

Emails from India  
Bhopal — Gujerat — Manali — Dharamshala — Amritsar  
February/March, 2009

February 26, 2009

Jao Ho! India is reveling in its glory - "Slumdog Millionaire" just won eight Oscars, including picture of the year. Everything here is "Slumdog"--ringtones, radio, TV commercials and India cable TV is running the movie every weekend.

Its been a glorious week. The first few days in Delhi are dedicated to errands -- like buying a new sim card — there is lots of security and paperwork to go thru, getting new glasses (they use Japanese technology here at 1/3 the price of even ForEyes), re-sorting my little mountain of luggage into the three different trips I'm doing and buying stuff you can't put in checked luggage like really strong aerosol insect repellent.

Am now in Bhopal on the last day of visiting some amazing archaeological sites in Central India -- Sanchi (oldest Buddhist stupa), Bhimbetka (9000+ year old petroglyphs), and Mandu (15th century bastion of the Afgan Empire in India and my favorite site of the week, and lots of temples in-between. My driver, Sanjay is a delight and can handle this horrific traffic easily; my guide Manu is wonderful and takes great care that I understand what I am seeing. Thanks to him, I see lots more than what is on the itinerary.

And the accommodations! I stay in two palaces (now heritage hotels) and good quality contemporary hotels. In Mandu, the most basic, it isn't too bad even though there is electricity just a few hours a day - and when the power is on, the TV has 300 stations!

I am seeing so much change in India, just from the last visit about 15 months ago -- Delhi has just about licked pollution, street people are few and far between and those crazy monkeys seem to be under control.

I truly believe there are not nicer people on earth than those in India. From the hotel security guard in Manu who notices I am walking into town (about 2 miles) and catches up with me to loan me his bike, to the hotel manager who ask where I am going next and call their cousin who works at the hotel to tell him to watch out for me (this is how I ended up in a balcony room overlooking the lake in Noor Us Sabah Palace in Bhopal) to the Yoga teacher who offers to run a 6:30 am class as I am checking out early that day and can't make the regular 7:30 class time. Amazing people.

Phase two begins this weekend in Delhi where I meet up with a British group for a tour called "Village India" run by by Explore Worldwide. There are about 10 persons, so it will be a nice size group. We plan to travel overland from Delhi to Ahmedabad visiting small villages and seeing (as they say) the "real India."

I receive sad family news this week and for this reason have made offerings at the various temples in my cousins name. Please keep Robert (a wonderful , warm and kind person) in your prayers.

All the best to you

Esther

XXX

March 8, 2009

Each day, India hands you a jewel to hold and treasure. It can be a village walk, a wave from a brightly turbaned Rajasthani goat or camel herder, or a man who lets you sit on the steps to his house on an incredibly hot day, and offers you a drag on his home-made cigarette.

The secret of enjoying the "real" India is to get out of the big cities as fast as you can. The rural areas are magnificent -- dotted with walled cities, farms, gorgeous temples and people adorned with tribal jewelry serving as their bank account. We stay in 18th and 19th century ( sometimes dusty, crumbling and faded) forts and palaces and are greeted by the Maharajas and Majaranis that still own them. Far from being cookie-cutter accommodations I've stayed in a castle turret, a harem and in one fort, in the Maharaja's own bedroom (he wasn't home at the time). Most often, we are the only guests.

Rajasthan has about 100 of these historic properties. The Maharajas have no power anymore and no income from the community. Many have converted their properties into hotels and some of the profits go back into the community as families still feel obligations to the villages that supported them for centuries.

We are now in Udaipur - probably India's most elegant city. It gleams as so many buildings are of white marble. Our hotel is on the lake and everyone has a view room. Last night we ate in a beautiful well-tended garden overlooking the magnificent Lake Palace and today we explore the city.

Our happy group of 8 travels comfortably on a 25 passenger bus with Ramesh, one of the best Explore guides I've had in India. He's a historian and no question stumps him.

