

RISHIKESH TWO



8TH FEBRUARY - 3RD MARCH, 2023

INDIA – 8th FEBRUARY - 3rd MARCH 2023

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3rd March	Flight back to London

27th December 2022

Preparing to go

It is 9:30 pm and I am trying to get to grips with the programs (or lack of them) on the laptop Mohammed has sold me. It does not seem to have Windows or, if it does, a version that is out of support and cannot be opened. The last laptop died in Luythens Bungalow when there was a power surge. Maybe the cosmic did not want me to type when I was in India - just to have a rest. So I will have to visit Mohammed again and find out about what he has installed or not installed.

The itinerary has been finalised with Om. A lot of it came from his input and we decided it was not a good idea to visit Dharamshala at this time as it would be too cold and I could sit in front of a heater in London and not in India. He came up with a great programme starting with Vrindavan where Krishna is supposed to descend in the night in a special temple with a garden. But the temple is locked at night and no one is allowed inside. A British tourist apparently got himself deliberately locked in the temple and was found dead the next morning. Don't mess with Krishna!

There were a lot of emails backwards and forward to Om about the programme and the internal flights. The luggage allowance is a problem. It is very little and I always take too much. Maybe this time I won't take too much, just to avoid paying 6,000 rupees each time I take an internal flight.

There will be an internal flight to New Delhi on March 2nd. Om did not like my initial plan to fly to Delhi from Dehradun in the morning and then connect with the international flight as there could have been problems if the flight from Dehradun was late so I am now booked into a hotel near the airport. Om is paying for the hotel – half of the price of the binoculars he asked me to get. Good deal. At least now I know he will get the present which he wants. His son Sidahrt did not tell me what he wants from London so we will have to go shopping in Rishikesh, me and him! I think he will enjoy that.

Since my return, chanting Krishna went very well with the help of YouTube every morning. It is rewarding, relaxing and uplifting. Most Mondays I make it to the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON) temple in Soho. There is a lecture usually from Swami Prabhupada. Sometimes he is really sexist like when he said women should get married and have children.

There is a lovely lady from Ukraine living in the temple building. She will be there until the war ends. A long time by the looks of things. The people are always welcoming with cheerful smiles and love in their hearts. Most quite young. It amazes me how they clean the altar and the statues. I don't like the chanting very much. The chant is not how Om used to chant or my YouTube chant I listen to every morning.

The study of Hindi has gone quite well but chapter seven on the past is challenging to say the least. Getting up in the morning is a total disaster and the diet not brilliant. But I am also going to Self Realization Fellowship meetings – mainly meditation with some affirmations and wise words and the masters watch over me from their pictures.

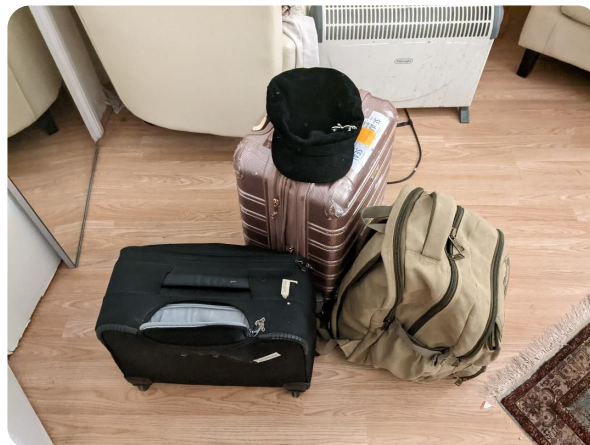
7th February 2023 - Tuesday

Flight to India

Despite the best of intentions I did not get up in reasonable time and the packing was a bit of a rush. Had to collect my purplish jersey from Rashid the Syrian Kurdish tailor who works for a laundry repair shop in Chepstow Road. The clothes were not ready when I got there and had to be brought from the another shop. I was a bit upset about this as we did agree they would be ready by 10am and I got there at 11.30am.

Rashid was his usual charming self with an engaging smile and a mischievous twinkle in his eye. Also had to get a few tubes of cannesten cream in case thrush flares up. The colon cleanse gave me a very severe bout of thrust. But despite the severe stinging felt strangely peaceful and contented: Krishna was welcoming me and I felt safe and taken care of.

Listened to a meeting organised by the Bahrain Freedom Movement on the day of martyrs. It commemorates the killing of two innocent protesters ten years ago. Every year Dr Saeed Shehabi tirelessly organizes the commemorations. This one was a bit heavy on speakers from Sinn Féin but there were three very good MPs. The constipation which led to the colon cleanse had not left me. Ran out time to eat the smashed avocado and chicken which I bought when returning with the dry cleaning.



The journey on the Elizabeth Line was quick. Managed to drop one of my cases on the escalator and it rolled to the bottom to the consternation of the Chinese TFL employee who politely suggested I take the lift next time. From the platform at Heathrow Terminal 5 to departures is short lift ride and in departures there were only six people. What a contrast to last year when there were about 200 in the queue. Now we have to print our own baggage tags. I played helpless and got a chap to help me which he did – with one only. Managed to sort out how to print the second one and had a leisurely wait after going through security. Tried talking to a elderly couple who were on the bench opposite me when I was eating the guacamole and chicken.

At the departure gate a very composed young woman in colourful clothing was burning a small brass lamp. A naked flame in the airport. Nobody seemed to notice or if they noticed they did not care, I wanted to tell her Hare Krishna but chickened out. It was necessary to take a bus to the BA flight. The first time I have taken a bus at Heathrow to go to a flight. There were around 200 people on the plane. Where did they all come from? One of life's mysteries.

The two Indian guys sitting next to me are reasonably friendly – the Sikh with the black turban and equally black beard. My OM necklace had curiosity value and he asked me if I was a Hindu. I said that I love the Hindu religion, the gods and the epics but I don't agree with the slavish following of a guru. We are all responsible for our own development and have to think for ourselves. Also I don't agree with the caste system which has been made rigid away from the original concept of the varna where people follow the profession to which they are best suited. He seemed to agree with me. He was very young with clear skin and a very healthy complexion. I gave the two guys my nuts. The constipation has not left me and nuts are a no-no as is bread and carbs. No more laxatives and no more colon irrigation. Just healthy food from now on.

Time went fast. Two meals, a bit of sleep, a bit of meditation and some reading of *Living Fearlessly*: face each situation Yogananda says with the confidence of a hero and the smile of a conqueror. A lot about non identification with the body, which is my problem, and the comment that you only die once and you don't know when that will be so there is no point worrying about it if you surrender your life to God and get in touch with and realize your eternal nature.

8th February, 2023 - Wednesday

Arrival and Luythens bungalow, Safdarjung tomb, Lodi gardens, Bada Gumbad

The driver was not at the exit welcome gate. I walked past all the people with names written on a sign. A friendly efficient young man who works for one of the hotel chains called Om and he said the driver is waiting outside – once you leave the first arrival gate you can't return so I had to be sure he was not there.

Found the driver Jadish with the sign with my name. Not as lavish as Trintera Tours but there, as agreed. It was a long walk to the car parking building and the weather seemed quite hot – too hot for the warm jacket I brought.



Fountain at Luythens

Jadish was not sure about finding the bungalow and asked twice. I recognized the entry gate and the young man minding it. Later found out his name is Lakshman. Strange a young capable man doing a seemingly mindless job. No prospects? No desire to move on?

Presi was on reception and I had to sign the large book which looked as if it had come from the time of the British colonisers. Lakshman took me to room 11, not much different from room 15. The safe could not be shut with the code. Presi helped me by giving me a key to the safe and putting it on the room key ring. No way I am going to leave this key in reception. Anyone could open the room and get into the safe – not that they would, but had to think of the worse.

Unpacking was very easy. Not much stuff. Had in fact done quite a good job even though it was done in such a big hurry. Did a brief lying down meditation which turned into a nap. Jadish was still in the driveway. He was joined by the guide Jai Singh and off we went to **the tomb of Safdarjung the last Mughal** ruler. It was a majestic building like the Ko Masjid and the gardens were impressive and well kept. The tomb stood there a relic, a museum piece from a bygone age.

Singh spoke with disgust that Safarjung robbed another tomb - that of Abdul Rahim Khan Khara - to get the marble for this tomb.

Enter the Reptilians, half man, half reptile, creatures which live under ground as they have been condemned to do so by Brahma for diverting worshippers from the right path. There are interesting small holes in the stone floor so the reptilians can breathe. They supposedly need the holes for air. Knocked on a door that was bolted over: the entrance to the reptilians' abode. It had very strange vibes and a strong feeling came over me that this is best left alone. Squirrels were having a playful time on the grass – very small skinny squirrels with stripes on their bodies.

The Safdarjung Tomb was built by Nawab Shujaud Daula in 1753-54 in the memory of Safdarjung, a Viceroy of Awadh under the rule of the Mughal emperor Mohammed Shah.

Safdarjung was a native of Persia, which is now present-day Iran. He was a descendant of Qara Yusuf from the Kara Koyunlu. His name at birth was Muhammad Muqim in-Khurasan. In 1722 AD, he moved to India and became the Subadar Nawab of Oudh, or the ruler of the Awadh state on March 19, 1739. He served in this position till his death and was bestowed with the title of 'Safdarjung' by Emperor Nasir-ud Din Muhammad Shah.



The Safdarjung Tomb

have been carved on its facade and rear side, of which the latter houses several rooms and a library. The graves of Safdarjung and his wife Amat Jahan Begum are placed in an underground chamber inside the monument.

One of the key features of the Safdarjung Tomb is an Arabic inscription carved on its surface, which reads, 'When the hero of plain bravery departs from the transitory, may he become a resident of God's paradise'.

The tomb has a nine-fold plan consisting of numerous rooms and libraries. The facade and the central dome give it a resemblance to the Taj Mahal. Four octagonal towers surround the tomb.

The square-shaped garden surrounding the mausoleum was designed keeping in mind the Charbagh style of architecture adopted by the Mughals. The garden was then divided into four smaller squares. Each square consisted of footpaths and water canals around it. Further, every square was segregated into four smaller-sized gardens.

One of the four water canals leads the path to a beautifully made gateway. The other three give way to three pavilions known as 'Jangli Mahal or Palace in the Woods', 'Badshah Pasand or The Emperor's Favourite', and 'Moti Mahal or Pearl Palace'. According to research, these pavilions were used as places of residence by the family of Safdarjung. At present, the offices of the Archaeological Survey of India are situated in the pavilions.

An interesting fact about the Safdarjung Tomb is that the brownish-yellow and red sandstone used in its construction was removed from the tomb of Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan.

In 1748, upon the ascension of Ahmad Shah Bahadur as the new Mughal emperor, Safdarjung relocated to Delhi. Here, he was elected as the Wazir ul-Mamalik-i-Hindustan or the Prime Minister of Hindustan. However, five years later, in 1753, Safdarjung returned to Awadh and passed away a year later in Sultanpur, which is close to Faizabad. Later, the Mughal emperor Ahmad Shah Bahadur granted Safdarjung's son, Nawab Shujaud Daula permission, to construct a museum in the memory of his father in Delhi.

An Ethiopian architect created the architectural style of the Safdarjung Tomb. It was inspired mainly by the architecture of Humayun's Tomb, although it lacked the magnificence and glory of the latter.

The monument was built on an elevated ground and surrounded by a large square-shaped garden. The square garden measures 280 metres or 920 feet. Each side has a courtyard, and a three-domed mosque is enclosed within a wall inside the compound of the tomb.

The tomb was constructed using red and brownish-yellow sandstone. It has a massive central dome and a high terrace. The two-storeyed main gate gives a beautiful view of the mausoleum's interiors. Intricate designs

Tried to sort out the Indian phone with Singh. The SIM is with Atriel and you have to call them to verify the account. We managed in the end, sitting on a bench near an abandoned palace. There was no attempt to turn this white, miserable building into a tourist attraction. The squirrels were running about but not close enough for me to get a photo. The squirrels I remember from the Taj Mahal, when I visited aged 23, were a lot fatter.

We continued to the **Lodi Garden**.

I was here very briefly in the hellish heat on my last trip. It was difficult to enjoy anything. Sat on a bench with Gagendra lamenting the heat and listening to him speculating that those who saw us would assume that we were lovers. Now it was possible to walk round the gardens and enjoy them in their full glory: the bonsai garden, the bamboo lane, the magical tulips. It's a place where the locals, courting couples and tourists enjoy themselves. The highlight of the visit was the bridge and the river with its gold carp and grey fish. The monkeys were swinging in the trees, a cool breeze was blowing. What more could one ask for on a perfect afternoon?



Shisha Gumbad, Lodi Gardens

Found out that Singh is a Rajput from the warrior class who co-operated with the Mughal invaders and provided them with an army. The Rajputs emerged into political importance as early as the 7th century. From about 800, Rajput dynasties dominated northern India, and the many petty Rajput kingdoms were among the main obstacles to the complete Muslim domination of Hindu India.

Back at the bungalow it's dinner time. I put on my grey dress with the belt with a shiny buckle. There is a knock on the door. One of the lovely men who works at the bungalow comes to tell me it's time to take dinner. Shukla is there. She gives me a big hug. She looks a bit older and less sprightly but she welcomes every guest with a genuine smile.

The vegetarian food is mainly vegetables: vegetable soup, aubergines, peas dhal and an orange for dessert. Meeting people over dinner is exciting. All nationalities and professions gather round the table. There are two Indian lawyers who defend the workers: Sanjay and Bennett. I tell them about the case I brought against the Libyans in the industrial tribunal for unfair dismissal when the 2011 uprising toppled Qadhafi, and I was summarily dismissed from the news agency JANA. Took the case to the industrial tribunal and represented myself arguing that there was still a case to answer as the news agency was part of the Libyan state and I was suing the state. The judge accepted the argument but the new embassy pleaded diplomatic immunity and I got nothing. Years later the European court ruled that in dealing with local staff, embassies could no longer hide behind diplomatic immunity, but it was too late for me. Sometimes in life you have to just let things go.

There was a man from the World Wide Fund for Nature dealing with marine life and tigers, a lady doing research in the archives about the history of India, a retired Swiss lady at the end of her holiday. Stories and jokes were shared. Conversation flowed freely. Instant friendships were made.



Fountain in Lodi Gardens

9th February 2023 - Thursday

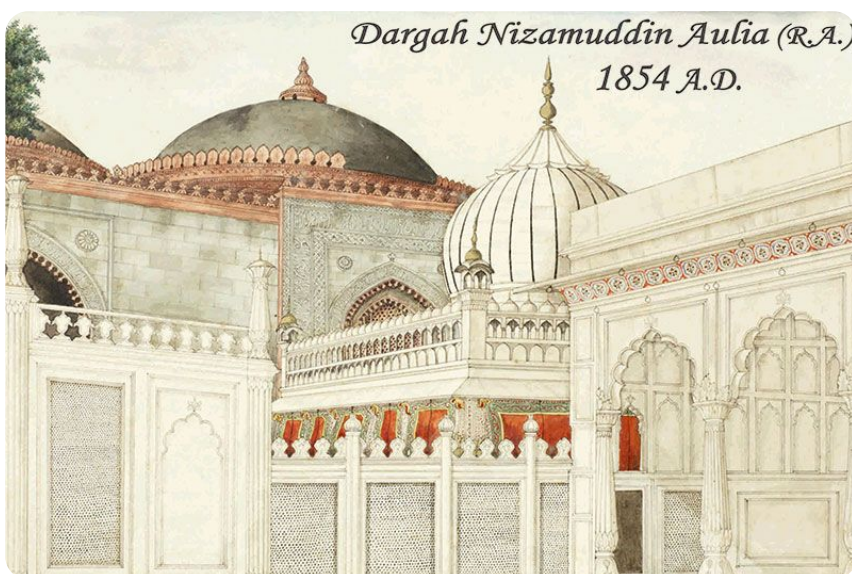
Dargah Nazrat Nizamuddin, Buddhist stupa, Hanumayan tomb complex, Connaught Club House

I was invited for breakfast with a knock at the door. Horrors. Urine dip stick test showed an infection and took one of the antibiotics I was given in case it came back. The thrush is still there, but kept reciting the affirmation I am enjoying perfect health. This problem can't ruin my holiday and have all the medicines to help beat it. The vegetables seem to have gotten rid of the constipation.

At breakfast there was a lady from Honduras who is an urban planner and a development consultant. Am always suspicious of these people. Who are they to come and impose their views on the Indians. Let the Indians sort out their own development and get the consultants to dance to their tune. It doesn't always work out that way. The omelette was lovely and the filtered black coffee went down very well. Jadash was early by 15 minutes and again I was alerted to his arrival with a knock at the door. It was agreed Singh would meet us at the Dargah Hazrat Nizamuddin, a Sufi shrine I was really excited about visiting. This place over promised and underperformed. It was billed as a Sufi shrine, a pilgrimage site etc., etc. At first the crowded alleyway which led to it was exciting – an explosion of colour: flowers, shawls, beads, jewellery, clothes. But everyone in that alleyway had something to sell to the foreigners. It was the ideal place to have your bag snatched, your pocket picked or to catch covid. Out came the mask for the first time since the plane. I wasn't taking any chances.

At the shrine there was an entry fee and men and women had a separate entrance. The tomb was packed with worshippers. Women set huddled together with texts in Arabic. There was no joy in their faces. Were they there out of coercion or desperation?

A quick walk round the grave was enough and Singh and I made our way back to the car. Easier said than done. First there were the children selling pens for 20 rupees. Last time I was in India they were asking for pens. But that was 30 years ago. Then came the aggressive beggars holding their children and asking for money for milk. There is a system whereby it is possible to buy a ticket to a restaurant, give it to a beggar and they get a free meal. I bought about ten and saw lots of hands coming towards me. It felt degrading both for the giver and the taker. The worse thing was the two girls who followed us out of the tomb and down the road. Decided to give them 200 rupees to get rid of them. Then they started fighting with each other.



Dargah Hazrat Nizamuddin - a Sufi shrine

Singh said they are not in genuine need. The government has accommodation and education for them, but they would rather beg. And sometimes their parents send them out to beg and pocket the money. They looked hardened, bitten by life, mean and determined to get what they want. The dark side of India which Om described.

Hazrat Nizamuddin is the dargah (mausoleum) of one of the world's most famous Sufi saints, Nizamuddin Auliya (1238 - 1325 CE). Inside the dargah complex, one can find the tombs of poet Amir Khusro, Mughal princess Jehan Ara Begum, and Inayat Khan. The dargah is for the world famous Sufi saint of the Chisti Order, Nizamuddin Auliya, who was born in 1238 in Badayun, Uttar Pradesh. He travelled to Delhi to preach the Order of Chisti and then finally settled in Ghiyaspur. Nizamuddin Auliya taught people that love and peace can help them get closer to the God; also one should keep on serving people irrespective of their cast, creed, and religion. During his life, he had many followers like Hazrat Nasiruddin Mahmud Chiragh Dehlavi and Amir Khusro. On 3rd April 1325, he passed away, and his Dargah was constructed by Muhammad Bin Tughlaq of the Tughlaq Dynasty, who was also his avid follower.

A street bustling with shops selling chadars, polychrome clocks and prints of Mecca and flowers leads to the Dargah Hazrat Nizamuddin. In the inlaid marble pavilion, one can see devotees singing qawwali in the honor of celebrated Persian poet and devotee of Nizamuddin Auliya - Amir Khusrau (1253-1325). Women are not allowed to go beyond the outer veranda, but they can peek through jali (lattice screen) to see the dark chamber where the grave of the great saint lies draped with chadar and rose petals. Locals say that tying a thread on the latticed screen serves as a constant reminder to the saint of their wishes. Apart from the main shrine, here, one can see the tomb of Nizamuddin Auliya's saints - Jahanara Begum, Shah Jahan's favorite daughter, and Amir Khusru.

Across the western side of the open courtyard, one can see the Jama't Khana Mosque, which was built, in 1325 AD. Towards the north side of Dargah, there is a stepwell. Locals say that the step well was built in secret as the all the building activities were banned. Successors of Nizamuddin Auliya made it with the help of water lit lamps. On the north-eastern side, there is a 16th-century tomb of Atgah Khan, who was a powerful minister in Emperor Akbar's court. In the open marble pillar, Chaunsath Khamba ("64 pillars"), one can find the grave of Mirza Ghalib, preeminent Urdu, and Persian-language poet during the last years of the Mughal Empire. Other important tombs located in the Nizamuddin heritage area are the Lal-Mahal, Chini Ka Burj, Kalan-Masjid, Ataga Khan's Tomb, Khan-I-Jahan Tilangani's Tomb, Barapula, Chaunsath Khamba, and Khan-I-Khanan's Tomb.

