

Dear Internet Friends

Some of you will remember last year receiving several emails from Bangladesh and Sikkim. They seemed to be enjoyed; here goes again. As always, if you're not interested drop me an email (or just delete them!).

Derek White Taylor and I had a meal together on Thursday afternoon as he took me to Heathrow. He dropped me at terminal four in good time (5.30) for my 8.50 departure. The only trouble was that the plane was delayed in Delhi by the fog there, and we didn't take off until almost midnight. It was a comfortable flight with good meals (Jet Airways) but when we got to Delhi again there was fog and congestion and we were circling for over an hour.

We landed about four hours late, but Delhi airport is transformed - a modern airport, not the grubby shacks of ten years ago. And the metro line into town has just opened with 20 minutes in air conditioning instead of an hour in a decrepit car.

All the papers have stories of the unnaturally cold weather (La Nina is to blame) and Friday had a maximum of 14 deg. It makes walking around the city much more pleasant compared with the 30s (and even 40) later in the year. The city is changing fast with many more cars, modern buildings metro lines, etc. But I still found some good food, including at a restaurant that has branches in Paris and London.

On Saturday night I caught the overnight train to Khajuraho. Again fog caused delays and the train was 'rescheduled' for 23.30 instead of 20.15. As it was about 5deg outside and an unheated waiting room, it was a cold evening - five layers.

The train lost more time en route and we eventually arrive four hours late, again. And there was no food on the train. However I was soon in the comfortable hotel, with a warm bath and a decent lunch. The weather here is sunny and about 20 deg - much pleasanter. I started doing the temples this afternoon. There are lots of them, Jain and Hindu, including the famous ones of the Tantic tradition with the erotic carving.

Just before I got back to the hotel I was in a roof top cafe watching the sunset enjoying a pot of Ginger and Cardamon Tea and a 'special' pancake.

All the best,

Martin

Allahabad, Wednesday

I had a good night's sleep on Sunday night and felt better, ready for a hard day's temple visiting. I spent the morning seeing all those in the main group. The area was an artificial lake and so the temples are all raised on plinths. What was lake is now parkland and the temples are all in a good stage of preservation, with work going on all the time on the World Heritage Site. Apart from the buildings it was good to sit in the gardens with my book, occasionally glancing up to take in the surroundings, with lots of tourists, foreign and domestic. Next door is a proper working temple which appeared to be celebrating a festival with hordes of visitors and lots of noise.

I went there on Monday morning when it was quieter and looked around and got my tilak. I had my lunch at a modest local restaurant, and had a VIP thali which was good and spicy (veg of course). I spent the afternoon walking in the countryside, but the exercise wasn't enough to send me to sleep; I think the difference in time zones is catching up. But a positive was an excellent family run restaurant on the roof top overlooking the lake, with good food and chance to meet other travellers.

Tuesday was moving on day, but on the overnight train so that I had a day to see more of the temples and more of the country walking, to a village about 5km out of town. It was good to get away from the tourist track and see a little more of real life. It's rural farming country with a backdrop of low but shapely hills. Back at the hotel I ate well from the buffet before the French group got to the trough. It was good, but you never tasted a garlic nan like the one there!

I had a car to take me to the station and the train started to the second at 23.20. You should see the size of the (new) station - three very long platforms for the four daily trains. Perhaps Railtrack should get some ideas about platform lengthening. The air conditioned coach was almost completely used by western tourists going to Varanasi (Benares); my section had a German woman and three Poles.

Would you believe that arrival was only 20 mins behind schedule? A 20 min walk got me to the hotel by 7.30 am and I was soon eating breakfast on the lawn in the morning sunshine. The weather has settled down it seems, to cool evenings (about

10deg) and clear blue skies by day with temperatures like the best sort of British summer days.

This afternoon I visited the Anglican Cathedral here (diocese of Lucknow). It's an impressive Victorian building and I haven't seen anything approaching it before in India. It was locked, 'only open on Sundays', but the priest in charge found me, opened the building and showed me around inside with an interesting conversation. Apparently the cathedral is the biggest Christian church in Asia (so he says, and I can believe it). Lunch was Chinese, if you following my menus, and very spicy it was.

Regards,
Martin

You should be able to see a few photos at

<https://picasaweb.google.com/117876186503115377818/25January2012#>

The time was called at the end of the last session; hence the curt sign off.

Gwalior, Friday

The Residency was the compound where the British lived and ruled up to 1857 and were besieged by the Indian Mutiny (now the First War of Independence). Apart from landscaping, the site has been left as it was. I wonder why the British didn't do any reconstruction. The history of the place is interesting, but the site, although peaceful and suitable for a rest and some reading was largely a set of ruins. But there were interesting graves and a small museum.

