

DELHI

DAY 7 – 30th June 2008

We were delivered to Queen Alia Airport in Amman with plenty of time to spare. It is always interesting to discover the origins of the names of the various airports around the world. John Lennon Airport in Liverpool is pretty well self-explanatory for those who know about the Beatles. Queen Alia, however, was the third wife of King Hussein of Jordan. She was killed in a plane crash!! So one doesn't really need such a reminder of what can happen just before flying!!

There were very few people around, and so we checked in easily, went through passport control and into the departure lounge quite smoothly. The Airport Lounge card really came into its own at Amman. The ordinary people had hard, stiff, plastic seats to sit on in the departure lounge, but in the VIP lounge, there were plush soft sofas, free food and drink! Since we had missed lunch, we made use of the selection of cheeses and fruits available.

Our flight from Amman to Delhi was uneventful, though there was a brief problem just before take-off. It coincided with the Islamic call to prayer. Although we had taxied to the end of the runway and were about to rev up the engines, a group of Moslem passengers suddenly undid their seat-belts and tried prostrating themselves on the floor in prayer – they were promptly told to get back in their seats, do up their seat-belts and wait until cruising height before prostrating themselves in prayer!

We landed almost 30 minutes ahead of time, which cut the time to have a snooze after being served a meal.

Mansel had painted a dismal picture of Delhi airport, and I was not looking forward to my first encounter with the Indian sub-continent. I need not have worried. Cairo seemed far worse. The only difference here was that we had to purchase Indian Rupees at the airport – it cannot be done in advance, as with most other currencies.

Not knowing the exchange rate, one money-changer put me off, saying that he could only give me 100 Rupee notes – I suggested I might want something of smaller currency. In fact I needed higher currency notes – the 100 Rupee note is about a pound!

Outside the airport we picked up the driver and car that I had pre-arranged and were delivered to the Oberoi hotel. I decided that on this first visit (and perhaps through the stories that Mansel had developed), that I would go for the best hotel in Delhi! The trouble, of course, was that we were turning up at 5.30 am to check in, where the usual check in time was 2.00 pm. Fortunately the staff were extremely accommodating, and after a 30 minute wait, our room was ready. The sight of a soft bed with pillows was so welcome. Even before my head hit the pillow I was asleep. Dominic too had taken advantage of the bed – but unlike me, who had just lain on top of the bed, Dominic had actually climbed in and looked most comfortable.

At about 11.00 am (Indian time – which is 4 and a half hours ahead of British Summer Time), we decided to get up, have a wash and face the day. A small snack at

lunch was called for, and then we hired a car and driver to take us round the important sites of Delhi – it would not have been right to have been here and seen nothing after all!

Incidentally, the time difference thing strikes me as a suitable compromise that should perhaps be considered when we move from Summer Time to GMT again – why not move it half an hour, and leave it there permanently?

Another interesting fact that I was told, is that a large number of people are actually reading this blog!! Is the storyline in “Eastenders” or “Coronation Street” that bad that people are looking here for entertainment? Seriously, I hope people are finding these ramblings interesting enough to follow with me round the world.

Our room in the hotel faces south-east, and we can see our first port of call from our room. It is “Humayun’s Tomb”, the first garden tomb from the early Mughal period. It houses the tomb of the second Mughal emperor, built by his wife. Although it was built some 100 years before the Taj Mahal, it has striking similarities – though it has red sandstone rather than white marble. Her own tomb, however, is quite some distance away, near the edge of the complex. I wonder why she did not want to be buried next to her husband for eternity?

New Delhi is lush and green. If it weren’t for the distinctive yellow and green motor rick-shaws, one could be forgiven for thinking that this was London. There are reminders of the various London Parks, as well as much of the architecture around Regent Park and the like. But the British Empire featured strongly here, of course!



We then moved on to see the “India Gate”, a war memorial built by Lutyens, to the Indian soldiers who gave their lives fighting in World War I, and at the other end of the centre the Rashtrapati Bhaven, or official residence of formerly the Viceroy of India (now the President of India). This has often featured as the backdrop for functions involving Lord Mountbatten of Burma. These are well-known, impressive buildings, and with the Indian Parliament’s oval building next door, it is clear that in this country politics is still a powerful force.

Our Indian driver warned us to watch out for the “hookers” both here and at the Taj Mahal tomorrow. However, the only women we could see were actually identified as school teachers, and somehow or other I don’t think they were “ladies of the night” in another guise. It was then that I realised that I had mis-heard our driver. He had actually warned us to be aware of the “hawkers”. These were quite obvious, and

while Dominic was plagued by someone trying to sell him some kind of helicopter that was catapulted into the air, I was accosted by someone with a basket. When I stopped to wait for the traffic to clear in order to cross, he put the basket down on the floor and took out a flute. I then realised what he had in his basket – a cobra!! Suddenly I no longer feared the traffic and managed to cross quickly, with the hawker in toe. Poor Dominic had trouble keeping up with me – it's amazing how quickly one can walk when one has to!! I got back to the car, jumped in and only just closed the door in time. I am sure that the snake-charmer would have thrown the snake into my lap if he had had the chance!!



We then headed to Old Delhi, passing on the outside of the Red Fort. We could not go in, since Monday everything seems to be closed – museums, public buildings, etc. Mind you, this was a welcome deterrent, otherwise we would have felt obliged to enter every building and museum on our tour!

At this point it started to rain! We are nearing the monsoon season, but the rain was torrential and sudden. Those on motor-cycles and in open rick-shaws suddenly took shelter under every bridge or overpass available, reducing traffic to one lane in an already traffic jammed city. By the time we had moved to the other side of the Red Fort, the rain had stopped, and the sun returned!

