



friendship force
CENTRAL
NORTH CAROLINA

Our mission is to promote global understanding across the barriers that separate people.

**Friendship Force of Central North Carolina
Journal of Ambassadors:
Discovering the Golden Triangle and Spotting Tigers in northern India
Home Stay with FF Kathmandu, Nepal
March 21 - April 7, 2023**



Pre-trip, March 19-21, Charles John

It was Martha's final ambassador coordinator call for the now thirteen travelers to convene via zoom to meet one another, exchange some factoid of significance that would lubricate the process of knitting the group together for the journey, and to work through the many 'any other business' items on her agenda. Attendees' keenness of anticipation for the journey was palpable as the conversation proceeded. But it was Tomoko's announcement that she had finally obtained her Indian e-Visa that eclipsed the session. It was a good omen. Thirteen was our lucky number.

Exactly how much luck pervaded the enterprise was put to the test the very next day, as the American Airline subgroups, all except the Clarkes, tried to check in online. The stories differed in minute details, but suffice it to say, frustration was uniform. Individually, we abandoned the efforts to get a good night's sleep in preparation for the demanding multi-day travel starting tomorrow.

Among the many key decisions at the final Zoom was that Danny, with his commodious pickup, would meet Charles, with his ambitious Avalon, at Laura Graham's house. Laura and Ed would ride with Charles, and any luggage surplus to the Avalon's carrying capacity would find accommodation in Danny's pickup. Danny and Charles would caravan to Sheetz, corner of Guilford College Rd and Hornaday Rd, where Martha and Tomoko would board Danny's pickup for the trip to Charlotte Douglas International. At the check-in counter, some residue of last night's online frustration began to reemerge. For some of us, the CLT4- Charles, Marilyn, Martha and Danny, and the CLT3- Lundee, Laura and Ed, records available to the check-in counter staff did not show confirmations for all flight sectors from Charlotte to Delhi. That some of us were holding confirmed paper e-tickets was immaterial to the proceedings. We ultimately obtained boarding passes for the outbound sectors after agonizingly long conversations between counter staff and head-office supervisors.

Arriving at our gate I heard my name called out loud, the voice coming from a masked woman with smiling eyes of recognition. "It's Terri," she said, and there was joy in our embrace, after months of phone calls, emails and Zooms. Our group was now ten. We learned that when the Holsingers flew out of Sarasota, Florida the American Airlines agent would only check their bags to JFK. They were concerned about the time needed to collect their bags and recheck them to Delhi, but luck was with them. When they rejoined us at the JFK gate for the Doha flight, Derek had also joined us, and our group was now eleven. On to Doha, Qatar, where we were joined by the Clarkes from Atlanta for the almost nine-hour layover. Our group was now complete with thirteen ambassadors. Then onward to Delhi.

Day 1-3, Tues-Thurs, March 21-23, Departure from many airports to arrive in New Delhi, Charles John

Thirteen of us embarked on this dream journey to India and Nepal. After many months of planning and an untold number of emails, the day finally arrived. Martha had her planning bible that held all the necessary facts and figures about our trip.

We had assumed that the resolution of the flight confirmation hiccup in Charlotte had cleared the way for smooth sailing for the rest of the almost 21 hours it would take to get us to Delhi. Turns out the course was certainly not smooth, as we would later discover upon arrival in Delhi.

As early as November 2022, just after confirming tickets for the group, we launched efforts to relieve the likely boredom of an almost nine-hour layover in the Doha air terminal. FFCNC President Kiszely even addressed a letter to Qatar's Group Chief Executive Akbar Al Bakar asking for a waiver of the airline's eligibility policy to allow us, economy ticket holders, access to one of the many lounges the airline maintains for long-layover business

and first-class travelers. Sadly, the effort was not productive, and we were on our own as we deplaned at Hamad International.



So, we chose to use the opportunity to get to know each other better. Our Zoom introductions and meeting exchanges allowed for spontaneous recognition as we promenaded Hamad International's vast halls and shops. And then there was the Orchard, the magical glass-domed garden, sized and elaborately landscaped with foliage and flowering annuals, shrubbery and trees, water features, park benches and other amenities.

I was struck by the diversity of the work force in various jobs in the terminal, and initiated conversation with a shop assistant in a perfume retail store to get an understanding of the demography of Qatar. Cosmos is a twenty-something Kenyan working at the duty-free establishment on a 2-year work permit. He traveled to Qatar sometime after completing his secondary education, appears to be keenly observant of his environment, and very articulate. According to him there were more Kenyans resident in Qatar than Qataris, almost all on work visas of maximum 2-year duration. Many other sub-Saharan countries are represented in this temporary-status worker population plus workers

from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Our conversation ended as he was needed to serve customers.

Checked luggage for the Charlotte 4 was not on the carousel in Delhi. The full impact of this situation is somewhat muffled by the fact that we are all at about exhaustion endpoint. It's not just the twenty plus flying/layover hours. Add the three hours pre-departure airport arrival plus perhaps an additional three hours making final preparations at home and getting from home in the Triad to Charlotte Douglas International. But Ambassador Coordinator Martha swiftly had the matter under control, with the cooperation of the Delhi airport staff and the Audley staffers, both Anameka at the airport and Sujit at Claridges. Later we agreed to an extra charge for prompt delivery by the airline contractor, and what was 'lost' finally became 'found in time for our departure from Agra on Day 6.

Day 4, Friday, March 24, Old and New Delhi sightseeing, Marilyn John

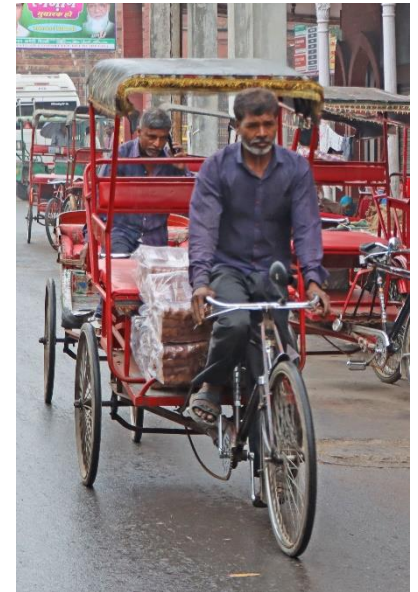
The group checked in March 23 at Claridges, located in New Delhi and had a wonderful breakfast on March 24 before beginning our India Tour with our Audley Travel guide Sujit Kumar. Delhi was the capital of the Mughal Empire from 1638-1857 until their defeat by the British.

We spent the day sightseeing in New and Old Delhi, with a combined population of 22 million. Its underground metro is the second biggest in the world, but we didn't use it because we had a bus available to us for the entire visit. All government buses use compressed natural gas (CNG). There are 3 UNESCO World Heritage sites in Delhi.

