

Dear India

In 2012, I won the BICC&I Jet Airways Scriptum Award for my thesis, "Microfinance, an empirical insight into the main challenges for SHG's in rural South India". 1 year and 3 months later, my boyfriend and I finally came to meet You.

Saturday the 15th of February 2014 our flight landed in Delhi. We arrived in the middle of the night. We had planned a 21-day round trip in the North by train, though, it turned out otherwise. The taxi driver who picked us up in the airport didn't find our hotel. He brought us to a tourist office that was supposed to help us for the night. Instead, they told us that our whole round trip would turn out miserably: our trains were wrongly booked and our hotel rooms were probably not confirmed. We fell for this deception which changed our travel plans completely. In the tourist office, we paid (quite a lot) for a driver who would also be our guide during the first 10 days of our journey. Then, it would be up to us again to continue our trip for the next 11 days.

After our stop, Ganesh - our driver, immediately took off with us. It was 4 o'clock, nighttime. We were already quite shattered. Yet, through the fog, we kept our eyes open. At once, You – India, overcame us. People wrapped in blankets gathered around in the dirty streets, making a fire to keep them warm. Mothers strolled with their children in their hands searching garbage cans for food. Cows blocked the road everywhere and thousands of noisy trucks made us almost disappear in the perilous traffic. Here, You left us Your first impression. You already had usurped us. A strange feeling we had never experienced before.

After an exhausting, bumpy, drive of about 7 hours – or about 280 kms – we arrived at our first destination. Mandawa, a small village in the Jhunjhunu district, was once a beautiful flourishing rich city which was a key stopping place on the desert transport route for goods such as textiles and herbs by camels. Since transport found more efficient ways over time, the village now reached rock bottom. It is probably one of the poorest villages we visited. Literacy is rather low and about 20% of its population is younger than 6 years. Nowadays, it's known for its beautiful havelis. These were only a few hundred years old but you could clearly see that time had damaged the delicate and pretty paintings on the traditional mansions fiercely. After our visits, we went to bed early to recover from our first impressions.

After a good night sleep, we felt more at ease with our driver and we continued our trip to Bikaner. Ganesh showed us the magnificent Junagarh fort, Lalgarh palace, the Laxminath temple and the Karni Mata temple. This last visit was a more unpleasant, but unique, experience since this temple is devoted to the goddess, Durga who is protected by thousands of black rats. These sacred animals are worshipped by the Indians who come and pray for their families for forgiveness and prosperity. Pregnant women come to this temple to favor their unborn child's gender. Strange, if you think of Western history where rats are the main reason of epidemic diseases as the plague.

By the time we arrived in Jaisalmer, we felt more confident. We resided 2 nights in the beautiful city which is very much used to tourists. Most of the inhabitants fluently spoke English and rickshaw drivers eagerly try to seduce you for a round trip. In time, Jaisalmer was the city of the great Maharajas. Nowadays, it is called the golden city which is under the governance of the Government of India. It locates a large number of military forces just outside the city to protect it from falling into the hands of Pakistan. We enjoyed its magnificent yellow fort and the peaceful sacred lake. Jaisalmer was one of the most pleasant places we visited.

The night from Wednesday on Thursday we experienced something unique. We drove off to the middle of the desert heading for the sand dunes of Khuri where we made a Camel safari and slept under the starry sky. What a feeling to be in the middle of nowhere, forget all sorrows and turn to the most primitive way of living. With nothing more than a bed, water, 2 Indian guides and a convivial small group of tourists, we enjoyed the night at a camp fire. A strange but peaceful feeling cradled us to sleep until the morning sun waked us at the horizon.

After breakfast, we set course to Jodhpur. The blue city is marvelous and there are some great things to see: Mehrangarh Fort, Jaswant-Thada, the clock tower and Umaid Bhawan Palace which can only be beheld from a distance (except if you are willing to pay a lot for entering). We also got acquainted with the overcrowded streets and markets. It was overwhelming. At every market booth, people took hold of us (or at least they tried). The life in Jodhpur is not to be compared to the life in Belgium but we enjoyed every bit of it for 2 days.

