

# Woman discovers India solo

## Fright turns to wonder as single female embarks on adventure

By MEI-YIN TEO  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Sitting on a windowless, New Delhi airport coach at 5:30 a.m. on a cool January morning, I sank down in my seat as wiry-boned men, huddled in large blankets ominously glared at me.

To make matters worse, painted on the seat in front of me were the words: Look under your seat, there might be a bomb!

I was scared. I thought to myself, "I can't take a whole month of this!"

At this point I felt like packing it in and taking the first plane back to Canada. But I'm glad I didn't because it turned out to be one of the greatest adventures of my life.

### Some essentials, such as toilet paper, must always be packed

Being a foreigner and a woman alone, you can imagine the attention I drew. But it was not all bad. In retrospect, the horror stories I heard about women travelling alone were quite far-fetched. Sure there are some basic precautions that must be followed but being a single woman travelling in India can be a unique experience.

Though I was excited about the prospect of travelling to the land of ancient civilizations and desert fortresses, I had a lot of apprehension being in a nation where women still practice *sati* — the custom of a widow throwing herself on her husband's funeral pyre (even though it was banned by Lord William Bentinck in 1829) — and the country of the controversial "ultrasound van."

Because of its kaleidoscopic array, research is imperative. I prepared months ahead — borrowing travel guides, taking advice from friends, and visiting the In-

dia Tourist Office. The latest version of the *India Handbook* or *India The Rough Guide*, quotes the most realistic prices.

Many travellers backpack in India, limiting luggage space. But some essentials, such as tampons and toilet paper must be taken. I brought six rolls myself which came in handy not only in washrooms where the "hand and water" technique is used. These things are difficult to find, expensive and poorly made. Though I was *au naturel* in India and strongly recommend it because of the dirt and pollution, if you wish to wear makeup, bring your own.

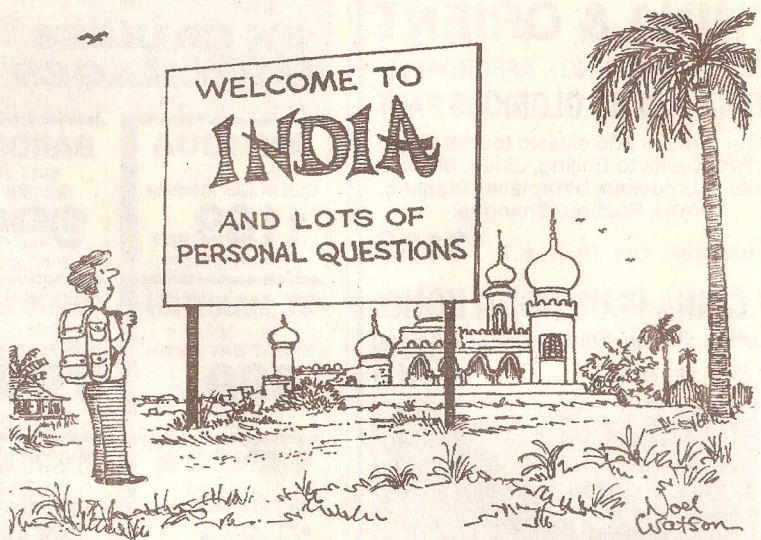
I am the first to admit that India is not an easy country to travel, especially for a woman. Aside from the appalling poverty and pandemonium, women have to deal with men staring tenaciously at them. Though it becomes irritating at times, it is usually not threatening and quite harmless. A common aggravation is men brushing up against you in a crowd and thighs are the preferred target. Avoid eye contact with men because it signals to them that you are approachable. I found sunglasses to be especially helpful.

Indians are very curious by nature and will ask personal questions. I had men ask me things like: "Are you married?", "How much money do you make?" and "Do you sleep with your boyfriend?"

If a man is being especially bothersome, a dirty look and a harsh, defiant tone generally deters him.

I had just a few run-ins which I would label "really scary." One was in the Centaur Hotel in New Delhi when a room attendant who knew I was alone kept calling me on my room phone. Even though I changed rooms, I still had a sleepless night. After that incident I always told others that my husband was nearby.

The other incident occurred one night around 11 p.m. when I was walking from a hotel where I was dropped off by a tour group to a house where I was staying. As I turned off the main road on to a quiet street I noticed two young guys on a motorbike who also turned down the same street



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and waited for me at the bend. When I stopped to tell a security guard my dilemma, they drove off.

The best way to reduce possible harassment is, don't draw attention to yourself. India is a conservative country and women are dressed very modestly. Even in the south, where the temperature soared above 30C, I still wore pants and T-shirts. Many women dress scantily (shorts, tank tops and bra-less) to cope with the hot weather, but I found it easier and just as cooling, to dress Indian style in a pair of baggy, cotton pants and a light top. In fact, it's best to bring the bare minimum and buy clothes there; it's dirt cheap and you can leave them behind when you depart.

### Day tours are a great way to meet others

As in any other country, the same rules apply for women travelling alone. Don't wander into isolated areas after dark. The only time I ventured from my hotel room in the evenings was when I was with a man. Though there is little in the way of nightlife outside Bombay and Delhi, I felt I missed out on experiencing this side of India.

I also changed my daily schedule and ate my biggest meal in the day, then grabbed something

small to have in my room for dinner. For 20 rupees (less than \$1 Cdn), thalis, a typical Indian meal, is filling and nutritious.

Evenings were the loneliest. At the beginning of the trip, I dreaded sundown. But as time went on, I saved daily chores to do in the evening like taking a bath, reading, writing in my journal, writing postcards and letters and sewing torn clothes.

Day tours are a great way to meet other foreign tourists. I felt safe because I was with a group of people, most of whom spoke English. It's an excellent way to build contacts which could prove helpful on your further travels.

It was on a Jaipur city tour that I met Anberin, who gave me a number of useful contacts, including her mother Dilshad in Bangalore, who had her driver take me around.

The pros of being a woman in this country greatly outweigh the cons. There are "women only" ticket lines at the bus and train station and the movie theatre, and "women only" train compartments and waiting rooms at the station.

Travelling alone gives one a chance to discover the attraction that has lured people to this magnificent country for centuries. Even in this land of contrast, India's sincere charm prevails throughout.

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