

Monday 21 October

We were all concerned that Penny hadn't shown up for breakfast and were even more concerned when she didn't answer her phone. Just about to break down her door when the receptionist pointed to a lady strolling up the entrance steps. She woke at 5.30 am and decided to go for a stroll – a very independent lady is Penny.



We were all completely wowed by the Amber Fort which overlooked a lake and garden. We ascended the fort by jeep but others went by elephants, it really was the most colourful site and just as we had all imagined India. Penny said this was her Marigold Hotel. We are not getting much better at coping with the street sellers. Rick fell in love with some wooden elephants and I managed to persuade him to only buy two. Next thing I know Penny has a bag full and Peter almost needed an elephant to carry his purchases down the hill!

The Palace inside the fort was decorated in many types of art with the mirrored room (Sheesh Mahal) being the most spectacular. This has been the highlight of the tour for most of us but the Taj Mahal is still mine.



This was followed a a very successful visit to a textile factory where we were shown how they made handmade carpets and printed on fine fabrics. I don't know if it was the rum and coke but we all got carried away. We have left a deposit for a carpet and will confirm by email when we get back as we have no idea of the correct room measurements. We were worried that we were holding the group up but they were getting carried away by the pashminas and cloths.



Lunch was in the City Palace Museum cafe that is in the middle of the "Pink City". The Palace (Chandra Mahal) is a seven story building part of which is still occupied by the royal family. There are ornate gateways everywhere and the Palace is decorated in many different types of art. Somehow we managed to get through the museum tour but we were all flagging and I was starting to get little pains in my tummy. Jaipur is a well planned city laid out in a geometric grid of streets and squares. It was designed by Sawai Jai Singh II. He was given the title Sawai, it means one and a quarter, better than 100%, because he was a keen scholar, statesman and patron of the arts. He was also an excellent astronomer and built five observatories with the most amazing one called Jantar Mantar on the Jaipur Palace site.



We persuaded Hari to let us have a couple of hours rest before the rickshaw ride through the bazaar. We were very apprehensive about this and I said to Rick that we must pick the youngest and strongest man. What a nightmare !!! They didn't have lights and we had to cross a busy main road, I actually felt quite sick as the cars, buses and bikes all shot in front and closed in on either side of us. The noise, a cacophony of hooting and engines. There were roads and roads of shops all selling the same things. There must have been over thirty shops selling saris and much the same number selling bracelets. Fruit and vegetables were mostly sold off stalls or from a blanket on the ground in the main thoroughfare. We saw a man squatting in the street and passed very close, almost touching to some open air urinals that were in use. I didn't really enjoy the ride as it was so stressful dodging in and out of the other traffic, pedestrians and cows. Also, I felt sorry for our young lad who was sweating profusely, I almost wanted to get off and help him out. Crossing the main road on the way back wasn't too bad but we had to make a u-turn across the traffic which was a bit scary - I just closed my eyes and before I knew it we were back at the start - phewwwww.



Hari had booked dinner with a Hindu family who ran a small hotel. On the way we saw a wedding procession. The astrological charts are checked before a wedding date can be fixed, sometimes a month can go by without a wedding then thousands can happen all at once. We were met by the wife, husband and elder son of about 18. They welcomed us by painting a red dot between the eyebrows and tying a lucky bracelet on our wrist, right hand for the girls and left for the boys. The son and his brother attended the same boarding school as their father. It sounded very grand as he had his own polo horses. His main regret was that he was once invited to play in the World Cup Junior Team in England but was unable to go because of appendicitis. When the Duke of York visited his school he was chosen to show him around. Once he finishes school he will help run the family businesses. They also have two farms where they grow vegetables and wheat. We were introduced to the family dog a cross between a pug and a Labrador. He spoke English in a formal, authoritative manner and talked about his garden and his farm and how he planned to build a tennis court. One of his remarks that we found most amusing was that a gentleman should never reveal the name of his tailor.