[Website](#)

The next stop Huyuman's tomb complex is a far cry from the chaos, clutter and rabble of Dargah. There are many tombs with both Muslim and Hindu symbols. Singh is very clear the Hindus built in sandstone and the Muslims plastered over the sandstone and stuck on their own inscriptions. There were many eight pointed Hindu stars and the six pointed Stars of David. Most of the time the designs were side by side in a happy symbiosis – but the non-Hindu symbols did not please Singh. He described in grim details the Muslim destruction of Hindu culture when the Mughals arrived in India. The winding stairways to the top of the structures were blocked off. "The masses are asses," Singh said with conviction. They deface the stonework with graffiti.

The Mughal Empire was an early-modern empire that controlled much of South Asia between the 16th and 19th centuries. For some two hundred years, the empire stretched from the outer fringes of the Indus river basin in the west, northern Afghanistan in the northwest, and Kashmir in the north, to the highlands of present-day Assam and Bangladesh in the east, and the uplands of the Deccan Plateau in South India.

The Mughal empire is said to have been founded in 1526 by Babur, a warrior chieftain from what is today Uzbekistan, who employed aid from the neighboring Safavid and Ottoman empires, to defeat the Sultan of Delhi, Ibrahim Lodi, in the First Battle of Panipat, and to sweep down the plains of North India. The Mughal imperial structure, however, is sometimes dated to 1600, to the rule of Babur's grandson, Akbar. This imperial structure lasted until 1720, shortly after the death of the last major emperor, Aurangzeb, during whose reign the empire also achieved its maximum geographical extent. Reduced subsequently to the region in and around Old Delhi by 1760, the empire was formally dissolved by the British Raj after the Indian Rebellion of 1857.

Although the Mughal empire was created and sustained by military warfare, it did not vigorously suppress the cultures and peoples it came to rule; rather it equalized and placated them through new administrative practices and diverse ruling elites, leading to more efficient, centralised, and standardized rule. The base of the empire's collective wealth was agricultural taxes, instituted by the third Mughal emperor, Akbar. These taxes, which amounted to well over half the output of a peasant cultivator, were paid in the well-regulated silver currency, and caused peasants and artisans to enter larger markets.

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The relative peace maintained by the empire during much of the 17th century was a factor in India's economic expansion. The burgeoning European presence in the Indian Ocean, and its increasing demand for Indian raw and finished products, created still greater wealth in the Mughal courts. There was more conspicuous consumption among the Mughal elite, resulting in greater patronage of painting, literary forms, textiles, and architecture, especially during the reign of Shah Jahan. Among the Mughal UNESCO World Heritage Sites in South Asia are: Agra Fort, Fatehpur Sikri, Red Fort, Humayun's Tomb, Lahore Fort, Shalamar Gardens, and the Taj Mahal, which is described as "the jewel of Muslim art in India, and one of the universally admired masterpieces of the world's heritage."

The great thing about the Hayuman Tomb Complex is its magnitude. There are lots of tombs, lots of immaculately kept lawns, greenery, fountains, flowers, respectful visitors and the tour guides with their loyal tourists lapping up every word.

It is a place for quiet reflection and meditation and it was here that I heard some extraordinary conspiracy theories from Singh.

We sat in the courtyard of one of the tombs and he began his exposition of the Jewish/Sikh conspiracy. The first and second world wars were fought so the Jews, the master conspirators, could have a home. WW1 got rid of the caliphate and WW2 weakened the forces of resistance and Israel appeared out of nowhere on the map of the world. The Sikhs fought for the British army and are in cahoots with the Jews.



Sikander Lodi's tomb, Lodi Gardens

Then there are the Jews of Malipur who Israel identified as one of the lost tribes. The Jewish community has been living in India since 75 CE and comprises a tiny but important part of the population. Many Jews settled in India after fleeing coastal areas of what is now Israel after the fall of King Solomon's second temple. They sought to avoid persecution from the Greeks.

Singh went on to speak about the Jains. They are crazy because they won't eat a chicken yet they destroyed whole ecosystems in Delhi and blew up mountains to get marble for construction. Then there is the Masonist conspiracy. Jinnah and Nehru were Masons. The people who run the Tata factories were opium drug runners for the British, Delhi has a Masonic Lodge and Belas was also a major opium drug runner.

Despite all his conspiracy theories Singh is not a man of malice or hatred. He is a walking history book and his knowledge

of Indian history is second to none. Most of time he stays away from the Masons, the Jews and others who he loosely describes as the mafia.

Asked to visit the **Millennium Park with the Buddhist Stupa**. At first both the driver and guide tried to discourage me but then they conceded that it could in fact be worth a visit. Didn't manage to persuade Singh to take me to a recently constructed Sikh temple – you can't win them all and generally they were very accommodating if not that flexible.



World Peace Stupa in Millennium Park

The stupa was built by the Japanese on a former rubbish dump. Some of the area was landscaped and once again the gardens were fantastic. The white and gold blended in magically and the simplicity of the structure was a joy to behold. Spreading its arms as far as 84 acres, Millennium Indraprastha Park is a famous tourist spot in Delhi which brims with the goodness of nature. Sculpted in 2004 by the Delhi Development Authority, the park is set close to Ring Road, Sarai Kale Khan and offers some of the best views of manicured lawns and gardens splashed with colours.

In 2007, a large World Peace Stupa was installed in the park by the 14th Dalai Lama, the Lt. Governor of Delhi and the nuns and monks of Nipponzan Myohoji. The park gleams with the beauty of nature which is present in the form of trees and flowers. A special seating arrangement, thatched roofs, and cottage are set up for travellers who want to attach their soul to this park and spend some time listening to birds chirping and the sunlight piercing through the tree leaves.

That's the official sightseeing programme completed and Singh asks me about lunch. I am worried about funds. This excursion has cost a lot more than anticipated and the rupees I put in my pink make-up case, which has now become a money carrying pouch, are low. I only have 1300 and that is clearly not enough for me and Singh and Jagdish. I thought they might buy me lunch and I would pay them back tomorrow but that is clearly not going to happen so I suggested we drive back to the bungalow, I uplift funds and we go for a nice lunch.

Jadish was especially pleased with this suggestion. He did not like it when Singh said he would go home as he lives close to the park. Took 10,000 rupees and off we went to the Connaught Club House. Again I was faced with the system I cannot stand. Drivers do not eat with their clients. I had this problem with Maniram and we managed to get over it and he was eating with me on the last days of the tour of North India. Singh came with me and Jaidesh went to the first floor to eat with the other drivers – his mates.

The menu was quite extensive with both English and Indian dishes. The Indian dishes were many and varied and the list of drinks was impressive but too expensive. Would have loved a glass of wine but it was not to be at 900 rupees. Singh was busy sorting out another tour he arranged of Old Delhi and abandoned to take care of me. Om described me as a very important client which made me feel good. Now his father was leading people on a walking tour of Old Delhi and some of them managed to get lost. Not difficult to do in a crowd. It almost happened to me at Nizamuddin.

We talked a bit about the issue of drivers not eating with their clients and Singh told me that one of his homestay clients told his guest that the driver would wait for him by the side of the road. He was really offended. A man with an MBA. “I was told to wait like a dog in the road. So what good did all my education do me?” he asked. Singh is an enterprising young man – well 40 is still young. He worked for a number of travel companies including Tui and after covid set up his own company – a force of one with more than 300 reviews. He works closely with Om and they send each other clients.



Connaught Club House

It was back to the bungalow before 5 and dinner is at 7. Not a big space between lunch and dinner but dinner is healthy vegetarian stuff. The chicken went down a treat and so did the vegetables. The waiter in the hotel took a great interest in my Hindu learning. Ordered a tea and a coffee in Hindi and he thought I was just practising my Hindi and at first we did not get it. My tip was 15 percent of the bill rather than the usual ten. The friendly waiter seemed to lose interest in me as soon as he got his tip. Is that all I am – a walking dollar, or should I say rupee – note?

Did some tai chi and stretching outside the bungalow. The plants seemed to be transferring their energy to me. It was a great experience even though I was a bit wankie because of the urine infection and the thrush. Another pleasant dinner and conversation. Learned that Venita is Shuklas daughter, Shukla liked my belt with the glittering buckle. I thought she would. Pleasant conversation at dinner. I asked the lady from Honduras and her Italian husband who live in Aussie what do you call an intelligent Australian? A New Zealander. They appreciated the joke.

10th February 2023 - Friday

Red Fort, Grand Mosque, Jain Temple, Shiva Temple, Old Delhi, Gudwara

The urine dipstick test came up positive again. Well it's only the second day of antibiotics and I am continuing with the affirmation that I am enjoying perfect health. Today one of the guys at breakfast was a soldier in the British army in Afghanistan and Iraq. Now he is doing waste management for an Italian government charity. He made the comment that the aid was as much a political tool to facilitate trade as it was development orientated. You always learn something at breakfast from interesting people.

Jagdish was right on time and I had fun trying to speak Hindi. A lot of what I learned from the book was useful but when you hear it spoken by a local it is a bit different than on the cassette which comes with the Teach Yourself book. Before we reached Old Delhi the streets were tree lined and green. This was no longer the case in Old Delhi which did in fact look old, crowded and not a place of leisure and peace. A lot of people in the narrow streets, lots of small shops and shopkeepers conducting their seemingly thriving businesses in a very confined space.

Jagdish parked the car in the car park outside the **Red Fort** and Singh and I walked for about ten minutes along the perimeter of the fort's wall. It is a truly majestic construction more pink than red. The crowds were beginning to form. Got a young man with a camera to take a picture of me and Singh. He brought the 'hard copy' of the photo minutes. The Indian government charges foreigners 900 rupees to go inside the fort. Yesterday's lunch set me back more than I imagined it would, so gave that a miss.

It was good to finally see the Red Fort in the flesh after having heard and read about it. It was a little disconcerting with large numbers of people pushing and carrying on with their business with little regard for anyone else. Held on to my back pack for dear life. This time had my credit card and did not want that to get pinched.



The Red Fort

The Red Fort Complex was built as the palace fort of Shahjahanabad – the new capital of the fifth Mughal Emperor of India, Shah Jahan. Named for its massive enclosing walls of red sandstone, it is adjacent to an older fort, the Salimgarh, built by Islam Shah Suri in 1546, with which it forms the Red Fort Complex. The private apartments consist of a row of pavilions connected by a continuous water channel, known as the Nahr-i-Behisht (Stream of Paradise). The Red Fort is considered to represent the zenith of Mughal creativity which, under Shah Jahan, was brought to a new level of refinement. The planning of the palace is based on Islamic prototypes, but each pavilion reveals architectural elements typical of Mughal building, reflecting a fusion of Persian, Timurid and Hindu traditions. The Red Fort's innovative planning and architectural style, including the garden design, strongly

influenced later buildings and gardens in Rajasthan, Delhi, Agra and further afield.

The planning and design of the Red Fort represents a culmination of architectural development initiated in 1526 AD by the first Mughal Emperor and brought to a splendid refinement by Shah Jahan with a fusion of traditions: Islamic, Persian, Timurid and Hindu. The innovative planning arrangements and architectural style of building components as well as garden design developed in the Red Fort strongly influenced later buildings and gardens in Rajasthan, Delhi, Agra and further afield.

The Red Fort Complex is a layered expression of both Mughal architecture and planning, and the later British military use of the forts. The most dramatic impacts on the integrity of the Red Fort Complex come from the change of the river into a major road, which alters the relationship of the property to its intended setting; and from the division of the Salimgarh Fort by a railway. Nevertheless the Salimgarh Fort is inextricably linked to the Red Fort in use and later history. The integrity of the Salimgarh Fort can only be seen in terms of its value as part of the overall Red Fort Complex.

The next stop was the **Grand Mosque**. It did not really make an impression on me. A mosque is a mosque, I've seen lots of them and they are not my favourite structures. Having said that, the Grand Mosque was massive with hundreds of worshippers as it's Friday. Climbed up the steps and peered at the mosque from the courtyard outside. No chance to go inside as people were praying – and no scarf to cover my head.

Towering over Old Delhi, the magnificent façade of Jama Masjid stands as the reminder of Mughal architecture. Commissioned by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, the Masjid-i Jahān-Nūm (meaning Mosque commanding view of the world) was his final architectural opus. On the other hand, the popular name, Jama Masjid is derived from the word 'Jummah', referring to the congregational prayer observed by Muslims on Fridays. Built from red sandstone and white marble, the edifice dominates the skyline of the busy Chawri Bazar in central Delhi and is considered the largest mosque in India. Each year, on Eid, thousands of reverent Muslims throng the mosque to offer special Eid Namaz in the morning. The mosque is jointly maintained by the Delhi Wakf Board and the Jama Masjid committee under the directives from the Shahi Imam.

Following the death of his wife, Mughal emperor Shah Jahan decided to shift his capital from Agra to Delhi and founded the walled city of Shahajahanabad. It remained the capital of the Mughals succeeding him and evolved to what we now know as Old Delhi. The Jama Masjid was commissioned to be the central mosque of the new city. Built by more than 5000 artisans under the supervision of Wazir Saadullah Khan, the mosque designed by architect Ustad Khalil, took six years to be completed.

The mosque is built on an expansive elevated stone platform that is accessible through flights of stairs from three sides, east (35 steps), north (39 steps) and south (33 steps). The mosque faces west towards the Holy city of Mecca. Three sides of the mosque are covered by open arched colonnades, featuring a lofty tower-like archway in the center. The roof of the mosque is capped with three marble domes with alternating striping in black and white marble. The domes are in turn capped with gold adornments. Two lofty minarets, standing 40 m high, decorated in longitudinal stripes of white marble and red sandstone, flank the domes on either side. Each minaret has 130 steps inside and only the southern one is open to public for a fee. The mosque measures 80 m in length and 27 m in breadth and houses the main prayer hall with seven arched entrances facing the west (facing Mecca) with the traditional mihrab (altar) for the prayer leader. The walls of the mosque are covered with marbles up to waist-level height.



*Jama Masjid Old Delhi
Photo: Muhammad Mahdi Karim*

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The washroom at the mosque was impressive. So far I have always managed to find sit down European style toilets – a blessing when one is wearing trousers. Gave the attendant more than attendants normally get. Don't mind paying people who provide a genuinely good service. The beggars worry me. They are probably doing it as a profession and the money does not go to them but to their parents or controllers.

A man with small baskets out of which a cobra emerged was outside the mosque. Looked at the contraption. It was cute and of a nice local craft design. At first said I did not want it but then changed my mind and parted with 400 rupees. He asked for 500. Singh told me the vendor was always asking him to bring his tourists to him but he never did. But he did try to get me into the pashmena store. Had the strong feeling he made a deal with the guy to bring him tourists.

We walk to the Jain temple. Jains insist that socks are also removed as walking in socks could kill an insect. It seems like a fascinating religion with 12 masters. It is an interesting experience seeing the marble statues of the 12 Jain masters. People are praying in the temple but there does not seem to be a place to sit quietly and mediate.

Jainism is one of the three most ancient religions of India, with roots that go back to at least the mid-first century B.C.E. Today, it is still an integral part of Indian culture. Jainism teaches that the path to enlightenment is through nonviolence and reducing harm to living things (including plants and animals) as much as possible.

Like Hindus and Buddhists, Jains believe in reincarnation. This cycle of birth, death, and rebirth is determined by one's karma. Jains believe bad karma is caused by harming living things. To avoid bad karma, Jains must practice ahimsa, a strict code of nonviolence. Jains believe plants, animals, and even some nonliving things (like air and water) have souls, just as humans do. The principle of nonviolence includes doing no harm to humans, plants, animals, and nature. For that reason, Jains are strict vegetarians—so strict, in fact, that eating root vegetables is not allowed because removing the root would kill the plant. However, Jains can eat vegetables that grow above the ground, because they can be picked while leaving the rest of the plant intact. In complete dedication to nonviolence,



Jain Temple Old Delhi

the highest-ranked Jain monks and nuns avoid swatting at mosquitoes or sweeping a path on the floor so they do not step on an ant. In addition to nonviolence, Jainism has four additional vows that guide believers: always speak the truth, do not steal, show sexual restraint (with celibacy as an ideal), and do not become attached to worldly things.

While it shares many beliefs and values with Hinduism and Buddhism, Jainism has its own spiritual leaders and teachers. Jains honor 24 Jinas, or Tirthankaras: spiritual leaders who achieved enlightenment and have been liberated from the cycle of rebirth. One of the most influential Jinas was Mahavira, born Vardhamana,

who is considered the 24th, and final, Jina. He was born into the kshatriya or warrior class, traditionally dated in 599 B.C.E., though many scholars believe he was born later. When he was 30 years old, he renounced his worldly possessions to live the life of an ascetic (one who practices self-denial of worldly things). After over 12 years of intense fasting and meditation, Vardhamana achieved enlightenment and became Mahavira (meaning “Great Hero”). According to tradition, he established a large community of Jain followers: 14,000 monks and 36,000 nuns at the time of his death. Today, most followers of Jainism live in India, with estimates of upwards of four million followers.

[Website](#)

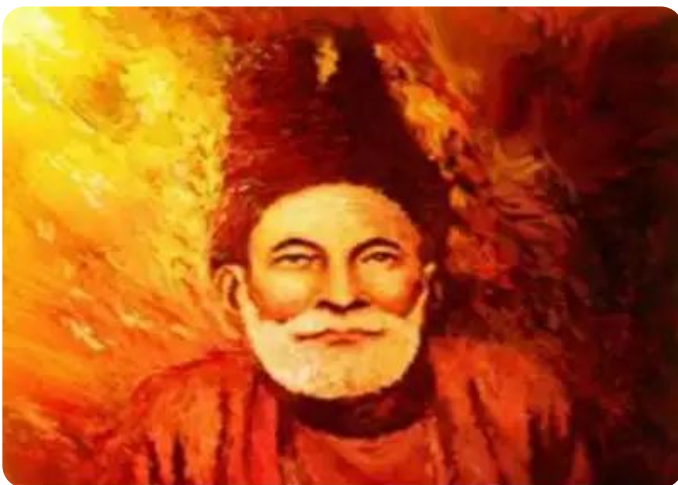
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The bird hospital next to the temple resembles a human hospital. There is an intensive care room where badly injured birds are treated. The birds who are recovering are in cages attached to the walls of a rectangular room. There are cages for those who have been cured and are ready to be released. No hard sell to give money here, just a donation book which I graced with some rupees.

Next to the Jain temple is a **Shiva temple**. Once again the removal of shoes and paying the shoe minder is required. Am running out small change and Singh obliges. Here I feel I am on familiar ground and recognise some of the images of the Gods, the bull, the lingam and the bell. For some reason it is in a glass case and can't be rung. Singh offers prayers and goes to the priest for a blessing. I get the orange tilak on my forehead even though don't belong to any caste. Whisper into the bull's ear that I experience perfect health and that God blesses me on the path to self realization and my time at Om Homestay. There are a lot of holy men sitting in front of the statues so I just walk round the temple – pradakshina - seeing which God I can recognise. There is a magnificent picture of Hanuman and of Druga. Time to re-read the book on Hindu gods but the blog takes my time and I also have to rest.

We take a rickshaw to the spice market. Lots and lots of mountains of spices with rather cheap price tags and many small shop keepers. Go into a dried fruit shop and don't manage to find apricots. But get a mixture of raisins, flower seeds, pumpkin seeds and cashews and some mustard seeds – smaller than the ones I get in London.

The streets are narrow, the shops small. But hardly any beggars and no one dragging you into their shop. There were streets of opticians, shoe shops, clothes and a little museum dedicated to **Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797-1868) one of the great poets of the Mughal empire**, of whose dying court he was the chief ornament. His ghazals, many set to music and sung by the most popular South Asian vocalists, still pervade the cultures of India and Pakistan. His statue was there, books of his writings and witty quotes on the walls. Nearby was the house which he rented.



Asadullah Khan Ghalib

The poet was against collaborators with the British who enabled them to finance the purchase of weapons with which to defeat the Indians struggling for independence. Singh is full of admiration for him – a proud Hindu but certainly not bigoted.

Our last stop is the **Gurudwara Sis Ganj Sahib** established in 1783 by Baghel Singh to mark the martyrdom of the Sikh Guru, Guru Teg Bahadur. Located in Chandini Chowk, Gurudwara Sis Ganj Sahib was built at the spot where Guru Teg Bahadur was beheaded by Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, when he refused to convert to Islam.

Then it's time for another rickshaw back to the car park. Wish Singh would take motorised rickshaws and not the ones where some poor cyclists have to carry the two of us. Gave them a 500 rupee trip. Singh said they were so afraid I would ask for change. These are the workers Sanjay is struggling for. Well at least I hope they are.

Old Delhi is not a place for cafes. Went to a rather strange bakery with sweets and upstairs seating but the queue to get the food and the drink was long and Singh gave up on it and only bought a sweetie. What a system. Chose the sweet. Get a ticket. Pay the ticket. Collect the sweet. Coke was sold by a lassie vendor.