New Delhi, also called Imperial Delhi, the capital of India, was built by the British in 1911. The British Crown took control of the country from the East India Company which had been granted a charter by Queen Elizabeth I in



1600 to secure exclusive trading rights in India. The British reign lasted from 1858 to 1947 when India obtained its independence.



New Delhi is the modern part of Delhi with bungalows built by the British and now occupied by high-ranking Indian officials. Many buildings are built with red sandstone and marble readily available in the area. It is also the home of Humayan's tomb, the tomb of Emperor Humayan, a UNESCO site, an example of Indo-Islamic architecture. Also, in the area Qutub Minar, another World Heritage site, is a 72-meter-high minaret constructed around 1192 by the first Muslim Sultan of Delhi. A plethora of Imperial era buildings exist in the area.

Old Delhi, the original Delhi, built along a river, consists of very congested narrow roads. We took a cycle rickshaw ride through the bustling, chaotic Chandni Chowk Bazaar. We visited Raj Ghat, site of Mahatma Gandhi's funeral pyre. We visited the Red Fort, a palace complex, the third UNESCO site, built in 17th century by the great Mughal Emperor, Shah Jahan.

Sitting across the road from the Red Fort is Jama Masjid, one of the largest Mosques in India, which we also visited. This mosque, which was completed in 1656, has a capacity for 25,000 worshippers.



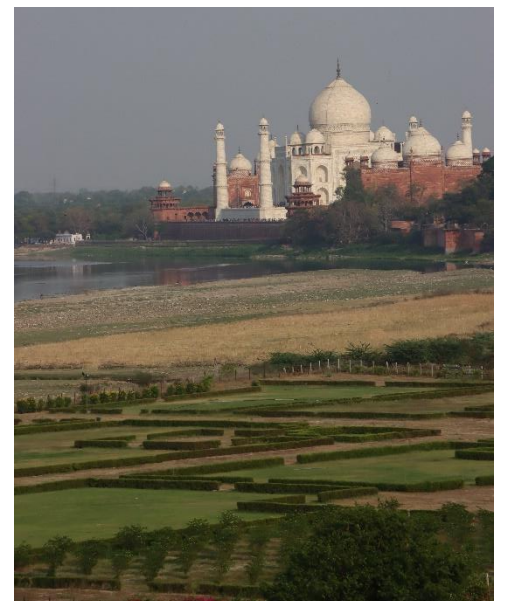
Day 5, Saturday, March 25, Delhi to Agra, Danny Crump

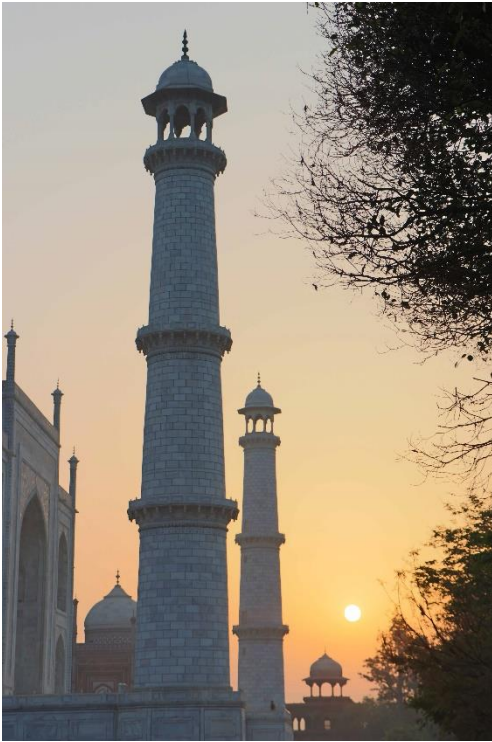
We left the Claridge Hotel in Delhi by tour bus. Our guide, Sujit Kumar, is doing a wonderful job. Leaving Delhi, we went through a new tunnel that was painted very beautifully inside. We started on the Greater Noida Expressway. We stopped for a break on the way to Agra. We bought large bottles of Aquafina water for 25 cents.

Our luggage was unloaded, and we found a bag from another group at Claridge Hotel that was mixed in with our luggage. Sujit called the hotel, and we left the bag at the rest stop for the hotel driver to retrieve. Enroute, we saw wagon loads of bricks pulled by tractors coming from the opposite direction heading back to Delhi. Eventually we went through an area for many miles where bricks were being made. The kilns had tall smokestacks. Fields were full of workers cutting wheat.

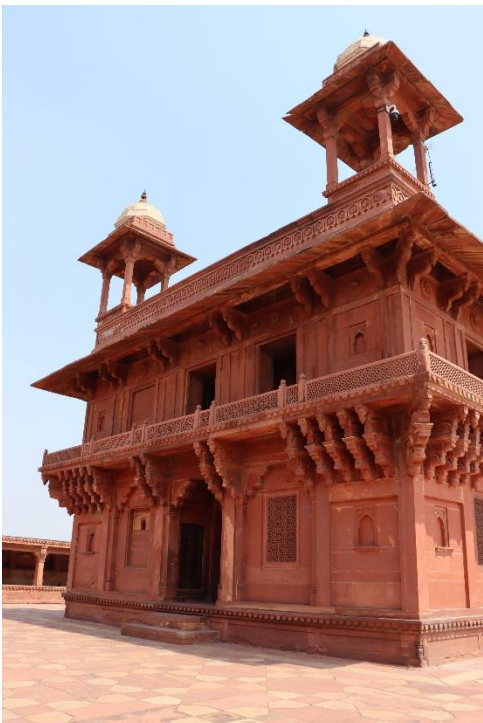


At some point, we were on the Yamond Expressway. Our first stop was Itimad-ud-Davlah, often called the 'Baby Taj'. This marble tomb was made with white marble inlaid with colored marble in beautiful designs. We had a nice but quick buffet lunch at the Courtyard by Marriott then we headed to the Agra Fort, also known as the Red Fort. This is another of the Mughal forts. More impressive than the one in Delhi. We had beautiful views of the Taj Mahal on the Yamuna River.





What a day! From our early rise at the Marriott in Agra we were off at sunrise to see one of the most spectacular buildings in the world. The white marble building reflected in the pool is breathtaking. We learned about the Mughals and Akbar who had 300 wives but no sons; he built Fatehpur Sikri, and Shahjahan who followed him, built the Taj in memory of Mumtaz Mahal who died soon after the birth of her 14th child. Construction on the Taj began in December 1631 and was completed in 1648. More than 2000 workers constructed it. Many other buildings were built nearby over the next fifteen years.



After leaving the Taj Mahal, we headed to Fatehpur, once the capital of the Mughal Empire. The buildings here, as opposed to the Taj Mahal, are primarily sandstone and red. The Panch Mahal, five stories high, was one of the more unique structures.

