



India

Assaulting the
Senses

I've gotta ask: have you ever dreamed of twisting the throttle and watching the road roll beneath you as you ride through a country unlike any other? You know what I mean—riding into a landscape that 1.2 billion people call home, and where sights, sounds, and smells come at you full force and non stop? Where absolute poverty plays side-by-side with the obscenely wealthy? Where you, the traveler, become intoxicated by the cultural cocktail being poured down your throat? Well...welcome to India!

Text and Photography: Simon and Lisa Thomas



The Show Must Go On

We are at the Wagah border in Northern India; we have little choice. There is only one road crossing between Pakistan and India that is open to foreigners. Our passports are stamped with our 68th country, and our entry into India is now official. I exchange a tired smile with Lisa as we walk past the modern brick immigration office and back to our bikes in the sweltering heat.

To our left, a large painted sign reads 'Welcome to India, the largest democracy in the world.' Hanging out at international borders is normally not done, but this is India and 'normal' doesn't apply. We find two tin seats among the swelling crowd of thousands. It's 4 p.m. and the show's about to begin. Flag lowering is now considered entertainment.

The traumatic partition of India in 1947 ended the rule of the British Raj and saw the birth of two nations—secular India and Muslim Pakistan. Nearly a million people were killed in factional fury. Now, more than 60 years later, the old aggression is played out in a largely good-natured, daily ritual. The crowds cheer for their country while guardsmen perform a carefully choreographed contempt. The immaculately dressed soldiers strut and stamp like groomed peacocks in a wonderful display

of mock rage. As the moment of flag lowering grows closer, the tension is palpable and the crowd's excitement grows more vocal. With fans sprouting from their turbans like raised hackles, the guards lower their respective flags with impeccable timing. It all ends in a flourish with a quadrille of stamping soldiers and the briefest of handshakes. Then the gates are ceremoniously slammed shut. The border between Pakistan and India is sealed for the night.

Outside the border compound we're jostled and cajoled into a small street café, and we enjoy our first cold beer since leaving Turkmenistan many months earlier. We can barely see the GSs for the clampering young men who swarm to have their photographs taken with the big bikes. With the day almost over, we plan to ride 18 miles due east into one of the largest cities in the Punjab State, Amritsar.

All That Glitters 'is' Gold

Last night we settled into the 'Tourist Guest House.' It's 4:30 a.m. and the freezing outdoor air slaps us awake. Our painfully thin rickshaw driver pedals furiously wearing only a loose loincloth and a stained white vest, as though he doesn't feel the cold or is hardened to it. We are racing the sun to photograph the Golden Temple as the first light of day shines onto this gilded shrine. The Temple is a giant complex of marble



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and gold, annually welcoming more visitors than the Taj Mahal. We kneel on the perfectly scrubbed, white marbled walkway and wait for the special moment. Our cameras fly into a shutter-clicking frenzy as the sunlight crests the fortress-like walls. Inside the holiest of Sikh shrines, the sense of tranquility is soothing, although to many, the ‘Golden Temple’ might be better known as the world largest free eatery. Anyone can eat here—the vast kitchen and thousand-strong group of volunteers serve between 80 and 160 thousand daily lunch-time meals.

The Rules Of the Road: There Are No Rules!

South of Amritsar, we ride the National Highway 15. In spite of its lofty name, the road is little more than a thin strip of pot-hole laden, sun-bleached tar. The towns of Tarn Taran Sahib and Talwandi Bhai are behind us as we leave the greenery of the Punjab for the arid landscape of India’s largest state, Rajasthan. Amid aged buses, battered 4x4s, trucks, and mule carts, our senses are on high alert as we fight to keep our small, but precious, space on the road. Lunacy rules here. I lean gently into a blind right-hander, and I am jolted as a quart of adrenalin hits my system. Ahead and on my side, a fast approaching truck is overtaking an aged bus. Incredibly, the bus is already alongside and overtaking a car on the inside. All three oncoming vehicles



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are flashing their lights and honking their horns. The deep gully just off the road looks uninviting! I jam the gearshift down twice, violently changing from fourth to second, yank on the brakes, and steer hard to the left. I feel the pull of air as the truck brushes past me with mere inches to spare. By mid-afternoon, Lisa and I have brushed two small motorcycles, been bumped by three cars, and have dodged dozens of meandering bovines. Twilight riding is even worse. Between the air pollution, evening mist, darkness, and the glare of headlights (all on full beam), visibility is a joke. Our nerves are shot. Our reward for the day ... survival!

Outside the Junagarh Fort Complex in Bikaner, we park the bikes and stand with mouths agape, dwarfed by the swollen, stone buttresses that have held off all attacks for 500 years. The inner courtyards emanate serenity, and each is decorated with elaborate lattice stone. In the royal chambers, the polished tiled floors reflect the dazzlingly painted walls. In the harem quarters, carved wooden walls are bejew-

eled with opals and other precious gemstones. In stark contrast to her surroundings, I watch an older woman sweep the floor. She is, I am told, an ‘untouchable,’ decreed by the Indian caste system to be the lowest of the low.

