

INDIA TRAVEL

Things I Wish I Had Known

by Heather Morton



MARK TWAIN wrote that the city of Varanasi was "older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend and looks twice as old as all of them put together" (from *Following the Equator*, 1897). Many people may not know that his trip to India was to help him write a non-fiction travelogue with the intent to get himself out of debt. While most of us may be lucky enough to travel to India under less strain, the drive to experience a country like India can be equally as intense.

India is a fascinating country as much as it is a confusing one. It is every writer's paradise and photographer's dream. Socially, however, it appears more Westernized than it actually is. Indian men who sport jeans and greet you with a handshake give off a modernized attitude, but their traditional roots are more than skin deep.

My first trip to India was made in 1999. As a yoga teacher and student, I have been traveling to India for the last 13 years; a sojourn that is very dear to me. As a woman traveling alone, I have learned many things about myself, people and life itself. In particular, I have learned it's just not enough to pack the right clothes and toiletries. India brought me face-to-face with the real meaning of the phrase, "live and learn."



There are often many misconceptions when it comes to traveling in India. And, to make things more confusing, some of these myths are intermingled with a couple of truths. These are some of the things I wish I had known.

PART I: TRAVEL MYTHS AS I EXPERIENCED THEM...

Traveling Alone is Lonely and Dangerous

Indians are very interested in foreigners and quite surprisingly so. More times than I can remember, I have often been the subject of photos taken by Indian tourists. As the minority, I felt like a novelty. There was simply no time to feel lonely with so many curious people inquiring about where I was from, what I was doing and how long I was staying.





As a woman traveling solo, I also felt it was easier to get around alone than in a group. It's easier to slip into a crowd and disappear from a pushy vendor when you're alone than when you're with a mob of people. In addition, I heard fellow women travelers say they interacted more with the locals when they were alone than when they were accompanied by a partner. In the latter scenario, the women were ignored as the men 'talked.'

It is wise, however, not to have in-depth conversations with men off the street. Street-smart rules still apply.

Staying Healthy

Getting sick is not advised and can be avoided by taking a few precautions. While there is usually a lot of hype about hygiene in third-world countries, I did not wear a mask or wash my hands every five minutes.



Some handy tips to avoid getting sick, include:

- Bring a hand sanitizer and use it before and after eating.
- Drink lots of water. It's easy to get dehydrated.
- Don't eat off the street. There are juicy fruits and yummy nuts tempting enough to try. I learned the hard way and returned to Canada with whipworm (a parasite)!
- Consult a Travel Medicine doctor (<http://www.tmvc.com/>) and not a family doctor before going. No matter how much I respect my doctor, family doctors are not experts in travel medicine and may not have the latest information.

The Food

Contrary to what many people understand as being Indian food, it is not hot and laced with curry. That's like saying Italians eat spaghetti and meatballs every day! The main staple is rice but there are a variety of wonderful vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes. In addition, the food can be prepared to your taste...from very hot to extremely mild.

The cuisine also varies from region to region. I love chapattis (Indian flat bread) and found it was hard to find in the North, where Naan was popular. Chai (Indian spiced tea with milk) is found all over India, but coffee is often the instant kind. Also, please note that coffee is ordered differently. In India, it's ordered as 'separate' (meaning black coffee with the milk on the side) or 'milk' coffee (self-explanatory).



The Climate

Like the food, most people mistakenly think India is hot. When I traveled to Shimla, the capital of the Himalayas, I was blown away by the 18° C summer breeze. Shimla is a hill station that was taken over by the British when they ruled India. The British flocked there when the temperatures reached a scorching 50° C on the lower plains.

Traveling further north there is snow (yes, snow) while the southern regions have conditions similar to London, England. Depending

on when and where you go, it is possible to avoid the severe heat and the monsoon.

Safety

Just because it's a third-world country does not mean I needed to fear being robbed. Having made friends with less wealthy Indians, these were the first people to offer me a meal and the last to ask for something in return.

