

Vignette #1 from India

Am happy to tell you that all is going well in India. The bane of jetlag seems to be over - thank goodness! The flight from Chicago to Paris is uneventful, mostly because it is a night flight and I sleep all the way. Paris to Delhi is another matter.

A nice looking Indian man sits across the aisle from me on the Air France flight from Paris. At one point, he helps me put my carry-on up then close the overhead bin. For some reason, he looks vaguely familiar. He is very quiet and I later notice him reading and chanting to himself. It is clearly religious in tone. As the flight drones on, he receives a lot of attention from the Indian flight attendants and, as a result, those around him (like me!) receive extra attention too.



As we deplane, my (French) seatmate asks me if I knew who that man was -- turns out he is physician, new-age philosopher and author Deepak Chopra!

In India, you're taught that there are certain qualities that make you a divine human being.
Deepak Chopra

Dev

I have a great two days in Delhi. And thanks to Preeth, my yoga teacher, who called India for me and contacted my favorite tuk-tuk driver, I am able to be back in touch with Gurdev Singh ("call me Dev"). He is such a delight. A big Sikh, complete with turban, he knows me as "Pinky" (my childhood nickname) as when we first met about 10 years ago, I didn't want to give this unknown man my real name. So I'm forever Pinky to him. He is a great driver and knows everyone and everything about Delhi. He helps me change money (and get those small denominations), get a sim card, find someone to repair a few pieces of jewelry, and make some rounds looking at antique jewelry (more about this later), and use a Citibank ATM in a safe, secure location.

A Little About Money

We are so lucky in the US in that banks routinely send torn, worn and dirty currency back to the Federal Reserve to be taken out of circulation. Not so in India. The only place I've seen dirtier, cruddier, more horrible looking money is in Ethiopia. So when I change money in India, I always ask for 'new' (uncirculated) currency. Also, since Joan and I will be in remote areas, it is important to have small denomination currency as people in these out-of-the-way places won't have change.

Right now (January, 2016), the exchange rate is \$1 USD = 67 Rupees. So I need a good quantity of 10 (15¢ US), 20 (30¢), and 50 Rupee (75¢) notes to pay for incidentals like coffees, teas and cappuchinos. No luck at the four exchange bureaus at the airport. All they have are 500 (\$7.38) and 1000 (\$14.75) rupee notes, and they are "used" money to boot!

Luckily Dev helps me out. Through his contacts, I get a good stack of 100's and some 50's, but, again, "used money". Where is all the new money?????

I soon find out!





In India, it is wedding ceremony custom to give gifts of money to the groom. Most often, the currency is artfully arranged and the groom wears it during the ceremony. January is wedding season, so the merchants who prepare these tributes have bought up all the good-looking currency!

Joan, my travel mate in this adventure, came in from Canada my second day in Delhi. We have an early dinner together, then breakfast the next day. Then she goes on to Shimla to visit friends and I fly to Rishikish to begin my spa and yoga week.

Rishikish

Though a small town, everyone seems to know about Rishikish. It was the home and ashram (school of religious teachings and meditation) of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi who specialized in Transcendental Meditation (TM) and who the Beatles visited in February, 1968. The best thing that came out of their stay here (which was not without its problems) was 48 songs, many of which are on their "White Album" released later that year in November.

Rishikish has become known as the "Yoga Capital of the World" with lots of ashrams (some of which cost only \$3 per day and include meals and classes) small hotels, and a few more upscale properties.

The population is interesting. Most of the tourists are Indian who come on pilgrimage on a circuit of Hindu sites. They come to be close to the Ganges and to take a "holy dip" in the river which will absolve them of their sins. Maybe I should try it! The westerners look like they've been here a long time -- sandals, loose, wrinkled clothing, men with scruffy hair, and women with long (and stringy) hair. So this is where all those Hippies ended up! And there are lots of Sadhus - they have bright (but dusty) orange robes, long hair and beards. They give up all worldly goods and live mostly in ashrams, or have taken over the care of a small temple (there are many around), or even live inside caves in the surrounding Himalayan foothills.

Rishikish has changed a lot since I first visited in the mid-1990's. The main streets are now lined with shop after shop. But I am able to find the one peaceful walk along the river that is still like the old Rishikish of years past, with single-storey ashrams, small homes, teeny temples and gorgeous views. Amazingly, I remember where to find the nondescript entrance to this picturesque lane where it veers off the main street.

The Ganga Kinare Hotel

As for me, I'm staying at the second-best hotel in Rishikish (The best is Ananda in the Himalayas, a destination spa set on 100 acres at the top of a mountain overlooking the town - I stayed there for a week about 12 years ago and cried when I left).

Judi, a travel friend, recommended the spa program at the Ganga Kinare Hotel. It is set a little way out from central Rishikish and is right on the Ganges and even has its own bathing ghat in case I want to do a "holy dip". I'm ensconced in one of the two Lotus Suites which is fabulous - top floor, view of the hotel gardens and the river. It is large, comfortable and well furnished. I've become especially fond of my huge wall-mounted flat-screen TV with has 988 (not a typo) stations! It finally hit me that with 22 official Language in India, plus a bunch of others, each language group has its own news stations, soap operas, music stations, and sports stations. It takes awhile, but I finally find CNN and BBC.



It was a few days before I take a close look at the bed's headboard. At first it looks like just nice sculptured elements; but on closer inspection, I find some very detailed bas-reliefs from the Kama Sutra!

I am here for the hotel's "Rejuvenation Spa Package" to "reinvigorate my mind and body" and just about everything is included. The restaurant manager has been especially helpful to me in identifying non-spicey foods on the buffet. On days when there is no buffet, there is a great menu with Indian, continental, Italian and Chinese items. I won't go hungry here. But, guess what, the whole town is

vegetarian, so no meat, eggs, or fish are allowed nor any liquor; but there are milk products available like yogurt and cheeses (thank goodness!).

There is a universal truth to travel: if you are going to stay in one place for awhile, select the best room possible. And if you are on your own, the room is important. I have to admit that I enjoyed staying in this suite, with its view of the Ganges very much.



My main obligation of the week is to be on time for my spa treatments and private yoga sessions. There is complimentary yoga at 7am -- way to early for me. I can't even make noon-time yoga at my club! So I have a private lesson each afternoon at 4pm with Akhile, the resident yoga teacher.

This is an ayurvedic spa so there are a minimum of western treatments. This 5,000 age-old healing and wellness system is considered a medical practice in India. The herbs and oils used are a mystery to me, but I know that I feel relaxed and energized after the spa treatments.



I loved having my spa treatments in the room shown above. One of the more interesting was Shirodara, an ayurvedic technique whereby warm oils drip in a steady stream onto the forehead. It sounds strange, but is amazingly relaxing.



Joan came in from Shimla to spend three days in Rishikish. Then we will return to Delhi to begin our “In the Footsteps of the Buddha” itinerary. We’ve worked on this itinerary for over a year and it is sure to be a good experience.



Joan and I spend the day exploring Rishikish. We have both been here before, so are happy to just walk around and explore. We have some errands to run - like having a watch band re-strung so I can put it on my backpack (left) and learning about the various faces and powers of Rudraksha beads (right).

With Joan overlooking Ramjula Bridge. You can see some of the Rishikish's many temples and ashrams in the background.