Singh said goodbye at the car park. Gave him a tip of 2000 rupees. We went to an ATM machine. First you type in the amount, then the pin. Got 10,000 rupees. Bit worried about the financial situation. This time round the New Delhi section turned out rather expensive with entry fees. There shouldn't be much spending from now on.



The author with guide Jai Singh

Writing blog big time at the bungalow. Paid the bill – 2500. Not bad for three dinners and about five cokes. Talk to Shukla. She always tells me I look nice. She seems sadder than before. All the staff are cheerful and welcoming and come to tell me that dinner is ready. Begin the barley water for the UTI. I am enjoying perfect health. Keep up the affirmation.

An American couple, just retired, appear at dinner. They have started travelling and seem content with their lives. The lady who spent ten years in Nepal as a teacher is radiant with her wonderful long white hair. Two cats appear. They are well fed and taken care of. Look a lot better than the dogs. This time the dog did not sit in front of my door.

So now the three days in the bungalow is over, not to be repeated for another year. It is a timeless place still in the British colonial era run by a family who remembers the colonialists. They are gift to New Delhi and all who stay in their wonderful establishment.

11th February 2023 - Saturday

Drive to Vrindavan, stay in Vrindavan Cottages

Woke almost an hour before the alarm and had a very peaceful lying down meditation. Yesterday my oxygen uptake was 98 and pulse was 61. Something very good is happening. The packing went well with good use made of the back pack.

At breakfast learned that one of the guests Michele Louro is the author of *Comrades Against Imperialism* a study of Jawaharlal Nehru's anti-imperialist thought and militancy during the period between the two world wars. The book reconstructs and analyses Nehru's commitment to anti-imperialism and his role within the *League Against Imperialism* (LAI) on the backdrop of international and Indian events spanning throughout the interwar period: from the Brussels Congress (1927) which gave birth to the LAI, to World War II (and beyond). Michele is now having a great time in the Indian archives researching her next book.

Put 1000 rupees in an envelope for Lakshman the never-tiring porter at the gate with his welcoming smile. I notice that tips are received with modesty, almost embarrassment. Jagdish is early by half an hour and interrupts my energy medicine exercises. Off we drive away from the tree-lined streets of Delhi onto the motorway, through smaller and larger dusty towns where I wonder how people can live. Fall asleep some of the time. We stop at a roadside cafe with an amazing painting of Krishna and the gopis and I drink a coffee. Jagdish shares his parta with me. Don't want to eat too many carbs today.

There is a change of plan. The first night will be spent in a hotel, Vrindavan Cottages, and then onto the ashram where my guide will be Madan Prabhu. Apparently the ashram is booked out. These places tend to get full like the ashram by the river in Rishikesh where I wanted to stay near the cave.

The town has a good feeling about it. The Lotus temple looks amazing and there are plenty of other temples. The cottage is a large complex with many blocks. My room is large with a king-size double bed and plenty of room to practice tai chi. There are some problems connecting to the internet. For security reasons you can't get a local network in the room, the manager explains. He speaks of the Ashardham temple in Delhi which was bombed. It was the first stop on my last tour and the security was worse than at the airport.



Vrindavan cottages

All is peaceful and still. Life is simple with a definite aim: the pilgrimage and the blog. Am slowly adjusting to the tempo of India and the focus on just this day. Each and every day has to be treasured and lived to the full. The best day of my life, as I say in the invocation, is today.

Am thinking about Len and wish he would phone. There are emails with the unvarnished truth and WhatsApp messages. He says the photos are great and it is great he likes them. But it would be nice to talk. Yesterday sent the photos by WhatsApp to Shirley, Len, Lindsay and Wajdan and got a shopping list for spices and jewellery from Wajdan.

Dinner comes to the room: heavily spiced mushrooms and vegetables for 500 rupees and then I am asked for more. The man talks in Hindi. Understand nothing and forget to ask him to switch the TV on for me.

Do I really want TV? Probably not. I want more time to

do the things I had hoped to do. No Hindu studying, not even the vocab, but at least am managing the tai chi practice. Last trip the weather was too hot and I was too tired. And so to bed after the vitamins and the black coffee which was sweetened freelance even though I did not ask for sugar.

12th February 2023 - Sunday

Lotus Temple, Basna temple Radha's father, Nandagoan Maharas temple, rickshaw ride round Gorvadan Hill, ponds of Radha Kund and Sham Kund

Got up early at 7am and there was plenty of time to get ready and pack. The urine infection has not left me. Puha for breakfast. Met Madan ji, my new guide, in a car park near the ISKON temple. The roads to the guest house and temple were closed because it is Sunday and Indian families all go to the temple. It was decided to check out a few historic temples out of town as the ones in town would be crowded.

We started with the **Lotus Temple**, or rather I asked to go there. It is an amazing structure in marble and the petals are amazing. A man with a monkey on a chain upset me. The poor creature was made to salute the tourists.



Dancing monkeys

Taking the shape of an elegant lotus flower, Priyakant Ju Mandir is a glamorous temple devoted to Lord Krishna and Radha. Here, it is believed that Lord Krishna in the form of Kant Ju and Radharani in the avatar of Priya Ji bestows their blessing upon numerous visitors who come to pray in the temple.

The structure is at an alarming height of 125 meters above the ground. The place is encapsulated with enormous ponds on the inside and a narrow road passing by the temple on the outside. Statues of Lord Ganesh, Lord Shiva, and Lord Hanuman can also be found in the corners of the temple.



The Lotus Temple

A long drive in through the Indian countryside follows. We are off to the Basna temple of Radha's father. The scenery not spectacular and cannot hold a candle to Uttarkhand with its lush pine forests. The land looks parched, the trees struggling to reach the sky.

We arrive in Basna. It's a town of narrow streets and lots of people. The car is parked in a car park and the walk to the temple begins. Singh suggests I jump on one of the motor bikes driven by a young man who specialises in taking tourists and pilgrims to the site. It looks to dangerous. A bike driven by a man keen on speed and weaving out of the traffic with too many cars and rickshaws seems like a good way to end up in hospital. We walk. The sun is coming up. Every car and rickshaw is tooting as if there was no tomorrow. Everyone is in a hurry. It's a choice of the road or 200 steps and Singh chooses the road.

The final stretch to the temple is lined with sadhus, beggars and children more

than eager to stamp the tilka on my forehead. Singh advises against it as the chemicals may affect my skin. I've had them before – red ones – but I take his advice.

There is not even standing room in the temple. It is a horrible, claustrophobic experience as are most of the temples in Vrindavan. Singh looks after me and makes sure I don't get lost in crowd.

After the visit go to the dreaded squat down toilet. But when you got to go, you got to go. The walk down the hill is much the same as the walk up the hill. Stick to the edge of the pavement afraid of the motorbikes and rickshaws.



Basna Temple

Radha Rani is believed to be the Goddess of Brajwasis. She is believed to be the secret power of Lord Krishna. For Brajwasis, Radha Rani is not just a consort of Krishna, but the ultimate source of his prowess. Due to her eminent character, she is the only worshipped Goddess of the Braj region. The Radha Rani Temple in Barsana is believed to be the place where Shreeji is always omnipresent and is believed to be blessing every pilgrim visiting the temple with unending devotion. Shri Radha Rani temple is a prominent temple in Barsana. Located at approx 43 km from Mathura in Uttar Pradesh Barsana village is one of the most revered places that appeals devotees across the world. Being the homeland and birthplace of Shri Radha Rani, this little suburb of Braj region is believed to be amongst the favorite spot of divine destinations not only for pilgrims but also for travellers with spiritual instincts. The Radha Rani temple in the city is also known as LadiLalji or Shree ji temple. Ladli lal Ji or Shree ji means beloved Radha .

Unknown facts about the temple:

Located on the Bhanugarh hill, the Shriji temple in Barsana is believed to be 5000 years old.

The name of the hill came from Shri Radha Rani's father's name Vrishbhanu. Barsana is famous worldwide as it is dedicated to Radha-Krishna. People all around the world come to visit the place as a pilgrimage. According to legends, Barsana is the place where Shri Radha Rani was born and brought up amongst her friends. Shri Krishna used to come to Barsana to meet her beloved Shri Radha.

According to the legends, Shri Krishna's father Nand Maharaj Ji and Shri Radha's father Vrishbhanu Maharaj were good friends and used to live in Gokul and Rawal respectively. Due to the atrocities of Kansa both Nand Maharaj and Vrishbhanu shifted to Nandgaon. Since Vrishbhanu resided on Bhanugarh Hill, the place became home to Radha Rani, where the temple is built today. Krishna and Radha's pastime stories are innumerable and Barsana witnessed some of them. It is said that Krishna used to come to Barsana to play Holi with Shri Radha Rani. This ritual is religiously followed by the locals here. The men of Nandgaon still come to play Holi with the women of Barsana. People from all over the world come to see this soul binding festivity and celebrate Holi here. The temple resonates the soulful spiritual vibrations the whole year which gains momentum during festive times like Radhashtmi and Holi.

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The walk to the next temple **Nandagoan Maharas temple** is pleasant with a coolish breeze. We walk along a reasonably large lane, past houses and their inhabitants for whom we seem to have curiosity value. There is a large complex for pilgrims. Women talking on their mobile phones sit outside their inviting rooms and gaze at us. We take off our shoes much too soon and the cracks in the concrete make my feet ache.

The temple is not as crowded as the previous one but there are more people than make me feel comfortable. Shoes on, shoes off, am getting used to this routine. Sometimes the concrete is hard on my stockinged feet. Chant Hare Krishna in my mind. Before leaving London the peace of Krishna was with me but it seems to be eluding me in his town which is a town of rushing and hustle and bustle and not of peace.

A middle-aged man, quite nice looking talks about taking us into the temple for 500 rupees, Singh is horrified but in the end we agree. He does very little apart from leading us into a smallish room with a statue of a deity. The priest is draping a golden scarf over the necks of the devotees. Not me. In the end he gets his 500 rupees but does not let me take his photo.

Krishna and his childhood pastimes amuse every pilgrim, and this amusement towards the supreme almighty brings the pilgrims to his own abode the Braj Dham. Nand Bhavan was the residence of Shri Krishna's foster father Nand Maharaj in Nandgaon. Located at 30 km from Mathura, Nandgaon is located to the south adjacent to the Nandiswar hill. Nand Bhawan is nestled on a mountain peak verdant with green foliage all around. The rolling mountains at the backdrop make this place more spectacular.



Nand Bhavan

Visiting Nand Bhavan in Braj is like revisiting the infancy of Lord Krishna. The opulence of Nand Bhawan can be judged by its sprawling vast complex. The premises are huge and few ascending stairs lead to its entrance. Nand Bhawan is wealthy in its manifestation. The wide open spaces around the palace bring the yester-world real to the eyes. There are fascinating rooms exclusively allotted to everyone including father Nand baba, mother Yashoda, mother Rohini, Shri Krishna, Baldev, Shri Radha and their allies. The residence is extensive as it had a kitchen, dining hall, restrooms, storerooms etc. The mythical place is wrapped up with stories from the spiritually significant era.

Besides splendid and spacious rooms, pilgrims here are allured by the red sandstone temple of Nand Maharaja. This magnificent 19th-century temple is the major attraction for pilgrims. The ceilings of the temple are flooded with beautiful paintings and the walls are decorated with the scenes from the spiritually significant era. The murals and paintings seem so real that they bring the episodic scenes back to life that were once played in this palace for real.

The temple has the idols of the deities Nand baba, mother Yashoda, Shri Krishna, brother Balarama, beloved Shri Radha and other family members. The enshrined deities are worshipped by the locals daily with faith.

Nand Bhawan beholds various stories of Lord's childhood and youth days with his brother Baladeva. It is believed that Shri Radha used to come here on loving requests of mother Yashoda. With great delight, she used to prepare tasty dishes for Shri Krishna. Krishna would then eat the food with his friends in the dining hall of and Bhawan and take rest in the bedrooms. Nand Bhavan is a major site for Hindu pilgrims. Devotees come here from all around the world and soak themselves in the timeless power and get connected to the spiritual world.

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Taking photos from the courtyard at the top of the temple was quite fun. The view of the town was not very scenic – just road upon road of rectangular nondescript houses. The walk back to the car was pleasant. Saw a European looking guy selling books. Surreal. A white guy selling spiritual books to Indians in an Indian town. He is from Wellington New Zealand where I was born. It was a joy to talk to him. The love of Krishna brings together people from all four continents.

Mount Govardhana - parikrama

Mount Govardhana, Situated at a distance of 15km from Vrindavan in the Mathura district of Uttar Pradesh. This is the hill which was lifted by Lord Krishna in his childhood by his little finger to save the life of local peoples from the natural calamity. The Govardhana Hill is now just a high rise no more hill from the ground level and popularly known as Giri Raj or Royal Hill in Vrindavan. The Parikrama (walking round the hill) of Giriraj Ji at Govardhana is one of the biggest pilgrimages for a Vaishna vite (one of the major Hindu denominations) is an extremely spiritual interaction with the Lord Himself in the process. The visitors can take a battery rickshaw which would charge about 500 INR to 600 INR for entire parikrama of 21 kms including, the Shyam Kund and Radha Kund (sacred ponds).

[Website](#)



Mount Govardhana lifted by Lord Krishna

Mandanji really built up this parikrama – a must do and a must see. Suggested we only walk for a bit but he insisted on a rickshaw for the whole deal which was like a ride round a non-descript Indian town getting thrown about and hanging on for dear life so I didn't fall out of the rickshaw.

Along the way were food stalls offering parasadam probably for free and lots of people walking the walk. Some lay down on yoga looking mats, others stretched up to the sky. It looked like a great journey they were making. For them it had a great spiritual significance like circumnating the kaba for the Muslims. Wish I had read more about Krishna's life before coming. Then the rituals may have had more meaning. Now they were something I was doing. Like visiting Najaf and Kerbala and then learning about Imam Ali and Hussein. Whichever way you do it, it's still good to do it in the heat and the feelings of sickness as the rickshaw hits every bump.

The cost of the rickshaw is incredibly cheap – only 300 rupees. Give 400. At least it's a motorised rickshaw. The manually driven rickshaw made me feel very sorry for the driver. Things looking a lot better. We are heading towards the banks of the Jamuna river also called Jumna. It is a major river of northern India, primarily in Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh states. One of the country's most sacred rivers it rises on the slopes of the Bandarpunch massif in the Great Himalayas near Yamnotri (Jamnotri) in western Uttarakhand.

With a cool breeze blowing, the heat is not at all oppressive as we reach **Shyam Kund and Radha Kund**.

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Radha Kund and Shyam kund are two pious ponds situated in a village named Arita near Govardhan hill. Believed to be eyes of Govardhan hill, this place has witnessed many sweet pastimes of Lord Krishna and Radha.

According to the legends, Krishna was to kill his uncles Kans in lieu their sins committed in Mathura. To keep himself safe, Kans used to send demons to kill Krishna. One such demon was Arishta who came in the disguise of a bull and was killed by Lord Krishna and Balaram who easily overpowered the evil and saved his friends from this demon. When Krishna after killing this dangerous demon went to meet Radha she jokingly refused to play with him and asked him to take bath in every holy place and then touch her pure body. Lord Krishna then created a kunda by striking his heel on the ground and summoned all the holy places to enter the Kunda in the form of water. Krishna then bathed in it and teased Radha that he is perfect in creating such pond. Radha Rani also wanted to dig a pond for her and did it with her bracelet. When not even a single drop of water was manifested in the kunda Shri Krishna signalled all the holy places to again enter in Shri Radha Rani's Kunda in the water form. Thus both Radha Kund & Shyam Kund consists of the most sacred water of the world and are in their purest form even today. Lord Krishna even promised Radha rani that he will take bath in Radha kunda Govardhan every day and this kund will always hold a special place in his heart. Pilgrims from across the world come to take pious dips in these kunds to relieve themselves from all the bodily sins. As prime centers of salvation and spirituality, Radha Kund-Shyam Kund hold a special place in the hearts of devotees visiting the region.

[Website](#)

As in Rudaprayag a priest offers his blessings and says some prayers which I repeat. Some of the words are difficult for me to pronounce but Madan more than makes up for what I cannot pronounce. Then comes the haggling over the price of the ceremony. The priest, an elderly dignified man reluctantly accepts 200 rupees but as we leave the kund I discretely slip him a few more when Madan is not looking. He is very worried I am wasting my money which is actually flowing like water.



Shri Radha Rani's Kunda

It has been a tiring day. We reach the guest house a bit late in the evening and all I can think of is eating and sleeping. No time even to write the blog. There are some problems in the guest house about the internet for security reasons but the nice man in the restaurant accesses the hot spot for me and bob's your uncle.

The room is enormous with two large beds. Spread things across the beds. This is the law of expanding junk which expands to fill the space it is given. Madan's kettle is a blessing for the barley water and the herbs. I thank God for being able to visit these sacred places.

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13th February 2023 - Monday

Banke Bilhari Temple, Seva Kunj forest, Ranganath Temple, Jamuna River boat ride, Pre Mandir Love temple

Explain to Madan Ji that crowded temples really don't do anything for me. Can't see anything, it is stifling and people pushing and shoving in all directions and from all sides does not do anything for me. But he is determined to make sure I see the temples relevant to the life of Krishna.

We start the day with the **Banke Bihari Temple**. The walk to the temple is fine, down and up narrow lanes filled with small shops with their bright wares, food stalls and trinket shops. When we reach the temple the shoes come off and the crush to get in begins. Have forgotten my mask. This seems like a covid paradise although I am told it is not a problem in India nowadays. Try to leave the temple as soon as we come but the security guard does not allow us to leave by the entrance we came in. It causes a problem in retrieving our shoes.

Dedicated to Lord Krishna, Banke Bihari Temple is one of the popular tourist attractions in Vrindavan. Built in 1864, the temple is located near Shri Radha Vallabh Temple. Dedicated to Lord Krishna, it is counted amongst the most visited temples in Vrindavan. In the name Banke Bihari, the term Banke stands for 'bent at three angles' and Bihari for 'supreme enjoyer'. The meaning refers to the image of Lord Krishna where, while playing the flute, his right knee is bent across the left one and the right hand holds the flute.



Banke Bihari Temple

The architecture of the temple reflects a classic Rajasthani design. Banke Bihari Temple is one of those seven shrines of Thakur in the Vrindavan. At this renowned sacred site, there is an image of Lord Krishna in Tribhanga posture. It is said that this sacred idol was once worshipped by the renowned poet and classical musician Haridas Swami.

The history of Banke Bihari Temple goes back to Swami Haridas (the guru of Tansen) who established the temple. Once Swami Haridas sang a verse in Nidhivan in Vrindavan for his disciples. While he was singing, Lord Krishna along with Radha appeared in front of him. That was the time when Haridas asked the celestial couple to merge. On his request, both Radha and Krishna merged together to form the idol of Banke Bihari. The Banke Bihari Temple is believed to house this very idol.

[Website](#)

We have to exit the temple through a different exit and walk for a while along the stone streets in our stockinged feet until we finish where we started from. Madan Ji is not happy with the crowds and says apologetically that is how things are in India.

He understands that the crowds are getting to me so now we go to **Seva Kunj forest** where Krishna reportedly comes every night. It is here that the trees turn to gopis! I am so happy there will be vegetation and fresh air and nature rather than the crush of humanity trying to get into a sacred structure. Heard that a British guy got himself locked in the forest on purpose. It forbidden to stay in the forest after dark. The next day he was found dead. Did the locals dispatch him or was it a supernatural force?

The forest may have been a forest 5,000 years ago. It is certainly not a forest now. There are a few miserable trees but the whole area is fenced off to keep out the monkeys who jump and scream on the roof of the enclosure which resembles a benign cage. The breeze is pleasant, the crowd is gone and we reach a small prayer area. I sit down and close my eyes to meditate. Madan asks me if I am tired.

A large groups of devotees appears chanting. The older ones look tired, the younger ones curious – maybe wondering what they have struck.

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Seva Kunj was discovered by Swami Hit Harivansh in 1590. Followers maintain this sacred site and offer daily pooja seva to the presiding deity. It has a beautiful temple dedicated to Radha Krishna which is also known as Rang Mahal, where Radha and Krishna used to perform Raas Leela along with other gopis of Vrindavan. The



Rang Mahal the forest in the temple which Krishna is said to visit at night

temple's walls are decorated with paintings of various leelas (dances) performed by Shri Radha Krishna. Each painting depicts different aspect of Radha and Krishna. One of the paintings depicts Krishna combing and decorating hairs of Radha. In another painting, Lord Krishna is massaging Radhas' legs after she is tired of Raas Leela. Other paintings depict Radha Krishna playing Holi and in one Krishna is entralling Radha while playing flute.

