

Asian continent found to have many varied surprises

By MARIA WAWER

One can read so much about an Asian country, see umpteen documentaries, talk to people who have been there. And yet, in some elusive way, everything on that continent turns out to be a surprise when one gets there. These surprises range from the abstract to the very mundane. For example, remember the first big white cow I saw sitting in the middle of Calcutta's busiest street. Now we all know they exist, but to see one lying placidly on Chittaranjan is a revelation nonetheless. Good grief! They really do exist!

I had the opportunity to get a taste of Asia, and especially India, when I was chosen as one of 50 Canadian students and 5 faculty members to take part in a World University Service of Canada International Seminar in India, in July and August of this year. Each student who went was to do a small study of some aspect of the Indian social, economical or political situation. (My own work concerned the medical system.) However, there was ample time to try to see a bit of India and to get to know some people. These are the aspects will try to bring across here.

At the end of June, the entire Canadian contingent found itself ensconced in the entrails of a 747 on our way to Delhi. The entire trip, including stops for a change of plane in Paris and refueling lasts over 30 hours. (theoretically.) However, I think I can destroy any fears the reader might have that this is a boring journey. Flights in Asia are seldom boring. After Paris, our first stop was in Tel Aviv - 45 minutes according to the schedule.

For some unknown reason, however, the Tel Aviv Officials decided to give our plane an extra security check. Twenty or so young, suntanned soldiers (male and female) clambered aboard and stood glaring at us for over two hours, trying to look fierce. They succeeded admirably in this last endeavour. During this time, other officials scurried about and examined everything, including the small kitchenettes on the plane. Perhaps it was better for us that we never found out what it was all about! We amused ourselves by counting the tanks around the airport. Actually there were not that many, but the only other form of recreation open to us was glaring back at the guards.

Next, Teheran, the capital of Iran. This time, the airlines tried to convince us that it would be an hour long stop over. We were there for almost 24. Some gadget in our big bird blew a fuse, and it was necessary to wait until a new part was flown in from Paris. We waited almost all night aboard the plane. Finally the airline company heaved a bureaucratic sigh and shipped us all to an excellent hotel in town.

We suddenly realized this was it! Wow! We were in Asia! Does this sound corny? Just wait and see... I am willing to bet an unexpected delirium comes over you, too, the first time you find yourself in the 110 degree sunshine of a strange country - a country you are totally unprepared to visit, where few people speak any of the languages you do, where you have no idea of the currency or even the number system (an upsidedown heart is five - that's all I can remember). People in the group kept asking what city we were in, and even what country this was.

In a situation such as this, the first thing one does is find a good tourist guide, right? Wrong. We were in no mood to waste time. The more interpid members of the expedition set out to find the bazaar, on the assumption that every city on that continent worth its camels must have some type of exotic shopping mall. We found it. It was big. It was exotic. It was nothing like a shopping mall back home. The Teheran bazaar covers about 20 square blocks. It is completely surmounted by an ancient, vaulted stone roof and consists of a labyrinth of interconnected passages line with shops. And what shops! In the twilight under the roof. One could buy everything from toothpaste and shoes, to fine gold and silver ornaments, brass vases, beautiful wool. Small lanterns sparkled everywhere. Local women, most still in the long black capes of purdah, moved around silently. The shopkeepers sat impassively on little platforms in their stores many of which were little more than tiny kiosks opening onto the alley. Were one to walk into such a shop, however, the mastachioed picture of serenity inside would become very animated, showing off wares, offering to bargain.

"You not want to pay 300 Rieles? Show mich you want to pay? Tell me - how mich you want to pay?" It is a challenge to bargain when

one has no idea of the local value of things. We attempted to try this ancient art. A crowd would gather, all of them shaking their heads sadly. Instinct told us it was not the shopowners who were being ripped off.

We emerged again into the scalding dry head of the street. Teheran, as many other cities we saw in Asia, is a world of contrasts. Upon leaving the bazaar, one enters a wide, modern street, populated by demented yellow taxis. New, highrise buildings line the streets, attesting to the new Persian treasure - oil. Traffic is chaotic. I had never seen so many dented fenders. I think Iranians enjoy accidents. I saw one car smash into another (nothing too serious). The drivers ran out, yelling unpleasant things to each other. A crowd gathered. More shrieks and arm waving. Enthusiasm from the crowd. Agreement. Handshakes all around. Both drivers drove off. No one had bothered to call in a 'cop.

Unfortunately, planes get fixed. Clutching curios in our greedy little hands, we took off again, and actually made it to Delhi.

Our group breathed a sigh of relief. At least we tried to. The monsoon was due any day, and the air was a stifling hot, wet blanket, even at two in the morning. The Indian World University Service committee was on hand to greet us, throwing lei-like strings of fragrant sandal wood shaving around our necks. In the heat, the smell was almost overpowering.

A rickety bus took us into the city. All was quiet. It was very late at night, and there were even fewer lights than we had seen in Teheran. I was sitting on the left hand side of the bus and couldn't

figure out why the road was so narrow, until it dawned on me that in India the British system of right hand drive is use. Strange fragrances wafted in through the window - sweet flower smells, most completely unidentifiable.

Our hotel turned to be a miracle of comfort. The India International Centre was a large, modern air-conditioned place with a marvelous garden. Instinct told us we wouldn't experience much of India if we stayed here for too long, but at the time it was what we needed.

As we shuffled into our rooms, someone had the presence of mind to issue a final word of warning. "Remember, don't drink the city water. Get some boiled stuff!" Good grief! Two months of this? My memory went back to a rather paranoid doctor in Montreal who had implied that the only safe thing we could eat would be boiled grapes. The man was miserably wrong, but that first night anything seemed possible.

Next week, Delhi and the trip to Calcutta!

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