Tuesday 22 October



Still suffering from tummy pains but thankfully under control. Made good use of the facilities during the visits to the Birla Temple, Albert Hall Museum and the jewellery outlet. Thinking back on the temple visit I wish I had done some homework on the religions. Hari is a Hindu but there appears to be loads of categories. He is vegetarian but last night's family were strict vegetarians as they also didn't eat eggs. Lentils, chickpeas and cheese are their main sources of protein. He says they can eat what they like apart from cows and pigs. If they wish they can also drink alcohol, he says Indians only drink to get drunk, much like at home! In Northern India they are not keen on fish. I got completely baffled when he started to explain all the different gods and festivals. It all seems so complicated. All religions apart from Islam adapt with the times. He thinks that will change eventually when all Muslims, especially the girls, are educated.



It was a five hour journey to Nimaj Palace along reasonable roads. Nimaj village is a maze of alleyways with only inches to spare either side of the minibus. You literally felt you had to breathe in as motorbikes were coming the other way. We were all secretly wondering what the hotel must be like as everywhere was congested. Suddenly the hotel entrance appeared and there was a magnificent palace. They gave us the traditional welcome and the poor porters had to lug our extremely heavy, bulging suitcases up several flights of stairs to a grand princely, hand decorated room. During the rooftop dinner we were entertained with singing and dancing followed by some fireworks. We were the only people in the hotel. I thought it was all under control but back in our room my own fireworks took off – bad tummy at last!!!!



Wednesday 23 October



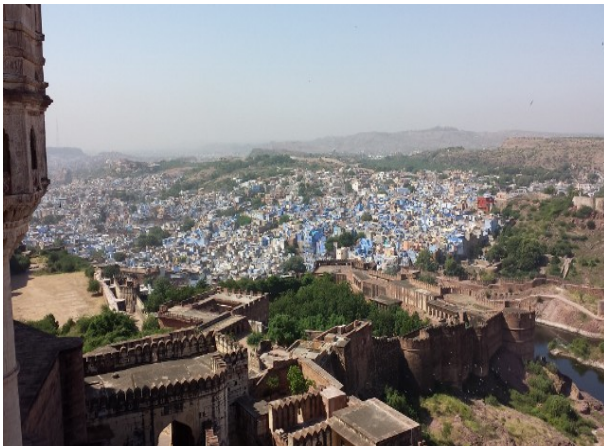
Started the day with a ride through the village on a bullock cart. They decorate their bullocks much the same as their lorries.



A short visit was paid to a nursery/junior school where the little ones wrote on blackboards and the older children were taking a test about computers. They all sat on the ground and Penny noticed discipline was tight. She saw a teacher pinch and pull a little boys arm. The children all seemed pleased to see us and we left them some biscuits as a treat.



We were on our way to the blue city of Jodhpur, strategically situated on the edge of the desert on the silk trade route. The city is dominated by the majestic Mehrangarh Fort, quite different from the other forts we have visited. Whereas the Amber Fort was romantic Mehrangarh Fort is more warrior like. Rick loved it, especially having an audio guide meant he didn't have to strain to understand Hari. It was founded in 1459 and added to mid 17th and mid 19th century. As it was so tall, from the top you can see for 80 kms, we had to take a lift half way. The sandstone was intricately carved and there were many bay windows. Inside there were opulently decorated rooms some of which have been made into an interesting museum. Every day we seem to see something better than before.



This was followed by a short visit to Jaswant Thada the cenotaph of Maharaja Jaswant Singh II who brought water to this part of the desert. Other rulers and royal family members also have cenotaphs there. My stomach started troubling me again during lunch at the a Rock Cafe.