The temple gates get closed after sunset and no one is allowed to enter the temple after evening aarti, as it is a local myth that Radha Krishna still perform Raas Leela and no one is allowed to see this divine spectacle. Even the monkeys which crowd the temple in the daytime, desert the temple after sunset.

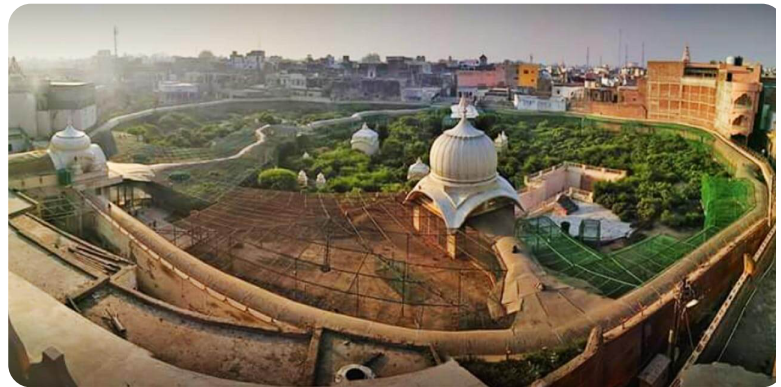
A little distance away from Seva Kunj is sacred Lalita Kund, which is believed to have been constructed by the flute of Lord Krishna to quench the thirst of Lalita Devi, a friend of Radha. Just north of Seva Kunj is Imli Tala. It has a very old tamarind tree which had existed since the time of Krishna. The tamarind tree lies in the courtyard of a Radha-Krishna temple which was built by Maharaja Bhakti Saranga. Lord Krishna used to sit under this tree and his body would turn into gold after ecstatic separation from his most beloved devotee, Radha.

The garden is also surrounded by various other temples like Radha-Vrindavan-Chandra temple, Banke Bihari temple, Dwarkadhish temple, Shahji Temple, Radha Damodar temple, Radha Shyamsundar temple and Raja Bharatpur Palace.

[Website](#)

We then proceed to the **Ranganath Temple**. It's a fantastic structure. Again Madant misjudges where to leave the shoes and the stone is hard on the feet. Chant hare Krishna in my mind. It's worth the pain.

Look at the temple. Jagdish takes my photo. He is a quiet, unassuming man always helpful. Started thinking about Madan. He doesn't add up in lots of ways. His story is that he decided to take on the temple life and was performing pujas for many years. His knowledge of



Ranganath Temple

Hinduism seems to centre on the facts and figures of the temples and Krishna's life but he says little about the philosophy. He left his family in West Bengal and came to Vrindavan. But his knowledge of Vrindavan leaves a lot to be desired. He had no idea where the ISKON guest house was and had to get a local to come with us in the car to take us to the place the night I arrived. Surely a spiritual person would know where the place was. Unlike with Om, there is no real discussion about the philosophy of the religion. He asked me what is the difference between a human being and an animal and was satisfied with my answer that a human being has self-consciousness and can experience God. Now his only regular activity is taking part in a ritual in a temple every night. Apart from that nothing – except the occasional guiding job. He says he wants a spiritual life with no hassles but he married a Latvian lady. It lasted six months and now she is back in Latvia with no plans to revisit India in the near future. He has a very modest dwelling which would be nice if he cleaned it up and says he has another house which will be like a European house when he has time to devote to it. So how did he get the money for two houses and savings in the bank when he is leading the monastic life? It is difficult to get him to slow down and

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soak in the atmosphere of the places we are visiting. He always seems in a hurry. Hurrying to what? Yes, there is a willingness to help. He lent me a kettle which was a godsend but I detect a certain impatience. He seems to want to be somewhere else. But there is respect and a lovely smile and good will. He loves the lunches I buy and ensures he always gets lunch.



Sri Rangji Temple

gates carved in Rajasthani style, one each on the eastern side and on the western side. The Rajagopuram is seven storeyed leading to sanctum sanctorum being guarded by 'Jaya -Vijaya'

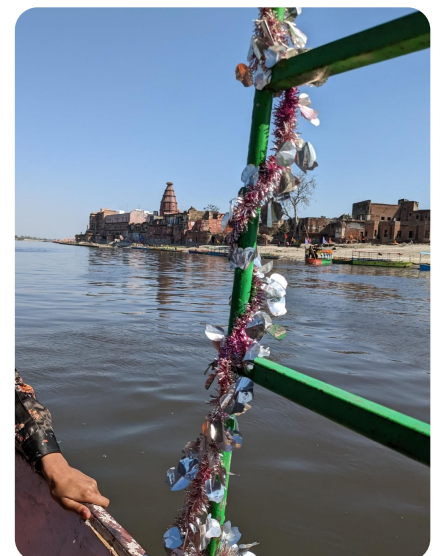
Sri Rangji Temple or Rangnath ji Temple is one of the largest and the only temple built in Dravidian style in Vrindavan. Vrindavan has always been the centre of faith and devotion because of its association with Lord Krishna and Radha Rani. This devotion has been the driving force behind the construction of temples throughout history. Built in 1851, by Seth Govind Das ji and Seth RadhaKrishna ji under the guidance of Shri Rangdesik Swami ji, Shri Rang ji Temple is dedicated to Lord Shri Goda - Rangamannar. Goda or Andal was a famous 8th century Vaishnava saint who had composed "Thiruppavai" - a set of Tamil devotional religious hymns. As per the belief, Goda devi had fasted and prayed to attain Lord Rangamannar or Lord Vishnu. Lord Rangamannar or Lord Ranganatha who is none other than Lord Krishna fulfilled her wish by becoming her bridegroom. In the temple, Lord Ranganatha is worshipped as the bridegroom with a walking stick with Andal on his right. Shri Ranganath ji temple is inspired from Ranganathswamy temple at Srirangam in Tamil Nadu. It mesmerises you with an amalgamation of South Indian and North Indian traditions and influences. This magnificent temple is an excellent example of Dravidian architecture mixed with Rajasthani style. One can see concentric rectangular enclosures around Sanctum Sanctorum or Garbha Griha, inspired from Dravidian architecture and two beautiful stone

We take a rickshaw to the banks of the Jamuna River. It's great to be near the water. Boats welcome and we decide on a trip on the river. Without being unkind to Vrindavan the best way to see it certainly seems to be from the boat. It is quite an old boat and Madan takes care of the usual negotiations about the price which is finally settled at 300 rupees

It reminds me of the song Special Investigations – my usual fee plus expenses.

Step in the mud clambering into the boat and sit myself down. No hint of a life jacket and remember articles I read about hundreds of people drowning when something goes wrong with a ferry. But why think negative. The boat soon fills up with locals who sing and take selfies with joy in their hearts. A young man with a ghetto blaster jumps on the boat and off we go in a circle.

Madan looks slightly tired as he often does. What does he do at night? It's great being on the river but the journey is short – only about 20 minutes. It's back to the guest house for a sleep before the visit to the Love Temple for a light show.



Jamuna River

Madan takes me on his scooter to an ATM. Withdraw the maximum allowed 10,000 rupees. Money is going fast and there will have to be a tip for Madan and Jagdish. Am thinking of giving him a tip of 2000 and topping up Jagdish's tip to 1500. It is fun on the scooter – third ride in my life. The first was in 1985 in Shinjuku Tokyo on my way to the UK, the second was with Anju in Rishikesh on the way to the arti during the last trip and now this is the third.

The rickshaws and the heat seem to be taking their toll and lie down and sleep – almost until 6pm when it's time to take a walk to the **Love temple Prema Mandir**. Walking with Madan is no fun. He races on ahead again always in a hurry and then turns around to find I am still struggling to cross the road and returns to hold my hand.



Love Temple Prema Mandir

We are early so we go to an upmarket mall and Madan buys me some tea. I ask what he wants and he eats a masala dosa happy that today he will not have to eat anymore. I ask for a small clay cup and Madan manages to get me one. There are some lovely looking cakes on display but decide against them. Weight is okay but in danger of going up.

We make our way to Prema Mandir. The temple was established by Shri Kripalu Maharaj in January 2001 and it took almost 11 years to complete. The temple was inaugurated on 17 February 2012 and was opened to public on 17th February itself. Approximately 150 crores were spend on it. It is situated on a 54-acre site on the outskirts of Vrindavan, and is 125ft. high, 122ft. long, 115ft. wide accommodating 25,000 people at a time and is still under construction with Italian marble. The temple represents a renaissance in ancient Indian art and architecture.

The ambiance of the temple is pious and spiritual. Lighting is used in a very modern way and within the intervals of 5-10 minutes the colours change. The temple beautifully describes the life of Lord Krishna.

The temple has spectacular idols of Lord Krishna and Radha on the first floor and Lord Rama and Sita on the second floor. This unique Prema Mandir of Shri Radha-Krishna shows a glimpse of ancient Indian sculpture. Prema Mandir through the temple architecture personifies divine love. The temple opens in all direction. The archway of Ashta Mayur is carved on the main entry points. Ninety four panels set up on the temple's exterior display the loving pastimes of Shri Krishna depicted on Shrimad Bhagvatam. meaning "Story of the Fortunate One," is text that is considered one of the main collections of wisdom in Hinduism, covering a wide range of knowledge from the nature of the Self to astrology, geography, music, dance, culture and yoga.



Statues in the Love Temple

The festival of Janamashtmi is also celebrated at grand level in this temple. The events related to the life of Lord Krishna are depicted in very beautiful manner.

It's an amazing explosion of colour. Round the temple are life size statues of Krishna and Radha and other significant characters in Hinduism. Buy a book small book *The Holy Name*. Have to keep the weight down or I will be charged something awful for over-weight luggage.

It would be great to visit this temple in the day time and spend some hours looking at the statues and taking a peak inside – without the crowds. Probably an impossibility in India.

Buy some sweets from the little shop in the ISKON temple. It is a long wait. People push in. The lady who handles the money with the same hands as she handles the food horrifies me. Maybe I will soak the sweets in hot water to kill the bugs. Madan remarks that I take very good care of hygiene unlike the Indians.

Send off the WhatsApp images to the folks back home. My head aches a bit and cough. Am sure it's the dust but do a covid test to reassure myself. It would be tragic if I gave the dreaded lerg to Om and his family. Manage a little bit of tai chi. Leg muscles hurt slightly. It's the walking up the steps in the temples. And so to sleep in my king size bed.

14th February 2023 - Tuesday (Valentine's Day)

Krishna's birthplace in Matura, Jamanu River, Virla Temple



Room in ISKON guest house

It's the last day in Vrindavan and I could not leave without seeing **Krishna's birthplace**: the jail in which he was born. Apparently there is also a temple.

Today I am on time but Madan sends a text saying he will be 15 minutes late. No great problem. The heat from the sun soon comes up and don't need my scarf at all. Don't sleep in the car. It's only seven kilometres to Matura, a smaller version of Vrindavan.

Mathura is one of the seven Hindu holiest sites in India located in west of Uttar Pradesh about 51 km away from Agra, 142 km from Delhi and 23 km from Gobardhan Mountain. It is famous as the birthplace of Lord Krishna who is respected as the most powerful god for Hindus. It is believed that the God Krishna was taken at his birth as a child of Mata Devoki at the jail of King Kansa (maternal uncle of Krishna). Krishna's childhood was spent at Gokul in Vrindaban just 13 km away from Mathura.

According to mythology of Hindus Mathura was the capital of the Surasena Kingdom which was ruled by Kansa. Previously it was known as Madhuvanas or Madhupura and later it took its final name. The city covers an area of 3801 sq km on the west bank of Yamuna River. From the ancient age of Indian history the culture of the city was highly influenced by the story of lord Krishna. The place has been invaded by several invaders and destroyed several times since the temple was built by Sri Vajranabha, great grandson of Lord Krishna, 5000 years ago. The new temple complex was completed in 1982.

There is a lot of security before entering the birthplace. The security guard looks at my two passports and the picture. The declaration explaining that I am in fact the same person is in the guest house. No questions asked. Off we go. There is a long passageway to the jail birthplace which ends with images of Krishna – and lots of people. Madan raises his hands in praise. I follow suit. Then we leave through the door at the other end of the birthplace and come into a large courtyard which leads to the **Krishna Janmabhoomi temple**. It's closed but the architecture is imposing. There is a mosque next to the temple but there is some bad blood between the Hindus and the Muslims as the mosque site was once the site of a Hindu temple, or so the Hindus claim.



Temple at Krishna's birthplace

One of these legends says that the temple was built by Vajranabha, Krishna's great-grandson. It is believed to have been constructed in the 6th century BC.

The temple has been renovated many times over the centuries, by different rulers. The buildings we see today are the result of a major refurbishment that took place in the 20th century. It comprises of Keshavdeva Temple, with the garbha griha (sanctum sanctorum) located at what is said to be the birthplace of Lord Krishna, and the Bhagavata Bhavan.

There is a small shrine in the complex devoted to Lord Krishna. A narrow street lined with shops selling religious paraphernalia leads to the temple complex.

Krishna Janmabhoomi Temple consists of paintings depicting scenes from Lord Krishna's life along with the idols of Lord Krishna and Goddess Radha. There are three temples which are a must see: Keshavdeva Temple was built in 1958 by Ramkrishna Dalmia. Garbha griha, or sanctum sanctorum, is dedicated to the eight-armed Yogmaya (Nand Baba's daughter), with a marble pavilion and underground prison cell.

The Bhagavata Bhavan which is dedicated to Shrimad Bhagavata was completed in 1982. It has five shrines, with the prime shrine boasting six-foot-tall statues of Lord Krishna and Goddess Radha.

[Website](#)

This site has a little of the peace I have been longing for. No chance to meditate but at least managed to see the deities. Suggest a cup of tea when we return to the car park but the restaurant next to it is closed and I ask to go the **Jamanu River**. Easier said than done, down lots of dusty streets and through the sewage disposal plant. There is an opening to the river bank and a few tourist boats with no tourists and no boat men. No tea kiosk, just a man selling water and soft drinks. Not a bite to eat, not that I want one. The carbs are making me put on weight.

Sit on the swing with Jagdish. He is enjoying himself and takes a picture of me and of us. Madan has calmed down a bit. A young man looks at me curiously and asks if I want to smoke marijuana. I smile and shake my head. Ten years in an Indian jail for illegal drug use. Not bloody likely.

We drive back to the main road. Jagdish asks for directions many times. Not a good place to get lost. The locals are friendly. We stop at the **Birla temple**. It's an imposing brown structure but not as elaborate and impressive as other temples I have seen.



Jamuna River

Gita Mandir, also known as Birla Temple, is a beautiful temple on the Mathura-Vrindavan Road. It is a prominent Hindu pilgrimage site and among the most visited temples in Mathura. Lord Krishna is the presiding deity here. The temple has magnificent architecture, with exquisite carvings and paintings further enhancing its beauty. Gita Mandir Mathura is built in the traditional Hindu style of temple architecture. Red sandstone has been widely used to build the temple and other structures in the complex. A white marble statue of Lord Krishna adorns the main sanctum sanctorum. And the walls are covered with colourful paintings depicting various events from Lord Krishna's life. But what makes Gita Mandir Temple special are the pillars inscribed with the chapters of Bhagavad Gita, the holy book of Hindu religion. These pillars have all the 700 verses, divided into 18 chapters, carved with precision. The temple, the pillars and the other structures in the complex are all enclosed within a beautiful garden. And the entire area offers a serene and calm ambience to the pilgrims. Gita Mandir was built by Sheth Jugal Kishore Birla in 1946, in the memory of his parents. Jugal Kishore Birla belonged to the reputed Birla family. And he was a well-known philanthropist and supporter of Hindu philosophy.

[Website](#)

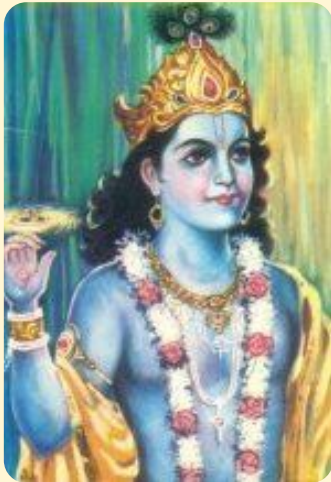
We drive back to Vrindavan. The return journey seems to be a lot quicker and there is universal agreement as it's my last day in the town, lunch is on me in the restaurant in the guest house. Have my usual vegetables and the two guys have a thali. Madan does not drink tea and goes to buy me a shoulder bag like the monks carry – present from Om Prakash. Very nice of him. When he returns Jagdish says good bye – until 7 am tomorrow morning. Madan comes to take his kettle which was life saver and I give him 1000 rupees. He is reluctant to accept it. We say goodbye. He has charm but also an impatient streak.

Then it's work time on the blog. Time goes fast. Pack most of my stuff and set the alarm for 5 am. So it's goodbye to Vrindavan. It will be appreciated more in retrospect when I learn about the life story of Krishna. It's an honour and a privilege to visit this city - something many Hindus have not been able to do.

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Gita Mandir



Biography of Lord Krishna

Sri Krishna is the central figure of the Bhagavad Gita. Sri Krishna is widely considered by Hindus to be an Avatar – a direct descent of God. During the Battle of Kurukshetra, Krishna gave Arjuna the immortal spiritual discourse of the Bhagavad Gita – Krishna taught a spiritual path of wisdom, devotion and discrimination. Sri Krishna also popularised devotional bhakti yoga through his time with Radha and the Gopis in Vrindavan.

Sri Krishna said in the opening section of the Bhagavad Gita:

“Whenever, O descendant of Bharata, righteousness declines and unrighteousness prevails, I manifest Myself. For the protection of the righteous and the destruction of the wicked, and for the establishment of religion, I come into being from age to age.”

Sri Krishna was born in northern India in approximately 3,228 BCE. The Puranas consider Sri Krishna’s life to mark the passing of the Dvapara age into the Kali Yuga (current age)

Krishna was born in prison to devout parents – Devaki and Vasudeva. At the time of his birth, his life was in danger because the tyrant Kamsa was seeking to kill him. It had been foretold that Kamsa would be killed by Devaki’s eighth child. Since Sri Krishna was the eighth child, he was smuggled out of prison to be raised by his foster parents Nanda and Yasoda in Gokula. Nanda lived a simple lifestyle and was a chief in the local Cow-herding community. The young Sri Krishna is often depicted in these days as being a mischievous child, who enjoyed playing pranks and having fun. Some worship Sri Krishna as the ideal child of innocence.



Scene from Krishna’s life

However, even in his young years, Krishna is reported to have killed demons Trinavarta and Putana. He is also said to have lifted a nearby hill – Govardhana to protect the villagers against the wrath of Indra.

In the early stage of his life, Sri Krishna is also often depicted playing the flute for his beloved gopis – female devotees. Of these Radha was the greatest devotee.

This life episode was crucial in the development of Hindu Bhakti devotional tradition. It is this tradition of bhakti which was important in the lives of future avatars such as Sri Chaitanya and Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Krishna taught that there were many paths to reach the goal of self-realisation, but devotion was the shortest path.

“However men try to reach me, I return their love with my love; whatever path they may travel, it leads to me in the end.” — Chapter 4, verse 11

On his return to Mathura, Sri Krishna killed his uncle Kansa – after Kansa had tried several times to have Krishna killed.

In Mathura, he befriended the Pandava Prince Arjuna. Sri Krishna became a counsel and friend to Arjuna.

The Kurukshetra war was a battle between the Pandavas and Kauravas (led by King Dhritarashtra). Despite the provocations of the Kauravas, Sri Krishna tried to mediate to avoid a conflict. He asked the Kauravas to give the Pandavas just a small amount of land.



The battle at Kurukshetra

However, Dhritarashtra refused any compromise. Once war became inevitable, Sri Krishna offered a choice to his dearest friend Arjuna – either he could choose Sri Krishna himself, or he could choose Krishna’s armies. Arjuna chose the counsel of Sri Krishna rather than his armies.

It was on the battlefield of Kurukshetra that Sri Krishna gave the immortal dialogue of the Bhagavad Gita, which was an exposition of Sri Krishna’s yoga and how an aspiring seeker might seek union with God. Unlike Indian scriptures of the past, the Bhagavad Gita did not require world renunciation but encouraged world acceptance. The Bhagavad Gita and the life of Sri Krishna were very important for making spirituality accessible to ordinary people – and not just yogi’s who renounced the

world. The central message of Sri Krishna was for man to take part in desireless action – motivated not by human ego, but for the Divine Cause.

“You are only entitled to the action, never to its fruits. Do not let the fruits of action be your motive, but do not attach yourself to nonaction.” Bhagavad Gita Chapter 2, Verse 47

During the battle, Sri Krishna occasionally intervened to help Arjuna and the Pandavas win. Sri Krishna broke his own word – proving his love for his dearest disciple was greater than so-called human morality.