Tomorrow we leave for tribal Gujarat - the highlight of the itinerary. We are going to desert areas and it is sure to be even hotter than it is here. Oh well..... this is India.

More to follow

All the best

Esther

XXXX

March 15, 2009

Sunday in Ahmedabad.....I spend the day with my own guide and car/driver touring Ahmedabad - the capital of Gujarat, India's most affluent state. He is excellent and we make stops at (yet another) colorful temple, the Calico(textile) museum (a private collection owned by one of India's richest industrialists and housed on his family's estate) and Gandhi's Ashram. You can tell we aren't in a tourist town as we lunch in one of the best restaurants in town and share four dishes, ate until we could eat no more and the bill came to 225 rupees - just over \$4.25 for the two of us!

Last night I hugged my eight travel companions goodbye as they leave the hotel at 5am for their flight to London. What a great group! No cranky people, no complainers, everyone is always on time and each is very considerate of the other. No one escapes being sick (well, this is India), even the guide. I am out of commission for two days probably due to dehydration/sunstroke and missed enjoying the stay at Udai Bilas Palace, the best palace on the itinerary, and a jeep safari at Dasada Park.

The highlight of this last week is our time in the tribal areas of Bhuj and Rann of Kutch. This area is so close to the Pakistan border we must present ourselves and passports at the central Police Station and obtain permissions. Only visits to certain villages are allowed. We camp at Bhirendiara, a Harijin or "untouchables" village where village officials let us use two of their buildings as a kitchen and dining area. We sleep in tents within the confines of the village.

The villages we visit are beautiful, colorful and clean. They are divided by religion and caste with nuances too complex for me to figure out. Enough to say the people live in large family groups, about 100 people to a village and they tend to marry within the same group.

Each village specializes in a particular craft and they are happy to show us their weavings, embroideries, artwork, brass-work, paintings and beadwork. In one village, there is just a single family left who does Rogan Art which is unusual type of painting on fabric. They show-and-tell, and oh how we buy. There is very little bargaining (most times only one round, just to be polite) knowing that so little tourism comes this way and this money helps feed their families.

Tomorrow I return to Delhi and Tuesday begin Part 3 of my India adventures - three weeks in Himachel Pradesh the state that lies in the Himalayas. Ramesh, our Village India guide warns me it is a lot of mountain driving but with spectacular scenery. I have already learned that some of the passes we had planned to cross are closed due to snow. These weeks concentrate on Tibetan India and are a good prelude to January when I hope to follow a Buddhist trail through Bihar and Nepal.

So all is well in India and I hope it is the same with you.

Esther  
XXXXX

### A Vignette

In Ludia - a small village in the Rann of Kutch (very near the Pakistan border)

She appears in a swirl of flowered and mirrored skirts and tabard style top. Her silver bracelets and anklets tinkle as she walks. There are at least 15 bracelets on each arm. She is beautiful with dark skin, flashing eyes, magnificent hair and wearing huge gold earrings and a nose ring so heavy it is supported with a ribbon attached to her hair. She seems dressed to kill, but this is everyday wear for these tribal women.

I admire her jewelry and in a flash this colorful swirl runs off. Did I offend her? Did she think I wanted to steal her jewelry?? In a few minutes the dazzling swirl reappears holding a tin box. We sit on the floor amidst the villages stock of weavings and embroideries and she proceeds to proudly show me her collection. Out of this rusty box comes a treasure of antique silver including ornaments for ankles, toes and whole feet, necklaces, chains, nose rings, earrings, hair pieces and many more bracelets. As any women in the world would do, I oooo and aaaa over each piece then tuck them safely back to their rightful place. For sure, it is her bank account and it holds its value.

We should be so lucky.

XXXX

March 27, 2009  
Hello from Manali

Mid-trip update: I have seen wondrous things, marvelous things, places so spectacular it makes me suspect there must be a God. This is Part 3 of this journey in India -- 21 days with a guide and driver (more about him later), in a big, fat SUV, visiting the Himalayan state of Himachel Pradesh.