The next stop was in Pushkar, a village which is famous for its numerous temples. After all the fuss in the city, we found some rest in this holy town. At first sight, inhabitants seemed very friendly and welcomed us but quickly it became clear that not everybody had good intention with us. We were swindled when performing a ritual at the sacred lake. I guess that when your family is hungry and you are out of work, people go very far to keep their loved ones fed, even if this means renouncing your belief which is normally so respected in the country.

After one night in Bikaner, we drove to the capital of Rajasthan, Jaipur. We expected this city to be the busiest, however, it turned out to be alright. Or maybe, we already got used to the fuss. In Jaipur, everything is possible, so our driver told us. We enjoyed it to the fullest. We visited Hawa Mahal, Jaigarh Fort, Jantar Mantar, the Laxmi Narayan Tempel and Amber Fort. We also took advantage of this stop to go to the Raj Mandir Cinema. The Bollywood movie was in Hindi but still it was a great animating experience.

When we left Jaipur, I was very excited. Finally the moment had arrived: our visit to Agra and its magnificent Taj Mahal. Off course it is true that the Taj is the most touristic attraction in whole India, though, we enjoyed every second of it. While the inside is rather modest, the outside is a thoughtfully completed marble palace. And let's face it; the love story behind this mausoleum makes it even more beautiful.

In Agra, our driver bid us farewell. We were on our own now taking the train to Jhansi, a village close by Orcha in the Madhya Pradesh state. After our adventure in the tourist office in Delhi, we were actually very happy that Ganesh showed us around during the first part of our roundtrip – even if this costed us a bit. He had some good advice and meanwhile we had the time to adjust to the Indian culture.

Once in Jhansi, we took a local bus to Orcha. We visited the Chaturbhuj Temple, Raja Mahal, Jahangir Mahal and the Ram Raja Temple. We also enjoyed the Betwa River and the nature surrounding it. Orcha's villagers were different compared to the very touristic places we stayed before. People were very friendly and made us feel welcome.

The next day we arrived in Khajuraho, one of the most popular tourist destinations. It is famous for its large group of temples which are covered by erotic sculptures. These temples belonged to the most spectacular ones we have seen, especially since they dated from the 1st century. Beside this, Khajuraho had something more to offer than temples; the Ranoh Falls, which were situated about 20 kms from the center of the village. Since we were out for something different, we choose to go there by rented bikes. You can imagine that two white tourist on bikes driving through the hilly landscape was quite something to see for the Indians. The waterfalls took us far away from the always busy streets. It revealed a whole other side of the magnificent country.

Finally, after a delay of 4,5 hours, our plane landed in Varanasi, the holy Benares. It turned out that we saved the best for last. Varanasi was the most breathtaking place of all India. Here, we couldn't be transported farther from all western values we know: hustle, pollution, harrowing poverty and burning bodies. In Varanasi, we finally saw your true nature which is beautiful. Even though poverty is hard here, people make the best of it and find the most original ways to earn money. Moreover, they are grateful with the small things they have while the hunger for money (and power) for some in the West is never satisfied. At the ghats, we met a saleswoman. She made her own jewelry in the hope that her earnings allowed her to feed her 3 children at the end of the day and maybe, if she was lucky, she could send her kids to school. Sunita was the most integer woman we ever met. She even made us food in her 6m² house where she slept with her kids and husband on the floor. She was known by every tourist, and even more, she and her kids were very much loved given that she did everything to make people happy. "Love is power", she said, a wise lesson that made her the best saleswomen at the ghats.

Ending up in Delhi, we mostly took the time to reflect on our past 3 weeks. It is true: India, you left us with so many mixed feelings which aren't to be brought under words. We are so thankful we could experience this adventure. It leaves us with a different view on certain things. Next to this, we believe that the country is undergoing one of the most crucial periods in time. Although it is seen as a developing global economic power, the BRIC country still has a very long way to go. India is growing exponentially in every way which puts so much pressure on its economy and prices that these increased by at least one fourth! In addition, the actual negative publicity about the rapes in the country causes poignant sorrow for the families in the streets who earn one's living from tourism. It still deals with hundreds of political, religious and economical impediments overshadowing its chances for making it a wealthier country for each of its citizens.

India, we hope to see you again someday.

Take care.

Kind regards,

Ivy Van Hileghem

Michaël De Keersmaecker

P.s.: A special thanks to the BICC&I and Jet Airways for making our journey possible and for giving us some food for thought...