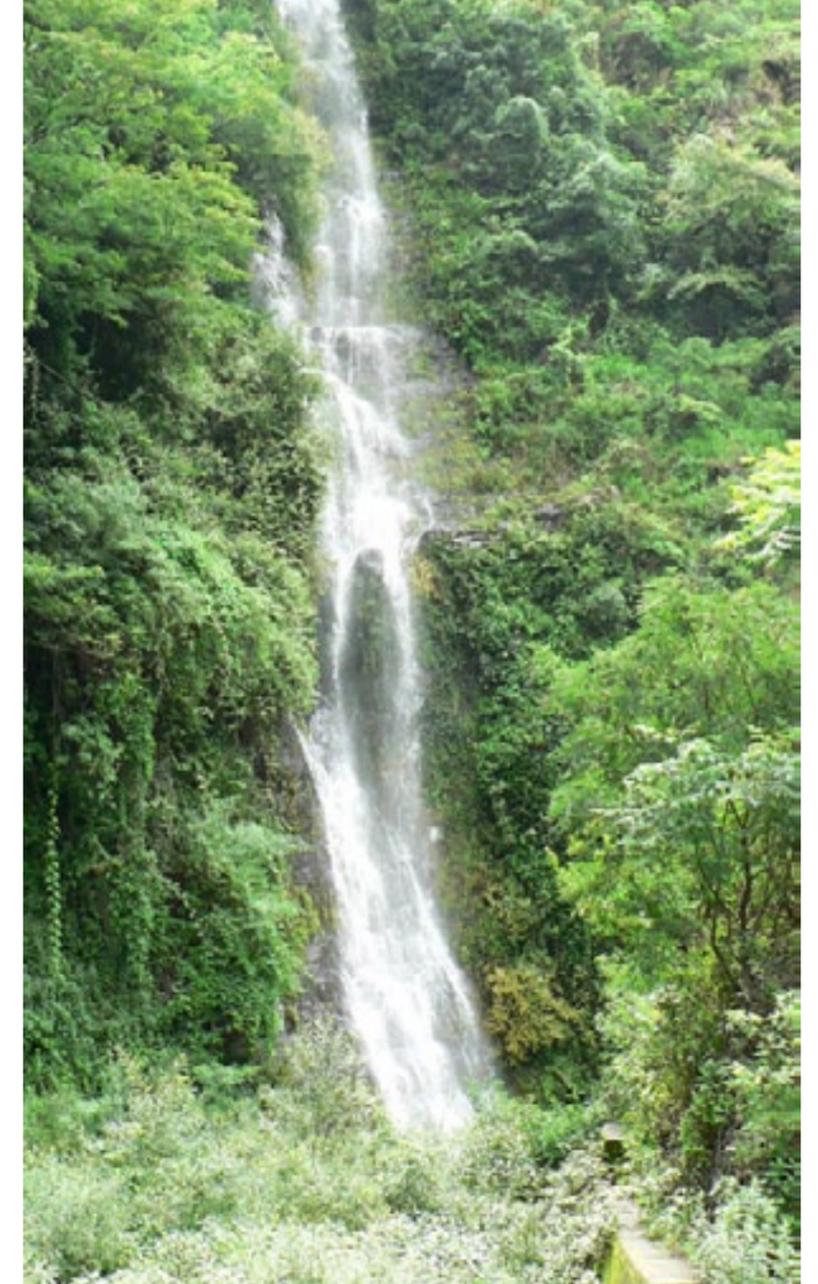
The honesty of the Indian people was put to the test when I thoughtlessly stuffed an

Indian rupee note in my back pocket (it was the equivalent to buying a nice meal). I was shocked when a young Indian tapped on my shoulder and pointed to the money sticking out of my pocket. I felt like giving him the money for his good deed!

Hygiene and Power outages

I have stayed in 5-star hotels and traveled by plane and taxi; rightfully enjoying Western toilets and electrical power 24/7 with a generator kicking in. On the flip side, I have also stayed in budget hotels and still had a toilet seat in an attached bathroom with the occasional blackout. In both cases, however, I was not subjected to peeing in a hole and using a bucket to flush.

At worst, I needed to remember to bring my own toilet paper, not to look down and to pinch my nose. At best, I accepted this as a part of traveling in a foreign country. I remind myself that the squat toilets in South Korea were worse. ✨



In the Fall Issue of Native Foreigner, check out the truths about India. Stay tuned...

Heather Morton is part of a select group of people certified in AtmaVikasa Yoga, becoming the first Westerner to be certified in both the 1st and 2nd series of the AtmaVikasa system. Having made 13 extended trips to India, she studies under her teachers annually in India. In 1997, she founded The Yoga Way (TYW), a Toronto based yoga school for structured programs.

