

Laurel Saville in India by Laurel Saville

Happy 2001 from Jericho, Vermont.

You may already know that I spent the last two weeks of December in India, visiting with my friend Mabelle and her family. They are living in Hyderabad, working for the non-profit organization her brother started.

As when I returned from Africa, I've collected some of my impressions below. If the full travelogue is a bit more than you'd like to chew on, perhaps a quote from Mark Twain will suffice. In 1897, he called India "... the land of dreams and romance, of fabulous wealth and fabulous poverty, of splendor and rags, of palaces and hovels, of famine and pestilence, of genies and giants and Aladdin lamps, of tigers and elephants, the cobra and the jungle, the country of a hundred nations and a hundred tongues, of a thousand religions and two million gods&."

In any case, let me wish you a New Year filled with challenges, surprises, and plenty of opportunities to create interesting experiences and memories.

Laurel

December 14: I've been reading Kipling tales of India from the turn of the century as well as contemporary Indian authors. Seems that the colonialists tried to use tradition itself as a means to pass on tradition. Others societies use food. Very specific ingredients, elaborate preparations, serving meals and sharing stories, while eating together. I'll take the food route, anyday. I had more incredibly vivid dreams last night. Crowds, fantastic animals, colorful bazaars, strange peoples and adventure straight from a StarTrek episode. I started to congratulate myself on the vividness of my imagination, but then remembered that hallucinogenic dreams are a not uncommon side effect of anti-malaria drugs. Oh well.

December 18/19: Drive to Montreal, and then airports, planes and waiting rooms. Canadian, London, Scottish, Irish, north European, and Indian versions of English. Familiar words twisted into new shapes, forms, meanings. Cell phones and their sing song ringings are everywhere, in every country.

People watching: a young man with yellow spiked hair, multiple piercings, and highly engineered facial hair is earnestly explaining why he spent last night at the club dancing with so many other women. His girlfriend is too charmed by him to be truly mad. They both mix French and English as they talk. He is overgroomed for his McDonald's uniform. A group of young people, baggy pants, mussed hair and packs full of cookies, reveal them to be snowboarders as much as the "Swedish Snowboard Team" patches on their coats. They are crocheting hats, one girl explains to a steward, as holiday presents. The women's fingers move fluidly and expertly; the young men are more slow and clumsy, faces taut with concentration. The man at the British Airways counter gallantly offers me a free day room at the Heathrow Hilton for my 9-hour layover. And lets his offer to join me later in the afternoon stand as merely a flirtatious joke. All the surprises of travel thus far have been pleasant ones.

Two young men holding a small sign with my name meet me in Delhi, both sons of an ad agency owner who works with Mabelle. One is a sometime race car driver, sporting a neck brace, wrist bandage, and yellow-dyed goatee. The younger, taller, quieter brother is fortunately driving. They take me to their home for a delicious lunch where I meet Mom and Dad, the newlywed eldest brother and sister in law. Mothers are the same in every country: smacking their boys playfully on the heads, pressing food and sweets on everyone, and filling my arms with presents to take to Mabelle and her family.

Another plane ride and I'm in Hyderabad. There are few things that offer the simple relief and deeply

gratifying pleasure of seeing your luggage come out onto the baggage carousel and the huge smile of a best friend after an incredibly long journey.

December 21: I am sitting in the sun on the patio in a garden of red earth, underneath a tree full of yellow flowers, looking at the blue sky, pink hibiscus, crimson poinsettias and green palms. The familiar smell of a developing country - a combination of dust, diesel, burning fires and sunshine - sits lightly in my nose and mouth, against my skin. I fell asleep last night to the sounds of dogs, insects, and distant traffic. I woke at first light with the Muslim call to prayer. Soon followed by dogs, traffic, birds, a baby's cry, the rhythmic scritch scritch scritch of a twig broom on concrete, and the strange call of the bicycling newspaper seller. I am remembering how deep is the quiet in a small New England town in wintertime.

December 23: We have been shopping, cooking, baking, visiting, eating. One afternoon spent getting a full body massage and mehendi tattoos applied to our hands. Maids, drivers, gardeners, watchmen, cooks, cleaners, sweepers, construction workers, deliverers of milk, water, newspapers, and messages are in constant and unhurried movement, everywhere. Between Mabelle's house and her brother's next door, there are five grown-ups, six children aged 2 to 17, at least as many household staff, three dogs, and some undetermined number of cats. The metal gates creak open and shut, the screen doors bang gently, the gardener yells to the housekeeper, the dog growls at the cats on the wall. I retreat to the roof with a chair and a book, but I read only a little. I listen to the activity below, I turn my face to the east, to the sun.

