakenly bought *insect attractor* instead.

Eventually we made it back to the hotel. I ate and called it a night. Tomorrow there would be more touring, hanging out with Seema and the train ride to Agra; the home of the Taj Mahal.

(Continued on page 11)

## Day 4—The Ganges (Cont'd)

(Continued from page 10)

## Day 5—Varanasi to Agra

In the morning we went to see the Ram Nagar Fort. This 17th century fort is the home of the former maharaja of Benares. It was only a shadow of its former glory yet you could see the incredible wealth that these maharajas had. One thing you can count on in any culture at any time is that the ruling class will bathe themselves in luxury no matter how the rest of the population suffers.



Rug Wars: Episode V

Finally we went for one last round of the rug wars. There was a rug that I liked and I had a take it or leave it price. They agreed to my price, including the shipping and I felt good. Back at the Hotel Clark Varanasi, I said goodbye to Mukul. He told me that the driver would come and pick me up at 9 PM, so I was on my own for the rest of the day. I was going to hang out with Seema and see where her Uncle's family lived.

Soon Seema and I were riding through Varanasi's residential area and dodging cows.

Her Uncle's home was a multi-storied structure, containing several apartments, with a common courtyard, kitchen and bathroom in the middle. Seema's uncle, Avneesh, owned the building. She said, "This is a middle income family in Varanasi." The patio was gated to keep out people and the wild monkeys that roamed the streets and climb people's roofs. Once, one of them got in and bit her uncle on the leg. (Hey

this happens to middle class people in America all the time!).

The funny thing is that when we were riding through the streets, I felt sorry for Seema, like "Oh my God how could she leave her apartment in New York to come here?" But as I looked around the home, I started to feel quite comfy.

Seema had a maid who though not yet thirty, had already given birth eight times (!), three kids dying at birth.

We made our way upstairs to the roof and looked out over town. What a great view! I was on the lookout for killer monkeys but none showed up. I imagine sitting out on this roof looking at the stars on a dark Varanasi night. Some of us are so caught up in life with all the things we "need" and yet, here, so many of those things seemed unimportant. A young boy, Shunu, was playing on the

roof. Seema told me that this boy, along with his family was living in a former storage room on the roof. She brought me over to the room.

The Mother, Anjuni, was there, along with what I thought at first was another little short-haired boy in a

big raggedy shirt. I started snapping some digital pictures. The little "boy" was hiding from having his picture taken. Then I showed him his picture on the digital screen. Suddenly a young girl came to life. She disappeared for a few seconds while Seema introduced me to Anjuni. The husband wasn't home, but

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Bodies are prepared for cremation



A tailor made Indian suit

## Day 5—Varanasi to Agra (Cont'd)

(Continued from page 11)

she showed me how the four of them slept on one full size bed which took up the entire room of their “apartment” and yet she was perfectly happy.

The young girl reappeared, in dress, unabashedly feminine. Her name was Ashi. Ashi was ready for her close-up. I began snapping pictures like crazy with both cameras. Meanwhile, I met Seema’s Uncle’s Wife, her Aunt Aparajita, and we all sat in the room on the roof and talked. Anjuni made me tea and some Indian snack.

Meanwhile I snapped more photos of Ashi. I was entranced, despite my perceived difficulty of her surroundings, she was so filled with happiness. There is nothing on earth as beautiful as the fire in a young child’s eyes. The sweetness, the innocence, the hope, love without prejudice is humanity at its best. Looking at her playfully posing for photos, then going back to her own world, then coming back again, reminded me of how special childhood can be. Your whole future is ahead of you and it could easily go either way.

I was reminded of the National Geographic photo of “the Afghan Girl”. It is one of the most famous portraits ever. Recently there was a special on her. The photographer tried to find out who this mystery girl was seventeen years after her photograph became an icon. He found her, alive and discovered how hard her life had been.

I wondered ten years from now where my Varanasi girl would be. Would she be a doctor, saving lives in some impoverished village? Would she be a beggar, struggling for her next meal? Would she

find love? Would she be trapped in a burdensome marriage, six kids before turning thirty? Would she be able to pursue her dreams? Would she even live another decade? *My dear Ashi, your world is a tough one and there are many odds against you, but my prayers are with you.* Someday I hope to see her



**“There is nothing on earth as beautiful as the fire in a young child’s eyes.”**

again and I hope the news is good, it would break my heart if it were anything else.

I spent a little time with Seema’s family and they were

very hospitable and friendly. Eventually Seema wanted to go to an Internet café. I wanted to log in and check my AOL email. I had forgotten about that world. When I logged in there was tons of junk mail, lots of stuff about work and one piece of email that made my heart stop. The title of the email had the name of a friend of mine, let us call him “Sam”.

Sam was very sick when I left for India. I couldn’t even open this email because I knew it would tell me that he died. I felt my body go cold, sadness and pointless rage overcame me. Years ago Sam made big changes in his life and began serving Jehovah God. He was so full of positive energy and hope. There was no one more alive than him. Now he was gone. For a brief second the sky went dark.

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I said goodbye to Seema and went back to the Hotel Clark. What a day. I had been entranced by the beauty of childhood and saddened by the death of a friend younger than me. My emotions were raw.

