

August 21, 2016

Monsoon Madness

As July arrived, the monsoon also arrived. People were so happy to see the rain after the months of hot weather and over a month of tempting skies. One annoying thing I noticed though was that instead of being able to wash and dry clothes within one hour, it now took a few days. Everyone went about their business as usual and no fuss was made about the change in season as it always is in England.

I had been looking forward to this month for a while as two of my friends Leila and Kate were visiting from England. The plan was for them to spend a week doing the Golden triangle (Delhi, Agra and Jaipur) on their own, then come to Maher for two weeks. However two days before they were to be in Jaipur I spontaneously decided to surprise them and join them there. It was somewhere I had not been and had heard great things about. So the day after deciding I set off on the 24 hour bus journey from Pune, with them still having no idea I was coming. Just a few days after the long journey back from Jharkhand, this was nothing and it was a luxury AC sleeper bus so I slept very well and the time went relatively fast. Unlike the trains, there was no toilet or food vendors which I definitely missed. Although the bus made a few stops, we did not stop for dinner until 10.30pm and the toilet stops were questionable with men being able to go on the side of the road. I had to ask the bus to stop for me once which they kindly did, but I did have a panic moment when I came out and the bus was not there with everything on it, luckily it had just parked slight further up the road.

I checked into a small guesthouse recommended by some friends who had travelled here a few weeks previous. Then I took an auto to meet Leila and Kate at their hotel. I had given in and called them from the bus to say I was coming so it wasn't a complete surprise, but all the same we certainly got some looks from the hotel staff as we ran into each other's arms screaming. It was so nice to see them and I was so excited to see what they thought of India.

with Kate and Leila in front of Hawa Mahal



Jaipur is famous for its treasure trove like shops selling beautiful scarves, clothes, jewellery, wall hangings and of course the intimidating shop keepers not letting you walk by without a quick look and a chai. Bargaining was a necessity. Jaipur is also known as the pink city with all the buildings painted pink for the Royal arrival of Prince Edward VII in 1876 and to me they looked like gingerbread houses with the white icing.

The next day we went to visit Amer Fort, just outside the city, which was beautiful; full of intricate carvings, archways, amazing views and even elephants taking visitors around. We also went to the city palace inside the old city which houses the current maharaja who had just celebrated his 18th birthday, as well as the largest sundial in the world with an amazing 20 second accuracy. I enjoyed the Rajasthani food which was different from Maharashtrian, much richer and included by first naan bread I'd had all year which is very North Indian. Our last day we were caught in a huge rain shower. In only

a few hours, the roads were completely flooded to knee deep which flooded into our auto. I thought we would be wading our way back to the hotel but nothing is too difficult for Indians who simply gave us a good push and we were on our way again if a little wet.

While we had been in Jaipur Sister Lucy had taken a large group of young girls at Maher, along with many volunteers, to her birthplace Kerala. Here she was receiving an award for 'Woman of the Year'. For many of these girls it was their first time in a train and an opportunity to see a new place. They all had an amazing time. When she returned, Maher put on a huge welcome



and the children swarmed her as she got out the car. For Leila and Kate this was their first time meeting her and it really felt like she was a celebrity. In September she is also receiving the 'Mother Teresa award' and I don't know anyone who deserves it more, I really feel lucky to have met this lady and witness all that she does. A very inspiring woman.

I enjoyed showing Leila and Kate around Pune and I was glad that they enjoyed the food just as much as me. The food at Maher was always amazing and definitely the best I've had all year. For Leila's birthday we went to see a Bollywood film called Sultan, even without subtitles it was a great watch and easy enough to understand the basic storyline.

Making chapattis with Saloni

Me and Kate spent a few mornings teaching English to a group of boys before school. I enjoyed this and it was nice to get to know the boys who lived in a separate house I had not really previously been too. On our last evening at Maher we had a goodbye ceremony in true Maher tradition; complete with lighting of the lamp, prayer for our safe return, speeches and songs.



Before leaving India, we decided to spend a few days in Mumbai. Although my second time to the city there were many things I still wanted to see and the constant heavy rain made for a very different climate to last time. Having read the book Shantaram this year, a standard book for any traveller in India about an Aussie ex convict who makes his new life settling in Mumbai, I was desperate to visit Colaba. This area is next to the India Gate and is full of travellers, markets and nice restaurants.

Specifically I wanted to visit the famous Leopolds Cafe, which if you have read the book is where they spend many an evening socialising. We had a lovely last evening here, together with Lena (another Maher volunteer) and her boyfriend Manuel. Unfortunately though it had changed a lot since the '80's when the book was set.



One morning, myself Lena and Manuel got up early and left the hotel by 6am to go and visit the city's largest launderette. This was where most of the city's big hotels send their laundry. It was really interesting to watch. Despite the heavy rain, the clothes were still hung out to dry as whenever it stopped it would be hot for a short time.



We then went to see the Haji Ali mosque (also mentioned in Shantaram), built on a small island jut out into the sea and connected only by a path which was very exposed to the elements. It was a very beautiful mosque and held the casket of a wealthy Muslim merchant Haji Ali who gave up his worldly possessions to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. I even made sure to take Leila and Kate to Chowpatty beach for the famous street food despite the rain.

I found Mumbai to be a very safe, cosmopolitan and multicultural city where we definitely didn't stand out as much as in other places, were much freer with what we could wear and even felt safe walking around in the nighttime.