

# *Supreme strength, gentle grace*

A full-spectrum human  
experience in India and Nepal

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The pack of vehicles brakes from 70 to zero, but my driver, Ali, spies an opening and accelerates. The side-view mirrors of our auto rickshaw are bent inward so we can slip past the back corner of a transport truck with half an inch to spare.

Ali honks to announce himself as we emerge blindly around the side of the truck – my arm jammed on the back of his seat to brace as we come full stop in an instant for a big-horned bull that has waltzed into the road. Ali eases on the gas and manoeuvres around the beast's backside – the whip of the animal's tail so close I put my hand out instinctively to let it brush my fingers, but I miss as we accelerate into another blind pass and full stop head to head with a motorcycle coming from the opposite direction.

Our front wheel rests against the front wheel of the motorcycle for a moment, and I send a quick smile to the toddler wearing shades who sits side-saddle on a woman's

**RIGHT:** Our 15-day guided tour wrapped up in Kathmandu, Nepal.

**ABOVE:** Travelling by auto rickshaw in Delhi, India, led to some close calls. (Photo by Andrea Perry)







One of the views in Kathmandu, Nepal

lap on the back of the bike before we pull our separate ways and speed off once more.

The hot exhaust I smell and feel on my face when we slow down morphs into a cool wind that whips my hair and slings dust in my eyes as we accelerate. I feel acutely alive. It’s not the adrenaline, I know, but the deep awareness that at any second – with slight movement from any player on the road, person or beast – I could be dead.

It’s my first day in Delhi, and I’m traveling solo across the city to the Baha’i Lotus Temple. It’s Monday, so the temple – one of seven major Baha’i places of worship worldwide – is closed, but Ali gives me a boost onto the perimeter wall so I can look over.

Across a field of dry grass sits an enormous lotus-shaped structure. It’s white and appears to radiate rather than reflect the sunlight. My ears buzz with honking from the street behind, but I can still hear a vast silence flooding from the temple. There is a pervasive sense of peace. It’s almost as if the structure is breathing – each intake clearing the air and making it anew on the outbreath, just as a giant flower in the centre of one of the world’s most populated and polluted cities would do.

I squat on the warm brick perimeter and take it all in. This juxtaposition of chaos and calm – a feeling of the full spectrum of humanity, both panic and peace, death and life – is my first impression of India, and it will endure for the remainder of the trip and onward into Nepal.

It had been a while since I travelled so far from home but, after the election in the United States and the slew of rising internal tension, North America had been particularly self-focused and I wanted out. I wanted to move my energy elsewhere and pop a steam vent in the pressure cooker brewing back home.

I also wanted to remind myself of what I already knew: the Western World is not the centre of the universe, as much as it may

seem to be when we are intensely looking inward. So, I chose India as a travel destination for the same reason many decide to avoid it: the sheer number of people existing in one place. With an estimated population of 1.3 billion, India holds one-seventh of the world’s population. By the number of beating hearts alone, it is an unparalleled centre of reality for what it means to be a human on planet Earth.

Back at the hotel, I give Ali a hug along with 400 rupees for the afternoon’s driving. I consider how untraditional it might be for a single western woman to embrace an unmarried Muslim man, but how else do you conclude an experience with someone who – literally – had your life in his hands? Besides, whenever I can get away with it, hugs are my thing.

I pass two veiled women outside the hotel and return their “Namaste” with my hands in front of my heart. In the lobby, I use the intermittent Wi-Fi to check Google and learn that, on average, 400 people are killed every day in road accidents in India. On Delhi roads alone, five people will pass from life each day. It sounds about right.

Up in my room, under a sheen of dirt and sweat, sitting on the corner of my white bed sheets at the end of the first day, I feel some jet lag, but no culture shock. This is just an opening – as much as is possible for a privileged tourist – to the depth and width of reality that is present here.

On my second day, I begin a 15-day tour with G Adventures travel company that goes from Delhi, India, to Kathmandu, Nepal. As a woman on her own, joining a guided tour group is an effective way to travel with some structure and security.

By combination of taxicab, auto rickshaw, bus and overnight train, our tour hits all the major sites. Among other places, we visit the historic city of Jaipur, the Taj Mahal world wonder in Agra, the holy city of Varanasi on the bank of the Ganges River, Chitwan National Park in Nepal, and the

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Cleansing in the Ganges River is one of Hinduism's most important acts of pilgrimage.

trekkers' haven of the lower Himalayas in Pokhara.

As much as I appreciate sightseeing, it is the people that I came here for, and the bubble of perceived security around our tour group allows me to be more open and engage the local people in a way that I may not feel comfortable doing if I was alone. I can have conversations and laugh and make meaningful eye contact as a form of connection and care and not worry about inviting more than I intend.

I can say yes when a swarm of teenagers asks for a group selfie in the market at dusk in Jaipur. I can say no when a barber on a stretch of white sand on the far side of the Ganges asks me if I have a husband back

## Visiting India and Nepal a reminder the Western World is not the centre of the universe

home, and I can say no again, "Not my thing," when he asks, "Boyfriend?" I can close my eyes and let my awareness drift to nothing other than the combined presence of a thousand people surrounding me in song and prayer at an evening service at the sacred Ram Raja Temple in Orchha. In short,

with the company of a trusted guide and 13 other travellers, I can let go and be myself.

