

इबटाएवे टठWड बहवे तियहवेए वेबगुठड

traveloड in inवीव & bकुतव 2015



Patrick & Louise Krohn

इवटारे टावड & थुपारे वरागुणड

travels in india & bhutan - 2015

Patrick and Louise Krohn

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new delhi

Even in business class, getting there felt like an eternity. We left North Vancouver on Friday at 9:30 a.m. and got to our hotel in Delhi on Sunday at 5 a.m. local time, a long 30 hours later. I had a quick shower, went to breakfast as soon as the restaurant opened at 6:30, and then had a blissful sleep for a couple of hours until we were awakened by a smiling and cheerful young man wanting to know whether we needed housekeeping. We asked him to come back after 12 p.m. and went back to sleep.

We decided that the best way to spend time for the rest of the day was to lie by the pool, doing absolutely nothing until we felt we could decently go to the bar for a G&T, dinner, and a good night's rest.

We ventured out for our first “Indian experience” the next morning after a filling breakfast at our hotel, the Crowne Plaza, in Gurgaon, a suburb of Delhi. The hotel was located on a busy thoroughfare, and there did not seem to be much sightseeing to be done on foot from our hotel. Having asked our concierge for suggestions, we set out to find a park that was supposedly nearby. Leaving the hotel, we turned right when we should have turned left—or maybe it was the other way around—which is how we wound up on the scenic route.

The traffic was deafening, with car horns blasting away non-stop for no apparent reason; sidewalks stood about 16” higher than the roads were and were full of traps requiring careful navigation—from broken pavers to dangling electrical wires to iron structures surrounded by barbed wires. There was not much to see along the way other than empty lots. One lot had a sign proclaiming it the “future home of the library”; others were strewn with assorted litter or were home to entire families living in makeshift tents, complete with adults, children, pigs, dogs and other animals.

We did finally find “our” park, nothing spectacular, but a nice oasis in a very chaotic world.

We returned to our hotel and spent the rest of the day reading by the pool, patting ourselves on the back for coming in a couple of days early and wondering, not for the first time, how the rest of our group would fare. Most people were due to arrive sometime during the night after flights as long as ours, and were expected to start the formal tour the next morning at 10:30 a.m. Poor souls!



Fountainhead at the Leisure Valley Park, Gurgaon



Street scenes on the “scenic” route from the Crowne Plaza Hotel to the Leisure Valley Park



Bronze statue of Mahatma Gandhi at the Gandhi Smirti Museum

Tuesday • We met our tour guide, Ashok, at 10:30 a.m. for the pre-tour briefing. We were introduced to our fellow travelers. There were 17 of us, and except for fellow Canadians Kevin and Charmaine from Harts County, Nova Scotia, all others were American. The group included Cliff and Nelda from Duncanville (TX), Joe and Patsy from Lindenhurst (IL), Paul and Karen from Sarasota (FL), Jack and Brenda from Boulder (CO), Jack from Tucson (AZ), Ann and Bob from San Diego (CA) and of course our friends Bill and Judi from Westlake Village (CA).

Ashok informed us that the itinerary had been rearranged so that the extra day in Delhi that was planned for the end of the tour was now at the beginning. The explanations about the change were not very clear, something about having an “easy” day at the start to allow people time to acclimate and also about not running into the other World Spree group that was on the same itinerary. Supposedly this was all for the best—except that it created havoc for a few people’s travel arrangements.

And so it was that we started with a tour of New Delhi, the capital and political centre of India. We drove along a wide tree-lined avenue in the diplomatic Chanakyapuri enclave, which hosts the majority of India’s foreign embassies. In contrast to the rest of Delhi, it was clean and green and featured many parks and open spaces.

We stopped to visit the Gandhi Smriti, “a poignant me-



Representation of Mahatma Gandhi’s final steps

morial to where Mahatma Gandhi was shot dead by a Hindu zealot on 30 January 1948. Concrete footsteps represent Gandhi’s final steps and lead to the spot where he died, marked by a small pavilion known as the Martyr’s Column.”¹ The museum also had an interesting gallery of photos, documents, and newspaper clippings illustrating Gandhi’s life and teachings.

Our final stop for the day was the Humayun’s tomb, a magnificent structure of pink sandstone and white marble built in the sixteenth century by the wife of the second Mughal Emperor Humayun.



Domed ceiling detail - Humayun’s Tomb



Humayun's Tomb - Delhi

ਗਰੇ ਰੇਲਾਂ

Wednesday • The next morning, we made our way to Jama Masjid, India's largest mosque. "This great mosque of Old Delhi is the largest in India, with a courtyard capable of holding 25,000 devotees. It was begun in 1644 and ended up being the final architectural extravagance of Shah Jahan, the Mughal emperor who built the Taj Mahal and the Red Fort. The highly decorative mosque has three great gates, four towers and two 40 m-high minarets constructed of strips of red sandstone and white marble." ² Prior to entering the mosque, we had to take our shoes off and women had to don hospital-like gowns. I wondered why these were required, as we saw quite a few Indian women in their everyday clothes . . . I can only think it was because tourists are not always appropriately dressed, and the gowns ensure the right level of modesty.

We were then treated to the obligatory rickshaw ride for what was supposed to be a brief visit through Chandni Chowk, one of the oldest markets in old Delhi. Patrick and I picked a rickshaw that had definitely seen better days, with a very old wizened man for a driver. We were shoehorned into a way-too-narrow-for-large-size-butts seat—the noise of horns blaring and people shouting was deafening—a sea of tuk-tuks, cars, motorcycles, cows, rickshaws, carts, and pedestrians were jostling for the few inches of available space in the narrow alleyways of the market, and tangled electrical wires were dangling from haphazardly placed poles. To top it all off, our driver got lost, and we were nearly a quarter of an hour late returning to the mosque parking lot. It was not an experience I was eager to repeat.



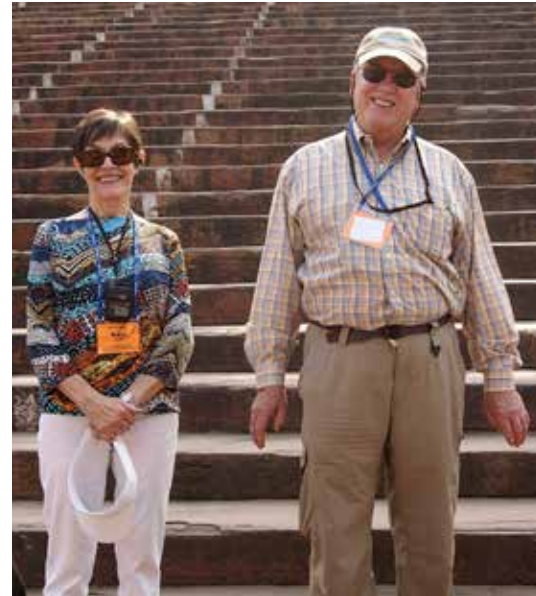
Lovely "Lady in Red"



Exterior and interior scenes - the Jama Masjid mosque



We had lunch at the Broadway hotel, one of the oldest hotels in Delhi. At the time, I jotted in my notebook the fact that we were served “gulab jamun” for dessert, a doughnut-like pastry swimming in sweet syrup. Did I jot that down because it was particularly good, particularly bad, or just particular? I simply have no idea! I have since found recipes for it on the online; I suppose one of these days I will try it and see why it piqued my interest.



Nelda and Cliff

The main afternoon attraction was a visit to the Gurudwara Bangla Sahib Sikh temple. This magnificent structure was “constructed at the site where the eighth Sikh guru spent several months in 1664.”³ Initially, it was a humble bungalow. It was rebuilt in 1783, but the current structure was primarily built post 1947.⁴ Today the temple fills an important need to the poor and the homeless. Staff and volunteers prepare food in a huge kitchen at the back of the temple and offer it free to anyone who wishes to eat, regardless of their background.

Having taken our shoes off and covered our head with the proffered bright orange caps, we walked through the kitchen, peeked into the temple itself where rows upon rows of people were sitting on the floor waiting to be served their meals, and finally emerged to walk around the beautiful outer pool occupying the front of the temple.



Scenes from the Old Delhi market



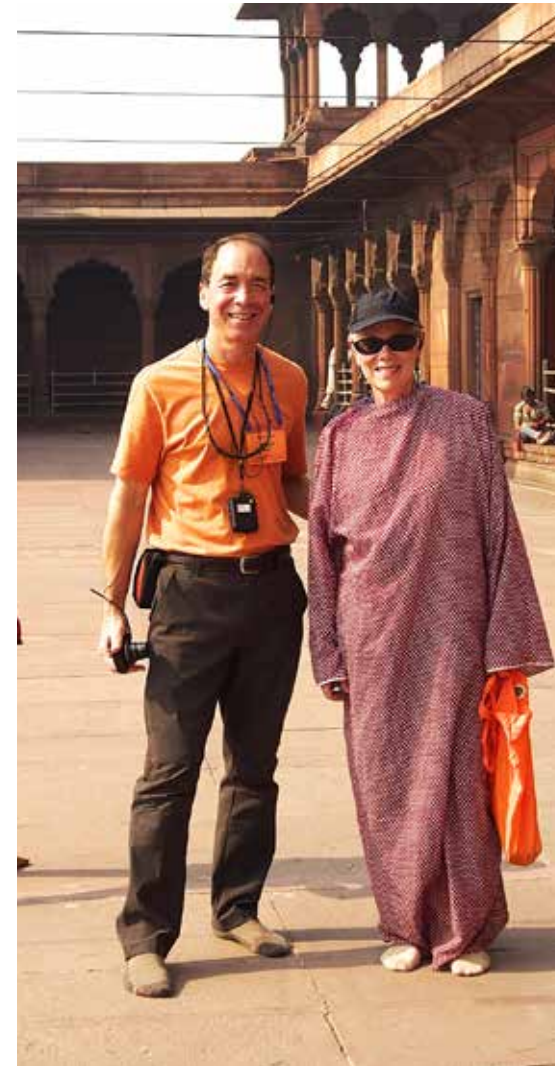
The Gurudwara Bangla Sahib Sikh temple



The Gurudwara Bangla Sahib Sikh temple's kitchen



People awaiting a meal inside the Gurudwara Bangla Sahib Sikh temple



Joe and Patsy



Paul and Karen

We ended our day with a brisk walk through the downtown market area. It was too fast-paced for most of us, with no time to stop for photos or souvenirs. It was our first introduction to Indian hawkers, a particularly tenacious breed of vendors. They were selling all kinds of trinkets, from necklaces and bangles, to pashminas and t-shirts, to small carvings and novelties. The one thing all these items had in common was that they were “cheap, madam, really cheap.” At first, I wanted to be civil and would briefly look at the offerings and then say a polite “no, thank-you.” Big mistake! The slightest encouragement, even just making eye contact, was

enough. They’d follow you and keep trying to engage you in a conversation, and the items for sale would become cheaper and cheaper—although not necessarily more attractive! And thus it would be for the whole of our stay in India.