On another day I saw some of the non-British sites. There are various Imambaras - Muslim Sites. some of these are very elaborate, and with a distinct penchant for Candelabra. One had an extensive labyrinth above the main hall, on several levels, some very dark. I managed not to get lost, but found sometimes the lack of 'elf and safety gone mad' a little disconcerting. It's the same on the roads; one has to look in every direction possible and not to assume that vehicles will be travelling in the right direction on dual carriageways. No-one gives way, in vehicles or on foot. Using a horn is the best you get for consideration.

The botanic gardens were a haven of peace but only open from six to nine in the morning for 'morning walk' which costs one rupee. Lots of power walking.

Then it was the train to Gwalior in Madyar Pradesh. The train takes about nine hours, and unfortunate the wasn't the usual catering available. It started on time but got later so that I arrived here at 10pm instead of nine. Luckily the hotel is close to the station and I was soon checked in and after some tea in bed for a welcome night's sleep. On the train I met a feisty lady doctor; she told me off for not learning Hindi which she said would be useful all over India. However I've been to Kerala and she hasn't. They don't like Hindi in the south. But she was a good companion for the journey.

Yesterday I spent the day at the fort, which is an imposing set of buildings on an extensive rock some hundred metres above the city. The palaces were variable, one very decorative on the outside but plain inside. The highlight of the fort for me was the Sikh Gudwara, where they were very welcoming in the nature of Sikhs. Free food was on offer in return for the washing up; but I just had the (very good) tea and compared notes on Southall.

Yesterday night seemed set for another noisy night. It seems to be an auspicious time for marriages. But the noise tailed off soon after ten; so that was OK.

Today I visited the museum at the local 21 gun salute maharajah's palace (he still lives there). It has an eclectic and interesting mix of exhibits, including a table top train for drinks etc which stops when you take something from it (it's the pressure released). And more chandeliers weighing tons. Back to the fort for the Jain carvings on the cliff faces beneath the fort. The faces and genitalia were defaced by the Muslim Mughals on the order of Emperor Barbur (a barbarous act?).

I had my meal at the India Coffee House. This chain is an institution, owned by it's workers. 'Life of Pi' starts in the branch in Pondicherri.

I was told off for not mentioning the weather last time. Summer seems to be arriving. Still cool at night but around 23 as a maximum. And of course clear blue sky (through the pollution haze).

Bye for now

Sunday

Thanks for those of you have replied. I also like to hear your news!

It is quite surprising that there are virtually no westerners in Allahabad - I've only seen four in three days. Because of that I'm a novelty and quite often get asked to allow others to take my photo. I ask for five rupees, but it is treated as the joke it is. Allahabad is a noisy and dusty city, but with some fine sites of interest - some British, like the cathedrals, and some from Mughal times.

Thursday was Republic Day, a public holiday so that lots of people had the day off. It was grey until afternoon when a little sun came out. I headed across town to the confluence of the Ganga and the Jamuna, two holy rivers, the site of the Kumb Mela every twelve years (next January). The confluence is a particularly auspicious place to bathe. There's a huge area for tents and even this year plenty. Everybody was in holiday mood, but not much bathing - the temperature perhaps.

On Friday I visited the Roman Catholic Cathedral. I managed to find the rear entrance, which was locked. Next door was the school, where the gate keeper took me to the office, and someone showed me through the grounds to the Cathedral, meeting the principal on the way. Another large, impressive building, but without the grandeur of the Anglican one. But I'm sure that Michael Portillo would find it 'wondrous'. Parks and the museum (quite indteresting, but musty and little information) and a splendid library from the days of the Raj.

There was a function on at the hotel that night with loud music until after midnight, and as I had to get up at 4.30 for the 6am train, I didn't get much sleep that night.

The train ride of four hours to Lucknow (see 'Kim') was pleasant enough, and I warmed to the city, more than to Allahabad. It has lots of old buildings but a modern centre and the neatest of Indian cities.

Today I visited the Residence of seige fame. More later

Bhopal. Monday

I know what everybody thinks about when Bhopal is mentioned, but I think that it's a bit of an 'elephant in the room'. Apparently there is still a problem with the ground water. But it's a pleasant place with lots of lakes and parks, and terribly congested old bazaar area with lots of poorly maintained motor cycles roaring about spewing out fumes. Those of you in the grips of snow and ice will be pleased to know that the temperatures are getting up to 28deg here, with sunshine from dawn to dusk.