Over the high walls of the fortress, Bikaner sprawls into the dusty distance and the air is fragrant with a mixture of black tea, boiled milk, and ginger. At the Hotel Harsar Haveli, an enthusiastic welcome and a wonderful smell coming from the kitchen convinced us to stay the night.

Riding south out of the city, we’re thankful as the traffic thins and we can begin to take in the bucolic beauty of this dramatic desert state. Our bikes cough with each gear change, a mild protest at the poor fuel we’re feeding them. We follow the ‘highway’ as it meanders through countless small villages. This wide and dusty landscape reminds Lisa and me of our ride through southern Morocco so many years earlier. As far as we can see into the distance, stubby shrubs line this lonely, desert highway.

Sand Castles and Desert Camps

Veering off to the right, we turn into Jaisalmer, so called ‘The Orange City,’ because of the colored sandstone rock from which the entire city is hewn. The city’s narrow streets pulsate with life—markets, animals, frenzied tourists, rickshaw drivers, small motorbikes, kids, and cows. Would-be guides wave and shout with the hope of snagging us as clients and earning a commission. We kick down our sidestands and park on a steep slope in Gandhi Chowk (a chowk is the town square or market place) outside the Prithvi Palace Hotel. We’re told that the rooftop terrace here provides a spectacular view across the city and on to the fort.

Down in the square, shaded by a monolithic stone arch, we barter with the rickshaw drivers. Inside the fort, a maze of steep, winding alleyways leads toward the ancient seven-story palace of Jaisalmer’s former rulers. Ornate mansions with intricately carved stone and wood facades line the narrow streets. We wander for hours among the locals and squeeze into a labyrinth of passageways, each crammed with



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breath-taking embroidery, bedspreads, mirror-work, wall hangings, oil lamps, stone-work, and antiques.

Mumbai madness

Jaisalmer's medieval din is just a half-day ride to our north, and we are on sensory overload. We need a few nights' sanctuary from India's intoxicating effect. We ride hard on the throttle and deep into the high sand dunes of the Thar Desert. The tires of our bikes churn the soft sand until our momentum stops and we can ride no farther. We decide to camp here for a few nights, to enjoy the tranquil escape, and we set to collecting thorn bush wood. As the sun sets, and Lisa cooks dinner, we spy a lone silhouette atop the tallest dune—a local shepherd has come to investigate our roaring fire.

India is a land of contrast. A clash of colors and the cacophony of sound hit us harder than ever in the heart of Mumbai traffic. Previously called Bombay, Mumbai is the most well-known city in India. An incredible 20.5 million inhabitants make it the fourth most populous city in the world.

Lisa's rear tire is dangerously bald, and we are scouring Mumbai for new rubber for her F 650 GS. In the heart of the financial district of Mumbai, where steel and glass structures rake the sky, we feel far removed from the simple dune camp we occupied just four days earlier. Heading north along city streets, the Arabian Sea laps the shore to our left. Just nine miles farther, ramshackle fishing villages with structures made from scavenged wood, tin, and nylon, line the coast. A sour smell of rotten fish fouls the air, and small children dressed in rags kick a deflated ball in the dust. Acute juxtapositions are the norm in Mumbai.

A Very Close Call in Glorious Goa

Five hundred miles south of Mumbai, but still on the coast, we turn from Route 17 onto a narrow county road to enter India's smallest state, Goa. We speed along a seldom-used tar track through dense tropical forest, all the while skirting the contours of a broad tributary that eventually delivers us to the ocean's edge and the tiny village of Agonda. Once a hippie destination, Agonda offers a one mile stretch of picture-perfect beach, which is now part of the 'trustafarian

trail.' Small wooden huts are intermingled with rows of tall coconut trees that extend up to the ocean. For two weeks, we soak up the simple atmosphere and relax with the locals. Tandoori fish, rice, and fruit become a nightly feast, but the magic comes to an end the next day as we once again do battle with this subcontinent's traffic.

Traveling east, we shun India's manic highway system and choose the small country roads instead. Regular roadside breaks for Masala Chai, a rich blend of tea, boiled milk, sugar, and ginger, helps maintain our sanity as we bump, nudge, hit, and knock our way across the country. The small roads exact a toll on our tires and within two days of leaving Agonda we've suffered six punctures and a dented rim. By late afternoon, my patience with the road insanity is short as yet another driver, determined to get past us, overtakes where no space exists. My bike shakes violently and starts to slide, left and then right, this feels bad! Seconds earlier, I'd clocked my speed at 50mph. With a sudden lurch, I realize I have lost all control and I am going down hard. As the back of the bike slides out, I am already in the opposite lane and I am sliding along the ground pinned under my heavy machine. Miraculously, the oncoming traffic is light. Fueled with adrenaline, I lift the bike and push it quickly to the side of the road. With a crowd of 50 watching, Lisa and I strip the front wheel, pull out the inner tube and add another patch to the emergency tube that already has four repairs. The incident has cost us 45 minutes of riding time—and the last shreds of our nerves.

