

Kaleidoscopic impressions of **India** by CAROLINE PHILLIPS

A cow is aborting at the side of the road. Nearby sits a man with a sawn-off arm and no hands. He is covered in flies, and his body is bent from the waist so his face rests on the tarmac. The next day both man and animal are in the same positions. They are in a street in which a woman buckets out the contents of an open sewer and piles it by the side of the road, then a dog starts to eat it.

We're staying in the rose sandstone Umad Bhawan Palace amid the splendour in which the maharajah still lives, with Art Deco suites and tigers' heads on the walls. Khaki-clad security guards salute every time you pass them in the air-conditioned marble halls. This is Jodhpur.

The maharajah's soothsayer, Dr Saras Wat - who is also a defence-ministry scientist - lives in a bungalow nearby. He wears pyjama-like garb, thick spectacles and sits beneath the fan. 'You enjoy travelling,' he says, peering intently at my hand. Later, we drive in an ancient Ambassador car to the 'master tailor'. His employees sit cross-legged on the floor, stitching. 'Master tailor' makes us jodhpurs and invites us home for cashews and coffee. Henna-dyed buffalo with painted horns wander outside his front door, beside the pavement bookstore selling Andrew Morton's *Diana: Her True Story*. Then we get caught in wedding festivities in the middle of the street, and are pulled in to dance. An elephant carrying branches and men lumbers past.

We're driven six hours through beautiful countryside to Ghanerao village by a man wearing the simple white *dhoti* dress that signifies a death in the family. A cow munches a paper bag in Ghanerao village street. On the wall behind, cow dung bakes in the sun, to be used for fire fuel. Further on, dogs and plump vultures gather at the side of the road, tearing the flesh from a dead buffalo.

Ghanerao Castle, a Mughal fort built in 1606 that is now an hotel, has been inhabited ever since



A view from the Lake Palace Hotel, Udaipur, haunt of Denis Healey, known locally as 'Lord Hilly'.

by the ancestors of the current owner, Sajjan Singh. (He is a *thakar*, rather like a duke.) He serves rice, dal and goat to guests who sleep on hard mattresses and 'shower' with plastic jugs of water. The electricity goes on and off. Outside the window, peacocks, dogs and jackals join force with the visiting musicians, who wear turbans (their *dholi* caste is distinguished by the colour and shape) and play *bansuri* (squeaky instruments like clarinets) and *tabla* drums.

Singh's wife, Sushil Kamari, lives in partial *purdah* in the women's section of the castle. She only came out of her set of rooms five years ago, after 35 years of incarceration - she has to cover her face and has curtains at the car windows. She talks about the rules of *purdah*: 'I can't swim or drive,' she says, sitting beneath a banyan tree sipping lime juice. 'But it's not as bad as it sounds. I know girls who couldn't take the strain of *purdah* and attempted suicide. But I feel there's a great strength in me because of my seclusion.' She is a sensitive and strong woman.

For the next stop on our city-hopping tour of Northern India, we arrive in Udaipur by a plane which

