

India November 1999. Birds and Mammals.

Unexpurgated version for Hilary and Chris.

Day 1. In which your unsuspecting hero departs for the sub continent.

We drive to the airport for the Red-eye to MAN at 7.20, somewhat tearful but full of anticipation for the pleasures to come. Arrive MAN and promptly processed for the 13.00 to Dubai with Emirates. My luggage only weighs in at 7Kg so I am pestered by several Asians to check some of theirs. No way! Off on time and a very pleasant if crowded flight. New plane with lots of toys. Co-passenger is financial adviser to Ex pats in the Gulf and well known to the crew. He also knows how to attack the complimentary alcohol and I am a good learner. Food also good and fall asleep until we are on the approach. Land at 01.00 and am woken up and put outside like George. 3 hour layover so visit Duty Free and read until our next flight is ready.

Day 2. In which your hero becomes less unsuspecting.

Flight to Delhi OK despite presence of large Asian man half in my seat. Land Delhi and tick House Crow and Kite.. 2 down, 298 to go. I clear passport and customs faster than most. Am I expected? Exchange money for case full of Rupees. Find leaders Shambu and Davinder and await rest of party who are supposed to have been on same plane. Two were also on MAN flight too, so where are they? They eventually turn up and we leave in Minibus for Breakfast at Posh Hotel. Chaos ensues as some of our party start chasing Chiff Chaffs in Hotel grounds whilst others (Me included) see wash and brush up as a bigger priority. Some TWO hours later we embark for a trip to the local open air latrine known as the Okhla Barrage from which Delhi draws its drinking water. We look at Ducks and Things while being careful of where we place our feet.. After two hours of this squalor we go to another Posh Hotel to check up on trains and, according to the trip briefing, a leisurely lunch. We wander the grounds of PH and view parakeets etc., before going to "New Delhi" Railway Station. The next 45 mins is spent arguing with guides, helpers and beggars all equally matched. One recumbent chap kept out of this but we later found out he was deceased. We played no part in this and simply exercised more caution where we placed our feet on the trek to the correct platform. The train "he late!" Pigs are feeding on 'refuse' between the tracks. Memo to self - "Avoid Pork!" Then, "The train he come!" Initial disappointment at travelling in the dark and thus missing scenery is alleviated by discovering the windows were too filthy to see out of. We fight for our reserved seats and we eventually win. En route the aforesaid 'leisurely lunch' is offered having transmuted into a luke warm veggie burger and crisps plus a dubious looking Samosa or maybe that was pudding? I do not know as I declined the kind invitation despite it being ages since I fed. After five hours of defending our seats from natives and cockroaches in equal numbers, the roaches could sit up and beg for our food on all 8 legs, we arrived at our stop about 22.59. and then began to fight to give up our hard won seats to gain the exits to disembark against the inward flow of others getting on. If all this sounds too grim to believe, it was actually worse. I have censored the more outrageous bits to spare your sensitivity and my spellchecker.

We are marshalled onto an open truck with seats and almost immediately spy a Spotted Owlet on a fence. We logged the cockroaches as Sp. due to lack of defining field marks. We arrive at Tiger Moon Lodge before midnight for a late, very late, dinner and/or shower. The shower "he no work", neither does the washbasin or toilet so we settle for dinner after reporting the room defects. Bed for the first time since leaving home.

Day 3. 21st November. When your hero becomes definitely suspicious. Up at 6.00 for drive to Ranthambore. No water for a shave, Hot or Cold!

The truck was the same one as last night. So much for the promised Gipsy. Plenty of birds. Eagles, 'awks etc., and Deer and Antelopes play. Tiger tracks but no tiger. Back for breakfast which bears an uncanny resemblance to last night's dinner, plus Omelette. Still no water so another complaint. "We will fix it now sahib!" A walk in the area to see more birds until the heat drives us back for lunch. The lunch bears the same uncanny resemblance to breakfast. Snooze or Birdwatch. Still no bloody water. "We will fix it now sahib!" I try to shave in jug drawn from 'swimming pool'. Quite warm but no lather. Back to jungle to frighten more birds and mammals before returning at dark for dinner. Yes, you will have guessed if you have been paying attention otherwise go back to top of page and start again.

Days 4-5 can be merged. Much the same routine. Same park, same birds, same problems, same promises and same food. Not much sign of tigers but we heard a Tigress calling for a mate and him answering. Unless someone had rigged up tape recorder which would not have unduly surprised me. The last night was a barbie and they ran out of food. I was glad I got in early. The beer was good and that did not run out quite so quickly.

