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International Travel Report: India
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Ten weeks.

In India.

Alone.

No set itinerary.

What a terrible idea!

These are the thoughts that went through my head during the weeks leading up to my trip. I knew that my journey was going to be somewhat of an endurance test, and that I would discover more about myself than I wanted to. I was warned about all the crime, violence, theft, schemes, strikes, disease, transit problems, and government corruption India has to offer - with very little emphasis on the beauty, cultures, and marvelous temples. I thought that 10 weeks was literally a death sentence. Amazingly, I survived, ended up wishing for more time, and plan on returning someday.

I found that when you travel alone, you’re not really alone, you’re with yourself-often times with various incarnations of yourself. You argue, and debate, and blame yourself... but you also laugh with yourself, enjoy scenery with yourself, and dare yourself to do things you normally would not. You are your worst enemy, your best friend, your parent, your secretary, and your boss. This is true regardless of your location or situation- I just became more aware of my roles as they were more vocal.

And then there was my body: a constant power struggle! Sleeping, eating, drinking, resting all took second priority to my intellectual drives... Until I hit Kolkata, that is. In an ironic parallel, my body went on strike at the same time the city went on strike. The war with myself would only cease when I was in a reflective state: usually when taking in scenery or exhausted from a satisfying day of exploring.

Seeing became a drug. I had to see the biggest, the best, the most colorful, most exotic stimuli India had to offer! If I missed a location by a few miles, my mind would conjure illogical scenarios of backtracking for days just for a glimpse of greatness. Towards the end on my trip I flew from coastline to coastline trying to see as much as I could; even though I saw 19 cities, there are a half-dozen I regret not visiting. I am thoroughly convinced that one could spend a lifetime travelling India perpetually in awe.

Information about the temples and gods was not easily accessible to tourists. While tour guides were available, they were rarely informative (even the ones employed by the Government of India). I overheard one such guide at the Taj Mahal say, “The tomb inside is much smaller than the outside.” -hardly worth the 200 rupee. I did
have two Brahman Priests show me around their temples and surrounding ones—which were among the highlights of my trip. I learned about Vay Da theology and practices as well as the key Gods and motifs of Hinduism. It was a good starting point, but I am far from being a Hindu scholar.

The Hindu religion has over 200,000 Gods, and unless you are a Hindu scholar or worshiper, quite frequently, you have very little understanding of what you’re looking at. Despite my obvious lack of knowledge, I had an intense visual appreciation. Each region of India has their own temple style in which to depict and celebrate the Gods. The style, colors, height, and permanence of each temple was largely dictated by available resources in each area. If stone was soft, monumental figures were carved; where if stone was harder, smaller figures and details could be achieved. My focus was on these contrasts and similarities between regions.

I had set out with the triangular pattern of Mumbai to Bhubaneswar to Delhi, then back to Mumbai; however, I completed this itinerary 4 weeks into my trip... with 6 weeks to go. So, I continued on my seemingly never-ending journey, ironically, in the shape of an infinity symbol.

Destinations (in order of arrival):

Mumbai
Aurangabad
Ellora
Ajunta
Bhubaneswar
Puti
Konark
Kolkata
Delhi
Chandigarh
Shimla
Manali
Agra
Chennai
Mamallapuram
Kotchi
Alappuzha
Madurai
Goa

When deciding where to go in the world, I thought about where the most amazing work of art I could think of resided. I remembered back to an Asian art history class I had as an undergrad and one structure came to mind: the Kailasanatha Temple in Ellora, India. My professor had
visited the site before and was explaining its construction to us; It was a complex
temple carved from a single mountain from the top downwards- there by making it
the world’s largest sculpture. I was simultaneously impressed and skeptical; it
seemed too miraculous to be true.

The cave temples at Elephanta Island were my first stop due only to their proximity
to Mumbai- Ellora was my first endeavor. I spent ten days studying the walls of
Kailasanatha: examining chisel marks, analyzing fault lines, looking for seems-
trying to debunk any doubts that still existed in my mind. I came to the astonishing
realization that it was, in fact, carved from one single piece of rock! After my
epiphany, I would just sit and stare for hours at a time at one of mankind’s’ greatest
architectural achievements. I thought that I could stay there for the entire ten
weeks, but there was a lot more of India to see. It was difficult to say goodbye, and I
vowed to return someday.
Above is the Mukteswar Temple in Bhubaneswar. It is an example of the architectural style and colorful rocks indigenous to the area. Here I met Manos - one of the Brahman Priests who oversees this particular temple. Later, he took me on a temple tour on the back of his motorcycle (which was hit by fighting bulls on the return home).

On the plane to Bhubaneswar, I read in the in-flight magazine that the Rath Yatra festival in Puti would commence the following day. Puti was a mere 45 minutes from where I was staying; so, I had to be there.