After a four hour train ride from Delhi to Chandigarth I met my guide, Puran, who immediately takes me to see the buildings designed by Le Corbusier. He designed this state capital in the 1950's and it still looks very modern. We also visit Neck Chands Rock garden, a whimsical park made out of recycled materials.

We have one task to deal with. I am going to places so remote and close to the Tibet and Nepal borders I need a police permit and we are kept track of at checkpoints where officials cross our names on/off their lists as we traverse through. Puran and I talk while we wait for the permissions to come through (about 3 hours and waiting at various

offices to get the right signatures) and we review the whole itinerary day by day. "It is a complex and difficult trip," he warns. He is so right.

We are then off to Shimla, "Queen of the Hill Stations". I've visited this lovely town before and it is a treat to be back.

Basically we drive north on the Hindustan-Tibet Highway starting in the Himalayan foothills and ending in a town called Kibber which lies at 13,000 feet in the mid-Himalayas. Most times we are surrounded by spectacular snow-covered peaks that shoot up to 21,000 feet. As I am traveling very early in the season (high season in June/July/August) many hotels and restaurants remain closed, as is the road over the high passes beyond Kaza/Kibber. Accommodations include some heritage properties (I love these dusty old places) to government guest houses to one place where the hotel turned out to be closed (but we have reservations!), so the Tibetan owner moves us into his home and we eat our meals with his family! The most unusual is staying in visiting monks' quarters at the monastery in Tabo. In most places we are the only guests.

We drive through the stunningly beautiful Baspa Valley which provides the first view of Buddhist prayer flags. This is a Buddhist-Hindu area where people believe and worship in both venues. The Kinnaur Valley is lush with green meadows and orchards. We continue into the Spiti Valley, a high desert and formerly (a long time ago) part of Tibet. This is what we drive days to see. This valley sits from 10,000 to 13,000 feet, is very austere, and very remote. Villages are few and far between and with small populations. There is sporadic land-line telephone service but no cell service -- unusual for India. The big event here is Tabo Monastery, founded in 966AD. It is rumored that the Dalai Lama will retire to this monastery when the time comes.

This monastery houses the best collection of early Buddhist art in the Himalayas. Puran's monk-friend (he knows everyone) takes us around, opens all nine chapels for us, explains the frescoes, statues and paintings in great detail and even offers to take us to the meditation caves in the hills further up the mountains! I am frescoed out by this time, but maybe next time.....

As wonderful as Tabo is, Ki monastery (16th century) remains my favorite. It is perched so far on top of a hill and seems like these monks don't want company. But our guide-monk is a darling. He notices I am shivering (it is COLD in these mountains!) so makes us hot tea in his cave-room before taking us around. Afterwards, since it is lunchtime, he offers us thukpa - a thick vegetable soup. Ki monastery must have the friendliest monks on earth and surprisingly quite a nice gift shop. Local residents make things for the monastery to sell and some of the pieces are very beautiful. I buy lots here including both guide books for Tabo and Ki monasteries.

Now for the driving..... think of the expressway at rush hour--- a piece of cake; the Karakoram Highway -- a walk in the park; the Hindustan-Tibet highway ... a thrill a minute. Designed by the British, but cut after Independence (early 1950's) there can't

be more than 50 feet of straight road before encountering twists, turns and switchbacks. You never know when you'll meet an overloaded 10 ton Tata truck, a flock of goats/sheep/cows, rockfalls, or overturned vehicles on the other side. There is a lot of this mountain driving and most times, not for the faint-hearted.

Puran, my guide is excellent. Very knowledgeable, but sometimes I don't "get" what he is saying. He knows the area well and has friends just about every place we stop. The surprise of the trip is my driver - Kavinder Kumar ("call me Kavie") who wears a double-breasted navy blue chauffeurs uniform complete with cap! Its very much like "driving Miss Esther" and I love every minute. Mountain driving is difficult and Kavie is an expert.

