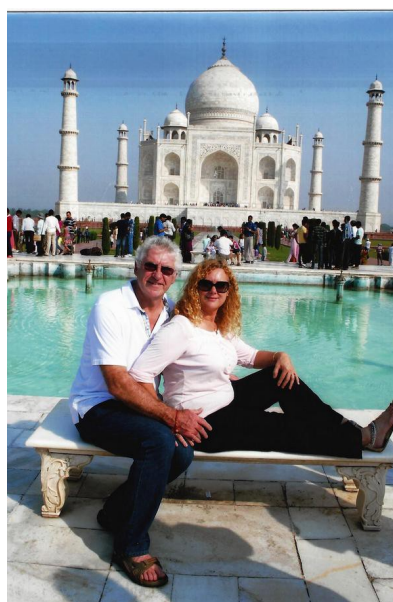
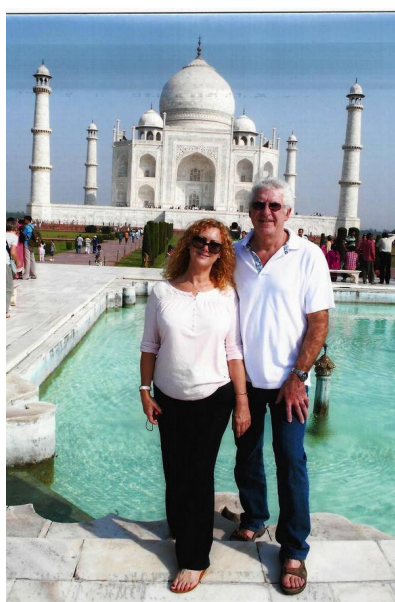


Thursday 17 October

Very early wake up call at 4.15 am as the Shatabdi express train to Agra left at 6.15 am. This was a real adventure. Even that early in the morning it was a hive of activity. The station had 14 platforms but seemed huge, it was surprisingly clean and was starting to get quite busy. A porter carried Hari's luggage on his head and haggled over his fee. All the seats were pre booked and the chap in front of us had an argument with the conductor who came round to collect the fare supplement. First we were given a large bottle of water, followed by tea and biscuits then omelette and toast and finally a yoghurt. Penny saw them throw all the breakfast rubbish out an open door onto the railway track and bank. Sorting through rubbish is a full time job for many of the those living in slums.



The Taj Mahal which was built in 1630 by the Mughal Emperor Shahjahan and dedicated to his wife Mumtaz Mahal was actually breathtaking and one of the most beautiful buildings I have ever seen. It took 20,000 craftsmen twelve years to build. We weren't the only ones having a big photo session, everyone wants to be photographed on the Diana seat.



After this visit we hardly had time to get our breathe back before we were whisked off to the nearby impressive red sandstone Agra Fort. It was hot and we were all getting confused about the Mughal Emperors. Rick was completely tempted, fort and palaced out but picked up when he saw an old Geaves motor mower. We all dipped out of the optional afternoon tour to the tomb of Itimad-ud-Daulah as the thought of a swim and relax at the Wyndham Grand Hotel was looking very inviting. Must try to see if I can watch the rerun of Monty Dom's program that featured the garden there .



Friday 18 October



Another day, another palace, today it was emperor Akbar's ancient capital Fatehpur Sikri. It was very interesting but you have to concentrate very hard as Hari is difficult to understand. We're getting very muddled about all these different Mughals and the buildings inside the fort seem to go on and on. Some of what we have been told about the architecture and designs is sinking in, well maybe. It was quite hot and we were thinking of the long journey ahead but first we had to face the hawkers. This is a Muslim city and they appeared very friendly but there was no way we were going to be able to escape having to visit their shops. Our minibus is our sanctuary as souvenirs are passed through the door or window and Hari helps us negotiate a good price. We all seemed to end up with a load of stuff. Penny ran out of patience and told one hawker to piss off as she had enough pens!



We were initially fairly impressed with the pay express highway from Agra but it ran out far too quickly and it's a long way from Agra to Ranthambore - 225 kms. As we passed through the many villages and towns our driver occasionally stopped to show us something of interest like the illegal prostitutes and the crazy bare-footed men dressed in white who had to make their way to their place of worship by passing a stone at arms length while lying on the ground then getting up and repeating the procedure until they reach their destination. This looked really scary as the traffic either went around them or made them move by hooting their horn. Many of the unmade roads were full of ruts making it difficult to keep on the left hand side of the road so everyone seemed to be weaving in and out. Apart from the incredibly bumpy roads crammed with cars, lorries, bicycles, motorbikes, tut tuts, tractors, there were also numerous obstacles to avoid like donkeys, dogs, camels, cows, buffalo, bullocks, goats, pigs, a fox, monkeys and of course hundreds of people. A motorbike went by loaded with mum, dad, daughter and goat. Trucks were completely loaded up inside with others hanging all around and on top of the outside, there were a few times when we thought they might topple over. Cows were everywhere and had no fear of the traffic. All along the route there were wigwams of long grasses where they store and dry off the cow dung that is used for fuel. The women were wore brightly coloured saris and Salwar-kameez. All this chaos increased when it started to get dark as there weren't any street lights and a lots of the cars and buses didn't have lights. It was a great relief after about 7 hours of being thrown about like a fairground ride that we finally arrived to a warm welcome at the Ranthambore a Regency Hotel.



