7-1-2010

Summer in India

Karen Tanenbaum

Recommended Citation
Tanenbaum, Karen, "Summer in India" (2010). Student Blogs. 3.
https://digitalcommons.law.uga.edu/stu_blogs/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Works and Organizations at Digital Commons @ Georgia Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Blogs by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Georgia Law. Please share how you have benefited from this access. For more information, please contact tstriepe@uga.edu.
Karen Tanenbaum
University of Georgia School of Law
Global Internship 2010
So I’m sitting on a plane en route to New Delhi, India, with a snoring young man to my left and my computer awkwardly crammed between someone’s reclined seat and my lap. It’s about midnight U.S. time. My first blog entry, like most things lately, was originally intended to be completed before this moment, before I actually took off on a plane and this trip became real. I don’t know, I guess I thought I’d alert everyone beforehand about my blog, talk about trip preparations, ease into my first crack at the whole blogging thing, blah, blah, blah. But maybe this is better.

If things go smoothly over the next 16 hours, they’ll look a little something like this: finish first blog post. Sleep at least 6 hours. Wake up (likely to sound of one of at least three crying babies in surrounding seats). Eat that little snack they give you when you wake up. Hope it’s pretzels and not peanuts. Watch just one more episodes of 30 Rock. Remember I’m the only non-Indian aboard this 300 person flight. Tell myself to get used to it. De-board. Don’t even notice there’s a ten-hour time difference and that it’s 8 p.m. in Delhi when it should be 10 a.m. instead. Also don’t notice 110-degree heat. Find Mr. Subash Patra, unknown man of presumably Indian origin who will be future workmate and ride home from airport, somewhere on the premises. Remember to first look for sign with “Karen” on it to be sure man I am speaking with is, in fact, Mr. Subash Patra. Ride to flat in “posh” neighborhood in south Delhi that, though lacking A/C to mitigate the predicted 110–20 degree pre-monsoon heat, is supposedly quite nice. Meet future Swiss roommate, Chantal, who also seems quite nice. Sit in chair (bed or couch will do) and take a deep breath. Because I’ll be in India.

So – aside from that special feeling I’ve got (you know, the one you get knowing you’re gonna be one of ‘those’ people who has their own little sign at the airport with their name on it), I am also a little worried about my arrival because, although the CHRI office was nice enough to provide Mr. Patra’s cell phone information, I myself will not have a cell phone nor will I have any rupees, as every currency exchange kiosk in both the Atlanta and Newark airports were fresh out of said currency this afternoon and morn. So, assuming exchange kiosks will be closed in India by 9 p.m. on a Sunday night, I’ll be crossing my fingers for a Visa-friendly ATM or a Mr. Patra, whichever comes first upon arrival.

Well, that’s it for now! (oh no, have I already ‘over-blogged’ on my first blog?) I will keep everyone updated as the next few days unfold, and hope to hear how everything is going stateside as well! (If this were an in-person conversation, now would be the time for one of those awkward goodbyes involving a side hug where one person’s said a lot but has no way to know if the other person was really listening – so I’ll go ahead and end this for anyone who’s made it this far in my post.) Talk soon! – K :)
Well, I do. And might I add that it’s quite easy when its nighttime and you’re not expecting the giant black heifer to be lazing around on the sidewalk by your apartment. Judging by my Indian companion’s dismissal of both incident and cow, though, I figured I should act like this was normal as well. So I did my best. I am now in India.

Right now I’m sitting on my new bed, surrounded by the thickest, hottest air I’ve ever experienced (which is saying a lot, for a girl from the swamps of Charleston, SC) eating a plate of rice with yellow curry listening to (quite unfittingly, I realize) some Nicaraguan folksinger on iTunes.

After 21 or so hours of travel, I landed in Delhi around 8 p.m. last night (10 a.m. US time). Unfortunately, I gave my bosses the wrong flight number (apparently your flight numbers change when you change planes in New Jersey before heading to New Delhi...duh, Karen) and so there was a bit of confusion before my pick up. Luckily, the arrival time itself was correct and so Mr. Patra was there, sign and all, waiting for me. He made sure to let me know several times, however, using part English, part Hindi, and several hand signals, that I had screwed up on the whole flight number thing. I apologized profusely and, his point made, he resumed smiling and shuffled me towards the door and a nearby taxi.

It was about 9 p.m. now, but as soon as we stepped out of the airport the change between air conditioning and outdoor heat was overwhelming. Apparently June and July are the two hottest months in Delhi, and I’ve come just in time for the beginning of them. Everyone is covered in a thin layer of perspiration, but nobody really seems to notice. When the taxi was hailed, Mr. Patra turned and spoke the first of many “you, come.” commands to me and we jumped in and took off.

The taxi driver seemed quite impatient to get wherever we were going, and not afraid to mow down anyone who would keep us from getting there. At one point he actually chuckled as he used his bumper to (not so softly) nudge a man’s rear end with a honk as the man scurried out of the street. Mostly, people didn’t even seem to notice or mind that our driver was dangerously close (and likely willing) to run them over. At times he would launch a series pre-emptive honks before the light even turned green, just to notify the drivers in front of us that the light was at some point going to turn green and he expected them to be ready to respond accordingly.

On the ride, one thing I noticed was how many people were walking everywhere. There were people along the highways, in the middle of the streets, 3 or 4 to one bicycle, camping on the side of the road, all over. And this time of night, they were almost all men. I saw a few women here and there, but never without men walking with them. Of the women I did see, some were
wearing traditional saris but others were in t-shirts and jeans, no big deal. Communication-wise, things with Mr. Subash were a bit strained. Not because we weren’t talking and pointing and trying, but because we simply only understood about a third of what each other said.

Then we arrived. My flat is located inside a gated neighborhood that, like the others around it, has a 24-hour guard out front. We walked into the building and, though Mr. Patra kept saying “2nd floor, 2nd floor,” climbed four flights of stairs to my door (He still says 2nd floor, so I haven’t quite figured that one out). The hallway light was burned out, so it was quite the debacle trying to find the key, keyhole, and to actually get inside the door. Once in, the apartment is quite spacious (ridiculously spacious, in fact) and, peeling walls aside, in decent repair. But boy was it HOT. There’s a kitchen, dining room, sitting room, GIANT balcony overlooking the area, and three bedrooms with giant king sized beds. Chantal (roommate) wasn’t home at this point, but apparently she occupies one room, I’ll have one, and tomorrow a girl from Canada will come and take the third. We’ll all be here for the summer.

Ah! And it turns out each bedroom has a little A/C window unit! This really only serves to put a dent in the heat (imagine one of your houses in the summer without A/C, but with a ceiling fan that sort of moves the heat around in a whirl, and that’s probably where my room’s at right now) but it’s an improvement nonetheless.

At some point before Mr. Patra left, I reminded him that I had neither food nor phone nor internet nor rupees (well, I had a 10 rupee note that some guy on the plane gave me out of pity in case I needed to call someone if my ride forgot me, but that’s the equivalent of about 20 cents) but he didn’t seem concerned. He paused for a second before saying “you, come” again, though, and led me to a vendor to buy some bananas, a mango, chips and two big bottles of water (cost: less than $2) for my dinner. This would be when afore-mentioned cow incident took place.

When we got back Mr. Patra laid each item we bought out on the table, sat me down, pointed to my food, bed, toilet, and door one at a time, making me acknowledge that I, too, knew what each of these things were and how to use them, and when he seemed convinced he could leave me without my screwing something up, he did. If Chantal didn’t make it back that night, he said, “don’t worry, I come for you tomorrow.”

So that was that. I ate about 4 bananas, tried and discarded the chips, unpacked, and got into bed.