As we arrived in Bharatpur to take a local train to Sawri Madhapur, we were caught in a terrible traffic jam and Sujit was concerned that we could miss our train. We eventually made it to the cause of the jam. A cow lying in the middle of the road totally unconcerned about the horns blowing and vehicles crawling past him! Cows are sacred in India, and they often roam free. Our delay was not helped by the fact that we had a long walk along the station platform to the stairs over the railroad tracks. Up, over, back down the stairs, and an even longer walk brought us to the spot we were to wait for our assigned train car. It was hot and our various backpacks and bags weighed us down. Sujit explained the trains in India are known for their punctuality. In addition, it would stop for only two minutes for passengers to get off and us to get on. But we made it!

Some of the group passed the time on the train playing "6 Suits." Others enjoyed the ice cream sold by vendors walking through the aisles. Upon our arrival in Sawai Madhopur Junction, we were picked up by a caravan of six white SUV's & drivers like we were a group of VIP's! And we were on our way to our next hotel – Dev Vilas.



Day 7, Monday, March 27, Ranthambhore National Park, Derek Brown

We woke up early to leave at 6:20 AM for the first of our three safaris. Our group filled three safari vehicles. In my vehicle were William, Juanita, Martha, and myself. We had a long ride through town in the cool morning air before entering Zone 7 of the park around 7 AM. Shortly after entering the park, we saw a herd of antelopes that our guide called blue bulls, though the group we saw were all female, which are brown. We also saw a troop of monkeys, parrots, and a family of wild hogs crossing the road.



We then began to climb a very steep hill. At one point, when we stopped to take photos of a tree called the flame of the forest, I thought we were going to roll backwards when we started moving again. Near the top of the hill, we noticed a dark spot on a rock far off at the peak of the next hill. I borrowed binoculars from Juanita to identify that the spot was a leopard. Our guide told us that it is even rarer to spot a leopard than the tigers the park is known for! A little further on we stopped at an overlook, where we had a great vista from the top of the cliffs overlooking the town and the surrounding landscape. Continuing from

here we saw peacocks and several deer belonging to two species, the spotted deer and the sambar deer. Finally, we began our descent the same way we climbed. On our way down we spotted a male blue bull and more deer. We exited the park and returned through town, now much hotter, to the hotel for a late breakfast.





After breakfast we had time to rest at the hotel through midday and lunch. Around 3 PM we began our second safari. It was now much hotter. A few members of our group chose to stay behind and continue resting. We explored a different part of the park, Zone 8. This zone was on low ground. We saw many more deer, and also spotted a mongoose crossing the road, however it ran away when we tried to get closer. We waited by a few watering holes hoping that a tiger would show up to cool off from the midday heat. While we waited, we took pictures of various birds. Near the end of our allocated time, we received word that a tiger had been heard near another

watering hole. We headed there to wait with the other jeeps in our zone. We heard growls from the jungle a few times, and our guide said that he believed there were two tigers in the jungle, probably a male and a female. However, they did not appear before we ran out of time and had to leave the park.

After returning to the hotel, we took a quick dip in the pool before dinner then headed to bed in preparation for another early morning safari.



Day 8, Tuesday, March 28, Ranthambhore National Park to Jaipur, Lunde Amos



We met for masala or black tea with biscuits or crackers at 6:15 AM. At 6:30 we left for our third safari. As we entered the gate to the Ranthambhore National Park, a man greeted us selling hats, scarves, and neck/face covers. Danny bought a hat. We entered zone 10 which is dense. Those in another jeep spotted tiger tracks! Animals appeared frequently: deer, gazelles, peacocks, egrets, rabbits, monkeys, various birds and even a rare black bear!. Bird sounds were numerous. We bounced around in the jeep on rugged terrain. Our lymph systems were stimulated with the fast bumpy movements to make us healthy.



Our naturalist guide shared his zealousness for Bengal tigers as the jeeps rushed at high speeds looking for them. We waited at a water hole hoping a Bengal Tiger would come for a drink. We heard a loud mating call. After a phone call from another guide, we frantically drove bumpy bump to see our awesome Bengal tiger. Excitement filled the air of everyone. Ed captured a picture of the Bengal Tiger with his telephoto lens. WOW, adrenalin



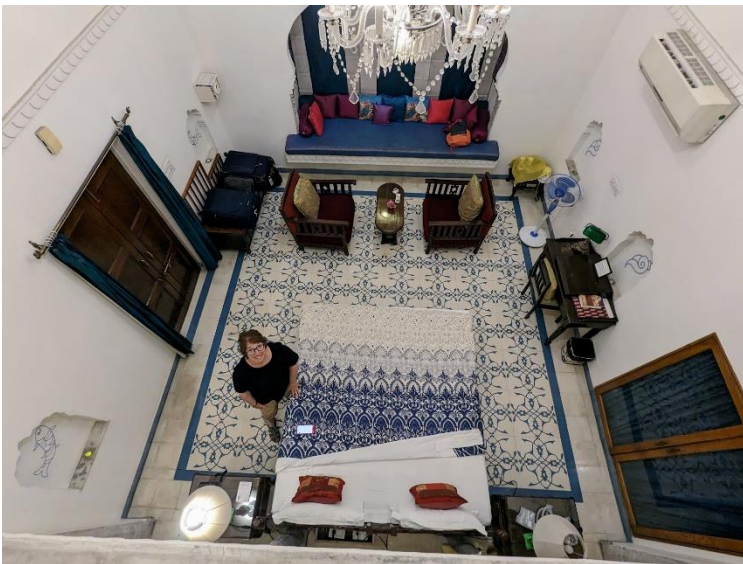
filled our bodies at the site of the tiger resting under a tree in the woods. That and the gentle looking black bear wandering down the road along with monkeys playing in the woods were sites to behold.

Wow! What a safari. Take a deep breath. Our beautiful breakfast awaited us upon our return to the hotel. We packed for the four-hour journey to the Dera Mandawa Hotel in Jaipur.

We passed through two toll booths and admired beautiful farmland with Hindu temples scattered along the way. Women dressed in brightly colored sarees worked in the fields. We passed the largest residential women's university in the world. Cows wandered along the highway, sometimes in front of cars. Many motorcycles scooted along weaving between cars, trucks, and buses.



Our Dera Mandawa Hotel host, Mr. Thakur Durga Singh (great grandson of Thakur Jait Singh Ji), showed great appreciation and enthusiasm for our being at his historic hotel established in 1885. He prepared tea and showed us to our unique huge accommodations. (There are only 11 rooms in the hotel). It is a boutique heritage hotel in a tranquil setting. Danny counted 53 light switches in our suite. Durga arranged a marionette puppet show that thrilled us with the puppeteer and his mom reciting the story. A cobra snake puppet jumped into the audience. Martha purchased a doll puppet. Mr. Singh served a lightly spiced dinner in the calm garden and shared tidbits about why India appreciates the US.

