

Varanasi, Journal entry #1, January 9, 2015

Dear fellow world traveler:

I hope you're ready for a real treat from the comfort of your side of the screen. Let me know if you don't want future journal entries simply by not responding to this one. Of course, I may give you a second or a third chance.

Sitting in Indira Gandhi domestic airport waiting for my Indigo air flight to board for Varanasi. My Apple World Clock app tells me I stepped into Bobb's Prius on the way to North Berkeley BART 29 hours ago. The toilet wallah sprayed the seat as he invited me into a cubicle then later handed me towels to dry my hands. The room was busy but sparkling. It's the the only toilet in what has to be the smallest airport in a major Indian city. All signs point to it.



Now I'm sitting again, at the Hotel Alka's restaurant, overlooking the Ganges, having Alodum Kashmiri for lunch. It's gratifyingly serene here with an occasional rowboat passing on its touristy way from one bathing ghat to the next.



Once more sitting, for meditation. After a few minutes it becomes clear that the sites I have come to see are secondary to my enjoyment of the silent depths of the inner experience in this holiest of places.

Nevertheless, on Thursday, I strolled north, from Meer ghat, where my hotel is located, to Manikarnika ghat and beyond. The ghats are the broadest of steps leading up from the Ganges. Residents of the old city, that part of

Varanasi adjacent to the river, bathe and play ball and wash their clothes on these steps.

Varanasi is also renowned as the place where devout Hindus come when it's their time to die and to have their body cremated on the banks of the Ganges. It's a great blessing to die in Varanasi, to have your body burned here, and to have the ashes offered to the river. Manikarnika is the main cremation ghat. No photos I am told. I don't want to photograph the burning but I do want a picture of the temples above the ghats. I test the waters, the waters churn. 45 minutes later, 45 photos later, a few hundred rupee "offerings" poorer, and I'm beyond Manikarnika.



Varanasi, Journal entry #2, January 12, 2015

Rich arrived on schedule on Thursday, having flown first class on Etihad and having spent a day or so in Delhi. We celebrated by having Kingfisher beers with our dinner. Today we took a boat ride past the ghats, northward and then back to our hotel. No one seemed to complain about the pics we both took of the temples and the cremations. I'll take Rich on a stroll through Manikarnika ghat in the next few days so he won't miss the full experience.



In the evening we had dinner at The Brown Bread Bakery - chicken tikka malai and potato and cauliflower curry - and were surprised by an excellent meal as well as a wonderful sitar-tabla concert, which brought back to me the vibe of the 60s.



Having enjoyed it so much we came back the next evening for a slightly different but equally excellent dinner with sarod and tabla concert this time.

Yesterday we went on a guided 3 hour stroll through the old city, covering old and new ground - always careful not to step where the ground is covered with enormous dense wet cow droppings or the foot tracks leading away. Standouts were the Nepali temple with its wood carvings from the Kama sutra, the mosque, vegetable stalls (ah, what lovely eggplant, and the cauliflower, whiter than Himalayan glaciers and far more prevalent), the long line of worshippers carrying flowers waiting to enter the Golden Temple (not for non-Hindus or those opposed to long lines).

In the afternoon we took a tuk-tuk (150 Rs) to our favorite cafe, The Mark, for repast, then walked back from Assi ghat, the southernmost ghat, to our hotel. That, and about 150 photos each was enough activity in a day for a week. And, yes, the cheesecake was good, as was the large capp. You are looking at an expression of sensory overload often characterized as exhaustion, a frequent malady of travelers. What you can't see is the bliss after the first bite.



The Mark Café
Shop & Eatery
FREE FILTERED WATER REFILLS
MENU
Coffee
Espresso, Frappe, Mocha, Cappuccino, Latte, Cold Latte, Macchiato, Mocha, Strawberry Cheesecake, Chocolate
Hot
Hot Chocolate
Tea bag
Teh Pagar, Assam, Earl Grey, Lemon, Orange, Strawberry, Lemon, Mint

Varanasi, Journal entry #3, January 17, 2015

Everyone loves a parade, right?



In order to get to our pickup station, we were walking along as swiftly as the crowds would allow, led by our agent, who had arranged for the taxi to the Buddhist site of Sarnath, just out of Varanasi, when we were interrupted by a parade. It didn't get in our way but it did present an unmissable photo opportunity. Our agent, Aman, said to me: "I make this for welcome you".



It was clearly a spiritual organization's parade: there were holy men dressed in saffron robes riding in carriages or on horseback and students of different ages. And there was even a band. The crowd didn't thin but the parade was obliging and turned around a barrier and headed right back in my direction so I had a second chance.



Sarnath is the place where Buddha first taught the eternal truth. Maybe if I had been there I would have heard but the place itself, this day, didn't ring any bells for me. The parade, however, even though it and I intersected for only a few minutes, did.

Varanasi is the holiest of Hindu cities but there's also a large Muslim presence. On the ghats you see mostly Hindus but there are sections of the old city, just west of the river, where the people are wearing traditional Muslim dress, including women covered in black from foot to head. The Muslim temple also occupies a prominent place in the ghat skyline.



In case I didn't mention it before, also occupying a prominent place in the ghat skyline is the haze (for lack of a more comprehensive term), which has obscured the sunlight and kept the temperature downright cold for almost my entire stay. Fortunately, the people of Varanasi are fantastically photogenic and, if they're a bit out of focus, I can always attribute that to the thickness of the haze.