Unfortunately, I was only able to sleep about 6 hours and woke up at about 6:30 am. So I laid around, finally got dressed, realized that Chantal hadn’t in fact come home, and laid around some more. I still...
didn’t have internet, phone, money, or any idea of exactly where I was, but just when I was at the point of wondering if everyone had forgotten about me (translation: near panic) and had nearly exhausted my supply of bananas and water, Mr. Subash showed up around noon. He told me Chantal’s train had been delayed last night and she would get in later today. He also helped me get food, first by attempting to order it on the phone (but he got mad and hung up because he said they were charging too much for coca colas), then by telling me once again to “you, stay” while he went out and fetched me a good meal, coke, water, and a light bulb for the outer door light. He told me to come to work tomorrow with Chantal, and that we’d handle the phone & internet issue then. He also gave me a bundle of rupees. Then, in a flash, he was gone again.

So here I am, eating my plate of rice, sitting in front of my A/C fan, hoping my roommate or anyone whose English I can actually understand will get here soon. I haven’t yet showered, because 1) I am not quite ready to figure out the bucket/hose-like system that’s going on in there, 2) there’s a rather large lizard who looks comfortable, 3) I forgot a towel. But I’ve stocked up on books, and the flat actually has a number of movies, magazines, little notes and books in English that others have left behind (very cool), so I imagine I’ll pick up one of those in a minute. If this post is up, it means I have somehow found an Internet connection and life is OK. I think my roommate’s computer somewhere has a connection, and if I get desperate enough I might just use it and apologize later. After all, I predict there’s only so much longer I can sit in this room...particularly since I think the power just went out. Err...

Any-who, I’ll keep everyone updated (though I don’t imagine my posts will in the future contain this much overwhelming detail because hopefully I’ll have a life starting tomorrow) – but feel free to email me and I’ll pass around my new Indian cell number just as soon as I get one!

-K

---

**R.I.P., A/C**
June 5, 2010

---

So, as elated as I was about my little air-swirling A/C unit during my last post, I am sorry to report that it seems to have taken a leave of absence. Indefinitely.

The problems all began only a few short hours after my cow post was written. First it sputtered, then it shook, then, almost cruelly, it began to alternate between fits of hot and cold air, each time allowing me to think (and yes, even pray) that the little guy would keep on chuggin’. Then it died entirely. Since it’s in the 90’s at night, I’ve resorted to bunking up (either in the bed or on a mattress on the floor) with my roommate whose bedroom A/C still works. I have one very brave British friend who has opted for no A/C for the last 2 1/2 months in the 110 degree heat, but I am clearly not so tough or willing.
To make matters worse (or, let’s say, more interesting), my new Canadian roommate’s AC turned out to be broken also. So the last few nights have been spent with anywhere between 3 and 4 of us (depending on who’s staying over) fitting into every crevice of Chantal’s A/C-filled room to sleep, as hers is the only room in the apartment that now has it. I was a little worried the power might go out (as it has been about once or twice during the day) and things would get very hot very quick, but so far so good.

When I first told Radhey, who heads the interns in the office, about the dilemma, he seemed somewhat sympathetic but mostly unmoved. “The landlord in this apartment provides A/C as like a gift,” he said, “so he won’t replace it.” He went on “But most of our flats don’t have A/C anyways. So you’ll be fine, yes?” Now, I suppose most of India doesn’t, in fact, have the luxury of A/C, but I had a sneaking suspicion that Radhey himself had A/C in his bedroom. So I pressed the issue a bit more. “Well, what if we call the A/C man and see how much to buy one?” I asked. “Too much money” he predicted, and I agreed, once he quoted the price. But just when I was contemplating spending the next two months sleeping on Chantal’s floor, he threw me a rope. “Oh, you can rent them,” he offered, “but our A/C man, unfortunately, has no more. They are very hard to come by in Delhi now, with the heat wave and all.” A bit frustrated, I pressed a little more. “Well, is there more than one A/C man in Delhi? Maybe the A/C man has a brother? Or a friend? Or there’s an A/C woman??” “Our A/C man says he knows no one with an A/C,” he said, but agreed that that was likely because he didn’t want to lose Radhey’s business to another. So I asked around, got a few numbers, Radhey made the phone call, and Bingo! It seems there is, in fact, more than one A/C man in this city of 14 some-odd million, and one should be headed to my house this weekend to install a new A/C. Whew.

Speaking of the people at work, I’ve now arrived and started and my supervisor is great! She’s a young Australian who was a criminal defense attorney at home, and has been in Delhi for the last 8 months or so working on CHRI’s East African Police reform project. Yup, that’s right, I’m an American living in India working for an Australian to research and monitor police and political reform in East Africa. The connection here is that CHRI works with orgs in all 54 (ish?) Commonwealth countries around the world to promote human rights issues. Since the Delhi office is the biggest, it heads up relations with more far-away places like Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Kenya, and
Tanzania (in addition to doing more local/regional stuff). A big focus right now is Kenya, where there have been a record number of extra-judicial killings by police officers, mainly of human rights activists and political protestors, since the chaos sparked by the 2007 presidential elections when, essentially, both candidates claimed they won and then attempted to split power in a not-so-clean way. Since I have much to learn about these 5 countries, I’ve spent most of the week looking at reports and articles that CHRI and my supervisor have written about common standards for policing in East Africa and current events. Eventually I’ll be analyzing the differences between their local laws and the norms established by international conventions and analyzing proposed reforms. Tennille (supervisor) writes articles that are often printed in newspapers throughout that region, and it sounds like I’ll get the chance to as well. So that’s that!

In other news, I’ve figured out the whole second/third/fourth floor thing (i.e. why Subash kept telling me my flat was on the 2nd floor of the building but I only found it after climbing 4 flights of stairs) – the first floor is zero! And, well, I guess half floors don’t count. So two of those mini flights of stairs = 1 flight. So there you have it, all you potential India-go-ers. Start counting at zero.

And finally, the food. It’s been surprisingly easy to find food for my not-so-spicy-loving palate. The vendors by my house sell lots of fruits and vegetables (no, mom, I don’t eat the ones washed in street water), and there’s another guy who has a cart full of coconuts that he’ll whack the top off of and stick a straw in for a refreshing drink. On the more substantial side, there’s tons of rice and curries and veggie dishes everywhere. India is the most vegetarian-friendly country I’ve ever seen. Not that I’m a vegetarian anyways, but hey, it seems healthy. They don’t eat cows (though there’s no shortage of them, and some of them seem to be quite better fed than the people feeding them) but you can get chicken.

Oh! And the chai man! Can’t forget him. So even though it’s about, as I’ve said, 110 degrees during the day, that doesn’t stop us from enjoying a steaming hot cup of chai tea on the streets after work. This guy (same guy we’ve gone to every day) has a little table on the busy sidewalk where he takes tap water, boils it (so it’s safe), adds the delicious smelling black tea leaves and condensed milk until it boils up and over the pot, then strains it and adds sugar til it’s sooo deliciously sweet, and pours it into these thick little glasses that look like they should be holding milkshakes in the 1950’s (also cleaned in tap water on the street, but eh, so far so good),
and you sit on a tree stump nearby and sip as people and traffic race by. And I think the guy is starting to recognize us (well, I’m sure he must since we’re about the only westerners I’ve seen since I’ve been in Delhi…) and he gave us a free biscuit yesterday. It’s the best part of my day so far.

I started to trust the whole boiling water thing after drinking his chai, which is good since we ran out the other night at our apartment after having a few friends over (camels!) and had to resort to boiling pots of it and sticking it in the freezer so we could hydrate. It worked, but we decided the best thing was just to buy a water cooler-sized jug the next day.