In time the driver came to take me to the train station. I was much more aware of my surroundings this time. I was ready for round two with the train system. The director guided me to the correct train. I found my bunk and settled in. It was like being back home again. I chatted with my bunk mates freely as the train pulled away from the station. This time I was on a lower bunk. I tucked my suitcases underneath, chaining them together. I took a big swig from my bottled water. Confidence pulsed through my veins. It would be smooth sailing from...

A man burst into our section, “Is there a doctor here? We have a man not breathing!”

I looked further down the car and could see a crowd gathered around something. I got closer and could see people pumping a man’s chest. His wife wailed. The rest of us stood around not knowing

what to do. A woman doctor was on the train. She fought her way through the crowd. It was pandemonium in the car. The stereotype of India is that it is so crowded that you could drop dead in the streets and people just step right over you. But you

should have seen how the men on the train took care of that wife, comforting her, giving her water, putting cold towels on her face. Meanwhile our ER team struggled to save her husband’s life. Her frantic cries broke down to moans and whimpers. (Not to be a self-centered

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Seema and Ajuni

## Day 5—Varanasi to Agra (Cont'd)

(Continued from page 12)

American, but *does anyone care I am going to see the Taj Mahal tomorrow?*)

Each second moved like an hour. It became clear that things were not going well. Groups of men gathered in corners away from the scene and talked in hushed voices. A lot of people of India speak in an interesting combination of Hindi and English, jokingly called “Hinglish”. Basically it is Hindi with English words thrown in once in a while. So the voices I heard sounded like, “*Biddy biddy biddy not breathing. Biddy biddy hospital soon. Biddy biddy, death certificate.*”

Soon the pumping of the man’s chest stopped, the moaning stopped, people made their way back to their bunks. It seemed to take forever to get to the next stop. Some men took up a small collection for her. I gave some rupees. As we slowed down for our stop, the silence of death was overwhelming. After several “official” type people came in and out of the car, several men scooped up the man’s body in a sheet. I watched as they walked right by me. He was a pudgy man probably in his sixties. His eyes were closed. Two men helped his wife, his widow, off the train.

The fact is, this could have happened anywhere at anytime. People die every second of every day, from Beverly Hills, to Palestine to Paris and yes even on a train in India. I would never know who this woman and man were, or what their lives had been. They never knew my friend Sam. There are six and a half billion people on this planet, how many of them mean anything to us?

I curled under my sheets. This was a bit too much reality for me in one day.

## Day 6 — The Taj

I awoke early in the morning, the sun was just starting to come up. Between cars I opened the exit door and look out on the landscape. We passed beautiful open farmland. The intense, emotion draining events of yesterday seemed like a distant memory. I went back to my bunk and got more sleep.

Eventually, we pulled into Tundla Station. I met Anurag Sharma of Colleague Tours. He originally saw my Internet post about traveling to India on a newsgroup. He contacted me, arranged the itinerary, and continually updated it until we got it right. It is strange to communicate with someone via mail or email and then finally see them. I had no clue what to expect, I was just glad to be here.

The train station had the usual crowd of people. An older guy, *at least fifties*, offered to carry my bags. Anurag nodded to me that this was OK.

The man took two of my heaviest suitcases and stacked them on his head. The other he carried by hand. As Anurag and I walked the *800 miles* to the car, I couldn’t help peeking out the corner of one eye at the guy behind us. He struggled under the weight of all my junk, but he stared proudly ahead as he walked forward. He might have been of the impoverished low class, but he didn’t need my pity, he just needed to

be able to do something to make money.

I was happy for him as we approached the car. Anurag indicated he would take care of the tip. I saw him slip a coin (*as in one!*) to the guy. I felt guilty and quickly slipped some paper rupees to him. For the whole trip I was never sure if I was giving the right amount as a tip. Most people would take whatever you put in their hand and thank you, without looking at it in your presence. This is polite, but what happened when they were out of my sight? Either I greatly offended someone, or I gave them a down payment on a house!

Agra was a forty-five minute drive from the station. Anurag and I chatted about many things as we fought the crowded streets. Then he pulled to the side of a street and said, “*Look, there’s the Taj!*” I strained my head and beyond the trees I saw it. Rising up



out of the dusty skies of Agra like the fiery Phoenix, was the

BEHOLD!

shadow of the Taj Mahal! The sky was so dusty I could only see the outline and yet this only added to the intrigue and the mystery.

We checked into the Mughal

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## Day 6—The Taj (Cont'd)

(Continued from page 13)

Sheraton of Agra. It was the grandest of the hotels so far. I took another post-train ride shower and nap.

The lunch buffet at the Sheraton was great. I then met up with Sonny, my guide from Delhi. He actually lives in Agra and only came down to Delhi for me. I also got a new driver, Rajendar (I hope I am spelling that right). Little did I know that he and I would be spending more time together than anyone else on the trip.

We got in our car and headed to the Taj Mahal. The day before I left for India, there was an advisory that terrorists were threatening to blow up the Taj, but I didn't care I was going.

Cars are made to park about 4 kilometers (*come on figure that out*) from the Taj, where you are picked up by an electric, (non-exhaust), shuttle. We slowly climbed the hill and parked. As we walked towards the red sandstone gates, I could see the white marble top peaking out above. We went through the security checks and stepped inside.

**BEHOLD!**

There was a pretty big crowd

throughout the grounds, but an almost reverential quiet hung throughout the air. We basked in the glory of a legend.