The journey from Gwalior to Bhopal was civilised; departure at 9.45am on the Shatabdi (centenary in Sanskrit) Express. Comfortable seats, at seat tea (served in a paper cup labelled 'hot tomato soup') and biscuits, and lunch (really was tomato soup, dhal, veg curry rice, roti and sweet - very tasty. On arrival at Bhopal at 2.30, I headed off walking to the hotel. I thought it was about four km, but it proved to be more like seven. When I was asking directions after three quarters of an hour from two men resting by the side of their truck, they offered me a lift (which I accepted) along the lakeside, aptly called the VIP Road along the side of one of the lakes. At the hotel, one of the swankiest yet (<http://www.noorussabahpalace.com/>), I think they were amused to see me walking up the drive with my rucksack. It's a comfortable place, but as always at such places they extras are costly.

On Sunday I headed off to Sanchi, an important Buddhist site with lots of stupas and monasteries and then to some cave temples nearby from the Gupta dynasty. I did the trip in style, with my own car and driver, mainly because I would have to get into town and then get a local bus there and back. It's so much easier with a bit of money.

Today I had a leisurely start and did a walking tour of the city (capital of Madya Pradesh), alongside the lakes, into the world's third largest mosque and the stinking fruit and veg market. Lunch was a Thali in a friendly little establishment, with the England second innings on the TV.

The papers seem finally to have stopped reporting the Jaipur literary festival and the upset about Salman Rushdie not attending. The line is that the state government warned of a threat to his life from Muslim Extremists but the papers suggest that this was fabricated to build up a 'vote bank'. Elections are pending. Apparently the S. V's as a banned book in India. William Dalrymple is one of the organisers, and AC Grayling a participant. He gets everywhere it seems. You'll be pleased

to know that I can keep up with the premier league results, but not those of Wycombe Wanderers. Tomorrow I have an early departure (7am from the hotel) to catch the train to Indore.

Enjoy the snow,
Martin

Mandu, 10 2 12

I got to the station in Bhopal for the train, by using an auto rickshaw at seven am, having had an early breakfast. It was a chilly but speedy ride through the almost empty streets of Bhopal. The train had come from Jammu Tawi in Kashmir state, starting over twenty four hours earlier, and so, as expected, was running 2.5 hours late. It's frustrating to get up early when you know that the train will almost certainly be late!

I was kept amused on the platform talking to a medical student, 24 years old, who was heading for Ujjain on the same train as me. He'd helped me find the platform as all the indicators were in Hindi. For those of you who know him, he reminded me of Jitin Verma, and is an exact equivalent. He was obviously a committed student and I'm glad to report planning to practice in India. On the train, which was full as usual, I was opposite an army officer, colonel I think, who was eloquent and mostly full of good ideas, although he obviously didn't think much of Muslims, and said that they had lots of children and were causing the over population. When he got off, he had a soldier to carry his bags and a car waiting for him. When I got to Indore I found a rickshaw to take me the five or so kilometers to my hotel in a suburb of Indore. Very comfortable it was, but hardly handy for sightseeing. However I was only there for an overnight and next morning it was back into town to catch a bus. It took two to get me here, first to Dhar (60km) and then one to Mandu (another 35km), and the whole took me about five hours.

Mandu is an interesting area - a large fortified plateau (walls around 45km around) with a village in the middle. It's studded with all sorts of mosques, tombs and palaces from the fifteenth century, some well preserved, others ruined. All are surrounded by farmland with views off the plateau to the plains 300m below.

It's good to get into the countryside without the pollution of the city, although it's still rather dusty with virtually no rain for the last four months. The nights are cold (I had the heater on in the morning as the room was down to 15deg) but warm (26) days.

The hotel is not bad, near to a lake which has about a third of its water present. I feed well for breakfast - cereal, fresh papaya, omelette, toast, coffee. Breakfasts are usually good with western or Indian options. I'm always amused that everything has to be qualified - you are offered bread toast and egg omelettes .

Last night however the electrics, which were obviously very 'India' fused; an attempt to mend was short lived and I moved to another room, which soon had problems. Another two rooms later and I finally settled down to comfort and relative safety. The first two 'rooms' were actually tents on concrete bases, albeit with A/C and attached bathrooms.

I'm typing this in and Internet overlooking the main street and all the life passing by. The computer is rather ancient and so I won't attempt to upload any photos here; that will wait for the next hotel. I go back to Indore for a night and then on to Jhansi.

Regards,

Martin

I continued to enjoy Mandu, and in spite of the noisy neighbours, the hotel was quite comfortable. The village was certainly interesting with lots to see.