Sri Krishna also unveiled his universal form to Arjuna – showing Arjuna his full spiritual Realisation. After this Arjuna became a disciple of Sri Krishna, rather than just admirer and friend. Sri Krishna embodied both the human and divine aspects. As an avatar, he played a human role, but, at the same time, was a fully realised soul – one with God. During his lifetime, few recognised Sri Krishna’s spiritual height.

Sri Krishna took eight principal wives and had many sons. However, his sons were unspiritual and became increasingly haughty and arrogant. It is also said, Sri Krishna took 16,100 more women whom he had rescued from Narakasura’s Palace after killing Narakasura. It illustrates Sri Krishna’s compassion for the downtrodden and unfortunate victims of society and old social traditions.

After the Battle of Kurukshetra, Krishna visited Gandhari to offer his condolences (Gandhari, wife of Dhritarashtra, had lost 100 sons in the battle) Gandhari cursed Sri Krishna because she believed he could have stopped the fighting. Gandhari cursed that Krishna would die within 36 years, along with anyone from the Yadu dynasty. Sri Krishna was happy to accept this curse because his sons had become badly behaved and he knew his mission was drawing to a close.

In later life, Sri Krishna retired to Dwarka where he lived for many years. Legend has it that Sri Krishna was killed by an arrow through his ankle when he was shot by a hunter, who mistook Sri Krishna for a deer. The ankle was the one area of weakness in Sri Krishna’s body. He accepted death calmly, knowing his time on earth and come to an end.

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15th February 2023 - Wednesday

Drive to New Delhi from Vrindavan, Flight to Rishikesh, wedding

Getting up at 5am was surprisingly easy. The routine was established. Do the urine test, (negative), check weight (going up due to the carbs), dry hair, dress. Make sure the Hare Krishna chant is playing on YouTube.

Packed everything and was downstairs at 7am. Jagdish walked through the door as I emerged from the lift. Checked had my tickets, passport etc., and off we drove through the non-descript countryside with few trees. Dropped off the key I accidentally put into my bag from Vrindavan Cottages and we were soon on the expressway to Delhi.

Breakfast was at a very salubrious cafe. Had a vegetable updam. Not managing to avoid the carbs. Jagdish brought a piece of paper and a pen and asked for a reference. Did the usual *'to whom it may'* praising his punctuality, professionalism and willingness to help and said I would have no hesitation in recommending him to prospective visitors to India.

We hugged at the airport, gave him 1500 rupees and felt I had made a friend. Was now in the custody of an airport porter whose shirt said no tip but he got a generous one nevertheless. Was charged 1000 rupees as had two cases instead of one but the weight was alright.

There were some lovely shops in the airport. Bought some elegant shoes-cum-slippers to make up for the tai chi shoes I forgot in the bungalow. In the jewellery store was told that women could not wear a necklace with the monkey god Hanuman. Near the gate, the seating was jam-packed. Out came the mask which was stifling but it stayed on for the duration of the flight. Hardly anyone wore a mask.



Wedding in Rishikesh

It was a short bus ride to the plane packed like the flight from London. A lady asked if I could take the window seat so she could sit next to her son. Agreed. The urine infection was over so no need to be in the aisle. A pleasant man from a wellness company sat next to me and we exchanged pleasantries. The flight was meant to take 55 minutes but it was shorter and the taxi driver sent me a message saying he was waiting. Om had already paid for the cab. It is wonderful the way he looks after me every step of the way.

Was decked out in the lilac trousers and matching top. Have been thinking about this meeting for a long time. The ride to Rishikesh was fast and in about 25 minutes we were on the outskirts of the town. A gloomy looking restaurant with a non veg sign suggested the locals would prefer if it wasn't there. Did not find a flower shop, so no flowers for Angi.

The hill to Homestay started to look familiar. We arrived and the neighbouring family was sitting comfortably on chairs in the drive so we took the cases and walked. Tusita, the daughter I did not meet on my first visit, was there to meet me and take one of the bags. Angi was on the front porch of the house looking slightly older and maybe a little sad. Sat at the large table and filled in the visitors' registration book.

The room was just as I had left it and my towel and dress were in the cupboard waiting for me. Started to unpack – each item at a time and then back to the porch. Om arrived not long after with a lot more hair – almost like the photo on his website. The same radiant peaceful smile was there and the words of wisdom started flowing.

The plan was for me to go with Angu to an Indian wedding. A neighbour was getting married and it is the custom to invite the whole neighbourhood. A giant marquee with carpet laid on the grass was lit up with a thousand lights and the women turned up in colourful saris. Children played happily and ate happily and the grown-ups seemed content to look at the bride and groom in their costumes covered in ornaments and jewels. They looked so young. The music was almost deafening, the photographers were enjoying themselves, a good time was had by all.

The food was modest but not anything in danger of making me ill. Roti, rice and vegetables. Anju made sure I was alright and had a seat from which I could lose myself in the noise and easily get up to take pictures. Om does not like these occasions so she had to show the face.

Got home to discover that Cristina, Mark's Spanish girlfriend – his fiancée judging by the photo of the ring on WhatsApp, had been deported when she returned to Britain. Put him in touch with Sabah Mukhtar a long time Arab lawyer friend. If anything can be done to get her back into Britain he will do it, but the law is the law and sometimes nothing can be done. There are regular WhatsApp messages to a few dear friends back home and then time to sleep.

It's early bed in the Prakash household. There was a blanket in the cupboard. Folded the duvet over double and fell asleep in the blue and white room with a dim light so the room was not in total darkness.



Children at Rishikesh wedding

16th February 2023 - Thursday

Waterfall, Ganga Arty

Today was the day I saw the waterfall Om had sent me so many videos of. Breakfast was the barley brought from London and a sunflower seed mixture bought in Delhi. Angi put some milk with it and it really tasted great. There were also two pieces of toast with butter and some rice. It was a great breakfast but have to stay off toast in future. There was also fruit, oranges and paw paw.

Then off we went past the house along a concrete path past a small restaurant and some small shops and slowly up the hill past more quaint places to stay with large home made swimming pools and rustic living quarters.

We were welcomed into one of these unique idyllic settlements and given a coffee. Angu spoke to man and they exchanged notes on business. Was shown a grain wheat mill which works on water only, no electricity. Do we really need modern day technology?

We were in the hills with a thousand shades of green: trees, flowers streams and small waterfalls. Nature in the town or the town in nature.

Sat on a rock and looked at the small waterfall. Life seemed to stand still. It was warm with a gentle breeze. We stopped, we walked, we stopped again until we reached the last waterfall. A small dignified shrine added a spiritual dimension to the scene as young men splashed about in the pool by the waterfall.

It is difficult to describe the beauty of the simplicity of nature. Simplicity is the key to truth. Nature and God speaks and when God speaks, listen!



Temple near waterfall near Om Homestay

We started making our way home. One minute I was standing and the next minute I was on the ground. Not at all sure what happened but my hand had a bit of a gash in it and my bum was sore. Made my way back to Om Homestay and Tusita put a plaster on scrape and disinfectant. Worried may have broken one of the small bones in my arm but the pain was not very bad.

The next treat was the Ganga Arti. Walked with Tusita part of the way then we took a tuk tuk. As it was early, stopped off in **Shivananda's house**. He was a doctor who studied in Russia and then met a holy man by the river in Rishikesh and dedicated his life to the spiritual path as well as offering free medical treatment. It is said Krishna appeared to him when he was carrying an injured man across a bridge for treatment.



Waterfall near Om Homestay

The house had a warm welcoming feeling like the person who lived there was welcoming you onto their own private world with a global focus. People sat on a mat in the lounge in front of a large picture of Shivananda. In one of the rooms a devotee in a white garment was motionless with a smile of total peace and serenity on his face. I hope one day I reach that state of bliss and total peace in meditation. The view of the river was amazing, hills in the background the flowing water beneath the window.

We arrived early for the arti. Men were washing the steps. Bought the flowers and candle to send down the river. A cow took an unhealthy interest in the flowers which would have made a snack if Tusita hadn't moved them. The animal stood on my foot as I was sitting on the steps. People laughed and gave me an understanding smile.

Flower petals were sprinkled onto the platforms. Across the river were two flames. Two bodies burned as their souls had left this world and it was necessary to free them from their mortal remains Tusita explained matter-of-factly. The Indians are a lot more comfortable talking about death than Westerners. Maybe because they believe we have many lives and the end is the start of the new beginning. Before the public arti a number of people had paid for their own private arti and they sat with their backs to the audience next to the river. Tusita remarked that is what people do if they have money. The private arti did not look like anything very special.



The Ganges in Rishikesh

We moved quite close to the celebrants. They stepped onto slightly raised platforms and began the ceremony slowly at first. Then the lamps got bigger, the flames more intense and the music louder. No health and safety here – paraffin was poured into the lamps and the flames leapt higher.

After the arti we walked back across the bridge to a tuk tuk. There was the negotiation of the price but is 200 – 300 rupees worth bothering about. Tusita talks to a man in the tuk tuk. The tourist business again. He offers to pay the fare but she doesn't have a good feeling about this and refuses.

She is a lovely lady, 20 years-old, not sure what she will be studying at university. The choice is between Sanskrit and psychology. Om does not want her to go into the tourist business. She has to make her own way. Unlike most Indian women she has cut her hair and looks stunning.

A French couple have checked into the Homestay. They are retired, on their first visit to India. Om's friend, a French-speaking guide, accompanies them. The conversation is in Hindi, French and English with some good natured laughter about my attempts to converse in Hindi. Will get my head around this language some day.

And so to bed in the lovely blue room, pleasantly cool but not cold.

Arundhati Cave



Arundhati Cave

Will a wonderful place and a wonderful experience be the same the second time round? These thoughts were going through my mind as I prepared for another visit to the Vashisht cave.

Tusita went with me. The taxi was a 10 minutes early and I was not quite ready. It's only a 25-minute drive from Rishikesh and we seemed to be there no time. The holy man with an amazing smile was there. He said 'Yes, I remember you.' And then he vanished.

We bought some snacks and carefully made our way down the path to the cave. The cows were in the small paddock and the modest ashram on the river bank seemed like a place where time stood still.

There were a lot of shoes outside the main Vashisth cave so we made our way across the stones to the much smaller Arundhati Cave. I climbed inside on my hands and knees. There was a small altar with pictures of Gods and images and a holy book.

Closed my eyes to mediate. The silence came like a dear friend. Peace was there, peace profound, no time, no space just being. When I opened my eyes two people were sitting close to me. It was time to let them enjoy the peace of the cave so I moved to the steps outside and look at the Ganges through the trees.

The Ganges flowed always the same and always different. There was a special vibration in the air. The coolish breeze was welcome. We walked down the water's edge. Needed a flat space of ground on which to practise my tai chi. The energy was amazing.

Half way through the form Tusita said the man is there. So I walked across the stones to where he was sitting. His amazing smile was there and he talked about how once he was in marketing in Hyderabad. He gave it all up to come and live by the river. Now he sits for two hours in meditation. He wants to sit for ten hours - nothing moving, not a single hair. His conversation is intense. Then Tusita comes and he speaks in Hindi. She listens intently. Sense it's time to go and give him 500 rupees so he can build his bamboo hut.



The author practising tai chi by the Ganges

We eat some oranges and drink some water. The main cave closes at 1pm so it's time to go back there. But there are more shoes than before and there is a queue.

It does not bode well. Tusita phones the driver to tell him to come and pick us up at 1.30pm.

Manage to see the light at the far end of the cave. Then it's time to leave. Today I was meant to make friends with Arundhati.

Back in Rishikesh sit at the outside table with the French couple and their French-speaking guide.

They show some images of their village close to the border with Spain. There is a lot of laughter and jokes. Understand very little as the conversation is either in Hindi or in French. But it's good to be there in a congenial atmosphere.

Have told Luke, my friend in the tai chi club, that I am going to the cave by the Ganges. He suggests I go for a swim but the sign and the weather suggests otherwise. Luke spent some time in an ashram and has a lovely altar in his home. Bought a dancing Shiva for him during the first trip. On this trip the presents will be limited to a nice box of sweets.

Feel I have understood the essence of tai chi by the Ganges and it could well have been a Hindu monk who brought tai chi to China but the Chinese are not keen on that version of the story and there are many histories of tai chi.

The magic of the cave is still there. The peace, like the Ganges, is always the same and always different. It is a place I have to visit every year, God (Krishna) willing.



Warning about swimming near Arundhati cave

18th February 2023 - Saturday

Shivanada ashram, 13 storey temple, ring for Wajdan, mandala, leaf painting

First stop today **Shivananda ashram** with Anju and Sidhart. An imposing but simple building. It was the Shiva festival and drummers were accompanying the chanting. Garlands were hung near the grotto graced by a large picture of Shivananda. People knelt and placed their foreheads on the ground. The priests gave dhal and a sweet. Avoided that. Still very careful about the food – and the covid. Sat peacefully on a chair and meditated, then fell asleep. Anju read a holy book.

Sivananda Ashram was founded by revered Saint Swami Sivananda in the year 1936. He was one of the first yogis of the last century to open his door to the western world and introduce a scientific aspect of Yoga. He had disciples and followers from all over the world, who themselves became a leader in the world of yoga and meditation. Some of his disciples are Swamis Vishnu Devananda, Chidananda, Sivananda Radha and Andre Van Lysbeth to name a few. The former president of India also mentioned the saint's impact in his autobiography, claiming that meeting Swami Shivanand was the defining moment in his life.

All those entering his Ashram were asked to first learn three principles of the Yamas (moral principles of the Yoga Sutras of Sage Patanjali) - non-violence, integrity and purity. According to the Swamii, these lead to mastery of the body, breath and mind to go beyond the mind to self-realization. He taught the practice of four major branches of yoga - Raja, Bhakta, Jnana and Karma. Hundreds of books on various aspects of Yoga, Hinduism, and Vedanta were written by Sivananda.

After the death of its founder, the ashram was handed over to Swami Chidananda who travelled the world to spread the teachings of Yoga and Vedanta. Under his efficient leadership, the ashram became a centre of spiritual influence.

[Website](#)



Sivananda Ashram

We walk along the banks of the Ganges. An elderly man is selling paintings on leaves. They are unique creations and I buy for those on my shopping list. Remember these paintings from my first ever trip to India when I was 23. Now I am 66. I wondered then if I would ever return. And something told me yes, but not for a long time. We pass a shop selling mandalas and other pictures run by a Tibetan lady. She says the mandala picture I liked can be painted for me in purple, black and white and it will only cost 1000 rupees – not 7000 like the man in another shop was going to charge me. I asked him to paint me one when he said the one I liked had already been ordered for 5000 rupees. But the price went up when Om inquired. So it's really great we found this lady.



Tera Manzil Temple

We make our way to the **13-storey temple Tera Manzil**. It is an amazing construction with Gods on each floor. Each God in his or her own little room. Souvenir sellers detract from the temple's spiritual atmosphere. Try to read the names of the Gods below their statues with varying degrees. Learning Hindi is difficult when you are surrounded by people who speak English.

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The stair-climbing stops at floor 12 and we have to be content with the view from there.

Really look forward to a drink of coke on floor 12 but Anju says you can't drink in a temple so it has to wait until we are at ground level again.



The Ganges in Rishikesh

Tera Manzil Temple or Trayambakeshwar or Trimbakeshwar Temple where one can worship all the deities at a single place. Unlike the other temples which are been dedicated to a single deity. But this temple offers you to worship all at a single place. This temple is a thirteen storey building which is resided at the banks of the sacred river Ganga. This temple is clearly visible from the Lakhman Jhula. It has many rooms inside the temple dedicated to different gods and goddesses. Also after every room there is a shopping zone in different compartments which sell authentic and the religious products like the yantra, rings, rudraksha, photo frames of the Hindu deities and much more.

This temple absolutely looks like heaven in the evening, as it is lightened with bright lights. Also in the evening the "Ganga Aarti" is been performed in the temple forecourt area, which adds extra glitter to the attraction of great the Trayambakeshwa.

[Website](#)

A boat ride across the river follows as the bridge is under repair. There are no set departures for the crossing. When the boat fills up it sails. There are plenty of life jackets but no one is wearing one. Anju says they can be put on if the need arises. If there is an emergency I will be at the bottom of the Ganges before I get the life jacket on. Anju is not concerned. If the Ganga takes me, it takes me, she says.

It's a very quick crossing. A cow is waiting on the opposite bank content to sit where it is. Cows wander about freely in Rishikesh. Everyone is careful not to do them any harm and they seem to enjoy their privileged status.

Near the river bank is a jewellery shop. I buy a ring with a snake. Wajdan has asked for a gold ring with a snake but the price is 500 pounds. Buy one for 300 rupees. Fake gold. The snake as nice eyes but Wajdan is not impressed and does not want fake gold.

The weather is not oppressively hot and it's possible to practise tai chi. Blog is getting written. Not much studying of Hindi or reading spiritual literature.



Crossing the Ganges on a local ferry

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19th February 2023 - Sunday

Sri Baharat Mandir, Raghuaat Mandir RishiKund, Dominos pizza, bought dress

Today was designated for shopping. Had actually done most of the shopping, if not all. Took a tuk tuk to the market. Apparently I had been there before. At first, the recollection was vague but then the garden of the **Sri Baharat Mandir** looked familiar.

The mandir is a small temple with a great atmosphere. Sat quietly on the floor opposite the small altar for meditation.



Sri Baharat Mandir

Bharat Mandir (Temple) is the most ancient, most sacred, most famous temple in Rishikesh. It is located in the heart of the city. Jagadguru Adi Shankaracharya reinstalled the presiding deity in the temple on the day of Basant Panchmi in 789 A.D. On this day every year the Shaligram is taken for a holy bath in the sacred Mayakund and then carried in a grand procession through the city to be taken back to the temple for the symbolic reinstallation. It is also believed that if any pilgrim on the day of Akshya Tritiya takes 108 parikarmas (rounds) of Lord Shri Hrishikesh Narayan at this temple and seeks the blessing at his feet (it is only day when Lord's feet are uncovered), all his wishes are full filled. The temple is mentioned in Vishnu Puran, Shrimadbhagwat, Mahabharat, Vaman Puran and Narsingh Puran. Lord Hrishikesh known as Shri Bharatji Maharaj is different from Lord Rama's younger brother Bharat. He is known by the name of Bharat because he is the incarnation of Lord Vishnu in Kaliyuga, the preserving force holding Shankh, Chakra, Gada and Padam in his four hands. It is said that the five Pandavas along with Draupadi visited here on their way to heaven. Having stayed here for some period and performed worship of Lord Hrishikesh Narayan. It is said that the main temple is named after the Bharat, Rama's brother who meditated here at the time of the Tretayug along with his other brothers. There is in fact a belief that in the kalyug, Vishnu will be worshipped as Bharat. The other temples in the vicinity are dedicated to Rama or Raghunath, The four armed idol of Lord Hrishikesh Narayan in the temple signifies that the sage Raibhya conquered over the senses and attained Lord Vishnu. Just opposite to the main entrance of temple there is an age old tree. Actually it's a combination of three different trees whose roots are intermingled in such a way that it is next to impossible to visualize them as a separate entity. A museum, containing sculptures, pottery and decorated bricks found in the temple premises during excavation, has recently been established in the temple. The is duly registered and certified by the Department of Archeology Govt. of U.P.

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Shopping continues. Sidhart was buying arts supplies. Went in search of a card for Mark and Christina and ended up with an elaborate wedding invitation in plush red velvet with gold lettering. Also bought an orange card to stick over the original text so greetings for Mark Christina could be inserted.

As we were searching for the card saw an amazing yellow dress with elaborate patterns .

Anju said let's go and ask about it which we did. 3000 rupees. 30 pounds. It is worth it. The shop assistant took me up some narrow steps to show me other dresses but that was the one I wanted.

A tailor appeared and took my measurements. It would take him half an hour to make the alterations. Also get some gold bracelets for 350 rupees. 3.50 pounds. We say we will be back in half an hour. The original plan was to go the arti. We walked for a few minutes along the river bank. Hoped to sit on one of the benches but they were covered in dust so headed back to the arti place past an interesting looking temple.

Rishikund is situated close Raghunath Temple and Triveni Ghat. This antiquated lake where Sage Kubj. Sage Kubj Meditated at Triveni Ghat for Yamuna River and asked for to come at Triveni ghat so he can clean up at both Ganga and Yamuna together. Yamuna than showed up at Rishi Kund at Triveni Ghat.

Raghunath Mandir (Temple) is situated at Rishikund and adjacent Triveni Ghat Rishikesh. This sanctuary is committed to Lord Ram and his significant other half Sita. You can see Ganga waterway close to the sanctuary. There are modest shops with gems, garments and other goods and , cheap food and neighborhood nourishment of Rishikesh in the market. It is believed that during the ancient era, Rishikund was a havan kund or a fireplace. It was here that the great sages performed Yagya to appease the Goddess Yamuna. The holy river eventually appeared there and stayed in the kund ever since. It is also believed that Lord Rama took a bath in this pond during his exile.