*OK, so what on earth is the Taj*



*"Build me a tomb more glorious than anything the world has ever seen."*

*Mahal anyway?*

Emperor Shah Jahan built the Taj Mahal as a mausoleum for his second wife, Mumtaz Mahal who died while giving birth to their thirteenth (!) child in 1631. Mumtaz was no trophy wife. She went with him during all his travels. She was a brilliant advisor. The Mughals had a tendency to overthrow each other in the family, Shah Jahan had to kill many of his own male relatives just to keep power. Mumtaz might have been the only person on earth he completely trusted.

On her deathbed she had him make three promises, 1) Take care of their children 2) Never marry again (*dang!*) 3) "*Build me*

*a tomb more glorious than anything the world has ever seen."*

Legend has it that Jahan was so depressed at her death that his hair turned gray overnight. But

that year he began work on the Taj Mahal, literally meaning "the crown of the palace" also a shortened version of her name. It would not be completed until 1653. Twenty thousand workers were brought in from India and Central Asia. Legend has it that the hands and thumbs of many of the workers were amputated so that that they could never again repeat the

perfection of the Taj. Specialists were brought in from as far as Europe to do inlay work of jewels. The construction bill in today's money is estimated at least \$60 million.

So here I was standing before the Taj, "the greatest monument ever built for love"©. Unlike years ago when I saw the Sistine Chapel and I was given fifteen minutes on my rushed tour, Sonny and I were going to devote the entire afternoon to gazing at the Taj from every conceivable angle. I had tons of film to devote to getting *the shot*. You know that awesome shot that you see in magazine covers, the blue sky behind the glowing white marble

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## Day 6—The Taj (Cont'd)

(Continued from page 14)

and the reflection in the water.

I walked around the huge park the mausoleum is set in, staring at it as I moved. As I moved the building changed under the sun's light. I would stop, sit down and stare. We

slowly inched our way closer. I was going through film like a mad man. I tried to imagine the mighty Emperor Jahan walking

around the courtyard, *twenty-two years* after his beloved had died and finally being able to lay her to rest. As you get closer to the Taj Mahal you see how incredibly big it is. The marble isn't plain white, nor is it flat. The texture and color only add to the mystique.

By the time you get to the front entrance you are in such awe, you are salivating about what the inside must be like. Here is the only potential for letdown. While there is some wonderful jeweled inlay work on the inside, the beauty of the Taj is the outside. Inside is mostly a place for the tomb of Mumtaz Mahal and Shah Jahan.

Legend also has it that once the Taj was completed, Shah Jahan wanted to build a black Taj on the

other side of the river for himself. This is when his son Aurangzab said "*Enough of this nonsense, you're bankrupting the kingdom!*" He overthrew his Father and locked him in prison.

We watched the orange glow of



dusk bounce off the white dome. Considerable work has been done in recent years to clean up the air of Agra. Pollution and acid rain were slowly destroying the Taj Mahal. What a shame it would be for this gift to the world to be destroyed ruined like so many other great sites! We slowly walked back to the bus. My heart and soul were filled. If the trip had ended here, it would be all good. But I was only at the half way point.

They dropped me back at the Mughal Sheraton. I was going to hit their buffet, but I got a call from Anurag who invited me to come over to his office and go to dinner at a local place with him and his friends. A local place? I was so game I leaped out of bed. He met me in the lobby and we

walked across the street to his office and then our restaurant for the evening.

Dinner was great and someone who shall remain nameless snuck a bottle of whiskey into the restaurant and we spiced up our sodas a bit. The food was fiery and seemed to hit me a second time as it settled into my stomach. (*This isn't going to be a problem is it?*) I gave them all Jaguar Films caps I brought along.

We sat walked outside for a bit and someone who shall remain nameless smoked a cigarette. "Hey wait a minute, I said, "Aren't some of you guys from the Brahman caste, the priestly class that remains pure and religious?" There was a good laugh and then, 'Yeah right! I want to **enjoy my life!**' Ancient traditions are great so long as they don't get in the way of a good time.



## Day 7—Agra Fort (and the Runs)

It was still dark when I woke up. I tried to sit up. OWWW!!!! There was a sharp pain right in the center of my stomach. “Uh-oh!” Without getting too biological and graphic, things were not good for the next few hours. I was supposed to go see the Agra Fort with Sonny in the morning. I finally opened that bottle of Pepto-Bismol that I carried to Cambodia last year and never needed. I dragged myself down to breakfast and had lots of hot tea and lots of water.



Entering the fort

Sonny was waiting in the lobby for me at 10AM. He took one look at me and said I should go back to bed and we would make the trip in the afternoon. I collapsed in the bed. Within a few minutes Anurag called. I think everyone was hearing that I was sick and were starting to panic. I told him I wasn't horribly sick and I was sure I would feel better in the afternoon.



A view of the moat.

I wasn't feeling totally better in the afternoon, but I wanted to see the Agra Fort and there was no way I was going to lay around for a whole day. So like a trooper, I poured myself into the car and we were off.

Construction on the Agra Fort was begun in 1565 by Emperor Akbar. It was

first and foremost built as a military structure and imperial city. There are 2.5km of double enclosure walls that are 20m high. Akbar built the fort primarily with red sandstone. When Shah Jahan took power he made the fort into a palace. There is lots of evidence of his handiwork; white marble buildings replaced many of the sandstone buildings.