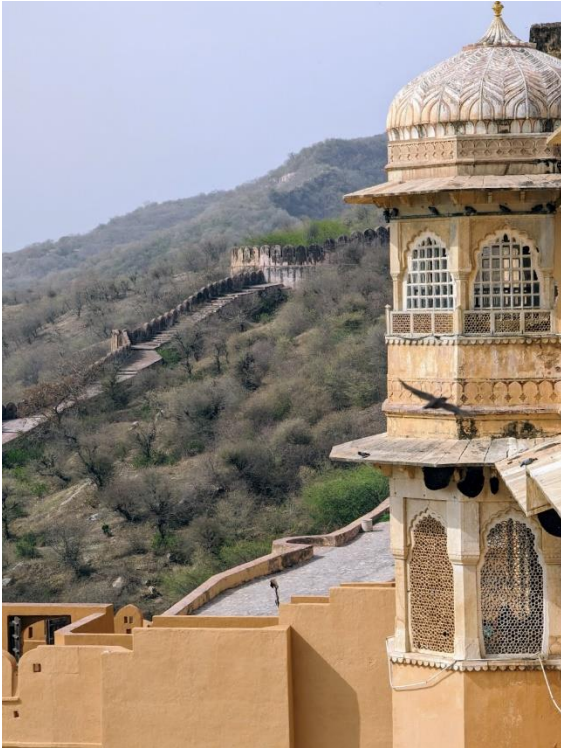


We heard a story about Sam Stokes, Johnny Appleseed of the Himalayas. When Sam Stokes, from Philadelphia, was about 20 years old, he decided to go to India and work in a leper home in Simla Hills. He joined some missionary activity. His parents, of course, were worried that he would get leprosy and never return. But he was determined to go. So, in 1904, Stokes arrived in India and started working in that leper home in the Himalayan foothills. He quickly realized that the people there needed help to fight not only disease, but poverty as well. He saw that people were very, very poor. They didn't have clothes to wear. They didn't have meals to eat. They would have tea with salt. Then he thought maybe he could try growing fruits in that area. Somehow the idea of apples came to his mind. <https://www.thebetterindia.com/153920/satyananda-stokes-india-freedom-independence-day-history/>

"In 1916, he brought the first apple trees from Philadelphia to the Simla Hills. He distributed the apple seeds free to the local people and helped them to plant and nurture them. That was the start of an economic revolution in that area." We retired to bed happy and tired from another adventure in India. Mr. Singh and his staff welcomed us with wonderful hospitality.

Day 9, Wednesday, March 29, Amber Fort Palace and Jaipur City, Martha Brown

I slept through the night without waking once. Not even for the morning call to prayer at 4:30 AM from the nearby mosque. By the time Derek and I made it to breakfast at 7:15 we were the last to arrive. I think almost everyone had eggs cooked to order - boiled, fried, scrambled, and omelets. We also had Indian rice porridge, a thin pancake made with graham flour and a mild spice, fruit, toast, and American style cereal.



Our bus ride to the Amber Palace (pronounced “amer”) took us through the Old City also known as the Pink City. The buildings are all painted the same color, which is not exactly pink, but a little more to the orange side. From the Internet I found this information: “In 1876, the Prince of Wales and Queen Victoria visited India on a tour. Since pink denotes the color of hospitality, Maharaja Ram Singh of Jaipur painted the whole city pink in color to welcome the guests. The tradition has been sincerely followed by the residents who are now, by law, compelled to maintain the pink color.”

The city was built in the 18th century and was a planned city designed on a grid layout. Even the traffic circles are squares! Also, in this area is the **Palace of the Winds** (Hawa Mahal) which the maharaja built. It has 953 latticed windows which allow the ladies of the palace to observe daily life without being observed themselves. These were Muslims and women at that time were not to be seen in public.



When parking the bus, we saw ‘snake charmers’. The Amber Palace is quite large. Sujit took us through the main parts that are open to the public. There were lots of people there because this is the 8th day of a nine-day holiday called Navaratri celebrating the Hindu new year which, by that traditional calendar, is 2080. Some people and couples were clearly there with a professional photographer to have their photo taken.



Next we visited a place that demonstrated block printing and carpet making. I volunteered to make a block print, though the man working there helped me. The design is carved on a block of teakwood. Ink is applied to the raised design on the block. Different designs on different blocks with different colors are used. The trick is to press the 2nd, 3rd, etc. blocks in the right place to produce a beautiful design. They will use this process to print yards and yards of fabric.

As for carpet making - there are several steps to the process in addition to the first one in which the yarn is knotted to the backing. The edge of the carpet must be finished. The top edges of the threads are cut off. And it is washed. Then we went inside the showroom where they showed us beautiful carpets of many designs including a few

contemporary designs. The wool carpets are made from the beards of goats. Camel hair is also used. Those carpets tend to be of various shades of brown. And they make carpets from silk. These carpets are very soft to walk on. A few of us purchased carpets which will be shipped to our homes within 21 days with no shipping fees.



Then we went into a shop that sold Indian clothing and fabrics. A few of us bought something there and some ordered shirts to be custom made and delivered to the hotel.

After this we had lunch and returned to our hotel for an hour and a half of rest.

When we regrouped, we returned to the Old City and were met by a guide who took us on a walking tour of the many shops in that area. For the most part, shops that sell similar items are in the same section.

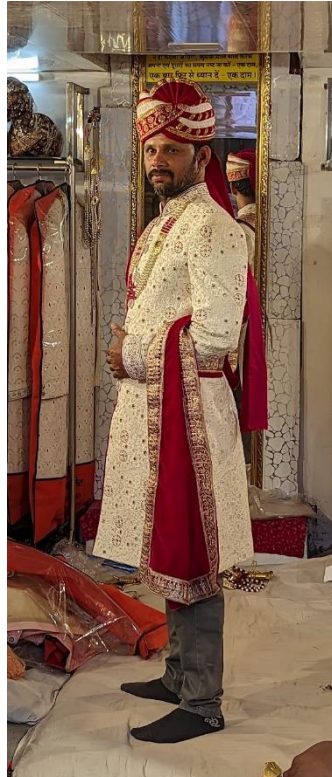


We began with a shop that sells metal items, mostly cooking ware and utensils. If these are gifts for brides and grooms, they engrave them with the wedding date. Our guide said at his home they have items with his mother's wedding date engraved on them.

Next was the sweet shop. Our guide said you need to see, touch, taste and then buy them. We were offered a treat.