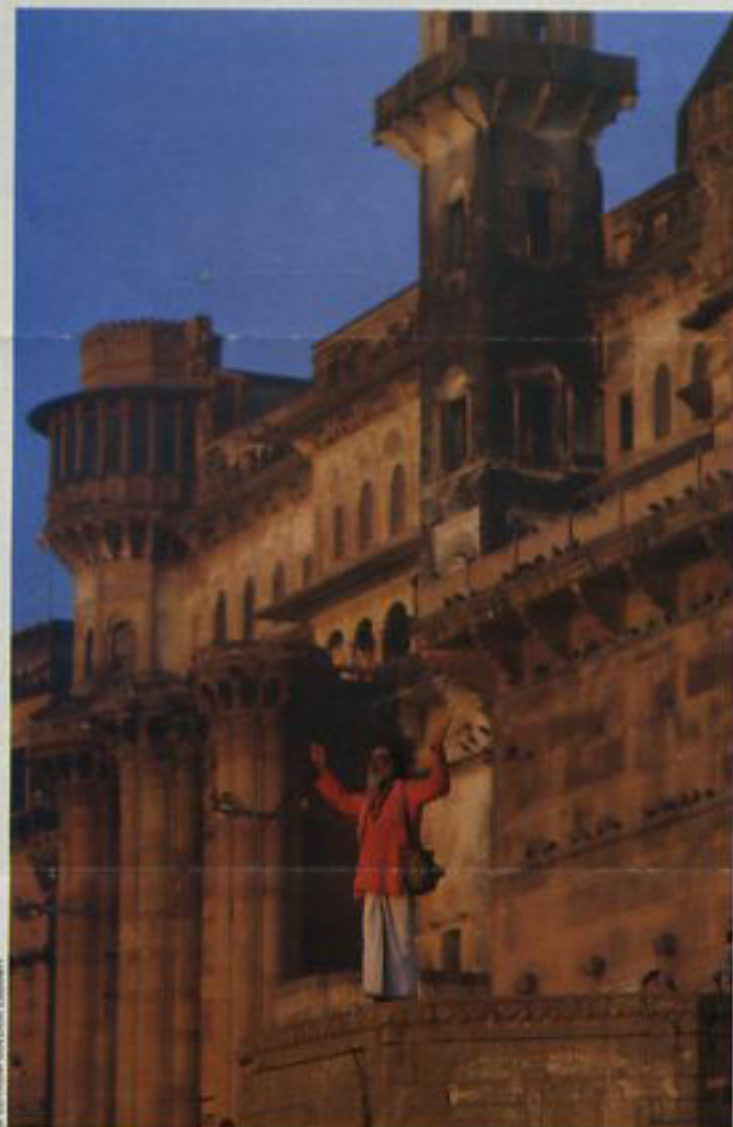
nose-dives so badly that we think it's crashing (it seems to happen on all the internal flights). We're greeted at the fantasy marble Lake Palace Hotel with traditional *bindi* (Hindu forehead spots) and marigold garlands beneath a sky of incredible stars. The people in Udaipur are more anglicised. 'That's Lord Hilly,' says the waiter, pointing to an Englishman sitting by the ornamental pond. And it is indeed Denis Healey. 'Namaste (hello), I'm an *adam khore* (man-eating tiger),' says the peer.

My companion takes to bed with fever and temperature, while I cross Lake Pichola to visit the enchanting City Palace with its mosaics and miniatures. Outside I take a photo of some Indians wearing *lungi*, and they take a photo of me in jeans, then give me a business card: 'chartered surveyor'. Everyone gives out cards the whole time in India. Behind us, emotional and tactile men walk by, hugging or holding hands.

Supper is at the heavenly Shiv Niwas hotel, lavishly large with a marble-lined swimming pool and the overspill of palace treasures in its rooms. The honeymoon suite is prepared traditionally, with a trail of rose petals leading to the bed and 25 strings of fresh pink and red roses hanging from the ceiling to make curtains round the bed. 'Octopussy was filmed here,' boasts the Maharana of Udaipur's amusing right-hand man, Don Deefholts. I dine with him and Kr Maha Singh, our handsome guide-cum-local nobleman. The waiter drops a knife in the chicken supreme with curry >



Rags next to riches: a street scene in the beautiful pink city of Jaipur.



Varanasi, on the Ganges, has 2,000 temples, and many more holy men.

< sauce, splattering us all, and Don talks about his dentures. People are more open in India - I'm often asked whether my motions are loose.

Our final Rajasthani destination is Samode, an hour from the famed pink city of Jaipur with its wondrous fort. Now, as we turn a blind corner in the twilight, there's a man sleeping in the road beside his lorry. The only rule of the road in India is who gets there first. People also drive at night without headlights, presumably to save batteries.

We stay in the 18th-century Samode Palace - romantic and with beautiful filigree, glasswork and Mughal art. Musicians play in a desert breeze in the courtyard and a girl, aged seven, dances in wild, gypsy style and asks me for lipstick. The owner is another nobleman, the charming and gentlemanly Rawal Yadavendra Singh. Whenever he goes past, the villagers bow deeply, salute or make praying gestures.