I had the luxury of a car to take me back to Indore, to the same hotel that I had stayed at on the outward journey. On the outskirts my driver transferred me to an auto rickshaw and paid the driver of that for the rest of the journey, 'he's a local man, he knows the way'. And he did, we were ducking and diving through the back streets and eventually he dropped me at the hotel.

I had been upgraded to a very comfortable room, but it was still noisy with a wedding celebration under the window during the evening. But earplugs and my copyrighted pillow sandwich (one pillow below and one above my head) helped.

I was in time for lunch and there was a Sunday buffet. As always in better hotels it was more expensive than usual at 550/- +

taxes. But there was an option for another 100 rupees to have unlimited wine. I was suspicious, but yes, I had three glasses of very decent Jacob's Creek red. Imported wine is usually prohibitively dear in India.

Next morning was another early start wake up at five, car at 5.45 and train at 6.50. This time it was on time, starting from Indore. I changed in Bhopal (time for lunch during the four hour stop over, and then onto Jhansi on the Shatabdi express (more tea/tomato soup). When

I got to the hotel, the room on offer was dire: dirty, no A/C, broken furniture. When I said the agent wouldn't have booked such a room, the first story was they did, then the AC room had 'a problem with the bathroom', and eventually the manager drove me to another hotel where he paid for me. It was a little better. There was AC, but more Indian electrics, with the bare wires poked into the socket. I had to ask for help several times for help with it; I wasn't going too close to it. The hot water came in buckets for a 'bucket bath', and the staff spoke little English. The guide book says of Jhansi 'it is better to stay in Orchha'. I agree.

But there was an interesting bus ride north to Datia to see the huge C17 palace and to have a decent lunch overlooking it and the lake.

Today I came to Orchha. Outside the hotel in Jhansi, a rickshaw man asked the usual 'where are you going' and for once I told him and was surprised that he quoted the fare that I had been told in the hotel was reasonable. So 30 minutes in a rickshaw rather than 45 mins walk and an hour in a bus.

I have a cottage in the hotel grounds and it seems comfortable, and the place looks interesting. More next time.

Martin

I've rearranged the photos so that the most recent ones are on the top:

<https://plus.google.com/u/1/photos/117876186503115377818/albums/5701570464135764865>

Wednesday

Orchha proved to be interesting, but also noisy. It was definitely the wedding season and on three of the four nights there was a wedding celebration going on until the early hours of the morning with very loud amplified 'music', with a very insistent base beat. After the first night in my cottage, the manager moved me to another, further from the kitchen and larger with better furniture. Then there was the geyser not working. An hour later, after visits from five men, I had it confirmed that it wasn't working, the element replaced, a confirmation that the water would be hot in 10 minutes (no red light: 'indicator not working'), the mess cleared up by the 'sweeper' and my laundry delivered (trousers, jacket, two shirts for £1.30). Had it not been for the weddings, it would have been very comfortable, and was, during the day. I enjoyed sitting on my terrace looking at the papaya tree and smelling the jasmine bush while reading in the sun. By the way, I had no rain during the four and a half weeks, sun every day and most days a clear blue sky from dawn to dusk. The maximum temperature reached 29deg (in Bhopal) and the minimum was in single figures, although not so cold as it was in Delhi in the first few days.

Orchha has an extensive fort, several large palaces, many temples and Chhatris ('cenotaphs' was the translation that the local labels used). Also, the immediate scenery was very attractive, with a river that actually had plenty of water in it, rocks and rapids. Whilst out sightseeing, I met a couple of Australian sisters who were on their first trip to India and spending three months travelling around. We had several meals and drinks together.

On Sunday I walked back to Jhansi - about 16km. The first half was along a side road and pleasant, but then it was along a main road with plenty of traffic and into the sun. Still it helped pass the time until the night train to Delhi. In Jhansi I had a meal, in a hotel that looked much better than one that I'd stayed in. After that to the station for reading until the 23.40 train, which was only 30 mins late in spite of having come for over twenty four hours from Chennai (Madras).

At 7.30 we arrived in Delhi and I headed for a South Indian cafe I know and had a huge dosa, coffee and fruit juice for breakfast before heading to my hotel, about three km out of the city centre. My room was ready for me and so I was soon unpacked and showering. After a rest, I had a walk around the city, buying more books (two of the bookshops I had been to before had gone out of business), but after lunch I was happy to go back to the hotel for a long night's sleep.

On Tuesday it was back to the airport on the metro for the afternoon flight back to London. The flight was as comfortable as a nine hour flight can be, Derek picked me up and I was back home for 9pm (2.30am Indian time).

And now it's raining.

Martin

<https://plus.google.com/u/1/photos/117876186503115377818/albums/5701570464135764865>

Full catalogue at <http://dmberry.dsl.pipex.com/>