When Aurangzeb overthrew his father, he imprisoned him in a section of the Agra Fort. From his gilded prison, Shah Jahan could look longingly at his creation the Taj Mahal, but he could never again visit it... until

his death. Aurangzeb entombed his father next to Mumtaz.

After the fort, I went to a clothing store and found some cool

outfits for some of the women in my family.

Sonny dropped me back at the hotel. Tomorrow was going to be a full day driving to see Fatehpur Sikr, the Keoladeo Bird Sanctuary and ending up at Ranthambhore.

I went to the observation deck at the Mughal Sheraton and sat down and started at the Taj in the distance. In the foreground were houses and apartment buildings in Agra. Women hung their clothing out to dry. Kids flew kites.

As I watched the sun go down slowly behind the Taj I thought about Shah Jahan. Who was he really? A barbarian who murdered his family to consolidate his power? A visionary whose love drove him to build one of the greatest buildings ever made? A heartbroken old man, imprisoned by his son, pining away for the memory of his true love?

And what of this Mumtaz Mahal? Her memory has inspired millions, yet we know so little of her. This beautiful woman of India, whose greatest triumph would come after her own death. Like a specter she hangs over us. Shah Jahan and Mumtaz, even death couldn't keep them apart.



Staff at the Mughal Sheraton

## Day 8 — Fatehpur Sikri, Birds and Much Driving

The next morning I felt far from great, but definitely much better. I checked out of the Sheraton and got in the car with Sonny and Rajendar. Today was going to be 8 hours of driving and touring and a couple of hundred kilometers. We would drive about 35 km out of town to see the “ghost city” Fatehpur Sikri. We would tour there, then we would drive on to Bharatpur to see the Keoladeo Ghana Bird Sanctuary and National Park. From there we would drive to the Ranthambhore Tiger sanctuary.



A section of the magnificent city

Fatehpur Sikri was the capital of the Mughal empire from 1571 to 1585. It was constructed by Akbar the Great to be his perfect city and nearly perfect it is! The Mughals were so ahead of their time in technology and architecture. Fatehpur Sikri was built mostly of red sandstone with incredible carvings. I can't even begin to detail it all. When Akbar died the city was abandoned. It turns out that despite being so amazingly planned, they forgot one tiny detail: the area was plagued by water shortages and no matter what ideas his engineers tried, they couldn't keep a supply of water coming into the city. You would think they would check for water before building a multi-gazillion dollar city!

At this point we said goodbye to Sonny. Rajendar and I began our long trek together. We left Agra behind and the state of Uttar Pradesh and crossed into Rajasthan. Like driving between states in the United States, we could feel the culture change. The roads and the air

turned very dusty and then we soon began seeing... camels! There were camels being ridden, camels towing carts and camels at the sides of the road.

Eventually we reached Keoladeo National Park in Bharatpur. This area used to be a semi-arid region that would fill with water during the monsoon season only. The maharaja of Bharatpur diverted water from a nearby canal so that water would stay in the park and soon vast numbers of

birds began to settle there. The maharaja did this so that he would have birds to hunt. Isn't this just like man? Set up a great nature park, so that you can shoot everything!

Now, no hunting is allowed in the park and over 354 species of birds have been identified in its 29 sq km including Siberian cranes, herons, egrets, geese, owls, kingfishers, etc. The only downside is the best time to see birds is October through February, and this was April. About 5% of the birds that are usually there, were around. So the thirty minutes we stayed in the park consisted of the guide telling me “*Well what you would see here ..*”

So I bought tons of postcards with pictures of birds and got back in the car.

The deeper we drove into Rajasthan, the more we lost modern conveniences... like asphalt. To say the roads were bumpy and bad is like saying that the center of a volcano is a tad warm. And then it began... a strong wind started blowing, kicking up huge swirls of dust. Then lightning started crackling in the sky. Hour after hour our tiny vehicle snaked through tiny dustbowl covered towns. {Hold it, John Steinbeck just called, he wants his plot to *The Grapes of Wrath* back!}

Finally, finally, we reached the Ranthambhore area. The dust and lightning were whipping furiously. I walked into the lobby of the Ranthambhore Regency and it was in darkness. The storm knocked out the power. Nevertheless they took me to my room. The room had a nice kinda' rustic charm to it. However, I did have an issue. One tends to have an issue when one's room is *eight*

*trillion* degrees! With the power being out, there was no air conditioning. There was a small generator that allowed us to turn on lights in the room, but

that was it. I tried opening the windows but the wind was whipping so much that I had to keep it closed.

And to think after the death on the train I was planning on calling this trip

*(Continued on page 18)*



The steps to the Mosque

## Day 8 — Fatehpur Sikri, Birds and Much Driving (Cont'd)

(Continued from page 17)

The Crucible. Upon seeing The Taj, I decided that name was too strong. Now again the Crucible seemed perfect! All that mattered to me was that the dust storm cleared up in time for us to see tigers tomorrow.

I walked down to the dining room, where there was enough

power to have some nice food. A few locals came in and did a small dance for us, well OK it was just me until a couple came in a half hour later.

The staff was very, very, very, *very* helpful. Every time I put down a glass or even a fork someone refilled the glass or offered to put more food on my plate. I guess someone told the manager that there is some guy out there with two cameras snapping pictures and writing things and he decided to make sure I couldn't write that the service was bad.