Rishikund

A number of big fish swim in the pond. They resemble eels which seem to be doing very well judging by their size. A large sign advises not to feed the fish.

Sit by the pond and gaze its water. There is a reflection of the trees, peaceful and serene. At first I sat with my back to the temple and was quickly instructed by the locals that this is not how it is done. A poor unsuspecting tourist sat on the steps with his shoes on and Anju was one of the first to ask him respectfully to respect the local customs.

20th February 2023 - Monday

Haridwar: Vedmata Gayatri Trust, Sri Keshvanand Ashram, Dach Prajapati temple, Ganga Kar Ki Pauri, holy men

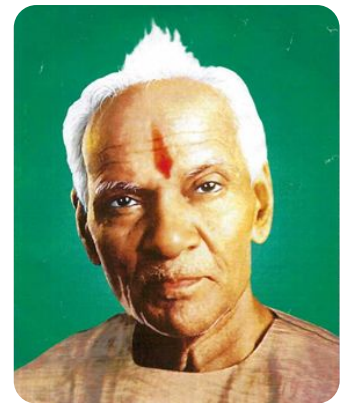
Haridwar is a place that looks just like the photos and videos on YouTube: a city by the Ganges where thousands of people congregate by the water to take a dip and wash away their sins.



The Ganges, Haridwar

Hindi and English and a garden with magnificent flowers which add colour and vibrancy to the complex. There is also a temple with a picture of the founder and a waiting room for those wishing to pay their respects. Food is served every day for everyone in the style of the Sikh gurudwara.

Shriram Sharma was an Indian author and freedom fighter. He founded All World Gayatri Pariwar which has 150 million members and 5000 centers worldwide. He praised the significance of Gayatri Mantra. He is the author of more than three thousand four hundred (3400) booklets and an interpreter of Vedic Scripture – Vedas, Puranas, Upanishads. He is also the pioneer of Scientific Spirituality.



Shriram Sharma

Shriram Sharma was born on September 20, 1911, in Agra, Uttar Pradesh. He wanted the betterment and upliftment of society. He used to teach children under a mango tree. He died on June 2, 1990. He considered Mahatma Gandhi as his spiritual master.



Statues of masters outside Swami Keshavanand Ashram

From the complex we proceed to the **Swami Keshavanand Ashram**. It feels a bit like familiar ground with its statues of Baba Ji and Lahiri Mahasaya. The grounds are spacious and the masters (Baba Ji, Lahiri Mahasaya and Keshavanand) on a raised platform in front of the astro turf. It is a good place to meditate.

After spending 37 years in the Himalayas doing deep Tapasya (meditation) Swami Keshavanand ji had a vision of The Supreme Goddess (Ma Bhagwati) after which he moved to an island near Haridwar to meditate further.

The island on one side has the Chandi Devi temple and the river Neeldhaara and on the other side the Bhagirathi river and the Mansa Devi Temple. At that time the island was a thick forest full of snakes and scorpions. Swami Keshavanand ji had only one Kamandal (water jug used by Saadhus) and a Chimta (tong).

This was in 1903 when there was British rule in India and the British Governor used to visit a Dak Bungalow from where he used to often come to do Swamiji's Darshan. The Governor would often find Swamiji's in deep meditation and sometimes he would sit and have long conversations with Swamiji. The Governor was very impressed with Swamiji's knowledge and fluent English. One day the Governor asked Swamiji how he could help and do Sewa (service). It was then that Swamiji asked him to make some arrangement where he could build a small hut and do his daily prayers and sing devotional songs without any problems or disturbance. Since then the land was and is leased to Swamiji and the Katyayani Trust that he set up. After obtaining the land Swamiji built an ashram. The trees spread a very fine fragrance. The Ashram which is on the banks of the river Ganga has the Mansa Devi temple on one side and the Chandi Devi temple on the other, is a very sacred and revered place.

[Website](#)

The next temple was **Daksha Mahadev** - not a very friendly place and Shiva, as his statue clearly showed, was not amused.

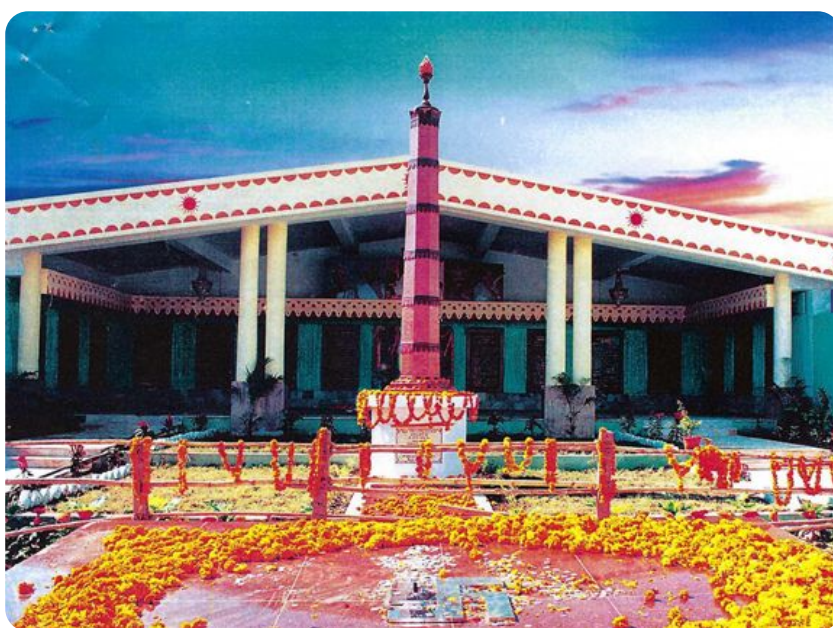
The Daksha Mahadev temple is popular among devotees due to its association with an interesting legend. Hindus believe that it is here that King Daksha had performed yagna. It is here that Sati burnt herself as she came to know about the insult done to her husband (he was not invited to the yagna). When Lord Shiva got the news, he took the life of King Daksha. However, Lord Shiva returned the life of Daksha later. So, the Daksha Mahadev temple is a reminder of this interesting legend and is regarded in high esteem by Hindus.

[Website](#)



Statue of Shiva outside Daksha Mahadev temple

We then walk along the bank of the Ganges. It's a very busy place with sadhus, shoppers, pilgrims and tourists. A warning comes through the loudspeaker to keep a close watch on phones and beware of pickpockets. It is here that I decide to get a photo with a sadu and approach an affable looking individual. Anju tells me that first you pay the money and take the photo. He gets his 300 rupees and then two others appear so I get three for the price of one.



Daksha Mahadev temple



The author with holy man in Haridwar

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21st February 2023 - Tuesday

Sunrise Kanjapuri Temple, Barjot Village, dinner German cafe, Anju, Sidhart and Tusita.

It was a cold day in hell. Got up at 4am to see the sunrise at the Kanjapuri Temple. It was an early morning ride and a climb of 312 steps, but the sight was truly amazing.



Kunjapuri sunrise

Kunjapuri temple is one of the best places to visit in Tehri Gharwal locale due to its story identified with divine beings and goddesses. There is also an all encompassing perspective of Garhwal Himalayan pinnacles like Swarga Rohini, Gangotri, Banderpunch and Chaukhamba toward the north and Rishikesh, Haridwar and Doon Valley towards the south. The sanctuary Kunjapuri is arranged on the highest point of the slope Kunjapuri 1,676m. high, 7 km far from Narendra Nagar, around 15 km from Rishikesh and 93 km from Devaprayag.

The Goddess Parvati is the partner of Lord Shiva. In her past birth, Goddess Parvati was known as Sati. She had hitched the Lord yet her father King Daksha was not very satisfied. He had sorted out a Yagna, a profound social affair where offerings are made to Agni Dev (Fire God). He had deliberately not welcomed his little girl and her better half. At the point when Sati came to know about this, she was enraged and chose to go uninvited. Master Shiva attempted to convince her to drop this thought however she was determined.

The ruler Daksha embarrassed her husband. Incensed by this, Sati hopped into the conciliatory fire and finished her life. Shiva was devastated and made ruin at the Yagna.

Master Brahma, the maker of the universe felt that if Sati's body did not get an appropriate incineration as indicated by the Hindu Shashtra's then she couldn't take resurrection as Goddess Parvati. Lord Vishnu was worried that Lord Shiva's pain would gradually bring about the decimation of the Universe. They couldn't control or face Lord Shiva's outrage so Lord Vishnu took his Sudarshan Chakra (Disk) and cut the body into pieces. As Lord Shiva voyaged her body part fell and the last rituals were finished by the divine beings. The spots where the celestial mother's body parts fell is known as Shaktipeeth. Sanctuaries have been worked around it and venerated day by day.

[Website](#)

The temple behind the viewing platform is small. A nice place to sit alone but not a good place to visit when there are lots of people. A coffee and biscuits are most welcome after seeing the sunrise.

We drive to Barjot Village 30kms north west of Rishikesh. A husband and wife live there, grow mustard, potatoes and lemons and tend a few cattle. Three dogs guard the house and protect its inhabitants from the pandas which appear at night. It is idyllic and peaceful. Sit on a chair and look out at the surrounding countryside. Silence. The peace of nature. The people are poor but happiness lights up their faces. I ask myself what do we really need in life?

Anju picks some lemons and gets some potatoes in a bag. The lady of the house brings me some tea and the biscuits Anju bought at the temple. A dog eats most of the biscuits. It looks at me with such pleading eyes I can't say 'no'.

We leave and dog follows us down the road until Anju shoos it to go back home. We drive back to Rishikesh with a stop for vegetable buying on the way.

Put myself in bed and sleep until the evening. The energy at the temple was powerful and the tai chi came alive when I practised it behind the temple.

Om announces that tonight Anju, Sidhart and Tusita would go out for dinner with me. The time was set for 6pm and off we went only to find that the restaurant, Anna's Mess, was closed. Made our way to the Ganges and sat in front of magnificent statue of Shiva. It looked as if the gods were out in force. The river flowed always the same and always different. It was a magic moment.

Dinner was at the German cafe. A German man did in fact teach the owners to bake the traditional German buns. The magnificent bookshop next to the cafe was open and bought a book, *Kabbalah Made Easy*, and two small books for Tusita and Sidhart.

Had some vegetable soup and paneer and vegetables and then went in search of an ice cream cone which was eventually found. Living dangerously, eating Indian ice cream. The one that comes packaged up is fine.



Woman at Barjot Village

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22nd February 2023 - Wednesday

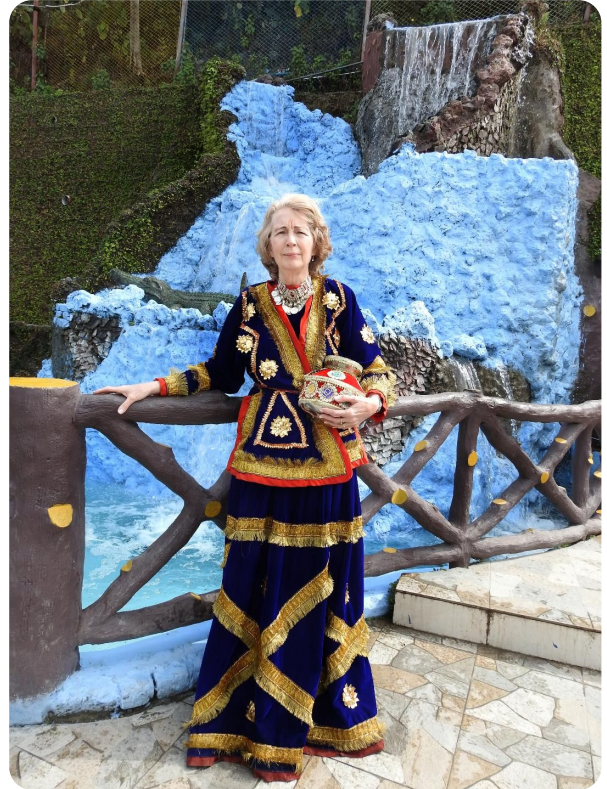
Dehradun: Ropeway, robbers' cave, temple, Buddhist monastery, noodles and mo mo at Chinese restaurant, family used oxygen meter

Left for Dehradun the capital of Uttarakhand with Tusita. She put a mask on in the car and I followed suit. The driver was coughing a little and in view of covid this was a little disconcerting.

We passed the airport road and drove through the amazing forest of Uttarakhand. The first stop was the **Sahastradhara Ropeway and Surkanda Devi Temple**. On reaching the temple, it seemed the ropeway was more of an attraction than the temple itself which was rather small. In fact there were two temples: a very small structure with Surkanda an avatar of Durga, and a bigger temple to Sai Baba who passed on about 90 years ago. He looked so affable and welcoming. No chance to sit and meditate in the temple.

Dressing up in a Tibetan costume and having my photo taken was fun. At first I was not keen but Tusita suggested it – for only 200 rupees. A lovely photo and sent to my Whats App as well.

Wanted to stay longer at the ropeway but Tusita was in a hurry and told me to pay for the photo and come. I found her a bit bossy, a bit arrogant and a woman in a hurry. Like to take my time at the attractions. She was not as bad as Madan. Was aware that I talk too much and have to do something about this.



The author in a local costume at Sahastradhara Ropeway



Sahastradhara Ropeway

Sahastradhara Ropeway is located opposite Sahastradhara in Dehradun the capital city of Uttarakhand. It is located on the top of hill where you can get 360 degree view of beautiful valley.

‘Thousand fold spring’ is the literal meaning of the term Sahastradhara. It is a lovely waterfall, with a depth of 9 meters. What makes the torrent so popular is its therapeutic value since its water contains Sulphur. Besides its medicinal merits, the stream presents a pictorial environ where one can spent hours in the calmness of silence. The Baldi River and the caves exaggerate the aesthetic beauty of the site. Since this astonishing natural splendor is situated with in the city limits, the tourists can easily reach to Sahastradhara.

Surkanda Devi Temple is the highest point in the area, located at a height of 3021 mt on the top of a hill. Situated at an elevation of 3, 030 m above sea level near the village Kaddukhal, the temple of Surkanda Devi is a lovely place to visit. The temple is famous for its architectural marvel and the verdant surroundings.

At the end of the ropeway Tusita and Sidhart eat some of the local food. Get a crispy snack without wheat. And off we go to the Robbers' Cave. It is obviously a tourist attraction with lots of eating places and gaudy souvenirs. Om warned me that the water in the cave reaches knee high. Wear the walking sandals left in the house after my last trip. There are also sandals for hire. Cheap, plastic and prone to fall apart as did the one Tusita hired.

The walk in the cave starts in water, at first more like a stream and then more and more water. Have to clamber over rocks and boulders of all shapes and sizes. My sandals bear up well. Tusita's not so well and one comes to pieces. Sidhart is really in his element, walking fast. Tusita really helps me, holds my hand and makes sure I don't fall again. Walking in the water is a lot easier than walking across the rocks. Most of the fellow walkers are Indians including women in brightly coloured saris carrying babies.

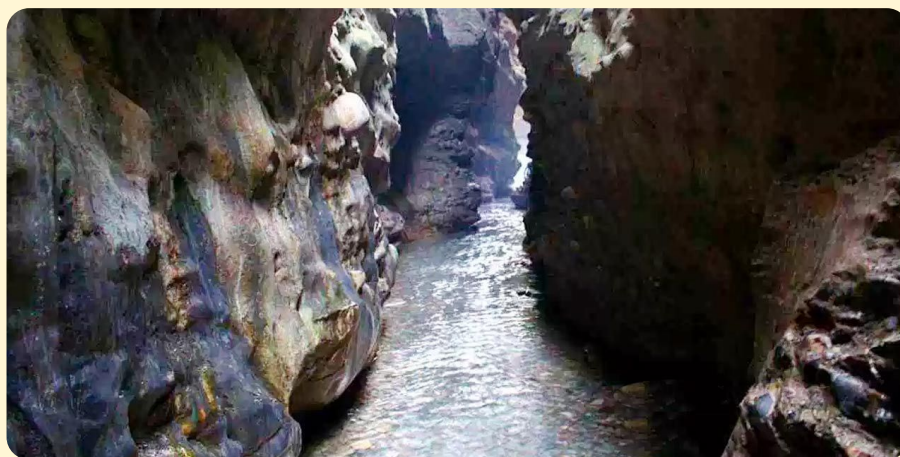
It is a longish walk. Is there an end to this so called cave? Tusita doesn't think so but we call it a day at the cafe which serves mo mos, a Tibetan dumpling with vegetables.

A Chinese couple sit on plastic chairs at a plastic table which has been placed in the water. What's wrong with sitting at the table in the cafe? Or do they just want a new experience? Tusita and Sidhart order mo mos – two portions. I am afraid they have not been cooked properly and settle for a packet of biscuits and two coffees. Tusita is in a hurry to get back. Hope she does not set to much of a cracking pace through the water. Going back is a lot easier than getting there.



Eating in the stream at Robbers' Cave

Of the many tourist spots in Dehradun, Robbers cave leaves a quaint mark on our memory. As we traverse the mountains, Robbers cave takes us back to the 1800s. A place that the robbers once used to hide their loot from the British Police, it is a place to enjoy a few hours of respite from the city. With knee-deep water flowing through the cave, Robbers Cave exudes a charm like none other. Take a long stroll or sit without worry and enjoy a few moments of



Robbers' cave

respite at one of the most famous tourist attractions in Dehradun. Robbers' cave, locally known as Gucchu Paani, is a natural river cave in the Himalayas in Dehar Plateau in Dehradun. The total length of the cave is six hundred metres, divided into two main parts. The cave has the highest fall of approximately ten metres. The central part of the cave has a fort wall structure which has now been broken. It consists of a narrow gorge formed in a conglomerate limestone area on Doon Valley's Dehra Plateau. It is the story behind the origin of the cave that attracts tourists to visit Robbers cave. It is ten km away from the central city. As you gradually ride up to the hills, you will discover the magnificent view that enthrals you. You will see a big monster-like face on the entrance gate. As you gradually walk inside the cave, the way gets narrower, shining pebbles underneath, and the sunlight streaming in between the gaps, make this cave more beautiful.

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Now it's time for the temples. Was really looking forward to the Buddhist temple but ended up in the Hindu Shiva temple instead. The road to the temple was not open due to the Shiva festival.

We walk through a market. There are some interesting porcelain products, statues of gods, vases and a lot of cheap junk. Men offering tattoos, and possibly free blood poisoning, sit by the roadside with their treacherous looking needles and inks of various colours with intricate designs which will no doubt inflict their fair share of pain.

The temple **Tapkeshwar** is more like a museum than a temple. If you can't sit quietly and mediate it is not a temple for me. There are many statues, the floor is wet, a good leg-breaking place. Om did not say anything about the Shiva temple.

The Tapkeshwar Mahadev temple is an age-old temple and has a rustic charm to it. The river adds to the beauty of the temple. This pretty cave temple located in the cantonment area of Garhi in the heart of the city is a very sacred and revered temple, which attracts thousands of tourists and devotees. The unique structural design of the temple is very appealing to the eyes. An interesting story revolves around the existence of this temple. It is believed that this temple dates back to the era of Mahabharata. Common faith follows that the guru Drona of Pandavas and Kauravas, meditated in this cave to gain the knowledge and expertise in military arts such as archery with the blessings of Lord Shiva. It was here that Guru Dronacharya and his wife, Kripa, were blessed with a son, Ashwathama, and milk started dripping from this cave owing to the powers of Lord Shiva for Ashwathama who needed this milk. This mythical stories revolving around it has endowed the temple with a hallowed aura.

[Website](#)

What I like most about this temple is the giant statue of Hanuman and the holy man with such a peaceful charming face it is a joy to give him some money for a photo. It makes him very happy and his smile gets broader.

We make our way back to the car. It is a very narrow path to the temple with scooters tooting as if there was no tomorrow.

Now, at last, the Buddhist temple. Again cars are not allowed and we have to walk again through a market filled with junk, gaudy items and very strange Tibetan carpets. Apparently the Dalai Lama spent some time in Dehradun when he first escaped from China in 1959. We reach the temple gate and it is closed. The magnificent golden structure really interests me but it is not possible to visit so Tusita decided on a walk through the market and dinner at a local Chinese – or it is Tibetan – restaurant. The man is frying noodles on a large wok and making mo mos – throwing them into boiling hot water. They should be safe to eat.



Tapkeshwar Mahadev



Holy man in Dehradun

We sit inside. Thought of ordering a sweet and sour soup but decided against it as it would take a while to cool down and Tusita might want to get back. Noodles and mo mos arrived along with a coke.