I got quite frustrated by the chattering of fellow travellers and their persistent chasing of little birds. After one particularly lovely view of a Nilgai Blue Bull in full evening sun was ignored in a race to see more bloody chiff chaffs I felt motivated to stop the truck and strongly remind the offenders that this tour was titled "Birds AND Mammals" and to dispel any lingering doubts "Mammals usually have four legs, one at each corner, and wear fur or hair and NOT feathers!" We left Ranthambore for the last time at noon having failed to see tigers. The truck probably would have not stopped anyway and the Chiff Chaff chasers would not have noticed if it had. Lunch, see comments passim, "The water will be fixed now Sahib" . It never happened. We set off for the one o'clock train to Bharatpur,. YH is not a happy bunny. Train much the same although we did gain our seats quicker. The learning curve was flattening out. We saw some birds and scenery despite the grime.

Bharatpur. Things did improve. Our digs are in an old palace and most facilities do work. The shower only spluttered out some rusty steam so I took a bath. Too late to go to the Park so we go to a bridge to see birds and be mobbed by kids. Unlike Africans this lot don't settle for pens. They want our cameras and binoculars. We do see some good birds including a Black-necked Stork catch and try to consume large snake which was strongly resisting being so consumed.

Days 5-7 ish. In which my fears are calmed to some extent. The digs are superb and the food and drink equally so. The packed lunches are a bit dubious but not obligatory. It was noted that even the local Jungle Crows chose discarded remnants carefully. Wise birds! Bharatpur is synonymous with Keoladeo Reserve and is rightly world famous for the waterfowl that migrate here each winter. Despite Kaiser Bill having shot over 4000 before breakfast there are still appears to be plenty left. Numerous Storks, Cranes, Geese and Eagles top the food chain. I lag behind the frantic Chiff Chaff chasers and "list tickers" on their head long dash to be first and see much more that they miss. A majestic Imperial Eagle lifts from a tree where they are searching the undergrowth for more Chiff-chaffs or maybe Willow Warblers. Who can tell? Who really cares? Not me. Some good walking produced two enormous Pythons and a trip on a small boat got us closer to Antelope (Blackbuck) and Marsh Harriers etc., Good views of Nightjars, Kingfishers plus multitudes of waterfowl including Siberian Cranes make the three days very interesting even to unbelievers like wot I am. Worth a visit. You even become somewhat inured to the squalor but not totally. Watching one's step is still very relevant near population centres. Good photo opportunities. The birds silly, NOT the squalor.

Days 8-10 Nov. 26th – 28th. During which I am both enchanted and infuriated. Not a good combination and not necessarily in that order! We have a last morning in the park as the party splits and we go our separate ways. Some do a quick dash to Agra (50km) to see the Taj before rejoining the main party in Delhi for the flight home. A stalwart 5 (the Famous Five we are not) are doing the slower Agra extension as we are gluttons for punishment and in my case it is necessary to coincide with my flight back to MAN whilst 'not enjoying' more of Delhi! So we bid the others farewell and get on the minibus to Agra via Fatephur Sikri. Our lovely guide tries to get us to stop at F.S as we pass by but this is scheduled for tomorrow and he is trying to pocket the cost savings. He is told "Agra NOW!" And we arrive Agra to more chaos. Traffic and people everywhere and where there is no people there are cows. We book into the Taj View Hotel which sounds promising. It has, as the name implies, a view of the Taj Mahal. Probably from the roof on a clear day. Somebody claims to have seen it but my room overlooks the gardens and a swimming pool. It is a nice hotel and everything works including the telly and the phone. So, to upset the tour manager, Davinder, we insist on visiting the Taj now as per the itinerary. He wanted to slope off to some of his mates "heritage" (Hindi for 'Tourist junk') establishments. We go to the Taj where we are jostled by hawkers and crowds. After slight delay while Davinder no doubt bargains for tickets we reach the building just in time for a quick photo session before light fades (or was it the dust level grows?) and tick off Brown Fish Owl and Fruit Bats. Then back to the Hotel where we are given the choice of 'eat out or eat in' as we are on B&B terms here. We chose 'eat in' and Davinder goes off to eat out. We pay for Shambu's meal as he is one of the good guys and enjoy an excellent if slightly westernised meal..