Next stop is Varanasi, India's holiest city, which the British used to call Benares. A 72-year-old Sri Lankan monk in saffron robes sits next to

me on the plane. 'I'm always happy, always living in the moment,' he says. (He left his wife at the age of 68 to pursue his ascetic existence.) I blush as the holy man scrutinises my Julie Burchill book, *Sex and Sensibility*. 'What a coincidence!' he exclaims, overjoyed. 'I'm writing a pamphlet of the same name.'

Ah! Varanasi, with its 2,000 temples. We get up at 5am for a boat ride to watch the devout washing away their sins in the river Ganges. Today the planets are propitiously aligned, so there are throngs of people. Professional beggars line the lanes, and there are dead bodies by the *ghats* (waterside steps): male corpses bound in white on bamboo funeral stretchers and women in red. Dying here offers the best of chances in the hereafter. People are drinking the purifying river water, performing Hindu rites, washing their hair and cleaning their teeth in it. A dead cow, some human intestines and a nun with the flesh on her ribcage half-eaten, float

by - only the bodies of the *sadhus* (holy men) and smallpox victims (their bodies are thought to be possessed by Sitala, the goddess of fever diseases, who might be injured by cremation) can enter the water unburnt. There are turtles that eat the rotting corpses and marigolds and floating candles in the water.

On the overnight train journey to Calcutta, rats as big as cats run along by the rails and hundreds of people sleep on the platform. The editor of the *Daily Vishwamirta*, a Bengali newspaper, and his wife share our sleeping compartment, and he goes out on the platform in his dressing gown to buy *chai* (tea). Later his friends join us and we are offered medicine, Bombay mix, Thums Up cola, and invitations to their homes.

The train is only delayed by six hours. As we approach Calcutta, the vegetation is lush and tropical; buffalo cool in the waterways and children with home-made bats play cricket between the railway lines. On the platform at Calcutta station, an unaccompanied three-year-old sits on the ground with a baby. Both are naked except for a leather thong with a bell around the waist, and their stomachs are distended with hunger. They share a small red plastic bucket of rice. Later we're followed by all the children of the subcontinent: 'Please auntie,' seven-year-old Hussain implores me, 'money to buy new cricket ball.'

Living in Calcutta is like being the doorman in Harrods on the first day of the sale, and the pollution is terrible, but the Taj Bengal hotel is an oasis of calm with possibly the best food in India. We go to Jagannath flower market, with its hibiscus, tea rose, marigold, lilies and lotus all threaded on straw and sold by the kilo from the colourful mounds on the floor. Today it is busy because there is a full moon and it is Guru Nanak's Day.

We visit Mother Teresa's Orphans' Home. 'Please refrain from kissing or cuddling the children for health reasons,' reads a notice. An entire dormitory has the measles, but the atmosphere in the place is sunny. There are birds in cages, and children eating heartily. The Sisters of Charity wear white and blue cotton habits with blue aprons and wide smiles. Mother Teresa's belief in soap and water is as strong as her Catholicism.

We visit the colonial Tollygunge Club: 100 acres of green and pleasant land around the 1781 mansion. Members gossip over tea and chocolate cake. The secretary is a 67-year-old Englishman, Bob Wright, OBE. He wears shorts and cravat, says 'oh ya', and has labradors and spaniels (seven of them). He also runs a Calcutta orphanage for 1,000 children.

As we leave the country, the airport immigration officer in khaki and black moustache offers us lurid yellow sweet rice balls. 'We have been blessed with a son,' he says. We give him our passports. 'After that I have stylisation,' he resumes. 'Do you believe in God?' □

Three-week tailor-made packages from Cox & Kings (071-931 9106), from £1,800, including accommodation, car and flights. Ten-day groups from £895. Return flights to Calcutta: KLM via Amsterdam, low-season, £510 (AFB Travel, 071-379 3177); Air India direct, £778 (071-493 4050).



Water baby: the purifying Ganges.