Wedding invitations are an important part of weddings here. Both the bride and groom send invitations and if they both want to invite the same person, that person receives an invitation from the bride and the groom. The wedding celebration lasts seven days with the last two or three being days that all the

guests celebrate with the family. It's not uncommon in the city for 500-600 people to attend a wedding. In villages, it can be 1000 - 2000 people! The invitations are very beautiful. The one he showed us was about 8" x 10". It includes the schedule for the entire week. The card is an indication of what is to come with the wedding. Families will spend about 10 rupees - 1 million rupees per card. That's 82 cents to \$12,000 in US currency. (Seems hard to believe!)



These days, young people are beginning to use What's App for wedding invitations, but the older people want to receive a formal, traditional invitation. It takes about one to two months to distribute the invitations personally. When you hand deliver the invitation, you are usually invited to stay a while and have tea or a meal. So, it takes a long time to get all the invitations delivered!

From that shop we went inside an old home that is no longer used as a residence. But we could see that the home was built around a central court that has no roof above it. This allows light to come in to all the floors and heat to escape from the house. The houses are usually three or four stories tall with a bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen on each floor. Several related families would often live together. The houses were built of limestone which is a good insulator for sound and temperature. Truly, it was quiet inside even

though outside on the street there was always raucous noise going on. Understandably, these homes which were built as long ago as the 18th century were not built with electrical wiring in the walls, so wires are now strung here and there inside the house and outside on the street. Our guide told us they are beginning to lay outside electrical wiring underground. Since this neighborhood is now designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, these homes have increased in value. Many families move to newer areas of the city to live but keep these old homes because of their value.

We stopped by a shop that makes bangles. They use 24 resins of various colors. Many of them had small gems in them.

We passed a Krishna temple which can be recognized by its flag. There were two elephant statues outside which indicated that this house was the home of the priest.

We stopped by a spice shop where we were told that turmeric powder with garlic can cure all kinds of things, including broken bones!

We finally reached the area where brides shop for their dresses for the one-week wedding celebration. They do not try on clothes in a dressing room like we do. They try them on over their own clothes. On the final day of the wedding celebration the bride will wear red. Families will spend 5,000- 1 or 2 million rupees on the dress. The very expensive ones may even have thread made of gold or silver.



Usually, men run the shops as they know how to bargain. As the workday winds down, the shop owners light incense sticks and have a cup of tea to relax before closing the shop and returning home. The market is a colorful place. According to our guide, it is full of people with positive attitudes and happiness.



After our walk and many hazardous street crossings to get back to the bus we returned to our hotel. Marilyn and Juanita enjoyed the afternoon napping. Terri enjoyed relaxing in the courtyard. She read a book until the owner's three granddaughters joined her in the swing. The six-year-old, visiting from Delhi, engaged Terri in conversation. Terri asked her about



speaking Hindi (their conversation was in English, of course) and the child made it quite clear that she did not like to speak Hindi and she liked taking selfies. They also played a game called Chaupar Pasa.

We had an hour between our return and dinner during which I enjoyed a shower after another hot, sweaty day. Dinner included meat tonight - mutton and chicken. After dinner laundry was returned to those of us who left it this morning. When Derek and I unpacked our bag, we found all our clothes neatly pressed and folded. Our folded shirts even had paper folded with them like a brand-new shirt, though it was old newspaper!

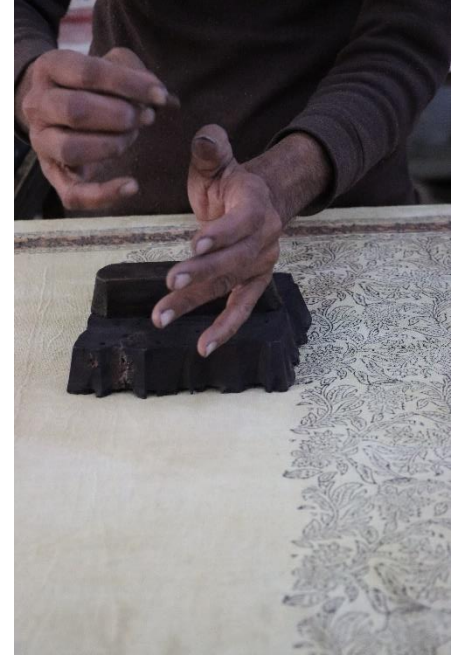
So, yet another long, but very interesting day ended.

Day 10, Thursday, March 30, Bagru, Bazaar, Cuisine & Crafts, Old Jaipur Walk, Terri & Stan Holsinger

Today we went to Bagru to see how fabrics are dyed and printed. Upon our arrival we were each given a garland of marigolds.



The owner's daughter took us on a quick tour. We observed how the designs are carved into blocks of rosewood. This enterprise has been owned by the same family for generations and they still have all the designs that were carved over the decades. We were taken upstairs to another building to create scarves with our own designs after watching a short demonstration given by a long-time employee.



As our scarves were drying in the sun, we toured the area where fabric is dyed in indigo.



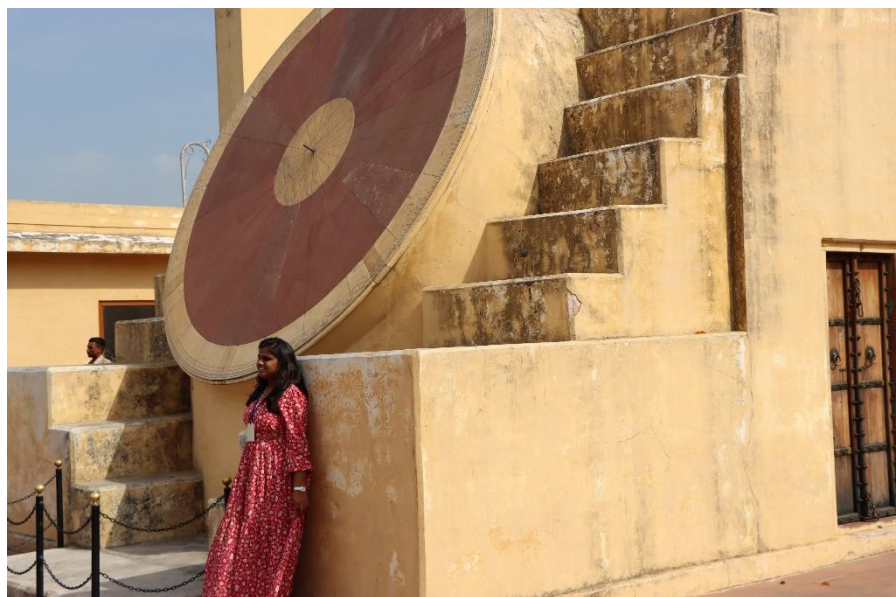
As we were about to leave the fabrication and print shop with our scarves and other purchases, a lot of music and celebration could be heard nearby. A short walk to the crowded main street brought us into the midst of the eighth day of the nine-day Hindu festival of Navratri. This festival holds immense religious significance in Hinduism. It is a festival dedicated to the worship of the Hindu goddess, Durga, and her nine avatars. Durga is a major Hindu goddess associated with protection, strength, motherhood, destruction, and wars.