Next day we go back to Fatephur Sikri which was worth the trip despite the dancing bears and hawkers. Ancient abandoned palace of Sandstone. Back to Agra for late lunch at some dive recommended by Davinder. Might have known! Then dragged around more junk shops posing as craft stores. WHY do they think we have come to India when we can buy better rubbish at home?? Dinner was at some new dive of Davinder's but it only cost 500 Rupees. Back to the Hotel where we got rid of Davinder and were invited, pressed by fond parents, to join in a wedding celebration in the grounds. Bed was rather late!

Up at dawn to visit Taj by sunrise. Truly a splendid sight even to a fully paid up Phillistine like wot I am. Many photos but few people as it is more expensive at this time of day (which is no doubt why Davinder did not want us to go as it cost him more!!) Back to Hotel for breakfast before he attempts to drag us around more craft centres/at shops and Marble factories disguised as 'cultural outlets'. We tell him to take a hike and go to Little Taj and Agra Fort instead. OK we paid to get in but it was better than looking at Tat! Both were equally splendid and worthwhile despite the ever present squalor en route. We skipped lunch at the Hotel and took afternoon tea on a lawn overlooking the Taj Mahal for which we are charged 400 rupees. It was a lovely sunset on our last evening in India. We then left for the "Supertrain" to Delhi with a promised meal during the journey. Dream on! The station platform was the usual squalor enhanced by the diseased, dying and even already dead! To add insult to injury the bloody train was late and when it arrived it was just as grim. Supertrain? Who are they kidding? I declined the meal service. If the carriages were like this god knows what the kitchens were like! Two of the party tried it but I noted they left most. Davinder scoffed the lot. No doubt he had starved when we ate out. The question is now "if the windows are opaque how the heck do you you when to get off?" The answer eluded me until we arrived in Delhi at 22.00 and were driven at speed to a hostelry of our choosing where I had the best curry of the trip whilst the others had Banana Splits. Dairy products in INDIA!!!

Day 11, November 29th. On which day I make my escape from India at last. To the airport for the 03.45 departure for Dubai. More chaos! We have the bags X rayed and then given back to us to check in?? We are seated together as the Famous 5. We go to Passport Control and are then told to go and identify our bags from the heap, in the corner. This we do with some difficulty and are rewarded with a little yellow sticker on our boarding cards! We finally arrive in the relative calm of "The Departure Lounge" where we have a coffee and await our flight. We get on the plane to find we have been given the "wrong seats!" After the longest 3 hour flight ever we arrive in Dubai for onward connection to MAN or LHR as the case may be. We try to get the seat allocations changed but are told, Try Service, Try Departure Gate, Try on board. I give up. Say farewell to the other 4 and board the MAN bound plane. Sit next to another large Asian (do they only come in one size?) with a NW Accent from Longsight in Manchester. Noted with disgust that the window seat I had wanted is unoccupied except when lady in aisle seat uses it as part of her bed. In flight catering was fine and the views of Iran and Iraq quite splendid. We must visit soon! On over Turkey and Europe and into MAN on time. Phone home to advise safe return so far and board plane to IOM at 13.45 and land on Island at 14.35 to tearful greeting with spouse. Kiss ground. Drive home for a bath, then another. Debate whether to wash or just burn clothes! The red dust does come off eventually from both my poor body and my clothes.

Would I go again? Normally on arrival at a destination I am thinking how to extend the stay, departure day is coming too soon. This trip was different in that for the first time I was thinking from day 1. Gawd, do I have to stick this out for another 10 days?

I don't think I 'do' India. Having been on trains through USSR, Mongolia, China and Greece NOTHING prepared me for this! Addis Ababa airport is clean and organised compared to Indira Ghandi International.

Now I know why Indian Widows practice Sutti and throw themselves on their husband's Pyre. It saves them having to clean up later!!

From a purely cultural view seeing the Taj Mahal alone was probably worth it and even this person who does not much care for old ruins was impressed. The wildlife is not without its attractions and maybe the Tigers have simply moved out for somewhere cleaner. Who can blame them?

Should you go? Delicacy prevents me from being too descriptive. I had been warned about the poverty and can handle that. There is poverty in Africa and China etc., but it is done differently there and not as upsetting. It is the squalor and stink of India that offends and is offensive to the eye and nose and is totally unnecessary given a political will for change. But they won't as it is part of their class system.

India is not high on my list of places to return to and I would NOT contemplate taking Elizabeth although as you both know she is no shrinking violet. There are Tigers elsewhere in the world for me and Shambhu our Nepalese guide and naturalist has offered to take me walking in Chitwan National Park where he grew up with Tigers and and Bears. Sounds fun?