By the time I got back to my room the air conditioning was back. Two of the local tour directors Satish and Sudhir stopped by and made sure I was OK. We chatted over a bottle of whiskey. I joked with them how interesting India is. This

was the second time that someone showed up with a bottle of whiskey. What happened to all that religious pi-ousness? They told me that *anything* that happens in America happens in India. It

just happens behind closed doors. On TV and in Indian movies you see highly manicured women in skimpy outfits jiggling around, but you NEVER see that on the streets. That is the life they *want* to live, but can't. How funny.



Rajendar, Me and "Sonny" (Mr. Sanjeev Dixit)

I called it an early night. Tomorrow the safari!



Stuck behind a camel



A dancer at the Ranthambhore Regency

## Day 9 — Ranthambhore: The Kingdom of Tigers

There was a knock at my door at 5AM. It was pitch black outside. One of the hotel workers brought me coffee and cookies. I handed him some rupees and then I saw it again. "**It**" was this weird head shaking move that some Indian people were doing. I didn't remember seeing it before Rajasthan. But now it seemed like lots of people were doing it while I was speaking to them. It might have been a simple mannerism or it could have been this guy's way of saying "*You stupid jerk, I bring you coffee at 5AM and that is all the tip you give me?*" Whatever.

By 5:30ish I was riding in a huge vehicle they called a canter, which was basically a 20 person jeep. The best times to spot a tiger were the early morning and late evening, when the temperature is coolest. The air was chilly as we entered Ranthambhore National Park.

Ranthambhore was originally the hunting ground of the Maharaja of Jaipur. (*There they go with the hunting again!*) The remains of an amazing thousand year old fort sits on a large mountain overlooking the



park. Also there are ruins of palaces, gates and other buildings. The park area encompasses nearly 152 square miles (392 square kilometers). The landscape is a breathtaking mix of dry grassland, hills, mountains, lakes, watering holes, jungles, rocky ridges, open valleys, thick forests. For a relatively small area, the park has a rich diversity of fauna and flora - species list includes 300 trees, 50 aquatic plants, 272 birds, 12 reptiles including the marsh crocodile & amphibians and 30 mammals.

After several days in dusty crowded cities, breathing fresh air out in the open was a wonderful change of pace. We slowly drove up winding roads. The driver and his two helpers scanned the area in search of the tigers. Unlike the lions in Africa who sit out in the open, tigers like to remain hidden. There were plenty of places for them to hide. We saw tons of deer, antelope, huge families of monkeys and gorgeous birds. This alone made it worth the trip.

At about 6:45 AM the driver stopped and quieted us. He pointed to a brushy area a few hundred yards up the side of a hill. We strained our eyes and then we saw it: a huge tiger sleeping in the grass. We all gasped in wonder.

This wasn't the zoo, where they were kept in a tiny cage to pace back and forth un-

comfortably. It wasn't the circus where the animal would be forced to jump through rings of fire. The tiger was doing what all those big cats do best, *absolutely nothing*. *Hey, how much would you move if you weighed 500 pounds?* We stared for about 15 minutes. At one point the mighty beast lifted it's head, looked around and then decided there was no real reason to move from the spot it had, so it went back to sleep. Eventually we moved on, thirsting for more.

As the sun came up and it started to get

warmer, we knew our chances for sightings were finished for the morning. We would go back out in the late evening. But we were psyched! We saw a tiger!

I went back to the hotel and took a nap. I finished the Pepto-Bismol. My stomach was just about better. Sudhir stopped by.

He was so thrilled that I saw a tiger my first time out. It took a lot of pressure off them. Often guests come to Ranthambhore and go on safaris for days and don't see a single one.

They leave the park angry, like the tigers should plan a schedule around them! Now that I saw one anything else was gravy. Sudhir arranged for me to take the afternoon drive in a small jeep. They are more mobile and can go places the big canter can't. Usually they had to be reserved months in advance. I had lunch at the dining room, where the very, very, very, very helpful staff was wonderful once again.

By 4ish I was in a jeep with a British couple, a driver and a guide. Once again we drove and admired the beautiful scenery of Ranthambhore. I saw more monkeys and deer than I could imagine. This guide had the most amazing eyes. He could spot an owl, hiding in a hole in a tree a hundred feet away with no binoculars. Our goal was to hit a lot of the major watering holes. In the evenings the big cats would need to drink and that was our best chance of spotting one.

We were in the last few minutes of the afternoon safari when we heard loud screeching noises from birds and other animals. The guide told us that was the alarm code that the animals send out when a tiger is moving. "**Attention K-Mart shoppers there is a big huge tiger moving in aisle nine, anyone who doesn't want to get eaten move your booty!**" Then we heard some guttural groaning noises. It was the tiger call! The guide

(Continued on page 20)

## Day 9 — Ranthambore (Cont'd)

(Continued from page 19)

said it was a male and a female, it was mating time. They were behind a large rock and it seems like they were finding a place to settle in. We watched and waited but they never came out. (*Hey would you? It's mating time!*)

We watched the golden sun slowly set behind a palace in the middle of a lake. Deer, birds and crocodiles mixed together. I watched tiny



Having the time of my life

ripples in the water. A feeling of real peace came over me. We drove back to the hotel. Tomorrow I had another long drive, this time to Jaipur. But there was a growing tingling in my body. I needed one more safari to spot another tiger. After the morning safari we could leave Ranthambhore. Sudir arrange for a final drive in the morning. I went to sleep smiling.