It was a good dinner. My first one in a local restaurant. All the food was cooked so it should be fine in theory at least.

The drive home was long. It seemed a lot longer than the drive there and we went through the city of Dehradun. Another busy Indian city, noisy with too many cars, scooters and tuk tuks.

Got a call from the ISKON temple inviting me to a meeting and two spam calls. Anju also called and asked to speak to Tusita. She must have been worried as we didn't reach home until around 9pm.

My oxygen uptake is 99 percent in Rishikesh and heart beat is 66 – excellent results. Tell Om and his whole family tries the oxygen meter. Sleep late typing the blog. Not a good habit.

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Hanuman state near Tapkeshwar Mahadev



Buddhist Temple in Dehradun

23rd February 2023 - Thursday

Patho Village Trek

Patho Village was promoted on the Rishikesh Day Tour website. It seemed like a great place with a lot of curiosity value which was satisfied today with a trek with Anju. Off we went on the same path as to the waterfall - Patho Village Road - and then another turning up, and up and up past modest houses into the forest with its narrow trek strewn with stones.

After the fall at the waterfall each step is taken with care. There are breaks to drink water as it is getting hotter and hotter. I count the steps. Then we sit down and Rishikesh spreads before us on the Ganges and the view extends as far as Haridwar. The trees touch the sky, a gentle breeze is blowing.

We reach the village. Forty people live in this village which has been around for 400 years, but during the day only the old and the very young stay here. The others have gone to the town to work. They either walk or go on the scooter. No road for vehicles. The children go to school on foot.

The crops, some sold at the market and others kept for the villagers own use include maize, ginger, potatoes, onion, garlic, radishes, mustard, finger millet, wheat, rice, tomatoes, pumpkins, mango, lemons, red chilis and turmeric. Cows, chickens and goats also make an appearance.

A small magic temple is on the outskirts of the village. Want to climb inside but Anju advises against it. Mediate just outside the temple and on we go. The downward trek is a lot easier than going up. It's a clear path but the small loose stones can be treacherous. Slowly, slowly.

Nature is speaking through the songs of the birds, the wind rustling in the trees. When God speaks, listen!



Patho Village Trek

If you are in Rishikesh for a short day trek, looking for a village near Rishikesh to off-trail trekking in Rishikesh with waterfall & valley river, this Rishikesh village "Patho Village Trek" has all to meet your need. It is a real-life offbeat travel adventure, even if you can not imagine how much nature is on the trail to Patho village.

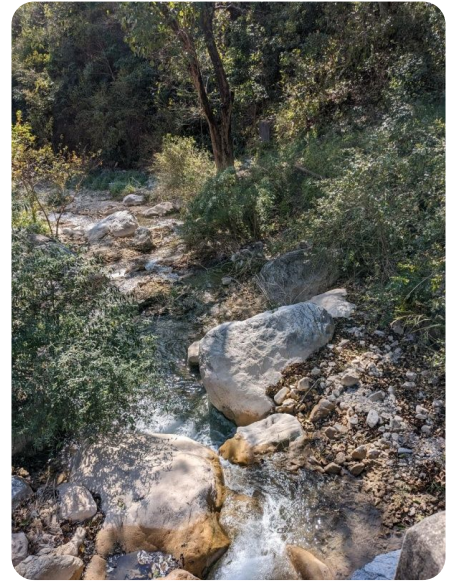
The trail passes through densely forested uneven land, the total distance of the round trip trek is only 8 km from Tapovan but it has all to full fill your heart and mind, high tall trees, small meadows on the top, mountaintop village, livestock. people. Shiv temple, ancient peepal tree, natural water stream, the Rudra waterfall, Patho is known as Nature care village Rishikesh Uttarakhand.



Trek down from Patho Village



The author with an 85 year old woman from Patho Village



Stream near Patho Village

There are few people in the village – a woman cleaning up after the wedding held a few days ago and an old woman – a 100 years older than God with most of her teeth missing and leaning heavily on a stick but still going strong and happy to have her picture taken. No question of asking for money here. Just happy for the human contact and being made a fuss of.

We approach ‘civilisation’ with its nature camps and swimming pools. The local children use some of the swimming pools and few tourists are about. Nobody sunning themselves. Peace and quiet and a benign kind of isolation

Thirst starts getting to me. The bottle of water was over after about an hour into the trek and the shop in the village looks very closed. Anju does not stop at any of the camps we pass along the way home through amazing nature and small waterfalls.



The author on the Patho Village Trek

Then it's back to a certain kind of 'civilisation', the quiet small town civilisation with quaint houses where life is slow, people sit outside their houses or shops or they just leave the shop unattended. Buy a bottle of water but Anju says we have plenty of water at home. Five litre bottles. It's cheaper to buy in bulk but I never think of this. Another way to do things, another system, flexibility is the key. If you don't bend you break!

Return home to the blog and a quiet sleep but not for the whole afternoon. Eat some delicious dhal soup. The vegetarian food is great – most of the time. Just the breakfast oats need some refinement and have to be sure don't eat the grapes washed in the tap water. But all else is fine, even if a bit heavy on the carbs.

Sleep early after vegetables for dinner and delicious paneer a kind of cheese which I try to reassure myself is not high on the cholesterol.

24th February 2023 - Friday

Rajaji National Park

More than 500 elephants, 12 tigers, 250 panthers and good prey base including spotted deer, sambhar, wild boar, barking deer, two kinds of bears: Himalayan Black and sloth, and over 400 bird species makes Rajaji National Park a perfect wild life and bird watching destination.

That's what the website says. Did they count the panthers? There was no tiger but there was a foot print in the sand which clearly showed that a tiger did pass that way.

Got up at 4.30am to be ready to see this spectacle. Om came with me. Down the hill we walked at quite a fast pace and the taxi appeared. En route we picked up Susan from Toronto, a jewellery designer who works with people in Jaipur. Om was chanting Hare Krishna in a reassuring way. God was with us.



Elephants in Rajaji National Park

It was a very pleasant drive along the Ganges but freezing cold. We reached the park and Om said: "This might take a while." In fact it was incredibly efficient. Just enough time to buy a belt, a T-shirt and a small paperweight with the elusive tiger and off we went.

The dirt road was fine and easily negotiable except for a few large boulders in the stream. Lots of spotted deer, three elephants, peacocks who strutted across the road arrogant and unconcerned about the vehicle.

Om saw I was freezing and suggested I sit in the front of the jeep which helped. Normally the mornings are fine and warm – not this morning. We stopped for a break and just took in the jungle atmosphere. The park looked untouched by human hands except for the road with white stones on the side.

Susan took lots of pictures. I didn't take any. The animals seemed too far away to enable a good picture to be taken. After the safari suggested we stop for tea. The suggestion was well received and bought some biscuits to make the tea go down better. No coffee at this tea stall.

Learned from Om that Hindus do not accept gifts or food from strangers as the funds used to buy these items may have come from dubious sources and they would inherit these vibes. The driver did in fact accept the tea and the biscuits from Om.

On the way back Om got out in Rishikesh and Susan left at Ram Jula. Continued alone to the Homestay and bought ten sachets of coffee powder without sugar. Om warns against drinking coffee but sometimes I need it.

So what about this park and its animals? Let's consult the website:

The Park spans over an area of 820sq. km which includes Rajaji, Motichur and Chilla wildlife sanctuaries, parts of Dehradun, Shiwalik and Lansdowne Forest Divisions. These three sanctuaries were amalgamated in 1983 to Rajaji National Park, named after the Late Raj Gopalachari The last Governor General of India in British period. The Holy river Ganges flows through the National Park for a distance of 24km, besides the innumerable streams and wild brooks making it rich and diverse. It offers ample opportunities to nature lovers to enjoy the captivating landscape and wildlife.

Rajaji is thickly foliated predominantly by the Sal Forest and a number of other forest types which include the Western Gangetic Moist and Northern dry Deciduous and Khair-Sissoo forests. Low Alluvial Savannah Woodlands cover the drier southern margins of the park, in contrast to the Shiwalik Chir-Pine on the high reaches of the hills.

The park is home to the Cheetal, Barking deer, Sambar deer, Wild Boar, antelopes such as the Nilgai, Goral and of course the Asian Elephant for which this park is the Northern and Western most boundary protecting it under Project Elephant

The primates include the Rhesus Macaque and the Hanuman Langur. The Indian Hare and the Indian Porcupine are among some of the small mammals found in the park.

Reptiles in Rajaji include one of the largest Pythons, King Cobra, Common Krait, Indian Cobra and the Monitor Lizard. The park also houses over four hundred bird species. The Oriental Pied Hornbill, Crested Kingfisher and Crimson sunbird are some of the residents of our retreat.

This area is the first staging ground after the migratory birds cross over the mighty Himalayas into the Indian subcontinent. Rajaji National Park and the Wild Brook Retreat give you all the excitement and exhilaration of holidaying in the heart of the Indian wildlife. Just where all the action is. In the lap of Nature at its most raw and where the law of the jungle prevails. Predators prowl the wild pathways, the deer call for help, birds shriek in the skies and reptiles slither across the earth.



Tiger in Rajaji National Park

The park also protects carnivores such as the Royal Bengal Tiger under Project Tiger and the Leopard and the lesser carnivores like the Jackal, Hyena, Jungle Cat, Leopard Cat, Civets, Himalayan Yellow-Throated Marten Himalayan Black and Sloth Bears.

There are about 315 species of birds that inhabit this park. India's National bird, Peacock is found here in abundance. Innumerable variety of butterflies and small birds add to the beauty of this place. Rusty cheeked Scimitar, Babbler, Golden-spectacled Warbler, Chestnut-tailed Starling, Brown Hawk-Owl, Drongo Cuckoo, Indian, Slaty Headed Parakeets, Great Hornbill, Red Jungle Fowl, Lined Barbet, Crested Kingfishers, Black Hooded Oriole, Khaleej Pheasant, Woodpeckers, Finches, Thrushes and so on. Winter season sees a large number of migratory birds visiting the National Park.

Reptiles seen at the park comprise of Monitor Lizard, along with King Cobra, Python and a number of other snakes.

[Website](#)

Home is the time for writing and eating. The blog is up-to-date and two reviews have been posted for Rishikesh Day Tour of Om Homestay and the Patho Village Trek.

Om talks about how he would like to build a small house near Baba Ji's cave or to buy a piece of land, grow vegetables and plant fruit trees. The Homestay is still too urban for him even though it is on the outskirts of Rishikesh. He has no insurance on the house. If it gets destroyed in an earthquake he will get a place somewhere else. The Baba Ji cave project needs five thousand pounds. I wish I had it to give to him.

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25th February 2023 - Saturday

Nomad Village, massage, South Indian dinner Tusita and Sidhart

Another village today. Also on the hills above the homestay. It was a nomad village called Guijan home to four families. The track to the village was quite steep with lots of little stones which made walking a bit slow.



Woman in Nomad Village

Betty from Italy was with me and Anju. She is a sprightly 56 year-old, very short and lean with endless enthusiasm and unquenchable love of India. Now separated for ten years she has decided to do whatever she wants to do in life and was put on the spiritual path by Om.

The views are not as stunning as those on the way to Patho Village but the walk through the trees and nature is amazing. The village is poor: houses made from the bare essentials of wood and straw with clay floors. Cows and buffalo are the mainstay of the people who love having their photo taken.

We meet Bibi who is 36 and has had six children, three boys and three girls. She carried 10 kgs of milk up and down the trek. Her husband looks a lot older with a welcoming smile – or is it her father?

She offers tea and we sit on her bed. The flames leap up and the water boils. She loves what she is doing. We certainly have curiosity value. Betty smokes a cigarette with the man of the house.

So what do we really need in life? Internet, smart phones, a hundred things to do or just a simple life where we are in touch with nature where the trees kiss the sky, where the animals look at us with love and are a vital part of our life?

We make our way down, me with my custom-made walking stick, given to me by one of the younger men of the family, going very slowly down. Going down is always harder than going up. Eventually make it to the concrete path, past the jungle retreats and back to Om Homestay. Betty has to have a massage and we check out the Ayurveda Centre. The men on reception are very pleasant and polite. Book in for half an hour back and shoulders and Betty books in for a whole body massage. There is time before my massage at 6pm and Sidhart takes me to the Ganges near the large statue of Shiva. The path is okay but there are some loose stones. Sit by the river as the water flows always the same and always different. The Ganges has a magical atmosphere. It takes you beyond time and space.

The massage is awful. The table does not have a hole for the head and you lie on one side and that hurts your neck. The lady doing the massage did not speak English. She also massaged by hair with oil and it ended up looking dreadful.

Sidhart and Tusita came to collect me and we had a south Indian dinner. The rice came with raw vegetables and I did not feel like eating it. The Manchurian vegetables were fine. The lady across the table ate the salad with relish. She told me she does not get sick. Lucky her.



Huts in Nomad Village



Lunch time in the village



Cattle - the mainstay of village life

26th February 2023 - Sunday

Vindhya wasin temple in Tiger Reserve

It was a quite family outing with the exception of Om. Set off in a jeep with Anju (sitting in front), Sidhart, Tusita and Betty. The Vindhya wasin Temple is in the Rajaji Tiger Reserve. It was not as cold as on the day for the safari but came prepared with scarf. Not many animals enroute just a few striped deer. It was great driving on the banks of the Ganges.

The outing started with tea. The tables were arranged in the stream. Then the steep climb to the temple.

The trek was reasonably easy apart from the treacherous small stones on the steps leading to the temple. The view was spectacular. It was reasonably peaceful and would have been more so if it wasn't for the other visitors.

A priest let us into the small temple and received some rupees. It was not a temple where you could meditate. Just look at the statues of the gods and leave.



Vindhya wasin Temple

During the early years of past century, a wandering 12 year young monk reached a mountain peak in the dense forests of Rajaji national tiger reserve and started his sadhana. He meditated at a peak and slept in a cave just below the peak. A wild bear too was an occupant of the cave and both of them had a congenial relationship. The monk meditated at the peak during the day whence the bear would slept in the cave. Every day without fail as dusk fell, the bear left the cave and came back only at dawn. During the nights, the monk was able to sleep in the cave without any disruption. This understanding went on till the end of days for both. The monk's name was Gaura baba. His tapasya pleased Ma Vindhya wasini who guided him and appeared in the form of a pindi (stone) which is the deity of the temple. Ma Vindhya wasini is also worshipped in the form of Devi idol. This is one of the lesser known temples near Rishikesh – the Vindhya wasini temple. Situated deep in the Rajaji national forest, it is dedicated to Ma Vindhya wasini. The temple is located on a mountain peak in the Gohari range of Rajaji National park approximately 10km from Rishikesh. Except for a small village and one or two resorts, not much human intrusion is there.

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But what the temple lacked in peace and solitude was more than compensated for by the idyllic seating area outside the temple with its amazing view of the mountains. Managed a 20-minute meditation there before the time came to descend. Carefully of course. Anju patiently waited for me while the others walked down quickly.

Food was ordered from the small cafe and we walked along the dirt stony road to a pond where I soaked my feet and Sidhart took a dip. It was obviously planned as he brought a change of clothes. Lunch was noodles and mo mos with vegetables. Little fish swam in the clear water of the stream. Drank my diet coke and water and let the world go by.

When we got home Tusita took Betty for a tattoo. Talked to Om and he spoke about leaving Varanasi to get away from the restrictions of the caste system and a society which restricts the activities of women. Anju is lucky to have a husband like him who lets her run the business. She drives off on her scooter the lady and master of the house, a wonderful mother to her two children with whom she spends quality time.

The patio at Om Homestay is a great place to sit in the pleasant warm but not too hot days.



Patio at Om Homestay

The place to just sit and be and enjoy being alive in this wonderful world that God has given us. I am blessed to have met this amazing family and thank God that my spiritual quest brought us together. Om said if I like his house I can build a small flat upstairs. It won't cost much – maybe two thousand pounds. Certainly worth considering for the future when I will be able to spend 90 days in India. In sha Allah.

27th February 2023 - Monday

Ganga Walk, holy man, henna from Anju

So today is the day when I will meet the holy man who appeared in one of Om's many WhatsApp messages. Well did in fact meet a holy man – the wrong one! It was still a great experience.

Took a different route to the Ganges with Anju. There are many ways down to the river from Om Homestay.



Holy man by the Ganga in Rishikesh

It started as a pleasant morning walk – then the sun came up and started to sweat for the first time on this holiday.

We reached a small track with a stick across the path which suggested it was private property. Saw the holy man sitting at the top of the trek looking ever so miserable. He did not say much or smile much. Perhaps that was an indication that he was the real deal.

His name is Sadhu Gautham Das and he certainly does not look 63. A Nepalese, he was initiated into the monastic life in Ayodha and subsequently took up residence in his present very humble abode. That was 45 years ago. Now his life consists of meditation and instructing a number of students who do the food shopping for him. He advised me to choose the spiritual life and then life would be better.

The setting of his hut was certainly idyllic with a great view of the Ganges. So why did he look so miserable? He offered to make tea which I accepted gratefully glad that there would be more time to gaze at the Ganges and wonder what it would be like to live the monastic life 24/7.



The holy man's home



The Ganga

Seeing the sadhu take out a mobile phone and conduct a not so peaceful conversation somewhat detracted from my image of a holy man. Of course I had no right to impose my view of what a sadhu should be like. One or two people passed by the start of the trek to his hut and did not come up. He does not like visitors but knows Om and Anju and I was deemed persona grata by virtue of my association with them.

After the visit, sat by the Ganges, soaked my feet in the water and marvelled at the vibes of the river. Thought of living in Rishikesh walking to the river along the path which Sidhart showed me, sitting by the river and meditating.

We returned home by the same route. The highway before the turn off to Om Homestead had some inviting looking coffee shops and the majestic Raj Resort.

Sat with Om for a while on the patio and he shared some of his wisdom. Then walked down to the main road – Baba Balaknath Mandir Road named after the temple at the start of the road.

Began my slow walk up the road to gather material for the article about the trek to the villages with a visit to the mandir. Again small and with no place to meditate. The 200 steps to the promised panoramic view of the city were not inviting and started walking slowly up the road taking notes on the various cafes and yoga establishments. There was the Revival Cafe with the quote advising to judge the day not by the harvest you reap but by the seeds you sow, the Bodhi Cafe and Ira’s Cafe to name a few. Passed Eva Ayurveda and resisted the urge to give them a not so brilliant review. Didn’t want to detract from their business even if the masseur did not speak English and the massage table was hard, uncomfortable and without a hole into which to put one’s head.

Bought some supplies: savoury snacks and instant coffee sachets with a creamy milk – and no sugar – from one of the larger well-equipped shops and proceeded to Motley run by Atal Kuksal who wanted to set up a different kind of shop on this road. He turned out to be a very nice youngish man with a deep devotion to his guru Naim Karoli Baba. There were lots of interesting crafts, especially jute in his shop and bought a jute bag, two necklaces and a sandalwood body spray for Lindsay. Sadly sandalwood is not available and she did not want an imitation.

Atal was very willing to talk about his philosophy of life – leaving time for God and family and striking an ideal work life balance by opening the shop between 1pm – 6.30pm.



The path to the holy man’s house



Atal Kuksal in shop Motley



Temple on the road to Om Homestay

So now it was time to write the article:

Rishikesh: ideal for scenic walks and insights into rural life

In Rishikesh nature has come to town. Or the town has come to nature. Whichever way you look at it, India's yoga capital, 233kms north of New Delhi, is ideal for scenic walks which provide a penetrating flash of insight into rural life.

Gujjan, a nomadic village where four families tend a small herd of cows, and Patho Village whose 40 inhabitants cultivate a variety of crops, can be reached by turning off the busy Badrinath Highway opposite the Raj Resort into Balaknath Mandir Road. The mandir (a small temple) offers great views if you feel like climbing up more than 200 steps.

Balaknath Mandir Road is a haven of yoga centres, ayurvedic (traditional Indian medicine) centres and restaurants and cafes serving Indian, Chinese and Israeli cuisine. The Revival Cafe has inspiring quotes: don't judge each day by the harvest you reap but by the seeds you sow, Kailas Art Cafe encourages visitors to have a go at painting. Ira's Kitchen & Tea Room is one of many eateries serving a variety of dishes.

Further up the road is Motley, a shop with clothes, bags, incense, perfumes, jewellery – a motley collection of crafts and eatables – hence the name. Atal Kuksal, once a hotelier, wanted to provide something different and strike a work-life balance. The shop opens between 1pm and 6pm leaving him with time to spend with his family and with God. A deeply religious man, he has a small altar on the premises and tells his customers about his guru Neem Karoli Baba.