Everything about Old Delhi screamed poverty, dirt, and chaos. The Indian politician Jairam Ramesh (National Congress Party) was quoted as saying, “I think toilets are more important than temples. No matter how many temples we go to, we are not going to get salvation. We need to give priority to toilets and cleanliness.”⁵ He may be on to something!

pushkar

Thursday • For members of our group, who were attracted to this tour because of the Pushkar Camel fair, it may have come as a surprise to find out that this small town of about 15,000 is one of the holiest cities in India for thousands of devotees. It boasts over 400 temples, ghats (these long flights of wide stone steps that border sacred rivers), and palaces and is the site of India's only temple devoted to Lord Brahma, the Creator.⁶

We left early to catch our “deluxe” train to Pushkar via Ajmer. While we were waiting, a train came in on the tracks opposite where we stood. It had dozens of milk cans hanging from the train windows. As soon as it stopped, men rushed out from the train, untied the milk cans, and ran across two sets of tracks to deposit their loads onto the platform. A few went back for more. The morning milk delivery had arrived!



The morning milk delivery

The 11-km 45-minute drive from Ajmer to Pushkar took us over the Snake Mountain. It was close to 2 p.m. when we finally moved into our “deluxe” tents. “Deluxe,” we found out, was a relative concept. For the train, it meant reserved seating and a light breakfast, not necessarily clean cars and comfortable seats. For the tent, it meant a great deal of space with two single beds, very hard mattresses and thin pillows, and an attached bathroom with a shower of sorts. Interesting? Definitely. Deluxe? No.

After lunch and a short break, we got our first taste of the famous Pushkar Camel Fair. Ashok led us through the crowded fair grounds, occasionally stopping to engage in conversation with a horse or camel seller or a food or souvenir vendor. The walk was too fast paced and chaotic—with motorcyclists zipping by with their horns blaring, riders on horseback galloping at full speed, and camel-driven carts nonchalantly riding along regardless of what or who might be in the way. Wary of lurking pick pockets and hawkers constantly pestering us, it was a case of “pedestrians beware.” Through our “Whispers,” a few of which never seemed to work properly, Ashok kept admonishing us to follow him, apparently oblivious to the fact that, enveloped as he was by a constantly moving crowd, he was invisible most of the time! As such, of course the inevitable happened, and Paul and Karen got left behind. They did catch up later on, but they were, understandably, not happy campers.

Our walkabout on the fairgrounds ended on a small hill just in time to witness a lovely sunset over the fair and the valley beyond.



Ashok and a vendor at the Pushkar Camel Fair

Even though most of us felt somewhat dissatisfied with our first experience at the fair, we realised in retrospect that it was a good preparation for the next day, which Ashok indicated would be “free time.”

We returned to our camp for dinner, and a few of us gravitated to a large dining tent where the food looked most appetizing and people were milling about with wine glasses in hand. It took us a few minutes to realise that this was not the World Spree dining hall; ours was in

a smaller tent farther away. The food looked not nearly as good, and there was not a wine glass to be seen. But when asked, a waiter ran out somewhere (to the first tent perhaps?) and came back, a big smile on his face, with both red and white wine bottles in hand.

Sleep that night was difficult. Loud music was blaring from the fair and from the front of the camp where folk music and dances were being provided for the guests' entertainment. When that finally stopped sometime around midnight, chants from a local temple took over and continued non-stop until about 4 or 5 a.m.



Camels showing off their decorations



Pushkar scene behind the fairgrounds

Friday • As promised the day before, we were taken back to the fair grounds for some four hours of free time. We were able to watch the camel decoration competition, and we witnessed a ball game where locals played against visitors. Kevin proudly represented the World Spree contingent and apparently scored a goal. I never did find out who won the game, but clearly a good time was had by all.

Shortly after we returned to the camp for lunch, we suddenly heard a major commotion. Panicked staff came running past us, shouting to each other about something. We heard an explosion and then, behind us, we saw a big plume of black smoke. One tent, thankfully empty at the time, was on fire. Just a few minutes later, the one next door to it—occupied by two sleeping guests at the time—caught fire as well. Fortunately, they got out in time. Mere minutes later, the staff had managed to extinguish the fire by throwing sand on it, but both tents had been completely destroyed. The fire department was called in to mop up. Thank God it was a windless day; otherwise the whole camp would have surely gone up in flames.

Later in the afternoon, we went for a walk into town. We walked quite a distance to go around Pushkar Lake. The journey took some time, but sitting on the ghats under the setting sun, we were able to admire the magnificent view from across the lake.



Modern communications and ancient mode of transportation



A camel ride

Pity the mood was spoiled by some officials whose job seemed to be to give flowers to tourists, invite them to throw these offerings into this sacred lake, and then demand payment for said privilege. Because Ashok had warned us in advance, most of us avoided the trap.

On our way back, we found that due to the heavy traffic caused by the fair, some of the major roads were closed. Our valiant bus driver who of course was not familiar with all the secondary roads in this area, kept getting into dead-end or closed roads and had a whale of a time turning our big bus around in impossibly small spaces. But he managed until he was finally defeated by that scourge of Indian life: police corruption. A solo policeman had closed the only road that would get us back to our camp and adamantly refused to let us pass. Ashok went to talk to him to explain that he had all these tourists in the bus and to ask what could be done. The officer would not budge. It was obvious that a bribe was needed, but Ashok could not offer one directly: that would be illegal. So he contacted the owner of the camp, a well-known (and well-connected?) business owner. Within five minutes, a lone motorcyclist appeared, “talked” to the policeman, and just like that, we were allowed through.

With all these shenanigans, what should have been a 15-minute drive took an hour and a half. En route, Ashok produced a bottle of rum, a bottle of cola, and some plastic glasses. With the help of our bus assistant Pema, Ashok mitigated our pain by serving each of us a large dose of rum and coke. That went down very well indeed.



Putting on the camel decorations' finishing touch



Deluxe tented camp in Pushkar



Interior of a deluxe tent



Fire!



Staff working to extinguish the fire



What's left of the tents after the fire



Beautiful behinds!



Spirited horse for sale



Indian ladies posing for the tourists



Sunset at the Puhskar lake

Jaipur



Minstrel entertaining passerbys on a Pushkar street

Saturday • After an uneventful bus ride, we arrived at our hotel in the famed “pink city” of Jaipur in time for lunch.

Together with Delhi and Agra, Jaipur forms the famous Golden Triangle, a circuit that takes travelers to some of the most iconic places in India.

“The city of Jaipur was founded in 1727 by Jai Singh II, the Raja of Amer who ruled from 1688 to 1743. He planned to shift his capital from Dausa, 51 km from Jaipur to accommodate the growing population and increasing scarcity of water (. . .) The construction of the city began in 1727 and took four years to complete the major roads, offices and palaces. The city was divided into nine blocks, two of which contained the state buildings and palaces, with the remaining seven allotted to the public. Huge ramparts were built, pierced by seven fortified gates. During the rule of Sawai Ram Singh, the city was painted pink to welcome Prince Edward VII and Queen Victoria. Many of the avenues remained painted in pink, giving Jaipur a distinctive appearance and the epithet Pink City. In the 19th century, the city grew rapidly and by 1900, it had a population of 160,000.”⁷ Today, the population numbers over three million.

Our Jaipur visit started with a walk through a colourful bazaar, where, in spite of aggressive vendors, I actually bought something: a T-shirt (that I threw away a few days later because it had holes in the back!) and a small nylon bag (that I used for the rest of the trip). All combined, I spent about \$10.

At six, we went to the Laxminarayan Temple to participate in a blessing ceremony. No photos were allowed inside, but the view outside was quite lovely. “Built in the 1930s by industrialist and philanthropist, Baldeo Das Birla and his son Jugal Kishore Birla, the temple is also known as Birla Temple . . . It was inaugurated in 1939 by Mahatma Gandhi on condition that it would not be restricted to Hindus and that people of every caste would be allowed inside.”⁸

We ended our day with an al fresco dinner at an old palace converted to a hotel and watched a dance performance and a puppet show by local artists. All in all, a very pleasant evening.



Man and his monkeys at the Jaipur bazaar



Jaipur bazaar



Evening entertainment at Jaipur restaurant



Laxminaryan Temple, Jaipur

Sunday • We had an early 7:30 a.m. start so we could beat the queues for elephant rides to the magnificent 12th century Amber Fort. “More of a palace than a fort, it is built from pale yellow and pink sandstone and white marble, and divided into four main sections, each with its own courtyard.”⁹ It truly was a beautiful place—well worth the hour we spent there.

Next came the first of three “official” shopping stops on our itinerary: Jaipur Handicrafts, a workshop cum store selling textiles, rugs, and marble carvings. A master printer introduced us to the art of block printing, and other workers demonstrated the intricacies of rug making. We were then shown many lovely rugs, varying in quality and size (otherwise known as “the tourist sales pitch”). A few people did buy rugs and carvings.

Our afternoon was a whirlwind of activities, starting with a visit to the City Palace. “A complex of courtyards, gardens and buildings, the impressive City Palace is right in the centre of the Old City. Jai Singh built the outer wall, but within it, the palace has been enlarged and adapted over the centuries. There are palace buildings from different eras, some dating from the early 20th century. Despite the gradual development, the whole is a striking blend of Rajasthani and Mughal architecture.”¹⁰ We spent some time at the museum and got a glimpse of the Chandra Mahal, which remains the residence of the descendants of the royal family.