## Day 10 — Ranthambhore to Jaipur

At 5AM I was up for the final safari. By a little after six we were at it again, driving through the wilderness of Ranthambhore, searching for one last shot at glory. I was back in one of the huge canterers. They arranged for Ravinda, my driver. They came this time. For more than 2 hours we sat by every watering hole, every spot of high brush.

The guides were trying their hardest. The excitement pulsed through our bodies. I sat at the edge of my seat, straining my eyes, looking for the orange stripes hiding somewhere in the brush.

We reached a spot of really tall brush. Three other jeeps, filled with people, were already there. The guides all conferred, they felt certain that a tiger was somewhere in

the brush. So we waited, and waited... and waited. NOTHING. The other three jeeps left. Our guide told us five more minutes. We eyed the grass. After 10 minutes nothing. He signaled the driver, time to head back. He started the engine. Suddenly several birds screeched: ALARM CODE! Tiger Moving!

The driver spun the huge vehicle on a dime and drove to the far end of the grass. He shut off the engine. The driver signaled us to be quiet. We looked at the edge of the grass.

### BEHOLD!

A few dozen feet from us, A huge tiger slowly walked out of the grass, it was a female and right behind her was a male! All breathing in the canter stopped. The two of them casually strolled across the field, unaware or unconcerned about our presence. This is what we came here for and I can't even begin to explain to you the awesome joy of the next sixty seconds. My camera and video camera were snapping like crazy. They didn't do anything special. A man in tights with a chair and a whip wasn't going to come out and make them climb on a chair or anything. The two, probably the amorous

pair from yesterday, sauntered and skipped over rocks, perhaps part of their mating ritual. (HER: *After last night you didn't even call!* HIM: *Sorry honey I was out hunting for food.* HER: *You still could have found time to call, yak yak yak...*) Then they disappeared into the small brush. Everyone in the canter looked at each other with smiles of satisfaction, almost in a spiritual way.

Man makes a building of stone and marble and he says "*It's magnificent! It's amazing!*" God makes a living breathing tiger and HE says, "**It's good!**" Nuff said.

We rode back to the Ranthambhore Regency like a victorious army returning back from battle. It was as if God himself had smiled at us. Soon news of our triumph spread throughout the hotel. I showed the video to workers in the dining room as I had one last meal. (*Hey there goes that head move again!*)

Rajendar and I left Ranthambhore. He was thrilled to have finally seen a tiger in his life. With very few words we shared the excitement of this bond.



Waiting for Godot

The road to Jaipur was much, much smoother. But it was still about a four hour drive. By early afternoon we entered the large pink gates of Jaipur, "the Pink City". Jaipur was founded by Maharaja Jai Sing (1693 – 1743) who was known for being a great warrior, but an

(Continued on page 21)

## Day 10 — Ranthambhore to Jaipur (Cont'd)

(Continued from page 20)

even greater astronomer. The oldest part of Jaipur is the north-east section of the city while the new parts are in the south and the west.

In 1876, Maharaja Ram Singh painted the old city pink to welcome the Prince of Wales.

It was a fascinating contrast as we drove the car through crowded bustling streets lined with pink **everywhere!**

I checked into the Trident Hotel. My final hotel was perhaps nicest of them all. The floor was a wonderful tiled black marble. From the room, there was a magnificent view of a lake with a palace in the center of it, just across the street!

One of the highlights of all the trips I have taken is finding the local congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses and meeting my local brothers and sisters. Before leaving I contacted the Indian headquarters and they told me there were congregations in Delhi. However, I had no time in Delhi to meet up with anyone or go to a Kingdom Hall. In Varanasi, Agra and Ranthambhore, there were no Jehovah's Witnesses whatsoever. But I was given a contact phone # for a sister in Jaipur. I talked on the phone with Shaguntala "Gunta" Peters and arranged to meet with her tomorrow evening after my touring was done.

I curled into bed and dreamed of tigers.



"God makes a tiger... It is Good!"



After a morning workout and breakfast I met with my guide, Mr. Eugene Pram and we headed for the Amber Fort. Eugene was an older gentleman, unlike all my earlier guides who were around my age or a little older. In certain ways he reminded me of my own father. Being with Eugene gave this section of the tour a unique sense of dignity and calmness. I knew I was in great hands.

Construction of the Amber Fort and Palace was begun in 1592 by Maharaja Man Singh, the Rajput commander of

Akbar's army. The fort sits magnificently on a hillside overlooking a lake. We rode an elephant up the hill and entered the fort. Once again I spent hours being amazed at man's handiwork. Yes the whole vacation con-

sisted of this feeling, yet it never got old for me. From the outside, the fort had a standard rugged imposing look. Yet on the inside there were marble hallways lined with delicate mirrors and jewels.

After the fort, Eugene, Rajendar and I had lunch at a local restaurant called Indiana. We then went to a jewelry shop. I also stopped at a newsstand and purchased a movie magazine only available in India. An Indian doctor that Mary Ellen works with wanted this magazine from her homeland.