Rath Yatra is also known as the Juggernaut Festival or Car Festival. For nine days every year, the three Gods: Jugannath, Balarama, and Subhadra (little sister), leave their temple and go to visit their aunt in the Gundicha Temple. They do this via three massive temples on wheels, annually reconstructed out of wood and fabric, and powered completely by worshipers pulling on attached ropes. It is one of the holiest and largest festivals in India.
Hundreds of thousands of Hindus and tourists flock to Puti for this occasion, and, to my surprise, I was at the front of the line (so to speak). I found a spot, dead center, on police rope that divided us from the festivities. Given my prime location, I was an easy target for beggars, vendors, and news anchors—I was interviewed four times by different networks. The festival’s date varies every year depending on when the monsoon reaches the city; however, there was no rain that day, so the police sprayed us with fire hoses to combat the heat. When the two ropes were driven into the crowd, I was between them... facing the wrong direction. My body was trapped between a sea of exuberant Indian men; I took tiny footsteps backwards, as to not be trampled to death.

Before the next car left, I—unknowingly—ran up a six-story housing complex (through apartment to apartment) to film from the roof. It was not until I peered over the railing that I realized just how many thousands of people were involved. It was the most exciting event of my life.
I caught some kind of stomach virus (how cliché) the day before I left Bhubaneswar for Kolkata. So, I decided I needed some time off from the India experience; luckily, Kolkata hosted a wide-variety of American fast food, Hollywood movie channels, and imperialistic British architecture! It was my escape to the west. Above is the famed Victoria Memorial: housing lithographs and timelines of India’s British rule-including numerous defiled, scratched-out faces of the queen!

I debated on whether or not I should even go to New Delhi; I heard it was terribly hot, humid, unfriendly, and I was not interested in the Taj Mahal at all. However, Darjeeling was on strike, and I was determined to see the Himalayas; so, Delhi to Manali seemed like my only option. My outlook on Delhi was bleak, but it had a (big) surprise in store...

The temple below is -quite obviously- dedicated to the Monkey-God, Hanuman. I did not plan on visiting this temple- I didn’t even know of its existence, just stumbled across it in passing from inside an auto rickshaw. This is not a typical Hindu Temple, and yet, it was an active, functioning temple. It is accurate too, since Hanuman has the ability to shift scale from miniscule to giant. Inside, the body is divided into different levels and rooms for various gods: Kali has the cave-like basement, Durga has a room of colorful mirrors- inlaid in a mosaic motif, Ganga, a river Goddess, is accessed by walking through a crocodile mouth, just to name of few. This temple was an all-out surprise, even if some in Delhi find it to be tacky.
The train route to Manali coincidently runs through Le Corbusier’s city – Chandigarh! I had to stay the night. Chandigarh is like no other place in India. It is a compartmentalized, Orwellian, gated community that appears like one huge strip mall. People, understandably, hate it. In fact, India was not Le Corbusier’s first choice for his city’s design- and he wasn’t India’s first choice either. The state of Punjab wanted to redesign their capital city, and had chosen an architect from New York to do so; tragically, he died in a plane crash, so Le Corbusier was chosen instead.

The city works on a 1km X 1km grid system with everyone living in sectors. They did not bother to rename the sectors based on their attributes, instead they are known as the harsh sounding “sector 32 next to sector 46.” On the plus side, it is one of the most quiet cities in India- since the traffic is so strictly regulated, no one has reason to blow their horns.
I took this picture of the rugged Himalayan mountain ridge at 13,000ft in Manali along the Routang Pass. When our bus reached the glacier, I commenced in a snowball fight with a south Indian named Panda who had never really been cold before. Afterwards, I took a hot sulfur bath at a nearby rustic temple made of shellacked wood.
After my experience in Puti, I decided to travel to any festival and major event I could find. Which led me to the Snake Boat Race in Alappuzha (Alleppey) to decide who would win the coveted Nehru Trophy! This photo shows about a quarter of the boat’s actual length; to see two boats compete IN ACTION follow this link:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXUyDxVjvpQ

I also captured this event –extensively- through the miracle and wonder of Super 8 color film! (I shot a total of 16 rolls during my time in India.)
The Meenakshi Temple in Madurai is the biggest –and most colorful- temple in India. It is routinely painted every seven years- by luck, I was there just months after its fresh new coat! I would stare at the temple’s statue laden structure for hours on end; it was mesmerizing, almost too visually overloading.
After nine weeks in India, I needed some time to unwind and reflect... luckily the beaches of Goa were on the way to Mumbai. Colonized by the Portuguese, Old Goa was meant to serve as their religious capitol with numerous gold covered Catholic churches within walking distance of each other. Goa also has a legendary party scene and August 15th marked India’s Independence Day! The stars were aligned for one last madcap cultural experience: a tour of Goa’s “biggest dive bars that are assuredly really crazy during peak tourist season”. On the plus side, monsoon season had left the beaches devoid of human interference- with stray dogs outnumbering humans 3 to 1. So, between the solemn churches, empty discos, and desolate beaches, I had plenty of time to reflect.

Sitting on Colva Beach, I thought about how fortunate I was to be offered such an amazing opportunity, and I’d like to take this chance to extend my gratitude to the School of Art and Design for making it possible. Thank You.