Adjacent to the City Palace was the Jantar Mantar, an observatory built in the first half of the 18th century. The UNESCO

website describes the site as follows: “It includes a set of some 20 main fixed instruments. They are monumental examples in masonry of known instruments but which in many cases have specific characteristics of their own. Designed for the observation of astronomical positions with the naked eye, they embody several architectural and instrumental innovations. This is the most significant, most comprehensive, and the best preserved of India’s historic observatories. It is an expression of the astronomical skills and cosmological concepts of the court of a scholarly prince at the end of the Mughal period.”¹¹

Finally, we visited an artisans’ shop and spent some time looking at the exquisite works of a particularly talented painter. From there, we made our way back to the bus, via another hair-raising rickshaw ride through rush-hour traffic on a busy main road. I would have preferred walking!

Almost since day one, we had been first hinting and then asking Ashok to give us an opportunity to buy some wine at a local store given the exorbitant prices charged in hotel bars and restaurants. Finally, that night, on the way back to our hotel at the end of what had been a long an exhausting day, we got our wish. I can’t remember what wine we bought, but I do remember how great it tasted with room service pizza back at the hotel. We were dog-tired and went to bed at 8:30 p.m., only to discover the next morning that we had missed what was likely the only opportunity we would have on this trip to witness a lavish wedding that had taken place at the hotel the night before.



Amber Fort, Jaipur



Tourist posing in the Amber Fort's garden, Jaipur



Bill and Judi enjoying an elephant ride, Amber Fort, Jaipur



Marble elephant at the entrance of Jaipur Handicrafts shop



Artist showing his intricate painting



Detail from Jaipur's City Palace walls



Rug finishing techniques demonstration



Top and middle: Block printing techniques demonstration

Bottom: Inlaid marble detail



Monday • We set off at 8:30 for what would be a long bus ride. We were on our way to Ranthambhore National Park, incredibly excited about the possibility of seeing Bengali tigers.

On our way, we dropped in unannounced at a small village school. Even though we were warmly received, I found it very awkward, all 18 of us peering into classrooms trying unsuccessfully to engage giggling students or shy teachers in conversation.

Summarizing their views of the Indian education system, Bojang and Barber wrote, “While all children should by law go to primary and middle school, in many states the record of attendance is poor. India has nearly 600,000 primary schools, but many of these are small village schools, often with dilapidated buildings and no facilities. A shortage of teachers hurt rural areas, and it is common for teachers not to show up for classes – on average, teachers in India are absent 25% of the time. The quality of the teaching is sometimes poor, and the curriculum being taught fails to capture the interest of the pupils.”¹²

The little we saw at that school and what Ashok told us later on the bus did seem to support that view: The principal said he was short one teacher, the buildings looked in need of a fresh coat of paint—if not repairs—there was no teacher present in at least one of the classrooms, and in our subsequent visit to the village nearby, we saw many children milling about who no doubt should have been in school.

We took a short walk around the few dwellings that composed the village. Smiling adults and giggling children came out to greet us. The teenagers who spoke some English were eager to engage us in conversation. People were most welcoming: They showed us their houses, pointed to the various animals they owned, posed for us, took selfies with us, and finally walked us back to our bus when it was time to go.



Scenes from a school, on the way to Ranthambhore



Proud lady posing for the tourists!



Family welcoming us to their village

Ranthambhore

It was close to 3 p.m. when we arrived at Ranthambhore. The sumptuous Nahargarh Hotel where we stayed was built in 2001 in the style of a 16th century hunting palace. The grounds were huge; just getting from the bus to the reception area felt like one-quarter of a mile! We were given a room at the very back: down a few steps from reception, across a courtyard, up five or six steps, across a corridor, down seven or 8 steps, across another courtyard, and just a few steps more . . . and there was our room! And what a grand room it was: very spacious, marble floors, shuttered windows, and comfortable furniture. Only one “minor” inconvenience: perhaps as a conservation measure, or for some other unknown reason, hot water was only available at certain times of the day . . . not, as it turned out, when Patrick got into the shower. Still, it was a lovely oasis in our busy tour.

We had a quick lunch and then some much-needed free time. I was finally able to catch up with my journal.

Tuesday • We set off in a most uncomfortable jeep early in the morning for our first safari to Ranthambhore National Park.

Bad news first: we never did get to see any tigers—not then and not later during the afternoon safari. It was not for lack of trying. Our very knowledgeable guide did listen for (but never heard) distress calls from other animals and did find (and followed) fresh pugmarks that should have led us to the tigers. But to our collective disappointment, they were nowhere to be seen.

Still, it was a most enjoyable day in the forest, away from pesky vendors, city noise, and traffic mayhem. And we did see quite a variety of birds and animals: sambar and spotted deer, kingfishers and treepie birds, grey antelope, crocodiles, and langur monkeys to name a few.

On the way back, some of us discussed whether future World Spree tours should be modified to include an extra day in Ranthambore to increase our chances of seeing a tiger, but we could not reach a consensus on this.



Sambher deer, Ranthambhore



The Nahargarh Hotel, Ranthambhore



The tigers we did not see in Ranthambhore (photo by Peter Krohn, c 1970s)



In the Ranthambhore Forest



Brightly coloured parrots



Mother and baby Langur monkeys



The closest thing to a tiger that we saw



Spotted owlets in mango tree



Treepie bird



Grey antelope



Watchful eagle



Sunrise in Ranthambhore



Lurking crocodile in Ranthambhore



Our Ranthambhore guide

फ़तेहपुर सिकरी

Wednesday • A very long drive: we left Ranthambhore at 8 a.m. and did not arrive at our hotel in Agra until 6 p.m.

Except for a lovely lunch at the impressive Umaid Lake Palace, which offered homegrown organic food, we only made one other stop, to visit the ghost city of Fatehpur Sikri.

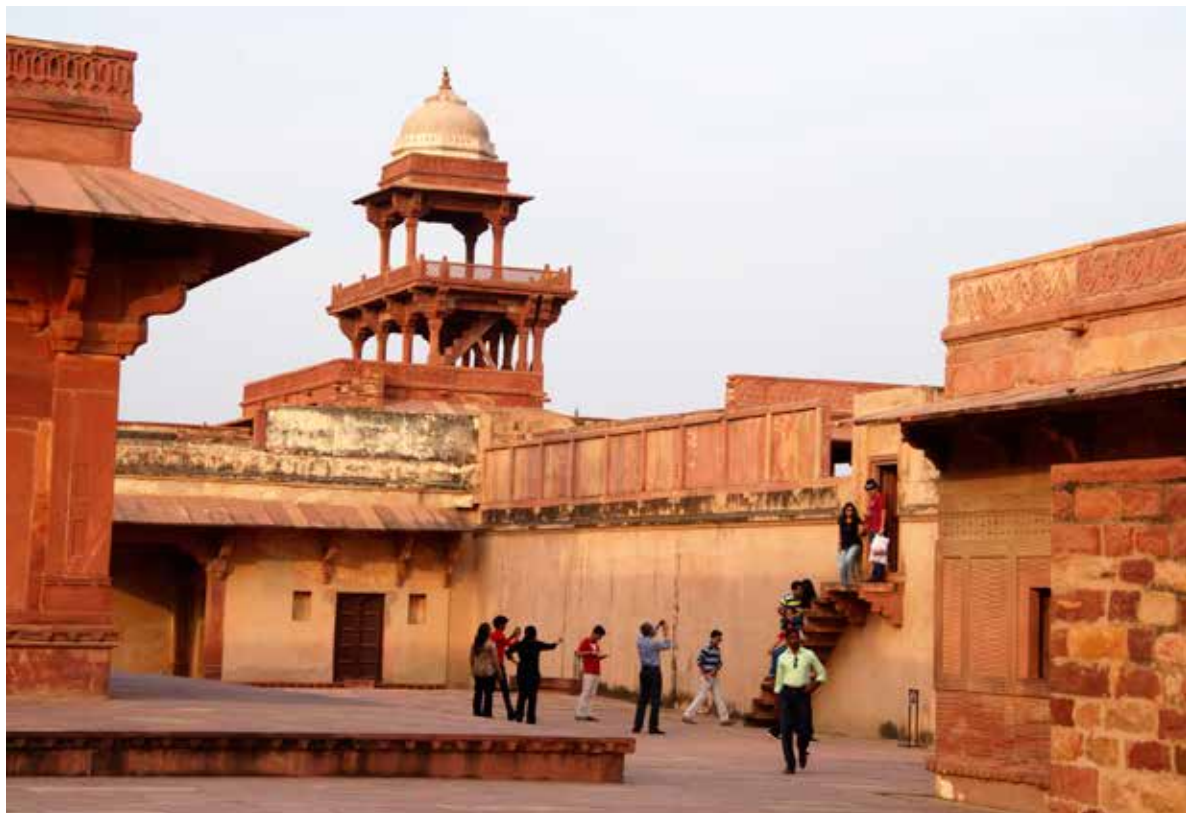
“By the time Akbar became emperor in 1556, the Mughal Empire had settled down. By the late 1550s, Akbar had survived rebellions and attempted coups and had begun to win control over increasing areas in North India. (. . .) In 1571, he decided to build himself a capital city. For it chose Sikri, a village on the road between Mughal’s imperial centre at Agra and their spiritual centre at Ajmer.”¹³

According to the chronicles, Akbar chose this site largely because of the presence there of a Suffi saint who had predicted that the heirless Akbar would soon be blessed with not one but three sons. And sure enough, it was there that his son and heir Salim was born in 1569. It was also where he returned victorious

from his conquest of Gujarat in 1572. To celebrate his victory, he renamed Sikri as Fatehpur, meaning “city of victory.” However, in 1585, only 14 years after it was built, Akbar and his court left Fatehpur Sikri never to return. Why he left was never definitively established.¹⁴



Fatehpur Sikri



Fatehpur Sikri courtyard



Ladies sharing a ride

agra

Thursday • No visit to India would be complete without a stop at the famous Taj Mahal. Ashok convinced us that there would be no point in getting there at sunrise, as had been advertised in our program, because at this time of the year, the whole site would be enveloped by the mist, and we would not be able to get any good photos. We therefore left at 8:30 a.m., early enough to beat at least some of the crowds.

Built between 1632 and 1653 by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his wife, and located on the right bank of the Yamuna River, the Taj Mahal is even more impressive in situ than it is in the best of photographs. It simply takes your breath away.

