

Trip to New Delhi thrill of a lifetime

(First in a series.)

Spending three months in the exotic city of New Delhi, India, must surely qualify for the title "Thrill of a Lifetime". Everything in India is different. The people, the clothing, the buildings, transportation, markets, food and even the leisure time.

I had been to India twice before so didn't expect a cultural shock. But of course my two previous first nights were spent in five star hotels. This time, however, I arrived alone at the Delhi airport in the middle of the night and due to an unfortunate mix-up in communications there was no one there to meet me.

The safest way to travel in India I know is to hire a car and driver. The tour companies have booths at all the better hotels and at the airport, and the advice of the driver can usually be trusted. Once hired, the driver will stay with you as long as you need him. No matter where you stop to visit or spend the night the driver will wait and as the cab is often his home, will sleep as many nights as

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necessary in the car. Of course you are expected to feed the driver if it's more than a short trip.

So I threw myself on the mercy of a tour driver and had him take me to a small guest house of his choice. All hotels have doormen, I know, but this one had a man wrapped in a blanket, asleep in a chair outside the main door. It's bitter cold at night in January and I mistook the doorman for one of India's thousands of homeless people. The buildings have no heat either, and as I was rather dubious of the accommodations I spent the remainder of the night lying on top of the bed, shivering

from cold and fear, and wondering what I'd got myself into.

When the sun came up in the morning things didn't seem so bad and after transferring to a hotel owned by a friend of a friend, I had an Indian type bath with a bucket and cup, changed my clothes and set out to explore my surroundings. My first stop was the restaurant downstairs where I was surprised to find Indian, Chinese and Japanese food on the menu. So my first meal in 26 hours was a huge plate of chow mein and a pot of strong Indian tea.

The hotel was small, very old and right smack in the centre of Connaught Circus, the world famous shopping area of New Delhi.

The first impression of India is that everything is so very old and like any large city the buildings are high and close together. Immediately you realize you are walking the streets and paths that have been trod by the natives and their conquerors for centuries.

As I walked and explored in the shopping areas it was amazing to see how many tourists there were and to listen to the many different languages they spoke. Many of them attempted to bargain with the hawkers while struggling with the universal language of English.

I was soon totally absorbed in my surroundings and in less than 24 hours, had completely forgotten the fiasco of my first night in India.