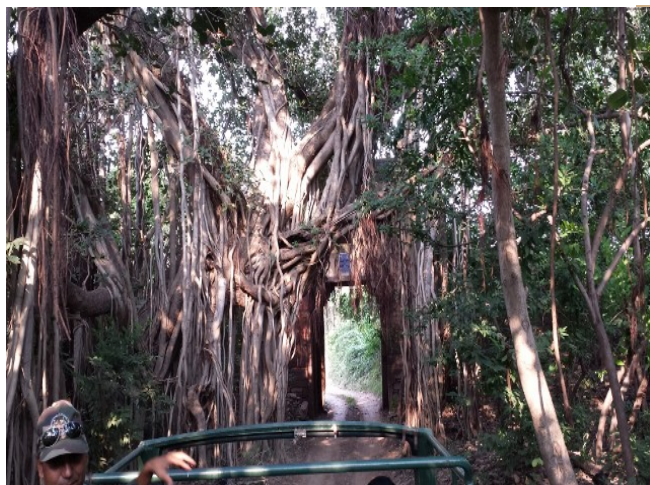
Saturday 19 October

Another early start as we had to be in reception at 6am for the Tiger Safari. The Germans all rushed for the best jeep seats and Rick and I had to sit alongside the driver. Another bumpy ride but we were so lucky that as we arrived we saw a tiger come out of the trees and walk up the road. We didn't get so great a look as there were a few jeeps in front of us but it was something and it was such a big tiger. The scenery was good but we didn't get to see much else. There were plenty of peacocks, deer and monkeys and we also saw a crocodile basking on a wall in the distance. I think the guide was getting a bit desperate as he started to tell us about some of the trees. I just couldn't make out the birds as they were so far away. I did eventually make out the shape of a small owl and suggested that perhaps it was a plastic one put there by themselves. That didn't go down well!!!

Back at the hotel which is very friendly I had booked myself in for a firm full body massage that cost about £25. She started with a head massage and tried to run her fingers through my hair but being very curly this is difficult and quite painful. When she asked me if I had pain, I foolishly said no, she then proceeded to slap me all around the head and finished off with a clout on the top. The rest was very average but she did point out a huge bruise on the back of my leg, I guess must have resulted from the rough rides. I came away covered in oil and looking like a witch.



The afternoon tiger safari was really enjoyable even though we didn't see a tiger. The gentle guide was excellent, he obviously loved his job and seemed at one with nature. The ride was rough though and I was in dire need of my sports bra as we were bouncing all over the place. We saw an amazing sunset over the lake. At the end, and it was getting dark by now, he thought the tiger may have been nearby as he could smell a dead animal. Eventually we gave up waiting, some of us are having another go tomorrow morning.



Back at the hotel it was time for a bit of retail therapy. Even though it was about 7pm in the evening they were keen for us to have something made up overnight. I ended up buying a Salwar-kameez, the pajama outfit which I wore to dinner.



We've been trying to keep to a vegetarian diet with no salad or ice. There has been no Delhi Belly, quite the opposite in fact, but today we have had frequent trips to "the facilities" so hopefully we end the day a lot lighter!

Sunday 20 October



Another 5.15 start for the morning tiger safari. Unfortunately, Diana who was to have joined us does have a dose of the Delhi Belly. We picked up a load of Australian students on the way who chatted and laughed incessantly. Sitting there in our safari hats I felt quite old. There wasn't much to see apart from a few bubbles from a crocodile, loads of deer, turtles and peacocks and a large variety of kingfisher. Our guide was disappointing and the driver stopped for a 30 minute breakfast break (what a cheek). This turned to our advantage as we were one of the last to leave and had prime position when we found the TIGER. Great excitement all round that is apart from the tiger who wasn't one bit fazed by all the jeeps and people. He slowly made his way to the other side of the road between us and the next jeep. Wow, it was exciting and worth the wait.



Another 6 hour trip to Jaipur but it wasn't boring as there is always so much going on. We stopped for a picnic lunch but the other highlight of the day was a stop at a family of 3 generations (35 people) house. They were farmers and had several cows in their yard. It all looked basic but it was a proper building with all mod cons like water, satellite television and mobile phones. They just loved having their photo taken especially when Rick showed them the instant pictures. They are strict vegetarian Hindu's who also don't eat eggs. That is probably why we have hardly seen any chickens. The cows are sacred, they use their milk and cow pats and can sell calf's but never for sacrifice. Pigs are only eaten by very low caste Hindu. We haven't seen a single cat that is because in North India they are seen as unlucky. Anyway, all the children in the family go to school which is close by. There is no money to be made in farming, they mostly grow vegetables and marigolds.





Jaipur is the capital of Rajasthan and for the next two nights we are staying at the SMS Hotel with dinner tonight at the adjoining Rambagh Palace. The Palace is so exclusive, reserved for dignitaries, that we weren't even able to have a pre dinner drink there. "The Steam" was a luxury restaurant in the grounds of the Palace. We could have eaten in the railway carriage but opted to eat at the low tables in the main restaurant. The drinks initially appeared reasonable but once all the taxes were added on it was about £8 for a gin and tonic. There were lots of small courses, mostly Italian, not so good for me. Diana was by now feeling a little stronger. Rick came to life with all the luxury surroundings and high cuisine and felt more at home being able once again to enjoy his hedonistic ways.