UNESCO considers it “to be the greatest architectural achievement in the whole range of Indo-Islamic architecture. Its recognised architectonic beauty has a rhythmic combination of solids and voids, concave and convex and light shadow; such as arches and domes further increase the aesthetic aspect. The colour combination of lush green scape reddish pathway and blue sky over it showcases the monument in ever-changing tints and moods. The relief work in marble and inlay with precious and semi-precious stones make it a monument apart.”¹⁵



Taj Mahal entry gate



Front view of the Taj Mahal, Agra



View of the Taj Mahal from the Red Fort



The Red Fort, Agra



Group photo at the Taj Mahal



Fittingly, our next stop (the second of our official shopping stops) took us to the Marble Art Palace where master craftsmen produced beautiful marble carvings using the same inlay techniques as used in the construction of the Taj Mahal. A very friendly turbaned Sikh explained the process and followed up with a relatively soft sales pitch in the showroom. A number of “sales associates” were on hand, ready to pounce (gently!) on anyone who so much as glanced at a piece. There were indeed some lovely works of art to be had, but we managed to resist.

Lunch, a couple of hours’ rest, and then up we went to the Red Fort.

“With the Taj Mahal overshadowing it, one can easily forget that Agra has one of the finest Mughal forts in India. Construction of the massive red-sandstone fort, on the bank of the Yamuna River, was begun by Emperor Akbar in 1565. Further additions were made, particularly by his grandson Shah Jahan, using his favourite building material – white marble. The fort was built primarily as a military structure, but Shah Jahan transformed it into a palace, and later it became his gilded prison for eight years after his son Aurangzeb seized power in 1658.”¹⁶

On our way back, Ashok took us to a “real” market, one where tourists do not typically go. He said that we would not see any beggars or aggressive touts. And we did not. Even though it was quite crowded, at first we were able to wander leisurely among the vending stalls. But soon we found ourselves caught in an intersection that was so jam packed with people, motorcycles, carts, and cars that it became almost impossible to walk. It was rather frightening, and I found myself clutching Karen’s hands to avoid getting lost in the crowd. Forget about stopping to shop . . . we lasted all of half an hour!

Later that night, we all congregated to the bar for “happy hour.” There was a very lively, and for us Canadians, very interesting, discussion about US politics. When it threatened to become a little too lively, Patsy tried her best to change the course of the conversation, but to no avail. The wine was not bad, the price was right, the conversation was entertaining, and we felt among friends. It was a great way to end a long day.



Monkeys seen at the Red Fort



Scenes from a “real” Indian market in Agra



Old man brushing his teeth

Orchha

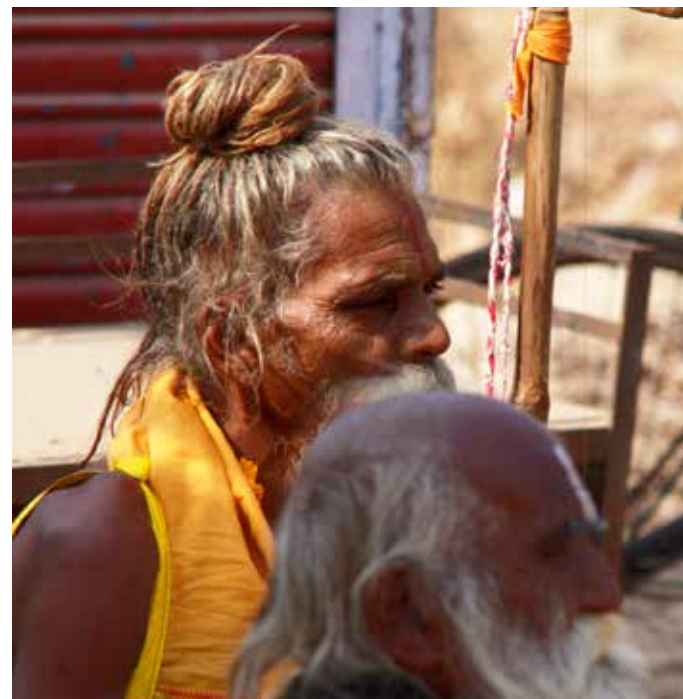
Friday • As indicated in our itinerary, the combined rail and road trip from Agra to Khajuraho was indeed quite long and took most of the day. We only stopped once for lunch and to visit the 16th century Orchha Fort complex on the Betwa river.

Once through the gateway, we came to a large open space surrounded by the King's Palace. "Its exterior is simple without any embellishments but the interior chambers of the palace are elaborately royal in its architectural design, decorated with murals of social and religious themes of gods, mythical animals and people. In the upper floor of the palace, there are traces of mirrors in the ceilings and walls. Its windows, arcaded passages and layout plan are designed in such a way that the sunlight and shadow create areas of different moods and temperatures throughout the day."¹⁷

The rest of the day was spent on the road.



Orchha Fort Complex



This page and left: people we noticed along the way

khajuraho

Saturday • The morning was dedicated to a guided tour of the famous temples in the small town of Khajuraho.

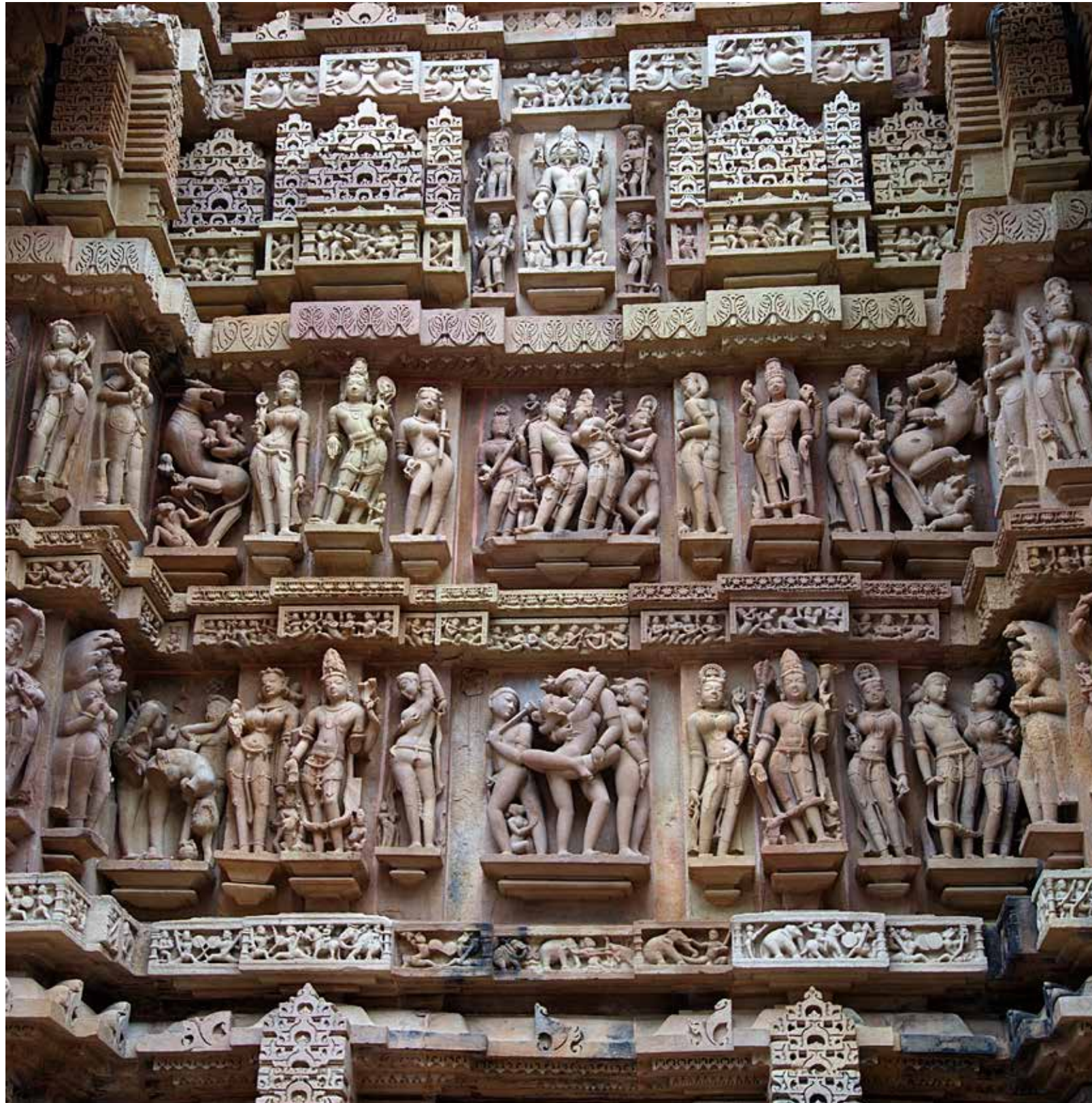
It is believed that the Chandella dynasty had built about 85 temples by the middle of the 12th century, some dedicated to Hinduism and some to Jainism. Only about 20 remain today, but they are incredibly well preserved. The outside walls are covered with intricate sculptures that the UNESCO website describes as “among the greatest masterpieces of Indian art.” There are sculptures of main deities such as Shiva and Vishnu along with some of minor gods and goddesses. There are scenes depicting groups of dancers and musicians, hunting scenes, teachers at work, and other secular scenes, and there are, of course, the intricate erotic statues that have made the Khajuraho temples so popular with tourists. Given all the attention the sexual-themed sculptures attract, it is hard to believe that they make up only about 10 percent of the several thousands of statues and artwork that decorate the temples.



Girl washing clothes at the Khajuraho ghat



Kandariya Mahadeva Temple, tallest of the Khujuraho temples



Erotic art on the outside walls of Khujuraho temple



Details from the outside walls of Khujuraho temple



Ladies exiting a Khajuraho temple

Varanasi

Sunday • We had arrived in Varanasi the previous afternoon on a short flight from Khajuraho and spent the evening catching up with some reading.

The next morning, we were up at the crack of dawn for a boat ride on the Ganges. Our bus dropped us off about 10 minutes away from our starting point, somewhere between the Raja and Bhonsale ghats. We boarded a wooden boat under the watchful eye of its young oarsman and were soon gently floating on the river. We kept fairly close to the shore so that we could watch as pilgrims performed various rituals on or around the ghats. During our mile-long ride, we were able to see different kinds of ghats, some dedicated to ritual bathing, some to clothes washing, and others to meditating or to cremating the dead.