The fascinating 15th century ruins in Vijayanagar (near the village of Hampi), create an extraordinary landscape of giant granite boulders, lush rice paddies, and banana plantations. It's been four days since I survived my front wheel blowout; and the last two days in Hampi have taken the sting out of the remaining bruises. We quickly fall in love with the village's relaxed tempo and intriguing location. On the southern banks of the Tungabhadra River, the Kalyan Guest House is our base. It's a short walk to Hampi's striking Vittala Temple, which is dedicated to Lord Vishnu. Adorned with some of the most sexually explicit sculptures we've ever seen, the temple is not for the prudish. We



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take advantage of the balmy mornings and walk to the river to join hundreds of others for the river washing ritual. Young, old, men, women, and children clean everything in sight. Upstream, the famed 'holy elephant' sprays water high from its trunk and gives a special blessing to just a few honorable dignitaries. The scene is pure magic. In the afternoon, locals vie to have their photographs taken and we happily oblige.

Love and Hate and Everything in Between

We have ridden hard for two weeks and we have pushed north across this vast sub-

continent. We have survived 1,300 mind-bending miles of bumps, scrapes, and near misses since leaving Hampi. Our bikes rumble over the stone streets of Varanasi and we are 300 miles east of the Taj Mahal in Agra. We are spent! On the banks of the Ganges River among the brightly painted Sadhus (Hindu wandering monks), we sit at the Ghats, the steps that lead down to the worshiped Ganges River. Millions bathe, pray, and bury their dead in, and next to, this holy river every day.

Among the din and the crowd, we are overwhelmed by the last few unforgettable weeks, and we grapple to wrap our minds around what we've experienced and learned from India. Just two days ago, we photographed endangered wild tigers in Bandhavgarh Forest. The day prior to that, we'd watched two buses drive head on into one another at a junction as both drivers stared at our parked bikes. What is India? India is alive. India is music, love, prayer, and fragrant spice. India is 'in your face' 24/7. India is a tiny rickshaw carrying 16 people, chai wallahs (tea makers), and cows sleeping in jewelry stores. India is ritual and rhythm unlike anywhere else on earth. India is where the impossible isn't just possible, it's the norm. Love it or hate it, but make no mistake—India demands an opinion. Indifference isn't an option. **RR**

GPS files are available for download in each digital issue purchased or included in your subscription. Log in at www.roadrunner.travel.

Facts & Information

India

Total Mileage
Approximately 4,006 miles

In General

India, with more than 1.2 billion people, is the largest democracy in the world. The main language is Hindi; the secondary is English. Hinduism is the predominant religion, and many religious festivals take place during the year. Note: In Hinduism, the cow is revered as a source of food and symbol of life. They may never be killed.

Haggling is a way of life in India. Double or triple the price is usually requested and foreigners are often charged more than Indian citizens. The currency is the Indian rupee (Rs). Currently \$1 is approximately 55 rupees. Most towns and cities have ATMs but it's wise to keep some small bills on hand as nobody in India ever seems to have change!

The salwar kameez (loose trousers and long tunic/shirt) is respectful attire for both sexes as is using the traditional Hindu greeting of 'namaste.'

October to March is the best time to visit most of the country.

Visas

An Inner-Line Permit (ILP) may be required when visiting disputed border areas. India and Nepal have six immigration points for foreigners. A Carnet de Passage is required for your vehicle.

Food & Lodging

Expect to suffer 'Delhi Belly' at least once during your stay due to consumption of contaminated food and water. Always drink bottled water as tap water is unfit for consumption. Roadside food stands (dhabas) with open kitchens are often more hygienic than small restaurants with covered kitchens. Budget meals will cost between Rs 40 to Rs 70 (70 cents to \$1.20).

Accommodations in major cities and towns run from Rs. 1000 upwards (from \$17 for top to mid-range), Rs. 600 (\$10 for simple), and Rs.150-300 for very basic.



Always consult more-detailed maps for touring purposes.

Public toilets are usually the 'squat' variety and are mostly very dirty.

Roads & Biking

Road travel in India is dangerous due to utter chaos. Drivers are generally reckless and ignore the standard rules of the road (i.e., running red lights and merging directly into traffic without looking). The use of a horn is not aggressive but necessary.

Beware of cows as they wander the streets. They have the right-of-way.

Contact Information

- Visa requirements and travel advice www.travel.state.gov/travel
- General travel information www.yourguidetoindia.com

Books & Maps

- Lonely Planet India (Country Travel Guide) by Sarina Singh, ISBN 978-1741797800 \$31.99
- India (IMTB) International Travel maps, ISBN 978-1553412564, \$12.95

Motorcycle & Gear

1999 BMW R 1150 GSA
2002 BMW F 650 GS
Luggage Systems: Touratech Zega
Jacket and Pants: BMW Trailguard
Helmets: BMW System 5
Boots: MX boots:
Alpinestars Tech 6
and Gearne SG-10