

The Reluctant Volunteer

...or how to overcome panic or inertia or both

Where to start? Turning 70 will do. I was determined to do something while I still could – physically reasonable, mentally not too debilitated. India was top and centre of my list. I have loved India from childhood – through literature from Kipling (yup politically incorrect but gripping) through to Forster, Jhabvala, Rushdie, Naipaul &&, plus Paul Scott's epic Raj Quartet about the last years of the British Raj.

It was, in fact, Granada TV's 'Jewel in the Crown' series that actually took me to India well over 40 years ago. The company decided to do a scene-setting factual documentary about the Indian National Army and its controversial founder, Subhas Chandra Bose - a central theme running through the Raj Quartet. As researcher, I spent three months in the British Library in Kew searching through old documents, and tracking down and contacting key people, who were mostly in India and still alive! So with my producer I was sent out to India to meet them. I was in my late 20s, it was an all-expenses-covered trip with stays at top hotels like the Taj in Mumbai, an air conditioned limo etc. and all admin taken care of. At the time Bose was little known outside his home state of Bengal. Today of course he is up there with the other big names of the Independence movement.

Anyway, back to the present. This time round my trip would be self-financed and self-organised – very different.

I quickly rejected packaged trips – at any price – and started researching volunteering to discover most volunteering was pitched at students – shared dorms (an absolute no-no for me), cost (paying for the privilege) and an uneasy sense that I would be with a group of other foreigners all "dabbling" in the culture of India before getting on with their future careers. I didn't want to dabble: I want to get stuck in – to do something with purpose. I did not want to be a slum tourist or a tourist in any way whatsoever.

A chance lunch with a Cambridge friend (I had been Senior Arts Scholar in my year at Girton in a previous life which DST chair Simon insisted I reference in this article!) and I mentioned India. He said a good friend of his had founded a charity in Jaipur. He rang Simon there and then. I looked at the website, consulted my son (in favour) and suddenly volunteering wasn't a dream but could ACTUALLY happen.

That's when reality set in.

It's one thing to dream; quite another to do.

You have to bear in mind at this point that for the previous 40 years I had hardly been anywhere, done anything and certainly nothing exotic, like flying to India. My daughter, now over 40, is special needs. She, and my partner's health issues culminating in dementia, had been my focus. It had been a very small, quiet life in the countryside dominated by fights with various institutions over care issues.

I talked to Simon (charity chair); I even arranged to meet Simon in London; I talked to trustees on video call. I talked to Rachel (charity lead on the ground) on video. I even talked to Rachel's mum, a regular visitor to Jaipur. The trouble was that no-one I knew had done anything like this – particularly at my age! At least one of my friends was doom-laden to the point of Titanic proportion catastrophising. Anyway I buckled and did not make it in my 70th year.

2025 arrived. Out of the blue, in March, Simon messaged me that he was booking return flights 'on a good deal' for the month of October. Did I want to come with him? Well that removed one fear – travelling alone and changing flights in India on my own. I said yes (backed by my son and his wife who had always said I should go). The decision was made – I had six months to organise the trip and deal with all my stress.

So what were all these stresses? I list them in full - deliberately!

- 1 Getting there: there are no direct international flights to Jaipur from the UK or Europe
- 2 Toilet arrangements (not wanting to be caught short – an age thing)
- 3 Getting around in Jaipur and places nearby on my own – being accosted, threatened, money stolen
- 4 Losing my passport, money, phone – (see 3)
- 5 Arranging access to cash
- 6 Upset stomach/being ill – malaria, dysentery, rabies (blame the Travel Clinic for some of those fears)
- 7 The food (see 6) – where to eat, how to access snacks
- 8 The heat – dehydrating to the point where I became ill or collapsed (see 6)
- 9 Luggage allowance – internal flights have much smaller allowance than international flights
- 10 Culturally appropriate clothing (see 9) which would not overheat me (see 8)
- 11 Loneliness and contact with home
- 12 The general expense of the trip - health insurance, hotel costs etc (I had a tight budget)
- 13 Balancing the teaching and seeing the sights (which dozens of Brits kept telling me I must see)

The list was of course completely absurd but real to me at the time. So, let's eliminate all of them one by one.

Getting there, as any seasoned traveller will know, is very straightforward as I discovered. English is a wonderful international language (particularly true of India where all officials you speak to will have some English – most of it good). And India is, I think, actually ahead of the UK in its use of online services (which work). I was able to book my return internal flight Jaipur to Mumbai on my phone easily. And on that return journey I had to get myself from Jaipur to Mumbai – on my own!. It really is straightforward.