Since the Rhotang Pass (which would take us straight to Manali in 9 hours) is still closed we backtrack to Shimla for one night. There are some long drives on this trip, but the views are spectacular and Puran has something to say about just about every town, building and rock we pass. Its going well.

Until next time....  
Esther

(Puran and I are working on a return itinerary to this beautiful state to cover Chamba, Leh and Shrinigar. Maybe in 2010!)  
XXXX

April 1, 2009 Greetings from Dharamshala

But first, a little more about Manali - for sure this town is a favorite. And the Ambassador Resort can't be beat -- friendly staff, great buffet breakfast and a decent spa. I had an Indian-style massage that included a head/oil massage and am told to leave the oil in for six hours! I looked like Medusa the rest of the day, but it worked and my hair is soft and silky!

As for shopping, there are several "markets" here with booths that go on and on. My favorite is a teeny magic shop and, thanks to its owner, I'm coming home with a very big bag of tricks. The almost toothless, non-English speaking owner enthalls me for about 45 minutes with a magic show/sale and even my guide buys some "magic." Manali is tribal central and you can sit in any restaurant (I recommend "Chopsticks") and watch an ethnic parade - Tibetans, Nepalis, Gaddis, Ladakhis, Zanskaries, etc -- each in traditional dress.

After three nights we continue to Rewalsar, a lake holy to Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs. It is ringed with monasteries and temples and the lake is filled with "holy fish" which everyone feeds, but not eats. They are the fattest carp and trout I've ever seen!! Kavi and I delight in throwing them food, while Puran, acting as photographer (digital is new to him so I let him use my camera) takes pictures. The most striking feature is a 108

foot gold statue of Padmesambava, the monk who brought Buddhism to Tibet and it seems like he is looking right in my window!

I enjoy Rewalsar immensely --I can see the lake from my balcony, the Tibetan shopkeepers are very nice and it has a very laid back atmosphere. I do kora around the lake three different times -- the last in the early morning as I tag along with a group of lovely elderly Tibetan ladies.

We reach Dharamshala in the early afternoon and it is like coming home. It is the home of the Dalai Lama and the seat of Tibet's government in exile. I'm staying at Chonor House which is managed by the Dalai Lama's sister. Its 11 rooms are furnished in traditional Tibetan style. I'm in "Nomads" (no room numbers here - just names) which has murals of Tibet's high pasture lands, nomads and yaks. The yaks are everywhere -- on the pillows, on the hand-woven carpets, on the window dressings, even on the bathroom tiles. My balcony over-looks the Dalai Lama's temple and I like to sit on my balcony in the morning to listen to the monks chanting.

The best part about getting here is delivering books I've collected to Dolma Ling Nunnery. Philippa Russell, my guide on a Hill Stations trip 1 1/2 years ago was instrumental in establishing and building this nunnery and "her" nuns like to read about Buddhism and learn English at the same time. Philippa is in awe of the quality and quantity of books and when she sees the copy of "Cave in the Snow" by Tenzim Palmo, she tells me more about her. She was the first westerner to become a Tibetan Buddhist nun in the early 60's and later lived alone and meditated in a cave for an extraordinary 12 years in the 1980's. Her goal was to attain enlightenment as a woman. She now resides in a nunnary about 50 miles from here) "Would you like to meet her?" Philippa asked. Philippa calls her cell number (EVERYONE has a cell phone here!), introduces me and indicated I might be stopping by. Regretably tomorrow we head in a different direction but... there is always next time.

Dharamshala has changed from even 1 1/2 years ago -- there are sidewalk cafes, a Starbucks-like coffee house and mass produced Thangkas are being sold as souvenirs. This I have a problem with. I try to look beyond all this and enjoy the moment -- being near the Dalai Lama, being in a Tibetan environment and enjoying my last few days in India.

Thank you for continuing to read these notes from India -- there is probably just one more to follow!