After lunch, we went to the City Palace which is still the home of the Jaipur royal family as well as a museum. The inner courtyard, Pritam Niwas Chowk, is famous for the four small gates (doors) that are adorned with themes representing the four seasons and Hindu gods. Pictured here is the Southwest (Rose) Gate representing winter.



Our last site of the day was Jantar Mantar. This is a collection of 19 astronomical instruments built by the Rajput king who founded Jaipur. It was completed in 1734 and features the world's largest stone sundial.



Day 11, Friday, March 31, Jaipur to New Delhi to Tribhuvan Airport, Kathmandu Nepal William Clarke

Our last day in Jaipur and in India began at 2:00 AM. In keeping with arrangements announced the previous evening, we placed our luggage outside our rooms at 2:30 AM and it was collected by porters.

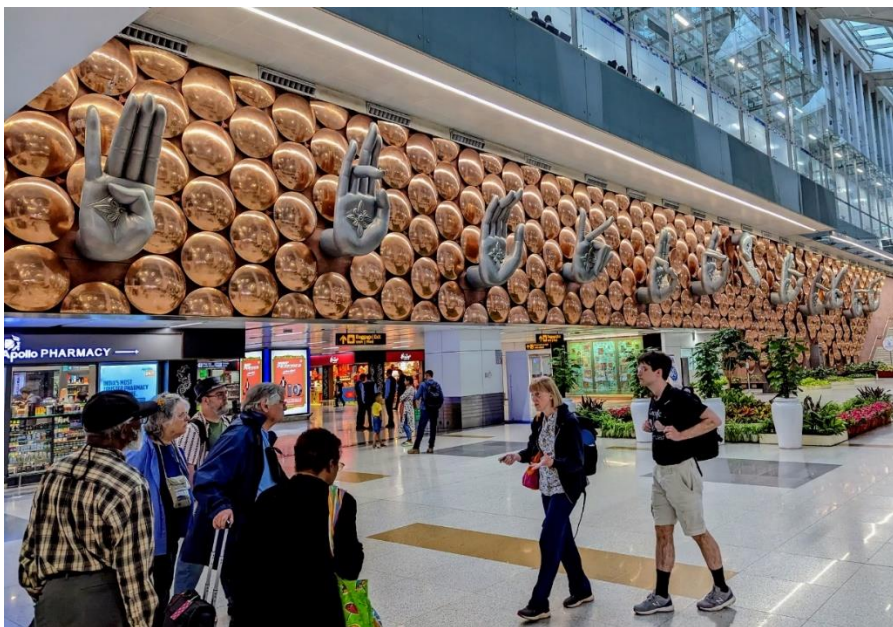
Ambassadors began assembling in the courtyard at 3:00 AM, and our charismatic host, Durga, invited us into the reception area for coffee, tea, biscuits and fruits. Here we were joined by Audley representative Digivay who introduced himself as replacing Sujit who had been our host so far. He advised that he would accompany us on the ride to the airport and had brought boarding passes for the flights from Jaipur to Delhi and from Delhi to Kathmandu.

Before boarding the bus, we identified our luggage which had been brought to the bus by the porters. We boarded the bus at 3:20 AM for the 40-minute ride to Jaipur airport. As promised, Digivay distributed boarding passes for both upcoming flights.

After disembarking the bus, Charles led a group of five ambassadors for the group check-in to Delhi. Martha's effort to lead the remaining group was thwarted by an attendant who insisted that she proceed to another counter because it also was checking for Delhi. Martha insisted on following the group while the attendant persisted. After a short standoff, Martha had her way.

After a bathroom break and headcount, we proceeded to security where we encountered a reminder of local customs. I followed Juanita and Lundee followed Danny for the security check. The security officers redirected us to the security lanes designated for our respective gender identities. After being scanned, my backpack of camera equipment was held until an officer examined its contents. After this delay, we took a bus ride to the plane on the tarmac for the 30-minute flight to Delhi.

We landed on schedule after a 30-minute uneventful flight from Jaipur, proceeded through security to the international transfer area, and met at gate 12A at 10:10 AM. We boarded the aircraft by a passenger boarding bridge for the first time since leaving the USA.



We encountered turbulence on approaching Tribhuvan airport in Kathmandu and the captain announced that it will take 20 minutes to cover the remaining 40 miles to land. We were a couple hours late arriving and getting through security & customs, so many of the hosts had left the airport and gone back to work. Marilyn had a fall while we were waiting at the airport. We were worried about her hip, but she is a trooper and continued on. After immigration hiccups for Juanita and Tomoko, we were greeted by Shiva and boarded a minibus that was followed by a luggage vehicle to our homestay drop-off points.

Day 12, Saturday, April 1, Tour Boudhanath Stupa & Pashupatinath Temple, Juanita Clarke

Today is our first sightseeing trip in Kathmandu. Oscar, the son of our hostess Sharada, will assist Shiva with the group. The first ambassadors to be picked up assembled at the pick-up point accompanied by their hosts.



Colorful merchandise for sale on the walk to the temple.

The Pashupatinath Temple is revered by Hindus as the holiest temple in Asia and is also the oldest and largest in the world.



Smoke from the cremations pervades the temple compound where devotees perform their rituals. The temple grounds span both sides of the Bagmati River. The temple occupies one side of the river and is accessible to devotees by a bridge from the other side of the river from which visitors view the temple. Funeral pyres in various stages of cremation line the temple side of the river into which the remains from completed cremations are placed. A Hindu priest or eldest son in the family usually leads the service.

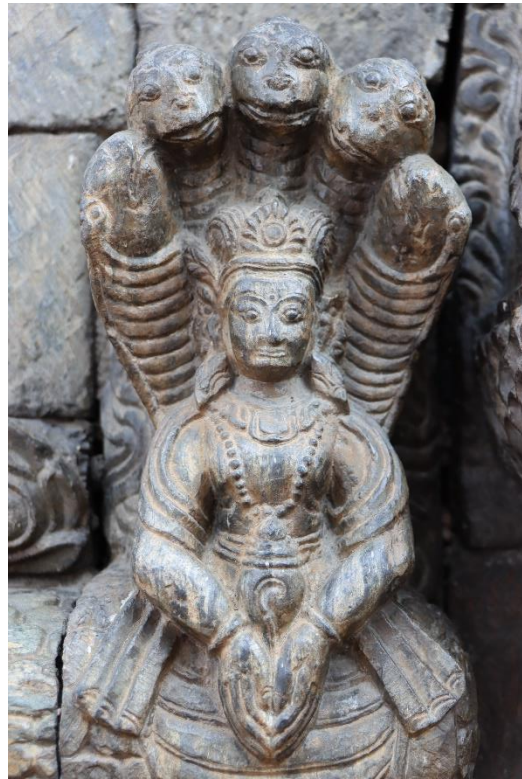


Handmade bamboo biers are made on site and carried across the river to the cremation sites.