As I open to the variety of people and energy in each place we visit, the feedback of emotion and experience is immense. It feels like a world of opposites and extremes, all coexisting in some form of harmony. Outside the Taj Mahal, a truly astounding human creation that rattles your perception with its size and passionate marbled beauty, a child living in poverty asks for the rest of my bottle of mango juice.

I spend time paragliding in Pokhara, soaring alongside eagles that dance in the same warm air system we are in; but I spend more time on my knees over a toilet in Jaipur, sick with a traveller's bug or other

type of virus.

Also in Pokhara, a tourist-oriented town that boasts yoga studios, meditation centres, and other modalities of enlightenment, we visit Sasane, a local non-government organization that supports women who have been victims of human trafficking.

In each city, among the masses of vendors that sell everything from brass Ganesha statues, to necklaces, to model 747 jumbo jets, I feel a severe sense of urgency from those hoping to make any kind of sale. Yet, below the surface level of survival, there is an obvious network of calm co-operation. In one market, shopkeepers buy a tray of corn at the end of the day to feed the pigeons. In another, our group leader allows a young street magician onto our bus to encourage his craft as an alternative to begging.

In both countries, there is also great complexity in the treatment of the feminine. The Goddess is ever-present in a multitude of forms (Kali figures on the dash of a taxi) and there is sincere reverence for both feminine and masculine sources of power (Parvati and Shiva are shown equal and very much in love in statues along roadway mediums). Yet, we interact almost exclusively with men in the hotels, restaurants, shops and museums; and it is clear that, in practical terms, the masculine is supremely dominant.

This duality of experience is everywhere. Varanasi, the oldest continually inhabited city on the planet, is home to the world's largest cemetery: the Manikarnika "burning ghats," an open cremation site on the Ganges River. Within the longest unbroken stream of human life, a steady parade of families moves toward the river carrying the saffron-shrouded bodies of loved ones who have passed. We brush ash from our hair and shoulders as we navigate the busy alleyways winding behind the smouldering wooden pyres on the riverbank.

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A tree is covered in prayer flags at Buddha's birthplace in Lumbini, Nepal.

The Ganges River itself – the most sacred river in the world – is also the most shockingly polluted. But I can't pass up the opportunity to partake in one of Hinduism's most important acts of pilgrimage: cleansing in Mother Ganges. So, I check myself for any open cuts and am sure to keep my head above water while I swim; and, despite my brain tracking the potential threat, as I kick against the current alongside our small row boat I feel a type of happiness and an expansion in my chest unlike anything I have known before.

This wide spectrum of reality doesn't unsettle me. Rather, it feels whole. On one of our train rides, I read a passage from Pema Chodron's "The Places that Scare You," and Chodron reminds the reader of Buddha's instruction to "sit with it all."

"The Places that Scare You" is the second book I chose to bring on the trip simply because it was slim enough to slip in my backpack without taking up too much space, and it turns out to be the perfect selection. Chodron writes how Buddha teaches that Earth has both great suffering and great joy. To be fully human is to be receptive to the whole continuum.

As part of the tour, we visit Buddha's birthplace in Lumbini, Nepal, as well as the site where he delivered his first sermon: Sarnath, India, a few kilometres northeast of Varanasi. In both places, the air is thick with Buddha's presence – both the presence of his person and the legacy of his teachings. It is a thickness infused with ease. Supreme strength and a gentle grace, inseparable from one another.

Following the 15-day tour, I stay in Nepal for another week to trek in the Annapurna mountain range. I'm with a guide and one other traveller from Australia.


We walk by day and sleep overnight in rural villages nestled serenely into the mountainsides. Prayer flags billow in the evening wind, roosters call at dawn, and children play on the stone steps between their small mud homes. We make steep, hours-long ascents under the blazing sunlight, and descend rapidly into shaded river valleys. It is exhausting and beautiful. My ears adjust to the quiet. As I sweat and breathe the open air, my body expunges any pollution and emotional density that I'd gathered throughout the trip.

The rejuvenating trek would have been the perfect way to end such a full adventure. But when I return to Kathmandu for my flight home, there is one more stop I have to make.

On the way to the airport, I ask the taxi driver to wait for an hour at Pashupatinath. Located on the Bagmati River and considered one of the holiest places in Nepal, Pashupatinath is both a temple dedicated to Lord Shiva as well as the second largest open cremation site in the world behind Manikarnika in Varanasi.

I walk slowly through the grounds. A monkey chirps from a low wall. A group of cows laze by a mound of garbage on the river's edge. Someone has spray-painted "human parasite" on the back of a stone bench. I pass groups of locals and smile whenever someone looks me fully in the eyes.

In the many passing faces, I see a universe of realities. I see sadness as well as happiness; I see stasis, and I see wonder. I see strength and acceptance. I see humans, and I see life.

I stand on a short bridge and look out over the river. As Shiva beams from the temple at my back, smoke rises from the pyres on the riverbank to blend with the afternoon sun. 



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