Esther

XXXXX

April 8, 2009

The Day I Lost All My Dark Stars and ended up in Richard Gere's Bedroom  
(this is not a typo!)

April 2... I am so excited to be in Dharamsala and so near the Dalai Lama's Temple. Puran, my guide, schedules a morning visit so we could spend as much time wandering about the property as we wanted. It is customary to leave your shoes outside the chapels which is the same for all Hindu temples and other holy places in India-- I have done this probably hundreds of times before with no problem. We come out and..... no shoes! Puran quickly walks around to see if anyone took them by "mistake" (brand new Keens -- I think not!) and reports it to security. The guard-monks look at each other with a "oh no, not again!" look. It has happened already once that morning and also earlier in the week. I continue my visit wearing Kavie's flip flops.

What is interesting is peoples reactions - the monks feel sorry for the thief -- "bad Karma" and Puran tells me that, in a way, I am lucky, for along with my shoes the thief had taken all my dark stars (incoming bad luck)! As Joe says' "Shoes -- you have shoes" and he is right. It is a small price to pay.

When we return to Chonor House, the manager stops me and asks if I would mind changing rooms as a Dharma group has arrived and they want rooms together. The minute she says "we can give you Richard Gere's room" I am ready to move. He comes every year with a "Mind and Life" group started by the Dali Lama and he always stays in the beautiful Kham Room. It is exquisite even though it is not the largest or best room in the house. It has view windows on three sides, a very private balcony and walls covered with murals of the Khampas - a Tibetan sub-group. I have the room for one night, the next night it is vacant and Richard arrived the next day. So sorry we missed each other!

April 3rd.....We have a long drive to Amritsar, capital of the Punjab province and home of the Sikh religious masterpiece, the Golden Temple. I stay two nights in Ranjits Svassa, a heritage property with spa facilities. It is hard to leave Puran and Kavie, but the drop at the hotel is the last of their responsibilities. It is hard and very emotional to leave those who have taken such good care of me for 17 days -- we hug goodbye and I knew I will miss them both. Among other things, I always liked how Puran called me "Pinky" my childhood nickname and much easier for locals to pronounce than "Esther". It also happens to be a common Indian name which he thought was hilarious.

Now for a new guide -- a woman guide -- Priya, who looks exactly like Lisa Marie Presley. I have been to Amritsar before so don't need to do the "regular" touring. I like old architecture and expressed an interest in walking in the Old City. "We can stop by my house" and we end up visiting with her mother and an aunt who live in a 100 year old house down a warren of little lanes. It is a little gem -- 3 floors, beautiful courtyard, with carved wood and colored glass everywhere. We do some last minute shopping, and later that night, visit the India/Pakistan border for the evening closing ceremony. It consists of lots of pomp, marching, and a friendly rivalry of people shouting "Long Live India" from one side and "Long Live Pakistan" from the other and ends with the lowering of flags and the slamming shut of gates for the evening.



I am able to have two spa treatments and if you are ever in Amritsar, turn yourself in to Indira at Ranjits Svaasa for a traditional Indian massage. It is almost like an anointing - your skin feels great and all you want to do is sleep afterwards. Wonderful!

April 5th....All too soon I transferred to the airport and take an afternoon flight to Delhi. I spend the next day with Gurdev Singh (call me Dave), the greatest tuk-tuk driver ever born. His father is a driver, his brother is, and his son wants to be. I discovered him in February during my first few days in Delhi and asked if he would drive me on subsequent visits. A good natured, tall, chubby Sikh man, he knows every alley and shortcut in the city and I think we drove thru most of them. Our errands consist of picking up eye glasses, getting a necklace re-strung, getting my suitcase repaired and a little shopping. If you need a Delhi tuk-tuk driver give him a call (his cell is 9818241967). Tell him Pinky sent you.

Thank you for sticking with me these seven weeks and I hope you've enjoyed these missives from India!

love  
Esther