After a late breakfast and a short rest back at our hotel, we took off again for a round of temple visits: the Durga Temple, known more widely as the Monkey Temple; the Tulsi Manas Temple, crafted from white marble and containing the entire Ramayana inscribed on its walls; and the Bharat Mata, or Mother India Temple, which had a relief map of India engraved in marble. But by that time, we were truly “temped out,” and merely taking our shoes off to go inside seemed like hard work. We did our best to pay attention, but our hearts were not in it.

On schedule that evening was another boat ride on the Ganges to witness the Aarti ritual at the Dashashwamedh ghat. Hundreds of people were there to take part or just to watch this daily religious event. It was performed by young monks dressed in saffron robes

and involved chants and music and the floating of a huge number of lamps on the water. I missed that event, but judging by the photos, it was quite a lovely spectacle.

We had a late supper in the hotel restaurant and bade goodbye to Paul and Karen who were leaving for Udaipur the next morning. From the e-mail they sent us a few days later, it sounded as though they saw a very different kind of India, one that I wished I had seen, too. They wrote, “We are going to suggest that they (World Spree) add Udaipur to the India itinerary,



Oarsman on the River Ganges

as folks, that city was absolutely wonderful!!! It was perfectly clean, beautiful and the air was clear!!! It has five lakes in the area, and the Maharaja takes such pride in the city, as do the folks who live there. After getting to the hotel, we were wondering if we were in the same country anymore! We had a day tour, which included the city palace, (2nd largest in India), a beautiful temple, a state garden that is simply lovely, and a walk around a bazaar and produce area, that was so clean and free of flies and pushy vendors, that it was a pleasure to walk around.”



Early morning street scene, on the way to the Ganges



Scenes from the banks of the Ganges



Holy cow looking for food along the Ganges



Funeral pyre on the banks of the Ganges



Aarti ritual on the banks of the Ganges

Sarnath



Dhamek stupa at Sarnath



Sarnath pilgrims

Monday • For our last full day in India, we went to visit Sarnath, a monastic relic only five miles from Varanasi, where Buddha chose to deliver his first sermon after attaining nirvana 2,500 years ago. “Sarnath has been developed as a place of pilgrimage, both for Buddhists from India and abroad. A number of countries in which Buddhism is a major (or the dominant) religion, among them Thailand, Japan, Tibet, Sri Lanka and Myanmar, have established temples and monasteries in Sarnath in the style that is typical for the respective country.”¹⁸

Although many of the ancient buildings and structures in Sarnath were destroyed over time, there were still many notable stupas and ruins to admire, including the 128-foot-high Dhamek stupa and the Ashoka pillar. There was also a monastery built circa 1930 with lovely wall paintings. We concluded our tour with a brief stop at the archaeological museum.

Because of the traffic jam we experienced earlier in the day, the bus driver decided to take us to the airport for our flight to Delhi via some back country roads. Even though there was no traffic jam per se, it still took over an hour to do the 15 or so miles between Sarnath and the Varanasi airport on the narrow, bumpy roads (sometimes paved, sometimes not) that link the two. We passed through numerous small, drab, and dusty villages that seemed home to happy, smiling people who waved at us as we drove by.



Monk meditating at Sarnath

When we finally arrived at the airport, we discovered that our flight had been delayed by a couple of hours, and so it was past 9:30 p.m. when we got to Delhi. There, before making our way to our hotel, we said good-bye to Kevin and Charmaine, who were catching their flights home that evening, and to Cliff and Nelda, who were spending a couple of extra days in Delhi.

We spent our last night in India at the Ibis Hotel near the Delhi airport. What I will remember about this hotel is that the restaurant was open late, you could buy wine at the bar, and the steam from the shower triggered the fire alarm in our room! Thank God we were only there for the one night.

bhutan

Tuesday • The 11 of us who had signed up for the Bhutan extension tour caught a late morning flight to Paro, Bhutan's only airport.

As we left India, the air cleared, and we had a beautiful view of the Himalayas in the bright sunshine. After landing, we all stood on the tarmac for a few minutes, delighting in the fresh clean mountain air that greeted us.

Our guide, Tshering, was waiting for us after immigration. We were all loaded into a small van that we had to share with our suitcases and took off for the hour-and-a-half drive towards Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan. We arrived at our hotel late in the afternoon and met Tshering for a pre-dinner briefing—at the end of which we agreed to all the changes he suggested to our itinerary. Some changes were needed because of poor planning (e.g., we were supposed to visit a school that was closed on that day); others were needed

because of the lack of local knowledge by the tour's organisers (e.g., the need to drive eight hours on a bumpy, narrow, winding road to go to see cranes for 30 minutes).

Over the short six days that we spent in Bhutan, we came to appreciate the country's charming architecture, amazing landscape, Buddhist heritage, and conservationist approach to development.

Tshering

“Bhutan holds many surprises. This is a country where buying cigarettes is illegal, where the rice is red and the chillies aren't just a seasoning but the main ingredient. It's also a deeply Buddhist land, where school kids wear the gho and kira (traditional male and female clothing, respectively), where giant protective penises are painted besides the entrance to many houses, and Gross National Happiness is deemed more important than Gross National Product. And while it visibly maintains its Buddhist traditions, Bhutan is not a museum nor is it a nation of other-worldly ascetics shunning the rest of the world. You will find the Bhutanese well-educated, fun-loving and vibrant.”¹⁹ And we absolutely did.



Flying over the Himalayas

thimphu

Wednesday • Over breakfast that first morning, we talked about the howling and barking dogs we had heard all night and wondered what that was about. When asked about it, Tshering said that the city had a major problem with stray dogs, about 7,000 of them roam free in a city of just over 100,000 people. He explained that, as a Buddhist country, euthanasia is not an option, but in 2009, the government had begun an aggressive sterilization program to bring down the dog population. It is working, but there's still a long way to go.

After breakfast, we embarked on an extremely busy sightseeing tour of Thimphu.

We started the day with a short drive to the Buddha viewpoint, with a brief stop on the way to take in the lovely panoramic view of the city. "This massive statue of a sitting Buddha measures in at a height of 51.5 meters, making it one

of the largest statues of Buddha in the world. The statue is made of bronze and is gilded in gold. 125,000 smaller Buddha statues have been placed within the Buddha Dordenma statue, 100,000 8-inch-tall and 25,000 12-inch-tall statues, respectively. Each of these thousands of Buddhas have also been cast in bronze and gilded. The throne that the Buddha Dordenma sits upon is a large meditation hall." ²⁰

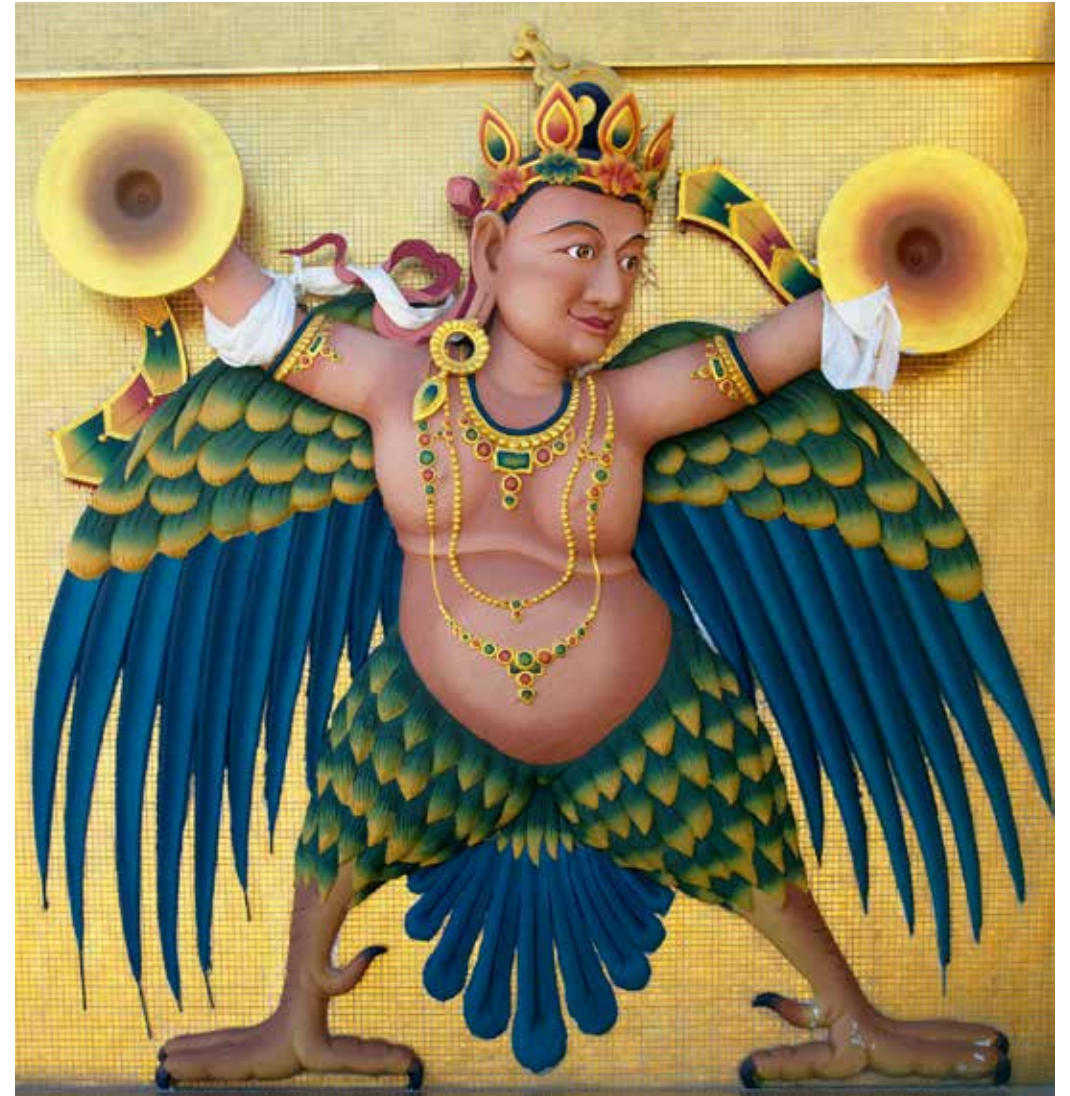
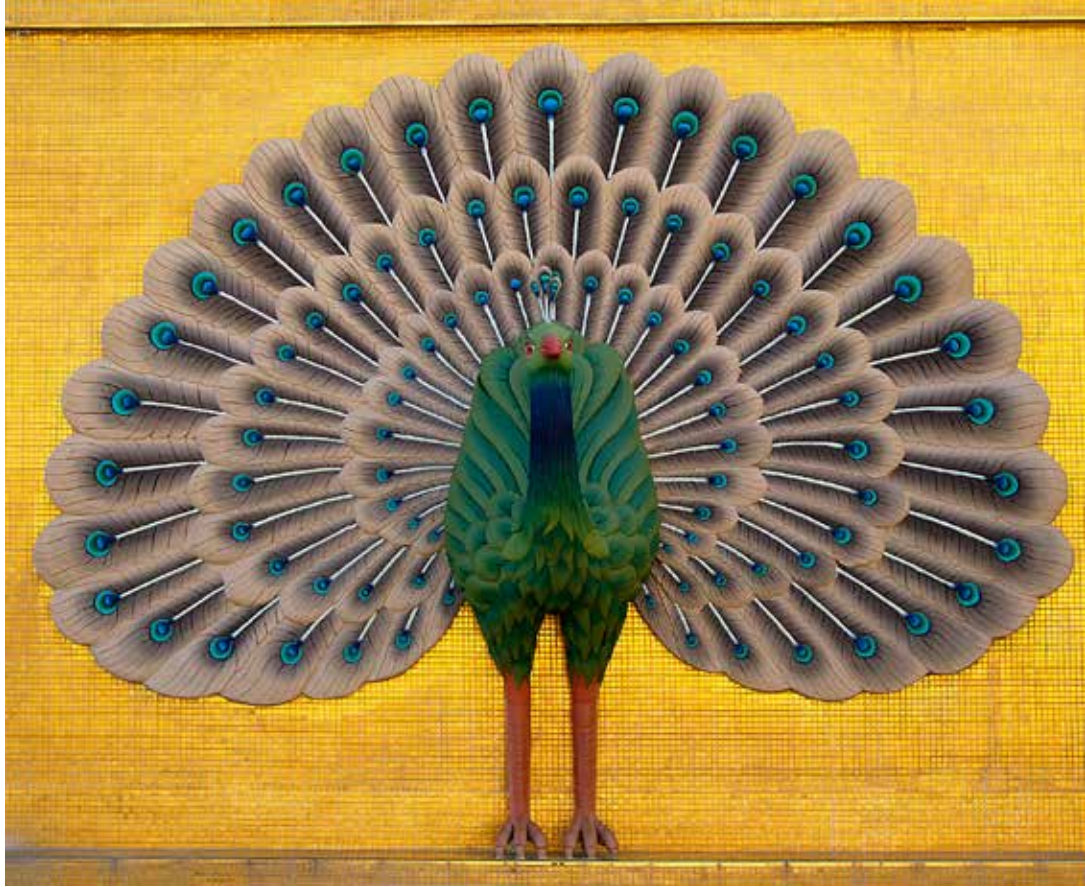
Patrick's self-portrait