A small private road just before Motley leads to Om Homestay, a villa-like house where Om and Anju accommodate guests in spacious rooms with en-suite facilities and provide delicious vegetarian meals. The couple and their two children Sidhart and Tusita moved to Rishikesh from Varanasi in search of a better life free from the restrictions of the caste system and built the four bedroom house to cater specifically for tourists. Om, through his company Rishikesh Day Tour, organises sight-seeing trips to temples and holy places and leads half- and whole-day treks.

The treks to Gujjan and Patho Village are half-day excursions through the forest behind his house – home to monkeys and panthers. As they rise above Rishikesh, the narrow tracks, which require a guide as the path is not always obvious, provide spectacular views of the Ganges and even Haridwar, a large town 20 kilometres away.

Forty people live in Patho Village, which has been around for 400 years, but during the day only the old and the very young are at home. The others have gone to the town to work. They either walk or go on a scooter. There is no road for vehicles. The children go to school on foot.

The crops, some sold at the market and others kept for the villagers own use, include maize, ginger, potatoes, onion, garlic, radishes, mustard, finger millet, wheat, rice, tomatoes, pumpkins, mango, lemons, red chilis and turmeric. Cows, chickens and goats also make an appearance.

Parvati (85) gives visitors an amazing smile as she sits on the steps of her modest house. The villagers love having their photo taken and are happy to serve tea for which a small donation is always gratefully received.

While Patho is a well-to-do village with idyllic concrete homes in a scenic setting, Gujjan is poor with only four families looking after a small herd of cows. The problem in Gujjan is a lack of water which makes growing crops impossible.

Bibi (36), the mother of six children, sells milk in Rishikesh. A strong woman, she has no trouble carrying ten-kilo containers up and down the trek. The money from the sale of the milk is the family's only source of income but Bibi and her husband Husan, who enjoys a cigarette with visitors, are content with their simple life in a wooden hut with a straw thatched roof. Water is boiled over a roaring fire, the cows are fed on a variety of leaves outside the door of the hut and the proud parents listen intently as their children tell them about their day at school.

The trek to Patho Village is an 8 km round trip with a well defined track on the way down. A round trip is not possible with Gujjan and care has to be taken on the trek strewn with small loose stones. Men and women in colourful attire walk quickly past the tourists with a welcoming smile.

Both treks end on the asphalt Balaknath Mandir Road with its tent camps and adventure holiday accommodation. The asphalt comes to an end at a waterfall where the locals take a dip. "Expect the unexpected when in the Himalayas," Om advises.

Not sure about the article or whether Om will like it, but at least its written.

28th February 2023 - Tuesday

Dehradun Shiva temple, amusement park, Sun Grace Hotel, Water fall, Druga temple

Left for Dehradun and Mussoorie at 10 am. Anju took me to the taxi and spoke to the driver, Vijay. It's a lovely walk down the lane where Om Homestay is located. The neighbours also have a villa-like house – with a dog which does not stop barking. It is tied up all day for reasons best known to themselves. We drove through the amazing Uttarakhand countryside with the glorious pine trees which stretched up to the sky.

Dehradun is the capital city and the largest city of Uttarakhand. Dehradun is located at an altitude of 1400 feet above sea level and has a pleasant climate all year round. Located just 30kms from Mussoorie, Dehradun is known as the gateway to Mussoorie and Rishikesh and Haridwar. Dehradun is also known as the "Educational Hub of Uttarakhand" with some of the country's prestigious universities and boarding schools. As you would expect from a city located in the foothills of the Himalayas, Dehradun abounds in caves, waterfalls and natural springs.



Tea stop en route to Dehradun

There was a welcome stop at a roadside tea stall. In these places I have great curiosity value as do the people serving the tea for me. It was very pleasant sitting in the Indian countryside without a care in the world, my every need taken care of.

The town of Dehradun is quite a long way from the airport. It's a large town like other Indian towns, crowded with too many small shops and too many people.

There was a brief stop at the Shiva temple. Not a temple for quiet prayer and contemplation but for looking quickly at the statues without giving any money to the priests, and leaving.

One of the most significant religious places to see in Dehradun is the Shiv Mandir on Mussoorie Road. Also known as Shri Prakasheshwar Mahadev Mandir, the temple is dedicated to Hindu deity, Lord Shiva, and is situated amidst the lush green valleys of Dehradun. The temple is not only visited by devotees from nearby cities but also from all over the country. The primary attraction of the temple is the sphaatik Shivlinga.

During special occasions such as Shivratri and Saawan (monsoons), the temple is literally flooded by worshippers from everywhere. During a visit to the temple, visitors must cherish the free Bhandara that is held every day where devotees are distributed prasada. There is also a small gem and jewellery shop within the temple premises for buying precious birthstones and other jewellery or souvenirs. An intriguing fact about the temple is that it is the only private temple of its kind which has an anonymous owner.

[Website](#)

The next stop was an amusement park. The Indians do not do amusement parks well. They are gaudy, in your face and aimed at extracting as much money as possible. The lake was artificial but the locals and tourists were having a great time peddling the boats which are just like the boats in Hyde Park. I ate some biscuits, carbohydrate loading in case the altitude affected me which it didn't.

The Sun Grace Hotel was great. I forgot to bring paper copies of my passport and downloaded the

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documents from my laptop and emailed them to reception. Problem solved. The room was comfortable and immaculately clean. I just sat on the bed and an incredible sense of peace came over me. It was one of those moments where everything just is: perfect peace.

There was a visit to a waterfall or several waterfalls one after the other. Vijay was not able to find a place to park the car so I went alone to the water fall up lots and lots of steps. Some of the steps had no hand rail and were quite steep. Felt I am getting used to this in India.

Kempty Falls is a magnificent waterfall set in a beautiful landscape of Mussoorie. It is one of the best sightseeing places in Mussoorie. You will find people enjoying, hanging out in the cool water of Kempty Falls. It is a famous picnic spot for the majority of tourists. A British officer once in the 1830s established this place for hosting tea parties. Since then the place has held a special place in Mussoorie and entertains every tourist. You can listen to the invigorating sounds of the rushing water as it falls down from the height. The water is cool and very fresh. You would definitely like to take a dip on a warm sunny day. The Kempty Falls has a capacity to refresh your mood and revitalize your energy.



Shri Prakasheshwar Mahadev Mandir

The view from the Druga temple was amazing. The temple also had a good feeling. Peace and no people – a rarity in India. Sat for some minutes quietly and Vijay sat with me. Learned that Vijay was planning to sleep in the car and gave him 1000 rupees for hotel.

Mussoorie, also known as Queen of the Hills, is among the most popular hill stations of the country. A British Captain Frederick Young, accompanied by an official named FJ Shore, had climbed up the hill from the Doon valley in 1827 and found this ridge offering great views and a salubrious climate. This visit laid the foundation for this grand hill station. A captivating paradise for leisure travellers and honeymooners, it is a perfect summer resort. Located on a 15-km-long horseshoe ridge with the grand Himalayas as a backdrop, Mussoorie spreads across at a height of 2,000 m above sea level. From this vantage point, it offers scenic views of Himalayas peaks in Western Garhwal. Many famous personalities have made Mussoorie their home – most notable being authors Ruskin Bond and Bill Aitken. Filmstar Victor Banerjee resides in Mussoorie while deceased filmstar Tom Alter was born and brought up here. In the 1960s filmstar Prem Nath had his house here while the son of Dev Anand studied in Woodstock school. Cricketers Sachin Tendulkar and Mahendra Singh Dhoni are frequent visitors to this hill resort.

[Website](#)

Dinner was a lovely chicken. Missed the chicken but not meat. An Indian couple were the only other people in the restaurant.

And then to bed with classic FM playing. The weather was colder but pleasant, there was a heater in the room which I left on all night and there was information in the drawer of the desk saying an electric blanket was available. Not cold enough for that, thank God.

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1st March 2023 - Wednesday

Gun Point, Post office, Dehradun Zoo, Mukhiya's Dhaba

Breakfast was very pleasant. It was a joy to see eggs beautifully scrambled in a masala omelette in the Indian way and a wide variety of food: fruits which I did not touch as I was afraid they were washed in water, cereals which lost their appeal, different enticing bread and of course tea and coffee. A chatty lady asked me where I was from. She was Gujarat, having a great time in Mussoorie. She looked wonderful in a shalwar kameez.



Druga temple view

Vijay was there ready for the day's adventures which started with Gun Point a remnant from the time of the British. The road to the Point was being dug up in the hope of better tar seal. The street was lined with small roadside takeaway food and a very decent European style public toilet. And of course the requisite tip that goes with using the facility.

We got to the cable car which was not working. A pleasant, sharp young man appeared with a motor bike and offered to take me to Gun Point. Time to live dangerously. Told him a few times not to drive fast and off we went, no crash hat and no health and safety! Up and up and up with some stops for me to get off and for the bike to get pushed up the steepest inclines. We made it first to an open courtyard with souvenir shops that looked like they had seen better days and a man offering a telescope for a fee. The actual Gun Point was very small with a concrete bench to sit on and a view. Although it was nice to be in the mountains did not find the views here so spectacular or breath taking but it was good to see how the British enforced their administration – at gunpoint sometimes no doubt.



Gun Point

There was a small temple at Gun Point but the motor bike rider cum tourist guide said visiting was not allowed. This seemed strange to me. Did not tell him I am a devotee of Hanuman figuring it was best to let it be and prepare myself for the ride down.

It was not as bad as I thought it would be. There were a few places where I had to get off the bike but it was quite exhilarating and the speed was not too fast. The guy kept talking of other places he could take me for only 1400 rupees seemingly oblivious to the fact that I had a car and driver and that he only got hired for this ride as the cable car was not working. In the end he got 1000 rupees – more than the 400 we agreed on initially. Vijay was happy the ride went fine and off we went to our next activity – finding a post office.



Tour guide at Gun Point

Gun Hill in Mussoorie offers unparalleled views all over Mussoorie, the Doon Valley and the Garhwal Himalayas. Gun Hill sits at a daunting height of 6,640 feet (2,020 meters) which makes it the **second-highest point in Mussoorie**. From the summit, one can see views of the rolling green hills of the Doon Valley in all directions. You can take the ride of your life to reach the viewpoint travelling up steep for about 1,300 feet (400 meters) from the Mall Road. If you are looking for an alternative to reach the Gun Hill in Mussoorie, you can spend 30 min walking up the winding trail road. The beauty and the atmosphere at the summit is such that both local residents and tourists enjoy visiting Gun Hill in Mussoorie. These are some substantial attractions that count among the hundreds of reasons why you should start packing for Gun Hill Mussoorie in Uttarakhand today. On a place that has such tourism potential, you can expect professional photographers offering visitors the chance to wear robes of typical Indian clothing and pose to look dashing for a keepsake photo. Enjoying the chilling winds relishing the views about the place, what can team up the best with a chilly day? Yes, you smelled it right, a cup of masala chai from one of the several cafés and restaurants awaits you.

[Website](#)

The people in London who ask for a postcard do not seem to realise that this can be easier said than done, but they like their cards and I value them and their friendship and figure it is the least I can do. So off we walk along the stones which seem to get more uncomfortable with every step.

The post office is quite an impressive looking building – no technology here. All manual and not always service with a smile but in the end we manage. Vijay takes charge. The first clerk can't manage to get stamps for London so we go to another clerk who sends us back to the first one and eventually we get the stamps.

After the post office, it is sanitizer buying time at the chemist. A delightful lady has just what I need. Then it's goodbye to Mussoorie and on the road back to Dehradun and Rishikesh.

The weather is hotting up but the drive is pleasant. Did not see a leopard or a tiger on the safari so let's hope I have better luck in the zoo. More than 40 years ago saw a snow leopard in the zoo in Mumbai. Did not appreciate the significance of seeing this rare creature at the time. You live life forwards and understand it backwards.



Dehradun post office

At the zoo there was some discussion about parking and the entrance fee. Non-Indians have to pay more, like in Kenya. If non-Brits had to pay more for tourist attractions in Britain there would be an outcry about discrimination.

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The zoo is spacious with all its inhabitants comfortably accommodated. The leopard is there, a forlorn creature in a solitary cage. No tiger! There are deer, lots of birds, snakes and a crocodile.

Read about a scheme whereby it is possible to sponsor an animal for a year – 2500 rupees for a leopard. Sounds like a good idea and Om agrees. Next time I am in Dehradun. Funds are running a bit low and there is still the tip for Vijay.

The zoo is the last stop before the journey to Rishikesh which seems to be going a lot quicker than anticipated. We stop for lunch at the roadside café, Mukhiya's Dhaba, a family business with lots of photos of the owners and their customers. Vijay demolishes a chicken biryani and some chapatis. For some reason don't feel like meat and settle for vegetables.

The drivers seem to have got used to me sitting in front of the car with them. There is always a nice conversation but I try not to talk too much. Sometimes feel should just shut up and enjoy the scenery and the people watching.

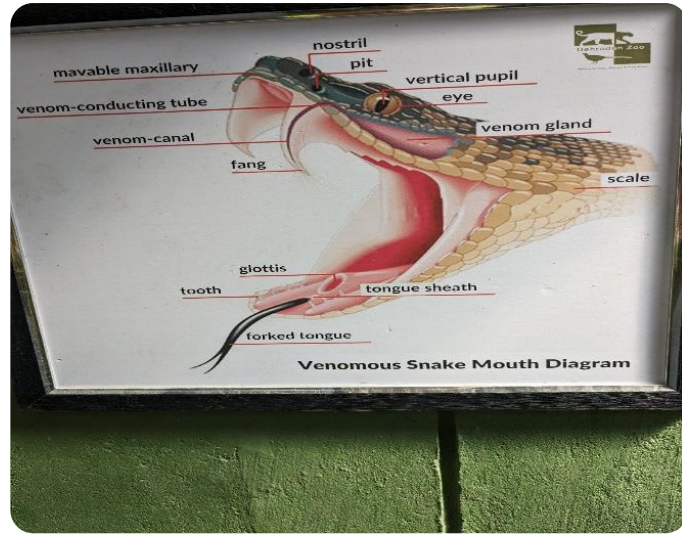


Illustration in Dehradun zoo

We reach Om Homestay. Vijay drives off from the top of the driveway. There are a lot of questions about my visit. Give a very positive report about everything, including the driver, which is of great interest to Om as he wants to be sure that the drivers he hires are doing a good job.

Start packing. The dress has to go in first into the small case where I packed the clothes. All goes well. Anju tells me the water and the laundry were not included in my package and the price is 3000 rupees. She has done an amazing job with the washing. With everything in fact.

The evening is like all the enchanting evenings at Om Homestay. The weather, the lovely flowers, bright yellows and red on the large patio, the vegetarian food, the masala tea, classic FM playing while I write on the king size bed with a small folding table. Life is peaceful, still it just is where I am meant to be. It's my Indian home and my Indian family a real treasure in life given to me by the cosmic.



Dehradun guide Vijay

2nd March 2023 - Thursday

Cave, flight to New Delhi, Les Seasons Hotel

Anju makes sure I am ready to go to Vasishtha Gufa, my last visit during this wonderful holiday/pilgrimage. She walks with me to the end of the drive. The taxi driver is different, a middle-aged man. She comments I know what to do and off I go. My first trip with a driver on my own while in Rishikesh. Tell him that we have to buy some flowers on the way back. The morning is pleasant, the vegetation looks extra green, the air fresh more peaceful than peaceful.

We reach the cave. There are a number of sadhus sitting at the beginning of the path but not the sadhu I have befriended. If he is not there, he will miss out on the funds to buy his hut. Walk carefully down the concrete path. Thankfully there is a handrail all the way. Large monkeys, the non-dangerous kind with white faces, are leaping about chasing each other and nit picking. It is nice to see the monkeys helping one another in that way. Real assistance, love and co-operation.

The large cave is not crowded. Thought that maybe a lot of people would have the idea to go early in the morning to avoid the crowd and create a crowd, but this did not happen. Only two people in the cave. Can get quite close to the altar. Wish the people weren't there but remember from my Rosicrucian studies: "To see your children beyond appearances, as you yourself see them, and therefore see only good in each one." The cave has its magic and the peace which surpasses all understanding. Give up on the idea of lying down on the mattress at the entrance. It looks very dirty and uninviting and make my way to the smaller cave where I sit at the entrance looking at the river through the trees.

A man comes and dusts the steps. Give him a small can of diet coke which he accepts after being reassured that it does not contain alcohol. Do an incredible tai chi 108 form by the river and in no time have to return to the car. Still no sadhu so another sadhu gets 500 rupees. The driver is there. He says he has been to the cave many times but today he didn't go. Don't ask him why.

Then just as we are driving away my sadhu appears. I ask the driver to stop and give him the 2000 rupees earmarked for his bamboo hut.



Sadhu at Vasishtha Cave

There is so much joy in his heart and in his smile. Really hope he will build this hut and continue his spiritual journey. No time to talk to him about his life with a view to writing an article about why he forsook a job as a marketing executive in Hyderabad for a life by the Ganges.

The driver is sceptical about his story and feels I should not have given him the money. Keep my eyes peeled for the expensive Glass House resort but miss it. Other accommodation is far from the cave and the ashram on the river bank, judging by the toilet, is not a place where I would like to stay so will have to book the ashram on the hill in plenty of time for next year.

Stop by the flower shop and get a nice bunch of flowers for Anju. Last year sent them from London.

Chose each bloom with love and care and hand it to the man who is patient and welcoming. Feel the driver approves of this a lot more than my sadhu assisting venture.

Give Anju the flowers. She is off somewhere with Tusita. Complete the packing. Anju was eager for me to be back by 11 am so she could get the room ready for the next guest. There are too many things to pack in the cases so leave some in a small carrier bag by the stairs. Know it will be there, lovingly packed for me and in the wardrobe in the room when I return, like this time.

Buy my last diet cokes and say goodbye to the manager of Motley. He has a lovely shop and an amazing philosophy.

The same taxi driver comes. Om takes one of my cases and tells me Hare Krishna. Anju and Tusita are not back from where ever they went so there is no chance to say good bye to them and Sidhart is at school. Maybe he will study Sanskrit like Tusita. She has not decided what she would like to study now and seems quite happy helping Anju with the Homestay.

The driver helps me with my cases and I give him 500 rupees. The money is almost over. Just enough for a few cokes in Delhi. A pleasant man helps me with my bags. Another 1000 rupees as I have two cases instead of one, even though the weight is alright. The flight is very short. No driver with my name on a card from Les Seasons Hotel when I arrive. One of the porters with 'no tip' on his clothing phones Om and we sort it out – eventually.

In Les Seasons Hotel the receptionist knows me. He makes the point that they sent a car for me – a car which went to the international terminal rather than the domestic one. The hotel is pleasant, the weather hot – 30 degrees – and air conditioning welcome.

Dinner is soup and delicious Indian fries. French fries step aside. Talk to three of the men at the table next to mine. They are Muslims from Gujarat. Have the feeling they don't really want to talk and read the *Times of India*. It reminds me of *The Evening Post* in New Zealand where I worked 40 years ago. It's rather parochial.

The hotel is on a lively street, unlike the bungalow which is in a world of its own. But there is no time to go outside to explore. Getting up time is 4.30am. British Airways informed me four hours are required at the airport.



Buying flowers for Anju

3rd March 2023 - Friday

Flight back to London

Only left myself half an hour to get ready. It was enough. The hotel kindly gave me a packed breakfast. There was still some traffic on the road to the airport. A very aggressive man grabbed my bags and demanded foreign currency for walking me for two minutes. Some of the locals were not impressed by the way he was behaving and told him to leave me alone. Was there before the bag drop opened incredibly wide awake.

At a lovely breakfast of smashed avocado and two cups of coffee. A Chinese man was having great fun using WhatsApp. Couldn't get mine to work despite the system at the airport with its password from the vending machine and helpful instructions from the people on the information kiosk.

The elephants looked at bit sad and forlorn and not very appealing, unlike the wooden animal engravings at Vancouver airport.



Elephant statue at New Delhi airport

Managed to buy some sweets at a stand just before the gate. The pack was heavy with the laptop and clothes. At last boarded the flight and got to my seat. No space in the overhead locker for my things. A very self assured man advised me to use the next locker which I did.

His name was Baz Bhasin, a very successful businessman who seems to have spent a small fortune on his daughter's wedding in a palace in Rajasthan which he hired. Showed me lots of photos and videos and talked about his business: design, property, scaffolding. A self-made man whose father disowned him after an argument when he was 18.

On landing, it was straight to the loo to put on the warm clothes. Completed a long survey before making my way to the Elizabeth Line from Terminal 5. Managed to end up at the Piccadilly Line by mistake.

The house had just been cleaned, the plants were fine, Mark did a good job watering the large plant in my room. Unpacked. Packed the red top for his finance Cristina. And so to bed looking at the pictures of Baba ji and Paramanshasa Yogananda.

Dreaming about the cave by the Ganges and flowers on the sand. Thus has it always been, thus will it always be.



Flowers by the Ganges