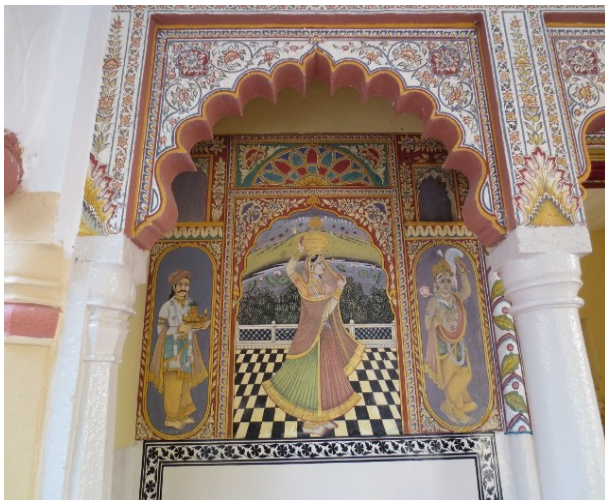
Jodhpur's bazaar is centered around a clock tower in the heart of the old city. We had a walk around and Hari said diabetes was a real problem here because they were all eating too much fried food and sweets. The horses and cows looked as if they could do with a bit of that. Cows are wandering about everywhere. The Cow Protection Act applies to all of Indians, even the Muslims who make up to 18 - 20% of the population. They can be milked and sold but not for sacrifice. Their urine can be drunk for health benefits or made into soap. On the 11th day after giving birth a mother has to drink a few drops. When they die (that is the cows) they are buried not eaten.



Next stop was a textile outlet that is frequented by the stars, Sting was there only last week. None of us were going to buy anything but you must know by now that never happens. Rick paid £90 for a Hermes scarf. He never wears a scarf. He is also thinking of going vegetarian. I can't say much as I bought two Hermes bedspreads at £130 each which retail at approximately £3500 each. Oh, also Rick persuaded me to buy a scarf for £30. Rick is still concerned that we are over our baggage allowance so they are going to send this lot to us. All this unnecessary shopping bought on my stomach pains again which necessitated in a couple of trips to their facilities.



It was getting late by now which meant we had part of the journey to the Rohet Garh Hotel, recently frequented by Madonna, in the dark. To take our mind off the nightmare traffic we chatted. The world's most economic car a Tata Nano costs about £1000 but because of technical faults it hasn't been as successful as they hoped. Dodgy tummy insured I had to opt out of supper but with free wifi I did get a chance to catch up with Jen.



Thursday 24 October



We were taken by jeep through the desert where there were about hundred cows together with the local and visiting bull anxious to do their business. The two bulls locked horns and had a real fight. The men had to throw stones to separate them but one bull was left lying on the ground. Almost as exciting as seeing the tiger! The many roaming antelopes are protected with no predators apart from the wild dogs of which we saw a few.



First stop was at Bishnoi family of about 20 who lived in mud huts without mains water and electricity. They love nature and farm mainly millet, lentils, chick peas and sesame seeds. They only use dead wood as they don't like to kill anything living. To save on wood they even bury their dead instead of the normal cremation. They have 29 articles they try to adhere to. I am still uncomfortable about taking photographs of locals but they don't seem to mind.



Just up the road was a Brahma village of about 40 families. If I thought that the Bisnoi were strange this lot were something else. They are also vegetarians but don't eat eggs, onions or garlic. They consider onions and garlic unclean as they are the only vegetable to grow in the dry season

and there was something about unclean menstruating women urinating on their ground. We watch some chapattis being made with millet flour and then it all got very interesting. It was opium time! Our retired school teacher guide said opium was just like paracetamol. Most lorry drivers take it to keep them awake as they drive through the night. Women are given it after childbirth and it is also given to the family when someone dies. It seems they can use any excuse to use it but it is usually used when welcoming guests. We were shown how it goes from being the liquid inside the dead poppy head (I had always thought it was the seeds) to end up being a liquid they mixed with water. The liquid is poured into the hands then slurped up. Initially we all declined to try it but Diana surprised us all by giving it a go. After that we all tried it, Peter asked for seconds and Rick enjoyed it so much he even smoked one of their funny cigarettes after. What did I say about each day getting better !!!



The Opium Den where Rick thought he had died and gone to heaven