This tunnel is formed by the interiors of a line of twelve Shiva temples each of which contains a phallic icon depicting Shiva's creative role. It is believed that Shiva lives in the Himalayan mountains.



Intricate carvings cover the temples.



These men don't want their photo taken unless the photographer pays them something.





Boudhanath Stupa with hundreds of pigeons and decorated with streamers of multicolored flags.

One of the doors into the Stupa which devotees enter to visit the shrine.



Circumambulation around the Stupa movement around the Stupa must be in a clockwise direction.

Metal prayer wheels, with mantras, are spun by worshipers.



One of a few signs written in English

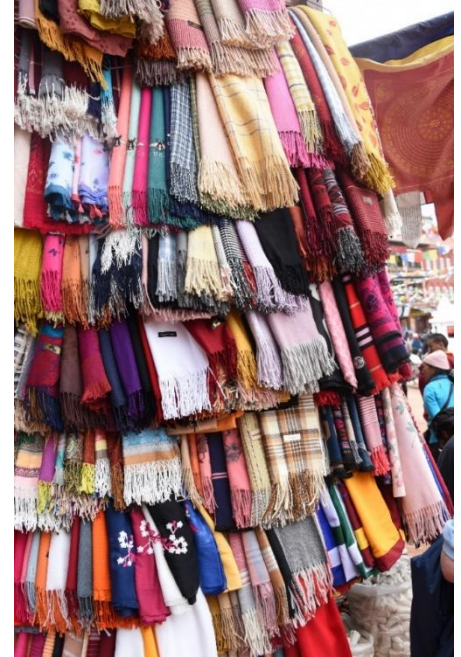
Pigeons are protected by uniformed officers with rods that discourage cats from catching the pigeons. To feed the pigeons, you'll gain karma.



Ambassadors had a pre-lunch shopping break.

After shopping, we toured this elaborately decorated building with a beautiful interior. The sign celebrates

the Nepali New Year 2080. From the porch above the sign we had a nice view of the Stupa.



The dog-care-station caught our attention. There are many stray dogs on the streets. They were given baths and vaccinations by streetdogcare.org. The dogs appear to be calm and easy going.



On the way to lunch, this service was advertised. Foreboding for those who would like to keep their phones secure or good fortune for those who have lost their passwords and need access to their phones.”

We walked along this narrow street to lunch and observed the difficulty of two vehicles passing, which resulted in a motorcycle traffic jam. The issue was wordlessly resolved, without any sign of annoyance or road rage.



Ambassadors enjoyed a vegetarian buffet lunch at the Utpala restaurant and were able to observe the baking of Naan, the traditional bread which was served to us at every meal.



After lunch, we toured Buddha Park where the seven stages of enlightenment and the eighth stage of Nirvana were depicted in the background of a large statue of Buddha.



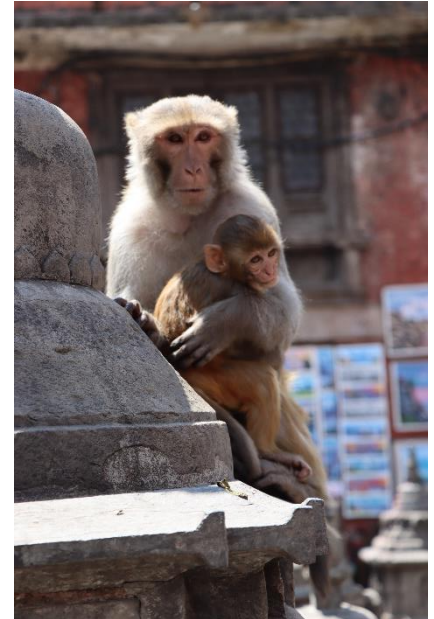
We then boarded the bus to return to our homestay venues.

Day 13, Sunday, April 2 Tour Kathmandu Durbar Square & Swayambhunath, Tomoko Thornburg



With perfect weather of 67F, we headed to Swayambhunath Stupa. Swayambunath is associated with Vajrayana Buddhism. It is located on the western edge of Kathmandu Valley, about 25 minutes from the town of Shari Tole where our host families live. A set of Buddhist temples and shrines were made of white marble and crowded with many worshippers/tourists from all over the world. We could hear many languages around us. It appears that the stupa is the destination place for Buddhists from nearby countries. You will notice that this stupa looks like the Boudhanath Stupa. We saw ladies in colorful attire, especially Tibetans were noticeable, and many monkeys.

After spending about 90 minutes, we moved on to Kathmandu Durbar Square and the Hanuman Dhoka Palace. This square consists of many elaborate wooden structures built in 1757 by King Jaya Prakash Malle. All the buildings had beautifully intricate sculptures on all sides.



A living incarnation of goddess, Kumari, blessed us at her last appearance of the day at 12:00. Kumari Ghar the home of Kumari is located on the southern side of Kathmandu Durbar Square with many souvenir vendors. She represents Taleju Bhawani and is a beautiful girl who appears to be eight or nine years old. No photos were allowed of her.

Much damage from the 7.6 magnitude 2015 earthquake remains visible in the square.





We roamed around for a while in the huge square and had a lunch at a snack bar called “Bar Dali.” It had a large screen showing a bird’s eye view of Everest and other Nepali sites. The food was a fusion of Nepali, Indian Asian and possibly other ethnic cuisines.



Everybody enjoyed lunch in the cool room. Several hosts joined us for lunch. Momo, a traditional Nepali dumpling was served family style with several other dishes.

On our way back to each host family, Shiva invited the whole group to his home so that many of us had a chance to see other host’s family life. Shiva’s wife, Maya, the gracious hostess, served tea to everyone.



I rode the returning bus with Shiva and visited the homes of host families of Charles/Marylin and Terri/Stan. Just like my host family, both families organized their stuff in open space mainly horizontally rather than vertically. There were many objects on the floor. The sense of interior is clearly different from Americans in their color choices also.

As Shiva and I walked back in unseasonal rain, I witnessed a butcher showcasing live chickens and a full body stripped chicken legs up in the air on the butcher block table. The third day ended full of excitement around five o’clock.