Buddha statue overlooking the Thimphu valley



View of Thimphu from the road leading to the Buddha statue



Left and above: Art work on the exterior walls of the Meditation Hall



Devotees at the Thimphu Memorial Chorten



Ticket seller at the Motithang Takin Preserve



Jack without his camera

Next stop: the Motithang Takin Preserve, a wildlife reserve area for the takin. Local mythology credits the creation of the takin to “the Divine Madman,” a 15th century Tibetan saint who, when asked to perform a miracle, requested a whole cow and a whole goat for lunch. When he finished eating, he took the head of the goat and fixed it to the skeleton of the cow, pronounced some magic words, and voilà, a new animal was born. Because of this association with the legend of the Divine Madman, the takin has been adopted as the national animal of Bhutan.

In quick succession, with only about 30–45 minutes at each stop, we visited two shops selling traditional crafts, the Textile Museum, the Library and Archives

of Bhutan and, after lunch at a local restaurant, a factory where they produced hand-crafted paper. We then spent over an hour at the Simply Bhutan Museum, watching and participating in live demonstrations depicting the country’s cultural heritage and trying on Bhutanese traditional costumes. Lots of good photo ops!

After a brief walk downtown, our last stop for the day (which was just one too many for me—so I stayed in the bus) was at the Tashichho Dzong to witness the flag ceremony. That dzong is the country’s centre of government and religion, where both the king and Chief Abbott have their offices.



Takins



Workers making paper



Bill, Jack A., Jack Z., Patrick, Joe and Bob wearing traditional Bhutanese ghos



Patsy, Ann and Brenda wearing traditional Bhutanese kiras



Patrick and Louise in Bhutanese costumes



Louise and Judi contemplating lunch at the Paro's farm



Handicapped man using a phone and sculpting with his feet



Wooden penises at the Simply Bhutan Museum



Flag ceremony at the Trashichhoe Dzong

punakha



Some of the 108 stupas at the Dochula Pass

Thursday • We set off for Punakha via Bhutan's main east-west road. The road was under construction (as were all the roads we used during our tour) and, every so often, we would encounter huge piles of rocks strewn across the road, leaving just enough space for one vehicle to pass. Sometimes, there were people at work there and sometimes not. Tshering told us that the government has embarked on a major road construction program to open up the country to make it easier for locals and tourists to get around. At this time, the road network is quite primitive, and there are large areas of the country that remain extremely isolated. Looking at a map of Bhutan, we could see that, although we spent a lot of time on the road, the three cities we visited during our tour were not all that far apart.

We arrived in Punakha in time for lunch and a cooking "lesson." It was not much of a lesson (we were shown how to fold dumplings), but the food was good enough.

After checking in at the Meri Puensum Resort and a brief rest period, we visited the magnificent 17th century Puna-



A cooking lesson

kha Dzong, aka the "Palace of Great Happiness." The main entrance was reached via two rather daunting sets of stairs, one made of wide stones steps and the other a very steep wooden staircase designed to be pulled up in case of attack. Inside, the elaborately carved wooden columns, the colourful prayer flags and tapestries hanging from the ceiling, and

the dozens of red and gold benches on the floor made for what is arguably the most beautiful dzong in the country.

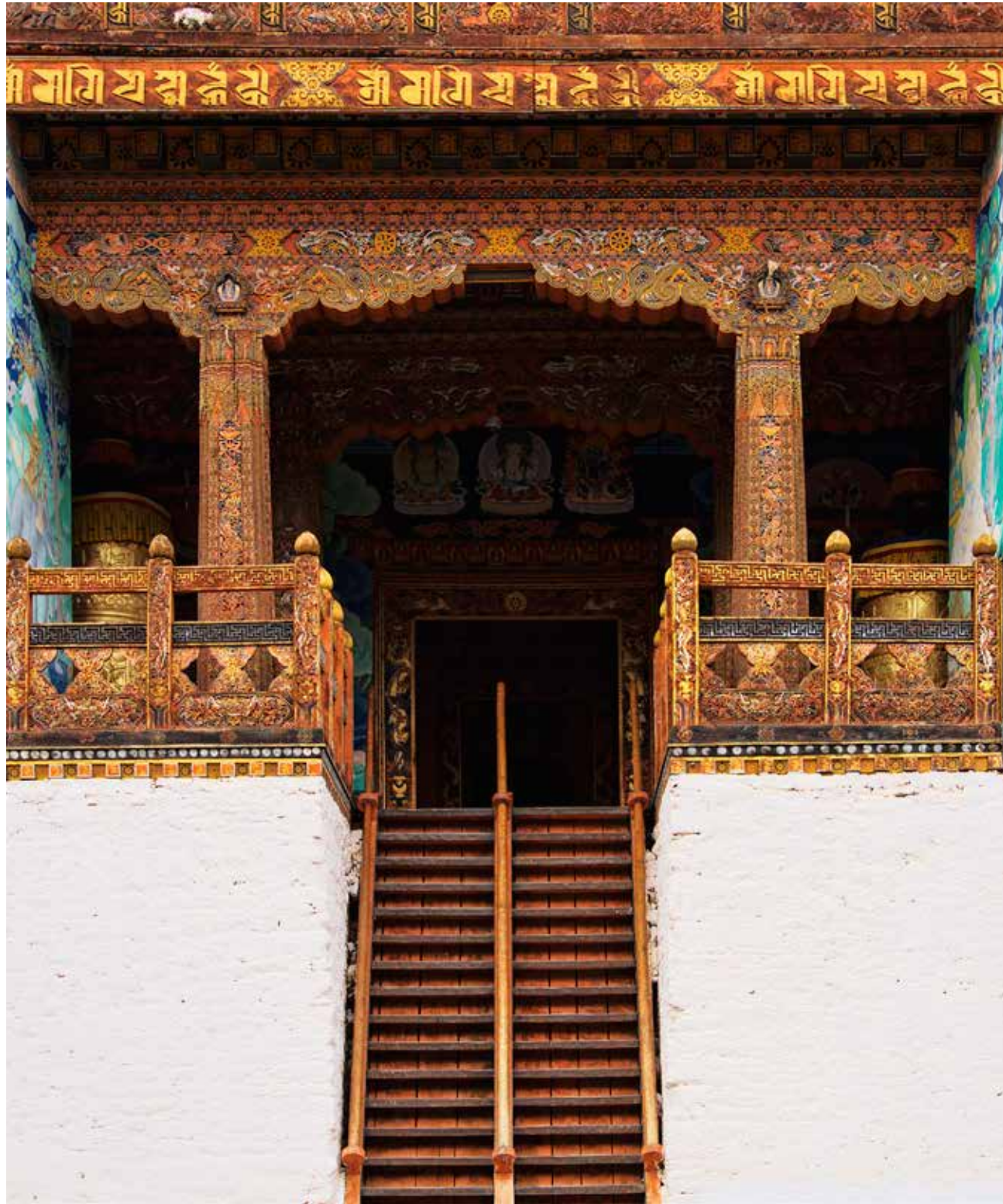
We had dinner at the hotel and a leisurely evening catching up with our reading.