Riding up to the Amber Fort

We then went to Jantar Mantar, the royal observatory which started construction in 1728. When you walk into the outdoor complex, you see an interesting collection of weird looking sculptures. However, each item is actually a carefully designed scientific instrument. These instruments perform functions like measuring positions of stars and planets and the zodiac. The grounds contain several magnificent sundials. Eugene showed me how to use one of the dials which works by reading the shadow cast by the movement of the sun. Without looking at his watch Eugene told me what time it was within 20 seconds and was correct! As he explained the purpose of each instrument, it was amazing to see how ahead of their time they were.

We then went to the city palace complex which included several museums and other interesting buildings. Finally we went to the last store. I bought a tie for my new father-in-law and an outfit for myself. I returned to the hotel and cleaned up.

Gunta Peters and her husband came by to pick me up. We went to her home, where she also has a room that doubles as a Kingdom Hall. There are eight Jehovah's Witnesses in the entire city of Jaipur which has about 2 million people! Sister Peters' experience is listed in the 1978 Yearbook of Jehovah's Wit-

nesses. After a few hours of visiting and spiritually upbuilding each other, Gunta arranged for her neighbor, who had his own auto-rickshaw, to take me home. She arranged for me to give him 80 rupees (45 rupees = \$1) to take me home.

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## Day 11 — Amber Fort, Jaipur (Cont'd)

(Continued from page 21)

Soon we were puttering along in the man's vehicle... very slowly. The smell of diesel fuel was choking me. I could swear people walking were going faster than us.

**“Oh well whatever, as long as this thing doesn't break d----“**

In the middle of a crowded hellish street, the auto-rickshaw came to a stop. UNBELIEVABLE and yet totally believable. While the gentleman pulled the engine apart & fiddled with spark plugs, lots of people came up to us and offered their “help”. But eventually he got it started and we made it back to the hotel.

Officially the tour was done and tomorrow I would head back to Delhi and fly home. But Eugene arranged for me to see the Jaigarh Fort tomorrow before I was to head back. I packed my things. The next 48 hours would be a whirlwind of touring, driving and time changes. Then there would be the greatest dread of all: flying with AEROFLOT Airlines again. *At least I got to see the Taj Mahal before I died.*



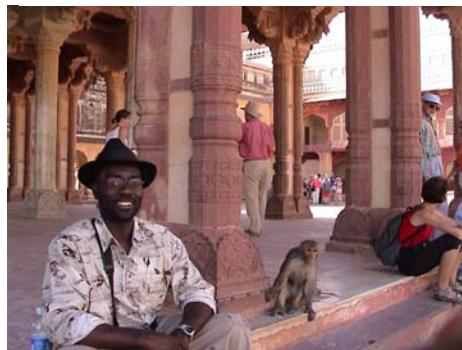
The Amber Fort on the mountaintop



Me with “Gunta” Peters



Monkeying around at the fort.



## Day 12 — Jaipur and Back to Delhi

In the morning we went to the Jaigarh Fort which is further up the same mountain that the Amber Fort is perched on. It was built in 1726 by Jai Singh. Since the fort was never captured, it is extremely well preserved. The fort was built with an incredible system for containing rain water and purifying it. If the fort was under siege, those inside could stay for years going dry. The fort also had what it claimed was the largest canon on wheels in the world. The canon has a firing range of 22 miles. It was said that the soldier who aimed and fired the canon had to volunteer to give up his life because the kickback would kill him. (*“Hey what's the 401K package with this job?”*)

Finally, in the afternoon, it was time to say goodbye to Eugene. I had a 5:35AM flight out of Delhi. The plan was to drive back to Delhi, about a 6 hour drive, let me get dinner somewhere and then drop me at the airport at midnight and I would hang out there for **5 hours!** Before checking out of the hotel, I contacted a Jehovah's Witness family in Delhi, the Roy family. They wanted to meet me before I left and said they would make dinner for me. Rajendar and I got into the car and left Jaipur behind.

It was almost 10 PM before we ended up in Delhi at the Roy home. Brother and Sister Roy awaited, as well as their daughter, their son, his wife. It was so exciting to meet them all. It was also sad that our time was so short. They talked about the Witnessing work in Delhi and the challenges that they faced. At times there has been great hostility, yet Jehovah's work marches forward.

When I finished eating, they told me they already had a bed prepared for me and that I should sleep for a few hours and then head to the airport. What wonderful hospitality! They had known me for only an hour and here they were

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## Day 12— Jaipur and Back to Delhi (Cont'd)

(Continued from page 22)

opening their homes to me in this way. While many parts of India are known for being hospitable, I know that above all reasons this could only happen because of our common faith in Jehovah. At about 3AM Rajendar and I were driving to the airport. It dawned on me at this time how little I really knew about him even though we had spent HOURS together. Almost on cue he said to me “*I want to thank you, you have been very good customer to me. Next time you come to India please request me.*” We smiled at each other. He dropped me off at Indira Gandhi Airport and I watched his car pull away. The great journey had actually come to an end. I pulled out my digital camera and snapped a few pictures which attracted a crowd of about 20 people who all wanted their pictures taken.

I whisked through customs and soon enough I was buckling my seat belt in Aeroflot flight #536 headed to Moscow.



Mr. Eugene Pram



The world's largest cannon on wheels



Views from the Jaigarh Fort

### The Roy Family



## Day 13 — The Long Kiss Goodnight

OK, Ok, all this time you have been waiting for the big finale, my return trip on Aeroflot. How would it be? I hate to disappoint you but it was quite uneventful. The trip from Delhi to Moscow was smooth as silk.