Day 14, Monday, April 3, Bhaktapur Durbar Square & Nagarkot, Danny Crump

We left Kathmandu in our tour bus for the overnight stay in Nagarkot. Enroute, everyone was relating their experiences in host homes. Hot water is not as available in Nepali homes as we are used to having. Terri related that the water was cold (because the solar power had gone off), the room was cold (48 degrees) and she could see steam coming off her body. That made her have a “steamin’ body” 😊



We arrived at Bhaktapur Durbar Square. Bhaktapur means “priest place.” Before entering, we were treated to a ‘King Curd’, a yogurt treat served in small clay pots. It was delicious. Many kept the little pots as souvenirs.

We entered the square and saw many beautiful Hindu temples. We walked to a pottery school and saw men throwing clay pieces on wheels. Many clay pieces were drying in the sun. We went to a nearby art school and several people were painting. There was a very intricate sand mandala done by Buddhist monks trained by the Dalai Lama.



We proceeded to Nagarkot which is about an hour’s ride. The last several kilometers were on a narrow mountain road with great vistas. Our destination was Hotel View Point. It was at 7200 feet altitude. We enjoyed a nice lunch on the outdoor terrace. Lunch was pizza and Nepoli pasta casserole. We went to our assigned rooms, some rested and most went for a walk through the village. We saw men building a rock wall for road widening. Some crews were



breaking rocks with sledgehammers. They were also installing fiber optic cables. Our day ended with a buffet dinner featuring chicken, fish and tomato soup.



Day 15, Tuesday, April 4, Nagarkot to Sudal Village & Paten Durbar Square, Terri Holsinger

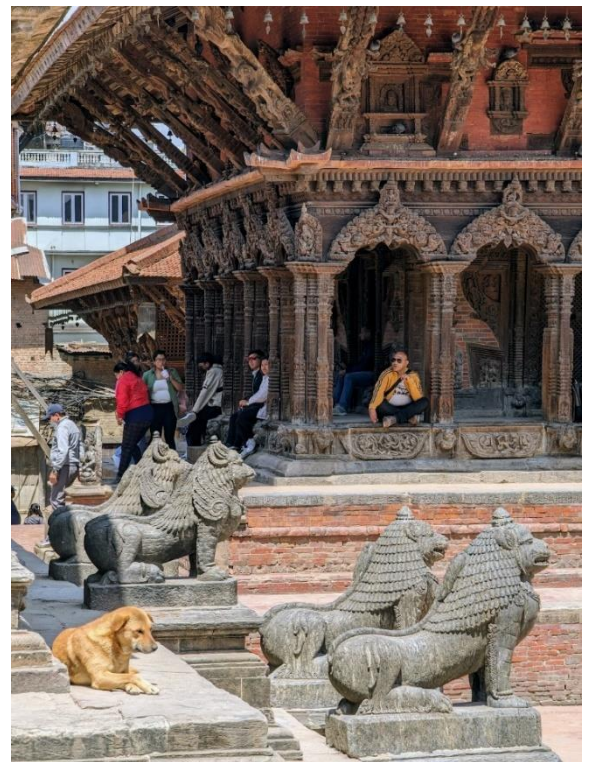


View from our hotel at sunrise! Shiva loaned us jackets as we weren't prepared for the dawn chill. We woke and had heat in the hotel, so excited! Stan went to the roof top for sunrise views of the Himalayas. I went up a little later & took more photos-great views of the mountains from our balcony.

Breakfast buffet was uninspired, but the milk tea was great. We packed up and loaded onto the bus. We headed down the mountain. We were stopped for a short time, while new asphalt was being laid.

We continued on the road and stopped in Sudal Bagmati village at the community center to drop off library books, pens, pencils, crayons, coloring books, US flags and candy. Shiva was a volunteer some time ago at this location and still supports the town. Lundee brought clown noses and they were a great hit with the kids and adults. The kids, headmaster and parents greeted us with good fortune marks (red dots on the center of one's forehead) and singing. Several teenagers quizzed me about where I'm from and where I worked. Also, if I had a husband and children. I'm now Facebook friends with one of the young ladies.





From Sudal, we went to Paten Durbar Square located in the center of Lalitpur (aka Paten) which is the third and last city located in the Katmandu Valley. Most of the buildings were built in the 1600's.

That evening, Charles & Marylin, Terri & Stan took their hosts to dinner. We had a delightful meal. The meal was only \$75 for 10 people!



Day 16, Wednesday, April 5, Kathmandu shopping, optional Yeti Airlines flight to Himalayas, Farewell Party, Stan Holsinger and Ed Benson



At dawn on our last full day, we went on our much-awaited Yeti Airlines flight to the Himalayas and Mt Everest (Sagarmāthā). I admit this flight was not at all what I was expecting. I thought we would fly in something like a Cessna Caravan, a small prop plane, with just our small group. Instead, the plane we



took was, while prop-driven, a large passenger airliner. As such we didn't get as close as I would have expected, either. That said, the view was incredible, and I don't think anyone regretted making the trip.



Those who went on the mountain flight also had the opportunity to visit a monastery. Some ambassadors needed cash. When the ATM machines at the airport did not work, Shiva took the group to the monastery near his home. He knew many



foreigners visit there and suspected (correctly) that our ATM cards would work there.

One of the monks is a relative of Shiva's and he gave the group a tour.



In the evening came the farewell dinner. Our host families were splendidly decked out, especially the wives in their matching saris.



I think I can safely say that all our Nepalese families were wonderful hosts and made us all feel welcomed and appreciated. Our hosts also presented us with scarves, and for the men topis (formal hats) to wear. The dinner was very good, with a nice tasting menu that gave lots of options. This photo is the 'long' pour with local brandy in raw clay saucers.



Day 17, Thursday, April 6, Rest Day, Departure, Ed Benson

On our final rest day, our FF Nepal host coordinator, Shiva Shrestha, gave us a brief morning tour of a factory, owned by a close friend of his, where they make a wide range of handmade paper products.



Among my many impressions from the trip, one thing that struck me most is that first impressions about things we saw were often deceiving. The seemingly insane and chaotic traffic in India and Nepal is a good example. While I still would not want to drive in such conditions, I came to realize that there was an internal logic to the way they drove that seemed to work quite well. If nothing else, we never saw a single accident, although one felt imminent at every moment.

I should also note that I think all of us were taken by the friendliness and welcome we received from everyone on this trip. My biggest personal regret was not being able to understand our hostess Sabitri when she was speaking to her fellow Nepalis, because she seemed very well spoken and enthusiastic about everything. She did mention that she was trying to become more active in local politics, which I can imagine she will do quite well at.

Misc. Notes:

Many thanks to Terri Holsinger for pulling our journal together and to the great skills of our group photographers - William Clarke, Stan Holsinger, Ed Benson, Martha Brown and Terri Holsinger - who used long lenses, cell phones and many settings to truly capture our journey.

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