So, that’s that. It’s about quittin’ time on Friday afternoon (yes, I took the last hour or so at work to write this blog but I was researching all morning and my boss is sick today!) and the weekend is about to begin, so I’ll keep everyone updated as I finally take some time to explore greater Delhi! We just booked train tickets to the Taj Mahal for a few weekends from now, and I’m contemplating Mumbai for next weekend…so we’ll see! Talk soon. – K J

Saturday and Sunday were my days to be a tourist in Delhi. We went to markets, visited the place where Gandhi was cremated, and stood by and watched some incredible ceremonies in a Jain and then a Sikh temple. By far the most interesting were the temples.

Religion is all-pervasive in India, and you see religious shrines everywhere from the cell phone store’s wall to the Auto taxi driver’s windshield to the tops of tree stumps on the side of the road. And these aren’t just little pictures or small metal crosses the way you see them in the west. These are often full-out temples or huts (about the size of a doll house or bigger) filled with figurines, flowers, small edible offerings, sometimes incense, and they always seem well tended. Even the men whose ‘shops’ consist of setting up a chair, sliver of a mirror, and pair of scissors on the sidewalk (and believe me, there are quite a few of these makeshift barbers and I’m told they drive quite the bargain) often manage to set up and tend to their miniature temples or other religious paraphernalia nearby.

When we went into the Jain temple, we were told to remove our shoes and any leather we wore. Not surprising, since one of Jainism’s central tenets is non-violence and it was safe to assume that anyone’s animal hide belt or wallet may have been a violation. As soon as we walked in, we heard loud singing and clapping and saw a middle to late-aged semi-naked (or maybe totally?)
Didn’t matter bc he was seated cross-legged so no one could see anything) man sitting at the front of it all. He was a guru, a really friendly girl informed us, and today was his birthday. Everyone lit candles and gave offerings of dry rice with their hands. I also saw one woman wearing a white hospital-like mask, and wondered if she was sick before I remembered that some of the most devout Jain followers wear the masks to avoid inhaling (and thus harming) flying bugs.

Later in the day we went to a Sikh temple, which was the most amazing thing I’ve seen so far in India (though I’m told I will say this at least once a week). Most of the older men wear their hair, which they are never supposed to cut, in big turbans, and carry daggers in a gold or silver case at their waistline. The women cover their hair with long lacy or silk scarves (at least while they are in the temple, I’m not sure if all do always). A number of the adolescent and mid-twenties/thirties guys had short hair, but one or two little boys were beginning to grow their hair out and put it in a bun on top of their heads. The tiny little bun was covered with a little piece of fabric that was held in place by a pony-tail holder (very cute).

The temple was huuuuuuge with all white marble and high, rounded, gold-covered ceilings. You went barefoot again, and were provided with a small scarf (more like a bandana) to put on your head before entering. You also walked through a shallow pool of water to purify yourself before you went in.

The sounds inside were phenomenal – like nothing I’ve ever heard up close and in person. There was a man singing in a very slow, almost ominous tone that was also very rhythmic and peaceful. There was an occasional drum beat, and some light piano in the background. There were droves and droves of people walking up to give offerings of this really sweet pudding (made with sugar, flower, cinnamon, and I can’t remember exactly what else but I know it was delicious, bc they gave some to each person on their way out) in small bowls covered by giant green dried leaves. We sat on the floor with everyone else and listened for a really long time. There were also a number of little kids running around and playing, but nobody seemed to mind. Finally, there was a giant reflection pool – like the size of one or two city blocks squared – outside that had people all along the edges stepping in, either partly or completely, and praying. It was really peaceful.

I learned that Sikhism, surprisingly given how old it is, has a very tolerant and egalitarian philosophy. According to the people we spoke with and the literature they gave us, Sikhs believe that women’s souls are equally as capable and integral in religious ritual as men’s are, and they say that all human beings, no matter who or what they worship, are part of the same human race and are all manifestations under god. Sikhism also refuses to recognize the caste system. They also allow for widows to remarry (an outright rejection of the ancient practice where a woman was expected to throw herself on the pyre at her husband’s funeral, or at least expected never to re-marry), though they don’t allow for divorce.

But there was a stark contrast between the scene inside and outside the temple. As soon as our Auto pulled up outside, an innumerable number of beggars, mostly women with babies in their arms, swarmed before we had even had a chance to pay. They were touching us, their babies were grabbing our sleeves, and one or two followed us for more than a few paces once we left the Auto. Beggars or traveling ‘salesman’ approaching Autos aren’t uncommon, and usually a little kid with an open palm or an armful of flower wreaths to sell will scurry over to your taxi (which, remember, is not a car but more like an open go-cart with no windows) and attempt to caress your hand with their merchandise or convince you to give money during the two or so minutes that the red light lasts on a four to six lane, ridiculously busy and dangerous highway. Not just to us, to every car they can. The light turns green and these kids dodge cars to head back to their
waiting place on the median or curb. Some of them sleep there.

The other day, I was sitting in a market drinking chai and noticed this skinny, dusty, partially-clothed little girl watching another little boy, roughly her age, being pampered by his family as they tried (generally to no avail) to coaxe him into taking bites of food from their full plates. Nobody noticed her watching, and, equally disturbing, her expression remained entirely blank as she watched them. Yes, there is definitely a big divide between the haves and the have-nots in India.

As I travel more and more, though, I'm ashamed to say I get more and more desensitized to these types of scenes. The first time I was in Mexico in the 6th grade, I could never forget this dirt-covered, naked little kid I saw playing in a puddle on the side of the street. I'd never seen anything like it. When I was in Thailand, must more recently, every skinny, flea-bitten stray dog even tugged at my heartstrings. But by the time I arrived in India, I didn't give people sleeping under ad-hoc tarp tents on the side of the highway more than a cursory glance. And there are, literally, a million skinny stray dogs. It's almost like it becomes too many to even notice. Too many to be able to notice or help without losing your sanity.

I think that's what explains why, at the outset, the Delhi 'haves' seem astonishingly dismissive of those around them who have absolutely nothing. I think it’s because, if you opened your heart (or wallet) up to every empty hand around you, you would wind up feeling too utterly powerless in the face of so much want. Or go broke. Because where would one draw the line between the begging child on one corner and the begging child on the next? And, as a friend and I recently discovered when we gave a small kid some of our fruit in the market, nearly ten times as many open palms almost immediately swarmed in asking for fruit we no longer had until, I’m ashamed to say, I wished we’d never given the first kid anything in the first place. It’s much easier, and simpler, to simply shut it out entirely.

Don’t get the wrong impression – it’s not like just bc these kids are poor they seem unhappy, as though everything around here is full of only misery. To the contrary, you’ll see half-naked little kids running around playing tag, jumping over trash piles and dancing all day. But you also see them or their parents begging, and you wonder what their future holds.

India’s growth rate is only 1.5 percent, but in country this populated that means they add roughly the population of the country of Australia each year. And, following the trend in most industrialized and industrializing societies, the more well-to-do individuals, those who can afford children the most, are the ones who end up having them the least.