On the way back to the hotel we passed through Connaught Place, which still retains its English name, in spite of various attempts to rename it in line with the modern Indian city and away from the days of the British Empire. This is really the commercial centre of the city, but since that does not really interest either Dominic or I, we decided that we would return to the hotel, have dinner and an early night.

Tomorrow we need to check out of the hotel before 6.00 am in the morning when we leave for the Taj Mahal. Fortunately the hotel will store our bags until we return, which saves lugging them with us all day. When we return from Agra tomorrow, we will just have time to grab a bite to eat before we need to get to the airport for an overnight flight to Hong Kong.

DAY 8 – 1st July 2008

This morning seemed to start in the middle of the night. It was a real struggle to get ready by 6.00 am, but the sun was shining, and that helped us on our way. We managed to check out of the hotel, store our luggage, and then one of the classic old Ambassador cars pulled up at the hotel entrance and we climbed in.

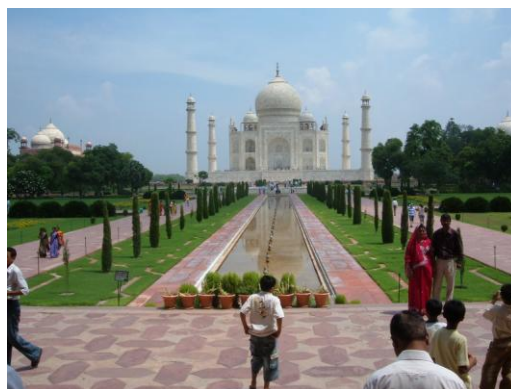
Our driver introduced himself, and within a short time we were heading south out of Delhi towards Agra. Even at this hour the city was alive. People seemed to be on the way into work and children were already waiting at bus-stops – I think school must start about 7.00 am.

However, we also learned the reason why tourists don't just hire a car in India, but also hire a driver. There is a knack to driving, but the horn must be sounded at every opportunity – to warn pedestrians, cyclists, other drivers, lorry (truck) drivers and even when nothing is around, just to check that the horn is working!! Within a short time my head was beginning to ache with the constant tooting and hooting all around!

It took about four hours to get to Agra, with a short stop for the obvious half-way. On the way we passed numerous lorries (trucks) all with the instruction “Blow Horn” written on them. They were packed with goods, and often with people too. There were countless auto-rickshaws. These would normally take two tourists in the back, with the driver in the front. But these transported people to (and later in the evening from) work. In one I managed to count 20 passengers as well as the driver – 5 on the passenger seat, 3 more on their laps, 1 either side of the driver, with 3 sitting on the back of the driver's seat, 4 hanging on the back and 2 on each side standing in the doorways. And the buses too allowed those sitting on the roof to get away without paying!! It was something I had heard about, but never witnessed until then.

At Agra we picked up our guide, and the driver parked the car. He was not permitted to guide in Agra for two reasons – it gives the local guides a guaranteed right to conduct tours, and cars are parked away from the Taj Mahal, to prevent pollution damaging the monument. In fact we transferred to an electric bus with no fumes visible!!

Our first glimpse of the Taj was confusing. We were looking side-on, through trees. This monument, of course, is actually a mausoleum built for Mumtaz-Mahal, the beloved wife of the fifth Mughal, Shah Jahan. The original plan had been that she was buried in the white Taj Mahal and he would be buried across the river in a matching black Taj. However, his son usurped him, put him under house arrest, and when he died he was buried next to his wife.



The Taj Mahal really does live up to expectations. The white marble changes colour during the day and night – almost pink in the morning (I'm told, since I wasn't there), to brilliant white at mid-day, to yellow at sunset and silver in the moonlight (again,

I'm told). Even when we were there, some of the domes were brilliant white while others, covered in the shadows of passing clouds, gave the impression of gold! One thing that does not often come through on photographs is the fact that the Taj Mahal is actually an octagonal building – it is easy to think of it as square, but the proportions are so perfect and that adds to the deception.

The gardens too are beautiful, and on a hot day, a welcome cool place to wander. We had the whole complex explained to us, but I won't bore you with the details. You will have to make a visit to the Taj Mahal yourselves to find out!



Although the Taj is not a Mosque, people were still asked to remove their shoes (though the sign actually said “Do not remove your shoes”!!) – this is partly to protect the stone-work, and everyone obliged, or put covers over their shoes.

Having completed our visit we called into a factory to see how the intricate work of cutting and inlaying the marble with semi-precious stones was done by the actual descendents of the original workers. The inlaid marble is unique to Agra, is very beautiful, but, as you might expect, very expensive too!!

In the afternoon we paid a visit to the second major point of interest in Agra – the Agra Fort (similar to, but of better quality to the Red Fort in Delhi). This is in two parts – the old fort, and the royal palace where the queen, Mumtaz-Mahal, lived with her court and harem before she died. Although the fort is made of red sandstone, the palace is of white marble. When Shah Jahan was imprisoned, he lived out his last years in the queen's quarters, from where he could see, but not visit, the Taj Mahal each day. Legend has it that when his wife died his beard turned white overnight. Another legend tells of him returning to his opium habit and falling down stairs at the call to prayer one day, when he tried to pray on the stairs!!



After our tour of the fort, we headed back to Delhi. This time the traffic was much heavier and it took four and a half hours. Yet our driver seemed as alert as ever, hooting and tooting the horn, making sure that we did not have any possibility of dozing off to sleep on the way!

Back at the hotel we freshened up, then had a meal. I debated whether to have a curry or not, and decided that it would have been wrong to have come all the way to India and not experienced the genuine article, so we were guided well and had a wonderful meal. At 10.30 pm set off again for the airport for our 3.00 am flight to Hong Kong, when this blog will take up the story again!