We visited a fair with vendors of woolen shawls, bolts of silk, hand embroidered clothing, glass beads, carved wooden furniture, silver filigree jewelry, morsels of food fried in huge flattened woks. Dancers and musicians in elaborate costumes entertained, while artists sitting cross-legged painted people's portraits under lamplight. This country can be overwhelming to the senses. I am gorging myself on ripe papayas and pineapples.

Hyderabad, the capital of the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, is a chaotic mix of the old and the new. It is a high tech training center whose graduates are sought after in India, Silicon Valley and places in between. Construction is taking place everywhere - office buildings, roads, walls, and huge concrete confections of homes. But the most spectacular structures are not of recent creation. We visited Golconda Fort, built in the 16th and 17th centuries by the kings of the Qutb Shahi dynasty. Surrounded by immense walls, the remains of grand living quarters, stables, gardens, battlements, baths, are all still visible. To get to the restored Hindu temple and Moslem mosque at the top of the hill, you must also pass a large dirt mound, brightly decorated with offerings of red and yellow pigments, and small bowls for milk and oil, the home and shrine of a family of cobras.

December 25: Christmas Day was spent in the company of people, presents, food and many post-dinner games of volleyball. I was glad to avoid the juggernaut of American commercialism and spend time with those who celebrate the holiday as the birth of Jesus Christ. Interesting for a non-religious heathen with Buddhist leanings, like me. We are also near the end of Ramadan, the Muslim holy month, celebrated by almost half of the people in this area. Christmas carols and Christian rock blast from the stereo next door, while the high, plaintive wail of the Muslim call to prayer rises from the mosque a little further away.

A Christmas Eve party illustrates the dizzying array of contrasts and melange of influences that is India. We drove to a new neighborhood, along streets edged with neat cobblestones cut with handtools by men and women from raw rock outcroppings, under freshly planted jacaranda trees, street dogs scattering in front of us. A guard with a machine gun casually strung across his chest stood outside the

home. Our hosts: he works for the Hindu government equivalent of the CIA, she in a Catholic orphanage started by Mother Teresa; a son studies to be a lawyer specializing in international adoptions; a daughter lives in the states but was visiting with her tall, ruddy American husband, holding their stunning 2-year-old daughter, whose coffee-bean eyes stared out from her caramel colored face, surrounded by long, auburn curls. Women in elegant, raw silk saris rustled over the marble floors. Men conversed rapidly in English, Hindi and Telegu. This new home was decorated with a brightly lit Christmas tree, pictures of Jesus and praying hands, and family photographs both recent and from the time of the Raj. On the third floor patio, gaily decorated tents covered a long table of chafing dishes filled with traditional Indian delicacies, to be eaten with the fingers of one's right hand. Mabelle's husband Dan dressed up as Santa Claus, led Christmas carols, and handed out small presents to children whose Indian names tripped up his Minnesota tongue. We spiraled up to the fourth story roof, and looked out over new houses, a mosque, the lights of the city, high-tech office buildings that block the view of Golconda Fort. I peered over the edge. Below me, in what I had thought was a vacant lot, was another home, marked by the glow of lamps, a small motorcycle parked in front, and laundry hung along a line. But this home was constructed simply of woven grass mats and a blue plastic tarp draped over a bamboo pole resting between two small trees.

December 28: Mabelle's driver, Kumar, is also a translator and indispensable guide to everything from where to buy spices, gifts and fabric, to how to pick a ripe pineapple, understand the Muslim faith, and attempt to unravel the complex politics of this country. His bearing is gracious, patient, and stately. His sense of humor is dry. Today, he was guard, as well.

We spent a few hours at the Salar Jung Museum, an eclectic assemblage of art, artifacts and personal possessions of a wealthy nobleman, "married to art," who spent the first half of this century collecting everything from weaponry to ivory carvings. Then Kumar led us through Charminar, the old, Muslim part of the city. As it was the last day of Ramadan, the tiny streets and narrow ways were packed with street hawkers, food vendors, shop keepers, and families out to make purchases in preparation for the end of the last day's fast in a month of daily fasts.