“Hello, Madame! Yes!”
June 18, 2010

...is certainly the preferred way to get a young (presumably English-speaking) lady’s attention in Mumbai. This catchall phrase is a particular favorite of the store clerk waving his latest merchandise to entice you come inside, the little girl on the corner with an eye for the chicken-filled dosa you just bought, or the passing taxi who has decided to slow down, ride alongside you, and honk his horn a few times just for good measure in hopes that you’ll eventually relent, hop in, and take a ride somewhere. Ah yes, I was quite the “Madame” in Mumbai.
The trip itself was rather last minute (shocker, I know). After insisting for two weeks that I didn’t want to pay the money for a flight, (Mumbai’s about a two hour flight southwest of Delhi on the coast of the Arabian Sea) I relented around lunchtime the Friday that Yannah and Chantal were scheduled to leave. I was finishing an article for Tennille at work, so Chantal grabbed my card and started flight searching for me. I couldn’t get on their flight, turned out, so we opted instead for a cheaper 6 am departure on Saturday morning. I wasn’t quite sure how I would get from my flat to the airport at 4 am the next morning, nor how I would find their hotel once I arrived in Mumbai (as they didn’t know where they were staying yet), but through a series of late-night text messages, google searches, and a pre-paid taxi service, I arrived safely at the Seashore Hotel in Colaba (south Mumbai) just in time to start our adventures on Sat morning. (Well, arrived isn’t quite accurate...my taxi was lost and drove by it, that little hole in the wall hotel up on the seventh or some-odd floor, but Yannah saw me from the balcony and came charging down the street after the car yelling my name until we screeched to a halt.)

And the city itself was quite the adventure. It’s the second biggest city in India (right before Delhi and behind Calcutta), and seemed more lush and cosmopolitan than Delhi. Girls can (gasp!) wear tank tops there without turning too many heads, and it’s right on the Arabian Sea. There’s shopping, beach, clubs, and really cool architecture. And of course, the famous Taj Hotel (well, famous for good and bad reasons now, since the terrorist attack there that killed over 100 people in 2008). It was a breath of fresh air (literally) from the dusty roads of inland Delhi.

The drive into the actual city, though, which took about an hour from the airport, was my first taste of India’s slums. For all of its skyscrapers and music and Bollywood flair, Mumbai has the biggest expanse of slums in India, and one in particular, with roughly one million people living on roughly one square mile, is the most populated slum in the world. There were little one room hut-like structures with corrugated roofs blanketing the ground for miles and, as we neared the city, filling in the gaps between the skyscrapers. People were literally living on top of each other. And they’re growing. While it’s hard to believe that so many people would leave the relative space and peace of their rural homes to come live in this squalor, apparently the poverty in rural India is much harsher, and employment opportunities even more limited. I also have to remind myself that, as large as these cities are and as much as they seem to burst at the seams, 75% of India’s population still lives in rural areas.

So. Back to my arrival at the hotel. We stayed in a room overlooking the water (which made up for lack of A/C with an in-room TV! The first I’ve watched since I’ve been in India), and it would have been even more enjoyable if there wasn’t somewhere around 100% humidity. The monsoon had already started in Mumbai (it slowly creeps its way up from the south of India in the summer months, and apparently hits the hardest down there), so it was overcast (whew) and rained in the evenings. When I arrived all of us were very excited to pull out some semblance of our ‘normal’ clothes from home (shorts, sleeveless shirts, etc that we’d been told we could wear down there without offending anyone) and (gasp) even decided to put on some makeup. I even had it in my head for several short minutes that I could wear my hair down. Within about a half hour walking around Mumbai, though, the hair was up, the makeup melted off, and we were back to being scruffs with dirty feet and damp foreheads. (oh well, ya do what you can.)

The first day we wandered around street markets and did some shopping (our first exposure to the “hellooooo madam!” line which came, without fail, from every stall and shopkeeper’s mouth as we walked by), saw the big Gate of India that overlooks the Arabian Sea, the famous Taj Hotel, and a number of taxi drivers napping in their cars on the side of the road in very strange positions (legs hanging out of windows, dangling on the street, anything to keep cool while they catch a snooze I suppose), and about a million stray cats. We also went to the infamous
“Leopold’s Café” that is the hallmark of Gregory David Roberts’ book “Shantaram” set in Mumbai. (If you haven’t read this book I’d def recommend it.)

When we arrived at the gate of India, though, the strangest thing happened. You know that feeling where you can tell someone’s looking at you, and you haven’t quite yet turned around to see them to confirm it, but you know they’re there? Well multiply that by (hmm, maybe there were 200 people at the gate that day?) and that’s what happened. We realized that all these people were stopped, dead in their tracks, and snapping pictures and videos of us with their cell phones and cameras! As if we ourselves were a tourist attraction. One family came up to us and asked us to take a picture, and as I took the camera and waited for them to pose, the older woman clucked at me, snatched it back, and instead pulled me and Chantal into their family huddle for a series of about five pictures. Approximately thirty families over the next day or two followed suit. We held people’s hands, children, who knows. We generally refused if any hooligan-looking guys asked us (though nothing could stop the clicking of camera phones from a distance), but almost always obliged when there was a little kid or pleading mother involved – I mean, what in the hell do you say?

So here’s the explanation: though Mumbai is a hugely international and cosmopolitan city and its residents probably didn’t give two hoots about seeing another white westerner, the gate of India area is where all the Indian tourists from other rural parts of the country come on vacation. So we were new to them, and quite the attraction. We’ve since heard other similar stories, and have been advised to never do anything we don’t want to, but there’s really no harm in it. They sure seemed to appreciate it! So, hey.

That night we went to a club where the world cup was playing, and I was reminded of why I don’t like clubs, whether I’m at home or halfway across the world. There was American hip hop, exorbitantly overpriced weak drinks, and no shortage of stumbling, scantily-dressed young Indian girls followed by hair-gelled men. There was a giant screen broadcasting the world cup, though, and I got to watch the US and England game (during which most people cheered for England.) On the way home a downpour began and we got absolutely positively drenched just walking to a cab. We were glad we checked it out, though, but decided we preferred the less pricey and smoky ‘day life.’

The next morning we took an hour long boat trip out to Elephant Island to see these cave carvings. There were no elephants, so I’m still not sure why it was called that, but there was a magnificent abundance of monkeys. Momma monkeys, pappa monkeys, babies, cousins, nephews, and so on. They all stole corn, ate banana peels, and enjoyed fornicating on trees nearby the tourist benches. Quite the little creatures. Truth be told, the boat ride (sooo nice out on the deck) and the baby monkeys made the trip more worthwhile than the caves themselves, but it was so nice to be out on the water and in the breeze again I would have paid just for the boat trip.

*Note: in buying our tickets to the island, we were reminded that for anything you’d like to procure in this country, from bottled water to boat tickets, there are at least two official versions and vendors, and three unofficial ones. All may be quoting different prices, often times in the same place, for what may (or may not be) the same thing. Same goes with directions – we were told that anytime we wanted to go anywhere, to ask at least 4 people. Not because anyone would intentionally mislead you, but because it just seems to rude for a person not to be able to give you an answer to your question! So even if this sweet lady on the corner doesn’t know where the milk shop is, she may point to the left just to avoid being rude or embarrassed.
Finally, we spent our last half day in Mumbai doing a tour of the slums. I know it sounds strange and even borderline exploitative at the outset (or at least it did to me). Did people just ride around in tour buses and snap cameras at poor people? Illogically, I imagined a loudspeaker and fanny packs being involved (even though I hadn’t seen evidence of either since I’d entered the country). Apparently, though, there’s a small, Indian-run non-profit working in one of the slums that runs schools, computer centers, etc, and does the tours to give 80% of the proceeds back into these projects. They didn’t allow any photography, took everyone on foot, and only allowed five of us. I’m not sure but I think our guide may have been from there as well.

