


India

Story by Michael Sloyer

Photos by Michael & Alan Sloyer



India, a palette of colors splashed and splattered across a gigantic canvas, is abstraction personified. At first glance, the chaos and crowds confound. Poverty is ubiquitous. Begging is persistent. Everything is for sale. Honking is performed liberally amidst a backdrop of repressive traffic. The concept of personal space does not exist. But this chaos is only at first glance.

On second glance, the chaos becomes organized. The crowds become endearing. Personal space doesn't seem all that necessary. And suddenly, you find that you have 1.2 billion friends. India is a feast for the senses, but for the visually and photographically inclined, this dramatic country is especially thrilling.

This past November, my father and I embarked on a two week journey across India. We set out with one piece



of luggage each, an endless supply of trail mix, and an intense desire to see, to learn, and to experience. We were fortunate to travel with several basic comforts, but this did not stop us from traveling with a backpacker's state of mind. And as the eastern religions teach us, it is our state of mind, not our physical body that is our ultimate reality.

We began the journey in Delhi, the nation's capital

and the epicenter of all things chaotic. Armed with our Nikon DSLRs, we explored and captured the narrow streets of Old Delhi where human foot traffic competes with tuk tuks, rickshaws, automobiles, vespas, and the not so occasional farm animal. From Delhi, we travelled to Agra, the home of the Taj Mahal. Given all the hype about the Taj and its status as one of the Seven Wonders of the Modern World, I had prepared



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myself for disappointment. Could one building possibly be worth the near death experience of traversing the roads from Delhi to Agra? But this architectural gem did not disappoint. In fact, it did just the opposite. It exhilarated, it provoked, and it inspired. As I entered through the famed gateway, I marveled at the symmetry of the four imposing minarets, the change in hue of the white marble against the setting sun, and the cypress trees lining the reflection pools. The culmination of both man and nature was utterly breathtaking. After this rather emotional experience, we

travelled on to Jaipur, the “pink city” and the capital of the semi desert lands of Rajasthan. In Jaipur, we enjoyed the opportunity to ride elephants up to the beautiful Amber Fort, explored the palaces of the maharajas, and browsed the colorful gems shops that seemed to be as omnipresent as the hawkers and beggars.

Our next stop was Varanasi, the spiritual heart of India and for us, the most visually charismatic. Life in the city began before sunrise as thousands of Hindu pilgrims from all over the world headed down to the banks of the





*Amer Fort
Jaipur, Rajasthan*



Ganges River. As dawn broke over the river and the mist lifted, we observed in reverence as the devotees performed ablutions in the chilly waters. With their emergence from the water came feelings of lightness and freedom as they had symbolically washed away the sins of their former selves. Between clicks of the camera, my father and I managed our own time for prayers and mediation. After sunrise, the ghats (a series of steps leading down to a body of water, particularly a holy river) along the banks burst into action. Young Brahmin boys read aloud from the Holy Scriptures, wandering Sadhus lined the narrow alleys with their begging bowls and elderly priests marked the faces of pilgrims with colorful paints and holy ash. The cremation ghat embraced its role as the last sacred stop of this human life; where bodies leave their earthly pasts behind and embark on new journeys in the next cycle of life.

Night time in Varanasi brought a more festive atmosphere, though no less spiritually and visually enchanting. The main event was the Hindu Aarti Ceremony at the Ganges River ghats. Thousands of pilgrims and other visitors watched in awe as the Brahmin priests swung their Aarti lamps. The fire lit up the sky and incense smoke soon formed billowing opaque clouds. The singing of the Om Jai Jagdish Hare, a devotional song to Hindu deities, and the rhythmic beats of the myriad percussion instruments combined to create a surreal atmosphere

From Varanasi, we flew down south to the state of Kerala, where the climate is tropical. We explored European fishing ports that felt like journeys back in time and spent a night out on a houseboat drifting in the peaceful backwaters. We relished the simple yet endless beauty of the agrarian landscapes.

The last stop on our trip was the rumbling, bustling city of Mumbai. Here, one kilometer taxi rides lasted in excess of an hour as frustrated drivers unconvincingly

Michael introducing himself

claimed that road rage does not exist. We explored the hanging gardens, marveled at the arcing promenade (called the “Queen’s necklace”) overlooking the Arabian Sea, and got a peak into everyday life for the 21 million residents of the city. We even managed to squeeze in a yoga session as we attempted to shake off the chronic entropy in favor of a more centered consciousness. Yoga + India = zen.

When all was said and done and we had made our way back to the states, we reflected on our photos and our memories. The photos told a colorful story of an Indian nation, its people and its history. The memories told a slightly different story: one of personal growth as well as a deeper understanding and appreciation for the diversity of our world.



*Aarti Ceremony
Dashashwamedh Ghat, Varanasi*





TOP: River boats lined up to transport the Hindu devotees down the Ganges River, Varanasi

BELOW: Hawa Mahal (Palace of Winds) Jaipur, Rajasthan