Toileting arrangements: Big News: there are toilets in India. The school at Harmada has them. But the heat is such that, even though I was drinking regularly, I needed the lavatory (as they call them in India) a lot less than in the UK – so a morning at one of the units with no toilet facilities was not a problem.

Getting around in Jaipur and India generally: as a woman on my own, I felt entirely safe (yes, I did do some walking on my own). The only accosting I experienced was from passing tuk tuk drivers asking if I wanted to go somewhere. I said no and that was that. There are plenty of people (understatement!) who will help you if you are lost – and they will not, contrary to some of my doom-monger UK friends, rip you off. I did not go out on my own at night. Also Uber has an efficient tuk tuk booking service in India – brilliant.

Hotel costs: The charity will always help you find a good place to stay. Rachel very kindly checked out a hotel I had found via Booking.com – it was clean, had air-conditioning, spacious (I even had a balcony). It was a reasonable cost – less than the daily rate for kennels for my dog in the UK!

Money from ATMs is easily organised: there are plenty of them. In fact you actually need very little cash if you have a card you can use in India.

Upset stomach and food. I discussed this with the Indian, Delhi-based, mother of a colleague of my son's. She was forthright in her recommendations to a foreigner new to the climate and to the food. Avoid meat, do not eat raw veg (because of the water they have been washed in); only eat fruit with skin you can peel; never eat street food; always drink bottled water – from a reputable seller. In short, eat cooked vegetarian meals and get your protein from pulses such as dhal. I followed her advice to the letter and can honestly say I had no health issues whatsoever – I actually felt better, indigestion-wise, than I do in the UK.

Eating generally: I went to one supermarket which I thought would be quick – it wasn't. It had Fort Knox style security which included going through a metal detector to enter and all purchased goods being checked, after payment!, one by one on the way out. All this took a lot of time. Afterwards, I used google maps to find a little local general shop for biscuits, toothpaste etc – convenient, friendly and quick. You can also use apps like Blinkit or Zomato to have meals and other items delivered – pay on arrival.

The heat: yes you get hot – it was 33c at times. But there is shade, buildings are designed for the heat and I never found it unpleasant (I was there in October). Yes, hotel air-conditioning is important.

Luggage allowance and clothes: one regular male traveller who shall be nameless (Simon) was very dismissive - he took hand luggage only – a couple of pairs of shorts and shirts because, as he pointed out, hotels offer cheap overnight laundry services and there are shops for everything else. This is true but easier for men to follow I think. I was genuinely worried about offending people with my clothes but wanted to stay cool. In the end, I need not have worried. I lived in a couple of pairs of cotton trousers and similar cotton tops. And a hat – important in the sun. Plus, I did buy a couple of cool tops and trousers in the markets – cheap and comfortable. I did take sunscreen to protect against bites – one bottle would have been fine! So even the internal flight luggage allowance is enough and I managed to include English Reading Scheme books!

I never felt lonely – not for one minute. I didn't have time to be lonely. In fact, as I wrote elsewhere, I felt hugged and looked after by the whole community who make up Do SlumThing – the children and their families and the teachers who welcomed me and went out of their way to ensure I felt – and truly was - looked after. And all that with about five words of Hindi to my name!

Jaipur itself is a wonderful, vibrant city, full of laughter, noise and an extraordinary zest for life which we in the UK could do with finding again. As for contact with the UK: I had an app for my phone which I bought before I left - £20 for the month: it was more than enough for local use – Google Maps, short WhatsApp calls, for instance. There is free wi-fi everywhere, including at the hotels.

As for my budget: I spent a lot less than on any package or comparable volunteering trip so, to be purely practical, it is truly affordable even for those, like me, on a tight income. £10 in India goes a long way.

As for teaching and seeing the sites – there was a perfect balance. I saw a lot of forts and world heritage sites – great! But for me the sites were always less important than the people and the teaching. That was my choice; the charity is flexible. In fact, the only thing I had not stressed over was the prospect of teaching and working with children. And it was a truly amazing and powerful experience. I feel Jaipur is my second home. I absolutely loved it. Every minute of it.

So, all in all – advice from one reluctant volunteer and novice traveller to others still dithering – go for it. I promise you, you will have absolutely no regrets. I don't.