What I saw was NOT at all what I expected. What I expected was Slumdog Millionare. (Naïve, I guess.) And some of the areas I didn’t see may, in fact, have met those expectations. But what I saw was a zillion small communities, each with its own school, housing area, shops, chai sellers, and manufacturing areas where people made leather, decorated sari scarves, and did much of India’s plastic recycling. There was trash everywhere, and working conditions were far from stellar. The water running along the ground in some areas was putrid, and their were families of five living in single room dwellings that were accessible only by the narrowest, shakiest, darkest footpaths deep inside the walls of the neighborhood. But there were also schoolgirls in white and blue pressed uniforms with ribbons snaking around us in these alleys with their books, yelling “Hi! Hi! Hello!” as they went by waving and giggling. A dad held his 2 year old baby up to give us a high five, and no one begged. In fact, most of them were too hard at work making pots or plastic to even notice us too much. I realized that, even more so than before I arrived, I really had no idea what it was like to be a part of this world — and to be honest I don’t even feel comfortable writing about it for the reason that I will inevitably misrepresent it, overstate the ‘poor but still happy’ vibe, or understate the poverty and underlying sense of desperation that the establishment itself nonetheless represents. So, that’s it for now.

I had a great time, and learned a lot. As always, I wish I could have seen and done more, though I wasn’t sorry to leave the humidity. One of the most remarkable things about India so far is it’s uncanny ability to, with each new destination and heat wave, introduce a whole new batch of sweat glands I didn’t even know I had. Looking forward to what the Taj Mahal has in store for the weekend. Boarding the train to Agra in an hour and a half! (And hoping for a more timely update early next week.) J-K

*PS – I meant to post pictures with this — I have so many good ones! But no time before I leave, so I plan to supplement this ridiculously long entry w/photos on Sun or Monday!

**Hot. Hot. Hot. HOT. (+Taj Mahal)**
June 22, 2010

It’s officially 115ish degrees in Delhi today, which the weather site, once again, accurately described as “Extremely hot. Widespread dust storms.” I am hiding out in my bedroom, lights out, A/C blasting (for whatever that’s worth), computer in lap. I left work today after lunch because I had a bit of a sore throat that I’m hoping to sleep off. One of my roommates seems to have contracted a case of food poisoning, and the other had a cough over the weekend (so I am counting my lucky stars that I only have the throat ailment.) But whatever I’ve contracted was worth it, because I got to see the Taj Mahal.
It all started with a train ride from hell. Well, not really. I’m exaggerating. But it was (have I mentioned?) HOT. This was also my first trip to the Delhi train station, and it was absolute chaos. People everywhere, sitting, standing, crouching, sleeping, eating, conducting any human or bodily function you can imagine, right there on or near the tracks. We, for whatever reason, decided to save the two or so dollars and book a non-A/C train for our four hour trip to Agra, the town that boasts the Taj. This I regret.

So on the trains there are these little cubbies of space with three layers of ‘seating.’ There’s lower bunk, middle bunk, and upper bunk. Usually, unless people are sleeping (which I can’t imagine how you could), the middle bunk is collapsed and there’s just top and bottom. And top is right up top, let me tell ya. My bunk was on top, but I couldn’t even sit up without my head hitting the ceiling. So eventually we switched around until I wound up on bottom looking out the windows (lucky) listening to my ipod and breathing each new blast of hot air as the train stopped and started. With every shift of my leg, back, or arm, I’d see a puddle of dusty sweat where my leg had been touching the plastic seat (had to share that part.) But the people we met on the trains, both to and from Agra, made it all worth it.

We met this one couple (who we later ran into outside the Taj!) who was about 1 1/2 years married and visiting the Taj for the first time. They were the most adorable pair of people I’ve probably ever met, and seemed so happy and affectionate. Then there was the pack of young hooligans who got on halfway through. When they first jumped on (and I do mean jumped — when the trains depart these stations there are still people scrambling to spring into the open doorways), I shifted my bag onto the other side of my shared bench so as not to be bothered (bratty, perhaps, I know). The girl (other half of the couple) laughed. But once I realized there were a number of them and they really had nowhere to sit, I relented and made room, motioning for them to sit. Then the craziest thing happened. The guy who sat down next to me, who seemed like the cleanest cut of them all, picked up my book (this is common here for people to assume they can see or read or share your things in close spaces, as we learned again when we were forced to share our semi-scandalous ‘cosmopolitan’ magazine with two sets of grandparents and another young couple on our train ride home. But that comes later.) — but he picked up my book and spent probably the next entire hour reading it. I mean didn’t even look up once. I still don’t know if he actually
understood it, because he didn’t speak a lick of English to me, but he sat intently studying each page, flipping it with care, and when one of his friends took it and (I’m assuming the Hindi translation went something like this) asked what in the hell he was doing with this English letter (not to mention girly-looking) paperback book, he snapped back (again assuming) something about he was learning English and to please be careful not to lose the bookmark. Then he snapped at another friend to stop spitting his paan/tobacco juice near our feet. So guess it pays to share your seat.

Chantal attempting to snooze

Fav. couple we ran into again after the train :)
Anyways, on to the Taj! I hate to bore you with more tales of the heat, but I must make a brief aside that this night was my absolute hottest in India because we were on the top floor of a hotel with no A/C and it must have been 100 degrees. It was 3 of us to a bed, and at one point I think I was near tears I got so hot and frustrated. (The next night we got switched to the bottom floor, though, where I actually covered up with towels in the middle of the night from the fan! Oh, the difference in several meters of elevation.) The next morn we woke at 6:15 am (well crazy Ann woke at 5:30) to try and see the sunrise over the Taj — did I mention our $6 a night hotel had a rooftop cafe overlooking the Taj?? — but missed it. We couldn’t be too bothered, though, because we were so pooped. So we ate our breakfast, drank our chai, and watched all the monkeys hopping around on people’s rooftops nearby and peeking into people’s windows. Then we called a guide (well, some man, anyways) that my supervisor, Tennille, recommended to show us around the Taj. He couldn’t make it, but he sent a cousin who arrived within 10 minutes. It was 8 am.

The trick is to see the Taj early, before the crowds, and the heat, set in. The building and scene were phenomenal. All hand cut white marble, a rare display of green grass and fountains all around, and a beautiful gated entrance. The history, apparently, is that an old king (maybe in the 16th century?) built the giant structure in honor of his wife (and mother of 14!) after she died. So it’s a monument of love. Each of the other gates around it are in honor of his other two wives (so monument of love(s)?) and many of them are buried there. It’s overlooking a big river bank. After exploring a bit we joined what seemed like half of the visitors there and lay on the marble to gaze up at the Taj and the sky.

We decided not to visit any more ‘sites’ that day, because, let’s be honest, nothing was going to compare, and went to a market instead. Well that turned into quite the debacle. First the taxi
driver took us to the wrong market, and then lied to us about what we’d find there (I think he just wanted us to have to pay him to take us to somewhere else — in such a tourist-driven city like Agra, all these taxis are in it together to get the most bang for their buck from non-locals). We ended up finding our market, but it was a dusty, crowded nightmare with winding alleys we couldn’t quite seem to find our way (or a taxi) out of. Two good things came out of it, though:

monkeys and a cup of chai. The monkeys came all at once when we rounded a corner and saw them swinging above the crowd tarzan-style on the city electrical wires, shimmying up buildings and peeking into people’s windows. We got quite the kick out of that, though nobody at the market could seem to figure out what we were so uppity and snapping our cameras at. The chai came after we made our one purchase in the market, where I stubbornly refused to pay an extra 50 rupees to a shoe vendor when I had already gotten the last pair for less. I almost stomped out, until Ann reminded me with a grin that I had gotten mad at myself just a week before when I did the same thing in Mumbai and didn’t end up being able to track back down the pants vendor once my pride subsided and I realized it was only the difference of a dollar or two (I know, I get it, I’m a work in progress. And nanny, I can hear you chastising me for being so stubborn and cheap right now...). So anyways, I finally decided to buy the shoes and, surprisingly, I think the vendor was so (surprisingly) amused and pleased by my display of tightness and idiocy that he decided to sit us all down and buy us a cup of chai tea. So we drank, and he talked about life and happiness. And I swore to myself, once again, that I will try and remember next time to just buy the damn shoes.
So anyways, we finally wound our way out of the market and (after some more seriously draining haggling with a number of auto drivers) secured a decent price to take us back to our hotel. Dinner on the rooftop again, and an early bedtime in a much cooler room. Next day we (rather unwisely, in retrospect) boarded a big rumbling public bus to a nearby “ghost town.” Needless to say, no air-con, and I am also now convinced that the bus and train stations are the underbelly of every town or city, but we were driven by thoughts of visiting somewhere that somehow miraculously didn’t contain any people in this crowded country. Well, we were wrong. Or, rather, we’ll just say ‘misinformed.’ The town was quite alive and well, and we were spit out in the middle of a hot, bustling market where we bumbled around for a bit before making our way up the hill to a nearby Mosque. We had to spend a considerable amount of time losing this one guy who insisted he wanted to ‘guide us around’ free of cost, and once we did, we made our own way up. The mosque was interesting, with beautiful, festive music being played by men in white on the inside steps. We decided to sit down for a bit and just enjoy, and struck up a game of patty-cake (ya know, that hand clapping game you played as a kid) with a group of two or three kids until, before we knew it, the group grew to about 10-12. The funny (or not so funny) part was, before we interacted with them these kids were begging. They were obviously street kids, and were asking for a rupee, a pen (not sure why), whatever. Looked like little adults with these weathered expressions and old men’s eyes. We didn’t give them anything, but after a few minutes just fell into playing this game because they were sitting nearby, and something crazy (well, nothing’s crazy these days, I guess) happened — they turned back into little kids again. The next thing we knew they were laughing and giggling and teaching us handshakes and games, too. And when it was finally time for us to go, something slipped out of my purse and I didn’t notice. Before I walked off, though, they hollered after me that I had left something behind and I should not forget it. The transformation was something I won’t forget.
From there, there was another hot, nondescript hour and a half bus ride back to Agra, where we grabbed lunch, our bags, and went to the train station. Another seemingly unbearably hot train ride turned bearable thanks to the company we once again met. Another young couple, two sets of grandparents who finally warmed up to us and ended up painting henna on my hand, insisting we share their homemade rose water, and spending more time looking (as I mentioned) at our books and magazines than we did.

Oh, there was a minor, teeny little incident where we actually accidentally got on the wrong train home, but that was no big deal. After the conductor told us (a simple “this is not your train, lady” did the trick), a crowd of about 15 formed around us to try and get to the bottom of this. Apparently we’d made quite the spectacle, and everyone within a four car vicinity seemed to think they needed to either advocate for us to stay on, quip about how we were taking their seats, or simply get close enough to the fray so they could go tell their eagerly awaiting comrades farther back in the crowd. I think our ticket was passed between like 10 sets of demanding hands, each simply wanting to hold it, check the number and destination, and then cluck and nod their head in agreement, “yup, these foreigners have, indeed, boarded the wrong train” for their own satisfaction. It ended up working in our favor, though, because the crowd ended up convincing the conductor not only to let us stay on, but to let us avoid the 600 rupee fine that normally accompanies such offenses. And, lucky for us, the train was headed through Delhi anyways.

So that’s that...another trip in India, not quite gone as planned, but with just enough highs to outweigh the lows and make it all worth it. This weekend we’re headed to the (much cooler) foothills of Rishikesh. Update you soon! – K :)

Next fav. couple on the train who helped w/our little ‘incident’
There is a fire downstairs. Chaloooo.
June 25, 2010

So the day before yesterday, about mid morning, we started hearing shrieking from the bottom part of the building. For a bit we just dismissed it, because there is a daycare nearby and we assumed it was the children playing some sort of lively game. It wasn’t. Within a few minutes Maja, our director, calmly opened the door to our office and told us there was a fire downstairs, and we needed to get out. Now.

By the time we got to the stairwell, I started to smell and see a light smoke curling upwards, but it was nothing too extreme. We all proceeded calmly, chatting about this or that. Within minutes after we had all gotten out safely, though, we heard a very distinct zapping sound that lasted for several minutes, intermittently, from inside the flaming room on the bottom floor. Ok. It was some sort of electrical fire. Still lighthearted and rolling our eyes, though, most of us just threw our hands up in the air, waiting to see what crazy event India would throw our way next. A few people approached with fire extinguishers, but with little success. Nobody was still inside, and we were sure this was just office space, so there was no need to panic. A few onlookers nearby snapped pictures, and a few more went closer to the flames to try and move cars and personal items out of the building’s driveway.

None of us realized exactly what was going on. Until 10, 15, 20, 25, then 30 minutes passed, and the fire still trucks hadn’t arrived. There was a traffic policeman on a motorcycle, and eventually a police truck with one or two men inside, but all they seemed to be doing was trotting up, nodding their heads, confirming there was, in fact, a fire that was now roaring in the bottom floor of our building, and then promising to go and fetch the fire engines. But we had already called the trucks. I mean, I guess really, what could the police have done without the proper equipment? Their presence and relative helplessness only highlighted the ridiculousness and steadily mounting urgency of it all. Smiles faded and people just started to get really hot, frustrated, and impatient. Things weren’t looking good.

Finally, about half an hour later, the fire truck arrived. But it couldn’t fit through the narrow road. People were scrambling to move a car or two, get everyone (at this point there were what seemed like 100 onlookers) out of the way, and finally the truck scraped its way through hanging tree limbs and made it to the front of the building. By this point, though, the entire bottom part of the building garage had been consumed in flames. We were told to leave, that the office would be taking everyone out to lunch down the street.

When we got back from lunch, we were relieved to find that none of our 2nd & 3rd floor offices had been directly damaged, though we did lack power and things were quite smoky. But then a number of us realized exactly what had burned down. There were children’s toys, clothes, a small bed, a mini stove. All charred. These were things that didn’t belong to some office with an insurance policy but to a family. They belonged to a family who had been living in that room, who had kept everything they owned, including their cash savings, in that room, and in our haste and distance we hadn’t even noticed their distress. This family lost everything.

This is when it kind of hit me. What started this fire was an electrical issue, which probably occurred because the wires in this family’s single room home were old or poorly made or being overworked in this crazy heat. What could have probably been dealt with quickly was then exacerbated because, as far as I could tell, they didn’t have a fire extinguisher. And because there was no “pull here” fire alarm nearby, the rest of the building, which did have extinguishers, couldn’t get there in time to help; not to mention that we weren’t even alerted of our own need to
evacuate until the fire had grown considerably. And finally, even though the fire was larger by the time the police etc were called, it only wreaked the havoc and devastation that it did, to the degree that it did, because of the long wait time before the fire trucks ever even arrived.

There was no one person at fault, no one thing to point your finger at and say “well if this, specifically, had been done differently, all would have been ok” which made it all the more frustrating. It wasn’t the family’s fault they were stuck relying on a crappy electric system to cook lunch, it wasn’t our offices’ fault that we hadn’t known what exactly was going on down there without being properly informed, and it probably wasn’t even the policeman or fire truck’s fault they’d arrived late — maybe they, too, were just strapped too darn thin.

So, I’m back at work now, with computers up and functioning (though yesterday was absolutely positively ridiculously inhumanely (enough adverbs? one more) unnecessarily grueling because those of us on the top floor were told to come to work for the day even though there were no A/C’s for at least half of the morning and afternoon.)

The office did, though, immediately organize a drive and everyone is donating money and other household items to give to the downstairs family today, before the weekend starts. So not all is lost (though I guess it depends on your definition of lost.)