While I do not know the language, the many unsavory remarks lobbed in our direction did not need translation for their meaning to be understood. A raised hand, stern look, and few words from Kumar put an immediate stop to each outburst. He turned to me several times to say, "There are some rude peoples here. If you come alone, very bad, would be very bad." The overall rush and tumble of humanity, the spilling over of produce, products, fabrics, footwear, underwear, spices, bracelets, jewelry, the beauty of the eyes of women that peered out from above and below their black chadors, the frank stares of the children, the henna decorated hands, and the general feeling of celebration, effectively overwhelmed most of the sinister commentary. We found the herbs and spices we were searching for, and picked our way back through the chaotic crush. As our car crossed the bridge over the Musi River, I looked out the window to see dozens of large bats punctuating the darkening day, fluttering past the silver crescent moon rising in the mango colored sky. They too, are setting out to end their daily fast.

December 30: We've come to Delhi for a few days. New Delhi is beautiful and clean, with wide streets flanked by broad walks, parks and stunning architectural wonders that house government offices, courts, forts and the presidential palace. Amazing what conquering powers can create in a country rich in natural resources and exploitable labor. For 500 years, it was the Mughul kings, and for the next 100, it was the British. India has only run itself for 50 years. It is a country both brand new and impossibly ancient. I see a chador decorated with ersatz CK logos and I wonder what this Muslim woman would think of Calvin Klein's US advertising. Trucks are painted with the name of their lorry service, as well

as flowers, bright decorations, and exhortations to both "Honk Please" and "Use Dipper at Night." Horn blowing, like the inimitable Indian head waggle, is the ubiquitous and inscrutable answer to all comers. Old Delhi is much like old Hyderabad and this time, we are escorted by our young cab driver who watches over us and rolls his eyes in mock horror at the prices shopkeepers attempt to fool us with. I make an offer for some trinkets, which is protested heroically, but only until the moment I start to walk away.

We also spent a day in Agra. The architecture of the Mughul kings is breathtaking. We visited Akbar's Tomb, the Agra Fort, and of course, the Taj Mahal. Mabelle and I came through the gates, our eyes filled with astonished tears, our mouths became mute, and our cameras were brought up but then dropped as we realized that no photograph could begin to capture the wonder that is this marble monument from a bereaved king to his beloved queen. A white marble colossus, flanked by red sandstone mosques, rises out of the morning mists and formal gardens. Every surface is elaborately carved and decorated with semi-precious stones set to create beautiful floral patterns, readings from the Koran, and delicate screens. Seeing this tomb is worth not only a flight half way around the world, but also the 3.5 hour bus ride, and having to run the gauntlet created by small bands of aggressive teenage boys who, for some inexplicable reason, want to have their pictures taken with us. I threaten to get a guard, and they leave us alone.

Outside the sights are more disturbing: women holding sick and deformed children, boys with tortured limbs, dwarfs, a young man tottering on feet swollen and warped with Elephantiasis, men dressed in bad imitation of holy mendicants, all with hands outstretched. This is the dark underside of a people for whom endless propitiation of countless gods and conquerors through innumerable sacrifices and offerings has been a necessary and historic part of everyday social, religious and political life. Hagging, bargaining, negotiating, begging - and often true charity - are integral to the culture. And in fact, I saw not that many more pan handlers and street hawkers than I might in some American cities in the years before the stock market became our deity. In India, the street people are much more aggressive and exploitative in their methods.

December 31: We spent the morning of our last day in Delhi - and the last day of the year 2000 - at the Craft Museum which included samples of architecture, textiles, arts, crafts and other creations from all parts of India. It was a wonderful overview of a richly creative land, culture, people and history. A sad goodbye to Mabelle, and then onto the endless litany of planes, airports, waiting rooms, CNN, dozing in Heathrow and dreaming I was home already, tasteless food, duty free, a Jackie Chan movie over the headphones, overloaded baggage, digging out my car, and an interminable, 2.5 hour wait at the Canada/US border. Of all the countries I passed through, I have the most difficult time getting into my own.

January 2: I am home. Here in Jericho, buried under piles of mail and three feet of snow, I feel my own internal unwillingness, familiar from other trips to faraway places, to let the trip become simply a part of the rest of my life. I am unwilling to unpack, to find places for Indian objects in my New England home, to overcome jet lag, to discuss what I saw and did with my stateside friends. I feel greedy and selfish with my experience. But I know this too will pass, and be taken up by the exact opposite emotion. Soon enough, I will begin to bore people with stories, photos, tales that begin with, "when I was in India&." In response to their queries, I ask my friends to be patient, tell them to watch their mail, and promise a letter is in the making.