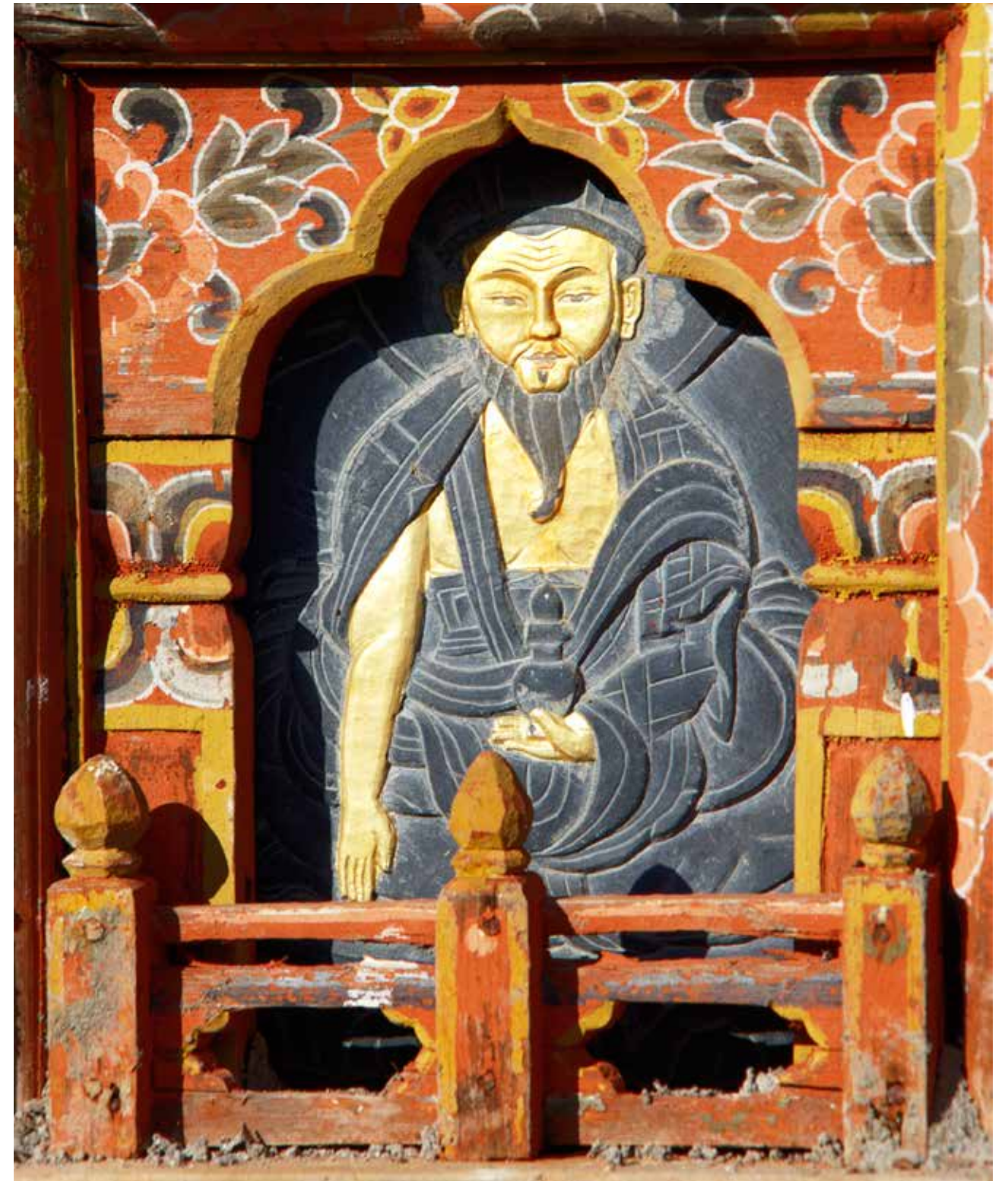
Monk sounding a gong



The Palace of Great Happiness



Main entrance to the Palace of Great Happiness



Detail from one of the Dochula Pass' stupas

Friday • After breakfast, our bus dropped us off at a trailhead from which we hiked through rice paddies to get to the Chimi Lhakhang Temple, known as the Temple of the Divine Madman. On our way, we explored the narrow streets of the small village of Pana and noted with amusement the many houses that were painted with giant penises. These phallic symbols date from the days of the Divine Madman; today, they are used as a sign of good luck and an instrument to ward off evil spirits.

The Chimi Lhakhang was quite a small temple. Tshering informed us that we would be able to receive a fertility blessing by the head monk. Given that all the women in our group were all long past fertility age, we were a bit skeptical. Still, miracles have been known to happen, and one can never have too many blessings, so we all gamely lined up to receive the blessing. The ritual consisted of our walking in turn to the head monk who sat in the centre of the temple among two dozen or so chanting young monks while we covered our head and mouth with our hand, bowing and accepting from the monk the coloured string and seed that he gave us. Tshering then told us we could eat the seed—he described it as “a mineral”—and showed us how to tie the string around our neck. We were to keep it there for three days. Patrick and I dutifully kept it on for the required duration but, thus far, no sign of pregnancy.

A couple of small girls attached themselves to us as we left the village for the temple. I spent some time talking to them, as they appeared eager to engage in conversation, but at one point, one girl tended her open hand towards me. It seemed as if growing tourism was already leaving its mark on the children: they were learning about begging for money from tourists. Sad . . .

The Sangchhen Dorji Lhuendrup Lhakhang nunnery that we visited after lunch was fairly new. A wealthy developer, who was also the king’s uncle, and who lived on adjacent grounds, had built it. The nuns we saw all seemed quite young, late teens or early twenties, and very boyish with their shaved heads and saffron robes. We walked around the grounds and admired the large square stupa with, on its dome, the Buddha’s eyes looking into the four directions. Tshering told us that the complex houses a learning and meditation centre for the nuns. A young nun whose English was excellent graciously guided us throughout the temple. She explained the significance of each statue, the main one being a 14-foot bronze of Avalokiteshvara, a four-handed Buddha depicting the compassion of all Buddhas.

Later on, we returned for another walkabout on Punakha’s main street, explored the local market and ended the day with dinner at a local restaurant.

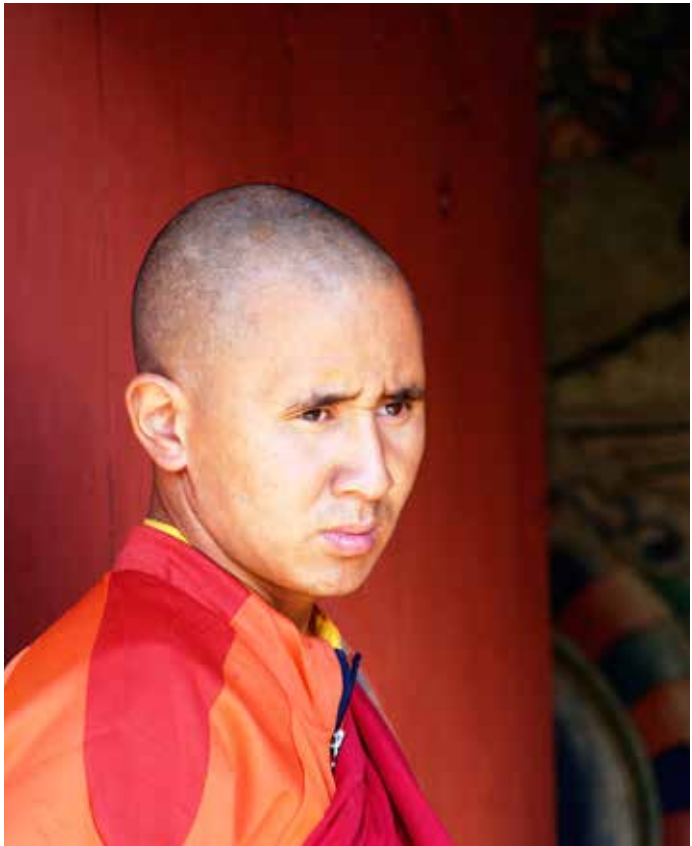


Illustration of the Buddhist’s legend of the Four Harmonious Friends





Beautiful people of Bhutan



More beautiful people of Bhutan



paro

Saturday • We left Punakha at 7 a.m. for the long drive back to Paro. En route, we visited the Simtokha Dzong, the oldest fortress in the country, which was built in 1627 and is now home to the School for Buddhist Studies. This is where Patsy had her first “happy birthday” event for the day. The minister for Home Affairs happened to be visiting the temple at the time and, being told of Patsy’s birthday, shook her hand and offered his best wishes.

The weather was perfect—when we reached the top of the 3,000-metre Dochula Pass, we had a fabulous view of the Himalayas.

Back in Paro, we had lunch at a local farm. According to the owner’s daughter who served as our guide for the visit, the farm had been in the family for more than 300 years. Those who were limber enough sat

on the floor for the meal, and the rest (including me) sat on a bench thoughtfully provided for tourists just like us. When asked whether they had many visitors, the owner said that they had arrangements with about 60 local travel companies. “One company wanted to buy the farm,” said the daughter, “but my mother told them that even if they filled the entire place with money, the farm was not for sale!”

From there, we visited Ta Dzong, originally built as a watchtower, now housing the National Museum of Bhutan. The museum houses over 3,000 works of Bhutanese art, which covers more than 1,500 years of Bhutan’s cultural heritage, including masterpieces of bronze statues and paintings along with some of the finest specimens of Bhutanese art.²¹

There was one more fortress on the agenda for the



View of the Himalayas



Monks at the Simtokha Dzong

day: the Rinpung Dzong, also known as the “Fortress of the Heap of Jewels.” Built in 1644 on a steep hillside, it houses both the monastic body and the district government offices and boasts a lovely cantilevered bridge across the Paro Chhu River.

We had dinner at the hotel, which had a particularly good restaurant. Not the usual buffet there: we were served a delicious five-course meal that ended with a scrumptious cake for us to share and a surprise gift for Patsy in honour of her birthday. Patsy was visibly touched by all this attention, and we were delighted to be able to partake in this special birthday with her.



Local farmer serving us lunch



Rinpung Dzong or the Fortress of the Heap of Jewels

Sunday • Most of our last day in Bhutan was taken by a visit to the Tiger’s Nest. Everyone but me did at least part of the demanding trek up the steep hill leading to this most famous monastery, described in our World Spree guide as “hanging on a precipitous cliff at 3,120 metres, about 900 metres above the Paro Valley.” Bill, Judi, and Bob made it to the first viewpoint, a hike of 2 km (1.3 miles)²² but an elevation gain of 300 metres (973 feet). Everybody else made it to the second viewpoint, 1.5 km (0.9 miles)

further up and an elevation gain of 224 metres (734 feet). The intrepid Jack Zellner was the only one who managed the last stage of the trek, with its 800 steps down and 900 steps up, and thus reached the monastery.