For now, I’m headed off to the foothills of Rishikesh (via overnight bus which, hallelujah, has air-con) and looking forward to escaping the dust of Delhi for a few days.

---

NYT
July 3, 2010

Exciting! This article made it to the front page of the New York Times the other day, and quotes the organization I’m working with in India! It’s about India’s Right to Information (RTI) law, and how it gives the disenfranchised more leverage in the legal system. It’s one of our initiatives in the Delhi office.
BANTA, India — Chanchala Devi always wanted a house. Not a mud-and-stick hut, like her current home in this desolate village in the mineral-rich, corruption-corroded state of Jharkhand, but a proper brick-and-mortar house. When she heard that a government program for the poor would give her about $700 to build that house, she applied immediately.

As an impoverished day laborer from a downtrodden caste, she was an ideal candidate for the grant. Yet she waited four years, watching as wealthier neighbors got grants and built sturdy houses, while she and her three children slept beneath a leaky roof of tree branches and crumbling clay tiles.

Two months ago she took advantage of India’s powerful and wildly popular Right to Information law. With help from a local activist, she filed a request at a local government office to find out who had gotten the grants while she waited, and why. Within days a local bureaucrat had good news: Her grant had been approved, and she would soon get her check.

Ms. Devi’s good fortune is part of an information revolution sweeping India. It may be the world’s largest democracy, but a vast and powerful bureaucracy governs. It is an imperial edifice built on feudal foundations, and for much of independent India’s history the bureaucracy has been largely unaccountable. Citizens had few means to demand to know what their government was doing for them...


Meet the Neighbors
July 14, 2010

“Well why don’t you run down to the vet with me, and we’ll have a look-see?” a neighbor asked me earlier this evening as she started walking towards her parked car. “I think there’s a chicken bone in there, but I just can’t be sure.” She was referring to the x-rays she recently had taken of her dog’s esophagus. Apparently, it kept getting sick after eating its food and she was quite worried about the old girl. “Oh, no thanks, I, uh, need to take my groceries upstairs and, you know, try and get some other things done this evening. But good luck with her, and please let me know how it works out!” I stammered. “Well then,” she answers, undaunted, “you’ll come by for a cup of chai later on...when, you asked me? Oh, no, no, no. No need for specific day or time, child, just drop in sometime, anytime this week. I’ll see you soon, and catch you up on how preeti (the dog) is faring.” I made my promises, and set off towards my flat with an armful of mangoes and cereal. I’d met the woman, for the very first time, fifteen minutes ago.

This, I marvel as I walk away, is one of the things that continue to both intrigue and confound me (often at the same time) about India: the immediate familiarity that is assumed between total strangers. I mean, here I had met this woman fifteen minutes ago, chatted a bit and showed some concern about her old dog when I saw it heaving in the street, and she’s inviting me to come with her to the vet and have a look-see at x-rays! No doubt there could have even been dinner plans following, perhaps involving the entire family. Followed by photos.

I’ll never forget the first time one of our young co-workers (who also lives in our neighborhood) learned we didn’t have a microwave in our apartment. “Well, duh, why don’t you just go to your
neighbors’ flats and use theirs?” she exclaimed, as if this were the most obvious solution in the world. “But we don’t, I mean, we don’t even know them,” we insisted. She looked at us, perplexed, and laughed. Oh, such westerners.

Such is the nature of things here. When it comes down to needing a microwave, or when you’re in a new city and some older woman sitting with you on the train insists you share her rosewater or maybe come by her house after the ride is over to have some rosewater of your own, being in India is mighty fine. On the other hand, though, when you’re sitting on an overcrowded bus and some total stranger practically sits on your lap without so much as a glance or an apology and then sticks one of her small children on your leg for safe keeping, or you’re trying to pay for some hydrocortisone cream at the chemist/drug shop and everyone around you huddles around to not-so-slyly peer into your bag or insists on leaning in to hungrily catch every word of your request for the cream in the first place, or when someone randomly shows up early on a Saturday morning to use your stove, being in India can be absolutely bewildering. Or, depending on your mood at the moment, absolutely infuriating. But then the next day, the same situation can be amusing, even heartwarming. It all depends on the day. Or the minute.

Faced with the multifaceted, double-edged sword that seems to characterize every situation and encounter I have in India, I haven’t even known what to blog about for the last few weeks, though plenty has been happening. I’ve felt this “blogger’s block” (hah, can one have such a thing?? And if so, can I say I used the phrase first?) – but anyhow, I’d stopped writing because any observation I had, or any sentiment I felt one minute, would be immediately contradicted or rendered woefully incomplete the next. I’d be so frustrated I could barely breathe one second and then so full of joy and laughter the next (often at the same place or at the same person) that I wouldn’t know which emotion actually characterized the experience. I’ve fallen in and out of love with this place more times than I can count, and while I’m seeing things, crazy things, all of the time, and I know what I see, I don’t know how to feel about them.

One example sticks out from last weekend. My friend Ann and I were walking out of a restaurant (or something like it) at a train station in northern India, and had bagged up my leftover food. We had a long ride and didn’t want to bring it, but didn’t want to waste it either. So we headed over to give it to one of the many homeless families lining the tracks with their bare-bottomed children and faded saris. I try not to give anything to people who outright harass you, or who use their children to beg, and generally try to give only food and not money. So I walked up to this woman who had been lying by the tracks with her little boy and, trying to walk behind her until there were as few onlookers as possible, attempted to discretely hand her the food with a small smile. It took a minute for her to organize child, water, bags, etc, though, before she could free a hand to take it, and by the time the act was complete everyone within fifty yards seemed to be staring. Some of them were scowling at her, but she couldn’t seem to care less as she smiled and turned away.

When we looked back, she and the kid were already eating on a bench. My friend was happy we did it, and said so. But I had this gnawing feeling. On the one hand, we had just given a meal to someone who, two minutes before, didn’t have one and maybe wouldn’t have had one that night. Pure and simple. This is good. But, at the same time, I remembered the scowls of some of the passengers nearby. Maybe this is bad. Maybe I just made it worse for her, because now those onlookers will hold her in greater contempt, or maybe she’d now get more grief from other beggars nearby. Maybe I made it worse for the people on the platform, because in some small way I just fed into the much looked-down-upon culture of begging. And, to be honest, what’s a crummy little meal of rice and veggis anyways? Kind of like a band-aid for a bullet wound. But then I jump to the other side of the argument – I mean, the mother and son sure were smiling. (And back and forth and back and
forth in my head until I’m not even sure what’s just happened or what to make of it, and wish my mind would just shut the hell up.)

So this is just an example of how grey everything can be here. Short term, something might be right or good or OK, while long term, maybe it did harm. From one angle, a situation is one way, but from another angle, it’s the complete inverse. And most frustrating, particularly for a type-A, need-to-know person like me, there’s no right answer. And I’m trying to learn to be OK with that!

So that’s that. Not everything has been full of these soul-searching, brooding, woah-as-me moments, though. To the contrary, I’ve been having quite a bit of fun. :) Just felt like I needed some explanation for the hiatus and some shift in theme from the “here’s what I did this weekend” blogs.

But, shifting back to those weekends, here are some pictures of what I’ve been up to, from the Himalayan foothills to the near desert region to the oldest, creakiest parts of Delhi (an area referred to as, you guessed it, “Old Delhi”)...

Rishikesh, little town in the Himalayan foothills.
This bridge was for foot traffic only!

Whitewater rafting in Rishikesh (we actually swam in the water and it was FREEZING
Me, getting cornered by a monkey outside my hotel room. (It flew in front of me out of nowhere, and I had to wait until it finished its mango to pass.)