I arrived at Moscow customs and had to go through security. The young guy at the desk looked at my information.

Him: "Why you are in India?"

Me: "I was on tour."

Him: "Aaah you are Jamaican. You were on haaaaashish tour?"

Me: "What!?"

Him: "Haaaaaaashish. You were for hashish?"

Then I realized this idiot was asking me if since I was Jamaican if I was in India for marijuana! What a jerk! I wanted to backslap him back to the Bolshevik era, but I decided using violence was not the answer. I politely told him no I was not there for hashish. And he let me through.

As the plane lifted into the sky, I blew Russia a kiss goodnight. About thirteen hours later the plane touched down at Los Angeles International Airport. Friends were there waiting to pick me up. As I rode back home, that great sense of accomplishment radiated throughout my body. I had survived The Crucible and I felt I was a better man for it. I needed to sit back and think about all that I had seen and experienced. This Journal is as much for me as for any of you.

But first there was this thing about a wedding. Registry, reception, groomsmen, marriage license, limousine, honeymoon, details, details and bills, bills, bills. Hmmm, *when is the next Aeroflot flight back to India?*



Resting in Moscow Airport, or "You \$^@#% Russians better not kill me!"



The wonderful staff at the Trident Jaipur

## Credits and Special Thanks

### The Guides

|                     |                            |
|---------------------|----------------------------|
| New Delhi           | Mr. Sanjeev Dixit          |
| Varanasi            | Mr. Mukul Srivastava       |
| Agra                | Mr. Sanjeev Dixit          |
| Jaipur              | Mr. Eugene Pram            |
| Ranthambhore Driver | Mr. Sudhir Sharma Rajender |

### The Companies

Colleague Tours – Mr. Anurag Sharma & Mr. Sanjay Anthony  
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Jasoria Enclave  
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## Credits, Special Thanks (Cont'd)

(Continued from page 24)

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Fax: 91-141-670303

### The Restaurants

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New Delhi

Indiana

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Jaipur, 302 001 India  
Ph: 3662061, 362062  
Fax: 91-141-365042  
Mobile: 98290-56062

### The Stores

Silk Ways  
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Ph: 091-0542-210791  
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Indo Cottage Industries (Rug guys)

- Mr. Iqbal Badri
- Mr. Altaf Khan
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- Mr. Muzaffer

Ganpati Textiles  
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Seema Singh, Friends and Family

- Ashi
- Shunu
- Anjuni

- Avneesh
- Aparajita

Dr. Peters and Shaguntala Peters  
The Roy Family

### Editors

Doreene Hamilton  
Anastacia Doniguan

*Good night Moolchand wherever you  
are...*



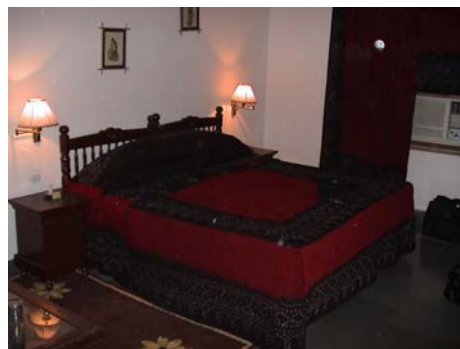
Mukul Srivastava my guide in Varanasi



The grounds of the Mughal Sheraton



The dining room staff at the Ranthamb-  
hore Regency



My room at the Ranthambhore Regency



The grounds of the Trident in Jaipur

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The Hazle Journal® will return!

Mary Ellen and I in Kauai



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## Epilogue

So now it is several weeks later, not only am I settled back from my trip to India, I have also just returned from my *honeymoon*. I am now wearing a wedding band. ("One ring to rule them all, one ring to find them...") The wedding was great and so was the time Mary Ellen and I had in Kauai. Now I am trying to settle into the life of a married man.

To all my friends in India thank you for your hospitality and effort. (Please email me if I misspelled your name. [waynehazle5@aol.com](mailto:waynehazle5@aol.com)) You gave me the adventure of a lifetime. As of this printing, India and Pakistan are on the verge of war. I only hope this clears up so that many more people can have the

wonderful time that I had. Despite 2 weeks of incredible adventure, India is still like a mysterious woman that has only revealed a few layers of herself. Who is she?

*"I am the streets of Delhi. I am the home Gandhi. I am the cows of Varanasi. I am the sacred waters of the Ganges. I am silk saris and hand woven rugs. I am the Mughals, vicious warriors, enlightened artists. I am the overnight trains rolling across the countryside. I am the great lovers Shah Jahan and Mumtaz. I am exotic spices and pungent smells. I am the Taj Mahal, a glorious*

*vision in marble. I am mighty*

**The Hazle Journal® will return!**

*forts and ghost towns. I am mosques in the shadow of Mecca. I am marble carvings, red sandstone, sapphire, ruby and emerald inlays. I am Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and Muslims. I am the tigers of Ranthambore, the camels of Rajasthan, the birds of Bharatpur. I am the pink walls of Jaipur and the elephants of the Amber Fort. I am Untouchables, I am Brahmins. But above all else, I am India, and I will be here long after you are gone. "*

Editor-In-Chief

**Wayne A. Hazle III**