I stayed at the hotel while others went on the hike, and it was after 1:30 in the afternoon when I was picked up to join the group for lunch. I think it’s fair to say that by then, most people would have been happy to just go back to the hotel for a well-deserved rest, but there was still at least one dzong that could not be missed: “the Kyichu Lhakhang, one of Bhutan’s oldest and most beautiful temples. The temple is popularly believed to have been built in 659 by King Songtsen Gampo of Tibet, to pin down the left foot of a giant ogress who was thwarting the establishment of Buddhism into Tibet.”²³ This temple had 13 original statues

dating from the eighth century. They were kept in a separate corner of the temple normally closed to visitors, but the temple’s caretaker happened to be on site and allowed us the rare privilege of entering this inner sanctum so we could see the statues at close range.

After a brief stop at a stadium to observe local people practicing Bhutan’s national sport, archery, we made our way to our hotel to enjoy a glass of whisky, courtesy of the hotel, and a 45-minute folk dance performance by local artists.

Monday • And then it was all over. The only thing remaining was the 38-hour door-to-door trip from Paro to Vancouver via Bangkok and Beijing, where we had long layovers. It did not simply feel like an eternity: it was an eternity.

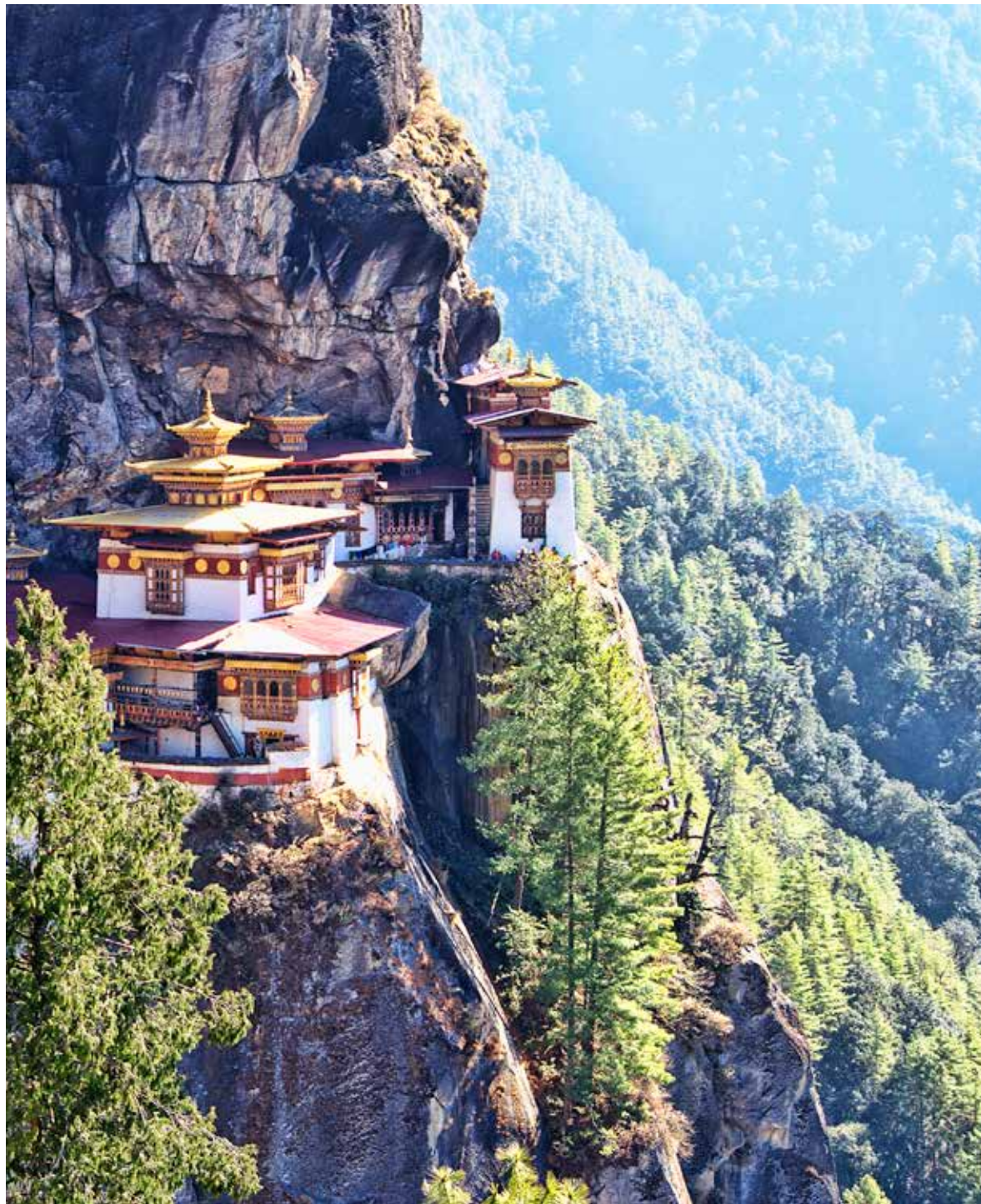
Note to self: next time, plan better!



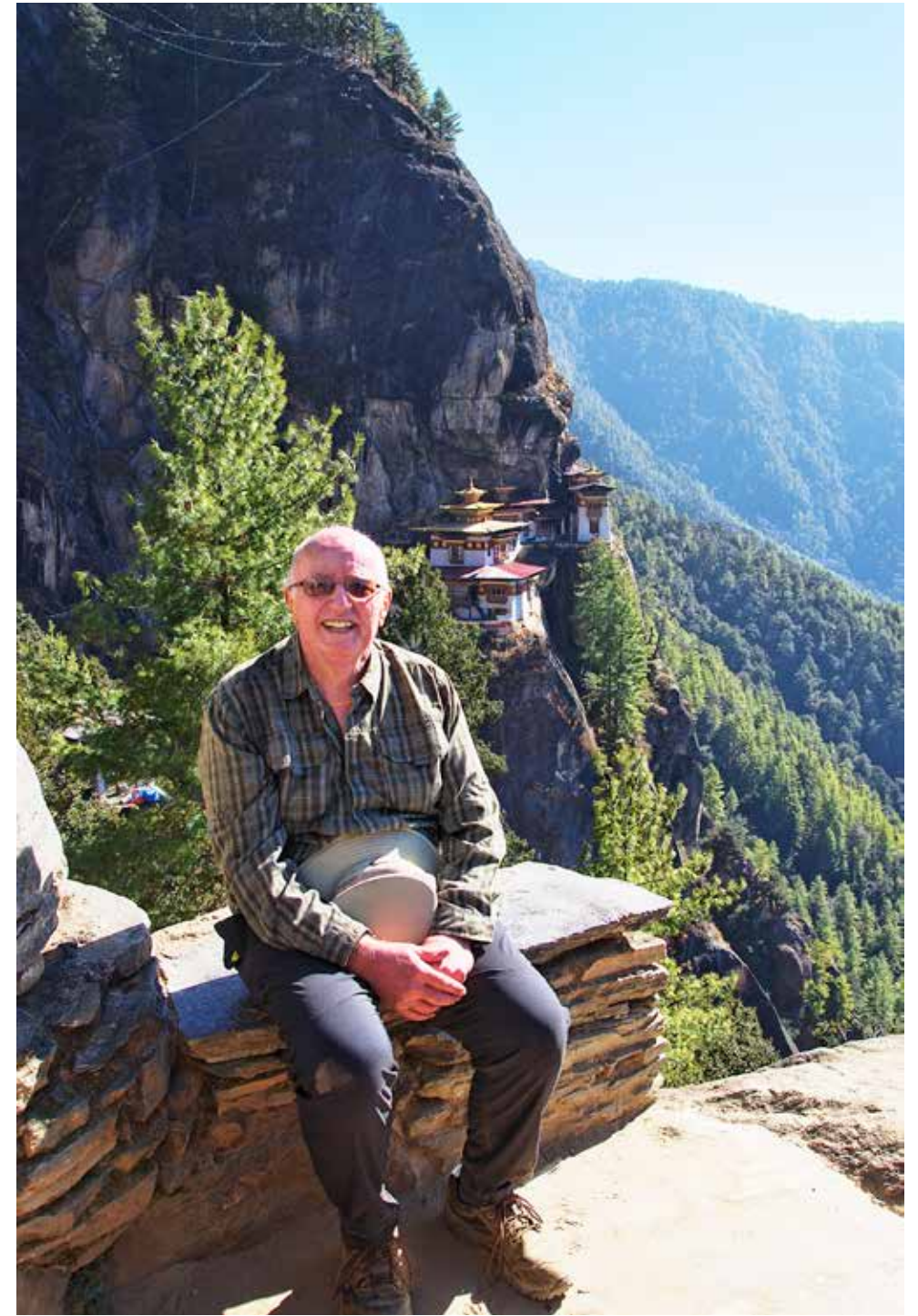
Folk dancer



Archer practising at the Paro stadium



The Tiger's Nest



Patrick at the second viewpoint on the Tiger's Nest trail

afterword



“Why have you come to India?” asked Ashok at the pre-tour briefing in Delhi. Good question! Because the price and the timing of this tour were right? Because our friends Bill and Judi were going? Because it was on our “bucket list”? Even to my ears, these reasons sounded rather mundane. I wish I could have said it was to immerse myself in a different culture, see how other people live and think, learn about their history, and so on. But of course that is not what you get from an organised tour. Even with the best of them, you see beautiful temples and castles; are told about, but never really take in, the country’s history by knowledgeable guides; stay in American-style hotels; taste the tourist version of the local food; and get great photo ops. Unfortunately, you leave with the impression that you have merely observed but not truly experienced the country.

It was no different this time, but I still found it an enriching and worthwhile experience. I returned to Canada with fond memories of the very companionable people who travelled with us; a feeling of gratitude for the privilege of seeing first hand world treasures such as the Taj Mahal, Khajuraho, and all things Bhutanese; and, if not the satisfaction of a cultural immersion, at least the sense that I know a great deal more about India and Bhutan than I did before the trip began. And in retrospect, these are perfectly good reasons to plan another trip . . . somewhere . . . soon.



Folk dancers

इसूक्त

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