Dancing in the rain on July 4th (the monsoon arrival sort of spoiled our little outdoor party at the US embassy)

Markets in Udaipur, Rajasthan

Cable car over town (Udaipur also, last weekend)
I’ve now got only two weeks left of my internship and another week or so of travel, so I’ll be sitting at home (well, actually, I hope I’ll be sleeping) at this in three weeks. On the 24th, I’ll fly down to Kerala, a more lush state in the southernmost tip of India right on top of Sri Lanka, for a week to jump on a houseboat and tour the Keralan backwaters that have been referred to by many a travelers as “paradise on earth.” I figure, after two months here in the dry, dusty north, I’ll be ready for some paradise.
Last night I had a revelation. Well, maybe not a ‘this-is-the-meaning-of-life’ moment, but a refreshing ‘light-bulb-goes-off’ moment of sorts.

It all started when I sat down next to a little old man selling books on the corner of a semi-lit street to wait for my (chronically late) friend to arrive for our dinner date. I had originally chosen the sidewalk spot because it was getting dark and he seemed innocuous enough with his little stand, and was in a well-lit patch near some guards. But it soon became the perfect site for my little experiment. Here’s the setup…

So after about five minutes, I noticed that, even though I was sitting about one and a half feet from this little man and we were close to the only people around, he hadn’t looked at me once. This was odd, since everyone in Delhi seems to be looking at me ALL THE TIME. [Note: far from being flattering, this is more than a little bit unnerving at times. India already has a ‘staring’ culture to the tenth degree, where anyone who finds anyone (or anything) remotely interesting doesn’t seem to think twice (or at all) about unabashedly walking up and staring at the object that’s captured their attention for just as long as they darn well please. Mix that with the sight of a very tall pale white girl roaming the streets of mainly residential and other non-touristy areas, and you can imagine there’s quite a bit of staring going on. In fact, I dare say I’m quite the attraction. There’s almost a sense of entitlement in it. Sort of like, ‘well, lady, you’ve gone and made yourself quite an odd site, so what did you damn well expect?’ At least that’s how I try to see it.]

So anyways, I noticed that this man hadn’t even acknowledged my presence at all. So, curious and bored as I was, I started staring at him instead. Like really staring. I scooched closer to his cart, so I was maybe a foot away, and angled myself straight towards him and just started unwaveringly following his every move. I watched him pack up his books, one by one, his magazines, stack by stack, and sat silently as some of the water from his jug splashed up as he washed his hands and face, wiped off, and said a small prayer over his cart before locking it. All in all I must have been staring for thirty minutes. And I swear, the man maybe looked at me one time. And when he did, it was sort of like he paused, looked up, slyly locked eyes with me for about two solid seconds with a curious glance, saw that I was still looking, did an internal shoulder shrug, and went back to his business. His resilience to my encroachment into his personal space was astounding. It made me want to stare more.

About halfway through, I leaned in even closer, and tried to get his attention with a friendly “Namaste” (hello) in Hindi (hoping he wouldn’t actually reply in Hindi, since I don’t know much beyond that, but desperate for something). He smiled, said it back, and went back to tending to his books.

This is when I realized something. I realized that, true to form, India kept giving me that double-edged sword with which to approach and analyze every one of my experiences here. Yes, I was subject to constant scrutiny and staring and often questioning by random onlookers, but I, too, could subject them to the same. I, too, could stare! I was staring right then, at that moment, in the rudest sort of way, and he didn’t even care!

At one point, I realized how ridiculous this scene must have looked and burst into laughter. Me, some random goofy westerner, sitting on a lonely street within a foot of this bookseller, unabashedly staring as he quietly glanced up, confirmed that I was, in fact, still there and still
staring, and just went back to ignoring me. He must have really thought I was bonkers. But he just gave another shrug and kept on with his business.

So. I know this seems like a rather pitiful (if not ridiculously obvious) realization and quite a lot of buildup here leading to it, but realizing how freely I could stare and invade peoples’ privacy was quite liberating. Without realizing, I’d already been doing this for two months, shooting back the same questions I’m often asked (What was I doing here? Where was my husband? How about my children? And my work salary? How much did I make, anyways?) thinking I was being cheeky by asking ‘the asker’ the same questions right back. But I was, in fact, just taking the liberty to ask things that they, too, had the liberty to ask me. If they were being my definition of ‘rude’ or invasive, well, the bonus was I was allowed to be the same way. For every time I got pushed out of the queue trying to pay for a soda or buy a train ticket in a crowd, the same crowd wouldn’t fault me for elbowing my way back in past someone else. It’s expected, after all, if you’re ever to get your soda.

So that’s that. Just another puzzle piece that’s helping me to understand and cope with things here. Or maybe it’s just India throwing me a bone. Oh! And on a side note, I actually saw the same man this morning when I went to run an errand at his shopping complex, and am happy to report that he immediately grinned and waved this time, with an English “good morning!” to boot, as I went on my merry way. Guess I’m not (that terribly) crazy seeming after all.

Last night I found myself sleeping on (or attempting to sleep on) two dining room chairs on our three foot wide outdoor side porch. Yes, two dining room chairs. I had them facing each other, a pillow on one, bum on the other, legs switching between a very cramped cross-legged pose to sprawled out over the top of the second chair. Why, you ask?

Well, naturally, because it was 3:45 a.m. and the power was out. Since the monsoon has arrived Delhi’s seen an increase in power outages, maybe a few times a day depending on the neighborhood, but they usually only last for a half hour or so, max. At work this is not a huge deal because our computers work on generators (though it does get mighty hot mighty fast without the A/C) but my apartment has no such luxury. Somehow, we’ve neglected to even buy a flashlight to combat this chronic situation, relying instead on the light of cellphones for navigation.

But tonight was different. The outage lasted for at least four hours. I woke up in the dark, covered in sweat, and mumbled a little curse as I stumbled out to the porch to catch a breath of air and open the windows. This wasn’t a big deal, and would probably go away soon, I figured. It didn’t. So I dragged said chairs across the apartment, set up shop outside on the porch, and there I spent the next three or four hours. It wasn’t so bad actually, though I’m sure it was a funny sight.

Around 6 or 7 am (who can be sure?), the power was still out, but my room had cooled down a bit so I crawled back into bed, eager to stretch my cramped muscles. Then the stray cat serenade began. At first it sounded like the wailing of a small child, and seemed so close I thought that small child might have been sitting there on my balcony, wailing just for me. Me and my roommates both rushed, re-awoken, to the balcony to peer out. It was two stray cats (orange, if you’re wondering) doing some sort of mating dance on the tin roof below.

Monsoons, cats, and almonds.
July 18, 2010
Now I’m not one to mess with nature’s business, but these cats were being UNBEARABLY noisy about the whole thing. As one approached the other, in fact, we weren’t sure whether they were going to kill each other or declare their undying love. I’ve never seen or heard anything like it. They were just staring at each other, making the loudest, most high pitched noises I’ve ever heard. Exasperated, one of my roommates ran and grabbed a bag of almonds. I’m not proud to admit it, especially as a cat lover, but we started pelting the roof below with almonds (and I think we hit the male cat once) to try and break up the bizarre fiasco. They hardly even noticed.

This was all just too much. We couldn’t close our windows because we’d burn up, but couldn’t get a wink of much needed shut eye with these cats out there. Then, someone had an idea. They grabbed one of the buckets we use for washing clothes and filled it with water. Bam. Water flies, cats scatter, we burst out laughing and crawl back into bed (to the faint cries, about twenty minutes later, of them starting up on another rooftop.) I felt guilty, but figured I was doing a public service of sorts, as the last thing this city needs is more stray animals.

When I woke up this morning I had nearly forgotten the whole thing, until I saw a pile of almonds in bed with me. This night, I said to myself, needs to be documented.